

The Broken Watch

1

Delilah suspected her husband, Frank, was cheating on her.

It wasn't that he was suddenly less attentive. Their sex life had never been flash-bang fireworks in the first place. It wasn't that he seemed stand-offish or like he was pulling away from her emotionally. He still gave her the same forehead kiss and told her he loved her before rolling over on his side of the bed and falling asleep.

No, it was something she really couldn't put her finger on. But she had the feeling nevertheless.

2

Perhaps he was lying about going to the gym. He'd gotten a membership at Atlas Fitness six months ago, when he noticed he was starting to get a bit of a gut. He said he wanted to get it under control before it was too late. Delilah had thought about signing up on a spouse membership and joining him – she was starting to get a bit of a muffin top – but he seemed like he wanted that time at the gym to himself so she never bothered.

She knew that he worked half days on Wednesdays due to the longer hours he worked the other four days of his work week (his firm had offices in London, Madrid, Tokyo and Sydney and so had to work all kinds of hours in order to “meet up” time-wise with the other locations) and that he liked to go to the gym right after he left so he would have the rest of his evening free. She decided that next Wednesday she would go to the gym and look around in his car while he was inside working out. She had a key fob for his Impala on her key ring, just as he had one for her Focus on his.

She hoped she wouldn't find anything incriminating in his car. Most men with well-paying jobs splurge for hotel rooms when they want to fuck someone else. They don't do it in their cars. They also tended to meet the other woman there, rather than have her ride in their cars, where they might leave something behind. In short, men of Frank's means usually knew how to cheat without making it obvious.

3

Wednesday.

Delilah sat in her Focus in the parking lot of the Tasty Taco across the street from Atlas Fitness. She was parked head-in and was watching the parking lot across the street through her rearview mirror, nervously chewing on the end of the straw sticking out of the top of her Tasty Taco cup. It was almost 1:30 and Frank should be there by now. His office was only fifteen minutes away, twenty if traffic was a little worse than normal. But early on a Wednesday afternoon, the traffic downtown was better than it would be after five. And much better than it was on game nights when the Spitzers were playing.

She was thinking about backtracking what should be his route from the office to the gym when his silver Impala pulled into the parking lot, bumping up over the speed bump that sat at the top of the entrance to the lot. She watched as he exited his car, popped the trunk and got his gym bag out. She switched her view to the driver's side rearview mirror as he walked up to the front doors of the gym, his bag bouncing against

his right leg as he walked. She'd give him ten minutes to make sure he didn't change his mind about working out (for whatever reason) and then walk across the street to his car.

When ten minutes had passed and Frank hadn't come out of the gym she climbed out of her Focus, walked to the corner and pressed the crosswalk button. She watched the front of the gym as she waited for the light to change, almost hoping he would come out and she could abandon this crazy mission.

When the light changed and the beep started that alerts the blind that it's safe to cross she jumped a little, startled, then crossed the street, her high heels clicking on the blacktop.

As she approached Frank's Impala she slowed, watching the door to Atlas Fitness, this time hoping that Frank *wouldn't* come out. She'd have some explaining to do. It was her lunch hour, but without a gym membership she had no reason to be there.

As she neared the vehicle she pulled her keys out of her skirt pocket and turned them until the key fob to the Impala was between her fingers. She pressed the unlock button and heard the driver's door unlock. She pressed it again and the other doors unlocked.

By force of habit she opened the driver's door and got in, closing the door. She sat for a moment behind the wheel with her hands in her lap, the keys still in her right hand. She looked at the front doors of the gym again. Two men in their twenties were walking out. *The gym's obviously doing them some good*, she thought. The doors sighed closed and she put her keys back into her skirt pocket, leaning a little to one side so she could do so while seated.

She started with the center console. Registration, proof of insurance, a pair of sunglasses in a protective soft case and a handful of peppermint candies. The last was a little odd; she never smelled peppermint on his breath. But that meant little. He was a voracious coffee drinker, usually having at least two cups before he even left the house and then taking a third in his silver travel mug when he left. He probably sucked on the peppermints to help his breath before he went into the office. The fact that the registration and insurance card were in the console instead of the glove box meant almost nothing, either. Having them in the center console meant they were closer at hand. Frank wasn't a small man and the Impala wasn't so big that he couldn't reach the glove box easily if he got pulled over, but having those items in the center console just meant it was that much easier to get to them.

Who are you trying to convince? she wondered. *Yourself?*

"Shut up," she said out loud.

She closed the center console and leaned over to reach the glove box. She turned the release knob and the door slammed open. A pair of black handcuffs was sitting on the door. The weight of them must have been what caused the door to slam open like that.

"What the hell?" she asked of the otherwise empty interior. She picked the handcuffs up and held their cold steel in her right hand. *What the fuck does he have these in here for?*

Now was not the time to dilly-dally. If she was going to keep searching the car, she'd better get to it. Time was not her friend. Frank usually spent no more than an hour at the gym, although that might be longer on Wednesdays. The problem is, she just didn't know. She worked the same hours every day and so she didn't know what time he actually got home on Wednesdays. The fact that he usually spent only an hour on the other two

days he went to the gym didn't mean squat about Wednesdays. Hell, *anything* he usually did didn't mean squat after finding a pair of black handcuffs in the glove box of his car.

She leaned over a little farther and looked into the depths of the glove box. There was nothing else in there except a handkerchief. She put the handcuffs down on the passenger seat and, holding onto the steering wheel with her left hand for counterbalance, reached into the glove box with her right hand until she could fish out the handkerchief.

The hanky was nothing special. Just one of the dozens he had, white cotton. Except...

She held it up to her nose and breathed in. There was a faint sweet smell on it that she couldn't identify. She could hardly register that it was there at all. She guessed that if she hadn't quit smoking fifteen years ago she likely wouldn't be able to smell it at all.

Unnerved, she put the handkerchief and the handcuffs back into the glove box and closed it. She got out of the car and turned. She pulled her skirt up to just above her knees and knelt down on the blacktop. She leaned over and peered under the driver's seat but could see nothing. There was a little space under there, but the seat's electric controls sat too low to be able to see into the small gap beneath them. She slid her left hand under the plastic-covered control unit and felt around.

She heard footsteps and tried to see who it was, her heart leaping into her throat. Her wedding ring got caught on the underside of the seat and she was unable to free her hand. Certain that it was Frank, she turned her hand as much as she could but it wouldn't come free. The footsteps came closer and sweat broke out on Delilah's brow. If he caught her searching his car this thoroughly, well, with the handcuffs and weird-smelling handkerchief in the glove box, who knew how he would react?

The footsteps were almost right on top of her. She kept struggling to free her hand but the damn ring wouldn't come unstuck and it wouldn't slip off of her finger. She almost hoped it would, even if it meant that she had to somehow explain its absence from her finger until she could retrieve it without his knowledge. At least she could get the door shut and make up some story to explain why she was there. Although at that moment she had no idea what such a story might be.

The owner of the footsteps approached the opposite side of the Impala and stopped. Delilah froze, holding her breath without realizing it. It felt as if even her heart had stopped beating, she was so scared. She heard keys jingle. A car door opened, then slammed shut. The car on the passenger side of the Impala started up and a few seconds later the driver pulled out of the parking space and made his way toward the exit of the parking lot. A few seconds after that Delilah remembered to start breathing again.

She turned her hand the other way and it came free with no resistance at all.

She stayed there, kneeling by the open driver's door of the Impala, for almost a full minute, tears in her eyes and her breathing slowly coming back under control. Her heart was now racing.

That was too close, she thought. So what now? Leave, or keep searching? She looked at her watch and was astonished to see that only seven minutes had passed since she had crossed the street.

In for a fucked-up penny, in for a fucked-up pound.

She stood, closed the driver's side door and walked around to the passenger side. Opening the passenger door, she once more hiked her skirt and knelt down. She was determined to not have a repeat of her panicky moments on the driver's side and took her charm bracelet off of her right wrist before sticking that hand under the passenger seat.

She slipped the bracelet into her left skirt pocket and then leaned in and stuck her right hand under the passenger seat. Feeling around, her fingers encountered something. It was thin, whatever it was. She tweezed it between her index and middle fingers and slid it out.

It was a child's wristwatch with Mickey Mouse on the face. The hour and minute hands were Mickey's hands. The tiny red second hand still moved smoothly around the watch face, but the wrist band was broken. The simple belt-like clasp was still connected, but the plastic band had broken at the top of the watch face. The watch was silver-framed and the band was white.

There was something familiar about the watch, but she couldn't place it.

Without knowing why she was doing so, she stood and put the child's watch in her left skirt pocket, where it joined her charm bracelet. She closed the front passenger door, opened the rear door and gave the rear seats a cursory examination. She neglected to check the trunk at all.

She closed the door and walked back to the corner, once again pressing the crosswalk button and waiting for the light to change. Her eyes were glassy as she stood there pondering the meaning of what she had just found in her husband's car.

The light changed and the beeping resumed. She absently started across. Luckily, no vehicles tried running through the light, or she would have been hit for certain. She got halfway across the street and then stopped, her eyes and mouth shocked O's. Her hands clenched so tightly that she left crescent moon-shaped cuts in her palms from her fingernails.

"Oh, you *idiot!*" she exclaimed.

She turned around and speed-walked as fast as she could in her heels without tripping or turning an ankle. She fumbled her keys out of her skirt pocket and held the Impala's fob up in front of her, repeatedly hitting the lock button.

"Lock, damnit!" she said as she continued walking quickly towards her husband's car. Finally she heard the familiar beep as the doors locked and the passive theft deterrent system armed. She stopped and took a moment to breathe, sweat standing out on her forehead.

"Alright," she said. "Enough is enough." She turned and walked back to the corner once again.

4

Delilah was halfway home. She had called her assistant and told her she was taking the rest of the day because she wasn't feeling well.

"Hope it's not something you ate," Ronnie said. She sounded concerned on top, but couldn't hide the glee a boss-less afternoon brought on. "If it's hitting this fast it's probably something bad."

"I'm sure it's nothing," Delilah had replied. "I'll be in in the morning." Letting Ronnie think it might be food poisoning and that she would tough it out to return to work the next day was much easier than explaining to her how she had found some mighty strange things in her husband's car.

She was turning her Focus left onto Figueroa when it hit her like a pot of boiling water to the face.

Jacob Rawlings!

Delilah pulled over to the curb as fast as she could and just sat there, sweating in the AC.

Jacob Rawlings.

Two nights ago on the Channel 6 eleven o'clock news there had been a missing child report. The boy's name was Jacob Rawlings, Jake to his family and friends. He was last seen leaving school Monday afternoon. He'd been wearing blue jeans, a Skyrim t-shirt, white sneakers and a blue Spitzers baseball cap. He had a black backpack with his school stuff in it and a Zune MP3 player.

On his wrist had been a silver Mickey Mouse watch with a white band.

When he still hadn't been seen or heard from at six o'clock, the police started a search of the area with volunteers. His backpack and Zune were found on a trail through the greenbelt between the street the school was on and the street two over from his house. The news said that the trail was frequently used by Whitehall Elementary students. There were no signs of a struggle and no signs of Jake. No Amber Alert was issued because it couldn't be verified whether or not Jake had been abducted, and they had no vehicle or suspect information. The police spokesman, Lt. Lou Mitchell, said he had likely just dropped his things and gone off to play somewhere. He said that they had high hopes that Jake would be found soon.

He wasn't.

5

When Delilah got home, she walked into the dining room and sat at the table. Ninety minutes later, when Frank's Impala pulled into the driveway and the garage door went up, she didn't move.

Frank pulled his car into his side of their two-car garage, killed the engine and hit the button to lower the garage door behind him. He got out of his car and walked through the door from the garage into the mudroom next to the kitchen.

"Lila, you home?" he called.

Obviously, she thought. *Why else is my car in the garage?* Not very generous, but she wasn't in a mood to be generous towards her husband. She had questions and he'd better have answers.

Frank walked into the dining room and looked at her sitting at the table. "You okay, sweetie?" he asked. Then he stopped walking.

His nostrils flared and his eyes widened. His hands hooked into claws and blood rushed into his face. Not embarrassment, it was rage.

Now she became animated. It was clear that he knew something, but how?

"You," he said. "What did you do?" His voice wasn't even his anymore. He spoke in a growl that she didn't recognize. He'd always been sweet to her, if a little distant, through their seventeen years of marriage. She no longer recognized the man standing in front of her as her husband.

And then he wasn't.

His eyes, which were normally a faded blue that was pleasant but not striking, were now a black so deep that they seemed to be no color at all. Saliva ran down his chin and fell on his button-down shirt, where faint tendrils of smoke rose from it.

She looked at his hooked hands, her eyes widening. His fingernails had grown long and sharp. They were black.

Her paralysis broke and she ran for the foyer and the front door. His heavy footsteps pounded behind her. It wasn't even close.

He snatched her back from the foyer before she even got all the way into it, much less anywhere near the front door. Her feet came completely off the floor and her shirt ripped with a rough purring sound. He jerked her back and slammed her down on the hardwood floor, knocking the wind out of her.

He stood there, panting hard and glaring down at her as she lay there on her back, eyes squeezed shut, trying to regain her breath. As she gasped in a huge gust of air his own breathing calmed and he smiled a little. She opened her eyes and looked around her, then up at him. He leaned down and her mouth and eyes opened into wide O's for the second time that day. She began shaking her head.

"No," she gasped. "Don't."

"It's too late for that, you meddling bitch."

He reached for her.

6

Delilah regained consciousness some time later. Frank was carrying her over his left shoulder. Her hands were bound behind her. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she was probably wearing the black handcuffs from his car.

She opened her eyes and looked around. They were outside in the woods and it was dark. Other than that she had no idea where or when it was. She tried to struggle out of his grasp to no avail. His grip was vice-like.

"Knock it off," he growled. "Or I'll drag you by your fucking hair." She stopped immediately, but she kept looking around, trying to figure out where they were. It was hopeless. She'd lived in the suburbs her whole life. One copse of trees looked like any other to her.

She looked down and saw that Frank wasn't wearing shoes. Where his feet should have been was a pair of scaly lizard feet with long, dangerous-looking claws. The arm and hand around her middle were like iron.

"We're almost there, anyway," he said.

She tried to send her mind back and remember how they had gotten where they were now. All she remembered was him picking her up off the floor between the foyer and the dining room, turning her around and hugging her. As he hugged her, tighter and tighter, consciousness had fled until she woke up hanging over his shoulder like a sack of grain. Had they walked here? Had they driven? Did it matter?

"Here we are," he said. He put her down – not gently – on the hard-packed dirt. Her teeth clacked together when her butt hit the hard-packed dirt and she nearly bit her tongue.

She looked around. They were in a clearing in the woods. There were large boulders arranged in a circle around the center. In the middle was a huge stone block with dark stains running down the side. The half-moon above provided sufficient light to see everything clearly enough for her fright to ratchet up even more.

He leaned over her and pulled an object out of his left pocket. He held it up for her to see. It was the Mickey Mouse watch. She tried to turn her head away but he moved his arm so the watch stayed in front of her eyes.

“Yes,” he said. “Here’s proof of your treachery.” He cocked his head to one side and looked at her more closely. “You want to know, don’t you?” He grabbed her forehead in one hand and she felt an electric shock through the middle of her brain. He closed his eyes and said, “Here you go.”

She pictured in her mind the path through the greenbelt between Peach Street, where Whitehall Elementary stood, and Grapevine Avenue. She saw Jake Rawlings walking on the path, head bobbing along to whatever he was listening to on his Zune, approaching her. Around the edges of her vision were leafy branches. She watched as Jake walked past, then she leaped out, snatching at him from behind. His backpack tore free and he almost got away but she was way too quick for that to happen. As she watched Frank’s hand drag across Jake’s back, she saw the long fingers catch in the ear bud wires of the Zune and pull it free, too. It dropped on the path alongside the backpack. Frank’s hand reached out, grabbed Jake’s wrist and slid up his arm. The band on the Mickey Mouse watch almost broke, but stayed together enough that it didn’t fall off.

She pulled Jake to her, pinning his arms against his sides with one arm and pressing the handkerchief against his mouth and nose with the other hand. His struggles weakened very quickly. Soon he was a limp ragdoll in her arms. She picked him up and threw him over one shoulder. Walking along the path she came out on Grapevine Avenue. In front of her was Frank’s car. She reached into the pocket of her slacks and pulled out Frank’s key ring. She looked down and watched Frank’s hand thumb the trunk release button on the Impala’s fob. The trunk obediently popped open and she placed Jake’s unconscious body into it between Frank’s gym bag and a satchel that she’d never seen before. Frank’s hands closed the trunk. The lid closed with a soft “snick” sound.

The vision smoked over so she had no idea of the route taken to get here. Apparently he didn’t want her to see what happened to Jake in this very clearing, either, because the vision picked back up as he was exiting these woods and walking back to the Impala.

She watched as Frank’s hands opened the trunk again. She leaned close in and saw the Mickey Mouse watch sitting on the carpeted floor of the trunk. Frank’s hand entered her view and snatched it up. The trunk lid closed and she got into the car behind the wheel. Leaning over, Frank’s hand opened the glove box and put the black handcuffs in it. She could just see the corner of the handkerchief inside.

Since Frank now knew what must have happened, she could see it now. The Mickey Mouse watch slipped out of his hand as he was putting the cuffs in the glove box and it fell on the floor. Somewhere along the line it must have gotten kicked under the seat, perhaps by her own feet when they went to dinner night before last in his Impala.

But how could he have not known it fell out of his hand? she thought. And how could he have forgotten about it completely and left it in there?

Frank’s hand left her forehead, the claws dragging painfully across her skin, and the vision snapped off all at once.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” he said, standing upright. “Yours was catching up to mine.” He turned and started to walk towards the stone block in the middle of the clearing, the one that looked like an altar.

As he left her there, leaning against one of the boulders circling the clearing, she got a better look at his back. He walked slumped slightly forward, his claw-like hands hanging almost to his knees. He had the satchel from the Impala’s trunk over his right shoulder.

The thought of trying to run passed through her mind, and then kept going. Where the hell was she going to run to? She had no idea where they were or how to get to help. The only thing she knew was that Frank would catch her before she got very far, no matter what direction she ran. It would be better to try to convince him to let her go. Maybe they could go home and talk about the whole thing.

Maybe foolish hope is better than no hope at all.

He turned partially around and looked at her, the satchel now in his right claw.

“I can hear your thoughts, bitch,” he grumbled through his grin. “Look at that –” he pointed to the far side of the clearing “– before you think about getting out of this alive.”

She looked where he was pointing and a low moan escaped her. On the far side of the clearing, where Frank’s hooked claw of a hand was pointing, was a loose pile of torn clothing and weathered bones. Small bones.

He saw her heightened terror and his grin widened. He held the Mickey Mouse watch up again for her to see, then tossed it into the pile.

“Children hold the most power,” he said. “You won’t be very useful, but you’ll do for tonight.”

She started to get up, preparing to run for her life. His left hand was a blur as it reached into the satchel held in his right and then jumped forward. A large dagger suddenly appeared in the dirt mortar between two boulders just inches in front of her face. She stopped.

“That won’t kill you,” he told her. “Try to take off again and I’ll make it slow. Incredibly slow. You’ll pray to your god for death, but it won’t come. Try me, bitch.”

Delilah sat back where he had dropped her. Frank turned back to the altar and started removing candles from his satchel and placing them on it. When he had them positioned to his satisfaction he lit them with a kitchen lighter, like the ones they used to start the Duraflame logs in their fireplace. That done, he turned and came for her and she knew there was nothing she could do.

He grabbed her and picked her up. She struggled and he held her tight, hugging her again. His face no longer even resembled a human’s. The moisture in his black eyes glistened in the moonlight, but from the eyes there was no color. His teeth were broken signposts, crooked ivory skewers jutting out of black, bleeding gums. His skin was grey in the moonlight and scaly. His hair stood in sparse clumps which moved gently in the slight breeze. There were gill-like slits on the sides of his neck.

“I use the handkerchief with them,” he told her, “so they go under faster. If anyone saw, I could kill them, too, but it would get messy. It’s better to use the chloroform.”

Delilah thought her heart would burst right through her chest, it was pounding so hard. She wondered briefly how much terror a person could stand before literally dying of fright. And still he hugged her tighter. No wonder her memory of his earlier terrifying embrace was foggy and almost nonexistent.

“Sometimes the peppermints work to lure them closer,” he said, “but not always. Sometimes it’s just quicker to grab them.”

He grinned wider as he squeezed her tighter. It seemed impossible for a person to grin that wide. She almost thought that the corners of his grin would meet in the back of his head of the top would fall right off. The entire grin was full of teeth. No human mouth ever had so many teeth.

“I can make the car...*dim*...for lack of a better word,” he said. “But it doesn’t last long and it’s not perfect. This place, though...no one will ever see it.”

He exhaled heavily and his ghastly breath invaded her mouth and sinuses. At last, blissfully, consciousness left her. She slumped in his arms.

Z

When she came to again, she was lying on top of the altar. Her wrists and ankles were bound by heavy rope. She turned her head to the left and saw that the ends of the rope binding her left hand disappeared into the top of the stone altar through narrow holes. The stone altar had looked solid to her. She had no idea how he had tightened the ropes around her wrists and ankles.

She turned to her right and saw the thing that had been her husband. His back was to her. When her gaze fell upon him he straightened – as much as he could in that body – and chuckled. With his new inhuman voice, that chuckle sounded like brackish water gurgling up through a blackened crack in the earth.

“Awake,” he said. “Good.” He slipped out of the shirt he’d been wearing and she saw that his pants, underwear and socks were already in a pile near the edge of the clearing.

He turned around and stood upright again, giving her a good look at his naked body. He looked like a deformed dragon. His face had elongated into a snout. A tail was growing longer behind him.

“Almost done,” he said. “How do you like your husband now?” He walked slowly towards her. In his hand was a large, ornate dagger. Its blade gleamed with reflected moonlight.

As he walked nearer her terror grew until it seemed as if it would simply wash her away like a tsunami. Her breath came in short, rapid gasps. Her heart was pounding against her ribcage. Her bladder let go, wetting her skirt.

The thing that had been Frank leaned over her, its face nearly touching hers. It closed its eyes and opened its mouth, its jaws creaking. It drew her terrified breath in and swallowed. Gulp after gulp it drank her terror. She screamed and it grinned.

It drew back and held the dagger high in one scaly claw.

“Here it comes,” it growled.

Delilah squeezed her eyes shut tight.

The moonlight shone down.

The dagger plunged.