

Picture Me Dead

By David Simpson

It was a damn good likeness.

The painting rested face up in the meadow. Wildflowers drooped over the edges of its frame. It was a portrait. The bust of an older man in a coat and tie with a smug expression that said, ‘Of course I’m better than you. How could you not know that?’

I tilted back my head, momentarily bathing my face in the breeze that was a constant companion in this wilderness expanse, the same breeze that coaxed the forest of surrounding pines to its majestic side-to-side waltz. But today was paradise interrupted. I looked back down, paused, extended both arms toward the painting, made Ls with my fingers and thumbs, then rotated my finger-frames crane-like to the right until they bracketed the face of the dead man sprawled just three feet away. His arrogance had fled, leaving only vacant eyes and pallid skin the color of coconut milk.

Still, it was a damn good likeness.

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“So, the theory is the killer’s an artist. He paints a portrait of the vic, and when he’s done, he strangles his subject, then dumps him up here in our laps. That it?”

I wasn’t about to disagree, mainly because that was the exact theory I’d just proposed to the chief about eight seconds earlier.

“Makes sense to me, Chief.”

“Yeah? So why do all that? Paint a fancy portrait. Gold frame. You know how much those things cost? And how long you think it took him to paint it? It’s nuts. More important.” He

raised a finger. “It’s over our heads.” The chief wanted to bring in experts. “Bullshit,” I said. “My crime-scene, my case. That’s always been the rule.” So what if we didn’t have a dedicated homicide unit. I’d handled three others. Plus, I’d taken those two online forensics courses.

Things got more complicated when the vic was I.D.’d as a San Francisco resident, the big city four hours south. His prints matched a CPA licensing database. We were still wrestling jurisdiction when a hiker found painting number two. Next to vic number two. Also strangled. And just my luck, also, it turned out, another S.F. resident.

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“It’s done, Finn.”

“So that’s it? We’re out?”

“Officially, they’re now S.F.P.D.’s cases. But look, also officially, we’re working together. Inter-agency.”

“So, I’m still in?”

“On three conditions.”

“Oh, come on. I’m—” I smothered my mouth. Time to behave.

“One, anything you find or figure out goes immediately to them. No Lone Ranger crap.”

I shrugged like, Who me?

“Two, our piece is just the local angle. Why were the bodies dumped here? What’s the connection to Siskiyou? Everything else – forensics, motive, connections between the vics, M.O., the whole painting thing – that’s all S.F.P.D.”

“Understood.” In my ten years as a Siskiyou County deputy sheriff I’d learned, if you were eventually going to ignore the chief, it was always best to agree with him first.

“Three.” The chief went Cheshire Cat. “The kid goes with you for everything.”

“No. No way, Chief. I am not babysitting—”

“Then, no case.”

The ‘kid,’ Conrad Dix, was the mayor’s nephew, son of his wealthy brother. A law school grad, he’d flunked the bar exam, but somehow magically was now working for us as a know-nothing assistant, doing, I didn’t know what. As far as I was concerned, he was a silver spoon dandy who got a deserving come-uppance and was now just cashing in on daddy’s connections. But I also knew babysitting him wasn’t the mayor’s doing. It had the chief written all over it. Payback for untold acts of insubordination by yours truly. I returned the chief’s smile.

“You got a stroller I can borrow?”

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“Where we going first?” Conrad was like an excited puppy.

“A date with a shrink,” I said. “Find out why somebody would go to all the trouble of painting a portrait of someone just to kill them.”

He raised one eyebrow. Neat trick.

“We’re investigating motive?”

“Very good, kid.”

“It’s Conrad. And I thought we were limited to the ‘local’ angle.”

“This is local. He works right here in town.”

I got the eyebrow again.

“I don’t think that’s what the chief meant.”

“Yeah? Then just leave the thinking part to me, kid.”

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“Most assuredly,” Dr. Bennington continued, “the portrait is your key. Deliberate. Gratuitous. Unquestionably a message.” A master of the obvious.

“Right, but a message about who?” I asked. “The killer? Or the victim?”

“Or both?” Conrad added.

Bennington and I turned like synchronized swimmers at my tag-along’s first words since the interview had started. “Precisely,” Bennington said. “In the majority cohort, we do find connections between victim and killer. The portraits are your killer’s way of telling us about that connection.”

“Telling us what?”

“That, I cannot answer. What I can say is that knowing someone paints so proficiently, that itself is revelatory.”

I glanced at Conrad, made a writing gesture. “Meaning?”

“They see the world differently, through an artist’s eye. They’re patient, not impulsive. Paintings can take days, even weeks to complete. Most important, your killer wants us to know he’s an artist. Perhaps he longs for recognition previously denied.”

“Okay. Now you’re—”

“Except what if it wasn’t the killer who did the portraits?” Conrad asked.

We both turned again.

“Once more?” Bennington said.

Conrad shrunk back. “I just meant, what if—I don’t know—the killer stole pre-done paintings or maybe had someone else do them?”

Bennington looked at me. “You said the killer was the artist.”

“We’ve assumed that. Because both paintings were found next to the bodies. But—”

“Indeed.” Bennington turned dismissive. “If someone else did your paintings, I’m afraid they tell you nothing about the killer. At least nothing I can help with, gentlemen.”

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“Sorry,” Conrad said, back in the car. “I just—”

“No. They were smart comments. Really smart. Smart enough to make me ask: How’d you flunk the bar exam?”

“I did it to piss off my parents.”

“Nice. No, seriously.”

“The real reason?”

I answered with a look.

“I flunked it to piss off my parents.”

“Look. Kid. If you want to—”

“It’s Conrad. And that is the real reason. They’re the ones who insisted on law school. I never wanted it. But in my family, if you don’t control the money, you don’t get to make decisions. About anything. They kept pushing, saying I was so smart that anything else would be a waste of my potential, they’d pay for it, blah-blah-blah. I gave in. Except, no way was I going to actually practice law. I mean, they had an entire career mapped out for me. So I figured, flunk the bar, they’ll realize I’m not the genius they thought I was, distance themselves from my failure, get off my ass, and let me live my life as the disappointing son I was meant to be. And it worked. Hey, maybe I am as smart as they thought?”

I shook my head.

“Look, I know I was forced on you. But I applied for this unpaid internship because this is what I want to do. For me.” He fixed me with a look. “What’s next?”

We stared, re-measuring each other.

“S.F.P.D.,” I said.

I started the car, called our liaison. I said we had zip on the local angle. Ditto on her end. They’d learned both vics were in finance. Both coached youth sports. Other crap. They had teams looking into everything plus the painting stuff. We agreed to talk later.

I pulled into a strip mall. Parked in front of “Color Me.” Art classes for adults and kids.

“Another date?” Conrad asked.

“Cram course in oil painting.” I waited for the eyebrow.

“Local artist?”

I half-smiled. “You catch on quick.”

* * *

Julie Rayne stared at my phone, switching back and forth between a photo of the first portrait and a ‘before’ photo of victim number one we’d gotten from S.F.P.D.

“I mean, it’s amateurish. The chin and bone structure are all wrong. The lips are a crime—no offense. It’s fine. Just not professional.” She returned my phone. “You think an artist’s strangling people?”

Her tone oozed defensiveness. “I think there’s a killer strangling people. And the killer —” I glanced at Conrad “—or someone unknowingly involved, also happens to paint.”

“Uh-huh.” Arms folded across her chest.

“Let me ask you something: The paintings, if you could see them in person, could they help us identify the artist?”

“Probably.”

A hit. Finally.

“Most artists, even shoddy ones, have preferences about paints they like, favorite colors, how they mix and transition them, whether they use palette knives or brushes and what kinds of each, stroke technique—I could go on. But to answer your real question, No. I am not—”

“Look,” I said, “I’ve got a murderer loose who’s killed two people—”

My cell buzzed.

“Sorry.” I walked away. Listened. “On my way.” Clicked off. Walked back.

“You were saying about two—”

“Three. Now it’s three.”

“Shit,” Conrad blurted.

“We gotta run. Bottom line? S.F. residents are being killed and then dumped up here. Our question is: Why? And maybe it’s because an artist, someone local, a total amateur, is unwittingly doing the killer’s paintings. And if they are, and you could help us identify and talk to the artist, maybe they’ve seen our guy.”

“Even so, they probably haven’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Websites. You pick an artist. Send a photo and money. Everybody I know uses PayPal. The artist does an oil portrait of the photo, then mails both back. The two of you never meet.”

Dammit. I had more questions. But I also had a crime scene that couldn’t wait.

* * *

Five hours later we were back in my office.

S.F.P.D forensics was on their way. The coroner had the body. We’d secured the third painting in our evidence locker. I was mulling over our psychologist’s and artist’s thoughts.

“It’s funny,” Conrad said. “It kinda looks like Tarville.”

“Sorry.” I hadn’t been listening.

“Nothing, I just—nothing.”

“Kid, we’re on the same team. Speak up.”

“We’re a team?”

“Don’t get all prom night on me. Talk.”

“The portrait. It’s just-it kinda looks like Justice Elliot Tarville.”

“Tarville?” I said. “Roberts. Ginsberg. Those names, I know. Who’s—”

“He’s not on the Supremes. He’s a California appellate justice, first district court of appeal out of San Francisco.”

“And he looks like our painting?”

“Sort of.”

“And you know this how? I never even heard of the guy.”

“I externed at the first district during law school. Pretty boring, really. They. . .”

But I’d already stopped listening. *A painting of a judge. A painting—*

I tapped Conrad’s laptop. “Show me his picture.” Seconds later, he swiveled the screen to me. He was right. Not a perfect match, but close enough. Too damn close to be a coincidence. And I’ve never believed in coincidences.

“Kid—”

“—Conrad.”

I shook my head. “You haven’t seen the first two paintings, have you?”

“My partner isn’t that good about sharing.”

It was like talking to myself. I brought up photos of both paintings on my phone. “You recognize—”

“Oh my God, Justice Gleason.”

Then.

“Justice Trotter.”

I fingered his laptop again. “Pictures.” He typed, then spun the screen. “Ho-ly shit.” My brain went into overdrive. “These two on the same—what’d you say? —first district appeals court?”

“Yeah. What—”

I shushed him with a raised finger.

The kaleidoscope was still spinning, but I could already see the final picture. I switched to thinking out loud. “We’ve assumed—everybody’s assumed—that the killer picked his victims because of some connection to each of them, then painted their portraits for some wacko reason we don’t understand, and then, once he finished, he killed them. But what if that’s all backwards? What if our killer started with these three justices, painted their portraits or had someone do it, and then went to a crowded place—”

“Like San Francisco.”

“Looking for people who resembled his paintings. And when he found a close enough look-alike—”

“He grabbed them and killed them.”

“Which would mean—”

“The killer’s connection is to those justices, not the victims.”

“Bingo. He’s killing them in effigy and leaving the portraits to make sure the world knows what he’s doing.” I had it. “And why, smart-boy, would anyone want to kill a judge?”

“Because they ruled against you.”

“Go to the head of the class, kid.” I rubbed my cheeks, trying to conjure up our next move. “So. . .how do we find someone pissed enough at these particular—”

I heard clicking. Conrad was already working his laptop. He narrated as he typed. “I’m logging into the Westlaw database of California appellate decisions. There are about sixteen justices in the first district. Cases are decided by panels of three justices assigned at random. We search decisions within the last—” He looked up at me.

“Say. . .five years?”

“Last five years, for cases with Tarville, Gleason and Trotter as the assigned panel. That’s. . .twenty-six cases. That’s a lot.”

“Ah. But he killed all three. Can you narrow it to just those cases where all three voted unanimously?”

“Doing it.”

“Will it tell us the names of each losing party?”

“Yep.”

“And what the case was about?”

“I can print each appellate opinion in full, plus trial court records, you name it.” He paused. “Okay, this is going to take me a little longer than I thought, because. . .”

But I’d already tuned him out again.

We’ll read all the cases. Pull names of the losing parties. Flag any cases containing a heightened emotional trigger for the loser or their families or for someone else implicated by the result. Cross-check for criminal records, artists, local residents, local employment—he thought of their artist—and PayPal accounts.

“How you doing, kid?”

“It’s Conrad. And I’m getting there. And I’m gonna need a printer.”

* * *

After that first domino, the rest fell in rapid succession. We spent the night reading and compiling a list of names. In the morning, after updating our flabbergasted chief, I dutifully forwarded everything to the equally flabbergasted S.F.P.D.

Their I.T. nerds returned a hard hit within hours.

Seems a certain Charles Frost lost an emotional wrongful termination lawsuit on a false technicality. He appealed. But a panel of our three favorite justices unanimously affirmed. They even sanctioned him for frivolous arguments. He filed for bankruptcy. Then turned killer. We let S.F.P.D. make the arrest. It went down effortlessly.

Later, I walked Conrad to the parking lot.

“Good work on this.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t let it go to your head. Tomorrow’s another day. Another day, another crime.” I turned my back and started toward my car. “Don’t be late. . .Conrad.”