

Dumped in

VEGAS

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE



SHEILA STREHLE

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Dedicated to my mother, Anne Walker.

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*And to my dear daughter, Quinn,
who inspires me daily.*

CHAPTER ONE

My doctor described my life just right last week. He pushed thick reading glasses up his strong nose and glanced down at his iPad. He gave me the results of my bloodwork, part of a routine physical.

“Beau, your LDL is a bit too high but your HDL looks good.” He grinned at me. He was probably the best looking 50-something doctor in Las Vegas. He was tall and fit with short salt-and-pepper hair, blue eyes, and a great smile. Not that I was looking for a hot doctor or anyone else.

I took in the words, seeing myself in the mirror behind his head. Unlike Dr. Hot, I couldn’t transcend the harsh fluorescent lighting. The white office walls blurred my pale skin and shoulder-length blonde hair. My eyes were normally a deep blue. Here, they peeked out of the white wall like two orbs the color of a rain-filled storm cloud. My long, thin legs dangled from my perch on the examination table. They felt awkward, like the limbs of a middle schooler growing too fast.

I thought about the diagnosis my doctor said was “nothing to worry about.” The bad cholesterol was a little too high, but there was still a lot of the good cholesterol in me. Not unlike my life.

There’s a lot of good going on. I’m doing my dream job and it’s going well. I have an Emmy Award and respect of my

co-workers. Life's okay on the social front, too. I have two best friends. Toni Stewart and Tommy Papacci are true friends. We stick through anything. Sunny times or muck, it doesn't matter. I also have a loving, if imperfect, family.

Now for the bad. My dad died. It isn't recent but sometimes it feels that way. Sometimes I'm going along having a peachy kind of day and then it hits me. The drapes close and my thoughts get dark and my heart hurts in a way I can't describe.

My dad was Capt. Bill Knox. He was gone a lot when I was a kid, but he made up for it when he was home. He took great care to spend time with me, have fun with me and teach me things. Mostly, he taught me to be my own person. To be "authentic" as he put it. Being a hotshot pilot in the Air Force took him many places, but he always came home. Until I was eight, and the Gulf War claimed him. Life changed the moment my mother told me. The notion of risk suddenly seeped into my invincible childhood. The possibility of dreams turned to the possibility of loss.

After a tough few years and lots of therapy, room opened up inside my head. I could entertain dreams again. Still, a strong anxiety about losing people has stayed with me.

Today at age 28, I still worry about loss, but I don't let it stop me from caring for my friends. Falling in love is another matter, and one I've managed to avoid.

Unfortunately, on this day, there was something I couldn't avoid—the tiny dog humping my left leg. I looked down at the tuxedo-clad creature pumping away on my calf. It was focused, ignoring me and one of its four siblings who was urinating nearby on the sequined shoe of an Elvis mannequin. The King's frozen smile gave no hint of the blemish on his southern extremity. I looked across the red-carpeted hall to see the other three dogs attacking Tommy. I couldn't tell if their miniature claws

were aiming for my photographer's jewels or the video camera he held in a death grip.

One of two things was about to happen in the Burnin' Love Wedding Chapel. Tommy and I would get this ridiculous story in the can or these animals were heading for a Graceland afterlife.

"Yo, Knox! Get these mutts off my camera!" Tommy shook back a thick lock of wavy, dark brown hair. He raised his video camera high over his head. "Use your stun gun!"

"It's pepper spray and it's in the news rig. I've got my own problems." I kicked out hard and finally dislodged the small fur bundle. It slid across the hall like a hairy bowling ball and knocked one of his litter off Tommy's left calf.

"That's the spirit, Knox!" Tommy managed one of his wide grins, showing pearly whites. He shot a determined look at me. "Okay. You grab the last two Totos down here and—"

"Hey! These sweeties are French Papillon. Toto in the *Wizard of Oz* was a Cairn Terrier for God's sake!" The 40-something bride had just emerged from the chapel's inner chamber. Her gold lame' heels put her at about my barefoot height, five feet, eight inches. A loose yellow gown reminiscent of a 1980's high school prom hung from her thin figure. Her bleached blonde hair was caught up in a loose bun that accentuated her sharply oval face and thick makeup. She was on the arm of a 50-something potbellied man with a thinning brown comb-over and shabby gray suit. The dogs, stuffed into tiny black tuxedos, were better dressed. The bride hurried over to Tommy and snatched up two dogs with her bejeweled pink fingernails. The other three scampered over to the woman, tongues wagging. Their dog faces tilted upward toward hers in adoration.

I mustered a smile, pushing a section of blonde hair behind

my ear. “Hello. I’m Beau Knox, KKNV Action News 9 here in Las Vegas. This guy with the camera is Tommy Papacci. Nice to meet you.” I stuck out my hand, glancing from their faces to the small tuxedos gathered at the bride’s feet. I hoped the proximity of my legs wouldn’t inspire another hump fest.

The blonde woman shook my hand, followed by her groom, whose grasp lingered a bit too long. His eyes swept me up and down, further vindicating my views about marriage.

“Beau? That’s uh, an interesting name.” The bride’s comment wasn’t the first I’d heard. Usually, people asked me why I have a boy’s name. I got the impression they expected a Beau to be somebody’s squeeze or a Deep South athlete or a cigar-smoking good old boy.

“I’m named after my grandfather.” I hoped she wouldn’t press for details. Beau is short for Beaugard. I’m named after the late Lieutenant Colonel Beaugard Knox, a decorated Air Force veteran who was my dad’s dad. The Colonel died on a classified mission before I was born. He’d passed down his name to me and his military legacy to my father. I was an Air Force brat at birth, moving around to bases in and outside the US until we’d settled in Las Vegas right before my dad was killed.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to tell the story of my name. We made more small talk with the bride and groom. Tommy and I then had a quick chat with the chapel manager, a short, skinny man wearing a baby blue tuxedo and black toupee. He explained the process to come. Tommy listened carefully, making mental notes about what to videotape.

We eventually proceeded into the main part of the chapel. The space was an almost completely white rectangle: white walls, ten-foot white ceiling, white carpet, white pews, white altar, white roses. There were framed black and white photos of

Elvis on the walls. The only color was a large painting of the iconic singer wearing post-weight-gain sideburns and white sequined Vegas costume against a sky blue background. The gold leaf framed portrait occupied a huge swath of real estate behind the altar. The depiction invoked the illusion of Elvis Presley, Royal-Justice-of-the-Peace-slash-Undertaker. The room more resembled the late singer's crypt than a hopeful place for couples to start their lives together.

Tommy started setting up his camera and tripod near the altar. I mentally prepared interview questions for the couple. Like how long they'd dated, why they had a five dog wedding party and when they thought the groom's infidelity would result in divorce proceedings. I swallowed the last question along with my irritation at having to cover this lame story.

I was an investigative reporter for the number one rated television newscast in Las Vegas. I had no business wasting my time on fluff like this. I'd argued about the assignment without success an hour before.

"I need a kicker tonight, Beau." My managing editor, Sean Steeple, had turned his six-foot, lean frame and stubborn, gray-eyed gaze my way. Sean's spiky, dark blonde hair framed a deceptively boyish appearance. It was a sharp contrast to his 48 years and ferocious pursuit of the news.

I'd tried to appeal to his news ethic by arguing that the kicker—a fun story at the end of a newscast—didn't warrant a full blown report.

"Come on Sean, this is another Vegas circus act. A bunch of dogs at an Elvis chapel? You can just get some video and have the anchors do a voice-over. Better yet, why not grab a feature story off the network feed?" My assertions had made no impression on my immovable managing editor. Tommy had witnessed the dispute and grabbed my arm to drag me out the

door before I got myself in trouble.

Sighing, I reminded myself to get through the wedding ordeal as quickly as possible. We had to be done by 10 a.m. to pursue another, much more critical mission. My fists clenched just thinking about it. Fortunately, the bride and groom were early risers and wanted to be married at this unwedding-like hour. I would soon be free with the rest of the day to chase real news.

###

I expected my interview with the Southern California couple to recount happy devotion to each other and the dogs but got something else entirely. An emotional dam burst forth when I asked the bride why it was important that the dogs be part of the wedding. It was an open-ended question, an important strategy for obtaining good sound bites. It allowed the interview subject to elaborate and share feelings.

The bride revealed her dogs were the only reason she survived a painful breakup. The groom shifted uncomfortably as his wife-to-be described her devastation when she caught her former boyfriend in bed with her cousin two years ago. Tears flowed, smudging her mascara and blush, and she exited the chapel with her groom to pull herself together. I felt an illogical pang of guilt since my interview had brought her to tears. I had certainly not encouraged the reaction.

“Make brides cry much?” Tommy looked at me slyly as he rearranged his gear. I turned to him, speaking in a low voice. “Hurry and let’s get the hell out of here as soon as possible.”

Tommy responded with raised eyebrows. “I gotta get the wedding, Beau. It’s the story, babe.” His hazel eyes twinkled. “It might be the only time you witness this ritual.”

“God, I hope so.” I headed into the small chapel bathroom, passing the newly powdered bride as she exited. It would be a few minutes before the ceremony was underway. Staring at my blue eyes in the bathroom mirror, I thought about the upcoming vows and my stomach lurched a little. In fact, I could see perspiration beading on my forehead! The thought of marriage actually made me break into a cold sweat.

I didn’t want to care that much about someone, then lose him. I’d invested my whole heart in my dad and he left. I know he didn’t intend to, but he did. Moving around military bases and schools hadn’t helped in my early years either. Just when I’d make friends, it was time to leave. I’d be damned if I would give my heart to some guy only to say goodbye or worse, not even have the chance to say goodbye.

My career fills the void in my personal life. The news is my first and only love. It offers the thrill of the chase without the risk of personal heartache. And it’s reliable. There’s no danger I’ll turn on the TV one morning and see an anchor with a blank stare say, “Sorry. Nothing to report today.” Homicides, accidents, political scandals and bad weather can be counted on. They’re always around, and they’re my True Blues, my Steady Eddies.

An explanation is in order. I sometimes adopt the vernacular of a 1960’s sitcom. The shameful truth is, I enjoy watching retro shows like that. They tell a time of family life where the biggest risk is Mom forgets the dinner rolls in the oven, or maybe you’re going to get a C in Chemistry. I like those odds. Beats the hell out of dying when your classmate shows up with an AK-47 or your parent dies in some global conflict over oil.

So I’m a loner who isn’t actually alone. I’ve got my work and my friends, and occasionally a family dinner in the Las Vegas suburb of Henderson. There is no boyfriend in the

picture, no fiancé, no spouse - by my own choice. At the end of a busy day, I'm happy to sink down onto my comfy brown couch in my small apartment and watch *Leave it to Beaver*. During rare weekends, Toni and I go hiking. It makes me feel alive in a way nothing else does. Chasing a good story inspires passion, but hiking is serene. The world makes the most sense when I'm climbing a desert sandstone hill or walking a wooded trail. I can feel the truth of life there, hear the sounds that explain it.

A knock on the door reminded me I was not in my serene place. I was in the marriage capital of the world. I heard the muffled voice of the chapel manager through the door. "Ms. Knox, we are starting."

I was due at a wedding. Thank God it wasn't my own.

###

I manned up and endured the knot-tying, all ten minutes of it. It was followed by a late arriving Elvis impersonator singing "You Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog." The chapel manager threw crushed dog biscuit confetti around the exiting couple. The dogs stayed behind to lick the floor clean. This inspired my thought about a call to the public health department. A health violation could turn the story into real (and even more bizarre) news. Unfortunately, it would require staying at the chapel and, well, it would be mean.

Tommy and I wished the bride and groom well, agreed to the chapel manager's request for a copy of the edited story and exited to the small asphalt parking lot. We headed for the white Ford Explorer with its garish Action News 9 logo splashed across the sides. The black and red paint resembled road kill, but I was proud to be seen in that vehicle.

I'd been lucky to score an internship at KKNV-TV my senior year at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I was majoring in journalism and writing for the UNLV newspaper. My award-winning story about discrimination against Arab-American students caught the attention of local media including KKNV.

On the eve of finishing my degree and my internship, the station offered me a reporting job. It was highly unusual given my lack of professional experience. News Director Garrett Greenway saw something in me. "You're cocky and clueless, Beau, but you've got potential."

Six years later, I'm not the best yet but I'm breaking stories and collecting an extensive array of information sources. I have cops, firefighters, prosecutors, politicians, government employees, casino staffers and even a couple of bookies in my cache. I'm gaining newsroom clout, assigning myself stories most days (notwithstanding today) and scooping the competition.

I'm making my mark in a prolific news town. Good, bad or ugly, Las Vegas is a hotbed of breaking stories. America's Most Wanted suspects are found trolling casinos or holing up in seedy off-Strip motels. Movie stars jam exclusive nightclubs, making tabloid headlines for drunken revelry or public displays of affection. The politics are sometimes sleazy and the environs an occasional graveyard for victims of homicide. Every couple of years, a corpse shows up in the surrounding desert or washes up on the shores of manmade Lake Mead. The city attracts risk-takers and oddsmakers, people with mysterious backgrounds and sometimes questionable ethics. Las Vegas is a reporter's dream. It's not always a dream shared by the many residents who also make this city their home. They are the people who don't show up in the headlines. They work hard and raise families (children are a full quarter of the population). They support the many schools, churches and cultural events

around the city. As a local, I sometimes feel guilty. My reporting often paints an incomplete picture of my home turf.

Early in my career, a KKNV newsroom veteran explained the macabre reality. “News isn’t ordinary—it’s extraordinary, Beau. Nobody wants to hear about a mother helping her kid with homework, or a father taking his child to the library or a guy flipping burgers to take care of his family. Now if the guy flipping burgers pulls out a Glock and mows down his co-workers, that’s a story.”

Sensationalism and all, I’m madly in love with the news business, no matter how flawed it is.

Tommy started loading his gear when we reached the Ford Explorer. I waited a few moments for him to finish. Closing my eyes, I let early March sunshine fortify me for the mission to come. The upcoming scene came into focus.

We walk up to the office building, camera rolling. The woman parks and gets out, walking toward the entrance. I appear, stick the microphone in her face and start grilling. “Who are you? How long did you think you’d get away with it? Have you considered going to AA—clearly you’re an alcoholic” and so forth. She’d hurry inside, slamming the door in my face. I’d keep knocking until she opened the door again. We’d repeat the hostile dance until she broke down, confessing everything. Then I’d repeat her heinous crime on camera as she begged me to forgive her. “Please,” she’d say. “I’m so sorry, Ms. Knox.” When she’d realized fully what an awful thing she’d done, I’d turn to Tommy sweetly. “You can erase the video.” She would look relieved, thank me profusely, promise never to do it again. I’d look at her severely, turn to walk away and throw a parting shot over my shoulder. “You’d better not. Next time you’ll lead the 5 o’clock news.”

Thumping sounds from inside the news vehicle interrupted the fantasy. I opened the passenger side door and Bon Jovi blasted out of the Explorer, loud enough to turn heads on the

sidewalk. Tommy was already behind the wheel.

“So, Knox! Do ya feel any different?”

I turned down the assaulting decibels, frowning. “About what?”

Tommy leaned over, his face inches from mine. “You know, you just saw a wedding up close and personal. Did it change your mind about the M-word, as you say?”

I attempted to thump his forehead but he dodged my digits, laughing. “Maybe you have a phobia, Knox. ‘The Idonwan-nagettahitched Syndrome!’” My photographer’s smug grin was full wattage. If he wasn’t such a smartass, Tommy Papacci would be something to look at. Close to six feet tall and fit, his wavy, dark brown hair framed hazel eyes that twinkled mischievously. “Walking the dark streets of Vegas,” as he liked to say, he carried his video camera with thinly-disguised pride. Tommy was 29 and a native New Yorker of Italian descent. He was raised in the Bronx and never hesitated to demonstrate his East Coast swagger. At about five minutes to five each evening, his booming voice cut through edit suites filled with sweating, on-deadline news video editors. His robust announcement, “It’s in the can!” signaled *he* had finished *his* story. Too bad if you were still up against it.

“Let’s focus, Tommy Tom. The Canine Wedding from Hell is old news.”

“It’ll be five o’clock news tonight, babe. Hey, maybe Sean’ll make you do a live shot from the chapel!”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s no way some sad couple committing to indentured servitude is worthy of a damn live shot, obnoxious pets or not! Who wants to belabor that?”

Tommy shook his head, smiling. He didn’t get my fear of marriage. He came from a robust family tree, although his immediate family was small—just his mother and an older

brother. His father, a New York City firefighter, died in a factory fire when Tommy was only 16. He didn't seem to carry the same emotional baggage I did though. Unlike me, Tommy had a huge extended family with dozens of cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. His uncles had filled in after his dad's death, taking Tommy and his brother fishing, coaching their Little League teams and telling them the facts of life. In Tommy's family, people took care of each other through the good and bad times. Like when an aunt and uncle would have a big fight and break up temporarily or a kid would run away or occasionally someone would go to jail for failure to pay parking tickets. Tommy couldn't understand the latter. He was a master of successful illegal parking, a skill that came in handy in the news business.

"So what's the plan this morning, Knox?"

I began to relate the dramatic confrontation just as I had imagined it a couple of minutes ago.

Tommy's laughter cut me off. "Geez, Knox. That'll never work." He wiped coffee dribble from his chin.

"Why the hell not?"

Tommy turned, sizing me up like a prospective buyer in a used car lot. "You're serious?" He didn't wait for my response. "Knox, she's not going to show up. Why would she? She threw him a line in a bar Saturday night to close the deal, know what I mean?" He smiled lasciviously.

"To close the deal?! You impersonate a television reporter to get respect, admiration. You don't do it to . . . you know."

Tommy looked at me expectantly, waiting for the wheels in my brain to finally start turning.

I didn't want to admit he was right but, well, he was. "Damn." I looked out the passenger side window toward Las Vegas Boulevard. Spring sunshine glinted off cars speeding

south toward the mega-resorts on The Strip or north toward Fremont Street and the historic casinos.

Like the lure of a triple 7 jackpot, my anger had blinded me to reality. My imposter would never be caught this easily. I only found out about her when a guy called me at the station to confirm my interview with him. After explaining I didn't have an appointment with him, I launched into third degree. I learned my imposter had flirted with him at the bar the previous weekend. She'd asked him about his job and said she was me. She even had phony business cards! He pitched a story to her about some silly product his company was launching. She agreed to interview him this morning.

It was truly insulting. I would never have gone after a lame story like that.

"Are you sure it wasn't you?" The salesman questioned me. "Sure looked like you—and you *were* pretty drunk Saturday night."

The guy tested my patience. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't me, seeing as *I wasn't there*." I didn't tell him I spent my exciting Saturday night curled up on the couch watching re-runs of *I Dream of Jeannie*, stuffing my face from a giant bowl of popcorn.

The salesman also mentioned my imposter had apparently been hawking her routine in bars across the city. How he knew this, I could only guess. The existence of a lounge lizard underground in Sin City wasn't a stretch.

"Unit 2, what's your 20?" The radio in the center of the Explorer floor crackled, reminding me where I was, and that I had no hope of a "come to Jesus" with the blonde identity thief.

Tommy was looking at me, waiting for my capitulation. I nodded, and he grabbed the handheld. "We're north of the Strip." He barked into the device.

“Call me on cell.” Matilda Burson, our assignment editor, cut out abruptly.

Fishing my battered cell out of my bag, I saw it was turned off, something I had no recollection of doing. I hit the on button and the number for the confidential newsroom hotline.

“What’s up?”

Matilda’s hacking assaulted my ear. When the coughing fit was under control, she greeted me in smoker’s baritone. “Sorry about that, Knox.” Another cough, then, “Got a 419 at the dump.”

“What’s the story?” Tommy watched me straighten up, recognizing the signal for a hot one. He leaned over automatically, his signal to me.

I put my hand over the receiver. “Dead body at the dump.” Removing my hand, I spoke into the phone. “Hang on, Matilda, I’m putting you on speaker phone.” Pressing the button, I caught the last part of Matilda’s hastily imparted sentence.

“. . . just you and Tommy?”

I sighed, understanding the half-silenced question. Matilda was entirely too nervous to be in the news business. “Yes, Matilda. It’s just me and Tommy. You can give us the skinny.”

“The skinny? Knox, you’re so retro. Okay. Here’s the deal. Sanitation worker empties his truck into the pit at the dump, and there’s a dead guy there in the trash load.”

“When?” Tommy and I asked simultaneously, smiling at our jinx moment.

“Hour ago. Knox, your hottie called it in—said he couldn’t get you on the cell.” Matilda suppressed another cough.

“Well-well-well! Loverboy strikes again.” There was no sense punching Tommy. His regression to a 12-year-old boy would persist at least through the next shift.

I ignored him, launching on Matilda. “What else did he say?”

Tommy jumped in again. “Did he ask if Beau would meet him for a beer at the dump?”

This time, I jammed my elbow into Tommy’s ribcage, eliciting a yelp and a guffaw.

Matilda ignored the familiar bickering. “He said nobody saw the body until the bulldozer in the garbage pit hit it.”

“Ouch!” Tommy’s east coast bellow filled the Explorer.

“He was probably feeling no pain by then.” Matilda continued matter-of-factly. “They’re working on an ID. Homicide’s already there. How far out are you?”

Turning off speaker mode, I turned to Tommy. “What—fifteen?” He nodded. I put the phone to my ear. “Fifteen minutes, Matilda.”

“Get going, Knox. Noon show’s looking for a live shot.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Clark County garbage dump was a sharp contrast to Las Vegas Strip neon. Its concrete and metal expanse painted dull color on a plain, industrial lot outside the city's clean, stuccoed neighborhoods. Large trucks coated with southern Nevada dust moved about in regimented lines, filled with the trash of the city's million residents and throngs of tourists.

Uncharacteristically, Tommy drove slowly as he neared the main entrance staffed by a sour-faced woman in a blue sanitation worker uniform.

"Good morning!" Tommy flashed his white teeth, all Bronx charm. "How are you this lovely sunny day?"

The gatekeeper looked down from her windowless frame and smiled—slightly. "Let me guess. You're here to see the worm bait in the pit."

"Now that you mentioned it, yes, dear lady. That is exactly why we are here." Tommy's grin grew wider. I wondered if his rapid blinking was intended to be the male equivalent of batting his eyelashes. It came across as a cry for lithium.

"I can't let you in there. Cops have the place sealed off." Sour face was back.

It was my turn. "We understand ma'am, of course. I just wonder if you wouldn't mind if we pulled over and parked so I can get in touch with the incident commander on my cell. I'd

hate for us to block the entrance here—just in case your folks need to get in and out.” My most accommodating facial expression acknowledged her power in the situation.

She hesitated, scratching her rouged cheek with a chipped burgundy-colored fingernail. “Well . . .” An old fashioned ring tone blared in her wooden cage. I could hear her harrumph as she answered testily. “Devereaux. Whadaya need . . . uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . Yep, they’re here. . . . All right.” She hung up and addressed only Tommy, whose smile teetered between severe, fearful and insane.

“You can go in. Park by the haz waste trailer.”

“Why, thank you ma’am. Thank youse so much.” I pinched Tommy’s elbow as he nodded his goodbye. “Ow! What is it with you, Knox? You’re not happy unless you’re hurtin’ someone.” His eyes twinkling, he gunned the engine, snapping my head back.

We parked and walked to the transfer pit. Most of Las Vegas called this place a garbage dump but it was a misnomer. This place was really just a way station. It was here that trucks dumped the trash, which was forced into an enormous chamber where it was squashed into mammoth cubes. The cubes were loaded for transport to a landfill in the desert, an hour’s drive, north of the city. The large, grayish building wasn’t much to look at. A faint odor of spoiled food and diesel filled my nostrils as I got closer.

I could see the detectives questioning a uniformed employee. He was a pale man of small stature, wearing a somewhat shell-shocked expression as he gestured with his arms. I’d bet he was the unfortunate bulldozer operator who had discovered the body. As I entered the structure, the man nodded, tipped his baseball cap to the police and left. Turning around, Hastin Gahjee (or “Hottie” as the women in the newsroom called him)

and his partner, Bill Jenkins, glanced in my direction.

Hastin's nickname was just right. He looked like steak in a world of hamburger. He was 30-something, muscular and tall—I guessed at least six feet, six inches. His skin was the color of white and milk chocolate combined, his deep tan blending with thick, short black hair and eyes dark as night. Handsome no matter what his expression, I remembered his smile. I'd only seen it once or twice (and not at this moment) but it completely transformed his face, beautiful straight white teeth the whipped cream of a most delectable dessert. I shook my head, clearing out the food metaphors. I suddenly felt very hungry, but not in the dietary sense.

Tie loosened and requisite suit coat, absent cop partner, Bill Jenkins still sweat profusely in the morning upper-seventies. His short-sleeved button down hugged his middle-aged love handles. Jenkins stood at least half a foot shorter than Hastin. I could see sweat beading on his scalp through his thinning salt-and-pepper crew cut. Hastin, still fully clothed, never seemed overcome by the Las Vegas heat—not even the brutal summers here made him break a sweat. Perhaps his Navajo genes had imparted immunity.

“Knox, so nice of you to join our little party.” Jenkins' usual smartass demeanor was second only to Tommy's. “Aren't you a little late?”

“Jenkins, do you see any other media around?” I shot him a challenging glare. “Didn't think so. Guess that means I'm early.”

“If I didn't know better, I'd say you were tipped off.” Jenkins turned raised eyebrows toward his partner. Hastin suddenly began taking copious notes about—something.

I had met Hastin a year ago on another homicide scene. The case had turned out to be quite gruesome. A Las Vegas call

girl had been carved up and dumped in an alley off the Strip. I'd been first on the scene, and had a description of the suspect on the air within minutes of our arrival, having successfully argued against my executive producer's opinion that the case was "just another seedy murder" that could wait until the five o'clock news. A tip came to the police within an hour, and the brutal low-life was caught. Since then, Hastin had treated me well, tipping me to hot police stories.

After the call girl case, I had done some digging about my handsome police source. Hastin had been a patrol officer on the Phoenix police force until he helped solve a high-profile homicide there two years ago. He had been promoted to sergeant but apparently was more ambitious. The Las Vegas Police hired him a few months later to fill a vacancy in the homicide detective unit. I'd also discovered he'd been a high-ranking official in the Navajo Nation at one time, but had left his post for some reason. An internet search of his name produced my conclusion that it was an altered version of a Navajo spelling: Hastiin Gaagii.

His name is pronounced "HAS-tin GAH-jee." In Navajo, Hastiin means "man" and Gaagii means "raven." Man Raven is a good description for Hastin.

"What have you got?" I looked expectantly at the two detectives.

Still focused on his notepad, Hastin delivered cursory information. "The deceased is a white male, late 20s, found by the bulldozer operator at approximately 8 a.m. after the body was dumped into the pit with a load of trash."

"Okay. How about telling me something I don't know?" You treat some sources gently. Some not. These guys were the latter.

Hastin continued staring at his notes, offering an off-hand

comment. “No cause of death—no obvious trauma to the body beyond the bulldozer impacts.”

“I.D?” I asked impatiently.

Hastin looked up from his notes then. I noticed Jenkins looked sharply at his partner.

“No official identification yet.” Hastin appeared stoic, glancing down at me, his eyes leaving my face to scan me quick as a military paramedic on a battlefield—and just as grimly, I noted.

Just then Tommy approached, his High Definition camera heavy on his shoulder. I reached out automatically to grab the tripod in his hand, which Tommy held in an iron grip.

“Give me the sticks, Tommy Tom.” I smiled sweetly.

“No way, Knox. I prefer to protect my appendages.” He grinned wickedly, jerking his arm away.

“You’re such a freak.” I turned to the detectives. “I try to be nice and see what it gets me?”

Jenkins was unsympathetic. “Somehow I think you earned that reaction, Knox.”

“THANK YOU!” Tommy clapped Jenkins on the back, accidentally stabbing him with the butt of the heavy tripod. Jenkins glared at him. I’d only seen the exchange in my peripheral vision. I was watching Hastin. He was holding back, and I knew it. And he knew I knew it. I had to get him away from Jenkins if I was going to hear whatever it was.

“We’ll be back in a minute. I thought I saw something hinky over there.” Tommy had his arm around Jenkins’ shoulder, walking him toward the hazardous waste shed. Looking back, he winked at me. Sometimes, Tommy was all right.

I knew time was limited so I shifted to stand directly in front of Hastin. “Okay, what are you holding back?”

Hastin appeared flustered suddenly. And was he . . . blushing?

It was hard to tell beneath his dark complexion, but I could swear he was slightly crimson. Weird.

“Come over here.” Hastin took my arm, directing me to the pit. Several feet below, the body lay uncovered on its back. A crime scene investigator snapped photos nearby, moving gingerly on a precarious wooden platform over the trash. It was the only way to avoid being swallowed by the mountain of garbage.

“How good is your eyesight?” Hastin still stared at the macabre scene below.

“20/15 each eye, 20/20 together.” I’d had Lasik eye surgery five years before to correct near-sightedness. I knew precisely what my vision was.

Hastin glanced at me quizzically for a moment, then looked back at the pit. “Take a look at his face.”

I stared, hard. Rigor mortis had set in everywhere, freezing limbs in awkward positions. The facial expression was frozen agony. I wasn’t sure but it looked like white spittle was coming out of both sides of the mouth.

After a moment, recognition hit my gut full force. I drew in a sharp breath.

“Holy crap.” *Breathe in and out, Knox.* I turned to Hastin, who was looking intently at me. “What do you have to do to ID him?”

“He had no ID. That means the Coroner’s got to do it, Beau.”

“I’m going to need to break in live with this.” I was determined to break this story in the next hour, and Hastin knew it was foolish to try to stop me. “Sources close to the case say it was him. Can you live with that?” I looked expectantly at the silent detective, who immediately looked away, apparently in deep thought. “Hastin?” I prodded. Time was passing.

He sighed, staring at the body. “Yes. Okay, Beau.”

“Thanks. Hey I’ve gotta get to the car. Are you going to be around in an hour or so?”

“Yes, but—”

“Come on. You’ve got to help me out here. I’ll only ask you one or two questions. I need you, Hastin.” Looking into his eyes, I could see a white flag.

“All right, but I’m not going to ID him, Beau.”

“Fair enough. Thank you!” I dashed out of the pit area just as Tommy approached, Jenkins laughing by his side. As soon as Jenkins walked away, I grabbed Tommy’s arm, almost knocking him off balance. “We’ve got to get ready for a live shot.”

“That’s not ‘till noon, Knox.” Tommy stumbled as I pulled him around to start heading to the car. “Whoa! Slow down, Beau.” He stopped abruptly, snapping me back, and I crashed into him. Both of us managed to stay upright.

“Okay now. Take a breath and give me the rundown, Beau.” Tommy’s genuine concern confirmed my near hysteria.

I took a deep breath, blew it out. “Tommy, the guy in the pit is Tree Nolan.”

Tommy’s jaw dropped. He searched my face, then scanned the area for signs he was being punked. Seeing none, he put down his camera. “We gotta go live then. NOW.”

“Tell me about it.” I was already dialing the newsroom on cell. Matilda answered. I explained what was up. “If we can get it on the air in the next hour, it’s exclusive. But my source won’t be able to control leaks beyond then. Too many sanitation workers around.”

Before I had finished speaking, I could hear Matilda’s muffled yelling through her palm on the receiver. She came back on, more breathless than usual. “Live unit’s on the way, Knox. We’re going to—hang on a sec.” Matilda’s voice cut off as she

put me on hold. A moment later, a male voice came on.

“Knox, tell me everything.” Sean Steeple’s demand boomed in my ear. My managing editor had little time and less patience.

I related everything I knew, which wasn’t much. Two beats of silence on the other end of the line, then Sean’s authoritative voice. “Let’s do this now. Dan just finished his news break. I’m going to keep him on set. He’ll throw it to you by phone. Stay on the line and be ready in 90.”

“We’re going live by phone in 90 seconds, Tommy.” I looked down at my notes, then thought about something. “Tommy, go grab Hastin. Tell him I need him over here.” I saw the question before he asked. “For the live phoner. Go!”

Tommy took off, jogging toward the garbage pit as I jammed in my ear piece.

“Knox, it’s James. Stand by for a ten countdown.” A moment later, I felt someone standing next to me. I looked at Hastin, who saw my expression and started walking away.

“Wait! You agreed to a live shot in an hour.”

“That’s one hour from now. I haven’t prepared—” Hastin continued to walk away.

I was desperate. “I’ll only ask you one question, and you can tell me you haven’t ID’d him. One question, I promise!” I looked at him desperately as he turned around, frowning at me, and then walked back.

“Ten, nine, eight—” Countdown in my ear, Hastin tugged my sleeve.

“Only one question and I’ll deny knowing anything—okay, Beau?” He looked at me intently.

I nodded. “Three, two . . .”

“That’s right, Dan. This morning at 7:30, a sanitation worker made a gruesome discovery when his bulldozer hit the body as it lay in the garbage pit. Sources close to the case tell me the

victim is Tree Nolan, lead singer of the famously popular Las Vegas rock band called Born Again Twice. The body had been placed in a trash receptacle somewhere in the city. A sanitation worker apparently unknowingly emptied it into his truck and it wound up here at the dump. Las Vegas Police are investigating. Detective Hastin Gahjee is here at the scene with us. Detective Gahjee, can you confirm the victim's identity?" I pushed the phone's mouthpiece to Hastin's mouth—it was our microphone.

"We have no official identification of the victim. The body will be transported to the Coroner's office where the cause of death and the victim's identity will be determined."

I spoke into the phone's mouthpiece again. "Other than injury from the bulldozer's impact, were there any obvious signs of trauma? Any indication of cause of death?"

"There do not appear to be any other obvious signs of trauma to the body. The Coroner will determine cause of death." Hastin's face was stoic.

"Do you know the time of death or whether the victim was dead before being picked up in the garbage truck this morning?"

"I can't comment on that at this time." Hastin's lips were tight, indicating my need to shut up now.

"Has the LVPD been able to isolate which garbage truck picked up the body this morning?"

"I have no information about that at this point."

Five seconds. James' voice sounded through my earpiece.

"Thank you, detective. We're tracking this tragic story and will have a live report for you at noon. Reporting live from the Clark County dump, I'm Beau Knox, Action News 9. Back to you, Dan."

I waited for an all clear in my ear, then turned off the phone and shoved it in my pocket.

“You said one question, Beau. Not four.” Hastin’s irritation was evident.

“Sorry about that. Filling time, you know?” I was staring at my notes, willing more information to appear magically on the reporter’s notebook—enough to fill a minute and a half live shot when our microwave news rig arrived. I considered a more robust apology, looking up only to find Hastin halfway across the gate entry road, heading for his vehicle.

“Your boyfriend’s pissed, Knox.” Tommy shot me a look.

“He’s not my boyfr—” Over Tommy’s head, I could see the detectives’ vehicle backing out of its parking space. Was Hastin really angry? Surely he understood I had to ask questions. It was my job. I’d asked one or two extra but he hadn’t revealed anything anyway. Was he really upset?

I punched Tommy’s arm lightly. “Come on, let’s go. We’ve got to get ready for an on-camera live shot.”

Before my next report, I hashed out the plan with my managing editor. I would stick around for the noon live shot. Sean would dispatch a crew to Tree Nolan’s house. The police had to be searching it by now. There was only one problem. We needed to find the address.

Sean and I started tapping our sources. Apparently, the rock star’s records had been sealed from traditional sources. Rumor was his house was somewhere in the upscale part of southwest Las Vegas, purchased under a shell corporation name. His name didn’t come up in connection with a home purchase any place I surfed on my iPad.

I called six sources, hoping for a lead to Nolan’s residence but with no luck. On the seventh call, I scored. “Hi, Brewskie. It’s Beau Knox.”

“Oh hey, Beau. What’s up?” John Bruster was an employee in the Clark County tax assessor’s office. I met him when I was

doing a story about a property tax increase two years ago. I'd run into him a few times since then at O'Mulland's Pub. There, I saw him justify his nickname. He methodically consumed at least a half dozen microbrews in each sitting, always followed by a quick trip to the parking lot. He'd return with red eyes, a distinctive smell and a supremely mellow demeanor. His title was "associate assessor" but Brewskie viewed his actual job as filing. Responsible for maintaining the county assessor's electronic records, all property transactions eventually came across his desk.

"Did you hear the news? About Tree Nolan?"

"No. What'd he do?" Brewskie crunched something in my ear, maybe a potato chip.

"He died, buddy. I just broke the story. Now I gotta find out where his house is."

More crunching, a pause, then keyboard clicks. "I got nothing on Nolan in the database."

"Yeah, he used some kind of shell firm to purchase the house. Can you search for any corporations owning swanky residential properties in Southwest Las Vegas?"

"Huh. Let's see." More crunching, more keyboard clicks. A full minute and a half later, Brewskie swallowed hard, probably knocking back some of the chewed up potato chips. "Uh, I see something . . . hang on a minute." Another full minute passed before he spoke again. "Beau, I've got a home owner in Spanish Trail under the name Daed Roputs, LLC."

Brewski spelled the name for me. It was incomprehensible, but the address was in the right neighborhood. Spanish Trail was an upscale country club community ten minutes from the Las Vegas Strip. It was an older development but still housed multi-million dollar estates ringed by a jewel of a golf course.

"What's the street name and house number?"

Brewskie provided the street address, confirmed there was no other LLC owner in the area, and hung up.

Tommy and I discussed the findings. “Dude, what the heck is ‘Daed Roputs, LLC?’ My photographer grabbed gum from the console of the Explorer, unwrapped a stick and popped it into his mouth.

I declined his proffered Wrigleys, instead typing into my iPad search engine. “Roputs. Daed Roputs.” After a moment, it was clear there was no internet record of Daed Roputs except the house address Brewskie had given me.

“Anything?” Tommy leaned over toward me, glancing at the now blank iPad screen. I placed the computer on the floor, snatching up my reporter’s skinny notebook. After dismissing the phoenetically similar but also incomprehensible “Dead Robots,” I tried to clear my mind and looked at the words again. I scribbled quickly. “Daed . . . Roputs.” Moving letters, writing in reverse, two words formed on the page. “Stupor Dead. Daed Roputs could be a reverse anagram for Stupor Dead.”

“What’s Stupor Dead?”

I ignored Tommy’s query and picked up the iPad again. I searched on the device. After blowing past a B movie DVD, a drug rehab facility site and a cannabis chat room, I found something. “It’s not Stupor Dead. It’s Dead Stupor! Dead Stupor Records. They’re headquartered in Los Angeles. And guess who their premiere artist is?”

Tommy grinned, nodding. “The world-famous Born Again Twice! How about that?”

I called Sean immediately with the address. At fifteen minutes to noon, more information came in from the crew Sean had dispatched to Nolan’s house. The crew couldn’t get past the security gates of the upscale neighborhood and so had

to rely on eyewitnesses and our news helicopter pilot flying overhead to describe the scene. Several police cars, a S.W.A.T. unit and forensics trucks had surrounded the house. Investigators were coming out with bulging evidence bags but saying nothing.

I got the all-clear from the station after finishing my live report. Over by the garbage pit, I saw the doors close on the Coroner's van, ready to transport the body. Grabbing my bag, I started jogging to the Explorer. Tommy caught up, loading his gear into the vehicle.

Tommy got behind the wheel and fired up the engine. "Where we headed?"

"To the Coroner's office."

Along with hundreds of other reporters who now knew that the most famous rock singer in Las Vegas history had met a bizarre end.

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