

MISSING
BEFORE
DAYLIGHT

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In loving memory of Ken Martin

PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 18TH

Fill N Go Gas Station, Woodbridge, Virginia

Leah adjusted her reindeer antlers in the domed mirror that was nested in the far corner of the store. Her boss wouldn't approve of her show of holiday spirit, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. He put on this persona of Scrooge, all *bah humbug*, but she sensed a deep sadness in him. It only motivated her to spread seasonal cheer with more gusto, especially just a week before Christmas Day. Hence the antlers, but the Christmas decorations didn't stop there.

She'd brought in a small pre-lit tree, and out of her own money, had also picked up baubles and ornaments from the dollar store and thoughtfully set about placing them. The icon of the holiday took up residence next to the till. Garland draped the front of the counter in two big swoops, and a red bow was fixed in the middle. No mistletoe in sight, not wanting to send out the wrong message for those who came in the store.

Those who did venture out at this hour usually filled their tanks and paid at the pumps. That suited her fine too. It gave

her more time to read and daydream about her future. Or she should say, *intended*, for deliberate manifesting.

Working here certainly wasn't her endgame. It was just a stepping stone to help make her grand plans a reality. People told her, at only eighteen years old, she had it together more than some adults twice her age. Leah took that as a compliment, even if her decision to become a vet came easily to her. It really was a no-brainer given that she had loved animals all her life, with an especially soft spot for cats and dogs. Clocking hours here would help pay for her schooling. Although her parents never said it, she knew they couldn't afford college. Each dollar her father earned went straight towards putting food on the table and a roof over their heads.

If she kept her goal clear in mind, it made the long, tedious night shifts bearable. With school out for the Christmas holidays, she had requested extra shifts too. It meant more time away from her family, but it was a small sacrifice. She was only adamant that she be off Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Those days were sacred to her and spending them with her loved ones made them perfect. To make this year even more special, her great-grandmother would be celebrating her one hundredth birthday. Nothing would keep Leah from missing that epic milestone.

The door dinged, and a man in a heavy coat stumbled in.

Leah set her novel aside, popped up from the stool she'd been sitting on, and grinned widely. "Merry Christmas." Her enthusiasm was met with a grumbled response, but she wasn't about to let his bad mood sap her joy. Who knew what he was going through in his life.

The man headed for the refrigerated drinks.

"Is there anything I can help you find?" she asked him.

He ignored her, opened a door, and plucked out a bottle of water, holding it up at her as he walked to the counter to pay.

Not exactly the talkative type. Got it. She scanned the barcode and told him his total.

He fished out a handful of change and set each coin onto the plastic topper that covered the lotto tickets instead of into her waiting palm.

She hadn't finished collecting them when the door dinged again as he left.

Nothing personal, she reminded herself as she often did when she didn't feel seen. This time of year wasn't everyone's favorite like it was hers. To her, there was a vibration in the air, a warm tingling sensation that was nothing short of magical and possibly otherworldly, and she did her best to "sprinkle that shit" everywhere. She smiled, recalling seeing that meme online.

A look outside showed no one in the lot, no one at the pumps, no one driving by. She dropped back onto the stool and picked up her book again. It was a light cozy mystery about a talking cat who was solving a murder with its owner, making it a good choice for working the night shift solo. Nothing too dark to stir her imagination into a frenzy, even if there wasn't much time left on the clock.

In just over an hour, she'd be tucking into her bed, though she'd need to face her mother first. Her father was harmless. He'd be settled at the kitchen table with the day's newspaper—in print, believe it or not—with her mother nattering away about what needed his attention around the house that day despite his full-time job. She'd only pause long enough to point out to Leah, yet again, that it wasn't safe *or right* for girls her age to work night shifts at a gas station. Leah would counter with the argument of equality, why was it okay for men and not for women? Their discussion would end with her mother throwing her hands in the air and walking away while mumbling something incoherent. It was the same shtick that followed every night shift.

A ding alerted Leah that a vehicle had just rolled over the line outside. She looked up to see a gleaming silver Mercedes sedan at pump four. Leah could own a car like that one day. *In my wildest dreams, maybe.* But if she had that much money to throw around, she'd put it to better use. She'd open no-kill animal shelters to give dogs and cats a second chance at an ever-after home.

A brunette got out, who had to be nearly six feet tall. She was dressed impeccably for this time of the morning in a thigh-length burnt orange peacoat and crisp black slacks.

She is a businesswoman or politician on her way to Washington, less than an hour's drive away. There she holds a position of importance in some fancy office building and manages staff with an authoritative yet gentle hand.

Leah smiled at the woman's story she'd written in her mind as she watched her fill the tank of her luxury car.

Another vehicle came in. This one a boxy, white Ford van.

Rush hour at the Fill N Go, she thought and chuckled to herself.

Leah shifted on her stool, not about to get up unless someone came inside. She liked to afford people the decency of rising to her feet for them, intending for it to make them feel special and seen.

The van parked at the back of the lot next to Leah's old Nissan Versa.

Leah set aside her book, prepared to stand, as she expected the door would open in a few seconds, but it didn't. The person in the van must have been held up in some way. Fishing for money in their console perhaps. Leah had been there.

The woman finished filling the tank of her Mercedes, settling the huge bill with electronic payment at the pump. Instead of getting into her car, though, she came into the store.

The woman was attractive, of fair complexion with delicate features, but there was a hard edge in her eyes. They told of a

dark past and unhealed hurts. Being able to read people was a natural gift and one her great-grandmother had pointed out. Leah would wager this woman had been through some trying things in life.

Leah shoved all her observations aside, popped up from her stool, smiled broadly, and offered a cheery “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas.” The woman smiled, a fleeting expression that barely graced her lips, and walked to the gum and snack aisle.

The door dinged again, and a man wearing a balaclava entered.

A knot twisted in Leah’s gut, and her heartbeat kicked up speed. The temperature had dipped, but not enough to necessitate the face covering for a casual outing.

Leah coached herself to relax and think logically. *He has a sensitivity to the cold. He’s already unwell and doesn’t want to make himself any worse.*

She squared her shoulders and greeted him, but he didn’t bother looking her way. There was no way he hadn’t heard her.

Maybe he didn’t respond because he doesn’t want me to hear his voice?

If that was the case, he was most certainly up to no good. She swallowed, even though her mouth was dry. Goosebumps trickled paths down her arms.

He strolled down the aisle one over from the woman. She seemed to be debating which gum or mints to buy, conflicting with Leah’s impression she was the type to know exactly what she wanted.

The man didn’t appear to browse, but he rounded the far end of the aisle and headed toward the woman.

Leah watched through the mirrored dome. She saw him pull something from a pocket, his hand gripped around it. *Is that a—?* Leah’s stomach tossed.

The man had a gun and was edging closer to the woman.

Leah opened her mouth to call out a warning, but no sound left her lips.

The woman stiffened, and her movements slowed. She must have sensed something off about him or seen his weapon.

Leah looked at the panic button. She just had to press it and the police would come, but it was out of arm's reach. Her legs weren't responding. They were quaking and heavy as if the pull of gravity had increased and tugged her feet into the earth. She stood there, powerless, terrified. Helpless.

The woman acted quickly, striking the man across his chest with an outstretched arm and an elbow to his chin.

The attack must have caught him off guard as he flew backward into the shelving. Bags of chips rained to the floor as if spilling from a smashed piñata.

The man quickly regained his balance, his gun pointed at the woman again.

Leah could hardly breathe. *This isn't happening!* Finally, her legs cooperated, and she lunged for the button.

The woman cried out, "Get down!"

Leah was too slow to respond to her warning. There was a sharp bang followed by an intense burning as a bullet cut through her flesh and burrowed into her chest.

Time slowed to a near stop.

The man continued to face her, his gun still raised.

The woman's face was etched in a mask of sheer agony.

Leah staggered, her hand to the wound. She lifted her palm. It was crimson. It was just a few precious inches to the panic button. She reached out, her fingers grasping at air.

Another thunderous boom.

The impact of a second round pushed her back, and she stumbled to stay upright. Her insides were on fire.

Blood bubbled up her throat and down her chin.

Her legs gave way beneath her. She reached out to stop her

fall, but her fingertips simply brushed against the plastic fir, and she collapsed to the floor.

The small Christmas tree crashed beside her, and Leah saw her reflection in a red bauble.

A sudden warmth overcame her, and the pain receded. Tears wet her cheeks, and she knew. *This is how I die.*

ONE

Amanda had no preconceived notions this week was going to be an easy one. With Christmas around the corner, more people were depressed, suicidal, and homicidal. The latter was what impacted her life the most. The phone call she'd received at five fifteen this morning did nothing to boost her outlook.

It had been Scott Malone, her sergeant with the Prince William County Police Department. There was a shooting at a local gas station, leaving one dead on scene.

"She's only eighteen."

It was one hell of a way to start a Monday morning and had her springing from bed with a quick nudge to her boyfriend, Logan, who was lying beside her. She gave him a kiss and let him know she had to leave. She'd also peeked into her eight-year-old daughter's room. An ache bloomed in her chest that she wouldn't be able to greet Zoe when she woke up.

Amanda hated it more when children were victims. An eighteen-year-old, equally tragic. Her life would have just been getting interesting for her and those around her. Where would her path take her? Would she meet somebody nice and get

married? Her mother may have anticipated grandbabies in the future.

All of that was eradicated with two bullets.

She was still processing the tragedy as she and her partner, Detective Trent Stenson, were en route to the Fill N Go gas station. After Malone's call, they had met at Central Station, their home base in Woodbridge, signed out a department car, and hit the road.

Ahead, strobing lights on police cruisers lit the early dawn, a collective beacon to mark the scene of a nightmare from a few streets back.

Trent pulled into the lot.

Aside from law enforcement, there was an older Nissan Versa parked near the back of the lot and a hybrid at the pumps. No sign of anyone from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner or the crime lab yet. Both were stationed out of Manassas, about a half hour from Woodbridge, and would be on their way. Same applied to Sergeant Malone, who told her he'd meet them on scene.

A scrawny woman wearing an oversized knitted hat in a rainbow of colors and olive-green puffer jacket leaned against the hybrid, arms crossed, as she spoke to Officer Wyatt. She kept adjusting her posture, the positioning of her legs, crossing one ankle over the other, then in reverse. Only her arms hung motionless at her sides. Wyatt seemed to be writing down everything she said.

Amanda and Trent left the car. A damp chill cut the air. It smelled of snow. Amanda burrowed into her jacket, wishing she'd brought her heavier one, but she'd have to make do with what she had for now.

Officer Cochran stood at the door for the store. Traci was a good cop, and an even better human being, from what Amanda knew of her. She had a warm, empathetic heart. That quality would either take her far in her career or tear her life apart.

They exchanged greetings as Amanda and Trent put booties over their shoes, and Traci got the door.

“She’s behind the counter,” she told them.

Amanda dipped her head and thanked the officer. Inside, perfumes and colognes mingled with the metallic smell of blood. The tangible density of death was thick and heady, all consuming, almost suffocating. The unseen accompanied the visible such as the high-velocity blood spatter on the wall and counter.

Her legs were leaden as she walked to the end of the counter. Macabre images layered, one upon the other in her mind, conjured up from previous murder scenes. Her life as a career cop gave her a catalog to pull from. It would be healthier if she could simply ignore them. After all, why put herself through the torture of dwelling on what had been? How one violent act wiped out all dreams and ambitions. But this was where she took over with the sacred duty of finding these souls justice and providing their loved ones with closure.

Sadly, this one was a child, barely a legal adult.

Amanda caught her first glimpse of the girl.

Ginger hair. A few shades lighter than Amanda’s.

Time suspended while the tether between this life and, possibly, the next stretched taut. She debated the existence of an afterlife, but to accept that nothing came after death felt so incredibly empty and meaningless. When her husband and six-year-old daughter died nearly eight and a half years ago, she was given a front-row seat to death that rivaled any she’d encountered while working in Homicide. It was an all-immersive hell that stole her breath and capsized her desire to carry on. Seared and kissed by its flames, broken, and nearly destroyed, she eventually emerged from the deep pit. The darkness gave way to a pinprick of light. She dragged herself toward it, and the journey led her to discover her strength and taught her resilience. While the heartbroken widow would always remain a part of her, she

had learned to survive despite this. Even flourishing alongside her.

Amanda took another step.

The young woman was on her back, head angled to the left, her arms at her sides, palms facing up. One was stained red, probably from touching her wound. An instinctual, yet ineffective, response.

Her mouth was gaped open, blood on her chin, and her green eyes were staring blankly.

Amanda followed the girl's sightline. Across from her, a tabletop Christmas tree lay tipped over, its white lights flashing. Generic and inexpensive baubles and ornaments were scattered on the floor.

Her gaze back on the girl, she took in the Rudolph antlers on her head, and the melancholy of the scene hit Amanda. *Hard*. No one should lose someone this close to Christmas.

"You all right?" Trent put a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded. Next month marked three years for them as partners, and he knew her well, how cases with younger people affected her, touching close to home.

The victim wore a red, long-sleeved shirt with a paw-shaped pin attached near the collar. It read, *Dogs are for life*.

The door chimed and the soles of dress shoes, dampened by plastic booties, slapped the linoleum floor. It was Malone, and he got right down to business.

"Name's Leah Bernard. Eighteen. A Berta Russo found the deceased at five AM when she came inside to pay for her gas. There were no calls to nine-one-one prior to that, so presumably no one heard or saw a thing. Of course, we'll get officers out canvassing. But that's all we currently have."

Again, Amanda took in the young woman. The whimsical touch of the antlers had Leah looking younger than eighteen. Maybe fifteen or sixteen even. "Then pretty much nothing."

“She didn’t push the panic button?” Trent pointed to a small red domed light under the counter.

“She must have run out of time.” A cold summation of her reality. The totality of it.

Malone picked up and said, “The owner of the gas station is on his way over. He didn’t handle the news well and said that he gave Leah night shifts against his better judgment.”

Typically, the next of kin were the first notified, but they needed to watch the security footage. It was assumed that was the reason Malone had called the man. “Is he insisting on a warrant?”

Malone shook his head, getting the underlying reference. “He’s agreed to be fully cooperative. Whatever we need. He’s prepared to bring up the video the minute he gets here.”

“That’s good at least,” Trent said.

Malone frowned. “The poor girl was due off at six. A man by the name of Marty Evans was scheduled to relieve her then.”

That was less than twenty minutes from now. “Was she still living at home with her parents?” Amanda scraped out, her thoughts painting the scenario of anxious parents awaiting their daughter’s return home, only to be left in limbo.

“Yeah.”

Her poor parents. They’d soon find out Leah would never walk through their front door again. Amanda pushed the heart-breaking thought aside and turned her attention to the scene.

The till drawer was shut, and the display of lottery tickets appeared untampered with. The only thing that appeared out of place was some broken shelving and busted bags of chips. It could indicate an altercation, but there was nothing to suggest a robbery had taken place.

“What happened here?” It was a slip, the words tumbling from her lips of their own accord. They sat out there, rhetorical and dangling, roping in the great cosmic existential question of why. The energy in the room intensified.

Malone eventually broke the spell with, “I think that’s your job to figure out.” He smiled, as if to soften the blow and rubbed his beard. It was always short and neatly groomed, but the mannerism was one he sometimes employed when trying to tamp down intense emotions, be they grief or anger.

“It doesn’t look like a robbery,” Trent said. “Personally motivated?”

The suggestion raised her hackles, the sheer coldness of the possibility, even if the scene supported the theory. In fact, the most immediate path would be digging into the girl’s life to see if they could unearth the shooter. Even if the surveillance video revealed something else, one thing was certain: the hearts of Leah Bernard’s parents were about to break.

TWO

Amanda typically preferred to be armed with more answers before serving notification to loved ones. Something that might support offering assurance or an explanation of some sort. At this point Leah Bernard's death had no meaning. It hadn't been a robbery and might not have been Leah in the wrong place at the wrong time. They'd be going to the Bernards with so few pieces of the puzzle, but the goal was to reach them before they started to fret when their daughter didn't arrive home. That was one small kindness they could extend.

After hearing Amanda's plan, Malone said he'd stay around and wait for the owner of the gas station, though he stepped out of the store. As he was walking out, crime scene investigators Emma Blair and Isabelle Donnelly were coming in. They held tightly to their collection cases, grim expressions on their faces. They must have heard it had been a young woman to lose her life.

"She's behind the counter," Amanda told them, her words taking her back to Officer Cochran saying that to her and Trent. What felt like hours ago had only been a handful of minutes.

Wyatt intercepted her and Trent on the way to the car and filled them in on Berta. “She lives in Maryland and has a clean record. Far as I see it, she’s not who we’re looking for. We have her info if you wanted to follow up later on.”

Amanda shook her head, picking up on his implied question. “She stays for now. The owner’s coming so we can review the security footage. After that, we’ll revisit this conversation.”

“I’ll go tell her the good news.” Sarcasm alive and well and, with that, he spun to leave.

Amanda wasn’t going to feel guilty about her decision. Until they knew what they were dealing with, they couldn’t afford to release her. “Oh, Officer Wyatt,” she called out, and he turned back to her. “Should a Marty Evans show up, keep him around too.”

“And who is Mr. Evans?”

“An employee here who is due to start at six.”

Wyatt looked at his watch. “Past that now by a few minutes, but I’ll keep an eye out for him. Or should I send a car around to his house? Just in case he’s involved with what happened.”

“Give it a few more minutes, and if he’s a no-show, send a car and call me,” Amanda said.

Wyatt dipped his head and resumed his path back to the woman.

“Maybe we should hang around,” Trent said. “Wait until he shows up?”

“No. I want to get to those parents sooner than later. Besides, who knows when he’ll show up.” *Or if he will.* That sour thought fired through uninvited.

“Let’s buckle up then.”

She appreciated the double meaning that was both literal and figurative. They needed to prepare themselves for the emotional ride ahead of them.

The van from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

was pulling into the lot while Trent was driving out. Hans Rideout, the medical examiner, was behind the wheel, and his assistant, Liam Baker, was in the passenger seat. Baker waved, and Rideout dipped his head, his expression somber.

Following them was a Chevy sedan, a perplexed-looking man in the driver's seat. He leaned forward, his chest practically pressed against the steering column.

"How much do you want to bet that's Evans?" Trent said.

"Actually, Trent, stop the car, please." She couldn't forgive herself if she didn't talk to the man and he was involved in what happened to Leah. Her parents would need to wait a few minutes longer.

Trent reversed to clear the hood from the road, and Amanda got out.

She tapped on the Chevy's driver's side window. The man lowered it, and she held up her badge. "Detective Steele, Prince William County PD. Can I ask your name, sir?"

"Marty Evans." He licked his lips and sounded parched as if he'd walked through the Sahara Desert and was in desperate need of water.

"Your identification, Mr. Evans." She clipped her badge back on her waist and held out a palm.

He jammed a hand into the front pocket of his jeans and gave her his driver's license. Name was Marty Evans, Woodbridge address, age forty-one. She gave him his ID back. "What's your business here, Mr. Evans?" She wanted to hear it from him.

"I work here. I was due to start about five minutes ago. What's going on?"

"There was a murder here this morning. Would you know anything about that?"

A rough swallow had his Adam's apple bulging. "Murder?"

"Are you normally late getting to work?" She couldn't

ignore the possibility he may be responsible for Leah's murder. He could have killed her earlier, left, and returned.

"Sometimes. Who was killed?"

"I won't say until the next of kin has been notified. Why were you late this morning?"

Marty massaged the bridge of his nose. "I kept hitting snooze on my alarm. That's all."

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Whoa. Hold up. Am I a suspect here?"

"I don't want you leaving until we've had the chance for a proper talk. Am I understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She pivoted toward the department car.

"Excuse me, ah, ma'am. *Detective?*" The latter tagged on a little louder.

Amanda returned to Marty. "Yes?"

"When do you think we'll have that 'proper talk'?"

"Are you in a hurry, Mr. Evans?"

His posture shrank, and he shook his head.

"It will take the time it takes. That's all you need to know, but the officers here will watch over you. If you need water or anything, just let them know."

Marty nodded, and Amanda made a stop to inform Officer Wyatt that Marty Evans had arrived and what little conversation they'd had.

"Not a problem," Wyatt said. "I'll keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

"Thank you. Also, the owner should be arriving shortly. I'm not sure if I mentioned that in so many words."

"You didn't, but good to know." Wyatt offered her a solemn smile, which she returned.

Back in the department car, she filled Trent in on Marty Evans.

Trent was laughing as he merged onto the street.

“What?”

“A *proper* talk’? It almost doesn’t even sound like you.”

She shook her head but was unable to deny the accusation. It wasn’t entirely in keeping with her character but seeing that young woman on the floor had rattled her. And the thought of informing her parents that she wouldn’t be coming home had the grieving mother inside of her rising for air.

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