

WITHOUT A TRACE

Ruth Long knelt and dug her hand under the clothing of the bottom dresser drawer to lift the garments out. These would be the last of Mary's things—her sister now deceased. As her hand neared the center of the drawer, she heard the crumple of paper. She fished out a legal-size manila envelope. Ruth cocked an eyebrow.

A typed label read:

FOR MY SISTER RUTH—PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL.

“That's strange,” Ruth murmured. Mary, her sister had never mentioned any letter and the lawyer said Ruth had received all legal papers.

“Oh well.” From a scarred desk, she picked up a letter opener, slit the envelope open and drew out a sheaf of papers. Under a paper clip lay half a dozen pages, typed and single spaced.

Her curiosity whetted, Ruth pulled out the desk chair, sat down and read.

My Dearest Ruth,

If you're reading this it's because I'm dead. For the past several years, I've carried a dreadful secret and I want to get the weight off my chest.

Do you remember that pond scum, Ryan Brockton? The man married to my sweet daughter Ellen? Well, when he died the doctor wrote on the death certificate “Death by myocardial infarction (heart attack)” That wasn't the case, Ruth. I killed him.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Ruth clutched at the armrests of the chair and drew several deep breaths. The room swam before her eyes. Minutes passed. Finally, breathing normal, she went on.

I'm not sorry, Ruth. For all intents and purposes, that slime ball killed my Ellen. Not by knife or gun, but by mental, physical, and verbal abuse. For too long, my daughter kept the abuse from that piece of garbage to herself.

One day, while visiting Ellen, I inadvertently walked into the bedroom while she was undressing. Ellen immediately ran into the bathroom, but not before I saw the black and blue welts on her shoulders and thighs. She claimed she had fallen down the stairs. I knew better. I begged, pleaded with her to leave Ryan. My daughter refused and a few months later she was dead.

I flew back to New York as soon as I heard of her death. She died of an embolism, the hospital said. Ellen had had a heart murmur since childhood and that rat, Ryan, exacerbated the condition.

At the funeral, I met Ryan's former squad-car partner, Alex Marino. We exchanged phone numbers and I made sure to keep in touch. He informed me of Ryan's whereabouts. Two years later, when Ryan took early retirement from the NYPD and left for St. Augustine, Florida, I packed up and followed.

My plans firmly fixed in my mind by then. I landed a job with the medical examiner's office as a cleaning lady. Can you imagine that, me, a graduate of Wellesley?

I used my maiden name, added gray to my hair to appear older than my fifty-five, wore frumpy clothes and had another photo ID made. It worked.

After two months on the job and ingratiating myself with the ME (brought him freshly ground coffee and pastries), and while on a coffee break, I jokingly asked him if such a possibility existed as the perfect murder.

He laughed, then leaned closer. "Why, you want to knock somebody off?"

"There was this boy in fourth grade who dumped me," I said.

The ME laughed again. "Okay. Yes, I know a method, but don't tell anyone because I'll deny it. Besides, it's almost impossible to succeed. You have to be at least two feet from the intended victim and they must not suspect anything."

"Then what?" I asked.

"You use cyanide vapor. The victim must inhale it for three seconds. The cyanide dissolves in the bloodstream without a trace and the victim appears to have had a heart attack from natural causes. Of course, cyanide in that form is difficult to produce and handle and most important, the killer must not inhale the vapor himself."

I said, "But I've always read and heard cyanide smells of burnt almonds."

He answered, "That's true, but if used like I said, only a minute amount disperses in the air, and, unless someone else is in the room, the smell fades in seconds. Or the killer can remove the almond scent another way."

"Which is ...?"

"Ammonia. Like in cleaning solutions. It'll mask the odor completely. Well, excuse me, I have another corpse to attend to."

He left and I had my answer. I hit the chemistry books and built a lab in my garage. In Florida, hordes of senior citizens indulge in hobbies from pottery to building planes in their garages, so I didn't draw attention. It took me a year of long hours and

experimentation, but I did it. Next, I applied for a position with maintenance in the Sheriff's office where Ryan worked as a deputy. I passed the background check and he didn't recognize me. I bided my time, learning the office routine and worked out in a gym to build upper body strength.

I bought a mannequin, filled it with sand and hung weights from the limbs. I practiced manhandling the dummy every day, seven days a week.

Because of his past health problems (drinking), Ryan had a desk job on the graveyard shift.

Finally, the night I had waited three years for came. Around two in the morning, as I routinely mopped and cleaned his office, I drew closer to him and greeted him like always with a cheery, 'Good evening.' He grunted and shuffled papers.

I trundled my cart behind him and out of his line of sight. Hidden amongst my cleaning supplies lay my special mask, gauze, a spray bottle of cleaning ammonia, and cyanide inside a breakable vial. I circled around him, as if to clean like I had done night after night.

I slipped on my mask, held the gauze in my open palm, broke the vial inside, swung the gauze to the front and pressed it over his nose.

He jerked back, but I held him with all my accumulated hate and fury—I had practiced this hold with the mannequin a hundred times. I counted off four seconds, released him and placed his head on the desk.

I sprayed some ammonia around the desk, and, within seconds I had hidden my gauze and vial in my mop pail beneath the dirty water, wheeled my cart to the front of the desk and removed my mask. I sniffed the air—no burnt almonds—only a slight antiseptic

smell of cleaning ammonia. I went to the door and called out to the deputy in the other office.

“I think Officer Ryan is asleep. I don’t want to disturb him, but I wanted to get the trash from under his desk.”

The deputy entered, shook Ryan, took his pulse, checked for a heartbeat, then grabbed the phone to call for an ambulance. The paramedics tried CPR, oxygen and all the rest. At the hospital, the doctor pronounced him dead of a heart attack. Also, no autopsy. Due to the expense, autopsies not performed on heart attack victims unless foul play suspected or the family insisted on one.

They asked me a couple of routine questions and I continued working for another month, finally quit. And you know something? After Ryan’s death, not one person in the sheriff’s office said anything nice about him. He became a nonentity.

Ruth, I have avenged the untimely death of my beloved daughter Ellen. Please forgive me. If you wish to report this to the police, I have enclosed all the details on the other pages. I now go to face God and explain what I’ve done.

Love,

Your sister, Mary.