

LOVED TO DEATH

Doug Schlatter

CHAPTER 1

My office door opened and a dead man walked in.

Almost dead, anyway. I gave him a minute or two. A good time to buy life insurance.

He staggered towards me. His body tilted forward so he kind of fell into each step. His head bowed as he watched his blood spurt out of a real nasty looking hole in his chest. Arterial blood, bright red, loaded with oxygen he'd never use.

I jumped up to help him, tripped over my chair, and fell across my desk.

He sloshed on, through little puddles of gore. Then stopped. Then he looked up into my face, and I watched the light in his eyes sputter out.

Jeeze. The last thing he saw on this earth was me. Poor bastard.

His face cracked as it hit the floor. The rest of his blood oozed out from under him, crimson against green linoleum.

I reached down to take his pulse, in the unlikely event he was playing possum, and spied a scrap of paper clutched in his hand. A note with a ten dollar bill folded inside. The note said "Save Ruby" and gave an address. The bill said steak dinner, drinks, a tank of gas, and a week's rent. I guess I'd just taken on a case.

The Houston cops told me they'd be by after lunch. No hurry, since the victim was already dead. Implying that they rush to non-mortal murders only.

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I'm a private detective. That's why I've got this dingy office. A frosted glass door. My name on it in gold letters, the last of which has fallen off so it says George Have instead of Haven. A thirty-eight revolver in my top desk drawer and a bottle of bourbon in the bottom.

I try to avoid cops, but figured I should stick around, given the circumstances. Unanswered questions tend to stimulate imagination, not that the police I deal with have much. But I sure wanted to allay their suspicions before they anointed me perpetrator to clear their books.

In the meantime, I checked out my visitor. He was a big guy, probably six feet tall, or long, in this case. Broad, too. I felt lots of muscles. He wore a shabby suit of coarse blue wool, which didn't fit very well in his current position. He'd slipped cardboard inside his shoes to patch the holes in the soles.

I put on a pair of rubber gloves I keep on hand for minimally nefarious purposes and lifted him up by the shoulders. And wished I hadn't. I don't have much tolerance for corpses, but I needed to find out what killed him.

Blood soaked his shirt from neck to belt. Splintered bone stuck out the side of his flattened face. And that hole, just below his sternum. Big enough to stick three fingers into. Which I didn't.

I laid him back down, careful not to disturb the liquid evidence under him. Then threw up discreetly into my wastebasket.

Looked to me like he'd been stabbed. With something big. A hunting knife. A bayonet. Maybe one of those bejeweled daggers with which the Medicis assassinated rivals in Renaissance Florence. Maybe not.

His pockets yielded a little change, a couple of keys, a bus ticket, and a worn wallet containing seven dollars and a business card.

His name, Caleb McCoy, didn't bother me, although it brought to mind a backwoods fellow perhaps inordinately fond of his sister. But his occupation did: Private Investigator.

Oh..... shit.

We detectives don't like to see a fellow PI get killed. There aren't many of us to go around, so if somebody wants to kill one, we each have a better than average chance to be him.

OK, the good news. He came from Dallas. A long ways away. The bad news: well, here he was. Not just here in my office. Here in my life.

By choice. His choice. Jeeze, the man had climbed three flights of stairs while bleeding to death to get to me. Me in particular. There're plenty of other detectives in town who have offices on the ground floor.

I guess I should've been flattered. Instead, I was scared to death.

Somebody didn't like this guy. Big time. I guessed it wasn't his personality. I guessed he'd been working on a case and somebody objected to what he'd found out.

But not before he turned the case over to me. Thanks a lot Caleb. Bastard. Maybe it was his personality after all.

I wanted to leave it alone. Forget it happened. But I couldn't. Any reasonable murderer would assume that Caleb had told me everything he knew. Somewhere out there, I heard a blade sliding across a sharpening stone.

I shuddered. Scared as hell. Sounded better than scared to death.

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I didn't really want leave my nice, safe, albeit gory, office to go out into the world, but I needed to learn all I could before the police arrived and mucked up the evidence. I swallowed a big slug of whiskey to fortify my courage, and stuck my revolver in my belt, betting that, just as rock breaks scissors, my gun would get him before his knife got me.

Just outside my door, I collided with Mr. Povich, my landlord, making one of his thirty-seven daily inspections of his building to find something to blame his tenants for. Good hunting this trip.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at the trail of Caleb's blood snaking up an admittedly magnificent wrought iron staircase.

"It's a trail of blood."

"Well, somebody's got to clean it up!" Mr. Povich's priorities were clear. Rent. That was it.

"I'd say that's building management's job," I replied, meaning him.

"It leads straight to your office. What have you got in there?"

"A body. A fellow got murdered a little while ago. Right here in your building, Mr. Povich!" I like to rile him up, just to watch him turn from pink to red to purple to, well, really mad.

"Murdered! That's bad for business! You've got to get him out of here, Haven! You've got to cover this up! You've got to"

“Go screw yourself, Mr. Povich.”

Of all my worries, Mr. Povich ranked near the bottom. I constituted exactly fifty percent of his tenants, the other being a stockbroker, who couldn't have been very prompt these days paying his rent. The building itself, once the tallest in Texas, had housed a thriving bank until Gettysburg, when Confederate war bonds took a dive and the bank went with them. Not unlike mine did in nineteen thirty-two, four pretty much penniless years ago.

I left Mr. Povich fulminating, and followed Caleb's blood down the stairs. How he'd ever gotten up them was a biological miracle.

The trail led to just outside the front doors, ending in a big splash on the sidewalk. He must've been knifed there. Most likely, nobody'd seen it. This neighborhood of crumbling structures and abrasive streets rarely attracts fashionable strollers.

Back inside, I glimpsed someone in the near darkness under the stairs. A prior someone. Dead as a doornail. This was my day.

Talk about a tidy crime scene. This guy had been shot in the forehead. I didn't have to move him to find what I was looking for. A big mean bloody butcher knife in his right hand.

Sure enough. Firearms beat cold steel.

Easy to figure this out. Somebody'd hired this guy to kill Caleb — then killed him. Standard practice for keeping yourself one step further removed from the crime.

Now, that new somebody was out there. Likewise highly motivated to get rid of me. Nonetheless, I felt enormous relief. I'd much rather get shot than stabbed.

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This opening chapter of *Loved to Death* won second place for best novel at the Fort Bend Writers Guild 2004 Conference. Published here by permission of the author, Doug Schlatter.