

JUDGE NOT by Nikki Stern

EXCERPT

Pat McCready, former patrol deputy and newly minted detective, knocked on her open door. “Got a minute, Lieutenant?”

“Always for you, Detective McCready,” she responded. He was one of her favorites, especially after working closely with him to catch the murderer who executed Arley Fitchett, a beloved local treasure hunter. Enthusiastic and hard-working, McCready turned out to be observant and a damned good shot to boot.

Jax bounded over to the grinning young man, hoping for a romp or at least a head scratch, maybe a treat. McCready glanced at the jar on Sam’s desk. “Can I?” he asked. She nodded.

After offering a biscuit to the dog, who took it back to his bed, McCready grew serious. “I came across some information while I was compiling notes from the domestic complaint last night,” he said.

“If it pertains to that case, you should take it up with Sergeant Gordy. I’ll review everything at our next meeting.”

McCready bounced on his toes, trying to keep his natural enthusiasm in check.

“Lieutenant, it’s not about any of our current cases. It’s more something that relates to your, uh, past cases. I mean, it’s probably nothing, but ...”

Sam felt a momentary flutter. “Okay, Detective. Show me what you’ve found.”

“This all started with my uncle’s brother-in-law, Roy,” McCready began. “He’s from Sacramento, okay? Well, he was, but he’s moved back east to be closer to the family after his divorce. Okay, that may not be relevant,” he added when Sam frowned.

“What is important is that he told a story about a serial killer that was active back when he lived there. This would have been twenty-odd years ago. The guy murdered five teachers over seven months. Stabbed them through the eye and left their bodies right in front of the schools along with some sort of memento, I think a notebook. Pretty grisly. Two Sacramento detectives caught him. California has the death penalty and back then, they used it in this guy, although it took seven years.”

“How is this relevant to me, or rather, to this department?”

McCready put his tablet in front of her. He brought up the website for the *Sacramento Bee*.

“I decided to research the case on my own time, Lieutenant. Just curious to see how crime-solving was covered in the days before everyone used social media. Then I found this recent obit for one of the lead detectives, name of Jack Frost if you can believe it.”

Sam scanned the article. “Says here he was killed outside his home two months ago,” she summarized. “An ice pick to the eye and a black and white notebook at the scene. Creepy, even perversely clever but not a shock. The man was a homicide detective. He likely investigated

plenty of violent crimes during his career. Someone with a grudge decided to take him out using the same method as the serialist.”

“Hold on, Lieutenant, there’s something else I need to show you.” McCready turned the tablet around, brought up a second screen, and turned it back. All the while, he was shaking his foot fast enough that Sam felt her desk vibrate.

Another news site. This one belonged to the Billings Gazette. Curious, she read:

Rosebud County Sheriff’s Office has announced the death of Under Sheriff Mackenzie “Mac” Scott, 38. His body was found on Anika Vista Ranch, north of Lockwood, nearly a week after he went missing. The ranch belongs to the Tubb family. Scott’s neck was reportedly broken and then branded with the ranch logo.

Dillon Tubb, son of owner Carter Tubb, found the body around 6 pm yesterday near one of the cattle pens. The family has disavowed any knowledge of the incident before the discovery.

The death is considered suspicious. “It’s been cool at night, which may have preserved some of the biological evidence,” said a representative from coroner’s office in Billings. “We hope that will aid in our investigation.”

Mac Scott achieved some notoriety when he caught Deke Garrity, aka the Cattleman Killer eight years ago. Garrity was accused of murdering three prominent cattle ranchers by breaking their necks and then branding them because, as he put it, “they needed to be treated the way they treated their animals.” Garrity was sentenced to death and executed last year after his last appeal failed.

“This is a heinous crime,” declared Sheriff Jarrod Greene. “Mac was a dedicated law officer, a loving family man, and a good friend of mine.” He asked that anyone with any information call the department hotline.

We will continue to update this story as information becomes available.

Sam reread the article, aware of McCready’s intense gaze. He wanted a reaction. She wanted to keep a lid on her emotions until she had a chance to examine them.

“This is dated a few days ago,” she observed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“These two homicides have elements in common, I’ll grant you that. A dead investigator. A duplication of the MO used by a serial killer brought down by the very men who are now victims of someone else. On the other hand, this Montana case isn’t nearly as specific. People’s necks are broken, either by accident or on purpose. As far as branding a victim, that may not be unusual out in Montana. Let me ask you: Have you located any more such incidents?”

“Not as of yet,” McCready admitted.

“Pat, you can do anything you want on your own time, and that includes researching unusual cases. But if you’re in here to ask me if I think there’s cause for further action, I’m afraid I don’t. Nor do I think in any event we’d have any jurisdiction. Do you?”

“No, ma’am, I guess not officially.” McCready reached for his laptop. He looked like a puppy who’d been sent to his crate.

“Look, the similarities between these two homicides could be a fluke, but you keep track. If another detective known for chasing serial killers goes down, let me know. I’ll pass it along to the FBI. Okay? And let’s keep this between us.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” He rose.

“Shut the door on your way out, please.”

As soon as he left, Sam pulled up a copy of *Police Chief Magazine* on her computer. There was the statistic she’d seen: 131 law officers killed last year. The article predicted a higher number this year. The detective in California and the undersheriff in Montana were just two.

Not your business, Lieutenant, she reminded herself even as her hand reached for the phone.