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Blood Work

Written by Michael Connelly

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MICHAEL CONNELLY

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McCaleb saw her before she saw him. He was coming down the main dock, past the row of millionaires' boats, when he saw the woman standing in the stern of *The Following Sea*. It was half past ten on a Saturday morning and the warm whisper of spring had brought a lot of people out to the San Pedro docks. McCaleb was finishing the walk he took every morning – completely around Cabrillo Marina, out along the rock jetty and back. He was huffing by this part of the walk, but he slowed his pace even more as he approached the boat. His first feeling was annoyance – the woman had boarded his boat uninvited. But as he got closer, he put that aside and wondered who she was and what she wanted.

She wasn't dressed for boating. She had on a loose summer dress that came to mid-thigh. The breeze off the water threatened to lift it and so she kept one hand at her side to keep it down. McCaleb couldn't see her feet yet but he guessed by the taut lines of the muscles he saw in her brown legs that she wasn't wearing boat shoes. She had raised heels on. McCaleb's immediate read was that she was there to make some kind of impression on someone.

McCaleb was dressed to make no impression at all. He had on an old pair of jeans ripped by wear, not for style, and a T-shirt from the Catalina Gold Cup tournament a few summers before. The clothes were spattered with stains – mostly fish blood, some of his own blood, marine

polyurethane and engine oil. They had served him as both fishing and work clothes. His plan was to use the weekend to work on the boat and he was dressed accordingly.

He became more self-conscious about his appearance as he drew closer to the boat and could see the woman better. He pulled the foam pads of his portable off his ears and turned off the CD in the middle of Howlin' Wolf singing 'I Ain't Superstitious'.

'Can I help you?' he asked before stepping down into his own boat.

His voice seemed to startle her and she turned away from the sliding door that led into the boat's salon. McCaleb figured she had knocked on the glass and was waiting, expecting him to be inside.

'I'm looking for Terrell McCaleb.'

She was an attractive woman in her early thirties, a good decade or so younger than McCaleb. There was a sense of familiarity about her but he couldn't quite place it. It was one of those déjà vu things. At the same time he felt the stir of recognition, it quickly flitted away and he knew he was mistaken, that he did not know this woman. He remembered faces. And hers was nice enough not to forget.

She had mispronounced the name, saying Mc-*Cal*-ub instead of Mc-*Kay*-Leb, and used the formal first name that no one ever used except the reporters. That's when he began to understand. He knew now what had brought her to the boat. Another lost soul come to the wrong place.

'McCaleb,' he corrected. 'Terry McCaleb.'

'Sorry. I, uh, I thought maybe you were inside. I didn't know if it was okay to walk on the boat and knock.'

'But you did anyway.'

She ignored the reprimand and went on. It was as if

what she was doing and what she had to say had been rehearsed.

'I need to talk to you.'

'Well, I'm kind of busy at the moment.'

He pointed to the open bilge hatch she was lucky not to have fallen into and the tools he had left spread out on a drop cloth by the stern transom.

'I've been walking around, looking for this boat, for almost an hour,' she said. 'It won't take long. My name is Graciela Rivers and I wanted –'

'Look, Miss Rivers,' he said, holding his hands up and interrupting. 'I'm really ... You read about me in the newspaper, right?'

She nodded.

'Well, before you start your story, I have to tell you, you're not the first one to come out here and find me or to get my number and call me. And I'm just going to tell you what I told all of the others. I'm not looking for a job. So if this is about you wanting to hire me or have me help you some way, I'm sorry, but I can't do it. I'm not looking for that kind of work.'

She didn't say anything and he felt a pang of sympathy for her, just as he had for the others who had come to him before her.

'Look, I do know a couple of private investigators I can recommend. Good ones that will work hard and won't rip you off.'

He stepped over to the stern gunwale, picked up the sunglasses he had forgotten to take on his walk and put them on, signaling the end of the conversation. But the gesture and his words went by her.

'The article said you were good. It said you hated it whenever somebody got away.'

He put his hands in his pockets and hiked his shoulders.

'You have to remember something. It was never me

alone. I had partners, I had the lab teams, I had the whole bureau behind me. It's a lot different than one guy running around out there on his own. A lot different. I probably couldn't help you even if I wanted to.'

She nodded and he thought that he had gotten through to her and that would be the end of this one. He started thinking about the valve job on one of the boat's engines that he'd planned to complete over the weekend.

But he was wrong about her.

'I think you could help me,' she said. 'Maybe help yourself, too.'

'I don't need the money. I do okay.'

'I'm not talking about money.'

He looked at her for a beat before replying.

'I don't know what you mean by that,' he said, injecting exasperation into his voice. 'But I can't help you. I've got no badge anymore and I'm not a private investigator. It would be illegal for me to act as one or to accept money without a state license. If you read the story in the paper, then you know what happened to me. I'm not even supposed to be driving a car.'

He pointed toward the parking lot beyond the row of docks and the gangway.

'You see the one wrapped up like a Christmas present? That's mine. It's sitting there until I get my doctor's approval to drive again. What kind of investigator would that make me? I'd be taking the bus.'

She ignored his protest and just looked at him with a resolute expression that unnerved him. He didn't know how he was going to get her off the boat.

'I'll go get those names for you.'

He walked around her and slid open the salon door. After going in, he pulled the door shut behind him. He needed the separation. He went to the drawers below the chart table and began looking for his phone book. He hadn't needed it in so long he wasn't sure where it was.

He glanced out through the door and watched her step to the stern and lean her hips against the transom as she waited.

There was reflective film on the glass of the door. She couldn't see him watching her. The sense of familiarity came over him again and he tried to place her face. He found her very striking. Dark almond-shaped eyes that seemed both sad and understanding of some secret at the same time. He knew he would easily remember if he had ever met her or even just observed her before. But nothing came. His eyes instinctively went to her hands in search of a ring. There was none. He had been right about her shoes. She wore sandals with two-inch cork heels. Her toenails were painted pink and showed off against her soft brown skin. He wondered if this was how she looked all the time, or if she had dressed to entice him into taking the job.

He found his phone book in the second drawer and quickly looked up the names Jack Lavelle and Tom Kimball. He wrote their names and numbers on an old marine service flier and opened the slider. She was opening her purse as he stepped out. He held up the paper.

'Here are two names. Lavelle is LAPD retired and Kimball was with the bureau. I worked with both and either will do a good job for you. Pick one and call. Make sure you tell him you got his name from me. He'll take care of you.'

She didn't take the names from him. Instead she pulled a photo out of her purse and handed it to him. McCaleb took it without thinking. He realized immediately that this was a mistake. In his hand was a photo of a smiling woman watching a small boy blowing out candles on a birthday cake. McCaleb counted seven candles. At first he thought it was a picture of Rivers a few years younger. But then he realized it wasn't her.

The woman in the photo had a rounder face and thinner lips. She wasn't as beautiful as Graciela Rivers. Though both had deep brown eyes, the eyes of the woman in the photo did not have the same intensity as the eyes of the woman now watching him.

'Your sister?'

'Yes. And her son.'

'Which one?'

'What?'

'Which one is dead?'

The question was his second mistake, compounding the first by drawing him further in. He knew the moment he asked it that he should have just insisted that she take the names of the two private detectives and been done with it.

'My sister. Gloria Torres. We called her Glory. That's her son, Raymond.'

He nodded and handed the photo back but she didn't take it. He knew she wanted him to ask what had happened but he was finally putting on the brakes.

'Look, this isn't going to work,' he finally said. 'I know what you're doing. It doesn't work on me.'

'You mean you have no sympathy?'

He hesitated as the anger boiled up in his throat.

'I have sympathy. You read the newspaper story, you know what happened to me. Sympathy was my problem all along.'

He swallowed it back and tried to clear away any ill feeling. He knew she was consumed by horrible frustrations. McCaleb had known hundreds of people like her. Loved ones taken from them without reason. No arrests, no convictions, no closure. Some of them were left zombies, their lives irrevocably changed. Lost souls. Graciela Rivers was one of them now. She had to be or she wouldn't have tracked him down. He knew that no

matter what she said to him or how angry he got, she didn't deserve to be hit with his own frustrations as well.

'Look,' he said. 'I just can't do this. I'm sorry.'

He put a hand on her arm to lead her back to the dock step. Her skin was warm. He felt the strong muscle beneath the softness. He offered the photo again but she still refused to take it.

'Look at it again. Please. Just one more time and then I'll leave you alone. Tell me if you feel anything else?'

He shook his head and made a feeble hand gesture as if to say it made no difference to him.

'I was an FBI agent, not a psychic.'

But he made a show of holding the photo up and looking at it anyway. The woman and the boy seemed happy. It was a celebration. Seven candles. McCaleb remembered that his parents were still together when he turned seven. But not much longer. His eyes were drawn to the boy more than the woman. He wondered how the boy would get along now without his mother.

'I'm sorry, Miss Rivers. I really am. But there is nothing I can do for you. Do you want this back or not?'

'I have a double of it. You know, two for the price of one. I thought you'd want to keep that one.'

For the first time he felt the undertow in the emotional current. There was something else at play but he didn't know what. He looked closely at Graciela Rivers and had the sense that if he took another step, asked the obvious question, he would be pulled under.

He couldn't help himself.

'Why would I want to keep it if I'm not going to be able to help you?'

She smiled in a sad sort of way.

'Because she's the woman who saved your life. I thought from time to time you might want to remind yourself of what she looked like, who she was.'

He stared at her for a long moment but he wasn't

really looking at Graciela Rivers. He was looking inward, running what she had just said through memory and knowledge and coming up short of its meaning.

'What are you talking about?'

It was all he could manage to ask. He had the sense that control of the conversation and everything else was tilting away from him and sliding across the deck to her. The undertow had him now. It was carrying him out.

She raised her hand but reached past the photo he was still holding out to her. She placed her palm on his chest and ran it down the front of his shirt, her fingers tracing the thick rope of the scar beneath. He let her do it. He stood there frozen and let her do it.

'Your heart,' she said. 'It was my sister's. She was the one who saved your life.'