

Mrs Whittaker



by
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“Make no mistake D.I. Crabtree; you’re in very deep shit.”

“I’m aware of that, sir.”

“And shit this deep can easily bury a career as mediocre as yours.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t misunderstand me; the public owes you a debt of gratitude for your work on the Whittaker case.”

“It’s my job, sir.”

“But the journey to this point has caused irreparable damage to the Force’s reputation: withholding information from your superiors; forming a questionable relationship with a suspect – and my God, man – dissecting corpses in a cemetery? You must’ve known the Met couldn’t withstand another—”

*“With respect, sir, it was **one** corpse, and it didn’t take my actions or thirty-eight dead prostitutes to bring shame on the Metropolitan Police: we’d lost the public’s trust long before anyone had heard of Rose Whittaker.”*

“One JCB, six floodlights, nine police officers – on overtime, I might add.” Cresswell’s trying to light a cigarette in a rainstorm, which makes him the biggest idiot in the cemetery.

“Have to ask myself, John; what the fuck are we doing here ... again.”

The rain, like Cresswell, is getting under my skin, and the noise of the excavator makes my head hurt. I put my hand in my coat pocket and root around in the lint. I can’t find the tiny Russian doll Mrs Whittaker gave me when I last saw her.

To remind you, she’d said, that you’ll find the good in everyone if you look deep enough.

“We’re here to repeat the same old story, Pete.” He hates it when I call him by his first name. We came through Hendon together, and after thirty years and three commendations, Pete gets promoted to Deputy Assistant Commissioner and lands, feet first, in a corner office of the new HQ.

All I’ve got to show for three decades at the sharp end is two divorces, and a hip riddled with shotgun pellets and held together with steel pins and cannabis.

“And what story is that, D.I. Crabtree?”

“The one about the missing prostitute and the police force that didn’t give a shit.”

“Whatever.”

Like most senior bods, Cresswell doesn’t like being out at night, unless he’s at a dinner party. Shame then that the Met likes to do its grave-robbing when no-one’s around.

And annoyingly, he’s managed to light his cigarette.

“Can’t believe we’re digging up this poor bastard for the second time in a month.” He shakes his head. “If you’re wrong about this ...”

“If I’m wrong about this, then you’ll duck the fallout, like you always do.”

“No mate. I have signed *two* exhumation orders for the same corpse; you screw this up again, we are both fucked. Understand? You and *me*.”

He looks like he’s about to say something else when one of the uniforms waves in our direction: the coffin’s out of the grave. Cresswell trips and slides his way down the

embankment, and I follow him, using my cane to find firm ground. A uniform holds out a hand to help me over a pool of rainwater; I stare at her until she folds the hand away.

By the time I get there, they've already prised off the lid. Cresswell edges over to the coffin and peers warily inside, as though he's expecting the corpse to leap out and slip him the tongue. I limp across and lean over the casket, my hand searching for the Russian doll in the lining of my coat.

Hello again, Mr Finch: fifty-nine years old, retired actuary; died of a massive cardiac infarction while making a sandwich in his kitchen. This is probably the thinnest he's ever been.

"It's still him." Cresswell's hand flies to his forehead. "It's still him! Just like it was a month ago." He turns away, screaming "Fuck!" again and again. The uniforms look at each other and step back to a safe distance.

"You said Whittaker was a serial killer!" Cresswell roars. "You said she was murdering whores by the truckload."

Just to be clear, I didn't call them whores.

"You said she's replacing the remains in her charge with the women she's killed!"

He's got me there. "Yes, and I was wrong."

"So we dig up Finch. And it's *still* Finch, not your missing prostitute!"

"Look, I didn't understand her then, but now I've spent more time with her, I—"

"Then you said, *No, hang on – she must be coming back a few weeks **after** the funeral and replacing the bodies then.*"

Yes, that's pretty much what I said.

"So here we are! Four weeks after the funeral and quelle fucking surprise – it's still Finch! Where is she, John? Where's Daisy? Where's the dead hooker you promised me?"

The Russian doll has found its way into my hand. It's the smallest of the set that lives in Mrs Whittaker's bedroom. *Find the good in everyone ...*

I let go of the doll and reach into another pocket for my penknife. I pull out the sharpest blade and hold my breath; I'm already on the verge of passing out from the stench.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cresswell lurches forward, but he slips and lands on his hands and knees.

I close my eyes and push the knife into the hollow of Mr Finch's throat.

Cresswell screams from the mud: "Don't just fucking stand there! Stop him!"

But the uniforms are too dumbfounded to move; well, two of them are – the third turns away to wretch into the grave.

I slice downward into the sternum, cutting away what's left of my reputation. I pray that I'm right; I pray that I'm wrong. The uniforms are moving again and Cresswell's on his feet: I hear a truncheon snap free, a taser whine into life – and then the blade catches metal, scraping against the wire mesh inside Finch's chest. Cresswell hears it; he freezes with his hand on my shoulder, while I start yelling for someone to get me a set of bolt cutters.

“Wire mesh?”

“So the host corpse maintains its shape after she removes the organs, tissue, and the skeleton. It’s a bit like taxidermy. Everything’s in my report, sir.”

“Except how you found Daisy Chambers.”

“A lucky hunch, sir.”

“I don’t believe in hunches, Detective Inspector, or luck.”

“Well, I guessed Mrs Whittaker would wait for a suitably large body to become available, then hunt a victim to put inside it. Mr Finch died and was given to her for burial a few days before Daisy disappeared.”

“A hunch.”

“Sir.”

“And luck.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right, and when you ordered Mr Finch exhumed for a second time, you neglected to explain all this to D.A.C. Cresswell – Why?”

I'm thinking of Daisy when Cresswell joins me in the patrol car. He smells of cigarettes and vomit. There's a lot of it about.

He slams the door and grips the steering wheel with both hands, clenching it in his fists until his knuckles turn white. "Shit."

"Yep."

"Medical examiner's here," he says. "Reckons you shouldn't have started without him."

"Have you got them out of the coffin?"

"Not yet, no."

"Well, maybe if you could all stop throwing up for five minutes ... She's been in there long enough." The cold and the rain has my leg in a vice; if I could stand, I'd free her myself.

Cresswell snorts. "Everyone thought you'd fucked up again. We thought, at best, we'd find Daisy resting in peace; no-one expected to come across a body inside another fucking body! But you knew; you knew and you didn't fucking warn us!"

"If I told you Mrs Whittaker was drugging and butchering her victims then caging them inside her customers' loved ones, would you have signed another exhumation order? Of course you wouldn't, *Pete*. This kind of shit doesn't happen; not in fucking Lambeth!"

He stares at me, his eyes as full of hate as Daisy's had once been full of hope, then he lets out a long, defeated sigh. He looks through the windscreen, into the rain, and reaches out his hand. "Here." He drops a pendant into my lap. I turn on the light so I can take a closer look: a flat silver disk with *Daisy* etched on one side, and *love Mum* on the other.

"Thought you might want to get it to her family, since you knew her best."

No, not me.

Daisy had real friends.

Friends who walked the streets with her.

Friends who looked out for her.

Friends who begged us to search for her when she vanished.

A real friend of Daisy Chambers wouldn't have found himself gazing up in shame at the stars, while she went down on him in an alleyway.

"The M.E. reckons her rate of decomposition doesn't match Finch's," Cresswell is saying. He takes a breath and presses on, forcing me to listen to what I already know, what I don't want to hear: "She was still alive when ...". He breaks down, slamming his fists against the steering wheel, mewling like a child.

And I'm thinking of Daisy – in pieces, trapped inside a coffin of wire and flesh, hearing the words of the priest: *ashes to ashes, dust to dust* ... unable to move, unable to scream ...

The Russian doll is in my hand again, and I remember that I'd cried too when I realised what the fragrant Mrs Whittaker had done.

“Thirty-eight women ...”

“Yes, sir. Most around Lambeth, a few in Peckham ...”

“She drugged them ... mutilated them ...”

“She always tried to preserve as much as she could: head and torso inside the body cavity; limbs inside limbs, jewellery left in place ...”

“She dismembered them, then buried them alive ... inside a corpse. ... Why couldn't she just end them, then cremate the bodies? She's an undertaker for Christ's sake. This ... this is inhuman.”

“Her victims were anaesthetised, sir.”

“And that makes it all right, does it?”

“In her eyes she wasn't trying to hurt these women, sir – she was trying to save them.”

After the sixth knock, she opens the door. She's dressed in a white satin blouse and a flowing black skirt that stops demurely, just above the ankle; and she's wearing her favourite lipstick: a glistening ruby red that makes her mouth shine. It's four in the morning; she knew we were coming.

"Hello, John," she says, glancing at the arc of flashing sirens and armed officers behind me. "You've brought friends."

I take her hand and fold her fingers around the Russian doll.

"Oh, thank you!" Her eyes brighten as she clutches it to her chest. "I shouldn't have given it to you, but you seemed so lost."

"It helped me see things more clearly." And not for the first time I wonder if the doll was her confession.

She wipes her eyes with the heel of her hand and says, "It was the only way to save them, you know. They'd never enter His kingdom, unless I clothed them in those with lesser sins."

"You were trying to sneak them past Saint Peter."

Her laugh rings like a bell inside my head. "No, silly. *The light of the just will cleanse them*. My father, God rest him; he used to say that to me when he brought them home."

Her father? I didn't see that coming. "Rose, listen to me: I need your help. I have Daisy, but I need you to tell me where the others are – all of them."

"You don't need to patronise me, John. I'll always help you; you know that." Her calloused fingers caress my left ear, and when the uniforms tense and take aim, she doesn't even flinch. "Come in out of the rain," she says, turning elegantly on her heels and gliding back inside her home. "Your friends are welcome, but they'll have to take their boots off. ... I'm nearly out of biscuits, I'm afraid, but I do have some of that tea you're so fond of."