

# **The Power of Law**

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"I guess you could say I'm prolific," he said as he ushered me through the beaded curtains into the studio. Paintings - all of them portraits - covered every millimetre of wall space; they were even nailed to the ceiling. "I can knock out three or four each day, got a whole shed full of 'em out the back too."

These were not the works of a master. These were the sort of paintings people picked up at flea markets; the sort of paintings that new owners would gleefully kick the canvas from so that they could reuse the frames. Yet despite the amateurish quality of the brushwork and the deranged sense of colour, the portraits did possess an unnerving, hypnotic quality - it was impossible not to look at them! It was the eyes. Each pair possessed a bewildered look, as if they were trapped - entombed somehow - beneath the varnish.

The big man closed the single window, shutting out the sweet desert air and locking in the heavy scent of oil paint and turpentine. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "I came out here for the solitude, but finding subjects is a problem. Lucky you saw my sign by the highway."

He patted the top of a paint-splattered stool. "Now perch yourself up here and get comfortable."

The painter took up his pallet and chose three brushes from an old coffee tin. He jabbed one behind an ear, clenched one between his teeth, and swirled the third through a moist lump of burnt sienna.

"Just relax my young friend, " he whispered, dabbing the second brush into a splotch of vermillion red, "painting is a journey where *anything* can happen."

Rumours stated that he was responsible for a dozen to a hundred deaths in the region, depending on which person you heard it from. People had died in their own homes. The police department was flooded with queries over their deaths and the possible link to this man, Ronald Sullivan.

However, they did not have an ounce of evidence. Not one speck. The criminal was clever enough to destroy the murder scene with fire. The only similarity was that these deaths occurred at night.

Due to the lack of proof, the police assumed that they were looking for someone to blame for their losses. People in trauma were never reliable, the police had said.

'Yet, then again, not one of these people had a silenced Colt .45 revolver stashed away in their pockets did they?' I thought reassuringly.' If things get too tough, I can take a break and light a few cigarettes.'

I glanced at my watch. Not yet.

"Now, move a little bit to the right will you?" Ronald asked, voice muffled by the paintbrush in his mouth. "I need to get a better view – after all, my subjects' portraits need to as *realistic* as possible..."

It was a sad life, being a detective. Poor pay, life on the line all the time, and the horrible canteen meals, especially those triangular sandwiches. And those ghastly little cupcakes that try to play hide-and-seek in your throat.

I watched as he executed his strokes with clumsy ease. The gaudy background was finished. I glanced at my watch. Not yet.

I winced as he withdrew a huge divider with razor sharp points from his toolbox. He brandished it right near my left eye, hovering just above my eyes. My pupils dilated. The steel gleamed in the dim sunlight.

“Sorry for frightening you mister, but I am a novice – I still need to hone my skills. I can capture the eye’s image, but I still cannot get the size and shape of the face right yet...”

I nodded my head slowly, accepting the apology rather reluctantly. I wiped the sweat from my brow. The portrait slowly came to life – the face was transforming from its amorphous state to something recognisable.

I glanced at the watch – still not yet. My nerves were beginning to tingle with anticipation; to calm myself down, I stared in another direction. Not that it helped, every wall was covered with goggle-eyed portraits all staring at you.

“All these portraits were painted for the subject – yet no one claimed them. Strangely enough, most of them disappeared off the surface of the Earth. Never to be seen again. Odd isn’t it?” He grinned, a grin full of pity and sadness.

I glance at the watch. It was time. The sun fell gracefully from the sky like a mandarin on a piece of string, until it was hidden completely beneath the horizon. As the painter turned around behind the canvas, I withdrew my revolver.

“Sir, per chance, do you know anything about these *disappearances* that have been occurring rather often here. Most of them, visited your studio. I was rather curious.”

Ronald stiffened, both due to the accusation and the pistol I was pointing at him.

“I am an honest man – I have never wielded a weapon, touched or did anything to any of those people you are talking about. Many of them were my friends.”

“That’s what they all say.” I aimed and fired.

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When smoke was discovered creeping up the sides, police sprang into action. Yellow lines fenced off the scene, police detectives crawled around like scavenging cats, and reporters lined up behind the ropes, all eager for a look.

Sergent Laurence emerged from his Police Cruiser and tapped me on the back.

“I have read your report. You were able to restrain him from violence until he went mad and committed suicide. Unfortunately, he decided to “not go down without a fight” and dropped a cigarette lighter in the mineral turps, incinerating everything, after you made your escape.”

I gave a sad grin. “It’s true.”

“Keep up the nice work, detective. As a reward, I will bump up your pay by ten percent. Maybe even apply you for a promotion.”

I grinned – this time with morbid happiness. Money was all that mattered.