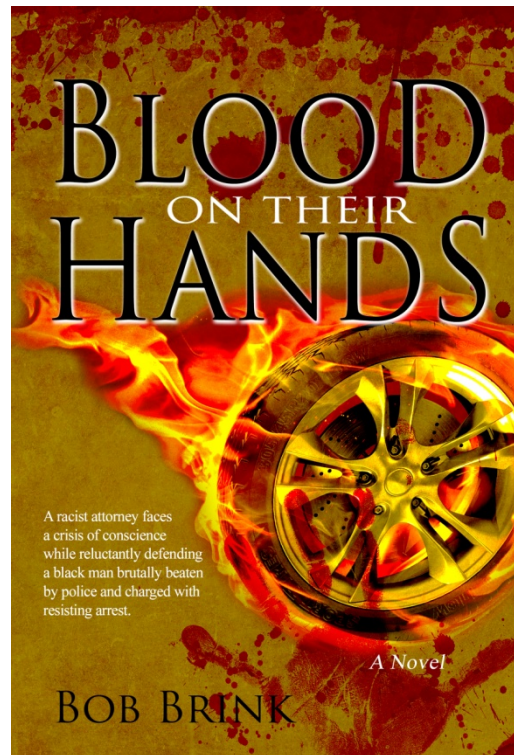




BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS

By Bob Brink

Chapter One

A siren sliced through the drone of traffic, and Alec Monceau caught the glint from a flashing red light in his rearview mirror. The police car bore down hard, and he glanced at his speedometer. His eyes widened. “I go only going thirty-seven in forty zone,” he muttered.

Checking his mirror for the cop car, he glimpsed his own face. “Police Shoot Young Black Man in Traffic Stop,” the recent headline read. There had been others during his three years in the United States. But Alec was in his mid-forties. Still ... maybe that thing on his bumper was a mistake.

Fear pierced his calm demeanor, and he stiffened, his grip on the steering wheel tightening. The squad car was on his bumper. Alec turned his head and saw, through the gloaming engulfing the prosaic suburban landscape like a rising tide, a line of cars traveling beside him.

He slowed to allow the cars to get ahead, then moved over and exited from Lake Worth Road onto Shelby Road, continuing for twenty-five yards before coming to a stop on the gravelly shoulder.

The cop car, bearing the insignia Granville Police, turned onto the road and pulled up behind Alec’s Geo Prizm, a 1999 model that looked newer than nine years, its royal-blue exterior glistening in the fading daylight. As it did so, a passenger in a gray, 2004 Mazda 3 sedan several cars back on Lake Worth Road, in the right lane, said to the driver, “Quick. Pull over into that vacant lot. I have to piss and I can’t wait.”

Garbuncle’s voice rang with urgency, and Brad Hitchens swerved the Mazda into the lot, just before the side road. He stopped the car and turned the lights off as Hiram Garbuncle stumbled out

and stood beside the car so motorists couldn't see him urinating in the charcoal twilight. Hitchens gazed out the passenger-side windshield at the scene on Shelby where the red light flashed.

The cop on the passenger side of the squad car jumped out, pulled his sinewy six-foot-two frame upright, and marched toward Alec. The officer walked with knees turned outward, looking to Hitchens as though he had a stick up his rectum. The cop's muscled arms poked outward at the elbows.

"Why didn't you pull over sooner?" he shouted in mid-stride.

"I couldn't," Alec said in a plaintive tone. "There was cars next to me and ..."

The cop's billy club slammed into his head above and to the side of the right eye. A large gash opened, and blood spurted out. Alec staggered, almost falling.

"Holy crap," said Hitchens. "Did you see that?"

"Aw shit," said Garbuncle. "You made me jerk and piss on your car."

"Great," said Hitchens. "You got enough booze in your urine to take the paint off. Why didn't you piss at the end of the ballgame, before we left my place? Although I don't suppose it would have done a lot of good, after all the vodka you drank."

Garbuncle continued urinating while gawking at the police scene, his head angled right. The driver of the police car, somewhat older than his young partner, got out, revealing a modest paunch, and bounded up to Alec. "So you like Obama, huh?" he shouted. "Maybe you oughta worry about gittin' that busted taillight fixed 'stead o' decorating your bumper."

"Taillight?" Alec sputtered. "Oh, yes, I forget. I have appointment at shop tomorrow and ..."

The thickset driver cop rammed one end of his billy club into Alec's solar plexus. He doubled up, gasping for air.

"Oh man," said Garbuncle, who had finished evacuating and was pulling his zipper up. He stood motionless and stared. "They're beating the crap out of that guy."

"That'll teach you to resist arrest," yelled the squad driver. The other cop smashed his club on the back of Alec's neck, pitching him forward. He fell face down. The older cop kicked him in the ribs and ripped his arms back and up, sending Alec's face grinding into the gravel. The partner kneeled and thrust his knee into the small of Alec's back, then jerked his wrists together and locked them in handcuffs. The officers grabbed his forearms and yanked him to a standing position. Alec screamed.

"Where you from, mother fuckin' darkie?" the younger cop demanded. "You got an accent."

"Trinidad," Alec mumbled.

"Where the fuck is that? Someplace in Africa?"

"By Venezuela," Alec croaked.

"That's what I said. Don't get smart with me." The cop swung his stick hard across Alec's shins. He cried out.

"Yer kinda light-skinned, like Obama. Prob'ly from the same place. Fuckin' monkeys tryin' to take over the country."

The cops shoved Alec into the back seat of the police car, and he gasped from the wrenching in his shoulder. The driving officer ambled to the back of the squad car with his arrest book and wrote the information on the faulty taillight. As he climbed behind the wheel, his partner in the passenger seat lowered his head and, without turning it, said out of the side of his mouth, "Maybe we oughta sit here for a little while and let this guy recover some before we haul him in. He don't look too good."

"Yeah," the driver agreed, and began writing in his arrest book:

Subject driving west on Lake Worth Road, aproksamatly 400 yards west of Military Trail at 7:45 p.m. Obzerved rite tail lite of subject's car not working. Terned on flashing lite, but subject kep going strate. Got on his bumper and he finely terned on to Shelby Road and pulled over about 100 yards north and got out. When officer Pickens aprocht him, subject began cersing and saying he

didnt do nothing rong. I insturkted subject to get in his car, and he swang at me with his rite fist. I dukt and he put his hed down and hed buted me, noking me to the gruond and kauzing abrashuns on my left forarm. Subject then charjed at me and I tript him and swang my billy and hit him in the hed. He fell hedfurst to the gruond and we kuft him.

He handed the arrest book to his partner, who read it. "You can't spell too good, can ya?" He smirked. "Looks good ta me."

Garbuncle got back in the Mazda.

"I don't want to detour, so don't turn your head when I drive past them," said Hitchens. "We don't want them to think we saw what happened or they might stop us and make trouble."

Hitchens drove back onto the thoroughfare and took an immediate right, heading north on Shelby. The Mazda passed the black-and-white squad car at medium speed. Hitchens and Garbuncle kept their heads pointed straight, though Hitchens couldn't resist looking out of the corner of his eye and seeing the despairing, slumped figure of Alec in the lighted interior.

A mile farther, just past the Granville city limits, another squad car loomed on the west side of the road. As the Mazda approached, the two men could make out **Hardinton Police** on the back. A little beyond the squad car was a burgundy colored Toyota and two officers standing in front of it with a woman. She walked a couple of yards with one foot in front of the other before losing her balance and stepping sideways to right herself.

"Is that ...?" Garbuncle said, leaning forward. "Yes, by golly, that's Donna. Pull over."

"What the hell for?" Hitchens said as he drove onto the right shoulder. "Who's Donna?"

"We rolled around in the hay a few times, maybe a year ago."

"That was before your divorce, wasn't it?"

"Uh ... no. Yes. Sexy gal. A little extra weight, but I like 'em with a lot o' meat on their bones. We shacked up a couple o' times since then, too."

"Oh yeah, I remember dropping you off at her apartment in Lake Worth one night after bowling. That old clunker of a tank you drive was in the shop again."

Garbuncle got out of the car and stood with the door open, looking at the scene across the road.

"What in blazes you got in mind?" asked Hitchens.

Without answering, Garbuncle closed the door and began walking around the back of the Mazda, halting to steady himself and then resuming with slow, steady steps. A chronic alcoholic, he'd long before learned how to affect sobriety when the situation demanded. A gentle breeze off the Atlantic tousled the thin dark hair combed back from where it began several inches beyond his forehead. His average-boned, short frame carried an ample paunch that hung over his belt, and he walked slightly hunched, feet slanted outward to complete the distorted effect. His face usually was solemn, Hitchens had observed, and during the brief periods when he went on crash diets, he closely resembled Richard Nixon in face and body, even in his walk.

He approached the officers, and Hitchens noted his air of nonchalance. Extending an open wallet, which displayed his driver license, he stared stone-faced at the cop and said, "Excuse me, officer. I'd like to confer with my client."

"Get back in your car," the policeman said, jerking his head toward the Honda, "and mind your own business."

"Pardon me, sir, but this *is* my business. That lady is my client, and I need to assist her."

"Did she ask for your help?"

"No, but—"

"Then get back on your horse, Lone Ranger, and ride the hell out o' here, or I'm gonna arrest you for interfering with a police officer."

"With all due respect, officer, I have the right to speak with my client."

“That’s it,” said the cop, reaching to his left side and releasing a pair of handcuffs from his duty belt. “Turn around.”

Garbuncle stood motionless, still staring at the officer.

“You gonna turn around, or am I gonna turn you around?” the cop said, his voice raised. Garbuncle slowly turned one-hundred-eighty degrees.

“Put your hands behind your back,” the cop ordered. “You’re under arrest.”

The attorney complied. The officer attached the cuffs, grasped Garbuncle on the shoulder, and marched him to the squad car, shoving him into the back seat. He grimaced as the cuffs dug into his wrists. The other policeman finished putting Donna through the physical dexterity tests and turned to his partner. “What’s up with that guy?”

“Says he’s the woman’s attorney and wants to talk to her. I ordered him to leave, but he wouldn’t budge, so I slapped the cuffs on. I’ll have to write him up.”

“Okay. This gal’s a DUI. Failed all the tests. Let’s haul ’em in.” He helped Donna into the squad car beside Garbuncle, and both officers boarded.

“I don’t want you two talking to each other,” said the driver, looking into the rearview mirror. “You got that?”

“Yesh,” Donna slurred. Garbuncle glanced at her but said nothing.

The Palm Beach County Jail was several miles north, a large, imposing facility on Gun Club Road in West Palm Beach. The cops marched the pair up to the booking desk. Each was escorted to a separate section for males and females, where the cuffs were removed, and they were deposited.

After a half-hour, Donna was allowed to use her cellphone to call a girlfriend to pick her up.

Garbuncle sat on the edge of the cot and rubbed his sore wrists. He slumped forward and dozed, jerking when his head dropped to his chest. Forty-five minutes later, a jail guard released him. The desk sergeant let him use a jail phone, and he called Hitchens at his apartment for transportation.

While making the call, Garbuncle watched as the two cops who’d beat up Alec brought him in and booked him. They turned right at the desk, almost brushing Garbuncle on the way to a cell. He turned his head to look at Alec as he passed, and noticed his puffed face and an eye swollen shut. The officers returned to the desk, and Garbuncle heard them tell the sergeant Alec resisted arrest and they had to subdue him. The sergeant smiled—sardonically, Garbuncle noticed—as the lawman stood behind the counter and read the report one of the officers handed him.

“Another uppity ni... colored guy,” he said.

Hitchens arrived, and Garbuncle turned his head to look down the hall at the cells as the sergeant escorted him to the exit.

“You curious about somethin’?” said the escorting officer. “The way you’re lookin’ around, you must like this place. Ya wanna stay awhile longer? I can arrange it.”

“No, no. I was just stretching my neck. I got a kink in it when I ducked to get in the squad car.”

Hitchens stood waiting by the entrance. The two got in the Mazda, and Hitchens stared at his passenger.

“Your eyes don’t look glazed anymore. I take it that was a sobering experience.”

Garbuncle looked straight ahead and said nothing as the car moved west to Military Trail, then south to Forest Hill, and west on the way to his apartment. Finally, “Those cops are going to cause me a lot of trouble.” He slowly turned his head toward the man behind the wheel. “They charged me with obstructing a police officer. They let me out on my own recognizance. But I’ll have to fight this in court. If they win, I could lose my attorney’s license.”

“I don’t know why the hell you did that,” said Hitchens. “Did you think she’d reward you with another romp in the sack?”

Garbuncle looked at his friend with a faint, grim smile. “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you wait till the cops did their thing and then call her and offer to represent her in court?”

“Cause that would have been the smart thing to do. I wasn’t thinking too clearly.”

“Hell, I can see why. You were too damned drunk. I’m surprised the cops didn’t charge you with public intoxication. Although I gotta say, you sure put on a good disguise. You were even walking straight.” Hitchens paused. “Guess you’ve had a lot of practice.”

Garbuncle didn’t reply. His head hung, and his friend saw the glum look.

At Forest Hill Boulevard, Hitchens turned west for a quarter-mile, then south onto Sherwood and into Pine Tree Condominium, dimly illuminated with fuzzy orange light from fixtures in the hallways. He stopped in front of one of the cream-colored, brown-trimmed buildings.

“When’s your car going to be ready?”

“Tomorrow. He works out of his garage.”

“So I guess you’ll want me to drive you there.”

“Will you?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Garbuncle got out, stood for a moment looking down and away, and muttered, “Thanks.” “That Marlins game ended up costing you a lot,” said Hitchens, leaning toward the open passenger door. “And they didn’t even win.” “As usual,” said Garbuncle as he closed the door. Feet splayed, he trudged to his first-floor apartment.

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Testimonial: A wonderful novel featuring a character for the ages ... Brink has fleshed out such an unforgettable comic character in Garbuncle that I hope to meet him again in future works. For now, we have *Blood on Their Hands*, a novel that manages to examine serious issues in wildly entertaining ways.

Michael Hartnett, author, *The Blue Rat*

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