

## Mail Call

by Virginia G. McMorrow

The sharp snap of bubble gum grabbed my attention as the chief went through the evening ritual of looking for his car keys. "Heading home?" I asked.

"About time, don't you think, Sally?" Nick Fraser, head of security for the college, nodded in time to his chewing. "Although knowing that my daughter and wife are going to be squabbling over the seating plans for the wedding is giving me the willies."

"Think about your retirement."

"Yeah." Nick's smile was uneasy. "If there's anything left after the wedding."

I watched his broad shoulders disappear into the parking lot shadows and waited a while before starting up the golf cart type vehicle to make the security rounds of the two main dormitories and parking lot. I made a slow tour of the first lot and stopped at the far end. There was a ten-year-old Mustang parked outside the wrong dorm. The car belonged to Melanie Curtis, who worked in the college post office. I could see that she still hadn't replaced the broken tail light that both Nick and I had warned her about. Puzzled, I grabbed my flashlight and peered inside, then quickly jerked the door open.

"Melanie? Are you in there, girl?"

When she didn't respond I scanned the inside of the car with my flashlight and saw her slumped over in the back seat with an empty bottle of bourbon and prescription bottle of Valium by her side.

Within minutes, the ambulance arrived, along with Officer Paul Thomas of the village police.

"Damn it, she was just a kid," I exhaled deeply. "I saw her the day before yesterday and we talked about her plans for the weekend. She was just fine."

"Not suicidal?" asked Officer Paul Thomas.

"Not that I ever heard."

"Any reason to suspect foul play?"

"I've no idea. But I do know this isn't her dorm."

"Was she strapped in?"

"No."

Paul pointed to an amber stain on the seat belt. I leaned closer and sniffed bourbon, on her clothes, too.

"You think someone forced the liquor down her throat?"

"Maybe." With gloves on, Paul showed me a ripped photo of Melanie and her boyfriend, Brady. "Lovers' quarrel?"

"They were pretty cozy the other day," I said.

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Brady Forsyth blinked at the two uniforms at his door.

"We need to talk to you about Melanie Curtis."

Brady's green eyes darted anxiously my way. "Has something happened?"

Paul kept his eyes fixed on the teenager until the kid stepped aside to let us in. "Should something have happened?"

"I haven't seen Melanie since yesterday."

"Aren't you her boyfriend?"

Brady's freckled cheeks flushed scarlet. "Melanie said she didn't want to see me anymore."

"Did you have an argument? Did she want to date other guys?"

"No. We were tight."

"Then you must have argued about something, ticked her off-"

Brady slumped against the wall, looking pitifully like a cornered animal. "No."

"Where were you tonight?"

"Here. In the dorm."

"Alone?"

"For most of the night, yeah. But what about Melanie-"

"She's dead." At Paul's harsh words, Brady's face shifted from scarlet to white. I gently nudged him in the direction of his bed before he hit the floor.

Paul handed him a business card. "I'll be in touch."

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Paul knocked lightly on Melanie's dormitory door, under which a light glowed softly. As a tear-stained face greeted us, he kept his expression empty. "Charlotte Deane?"

"Brady just called," the girl sobbed. "What happened?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," I reassured her. "I understand she and Brady were no longer dating."

"Yeah, but it still doesn't make sense."

Paul carefully opened drawers and peered inside, pulling out a parking ticket.

Charlotte made a sour face. "The chief gave her a ticket for the broken tail light. She wasn't too happy with him."

The girl's eyes darted my way. "He tracked her down in the mail room, scolding her in front of her boss."

"When did you see her last?"

"About 6 o'clock tonight. How did she die?" I glanced at Paul, interpreted his nod as approval, and told the girl.

"It looks like she overdosed on pills and booze."

"No way. Melanie wouldn't even take an aspirin. She wouldn't get into drugs she was too straight."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Paul handed Charlotte a business card. "I'll be in touch."

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I walked around Melanie's car, the yellow police tape fluttering in the breeze. Stepping onto the curb, my boot sank into moist earth, still damp from the heavy rains two days earlier. Extricating my foot, I felt a wad of something nasty beneath my heel. Disgusted, I grabbed a partially dry twig and started scraping what looked to be bubble gum from my heel, and thought about Nick. Why hadn't he recognized her car, with the broken tail light, in the wrong lot? Had he been here, looking around?

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"That's too damn bad about the kid." Nick shook his head with regret when I came on duty the next evening. "I took a ride over, saw the Mustang last night, and was tempted to give her another ticket. Paul Thomas called and said a lot of the kids are on some drug or another."

"How come we never heard about it before?"

"Paul said it's recent. But Melanie had prescription drugs. Beats me. Guess I'd better head out." He grabbed the big plastic bag from under the miniature desk.

"Isn't it a little early to be playing Santa?"

"I had to stop in the drug store for my girls. Feminine products," he protested, "you know how foolish I feel?"

"That's an awfully big bag for feminine products."

"I needed to pick up my old lady's bronchitis prescription and a whole mess of other things. You know, ask Daddy to pick up this and that." He popped a fresh wad of bubble gum in his mouth. "Ok, Sal, see you tomorrow."

Not more than five minutes after the chief left, a student car pulled up. Charlie Selden peered out the window with sad blue eyes. "Just heard about Melanie. She was a really nice girl."

"Melanie didn't strike me as a kid that would bail out like that."

"She wouldn't. Brady didn't deserve her. He got the girl I wanted, you know? And another thing, Sally, he's a pretty lousy driver. The chief keeps dropping off tickets in his mail box."

As the kid drove off, I bent to pick up a piece of trash tucked beneath the desk. It was Nick's receipt. Laughing to myself, I read the list of feminine products, tissues, panty hose, aspirin, and- Where was the bronchitis medication?

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"Hey Sal, all's quiet." Nick chewed contentedly on his wad of bubble gum.

"I hope you're not going to chew gum and blow bubbles when you walk your daughter down the aisle," I teased, watching his face, searching for something I wasn't able to identify. "How's the wife feeling?"

For one brief moment, he looked puzzled. "Oh, fine, thanks. The medication always helps."

"What's all that?" I pointed to a pile of parking tickets. "Are you harassing the kids?"

"I don't understand why they always behave when you're on duty."

"Maybe I overlook a lot of minor infractions."

"Maybe you shouldn't. If we don't discipline them, they'll get away with murder."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that someone had, but I didn't. "Why don't you just leave those on the cars?"

"The kids will say they never got them. I'm going to put them in the mailboxes."

"I'll do it. It's getting late."

"Do you really think I'm in a hurry to go home and decide on wedding flowers?"

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"You really have to stop thinking so hard," Paul teased, when he'd caught me, lost in thought, about an hour later.

"If you don't make nice, I won't let you on campus. Come with me over to the main building, will you?"

"What are you looking for?"

"Humor me."

Paul obeyed, watching in wary silence as I turned on the lights in the post office. I stepped behind the old-fashioned grill, facing the open, endless rows of cubbyholes and found Brady's cubbyhole. Inside was a ticket from Nick, along with a plain white envelope. I felt small lumps through the thin material and handed it to Paul.

"You think Melanie was delivering drugs through the mail?"

"No," I said slowly. "I think she saw who did." Searching at random, I found five more tickets with identical envelopes and a parking ticket.

"You think," Paul dropped his voice to a whisper, "she saw Nick deposit those envelopes, along with the tickets."

"No way. Nick's clean. There's got to be another explanation."

"Hey, ok, fine." Paul raised both hands in the air. "I know he's your friend and boss-" He sighed, couldn't find the right words. "But he's got an expensive wedding coming up-"

When I started to leave, he held me back. "Let's talk to Brady."

In uneasy silence, we knocked on Brady's door. Paul pounced on the boy the moment the door opened. "Do you take drugs?"

"Absolutely not. Hey, I wanted to, but Melanie persuaded me to stay away."

Paul produced the envelope from the boy's mailbox. Brady made a valiant effort to look unconcerned, but his fingers were shaking.

"Look, we can do this the easy way, or you can make things hard for yourself."

"Once," he stammered, "only once."

"Mind if I check around?"

"You need a warrant."

"Only guilty people ask for a warrant first. But ok. You just stay on campus until I come back with that warrant."

Paul pulled the door open, and I followed him outside. "How do you think Nick fits into all this?"

"I don't, and I'm going to prove you wrong."

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I saw a shadow swiftly approach the darkened administration building. Tailing the figure to the mailroom, where he retreated behind the grill, my heart sank when I saw who it was.

Nick held a pile of tickets and small white, identical envelopes.

"I was wondering how long it would be before you caught on."

"Put the envelopes down, Nick."

"Do you know what I'm doing?"

"Delivering drugs."

"Delivering placebos. I'm replacing valium with placebos, because someone's dealing drugs on campus through the local pharmacist, who thinks I'm a dirty cop."

In the corridor, the wooden floor creaked, and we both fell silent. Footsteps moved stealthily toward the post office cubbyholes, and I was torn between keeping an eye on Nick and facing the next intruder. I didn't have time to decide when another set of footsteps

approached, and a familiar voice yelled, "Police! Freeze!"

Paul Thomas, poised in a shooting stance, had his .38 aimed at Brady. "Mind taking those envelopes from his inside pocket, Chief? He decided to deliver them early instead of flushing them down the toilet. Just as we figured."

"Sorry it took so long, Paul, but I missed his deliveries twice and slipped in some envelopes to see if he'd bite. Good thing Sally was sharp."

It took a few seconds before events clicked into place. My jaw dropped, as I watched Paul fasten the cuffs on the sullen teenager.

"I didn't kill her. It was an accident. Melanie threatened to go to the cops. I thought," Brady murmured, "if I scared her, it would be enough to stop her. The pills-" Tears won the battle, trickling slowly down his cheek. "They were supposed to be fake, but they weren't. The guy at the drug store told me they were fake. I swear it."

"Don't be mad at Nick," Paul said quietly. "He wanted to clear up the trouble on campus before you took over as chief."

I stared from one man to the other, speechless, and headed out.

"Sally-"

Sighing from a jumble of emotions, I turned on my heel and stared Nick down. "You better invite me to that wedding, Chief, because I intend to string a length of wire across that white carpet and trip you."

"I promise you the best seat in the house."

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