

MURDERS ON THE RIDGE - EXCERPT



June 11, 2016

As soon as I pulled off the two-lane highway onto the gravel drive leading up to the Hatfield property, I sensed something was amiss.

The gate was standing ajar, which typically wasn't the way Vince Hatfield left it once he'd unlocked it for the day. I stopped my truck, got out and pushed the gate the rest of the way open, securing it against the fence with the metal hooks hanging from the post just for that purpose.

Back in my truck, I passed through the entrance, and took the first gravel lane to the right which circled around the property, passing the three mobile homes which were spaced about twenty yards apart, each one separated by a row of shrubs.

Vince Hatfield's cousin Ray, his girlfriend Denise, and her two kids inhabited the first trailer. The middle one was where Vince's daughter, Tammy Hatfield, stayed with her current boyfriend, James something-or-other, along with her daughter, Maddie and their newborn baby boy Barton.

The last one on the left was Harlan Hatfield's place, Vince's oldest son. Harlan's trailer sat back from the others several hundred feet. A carport with a shed had been built to allow him more privacy from the others. Harlan liked his privacy when he wasn't partying.

Harlan's truck was parked under the carport and as I pulled up my truck behind it I saw that the window at the end of his trailer was wide open and the A/C unit had been pulled out and was now on the ground next to the metal skirting that surrounded the bottom of his mobile home. The screen on the top half of the open window had been cut as well. That was Harlan's bedroom window, I was pretty sure.

Strange.

As warm as it was, I couldn't imagine why he'd taken his window air conditioner out. And what was with the cut screen?

It was a little past seven. I was running a bit late. Harlan should have been up, sipping coffee on his front steps, smoking a cigarette while waiting for me to show. Just like he was every Saturday morning. Like clockwork.

The air was thick with silence at the compound. No Harlan, no music blasting from Tammy's trailer, no babies whining. The Hatfields were creatures of habit. Early risers, up and about even on weekends when most folks enjoyed the luxury of sleeping in a bit.

I jumped out of the truck and walked the few feet over to the wooden steps leading up to the deck that ran half the length of his trailer to the front door. Both the screen door and inside door were shut tight. I leaned in, listening for any sounds from inside to indicate Harlan was up and about. There was nothing. No sounds of a television, radio or Harlan bumping around inside.

Dead silence.

I pulled the screen door open and was about to knock when I saw it.

A reddish brown streak of something ran a wide swath down the center of the white steel framed front door. It looked like blood. I hesitated momentarily, and then pounded my fist on the door, my other hand trying to turn the knob at the same time. Nothing. The door was locked, and nothing indicated any activity inside.

My instincts instantly went on high alert. I let the screen door slam shut and returned to my truck, backing out and heading up the curved drive that led to the main house.

I wasn't about to step into Harlan's place without Vince or his wife being with me. This family was clannish. Trusted few people, and

stayed to themselves for the most part. I wasn't about to force Harlan's door open until I had somebody with me if for no other reason than to witness whatever was behind that damn door.

As I rounded the bend, I saw Vince's truck parked in the usual spot. I was relieved although a bit surprised he hadn't left for work yet. He was generally gone before seven, meticulous about leaving the main gate open for me, knowing I'd arrive around seven.

His wife's SUV was right next to his truck, and his teenage son Darrel's new Mustang parked next to hers.

Vince's two pit bulls were out on the porch, wandering around the front door unleashed.

That never happened.

The dogs stayed mostly inside, obviously bred and trained for protection. To see them pacing on Vince Hatfield's front porch, scratching at the screen door, was in no way typical behavior for the dogs.

I jumped out of my truck and headed up the steps of the front porch, noticing immediately that the door to the main house was ajar. I cupped my hands and peered through the screen door, the dogs whining beside me as I did.

There were no sounds from within the house, and the interior door wasn't opened far enough to allow me to see anything. I opened the screen door, and pushed the interior door wide, slowly stepping inside the house.

It was as quiet as a tomb . . . which made sense, because after I'd taken several steps from the narrow hallway into the front room, glancing around at the carnage, I realized it was indeed a tomb. I pulled my cell from the pocket of my jeans and called 9-1-1.

Afterwards, my brain in a fog, I left the crime scene, to go outside as instructed and made sure to get the dogs on their chains before law enforcement arrived.

I dug my cell phone out again and called Harlan. I knew he wouldn't answer, but I let it ring and ring until it finally went to voicemail. "This is Harlan. Leave a message and if I feel like it, I'll call your ass back."

Beep!

I ended the call and quickly hit the other number I needed to call. When answered, I spoke quickly, "We've got trouble in Briar County. Better get someone down here stat."

Call ended.

I relived what I'd seen inside. I hadn't gone further into the house once I saw the two blood-soaked bodies of Vince and Darrell on the floor of their living room.

Vince's eyes were open, but they had that dead blank look in them, no longer able to blink, his most likely last vision was that of his murderer. I assessed the rest of his body. His face and neck were bruised, a gag placed over his mouth.

His arms and legs had been hog-tied. His shirt had been ripped open. I could see the bruises and some strange half-moon welts that covered his stomach and chest. It looked as if he'd been tortured and maybe kicked with steel-toed boots. But the strangest thing was that his body was framed by hundred dollar bills stacked neatly around him. Somebody had taken his time in doing this, displaying him surrounded by money. But why? What was the message?

It was more difficult to look at Darrell. The kid was only sixteen for Chrissake! He was slumped on the floor in the doorway leading from the kitchen to the living room. It didn't appear as if he'd endured the beating or torture his father had received.

More than likely he'd walked in on the fray; he was wearing pajama pants and a wife beater tee, and looked to have been shot in the head close range. There was a path of blood and brain matter on the white wooden doorjamb, most likely left as the boy slid down against it to the floor after being shot.

I couldn't erase those images from my mind. Maybe I never would. I leaned against the tree, closing my eyes trying to wrap my mind about what possibly could have gone down last night or earlier this morning with the Hatfields.

There was more carnage to be found. I felt it with every fiber of my being. But there was no way I was going any deeper into that crime scene. I'd known that without having to be told by the dispatcher to leave the house immediately and await the authorities.

In the distance, I could hear the shrill echoes of multiple sirens getting closer. And just before the first county deputy's car pulled off the

road to head up the drive, I leaned over and puked my guts out behind a tree.

