

PROMINENT COUPLE SLAIN (A short story from LIGHTING THE DARK SIDE)

Detective Jack Staal glanced up from his double cheeseburger when Penny, his waitress, asked him if he needed anything else. “Nope,” he said, chewing a mouthful.

Penny topped up his coffee before she headed for the kitchen. The eatery had less than twenty tables and was well-known for gourmet burgers at fast-food prices. Encased in Lucite beneath his plate and covering every inch of wall space was a photo collection of Hanson, British Columbia from 1880s black and whites to present-day glossies, chronicling the town’s one-hundred-eighteen-year history.

His phone buzzed in his blazer pocket. “Staal,” he said.

“Yeah, Jack. It’s Barns.” It was Sergeant Maxwell Barns, head of the Major Crime Section of the Hanson Police Service. “Just had a shots fi red called in over on Carnarvon.”

“Oh yeah. Need us to roll?” Staal sat straight in his seat.

“Not yet, just a heads-up. Uniform is checking it out. I’ll let you know.”

Constable Detective Lesley Degarmo returned from the restroom and slid into her seat in front of Staal. Degarmo became Staal’s first female partner when Staal transferred from Vancouver Police Major Crimes. At forty-two, Degarmo was a rarity in the service; a happily married career cop with two kids. Staal was skeptical of her abilities at fi rst; however, he quickly realized she was a good cop and a skilled investigator.

“So, Jack. Is it back to the house for another look at that disgruntled employee list?”

Degarmo referred to a list of former TD bank employees as possible suspects in three heists of Dominion branches.

“Doubt it. Just heard from the boss. Shots fi red on—” His phone interrupted.

“Staal. Get over to 420 Carnarvon. Bothman and Kalan got two not breathing,” Barns ordered.

Staal relayed the information to his partner and placed thirty dollars on the table for the tab. He increased his pace, moving at a slight jog until he and Degarmo reached their department-issued Chevrolet Impala sedan.

Lighting the Dark Side 91

Six HPS cruisers were already on the scene. One squad car had Carnarvon blocked at Fourth Street and another at Sixth. Neither cruiser was allowing civilian vehicle or pedestrian traffic to pass. Gus Cannon, a sergeant of patrol, recognized Staal and crossed from the sidewalk on Agnes Avenue to the driver’s window of the Impala.

“Witness reported two teenagers dressed in dark colors running down the hallway from the scene,” Cannon said. “I’ve got every available unit searching the neighborhood.”

“Sounds good,” Staal said. “They probably had a car parked right here.”

Staal drove, circling the twin buildings at Fourth and Carnarvon before stopping next to an ambulance in front of 420. Staal walked to the rear of his Impala and removed a black duffel bag from the trunk. A lone uniformed cop stood at the front entrance and waved to him and Degarmo.

“They’re up on 14,” Constable Margaret Chan said as she held open the door.

A second uniform stood guard at suite number 1411. Constable Steven Wall moved aside to allow the detectives to enter the suite.

The apartment was spotlessly clean and recently refurbished with a slate entrance way and oak hardwood flooring. The walls were finished in an off-yellow color that Staal believed to be called summer straw. In the kitchen were uniform cops, Graham Bothman and Gurdeep Kalan, and two EMTs.

Kalan nodded to the detectives and moved toward the hallway. “Out here,” she said.

“Both of them. In the living room.”

“Oh Jesus!” Degarmo said, sighing.

“Shit!” Staal shook his head. Even after seventeen years on the force, he had never gotten used to humanity’s capacity for violence and cruelty. The room reeked of burnt gunpowder and blood.

It was the smell of murder.

Lying on his back next to the window was a Caucasian male in his late fifties with an obvious gunshot wound to his right temple. His dead eyes stared up at the twelve foot ceiling. Next laid a Caucasian female, several years younger than the male, perhaps forty-five. She too had a bullet wound to her right temple.

“Anybody touch them?” Degarmo said.

“The paramedics worked on them both for a minute or two,” Kalan answered.

“Don’t let the EMTs leave,” Staal said. “FIS might get something that transferred from the victims.” Staal referred to the Forensic Identification Section, the HPS’s version of CSI.

“Looks like a .38.” Degarmo said to Staal.

“Yeah.” He opened his duffel bag, put on a pair of surgical gloves, removed the lens cap from his camera, and stepped closer. “Looks like an old retired police issue.”

He took three photos of the scene and then numerous close-ups of the revolver still in the grip of the female’s right hand. He used the zoom setting on his camera and never got closer than four meters to the bodies. He concentrated on the wounds of both victims and then snapped more than a dozen others until he was certain he had enough to begin the investigation. “Should do it.” He stepped back.

92 William R. Potter

Then a face flashed in his mind. He stepped closer to look at the male victim.

“Hey, Les. You recognize this guy?”

She crouched to look at the victim’s face. “Don’t think so—no.”

“He looks like—damn it, he’s somebody.” Staal couldn’t name the face.

“FIS should be here shortly.” Degarmo had circled the room. “Drummond will suit up and search them both for ID.”

“Uh-huh,” Staal said. “I’m gonna look in the bedroom. Shout when Wil gets here.”

The bedroom was free of clutter and featured a king-size bed, three bureaus, and a mirror that ran a meter wide from floor to ceiling. The walk-in closet was flawlessly arranged, also uncluttered, and contained no trace of women’s clothing. The shoes in the closet appeared to be at least one size too small for the male victim. Staal did a quick scan of each chest of drawers and found only neatly folded, name-branded men’s clothing.

The lack of female effects, along with an absence of family photographs and the shoes, led Staal to believe that the couple did not live in the suite. The furnishings, decoration, and level of cleanliness throughout the home all hinted of a woman’s presence. This was contradicted by the bedroom findings.

On the largest dresser drawer was a photo album. Staal opened the album and flipped through the vinyl pages. Each page held four snapshots of the male victim, along with another man in different poses of embrace. Mystery solved, Staal thought. The tenant of the suite was most likely the male victim’s lover. Staal removed a photo of the stranger, now a suspect, who looked to be in his thirties with blond hair and an athletic build. Staal met Degarmo in the kitchen and showed her the blond man’s photo and another of the victim.

“So, Les, any theories?” Staal asked.

“I think someone is selling this as a murder-suicide,” Degarmo said.

“But you’re not buying?” Staal smiled. “Any reasons?”

“No, I’m not,” Degarmo said. “Well, it just doesn’t feel right. I dunno.”

“Well, I think blond guy lives here,” Staal said. “Probably taken care of by our male vic.”

“And the female is the angry wife and the shooter?” Degarmo shook her head. “Seems a bit too easy.” She paused, and then said, “Oh, I found a cable, light, and phone bill addressed to a Bruce Laakman.”

“The blond guy.” Staal looked at the snapshot again.

“What about the wit saying he saw kids rushing from the scene?” Degarmo said.

“Could be nothing.”

“I want to start a canvass. Where the fuck is FIS?” Degarmo said.

A moment later, Corporal Wilson Drummond and Constable Sheila Kent stepped into 1411. Both carried aluminium briefcases of equipment. The FIS team included four sworn members and a full-time civilian lab technician. Drummond and Kent would gather, collect, and record any physical evidence, including latent prints and trace evidence, for examination at the FIS office. Drummond was nicknamed Captain Video for the copious amounts of photos he shot and for taping miles of video at crime scenes.

“Hey, Wil,” Staal said.

“Jack. Should we bother starting with the gods of homicide on the way?”

“Might as well.” Staal smiled. “If only to piss off Donny Chin.”

Drummond was in his late fifties with a heavy build and thinning hair.

“What’s the deal with you guys and the RCMP?” Kent asked. Sheila Kent was barely thirty and looked seventeen. Many in the Criminal Investigation Division questioned her appointment to FIS with so little experience.

Staal and Drummond exchanged glances. “Got no problem with the RCMP, just the politicians that dreamt up the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team,” Drummond said, rambling. “Doesn’t that sound nice?”

The Integrated Team combined the talents of homicide specialists from the RCMP’s “E” Division with experienced detectives from local law enforcement agencies. Working homicides, attempted murders and all unexplained deaths throughout metropolitan Vancouver.

Hanson had one member on the integrated team. However, Constable Byron Heatley had gotten himself stabbed during a case in nearby Surrey and was on Compensation leave.

“They do a good job. It’s the egos and attitudes that I don’t need,” Staal said.

“We are on the same side,” Degarmo said.

“Someone might want to tell them that.” Drummond opened his briefcase.

“How long were you in VPD Major Crimes, Jack?” Drummond said. “Ten years, right?”

“Twelve.” Staal smiled. Degarmo and Kent had Drummond riled.

Drummond spoke right at Kent. “Imagine how many homicides me and Jack and a hundred others cleared before anyone even thought of IHIT?”

“Well, they’re not here yet,” Degarmo said. “Let’s start a canvass and see if we can’t get a jump on them.”

Staal began the canvass across the hall and knocked at suite number 1401.

“You know,” Degarmo said, “clearance rates are up almost 30 percent since IHIT began in ’03. Maybe Hanson should embrace the integration idea and get a second member on the team.”

Staal glared at his partner and then turned the grimace to a smile when the door opened. Staal made introductions and then asked Gail Patterson if she saw or heard anything after the gunshots rang out. Patterson said that she called 911 after the explosions; however, the operator said that officers were already responding. She then locked her door and didn’t look out.

Suite number 1405 was next. The front door was exactly halfway between the crime scene and the north stairwell. Staal knew that a fleeing killer would most likely use the stairs for a quicker escape than the elevator.

“Yeah, I heard the shots. Two of them,” Charlie Reynolds said. “Scared the shit out

of me.” Reynolds was at least eighty with white hair, a full grey beard, and a filthy faded blue shirt. His body odor was strong and his breath was rancid.

94 William R. Potter

“Did you hear anything before or after the shots?” Degarmo asked.

“Yeah, sure did. A lot of yelling right before and then after the door slammed and one of them swore.”

“Swore, sir?” Staal said.

“Yeah, little bastard yelled, ‘Come on, let’s get the fuck out of here.’” Reynolds emphasized his story with sharp hand movements, releasing a blizzard of dandruff from his hair.

“Anything else, sir?”

“Well, sure. I cracked open the door in time to see the two of them run past my place. Then they took off down the stairs.” He pointed to the stairwell.

“Can you describe them, sir,” Degarmo said.

“Well, they were young, driving age, I guess,” Reynolds took a moment to think. “Both of them wore dark clothing, dark gray. Even had those tight toques on . . . all black.”

“Would you recognize these two individuals, sir?” Staal asked.

“No, I doubt it. Didn’t get a look at their faces. You know.”

Staal was about to thank Reynolds for his time when he heard yelling coming from the elevator.

“What the fuck do you mean I can’t get out!” an angry, effeminate male voice said.

“I live on this floor.”

Staal saw two uniforms working to restrain a man from exiting the elevator. The man had blond highlights in his light brown hair.

“Guys, hold up!” Staal said as he began to jog for the elevator. “Bruce Laakman?”

“Yes,” Laakman said. “How do you know my name?” Laakman’s face was worried, and he looked like he might cry.

“I’m Detective Jack Staal of the Major Crimes Section.” Staal held up his badge. “Do you have any identification?”

Laakman nodded and fumbled in his wallet. “I don’t drive.” He handed Staal a photo ID.

Staal took the card, noted Laakman’s full name and that the address was in West Vancouver.

“Jack,” Degarmo said as she stepped out of 1411. “Drummond says that according to their DLs, the victims are Jonathan Burke and Juanita Burke.”

“What?” Laakman’s voice warbled. “What has happened to Jonathan?” His knees began to buckle.

“Mr. Laakman. Jonathan Burke and his wife are dead,” Degarmo said.

“No, you’re wrong. It’s not Jonathan!” He looked each detective in the eyes for reassurance and found none. “NOOO!” Laakman’s body bent forward until he supported

his torso by holding his thighs. He turned away from Staal and heaved once and then again, but he didn't vomit. He then slumped to the floor, sat cross-legged, and covered his face.

Staal wasn't sure what bothered him more about homicide work, the violent scenes or the anguish of the victim's loved ones. Both had assisted in his decision to leave the

Lighting the Dark Side 95

relentless string of vicious gang murders of Vancouver PD for a more laid-back life in his hometown. Now, that brutality was before him once more.

After several minutes passed by in the fourteenth-floor hallway, Degarmo knelt and then began questioning Laakman. "What was the nature of your relationship with Jonathan Burke?"

"We've been together for eleven years," Laakman mumbled, as a tear spilled down his cheek.

"But Burke never left his wife?" Staal added. He noticed that Laakman spoke as though Burke was still alive.

"No, but I'm fine with that. He loves me and takes care of me."

"Do you have contact outside of the relationship?" Degarmo said.

"Yes, I work for him at the office and he pays for the apartment and expenses."

"Was Juanita Burke aware of this?" Staal said, jotting notes in his pad.

"I'm sure she had her suspicions, but I doubt she thought for a second that Jonathan was gay."

"What kind of business is Burke in?" Degarmo asked.

"Jonathan and Juanita built Burke and Stevens Real Estate Corp. It was a medium sized firm, and the 90s real estate boom made them millionaires." He stifled a sob and then continued. "Jonathan invested most of his fortune into a diamond mine in South Africa. The mine was a bust and the firm collapsed. Jonathan moved the family here from West Vancouver for a new start nine years ago."

Laakman wiped tears from his face and blew his nose. "Then . . . then he ran for mayor. And I'll never understand why."

"That's it." Staal remembered. "First in 2000 and then in '04."

"Yes, Jonathan never had a chance. Mayor Foxworth brought in the golf courses and casinos. It was over before it started."

Degarmo asked if Burke had any enemies.

Staal's cell phone buzzed in his pocket again. He stepped aside to answer the call, half listening to Laakman say he didn't know of anyone who didn't like the Burkes. The caller was Constable Raymond Shepherd of the IHIT team calling to say that the investigation would have to wait as the team was stuck on the Alex Fraser Bridge. "IHIT is gonna be late," Staal said to his partner.

"I can't do anymore of this," Laakman said, as he turned away from the detectives.

"I need to get some air . . . go for a walk." He stood as if to leave.

“Bruce, we can’t let you leave,” Staal said. He glanced at Degarmo.

“We need you to come to the precinct house and answer a few more questions,” Degarmo added.

“What? Why? Oh my god! You think I did this.” Laakman’s legs buckled and he staggered.

“Bruce, if you didn’t do this then you have nothing to worry about,” Staal said. “However, this happened in your residence and you had a relationship with the victims.”

“Am I . . . am I under arrest?” Laakman’s face turned from worry to fear.

96 William R. Potter

“No. But you need to let us record your fingerprints and take a DNA sample,” Staal said.

“The sooner we do this, the sooner we can clear you as a suspect,” Degarmo said.

“Okay, let’s do that then.” Laakman nodded.

Look for the conclusion of **PROMINENT COUPLE SLAIN** in the short story collection, ***LIGHTING THE DARK SIDE***. Now available at Amazon.com and all major book stores. 9781436312530