

Morden Wakes Up

It was just a bit past two in the morning. She just got finished telling me "I told you so." In more words.

"Yeah," I said in reply. "You're a real Cassandra."

"Does that mean you'll never believe me, no matter how many times I'm right?"

"No, it means no matter how many times I do believe you, you'll only remember the times I didn't."

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It all started when I got the call at half past eleven on a Tuesday morning. "Mister Morden," the voice said, sounding like it had been sucking air through a filter since it was ten. "My name is Calhoun. I hear you're good at dealing with people."

"You heard wrong," my own voice said, probably sounding like I had just swallowed a porcupine. "I'm good at observing people. It's my partner who does the dealing."

"Whatever the details are," he replied quickly, "I am sure will be made apparent as they are appropriate to make apparent."

It took me a second to untangle his odd statement. Any mind that could work linguistic loops like that was not one I wanted to spend very much time talking with. "And who decides that, you or me?" I was already on guard; already sparring. It was like I had been talking with him for an hour already. This was where the conversation was going to go, so there was no point in delaying it.

"If the details are mine; I decide. If they are yours; you decide. Why are we talking about this? Is this how you always deal with potential clients? Ah, but you did just tell me that it is your partner who does the dealing. Should I have called him?"

"Her," I said, knowing full well that he knew that my partner was a she. "Florence Point." He was feigning ignorance. Everything was a game to this one. I knew it as soon as he laid down that BS about me being good with people.

"Ah, so Doctor Point is a woman. Well then, perhaps I should speak with *her*?"

I yawned, a long cat-like yawn which I was sure gave him a clear mental image of a long furry beast arching up its back to twice its normal height. "She's not exactly sitting across the desk from me holding her hand out for the phone," was all I said. I figured he was old enough to remember the days when phones were objects that could be passed from person to person. This conversation was pointless. Why was he being so roundabout? He was stalling for some reason. He was trying to reason me out; that or

giving me something to reason him out with. Did he want me to know the truth, or was this some show to mislead me? More importantly, why was my glass empty, and how could I survive the next minute if this wasn't corrected? I reached for the bottle on the shelf as I waited for his calculated reply.

"I can see you have a sense of humor." That was nonsense. If he has born witness to my sense of humor he'd have dropped the phone because he was laughing too hard; or to pick up a blunt object in order to bludgeon himself to death. "I think you and I will get along after all, Mister Morden." He has been planning to say that all along, but was probably hoping that there would have been a better lead-in to it rather than that BS about my sense of humor. I waited as he pronounced every syllable hoping that his next sentence would have some relevance, and not be just some rhetoric designed to make me more amicable without knowing why. I was way, way too disconnected from the normal human thought process for that. "We should meet, along with your partner, and discuss this matter further. I think I can pay your rent for the rest of the year, if all goes well."

"In that case, I had better find better digs. As long as you're spouting vague promises I may as well take advantage of their full nebulous implications, eh?"

"I'll see you at O'staf's Burgers in two hours."

I could tell from the start that this was going to be all about long pointless conversations designed to trick the listener into revealing something about his-or her character that could be used against them. Or maybe this guy was just as bad at dealing with people as I was. Either way, I had Flow on the line next and was yammering the spiel to her.

"He actually said that?" she said in the least deadpan tone she was ever known to make unless she was deliberately putting on a show. It was how I knew she was amused. Or irritated. With her it didn't really make a difference, because she usually found her own irritation to be a source of amusement. She was, of course, talking about the part where Calhoun pretended to think she was a man.

"One of the problems of that whole Doctor thing," I said, taking her infinitesimal display of emotion to be an invitation to tease. "Makes that glorious sex appeal you try so hard to manufacture all pointless."

"No pun intended?" she asked, but completely dry that time. Figures she'd latch on to the unintentional wordplay and completely dodge my ribbing. But, that was how I knew she liked me. If it was anyone else she'd have played along. She didn't like playing along. It was how she avoided actually bonding with anyone.

I met her on the way there. "A trench coat?" was all I said when she finally caught up with me. "This time of year?"

"Your comment about my glorious sex appeal cut me to the core. I figured I may as well go unisex today."

I wasn't going to look her up and down. I was walking too quickly down a busy sidewalk, and wasn't nearly cool enough to walk without watching where I was going without tripping or ramming into someone, so my reply had to go without the sight gag. "You really don't understand people, do you?"

Far sooner than I wanted but far later than my legs cared for I was sitting in a booth at the diner with Flow at my elbow. The waiter came up, spoke the only English words he probably knew, and she and I both replied, "Coffee."

A few silent seconds later and I was drinking the stuff. It was half as strong as I liked, and much too sour. This is why I hated places like this. On the other hand, the burgers would be to die for, if I hadn't already eaten two hours ago. Still, the smell of bacon from the kitchen was taking my mind off that burrito I had just crammed down.

"So if we're meeting him here, he knows what we look like, or you know what he looks like. I doubt the girl at the front is going to act as our liaison without prompting." She sounded annoyed. I probably interrupted her during an exciting date with a frog's brain she was dissecting.

"Fatso," I just said.

"What?"

"The name of this place. Ostaf. It's Fatso backwards."

She stared at me in silence for a moment before saying, "OK."

"I'd say he's about five-eleven, but thinks he's six-two. Two sixty pounds, at least, with forty of that in his gut and twenty in his shoulders. He moves like he's used to having a gun in his pocket, but hasn't worn one for years. He's used to wearing sunglasses, but doesn't anymore so he squints all the time. Way too much hair gel."

"Did you get all of that from talking to him on the phone, or is he walking up to the table right now?"

"Neither. NotFlinn just sent an image to my mobile."

"Huh," she said as she craned her neck to see the photo glowing from the small display. "So he's important enough that NotFlinn could dig up an image of him just like that. This should be interesting."

"Haven't you ever egosurfed before, Flow? I bet I could call up a photo of you from the web, cold. Hell, I bet I could even find one of you in a bikini."

"That would be a neat trick, considering that I've never worn one."

"Don't be silly. Don't you know that these days photoshop comes with an automatic 'make into racy tabloid photo' filter? Came out back in '25. How do you think that industry survived the outlawing of paparazzi? These days all celebrity photos are complete digital fabs."

"And how do you know all of this? Considering a career change?"

And so it went on. We always had our best conversations when we were bored and had coffee. We were both on our second cup of coffee when

he arrived. The photo was old. It looked more like fifty of the extra pounds were in his gut now, and there wasn't enough hair to gel anymore. If he ever got a new photo taken he definitely would want to use some type of filter. The 'take off twenty years and fifty pounds' one was especially overused.

Without having to say anything Flow switched on her earpiece, and I did as well. *"Good thing you're so skinny,"* I subvocalized to her, *"when he sits down he's going to smash with this table. Why did we have to get a booth?"*

She gave no reaction to betray that she had heard me, but I had gotten far too used to using the earpieces to have any doubt that she did. Every sarcastic remark, every joke about his balding head would be heard loud and clear, while to him it would look and sound just like we were picking food out of our teeth with our tongues.

"So good of you to both come," he said, with the same voice I had heard on the phone but with a completely different attitude. Either it was the diner setting, the promise of food, or the presence of a woman that changed his demeanor, or this was just another one of his games. I braced myself for the impact of the table against my ribs. Then I remembered another reason why I hated diners; I wanted a smoke.

"Lay it on heavy," I told her silently. "He's caught off guard by you. He doesn't expect to be treated well by a woman, so you can put him off his game."

"Ask me to walk over hot coals, why don't you?" After she got done complaining, Flow smiled warmly and said, "Not at all, Mister Calhoun. I'm always excited to meet with new clients!"

"Oh, please Doctor Point, call me Martin. And must I remain so formal with you?"

She gave a musical laugh and said in her best sing-song voice, "Doctor Point isn't formal, Marin, it's flattering."

"Don't overdo it. I think I just threw up a little."

"Are you sure it's not the coffee?"

She sweet talked him and I kept my mouth shut, or at least, that's what he would think. I never stopped feeding her information. She talked, I observed, and what I observed I'd tell her; raw information, what he was thinking. I couldn't read his mind, but everything he did stood out to me like it was blared through a bullhorn. I noticed every twitch, every glance of his eye, every change in tone.

"I come to you on the behalf of an associate-friend of mine. He's in a bit of trouble you see, and we need a third party to quietly intervene and help him disappear."

"Associate-friend? He broke eye contact. He's gripping the pointer finger of his right hand with his thumb, tugging at it several times before

letting go. He keeps glancing outside. As he said disappear he shifted uncontrollably."

She knew what to do with it. She couldn't see it herself – that much was lost to her, but she knew what it all *meant* – that much was lost to me, and how to react to it. How to measure him. How to figure him out. It was how we always worked with clients. It was how we always worked with enemies. People who were clever and knew about the latest gadgets would possibly figure out that we were communicating subvocally, but no-one knew about our particular talents and how we worked together.

"He goes by Willard. Perhaps you've heard of him? Back in the revolutionary days they would have called him first in line to be hanged! No-one knows who he is, except his closest friends of course, and he aims to keep it that way. There are those who don't like what he thinks or says. Those that would mean him harm. Well that's about to happen, but not if you can help me help him."

I relayed everything to her as I saw it, quickly, silently. I could subvocalized far faster than he could talk. "Do we even need to go through this? Even I can tell this guy is lying his fat ass off."

"No, he's not lying his ass off, but he's misrepresenting his own position concerning what he's saying. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one Willard needs protection from. How can he be that obvious? Does he think we're stupid?"

"No, he just doesn't know you're brilliant."

"Save it for the pillow-talk."

"Yes ma`am."

"Well I am sure we can help, Martin. I can tell that his safety is very important to you," she said without skipping a beat. She was good at this; having two conversations at once. I was terrible at it. "Please, tell us what you need and we can begin at once."

The soft, motherly tone was alien to her lips. The look of empathy in her eyes was like a neurotoxin in my brain. Sometimes I could barely stand to watch her, the cold, stoic woman who only I could really get, put on her clown costume and do her little dance of make believe, behaving however she needed to in order to get the reaction we needed from whoever she was dancing for. If I hadn't known it was all a game I'd have run away screaming. When we weren't working on someone, when it was just me and her speaking one on one, the only reason I could deal with her at all were her subtleties. With everyone else it was like talking during a hail storm. I'd get lost in the torrents of nuance from their facial and body language, and render everything an overwhelming jumble. They'd be talking on and on and all I'd notice was how many times they tapped their finger or blinked. Oh, I could still carry on with the conversation. I could make sense of it eventually, but I was slow, and I tended to overanalyze. Interacting with her was, I assumed, something like how normal people interact with other