

Dust to Dust

Tami Hoag

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Extract

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I

‘They oughta hang the son of a bitch came up with this shit,’ Sam Kovac grouched, digging a piece of nicotine gum out of a crumpled foil pack.

‘The gum or the wrapper?’

‘Both. I can’t open the damn package and I’d rather chew on a cat turd.’

‘And that would taste different from a cigarette how?’ Nikki Liska asked.

They moved through a small throng of people in the wide white hall. Cops heading out onto the steps of the Minneapolis city hall for a cigarette, cops coming back in from having a cigarette, and the odd citizen looking for something for their tax dollar.

Kovac scowled down at her from the corner of one eye. Liska made five-five by sheer dint of will. He always figured God made her short because if she had the size of Janet Reno she’d take over the world. She had that kind of energy – and attitude out the wazoo.

‘What do you know about it?’ he challenged.

‘My ex smoked. Lick an ashtray sometime. That’s why we got divorced, you know. I wouldn’t stick my tongue in his mouth.’

‘Jesus, Tinks, like I wanted to know that.’

He’d given her the nickname – Tinker Bell on Steroids. Nordic blond hair cut in a shaggy Peter Pan style, eyes as blue as a lake on a sunny day. Feminine but unmistakably athletic. She’d kicked more ass in her years on the force than half the guys he knew. She’d come onto homicide – Christ, what was it now? – five or six years ago? He lost track. He’d been there himself almost longer than he could

remember. All of his forty-four years, it seemed. The better part of a twenty-three-year career, for certain. Seven to go. He'd get his thirty and take the pension. Catch up on his sleep for the next ten years. He sometimes wondered why he hadn't taken his twenty and moved on. But he didn't have anything to move on to, so he stayed.

Liska slipped between a pair of nervous-looking uniforms blocking the way in front of the door to Room 126 – Internal Affairs.

'Hey, that was the least of it,' she said. 'I was more upset about where he wanted to put his dick.'

Kovac made a sound of pain and disgust, his face twisting.

Liska grinned, mischievous and triumphant. 'Her name was Brandi.'

The Criminal Investigative Division offices had been newly refurbished. The walls were the color of dried blood. Kovac wondered if that had been intentional or just trendy. Probably the latter. Nothing else in the place had been designed with cops in mind. The narrow, gray, two-person cubicles could just as well have housed a bunch of accountants.

He preferred the temporary digs they'd had during the remodeling: a dirty, beat-up room full of dirty, beat-up desks, and beat-up cops getting migraines under harsh white fluorescent lights. Homicide crammed into one room, robbery down the way, half the sex crimes guys wedged into a broom closet. That was atmosphere.

'What's the status on the Nixon assault?'

The voice stopped Kovac in his tracks as effectively as a hook to the collar. He bit a little harder on the Nicorette. Liska kept moving.

New offices, new lieutenant, new pain in the ass. The homicide lieutenant's office had a figurative revolving door. It was a stop on the way for upwardly mobile management types. At least this new one – Leonard – had them back

working partners instead of like the last guy, who'd tortured them with some bullshit high-concept team crap with rotating sleep-deprivation schedules.

Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't an asshole.

'We'll see,' Kovac said. 'Elwood just brought in a guy he thinks is good for the Truman murder.'

Leonard flushed pink. He had that kind of complexion, and short, white-gray hair like duck fuzz all over his head. 'What the hell are you doing working the Truman murder? That's what? A week ago? You're up to your ass in assaults since then.'

Liska came back then, wearing her cop face. 'We think this guy's a two-fer, Lou. He was maybe in on Nixon *and* Truman. I guess the Nation wants to start calling the Bloods the Dead Presidents.'

Kovac laughed at that – a cross between a bark and a snort. 'Like these dickheads would know a president if he pissed on them.'

Liska looked up at him. 'Elwood's got him in the guest room. Let's go before he uses the L word.'

Leonard stepped back, frowning. He had no lips, and ears that stuck out perpendicular to his head like a chimpanzee's. Kovac had nicknamed him the Brass Monkey. He was looking as if solving a murder would ruin his day.

'Don't worry,' Kovac said. 'There's more assaults where that one came from.'

He turned away before Leonard could react, and headed for the interview room with Liska.

'So this guy was in on Nixon too?'

'Beats me. Leonard liked it.'

'Brass asshole,' Kovac grumbled. 'Someone should take him out and show him the fucking sign on the door. It still says "Homicide," doesn't it?'

'Last I looked.'

'All he wants is to clear assaults.'

'Assaults are the homicides of tomorrow.'

‘Yeah, that’d make a great tattoo. I know just where he can put it.’

‘But you’d need a miner’s hat to read it. I’ll get you one for Christmas. Give you something to hope for.’

Liska opened the door and Kovac preceded her into the room, which was about the size of a spacious coat closet. The architect would have described it as ‘intimate.’ In keeping with the latest theories on how to interview scumbags, the table was small and round. No dominant side. Everybody equal. Pals. Confidants.

No one was sitting at it.

Elwood Knutson stood in the near corner, looking like a Disney cartoon bear in a black felt bowler. Jamal Jackson had the opposite corner, near the totally useless and empty built-in bookcase, and beneath the wall-mounted video camera, which was required by Minnesota law to prove they weren’t beating confessions out of suspects.

Jackson’s attitude hung on him as badly as his clothes. Jeans that would have fit Elwood were slipping off his skinny ass. A huge down coat in Nation black and red colors puffed up around his upper body. He had a lower lip as thick as a garden hose, and he stuck it out at Kovac.

‘Man, this is bogus. I din’ off no-body.’

Kovac lifted his brows. ‘No? Gee, there must be some mistake.’ He turned to Elwood and spread his hands. ‘I thought you said he was the guy, Elwood. He says he’s not the guy.’

‘I must have been mistaken,’ Elwood said. ‘My profuse apologies, Mr Jackson.’

‘We’ll have a radio car take you back home,’ Kovac said. ‘Maybe have them announce over the bullhorn to your hood that we didn’t mean to bring you in. That it was all a big mistake.’

Jackson stared at him, the lip moving up and down.

‘We can have them announce specifically that we know you weren’t really involved in the murder of Deon

Truman. Just so there's no mistake what we had you in for. We don't want a lot of bad rumors going around about you on account of us.'

'Fuck you, man!' Jackson shouted, his voice jumping an octave. 'You trying to get me killed?'

Kovac laughed. 'Hey. You said you didn't do it. Fine. I'll send you home.'

'An' the brothers think I talk to you. Next thing, my ass is horizontal. Fuck that!'

Jackson paced a little, pulling at the short braids that stuck up in all directions on his head. His hands were cuffed together in front of him. He gave Kovac the eye.

'You put me in jail, motherfucker.'

'Can't do it. And here you asked so nice. Sorry.'

'I am *under arrest*,' Jamal insisted.

'Not if you didn't do anything.'

'I done plenty.'

'So now you're confessing?' Liska said.

Jackson looked at her, incredulous. 'Who the hell is she? Your girlfriend?'

'Don't insult the lady,' Kovac said. 'You're telling us you capped Deon Truman.'

'The fuck I am.'

'Then who did?'

'Fuck you, man. I ain't telling you jack.'

'Elwood, see that the man gets home in style.'

'But I'm *under arrest*!' Jackson wailed. 'Put me in jail!'

'Fuck you,' Kovac said. 'Jail's overcrowded. It's not a goddamn hotel. What'd you pick him up on, Elwood?'

'I believe it was loitering.'

'Petty misdemeanor.'

'The fuck!' Jackson shouted, outraged. He pointed at Elwood with both index fingers. 'You saw me selling crack! Right there on the corner of Chicago and Twenty-sixth.'

'He have crack on him when you arrested him?' Kovac asked.

‘No, sir. He did have a pipe.’

‘I ditched the goods!’

‘Possession of drug paraphernalia,’ Liska said, unimpressed. ‘Big deal. Cut him loose. He’s not worth our time.’

‘Fuck you, bitch!’ Jamal said, swaggering toward her. ‘I wouldn’t let you suck my cock.’

‘I’d rather gouge my eyes out with a rusty nail.’ Liska advanced on him, blue glare boring into him like a pair of cold lasers. ‘Keep it in your pants, Jamal. If you live long enough, maybe you’ll find some nice guy in prison to do it for you.’

‘He’s not going to prison today,’ Kovac announced impatiently. ‘Let’s wrap this up. I got a party to go to.’

Jackson made his move as Kovac started to turn for the door. He pulled one of the loose shelves out of the bookcase and rushed Kovac from behind. Caught back on his heels, Elwood shouted an obscenity and jumped too late. Kovac swung around in time to catch the corner of the shelf, the board slicing a gash above his left eyebrow.

‘Shit!’

‘Dammit!’

Kovac went down on his knees, his vision lacy with a spiderweb of black. The floor felt like rubber beneath him.

Elwood grabbed Jackson’s wrists and jammed his arms upward, and the board went flying, a corner of it gouging the new wall.

Then Jackson screamed and went down suddenly, his left knee buckling beneath him. Halfway down he screamed again, back arching. Elwood jumped back, wide-eyed.

Liska rode Jackson down from behind, her knee in the middle of his back as his face hit the floor.

The door opened and half a dozen detectives stood with guns drawn. Liska raised a short black ASP tactical baton, looking surprised and innocent.

‘Gosh, look what I found in my coat pocket!’

She leaned down over Jamal Jackson’s ear and murmured

seductively, ‘Looks like I’ll get to fulfill one of your wishes, Jamal. You’re under arrest.’

‘Looks kind of faggy.’

‘Is that the voice of authority, Tippen?’

‘Fuck you, Tinks.’

‘Is that a no or wishful thinking?’

Laughter erupted around the table, the kind of raw, hard laughter that came from people who saw too much ugliness on a day-to-day basis. Cop humor was rude and biting because the world they lived in was a crude and savage place. They had no time or patience for Noel Coward repartee.

The group had snagged a coveted corner table at Patrick’s, an Irish-named bar owned and run by Swedes. On an ordinary day the pub – strategically located equidistant between the Minneapolis Police Department and the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office – was packed belly to butt with cops this time of day. Day-shift cops gearing down and loading up for life off the job. Retired cops who’d found they couldn’t socialize with regular humans once they’d left the job. Dog-watch guys grabbing dinner and camaraderie, killing time before they were up for their tour.

This was not an ordinary day. The usual crowd had been augmented by PD brass, city politicians, and newsies. Unwelcome additions that put an extra layer of tension in the air that was already blue with smoke and language. A news crew from one of the local stations was setting up near the front window.

‘You should’ve insisted on real stitches. The old-fashioned kind,’ Tippen went on.

He tapped the ash off his cigarette and raised it to his lips for a long drag, his attention narrowed on the camera crew. He had a face like an Irish wolfhound: long and homely with a bristly gray mustache and fiercely intelligent dark

eyes. A detective with the Sheriff's Office, he had been a member of the task force that had worked the Cremator murders a little more than a year before. Some of the task force members had become the kind of friends who did this – met in a bar to drink and talk shop and insult one another.

'Then he ends up with a big ugly Frankenstein scar,' Liska said. 'With the butterfly clamp, he gets a neat, thin scar – the kind women find sexy.'

'Sadistic women,' Elwood commented.

Tippen curled his lip. 'Is there another kind?'

'Sure. The kind who go out with you,' Liska said. 'Masochists.'

Tippen flicked a corn chip at her.

Kovac regarded himself critically in the mirror of Liska's compact. The split in his forehead had been cleaned and patched by an overworked resident in the Hennepin County Medical Center ER, where gangbangers were regularly patched up or zipped into body bags. He'd been embarrassed to go there with anything less than a gunshot wound, and the young woman had given him the attitude that treating anything less was beneath her. Sexual attraction hadn't been a part of the picture.

He assessed the damage with a critical eye. His face was a quadrangle punctuated with stress lines, a couple of scars, and a hawkish, crooked nose that made a nice accompaniment to the crooked, sardonic mouth lurking beneath the requisite cop mustache. The hair was more gray than brown. Once a month he paid an old Norwegian barber ten bucks to cut it, which probably accounted for the fact that it tended to stand up.

He'd never been handsome in the GQ sense of the word, but he'd never sent women running either – at least not because of his looks. One more scar wasn't going to matter.

Liska studied him as she sipped her beer. 'It gives you character, Sam.'

‘It gives me a headache,’ he grouched, handing the compact back to her. ‘I already had all the character I needed.’

‘Well, I’d kiss it and make it better for you. But I already kneecapped the guy who did it. I think I’ve done my part.’

‘And you wonder why you’re single,’ Tippen remarked.

Liska blew him a kiss. ‘Hey, love me, love my ASP. Or in your case, Tip, kiss my ASP.’

The front door swung open and a gust of cold air swept in, along with a new pack of patrons. Every cop’s eye in the place went instantly flat, and the tension level cranked a notch. The cop collective guarding against outsiders.

‘The man of the hour,’ Elwood said, as recognition rippled through the crowd and a cheer went up. ‘Come to hobnob with the unwashed masses before his ascension.’

Kovac said nothing. Ace Wyatt stood in the doorway in a double-breasted camel-hair topcoat, looking like Captain America, master of all he surveyed. Square jaw, white smile, groomed like a fucking game-show host. He probably tipped his hairstylist ten bucks and got a complimentary blowjob from the shampoo girl.

‘Is he wearing makeup?’ Tippen asked under his breath. ‘I heard he gets his eyelashes dyed.’

‘That’s what happens when you go Hollywood,’ Elwood said.

‘I’d be willing to suffer the indignity,’ Liska said sarcastically. ‘Did you hear the kind of money he’s getting for that show?’

Tippen took a long pull on his cigarette and exhaled. Kovac looked at Captain Ace Wyatt through the cloud. They’d worked on the same squad for a time. It seemed a hundred years ago. He’d just made the move from robbery to homicide. Wyatt was the top dog, already a legend, and angling to become a star on the brass side of things. He’d succeeded handsomely within the department, then branched out into television – maintaining his office as a

CID captain and starring in a Minneapolis cross between *America's Most Wanted* and a motivational infomercial. The show, *Crime Time*, was going national.

'I hate that guy.'

He reached for the Jack he wasn't supposed to mix with his painkillers and tossed back what was left of it.

'Jealous?' Liska needled.

'Of what? Being a prick?'

'Don't sell yourself short, Kojak. You're as big a prick as any man here.'

Kovac made a growl at the back of his throat, suddenly wanting to be anywhere but here. Why in hell had he come? He had three parts of a concussion, and a perfect excuse to beg off and go home. So there was nothing to go home to – an empty house with an empty aquarium in the living room. The fish had all died of neglect while he'd pulled nearly seventy-two hours straight on the Cremator case. He hadn't bothered to replace them.

Sitting at a party for Ace Wyatt, he was as big a masochist as any woman Tippen had ever dated. He'd finished his drink. As soon as Wyatt's posse cleared the door, he could make his way through the crowd and slip out. Maybe go down to the bar where the Fifth Precinct cops hung out. They could give a shit about Ace Wyatt.

In the instant he made the decision, Wyatt spotted him and zeroed in with a blinding grin, a quartet of minions trailing after him. He wove through the crowd, touching hands and shoulders like the Pope giving cursory blessings.

'Kojak, you old warhorse!' he shouted above the din. He took hold of Sam's hand in a powerful grasp.

Kovac came up out of his chair, the floor seeming to shift beneath his feet. The aftereffects of his close encounter with the board, or the mix of drugs and booze. It sure as hell wasn't his thrill at Wyatt's attention. The asshole, calling him Kojak. He hated the nickname. People who knew him well mostly used it to grind him.

One of the minions came in close with a Polaroid and the flash damn near blinded him.

‘One for the scrapbook,’ the minion said, a thirty-something cover-boy type with shiny black hair and cobalt-blue eyes. He had the looks for a part in a low-end prime-time drama.

‘I heard you took another one for the cause!’ Wyatt bellowed, grinning. ‘Jesus, quit while you’re ahead. Quit while you still *have* a head!’

‘Seven to go, Slick,’ Kovac said. ‘Hollywood’s not beating my door down. Congratulations, by the way.’

‘Thanks. Taking the show national is a chance to make a big difference.’

To the Ace Wyatt bank account, Kovac thought, but he didn’t say it. What the hell. He’d never had a taste for designer suits or a weekly manicure. He was just a cop. That was all he’d ever wanted to be. Ace Wyatt had always set his sights on bigger, better, brighter, faster; reaching for the brass rings of life – and catching every goddamn one of them.

‘Glad you could make it to the party, Sam.’

‘Hey, I’m a cop. Free food, free booze – I’m there.’

Wyatt’s gaze was already roaming for a more important hand to shake. The pretty-boy minion caught his attention and directed it toward the television camera. The Wyatt grin brightened by a couple hundred watts.

Liska popped up out of her chair like a jack-in-the-box and stuck her hand out before Wyatt could move on. ‘Captain Wyatt. Nikki Liska, homicide. It’s a pleasure. I enjoy your show.’

Kovac cocked a brow at her. ‘My partner. Blond ambition.’

‘You lucky old dog,’ Wyatt said with good-natured chauvinism.

The muscles flexed in Liska’s jaws as if she was swallowing something unpleasant. ‘I think your idea of

strengthening the link between communities and their police forces through the show and the Internet is a brilliant innovation.'

Wyatt soaked up the praise. 'America is a multimedia culture,' he said loudly, as the TV reporter – a brunette in a bright red blazer – edged in close with a microphone. Wyatt turned fully toward the camera, bending down to hear the woman's question.

Kovac looked to Liska with disapproval.

'Hey, maybe he'll give me a job as a technical consultant. I could be a technical consultant,' she said with a mischievous quirk to her lips. 'That could be my stepping-stone to working on Mel Gibson movies.'

'I'll be in the john.'

Kovac made his way through the mob that had come in to drink Ace Wyatt's booze and chow down on spicy chicken wings and deep-fried cheese. Half the people here had never met Wyatt, let alone worked with him, but they would gladly celebrate his retirement. They would have celebrated the devil's birthday for an open bar.

He stood at the back of the main room and surveyed the scene, made all the more surreal by the Christmas decorations reflecting the glare of the television lights. A sea of people – a lot of the faces familiar – yet he felt acutely alone. Empty. Time to get seriously hammered or leave.

Liska was hovering around Wyatt's people, trying to make nice with the main minion. Wyatt had moved to shake the hand of an attractive, serious-looking blonde who seemed vaguely familiar. He put his left hand on her shoulder and bent to say something in her ear. Elwood was cutting a swath through the buffet. Tippen was trying to flirt with a waitress who was looking at him as if she'd just stepped in something.

It'd be last call before they missed him. And then missing him would be just a fleeting thought.

Where's Kovac? Gone? Pass the beer nuts.

He started for the door.

'You were the best fuckin' badge on the job!' a drunken voice bellowed. 'The man who don't think so can talk to me! Come on! Come on! I'd give Ace Wyatt my goddamn legs!' he shouted.

The drunk sat in a wheelchair that teetered on the top of three shallow steps leading down to the main bar, where Wyatt stood. The drunk had no legs to give. His had been useless for twenty years. There was nothing left of them but spindly bone and atrophied muscle. In contrast, his face was full and red, his upper body a barrel.

Kovac shook his head and took a step toward the wheelchair, trying to catch the old man's attention.

'Hey, Mikey! No one's arguing,' he said.

Mike Fallon looked at him without recognition, his eyes glassy with tears. 'He's a fucking hero! Don't try to say different!' he said angrily. He swung an arm in Wyatt's direction. 'I love that man! I love that man like a son!'

The old man's voice broke on the last word, his face contorting with an inner pain that had nothing to do with the amount of Old Crow he'd put away in the past few hours.

Wyatt lost his glamour grin and started toward Mike Fallon just as Fallon's left hand landed on the wheel of his chair. Kovac leapt forward, crashing into another drunk.

The chair pitched down the steps and spilled its occupant. Mike Fallon hit the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Kovac pushed the drunk aside and hustled down the steps. The crowd had cleared back in surprise. Wyatt stood frozen ten feet away, frowning as he stared down at Mike Fallon.

Kovac dropped down to one knee. 'Hey, Mikey, let's get you off your face. You've got it confused with your ass again.'

Someone righted the wheelchair. The old man rolled over onto his back and made a pathetic attempt to sit up,

flopping on the floor like a beached seal, tears pouring down the sides of his face. A guy Kovac knew from robbery took one side while Kovac took the other, and together they hoisted Fallon back into his chair.

The people standing nearby turned away, embarrassed for the old man. Fallon hung his head in abject humiliation – a sight Kovac had never wished to see.

He'd known Mike Fallon since day one on the job. Back then, every patrol cop in Minneapolis had known Iron Mike. They had followed his example and his orders. And a good lot of them had cried like babies when Mike Fallon was gunned down. But to see him like this – broken in every way – was a heartbreak.

Kovac knelt beside the wheelchair and put a hand on Fallon's shoulder. 'Come on, Mike. Let's call it a night, huh? I'll drive you home.'

'You all right, Mike?' Ace Wyatt asked woodenly, stepping up at last.

Fallon held a shaking hand out to him but couldn't bring himself to look up, even when Wyatt took hold. His voice was tight and raw. 'I love you like a brother, Ace. Like a son. More. You know, I can't say –'

'You don't have to say, Mike. Don't.'

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry,' the old man mumbled over and over, bringing his other hand up to cover his face. Snot ran in an elastic string from his nose to his lap. He had wet his pants.

In his peripheral vision, Kovac could see the newsies creeping in like vultures.

'I'll see he gets home,' he said to Wyatt as he rose.

Wyatt stared down at Mike Fallon. 'Thanks, Sam,' he murmured. 'You're a good man.'

'I'm a fucking sap. But what else have I got to do with my time?'

The blond had vanished, but the brunette from TV

sidled up to Wyatt again. 'Is this Mike Fallon? Officer Fallon from the Thorne murder back in the seventies?'

The black-haired minion appeared like the devil's familiar and pried the woman away with a serious something whispered in her ear.

Wyatt collected himself and turned away, waving off the reporters with a look of disapproval. 'Just a little accident, folks. Let's move on.'

Kovac looked down at the man sobbing in the wheelchair.

Let's move on.