

## SMOKY MOUNTAIN INQUEST

by

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Just after 1:00 a.m., rain slashed Edgar Marconi as he ran from his decade-old sedan, to the steps of the Swain County Sheriff's Department substation. Entering the unoccupied foyer, his wet soles squeaked on the linoleum floor.

One of one hundred counties, deep in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina, Swain County covered five hundred and twenty-eight square miles; twelve of them bisected by the mighty Nantahala River. Twenty-three deputies protected and served just over thirteen thousand residents daily.

The second floor of the station, which loomed across the street from the Bryson City courthouse, housed the office of the deputy's detective squad. The large open room normally buzzed with the energy of male and female officers, both in and out of uniform. Stained Styrofoam cups and half-eaten pastries littered industrial metal desks. Scorched coffee permeated the air. A dozen work areas stood in an erratic configuration within the large room, paperwork strewn atop them.

During the daytime hours, officers worked their cases on computer keyboards. A few old-timers pecked on electric typewriters. Some conversed with irate offenders as well as fielded phone calls.

But, after-hours the mood of the normally adrenaline- and testosterone-charged room changed drastically. The room, devoid of people or activity, seemed as if time stood still until daylight when the law enforcing would begin again. In order to conserve energy and save taxpayers money, central heating, and air was programmed to shut off after sunset only to rumble

on every four hours throughout the night.

Trudging up the stairs, Edgar rounded into the open office of the detective's squad, and halted in his tracks. He clutched the strap of the nylon satchel draped over his shoulder as he took in the room. Nudging his glasses back in place, he inhaled deeply as a rush coursed through his body.

"Over here, Edgar." Sheriff Nathaniel Sands stood sentry across the room, his bear-sized frame taking up the entire open doorway.

Edgar squared his slight shoulders. Going to Sands, he extended his hand, which disappeared into the sheriff's baseball mitt of a grip.

Sands ushered Edgar into his office, sparsely furnished with a desk, and two chairs on either side of it. A halogen lamp illuminated the desktop and a short stack of manila file folders.

"Appreciate your coming in, Marconi." Sands unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on the teetering coat rack in the corner of the room next to the door. "Be interesting to see what you make of this mess. Never again will I allow three separate investigators to gather evidence for a case. Especially one this important."

"Not a problem, Sir," Edgar said, his hand still stinging from the sheriff's grasp. "I know time is crucial in these matters. Especially with the rain and all."

"Yeah," Sands said. "Hope the photos turned out. No re-creating the scene after this storm."

As if to verify the sheriff's words, a whoosh of rain pelted the roof, followed by a surge of wind causing the window behind the desk to reverberate.

Shrugging off his slicker, Edgar said, "I heard over the scanner coming out that the Nantahala's set to rise three feet by morning."

"Don't doubt that."

Edgar draped his dripping jacket onto the hook next to the sheriff's gun belt, studded with

.40 caliber rounds. Leather and the comforting smell of lubricating oil tingled Edgar's nostrils. His eyes locked to the gear and he stroked the butt of the Glock tucked inside its holster.

"Everybody's out on patrol, so no one will bother you."

The sheriff's booming voice pulled Edgar out of his reverence. Slicking back his hair, he stepped to the desk.

Sands tapped the stack of files. "These are each investigator's folder. If you could collate and do . . . whatever it is you do, we'll sort it all out tomorrow. Just leave the disk, and Shelly in records will print up your files for me."

"Everything will be in order." Edgar set his satchel on the desk and pulled out a laptop. When he noticed the distressed look upon Sands's face, he felt a flutter in his stomach and could not meet the sheriff's eyes.

"I'll be discreet, Sheriff. The program's already loaded into the computer. I won't need to use the Internet."

"Shouldn't be anyone in except to make follow-up calls. Rain'll keep them busy. Just pull the door shut if you hear someone. Best if you're out of here by sunup though."

Sands yanked open a desk drawer and withdrew a legal pad, then tossed it atop the folders. "Okay, Marconi, it's all yours. Any questions that come to you, just make notes and I'll have someone address them first thing." Fishing in his pocket, Sands withdrew a ring of keys and held them out. "Be sure to lock up in here. My office key's on there, hell everything's on there. Even the jail cell key, so don't misplace them."

Edgar's eyes grew wide, his mouth dropping slightly open. Taking the key ring, he said, "You're sure about this?"

"I know where to find you," Sands said with a chuckle. "I trust you more than most. Only wish you were with me full-time."

Edgar dropped his head momentarily to study his shiny galoshes.

“Is there anything I should be paying particular attention to, Sheriff?”

“A suspect would be nice,” Sands mumbled. “No, just match up what each deputy found and make note of any differences.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I’ll leave you with it then.” Sands rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Been a long day. Night, Marconi.”

“Good night, Sir. My best to your wife.”

Edgar heard Sands cross the bullpen, then the flick of the light switch extinguishing all but a few desk lamps in the squad room. After a moment, a door slammed, then silence.

Taking a deep breath, Edgar settled into the creaking office chair behind the desk and angled the laptop to face him. Waiting for the computer to boot up, he opened the top file folder and began to read.

Victim: Emily Anna Sanders

Vital Stats: Age: 22, Height: 5’10”

Occupation: Nursing Student

Last Known Whereabouts: Swain County Hospital

Time Last Seen: 5:09 p.m.

Intrigued immediately, he entered the details into the database. He searched for any differences from the first investigator’s findings in the second file, then scanned the third folder, and continued tapping on the keyboard.

Edgar needed no photographs to imagine the grisly murder of the young woman. Petechiae in her left eye was indicative of strangling, but the ear-to-ear gash across her neck was what undoubtedly killed her.

Excited by reading the investigative procedural, he digested two of the files before he pulled an aluminum thermos from his bag and poured hot coffee into the container's lid. Guided by the details, Edgar pictured the death scene. The woman's blouse ripped from its buttons, skirt pulled up to reveal torn panties, shoes found tossed in the bushes nearby.

Taking a sip, he wrote a note on the legal pad:

Why were shoes removed, but not clothing?

Could her height be a factor here?

Edgar thought about the coon hunter and his dog discovering the body. If not for him, it could have been days before anyone found the woman, discarded near the railroad tracks into a bed of kudzu vines three miles outside of town.

"Well, if it isn't, Egg Macaroni. I figured you'd be the Sheriff's paperboy tonight."

Engrossed in his work, Edgar hadn't heard the stocky man standing in the doorway. Arms crossed at his chest, he leaned against the doorjamb, the pose accentuating his well-toned body.

Edgar stuttered, "Christopher. Shouldn't you be on patrol?"

"And you want to be a sheriff's investigator?" Christopher opened his arms wide. "Come on Macaroni, I'm not even in uniform."

Edgar felt his face flush. "I guess I'm just surprised to see you."

"Need any help?" Christopher asked, entering the room and turning around the chair opposite Edgar, to sit with his arms folded to rest on its seatback.

"Thanks, but that's not necessary." Edgar gathered the papers and tapped them on the desk, evening up the pages. "I've got my own system. One that's worked well in the past."

"Right. You practically solved that missing girl case a while back single-handedly, huh? Traced her cell phone calls and e-mails and found her hiding out with the scumbag she met

online. Damned near killed her, didn't he?"

"She left a lot of clues for me."

"It was a big deal, that it was. I know the Sheriff appreciated it. Mayor even gave you a plaque, as I recall."

Repressing the urge to smile, Edgar cleared his throat and pulled off his glasses, then proceeded to wipe them with his shirttail.

"That's all wet, buddy," Christopher said, pulling a bandana from his back pocket, and handing it across the desk.

Edgar hesitated taking it, the royal blue and white colors catching his attention.

"It's clean." Christopher waved it like a flag and laid it on the desk. "Keep it if you want. Got a drawer full of them at home."

"There's no insignia. What do the colors mean?"

Christopher let out a belly laugh. "You gotta' be kiddin' me, man. They're Duke University's colors. You never went to college did you, Macaroni? Shocked everyone, I'll tell you what. Smart as you were all through school." He snapped his chewing gum a couple times, then said, "Did go to prison though, didn't you, Egg?"

Edgar felt the blood rush from his face. He blinked several times, but found no words.

"Yeah, I know all about it. Sorry, Egg. I know how much you always wanted to be a cop. Too bad your hacking career killed that little dream." Christopher suddenly leaned forward, a look of concern on his face. "Hey, does your probation officer know you're working with a computer?"

Easing the lid closed on the laptop, Edgar's heartbeat quickened.

Christopher gave Edgar a disarming smile. "Don't worry about it. It'll be our little secret." He winked and clicked his tongue. "Find anything juicy in there yet?"

"I'm just getting started actually. Not really paying much attention. Loading in the

information. Pretty tedious stuff.”

After a moment, Christopher said, “So, she bled out, huh?”

“How would you know that?”

“Well, it’s in the file.”

“You’re not one of the investigators.” Edgar rifled through a few sheets in the top docket.

“I don’t see your name listed as one of the deputies on-site, either.”

“I wasn’t, but Nolan was, right?”

Recognizing the name, Edgar read one of the folders’ tabs. “Nicole Nolan, yes.”

Christopher smiled, leaning back in his chair, his hands lacing behind his head. “There you go.”

Edgar looked at the bandana and did his best to slow his pounding pulse. Opening the third file, he flipped to the page listing items found on or near the body, reading the details carefully this time.

- 1) Laminated Personal I.D issued by Swain County Hospital--photo matching victim.
- 2) Backpack including wallet, 3 credit cards, Driver’s License--photo matching victim, Wallet contents totaling \$72 cash.
- 3) Blood Spattered Royal Blue/White Bandana. No Insignia.  
Hold for DNA.

Edgar whispered, “Thank you, Emily.”

“What’s that you said, Egg?”

Closing the file, Edgar replied, “Nothing.”

Trying to decide what to do next, Edgar lifted himself from the squeaky chair to stand at

the small window, and peer out. A flash of lightning lit the enormous pines across the road, strangled by ropes of kudzu vines trailing the length of their trunks. Nearly every tree in the forests of the South seemed to be threatened by the invasive greenery reputed to grow a foot a day. The vine left much of the uninhabited areas with the appearance of a looming beast. He thought of Emily Anna's body lying on a sea of green. In three days he supposed her body would have been covered over with new growth.

Thunder rumbled, rattling the windowpane as a thought came to Edgar. In order to entice Christopher, he went back to the desk and opened the second folder to a page listing non-essential information, and then stepped away from the desk to the coat rack.

Looking back at Christopher, Edgar noticed the bulge at the inside of the deputy's ankle. He figured by the size, it must be a .22 tucked in a holster.

“Why aren't you wet, Christopher?”

Leaning forward, attempting to read the exposed sheet on the desk, Christopher said, “What do you mean?”

“It's been raining for hours, but your hair's not even damp. I only ran from my car to the building and got soaked.”

Hands on the sheriff's gun belt, his eyes remaining on Christopher, he waited for the next flash of lightning and ensuing thunder. As the room filled with light and two seconds later a crack, simultaneously, Edgar unsnapped the trigger guard and handcuff's pouch, then eased the Glock from its holster. Taking the cuffs from their sheath, he slipped them into his pants pocket.

Christopher chuckled. “You goin' lawman on me, Egg?”

Engrossed in the police file, Christopher did not look at Edgar as he returned to sit behind the desk. “You're about five foot, six, aren't you, Christopher?”

Christopher tore his attention from the file and glared at Edgar. “Yeah, what about it?”

“Just curious. I always remember you being touchy about your height when we were

growing up. Picked fights on the biggest kids when they teased you.”

Christopher nodded, smiling and clicking his gum. “It’s never been a problem for me.”

“That’s true. Most of the women you date are small. I know Nicole Nolan is. Abigail in evidence lock-up is tiny. Do you date her, too?”

“Why are we talking about my love life, Egg?”

“You wanted the tall girls, but they always shot you down. Laughed at you when you’d ask them out, as I recall.”

“Better watch yourself, Egg.”

“You’ve been waiting for everyone to leave so you could get your hands on these files. Am I right? You’ve probably already taken care of the evidence. I’m sure Abigail and the Sheriff are the only ones with keys to that room.”

“Think you’re pretty smart, don’t you, Egg.”

Edgar challenged Christopher’s gaze.

“What the hell, since no one’s ever going to see you again, I may as well tell you.”

Christopher shrugged. “Bitch had it coming. Saying no to me. Then she kneed me.”

Christopher winced. “Balls still hurt. Man’s gotta’ do what a man’s gotta’ do. Know what I mean, Egg?”

As Christopher lowered his hand to his side, Edgar drew the Glock from his lap and aimed it directly at Christopher’s forehead. “40 beats 22. Every time.”

“What the--”

“Hands in the air.”

Edgar waited for Christopher to comply before rising from his chair, then he eased behind him, gun aimed at Christopher’s back. “Remove your weapon. Nice and slow.”

Shaking his head, Christopher said, “You’re starting to piss me off, Egg.” One hand remaining in the air, he lifted the .22 from its ankle holster.

Edgar snatched the piece and tucked it in the waistband at his lower back.

“Now, lace your hands behind your head,” Edgar said.

Pulling the cuffs from his pocket, Edger performed a maneuver he had practiced for hours until it became second nature. One-handed, he flipped open one cuff and clasped it on Christopher’s wrist.

“Put the other hand down.”

Christopher lowered his other arm and laughed. “This is a big mistake. Who’s going to believe you, Egg?”

Edger placed the .40s muzzle against Christopher’s neck and said, “Edgar. My name is Edgar Marconi, you backwoods punk. And you’re under arrest.”

The ratchet of the other cuff locking Christopher’s hands together silenced his amusement.

Edgar yanked his prisoner to his feet. “You have the right to remain silent--”

“You’ve got no authority to even speak those words.”

“I’m sure the sheriff won’t mind,” Edgar said, fishing Sands’s keys from his pocket.

“You think by doing this you’re going to redeem yourself in the eyes of the law?”

“No,” Edgar said as he nudged Christopher out of the room. “But a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

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