

## The Funeral Murder

Vivian and her husband, Mario, stood in the gardens outside the still-locked church on a warm July afternoon. A smattering of similarly early grieverers dressed in an array of subdued colors waited with them. When did people stop wearing black to funerals, Vivian wondered. She shrugged in response to her own question. Never mind. Let others switch to less restricted colors, she was old school, at least for funerals, especially if it was to her advantage. She wore a black suit that set off her upswept platinum blond hair. Her skirt was tight and short. Her peplum jacket pinched in at her waist to show how tiny it remained as she reached forty-eight and was buttoned all the way up, but cut so low that the mounds of her breasts rounded above the sweetheart neckline and her cleavage was visible atop the upper-most polished black button.

Some people—women, she imagined—would no doubt cluck their tongues and whisper, that on this solemn occasion, she should have worn a little something under the jacket. She didn't mind their disapproval; why would she cover her best assets? And she was sure that the male attendees liked how she looked and welcomed an opportunity to celebrate a live, vital woman instead of only thinking of the dead Gloria, gone from this world too soon because of cancer.

The sound began softly, so distant and light that those waiting didn't notice it at first, or if they did, they attributed it to a large truck or convoy of vehicles passing on the nearby freeway. But the sound grew louder and more insistent, demanding that it be noticed. It was uneven and buzzy—uncomfortable even—like a massive swarm of yellow-jackets furious that their nest had been disturbed. A minute later, black dots appeared on the horizon, grew larger, and closed over the broad parking lot and manicured lawn and gardens surrounding the church, heading toward the mourners.

“What on earth?” Mario sputtered. Other grieverers muttered and murmured the same question.

As the swarm grew closer, a couple of dozen figures emerged in the field beyond the parking lot. They were almost as loud as the drones they piloted as they shouted encouragement to one another.

Most were polite and kept their toys at a reasonable distance from the mourners or high over the garden and church. But the anonymity of the flash mob produced a few bad actors who found it amusing to direct their devices close to the agitated funeral-goers, enjoying making them shriek as drones dove at them, or run or crouch as the drones came shockingly close before pulling up at the last second before impact.

One mourner whipped off his jacket as a drone dive-bombed him and used it as a whip to strike the menacing attacker outfitted with glowing red lights that mimicked eyes, downing it. As it hit the ground he stomped on it. A member of the drone mob rushed toward him screaming and shaking his fist.

“Do you know how much that drone cost?” he bellowed. “You're going to pay for it!”

“I'm going to see you charged with assault,” the drone downer shouted in reply as he pressed numbers on his phone. “I'm calling the police.”

Vivian's instinct was to run toward the church and seek what shelter she could find under the sparse eaves over the sanctuary door, but her husband held her hand tightly and seemed frozen on the spot, fascinated and horrified by the drama around them. He didn't move and so, neither did she. A tiny drone shaped like a dragonfly slammed into her neck just above her collarbone. She screamed and

swatted at it, but it was quick, and pulled up and away before she did any damage to it.

“That damn thing bit me. It hurt,” she wailed, “a lot!”

“It looks like it cut you pretty good,” Mario said. He pulled the striped handkerchief that matched his tie from this breast pocket. “Let me clean you up. You’re bleeding and you’ll be dripping on your clothes soon.” He rubbed the handkerchief against Vivian’s neck.

“Aww!” she yelled. “Get that thing away from me. You made it hurt even worse. Give me your real hanky and let me do it myself.”

“This is all I have,” he said as he refolded the decorative piece of fabric with the bloodstained portion inside and pushed it back into his breast pocket. “Men don’t carry hankies anymore.”

“Not even to a funeral? Suppose you cry?”

“I’m not going to cry. Gloria was your friend, not mine.”

Vivian opened her purse and grabbed a wad of tissues she had stowed inside it. She pressed them to her neck and then pulled them away to inspect them. “I’m bleeding.”

“I told you you were.”

“I mean I’m bleeding a lot. I may need stitches.” Her mouth formed a grimace although her botoxed forehead remained serenely smooth as she whimpered her opinion.

A darkly clothed drone driver sporting a hoody sounded an air horn and waved his arm in a circular motion over his head. As quickly as they had arrived, the drones began to retreat. They disappeared over the field where they were first visible, followed by their owners. It took a few minutes for all of them to disappear and for their buzzing to completely cease.

Other funeral goers arrived as the drones cleared the church surroundings and began departing. Among them was Vivian’s stepdaughter who parked her car and began strolling toward Mario and Vivian. Mario held his hand aloft and motioned for her to come to them quickly.

She picked up her pace. “What?” she greeted them as she got close.

“Take a look at Vivian. She was cut by one of those drones.”

“I’m bleeding,” Vivian squeaked. “You’re a doctor. Can you fix me up or do I need to go to the emergency room? It hurts, too. Can you make it stop hurting?”

Dr. Anne Granger rolled her eyes in Mario’s direction, unconcerned if her stepmother saw what she did. “You are such a drama queen, Vivian. Let me have a look.”

She pulled Vivian’s hand with its clutched tissue wad away from her stepmother’s neck. There was very little bleeding, she noted. She leaned in for a closer look. “There’s...it looks like there’s a fragment of something...” She opened her handbag and removed her glasses, put them on, and leaned close to Vivian. “Yes,” she said, “I can see something.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said and then turned and hurriedly headed for her car. She was back in less than a minute moving at a half-run and carrying a medical bag which she deposited on the ground near Vivian’s feet. “I’ll have to get whatever it is out which might involve a little poking...”

Vivian moaned “Ohh, ohh.” She clutched Mario’s arm.

“I’ll numb you up with a bit of lidocaine first. You won’t feel a thing.”

Anne rooted in her bag, found latex gloves, and snapped them on to her hands in an experienced motion. Next, she removed a small syringe from her bag, checked the label, and removed its protective covering. She quickly pressed the needle lightly into Vivian’s neck and injected the syringe contents.

“Ahh,” Vivian sighed. “That works fast.”

Anne leaned in again and palpated the wound with a gloved finger.

In her next bend over her medical bag, Anne returned the syringe and produced a sterile probe and small forceps and opened the wrappings from both. “Be still. This isn’t where I’d like to work on you, but it will do if you don’t wiggle. The object is very near to the surface and should be easy to remove.”

A crowd had assembled around the wounded, her husband, and her medical rescuer. Anne ignored them and carefully used the probe to inspect Vivian’s laceration.

“It looks like there’s a bit of metal—a bb I think—in your cut,” she announced loudly enough that a couple of bystanders heard and clucked their tongues. “I’ll have to bring it out,” she said as more spectators gathered to watch.

Before Anne could use the forceps, the tiny fragment dropped to the ground. Anne moved the probe delicately in Vivian’s wound without discovering any other fragments and finally pronounced, “That should do it. I’ll dab some antiseptic on you, apply a little butterfly bandage, and you should be good to go. Put a drop of Neosporin on it twice a day for a couple of days and let me know if you see any redness or if it doesn’t begin to heal. I’m sure neither of those things will happen. You’ll be fine. Sorry, you’ll have to pick up the Neosporin at the drug store, that was my last packet.”

Anne snapped her medical bag closed. “Looks like we can go in, now. I’ll take this back to my car and see you inside. Save me a seat.”

Vivian and Mario joined the other mourners entering the sanctuary and found three seats near the front of the church. “Let Anne sit in the third seat,” Vivian said. “I want to say a couple of words when they call for the congregation to share their remembrances of Gloria, so I need to be able to get out easily.”

“Maybe I should be the one seated farthest in with you next to me. Anne knew Gloria as well as you did; she may want to say something, too.”

“She can climb over us. I’m not climbing over her. It would be just like her to make me look clumsy.”

Mario smirked. “It would be just like you to try and make her look clumsy.”

Vivian smiled.

She didn’t move her knees as Anne joined them, but Mario stood to make it easier for her to get to her saved seat.

As the minister began speaking, Vivian leaned toward Mario. “I don’t feel well. I need to go to the ladies’ room.”

“You can’t disturb...”

Anne leaned forward, and in a whisper loud enough to project beyond Mario asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I feel a little sick and fluttery, like my heart’s racing.”

“It’s the lidocaine. Some people react to it with a rapid heartbeat. It will go away in a couple of minutes. Tough it out.”

Vivian looked from her stepdaughter to her husband, who took her hand and pressed his lips together. “Anne’s right. Don’t make a scene.”

“It’s getting worse,” Vivian whispered urgently.

“It’s just your imagination,” Anne retorted.

“Lean against me and try to relax,” Mario instructed.

“No, really. It’s not my imagination. I...I can’t catch my breath,” she panted.

“Vivian, you’re working yourself up so much that you’re having a panic attack,” Anne whispered forcefully. She moved both of her hands up and down in a slow rhythm. “Only take a breath when my hands touch my lap. It’s not a paper bag to breathe in, but it will work if you follow my lead and do it.”

“No. I really...I need help.” Vivian clutched her chest and gasped. “Oh, it hurts!” She tried to rise, but instead of standing she collapsed face down into the church’s center aisle.

The minister stopped speaking half-way into his call for a first Bible reading. Mourners who could see what had happened stirred.

Anne jumped from her seat on the far side of Mario who didn’t have time to stand to let her pass and tripped on his feet, falling on to Vivian’s legs. She pulled herself off her downed stepmother and turned her over. Anne felt for a pulse and then pressed her ear to Vivian’s chest. She began chest compressions and yelled, “Someone call 911, stat! Tell them I need paramedics with epinephrine.”

Anne felt Vivian’s ribs snap as she worked. Vivian didn’t notice; she was already irreversibly dead.