

# A Brother's Cold Case

## 1

Rick Cornell held his breath for a few seconds as the semi's long, black exhaust plume drifted over him. The smoke stung his eyes. After the truck rumbled past, the line of cars resumed. Their tires whirred on Central Avenue's pavement, and lights stabbed at him in the darkness. He took a long pull from his paper-bagged bourbon bottle as he walked.

He'd been fired for two months now from the Albuquerque Police Department. He'd managed a long time as a cop with his weakness for booze. The camaraderie of the Blue Wall of Silence protected him as long as possible.

Lots of cops drank too much, he reasoned as he stumbled farther along the sidewalk in the lingering heat of an August night. Who wouldn't drink for escape after having to deal with society's predators? The violence, the danger—the mental exhaustion of knowing any traffic stop, any domestic disturbance call, could turn deadly. Even so, he'd kept his most serious drinking to after-duty hours while a street cop. Never should have transferred to the unpredictable hours of detectives. He thought of how he'd crashed into that city bus with his unmarked unit, drunk when he was called out on a case. Scaring the passengers. Neither cop buddies nor APD public relations experts could save him after that.

He sidestepped into Highland Park—its trees, hills, and shadows a retreat from the clamorous traffic. He inhaled the scents of grass and trees as he clutched the bourbon bottle. He had enough of a pension to afford bars and decent whiskey instead of the beer and wine so many others had to settle for on the streets. So he was okay, he decided, as he sat at a park picnic table and unscrewed the bottle top.

With each swig, Rick scanned the area around him. He still had police alertness as a habit even with the liquor burning his throat. He noticed the silhouette of a man entering the park. Just some homeless drunk, he thought. He snorted at the irony of him accusing someone else of being a drunk. The man was probably a homeless guy looking for a spot to spend the night. Rick would be homeless too if his brother didn't pay for a scruffy motel room. He had to admit his brother was smart not to give Rick the cash and depend on him to pay the rent. His brother. A good guy, that Andy.

He turned his gaze away from the man and looked around the park, dimly lit by a few scattered lamps. "Not a bad spot," he mumbled aloud.

It was quiet times like these that he sometimes looked back on his career with pride. He'd been decorated three times for bravery. The first time was for running into a burning house he'd seen while on patrol, carrying out the fourteen-year-old babysitter under one arm and a diapered baby tucked under the other arm. That baby was grown up and in college now. The parents still mailed him a Christmas card every year. The only card he ever got besides one from Andy. After he'd made detective, he tracked down the monster who'd kidnapped a fifth-grade girl. Took him a week of nonstop days and nearly sleepless nights, but he rescued the girl, and the FBI caught the kidnapper on the run. Then there was the shootout with druggies while he dragged a wounded cop to safety.

He took another drink and coughed. Yes, becoming a detective had been a mistake. He became one because he'd been good at solving crime puzzles. He'd had a willingness to go outside the rules if that's what it took. Like the big narcotics case he was working on when they fired him. "Wonder what happened with that," he muttered. Probably not much. Because he'd gone outside the rules. Who'd even know about it?

Taking another swig caused him to look up. That's when he realized the man had turned to walk toward him.

"Beat it," he ordered the man.

The man continued walking toward him. Rick slid off the picnic table bench and rose to his feet. He didn't want to be sitting if it came to fighting for his booze.

The man stopped on the other side of the table. He wore dark clothes and stared at Rick from under the bill of a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. His right arm extended toward Rick.

"What the hell you want?" Rick shook his doubled-up fists as a warning. "I told you to go away, you sonuvabitch. I mean it."

The man seemed to smile as he stepped into a pool of light. Or was it a sneer? "Hello, Rick."

Rick blinked. Another former cop? Not familiar. Who is this guy, Rick thought, and how does he know my name?

Rick grabbed his bottle and backed up a step. Now illumination from a park lamp glimmered on the steel pistol in the man's right hand. A long sound suppressor extended from the barrel. With the table separating them, Rick couldn't try to move closer and grab the gun as he'd been trained at the police academy years ago. Under the best of circumstances, that was hard to pull off anyway. Still, Rick thought, with the bourbon reassuring his brain of all things possible, maybe he could do it.

He moved sideways around the table to get closer. "Put the gun down," he said as he took a step toward the man. He almost lost his balance, stepping sideways like that. "Put it away and just leave. We'll pretend this never happened."

Rick could see the man's teeth gleam in the indirect light.

A rush, Rick thought. I'll throw the bottle at him and rush him.

Rick was a split second from jumping at the man when his world ended.