

Mick was responsible for overseeing a U.S. Government Accountability Office assignment involving the U.S. Marshals Service and Geneva County but never before visited this small substation. Today's trip was a social call. The sheriff's office wanted to hire an administrative officer, and this just happened to be where there was space available for the new employee. Under the circumstances, Tom was thrilled when the county offered him the job, and he was certainly qualified based on his prior positions as an LAPD police officer and chief of security on a cruise ship.

Tom lost his previous job with the World of Seas Cruise Line nearly two years ago in part because he used his expertise and considerable moral judgment to help Mick and Darcy fight a shipboard murderer. Then his continued involvement with their problems almost got him killed in a most bizarre way. After all that, their friendship grew into a close . . . really a family . . . relationship. The new job meant so much to him because he needed something meaningful to do now that he was over the physical and emotional trauma. With no family and no romantic relationship, he was still alone except for his few friends.

Up ahead, the medics received a hand signal from the desk officer and passed through the small reception area, disappearing into the business section of the station. Mick stepped up to the counter and introduced himself, showing his GAO credentials. He nodded toward the back. "What's going on back there? You have some kind of problem?"

"That's an understatement. One of our deputies has been shot." He glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. "We've never had anything remotely like this happen in the county that I know of."

Not one to be an alarmist, Mick nonetheless suddenly had a very bad feeling about this, apart from the fact there had been a shooting and that was bad enough. Tom had only worked here for two weeks and apparently already encountered a violent situation . . . it was ironic. "I came to see your new admin officer, Tom Smythe. Is he back there?" Mick asked, feeling the rolling sensation in his gut intensifying.

The officer gave Mick an odd look and slowly nodded. "Yeah, he's back there all right, with his ass in the middle of this mess."

Mick's uneasiness resolved into something else entirely. Without waiting for a response, he said, "I'm going on back there, OK?" He was already striding to the door leading to the back offices and did not hear the reply.

The situation was readily apparent as soon as he entered the chaotic bullpen-style work area. The medics were frantically working on the deputy who was down on the floor—a blood pool spreading from under his left shoulder—and Mick thought his stillness and gray pallor did not bode well for his condition. Watching, he was momentarily transfixed by their efforts to stop the bleeding and suppressed a painful flashback of his own injury before it completely took hold of him. He had worked very hard to overcome the residual effects of that traumatic ordeal.

Quickly turning his attention to the far side of the room, a shock wave of anxiety hit him as he looked directly at Tom and the two deputies who were holding his arms pinned behind his back. "What the hell?" Mick rushed to his friend but stopped abruptly against a third officer's palm pushed into his chest. The officer quickly replaced his hand with a .40 Smith & Wesson automatic.

“Hold it right there, sir. Who are you?”

Mick saw Tom’s distraught expression as one of the deputies holding him secured the handcuffs and shoved him down into a chair. Then he looked at the deputy who was holding the gun two feet from his chest. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have rushed in like I did. I’m Mick Clayton, director of State Law Enforcement Issues for the GAO in DC. I’ve done a lot of work with your office along with the U.S. Marshals Service.” He looked at his friend and tried to smile reassuringly. “Hey, Tom, what have you gotten yourself into now?” Tom lowered his eyes and shook his head—not a good sign.

The deputy lowered his weapon and beckoned for Mick’s ID, which he quickly produced. The rest of the room was in a state of turmoil, with four employees at desks engaged in frantic phone conversations and two others bent over their fallen comrade trying to assist with his care. Obviously, the sheriff was not here, but Mick was sure he would soon be making an appearance.

He turned his attention back to Tom and looked at him intently, trying to read something in the soft gray eyes and drawn expression. Tom had lost weight and bulked up a little since they first met. He altered and improved his appearance, but now his nondescript middle-aged face showed signs of stress that Mick hadn’t seen for some time. Tom endured a lot of emotional pain and regret for months after they all returned from South America.

“What the hell’s going on?”

The deputy raised an eyebrow as he handed back Mick’s credentials. “Michelangelo? For real?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Mick will do.”

“What’s your business here now?” demanded one of the deputies with his hand on Tom’s shoulder restraining him. There didn’t seem to be a need—he appeared relaxed and calm.

“Well, I just dropped by to see how Tom here is doing in his new job. He’s a good friend.” Mick’s exasperation was mounting as he looked from the deputy back to Tom. “Somebody please tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I’ll tell you. Your good friend here just shot poor Blake over there in the left chest with his own service weapon, and it doesn’t look good for him . . . or for you either, Smythe.” He yanked on Tom’s shoulder as if to administer some pre-till-proven-guilty punishment. Tom winced and looked up at Mick. His eyes widened, but he kept his mouth shut.

Mick grabbed the edge of the desk conveniently situated about a foot behind him and half sat—half fell onto it. He tried to order his thoughts rationally so as not to say anything that might make matters worse. Tom wasn’t providing any information, and Mick knew it was the smart thing to do.

Voices could be heard out in the reception area; and Sheriff Clyde Carmichael rushed through the door, accompanied by two civilians in suits, who Mick assumed were high-level county officials. The sheriff strode directly to the injured deputy and spoke to the medics while they loaded him onto a gurney. As they

wheeled the victim out to the ambulance, the sheriff looked around the room until his gaze fell on Tom. His expression immediately hardened.

“I don’t get exactly what has happened here yet, but you’re in a heap of trouble, my friend,” he said to Tom as he approached. His expression turned even nastier when he saw Mick. “Hello, Clayton, what are you doing here? Oh yeah, you’re the one who got us to hire this asshole, right?”

“Clyde. . . I mean, Sheriff . . . good to see you too,” he answered calmly. This situation needed to be played carefully no matter what was happening, and so far he had no clue what that might be.

He glanced over the sheriff’s five-foot-six head and noted something odd. The door to the property locker was standing wide open, and he could clearly see through to the back of the large closet like space. Floor-to-ceiling shelves along both side walls were stacked with boxes, and a large vault with its door also ajar dominated the back wall. This highly secure space contained case evidence and various types of property that the sheriff’s office and the marshals seized from prisoners, tax evaders, drug dealers, and the like.

Leaving everything open this way was not standard protocol, and he knew the condition must be related to whatever occurred here. His suspicion was confirmed when his eye shifted to the cement floor inside the locker. Another blood pool was smeared, and drops led out of the room to the injured deputy . . . so they moved him from where he was shot. That was interesting.

Mick reached deep inside and pulled out an aura of calm that he did not really feel. “I’d really appreciate just a brief explanation of what happened here, Sheriff.”

“Yeah, OK Clayton, it appears it didn’t take your friend here long to get his hands on a very valuable silver box and a couple of firearms from our locker. They tell me that Blake—Deputy Masters—confronted him about the thefts, and Smythe disarmed and shot him. Blake’s our evidence custodian, so he’s responsible for knowing what’s in there.”

That story was absurd, as anyone who knew Tom would understand. He was the new guy here and somehow stumbled onto something that hadn’t ended well. “Look, Sheriff, this will all get sorted out. There is no way Tom would steal, period.” He turned to Tom. “It’s going to be OK. I know there’s another story here, and we’ll get you counsel and get it straightened out.”

Tom spoke for the first time. “Thanks, Mick.” He glanced at the sheriff and seemed to stop himself from saying anything else.

“Take him over to operations and process him for lock up,” the sheriff ordered. “I’ll be along as soon as I check on Blake. He was barely hanging on when they wheeled him out of here.” He ran his hand over his gray buzz-topped hair and sighed. “I have to call Blake’s wife . . . damn! I can’t believe this.” He glared at Tom and then at Mick. With fists balled at his sides, his round face turned a dangerous crimson and his protruding belly heaved as he struggled to control his anxiety.

The two deputies pulled Tom up and sidled between the sheriff and Mick, roughly guiding him toward the door. Mick called out, “I’ll be over there soon, Tom. Try not to worry, buddy. I’ll get you a good attorney.

He turned back to the sheriff. "I can appreciate your position, but something else obviously happened here. You have a big problem on your hands and so does Tom, but the main thing you have is an impartial investigation to conduct."

Carmichael stared at Mick but did not respond. Instead, he turned away and beckoned to his companions, signaling that he was ready to leave. Raising his voice above the noisy conversations in the room, he admonished everyone, "Listen, don't touch anything in the crime scene area. Our lab team will be here any minute to start investigating, and FDLE will be along soon. They're coming from their Fort Meyers Ops Center. Stay put to answer their questions." He waved his arm in their general direction and glanced at Mick as he turned to leave.

Mick knew the sheriff meant the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, an FBI-like agency that was the state's top-level investigative body. Their agents conduct criminal investigations at the request of sheriffs or the state attorney general.

Before the sheriff got very far, Mick spoke to his back. "Sheriff, I don't want to get crosswise with you, but you know I have experience with the investigation of past problems in your office having to do with the proper handling and safeguarding of seized property." He turned his head toward the open property locker.

The sheriff abruptly whirled around and glared at him. The alarming reddening of his face and neck told the extent of his anger. Mick knew that Carmichael was a professional and was highly respected, but he was understandably overwrought, and he too was probably in the dark about the specifics of what just happened.

"That's enough said for now, Sheriff. There'll be plenty of time to discuss this later." Mick quickly walked around the sheriff and left the room and the building.

Jogging to his car, his mind reeled with the implications of this situation. So much for his earlier contented feeling and the premature notion that the trauma and violence they suffered on the cruises were behind them. He thought about his comment to Carmichael. From his prior work, he knew stored property disappeared before; and in every instance, the theft was traced back to a deputy sheriff or deputy marshal. In those cases, however, neither organization was able to gather the evidence needed to prosecute the individuals.

Behind the wheel, he linked into the Lexus's Bluetooth and called Darcy. He knew she planned to be at home all day, working on her latest manuscript; the story of their second highly publicized cruise ship nightmare. He was also well aware that next to himself and her daughter, Rachael, Darcy loved Tom Smythe and felt very protective toward him, probably because he had sacrificed so much, had no wife or family, and was such a great guy. She wasn't going to believe what he was about to tell her, and of course she would insist on jumping into the middle of it. *Hell, she might even beat me to the jail.* Mick knew there was nothing he could do about Darcy's involvement in Tom's predicament . . . even if he wanted to.