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Asked to participate in a promotional oral board the North Charleston Police Department was conducting for the rank of detective, Bobby Ray was clearly, through no fault of his own, in the worst location possible when he first received news of the latest murder confronting his department. A week earlier, the GCSD had been called to investigate a similar murder that had taken place less than a mile from this new scene. It was an investigation that was still in high gear.

Despite the beautiful weather that had followed the morning’s rainstorm, and despite his own heavy foot, Bobby Ray’s ride from North Charleston to the new crime scene on Richmond Hill Drive, in Murrells Inlet, took nearly an hour to complete. After passing through McClellanville on Highway 17, and after being updated twice on what was confronting Sergeant Edward Kindle at the scene, Bobby Ray called Sheriff Renda to advise him on what had actually transpired that morning. Like his Major Case commander, Renda had been out of the office that morning attending a meeting at Conway High School on school violence with other area law enforcement officials.

“Is Kindle sure there’s only one victim?” Renda asked Bobby Ray from where he stood in the hallway outside of the school’s auditorium. “And is he sure the guy died for the same reason our other guy did?”

Frustrated from having to negotiate his way through traffic that was backed up on Highway 17 from an on-going highway construction project in Pawleys Island, Bobby Ray bit his tongue before responding to Renda’s questions. They were ones the veteran investigator found rather premature for his boss to be asking.

“Not sure what Big Ed knows and doesn’t know right now, boss. He’s only been at the scene for about forty-five minutes so far. I’m sure he’s had his hands full up to now just getting the scene stabilized. He’s likely just getting a handle on the big picture.” As he finished speaking, and despite having activated both the audible siren and flashing blue lights on his unmarked vehicle, Bobby Ray was forced to brake hard to avoid striking a motorist who had pulled out in front of him from the local Fresh Market parking lot. As he did, he silently cursed at the inattentive driver for nearly causing an accident, one he did not have time to be a part of.

After listening to a few of Renda’s other comments and questions, Bobby Ray, having regained his composure, again spoke to the sheriff. “Boss, you know Kindle’s as good as we’ve got. He’ll get the scene stabilized for us as soon as he can, and then he’ll let us know what it is we’re facing. Besides, it’s kind of foolish at this stage of the game to expect him to know why our newest victim croaked, isn’t it? I’m sorry, but I’m not calling him to ask him any foolish questions right now. He’s too busy for that. Besides, I’ll be there in just a few minutes. I’ll find out the answers to your questions myself.” Bobby Ray could not help shaking his head at the foolish questions his boss had expected him to know the answers to this early in the investigation.

“OK, OK,” Renda said as he stood off to the side watching as a large number of students passed by in one of the school’s busy hallways. Reluctantly responding to the warning a series of hallway bells were making, each of the students began moving more deliberately towards their next class. “Call me later when you know more. I’m going to be making a few calls before I head back to this meeting I’m attending. And, just so you know, I’ll probably stop at the scene on my way back to the office. Have some answers for me when I get there.”

“Will do. I’m less than a minute out from the scene. Talk to you later.” Clearly annoyed at being bothered, Bobby Ray disconnected the call before Renda had time to reply. After doing so out of pure frustration, he cried out in anger. He did so as a means of trying to force himself to calm down before arriving at the scene. Frustrated by the heavy traffic, and from nearly being struck by another vehicle, the normally patient Major Case commander had become testy after having his time wasted by having to answer Renda’s ridiculous questions.

“As long as I’ve known him, and for as long as he’s been a cop, that man has asked some of the lamest questions at times,” Bobby Ray muttered to himself as he pulled up to the scene. As he did, he saw Kindle, the department’s day shift uniformed patrol supervisor, standing with several others in their newest victim’s front yard. While it was too obvious for him to miss, Bobby Ray also saw the immediate area around the residence had already been cordoned off twice with yellow crime scene tape. This had been done not only to define the scene’s inner and outer perimeters, but had also been done to keep on-lookers and the media as far away as possible.

Walking to where Kindle stood near the victim’s body, Bobby Ray heard the veteran sergeant ordering his deputies to make sure the immediate area around the neighborhood had been completely closed off to traffic. This included a nearby intersection where three streets merged together. Having been broken in by Kindle years earlier, he knew the sergeant’s orders were primarily being issued for two reasons. The first was to make it difficult for the probing eyes of the media to be able to photograph the victim’s remains before his family could be given the courtesy of learning about his death the right way. Despite doing so, Bobby Ray knew the long range and low-light capabilities of the media’s camera lenses made it difficult to protect the scene from being viewed by the outside world. Like most cops, Bobby Ray believed that a victim’s friends and family members should not have to learn of their loved one’s demise from seeing a gory and upsetting news clip. By doing it the right way, by making personal contact with their victim’s next of kin, two detectives would prevent them from learning about it on television. The other reason, the more important one for Bobby Ray’s detectives, was to prevent the destruction, or loss, of any evidence that had yet to be recovered along Richmond Hill Drive.

Seeing the small group of reporters and satellite trucks who had already begun to congregate at the scene disgusted Bobby Ray. “Freaking vultures,” he muttered out loud, “the poor bastard’s been dead less than two hours and these people are already swarming around the scene. They always have to be in the way, don’t they?”

Having already discarded his tie, Bobby Ray rolled up the sleeves of his blue dress shirt as he moved closer to Kindle and the others. As he did, he unwrapped two sticks of Juicy Fruit gum. Placing the sugary sticks inside his mouth, he gave a quick but friendly nod to those hovering over their victim’s body.

“What’s it look like, fellas? Anything like the one we had last week?” Bobby Ray asked, donning a pair of blue latex gloves as he shooed a couple of his evidence technicians out of the way. As they moved further away to give him some room, the Major Case commander knelt down to examine what was now lying at his feet. As he did, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kindle pointing to a broken flagstaff less than six feet away. Looking at it, Bobby Ray could tell the blood soaked upper section of the wooden pole had likely been the instrument used to inflict the massive head injuries he now saw the victim had sustained.

“Looks like this poor bastard took quite a beating, Bobby Ray,” Kindle said as he watched his good friend lift a once clean white sheet further off the victim. While it had only been in place for a short amount of time, blood now stained the sheet bright red in several places. Lifting it revealed several other significant injuries to the victim’s chest and arms. “Besides the obvious wounds you see on his face, take a look at his hands. It looks like at least seven of his fingers have been broken. Our vic apparently tried to protect himself by putting his hands up in front of him as he was being beaten. You’re the expert here, but my guess is those are all defensive wounds you’re looking at. When you’re done looking at his fingers, take a look at the guy’s mouth. Poor bastard also lost several teeth. When you finish looking at him, take a look at the lawn over here,” Kindle said, pointing to a spot less than ten feet away. “There’s a bunch of blood over there, likely it’s blood that was cast off the flagstaff during the beating.”

Bobby Ray’s gaze moved up and down the victim’s body as he took mental note of the brutal beating that had taken place in the front yard of the nearby home. Quick looks at both the victim’s hands and mouth confirmed Kindle’s assessment of what had occurred.

“Do we have any witnesses? What do we know about our vic?” Bobby Ray asked to no one in particular as he continued to kneel on the ground.

As before, it was Kindle who spoke first. But before he could finish answering the questions that had been asked, Bobby Ray asked his next two questions. As he asked them, the Major Case commander stared at a fixture mounted on the exterior of the house. Mounted at eye level on the home’s exterior siding, a polished metal bracket sat just to the left of the still opened front door. A door sitting less than twenty-five feet away.

“Probably a couple of stupid questions to ask, Big Ed, but that bracket I’m looking at by the front door, that’s where this broken pole came from, correct? We do know this is our vic’s home, correct?”

“Yep, this is . . . sorry, Bobby Ray, I meant to say this was his house,” Kindle offered, correcting himself due to the victim’s recent demise. “Our guy’s name is Kevin Holland. He’s a sixty-eight year old white male with a DOB of August 23rd. He was born in 1948. From the little we’ve been able to learn about him, he’s lived here alone for the past six years. One of the neighbors told us our vic moved here from Jersey after his wife supposedly died in some kind of work-related accident. Just so you know, I already have one of my senior guys checking that out. We’re also being told our vic was a career military guy; supposedly spent thirty-plus years in the army. Maybe that’s why this yard, the home as well, looks so neat. Looks like this guy was a spit and polish kind of guy, kind of wish I was more like that at times myself.” Kindle said with some regret as he closed the pad he had been reading from. Taking a moment before slipping his small black pad back into his pants pocket, he took another look around the manicured premises their victim had obviously taken great pride in caring for.

Standing up after covering Holland’s body back up with the sheet, Bobby Ray again took notice of the broken flagstaff. Splintered badly, and nearly broken in half, it had been discarded in a small circular flower garden a short distance from where its owner’s body now rested. Around it, in what looked to be freshly laid mulch, several well-tended flowering plants bathed the garden with their bright yellow and red colors. Stirred by a gentle breeze, an American flag, and just under it a black POW flag, waved at the top of a twenty-foot high flagpole. Standing erect in the middle of the garden, the white flagpole was surrounded by the many colorful plants and flowers Holland had carefully tended.

The sound of a car door being closed out on the street caused Bobby Ray’s attention to shift in that direction. Almost immediately he saw his friend, Paul Waring, making his way towards where he and Kindle stood.

“Morning, fellas! At least, I think it’s still morning,” Paul said cheerfully, glancing at his wristwatch as he moved closer to where the others were waiting for him. Reaching them, he shook hands with Kindle as he gave a friendly nod to Bobby Ray. In moments, Paul’s attention shifted to what was once again covered up by the bloodstained sheet. As he did, his eyes picked up on the broken wooden pole lying nearby. “I’m thinking if you boys called me down here to help you with something, more than likely it’s what I see lying under this sheet that you need my help with. The fact that these bloodstains are seemingly expanding in size as we stand here also tells me whatever is under this sheet is likely pretty dead. Am I correct on those assumptions, Captain Jenkins?” As he waited for his friend’s response, Paul put on a pair of blue latex gloves that Kindle handed him.

“You’re pretty smart . . . very observant too . . . for a damn Yankee, ain’t you?” Bobby Ray deadpanned.

Smiling at his friend’s good-natured shot, Paul, without asking for permission, removed the sheet covering Holland’s face and upper torso. Doing so revealed the significant damage that had been inflicted upon the retired soldier’s face. Having already seen far too many similar injuries in his career, what he now stared at did little to make Paul flinch. His lengthy career with the Connecticut State Police Department, as well as the two recent murder investigations he had helped Bobby Ray with, had dulled his sensitivity to the brutality inflicted on man by his fellow man. The stoicism he now displayed as he examined Holland’s body was not meant to be a reflection of any indifference or lack of concern, but was rather a means of dealing with the inhumanity he was once again witnessing.

Despite realizing what was now confronting Bobby Ray and his staff, Paul, at first, could not figure out why his friend had summoned him to the scene. From all accounts, this was a routine murder investigation he was now present at, one the sheriff’s department had competently handled many times in the past. But then, as he surveyed the scene around him as others continued to stabilize it, Paul’s eyes focused on the broken flagstaff. More than just the murder weapon, it was the one clue present that only a veteran criminal investigator like him could pick up on without being told much about it. As he continued to stare at it, Douglas Vane, the GCSD’s senior forensic examiner, quietly walked up and stood by Bobby Ray’s side.

“This why you called me here, Bobby Ray?” Paul asked as he pointed to the flagstaff before shaking hands with Vane. “Did you call me here because of that, or because Audrey’s not here to help you guys sort this mess out?”

The mention of Audrey Small’s name caused a slight grimace to appear on Bobby Ray’s face for a brief moment. Next to him, Vane, who had been especially hit hard by their friend’s death, shifted uncomfortably on his feet as he turned slightly away from Paul. Seeing his friends react as they did at the mention of Small’s name caused him to make a mental note about mentioning their late friend’s name too often.

“Both really,” Bobby Ray replied in answer to one of Paul’s previous questions. “Audrey’s death has certainly left me short in both the experience and supervisory departments. It’s all on me, but I just haven’t had the time or the inclination to fill her position within the squad as yet. I know it has to be done, and I know Renda wants her spot filled for all the obvious reasons, but out of respect to her I’ve left it open. Perhaps I’ve left it open too long.”

“I understand how you feel, Bobby Ray, but Audrey, if she was here today, she’d tell you to get your butt in gear and take care of business. It was somewhat classy of you to leave her spot unfilled for a time due to the circumstances surrounding her death, and I know you know this, but we’re all replaceable. Don’t get upset over what I’m about to tell you, but I think you need to get moving on what needs to be done.”

Forcing a smile, Bobby Ray complimented Paul on his astute observation. “Looks like you’ve still got it, Yankee Boy.” While his comment was meant to be a friendly jab at his Northern friend, it was also said to get them back to the matter now confronting them and away from thinking about the painful absence of their mutual friend.

Taking a moment, Paul cast a furtive glance at the damaged flagstaff before speaking again. “My gut is telling me there’s more to this mess than what you’re telling me, fellas. I’m thinking you need to tell me what was on this pole before we go any further.” Looking at Bobby Ray, then at Vane, and then at Kindle, Paul added, “And, if it wasn’t what was on this pole that got this old-timer killed, then tell me what it was that caused us all to gather here on his front lawn today.”

Their friend’s perceptive comments caused Kindle and Bobby Ray to exchange brief looks with each other before offering a response. It was Bobby Ray who finally let Paul in on what had caused Holland’s death earlier that morning.

“It’s what was on the flagstaff that apparently caused our vic to be murdered, Paul. I’m afraid it’s just like the one we had last week when you and Donna were back home . . . at least I suspect it’s for the same reason.” Pointing at Kindle, Bobby Ray then continued by giving his friend more information to digest. “Ed’s deputies have already spoken to the two neighbors on either side of Holland’s home. Doing so confirmed it for us; at least I think it did. While we haven’t found anyone who saw or heard Holland fighting with anyone out here, they did confirm one important thing for us. Seems like a poor excuse to murder someone, but I . . .”

Frustrated by Bobby Ray’s long-winded explanation, Paul impatiently cut him off before he could finish with what he had to say. “Hey! We’re burning daylight here. While I’m still young, OK? Are you going to tell me what was on the freakin’ pole or do I have to find out for myself?” Well aware of Bobby Ray’s tendency to be verbose at times, Paul’s sarcastic comments caused Vane to briefly laugh out loud.

“The Stars and Bars, old buddy. The Stars and Bars are what likely got this poor old SOB murdered right here in his own front yard.” While he already knew why Holland had been killed, Bobby Ray’s answer caused Kindle to shake his head in disgust. His doing so finally told Paul the reason why he had been called to the scene.

“You’re talking about the Confederate flag, right? You’re telling me the Confederate battle flag, the one we all recognize as being the flag of the Confederacy, that’s what got this poor bastard killed? Is that what you’re saying?” Paul asked incredulously, not sure if he should believe what he was being told or not.

“Afraid so.” Bobby Ray replied as he stared down at the sheet covering Holland’s body. “At least, that’s why we think he was killed. Until I hear otherwise, I’m focusing our investigation around that motive for now. I hate to admit it, but that flag has stirred up everyone’s emotions recently. We’re obviously going to be taking a look at everything, just like we always do, but that dang flag is likely what caused Holland to be bludgeoned to death right here on this very lawn.”

Like many others, Paul had closely followed the events surrounding the tragic shootings that recently occurred in Charleston at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. While he understood the fervent historical support the flag still received, as well as the hatred others directed at the principal symbol of the Confederacy in the wake of the tragic deaths of nine innocent victims, it confounded the veteran investigator as to why the flag had been the cause of Holland’s death.

“Was Holland a guy, and perhaps it’s too early for you to know the answer to this right now, but was he vocal about his support of the Confederate flag? I mean, you said he was from Jersey, right?” Paul asked, still perplexed over why the flag had caused Holland’s death.

“Not that we know of right now,” Kindle answered, looking directly at Paul as he spoke. “I had one of our intel analysts back at HQ run his name through our database to see what she could find. I was told the guy doesn’t even have a record of getting a traffic ticket or for even being involved in an accident over the past ten years. He certainly isn’t on our radar, or anyone else’s that I know of, for being a white supremacist or anything remotely close to that. I suspect Bobby Ray’s folks will do a more thorough check on Holland’s background with the feds, but for now our guy looks like he lived a quiet but boring life.”

“Why’d he fly the Stars and Bars then, any idea?”

“Not yet, Paul. No idea.” Kindle answered as he scratched the back of his head with his left hand.

Having not seen what he was looking for, Paul scanned the yard once more before asking his next question. It was an obvious one to ask. “If he flew the Confederate flag, where is it?”

“We haven’t found it yet,” Bobby Ray answered as he stared at a group of neighbors collecting on someone’s lawn across the street from Holland’s home. “Haven’t found a trace of that flag, or of any other flag that might have been with it. Hate to guess at things because it clouds your objectivity during investigations like this, but I wouldn’t be surprised to learn our killer, or even killers, took it with them.”

As Paul went silent, processing what he had seen and was told at the scene, Bobby Ray gave Vane his marching orders. “Doug, we’ll be done here in a minute. When we are, I’m going to get our folks together over there in the driveway so we can get this investigation going. I’ll hand out everyone’s assignments then. No need for you and your folks to be there though, you’ve got a pretty good size scene to start processing. Do me a favor, start from the area around the front door and then work your way to where we’re standing now.” Collecting his thoughts for a moment, Bobby Ray then spoke again to his forensic examiner. “Dougie, I know I don’t have to tell you this, but make sure you bag both of Holland’s hands after you’re done with your photographs and sketch map. Who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky and find some asshole’s DNA under our guy’s fingernails.”

As someone who hated attending meetings of any kind, Vane was pleased to hear his presence would not be required at Bobby Ray’s strategy session. Because of that, the fact that Bobby Ray had needlessly told him he wanted their victim’s hands bagged to preserve any potential evidence from being lost did little to dampen his spirits. Being told he did not have to attend a meeting he would have likely considered a painful waste of time brighten Vane’s day enormously. While bagging the hands of a murder victim was an obvious part of processing any scene, a task he had completed many times already during his career, Vane, by way of his usual dry and sarcastic wit, assured his boss it would soon be taken care of. “Not to worry, I’ll make sure that happens as soon as possible. Thanks for reminding me to do that.”

Vane had barely finished speaking when Paul spoke again. He did so after giving some thought to a statement his friend had made regarding a similar case already under investigation. “Bobby Ray, a few moments ago you made reference to this being the *second* murder of this sort. Did I hear you correctly? Is this really the second such murder you’ve had like this?”

“Yep, you heard right. That one and this one are the real reasons you’re here. I’m thinking this issue with the flag, no matter what position you’re taking, is one that’s only going to get worse. Those folks in Charleston . . . doesn’t matter if their black folks, whites, liberals, Civil War buffs or whomever . . . they’re the ones with the cool heads. They’re dealing with a very flammable issue down there. For whatever it’s worth, I’m proud of them for dealing with it like they have. They’re using their faith in God, and in the judicial system, to comfort them. In our case, we’re the ones dealing with a whack job right now. A whack job who, in my opinion, is apparently intent on killing again.” Taking a moment to look at the sheet covering Holland’s body, Bobby Ray then turned to look at Paul as he started speaking again. “As we have in the past, and even more so now because of Audrey no longer being with us, we need your help again. We need to put an end to this madness ASAP.”

While comprehending what his friend was telling him, Paul sought to learn more information before committing himself to the GCSD again. Despite being eager to help, he needed to learn more about what had already happened. “Tell me more about the first murder, Bobby Ray, especially any similarities between that one and this one.” As Paul finished speaking, Vane moved off to give his crime scene techs and the two detectives assigned to the Major Case crime van their instructions.

For the next couple of minutes, Bobby Ray, with an occasional comment tossed in by Kindle, explained what had happened eight days earlier on Fire Thorne Drive, in Murrells Inlet. Like their current location, the first scene had also occurred on a normally quiet residential street. “Our first vic, a guy by the name of Roger Platek, was a forty-seven-year-old white male who had been born and raised here in the inlet. Unlike Mr. Holland, Platek was something of a redneck. He’d been arrested seven times, maybe it was eight times, over the past six years for stupid shit, mostly victimless crimes. But he was also a loudmouth who liked to drink too much beer. Much to the dismay of several of his neighbors, he was also someone who often drove his piece of shit pick-up truck too fast.”

Shifting on the balls of his feet as he listened to what he was being told, Paul struggled to find a connection between the two murders. “Bobby Ray, once again you’re telling me everything but what I need to know. I’ll worry about the first guy’s pedigree later. What I’m waiting for you to tell me is how or what connects these two cases together. Is it the manner of death? I mean, did you also find a broken flag pole at that first scene? Did this Platek guy, or whatever his name is, did he also fly the rebel flag?”

Like his friend had done before him, now it was Bobby Ray’s turn to shift uneasily on his feet before speaking. “Yeah, that’s about it. Platek took a serious beating before he died. From the amount of blood we found at the scene, he apparently gave someone a good beating as well. Presumptive tests Doug ran showed we had two different types of blood at that scene, both human. Just like here, we also found a broken flagstaff in Platek’s driveway. It was smeared with blood just like the one we found here. Like I already told you, Platek was what you Yankees would call a redneck.” Pausing to look up and down the street in front of Holland’s home, Bobby Ray then added, “Down here rednecks . . . and many others, still fly a certain flag because of their Southern heritage. I guess that answers the last part of your question, doesn’t it?”

Glancing at the broken flagstaff still lying in the garden near Holland’s now cold body, Paul asked his next question. “You said you found the first flagstaff in the victim’s driveway. Was it near his body like this one is?”

“We found the bottom half lying about ten feet away from where we found Platek and . . .” Somewhat upset now, Bobby Ray looked at Paul for a couple of moments before finishing the answer to his friend’s question. “The other half, the half with the sharp splintered edges, had been used to stab him several times in the chest. His killer left it there after stabbing him for the final time. If you ask me, and Lord knows I’ve seen a lot of people who’ve been killed, but that was a pretty brutal way to kill someone.” Despite his years of investigating horrific crimes of violence, Bobby Ray’s voice trailed off as he finished speaking.

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Seeing that his detectives had finished photographing Holland’s yard, and were now doing the same to document the injuries their victim had sustained, Bobby Ray, accompanied by Paul and Kindle, walked several feet away. This allowed the next set of detectives, assisted by Vane’s crime scene techs, to carefully plot on the crime scene map the locations of Holland’s body, the broken flagstaff, and the various places where blood now stained the front yard.

Along with the map, they would be photographs that would be referred to many times over the course of the next several weeks.