

# Size Matters

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Sheila Connolly

She's a medium."

"What?" I tried to focus on Jani's voice. It beat throwing up, which was what I really wanted to do. "Well, if she was, she sure didn't see this coming."

"No, I mean, she's a medium. Size. You know?"

"Oh." I forced myself to look at the blood-soaked body that lay crumpled on the floor of the dressing room. The harsh fluorescent lighting made her look awful. But then, even healthy people looked awful in that light. "And why are you telling me this?"

Jani looked more excited than upset. "Think about it. Look at what she's wearing."

"I don't want to." But as manager, I was responsible for taking care of messes at the store, and this qualified as the biggest mess in my seventeen-and-a-half months at Sharp. So I had to look, if only so I could tell the police about it. Her. Short answer: body, female, twentyish, bloody. Ick. "All right, I'm looking. She's dead. What else am I supposed to notice?"

Jani gave me a pitying look. "Her shirt."

I squinted. Yes, Jani was right: she was wearing a shirt. Duh. "So?"

"It's the wrong size."

"Huh?" I definitely was not following.

Luckily, Jani was patient, for a teenager. “She’s a medium. She’s got on an XL.”

I felt a stab of annoyance. “Jani, so what? Maybe that’s her fashion thing.”

Even before I finished, Jani was shaking her head. “No, no, no. Look, I know her. She buys medium, sometimes even small. Size four jeans. She likes to flash her body, you know?”

I was still processing what Jani had said first. “You know her? Who is she?”

Jani hesitated. “Well, I know what she buys, see? I don’t know her name.” Then she brightened. “But I betcha we can check credit card receipts. I know she never paid cash.”

“So she’s—she was—a regular customer? Then that’s what we’ll tell the police.” She didn’t look familiar to me. But then, people usually look different when they’re dead, don’t they? “Time to call them.”

I swear, Jani looked disappointed. “Can I stick around? Maybe they’ll let me help.”

“Sure, Jani. Okay, here’s the deal: I’ll make the call, and you clear out any customers and pull down the grill in front until the police get here. Go!”

Jani went. Me, I sat down on the plastic bench along the wall opposite the dressing rooms and took several deep breaths. So far I had kept my cool: when I saw the feet sticking out of the cubicle, I had hoped that it was the usual—a mallrat who had passed out from the drug du jour. It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened. When I had opened the door, the blood had convinced me otherwise, fast. Luckily, there had been no customers in the store, because we had been open only a few minutes, and it was a Tuesday morning. I had forgotten to warn Jani to make up a story for any unfortunate person out front. Saying, “Sorry, one of our customers has just been murdered” would not exactly encourage business. As manager, I was supposed to think about things like that.

Murdered. No doubt about that. Not that I'd examined the body that closely. But there was a lot of blood, and it still looked pretty sticky. How long had the girl been dead?

And where had the killer gone?

When I hit that thought, I jumped up from the bench, then dropped to my knees and peered up and down the hallway. Nope, nobody in any of the other cubicles. Or at least, nobody with feet on the ground. No way was I brave enough to open each and every door and check.

I backed away to the employee phone in the alcove at the entrance to the dressing rooms, grabbed it and hit 911. Keeping an eye on the row of cubicles, I gave the operator the bare bones. "There's a body in the dressing room at Sharp, at the Heritage Place Mall. Yes, she's dead." Nobody turns that color and lives. A very unflattering color. "I don't know how she died. I haven't touched her." I don't want to touch her, not now, not ever. "But there's lots of blood. It's just me and one clerk here now. We'll keep anyone else out. Yes, we'll wait here. Thank you."

I laid the phone down to keep the line open, and turned to see Jani hovering at the entrance to the dressing rooms. "They're on their way," I said. "You cleared the place?"

"Yup, no problem. There were only a couple of customers."

"What did you tell them?"

"That the last shipment of T-shirts came from China and might be toxic."

Great short-term solution; lousy long-term solution. I sighed. "And you shut the gate?"

"Yes, ma'am. So, do we need to get our stories straight?"

"What stories? I opened up, I came in here, I found a body. What else is there?"

Jani bounced on the balls of her feet. "But I told you, I knew her, at least sort of. So I can help the cops to ID her. But what about evidence?"

“Jani, what are you talking about?” Jani was bright. She was working at Sharp as part of a work-study program at her high school, and she planned to go to design school. She was eager and didn’t complain about boring tasks like shelving new stock or picking up the clothes that her peer group left crumpled on the dressing room floor. She was a good employee, but I didn’t recall seeing “detective” on her brief resume. “What evidence?”

Jani grinned at me, relieved that I was willing to play along. “Okay, how long do you think she’s been there?”

“How should I know?”

“Was the blood wet or dry?”

I was beginning to see where she was going with this. “Halfway in between?”

“You closed last night at nine-thirty, right? Was she here then? Did she hide out somewhere overnight? Or did she come in sometime after we closed?”

Any of the choices made me look like a lousy manager. I certainly should have been aware of anyone loitering near closing. I tried to remember what I had done the evening before. It had been a slow night. I’d locked up as usual, and all locks had been in place when I opened up this morning, not that anybody with the slightest criminal intent couldn’t have gotten in if they really wanted to. And I knew I had cleared the dressing rooms and made sure there weren’t any discarded clothes there. I like to leave things neat. That makes me feel better.

“I’m pretty sure she wasn’t here last night when I closed.”

“So, somebody probably sneaked in her body overnight. Wow.”

“She wasn’t killed here,” I said firmly. “There would have been a lot more blood, all over the place.”

Jani’s brow wrinkled. “Good point. Hmmm. Puddle of blood, but did you see any wounds?”

Reluctantly I dredged up the image of the dead girl, and realized what Jani was saying. “No,” I said slowly, “I didn’t. Her shirt was

bloody, but I didn't see any visible stab wounds or bullet holes. And I don't think her throat was cut, or she slit her wrists, or anything like that."

"I'll check." Jani bounded off down the row, her pink Converse high-tops flashing.

"Jani, don't touch anything! Fingerprints!" I yelled after her.

She skidded to a stop. "Oh, right." She darted back and found a wad of discarded plastic, covered her hand carefully and opened the door to the Cubicle of Death. After staring into it for several seconds, she shut the door gently with her still-covered hand and made her way back to where I waited. She was distinctly paler than she had been.

"No, no visible wounds," she said in a shaky voice. "But you know what that means?"

"Uh, no."

"It means she wasn't killed in that shirt! Somebody put it on her after they'd stabbed or shot or whatevered her! I told you it was the wrong size!"

"Why would anyone do that?"

Jani looked crestfallen. "I don't know. Did you see if she was wearing a bra? Maybe somebody had a thing against naked corpses?"

"I most certainly did not check out her underwear! But you're saying that someone killed her and dressed her afterward?"

"Exactly. This girl was into what was new. That's why I remember her. No way she would hang at the mall wearing the wrong size shirt. It was *not* her shirt. And it's not one of ours."

"If you say so," I said dubiously. Maybe I was losing my eye for style, or maybe I just couldn't see past all that blood. "So, if it wasn't her shirt, and it wasn't from here, where did the shirt come from?"

"From the crime scene, of course." Jani, unconcerned, moved on to another question. "There was blood on the floor, right? So she was still bleeding when whoever it was dumped her there. Maybe she wasn't even dead."

“Jani!” For a moment I felt a flash of horror at the thought of that poor girl dying on the floor of my store.

Jani had the grace to look ashamed. “Okay, not cool. But still, it’s got to mean something, right? So say he slashed her or whatever, and panicked, and decided this was a great place to dump her—like, her favorite store. So wherever he did it, there’s got to be spatter and all that stuff . . .”

“You’ve been watching too many television shows,” I said sternly, although I probably watched the same ones. “Anyway, that’s not our problem. Let the police sort it out.”

“I’m just thinking out loud, right? It beats thinking about *her*, lying in there. You think he hung around until he was sure she was dead?”

I shook my head. I didn’t even want to think about that. We both fell silent, in tribute to the late Ms. Medium.

The police arrived ten minutes later, and I wrestled with the security grill to let them in. They were a mismatched pair, one mid-size, thirtyish, probably a 38 long; the other painfully young, his neck barely filling his uniform collar. Older Guy gave Younger Guy a nudge, and Younger Guy spoke. “What seems to be the problem, ma’am?”

When did I become a “ma’am”? The officer couldn’t be more than five years younger than me. Well, maybe eight. I *think* he had to shave every day.

“When I came in this morning, I found a body in the dressing room.”

The officer had pulled out a small notebook and was busy scribbling. “When you say body, ma’am, you mean a dead person?”

It’s not easy to talk between clenched teeth. “Yes, Officer, there is a dead person in the dressing room.”

“Are you sure this person is dead, ma’am?”

What was it with the “ma’am”? “She is not breathing, and there is blood all over the place.”

The officer jotted something else, then looked around. “What is this place?”

*Earth, you dummy.* “This is Sharp. It’s a clothing store, part of a regional chain.”

“The body was here when you arrived?”

I nodded.

“What time did you close last night?”

“Nine-thirty. I tidied up and left around ten.”

“And the body wasn’t here when you left?”

“No. I think I would have noticed.”

The juvenile officer was spared any more of my sarcasm when Jani emerged from the back of the store. “Teddy!” she squealed.

Officer Teddy fought a smile, but the smile won. “Hey, Jani. You work here?”

“I do. And you’re investigating our murder? How cool is that?”

Hello? I was still standing here. “Would you like to see the body, Officer?”

Officer Teddy tore his eyes away from Jani. It did not take a detective to deduce that they knew each other, but there were more serious matters at hand. Like a murder.

But Officer Teddy was on the job. He squared his shoulders, looked me in the eye, and said, “Show me the body.”

I led the way to the entrance to the dressing rooms, stopped, and pointed. Even from where we stood, the poor girl’s feet were visible. “There she is.”

I wasn’t about to go any further, but Junior strode forward manfully to investigate. Older Guy stayed behind. He leaned against the doorjamb and sighed. “Damn, I hate training the new ones.”

“Hey, officer sir, you have a name?”

He nodded. “Detective Richard Jarvis. I assume you do too, although Junior didn’t bother to ask for it.”

“Kristin Foster. Kris.” Hmmm . . . Richard. Detective Dick. *No, don’t go there, Kris.* This dead body stuff was making me light-

headed.

“With a K?” The detective had pulled out a notebook of his own and dutifully wrote it down.

“Right.” At this rate the investigation would take a month, and in the meantime I was losing sales. “Listen, you sure Teddy is up to the job?”

“Got me. It’s his first murder. But we’ve all got to start somewhere.” He lapsed into silence, and we waited.

But not for long. Officer Teddy backed out of the cubicle, his face an interesting shade of bilious green, or maybe it was pale lime. “Presence of a dead person confirmed, sir,” he said in a strangled voice, swallowing several times.

“And what do you do next, officer?” Detective Jarvis said patiently.

“Uh . . . call in the forensic team?” Junior recovered quickly: his ears pricked up like an eager puppy’s.

“Very good, officer. Why don’t you do that? Oh, and also the Medical Examiner.”

“Yes, sir! I think I should go out there to make those calls, sir.” Without waiting for permission, he bolted toward the front of the store. *Please don’t barf on the displays, Junior*, I prayed.

I turned to Detective Dick. Oops—Jarvis. “Do you think we could pick up the pace a little here? Because I’ve got a store to run.”

The detective looked down at me. “Obviously you haven’t been involved in a murder investigation before, Ms. Foster. This is going to take some time. But I think Teddy there has his hands full, so why don’t I take your statement? Is there someplace we can sit?”

There was my office, which was really a corner of the storeroom with a chair, a telephone, and a countertop that I had to shovel clear whenever I needed to do paperwork. There had to be another chair around somewhere, maybe under all the returns. “This way.”

Because I didn’t know anything, it took no more than five minutes to spill it all. The second repetition took even less time. By

the time Detective Jarvis had dotted the i's and crossed the t's, the first wave of forensic people had arrived, and we went out to watch the show. Apparently Officer Teddy had pulled himself together enough to take Jani's statement: we found them standing in the front, Jani gesticulating, Teddy scribbling. We arrived for the tail end of it.

"So, you see, it's like, she couldn't have been wearing that shirt. It was all wrong."

Officer Teddy stopped writing. I watched as he and Detective Dick exchanged a glance. Jani and I swapped looks of our own: *Men! Clueless!*

The senior detective turned to us. "Ladies, why don't you go and get a cup of coffee somewhere? There's nothing you can do here until the team is done. We'll call you back if we need anything else."

I was torn. This was my territory, and I was responsible for what went on. At the same time, I really didn't want to see them haul the bloody body out. Easy choice. I smiled up at Detective Dick. "Why, certainly, Detective. Jani, why don't we go right over there?" There was a fast food place across the wide corridor. "Then you can find us easily. Right?"

Detective Dick responded absently, "Fine." Apparently we were dismissed for now.

I smiled at him. "Oh, and please try not to get that fingerprint powder stuff all over the merchandise?" I had a feeling it would never come out, and I didn't think corporate headquarters would let me write off the loss.

"I'll see what I can do," the detective said. "Now go."

I grabbed Jani's arm, and we fled across the corridor.

We bought coffee and plunked ourselves down at a table with a clear view of Sharp. When Detective Dick looked our way, I waggled my fingers at him. He nodded without smiling, then turned his attention to the crew of people bustling around the store.

"What now, boss?" Jani said.

"How do you know Teddy?" I asked.

“I’ve gone out with his younger brother. Teddy’s not a real bright bulb, if you know what I mean, but he’s a nice guy.”

“Is he a good cop?”

Jani shrugged. “No idea. I think he just joined the force a couple of months ago. I was surprised to see him here. I didn’t think they let the rookies do much of anything for a while.”

“You told him about your T-shirt theory?”

Jani looked disgusted. “Yeah, and I can tell he thought it was *really* important.”

I considered. I should call Sharp corporate HQ and tell them what was going on, let them get the PR team cranked up to handle any negative publicity that might crop up. Might? That *would* appear, especially if it was a slow news day. And that meant sales would fall off at my store, and I didn’t need that. The current lousy economy had cut way into our profits, and somehow I’d end up being blamed, and I couldn’t afford to lose this job. That made me mad. I wasn’t about to watch my career in retail go down the tubes, because the police were going to take their own sweet time in solving this crime.

I looked at my watch; I looked across at the store. No news crews in sight yet, but I’d bet my paycheck that they would show up in time for the mid-day broadcast, if there was nothing else more urgent. So I didn’t have much time to figure out what had happened, which, if I did, would make me look like a real heroine and maybe even clinch my promotion. Now all I had to do was find out who killed the girl, whoever she was. In the next hour.

I sat up straighter. “Okay, Jani. Tell me everything you can remember about the dead girl.”

Jani frowned. “I thought I did.”

“Humor me.”

Jani sat back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. “Okay. Twenty, twenty-one, maybe. Five foot six, about 140 pounds. Blonde hair, not natural, maybe some extensions. Deluding herself about what size she wears, but lots of people do that.”

Wow, Jani really did have a good eye. “How often did she come in?”

“Maybe twice a week?”

“She check the sale racks or new stuff?”

Jani was beginning to get into this. She leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Always new. She could spot a new shipment from across the mall.”

“She a looker or a buyer?”

“Looked at a lot, tried on a lot, usually bought something, but one, two pieces at a time. Not a big spender, but steady.”

“When was the last time she was in?”

Jani shut her eyes to concentrate. “Not yesterday. Sunday, I think. Yeah, Sunday afternoon. We were kind of busy, but she picked up a couple of shirts.”

“Jani, this is great! Now we need to figure out why she ended up in our store last night. Oh, was she with anyone? Sunday, or ever?”

Jani shook her head. “I don’t remember seeing her with anyone, male or female. Real loner—or maybe she just took her shopping seriously and didn’t want to be distracted.”

I thought harder. “Okay, if she was dumped in our store, why? And how? The doors were locked when I came in.”

Jani snorted. “Like that makes a difference. You do know that all the managers have a master key to get in the back?”

I wanted to hit myself on the head. Of course I knew that. I had one. And I had to fill out a whole batch of paperwork, and go through a criminal records check, before the mall administration would give me one. “Oh, right. So, if we assume that someone came in the back door and dumped her, that narrows down the suspects, right? To store managers?”

“Sure. Or somebody who has access to the manager’s key.”

I couldn’t just sit still and let some unknown creep trash my career. “Well, if somebody managed to transport the body, then, like you said, it would take someone big to carry her, because we know

she wasn't dragged. Right? We know any beefy managers?"

Jani looked at me with a gleam in her eye. "The guy at the sports store. He isn't big, but he works out, and he lets everyone know it."

"But why would he kill our girl?"

"How should I know?"

I stood up. "Well, why don't we go talk to him? Maybe something will pop out." I looked across at Sharp, but nobody was paying any attention to us. "Let's go."

When we walked into the sports store, Jani pointed silently: Beefy Guy was behind the register. I recognized him in a vague kind of way, but I didn't remember ever talking to him. As I walked toward him, I tried to think of something to say.

He solved the problem for me. "Oh, hey, hi! You work over at Sharp, right? What's goin' on?"

"Um, I found a body there this morning." A girl sure doesn't get to say that very often.

He looked impressed. "No way! Dead?"

"Very dead."

"You know her?" Beefy asked.

My radar pinged. How did he know it was a "her"? We sold both men's and women's clothes. "No, but Jani says she's seen her in the store."

"That sucks. Hate to lose a customer, right?"

Beefy didn't appear too broken up about it. To my uneducated eye, it looked like Beefy had been helping himself to some handy steroids. Still, it was a big jump from XL shirts and steroids to murder. And why would he do it?

The answer walked out of the storeroom. Willowy blonde, skin-tight jeans, ridiculously high heels. She sashayed up to Beefy and laid a proprietary hand on a bulging bicep. "What's going on?"

Beefy looked at me to explain, but I was too busy goggling at Blondie's chest to answer. No, not her boobs, although, given their symmetrical immobility, they had to be fake. But the T-shirt stretched

across them read “Babe.” One of ours, from the shipment that we had unpacked yesterday morning to inventory but hadn’t put out on the shelves yet. I could feel Jani beside me, quivering like a teacup Chihuahua. I jabbed her with my elbow.

“Hey, nice shirt,” I said. Luckily Jani kept her mouth shut.

Blondie beamed. “Yeah, Sid here just gave it to me this morning. Wasn’t that sweet? He thought it would make my new additions look good.” She shoved out her chest even further, which I wouldn’t have thought possible. The Babe logo bulged right along with her.

I thought furiously. What did I have? A guy big enough—and apparently stupid enough—to do the deed, and a T-shirt that shouldn’t be where it was. Not exactly an airtight case. But if Beefy—er, Sid—had killed our girl, there must be blood somewhere, and close. Not in the sales area. Blood was hard to get out of carpets, and he couldn’t have had much time to clean up. The storeroom? But what excuse could I give him to check out the storeroom right now?

A wild thought slammed me. I took a look at Blondie and decided she might buy it. I leaned in close. “Hey, you know, I’m thinking of having mine done, too. Could you show me what your surgeon did? Maybe I’ll go to him.”

I held my breath while she processed my lame request. Her eyes fell to my chest, and a look of pity flashed across her face. “Hey, sure. I’m real happy with mine. Gee, maybe he’ll give me a finder’s fee or something. Come on, let’s go into the back room, and I’ll show you.” Bingo!

Jani looked at me as though I had lost my mind, and I shot her a warning glance. I followed Blondie into the storeroom, admiring the tramp stamp peeking over her low-rise jeans. Inside, she peeled up her T-shirt, revealing . . . Heck, I didn’t really care what she revealed: I was busy scanning the entire room for anything that looked like blood.

And I found it. If you weren’t looking for it, you wouldn’t have noticed, but once you knew it was there, there were little droplets

everywhere. Beefy Sid wasn't a great housekeeper, but he'd probably been in a hurry. I dragged my attention back to Blondie, who was prattling on happily about her 36Ds. I tried to make admiring noises. Luckily, we were interrupted by a bellow from Beefy.

"Hey, you better get out here. There's something goin' on at your store—TV cameras and stuff."

"Nice work," I tossed back at Blondie, as I hurried toward the front of the store. Sid was right: the news vultures had arrived and were setting up lights and doing sound checks and whatever news people do. I checked my watch: 11:47. I nodded at Jani. "We'd better get back there." Then I turned to Beefy. "Want to come watch?"

Beefy wavered for a moment, but there were no customers in the store. He followed us across the corridor, with Blondie in tow. I leaned close to Jani and whispered, "You saw her shirt?"

"Yeah! Sid?" she hissed. The girl was smart. I nodded, and then I shoved my way to the front of the gathering crowd and motioned to Detective Dick. He ignored me. Jani sidled up to Officer Junior and whispered in his ear, and I saw his eyes swivel to Beefy, now standing beside me. Junior started moving slowly toward us.

The TV lights flashed on and focused on the storefront. Newscasters ran through their lead-ins, and then all microphones swiveled toward Detective Dick, who launched into his statement. "At approximately nine o'clock this morning, the body of an unidentified woman was found in . . ."

Before he could go further, I elbowed my way to his side, then turned to face the cameras. "I'm Kris Foster, manager of Sharp, and I found the body. And I know who killed her: him." I pointed at Beefy, who looked startled. And then his face turned bright red, and he let out the closest thing to a roar that I had ever heard come from a human throat. "Where'd you get that T-shirt? It's one of ours!" I yelled, over the increasing din, pointing at Blondie's chest.

Blondie looked down at her shirt, then up at her now-magenta boyfriend. You could almost see the light bulb going on over her

head. In one swift motion, she peeled the T-shirt over her head and threw it at Beefy. “You! You! . . .” she shrieked.

Oh yes, we were going to get news coverage today.

Later, Detective Dick and I found ourselves back at the fast-food place. “All right, one more time. How did you figure out he did it?” he said wearily.

“Elementary, my dear, uh, Jarvis. The dead girl had the wrong shirt on. Only a guy would have put that shirt on her, and it had to be a guy to move the body without leaving a bloody mess along the way. And then, when I saw his girlfriend wearing our shirt, and she said he had just given it to her, it all came together. That shirt isn’t available for sale yet. It came in yesterday.” Note to self: Make sure the Babe shirts were out on the racks when curious people showed up after seeing the broadcasts. “You did find the blood in the storeroom?”

He nodded. “We did. And the weapon—a box-cutter. And Sid confessed. The woman was in the mall late last night, and they started talking. He came on to the victim, and he thought she was into him, or so he says, at least long enough to take her shirt off, but then she had second thoughts or something, and he went nuts, grabbed the first thing he laid hands on. Classic ’roid rage, I guess.”

“And he dumped the body in our store, because we were close but not right next door. A real Einstein, isn’t he? And while he was there he decided that our T-shirt would make a nice present for his lady love?” Guilt over betraying Blondie? We’d probably never know. I shook my head. The stupidity of men never ceased to amaze me.

“Looks that way. Anyway, thanks for the help.”

“No problem,” I said smugly. I’d taken what could have been a PR nightmare and turned it into some great publicity for Sharp, and I’d make sure headquarters noticed. “By the way, he got the right size Babe shirt.”



*Sheila Connolly* writes the *Orchard Mysteries* for Berkley Prime Crime. As Sarah Atwell, she also writes the *Glassblowing Mysteries*, whose debut book, *Through a Glass, Deadly*, was nominated for an Agatha Award for Best First Novel. Sheila's new series, the *Museum Mysteries*, opened in October 2010 with *Fundraising the Dead*. "Size Matters" is her first published short story.