

WHAT KIND OF DUMB-ASS REPUTATION DID I HAVE AROUND here anyway? Was I just the guy you bring your shit flambé to? The guy everybody knows is willing to run headlong into a thrashing machine? I'm supposed to be this dumb-as-dirt kamikaze who'll ignore a direct order from Captain Jane Sasso, the bitch queen of Internal Affairs? Not to mention Keith Summers and Deputy Chief Townsend. I'm supposed to go sailing straight into that trifecta of perfect assholes without any regard for my career or pension? What do these people take me for?

That being the case, what the hell was I doing riding up in the Parker Center elevator with this damn Hickman file under my arm? Why did I agree to take it from Scout Llevar in the PAB garage? What the hell was I thinking?

What I was thinking, I guess, was that Lt. Brian Devine had some serious Scully payback coming. I owed him from fifteen years ago when I was working Valley Patrol, riding in an X-car with Zack Farrell. Back then, Brian Devine was assigned to the Special Investigation Service. SIS had a reputation on the job, and in the press, as being little more than an assassination squad. Their beat was predicate felons—criminals who were unredeemable repeaters.

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The unit employed a murderous methodology. They would wait for some hard case to get out of prison and then follow him around while he bought a new gun, or hooked up with his old ex-con buddies. All crimes worthy of a parole violation. But SIS wouldn't P.V. the guy on any of that low-weight stuff. Instead, they'd wait until he and his crew held up a bank or a liquor store. Then they'd swarm in and initiate a shootout, killing everybody. The operative theory being that a dead asshole can't beat the system on a technicality. SIS got a lot of bad press, but also took out a lot of bad guys. Subsequently, the unit was reorganized.

In those days, before Alexa and my son, Chooch, came into my life and gave me a reason to live, I was drunk on the job most of the time, depressed and cynical. My partner, Zack Farrell, had mother-henned me through each watch, keeping me out of the clutches of Internal Affairs.

One Saturday night in November, we happened to stumble into one of those SIS takedowns. It was a mini-mart robbery that turned into the *Gunfight at the OK Corral*. Three innocent civilians were wounded. Fortunately, none of them died. But when it was over, the incident morphed into a big media stink because witnesses stated that SIS could have affected an arrest without killing the three hold-up men and wounding innocent bystanders. I.A. filed charges and Zack and I were called to testify against Brian Devine and his crew of razorbacks at an Internal Affairs hearing.

Two weeks before the Board of Rights, Devine and his squad rolled up on us one night at three A.M. while Zack and I were cooping behind a liquor store. They pinned us in at the curb and threatened both of our lives, as well as Zack's family.

Back then, Brian Devine was a Policeman II, and there was a definite craziness about him. An unhinged feeling. Uncontrolled violence buzzed dangerously behind his eyes. He was a known gun-fighter. The kind of cop we used to say had Wyatt Earp Syndrome.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

He'd rather shoot a suspect, than hook him up. A killer with a badge.

Zack and I decided to hedge our statements at the B.O.R., rather than risk confrontation with a murderous cowboy like Brian Devine. We reasoned that nobody but three hard-case killers had died. Let somebody else step up and put the hat on him. Zack didn't want his wife and young son at risk. I had no family then, but was barely functioning. I was afraid my alcohol abuse would be brought out at the hearing by Devine's defense rep in an attempt to impeach my testimony and ruin my career. So I went along and kept quiet. It was a bad choice, even cowardly. Devine and his crew got off, and to this day, I've never felt right about it.

Back at my desk in Homicide Special, I opened the Hickman file and read through it to kill time. Secada had included copies of Lt. Devine's initial police reports as well as copies of crime scene photos showing the bloody shoe print and Olivia Hickman's body. All of this stuff was third generation, and the pictures were hard to see clearly. She had probably photocopied them hastily before turning the file over to Captain Sasso. I stared at the material, unsure of what to do. It was a file full of leaking nitro. I knew if I messed with this, it would explode in my face.

I had been thinking of trying to get a couple of days away with Alexa. We needed some private time together. Why had I even agreed to read this damn thing? It was nuts. I left it on my desk, got up, and walked into Captain Jeb Calloway's office.

Cal runs Homicide Special. His family came here originally from Haiti. He has a shaved bullet head and is short—just at department height minimums—but he's made up for his diminutive stature by building an upper body that looks like it belongs on the pages of a Marvel comic. The Haitian Sensation. You screw with this guy at your own risk. But I liked him. He was a good boss who stood up for his detectives.

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I caught him going through a budget analysis, something no supervisor likes to do, so he seemed glad for the interruption.

"How's Sally doing?" he asked as I came through the door.

My partner, Sally Quinn, was in her eighth month of pregnancy. She was out of the office, testifying in an old Valley murder case of hers that had come up on appeal, leaving me with phone calls and paperwork on the few open cases we were handling. After the trial she was going to take maternity leave. In the meantime, I was an assigned floater, picking up odd cases with other detectives whose partners were out sick or on vacation.

"She's still in court," I answered. "That trial is really dragging on. I got a little problem, Cal."

"Let's hear," he said, pushing some spreadsheets aside.

"It's personal. As long as Sally is out, I thought maybe I could take a few vacation days."

"Everything okay?" his expression projecting more than his words.

Everybody knew that Alexa was upstairs tearing the paneling out of her office. Things hadn't been right since she came back on the job three weeks ago. Temper tantrums, unexplained absences, opening unauthorized investigations. Before Chief Filosianni left to go to London for an international police conference, he told her that she was going to have to undergo a performance review upon his return. It was scheduled for next week. She was going crazy getting ready for it. Half the building was rooting for her to pass while the other half wanted her to fail. The last month had cost her a year's worth of goodwill.

I just shrugged, not wanting to get into any of this with Cal.

"I guess you can take a few days," he said.

"Good."

"If something comes up, I may need to pull you in, so keep your cell on."

"Right. Thanks."

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It was only three o'clock, but I was in no mood to shuffle paper on old cases, so I left Parker Center and killed some more time by going over to the criminal courts building. I rode the elevator down to the subbasement, to the evidence lockers. The Hickman file was under my arm. I figured this shouldn't take me long. I had already decided to just take a cursory look at the evidence boxes so I could tell Scout I at least gave it a nod before I sent all this back to her with a "no thanks." I found the police graybeard assigned to the court property room. He led me to a storage alcove.

Evidence boxes for current court cases were held down here for a year or until the appeals had cleared the system, then they were moved over to a warehouse facility downtown. The Hickman case wasn't being appealed because it had been plead out. It was close to the year cutoff, but we were running about six months behind on filing this stuff so I was pretty sure the material would still be here. It was.

I collected four cardboard boxes, sat down at a small wooden table, and opened the first one. More crime scene photos. These were originals and now, since I could actually see them, I examined them carefully. Whoever killed Olivia Hickman had done a damn thorough job of it. She'd been stabbed twenty times. What we call in law enforcement, overkill. When you see that many knife wounds it generally indicates extreme anger and usually the perpetrator is someone with a strong emotional attachment to the victim. Like her son. It was probably one of the reasons that Lt. Devine was initially so fixated on Tru Hickman.

I kept looking. I saw many pictures of the bloody shoe print. All the downstairs windows and doors had been photographed. No forced entry. Whoever murdered Olivia Hickman either had a key, or at least had entered through the door. Again, this fit her son.

There were two boxes of physical evidence. The first contained Tru Hickman's boots and clothing. I picked up the boots and looked at them. I couldn't see any blood, so I put them back.

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His clothing was carefully packaged in glassine envelopes, and upon examination, appeared to be free of blood spatter. The second box held his mother's bloody nightgown with twenty knife holes in it and a pair of slippers splattered with blood. There were little Baggies with vacuumed hair and fibers all neatly labeled LIVING ROOM, KITCHEN, BATHROOM, BEDROOM, etc.

Her purse.

Taped to the plastic handle was an inventory tag with a list of the contents: lipstick, hairbrush, Kleenex, eyebrow pencil, comb, and wallet. I opened the purse and looked inside. It was all there as listed. I opened the wallet. Vons market employee ID card, union card. No credit cards or paper money, incidental change. I put everything back inside the box. Just before I replaced the purse, I noticed a small zipper concealed in a fold of the lining. I patted it carefully and felt a slight bulge, then unzipped the pocket and pulled out the contents.

It was a wad of bills. I straightened the money and counted it carefully. Two hundred dollars. Exactly the amount that Tru was supposed to have killed his mother for.

Why hadn't Lt. Devine found it? Could he possibly be that careless?

Of course, that led me to a much bigger question. If Tru Hickman hadn't killed his mother for this money, then what the hell was his motive for the murder?