

Sudden Death

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Cover image of a bloody sink modified from original by Gaelx, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE RANCID SMELL met me at the door. I hurried to the bedroom window and slammed it shut. I didn't know what Felix and Jessie, my neighbors, were cooking this time, but it smelled like road kill. Messy road kill. I resolved to ask them, yet again, to at least have the decency to cook these things in the kitchen and not on their balcony where the rest of us had to smell them too. Unfortunately, the odor had already spread through my apartment. Lovely. They must have been using the slow cooker.

I tried spraying air freshener, which helped, and grabbing a beer, which helped even more, then sat down to watch television. A couple of stupid sit-com

re-runs later, I felt more relaxed about the reek. I could still smell it, but I figured that if I went out for dinner it would be gone when I got back. I turned on the kitchen fan, to make sure, then grabbed my wallet and keys from their home at the end of the counter.

I was making a brief but important stop in the bathroom when I realized the smell was not coming from outside. It was coming from my shower.

I would rather not describe what I saw when I opened the shower door, except to say that it was bloody, not entirely intact, and only barely recognizable as Felix. I threw up before I could make it back to the toilet, which must have been the final indignity for poor Felix.

I did manage to get back to the toilet before I was finished emptying my stomach of what seemed like everything I had eaten that week. It took a while, and I was shaky, sweaty, and crying before I was done, bangs clinging to my forehead and tee-shirt to my chest. I reached for my cell phone to tell the police about the poor bastard. Sure, I always hated the rude, insensitive prick, but nobody deserved....

Why was he in my shower?

I set the phone down and forced myself to look again. It was Felix, down to the gold tooth. And next to what remained of him, covered in gore, was my butcher knife – an unmistakable hand-me-down that dated back to World War I.

Everyone knew Felix and I hated each other.

Our shouting matches were legendary in the apartment complex, and the manager had come to talk to me twice about it this year alone. And now Felix was dead in my shower. Not even a sign of a break-in...

Holy crap. This was an open and shut case. Why would overworked, underpaid cops even look for another suspect? Why let a little thing like my innocence keep them from closing the file? Heck, even the forensic team that could prove my innocence might not look hard for what would amount to more work.

Sweat gelled on my chest and face. My neck and shoulders shivered. Chances were entirely too good that Felix's murder meant life in prison for me. Cold certainty swept over me that the cops assigned to my case would be lazy or stupid or crooked or something and I would spend the rest of my life with a bunch of career criminals who would see me as fresh meat.

I panicked. Maybe I had read one too many online tales of police mischief. Maybe I had heard one too many stories about innocent citizens languishing in prison for twenty years before DNA evidence cleared them. Maybe I should just have had more faith in our criminal justice system. But I panicked.

I don't really remember the next hour. I know I threw some clothes in a bag with all the cash I could find in the apartment and ran like I was alone in the woods and heard the opening notes of 'dueling banjos.' Only freeway traffic kept me near the speed limit as I

fled the Bay Area.

Somewhere outside of Sacramento I had to stop to buy gas, maybe a hundred miles or so from my apartment on the Peninsula. The chain gas station was bright, shiny and way too exposed for my taste in the fading, late spring sunlight, but I saw no better alternative. I had enough together to stop myself from paying outside at the pump, in case the cops started tracking my bank transactions. I would have to go into the little convenience mart and pay cash.

I took a deep breath, forced a smile on my face and pretended to dig through my pockets as an excuse to look away from the likely security camera. I pushed through the glass door and wrinkled my nose at the smell of old, wet hot dogs.

"You all right there, buddy?" asked the clerk, a career attendant by the look of him, probably twenty years on the job.

"Bad day," I said, handing him two twenties and shifting uncomfortably at the thought of twenty years. "Number six, please."

"Sure thing." He stared at my trembling hand a moment before taking the moist bills. "We have some nice restaurants around here. Millie's Diner is just across the street there."

My body rebelled at the thought of food, but I had not eaten in eight or nine hours. I compromised and ordered something not quite food that he had heating behind the counter. The attendant sighed,

but without another word gave me two foil-wrapped things and the largest caffeinated soda they served.

I retreated to my Subaru and choked down the food while the gas pumped. Grease, salt, and blech left a bad taste in my mouth. As I threw out the wrappers, I checked around for the nearest bank. Whatever cash I had grabbed in my apartment would not last long. When the pump clicked done I hung it up, my tank not quite full, but close enough for now. I had to get moving.

I drove down the block to an ATM. I withdrew my cash limit, then realized what I'd done and banged my head against the wall next to the machine. Scanning the area as though expecting a SWAT team, I scrambled back to my car and slammed myself inside. I tossed the cash onto my passenger seat and cut up the card with my pocket knife to keep myself from doing something that stupid again.

I slumped in the driver's seat, crying. I wanted to curl up in a ball and hide. I wanted someone to tell me that everything was going to be all right. I pinched myself twice, hard, to see if I could wake up. Nothing helped.

I had to go someplace. I had friends in Reno and L.A. I was near Sacramento because I had been subconsciously heading for John's place out in Reno. What could I say to him, though? "Hi, John, can you and Kate spare some crash space for a few days? I'm on the run for murder. Oh, I didn't do it though, so it's

okay, right?"

That image got me my first laugh in hours, hysterical though it may have sounded, but in the moment of quiet that followed I pulled out my wallet to put away my ill-advised cash. Already the wallet held the remaining bills I picked up in my apartment: two ones, a five, a twenty, and five one hundred dollar bills.

Fear built a summer home in my sinus cavity, pressed against that spot between my eyes. Five hundred dollar bills? I never kept more than a hundred dollars cash in my apartment, even around the holidays.

I gingerly double-checked my wallet, looking for anything else unexpected as though defusing a bomb.

I counted the hundreds twice and got the same number both times. I almost threw them out the window. They had to have been left by Felix's murderer. That thought brought back the vivid image of Felix's remains and I barely got the door open in time to re-decorate the parking lot with my 'dinner.' My stomach burbled and trembled, but I had bigger problems. I was carrying blood money, blood money I had been getting my fingerprints all over. I had fled the scene of a brutal murder in my own shower, apparently done with my own kitchen knife, and I had five hundred dollars in unexplained cash in my wallet. I needed somewhere to stop and think.

I started the car, pulled onto the freeway, and

backtracked for half an hour, trying to throw off potential pursuit. I stopped at some generic motel, signed a fake name and paid cash, using ATM money. The clerk gave me the key to an end room on the second floor, facing the parking lot, number 247.

My room looked clean, if shabby, and it smelled of rose-scented disinfectant. As soon as I had the door locked behind me and the curtains drawn I threw the suspicious money on the bed and stared as though I could will answers out of it. Unfortunately, money does not have much to say for itself, no matter how many people say it talks.

The hundreds looked innocent to my untrained eye. They were not crisp and clean, but they were not soiled. The serial numbers were not sequential. Two of the bills were three years old and three of them were two years old. I tried to think of significance for that for a few minutes; I stopped myself before I felt the urge to make a tinfoil hat.

I could not find any distinguishing marks on them either: no small pen tics, no Where's George stamp, nothing. I don't know how long I kept at it before exhaustion took its toll.

I slept about as well as you might expect, but I actually felt a little better when I awoke, at 12:23 according to the red digits of the cheap alarm clock. I might have felt cheered that I was hungry. I know I had started to think that I would never be able to face food again. But before I could set foot outside,

I had to get myself together. I couldn't afford to go around looking like a man on the run. So I stepped into the bathroom, checked the shower-tub (empty) and used the toilet. I washed up in the sink, one eye on the shower-tub in the mirror (empty). I checked it one last time as I dried my hands (still empty).

When I came back into the main room I found the cash exactly where I left it, half under a crease in the blanket, just so. No new money had been added. A glance around the room turned up no other changes, so I doubted that anyone had snuck into my room. In the quiet of my intense scrutiny I did hear my neighbors arguing in the next room, but I couldn't make out any of the words. As far as I could tell, it had nothing to do with me. Perhaps things were looking up.

I folded the suspect bills in half, intending to hide them in the trunk while I figured out my next move. I stepped out onto the second-floor walkway, and squinted against the noonday sun. No signs of suspicious activity, except my own.

On my way through the parking lot I wondered how the police would react if I went back home and told them what happened. I tried to imagine kind and understanding officers smiling as they explained that this sort of thing happens all the time and that I had nothing to worry about.

Then I opened my trunk.

Instead of my usual jumbled assortment of books, receipts, tools and empty grocery bags, I saw

a lumpy, black plastic garbage bag and an envelope addressed to me. The bag was in a corner, like it had been shifted about by my driving, but the envelope had been taped in place, dead center of the trunk. My name was written on it in the nondescript block letters of a drafter.

I closed the trunk and leaned on it, my head on my folded arms. I wanted to start crying again, but nothing came out. Finally I sighed and opened the trunk. Nothing had changed. I pulled the tape off of the envelope and used it to secure the hundreds into the wheel well. I closed the trunk. I could not bring myself to pick up the envelope or open the bag yet.

I sat on the bumper and stared at the horizon: cars, freeways and open space between me and the mountains. I found the buzz of the vehicles calming. Familiar. Ordinary. I made myself think about the mess in my apartment shower. I hadn't taken a long look, and I never actually touched the remains, such as they were. Perhaps it was a hoax? Some big joke played by visiting fraternity brothers? It would not have been the first death we faked for a joke.

Then I remembered the smell and had to fight to keep my bile down. I was glad I had not yet had breakfast. We may have faked a death or two in college, but we never went so far as to fake that smell.

We never left a sealed envelope, either. Someone had left five hundred dollars in cash in my apartment, my late neighbor in my shower, and now an en-

velope in my trunk. But I had taken my car to work. . . .

A chill started at the base of my spine, swept up my back, crossed my shoulders and settled on my neck, just under my ears. I double-checked my wallet and pockets: no surprises there. I went through the car, starting with the glove compartment and checking every place I could think of until I got to the trunk again: nothing, not in the engine block, not under the seats, not in the drink holders, not in the sun visors, not in the any of the compartments. Just the envelope in the trunk, and whatever was in that bag. There had been no smell in the trunk, or at least nothing more than normal car smells. The bag was first then.

I popped the trunk and untied the bag, but it held only the normal contents of my trunk. Whoever did this didn't even throw out my garbage. No answers here.

I shoved the bag aside and stared at the envelope. It frightened me more than the garbage bag, even more than the cash. A direct message, to me, from the people who killed Felix and left his remains in my shower. But my efforts so far at figuring out anything they didn't want me to know had proven fruitless. It was time to find out what they did want me to know. I puffed out a sigh and picked it up.

I slit carefully through one end with my pocket knife, blew air in to open it, and pulled out a tri-folded piece of ordinary printer paper, the kind we had at my office. I almost thought I had something there, but

then I realized that we bought that paper because it was cheap, so it was probably the same kind used in every office.

My office! It was Friday. I should have arrived at work hours ago. But no one had called? I pulled out my cell phone: dead. I had fallen asleep without charging it. Probably just as well. The cops might track its GPS. I tossed my phone into the trunk and turned my attention back to the letter and envelope.

I glanced inside the envelope and saw a small key, like for a padlock. I dumped it into my hand. The key was stamped with the number twenty-three, but no other marking.

I unfolded the letter, which was written in the same nondescript hand as the envelope.

Dear Mr. Ramirez,

If you found the envelope in your mailbox, you may destroy this one at your leisure. It contains no new information for you. If you did not, do not be concerned. No one else will find it. We will see to that.

I suppose you have a great many questions right now. I know that I would, were I in your position. A letter left for you to find, however, is by its nature not the place to address these questions. So I'm afraid that in place of answers, I must instead ask you this: which is more important, survival or understanding?

Make no mistake, Mr. Ramirez. The

evidence against you is considerable. While it is theoretically possible that extraordinary representation might slide you through the slender gap of reasonable doubt, we both know that you do not possess the resources necessary for such representation, rendering the point moot. Further, even with such support behind you, the court of public opinion would crucify you. The common man, after all, does not concern himself with trivialities such as innocent until proven guilty.

Salvation, freedom, and a new life await you in Southern California. Enclosed is the key to a safety deposit box in a bus terminal at 7610 Woodley Ave, in Van Nuys. Inside you will find a birth certificate, passport, driver's license, checkbook, debit card, and savings account book in a new name. You will also find a rental agreement for an apartment in Malibu. Collect these things and you are a free man. From there you may do whatsoever you choose, and never hear from us again. But, you would never know why all of this has taken place.

Alternatively, you may come to room 207 in the Holiday Inn Express in Medford, Oregon, where you will find answers. I guarantee nothing else about this path, except that the police will not be waiting for you, nor will you have another opportunity to change paths.

We await your decision. Note however, that if you do not arrive at either location by Sunday morning, we will assume that you have chosen a third option of your own, and close the two we have offered.

Best of luck to you.

The letter, of course, was unsigned. I looked again at the safety deposit key, but it remained a mystery. Was this really it? Felix was dead, slaughtered mercilessly, and I was set up to take the fall to make me quit my IT job and take an apartment by the beach?

I read the letter again. 'We await your decision.' So, more than one person was involved. I slammed my fist down on the trunk in frustration. Speculation would get me nowhere. The letter could be completely true or utterly false, and I had no way of knowing.

What I did know was pretty simple. As far as I could tell, Felix had been murdered and I was set up to take the blame by persons unknown. I could not be sure that more than one person was involved, but it seemed that one person would have been hard pressed to get everything done.

All of this, according to the letter, was done to get me to make some kind of stupid choice: go here or go there. Obviously they wanted me to go to Medford. A stubborn streak made me want to go to Van Nuys, just to spite them. I liked Malibu, but if I went that route I would never be able to forget that Felix had been murdered for my life. My *new* life: old friends

gone, old connections gone, and daily reminders that my world had been turned over by strangers, and I would never know why.

I closed the trunk and leaned back against it, key, envelope and letter in my hand. I stared at the high, pale sky. None of this was my fault. I did not kill Felix, even if the police thought otherwise. And with money and a passport I could....

I read the letter again: 'Inside you will find a birth certificate, passport, driver's license, checkbook, debit card and savings account book in a new name...' That was a lot of ID to fake, especially photo ID.

Photo ID? They claimed to have forged a passport and driver's license for me under a new name, and presumably a new social security number. If this offer was real, and another chill told me I believed it, then the setup had to involve multiple people with resources and time. This was no idle, impulsive act.

I ducked down, suddenly aware of how exposed and visible I was, standing in a half-empty motel parking lot two blocks from the freeway. I huddled my arms tight around my knees, my back still against the bumper of my Subaru and the paper crumpling in my hand. For all I knew they had been following me and were watching. I could feel my shirt and hair dampen from sudden sweat.

Time to get moving. I got back in my car and forced my breathing to slow down. Paranoia, however justified, would not help right now. Whatever these

people wanted from me, they were either giving me a real choice or setting me up. If they were setting me up, they had me where they wanted me. They had clearly done this sort of thing before and I was out of my league. Better to act from the assumption that I had a real choice.

Some people would call this no choice at all, and then go with the option that felt most important to them: safety or answers. I saw the choice though. Maybe I did not ask for any of this, but that no longer mattered. These persons unknown may have selected the game and set the rules, but my decision was still mine. I had power to act now, not just to react, and that understanding helped calm me.

I knew what I wanted: answers. I was going to Medford.

This left me with only one question: where the hell was Medford, Oregon?