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Chasing Darkness

A Cole & Pike Novel

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Extract

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1

OUR OFFICE was a good place to be that morning. There was only the tocking of the Pinocchio clock, the scratch of my pen, and the hiss of the air conditioner fighting a terrible heat. Fire season had arrived, when fires erupted across the Southland like pimples on adolescent skin.

Joe Pike was waiting for me to finish the paperwork. He stood at the French doors that open onto my balcony, staring across the city toward the ocean. He had not spoken nor moved in more than twenty minutes, which was nothing for Pike. He often went soundless for days. We were going to work out at Ray Depente's gym in South-Central Los Angeles when I finished the grind.

The first call came at nine forty-two.

A male voice said, "Are you Elvis Cole?"

"That's right. How can I help you?"

"You're a dead man."

I killed the call and went back to work. When you do what I do, you get calls from schizophrenics, escapees from Area 51, and people claiming to know who killed the Black Dahlia and Princess Diana.

Pike said, "Who was it?"

"Some guy told me I was a dead man."

Pike said, "Smoke."

I glanced up from the work.

"Where?"

"Malibu, looks like. Maybe Topanga."

Then Pike turned toward the door, and everything that had been normal about that ordinary morning changed.

"Listen—"

A stocky man with a short haircut and wilted tan sport coat shoved through the door like he lived in Fallujah. He flashed a badge as if he expected me to dive under my desk.

"Welcome to hell, shitbird."

A woman in a blue business suit with a shoulder bag slung on her arm came in behind him. The heat had played hell with her hair, but that didn't stop her from showing a silver-and-gold detective shield.

"Connie Bastilla, LAPD. This is Charlie Crimmens. Are you Elvis Cole?"

I studied Pike.

"Did he really call me a shitbird?"

Crimmens tipped his badge toward me, then Pike, but talked to the woman.

"This one's Cole. This one's gotta be his bun boy, Pike."

Pike faced Charlie. Pike was six-one, a bit over two, and was suited up in a sleeveless grey sweatshirt and government-issue sunglasses. When he crossed his arms, the bright red arrows inked into his deltoids rippled.

I spoke slowly.

"Did you make an appointment?"

Crimmens said, "Answer her, shitbird."

I am a professional investigator. I am licensed by the state of California and run a professional business. Police officers did not barge into my office. They also did not call me a shitbird. I stood, and gave Crimmens my best professional smile.

"Say it again I'll shove that badge up your ass."

Bastilla took a seat in one of the two director's chairs facing my desk.

"Take it easy. We have some questions about a case you once worked."

I stared at Crimmens.

"You want to arrest me, get to it. You want to talk to me, knock on my door and ask for permission. You think I'm kidding about the badge, try it out."

Pike said, "Go ahead, Crimmens. Give it a try."

Crimmens smirked as he draped himself over the file cabinet. He studied Pike for a moment, then smirked some more.

Bastilla said, "Do you recall a man named Lionel Byrd?"

"I didn't offer you a seat."

"C'mon, you know Lionel Byrd or not?"

Charlie said, "He knows him. Jesus."

Something about Crimmens was familiar, though I couldn't place him. Most of the Hollywood Bureau detectives were friends of mine, but these two were blanks.

"You aren't out of Hollywood."

Bastilla put her card on my desk.

"Homicide Special. Charlie's attached out of Rampart. We're part of a task force investigating a series of homicides. Now, c'mon. Lionel Byrd."

I had to think.

"We're talking about a criminal case?"

"Three years ago, Byrd was bound over for the murder of a twenty-eight-year-old prostitute named Yvonne Bennett, a crime he confessed to. You produced a witness and a security tape that supposedly cleared him of the crime. His attorney was J. Alan Levy, of Barshop, Barshop & Alter. We getting warmer here?"

The facts of the case returned as slowly as surfacing fish. Lionel Byrd had been an unemployed mechanic with alcohol problems and a love/hate relationship with prostitutes. He wasn't a guy you would want to know socially, but he wasn't a murderer.

"Yeah, I remember. Not all the details, but some. It was a bogus confession. He recanted."

Crimmens shifted.

"Wasn't bogus."

I took my seat and hooked a foot on the edge of the desk.

"Whatever. The video showed he was here in Hollywood when Bennett was murdered. She was killed in Silver Lake."

Behind them, Pike touched his watch. We were going to be late.

I lowered my foot and leaned forward.

"You guys should have called. My partner and I have an appointment."

Bastilla took out a notepad to show me they weren't going to leave.

"Have you seen much of Mr. Byrd since you got him off?"

"I never met the man."

Crimmens said, "Bullshit. He was your client. You don't meet your clients?"

"Levy was my client. Barshop, Barshop paid the tab. That's what lawyers do."

Bastilla said, "So it was Levy who hired you?"

"Yes. Most of my clients are lawyers."

Attorneys can't and don't rely on the word of their clients. Often, their clients don't know the whole and impartial truth, and sometimes their clients lie. Since lawyers are busy lawyering, they employ investigators to uncover the facts.

Bastilla twisted around to see Pike.

"What about you? Did you work on Byrd's behalf?"

"Not my kind of job."

She twisted farther to get a better look.

"How about you take off the shades while we talk?"

"No."

Crimmens said, "You hiding something back there, Pike? How 'bout we look?"

Pike's head swiveled toward Crimmens. Nothing else moved; just his head.

"If I showed you, I'd have to kill you."

I stepped in before it got out of hand.

"Joe didn't help on this one. This thing was Detective Work 101. I must pull thirty cases like this a year."

Crimmens said, "That's sweet. You must take pride in that, helping shitbirds get away with murder."

Crimmens was pissing me off again.

"What are we talking about this for, Bastilla? This thing was settled three years ago."

Bastilla opened her pad and studied the page.

"So you are telling us you have never met Lionel Byrd?"

"I have never met him."

"Are you acquainted with a man named Lonnie Jones?"

"No. Is he your new suspect?"

"During your investigation into the matter of Yvonne Bennett,

did you discover evidence linking Mr. Byrd to any other crimes or criminal activities?"

"What kind of question is that? Have you re-arrested him?"

Bastilla scribbled a note. When she looked up, her eyes were ringed with purple cutting down to her mouth. She looked as tired as a person can look without being dead.

"No, Mr. Cole, we can't arrest him. Eight days ago, he was found during the evacuation up in Laurel Canyon. Head shot up through the bottom of his chin. He had been dead about five days."

"I didn't kill him."

Crimmens laughed.

"Wouldn't that be funny, Con? Wouldn't that be too perfect? Man, I would love that."

Bastilla smiled, but not because she thought it was funny.

"He committed suicide. He was living under the name Lonnie Jones. Know why he was using an alias?"

"No idea. Maybe because he didn't like being accused of murders he didn't commit."

Bastilla leaned toward me and crossed her arms on a knee.

"The man's dead now, Cole. Reason we're here, we'd like to examine the reports and work product you have from the Bennett case. Your notes. The people you questioned. Everything in your file."

She waited without blinking, studying me as if she knew what I would say, but was hoping I might not say it. I shook my head.

"I was working on behalf of defense counsel. That material belongs to Alan Levy."

"Levy is being contacted."

Crimmens said, "The fucker's dead, Cole. You got him off. What's it matter now?"

"If Levy says fine, then fine, but I worked for him, Crimmens, not you. There's that little thing about 'expectation of confidentiality.' "

I looked back at Bastilla.

"If the man's dead and you don't think I killed him, why do you care what's in my files about Yvonne Bennett?"

Bastilla sighed, then straightened.

"Because this isn't only about Bennett. Lionel Byrd murdered seven women. We believe he murdered one woman every year for the past seven years. Yvonne Bennett was his fifth victim."

She said it as matter-of-factly as a bank teller cashing a check, but with a softness in her voice that spread seeds of ice in my belly.

"He didn't kill Yvonne Bennett. I proved it."

Bastilla put away her pad. She got up, then hooked her bag on her shoulder, finally ready to go.

"Material linking him to the murder was found in his home. He murdered a sixth woman the summer after his release. His most recent victim was murdered thirty-six days ago, and now he's murdered himself."

Crimmens licked his lips as if he wanted to eat me alive.

"How do you feel now, Mr. Thirty-a-Year?"

I shook my head at Bastilla.

"What does that mean, you found material?"

"Something in your files might help us figure out how he got away with it, Cole. Talk to Levy. If we have to subpoena, we will, but it'll be faster if you guys come across."

I stood with her.

"Waitaminute—what does that mean, you found something? What did you find?"

"A press conference is scheduled for this evening. In the meantime, talk to Levy. The sooner the better."

Bastilla left without waiting, but Crimmens made no move to follow. He stayed on the file cabinet, watching me.

I said, "What?"

"Escondido and Repko."

"Why are you still here, Crimmens?"

"You don't recognize me, do you?"

"Should I?"

"Think about it. You must've read my reports."

Then I realized why he was familiar.

"You were the arresting officer."

Crimmens finally pushed off the cabinet.

"That's right. I'm the guy who arrested Byrd. I'm the guy who tried to stop a killer. You're the shitbird who set him free."

Crimmens glanced at Pike, then went to the door.

"Lupe Escondido and Debra Repko are the women he killed after you got him off. You should send the families a card."

Crimmens closed the door when he left.