



HELL OF A PLAY

a short story by

D. CHRISTOPHER BADER



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Hell of a Play

Sheriff Hank Sullivan was halfway to Boyd Weller's place, gravel humming under the tires of his Ridge County Sheriff's Department Tahoe, when Dispatch called again. Broad-shouldered, silver-haired, and carved from the same dust as the road ahead, Hank looked like a man who'd outlasted the badge.

"Sheriff? Weller's on the line. He's getting worked up."

"What's he sayin'?"

"He's shouting about dead animals. Claims it's aliens. You want me to patch him through?"

Sheriff Sullivan sighed. "Might as well."

A click, then static, and suddenly, Boyd Weller's voice filled the cabin, high-pitched and panicked.

"They're all dead, Sheriff! Every last one!"

"Slow down, Mr. Weller. Who's dead?"

"Not who, what! My goats! My prized Boers. Every last one of 'em!"

"Could've been wolves," Hank offered. "Mountain lion, maybe. Even a bear."

"No," Boyd snapped. "This wasn't no animal. They were arranged. Precise. Clean cuts. Aliens, Sheriff."

Out on the horizon, dawn pinked the clouds. Hank exhaled slowly. "Let's not jump to little green conclusions."

"I'm tellin' you, something unnatural happened. You better hurry."

The line went dead.

Hank reached for the radio mic.

"McCord, where are you?"

Static, then: "Running radar out by the reservoir. Caught a logger doing sixty in a thirty."

"Leave it. I need you to head to the Weller place, something got into his goats."

"Mountain lion?"

"Maybe. He's hollering about aliens. Just get moving. And McCord, don't mention this to Max. Last thing I need is him poking around out here looking for E.T."

"Copy that."

A half hour later, Hank turned up Boyd Weller's long dirt drive. The house sat squat under a line of cottonwoods, quiet as a grave. No Boyd pacing the porch. Only the wind, and the faintest whiff of rot in the morning air.

At the cottonwoods, the place sat silent. He parked, stepped out. Knocked once. Nothing.

"Mr. Weller?" he called, already scanning the tree line.

No answer.

Beyond the barn, vultures, five or six circling low over the back pasture.

"Hell."

He followed a rutted trail down past the old barn, the smell growing stronger with each step, hot metal and something sour.

Then he saw it.

Six goats, laid out in a ring. Their bodies bloodless, necks broken or sliced with surgical precision.

And in the center lay Boyd Weller.

Shirtless. Arms spread wide. Throat slit clean.

A pentagram was carved into his chest, symmetrical and shallow, like someone took their time.

Hank studied the scene for a long moment, then pulled his radio.

"McCord, you still en route?"

"Ten minutes out."

"Make it five. And call the coroner. Boyd Weller's dead. And I think someone wants us to believe the devil did it."

Tires on gravel broke the morning stillness. Hank didn't look up from the ring of bodies. He knew that engine.

Deputy Clay McCord pulled in near the barn and cut the engine. A few seconds later, his boots crunched on dry grass as he approached the trail on foot. Then he stopped.

The deputy whistled low. "You weren't kidding. That's a pentagram, right?"

Hank gave a tight nod. "Start on the perimeter. Photos, measurements, and anything else you can document. Stay clear of the body."

McCord crouched down, pulling the department camera from his vest. His hands weren't shaking exactly, but they weren't steady, either.

"Never seen anything like this," he said, voice a little thinner than usual.

He raised the camera, then hesitated.

Hank glanced over. "You gonna pass out on me?"

A swallow, then: "No, sir. Just... wasn't expecting the smell."

Hank gave a dry nod. "It's always worse when the blood's fresh."

McCord snapped the first photo, then leaned slightly to the side and took a deep breath through his mouth.

"I mean, I've seen wrecks," he said. "But this, this is different." He snapped a photo, then said, "It's obvious what happened, though."

"Oh?" Hank kept his eyes on Weller's body.

"Satan worshippers. Probably spun out on meth. This looks... ritualistic. Goats, the carving, and the setup. They wanted to send a message."

Hank looked over at him, dry and flat.

"Things aren't always what they seem," he said. "Some folks like making a mess look meaningful."

The deputy went silent.

Then another engine. Slower this time. Tires crunching farther off, near the house.

Hank turned.

Not the coroner.

It was a silver Subaru, paint dulled by dust. The car stopped a little past the cottonwoods near the porch. The driver's door opened.

Delaney Weller.

Stepping from the car, she swept the property like she already knew something was wrong. Wind tugged at her hoodie, an old Weller & Huxley Brewing zip-up with goat hair clinging to the sleeves.

Hank muttered under his breath and started back up the trail, moving fast enough to head her off before she got too close to the barn.

She spotted him and called out, "Sheriff?"

"Mrs. Weller," he said, keeping his voice calm. "You didn't need to come out."

"Boyd called about the goats, he was losing his mind. I figured I'd come home to settle him down."

Her gaze shifted toward the barn, then past it, toward the field, where the vultures still circled.

"Where is he?"

Hank didn't answer right away. He stepped closer, voice low and even.

"I'm sorry. We found him in the back pasture. He's gone."

Delaney blinked once. No scream. No sob. Just a sharp inhale and a long silence.

"Was it an animal?"

"We're still figuring that out."

She glanced toward the barn again. "Can I see him?"

"No," Hank said gently but firmly. "Best you don't."

Delaney's mouth twitched. Then she nodded, jaw clenched tight.

"I told him the goats were too much," she said softly. "Said one day they'd be the death of him."

Hank didn't reply.

Behind them, down the trail, McCord's camera shutter clicked. The sound was distant, but Delaney flinched all the same.

"You got somewhere you can go?" Hank asked.

"My sister's in Powell. I'll head that way."

"I'll need to talk to you later."

"Of course."

She turned back to the car and drove off slow, dust trailing behind her like smoke.

Hank watched the Subaru disappear down the long dirt drive. The dust took its time settling.

He walked back through the hum of flies and the lazy orbit of vultures still waiting their turn.

McCord was crouched near the edge of the goat ring, one

glove on, holding something between pinched fingers.

"I haven't made it to the inside of the ring yet," he said. "Just spotted this when I was photographing the perimeter. Thought it looked out of place."

Hank stepped closer. It was a key, plain, it looked brand new. No keychain. No tag.

Hank studied it for a second. "No markings?"

McCord shook his head. "Blank on both sides. Could be a house key. Maybe a business."

"Could belong to Weller," Hank said, "Bag it."

McCord pulled an evidence pouch from his back pocket and sealed the key inside.

"How'd the wife take it?" he asked.

Hank looked out at the carved-up scene for a beat.

"Not like I expected," he said. "Asked if it was animals, but didn't press. Didn't cry. Just said the goats would be the death of him."

McCord zipped the pouch. "Grief's a weird thing."

"Sometimes," Hank said. "Other times it's the absence of surprise."

From up near the house, a boxy white van turned down the drive, suspension squealing over ruts.

McCord looked over his shoulder. "Coroner?"

Hank nodded. "Finally."

The van crept down toward the barn, sun glinting off the windshield like a flashbulb. The wind shifted. The smell got worse.

Hank didn't move.

He fixed his gaze on Boyd Weller's body lying at the center of the circle.

The van came to a stop. The engine ticked as it cooled. A

moment later, Dr. Reuben Glassman stepped out, tall, thin, and built like a crane left too long in a Wyoming winter. He wore the same windbreaker he always did, faded blue with "RIDGE COUNTY CORONER" stitched crooked on the chest.

"Damn," he muttered, surveying the scene. "I thought Dispatch was exaggerating."

"Nope," Hank said. "This one's all yours, Doc."

Glassman crouched beside the body, pulling on gloves. "You touch anything?"

"Just eyes on it."

The coroner didn't answer, already muttering to himself, pulling a thermometer, snapping photos of the carving.

Hank asked McCord, "You've got everything bagged?"

McCord nodded. "Almost."

"Ok. When you finish, head back to town. See if Weller had any priors, disputes, restraining orders, financial issues. Ask around if anyone saw or heard anything strange last night. Try not to wave ritual murder theories all over town."

The deputy hesitated, eyes dropping to Boyd Weller's body again. "This ain't gonna stay quiet long."

"It never does," Hank said. "But let's try not to lead with demons."

McCord gave a short nod, jogged up the trail, and climbed into his SUV.

Hank stayed behind, watching as Glassman worked, methodical and quiet, the way all good coroner work should be.

After a minute, Hank keyed his radio.

"Dispatch, this is Sullivan."

"Go ahead, Sheriff."

"I'll be heading over to the brewery to speak with Jonas Huxley, Weller's business partner to let him know what happened."

“Copy that.”

“And after that, I’ll check in on Delaney Weller. See how she’s holding up.”

He glanced one last time at the ring of goats then turned and started back toward his SUV.

Weller & Huxley Brewing sat off the highway, a gentrified barn with fresh red paint and a sign that cost more than Hank’s monthly budget. The smell of hops hung faint in the breeze.

Hank stepped inside. The taproom lights were on, but the place wasn’t open yet.

Jonas Huxley stood behind the bar, drying a pint glass that didn’t need drying. Clean-cut, well-dressed, and calm in the way only people who’ve never shoveled manure can manage.

He looked up and smiled. “Morning, Sheriff. Here for a tour, or did Boyd finally call the health department on me?”

Hank’s brow lifted slightly. “You expecting him to?”

Jonas chuckled. “Boyd’s been on a tear lately. Said I was shortchanging the farm. Probably thought I was laundering money into beer cans.”

Hank didn’t return the smile. “Can I talk to you a minute?”

“Sure thing.” Jonas set the glass aside and leaned against the bar. “Boyd and I didn’t always agree, but he had a vision. Man loved his goats almost as much as he loved people. Would’ve sunk the whole business into prize stock if I hadn’t stepped in.”

Hank said nothing.

Jonas kept talking. “Hell, I think he did spend some of our profits on those damn show goats.”

Hank let the silence stretch a second longer. “Jonas... Boyd’s dead.”

The air went flat.

Jonas blinked, then stood a little straighter. “What?”

"We found him this morning at his place. In the back pasture."

He didn't go into detail.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Jonas answered. "I didn't think, I mean, I figured you were here to ask about a fight or something. Not..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

"You two argued recently?"

"Yeah. I was out there Wednesday morning. Nothing major. He wanted to double production from the farm side. Said he was gonna rebrand the whole brewery around his goats."

Hank scanned the tap handles. Goat logos. Clever names.

"Looks like he already did."

Jonas gave a thin smile. "That's branding. Boyd wanted to bring in hay bales and let goats wander the taproom."

He said it like a punchline, but it didn't land.

Hank stepped back. "Appreciate your time."

Jonas followed him to the door. "You think someone did this?"

He stepped out, then stopped shy of the gravel.

"I don't recall telling you how Boyd died."

Jonas said nothing.

He left Huxley standing in the doorway, hands buried in his vest pockets, mouth working at words that wouldn't come.

Wednesday, Thursday—two stories. Someone wasn't keeping their days straight.

The hum of the overhead lights and the quiet snap of labels being pressed onto evidence bags filled the back room of the Sheriff's Office. Deputy Clay McCord sat at the intake desk, his sleeves rolled up and a stack of field notes at his elbow. On the table in front of him were the physical pieces of the morning: a fresh roll of crime scene photos, two numbered bags with hair

samples from the goats, and one small, unmarked brass key.

He finished logging the location, condition, and chain of custody for the key when the radio crackled.

“McCord, it’s Hank.”

McCord picked up the mic. “Go ahead.”

“You haven’t started asking around yet, have you?”

“Not yet. Wrapping up evidence intake.”

“Good. Hold off. I want you to focus on that key.”

The deputy glanced down at the pouch again. “You think it’s important?”

“I think it’s out of place, and that makes it important. See if you can find what it opens.”

“Any starting point?”

“Yeah. The brewery,” Hank said. “When I stopped by, I noticed a new lock on the office door. Looked fresh. But it also looked like someone tried to pick it.”

McCord grabbed a notepad and jotted a reminder. “You want me to ask Huxley?”

“Not yet. Just try the key. Quietly. If it fits, I want to know before he does.”

“Copy that.”

McCord leaned back in his chair, staring at the bagged key like it might blink.

Then he stood, slipped the pouch into his jacket, and grabbed the keys to his SUV.

The road to Powell rolled out long and empty, flanked by brittle grass and fence posts leaning like old men in the wind. Hank drove with one hand on the wheel, the other tapping the roof of the SUV in slow rhythm. The smell of goat and blood still clung faintly to his jacket.

He was ten minutes out when his phone buzzed in the

passenger seat. He glanced down, Dr. Glassman.

He hit speaker.

"Glassman."

"Just wrapped the prelim on Boyd Weller. I figured you would want it fresh."

"Go ahead."

There was a pause as the coroner found his place.

"The throat cut was postmortem. Clean, single draw. Same with the chest carving, deliberate, shallow. No hesitation marks. This wasn't rage, it was performance."

Hank squinted into the sunlight. "You saying it was staged?"

"I'm saying whoever did it had time. Boyd was probably poisoned. May have known the attacker, no defensive wounds, no bruising consistent with a struggle."

Dr. Glassman flipped a page on the other end of the line.

"And the pentagram? It's not anatomically centered. It was off by a good inch and a half, skewed toward the left side of the chest. Whoever carved it didn't know what they were doing, or they didn't care. They wanted it to look Satanic. But they got their reference from a comic book, not a grimoire."

Hank waited for a moment, eyes scanning the highway like it might give him something more than empty fence line.

"So someone wanted us chasing the devil," he said finally. "To throw us off the trail?"

"That's my read."

"Appreciate it, Doc."

Hank ended the call and let the silence fill back in. A hawk drifted overhead, slow and steady, following nothing in particular.

He pressed the accelerator just a little harder. Powell was getting closer.

And so was Delaney Weller.

The house was modest, with a clean yard, faded siding, and a swing set in the side yard that hadn't seen much use in a while. Hank parked at the curb and knocked once. Delaney's sister answered and waved him through.

"She's out back."

Hank stepped through the house and found Delaney Weller sitting in a patio chair beneath a patch of shade, smoking a cigarette and nursing a Coors Light. She was still wearing the goat-branded Weller & Huxley hoodie, the sleeves speckled with hay and goat hair. She didn't get up.

"Sheriff."

"Mrs. Weller."

He pulled a metal chair across the concrete and sat beside her.

"I didn't want to press too hard this morning," he said. "But there's something you need to know."

She took a drag and gave a small nod.

"It wasn't an animal. Your husband was murdered."

The cigarette paused halfway to her lips.

"Are you sure?"

"There's no doubt. No signs of a struggle. Likely drugged. And the way he was... displayed, it was staged. Done with intention."

Delaney looked out toward the fence line.

"You think it was a message?"

"I think someone wanted to throw us off the trail."

She said nothing for a while.

"Anyone come to mind?" Hank asked. "Someone with a grudge?"

She shook her head. "No. People loved Boyd. He was fair. If

someone had a problem with him, they kept it to themselves.”

“What about Jonas Huxley?”

That got a reaction, not shock, but a subtle shift in posture. Her shoulders stiffened just enough to notice.

“What about him?”

“How were things between them?”

“They were different men. Boyd was about people, farmers, regulars, the community. He liked things small, manageable. Jonas had big ideas. Talked about expanding, opening a taproom in Jackson, getting on shelves statewide.”

“They argue much?”

“Now and then. Boyd didn’t want to lose the connection to locals. Jonas didn’t want to leave money on the table.”

Hank watched her for a beat. “When was the last time you saw Jonas?”

Delaney took a long drag from her cigarette. “Last week. He dropped off some papers. Boyd was agitated after. Probably financial stuff.”

“What time?”

“Evening. Thursday, I think.”

Hank tilted his head. “Jonas said it was Wednesday morning. Said they argued.”

She hesitated. “Then maybe it was Wednesday. I’m not sure.”

“Mm.”

Hank didn’t press it, but he didn’t nod either.

Delaney stubbed out the cigarette in a clay pot by her chair. “Is there anything else?”

“One more.”

He turned to face her.

“Did Boyd have any connection to Satanism? Occult stuff?”

She didn’t flinch. Didn’t blink. No confusion. No offense.

Just a flat:

“No.”

A sour look crossed her face and was gone. “What he had was goats. Every spare dollar fed them.”

Hank stood. “I’ll be in touch.”

She didn’t watch him leave.

By the time Deputy McCord pulled up to Weller & Huxley Brewing, the lunch crowd was already filling the front patio, local contractors, a ranch couple in muddy boots, a few tourists fresh from the scenic byways.

Jonas Huxley wasn’t behind the bar.

A young woman was. Early twenties, red eyes, trying to smile through the day but not managing much. Her name tag read “Isabell.” She wiped at the counter like she was fighting back tears one ring of condensation at a time.

McCord stepped up slowly, hat in hand.

“Hey there. Isabell, right?”

She nodded, eyes flicking up. “Yeah. You’re with the sheriff’s office?”

“That’s right.” He kept his voice low. “Heard about Boyd?”

Her chin wobbled, but she kept her composure. “Yeah. He was a good man.”

“Is Jonas around?”

She shook her head. “Left right after I clocked in. Didn’t say where he was going, but I saw his car heading toward the highway to Powell.”

“The Audi?”

“Yeah. Kinda hard to miss.”

McCord looked toward the back hallway, where the office door sat closed under a fresh padlock. He turned back.

“How were things between Boyd and Jonas lately?”

Isabell hesitated. Looked at the crowd. Then leaned in, speaking low.

"I don't know if I should say anything..."

McCord gave her a gentle shrug. "Not trying to trap anyone. Just trying to understand."

Nodding, she took a breath.

"Things weren't good. Last time they were both here, it got ugly. They were in the back room. We all heard it. Yelling about money, each accusing the other of skimming. Boyd said Jonas was funneling funds to open a new taproom in Jackson. Jonas said Boyd was stealing cash for the goats."

"Did it get physical?"

"Jonas shoved him. Boyd tripped over one of those carved wooden goats he made for the taproom. He landed pretty hard then Jonas stormed out."

"And Boyd?"

"He left a little after. When he came back the next day, he replaced the lock on the office door."

McCord pointed toward the hallway. "That one?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

He reached into his jacket and pulled out the small brass key, bagged earlier that day.

"You mind if I try something?"

"Go ahead."

He walked back, fit the key into the new lock, and turned it. It clicked open.

He didn't enter. He backed away and zipped the key into the pouch.

As he reached for his radio, Isabell spoke again, voice lower this time.

"There's something else. Might not mean anything..."

McCord looked up. "Go on."

"Delaney's been around a lot more lately. Used to hardly see her. Now it's a couple times a week."

"To visit Boyd?"

Isabell shook her head. "No. What's weird is, she's only here when Jonas is. Never alone. And she always leaves right after he does."

McCord frowned. "You think they were meeting up?"

"I don't know. It's just... they parked at opposite ends of the lot. Like they were going out of their way not to be seen leaving together. I watched once. They even drove off in different directions."

McCord nodded slowly, thumb hovering over the radio.

"Thank you, Isabell. You've been a big help."

McCord climbed into his SUV, the front seat still warm from the midday sun. He shut the door, pulled the mic from the dash mount, and keyed it.

"Sheriff, you copy?"

A beat of static, then Hank's voice came through, steady as ever.

"Go ahead."

"That key we found, it fits the office lock at the brewery. I didn't go inside, but it opened smooth. Also... something else. Might matter."

"Let's hear it."

"Bartender, Isabell, said Delaney's been around the brewery a lot more than usual. But only when Jonas is there. She never saw her talk to Boyd. And she always leaves right after Jonas does."

Hank was silent on the other end.

McCord continued, "Isabell said it looked like they were

trying not to be seen together. Different parking spots. Drove off in opposite directions.”

There was a pause.

“He could be heading your way, Sheriff. Isabell said she saw his Audi on the highway to Powell.”

Hank’s voice came back, cool and clipped. “Good work, McCord. I’m still in Powell. I’ll hang back, see if he shows.”

“Copy that.”

“Start the paperwork,” Hank added. “I want warrants ready, for Jonas Huxley’s place, the Weller house, and that office at the brewery.”

“On it.”

As McCord reached for his notepad, Hank’s voice came back in, low and sudden.

“Scratch that. Hold up on the warrants a second.”

“What’s up?”

Hank was already stepping away from his SUV, eyes locked on the street.

“Jonas Huxley just pulled into the drive.”

The Audi pulled up too fast, gravel spitting under the tires as Jonas cut the wheel into the drive. He parked crooked, half in the grass, and climbed out like the car might bite him.

He was sweating, and not from the heat. Panic had a hold on him. Hank’s visit had rattled something loose.

Delaney met him on the porch, arms folded, face unreadable.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked.

“I couldn’t wait,” Jonas said, his voice low and fast. “The Sheriff came by the brewery. Started asking how things were between me and Boyd. I slipped, I told him we’d fought.”

He looked at her, eyes wide. “Delaney... he knows.”

“He doesn’t know anything,” she said, cool. “He’s bluffing.”

Trying to rattle you. That's what cops do."

Jonas ran a hand down his face, jaw tight. "Jesus. I still haven't found Boyd's key to the office. What if—"

"Stop." She grabbed his arm, her fingers quick to his pocket. "We've come this far. You need to keep it together. The Sheriff is grasping. If he had something solid, you'd be in cuffs already."

Jonas opened his mouth to respond.

"Mind if we all have a little talk?"

Both of them turned sharply.

Sheriff Hank Sullivan stood at the edge of the porch, hat in one hand, the other resting easy near his belt. He didn't look angry. He looked tired. Like a man who'd walked too long to enjoy being right.

Jonas froze. Delaney didn't.

She smoothed her hoodie sleeve like they were meeting for coffee.

"Sheriff," she said coolly. "Didn't hear you come up."

"I didn't want to interrupt."

He stepped onto the porch, slow and deliberate.

"Jonas. Good to see you again. I didn't expect you to make the drive."

Jonas swallowed hard. "I, I wanted to check on Delaney."

"You always check on grieving widows mid-workday?"

Delaney cut in. "Is there something we can help you with, Sheriff?"

"Oh, I think so," Hank said. "I've got a few more questions. Thought we might sit down and compare stories. See where they line up, and where they start to drift."

Delaney didn't blink. Jonas took half a step back, then realized there was nowhere to go.

Hank looked at both of them.

“Nothing official. Not yet. But I’d suggest you don’t lie to me. Because the second I get back to Bridger, I’m filing for warrants. Three of them.”

He ticked them off with his fingers.

“Jonas Huxley’s house. Boyd Weller’s house. And that little locked office at the brewery.”

He paused.

“Found a key at the crime scene. Thought I’d see what it opens.”

The silence stretched.

Then Hank added, flat and final:

“How about we all take a ride back to Bridger?”

Jonas’s Audi still idled at the curb; Hank didn’t spare it a glance as he loaded them into the Tahoe.

Neither Jonas nor Delaney argued.

Jonas nodded quickly, too quickly. Delaney just brushed goat hair from her sleeves.

They climbed into the back seat, Jonas on the passenger side, Delaney behind the driver.

Hank didn’t say a word as he pulled onto the highway.

The Tahoe hummed along the two-lane road, tires thudding gently over seams in the pavement. Fields rolled past, gold fading into blue. Nobody spoke.

Hank adjusted the rearview mirror. He didn’t look at either of them when he said, “You’ll be in separate rooms when we get there.”

Jonas didn’t respond.

Delaney smirked faintly, like she’d expected nothing less.

They arrived at the Ridge County Sheriff’s Department and Hank led them from his SUV through the back entrance, past the empty duty desk and down the short hallway that smelled

like paper, old coffee, and something faintly metallic that never quite went away.

He stopped outside the interview rooms. One door to the left. One to the right.

"Before we go any further, I'm going to read you your rights."

Jonas shifted. Delaney didn't.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be provided."

He looked at each of them in turn.

"You're not under arrest. You're here voluntarily. You can leave at any time."

Jonas cleared his throat. "Should I be calling a lawyer?"

"You can," Hank said. "You're entitled to. But if there's something you want to get ahead of, before this turns into charges and headlines, this is your chance."

Jonas nodded, but his eyes flicked toward Delaney, searching for some kind of signal.

Delaney just said, "I won't be needing one."

Hank gave her a slow, neutral look.

"Alright then."

He opened the left door. "Jonas, in here."

Jonas hesitated for half a second, then stepped inside.

Hank turned to Delaney. "You'll be across the hall."

She didn't speak, just walked to the other door and stepped inside like she'd been there before.

Hank stood in the hall a moment longer, then shut both doors behind them.

A moment later, the front door opened. Deputy McCord stepped in, brushing road dust from his sleeves and carrying a notepad under one arm.

"Got here as fast as I could," he said. "Everything good?"

Hank nodded once. "More or less."

He pointed toward the right-hand door.

"Delaney's in there. Let me know if she tries to leave."

"Will do," said the deputy.

Hank turned to the opposite door, took a breath, and walked in to speak with Jonas Huxley.

The chair across from Jonas Huxley creaked as Hank sat down, notepad in hand but untouched.

Jonas couldn't stop bouncing his leg.

Hank set a bagged brass key on the table and let the silence work.

"You need to talk to her," Jonas said before Hank could ask a single question. "Delaney. She started all of it."

"We'll get there," Hank said. "Let's start with you."

Jonas swallowed. "Look, yeah, we were having an affair. Alright? I'm not proud of it, but it's not illegal."

Hank's voice was flat. "No, but last I checked, murder still is."

Jonas's face drained.

"That was her," he said quickly. "The whole setup. She said Boyd was skimming from the brewery, taking money for his damn goats. Thousands. Buying feed, fencing, show stock. Stealing from me... and ultimately from her."

"Why'd you go along with it?"

Jonas looked away, jaw clenched. "I was pissed. It was a lot of money. Forget the Jackson taproom, hell, I didn't know how we were going to stay open another month. Boyd was driving the whole thing into the ground."

He paused, then added:

"And Delaney... she's very convincing. She said if Boyd died, with the insurance and the publicity, especially with it being a

crime like this, we'd more than recoup our losses."

"Publicity?"

He rubbed his face. "Policy on Boyd was low six figures."

He wiped sweat from his brow. "She swore the headlines would draw crowds, the coverage would backfill the losses."

Before Jonas could say more, McCord opened the door.

"Boss, Mrs. Weller's asking to leave."

Hank stood. "Let me talk to her."

In the hallway, Delaney Weller stood near the exit with her arms crossed.

"Mrs. Weller," Hank said. "Before you go, there's something I think you should hear."

She met his eyes, unblinking.

"I know my rights, Sheriff."

Hank gave the smallest nod. "You're free to go."

She didn't smile, didn't gloat. Just turned and walked out the door without another word.

Hank and McCord stepped to the window, watching as Delaney crossed the lot and climbed into her sister's Ford Escape. They drove off slow, smooth, no rush.

Hank looked at McCord.

"Follow her. Don't get close. But if she veers off the highway, I want to know before she turns the wheel."

McCord nodded and headed out.

Hank stood there a beat longer, then walked back into the interview room. Jonas looked up, eyes rimmed red.

Hank didn't sit.

"You may want to call that attorney."

The station was quiet. Only the buzz of old fluorescents and the creak of the building settling into night.

Hank Sullivan sat at his desk, sleeves rolled, a cup of coffee

gone cold in his hand. In front of him: a mess of paperwork from the brewery office, bank statements, ledger printouts. McCord's voice crackled over the radio.

"She's back at her sister's. Straight shot. No detours, no stops. They parked and went inside."

Hank picked up the mic.

"Copy that. Stick around a while. If she tries to run, I want to know before the tires leave gravel."

"Understood."

Hank set the mic down and leaned against the edge of his desk. His eyes drifted to a manila folder stamped with "Weller & Huxley – Internal Records."

He opened it and flipped through page after page. Then he stopped.

A deposit slip. Then another. Then an invoice from a livestock auction that never happened.

The money trail led to neither Boyd nor Jonas.

It led to Delaney Weller.

Hank sat back. No triumph. No satisfaction.

"Boyd thought Jonas was bleeding him dry. Jonas thought Boyd was stealing feed money. And all the while, she was carving off the top. Smiling at both."

He glanced over at the mug, then tossed the last of the cold coffee into the trash.

"Hell of a play."

Hank reached for the radio mic.

"McCord, you still sitting on the house?"

A crackle. "Yeah, Sheriff. I've been watching for movement. The streetlight's out on the corner; sight lines are garbage. The Audi's still at the curb." "Bring her in. Quiet, respectful. But it's time."

“Copy that.”

McCord stepped out of his cruiser and crossed the drive. The porch light burned yellow. He knocked twice. Delaney’s sister answered in slippers and a robe, brow creased.

“Evening, ma’am. Is Delaney here?” McCord asked.

She blinked, still groggy. “She left a while ago. Why?”

McCord frowned. “You sure? Her car’s still out front.”

The woman glanced toward the curb. The silver Subaru sat there, untouched.

“That’s odd,” she said.

McCord stepped off the porch, eyes scanning the street. The Subaru was right where it had been.

But the driveway?

Empty.

His stomach dropped.

He clicked his radio. “Sheriff, this is McCord.”

“Go ahead.”

“She’s gone. Looks like she took Huxley’s Audi. She must’ve slipped out a back door and cut through the alley while I was watching the front.”

There was a long pause. Hank rubbed his temples, slow and deliberate, trying to press the headache back where it came from.

His voice came back, flat and low.

“Understood.”

The front door creaked open.

Tim Larson, barely out of the academy, stuck his head in. Wide-eyed, earnest.

“Sheriff Sullivan? Sorry, it’s late, I know. I heard there might be a deputy spot open.”

Hank didn’t stand. Just studied him for a moment like he was

trying to place him in a world that had stopped making sense.

“You ever clean up a mess that never ends, Larson?”

Tim gave an awkward smile. “I’m a quick learner.”

Hank nodded once.

“We’ll see.”

A black Audi cruised down an empty two-lane stretch nearing the Montana state line, engine hushed, lines on the road sliding by in rhythm.

Delaney Weller behind the wheel. Calm. Composed. Wind pushing softly through the cracked window. One hand on the wheel, the other resting on the console.

In the back seat: a duffle bag of cash.

She didn’t smile.

Didn’t look back.

Just drove north, clean, and free.

About the Author

D. Christopher Bader writes western noir with a crooked grin and a soft spot for small towns, eccentric weirdos, and Boston Terriers. He lives in Arkansas, works in public service, and tells himself that late-night edits count as sleep. When he's not writing, he's probably drinking too much coffee, plotting fictional crimes, or losing arguments with his dogs.

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