



THE
MANTIS
PACT

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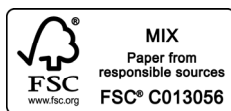
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a discovery is made

One

The telegraph poles between I-15 and the railway seemed frozen in the side window of Paul Kleberson's Squad Car, as if the red beacon on the roof of the car was acting as a strobe light. At three a.m. the junction with Forty-Seventh Street South was eerily quiet as he sped across it against the lights. Minutes later he turned left on Sixty-Ninth, heading for the northern outskirts of Derby.

Kleberson had been in charge of the Homicide Squad in Wichita for nearly five years, during which time his department had dealt with an average of no more than a couple of dozen cases a year. The majority of those occurred within an area on the north-east side dubbed 'the badlands' by local police, so it would not have been unusual for his Squad to be answering a homicide call to the north of I-54. But all the way down south in Derby it was almost unheard of.

The only cases of any note outside the badlands during his time in the department had been a crime spree by a couple of crackheads that had concluded with the brutal assassination of four friends on a school football field. That case, although quickly and easily solved, produced a subsequent show trial that had been the focus of the local media for two years. From the scant information he had already received, Kleberson was already dreading the thought that the case unfolding in this quiet suburb might create a similar media circus, but for totally different reasons.

His fears were confirmed the minute he turned into Plainlands View. There, outside of one of the neat simplexes, were half a dozen Police Cruisers and the KNKW outside broadcast truck. Heading straight for him as he drew-up at the kerb, microphone in hand, was the familiar figure of Marjoree Rolles, the star link for the station.

'How the hell did she get here so quick', he thought, but before he could think further his door was opened and the offending microphone thrust under his nose.

In the seamless manner of the consummate professional she had become, Marjoree Rolles was finishing the live link she had started as she began walking towards the car: "... and just arrived is the head of the local homicide unit, Lieutenant Paul Kleberson. Lieutenant, can you confirm that the body discovered here this morning is that of Hilary Nicholson?"

Marjoree was the rising star of Midwest media. Her local station was syndicated and it was only a matter of time before she made the inevitable career move to the national network. Although not easily deflected, she was an accomplished and experienced journalist who would respect police requests to give them space if they needed it, although in doing so she drove a hard bargain,

a bargain that nearly always resulted in the exclusive that gave her career just that little bit more State-wide coverage, and the resultant occasional national exposure.

Kleberon batted the question in an equally professional manner, looking directly into the camera he responded: "I can neither confirm nor deny any such thing, as you well know Ms Rolles."

He stared through the camera lens towards the person holding it. It was an instrument he would dearly have loved to push firmly into one of darker recesses of that cameraman's body.

Kleberon hated Tom Cochrane; he hated his propensity for invading crime scenes in a virtual way with his intrusive zoom lens, revealing facts live to the TV Station before the Squad had a chance to assess their significance, if any. Oh yes, Cochrane was good at what he did, but it often caused an unnecessary extension of the case.

On the other hand, he quite liked Marjoree, although he couldn't abide the way she spelled her christian name. A keen English student since his youth, the use of misspelling or mispronunciation purely for status or effect was not to his taste. Every time he saw the caption under her name on a TV bulletin he would shudder spontaneously.

Kleberon braced himself for two or three more quick-fire questions before he could reach the sanctuary of the police tape cordoning-off the scene. However, the questioning immediately stopped and Marjoree faced the camera passing her microphone hand across her throat to signal Cochrane to stop the camera. Cochrane's head shot out from behind the viewfinder glaring at her, his face etched with an angry, questioning expression: "what?" he mouthed. She just focussed on him and repeated the gesture, this time with more force.

Cochrane lowered the camera and shrugged with disgust. The promise in his own career had risen inexorably as he accompanied Marjoree on most of her 'scoops', and he expected to 'go national' with her very soon. This unusual compassion for the police had obviously taken Cochrane completely by surprise.

It also caused Kleberon to stop momentarily in his tracks. He centred Marjoree in his gaze as she turned back towards him, microphone at her side. It was then that he noticed the tears welling in her eyes.

"Is it Hilary?" The question emerged in a breaking voice, emotion was melting the media ice-woman.

"You know I can't say right now," he replied gently.

"Off the record," she pleaded, "please ..."

Kleberon maintained his professional distance: "you know Hilary Nicholson?"

"Since college ... we were room-mates for three years."

"If I say anything off the record, Ms Rolles, it will be you that owes me the exclusive."

"It's a deal," came the tearful reply.

Two

Kleberon entered the house through the front door, which opened straight into the main lounge area, a neat room with light furniture, white leather sofas and a large fish tank in the far corner creating a shimmering blue haze.

The house was a zoo; there must have been twenty people in there, mainly patrolmen searching rooms and the garden, plus three of his Detectives, including his second in command, Chris McKinley, who was briefing two other Homicide Squad members, Moreno and Capaldi.

He spotted Kleberon and beckoned him over: “scene’s in the master bedroom Paul. No sign of forced entry, looks like Ms Nicholson knew her killer.”

“So we’ve already decided it’s a homicide have we?” Kleberon replied.

“When you see it I think you’ll agree. M.E. wants to move the body, wouldn’t let her until you’d seen it. CSI have photo’d everything.”

“That’s quick work Chris.”

“Yeah, the Chief ordered it all by cellphone, he started back from Topeka soon as he heard.”

“Topeka?”

“Charity bash.”

“Oh great! So he’ll be bustin’ our balls within the hour, huh?”

“You got it Paul.”

“Well if he’s gonna do that, get everyone out of here except the techies while we still have the remains of a crime scene left for them, shall we?”

“Sure thing.” McKinley nodded to the other two: “organise it guys will ya.” Moreno and Capaldi started moving around clearing out patrolmen.

“We sure it’s Hilary Nicholson?” Kleberon enquired.

“Can’t mistake the face of ‘The Prodigal’s Saviour’, even in the circumstances the rest of her’s in.”

Three

The reference was to a headline in the ‘National Enquirer’ the previous year when Hilary Nicholson, accountant to the Kendrick empire, announced her engagement to Jackson Kendrick III, heir to the Kendrick family fortune.

This had happened shortly after the previously-estranged groom-to-be had been welcomed back into the fold of one of the most wealthy and powerful families in the State. The family-owned Kendrick Corporation was the holding company of a huge multi-national conglomerate with businesses engaged in everything from real estate to entertainment. The current president of the corporation was Jackson Kendrick Junior.

The family was very much new-money, because the company had only been founded in the nineteen-forties by Junior's father. Jackson Kendrick Senior was a hard businessman; he had to be, having been an 'Okie', a dirt-farmer from Oklahoma who lost everything during the Dust Bowl period of the mid-thirties, including his wife and children to malnutritional diseases. Other than that fact, details of which he would freely offer to anybody willing to listen, little was known of what happened to him in the dozen-or-so years following those events, up to and including the second world war, a period on which he avoided discussion throughout the rest of his life.

He emerged in eastern Kansas in 1946 with a second wife, a young son and several thousand acres of farmland. Authorised biographers attributed the acquisition of this wealth to inheritances received by his second wife; unauthorised accounts hinted at more dubious methods during the war years. Whatever the truth, it was what he did with those assets that forged the future. During the next ten years, the land was developed and the profits used to acquire failing companies, which he generally turned-around into thriving businesses.

By the early 'sixties, he was a multi-billionaire approaching his seventieth year and had turned his mind to philanthropy. This aspect of his life was mainly-attributed to his second wife, twenty-five years his junior and a lady of deeply-religious upbringing. She ran all of the many charitable-foundations that were set-up by her husband, and continued to do so after his sudden death in 1964, right up until her own demise on millennium night just two weeks short of her eightieth birthday.

On the death of his father, and as the only child of the second marriage, Jackson Kendrick Junior had been thrust in charge of the conglomerate at the age of just twenty-three. Although Junior, as he had always been known, was barely out of university, he took to this new responsibility like a duck to water. Through the ensuing near-forty years, he had multiplied the size of the already large organisation by a factor of hundreds, maybe even thousands. Nobody really knew quite how large the corporation actually was, except Junior himself and, perhaps, Emil Friedmann, the ambitious young lawyer who had snared the hand of Junior's teenage elder-daughter twelve years earlier. Such was the success of Friedmann's offshore activities, that even Forbes Magazine was unsure of where exactly Jackson Kendrick Junior should figure in its annual list of the world's richest people.

Three years after taking the reins, Junior married Estelle Gray, an East Coast socialite from an old-money family that had fallen on difficult times and was in need of an injection of new-money status. To all intents and purposes the marriage was a huge success; two years in, she produced their daughter, Gloria, and three years after that, the son and heir - Jackson Kendrick III. There had never been any hint of impropriety on either side of the marriage, both regularly appearing arm-in-arm at business and society functions.

The truth was that, although very close, they essentially never had time for dalliances. There was simply too much money in this world that was not already

under Junior's direct control, so he simply devoted almost all of his waking hours to acquiring as much of the rest of it as he could. Having always been a member of East Coast 'royalty', Estelle was constantly busy on the national social circuit. When she wasn't, she was either at home being a devoted mother and grandmother, or busy running the family's many Foundations, a role she had officially inherited on the death of her mother-in-law, but in reality had been covering behind the scenes for many years previously.

Junior had always intended to devote more time to the Foundations himself. As he grew older and retirement age beckoned, he had planned to pass the company reins gradually to his son. But this had proved impossible due to a lack of apparent fiscal responsibility in his male offspring, who also acquired a history of high-profile run-ins with police forces all over the country through drunkenness and womanising that eventually developed into drug-abuse. Junior had been constantly busy behind the scenes keeping his son out of the criminal courts, and the almost-definite subsequent jail.

Millennium year proved a major watershed for the family in several aspects. One was the receipt by Junior of a private warning from senior Senators that his influence would no longer save his son should he fall-foul of the authorities again, wherever that may occur. As a result, Jackson Kendrick III was publically disowned and disinherited by his father.

Following this humiliation, and stripped of the greedy attention of the host of human detritus that such a tabloid figure accumulates through little effort, but great expense, 'The Turd', as the son had become referred to colloquially by the gutter press, and privately in police forces across several States, achieved something of a turnaround in his public image. Three years on, and engaged to one of the most respected young businesswomen in the Midwest, he was considered by the family, in public at least, as something of a saved soul. The quality press rejoiced in the reconciliation to virtually the same sickening excess to which the tabloids had previously charted the long descent into depravity.

However, those closer to events were well-aware that his behaviour in private had not changed; it was the public-relations aspect that had become much better-managed. There were two reasons for this. Firstly he had restricted the majority of his excesses to within his home State borders, where Junior's influence was still strong enough to ensure that blind-eyes were turned whenever necessary, hence the disdain with which his name was treated by the foot-soldiers in law-enforcement. Secondly, the PR was firmly in the control of Emil Friedmann, brother-in-law to 'The Turd', father of Junior's two young grandsons and chief lawyer to the Kendrick empire.

Friedmann had been tireless in his efforts to keep his relative-by-marriage out of the headlines, coaching him in his public responsibilities and, wherever necessary, persuading injured-parties to 'be reasonable' by whatever method necessary. Although public-opinion was divided on the motives behind Friedmann's actions, and at what cost to the empire's coffers they had been achieved, there was no division of opinion about how successful he had been.

This night's turn of events undoubtedly had the potential to bring that particular house of cards crashing around Friedmann's ears.

Four

Kleberon and McKinley walked slowly down the corridor and into a bedroom that looked remarkably normal, given the circumstances, other than for the form laying on the bed. The bedside lights were on, providing a demure light that was only disturbed by the neon light beaming from the wide-open bathroom door, through which two white-overalled CSI Techs could be seen carefully swabbing exposed surfaces.

On the queen-size bed was the naked body of an attractive woman in her thirties, led face-up. Her head, which was resting on a pillow plumped-up against the headboard, was completely shaven; the facial expression was totally peaceful. Her smallish-breasts were firm and perfectly round, as if they had some form of enhancement, but there was no evidence of any surgery. Her arms were laid straight out at right angles to her body, spreading across towards both sides of the bed, hands palm-up with the index finger of the right hand pointing slightly upwards. Strangely, both thumbs were folded along the line of their respective middle fingers.

Both legs were spread to an angle of about sixty degrees, fully-revealing her vagina which showed signs of recent sexual activity. Her right foot was pointed at the ceiling, her left pointed outwards resting on the bed. There was no pubic hair; in fact the entire body appeared to have no hair at all, as if recently-waxed. Kleberon thought it had something of a sheen to it, but dismissed the thought as a trick of the ambient lighting.

"Who called it in?" Kleberon asked.

McKinley replied: "nine-one-one call, anonymous, just after midnight"

"Great! Nobody here then."

"No. Caller said there was a break-in, patrol was despatched and found the house unsecured. They entered and found everything looking normal, radio on, no obvious point of entry, but nobody answered their calls, so they started to search and found the body."

"Who did?"

"Officer Pendleton."

"Don't know him do I?"

"Two months out of academy, only issued a few speeding tickets up to now, ran out in the garden and threw-up all over the place. He's out there now sobbing his heart out."

"It just gets better! Now just tell me how many head of cattle were stampeded through here as well will ya, just for the record."

Mary Jourdain, the County Medical Examiner, emerged from the bathroom: “hey Paul,” she greeted him, somewhat sadly.

Kleberon acknowledged with a nod and a faint smile: “Mary.”

She looked at the bed: “bit weird doncha think?”

“I assume we have eliminated some form of ritual-suicide, shaving her hair to indicate her loss of self, then writing a note saying how she couldn’t face the rest of her life with that sonofabitch Kendrick-from-hell, before emptying the entire bathroom cabinet of barbiturates?”

Mary Jourdain turned and gave her normal look of disdain that Kleberon had become used to over the years they had worked cases together. She started narrating her notes: “female, early/mid-thirties, no obvious wounds from what I can see from how she is laying there, so I would like to move her and check the rest of the body while you’re here, if that’s OK.”

Kleberon turned to McKinley: “we don’t need anything else here do we?”

“No Paul, like I said whole scene’s been photographed.”

“OK Mary, off you go.”

She called to one of her overalled assistants: “give me a hand here would you.”

The body was turned over on the bed. There appeared to be some bruising across the back, but Mary Jourdain quickly dismissed it as she conducted an initial cursory examination, commentating as she went: “minor bruising to the back and rear of the legs caused by the time the body has lain in that position post-mortem. No other pre-mortem injuries, so no obvious struggle ... hold on ...”

Kleberon stepped forward: “what have you found?”

“Hmm - small needle puncture at the back of the neck. That changes everything Paul. You don’t self-medicate in that location and because there are no signs of a struggle, we’re almost definitely looking at an additional party here. I’d say she was either asleep or in someone’s arms.”

“Or drugged?”

“I can only tell you that when I get her back to the morgue. She’s been shaved, then washed-down completely, my guess would be in the shower as the bath drain looks completely dry, although it would be far more difficult to do in the shower if she was already dead, so that would suggest pre-mortem complicity of some sort. I’d say there’s little chance of finding anything helpful on the body. If the killer’s been as efficient as I think, there’ll be no fluids or alien body hair either.”

“Alien body hair - what’s this an X-File now?”

She gave him another look of disdain, this time showing some signs of annoyance. Kleberon tilted his head slightly and shrugged. She returned to the examination: “as you probably saw from her original position, there’s been obvious sexual activity ... I couldn’t tell exactly with the body in that position, but ...” her voice faded away.

“But?” Kleberon prompted.

Mary Jourdain rounded on him, eyes unusually wide, her growing anger showing clearly in the answer: “you’re asking me to make a prejudgement - you know I don’t guess, but you always ask me to guess.”

Kleberon was also becoming a little agitated: “which you always want to don’t you? But you won’t until I issue a disclaimer just in case, which is a waste of time because you’re always right. So let’s just cut to the chase, take it as read that I won’t quote you like I never do - just tell me what you think.”

“The intercourse may have been post-mortem, front and back. There you go, I wasn’t being coy, I just didn’t want to say it. Now can I take her to the morgue?”

Kleberon saw the anguish in her eyes, something he didn’t see often and he felt dreadful. It was as if he had inflicted a similar, but mental, violation on his colleague and friend to that which had been inflicted physically on the actual victim.

“Of course - and Mary, I’m sorry, OK?”

“OK.”

“One last thing - time of death?”

“Best I can tell here, between eight p.m. and midnight - and I’m sorry as well, Paul.” She managed a weak smile.

Kleberon looked at her with compassion in his eyes. They both knew what was meant and, had this not been a crime scene, they would probably both have hugged, because they knew instinctively that this was only the beginning of what was going to be a very protracted case.

Five

Kleberon and McKinley walked back into the lounge area, which was finally empty. Kleberon could just make-out, through the french doors at the rear, the figure of a patrolman outside, slumped in a patio chair, head in his hands: “I thought I said get all the foot soldiers out Chris.”

“That’s Pendleton. Thought you might want to speak to him. His partner’s outside in the Cruiser waiting for him.”

Kleberon stood still, hands on hips and breathed a long, deep sigh: “let’s just summarise here a minute shall we Chris? Our victim most likely was asleep when she was killed, maybe on the bed in there, maybe raped as well; but the killer didn’t break-in. The body was taken into the shower, shaved and washed. Then most likely the killer did the housekeeping, called nine-one-one and vanished. Our newest-finest out there rolls-up with his buddy, tramples through the house, then back again before depositing his dinner on the lawn out back. They call it in, Chief gets alerted because of who the victim is, but as he’s a hundred miles away, he immediately invites the entire population of Wichita to view the scene, ensuring that anything our rookie out there hasn’t already

disturbed is definitely contaminated. Now the Chief's less than half an hour out, expecting a fully-solved crime, perp in custody, on arrival."

"Guess that about sums it up."

Kleberon looked at the ceiling: "beam me up Scotty!" He held the pose for a split second, then dropped his shoulders and looked briefly at the floor before turning to McKinley, fixing him momentarily with a focussed stare. His face relaxed again as he began his instructions: "OK Chris, lock it all down, don't let anyone in the place, including the Chief, until Mary's boys have been over it with a fine-tooth comb. Then when they've done that, get them to do it again with a finer-tooth comb. We're looking for anything that doesn't fit - get that, anything!"

"Sure thing Paul."

"And no, I don't need to speak to Pendleton, just let him write it up when he gets back to City Hall, via the side entrance please. I'm going down to the garage, maybe we can use that for a bit of privacy. Who else have we got here?"

"Just Moreno and Capaldi at the moment."

"Tell them to meet me in the garage. Then you meet 'n greet the Chief outside and bring him to me in there as well."

Kleberon made his way to the garage via the basement and checked the side-door; it was unlocked, as he suspected it might be.

Capaldi came down the stairs. Kleberon turned to him: "get someone down here to check and print this door, can you?"

"Sure Boss," came the reply, as Capaldi turned and sprinted back up the stairs.

Kleberon looked around. A silver Porsche Boxster stood in the centre of the garage, hood down. He moved to the rear of the car and dropped down by the rear bumper. He reached under and touched the exhaust - it was still slightly warm to the touch; the car hadn't been there many hours.

A CSI technician appeared at the bottom of the stairs and walked over to the side door. Kleberon spoke to him: "open it and leave it open when you've finished, then photograph everything outside."

"OK Lieutenant, came the reply."

Capaldi came back down the stairs, this time accompanied by Moreno. Kleberon issued their instructions: "OK you two, house-to-house, find out if anyone saw anyone coming and going, you know the deal."

Moreno was the more outspoken of the pair: "it's four a.m. Boss, they're all asleep."

"Sure they are, with a police and media convention going on outside! If they are, then wake 'em up. Then when you've done with that, find-out whose house this is, 'cos it sure as hell ain't Ms Nicholson's. Then contact the owner and find-out what their connection is to Wichita's most famous accountant and why she is all the way across town here sleeping in someone else's house with her car in the garage, instead of being safely tucked-up in her million-dollar security-guarded home in Eastborough."

“And then what should we do to fill the spare hours until breakfast?” quipped Moreno.

“Well you could always humour the Chief for me.”

“Humour me yourself Kleberson ...” The booming voice came from the side door where Chief of Police Stanton stood, filling the portal with his huge frame; Kleberson could just make-out McKinley standing behind him.

“... 'cos you see, I could really do with a little humour right now, having to just run the gauntlet of that rottweiler Cochrane trying to interview me. How'd he get here so quick, and without the lovely Ms Rolles?”

“She's not out there?” Kleberson asked.

“She's sat in her car Paul,” McKinley interrupted.

“What the hell are we discussing that bitch for anyway?” Stanton bellowed: “we got a murder here and one that's gonna put a millstone round our necks quick enough without her damned help!”

Kleberson rounded on the massive frame standing inside the doorway: “she knows the victim and I suspect a whole lot more, but before I can get to that, I need to secure what little I have left here.”

McKinley backed out of the doorway. He knew the signs well enough of when a bomb was about to go off between his two bosses, and ground zero was not the place to be when it did. So did Moreno and Capaldi, who quickly exited stage right up the stairs. The CSI tech needed no prompting to follow McKinley outside and carry-on his work.

Stanton and Kleberson had a strained professional respect for each other. Stanton knew Kleberson was the best detective he had and that the department had been lucky to get him from the Feds. Kleberson knew Stanton was an ace politician and would keep the elite from falling on his Squad from a great height in situations like this. So both needed to keep their professional relationship onside, despite neither approving of the other's methods. Kleberson fired the first volley: “this is your handiwork isn't it Chief?”

“Don't you start on me ...” Stanton was cut-off in mid-sentence, Kleberson unloading his ire on his newest visitor.

“Shut the fuck up Chief, you started this three-ring circus. How did Cochrane get here? You sent him here, or rather the Mayor did after you got him out of bed at two a.m. no doubt. And Why? 'Cos we have a high-profile murder here and someone wants it cleared-up, covered over and out of the headlines before Election Day!”

“Now just a cotton-picking minute ...” Stanton tried to stem the flow.

But Kleberson was off and running: “when I got here, the whole crime scene has heaving with maggots 'looking for clues' - destroying them more like - and you put 'em here. How the fuck am I supposed to close this with no evidence, huh? Or am I not supposed to, is that it? Don't tell me - one of the Kendricks rang you, or were they at the function and got a call? Well which was it?”

Stanton could see that he was going to have the facts dragged out of him, Kleberon was too damned good in this type of scenario for them not to be. So he switched tack, in order to try and take the heat out of the situation: “Junior got a call from Friedmann and came across to my table, but I had already been briefed by ...”

“So where was the son?”

“I don’t know.”

“So he wasn’t there with good old pappy then?”

“Hell no, he ...”

“So Junior gets a call from Friedmann telling him that his son’s betrothed is lying dead in someone else’s house in Derby, at the same time that you’re getting a heads-up from control. The son’s nowhere to be seen, but instead of you thinking ‘hold-on a minute, where’s the boyfriend in this?’ you send in the cavalry to destroy any evidence, quite legally of course, that might connect the State’s darling first family to any wrong-doing. Then you round-up the local media, whose lead reporter is an old friend of the victim, just for good measure. Well, I think I know who my perp most likely is, so while I’m down at the Judge’s office swearing-out an arrest warrant, why don’t I just get one to serve on you for good measure. How does accessory after the fact grab you, huh Chief?”

Throughout this tirade, Stanton had been reaching boiling point. Finally it was his turn: “right, now you listen-up here, you got nothing on any member of the Kendrick family, not even circumstantial, so don’t even think of going there. As for Junior, course he’s gonna hit on me, this was his future daughter-in-law, the mother for his grandchildren-to-be, why wouldn’t he demand action?”

“Tell it to the electorate Chief, in the meantime get the fuck out of my crime-scene and pray I don’t find any probable cause to swear-out that warrant.”

“You won’t have time, sonny-boy, ten a.m. press conference and you’d better have something to say.”

Stanton stormed out of the side door and across the lawn towards his car. Cochrane made a move to get another quote, but only met the lowered shoulder of the two-eighty-pound former KSU linebacker as he ducked under the police tape. Stanton would later apologise for the ‘accident’ that Cochrane clearly knew was anything but.

Six

“Elvis has left the Building,” McKinley quipped as he re-entered the side door.

“Idiot,” Kleberon snapped.

“You always say that.”

“Not him Chris, you! How could you let the scene get so far out of control?”

McKinley tensed as he reacted to this unexpected accusation: "it was like this when I got here Paul. Good grief! I was only a couple of minutes ahead of you. The Chief, however, had been phoning everybody at two-minute intervals from his car, trying to gather information."

"Yeah, probably had Junior on the cellphone feeding it back too. Sorry Chris, it's just that family always seems to have the drop on us."

"You're convinced it's 'The Turd' aren't you?"

"Well tell me Chris, you got any alternatives right now, 'cos if you have lets get 'em in now before the Chief railroads some poor unsuspecting Hispanic from bandit country just in time for the press conference!"

"There ain't anything Paul, nothing obvious anyway."

"Then find out where 'The Turd' is. No doubt he's sleeping off whatever last night's indulgence was somewhere, 'cos he sure as hell ain't here bustin' my balls like any normal bereaved husband-to-be would be, is he? When you've found him, call me. Don't interview him, leave that to me; you can bet your boots Friedmann's with him in any case. But first, on your way out, see if the delectable Ms Rolles is still in her car. If she is, make sure Cochrane's out of earshot, then ask her to meet me alone in Glenda's at Topeka and Kellogg in half an hour. I'll meet you back at base. Let's have a sitrep at six a.m. Oh, and while you're at it, cancel everyone's weekend."

Seven

Kleber's maroon Chevy dropped off the ramp from I-54 and through the green lights on Topeka. He pulled onto the forecourt of Glenda's where there was just one other car parked, a dark green Chrysler 300M. Marjoree Rolles was sat at a table in the window behind the car, holding a scrunched-up napkin in her hand. It was 4.45 a.m. and the restaurant was empty apart from the night boy.

Marjoree's eyes were red from the tears that still dampened her pronounced cheekbones. Kleber offered to get her a drink, but she just shrugged. He ordered a black coffee, then gestured to her to join him at a table away from the window. She slid into the stall opposite him and gave him an intensive stare: "is it Hilary?" she asked

"No positive ID yet, but totally off the record?" She nodded, her look more fearful. Kleber continued: "I never actually met the lady in life, but I would be as sure as I can be that it was her."

Marjoree slumped forward onto the table, buried her head in her arms and quietly sighed: "the bastard."

"Who is?"

"Jackson Kendrick the Third, or should I say 'The Turd' as you guys prefer to call him."

“And you guys as well, huh?”

“It does seem an apt soubriquet doesn’t it, although I never expected him to plumb these depths.” Her head raised again, exposing the damp patch on her sleeve where the fresh tears had fallen.

Kleberon prompted her: “tell me what you know, and what it’s going to cost me.”

“Let’s call it a charitable donation in memory of a dear friend.”

“What no exclusive?”

Her eyes narrowed angrily: “cut the cynicism Lieutenant, it really doesn’t suit you. If it makes you feel better, you can match my generosity with whatever you think is appropriate when the time comes, OK?”

“Fine, I’m all ears.”

“Hilary and I met at USC; we had rooms on the same landing. Within months we were inseparable, and by our second year we had moved-in together ...”

“Just a minute,” interrupted Kleberon, “are you saying you were an item?”

“What’s the matter Lieutenant, you shocked? Or are you getting a hard on?” She smiled a wicked smile.

“Ms Nicholson was ac/dc - that what you’re telling me?”

“I’ll talk, you scribble - alright? Like I said, we were together for the next two years. Then, when I moved home to Salina, Hilary came too. She was much more clever than me, got a job very quickly with Ernst & Young in Kansas City while I got a break at the Wichita Mail. So, she moved to KC and I moved down here. For the next couple of years we alternated weekends at each other’s places, then I landed KNKW and the hours went haywire. S’pose we just drifted apart, from the commitment point of view, but we remained the very best of friends.”

“So, when she moved here, what, three years ago, you took-up again?”

“No, like I said, really good friends, almost sisters really, but not enough common time for anything else.”

“What, not even one-night stands?”

“Watch your hormones Lieutenant, I’m not answering that ‘cos it ain’t relevant! She had the odd fling, mainly people she met out-of-town whilst on business, but nothing either significant or important.”

“How do you know that?”

“I told you Lieutenant, like sisters.”

Kleberon realised there was a lot more here, but he would have to settle for what he got voluntarily, for the time being at least. But he pushed a bit more - he needed a break: “so, no weirdo’s then?”

“Hilary wasn’t into anything kinky, neither am I and neither was anybody else she took-up with. It was as much companionship with her as anything. When there was sex, it was always gentle and meaningful and the infrequency made it all the sweeter.”

“So if anyone cut-up rough, she would have dropped them?”

“Literally on the spot Lieutenant, she was sixth dan karate blackbelt, knew all the pressure points, nobody could have got close enough to attack her. Only a gun would have killed her.”

“A gun? What type of gun?”

“She was shot, right?”

“No details, my call on the donation remember?”

“But she must have been shot. Nobody would have been allowed any closer - I’m telling you!” The tears welled-up again as a look of fear crossed her face.

“OK, OK, she was shot. But you quote me on that and I’ll lock you up and throw away the key.”

Marjoree calmed down. Kleberson continued: “so, nobody out there that you wouldn’t be aware of?”

“Absolutely not and no men either, not that I know of, until that slimeball came along.”

“I’m glad we got to him. How do you explain it?”

“Oh that’s easy, it was a marriage of convenience, or at least a marriage-to-be. You see the one thing Hilary wanted was a child - not adopted, her own. But she didn’t want anything else, just one roll in the hay, perfectly timed and hey presto! Offspring, with no attached subsequent sexual commitment.”

“But ‘The Turd’ would never have gone for that, he’s testosterone-supercharged. How would he possibly survive? It’s like making a pact with a female Mantis. One jump and you’re dead!”

“That’s where it was perfect. They drew-up a pre-nup. He got her once, or as many times as necessary at her instigation only, from which she delivered an heir to the dynasty. He would leave her to bring-up the child and could carry-on with his ‘private life’ as if nothing had happened. She would be the doting wife and mother, whilst being allowed her own ‘friends’.”

“But what about when he finally got caught-out? After all, he’s hardly Mr Subtlety is he?”

“That was the coup-de-grace - he mustn’t, otherwise the entire Kendrick fortune went to the child in trust. If he got caught, he lost everything.”

“So what did Junior think of all this?”

“He didn’t know, Friedmann drew it all up.”

“Friedmann? But he’s Junior’s right hand.”

“That’s what Junior thinks, but ‘The Turd’ has been in Friedmann’s pocket since the banishment, and heavily into sweeteners to keep Friedmann quiet.”

“So that’s it then, ‘The Turd’ realises he’ll never keep his end of the bargain, wants out, she refuses, he kills her.”

“Good try Lieutenant, but no-sale. Hilary would have torn-up the agreement at anytime. You see, she wanted the child, nothing more. She just needed to be sure that the kid would be provided for and, as you say, ‘The Turd’ could never have kept his end of the bargain, so she was home and hosed, but only after the

kid came along. If 'The Turd' wanted out, she would have let him go, then waited for another stud with the right credentials to come along."

"But he ain't that intelligent, he wouldn't be able to accept that someone would let him off scot-free."

"You might think that, but I witnessed the agreement. Anyway, if he started any funny stuff, I've got enough unused garbage on him to bury him ten times over; he wouldn't have kept Junior's blessing for anything once I'd done that."

"OK, OK, so if it's not him, and I ain't letting him off that easy, then who?"

"That's it, I have no idea, not an inkling. She was in her safehouse, nobody else had a key. The alarms would have been set ..."

"Wait, wait, wait! SAFEHOUSE?"

THE
MANTIS
PACT

◆

The fiancé of the heir to one of the richest families in Kansas is found dead in her house in a peaceful suburb of Wichita. The position of the body is similar to the form of a famous Da Vinci masterpiece. If that isn't enough of a problem for Lt. Paul Kleberon, head of the homicide squad in the city, within hours a second body, that of her oldest friend and the star anchor for the local TV station, is found in a penthouse in the centre of the city, presented in a manner mirroring the first. The profile of the murders resembles that of a serial killer known to the FBI, but shot dead two months earlier by the agent they send to Wichita to assist the local police.

So is everything quite what it seems?



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