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Off the Air: A Pat Cassidy Novel

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A Pat Cassidy Novel

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Chapter Five

It was rare for Brett to miss the morning news shift, but the afternoon anchor covered for him at Brett's request. I had the interview at 2 p.m. with Coach Langlely at their practice facility in North Dallas. Still no Brett when I left for the interview. At five-fifteen I was in the production room editing sound bites for my sportscasts in the morning. Still, no one had heard from him all day. I tried calling him several times at home, but his wife, Jean, said she still hadn't heard from him either. At 9 p.m. I was working on a second beer at Ernie's Bar and Grill next door to WFTW in downtown Fort Worth, wondering about what Brett had been up to all day. The beer buzz on an empty stomach got a boost from a tequila shot. The pretty blonde from the dress store across the street walked in and sat down at the end of the bar. She gave me a smile and for the first time in months I smiled back.

"Telephone, Pat," Ernie said and sat a black phone down in front of me.

The second button was lit up and blinking. I looked back at the blonde and Ernie was taking her drink order.

I punched line two, "This is Pat Cassidy."

It was Brett out of breath.

“Champ,” he said. “I’ve hit the jackpot!”

I could barely hear him over the highway noise behind him.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“You remember that old abandoned warehouse next to the stockyards? Meet me there as fast as you can.”

Brett was on to something. I had never heard him this excited about anything.

“Where are you calling from?” I said loudly into the phone.

“A pay phone! You gotta hurry, Champ,” he said. “My source is bringing documents that will prove everything we suspected.”

“What source, Brett? What do you know?”

I had raised my voice above the bar noise and the room got a little quieter. Ernie and the blonde at the end of the bar were staring at me.

“I’ll tell you everything when you get here,” he said. “I need you to back me up.”

“Brett...”

“Champ, just meet me there!”

The Pearl Beer clock told me it was 9:15, and it was ‘the beer brewed in the country of eleven hundred springs.’ If I hurried I could be there in fifteen minutes.

I said, “Brett, don’t do anything until....” A dial tone had replaced his voice.

Ernie took the phone, “Everything O.K.?”

“I don’t know. Brett’s working on a story and needs some help.”

The blonde looked at me and smiled again. I tapped on the bar and Ernie knew to put my drinks on the tab.

Brett was nowhere in sight when I reached the abandoned warehouse. The WFTW white station wagon was parked in front with the headlights on and the motor running. I opened the glove compartment of the Malibu and took out my nine millimeter. The clip was engaged and loaded with thirteen rounds. I cocked the Browning with my left hand and slipped on the safety with my right thumb. I looked inside the news car and turned off the engine. A garage door at the front of the warehouse was slid open. I moved up against the wall next to the door and peeked inside. It was dark and empty except for a light coming from an office-like room in the middle of the building. My gut feeling said something wasn't right. I walked across the dark warehouse toward voices coming from the room with the light on. As I got closer to the door the voices became clearer. It was Brett.

"You guys are crazy if you think you can get away with this," he said.

Moving to the edge of the door I looked into the room and saw Brett standing against a wall. Two men stood in front of him with their backs to me. One was tall, had greasy hair and was wearing a dirty, white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up and blue jeans. The other guy was shorter and stockier and he was wearing all black. *A real James Dean and Johnny Cash*. Then, I saw the revolver. A .38 caliber revolver was pointing at Brett.

"No...!" I shouted.

A second later the man in black shot Brett in the head. 'Dean' turned, pulled a gun and took a shot at me, hitting the door jam above my head. I returned fire and hit him in the throat. He tumbled backward

into 'Cash' who had just shot Brett. The shooter pushed 'Dean's' body out of the way and brought his revolver up and took aim. Before he could fire, I squeezed off a round that hit him between the eyes. The bodies of the two men lay clumped together on the dirty concrete floor. Both were dead. *Sorry to break up your act, fellas.* I looked across the room. Brett's body was slumped against the wall with a bullet in his head. He was dead.

I spent the rest of the night and most of the next day trying to explain what happened to homicide detectives. Since Dad was head of the department, I was treated fairly, until Calloway tried to force him to arrest me on murder charges.

"Self defense, plain and simple," Dad told the Mayor.

Calloway then ordered him to make the charges stick or he'd fire him. Dad stood his ground and forced the Mayor's bluff.

Reporters surrounded me as I left the Fort Worth Police Department. In the past twelve hours, the story had become headlines across the country. Dad stood next to me as we stopped on the steps in front of the F.W.P.D. I tried to explain to the media my take on what happened, but had no proof to back up the allegations I had made against both Calloway and Riley.

A 'Barbara Walters' wannabe with red hair and blue eyes pushed her way between two television cameramen to ask me a question.

She said, "Paula Conn, Channel 8 News. Mr. Cassidy, what evidence do you have that ties the leading candidate in the governor's race to the murder of Brett Tucker?"

The question seemed to come at me like a ton of bricks. *Brett was really dead. I had seen it with my own eyes.*

“Mr. Cassidy,” repeated Ms. Red Hair, “what evidence do you have?”

“I don’t have any,” I said. “Not yet.”

She wasn’t pleased with the answer. “But you told homicide detectives that Mr. Tucker had documents tying Mayor Calloway to illegal activities of Big Jake Riley’s union.”

I looked at Dad.

He looked straight into the lady’s eyes, “Who told you that? That information hasn’t been made public yet.”

“A source inside the Fort Worth P.D.,” she said. “So, Inspector, is it true?”

“Yes, it’s true, we would have...”

I intervened and finished Dad’s sentence. “But we never got our hands on the documents. Brett told me on the phone before he died he was meeting someone who was going to hand over the documents that would prove the allegations we’ve made are true.”

A camera clicked to my left, another to my right, and then another question.

“Did you see the informant before you shot the killers?” A man from another local TV station asked.

“I never saw the informant,” I said.

“Mr. Cassidy,” a man shouted from the crowd, “do you believe Brett Tucker was telling you the truth? Some say it was a drug deal that went bad.”

He looked different from the rest of the media. *Like he didn't belong.* No camera, pad, pencil, or tape recorder. His hair was thinning on top and cut short, but combed nicely. He looked like a lawyer in blue jeans and his voice had the tone of a performer. *And he was pissing me off.*

"I'll ignore that comment. On second thought..." I said stepping toward him with the intention of punching his lights out.

Dad grabbed my right arm but I yanked it away. "Pat, watch your temper," he whispered.

"Never mind," I said, "any more questions?"

"What do you have against the mayor?" 'Blue Jeans' said walking through the crowd toward me. He was now getting the attention of everyone.

"I had nothing against Mayor Calloway, until he and Jake Riley had my best friend killed."

"You're a liar," he sneered.

The vision of Brett being shot flashed in my mind and blood rushed to my face as a rage of temper overtook me. Pushing a cameraman out of the way, I reached into the crowd and grabbed 'Blue Jeans' around the neck with my left hand. I measured him for a right cross when Dad caught my arm and pulled me away from him. Free from my chokehold he shouted at me again.

"Mayor Calloway isn't the guilty one here. You should be the one charged with murder!"

Dad held me tightly as I struggled to get at him again.

“Calm down, Pat,” Dad said. “He’s a plant by Calloway to throw suspicion on you.”

“He’s got to stop,” I said. “What he’s saying isn’t true.”

“Pat Cassidy is the murderer here,” ‘Blue Jeans’ said turning his back to me facing the crowd gathered at the bottom of the steps. “He killed his friend and then killed those men to make it look like they did it.”

Clicking sounds from the cameras grew louder as the media grew quieter. Dad let go of me as fast as he had restrained me earlier. He didn’t have to say it, but I knew why. Momentarily, I contemplated walking away without doing anything. *Oh, what the heck.* Stepping forward I tapped ‘Blue Jeans’ on his right shoulder. He turned to his right and I hit him flush with a left hook on his chin that knocked him back into the crowd.

The next day a picture of the punch was on the front page of every major newspaper in Texas. The ‘plant’ had worked and the media bought it. Public opinion didn’t believe me. Calloway held a press conference explaining away any involvement in the shooting and allegations. The incident only improved his chances of being elected the next governor of Texas. *I hope he doesn’t expect my vote.*

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