



CHAPTER 1

Two bizarre deaths

Detective Inspector Pat Crowley was deep in thought when the ringing of his cell phone startled him back to the here and now. However, the phone was trapped by his seatbelt, so he had to pull his car onto the soft shoulder to retrieve it. "Crowley," he snapped irritably. "Hawkins here, Sir," responded his station's desk sergeant. "Sorry to call you on your cell, but we've had a couple of strange deaths reported and I didn't want to put the information on the radio before you'd had a chance to check it out."

"Okay, Jack. What's up?"

"We have two dead men, Sir, on a construction site at the South West corner of the Fifth line and Ridge Road. This promises to be a weird case. One guy has apparently drowned – in an area where there is no water – and the other one died from a chest wound that looks as though it was inflicted by a long blade – possibly a sword. There's an exit wound in the guy's back. No sign of the weapon though. I don't remember there being any open water thereabouts; nothing deep enough to drown a man in anyway. The two deceased were part of a group eating lunch at the site but the rest of the group can't explain how these two ended up dead. The situation was reported by one of the group, an electrician that was working on the house. But he's not making any sense. He keeps babbling about an old sailing ship, fishing nets, and figureheads. I'm also concerned that he may have called a TV station before contacting us. That's why I avoided the radio. Too many people are listening in on scanners these days. I thought you'd want to

check this out yourself, just in case any media show up. We are keeping the electrician at the station until he completes his statement.”

“Okay, Jack, I’m on my way. Who do we have at the scene?”

“Saunders, Sir. He’s a pretty cool guy as a rule, but seems a bit unnerved by this turnout and he’s anxious for help. He said the man that drowned looks as if he’s been dragged over gravel and the live people are all acting strange. One guy had his pants off and keeps doing squats and knee bends while another one is unresponsive to anybody and acts like he’s swinging an imaginary axe at something. Saunders is having a job keeping them on site, Pat. I’ve sent two more cars, and requested a coroner and forensic team. We’ve also had a problem at the station. Sergeant Stanton collapsed a short time ago. He was out cold for a few seconds but seemed okay when he came to. I had Williams take him to the emergency room anyway; just to be safe. The doctors are keeping him for some tests.”

“Good thinking, Jack. Keep me posted on that. Is there anything known about the deceased or anyone else at the building site?”

“Saunders believes the guy swinging the imaginary axe has a record, Sir. He remembers his face, but can’t recall from where. We’re checking that now. One of the names Saunders gave me was Earl Whitt, a real estate developer. This building lot is the site of Whitt’s new house, which is almost complete. Pat, you will recall Toronto asking us to check on Whitt’s wife about three months ago. Her lawyer had given them an address up here after her friends reported her missing. You had Stanton interview her, and he said she was recovering from a bad beating. He was so upset by the lady’s injuries he wanted to go a few rounds with her husband himself. You spoke with Mrs. Whitt’s lawyer after that, Richard Wellesley. Remember?”

“I remember. Is Whitt one of the dead?”

“Saunders didn’t say, Sir. He had to leave the car and chase after someone trying to leave the scene. That was the last time I spoke with him.”

“Okay, Jack. I’m on Ridge Road now. I’ll get the rest from the guys on site. Keep me posted about Stanton.”

“Aye, Sir.”

Crowley well remembered how angry Stanton had been after meeting Mrs. Whitt. It was because of his anger that Crowley had made a point of visiting the lady’s lawyer himself. Wellesley had told him: ‘Mrs. Whitt left

her husband after a bad beating. She also left a note on their fridge, stating that she would make no claims on him, provided he left her alone and didn't try to contact her. Whitt wanted the terms of her note converted into a binding legal agreement and asked a friend of mine, Bill Jones, to draw up a sort of retroactive, prenuptial agreement for her to sign, intending to deny his wife any access to his estate when they divorced. 'Jonesy' is a corporate lawyer, and didn't want the job. However, Whitt's partner, Chernak, who was already a client of Jones', persuaded him to look into the matter. Jones' enquiries led him to me and when he learned that Whitt was a wife beater, he wanted nothing more to do with him. However, his only contact with Whitt had been over the phone and so, as a courtesy to Chernak, he decided to give Whitt a chance to present his side of the story. I would have liked to have been a fly-on-the wall at the meeting.'

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That meeting had actually taken place two months before the strange deaths on Ridge Road. Whitt, whilst pestering his partner, Chernak, to influence his lawyer to act on his behalf, had learned that Jones was a gourmet who delighted in new dining experiences. So, Whitt, who was a friend of the owners of an exclusive, gourmet restaurant 'The Victoria-Anna', was determined to make a 'buddy' of Jones by treating him to a working supper there. The house had been converted into a restaurant of several intimate dining rooms where antique furniture, crackling fireplaces and lush area carpets, over polished wooden floors, gave the impression of an elegant private home, rather than a restaurant. Whitt was gratified by the lawyer's look of pleasant surprise when he greeted Jones there for their meeting.

Whitt waited for Jones to set his cutlery aside before asking: "So, how was your meal, Bill? It seemed to have your full attention, so I'm hoping it was as enjoyable as my own."

Jones' pleasant features lit up in a broad smile. He clasped both hands to his stomach before gathering up his wine glass, and relaxing in the comfortable, upholstered chair.

"Earl, that meal would have compensated for some of the worst days of my life. This has been a delight. Thank you for introducing me to this wonderful place. Converting elegant old houses into a restaurant of several intimate dining rooms is a well-established style, of course, but I've never

been as impressed as I am by this one. I have a passion for good food.” Whitt felt his muscles relax and tension slip from his body. This meeting was off to a good start. They both declined the tempting dessert cart, ordering liqueurs and coffee instead. Then Jones addressed the reason for their meeting outside of business hours.

“So Earl, I understand that you are leaving for England tomorrow, to be best man at Al Chernak’s wedding. That promises to be an exciting affair. Al told me that the ceremony is to be in a unique church; in the West Country I believe.”

“That’s right! Al’s fiancée comes from a fishing village called Ryeport, where an ancestor of hers designed the church and was later married there. That began a family tradition unbroken to this day, more than two hundred years later. I suggested that Al and Heather just live together. We all know how short-lived marriages have become these days. Heather, Al’s fiancée, wouldn’t hear of it. So, I suggested a quiet civil ceremony over here, with a more formal event in Ryeport later, when we weren’t so busy. Apparently, her whole family ganged up against that idea. You’d think this marriage was the most important event of their lives. I could do without this fuss and interruption to my business schedule, especially now, in view of this problem with my wife.”

Jones raised his eyebrows. “That sounds a bit ‘Marley and Scrooge,’ Earl. Surely, you must be flattered to be chosen as your partner’s best man, especially for such a unique wedding. I understand Al stood up for you, when you were married. This offers you an opportunity to reciprocate.”

“Al is a fool to get married. Especially since he’s seen the problems I’m facing through legally tying myself to one woman, in such an outdated ritual.”

Jones appeared at a loss for a response, and relieved to see the waitress arrive with the coffee and liqueurs. Their conversation paused until she left the room.

“Speaking of Millie,” Jones said, “we really should get down to business. Earl, whilst researching the arrangement you requested, I uncovered some things I didn’t expect. Just to ensure my facts are correct, I’d like to review my understanding of the situation and clarify a point or two. If any of my assumptions are wrong, I’d appreciate your corrections. Okay?” Whitt nodded his assent and Jones continued. “You have been married about two and a half years now, and your wife Millicent recently left you, without

warning, and disappeared from sight. I have the copy of her note that you gave me, in which she stated that she would make no claims on you provided that you made no attempt to contact her. Okay so far?" Whitt nodded as he topped up their coffee. Jones continued. "Her friends were alarmed by her sudden, and unannounced, disappearance, and contacted the police. They suspected foul play." Jones paused, searching Whitt's face for a reaction. Finding none, he continued. "The police questioned all known associates, and her employer referred them to a lawyer: Richard Wellesley, who arranged for the police to meet Millie. Incidentally, her friends reported her missing before you did. Why was that?"

Whitt shrugged. "I thought she must be staying with friends. I had her note, remember?"

"Of course! The police met with your wife, confirmed that her seclusion was self-imposed, and that she intended to remain incommunicado at this time. They also stated that she was recovering from a severe beating." Jones fixed his eyes on Whitt again, obviously inviting a response but Whitt remained impassive, so again Jones continued. "Contrary to the terms of Millie's note, you tried to establish contact, but got no further than her lawyer whom, I must advise you, is a friend of mine. He told me that he reminded you of the terms of your wife's note and advised you to back off or risk a costly division of assets, and a possible suit for mental and physical abuse. However, you decided to engage a lawyer to convert the terms of Millie's note to a binding legal agreement. In fact, you wanted me to arrange a sort of retroactive, prenuptial agreement. Still on track?"

Whitt nodded. "Yes, I thought we had all this established."

"Mr. Whitt, you are going to have to level with me if we are to continue in this matter. Did you beat your wife?"

Whitt found the lawyer's eyes riveted on his face, as though daring him to lie. He was silent for a few seconds before raising the coffee carafe to Jones. The lawyer declined with a curt wave of his hand. "Whatever happened to Earl? Are we no longer on a first name basis?" Jones ignored the question so, with a wry smile, Whitt said: "We had a few quarrels. Contrary to first impressions, Millie is a hard woman to live with: very demanding, jealous and possessive."

"Did you beat your wife? Please answer the question." Jones' tone was insistent.

Whitt's athletic frame tensed as he leaned across the table to stare angrily into the lawyer's face. "Am I on trial here?"

"No, but you could well be and very soon, if I read Millie's lawyer correctly and he'll not be less direct." Jones appeared unmoved by Whitt's aggressive attitude, and his eyes didn't waver from their scrutiny of his companion's face.

Whitt shrugged and sank back in his chair. "I slapped her, a couple of times, nothing of any consequence. The woman was unbelievably irritating, always questioning my whereabouts. Certainly, there was no cause for her to leave. I gave her everything she wanted. I was even building a new house for her. What a bloody white elephant that will be! I even have to visit the site before I fly out tomorrow and I...."

Jones interrupted, "Nothing of any consequence, you say." He produced an envelope from an inside pocket, withdrew a photograph, and placed it in front of Whitt. "This photograph was taken in the Emergency Room of St. Mike's Hospital on the night that Millie left you. The picture is dated and signed by the attending doctor. Her doctor and the police don't consider Millie's injuries inconsequential. In fact one would have a job recognising her, because the severe bruising and swellings have so distorted her features."

"What does that have to do with me?" Whitt responded.

Jones spread more pictures in front of him. "The dates and doctor's comments indicate a progressive increase in the severity of the beatings over the past year. The doctor said she looked very frightened. On the face of things, if we were to believe these pictures and the statement of her friends and co-workers, one might conclude that you are a vicious, bullying, wife beater. But that couldn't possibly be true – or could it?" Jones gave a small, disparaging smile. Whitt raised his eyes from the pictures.

"I certainly didn't do that," he said. "She must have fallen down the stairs again. She was accident prone."

Now it was Jones' turn to lean across the table, as he stared into Whitt's angry face, as though trying to read his mind. "Wellesley has investigated this matter very thoroughly and, believe me, he deserves his excellent reputation. He has built a substantial file in preparation for this case and advised Millie to bring this matter to court. Initially she declined, but I believe it would be a difficult case for you to win if Millie decides to proceed." Jones appeared bored and that seemed to fuel Whitt's anger even more.

"You are supposed to be representing me! You act more like a damned prosecuting attorney, for God's sake. I hired you to secure a simple legal agreement. Millie had already proposed terms that were acceptable to me. All that was required of you was to draw a legal document in those same terms, and have her sign it. Stop treating me like a bloody criminal. I'm your client, the one who will be paying your exorbitant bill."

"Oh, Mr. Whitt, I wouldn't dream of presenting you with an exorbitant bill. After all, you are not yet a client. I only agreed to consider this matter as a favour to Al Chernak. I never accept a case before I check it out." Jones gathered up the photographs and returned them to his inside pocket. "Actually, this is not my area of expertise. I would never have considered the case at all, but for your partner's earnest request. Your wife's lawyer, on the other hand, is possibly the best in Canada in matters of physical and mental abuse. I have promised to return Millie's photographs to him." Jones rose from his seat. "Goodnight, Mr. Whitt. In my opinion, you would be wise to abide by the conditions of your wife's note and let the matter rest. Thank you for supper. In the circumstances, I shall consider that adequate compensation for time expended on your behalf. You will receive a letter from me declining to represent you in this matter. I shall, of course, hold my notes on file. Please apologise to Al for me. Tell him that I find your needs far exceed my expertise." He turned and left the room without looking back. There was no parting handshake.

Whitt stood, as though to follow him, but thinking better of it, angrily smashed his fist on the table instead, causing the coffee cups to rattle. He was having a hard time controlling his anger. "So much for the expertise of the great Bill Jones," he said. "Some bloody referral. Now I have to leave this matter up-in-the-air while I go to England for Al's stupid wedding." He looked out the window in time to see Jones enter his car. Light snow was falling, and the small flakes swirled and danced their way through the pools of light cast by the Victorian street lamps in the parking lot. "You double-dealing bastard," Whitt muttered, as he watched the car pull away, spinning snow from under its tires.

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While Whitt and Jones had been enjoying the luxury of the 'Vic', the contractor responsible for completing Whitt's new house: Walter Wilton-Smythe – Smitty to his friends and creditors – was seating himself for his main meal of the day. However, the ambience of the Legion's beverage

room paled by comparison to that of the 'Vic'. Smitty, chose a secluded corner, and placed his beer and paper plate on the arbourite-topped table. His meat pie was hot from the microwave, and his only side dish was a package of potato chips. He took a quick mouthful of beer before settling into his usual 'gun-fighter' seat; his back to the wall and facing the door. Carefully he placed his stiff left leg between the corner wall and the table so that no one could trip over it. That leg had been badly damaged in a motorcycle accident three years earlier and the knee was now inflexible, held together with screws and metal plates. Smitty tore the top off the bag of potato chips, and poured them onto the plate. The beverage room was quiet tonight, which suited the mood of this lean, six foot-two man perfectly. The last thing he wanted tonight was company. However, his solitude was short lived. He groaned and his shoulders slumped as he watched a familiar figure enter the room, buy a beer, and spotting him, cross to the table.

"Hi, Smitty!" Living high-on-the-hog tonight I see."

"Hi, Bert! I've got a lot on my mind tonight. I need some quiet time to resolve some private problems. I thought I'd find a quiet corner where I could focus on possible solutions, without interruptions."

Bert took the seat across the table – but not the hint – and studied Smitty thoughtfully. After a few seconds of reflection, he seemed to reach a decision. "Smitty, I've noticed a big change in you over the past few weeks. If you've got problems, I'd be pleased to help."

Smitty gave a shake of his head. "No, Bert! It's personal but thanks anyway."

"Come on, Smitty. We've been friends since grade school. You know I'm no gossip. Anything said here stays here. As I said, if I can help, I'll be pleased to. Trouble at work, is it?"

Smitty was silent for a few seconds, avoiding eye contact, before flipping his pie upside down and cutting into it with his plastic knife. Steam poured from the cut and the aroma of meat and gravy drifted across the table. Bert smiled. "Smells good, Smitty, but it won't be a patch on Amy's cooking. Why aren't you at home, where the food is better, and Amy can help you with your problems?"

"Sorry, but this is a private matter. I'm really not in the mood for questions tonight."

Smitty's surly manner left no illusions about his not wanting company, but

Bert refused to be put-off. "I bet it's got something to do with that bum of a helper you hired. Where is Robbie anyway?"

"Shopping!" Smitty ate a couple of potato chips. "I'll pick him up later. He'll call me here when he's ready."

Bert shook his head. "So, you are still acting as his private chauffeur. That guy is a real pain-in-the-ass. Everybody here knows that. They all wonder why you keep him on. Is he that good a worker?"

"No, Bert. Just between you and me, he's a liability. But he got us the job that we're working on and that's the crux of the matter! So, if anybody asks, you can tell them that I will make the hiring and firing decisions in my little firm."

Bert ignored the inference that he should mind his own business and leave. "That'll be the job in the valley – the job the black lawyer from England told Robbie about, when he accidentally bumped into him in the Orillia Legion." Bert gave a derisive, grunting, laugh. "Let's see if I've got this right? A lawyer from England just happens to be in the Orillia Legion, where he bumps into a stranger – an out of work ex-con, no less – and promptly offers him a fat contract. Not for him, but for you – another guy he's never met and who doesn't operate in the Orillia area." Bert raised his arms and his eyebrows in a gesture of total disbelief. "I wouldn't want that guy as my lawyer. I thought that profession was supposed to be more prudent than that."

"I don't know anything about the guy, Bert. I've never met him. Don't even know his name. Robbie couldn't remember it. Apparently, his firm handles all the legal affairs for Whitt's real estate company, including Whitt's new house. His original contractor quit when he was offered a fat bonus to work exclusively on another house that had a tight closing date. The bonus was to ensure there'd be no jumping from job to job. Whitt was mad as hell apparently, but had no written contract, so he needed a new contractor. When this lawyer – the black guy – 'bumped into' Robbie, he told him he needed a contractor in the Orangeville area to complete Whitt's house and asked Robbie if he knew me. I lost my previous helper, Andy, when he received an unexpected inheritance and the lawyer said he knew of me, because it was his firm that had helped Andy with his legal particulars. Anyway, Robbie piled on the bullshit, saying he knew all the contractors in the area, and got a phone number from the lawyer. Later, Robbie found

me and told me the story. I called the law firm, Krueger and Johnson, and they sent me the specs for Whitt's house. So, I worked out a quote and called them back. Guess what? They didn't even want to hear my quote. Just asked if I would accept the balance of the work, for the balance of the originally contracted price. That balance was a lot higher than my quote, so it was a no-brainer. There was one condition; I had to employ Robbie for the duration of the contract. Obviously, I said yes. But if I'd known how much trouble Robbie was going to be, I would have turned it down. The fact remains though, that if Robbie hadn't brought me that lead, I might not be working now. But I often wish I hadn't taken the job. Whitt's a real bastard to work for and Robbie's shoddy work is causing lots of problems."

Bert was looking puzzled. "But why are you here now, Smitty? You and Amy make a great team. Since you met Amy, you shook off the 'macho-biker' mentality that cost you full use of your leg and became a responsible family man. And you got yourself a great, ready-made family to boot. Your friends were all happy to see you in such a good wholesome, relationship. Surely Amy could help you with whatever problems you've got?"

Smitty sighed and gave a shrug of resignation. Then he looked Bert in the eye and said: "Oh well, Bert I guess you'll hear about it soon anyway. Amy and me are splitting up."

"What?" Bert sat bolt upright, looking totally shocked.

Smitty looked glum as he continued. "Yeah, we had a bust-up over my getting home late the other night. The night you drove me home in fact. After work that night, I'd dropped Robbie off here and he insisted on buying me a beer for driving him around. We had a game of darts. One game became two, then three, and the beer kept coming. I played more games than I'd intended and got home too late to take the family to the show. I'd promised the kids that I'd take them and I let them down. Amy was annoyed. She said I was drunk, which I wasn't, and we ended up having a fight. I stormed out and had a few more beers. I thought I'd show her what drunk really looked like. That was the night you found me trying to get into my truck, took my keys away and drove me home, remember? Amy and me had another fight when I got home. She said she doesn't want her kids to hear us fighting, or see me drunk. 'My kids aren't used to that,' she said. 'And I don't intend they shall ever get used to it.'" Smitty waved his hand dismissively. "I can't blame her. She was absolutely right. The whole thing was my fault. Stupid really! I love Amy, and her kids. I'm really going

to miss them. Anyway, Amy gave me an ultimatum. 'Get rid of Robbie, and quit the heavy drinking' she said. 'All our troubles started when you hired him. Otherwise we'll have to separate.' So, I'm leaving! Tomorrow morning. It's her house after all! I am just the live-in boyfriend." Smitty picked at the pie with his plastic fork. "So now you know the whole story, Bert. But it's not for publication." He fixed eye contact, and pointed his fork at Bert – just to emphasise the point.

"Come now, Smitty. Surely, you're not going to throw away such a great relationship, over a few beers, and a louse like Robbie? For God's sake, dump Robbie, go on home and say you're sorry. Robbie's just using you! You need to get your priorities straight, my friend."

"Well, like I said, Bert, the contract guarantees his employment. If I fire him, I break the contract. I can't afford to do that. Every last penny I have, plus a massive loan, is tied up in Whitt's big house. Until it's finished, I don't get paid up, and I'm in debt up to my ears." Smitty's shoulders slumped, and he suddenly looked defeated. "I simply can't afford to break the contract," he mumbled. "I can't fire Robbie, and I'm also stuck with Whitt until the job is complete. The three of us might just as well be welded together until then." He looked tired and beaten but that only lasted a few seconds. Then he looked up, squared his shoulders and said: "So, if anyone asks, I'm still responsible for my little firm. I'll make the decisions – good or bad – not the guys at the Legion or my girlfriend. Sink or swim, it's up to me. Anyway, I need a helper. This gammy leg has robbed me of a lot of my independence."

Bert took a sip of beer before responding: "I'm sorry, Smitty; I'd help if I could. Can't you get your previous helper back?"

"No, Bert. I'd love to have Andy back, but I wouldn't even ask him. He had that inheritance, remember? Talk about coincidence! It was the same firm, Krueger and Johnson, that handled that too. Andy got a small farm willed to him. Well, to his dad actually but his dad died two years ago, so it passed to Andy. Right out-of-the-blue, that was. Just like winning a lottery with a found ticket. It seems an army buddy of Andy's dad passed away without leaving any relatives. Andy doesn't even remember his dad mentioning the guy. Anyway, we were working in Orangeville one day when this good-looking girl – Heather her name was – found us at the job site. She told Andy about the Will. Anyway, this girl, Heather, said that the farm would now pass to Andy. A conditional bequest I believe she called it.

It's outside Calgary somewhere! The farm I mean. Andy and me both stood there with our mouths hanging open, while she gave him the news. He had to go to Toronto the next day with proof of identity, and some army papers of his dad's. When he left here, he owned a farm. His first thought had been to sell it. But that wasn't allowed under the conditional part of the bequest. He had to live on the farm, and work it himself – no selling or renting the place. He's not allowed to change the farm to any business other than farming either. After three years, provided he shows a profit from the farm, the conditions will be lifted and he will become fully vested in the farm. He'll make it though. Andy is a hard worker – his girlfriend too. They make a great team. I'm happy to see good people get a break. But I was real sorry to lose Andy; he was a great tradesman and a good friend. And, to make matters worse, Robbie was his replacement. It seems that the big guy, upstairs," Smitty rolled his eyes towards the heavens, "must have decided I was having things too good since I found Amy and her kids, and decided to throw some crappy stuff my way, just to even things out. He overdid it though when he added Robbie to the mix. Andy learned, from this girl Heather, that this friend of his dad had always dreamed of owning a farm, and finally managed to buy this place just before he retired. Then the poor bastard got sick. He wanted someone else to fulfil his dream for him. So he willed the farm to his friend, but with those conditions attached. He didn't intend to give away a lifetime of savings and hard work to someone who would just cash-it-in."

Bert was looking glum. "Well, good luck to Andy for sure. But that still leaves you stuck with Robbie and you're still having to drive him all over the place. When is he getting his licence back?" Now it was Smitty's turn to look startled. "Get his licence back? I never knew he'd lost it! When was that?"

"Shortly after he got out of the 'nick,' Smitty. Drunk driving. And he was nailed for driving without a licence or insurance after that. Incidentally, he doesn't know that I know that. I had a friend of mine in the police check him out. His jail time was for grievous bodily harm, you know. He beat up an old variety store clerk for the cash in the till, and nearly killed the guy, all for about thirty bucks I believe. While Robbie was inside, his wife and kids took off. They disappeared down east somewhere. But I'd appreciate you keeping that information under-your-hat, Smitty. Robbie's got a reputation for back-alley methods of settling accounts."

Smitty was dumbstruck. "He never told me he lost his licence. He told me he couldn't find a reliable car that he could afford."

"Yeah, I know; that's why I checked him out. When my wife got promoted recently, a company car came with the new job. We had just had her own car completely overhauled, so I offered it to Robbie, at a really good price and I told him I'd take two hundred bucks a month. I thought that would help you out. That's some buddy you've got there, Smitty. With friends like him..." Bert spread his arms wide, "you don't need enemies. Watch your back."

Smitty ran his fingers through his hair, looking totally downcast. "Thanks for cheering me up, Bert. I feel much better now."

"You're welcome, mate! That's what friends are for! Seriously, though Smitty, if you can think of some way I can help, please let me know. I would hate to see you and Amy break up." Bert pushed back his chair, and picked up his empty glass. "Well, I'm off home, mate. Eat your pie – it's getting cold."

Smitty collected Robbie just before seven p.m. and dropped him off at his apartment. He declined the offered drink, saying he had to get home, but in fact, he had no intention of going home until Amy would be in bed and asleep. He wasn't sure how he would cope with this parting-of-the-ways, and certainly wasn't up to discussion with her tonight. He decided to waste some time in the Orangeville movie theatre until he felt sure Amy would be asleep. He bought some peanuts and settled in for the 7:30 pm performance.

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As Smitty took his seat in the movie theatre, it was already 12:30 am, in Ryeport England, where Holly Maxwell, the new live-in barmaid at The Seahorse Inn, lay smiling in her bed. Holly was feeling safe and comfortable, for the first time in many years. She was relieved and grateful to have escaped from her previous job as a bartender at Freefrees, a sleazy nightclub at Plymouth. She had hated that place. Any conversation the regulars started with her usually included an offer to get laid, do drugs or go to a party, where you might be expected to rotate through all of the above. Had she not needed a job so desperately, she would have quit that place that very first night. But she had been single, living from paycheque to paycheque, while struggling to pay off the overloaded plastic her ex 'boyfriend' had left her, and she had to have a job, any job, to pay her bills.

On her last night at Freefrees, she had been trying, with such grace as she could muster, to escape the unwanted attentions of a ‘macho-type’ at the bar who was trying to sell her on the merits of spending the night with him, when the tall black man had entered the club. He had paused in the doorway for a quick survey of the room before making his way to the bar. The disdain on his face was hard to miss, especially as he paused to watch an effeminate, tubby man pinning zodiac buttons on various patrons. “Compatibility is so important, my dears,” ‘Zodiac-man’ was saying, as he smiled his simpering smile. Holly had not been able to repress a smile herself, as she noted the newcomer’s unmistakeable expression of disgust. The newcomer had appeared to be in his sixties; in good physical shape, well groomed, wearing an obviously expensive suit and looking too classy for that sleazy, ‘meat-market’ establishment. She recalled how out of place he’d looked as he seated himself at the bar and waited patiently for service.

But ‘Macho-man’ had her wrist in a firm grip, and seemed intent on holding her there until she gave him the answer he wanted. The black man waited patiently a while longer before interrupting. “Excuse me, Sir,” he said, smiling at the man when he turned to face him. But he then addressed himself directly to her. “Could I have a Heineken please, Holly?” She jerked her wrist free, and rubbed it with her other hand. “Certainly, Sir,” she said. “Coming right up.”

‘Macho’ was not pleased and scowled as he faced the black man. “Why don’t you bugger-off, spade,” he’d said belligerently. “Don’t you know better than to interrupt when a bloke’s chatting-up a lady?”

The black man lowered his head momentarily. Then he stepped down from his stool and his expression was grim as he addressed him. “Obviously, you do not know of me,” he said. His voice was quiet, but every word was slowly and clearly enunciated, as though to ensure no misunderstanding. “Permit me to introduce myself. Just to give you fair warning. I am known as ‘The Sexton.’” He raised his eyebrows as he gave the familiar quote signal at the word Sexton. “In case you are unaware, a sexton is paid to put people in their graves. Sometimes, I work for free.” He smiled a small but humourless smile, as he again raised his eyebrows. “Your bad manners could prove detrimental to your health. I would suggest, Sir, that you take your drink elsewhere. I’m sure that, if you have any friends or family, they would want that.” ‘Macho’ hesitated, disturbed by the newcomer’s confidence and unwavering eye contact. He noticed that the black guy had also returned

one hand to his pocket. Could 'Sexton' be a street name for a 'hit-man'? This club was frequented by quite a few villains. The two men stared at each other for a few seconds before 'Macho' picked up his glass, and walked away. "She's not worth the bother," he mumbled.

"Thank you, kind Sir," she'd said, with a theatrically coy response, batted her eyelids and gave a small curtsey, holding the forefinger of her right hand under her chin. She had followed that with a quiet laugh. "Frankly," she'd said, "some of the people here are quite scary, especially when they hear the word no." She'd placed a napkin on the counter and poured the newcomer his Heineken. The black man had smiled as he said: "Holly, I have something here that I think might interest you." He unfolded his newspaper and drew her attention to an advertisement for a live-in barmaid at The Seahorse Inn in Ryeport. "Ryeport is a small fishing village west of here," he explained. "The village has an interesting history of smuggling and seafaring adventures. In a couple of months they will be exploiting that history by opening a vacation park; a modest sort of theme park for tourists." He'd smiled again. "No threat to Disney World, you understand but it should prove an interesting and lucrative enterprise. Anyway, the inn will need an experienced barmaid to cope with the tourist business. At the moment, their beverage trade is just draft beer and straight shots. Next weekend a few weeks ahead of the park opening, the inn will also host a wedding. A Canadian man will be marrying a local girl whose ancestor designed the local church. The church is unique and will also be a feature of the vacation park. The inn will be very busy Holly. I'm sure you'd like it much better than this place. The clientele will be more wholesome. By the way, my name is Sexton. Paul Sexton. And I am also 'The Sexton' of The Guiding Light Church, in Ryeport. So, I'm Sexton by both name and occupation." His smile had been warm and reassuring. He gave a small shrug. "I just steered your macho friend to a more sinister interpretation for my name."

She remembered smiling at his little subterfuge and watching his smile grow to a big grin, in response. "I wonder that I didn't see this advertisement myself," she'd said. "I've been looking for another job, ever since I took this one."

"It's a local paper," Sexton responded. "I don't imagine it's distributed here." She had re-read the ad. Compensation included room and board, plus a modest wage. The live-in aspect of the job would certainly be a relief. No

more struggling for the rent at month's end or having to prepare her own lonely meals. And the biggest plus – she would be free of the inexhaustible supply of creeps at Freefrees. The pros easily outweighed the cons and she had applied for the job, in person, the very next day.

She recalled how she had checked herself out in the mirror before leaving her flat. "First impressions are important," she had told her reflection, as she dusted a piece of lint from her smart, dark green raincoat. However, she was disappointed in her first impression of the inn's owners, Sam and Sarah Bass. Sam was an overweight grungy looking individual, with a smile to match. It soon became obvious that he was not too bright either. Sam's wife Sarah, a short tubby woman, was pleasant enough, but when she learned that Holly was single, her questions focused more on her love life than her skills as a barmaid and that had given her the impression that Sarah might be concerned that an unattached barmaid might be tempting to Sam. Holly shuddered at the thought. However, she'd got the job. It transpired that Sexton had recommended her very highly and that his opinion carried a lot of weight in Ryeport. She had started the very next day, feeling strangely comfortable at the inn from the very outset. She was still smiling happily as her eyelids closed, and she drifted off to the land-of-nod.

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At this time Smitty, who had spent the night on the couch, was sitting, alone, at the kitchen table in Amy's house in Bramalea, a mile or two east of Whitt's route. His right hand held a mug of cold black coffee. Two slices of burnt toast sat, untouched, on a plate he'd pushed away when the coffee had still looked appetising. Several partially smoked cigarettes lay crushed out in the ashtray. He had no appetite for anything. She had thrown down the gauntlet, by insisting he fire Robbie – without knowing, of course, that his contract with Whitt would have bankrupted him had he done so. Smitty's left hand was fidgeting restlessly with his hair – a sign that both Amy and Whitt had come to recognise as an unwitting signal that his confidence was low and that he would be indecisive and vulnerable.

Smitty was a ruggedly good-looking kind of guy – over six feet tall, with a rangy build and a thick mop of dark brown hair. But a few months after his motorcycle accident some stands of grey had crept into his hairline. Now there were two very distinct, almost white stripes, at his right temple. Amy said it looked distinguished but he thought it looked 'freaky' and that

Amy was just trying to make him feel better. That accident had robbed him of more than the mobility of his left leg. He had never been short of confidence before that.

The quiet creak of the bedroom door intruded on his thoughts and he raised his gaze to watch Amy enter the kitchen. She was wearing the rose-pink housecoat that he'd bought for her last birthday. Her arms were folded across her chest, head and shoulders bent forward, as though huddled against the cold. That self-hugging mannerism that made her look so vulnerable, together with her tousled reddish-brown hair and sleepy hazel eyes, would always be one of his strongest memories of her. As she entered the kitchen, her gaze rested briefly on two cardboard boxes that he'd left at the side door. The sight of them seemed to startle her, and she turned, as though to speak but paused, biting her lower lip, before saying: "I didn't hear you get up; I hope you weren't going to leave without saying goodbye." Her eyes took in the table scene and his obvious despondence and her voice cracked a little as she asked: "Any coffee left?"

"I was very late last night." Smitty responded. "I didn't want to wake you, so I slept on the couch. The coffee's cold. I'll brew some fresh, then I'll be on my way." He avoided her eyes and dumped the cold brew down the sink. "I'll make some fresh toast too. The coffee won't take long." Smitty thought of Bert's advice of last evening: 'You'd best get your priorities right.' Well, he knew they were right here but if he walked away from Whitt's house now, he'd be bankrupt, and have to find a new job. That certainly wouldn't help Amy and the kids. So, he had to hang tough for a while. He was desperately short of personal cash too. The material costs for Whitt's luxury house had all but drained his business, personal accounts and lines-of-credit. The payments that Whitt should have made at various stages of completion, should have kept him solidly in-the-black, but Robbie's shoddy work always gave Whitt the opportunity to withhold those stage payments, until that work was corrected. One such payment was due now. But Whitt would be in England for at least ten days, so Smitty would now have to pay Robbie's wages out of his own pocket. "Oh well, there's still Visa," he mumbled.

"What did you say, Smitty?" Amy had detected his muttered undertones. "Nothing Amy, just thinking aloud." So, he poured the coffee. They left the toast to waste again and said their goodbyes; it was all very civilised. Amy shed a few tears as she gave him a quick hug. "Sorry, Smitty but I must consider the kids first. Take care of yourself. Please call me sometimes. Let

me know how, and where you are, and how things are going. Please call. I didn't want us to split up."

"I'm sorry too Amy but I am running late and still have to pick Robbie up. We should be on the job by now. He gave her a last peck on the cheek. "Give the kids my love. Bye, Amy; thanks for everything." He turned, grabbed the boxes by the door and stepped out, into the minus twelve degree morning. Amy watched from the kitchen window as he threw his things into the back of the pickup. He was about to slam the tailgate when he paused. "Right now, this, plus my remaining equity in the trucks, and the used machines and tools at my shop, represents all my worldly wealth – maybe, twenty grand on the open market. What a loser!" He slammed the tailgate shut and hauled his stiff leg into the cab. "This has to change." He snarled, as he started the engine. He was all set to 'scream' the truck out of the driveway, when the frost covered windshield forced him to reconsider. His show of macho defiance would have to wait until he'd scraped the windshield clear and the pickup's heater was capable of keeping it that way. When he finally drove off, to collect Robbie, it also occurred to him that he had no idea where he would sleep tonight. He was desperately short of cash and there was little room left on the plastic. It was then that he realised that he'd been hoping that Amy would back down, and ask him to stay.