

LAST RESPECTS



A NOVEL BY JOHN ESSICK

I wasn't even in the room when she was killed, how could I be a suspect...

I was almost out the door when I turned to take one last look around. Tina's travel bag was sitting on the bed, and the vodka bottle was still on the table. Even if it wasn't my liquor of choice, I could see no sense letting it go to waste. I walked over, grabbed the bottle, and put it into the shopping bag that held my belongings. Just then I heard a cell phone ringing from somewhere in her bag. I looked over my shoulder at the door. No one seemed to be in the hallway. The phone rang again. I dug into her bag and found the phone. The display read "Puddy." It rang again.

I know I shouldn't have, but I answered it. "Hello?"

"Who's this?" the voice on the other end asked. "Let me talk to Tina."

"Um, Tina can't come to the phone right now."

"Bullshit. Put her on," the voice demanded.

"Yeah, well, you know Tina's been drinking, what with all that's happened. Why don't you come on over to the hotel, Puddy? We can talk."

"Who the hell is this? How do you know my name? Is that bitch talking? You tell her she says anything to anyone that gets me in trouble, she's a dead woman."

"You're too late, Puddy. Someone already killed her. You want to tell me anything about it?"

"She's—dead. Oh shit, oh shit—"

The phone went dead.

"Hey, what are you doing?" a voice asked from behind me.

I turned. It was the young officer who had stood guard at my door.

"Um, just checking for messages," I answered.

"Yeah, right. You're under arrest and coming to the police station with me."

So much for the Evergreen Motel. Seemed I found other accommodations.

Wes Byrne has lost his wife to cancer and his career as an investigative reporter is in a free-fall because of a decision to investigate the powerful drug company that contributed to her death. Now, after losing another, and what may have been his last, chance to revive his career, he arrives in his old hometown to attend the funeral of a murdered childhood friend before continuing on the road to oblivion. Despite his repeated denials, however, his reputation as a reporter leads people in the town to believe he has actually come to find his friend's killer. Wes soon stumbles upon more dead bodies and becomes a "person of interest" to police in those murders. He has no choice but to go against his better judgment and, fueled with more than a few tumblers of Powers whiskey, expose the murderers to avoid becoming the next victim.

KUDOS for *Last Respects*

In *Last Respects* by John Essick, Wes Byrne is a failing investigative reporter whose life is in a down spiral since his wife died of cancer. Now has just been fired from his latest job at the *Providence Sentinel*. But when he goes to his old hometown to attend the funeral of a murdered friend, everyone thinks he is there to investigate the murders, even though all Wes wants to do is to attend the funeral and leave town. Then his car is stolen and an old friend from high school is murdered in his hotel room. Wes is now a person of interest in the newest murder and being drawn into the investigation whether he likes it or not, though he is just as likely to be the next victim as he is to find the murderer. Essick's character development is superb and the mystery intriguing, with a number of subplots equally as compelling as the main one—a highly entertaining read. ~ *Taylor Jones, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Last Respects by John Essick is the story of a man who has lost everything important in his life—his wife, his career as an investigative reporter, and his self-respect—and who just wants to continue his downward journey in peace. Just as Wes Byrne is fired from his latest job, he gets a phone call telling him that an old friend has been murdered. Since he has nothing else to do, Wes packs his belongings into his twenty-year-old car and heads for his hometown to attend the funeral. He barely arrives in town when his car is stolen and everyone he meets thinks he is there to investigate the murder of his friend since the police don't seem to care. Wes tries to explain that he is no longer employed as a reporter, and he is just there to attend the funeral, but no one believes him. Then when another old friend—who returns his stolen car on the condition that he take her with him when he leaves town in the morning—is murdered in his hotel room, Wes is arrested for her murder. Since the police have no evidence to hold him on, he's released but told not to leave town. Now that he has to stay, he decides to do what everyone thinks he is already doing and find out what he can about the murders—a decision that soon has the killer targeting him too.

Last Respects is a suspenseful mystery/thriller that will keep you on the edge of your seat from beginning to end, turning pages as fast as you can. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

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LAST RESPECTS

JOHN ESSICK

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DEDICATION

*For June and for those who believed that I would,
but are no longer here to see that I did.*

CHAPTER 1

The reason I'm showin' ya the door, Byrne, is, despite whatever great reputation you may believe you have, I think your writing's crap."

I had to hand it to Rollie. There were so many other ways he could have told me the paper was letting me go. After all, it was no secret the newspaper industry was dying and jobs were being eliminated every day. I was one of the newest hires at the *Providence Sentinel*, the city's first, now only, and, if things continued the way they were, last newspaper, so he could have taken the old lack of seniority tack. Or he could have trotted out the old standard about changing demographics and the need for the paper to attract new, younger readers. Either would have displayed a touch of decency. However, if I had learned one thing during my brief tenure at the *Sentinel*, it was that Roland "Rollie" Deeple, Features Editor, was one of the biggest sons of a bitch I ever had worked for.

I looked across his cluttered desk and couldn't help noticing the smug look of satisfaction on his face. He was enjoying this. He had never wanted me on his staff in the first place. The decision to hire me had come from above, and I was given my column in Features over his strenuous objections. Now, here was an opportunity to not only kick me to the curb but also send a shot upstairs to remind the powers that be that no one tells Rollie Deeple what to do.

"Does Tom Hawkins know?" I asked.

"Yeah, and he agrees. All I had to do was show him this," he said, waving two pages of my latest copy. "No one wants to

read another depressing column about death and loss and whatever sad sack shit is happening in your life.”

A little meatball of a man, more bread crumbs than hamburger, Rollie represented everything I loathed in this business, what I'd come to call “tenacious mediocrity.” It made me angry to contemplate that this foul-tempered, mean-spirited hack had back-stabbed and manipulated his way to becoming an editor of a fairly important newspaper. Day after day, I watched him dash the ambition of every young reporter who possessed a modicum of the talent he knew he himself didn't have, or crush the career of a good writer who he thought posed a threat to the power he had schemed so hard to attain. It further angered me to realize that, in my case, this horrid little fat man was right. My writing stank.

Rollie waited for my reply, but all I could do was stare at the stain on his shirt. Every day that I had worked at the paper, Rollie managed to have a stain somewhere on his shirt. As I sat there, I sadly realized the thing I was probably going to miss most about the paper was not the camaraderie of fellow reporters or the rush I once got from seeing my name in an article's byline, but instead throwing my dollar in the office pool each day and making a guess as to what Rollie had managed to spill on himself that morning. Today I went with raspberry from a jelly-filled donut. Wonder if it was too late to change it to blood, my blood.

“I want you packed up and your desk cleared right away. When you're ready to go, security will escort you out,” he said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Security? That won't be necessary.”

“Paper policy. We wanna to make sure you're not walking off with any state secrets and make sure you leave the building like you're supposed ta. We've had nuts hide out in a bathroom and sabotage the next edition after the day-staff had gone home. We've learned to take precautions.”

I stood to leave. So far, I thought I'd handled myself with dignity and kept my emotions in check. “I'm not the saboteur type,” I replied. “Besides, I couldn't do any more damage to this newspaper in one night than you do on a daily basis.”

“Get the hell out of my office, you loser,” Rollie screamed. So much for dignity, but sometimes dignity was overrated.



As I left his office, I could see from the faces of my now former co-workers that word about my dismissal had spread. Made sense, of course, since it was a newspaper staffed by professionals trained to be on top of the latest events. Some gave me a wry smile and a shake of the head. Others averted their gaze lest whatever I had that caused my firing be transmitted by eye contact.

I walked over to my desk and was surprised to see an empty file box already waiting for me there. Rollie didn't waste time.

He needn't have worried. It wouldn't take me long to pack because I'd never really settled in. The *Sentinel* never felt like home, although I'd be hard pressed to say exactly what home felt like anymore. I had it once, really had it all, forever ago. Then everything seemed to crumble so quickly, and here I was packing up my stuff just like I had everywhere I'd been since everything...well, actually the only thing that mattered...had washed away.

Margie the office manager—a short, slightly plump woman in her mid-forties, with her hair cut short with jagged bangs and her reading glasses hanging from a chain around her neck—was also there. She had a file with my name on it in her hands, no doubt with my marching orders inside.

“Wes, I'm so sorry, really. Just a few papers to sign...” she said, putting her reading glasses on. “God, I hate this part of my job.”

“It's okay. It's not your fault,” I said just as my smartphone began to vibrate on my desk, where I'd tossed it when I came in. With my luck, it was my landlord calling to tell me my place was infected with bedbugs.

No, the call was from out of state. I didn't recognize the number, but it had an area code I hadn't seen for a long time. I hesitated for just a moment then answered it.

“Wes Byrne.”

“Hey, Wes, It’s Tim. Tim Brewer,” a voice replied.

Tim didn’t have to give me his last name. I recognized his voice immediately, even after so many years.

“Hi, Tim. Long time. How’d you track me down?”

“I’ve got my ways. Listen, I know you’re probably busy, but I just thought you might want to know. Someone killed Stevie.”

Suddenly I couldn’t breathe and the room seemed to press in on me from all sides.

“Wes. You still there?”

I needed space. I found my distance by stepping back into the safety of what I did best, or once did best. I became a reporter. I picked up a pen that was on the desk and grabbed a notepad out of the desk drawer. I wrote *Stevie dead. When? How?* “Any idea who did it?” I asked Tim.

“No, not yet—and to tell you the truth the police aren’t exactly tripping over each other trying to find out. Anyway, the funeral’s on Friday. Thought you might wanta come down for it.”

I didn’t answer, just pressed my pen down hard as I underlined the words I’d written on the notepad.

Suddenly, I heard a loud thumping and looked up to see Rollie standing and banging at his office window that looked out over the newsroom.

He was glaring at Margie and pointing at me with his left hand while fanning at his ear with his right hand the way a dog that’s got fleas does.

“Tim—hold on a moment,” I said. I looked at Margie. “You don’t suppose Rollie wants you to tear my ear off, do you?” I asked.

She sort of smiled. “No, I think he wants me to take your phone,” she said with a please-don’t-blame-me shrug.

I put the phone back to my ear and turned to avoid looking at Rollie.

“Tim, listen things are a little crazy for me right now. Let me call you back in a little bit when I’m alone.”

“Sure, no problem. Whenever it’s good for you,” he said.

I wrote down Tim’s number from the screen readout, ended the call, and handed the phone to Margie. I signed the papers

she pulled out of my file. She put them back in the folder, patted me comfortingly on the arm, and left me to my packing. "I'll need your ID card too. You can leave it at the front desk when you leave. Sorry. I hope things work out," she said before walking away.

I started putting the very few possessions I had in the box while trying to collect my thoughts. Elaine from Accounting came walking up to my desk.

Elaine was probably in her late-twenties, although whenever we talked she mentioned yoga and weekend hikes and bike rides, so she might have been older and just in great shape. She wore her blonde hair short, cut above the ears, parted on left with the top hair sweeping across her forehead. She was probably the nicest person I'd met at the *Sentinel*.

"Gee, Wes. Real sorry to hear the bad news. Looks like it was quite a shock."

It took me a moment to realize she was talking about me being fired, not Stevie's murder.

"What? Oh, the job. No, it's not a big deal, just goes with the territory sometimes."

She handed me my last paycheck. "I've got some other bad news."

"Really, what's that?"

"You just missed out on Rollie's stain pool. You were close, but it turns out that today he had a few slices of cherry pie for breakfast, so it's a cherry stain, not raspberry. Pretty close, though."

"Pie for breakfast?" I asked absently.

"Probably how he keeps that boyish figure. Anyway, good luck," she said with a smile and a pat on my upper arm as she turned and walked away.

I finished packing the file box and put the lid on it. I looked up and standing in his open doorway was Rollie, watching me, a smug look on his jowly face. I looked at the stain on his shirt. That about summed up my sad-sack life. A guy like Rollie pigged out on a pie full of cherries while I got a large slice of the humble variety.

CHAPTER 2

A little early, ain't it? Even for you?" I recognized the voice well before my eyes adjusted to the dark interior of the Ink and Pen, the preferred watering hole of Providence's newspapermen and women since type was set by hand. Liam Dooley, a slight trace of an Irish brogue in his speech, which I'd always viewed with a reporter's skepticism seeing as how he was born and raised in Providence, was at his usual place behind the bar.

"Ah, shit," he said, and I realized he could see me clearly enough and must have noticed the tell-tale file box I carried into the bar with me. "Not you too? How the hell am I supposed to stay in business if that damned paper keeps firing my best customers?"

"I guess you'll just have to water your whiskey down even more," I replied as I approached my usual seat at the bar. Of course, I could've sat anywhere. The bar was empty at that early hour.

"Hold your tongue. An Irishman would no more water down whiskey than a Hindu would eat a steak."

Slowly I began to distinguish Liam's bulky figure manning his post. If ever a man was born to own a bar, it was Liam. He had a knack for remembering the name of every customer who ever entered his place and could make even the most miserable human being on the face of the Earth feel welcome. I was always amazed how he seemed to know enough about everything to keep a conversation going, but not so much as to appear an expert. He let the customer fill that role. He had an easy-going

manner and a natural gift for telling jokes and stories. Despite his size—he was easily over six foot three and must have weighed well over 250 pounds—he moved behind the bar with the grace of Fred Astaire, and I swear he could hear an empty glass touch down upon the bar top, no matter how loud the bar crowd, and swoop in with a refill before a patron could call out for another round. Yet congenial as he was, he made it known, in his way, that he'd countenance no monkey business in his bar, and an unruly customer would find himself flying ass over heel into the street quicker than lager turns to piss.

I sat down and placed the box on the stool beside me.

“Well, just in case, pour me a double. And so I won't be drinking alone, pour one for yourself and one for my late, lamented career at the *Providence Sentinel*, here,” I said, gently tapping the lid of the file box.

“Well, it is a bit early for me, but seeing as to the occasion, I'd be a poor friend to say no,” he answered.

Liam placed three shot glasses on the bar and poured some Powers whiskey into each right to the peak. The two of us raised our glasses, and then clinked them against the one sitting in front of the half-filled file box.

“To lost jobs and broken hearts,” Liam toasted.

We knocked back our shots and slammed our glasses on the bar with a loud thud.

“Your friend here doesn't appear to be too thirsty,” Liam said, wiping some whiskey off his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Yeah, well, he's taking it pretty hard. I think it's his first time.” I sat for a moment remembering mine. “I, on the other hand, do not have that problem,” I said and slid the full whiskey glass over in front of me.

“Well, you know, Wes, and forgive me if I'm sticking my big Mick nose where it doesn't belong, but Jaysus, you must have seen it coming. I mean, some of the stuff you wrote was depressing enough to make Little Orphan Annie slit her wrists.”

“Everybody's a critic,” I said. I polished off the remaining shot of whiskey. No sooner had I returned the glass to the bar than Liam refilled it for me.

“So, what are your plans? I can’t imagine, much as I’d miss you, that you’ll be staying around Providence. Not much, besides my dear friendship, to keep you around, is there?” he asked.

That was one of things I’d come to love about Liam. He would stick his big Mick nose wherever he thought it needed sticking and his honesty was refreshing. We’d hit it off pretty well the first time I came into the place and, once he found out we both had ancestors in County Donegal, he’d practically adopted me as a brother. I was going to miss him.

“Ya know, I did a little research on ya, seeing as how I’m the curious sort and like to know a little about my customers, especially those running a tab. I read some of your old stuff, from where was it...Boston? You were once a pretty good reporter—broke some big stories.”

I ran my finger around the top of my shot glass, eyeing Liam warily. “Yeah, and stepped on a lot of the wrong toes. So what?”

“So, I was wondering what happened.”

I raised the glass to my lips but only took a sip this time. It wasn’t yet noon after all.

“Nothing I really feel like talking about.”

“Yeah, well, unless you want to kiss your newspaper career goodbye entirely, you better start talking about it, and it might as well be with me.”

To hell with the hour. I finished off the rest of the whiskey in one quick swallow. I put the glass back on the bar and covered it with my hand to stop Liam from pouring me another.

“Okay, you want to be my psychologist. Well, here’s the road version and then we go back to you being the bartender and me being the soon-to-be drunk. Once upon a time, I had a good career and a great marriage. My wife died, my career went up in smoke, and I ended up getting a job here only because the father of a friend happened to be one of the bigwigs at the paper. Ever since I got here, I’ve written crap and got canned. End of session.” I moved my hand from atop the glass. “Pour me another drink...please.”

Liam was silent for several moments. Then he shook his head sadly and filled my glass. He poured one for himself.

“Sláinte!” he toasted and we drank our shots. We were back on familiar turf.

“So, what are ya going to do now?” he asked.

“Well, believe it or not, getting fired was actually the bright news of the day. Seems a friend from long ago days was murdered in my hometown a few nights ago. I’m debating going back for his funeral.”

“Why wouldn’t ya?”

“Well, before I left years ago, I broke a story for the local newspaper that pissed off some very important people and hurt someone I cared about deeply. I don’t think I’d be welcomed back with open arms,” I explained.

“You think those people are still mad at you?”

“People in my old hometown hold grudges the way folks in other places hold Fourth of July celebrations. Everybody’s just waiting for the fireworks.”

“How’d your friend die?” Liam asked.

“Haven’t gotten all the details yet.”

“Police catch who did it?”

“No, and knowing my friend’s reputation with the local constabulary, they aren’t going to knock themselves out trying to find the culprit. Stevie—that was his name—had a way of pissing people off.”

“You’re a reporter, or at least you once were. Don’t you want to know what happened?”

“Of course I do. We haven’t been close for years, but there was a time we were as close as brothers, but I am not going down there to get involved. Those days are over.”

“Tough situation,” Liam said, pouring each of us another round. “You can do the wrong thing and go back and try to the find the killer, or you can do the right thing and go back and find the killer—or you can be a horse’s arse and do nothing.”

I shook my head and chuckled. Leave it to Liam to make me laugh at a time like this. “Yeah, I think it’s what they call a conundrum.”

“Ya know what I think you should do?” Liam asked.

“You mean other than start lining up a liver transplant donor?” I asked, eyeing the full shot glass in front of me.

“I say to hell with the people you might piss off. Maybe if you go back you find your friend’s killer, you start to find your old self as well.”

“I’m a reporter, or at least was, not a detective. Besides, I thought I said the shrink session was over,” I answered.

“I’m not saying that as a psychologist. I’m saying it as a friend.” He lifted his glass. “To old friends and new beginnings.”

We drank.

CHAPTER 3

Callous as it might seem, Stevie was the one person I knew that I could easily understand being murdered. In fact, when we were growing up, I sometimes thought I would be the one to do it. He just had a way of pushing people's buttons, and I swear he could have made a Buddhist want to slap him silly. So it was strange that the news of his death, his murder, was such a shock to me.

"The police seem to think it had something to do with drugs," Tim explained to me when I called him back on Liam's cellphone after sufficiently numbing myself with James Powers's gift to civilization. I had slipped into a back room at the bar to get away from the raucous lunch crowd to where it was quiet enough to talk. For further privacy, I installed myself in an old wooden phone booth with a sliding glass door that Liam had somehow managed to keep in the bar. Legend had it then when a guy from the phone company came to take it away, Liam got the guy so drunk he forgot all about it. Having it here, even though the phone was no longer connected, was just another of those things I loved, and would miss, about the Pen and Ink. I placed a coaster on the writing platform in the booth and placed the beer I had brought with me on it.

"Did he have any drugs on him when he died? Did he have any drugs in his system?" I asked.

"Hell if I know. I get my facts the old-fashioned way—gossip at the Town Crier Diner with my breakfast and no one there seems to have any information—just opinions," Tim answered.

The mention of the Town Crier brought back warm memories of teen-age nights spent languishing in the comfortably upholstered booths and sharing tall tales of sexual exploits—or, in my case, lack thereof—over plates of steak fries with gravy and onion rings, our selections from the jukebox mixing with the voices of waitresses barking out orders to the cook. It was odd to think of Tim now being one of the regulars we used to crack jokes about and swear we would never become. Still, I had to admit feeling a slight twinge of envy as I pictured him sitting at the Formica counter arrayed with condiments, sugar packets in their holders and salt and pepper shaker stations and discussing the high school football team's chances in the upcoming season or the need for a traffic light on Main Street with the usual crowd that gathered each morning.

“Well, did they find the murder weapon?” I asked.

“What's with the all the questions? Thinking of poking around where you're probably not wanted when you come down for the funeral?”

“No, no, of course not. You know me. I just like to know what's what is all,” I answered. And I meant it, despite what Liam had said about finding the killer in order to find myself. I had decided to go to the funeral somewhere between my last shot and my first beer, since I really had nothing else to do or anywhere else to go. Just for the funeral, that was all. I planned to get in and get out of my old hometown before moving on to the next phase of my life, whatever that might be.

“Well, if you are, you should know that I hadn't seen Stevie for years, but from what I heard he was running with a pretty rough crowd. I'm glad you're coming but you should be careful. The last thing you need in this town is more enemies.”

I took a swallow of my beer and imagined the type of people Tim was talking about—a gauntlet of drug dealers, bikers, and other small-time hooligans. I could picture them all lined up, just waiting for the chance to bash in my thick reporter's skull with their chains, clubs, and baseball bats. And that was just the women. The men would rip me apart with their bare hands.

In and out—nothing more, I promised myself.

“Don’t worry, I’ll behave. No one will even know I’m there. By the way, how’s Sue Ellen taking Stevie’s death,” I asked, deciding to change the subject.

“About what you’d expect, seeing as he was her kid brother. Wouldn’t be surprised if she blames herself a little, although she did everything she could to help Stevie straighten out,” he answered.

“Yeah, she always looked out for him. Can’t tell you how many times she beat up one of the older boys for messing with Stevie when we were growing up. Nobody wanted to mess with her.”

“Right, up until high school and then there wasn’t a guy in town who wouldn’t of stood in line for a chance to wrestle with her.”

We laughed and then were both silent for a few moments. I knew that Tim, like me, was remembering how things used to be. You think things will never change, can’t imagine life being any different and then next thing, you see people you thought would be your friends forever in the supermarket or at the dry cleaners and they’re almost total strangers.

“Guess she’s still married to Tony,” I said.

“Yeah, though rumor has it things aren’t so great between them—just more Town Crier gossip, mind you.”

I had to admit I was a little glad to hear that. I never liked the guy, even before all the trouble I stirred up, and it was mutual. I wasn’t that surprised that Sue Ellen married him, because she’d always, even when we were kids, made it clear that she was going to marry money, and Tony came from the richest family in town. He married her, I always thought, just to prove he could, because every guy in town was after her. Of course, he was one of those bastards that always seemed to get what he wanted, even when he didn’t deserve it. Sue Ellen was another case in point. I always thought she was more of a trophy to him than a wife.

“She runs with the horsey crowd these days, so I don’t see too much of her. Got a couple of kids—daughters—both pretty like her. She raised them right, didn’t let them get spoiled, despite all the money.”

We were silent again. The thing about old friends, and I still considered Tim a friend, despite the years and the distances I put between us, was how you could know just what the other was thinking and it was just a matter of time before it came out.

“Do you think she’s still mad at me?” I asked. “I’d hate to come down to the funeral and cause some kind of scene.”

“No, to tell you the truth, I don’t think she is. Last time I saw her, she even asked about you. I think maybe being married to Tony, she understands how things really were. Now would Tony be thrilled to see you? That’s another story altogether.”

“So you still think I should come?”

“You kidding? You owe it to Stevie and, hell, if there is some dust up between you and Tony, well, no one would be happier than Stevie, wherever he might be resting. He’d hate having a boring funeral.”

CHAPTER 4

At one time, each small town in America had a unique identity, a way for a traveler to know whether they were in some backwoods burg in Rhode Island or Connecticut or New Jersey. That time had passed, and it seemed these days it was impossible to distinguish one strip mall of fast food restaurants and retail chain stores from any other strip mall anywhere along any road in our country. America seemed to have blended into one endless stretch of commercial conformity. I wondered if the same thing had happened in East Hastings.

It felt more than a little macabre to rush to see someone placed in a hole in the ground, so rather than take Rte. I-95 south I decided to drive along the less direct back roads down to Stevie's funeral. Not that I really had that much of a choice. There wasn't much chance my reliable, old 1989 Toyota Camry was up to competing with SUVs and tractor trailers on the interstate for the more than six-hour drive south. I didn't mind, really. It only seemed appropriate that neither my car nor I seemed capable of driving in the fast lane anymore.

The Camry was the first, and only, new car I had ever bought. When I got it, I thought I'd hold onto it for a few years before I traded it in for a newer model, probably something a little sportier. I used most of my very first paycheck for the down payment, but seeing as how I was single and renting a studio apartment, I didn't mind the expense. It suited my needs. It was dependable transportation, good gas mileage, and so what if it wasn't a chick magnet? It wasn't that bad-a-looking

car. I'd take good care of it, keep it clean. The women could wait a year or two to fight over me.

What's that old saying? If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans? Well, my sportier car never happened. I made good money at the paper and had actually built up a little bit of a savings account when I met Jan. Things moved fast. Next thing I know we're living in an overpriced two-bedroom apartment in downtown Boston on my salary, while Jan was working her way through med school. We could've found a cheaper place outside of the city, but she had to be close to school and the hospital where she spent extra hours volunteering, and I figured, since I was going to be the *Boston Herald's* next great investigative reporter, I should get to know the sinister back streets and alleys of the city I was going to clean up. Any extra money we happened to scrape together went toward saving for the house we intended to buy after she graduated. We would get something real nice with the extra income, once she was working and had paid off all her tuition debts. We'd need room for the kids, after all. Nice plans. I think comedians call it the set-up.

Instead, Jan got ovarian cancer and even though she was surrounded by the best medical minds and technology and had access to the very best treatment available in the entire country, the cancer won and took her away from me. I got a little bitter. I guess I started looking for a bad guy. There had to be a bad guy. Beautiful, bright, full-of-life people like Jan just didn't die.

I found my suspect—PharmaHeal, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the country. Rumor had it the cancer drug they developed, the one prescribed for Jan during her treatment, was about as useful against her cancer as a fly swatter against a swarm of locusts. And they knew it.

I went after them. Man, did I go after them. But I guess I got a little stupid, lost a little perspective on who I could trust and who I couldn't. There was a lot at stake. I didn't listen to the warnings because I was going to take them down. I didn't care that PharmaHeal was big and powerful—ex-governor, an ex-presidential candidate, and a member of one of the most powerful families in Massachusetts on the board of directors power-

ful—to say nothing of being the *Herald's* biggest advertiser. My story got squashed and I was not-so-delicately told to keep quiet and consider how much I treasured my career as a journalist.

Why didn't I listen? I'd keep asking myself that for a long time to come. I would listen today, no doubt about it. But back then...well, every time I closed my eyes I saw my lovely Jan fighting against that damned disease, and I saw how strong she was trying to be for me. For me! So I got a lot of stupid. I gave the story to a rival paper and waited for the fireworks.

Well, they came, and they were all directed at me. Sources recanted or completely disappeared. PharmaHeal—with plenty of help from the *Herald*—portrayed me as an out-of-control, angry, —okay, so I did tend to end my days with my butt plastered on a bar stool—and unprofessional opportunist with an axe to grind. I guess I was lucky not to end up in jail or sued for libel. I think everyone was just happy to see me go away.

So I packed the Camry, left Boston, and started driving downhill.

Still, I loved this old car. It was one of the few vehicles that my six-foot-three-inch frame comfortably fit into, and now after twenty years, the driver's seat felt as cozy as a living room recliner. A lot of forty-one-year-old men probably wouldn't feel the same affection for a car with dried out cracks on the dashboard; mysterious rattles from inside the door frames; and a smell that seemed like a mix of rotting banana peels and stale, spilt milk. Throw in the fact that every personal belonging I owned was either stuffed into the trunk or piled on the back seat, and my situation sure didn't scream "success." I didn't care. It was the one thing I owned, and it was full of memories from better times.

I drove along my back roads of America, hoping to find a down-home tavern along my route, a no-frills place where I could get a quick lunch, a mid-day eye opener or two, and maybe play some darts or long board. No such luck. It would probably be easier to find a gas station with attendants that squeegeed my front window than a tavern.

I gave up and the best I could do was a bright, wholesome-looking place with a name that I knew had been cooked up in a boardroom by a bunch of advertising executives who would never set foot in the place themselves. Upon entering, I was met by a twenty-something, cute, bright and wholesome-looking hostess who seemed just a little too glad to see me.

“How you doing today? You’re all alone?” she asked.

Damn, was it that obvious? “Yeah, afraid so,” I answered.

“Right this way,” she said, snatching a menu the size of a placemat, only razor thin and laminated, out of a holder by the front desk. She turned and began to lead me into a dining room filled with tables covered with checkered tablecloths and chairs with metal heart-sculptured backs. A few booths lined the walls. The room was filled with mid-day light that streamed in through the large windows at each booth.

There was a decent lunch crowd, with the noise level somewhere more than a murmur and less than a buzz.

Using the sharp skills honed over years of investigative reporting, I looked around and noticed that nowhere was there a person sitting alone, by themselves, at a table or in a booth.

“Excuse me,” I said before the hostess took me too far into the dining room, “do you have a bar I can eat at and maybe get a drink?”

“Of course, right this way,” she said, turning around, and leading me out of the room. As we passed back by the hostess station she grabbed a different, but just as large, menu from a holder by the front desk.

“These are our drink specials and bar appetizers,” she explained. “We offer over fifty fabulous cocktails for you to choose from—Sex on a Beach, Fuzzy Nipple, Mai Tais—”

“That’s all right. I just want a Powers or two?” I interrupted.

The hostess slammed on the brakes, and I nearly ran into her from behind. She wheeled around, almost slicing my neck with the edge of the menus she was cradling in her arms.

“A Powers?” she asked. “Is that some kind of energy drink?”

“Depends on the time of day,” I answered.

She scanned the large drink menu.

“We have one with Red Bull, vodka, and cranberry juice—called a Molotov Cocktail—but not a Powers. How do you make it?”

“You don’t have to,” I answered. “It comes premade right in the bottle.”

“Oh, then I doubt very much that we have it. Our bartenders make all our drinks fresh while you wait. That’s what makes them taste so good.”

I didn’t bother asking about darts or long board. No need to, because I knew, up in heaven, God was busting a gut.

CHAPTER 5

I couldn't shake the feeling almost as soon as I crossed into the East Hastings town limits that I was being followed. Pure paranoia because, despite my initial apprehension that I would be tarred and feathered upon my return, the more I saw of the town I left behind, the more I realized that it was doubtful anyone in this town even remembered that I had ever lived there.

East Hastings had changed, but not in the let's-build-some-strip-malls-and-call-it-a-town way that so much of America had. No, East Hastings, it seemed, had grown up, from a small, sleepy college town into a prosperous, chic, very happening place. The adults had taken over—or at least what passes for adults these days—and from all appearances, the adults had quite a lot of money.

Of course, there had always been money in East Hastings. Old money, that owned acres and acres of farm land and pastures for horse breeding, and new money earned through law practices and political favors because East Hastings was the county seat of Hastings County. Everyone knew the money was there, but when I was growing up the working class never really saw it, unless they worked at the country club or one of the exclusive, historic restaurants which had been serving the well-heeled and rich heels since the town's founding in the late 1700s. That's the way the old rich wanted it.

Now it was on display, in front windows of jewelry stores and fine art galleries and places to eat called bistros, ristorantes, and cantinas that didn't just serve food but cuisine. Back in the

day, East Hastings was a town of Fords and Chevys, though the moneyed set drove Lincolns and Cadillacs. Now the street was lined with Saabs, Volvos, and BMWs. At least I didn't feel too out of place with my import, even if it was twenty years old.

Since I was a few hours early for the funeral, I thought I'd park and stretch my legs and see how many memories I might stir up by taking a walk along High Street and, hopefully, shake the silly sense that someone was watching me. I'd known the feeling before, back in Boston when my investigation of PharmaHeal somehow got back to the company. However, then it wasn't just an odd sense. I was actually being tailed. I saw them because they wanted me to see them. They wanted me scared and, if I hadn't felt so damned righteous, I should have been. Instead I made it all into a game, giving the two guys who followed me everywhere nicknames—I called them the Hound Brothers, Bassett and Harrier—and paying the booth attendant money for their tolls when they trailed me through toll booths on the Mass Pike or over the Tobin Bridge.

This time, though, I saw no one. Maybe deep down I think I was actually hoping I might be tailed. How sad was that? I wanted to be noticed, have someone remember who I was, so bad that I would create an imaginary stalker.

If that didn't call for wallowing over a drink, I don't know what did, but out of respect for Stevie rather than find a bar, I instead opted to kill time at Bean Me Up Espresso, a place I hoped wasn't near as cute as the name implied. Actually, it was just your basic coffee house—palpable, thick aroma of coffee in the air, cushy sofas with coffee tables, wooden bistro chairs and square tables, recessed ceiling lighting—with the only bow to kitsch being the photographs from *Star Trek* hanging on the walls all about the place. Looking around, it was pretty ironic to see a picture of the space-traveling Kirk talking into a handheld communicator and notice that most of the patrons were either speaking or texting into a similar device at their seats. East Hastings—the final frontier. Who'd have known?

I ordered and took my coffee to a corner chair and table at the far end of the place in order to have a good look around, at the comings and goings. I've often wondered if I became a re-

porter because I always felt more comfortable on the outside looking in, always on the perimeter and never part of the action or if that's just where I always found myself.

Bean Me Up Espresso was doing good business. In addition to a steady stream of take-out orders, there was a nice crowd for the late afternoon and a pleasing mix of ages huddled around tables. Those who weren't talking on cell phones or texting were working on laptops or poring over college text books. I seemed to be the only one who wasn't doing anything. Then I spied a relic, or soon to be relic, sitting on an empty, nearby table—a newspaper. And not just any newspaper! *The Daily Chronicle*, the paper where I launched my career as a stringer covering township and borough meetings that were more boring than a Saturday night in Utah.

It's also where a chain-smoking, hard-boiled newspaperman named Hoppy, short for Hopkins Brewster Weatherly, gave me my big shot and had the balls to stand by me when the flak was coming at me hot and heavy. I was embarrassed to realize that I hadn't contacted him since everything started going downhill after Jan or to even let him know I was coming back for Stevie's funeral. Of course I'm not sure I could explain how everything went so sour to him.

Besides, it had been so long since I'd talked to him I wasn't even sure he was still at the paper, or even still living in East Hastings.

I opened the paper to check. Yep, there it was at the top of the masthead. Hopkins Weatherly, Editor. The best editor I have ever known. Why did he still do it? How could someone as good as him spend an entire career at such a small-time, one-horse—

“Is anyone sitting here?”

I looked up from my newspaper to see an attractive redhead standing at my table, holding a large ceramic cup of creamy coffee. Her long hair was styled in bouncy waves and, though she may have had overdone it with a bit too much eye shadow and mascara, she had lovely light green eyes. She wore a breezy light-yellow Victorian-lace peasant blouse that highlighted those eyes and a knee-length denim skirt. Her open-

toed, high-heeled wedge sandals accentuated a pair of very shapely legs and showed off brightly painted green toenails.

I did what I usually do in the presence of a beautiful woman—acted like a spaz. In my attempt to appear gentlemanly, I dropped the paper and sprang up from my chair. Rather than appearing suave, however, my thighs caught the underside of the table, rocking it and the coffee sitting upon it.

I saw the smile on the woman's face turn to horror as both table and hot coffee tumbled her way. However, I was quick enough to lunge across and save both the table and cup from tipping over. I then stood erect, gave what I'm sure was my goofiest smile, and swept one hand toward the empty chair beside the now still table. "Be my guest," I said.

To my surprise, she sat down. "That was quite a show. A simple yes would have been enough," she said. I sat down and pulled my coffee over carefully to avoid any further mishaps. "I don't think I've seen you here before," she said. "I'm a bit of regular, you see, need a caffeine fix or two to get me through the day. Are you a big coffee drinker?"

That was, of course, my cue to say something but instead I sat staring at her. There was something familiar but I couldn't place it.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself on the table?" she asked.

I got it! "Tina Sanders, right? Graduated from high school, class of 'eighty-two?" I said.

She looked a little taken aback, thrown a bit off balance. "Well, my last name is Stewart now, but yes I—" She looked at me a little more closely. "Oh my God. Wes? Wes Byrne? I can't believe it. I haven't seen you in, like forever. I thought you left town."

Tina Sanders, now Stewart, was one of the many young vixens who had tortured my adolescent soul from grade school to high school graduation. Unfortunately for me, her tastes seemed to run toward the "bad boys" in school and, since the baddest thing I ever did was cutting class to go to an all-day Marx Brothers film festival in the city, I never made a blip on her radar.

“I did,” I answered. “Went away to go to college and haven’t been back since. I came into town for a friend’s funeral—Steve Darby—I don’t know if you remember him.”

“Oh, of course, I knew Stevie, saw him around once in a while. I’m going to his funeral too. Poor Stevie! I can’t believe someone would kill him like that, stabbing him in the back and all. I hope they catch the guy who did it.”

“I haven’t seen him for years—heard he didn’t change much though.” I said.

“Yeah, we useta...um...go out once in a while after my husband died,” she replied, glancing down briefly at her coffee. “Moe Stewart, remember him?” she asked, looking back up. “A coupla years older than us, his brother Tommy was a junior when we were seniors? Died in a truck accident.”

“Sorry to hear that. I remember him, I think. Tall, kind of lanky—didn’t he have a nickname?”

“Slo-Moe, cause he did everything real slow, never in a hurry. Kinda nice in the bedroom, if you know what I mean,” she said, giving me a quick smile, and I’m sure I blushed, “but anytime we had to go somewhere, it’d just drive me crazy. I used to always be after him. ‘Hurry up, will ya, we’ll be late,’ but he would just always take his old sweet time. Lost control on an icy road—rushin’ home from work to be with me on our first Christmas Eve—only time I think he ever hurried in his life.”

She paused and I could tell the memories were flooding back. She picked up a napkin, daubed at her eyes to stem the beginning of a tear, and then, as someone who’s grown accustomed to living with grief, turned the conversation away from the pain.

“How about you? I see you’re married?” she said, indicating the wedding band I still wore on my finger. “First thing a single woman looks for on a good-looking man is a ring.”

I’d never been able to take the damned thing off, seemed like betrayal, though I always wondered if there’d come a day.

“Was married. My wife died a few years ago. Cancer,” I answered, as always avoiding eye contact whenever I had to say it out loud to someone.

Tina reached across the table and touched my hand. "I'm so sorry."

It had been a long time since a woman had touched me like that and I hated to admit it, but it felt nice. I looked up and there was a sweetness in her eyes, a shared knowing. Maybe I wasn't ready to move on from Jan entirely, like everyone kept telling me to, but I thought I could share a night with someone like Tina, a fellow survivor, a first small step and not feel too guilty.

"So much death around us—my Moe, your wife—what was her name?" she continued.

"Jan." I answered.

"Your Jan, and now Stevie. Of course, with a traffic accident and cancer, a person doesn't have much choice. In Stevie's case...well, he sure knew how to piss people off. I remember one time, he was playing darts over at the Circle Bar, and old Cooty Lewin was riding him pretty hard, saying he was no good and all, that he might as well give up and let the next person play. Well, Stevie just starts throwing like you wouldna believe and scores out with three darts to the bull eyes—never seen nothin' like it. So he struts on over to where Cooty's sittin', spins round, pulls down his pants, and shoves his ass right in Cooty's face. He says, 'How do like this bull's eye?' I swear I thought old Cooty was going to kill him right then and there." She laughed, a sweet laugh, and I couldn't help but join in.

"Sounds like Stevie," I said.

"Yeah, well, like you said, he didn't change much over the years. Guess none of us really have around here," she said, taking a sip out of her large coffee cup.

"Must be a lot of theories floating around about who killed him. Have you heard anything about why someone would do it?" I asked. I regretted the question as soon as it came out of my mouth.

"What?" she asked, a sudden defensiveness, a trace of anger in her voice. "How the hell would I know who would do a thing like that? Why would you ask me such a thing?"

"Sorry, must be the reporter in me. Always asking inappropriate questions," I answered.

Tina straightened up sharply and her eyes narrowed. “Reporter? Are you a reporter?”

“Yeah—or at least I used to—”

“That’s right,” she said. I could see the past working itself back up, see her working through the years. “You caught those people dumping crap into the Kithane a long while back.”

Suddenly Tina seemed a little nervous, started fidgeting with the coffee cup.

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago. See, I ended up working for a paper in Boston.”

“Those people went to jail, didn’t they?” she asked.

“Well, yeah, for a couple of years, nothing like what I thought they deserved.”

“Now you’re back here asking about Stevie?” she said.

“Just idle curiosity is all. Like I said—”

Tina quickly looked at her watch, then grabbed her purse, and started digging through it. “You know, I just remembered I’ve got to call my sister. She was...um...food shopping out at Acme and wanted me to meet her,” she said, pulling a cell phone out of her purse. It rang just as she was starting to dial, startling her a bit. She looked at the number and then looked at me quickly before answering it.

“Oh, hi, Terri, you wouldn’t believe who I’m having coffee with. Wes Byrne. You remember Wes Byrne, doan ya, the reporter?” She smiled as she listened to the caller. “That’s right...that’s the one...” She pulled the phone away from her ear and covered the front microphone with her hand. “My sister remembers you,” she said. Then put the phone back to her ear. “Yes, back for Stevie Darby’s funeral...says he just got into town. Isn’t that a coincidence that I would run into him? He’s asking questions about Stevie’s murder, though I don’t have anything to tell him, of course. Um, are you done with your, um, shopping yet? You are...good...okay, I’ll come right over and meet you.”

Although I couldn’t make out what the caller was saying, the person was saying it loud enough that Tina pulled the phone a little way from her ear. I wouldn’t swear to it, but it sure didn’t sound like a woman’s voice on the end of the line.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m leavin’ right away,” she said. She ended the call and tossed the phone back into her purse. She stood up hurriedly, leaving her coffee half-drunk, pushing her chair in. “It was real nice to see you again, Wes. I really gotta get going.”

“Let me walk out with you. I was just about to leave anyway,” I said. I started to get up but Tina reached across and put her hand on my shoulder, keeping me in my seat.

“No, don’t go on my account,” she said.

“No, I really should get to the hotel,” I said, rising up, despite her firm pressure. “Check in time at the Hearthstone is two o’clock, and I want to shower and change before the funeral. I’ll walk you to your car.”

“No!” she answered brusquely, though she tried to quickly compose herself. “I’m parked at the garage and it’s a bit of a walk—and besides you’re parked in the opposite direction.”

“I am? How would you know where I’m parked?”

“What?” she asked, backing away from the table as if it there was a bomb sitting under it. “Oh...um...oh, aren’t you? Just a lucky guess, I guess. Listen, I’ve really got to go.”

With that, she turned and was gone, almost careening into a patron carrying a full cup of coffee in her rush.

I watched her go. *Well*, I thought, *I certainly haven’t lost my way with East Hastings women.*

I took both of our cups over to the dirty dish bin and then stopped at the counter to buy a copy of the *Chronicle* for later reading.

I left the Bean Me Up and started walking back to my car, running the whole thing through my head. Everything had been going so nice until I asked her about Stevie’s murder—me and my damn questions. It was odd, though, her reaction.

Stop, I said to myself. *I mean, c’mon, there was no way Tina could be involved in Stevie’s murder? Okay, so she did say she and Stevie hooked up once in a while—maybe there was a jealous boyfriend. Nah, that was crazy thinking, that the very first person I speak to in East Hastings was involved in Stevie’s murder.* I really needed a quick nap and a shower.

I turned into the parking lot where I parked the Toyota and couldn't believe what I saw—or didn't see. My car was gone.

CHAPTER 6

I'd finished filling out all the paperwork and had spent the last twenty minutes waiting in the lobby in case the police officer assigned to the case had any more questions. Good thing I had brought the *Chronicle* from the Bean Me Up because, with the exception of wanted posters and community announcements hung about the walls, the police station was sorely lacking in reading material. I wasn't expecting rat-eared copies of *Crime and Punishment*, but you'd think they'd have old issues of police magazines, with names like *Badge and Siren* or *Patrol Beat*, lying about.

I gathered from reading the *Chronicle* that, aside from the high school football team's chances for a title once the season started in September, the big issues were increased traffic due to new home development out along Route 83, several home fires suspected to be arson in neighboring Harrisville, and—well, what do you know, a rash of car and farm equipment thefts that authorities believe to be the work of a local criminal ring.

It seemed that for over the past two years, throughout East Hastings and local neighboring towns and communities, tractors, harvesters, and other large farm equipment had been stolen from farms and automobiles had been disappearing from parking lots and garages, off streets, and, in some cases, right out of people's driveways. At first, authorities attributed the rise in car thefts to young kids stealing the cars and driving them into Philadelphia where they either traded them for drugs or just abandoned them. However, as more area farms began to report

missing farm equipment, police and criminal investigators began to believe that the thieves were much more sophisticated than a bunch of kids.

Down the hallway a door, over which a sign reading *Criminal Investigations* stuck out from the wall perpendicularly, opened and a uniformed policeman came out, carrying a clip board. He glanced my way and began walking toward me. His black shoes were polished to a scuffless sheen, his dark-brown trousers sharply-creased, his light brown, short-sleeved shirt neatly pressed, and his star-shaped badge shined to a bright luster. As he approached, his lips started to curl up into a sneer and, when he got close enough, I understood why. It was Danny Sullivan.

“Well, well, I just couldn’t believe it when I read the report but I’ll be damned—Wus Byrne, crime victim,” he said. He held the document I had filled out earlier that was attached to his clipboard up for me to see. “Says here someone went and stole your nineteen-eighty-nine Camry. That can’t be right, can it—a hot shot reporter like you driving a twenty-year old car?”

Danny Sullivan was one of the members of the “Fearsome Foursome,” who along with Randy Smith, Glen Poppy, and, of course, Tony Augustino shared a common mission of making my life a living hell from elementary school up until the day I graduated from high school. The four had taken bullying to a whole new level where I was concerned. If there was a way to humiliate and degrade a fellow human being that these guys missed, I really wouldn’t want to know about it.

I endured “purple nurples,” wedgies, noogies, pantsings, towel snaps, and swirling, as well as the very hilarious strip-a-guy-down-and-toss-him-into-the-girls’-locker-room stunt. There was no end to the enjoyment those four could find in tormenting me.

I had a feeling this wasn’t going to go very well.

“When did you become a cop?” I asked.

“That’s police officer, Wus.”

“The name’s Wes.”

I could see he was a little shocked by my come-back, maybe expecting the same old “Wus,” and, to tell the truth, I was a little surprised myself. It felt good.

He stepped closer and looked down menacingly at me in my chair. “Once a wuss, always a wuss, and—” he continued, pointing to his badge, “—this here means if I want to call you Sally or Betty, I damn well can.”

“Okay, right, sure. Listen, I just want my car back. Everything I own was in it. Can you put out an APB or whatever you can to find it?” I answered, not wanting to give him any chance to escalate things.

“Oh, of course—whatever you say. Why don’t I just call every officer off every case they’re working so we can find your piece of crap rice burner?” he replied, taking another step closer, now practically standing on my toes.

I took a deep breath. “Look, I just think that the sooner you all start looking for it, the better the chances of finding it, is all.”

His neck muscles tightened, his face reddened and his eyes became little piercing arrows. “You trying to tell me how to do my job, you god-damned son of a—”

“Is there a problem here, Officer Sullivan?”

We both turned to see a policewoman approaching us, and, based on the way Sullivan suddenly morphed from my tormentor into the friendly cop on the beat, I knew instantly that she was the one in charge of the show.

“No problem, Chief,” he said, reaching out and patting me chummily on the shoulder. “Me and Wes here went to school together back in the day. We were just...ah...fooling around...um...catching up...”

“I understand his car has been stolen?” the head honcho asked, giving Sullivan a dubious glance before turning to me.

“Yes, that’s right. Out of a public lot on High Street.” I reached out my hand. “Wes Byrne, Officer...”

“Chief—Chief Roark,” she said, taking my hand. “Sorry to hear that.”

She was stout, not fat but solid. At first blush, I would have said she was ex-military. Her brown hair was cut short, neat,

and conservative, and she had the general bearing of a soldier or marine.

She had serious, penetrating brown eyes, and I suspected she didn't miss much.

She took the clipboard from Danny and studied it. "So you just got into town. Visiting?" she asked, not looking up.

"Yes, well, I grew up here but I'm in town for an old friend's funeral. I stopped for a cup of coffee and came out to find my car missing."

"I see. That friend of yours happen to be Steve Darby?" she asked, now looking up, her eyes growing a little bit more penetrating.

"Yeah, and um...I'm afraid I'm going to be late for the service," I said, glancing at my watch. I didn't know what she was after and didn't want to stick around to find out, my car be damned. "Maybe I can call a cab or something and Danny—er, Officer Sullivan—can finish filing my report while I wait for it."

"No need for a cab. I was just heading over myself—out of respect for the family. Give you a lift." It was as much an order as an offer. "You about done here, Sullivan?" she said to Danny.

"Yes, sir. Got pretty much everything I need right here," he said, taking the clipboard back from Chief Roark. "I was just about to put a description of the car out over the wire, in the hopes someone might spot it. Figured the quicker I got the word out, the better our chances of finding it."

"Well, get to it."

"Yes, Chief. Right away." He smiled his best apple-polishing smile at her before heading off down the hallway.

Chief Roark watched him go and then turned to me and cocked her head in Sullivan's direction. "So, you two old friends?"

I looked over the captain's shoulder to see Sullivan turn and give me a glance that could melt a glacier before he disappeared through the hallway door.

"I wouldn't exactly say that," I answered.

CHAPTER 7

Driving to Stevie's funeral with Chief Roark, I was visited by the same thought I always had over the years whenever I did ride-alongs with cops, namely that it is so much nicer to sit in the front than in the back of a police car. Never liked the back, without door handles or even a way to roll down a window. And they all have that thickly-screened, or in this case Plexiglas, panel running across the top of the front seat, a clear demarcation of power. Of course, my feelings may have been influenced by the time, on my very first ride-along with the Boston cops, I was left in the car for hours after their shift—some sort of initiation I guess. They sat and drank in a cop bar while I endured stares from passer-byes and taunts from neighborhood kids.

Roark let the silence rest between us as she pulled out of the station parking lot and into traffic. She waved to a few pedestrians walking along on the sidewalk and they waved back.

I guess it was up to me to break the silence.

"I appreciate the ride to the service, Chief, but I could have just called a cab," I said.

"Not a problem. I was going myself. Besides, this ain't Boston where you just step out and hail a cab down," she answered.

It had to be a coincidence that she mentioned my old city. "Have you been to Boston?"

"No, never have, but I know you used to work there, while ago," she said.

No, not a coincidence, and I suddenly sensed her offer of ride wasn't one either, though I had no idea why. I mean, I'd

only been in town a few hours, and I was the victim here. I glanced quickly at my door. It did have a handle, but the door was locked and I didn't see any button or switch to open it. "Danny, er, Officer Sullivan, tell you that?"

"No, just good old police work. We found one of your old business cards in Steve Darby's wallet. I called the number. Wondering if it was a lead of any sort. They said you hadn't worked there for a couple years," she answered.

We were driving out to the cemetery on Route 5, a road I'd driven along a thousand times, as a kid with my mom and then as a teenager once I got my driver's license. It struck me that, although the buildings hadn't changed, the businesses they housed had. Hansen's Hardware Store was now Emilia's Vintage Boutique, and The Five Point Pharmacy was now The Five Points Kitchen and Bath Design Showroom.

The signs for the shopping center entrances along the road were cleaner, somehow brighter, cheerier, and the small islands of dirt and shrubbery were all neatly landscaped.

"Your card doesn't say what you did at the paper—just your name and phone number. You didn't happen to work in the accounting department or sales, by chance?" she asked, darting a quick, sort of knowing glance my way.

"No, I was a reporter," I answered.

"Really? But you're not a reporter anymore?" she asked, this time not taking her eyes off the road.

"Actually, most recently I was a columnist, at a couple different papers," I said.

"Ah, well, a columnist. Funny that you keep saying 'was.' Does that mean you're not one now?" she said.

"Well, no, I'm sorta between jobs at the moment. That's why I hope I get my car back soon. Going to explore some possibilities a little farther south," I said, hoping to change the subject.

"South is nice. I was stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Nice country, great barbecue." She was quiet again for a minute or two. "So you've become a bit of a drifter, huh?" she asked in an easy-going manner, although the way she said it made me sound like I had just jumped off a freight car and

would be back on the rails as soon as I grubbed a few meals and earned a little stake sweeping floors or washing dishes.

“Wouldn’t say a drifter—like I said, just between jobs,” I answered, a bit defensively perhaps. “About my car—”

“Oh, we’ll sort that all out. You didn’t say where you’re staying while you’re in town?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t, but it’s in the police report,” I answered, turning to face her. “You know, I have a feeling there’s a question you want to ask. In my experience, the direct approach works best.”

“Is that experience as a columnist or a reporter?” she asked.

Again she became quiet. It seemed to be taking an awful long time to get to the service.

“No, nothing in particular,” she finally said. “It’s just that, well, I guess police and reporters are a little like bears and dogs, you know, where it’s something in their instinct to just not get along very well. The dog doesn’t seem to like the fact the bear is bigger, and the bear doesn’t like having a dog sniffing around it and nipping at its heels, trying to prove how tough it is.”

“Sounds like you have experience—with bears and dogs, that is,” I said, looking out the window, hoping to see a church spire or graveyard, any indication that we were almost at the service.

“I do,” she said with an emphatic nod. “See, I do some hunting—mostly small game—occasionally go bow hunting for deer. Well, one time I was out hunting with some other marines during leave and one of them had a dog. We turned a bend and there was a black bear, wasn’t a big one, maybe 350 pounds. It didn’t look happy to see us. You should have seen the hackles on its back raise up—like happens when they sense danger. The dog, well, it went nuts at the sight of the bear, tore at the leash, and got free, went right after that bear—no regard for its safety.”

I turned back to look at Roark. “Dog sounds kind of stupid.”

“That’s what I’ve always thought. Better to just turn tail and get on out of the bear’s way, but it’s that bear and dog thing I guess. Dogs just don’t seem to know better,” the chief said. “So anyway, we can’t get a shot at the bear, what with the dog nip-

ping and jumping at it. Besides, we were only carrying for small game. We had nothing to bring it down, probably just get it madder.”

“And let me guess, the dog didn’t win.” I said.

Roark shook her head. “No, it didn’t. At some point, the bear seemed to just get fed up and swatted the dog away with one of its big old paws. Sent the dog flying. It didn’t die though, just knocked silly.”

At last, I saw the large field stone columns at the entrance-way to the church. I didn’t know what was going on here, but I was glad the ride was finally ending. “That’s a fascinating story. I guess it had a happy ending, with the dog living, and all,” I said.

“Yeah, we actually took it hunting again, but it wasn’t the same. Seemed to only want to get the scent of that bear again. Didn’t learn a thing. But I guess that’s the way dogs are.”

“I guess so. I don’t know much about dogs, to tell you the truth,” I answered.

“You didn’t ask about what happened to the bear,” Roark said.

“Well, what happened?” I asked.

“It just went on about its business, marking out its territory. Way I imagine it, bear never gave that dog another moment’s thought. More important things to do, probably.”

We pulled into the drive, between the two columns, and along the road that led to the entrance of the church. There was a hearse at the base of the steps that led to the church doors and a few people, dressed solemnly, most smoking cigarettes, milled about. The chief pulled the police cruiser in behind the hearse and turned off the engine. I noticed she didn’t unlock the doors, though.

“I’m glad we had this chance to talk,” she said, turning her body to face me. “See, it’s nothing personal, but when I find a reporter’s business card in a murder victim’s wallet and then suddenly that reporter shows up in my town...well, let’s just say it tends to get my hackles up a bit, speaking metaphorically. Could be nothing—hope it is nothing,” she said, looking me directly in the eyes.

“I’m just here for Stevie. Paying my last respects—and once I get my car back, I’m gone,” I said.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Sure you’ll be off to bigger and better things. I do promise you we’ll do everything to get your car back. In the meantime, don’t you go chasing off after any scents, if you know what I mean. You leave the police work to the police.”

With that she touched a switch on the driver’s side armrest and the door locks popped up.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I said, opening the door. “This dog’s got no more hunt left in him, speaking metaphorically.”

I quickly climbed out of the car. Seemed a ride in the front of a police car wasn’t that much fun either.

CHAPTER 8

I thought I had made a clean get-away, but after I entered the church, pausing to look over the crowd to find someone I might possibly know, Roark came through the doors from behind and sidled up next to me.

“I forgot to ask you how you’re getting back to your hotel after the service. I could give you a ride.”

I scanned the gathered mourners with a little more urgency and was relieved when I saw Tim Brewer turn his head around in his seat about halfway up the right aisle. He motioned for me to join him and indicated an empty space beside him.

“That’s very generous, but I see an old friend over there,” I said, pointing to Tim, “and I’m sure I can catch a ride with him after the burial.”

“Okay, then. Enjoy your time in East Hastings,” she said before walking off down the aisle, pausing to shake a hand or two along the way, before sliding into a pew close to the front on the left side of the aisle.

I proceeded down the center aisle toward where Tim was sitting with his family—his wife Ellen and their two kids. As I neared them, I noticed that Tina Sanders was sitting about two rows in front of them and was watching me. I gave a small wave, but she quickly turned back to the front. A balding, sausage-headed man sat beside her, some flab from his neck spilling out over the tight collar of his dress shirt. Tina’s sudden turn caused him to look first at her and then to turn and look at me. He whispered something to Tina, and she nodded her head. His beady eyes sized me up, and then he turned his attention

back to the front, again whispering to Tina, this time a little more animatedly.

Tim's family all slid over to give me a little more room in the church pew. I shook Tim's hand and nodded my greeting to Ellen, his wife, and the two kids, trying to remember if their names were Glen and Kathy or Gary and Karen. I only knew them from their pictures on the Christmas cards I'd received from Tim over the years. Ellen smiled briefly, sufficiently somber. The offspring glanced up momentarily before bowing their heads, returning their attention to their electronic game devices held low, at arm's length, on their laps.

I was amazed to see that Tim had spent the last twenty or so years growing to look almost exactly like his father—the same receding hair line with a bit of gray beginning to show, his face still youthful, a little paunch that hung over his belt. The eyes were Tim's though—bright, friendly—unlike the stern, hard disciplinarian eyes of his father, who, quite frankly, always scared the hell out of me.

“You won't believe what happened to me just now, really strange. The chief of police—” I began to say.

Tim turned to look at me, his eyes giving me the once over. “Nice of you to get dressed up,” he said, and I realized that I was still wearing the Bermuda shorts, polo shirt, and sandals I had on when I got into town. Damn, just the impression I was hoping to make.

“My clothes were stolen,” I said to him in a low voice.

“What? Why would anyone want to steal your clothes? I mean how many six-foot-three-inch thieves are there running around?”

“They were in my car. Somebody stole my car,” I answered, perhaps a little too loudly because Ellen cast me a disapproving glance.

I also couldn't help notice that Tina sat up a little straighter in her pew and, again, the guy next to her leaned over and whispered something to her. Again, she only nodded.

“Well, welcome back,” Tim answered.

“Yeah, it's been a pretty weird day.”

I looked around at the assembled masses. There was about a hundred people, give or take a few.

“Pretty nice turn out. Hate to say it but I thought there might just be Sue Ellen, you, me and a few of the old crowd,” I whispered to Tim.

“Well, actually, I’m not sure how many of these people even knew Stevie. Think most of the crowd showed up either out of respect for Sue Ellen or to kiss Tony’s ass.”

Ellen shot Tim a look that would freeze lava. “Tim, we are in church!” she scolded with a hush.

“Sorry,” he replied to her, “it’s true, but I’ll watch my language.” He turned back to me. “That’s the family up in the front there,” he said, indicating with a nod of his head the first pew in the church. “Sue Ellen’s the one wearing the hat. Those are her kids next to her, she’s got two—I think I told you that—and then, of course, there’s Tony.”

I craned to get a good look at them, but could only see backs of heads and Sue Ellen’s hat. I was still working up what I would say to her, had been ever since I heard the news, and was actually wondering if I was right to come at all when the minister approached the pulpit and things got under way.



It was a pretty nice service, as far as they go, although it seemed like there was someone else in the casket that sat to the one side of the pulpit, the way the speakers talked about Stevie. Loving son—okay, I’ll give him that. He seemed to get along with his dad, whenever he wasn’t on the road. His mom was a nice woman who thought the world of her Stevie and he always did his best to shield her from most of his escapades. Loyal and loving brother...well, that might have been a bit of a stretch. There was the time in junior high when he was selling naked pictures of Sue Ellen. Of course, the pictures weren’t actually of her, but of Nancy Holligan. They had been taken from behind, through a bedroom curtain and pretty much out of focus so it really could have been anyone, so I guess it was no crime, no foul, but still...

And I couldn't really say as far as him being a generous and doting uncle, although I imagine he was the type to shower his nieces with gifts when he was flush but also let birthdays and holidays pass without a note.

No, the real bullshit was all the stuff about him always being willing to help neighbors and working hard to overcome his demons. Or about the way he put family first and could be counted on most when things got a little rough. Of course, I really didn't expect the truth, about how you knew deep down you couldn't trust Stevie as far as you could throw him but how, regardless of anything he did, you could never stay mad at him or really—okay, I'll say it—stop loving the guy.

As the service ended, we all rose and stood as Tony and a few other guys—some who I recognized from high school, others who I didn't and none who were probably friends of Stevie—escorted the casket as it was rolled up the center aisle on a draped cart, Sue Ellen, her kids, and family following behind. I hated to admit it, but Tony still looked good—handsome with just a tinge of gray at the temples, trim and powerful, and sharply dressed in a tailored black suit, white shirt, and gray tie with matching handkerchief. Tony saw me, and we locked eyes for a brief moment. Not the friendliest of looks. He turned his head to say something to the guy behind him, who nodded and then looked me over as they passed.

Sue Ellen was as beautiful as I remembered her, although behind the slight veil that covered the upper half of her face it was difficult to make out her features clearly. Tears slowly streaked from beneath the veil and she dabbed at them absently with a handkerchief as she followed the casket up the aisle. I thought she was going to pass by without noticing me, when, with a slight start, she turned her head to look at me. A sad smile appeared and she silently mouthed the words, "Thank you," before moving on.

The rest of the mourners filed out of the pews, starting at the front and emptying, in order to follow the family. So since we were near the rear, it took a little while for me, Tim, and his family to get out of the church. We stepped out into the midday sun. I stopped at the bottom of the steps to watch the back doors

of the hearse close while Tim and family continued along the sidewalk that ran to a parking lot, stopping to talk to a family with children about the same age as Tim's kids.

The sun was bright and I was feeling my pockets to see where I'd put my sunglasses when the guy who had been walking behind Tony with the casket approached. He was a pretty good-sized gentleman, hair slicked back, black suit, white shirt buttoned at the collar, no tie, big chest, and no doubt big biceps. He had shark-like eyes that scanned me up and down. My attire appeared to amuse him. He leaned in close.

"Tony wanted to tell me that he can't stop you from coming to the cemetery, but that you are not to go near his wife or family and, by no means, are you to come to the house with the other mourners afterward." He paused to let the message sink in. "Got it?"

There wasn't really much to say. "Got it," I answered.

Tim, who had seen everything, left his family and came over to stand next to me as I watched the guy walk away.

"Like I said earlier," Tim said with a little laugh, "welcome back."

CHAPTER 9

I stood on the outer fringe of mourners as Stevie's body was lowered into his grave. Over everyone's heads, I could see Sue Ellen sitting in a metal folded chair beside her two girls—pretty, like Sue Ellen was at their age—and Tony standing on her other side. Sue Ellen held the hand of the child sitting nearest her, most likely her eldest daughter, probably fourteen, although she could have been older, tightly in her lap. It might have been my imagination or perhaps just a result of the way I was feeling about Tony at the moment, but it seemed that at one point he reached his hand over to rest it on Sue Ellen's shoulder and she imperceptibly shifted her body to slide out from under it.

The service ended and I remained back as the crowd lined up and moved along to offer their condolences to the family. Any thought I might have had about joining the line was quelled by the sight of the large man from the church service standing quietly behind the family with his eyes fixed upon me, a slight sneer on his lips. At one point, Sue Ellen looked up my way and tilted her head slightly, as if wondering why I wasn't coming forward. Then she looked over at Tony, busy shaking hands with someone I didn't recognize, then over her shoulder at that sneering big guy and then back toward me. She seemed to nod in understanding, although I might have been seeing things that weren't really there.

I couldn't believe what I was doing, letting those two keep me from speaking with Sue Ellen. Sneer be damned, I was going to go up to her. And I would have, really, if at just that mo-

ment Tim hadn't come over to me, along with three other guys who, after a moment, I recognized as Denny Lucas, Bob Keith, and Dom D'Annunzio. We had all hung out with Stevie back in the day, and they might have been the only ones at the funeral, besides Sue Ellen of course, who really knew him. By the time we had all shook hands and I answered their initial questions about how I was and I had told them about my car to explain why I was dressed the way I was, I looked up and saw that Tony was leading Sue Ellen away from the grave toward their limousine. As I watched, she stopped for a moment and turned back to look first at the grave and then up at me. Tony turned as well, and when he saw she was looking my way, turned her back in the direction of the car, a little too forcibly for my tastes, made a comment to her that I'm sure was at my expense, and walked her away.

"Any chance you've come to get your old job back at the *Chronicle*? Maybe you can take over for old Hoppy now that you've had all that big city experience," Denny said, bringing me back into the conversation. Denny had been a pretty good athlete in his day, and I was always sort of amazed that he had hung with us back in high school. Of course, his sport was gymnastics, at which he excelled, but that probably wasn't macho enough for the guys like Danny Sullivan and his jock friends. Denny still looked good, tanned, and confident. It turns out he had done pretty well starting an exercise club in East Hastings and now had three others in the county.

"Now why would Wes want to get on board a dying ship? The *Chronicle's* become nothing more than a tabloid, running down the accomplishments of this town with its stories about thieves running amok and murderers. It may have had its day, but times are changing. Wes probably has big plans," Bob said, taking my hand and shaking it firmly. "Of course, if you are thinking of settling down, I've got a few places listed that would be perfect for you."

Bob had started selling houses right after college and, from all appearances, was doing pretty well. He was heavy and with a notable stomach, but he was wearing suspenders over his pressed white shirt so there wasn't a roll hanging over the

waist. His well-fitting, I would guess tailored, black wool-blended suit hung well on his frame. His yellow tie was still knotted tightly at his neck, although I think the heat was beginning to get to him a bit, sweat forming around his collar. He wore a yellow gold Oyster Rolex watch on his left wrist, which I noticed when he pulled a neatly folded handkerchief from his suit coat's right inside pocket and dabbed at the beads of sweat on his forehead and back of his neck.

"Well, I have no plans of working at, let alone taking over, the *Chronicle*. Hoppy is a great editor, no one could run it like him. I'm just here to pay my last respects and then move on," I continued. "Been thinking about checking out points south, never been south."

"Wait a minute," said Dom, turning to Tim. "I thought you said Wes was thinking about looking into Stevie's murder, and we were supposed to convince him to do it."

Ah, good old Dom, He was always honest, even if he had a habit of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. The thing about Dom was that, on the surface, he didn't appear to be anything really special, average height, a little bulky, and he'd never been—and there was no use arguing the point—the sharpest tack in the carpet. But he was just such a good guy. People trusted him, they liked him, and he treated everybody, and I mean everybody, straight up.

"That's not what I said, Dom," Tim quickly interjected, giving me a quick look of *mea culpa* before turning back to Dom. "I said that Wes was coming down for Stevie's funeral and that, if he had any questions about the murder, we should tell him what we know."

"Well, whatever you said, I think it's a good idea," Dom said to Tim. "Nobody else is doin' nothin'. It ain't like you're gonna find Stevie's killer sitting up there in your ivied tower."

Sometimes, I now remembered, it took a moment or two to decipher exactly what Dom was talking about.

"Ivied Towers," Bob guffawed. "You're mixing up ivory tower which means out of touch and ivied walls, which sometimes means a college. There's no such thing as an ivied tower."

“And besides that there is not a speck of ivy at East Hastings University,” Denny joined in.

“Ah, you know what I mean. Bob sells houses, I sell plumbing supplies, Denny’s got his clubs, and Tim’s teaching all day. What do we know about getting to the truth about Stevie? Wes does. He did it before.”

There was a bit of silence. I checked out the neatly mowed grass at my feet.

“Hey, if Wes wants to go, who are we to stop him?” Bob finally said. “In the meantime, it’s getting a little hot out here for me and I’ve built up a bit of an appetite, standing around out here in the fresh air,” he added, patting his ample belly, “and think it’s about time we headed over to Tony and Sue Ellen’s place. It’s air conditioned and I heard Costello’s is catering.”

“Well, er, I—” I started.

“Actually,” Tim said, giving me a look that let me know he’d handle everything, “I didn’t really see anyone other than Sue Ellen that I wanted to talk to, so I thought Wes and I would just pick up a case of beer and head out to one of the places we used to hang with Stevie, kinda hold our own private wake. You guys are welcome to come.”

Good old Tim. Not only did he save me the embarrassment of telling the others that I was persona non-grata at Sue Ellen’s, but he actually came up with a much more favorable alternative.

“That sounds like a good idea. How about the old spot out at the Kithane?” Dom replied. “I haven’t been out to the Kithane in years.”

“Sounds good,” said Denny.

We all looked at Bob. It was obvious he was weighing the offer against what was sure to be an opulent spread at Tony and Sue Ellen’s gathering.

“Okay—okay. I guess I’m in, but we also have to stop and pick up some hoagies to go with the beer. I’m starving.”

“Great,” said Tim. “Let me run over and tell Ellen. Denny, do you think her and the kids can get a ride over to Sue Ellen’s with Holly? That way I can drive us in the CRV.”

“Sure. I’ll go make sure she doesn’t mind,” Denny answered.

“Yeah, I’ll let Marcie know,” added Dom, “she probably won’t mind, seeing as it’s Wes.” He smiled at me. “Of course, you’ll have to come over to the house for a dinner before heading off to wherever you’re going. I know she wants to catch up.”

“I’ll get my car and follow you over,” said Bob.

And with that they all headed off to their families, who I could see were waiting impatiently by their respective cars. Left alone, I walked over at last to Stevie’s grave.

Workers were dismantling the tent that covered the immediate grave area and were rolling up the green tarp that had surrounded the grave. Nearby a small bulldozer idled, waiting to push the nearby pile of dirt over Stevie’s coffin.

I slid a single rose out from one of the many floral arrangements left behind by the mourners and stood over the grave, looking down at the box that held Stevie’s body.

On a small brass plate on the lid of the casket was Stevie’s date of birth and his death and a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson.

*Do not go where the path may lead,
go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*

“‘Don’t go where the path may lead.’ That’s you in a nutshell, Stevie. I’m so sorry I didn’t keep in touch. I don’t know if it would have mattered, but at least—”

I stopped, the words catching in my throat, and a single, salty tear rolled down my cheek and over my lip. I looked up and noticed the workers had stopped to watch me.

“You guys take good care of this grave. He was a pretty good man, all in all,” I said to them.

They turned and went back to work.

I threw the rose into the grave. “I really wish there was something I could—” I caught myself again. Sometimes words were just so worthless.

CHAPTER 10

As it turned out, now I was the one appropriately dressed. While I sat in the shade of river birches in my Bermuda shorts and polo shirt, sipping my cold beer by the side of the Kithane River in the mid-day August heat and humidity, my old friends, even with their suit jackets off and ties loosened, could not have been more uncomfortable in their oxford shoes, long pants, and collared shirts. I felt particularly bad for Bob. He had been expecting a feast of crab stuffed mushrooms, imported salamis, chilled shrimp, and a host of other artery-clogging hors d'oeuvres while swilling expensive wines in the air-conditioned comfort of Sue Ellen and Tony's house. Instead, he sat balancing a half-eaten roast beef hoagie—it was his second—on his lap and nursing a domestic beer as sweat turned his once neatly pressed shirt into a soggy layer of clinging cotton.

It had taken us about half-an-hour to drive around town to pick up the beer and hoagies and another half hour or so had passed while we ate. We spent the time catching up. They expressed their sympathy for Jan's passing. I quickly turned the subject to the changes East Hastings had gone through, and they took turns filling me in on their families. One thing that hadn't come up was probably the one thing that was foremost on all of our minds—Stevie and what the hell had gone on in his life for him to end up with a knife in his back in a dive bar.

We sat in silence and watched a group of young teenagers frolicking in the river a little ways up stream. "You guys re-

member the time Stevie likely saved me from drowning in this river?" Dom asked.

"Yeah," Tim answered. "When was that...seventh, eighth grade?"

"Pretty sure it was just after eighth grade, summer before going into ninth," Dom answered. "I remember because Kathleen Havery had developed the most amazing pair of tits I'd ever seen and I promised myself I was going to cop a feel before the end of summer."

"Yeah, I remember those. Magnificent!" Denny said. "The rest of her wasn't bad either, if I recall."

"I always thought she was a little stand-offish," added Tim.

"Well, with that rack, she had to stand-off a bit, didn't she?" Dom replied.

We all groaned. I shook my head, but couldn't help smiling—it was seventh period study hall all over again.

"So anyway, I was out here with Stevie, Tim, I think we were all there. Some girls were with us. I don't think you were, Wes," Dom continued.

"Probably at the library, after all, it was summer," Denny piped in.

"I think he had a crush on old Mrs. Linders, the librarian," Tim added.

"What was she...like eighty or something? Just Wes's type," said Bob.

"Hey, can I finish my story here? I don't care if you'd heard it before. It's about Stevie, the kind of guy he was." Dom looked at Bob, who graciously bowed his head, reached out his right hand, and rolled his wrist and hand to palm up, deigning Dom to continue.

"So, anyway I remember, it's a hot, humid day and it's great to be at the river with these girls. We're in our cut-offs and no shirts and the girls were wearing bathing suits. Kathleen was wearing a two-piece and looking real good soaking wet."

Bob pulled a cold beer from the cooler and held the iced bottle against his forehead. "Jeez, I'm gonna sweat off like thirty pounds by the time you get through this story."

“Hey, if you didn’t keep interrupting—so Stevie, he knows I’ve got this thing for Kathleen and he pulls me aside and tells me that if I really wanted to impress her, I should do a flip offa this tree branch that’s hanging out over the river. I wasn’t too sure, but Stevie, he says it’s a piece of cake and to prove it he shimmies up the tree and does this terrific flip offa the branch and into the river. I look at Kathleen and I can see she’s impressed, so I figure, ‘what the hell’ and up I go. Course, I was a little bigger than Stevie and as I get out on the branch, the damn thing snaps, and down I go and the back of my head slams hard against the water and I go under. Luckily, Stevie was right there and managed to pull me out and get me to shore. I can’t remember who, but someone ended up taking me to the hospital and I spent the night there. Man, I was close to really impressing her and, ya know, Kathleen didn’t even bother to visit me.” Dom took a long swallow of his beer. “Still, if it wasn’t for Stevie, I’d probably drowned.”

I noticed Denny, Bob, and Tim sharing a look between them as they tried to stifle laughter.

Dom noticed too. “What?” he asked. “What’s so funny about me almost dying?”

Tim looked at Denny, Denny looked at Bob. “You tell him,” he said.

“Tell me what?” asked Dom.

“Well, you see,” Bob said, “since Stevie’s gone, I guess I can tell you. One of the reasons Kathleen didn’t visit you in the hospital that night was...um...well you see, we all went back to Stevie’s house after dropping you off at the hospital, ’cause his mom was at work and there was some beer at the house, and, um, well...”

“Well, what? What happened?” Dom asked.

Bob looked at Denny and Tim. Both nodded for him to continue.

“Stevie and Kathleen disappeared into his room at some point, and they were still there when we all left,” Bob finished.

Dom sat looking at Bob then at Tim and finally Denny. You could almost hear the wheels in his brain turning. “You mean,”

he started slowly but his voice quickly rose. “You’re telling me that Stevie copped *my* feel?”

“Actually, a little more than that, according to Stevie,” added Bob.

“That bastard! That son-of-a-bitch! I never woulda gone up that tree if not for him and then he—”

Tim, Denny, Bob, and I looked down momentarily to avoid eye contact, but it became impossible to hold the laughter in. As one, we roared. Even Dom saw the humor in the whole thing and started laughing along with us.

“Fucking Stevie,” he said with mixture of admiration and sadness.

The laughter passed and each of us seemed to drift off for a moment with our own memory of Stevie and sat in silence.

Finally, Tim turned to me. “So, Wes, you’re really just going off again?” he asked. “Aren’t you just a little bit curious about what happened?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course, I’m curious, but c’mon, guys, it really is like I told you,” I answered quickly. “I’m not here to poke around. Hell, I wouldn’t even know where to start. I met the chief and she seems like a good cop. I’m sure she’ll do all she can.”

“I think we all agree the chief may be good, but the deck is stacked against her. Some people in town didn’t even want someone from the outside brought in after Chief Close retired. Certain people even wanted Danny to take over,” Tim answered.

“You mean Tony?” I asked, though I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

Denny, Dom, and Tim waited for the others to speak up. They were quiet for a minute or two.

“Yeah, Tony, those two were always thick as thieves, from way back,” Tim said. “But not just him—same old families, just different generations. The Heards, the Abernathys...”

I’d worked in enough places now to understand that, big city or small town, a select few always seemed to call the shots, whether it involved zoning regulations, liquor licenses or who did or did not go to jail for their crimes.

“Now, they want it to just go away,” Denny said.

“Oh, sure, the whole town’s involved in this. And of course you all bring up Tony, the guy who got this town back on its feet?” Bob quickly interjected. “It was the drugs. Stevie was selling drugs, everybody knows it, and he pissed off the wrong people. Drug dealers should expect to be killed.”

“So you’re saying Stevie deserved it? Is that what you’re saying?” Tim answered Bob and his voice had an angry edge to it.

“No, I’m not saying that, just that the town doesn’t need a bunch of dirt being dug up. Who’s gonna move to East Hastings if they think a bunch of drug gangs are running around killing each other—” Bob answered.

“It could have been a jealous husband,” Denny said, interrupting Bob and Tim. “Not that I know anything, but Angie says she’s heard stories from some of the women at our clubs. You know Stevie, he didn’t exactly have boundaries when it came to who he slept with—single or married.”

“I heard he was mixed up with the Crawfords,” Dom said.

The other three looked at Dom as if he was conjuring up the devil.

“The Crawfords? Are they still in business,” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, of course. They’re like cockroaches—stomp on one, there’s always plenty more,” Tim said. I couldn’t help but notice the stone-cold look he sent Dom’s way. “Not even Stevie would be stupid enough to mess with them.”

“Well, you say that but I saw Stevie earlier this summer down at the marina in Sea Isle where I keep my boat,” Dom continued. “Said he was in the market for one himself, asked me questions about the other boats docked there—how much would that cost, how much for that one? It took me years to save up to get my boat, and I know Stevie don’t got that kind of money. So I ask him if he won the lottery, but he says, all sort of confidential-like, that he’s expecting a big pay day, gives me that big grin of his. Well, there’s only one way to get that kind of money in this town overnight and that’s to do something for the Crawfords.”

“Stevie wasn’t mixed up with the Crawfords...” Denny said, and it might have been a coincidence but a large cloud moved across the sun and its brightness dimmed. It also felt, and this might have been my imagination, that the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees.

“So, there you go, Wes, everybody’s got a theory,” Bob said after a moment, shaking out the final crumbs from a bag of potato chips into his palm. “You know, you guys really amaze me, and see there what you’d be getting into, Wes? It would all be a huge waste of time.”

He licked the crumbs off his hand and crinkled up the empty bag. “What it all comes down to is that no one has any idea why Stevie was killed, let alone who did it. It coulda been anyone for any of a dozen reasons, and I’m not saying that outa any disrespect for Stevie, but we all know how he could push people’s buttons.”

Tim turned to Bob. “Sure he could, but the owner of the place he was stabbed was working the bar and said Stevie hadn’t talked to anyone the entire night, said he was just sitting at the bar, checking his cell phone, sipping his beer like he was waiting for someone.”

“Like he was watching him the whole time. Somebody coulda slipped in, someone holding a grudge, knew Stevie would be there,” Bob answered.

“Owner said Stevie hadn’t been in the place for months,” Tim responded.

“Christ, Tim, what are you? Frickin’ Sherlock Holmes or something? The owner said this, the owner said that.”

“I’ve been following the case in the newspaper,” Tim answered defensively.

“Here we go with the *Chronicle* again. Where are they getting their information? You know how it is with newspapers—if they can’t find any facts, they just make things up to sell papers.” Bob turned to me. “No offense, Wes.”

I didn’t realize I should be offended.

“And, yeah, like the owner’s gonna tell the police—or the newspaper—the truth,” Bob continued. “Like he’d have any customers if word got out he was putting suspicion on any of

his regulars. Hell, most of the people who hang out at that joint have a lot to hide from the police, from what I've heard about the place. But no, don't blame some guy livin' in a bottle or some druggie. Instead, point the finger at the most successful guys in town, screw with people's marriages. So frickin' typical."

"Look, all I'm saying is that there are some people in town who have a lot of money invested in and around East Hastings, and you know, like you said, having a murder continue as front-page news probably isn't the best thing for business." This time Tim glanced quickly at me. "We just don't think the police are doing all they can to find the murderer."

"Ah, enough of this," Bob said as stood up. "You guys heard Wes. He doesn't want to get involved, has bigger fish to fry somewhere." He turned to me. "Good luck, Wes, wherever your travels take you, but right now I'm hot, sticky, and I think I've got ants crawling up my leg. I want to go home and take a shower—now."

He opened the top to the cooler and waited while we took last swigs of our beer and threw the empty bottles inside it. We all stood.

"Guys, you know, I'm really sorry. I hope they catch the guy and all but—" I started.

"No, Wes, it's okay," Dom answered, but I could tell it really wasn't.

They just didn't understand. Not sure I did either.

"C'mon," Tim said. "I'll give you a ride to your hotel, maybe see if we can get you some new clothes." He fell in behind Denny and Bob as they headed back to the cars.

"And maybe some deodorant," said Dom, waving his arm with a playful smile, as he approached me. He took my hand. "Wes, if I don't see you before you go, I'm glad you could make it." He followed the others off.

I was alone. I turned and took one last look at the river. It really hadn't changed at all.

CHAPTER 11

Mr...uh..." The hotel manager glanced at my credit card. "Mr. Byrne, perhaps you'd be happier at a motel up the road."

I guess I didn't look like the type of guest the hotel usually catered to. Instead of luggage I had two shopping bags, one from Thatcher's pharmacy which contained a new set of toiletries and the other from the Army/Navy Store where I purchased underwear, a pair of jeans, and a couple of shirts. I hadn't shaved for twenty-some hours, I'd been sitting in East Hastings humidity drinking beer, and, though I was not sweating at the moment, patches of stains still splotched my shirt. My breath must have been a nearly lethal combination of beer, salami, onions, and hot peppers. I also didn't think the manager was the one gently swaying side to side.

"No. I've always wanted to stay in this hotel. Can you believe I grew up here and this is the first time I've been here?" I answered.

The manager looked me up and down disapprovingly again. "Actually, I can," he said.

"Of course, living in East Hastings, why would a person stay here? I mean, you'd only need a place if you were from somewhere else—which is what I am now."

I didn't drink a lot of beer as a rule but when I did I often got an irrepressible urge to make small talk whenever I'd had a few too many. Thing was, I was awful at small talk.

"I'm sure I don't know," the manager answered, not looking up as he searched the data on his console. "Ah, there is a reser-

vation.” He didn’t mask his disappointment. “Would you like a smoking or non-smoking room?”

“Non-smoking please. Of course, I always thought I’d be staying there, but I didn’t, so when I knew I was coming back to East Hastings I thought, great, I can stay here.”

“I see. Exactly how long are you expecting to stay with us?” the manager asked, eyeing my “luggage” suspiciously.

“Well, that’s sort of up in the air. You see my car was stolen this morning, and I’m hoping the police will find it, but until they do I really can’t leave town, at least until my insurance kicks in.”

“I see,” he said.

I think what he really saw was the last thing he needed—a character.

The reservation sheet stopped printing. The manager tore it along its perforated edge and slid it, along with two key cards, across the reservation desk. “I’ll need your home phone please and your signature.”

“Oh, yeah, well see I lost my job and thus my phone, which the job provided, so I don’t have a number I can give you. I am planning to get one, of course, as soon as I’m settled,” I added as some sort of consolation.

The manager wasn’t consoled. He looked at the reservation screen.

“Mr. um...Byrne...”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t want to seem...well, too harsh, but you see we cater to the tour bus crowd, people coming to visit the museums and historic sites. They tend to be a bit older, like things quiet. We provide our guests with an ambience of understated elegance. We’re not used to people simply wandering in off the street—”

He didn’t finish his sentence because at that moment the first wave of one such tour group burst in through the front doors, led by a frazzled looking woman carrying a clip board. She was obviously the tour director. “Peter, daaarling, thank goodness,” she said as she approached the front desk.

“You wait here,” the manager muttered to me before turning his charm toward the tour director.

“Della,” he answered her, moving out from the behind the desk to greet her, taking her hands in his cordially. “I was beginning to wonder what happened to you.”

“Well, we had a little problem when some members wanted to stay longer at the vineyard, which made some of the others feel shortchanged with their time at the mushroom museum gift shop, and they were insisting we go back, which would have thrown us way off schedule—none of them seemed to care at all about the schedule. I mean what’s the point if we don’t have a schedule?”

“I understand completely,” Peter the manager sympathized, “there’s always a few bad apples,” he said, and I couldn’t help but notice the quick, derisive look he threw my way.

“—except when it comes to meal time,” Della the tour director continued, gripping her clip board tightly and shaking it at no one in particular. “Heaven forbid, we’re off schedule at meal time. You should have heard all the griping when we couldn’t find the TGIF. We were only fifteen minutes late.”

“I understand completely. It’s not always easy, is it? Well, we do our best, don’t we? We do our best. However, you may now put yourself in the hands of the Hearthstone. Why don’t we have your group wait in the lounge before I check you in? Come this way,” he said, leading her off toward an open set of French doors at the far end of the lobby. “They can get a drink at the bar and, if they are still hungry, perhaps an appetizer or two.”

She leaned in close to him and spoke softly, but loud enough for me to hear.

“To hell with them, *I* want a drink.” She turned and put on a big smile for her group. “Everybody, this is Peter and he is the manager here. He’ll get everybody all settled in as quickly as possible. In the meantime, why don’t we all go to the lounge and get comfortable.”

“Right this way,” Peter said, also putting on a big show of hospitality as he led them off.

I took the opportunity to discretely sign the reservation sheet, take my room key cards, and slip away. All I wanted was a hot shower, a clean shave, and a quiet night.

CHAPTER 12

I f I'm going to get the bum's rush out of the place, at least I'll be a clean bum, I thought as I left the bathroom to answer the rather insistent knocking at my room's door. I had no idea how long someone had been knocking while I showered and shaved with the bathroom door closed. Tossing the wet towel onto the bed, I slipped on some clean underwear and my new pair of jeans and then pulled on my new T-shirt that read "Property of Hastings University."

I had a feeling I had gotten away a bit too easily at registration and was expecting Peter to pay me a visit. I'd met a thousand guys like him, the type who protected their little fiefdom with the fury of a Doberman pincher. He lived for the chance to flex his authority over a person he deemed "undesirable." A bribe to let me stay through the night was probably out of the question, only contributing to his sense of superiority when he turned me down. Still, if I wasn't so tired and running low on money, I might have tried anyway, if for no other reason than to bring a little joy into his life.

I opened the door. It wasn't Peter. It was Tina, and she was looking even better than she had at the Bean Me Up. She wore little or no make-up and let her beautiful features do the talking. Her green eyes seemed to glow, accentuated by emerald earrings and a matching stone set in her gold necklace.

She had on the simple black dress and high-heel ankle boots I had seen her wearing at Stevie's funeral. A large purse hung from her shoulder.

“I guess you’re surprised to see me,” she said with a mischievous little smile.

Stunned was more like it, and even now I can’t remember exactly what I said, probably something profound like, “Um, yeah.”

“Well, I remembered you saying you would be staying at the Hearthstone, and I have something I wanted to give you. But first you have to promise me—no questions.”

No problem there. She had me so enchanted I couldn’t even form a complete sentence. “Sure,” I answered.

She reached over to grab something just out my sight in the hallway, lifted it, and dropped it at my feet in the doorway. It was my packed nylon duffel bag.

“I thought you might be needing this. I found it in your car,” she said. “I brought the car back too.”

“My car? Where did you find my—” I started to ask.

“No questions. You promised,” she said, placing her forefinger to my lips. “Can I come in? Someone might see me out here.”

“Sure, of course,” I said, picking up my duffel bag, and ushering her in.

She took a quick glance both ways down the hall before entering. I closed the door behind her.

“I think you might be able to see your car out your window, if you want to take a look,” she said as she tossed her handbag onto the bed.

I went to the window, looked out, and, sure enough, there was my old Toyota sitting in a space a little way across the lot. It looked no worse than before, though of course, it wasn’t exactly in mint condition when it was stolen. I turned back to Tina.

“I know I promised, but I’ve gotta know. How did you get my car back? I mean, at some point I have to tell the police I’ve gotten it back and I can’t just say I looked out the window of my hotel room and there it was.”

Tina sat down on my bed, tossing my wet towel onto the carpet beside it. Maybe I was imagining things but she seemed to be getting sort of comfortable, the way she smoothed the bed

covers and pushed down on the mattress to check the firmness. Maybe she was just thinking things over.

“Look, I want you to know, I’m through with everything—but I can’t—I won’t tell you any names. If I do tell you how I got your car back, can you just call me... what is that they call a person who provides information but the newspapers don’t say who it is?”

“An anonymous source?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s it. I’ll be an anonymous source because these people—who I will not name—they’re awful scary, and I don’t want them finding out I helped you with your story. God, of all the cars around town, I can’t believe we got and steal *your* car—”

“Tina, there is no story, but tell me, what scary people exactly are we talking about?” I asked.

“Why the people who stole your car, silly, the ones you’re here to write about.”

“Who said I was doing a story about stolen cars.”

“Well, why else would you be here? It’s big news, isn’t it,” she answered, looking at me like I was a two-year old. “Course I don’t know that much anyway. I just helped Pud—er, someone—out once in a while.”

I had to sit down. I pulled a chair out from a desk across from the bed and lowered onto it. First the police chief, then the old gang, and now even Tina—it seemed like I was the only one who thought I didn’t have an agenda for coming back to East Hastings.

“Tina,” I said, “I appreciate what you’ve done, but I think you might have put yourself in a lot of danger. I’m not doing any sort of story. In fact, I don’t even work for a newspaper anymore. If you know something, I think we should call the police.”

“No! No police, not yet. Don’t tell them anything until I’m gone.” She grabbed her purse and stood up from the bed. “If you’re going to call the police, I’ll leave right now.”

“Okay, okay, no police,” I said against my better judgment.

Waiting until morning probably wasn't going to hurt. It wasn't like I believed the cops were wasting precious manpower out scouring the countryside looking for my car.

Tina sat back down and flashed me a smile. "That's good, 'cause to tell you the truth, I really don't have anywhere else to go. I was kinda hoping you'd let me stay here, with you, for the night."

"Stay? Why...um...yeah, sure, of course," I answered, trying to sound cool and calm although the temperature in the room seemed to shoot up about sixty degrees and it felt as if my shirt collar was tightening around my neck. "Do you...um...have any bags in the car you want me to get for you?"

"No. I've got everything I need for tonight right here," Tina said, patting her purse.

"In there?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. After all, I won't be needing that much," she answered with a playful giggle. She reached into her purse and pulled out a very sexy looking negligee and held it up against her body. "I've been saving this for a special occasion."

This was incredible. Could it be that all my high school prayers were finally being answered? The saying is that God works in mysterious ways. No one ever said he or she took their sweet time about it. Of course, I wasn't complaining. It was definitely not the time for complaining. Just a good time to go along and let my dreams come true. That was why I couldn't believe it when I heard the words come out of my mouth.

"Um, Tina, before we get too far along here, there's something I've gotta know. Was Stevie mixed up in this whole car theft thing? Was it one of these scary guys that killed him?"

Tina's lovely lips pursed into a pout. "You always were so serious. You know, I had a bit of crush on you back in high school, but you were always so busy with the school paper and everything you never even noticed me."

"I noticed you, Tina. Hard not to, you were the prettiest girl in school."

She smiled, leaned back a bit, rested her hands on the bed, gave her hair a quick toss, and crossed her lovely legs. Her an-

kle-booted right foot hypnotically flexed slowly, toes pointing toward the ceiling and then straight out at me. “And now?”

The room seemed to be running low on oxygen. Either that or I’d forgotten how to breathe.

“Even prettier, and I can’t believe you’re here—”

“Then why are you sitting all the way over there?” she asked.

I wish I knew. “Well, it’s just...just that...well...”

She took a deep breath. “No, Stevie wasn’t involved in the car ring, at least as far as I know. He wasn’t the stealing type, you know, more interested in making the big score. I think he wanted to prove that he was smarter than everyone else, especially that brother-in-law of his.”

That sounded right. Stevie might have been wild, and very willing to live life according to his own rules, but I never thought of him as a thief.

“Does it really matter? You promised no questions and, besides, you said you weren’t doing a story anyway,” she asked.

“I’m just curious, comes with the job—or at least the old job—and the police are going to ask me a few questions. I can’t lie to them if I don’t know the truth,” I answered. “My car—how did you manage to get that back?” I continued, changing the subject a bit.

Tina hesitated, and it was obvious she was a little scared. “You promise not to tell the cops until I’m gone?” she asked.

“I do, in fact, I promise no one will ever know you were here,” I said.

“Okay,” Tina said, ironing out non-existent creases in the bed spread with her hand before looking up at me. “The way it worked is that whenever, Pud...uhm...what should I call the person whose name I’m not going to tell you?”

“I don’t know, how about Mr. X?” I answered.

She laughed, and I had the feeling she was getting a kick about the part she was playing. “Okay. See I’d drive around with Mr. X—” She laughed again. “—in his tow truck a couple days a week. He had a list of cars to be on the lookout for and whenever he saw one on the list heading into town, we’d follow

it to see where it parked and where the driver was going, like into a store or a bar...”

“Or the Bean Me Up,” I added.

“Yeah,” she said with a smile, “like the Bean Me Up. He’d drop me off and if it was a woman and she was shopping, I’d compliment what she was wearing or her jewelry or hair and ask where she bought them or had her hair styled. If it was a man—”

“You’d captivate them with your smile,” I said. I was enjoying this too.

“Yes,” she said and I noticed a slight twinkle in her eye. No man would stand a chance.

“So, anyway you can imagine how I feel when I find out it’s you I’m supposed to stall, especially once I remembered how you got those people sent to jail for what they were doing to the river. I was going to call Mr. X and tell him to leave your car alone but he called me first and said he already had it.”

“So that wasn’t your sister who called you,” I said. “I thought the voice sounded a little deep.”

“See, I knew you were on to me,” she said. “That’s why I rushed out.”

“So what happened next?” I asked.

“A little later I met up with Mr. X and I told him all about you. He said to just keep quiet about it, that you’d never link me to the theft. No one ever did the whole time we’d been doing it.”

Mr. X was right about that. I hadn’t given it the slightest consideration that Tina had anything to do with the car being stolen.

“He said, even if you did, he’d take care of you himself. Well, then I see you come into the service for Stevie with the police chief, and I’m sure you’re going to point me out, but you didn’t.” She gave me a lovely smile. “That was sweet of you, but I thought Pud—er Mr. X was going to crap in his pants when he saw you, though,” she added with a little laugh. “After the service—we didn’t even go to the funeral—we went back to Mr. X’s place, where he had your car stashed to wait for—”

She paused and tilted her head slightly. “What do I call someone else whose name I don’t want to give you?” she asked.

“How about Mr. Y,” I said.

“Oh yeah, that makes sense. So we were waiting for Mr. Y, who was supposed to help Mr. X strip your car for parts, but he didn’t show up. Now Mr. X started getting nervous and he got a bottle of bourbon and poured a drink to calm his nerves. That’s when I got the idea of bringing the car back to you, so I kept pouring. He never could hold his liquor, and eventually he passed out. I hot-wired your car, went by my place to collect a few things—and here I am.”

“You know how to hot-wire a car?” I asked, amazed.

“Sure, Mr. X showed me how. It’s really pretty easy, especially an old car like yours.”

I know she didn’t mean it as a put down of any sort, but for the first time ever I felt a little embarrassed that I’d held onto my old car for so long, never got that flashy new car I once promised myself.

“And this Mr. X, he’s the one you’re afraid of?” I asked.

“Him, oh no. He’d never hurt me. He just talks big is all,” she answered.

I had a pretty good idea who Mr. X was. It must have been the sausage-headed guy she was sitting with at the church service. I wasn’t really sure why it mattered in the first place. I wasn’t going to get involved. Guess I just didn’t like loose ends.

“So, does that answer your questions?” she asked with an air of finality.

“Just one last thing. How did you find me?” I answered.

“I told you. You said you were staying here when we were at the Bean Me Up,” she answered, the playfulness returning to her eyes.

“Okay, but how did you find my room? There are quite a few in the hotel,” I answered.

She sat up and crossed her hands on her lap. Again, she gave me that look like I was a two year old. “That was easy. I just asked the very sweet guy at the front desk and he told me. I said

we were old high school sweethearts and I hadn't seen you for years. He was more than happy to help," she answered.

"Peter the manager—sweet, more than happy?" I asked softly, almost to myself.

"The manager? Oh no, not that old stick in the mud. This was a younger guy. I think he might be new," Tina answered.

"Wait, you know Peter?" I asked.

For the first time since she'd entered my room, it seemed I had knocked Tina a bit off-balance with my question.

"What? Know him?" she said a little nervously. Her posture straightened. "Of course, I don't know him."

"But you said he was a stick in the mud, and he definitely seems to be," I answered.

"Well, um, you see my sister stays here when she comes to visit—my place isn't big enough—and...well, I remember the last time she was in town that the manager gave us a little grief for being too loud late at night."

She got up off the bed and walked over to me. She leaned over, put her left hand on my right shoulder, and gently pushed me back a bit into my chair. With her right forefinger, she began slowly tracing my lips. She brought her face close to mine.

"You know, Wes. It almost seems like you really don't want me here," she said, again giving me that pouty look.

"No, no, I'm glad you're here. Really," I said, meaning it completely.

"Are you done asking questions?" she asked.

"Yes, most definitely. No more questions," I promised.

"Okay, well, I have one for you. Will you do me one—no, two favors?" she said.

"Sure, of course anything," I said.

I could smell her perfume and her face was so close to mine that a few strands of her luscious red hair brushed atop my right and left clavicles.

"Tomorrow, in the morning, will you drive me to my sister's house in Carlsbad? She said she'd put me up for a few weeks," she said.

“Yeah, no problem. Now that I’ve got my car, I can get on the road too,” I said, my eyes captive to hers. “What else? You said two favors?”

She moved her forefinger to gently rub the tip and bridge of my nose.

“Before we get on the road, will you take me by my place? I want to pack a few more things and pick up my cats,” she said.

“Of course,” I answered.

“Good, and just so you don’t go getting all serious on me again—” She stood, turned around, and reached into her purse that was sitting on the bed. She pulled out a three-quarters full bottle of Smirnov vodka. “I brought this with me so we could have a little fun on my last night in East Hastings. You do drink, don’t you?” she asked.

“Only when I’m conscious,” I answered.

“Good,” she said, walking over to the table next to the chair I was sitting in.

A small plastic tray on the table held a few small translucent twelve-ounce plastic cups wrapped in plastic and one of those square plastic containers with a lid for ice. She put the bottle on the desk and picked up the container, holding it out to me.

“We’re going to need ice—lots of it—and something to mix with the vodka. I can’t drink the stuff straight,” she said.

“Right,” I answered, standing and taking the container out of her hands. “Ice and mixer coming up.”

“And, Wes,” she said, reaching her hand up and around the back of my neck, pulling me down to her, “don’t be long. We’ve got some catching up to do.”

She kissed me deeply. I kissed her back. My arms slipped around her, and I pulled her close to me. I’d almost forgotten how great a woman’s body could feel, but sensed Tina’s would bring it all back to me.

I reluctantly pulled away from her, turned, and headed for the door. On my way out, I grabbed the *Do Not Disturb* sign off the inside door handle. Let the stick in the mud manager be damned. I wasn’t going anywhere tonight.

CHAPTER 13

Why wasn't the vending machine stocked with cans of tonic water? That would have made life so very simple.

Before I met Jan, I dated a girl a few times and she drank vodka, mixed it with tonic. I've heard the Russians have a saying, something like "There are no ugly women, only not enough vodka!" Well, it turned out the same held true for tall, geeky guys. The more vodka and tonics the girl drank, the wittier, interesting, and, dare I think it, desirable I became. Maybe lightning would strike twice.

Tonight, however, no tonic, so while Tina waited for me in my bed back in the room, I stood in front of the damned machine completely at a loss as to what soda she would like to mix with her vodka. So many choices and I wanted to get this right.

Jan drank wine, white wine, and very little of it. In fact, I don't think I ever saw her tipsy, let alone drunk. She always seemed to have studying to do, an early class the next morning or was on call at the hospital. She drank so little, in fact, that I had no idea how such a beautiful woman ever found me attractive enough to want to sleep with me.

The hell with it! I fed dollar after dollar into the machine and worked my way down from the top of the choices. One of the reasons this all seemed to be taking so long was my need to stop at the front desk and get change for my twenty. The machine only accepted one dollar bills. I found out Tina was right though. The young guy at the front desk was much nicer than Peter the manager. First he asked me if my visitor had found

my room and after he handed me my change, he gave me a knowing look and wished me a good night. I told him I wished me a good night too. He laughed.

So now I was making my choices—7-Up, of course, Mug Root Beer, sure. Pepsi, sure. Mountain Dew, sure, Iced Tea, sure, why not? I was bound to be right with one of them. Once down the column, and then—spare no expense—another round.

I looked down at the collection of ten soda cans at my feet and realized I now had to carry them back to the room. There were no bags in sight. Of course, I could make a couple of trips but there was no way I wanted to leave that hotel room once I returned. There was, it seemed, no other option for me but to put my faith in the work quality of a Sri Lankan sweatshop worker and carry my load in my newly purchased “Property of Hastings University” T-shirt.

I pulled the bottom of my shirt out and began piling the cans into the pouch I created. I had to keep pulling the bottom up more and more with each can I deposited, so that by the time I had them all loaded, the shirt bottom was up to my chin. I realized I probably looked pretty silly, but no one was going to see me. I just hoped the shirt would hold out.

I had forgotten about the ice, so I had to slowly lower into a crouch to pick the ice bucket up off the floor. The cans shifted and slid toward the outer edges of my pouch, but I managed to keep any cans from falling out while I grabbed the bucket, placed it under the ice dispenser, and pushed the button that released ice a few times until the bucket was full. Life shouldn’t be this hard. Then I thought of Tina. It was all worth it. In a matter of moments, I would drop the brightly colored cans at her feet like some kind of pirate’s booty of sparkling gems.

I left the beverage nook and turned to return to the room.

“You there. Hold on a minute. I want a word.”

I recognized the voice right away—Peter the manager. I sped up as much as I could. The weight of the cans forced me to bend forward a bit and I couldn’t move too fast without having them swing out and then back against my chest. I couldn’t let him catch me. Paradise lay just around the turn at the end of the corridor.

“Mr. Byrne. Stop.” I did. He came up alongside me. He was breathing like he’d just run a fifty-yard dash. “Didn’t you—” He gulped some air. “—didn’t you hear me calling you?”

“You were calling me? Is there something I can do for you?”

“Yes. You didn’t finish filling out your reservation sheet. I need a phone number and license...what the hell is that?”

He eyed my pouch suspiciously. This wasn’t turning out well at all.

“This? Ah, well...um...you see, I’m not supposed to tell anyone. It’s supposed to be a secret.”

“A secret, huh? Know what I think? I think you’re some kind of junkie—heard junkies get massive sugar cravings. Why else would someone be carrying...what have you got there?...a dozen cans of soda?”

My room was only a few doors away down the hall. I couldn’t let him stop me now. Time for a little creativity.

“Well...um...you see...um...I could get fired for telling you.” The look on his face didn’t show much concern. I had to come up with something and it had to be good. “Have you ever heard of Zagats?”

“Zagats, the restaurant reviewer? Sure. What’s that got to do with anything? We don’t have a restaurant here, just a lounge.”

“Well...um...you see, there hasn’t been any sort of announcement yet, People at corporate are keeping things pretty hush-hush, you know how they can be.”

If he did, old Peter wasn’t sharing his knowledge with me. The skepticism was clear on his face. I’d never been a good liar and expected to break out in a beady sweat at any moment, in spite of having cold soda cans pressed against my body in the air conditioned hallway.

“So—now you promise not to say anything, right?—well, we’re branching out, you see, going to start rating hotels the way we do restaurants. I’m one of the reviewers.”

“You?” he asked, “You don’t look like any hotel reviewer I’ve ever seen.”

“Yes, ah, that’s the point. My bosses wanted me to base my experience at the hotel from the average joe’s perspective—”

Peter frowned.

“Not that that’s the type of clientele this hotel attracts,” I quickly added to avoid any perceived insult and pander a bit to his pride. “It’s just that if a hotel treats someone looking like me with great service, well then...you get the point.”

It seemed to be working. He was listening, appeared to be mulling it over. “So what are all the soda cans for?”

“The cans...well, um, I’m checking for dust.”

“Dust?”

“Yeah, we’re very thorough. You’d be surprised how often the finest hotels have vending machines stocked with stale chips, candy with expired sell-by dates or dirty soda cans—really quite appalling. It’s going to cost more than one hotel a five star rating when we launch our service later this year, I can tell you.”

His face showed the slightest hint of concern. He seemed to be buying it. No doubt that first thing in the morning he’d be directing his staff to check every vending machine in the place. I saw my opening to get away.

“Well, if that’s all, then I really should get back to my room and finish my work, although I must say at first glance these cans look just fine. Sure, they’ll be no problem,” I said, starting off to my room.

I was almost away when the manager caught up to me once again. This time he was all charm.

“I’m terribly sorry if there was any inconvenience. I mean we do have to be careful—the welfare of our guests and all. I want you to know that should you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask. Not because of the Zagat review, of course, but just because that’s how we treat all our guests. No request is too great. And I do want to apologize, if there was any perceived abruptness on my part, it’s just that when you showed up without any luggage or a car, well that’s very unusual.”

“Oh yeah, about the car. I’m afraid that was part of the undercover bit. I do have a car, my assistant brought it here and parked it in the back, outside my room—a red Toyota Camry—just in case you get suspicious. Massachusetts plates.” Last thing I needed was him calling the cops to report a strange car

sitting in the parking lot all night. As far as they knew, it was still stolen.

“Glad you told me. We do have a man who patrols the grounds, checking for anything unusual, security you see. After all, the hotel does everything it can to make sure our guests are safe and sound,” he said with an ingratiating smile.

We’d just about reached my room and I realized that, with Peter standing next to me, it might be better to use my key than to knock and have a scantily-clad Tina open the door. Problem was, my hands were tied up holding the soda cans and ice bucket. I turned to him.

“Would you mind taking these cans for a moment while I fish for my room key?”

“Not at all. I’d be glad to.”

He probably would have washed and waxed my car if I’d asked. He held out his arms as I poured the cans into them. Amazingly, he didn’t drop one of them.

We reached my door just as I pulled my key from my back pocket. Turned out it wasn’t needed. The door was slightly ajar.

Damn, I thought. *Tina must have given up on me*. I pushed the door open and entered the room. I didn’t know it at the time, but Peter was following close behind me.

“Tina?” I called out, moving farther into the room. I heard the sound of soda cans hitting the floor behind me. I turned and saw Peter dashing to the bathroom and then heard the sound of him retching into the toilet. I turned back and looked at my bed. Tina lay on her back, eyes vacantly looking up at the ceiling, a stain of bright red blood growing larger on the negligee she had put on for her special occasion.

CHAPTER 14

I want him arrested. He said he was checking our cans for dust!”

Peter had recovered from his episode in the bathroom by the time the police arrived and apparently cornered one of the officers in the hallway, pleading his case to have me dragged away and locked up.

“Instead, I find that...that prostitute sprawled out on his bed. I bet they were doing drugs. I knew he was up to something the moment he showed up.”

I could hear, but not see Peter. The police had placed me in a room across the hall from mine and placed a guard at the door. I couldn't see directly into my old room but could only catch glimpses of what I assumed were forensic and coroner personnel moving about in the hallway beyond the guard.

“How soon will this all be cleaned up? I have a hotel to run and don't want to see my guests disturbed,” I heard Peter say.

I wanted to get up from my chair and beat some compassion into him. I looked down and realized both my hands were clenched tightly into fists, and they were shaking.

This room was exactly like the one across the hall—same floral patterned curtains, same beige contemporary scroll design wallpaper, same plum plush carpet, same mahogany armoire. It even had the same beige and burgundy striped fitted bedspread on the king-sized bed, although, of course, this one didn't have the dead body of a beautiful woman lying on it.

The air conditioner had just been turned on, so the room still felt a little stuffy. I don't know why it is, but hotel rooms seem

to have two temperatures—too hot and too cold. What I needed was fresh air to clear my head, but of course like all buildings these days, the windows wouldn't open to allow a breeze, if there was one on this humid August night, to waft in. I knew there was no way the young officer at the door was letting me take a stroll outdoors. He was all business.

Even at this early hour, his uniform was smartly pressed and his shoes shined to a polished sheen. He had a disconcerting habit of looking at me and tapping his fingers on his gun holster, as if he might have to pull his weapon out any second to keep me from making a getaway.

I'd seen murdered bodies before—came with the job of being a crime reporter. This was different though, very different. What struck me most, above all else, was the look in her eyes, those once sparkling eyes. Disappointment. That's what I saw. Disappointment in me, for not being there, for letting her life end the way it did.

"I had you figured for being a total loser, but not a murderer." Danny Sullivan was at the door. He was smirking again. Maybe it was a permanent condition, maybe he reserved it for me. Regardless, I couldn't help but sense that he was enjoying this.

He turned to the officer guarding the door. "You can leave us alone. If he tries anything, I think I can handle him."

"Yes, sir," the officer answered.

He looked at me, tapped his holster one more time, and left us alone.

Danny came into the room, closing the door behind him. He gave me a quick look-over. I don't think my East Hastings T-shirt impressed him.

"So what happened? You were all set for your big moment and she changed her mind when she took a good look at you?"

"You know, Danny, I always knew your tires were a little low on air, but even you can't think I would murder Tina."

Dumb thing to say. Door closed and only me and him in the room. He could beat me to a pulp and tell everyone I went after him trying to escape. I didn't care, though. I was angry, real

angry, and while a killer was slipping away this jerk was standing there accusing me.

Danny's face tightened, his eyes hardened, and he took a few steps toward me. I should have been scared but wasn't. Maybe I wanted someone to hit me. Maybe I deserved it.

"I told you before, Wus, it's Officer Sullivan, and yeah, I think you killed her. Prisons are full of pathetic assholes like you, guys who think they're big shots and then snap when they realize what a failure they really are. I did some checking up on you. How many jobs you lose over the last few years? How many times you been fired? What happened? Tina laugh at you when you couldn't get it up, finally pushed you over the edge?"

"Christ, Danny," I answered, putting extra emphasis on his name. "You are such an idiot."

That did it. He was at me quickly and I did nothing to prevent the right hook that landed squarely on my jaw and sent me tumbling back into the table and onto the floor. Danny stood over me, breathing hard.

"Get up, asshole. C'mon get up. I'll show you who's an idiot."

The door opened and the officer who had been standing guard looked in.

Danny turned to him. "Get out of here," he ordered.

The guard glanced at Danny and then at me, lying on the floor. He didn't seem concerned in the least, actually seemed to like what he saw.

"Thought you should know. The chief just got here. Wants to talk to the suspect."

He closed the door, leaving us alone again.

Danny took a second to compose himself, get his breathing under control. "Get up and sit in that chair—and believe me, this isn't over."

I did as I was told. I felt my jaw and could feel a welt growing, but it seemed I still had all of my teeth. I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs. This wasn't the first time Danny had hit me and, despite the years passing since high school, he could still pack a punch.

“He’s in here, Chief,” I heard the young officer say out in the hallway. The door opened and Chief Roark entered. She looked me over and then turned to Danny.

“What happened to him?” she asked him.

“He tried to get past me and out the door and I had to hit him,” he said.

She looked at him skeptically. “Okay, you can leave us alone,” she said.

“What if he tries something again?” he asked.

The chief looked at me. “Are you going to try anything?”

“No, I’m not,” I answered.

“Officer, you can go,” she said, not looking at Danny.

“Yes, Chief,” he answered and left the room without looking back.

Chief Roark came nearer and took a good look at the growing welt on my jaw. She wasn’t dressed in her uniform. Instead she had on a partly zipped up black nylon taffeta windbreaker with EHPD silkscreened on the left chest over a sweat shirt, a pair of clean, neatly pressed blue jeans and a pair of lightweight high-topped boots. A nine millimeter Glock was holstered on her hip.

“What he said true?” she asked, though I’m sure she had a pretty good idea.

“The part about having to hit me is,” I answered.

“You want to press charges,” she said.

“Would it do any good? No witnesses and the word of a police officer against mine.”

“Probably not,” she answered.

I appreciated her honesty.

“Tell me what happened tonight with the girl,” she asked.

“Tina,” I answered. “Her name is Tina.”

“Okay, tell me what happened to Tina.”

“Nothing to really tell. She showed up at my room, I went to get something to mix with the vodka she brought with her, got back to my room, and—” I took a deep gulp of air and was surprised that my eyes were getting a little misty. “—there she was.”

“What about your car? The manager said it’s in the lot,” Roark asked.

“Yeah, she brought my car back to me.”

“Say where she got it?”

“No.”

“Say who stole it.”

“No.”

“Big-time reporter like you didn’t ask?”

“I told you, I’m not a reporter. I’m nothing,” I answered.

“That’s right. You’re just passing through. Still, weren’t you curious?” she said.

“Of course I was, but she made me promise not to ask any questions. She was scared.”

“Say who she was scared of?”

“No, only that she was leaving town in the morning, wanted to spend—to spend her last night in town with me. I was going to take her out of here.”

“You two have something going? What she was wearing, looked like you were more than just friends.”

“No. I hadn’t seen her for years, ran into her at the Bean Me Up this—er, yesterday morning—right before my car was stolen. Saw her at Stevie’s funeral service but we didn’t talk. Then she showed up here.”

“You have any idea who killed her?”

“No, only that she was scared of someone.”

“You know the hotel manager wants you arrested for impersonating a hotel reviewer? Says you told him some kind of story about being from Zagats. Why’d you tell him that?”

“I thought he was going to throw me out. Came up with the first thing I could think of so he’d let me stay. You going to arrest me?”

“For lying to a hotel manager? I’d have half the husbands in town behind bars if that was an offense. Still, I want you to stick around, in case anything else comes up.”

“Sure. Got no place to go. Speaking of which, can you recommend a good place to stay. I have a feeling the hotel manager isn’t going to want me staying here.”

“Think you’re right. I’d suggest the Evergreen Motel up the Route Two-Twelve. It’s pretty clean, from what I hear. Not sure how you’re going to get there, though. We’re going to impound your car, see if there’s any prints or other evidence we get from it. Probably get it back to you in a day or two.”

“What about my stuff in the room? Can I take that with me?”

“Yeah, I don’t see a problem with that. Let me check, though.” Roark got up to leave. She turned back to me as she reached the door. “Remember what I said about not liking coincidences? If I find out you’ve been lying to me or holding anything back...well, I’m not going to look too favorably on that. Understand?”

I nodded. “Sure do, and believe me, I’m completely in the dark here.”

“Yeah, well any light comes on, you let me know.”

Roark left the room and I could hear her talking to someone out in the hallway, though I couldn’t make out what was being said.

Alone in the room, I suddenly realized how tired I was. It had been over a day and a half since I’d had any sleep. I didn’t care if the Evergreen Motel was a complete dump, as long as my room had a bed.

“Okay, we’ve removed the body, so you can collect your things, but don’t touch anything else. Our people are going to check for prints,” Roark said, poking her head back in the door for a second.

I raised my weary bones off the chair, left the room, and crossed the hall into my old one. Tina’s body was gone, though there was a slight trace of blood on the bedspread. Other than that, no one would have any idea that a murder had taken place in the room only hours before. My stuff was right where I had left it, and it didn’t look like anyone had disturbed it. I went into the bathroom to collect my toiletries. It had a faint odor of vomit and I resisted the impulse to call the front desk to remind Peter to have it freshened up. Let sleeping dogs lie.

I was almost out the door when I turned to take one last look around. Tina’s travel bag was sitting on the bed, and the vodka

bottle was still on the table. Even if it wasn't my liquor of choice, I could see no sense letting it go to waste. I walked over, grabbed the bottle, and put it into the shopping bag that held my belongings. Just then I heard a cell phone ringing from somewhere in her bag. I looked over my shoulder at the door. No one seemed to be in the hallway. The phone rang again. I dug into her bag and found the phone. The display read "Puddy." It rang again.

I know I shouldn't have, but I answered it. "Hello?"

"Who's this?" the voice on the other end asked. "Let me talk to Tina."

"Um, Tina can't come to the phone right now."

"Bullshit. Put her on," the voice demanded.

"Yeah, well, you know Tina's been drinking, what with all that's happened. Why don't you come on over to the hotel, Puddy? We can talk."

"Who the hell is this? How do you know my name? Is that bitch talking? You tell her she says anything to anyone that gets me in trouble, she's a dead woman."

"You're too late, Puddy. Someone already killed her. You want to tell me anything about it?"

"She's—dead. Oh shit, oh shit—"

The phone went dead.

"Hey, what are you doing?" a voice asked from behind me.

I turned. It was the young officer who had stood guard at my door.

"Um, just checking for messages," I answered.

"Yeah, right. You're under arrest and coming to the police station with me."

So much for the Evergreen Motel. Seemed I found other accommodations.

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Fascinated by the complexities of human nature, John Essick uses his vast experience as a writer to craft wonderful stories with a unique blend of crime, mystery, and humor. *Last Respects* is his first novel in the Wes Graham series. His screenplay for the short film *Wishing Well* won the Best Science Fiction Screenplay at the Indie Gathering International Film Festival. He currently lives in the Mid-Hudson Valley region of New York State with his wife, stage director June Prager.