



# THE BODY IN CELL TWO

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by Kate Hohl

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New author Kate Hohl lives in New Rochelle, New York, and teaches writing at Pace University. Her haunting debut story takes us back to the period immediately following World War II.

It took four men to carry the body into the police station. I opened the door for them, cold rain from the grey October sky stinging my cheeks like nettles. They struggled to maneuver their burden up the slick marble steps. As they squeezed by me in the narrow entryway, I caught a whiff of the wet-wool fug of the army blanket wrapped around the corpse. The men carried it past me into the small waiting room that housed my desk, an ancient filing cabinet, and a hot plate plugged in near the radiator. The American flag crisscrossed with the blue Maine flag on the wall next to the front door. Water fell from the sodden edge of the blanket. Plink. Plink.

Forming a puddle on the concrete floor.

“Thanks for coming in early, Evie,” Arn said.

Arn Colby was the Scarborough chief of police on that raw October day in 1951. He was a tall man whose blond hair and broad shoulders hinted at Viking blood mixed into his Yankee ancestry. He grimaced a little as he and the other three men shifted the weight of the body between them. Arn had tangled with a land mine in Anzio in '44, which cracked his spine and blew off the fingers on his right hand. Arn never complained, but the pain scored deep brackets around his mouth. He spent the duration of the war in traction in a VA hospital in Baltimore.

That's where he had met the pretty blond nurse who later would become his wife. He kept a picture of her on his desk. She had bright eyes and a no-nonsense curve to her lips. I think I would have liked her.

“Of course, Chief Colby. Cell Two is unlocked,” I said.

“You're a good girl, Evie,” Arn said. “Come on, boys, you heard Miss Evie. Let's bring our friend here to the back.”

Even with a bum hand, Arn was the kind of man others followed. On his right, he was flanked by Roy Landers, the deputy, and the only other full-time police officer in town. Roy's cap sat at a jaunty angle so that it covered the cowlick in his light brown hair, like a kid playing dress-up. He carried the body at arms' length, careful not to let the wet and salt-stained tarp brush up

against his spick-and-span uniform. On Arn's left were Martin and Eugene Pelletier, dressed in hip waders and rough wool fisherman sweaters.

I trailed the men down the short narrow hallway to the jail cells, bookended by a small window on one end and a locked door leading to the alley on the other. The two cells in the Scarborough police station didn't get regular use during the week, but most weekends Arn was called on to break up fights at the Dog and Anchor, the local tavern. Occasionally, he had to lock up a local long enough for him to dry out.

That Monday morning, Benjy Boucher was firmly ensconced in Cell One. The Bouchers lived in a tumble-down shack out on Old Route One and had a history of starting trouble they couldn't finish. Like all the Bouchers, Benjy's eyes were small and close set and even though he wasn't yet out of his twenties he had hair that was thinning near the crown of his head. His hand gripped the bars of the cell.

"What in the hell is that, Arn?" Benjy said.

"You'll want to watch your mouth, Benjy. There's a lady present," Arn said. Benjy's gaze slid over to me. "If you say so, Arn," he said.

I ignored Benjy's smirk. I knew how small-town minds worked. Tongues wagged when I arrived a few months before, a flatlander widow from Boston who stepped off the Downeaster train with a one-way ticket stub in her hand. It was few weeks' wonder amongst the good people of Scarborough when Arn took me on as his secretary, but eventually most of the talk died down. Arn was clearly still committed to the memory of his wife. I was committed to keeping a job I knew I was lucky to get.

"This thing's getting heavy. Let's tack 'er up and dump it," Martin Pelletier said.

"We'll put 'em in Cell Two, at least until the medical examiner can get here from Portland," Arn said. He shifted his weight on the balls of his feet, his face pale under the pendant lights. He would never show that the weight was straining his good arm, but I knew the signs when he was in pain.

Arn and the others laid the body down on the floor of the cell and filed out. I closed the door of the cell over, turned the lock, and hung the key on the far wall by the door.

Benjy sniffed the air and grimaced. "I never smelled such a Christly stink."

"Benjy, what do you say I go get you some breakfast?" I said.

Arn threw me a grateful glance that warmed me better than a fur coat from Filene's.

Benjy's expression brightened at the mention of chow. "Fine. But tell Dinah to go easy on the eggs this time. The last ones were so hard-boiled the only thing they were fit for was to bounce 'em off the walls," Benjy said.

Roy and the Pelletier brothers followed Arn into his office. I stuck my head in the door. The office was just large enough to accommodate Arn's big metal desk and his three visitors. The surface of the desk held the framed photograph of his wife, a green blotter which I changed twice a month, and the seventy-five-cent fountain pen gifted to him by the Elks. The window behind Arn's desk looked out onto Main Street. The other overlooked the alley between the police station and the Methodist church next door. Once the rain stopped, Roy would pull his Duesenberg into the alleyway next to Arn's Buick and wash the car. He treated that jalopy better than most men treat their wives.

"Fresh pot of coffee on the hot plate," I said. "Anyone need anything over at Dinah's? I'm going to fetch Benjy's breakfast."

"We're fine here, Evie," Arn said.

"I'll be back in two shakes," I said.

"Yessir, best part of the job is looking at that view every day," Roy said in a low voice as I walked away. The Pelletier brothers snickered.

Small towns are filled with guys like Roy Landers. Confident about their place in the world, they point with pride to their names on mossy headstones in boneyards, generations of their families intertwined with the soil. The problem with roots that deep? You can't see the rot until after it's already set in.

Dinah's Coffee Shop was located across the street and down a few buildings from the Landers General Store run by a prosperous branch of Roy's family. Dinah was one of the few women in town who was friendly to me. She and her husband Joe ran the place together. He did the cooking and she waited tables.

A customer sat at the horseshoe-shaped counter, his head buried in the morning paper. The radio on the counter was tuned to WABI out of Bangor. Skeets McDonald's pure country wail warned his fickle woman to "Scoot, Git and Be Gone."

"Morning, Evie," Dinah said with a bright smile that belied the tired look in her eyes.

"Morning, Dinah. I'm here to order breakfast for Benjy Boucher," I said.

Dinah clicked her tongue. "Again?" she said with a rare frown.

"Two eggs, soft-boiled, crispy bacon, and some of Joe's special hash browns," I said.

Dinah scribbled the order on her pad, then slapped it down on the high counter behind the pastry cases. "Hey Joe, did you hear? Benjy Boucher is back at the jailhouse."

Her husband's face appeared over the counter. He had a wide, pleasant face under his paper cap. "Now Dinah, that's no business of ours," he said, then disappeared back into the kitchen.

Dinah rolled her eyes. "Men. Their tongues rattle with hinges on both sides but they pretend they don't like a good gossip as much as we ladies do."

We shared a smile, but all I said was, "How much do I owe you?"

She stepped behind the register. "Since the county's paying, that'll be sixty cents."

I fished out three quarters from my change purse. Dinah punched in the amount on the register. The double ding of the bell rang and the cash drawer popped open. The man at the counter started a little at the sound, but when I turned to get a better look at him, his face was buried again in the paper.

Dinah handed me the paper bag. It was warm and smelled of the bay seasoning Joe sprinkled into his potatoes.

I stood in the doorway to the coffee shop and waited for a break in the rain pumping down from the sky. I shared the awning with two boys dressed in school clothes clutching newspaper boats in their hands. They were part of a gang that sometimes hung out near the police station.

"You Chief Colby's secretary?" the older, rougher-looking boy said.

"Guilty," I said.

"Was that a dead body they just carried into the station house?" the younger one said.

"A simon-pure corpse," I said. "But anyone asks, you didn't hear it from me."

Their eyes widened. "Tolja," the younger one said. The older boy cuffed him on the ear. The younger one roared and dropped his newspaper boat in the gutter. The boat bobbed away, then circled down the storm drain as the boys chased each other down the street.

When I got back to the office, the Pelletier brothers were gone. After I delivered Benjy's food, I ran the mop over the floor of the waiting room. I put away the mop in the utility closet and slipped a fresh piece of paper into the typewriter. The door to Arn's office was ajar.

"So you found the body in the marsh," Arn said to Roy.

"Don't know how I would have pulled it out if the Pelletier boys hadn't stopped by," Roy said.

"What in blazes were you doing out there before dawn?" Arn said.

"It was my shift for the Observers," Roy said. During the war he was 4-F, but he had led a group of Scarborough citizens known as the Ground Observer Corps. The Observers watched the skies above the coastline at Dunstan for enemy planes.

"The war's over, Roy." The pop of a match, then the sweet smell of Arn's pipe tobacco trickled out the door.

"That dog don't bark, Arn. We might have whooped the Nazis but what about the Ruskies? Let those dirty Reds fly their planes too close and next thing you know their tanks'll be rolling up on U.S. soil," Roy said.

"So, in your opinion, a Commie lands here and the first thing he does is visit a racetrack?" Arn said. When Arn searched the body, the only thing on it had been a racing form tucked into the inner pocket of the corpse's jacket. It was a sodden mess, the fine print barely legible.

"Just because the fella had a racing form on him, it don't mean he went to the Downs," Roy said, his voice sulky. Scarborough Downs had been built two years earlier, in spite of protests from many of the locals, including Arn and several town leaders. Since it opened in 1950, people from all over the state had flocked there. Town gossip had it that Roy was a little too fond of playing the ponies.

"Did you search the Observation Post?" Arn said.

"What do you mean?" Roy said.

"Gee, I don't know, Roy. A dead body shows up a few feet from the post, I figured you'd search it. See if you could find any clues," Arn said.

Arn's desk chair squeaked as he pushed it away from his desk. He emerged from his office, a shamefaced Roy at his side.

"Evie, Roy and I are going to take a ride out to Dunstan," Arn said.

"What should I do about Benjy?" I said.

Arn sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. Purple smudges under his eyes told the tale of yet another sleepless night. "Let him cool his heels a little longer. I'll cut him loose when I get back."

\* \* \*

The phone on my desk had remained mute all afternoon. No word from the coroner in Portland. It was almost four o'clock and Arn and Roy still hadn't returned.

The day had folded up, the sky fading into a battleship-grey dusk. I grabbed

the extra set of car keys from the top drawer in my desk and brought Benjy's supper to him.

"It's about time," Benjy said. "I could have starved to death in here."

I handed him a paper bag.

"What is it?" Benjy said.

"Guinea hen under glass," I said.

He opened the bag and took out one of the hamburgers Dinah had scraped off the grill.

"You call this suppah? This food is stone cold," he said. He threw the bag down on the cot. "And how am I supposed to eat anyway with that corpse rotting in the next cell?"

For once, Benjy was on the nose. Thanks to the efficient new central heating, the smell of the body in Cell Two had only gotten worse since that morning.

I cracked open the window in the hallway and grabbed the keys off the wall. Benjy looked hopeful, but I walked past him and opened up Cell Two. The body sat in a kidney-shaped pool of water that almost stretched to the back wall. The blanket wasn't long enough to completely cover the corpse's feet. I averted my eyes from the sight of the black wing tips sticking out and grabbed the extra blanket off the cot.

"Here," I said and handed the blanket to Benjy.

"Where you goin'?" Benjy said around a mouthful of hamburger.

"To look for Arn," I said.

\* \* \*

Arn and Roy had taken Arn's Buick, so that left Roy's Duesenberg. I drove it at a snail's pace through the cobblestone roads in town, but once I reached the turnoff onto Old Route One, I dumped the clutch and hammered it.

About ten minutes down the road, I parked on the shoulder behind the Buick. It would have to be shanks' mare for the rest of the way to the salt marsh. I fished the flashlight out of the glove compartment. I didn't need it yet, but full dark would fall soon.

The wind cut through my thin wool overcoat. It was sharp and bitter cold and carried the fishy smells of low tide from the marsh. My toes were numb in my kidskin shoes.

I snapped on the flashlight. The thin light bobbed along the dirt path that led to the post. When I caught sight of the small, flat-roofed shack with its weathered wooden siding, the windows were dark.

"Arn?" I called out.

The front door rattled on its rusty hinge and slammed in the wind. A shiver of dread ran up my spine.

*You don't have to do this, I told myself. Just walk away. Go back to the road. Drive the Duese back to town, nice and easy. The voice in my head didn't stop there. Leave a fin with the landlady to cover the week's rent. Grab the fern plant that Arn bought you for Easter. Grab your suitcase. Then walk to the train station and catch the first rattler out of this burg.*

What would Arn do if our places had been reversed?

I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The sight of Arn Colby slumped on the floor next to the potbelly stove would

revisit me in my nightmares for many years to come. My hands shook as I grabbed his big shoulder and rolled him onto his back.

“Arn?” I said. I swallowed hard. My heart felt like a rock lodged in my throat.

“Is he hurt bad?”

I stifled a scream and jumped to my feet. Roy Landers lurched into the beam of the flashlight.

“Roy, you scared the life out of me. What happened?” I said.

“There were two of them,” he said, his expression grim. He touched the back of his head gingerly. “They musta been waiting for us. Arn got it first. Went down like a sack of wet sand. Then I took a sap to the back of my melon, and that’s all I remember.”

“We have to get help,” I said.

Arn groaned. I had never heard a more welcome sound.

We half dragged, half carried Arn out to the Buick. I drove, tailing Roy and the Duesenberg back to town.

Arn turned to look at me. “Thank you, Evie,” he said.

Our eyes met by the light of the dash. He reached out with his good hand and held mine.

\* \* \*

The next morning flew by in a flurry of activity. Arn and Roy went out on a call for a robbery at the feed store downtown. An administrator from the hospital where Arn’s wife had passed called and left him a message. Benjy would have to be fed. His brother still hadn’t shown up to post his bail.

Before lunchtime, I called the medical examiner’s office in Portland to find out when we could expect him. The secretary sounded surprised, then indignant.

“We received a call yesterday that you didn’t need the coroner,” she said.

“There must have been some sort of mix-up. We need him all right,” I said. The state of the body hadn’t improved during its overnight stay.

Miffed, the secretary put down the phone while she talked to her boss. She was gone so long, I thought she pulled a Judge Crater but she eventually got back on the line. The coroner had appointments in Portland all morning but he would make the drive down late that afternoon.

Arn walked in the door as I hung up the phone. “Coroner’s due to arrive by four today,” I said.

Arn winced and rubbed the back of his head. “I mean to take a ride back out to the post. Take a look around. Why don’t you come with me?” Arn said.

“What about the body?” I said.

“Coroner’s scheduled for after four, right?” he said. I nodded. “In that case, we’ll be back at quarter-of. Not like our friend in Cell Two is going anywhere.”

The phone rang as I pulled on my coat.

“I’ll get it,” he said.

He cradled the phone under his chin and slipped his gun, German luger, into his shoulder holster. It was a nasty piece, liberated from a dead SS officer during the war.

He tossed me his car keys. “Why don’t you start the car?”

If Arn expected trouble, we didn’t find it on that trip out to the Observation Post. It was just as desolate a spot during the day. The wind swept down the beach. The weak sunlight bounced off the dark surface of the marsh.



Inside, Arn prowled around the small space looking for clues, but there wasn't much to see. A cane-backed chair sat in front of a spindly card table, and a high-powered telescope held pride of place near the window that looked out over the marsh. A few strands of dark hair stuck to the congealed blood on the side of the potbelly stove where I had found Arn the day before. I shuddered.

"Cold?" Arn said.

I shook my head.

Arn gestured to the telescope at the window trained on the skies over the marsh. "Care to take a look?"

His hand was warm where he cupped my elbow. He gently positioned me in front of the telescope. I took a deep breath and turned around to face him. The heat of his long body felt good against mine as I stepped into the circle of his arms.

\* \* \*

When we pulled up back at the station house, the windows were dark.

"That's funny. I always leave the light on my desk on. And the one in the hallway by the cells too," I said.

Arn cut the engine and jogged up the stairs. I followed.

I turned on the light on my desk. Nothing looked out of order on my desk or on Arn's.

From the back of the station house a faint creaking sound broke the silence.

I followed Arn back to the cellblock. "Benjy?" Arn said.

He flicked on the pendant lights.

Benjy hung from the light fixture in his cell, a leather belt digging into his neck. His sightless eyes bulged out of his purple-mottled face. The body swayed in the breeze in the open window in the hallway.

Cell Two was empty.

\* \* \*

When the coroner arrived, I ushered him into Arn's office and closed the door. We would have a lot to do after he left. The Bouchers would have to be called.

I pulled out the mop and set to work. After I finished cleaning the floor in the waiting room, I went back to the cellblocks. Arn had pulled poor Benjy down and covered him with a blanket. The pool of water in Cell Two had started to recede, but a wet trail led from the cell to the alleyway door. Curious, I reached for the key on the wall and unlocked the door. The smears continued down the two cement-block steps and into the alleyway.

Later, I realized just how close I came to missing it. A man's wing tip lodged between the bottom step and the metal garbage cans which lined the side wall of the station. Black leather, mottled grey, ruined by salt. The sole peeled back a little at the heel, revealing a flash of red which I tugged free. A ticket, wrinkled and waterlogged, but intact. I smoothed it out on my palm.

Across the alley, the two boys from the day before were playing marbles in a small patch of dirt in front of the Methodist Church. A flock of crows perched on the mossy gravestones. The older boy cocked back his thumb. A big blue Aggie sprang forward, scattering the ring of smaller marbles.

"Boys," I said.

They gave me the Yankee nod.

"Been out here long?" I said.

"Since school let out," the older boy said.

“Have you seen anyone come in or out of the station house?” I said.

“Not since Deputy Landers drove off,” the younger one said.

“Took the corner out of the alley so fast, I thought for sure he was gonna stove-in the door of the Duesenberg,” the older boy said.

“What’s wrong, lady? You don’t look so good,” the younger boy said.

Through the side window, I saw Arn at his desk, his golden hair limned by the light of his desk lamp.

The flock of crows watched me with their black beady eyes. *Not a flock*, said the voice inside my head. *A murder. You call a group of crows a murder.*

I crossed the street to the coffee shop. The man from the day before sat at the counter nursing a cup of joe. I slid onto the stool next to him. He looked up from his newspaper.

\* \* \*

When I got back to the office, the coroner was gone. The door to Arn’s office was ajar.

Arn motioned me inside.

“That coroner fella sure is wound tight. Though he’s right about one thing. We’ll have to alert the county about the missing body,” Arn said.

“Arn, you need to find Roy,” I said.

Arn struck a match against the bottom of his shoe and lit his pipe. I breathed in the sweet aroma. “What’s wrong, Evie?” Arn said.

“Out at the Observation Post, there was blood on the potbelly stove. And sticking out of the blood there were some hairs. Dark hairs. Not blond like yours. Or even brown like Roy’s. Whose blood was it, Arn?” I said.

His shoulders dropped like an immense weight had been lifted from them. “The body in Cell Two,” he said.

“Who was he?” I said.

“An Italian fella from Boston. What they call a loan shark,” Arn said.

I groaned. “If Roy went bust at the track, he should’ve gone to his family for the money,” I said.

Arn rolled his pipe between his fingers. “Roy didn’t borrow money from him. I did.” There went my heart again. But this time it felt like it stopped beating.

Arn reached into his top drawer and pulled out a stack of bills, “Past Due” stamped in red across each page.

“When my wife got sick, Doc Walker told us it was hopeless. But I insisted we go to doctors in Boston. When they told us the same thing, we went to New York. I borrowed against my pension to pay the bills, but it wasn’t enough. Roy found me here one day, tearing my hair out. He told me about some people who helped him out when he fell short after playing the horses out at the Downs. Offered to introduce me.”

“Syndicate guys,” I said.

He nodded. “When I got behind on payments, they sent a heavy, one Patricio Gagliardo, to pay me a visit. Roy and I took him out to the track. Figured if we showed him a good time, he’d consider giving me more time on the loan. At first it seemed to work. Gagliardo hit a long shot that paid out ten to one. He agreed to go out to the Observation Post to renegotiate the terms. But first he stopped by the train station to check a bag with his winnings.”

“Whose idea was it to punch Gagliardo’s ticket?” My voice sounded funny to my own ears.



"You'd make a good detective, Evie," Arn said, "Mine, of course. Way I figured it, *Signore* Gagliardo disappears, Roy and I split the money. I square the loan and, hey presto, no more visits from our friends in the sharkskin suits." He reached for his pouch of tobacco, tamped it down with his thumb, and relit the pipe. The blue smoke curled in the air between us.

"Problem was, after I did for Gagliardo, we couldn't find that claim ticket anywhere.

Then I started thinking. Maybe Roy was holding out on me." He sighed and looked down. "He was the best man at my wedding, and we nearly knocked each other's blocks off. If you hadn't followed us out to the post, I think I might have killed Roy too." He picked up the picture of his wife, then placed it face-down on the desk.

"I don't sleep much. Because of this." He held up the ruined stump of his hand. "My fingers were blown clear off in that Italian forest. I know I shouldn't be able to feel them. But I'll tell you what, Evie, I do. The ache is so bad sometimes, I think I'm losing my mind," Arn said.

"Oh, Arn," I said.

The front door to the station house opened. The man from Dinah's coffee shop walked in. I might have been sucker enough to fall for a man whose heart was buried next door in the Methodist boneyard, but I could still spot a G-man when I saw one.

"Chief Colby? I'm Federal Agent Barnes. I'd like to have a few words with you."

\* \* \*

I walked into the hallway of the cell block. Arn sat on the cot in Cell Two. I held up a bag of food from Dinah's.

"I brought you some of Joe's home-fried potatoes," I said.

"Any word on Roy?" Arn said.

"They picked him up at the Canada border. He dumped Gagliardo's body somewhere along the way."

"They'll lean on him hard for the location," Arn said.

"Yes," I said.

"Poor Roy. He didn't really have the stomach for it, you know. The killing," Arn said.

"He's on his way now to county," I said.

"Do you know what the other prisoners do to cops in jail?" he said. He gestured to the keys on the wall. "I don't suppose you could hand me those keys and look the other way."

"The paddy wagon's on its way," I said. "Try to eat something before it gets here."

I reached between the bars and put the bag on the floor. The contents of the bag landed with a loud thump. Arn looked from me to the bag and back again. One of his rare smiles curved his lips.

"You really are a good girl, Evie," he said.

\* \* \*

The G-man sat behind Arn's desk. "I'll take a cup of coffee, honey," he said.

"We're out. I'll just make a quick run to the General Store," I said.

I pulled on my coat. Arn's empty shoulder holster hung on the coatrack. Outside, the wind had kicked up again.

As I passed the graveyard, a shot rang out from inside the police station. The loud blast of a German luger. The crows, startled, screeched and took flight, sooty black smudges circling the sky.

When I stepped onto the train at the Scarborough station, I declined the redcap's offer to check my bag. I found a seat, then opened the bag. I peered at the stack of bills.

The train started with a jerk. I looked up.

A tall man with blond hair and wide shoulders stood in the doorway between cars, his face lit with a smile.

"There's my good girl," he said.

My heart slammed in my chest.

"Daddy!" the little girl squealed from the seat behind me. The man walked past me and lifted the little girl off her mother's lap. He held her close with his two good hands.

Funny thing about nerve endings. Even when the thing that hurts the most is no longer there, you still feel the pain.

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