

Giving The **DEVIL** Her Do



A Cooper Wright Mystery
by Rob Steele

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There were few women like Jackie Tolstoy. Frankly, I think that's a good thing. It's not that I have a thing against women. That's how it comes off most of the time people talk about her. She was a woman in power, after all. On the city council. Member of several boards of this and that. The woman in power part, I don't know of anyone who had a problem with that. It was that she was such a hateful woman. Feared? Sure. Respected? Yes. Hated with a blinding rage? By just about anyone who's ever met her.

Tall, long legs, long pitch-black hair and some of the most piercing blue eyes I've ever seen. It wasn't her looks that kept Ms. Tolstoy unmarried. She was quite attractive. It was her attitude. It wasn't just her hatefulness, it was the ignorance that accompanied it. Let me give you an example. About a year ago, Manny Vasquez, a great detective in his own right and of Puerto Rican descent, and I encountered her while working a case. She took one look at Manny and without him saying a word told him, "You need to go back to Mexico or Sweden or wherever you Frenchies are from!" And with that she refused to talk to him. She'd said she'd only talk to me because I was "an officer and not one of the little people." Even then, getting answers out of her that made sense was difficult to say the least.

Today, Manny and I came across her again in a case. Jackie Tolstoy was found dead in a hair salon just off 6th avenue called *Live Free or Dye*. I'm told the place is very popular for it's red, white and blue dye jobs. I have to say *I'm told that* because I've never seen anyone with hair like that, but whatever. If I seem like I'm having trouble starting this case, it's because I am.

The murder of Jackie Tolstoy is going to be nothing but trouble. Her political connections are going to be enough trouble, what with the mayor and city council yelling at the commissioner who yells at the chief who yells at my boss who yells at me. No. The problem is going to be narrowing down the suspect pool. It's my understanding that everyone is supposed to hate the devil. Well, here she is, in all her splendor. Lying on the floor in a tank top shirt and yoga pants... dead.

The medical examiner, Dr. Seong-ho Young is already on scene and examining the body. "It's going to be a toughie on this one, Cooper. No bullet holes. No strangulation marks. No petechial hemorrhaging. No obvious signs of death other than she's not breathing. I'll have to get her on the slab and do a full autopsy before I can really give you anything useful. Sorry."

"That's okay. Thanks, doc." Henry Ruth, doc's assistant, helps him get the body on a gurney to take her back to the coroner's office. Meanwhile, I have a surprisingly small number of suspects in the salon. "So where is everyone? It's what? Three thirty? Shouldn't you be busy about now?"

"Nah," replies Janet VanPorter, the manager. "Just about everyone's gone to lunch. Ms. Tolstoy won't come in here unless she's the only one. So, it's just me managing and Deena cutting. She drew the short straw. Honestly, we have tried everything to get her to go somewhere else. That woman is so hateful. I know she wants to let it be legal to refuse service to gay people, right? But that would mean she wouldn't have anywhere to go because everyone thinks she's an utter..."

"Don't use that word. I'd have to put it in my report and that might not go over well," I interrupt. Ms. VanPorter waves a hand dismissively and smiles. "Do you have access to the surveillance system? We'd like to look at the footage." She looks at the camera in the corner and points to a door at the back of the salon. Manny and I leave the salon workers with Office Tim Fey and head to the back to see if the alibis of the stylists check out.

According to the video, they do. The video shows Ms. Tolstoy in the salon chair being tended to by Ms. Deena Philips and Ms. VanPorter doing something at the main desk at the entrance. Just after Ms. Philips finishes and holds the mirror behind Ms. Tolstoy, showing the back of her hair, Ms. Tolstoy gets up, turns, takes one step, convulses once, and falls over. The stylists check on her but are quickly repulsed and Ms. VanPorter calls 9-11. I look to Manny, who just shrugs. Neither of us saw anything that looked like she was shot, poisoned, strangled, stabbed, or any other 'standard' method of murder. As far as I'm concerned, the stylists are off the hook – which opens a whole new can of worms. Now I have to go talk to her co-workers on the city council. I was hoping for a nice quick stabbing, but, no, we have

an actual mystery. Oh good.

I send Manny back to the office to check on Ms. Tolstoy's financials. No sense in both of us having to suffer through putting up with these stiffes – the city council, not Ms. Tolstoy. I don't really have a problem with the city council. Frankly, most of the time, I don't even know they're there. I occasionally hear that they've done something, like approve construction of something or cut someone's budget, but that's it. I've never been to a meeting. Not even sure when they are. I strongly suspect, that's typical.

The first person I come across when I enter city hall is Councilor Dan Duff, who seems to know me from somewhere, but I can't quite place him. "Well, howdy, Lieutenant! How you been keepin' yourself?" His massive Texan drawl brought everything back - the Tatiana Monday case last year. He was the primary suspect for a while. Apparently, he's moved on. "I hear you're working on the Tolstoy murder. Y'know, normally my heart goes out to a lovely little Philly like that, but she was as ornery as a surly mule stuck in a mud puddle with an irritable cobra. No... scratch that. She'd be the cobra. I ain't gonna shed a tear over that cantankerous harpy. But since I just made myself a suspect, I know you need an alibi, and I got me one. The whole council had a meeting to discuss how to handle her passing. We decided that since she didn't have any kin or nothin', and we were all waiting for her to die off anyway, we'd have a celebration."

Okay, I wasn't expecting that. And apparently it showed since he continued. "Yessir, we talked about it and decided that none of us really liked her in the slightest. In fact, most of us hated that hateful woman. I know that you remember last time we ran into each other. I could tell you thought I was some backward hick racist bastard. And you know what? I am. But she put *me* to shame. So, I can tell you a whole room full of suspects who wanted her dead, but we're each other's alibi. Sorry about that. Well, I got another meeting. Good to see you, lieutenant. By the way, the party is on the 15th here in the hall. Hope to see you there!" With that, he doffed his imaginary hat and waddled off to another meeting.

I check with security and watch a few minutes of the video of the meeting and Mr. Duff's claims are validated. I suppose the good thing is that this saved me the trouble of meeting with a bunch of stiffes. The bad news is

most of my suspects are alibied. At that point, I get a text from Manny that I was hoping would be good news. It wasn't.

News of her death has reached social media. Manny's sent me a link to a tweet from Dan Duff's account showing a simple announcement: "Tolstoy's dead!" A bit callous, I think. I mean, a woman did just die. And normally I think that Twitter could use more than just a "like" button since this is a death. But the fifteen-thousand (and counting) likes in this case seem to be genuine like for her death. I had briefly considered that her outward callousness for the world at large might just be a chrysalis, and that a loving and caring person might be underneath, but judging from all the snickering and excited musitations in city hall, I quickly abandon that train of thought. I'm surrounded by people with motive, but they all have alibis!

Summing up, I have no suspects. No cause of death. A city-hall full of people who hated her but want her murder solved that won't stop yelling up and down my chain of command. I see no point in yelling at my people. I mean, we're doing our best. Until I have autopsy results, I suspect I'm not going to have a lot to go on. I spend the rest of the day talking with people at city hall. None of them have anything nice to say about her. None. I did receive several invitations to the party though.

Just before six o'clock, I get a text from Dr. Young saying that it would be tomorrow before the preliminary toxicology report would be done. I call in that I'm heading home. I get an earful from dispatch about how the mayor wants it cleared up immediately. And dispatch gets an earful to send back about how it would be tomorrow before we had any useful information to go on and how beat I was and that I was going home to get some sleep anyway.

When I get home, I'm greeted by my family, which is typical, and a bunch of questions about who in town could have killed the devil, which is atypical. Normally, my kids couldn't care less about my job, only that I bring home money for them to spend. Even my wife stopped asking years ago. But not this time. Kill the devil and everyone wants to know who did it. I even have the weirdest dream where a cadre of priests show up demanding to know who killed the devil and if it would affect the size of their congregations. Since the devil is dead, why go to church? *Why go anyway?* I try to argue, to

no avail. The dream didn't get any better and before I wake up and feel as though I haven't slept at all.

I go through my morning routine anyway: shower, breakfast, read the paper. Yes, I still get a newspaper. And the headline reads, TOLSTOY DEAD. The accompanying story includes almost everything I know, including the time and place of the celebration. I desperately hoped that I'd have this wrapped up by then. Shortly after reading that story, but before I can get to last night's hockey scores, I get a call from Henry Ruth, the assistant coroner. Dr. Young would like me to stop by and that it's important. I ask why he isn't calling me himself and Henry says that Seong-ho was up all night doing the autopsy and that he's currently passed out in one of the morgue drawers they keep bodies in. I guess he was getting pressure, too.

About twenty minutes later, I enter the morgue fully dressed in surgical scrubs and a facemask, because I've had too many suits ruined by just walking in here, and I see Henry Ruth leaning against the wall of body drawers holding a cup of coffee. He chuckles, I assume, because he's wearing jeans and a Detroit Redwings t-shirt and holding a cup of coffee. He says that they're quite done and that I didn't really need to dress up. He knocks on one of the drawers and opens it, revealing the extraordinarily groggy form of Dr. Seong-ho Young. Doc sits up blearily, looking at Henry and yells, "I told you not to wake me up until Cooper gets here!" Henry nods in my general direction. Doc turns and, seeing me, looks a bit humbled. "Fine," he says, "get me a cup of..." Henry hands him the coffee. Doc stares at it blankly for a moment, as if deciding what to do with it. Eventually he takes a swig and hops down from the shelf.

"Okay, Cooper," he begins slowly, "this one was almost a pain in the ass as she was. Just between you and me, I did stab her a few extra times with the scalpel, just to be sure. Very cathartic. Anyway, you want to know what killed her so you can find out who killed her. I'm going to need more coffee." He downed the rest of the cup he had, handing the empty vessel to Henry to refill.

"So, you didn't like her either? What she do to you, doc?"

"This hateful woman cut my budget *five times*," he exclaimed. "She said,

'the dead are dead. They won't care why they died so why should we?' If it weren't for the upper brass, I'd just leave her in a field somewhere and let the crows eat her. Good thing I'm a professional, then, right?"

"Damn, doc. Remind me not to get on your bad side."

"Anyway, you'll love this. It took a while to figure out. It wasn't murder."

"You're saying she just dropped dead because of natural causes?"

"Well," he shrugged. "Actually, she had a condition called postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome. It's when the heart is too small for the body. You remember Andre the Giant? It's like what he died from, except his body was extraordinarily large. This woman's body was normal sized, and her heart was still too small."

I know I look a little puzzled at this. "So, you're saying she really was the Grinch?"

Doc chuckled. "It's even called that in some circles. Postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome is a bit long. Lots of people just call it 'Grinch Syndrome.' You know me, Cooper. 99% of the time, I don't find anything amusing about people dying. But this is too funny."

"Yeah. I'm just waiting for the headlines. 'Grinch Dead – Celebration To Have Whoville Theme.'" Part of me wants to laugh. Part of me is worried that the top brass is not going to accept what happened. Then I think about the party they're throwing, and it makes me sad.

"Don't be sad, Cooper," Doc says, patting my shoulder. "She was the woman who held back your raise for the past three years."

"THAT BITCH!"