

Vegas Die: an unpublished beginning

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Hefting the last packing box flecked with fingerprint dust he held the door to his apartment open to allow the gurney with the square-folded body bag to be shuffled inside. He saw an image like he felt, empty in, dead out.

Through the milling mix of Biloxi police and fire department paramedics Owen threaded his way to his rental u-haul. The path before him flashed in red-blue strobes swirling off the emergency vehicles searing the night-end fog that crawled in from the Back Bay. A wet chill in the early morning hours was an accomplice to the fog which flowed in easy, a cream curdled grey look, dripping through the magnolias and churning heavy over the Spanish moss that dangled like blue-green icicles in the sea pines. Among the clinging kudzu the fog as if with more sinister deliberation clawed across the vines with boney ghost-like fingers. The neighborhood curious, awoken first by the gunfire and later by the siren screams, wandered near the yellow police crime scene tape wearing their robes or were garbed in early-shift work clothes, drinking coffee, gossiping with theories, socializing like it was the annual crawdad gumbo festival.

The Harrison County Sheriff had sent over a designated deputy to assure his presence was felt yet mindful of jurisdictional protocol since the shootings

were within Biloxi city limits proper. The Sheriff had first ordered the deputy to stop off and bring along the chief investigator for the Mississippi Gaming Commission who

though based out of Jackson, had been along the coast in the recent weeks as part of the task force involved in the investigation that had blown up into this bloody conclusion.

Gaming Commission Investigator Auggie Dupin (short for Augustus and the last name pronounced 'do-pan') continued his dialogue with a Biloxi detective while he watched his friend Owen McCombs cleaning out the rest of his meager apartment belongings. He would miss the guy but accepted the fact greener pastures awaited the young casino executive. Investigator Dupin was Creole by heritage, whatever politically correct blood mix that meant these days. He was a pounded squat stocky man robust from Zydeco living, dark skinned, short-cropped black hair with sideburn grey frazzled strands, a rounded face but bearing a pointy French roman nose. Ex-FBI many years retired. He and casino executive Owen McCombs had worked with each other in past issues, many labeled as discreet, the very sensitive sticky problems not to be broadcasted, to be settled without fanfare. To maintain the integrity of legalized gaming, for their own personal reasons, one as a State job, the other to protect his boss. This was not one of these times. The television station mobile trucks were setting up for a live feed, coiffed reporters primping with microphones readied.

As Auggie approached him Owen jammed his last box into the truck that held all his worldly possessions, pulled down the sliding truck door and snapped the Master lock shut. He double checked the chains on the auto carrier that held his baby snug, the 1960 Corvette roadster, fire-engine red with midnight interior. He was ready for his fresh start. Just in time.

"Vous san vou-mem byen?" slanged Auggie in a Cajun brogue, reserved only for his buddies.

“Mon bon. A little worse for wear. I feel the ‘bleues’. I gave Chief Hewes and his minions my statement.”

“P’tite kraut.” Owen did not disagree with Auggie’s earthy assessment of the police chief. *Little turd*. Since Owen had been transferred to Biloxi from Colorado two years back to work in political community relations, without title, he had found himself bumping heads with the entrenched good ol’ boy establishment. Chief Hewes and Owen were as compatible as a rabid skunk and a coon dog.

Auggie and Owen tried to be detached observers taking in the controlled bedlam surrounding Owen’s apartment. The investigator added to his scribbled notepad the apartment address: 223-A Baker Avenue. 221-B upstairs. A quad of four tan-brick apartments in a grouping of about twenty small buildings. The police were at the neighbors taking statements. Auggie’s report would be the official record for the Gaming Commission.

“You’re still planning on leaving? They could hold you as a material witness.”

“Chief Hewes and I already had it out. I’d squawk and hold TV interviews, and the police especially Chief Hewes have enough bad publicity as it is. They know where to find me.” Both of them could see above the ground fog to the casinos across the bridge, along the strip Highway 90, where the largest of the Gold Coast towers flared with red neon ablaze: Magnum Casino Hotel Biloxi--Mississippi’s largest single corporate employer, outside the military bases belonging to the Federal government.

“I don’t know if Vegas is ready for you? Mal pris, Owen, you seem to bring your own voodoo of bad luck wherever you end up.”

“This job transfer will definitely be an improvement over being beat up and shot at.”

“Don’t leave out the net wave-ride you took behind that gook shrimp boat.”

They both watched in a moment of silence as the county medical examiner and the funeral home transport crew led the procession carrying out the dead man. Shot twice by separate fire arms, the first in the shoulder the second and the lethal strike in the chest, blowing apart the pulmonary artery. Massive internal bleeding might be the official cause of death but they both knew avarice was the true fatal ailment. Casinos are like banks: that’s where the money is.

“Well, you saved our grits, I guess that’s the way it’ll play out.”

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks.” Magnum Casinos did not pay big bucks. “Adyeu, Auggie, keep the South rising.”

“Owen, it’s been a pleasure. *Laissez les bon temps rouler*. Good luck, and I mean that.”

“It would be nice for a change.”

Owen climbed into the truck cab, fastened the seat belt, adjusted the door side mirror, and edged the truck through the official traffic snarl. He saw her as he drove away from his apartment, from the crime scene she helped to create. She wore red jeans, one knee patched, wearing one of his New ‘Awlins Margaritaville beach t-shirts, cut-off, displaying her pierced navel, and the start of that speckled band tattoo slithering downward out of sight. He had once traced

the reptile's path with his tongue, had enjoyed the nesting grounds, and had lived to regret sleeping among the vipers. She slumped against a Biloxi patrol car her upper arm bandaged, her wrists handcuffed. A police officer stood guard. She gave him a departing stare, a look beyond malice, a look that could kill, and with a gun in hand had. Twice.

With this story over, literally, he flipped on the cassette tape recorder beside him and munched on a guy breakfast of stale Fritos and caffeine laced Coke. 1,804 miles to go.

Static and canned the recorder spoke with a perky female voice, "Welcome to your new job at *Magnum Casino & Hotel Las Vegas*. This is one of eight tapes that will educate you to both the city of Las Vegas, one of the fastest growing communities in the country, and to one of the most exciting casino projects now being built. Excitement means Magnum Casinos."