

The Hubley Case

A Thriller

by

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Chapter 1

“Eu o vejo. Dez horas.”

I see him.

Ten o'clock.

“Apanhei-o.”

Got him.

The Sao Paulo International Airport in Brazil was both less ornate and less expensive than its namesake city, a conclusion any visitor couldn't help but make despite the fact that the five-terminal complex technically resided in Guarulhos, not Sao Paulo. An impenetrable glass wall divided the international and domestic gates, and on both sides of it were dark and matte floor colors, chosen to conceal filth rather than woo tourists. Duty-free shops lined the terminal, offering items at less than half of what you'd pay downtown. Though still steep by US standards, you could get a candy bar for R\$6.00, just under three bucks.

It was not, however, any less crowded.

After a visit to one of the wealthiest cities in the southern hemisphere, you'd think Sao Paulo set the worldwide standard for congestion – with eleven million people and a density four times New York City's – but you'd be wrong.

With twenty million people flying in and out of GRU every year, chaos surrounded long lines for food, shopping, and security. Which was why, when his partner said he'd located the subject, a slight smile crept across his usually stoic face as he shifted his weight and focused.

The man in question was both avoiding the airport congestion and taking advantage of its financial perks, sitting quietly at the far end of a small café, sipping a cappuccino with crushed peanuts and a cinnamon stick while reading *USA Today*. After surveying the surrounding area, noting travelers, security officers, cameras, exits, emergency doors, access points and walking traffic flows, he checked the first page of the red folder he was holding. You could never be too sure. Thirty-eight years old, six feet tall, two hundred fifteen pounds, short, light-brown hair, almost blonde, large hazel eyes, and a dark birthmark just below his left ear.

It was definitely him.

Mr. Peter Hubley was a father of two young boys – Timothy and Samuel, ages three and one. He'd been married for just over four years to Sally Gordon Hubley, a former third-grade schoolteacher turned stay-at-home mom, and he had an uncle he played chess with once a week. The black briefcase resting on the floor next to him was of little significance other than to confirm that Mr. Hubley was returning to the USA after a week of international business.

According to the red folder, Peter Hubley was on United Airlines Flight UA30, an eleven o'clock departure, landing in Newark at 5:55 the next morning. A car had been arranged to take him to Newark Liberty International Airport Marriott, and he had a dinner reservation just outside New York City that evening at six. The next morning, he was scheduled on United Airlines Flight UA1030, departing at nine, landing in Chicago at 10:34 – a grand total of seven days away from home.

The subject's criminal background was nonexistent. His record was spotless and his intentions clear. He was an innocuous finance executive working hard for his family of four, quietly sipping his beverage, waiting to board his flight in twenty-five minutes. Two people sat next to him and he smiled as they took their seats. He seemed focused on his newspaper, his left foot resting on his right knee, the briefcase almost touching his right leg – as if protecting his company-issued laptop and the past week's worth of meeting notes.

While his partner watched Peter Hubley, Jose Luiz Lettnin walked away from the kiosk towards the bathroom. Once inside, he ripped the trusted red folder into shreds, disposing of its small pieces in the toilet before flushing them away forever. After a very brief moment of silence, he withdrew the Tylenol bottle, swallowed the pills, and splashed water on his face. Time now his enemy, he exited the bathroom and walked quickly, Floriano Felipe catching his stride so that they approached the café abreast. His partner's nodding head confirmed that they were in this together. No going back.

When they reached their destination, they didn't hesitate.

With planned synchronization, each withdrew his commercial Beretta M9 handgun and rapidly fired the fifty-meter range pistol from less than five feet away. Seconds later, both fifteen-bullet magazines were empty, and Peter Hubley's maimed corpse was sprawled across the floor, cappuccino dripping down what was left of his forehead.

Chapter 2

The name on his passport read Matthew J. Baker. The same could be said for his plane ticket to Atlanta, the driver's license in his pocket, and all the hotel receipts from his two-week vacation in Brazil. Matthew J. Baker had a social security number, home address, and place of work. And if people really wanted to dig, they'd find two registered vehicles, emergency contacts and last year's property tax bill, all in perfect order. As far as airport security was concerned – both the local Brazilian authorities and TSA in the United States – Matthew J. Baker was very real.

His trip had been meticulously planned to ensure a suspicion-free return, layered with concrete evidence and verifiable alibis accounting for each and every day of it. Two hotel maintenance workers could testify if called upon that he'd spent the vast majority of those two weeks chasing beautiful local women and drinking an excessive number of mojitos and caipirinhas, Brazil's national cocktail. Hotel security cameras could corroborate said testimony, and signed receipts for three meals a day could verify he'd been grounded at the Rio de Janeiro hotel the entire time. What the workers didn't know was that he'd been overly friendly with them so that they'd remember his being there every day, and that those drinks were virgin.

All to irrefutably prove it was pure coincidence that Matthew J. Baker witnessed Peter Hubley's death and certainly had nothing to do with it.

He'd been instructed by Mr. Riddle to arrive in Brazil a week early for just that reason. Rio de Janeiro was chosen not for its popular tourist attractions or beautiful women – as he'd indicate if ever asked – but because it was both believable as a

destination and an hour by plane from each of Hubley's stops during the finance executive's business trip. No chance of sneaking out unnoticed.

It all seemed overkill to him – the paperwork and the alibis and the cameras and such – but Mr. Riddle was a very thorough man who spared no expense and paid strict attention to detail. He wanted to ensure that there would not be a problem.

And there never was.

When Floriano Felipe Pereira and Jose Luiz Lettnin opened fire on Hubley, he ran his hand over his hairless head and gasped for the cameras. The past two weeks had been about acting – from inebriation to women-chasing – and it was merely an extension of that acting that would make it appear he was just as shocked as those around him to witness the heinous crime.

The Brazilians did their job, rapidly firing their weapons empty before the airport police even had time to react. He hovered against a wall a few hundred feet from his 10:55 Delta flight departure gate, watching the scene unfold as travelers screamed and scurried in all directions. Pure chaos enveloped GRU's international terminal in a matter of seconds as smoke emitted from the barrels of the two Berettas he'd provided the Brazilians.

When the police finally figured out what had happened – long after Hubley's body only vaguely resembled a human being's – the two men did as instructed and lay down for apprehension. The police officers screamed Portuguese and pointed their weapons forcefully; and the two killers quietly obeyed and remained stoic. A few onlookers captured the start of the arrest with cell phone cameras, but most simply stared in awe and fear at what they'd just witnessed.

The man known to authorities as Matthew J. Baker pretended to do the same – but was secretly waiting for what he saw next:

Both killers' bodies started twitching, subtly at first – hardly recognizable if you didn't know to look for it – but very soon after transforming into noticeable spasms. The police officers were unprepared and didn't react well, actually stepping away as both men's necks and heads began to visibly shake. They regrouped and applied handcuffs, but that was completely irrelevant.

The spasms would lead to full body convulsions in a matter of minutes, the stimuli of being jerked up from the ground and forcefully walked towards a private interrogation room intensifying the effects along the way. Eventually, the backbone would continually arch against itself, and the killers would experience lactic acidosis and the onset of hypothermia. The neural pathways regulating the body's breathing would soon be paralyzed if the convulsions didn't beat them to it.

Either way, within a few minutes, Floriano Felipe Pereira and Jose Luiz Lettnin would be as dead as Peter Hubley.

Chapter 3

“I’m not gonna blow smoke up your skirt, kid; the facts of this case really stink up the joint.”

FBI Special Agent Nikki Benton couldn’t figure out what displeased her most about that statement. Three immediate options came to mind: the sexist cliché from her boss of only six months, the degrading term of “kid” used in his first sentence, or the overall point he was making.

“Six days ago, an American businessman gets publicly massacred in an international airport – one of the world’s busiest at that,” Special Agent in Charge Marcus Redmond continued. “The two gunmen who somehow got weapons past security die nine minutes later, then the ambulance taking their bodies to the morgue gets hijacked. No interviews, no autopsy, no statements. Nothing,” Redmond lamented as he paced behind his oversized oak desk, the vein in his creased forehead bulging with frustration.

“Did we get an ID on the shooters?” she sought some measure of good news.

“From the fingerprints,” he replied, rattling off two Brazilian names from the file he was holding that meant nothing to her. “Both men have ties to the PCC but no known connection to the victim.”

She debated whether to ask or not, but her face apparently made the decision for her while also exposing her ignorance.

“Don’t be shy, kid. This office doesn’t deal with other countries’ problems all that often. Even I had to look it up,” he pronounced, smugly implying that it must be some real esoteric piece of information.

“What is -”

“The PCC, formally known as the Primeiro Comando da Capital, is Brazil’s largest criminal organization. Its primary target is Sao Paulo’s military police force, and it is extensive. Some fifteen thousand members according to the Brazil feds, but a lot of its members are already in prison as we speak and it appears to be strictly domestic. No known ties to the USA,” he read.

Until now.

SAIC Redmond plopped the file on the desk in front of her, tugged on the lapels of his undersized suit jacket, and paced towards the oversized terrarium in the corner of his office.

That terrarium was home to Spot, Redmond’s ill-named Galapagos Tortoise and the Chicago Field Office’s unofficial mascot. Redmond loved that reptile. Some coworkers had joked he was more affectionate with it than his wife. As he squatted down to see Spot face-to-face and began whispering, Nikki was reminded of why. The poor thing was an endangered species and here Redmond was, housing it in a custom-made five thousand-gallon terrarium with a small pool of water and man-made mud hole. She didn’t know what would happen to Spot when he grew to over five hundred pounds, as his breed was known to do, and she didn’t dare ask. A small part of her thought it was adorable, the larger part cringed at the odor that Spot and his home emitted.

The office smelled like *tortoise ass*.

“What do we have on the victim?” she asked, interrupting the moment.

“Peter Hubley, an executive at InvestSecure on Clark Street, lives in Chicago, father of two, coming back from a week of meetings in Brazil. No criminal record, no questionable history, no flagged friends or acquaintances. Nothing at all that would make you think he had this coming. His personnel file is on the seat next to you.”

He said it all without looking away from Spot. She dropped one file and picked up another, twice as thick, and began browsing its pages.

“What happened to the shooters?” she asked while reading.

SAIC Redmond sighed as he sarcastically conveyed the events, finally turning to face her:

“As they’re getting arrested, they start shaking and convulsing. Starts off minor, like tremors or fear...they did just kill a man in cold blood and were headed to prison for the rest of their lives, right? But the shakes get worse, a lot worse. And on the way to the airport interrogation room, they keel over and die. Snap, on the spot. I’m getting airport security footage, but you can just watch it yourself on YouTube in the meantime. Plenty of people saw them croak and thought it’d make a nice home video. What’s this world coming to?”

“Asphyxiation?”

“That’s my guess, but with no autopsy or bodies, we’ll never know for sure.”

“Yeah, about that...”

“That’s where it gets even better. The morgue they were being transported to is twenty-two kilometers from the airport. At some point in the fifteen-minute trek,” he continued, disbelief in his voice, “the ambulance got hijacked en route, and both paramedics were shot dead on scene. Autopsy confirmed that a bullet to the head from point-blank range was the cause of death, and the Brazil police are still trying to get more intel on the hijacking. But it’ll probably lead to a dead end.”

“Why is that?”

“Look, kid, Brazil’s more corrupt than Washington. And, you don’t have any jurisdiction to investigate there. So you’ve got to start with Hubley. I need you to read his file, cover to cover. Do some serious investigative research. Figure out what we don’t know. Talk to his boss, talk to his wife, ask questions, look for the secrets, anything at all that could explain why he’d be the target of two Mafia hoods over five thousand miles away.”

The corruption comment was an ironic reference for an FBI employee who was three reports away from its National Director, but the rest of what Redmond said seemed logical enough.

After a moment’s pause, he continued.

“Listen, I know I sprung this on you,” Redmond said in a softer, more sympathetic voice as he took a seat at his desk. Rubbing his graying mustache and fixed on her in a way that made her wish he was still looking at Spot, he said, “I also know that in Phoenix you didn’t see many murder cases and that, like I said, the facts in this one really stink up the joint. It’s not ideal and I get that.”

She straightened up in her seat, trying to exude confidence while waiting for him to come to his point. “I need to know if you feel comfortable taking this on? I can reassign it, give it to someone else with more experience if you -”

“No, I’m on it.” “

Because we can’t afford to -”

“*Sir, I’m on it.*”

“Good,” he replied, nodding. “Just stick to Hubley. Do the groundwork and look for what we’re missing because right now, this doesn’t add up. Find out what he was doing in Brazil, specifically what his agenda was, if he traveled there often, stuff like that. Get a list of all US citizens flying to Brazil within a few weeks before and after his death and follow up on anyone suspicious. See if Hubley knew any of them. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find a link that leads to a motive. Dismissed.”

And just like that, after ten minutes of information dump, the meeting was over. Nikki got up to leave, two thick files in her arms and an even thicker one in her head, but turned when she got to the door to ask the question.

“Sir, why are we investigating this?”

“Pardon,” Redmond replied, already checking his e-mail.

“Well, it’s like you said...we don’t have jurisdiction in Brazil, there’s an FBI Brasilia office that does, we know the shooters are Brazilian, and both the initial crime and follow up ambulance hijacking occurred there...why is the FBI’s Chicago Field Office looking into this?”

He looked at her through a narrow line of sight just above his reading glasses and below his forehead, either impressed that she knew this assignment didn’t make sense as explained or upset that she’d questioned it. With limited face time the past six months, she couldn’t be sure which.

“This morning I got a call from Thompson’s office,” he said, alluding to FBI Executive Director Charles Thompson, Redmond’s boss and the head of the Criminal, Cyber, Response and Services Branch. “Interpol Brasilia contacted Interpol Washington and asked for our help in learning more about Hubley. The only reason we’re the lucky field office is because Hubley happened to be from Chicago.”

“Did they say anything else? There’s still -”

“You know as much as I do, kid. Just do your job and I’ll funnel any information that comes my way.”

Great, she thought, as she exited Redmond’s office.

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