

# FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES

by Tom Avitabile

## EXCERPT

Brooke was escorted to the lobby of a government building where a tall man, wearing a sharp-cut suit and perfect tan, extended his hand as he introduced himself. “Mrs. Morton? Kyle Simms, head of 5-0.”

“Pleasure, Simms. Let’s get to it,” Brooke said as if she had been the one to call this meeting. It made him raise an eyebrow.

He extended his arm in the direction of the elevator. “Please.” The well-mannered Simms let her enter first. He pressed the button for the top floor. She noticed the manicured hand. *Buffed, not polished.* She detected the faint smell of cigars. *Must have caught him coming back from a smoke break,* she imagined.

“To the right,” he said as the elevator door opened. He pointed to the glass doors of a sunlit corner office. When they entered, he gestured to a small conference table opposite his very impressive desk. She noticed his “Love Me Wall.” It was de rigueur for military officers. His was filled with photos and newspaper headlines in wood frames. There was a plaque on the wall: Operation Desert Storm. A framed picture showed a platoon of Rangers. From across the room, she couldn’t make out which one of the younger men was Simms. A Ranger beret with a silver bar pinned to it was resting on the credenza. It told Brooke he had been a first lieutenant. Brooke took a seat.

“Coffee?” Simms said. Brooke considered it, then her overactive bladder of late. “No thanks. Is Jenny Kupalli alright?”

“The daughter? Yes, she’s with child services right now.”

“Thank God. I was so worried when she didn’t show for the game this morning.”

“Mrs. Morton, you are here as a courtesy. I have an inkling of your former service to our country. So I wanted to give you every chance to tell me your side of the story.”

“Courtesy? You send a unit, a cage unit? To my school! You could have just called me. I would have driven right over.”

“I’m sorry, you know how this goes. I ask them to drive you over as a courtesy, and somehow they assign an RMP, not a detective’s car. Sorry. Wasn’t intentional.” Brooke wasn’t buying it. She had used this technique to soften persons of interest the

same way by putting a little police procedural fear into them before their conversation. “Are you considering me as a suspect?”

“Again, right now you are a POI. Nothing more.”

“Let me ask you, are you recording, transcribing or in any way preserving our conversation today, Saturday at 2:03 p.m. at 5-0 headquarters?” Simms smiled. If they were, and they weren’t, she just made the whole practice inadmissible in court. “No. Kyle Simms, Deputy Director of Law Enforcement, HPD state police department,” he said, clarifying his rank just to match her pseudo-official disclaimer.

His official response told Brooke that she didn’t need a lawyer. Over the next ten minutes she read him in on her total encounter with Mr. Kupalli and her suspicions about Jenny’s abuse.

He listened intently, scratching notes. When she paused, he waited. But she was not falling for the “fill-the-silence” ploy. So, he sat back, looked at her for a few seconds. She just looked back. It was a standoff.

He broke the stalemate. “And you had never met him before?”

“I don’t believe he ever came to a game. Seems like the kind of guy who wouldn’t cheer on an equipment manager.”

Simms nodded. Then, as if he made a hard left turn, said, “Do you own a 9-mm handgun?”

Brooke sighed. Simms was going to go strictly by the book. “Yes. Glock 26.”

“Do you know where it is now?”

“In the fingerprint safe by my bed.”

“Would you be willing to voluntarily surrender the weapon for ballistic elimination?”

“For my protection, and yours, you’ll need a warrant, hopefully limited in scope, Deputy Director. As I’m sure you’re aware, my husband is a high-ranking naval officer. Poking around our home might violate his Fourth Amendment rights and no less than three national security protocols.”

“Fair enough. Off record?”

Brooke shot him a look. Her defenses reared up. “Wasn’t this all off record?”

“True, but this is more personal than professional.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“That’s what I’m asking you. Did you shoot this model citizen?”

*That was an odd question to ask off the record,* Brooke thought. “Nope. In fact, just the opposite. I had hoped that I put the fear of God into him. I believed he’d have second thoughts about smacking around his daughter now that he knew I had eyes on him. But a Skel like him, he must’ve pissed in someone’s Cheerios somewhere along the way, and that’s what probably contributed to him achieving room temperature last night.”