

Act of Vengeance Excerpt

Detective Rick Burns raced into the upscale Indianapolis neighborhood, slammed on the brakes, and stepped out of his rusty red Pontiac. He peered into the night as the crowd gathered, took a deep breath and prayed to God that this murder would not be like the others. The heaviness, the blood, the darkness had finally pricked its sharp edge into his soul.

Red and blue lights enveloped his body and danced across the frightened neighbors who had gathered together, shaking and shivering. The car door let out a lingering squeak as he slammed it shut and then he hurried toward the crime scene.

The detective rushed past an ambulance and heard a woman whimpering to his right. He turned toward the sound, continued forward and studied her face with twisted brow. The woman stood near a paramedic and a police officer with a wool blanket over her shoulders, warmed from the night breeze. Streams of mascara ran down her cheeks like a river of death. But her shoulders didn't shake, and she didn't sob or wail in disbelief.

Detective Burns examined her slow, careful movements as she gingerly wiped her tears.

Her eyes lacked the hollow, desperately confused grief that he'd seen far too often.

Lady of the house, or mistress perhaps—whatever the case, something about her didn't ring true.

He pulled his notepad and pen from his jacket pocket and scribbled a few words regarding his first suspect:

Female Caucasian.

Mid-fifties.

Pin-striped suit.

Stilettos.

Short red hair shaved in the back with a flaming twist burning upward.

Approximately five-foot-eight.

No blood visible.

September 13, 11:00 p.m.

The detective weaved through the crowd of wealthy onlookers who were wrapped in throw blankets and pajamas. Fearful murmurs and conjectures splashed his ears amongst the waves of apprehension as he approached the house. The frightened neighbors looked at him curiously, no doubt wondering whom this scruffy-looking man winding his way through them could be.

Rick realized fleetingly that, with his tousled hair, wrinkled t-shirt, faded jeans and running shoes, he probably looked more like a down-on-his-luck reporter than a ten-year veteran of the Indianapolis Police Department.

I guess I could've changed my clothes and combed my hair, he thought. No time for primping though—there's work to be done.

Rick couldn't be bothered with fussing about his appearance. Besides, in his line of work, he found that appearances, more often than not, were deceiving. His sport

coat was a mere covering, nothing more than a show of respect for his position.

Rick lifted the crime-scene tape and walked toward the house, a Meridian Street classic with stacked Bedford stone, copper gables and staggered limestone corners climbing up two levels toward the slate roof.

He noticed that a second story window was open and the room illuminated. He peered into the yard and could smell the fresh scent of glory maple leaves and purple pansies at the base of the stamped-concrete entrance. The architectural masterpiece watched over the courtyard and gardens amid a family of oak and sycamore trees that hugged the estate with their long reaching arms. The fancy contours and lighting looked great from the outside, but Rick had a bad feeling about this place.

The detective made his way toward the house and wondered what he'd find. The other murders had nothing in common, except an absurd brutality, bridging race, age and social class. He opened the glass entry door and mentally noted that the doorjamb had not been tampered with. He approached a group of officers gathered at the base of the stairway.

“Which way, fellas?” he asked.

They pointed toward the stairs. Rick noticed their disturbed behavior, arms crossed, eyes reeling in disgust.

Officer Nicholas Carmichael, the rookie, looked and smelled like he had recently vomited and was busy wiping a milky residue from his chin. He looked at Detective

Burns, embarrassed by his weakness. Rick patted him on the back as he passed.

Dave Daniels, the first responding officer called from the crowd, his eyes weary and unsettled.

“Hey, Burns!”

Rick stopped walking and looked over his shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“It’s not pretty.”

Rick observed the dread in Dave’s expression and asked, “On a scale from one to ten; what’ve we got?”

“Twelve. Maybe thirteen.”

The slant of Dave’s bushy eyebrows said, *it’s bad...real bad.*

Rick looked up the stairway and imagined the grisly scene. He reached into his pants pocket, grabbed a bag of sunflower seeds and popped a handful into his mouth and then sucked on the salty shells.

Five dead in two years—all on my watch. This’ll make six.

He swallowed, nearly choking on the lump in his throat, headed up the steps and slapped his hands together.

“Time to get dirty, boys.”

Rick felt as heavy as a lead wrecking ball, but he guarded his anxiety like a trade secret. Throughout his career, he knew what to say and how to act to keep his fearless detective image intact. Lately, however, his tough-guy image had begun to wear thin, internally breaking down with each successive homicide. He took a deep breath and his heart raced in anticipation of the unknown.

He walked up the stairs and marveled at the beauty and extravagance of the large home. Each hardwood step curved at precisely the right arc, painstakingly shaped to fit between honed spindles.

A large crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling and twisted gently with the air current leaving a trail of sparkling diamonds glittering over mahogany paneled walls. He could only dream of living in such extravagance. His hand slid up the wood-grain railing and his shoes shuffled up each winding step. He listened to the walls, to their sorrowful tales, reflecting upon the cold beauty of everything perfectly in place, a sign of control and obsessiveness.

Rick popped more sunflower seeds into his mouth. Chewing calmed his nerves. Catching the details saved his ass. Seeds, gum, pens and fingernails were all fair game. He chewed on anything to keep his fears at bay—fears that had haunted him from his youth, dreams unexplained, lingering, warring among his many troubles.