

"Mind-grabbing...fast-paced.... Will make any reader believe 'what if' could happen." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

BLUE RAIN



CHUCK FREADHOFF

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HarperTorch

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

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Presumed Dead

“Look, we got a tentative ID off some dog tags he was wearing, but the body was so badly decomposed it’s going to take a week, maybe ten days to rehydrate the fingers so we can lift some prints and verify. *If* we can get prints. There’s no guarantee.”

“What are you getting at, Doc?”

“According to the tags, the guy was Sergeant Roberto Ruiz.”

“Yeah, I already knew he was military. Where was he stationed?”

“That’s just it. He wasn’t stationed anywhere. According to the Army’s records, the stiff can’t be Roberto Ruiz because Sergen Ruiz was lost in Vietnam about twenty-five years ago. Listed as MIA, presumed dead, body never recovered.”

Johnny shook his head slightly, thinking of Pham’s murder and the threat he’d just received and what Doc was telling him about a second MIA. “You know, Doc, something really strange is going on here. How can an MIA just suddenly drop into the middle of the Mojave Desert?”

Praise for Blue Rain

“Offbeat. . . . Freadhoff puts a different spin on the Vietnam POW story, and in Johnny Rose he has created a character who is comforting in his normality, a man whose plodding pace is more impressive than a superman.”

Orlando Sentinel

“The terrors of Vietnam come ever closer. . . . Freadhoff conjures up enough paranoia to chill readers, all the while offering an insider’s take on how a good reporter goes about digging out the facts, no matter what the obstacles.”

Publishers Weekly

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For Dave Miller

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In the distance Johnny could see the flashing lights atop a sheriff's car at the edge of the two-lane dirt road. Filtered through the heat waves rising off the desert floor, the alternating red and white flashes seemed to waver and had none of the urgency they command in the city's penned-in concrete streets. Out here miles from the nearest paved road, the lights seemed languid, almost lazy. He could make out a few people, too, although they were little more than blurry outlines standing in a cluster at the side of a van out of the direct sun.

Inside Johnny's aging 240Z the temperature was rising as the air conditioner struggled against the desert heat. Last spring his mechanic had said something about the Freon needing to be recharged, but Johnny hadn't done it, and now he cursed himself for ignoring the advice. Sweat trickled from his armpits down the

sides of his body, and even with the AC on high his back stuck to the seat. He drove slowly, but the car still jolted over the ruts and the tires slipped on the rocks and sand. Johnny eased off the accelerator for a moment, then drove on, keeping the Z in first gear.

It was a strange place to find a body. Over the years, Johnny had seen bodies in many places: sprawled in garbage-strewn alleys behind working-class bars; locked in the twisted wreckage of cars as firemen worked methodically to cut away the steel tomb; in body bags being loaded on gurneys and wheeled out of the charred remains of houses; and once he'd even been there when the cops popped the trunk of a car and found a mob enforcer who had been missing for ten days. But he'd never been to the desert to cover a story like this.

The road crested a small rise, and he could see the yellow police tape flapping in the breeze perhaps fifty yards or so off the dirt road. He could see the van better. It was a white television vehicle with a small disk antenna mounted on the top. He also saw a black-and-white patrol car and a copper-colored Chevy Caprice, all parked at the edge of the road. He eased his car down an incline and a few minutes later pulled to a stop behind the last car in the line. The heat and wind hit him as he stepped from the car. He blinked and turned his head for a moment, turned back and walked slowly up to the group of three men and a woman standing beside the TV news van.

The woman was dressed in a V-necked white blouse and black slacks. Johnny recognized her as a reporter for one of L.A.'s independent television stations. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her cameraman, dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and floppy

hat, stood at her side. The other two men wore deputy sheriff's uniforms. The van blocked the wind, and Johnny understood why they were clustered together at its side.

He looked at the taller of the two deputy sheriffs. "Hi, I'm Johnny Rose. I'm with the *Chronicle*."

"Hi." The deputy nodded back. He was taller even than Johnny, and thin with a long face and a small black mustache. Half-moons of sweat had soaked through his uniform at the armpits and his face glistened. Johnny guessed he was about thirty, no older.

"I'm surprised you guys are still here. I figured by the time I drove out from L.A. you'd be long gone."

"Coroner's wagon broke down. It'll be here soon. At least they keep telling us that."

"You catch the call?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah."

"Who found the body?"

"Couple of guys in a dune buggy. Just out banging around the desert. Almost ran over the guy."

"So who's running the show?"

"Sergeant Martinez." The deputy cocked his head toward the waving yellow plastic tape. Johnny looked and saw two men in street clothes, one standing behind the yellow tape watching a second man who was kneeling in the dirt inside the roped-off area.

"Thanks."

Johnny stepped out from the van's protected side and was hit with a sudden gust of wind. A moment later the wind died to a steady breeze and the heat seemed to jump immediately. In mid-September, while the rest of the nation was raking autumn leaves, enjoying Indian summer and thinking of putting on snow tires, nothing much changed in the desert north

and east of Los Angeles. The heat could top 100 degrees and rain was as rare as meteors.

The yellow police tape was strung in a loose triangle between two yucca trees and a pile of rocks. Johnny recognized the man standing at one point of the triangle even before he turned around. It was Steve Hounds, an AP reporter. In his mid-fifties, he had a barrel chest and thinning reddish-gray hair. They'd covered the same stories and shared beers after deadlines off and on for more than twenty years. He glanced over his shoulder as Johnny walked up.

"Who'd you piss off?" Hounds asked.

"What?"

"No one drives out to the Mojave in the middle of the day this time of year unless they have to."

Johnny shook his head. "No. It was my idea." He looked past Hounds to where the other man was kneeling in the sand, then looked back at the AP reporter. "Thought this might turn out to be Billy Osborne. Could make a good column."

"Osborne? That missing stockbroker?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I hate to break this to you, Johnny, but Osborne took off with his clients' money and his wife's best friend and I can pretty much guaran-damn-tee you he didn't come out here. As I remember it, you did a couple of columns on it yourself."

Johnny shrugged. "Yeah, but you know how it is. I always need copy. Besides, I had nothing better to do."

"Yeah," Hounds said and looked back at the body. Johnny's eyes followed. It was facedown, legs spread slightly and wearing Nike sneakers, pointed outward. The body was clad in lightweight pants and a polo shirt. The edge of the shirt, pulled free from the waist,

flapped in the light breeze. One pant leg was pushed above the ankle, exposing a once-white sock, now gray with dirt and sand. The exposed arms were brown and leathery, the skin pulled tightly against the bone.

As he looked at the scene Johnny sensed something odd, out of place, but wasn't sure what. He watched the man kneeling next to the body for a few minutes, then looked around the roped-off area, letting his glance drift from the base of the yucca tree over the rocks and sand and back to the body. He felt a small nagging at the back of his skull. He looked at the body again and the nagging grew, becoming more insistent.

"You see anybody move anything?" he asked Hounds.

"What?"

"This is just the way they found the body, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just wondering."

Hounds turned and looked at Johnny. "Come on, don't bullshit me, Rose. What are you thinking?"

"Maybe the coyotes dragged the body around, that's all," Johnny said. If Hounds didn't see it, that was his problem. Johnny wasn't going to help him. Away from the job, the AP reporter was a friend, but out here he was also a rival. If the AP moved the piece on the wire, Johnny could lose his edge, lose a column.

Before Hounds could say anything the detective stood and walked to the other side of the corpse. The newsmen stopped talking and watched as he knelt again, going down on his hands and knees, bending close to the ground while looking like a Muslim in prayer. He seemed to be looking at something strung around the body's neck. A moment later he stood and, still looking down at the corpse, pulled latex gloves from his hands.

Johnny watched him as he walked toward them. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled above his wrists and his tie was loose. He was short and stout and his stomach slipped over his black leather belt. He wore jeans and cowboy boots. His skin was a deep brown and his thick black hair was combed straight back from his forehead. He wore dark aviator glasses that hid his eyes, making it tough to guess his age.

As he approached, Johnny looked past him. In the distance khaki-colored hills rose gently off the desert floor to the stark blue, cloudless sky. There are those, he knew, who talk of the beauty of the desert and how it teems with life, but at that moment, looking from the desiccated corpse to the detective approaching them and the land behind him, Johnny saw only the harsh, unforgiving sun and dirt that seemed to stretch to infinity.

"I'm Johnny Rose, with the *Chronicle*," Johnny said as the man reached the tape. "This is Steve Hounds with the AP."

"I'm Sergeant Martinez."

Hounds and Johnny pulled their notebooks from their hip pockets. The wind whipped the pages, forcing them to cling tightly as they wrote.

"What can you tell us?" Johnny asked.

"Not much. Body's an adult male. No way to tell the exact age yet. Could be Hispanic, judging by the black hair, but again it's pretty hard to tell."

"How about an ID?"

"I've got a tentative ID but we still have to confirm it, so I can't release any information yet."

"Any idea how long he's been here?"

"It's been a while. I mean, he didn't die yesterday or anything like that. I'd guess a few weeks, minimum."

The coroner will have to make the final determination.”

“You have any idea how he died?” Hounds asked.

Martinez shook his head. “No. Not yet. But with any case like this, we treat it as a homicide. I’ll say this, though, right now there doesn’t seem to be any indication of foul play.”

“Is it possible he was killed somewhere else and dumped here?” Hounds asked.

“Well, anything’s possible, but like I said, there doesn’t appear to be any indication of foul play.”

“You recover a weapon?” Johnny asked.

“No.”

“So if he wasn’t murdered, what killed him?”

“My guess is he died of exposure.”

“Any idea what he was doing out here?” Hounds asked.

Martinez shook his head. “Nope. I’m hoping we’ll know more after we contact the family.”

Hounds exhaled deeply and shook his head slowly. “Jesus, it’s hot.” He paused, then went on. “When will you be releasing the name?”

“Soon, I hope. Just want to confirm the ID, that’s all.”

“Okay, look, I gotta get to a telephone and file this. Let me get the correct spelling of your name, okay?”

Johnny moved away as Martinez and Hounds talked. He walked along the yellow plastic tape, making his way around the perimeter of the marked-off area. He studied the scene carefully, then found the place where the tape was nearest the body and stood looking at the figure. He could see the head, the burned skin pulled tightly against the bone. The man’s shirt and slacks were bleached almost white by the

sun. It made Johnny conscious of the heat again, and he licked his lips and swallowed. He squatted down for a better view and looked at the man's legs. Part of the pants were gone and a chunk of leg was missing where a desert animal had torn away a hunk of flesh. The breeze puffed the rear pockets in the corpse's pants. Johnny saw that they were empty and wondered how Martinez had made a preliminary identification. He stood and as he did, the sun suddenly glinted off something in the dirt at the man's throat. Johnny knelt down in the dirt as he'd seen Martinez do earlier. His cheek brushed the ground and he shaded his eyes and looked across the sand at the corpse. He saw a small piece of metal hanging on a chain around the man's neck.

When Johnny looked back Martinez and Hounds were already walking toward the parked cars and TV van. Johnny stood near the tape waiting until he saw Hounds leave and the TV van drive slowly down the narrow road. He didn't want to ask his questions with other reporters around.

He crossed the desert to the patrol cars and found Martinez behind the wheel of the Caprice. The engine was running, and when the detective rolled down his window, Johnny could feel the air conditioning.

"Let me ask you something," Johnny said. "This is off the record since you're not releasing the ID yet anyway, okay?"

"Okay."

"This guy have a wallet on him?"

Martinez smiled and shook his head. "No, not that I saw."

"Then how were you able to make a preliminary identification?"

“Well,” Martinez paused. “This is off the record, right?”

“Yeah, I won’t use it until you officially release the name.”

Martinez leaned close to the window. “He was wearing dog tags.”

Johnny stood up and looked across the top of the car to the yellow tape swaying in the breeze, then bent and looked in the car window at Martinez again.

“Well, he sure wasn’t wearing fatigues and those weren’t jump boots he had on. Those are Nikes. They look good on the street, but I sure wouldn’t try and cross the desert in them.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Guy didn’t have a jacket, either.”

Martinez grunted. “Hey, man, it must be a hundred and ten out here. Who needs a jacket?”

“It gets cold at night.”

“Yeah, I see your point. He was dressed pretty lightly for this climate.”

“You know, there’s something else that bothers me.”

“What’s that?”

“You find a backpack or anything like that?”

Martinez smiled again and Johnny knew the sergeant had already asked himself the same questions. “Nope.”

“How about a canteen?”

“No, nothing. Just the body.”

“So what was he doing out here? Where was he going?” Johnny asked the questions but didn’t expect an answer. Martinez shrugged. “Is there anything near here? Any towns, mines, settlements, anything?” Johnny asked.

Martinez shook his head slowly. "There's nothing for fifteen, maybe twenty miles."

"So how'd he get here?"

"My guess is he walked."

"Walked? You think his car or dune buggy broke down and he was trying to walk out and get help?"

"I don't know, but I doubt it. We've searched the area and haven't found any vehicles."

Johnny waited a moment, then looked at the sergeant, staring hard at him, trying to see through the lenses of Martinez's sunglasses. "So what you're telling me is, this guy just dropped out of the sky, is that it?"

Martinez nodded. "Sure looks that way, doesn't it?"