

Death Comes *in the* Morning

DON BISSETT

a Nathan Parker novel

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Chapter 1

I made the call at ten in the morning. I was surprised that there was cell phone service this far out in the forest in Montana. But three bars showed on my phone, and the call was answered after one ring.

"9-1-1 Teton County. What's your emergency?" An alert, calm, professional-sounding female voice. Someone who had experience in answering 9-1-1 calls. But for me, this was my first time ever calling the number.

"I found a dead body in the forest," I said evenly.

"You found a body?" Her response was full of disbelief and emotion.

"Yes. There is a dead man here." Just the facts. Wait for her next question.

"Why are you sure he is dead? Does he need medical attention?" She sounded a bit frenzied. One so often hears on the news the frantic unintelligible audio from hysterical callers in distress. The operator has to ask the same question over and over to get clear answers. And the voice of the operator also can rise in pitch and volume in the excitement of the moment. Perhaps this was the first time she had gotten a call about a body. She might also be wondering why I was not one of those hysterical callers. But I would be calm and clear since I was detached from this problem.

“No, he doesn’t need medical attention. There’s no doubt he is dead.” I let that sink in for a few seconds. I looked down at the lifeless form at my feet, his eyes staring blankly, flies buzzing around the exposed face and hands.

It was the sound of buzzing flies that had drawn me off the trail. When I approached, a vulture lazily hopped away, perching nearby to guard his meal. His abrupt departure sent a cloud of flies airborne. There was also a very faint putrid odor. Not overpowering, but it was definitely there, the smell of death.

I spoke again to the 9-1-1 Operator. “My name is Nathan Parker. I was hiking on Monarch Trail in Lewis and Clark National Forest and found the body. I don’t know who he is or how he died. He is lying near the base of a cliff on the trail.”

I could hear the clicking sound of a keyboard. She was probably entering the information into a computer. She didn’t tell me to slow down or to repeat anything, so I continued. “I estimate he’s been dead for less than twenty-four hours, probably less than twelve.” That seemed like a reasonable estimate to me.

“What? How do you figure that?”

“The blow flies. He’s covered in them.”

“What kind of flies?”

“Blow flies. They are the first insects to invade a corpse. There also may be some flesh flies in the mix.”

“What? How do you know that?”

“I’m an ex-cop. I’ve seen many bodies.”

I thought of a couple more pieces of vital information. The operator needs to know the Ws: what, where, when, who, why, weapons. I hadn’t yet given her all of them. So I added, “There is no weapon that I can see, and there’s no one else here, just the body and me.”

Yes, just me, I thought. I had always been a bit of a loner. I liked solitude. Maybe that is part of the reason hiking is so appealing to me. Alone to wander quietly at my own pace in the wilderness. I did not choose to be this way. It’s just the way I am. Maybe it’s genetic, maybe it has something to do with my upbringing, the old nature vs. nurture debate. It didn’t matter. I am what I am.

But I had been alone for a long time now, dumped as a cop, looking for work, roaming westward. My time was occupied, but I was alone, too alone. I had found my limit for solitude. I would always need periods of alone time, but I also needed more. Even this long-distance connection with a nameless 9-1-1 Operator was comforting contact.

I gave her my cell phone number in case it was not displayed on her screen. She told me to stay on the line while she transferred my call to the local authorities. I stayed on the line.

I stayed on the line waiting, waiting for a long time, and thinking.

I’m an ex-cop. When I supplied that information to the 9-1-1 Operator, it was the first time I had actually said that to anyone. I added it thinking there would be some authority be-

hind it, like I would automatically therefore know what I was talking about. But I really didn't feel authoritative. They took that away from me when I had to turn in my badge and gun back in Cincinnati.

They said it was the economy. The financial meltdown of the Great Recession hit like a tsunami, even in conservative Cincinnati. It has been said that Mark Twain, speaking about that conservative city, once stated something to the effect, "If I knew the world was going to end, I would move to Cincinnati since everything there happens ten years later." He was wrong. The collapse happened even there as it rippled through the US. It left me and millions of other casualties in its wake. One day you're working, next day you're out. Discarded. Thrown away. Society's litter.

And no one was hiring. I tried for months to find a job as a cop, bodyguard, security guard, life guard. No one was hiring. My unemployment benefits ended. I found some low-paying jobs, but all they did was slow my downward financial spiral. So I finally gave up, sold all my belongings, dropped all my subscriptions, and abandoned my house and its under-water mortgage. Homeless. Now all I had left in the world was inside my old car.

My ex-partner, Ed Garvey, offered to let me move into his basement. As close as we were on both professional and personal levels, I could not intrude on his life like that. He had kids to raise. He did not need me in the way.

If I had stayed in Cincinnati, it would have been too tempting to keep trying to re-enter my old life, waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for the call back to my old job, waiting for something that was not going to happen. I had to leave. So just like many refugees of the past, from the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, I went west to find greener pastures. I eventually wandered to Montana, Big Sky country.

Of course, there were no jobs out here either. Besides, who wants to hire someone who lives in his car? Too unstable. Can't be trusted. Just a drifter. Society's litter.

I lost confidence, drifted aimlessly, and lost hope. So to boost my own morale, I decided to pursue two passions of mine: hiking and writing. Hiking really cost nothing except time, and I had plenty of that. It allowed me to clear my head and try to forget that I was discarded. Writing also cost me nothing, but it had potential to produce income. Perhaps I could write something that would capture my first-hand experience as a homeless person. Could I make that into a compelling-enough story to start a new career as a writer? Maybe. I had written articles for magazines on hiking and then about the litter that other hikers leave behind. As Ed Garvey advised, "Go write the great American novel." So here I am in Montana, the Big Sky State, to try to do that. Perhaps Big Sky could make big dreams come true.

My brooding was finally interrupted when a voice came on the line.

"This is Deputy Powell, Willow Run police department." It was a young-sounding, deep, booming voice. I knew Willow Run was the nearest town, the only town for many miles. That is where I had rented a room at a cheap run-down motel, though I hadn't actually seen the town center yet.

"What's the problem?" His question sounded almost bored. The 9-1-1- Operator must not

have told him that I was reporting a body.

“There’s a dead body here.”

“A body?” This response was enthusiastic. But then he became more suspicious and fired questions at me. “Are you sure he’s dead? Does he maybe need medical attention? Where are you?” Then he yelled into the phone, “And who the hell is this anyway?”

Deputy Powell must be an inexperienced officer. Too frantic, firing off too many questions, making his own job more difficult. I chose to respond calmly to just one of his questions rather than fire back random answers.

“No,” I said, trying hard to keep the annoyance I was feeling. “With all the flies and the vulture that started in on him, there’s no doubt. He’s dead.”

“Where are you and what’s your name?” he repeated, his tone now more accusatory.

Trying even harder to keep this conversation informative, I responded evenly, “I’m on Monarch Trail in the National Forest. My name....”

He did not let me finish before he shouted into the phone, “Did you kill this guy?”

What is this guy’s problem? Now I was beginning to wish I had not made the call. I was out of this death business. I could have just walked away. Maybe I could have convinced myself it’s not my problem. But I knew that wasn’t possible for me. As a cop, I had taken an oath to protect and to serve. I still felt that obligation. Besides, now it’s too late. But this Deputy was beginning to annoy me and to worry me.

“Deputy, please let me explain,” I said trying my hardest not to vent back at him in frustration.

“Oh, so you admit you have some explaining to do. Why did you kill him?” He was breathing heavily into the receiver, like he was hyperventilating. “Well?” he bellowed.

That was it. He had received the last courteous response from me. “Maybe I should put the dead guy on the phone. Then he can tell you he’s dead and that I didn’t do it,” I quipped. If I had thought about what I would say, that quip would not have been my first choice. But I was glad it came out that way. I may have lost hope in finding a job, but I hadn’t lost my sense of humor in dealing with pinheads.

At least he was no longer ranting, but his voice took on a more sinister tone. “Oh, a smart ass,” he responded in a *you’ll-pay-for-that* tone.

“Look, Deputy.” I had to get this conversation back on a professional level. “The guy was already dead when I got here. He was covered in flies, like he has been dead for at least several hours.” I paused to let that sink in. “My name is Nathan Parker, and I’m just out here hiking. I’m calling from my cell phone.” I gave him the number. “I’m about 3 miles out on Monarch Trail in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. The body is lying here near the base of a cliff. The guy appears to be Hispanic.”

He too must have recognized the need to be more professional about this. “All right,” he said in a more controlled tone. “I know the trail. Well, you stay put and don’t touch anything.”

His voice was getting a bit calmer, though it still wavered with agitation. “I don’t want you messing with my crime scene.”

Crime scene? This looked more like a guy falling off a cliff.

Deputy Powell continued, “I’ll be there in about an hour. Don’t mess with my crime scene,” he repeated, the confrontational tone returning. “Understood?”

“Don’t worry, Deputy. I won’t disturb the body.” But my words were spoken to a dial tone. He had already hung up.