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## **Local Work**

By

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In Scircleville, along the Moody River, there lives an assassin. Not the garden variety with muscles, guns, a dead-eye stare and bombs in his back pocket, but the kind only the heartland town of Scircleville could produce. A steadfast, upright sort of man, with a strong sense of small-town community and loyalty. The town's forefathers had misspelled its name, not knowing any better and perhaps wishing to err on the side of caution. Thus the redundancy of the first two letters. The townspeople had never once considered correcting that mistake. They chose instead to adhere to that steadfast loyalty and devotion to the forefathers of their community—loyalty shared by Morley Long, hometown killer.

Morely Long belonged to them. He had been born in Scircleville in a small blue-gabled house, had grown up in that same house, attending church camp and the 4-H fair every year. He became an assassin out of natural inclination and ability, leaving Scircleville only when the demands of a job required it, and once in awhile to visit his aunt and cousins in Tipton, a four-hour drive away.

A small, non-descript man with thinning mouse-brown hair, slightly knocked knees, a bunyon on his left foot and the beginnings of a spare tire hedging his waist, Morley Long was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Jaycees and the Rotary Club. His generous gifts to the community allowed for the remodeling of the old stone library on the corner of ninth and Idaho streets, and for the yearly planting of flower beds on Macgalliard Street. Tourists always complimented the town on the lovely riot of flowers blooming all summer from May to the first frost in September, sometimes October. He himself kept a small house near Gladding-McBean park. It was a neat bungalow style place painted white with moss-green trim. His mother continued to live in the house of his childhood until she'd died four years before and he'd donated the house to the town as a day-care center. Now it was called Curious Minds. Cherry trees and roses surrounded the small greenhouse in the postage stamp back yard, while sugar-maples stretched graceful limbs over the front porch. He kept an orange tabby cat name Crusher who had survived innumerable run-ins with other cats and once a raccoon, and who was now mostly blind with a pronounced limp. Most often Crusher could be seen sprawled across the hump of the lemon and cream striped camel-backed sofa in Morley Long's front picture window.

All in all, Morley was considered a good citizen and neighbor and was well-liked by most every soul in Scircleville.

As assassins went, Morley was quite good. He'd never been caught, never been suspected of any murder he'd actually committed, never missed his mark. He was often in demand. At the same time, he was a model citizen of Scircleville. He paid his bills early and supported all the highschool booster efforts to raise money for band uniforms, for fencing the football field, for the trip to Washington, D.C. to visit the Smithsonian, for a new gym floor, for whatever. He never let dandelions grow in his yard so that they

polluted his neighbors' yards, and more often than not he could be seen mowing the lawns or shovelling snow for those folks on his street who couldn't get around well any longer. And every so often the police chief even asked Morley to donate his time, consulting on a particularly difficult murder case—not that Scircleville had many of those, which of course may be why the police chief found them difficult, not having practice. Generous to a fault, Morely always gave whatever he could. Being such an expert and all.

Once Mavis Mewes accused him of murdering her mother in the old folks home. It was a ridiculous claim of course. Everyone knew that Morley never, ever, worked in town. Still, he felt obligated to clear his name and as it turned out, Myrtle Mewes had died when a leaf from her Foxglove fell into her soup and caused her heart attack. After that, just about everybody in town who had one took a shovel to their own Foxglove, not wanting any like accidents to happen in their families. Morley's Foxglove continued to bloom a lovely blushing pink. He had no family and Crusher knew better than to eat any of Morley's plants, and of course, it was a tool of his trade. Later he and Mavis started dating and could be found line-dancing every Friday night at the Red Rooster, bowling Saturday nights at Clancy's Bowling Alley, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays, having the blue plate special together at the Crossroads café. When Morely wasn't off on a job, of course.

One April morning, several months after Mavis had begun spending the night regularly with Morely, three grim and nervous men knocked on his door. Mavis answered regally in a lavender chenille robe, her still-thick chesnut hair hanging down her back in a long braid. She greeted each man by name—Mayor Hartsel, Police Chief Runyon, and Judge Victor Bartleby, owner of the local paper-bag works. Mavis directed them into the dining room where Morely was eating his breakfast. She brought them coffee and danishes and then retreated into the kitchen as the silence turned thick and turgid.

Not one to be distracted from a good meal, Morely let his uninvited guests stew as he carefully diced up his eggs and bacon, methodically scooping bite-sized amounts of the squishy mixture up onto his toast and into his mouth. When finally he'd mopped up the last bit with a crust, drained his orange juice glass, pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth with a pale green linen napkin, he leaned back in his chair and waited congenially for them to begin.

They each hemmed and hawed one after another, then together, then subsided into a frenzy of eating the untouched danishes Mavis had left for them. The pastries couldn't last forever, however, and eventually their mouths were once again empty, bringing them around again to the matter at hand. Before the silence could stretch to the point of absolute absurdity, the Mayor at long last began an explanation in his slow, tedious way, releasing each word in much the same way that a skinflint parts with his money, grudgingly, one aged penny at a time.

"You see, Morely, Don Kipper's becoming a problem. Something more than we can handle in the usual ways. Hasn't broken any laws that we can catch him at, and his lawyers are too damned good to get around for a frame. Even if we could, he's got something hard on us. Don't know what."

"Been sleeping with Alice, too," Runyon tossed out in his sharp, ratcheting way, impatient to have it all out, now that Hartsel had broken the ice. "You'd think the man would have more respect for me. My own daughter-in-law. Everybody's already talking."

Morely nodded sagely, certain where this was going. They were asking for his professional help. He let them go on, though his mind was already made up and they would not change it. Still he was willing to let them explain the particulars before he gave

them his flat out refusal if it would make them feel better. Nothing personal. Business never was. Just that he had policies.

“We wouldn’t even have thought of coming to you if he hadn’t stirred things up with this whole petition he’s got going,” griped Bartleby, who had most to lose. “But he’ll have inspectors and government people tracking through here like mice in a candy factory, and then you know what will happen.

It wasn’t really a question. Morely merely raised his eyebrows and looked naively from man to man, letting them explain it to him.

“I’ve got to put my kids through college yet and my wife is used to certain things. I can’t just stop with all that and not raise suspicions,” Bartleby continued. He wasn’t really hitting on the real problem, which was that he’d taken up gambling in hedge funds and had overextended himself considerably, even to mortgaging his house and factory. He was counting on everything working out as planned in order to pay off his debts so that no one would ever find out how low he’d sunk.

Not that Morely thought he would. The man was too far down the left-hand path and any money made off this deal would go back in the market. And Bartleby wasn’t likely to get any better with his choices. Like every other gambler, Bartleby would be thinking that his luck was about to turn on the latest hot tech stock tip, and of course it wouldn’t. He’d be financially ruined, and his career as a judge would be down the toilet when people found out he’d borrowed on the city pension fund. His friends would drop him, his wife would leave him . . . . Morely could understand, even sympathize to some extent, with his situation. After all, good men did bad things sometimes. Who knew that better?

“It’s really not good for the town. Kipper claims it will boost tourism dollars, and he’s right so far as that goes, but the costs will outweigh those gains.” Hartsel sounded like he was still trying to convince himself.

What he said might or might not have been true, Morely didn’t know, but the fact of the matter was that, like Bartleby, Hartsel was spinning this in the best possible light for their plight. They thought if they could get Morely’s sympathy, he’d take care of Kipper.

Truth be told, Morely didn’t like the man much either. Kipper was as smarmy-slick as an insurance salesman. And a killer. Not that Morely could reproach him much on that count, but Kipper was messy and vicious. The three businessmen sitting around his breakfast table would be incensed if they knew. Not that they weren’t here on an errand of death themselves. But they approved of Morely. Don Kipper hadn’t asked permission.

But he still wasn’t going to take a job in town. Once he did that, sooner or later, someone would decide he wasn’t safe for the kids, wasn’t a good influence, shouldn’t be allowed to live in Scircleville any more. Sooner or later, they’d run him out of town on a rail. His being there would be an intolerable risk to their own safety. And these three men would lead the lynch mob. He smiled, a gentle thoughtful smile. He could afford to think of them gently, as if children run amok.

Still, he’d let them ask. It was easier to do it that way. Let them have their arguments, their pleading and ranting over Kipper. They could vent themselves and go away feeling better about that, even if they didn’t get their own way.

Their reactions to his declining their rather generous offer were met, as he expected, with first disbelief and then rageful expostulations. Morley reminded them of

his policy with obdurate repetitiveness until they realized they really weren't going to get his cooperation.

There was loud scraping of the wood chairs across the oak floor, then furious mutterings and stomping feet as they evacuated the parlor. The echo of the slammed door still reverberated in through the Victorian bungalow when Mavis swept back into the room.

"It'll take some work, getting those out," Morely sighed on his hands and knees from the floor where he'd been examining the damage to the honey colored oak. "Ought to have a rug here for this sort of thing. I'll call Karl and get an appointment."

Mavis just sniffed, her foot tapping.

"You ought to bill them for it. Bulls in a china shop. No respect for other people's things. You'd think they'd been raised better," she fumed.

Morely stood, giving her that slow unfettered smile, so much like a delighted child. She didn't ask about the meeting. Morely wouldn't have told her anyway.

The summer progressed, with attacks and denouncements every day in the paper, one side against the other delivered in sly slices then angry axe-blows. Mostly Morely read the entertainment, weather and sports sections and then filed the paper away in the recycling bin. Mavis, on the other hand, read the accounts avidly, often exclaiming and then reading sections to Morely as she marched up and down, hand slapping her thigh. He didn't want to know, but he didn't want to deprive Mavis either, so he listened, nodding and frowning in the appropriate places. She was glorious in her temper, and he watched her with all the quiet admiration he lent to the brilliantly sparking fireworks on the fourth of July, his eyes blinking owlshly at her.

As spring warmed into summer, the rose bushes and hydrangeas in his garden swallowed in bright pink, yellow, red and white blooms. His tomato and pepper plants hung heavy with fruit, his melons and squashes swelling beneath drooping leaves and buzzing bees.

Morely spent his mornings in the garden, pulling weeds, deadheading flowers, adding a bit of mulch or fertilizer, winding the trailing creepers up onto the trellises, and moving the slow dripping hose from this bed to that. It was a great joy in his life. It had been the joy in his life, until Mavis.

That most robust of women had joined a number of clubs and charities in town, and now found herself on the fair board, and then on the founders' day parade committee; now selling baked goods outside of the Safeway to raise money for the animal shelter, now decorating the civic center for the annual Taste of Scircleville barbeque and chili cook-off. Morely saw her in the evenings, often cooking her dinner, and had begun pondering asking her to marry him.

The July 5<sup>th</sup> paper had a headline that read:

“Corporate Baron Don Kipper Dies, Coroner Calls It Natural Causes.”

Ordinarily Morely wouldn't have read the front page, but the headline was so large and he had unrolled the paper to lay it next to Mavis' plate for when she got up. She'd helped out with the Fourth celebrations and he'd let her sleep in. She deserved it.

There wasn't much to the story. And of course he couldn't call up Phil Runyon. The man hadn't spoken to him since that day in April. It appeared that Kipper had been boating with his family, had overdone it in the heat, had drunk too much alcohol, and that night during the fireworks, had keeled over of a massive heart attack.

Morely wondered at the coincidence.

He snatched up the phone on the first ring, not wanting to wake Mavis.

“Hello?” he said absently, turning the paper over.

“Morely? Phil Runyon here.”

“Oh. Hello Phil.”

“Don’t want to keep you, but we wanted to say thanks. I covered for you on the scene. No need to worry on that front. You really came through for us. Don’t worry about the— uh, compensation. We’re good for it buddy.”

It all came out in a rush and Morely had hardly the chance to say “But, it wasn’t—” before Phil had hung up the phone.

Morely sank into his seat, forgetting to take the breakfast tray to Mavis. Her sunnyside eggs congealed on the plate as they cooled, and still he stared out the window, not seeing the cars driving by, the fluttering of the butterflies on the peace roses lining his front walk.

“Good morning,” Mavis yawned, pulling her robe tight as she wandered down the stairs. “How sweet! You made breakfast.” She reached over and took a strip of bacon. “It’s cold. Morely? What’s the matter?” He waved the paper at her and she took it.

Where would he go? He couldn’t stay in Scircleville. Those three thought he’d killed Kipper and they’d tell everyone else, or threaten to, which would be as bad. Oh not right away, but the next time. Leverage.

Morely’s throat contracted and his breath wheezed in his chest.

“That’s awful,” Mavis said. “But I didn’t think you knew him that well.”

“I didn’t.” It came out strangled.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I’ll have to move.” Morely throat hurt and felt like crying. “They asked me to do it, you see. And they think I did. Sooner or later someone else will find out. Secrets don’t stay secrets in a town this small. Scircleville won’t stand for it. Not in my own backyard. They’ll think I’ve betrayed them. They’ll want me gone. I’ll be too dangerous. Where will I go?”

Mavis sat down opposite, her brow wrinkled as she thought.

“It says natural causes here.”

“With me it always says natural causes. Or accident. But you know those three. They’ll be so proud of themselves and what they think I’ve done that they’ll be spouting it out after their first beer on bowling night.”

“Oh. Dear.” Mavis stood and went to the window, her hands tight around the paper. She stood there awhile, though Morely didn’t notice the time passing. He continued to rock back and forth, hands wringing together.”

“I put the foxglove in mother’s soup,” she announced at last. Morely hardly heard her. “She was tired and fretful and asked me to take care of it. I hated to do it, but I could hardly ask you. We all know you don’t work in town. I don’t know why anyone would ask you to. Everybody knows.”

She fell silent. Morely at last began to process her announcement. He straightened in his chair.

“Everybody knows. I heard them when they came to hire you. But they’re grudge holders. You hadn’t thought of that. I went to school with Phil and Victor’s my dad’s crony. I’ve known them all my life. Better than you. They’d have come after you. I didn’t want you to lose your lovely home. I didn’t want to lose you. I thought, if the foxglove worked once, why not again? No one would suspect you. Everybody knows.

And I made a tea from the foxglove and mixed it in Don's iced tea at the park—it would look natural.”

She turned to look at him, her eyes fierce. “And it did work. And it did look natural.”

“But Mavis, don't you see? While I didn't work in town, I was safe. Now everyone will worry about their own food, their own water, their cars and their homes. They won't suffer me much longer.”

She sank down on the floral couch. “I'll have to tell Phil and Victor and Brad it was me.”

“No!” Then more gently, taking her hand. “It won't be any better. They'll have the both of us to blackmail. They'll know I won't let anything happen to you.”

“We'll stop seeing each other. Then they won't be able to touch you.”

“Will you marry me?”

“Morely! This is no time to make jokes!” Mavis yanked her hand out of his and stomped across the room, rattling the decorative plates on the mantle, color flagging her cheeks. He watched her, cotton clogging his throat. There was an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach, like he had the flu. He said nothing.

“I'll admit killing mother made me feel . . . bad. But Kipper. That was— I felt— It was like— It was perfect. I want . . . I want to do it again.”

Her hands fluttered together like restless birds. She reached out to pick up a crystal paperweight, setting it back down without looking at it. She passed the length of the mantle and along the window seat, shifting the ornaments, picking them up one after another with audible clicks and thumps, her lip caught between her teeth. She was waiting

for him to speak, to react. Morely said nothing. He could not push words past the clenching of his throat, even if he knew what to say. So he sat perfectly still and silent.

“I’ll just— I’ll collect my things and leave right now.” Mavis went up the stairs without looking at him, her chin quivering. Morely listened to the creaking as she paced about, heard the thump of shutting drawers, the squeak of the closet door, running water, the flush of the toilet.

Slowly he rose, went to the table and wrote a note: Don’t leave. Wait for me.

He shut the door in his quiet careful way and ambled down the steps and out the front gate. The day was warm, scented with roses and holleyhocks. The dogwood on the corner had begun to bloom. Someone was already barbequeing and a dog barked on the next block.

He returned well after midnight to a darkened house. His heart thumped. Mavis had left. He paused at the gate, wondering if he should continue on, go to her house. With a shake of his head, he dismissed the thought. He’d see her tomorrow. Or the day after. Soon.

He opened the door and went in, leaving his shoes in the vestibule. He went into the dining room and sat down at the table, leaving the house dark. He started when the light switched on. Mavis sat primly in the window seat, her back straight, her feet and knees together, hands folded in her lap. She had her bag on the floor beside her.

“You stayed?”

“So it would seem. It’s very late.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t think it would take so long.” Morely stood back up, then shifted side to side, curling his toes into the carpet. “I took care of them.”

“Took care . . . ?”

“Not like that. The town would really look at me then. But, it works both ways. Blackmail. They won’t make things difficult. It’s not really smart when you think about it. Trying to blackmail someone in my line of work,” he mused, shaking his head.

“Um.” He cleared his throat. “Would you, I mean, consider really— That is, would you be willing to—”

“No,” Mavis interrupted. “I’d like to marry you. I love you. But you of all people . . . I liked it, and here in town, there is a need. Not full time or anything, but like for instance my mother, or to clean up some of the trash—community service in a way. I think they’d let me, being a woman and knowing how I feel about everyone here. But I know how you feel about your work and about Scircleville, and today it almost fell apart for you. I want you to have your home.” She stood up, gripping her bag.

Morely frowned.

“But— You— I could teach you some things. More than foxglove. And that would be okay. And I still wouldn’t take jobs here. Wouldn’t that be enough?” He looked at her. “I think that would be enough. For me.”

“Are you sure?”

Morely’s heart thumped. He could hear the hope in her voice. He nodded, then went over to her, taking the bag from her hands and pressing a soft kiss on her lips.

“Have you eaten dinner? There’s some chicken and salad. We could eat on the porch. It’s a lovely night.”

Mavis smiled and nodded. “I could make dessert. There are ripe gooseberries.”

“I’ll take your bag back upstairs first.” He watched Mavis walk into the kitchen. He wouldn’t take chances. He was good at accidents, and if he waited until they went out of town, he wouldn’t be breaking policy. Not really. It might take awhile to get them

away together, but he knew how to be patient. He began to whistle and trotted up the stairs, his heart lifting as though full of helium.

End