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## The Contest

Naturally, it made the headlines. Being a small farming town of Hickory, a wandering cow on the road (there are two—roads, that is) made the news, and so did this.

The morning paper had been delivered by Jeffroy, who felt the need to point out the item, even though it was doing everything but flashing lights at me.

*A Hickory Murder!!* It read.

*Amy Pierce, age 10, was found dead among upturned roots and sod in the New Haven Development Centre just hours ago. Little is known around the circumstances of her death, as the landscaping crew had finished their work for the day. Foul play has not been ruled out, police sources have disclosed.*

*Amy is survived by her brother, Ben, age 3, and her parents, Peter and Mary Pierce.*

*An update will be available as details of this news breaking tragedy are discovered.*

"Oh God! Jenny, come here!" I screamed.

The little pounding of shoes down the last set of stairs suggested she was waiting for me to call her.

"Y-yes, M-mom," she stammered.

"I have some bad news for you dear. Please sit down. It's terrible, just terrible. Where do I begin?" I took her hands in mine. "Amy, dear sweet Amy is in God's hands now, sweetheart."

I don't know what I had expected: crying, screaming, or denial, anything but a solemn girl who said, "Oh."

"Hon. Are you okay?"

"Yesss, Mom."

"Did you understand what I told you, sweetie?"

"Yes, M-Mom. Amy's dead. Can I go to school now?"

"Of course, sweetheart. I'm driving you today. Are you sure you are okay?"

"Yes mom."

At the school, services consisting of a team of specialized trauma and grief counselors were on their way in from Hornsby, our closest city. They would hold a general meeting in the gym and would be on hand for Amy's closest friends and classmates.

The funeral for little Amy Pierce was held on a beautiful spring afternoon, three days following the grisly discovery. The sun seemed to be tantalizing. Spring flowers were beckoning. Spring was a time for renewal and re-growth. For the small town of Hickory, spring held the stench of death at its door.

Months went by. The little town tried to pick up its pieces and carry on. Amy Pierce's killer was still at large. The autopsy concluded death by strangulation. Detectives from Hornsby encouraged the public to come forward with any information pertaining to this horrific murder. No one responded. Eventually, the detectives left to answer cases in their own metropolis; Amy's case remained unsolved.

Father Dominico, the only priest of our small church in town, was the center of attention as people turned to God. The rectory had kept their doors open 7/24.

Still months later, I was worried about Jenny. The grief counselors from Hornsby carefully examined her and repeated what our counselors had told me. All kids react differently. In time Jenny would accept what had happened and would move on.

One day, shortly after this, I decided to give Jenny's room a thorough cleaning and redecorating while she was at school. I thought a new coat of paint on her bookcases and new wallpaper would help her to feel better.

Removing her books from her bookcase, I dropped a small one—her diary. It was locked and even if it wasn't I wouldn't have opened it. I remember the shame of my written words over Ronny Sinclair as a teenager, when my mother found and read my diary. Holding Jenny's to my chest, I breathed in the scent of fresh paper and put it on the growing pile of books. As I did so, I noticed a little slip of paper towards the middle of the diary. I tried to push it back in, but the paper was too thin and instead I ripped the edge. Cursing, I pulled it out with the intention of explaining and handing it over to Jenny that night.

I couldn't help but notice the writing on it as it was not Jenny's 10 year old penmanship. This was an adult's slant and it briefly said "Amy, winner of Apr 10 contest."

My heart sped up. What could this mean? What contest? And it was near the time of her death, I was almost certain. I ran to my study and flipped back the calendar. Yes, April 10<sup>th</sup> was exactly the day that Amy died. My blood ran cold. Did Jenny know the killer? Was she in danger?

All I could think of was getting her home where she would be safe in my arms. I haphazardly grabbed my keys and was running out the door when I realized she was at the church. She would be safe. The good Father was always there now.

Slowing my breathing, I put on my jacket, hat and gloves and started my Jeep, letting it warm up in the inclement weather we were experiencing . Arriving at the church, I opened the doors and searched out Jenny. She was with Father Dominico. When she saw me she ran and hid behind my legs.

"My apologies, Father," I said. "She is still very jumpy and clingy. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, my dear," he said. He bent down to Jenny and said, "Just remember what I said child, and may God be with you."

With Jenny in the Jeep, I turned to her and asked her about the paper. I needed to know what this contest was all about.

"Just something from school."

"From what teacher?" I asked.

"No teacher. From church," and she began to cry. I reached over and held her to my chest and told her it would be okay. I would make it all okay.

"N-no police. Please Mama. I'm scared."

"Did one of the altar boys do anything to you or Amy? What was the contest? How long has it been going on?"

She began to speak and describe a contest that Amy won that no 10 year old should know anything about. She wouldn't name names.

I took her home, fed her some Campbell's tomato soup with buttered Ritz crackers and read her a story before bedtime. After she was resting comfortably, I formed my plan. I know I should take the evidence to the police but all I saw was a red, hot rage. I went into my bedroom, after checking on Jenny one last time, closed and locked the door. I went into my walk-in closet which revealed a small safe. Upon opening, I took out Steve's Colt 1862 Pocket Police revolver. He had it on him the day he was murdered in Chicago during active duty. Suddenly, I had found myself a single parent. The irony was I moved back to my old hometown of Hickory to avoid such violence. Steve always insisted I take up firearms as a means of safety for myself. I sent up a silent thank you to him now.

I placed a call to my neighbor, Beatrice, explaining I needed to run out and could she possibly come and sit with Jenny in case she woke up.

She was there in a moment.

I jumped into the Jeep, started it and pulled away. I parked in the shopping center where no one would see me; the stores were closed for the night. I took the gun out of my jacket and brought it to my nose taking in the metal scent and recent firing. I was at the rifle range just the other day. Since Amy's death, I made sure I was armed for both Jenny's and my protection. The parking lot lights spilled over my windshield, and I rubbed the barrel up and down in a polishing motion. The white grip felt solid in my hands. I cocked the hammer assembly and placed my hand on the trigger looking down the front sight. I imagined pulling the trigger.

I headed to the church armed with gun and paper.

What I wasn't prepared for was the church being empty. Where do the altar boys sleep? Still, I was here and the doors were open.

I called out a hello and was answered by Father Dominico who called me back into the school room.

Walking in, I made sure the gun was tucked into the back of my jeans. The last thing I wanted was the Father to know I was carrying a concealed weapon, which I had considered using against one of his altar boys.

I turned left at the end of the corridor, and began to talk.

"Father, I think I know—"

But I was brought up short. Father Dominico was writing a new sermon on a blackboard and in less than 24 hours this was the second time I had seen that adult scrawl.

I jumped down from the steps and proceeded to my Jeep. There were no tears. No misplaced guilt and no remorse. My fingers were wrapped around the small scrap of paper- it was the only proof I had.