

# The Hamlet Mysteries 1

Volume 1

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# To Not Be In Hamlet

1

I stood in the driveway and stared in utter contempt and disbelief. Water ran in a wide stream out of the garage and flowed down the gravel drive, past my feet and towards the street.

What now?

My shoes slapped in the water as I walked towards the back of the garage. I knew where the water was coming from. It was laundry water leaking from the drain pipe that ran along the back block wall of the garage. The house was, like many houses in the rolling hills of Michigan, built into the side of a hill.

The basement walked out into the garage. In the basement was the washing machine which drained into an old clay pipe that came through the wall, into the garage, across the back of the garage, out through the far wall and disappeared into the ground. After about 20 feet the land beside the garage dropped down another 10 feet. It was out of this embankment the old clay pipe reappeared disgorging wash water on the ground. This was not only somewhat disgusting, but I knew it must violate about a dozen health codes. The ancestral home of the MacNeils, now more than 70 years old, was built in an era when building codes in rural areas such as this were lax, at best, and the simple solution to something undesirable was to just dump it somewhere else.

I did not want to deal with this. It wasn't really my problem. I was just house sitting for my parents who were on a perpetual vacation since my father's retirement. It wasn't just the hassle of finding someone to fix it. It was the fact that any licensed plumber was going to have to bring it up to code. That meant major changes and big money.

After a few minutes of applying deep thought to the problem I decided to deal with the situation by walking into the basement, upstairs, out on to the deck (which constituted the roof of the garage) and sitting down in a lawn chair with a cold beer and watching the water run out into the street.

By the time I finished my second beer I was down to deciding between believing that I could fix the pipe myself and just letting the water run out into the street. Hearing the siren coming down the street pushed me towards fixing the pipe myself.

I turned my head and watched Russell go flying past in his black and white souped-up Malibu, the words "Hamlet Police" in bold print down the side, siren cranked up. He sure loved that siren. Ten years ago the sleepy rural township of Hamlet decided they needed the services of a policeman to keep the peace. The peace was typically only disrupted by drunk drivers. Still, the township council, after a futile search to find someone that was willing to move to such a small town and work for peanuts, opted to hire a local guy—fresh out of the criminal justice curriculum of a nearby community college. Russell Crane, sheriff of Hamlet.

I returned to carefully examining the label on my beer bottle. Minutes later there was the distinctive sound of crunching on the gravel driveway below me as someone pulled in. I glanced back over my shoulder to see who it was. Crap. A beat up old rusting pickup truck coughed itself to sleep in my driveway. I recognized the truck immediately. In fact, almost everyone in the township would

recognize that vehicle. I walked through the house and emerged out of the garage just as he was sliding his chunky frame out of the truck.

"Wilson Daggot." I said.

"Evenin', Sammy." Wilson said with half a smile on his face. That was somewhat significant, the smile I mean. Wilson Daggot scratched out a living doing any odd job anybody would pay him to do. Usually it was work no one else would care to touch. You need dead livestock disposed of, call Wilson Daggot. You need a new drain field (where no drain field would ever be permitted), call Wilson Daggot. You need...well you get the point.

"Don't call me Sammy." I don't know how many times I have to tell some people that.

Wilson's unshaven face twitched in some kind of acknowledgment and a half shrug untucked even more of his grungy faded button down shirt. Wilson took his typical shuffle step closer to me. He kicked up a little splatter of mud from the running stream in the driveway. The mud left brown speckles on his khaki pants that were officially dirty years ago.

Wilson glanced down at his feet. "Having trouble, are you?"

"Drain pipe is leaking." I said.

"I could fix that for you."

I sighed. Everything Wilson Daggot did was, in some way, angled towards making money.

"I'll take care of it."

"I'd do it for free."

I had to shake my head slightly. I was sure I didn't hear that correctly. Then reason set in and I nodded. "You want something from me."

Wilson shuffled his feet and looked around uncomfortably. That was odd. I had seen Wilson stare people (including me) right in the eye and lie to them about something a six year old could see wasn't true. I had seen people so pissed at him they were in his face screaming obscenities while he just smiled and shrugged back. I watched (on more than one occasion) meekly explaining to the sheriff some elaborate reason he was caught doing something illegal—all the while maintaining an oily detachment from the conversation. I had never seen Wilson genuinely uncomfortable.

It was making me uncomfortable. "Out with it Wilson."

"Well, you see, it's like this. You know Danny, right?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess. He's that kid you have working for you, right?"

Wilson nodded. "Yes sir. That's right. Well, you see, we was doing some work for that new guy up off Cherry Creek road. Land clearin' stuff." Sirens sounded off in the distance.

"What new guy?"

"The guy, he bought some Benedict land off of Cherry Creek road. He's from the city somewhere."

The Benedict family constituted a pretty fair percentage of the immediate population of Hamlet. There were cousins, uncles, aunts, second cousins and what not scattered all over the surrounding

countryside. As a matter of fact, most of the houses lining the opposite side of the street, the main road through Hamlet, from my parent's house were occupied by Benedicts. Cherry Creek road crossed the main road about a quarter mile south of where we stood.

"OK, so you were clearing land for this guy."

"Yeah, Mr. Barrister is his name. Anyway we was startin' to clear some land for a road when what do you know, but some trash starts poppin' up---right out of the ground. And so, I get to be starin' around and all of a sudden the land starts lookin' familiar."

It took me a minute to catch on. "You mean that land where the old dump was?"

"Yes sir, the same. I recognized where I was the moment I seen that trash poppin' up."

I remember, as a kid, going with my father up Cherry Creek road to throw trash into the dump. It was nothing more than a very large pit and people just backed their vehicles up and tossed their trash (anything and everything) down into one end of the hole. As that end began to fill an area next to it would be opened up and the dirt from the new area was just piled top of the trash to cover it up. It was ecological ignorance at it grandest.

"I guess I didn't know that was Benedict land. I suppose I should have assumed it."

"Old Mr. Donald's I think. Anyway," Wilson continued, "so I point it out to Mr. Barrister and tell him about the old dump and he goes nuts crazy, you know, screamin' and shoutin' at me like I put the trash there or somethin'. I tried to tell him it wasn't me, it was just the old dump, but he won't listen. Just keeps on threatenin' me with things. Says he's got connections and stuff."

"So? It's not your fault he bought an old dump."

"Yeah! That's what I said to him. But...those connections. You know I seen it on TV. When people say they have connections it means that one night someone just shows up at your door and bang! You're dead."

My shoulders sagged. "Oh, please, Wilson. The man's just pissed he was sold a worthless piece of land. He's not going to hire someone to kill you. You didn't sell him the land. It's old Donald Benedict he should be pissed at."

"Oh, he is. Says it's some kind of redneck conspiracy. Says he's gonna get us all back for this."

"Relax, Wilson, this Barrister will have to take it up with his attorney and Old Donald. It doesn't really have anything to do with you. So why are you telling me all of this anyway?"

Wilson shook his head. "You don't understand. You didn't see the look in his eye. He means to do something."

"So, go tell Russell about it. Why come to me?"

Wilson looked down at his feet. "Well, you know Russell and I don't get along all that well."

"That's because you're a thief and con man, Wilson."

Wilson's expression was one of shock and disbelief. "Sammy, that is a hurtful and mean thing to say."

I stared at him for a moment waiting for the memories for a couple of past incidents between the two us to drift back around.

Wilson glanced back down to the gravel. "Well, OK, maybe there have been a few times where there were some misunderstandings, but..." He trailed off.

"So what is it you think I can do about it?" I asked, growing weary of the conversation. A third bottle of beer was calling to me.

"Well, I thought maybe you could talk to him."

"Talk to who?"

"Mr. Barrister."

"About what?"

"Just calm the man down. Explain to him it's not my fault he bought the old dump." Wilson said.

"Why would this Barrister guy listen to me? I don't even know the guy."

"Cause you're a famous writer."

"Wilson, I wrote one mystery novel that barely sold enough copies to pay for the printing. That hardly constitutes fame and fortune."

"I'll make you a deal. I'll fix that pipe for you if you just go talk to this guy and settle things down."

My inclination was to decline any deal with Wilson, but I did not relish the idea of fixing that drain pipe. Normally, if I wanted a job done right Wilson was not the man for the job, but I knew for this job to be done right would involve a major expenditure of money and possibly a fine or two from the health department. A job done by Wilson was almost always a half-assed job, but considering the whole drain system as it stood was already a half-assed job that issue was moot. Besides, my end of the deal only involved talking to this Barrister guy.

"I can't promise you I can convince this Barrister guy anything."

"That's OK. That's OK. I just want be able to sleep at night." Wilson said eagerly as he handed me a scrap of paper with Barrister's phone number on it.

I shook my head. "If you want to sleep at night, Wilson, stop watching TV."

Wilson nodded with a grunt and shuffled back to his truck. "I'll be by tomorrow to look at that pipe." The truck chugged to life and creaked out of the driveway leaving behind the stench of burning oil.

I glanced down at the piece of paper and stuffed it into my pocket. I returned to the deck clutching a third beer. As I neared the end of the third beer gravel crunched on the driveway again. I turned this time to see Hamlet's finest pulling in. I made my way back down to the driveway.

Russell Crane rolled out of the car. As always, he hiked his pants up in a less than professional manner. Russell wasn't fat nor muscular—just a bit bulky. Typically, though, it was Russell's red hair that people first noticed about him. That is, if he wasn't wearing his wide brimmed hat. The hat was usually a tip off. When he was on "official" business the hat was on. He reached back into the car, pulled the hat out and popped it on to his head.

I stood just outside of the garage as he approached. "Russell."

Russell nodded as he came up. "Sammy."

I sighed and waited. Russell never seemed to be in much of a hurry.

"Jimmy Seton drove by, said he saw Daggot's truck here."

I nodded. "Yep. He was here."

"Don't happen to know where he was headed do you?" Russell asked in a very professional monotone voice.

I shook my head. "Nope. Is this about Barrister?"

Russell looked at me quizzically. "Barrister?" He shook his head. "Don't know anything about Barrister. I'm looking for Daggot because of Danny."

"Danny? Oh, the kid that works for Wilson."

"Worked."

"Worked?" I asked.

Russell gave a brief and dramatic nod. "Just found him floating down in the lake. Dead."

2

"Dead? How did that happen?" I asked. Dead people, at least unaccountably dead, were not common here so it would be big news around town very shortly.

"Don't know yet. The county coroner will be examining the body. Do you know where Daggot is?" Russell gave me his serious cop stare.

I shook my head. "He's going to do some work for me, but I wasn't expecting to see him back here until, maybe tomorrow."

Russell huffed and glanced down at the ground.

"I assume you already tried his shack." I said. Wilson lived in what was once someone's vacation cabin. No one was quite sure how it was he came to live there, but the generally accepted explanation was that he simply moved in and established some kind of squatter's rights to it. It was in terrible shape years ago when he first moved into it and his upkeep on it hadn't improved the overall look of it. The cabin was a patchwork of old wood and corrugated aluminum.

"Yep. Went there first." Russell scuffed some gravel with his feet. "Well, if you see him, let me know."

I nodded. There was something, far back in my head, that stirred. Couldn't put my finger on it, but I didn't like it.

Russell got in his car and drove off. I, in turn, made, what was for me, an important decision. If I wanted to relax with a beer, I would have to do it somewhere other than here. So I headed out. Six houses, two sets of railroad tracks (separated by a small bridge over an unnamed creek), up a hill and I arrived at the Hamlet Pub.

The Hamlet Pub was an old wooden building. A creaky wooden floor, a long worn bar running along the right side and a constant smell of stale cigarettes, stale beer and musty wood. In the back right

was a bathroom and a grimy kitchen. The only natural light came from a large frosted window on the front wall, immediately left of the door. The only other light came from dingy, single bulb light fixtures hanging at various intervals around the room.

As usual there were only a couple of people in the place, including, of course, Ben Sterling. He used to own a small print shop next door to the pub. He had long since given up on that business and now worked at drinking full time.

I took a seat at the bar, a safe distance away from Ben. I had no interest in a conversation with him. It's not as if one could really understand much of his slurred speech these days anyway. I didn't see Harry, the owner, but Renee was working behind the bar. Renee and I went to school together. She had lived in this town her whole life.

"Hey, stranger." Renee said as she wandered over to me.

"Hey, Renee. I'll have a beer." I said, though Renee was already drawing one up for me anyway.

"Haven't seen you in a while." She said setting the beer in front of me.

I shrugged. "I am managing to stay busy. Just wanted to come in," I turned indicating the rest of the nearly empty bar, "and make sure Harry didn't go bankrupt."

Renee snickered. Her short black hair jiggling as she laughed. "Yeah. Well, I might take no business over the patronage of some people."

"Really?" I said. "I hope you're not referring to me."

Renee shook her head. "No, it's that Barrister guy. What an ass."

I shook my head. "Never met the guy."

"You're lucky. He was in here earlier. Downed a few shots and spent his time grumbling about how all us 'hicks' have something in for him. Some kind of conspiracy to prevent him from building here."

"Ah, because he bought the old dump site."

"Why would someone buy that land?" Renee asked.

"Well, I would guess he didn't know it was the old dump. The question is how did he ever get a permit to build on it?" I said.

"Yeah. Anyway, what's the deal with that body down in the lake?" Renee asked. News moves like wildfire in small towns.

"That kid Danny, the one that worked with Wilson Daggot."

"Is that who it was? Hmm.." Renee thought for a moment. "Didn't really know him. Only ever saw him once or twice. He was a little creepy. At least, when he looked at me I kind of got the creeps."

"Really? I only ever saw him a couple of times too, but I never got the impression he was scary at all—just not the sharpest tool in the shed."

Renee shook her head. "Not scary. Creepy. It's not the same thing. Creepy like when he looked at me he was thinking about something that—trust me—was never going to happen between us. How'd it happen?"

I shook my head. "I was just talking to Russell, but he didn't divulge any details. You know it's all official police business."

Renee made a sarcastic face. "Of course. I heard he was just floating over in the swampy end of the lake."

I nodded. We were quiet for a moment.

"I can't believe something like that happened here."

I nodded again. It did seem a bit surreal. We were silent again for another minute.

"You know Becky has been wondering when you were going to stop in again. She'll be pissed if she misses seeing you." Renee said. I went to school with Becky as well. She too worked at the bar.

"Well, I'm sure I'll be seeing her more. I have decided I probably need to drink more and think less. Thinking only ever gets me into trouble." I smiled.

"I'm not sure that's the best career move. Besides," She subtly indicated Ben at the other end of the bar, "I think that job's already been filled."

I nodded. "You may be right. That would be some stiff competition. He's a professional."

"So, why don't you just ask Becky out sometime?" Renee asked.

I shrugged. "Never been one to rush into something."

"If you ran right over to her apartment this minute and asked her out it would hardly constitute rushing into something."

"Maybe so." I said. "Well, we'll see." My history with women had been less than stellar. I had a bad habit of picking women with self destructive issues. After Callie I had decided it was time for a hiatus from women. I thought I had finally found someone, in Callie, different from previous choices. She wasn't self destructive, at least not overtly, but for those around her it was like trying to stand and watch a hurricane as it passed overhead. After three tries at building some kind of relationship with her I was feeling like I might be eligible for FEMA help.

Renee wandered down the bar to clean some glasses. I lifted the beer to take a drink and it came to me. That thing in the back of my head that bothered me as I was talking to Russell. He was uncomfortable. Russell was uncomfortable—no, not uncomfortable. He was unnerved. I had never seen him like that before.

3

It was mid morning and out of desperation I headed into town to the grocery store. The small grocery store was on the opposite side of the street from the pub. I drove up (because I had no desire to carry the groceries back to the house) and parked in front of the small red brick building. Parking was not a problem since there was never more than 3 or 4 cars, at most, parked along this side of the street.



Marjorie and Brim owned the Hamlet Grocery. They had owned it since I was a kid. It had four weakly lit aisles and a meat counter in the back. Marjorie stocked shelves and checked out customers while Brim worked the meat counter.

I walked in past the checkout counter where Marjorie, a big square built woman with long black hair, a big nose and a dark complexion, was in a quiet intense conversation with the only other patron of the store as she checked him out. I wandered the aisles with a hand basket carefully making selections from very limited choices. I nodded to Brim as he thumped onto a chopping block with a meat cleaver and I rounded the back of an aisle. He was stocky, ruddy skinned, black hair, nearly bald on the top and a black mustache that, like the hair on his head, was speckled with gray and he was missing his left thumb—a fact that no one ever wanted to talk about since its final resting place was unknown and no one wanted to think about where the butcher's thumb ended up.

I carried my basket to the front counter where Marjorie leaned over the counter as if to tell something private and secret—though, other than Brim, we were the only ones in the store.

"Sammy, I'm sure you have heard about that boy's murder." She said, glancing about.

Instinctively I glanced about, still not sure who we were concealing our conversation from.

"It's Sam." I said correcting her.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. "No, I think the boy's name was Danny. Didn't really know him, though."

"I meant, uh, never mind, I think you're right. So, who said it was murder?" I asked.

Marjorie began punching the register. Bar code scanning hadn't made its way into Hamlet as yet. She worked her way through my basket as she talked.

"Oh, but it was! He was shot right in the back of the head. Execution style. Oh, a terrible, terrible thing." She said nodding.

I stared out the plate glass windows of the front of the store, past the stacks of merchandise blocking some of the view. Terrible? Yes, but more than that (at least for me), it didn't make much sense. I didn't know Danny very well either or what he might be involved with that would have ended like that, but, from what I did remember of him, he never struck me as being swift enough in the head to get himself involved in anything worth getting killed over.

"You OK?" Marjorie asked, staring at me.

I glanced back at her. "Yeah." I picked up the bag of groceries and turned to go.

"Hold on there. Don't make me call Russell now, huh?" Marjorie said with a smile. She held out her hand.

"What?" I said, distracted.

"We still accept money for merchandise." She said, still smiling.

"Oh, sorry." I turned back and paid her. I drove back home and into the garage. As I climbed out of the car I heard someone else pulling into the gravel driveway. Maybe I needed to get a gate.

Turning I saw a dark blue convertible. I didn't recognize the driver. He was middle aged, golf shirt, slacks and a baseball cap (Red Sox)—probably hiding a balding head. Despite the cloudy skies he was wearing dark sunglasses which he smoothly whipped off as he walked up to me.

"Are you Sam MacNeil?" he asked.

I made noncommittal gestures. "Sometimes. Kind of depends on the day."

He stared at me for a moment. He didn't seem to find my answer particularly amusing.

"Well, for the sake of argument let's assume you are Sam MacNeil, the author." He said. "I am David Barrister." He extended a hand.

I hesitantly took his hand. "You have the property up Cherry Creek."

He made a brief nod. "Yes, well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. You seem to know these people pretty well, I thought you might be able to help me understand why these people are out to get me."

I stared at him blankly for a moment. "I guess I know these people. Mainly because I am one of these people." It was harder for me to actually say that than I would have expected.

Barrister hesitated. "I thought you just moved here recently."

"I'm just house sitting." I waved back towards the garage. "But I grew up here. Right here, as a matter of fact." I pointed towards the ground. I assumed he knew I didn't mean specifically right in the driveway.

"Oh." Barrister stood there clearly unsure about whether to continue or not.

"Look, Mr. Barrister, I very seriously doubt anyone here is 'out to get you'. First, because I truly don't believe anyone here gives a rat's ass whether you do something with that old dump property or not and, second, getting people around here to focus on something and work together is, quite probably, beyond the realm of reality."

Barrister stared at me for a moment. "Well, I don't know. Every time I go out on that property they're watching me."

"In a town this size people see just about everything." I said.

Barrister shook his head slightly. "No, I mean I saw someone in the trees at the edge of the property watching me."

"Hmm." I said. "That does seem like a bit more effort than most people around here would put into it. Generally, peeping through their curtains is sufficient."

"They didn't see me, but I spotted them."

I nodded. "Well, I don't know, but I doubt there's any kind of conspiracy against you. On an unrelated note, I understand you have a problem with Wilson Daggot?" I asked.

"Daggot?" Barrister waved a hand disgustedly. "That idiot? No. If he was part of something he would have known before he even started tearing up the ground what was there."

"You threatened him." I watched Barrister's face, but he only seemed puzzled at what I said.

"Threatened him?"

"You had some 'connections'?" I prompted.

The light went on and Barrister waved his hand dismissively. "Oh. I was just pissed. This doesn't have anything to do with Daggot. It's Benedict I need to deal with."

I nodded. "That's what I told Wilson. And the kid Danny?" I was just curious to see Barrister's face.

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Oh, yeah. I heard about that. Kind of weird. Wouldn't have expected something like that in a place like this."

"Nor would I." I said.

Barrister shrugged. "Guess he was into something bad."

I shrugged. "Maybe. He was out working on your property with Daggot?"

Barrister nodded. "Yeah. He was supposed to be out there the other day. Guess he never made it. Anyway, I'll see you around." He turned and walked back to his car.

"Yeah." I said. "Probably so."

As the sun began dropping into the trees to the west I stared at the pile of laundry and, in its own way, it stared back. The situation would have to be dealt with, but that involved addressing the pipe in the garage. I didn't really want to think about that. Fortunately, the doorbell spared me from that fate.

"Becky." I said as I opened the door wider and beckoned her in.

Short with straight blonde hair pulled into a single pony tail down past her shoulders she waved a pizza box past my face as she sauntered in.

"I brought you a present." She said with a smile and carried it across the living room to the dining room table. She circled around the counter and began searching kitchen cabinets for plates.

"I see that." I said following her.

"You don't mind do you?" She asked, not really waiting for an answer as she pulled down a couple of plates.

I shook my head. "I can never argue with pizza."

"I know that. I was referring more to the company." She said as we sat down.

"I can't argue with that either."

Becky smiled at me. "Good. I was on my way to work and thought you might be lying on the floor dying of starvation."

I nodded. "Close to it."

"So," Becky spoke around a piece of pizza, "have you heard about Wilson Daggot?"

"Russell was looking for him."

"Russell found him and arrested him." Becky said.

"Arrested him? For what?"

"That kid Danny's murder."

I stopped with my a piece of pizza in midair. "That's ridiculous. Wilson's a lot of things, but there is no way he's a murderer. Russell damn well knows that."

Becky nodded. "Well, you know Russell, he wants to make sure everyone knows he's doing his job."

"Yeah, well, that's just stupid." I said, chewing slowly through the piece of pizza.

Becky studied me for a moment. "Hmm, I know that look. I see the gears starting to turn."

I glanced over at her and then shook my head. "Don't know what you're talking about. I just think it's ridiculous to arrest Wilson. That's all."

Becky smiled. "No it isn't. I know you. Once you get something in your head you can't let go of it until you've got it all figured out. That's why you write books. Remember you once told me that all stories are, essentially, mysteries." Becky leaned towards Sam, cradling her beaming face in her hands.

"Unfortunately you don't seem to focus on the right mysteries."

I smiled back at Becky. "Perhaps."

"I could stop by after work, you know, in case you wanted to investigate another mystery."

I leaned back. "You know that's way past my bedtime."

Becky made a face. "Right."

4

The Township offices were in an old church, complete with a tall white steeple over the double front doors, about a block off the main street running through Hamlet. The fact that it was an old church was appropriate since, if you wanted the powers that be in the township to act upon something for you, it was best to approach the building and all occupants therein in a most pious and humble manner. People that ran small towns took their job far more seriously than those running major countries.

I walked up the steps and into the Township offices. There was a little unenthusiastic clatter of typewriters (yes, they still used them here) and paper shuffling as I walked into the main room. After passing through what used to be the entry way and cloak room of the church there was a counter that blocked further progress. If you were lucky someone would eventually notice you and, depending on their mood, would come forward to see why you were bothering them. No one was immediately interested in my presence so I just circled past the counter. This, of course, got an immediate reaction. Jessie, the head clerk of the Township suddenly popped up from behind several cubicle walls and headed straight for me.

Fully aware that if I were to hesitate for even a moment Jessie would drive me back beyond the counter, with a broom handle, if necessary, I veered right into the open office door of Russell.

Russell's head snapped up from a desk full of papers. He was clearly puzzled that someone would appear in his doorway without the official and proper process of being announced by Jessie.

"Got a minute?" I asked.

Russell hesitated, shot a glance at Jessie who was suddenly hovering behind me, then waved me towards a chair in front of his desk.

I sat down. Russell stared at me expectantly.

"I...understand you arrested Wilson Daggot."

"And?"

"And...you don't seriously believe he murdered that kid, do you?"

Russell seemed to be considering several different replies. I was sure some of them were not flattering.

"He was the last person the kid was with and he cannot account for his whereabouts at the approximate time of death."

"But Wilson Daggot? I can think of a lot of things to call him, but a murderer is not one of them."

"And you have a better suspect in mind?" Russell stared across the desk.

I looked down. "Well..."

"And why am I even having this discussion with you?"

"Because arresting Wilson Daggot doesn't make sense to you either."

"Now hold on..."

"Where's the sheriff?" The voice came bellowing in from the outer office.

As I turned Barrister came bustling into the doorway of Russell's office. Again, Jessie hustled up to hover just behind Barrister. With a disgusted flick of his hand Russell waved Jessie off.

Russell rubbed a hand across his face before he spoke. "What is it, Mr. Barrister?"

"I don't know who you people think you are, but there are procedures for how things are done."

Russell was quiet for a moment. "Am I supposed to know what the hell you are talking about?"

"You're health department people."

Russell's face contorted. "Bailey?"

Barrister shook his head. "No, neither one of them was Bailey."

"Old man Bailey is still doing permits?" I asked. The man had to be about 110 by now. I thought about my current drainage issue. This didn't bode well. Bailey lived to make people suffer for each and every permit they needed.

"I need you to check out the two men that were just out on my property."

"Check out?" Russell stared up at him.

"Yes. Check them out. Look, I was out on my property when two guys drive up. They tell me they were from the health department."

"I don't give a rat's butt about your property issues right now Barrister. In case you're unaware I am involved in a murder investigation." Russell stood up.

"You think maybe I could talk to him?" I asked.

Russell glanced over at me. "Talk to who?"

"Wilson."

Russell stared at me for a moment. "No, you cannot talk to the prisoner."

"I have a far better chance of getting something out of him than you do, wouldn't you say?"

Russell started to say something and then stopped. He hesitated.

"Jessie!" Russell called out.

Jessie appeared in the doorway.

Russell nodded toward me. "Take Sammy here back to see our prisoner, would you please."

I slid past Barrister.

"Now, Mr. Barrister..." I heard Russell saying as I followed Jessie towards the back of the building.

"Are you alone?" Wilson asked anxiously.

I glanced over at Jessie and back at Wilson. He sat on the edge of a cot in the tiny cell. Without getting up Wilson leaned over to try and glance past me.

"It's just me." I said. I made a gesture towards the door, for Jessie to unlock it. She looked at me dumbly.

"The sheriff didn't say anything about opening the cell." She said with a huff and walked back up the hallway towards the front of the building.

Wilson stood up and came over to the door of the cell. He leaned close to the bars. "Did Russell arrest that Barrister guy yet?"

"Arrest him for what?" I asked.

"For Danny's murder."

"Wilson, I don't think Barrister killed Danny—or anyone else. He may be a bit of an ass, but I don't think he's a murderer."

"How can you tell, oh, that's right you know these kind of people. You can kinda read them, right?"

Wilson said staring closely at me.

"No, actually I write them, but that's irrelevant. Look, Danny had to be into something. Any ideas what that might be?"

Wilson shook his head. "I don't know. The boy didn't talk much. He didn't have no troubles that I know of. Not till we started working on Barrister's land and turned up that stuff."

"Was there anything odd in the trash that you guys plowed up?"

"Odd?" Wilson thought about it. "No. Just trash stuff. You know, the usual things people dump off."

"Alright." I turned to go and stopped. "Was Danny out at the property the day he was killed?"

Wilson nodded. "Yeah. I think so. Yeah, I remembered when I dropped him off there he asked me about the holes."

"What holes?"

"The holes. Someone had dug some holes out on the property." Wilson said.

"Why would someone be digging holes out there?" I asked.

Wilson shrugged. "Don't know. Just thought it was Barrister. You know, checking the land for more trash."

"Hmm." I said and turned again.

"Wait. What about me?"

I looked back at Wilson. "What about you? You're not going anywhere, are you?" I walked back up front.

"If you're not going to do anything then you'll be hearing from my attorney!" Barrister was shouting at Russell.

I glanced at Jessie behind the counter. She was pretending to be looking for something, but I knew she was hiding. When she saw me she grabbed my arm and pulled me close. "Get him out of here before Russell throws him in jail."

"And the downside of that would be...?"

"We only have one cell." Jessie nodded towards the back of the building.

I started to say something, then caught her meaning. Barrister and Wilson sharing a cell. Probably a really bad idea. I sighed and moved to the door of Russell's office.

"Barrister." I said.

Both men looked at me as if I had just suggested something very unflattering about their lineage.

"Why don't you show me what's been going on with your property."

Barrister stared at me for a moment in surprise.

Russell opened his mouth to tell me to stay out of his official business, then reconsidered.

"OK. Great. Finally someone is taking my problem seriously." Barrister said walking past me.

Russell shot me a warning glance, but said nothing.

15 minutes of driving brought us out to Barrister's property. It was multiple acres of weeds surrounded by trees that lined its perimeter. I could see several stretches of upturned ground where Wilson had run a blade over it.

I nodded. "I remember this place. I used to come here with my Dad. Sometimes he'd let me throw the trash out of the back of the truck."

"A touching story." Barrister said, but his tone was less than sincere.

We walked around a little scanning the edges of the property, but no one could be seen.

I pointed towards a couple of spots where someone had clearly been digging recently with shovels.  
“What were these for?”

Barrister shrugged. “I don't know. Ask Daggot. He must have dug them.”

“Maybe it was the health department guys.”

Barrister shook his head. “I don't think they were really from the health department.”

“Well, unless one of them was about 110 years old they weren't from Hamlet. Maybe they were from the county.”

“Maybe.” Barrister seemed unconvinced.

5

“I know that look.” Becky said as she walked across the deck where I sat staring at the empty fields stretching out behind the house.

“I don't have a look. I am devoid of looks.” I replied.

“If you mean fashion—definitely, but you do have a few expressions—not many, but a few.” She said sitting down on the edge of a lawn chair.

“Hmm, I'll have to work on that.” I said.

“So?”

“So.”

“C'mon. Out with it.” Becky said impatiently.

“Something's not making sense.”

“About what? Why you aren't asking me out to dinner?” Becky asked with a somewhat sarcastic look on her face.

I shot her a glance. “About what's going on at Barrister's property and Danny's murder.”

Becky's brow furrowed. “I didn't know there was any connection between them.”

I shrugged. “Doesn't seem like it—other than Danny worked on the property.”

“But you think they're connected?” Becky prompted.

I didn't answer her right away. I didn't have a good answer for her, but it felt like something was there in the back of my head. I just couldn't put a pin in it to keep it from eluding me.

“I called the county a little earlier. They said they sent a guy out to look at Barrister's property yesterday morning. Barrister said two men claiming to be from the health department were out on his property this morning.”



“Well, that does seem a little odd, I guess. What did the county guy have to say about Barrister's property?”

I looked at her. “Funny thing about that. I couldn't talk to him. Nobody has seen him since yesterday morning—when he left to go look at Barrister's property.”

“That's weird.”

I nodded slowly. “Things keep revolving around that property. Just can't see why. There's nothing but garbage there.”

We were both quiet for a moment. Then Becky stood up.

“I've got to go to work. Are you going to stop by the pub tonight?”

I shook my head. “Not tonight.”

I knew she wanted me to say yes, but I had a feeling I didn't like and I wasn't in the mood to socialize. She left and the darkness closed in around the deck.

6

“You're doing it wrong.”

I turned around slowly and looked at him. My hands were grimy and had an indescribable smell.

“Billy Fallon.” I said.

“I know my name.” The boy said, his face scowling.

“So...you're an expert on plumbing now too?” I asked, only slightly masking my sarcasm. It was my halfhearted attempt to conform to social rules. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I thought it seemed wrong to be blatantly sarcastic to a 10 year old boy.

“Watched my Dad fix pipes. He don't fix 'em like that.” He pointed past me at the drain pipe that emerged from the wall of the basement.

I glanced back at the layers of duct tape circling the pipe. I stared at the water steadily dripping from the edges of the tape.

“So. How does your Dad fix pipes?” I asked.

“Not like that. That ain't right.”

I sighed as I turned back towards Billy. “Thank you. That was very unhelpful.”

Billy shrugged. “Welcome.” His sincere tone was even less appreciated.

A car pulled into the driveway. I stood up and walked to where Billy was standing at the front of the garage.

Russell rolled out of the car. He hiked up his pants. He started to reach for his hat, then hesitated. He decided against the hat and walked up to the garage.

"Sammy. Billy." Russell said.

"Morning." I said.

"You're supposed to have your hat on." Billy said.

"What?" Russell looked at Billy.

"Any time you're wearing your uniform and not in your car you're supposed to wear your hat. It's part of the uniform." Billy said confidently.

Russell stared at him for a moment and then looked at me. "I let Daggot out this morning."

"So, you agree he's not a murderer?" I asked.

Russell shook his head slightly. "No. Just don't have any evidence. Still going to watch him, though."

"Saw it on a show."

Russell looked back at Billy. "What?"

"The hat. Saw it on a cop show. It's part of the uniform. You're out of uniform." Billy said smiling.

Russell stared at Billy again for a moment. He looked back at me. "I understand you called the county health department yesterday."

I hesitated. "I thought only the NSA monitored my phone calls."

Russell made a huff. He did that from time to time, but it was never quite clear what it meant. "There was a missing person's report sent out today for the county health guy they sent out here day before yesterday. I called them up to find out if they had any ideas where he was going or who he was planning on seeing and what do you know? They tell me that you were calling about him just yesterday." He stared at me expectantly.

"I could probably turn you in."

"What?" Russell glanced down at Billy. He took a breath to say something.

"I gotta go." Billy said casually and strolled on down the driveway.

We both watched him for a moment, then Russell turned back to me.

"Any leads on Danny's murder?" I asked.

"You're changing the subject." Russell replied.

I shook my head slightly. "I'm not sure that I am."

Russell stared at me for a heartbeat or two. The hesitation said something. Russell took his job very seriously. As a general rule (bordering on absolute) he wasn't open to anyone telling him how to do his job. If he wanted your opinion, which he rarely, if ever, did, he would ask for it. I knew then that both the county detectives and Russell were getting nowhere with Danny's murder.

"This isn't one of your mystery novels, you know." He meant it to be at least somewhat sarcastic, but it didn't come out that way. I think it was all he could think of to say, because he surely wasn't going to ask me my opinion on an ongoing investigation.

"I think something is going on with Barrister's property and Danny's murder is somehow tied into it."

"And you base that on what?" Russell asked.

I glanced away. "Well, just a feeling at the moment."

Russell shook his head. "As I said, Sammy, this ain't a plot for one of your stories. Is that why you were calling the county? You're using this for your stories?"

I started to shake my head, but stopped. What was I doing? Going with Barrister out to his property, calling the county about their missing employee? In point of fact I wasn't working on anything at the moment and certainly wasn't thinking anything here was worthy of writing about, but if I told Russell that it would only imply then that I was messing around in his investigation. That would not be a good idea.

"Sorry." I said. "Force of habit."

Russell nodded. "You best leave this real world stuff to us."

I nodded once without saying anything. It was my way of ending a discussion without committing to anything.

Russell pointed past me. "You best get back to it then. Your pipe's leaking."

I nodded again. "I know."

Russell left while I remained standing at the front of the garage.

7

I had to drive past the township office three times over the course of 45 minutes before Russell's car was no longer parked there. Finally I pulled up and went in. Jessie popped her up from somewhere behind the counter when I walked in.

"Russell's not here." She said.

I waved a hand casually. "That's alright. I was just wondering if I could look at permit records."

Jessie looked at me suspiciously. "I don't know if I can do that. I would have to check with Mr. Bailey first."

I cringed internally. I knew that was going to be more difficult to get his permission to look through his old records than skinning a live tiger. "Aren't they part of public records?"

"Oh, I don't know about that." Jessie said doubtfully. "I think I would still have to check with Mr. Bailey."

I sighed. "Okay. Well, could you ask him?"

She gave me a look that clearly indicated I was inconveniencing her. When I didn't rescind my request she thumped a stack of papers she was carrying down on the counter and waddled back to an office further back. She was back momentarily.

"He's kind of...busy right now." She said.

I knew what that meant. He was either sound asleep at his desk or slumped over dead. Either way, she wasn't about to disturb him.

"I really need to look something up." I said staring at her.

She hesitated. "Well, unless they are older records they would be in the filing cabinet behind his desk and I am not going to climb over him to get them."

"How old?"

"Mr. Bailey only keeps records in his office for the last calendar year. Everything else goes into the back files."

I had no idea when Barrister would have gotten a permit for his property. Chances were it was indeed within the last year, but access to the "back" files sounded considerably easier than going through Bailey.

"I think they are older than a year." I said, throwing out a lie.

"Well, I guess you could try the back files." She stood there staring at me.

"Okay." I stared back. 30 seconds passed.

"So," I said, "can I see the back files?"

"I guess you can." She stared at me.

I stared back.

"Could you take me back to them?" I waved a hand towards the back of the building.

Jessie glanced back in the direction I was waving and then back at me confused. "Back there?"

"Yes. The files."

"Oh, the back files aren't back there." She said flatly.

We stared at each other another 10 seconds.

I sighed. "Okay, the 'back' files aren't in the back. I get that. So where are the 'back' files?"

"Oh, they're next door. In the basement of the library." She said.

"Oh. Okay."

"We don't have room for them here." She said, like it was obvious to everyone—except me, of course.

I walked out of the township office and next door to the small Hamlet library. I had known Pat, the librarian, since I was very young. Enlisting her help in tracking down the permit records would be easy.

I walked into the library just as Pat was emerging out of her small cluttered office.

"Sammy, how are you?"

"Fine. Jessie told me I could look through the back files of the township."

"Oh, sure. They're downstairs."

I followed her around to a small set of stairs and down into the basement. There were boxes piled everywhere, on the floor, on shelves, on tables and atop old filing cabinets. Some boxes were taped shut with writing on them indicating, presumably, the contents. Others were open topped with papers just piled in them. Still other boxes contained books. These were books donated to the library that Pat hadn't gotten around to catalog for the library shelves upstairs.

"What records are you interested in?" She asked.

"Building permits."

"Hmm." She wandered around for several minutes deftly navigating the boxes like a hunting dog searching the brush. She alternated between slipping on her small reading glasses that hung from her neck to examine the writing on a box to pushing back wisps of silver hair that kept wanting to hang in front of her eyes.

It seemed every box she touched and almost every move she made kicked up a small cloud of dust.

Finally she stopped and stared at a box on top of a stack. "I think they are in here."

She pulled the box lid off, handed it to me and sifted through some file folders within it.

"Yes, this is it. That's kind of odd." She said.

"What is?" I asked.

"I would have expected this to have been buried deeper than that. Anyway, there you go." She said sliding the box over to me. "Let me know if you need anything else." She said as she headed back up the stairs.

"Thanks." I said, sitting down on the cement floor in front of the box. I peeked into the box. The contents were divided into larger folders that reflected individual months. The months were sequential. I jumped to the back of the box—the most current. It was December, but not the most recent December. That meant the most current records were almost 18 months old.

Well, I thought, I could at least skim through some of them since I was already here. I pulled out the December folder and opened it up. Within that folder were more folders. I skimmed the folder tabs. Foolishly I was expecting to scan for Barrister's name, but the folder tabs held only long cryptic numbers. I stared at them for several minutes before it occurred to me what they were: plot numbers. Great. I had no clue what number Barrister's land was. This was a waste of time.

I slid the December folder back into the box. I stared at the box for a moment. Just to be sure I flipped through the folder tabs back through the months on the outside chance that some of them were labeled by the owner's names. No luck. All plot numbers.

I picked up the box lid and stopped. Something seemed odd, but I couldn't place it. I set the lid back down and scanned through the main folders. Not sure what I was looking for. July, June, May, March, February. Wait. That was it. No April. I checked twice to see if it was out of sequence. No. Not there. Odd. Could there have been no permits for the month of April that year? The quantity for each of the other months suggested otherwise.

I picked up the box lid again and set it on top. I patted it back down. My mind was thinking about April, but my attention was pulled away. I looked down at the box lid. No dust.

Upstairs I crossed the library in a fog as my mind spun through questions I wasn't trying to ask.

"That was quick." Pat said from behind the front desk of the library. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Not sure what I found." I said absently.

"So," Pat said, leaning over the desk, apparently trying to be discrete, though we were the only ones in the library, "who do you think did it?"

I glanced over at her, puzzled. "The...missing...folder?"

"Missing folder? What missing folder?" she asked.

"There's a folder from last year missing."

"Oh, maybe Mr. Hesse has it. He was in here looking through records just the other day."

"Who's Mr. Hesse?" I asked.

She waved a hand in the direction of the township office. "Mr. Bailey's helper."

"Helper?"

"Yeah. He helps out Mr. Bailey when he can't be here. So who do you suspect?"

"The missing folder?" I stared at her.

"No," she said, "the murder."

"Murder? Oh, that Danny boy. Don't know."

"I know." Pat said nodding her head.

"Really." I said.

"Yes. It's just like out of a Chandler novel." She stopped and stared off into space. "No, wait, Hammett. Yes, I think it was..."

"So, you have it figured out." I said.

"Robert Parker."

"Robert Parker? The author?" I asked.

"Yes. Him."

"I kind of doubt he did it. Primarily, of course, because he's dead." I pointed out.

"No. I mean it's like something out of one of his novels. You know, that one, with the murder in it." She waved her hands around, but I couldn't follow what they were indicating.

"Don't they all have a murder in them?"

"You know, the one where they execute the guy just to make an example of him. Just to keep everyone else quiet."

"Quiet about what?" I asked, not having a clue what she was referring to.

“Oh, I don't remember. But it's just like that.” She pointed off towards the shelves of books—presumably toward the mystery section.

“So, you think Danny was killed to keep something quiet? And you said you knew who did it.”

“Gangsters. I bet it was a drug deal gone bad. And that boy knew something about it.” She nodded knowingly, more to herself than me.

“Well, it's a theory.” I said.

“Who do you think did it?” She said leaning towards me again.

I glanced around, still not finding anyone to eavesdrop on us. “Don't know. More questions than answers right now.”

“So, are you going to investigate it?” She asked, careful that no one overheard us.

I glanced around slowly so she knew I was being covert too and whispered my answer. “I'm a writer—not a detective.”

She waved off my words. It seemed to her there was no difference. “You'd better. Russell never will.”

“Well, I think it's really the job of the county detectives anyway.” I said.

She made a disgusted sound. “Those guys. They'd rather do nothing than risk doing or saying anything that might make them look bad. I was married to one, you know.”

I nodded. Pat had been divorced for many years now and her ex-husband had moved away long ago.

She grabbed my sleeve. “Keep me posted on what you find out.”

I sighed, extracted my sleeve from her grip and nodded. “Right.”

8

I pulled the door of the Hamlet Pub open and walked in. It always took a moment for your eyes to adjust. It didn't seem to matter how dark it may be outside it always felt like the pub was just a shade darker inside.

I saw him sitting at the bar. There were a couple of locals at a table against the back wall and, of course, Ben, but he was more like a piece of furniture that went with the building. Barrister sat stewing over a drink.

“Just the man I was looking for.” I said sliding on to a stool next to Barrister. I had seen his car in parking lot.

Barrister looked up. “Oh. You. It's Macalister, isn't it?”

“MacNeil.”

“Hey sweetie.” From out of seemingly nowhere Becky appeared next to me. I gave her a sideways glance. “Are you drinking or working?” She asked.

My eyes narrowed. “Working?”

Becky nodded her slightly towards Barrister.

"I'm not..." I closed my mouth. I waved a hand at the bar. Becky smiled and walked around behind the bar and drew a beer for me.

"Hey," I said, "when did you get the permit for that property?"

Barrister hesitated for a moment. "Last year. November, maybe."

I frowned. "You're sure it wasn't the year before that?"

Barrister looked at me. "No. Never would have bought if that Benedict guy had been honest with me."

"Did he know you were going to build on it?" I asked.

"Build on it?" Barrister stared at me sharply. "Who said I was going to build on it?"

"I...well, what were you going to do with it?"

"What does it matter? Nothing can be done with that land anyway."

"Well, what was the permit for?" I asked.

Barrister's eyes wandered. "Recreation. I was going to build a park there."

"A park? There?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with a park?" He asked indignantly.

"Nothing, I guess." A park out there didn't make much sense, but Barrister didn't appear to be in the mood to debate that.

"So, Bailey gave you a permit to put in a park there?"

Barrister shook his head. "No. Bailey wouldn't give me a permit for anything there. Wouldn't give me a reason. That's why I think Bailey and Benedict were in on something together. Anyway, I got busy with other business for a while and by the time I got back around to getting back here to either get a permit or an explanation Bailey wasn't here." Barrister stopped and sat quietly.

"In November?" I prodded.

Barrister nodded. "Yeah. That guy Hesse was doing Bailey's work and he gave me a permit."

"Did Hesse say anything about the property?"

Barrister shrugged. "I don't know. I don't really remember the exact conversation. Just happy to finally get a permit."

I nodded. "Well, my guess is it was not personal. As old as Donald Benedict is getting he may not even have remembered what was under there."

"Oh, he knew alright. When he and I walked the property I asked him about the dug up spots."

"Dug up spots?" I asked.

"Yeah, there were several spots where some dirt had been turned up and raked smooth again. I asked him about them. He said some guys had come by. Said they were from some environmental place and



wanted to do some ground testing. He gave them permission and they went and got permits and did some testing. He knew what was buried there.”

“When was this?”

Barrister shrugged again. “I don't know. Some months before.”

I sipped my beer.

“I'll be done at six. If you want to get something to eat.”

I looked over at Barrister. “What?”

Barrister gave me an odd look.

“Hey. Me.”

I turned and looked at Becky leaning on the bar in front of me. “Oh. Sure.”

Becky looked surprised. “Really?”

“Sure.” I said. “Wherever you want.”

Becky grabbed a napkin and whipped out a pen. “Let me write this day down.”

Barrister got up. “Let me know if you come up with anything useful, Mac...”

“MacNeil.” I said.

Barrister waved his hand in a gesture of 'whatever'. “Right. Anything you learn might be useful in my case.”

“Case?”

“My case against Benedict.” He said.

“Oh. Right.” I said, with no actual interest in helping him.

Barrister walked out.

“Where do you want to go?”

I looked over at Becky. “Go?”

She leaned over at me like she was speaking to a deaf child. “For dinner.”

“The township office.” I said, absently.

Becky stared at me for a long moment. “Sam, they don't even have a vending machine there.”

“What?”

“The township office?” Becky asked. “Really? For dinner?”

I waved her off. “No. I need to go over to the township office before it closes.”

“Dinner.” Becky said as I made my way towards the door.

“Right.” I said.

“Six o'clock!” She yelled to the closing door.

"He's not in." Jesse said and stared blankly at me.

"He left already? For the day?" I asked.

Jesse shrugged. "I guess."

"What do you mean you 'guess'? Doesn't he keep hours?"

"I don't keep track of Mr. Bailey's hours." Jesse stared at me waiting. She was obviously planning on walking out the door as soon as she could get rid of me.

"Damn it." I said.

"Watch your language young man. This is a township office." Jesse said sternly.

It had been a long time since anyone actually thought of me as young so I could only take that as a compliment—though, that was not the intent. I did try to summon up some shame for potentially desecrating the sanctity of a township office, but got nothing.

"What did you want him for anyway? A permit?" She asked. There was a tone in her voice that clearly indicated how humorous she found the prospects of that happening.

"Sort of." I said.

The door opened behind me.

"Sammy." I heard Russell's voice. "What is it now?"

"He wants to see Mr. Bailey." Jesse volunteered.

"About a permit?" Russell asked it with the same smirk that Jesse had asked it.

I shook my head. "No. About an old permit."

Russell grunted and went into his office.

"How old?" Jesse asked.

"November." I said.

Jesse thought for a moment. "Mr. Bailey wouldn't have done any permits then."

"Why not?"

"He was out then. Health reasons. Mr. Hesse was taking care of things while Mr. Bailey was out." She explained.

"So I've heard. Don't know him." I said.

"Yeah. Franklin Hesse. Lives over by Rush Lake. He retired out to here from the city a couple of years ago. He was an administrator down in Detroit for years. In sanitation or something like that. He was familiar with what we were doing so it worked out well. I think he was just bored."

"Bored?"

Jesse nodded. "Yeah. He was pretty young to be retired anyway. Maybe in his forties. Anyway, I just think he didn't know what to do with himself."

"Hmm. Must be nice to retire early. Wonder what you have to do to get that early of a retirement." I mused.

"Said he came into some money, I think."

I nodded once. "Alright." I stood there thinking.

"Is that it?" Jesse asked, with a clear intent.

"Yeah. Thanks." I walked out.

10

The waving arm caught my attention. Becky. Oh. I pulled over to the curb in front of the pub.

Becky looked at me suspiciously as she climbed in. "You looked like you were going to drive right past me."

"Uh...no, definitely not." I said, scrounging up as much innocence into my voice as I could.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Becky asked indignantly.

"No. Absolutely not." Hesitation. Then, "Well, yeah. Completely."

"Sam!" She exclaimed. "Really? It's been 30 minutes. 30 minutes."

I scratched my head and grimaced a little. "Yeah. Sorry."

I drove down the hill and away from town.

Becky's face clouded. She let two more minutes tick away. "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Where are we going to eat?"

"Uh..." I made noise, but no sense.

"Oh, you are not doing this." Becky's eyes burned into me. "Sam, where are we going?"

I turned up Cherry Creek road. "I just want to check something out. Then I promise we will go and get something to eat."

"You're going out to Barrister's property aren't you?" She asked.

"Just for a couple of minutes." I shook my head. "It's all about the property."

"What's 'all about the property'?"

"Whatever's going on." I said.

“What's going on?”

I shook my head. “Don't know yet.”

“But you're going to find out.”

I shrugged.

Becky stared quietly at me for a moment. “You're not going to be able to let go of this until you do.”

I shrugged again. “I don't know.”

“I do.” She said.

I pulled the car over to the shoulder of the road and got out. Becky got out as well. There were a row of trees running along the road behind which was a wide grassy field. Straight out from the road, across the field, was another row of trees marking the far edge of the property. To the right, in the distance was another line of trees that ran along a dirt road. That was the western boundary of the old dump. To the left, east, the land ran for a short distance and then dropped down towards a small creek and some swampy land.

I started walking out across the property. Becky followed. I could see further out places where the ground had been dug up a bit. I walked over to one of them and stared down at it.

“What's this?” Becky asked as she joined me by a shallow hole.

I shook my head. “Don't know.” I looked up and glanced around. I could see some of the other locations where holes had been dug. I tried to fit them into some kind of pattern, but they wouldn't go. Who made them? What were they looking for? There was nothing but trash here.

I circled around to a few more dirt spots. There was nothing revealing or interesting about any of them. This property should be nothing more than a lawsuit between Barrister and Donald Benedict, but it wasn't. I was pretty sure of that. Who were the guys Barrister kept seeing here? Who killed Danny and why? I was sure there was a connection.

“Someone's watching us.”

I turned to where Becky stood, a few yards away. She pointed towards the dirt road west of the property. I turned around in time to see someone lowering a pair of what I assumed were binoculars and climbing into a car.

“I think we are done here.” I said and moved towards our car. Becky followed closely.

Before we reached the road I heard a car start up in the distance. As we crossed the road towards my car another car turned out of the dirt road and drove towards us. I watched the car carefully. It sped up as it drew nearer to us. I grabbed Becky's elbow. Two heartbeats later I was heaving myself behind my car pulling Becky down with me as the oncoming car veered across the road and just missed mowing us down.

Becky and I lay on the ground and watched the car speed away. Too fast to catch a glimpse of the license plate. Becky lay on top of me, shaking.

Becky looked at me and smiled weakly. “If this is what it takes for you to hold me, I'm not sure it's worth it.”

I brushed some hair out of her face. “Does seem a bit extreme.”

“Who were they?” Becky asked as we stood back up.

“Don't know.” I said, then quietly, “But I think I'm going to find out.”

11

I sat staring at the rear view mirror waiting for the aging horses to plod past the end of my driveway. Geoff Benedict was hauling a load of hay bales from his fields back to his horse ranch across the road. He had about 30 acres of land on which he boarded horses for people. He had several horses of his own with which his daughter, Ginny, gave people riding lessons. When the horses were not engaged in trotting around with children on their backs Geoff used them for hauling stuff around, primarily material to go in one end of them or what came out the other end.

Geoff waved at me as he pulled the horses into the drive across from me. I waved back and backed out on to the road. The car thumped over a soft bump. Great. I knew what that was.

I drove into town and parked at the township office.

“Russell isn't in.” Jesse said.

I pointed further back. “Bailey.”

Jesse looked at me. I could read the expression in her eyes: 'Are you sure?'

My expression was clear: 'Yes, I know old man Bailey is a pain in the ass and I am quite probably wasting my time in talking to him about whatever it is I was here for, but, reluctantly, I need to speak to him about something and it is important enough for me to brave a visit to his office/lair and if I am not out in 30 minutes call 911.' Personally, I felt I was pretty good at conveying my thoughts with expressions, but, admittedly, I may have been the only one that truly knew what my current expression was saying.

Jesse shrugged and waved me past with an expression of: 'OK, but you're either an idiot or a masochist—and probably both.'. I wasn't sure, but I think I caught a hint of: 'And, by the way, 30 minutes my ass, you're on your own.'

I stood in the doorway and tapped on the open door. An ancient bald head and very stooped shoulders were slumped over the desk.

I reached out to tap the door again, but hesitated. Maybe he was dead. It seemed more likely than he was just asleep.

“I'm not dead.” came a raspy voice before I could tap the door a second time.

His head slowly rose up and two piercing eyes struck me like rusty knitting needles.

“And I wasn't asleep.” came the voice again.

I nodded, but my expression clearly said I was equally comfortable with either possibility.

“What do you want?” Bailey's lips hardly moved. Perhaps they didn't. I couldn't be sure he wasn't just using his demonic powers to convey his thoughts.

“Barrister's property. The one up Cherry Creek where the old...”

“I know where it is.” He croaked. I had also forgotten about satanic omniscience.

“I was just wondering how he got a permit to build anything on that land.” I said stepping into the office and sitting down.

Bailey watched me sit down as if I had just invaded Poland—which it seemed likely to me that he may have had a hand in that some 60 years earlier. A full minute passed with him staring at me. A weaker (or wiser) person would have fled, but I waited him out.

“What business is it of yours?”

“I know you didn't issue the permit and wouldn't have issued a building permit for that property,” then quietly adding, “even if it was viable land...”

“Huh?” he asked leaning slightly forward.

“Nothing, but was it just an oversight on Hesse's part?” I asked.

“Hesse.” Bailey said the name like it was a curse.

“I take it you didn't like him.”

Bailey waved a hand dismissively. “A city man.” It was meant as an insult.

“Yes, but it doesn't really answer the question.” I said.

Bailey grunted. “I don't know why he issued a permit for that land. Certainly not for a park.”

I was about to say something, then stopped. I ran through what Bailey had just said. “Are you saying you don't think Barrister was putting a park there?”

“Would you?”

“Are you saying Barrister lied?” I asked. Bailey stared back at me as if I had just asked him to dance the tango with me at midnight in the middle of town.

“It is not for me to say.” Bailey said acidly.

“What did the permit actually say on it? Can I see it?”

With a disgusted sigh Bailey slowly rolled his chair over to the file cabinet behind him. He pulled a drawer open and flipped through folders. Two minutes passed as he flipped through the folders a couple more times. He stopped. He stared at the open file drawer. He grunted.

“A problem?” I asked.

Bailey turned slowly back towards his desk. He stared intently at me.

“It's not here. Or, maybe you already knew that.” His voice carried the same tone I assumed he used when calling forth demonic legions.

“What?”

"The file is missing. And here you are asking me about it. Quite a coincidence." I was picturing demon hordes mounting fiery steeds and organizing.

"If I had taken the file why would I be in here asking you about it?"

He thought for a moment. "Maybe you're just covering your tracks."

"Or maybe I just enjoy your effervescent personality. Could the file just be misplaced?" Again, 'Tango at midnight, anyone?'

"No." This was the definitive 'No' of someone asking to get out of the contract that has just sold their eternal soul.

I thought for a minute. "Coincidence." I said.

"Coincidence." Bailey repeated.

12

I slowed the car down in front of the small house. According to the phone book this was the house. Didn't look like anyone was home. I decided to pull further along the road and park. I got out, walked to front door and knocked. No answer.

I wandered casually around to the back of Hesse's house, glancing in the windows as I went. No sign of anyone.

I tried the back door. Locked. I stood there. I had wanted to ask Hesse a couple of questions, but when it was obvious that he wasn't home something else was driving me. I wasn't sure why, but I felt like I wanted to have a look around Hesse's place. Whatever was going on with Barrister's property started when he got a permit to build on it.

I stared at the locked door. I had written stories where the protagonist just picked the lock. Shouldn't I be able to do this myself? Two problems. First, in fiction there's always something useful for picking a lock just laying around. I glanced around. Nothing. Apparently people don't leave small screw drivers or nail files lying around their back doors anymore. Second problem: I had no clue how to actually pick a lock. Given the right tools I could be here until next Tuesday trying to get the stupid door open.

I glanced around. I didn't want to wait around until next Tuesday. I casually elbowed one of the small windows in the door sending pieces of glass on to the tile floor of the small kitchen inside.

I stepped in and looked around. Other than the pieces of glass I was now crunching into the floor the kitchen was spotless. I crossed to an archway that led into a narrow hall. Most of the houses here in the Rush Lake area were originally cottages.

I turned left and moved along the hall. I passed a tiny bathroom, clean and neat. A small bedroom was inconsistent. The bed was carefully made, knickknacks obviously placed with care and precision and no clutter anywhere on the floor. But...two dresser drawers were sitting open with a couple of garments hanging out and the closet door was open.

Straight ahead was the front door and on both sides of that were front sitting rooms. With the exception of the kitchen hardwood floors ran throughout the house. I glanced into each of the front rooms. Again, everything in place, tidy, nothing ruffled, nothing tossed casually about. No cobwebs, no significant dust.

My shoes scratched on the wood floor. Looked down. Dried muddy footprints. I squatted down and stared at them. It didn't take an expert to recognize that there was more than one set.

What did it mean? I don't know, I thought, I'm not a detective. I stood up. Wait a minute. I write mystery stories. This is just a story. Read it.

I looked down at the footprints. Someone came here. Probably two people. The door was intact so someone let them in. They stood just inside the front door. No further. They talked. They left.

I looked at the front rooms again. Hesse was something of a neat freak. Everything neat and tidy. But not the bedroom. It's a little messy in there. He grabbed some clothes in a hurry. He was afraid. He didn't care he left it messy. He wasn't coming back. Why? Something his two visitor's said to him? Maybe.

I studied the rooms again as I went back through the house, but nothing else spoke to me. I left by the back door and circled back to my car.

13

"You can't park there."

I turned around as I got out of the car.

"Billy." I said.

"You can't park there." he repeated.

I glanced down along the front of the grocery store. There were about 10 unmarked parking places in front of the store, currently all but the one I was in were empty.

"Really?" I said, closing the door of the car.

"That's a handicap spot." Billy said waving at my car.

"It's not marked." I said walking around the front of the car towards the door of the store.

"Every place has to have handicap parking. Even if it's not marked it's always the closest spot to the door." Billy pointed towards my car. "That's the spot. You're parked illegally."

I stopped and stared at him for a moment. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

He shook his head. "Not today. Could turn you in, you know."

"I appreciate your restraint." I said, not even trying to hide my sarcasm.

"Hi Sammy." Marjorie waved from behind the register.

"Hey." I said with a nod. I grabbed a hand basket and ducked down an aisle.



“What have you got?” The voice startled me. I had been lost in thought over a serious issue—the round Spaghetti-Os or the shaped ones—when the voice, filled with urgency, appeared next to my left elbow.

I looked over at Pat and then, slowly, down at my empty hand basket. “Well, actually, nothing at the moment.” I said extending the hand basket out as proof.

Pat glanced down at the hand basket uncomprehending. She looked back at me with renewed excitement. “The investigation. Got anything?”

“Oh.” I said. “It’s...moving right along.” Futilely hoping our conversation would be short lived.

“Really?” she asked. “How?”

“Uh, well, you know, suspects under surveillance, arrests pending, all hush hush, you know how it is.” I said in my best conspiratorial voice.

Pat nodded. “Of course. Of course. Got them for both murders, did you? That’s a relief. I knew you would.”

My hand stopped half way to the Spaghetti-Os. “Both murders?”

“Yeah. That Danny boy’s and the county guy.” Pat said.

I didn’t move. County guy? I looked at Pat. “You mean the guy from the county health department?”

Pat nodded vigorously. “Yeah. A couple of kids found him early this morning. They were walking the train tracks towards Pixley. Spotted him floating in the swamps. Didn’t you know?”

“Been there a few days too.” I nearly jumped at the voice suddenly at my right elbow. I glanced over at Marjorie.

“Of course.” I said absently. It had been a few days since he would have been out to Barrister’s property. Anyone messing around on that property would be at risk. But from who? And why?

“Sam?” Marjorie’s voice came from somewhere behind me. I had absently handed her my hand basket and was walking out the door.

I walked to my car where a piece of paper stuck out from under the wiper. I read it.

‘Didnt report you. Just giving a warning this time. Billy.’

I sat in the car. Two murders. Assuming the county guy was murdered, but my gut told me he was. Two murders connected by a piece of property. An old dump. There was definitely nothing valuable about that land—or what was under it. What was it Daggot had said? Just stuff people wanted to dump off. Dump off. There was something buried there. Something someone didn’t want found.

Had Danny stumbled on to whatever was buried there? That didn’t make sense. Danny and Wilson had only started scratching the surface of the property. Whatever was hidden there was unlikely to be a foot or so below the ground. Why kill Danny?

I glanced down at the piece of paper in my hands. Billy’s warning. A warning. Is that what Danny was? It seemed a little overly dramatic.

A tap at the window startled me. I glanced up at Barrister. I rolled the window down.

“Why are you just sitting in your car staring into space?” He asked.

I frowned at him. “Because there's not enough room for me to stand in here.”

“Where's the sheriff? I need to talk to him.” Barrister demanded.

I stared at him. “Why are you asking me? Did you try the township office?” I jabbed a thumb back across the street.

“Tried there. He's not there.” Barrister said looking around. There was a nervous quality to his movements.

“Haven't seen you around for a couple of days.” I said.

“Yeah, well, I had some trouble at my home in Farmington.” He said only glancing down at me.

“Oh?”

He looked at me for a moment. “Yeah. Had an intruder in my house. Police showed up because of the alarm system. Ended up shooting the guy. Killed him. Didn't look like he was trying to steal anything. Not sure what he was doing there.” Barrister's last sentence didn't sound very sincere.

“What were you planning to do on that property?” I asked. I watched him.

Barrister looked at me hard. A full 30 seconds passed. “I can't talk about that. It's...a legal case. I can't discuss it.”

I shook my head. “Old Bailey would never have given you a permit to do anything on that land. But you didn't deal with Bailey. You got your permit from Hesse. Even an outsider like him would have at least done some minimum due diligence on the property. There's no way he couldn't have found out what that land once was.”

Barrister shrugged and looked away.

“You weren't planning on building a park on that property were you?”

“I don't have to tell you squat.” Barrister said and stomped back around to his car. In another moment he and his sports car were gone.

I looked out through the windshield at the eyes watching me. From inside the store were three sets of eyes. I recognized Brim's bushy black and gray eye brows over the top of the sign that perpetually advertised ground beef. Marjorie peeped from behind boxes of corn starch stacked in the front window. Pat, of course, was behind a box of corn flakes.

Why would Hesse issue any permit at all? Where is Hesse?

Why was Barrister's file missing? What was in the file that was worth stealing it?

And, of course, the elephant in the room: what's buried in the old dump worth killing people over?

"What the hell...?" I stood just inside the front door. I stared across the living room, through the dining room and out the window that looked out into the backyard at the hulking thing. It nearly filled the window. I walked across into the dining room and stared closer. I recognized it, but couldn't wrap my brain around what it was doing there.

I turned and walked through the kitchen, to the side door and out on to the deck. At the steps at the back of the deck I stared at the shabby truck parked there.

"What the---"

"Sammy!" A desperate whisper jumped at me from down below, along the back of the garage.

"Daggot! What the hell are you doing?" I gestured towards his truck.

"I'm hiding Sammy." He rasped back.

"From who? Barrister isn't after you and Russell isn't looking for you."

"No, no, from those other guys." Wilson glanced fearfully around.

I sighed. "What other guys?"

"I don't know who they are, but they were waitin' for me."

"Waiting where?" I asked.

"At my house. I went there after Russell let me out and there was these guys there. So, I didn't go up to the house, see. I just snuck up."

"You mean like if you saw someone you had cheated money out of there?"

"Yeah, just like..." Wilson stopped. "Now, that's not kind of you, Sammy. I am always a upstandin'---"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. What about these guys?" I cut him off.

"Well, not sure how many there was. Couldn't see 'em all. They said: 'This is the place'. Meanin' my place."

"Yeah. What else?"

"Not much. Didn't say who they were or what they wanted. Just said that they weren't gonna wait around all day. Said the boss wouldn't want them to."

"What 'boss'?" I asked.

"I don't know, Sammy. Somebody they called Scanlon." Wilson shrugged.

"How do you know they were there to make trouble for you?"

"Guns." Wilson said flatly.

"Guns?" I leaned slightly over the railing of the steps, closer to Wilson. "You saw them carrying guns."

Wilson just nodded solemnly.

I stood up straighter digesting this.

"You gotta hide me, Sammy."

"You need to tell Russell about this."

Wilson shook his head. "He wouldn't believe me."

I started to say something then stopped. "Yeah, maybe not."

I thought for a minute. "Alright. I will go talk to Russell."

"Thanks, Sammy." Wilson nodded vigorously.

15

I got out of the car and looked around. The morning was cool and the town quiet.

"You know you can't park there either."

I turned around. Billy Fallon.

"Don't you have a home?" I asked.

"You're not allowed to park there." Billy said waving towards my car.

I sighed. "OK. I'll bite. Why?"

Billy pointed to the sign in front of the car. "It's for visitors."

I nodded. "Yes. And I'm just a visitor here."

Billy shook his head. "You're not a visitor. You live here. You can't park there. It's for visitors."

"I don't live here. I'm just house sitting. I mean, I did live here before, but then, never mind." I took a breath. "The sign means visitors to the building."

Billy shrugged. "Doesn't say that."

"Well, that's what it means."

Billy frowned. "People just think if no one is looking they can do anything." He walked away.

I walked into the township office. Jessie was strangely absent from her duties as bouncer. I could hear voices in Russell's office. I hesitated. Didn't know who he was talking to or why, but what I needed to ask him seemed pretty important.

I knocked on his door, opened it and stuck my head in.

Russell was immediately glaring at me from behind his desk. The other man turned in his chair to look. His face was impossible to read.

"Sammy? What the hell are you doing? I'm in a meeting." Russell said.

"Sorry, Russell. I just have a quick question. It's really important." I said.

Russell hesitated. I could tell he wanted to yell at me, but something was holding him back. He glanced at the other man who shrugged deferentially.

"What is it?" Russell asked. "Make it quick because I'm very busy right now."

I nodded. "Ever hear of a man by the name of Scanlon?" I asked.

"Scanlon? Never heard of him. Is that all?"

"Perhaps, Sheriff you could introduce us." The other man said casually.

Russell shot a look over at the man. He was puzzled and impatient. "Uh, this is Sam MacNeil. He lives here."

"Well, actually, I'm just house---"

"The writer." The man said.

I nodded slightly. "I've...written a few books."

The man stood up and shook my hand. "Yes. I've read them."

"Ah, so you're the one." I said.

He laughed lightly and sat back down.

"Sam, this is Dixon Reese. County detective. He's in charge of..."

"So, Mr. MacNeil..." Reese said watching me closely.

"Sam." I said.

Reese nodded. "Sam. What is it you know about this Scanlon person you were asking about?"

I paused. "You know who this Scanlon is?"

Reese shrugged noncommittally. "We hear names all the time. So, where do you know this Scanlon from?"

"I don't know him." I said. We looked at one another for a moment.

Reese nodded slightly. "But you heard the name from someone?"

"I did."

"Come on, Sammy, stop playing around. If you know something about this guy, speak up." Russell said impatiently.

"Daggot."

"Daggot?" Russell asked.

"What, may I ask, is a daggot?" Reese asked.

"Not much." Russell replied.

"Wilson Daggot. He's kind of a general purpose handyman." I said.

"He's not very handy." Russell added.

I had to nod at that.

"He's the guy I had picked up on suspicion for the murder of the boy." Russell said.

"So he knows Scanlon?" Reese asked, looking at me.

I shook my head. "He doesn't know Scanlon. Who is this Scanlon? Obviously this Scanlon means something to you or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Reese nodded once. "Scanlon is really just a name. Someone from the city."

"I see." I said. Anyone in this area knew that "the city" meant Detroit.

"So where did your friend...Daggot hear the name Scanlon?" Reese asked.

"Trust me, Wilson Daggot is not..." I waved that off, "well, never mind, it seems some men paid a visit to his home. Wilson was hiding, naturally, but he overheard them talking. They mentioned the name Scanlon and something about 'cleaning things up'. It can't be a coincidence that these guys are here and...recent events."

Reese nodded sagely again. "A reasonable deduction."

"So, who is this Scanlon?" I asked.

"That's not your concern, Sammy." Russell spoke up. "Just leave this to us."

I didn't look over at Russell. I watched Reese and he stared back at me.

"Do you have any other information that may be helpful?" Reese asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know."

"Sammy, if you know anything you better speak up or so help me God I will lock your ass---" Russell blustered.

"It's alright sheriff." Reese said holding up a hand in Russell's direction.

Reese and I stared at each other for another moment.

I shrugged again. "It's hard for me to know what's useful to you and what's not."

Russell was about to say something again, but Reese cut him off.

"OK." Reese said. "Scanlon is a known figure in the city. Something of a 'cleaner'. He does a variety of jobs that eliminate any unwanted 'issues' for anyone with money to hire him."

"So he might here? In Hamlet?" Russell asked.

Reese shook his head. "Unlikely. He's not much of a hands on kind of person."

"So, Sam?" Reese watched me.

"I think there's a connection between all of this and Hesse." I said. I knew Russell wasn't going to like this.

"Hesse?" Reese asked.

"You mean Bailey's stand-in?" Russell asked.

"Former stand-in." I said.

"He handles permits when old man Bailey is out. He's..." My words starting sinking in to Russell's thoughts. Russell's face flushed. "Not another body!"

I shook my head. "No body. But he's gone. Wherever he went, he was in a hurry."

"How do you...?" Russell's fist clenched. "Sammy what---"

Reese cut him off again. "It sounds like you do have more to tell us."

I told them about Hesse's house. I was afraid that Russell was going to have a stroke.

Russell could hardly contain himself. Reese sat quietly for a moment.

"Sammy." It was all Russell could get out between clenched teeth.

Reese shrugged lightly. "Well, it doesn't invalidate any evidence. It sounds like a search warrant might be in order."

"There's more." I said.

"Great! Did you rob the bank while you were out running errands as well?" Russell said, heavy with sarcasm.

I told them about the missing April folder and the actual permit.

Russell waved that off. "That's nothing. Things are lost around here all---" He glanced over at Reese and stopped.

I shook my head skeptically. "The only folder missing is the one containing Barrister's first permit request? And then the actual permit goes missing? The one issued by...wait for it...Hesse."

"Why didn't I know about this?" Russell asked. He was furious.

"Bailey just found out about it when I asked to look at the records." I said.

"I almost hate to ask this, 'Sam', but is there anything else?" Reese asked.

"I think that about wraps it up for today." I said.

Reese smiled at me. "You have been very helpful. Now, I think it is time for you to take the sheriff's advice and leave this to us." Reese stood up and shook my hand again. I was being dismissed.

"I could try, but, sometimes, it seems hard to stay out of the way." I said.

"Please try." Reese said with a courteous smile.

16

The afternoon had been comprised of various tedious errands, but I wasn't sure how happy I was to finally get back to the house. I parked the car in the driveway, not in the garage. I had two suspicions. First, that my pipe repair in the garage was failing. Second, that Wilson was still hiding in the backyard. If both suspicions were true perhaps I could, at least in some small way, benefit from Wilson's presence.

Behind me I heard the crunching of gravel and the sound of a car. Turning I saw Becky's aging Honda pull up. I walked up to the car door.

"Hey. It's me." Becky said.

I nodded. "I picked up on that even before you told me."

"Well, smart ass, it just so happens that I have time before heading to work to make you dinner."  
Becky said with a smile.

Without the slightest bit of exaggeration it was safe to say that I was not gifted in the field of culinary arts. Hence, any food that I didn't prepare was generally far better than what I would end up doing to myself. But, the thought of Wilson checked my impulse to invite Becky in. I didn't think she would be thrilled with dining with Wilson and, frankly, having never actually witnessed him eat, I wasn't sure it was something I was up for either.

"Not tonight." I said. "I have some other business still to take care of."

Becky frowned and stared at me for a moment.

"Fine." She said and, without another word, she drove off.

I knew she was frustrated with me, but I didn't want to tell her about Wilson and why he was here. She would want to help and after our incident the other night it seemed unnecessary to drag her any further into this.

I walked up to the front door and in. With the front door half closed I froze. The scene was something out of a movie.

"Please, close the door, Mr. MacNeil."

I stared at the man sitting in the chair for a moment. He made a gesture with his hand at the door and I slowly closed it.

"Please come in." The nicely dressed man said, waving me into the living room.

"Thanks." I said, slowly stepping forward into the room. "I feel...right at home."

"Good. Good." The man said. Actually, not counting myself, there were four men in the room. Two sitting in dining room chairs that had been brought into the living room. One of the sitting men, tied to the chair, was Wilson. The two bigger men, standing, said nothing.

"And you would be...?" I asked.

The man smiled. A very friendly smile, but I doubted he was really my friend. "Just a visitor. Think of me as one of those people that takes surveys."

"I usually close the door on those people." I said.

The man nodded sagely. "Don't we all. However, I think it is a little late for that now, wouldn't you say?"

I nodded just as sagely. I glanced over at Wilson. He looked a bit roughed up and terrified. "So, I take it you have some questions."

"Yes, Mr. MacNeil, I do."

"Don't we all." I said.

"My questions first. You understand." The man said. "Then, depending on your answers we will be on our way."



My gut told me the odds of these guys leaving and Wilson and I still being alive weren't good. There was, after all, a couple dead bodies that suggested a different ending for this. I needed a plan and while I tried to come up with something brilliant in the heat of the moment like they did on the movies, I had nothing. I just wasn't as quick at devising elaborate getaways as fictional characters always seemed to be. I needed more time to come up with something foolish and stupid.

"So, Mr MacNeil, you seem to be overly interested in a piece of property not far from here. All I want to know is who else is interested in this property. That's all."

"Thinking of going into the real estate business?" I asked, mentally searching through the house for something that would inspire me to do something crazy. Still nothing.

The man snickered lightly. It didn't seem sincere and I doubted he actually had much of a sense of humor. "No, Mr. MacNeil, I am not. Who else is interested in this property?"

The property. That's what this has been about. Over and over again it came back to the property. But why? It was a worthless piece of land. An old dump. How was that worth a couple of bodies in the morgue? Why would thugs from Detroit kill people poking around at land people had thrown things they didn't want anymore? Something hit me. What had Billy said...people can do anything they want when no one is looking. The old dump was just a big hole in the ground. In rural nowhere. The bodies in the morgue were a couple of unfortunate people who were digging around where...more bodies probably were.

But how did Hesse fit into this? He left in a big hurry. He knew something. Hard to say if he actually knew bodies were there, but he knew something was buried there. So why issue a permit to do something on that land? That would be risky. Unless what Barrister told Hesse the land was going to be used for wouldn't entail digging up the land. The park story. Barrister told that to Hesse too. Still, why would Hesse go along with it? Because once the park was there the secret would be safely tucked away. But Barrister changed his mind and decided to build on it. Hell, maybe he had always planned to build on it and that was trouble. Hesse must have let someone in the city in on the situation and disappeared, knowing he would be someone's loose end.

"I am waiting, Mr. MacNeil, and I am not a patient man."

I needed a plan, but my mind continued to spin in futility. Well, as they say if you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit. After all, isn't that what I did as an occupation? Lie for money.

"Well, let's see, most of the Benedict family had been hoping to inherit that property when old man Charlie died, so, let's see that would be six families. And the Emersons, they live just up the road from it had hoped to set their children up with a couple of houses there. And, well there was talk that the ball bearing plant on the west side of town was going to purchase that for storage and..." I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that Wilson's face was wrinkled in complete puzzlement. This was all news to him. It would be news to everyone thus far mentioned.

The man sat for another minute listening to me before he interrupted me. "Enough, Mr. MacNeil. I find your rambling to be tiring and, quite probably, a load of crap."

"Somehow, I think I should take offense to that." I said.

The man sighed. "This won't go easy for you if you keep this up."

"I'm not sure how this is going to go well for me regardless...Mr. Scanlon." I was still trying to buy time.

The man's eyes narrowed sharply. The other two men shifted uncomfortably. There was silence for a full minute.

"I have no idea who this...Mr. Scanlon is, but, let me assure you, that if I did I would guess he would not bother coming all the way out here for the likes of you." The man's voice razor sharp. It was also obvious to me that the first part of the sentence was bullshit, but the second was true. This wasn't Scanlon, but my knowing Scanlon's name was not a good thing.

The man slowly stood up. "Well, Mr. MacNeil, you have a quaint little town here. I'm sure it is just like in story books, right? Every knows everyone else's business? I guess we will just have work our way through the whole bunch until nobody knows anything. I guess next we should check into that little blonde who was just here."

While I wasn't happy before this, now I was pissed. I still didn't have a plan, but an odd thought popped into my head: What would Bogie do? Like something out of the Maltese Falcon I needed to do something crazy to change the dynamics of the situation. I needed to make a scene.

"Go ahead," I yelled, waving my arms and stomping around the living room, "just start killing everyone. Sure that'll work. You're trying to cover up some dead bodies you stuffed into an old dump so what's the best way to hide that: pile up a lot more dead bodies. Sure. That's great thinking. No one will think that's strange in small town like this..." Then it hit me. What I had just said and what he had said. In a small town like this everyone knows everyone else's business.

My outburst had surprised them. They had all flinched slightly and stood watching the show. I needed to keep them off balance and see if my idea would work. I picked up a small end table and threw it through the large front window. It made a loud crash. Glass flew all over into the front yard and the end table somersaulted down into the driveway.

For a moment no one moved or spoke. All three men, however, had pulled out guns.

At first the man, now standing, snickered a little. "Going out with bang aren't you?" After a moment more though a shadow crossed his face as he glanced over at the window. He was figuring it out.

"That only speeds up the inevitable, Mr. MacNeil."

I stared at him hard for a moment. A whimper slipped out of Wilson's throat.

The quiet moment was broken by the sound of tires lightly screeching on the pavement in front of the house.

One of the thugs stepped forward to glance out the broken window. "Jesus, it's a cop."

The man that had been talking backed out of the living room. "Take care of them." He said over his shoulder as he slipped around the corner and towards the back door.

I glanced over my shoulder and noticed Russell pulling into the driveway and getting out of his car. The two thugs each pointed their guns at Wilson and I. Next to me, on the other end table, was a black candlestick made out of wrought iron. I grabbed it and slung it at one of the thugs. He ducked his head, but it still caught him in the shoulder. I knew it had to hurt. He cried out and fired off a shot into the ceiling.

Outside I heard Russell yell as he ran up the front steps. In a heartbeat both thugs disappeared around the corner and out the back door.

“What's going on?” Russell bellowed as he rushed in.

I started to say something, then checked myself. Somewhere in the backyard he would be outgunned. A moment later I heard a car start up and drive across the backyard, away.

Russell stood motionless, glancing around the room, confused. “Sammy! What's going on?”

17

I sat in the truck trying not to imagine what may be stuck to the seat of my pants when I got out or wondering if I would ever be able to get the smell out of my clothes. Wilson Daggot's truck should have been buried deep in the dump—not parked across the road from it. I had backed the truck up the Hollenwell's long driveway. It was back by their garage, obscured from the road by their house. They spent most of their retirement years now traveling in their giant motor home and consequently were probably in Wyoming or points west this time of year. Their house was located conveniently near Barrister's property.

I could hear Daggot's tractor running. He was out on Barrister's land randomly plowing up ground. This plan wasn't about finding dead bodies or solving old crimes. It was just about ending this game. The only reason Russell went along with it was a desire to demonstrate to Reese and the county sheriff's department that he could handle things in his jurisdiction. Or, at least, that's what I convinced him this would do.

From where I sat I could see out across the Emerson's long front lawn and nearly all of the stretch of road that ran along the side of Barrister's property. I was waiting for them. I was pretty sure Daggot's plowing would bring them.

It took nearly an hour, but there they were. The car slowly glided to a stop along the gravel road. The road ran between two fields: Barrister's property and a largely unused hay field. Along the shallow ditch on either side of the road ran an old fence.

I started the truck—not without some effort. Grinding it slowly into gear I eased down the driveway and out on to Cherry Hill road. I drove along Barrister's property towards the small side road. When I reached the road I made like I was turning into it, but didn't really cut the wheel much. I ended up parking the Daggot's truck across the road, blocking it from ditch to ditch.

The guys in the car must have figured out something was up. Whatever the technical name for their occupation was a healthy dose of constant suspicion was probably a basic requirement. They started the car and drove slowly towards me. That wasn't exactly how the plan was drawn up, but they hadn't been in on the planning meetings.

I waited. Not really sure what I was going to do once they reached me. I glanced around the cab of the truck. Not much except garbage scattered about. I spied a medium sized pipe wrench on the floor of the passenger side. I stared at it. My pipe wrench skills were somewhat lacking and I was fairly certain a pipe wrench didn't match up well against guns when it came right to it.

I looked up. They had stopped about ten feet from me. Both doors opened and the two guys stepped out. I was about to say something witty and charming to them, but it was clear they weren't interested in talking.

They heard it before I did. A scuffling sound. They turned and looked back up the road. It was Russell's police cruiser. As he got closer he flipped the lights on and gave the siren a quick burst.

I watched the two guys exchanging words. They were deciding something.

Another sound now grew louder for all of us. I glanced back to my left. Daggot was nearing the end of the field and heading straight at the parked car. He had his bucket up in front of him. It was obvious he intended to cross the ditch and smash their car.

Russell pulled to a stop about thirty feet away, turning his car so it blocked most of the road. He opened the door, stood behind it and pointed his gun at the men.

The conversation between the two men changed as they backed away from the car and Daggot's approaching tractor. They dropped their guns and backed towards Russell's cruiser, keeping a close eye on Daggot and his tractor.

Daggot stopped the tractor, straddling the ditch. Russell took custody of the two men. I glanced back at Barrister's field. I thought Daggot had been randomly driving around in order to draw the attention of the two men in the car, but there seemed to be some kind of pattern to his movements. Standing in the road I couldn't tell what it was. I climbed up in the back of Daggot's truck.

Letters. There were letters scratched into the field. I couldn't make them all out from my vantage point, but I could make out the last group: "shole". I stared at it for a moment before I figured out what it said.

I looked over at Daggot. He was watching me stare at the field. I gestured to the field.

"Really? You couldn't just drive around?"

Daggot shrugged.

18

"And that's your story?" Reese asked. The three of us sat in Russell's office.

I shrugged. "It's not a bad story."

"You've written better ones." Reese said. He looked over at Russell. "So, while out on patrol you spotted these guys, snuck up on them and arrested them singlehandedly?"

Russell shrugged. I knew he didn't want to deliberately lie to Reese, but we also knew Reese would like the real story even less. Besides, it certainly looked good for Russell. He may not have been the ideal sheriff, but he worked hard at his job and was, at least, one of us. Mentally, I flinched. One of "us"? I reminded myself I was just here temporarily.

"So, do you go after Scanlon now?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Reese looked at me for a moment. He knew I was changing the subject and he let it go. I had a feeling he understood how much easier the paperwork would be if we all just went with the current story.

"We won't be able to hold these guys very long and we won't be able to tie them back to anybody in the city, but we know, nonetheless, who they work for. Once forensics finishes their archaeological dig," Reese waved a hand at what was supposed to be the general direction of Cherry Hill road, "we will probably have evidence from quite a number of murders from the past few years. That may lead us somewhere. Obviously they didn't want anybody digging things up there so there's reason to believe it will give us something."

"And Hesse?" I asked.

Reese shrugged. "Don't know. We don't know how, if at all, he was involved in this."

"I don't doubt he was somehow involved." I said. "He appears here from the city. He is retired which just means he is receiving money from some source other than the little job he does here. And sometime during his time here bodies were deposited in that dump. There's some connection."

"Well, if he's still alive, I doubt any of us will ever see him again."

"Well," I stood up, "if we're done here..."

Reese's steady gaze told me he wasn't quite done. A moment passed before he said, "I look forward to reading your next book."

"Uh, thanks, well..."

Reese cut me off. "I would, however, prefer you to stick to the realm of fiction."

I smiled. "I will try."

Reese smiled. "Try hard."

I nodded and walked out.

19

I walked into the house. I appreciated the fact that no one else was there. The light on the answering machine was flashing. I considered just pulling a beer out of the refrigerator and ignoring it, but, against my better judgment, I hit the button.

Reflexively I cringed at the voice. "Samuel Winston MacNeil, why are you never there? How can you be house sitting if you are never at the house? Anyway, I have tried calling you for days."---I had forgotten all about checking the answering machine---"Well, your father and I have decided"---she decided, he just followed orders---"to join the Winslows, you remember them, they have the house out on Rigby road, by that old church, you went to school with their son, no you would have been older than him, I think,"---I was fondly remembering my time with the thugs from Detroit and wishing I was back there again---"anyways, Annabel, you know how she always has liked exotic places, well, maybe you don't, but she has talked about it with me many times, she wants to take this other cruise down the west coast of, no wait, your father says it is the east coast,"---please Mr. Thug, just a quick

couple of shots---"anyway, of South America, anyway, in order to do that we have catch a plane to Miami right from the terminal, so, anyway, we need you to stay at the house until at least..."

My mind drifted. I glanced at the plywood covering the front window and the bullet hole in the ceiling. Maybe it was just as well. I would never hear the end of it if my mother saw the current state of her house.

There was a knock on the door. I opened it.

"Hey," Becky said, walking in. "You want to explain what it was you thought you were doing here?" She waved a hand at the window.

"Uh, ad-libbing, mostly."

Her expression clearly indicated she didn't find my answer amusing. "You have two jobs, mister, writing and wooing. Getting shot at—not one of those options."

"Right. Haven't been doing much writing lately."

Becky smiled. "Then focus on your other job."

"Equally dangerous." I said, but very quietly and pretty much to myself.

"What was that?" Becky asked.

"Dinner. We should go to dinner."

"You're changing the subject, I think, but OK."

The phone rang. I jumped slightly. I was still mentally scarred from the answering machine. I picked up the phone, fearing the worst.

"Sammy, thank God you're there."

These days, I thought, I'm not sure that was the correct metaphysical being to be addressing.

"Yes?"

"It's me, Heidi. Heidi Stevens."

"Ah, hey, Heidi." Heidi Stevens was a friend of the family from many years back. She was an artist and art collector. She had a beautiful, upscale house northwest of town. Honestly, I don't know that I had spoken to her in 10 years.

"I heard about you solving those murders and thought you could help me out. You see, someone's been stalking me and I thought..."

"I didn't..." I tried slipping into the conversation, but it wasn't happening. I looked at Becky.

Becky gave me a look. "No dinner, right?" she whispered.

I rolled my eyes as Heidi went on and slowly shook my head.

"You want to take a ride?" I whispered back to her.

Becky sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "I guess. Sometimes a girl just has to take what she can get." she said with a certain resignation.

“So, you'll be right over?” Heidi asked.

I sadly eyed the refrigerator and its friendly contents while I answered her.

“Sure, what else would I be doing?”

K McConnell

# The Art of Hamlet

1

I turned on to Heidi's street. It was a dark...and lonely street. No, actually it wasn't. This was Hamlet Hills. An exclusive neighborhood—the only exclusive neighborhood in Hamlet. The houses were nice. Nice sizes, nice front yards, even nice mailboxes.

It had been some years since I had even seen Heidi. She was a relatively famous art critic and collector. She was also a long time family friend.

The door swung open and a short gray haired woman sporting reading glasses around her neck greeted me.

“Sammy, it's so nice to see you again.” Heidi froze for a moment. “Oh, yes, of course. I'm so glad you're here. The guy...”

“It's nice to—” I started.

“Oh, come in, come in.” Heidi pulled me into the stone tiled foyer. “Best not to stay out there. You never know.”

“Never know...?”

“He could be anywhere.” Heidi said in a voice filled with conspiracy and she glanced around.

“He...wait, wait, slow down Heidi. Tell me what's going on.” I said waving my hands towards her.

“The guy, Sammy. The guy.” Heidi glanced past me at the highlight windows next to the front door. She pulled me into the large adjoining living room. “Come in here. He might be able to see us there.”

“Who? Oh, wait, the guy, but...OK, what guy?” I had forgotten that even under the most benign circumstances conversations with Heidi were often confusing. She tended to jump around a bit.

“The guy I told you about. The one that's been following me. I think he's some kind of stalker.” Heidi's eyes grew big.

“A stalker? Which kind of stalker would that be? The little old lady kind or the art critic kind?” I glanced about the living room. It was filled, almost over filled, with various pieces of art. There were sculptures, large and small, paintings, some hung, some just leaning up against furniture, and an odd assortment of artistic pieces I couldn't quite define.

Heidi stared at me for a moment. “Samuel Winston, are you taking me seriously?”

Does anybody? I thought, but, more safely I replied, “Of course. Tell me about this guy.” I was staring at something just behind Heidi. It was taller than me and shaped kind of like a person.

Heidi turned to look at what I was staring at. “Oh, that's one of Antony's figures.”

“Antony?”

“Antony Gormley. He sent me that.” Heidi waved it off.



"I meant tell me about the stalker guy." I said.

"Well, I'm sure you know the type." Heidi said as she began pacing about the room. "After all, you've probably studied them. You know, for one of your books. Mystery writers know all about these things. That's why I thought of you when this started happening."

"Actually, I only wrote a few..." I started to explain that what I wrote didn't require getting a degree in stalkers.

"So, what do you think?" Heidi cut me off.

"About what?" I asked.

Heidi stared at me. "Sammy, please, try to focus here. About the stalker."

I sighed. "Heidi, you haven't told me anything yet."

"Oh, haven't I? You know, I need a cigarette." She glanced about, then moved over to an Ottoman. She turned it over and there was a pack cigarettes taped to the bottom.

I pointed at the cigarette pack quizzically.

"Oh, yeah, I'm trying to quit so I hide them from myself." She said lighting up.

"But...if you know where you hid them...? Never mind, this guy, tell me about him."

"OK, well, let's see. I first saw him several days ago, the first Tuesday of this week, I think. Yes, definitely." The long years of being immersed in art had left her with an interesting perspective on the world around her.

"The first...?"

"What?" Heidi looked over at me.

"Nothing." I said, shaking my head. "Keep going."

"Where was I?"

"The first Tuesday..." I prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Well, I saw him walking down the street past the house."

I nodded in exaggerated total agreement. "Definitely crazy suspicious."

Heidi hesitated, watching me. "He walked past watching the house."

"Maybe, he likes the architecture."

Heidi nodded. "I thought that the first time, but every time he goes by he is staring over here. And one day I spotted him in the side yard staring in a window. When he saw me he hustled back on down the street."

"Hmm." I said. "OK, he's definitely interested in something. And you've never seen him before this?"

Heidi shook her head. "Never. And then, of course, the break-in."

"Break-in?" I asked.

"Well, almost a break-in. Someone tried to break in through the backdoor. It set off the alarm."

“Did you get a look at the person?”

Heidi shook her head. “Oh, I wasn't here at the time.”

“Who responded to the alarm? Russell?”

“Russell Crane, hah!” Heidi said around her cigarette. “Yeah, he came out. He did his usual thorough job. He looked at the door and said that someone had tried to break in. Like I needed him to tell me what I already knew.”

“Did you tell him about your stalker friend?” I asked.

“I did and do you know what he said: 'Don't worry, it's probably nothing.' Nothing is exactly what he did about it.”

I had a somewhat higher opinion of Hamlet's finest, but it would be safe to say that typically Russell wasn't really a man of action.

“Well, at the moment, we don't know that anything significant is going on. I'm not sure that it is entirely coincidental that this guy was watching your house and then you had an attempted break-in. It certainly suggests a connection, but it's quite likely that since the alarm scared him off you might never see him again.”

Heidi waved me off. “No, no, Sammy, I just saw him today.”

“Where?”

She pointed towards the street out front. “Out for another walk.”

“Hmm.” It was all I could think of to say.

“So. What do you think should be done?”

“Done?”

“Yeah. You're going to check it out for me right?” Heidi asked, staring at me. It was that same look when a needy relative showed up at the door.

“Uh, well...”

“Thanks. Sammy. You don't know what a relief it is having you look into it.”

2

After a couple of minutes of deep soul searching, standing in an aisle in the Hamlet Grocery store, I decided on a can of chicken noodle over the tomato soup.

“Another one.”

I flinched in surprise. It was Marjorie suddenly at my right elbow. She, along with her husband Brim, owned the store.

“I think one is fine.” I said.

“One?” Marjorie looked at me oddly.

“One can.” I waved the can in my hand.

“Can?” Marjorie was still staring at me.

“Can.” I repeated.

“Dead body.” Marjorie said firmly.

“What?” I stared back at her.

“Another one.” The voice at my left elbow startled me. It was Brim.

“The dump.” Marjorie said. “You know Sammy, you're kind of jumpy. Guess everyone is a little jumpy since they keep finding bodies in that old dump.”

It had recently been discovered that in an old abandoned dump south of town bodies were being hidden away by criminal elements out of Detroit. Consequently, there was an ongoing excavation to determine the extent the old dump had been used. I had been involved in the discovery so now everyone thought I was keenly interested in the body count, but they were wrong. My stay in Hamlet, the town I grew up in, was just a short lived phenomenon. I was merely house sitting whilst my retired parents were on an extended cruise. Upon their return I would once again escape the quirky trappings of the town of Hamlet.

“Just two?” Marjorie asked.

I thought for a moment. “I think that would make three now.” I said.

Marjorie looked at me disapproving. She pointed at the two cans, one in each hand. “Two cans.”

“Dead bodies.” I said.

“Oh, yeah, I think so. Won't be long now.” Marjorie said as she turned to head back up front to the cash register.

“Not long now.” Brim said through his bushy mustache, heading back towards the meat counter.

“Long until what?” I asked heading up to the register.

“Until they find him.” Marjorie said matter of factly.

“Who?”

“Jimmy Hoffa. That will be 96 cents.”

I looked at Marjorie. “Don't you have to ring it into the cash register?”

Marjorie glanced over at the register. It was an old mechanical one. She shrugged. “Ah.” She reached back and randomly hit a key and the drawer sprang open with a jingle. She took my money and hip checked the drawer closed.

“Hoffa? I doubt that, but maybe they might discover Homo Hamleticus—which would explain some of the inhabitants here.”

Marjorie stared at Sam. “You think they'll find something like that in there?” Sadly, she was serious.

I sighed. “I am increasingly afraid they just might.”

I stood beside my car in the driveway. I couldn't park in the garage because a truck blocked the garage entrance. It belonged to the guys fixing the front window of the house. I watched them replacing the large pane of glass. I had broken the window in a crazy scheme to save myself from a couple of would be killers.

At the sound of chugging and gravel crunching I turned to see an old truck pull into the driveway. Involuntarily I cringed. Wilson Daggot. A local poor man's handyman. One had to be extremely poor—or desperate—to willingly employ Wilson Daggot for any job. But that's not what made me cringe. It was Wilson stopping in to talk to me that had started the whole business with the old dump, dead bodies and thugs trying to kill him—and me. I was convinced nothing good ultimately came from a visit from Wilson.

“Hey Sammy.” Wilson said, climbing out of his truck.

I held up a hand shaking my head. “No.”

Wilson looked oddly at me. “What are you talking about Sammy?”

“Whatever it is...the answer is no.”

Wilson shook his head. “But Sammy, I'm here to fix your pipe. Like I said I would.”

“The pipe?”

Wilson nodded and pointed towards the garage. “Your broken pipe. 'Member? Told you I would fix it for you if you helped me outta that...other problem.”

The thought of Wilson 'fixing' the leaking drainage pipe running under the concrete floor of the garage bordered on scary.

“That's...very kind of you Wilson, but I release you from any obligation to me.”

“But Sammy, I owe you.”

I waved him off. “No problem. I'll get it taken care of.”

Wilson hesitated. “With a permit.”

I had started to turn away and froze. A permit. Hmm. That would be a problem. Old Bailey at the township office doled out permits like they were pints of his own blood—which I was sure he didn't have much left anyway. In addition, he didn't like me much. Odds were that I'd be an old man before I saw a permit to get that drain pipe fixed.

I hung my head and waved Wilson towards the garage. “Go ahead.” I couldn't escape a sense of dread. I watched Wilson walk into the garage. More gravel crunching at the end of the driveway. I turned to see Russell's police cruiser park at the end of the driveway—there wasn't room for any other vehicles to fit.

Russell hoisted his bulky frame out of the car and hiked up his pants. I watched to see if he put on his wide brimmed hat or not. It was a telltale sign of whether this was an official visit or not. No hat.

"Sammy."

"Russell."

"Getting the house back together?" Russell asked, nodding towards the new front window.

"Slowly." I said, waiting for it. Russell wasn't the most sociable individual in Hamlet. There had to be a reason he was here.

"I...was wondering if you knew a woman by the name of Gretchen Pearce?"

I thought for a moment. The name wasn't familiar. I shook my head. "Never heard of her. Why?"

Russell shrugged slightly. "No reason. Got a missing person report on her. I don't know her either. Just thought I'd ask. You know a lot of people around here."

"Hey, while you're here, what was the deal with the attempted break-in at Heidi Stevens house? Anything interesting?" I asked.

Russell looked at me for moment. "Why do you ask?"

I shrugged. "She thinks there's something more going on. She been asking me to look into it for her."

"Hmph." Russell grunted.

"Something...?"

Russell shook his head slightly. "Nothing, I guess. Odd coincidence, though."

"What's that?"

"That you asked me about the Stevens' break-in."

"Why?" I asked.

"The Pearce woman, the one that's reported missing, she lives a couple of houses down from the Stevens woman."

4

I hated coincidences. They gnawed at me. I turned the car into the parking lot of the Hamlet Pub and got out, still pondering even the idea of a coincidence.

"That's a bad idea."

I turned around. Billy Fallon. Ten years old and a pain in the..."What?" I said.

"Going in there." Billy pointed at the pub. "It's a bad idea."

I glanced at the pub. "Probably."

"My Mom says alcohol is bad for you. It's a poison." Billy said.

I watched another car pull into the parking lot. It was Becky.

"There are more dangerous things in life." I said, abstractly.

"The smoke in there will kill you." Billy said, shaking his head slowly. "You're probably as good as dead already."

"I might be at that." I said as Becky walked up to us.

"Might be what?" She asked. "Delinquent in taking me to dinner? Again?"

"Yes...that's just what I was talking about." I said with a smile.

"Right."

"No, really how about tonight?" I asked, innocently.

"Tonight? Really, Sam?" Becky gestured towards herself and the pub. "Tonight."

"Oh, right. You're working."

Becky stood there waiting for me to say something more, but, at the moment, I had nothing.

Finally she said, "I'm working tonight, but not tomorrow night."

"OK." I said staring at her.

She stared back at me. Seconds ticked by. "Oh my God, Sam. Tomorrow night I am not working."

"Right. You said that."

"Dammit, Sam, ask me out to dinner for tomorrow night."

"Oh, right. OK."

"OK, what?"

"Dinner. Tomorrow night."

"That's not a very romantic way to ask someone out." Becky said.

"You don't want to go?" I asked, I wasn't sure, but maybe it was a case of mixed signals.

"Sam." Becky said gritting her teeth. "Six o'clock tomorrow. Pick me up at my apartment."

OK, maybe not mixed signals. "Alright."

"And no excuses this time."

"No. Definitely not." I said, applying great meekness to my voice.

"Sometimes I am not sure if you're not just blowing smoke with me."

"It's called second hand smoke."

"What?" Becky turned to Billy.

"The smoke in there that kills you." Billy waved towards the pub and pointed at me.

I sighed. "You know that some animals eat their young."

"Sam!" Becky said, "That's a terrible thing to say to a child."

She turned back to Billy. "I work there and I can tell you that's it's OK. There's good ventilation."

Billy looked at Becky and slowly shook his head. "My Mom says that being around smoke gives you wrinkles." He stared at Becky for a moment. "You're probably dead already."

Becky stared at him. I could almost see smoke coming out of her ears—which would have confirmed Billy's hypothesis.

Becky looked over at me. She jerked a thumb in Billy's direction. "You want a wing or a leg?"

A siren was approaching from south of town. We all turned in that direction.

"Wonder what that is about." Becky said.

"Maybe someone heard what you said." Billy volunteered.

"If it were any other child, maybe..." I said quietly.

Russell's police cruiser came up the hill. He was just passing the pub parking lot when he hit the brakes and stopped. His window went down.

"Sam!" Russell called out.

I walked over. "What's up?"

Russell nodded towards the passenger seat. "Climb in."

"Told you." Billy said.

"Shouldn't you cuff me and read me my rights or do I have to do all that myself?"

Russell looked puzzled for a moment and then dismissed it. "The Steven's woman has had a break-in. She just called it in. I want you to brief me on anything you have on the first break-in."

I hesitated. I should have told him right there that I hadn't done anything as far as Heidi's would be stalker, but I knew the moment I got home there would be a call on the answering machine from Heidi so I decided I might as well deal with it now.

"Alright." I said getting into the car. I could see Becky wasn't happy about my getting involved in something else. It potentially would be another excuse why I couldn't make another date with her. It's not that I didn't want to go out with Becky. She was actually a pretty good companion and I could do much worse than someone like her, but I really expected that my time in Hamlet was going to be short lived and my leaving would be problematic. Some women are easier to walk away from than others. Becky was a hard one. Escaping from Hamlet was something of a priority for me and the more involved I was in things here the harder it would be. I did not want to have to become something of an escape artist when the time came.

5

"So you don't know a damned thing. That's what you're saying?" Russell said, irritated.

I nodded. "Pretty much."

Russell pulled the car into Heidi's driveway. "Then I don't need you here."

Russell got out and held up a hand towards me as I got out. "You don't have anything to add here and it's official police business, so you wait out here."

"You mean I rode all the way out here just to stand on the curb?" I asked.

Russell shrugged. "You should have told me you didn't know anything to start with." He walked up to the door and banged on it, completely ignoring the doorbell. Heidi answered the door and they both disappeared inside.

I wandered around the car trying to look less stupid than I felt. The houses up here were all nice homes. I glanced around at them. It never seemed like anybody actually lived here, though. It was always quiet. When did these people ever come or go? Or maybe they didn't. Maybe they just hid inside.

I saw a curtain stir in a house nearby. Well, at least somebody was still alive. It was good to see the age old Hamlet pastime of spying on your neighbors was alive and well here too.

My meager supply of patience ran out. I slowly circled around the house. I spotted the point of entry. The back door was still open from where someone had cleared forced it. I could hear voices from somewhere inside. I quietly eased inside.

Some glass and wood splinters were on the stone tiled floor of the large kitchen. Nothing in the kitchen looked particularly out of place. I moved down a short hall past a formal dining room on one side and a less formal eating area on the other. Still nothing looked messed up along there either.

I came to the opening into the large living room where I had stood with Heidi just the other day. Russell and Heidi were towards the far end with their backs to me. I scanned around the room. There were a number of broken pieces in here. Some across small tables, some on the floor. I didn't have an inventory of the objects in this room so I had no way to tell if anything was missing. Many of the works of art in here and throughout Heidi's house were worth a substantial amount of money.

Something about the scene seemed odd. I walked up to a small side table and stared at the broken pieces. It looked like a very clumsy burglar.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I looked up at Russell's words. "Uh, nothing."

"That's exactly right, you're—"

"Sammy, thank God you're here. You have to help me." Heidi said coming over to me.

"Was anything taken?" I asked.

"I'm conducting this—" Russell started.

"I don't think so." Heidi answered. "I'm still checking though."

Russell huffed.

"Sammy, what should I do?" Heidi asked me.

Eyeing Russell, I answered carefully. "First, we should let Russell complete his investigation."

Heidi snorted, which led to a perfectly awkward momentary silence.



"Then what?" She asked.

"Then we need to be very careful." I said honestly.

"You think the situation is dangerous?" Heidi asked anxiously.

I shot a quick glance over at Russell glaring at me. "I think it's safe to say that one of us is in danger."

I thought it was a long ride over here, but it was going to be an even longer ride back.

6

There was no rural mail delivery in Hamlet. Everyone, eventually, had to come into the Post Office, conveniently located two buildings down from the Hamlet Pub, to get their mail. The post office was in an old house. How that came to be I never knew.

I walked in the "front" door. Directly inside the door was a tall counter. Where the counter ended, to the right, started a wall of antiquated postal boxes. Tiny doors, brass face plating, little glass windows and simple combination locks.

I didn't see Old Casey behind the counter. That really wasn't surprising. Casey Benedict was largely confined to a wheelchair and generally not visible unless you stood right up against the counter. I moved down along the wall of postal boxes. I spun the little brass handle of the combination lock and opened the box door.

"Sammy! Good Morning. How is your investigation going?"

I peered through the tiny box door and saw Casey's shoulder. Lifting up a slightly I could make out Casey's face, broken up by a number of box windows.

"Morning Casey." I thought for a moment. "I'm sorry. What did you ask?"

"Your investigation. How is going?" I heard the squeak of his wheelchair as he moved forward a little to fill more postal boxes.

"Investigation?"

"Heidi Stevens. The break in."

"I'm...not really..." I rambled quietly.

The door of the post office jangled open.

"Sammy! I heard you were back."

I turned. Joey Needles. "Back? Uh, well, not..."

"It's good to see you. Hey, you should see what I have been workin' on lately. You could really appreciate it. You know, being a detective type person and all." Joey said, bobbing his head as he spoke. Skinny with close cropped blonde hair, he always acted like he was late for something.

"Joey, I'm not a..."

"Oh, and how's your latest investigation going?" Joey asked as he pulled a pile of junk mail out of his little postal box.

I sighed. I stared at Joey, then back at Casey. They waited anxiously for some lurid details.

"It's going fine. Very hush hush, you know how it is." I said, feeling the real world spin slowly out of my grasp.

"Right. Right." Joey said, nodding his head.

"Oh, of course." Casey said and squeaked forward again.

"So, Sammy, you've got to see what I am working on." Joey almost danced next to me as we walked out of the post office.

"Well, I was planning on..." I started.

"No problem, man. My house is just around the corner from the store." Joey said, urging my left elbow to go along with him.

We crossed the street, past Marjorie and Brim's store, down a couple houses and around the corner.

Joey's house was a small old wooden house. Parts of it looked like they weren't going to last long. The outside strongly suggested there was little hope the inside would look much better. Fortunately, Joey led me towards the attached garage.

"Hey, I thought you got married? What was her name? Cathy?" Joey asked.

"Callie." I said. Just saying the name was somewhat unnerving. Callie Wainwright. She was a brown haired blue eyed walking disaster. Where Callie went, chaos followed. She dominated every conversation and every decision. Not because she was domineering. She was just on GO all the time and where that GO led to no one could ever predict. Callie did want Callie wanted to do and listening to the advice of anyone else, including me, wasn't in her character.

Callie and I dated for two years with plans of matrimony. Fortunately, for me, Callie decided early in the wedding plans that she had too many other things to get done before she settled down. The wedding was initially postponed and then just faded away.

"Uh. That just didn't work out." I said.

The inside of the garage was crammed with piles of what, on a good day, would be considered junk. Joey was always working on something that was going to make him rich.

"There it is." Joey said with pride. We stood next to an old wooden workbench and stared down at a small metallic box with a cylinder and several hoses attached to it.

"Yes," I said, nodding my head, "it is right there."

Joey watched me for a moment before speaking. "It's an amped up fuel injector."

I nodded wisely. "I was about to guess that."

"Were you?" Joey asked.

I looked at him. "No."

"Oh."

"So," I asked, "this does what?"

Joey smiled. "With this under your hood, your car can fly."

"Great. That means I could sell my helicopter."

"Wow. You have a helicopter?"

I looked at him again. "No."

"Oh."

"So, it makes a car run faster." I said.

"Well, actually, it's more of a one time boost. Like strapping a rocket to your car." Joey said proudly.

"Well, that would spare me from always duct taping rockets to my car."

Joey stared at me. "You strap rockets...?"

I looked straight at him.

"Oh. You were probably just joking."

"What are all the black markings on it?" I asked dubiously.

Joey waved that off. "Oh, I blew an engine or two before I worked out a couple bugs. It's fine now."

"Hmm. I see. Is there a big market for rocket assisted cars right now?" I asked, which seemed like a better question than: "Are you out of your frickin' mind?"

Joey thought for a moment. "I don't think so."

We stared at each briefly.

"So, what is this for?" I asked.

"You."

"Me?" I stared at Joey, puzzled.

"Yeah. I figured in your job this would be really useful. I thought of it when I heard you had moved back here."

I sighed. "Joey, I didn't move...wait...what job?"

"Your job. Detective work."

I shook my head. "Joey, I'm not a..."

"You know, for those times when you have to get away from someone quick. Or maybe you need to stop someone and you need to ram their car and knock them off the road."

I stared at him. My brain had locked up. I wanted to say too many things all at once. Finally, I just gave up and ordered a full retreat.

"Great. Sounds great, Joey. Listen, I have some place to be, anywhere, actually, so I need to be off." I said, easing back out the door of the garage.

Joey followed me out. "So, when would like to give it a try?"

I waved back at him. "Anytime. You know, whenever. We'll talk." I quickly back peddled to my car and was off.

7

I smiled across the table at Becky. This was nice. A quiet pleasant evening, with only a hint of foreboding. My trepidation stemmed from our location. A Chinese restaurant in Hamlet. I wasn't sure what Frankie, the owner, was thinking. Hamlet never struck me as the place for exotic or eclectic dining—not that I expected Frankie's version of a Chinese restaurant was going to be eclectic.

Something shuffled out through the sea of empty tables towards us. At first I thought it was a panda. Moments later, I wished it had been.

I looked up at her. "Hey Belinda. So...what's with all this?" I waved at her kimono and face paint.

"Glate and wise husband wishes to clee-ate atmosphleer." Belinda hacked her way through the sentence.

"What?" I stared at her.

"Onolable husband..."

"Stop." I said firmly. "That is just painful to listen to."

Belinda sighed. "I know, but Frankie says we gotta create the right ambiance."

"Well, this is something," I gestured to her whole image, "but I don't think I would call it ambiance. Besides, this is supposed to be a Chinese restaurant and you are dressed up like a Japanese woman."

Belinda seemed surprised. "There's a difference?"

I opened my mouth to say something, but Becky was slowly shaking her head.

"I think you look neat." Becky said and smiled at Belinda.

"Oh, you think so?" Belinda replied with a smile. She leaned closer. "Frankie has me where this at home sometimes." She winked at us. "You know like when..."

"Menus?" I asked, cutting her off. Unfortunately it was already too late to stop the picture in my head that I was desperately trying to drive out.

From somewhere in the outfit Belinda produced two menus. "I'll be back." She shuffled off.

I opened the menu and spent five full minutes staring at what appeared to be gibberish.

"Uh..." Becky said, staring at me over the menu.

"Yeah. I think it's supposed to be in English, but spelled phonetically in a really bad Chinese accent."

"Oh." Becky said. "OK, then. I think I shall defer my choice to my wise and honorable date."

I looked at her. "In other words, you're copping out."

Becky nodded. "Yep." She closed the menu and set it aside.

“Great. You do realize I'm not sure what we are going to be eating.”

Becky nodded again. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Well, it won't matter that much anyway. I'm sure it will taste Italian.” On Frankie's old menu everything had an Italian flavor to it. It was really all Frankie knew how to cook. It did make for an interesting Reuben, though.

Belinda shuffled back. “So, ready to order?”

“As ready as we'll ever be, I suppose.” I pointed to the menu. “You do know that the capitol of China is Beijing—not Peking, right?”

“Oh. When did they move it?”

“They didn't...” I saw Becky's head shaking again.

“Never mind. So, what is this section here with dishes that sound suspiciously Italian?”

“Oh, those are special recipes from the 'Little Italy' part of Peking.”

“There isn't any 'Little Italy' part of Pek—Beijing.”

Belinda nodded. “Sure there is. It says so right there in the menu.”

I sighed. “Please tell Frankie to surprise us.”

“OK.” Belinda smiled and shuffled away.

“So. What shall we talk about? Us?” Becky asked with a smile.

I smiled back at her. That was an invitation to a stroll through a minefield. No matter how carefully you tried to navigate your way through that sooner or later you were bound to take a wrong step. I just kept smiling. The second hand on the clock ticked along.

Becky sighed. “OK. Well, how is your investigation going?”

“I'm not investigating anything.”

“Heidi Stevens. The break-ins.”

I shook my head. “Russell is handling that just fine. It's not my job.”

“Russell is not a detective. He catches criminals. He doesn't solve crimes.”

I sat quietly for a moment. Becky waited.

“Alright. I'll admit that I am curious about something.” I said.

“Something that Russell has overlooked?” Becky asked.

“Not something he's overlooked. He just doesn't think it's worth checking out.”

Becky sipped her water. “You mean the fact that nothing has actually been stolen?”

I shook my head. “No. It's obvious whoever was breaking in isn't stealing—they're looking for something in particular.”

“Maybe they're looking for Gretchen Pearce.” Becky said with a smile.

I stared at Becky. Actually, I stared right past her into space.

"That was a joke. You know, because she's missing and she's a neighbor of Heidi Stevens."

"They were breaking small ceramic figures." I said absently.

"Sam, it was a joke. I was just joking. I'm sure Gretchen Pearce isn't hidden in some small statues. Well, you know, unless she was, you know, in a bunch of pieces..." Becky trailed off.

I waved her off. "No. I asked Russell if there was anything common about the pieces they broke, but he didn't know. He doesn't think there's anything special about the broken pieces. He thinks it's just some vandals harassing Heidi, but I have to believe there's something the various pieces have in common."

Becky shrugged. "I don't know. I don't really know anything about Heidi Stevens. Other than she travels a lot and collects a bunch of artsy stuff."

"Yes." I nodded, still thinking. "She collects art from all around the world. I wonder..."

Belinda appeared next to the table carrying two dishes. She slid them in front of us.

I stared at my plate. "Hmm. Well, it looks pretty good."

Belinda smiled. "It is from an ancient oriental recipe brought back by Marco Polo himself."

I looked up at Belinda. "Belinda, it's lasagna."

"It's La Sa Na." Belinda nodded knowingly.

"Lasagna. And Marco Polo was not collecting recipes."

"Shut up and eat your La Sa Na." Becky said with a smile.

I looked at the two of them and then stabbed off a piece of my La Sa Na.

Belinda shuffled off again.

"So you were wondering...?" Becky said between bites.

"What else I don't know about Marco Polo." I said, fully allowing the sarcasm to accompany my answer.

"Ha, ha." Becky said, flatly. "About the break-in."

"Oh. That. I was wondering if Heidi, in her travels, brought back something more than she thought she was getting."

"It sounds to me like you're planning another visit to Heidi's house."

"Perhaps." I said.

"For someone who's not investigating anything you sure are hanging out with Heidi Stevens a lot. A girl could get jealous."

I smiled over at her. "Shut up and eat your La Sa Na."

I turned the car on to Heidi's street. I was hoping I wouldn't be interrupting one of her evening parties, but there had to be some kind connection between the broken objects—and it was bugging me.

I tried to remember which house Russell said belonged to the missing woman, but I wasn't sure which one it was. There was a light on in the one I thought it was. It could have been left on by the woman when she left, but it switched off as I drove by, so, obviously not.

Heidi opened the door. The lights were on and there were no cars in the driveway so it seemed like a safe time to be dropping in.

"Oh, Sammy, come on in. What's up?" Heidi backed out of the doorway.

"Questions." I said as we walked into the spacious living room. It was cleaned up and new pieces of art had replaced the broken ones. Heidi was never short of things to display.

"OK. Fire away." Heidi said, taking a sip of wine from a glass she obviously had been working on. She gestured to the glass, but I waved off a glass of my own.

"It's obvious the intruder was looking for something." I said.

Heidi shrugged. "I guess. Yeah, that makes sense. But what?"

"Something small. Something that could be hidden inside a small object."

"OK, but what?" Heidi asked again.

I sighed. "I don't know, but maybe the particular pieces will tell us something. Are you sure there was nothing the pieces had in common? Similar origin. Same style. Were they all purchased from the same dealer or on the same trip abroad?"

Heidi shook her head. "I have thought about that, but, really, I can't think of anything they had in common. Whatever it was they were looking for must have been pretty small."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because. They didn't just break them open. They practically crushed them. There were hardly any pieces bigger than a penny left." Heidi said, taking another sip of wine.

"Interesting." I said. I had missed that. "Was there anything about the material they were made from that could connect them?"

Heidi shook her head. "No. Clay, ceramic, porcelain. All different."

I stared down the floor. It still didn't make any sense. Something had to connect them. Something other than the fact that they were all smaller pieces, but that wasn't very helpful.

"Have you seen some of my newer pieces?" Heidi asked leading me over to an end table. On it sat a two foot tall clay piece. It was strands of brownish red clay twisted in braids and the braids wound around each other.

"Have a look at this. What does it say to you?"

I stared at it for a moment trying to tap into my inner creative, artistic side for an interpretation. The tap sucked air and nothing but a farting sound came out. I was forced to fish for an answer out of my standard thought processes.

"It says pretzel." I said.

Heidi laughed. "It is entitled 'Lovers Unmasked'."

I shrugged. "I would lean towards 'Pretzel Lovers Unbagged'."

With a shake of her head Heidi turned me towards a piece standing across the room. It was nearly as tall as me, perhaps 5 feet. A swirl of blown glass, yellows and ambers, coiling upward.

Heidi stood by, waiting for me to respond to the work.

I stared at this too with no better result than before.

I looked at Heidi and shrugged. "'Unlimited Beer'."

Heidi laughed again. "Try 'Sunrise in Turmoil'."

I looked at the piece and then back at Heidi. "I really like the sound of 'Unlimited Beer'. It speaks to me on various levels."

9

It was a clear morning. The air was fresh, which indicated the breeze was out of the west. An easterly breeze crossed the fields of the Benedict horse ranch across the road and brought with it an entirely different interpretation of the term "fresh".

I was hoping the clear skies were some kind of cosmic message that today things would make more sense. I reached for the door of the car, but stopped at the sound of gravel crunching at the end of the driveway.

I turned and saw Wilson Daggot's ragged looking truck lumber up the drive. He parked it to one side. Wilson's grizzled frame slid out of his truck. He didn't look to be in much better shape than his ancient truck was.

"Sammy. You're pipe's in pretty bad shape." Wilson said. "May take some work to get it fixed up."

"Like...a lot of work?" I stared at him for a moment. I could not keep a certain suspicion out of my voice. Some of Wilson's less than spectacular workmanship ended up being major undertakings.

"Oh no. Just have to find all the leaks." Wilson waved towards the garage where the perpetual stream of trickling water showed that my duct tape repair of the household drain pipe was largely a total failure.

"All the leaks?" I hesitated.

"Yup." Wilson stared at me.



I hesitated. A part of me wanted to send Wilson away, but the pipe needed fixing before it created even bigger problems. Just to emphasize that point, I felt a little water seeping into my shoe. I stepped back out of the stream.

“Fine.” I said with a wave of my hand.

Wilson nodded. “Hey Sammy, did you hear they had to stop digging at the old dump?”

“No,” I said, “I hadn't heard that.” I had helped to determine that the old dump up on Cherry Hill road was being used to dump dead bodies into by some people, of dubious character, out of Detroit. Wilson had stumbled into the situation and I had, inadvertently, of course, managed to get us both out of a couple of sticky issues while dealing with it.

“Yeah. Guess they found something.”

I smiled. “Probably Jimmy Hoffa.” A perpetual running joke in Michigan that just never got old.

Wilson looked puzzled. He looked at me like I was an idiot.

“Sammy, everyone knows that Hoffa is hiding out in Mexico with Elvis.”

We stared at each other for moment. I was really hoping he was joking, but, sadly, I was mistaken.

I sighed. “OK, then. What did they find in the old dump?”

Wilson glanced about carefully. “Nuclear waste.”

I hung my head. I needed a moment. I looked back at Wilson.

“They didn't find nuclear waste in the dump.” I said flatly.

Wilson nodded. “They did. And it makes sense. It's why there is a green glowing fog all around there at night.”

“There isn't any green glow there at night.”

“Sure there is.” Wilson said, nodding excitedly.

“Have you seen it?” I asked.

“Everyone has.”

“Have you?” I persisted.

“Well, most everyone.” Wilson's eyes shifted away.

“So you've never been out there at night and seen a green glow?”

Wilson looked shocked. “I would never go out there at night!”

“Why not?”

“There's all those dead bodies out there and everyone knows what happens to dead bodies when they are exposed to nuclear waste.”

I shook my head slowly. “You didn't even know anything about the bodies until—never mind.”

“And there's government people coming to look into it. Probably have to bring in the army to fight the zombies, if they find any.” Wilson nervously glanced about.

I stared at Wilson for a moment. "I have to go."

I pulled up next to the Township office and parked. I wanted to ask Russell about the missing woman. It bothered me a bit that the woman lived close to Heidi. I couldn't see a connection, but I never liked coincidences. Something about them always turned out to be, in some way, wrong.

"It's wrong."

"What?" I said turning as I got out of the car.

Billy Fallon.

I hesitated and then resigned myself to the inevitable.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The Township Office in a church. In school they say it's the law. Separatin' of churches and government stuff." Billy said with a firm nod.

I glanced at the building. The Hamlet township office was housed in what used to be a church.

"It's not a church anymore." I said.

"Once a house of God always a house of God. That's what my mom says. God doesn't like government stuff in here." Billy pointed at the building.

"He's not the only one that has problems with things in there." I said.

"God will punish people going in there."

"Oh, he does. Trust me." I nodded. I started towards the door, foolishly thinking our conversation was over.

"You go in there a lot. I don't think God likes you very much." Billy said shaking his head.

I looked back Billy. "I have no doubt I am on several of his lists. Please don't tell me God speaks to you, like through the white noise on the TV or something."

Billy stared back at me as if I was a complete idiot. "Everyone knows only dead people talk through the TV."

We watched each other for a moment.

"Right. Well, then...you'll have to excuse me. I have to go piss God off some more." I turned and went into the township office.

I walked up to the counter. I glanced over at Russell's office. His door was open, but I didn't see any sign of him. Jessie the secretary, receptionist and bouncer of the township office stood behind the counter talking on the phone.

"There are no terrorist alerts right now." Jessie said into the phone.

I waited.

"No. No notices from the government about any terrorists in Hamlet."

I waited.

"Bernie, you know we declared ourselves a Terrorist Free Zone two years ago. They're just not allowed here."

I waited, but now with a puzzled expression.

"Of course they would know it. We put it on the web site. Bernie, I have important township business to attend to. I have to hang up now." Jessie hung the phone up.

"Well, I don't know how important my business is, but I appreciate your attention nonetheless." I said with a smile.

Jessie gave me an odd look. She shrugged and, without a word, walked back down the hall to the bathroom.

I waited.

Jessie returned. She looked at me like I was interrupting her work.

"I was looking for Russell." I said.

Jessie shrugged again. "I don't know where Russell is. He was here. Now he's not."

"Could you call him on the radio?" I asked.

"Is it an emergency?"

"No. But if he's..."

Jessie shook her head. "Then no."

I hesitated. "A 'Terrorist Free Zone'? How you do just declare...?" I could see by the look on Jessie's face that she deemed my question stupid.

"Why wouldn't we? We don't want those people around here."

I was about to ask her exactly how the 'Terrorist Free Zone' actually worked, but then realized this conversation would not lead to anything that made sense. I changed topics.

"The person on the phone. You referred to him as Bernie." I said.

We stared at each other for moment.

"Is that a question?" Jessie asked.

I sighed. "Yes. That wouldn't happen to be Bernie Weekes, would it?"

"It would be." Jessie replied.

"I'm surprised. I didn't realize he was still around."

Jessie gathered up some folders off the counter. "He is still around. Unfortunately."

"Why you do say that?" I asked.

"Because he is crazy. Completely nuts, if you ask me." Jessie said.

"Really? Bernie?"

"You would understand if saw him." Jessie said with a nod.

“Where is he living?”

Jessie sighed, She was clearly tired of our conversation. “He lives in the basement of the Pollocks' house. Now, if you do not have any further 'township' business...” She didn't wait for me to answer and turned around toward some filing cabinets.

10

The Pollocks house was about a block off of the main street of Hamlet and about a block from the elementary school. It was a quiet, sleepy residential area. Old houses, old yards, old people.

I parked the car along the street. Standing next to the car I stared at the houses. One of these was the Pollocks'. I think I went out with Milly Pollock once, many, many years ago, but I couldn't actually remember. I walked up the porch steps, pulled the creaky screen door open and knocked. Nothing. I knocked again. Some scuffling noises and the door cracked open.

“You one of them?” A scratchy voice rasped. “If you're one of them I'll shoot you.”

I could just make out a frail old woman and two dark beady eyes staring out at me. I also could have sworn I heard the clicking sound of a gun being cocked.

“One of who?” I asked, thinking carefully about which way I might want to jump—should the need arise.

“From the dump, of course.”

“From the dump? Who...?”

“The zombie things, you idiot!” The voice gargled at me.

“Zombie...? Wait...Mrs. Britchley?” I don't know how I remembered the woman, but from somewhere in the back of my memory something clicked.

“Ahhh!” She slammed the door.

“Ah.” I said to myself. “Wrong house.”

I walked back to the broken sidewalk and stared at Mrs. Britchley's house. I recognized the Pollocks' house to the right.

It took several times knocking on the door before something shuffled behind it and the door cracked open. A sliver, a gap, then, finally, enough to see Bernie Weekes. Black wild hair, thick glasses, crumpled clothes and, yes, an odor.

“Sammy?” Bernie squinted out at me.

“Bernie? Holy crap. You look like crap.” I said, abandoning all social tact.

Bernie pulled the door open slightly wider. “Come in quick.”

I slid in and Bernie began running through the numerous locks inside the door.

“What's going on?” I asked.

"Can't be too careful. They're everywhere now, you know."

"Who is?" I followed Bernie as he shuffled down the front hallway. The house was quiet.

"The government." Bernie said over his shoulder. He opened a door along the hall. Steps led down into the basement.

"At what we pay in taxes they ought to be everywhere. Otherwise, I am due some refunds." I followed Bernie into the dimly lit basement, bravely telling myself 'This isn't creepy at all.'

Bernie stopped at the bottom of the steps and turned towards me. "Refund? Wait... 'crap'? Ten years since I last saw you and that's all you can say? That I look like crap?"

I waved a hand taking in Bernie's general appearance. "And you would call this?"

Bernie glanced at himself. "Oh, well, whatever."

"Why are you so worried about the government?"

"Oh, it's not just the government. It's anarchists and terrorists." Bernie waved me further into his basement abode.

"Well, I don't know about you, but anarchists are looking more sane to me everyday and I seriously doubt terrorists would be targeting Hamlet. Frankly, I'm not sure who would be terrorizing whom."

"No, no, Sammy, you're wrong. They're here."

"Who's here?" I asked.

"The terrorists. Let me show you." Bernie slipped past a cot against the wall and sat down to an old table with computers, monitors, keyboards, routers and a variety of equipment I didn't recognize.

I stared at the room. A room that seemed to be closing in around me. I swear some of the piles of clothes and food containers were moving.

"Holy crap, Bernie." I said.

"What?" he asked.

"This isn't an apartment. It's like the lair of something. Something on a different limb of the primate tree. Quite a ways out on the limb from the looks of things." I stepped over to the table, very carefully.

Bernie grunted as he sifted through piles of stuff on the table. He pulled some papers out and handed them to me.

"Look Sammy."

I glanced through printouts from Internet news sites.

"And these." Bernie pointed to several items tacked up on the wall. "They're here."

"Who's here?" I didn't understand what I was supposed to be seeing.

"The terrorists. The Red March."

"Who's the Red March?" I asked, dropping the papers on to the table.

"South American Communist terrorists. They're here in Hamlet."

“Communist terrorists? I thought everyone had given up on Communism.” Really, I thought all the Communists had retired. I mean, come on, everyone working for the common good—like that could ever happen. Not that any country in history had actually implemented real communism.

“Well, they're kind of nostalgics in their ideology. They like Film Noir and Miles Davis jazz too.” Bernie said with a nod.

“OK...then. What makes you think these noirist communist classical jazz enthusiast terrorists are in Hamlet?” I asked.

Bernie snatched up a piece of paper off the table and handed it to me.

“What's this?”

“An email.”

I read: 'Red in Hamlet MI. 35 Trout.'

“What does this mean?” I looked at Bernie.

Bernie shook his head. “Not sure. Other than it references Hamlet.”

“How do you know it has anything to do with these Red March terrorists?”

“Because of the recipient.” Bernie pointed at a corner of the paper.

“Who was the recipient?” I asked, trying to decipher the gibberish in the upper left corner of the page.

“The NSA. You see once I saw it was an NSA communication I just worked through all possible terrorist organizations with red in their name that came from South America, since the email was encrypted and originated from a server in Brazil and voila!” Bernie explained with a smile.

“The NSA? Bernie, how did you get a hold of an NSA email?” Hopefully I was only imagining the sound of helicopters circling the house.

Bernie waved off my question as trivial. “The NSA bugs and hacks all of you people and I hack the NSA. It saves a lot of extra work.”

“O...K...well, then, it's been great seeing you again, but I've got to go.” I said, carefully and quickly backing up the stairs.

“But Sammy,” Bernie called after me, “I thought that's why you were here. To get these guys. To catch the terrorists.”

“Uh, right, yes, how about next week...” And I was out of there.

11

“Can you believe it Sammy?”

“Believe what?” I asked, sloshing the last of my beer around in the glass.

“Another body.” Renee said.

"Oh, at the dump." I nodded.

Renee shook her head. "No. In Wyatt lake."

"Wyatt lake?"

"Yeah, it's on the way up to Howell." Renee pointed in what was supposed to be the direction of Howell.

"I know where Wyatt lake is." I said, waving at her, "What about a body?"

"Yeah, that missing woman." Renee leaned over the bar to be closer to me and lowered her voice.

I glanced back over my shoulder to see if anyone other than Renee, myself and, of course, Ben Sterling, who seemed to live there, was in the Hamlet Pub. Nope. Nobody.

"Missing woman?"

Renee nodded. "That Pearce woman."

"Oh yeah. Her."

"Yeah. Right by that country club golf course. A golfer spotted her. She was just bobbing around."

I thought for a moment. "That's not far from where she lived."

Renee shrugged. "I guess. I think she lived in that rich neighborhood. What is it?"

"Hamlet Hills." I answered.

"Yeah. That place. Where all the streets are named after animals."

Animals. What was Heidi's street name? Pearce lived on the same street. Why did it matter? Then I knew, somehow, it mattered. Crap. Trout. The name of the street was Trout.

I kicked the bar stool back and headed for the door.

"Hey!" Renee called after me, "You didn't finish your beer!"

The road curved around Wyatt Lake. At the far end was the Hamlet Hills subdivision. I turned in at the sign. Two animal themed street names later I was on Trout. I drove slowly noting addresses. The one I was interested in was crowded.

35 Trout was two houses down from Heidi's house. There were several cars parked either in the drive or on the street, one of which was a county patrol car. I pulled up behind one of the cars along the street and sat for a minute. It was hard to put much credence into what Bernie had said. He clearly wasn't dealing with a completely full deck. Still, I didn't like coincidences.

I got out and started walking up the paved driveway without any real idea what I was doing there.

"I should be surprised to see you, but somehow I'm not." A voice called out.

I turned. Dixon Reese, county detective. I hadn't seen him leaning against one of the cars along the street.

"Detective Reese." I said, though I was certain he already knew his own name. Reese and I had met when bodies had started turning up in the old dump on Cherry Hill road and some rather unsavory

individuals also appeared—willing to add a few more dead bodies to the tally. The detective did not appreciate my involvement in that episode.

“Mr. MacNeil. Dare I ask what you are doing here?” Reese smiled suspiciously.

I shrugged. “You know, just another curious citizen.”

Reese was skeptical. “I seriously doubt you just happen to be in this neighborhood and stopped by 'just out of curiosity'.”

I hesitated. I wasn't really sure what to tell Reese. I didn't have information that I could say was related to the Pearce woman's death.

“MacNeil, let's not play this game over again. If you've got a connection to this I need to hear it.”

“Are you investigating a homicide?” I asked.

Reese stared at me. A moment passed. “Alright, you want to trade. Fine. It doesn't take a genius to say that a fully clothed woman with a rope tied around her waist wasn't swimming in Wyatt Lake.”

I nodded. “Did she die from drowning?”

Reese shook his head. “Nope. Blow to the back of the head. You're turn.”

I shrugged. “Not sure that what I have is related.”

Reese flashed a sarcastic smile. “Because it's you I'll bet there's a connection. Fire away.”

“Find any evidence of terrorists inside?” I asked.

Reese hesitated. “Is that supposed to be telling me something? Why would you be asking me that question?”

My turn to hesitate. This sounded rather ridiculous in my head and I was pretty sure it wasn't going to be any better out loud.

“Because...it's possible that this house was mentioned in an NSA email in connection with South American terrorists.”

Reese stared at me for a long, awkward moment.

“An NSA email?”

I shook my head. “Let's not go there.”

Reese sighed. “Let's not. I'm going to just pretend that I didn't hear that and say, not related to anything, that there is no evidence of terrorist activity connected to the Pearce woman's murder.”

Something was spinning in the back of my head. It concerned the last time I had come over to talk to Heidi.

“When was the woman killed?” I asked.

“She was found floating—”

I cut him off. “I know when she was found. When was she killed?”

“Why?”



I pointed at the house. "Because two nights ago there was a light in that house."

Reese was quiet for a moment. "Hmm. Now that is interesting."

"So, it's safe to say that the woman was dead at that time?"

Reese nodded slightly. "That would be a safe assumption."

"Kind of changes the type of person you're looking for."

Reese nodded again. "That it does."

"Why kill the woman and then hang out in her house?"

"That is an interesting question, isn't it?"

"What were they waiting for?" I wondered out loud.

Reese glanced at me. "Why do you say 'they'?"

I shrugged. "No reason. But it's always easier to quickly dump a body when there is more than one person. So, what were they waiting for?"

Reese shook his head slowly, but didn't say anything.

"I think we can rule out a simple burglary like her neighbor." I said absently.

"What burglary?" Reese asked.

"Two houses down." I pointed towards Heidi's house. "Twice in the past week."

"That seems...coincidental." Reese looked at me.

"I agree, but it doesn't make much sense. Go into one house and kill the occupant. Go into the neighbor two houses away and just smash some art work. A manic depressive art critic?"

Reese's expression clearly indicated he wasn't going to answer that. Reese rubbed his jaw. "Perhaps I should talk to this neighbor."

"Mind if I tag along? She is a friend of mine."

Reese hesitated.

"Russell asked me to look into it for him." I lied.

Reese watched me for a moment. "I find that hard to believe, but come on." He started walking down the street.

12

I drove back through town. Still nothing. Reese had asked Heidi about her neighbor, but learned nothing of interest. Heidi hardly knew the woman. They had only met a few times.

As I passed the hardware, in the center of town, the car coughed roughly. A couple more spasms and the engine quit. I muscled the wheel to the right and coasted to the curb in front of the post office.

I tried starting the engine back up, but it only made some sad scuffling noises and nothing more. Great. I got out and opened the hood. I stared down at the engine. It stared back at me. We were two aliens eyeing each other.

A car pulled up behind mine. It was Joey.

“Hey Sammy! Having trouble?” Joey asked standing next to me.

I waved a hand towards both the car and myself. “One of us is.”

“I’ll take a look at it if you want.” Joey said.

“That would be great.” That’s one thing about small towns, I thought, people all know each other and go that extra mile to help you out.

Joey stared at the car for moment, contemplating something. “You headed home?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Tell you what,” Joey said with a smile, “I’ll drop you off back at your house and come back and work on this.”

“Thanks, Joey. I’d appreciate that.” I said as we walked back to his car.

Five minutes later we were pulling into my driveway. We both stared at the entrance to the garage. Chunks of broken cement were strewn all about. Inside the garage was Wilson Daggot swinging a sledge hammer.

“Whoa.” Joey said. “What’s Wilson doing?”

It took me a moment to answer. “Going an extra mile I really didn’t want.” I got out and Joey drove off.

I walked to the front of the garage. Wilson looked up from his work and stopped.

I held my arms out. “Wilson, what’s all this?”

Wilson shrugged. “Sorry, Sammy, but it all had to come out. The drain line is collapsed.”

I sighed. There were several things I wanted to say, but instead I went into the house in search of a beer. I opened the refrigerator door and was just reaching for a bottle when a flashing red light caught my eye. The answering machine. With trepidation I pushed the button for playback.

“Sammy, this is Heidi. I just thought of something about Mrs. Pearce I forgot to tell you about. I will be out tonight so maybe you could stop by tomorrow and I will show you. Bye.”

Show me? What did that mean? I dialed Heidi’s number, but got no answer.

From somewhere below, in the garage, I heard (and felt) the pounding of a sledge hammer. I returned to the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles. I had a feeling the first bottle wasn’t going to last long.

Another day and another trip up Trout street. Before this week I hadn’t been in Hamlet Hills more than once or twice. Now, it was a daily task.

It was good to have my car back. Joey had dropped it off first thing in the morning and it seemed to be running better than ever.

I parked in front of Heidi's house. Unlike the previous day the street was mostly empty. I had only passed one car in the subdivision and there was another parked along the street a couple of houses further.

Heidi opened the door. "Ah, Sammy. Sorry I forgot to tell you about these yesterday." She said walking back into the dining room. On the table sat three small round statues.

"Here they are." Heidi said with a wave at the statues.

"Here what are?" I asked.

"They're small figurines." Heidi looked at me as if I was blind.

I nodded. "I realize they are small figurines. What about them?"

"Oh, that Pearce woman gave them to me. I had forgotten about them, well, because they were ugly. I had stuffed them away in a box in the basement."

"I thought you didn't know her. Why would she give these to you?" I asked.

Heidi shrugged. "I didn't know her. Not much anyway. It was just after her husband died. I think she was just cleaning out some of his stuff. I remember her telling me she thought because I was an artist I might like them." Heidi lowered her voice. "But they were just ugly junk. I didn't want to tell her that though."

I glanced around. Who did Heidi think was going to overhear us? The Pearces were both dead. It seemed unlikely they would care now.

"So these were her husband's?" I shook my head. Another coincidental tie between Heidi's small statue vandalism and the murder of the Pearce woman, but I couldn't see how this was connected.

Heidi nodded. "Yeah. I think I remember her telling me that he traveled a lot for his job and often brought back things."

"Hmm." I stared at the statues. They seemed pretty mundane. Cheaply handcrafted tribal god figures made to sell to gullible tourists.

"What did her husband do?"

Heidi gave a shrug. "I can't remember. Wait, he was an engineer. He did consulting for foreign governments on building things. Third World countries, I think."

Now something was stirring. "What Third World countries?"

Heidi gave me a look like the question was absurd. "Oh, God, I don't know. South America, I think it was."

I had that slippery slope feeling. Like I was moving in a direction I wasn't going to like. I reached out and lifted one of the figurines. It was heavier than it looked.

"I think...these should come with me." I said, picking up the other two statues.

"You think they're important?" Heidi asked, staring at them as if she had never seen them before.

"I don't know, but I have a feeling they may be at the center of things."

I walked out to my car and set the statues on the roof of my car. I stared at them again in the daylight. Certainly didn't look very impressive. A car started up down the street and pulled me out of my examination. With a shrug I set the statues on the back seat and headed home, not really sure what to do next.

The sun was setting and I watched it from a chair on the deck. I had stuffed the statues into a dresser drawer in the guest bedroom. I heard a sound in the driveway and turned around. Becky.

"Hey," Becky called up to me. She waved a pizza box. "I come bearing a gift."

I waved at her and went in through the house to meet her at the front door. She kissed me as she walked past carrying the pizza to the dining room table.

I pulled out two beers from the refrigerator and held them up towards her.

Becky shook her head. "I have to be at work at 8. The front window looks good."

I nodded. In an effort to avoid a premature death at the hands of some rather unsavory individuals from Detroit I had tossed an end table through it. "Almost have everything patched back up." I put one of the beers back.

"So what's up, mister?" Becky asked as we began devouring pizza.

I told her about Bernie Weekes and his terrorist concerns.

Becky laughed. "Yeah, Bernie really has kind of lost it since we were in high school. Remember how everyone thought he was going to be some great scientist or something. Wow, valedictorian of the class and, well, just wow."

I nodded. "Yeah. You just never know where people end up."

Becky smiled at me. "You just never know, do you?"

We stared at each other for a moment. Everything seemed to just melt away. It seemed like the space between us was slowly shrinking and—wait, what was that?

Our eyes were still locked, but our expressions changed slightly.

"Did you just hear something?" I asked.

There was a certain resignation on Becky's voice. "Like glass breaking?"

I nodded. "Like glass breaking."

I jumped up. It sounded like it came from the basement. I was at the basement door and flying down the steps. I could hear footsteps crunching through broken glass. I turned a corner and stopped. There was a guy standing just inside the basement door. He watched me for a heartbeat. He seemed to be waiting to see what I was going to do. Little did this stranger know that my first reactions are almost always ill timed, poorly thought out and, most importantly, highly foolish.

I glanced to my left and spotted a golf club. Thank goodness there were no golf courses on cruise ships or my father's clubs would have been somewhere off the coast of Brazil right now. I grabbed the club

and charged at the guy—only then recognizing in the dim light of the basement that he was carrying a gun.

With a surprised look the guy leaped backwards. I was swinging an eight iron so it was obvious that I meant to get some height out of whatever part of his body I struck. He stumbled back out the door. He fired off a shot, but it was wild—unless he meant to put a hole in the washing machine.

I hesitated for moment, glancing back at the washing machine. Crap. Wasn't sure exactly how someone reasonably explains a bullet hole in a washing machine. When I did duck out the door the guy was half way down the driveway. I could see a car pull up at the end of the driveway, it waited for him.

I stopped. I could hear Becky yelling something down the stairs.

“I'm fine.” I yelled back, not really sure if that's what she was yelling about. “Throw me the car keys.”

I ran back to the bottom of the basement steps just in time to catch the keys with my forehead.

“Thanks, I think.” I said and scrambled out to the car which, because the garage floor was in pieces was sitting just outside the garage.

The other car was just pulling away. I fired up the car. The tires of the car torn into gravel. I plunged out on to the road, thankful traffic on Hamlet's main street was scarce, and slammed the car into drive. I could still see the other car some distance ahead.

I stomped on the gas. The car coughed, jerked forward about 10 feet and then with a deafening boom stopped dead. I sat for a long moment slightly dazed from the sound. What the hell just happened. Smoke softly curled out from under the hood. It occurred to me that I just blew the engine. One word came to mind: Joey.

14

“Wait a minute,” Russell held up a hand, “tell me again, what did Joey Needles have to do with all of this?”

I waved that off. “That was just about the car. Never mind that. Clearly, whoever was breaking into Heidi's house was looking for the statues that the Pearce woman gave Heidi. It's why she was killed.”

Russell stared at me. “Why was Pearce killed?”

“Well, I don't know that part yet.” I said.

“He could have been shot.” Becky said glaring at Russell.

Russell held his arms out. “How was I supposed to know an armed perpetrator was going to break in here?”

“Because he had the statues!” Becky yelled.

“What statues? The ones the Pearce woman had? Sammy didn't tell me he had them. And how did he know that they would be coming after them? He hasn't told me anything.” Russell said fixing me with cold stare.

"You knew they would be coming after the statues?" Becky turned towards me.

I mentally tested my position. Yup. Still on that slippery slope.

"Well, I might have had a suspicion..." I said slowly.

"What?" Becky's tone was angry. I knew she didn't want me getting into these kind of situations.

"What?" Russell's tone was irritated. I knew he didn't like me getting involved in what was clearly his job.

"What?" My tone was innocent. I wasn't really sure they knew I had the statues or that they would still try to take them.

We stood staring at each other.

"Where are the statues now?" Russell asked.

I went into the guest bedroom and retrieved them. I set them out on the table, pushing the pizza box aside.

We stared at the statues.

"Those are ugly." Becky said. "I don't see how they could be worth anything."

I shook my head. "I don't think the statues are worth anything. I think there's something inside of them that these guys are after."

"What's inside?" Russell asked.

I shrugged. "Don't know yet." I picked a statue up and carried over to the kitchen counter. From a drawer I pulled out a small metal mallet. I wasn't sure what my mother used it for. I pictured her brutally punishing some kind of dinner food with it until it was unrecognizable.

I raised the hammer up. Out of the corner of my eye I saw both Becky and Russell open their mouths to say something, but I was committed. With a crash the statue was shattered. White ceramic dust and chunks scattered everywhere. And there was something else, mixed in, as well. Something red. Globules of the red stuff bounced and rolled across the counter in all directions and on to the floor.

We stared at the mess. No one moved.

"What the hell?" Russell finally blurted out.

"Red in Hamlet." I said, absently.

15

"What was that you said?" Russell asked, moving for the fourth or fifth time out of the way of one of the county hazmat workers as they jostled past going in and out of the house.

"About what?" I glanced over at him. I had left the mess in the kitchen for the night. Russell, though, insisted on calling the county the following morning to figure out what the stuff was. The substance

was sufficiently creepy looking that it was decided having someone else cleaning it up sounded like a good idea.

"About something red." Russell said ducking his head just in time to miss getting blind sided by some kind of long metal rod. There didn't seem to be any safe spot to stand on the deck.

"It was something in an NSA email." I said.

"A what? Did you say NSA?" Russell glared at me.

I shrugged. "It was something Bernie Weekes showed me."

"Weekes? That whacko. He's as crazy as it gets."

"Maybe." I said. "Did the county coroner have anything to say about the Pearce woman's murder?" I could hear the screeching of wood and nails being wrenched apart. Inwardly, I cringed.

Russell watched the hazmat workers for a minute before answering. It was obvious he wasn't sure if he should talk about it or not.

Russell sighed. "Well, it looks like there were some minor burns on her body."

"Like she was tortured?" I asked. A heavy hammer pounded on something. I was pretty sure there was nothing in that kitchen that could withstand that kind of beating and still pass my mother's rigid inspection when she finally returned.

Russell nodded slightly. "Looks that way."

"Somebody really wanted that stuff." I said, watching guys in hazmat suits gently carrying sealed containers out of the house.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Russell fished around in his pockets and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. He unfolded it and handed it to me. "Bailey gave this to me to...deliver."

I glanced at the paper. Notice to Condemn. I looked at Russell. He was purposefully avoiding looking at me.

"Bullshit." I said. I crumpled up the paper and stared at Russell.

"I...didn't see that." Russell said quietly. Something about his demeanor told me he wasn't interested in enforcing Old Bailey's notice. If you needed a permit for something it could take a year to get it out of Bailey, but, if he didn't like a person—and he did not like me, at all—citations magically appeared with lightning speed.

"I think," I said, "if we want to know what these guys are really after, we need to know what that stuff is." I pointed towards what used to be a kitchen.

"I'm not sure the county will tell me that." Russell said with a shrug.

"Reese would know." I said.

"What makes you think Reese will tell us anything?" Russell asked.

I smiled. "Ask him if he's heard anything about the NSA lately?"

"What does—"

"Just ask him."

16

Once again, chicken noodle soup or tomato soup? That was the seemingly never ending question. My hand hovered between the two. This would be tonight's dinner so I needed to choose carefully. I stood in the aisle of the store and worked through the weighty decision. Finally, I reached for the chicken noodle.

"What about the red stuff?"

So intense was my concentration the voice startled me. "What?" I looked over at Marjorie.

"That red stuff. What about it?" She had a nervous look in her eye.

I glanced back at the shelf. "The tomato soup? You think?" I wasn't sure I was in the mood for that.

"Tomato soup?" Marjorie stared at me.

"Tomato soup." I said and pointed at the shelf.

Marjorie waved that off as unimportant. "The red mercury. The stuff those terrorists were going to blow the town up with."

"What?" In my dumbfounded state it was the most I could say.

"Have you found out yet why they were going to blow us all up?"

"Red mercury?"

Marjorie nodded vigorously. "Yeah. It's very dangerous."

"There's no such thing as red mercury." I said.

"Oh, there is." Marjorie said, "I saw it in a movie once. Bad stuff."

"Uh...well, anyway, where did you hear about 'red mercury' in Hamlet?" I asked.

"Oh, my friend Emma, she works in the county offices, it's all the talk up there."

"Ah." I nodded, knowingly. "That would explain the gaping hole in my house where a kitchen used to be."

"You mean they blew up your kitchen? Oh how awful. I must tell Brim. He'll want to search our kitchen." Marjorie waddled off down the aisle.

I stepped outside the door of the grocery store and froze. Maybe, if I didn't move, he wouldn't see me.

"There you are." Billy Fallon said.

"Unfortunately, here I am." I agreed, with a sad shake of my head.

"You're a fugitive." Billy said.



I stepped around Billy to the side of the car Joey had graciously loaned me. "You have no idea how much I would like to be on the run right now."

"You're wanted by the police." Billy said. "You must have done something pretty bad."

"I'm not sure what I may have done in the past, but I am contemplating a couple of things right now."

Behind me a car stopped in the street.

"There you are."

I turned around. It was Russell.

"Meet me over at the office. Reese is waiting for us."

I nodded to Russell.

"I should get a medal or something. You know, for capturing you."

I gave Billy a quick glance. I nodded. "You should get something alright." I climbed into the car.

I walked into Russell's office with him. Reese was already waiting in a chair. Russell circled the desk and sat down. I took the remaining chair next to Reese.

"Well, here we are again." Reese said with a sarcastic smile.

"In my defense..." I started.

"You actually have a 'defense'?" Reese asked.

I hesitated. "OK, well, not really, but..."

"How did you come into possession of that statue?" Reese asked, leaning back in his chair.

I told Reese about Heidi calling me concerning the statues.

"And...you didn't think to call me?" Reese eyed me.

"I didn't know yet there was anything special about them." I said.

"Other than someone was willing to kill for them?" Reese glanced over at Russell, then back at me.

"Yeah...well, I thought maybe I could figure out their significance in all of this." I said, with a lame shrug.

Reese nodded slightly. "From what I heard about your kitchen, I'd say you were successful."

I frowned. "I'm not sure about that. So, from what I understand, there's mercury in the statues. What does that tell us? And why is it red colored?"

Reese drummed his fingers together for a moment. "Don't know."

"Well, they came looking for the statues once. They will probably be back again." I said.

Reese looked over at me. "You still have the other two?" He shot a look at Russell, who quickly found something important to examine on his desk.

"Uh, yeah." I said.

Reese sighed. "Fine. I want these guys picked up before the Feds get involved. They'll just muddle everything up and we might never catch them. I will send a deputy over to your house. We'll see if we can get them this time."

I climbed into Joey's car and after a couple hideous screeches the car started up. I backed around and slowly headed towards main street.

"Just keep driving." A voice from behind me spoke in my ear.

I nodded casually. "I do that a lot from this seat." I couldn't see him in the rear view mirror.

"Should I just assume you have a gun?" I asked.

Something hard nudged the back of my head.

"Well, that clears that up." I said. "So, where am I going?"

"Turn right." The guy said as we stopped at the flashing red light at the intersection of main street.

I turned right. Heading south out of town. We crossed the two sets of railroad tracks and kept going. Curiously the man said nothing as we drove right past the house.

"Did we miss a turn?" I asked. "Or are you not who I think you are?"

"Turn right at the road up here."

Cherry Hill road. The old dump was up that way.

I turned on Cherry Hill. We drove along. We passed the old dump. At a small gravel road on the right he had me turn. I knew where this led. There were some old gravel pits out here. No houses. Quiet. Isolated. I didn't like this.

The car bounced on the rugged gravel. We stopped. Just to our right was a steep slope that dropped away. It was comprised of loose gravel. As kids we used to often play out here. I knew this place well.

We got out. I finally got a look at the guy. Black hair, dark complexion, stocky and, yes, armed with a .45. We stood staring at each other in front of the car. His back towards the edge of the embankment. Maybe 10 feet away.

"Nice office." I commented.

He stared at me. He didn't get it.

"So you wanted to talk about something?" I asked.

"The statues. Where are they?" He had a steady, cold stare.

I eyed him. "We drove all the way out here so you could ask me that?"

He motioned with the gun, indicating he was waiting for an answer.

"I have them. At the house."

The man shook his head slowly. "We searched there."

I felt a slight cringe. There was the image of a small tornado having ripped through the house. As if it didn't already look bad enough.

"They're there." I said. "We'll have to go back. I can show you."

Another slow shake of the head. The guy pulled out a cell phone. He dialed. When someone answered. The guy spoke. Spanish—no Portuguese. Brazilians.

He held the phone out to me. "Tell him."

I will never fool anyone into thinking that I am a genius, but I didn't just fall off the back of a tater truck. We didn't come out here because the cell phone reception was good. Regardless of what I said or what I did, ultimately, there was only one outcome planned for me.

"But I don't speak Portuguese." I said. I didn't take the phone.

He raised his arm so the gun was right next to the phone. He cocked the gun. "English is fine."

A moment passed. I took the phone.

"Hey, o que está acontecendo?"

The guy looked at me suspiciously.

I shrugged. I didn't actually speak Portuguese, but I did date a Brazilian girl once. Well, I slept with her. I think that counts for something.

"O Quê?" The voice on the phone asked.

"The statues."

"Sim. Where?" The voice asked.

"The basement." I said. "Entendeu?"

"Sim. I go to the basement."

I could hear him walking through the house and the sound of basement stairs creaking under him. My friend with the gun watched me.

I needed to come up with a plan. I couldn't just stand here playing hide and seek with the guy on the phone indefinitely. Moments passed and the guy on phone was asking where to next. Come on, dumb ass, I thought, this is where you played as a kid. Think of something useful.

Playing. That was it. Not hide and seek. Tag. Reckless young boy style. One of our favorite tricks to escape the person that was 'it': jump over the embankment. It was about 70 feet of steep sloping gravel. If you picked your spot right you landed in some of the really loose gravel and slid on your butt the rest of the way down.

The guy on the phone was saying something. The guy with the gun was clearly wondering what was taking so long.

I waved the phone towards him and did what came naturally to any writer. I lied.

"Lost the call." I said.

He reached out for the phone, but I threw it at him. It caught him right on the bridge of the nose. His eyes opened wide and he staggered back. I ducked behind the car and scurried towards the back. In a moment he recovered and circled around the front to the side I had hid behind. By then I was at the

back and from there a straight sprint to the edge of the embankment. I made the edge before he quite cleared the car to get a shot at me. Without breaking stride I jumped.

I clearly remembered the gravel being a lot softer. Both feet hit the loose gravel and an instant later I executed two neat somersaults—purely unintentional—and then, with no grace whatsoever, slid on my butt until I ground to a halt. Despite strong recommendations from my body to roll around on the ground and cry a little, I scrambled to my feet and ran the rest of the way down the slope. I heard a couple of shots from the ridge above. No idea where they hit. It wasn't me and that was the important part.

At the bottom of the embankment was another gravel road. This one snaked its way along the embankment for perhaps a half mile before ending in a pile of gravel.

I crossed the gravel road. There were more piles of gravel built up or dumped about with no particular discernible pattern. I tried running and ended up just crawling over the top of a pile and rolling down the other side. From there I was no longer visible from the top of the ridge.

My choices were limited. South was back towards Cherry Hill road and people, but there was virtually no cover that way. I wouldn't get far. East the ground sloped back up. That direction eventually led back towards my house and town, but on the up slope I was perfect target. No good. West, well, I could hear the guy cursing and scrambling down the gravel slope I had just come down. That was an obvious no. That left north.

To the north there were small mounds of gravel, clumps of trees and ponds where gravel had been gouged out. Further on was swamp. Lots of swamp. It stretched from the west side of Hamlet out to the crossroad village of Portage. Not a great option, but apparently my only one at the moment. Time to move.

I ran out from behind the gravel mound, across open space and behind another smaller mound. I snuck a look at the guy. He was just reaching the bottom of the slope. He saw me as well and fired off a shot. I had no idea where that went, but just from the way he flailed the gun in my direction I knew it was destined for the next county.

I crouched low and scampered over to a small stand of trees. I could hear him running now across the gravel. I took off weaving around a muddy flat that used to be a pond, behind a tiny knoll with two scraggly trees on it. He was quickly gaining on me. In case there was any doubt about it I could attest to the fact that a life of writing does not lend itself to impressive athleticism. I was getting winded.

I circled another mud flat. When we were kids these ponds were knee deep in water. We used to hunt frogs in them. Now they mostly dried up. I skirted around them more out of distantly remembered habit. I reached the far side of the mud flat.

“Stop!” He emphasized his call with a shot that scattered gravel just right of my feet. I stopped.

I was running out of real estate anyway. Another 50 feet and I would have been standing at the edge of the swamp. I could feel the ground under my feet was already feeling softer. I turned around.

We stared at each other across the mud flat.

“So,” I said, “what's so special about a little bit of mercury?”

The guy hesitated, then shrugged. “It is red mercury.”

I shook my head. "There's no such thing as red mercury."

"You saw it." He replied.

"That's just mercury colored red, but there's nothing special about that—other than it's hell on kitchen counters."

The guy nodded with a snicker. "Sí, but most people do not know that."

"So, you're going through all this just to frighten people with a substance that doesn't really pose a threat to them?"

"In this game it is all about fear. Besides, this stuff is dangerous—if you take it in."

I thought for a moment. "You mean like in the water supply?"

He smiled.

"You don't have enough to significantly affect a major water supply." I pointed out.

"I don't need a large supply to create fear. Especially if you people don't know which water supplies are affected. No one will trust their water."

"Hmm. Maybe so. But that's still not going to significantly hurt people here. It wouldn't take that long to verify that the water is safe."

He shrugged. "We aren't trying to destroy your country, but you will know who we are and what we stand for when it is done."

I was about to ask him what he stood for and then realized I really didn't give a damn.

"So, if I understand this right, you wanted to get recognition for your cause and you chose Hamlet as a high profile target? Hamlet? Really? I'm thinking that wasn't a well thought out strategy."

The man sighed. His shoulders sagged a little. "We didn't mean to be here."

"I hear you." Could my reply be more honest?

"The man," the guy waved a hand in the air trying to recall the name, "Pearce, he was not supposed to receive the package. A mix up in the exchange at the gift shop in Rio. We lost track of our package. Took us a long time to find the man. By then he was dead. His heart. We just wanted our package back."

The guy tightened his grip on the gun and began walking towards me. "Enough. Where are the statues?"

My time was running out. I tried to think of something to do. As usual, in moments of great danger, my keen intellect was on a coffee break. Thanks 'idea guys' in the back room.

If I turned and ran I could expect a bullet in the back. The idea of laying face down in the swamp with a hole in the middle of my back, where no hole should be, didn't appeal to me. If I told him what he wanted to know he would verify it with his friend back at the house and then I would catch a bullet in the chest—as a thank you for my cooperation. Laying in the gravel facing the sky with a hole in my chest, where no hole should be, also didn't appeal to me. Two options—neither one was good.

The man crossed about two thirds of the mud flat before the ground under him cracked and his left leg sunk up to the knee in mud. Apparently, the old pond wasn't quite as dried up as it appeared. Probably due to the proximity of to the swamp.

He shifted his weight to the right foot to pull his left out. With a crack the right foot went down as well, slightly deeper than the left. With frustrated thrusts he jerked his weight back and forth trying to dislodge either leg. That only sunk him in a little deeper.

He stopped and looked over at me. I could see he was really pissed. He aimed the gun at me.

"Get me out." He said through clenched teeth.

I struck a contemplative pose. "Let's work through this for a moment."

The guy looked at me as if I was totally insane. He waved the gun a little under the mistaken idea that I had forgotten he had it. I hadn't.

"So, I help you out of there, then tell you where the statues are and you kill me. That's the happy little scenario you want me to buy into?"

"You help he out or I'll kill you." He cocked the gun.

I nodded wisely. "I believe we just covered my tragic demise. Of course," I said, helping him working through the situation, "you shoot me now and you're still stuck there, you know, waiting for the wolves to come and finish you off."

"Wolves?" He glanced around.

There hadn't been wolves in this part of Michigan in probably 150 years, but, hey, he was Brazilian, how would he know?

The guy was quiet for moment. A smile slowly crept across his face. He pulled out his cell phone and triumphantly waved it at me.

I waited. I had a strong suspicion where this would lead.

He looked down at phone. It only took a moment for darkness to settle back on to his face. Hamlet only marginally passed for civilization. Up on the crest of the embankment there was some phone service, but down here...not bloody likely.

He looked over to me again. "OK. You get me out. You give me the statues and you live."

I nodded, as if I was considering his generous offer. "How about this: I just leave." I took a couple of steps back.

I could see he wanted to shoot, but those damned wolves were skulking about in the back of his head.

"OK. OK. Wait." He uncocked the gun and pointed it away. "Look, I get rid of the gun and you help me out."

I inclined my head, appearing to think over his newest plan. "That might work."

He nodded and tossed the gun into the gravel at the edge of the mud flat.

"And the cell phone." I said.

He hesitated. "Oh. OK." He tossed that too.

I picked them both up and started walking back towards the embankment where the car was parked.

“Hey!” He yelled. “You were going to get me out!”

I stopped, looked back at him and shook my head. “I said your plan might work. I didn't say it would. I guess it didn't work.”

“You lied! I'll kill you.” He screamed at me and started thrashing about again.

I shrugged. “Yeah, well, excrement occurs.”

17

I stopped Joey's car along Cherry Hill road. Just up ahead was the main street of Hamlet. I walked up a private drive. There were several houses along the drive which came to a dead end at a barn about a ¼ mile further. Past the end of the road was a large field. Once out in the field if one were to head west for about a mile and a half they would eventually find themselves back among gravel piles, dried up ponds and, new to Hamlet, one very pissed off Brazilian. If you went east you came up behind my house.

There wasn't much natural cover in the back half of the acre my parents' house sat on. I was fairly certain my father had never planned on the need for sufficient cover to sneak up on our house, you know, in the event there were killers occupying it. Well, 20-20 hindsight.

I did the best I could ducking from spot to spot, but I was pretty sure that a few trees four inches in diameter were not disguising me much. Nonetheless, I made my way up to the back of the house. I listened. Nothing. What did that mean? Well, nothing, actually.

I moved around to the side of the garage. I peeked in the window of the garage. It looked awful. Like a bomb had gone off inside the garage—wait, oh yeah, that was just Wilson's work in progress. There was something else in the garage. A body. I didn't like that. I couldn't make out much of anything about it through the dingy window of the garage.

I was suddenly seized with the picture of Becky showing up and finding someone—not me—at home. I didn't like that even more.

I quickly crept around and into the garage. Watching the basement door carefully hurried over to the body. Not Becky. A deputy. Reese's guy.

I felt for a pulse. He was still alive. Didn't know what his condition was, but I couldn't do much for him at the moment.

I slid up next to the basement door. Now I could hear something. It sounded like someone had locked an ornery buffalo in the basement. Things were crashing about. I slipped into the basement. I could hear him on the other side of the wall that divided the basement into roughly two large areas. I was in the workshop area. The guy was in the more finished other side, apparently flipping furniture over.

I worked my way through the workshop looking for something useful against the gun I presumed he had. Note to self: most workshop tools are virtually useless against a gun.

The crashing around had stopped. I stopped. Not sure what was going on.

I heard footsteps. He was coming into the workshop area. I ducked under a work bench. A giant passed by heading for the door. Wow, how lucky could I get. He must have been over 6' 5". I didn't see a gun, but that didn't mean he didn't have one. Everyone knows it's hard to carry a gun around while smashing someone's house.

He reached the basement door. Leaning out from under the table I could just see him from behind. He stood in the door frame and peeked out.

Then I heard it too. A car in the driveway. I was hoping it was Russell. Or maybe Reese checking on his deputy. When the guy stepped out into the garage I knew it wasn't either one. And that wasn't good.

I needed to see who was out there and what was going on. I crawled out from under the work bench and moved to the door. I glanced out. Crap. Son of a crap. Becky.

The guy stood at the front of the garage facing Becky. Even in the dim light of the garage I could clearly see now that, yes, he did indeed have a gun. He was pointing at Becky and waving her to come towards him. She moved very slowly. She was carrying a six pack of beer.

I needed to move. My eyes jumped around. On the floor. A piece of copper piping. Must have been something Wilson was going to use. I hopped out the door and scooped up the pipe.

I moved as quietly and quickly as I could. In a few strides I was behind the guy. He looked even bigger up close. I took a good baseball swing at his back. I could here a "whoof" of air come out of him. I was pretty sure I had bent the pipe slightly, but the guy only turned slowly around. I was really never very good at baseball.

When the guy had turned around I could tell that my swing had hurt him at least a little bit, but not enough. It was obvious he was pissed off. This wasn't going to go down pretty.

He took a step towards me. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to get another good swing at him, but I readied myself nonetheless.

As I watched him carefully something appeared to emerge from what looked like right out of his shoulder. With the light behind him I couldn't focus on what it was. Then something hard clipped the side of my head. I caught a glimpse of it the moment before it hit. A beer bottle.

I staggered a step backwards. I had to blink a couple of times to clear my vision.

The guy snickered at me and turned back towards Becky. He made half the turn when he caught a bottle square in the temple. It made a solid dull thump and ricocheted to the concrete floor in a glass and foam splat. Amazingly, the guy finished his turn and was facing Becky, but his knees clearly wobbled.

I hopped forward and whacked him in the back of the head this time. He dropped to his knees. Then in slow motion he leaned forward and slumped into Becky.

"Get off me!" Becky yelled. She tried to shove him away, but the difference in mass between the two of them only resulted in Becky going backwards. She stumbled back a couple of feet.

The guy finished his fall face down into the gravel.

Becky and I stared at each other for breath. She hopped over the guy and ran over to me. We hugged.



"Are you OK?" She asked.

"Well, yeah, you know, except for the beer bottle off the side of my head." I touched a tender spot on the left side of my head.

"Oh! Sorry about that." She said taking a look at it.

"Still, that was a pretty good aim." I waved towards the guy.

Becky shrugged. "Yeah, I get some practice at the pub some nights. You know, when it gets a little rowdy."

Another car pulled into the drive. Russell. He got out and walked up to stare at the guy on the ground. He looked at me.

"Your timing wasn't quite as good this time." Russell had showed up in a very timely fashion when some guys from Detroit were planning something unpleasant for me some time back.

"I guess I missed something." Russell said squatting down to turn the guy over and look at him.

"Yeah. Well, I guess I have a few things to tell you about, but first you need to call for an ambulance." I broke away from Becky and moved back over to where the deputy lay.

18

Carefully stepping over the rumble that now constituted the floor of the garage I walked out to my car. Joey said it was "good as new". Of course, it wasn't all that good when it was new, so the bar wasn't set very high.

Joey had rebuilt the engine, but I hadn't worked up the courage as yet to look under the hood. I had envisioned several rats running around on exercise wheels, rubber bands and a variety of containers holding substances I couldn't identify. In this case, remaining in ignorance was probably the best course of action.

As I reached for the car door a truck, or something that vaguely passed as a truck, pulled into the driveway. Wilson. He parked off to one side.

I waited for Wilson to lumber over to me. I hoped this wouldn't take long. I was meeting Becky at Frankie's Chinese restaurant. The food was fine there. The atmosphere was a little disturbing, but the choices in Hamlet were limited.

"Sammy." Wilson said with a nod.

"Wilson." I waved back towards the garage. "Is there some hope that this might get done in my lifetime?"

"We're gaining on it, Sammy. We're gaining on it."

"I'm not sure I'm gaining anything here, but...whatever." I shook my head slowly.

"Did you hear about the ghosts?" Wilson said, there was a nervous tone in his voice.

I sighed. "I thought we covered this ground already. There are no ghosts at the old dump. Just victims secretly buried there by those guys from Detroit. No ghosts. No zombies. Nothing."

Wilson shook his head. "No, no, Sammy, not at the dump. The swamps."

"The swamps? What are you talking about?"

Wilson pointed off to the west. "The swamps. Everyone's been seeing them."

"Have you seen them?" I asked.

"Me? I wouldn't go out there. There's ghosts out there."

I sighed, again. "Well, maybe the zombies, which come from the bodies in the dump and were created by the nuclear waste—that isn't in the dump—walked out into the swamps, sunk into the mud, died and came back as ghosts."

Wilson thought about that.

I waited. Seriously? This was something he had to think over?

Wilson shook his head slowly. "I don't think that would work. The zombies...would already be dead..."

I groaned. "I'm running late. I need to go."

Wilson nodded. "Sure. Your girlfriend is waiting for you."

I hesitated. The natural male twinge at the mention of some kind of commitment swept over me.

"I'm...not sure Becky..."

Wilson shook his head. "Oh. Not her." He shuffled off towards the garage.

"Uh...?" I stood for a moment, then, with a shrug, climbed into the car.

I parked at Frankie's and got out of the car. There were several cars in the parking lot. I was a little surprised. Apparently the eclectic cooking of Chinese food the Italian way was catching on in Hamlet.

Two parking spots from me a car door opened. Instinctively I glanced over. A woman climbed out of the passenger's side. A man climbed out of the driver's side. I didn't recognize him and barely noticed him.

I had never been one to be captivated by the look of a woman, but that's where I suddenly found myself.

She had dark eyes, short hair, a tight black dress and a trace of smile on her lips as she stared back at me. But there was something more to her. Something about her that felt predatory. That alluring, unflinching confidence that makes a woman like that more powerful than any man could ever dream of being.

They walked to the door of the restaurant. I stood watching them—well, OK, her. She glanced back at me as they went in.

I woke up and walked into the restaurant. The woman—and the other completely out of focus being with her—were already seated. I deliberately did not look at her and weaved my way over to the table Becky was sitting at.

“Hey.” Becky said as I sat down.

“Hey.” I replied.

She looked at me. “Is something wrong? You look like you've just seen a ghost.”

I pulled my attention back to her. “Ghost? No, not me. Despite the fact that it seems to be trending right now.”

“What does that mean?” Becky asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Belinda shuffled over to us with menus. “Gleate to see you ageen.”

I gave Belinda a long serious look.

“Oh. Sorry, Sammy.” Belinda said. She handed us menus and waddled away.

Becky stared at the menu. “Hmm. This isn't clearer the second time through.”

I tried to study the menu, but something was pulling my attention away. I thought it was the woman in black, but something on an instinctive level told me that wasn't it. Like an antelope grazing peacefully in the grass suddenly getting a feeling that there was a leopard in the tree above.

My eyes peered over the menu and around the room. Then I saw her. Just the back of her head, but I knew immediately it was her. Callie.

Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!

Callie was not from Hamlet. Somehow, some way, there could only one reason for her being here in Hamlet. It had to have something to do with a suddenly terrified antelope named Sam.

“I think you may have to pick...what is it? A ghost again?” Becky looked at me over the menu.

I shook my head very slowly. “Not a ghost. More like legions from hell...”

K McConnell

# Ophelia's Hunt

1

"Sam, what is wrong with you?" Becky asked, staring across the table at me.

"Uh..." I answered in my usual quick-witted manner. I stared at Callie's back sitting at a table on the far side of the restaurant. There was no mistaking her. I knew the short brown hair, the little nose in profile, the big smile, the command of every motion of her body. It was Callie. My ex-fiance. What was she doing here?

"Uh is not an answer." Becky said impatiently.

"I..." My mind was spinning. I had been engaged to Callie a few years ago. It had been a wild ride. Callie came from money. Her family was cluttered with corporate royalty. Whatever Callie wanted Callie got—not necessarily because she was spoiled, but usually because Callie never took no for an answer to anything. For a time what Callie wanted was me, or so she thought. Initially I was swept up in the whirlwind of Callie's life, but after a while I started having doubts about whether we were actually a couple or if I was just a willing sidekick.

Belinda came over to take our order.

"I'm afraid we're not ready yet, Belinda." Becky waved over at me. "The writer can't seem to make any sentences."

"I heard he had writer's block." Belinda nodded her head sympathetically.

I sighed. "I don't have writer's block."

"Oh, so you can talk to her, but not me?" Becky stared at me.

Maybe I could just hide behind the menu and quietly speed through the meal. Maybe it was just a crazy coincidence that Callie was here. Bullshit. Callie wasn't from Hamlet and I didn't believe much in coincidences.

I lifted up the menu. "Let's see." I pretended to be mulling over the options.

"I thought you couldn't understand the menu?" Becky asked, pulling the menu back down.

I glanced down at the menu. She was right it was almost gibberish. Frankie, the owner, was of Italian descent and a pretty good Italian chef. For reasons beyond my understanding he decided it would be more profitable to switch his menu to Chinese. Unfortunately, neither Frankie or his wife, Belinda, were very good at spelling—particularly phonetic Chinese.

"You order for us while I teach myself a new language." I lifted the menu back up.

Becky ordered. After Belinda left Becky pulled the menu down. "Care to tell me what's going on?"

"Sam! What a pleasant surprise!"

I looked up. Callie. I nodded slowly. "Callie."

"Callie?" Becky asked. Her head swung from Callie to me and back again. Her blonde pony tail swooshing back and forth.

Belinda came back to the table. "Will there be a third person joining you?" She asked.

"No." I said.

"No." Becky said shaking her head.

"Maybe." Callie said with an ever present smile. She shrugged her shoulders. Callie lived her life the way she wanted and was never burdened by other people's thoughts or feelings.

"No." I said, knowing Callie wasn't listening to me.

"No." Becky said, not comprehending that Callie wasn't listening to her.

Callie smiled at Belinda. "Maybe."

Belinda shuffled away in the awkward silence.

I sighed. "Callie, we both know you are here for a reason and that reason must have something to do with me. People just don't happen to be in Hamlet (other than me, of course). Hell, it takes some decent navigation skills to find Hamlet even for people who are trying to get here. So, why don't we just cut to the chase and you tell me what it is you want."

Callie shook her head as if she was disappointed with me. "Is it such a terrible thing for me to just want to see how you are getting along and reminisce a little?"

"For you or for me?" I asked.

Callie sighed. "Alright, there is something I need to talk to you about."

I stared at Callie, waiting.

Callie smiled back at me.

Becky looked at both Callie and I, but definitely not smiling.

Belinda shuffled towards the table and was about to say something, then noticed yet another awkward silence. She somehow managed, in her tacky Japanese kimono costume—the closest thing she had to Chinese attire—to shuffle backwards from the table.

"OK, this could go on forever." I said. "What is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Callie feigned embarrassment. It was clearly not genuine. I seriously doubt Callie was ever embarrassed by anything she did.

"Well, Sam, it's kind of personal..." Callie said slowly. "Maybe we could discuss it over lunch tomorrow, since, well, I see that you're busy tonight?"

"He is. And probably tomorrow too." Becky kindly volunteered.

"Uh..." I uttered in my usual sophisticated manner.

Callie's eyes never left me. She was masterful at completely ignoring anything or anyone that did not figure into her immediate plans.

"So tomorrow then?" Callie asked.

"No." Becky said.

"Maybe." I said. Becky's glare almost knocked me out of the chair.

"Great! I'll call you." Callie said, still smiling.

"You don't know my number..." I started to say.

Callie laughed. "Really, Sam? I know everything going on in your life." Callie glanced over at Becky. "And even things that aren't."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Becky snatch her glass of water. I shot a hand out and grabbed Becky's wrist.

"OK, great, I will talk to you tomorrow." I said, waving Callie away.

Callie walked off with a little wave.

Becky pulled her wrist free and spilled her water on to the table.

"What was that all about?" Becky asked, burning two holes into to me.

"Uh, I don't know yet." I said in complete honesty.

"You said that you and Callie were over with." Becky said.

Belinda shuffled towards the table to wipe up the water. Becky and I glanced over at her. She stopped. Moving slowly, she shuffled backwards again. She was getting good at that.

Turning from Belinda my eyes locked on to those the woman from the parking lot. She was sitting with an older guy. Someone I didn't know. For a moment I couldn't pull myself away. Her look told me nothing, but her steady gaze was almost unnerving.

Becky glanced back over her shoulder. She spotted the woman.

"What's going on here?" Becky demanded.

I looked at Becky and shook my head. "I don't know what Callie wants."

"I think I might have an idea." Becky said, not smiling. "Maybe this would be a good time to tell me what went on between you and her."

I looked down at the table. After a moment I shook my head slowly. "I will, but..."

"But what?" Becky demanded.

"After I see what she wants here and she goes." I said.

"Why? Do you need to get her permission? Or do you just want to make sure she doesn't want you back before you go with plan B—me?" Becky threw her napkin down on the table.

"No, it's just—"

"Never mind." Becky stood up. "I'm not hungry. I'll find my own way home." She stormed out of the restaurant.

I sat there staring at the table in front of me. I could feel everyone's eyes on me. Including hers. I could almost feel that woman's presence in the room. I didn't look up until I heard Belinda's shuffling. I glanced up. Belinda met my gaze and began shuffling backwards again.

I didn't know why I couldn't tell Becky more about Callie, but something made me hesitate. Becky was pretty sure what was holding me back from talking about Callie, but I knew that wasn't it. I didn't believe for a moment that Callie was back here to rekindle something with me and it was definitely not a coincidence that Callie was here in Hamlet.

I stood up. Well, presumably Callie would tell me what she wanted at lunch tomorrow and then I could sort things out with Becky. There was, however, a nagging feeling biting at my heels as I walked out of the restaurant. If there was one constant about Callie it was that when you reached a point at which you were sure what she was going to do next she would blind side you with something you never saw coming. That was Callie.

2

I pulled into the parking lot of the Hamlet Pub. I was looking for Becky. My gut told me that she wouldn't be here. I sat in the car and tried to think of where she might be if she wasn't here and realized that when she wasn't working or hanging around with me I didn't really know what she did with her time. If I was in a relationship with Becky, it was obvious I was doing a poor job of it.

As I got out of the car my gut went on to say that I hadn't eaten any dinner as well. I never much cared for extended conversations with my gut so I ignored it.

"Are there going to be dead bodies in there?"

I had almost reached the door of the pub. I recognized the voice. So close. So close to escaping. Don't turn around. Just go in. Don't turn around.

I turned around. Billy Fallon.

"Shouldn't you be at home? It's almost dark." I said, foolishly thinking I could weasel my out of yet another totally pointless conversation with Billy.

"Dead bodies." He said.

"What? What about dead bodies?" I asked.

"Are there any in there?" Billy pointed at the pub.

"Not...that I know of." I said staring at him. Though I thought about Ben Sterling. He once owned a print shop in town, but now seemed like just a part of the eclectic decor of the pub. "Although, the status of some of them may be somewhat unclear. Why would you ask about dead bodies?"

"My Mom says wherever you go dead bodies are found." Billy said. "So, there must be some dead bodies in there."

I shook my head. "That's not true."

"I heard the sheriff say it too. And that man from the county, the detective guy." Billy went on.

"Yeah, well, that's just..."

"And I heard them say it in the store." Billy pointed across the street to Hamlet's small grocery store.

I glanced over at the store and caught a glimpse of Marjorie, the owner's wife, peeking out from beside a sign taped to the window advertising a sale on emu steaks.

"That's just...well...OK, yeah, sometimes that happens, but I'm sure there aren't any dead bodies in the pub." I said. I realized I wasn't sure if I was trying to reassure him or me.

Billy looked disappointed. "Maybe after you have been in there a little while some will show up."

I sighed. "Well, we'll all keep our fingers crossed, OK?" I turned and went into the pub.

There was a small scattering of people around the room. I veered over to the bar. Renee spotted me and came down the bar to where I stood. Renee typically worked the bar when Harry, the owner, wasn't in. Her short black hair splayed across her face as she leaned over to talk to me.

"Have you seen Becky?" I asked.

"She called me a little while ago." Renee stared at me with a stern look. "She wasn't happy."

I nodded. "Yeah, I figured that out. Do you know where she's at?"

Renee shook her head, sending hair dancing about. "Didn't say. Probably doesn't want you to know right now."

"Probably, but I still need to talk to her. If she calls back will you ask her to call me?"

Renee shrugged. "I'll tell her, but I wouldn't hold my breath."

"Yeah, that would just confirm Billy Fallon's theory." I said nodding.

"What?" Renee asked.

I waved her off. "Nothing."

"MacAlister!"

I turned around. It seemed odd to hear a voice raised in the pub. It was such a quiet and sleepy place. At a table in the middle of the room sat David Barrister, a business man from the city (which usually meant Detroit) that had purchased some land here in Hamlet. He had grandiose ideas of building a quaint subdivision on it until he found out the land used to be the old township dump. He wasn't happy. Worse yet, the old dump had been, in the past, used by criminal elements from Detroit to hide bodies. Since then he had been working on different ideas on how to utilize the land for some profitable purpose.

Across the table from Barrister sat Tom Crawley. Tom was a farmer from the north side of town. He used to raise cattle, but gave that up years ago. He had, over the years, tried raising a variety of more exotic animals. Currently, he had a deal worked out to "free range" the stray dogs and cats that plagued Hamlet. How that was working out I wasn't quite sure.

The two guys were distinctly contrasting. Barrister, in his casual slacks, golf shirt and blonde-gray hair combed neatly to one side. Tom, in his overalls, flannel shirt and wildly scruffy dark hair. It seemed an odd pair.



It was Barrister that was calling out and waving me towards their table. I walked across the creaky old wooden floor over to their table.

"MacNeil." I said.

Barrister stared at me for a moment. He shook his head. "No, it's Barrister. David Barrister."

I sighed. "My name is MacNeil." I said.

"Oh. Well, whatever." Barrister said with a shrug. He waved across the table. "This here is..."

I nodded at Tom. "Hey, Tom."

Tom nodded. "Sammy."

I looked at Barrister. Why is it that people from bigger cities just can't seem to wrap their brain around the fact that in small towns people actually do know just about everybody else?

"I was just talking with Mr. Crawley here about using the property as pasture." Barrister said.

"You're going to raise cattle on your property. Is that...safe?" I asked.

Barrister shook his head. "Not cattle. The beef market is too volatile."

"Then..." I glanced over at Tom. "Not emus."

Tom shook his head. It made his saggy face jiggle. "No, Sammy. Not emus. I think we've all learned our lesson there. Those critters sure can jump fences."

I looked back at Barrister. "So, what are you going to raise? What's the hot commodity these days?"

Barrister shrugged. "Not sure yet. But the hottest commodity these days is tourism."

My brow wrinkled. "Tourism? Here? In Hamlet?"

Barrister nodded. "Tom was a pioneer in that. His emus were a great draw. Even now, people are coming in to see his free range animals."

I glanced at Tom. "They're stray dogs and cats."

Tom just nodded.

"People will come to see anything if you put it in a pen." Barrister smiled. "I want to find something that would really draw people in."

"And charge them admission to see it." I said.

Barrister gave a half shrug. "Probably a little something. But then there lots of other revenue generating sources that could be mixed in. I'm still working out the details. It will depend a lot on the type of animal."

"You might want to check with the township on that. For reasons I can't quite grasp, there are few animals that don't have a hunting season in Hamlet."

It was clear the thought hadn't crossed Barrister's mind. He glanced at Tom. Tom seemed to think about it for a moment and then gave a solemn nod.

"Well, I'll figure it out. Anyway, what I wanted to ask you about was where I could find your friend, Daggot. I have some work I need him to do." Barrister said.

I sighed. "Wilson Daggot is not my friend." Wilson Daggot was a shabby handyman that would take on any job that paid cash, didn't require any permits or inspections and could be cobbled together with whatever he could scrounge up. He also had a bad habit of stumbling into trouble. A habit I had to reluctantly bail him out of more than once.

Barrister shrugged off my objection. "Isn't he still doing work on your parent's house?"

I nodded. "When he shows up, yes." I had been house sitting for my parents while they were perpetually traveling for a while now. During that time the house had taken something of a beating. I continually tried to tell myself that it wasn't my fault, but Billy Fallon's words haunted me.

"I haven't seen him in more than a week." I said. I waved towards Tom. "I thought he was rounding up strays for Tom's farm."

Tom slowly shook his head. "Hasn't been around in a couple of weeks."

"Did you try his shack down by the lake?" I asked.

"I did, but that place doesn't look like anyone's lived there in years." Barrister replied.

I waved that off. "It always looks like that. Just leave a note on the front door. He'll show up, eventually."

"Alright. Thanks." Barrister said with a quick nod.

And with that I sensed I had been dismissed. I nodded at Tom and headed out of the bar.

3

After slogging down a cup of the brown watery stuff that I had made (sometimes called coffee) I walked out of the basement door and into the attached garage. I glanced down at the septic pipe repair job Wilson Daggot had recently done. It was a sorry sight. Out of the wall of the basement, back along the base of back wall of the garage and out through a hole in the side of the garage snaked a patchwork of different diameter pipes cobbled together. It was a plumbing job from hell. It would never pass an inspection, but I was never planning on getting an inspection. That's why I had Wilson do it. I would just need to shove all the junk lying around in the garage up in front of the piping to hide it.

I got into the car drove the quarter mile up into town. Managing a household was never one of my strong points so I was perpetually finding I was out of food. I pulled up in front of the grocery store. I had barely walked in when Marjorie scurried over to me.

"I'm glad you're here." Marjorie spoke in hushed tones despite the fact that I couldn't see another person in the place. She was a bulky woman with longer, slightly wandering dark hair.

"My stomach is too." I said. I strolled down an aisle.

Marjorie followed me. "Everyone is talking about you."

I glanced over at her. "I seem to be a regular topic around here." I reached for a can of something.

"No." Marjorie said.

I pulled my hand back. It seemed like a harmless can of corn.

"No, this is different." Marjorie said.

I reached for the can again. It seems like corn was back on the menu. "Oh? How is that?" I asked, completely lacking any real interest in the answer to my question.

"The love triangle." Marjorie said, nodding her head.

I stopped before I could grab the can of corn. "The what?"

"The love triangle." Marjorie repeated.

We stared at each other for a moment.

"Are you sure you don't mean the Bermuda Triangle?" I asked. Of which I was certain Hamlet was somehow tucked into a small corner of. Geography be damned.

Marjorie stared at me as if I was an idiot. It was an expression I commonly received in Hamlet.

"You and Becky and your ex wife." Marjorie said putting her hands on her hips.

My hand hovered in space, ready to grasp a can, but holding nothing.

"Me...Becky...and...oh, Callie is not my ex wife." I stammered.

"Oh, well who is your ex wife then?" Marjorie, looking confused.

"There is no ex wife." I replied. I tried moving my hand closer to the can of corn.

Marjorie gasped. "What happened to her? You didn't do anything...inappropriate to her, did you? You know, like maybe she's in the old dump?"

My hand dropped to my side as I turned to face Marjorie.

"He wouldn't put her in the old dump. He writes horror stories. He would probably just chop her up."

I swung around to find Brim, the store owner and Marjorie's husband. He was a round man. Not tall and sporting a fluffy mustache that nearly hid his mouth.

"Chop...dump...what...wait—I write mysteries, not horror." I said. The conversation was now officially deep into the weeds.

"Well, she has to be hidden somewhere." Marjorie insisted.

"Who?" I asked, looking back at Marjorie.

"Your ex wife." Marjorie stared at me, clearly puzzled at why I couldn't keep up with the conversation.

"I don't have an ex wife" I said.

"Well, that's what we're saying. She's disappeared." Marjorie said, shaking her head sadly.

I sighed. "There is no ex wife—dead or alive."

Marjorie gasped again. "You're still married to her?"

"Married to who?" I asked stared at her.

"Oh for Pete's sake. Your wife. Who else would you be married to?" Marjorie stamped a foot.

I sighed again. "I am not married to anybody. I have never been married. If you're talking about Callie, we were only engaged once."

Marjorie hesitated for a moment. "Oh, well, everyone wants to know if you're dumping poor Becky for this Callie girl now that she has come crawling back to you."

"I'm not dumping...Callie isn't...no, there's nothing going on." I wasn't sure why Callie was here, but Callie never went crawling back to anything.

"Just like a man. Can't face up to things." Marjorie said stomping away.

I started to reach for the can of corn again.

"You need more houses."

I glanced over at Brim. "What?" My hand hanging in the air.

"More houses." He said with a nod.

I didn't even own one house. I was just house sitting for my parents. Once they finally returned I fully expected to be out of Hamlet and on the road somewhere.

"I...don't think..." I sputtered.

"In different towns. That's how you do it." Brim said knowingly.

"Do what?" I asked, immediately regretting my reflexive response.

"Managing your women." Brim said smiling.

"Managing my women? What are you talking about? Oh, wait, don't tell me you...?" It suddenly occurred to me I needed an exit strategy.

Brim shook his head. "No, but I was young once. I know how it is to have the women chasing you."

I studied the short, squat bald man in front of me with the sleepy eyes and some serious slumping in every visible part of his anatomy. We stared at each other. Brim with a look suggesting a lurid past. Me with a look suggesting that perhaps insanity ran in his family.

"Thanks for the advice, Brim." I said. I snatched a couple of cans off the shelf and checked out with Marjorie up front.

Outside the store I stood breathing in the quasi-fresh air that was Hamlet. A car drove slowly through town. I glanced over at it. A very sleek and shiny black Mercedes. I didn't recognize it. If they didn't live here then odds were they were very lost.

As the car passed it slowed even more. A woman was driving. She turned and she smiled at me. It wasn't just a woman—it was **the** woman. The one from the restaurant. She continued on by, but it felt as if I couldn't pull my eyes away from her. There was something about her that—no, there several somethings that added up to something very unique.

When the car was far enough along that I could no longer see her, I woke up. What was I doing again? I glanced around and down into the grocery bag I was holding. Oh, yeah, I was picking up some...beans. Beans! Damn, I hate beans.

I tossed the bag into the car and crossed the street to the pub. Inside, Harry was working behind the bar. No one else was there. No, that wasn't true. Ben Sterling was there. He naturally blended in.

"Hey, Harry." I said.

Harry looked up and frowned slightly. "Hey, Sam."

"I was looking for Becky." I said.

"Well, she was supposed to be working this morning, but she called in sick." Harry grumbled. "Sick my ass." He mumbled on.

"Ah," I said, "Well, I'm just trying to track her down."

Harry stopped. "Well, I hope so. I can't work every day, you know."

"Uh..." It was all I could think to say, with my usual quick wit.

"Listen, I don't know what's going on, but, personally, I think you just need to divorce your wife and patch things up with Becky. Otherwise, I'm going to need to look for a new employee." Harry said, exasperated.

Ben mumbled something. His speech was so slurred from years of heavy drinking few people could understand him.

"No!" Harry turned towards him. "Nobody's been chopped up. That only happens in his stories."

"Divorced? Chopped? Wait, damn it, they are mysteries—not horror." I turned and looked back in the direction of the grocery store. I started to point and then turned back towards Harry and Ben.

"How...? They just...?" I was headed back towards another vast field of weeds. "Never mind. Thanks, Harry."

I walked out of the pub. I took a deep breath. I had an overwhelming desire to throw a can of beans at someone. What else were they good for?

4

I pulled the car into the driveway and immediately knew who the little yellow sports car, already parked there, belonged to. I parked next to Callie's car and got out. She got out of her car, circled around the front of mine and hugged me. I hugged her back and realized I really didn't harbor any negative feelings towards her—not that she would probably permit me to anyway.

Callie leaned back against my car. She just stared at me with a smile.

"I've missed you." Callie said, laughing a little. "It was a lot of fun times."

I nodded. "There were many good times. That's true."

I watched her for a moment. She was pretty, there wasn't any doubt about that. And she was a glass  $\frac{3}{4}$  full person. She was very good at always finding the bright side of things. More than that, she had a knack for leveraging good things out of the negative crap that all of us wade through in life. That was nice to be around. Someone that almost always kept your chin up when life seemed to be hell bent on dragging you down.

"So," I said, "you have something you needed to talk to me about."

Callie tilted her head and looked at me out of the corner of her eye. I knew that look. It was her playful look.

"Oh, it's not that important. I would rather spend some time remembering how things used to be." Callie said with a crooked little smile.

I knew Callie as well anybody did, but even I wasn't always sure what she was up to.

"I enjoy reminiscing as much as anyone, but I prefer to take care of business first." I said feeling old desires rumble around slightly from somewhere deep inside as we stared at each other.

For a moment Callie's eyes drifted off to someplace else. She seemed to be trying to decide something.

"Well, I do have a little problem." Callie said, almost reluctantly.

"Which is...?" I asked.

"I seemed to have developed a following." She said.

"You have always had a following." I said.

Callie reached out and brushed my cheek with her hand. "I mean besides you, sweetie."

"You mean, like a stalker?" I asked, getting more serious.

Callie shrugged. "I don't know who they are?"

"They?" I asked.

Callie nodded. "I have noticed a couple of guys following me around lately."

"Lately? So what have you been up to lately that would draw someone's interest?"

Callie shook her head. "Nothing. There's nothing going on that I can think of that someone would be following me around for."

"Can you describe them?" I asked.

She shook her head again. "No. I never get to see them clearly enough, but I know it's always the same two. They use different cars, but I know it's still them."

"When did you last see them?"

"Last night. At the hotel. In Ann Arbor. They were waiting across the street when I got back from seeing you."

I thought for a moment. "Why don't you just tell your father? He certainly has enough connections to find out who they are."

Callie shook her head. "No. No way. You know Daddy. He would just use it as an excuse to start micro managing my life. No, thank you."

I spun through the situation. It was no sense playing games. I was always more inclined to deal with things sooner rather than later.

"Did they follow you here?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so. At least, I haven't seen them today." Callie said, glancing out towards the road.

"Alright," I said, "we just need to find out who they are and what they want. The simplest approach is usually the best."

"OK. You're the boss." Callie said with a playful smile.

I laughed a little. "Callie, I was never the boss."

"Well," she said with a shrug, "maybe there will be a new job opening."

I watched her for a moment. I wasn't sure what that meant. Even more, I wasn't sure if I wanted it to mean anything. And where was Becky in this? I needed to talk to her, but I was less sure at the moment about what I was going to say to her than I was last night. Still, I needed to talk to her.

"I...have something I need to do this afternoon. Maybe we could..."

"It's OK. I have to meet with someone later on anyway. So, how about a late dinner?" Callie said smiling.

I hesitated. Again, not sure where Callie was coming from right now. Besides, I didn't know if I could find Becky, what was going to happen there.

"Do you think you'll be OK until lunch tomorrow?" I asked.

Callie nodded. "I'll be fine."

"Alright. I'll call you." I said.

"OK, I'll talk to you later." Callie kissed me on the cheek and I watched her drive off.

I stood thinking about the guys following Callie. Honestly, I thought, there could be lots possibilities given the fast paced life Callie lived.

5

I needed to find Becky and talk to her, but before I did that it seemed worthwhile to check in with Russell, Hamlet's own sheriff. Russell Crane was a big man—not fat, but bulky. With reddish hair and a weary serious approach to his job, he did his best to cope with the perpetual chaos that seemed to constantly engulf Hamlet.

It seemed unlikely that if the guys were following Callie and she was staying in Ann Arbor, about 20 miles south of Hamlet, they were probably not hanging around here. Still, Callie had made two trips

into Hamlet and anybody not from Hamlet was easily spotted. It was a long shot, but if someone had seen them around I might get at least a description of their current vehicle or maybe even them.

I drove the car up to the township hall. It was located about a block west of the main street of Hamlet in an old church. An irony never lost upon me. It was like a temple dedicated to confusion and frustration. I parked and walked in.

Glancing around I didn't see Jessie, the township clerk and gate guardian. Getting past her always felt like petitioning to have the sun moved three feet to the left. This was especially true for me. I was generally not welcome in the township hall. There was the persistent impression that I somehow was the precursor to something bad happening.

I started to walk past the counter towards the door to Russell's office.

"Where do you think you're going?" The voice of doom and despair called out.

I stopped and turned. Jessie was standing at the counter. I glanced around. Where did she come from? Sadly, I couldn't completely rule out that she just materialized out of empty space.

"I...was just checking...on what might be currently in season right now." I said, desperately making something up. I could just tell her I was here to see Russell, but that always led to a 20 question grilling before the inevitable denial.

Jessie looked at me suspiciously. Slowly, here eyes closely watching me, she turned towards a bulletin board behind her. She shot a glance at a piece of paper tacked on to the board.

"Currently in season are the following: large feline predators, feral terriers and, of course, emus." Jessie said staring at me.

"What, no writers?" I asked.

Jessie's expression did not change. "There has been some discussion on that."

"Uh...well good, then...so maybe I could..." I pointed towards Russell's office.

Jessie's cold stare suggested that wasn't likely.

Russell stuck his head out of his office door. "Jessie, could you..." Russell caught sight of me. "Crap."

Russell sighed. "What do you want?"

"Not much. Just a minute." I said innocently.

With a reluctant wave Russell ducked back into his office. I followed him in and sat down.

"Please tell me this discussion will not at any time use the term 'dead body'." Russell stared at me.

I waved that off. "Absolutely not. No dead bodies."

"OK, then what?" Russell asked.

"Just wondering if anyone has reported seeing any strangers in town."

Russell watched me for a moment. "What is it now? Come on, out with it."

I shook my head. "Nothing. I was just helping out a friend. She's trying to find someone." It wasn't exactly the truth, but close enough.



Russell shook his head. "No. With you this somehow leads to dead bodies."

Again, I shook my head. "No dead bodies, I promise."

Russell hesitated. "So who is your ex wife looking for?"

I sighed. "Callie is not my ex wife. And, I'm not sure."

Russell studied me for a moment longer and then shook his head. "I haven't heard about any strangers hanging about."

"So no one suspicious around here lately?" I asked.

"Other than you? No." Russell said, flatly.

I nodded. "OK. Well, that's all. Thanks." I stood up.

Russell looked up at me. "With you, that's never all there is to it."

There were sounds of someone coming in outside Russell's office and a moment later Dixon Reese, the county detective walked in. Reese was not a big man, but a well dressed representative of the county's finest. Brown hair neatly combed to the side, shirt and tie—no coat—and slacks.

"Sheriff." Reese said with a courteous nod to Russell.

Reese glanced over at me. "Mr. MacNeil. Seeing you here, should I be concerned?"

"Yes." Russell said.

"No." I said, quickly.

Reese looked at Russell questioningly.

Russell shrugged. "Anytime he shows up..."

Reese nodded. "I understand."

Reese set a folder down on Russell's desk. "This is the file I was telling you about. We know they are into drugs. We just don't what or where. If you have any ideas, let us know."

Russell pulled the folder over in front of him. "Yes, sir. I will do that."

"Well, I'll just be going." I said.

Both Russell and Reese gave me a quick nod and I was out the door. Admittedly, I was a little curious what was in the folder Reese had brought, but right now I needed to find Becky. I walked out of the building and around to my car.

A clear feeling of dread swept over me as I nearly ran into Billy Fallon.

"Billy." I said. "I would have thought you would have been sold to a circus by now."

Billy stared at me oddly for a moment. "There's no circus here right now."

I shook my head slowly. "Sadly, that's true, but we could hope one comes around soon. Wouldn't you like to join the circus?"

Billy thought about it. "I don't think so. My mother says all circus people are thieves. Like you."

"Me?" I asked. "I'm not a circus person."

Billy shook his head. "A thief."

"Thief? What are you talking about?"

Billy pointed at the car. "Is that your car?"

I glanced over at the Malibu. "No, it's my parents' car."

"Did you ask them if you could drive it?"

I frowned. "I didn't need to ask them if..."

Billy shook his head. "My mother says if you take something without asking permission, that's stealing. So you're a thief."

I sighed. "My parents don't care if..." I hesitated. The house had taken quite a beating recently and was only now getting back to being livable. And I did blow the engine of the Malibu trying to catch a murderer, thanks to Joey Needles, our local would-be inventor, making some modifications to the fuel intake.

"Well, anyway, my parents allow me to use their car while they are gone." I said.

Billy's eyes narrowed. "Did they make a contact with you?"

"A contact?" I stared at him.

"Did they write it down and make you sign it?" Billy asked.

"Oh, a contract. No, no contract." I told him.

"My mother says if ain't wroted down it don't mean nothing."

"That's a triple negative." I said. "I'm not sure what that even means."

From behind me came a scuffling of feet. I turned to see Russell and Reese both coming out of the township office at a fast pace. They moved towards their vehicles. Both of them stopped when they saw me still standing in the parking lot.

"You see. I knew it." Russell said over the roof of his car to Reese.

Reese glanced over at me. "It does seem awfully peculiar."

"What?" I said. "I'm just standing here."

"It's because you stoled a car." Billy said.

I shot Billy a "I'm going to sell you to the nearest circus" look.

"Perhaps," Reese said, "You should accompany us."

"What?" Russell exclaimed.

Reese looked back at Russell. "You said it yourself. Every time Mr. MacNeil shows up there seems to be trouble. We might as well save ourselves some time and bring him along. Based on past experience there's bound to be some kind of connection."

Russell waved a hand. "Whatever."

Reese looked at me and indicated the passenger side of his car. "If it's not an inconvenience..."

I slowly walked towards Reese's car. "What's going on?"

"George Williams, the millionaire up in Hamlet Hills, he was just found dead." Russell said.

6

The house, like all of them in Hamlet Hills, was elegant, large and nicely taken care of. We pulled into the circular cement driveway. Reese parked behind one of the two deputies' cars already there. It didn't appear as though the county coroner had been there yet. Russell pulled in behind us. The three of us walked into the house.

The entry way was nice. A long central hall through the house. It stretched back towards what looked like a sitting area at the back of the house with what appeared to be a nice view. A staircase headed up to the second floor along the right side of the central hall. To the immediate right was a large formal dining room. To the immediate left was another doorway. A deputy stood outside that door. From the dining room came the sounds of muffled crying.

"The body's in here." The deputy in the hall waved towards the room he was standing outside.

The three of us stepped into what turned out to be an office or study. Beautiful wood flooring and wood paneling was everywhere. There were lots of book shelves set into the walls and a large bay window facing the front of the house. Just in front of the window was an impressive desk. The only visible sign of a body was a hand, on the floor, extending out from behind the desk.

Russell stayed at the door while Reese moved carefully forward. I followed, despite a disapproving grunt from Russell, but curiosity was pushing me along. I hovered just behind Reese as he circled around the desk and stared down at the late George Williams.

I didn't know George Williams. If he had been around when I was originally living in Hamlet, I never met him. Despite that, there was something familiar about him. I just couldn't put a finger on it.

Reese stood motionless. After a moment he glanced back at me.

"So," Reese said, "I understand writers are supposed to be good observers. Is that true?"

My eyes pulled off the body and looked at Reese. I nodded slightly. "It is important."

Reese waved a hand at the body. "So, tell me what you see."

Momentarily, I almost joined our new friend George on the floor. I had fully expected Reese to order me out of the room—not ask my opinion.

I scanned the room. "No signs of a struggle. No blood. No obvious wound. Suggests a natural cause. Maybe a stroke, but his expression of something like pain looks more like a heart attack."

Reese nodded. "Possibly. We'll check his medical records. Could be poison."

I glanced over at Reese. "Any reason to think someone wanted to kill him?"

Reese stared down at the body and shook his head. "Not right now. The girlfriend is in the other room. She might have something to tell us. What else?"

I squatted down. Williams was laying on his side. He obviously had been sitting at the desk and fell out of the chair on to a nice thick rug that encircled the desk and immediate surrounding area. His knees were pulled up slightly. There was a splattering of a creamy brown liquid on the rug. A few inches out from his left hand was small glass bottle. A little of the brown liquid remained in it. I leaned over a little further to look at the label on the bottle.

"Iced coffee." I said. "If it is poison and it came in that," I pointed at the bottle, "then it had to be subtle."

"Because..." Reese said.

"It looks like he drinks that often." Standing up I pointed to the circular ribbed water stains on the desk blotter on top of the desk. They were the same pattern as the bottom of the bottle.

"Seems like he would notice a taste difference." I added. "Besides, if you wanted to poison someone and not make it obvious, then I think you would choose something that wouldn't cause a lot of pain. Something that causes significant pain would probably leave a fairly obvious signature."

Reese nodded. "Not bad. I think I'd like to talk to the girl."

We walked out of the study and across into the dining room. I followed Reese, but almost stutter-stepped as I entered the dining room. It was her.

Reese introduced himself while I stared like an idiot. It was the woman from the restaurant and the drive by. I caught her name as she snuffled a response to Reese: Misty De LaCorte.

I was still staring stupidly as Reese asked her a question that I totally missed.

"Like I told the officer," Misty said, "I was just shopping this morning in Brighton and when I got home...well...he was just there." She waved towards the study.

"Did he have any health issues?" Reese asked her.

"I think so, but I've only known him a short while. I don't know for sure. He didn't want to talk about it and I didn't push it." Misty replied.

"Did he ever show any symptoms of anything? Anything that might indicate what might be bothering him?" Reese watched her closely.

Misty shook her head. "I never saw anything."

"So, you...lived here with Mr. Williams?" Reese asked, though he obviously wanted to ask a more direct question.

Misty nodded. "Yes. I have been staying with George for a little while now."

"And your relationship was...?" Reese asked, looking directly at her.

Misty glanced past Reese and saw me for the first time. For the briefest of moments I almost thought her expression changed, but an instant later I swore I was wrong. When she answered Reese she was looking at me.

"I was a friend. A companion."

Reese clearly wanted to get a further clarification, but didn't ask. At the moment there was no reason to assume there was anything going on here, but a sudden, tragic natural death.

A deputy stepped into the room and indicated he wanted to show Reese something. At the same time the front door opened and, from the sounds it was obvious the coroner had arrived. From somewhere in the central hall Russell's voice could be heard directing the coroner. I still stood in the dining room trying very hard not to look stupid while I watched Misty. I told myself I was watching to see if her sad expression slipped at all and revealed something else. I tried real hard to believe that's what I was doing.

"I'm Misty." Misty offered her hand.

"Sam." I took her hand and patted myself on the back that I didn't stutter.

"Are you a detective too?" Misty asked still holding my hand.

"No. He's a pain in the ass. If you'll excuse my language, ma'am." Russell's voice came from the doorway of the dining room.

A small, very pretty smile crossed Misty lips. "Is that true?" She asked.

I nodded. "Far too often, I'm afraid. I'm a writer."

Misty looked a little confused. "So, why are you here? Do you write for a newspaper?"

I shook my head. "No. I write novels that very few people are interested in reading. As to why I'm here...that's a good question."

"Are you a friend of the detective?" Misty asked.

I shrugged. "I'm just helping out."

"Thank you." Misty said, with another small smile.

"Uh, well, I really haven't done anything as yet." I admitted.

"It's comforting, to me, that such nice people are...taking care of things. It's...just hard. Losing George so suddenly like this." Misty sniffled and turned away.

I took a breath. I wasn't sure how long it had been since the last one. "So...you're sure he hadn't been showing any signs of...health issues?"

Misty looked back at me. She shook her head slightly. "Not really. He seemed to be a little more forgetful lately, but I thought that was just that he's been so busy with his businesses. I think there was some big merger or something like that going on."

"Well, we'll know more once the coroner has determined what happened." I said, once again, doing what I seemed to do best: pointing out the obvious.

"If you're done here..." Reese said over my shoulder.

I pulled my eyes away from Misty's. "Uh, yeah."

"A deputy will take a full statement from you." Reese said to Misty.

Misty nodded, then touched my shoulder as I turned away. "Thank you."

I half shrugged back at her. I had no idea what she was thanking me for. "No problem."

Russell drove me back into town. He said very little and I said even less. I tried thinking about finding Becky or what was going on with Callie, but the tears in Misty's eyes kept drifting into every scene.

7

After a restless night of sleep I left about mid morning and drove south to Ann Arbor. Right downtown, a couple of blocks east of main street I parked (always an undertaking in that city) and walked into the Bell Tower hotel. It was a nice and elegant hotel, but where else would Callie stay?

I took the elevator up to her room. One of the Atrium suites. I knocked on her door.

"You're late." Callie said with a smile.

I shrugged. "You know Ann Arbor, it's all about parking."

We stood in the living room of the suite quietly staring at each other.

"So," I said, feeling oddly awkward, "have you seen your friends?"

"My friends?" Callie seemed puzzled.

"The guys who are following you." I reminded her.

"Oh, those guys." Callie waved her hand. "Oh, they're probably hanging around the lobby somewhere."

"Maybe you could point them out to me."

Callie nodded. "Sure, but I'm starving. Let's get something to eat."

I watched her for moment. "You don't seem to be too concerned about them."

Callie smiled at me. She walked over and rested her arms on my shoulders. "That's because I know you will take care of it for me." She kissed me on the forehead.

We took the elevator down to the lobby. As we walked across the lobby I caught a glimpse of a couple of guys slipping out the front doors. Callie pointed towards them.

"That was them." She said.

I took a step towards the door, but Callie grabbed at my sleeve.

Callie pointed towards the restaurant in the Bell Tower. "Starving. Lunch first."

I started to say something, but she put her fingers on my lips.

"They are following me. As long as I'm here, they aren't going anywhere." Callie said as she pulled me towards the restaurant.

As if reliving a past life, I let her direct me to where she wanted to go—where we always, inevitably, ended up.

We sat down and ordered. Callie talked and I mostly listened, again, like the old days. But Callie talked about her most recent adventures: gross, but amusing miscommunications between shipmates on a Congressman's yacht, an overzealous strip search coming back from Thailand, a bizarre marriage proposal from a Brazilian playboy that involved monkeys and a nudist beach and more such tales.

I listened and a part of me very much wanted to go back to living in the center of the whirlwind that was Callie. Life was never dull—even in the times when it was just her and I.

"So, why are you in little Hamlet these days?" Callie asked.

I sighed. "An excellent question. Well, it seems that after several years of retirement my parents were suddenly stricken with a dread fear."

"Really? What?" Callie looked concerned.

"They came to the frightening conclusion that unless they took drastic measures they might just end up leaving me something in their will. So, to prevent such a tragedy they have taken up the sacred right of all retirees: perpetually traveling the world."

Callie laughed. "Other than guaranteeing you long term poverty, how does that affect you?"

"They asked me to house sit for them while they went on a vacation." I said.

"So, what's wrong with that?" Callie took a sip of water.

"That was several vacations ago. Hamlet is quaint as you drive by it on the freeway, but..."

Callie frowned. "I don't think you can see Hamlet from the freeway."

"Exactly." I said.

"Well, you could always find something more entertaining to do." She had a playful look in her eye.

"Like follow you around?" I asked watching her. I didn't know what I was watching for. Did I want her to say yes?

"You make that sound like an unpleasant thing." She said, pretending to frown, but she knew me well enough to know that I wouldn't have found it unpleasant.

I smiled. "You know better than that."

We finished lunch.

"Well," I said as we walked back out of the restaurant, "shall we go find your friends?"

Callie shrugged. "OK." There was something oddly distant about her answer. It seemed like she should be more concerned about who they were, but sometimes Callie was hard to read.

We stepped out the door and stood on the sidewalk. I looked around. It was a typically busy day in the city, but I didn't spot the two guys. Still, I had a feeling we were being watched. Maybe it was just the power of suggestion. The expectation that we were being watched created a feeling of actually being watched. I couldn't be sure.

"Let's take a drive." I said.

"That sounds nice." Callie said with a smile as she took hold of my arm.

We made our way to my car, a couple of blocks away, and I pulled out into traffic. I meandered around several blocks just to see what appeared. It didn't take long. I spotted them several cars back. They were casual, but consistently there.

I zig-zagged through some blocks until I could pull up on to the freeway. I headed north, towards Hamlet. I had a pretty good feeling that I could find just the right spot in Hamlet to corner them.

I drove faster than usual up the freeway. I wanted them to worry a little. It often led to their making poorer decisions later on. Callie was talking, but I was only half listening. She was saying something about her father and his many business schemes and how they sometimes spilled over into her life in ways she never expected. It didn't mean anything to me so I didn't really pay attention.

We reached the exit for Hamlet. I cruised off the freeway, down the exit ramp and on to the road that headed west towards Hamlet. Again, I was going faster than usual. I wanted just enough of a distance between us that they would occasionally lose sight of us for just a moment or two.

It was about 5 or 6 miles to Hamlet and the quiet two lane road made several 90 degree turns. The first turn was about a mile away. The road here was a straight shot to the curve with swamp on both sides of it. I hit the gas and tore down the road. Behind us our friends were slow in catching on and a distance opened up between us.

Callie laughed. She said something about there being better ways to get her adrenaline going. I didn't answer her.

I came up to the corner fast and took it about as fast as I dared. I sent a hub cap wheeling off into swamp water. I went only a short distance further, enough that the cattails and reeds hid us from the guys behind us who were fast approaching. I stopped. I sat in the road and waited.

"What are you doing?" Callie asked. "They'll catch up with us."

"Yes," I said looking at her with a smile, "they will."

Two heart beats passed and they were swinging around the curve. Squealing tires told us they saw us sitting there. They came to a stop less than ten feet from our back bumper. With only a moments hesitation they began backing up. I flipped the car in reverse and an odd backwards chase ensued. It was short lived.

As they reached the curve they tried to take it in reverse at a decent speed. That's not exactly a skill most people practice and these guys failed miserably at it. They made it about half way around before dropping off the road and burying the back end of their car in swamp.

I stopped our car. I grabbed the door handle and started to get out.

"What are you doing?" Callie asked. She seemed almost in a panic.

I glanced back at her. "It's OK. I'll just have a talk with them. It's the only way to see what they want."

"No." Callie said. "Can we just get out of here? They can't follow us now."

I watched her. It was out of character for Callie to be this nervous. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"What...if they have guns?" She asked, glancing back at their car.

"Well," I said, "it wouldn't be the first time someone was trying to put a hole in me."



Callie stared at me. "Really? Since when?"

I sighed. "Callie, you'd be amazed at how dangerous small towns can be."

Callie waved that off. "I don't know and I don't care. I just want to go. Can we please just go?"

I glanced back at the guys in the car. They hadn't gotten out and I couldn't get a good look at them because of the glare off their windshield.

"Alright." I shrugged. "But we could have settled this right here."

"Please." Callie said.

I pulled the door shut and drove away. Ten minutes later we were both standing in the driveway of my parents house.

Callie leaned into me. I tucked an arm around her waist. At first I thought she was shaking, but then I realized she was laughing.

"You were cool back there. When did you get to be such a tough guy?" Callie was still giggling.

"Here in Hamlet," I said, "you apparently either have to be lucky or crazy. Truth is, I really haven't come a final decision on which direction I am heading in yet."

Behind me I heard a car slow down as if it was going to turn into the driveway. Crap, I thought, how did they get out of that swamp and find us that fast?

As I turned, still holding Callie, and caught a glimpse of the car it was already speeding back up and driving off. It wasn't Callie's followers. I saw her face clearly. It was Becky.

8

I pulled the car into the parking lot of the Hamlet Pub. I needed to talk to Becky. I knew yesterday what I wanted to say to her, but I was a little more confused today. Nonetheless, I needed to talk to her. I was sure she had all kinds of crazy ideas about what was going on. Although, I wasn't sure just how crazy some of the ideas might be.

I walked into the pub and looked around. I didn't see her anywhere, but my eyes locked into a dead stare at Misty. She was sitting at a table by herself along the wall. She smiled at me and waved. I made an awkward stupid looking wave.

"You know that you need to talk to her."

I froze. I had never experienced a voice in my head being so loud and distinct.

"Hey, Sam, you hear me?"

I started to answer myself when someone slapped my shoulder. I turned to look at Renee leaning over the bar.

"I'm talking to you." Renee said.

"Oh." I said "Right. Sorry."

"You need to talk to her." Renee repeated.

I almost turned towards Misty and somehow the Gods of Stupidity were looking the other way. Instead I kept my eyes fixed on Renee.

"Oh, you mean Becky." I stumbled the words out.

Renee graced me with a fierce look. "Yeah, Becky. Who did you think I meant?"

"No one. Definitely no one." I said summoning up a very sincere look.

"Can I talk to you?"

I turned to find Misty whispering in my ear. I glanced at Renee as she stomped away with a disgusted look on her face.

"Uh, sure." I let Misty lead me over to her table. I sat down and she scooted her chair around closer to mine.

"I needed to get out of that house, you know, after what happened, but I don't think this was a good idea." Misty said, her eyes seemed sad.

"I understand." I tried to only casually look at her. Not an easy task.

"I just wanted to sort some things out in my head. Some time alone." Misty stared down at her glass of wine.

"It seems like I would be complicating your 'alone' time." I said, thinking I could really use a drink right now, but, given Renee's current state of mind, the chances of that were virtually nonexistent.

Misty touched my arm and shook her head. "No. I didn't realize that I kind of would like some company and it was nice to see a familiar face."

"Well, not that familiar. Sometimes even I am confused by the mirror."

Misty smiled. "Well, it's a nice face anyway."

"That's good. It's the only one I've got." I smiled back. It was unnerving how much I suddenly wanted to keep that smile on her face.

Misty sighed and her expression changed. A weariness found its way to her face. "I just don't know what I'm going to do. I've never been in a situation like this before."

"I'm not sure what to tell you. Honestly, I don't really know the extent of your situation." I said and worked on convincing myself that I was trying to find out more about her for the sake of helping Reese with his investigation.

Misty shrugged slightly. "Lots of people have ideas about what my situation is—was."

"Doesn't matter what 'lots of people' think. It only matters what you think your situation is." I said.

"Maybe." Misty said. "But it might matter what some people think. Like your friend."

"My friend?" I glanced over at Misty.

"The detective."

"Oh, him. Well, its hard to say what Reese is thinking." I said with a shrug.

"I thought you were helping him with his investigation?" Misty watched me.

I laughed a little. "I'm not sure 'helping' him is what I would call it. He was asking for my observations."

"Oh, so do you do that for the police? Like a consultant?" Misty asked.

I shook my head. "No, not a consultant. Most times its more like a victim."

Misty stared at me a little confused.

I waved off the comment.

Misty shrugged again. "I got a kind of creepy feeling from that detective. It's like he was thinking...I don't know...something terrible about me."

"I..." Whatever sense I had about Reese's thoughts, I was sure he didn't want me sharing them with Misty, but I was staring into her eyes and something inside me really wanted to say something, anything, that would bring that smile back to her.

Misty watched me. The smile returned to her lips. "I'm sorry. I have made you uncomfortable."

That was an understatement. "Oh, no, I'm fine, I mean, it's OK." I said, feeling properly stupid.

"Are you wondering about my situation?" Misty asked, taking a slow sip of her wine and watching me over the rim of the glass.

"Uh, well, it's...not really any of my..."

"It's OK." Misty said. "I don't mind telling you. You seem different. You're kind and caring. I feel like I could open up to you."

"Well, I guess I'm a pretty good listener. I always thought I would make a good bartender, well, except I probably would have a hard time letting go of the drinks." I shrugged.

Misty laughed a little. "And you're funny. Not like your friend the detective. He seemed very serious. I got the feeling he sees crime around every corner."

I shrugged again. "He's pretty good at his job."

"Well, I think he was thinking something disgusting was going on between George and I." Misty said, staring down at her drink.

I didn't say anything. I was still trying to pretend I was talking to Misty to help Reese out.

"George was like a crazy uncle to me." Misty said sincerely staring into my eyes. "I know he cared deeply for me. He took me in during a very rough time in my life."

"I see." I said, for lack of anything profound or witty to say.

Misty hung her head down and sniffled a little. "I guess I've never been good at standing on my own two feet. Without George...I don't know..." She glanced around the room as if the words she was searching for were written on one of the walls.

Without thinking I put my hand on her shoulder. The door of the pub opened.

"There's something I need to confess to you." Misty said.

I tensed a little. I could hardly believe what I was feeling, but there was no doubt that a part of me didn't want to hear what I was afraid she was going to confess to. I glanced up towards the door in time to briefly meet Becky's eyes before she ducked back out the door. I backed my chair up a little to go after Becky, but Misty's hand reached up and held my hand on her shoulder.

"I came here looking for you." Misty said softly.

I pulled my eyes away from the door and met Misty's gaze.

"Looking for me?" I knew I needed to get out and catch up with Becky, but I didn't move.

"Yes." Misty said, her voice still quiet. "I knew when I met you the other day that you were someone I could talk to you."

"I...need to talk to someone. Can you excuse me?" I managed to stand up.

Misty grasped my hand tighter for a moment. "Maybe you could come by tomorrow and see me?"

"I..." I glanced at the door and then back at Misty. "OK. I'll stop by tomorrow."

"Thank you." Misty smiled up at me.

For no reason I could think of I squeezed her shoulder and walked out of the pub. I hustled around the corner of the pub and into the parking lot. I glanced up the street and watched taillights driving off. I was sure it was Becky.

9

The morning was cool and quiet. I walked into the post office. I didn't see Casey Benedict, the postmaster, behind the counter. He was confined, for the most part to a wheel chair, so sometimes it was hard to see him back there. Casey had been the postmaster in Hamlet since, well, I think the days of the pony express. Which, in Hamlet, that might only have been a few years ago.

I walked down to the postal box of my parents. I leaned over, spun through the little combination lock and opened the tiny door. I pulled the mail out.

"How are things going with your girlfriend?"

I stared down at the mail in my hand. This was something new. I had never had the mail talk to me before.

"Uh, what girlfriend? Wait, you can't talk...?" I flipped the mail over to look at the other side of it.

"What the hell are you talking about, boy?"

I turned my head and looked through the tiny door of the postal box. I could see a part of Casey's wheel chair.

"Oh, it's you Casey." I said.

"Of course it is. Who did you think it was?" Casey said. His tone clearly suggested he thought I was an idiot.

"He can be a little daffy. I told you he was a little strange. I think its from constantly chasing down killers." A second voice volunteered.

I recognized the second voice. Joey Needles. I had gone to school with Joey. He was mechanically inclined and constantly working on some kind gadget that he was sure was going to be the next great thing.

"Joey?" I asked, already knowing. "Wait, I am not hunting down killers. Well, not by choice."

"Never mind that." Casey said. "What's this about your old girlfriend?"

"Old girlfriend? Oh, Callie. She's not old." I said.

"So, she's still your girlfriend? I'll bet Becky doesn't think much about that—oh, she probably doesn't even know." Joey said.

"Wait, whoa, no, that's not it at all." I floundered.

"I heard his old girlfriend was here to beg him to take her back. Left her crying at the altar, he did." Casey explained to Joey.

I shook my head. "No. No. None of that—who makes this stuff up anyway?"

"Two timing, wow. You were never the ladies man in school." Joey said, smiling.

"I am not...why are you back there?" I asked trying to see what Joey was doing.

"I'm putting in an automatic mail dispenser. My own invention, of course." Joey replied.

I thought back on the engine accelerator Joey had installed, without my consent, into my parent's car recently. When I attempted to pursue a couple of unsavory individuals the device ended up blowing the car's engine.

"What is...no, never mind. I don't want to know." I said. "I need to go. I have an appointment."

"With that dark eyed woman." Casey said, knowingly.

"What? How?" I stared at the wall of postal boxes.

"Is that true?" Joey asked from somewhere beyond the wall.

"Uh, maybe..." I didn't want anything more to do with this conversation.

"Whoa, you dog!" Joey exclaimed. "You and your women."

I opened my mouth to say something, closed it and walked out.

Standing next to the car I dialed Callie. I had given explicit instructions on changing hotels and watching for any sign of the guys following her. I wanted to know if she had done what I asked. It was a total crap shoot on whether Callie would ever listen to anything I told her.

The phone rang a couple of times before bouncing to voice mail. I left her message to call me—for all the good that would probably do. It bothered me that I couldn't get a hold of her. I wasn't sure if it bothered me because I was just concerned for her welfare or if I just really wanted to talk to her and, maybe see her again. No, been there before, didn't go all that well, don't go there again. I told myself this firmly, but I wasn't sure I was listening.

A car pulled up next to me and the window rolled down. Reese Dixon, my "friend" the county detective.

"Stir up any new trouble?" Reese asked with a smile.

I shook my head. "Nothing more than the usual general mayhem."

"I see." Reese looked at me for a moment. "Interesting about your friend, Miss De LaCorte."

"My...?" I said hesitantly.

"Seems she is the only heir to one George Williams." Reese said staring solemnly at his steering wheel, though I could tell he was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

"Hmm." I said, in my typically profound way.

"The will was changed just 2 months ago." Reese said flatly.

"That is a bit interesting, isn't it?" I said.

Reese shrugged. "Maybe. But Williams was divorced. His ex wife died 3 years ago and he was estranged from his two children. So, kind of hard to read into that."

I nodded.

"Coroner has concluded he died of a heart attack. Medical records indicate a history of heart palpitations." Reese continued.

I was puzzled by this wealth of information being showered upon me. "So...death by natural causes?"

Reese gave a half shrug. "No poison was found in his system. No food in his stomach. No suspicious chemicals found in any of the food or drink lying about the place."

"So that's it then?" I asked.

Reese inclined his head and looked at me. His expression suggested he was not convinced.

"She...seems a bit too young and beautiful to be settling for an older man like Williams."

I shrugged. "Lots of women are guilty of being young and beautiful and not guilty of murder."

Reese looked straight at me. "You and I both know there's more to this one than meets the eye."

I nodded slightly. I couldn't deny that. "She is something."

Reese smiled, but this smile wasn't as friendly as the first one. "I have a feeling you might be in a better position than I am in finding out exactly what that something is."

"Really?" I asked, a little irritation creeping through me. I wasn't entirely sure why, but it felt like Reese was asking me to betray Misty's trust in me in some way. And if he was? I didn't really know her. And what if she had done something? Shouldn't I be helping Reese figure that out? The answer should have been straightforward, but, somehow, it just wasn't.

Reese nodded. "You know, the next time you get a chance to spend some time with Miss De LaCorte."

I stared at Reese. Here I was about to climb into my car and drive over to Williams' house and meet with Misty. Did Reese know that? Or was it just crazy coincidence? I didn't believe much in coincidence.

"You're having her followed, aren't you?" I asked.

Reese smiled again. "Have a nice lunch." He said. The window rolled up and Reese's car rolled away.

I watched it go. He had someone at the pub last night. Was Reese telling me this stuff so I could go and try to ferret out more information from Misty? Of course he was, you idiot. But a part of me also had the sneaking suspicion that Reese was warning me. The evidence didn't indicate anything wrong with Misty's story, but...there was more to Misty, behind that beautiful face and mesmerizing eyes than what I was seeing. A part of me knew this all along, but it was kept quietly in the back of my head. Reese knew it too, though. The voice was a little louder now.

Still, maybe everything wasn't always negative. Sometimes being the perpetual pessimist makes us blind to some of the beauty around us. In this case, maybe literally. I stopped myself. What the hell does that mean? What if Misty is just what she seems and nothing sinister? How far down that road would I be going? And was it a road or a slippery slope? I thought about Callie and then Becky. Holy crap, don't I have enough to sort out already?

10

I curved around Wyatt lake and came to the entrance of Hamlet Hills. It was an enclave of the wealthy. Some rolling hills surrounded by numerous lakes (and a few swamps) dotted with excessively expensive homes. It was "country living" for those that didn't really want the pedestrian reality of actually living in a rural area.

I wove through the short streets of Hamlet Hills. They were neat and clean, as always. I was nervous and knew I shouldn't be. I was here to help Reese with his investigation, but I had to keep telling myself that.

I stopped the car in front of the large garage. Stepping out on to the patterned paver stones of the driveway I glanced back at my parents old Malibu. I prayed the car wouldn't drip anything disgusting on to the pristine drive.

Before I could knock on the front door Misty opened it.

"Hi." She said in a small voice.

Crap. She was wearing a shirt too short to cover much. It had no shoulders, held up by shoulder straps, one of which wasn't working very hard at its job, and the shirt tried, but was unable to reach the top of her slim jeans. Doesn't anyone answer the door in whatever ragged smelly clothes they found laying around on the floor somewhere—anyone besides me?

Misty stared at me.

"Oh, hi." I got the words out in a whisper. Why was I here again?

Misty motioned me into the house.

"I was hoping you wouldn't forget." Misty said, quietly.

"You're kind of hard to forget." I said, then immediately regretted it. Focus, idiot.

Misty smiled at me and I almost ran into a table in the foyer. She led me through a central hallway and I was not looking around for clues. There could have been bloody axes hanging on the walls and I wouldn't have seen them. The muscles in my eyes must have cramped up because they refused to look anywhere except at Misty directly in front of me.

We entered a sitting room at the back of the house. It had a wall of French doors that opened out on to a veranda. People in Hamlet Hills had verandas at the back of their houses. The rest of us just had porches.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Misty asked.

I answered her, but couldn't remember what my answer was. She disappeared down a hall and I assumed my answer had been yes. I stared out at the nicely manicured back lawn. Not a blade of grass out of place. Who combs their lawn?

Something out of the corner of my eye made me turn to look down along the back of the house. I thought I saw someone just duck around the far corner of the house. I wasn't sure.

Misty reappeared with two glasses of wine. She handed me one and opened a couple of the French doors. Wrapping a hand gently around my arm she eased me out on to the veranda where we sat down on cushioned patio chairs, but not before she slid her chair closer to mine.

"I thought I saw someone." I said, pointing towards the corner of the house.

For the briefest of moments an expression crossed Misty's face. I wasn't sure what it was, but it didn't seem happy.

"Oh, that's just Carlos, the gardener." Misty said.

"Ah, the lawn comber." I said with a nod.

Misty gave me an odd look and then laughed a little.

"So, what are you going to do now?" I asked. I wasn't sure if I was asking this for Reese's sake or mine.

Misty shrugged, dropping a shoulder strap. "What do you think I should do?"

I looked over at Misty. She was staring straight into my eyes. I wasn't sure if that was a leading question or not. Either way, it felt like slippery ground to be on.

I smiled. "I wouldn't presume to tell you what to do."

"You're a writer. I thought writers were smart. I thought they knew everything by observing people." Misty smiled.

I shook my head. "No. If writers were smart they would never become writers in the first place. There's no future in it."

"You never know what's waiting for you in your future." Misty said. There was a smile in her eyes as she looked at me.

My mind was jumping all over the place. Was she implying something? Something about her and I? I shouldn't care. I shouldn't even be here. But I wasn't getting up to leave.

"Are you going to tell me what my future is?" I asked.



Misty laughed a little. "I think...in your future...you could have anything you wanted." Misty's eyes seemed to laugh at me.

Like you? I thought, but there was no way I was letting those words out. The effort it took to not say those two words was phenomenal. This can't be happening, I thought. I cannot be pulled into those eyes so easily. It seemed that with little or no effort she could easily push me in any direction she wanted at this point. Misty was in a league all her own and that league was several levels above me.

Focus, idiot. Focus. If you don't, this girl is going to turn you into a sock puppet. I took a deep breath and thought about Becky. That helped.

"You didn't answer my question." I said.

"What question?" Misty asked softly.

"What are you going to do now?"

Misty shrugged slightly. "I'm not sure. This seems like a nice place."

I made a disparaging sound, but Misty ignored it.

"It might depend on whether I make a friend here." Misty leaned forward slightly which brought her face closer to mine and smiled.

"I think," I said smiling back at her, "that you probably have no trouble making friends."

Misty shrugged one shoulder and gave me a sidelong look. "I meant someone special."

I wasn't sure what to say so I just sat there and continued to work on sweating slightly. Again, I thought about Becky.

Misty looked off into the distance. "Your friend is watching me."

I hesitated, still picturing Becky. It took me a second to recognize that Misty wasn't picturing Becky in her thoughts.

"You mean Reese, the detective?" I asked, knowing now that's what she meant.

She nodded. "Everywhere I go I see someone following me. Why does he think I had something to do with George's death?"

Again I hesitated. "I...think it's just a part of the job. Always seeing things that may not be there."

Misty shook her head slightly. She looked at me with sad, pleading eyes. "No. I think he really thinks I've done something awful. Why? They said George died from a heart attack. Why does this guy think something else happened?"

"I..." I wanted to say something comforting, but, the truth was, it was perfectly logical to be suspicious of her given the circumstances.

"I mean, he had a heart condition. It's in his medical record." Misty said sadly.

Quietly, somewhere in the back of my head, something rattled around.

"Williams, I mean George, liked iced coffee?" I asked.

Something in Misty's eyes changed. Not something obvious. Something deeper. I couldn't read what it was.

She nodded slightly. "He did."

"How many did he drink in a day?" I asked. I kicked myself for asking. I was being the detective now and, honestly, I wanted to be something at that moment, but not that.

Misty shook her head. "Never more than one."

I nodded.

Misty reached out and brushed my arm. She smiled at me and I didn't think her previous smiles could have been more mesmerizing, but I was wrong.

"Would you like another glass of wine?"

I glanced down at my glass and saw that it was empty. I couldn't figure out how it got that way. Seeing no stain on clothes I had to assume I drank it.

"Really, I probably..."

Misty squeezed my arm. "Don't make me drink the whole bottle by myself."

"Well, I..." As always, when I needed it most, my quick wit had left the building.

Misty stood up and leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"I don't like doing things all by myself." She turned with a smile and went back into the house.

I watched her walk away, because I couldn't do anything else. I tried to picture that other girl, but, for the moment, I couldn't remember her name.

Misty returned moving with a smooth grace that indicated that she knew I was watching her, but then I suspected she was very much accustomed to being watched. She handed me another glass of wine.

I took a sip of wine and Misty reached out and touched my arm again as she sat down.

"So, please, tell me, why does your friend think...you know. What have I done to make someone think such awful thoughts about me?" Misty's eyes teared up a little.

"I...don't know of anything." I said, honestly.

"There must be something." Misty's voice, just for a moment, held a little edge to it.

I shook my head at her.

Something flashed across her eyes, but just for an instant and I couldn't get a read on it.

"I don't think you trust me. It tears me up to think that you too might think...you know...something unthinkable about me." Misty said.

"Misty, I...it's not about trust. Even if I did know what Reese was thinking I couldn't talk to you about it." I sat for a moment. I stared at Misty and she stared back at me. Did either one of us actually believe that she couldn't extract anything out of me if she really wanted to? But what did I really think about her? About the possibility that she had something to do with Williams' death.

That something rattled around in the back of my head again. I wasn't sure what that something was as yet, but just the fact that it was there told me something. It told me that I believed that, good or bad, this girl could do anything she wanted.

Misty watched me and I felt like she could easily read every thought that went through my head. She lifted her glass and took a big drink of wine. I did the same to fill the awkward moment.

We sat silently for a minute and then Misty got up and walked to the edge of the veranda. I tried to do the same. I only made it half way. The veranda tilted to the left. I took a step to the left, but found myself down on one knee.

Misty turned and watched me for a moment. She took a couple of steps closer and leaned down to look into my face.

"I think you are very smart." She kissed me. "And I kind of liked you."

My vision slurred. Someone came up behind Misty. A man. I tried to say something. Maybe warn her, but she turned and seemed to know him. She said something to him. I finished my slow, ungraceful slumping to the floor.

11

Cold. Dark. That's all I could think of. It was damn cold. Just my luck. A cold day in hell when I arrived. Just one thing: should there be this much water here?

I shifted slightly and water sloshed around. I couldn't move my hands or feet. Tied up. I lifted my head up and banged it into something hard. It sounded kind of hollow. The thing I hit—not my head.

The water was high enough I needed to make a point of keeping my head above it. Something jabbed into my side. I wiggled around to get a hand on it and push it away. It felt just like several needles. Like a folded warped umbrella. Just like the one that I had thrown into my...trunk.

I flopped around like a wounded seal for a minute to get a feel for the dark place I was in. Sure enough. My trunk. I knew it the moment I felt the empty champagne bottle roll underneath me. Couldn't really remember why that was in here.

I wiggled some more to get my hands towards the back of the car where the child safety latch was. That's what they really made those things for, right? Situations like this? There was still plenty of space at the top of the trunk to breathe. That seemed odd. I didn't know how long I had been in here, but it seemed like I should have sunk to the bottom of whatever lake I was in.

I found the latch and, after fumbling with it for a couple of minutes, I got it to lift. The trunk lid lifted slowly and more water poured in. I looked around. The car wasn't sinking. The top third of it still stuck out of the water.

I was looking back towards a shore. There was an old dock sticking a short distance out into the water. Something looked familiar about this place. It took a full minute of shivering for me to remember. This was Reed Lake. It was about 5 or 6 miles north of Hamlet Hills. It was also only about 6 feet deep even in the middle. No wonder the car wasn't sinking. It was sitting in about 4 feet of water.

Whoever drove the car into the lake didn't know Reed Lake was so shallow. Misty. No. I couldn't picture her doing this. Maybe because I didn't want to. Carlos. Yes, I could see him doing it. Gardener, my ass. What was Carlos? Her accomplice for sure. Was he more than that? And why the hell was I sitting here going into hypothermia worrying about that? Focus, idiot. Focus.

I flopped, with all the grace of roadkill, out of the trunk and into the water. I cleverly face planted into the mucky bottom of the lake. I forgot that with my legs tied walking to shore wasn't going to be an option. I managed to stand up which only allowed me to fall forward into the water again. I was a few feet closer to the shore. And so it went. Face plant. Wiggle up. Face plant. Etc. Etc.

I wanted to rejoice when I finally reached the shore, but face planting on to the shore was actually painful. I rested for a couple of minutes, but I was freezing. I rolled myself over to the dock. There were old rusting metal brackets still trying to hold the dock together. I worked my hands around to one of the brackets and eventually cut through the rope.

I crawled up on to the dock. Again I rested for a minute or two. My muscles were tightening up from the cold. I needed to get out of these wet clothes and somewhere warm, but I really wanted to pay a visit to someone. Misty, Misty, Misty. This was no way to break up a beautiful blossoming relationship. Well, at least I didn't have to sort through a confusing array of mixed signals.

Hoisting myself up I trudged down a grassy track about a quarter of a mile to a gravel road. I followed the gravel road for a mile until I came to one of the main roads between Brighton and Hamlet. From there I was able to flag down an old man in a pickup truck who gave me a ride to the entrance to Hamlet Hills.

Weaving my way along the quiet streets of Hamlet Hills I arrived at the bushes straddling the driveway of the late George Williams. He was the victim, I was now certain, of foul play.

I was shivering badly, but I had to see her. Besides cold, I felt splintered. One part of me wanted to confront her just to show her that I was still alive. That she hadn't gotten rid of me. That I had won. But, really, this didn't feel like winning.

Another part, the stupid part, just wanted to look into those eyes again. That maybe she didn't want to be a part of all of this. That she, that her and I, well, like I said, the stupid part of me.

Finally, I was here because, the truth was, she probably did kill Williams and would have killed me. And this was probably not her first rodeo. And that just didn't sit right with me. And, Carlos be damned, I was going to stare straight into those eyes again and tell this, that and everything to her.

Before I could take a step towards the house that thing in the back of my head rolled to the front. Ah, yes, the iced coffee. I should have thought of that earlier.

I slid up to the front of the house. Peeking into windows I saw nothing moving. I knew I must be making at least one of neighbor's day. I'm sure they were speed dialing Russell right now. I didn't hear anything, but, more than that, it felt quiet. I circled the house. Nothing. I peeked into a side window of the garage. The Mercedes was gone.

Anger and frustration took a stroll hand in hand through me for a minute or two. I wanted to say that my feelings were due to my desire to see justice done, but there was still a strong part of me that was being stupid. To avoid facing that, I walked a couple of blocks down to my friend Heidi's house.

I sat in the passenger seat for a wild ride into town. Heidi tended to talk a lot and with her hands. Not a good idea when trying to drive on curvy country roads. I huddled in the blanket she had wrapped me and hoped it would act like an air bag—should I need it. I borrowed Heidi's cell phone and called Reese.

"Mr. MacNeil. Have a nice lunch?" Reese asked.

"It started well. Ended...well, like some of my more recent activities." I said.

Reese hesitated. "Really? In your case that suggests dead bodies."

I sighed. I was gaining quite a reputation and, truly, it wasn't my fault. "Well, no dead bodies. Though, if Reed Lake was any deeper..."

"Reed Lake?"

I told Reese most of what went on with Misty. I left out the parts where I was acting like an idiot. That trimmed the story down by at least a third. By the time I had finished Reese had already called someone into his office and told them to get an APB out for Misty and, possibly, an accomplice.

"So, the coroner's report." I said.

"What about it?" Reese asked.

"Did Williams have caffeine in his system?" I asked.

I could hear Reese shuffle some papers around. "Yeah. But we know he was drinking an iced coffee at the time."

"How much caffeine?"

"Doesn't say." Reese answered. "You think he was drinking a spiked iced coffee?"

"I'm thinking some extra caffeine for a guy with weak heart might just push him over the edge."

"Hmm." Reese said. "Maybe so. Her prints weren't on the bottle, though."

"I don't think she spiked the coffee that morning. I think she spiked all the coffees in advance, wiped them clean and then just waited." I said.

"What coffees? There weren't any other coffees." Reese replied.

"You looked in Williams' refrigerator?" I asked.

"You'd be amazed the things it could tell you about people." Reese said. I could hear the smile on his face.

"Ah, idiot. Of course there weren't any in there. She would have dumped them all before we got there. Just in case." I said.

"How do you know there were any other coffees to begin with?" Reese asked.

"Really? You think ol' George hopped into his Mercedes every morning and drove into town to buy a 99 cent bottle of iced coffee?"

"Probably not." Reese said. "Alright, well, I'll let you know when we get her."

I hung up with Reese. Somehow I had a feeling Misty wasn't going to be easy to catch. I wanted to kick myself, though, because only most of me wanted her to be caught—not all of me.

12

A hot shower, dry clothes and a beer was sufficient first aid to pull me back from the brink of hypothermia. I was thinking I had better see if Becky was working when the doorbell rang.

As soon as I had the door open she breezed in, kissing me on the cheek as she passed.

"Hi, Sweetie." Callie said as she made herself comfortable on the couch and patted the cushion right next to her. "I need a favor."

I glanced out the door looking for her "friends". I didn't see anyone.

"A favor?" I asked. "Are your buddies still following you?"

Callie shook her head. "No. I think you took care of that." She smiled at me.

I walked over to the couch, but I didn't sit down. Instead, I stared out the front window. There was something going on here and I just wasn't seeing it.

"Baby, do you remember when I asked you to sign some papers?" Callie stood up and stepped close to me. Her smile became more tender. She put a hand on my shoulder then slid it down my back as she drew even closer. "You know...when we were going to be married..."

I eyed her suspiciously. While, admittedly, it felt nice to be this close to Callie again I also knew Callie well enough to know that something was coming. Something I probably wouldn't like.

Callie watched me. She knew me pretty well too. "Oh, stop. It's nothing bad."

My attention was drawn out the window. A car slowed down as it passed the driveway. I recognized it as the guys that were following Callie. I tensed up. Callie turned to look out the window. I started to move towards the door. But Callie grabbed my arm and held me back.

"That's the..." I stopped and stared back at Callie. Something in her look told me a whole pile of things. She knew who the guys following her were and they weren't a threat to her. They were just an excuse for her to be here.

My expression hardened. I was pissed she had played some game with me. "Those guys work for your father don't they?"

"Baby, just relax. I was going to tell you about..."

"They work for him don't they?"

Callie nodded. "Yeah, they're just keeping an eye on me. You know how Daddy is."

"Callie, what the hell is going on?"

Callie sighed. "I know I didn't do this right. I just...I don't know. I was just going to talk to you about the papers when I saw you at the restaurant, but, then, you were with that other girl and...well, I kind of...damn it, I kind of missed you."

I stared at her for a moment. "You lied to me and let me believe you were in trouble because you had a moment of jealousy?"

Callie shrugged. "Sometimes I miss you. Sometimes...I wonder what it would have been like..."

I sighed. "Callie, we went through this, a few times, I believe, already. It just wasn't going to work."

Callie nodded slightly. "I know." She brushed my arm.

Though there were many times in the past where Callie had really pissed me off, I was never very good at staying angry with her. I knew that no matter what she did she was never intentionally hurting me. I think it just came naturally to her.

"So, what about these papers?" I asked. "If I remember correctly you told me they were prenuptial papers that your father wanted me to sign."

Callie glanced around. I knew that look. She was avoiding saying something.

"Callie. What?" I asked.

"Well, its just company documents."

"What company documents? What are you talking about?" I was getting impatient.

Callie sighed and put a hand on my chest. "They're ownership documents."

"Ownership? I don't own any companies."

Callie looked up at the ceiling. "Well, sweetie, you kind of do..."

"What?"

Callie gave me a sweet smile. "You see Daddy thought, you know, for tax purposes, well, I mean you were going to be a part of the family and..."

"Tax purposes? You mean your father had you dupe me into sign documents making me the owner of some of his companies to avoid paying some taxes?" Now I was getting pissed.

"No! That's not how it was." Callie said, staring emphatically at me.

I stared back. We stood like that for a few moments.

"Well, OK, yeah, kind of..." Callie said with a shrug.

I hung my head with a sigh. "I am probably wanted by the IRS by now for tax evasion."

Callie shook her head. "Oh no. All of those companies always lost money. I think he called them 'write offs'."

I looked at her for a moment. "Fine. So you are here to have me sign them back over to you or somebody?"

Callie nodded.

I shook my head slowly. "You told me those were prenuptial agreements."

Callie smiled and brushed my cheek. "Oh, sweetie, sometimes you are just so adorable. How many pages do you think you have to sign for a prenup?"

I thought about it. Feeling stupid didn't make me any less pissed.

"I'll meet you at that cute little Japanese restaurant." Callie said. She kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you." She whispered in my ear.

I looked at her, trying to still be pissed off. Sadly, my anger was slipping away.

"It's a Chinese restaurant." I said.

Callie frowned slightly. "But the girl was wearing a Japanese kimono."

I nodded. "Yeah. I know. It's Hamlet."

Callie gave a brief nod. She was not a small town person and probably would never understand. I wasn't sure I wanted to understand it, but it was probably something I wasn't going to be able to escape. For the moment, I would just focus on physically escaping Hamlet. Immediately I thought about Becky and things weren't quite as clear I thought they had been.

"Six o'clock." Callie said with a smile as she climbed into her car.

"Right." I said and watched her drive off. A minute later her "escorts" drove past, flashing me a dirty look.

As evening approached I headed up into town to meet Callie. I was early, but I wanted to find Becky. I needed to talk to her. I wasn't sure what exactly I was going to say, but I felt like I needed to talk to her anyway.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Hamlet Pub. I barely got out of the car when I heard it. It conjured up the same feeling as the sound of metal on metal screeching, but it was just the voice of a 10 year old boy.

"Oh, it's you again." Billy said.

"Whatever it is Billy, I'm not interested." I said waving him off.

"I'm watching for luscious people." Billy said, taking out a notepad and writing something down.

"I've told you before, I'm not a lush. I'm not here for a drink." I said, glancing around for Becky's car.

"My mom says that people addicted to lacquer get cranky when they don't get a drink." Billy said nodding.

"It's liquor, not..." I glanced at the pub. "Well, mostly liquor. Anyway, I'm not cranky."

"You sound cranky to me." Billy said, writing more in his notebook.

"I am not cranky!" I yelled at him. We stared at each other for a moment. Sadly, both of us recognized the irony of what I just said. Thankfully, Becky's car pulled into the parking lot and I walked away from Billy.

Becky got out of her car and hesitated as I walked up to her.

"Hey." I said. "I wanted to talk to you."

Becky started to slowly slide past me. "You don't owe me any explanations."



I stopped her by lightly putting my hand on her shoulder. "It's not about feeling obligated. It's about wanting to tell you some things."

Becky turned to look at me, but didn't say anything.

"I'm on my way to have dinner with Callie." I said.

Becky shrugged a little. "I already told you—"

"No." I said, cutting her off. "Callie is only here because somehow, during our past relationship, I became the proud owner of some of her father's dead beat tax shelter companies and now they want them back. So, I am going to meet her to sign the papers."

Becky stared at me for a moment. "Why would they do that?"

I shook my head. "Because that's who they are. Money, business, fun and games. It's all the same for them."

"So, she wasn't interested in starting something with you again?" Becky asked.

I hesitated. "No."

But Becky noticed my hesitation. "Right. It looked like more than just business to me."

I nodded. "I know. I...was a little unsure what was going on myself, but we had forgotten that it just wasn't meant to be."

"And how long did it take for you to figure that out?" Becky immediately held up her hand. "Don't answer that. It's none of my business."

I took hold of Becky's hand before she could turn away. I knew what she was actually asking me.

"Not that long." I said.

"I see." Becky said. She was quiet for a moment. "You...made a new friend."

It took me about two heartbeats to catch on. "Misty." I said, not meaning to say her name out loud.

"Is that her name." Becky nodded once. "She's very pretty."

I laughed. Becky didn't find the conversation amusing and tried to walk away. This time I had to put some effort into stopping her. I turned her around and brought us up nose to nose.

"Misty is very pretty. She's also a murderer."

Becky's eyes widened.

I nodded. "For whatever reason, Reese seemed to want me involved in his investigation. Don't know why, but he seemed to be encouraging me to find out more about her."

"Poor you. And her being drop dead gorgeous and everything." Becky said, but, and I may have been mistaken, there seemed to be a complete lack of sympathy in her voice.

"Drop dead being the key words." I said.

Becky looked closely at me. "What does that mean?"

"I'll tell you about it later." I thought for a minute. "Come by tomorrow. We'll get some lunch."

For a moment Becky hesitated, then she smiled back at me.

"Alright."

I watched her go into the pub and realized that for the past few days I had been carrying a weight around that I couldn't identify. Suddenly, it had just lifted.

13

I pulled the car into a spot at the Chinese restaurant. I made as far as one car length away when a car pulled up next to me. The passenger window rolled down.

"You don't seem too worse for wear." Reese said with a smile.

I returned a sarcastic smile. "Glad I could take one for the team. So, what, you didn't have a deputy you could throw at Misty?"

Reese shook his head. "No sir. I can't afford to lose one of them. The tax payers wouldn't forgive me if I did."

"Ah, I was expendable. Good fiscal management." I said.

Reese shrugged. "I try. Truth is, that woman was way out of my deputies' league."

"That woman is in a league of her own." It was one of my few moments of complete sincerity.

"Well, there's been no sign of them. They are probably long gone by now." Reese said.

I nodded. "Probably so." I shoved aside a feeling of regret.

"By the way, the coroner informed me—upon closer inspection—that there was much more caffeine in Williams' system than should have been there for one iced coffee drink."

"Enough..." I said, trailing off.

"Enough. With his heart condition." Reese nodded slowly.

I sighed. I couldn't think of anything more to say about Misty.

"Have a nice dinner." Reese said with a wave and he drove off.

I walked into the restaurant and found Callie already waiting for me at a table.

"Hey, sweetie." Callie stood up and kissed on the cheek.

I knew that kiss would be all over town before our meal was over. There were 17 eyes watching us. I didn't know the name of the old farmer sitting in the corner with his poorly aged plump wife, but I did know he had one glass eye.

Callie and I sat down.

"So, you brought the papers?" I asked.

"Yeah. I have them right here." Callie patted a leather folder leaning against a table leg.

Belinda shuffled up to our table with a couple of menus.

Callie looked Belinda over. "You know that's not—"

"Callie, never mind. It...doesn't matter." I took the menus from Belinda.

"So...Becky won't be joining you two tonight?" Belinda asked.

Callie and I stared at Belinda.

"I see." Belinda said and shuffled away in her tight kimono.

"Alright," I said, "Let's get this paperwork stuff over with."

"Oh, right to it then." Callie said. "I was thinking we could talk a little about...I don't know, how things used to be, maybe."

I studied Callie for a moment. I wasn't sure if she was really thinking about us in the present or us in the better moments of the past.

"There were some things in the past that were nice, but everything wasn't always nice." I said.

Callie shrugged. "Nothing is nice all the time."

I nodded. "True, but..."

Callie sighed and looked away. "I know. It was still fun, though."

I nodded again.

Belinda shuffled over once again. I pointed to a couple of items on the menu and she left.

Callie reached down and pulled out a stack of papers. She sifted through them and slid a page over to me.

I glanced down at it.

"Just sign where I marked it." Callie said, pointing on the page.

I took the pen from her and then stopped with the pen hovering over the paper.

"I own lingerie?" I asked, looking over the page at Callie.

Callie stared back at me, puzzled. "Uh...really, I have no idea what you are into these days. Well, unless, maybe its a little something I may have left behind, of course."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the people at a couple of tables turn their heads. Conversation around us stopped.

"No, I mean this company." I waved at the page in front of me.

"Oh, that one. It was sheer stupidity to have gotten into that one. We should've see right through all the hype." Callie replied with a smile.

"Uh, right." I said. I sighed and signed the paper. I slid it back over to her. Callie took it, slid it to the bottom of the stack. She shuffled around some more papers. Another piece of paper came over to me.

I scanned the document. "Huh. I'm losing My Marbles." I said, with a tinge of regret.

"Well, you are living here, in Hamlet." Callie said with a casual wave of her hand.

We received generally disgusted looks from the surrounding tables.

"No, the company 'My Marbles'. It's makes some kind of novelty items." I said, pointing at the paper.

"Oh, that thing. We were just playing around with that company. They were on a roll for a while, but not any more." Callie said, casually.

"OK..." I said and signed that page.

"And this one." Callie slid another page over at me.

"What's this one?" I asked.

Callie sighed. "We are going to be here all evening if you are going to read every one of these."

I felt a little indignant. I should at least know what I was losing—even if I hadn't wanted them in the first place. Nonetheless, I whipped through several more signatures and Callie packed the papers away just as our food arrived. We ate, talked about some of the crazy things we did together and the evening wound down.

We stood outside the restaurant next to Callie's car in awkward silence. It was odd because in all our time together rarely were there ever awkward moments.

"Well, sweetie," Callie started and a moment later she was kissing me. Not a subtle kiss on the cheek. Serious kissing. Admittedly, I believe I was contributing as well.

Then we were a step back from each other and things were awkward again. It was a moment when the past feelings were all there followed by an acknowledgment that it was now all in the past.

I couldn't think of anything to say.

Callie finally spoke. "I have to fly to Chicago tomorrow."

I nodded.

"I don't fly out until the afternoon. I'll stop by tomorrow before I go." Callie smiled at me.

I nodded again. Still unable to think of something witty or even stupid to say.

Callie got in her car drove off.

I stood in the parking lot and watched her go. My cell phone rang. Absently, I answered it.

"Hello?"

"Have you missed me?"

My head was spinning. I was thinking about Callie. Why would she be calling me? She just left. Then I recognized the smooth purring voice. Not Callie.

"Misty." I said.

"You know, it's funny, I've always had a soft spot for guys that are trouble and you have caused me some trouble." Misty's voice felt like it was reaching right through the phone and curling around my brain. I couldn't see anything but her face floating in front of me. I shook my head trying to clear my thoughts.

"Well, it's a specialty of mine." I said.

"I wish I could spend more time exploring your talents. Guys like you are fun to play with." Misty said softly and slowly.

I was cringing on the inside. My knees were wobbly while my brain kept reminding me she was a killer.

"Did you kill him?" I asked, though I already knew she had. I just wanted to hear her say it. Maybe I thought it would help me clear my head.

"How droll. Really, is that what you want to talk to me about?" Misty said quietly.

"I guess I just want to hear you say it." I answered honestly.

Misty laughed a little. "Would it help you sleep at night?"

"Maybe." I said.

"I could give you other things to think about at night."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sure of that. Did you kill him?"

"What do you think?" Misty replied.

"I think...you injected a stimulant, a high dose of caffeine probably, into his iced coffee. All of them. So whichever one he picked out of the refrigerator he was going to get it. Then you cleaned them all out before calling 911. That's what I think."

"Hmm, you're a very clever boy. I like clever boys. Unfortunately, clever boys usually end up being too clever for their own good."

"Really." I said, not sure if she was implying something or not.

"Well, at least it looks like you had a nice dinner." Misty said, her voice told me she was smiling as she spoke.

The stupid grin my face had been mindlessly displaying immediately disappeared. My eyes focused and started looking all around. Just up the street at the gas station a black Mercedes pulled out and sped away.

"Misty." I said quietly, staring at the car as it disappeared around a corner. What exactly I meant by saying her name was too knotted up for even me to sort out right now.

"Bye bye, clever boy." Misty said softly.

I stood there for a long moment, not moving. I shook off the haze I was in. Damn it, focus, idiot. I dialed Russell's cell phone and told him about Misty.

14

I pulled up in front of the Post Office. The morning was cool and quiet. I walked in and opened the door of my little post office box. With a whoosh my mail came flying out of the box ricocheting off my face. I didn't move.

"Hey, how'd that work for you?"

I recognized Joey's voice. "Great. I prefer my mail being shot into my face." I said, making no attempt to disguise my sarcasm.

"Thanks." Joey replied. "I think there's a few bugs I still have to work out of it though."

"No. No, not at all. I wouldn't change a thing. It's...just perfect." I said, picking up my mail from the floor.

Behind me someone came in and walked over to post office boxes where I still stood. It was Barrister. He opened his box and his mail flew past him all over the floor.

"What the...?" Barrister looked over at me as if I had done something.

I nodded. "Great, isn't it? Works better, though, if you stop it with your face."

Barrister stared at me for a moment. He shrugged. "Whatever. Today's the day." He said with a smile.

"Oh, is it today?" I said, having no clue what he was talking about.

Barrister nodded. "It's today." He looked at me.

I looked back at him. A minute passed.

"You have no idea what I am talking about, do you?" Barrister asked.

I shook my head. "Not a clue."

"The goats." Barrister said.

"Oh, the goats." I stared at him, nodding slightly.

Barrister watched me. Another minute passed.

"Still clueless." Barrister said.

I nodded. "Still clueless."

"After talking to Tom Crawley and the money he made with people coming out to see his emus, I decided to invest in fainting goats. People love those things. They'll come out to the property to pet and feed the buggers. Daggot finished the fencing yesterday and the goats arrive today." Barrister explained.

"Fainting goats?" I said.

"Yeah, it will be a lot of fun for the kids. You know, goats fainting all over the place."

I nodded. "No doubt. Those goats will be dropping like flies once they realize what's under the green grass of their pasture."

"They got all the bodies out of that old dump and the goats won't care what's under the grass." Barrister graced me a scowl and walked out.

I headed out of the Post Office and over to the Township Office. For once I was lucky. Jessie was part way down the hall behind the front desk.

"Does that go on tonight's agenda?" Jessie yelled back down the hall.

As I eased up to the counter I could hear Barnard Weekes, one of the town councilmen, yelling back.

"Yes!"

Jessie leaned on the counter to write something down on the paper she was holding. She stopped and turned back towards the hallway.

"Is this a seasonal hunting license issue or a general township ban?" She half turned yelling down the hall again.

I saw Barnard poked his head out the door of his office. He looked perplexed. "That's a good question. We'll debate that first." He ducked back into the office.

Jessie turned back to the piece of paper and wrote something down. I caught a glimpse of the word "ghosts". With a quick sidestep I slid into Russell's office before Jessie could say anything.

Russell looked up. He shook his head. "No sign of your girlfriend yet—unless you've seen her."

I hesitated. Becky? Callie? Wait... "Misty." I said.

Russell looked disgusted. "Yeah, that would be Miss De LaCorte to the rest of us, but I'm sure she's 'Misty' to you."

I sighed. "She tried to kill me too."

"Aren't you special." Russell said looking back down at some official looking papers that didn't completely cover up a crossword underneath.

"So no sign of her?" I asked.

Russell gave his head a quick shake. "As I said. Nothing. I'm sure she's long gone."

"I'm not so sure." I said.

Russell looked at me. "What makes you say that?"

"Just the way she said I was too clever for my own good."

Russell waved that off. "Don't worry about it. You're not that clever."

"Uh, wait, was that supposed to be reassuring?" I asked.

Russell frowned. "Not really, but, whatever."

I stared at Russell for a moment more, but couldn't think of anything more to say. I was really hoping he had heard something of Misty. Because I wanted her to be arrested for murder, right? Damn, I hoped so.

I left the township offices and drove back to my parent's house. I saw a car pull into the driveway moments before I turned into the drive myself. The car pulled to the side of the driveway and I pulled up next to it. She got out of the car. Callie.

I got out and Callie circled around to me.

"So you're off to places unknown?" I asked, smiling.

"Always." Callie said, smiling back. "I was thinking maybe we could have lunch, but, I think maybe I should get going."

I nodded.

Callie stepped forward and hugged me. She stepped back. "It was really nice seeing you again."

I smiled and nodded. "It was."

I heard gravel crunching on the driveway as another car pulled into the drive. I turned to see Becky getting out of her car. Callie and I watched as she walked towards us.

Something was happening, but I couldn't wrap my brain around it. I know Becky was smiling when she got out of the car, but now, halfway to us, she stopped smiling. She reached into her handbag pulled out...holy crap...a gun.

My thoughts were spinning. This wasn't Becky. The gun seemed to be pointed right at us and Becky's expression was fixed and focused. I wanted to say something, but I knew Becky. This wasn't her. She would never...and then she fired.

I shot a look over at Callie. She looked at me. We both looked at Becky. From behind me, towards the garage, came a groan and a thump. I turned to see, several steps away, the prone figure of Carlos—still gripping an ax. He had a red stain coloring the right shoulder of his dingy white t-shirt.

"What just happened?" Callie asked looking back and forth between Carlos laying on the ground and Becky, still holding the gun.

I turned and smiled at Becky. She shrugged. "My grandpa's gun."

"I thought you were going to shoot..." Callie said, her voice trailing off and a finger starting to point at herself.

"Not a chance." I said, staring at Becky.

"Wow," Callie said, "You live a wild life here and you have a bad ass girlfriend."

I stepped over to Becky. Her hands were shaking a little. "Yes," I said, still smiling at Becky, "I do." I leaned in and kissed Becky, taking the gun from her hands.

Becky smiled back at me. "Thanks."

"Thank you." I said. I heard a groan from Carlos and turning went over to him. He was trying to sit up. I put a foot on his wounded shoulder and pushed him. He winced and fell backwards. I kicked the ax aside. Behind me I heard Becky calling Russell.

I looked around. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Wait, that was a lie. I knew what, or actually who, I was looking for, but I didn't see her. I glanced down at Carlos. Misty was alone, for now. Until she found another minion.

I looked over at Becky. She and Callie were laughing about something. For the first time in a long time, I knew I wasn't alone. Bad ass girlfriend. Yeah, I kind of liked that. And the way things were going around here, maybe I needed that.

Out on the road I heard something stop at the end of the driveway. I turned. Daggot's truck. Wilson got out and walked up the drive. He looked at Carlos and shook his head.

"Just like people are sayin'. You gotta stop killin' people, Sammy. It's bad for tourism."



"He's not dead and I didn't shoot him anyway. Becky did." I said.

Wilson shook his head sadly. "That's like gangster stuff Sammy. Havin' someone else do your killin' for you."

"He's not dead!" I kicked Carlos lightly in the ribs and he groaned.

Wilson sighed. "Well that's good. We don't need any more ghosts around here than we already have."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"The ghosts, Sammy. I told you about them already." Wilson whined.

"What ghosts?"

"The ones comin' out of the swamps. West of town." Wilson waved off in that direction.

"I heard something about that too." Becky said.

I glanced over at her. "Don't encourage him."

"You gotta do somethin' about them." Wilson continued.

"I'll tell you what," I said, "you can hide from the ghosts in my garage and while you're in there you can finish the work you started. I don't keep any ghosts in the garage—just murderers." I pointed down at Carlos.

Wilson rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I don't know..."

In the distance I could hear the siren of Russell's police car. Wilson turned at the sound.

"I better be going." Wilson said suddenly and waddled quickly down the drive.

"So is this the guy that was helping her?" Becky asked, looking down at Carlos.

I nodded. "Yeah."

Becky looked at me. "At least he'll go to jail. What about her?"

"I don't know about her." I said, but only I knew on how many different levels I meant that.

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## *The Hamlet Mysteries series...*

# The Ghosts of Hamlet

Sam MacNeil, part time writer, is house sitting for his parents in his hometown of Hamlet. The people of Hamlet are far more quirky than Sam remembers from his childhood and he is keen on leaving them behind and getting his life back, but it's those dead bodies that are the real problem. They just keep showing up. Murder in the small town of Hamlet has taken a noticeable uptick since Sam has returned and the residents have taken notice. Sam claims it has nothing to do with him and yet...Now, even worse, the residents are seeing ghosts and they blame Sam for that as well.

Sam may get his chance to escape Hamlet now that his parents are heading home, but can he really walk away without solving the mystery of the ghosts? Will he get away before the "gangsters" from Detroit catch up with him and turn him into a ghost? And what about Becky? He really wasn't planning on a romantic entanglement to muddle things up.

So what do ghosts, gangsters, girlfriends, musk ox and talking cans of beans all have in common? Sam MacNeil and the quirky town of Hamlet, of course.

# The Play of Hamlet

It is finally here. The Founder's Day festival in Hamlet. A gala event highlighted by a play depicting the bizarre founding of Hamlet. Sam is not only the star of the play, but also a target for Scanlon and his killers from Detroit. They are determined to finish him off once and for all. But Sam knows they are coming and, with the help of the quirky residents of Hamlet, he has his own plans in the works. What Sam doesn't know is that Scanlon isn't the only killer from Sam's past that is out to get him. Could the biggest day of the year in Hamlet be Sam's last?

# The King of Hamlet

The sixth story in the Hamlet Mystery series starts out where most of the stories end up...with a dead body. The trouble is Sam is found standing over the dead body and refusing to explain what has happened. He seems willing to take the fall for the guy's murder, but he is clearly hiding something. His friends are sure he didn't commit murder, but who is he protecting and why? What Sam is not telling anyone is that he is playing a more dangerous game than any of them can imagine. As bodies begin piling up around Sam he is increasingly wondering if he has a guardian angel or has become an unwilling accomplice to the Angel of Death. Once again women and murder are causing headaches for Sam.

# The Graves of Hamlet

As if the town of Hamlet didn't have enough trouble with dead bodies now, it appears, someone is digging them up in the cemetery. The quirky residents of Hamlet are sure this has something to do with Sam. As usual Sam doesn't really want anything to do with whatever is going on, but when someone tries to make the cemetery Sam's permanent home one dark night it would seem that Sam will need to sort this out---if only to save himself. To add to the confusion, with Becky out of town, Sam must also figure out who the half naked woman is that keeps showing up on his deck sun bathing. Oh, and who are these other guys that just showed up in Hamlet? The grandson of the recently deceased retired cop who is lying about his real identity and the suspicious looking guy casually asking questions around town about the same dead cop...?

## Polonius' Plight

Here's a surprise...there's been a murder in Hamlet---again. This time, however, Sam is very much intentionally involved. It's the suspects. The guy was found with a gaping shotgun blast to the chest. Like the one in the trunk of Renee's car. Of course the last person to be seen with the murder victim was Jen---and she seems to have disappeared. And why is Reese, the County Detective looking for Becky and her grandfather's .38? Sam is sure none of his friends are murderers, but to keep any and all of them out of jail he needs to find out who the killer is and fast. To make matters worse, while Sam is trying to solve a murder and hide his friends the Town Council of Hamlet has had enough of Sam and the murders that seem to follow him around. They passed yet another of their many bizarre ordinances. Sam has been ordered to leave Hamlet.

**A short story from the Hamlet Mystery series...**

## Hamlet on a Budget

When Wilson Daggot, a dubious handyman and general layabout, finds a suitcase full of money he's delighted, but Sam MacNeil, still perpetually trapped in his hometown, can only see trouble coming from this. When not one, but two men, with different agendas, show up bearing guns and cold determination looking for the money it isn't long before murder makes another visit to the quirky town of Hamlet. Just as disturbing to Sam is the suggestion that the food chain leading up to his beloved steady diet of pizzas may be compromised. Can Sam determine what's in the pepperoni on his pizza before gunmen put holes in him looking for Wilson's suitcase of money? Once again Sam must navigate the wacky streets of Hamlet to save himself and his faith in pizza...

# The Office of Scientific Operations

With the conclusion of the traumatic events in 1933 surrounding the shocking affair involving the city of New York and a beast commonly referred to as "King Kong", the president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, established the Office of Scientific Operations (OSO). The purpose of the OSO was to monitor and evaluate the level of risk and assist in any manner the mitigation of danger of any and all scientific operations and anomalies. With the rapid pace of scientific discovery this office was given the highest priority and clearance to investigate any potential threats or consequences to the interests of the United States of America.

What follows are the real stories behind the cinematic cover-ups presented to the general public...

## Release #1

### from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

#### **From 1953...**

File #153 (commonly referred to by the public as "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms")

OSO agents Elliot Simms and Robbie Regan, while observing an atomic test in the Arctic, are unwittingly caught up in the release of prehistoric beasts from millions of years of suspended animation in the ice. Now they must help in stopping this new terror as it moves steadily down the east coast destroying anything in it's path.

#### **From 1954...**

File #157 (commonly referred to by the public as "Them")

OSO agents Simms and Regan investigate the odd circumstances surrounding a missing FBI agent only to stumble upon a horror in the New Mexico desert and if they cannot find a way to stop it there is a very good chance this could be the end of humanity.

## Release #2

from the declassified files of the  
Office of Scientific Operations...

### **From 1954...**

File #159 (commonly referred to by the public as "Terror in the Jungle")

OSO agent Jonathon Wyatt is pulled off vacation to an island in Indonesia to investigate sightings of pteranodons. The island is not far from the island known infamously as Z Land. It was once the headquarters of Dr. Zeitner whose experiments in genetically manipulating prehistoric monsters terrorized the world in the 1930s before the OSO put a stop to it. Wyatt's job is to determine if these are indeed Dr. Zeitner's creatures, but what he finds is much more deadly. This is no way to spend a vacation---trying not to get eaten.

## Release #3

from the declassified files of the  
Office of Scientific Operations...

### **From 1954...**

File #161 (commonly referred to by the public as "Revenge of the Creature")

After the capture of an unknown species of half man half fish is brought back to a Florida marine institute, OSO agents Wayne and Wyatt must determine the risk to the American people it poses. When the creature escapes and begins terrorizing the citizens of Florida the risk becomes all too real. Now they must hunt it down and stop it's killing spree, if they can.

### **From 1955...**

File #165 (commonly referred to by the public as "It Came From Beneath the Sea")

OSO agents Simms and Regan are sent out to Pearl Harbor to investigate damage to one of the Navy's most advanced atomic submarines by some kind of giant creature. While the Navy has a hard time

believing it, the OSO knows such creatures are real. It soon becomes apparent by the large number of ships being lost that something dangerous is hunting throughout the Pacific. Now, with the creature openly attacking the west coast of the United States Simms and Regan join the fight to stop this thing before the entire Pacific is destroyed by it.

## Release #4

from the declassified files of the  
Office of Scientific Operations...

### From 1954...

File #163 (commonly referred to by the public as "The DC Creeper")

On a break from hunting monsters for the Office of Scientific Operations, OSO Agent Wyatt is trying to adjust to a more crowded domestic life. As brutally murdered bodies begin showing up in the nation's capitol, though, this doesn't seem like it is going to be much of a break. The newspapers have dubbed the hulking killer "The Creeper" and it looks like Wyatt is going to have to hunt him down and stop him before Wyatt becomes the next victim.

## Release #5

from the declassified files of the  
Office of Scientific Operations...

### From 1956...

File #166 (commonly referred to by the public as "Tarantula")

Agents Simms and Regan from the Office of Scientific Operations, the OSO, returning from the Pacific Coast having just finished dealing with yet another monster threatening the United States are redirected to a small town in Arizona to verify that a large tarantula that has been terrorizing the local inhabitants has been destroyed by the Air Force. With Beka, a woman who insists on tagging along with the intrepid agents---a clear violation of official regulations---in tow, they quickly discover that the threat of the giant spiders in the Arizona desert are not over just yet.

## **From 1956...**

File #171 (commonly referred to by the public as "Invasion of the Body Snatchers")

The Office of Scientific Operations, the OSO, has sent agents Wayne and Wyatt out to the small California city of Santa Mira to locate a missing Air Force major, sent to investigate the impact of some meteors, and to understand the meaning of his last cryptic message to Washington. What they find is that, while the city of Santa Mira may look like a quaint place to visit it soon becomes apparent that a missing Air Force major is the least of Wayne and Wyatt's problems. There is something very strange and deadly going on in Santa Mira. Something that seems...alien?

# The New Sheriff

Travis Ames, somehow, has developed super powers. Exactly what these powers entail he's not sure. He's still learning how to control his powers, but he's already decided that he should use this new found power to fight crime. And...if he made a little profit along the way, well, that wouldn't be so bad either. But reality has a way of altering the best laid plans. He has quickly figured out he has no idea how to go about crime fighting. And, to make matters worse, he has learned the hard way, his new powers won't protect him from getting hurt or, quite possibly, killed. Can he survive long enough to learn how to use his powers? Can he get an aging detective to teach him how to fight crime? Can he prevent Aubrey, the new girl, and everyone else at work from figuring out what he can do? How long can he keep this up before he makes that one small mistake and ends up dead?