



**The Flower Girl Murder**

## Chapter Ten

Hank Hickox stared at the twenty-, fifty-, and hundred-dollar bills floating in the laundry sink he had installed in the barn. As soon as Cody's truck was out of sight, he brought the bag of currency into the house and dumped it all out onto the table in his kitchen. It was more money than usual. He separated out a small pile and put the rest back in the bag, retied it, and set it aside. He took less this time than last, making a mental note to take more next time. "That looks about right, don't it, Duke?" The dog ignored his master. His mind was purely on getting at the marrow inside some big bone. Hickox had been skimming money from his brother- and nephew-in-law for years. The first couple of times, it made him nervous, but it turned out to be so easy, for a number of reasons. First of all, the Goochlys were an extremely loyal clan, and while they didn't warm to Hank in the beginning stages of his courtship with their daughter, sister, aunt, they decided they liked him if she liked him. When Betty Lou Goochly became Betty Lou Hickox, they loved him.

Another reason taking the candy from these particular babies ended up being easy was that neither Tanner Goochly Sr. nor Jr. was very smart. For example, Hickox learned that both father and son assumed the other counted the money, when neither actually could be bothered. They just stuffed it in bags and gave it to that snot-nosed kid, Cody, who gave it to Hank. It was then his job to leave it in a Dumpster or trash can behind whichever business the Goochlys decided was that week's drop, to be picked up by one of many unknown, unnamed delivery delinquents. And because of reason number one, even if they realized that some of the money was being siphoned out of the system, Hank Hickox would have been the last person they suspected. A third reason was the lack of a paper trail. Hank never put any of the stolen Jacksons, Grants, or Benjamins in a bank. His preference was coffee cans, a variety of Folgers, Taster's Choice and Maxwell House, buried a few feet deep around the vast acreage that composed the Hickox estate. He had already taken this week's take—he figured about \$7,500—and run it through a small cement mixer filled with a couple of shovels full of Carolina dirt, and now he was rinsing it in the sink. It made the bills appear older, more well worn, used. He chuckled the first time he thought of himself as a "money launderer." Then he realized he was just a plain old thief, stealing from other thieves. After the money dried, he'd roll it up, wrap a rubber band around it, then go out to the south forty and find a can. Over the years, he figured he had put several hundred thousand bucks of the Goochlys' illegal gambling earnings in Hickox family ground. It was a fairly steady stream of income that was interrupted for about thirty-five months when Tanner Goochly Sr. was in the hoosegow.

The betrayal all started the day after he lost his Betty Lou to a shocking, sudden illness. The doc said a blood vessel burst near the base of her brain, killing her instantly. Called it a cerebral aneurysm and said she wouldn't have felt any pain. How the hell could he know that? Hank thought. He had no way of knowing if she suffered any pain, or how long it took her to die. Nobody did. Hank found her on the kitchen floor, soup pot boiling on the stove, after he had come in from working one of the fields. All he had wanted was a drink of cold water and a kiss. He'd never get one of those two things again. Hank's heart broke, and then it broke again when he had to tell his ten-year-old little girl when she came home from school and wondered where Mommy was. Hank never had a way with words, and holding back tears, he simply said, "She died, honey. Mommy just died." He told the Goochlys too, both Tanners and Betty Lou's father, Gus, who took it the hardest. In fact, four days later, Gus Goochly blew his brains out

in his car, a picture of a teenage Betty Lou in his lap, so they had ended up burying two Goochlys in one day.

End of sample of The Flower Girl Murder

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