

Love You to Death

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1

They had removed the woman's body. The ambulance was pulling away as I crunched through the old snow up to the front door of the Forties bungalow. A patrolman in the doorway stood aside and said, "Go on in, Professor Samuels." I'd seen him before but I couldn't place his name. Good looking, blond if the hair that showed under his uniform cap was any indication. Buck-something maybe. Buckman? Buckley?

Inside, standing in a dimly lit bedroom, I was glad that I arrived when I did. The bloody smear down the wall where the victim had slumped was still fresh. Maybe not damp. But fresh enough to give my stomach a twitch. I didn't need a body present to make matters worse.

I stood looking at the ruined wallpaper and let the silence settle around me. I should say around us. Detective Foster Newkirk was standing next to me. The bloody smear started about five feet above the baseboard and ran down about two feet to a larger spatter of red. I imagined the woman's bloody head tracing the course as she slid down the wall. Dead before she hit the floor, I suspected. But there was something odd about the smear, something I couldn't put my finger on yet. Like a name that's on the tip of the tongue but just that far out of memory's reach.

"It's wrong, isn't it?" I said.

The detective sucked his lower lip. "Yeah, but damned if I can put my finger on why."

"So you phone up a history professor to guide your hand?"

"Don't be cute, Brian. You know you're good at figuring out stuff."

Foster and I had known each other since grade school.

"I have a colleague who's good at the *Times* crossword, too. A real whiz. I don't see you calling him up."

"Maybe later. If you bomb."

"Thanks." I looked at the blood smear some more, then took a minute to scan the room. A typical bedroom in a typical house.

"You have to admit this is a far cry from murder in ancient Rome," I said.

I should explain that I teach history at Guilford University. But everyone knows that my sideline is writing mystery novels set in the Roman Empire — three to date. I prefer to use my detective skills, such as they are, in fiction.

There wasn't much else of interest in the bedroom, so Foster and I just stared at the blood-stained bedroom wall and shoved our hands deeper into our overcoat pockets even though the room was overheated. Death put a chill in the air.

"Could the victim might have been dying, or even dead, before the gunshot?" I asked.

"You think?"

"It's an idea."

"I wonder if forensics can tell."

The professor and the detective. We were both in our 30's and I like to think still boyish in our own way. I ran my fingers through a shock of sandy hair as unruly as it had been when I was a kid. Of course it didn't help that Foster had phoned at six, which coincided with the ringing of my alarm clock, and I'd just thrown on some clothes and raced over. Most people would say we were hometown boys made good. Foster, well, he was thicker than he had been as a teen, but he still had a smooth face, dense dark hair, and heavy eyebrows over nearly black eyes.

He was expounding. "Trish Vanderark is the suicide. If it is suicide," he qualified. "Young blond woman, part-time student," he said. "Darla Hoffman is the distraught housemate. Quite a bit older. Says she probably drove Trish to it. 'Loved her to death' was the phrase she used."

"Were they a couple?" I asked.

"Yeah, been together a year or so. In this house at least. According to a neighbor. Maybe they were together before that. You know them?"

"No. Why?"

"You know," he shrugged.

"Lesbians," I pointed out, "actually have more in common with straight men than with gay men, Foster."

He pondered that. "Makes sense, I suppose."

"Darla Hoffman still here?"

“At a friend’s place. I’ve got a woman officer keeping an eye on her.”

“Okay, well you got me out her at the crack of dawn, so give me the run down,” I said.

“Let’s go sit in the living room, Brian.”

2

I folded my lanky frame into an overstuffed chair with a tired cushion that seemed to rest on the floor, while Foster straddled a sofa arm. There wasn’t much to his account. A middle-aged neighbor, Stanley Wodz, heard the women arguing in the night.

“Which way does he live?”

Foster pointed. “His bedroom faces the one where we found her.”

I nodded for him to continue.

“Apparently, the argument went on for about an hour,” said Foster. “It was right around midnight, according to Wodz, when the shouting stopped. He went to bed. Half an hour later, just as he was dozing off, he heard what sounded like a gunshot. He got up and raised a window.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“Curious, I suppose.”

“Someone starts shooting in my neighborhood, I’m going to get on the floor and stay there, not stick my head out the window.”

“Maybe Wodz isn’t as bright as you are,” commented Foster.

“Anyway, he says he waited several minutes, peering over here. Then, while he was still looking out the window, trying to see if anything was going on, he says, he heard a crash.”

“He actually see anything?”

“Nah, says the shade was down. He was just looking, maybe thinking he’d see a shadow or something. You know how people do that.”

“Yeah.”

“The crash was probably Darla Hoffman breaking down the bedroom door. Wodz didn’t say that, but that’s likely what it was. He just heard a crash of some sort.”

“She strong enough to do that?”

“Built like a linebacker.”

Curious how often stereotypes turn out to be true.

“Anyway,” Foster continued. “Wodz figured something bad had happened, picked up the phone, and called 911. According to the 911 operator, a call from Hoffman came in a couple of minutes after the call from Wodz.”

“The neighbor called first?”

“Right. But the calls weren’t far apart.”

I looked around the living room. Cozy, if you went in for second-hand furniture and bare walls. The place itself wasn’t bad for a rental though, considering. Wood floors. Fireplace looked unused, except for some old soot. Chimney probably needed cleaning. Not a lot of personal items. No knickknacks. Maybe the women hadn’t been together long enough to collect any. Or maybe they weren’t the type to go in for knickknacks.

A lamp had been knocked over.

“That happen during the argument?”

Foster riffled the pages of his notepad. “According to Officer Buckley’s report” — Buckley, that was his name — “Hoffman and Vanderark scuffled and the lamp got broken.”

“What was Darla Hoffman doing when the police arrived?”

“Buckley says she was sitting on the floor next to the body crying her eyes out.”

“Front door unlocked?”

“Hoffman apparently unlocked it after she called 911. The floor was wet.”

“Huh?”

“Hoffman told Buckley that she was in the shower when she heard the gunshot. The door between the bedroom and the bathroom was locked on the bedroom side. The door into the bedroom from the hall also was locked. So she broke down the hall door and found Trish Vanderark slumped against the wall. The gun was still in Vanderark’s hand.”

“How’d she do it?”

“Vanderark?”

“Yeah.”

“According to the medical examiner, looks like she put the gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger. Pretty butch, huh?”

I shrugged. How would I know?

“Gun kept in the bedroom?” I asked.

“Drawer of the nightstand. It was Darla Hoffman’s revolver. Registered. Nothing wrong there.”

“Convenient.” I drew in a breath and blew out. “Locked room murder?”

“That’s where I’m going with this, Brian. Question is: How’d Hoffman do it?”

“If she did.”

“Right. If.”

3

Later that morning in my office, I folded myself into the university-issue swivel chair behind my desk, rotated toward the window, and gazed out on Brixton Woods, the center of the old campus at Guilford University. Snow had begun to fall again. Consciously setting aside the images and ideas of earlier, I thought I’d spend a few idle moments mentally plotting what I hoped would be the next of my Roman mystery novels.

Gaius Chrysanthus Capito examined the rust-colored stain that marred the frescoed wall. “A pity, that,” he thought, musing on the bloody smear that now defaced the handsome domestic scene. The caw of a crow broke his concentration, causing him to look toward the window....

A real crow’s caw broke into my attempted reverie. Even my ancient Roman was seeing blood on a wall. I refocused, my eyes drawn to the flock of crows huddled on some branches near my window. Not “flock,” I remembered. Crows in literature often were used as symbols of evil or the macabre. Huddled together, they were, technically speaking, a “murder.”

I had asked to see the crime scene photos, which Foster promised to send over. He had urged me to give the case my closest, and quickest, attention, as if I didn’t have classes to teach or papers to correct or, okay, a novel to plot.

“Just think about it, please, Brian? Higher-ups in the Police Department are eager to write ‘suicide’ on the file and stamp it ‘closed.’”

“You don’t believe it was suicide.”

“No, and neither do you.”

“I know,” I said.

Time, I thought, to shrug into the shabby toga of G. Chrysanthus Capito, my fictional detective. Where would Gaius start? This wasn’t the kind of case that called for politely kicking (Romans didn’t use their knuckles to knock) at doors and asking pointed questions.

Officer Buckley, after securing the house, getting a nearly hysterical Darla Hoffman packed off to a friend’s home, and calling in the evidence team and the medical examiner, had already done all the necessary door-knocking, according to the report Foster shared with me. Only Stanley Wodz had been awake. All of the other neighbors were either away or slept through the whole business.

According to Wodz (so said Buckley by way of Foster), Darla Hoffman and Trish Vanderark had been decent enough neighbors except for the occasional loud argument. Over the backyard fence, Wodz had found out that Hoffman worked at a local furniture factory and Vanderark waited tables at the Dixie Diner when she wasn’t in classes at Guilford. The Dixie Diner was a half-step above a greasy spoon, and Trish Vanderark was a late-bloomer as a college student. She’d been in her late twenties, Wodz thought, and Hoffman looked to be in her early forties, he said. Foster confirmed that both guesses were on the mark. Asked what they fought about, Wodz couldn’t say. He could hear the loud voices but couldn’t make out more than a word here and there.

There was a tap on my open office door.

“Professor?” I swiveled toward the sound of Angie Lyter’s voice.

“A police officer brought this.” The departmental secretary handed me a large brown envelope. She managed not to roll her eyes. Maybe she was getting used to law enforcement types showing up in the History Department.

I closed the door behind her before opening the envelope and spreading the photos across my desk. The police photographer had panned his camera around the bedroom. Four photos told the story, one shot toward each wall. Against the first wall stood a dresser beside a door, presumably a closet. The next photo showed the room’s outer wall with a single, wide window with a room-darkening roller shade, no curtain. Underneath the window was a low cedar chest. Continuing the pan, the next wall held what would be the door to the bathroom, still closed, likely still locked.

The last photo was the most dramatic. At left was the bed, probably a queen-size, still neatly made. At right was the shattered doorframe and the open door. In between, slumped against the wall, head bent forward, legs splayed as if

she were an abandoned rag doll, was the body of Trish Vanderark. Between her body and the bed, her arm looked as if it had been flung outward by the gun's recoil. The revolver was still in her grip.

I reached in a desk drawer and pulled out a magnifying glass worthy of Sherlock Holmes. Then I looked very closely at each photo in turn. Even Sherlock's 19th-century technology seemed light years beyond that available to old Gaius.

4

When all else failed, Gaius Chrysanthus hied himself to a corner wine bar to soak up any gossip that might help solve a case. I settled for coffee at the counter of the Dixie Diner.

The owner, standing behind the counter, was a self-described "scrawny old dame," a town legend. I didn't know her real name. Maybe no one did. For some long-forgotten reason, everyone called her Bubbles.

Mid-afternoon. The lunch crowd was gone. I was the only customer. Bubbles set a mug of coffee in front of me and went back to wiping down the counter.

"I heard about Trish Vanderark on the news." I lied, but I knew the story had been on the radio. And I could hear Bubbles' radio playing in the kitchen. She probably kept it on all day.

"Damn shame." Bubbles continued wiping. "She was a nice kid. Too good for that partner of hers."

"Darla Hoffman."

"Yeah."

I floated out an idea. "I heard they argued a lot."

"Jealous one, that Darla gal." Anyone under fifty was a "gal" to Bubbles.

"Yeah?"

Bubbles finished wiping and leaned back against the counter.

"They were jawing in the back booth just the other day. Got pretty heated. I caught a snippet or two, walking back and forth to the kitchen."

"What did they argue about?"

"Darla accused Trish of seeing someone else." Bubbles caught herself up. "You a friend of theirs?"

“Never met either one. Just heard the report on the radio. Curious. You know?”

“Yeah. Well, all I can tell you is that Trish was a pretty nice girl. Good worker, as students go. Neat. On time.”

“You say she and Darla argued yesterday?”

“Before Trish’s shift. She was here to work the dinner hour.”

“Darla stick around?”

“Nah, she stamped out in a huff. Trish came round to the back, put on her apron, and went to work. Later on, when she had a break though, I saw she was writing a card. Showed it to me. Left it in back, saying she’d give it to Darla when things had cooled down.”

“Mind if I take a look at it.”

Bubbles shot me a look but then shrugged. “Suppose it doesn’t make any difference now.” She disappeared into the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and returned with the card. The flowery front said “I’m Sorry.” Inside, Trish had written in a sloping backhand, “Darla, I know you find it hard to believe sometimes, but you are my one true love. Honestly. Love, Trish.”

I read the message a second time and handed it back. I must have hmm-ed.

“Hm, what?” Bubbles asked.

“Just noticing the handwriting, that’s all.”

The bell on the door jangled, and Bubbles and I turned. Against the outside light, the silhouette could have been a man or woman. Thickset, parka, jeans, boots. Then, as the figure came closer, I realized it was a woman.

“Darla,” Bubbles greeted her in a neutral tone.

Hoffman nodded. “I came for Trish’s things.”

Bubbles shrugged a sigh and headed for the kitchen.

I said, “I was sorry to hear about your partner.”

Hoffman’s dull, lifeless eyes found my face after a beat or two. It was plain that she hadn’t slept yet. She got a word out,

“Thanks.”

Bubbles returned with a shopping bag and handed it to Hoffman, who

muttered thanks again and shambled out.

As Hoffman retreated beyond the glass, Bubbles pointed a gnarled, accusing finger. "I heard her say she'd kill Trish if she ever caught her cheating on her."

"Yeah?"

"Guess Trish saved her the trouble. Sad, don't you think?"

"You think she was cheating on her?"

"Trish was young and pretty. Who knows. But, no, I don't think so. I think she was being like she said in that card — honest."

I paid for the coffee and started back to the campus.

5

Walking washes the mind, thought Gaius Chrysanthus. The flapping of his sandals on the cobblestones of a quiet side street on the Esquiline Hill blended with distant sounds in other streets — oxcart drivers shouting at their beasts, street-sellers hawking their wares....

I could use that, I thought, hanging my coat behind the office door and rubbing the chill out of my hands. Rome was probably a good deal warmer than Indiana, at the moment. Sandals indeed. I kicked off my wet shoes, wondering why I hadn't put on boots this morning, then remembering that I'd left the house in a rush. I padding over to my desk in stocking feet and opened the drawer where I'd place the envelope of crime scene photos. I looked at the one that showed Trish Vanderark lying dead against the bedroom wall, her arm flung out still holding the revolver. I could have just looked at the image in my mind's eye. It was accurate. But I wanted to double-check. Then I punched in Foster Newkirk's phone number.

He answered on the second ring.

"The trouble with locked room murders is you get to thinking the room actually was locked."

"Uh. Okay," said Foster.

"I assume you've been keeping an eye on Darla Hoffman. I saw her at the Dixie Diner awhile ago."

"Yeah, I've had a man watching her. She told the policewoman she wanted to be alone about midmorning."

"Have you let her back into the house?"

“No, it’s still a crime scene — for now. I’m not going to be able to hold it for long.”

“You won’t have to.”

“You figured it out?”

I told Foster my reasoning. I told him about the doors, the fireplace, the lamp, and so on. It must have been convincing. When I finished, he said, “Jeez, you make it sound obvious.”

I let the comment slide.

“From what I saw this afternoon, Foster, Darla Hoffman is a mess. If you want my advice, confront her. My guess is she’ll simply give it up.”

6

The next day, Foster Newkirk invited me for coffee. Not at the Dixie Diner.

We met in the Student Union coffee shop. Midmorning. A few students sat at scattered tables studying or quietly talking, but the place was mostly empty. Foster and I sat across from each other in one of the booths, mugs of coffee steaming between us. With a little imagination we could have been back in school together.

“I knew,” said Foster, tapping the nail of his index finger on the table top, “I knew something wasn’t right. It was the blood smear. It was above the splatter, rather than below it.”

“There are ways that could have been done, but, yeah, your intuition was accurate.”

“Someone shoots himself — herself — through the mouth, it’s gonna blow out the back of the skull and splatter the wall,” he continued. “Which it did.”

“So the only way she could have made the downward smear of blood is if she’d been crouching when she shot herself. That way the splatter would have hit the wall and she might — might — have been thrown up against the wall and then slid down leaving the smear of blood above the spatter. But that was pretty unlikely.”

“Very unlikely,” he agreed.

“It seemed more likely that Trish Vanderark’s head was bloodied before she was shot, or before she shot herself,” I said. “During the argument, Darla Hoffman might have hit her with enough force to bloody the back of her head

but not kill her. Trish, hurting, fed up, goes to the bedroom, locks herself in, gets out the gun, slumps against the wall leaving the smear. Then she kills herself and that leaves the spatter.”

“Sure. That works. But like you suggested, that wasn’t what happened.”

“No, I was pretty sure it wasn’t. There didn’t seem to be anything lying around that Hoffman could have hit her with. Sure there was the broken lamp but it was a pretty flimsy affair. There was no evidence that it was used as a weapon. It simply got knocked over and broken.”

“But you were right when you said yesterday that you wondered if Vanderark was dead or dying before she was shot.”

“The timing was off. That was the real clue. There were two unaccountable delays, if Wodz could be believed. One was between the end of the argument and the gunshot, and the other was between the gunshot and the crash of Darla breaking down the bedroom door. Why?”

“Well,” said Newkirk, “your theory proved to be true. Hoffman and Vanderark argued, which led to a scuffle. The lamp wasn’t all that got broken. Hoffman confessed that she shoved Trish, who lost her footing and fell, cracking her skull on the fireplace hearth. Literally. That’s when Darla Hoffman panicked. Trish Vanderark was either dead or certainly looked dead to Darla.”

“Big time panic was my guess, because she knew that people — Bubbles at the Dixie Diner for one — had heard her say that she’d kill Trish if she caught her cheating on her. Now Trish was dead, or seemed to be. And she was sure to be blamed.”

“So,” Foster picked up the narrative, “she carried Trish into the bedroom and set her against the wall, leaving the smear in the process. Then she got her gun and put it in Trish’s hand, stuck the barrel in Trish’s mouth, and pulled the trigger.”

We both shuddered at the cold calculation that must have taken.

Foster swallowed some coffee and continued, “Her whole motive was to cover up the fact that Trish was already dead or at least dying. The exit wound would hide the fact that Trish’s head had been bashed in by the fall against the brick hearth.”

“I can’t even imagine what that would take to do that to your lover,” I said.

Foster took another noisy slurp. “Hoffman would have been running after that,” he continued. “Her clothes are blood-splattered. She tears them off — by the way, how’d you know she stuffed them up the chimney?”

My mouth twitched as I suppressed a smirk. “She would have gone back to clean off the hearth, which was the only spot in the room that seemed a likely

place to crack one's head. There were no fireplace tools because they didn't use the fireplace. But it had been used in the past. Some soot had fallen into the empty firebox. I asked myself why. What had dislodged it? The chimney was handy. Where else could she put her bloody clothes so they probably wouldn't be found? Hoffman shoved her clothes into the chimney flue. Simple, huh?"

"Sure, sure. Simple. Okay," Foster continued. "So Hoffman then runs to the bathroom, comes through to the bedroom, and locks the hall door. Then she goes back to the bathroom and showers. Even at a run, that takes a few minutes. When she finishes the shower, she throws on a robe, breaks down the bedroom door, and crosses the room to lock on the bathroom door. The illusion is complete. Both doors appear to have been locked when Trish was shot."

Newkirk continued, "When we confronted Hoffman, she broke down and confessed to everything. If she had stonewalled and if you hadn't suggested looking in the chimney for her bloody clothes, we probably would have been forced to label Vanderark's death a suicide."

"No. There was something else."

Foster Newkirk's dark eyebrows rose.

"In her panic, as much as she was able to create the scene as she wanted it, she still made one mistake," I said.

I blew across my cup, but it was just for effect.

"Well?"

I took a sip of lukewarm coffee. "I didn't realize it until I went to the Dixie Diner. Do you remember where the gun was?"

"Sure. In the Vanderark girl's hand. What's that got to do with the Dixie Diner?"

"Which hand?"

Foster looked into the air above my head to picture the scene. Finally he said, "The right. Yeah. Sure, of course. Her right hand."

"The card Bubbles showed me, the one that Trish had written... it was obvious from her handwriting that Vanderark was left-handed. You do anything as drastic as shoot yourself, you're going to use your dominant hand."

Foster held up his hand to protest. "Hoffman would have known that."

"Sure. But when she was facing Trish, Darla's left-hand side was Trish's right.

Even you had to think about it for a moment. In a panic, it was an easy mistake for Hoffman to make. She put the gun in the wrong hand.”

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