

CHAPTER 1

So the deal is this—any cop who tickets me for a moving violation, gets an “attaboy” from the chief and a day off duty, off the books. To their credit, most cops know this is not fair play, but there’s still enough of them out there who like the idea of a day off without their wives knowing about it that I keep a close eye on my rearview mirror and a light foot on my accelerator, careful not to let the speedometer of my Mustang sneak past thirty.

I’ve been on guard against Minneapolis cops since the police chief put a bounty on my “pretty little head” two years ago. He was good and pissed after I did a TV story about some of his officers sleeping in movie theaters and hanging out in strip clubs instead of patrolling the downtown streets. He got even more pissed when I reported other cops falsifying overtime after a tornado blew through town. You’d think by now the man’s job would be on the line, but the chief apparently knows some dark secret about the mayor, who reappoints him to a new term every three years.

I knew all this from a source I was rushing to meet.

When the public thinks source, they think Deep Throat. Don’t get me wrong, for a journalist, a high-level source is the ultimate rush. But you can’t spend your news career waiting for a mysterious

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cliché in a trench coat to whisper state secrets. A low-level source with remarkable access can do almost as much damage. Give me a secretary with a straight-and-narrow conscience, working for a boss with a crooked soul, and I'll give you a lead story for the late news.

What bosses don't understand is that whistle-blowers don't call reporters first. They call us last. Only when they are completely disillusioned by the knowledge that going through the system doesn't work do they turn to us: the media. That's when we turn scandal into ratings and ratings into money. If I sound jaded, that's a shameful, recent development.

I hit the gas. Speed down the freeway ramp off Lyndale Avenue and onto the interstate. Here's where I make up lost time. City police don't usually make traffic stops on freeways and I'm not worried about the State Patrol. More than a year ago, I became untouchable in Minnesota. Every State Patrol officer from International Falls to the Iowa border knows my name and face. If I'm inadvertently stopped, they apologize sincerely and send me on my way.

My name is Riley Spartz. I'm a television reporter for Channel 3. I'm thirty-six years old, but on a good day I look a decade younger. A big plus in a cutthroat business. Beyond the obvious advantage of youth meaning a longer shelf life, strangers tend to underestimate me—thus I've broken more than my share of exclusives and won more than my share of awards. But none of that matters when contract time comes around. Then, all any news director wants to know is "What have you done for me lately?" Being objective, I have to admit, lately I haven't done shit.

When I first started out in this business, I considered news the stuff that happens to other people. I know better now. I understand why some folks consider news just another four-letter word.

I WAS ACROSS the Mississippi River and had already claimed the back row of seats when Nick Garnett walked in the Highland The-

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ater in St. Paul. I gave him the aisle since his legs are longer. The afternoon matinee wasn't scheduled to begin for a half hour so the theater was empty.

"Been waiting long?" he asked.

"A few minutes."

"Sorry. I got lost on the way." A top Minneapolis homicide detective, Garnett was more talented at telling good from evil than north from south.

"Why did we have to meet all the way over here?" I asked.

"So we won't run into anybody who knows us."

The overhead lights dimmed on the art deco décor but only Garnett's boss would consider our meeting illicit.

"Unfortunately that rules out all the fancy-pants hot spots where you like to hang out," he continued.

"It also rules out all the dives where you mooch free food 'cause you're a cop."

I'm always surprised how many restaurants will trade coffee and a burger for police presence.

"Not for long."

Garnett had a big retirement bash set for tonight. I wasn't invited, though we'd known each other nearly half his career. For the best sources, public credit can be hazardous to their jobs. Garnett didn't relish being reassigned to rounding up drunks for detox, so our friendship remained our secret.

We'd first met when I was a rookie reporter covering a small-town fire in southern Minnesota. The blaze started in an apartment building and consumed city hall, a hardware store, and the town diner before firefighters got it under control. Ends up, the local police chief set the fire so he could rescue his girlfriend, who lived in an upstairs apartment.

She'd dumped him the weekend before and he figured playing hero might win her back. The plan was ending as happily as a fairy tale, except that a security camera mounted on the service station across the street recorded video of the chief carrying a gas can into

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the apartments moments before the blaze began. Garnett had slapped the cuffs on his boss and done a perp parade in front of the courthouse. A couple years later, Garnett took a street job in Minneapolis, moving up the ranks to homicide.

"I still don't see why I can't come to your party," I said. "I'd like a chance to roast you and toast you. What are they going to do if I show up? Fire you?"

"I don't need the grief."

He'd had enough of the inside politics involved in fighting big-city crime. Garnett had landed a lucrative private sector job as head of corporate security for the Mall of America out in Bloomington. So at age fifty, still in decent physical shape, and with just barely graying hair, he was taking an early retirement package. It came with a cushy public sector pension.

"I'm leaving at the top of my game," he said. "I don't need any whispers. I don't need any finger-pointing. And I sure as hell don't need my new bosses knowing about you." He gave me a look that meant he meant business. "And from now on you can leave your hidden camera home when you step on my turf."

"What? The Mall of America is my favorite undercover shopping spot."

The Mall of America is the largest indoor shopping complex in the world. Something like 520 stores. Fifty restaurants. Fourteen movie screens. Very upscale. Minnesota-based Northwest Airlines even offers special rates for day trips so shopaholics from as far away as Tokyo can afford to fly in for a holiday spending spree. An added bonus: no sales tax on clothing purchased in Minnesota.

I used the mall as a backdrop for several consumer investigative stories. I often shoot undercover video with a hidden camera, just one of the modern tools of the TV trade not available to Edward R. Murrow. Early on, I'd mounted a bulky black-and-white camera in an oversized briefcase. Next came a lipstick lens in a Coach purse. But technology improved so much that now I'm able to shoot color video with a pinhole-size lens hidden in an ink pen, watch, brooch, button, or even a pair of glasses.

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A wire runs from the lens to a small video recorder I carry in a fanny pack around my waist. I tape a tiny microphone to the V of my bra. I'm a B cup, ample enough to hide the mike, but not so voluptuous that the audio is muffled. Luck and a whole lot of duct tape keep the operation inconspicuous. I was not eager to give up the Mall of America. So I told him that.

"Yeah, but I gotta show I'm doing something," Garnett said, "so in addition to increasing security, I'm going to cut down on negative publicity about the mall. Besides, you're going to be too busy working on your next big scoop to have time for stories about shoppers being cheated out of a nickel."

"Hey! That pricing error story was good TV. It won a lot of awards. My motto is, if you can show ten thousand folks getting cheated out of a nickel, that's as good as showing one guy getting bilked out of five hundred big ones. Also more relevant to a wider audience. Any-way, I don't have a next big scoop."

"You do now." He pulled a fat file from his briefcase. By now other movie patrons were shuffling around, looking for seats. I considered pretending to make out with Garnett so no one would want to sit by us, but he definitely wasn't my type, plus that could create a whole new set of problems.

We both acted like we were getting together to celebrate his new job, but we both knew he was there to prop me up. This was no business meeting. This was one friend healing another's pain. My career was in the toilet. Going from star to slacker wasn't working for me, and Garnett could tell.

"I know it's not the same, Riley, but you helped me through my divorce when things got wacko. I'd like to help you." He paused, then said with exaggerated emphasis, "After all, tomorrow is another day."

"Vivien Leigh, *Gone With the Wind*, 1939," I answered.

Garnett and I were both film buffs and occasionally met in shadowy theaters to pass documents and catch an action flick or drama. Never a date movie. We'd developed a routine of him weaving famous movie lines into our conversations, and me guessing the actor,

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picture, and year. Not as difficult as it sounds, because I associate films with historical and breaking news events. For example, *Gone With the Wind* debuted the year Germany invaded Poland. And *Stand by Me* came out the same year the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded.

Our rule to avoid reruns: no matter how appropriate the circumstance, Garnett can utter a line only once. The man has patience; in all the years I'd known him, he'd never used Rhett Butler's scandalous farewell with me. I'm sure there were times he was tempted, but I suspect he didn't want to waste the line on a mediocre moment.

"My life's not your life," I said. "And as for tomorrow being another day, my tomorrow is really no different from my yesterday."

I shook my head, still bitter about being single again. Angry the way my marriage ended.

An old priest I knew from my farm girl days suggested that forgiving those who hurt us can lead to inner peace. Trouble was, I wasn't interested in peace. I craved revenge. On my good days, I'm an edgy chick with a temper. I didn't like that I still didn't like sleeping alone. I was also embarrassed to admit that I missed my husband, even though I'd found plenty to complain about when he was around.

Garnett pressed the file at me along with a tiny flashlight. "Have a look while I get us some snacks. But don't look so close you lose your appetite."

He left me alone with the file. It read SUSAN. I flipped through the police reports and the crime scene photos.

The truth was, I was desperate for a big scoop.

I had just come back to work last week following a three-month personal leave spent trying to get my personal life back together. I worried the time off might have been a mistake. I had always considered the key to keeping my world in order was never letting my personal and professional lives get out of whack at the same time. Now I was trying to get them both on track simultaneously. An overwhelming challenge.

Garnett returned during the previews with two large plastic cups of soda pop and a giant bucket of popcorn. I took a handful to be po-

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lite and got extra butter all over my fingers. Luckily, he brought extra napkins. I said nothing, accepting him for who he is—a man who considers potato chips his favorite vegetable and chocolate-covered cherries his favorite fruit.

“Who’s Susan?” I finally asked.

“Which one?” Garnett pulled a newspaper clipping from the folder. The headline: “Body Found by Lake Calhoun.” He said, “Check the date.”

I moved the light beam to the top right corner. “November 19, 1991.” He handed me another article, printed the next day, that identified the victim as Susan Chenowith. “Okay,” I said, “tell me the story.”

“Not yet.” He stacked another clipping on top: “Unidentified Woman Strangled,” it read.

I jerked slightly when he pointed at the date. November 19, 1992. Exactly one year later. “This is sort of weird.”

“Don’t get me started.” He handed me a follow-up article that identified the second dead woman as Susan Moreno. “Okay,” he said to me, “now you tell *me* the story.”

I paused, my eyes moving back and forth between the two headlines in front of me. “They’re both named Susan. They were both murdered. Same day, a year apart.” Up on the silver screen the movie began, so I lowered my voice. “A serial killer stalking Susans?”

“Don’t go writing your promo before you’ve got the facts,” he warned. “I don’t know what it means. I can’t prove they are even related, though I spent a few years trying. But I also can’t walk out the door knowing no one else is going to bother. So I’m giving you a copy. Have a crack at it.”

Garnett’s cell phone rang during the opening credits. An older man a few rows in front of us turned to glare. “No cell phones,” the man hissed. He had no clue he was hissing at a cop. Garnett wore a dark suit and tie, nice enough for the street, but not good enough for on air.

He pulled out his badge, shined the light on it and then in our hisser’s eyes. “Police business.”

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His phone rang again, the same generic ring tone as the day he bought it. He liked blending in, whether it be clothes, cars, or cell phones. He glanced at the number. Then he flipped open the receiver and I watched as he listened to whoever was on the other end. "Okay. I'm on my way," he finally said.

I didn't ask for details. If he could tell me, he would.

"I'll be back." He imitated the husky voice of a postapocalyptic cyborg. Pitiful.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger, *The Terminator*, 1984. That the best you got? You are so incredibly lame."

"I wanted to start you back slow until you get your confidence. When I'm convinced you can handle blockbusters again we'll move on to independent art films. And since you did so well in today's competition, I'll leave you our feast." He shoved his popcorn my way.

Some feast. A pail of grease. I shook my head and motioned thanks, but no thanks.

"Call me when you've had a chance to look through the file," he said. "I'm interested to see if there's anything I missed. And when you talk to the department, don't let them know you have it."

Then he pulled me close to whisper in my ear. "Be careful on this one."

I shrugged. "I'm always careful." But that wasn't exactly true, and he knew it.

"This is a bad unsub," he told me. "Unsub" is cop talk for "unidentified suspect." I love cop talk. "Real bad," he said again for emphasis.

"They're all bad," I replied.

"But this one might be a cop."

Before I could press him further about this juicy little nugget, Garnett grabbed his briefcase and his greasy popcorn and left me alone in a dark theater in St. Paul. Holding a cold case file.