

VENDETTA STONE

Sneak Peek of a Novel by Tom Wood

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Angela Stone was *Pure Palomino*. The name of her 1993 debut album, which boasted two Top 100 songs in the title cut and “Sweetie’s Pie,” also described her look—flowing, taffy-colored tresses surrounding a creamy-golden oval face capped by an upturned nose, full lips, and striking eyes. One critic labeled Angela as her generation’s Farrah Fawcett.

Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Angela went to New York City with her mother in 1990 to begin a successful modeling career. They moved to Nashville in 1992 to launch a solo singing career after becoming disenchanted with the modeling scene. Angela fell in love with the Music City vibe and decided to stay when her father got sick and Mama went home to Houston to nurse him back to health. A few years later, she met Jackson.

But this isn’t Angela’s story, not really. Today marks the second anniversary of the 2010 murder of Angela Stone, to whom this book is dedicated.

I never met Angela, though as a veteran reporter at Nashville’s daily newspaper, *TenneScene Today*, I’ve come to know her through conversations with family, friends, and people whose lives she touched. I’m certain you’ll become acquainted with her, too, in these pages. Instead of focusing on her murder, I’m concentrating on her husband, Jackson Stone, and his wholly unexpected reaction to her premature death and his quest to hunt down the killer.

I’m writing this book because I’m a reporter who got a little too close to this story and Jackson, who was trying to do something right, even if it was wrong.

For the record, I reconstructed some scenes from first-hand accounts, journals, countless interviews, police reports of certain incidents that occurred to which there were no living witnesses, and other public records. In those passages, dialogue was remembered from my hearing it, deduced from a written source, or presented verbatim from an interview. But evidence suggests this is how events took place, and every speculation is fact-based.

—**Gerry Hilliard**, *August 3, 2012*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 13, 2010

1

Jackson Stone lumbered to the front of the media briefing room at the East Nashville precinct. He forced his legs forward, his arms swung funny, and his face was pasty white. I sat transfixed on the front row, one of a dozen reporters, photographers, and cameramen summoned to the police station that hot, humid afternoon.

Zombies don't call press conferences.

But Jackson Stone did. At least, that's what this felt like. He slumped behind the lectern, shoulders curled, sport coat rumpled, and his glassy-eyed stare went above the crowd. He fit the image of the undead—not really dead, not really alive—a man in mourning. His wife had been murdered.

What happened next sucked my breath away.

“I don't want justice,” Jackson said in what began as a hushed tone, but grew in resolute strength with each word, his cheeks flushing to their normal ruddy color. His palms came together, then his fingers balled into fists. A tear rolled down his cheek. He let out a long, whooshing breath of air, a sigh of deep despair.

Angela Stone had disappeared from their Lockeland Springs home in East Nashville ten days earlier, and after a massive city-wide search, police found her bloody and broken body three days ago. Because of her notoriety as an established model and country music singer, the case drew intense coverage from my newspaper, *TenneScene Today*, as well as other media. As other reporters scribbled notes and

cameras rolled, and my mini-cassette tape recorder captured the details, I focused all my attention on Jackson Stone. He wasn't done.

He brushed his tear away in a brusque, cold manner, then his hand covered and slid down his face, an unconscious move that struck me as perhaps the unmasking of his true personality.

"I want revenge." It was a guttural sound.

This uncoordinated, mindless mass of man changed before my eyes into a hardened, embittered force, hungry for human flesh.

That man just bit a dog.

One of the oldest adages in the news business: When a dog bites a man, it rarely makes the paper, but if a man bites a dog, that *is* news. Big news. This was once-in-a-career news.

This forty-five-year-old advertising executive just called out his wife's killer in a very public challenge.

Had he lost his mind? Or his humanity?

2

Jackson had been staying in the guest bedroom of the West Meade ranch home of his brother Patrick since police discovered Angela's body. This morning, he was awakened by the radio alarm in Patrick's room across the hall. The heaviness of his loss kept him in bed, and he listened to the stirrings of Patrick and Sheila. Their shower rattled the old bathroom pipes, and he heard their kids, Brianna, three, and Jonas, five, run down the hall.

Their lives were normal. His wasn't.

Jackson closed his eyes and looked back on the past ten days that had changed his life.

On the morning of August third, a six a.m. US Airways flight awaited Jackson for a day-long, emergency business meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina. As he dressed, Jackson watched Angela sleep. She was the same blonde bombshell he'd met after returning from the first Gulf War in 1992.

The previous night, they'd dined at one of their favorite upscale East Nashville restaurants, an intimate atmosphere where she escaped the spotlight that went with being one of Nashville's recognizable citizens. Residents and Music City celebs coexisted in public settings. You might spot Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban shopping in Green Hills or Vince Gill at one of the many local golf courses or at a Belmont University basketball game. And rarely were they heckled or harassed for an autograph.

Angela didn't go out of her way to avoid publicity like others who might have covered up in a scarf and sunglasses. It wouldn't have worked. She would've still stood out.

Their last conversation played over and over in Jackson's mind. When he returned from Charlotte later that evening, apologizing with a dozen red roses topped his to-do list.

The Stones enjoyed a rock-solid marriage, according to friends and family. Not perfect people, but perfect for each other. Jackson's strengths made up for Angela's weaknesses and vice versa. Their temperaments ran hot and cold. Whereas his emotions hit a hot boil, her anger resembled a slow burn that turned ice-cool.

Such a scenario had played out that final night at Margot Café & Bar, a one-time filling station in East Nashville converted in the mid-1990s into a cozy-casual, brick restaurant that exuded plenty of Old World charm.

Jackson had gotten tied up at work, so they missed their reservation and waited for the first available table. Over appetizers, Angela wanted to discuss something important with him.

"Okay, I'm all ears . . . hey, look who's coming in—Stephen and Connie. Hey, y'all."

Forgetting all about Angela's news, the gregarious Jackson invited the couple to join them for a few minutes. Those few minutes turned into about ninety as the couple ordered a bottle of champagne, and Jackson returned the favor after the pan-seared scallops arrived. Two more bottles of champagne came and went.

Angela limited her intake to one glass, Jackson recalled, as she turned down all refill offers. Pushing ten o'clock, the impromptu party ended, and Jackson stood while they bid the couple farewell. Angela still wanted to talk to Jackson and asked him to sit back down.

"Aw, hon, if it's that big a deal, let's talk about it tomorrow night. It's late, and I've got a six o'clock flight out. I'm due back on the six-thirty, so I ought to be home by seven, seven-thirty. I'll bring you back to your favorite restaurant. Just you and me this time, I—"

Jackson's smirk died, and the words froze in his throat in mid-sentence.

"Uh, sure," he continued. "I'd like another glass of bubbly anyway. Want one?"

He sat, and she stood.

"No way," she said. "I've wanted to talk all night, and now it's too late? You know what, Jack, you're right . . . as usual. Twenty-four hours . . . twenty-five days . . . twenty-six weeks. I'll let you know when I'm ready to discuss it again. Just take me home."

On that warm August night, a distinct chill blanketed the car all the way home.

Jackson propped himself up on one elbow on the soft mattress and turned on the bedside lamp. From the way Angela had acted at dinner, he assumed she'd planned to announce her intentions to quit drinking and to also ask him to cut back. They never got to that conversation, though, and it haunted him. Guilt weighed down on him. Don't beat yourself up, he told himself. You'd change that now, but it still wouldn't change what happened to her.

Maybe because of the sudden burst of light from the lamp, but in his mind's eye flashed an image of Angela's battered body in her own bed, a dark, hulking figure standing over her. Jackson blinked and shook his head to shut out the horrifying vision.

He picked up the engraved, silver heirloom watch she gave him for their tenth wedding anniversary, turned it over, and reread the inscription. "Love Always, Angela." His chest tightened in a flood of emotions. The luminescent clock glowed five-fifty-two as the television came on in the den, and he heard the kids fussing over what to watch. Sheila settled the argument by turning on the DVD classic "Three Little Pigs." He heard Brianna singing, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, big bad wolf."

Jackson headed to the bathroom and caught a glimpse of himself. The mirror didn't lie. The salt-and-pepper stubble on his face matched the color of his hair, and the overgrown

mustache needed trimming. He had large bags under his eyes. He brushed his teeth, splashed cool water on his face, and combed his sparse, oily hair by running his hand through it several times until it settled on his head. He dressed in the same Dockers and navy knit shirt he'd worn the last three days and ambled down the long hall to the sun-splashed open kitchen.

Patrick, Sheila, and the kids watched him pour a cup of coffee. Jonas, dressed in his favorite Buzz Lightyear pajamas, froze with a spoonful of cereal in his hand. Daddy explained why Uncle Jack always seemed upset since Aunt Angela went to heaven.

"Uh, g'morning," Patrick said, wearing a University of Tennessee orange shirt, maroon pajama bottoms, and beat-up house shoes. "Guess we woke you. Sorry 'bout that."

"Saw-wee," Brianna echoed.

Despite the lack of sleep, despite all the horrors of the last week, the innocent concern on the little girl's face touched Jackson. Instead of his usual grunt and grab of the morning paper, he squatted in front of his niece and put on his smiley face. Sheila and Patrick shared a look of relief. For a moment, at least, good old Unca Jack was back.

"You didn't wake me, honey, but thanks," he said, smoothing the little girl's auburn hair. "Got a hug for me?"

Brianna's arms wrapped around his neck, and as Jackson squeezed back, she planted a kiss on his cheek and squealed. "Ooh, your beard tickles." She didn't see the tear roll down his face, but Sheila and Patrick did and began to worry anew. Good old Unca Jack was gone.

Jackson stood, picked up the front and local sections of the newspaper, and headed for the den. He settled on the green-suede sofa, then flipped through the newsprint looking for the latest article on his wife's murder. On Page 2B of *TenneScene Today*, he found what he sought, and he read the words I'd written the previous afternoon.

I fumed that my story about the police all but clearing Jackson as a suspect failed to make the local news section's front page. Even worse, it got cut in half to about ten inches

of copy. True, it stood above the fold, but I thought it deserved better play.

I sat in my breakfast nook perusing the paper. “This woman’s big fan base and her name recognition make coverage of every aspect of her murder worthy of front-page display,” I said to my wife, tapping a finger against the newsprint. Steam was rising off the mug of coffee beside me. Jill nodded, but never looked up from spreading her toast with strawberry jam.

I thought I had a pretty good nose for news judgment. I’m Gerry Hilliard, 1979 graduate of the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Georgia, former reporter in Athens. I passed up a chance to go to the *AJC* (that’s *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*), and latched on at *TenneScene Today* where I’ve been for a long stint. I rarely questioned how or where a story was played, but this one did not belong on 2B.

The murder made national headlines, though most newspapers carried it as a celebrity column brief. The tabloids, on the other hand, were already rife with speculation into circumstances of Angela’s death. “MODEL CITIZEN’S DEATH POSES QUESTIONS” read the inch-tall, bold headline in *Country Weekly*. I argued my point later in the day, but city editor Carrie Sullivan stood firm. She countered that a mundane story on the husband *not* being a suspect, offering almost no new developments on the case itself, didn’t deserve better treatment. In hindsight she made the right call, but reporters were always challenged by editors, and vice versa. It was a constant battle.

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Send \$20 (includes tax, shipping) to:**

Tom Wood
7378 Bridle Drive
Nashville, TN 37221

THANK YOU!