

Absent the Soul

A Short Story Collection

by BJ Bourg

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Editors: Herbert Holeman, Ph.D., Sharon L. Connors, and Marlicia Fernandez
Afterword by Jack Herrmann
Cover Art by Cathy Bourg
Cover Design by Margaret I. Carr
Book Design by Elaine Roberts

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Dedication

For Cathy, Brandon and Gracie, without whom I am nothing.

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Muddy Waters

“Looks like she’s smiling.” Detective Rick Patterson snapped another picture.

“Have a heart,” I said, “she’s somebody’s daughter.” I jumped from the boat and sank to my knees in the marsh. Muddy water seeped into my shoes and a swarm of mosquitoes rose up from the marsh grass to greet me. I fought my way through the slush to where the grass grew in thicker clumps and followed them until I reached the edge of the gully where Rick stood. Sweat poured off me from the heat of the August sun. I was no stranger to the Southern Louisiana heat, but it was an unusually hot summer. It felt as though Hell’s doors had been opened.

“How long do you think she’s been here?” Rick asked.

I rolled up my sleeves and stared at the swollen body. She lay on her back in a shallow gully. The seams on her blue shorts and red T-shirt stretched to the point of ripping, the bones in her hands and face were exposed, and the smell...gut wrenching.

“I don’t know,” I said. I held my breath and tried to get close to the body.

“Who found her?”

“A fisherman,” Rick said. He pointed to where the gully merged with Bayou Lafourche. “My guess is she floated in through there when the tide was high and when the tide went out she was stranded. No sign of trauma. Looks like she drowned, then floated down the bayou until she got here.”

The Water Patrol sergeant stumbled toward us dragging two long planks. I helped him drop them across the gully, one on each side of the body. I inched across the planks for a closer look. The woman’s hair was black. Her gray eyes bulged. The flesh around her mouth was gone, exposing a row of bright white teeth. Rick was right; it looked like she was smiling. “Any missing persons reports?” I asked.

“Yeah. Some guy, Joey Coleman, reported his wife missing a few days ago.”

“She match the description?”

Rick nodded. “Down to her decomposed face.”

I shot him a hard look. He smiled his apology. “Really,” he said. He slapped a mosquito that drank from his neck. “She matches the physical description. Even wearing the clothes her husband described.”

“Name?”

“Cynthia.”

I tilted the woman’s head and noticed a gold, loop earring in her right ear. The left one was missing. I moved to her feet and noticed her left foot was bare. A white sneaker that displayed a Nike emblem was on her right foot.

I looked up and down the bayou. There was nothing north of us for miles. To the South, the Leeville Bridge and a smattering of fishing camps. “How’d she get in the water?” I asked.

“Fell off a boat. Jumped off the bridge. Take your pick.”

When we were done at the scene, we loaded her body into the boat. The hearse waited at Guidry’s Boat Landing.

It was still early morning when Rick and I found Joey Coleman at his house in Galliano, a small town thirty miles north of Leeville. He looked to be in his thirties and his callused hands told me he was a laborer. I showed him my badge. “Hi, I’m Detective Brandon Wolfe and this is my partner, Detective Rick Patterson. We need to speak with you concerning the missing persons report you filed—”

“Oh God, she’s dead!” His blue eyes widened. He turned to his table and sank into a

chair.

“We don’t know for sure,” I said, moving closer. “We need you to come to the morgue and look at the body.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head. He cried out loud. I shifted my feet and looked at Rick. He rolled his eyes. I shook my head—he needed a lesson in compassion. When Joey looked up, his face was red and streaked with tears. He nodded and said in a quiet voice, “I’m ready.”

Rick and I drove Joey to the morgue and Doctor Rachel Looper led us into the cold autopsy room. Before we entered I turned to Joey. “Prepare yourself. She’s been exposed to the elements.”

The woman’s body was on its back on the stainless steel table. Her appearance was shocking and the room reeked of decayed flesh. Joey didn’t seem to notice. He rushed to the body and threw himself against it. He shook violently and uttered something that I couldn’t make out. After several minutes, I put my hand on his shoulder and guided him out of the room.

He nodded. “She’s wearing the same clothes she left for work in.” He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. His hands trembled.

“When was that?”

“What?”

“When did she leave for work?”

“Friday morning. About six o’clock.”

“Where’d she work?”

“Southside Restaurant. She was a waitress.”

“That the last time you saw her?”

“Yeah.” He sank to the curb and lowered his head to his knees.

I squatted beside him. “Have y’all been having problems?”

“We argued sometimes. Nothing serious.”

“What was she doing in Leeville?”

Joey threw his hands in the air. “That’s the crazy thing. We never go to Leeville. We don’t even know anyone there. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

He shook his head. “No, no. Cynthia would never do anything like that.”

“How can you be sure?”

Tears streamed down Joey’s face. “Because she loved me. You don’t do that to someone you love.”

I called for a patrol cruiser to take Joey home. “I’ll need the names of her doctors, dentists, stuff like that.” I said. “I need a statement from you, too. Tomorrow maybe. Meanwhile, try to get some rest.”

Joey nodded and didn’t say another word until the cruiser arrived. Before he got inside, he grabbed my arm and stared into my eyes. “Find out who did this to my wife!”

When we returned to the autopsy room, Doctor Looper was busy on Cynthia Coleman’s body. She looked up and pulled the mask from her face. Her freckled nose and porcelain complexion made an attractive combination. “Didn’t y’all say her body was found in the bayou?”

I nodded.

“This woman drowned, but not in the bayou. There’s no soot or mud in her throat or lungs. Clean water killed her. My guess is a swimming pool.”

“There’s not a swimming pool within ten miles of Leeville,” I said.

“She was dumped,” Rick said.

“No signs of trauma?” I asked.

“None that I can tell.” Looper peeled off her gloves. “I think she was moved after she died. Now you have to find out why.”

Rick and I drove to Southside Restaurant and spoke with Cynthia’s manager, Daisy O’Conner. Daisy’s blood shot eyes and swollen cheeks were a dead giveaway that she already knew about Cynthia’s death. She served us steaming coffee and settled down behind the counter.

“Cynthia was a sweetheart,” she said. “Always happy. I’ll miss her for sure.”

“She have problems with anyone?” I asked.

“No, everybody loved her.”

“How about her husband?” Rick asked.

“He called a lot. I heard her arguing with him a few times.”

“About what?”

“Well, he came here once when she was talking to a male customer. She was just being friendly, but he got mad. She left work early that day.”

“The jealous type?” Rick asked.

“She never really said, but it seems so.”

“Did he have reason?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Was she fooling around?”

Daisy shifted in her seat. “I don’t know, like, for a fact, but I think there was somebody.”

“Who?”

“He’s a regular. Comes in about three times a week—evenings mostly. Cynthia always waited on him. She spent a lot of time at his table. He would wait outside for her sometimes. I saw them leave together once.”

“Did she ever say anything about him?”

“Never. And I never asked.”

“What’s his name?” Rick asked.

Daisy smiled and shook her head. “Funny thing, I never heard his name mentioned.”

“When was the last time he was here?” Rick asked.

“Wednesday, I think.”

“Was Cynthia working that night?”

“Yeah.”

“Was that the last time you saw her?” I asked.

“No,” Daisy said. “The last time I saw her was Thursday night when she left. She was supposed to work Friday evening, but she never showed.”

I looked at Rick and he nodded. He and I had been partners too long—we could read each other’s mind. I leaned closer to Daisy and stared into her dark brown eyes. “We’re gonna need your help,” I said.

“Anything,” she said. The corners of her mouth twitched and her eyes glowed.

I pointed to a table in the corner of the dining area. “We’re gonna wait there. If our guy walks in, I want you to point him out to us. We’ll take care of the rest. Got it?”

She started to nod and her face suddenly fell. “I thought Cynthia drowned? You don’t think—”

I shook my head. “This is routine. Nothing to worry about.” She didn’t look convinced.

We waited a couple of hours and were about to order dinner when a tall, thin man strode into the restaurant. His dress slacks and sports coat seemed out of place beneath his dark

and weather-beaten face. He took his seat in one of the booths and my eyes found Daisy. She had just emerged from the kitchen. She froze in place and looked in our direction. When our eyes locked, she nodded and hurried back into the kitchen.

“That’s him,” I told Rick. We made our way to his booth. I showed him my badge.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Andrew Rowdy. Why?”

“We need to ask you some questions down at our office,” I said.

Andrew looked surprised. “What about?”

“We’ll discuss that when we get there,” Rick said. “You just come along so we can get this done with. Then you can get back to your business.”

“Well, okay, but I’d still like to know what this is about.”

I pointed to the door. “You’ll know soon enough.”

When we were seated in the interview room, I offered Andrew a cigarette. He took it.

“Tell me about your relationship with Cynthia Coleman,” I said.

His brow furrowed. “Who?”

I propped my elbows on the desk and leaned close to him. “Don’t play stupid. You know who.”

Andrew licked his lips and shifted in his chair. “I don’t know anyone by that name.” He fumbled in his pocket for a lighter.

“Andy, you’re fixing to cause yourself a world of grief. Tell me about your relationship with—”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. And if I did, what business is it of yours?”

Rick jerked a *Polaroid* of Cynthia Coleman’s body from his pocket. I winced when he threw it on the desk. Andrew recoiled in horror. His cigarette spat from his mouth and fell to the floor.

“It became our business when we pulled her out the bayou.” Rick’s voice was loud. “If this doesn’t refresh your memory, a punch in the head will!”

I put my hand on Rick’s outstretched arm. He jerked it from me and stormed out the room.

Andrew’s face was ashen. “Is that really her?”

I nodded. He buried his face in his hands and it was then that I noticed the gold band around his ring finger. I collected his cigarette from the floor. He stuffed it in his mouth and I held the lighter for him. He nodded his thanks. A couple of drags later he was calm.

“Want to tell me about your relationship with Cynthia?”

“I’m married with three kids. If my wife finds out about this...”

“She won’t.” I slid the ashtray to him. “When did you last see Cynthia?”

He let out a long sigh. “Friday afternoon.”

“Did you meet her somewhere?”

He shook his head. “She came to my camp. We were there—”

“Your camp? Where is it?”

“La 1. Leeville.”

“Where in Leeville?”

“Just before the bridge. Why?”

I leaned across the desk. “Because Cynthia’s body was found in the bayou just north of the Leeville Bridge. Ain’t that a hell of a coincidence?”

Andrew’s mouth dropped. “Are you saying I did this?”

I shrugged. “What time did Cynthia leave your camp?”

Andrew’s eyes were desperate. “Uh, about 2:30 PM. Look, I swear I didn’t have anything

to do with—”

“Do you own a swimming pool?”

“What’s that got to do with this?”

“Is that a yes or no?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Has Cynthia ever been to your house?”

“Never. My wife stays home with our youngest.”

“Do you mind if we search your camp and your car?”

Andrew hesitated. “Maybe I need to call a lawyer.”

I stood up to walk out the room. Andrew reached out with his hand. “Wait,” he said. “Where’re you going?”

“Oh, you suddenly want to talk again.” I sat down. “Listen, did you have anything to do with Cynthia’s death?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then you shouldn’t have a problem with us searching your camp. Am I right?”

Andrew thought for awhile, then nodded. “I just don’t want my wife knowing what’s up.”

We arrived at Andrew Rowdy’s camp just after dark. It was a yellow, wooden cabin built high off the ground. It was only about a mile from where Cynthia Coleman’s body was discovered. A search of the interior yielded nothing. We moved outside and I walked toward the wharf. Andrew was on my heels. Rick wandered off through the tall marsh grass. His flashlight swept from left to right as he trudged along.

“What are y’all looking for?” Andrew asked when we reached the water’s edge.

“We’ll know when we find it.” The moonlight was bright over the water and the marsh grass danced in the wind like a music-box monkey. The steady breeze kept the mosquitoes away—much to our relief. It all made for a pleasant night. I almost forgot my reason for being there, when Rick called out. He stared down at something in the marsh about a hundred yards north of Andrew’s camp. When I reached his side, he pointed to a shoe in the mud—a woman’s white Nike sneaker.

Andrew looked over my shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Wait for us by your camp,” Rick said. When Andrew did as ordered, Rick continued. “See these drag marks and foot impressions? They start by the road and go to the water’s edge.”

“She was dumped here.” I looked at Andrew. He sat on the steps to his camp. “You think he did it?”

Rick shrugged. “If you killed her, would you dump her in your back yard?”

“You have a point. Let’s call it a night and talk to Joey tomorrow. He might be able to shed a little light on this case.”

I met Rick at the squad room early the next morning. He handed me a phone message. “This mail carrier said she wants to talk to the detectives working Cynthia Coleman’s death.”

We found the mail carrier at the Post Office loading her shoulder bag. Her blonde hair was drenched. She sighed when we walked up. “I can’t wait until winter.”

“I understand you might have some information for us,” I began.

“It might be nothing.” She sat on one of the nearby crates. “I was making my rounds on East 7th Street, Friday. When I put the mail in Mr. and Mrs. Coleman’s box, I could hear them arguing inside. Sounded pretty intense.”

“What time?”

“About 3, maybe later.”

I rubbed my head. "Are you sure it was Mr. and Mrs. Coleman?"

"I'm assuming it was. I don't know their voices well enough to say I recognized them, but I figured it was them."

"Did you see them?" Rick asked.

She shook her head. "I didn't even look at the house. I felt like I was eavesdropping."

"What were they saying?" I asked.

"I couldn't make out their words."

Rick and I drove straight to Joey Coleman's house. He invited us into the kitchen. I glanced around the room. Nothing out of place.

"Can I use your bathroom?" I asked.

"Sure." He pointed down a narrow hallway. Once inside, I locked the door. I searched the drawers and the closet, but didn't find any answers. When I knew I'd been in there too long, I flushed the toilet and turned toward the door. I stopped. Something shiny caught my eye. It was swishing around the toilet bowl and got sucked in with the current. I thought it was gone, but when the water settled I caught a glimpse of it just inside the mouth of the toilet ... just out of reach. I jerked a hanger from the closet. I worked it straight and made a hook on one end. I eased it into the toilet bowl and dragged the bottom until the shiny object came into view. When I saw it, my heart stopped. I pulled it out of the water and washed it in the sink, then dropped it in my pocket.

I rejoined Rick and Joey. I sat at the table. "Andy, go over what happened the day your wife disappeared."

A long frown tugged at his mouth and he lowered his head. "Cynthia had to work that day. I stayed home sick. I woke up around 12 and checked the mail. I noticed her car in the driveway. I checked around the house, but I couldn't find her. I figured she came home and then left again with a friend. I felt sick. I went back to sleep. I must've slept forever, because when I woke up it was dark. She still wasn't home." Joey stopped and shook his head. "I started to worry. I called 911 and made a report. I thought she ran off to her parents in Mississippi, but they said they hadn't seen her."

"Has she ever done that before?" Rick asked.

"About a year ago we had some problems and she drove up there. She stayed there a couple days. I had called her parents back then, but they said they hadn't seen her. I found out later that they lied."

I put my notebook down and stared at Joey. "When's the last time you went to Leeville?"

Joey's face tensed just a little and he blinked several times. "Uh, it's been a while. A month or two, I guess."

I puckered my brows and tilted my head sideways. "You sure?"

Joey looked at Rick and then back at me. He hesitated and then nodded slowly.

"What did you and Cynthia argue about Friday?"

"Argue? We didn't argue."

"Well, what did y'all talk about?"

"We didn't talk. I didn't even see her. When I woke up she was gone."

"You didn't talk to her before she left for work?"

Joey shook his head. "I, I was sleeping."

I leaned across the table. "If you were sleeping, how the hell did you know what she was wearing?"

Joey stammered.

I decided to gamble a little. "Is that your welding truck in the driveway?"

He nodded.

“What would you say if I told you someone saw you in Leeville within the last couple days?”

Joey’s face fell and his tan faded.

“Have you ever tried to flush a penny down the toilet?” I asked.

Unable to speak, Joey just shook his head.

“You can’t do it. For some reason, the damn thing just won’t go down.” I pulled the shiny object from my pocket and tossed it on the table.

Joey’s chin began to tremble when he saw the earring and one of his legs shook uncontrollably. I moved around the table and put my hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right,” I said in a quiet voice. “We understand how you feel. I know you loved Cynthia—I can tell that by looking around this house. You gave her everything, and you took such good care of her, but that wasn’t enough, was it? She just couldn’t be pleased. You were so good to her and she betrayed you. You couldn’t understand why she would do that—how she could do it. You were confused. You didn’t mean to hurt her, you only wanted answers. Sure, you were upset...you loved her! Love, Joey, love made you do it. You did it for—”

“Oh, my God!” Joey began crying like a newborn. He slammed his head onto the table. “I’m so sorry, baby! I’m so sorry!”

I waited until his crying subsided somewhat and said, “Tell us what happened. Help us understand exactly how you feel...”

Joey lifted his head. He looked pitiful. “She was cheating on me,” he whispered. “I, I followed her to that, to that camp. She thought I was working. I’ve been knowing something was up.”

“Did you confront her?” I asked.

“Not at the camp. I parked across the street and waited until she left. She never saw me. I followed her home. I waited a few minutes before going inside. I wanted to calm down. I thought I was calm, but...”

“Go on,” I said in a soothing voice.

“I found her in the bathroom. She was still dressed, but she was running water for a bath. She freaked out when she saw me. That look on her face...she knew she was busted!” He wiped his nose on his sleeve. “I don’t know what happened after that. I just snapped. I remember holding her head under the water. It felt like a dream. She struggled some. She tried to push my hands off her head, but I was too strong. Then she stopped moving and I realized what I had done. I got scared.”

“What did you do then?” I asked.

“I waited until dark. Put Cynthia in the back of my truck. I drove to Leeville. I threw her in the bayou next to that guy’s camp. I wanted the cops—y’all—to think he did it.”

“What’s with the earring?” Rick asked.

Joey sighed. “I found it on the floor in the bathroom just after I called 911. I knew the deputy would be here any minute, so I threw it in the toilet and flushed it. I thought it went down, but...”

Joey didn’t say a word on the ride to the parish jail. When we dropped him off he turned away from the deputy who was rolling his fingerprints. “Detective.”

I stopped and looked into his mournful eyes.

“I really meant what I said out there by the patrol car.”

I tilted my head and tried to think back.

“About you finding out who did that to my wife,” he said. “I wanted to tell you. I just didn’t have the courage. Thanks for helping me get it off my chest. I would’ve died

otherwise.”

I just nodded and glanced at Rick, who said, “That would’ve been a good—”

“Partner,” I said. “Ready for lunch?”

Rick glared at Joey Coleman for what seemed like forever. He finally shook his head and stormed out of the room. I followed him to the parking lot. He shook his fist in the air. “I’d like ten minutes alone with him.”

“It’s not his fault,” I said, trying to stifle a smile. “Love made him do it.”

Rick was livid. “Love don’t kill!”

A Handful of Evidence

Triple Oaks had always been a quiet town. Children played in the streets, doors were left unlocked and windows were left open at night. It was a happy town that didn't know the meaning of violent crime and where everyone knew your name.

That cold December morning was no different than any other December morning in Triple Oaks. Amid the bustling, last minute Christmas shoppers, Derrick Neils picked his way across Main Street. Had he known what awaited him on the other side of the street, he wouldn't have crossed. Heck, he wouldn't have even gotten out of bed that morning. Of course, he should have expected something. Town rumor had it, he had been fooling around with Jerry Winston's wife, and the whisper was that Jerry Winston hadn't always been law-abiding. And in a town like Triple Oaks, town rumor is gospel and you're guilty even if proven innocent.

I had heard the rumor just the day before at Billy's Barber Shop. It seemed I was the last to know. "I swear on my sister's eyes," Billy the Barber had said. "It's gospel. Heard it told they were seen at the Triple Oaks Motel three nights of last week."

Derrick whistled Jingle-Bells and sidestepped a group of jostling boys as he sprung onto the busy sidewalk. He flashed a row of bright whites in the direction of a young lady who sauntered by. He casually looked back around and he turned to instant ice. When I saw his tanning-bed gold turn to ash, I knew something was about to happen. Of course, I wasn't prepared for the deafening explosion that followed.

I think everyone on the street jumped at least a little, and some of us more than a little. The front of Derrick's coat flapped violently. A second shot rang out and the coat flapped again. Derrick stared unbelieving at the crimson pool that started to form on the front of his jacket. The town seemed frozen in time. We all stared as Derrick took a half step backward. Confusion and fear etched deep lines in his face. He collapsed to the ground. He shook violently, blood oozing from his mouth, and, after several moments, finally lay still.

The crowd was too thick for anyone to see who had fired the shot. When the realization of what had transpired settled into the minds of the unsuspecting townspeople, several women screamed and a child started crying. That seemed to have a thawing effect on the other townspeople. As though stabbed with cattle prods, the entire crowd bolted. Like a herd of stampeding buffalo, we roared down Main Street. I was toward the back of the human stampede and the faster I ran, the faster they ran.

The children and women continued to scream as we roared toward the hardware shop, the doors of which stood wide open and inviting. Just as the front of the stampede reached the doors and gushed inside, I caught a reflection in the broad shop windows of three sheriff's deputies in hot pursuit. Their guns were drawn and their faces tense. The human stampede bottlenecked at the door and it gave the deputies the precious time they needed to catch up to the crowd.

Skidding to a stop, the deputies leveled their guns at the crowd. With fingers whitening around the triggers of their service revolvers, they screamed, almost in unison, "Jerry Winston, drop the gun!"

Shots rang out and, at that very moment, I caught my own reflection in the store window. It was with great horror that I realized the gun was still in my hand....

A Picture Perfect Murder

“Walter, she didn’t have a chance.” The Crime Scene Investigator, Kristen Silverman, turned Valerie Gravois’ body over. Valerie’s brown eyes stared unseeing into space. Her lime-colored shirt accentuated the crimson spot on her chest.

I swallowed hard and turned toward the counter. I heard a faint beeping noise and realized that the telephone receiver was on the floor. I glanced up. The remnants of the surveillance camera dangled from the ceiling. “Why shoot the camera?”

Kristen looked up at me. “I found a piece of red fabric in the victim’s hand. She probably ripped it from the suspect’s face and he panicked.”

I shook my head. “Val always was a bit feisty.”

Sweat pasted a tuft of blonde hair to Kristen’s forehead. “You knew her?”

“I came to the Swift Stop nearly every morning to talk with her. Good girl.” I pointed to the office door. “Anything on the tape?”

“Forget it. According to the owner, the recording device is empty. He has it more as a deterrent. He never dreamed anything like this would happen.”

“It didn’t deter crap here.” I looked toward the end of the counter where the register was located. The cash drawer was open. “How much did they get?”

“Cleaned it out. The owner’s best guess is two or three hundred.”

I looked down at Val’s body. She would have turned nineteen in June. A bright girl with a bright future. Why did it have to end like this for her? Sure, I’d seen more than my share of dead and dying, but this was something altogether different ... I usually met my victims *after* they were dead.

Kristen straightened and pulled at her tight jeans. She gathered her crime scene kit and moved into the office. She let out a long whistle. “Wow, who’s the photographer?”

I followed her into the office. Three of the four walls were covered with photographs. I smiled. “Val loved to photograph people.”

“Good stuff.” Kristen scanned the walls. “She liked you. There must be twenty pictures of you here.”

“She did that to harass me.”

“Seems like she was a lot of fun.”

“Yeah.” I thought for a moment. “Come to think of it, she hadn’t been herself the past two weeks.”

“Meaning?”

“She seemed preoccupied. When I’d ask what’s up, she’d just say she had a lot on her mind.”

When I could no longer stand to see Valerie lying there in her own blood, I walked outside. I took a deep breath and said softly to myself, “Remain detached, remain detached.”

A patrol sergeant was across the street interviewing an elderly woman. The woman wore a battered straw hat and stood beside a lawnmower. I started toward them.

“Detective Diaz, hold up.”

I turned.

A K-9 deputy jogged across the parking lot to where I stood. “Rufus picked up a track. It went round back to the bayou side and then south to that vacant lot.” He led me around the north side of the convenience store to the middle of the vacant lot. “Track stops here.”

“Car?”

The K-9 deputy nodded.

I jotted the information in my notebook and surveyed the area. It was quarter to one on a Monday afternoon. Cars were bumper to bumper along the busiest street in Lafourche Parish. There was an insurance business to the north of the convenience store and several houses across the street. I shook my head. This was brazen.

I walked over to the patrol sergeant. "Hey Sarge, got anything?"

He pointed to the elderly woman. "She saw two men run to a blue Ford Thunderbird parked in that empty lot. One had on a mask. The other was holding his hand over his face."

"Gun?"

"One of them had something black in his hand. She couldn't say which man or which hand."

"Direction of travel?"

"North."

"Anything solid on the car?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Just make and model. Her daughter drives a red Thunderbird, so she's sure about that. She didn't notice bumper stickers, license plate, damage, stuff like that."

"Run a state-wide check to find out if any Thunderbirds were stolen in the past month or so."

The sergeant turned to leave and stopped. "One other thing—she thought there was a woman driving. She couldn't be positive, but she did mention it."

I recruited three detectives from my squad and we spent the rest of the afternoon canvassing the area. Other than the grandma cutting grass, no one saw anything.

Just before knock-off time, I stopped at the Crime Lab to see Kristen Silverman and found her bent over a microscope. "Give me the good news."

"Not much to give." Kristen brushed her short, blonde hair from her tanned forehead and straightened. "The bullet that killed Valerie and the bullet that killed the surveillance camera were not fired from the same gun. A .357 killed Valerie and a 9 mm destroyed the camera. I sent the bullets to be entered into IBIS."

"So, they both had guns." I dropped into the chair by Kristen's desk. "What's an IBIS?"

"Integrated Ballistics Identification System. It's a database of bullet fingerprints. If this gun was used in other crimes, I'll know about it."

"Technology never ceases to amaze me. Someone needs to hurry and find a cure for seasonal allergies." I flipped open the photo envelope on Kristen's desk. Autopsy pictures of Valerie slid out. I gasped when I saw them. She looked so pale and ... *dead*.

I felt Kristen's hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I just didn't expect to see that." I took a deep breath. "You know, I convinced her to go to college. I'd tell her that she was too smart to be a store clerk." I smiled. "Of course, she'd often tell me I was too dumb to be a detective."

Kristen threw her head back and laughed. "Apparently she didn't know you very well. You're the best we've got."

"That ain't saying much. But Val, she was smart. She had only a year left to get her degree." I closed the envelope. "Any prints at the scene?"

"I recovered a dozen prints, but I was able to match them to the owner and Valerie."

Kristen handed me a picture of the red fabric. "This and the projectiles are about the only pieces of physical evidence to link the suspect to the scene."

"If the dirt-bag keeps the gun."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Kristen handed me a list of credit card and bank account numbers. "Valerie's purse was also taken. I've been on the phone with her bank and credit

card companies. They're gonna keep the cards active for a few days."

"How about her camera?"

"Didn't find one."

"Hmm, it was always with her. Did you check her car?"

"Yep. Nothing."

"Okay, I'll check the pawnshops. Let me know if you get anything else."

The pawnshops turned up nothing. When I returned to the office, I surfed the computer for unsolved murders and robberies. The neighboring parish of Lakeside worked an execution style murder two weeks prior, but a call to the lead detective dispelled any thoughts of there being a connection. "Poor bastard was shot behind the ear at close range in his front yard," the detective told me. "We found a large quantity of heroin in his possession. Our narcotics detectives confirmed that he was one of the biggest drug dealers in our parish. You ask me, the killer should get a public service award."

I checked the Louisiana Department of Corrections database for any paroled robbers or murderers, but nothing looked promising. With nowhere else to turn, and starting to fear that Valerie's murder would go unsolved, I thumbed through the mountain of files that had been compiled over the years on those suspects whom we knew committed specific offenses, but were unable to gather the evidence needed to garner convictions. The minutes turned into hours and the hours began to overlap. I searched and searched and....

* * *

I awoke to the sound of voices. I opened my eyes but didn't move. It took me a full second to realize I was still at the office.

"My Lord, you never went home?" Marcia's arms were crossed as she looked over the rims of her oversized glasses. There was an artificial look of concern in her faded eyes. "What is it about this case that kept you here all night?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to talk to Marcia about anything, much less this case. Sometimes I thought she hid a tape recorder in her salt and pepper frizz. I could think of no other explanation for the accuracy with which she repeated everyone's conversations. Some of the detectives referred to her as 'Motor-mouth Marcia' behind her back.

I followed the aroma trail to the coffee pot and, although I never touched the stuff, I poured a monster-size cup. It didn't help my headache, but it did separate my eyelids and kept them open on the drive back to the crime scene.

The Swift Stop was still closed for business. I ducked under the crime scene tape and unlocked the door with the key I'd gotten from the owner. Kristen was one of the best crime scene investigators in the state and I knew if she didn't find it, it didn't exist ... I just couldn't help but think there had to be something here. I went over the scene again and again. I bent under the counter and searched the floor inch by inch—

"Hey! Where's my whiskey?"

I snapped upright and banged my head hard on the underside of the counter. Cursing to myself, I jumped to my feet. A wino stood on wobbly legs across the counter. He pointed a long, crusted index fingernail in my face. "You don't work here."

"And you must be blind." I walked around the counter. "Didn't you see the police tape? This is a crime scene."

The wino's eyes grew wide when he saw the pistol on my side. He scurried back toward the door. "No need to get physical," he said.

I watched him throw his leg over a rusted bicycle. He pushed off to a shaky start and crashed into the garbage bin and fell. I laughed. The wino stood, pulled a rag from his back pocket and wiped down the seat. I turned away. I started to go over the scene once more

and then froze. The rag—it was the same color and pattern as the fabric Kristen found in Valerie’s hand.

I rushed outside. “Where’d you get that rag?”

The wino fell to the ground and covered his greasy face with his stained hands. “Please, don’t hit me.”

I grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet. “Don’t be stupid.” I pulled the rag from his hand. It was a larger piece than the one Kristen found. “I just want to know where you got this rag.”

The wino shrugged. “Found it.” He pointed to the north. “Over by the bank.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“Show me.” It didn’t take me long to regret letting the wino ride in my unmarked. The stench of stale urine drifted across the few feet that separated us. I rolled the windows down and hung my head out. The wino directed me to Granny’s Oven, a bakery just south of Southern Premier Bank. I turned down West 15th Street. It separated the bank from the bakery. The wino pointed to the payphone beside the bakery. “Found it right there. On the ground.”

My heart pumped like a piston. I felt that a break in the case was near. I carefully checked the area surrounding the payphone—no clues. I dusted the payphone for prints. I found a couple of partial prints, but nothing too promising. I wasn’t even sure if there was enough ridge work for Kristen to make a match.

Before I threw in the towel, I decided to speak to Granny. I told the wino not to touch anything in my car and I pushed through the glass door of the bakery. The sweet smell of icing tickled my pallet. I smiled at Granny. “Got any brownies?”

Granny shook her gray head and laughed. “My dear, you eat them faster than I make them.”

“For sure.” I pulled up a stool and showed Granny the piece of fabric. Her usually glowing face turned to ash when I told her why I was there.

She pulled at the buttons on the front of her shirt. “You think those murderers were outside my store?”

“I’m not sure. See anything suspicious? Strange vehicles? Anything out of the norm?”

“No. I was in the kitchen most of the day. I can’t see anything from back there.”

“Any customers who weren’t regulars?”

Granny ran a finger along her wrinkled brow. “There was one girl. She came in around noon, or earlier. She wanted change for a dollar. That’s all. Stood right about where you are now.”

My heart raced. “Did she lean on the counter?”

Granny shrugged. “She was right there. I don’t know—”

“Don’t touch anything.” I rushed to my car and retrieved the fingerprint kit from my trunk. The wino was passed out in my back seat. “Hey, get up,” I said.

The wino dragged himself to a sitting position and wiped his crusty eyes. “Where am I?”

“Grab your bike and go home. I’ve got work to do.” I ushered him out of my back seat. “If I need anything more from you I’ll come find you.”

The wino grumbled while he steadied his bike. He paddled across the street and disappeared behind the bank.

I was not surprised to find several different fingerprints on the countertop. Most were smudges, but I located four legible fingerprints and a partial palm print.

“What are you doing with that tape?” Granny wanted to know.

“We use the tape to lift the print.” I grabbed a white backing. “We then place the tape on the card like this, and ... bingo. We’re in business.” I held up the card for her to see. When she finished awing over it, I stuck it in my folder and rolled her prints for comparison purposes.

I bought a bagful of brownies before I left the bakery. “Call me if you remember anything.”

* * *

“Definitely the same fabric,” Kristen said. “Where’d you get it?”

“A drunk had it. Picked it up near the payphone by Granny’s Oven.”

I squeezed Kristen’s shoulder. “Gotta run.”

“Aren’t you gonna wait for the prints?”

“Just call me when you run them.”

“Why the hurry?”

“Need to catch the telephone company before they close. I want them to pull the records of calls made to or from that payphone on the day of the murder.”

Kristen smiled. “Not too shabby, Einstein. Maybe Valerie was wrong after all.”

* * *

“Let’s see,” said the office manager at the telephone company, “yep, here it is.” She pushed her Coke-bottle glasses higher on her nose and shoved a computer printout across the desk.

“What am I looking at?”

The manager pointed to one of the columns. “This collect call was made yesterday at 11:40 AM.”

“Ten minutes before the robbery. Anything else?”

“No, sir. That’s the only call made that day.”

My cell phone rang. It was Kristen.

I stepped outside. “Shoot.”

“Most of the prints you lifted are the old lady’s.”

“Most?”

“Three of them from the counter and the ones from the payphone belong to the same person, probably a female or small child. I didn’t get any hits from the Automated Fingerprint Identification System. Either they were never arrested, or if they were, the individual department didn’t enter their prints.”

“That’s okay. I might have something here.” I returned to the desk. “Got subscriber info on the phone number?”

The manager smiled and handed me a printout. “I knew you would ask.”

I thanked her and left. The phone was registered to Grace Breaux of 2021 Blackberry Lane in Des Allemands. A driver’s license check revealed that Grace was fifty-eight—a bit old to be robbing stores.

An hour later I turned down Blackberry Lane. It was a narrow street, but long. I found 2021. It was a new, doublewide trailer that squatted in the shade of a large oak tree. An elderly woman knelt beside a modest flower garden stabbing at the ground with a small hand shovel. She looked up when I approached and pushed her straw hat away from her sweaty forehead with the tip of the shovel.

I introduced myself. “Are you Mrs. Breaux?”

She nodded.

“I’m looking into collect calls that were made from a payphone yesterday. Receive any?”

Grace Breaux looked puzzled. “My daughter called me. Is there a problem?”

“Probably nothing. Why’d she call?”

“She borrowed my car, was supposed to bring it back for noon. I paged her to find out where she was.”

“Borrowed your car? What kind do you have?”

“You sure there’s not a problem?”

“Do you have a blue Thunderbird?”

Grace dropped her shovel and pulled herself to her feet. “What happened? Is Rebecca okay?”

“I’m not sure. I need to talk to her.”

“She’s not—” Grace Breaux jumped in her skin when my pager went off.

I glanced down at the display screen. It was Marcia and she had paged me with 9-1-1. I shook my head. She always paged me at the most inopportune times and she used 911 more than she inhaled. “Where’s your daughter?”

“I haven’t seen her since yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”

“She left before daylight, came home about ten, left again. Haven’t seen her since.”

“Why’d she stop by?”

“Said she needed something. Last I saw of her.”

“Is this common?”

Grace nodded. “She’s had drug problems for years ... gets better ... gets back on drugs.” Grace sighed. “What’s a mother to do?”

“Was she alone yesterday?”

“Said she had to meet someone. Didn’t say who.”

“Look, someone might’ve involved Rebecca in some bad stuff. If I can talk to her and she cooperates, I can maybe get her a reduced sentence.”

“What do you mean, sentence? She’s going to jail?”

I put my hand on Grace’s shoulder and in a calm voice said, “Look, if I can talk to Rebecca, I know I can convince her to cooperate and everything’ll be okay. Now, I need to examine your car. How can we find her?”

Grace hesitated, but finally relaxed into resignation. “When I page her with a special code she calls right back.” She turned toward the trailer. “I’ll get the number.”

My phone rang—Kristen. “Hey, girlie, what’s up?”

“Where are you?” Kristen was excited. “I told Marcia to page you. You need to get here quick!”

“Get where? I’m about to solve this murder. I identified the driver and I’ll bet a year’s worth of paychecks that she’ll lead me to the shooter.”

“Walt, we found the Thunderbird.”

I didn’t like Kristen’s tone. “Where?”

“It’s behind the Sugar Mill—burnt to a shell.”

* * *

When I pulled up behind the Sugar Mill, my heart sank. A hearse was parked near the smoldering shell of what used to be a Ford Thunderbird. A blackened corpse lay curled on the ground. “That’s not...”

Kristen nodded. “Her hands were balled into fists and that somewhat protected her prints. She’s definitely your girl from the payphone. I’ve already put in a call for Rebecca Breaux’s dental records, but I’m certain it’s her.”

My insides crumbled. I leaned against the hearse and rubbed my tired face. “She was my only lead.” I pounded my forehead while I tried to figure my next move. “Look, keep her

identity quiet for a while. I need some time to figure this out.”

I helped Kristen comb the crime scene, but we found nothing. “We’re dealing with some slick killers,” Kristen said.

Before we finished, Marcia paged me to say that Valerie’s mother wanted to speak to me. Something about a diary and a photograph.

“We’re still at the burn scene,” I told Marcia. “Let her know I’ll be there first thing in the morning.”

“Need the address?”

“Yeah, give it to me.”

“326 Titus Lane in Lakeside. I talked to Betty, she’s the secretary there at CID, we’re old friends, used to play Bingo together on Thursday nights and we got to talking—”

“Marcia, gotta go.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I told her what was up and she gave me directions to that address. I drew up a map for you—”

“I’m familiar with the area. Thanks, anyway.”

“Oh, and Walter, what did y’all find out there?”

I rolled my eyes at Kristen. “Marcia, we’ve been over the confidentiality thing before.”

“I know, I know, I was just wondering if y’all are any closer to solving that dreadful murder.”

* * *

I arrived at Nancy Gravois’ house early the next morning and saw two Lakeside deputies huddled by the front door. I recognized one of them from the police academy. “Hey Steve, what’re you up to these days?”

Steve Nielson turned and smiled wide, exposing a row of tobacco stained teeth.

“Dynamite Diaz! What’s up, cuz?”

Steve introduced me to his partner and then slapped my back hard. “They got you investigating burglaries in our parish now?”

“Not quite.” The doorjamb was splintered and the deadbolt bent. I pointed to it. “What happened?”

“Early morning burglary. The lady thinks there’s a connection between this, her daughter’s murder and the murder we had here two weeks ago.”

“I talked to your homicide detectives about that. Wasn’t it drug related?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why would she think it’s related?”

“It happened right there,” Steve indicated across the street with his head. “Gary Coleman was shot in his own driveway.”

I walked to the street. The house was directly across from the Gravois’. It was yellow with white trim. Two story. Three-car garage with a big driveway. A Rolls was parked in the driveway and a Harley was tucked into one side of the garage. A strip of yellow police tape was still attached to the mailbox.

When Steve and his partner were done, I sat down at the kitchen table with Nancy Gravois. She looked a lot like Valerie, just older. “You wanted to see me, ma’am?”

She dabbed at her wet, swollen eyes with a Kleenex and nodded. “I found Valerie’s diary yesterday. I was reading through it and a picture fell out.” She stared me right in the eyes. “I think she photographed the murder across the street.”

I tried to get comfortable with that statement before I spoke. “What exactly do you mean?”

“I think she saw what was happening from her bedroom window—”

“And she photographed it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, where’s the picture?” The beating of my heart sounded like the cows coming home.

Nancy Gravois shook her head slowly. “They got it.”

“What about the diary?”

“Gone.”

I punched the table. Mrs. Gravois jumped and stared wide-eyed at me. I wanted to punch myself next ... square in the nose. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s just that I knew Valerie. She was a friend.”

Nancy nodded her forgiveness.

“Did you tell anyone about the diary, or the picture?”

“No. The only reason I called for you was because Valerie mentioned you in her diary.”

“But why didn’t she tell me?” I said that more to myself. “I’ve seen her a dozen times since that murder.”

“Maybe she didn’t know if she could trust you.”

“Excuse me?”

Nancy Gravois braced herself. “The men who killed Mr. Coleman were cops.”

My jaw dropped. “Are you sure?”

“In the picture, you could see fire coming from the gun. The cops had badges hanging from some kind of chain around their necks. The gunfire reflected off the badges.”

“But, what if they were bad guys impersonating cops?”

Nancy walked to a table in the corner of her spacious kitchen and dug through a stack of newspapers. She fished one out, dropped it on the table in front of me and pointed to a picture on the front page. “That’s the man in the picture Valerie took. He’s the one with the gun.”

The man was Lakeside Parish Sheriff’s Office Narcotics Agent Wayne Ford. According to the news article, he and his partner were awarded the Crime Fighters of the Year Award for their work in helping to quell the drug problem in their parish. This was not going to be easy. I looked into Nancy Gravois’ troubled eyes. “Are you positive this is the man who shot your neighbor?”

She simply said, “Yes.”

I called Kristen and she confirmed that the bullet that killed Valerie Gravois was fired from the same gun that killed Gary Coleman. “I wanted to call you earlier,” she said, “but I got called out. A fisherman found Valerie’s purse and camera at a boat launch. Everything was intact and, as I suspected, there were no prints.”

“Now I understand why these guys are doing such a good job covering their tracks.” I filled Kristen in on what I’d discovered.

I was about to hang up and she stopped me. “Oh, I almost forgot ... the autopsy report’s in on Rebecca Breaux. She was killed with that same .357. It was a single gunshot to the back of the head.”

“Thanks, Kristen. I have one call to make and then I’ll head back to the office.”

A call to a trusted friend inside the Lakeside Sheriff’s Office Narcotics Division revealed that Rebecca Breaux had been arrested in their parish for distribution of cocaine. She had made a deal to work off the charges and the case agent was none other than Wayne Ford.

I called a meeting with my Captain, my Sheriff and the District Attorney. Kristen and I presented our case to them. They agreed we were on to something, but the consensus was that we needed a lot more.

After a long morning of meetings between the Sheriffs and District Attorneys of both parishes, they agreed to let Kristen and I interview Wayne Ford and his partner, Gerald Robichaux, under the guise of trying to locate a missing Rebecca Breaux.

I called Wayne just before lunch and he graciously agreed to meet at our office to share information.

“Becca was a good girl,” Wayne said. “She just got involved with the wrong crowd.”

“I agree.” I winked over at Kristin, who listened in on the other line. “We’re very committed to finding her and we appreciate everything you can do for us.”

“Like I said, as soon as me and Gerald eat, we’ll be there.”

I hung up the phone. “It’s definitely them.”

“How can you be sure?” Kristen wanted to know.

“Trust me.”

* * *

The next day, Wayne and Gerald arrived at our office a little after noon. Wayne looked meaner in person. He was big, with dark, bushy eyebrows and his face was twisted into a permanent scowl. Gerald was different. He had a nervous twitch going and an obvious stuttering problem. His frizzy hair was unkempt and he wore two earrings in each ear.

Wayne’s hand enveloped mine when we shook. He tried to squeeze, but I deftly repositioned my hand around his fingers and he lost round one.

“Thanks for coming,” I said. I pointed to one of our newest detectives. “Wayne, if you’ll go with this detective, he’ll show you some mug books and maybe you’ll recognize some of Rebecca’s street contacts.”

Wayne’s glare was suspicious, but he did as asked. I turned to Gerald. “Come with me.” I led him to an interview room where Kristen waited. When I closed the door, I gave it a shove and it slammed hard. Gerald jumped. Before he could recover, I put a hand on his shoulder and gave a gentle push toward a chair. “Sit here.”

Gerald sank into the chair and tried to smile. It looked painful. I held out a picture of Rebecca Breaux. “Is this the same Rebecca Breaux who CI’s for you and Wayne?”

Gerald nodded.

“How far is she from working off her charges?”

Gerald shrugged. “I’m not sure. I guess she was almost done. It’s up to Wayne, really.”

“Does she hang around with a rough crowd?”

“I guess you could consider drug dealers a rough crowd. She hung around with all kinds of dopers.”

“Rebecca’s involved in some serious crimes. Maybe murder. Who, in her circle of friends, is capable of murder?”

Gerald stammered. “M ... may ... maybe she was involved, well, she ... she was a pretty rough girl, her ... herself.”

“There you go again, Gerald.”

He looked from me to Rebecca and back to me. “W ... w ... what?”

“Do you know something we don’t know?”

Gerald just stared at me.

“Where’s Rebecca?”

Gerald shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Do you watch Blue’s Clues?”

Gerald shook his head, a blank expression on his face.

“You see, you keep referring to Rebecca in past tense. If this were Blue’s Clues, that would be a paw print.”

“A p ... paw print? What are ... what are you talking about?”

“Let’s talk about Monday. Where were you?”

“Work. Why?”

“No reason. When did you start working for Lafourche Parish Sheriff’s Office?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why were you in Lafourche Parish Monday?”

I could see the front of Gerald’s shirt jumping with each beat of his heart.

Kristen looked at me and I nodded. She scooted next to Gerald. “Gerald,” she began in that soothing voice of hers, “if I set out to destroy computer files, and I took a sledge hammer to the monitor, would that work?”

Gerald thought for a moment. He finally said, “No. You would have to destroy the hard drive.”

Kristen smiled. “Exactly. Now, a video surveillance camera is no different. You can destroy the eye of the camera, but the recording device is like the hard drive. Everything it recorded up until the time the camera’s eye was shot out will be preserved.”

The color drained slowly from Gerald’s face.

“Gerald,” Kristen touched his arm, “what do you think is the last thing the camera recorded before you shot it?”

“This was a trap!” Gerald bolted to his feet. “I’m leaving!”

I stepped between Gerald and the door. My eyes must have looked as cold as I felt, because Gerald melted. He dropped to the chair and buried his face on the desk. He sobbed like a little boy who just found his puppy dead.

“You need to tell us what happened,” Kristen said.

“I’m not saying anything until I talk to Wayne.”

“Wayne has done quite enough for you,” I said. “Although, you are lucky in one regard.”

Gerald was puzzled. “W ... w ... what d’ya m ... mean?”

“I hear lethal injection is much more humane than the electric chair. They say you don’t feel a thing. It’s like going to sleep, except you wake up dead.”

“Lethal injection?”

I nodded. “Unless you start talking, you’ll get the death penalty for the murder of Gary Coleman, Valerie Gravois and Rebecca Breaux. I know you didn’t pull the trigger and you weren’t the mastermind behind it all, but we can’t prove that—unless you help us prove it. You need to start talking. That’s the only thing that’ll save your life.”

“First, you gotta promise to protect me from Wayne.”

I nodded. “Consider it done.”

Gerald sighed. “Can I have a cigarette? I’ll tell you everything.”

Gerald told us he and Wayne were wired into Gary Coleman’s drug business and Wayne began to get greedy ... demanding more and more money from Coleman, until Coleman couldn’t afford to pay his bills and was in danger of losing everything. “Gary threatened to turn himself in and rat us out.” Gerald shook his head. “You don’t threaten Wayne.”

Kristen said, “Go on.”

“We went to Gary’s house and Wayne made him kiss his Rolls goodbye. While Gary was bent over, Wayne shot him behind the ear.” Gerald scrunched out the cigarette. “We saw a flash from a bedroom across the street. Wayne knew it was from a camera. We started following the girl and Wayne decided to do her at her job ... make it look like a robbery. When we ran through the door, she reached for the phone. I tried to stop her and she ripped off my mask. That’s when Wayne shot her.”

“How’d Rebecca factor into this?” Kristen asked.

“Wayne needed a driver.” Gerald shook his head. “He told Becca we were working an undercover operation. When she became suspicious, Wayne killed her and burned her body in her car.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Who broke into the Gravois’ home last night?”

Gerald raised his hand. “I did.”

“Why last night?”

“Wayne overheard our secretary talking to someone from your department about a diary and incriminating picture that Nancy Gravois had.” He shook his head. “I just wanted all of it to stop.”

“You could’ve stopped it at any time,” I said.

“You don’t know Wayne. He would’ve killed me ... and he’ll kill you if you try to arrest him. He’s already said he’ll die before going to jail.”

I slid a notebook to Gerald. “Start writing everything down.” I called a detective to sit with Gerald.

Kristen and I met with Wayne in a separate interview room. He looked up as we entered. I closed the distance between us fast and slapped Wayne square in the face. Stunned, he staggered to his feet. I grabbed his right arm and twisted it into a rear arm-lock and smashed him facedown against the desk. Kristen kicked his legs out from under him and snatched his duty weapon, a backup pistol and two knives from his person. We handcuffed him.

The veins in Wayne’s temples were bulging. “What is going on? Do you know who I am?”

I pushed Wayne to a chair. “Sorry about all of this. We did this so we wouldn’t have to kill you.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Wayne strained against the cuffs. “Boy, you’d better get me out of these cuffs right now!”

“Wayne, you’re under arrest for the murders of Valerie Gravois and Rebecca Breaux.” I calmly read Wayne his Miranda Rights, but I don’t think he heard a word I said above his own swearing.

“You’ve got nothing on me!” Wayne spat the words at me. “I’ll get out soon, and when I do, I’m gonna come for y’all!”

Kristen met Wayne’s evil gaze with her own and held it until he looked away. “You’re nobody I’d ever worry about. You’re a coward. You shoot helpless, defenseless people. For once in your life, why don’t you show the semblance of manhood and admit what you did?”

“Please, you’ve gotta believe me,” Wayne fell to his knees, “I didn’t do any of it. I’m a good cop.”

I stood to go. “Wayne, you can go to the needle denying what you did ... I don’t give a shit. What I do know is this ... you took three lives and now you’re gonna lose your own.” I held the door for Kristen and then turned back to Wayne. “I just wish we could kill you three times.”

Hell Hath No Fury

“Is that him?” Brandonberg asked.

I nodded. Even in the dark, there was no mistaking Logan Anderson’s hat—or the smell of that dreadful pipe. I pulled the 9mm pistol from my waistband and screwed the silencer in place. “It’s show time.”

I was about to step out from where we hid, when Brandonberg grabbed my arm. “Someone’s coming,” he hissed.

We waited in the shadows and watched as a car approached Logan. He shielded his eyes from the bright headlights that blinded him. The car stopped twenty feet away. A door slammed. A dark figure crossed in front of the headlights.

“What are you doing here?” Logan asked. He sounded surprised.

“I want to watch you die,” a female said.

Shit! It was Beverly Anderson. I had told her to stay away. Brandonberg and I rushed into the light. I leveled my pistol at Logan’s chest.

The pipe fell from Logan’s mouth and with a voice that shook, he asked, “What is this? What the hell is going on?”

“You’re getting murdered,” Beverly said.

I shook my head. There was a glint in Beverly’s eyes that I hadn’t noticed before. She seemed to be enjoying this entirely too much. When she found out about her husband’s affair, she came to us as a distraught wife. She cried and told us she feared her husband would have her killed to be rid of her. I didn’t give a shit about her sob story. It was the \$75,000 that did it.

“How much is she paying you?” Sweat formed like raindrops on Logan’s forehead.

“There’s a briefcase in my car...\$500,000 in it. Kill her and it’s yours.”

Beverly gasped. “What are you doing with that kind of money?”

I nodded to Brandonberg and he checked the car. “It’s all here.” He carried the briefcase to where I stood.

The smile that cracked Logan’s face was wicked. “Honey, this is a man’s game. Played by men, won by men.”

Beverly stepped toward me. “You took my money,” she said, “you *have* to kill him!”

“Mrs. Anderson, like I told you, when I accept money for a hit, the obit’s as good as written.” I shot Logan twice in the chest. His wicked grin turned to shock. He clawed at his chest. Blood oozed between his fingers. He sank slowly to the ground. After a brief struggle, he lay dead.

I slowly turned the pistol on Beverly Anderson. Her eyes grew wide. “What are you doing?”

“I also accepted his money.”

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