

SUNSET CLAUSE

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SOUTHERN FRAUD THRILLER 6

J. W. BECTON



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ONE

A set of industrial-grade florescent lights buzzed so loudly that the air in the small room vibrated against his skin.

A voice crackled from a small brown speaker mounted in the corner. “Turn to the left.”

Mark Vincent executed a crisp, military-style turn and looked down at the heads of the five other participants in the lineup as they shuffled to the left with nearly unanimous malaise.

He towered over the tallest of his companions by a good six inches, his athletic form creating a sharp contrast to the hodgepodge of subjects the Mercer Police Department had chosen from lockup. Their physiques ranged from overweight to emaciated, but their hair color was similar to his own ruddy brown.

Despite that single point of similarity, no one was going to confuse him with any of these other men.

And that was exactly the point.

Someone well placed in Mercer law enforcement had gone to a lot of trouble to rig this lineup in an effort to ensure that every witness on the other side of the glass would name Mark Vincent as the man who had ended Samuel Oliver’s life.

Only Vincent hadn’t pulled the trigger.

It didn't seem to matter that Samuel Oliver had taken his own life.

"Face forward," the disembodied voice commanded.

He—and the other five men—did as they were told.

A glance at himself in the two-way mirror showed Vincent that his fists were clenched, and he deliberately relaxed the tight muscles of his arms. He was doing himself no favors by looking so surly, even though the game was rigged, the narrative against him firmly in place.

"Aggressive law enforcement officer Mark Vincent, a man with a documented history of violence, murdered Samuel Oliver without provocation or justification."

He'd heard that fictional tale on the news a dozen times. The *Mercer Messenger* echoed the story in its headlines, and radio announcers gleefully reported it on local radio every half hour.

Only one news outlet—Channel 2—bothered to dig deeper into the story or to question the bogus information passed out by corrupt members of the MPD and their cohorts in the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

The ballistic evidence that would prove that the fatal bullet had not come from Vincent's service weapon was long gone. With the physical evidence out of the way, law enforcement officers were leading witnesses and manipulating their memories, tasks that were shockingly easy for trained interrogators.

Someone wanted to see Vincent off the streets and in a cell—or on death row.

Either way, he was in real trouble.

Thankfully, he had help. On the other side of the window was his defense attorney, Henry Martling III, and Helena St. John, a US attorney who was acting in an unofficial, advisory capacity. They were two of the best.

But they were battling fraud and political corruption on an unprecedented scale for the little city of Mercer, and so far they couldn't prove anything.

The voice crackled across the speaker again. Vincent turned to the right, and soon after, a pair of uniformed Mercer police officers escorted him and the five ringers out of the room.

Clearly, his time as a free man was running short.

If the unscrupulous members of Mercer government had their way, Mark Vincent would never see the light of day again.

The waiting area where the MPD stowed me wasn't a room so much as an offshoot of a long linoleum hallway. A couple of wobbly chairs sat around a corner and out of the main flow of traffic. It was more of a waiting cubbyhole.

Less than an hour ago, a couple of officers had escorted Mark deeper into the bowels of the MPD building. As a former cop, I was familiar with the layout. I knew where he was and how to get to him, but I might as well have been in Siberia. Effectively out of commission, there wasn't much I could do to help him.

I slouched in my chair and tried my best to relax into the posture. It wasn't working, but I tried. Mark's freedom—and possibly his life—was on the line, and I was stuck in a hallway, twiddling my thumbs and feeling utterly useless.

The sound of high heels tapping briskly down the passage drew my attention. The sharp clacking stopped abruptly, and a female voice echoed along the expanse of linoleum. "What—in the name of all that is holy—was that?"

I sat bolt upright, all hope of attaining zen-like calm vanishing as the woman's chilly tone sliced through my bones.

I knew who it was without having to peek around the

corner: Kay Lanyon, prosecuting attorney. She was a dirty, dirty, dirty public official who'd hounded me ever since my evidence theft came to light.

Yes, I admit it. Back in the day, I'd stolen a small scrap of evidence, but I had a good reason: keeping my sister Tricia's rape case from going cold. What I'd done was technically illegal, but it worked. The man who had attacked my sister was arrested and currently serving his sentence in prison.

Unfortunately, justice for Tricia came at a high personal cost. I lost my job at the Georgia Department of Insurance and was stripped of my law enforcement certification, making me unemployable as a police officer in the state. Worse, once I'd gained the reputation as someone who would tamper with evidence, numerous criminals I'd arrested used that one action to create reasonable doubt about their own arrests. As a result, some dangerous fraudsters ended up going free.

And Prosecutor Kay Lanyon was pissed about it. She was bitter—not only about me having no jail time but also that the fallout from my crime tainted her own conviction record.

Bitter wasn't really an adequate word. She hated me with the heat of a thousand suns. And I returned the sentiment.

I might not have gone to prison, but I was punished for my crime. I lost my job and my reputation. Not to mention a sizable chunk of money in legal fees. Still, Lanyon intended to make me pay even more. And so far, she'd done a bang-up job. She'd used corrupt GBI agents and a shady local judge to perform a search of my home. She'd also discovered a file of information about Ted Insley, my former boss, and fully intended to pin his murder on me.

Only I didn't kill him. And I had evidence to prove it. Evidence that even she couldn't make disappear.

Not that the truth mattered to her. She seemed intent to convict me of *any* crime with a lengthy prison sentence regardless of whether or not I was guilty.

Ditto for Mark.

Of course, Lanyon was involved in Mark's current situation too. I could just picture her in her little pencil skirt, stiletto heels, and a set of devil horns, clacking around and ruining people's lives.

"It was the lineup *you* requested," a male voice responded. His tone was softer, but I could still sense the anger behind it.

Lanyon made a sound somewhere between a growl and a hiss. "*That* isn't what I requested."

"Every witness identified Mark Vincent as the shooter," the man said, his tone defensive. "That's what you wanted."

My heart began to pound. If witnesses pegged Mark as the person who killed Samuel Oliver, then the situation was worse than I feared. Without exposing my presence, I leaned forward and strained to hear every word they said.

"I wanted IDs I could use in court," Lanyon said in a tight voice. "A lineup has to be believable to be admissible in the courtroom. The stand-ins you provided made Vincent an obvious choice. Hell, people who weren't even in the restaurant would have picked him out of that lineup."

I couldn't make out the man's response, but I got the feeling that he disagreed.

"That," Lanyon continued, "will never make it out of a suppression hearing."

"Sure it will," the man said, his tone unconcerned. "The judge will push it through."

The man, whoever he was, was probably referring to Judge Hutchinson, the same corrupt justice who had signed Lanyon's search warrant for my house.

"To what end?" Lanyon demanded. Her irritated tone shifted to pedantic, and she addressed the man as if talking to a small child. "Pushing a flawed lineup through trial will leave us open to a future appeal in a higher court. A higher court with a *less friendly* judge. We can't afford the risk, not when legitimate evidence is out there."

Legitimate evidence?

I suppressed a bark of laughter. There was no *legitimate* evidence to prove that Mark Vincent shot Samuel Oliver. But Lanyon said it with such conviction that anyone who overheard her might believe the prosecutor wanted to put a truly dangerous person behind bars. It almost sounded as if she believed her own words.

But Kay Lanyon knew Mark hadn't killed Oliver. She simply believed he was guilty of other crimes, and she was willing to work the system to make him pay.

There was a pause, and then the sound of Lanyon's heels approached my waiting area. I squashed back into my chair, hoping she wouldn't turn her head and notice me when she passed my cubbyhole. I didn't want her to catch me eavesdropping, even though technically it wasn't my fault.

"The lineup was a formality." The man's voice boomed down the hallway. Lanyon's steps slowed and then stopped. "Vincent is a dirty cop, and you know it."

I heard Lanyon's heels clatter away again.

"If we're going to make a case against Mark Vincent," she hissed at him, "then it has to be solid. We both know he's a violent, dirty cop. But it's not what I know that counts; it's what I can *prove*. Which is nothing with that ridiculous lineup. The evidence I come up with has to be believable."

My fingers curled around the sides of my seat. The edges of the plastic chair dug into my flesh. Kay Lanyon had basically admitted to fabricating evidence against Mark.

But it was my word against hers, and no one would believe me.

Moreover, the irony of her admission had me shaking my head.

Not so long ago, Lanyon accused me of fabricating evidence against fraudsters, and here she was committing the same crime. Projection, anyone?

Obviously she had no qualms about inventing evidence against innocent people, and apparently she assumed that

other people—specifically me—would be willing to do the same.

“You’re overreacting,” the man said. “People’s opinions can be swayed. Juries can be convinced. You don’t need a smoking gun.”

“Even the most delusional juror wouldn’t buy that line—”

A door opened somewhere along the hallway, and Lanyon’s voice clipped into silence.

Another set of footsteps marched in my direction, slowing to a stop long before they reached me.

“Lanyon, Special Agent Fowler,” the newcomer said, and I finally knew the male speaker was Agent Fowler of the GBI.

But at the sound of this new voice, I nearly stood up and did a happy dance. Helena St. John, my best friend and US attorney, had just entered into the discussion.

“You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” Helena said, her tone hard and sharp as an ax blade. “Especially you. I always respected you as a prosecutor, but you need to reevaluate your beliefs in light of the evidence.”

“What evidence would that be?” Lanyon countered, her tone also turning defensive.

“The suicide note. Oliver clearly states his intention to die, and he apologizes to Vincent for forcing him to do it. Not to mention the inconvenient truth that the bullet that ended Oliver’s life didn’t come from Vincent’s weapon, but from the victim’s own gun. Ballistic evidence would prove it, if it hadn’t conveniently disappeared....”

“Until I see the alleged suicide note—the original—and have the handwriting analyzed by an independent contractor, I don’t believe it.”

Of course, she wouldn’t believe the suicide note. Lanyon wouldn’t know the truth if it walked up and slapped her in the face.

But there was no way we were giving the original suicide

note to that pack of jackals. It would be sitting alongside the ballistic evidence in a trash bin in two seconds flat.

“For obvious reasons, a copy will have to suffice. Here,” Helena said. I heard a piece of paper crackle in the exchange.

“I know about your friendship with Julia Jackson.” Lanyon spat my name as if the letters themselves were cursed.

“I’m not attempting to conceal our friendship,” Helena said, and I heard the implied “...anymore” in her tone. At one point, Helena had to distance herself from me and my legal troubles for the sake of self-preservation. I didn’t blame her, but I hated not being able to talk to her. Thankfully, that time was over, and Hels was on my side.

“Unlike you, Lanyon,” Helena continued, “I don’t enjoy operating in the shadows, tampering with witnesses and rigging lineups.”

Lanyon sputtered. I could hear her muttering from down the hall. And then she found her words. “Julia Jackson and Mark Vincent are corrupt! To this point, Jackson has gotten off easy. But I have Vincent on this shooting—”

“You don’t really believe you have a legitimate case here, do you?” Hels interrupted. “Oliver drove a car into a crowded restaurant, brandished a weapon, and then shot himself. A legitimate look at the evidence and the autopsy will show conclusively that Mark Vincent did not fire the shot that ended Samuel Oliver’s life.”

“I do have a case,” Lanyon argued. “I have a slew of witnesses who will testify that they saw Vincent pull the trigger. I have no physical evidence that says otherwise. And we’re waiting on the autopsy, which will no doubt prove the witnesses to be accurate. Vincent must be held accountable for his crimes. Those who work in the criminal justice field should be held to a higher standard.”

“Yes,” Helena said, pausing, probably to let the irony of Lanyon’s own words register. “We *should* be held to a higher standard. That’s why I chose the prosecution of corrupt

officials as the focus of my practice. If it turns out that you—either of you—had a hand in any of the unethical actions against Mark Vincent, Julia Jackson, or any other citizen of Mercer, I will not only end your careers. I will send your asses to prison.”

Apparently, Agent Fowler decided to step in at this point to break up the discussion. He sent Hels in my direction, and he and Lanyon disappeared through another door somewhere down the hall.

When Helena walked past the little offshoot where I sat, I stepped out and matched strides with her. She had known I was in the waiting cubbyhole and wasn't surprised to see me.

“Thank you,” I said. “For what you did back there. For what you're doing for Mark and me.”

Helena narrowed her almond-shaped eyes at me, and I was surprised to see how angry she was.

“Don't thank me yet,” she said. “Kay Lanyon is just the tip of the iceberg. We have no idea who—or what exactly—we're dealing with yet. But I intend to find out.”

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