

THE FIX

by

Jeff Schneider



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Chapter 1

The killer stroked his shiny golden ponytail and waited. One more minute and the lights would go out. Finally they dimmed. He took a deep breath, relaxed. Midnight. He had measured the place for three nights in a row and knew his man was fast asleep, probably dreaming about all the sexy young coeds that had just left his room. Their bodies. What he'd like to do with them when the lights were out. He chuckled. Party was over.

This basketball player wouldn't be expecting him now, especially after all the weed and cold beer consumed at the party. The smell of the pot lingered, curling around his nose. But he had made his warning to Antoine so clear.

All in black, except for a red rubber band around the ponytail, he moved out of the shadows on the balls of his feet to silence his arrival. The only noise came from the end of the hall where the muffle of a television and some small laughter could be heard. Maybe somebody watching Leno, Letterman. The rest of the hall was quiet. College kids studying to take over the world. He was amused.

As he reached the door he was thinking the cops would make a lot of noise at first, but when they found out what the kid was doing it would all be quietly swept under the rug. Always was. He had learned over the years. Colleges hated scandals. This would be a scandal.

He felt the doorknob through his glove. His heartbeat quickened. He turned the knob slowly, then pushed gently with his left shoulder, sliding his back along the inside wall. A full moon illuminated the

room, shadows of a tree falling across the ten-by-ten space. A figure rumbled the bedcovers, face turned away, blanket pulled to his shoulders. The killer wanted to wake Antoine and ask him why he didn't miss the baskets they'd asked him to miss. Why he took the ten thousand dollars, then didn't follow through with their little secret. But there was no time for questions now. He had his orders.

He slipped the gun with its silencer from the holster strapped to his right ankle, brought it quietly to Antoine's ear, then splattered the eggshell-colored wall with blood. Antoine's blood. The killer stood there for a second and watched the purple blood streak down the wall. He wondered what kind of kid would take this kind of chance. Didn't they know?

The killer shook his head, then turned and slipped a watch and some money from a wallet into his pocket. Make all this look like a robbery, give the university an out when they discovered Antoine was fixing college basketball games.

Was.

In charge of the FBI's Sports Fraud Division, Dale Cutter drove faster when he heard the news over the radio. They might have elevated him out of Homicide, but they couldn't take the job out of him. A basketball player had been found murdered at Georgetown University. That alarmed him, as it would the rest of the D.C. community later in the morning. Athletes didn't die this way. Only junkies and winos died like dogs.

He hopped out of his white Crown Victoria and walked the flight of stairs. Campus police already had the crime scene under control. Students rubbernecked to see what was going on. He flashed his I.D., then made his way to the particular dorm room.

"What do we have?" he said to his old assistant, Rudy, a wide-shouldered man with a long neck who was chewing gum at a frantic pace.

"What're you doing here, man?" Rudy propped his fists on his hipbones and stared. "You know you shouldn't be here."

"This kid is an athlete, right? I figured it fell under my jurisdiction."

“You’re kind of stretching it, aren’t you?”

“Only if you’re into details.” Dale smiled and winked. “So what’s going on here? Crowd outside is getting bigger by the second.”

“Shot twice in the head. Close range. Kid never had a chance. Bullets went through his brain...lodged here in the wall.”

Dale winced as he followed Rudy’s finger to the blood on the wall. He had never taken death as easily as others in the department. “Any motive?”

Rudy looked back from the bullet holes. “Maybe robbery. Cash missing from the wallet. Could be drugs. Could be he was fucking some professor’s wife. Who knows anymore. Kids aren’t like they used to be.”

Dale’s eyes slowly scanned the room. Things seemed in place. He had suspicions, though, especially after the recent shenanigans at Northwestern and Notre Dame. College basketball players didn’t get killed in their own dorm rooms in the middle of the night once in a blue moon, not once in ten. If it were drugs, they wouldn’t have come to his room and blown his brains out. Would have happened on the streets. If he were screwing some professor’s wife, the murderer would have panicked and left a trail as wide as Montana. No, this was something else. Years of detective work told him so. “Anyone seen coming or going?”

Rudy scratched his head. “Not a soul. Whoever it was vanished into the night. Must have been a black cat.” He looked rueful. “A cat with some real nasty hardware.”

Dale walked over to a bookcase full of trophies. “Our dead ballplayer was hell on wheels, if I remember correctly.” He lifted a tall trophy and inspected it. “MVP last year in the Great Alaskan Shootout. Knew I recognized his name. He was recruited out of New York a couple of years ago to play here. They all said he’d be the next Bernard King.”

“Yeah, well, he ain’t ever going to shoot another basketball, that’s for sure.” Rudy tossed a sheet over the body and shook his head slowly.

“Rudy,” Dale said, putting the trophy down, “check all the kid’s phone calls for the last six months.”

“Hey, this ain’t your deal anymore, Dale. Go back and sit in the big chair of yours and coast like they want you to. Relax, baby. Take the money and run.”

“Nope, can’t, I’m suddenly getting a hunch.”

“A hunch, huh?” Rudy finished filling out a document and handed it to a uniformed cop. “You always got hunches. What’s this one?” Sarcasm dripped from his words.

“Don’t worry about that, just check the phone numbers, give me a call in the morning.”

Dale stepped through the growing throng of students, made his way back to his car. The back of his neck tingled. Basketball players didn’t die this way. A long-time question of his suddenly popped back into his head. Why did men become involved in games of children? It was almost always the children who got hurt. He could cite a thousand examples, including one that happened to him growing up.

“Throw it here, Dale. Hurry...hurry...hurry!”

The first baseman called for it anxiously, his outstretched glove open, one eye on him, one on the runner. Dale had the ball in his glove and knew there was time. Knew he could give the man half the baseline and still get the ball from short to first without a strain. He reached into the glove, wrapped his right hand over the seams, pulled the ball out, took it behind his ear, went to release. But something in the stands flipping in the breeze caught his eye for a split second. He turned and looked at it for some reason only a child could explain—an empty popcorn container—then directed his attention back to the game. The ball left his hand as usual, snapping through his right two fingers with authority. It sailed on a line and popped the first baseman’s glove.

“Safe!”

Safe? He couldn’t believe the ump’s bark. No way, Dale first thought. He never missed that throw. Then he looked at Dinwitty taking the ball out of his glove, shaking his head, tossing it maddeningly back to the pitcher.

“GODDAMMIT, DALE!”

The voice was low and full of octane. Thrust from a jet you couldn't see, only feel shaking the earth. He hunched his shoulders and kicked the dirt. He knew what was coming...Coach.

“Dale, that's the third error today, son.” Specks of broken blood vessels stood out in the whites of his eyes. “What the hell gives with you today?”

Before the words hit him, a stream of tobacco juice sprayed his shirt. He took a step back, then kicked the dirt again. “I'm sorry, Coach.” He swiped his head with the palm of his hand. Eyes around the field were riveted to the action, you'd think he'd been caught stealing an old woman's purse.

“Sorry ain't good enough, Dale. *We're* here to win...and *you* aren't.”

Coach called for the ball from the pitcher, then turned his hat around so the bill shadowed his deep red neck. He gripped it and fired it, snapping the first baseman's glove. “*That's* how you throw the ball to first, son.”

The ball came back. Coach pawed it so hard his knuckles turned white. “Dale,” the man screamed again, punching the air with a stiff index finger. “Get the hell off this field!”

Dale finally looked up, a sharp sun directly behind the coach's left ear. He remembered it so clearly—all he'd wanted to do was slither away. “I'm sorry, sir.”

“Get...off...the field, I said. NOW!”

Dale squinted, then turned for the dugout, hearing the laughter from the crowd. Crossing third base, he suddenly felt something explode between his shoulder blades.

He fell headfirst into the dirt, sand speckling his face. For a moment he was silent, then he started to cry. The ball was the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes. The sonofabitch threw it.

Dale quickly became a basketball fan.

Rudy knocked on Dale's office door for the third time, then walked on in. “You been sleeping in here or something?”

Dale's eyes were glazed, more in the back of his head than the front. The knot in his tie fell halfway down his shirt. Whiskers peppered his face. Finally he mumbled something incoherent.

Rudy shook his head and spoke at the same time: "Bro, you look rough. Here, drink some coffee and have a doughnut." He pulled out a glaze and put it on the desk.

Dale straightened in his chair and took the coffee. A magazine fell to the floor. He coughed and cleared his throat. A clock on the wall behind his head ticked loudly.

"You fall asleep reading or something?" Rudy asked again as he picked up a copy of *The NCAA News*.

"Yeah," Dale said. "When I left you last night I came here to follow up on that hunch I was telling you about."

"Man, you're nuts, aren't you? You aren't working Homicide anymore. Can't you get that into your thick skull?"

Dale didn't even hear what Rudy was saying. "Well, I knew something was funny by what happened to the kid, so I came back here and reread some of these old issues."

"First I've heard of the NCAA dealing with murder." Rudy sat down, propped his feet on the corner of Dale's desk. He slipped another chocolate doughnut into his mouth.

"It was these gambling stories I was checking into." Dale pointed at a copy of the sports journal again.

"Gambling stories?"

"Uh-huh, gambling."

Rudy picked up immediately on what Dale was thinking. "So you think the kid may have been betting?"

"Yeah, I do."

"And he was losing and didn't pay up, and the bookie came and whacked him?"

Dale sipped the coffee, then dunked half his doughnut in the liquid. "Could be that." He took a bite before the soggy pastry dropped into the cup. "Or it could be he was involved in fixing a game."

Rudy's head jerked back. "Fixing a college game? No way."

"Why not?"

"Bro, that shit only happens in the movies."

“Fact is stranger than fiction, Rudy.”

“Nah...that’s nuts.”

Dale bent and picked up a copy of *Sports Illustrated*. “Not really. This story is all about that deal at Northwestern where the kid was throwing games for cash. Here, check it out.” He tossed the magazine into Rudy’s lap. “I think I’m onto something, that’s why I need you to find out all you can about the kid’s phone records for me. Not just numbers...everything.”

Rudy glared. “I’ve done you one favor already. I had to sneak this shit over here to you.” He flipped the phone records onto Dale’s desk. “My ass will be on the line if they know you’re snooping around in something that’s none of your business.”

“Well, if you remember correctly, you owe me one or two.”

Rudy grimaced. His old boss did have a few secrets hanging over his head, and his hunches were usually right. “Bro, this is the last one, so help me God.”

Later in the day Rudy was back with an address for every phone call coming and going to Antoine Tandy over the last six months. He plopped the bulging file on Dale’s desk. “Nothing, Dale. Not even one single call to get a hooker. This kid is as clean as Mary Poppins.”

Dale picked the file up and scanned the contents. For fifteen minutes he didn’t say a word, then finally he looked up. “Rudy, get down to that school and start asking questions. Someone must have seen something. Talk to teammates. I guarantee they’ll know something. Teammates know everything. He must have said something.”

Rudy shook his head. “Nope, this ain’t your deal anymore, Dale. Anyhow, the boys in blue are already calling it a burglary gone bad.”

Dale clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair. “I got a different hunch, Rudy. A hunch that there’s a lot more gambling going on in college basketball than we all realize. And a hunch that if we don’t do something about it, someone else is going to die...just like our friend Antoine. He played a hunch—”

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“Yeah, and he died.”

“Okay, but if you don’t follow up on what I’m saying, the guilt will be on your shoulders. Can you live with that, Rudy?”

Rudy hung his head.