

## The Willow

Stephanie Mickelson

*I need to stop watching so many crime shows*, thought Eileen as a delivery van drove by with a short in the tail light. It probably wasn't because someone was trapped inside, scared and alone, signalling for help, but she couldn't help thinking so. Years of *Law and Order: SVU*, *Castle*, and *Psych* had made her regard people with more suspicion than was probably normal-or healthy. She signaled and turned onto 7th Street, keeping an eye on the delivery van continuing on Main.

*I really hope I'm wrong*, she thought as she continued towards the park near her work with the nagging feeling that she had just sealed some poor girl's fate. She kept repeating the license plate in her head *473-GRB, 473-GRB*, just in case. It was a white van with faded lettering that alluded to a delivery company probably no longer in business with faded balloons, most likely a party planning delivery van. *But why were the letters and graphics so faded?*

A chill was evident despite the September sun as Eileen set out for her morning walk in the park near the flower shop where she worked. Weather in Vermont was never stable, and the summers never got too hot, so they sort of slipped into fall. Something she took into account when she moved here after finishing college in the sweltering heat of Florida. Eileen zipped her jacket and started out on the bike path with the sun warming her shoulders as she walked towards the shoreline. Clouds shifted in the clear blue sky, couples walked hand-in-hand, and owners walked their dogs. Eileen absent mindedly eyed each one with an ounce of suspicion before her mind slipped back to the van. She shook her head and focused on watching a shaggy golden retriever jump wildly after a frisbee thrown by an equally shaggy owner. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of silver and focused in on a glint of glass. Her eyes narrowed as she moved towards it. The park was generally clean, and the community made an effort to keep it that way, so an errant piece of glass wasn't tolerated. She reached the spot where she had seen the glass, but with the sun at a different angle, it was hard to locate it again. Then she saw the camera. It was flaked with mud and spots of red paint with a smudge crossing the lens for which the cap was missing. It was a nice camera and had probably cost a lot, so Eileen picked it up gingerly and tucked it under her arm and turned to head back to her car intending to post a Craigslist ad after work looking for the owner.

"Good morning, Eileen," said Jeff, greeting her with a smile as the bell on the door jingled her arrival.

"Hey, Jeff," replied Eileen, flattered that he would acknowledge her and suppressing a smile as his earring gleamed from his left ear. Jeff, her boss, was a stickler for punctuality and perfection and in a fit of middle age crisis had just pierced his ear. A smile meant he approved of her arriving to work 5 minutes early. As for perfection, she wasn't sure how she would perform after the delivery van incident. The scent of lilies and roses greeted her as she swung the door open to the back grabbing the day's work orders as she swept to her workstation. Shaking her head to clear her mind of the desperate girl likely being held captive, she opened the door to the cooler and frosty air hit her in the face as she grabbed buckets of flowers to start her arrangements for the day. They were deep into the fall wedding season, so she'd been swamped all week.

“Already started?” Lynn rushed in throwing her bag under her station. “Jeff ignored me, so I think he might not have notice I’m late again.” She grabbed a few orders off the top of the stack.

“I already put out most of the flowers for the first couple orders,” said Eileen, “but I think we still need baby’s breath.”

“Oh, we’re out. Jeff said he’d order more, but it probably won’t be in until today’s delivery,” explained Lynn.

Eileen groaned knowing that would slow down the day’s production, but she started setting out supplies figuring she could do the bulk of the arrangements and add accent flowers later. God forbid a bride would get a bouquet without baby’s breath.

The day went quickly and before she knew it, she flicked off her work station light and slid into her car checking to make sure the camera was still on the passenger side floorboard. When she got home, curiosity got the best of her, and she decided it might help to glance at the pictures in order to have the owner identify the camera in case more than one person called. The light was fading outside and the wind rustled through the drying leaves. Shadows began to creep along the wall and floor and the camera’s lens adjusted when she clicked it on. She was surprised to see only a black screen. She clicked backwards through a few more, only to be met with blackness. Surely, she thought, someone with a camera this nice would take better pictures than that. She continued to click through until color began to seep into the corners forming blurred images, each picture becoming progressively clearer until finally a picture of a tree appeared.

“I know that tree,” she whispered. She stared at it, racking her brain for where she had seen it. With a suddenness she wasn’t prepared for, she remembered seeing the tree on a day she had wandered from the bike path into the wooded path that lead to a small pond. The path was worn but not well travelled, and she had to push her way through branches. She couldn’t remember why she had followed that path that day, but it probably had something to do with a perceived mystery. The clearing had appeared as if from nowhere and on the edge of the pond was a tall willow that arched gracefully over the edge of the lightly shifting water.

Eileen focused her attention back to the camera hoping for another picture she recognized, but she was at the back at the beginning. There were a total of 10 pictures: 3 black screens, 6 blurred beginning with a barely recognizable image and getting progressively clearer, though still unidentifiable, and finally, the picture of the tree. *So weird?* Eileen mused.

She examined the camera and realized that the paint had rubbed off on her fingers along with some of the mud. But paint didn’t rub off. No way that it was blood. She shook her head again to clear her thoughts. *Too many crime shows, Eileen.* She remembered that some cameras had an external memory card along with their internal memory, so she checked in the battery compartment to see if there was a memory card. Finding one, she flicked through the settings until she was able to switch from the internal memory to the memory card. Her fingers began to tremble and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead as she stared at the image in front of her. Plain as day, the license plate from the delivery van stared back. *473-GRB.*

Her first instinct was to call the police, but realized how crazy she would sound. *Hello, officer, I found a camera in the woods that has a picture of a license plate I saw earlier today. Can you do something about this?* What in the world would they think of her? She didn’t want to come off as a crackpot single woman with nothing else to occupy her time than to send the police on wild goose chases after delivery vans with shorted out tail lights. She thought back to where

she found the camera and with a sharp intake of breath realized she found it close to where the wooded path veered off towards the clearing. Her mind worked overtime as an explanation began to form in her mind. She began talking out loud, so she could hear herself think.

“Is it possible that the picture of the tree was the last picture that was taken before something bad happened? Whoever owns this camera-the time stamp!” grabbing the camera, she went back into the settings and activated the timestamp on each. The first picture of the tree had been taken at 7:00 that morning, just as dawn was breaking. The next picture was taken at 7:28, an image that upon close examination may have contained the tree, but a blurred version on its way out of the scope of the lens. The successive images became more and more blurry until the black screens, stopping at 7:31. All had been taken over the course of 3 minutes. She reconstructed her timeline from the morning wishing she had looked at a clock more often. She had gotten up at 7:30 and left for work at 8:00 and got to the park at 8:15 and found the camera about 15 minutes later-8:30. She left the park at 8:45 and made it to work at 8:55, five minutes early. That gave an hour window. She had seen the delivery van at about 8:10 heading east on Main St. She moved towards the sink to wash the mud off of her hands and saw her hands begin to shake as she realized that it wasn't paint that had rubbed off. It *was* blood. An end table crashed to the floor and she stumbled over it, hurrying to the bathroom. She flung open the medicine cabinet and grabbed for the Q-tips, ziplock bag in hand.

“This can't be happening, this can't be happening,” she whispered over and over as she swabbed her hand and placed the Q-tip in the bag. Still unsure of whether or not to call the cops, Eileen stored the bag in the drawer next to the sink. Cold beads of sweat dribbled into her eyes and she plunged her hands under the hot water.

Friday morning came slowly with soft light filtering through the curtains. The early morning rays fell on Eileen and illuminated the rumpled covers, tangled from a sleepless night. Her eyes snapped open and the events of the night before came back in a rush. Sometime in the night in between sleep and awake she had formulated a plan. She would go to the clearing and look for clues. If she found something, then she would call the cops. Hurriedly, she got ready for work and set off for the park.

No sun greeted her as she climbed into her car, camera in hand, now wrapped in a plastic bag to preserve fingerprints. *If it even comes to that*, she thought, still hesitant to believe that something like this could fall into her lap. The overcast skies were ominous and the chill from the day before was deepened from the lack of sun. She moved with an urgency down the bike path to the spot where the camera had been the day before, veered onto the wooded path, and noted that there were fewer branches to push through this time. The dirt looked freshly walked on. The clearing opened up before her and the willow's branches circled lazily in the water beneath it. Moving slowly so as not to miss anything, Eileen crept towards the tree and edge of the water. Using the Latex gloves she had removed from her first aid kit at home, she took the camera from its bag and turned it on, listening to the whir of the lens adjusting. She placed herself in the spot from which it appeared the picture had been taken and looked around turning in a slow circle. At the opening to the path, she noticed branches had been broken, so she slowly retraced her steps, a shock of blue drew her attention towards the tree line a few feet to the right. Hanging on a broken tree branch was a piece of silk fabric. The fabric was clean and didn't look as if it had gotten wet, which meant that the rain two nights ago hadn't touched it. She walked

the tree line back to the opening, but stopped when she saw newly disturbed dirt with what looked like two distinct footprints heading towards the path. *It's time to call the cops.*

The cops left the flower shop after asking lots of questions and taking the camera. Eileen said she would bring the swab down to the police station immediately after work. Lynn rushed in in the middle of the interview, shot Eileen a baffled look and hurried to her station ignored by Jeff who stayed off to the side obviously not impressed that Eileen had interrupted her workday. The officer not asking the questions took notes on a small notepad only glancing up when Eileen paused to collect her thoughts.

“So you say you saw an old delivery van, memorized the license plate, and that it's the same license plate on this camera?” asked the officer, officer #2 scribbled.

“Yes, I know it sounds crazy, but I noticed the van right before I came to work yesterday and memorized the license plate just in case. Then there was a picture of it on the camera that I found,” she clenched her teeth at the look she saw on the second officer's face. She knew they didn't believe her, especially since there hadn't been a missing person reported and memorizing random license plates was just weird. Jeff continued to look annoyed, and she knew she needed to get back to work.

“I've told you all I know, and you have my number, so if you have any more questions, let me know. I really need to get back to work,” she shuffled buckets of flowers around on her station and grabbed a basket from underneath. The cops turned and walked out leaving only the sound of the tinkling bell.

“What in the world was that about?” whispered Lynn.

“I'll fill you in later, let's not irritate Jeff anymore, or we may both be out of a job.”

Saturday morning was cloudy again, but Eileen decided that another look around the park couldn't hurt anything. It was obvious the cops hadn't believed her, and with the meager amount of evidence she presented them, she didn't blame them. The wind whipped around her as she followed the familiar bike path towards the now too familiar wooded path. The early morning light cast shadows that seemed to follow her through the woods. The clearing appeared and a twig snapped behind her. She whirled around to find herself face to face with Jeff, knife pressed into her stomach her mind reeled.

“Don't say anything,” he hissed. He turned her away from him, faced her towards the path and began walking. She felt the pressure of the knife on her back and she reeled with the weight of what was happening. Jeff was the driver of the van, he had taken the person who took the pictures, he listened to her entire conversation with the cops and knew what she knew. The van loomed in the distance and in the early hours there was no one around to signal. Her shoulder slammed to the floor and she watched as the door fell and with a sickening click, latched.

“Did Eileen call in sick, today?” asked Lynn arriving on time for the first time in weeks. Jeff's head snapped up from the papers on his desk.

“Yea, that van thing really has her in a bind, so she wanted a few days off to collect herself. You're going to have a lot of slack to pick up,” Jeff said with finality.

