

# Chapter 2: Paths that Cross Will Cross Again

## From *In Good Hands* by David Hechler

As Patsy Habben willed her body out of bed and into the shower, she was glad that she'd packed the car the night before. It was 5:30 A.M., September 9, 1993, and at least she didn't have to lug out those big boxes.

All the materials South Carolina's forty-six coroners would need were neatly stacked in the three boxes that occupied the back seat of her gray Chevy Caprice. That was the only place they would fit. The trunk was stuffed with the supplies she always took with her: medical equipment, a floodlight, a saw and ax, rain gear, and emergency food and water in case she was assigned hurricane or tornado duty. For undercover work she carried Band-Aids to hide the prominent mole on her right cheek and several caps under which she could conceal her bright blonde hair. Her Remington .870 pump-action 12-gauge shotgun rested beside a large supply of ammunition. A Smith & Wesson .38 revolver was stashed in the glove compartment.

After her shower, Habben made coffee for her husband, Ken, and fed her eleven-year-old daughter and sixteen-month-old son. Her son's sitter lived just down the block. Once she arrived, Patsy and Ken squeezed into the front seat of Patsy's car with their daughter, and then dropped the child off at Grace Christian School.

Patsy and Ken Habben were both lieutenants at the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division. That was the somewhat odd name for the state police—a name that seemed designed solely to allow everyone to call it by its acronym, SLED. Patsy, who was thirty-nine, had worked with Ken in SLED's forensics lab for fifteen years, the last thirteen as his wife. Ken, who was forty-four, was head of toxicology while Patsy had been, until recently, in charge of the serology and DNA labs.

But three months earlier she'd begun a new assignment. A law had been passed mandating that SLED supervise the investigation of all sudden and unexpected deaths of children under eighteen. It was a progressive law in keeping with South Carolina's leading role in this field. (At the time, few states in the country undertook thorough, comprehensive child death investigations; and none had been focused on this issue longer, or had a better system in place, than South Carolina.) SLED administrators had responded to the state's new law by creating the Child Fatalities Department, which Patsy Habben had been asked to direct.

The task had proved even more daunting than she'd imagined. She'd done some research and couldn't find any states that had departments like it, so it wasn't simply a matter of collecting a few training manuals and putting together one of her own. It was more like inventing a discipline from whole cloth. And then teaching it not only to the three investigators who reported to her, but to the agencies around the state with which they had to work: from local police and sheriff's departments to pathologists and county coroners.

That was where the boxes in the back seat came in. Patsy Habben was on her way to the annual coroners' conference, where she would introduce herself and her agents to the coroners from the state's forty-six counties. It would be her department's first public appearance. She would distribute the three boxes of protocols she had just finished writing, and explain that the new law required the coroners to fill out and return the forms each time a child died in their jurisdictions.

As head of toxicology, Ken was also going to the conference. Instead of driving the 10 miles to SLED headquarters, on the outskirts of Columbia, they would drive 110 miles to Charleston. Ken was at the wheel, and Patsy hadn't been this relaxed since she'd started the new job.

About 100 people attended the conference, including the coroners and assorted professionals who worked with them. Dressed in a conservative suit that concealed the Glock automatic strapped to her waist, Patsy Habben introduced her three investigators. Then she told the coroners what the new law required, and why they were crucial to its success.

She had a strong background in science, but she wasn't there to show it off. South Carolina didn't require its coroners to have medical training. At the time, in fact, they didn't even need a high school diploma. Some had prepared with years of training, a few were doctors, and about a third were funeral directors. Patsy Habben's protocol was designed to reach them all: simple, direct, no fancy medical terms. The point was to help them record information at death scenes, not perform emergency brain surgery.

When the conference broke for lunch, Ken and Patsy went to a café downstairs. Before they could order, a woman Patsy recognized from the conference asked to join them. Linda Bass was a nurse who specialized in bereavement support—particularly for parents whose children had died of SIDS. She worked at the Lexington County Medical Center, not far from where the Habbens lived. Bass was a perky woman of forty-three with a round face, clear blue eyes, and closely-cropped brown hair flecked with silver. Until Habben's presentation, she'd never heard of the new child fatality law. Now that she had, she could barely contain her excitement.

Linda Bass felt that the law could be tremendously valuable in the diagnosis of SIDS cases. As she often had occasion to explain, sudden infant death syndrome was one of the great medical mysteries. Although it was only named in the 1960s, it was described as far back as the Old Testament. But modern medicine had learned little about its cause. In fact, the only way coroners could arrive at the diagnosis was by eliminating all other possibilities. They were justified in listing SIDS as the cause of death only when an apparently healthy child between one month and one year of age died suddenly and unexpectedly, and an autopsy, a medical history, and a thorough investigation revealed no other explanation. In 1993, it was the leading cause of death of babies under one, claiming around 6,000 victims a year in the United States alone.

But, as Bass knew, sometimes cases were called SIDS before all possibilities had been explored. In poor rural counties, where money for autopsies was scarce and pathologists qualified to perform them sometimes scarcer, a coroner might label a death SIDS without an autopsy. And local police did not relish questioning parents or delving into a child's medical history, so sometimes cases were not thoroughly investigated. Bass hoped that the new law would change all that.

She poured out her enthusiasm for the new Child Fatalities Department. She would do everything in her power to assist them. In turn, she hoped that Habben and her colleagues would tell parents of apparent SIDS victims about the services Bass offered. She ran the only support group for SIDS parents in the state. She also ran the only group for child-care providers who had experienced SIDS deaths. Glancing at her watch, Bass thanked Habben for listening and hurried back to the conference.

Patsy Habben was impressed. The woman seemed genuine in her desire to help, and she was certainly enthusiastic. The Child Fatalities Department needed all the friends it could get. Habben knew, even then, they would have little trouble making enemies.

Since Ken had driven on the trip out, Patsy took the wheel for the drive home. She hadn't been driving an hour when her pager beeped. It was SLED, and it was a "code one," which meant call immediately. She called headquarters, and that was how she learned that a baby had just died in a day care.

Habben directed the investigation while she drove. First she spoke with Irmo's police chief, who had just returned from the scene. He described the day care. The dead baby was four months old and was one of nine children under care. The day care owner's husband had attempted CPR, but when the emergency medical technicians took over, the child was

dead. The chief had called the Richland County coroner's office, only to learn that the coroner couldn't go to the scene because he was at the conference that Habben had just left. His assistant said he couldn't go either. Two Irmo police officers were in the home now; what did Habben want them to do?

Patsy Habben fired off instructions. Take photographs of the residence. Collect the bedding on which the child had slept, the last bottle it had taken, and the trash. Secure them as evidence and drop them at SLED. She wanted the names, dates of birth, and Social Security numbers of the day care owner and all workers, and the name and date of birth of the baby. She also wanted an account of all activities at the day care that day, and a detailed statement from the last person who had seen the baby alive.

A few minutes later Patsy Habben was on the phone with one of the officers. The dead little girl was Ashlan Daniel, age four-and-a-half months. The day care was located at 1101 Chadford Road, and the Daniel baby was apparently the second child to die there. The officers had collected everything. There'd been only one hitch; the husband had insisted on speaking to his lawyer before relinquishing the trash. But in the end he did.

Habben had been scribbling notes in her Day-Timer. Once she reached home, there were more beeps and calls and hastily scratched notes. And there was dinner to cook, and a bath to give, and bedtime stories to read. So much for her "easy day."

Still, it hadn't been one of her harder days. Her new job was proving plenty challenging. This case sounded like routine SIDS. Except for one thing. That night, just before she went to sleep, something gnawed at the edge of her consciousness. The Irmo officer had said this was the second death at the day care.