

Taking a Chance - A Hamilton short story

The only thing spoiling the pristine perfection of the room was Ryan Chance. His naked body was draped over the side of the bed with the bloodstained knife on the bedside rug close to his outstretched arm .

Superintendent Hamilton, fresh from a holiday in Belgium where she had seen David's "Death of Marat", thought that if the killer had put this body in the bath, then the similarity, shower curtain apart, would have been startling. Would have been easier to clean up, too, but luckily that was not something she would be doing.

She knew that Stafford would stay in the bedroom doorway, his stomach heaving, not wanting to get down and dirty with the corpse. Good job one of them was not squeamish. Hamilton had explained that the smell was just a mixture of chemical breakdown and amino acids, but death to Stafford was not just a matter of chemicals.

'Anyone spoken to the wife?' Hamilton turned her head to look at him.

'She rang from Norfolk. Ryan was supposed to call her. When she rang him, there was no reply.

Hamilton turned to the SOCO. 'Got everything you need?'

'In here, Gov', yes. Doctor Cartwright says rough time of death is between two and five this morning.'

'Right. I think you can take Mr Chance away, now.'

Hamilton walked out of the bedroom just as Josh Painter lumbered up the stairs.

'Mrs. Chance is driving home, Gov?'

'Good. Now I can get out of this paper snowman's outfit.'

She walked downstairs, looking round. 'This place is like a show house, isn't it? I feel like I should have left my shoes at the front door. Come on, Alec, let's go.'

They climbed into Hamilton's BMW and drove towards the centre of Temingham. It was just past ten on a chilly autumn Saturday morning. One of those crisp bright mornings that from the warmth and comfort of a car make winter feel a long way off.

'Had breakfast yet, Alec?'

'No.'

'Fancy coffee and a hot panini?'

'Do I breathe?'

Once seated with both hands around a mug, Hamilton was all business.

'Right. What have you found out?'

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‘Ryan Chance. History teacher at the new school. Forty-three. Married to Melanie. No children. Melanie, left for a weekend away yesterday. We got that from the local neighbourhood watch, in the form of Mrs Know-it-all next door.’

‘And did Mrs Know-it-all tell you anything about the state of the marriage?’

‘Very solid. Devoted to each other, in fact. She told Painter that they were always cheerful and chatty. She never heard any rows.’

‘A happy marriage, then?’

‘Apparently, yes.’

Hamilton’s mobile shrieked from the depths of her bag. She listened, frowning. ‘Bring her to the station,’ she said before folding the phone up.

‘Finish your breakfast, Alec. A woman has just turned up on the doorstep of Chance’s house, complete with an overnight case.’

‘Who?’

‘Her name’s Amy Davidson. She says she’s Chance’s fiancée.’

Hamilton examined the thirty-something woman opposite her. Amy Davidson was dun-coloured, from her hair and red-rimmed eyes down to her muddy complexion and coffee-coloured clothes. No makeup and no perfume. She had not stopped crying since her arrival in the interview room. Hamilton sighed and put a box of tissues on the table.

‘Miss Davidson, you say you were coming to stay with Mr Chance whilst his wife was away for the weekend?’

‘Yes. We’ve been together for over a year now. He was planning to divorce Melanie and marry me. Look, my engagement ring.’ She held out her left hand. On the fourth finger a sapphire and diamond cluster flashed fire.

‘Ryan gave me this in July when we were in France with the school. I can only wear it when we’re together, of course. Melanie doesn’t go out much, so we never have...we never had a lot of time together.’

‘When did you arrange this weekend?’

‘As soon as we knew that she was going away. We decided I’d better not arrive until this morning. That gave Ryan time to phone Melanie on her friend’s landline and make sure the coast was clear.’

‘And how were you to know if it was?’

‘Ryan said he would ring if there was a problem. If he didn’t ring by eight-thirty, it was safe to come. He didn’t ring.’

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‘Have you managed any other stolen weekends?’

‘One in Keswick last spring, at a history conference and the week in France. That was magical. He loved the trips abroad. Said it gave him a chance to rough it a bit.’ Amy’s voice faltered. ‘You are sure he’s dead? You haven’t made a mistake, have you?’

‘No,’ said Stafford. ‘I’m sorry. He really is dead.’

‘Did he take an overdose? I know he was feeling very guilty about Melanie.’

‘No, he didn’t take an overdose,’ replied Hamilton. ‘Tell me, how often have you been in Mr Chance’s house?’

‘Only twice. I was there once before we started seeing each other. He had a barbecue for the departmental heads at school soon after it opened, a sort of getting to know each other party. We hit it off from the moment we got talking. Instant soul mates. He said finding me was like coming home.’

‘And the second occasion?’

‘Ryan took me home about two weeks ago after a parents evening.’

‘How did Mrs Chance react to that?’

‘She didn’t know about us, of course. She was very friendly. Ryan said that he wanted to lend me some books, so while he was looking them out, she gave me a glass of wine and we got chatting. I told her I’d been decorating the flat. She noticed that my hands were dry because of the white spirit. She even gave me some hand cream to stop them being so sore.’

‘And you felt no guilt at deceiving her?’

The girl coloured. ‘She didn’t make Ryan happy. I did.’

‘Have you any objection to us taking your fingerprints for elimination purposes?’

‘No.’

‘Thank you Miss Davidson. That’s all for now.’

Hamilton thought Melanie Chance looked like a pre-Raphaelite heroine, her beauty evident even though her eyelids were swollen and there were traces of tears on her cheeks. She caught the faint whiff of something expensive and floral as Melanie sat down.

‘There’s no easy way to say this, Mrs Chance. After your call, we went to your home. Your husband was murdered some time during the night. I’m sorry.’

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Melanie's already damp handkerchief flew to her mouth. 'I thought when you said he was dead that he'd had an accident, fallen down the stairs or had a heart attack.'

'I'm sorry,' Hamilton said again. 'I realise that this is an enormous shock, but the sooner I ask my questions, the better chance I have of catching Ryan's killer.'

Melanie mopped the freshly falling tears. 'Ignore me crying, Superintendent. I want you to catch this man, so ask whatever you want.'

'How long had you been married?'

'Fifteen years. We met at a work placement evening at Ryan's last school. He was co-ordinating work experience for his pupils and I was there as a prospective placement. Back then I owned a nursery and some of the girls wanted to be nursery nurses.'

'Were you happily married?'

'Extremely. We didn't need anyone else. We spent all our spare time together. In fifteen years, we only ever disagreed once.'

'What about?'

'Ryan insisted on volunteering every year for the school trip. Said it was his duty. Of course, after a week, or sometimes two spent looking after the children, he would come back tired and bad-tempered. When I suggested that he let someone else volunteer for a change, he was very angry. But that was the only time we argued.'

'What happened to the nursery?' asked Stafford.

'I sold it five years ago to a competitor and I made sure she paid top dollar for it. I invested the money. It brings in a small income. I'd worked all my life and I thought I deserved a rest.'

'I see,' replied Hamilton. 'What did Ryan think of that?'

'He thought we should spend the money on a holiday and a new car, but he soon came round to my way of thinking and agreed that a regular income was a better idea.'

I think that's why he liked to go off abroad with the children. It gave him the opportunity to travel. I've never been one for a lot of foreign travel. I would perhaps have liked a narrow boat. The idea of floating round the countryside in your own home really appeals to me, but Ryan couldn't abide water. He used to hate the ferry crossings, especially with forty children in tow.'

Hamilton nodded to Stafford.

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‘Let’s come to yesterday,’ he said. ‘Take us through your day, Mrs Chance.’

‘I got up and showered after Ryan left for school. Then I had breakfast and packed before the cleaner came at nine-thirty. A few minutes after that, I left for Norfolk. I spent my childhood near the Broads. Lily is an old school friend and we’ve always kept in touch. She has a small house near Wroxham. I arrived there just before one.’

‘Can you think of anyone who would want to harm your husband? Has he ever had a row with anyone at school, for example?’

‘No. Never. We didn’t socialise. We kept ourselves to ourselves.’

‘But I understand you had a party a while ago for teachers at the new school, is that right?’ asked Hamilton.

‘Yes, but that was a one-off. As I said, we didn’t need other people. We had each other.’ She began to cry again. ‘Oh, Ryan, Ryan.’

Later that afternoon, Hamilton sat on the corner of Stafford’s desk.

‘Have you been in touch with the friend?’

‘Yes. Lily Baker. She confirms Melanie’s story. They spent the afternoon walking round the village. After dinner they had a drink at the local and went home to watch a bit of telly. Pub landlord says they left at ten.’

‘Have Forensics come back with anything?’

‘One smudged fingerprint on the glass top of the bedside table – not Mrs Chance’s.’

‘Whose?’

‘Guess.’

‘Little Miss Davidson?’

‘Yes. She has the scar of a cut across the tip of her right-hand index finger. How did you guess?’

‘Because something about this is all wrong, Alec. I can smell it but I can’t work it out. Ryan was a handsome man. Melanie is beautiful. What did he see in a last-chance, on-the-shelf mouse like Davidson?’

‘Perhaps he got fed up living in something straight out of a glossy magazine,’ suggested Stafford.

‘Possibly. Any other prints?’

‘Mr and Mrs Chance, of course. His in the kitchen, both of them in the bathroom, nothing unusual.’

‘Did they find Davidson’s prints anywhere else?’

‘No.’

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‘Time for another chat with her I think.’

Hamilton stared at the woman on the other side of the table. ‘You told us that you had not been in the house for two weeks.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Can you explain how your fingerprint came to be in the bedroom?’

Amy frowned. ‘I’ve never been in the bedroom.’

‘The bedside table tells a different story. Where were you last night?’

‘At home.’

‘Anyone with you.’

‘No. I live alone.’

‘Then we have a problem.’

‘I have never been in Ryan’s bedroom. I’ve not been inside the house since the visit I told you about. I wouldn’t hurt him. I loved him.’

‘But your print was found in the bedroom. How about telling us what really happened? Did you go to the house last night and fall out? Was it an accident?’

‘I’ve told you the truth. I’m not saying any more. I want a solicitor.’ Amy folded her arms.

Hamilton and Stafford walked back to their desks. ‘What do you think, Alec?’

‘Seems as clear as day to me. They fell out last night. Perhaps he called the whole thing off. She grabbed the knife and stabbed him.’

‘It does look like it. How about the cleaner. What does she say?’

‘She backs up Melanie’s story. Why?’

Hamilton picked up her jacket. ‘I’d like to talk to her myself.’

They found Val Hale, a scurrying little woman in her mid-fifties, busy cleaning her own kitchen. She offered to make coffee but refused to sit down whilst she answered their questions. ‘Don’t have time today. I’m due at Mrs Cook’s in an hour. I can make you coffee, if you’d like, though.’

Hamilton, sat at the kitchen table, picking up various cleaning products out of a basket, sniffing them and reading the labels. The house was spotless but she felt more at home here than she had at the Chance house. She was amused to note that Val carried on cleaning, a damp cloth in one hand and a duster in the other whilst she waited for the kettle to boil.

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‘Why don’t you use the same cleaner for everything?’ Hamilton asked.
‘Why do you need all these?’

‘Don’t do a lot of cleaning, do you, dear?’

‘No.’

Val spoke as if teaching a child. ‘Look, you would use this sort on kitchen surfaces, but this one on wood. Now, for things like the sink, taps, draining-board and kettle, you use a stainless steel cleaner. Gives you a better shine, see?’

‘Right. Complicated isn’t it? How long does it take you to clean the Chance house?’

‘Not long. It’s never messy. Look, dear, if you need someone, I’m free Wednesday mornings, and I charge £7.50 an hour, which is dirt cheap these days.’ She followed this pronouncement with a cackle of laughter.
‘That’s good. Dirt cheap for a cleaner.’

Hamilton stifled a grin. ‘Thank you. I’ll bear you in mind.’

‘Nothing like touting for business in the middle of being interrogated, is there?’ commented Stafford as they reached the car.

‘Actually, I could do with someone. Do you think she ever stops moving?’

‘Only if you take the duster out of her hand. Look, it’s obviously not the cleaner, so, we arrest Amy Davidson, yes?’

‘No. I need to think.’ Hamilton squashed a spider crawling across her wing-mirror. Then she gazed at her fingers. ‘Wait, Alec. I need to ask something else,’ she said, running back to Val’s front door.

‘You look chipper,’ said Stafford the next morning as Hamilton walked into the office.

‘I am. I’ve just examined the fingerprint Amy left in the bedroom. I want to see Melanie Chance again. Now.’
Melanie, her face set, stalked into the police station half an hour later, pushing past a young man on her way to the interview room where Hamilton stood in the doorway waiting.

‘What is it now, Superintendent? I have a funeral to arrange.’ Her nose wrinkled. ‘God, stale humanity. Disgusting. Don’t you ever clean these places?’

‘Never mind about that. We know the truth, Mrs Chance.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

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‘That young man you’ve just walked past is the night assistant at a garage on the A17. You won’t have seen him nod, but he identifies you as the lady who filled up a Renault on Saturday morning at two-thirty. So does the forecourt CCTV. I have a neighbour down the street who saw you park a Renault outside her house at four.

‘I don’t drive a Renault.’

‘No, but Lily Baker does. You slipped up. You see, when anyone holds a glass, they use their fingertips. If they lean on furniture, at the very least, they leave the whole finger pad. The print on the bedside table was just Amy’s fingertip. You transferred it from her wineglass, didn’t you? Lily Baker has also been arrested, by the way.’

That final piece of news made Melanie’s shoulders slump. Hamilton saw shock, rage and hate flit across her face. She had played and lost.

‘Damn. All right. Amy Davidson was the last tart in a long line. I expect she’s wearing a sapphire ring. She’s the first one to wangle a ring out of him. I wonder how she managed that? It was my mother’s and you can tell the thieving little cow I want it back.

The ring was the last straw. He thought I wouldn’t miss it because I didn’t wear it, just as he thought I didn’t know about his little amours on the school trips and the weekend courses.

Yes, I killed him. The night he brought her home, I gave her some hand cream so that I’d get a good print on the glass. She thought I was being kind, stupid bitch. They must have thought I was blind.’

‘How did you transfer it?’

‘I bought a toy fingerprint kit, complete with tape. I practised, of course. After I’d stabbed the disloyal bastard through the heart, I put the print on my bedside table. How did you work it out?’

‘You overdid the lovey-dovey bit. We also found blood in the drain of the bath and your fingerprints on the shower tap. You told us you showered before Mrs Hale arrived. You left home before she cleaned the bathroom. I’ve watched her cleaning. She wouldn’t have missed polishing the shower tap and she is adamant she did polish it. So how could your prints be on it?’

Then I double-checked the fingerprint. It was just the tip of one finger. It wasn’t the right sort of print for where we found it. What I don’t know is why?’

Melanie sighed. ‘Lily and I have always been in complete harmony with each other. Life with Ryan was never peaceful or serene. He was a

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slob, always making a mess. Lily's cottage is rented. She has nothing. Divorce was no good. I needed all the money so that we could buy a boat, live on it and travel round the country. Amy Davidson was the perfect fall-guy.'

'How touching,' said Hamilton. 'We'll have to see if we can get you adjoining cells in prison.'