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Written by Tami Hoag

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TAMI HOAG

Secrets to the Grave



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I

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The house stood by itself back off the road in a field of dried golden grass, half hidden by spreading oaks. An amalgam of styles – part Spanish, part ranch – the once-white stucco building was weathered in a way that made it seem a part of the natural surroundings, as if it had grown up out of the earth and belonged there as much as any of the hundred-year-old trees.

The scene was a plein air painting, soft and impressionistic: the golden grass, the dark trees, bruise-purple mountains in the background, and the whisper-blue sky strewn with long, thin, pink-tinted clouds; the small white house with its old tile roof. On the other side of the mountains the sun had begun its descent toward the ocean. Here, the day seemed to have paused to admire its own perfection. Stillness held the landscape enraptured.

Nothing gave away a hint of what lay within the house.

The driveway was a path of dirt and crushed rock with grass and weeds sprouted up the middle like the mane of a wild pony. Falling-down fences the color of driftwood created the lane between two overgrown pastures that had once been home to cattle and horses.

A vintage Woody station wagon well past its glory days was parked at a casual angle near an open shed full of rusted farm equipment. An old Radio Flyer red wagon had been abandoned near the front porch with an orange tabby cat sitting in it, waiting for a ride. On the porch two kittens played peekaboo among overgrown pots of parched

geraniums and kitchen herbs. One propped herself up on the screen door and peered into the house, then squeaked and leapt and dashed away, tail straight up in the air.

Inside the house nothing moved but flies.

A horrible still life had been staged on the Saltillo tile kitchen floor.

A woman lay dead, her hair spreading out around her head like a dark cloud. Her skin was the color of milk. Her lips had been painted as red as a rose – as red as her blood must have been as it drained from the wounds carved into her flesh.

She lay discarded like a life-size broken doll – made up, torn up, and cast aside, her brown eyes cloudy and lifeless.

Beside her lay a smaller doll – her child – head resting on her shoulder, face streaked with the last of her mother's life's blood.

The flies buzzed. The wall clock ticked above the sink.

The telephone receiver dangled near the floor, stenciled with small bloody fingerprints. The last words spoken into it were a whisper still hanging in the air: *'My daddy hurt my mommy . . .'*

2

'The victim is Marissa Fordham, twenty-eight, single mom. An artist.'

Sheriff's detective Tony Mendez rattled off the facts as if unaffected by what he had seen inside the house. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In fact, shortly after he arrived at the scene, he had had to excuse himself from the kitchen to vomit under a tree in the backyard.

He had been second on the scene, the property being on his side of town. The first responder – a young deputy – had puked under the same tree. Mendez had never seen so much blood. The smell of it was still like a fist lodged at the back of his throat. Every time he closed his eyes he saw the victims in freeze-frame shots from a horror movie.

His stomach rolled.

'You said there were two vics.'

Vince Leone, forty-nine, former special agent with the FBI's legendary Behavioral Sciences Unit, former Chicago homicide detective. Leone had been his mentor during his course at the FBI's National Academy – a training program for law enforcement agencies around the country and around the globe. In fact, Leone had come to Oak Knoll more than a year past in part to work a serial-killer case, in part to try to recruit Mendez to the Bureau.

The case was ongoing. Neither of them had left.

Leone had just arrived on the scene. They drifted slowly away from his car toward the house, both of them taking in the cool, eucalyptus-scented air.

'The woman's four-year-old daughter,' Mendez said.

'She had a faint pulse. She's on her way to the hospital. I wouldn't expect her to make it.'

Leone muttered an expletive under his breath.

He was an imposing man. Six foot three with a mane of wavy salt-and-pepper hair. A thick mustache drew the eye away from the small, shiny scar marking the entrance wound of the bullet that should have ended his life. Instead, the thing remained in his head, inoperable because of its precarious location.

'I hate when it's a kid,' he said.

'Yeah. What did a four-year-old do to deserve that?'

'Witness.'

'She knew the killer.'

'Or he's just one mean bastard.'

'I'd say he has that covered,' Mendez said.

They went through the little gate to the yard and followed the rock path around the side of the house, past an old concrete fountain that gurgled soothingly despite the occasion.

'Who called it in?'

'A friend who happened to drop by.'

Leone stopped and looked at him. 'It's the crack of freaking dawn.'

To be precise, 7:29 a.m. The sun was barely up.

'Yeah,' Mendez said. 'Wait until you meet him. Odd guy.'

'Odd how?'

'Looks-like-a-suspect odd. Who drops in on a neighbor at six in the morning?'

'Is he here?'

'He's with Bill.'

Bill Hicks, sheriff's detective, Mendez's partner. Hicks had a way of putting people at ease.

'Is Cal coming?' Leone asked.

Cal Dixon, county sheriff, Mendez's boss.

'On his way.'

'I don't want to step on toes here.'

Leone was not on the SO payroll, but he was too good a resource not to call. Studying the country's worst serial killers for more than a decade, he had seen just about every atrocity one human being could inflict on another. More important, he could discern much from the scene that could point them in a direction in the search for the perpetrator.

'I spoke with him,' Mendez said. 'He agreed.'

'Good.'

They paused at the kitchen door. Mendez pointed at the tree.

'The official puke zone. In case you need it.'

'Good to know.'

The scene struck him almost as hard going in this time as it had the first time. The contrasts, he decided – and the smell. Visually, the contrasts rocked him. The kitchen was like something from another era: old-fashioned painted cupboards, a cast-iron farmhouse sink, checked curtains, appliances that had to have been from the fifties.

It was the kind of kitchen that should have had June Cleaver or Aunt Bea in it. Instead, crime-scene techs bustled around like so many cooks, dusting this, photographing that, all working around the bloating, discolored body of a murdered woman on the blood-drenched Mexican tile floor.

Leone took in the tableau with a dark frown and his hands on his hips.

'She's been dead awhile.'

'A couple of days, I'd say.'

'Maggots already,' Leone commented. 'Has she been moved?'

'No. I didn't let the paramedics touch her. There was no question she was dead.'

The victim's throat had been cut so viciously she was nearly decapitated. Someone had painted her lips red with her own blood.

'And the little girl was where?'

'Laying with her head on her mother's left shoulder. I moved her when I felt her pulse,' Mendez said.

'And what had been done to her? Was she stabbed?'

'I couldn't tell. She was covered in blood. I couldn't tell if it was hers or her mother's. Looked to me like she might have been strangled, though. There were bloody finger marks on her throat.'

Leone took a handkerchief out of his pocket to hold over his mouth and nose as he moved closer to the body on the floor. He was careful not to step in the blood. He squatted down for a different angle.

The woman's breasts had been cut off. There was no sign of them anywhere in the room. The killer had to have taken them with him when he left. A macabre souvenir. The gaping wounds were alive with fly larvae.

She lay spread-eagle, faceup, staring at the ceiling. She was naked. Wounds slashed her arms, her legs, her torso. She had been stabbed so many times in the lower abdomen, the area looked like a lump of ground meat, crawling now with maggots.

The blade of a butcher's knife protruded from her vagina.

Leone arched a brow. 'That makes a statement.'

'Have you ever seen that before?' Mendez asked.

'I've seen the blade inserted. Never like this. What do you make of it?'

Leone looked up at him, ever the mentor. He sure as hell had an opinion. The man was a legend. He probably had already begun to build the profile of the killer in his head. By the time they broke for coffee he would have decided the perp had a stutter and walked with a limp.

He wanted Mendez to think for himself, read the scene

in front of him, call on cases he had studied and things he had been taught at the National Academy and in the field.

'I think maybe the statement is about her more than it is about her killer,' Mendez said.

Leone nodded. 'It would seem so.'

He stood up, took a step back, crossed his arms. His gaze slowly scanned the room, taking in every detail. Outside the house an engine died, a car door slammed.

'He didn't bring the knife with him,' he said, pointing to a wooden block of knives on the counter. 'The big one is missing.'

'That's a lot of overkill for a crime of opportunity,' Mendez said.

Leone hummed a low note. 'Any signs of a robbery?'

'I made a quick pass through the house. There's no sign of forced entry. A couple of rooms have been tossed, but I don't know why. There's some expensive-looking jewelry on her dresser. It doesn't look like anything in the way of electronics was taken.'

'Drugs?'

'No paraphernalia. The house is too clean for a junkie. I don't make it for drugs. It doesn't feel that way.'

'No,' Leone agreed. 'This was personal. No question. We're looking at maybe thirty or forty stab wounds.'

The screen door opened and Cal Dixon stepped into the scene. Dixon was fifty-four, silver-haired, and fit. His uniform always looked freshly pressed. He turned his piercing blue eyes first to the victim, then to Leone and Mendez. His expression was grim and washed pale.

'What the hell is the world coming to?'

'First murder in a year, boss,' Mendez said, as if that were a bright spot in their lives.

Dixon came over to stand with them, hands jammed at his waist. He pointedly did not look down at what remained of Marissa Fordham.

'Dispatch had a nine-one-one call yesterday,' he said. 'Early morning. A child's voice saying that daddy had hurt mommy. That was it. No address. No name. The phone went dead and that was that.

'The supervisor came to me, but what could I do? I can't have every house in the area searched on the off chance there might have been a crime committed.'

'I read Orange County has the enhanced nine-one-one system,' Mendez said. 'All the info comes up on the screen with the call. Name and address.'

'That costs big bucks,' Dixon said. 'I've filled out the paperwork for a grant, but who knows how long that will take.'

Once again, progress progressed at a painful crawl toward Oak Knoll, California. Mendez kept abreast of the latest technology being developed for law enforcement, yet tantalizingly out of reach – particularly for smaller agencies. They didn't have the budget or the clout.

He glanced down at the corpse of Marissa Fordham, two days into the decaying process, smelling like an open sewer on a hot summer day. 'Too late for her.'