

Undone

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Author Notes

This novel is a work of fiction and although some of the names may exist, most of the characters are completely fictitious.

Note that Amp is the actual groundskeeper at Publix Field in Lakeland, Florida, his wife's name is Amanda, and he has five children. Beyond that, again, his character is pure fiction. Including Amp's character in this work is only meant to be a tribute to those who work diligently behind the scenes to ensure that our professional sports operate smoothly.

Yes, I did lose an elementary and secondary school friend, Mark Golding to a tragic accident as described early in this novel. Mark loved to drive and unfortunately his passion took his life.

Also, the owner of Antonino's Original Pizza is Joe Ciaravino and a dear lifelong friend who is very proud of his pizza and his parents who taught him their craft.

Lastly of course, references to Windsor/Detroit/Chicago NHL legend Bob Probert are non-fiction. I had the honour of playing high school football and minor hockey with Proby. The last time I saw him was over 25 years ago, but it was really nice to catch up with him. He met my very young son and Bob was expecting another child just days later. It never ceases to amaze me as to how gentle and kind he was off the ice. Please bless Bob's soul and his family.

Part One - Narrated by Roberta Hodgson

Chapter 1.1 – Securing the Scene

My name is Roberta Hodgson and I am a traffic cop with the city of Detroit. I am at the tail end of an overnight shift and it is just after 7 a.m. in mid-April. By any standards, we have been blessed with some beautiful weather here in the Motor City this spring. Even early in the day today, it is already 58 degrees and there is virtually no humidity. We are in a warm spell and I will enjoy it while I can. I dread July when we can get well into the 80's with humidity to match and thankfully, the snow and wind chills of our Michigan winter are a distant memory at this point.

I am patrolling in Southwest Detroit on this fine morning and in my rear view mirror, I can see the newly rising sun glistening off the Detroit River.

As I am coming up on a curve on Jefferson Avenue West and crossing the Rouge River, I catch a glimpse of something shiny in the peripheral vision of my right eye. I am not sure what, but there is something on the riverbank. Being a Sunday morning, there is not much traffic, but I still do not want to just hit the brakes. I coast over the bridge and find a safe location to make a U-turn. As I travel back over the bridge, there is no oncoming traffic, so I drive on the wrong side of the road to get a better look at what caught my eye.

While I pull to a stop, I put on my flashing lights and I pull over onto the shoulder facing against non-existent traffic. Sure enough, there is a vehicle on its roof. I exit my cruiser quickly in case the accident is fresh, but I suspect not. I do not see any smoke, steam, or spinning wheels. The presence of any of those might indicate that I will need to help someone out of the vehicle, but the vehicle appears to have come to rest, hours before.

I brace myself to either find an unconscious driver or worse, and I pray that there are no children on board. Throughout my career, I have seen far too many young souls lost in careless driving accidents. I silently hope that the driver found their way out of the vehicle and is safe and sound somewhere sleeping off this misadventure.

After approaching the passenger side of the vehicle, I break the window with my baton to allow me access to the door controls and I unlock the vehicle. I hustle around to the driver's side of the vehicle, but then my heart sinks. A black male is hanging upside down in the driver's seat still secured by his three-point safety belt. I suspect that he has been there for some time as his head is bloated and his eyes are open, bloodshot and bulging. His left arm hangs down below his head and is swollen, but his right arm is caught up in the steering wheel. It is obvious that the swelling is from the blood pooling in the inverted lower extremities. After opening the driver side door and checking for a pulse unsuccessfully and unsurprisingly, I survey the interior to determine that there is no other occupant in the vehicle and I return to lean on my cruiser fender. A deep breath helps calm my nerves and I curse the fact that there is no hope of any amount of CPR reviving this driver.

My first priority is to call in the license plate of the vehicle and request assistance. While I wait, I secure the area with traffic markers on the shoulder and I direct the next two officers and cruisers that arrive to set up and redirect potential traffic to the far lane.

As determined from the license plate and the ownership, it appears the deceased is a David Stone, who is only 24 years old. I am also informed of a documented warning for the driver from less than two weeks prior. After donning clean latex gloves, I enter the vehicle from the passenger side. I carefully open the glove box, anticipating random items to fall out, and I retrieve a plastic dealership packet that likely has the ownership and insurance information. The paperwork is also in the name of David Stone.

After crawling along the roof liner, I reach to feel each of the driver's four pants pockets and I find a wallet in the right back pocket. To myself, I silently hope that the name on the driver's license is also David Stone, but then I question myself as to why. I guess it will be simpler if all the names match. Sure enough, the driver appears to be David Stone as well, but with the condition of his face, I cannot confirm that it is one in the same from the DMV photo. I put the wallet back into the exact same location and orientation from which I took it and that is when I notice something that gives me chills.

I see an old English D tattooed on the inside of the left forearm. This old English D is the one you see on a Detroit Tigers hat. Even non-baseball fans might recognize the logo if they have ever watched Magnum PI, whether it was the eighties television series with Tom Selleck or the recent reboot version. The logo leads me to believe that this David Stone is likely the rookie shortstop for the Detroit Tigers. I quietly say to myself, "Shit," and then I feel guilty for somehow thinking that this lost life is any different than if it was some random 24-year old male. As an officer, I am always very cautious, but now I have a heightened awareness of everything I do, as this will be a tragic event for the city of Detroit and the media will scrutinize every move the Detroit Police Department makes.

Chapter 1.2 – Initial Investigation

Detroit Police Department policy is that whenever there is a fatality in a motor vehicle accident, a homicide crash investigator is assigned to document and investigate the scene. My superior indicates that they want a homicide detective on-site, in addition to a crash investigator, and I am told that we may have to secure the site for quite some time. While I wait for the investigator and detective to arrive, I tour the area and scribble in my department issued notepad.

I assume the vehicle was coming from the northeast and was heading southwest, but see no skid marks. The road is dry, but I do notice a puddle on the shoulder that appears dark in color. I am not sure if it is something from the vehicle or if it is just pooling dew, or perhaps something totally different.

It looks like the vehicle left the road just prior to the bridge. It then clipped a large landscaping boulder, as evidenced by the silver paint and scrapes on the rock. It seems logical that the collision with the rock would upend the vehicle causing it to come to a rest on its roof. The engaged seatbelt ensured that the driver was held securely in his seat and he quite possibly survived the initial crash. However, he must have lost consciousness and remained strapped in until he succumbed to internal injuries or just too much blood to his head. Unfortunately, I know personally that this type of accident can be fatal.

I think back to my high school days when I was a sophomore. A male friend of mine, named Mark, had gone for a late night drive, in October. I remember the timing, because I was at an Oktoberfest beer tent when I heard the news of his death. I heard by word of mouth as this was well before cell phones and social media. Mark ended up in an inverted position in his car in someone's side yard, ironically in a dried-up ditch – a similar version of the scene I see here today. I remember being furious when I read an article in the newspaper a few days later that the homeowner had heard a loud bang in the middle of the night, but did not think much of it and went back to sleep. Still to this day, I wonder if my friend would have survived if the homeowner would have gone outside to check on the noise and I also wonder if the homeowner feels any guilt. I feel my blood pressure rise, just as it does every time I recall this memory. I shake my head to clear my mind just like you would with a child's Etch a Sketch toy.

My mind comes back to the matter at hand and I continue taking notes regarding the scene. I return to the vehicle with my notepad in hand. Clearly, the airbags deployed, at least on the driver's side, as the depleted airbags hang from where they were deployed. The deployments left a chalky film over much of the interior. In the vehicle cabin, I notice a nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels lying on its side on the roof liner. The bottle is open, but some of the amber liquid remains, just even with the uncapped spout. There is a nearly full, capped water bottle also lying on its side further to the back of the vehicle. The windshield is shattered into little pieces, but held together with the film of plastic as it is designed to do. On it, I note loose change, an empty

Tic Tac packet, and a Sharpie marker. I speculate that all celebrities carry a black Sharpie for signing autographs. That speculation does not go into my notes.

I go back to lean on my cruiser again and I continue taking notes. While doing so, I am sure to just state facts as we have been instructed to do throughout my schooling and career. I will leave drawing conclusions to the accident re-creation experts and the detective. I do wonder why a detective is being called in so early into this investigation, but granted, our crash victim *is* a local celebrity. The brass will want another set of eyes on the situation, just in case.

Chapter 1.3 – Detective Gaines on the Scene

The crash investigator arrives and I give a summary of my notes, to which she jots down her own notes. She thanks me and leaves to survey the scene as well.

Just then, a black unmarked Dodge Charger pulls up and out crawls a detective whom I recognize, Finn Gaines. He yells at me, “Hey Hodgy, why am I getting called to an accident scene?” I do not know why he calls me Hodgy. My friends do shorten up my name, but they call me Hodge.

I will make a point as I respond, “The driver is a VIP and we need to cover all our bases here, Finny,” with some emphasis on the last syllable.

The point is made as he responds with, “Finn, just Finn, please. Okay, let us take a look, Hodge.”

“Ah, you can take a hint, can’t you? Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks?”

I do feel a twinge of guilt, because I could have responded as he did. The more mature route would have been to just tell him that I prefer Hodge. Okay, it is a lesson learned.

Finn continues, “Hey Hodge, what kind of vehicle is this?”

“2019 Toyota Rav4 Limited, hybrid model. Just a couple months old according to the registration.”

“Any cell phone?”

“Yes, I patted down each pocket and it looks like it is in his left front pant pocket.”

Finn pulls on a pair of gloves and slides out the iPhone. He puts the phone up to the driver’s left thumb and nothing happens. This is not surprising considering how swollen the hand is. I have trouble unlocking my phone when my fingers are cold, wet, or if I have a cut. Finn then tries the body’s right thumb and the phone comes to life.

I bite my lip as I wonder about the legality of this action, which just draws a grin from Finn. He makes some notes and declares, “So, it does *not* appear to be a texting and driving situation here.”

I say, “Considering the phone was in his pocket, I would guess not,” a little sarcastically, which he ignores.

As Finn continues to look at the phone, he mumbles, “So, he texted a Jessie at 12:03 a.m. asking her to call. Jessie did call him at 12:10 a.m., but he did not answer. Before that, he got a call from a Jimmy Greyson.” Finn pauses and then continues a little louder while nodding, “Ahah, so this is who this is. This is *the* Dave Stone – the new shortstop for the Tigers.”

“I thought that you knew. They didn’t fill you in, eh?”

“Nope, I guess information flows as needed here.”

“Well, you can get all my notes, no problem.”

Finn says, "I appreciate that Hodge. Please be sure to document everything here and we better get the coroner to weigh in. I am guessing that the tox screen will show some alcohol. It clearly looks like an impaired driving case at first glance."

"Will do, Finn. I do have word that Mr. Stone was also pulled over not long ago by one of our officers. He was really out of it, but the officer was starstruck and let him go."

"Seriously, in this day and age? Let me guess. Last Chance?" to which I nod. Finn continues, "I will follow up with LaChance, but why call in a Homicide Detective on top of the homicide crash investigator?"

"As I said, the brass just wants us to cover all our bases, considering who the deceased is. Personally, I do not see anything jumping out at me. Do you? Is your *spiny sense* going off?"

Finn looks at me confused and asks, "*Spiny sense*?"

"Yeah, you know how Spider-Man will say that his *spiny sense* is tingling. His spine is tingling. Chills in the spine kind of thing."

"You jackass! Spider-Man has *spidey sense*, not *spiny sense*!!"

Well, I feel foolish, but after being called a *jackass*, the guilt I felt for calling him *Finny* has dissipated. I respond, "Are you sure? I have always thought it was like spine tingling."

"Yes, I am sure, Hodge. Well, right now, I have no tingling whatsoever, but I am still gathering evidence." He hands me the phone and continues, "Can you get the phone to IT? They can clone it and get the copy to me. I know they like to do the deep dive, but I want my own copy, too. Ninety percent of the time nowadays, the cell phone holds the secret that kicks investigations into another gear."

"Sure, but hey Gaines, there is the other possibility that we cannot overlook."

"Yes, I know. No skid marks on the road, alcohol involved, and career struggles. Suicide is a possibility here."

"Those struggles on the field are minor, but who knows what other struggles or demons an individual is battling? Now, this is a new vehicle, so would it have a black box?"

Gaines replies, "Yes and no. It will have an EDR, an Event Data Recorder, but the information is fairly limited and only within less than a minute prior to the accident. We will be able to tell if the vehicle safety features operated as expected, if the driver wore their seatbelt, and if the driver was pressing on the brakes or accelerator. The scope is fairly limited."

"And clearly, the airbags deployed, he was wearing his seatbelt and we see no evidence of braking."

"The seatbelt would tend to rule out suicide, would it not, Gaines?"

"Actually, not always. Sometimes, it is a last second decision and not always well thought out."

I cannot put a finger on it, but I do have a feeling that this is not a straightforward drunk driver going off the side of the road. Spiny sense or spidey sense, something is telling me that Finn Gaines has some work to do.

I also have an overwhelming sense of sadness. I will never get accustomed to this type of tragedy.

