

THEY WON'T BE MISSED

by
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PROLOGUE

The bodies were due.

Kenneth Franz trudged to the doors at the end of the short, narrow room. A fan in the corner recycled sweaty air, and a clock ticked on the wall behind his head. They were ten minutes late. As usual. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, and realised he'd never felt so tired.

He studied the two large gurneys that sat side by side in the room, covering almost all of the floor space. For a moment, in his sleepy stupor, they looked comfortable. But he knew what they were used for, and the tin headrests and bulky machinery put an end to that notion.

His colleague strode into view and laughed. "This your attempt at looking presentable?"

Franz rolled his eyes. "You really think this place cares about looks?"
"They let you in, so evidently not."

Let him in? He couldn't remember the last time he was out. It wasn't hard to look presentable when you had time to sleep. No one forced him to stay, yet he worked longer hours than anyone else. The work instilled a feeling of accomplishment that few people could ever feel or understand.

He couldn't be bothered arguing. "Just settle down. They'll be here any minute."

Almost on cue, the door buzzed. Franz buttoned his white coat, smoothed out the creases, then ran his fingers through his greasy hair. Two transportation gurneys were wheeled in, two bodies trembling beneath the straps.

As always, the bodies brought with them an unshakable feeling of guilt. Franz looked away for a moment and steeled himself. He knew what needed to be done, and he'd done it often. But on some indescribable level, it never seemed to get easier.

The transport gurneys trundled past. Franz had a schedule to keep, so he wasn't going to dwell on the late delivery. He held the door open for the men. They nodded and left without a word.

Franz and his colleague took control and wheeled the delivered gurneys toward the centre of the room. Even after they were brought to a halt, the bodies continued to twitch and shudder under the restraints.

"I don't recognise them. Why are they back?" his colleague asked.
"An error. Not important. You know what to do."

They ensured the bodies were lined up in front of the two larger gurneys, then Franz slid around to his colleague's side.

The men on the gurneys almost looked peaceful, rested. Franz felt somewhat envious. But when he considered what they were about to endure, the thought made an abrupt exit.

"Ready?" he asked, as his colleague finished untying the leather wrist and ankle straps.

"Yes."

They pulled, and the body slid off one gurney onto the next. His colleague leant over the helpless figure and snapped heavy steel locks into place around the man's wrists and ankles. They moved around to the gurney on Franz's side.

"Looks like this one hasn't had it easy," his colleague said.

Franz stopped and stared at him. "Did you expect otherwise?"

His colleague shrugged, then helped haul the body across. He wheeled the empty transport gurneys toward the door, then returned to the other side of the room.

There was barely enough space for Franz to stand without nudging the counter behind him. He grabbed the prostrate man's chin, then turned the head to the side, examining the neck.

Franz hated to admit it, but his colleague was right. The man was a mess. Lengthy, unkempt hair obscured his face, and his white clothing was a patchwork of muck. When Franz released his grip, the head slumped to the side, facing him. Uncomprehending eyes blinked slowly, watching his every move.

Franz made a quick note, then fumbled with his pen. Hand cramps. So tired he'd forgotten to have a drink that morning. He made a fist, squeezed, then stretched his fingers several times, but it did little to help. Despite the discomfort, he started closing the locks on the gurney.

His colleague smacked the counter top. "Damn it. I need to reposition. The neck's misaligned."

Franz sighed. He expected nothing less. Another day, another basic mistake. "Fine. Give me a minute."

As he leant over the gurney to close the final wristlock, the cramp became intolerable. He winced and flipped the lock away from him, then turned and hit one of two red buttons on the wall directly behind him.

The locks sprang open on the opposite gurney. His colleague pushed the man into position, then locked him in once more.

"All set?" Franz asked.

"Ready when you are."

Franz turned and flicked a switch on the counter.

A mechanical arm with a needle attached burst into life beside each headrest. It advanced forward and speared the necks of the two prone men. They winced as it pushed deeper and began administering fluid from the attached vials. A moment later, a beep sounded, and the arm retracted. On the gurneys, the men's eyes grew wide, and their bodies started to convulse. Garbled sounds came from their throats.

"Need me for anything?" his colleague asked.

"No."

"Right. I'll be back in ten." He disappeared through another door, leaving Franz with the two bodies.

All he had to do now was wait.

He turned his attention to the counter, studied a sheet of paper, then poured himself some water. There was a distinct coffee aftertaste. He realised the mug hadn't been washed. He shoved it aside, closed his eyes

and took a deep breath. Perhaps they were right. Maybe he did need a day off.

Maybe tomorrow. He could do with a shower.

A groan came from the gurney behind him, sooner than expected, but it varied from person to person. The groan grew louder, then he heard a click. He spun around.

The wrist lock he'd flicked over burst open and an arm came hurtling toward him. He dropped the cup and spun to his left, but he was too slow. A hand grabbed his coat lapel and pulled. The gurney screeched across the floor, almost pinning him against the counter. He recoiled, but his head was yanked forward. Eyes, now full of life, raced toward his own, and their heads collided.

He collapsed to the floor, and for a moment, his vision went black. Then, above him, he saw an outstretched arm. What the hell was the man doing? He heard several clicks. The buttons for the gurney restraining locks. *Oh my god.*

Franz rotated and saw the legs of the man descend from the gurney. His heart thudded like a fist against his chest. He pushed the gurney aside and clambered to his feet.

The man shoved the other gurney into the wall, and moments later, the second man leapt down. They shouted and exchanged blows, then they both stopped. They turned and stared at Franz.

Franz was rooted to the spot. He didn't know where to go, what to do. Then he remembered the sedatives. They were nearby. He turned to the counter. His hands searched, desperate, sending paperwork flying. Where the hell were the damn things? He spotted the tranquiliser gun beneath a mound of paperwork.

As he reached for it, something screeched behind him. There was a loud crack and pain shot through his back. He winced and spun round. The man who had knocked him to the floor was braced low, hands on the gurney, screaming.

The gurney screeched again as it scraped across the floor. It crashed into his hips, and he dropped to his knees. But he managed to steady himself against the counter.

"Stop!" he yelled, but the man didn't respond. The gurney raced forward and hit him square in the chest. He cried out and fell to the floor. There was a tightness in his chest, and he hunched over, clawing at his ribs. He couldn't breathe. They were going to kill him.

He fought the pain, rolled onto his back and jerked his body up. He punched the alarm beneath the counter top. An ear piercing siren filled the room and a red security light whirled across the walls. He curled up as the pain became insufferable.

Steel utensils clattered to the floor around him. Then one of the men padded across the room, heading for the exit. A door opened and more legs appeared. Security. *Thank god.* Both sides shouted and grunted as they fought to gain control.

Then Franz noticed the man who had attacked him was crouching behind the other gurney. Silent. Not engaging. Then he made a break for the door. The guards were piled on top of the other man, restraining him. They hadn't noticed there were two of them.

Franz tried to call out, but his chest erupted in pain. He watched, unable to move, unable to speak, as the figure slipped through the door unnoticed. A fleeting shimmer of sunlight bathed the room as the figure pushed through the fire exit.

He was out.

CHAPTER 1

Officer Mark Casey wondered who the hell wanted to see him so adamantly. He had no meetings scheduled, and anyone of importance would have called his cell phone. It would no doubt be a waste of time. Plus, he had other things on his mind. Twenty minutes prior, his actions had turned a drug bust into a disaster.

Frustrated, he marched to the outer doors of the Brennich Police Department headquarters. Headquarters was pushing it. It was a single floor with six offices, a few interview rooms and a heap of desks wedged in like sardines in a can.

An icy blast hit him as he pushed through the outer doors. Not only had the weather turned to torrential rain, but also he could tell the heating had failed again. He wrapped his coat tighter around him. As always, the chill was uncomfortably familiar.

For two years, Mark had lived corner to corner on the streets of the dilapidated city of Brennich. His wife dead, his daughter with his in-laws, his home gone, he had been forced into a world where only the strong stood a chance of survival. Fortunately, he'd made it out, but he was still restoring his life, which was a far cry from what it used to be.

The bustling headquarters hummed behind the heavy inner doors, then became crisp and loud as he snatched them open. Phones rang off the hook with too few hands to answer them, people hurried across his path toward beeping fax machines, and a boiling kettle screeched and whistled in the corner of the room. Caffeine was the last thing this place needed.

The heads of several officers lifted and exchanged glances as he entered. Two voices picked up over the din.

"Quite the team player, Casey, as always."

"Terrorising mothers and their kids eh? What's it going to be next week?"

Mark wanted to pin them to the wall, tell them they to get out from behind their desks, do some real work, but instead, he just said, "Shut your mouths," and continued past.

Alice, Captain Barstow's secretary, came toward him and his stomach clenched. The thought of facing Barstow did not appeal. Though he was unsure if either of them had heard about the incident.

"So what's this all about?" Mark asked.

"There's a guy here who says he needs to talk to you."

"Name?"

"Hasn't given one."

"Get him to speak to someone else. This isn't a good time."

"He won't. He's specifically asking for you. Apparently, he won't leave until he does."

Mark sighed, scratched his head. "Where is he?"

"Waiting in room two."

Mark decided to test the waters, tried to act casual. "Barstow in?"

"Out for the day."

"Okay." Thank god. He had a day to get his story straight.

Alice retreated to her office.

A small boy, who had clearly spent too long sitting in a chair, was being steered toward the exit by his father. As they neared Mark, the boy looked up, a look of awe on his face. He looked to be the same age as Mark's daughter. Mark smiled, held out his palm.

The boy's mouth fell open. He hesitated, then high-fived Mark and beamed. His father smiled, nodded, then moved on with the boy in tow. Mark's grim disposition returned when he realised he had to go through with the meeting.

Room two was at the back of the building. Holding a formal conversation with a stranger was the last thing on Mark's mind, but nevertheless, he approached the door, stood up straight, shrugged his shoulders back and entered.

The man looked up from the table he sat behind. He sported a jacket, which might have been green at one stage but was now pale and ripped in several places, and a clean yellow t-shirt that was obscured by a beard that had not been trimmed. He looked like someone from the streets. The chair screeched as the man stood up to greet him.

Mark took the man's outstretched hand. "Hello, I'm Mark Casey."

"Hello. Shaun Roper." The man's voice was quiet and measured.

"Please, sit," Mark said, motioning to the chair. He removed his coat. "I hear you were asking for me. What can I do for you?"

"I need help." He paused and looked at the door. "It's too much. I can't take it no more. The nightmares keep coming."

When the homeless were willing to help themselves, Mark would help them in any way he could. On the table was a notepad and pen. He slid them in front of him and flipped to a blank page. "Why don't you start at the beginning."

"I remember it happening. I still see it. Every day. Like yesterday. I've got bruises and cuts." He rolled up his sleeve and lifted his t-shirt. Some bruises were starting to fade, and scarring was evident.

Mark began writing.

"I woke up. I'd been moved. Wasn't where I usually was. People were over me."

"You'd been attacked?"

Shaun rubbed his cuff between his fingers. "No, not yet."

Not yet? Finally, something Mark could sink his teeth into. He had been trying to maintain a professional distance, but now he leaned forward, helplessly curious. "So, where were you? Who attacked you? Can you recall their faces?"

Shaun shook his head. "I couldn't move. Don't remember any of their faces. Just the others."

Mark squinted, sat back. Their faces? Other faces? What was the difference?

They sat in silence, waiting for the other to speak first.

"Okay, describe the others to me," Mark said.

"They were out of their minds. Like animals. I can see them in front of me. Screaming. Like a horror film. I climbed up, away from them."

"Up what?"

"A tree," he said. "We were in the jungle."

Mark sighed. The jungle. Unbelievable. This guy didn't need the police, he needed a psychiatrist. What a waste of three minutes. Mark tapped his pen on the table. "The jungle?"

Shaun nodded. "Then I remember crawling. Then being home."

"Home?"

"The new housing scheme."

"The homeless housing over on Darder Road?"

Shaun nodded.

The homeless housing was a new, government run project. An attempt to "clean up" the area, get people back into work. The words they used made the homeless sound like litter. He had no idea if the scheme was working, but he saw the homeless traipse in and out of there daily, homeless begging homeless for five minutes respite inside.

From what he'd gathered, it only served to get them off the streets at night. Despite this, Mark was behind the project if it was used correctly. He never had the luxury of free housing, and nor should others if they didn't use it as a stepping stone.

"So yeh, I woke up home. That's all I remember."

Mark stood up and moved to the door. "Thank you Shaun, that'll be all." He motioned towards the door. He had never heard a more fanciful load of drivel in all his time doing interviews. Not only had he got his hopes up that this may be a case worth pursuing, but he'd wasted his time.

Cold air blew into the room. Shaun looked toward the open door. "But, you said you could help."

"No Shaun, I help people with real problems. You're an alcoholic aren't you?"

Shaun's eyes darted about.

"As I suspected. You got into fights, fell over, whatever it was that caused your bruises, you went home, concocted some strange nightmarish fantasy in your sleep and woke up in a bed you don't deserve. Get out."

Shaun stood up and pointed a trembling finger at Mark. "I deserve that bed as much as anyone else."

"The people who deserve those beds are people who are trying to better themselves. People who will push beyond that, who will get a job and start over. Not some drunk who spends what little money they have on alcohol because they've got a nice place to sleep."

Shaun didn't move. He just stood there, eyebrows raised.

"I want to show you something," Mark said. "Come with me."

As Mark strode back across the station floor, Shaun trudging behind him, Mark felt eyes watching him. Everyone seemed to have stopped. No movement, no rustling of papers. Even the beeps and phones ringing in the background seemed muted. Mark blocked it out, his eyes focused on the desk ahead.

Mark squeezed behind his desk and pointed to a pile of case folders. This would make his point loud and clear. "You see these? These are people who deserve my time."

Shaun looked at the pile, then sat down in the chair by the desk. "I'm not leaving. I thought you of all people could help."

Mark clenched his teeth. That was it. He swiped at a plastic container of pencils on the table. It crashed into the wall and split open.

He moved from behind his desk, grabbed Shaun by the coat and hauled him toward the door. People at the desks opposite stood up, incredulous.

As he heaved him toward the door, Shaun's coat fell open. Mark spotted the top of a flask in the inside pocket.

Shaun's eyes followed Mark's to the flask. "It's not mine. I don't know where it came from."

Mark opened the front door and shoved Shaun into the rain. He fell to the ground, coming to rest in a pool of water.

Mark spun on his heels and went back inside. Everyone had stopped what they were doing. They stared at him, like he'd just shot the man. Alice held a muffin in front of her mouth. A piece broke off and fell to the table. He looked from face to face. What was their problem?

He didn't care. They had no idea what he'd just heard.

As he turned to his desk, his eyes fell to the end of the room.

Captain Barstow stood there, watching.

CHAPTER 2

"In my office. Now," Captain Stephen Barstow said, his thumb pointing over his shoulder.

Mark closed his eyes. Barstow had come back early. He couldn't have seen that much. If anything, this would be about the earlier drug bust.

Barstow waited at the entrance to his office, his gut protruding past the door's edge. The only way to describe him is that he looked like a sand filled punch bag. Heavy at the bottom, light at the top. The type that sprang back up after kids hit them to the floor. Sort of the way Barstow worked, too. He would run himself into the ground, doing everything he could for the town, but he'd always get back on his fat feet.

The room seemed to shrink as Mark stepped inside. He became aware of a clock ticking on the wall.

Barstow slammed the door shut. "What the hell were you doing?"

Mark slid into a narrow seat. "It's not what it looked like."

"Enlighten me."

He wasn't sure which way to go. Lying would cause more issues, and the truth was good enough reason in itself to throw Shaun out.

Mark cleared his throat. "A guy comes here, asking for me, and tells me his story. I actually believed him. Said he'd been kidnapped, beaten, the works. Then he says he was in the jungle. He's a fruitcake, a drunk. He refused to leave, twice, so I showed him the door." Mark leant back, quite assured that Barstow would have done the same thing.

Barstow pursed his lips, placed his elbows on the desk and brought his hands together. His voice was quiet. "And you think that's acceptable?"

"Given the circumstances."

"Wrong," Barstow said, getting to his feet. "You do this time and time again. You lose your head and take matters into your own hands." He placed his hands in his pockets and started circling the room. "Case in point. The drug bust you were involved in. I get a call today to tell me you broke down some woman's door and pointed a gun at both her and her daughter. Care to explain?"

Barstow passed behind him. The smell of wet fabric and perspiration followed him.

Mark swallowed. "That was a mistake. The apartments either side of the one we were going to hit were supposed to be empty. When I heard running behind the door, and I knew there were emergency connecting doors between apartments, I had to go in. Ninety percent of the time, it would have been the dealers, not a family that had moved in that morning."

"But that ten percent is a huge mistake, Mark. And I can't fathom why you went in yourself. What the hell were you thinking?"

"The residents had seen us enter the building, so I presumed the dealers might have as well. They could have been flushing evidence while

the team got in position at the rear of the building. There just wasn't any time, sir. Chances were they knew we were coming. I had to act."

"And there are the words which seem to cause me so much pain."

It felt like Mark was being scolded in the Headmaster's office at school. Fortunately, both then and now, no cane.

"You take chances. Chances, when instead your actions should be carefully planned. Your use of the word 'we' is also, shall we say, loose. You fail to work as a team, you can't take orders, you aggravate others and as I just witnessed, you seem to have some sort of anger problem."

Mark felt his stomach sink. "I definitely don't, sir."

The chair gave out a hiss of air as Barstow sat back down. "Listen, I've seen a lot of good in you, but this can't go on. Hell, just a few weeks ago in that bar, you broke a guys nose during the arrest. You're just lucky it looked like he swung first. I've thought carefully about this, and I've come to a decision."

This job was all Mark had. He couldn't lose it. If this went, everything did. More importantly, if things went as planned, he needed it in the coming weeks.

"We've spoken to the woman whose door you broke down. Once we explained why we were there and what her neighbours were up to, she agreed to let the matter drop as long as her door was fixed today."

Thank god, Mark thought. One bullet dodged.

"It's being done as we speak. The replacement door will come out of your pay check."

Finances swirled around in Mark's head. He could make it work. Shuffle a few things around. Money was tight, but one month wasn't the end of the world.

"Unfortunately, given your history in the field, you are being put on desk duty until further notice and are taking a reduction in pay."

Mark jumped to his feet. "You can't, sir. I need this job, this money." He felt himself begging. "I'm barely making ends meet as it is. I have a little girl."

"I'm sorry son. I know you've overcome a lot to get here, but until you lose that street bravado and show me you can work as a team, you give me no choice."

Mark felt anger begin to bubble to the surface. He didn't know what to do. He knew there was nothing he could say. Barstow wouldn't cave.

"One other thing," Barstow said. "I want you to go after that guy you threw out. Apologise, and since you'll have plenty of time here, schedule another interview. Go by the books this time."

Blood thundered past Mark's ears. Everything beyond the office became distant. He fought the urge to leap over the desk as he stared back at Barstow.

Then Mark's phone beeped, snapping him out of it. The screen flashed red as he took it from his pocket. He looked at the screen then to his watch, and he felt a pang of anxiety. He had things to do that couldn't wait. He shook his head, and without another word, walked out.

CHAPTER 3

Mark's clothes were a shade darker when he finally reached his apartment. When he left headquarters, he had immediately phoned for a cab. The operator mumbled something about the weather and being busy, and it would be at least a half hour. Instead, he booked it to pick him up in forty minutes from his apartment. He decided to run home and was splashed by near every car that sped past.

The door to his apartment put up its usual fight. Sometimes a jiggle would free the lock. Sometimes it just took patience. Finally, it opened, and he rushed inside. A tight hallway led into a combination living room and kitchen and beyond that his bedroom. The apartment was compact but was his little piece of heaven.

Everything in his apartment had stayed immaculate since the day he moved in just over a year and a half ago. The carpet he buried his toes into each night was still bright and fluffy, and the sofa were as if it had never been sat on. People told him it looked sparse and cold, but every time he walked in, it reminded him of how life had turned and was once more going in his direction.

Drips splattered onto the mat beneath his feet. Advancing no farther, he hurriedly took off the sodden clothing. The fabric resisted and clung to his skin. He cursed, stomped on one trouser leg and ripped his other foot free before dashing to the kitchen.

He dropped his clothes into the sink, threw on a robe, then rushed to turn on the only beat-up looking thing in the apartment, the computer in the corner of the living room. He couldn't afford any of the new high spec hardware for sale and truth be told he probably couldn't use it either. This one was two steps away from being dropped in the trash bin when his best friend, Chris, had offered it up. It barely functioned, but he'd become a slave to it for one purpose. His finances.

Mark had only thirty minutes until the cab picked him up for his next appointment. He wondered if the news would be different this time. While the box on the table whirred and whined and a multitude of thoughts whirled around in his head, his gaze fell to the coffee table.

On the table sat a cup with a wilting flower his six-year-old daughter, Amber, had picked for him last week. Next to it was a photo of Amber, pouting, holding his police badge, thrusting it toward the camera, like he was in violation of a law. It warmed his heart and made him laugh every time.

Beside that was a photo of his deceased wife, Jackie. It never got easier. Every day, he missed her. His tears were now no longer swept away in the rain as he lay on the unforgiving ground. Instead, they stained his pillow at night. He still couldn't believe she was gone. The only thing that kept him going was the little girl who week after week would pluck him another flower for the little cup on his table.

The computer seemed to cough a few times, then played a tinny welcome song. He pulled up the browser and navigated to his online banking, a ritual that was performed every day at the same time. After a few moments he was in and his fingers set to work.

Every account was checked down to the finest detail, money was moved, and all passwords reset. A slip of paper was exchanged for another with new passwords in a cryptic format only he knew. He committed them to memory, then stuffed the paper out of sight behind the baseboard.

Money was tight for him. Real tight. What little money he had was given to Jackie's parents for the care of Amber. The rest he split between his rent, food and sundries, and a small savings account he had been working hard to fill for Amber's future.

A pay decrease was devastating to his finely tuned finances, and he refused to let Amber get hit by it. He could get by on less food. Hell, he'd relied on a soup kitchen and his own entrepreneurship to get by before. He could manage this.

The phone in the apartment began ringing and scuttled across the table. Mark looked at his watch. He still had twenty-five minutes.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hi. She'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"That's earlier than we agreed."

"We were in the area, so we'll just wait."

"Fine. See you shortly."

Mark hung up, raced to his wardrobe, put on dry clothes, made himself look presentable and phoned the cab company. He needed picked up sooner.

They always had to make things difficult.

CHAPTER 4

The cabbie had said nothing on the way over and only began speaking as they rolled to a stop. "We're here," the driver said, without even turning his head. "Have a great day." Mark hated that. He took out his wallet and grabbed his umbrella. He wondered why he'd brought it; it was bone dry here.

An L.E.D. meter illuminated the cave like rear of the cab. The bright numbers assaulted Mark's eyes. Cab fares seemed to be going up. He wondered if they decided to charge more when it rained. He tossed a bill through the window. If the guy didn't like the microscopic tip, too bad.

As he stepped out and looked at the short stretch of concrete ahead of him, he felt apprehensive. A car door slammed shut in the distance. He looked up and saw Amber racing toward him, her backpack and blonde hair jangling in all directions over her shoulders.

"Dad," she called out. She had a lottery winner's smile from ear to ear. He jogged forward to meet her, then braced himself as she leapt into his arms.

"Hello, sweet pea," he said, planting a kiss on her cheek, which she quickly wiped off. "You okay?"

"Yup," she said, throwing her arms around his neck, squeezing tight. She turned her head and whispered in his ear, "You can put me down now. I'm not a child, remember."

Mark let go, and she slid down to the ground.

He saluted. "Beg ya pardon ma'am."

She put her hands on her hips, nodded, then started to giggle.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand. They headed back up toward the dented car she had arrived in.

The window wound down as they approached and Mark wondered what fresh hell he'd be greeted with this time. He heard a saxophone and trumpet fade away as Cameron and Kathy Larson, Jackie's parents, turned down the stereo and looked toward them.

"Have fun with your dad, sweetheart," Kathy said. Mark couldn't stand the niceties and looked away, sure that he had seen a smile on Kathy's face. He could feel them judging him, no trust in his ability, waiting for him to screw everything up.

"Good luck Mark. We really hope it's good news," Cameron said.

Mark didn't say a word. He let them say their goodbyes, even though Amber would be seeing them again in only an hour. Then he and Amber walked through the entrance to the lawyer's office.

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