

Don't Look Back

Mercer Murder 1

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ARC

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Prologue

Catrina Milley had packed and unpacked her pink duffel bag a hundred times, but this time, she was really going to do it. She was running away.

Nothing would stop her from escaping this time.

Determined, Katrina yanked her bag from underneath a pile of junk in the back of her closet and set it on top of the low chest of drawers. She unzipped it and considered the items that were still inside from the last time she'd thought about running away.

Last time she'd chickened out. Not this time.

She raised her eyes to the mirror above the dresser and gave herself a hard look. Things were different now. This time she had a plan and the cash to pay for that plan. Thanks to the money she'd hidden away over the past few weeks, she could afford to hop on a bus and get out of Mercer, Georgia, fast.

And it had to be fast. She had to be well out of town before anyone realized she wasn't in her room. She needed to be safe before they even thought about coming after her.

Considering what she needed other than money, Katrina pulled her fine blond hair into a ponytail and looked around her cluttered bedroom. It was packed with all the things she'd accumulated since she'd moved here.

Catrina blew out a breath.

How was it possible that every single thing she owned was crap? Cheap clothes, even cheaper jewelry that turned her skin green, and heels so high she could barely walk in them. She wouldn't need any of that in her new life.

Her new life would be different, better than this. She would make a real home for herself.

She couldn't trust anyone else to do it.

She looked around her room at the Riverwalk. This was just a place to stay, not a home. She hated every square inch of this place: from the grimy bathroom tile to the bedspread that was probably from the 1970s, not something cool and vintage inspired.

And the people here were not her family. Most of them were hardly even her friends. They claimed to care about her and want the best for her, but neither one was really true.

She was just a convenience for them.

Catrina felt tears prickle her eyes, but she refused to let a single one fall. Those people didn't deserve her tears.

Besides, she wasn't really hurt by them. She was angry at herself. She'd been naive to think this was a good place where she could work and live. She'd thought she had friends, people who would help her out. People she'd treated like family. But that was wrong.

Instead of giving her friends, a family, and a place to live, all the Riverwalk had done was remind her that she couldn't trust anyone but herself.

Catrina had been on her own, taking care of herself long enough.

And she would do it long after she left the Riverwalk.

Forcing her mind back to the task of packing her bag, she decided to be practical. All she needed was enough to see her through the next couple of days.

Besides, if she packed everything, *he* would suspect that she was up to something right away. But if she left most of her stuff, he might think she was just out at the movies or shopping or something.

It might give her time to put some distance between them.

If he caught up to her, she might be trapped in this life forever.

She had to escape now, or she would disappear a little more each day until she was no longer herself. Until she was no one at all.

She wouldn't let that happen.

She found the pink sequined clutch that held her fake ID and the small stack of cash she carried with her when she went out. Next, she stuffed a few pieces of clothing into the bag and then went to the small bathroom that flanked the bedroom. Toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, a few individually wrapped soaps she'd swiped from a janitor's cart.

The bathroom items went into the bag on top of the clothes. Then she paused to ponder the products that remained on the counter. She scowled at the cheap, half-used makeup scattered across the white tiles. She picked up a tube labeled "Glitterbomb." Whoever came up with blue glitter body lotion should have their head examined. Getting it was Jasmine's idea, and Catrina had never even cracked open the tube.

Throwing the tube of Glitterbomb onto the counter with all the other makeup palettes and bullets of lipstick she planned to leave, she considered what else was necessary. Maybe a jacket? That seemed practical.

Heading back to the bedroom, she unearthed her denim jacket from a pile of clothes on the floor and went to her dresser for the last thing she'd need.

Her stash of money. The real stash.

She'd kept it hidden, slowly adding to it each day until she finally had enough.

Looking around as if someone might catch her, Catrina opened the second dresser drawer and felt along the underside of the divider for the envelope she'd taped there.

All she felt was bare wood.

Her stomach dropped.

The envelope was gone. How could it not be there? It had to be.

She dropped to her knees and felt around with both hands. Then she hauled the drawer onto the floor and twisted to look underneath the divider.

All that was left of her emergency stash was the sticky remnants of the tape she'd used to adhere the envelope to the divider. Maybe it had fallen into the drawer below. She emptied the contents onto the floor and searched for the thick envelope.

Sitting back on her heels, she stared at the mess she'd made. Dread flushed through her body from her head to her feet. Her money was gone.

Before she could start to form her next thought, Catrina's phone chimed. Jumping at the sound, she yanked the device from her back pocket and stared at the screen even though she didn't need to.

She knew it was *him*.

Her blood ran cold. *He* had found the money. He knew.

Catrina threw the phone into the drawer, put a wad of clothes on top, and shoved the whole thing back in the dresser. The ringing faded away and eventually stopped.

But she really had to hurry now. If he'd found her money, he must know about her plan to run. And if he knew, he would punish her for it.

If he caught her...

She absolutely had to go. Right now.

Before Catrina could do anything else, the doorknob rattled, and her heart stopped. She spun to stare at the silver deadbolt.

He was already here. She didn't have time to run. She didn't have time for anything. After all, a locked door meant nothing to him.

She didn't want to give up, but she had no choice now. She would have to fake her way out of this, buy some time to escape later. She could play dumb about the money.

But the truth was that she was just as trapped as ever.

Her eyes prickled again with unshed tears. She turned, ready to stow her bag in the closet, but three soft knocks broke the silence.

A beat later, she heard her friend's voice. "Cat? Why's the door locked?"

Catrina whimpered in relief. It wasn't him. It wasn't a spy. It was Jasmine, her only friend. She was safe, at least for the next few minutes.

She still had the chance to run if she moved fast. She might not have money, but she could disappear anyway. She could hitchhike or walk. Whatever it took.

Instead of hiding the bag, Katrina zipped it and slung it over her shoulder. She hurried across the room to open the door just enough to peek out and see Jasmine standing alone on the walkway.

"Oh, thank God. It's you, Jaz," Katrina breathed, opening the door further.

"Of course, it's me," she said, laughing lightly. "Who else would it be?"

Catrina let Jaz in and shut the door firmly behind them, being sure to throw the bolt.

She turned to find Jaz looking at her bag with narrowed eyes. Katrina didn't shrink under her scrutiny.

Jaz liked to think she was tough. Most of the time, she acted tough, dressed tough, and talked a tough game. But deep down she was scared, more scared than she'd ever let on to anyone.

Jaz had lived at the Riverwalk longer than Katrina. When Katrina moved in, Jaz was the first to accept her. They spent all their downtime together, but when Katrina grew dissatisfied

with life at the Riverwalk, Jaz freaked.

Whenever Catrina talked about leaving, Jaz went straight back to her tough-girl act and tried to bully her into staying. She said Catrina would go to jail or worse if she left.

Even now, Jaz was wearing her tough-girl outfit: distressed black denim shorts, a cropped Led Zeppelin tee, and studded heels that she often wore clubbing. Blue Glitterbomb lotion created a look-at-me sparkle on the contours of her long legs, and her makeup was sexily smudgy and disheveled. But her edgy look didn't fool Catrina.

Jaz dropped her glare and sauntered to the table by the window to flip open the red-and-white Gianulli's pizza box.

"We finished it earlier, remember?" Catrina said.

Letting the lid fall shut, Jaz shrugged and then perched on the side of the table, regarding Catrina once more.

"What's up with you?" she asked with blatant suspicion in her tone. "You're acting weird."

"Nothing's up," Catrina said in a high-pitched voice that gave her away. She didn't want to tell Jaz that she was leaving the Riverwalk. She knew how her friend would react and didn't want to hear it all again.

"What's with the bag, then?" Jaz asked. Her eyes were wide with disbelief and trepidation. "You aren't thinking of leaving me again, are you? I thought you were over that."

Catrina hung her head for a beat. "I'm sorry. I don't want to leave *you*." She raised her eyes. "You're my bestie. But I can't do this anymore."

Jaz's face fell, and Catrina decided to make one last plea for her friend to come with her. Though she wouldn't admit it, Jaz hated living here too. Catrina knew she did, but she didn't

think she could do anything about it.

“Like I said, you could come too,” Catrina said, grabbing Jaz’s hand in desperation. That would be the perfect way out. They could run away together. “Just go next door and get your stuff. No more of this shit.”

Jaz looked at their joined hands before meeting Catrina’s eyes. Then she pulled away. “You know what happens to people who run,” she whispered, pushing herself off the table and stopping beside the door. “*He* doesn’t like it.”

A sick feeling washed over her at hearing Jaz reference *him* with such reverence and fear. He was a worthless, ’roided-up asshole. He was scum and should have no influence on how they lived.

But he did.

“I don’t give a damn what he thinks about it. This is about *our* lives. Not his,” Catrina proclaimed. “Nothing bad will happen if we leave together right now. I promise. Go pack a bag. Hurry.”

Jaz looked between Catrina and the door a few times as if considering the idea.

“Let’s go,” Catrina encouraged. “We can do it.”

“Are you sure about this?” Jaz’s expression turned a little wistful, maybe sad. “You’re going, no matter what? Even if you end up in jail?”

“I’m not going to jail,” Catrina said, putting certainty into her own expression so Jaz could see her confidence. “I’m setting myself free.”

In a sudden motion, Jaz threw her arms around Catrina and hugged her close.

“I can’t go with you,” Jaz cried. “I can’t. I’m sorry, Cat. I’m so sorry.”

Before Catrina could respond, Jaz turned and flipped the dead bolt, pulling open the door.

Catrina expected her to rush through it and go to her own room next door, but instead she staggered backward.

He forced his way inside. His black eyes glittered as they met Katrina's, and sick fear washed over her. It was too late. He would never let her leave.

And he was going to enjoy beating the hell out of her.

"Cat, Cat, Kitty Cat," he chided, stepping closer until he could reach out and take her chin in his fingers. "You're even dumber than you look."

Catrina jerked her head away. "Right back at you," she sneered, knowing she would pay for it.

He grabbed her chin again, this time roughly. "You can't leave," he said. "You still owe me."

"I don't owe you shit," Katrina said, thinking of her missing money. "You owe *me*."

Over his shoulder, she could see Jaz cowering by the door. Despite her bravado, Jaz was weak, fragile. She would do anything to avoid being hit.

But Katrina had survived the beatings before. She wouldn't break this time either.

And maybe she could save Jaz.

If Katrina distracted him, Jaz could escape. Then Katrina could run and lock herself in the bathroom. He might be too lazy to break down the door. He'd only have to fix it later anyway.

Catrina turned and fled toward the safe haven of the bathroom, hoping Jaz would take her chance to get out. The rasp of her own quick breath sounded loud in her ears. Her feet pounded through the bedroom, her heart racing. If he caught her....

His hand landed on her bag, and he jerked her backward with a laugh.

His first blow came from behind. Katrina's head snapped forward, and the ground rushed

toward her. She fell to her hands and knees on the rough, dirty carpet. His grasp on the bag broken, Catrina crawled closer to the bathroom, bare knees already turning raw.

“You can’t run away, little Kitty Cat. Don’t you know that?”

She kept crawling anyway, and he followed, letting her get a few feet closer to safety before gripping her by the hair and yanking her to a halt.

Using her ponytail, he levered her head sideways. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

“Screw you,” she spat, refusing to meet his demand and lift her eyes to his. He shoved her sideways, and she crashed into the base of the dresser. The bag had slipped his grasp again, so she tried to stand, but she was off balance and dizzy and ended up back on her knees.

All he had to do to stop her was to put his boot on her calf.

“I gave you a nice place to live, a job. And now you run out on me?” he growled, grinding his shoe into her flesh. “You steal my money? I always knew you were an ungrateful little bitch.”

Despite the pain in her leg, Catrina tried her best to wrench it out from under him. If she could just get to the bathroom, she might be able to shut the door and lock it.

He lifted his boot off her leg. She began to scurry forward. Now that he’d made his point, maybe he’d get bored with her and go away.

She was almost there. Her hands touched the cool tile. She might make it.

“There’s no way out back here,” he warned, his hand landing again on the bag still strapped to her shoulders. “But it’s cute that you won’t stop trying.”

Rage exploded in her. She wasn’t a cute little kitty cat. She was a fighter, a hellcat. He would see.

Somehow, she would show him the truth.

She would never let him win.

But then there was more pain, this time on her shoulder. Something warm began to ooze down her arm. She twisted her head to get a look at it.

Blood.

She had no idea why she was bleeding, but she knew she was in trouble when the floor tiles started to turn fuzzy. In the distance, she heard her friend's voice begging him to stop.

Why wasn't Jaz gone already? She should be safe in her room by now.

Catrina tried to yell at Jaz, telling her to run away.

But before she could call out, more hot pain erupted in her shoulder, and the tiles went from dirty white to speckled red.

Her arm gave way, and she crumpled in on herself, her face landing on the slick, sticky floor. Everything hurt, and she could hear her own voice, pleading with him to stop whatever he was doing.

Suddenly, she was on her back, staring at the ceiling. He wrenched her arms over her head and started dragging her across the floor.

"Is this where you wanted to go?" he demanded, sliding her the rest of the way to the bathtub. He leaned over her, and his face swam into her view. She hated that face.

Bracing herself on the tile, she tried to sit up. She didn't get very far because he knelt on her chest.

"Still trying, are you?" he sneered as he wrapped both hands around her neck.

She gritted her teeth and tried to punch him, but one of her arms wouldn't work. And all she could do was flail the other. She tried to claw at his face and ended up grasping at his shirt. She couldn't breathe, but she tried to thrash, hoping he'd lose his grip. She had to get away.

But his hands didn't let up, and she began to realize he wasn't only trying to make a point. He wanted her to die.

Soon, it would be too late. She had to find a way to draw a breath. She had to loosen his clenching fingers. But she couldn't get a hold on him, on anything. Her vision went hazy, and despite her desire to fight back, the strength left her.

Catrina's vision cleared long enough for her to stare one last time into his hateful black eyes, and somehow she knew he was wrong. She could still escape him.

Even if that escape was death.

Running at a dead sprint, Tripp Carver dug his feet into the soft red dirt as splinters of wood rained down around him. At the last moment, he dove headfirst across the ground, narrowly dodging the fist of the man who awaited him.

He lay there, only hearing the sound of his own ragged breathing and the pounding of his heart. Everything else went still and silent for a beat.

He looked over his shoulder.

“Safe,” muttered the unenthusiastic umpire who stood above him.

The throw to second was late. DeNeeve’s tag was pointless, but that didn’t stop him from trying to shove Tripp off the bag anyway. DeNeeve succeeded in dislodging his batting helmet, but Tripp stuck to the base like a tick until the ump called time.

Now that the play was over, Tripp bounced up, grinned at the already pissed-off shortstop, and then glanced at the remnants of the broken bat that littered the infield.

Replacing his helmet over dark hair that needed a trim, he shook out the dirt that had gathered in the belt of his uniform trousers and took a hard shove from DeNeeve’s glove.

“You suck, Carver,” he growled through gritted teeth.

Chuckling, Tripp nodded to the runner on first and then took his place on second.

DeNeeve gave him another shove. His team was off tonight, and to compensate he’d been turning up the trash talk steadily with each successive inning. And Tripp didn’t mind exploiting DeNeeve’s inability to control his competitive nature.

For his own part, Tripp was having a great time. He enjoyed life. At least he always aimed to. No matter what happened, he kept a positive attitude, and that quality really irritated people like DeNeeve.

That night, it was synergistic. The more positive Tripp was, the more annoyed DeNeeve got, and the more fun it was.

“Not very sportsmanlike, DeNeeve,” Tripp chided with a smile, hoping to piss him off more.

He raised his lip in a snarl but said nothing.

Then, to twist the knife a little more, Tripp gave DeNeeve a few disappointed clucks. “This game is for charity. Kids are watching.”

He glanced pointedly at some of the kids from the Mercer Children’s Home who would benefit from the money raised. Then, recognizing a familiar face among the children, he tipped his batting helmet to Margaret Schuster, the manager of the home, who was wearing a bright red Phillies jersey and matching cap over her steel gray hair.

When he looked back at DeNeeve, his opponent was glaring as if he’d like to take a swing at him.

“Take it easy, you two,” the umpire warned. Then he muttered to himself, “This is the last time I volunteer to umpire a charity game. Dirtiest baseball I’ve seen in years.”

DeNeeve glanced at the ump and then once more at the kids and apparently decided against an overt physical attack.

But he was amped up, and that was good. An emotional player means an erratic player. And that would help the police team defeat the fire department for the fifth year in a row.

The annual Mercer police versus fire department baseball game was a high-stakes event. Not only was charity money up for grabs, but so were bragging rights. Plus, the losing team had to provide a steak dinner for the winners.

That meant a dirty game, and the trash talk was on point from both sides.

So far, things were not going the fire department's way. The police department was up by four in the seventh inning, and the infield umpire had grown weary of the fire department's tricks sometime during the second.

"Next time," DeNeeve warned, forcing a smile at the end of the threat for the sake of the ump and the children in the stands.

"Whatever you say, buddy," Tripp said, throwing in the "buddy" because he knew it would irk him.

"Your luck's got to run out sometime, Carver," DeNeeve continued as he adjusted his glove, eyes focused on the pitcher who was shaking off signs from his catcher.

"Nah," Tripp said. Thinking of stealing third just for the fun of it, he took a healthy lead off second and made a wild claim. "I lead a charmed life."

"If by 'charmed life' you mean not being able to score, then sure," DeNeeve quipped back, pleased at his double entendre. "I don't want to lead *that* kind of life."

Tripp's focus on the game didn't change even though DeNeeve's words rang a little truer than he'd care to admit.

Sure, Tripp had a full social calendar, but he hadn't been seriously interested in any woman for a full year. Not since he'd gone to his high school sweetheart's wedding. There was something sobering about watching your first love get married to someone else, especially when other things are falling apart at the same time.

And maybe, somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd harbored a secret hope that he and Julia would find their way back together again someday.

But that wasn't meant to be.

Lately, his heart just wasn't in the dating scene...or much else for that matter. Sure, he

was enjoying the hell out of the baseball game. And he took pleasure in his home improvement projects. He was serious about his work.

But there was a difference in filling his time with enjoyable projects and meaningful work and living to the fullest with passion and heart.

At the moment, his life was all surface. Nothing went too deep. Nothing hurt too much. Things were amusing or pleasant, but that was as deep as his emotional reservoir went.

It wasn't ideal. But as they say, it is what it is, and he was okay with it. For the time being.

Shaking off his gloomy thoughts, he decided to steal third on the next pitch.

He watched the pitcher carefully to get his timing right, but his concentration broke when he heard his name called from the bench. "Detective Carver."

Tripp deflated a little and swore under his breath. He knew what was coming.

"You've got a call."

He'd wanted to finish the game. But a call usually meant someone was dead, and that always took priority.

DeNeeve shot him a triumphant smile. "Looks like your luck just ran out."

"Someone's did," Tripp said to the shortstop. "But not mine."

Signaling a time-out to the umpire, he trotted toward the PD's dugout.

A mixture of boos and cheers arose as the spectators realized he was coming out of the game. He tipped his cap to the crowd in the PD stands. The resulting applause made him feel like an MLB superstar, even though the cheers came from the players' wives or girlfriends and a few kids from the children's home.

At the dugout entrance, Tripp slapped the hand of Elliot Davis, the officer who would

take his place.

“DeNeeve is off tonight,” Tripp informed him with more than a little devious pleasure. “And their pitcher has a slow delivery. If you time him right, you can get a big jump and take third. It’ll really piss off DeNeeve.”

“Yes, detective,” Elliot said, grinning in anticipation.

Wishing he could stay to watch the ensuing baseball carnage, he grabbed his radio and canvas gear bag and headed for the men’s bathroom to change from Clark Kent into Superman.

As he opened the heavy metal bathroom door, he heard the uproar when Elliot stole the base.

Grinning, he let the door fall closed behind him. He was out of the biggest baseball game of the season, heading instead to what was likely to be another pointless, violent death.

Maybe his life wasn’t going quite the way he’d planned or hoped, but he was alive. That was a fact he never took for granted.

And tonight his team was winning.

That would have to be enough.

For now.



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