# Rides a Stranger

## Bibliomysteries

**by David Bell, 1969–**

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My father died slowly.

In his early sixties, after a lifetime of vigorous health and strength, he contracted a rare neurological disorder that killed him inch by inch. First, he couldn't walk. Soon after that, he couldn't dress himself or feed himself. Eventually he was confined to bed, wearing adult diapers. A nurse came and

changed him several times a day, rolling him from one side to the other with the detached and practiced care of the medical professional.

My dad's eyes remained sharp and intelligent. He was in there. We all knew that. But his body deserted him, like an electrical device with a failing battery. He slowly wound down, losing motion and control. A slow unraveling.

The last thing to go was his ability to speak.

For several months, his voice became a raspy whisper. Every word cost him effort. To say something as simple as "yes" could take five minutes and reserves of precious energy he just didn't have.

I didn't visit as much as I should have. I lived four hours away in a small college town where I taught American Literature to the indifferent and unwashed masses of middle-class kids at a public university deep in the heart of Kentucky. It was a good job and mostly fulfilling, and I told myself it left little time for regular trips to my hometown to see my father wasting away in a hospital bed. The truth is—I didn't know what I could do for him. Even when my father was at his healthiest and in full voice, we didn't have much to say to each other. We didn't see eye-to-eye politically. His facts came from Fox News, mine from MSNBC. He spent his life working in business, selling auto parts to distributors around the Rust Belt. I spent my life in the ivory tower.

We couldn't even agree when it came to books. I wrote my dissertation on Fitzgerald, specifically *The Great Gatsby*. Dad's reading habits remained more pedestrian. He read anything that landed on the bestseller list. When I was a child, he read Alistair Maclean and Jack Higgins. Later he switched to Tom Clancy and James Patterson. Big dick books, my ex-wife—also an English professor—used to call them. Big dick books.

And Dad's favorite big dick genre of them all—the western. Oaters. Horse operas. Shoot 'em ups. He read them all. Max Brand. Will Henry. Luke Short. And his favorite of them all—Louis L'Amour. Dad read every Louis L'Amour book ever written. He read and re-read them. He bought multiple copies of them. He'd wear one out from re-reading, and then he'd go out and buy the same book and wear that one out as well. It seemed like strange behavior for a man who grew up in Vermont, lived most of his life in Ohio, and never once ventured west of the Mississippi River.

So, we didn't talk about books either.

But I did hear the last words he ever spoke.

This happened about three weeks before his death. I made one of my infrequent visits. The university I teach at had a fall break, and my mother had been calling me, obliquely warning me that the old man didn't have much time left. She'd say things like, "Well, your father isn't as strong as he used to be." Or she'd say, "Well, we all just have to do what we have to do." I understood. Mom was telling me to come and say good-bye.

So I made the trip. I went into their bedroom, the bedroom in which I was conceived, and which was now filled by a large hospital bed. My dad looked small beneath the tucked in sheets, almost like a sick child. He had lost close to sixty pounds, and when I saw him that day, he looked like a sketch or an outline of himself, something without substance or heft.

I took the seat next to the bed and held his hand. I didn't like holding his hand. My dad had acquired the habit of reaching down beneath the bedclothes, trying to fiddle with or even remove the diapers he wore. I never knew if this was out of discomfort or because he rebelled against the idea of wearing a diaper at all. But his hands were often busy beneath the sheets, and while I never saw anything gross on his hands, I always wondered. Was I touching feces? Or worse? And I never failed to wash my hands when I left his bedside.

The old man looked me in the eye. His eyes were blue like mine. A little watery but bright blue. And intelligent. There could be no doubt someone—Joseph Henry Kurtwood, my father—was staring back at me. He was in there. I knew that.

"How are you, Dad?" I asked.

He didn't say anything. I reminded him that he didn't have to say anything, that I understood he might be too tired to speak and to save his strength. I didn't know—and I'm sure he didn't either—what he would be saving it for, but it was something to say, something to fill the quiet space in the house. The kind of quiet that descends on a house with a dying person inside it.

My mom hovered nearby.

"Don, honey, why don't you tell Dad about your tenure vote?" Mom said, always cheery. "Joe, Don got tenure at the university."

"I thought you wanted me to tell him?" I said.

"Don't be sassy," Mom said. "Tell him about it."

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

I turned back to Dad. Why not, indeed? The truth is—he didn't really care. And I didn't really care. It was no great accomplishment to earn tenure at a mid-sized public institution in the south. Publish a few articles, go to a few conferences, show up for meetings on time, attend the department holiday party and get a little tipsy but not too drunk, and I was a shoo-in. The department approved me unanimously. They didn't care that Rebecca and I had divorced. Hell, Rebecca voted for me.

But it was something to talk about, the adult equivalent of bringing home a high score on a Civics exam or a report card with more Bs than Cs.

"I got tenure, Dad," I said. "I'm an associate professor of English."

He squeezed my hand.

I took this to be his way of congratulating me, so I said, "Thanks."

He squeezed again. Harder. More insistent.

"Okay," I said. "The vote was unanimous—"

This time he didn't squeeze so much as he tugged my hand, jerking me a little forward in my chair. It surprised me. I didn't know the old man had that much strength left.

"What is it, Dad?" I asked.

He didn't squeeze or tug. His face looked strained, and some of the color had drained from it. His shoulders sank down even farther into the mattress, another little bit of him disappearing.

His lips moved. They moved but no sound came out.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Is he thirsty?" Mom asked. "He always thirsty. It's those pills."

“Are you thirsty, Dad?” I asked. But I knew that wasn’t it. His head moved again, almost imperceptibly. Just about a quarter inch of movement. “Do you want …?”

I stood up. His lips moved some more.

“Is he saying something?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know. You keep talking.”

“Don’t sass.”

“Shh.”

I leaned forward, my ear almost pressing against the old man’s lips. I felt his breath against my skin, hot and clammy. Dying. The last few weeks of precious breath he had left.

I stood that way for a long time, thinking the moment had passed and no words would come.

But then he said it. Two words.

I think.

He said, “Good will.”

The end came three weeks later.

Because it took Dad so long to die, there was a lot of time to plan. When I spoke to Mom on the phone that day, she told me that she didn’t need any help.

“It’s all arranged,” she said. “You can come for the funeral.”

Something rustled in the background. Then a ripping noise.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Me?” she said.

She sounded surprised that I would even ask the question. I figured a whole host of people had been asking her that question over the past few years. First, when Dad became sick, and then even more intensely in the wake of his death.

“Yes, Mom. Are you okay? How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” she said. I heard the ripping noise again. “I’m going through your father’s things. I started… well, you know, *before*. I took away a number of boxes. But somehow it didn’t seem right. You know… when he was still… here. But now, there’s a lot to go through.”

My mother might sound business-like. Even cold. I don’t want to give the wrong impression of her. She could be business-like, even in the most stressful situations, but she was also very loving. She read to me constantly when I was a child. She encouraged my scholarly career. She was—*is*—an excellent mother. But her and my dad? How do I put this? They really weren’t in love. They were companions. Roommates. Partners in the strictest sense. They raised a son together. They rowed in the same direction. But it wasn’t a love affair. I’m sure Mom saw Dad’s death as a passage from one phase of her life to another. When she called to tell me Dad had died, she simply said, “It’s over.”

“Are you okay being there alone now?” I asked. “In the house?”

“Am I okay being alone?” she said. “Don, I’ve been alone in this house ever since you moved out. Your father and I were both alone here. It’s no big deal.” The ripping noise again. “And your father has so many books. So many.”

I suddenly figured out what the ripping noise was. Tape. She was taping up boxes of Dad's books. Probably sending them to the library book sale. Mom volunteered there twice a year. It was her pet cause.

I wanted to ask her so much more. I wanted to ask her why she married Dad. I wanted to ask why they stayed married. I wanted to ask about Dad's last words. "Good will."

And I wanted to ask the biggest question of all: Did you know Dad? Did you—or anybody else—really know him?

But Mom moved things along.

"So," she said, the ripping sound of packing tape coming again. "Tuesday then? Don't be late."

In the funeral home, during the viewing, I stayed at the back of the room. The casket remained open, and even though I'd seen my dad just three weeks before his death, wasting away to a stick man, I couldn't bear the thought of being close to his dead body. Even though the funeral home had done a good job on him—according to my mother—and I imagined that he probably looked peaceful or any of the other clichés people threw around on such occasions, I knew Dad wouldn't like it. The whole event felt… embarrassing somehow. The old man up in a box, wearing a coat and tie he never wore when he was alive. He seemed exposed. Vulnerable.

And very, very dead.

The family members—cousins, aunts, uncles—as well as the women and men my mother knew, found me despite my lingering at the back. They shook my hand, pecked me on the cheek, hugged me, and fussed over me. I was an only child and I had lost my father. Mom remained stationed at the front, accepting condolences and occasionally smiling.

*It's over.*

When the man first approached me, I assumed he was another friend of Mom's, someone she knew through church or volunteering at the local school. Except he didn't look like anyone my mother would hang out with. He was short, just over five feet tall. And round, almost as wide as he was tall. His brown suit coat was frayed around the edges of the collar and the sleeves, and his once-white dress shirt looked dingy gray.

"You must be the son," he said. He shook my hand. "I'm sorry about your father."

His voice carried the trace of an accent, something from the East Coast.

"I am," I said. I did the same thing with him that I did with everyone else that night—I pretended I knew who he was. "It's good to see you."

The man smiled. "You're trying to place me," he said.

"No, I… well, to be honest, there are a lot of relatives here—"

"I'm no relation," he said. "And I'm really not a friend."

"Not a friend?"

He held his smile. "Not a friend of yours, yet," he said. "But hopefully soon." The man looked over both shoulders, as though he thought someone was eavesdropping. The viewing room was emptying out. Only a few stragglers remained talking to Mom up at the front. And, of course, Dad. He was still in his place.

The man reached inside his jacket and brought out a slightly wrinkled business card. He held it out to me, but I didn't take it.

"Are you a lawyer or something?" I asked. "Mom has everything taken care of—"

"Read the card." He moved his hand forward a few inches, almost forcing the card into my hands.

I took it and read. Lou Caledonia, Rare Book Dealer.

I recognized the address under the name. I knew the place. A small, cramped storefront downtown. I'd been there once, many years earlier, just looking around. But I remembered the place. It seemed to specialize in genre fiction—pulp novels, mysteries, men's adventure magazines. Not the sort of reading that appealed to me, so I never went back.

"Did you know my dad?" I asked.

"I wanted to," Lou Caledonia said. "But he didn't want to know me."

Then it slowly dawned on me. "Are you here trolling for business? Because if you are, that's pretty tasteless. This is my father's viewing. You could call next week about his books."

Lou Caledonia looked hurt. The corners of his mouth sagged and he blinked his eyes a few times.

"Please," he said. "No. I'm not that kind of man. And if I've given any offense to you or your family, I deeply apologize and will go."

He held out his hands in front of him and started backing away.

But there was something about him. Maybe it was how quickly he apologized. Maybe it was his droopy dog looks. Or maybe, just maybe, it was because I wanted to understand this man's interest in my father.

"Okay," I said. "No offense taken."

He stopped backpedaling. His smile returned.

"You're a gentleman," he said. "I can tell." He moved closer again. "You're right that I shouldn't conduct business at such a solemn occasion, but you have to understand how important this is to me. And I tried speaking to your father before… well, before, and I was always rebuffed."

"Why?"

"Do me a favor," he said. He pointed to the card. "Tend to your family. Tend to your mother. But when all of this awful business is done, if you can just spare a little time, come to my shop. Come by and we'll talk. Please?"

I looked at the card again. The shop was on my way out of town.

"Okay," I said. "The burial is tomorrow, and I'm leaving the day after that. I'll swing by during the day."

Lou was already shaking his head. As he shook, the loose skin around his jawline shook as well. His eyes were closed. He looked solemn as a monk.

"Tonight," he said. "Come by tonight."

"Tonight? I can't. I have my mother. And family coming over. It's already eight o'clock."

"I'll be in the shop all night," he said. He started walking away. "Just come by. Please."

"But what's this about?"

He shuffled out of the room, the worn and faded back of his corduroy pants was the last thing I saw.

“Did you see the man I was talking to?” I asked. “At the funeral home.”

Mom and I ate in the kitchen. It was just after nine o’clock, and we were both hungry when we got back to my parents’ house. Someone had dropped off a pan of lasagna, and Mom heated it in the oven. We both ate a lot, and only after I had the first serving down and started on the second did I ask my question.

“What man?” she asked. “There were a ton of people there. More than I would have expected, even.”

“He came at the end,” I said. “His name is Lou Caledonia.”

“Lou Caledonia?” Mom said. She almost made the name sound like part of a song. She shook her head. “Never heard of him. And, believe me, I’d remember a name like that. How did he know your father?”

“I don’t know that he did.”

“What?”

“He owns a bookstore. Used books. It’s downtown.”

Mom stopped chewing and patted her lips with a cloth napkin. “That explains it. Books. Your father and his books. Do you know how many boxes I hauled out of here while your father was sick? I finally stopped because he saw me doing it and had a fit.”

“How could he have a fit? He was bedridden.”

“He knew what I was doing. He knocked his water glass off the table, then he said, ‘Stop.’ One word. I knew what he meant. The books. Leave them alone. And there are just as many still to go. That’s one way the two of you were just alike. Obsessed with books.”

“Don’t compare us that way,” I said.

“What way?” she asked. “Is it not true that you and your father both have an insane obsession with books? He filled this house with them, and I’ve seen your house down in Kentucky. You’re on the way to equaling him.”

“I’m an English professor,” I said. “That’s my life. Dad read a lot of schlocky fiction. I’m …”

I wanted to say I was a scholar, but was I? Just because I had the Ph.D. and wrote about books didn’t mean I was a scholar. In fact, was I really contributing anything to the intellectual or cultural life of the world?

“You’re what?” Mom asked.

“Nothing.”

Mom pushed her plate aside. She reached out and placed her hand on my forearm. Her skin felt soft, but I could see the age spots on the back of her hand. She still wore her wedding ring.

“What’s going on down there?” she asked. “In Kentucky?”

“Work goes on down there.”

“Is there a special someone in your life?” she asked. “Since Rebecca?”

“No,” I said.

“You know, I called there once, your apartment, on a Saturday morning. Some girl answered.”

“Mom. Please.”

“She sounded very young. She said you were in the shower or something.”

“Mom. Enough.”

“I worry. You’re my only child. I don’t want to think of you being alone. You’re forty now. If you want to have children… I just worry about you living in that house full of books. Would any woman want to come into that? And how are you going to leave something behind if you’re not married? Your father and I, we had you. You’re our legacy.”

“I have work, Mom. I have my work.”

She nodded. “I know. The articles. The presentations.”

“And teaching,” I said. “The lives I’ve touched.”

Mom smiled. I recognized the sly look on her face. She had something to zing me with, and she said, “I bet you were touching that girl’s life, the one who answered your phone on a Saturday morning.”

“Jesus. You’re my mother.”

She laughed. And I couldn’t help but laugh a little too.

“I’m going out in a little bit,” I said.

Mom turned and looked at the clock. “Are you meeting some old friends?”

“I’m going to that bookstore. To see Lou Caledonia.”

“Why on earth for?” She stood up and started clearing dishes.

“He wants to see me,” I said. “I think he knows something about Dad.”

“Honey, the only thing to know about your dad is that he liked to sit in his chair and read more than he liked to work. And that’s pretty much that. It’s after nine, and you have to get up early tomorrow. We both do. Besides, maybe this guy is a crazy person? What if he’s a serial killer or something?”

“A serial killer?” I said. “He looks more like a hobbit.”

“A what?”

“Never mind.” I brought my plate to the sink. “How much trouble could a used book dealer cause?”

It was nearly nine forty-five when I pulled up in front of Lou Caledonia’s bookstore. The streets downtown were quiet and empty. No cars went past, and the streetlights all blinked monotonously yellow. The storefront looked dark. I checked his card. It gave no name for the store. Above the glass display windows the word BOOKS was spelled out in chipped gold letters. The sign looked like it came from another time.

I climbed out of the car and went to the door. I looked for a bell or an intercom, but there was nothing. I pressed my face against the glass. In the shadowy light I saw rickety wooden shelves filled with endless rows of paperback books. More books sat on the floors of the aisles, and even more were stacked at the end of aisles. Cardboard boxes on the floor overflowed with additional books. Even though I didn’t think the titles interested me, I had to admit to feeling a thrill of excitement at the sight of all those books. The shop seemed crammed full of the essence of reading—the simple book. How long had it been since I’d simply taken one off the shelf and read it and enjoyed it? How long since I’d read a book without the red pen of the critic in my hand, the theorist’s coldly detached eye formulating a jargony thesis as I read the words?

I didn’t know what to do, so I knocked. And waited. The wind picked up a little. It was a cool fall night, the sky clear and inky black. I looked around and still didn’t see anyone on the streets. No one came downtown anymore. I figured they were all home streaming movies or TV or texting. When I was a kid, we came

downtown for movies, for plays, for restaurants. Most of those establishments were gone.

I knocked again. Then I tried the door. It opened.

I looked around again. I don't know what I expected. The police coming to arrest me for breaking into an unlocked and nearly forgotten bookstore on an empty street? I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"Mr. Caledonia?" I said. "Lou?"

I considered backing up and leaving. He told me to come by anytime, but maybe it was simply too late. If I wanted, I could try again when I left town, as I had originally proposed. Or maybe I wouldn't bother at all. What could this man know about my father that I didn't know? That's when it struck me: I didn't know anything about my father.

I took a step toward the door when I heard something rustle near the back of the room. I froze in place.

"Mr. Caledonia?"

I heard the noise again. This time it was followed by a sound I definitely recognized—a stack of books falling over. Someone was in the room.

I walked down the center aisle of the store, picking my way carefully. I stepped over the many books on the floor. The musty scent, the decaying paper of the pages and the heavier stock of the covers filled my nostrils. I loved it. It comforted me. I wished my own apartment smelled that way.

"Lou? It's me. Don Kurtwood. Remember? From the funeral?"

I reached the end of the aisle. There was a door ahead of me. I assumed it led to Mr. Caledonia's office. The door sat open a few inches, and weak light from a desk lamp leaked out in a narrow sliver.

"Lou?"

I took a slow, deliberate step toward that door, my foot stretching out before me, when I figured out the source of the rustling noise I heard earlier. The fat, gray cat leaped across my path, his body brushing against my pant leg. I pulled back my foot, losing my balance. I knocked over a stack of books behind me and grabbed hold of the shelf for balance.

"Jesus," I said.

I held on longer than I needed to. I held on until my heart stopped thudding in my chest. I finally looked down. The cat stared at me, its eyes glowing yellow in the gloomy store. The cat looked edgy and agitated. Its fur stood up along the ridge of its back.

"You scared the hell out of me, cat," I said.

The cat meowed once, and then slipped through the narrow opening into the office. Was I crazy to think he wanted me to follow him?

Maybe the whole thing was crazy, but I did. I took those two slow steps to the office door and pushed it open. The light from the desk lamp illuminated the portion of the floor where Lou Caledonia lay.

He was dead. The thin trickle of blood from the gunshot wound in his temple telling me all I needed to know about that. He was most definitely dead.

I called the police from my cell phone and told them what I had found. The dispatcher sounded cool and calm. She asked me if I was safe, and I told her I

thought I was. But I wasn't certain. I was still in Lou's little office, standing over his dead body. How could I feel safe?

The dispatcher also asked me if I had touched anything or moved the body. I told her I hadn't.

"That's good," she said. "Why don't you leave the premises and wait for the police outside? You shouldn't disturb the scene."

Her words made sense to me. Even though I didn't watch a lot of popular TV shows, I'd seen enough at least to know not to disturb any of the evidence. I didn't need a dispatcher to tell me that.

"The officers should be there soon," she said. "Would you like me to stay on the line with you until they arrive?"

"No," I said. "That's not necessary."

I hung up and started out of the office. I really did intend to leave. Why would I want to stand around in a cramped office with the dead body of a man I barely knew? A man who had been murdered in the last few hours?

But then another thought crossed my mind: How would I ever know what Lou Caledonia wanted from me? How would I ever know what he had to do with my father—and why he showed up at Dad's funeral?

The nearest police station was located about ten blocks away. They'd probably dispatch a detective from there, which gave me about ten minutes. And that was assuming there wasn't a patrol car in the immediate vicinity of the store. An officer could show up in a matter of seconds.

But I just wanted to take a quick glance. I moved forward, my feet getting as close as possible to Lou's body without touching it. I had to get that close in order to see what sat on the top of his desk. I could see no discernible order to the papers, pens, and books scattered there. Most of the papers were handwritten bills of sale, either for books he had sold or books he had purchased. There were a couple of flyers advertising antique sales, and in the upper right corner of the desk a thick, well-worn paperback book called *The Guide To Rare Book Collecting, 1979 edition.*

I looked around the room. The shelves above and to the side of the desk were crammed with more books and papers—again a haphazard jumble. On the floor, framing Lou's body, were more cartons of books and accordion files overflowing with papers.

I heard something from the front of the store.

"Hello? This is the police. Is anyone in here?"

"Shit," I said.

The cat jumped onto the desk and stared at me. It eyeballed me, its tail swishing back and forth across the papers on the desk. I took one more look. The cat's paw rested on a clipping torn from the local newspaper. I saw one word in bold type across the top: Kurtwood. I picked it up. Dad's obituary. Across the top someone, presumably Lou Caledonia, had written: "Stranger. Could it be?"

I stuffed the clipping into the pocket of my pants just before a young, uniformed police officer appeared behind me and said, "Sir? I'm going to have to ask you to step outside."

I thought it would take longer to deal with the police and a murder investigation. I stood in the cold with the uniformed officers for about five minutes.

They took basic information from me and looked at my driver's license while I shivered, and then a detective showed up. He was a middle-aged man who wore a shirt and tie but no jacket of any kind. His hair was thick and gray, and when the wind blew it flopped around on his head. He never reached up to straighten it. His handshake felt like a vice.

"I'm Phil Hyland," he said. "Why don't you tell me what happened here?"

So I did. He didn't take notes. He listened to everything I said, a look of concentration on his face. I told him about Lou Caledonia showing up at my dad's funeral and then insisting I come down to the bookstore to talk to him as soon as possible.

"The door was open, and I found him dead back there," I said.

"You say your father just died?"

"A few days ago."

"What were the circumstances of his death?" Hyland asked.

"Natural causes," I said. "He had a neurological disorder."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hyland said. "So you'd never met this Caledonia fellow before?"

"Never."

"And what did he want with your father?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I assume was something to do with books. My father owned a lot of books. But Mr. Caledonia acted offended when I suggested that's why he was at the funeral home." I tried to remember his exact words. "He told me that he had tried to talk to my father before but had always been rebuffed. That's the word he used. 'Rebuffed.' I guess I came here to see what he knew about my dad. If anything."

"Dads can be a tricky business," Hyland said. "I never knew mine that well."

"Exactly," I said. "Do any of us really know our fathers?"

I thought I was on the brink of a connection with Hyland, but just as quickly, the moment seemed to pass.

He asked, "Did the officers take your information?"

"Yes."

"We'll be in touch if we need anything more," he said. "We're probably looking at a robbery here. The neighborhood isn't what it used to be."

He started toward the door of Lou Caledonia's shop but, before he went in, he turned back to me.

"Are you sure there isn't anything else, Mr. Kurtwood?" he asked. "Anything else you saw in there?"

I could feel the clipping in my pants' pocket. It itched and scraped against my thigh. I knew I should give it back. But… I didn't want to give up that scrap. I knew it made no sense, but I guess I saw it as an artifact from my dad.

"Nothing," I said.

Hyland went inside, and I went back to my parents' house.

The morning paper carried no news of Lou Caledonia's death. Either it happened too late to make the cut, or it was deemed too insignificant to mention. As we dressed in the morning, Mom didn't even ask me about my trip to the bookstore the night before. Either she was too distracted by the funeral service, or

it had slipped her mind. And I wasn't going to bring it up. She had enough to worry about and I didn't want to add to her stress.

We both maintained our composure during the service. Neither of us was big on emotional displays, and the Catholic Church provided enough rigidity and structure in the service that there was little room for genuine feeling. I sat in the front pew of the church next to Mom and recited the responses and hymns by memory, even though I hadn't been inside a church in about fifteen years.

When my mind wandered, it wasn't to bad memories. I thought of my childhood and the things my dad and I did together. He took me to the library a lot. He let me wander wherever I liked and was willing to let me read whatever books I happened to find. I first read *On the Road* that way, as well as *Lord of the Flies* and *The Great Gatsby.* Dad always found something from the bestseller list, but he never commented on what I read. Except once. When I was about fourteen, I picked up a copy of *Crime and Punishment*, and he said, offhandedly, "Yeah. I read that a long time ago."

"You read this?" I asked. "For school?"

"Not for school. Because I wanted to." He looked at me over the top of his glasses. "Do you think you have the market cornered on reading the great books?"

I hadn't thought of that in a long time. But sitting there in the church, I remembered that the old man could surprise me, that I shouldn't assume I understood him—or anyone else—easily. He was a stranger to me in many ways, and perhaps to my mother, too. But what did that have to do with a murdered bookstore owner? I wondered if I'd ever know.

A small group travelled to the graveside service. The day started to turn cool, gray clouds building in from the west along with a stiff breeze. The priest didn't waste any time getting through his prayers and rituals. I started to think about the food spread waiting for us back in the church basement. Hot chicken salad, coffee, peach cobbler. Except for a pasty communion wafer, I hadn't eaten all day. When the service concluded and we turned toward our cars, I saw a woman standing at a distance. She wore oversized sunglasses despite the day's gloom, and a barn coat and work boots. I couldn't tell how old she was, but she seemed to move with an easy grace as she turned and climbed into the cab of a pickup truck and drove off before we reached our cars.

"Do you know who that was?" I asked Mom.

But she didn't even answer. She was talking to one of my aunts, and then the pickup was gone.

"Did you say something something, honey?" Mom asked.

"I saw someone and I was wondering if you knew who they were."

"I'm so tired," she said. "I don't even know who I am anymore. Family and friends are a great support, but they wear me out."

I hadn't slept much the night before, so I said, "I understand."

"But if you're up for it later, I'd like your help with some of Dad's things. He has old boxes in the attic I can't carry down. You don't have to sort through them, but just bring them down so I can."

"There's no hurry, Mom," I said.

“I know,” she said. “But it’s therapeutic. I did the same thing when my mother died, Grandma Nancy. I went through all of her clothes and pictures. It helped me cope.”

“Mom?” I asked. “You know I went to that bookstore last night.”

“That’s right. I must have been sound asleep; I didn’t hear you come in. What happened with that man? What did he want?”

“Well, it’s a long story. But he had a copy of Dad’s obituary on his desk.” I paused. “I took it.”

“Why?”

“It seemed like a keepsake of some kind,” I said. “I guess it seems silly. But the bookstore owner wrote the word *stranger* on it. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Does that mean anything to me?” she asked. “That sums your father up perfectly. Do you know we dated for two years before I even knew his middle name? Two years. At first I thought he didn’t have one because he always used the initial H. Then one day I saw his birth certificate. I saw that his middle name was Henry. Now why hadn’t he ever told me that?”

“Did you ask?”

“I shouldn’t have to ask,” she said, sniffing. “Husbands are supposed to tell their wives these things. But not your father. Maybe he wanted to maintain some mystery in our marriage.”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s face it,” she said. “I loved the man dearly. Dearly. But I didn’t know him. And now I never will.”

I hauled six cardboard boxes down from the attic that afternoon. They were heavy as iron bars, and when I was finished carrying them, I slumped into a living room chair, my back screaming. Dad’s prophecy about me had come true—I was too bookish and didn’t spend enough time playing sports. I decided forty was too old to change and asked Mom where she kept the ibuprofen.

That evening, we ate food that a neighbor had dropped off. Chicken casserole followed by a peanut butter pie. I hated the fact that we all died, that people I loved—like my father—could be taken away so cruelly. But the food was amazing. Comfort food in the truest sense of the term.

Mom seemed distracted while we ate. I finally asked her what was on her mind.

“Are you just feeling sad about Dad?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” she said. “I’m just thinking about the fact that you’re going to leave and go back to your life. And I want you to do that. But the house is going to feel awfully lonely.”

“I understand,” I said. “But you have a lot of friends. You’ve always been good at keeping busy.”

“Sure.” She forced a smile. “Maybe I need to sell the house.”

“You can think about that at some point.” I gestured toward the living room. “What do you figure he has in all those boxes?”

“Knowing your dad, more books. Hell, who knows? They could be the collected love letters of some ex-girlfriend.”

“Dad?”

Mom waved her hand in the air, dismissing me. “Maybe I’ll self-publish them and create the next *Fifty Shades of Gray*. Except it would really be gray because of how old we are.”

Like most children, I didn’t like to think of my parents’ sex lives. And I certainly didn’t think of them as sexual creatures who had relationships before they met and married each other. But, of course, they probably did. I knew Mom and Dad married when they were in their late twenties, and Mom had me within a year of their marriage. They met through mutual friends. Mom worked as a secretary in a law office, and Dad was a casual acquaintance of the lawyer. They sometimes golfed together. So they both must have dated others during high school and college and those first few years out in the real world.

My mind flashed to the woman at the cemetery. Had she really been there to see Dad’s funeral? People spent time in cemeteries for any number of reasons. Why would I assume she was there because of Dad?

“Let’s open up one of the boxes and take a look,” I said.

“Be my guest. It’s all yours anyway. You’re the heir to this great fortune.”

Mom cleared the plates while I went out to the living room. I took out my key to slit the tape on the box, but before I could do anything, the doorbell rang.

“If that’s Mrs. Himmel from up the street, tell her I’m lying down,” Mom said.

I went to the front window and slid the curtain aside.

“It’s not Mrs. Himmel,” I said.

“Who is it?”

I opened the door to Detective Hyland.

“Who is it, honey?” Mom said, coming into the room. “Oh, hello.”

“Mom, this is Detective Hyland from the police department. It’s kind of a long story.”

Mom listened while I explained the events of the previous night and the death of Lou Caledonia. Mom’s face remained composed, and she didn’t display much shock or dismay. She reserved her comments for the end of my story when she looked at me as only my mother could and said, “Why on earth didn’t you tell me this last night?”

“I didn’t want to wake you up or worry you,” I said.

“Sit down, Detective,” Mom said. “How can we help you with this?”

Hyland came into the room. He eyed the boxes in the middle of the floor but deftly stepped around them without comment. He wore a different shirt and tie than the night before and still no jacket. His hair looked less windblown as he sat on the couch and crossed his legs, ankle on knee.

“I’m sorry to intrude on you at such a difficult time,” he said. He really didn’t seem that bothered by his interruption and showed no sign that he might get up and leave. He looked settled in on the couch.

Mom and I took the hint, and we each sat in matching chairs that were arranged on either side of a small table. The boxes filled the floor space between all of us.

“Last night you told me that you didn’t know Mr. Caledonia,” Hyland said.

“That’s right.”

“And you don’t know the nature of their friendship?”

“That’s what I was going to the store to find out,” I said. “Lou said they weren’t really friends. He said something like he wanted to know Dad, but Dad didn’t want to know him.”

“Your father always was a bit of a loner,” Mom said.

“Mr. Caledonia wrote a number of letters to your father. At least ten. They were in his office at the bookstore. All of them were returned unopened.”

“My husband was bedridden for the last six months,” Mom said. “He wouldn’t have been able to open an envelope.”

“But you would have seen the letters,” Hyland said. “Or opened them?”

“I don’t remember any letters like that.”

Hyland’s eyes narrowed. I thought he was going to press Mom further, but he didn’t.

“These letters were all written over the past five years,” Hyland said. “They stopped about a year ago. I’m not sure why. Maybe Caledonia got tired of being rejected.”

“What were the letters about?” I asked. “What could this man possibly want with Dad that he would keep writing him for so long—without a single response?”

Hyland took his time answering. He seemed to be considering me. The clipping from Lou Caledonia’s desk, the one with Dad’s name and the word Stranger written on it, sat on my nightstand upstairs. My heart started to beat irrationally. If the detective decided to snoop around the house, he would find it. And he’d know I lied to him at the scene of the crime when I said there was nothing else to know.

Hell, maybe he already knew about it and was just toying with me and making me sweat.

Finally, he said, “Apparently, your father had a book Mr. Caledonia wanted.”

“Which book?” I asked. “Hell, if he’d told me the title I would have brought it to him last night.”

“If he’d have told me the title,” Mom said, “I’d have given him *all* the books.”

Hyland was shaking his head. “I don’t think you understand,” he said. “Caledonia didn’t want one of the books your father *owned*. He wanted a copy of the book your father *wrote*.”

Mom laughed. I would have laughed, but the idea of my father writing a book was so bizarre that I couldn’t say anything.

“No,” Mom said. “That’s not true.” She laughed again. “My husband never wrote a book. He couldn’t write a grocery list. He once went away fishing for the weekend, and he didn’t even bother to write me a note. He didn’t write anything.”

“My dad read a lot. But he was a salesman. He didn’t write any books.”

Hyland shifted around on the couch. He reached into his back pants pocket and brought out a small notebook. He flipped through it to the page he wanted.

“Well,” Hyland said, “you may not think your father wrote a book, but Lou Caledonia most certainly did.”

“He did?” I asked. “Is that why he came to the viewing?”

“That’s a good guess,” Hyland said.

“Well, what book?” I asked. “Are we talking about a novel? Or what?”

“There’s no book, Donnie,” Mom said.

Hyland ignored her. “We’re talking about a novel,” he said. “According to the information in the letters and files in Mr. Caledonia’s office, he thinks your father wrote the novel, *Rides a Stranger*, under the pseudonym Herbert Henry.”

“Henry,” I said. “That’s Dad’s middle name.”

Hyland said, “Believe me, Lou Caledonia was aware of that.” He looked at the notebook. Apparently, he thought your father wrote this novel, which was published in 1972 by Woodworth Books as part of their Monarch Series.” Hyland looked over at us. “The Monarch Series was dedicated to novels about the American west. They published twenty books in the series, and *Rides a Stranger* is number nineteen.”

Rides a Stranger? The obituary I took from Caledonia’s desk. *Stranger*.

Hyland looked at his notebook again. “But even though the books were meant to be mass produced and widely distributed to be sold in grocery stores, drug stores, airports etc., something went wrong with number nineteen. There was a printer’s strike at the plant that manufactured the book. The first batch was printed by replacement workers.” Hyland looked over again. “Scabs for lack of a better word.”

“I see,” I said.

“They printing went horribly wrong. Blurred cover. Pages cut wrong. A disaster. So they had to pulp that whole batch. Throw them out. They were worthless. The strike ended a few weeks after that, and the regular workers came back. They did a test run of about one hundred books in order to make sure the problems from the last batch—the scab batch—were corrected. And the problems were fixed. But by that point book number nineteen was so far off-schedule that they went ahead and decided to print number twenty and then go back and do number nineteen later. And guess what?”

“What?” Mom asked.

“They never did,” Hyland said. “They printed number twenty, and then Woodworth Books folded their tents and went out of business. Number nineteen was never given a full print run.”

“How many were printed?” I asked.

“Lou Caledonia guesses they printed about fifty. Fifty cheap paperback books were printed about forty years ago. Understandably, not very many of those fifty are still around. Some went to libraries and got worn out. Some were sold in a few places. But mostly they’re gone. The book itself, your dad’s book, isn’t that valuable in and of itself. You see, it’s the set of all twenty Monarchs that would be the real prize. Lots of people have managed to collect the nineteen mass produced titles, but to find a set with all twenty … well, that’s a rare thing. And one of those sets is worth thousands of dollars on the collector’s market.”

“He didn’t write the book,” Mom said.

“Why is this set worth so much?” I asked. “I mean, who cares about twenty old western paperbacks? Aren’t they a dime a dozen?”

Hyland flipped his notebook shut. “You would think that, wouldn’t you? Except there’s one catch with this Monarch Series. Number eight in the series is a book called *The Midnight Guns.* It was written by someone named T.J. Tucker.”

Hyland looked at both of us as though the name should mean something to us. It didn’t.

“What’s so special about a guy named T.J. Tucker?” I asked.

“T.J. Tucker isn’t a guy,” Hyland said. “T.J. Tucker is a woman who wrote under a pseudonym. I guess they figured men were more likely to buy a western, and they wouldn’t buy a western if it was written by a woman. That was her first book, and she never published another western. Her real name is Tonya Jane Hood. You know who that is, right?”

“It sounds familiar,” I said.

“Are you shitting me?” Mom said.

“I’m not,” Hyland said.

I looked at Mom. “Who is this?”

“Tonya Jane Hood,” Mom said. “She writes the *Glitter Blood* series. You know, the books, the movies, the TV show. *Glitter Blood.* I read all of them.”

“That’s right,” Hyland said. “The Hood novel is very desirable, but they printed close to one hundred thousand copies of that one. And when you combine the desirability of Hood with the rarity of Henry you get a valuable series. Very valuable. Maybe even worth killing over.”

“This is ridiculous,” Mom said. “My husband died. We buried him today. I don’t want to hear this crazy stuff about these books. It doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

I held out my hand, hoping to calm down Mom a little bit. But I didn’t disagree with her.

“Detective,” I said. “Lou Caledonia seemed like an odd guy. So he thought my dad wrote a book, a rare book. What’s his evidence for this? The whole thing seems kind of far-fetched.”

“You may be right,” Hyland said. “Maybe Caledonia’s death was just a robbery gone wrong. Maybe he was dreaming when he thought your father wrote this book. But there is the middle name. There’s the fact that, according to the biography in the book *Rides a Stranger*, the author of the book lives in Cincinnati, Ohio.”

I said, “Lots of people named Henry live in Cincinnati, Ohio. It’s a big city.”

“True,” Hyland said. “Very true.”

A silence settled between us. No one said anything. Hyland looked lost in thought for a moment, as though contemplating whether or not he wanted to say anything else. Finally, he just stood up. “Perhaps I’m just fishing.”

Mom and I stood up as well, and Hyland nodded to us. He shook my hand.

“Do accept my sympathies,” he said. “If you think of anything else that’s relevant, just give me a call.”

He let himself out.

When Hyland was gone, Mom started puttering around in the kitchen. She scrubbed the countertops and rattled dishes into the dishwasher. I stood in the doorway and watched for a few moments. I knew she knew I was there, but she didn’t look up from her work.

“Mom?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“What do you think of all that?” I asked.

I didn’t think she was going to answer me. She kept cleaning. But then she stopped what she was doing and said, “I don’t put much stock in it.”

“Did you ever know Dad wanted to write something?” I asked.

“Your father wanted to do a lot of things,” she said. “He had a lot of dreams. He wanted to run his own business, and he wanted to retire to Florida, and he wanted us to take a trip to Europe. He did none of it. Your father was a dreamer but not a doer. There’s a big difference there.”

“That sounds depressing.”

“Be glad you didn’t get those qualities from him,” she said. “You got an advanced degree. You have a good career.”

“Dad had a career,” I said.

“Dad had a job. That’s it. He hated it, and it made him miserable.”

“So maybe he really wanted to be a writer. Maybe he tried it…”

I stopped in mid-sentence as something occurred to me.

Mom didn’t notice. She dried her hands on a red towel and turned off the light over the sink. When she turned around, she said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“What year did Hyland say that book was published?” I asked. “The one Lou Caledonia thinks Dad wrote? Do you remember?”

Mom’s forehead creased, but I knew she remembered.

“What’s the year?” I asked.

“1972,” she said.

“1972. That’s the year I was born,” I said. “He quit writing because I was born.”

After Mom went to sleep, I tore into the boxes. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, but I hoped to find something related to all the things I had been talking about with Detective Hyland and Lou Caledonia. What did the used book dealer really want with Dad? Had the old man written a book—a novel—and a rare one at that? Could the book be so rare and valuable that someone would kill for it?

But then I had to ask myself something else: Did I really care about the book stuff at all? What was I really trying to understand? It was pretty simple, really. If I could get my hands on a copy of that book, then I assumed I would understand something about my dad. Up until that point, I really didn’t understand anything about him. How did he marry my mom? What made him choose the life he chose?

And his death and the death/murder of Lou Caledonia only raised more questions. Did he really write a novel? And if he did, why did he stop? Was it just because he had a wife and a child and had to make a better, more stable living than writing could provide?

The boxes provided no answers in terms of the books. I hoped to find manuscripts and rejection letters, book contracts or correspondence with editors and agents. But there was nothing like that in the boxes. In fact, looking at the contents of those boxes, one would think my father didn’t have any literary aspirations at all. I found nothing about books or writing. Nothing like that.

So what did I find? Pictures. Lots and lots of pictures. And all of these pictures were taken before I was born. Before Dad met and married Mom, I guessed. They revealed that Dad did, indeed, have a life before he was married. My father had few friends when I was growing up—and maintained little in the way of friendships even after I was an adult and he was retired from work. My mother had friends. My father had his books and sports on the television.

But the pictures in the boxes told a different story. In the pictures Dad lived in a swirl of friends, men and women. He went to parties, to bars, to nightclubs. He spent time at the beach and in the big city. He drank from beer cans and

champagne bottles. He wore suits and swim trunks. He had a life, one that I never imagined. He apparently had more of a life than I ever had.

One woman showed up in more of the pictures than anyone else. She was pretty, very pretty. Slender. Her hair was blonde, her smile bright. And she stood by my father's side a lot, her head resting on his shoulder, her lips parted to laugh. Dad smiled in all of these pictures, too. He looked happy. And young.

I turned one of the photos over and found a name. "Mary Ann." On another, the same woman appeared with the nickname "Peanuts" written on the back. Mary Ann? Peanuts? My father appeared to have had a serious girlfriend before he met Mom, one he appeared to love—or at least felt an immense amount of affection for.

Who knew the old man had done so much better than me?

I must have dozed off in the chair. When the phone rang, I opened my eyes and saw my father's photographs spread out on my lap like a blanket. As I moved, the photos shifted and slid, some of them falling to the floor and others dropping into the cracks between the cushion and the bulk of the chair itself.

I checked the time on the ringing phone. 11:35. I didn't recognize the number, but it was local. I answered.

"Mr. Kurtwood?"

"Yes."

"This is Detective Hyland again. Sorry to bother you."

"It's okay. I was just…"

"I was hoping we could speak tomorrow, before you leave town. There are some other aspects to your father's case I was hoping to go over with you, and I'm not sure your mother would want to hear them. At least not yet."

"Is this about the book?" I asked.

"Among other things."

"I can be there at nine."

"Excellent," Hyland said. "See you then."

Before I went to sleep, I put back all the photos in their boxes and closed the lids. When I came downstairs in the morning, Mom was sitting at the kitchen table working a crossword puzzle, and the coffeemaker puffed along on the counter. She looked up expectantly and said, "So, are you all packed?"

"I was thinking I might not head back today."

"Oh."

"I only have one class tomorrow, and I don't really need to be there for it. Maybe I'll stay another day and enjoy the old homestead."

"I won't argue with you there," Mom said. "Ordinarily I have to beg you to visit. If you want to stay another day, be my guest. Did you go through any of those boxes?"

"I… well, I just glanced in the tops of them," I said.

"And?" She looked at me over the top of her glasses. "Any deep dark secrets contained within? Was you father a spy as well as an author? Did he cure cancer or fly to the moon?"

I hesitated. I didn't know what I was supposed to tell her. I wanted to share the truth—Dad had a girlfriend!—but she might already know that. And, if she didn't, what good did it do to dredge up anything from the past, especially just a few days after Dad's death? I wasn't even certain the thing I was thinking about was worth

exploring—the book allegedly written by my father. Maybe I really just needed to go back home and get on with my life, such as it was. But Detective Hyland didn't want to let me.

"It looked like a lot of old stuff to me," I said. "Nothing too special."

"I figured as much."

"But don't throw any of it away," I said.

She perked up again. "Why? If it's junk, I can toss it."

"No," I said. "Maybe I'm just being sentimental, but I can take it all with me."

"Suit yourself," she said, returning to her puzzle.

"And," I said. "Those books you said you got rid of?"

"What books?"

"The books you took away before Dad died?"

"What about them?"

Her voice was as flat and gray as pavement.

"Where did you take those?" I asked. "The library book sale?"

"Goodwill," she said. "Nobody but Goodwill would resell them."

I nodded.

*Goodwill.*

I waited a long time at the police station. I assumed Detective Hyland would be eager to see me, especially since he had invited me. While I waited, I searched the Internet using my phone. I tried to find a copy of *Rides a Stranger* by Herbert Henry. A few were for sale, but none were listed for less than one thousand dollars. One thousand dollars for a pulpy western paperback published forty years earlier. On several message boards devoted to book collecting, buyers had placed the book on their most desired list, with one calling it "the white whale of vintage paperback collecting."

I wondered what Dad would have made of all of it—if he had written the book. And I wondered about those books Mom had hauled off to Goodwill. Were there copies of *Rides a Stranger* in there somewhere? Is that why Dad insisted she stop? Is that why he whispered that one word into my ear just a few weeks before he died?

*Good will.* Was he wishing something for me? Or Mom? Or did he mean *Goodwill*?

After keeping me waiting for an hour, Detective Hyland finally appeared. He looked to be wearing the same clothes as the night before, the tie loosened and a little askew.

"Mr. Kurtwood," he said. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. Something came up, something related to Lou Caledonia's case. It's had me tied up all night and most of the morning."

"I understand," I said, standing up. "Do you need me to come back another time?"

"No, no," he said. "In fact, why don't you come back? You may be interested to hear some of this."

As we walked to the cubicle where he worked, I asked if the development in the Caledonia case had something to do with what he wanted to tell me that morning.

"As a matter of fact, it does," he said. We settled into chairs at his neat and orderly desk. There were no papers cluttering the surface. Just a computer, an

autographed baseball encased in glass, and a cellphone that vibrated every few minutes.

"Like I said, I didn't want to discuss this in front of your mother because I was afraid it might be a little awkward."

"Probably no more awkward than surprising her with the news that her husband was secretly an author."

"I'm not so sure," Hyland said. "You see, I contacted a book dealer online, someone who had a copy of your father's book… well, *Rides a Stranger*, for sale. I was looking for any information that might help us with the case."

"Of course."

"It turns out the book in question has a dedication."

I sat straighter in my chair. "Really?"

"Indeed. The book is dedicated to M.A. That's all it says. *For M.A. with love*. Do you know what that might mean?"

"My mother's name is Elaine. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was named Nancy. My dad didn't have any sisters."

"It sounds like a woman, right? *With love*. Men don't say with love to other men, even our fathers. Do we?"

I had to agree. I only told my father I loved him when he was dying. He rarely said it to me after my childhood. That didn't bother me. It really didn't. That was just how men are.

"Well, it seems like we caught a little bit of a break. We went through Mr. Caledonia's possessions in his office. His calendar, address book, computer. It wasn't an easy job. I suppose he's like most collectors of arcana—a little bit disorganized, a little bit of a pack-rat. But it turns out he's been carrying on quite a correspondence with a woman named Mary Ann Compton. Does that name ring a bell?"

"It doesn't."

"But you can see the initials, right?" Hyland asked, obviously pleased with himself.

"It seems pretty clear. M.A. Mary Ann."

"But you're not familiar with her?" Hyland asked.

"Not that I know of. Does she have something to do with my father? Or this book?"

"This is the part I didn't want to bring up in front of your mother," he said. "You see, these events having to do with Lou Caledonia, they don't really have any bearing on you. Not directly. Your father died of natural causes, of course. Mr. Caledonia's murder was only tangentially related to your father's life. If your father even wrote that book at all."

"If."

"But I think it's pretty safe to say now that he did write *Rides a Stranger*. Very safe indeed."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because he dedicated the book to Mary Ann Compton. Back then, when your father wrote the book, she was known as Mary Ann Gates. She was dating your father when he wrote and published the book. And she's been trying to get her hands on a copy of the book ever since then. She wanted Mr. Caledonia to grant

her access to your father, which he wouldn't do. She killed Mr. Caledonia when he refused her once and for all."

"Killed him?" I said. I felt a little shaky. "Over a book?"

"Not just any book," Hyland said. "Your father's only published novel. Dedicated to her."

"How are you so certain of all of this?" I asked.

Hyland smiled. "Because we have Mary Ann Compton in custody. We brought her in last night, and she confessed to the murder of Lou Caledonia."

Detective Hyland told me at least five times how irregular it was. He muttered under his breath that if anyone found out—anyone at all—he might end up in a great deal of trouble. But as he walked me back to a small interview room, the room where I would be able to have just a few minutes alone with Mary Ann Compton, he admitted that my seeing her probably wouldn't do anybody any harm.

"She confessed," he said, his hand pulling open the door to the small room. "And, besides, I have a soft spot for this whole case. Or, more accurately, your involvement in it."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"My old man liked to read. Mickey Spillane. Donald Hamilton. Richard Prather. I sometimes wonder if I became a detective because of the books he always read."

"You never know," I said.

"I think I ought to write a book someday," Hyland said. "You know, about all the cases I've worked, all the crazy things and people I've seen. I've even tried a few times. It's not as easy as it looks, writing a book."

"No, it's not."

"She'll be here in a minute," he said, holding the door for me. "And you can only have a few. Make it quick."

"Thanks," I said.

The room held a small wooden table and a few chairs. The table looked like it had been to hell and back. The floor was dirty and stained—coffee, candy wrappers, grime. I took a seat, the chair rickety and squeaky beneath me.

I thought about the woman I was going to meet. She was my father's ex-lover. No big deal. People dated others before they got married. But this woman meant so much to my dad he dedicated a book to her, a book he published the year I was born. Wasn't he dating Mom at that time? Wouldn't they have been practically engaged by then?

I ran my thumbnail through one of the deep grooves scarred in the top of the table. Maybe Dad didn't write the book at all. Maybe the whole thing was a misunderstanding. After all, no one had completely convinced me that the old man had really written the book. An eccentric used book dealer and a jilted lover pointed their fingers at my dad. Those of us who lived with the man, who knew him better than anyone, didn't think it was possible.

Who knew best?

The door opened, and I got my first look at Mary Ann Compton. Detective Hyland led her in. She didn't wear handcuffs or a prison jumpsuit, but she looked tired. She was an attractive woman, slender and trim despite being in her sixties. Her auburn hair showed a few streaks of gray. She wore no make-up, but the lines

on her face gave her character, like someone who had spent a lot of time in the outdoors, soaking up the sun and the wind.

"Five minutes," Hyland said and left us alone.

I stood up. The woman—Mary Ann—took me in from head to toe.

I held out my hand. "I'm—"

"I know who you are," she said. "You look just like him."

Her voice was warm, but not effusive. She offered me a weak smile and came into the room and sat at the table. I sat again and rested my elbows on the tabletop.

She said, "We don't have much time, so you might as well ask what you want to ask. I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

"I do."

"Then you better go for it," she said. "I doubt we'll be seeing each other again."

"But we have seen each other before, right? At the cemetery."

"Yes, I was there," she said. She looked down and picked at a piece of loose skin around one of her fingernails. "I got as close as I dared."

"So you and Dad… my dad… you were a couple."

"We were meant to be," she said. "He was the one, and we belonged together. He was the great love of my life."

The words sounded so strange. Who talked that way about my father? Not my mother, that was for certain. It was hard to imagine anyone thinking that about him, but I believed this woman when she said it. Her words carried such conviction.

I was aware of the press of time. I didn't hesitate.

"So, why weren't the two of you together?" I asked. "If you loved each other so much?"

"I suspect you know the answer to that," she said, looking up at me.

I thought about the dedication again, the publication date of the book.

"How did that happen?" I asked. "How did my mother get pregnant if you and Dad were together?"

"We weren't together at the time," she said. "We had a little bit of an on and off relationship. We were off for a while when he met your mother. He was with her when he found out two things that changed his life. One, his novel was going to be published. Two, he was going to be a father. Both things meant a lot to him, of course, but he certainly cared more about being a father than about that book. In the end, that's how he felt."

"And you know that because…"

"Because I got the book dedication," she said. "And you and your mom got him. I can't really blame him, of course. A child is a big deal. And he didn't want you to grow up without a father. It was the right thing all around. But…"

"But he could have kept writing even after I was born," I said. "Lots of writers have families and day jobs, and they still write. Why did he stop?"

It took her a moment to answer. Then she said, "We weren't together when the publishing deal went south. You know about that, right?"

I nodded.

"But we still talked from time to time. He was devastated when that happened. We didn't talk about it much, but I could tell. I think he just took it as a sign. It

offered him a clean break with the past. With the time and effort he would have to put into writing… and with me."

"Jesus." I slumped back in my chair. "I can't imagine the disappointment he must have felt over the book. To have tried for that and then have the book just disappear, to never even hold it in his hands."

"He did hold it in his hands," Mary Ann said.

"He did?" I asked.

"Your dad received all of his author copies," she said. "He had at least one whole box, maybe twenty or thirty copies. That's what Lou Caledonia was trying to get his hands on. And that's how all of this ended up happening."

"You mean Lou Caledonia's death, right?" I asked.

She nodded. "He found out your father wrote that book. For years, no one knew who the author was. Everyone knew the book was rare, and no one knew what happened to the author. Some people assumed it was a pseudonym of a well-known author. Some people thought maybe an editor wrote the novel and used a different name."

"Who thinks these things?" I asked.

"People on rare book message boards. Book dealers and collectors."

"Are you one of those?"

"No, but I followed the discussions. I knew who wrote the book. I was curious to see if anyone else did."

"And Lou Caledonia figured it out?"

"He did. He started hinting on the message boards that he knew something about Herbert Henry, that very soon he hoped to have a big discovery about the book. He should have kept his mouth shut to be honest. But I think the guy just couldn't resist bragging. After all, they call that book—"

"The white whale of vintage paperback collecting."

"You did your homework. Anyway, Lou Caledonia had found someone who used to work for Monarch Books. He found out some things about the author of the book. Can you imagine his surprise when he found out that the author of *Rides a Stranger* lived right in the same town he did? It probably made that fat little man think he had found his destiny at long last. All I wanted was a copy of the book. Just one copy."

"You didn't have one?"

"No. Like I said, your father and I weren't seeing each other by the time the book came out. I guess I could have written to him or called him. We were right here in the same town as well. But I decided that he had moved on for all the right reasons and I needed to let that be. He had a wife and a son. I ended up getting married and moving on with my life as well. I planned to let the whole thing go. I should have, you know?"

"So why didn't you?" I asked.

She took a deep breath. When she did that, I saw the lines on her face deepen, and just for a moment, she looked her age. She let the breath out and composed herself. "I found out that your dad was dying. I ran into a mutual friend from the old days. John Colfax? Do you remember him?"

The name sounded vaguely familiar from my childhood. I couldn't attach a face to it though. "I don't know," I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “He heard from your dad from time to time, and he heard about the illness. He told me, and we tried to keep our conversation about it casual. We said what everyone is supposed to say in those situations. ‘So young.’ ‘Isn’t that awful.’ ‘I’ll be thinking of him.’ We said all that and parted ways. But it rocked me. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I had buried those feelings a long time ago, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t excavate them.” She shrugged. “So I sent a card. I didn’t hear anything back. So I called. The number is right there in the book. I knew the neighborhood your parents lived in. I called and spoke to your mother.”

“And? What happened?”

“She pretty much hung up on me,” Mary Ann said. “She said your father was too sick to come to the phone. She said it was best if I didn’t call anymore and left them in peace. I got the brush-off basically.”

“Mom knew who you were?” I asked. “What you once meant to Dad?”

“I’m sure she did,” Mary Ann said.

“She says she never knew about the book,” I said.

“I guess that’s possible. I don’t know if your dad talked about it with anybody once he decided he wasn’t going to be a writer anymore.”

“I don’t understand why you killed Mr. Caledonia,” I said. “You really killed him, right? That’s what the detective said.”

As if on cue, Hyland opened the door and stuck his head into the room. “Time’s up,” he said.

“Wait.” I held up my hand. “Just another couple of minutes.”

“Yes, please,” Mary Ann said.

Hyland looked us over, and then he tapped the face of his digital watch. “Two minutes. No more.” He shut the door.

Mary Ann said, “I wanted a copy of that book before your dad… was gone. I went to Lou Caledonia and asked him if I could have one, if he ever managed to get his hands on that box your dad had.” She shook her head. “First he wanted to use me. He told me to go back to your parents’ house and try again. He said if I could get inside there and get whatever copies of the book your dad had, he’d share them with me. He called it a finder’s fee because he located your dad.”

“But you didn’t need him to locate Dad.”

“I know. I guess I’m a sucker for a hard luck case. I told him he could have as many copies as he wanted, as long as I got one. That’s it—I just wanted one to keep. I never got one way back then, you know.”

“Did you go back to my parents’ house?” I asked.

“I did. And I got the brush-off again. This time, your mom was less polite. I reported this to Lou, and then about a week later, your dad was gone. I went back to Lou to ask him if he was going to try to buy any part of the estate. He was evasive. He was giving me the brush-off as well. But I saw the obituary on his desk. I knew what he was thinking. He was going to go to the funeral and try to talk to someone, probably you. I walked out of there. I just walked out. I told myself it was all over, everything was over. Your dad was gone, that relationship was long in the past, and I really did need to just forget about it. That’s what I told myself.”

“But?”

“But I hated sitting home during the viewing. I wanted to see your dad one more time. I thought I should be there, but I didn’t go. Instead I went to Lou’s store that night. My ex-husband bought me a gun when we split up. I brought it with me. I just wanted to scare that little ogre of a man. I wanted him to know that I wanted a copy of that book. Just one.” Her voice started to rise. “Is that too much to ask? Just the one copy? It’s dedicated to me.” She paused and gathered herself. Her voice returned to its normal volume. “He denied me again. He said he had a line on the books, and those were going to fund his retirement to Florida. I don’t know what happened really. I’d been brushed off so many times… so many times in my life. Your mom. Lou.”

“My dad?”

She nodded. “I shot the little weasel. I went to the cemetery the next day, knowing I was guilty and knowing I would turn myself in. I saw the coffin, your dad’s coffin. That was as close as I could come.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “It was a crime of passion… committed forty years after the romance died and directed against the wrong man. That’s the story of my life.”

Goodwill stores smell different from bookstores. In used bookstores—like Lou Caledonia’s—I could smell the pages and the dust jackets and the endpapers. It was a fresh, hopeful smell, despite the age and condition of the books. But a Goodwill store smelled like desperation. In a Goodwill store the accumulated detritus of thousands of unconnected lives merged together to create the odor of surrender, of loss. Of defeat. Goodwill provided a home for things that couldn’t be discarded anywhere else. Goodwill was for everything that couldn’t be sold in a consignment or an antique store. I hadn’t entered one since high school.

This location sat about a mile from my parents’ house in a neighborhood that had once been nicer. As I kid, I remembered driving through and seeing middle-class homes with yards that were tended and clean. Not anymore. The houses around the store looked dingier and more rundown. The yards were full of toys, the grass worn and dying. It seemed appropriate somehow.

I went into the store and walked past the musty racks of clothes and the ragged and cheap furniture. Near the back I found the books. Two tall shelves stood side by side. Near the top I saw hardcovers, mostly book club editions with missing or frayed dust jackets. I scanned down to the bottom where the paperbacks were. I ran my eyes over the spines. Lots of James Patterson, Nicholas Sparks, Mary Higgins Clark. Most of the spines were creased. I flipped through them like they were cards in a Rolodex, moving each one I touched to the left and going on to the next. I passed mysteries and romances and the occasional science fiction or fantasy title. Not many westerns. A few Louis L’Amours and one or two Max Brands. But no Herbert Henry.

I went back through the shelves again, just in case I missed something. But I hadn’t. The books weren’t there.

Did I think it would be easy?

I went back to the front looking for an employee. I found a longhaired, wiry guy, wearing a store smock. I explained my problem, and he went to fetch his manager. She turned out to be a middle-aged woman with hair dyed the color of honey. She

also wore a store smock with a nametag that said “Patti,” and her authority rested in the set of keys she wore attached to her wrist by a Day-Glo rubber cord. I thought her presence would work in my favor. I had prepared a story—which wasn’t really a lie—and I assumed she’d be more susceptible to it.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

I told her about Dad dying and Mom giving the books away. I told her about the box of books that my dad had written—and I left out the part about the books being really rare and potentially valuable. I also left out any mention of Lou Caledonia’s murder and Mary Ann Compton’s confession. I didn’t think she needed to know that.

While I spoke, Patti’s face remained neutral. I felt like my words weren’t getting through, that they were like darts hitting a brick wall and bouncing away, leaving behind no discernible mark or impact. But I kept talking, hoping that the more I talked the more likely she would be to understand.

When I finished, Patti remained silent for a few moments. Then she said, “I really can’t let anyone back to see the donations. It takes several days for us to sort them, and lots of people would like to get back there and see what we have before it goes on the floor.”

“I understand,” I said, although I didn’t. Were people really in such a hurry to get their hands on Goodwill stuff?

“It’s not unusual for this to happen,” Patti said. “Families donate things and then some other family member comes along and wants it back. It happens at least once a week.”

“Of course. But…”

I didn’t know what else to say. I had made my argument. I was at Patti’s mercy, and it looked like she was going to turn me away.

“Did you say this book your dad wrote was a western?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Hmm,” Patti said. “My grandpa read westerns all the time when I went to visit him. I can picture him in his chair reading Louis L’Amour or Zane Grey. Who was the other one? The one everyone used to read?”

“Max Brand?” I said.

“That’s it.” Patti looked lost in thought for a moment. I took that as a good sign. I wondered if she were back in her childhood somewhere, in her grandparents’ house, coloring on the floor or playing with dolls while her grandmother cooked in the kitchen and the old man sat in a chair lost on a cattle drive or a gunfight or a saloon brawl.

“So what do you think?” I finally asked. “Can I take a peek?”

She snapped out of her reverie. “Sure,” she said. “But don’t tell anyone I let you do this.”

The back room was huge. The ceilings were high, the metal beams and girders exposed. The smell I noticed at the front of the store was even more intense back there, probably because the back room held things that weren’t good enough to be put out front. I didn’t want to think about what those things were.

Patti led me through the racks of clothes, the shelves of toys, the clutter and refuse from who knew how many lives.

“When were these items brought in?” she asked.

"A couple of weeks, I guess."

"And you're just looking for books?"

"That's right."

"I think we keep the books over here before we sort them."

We went to the far back corner of the storeroom. There were boxes and boxes of books, and then more books that weren't in boxes. Hardcovers and paperbacks. Books for kids and books for adults.

"It's a lot," I said.

"Take your time," she said. "We're open until nine."

I found a plastic stool and pulled it over by the boxes of books. I sat down and felt my shoulders slump a little.

*Did I really want to do this?*

I thought back over what I knew. A couple of people—one of them a murderer—believed my dad wrote a book. And published it. And it became the rarest book in the land.

*Did any of this make sense?*

I had already stayed an extra day. I thought of work and my life back at the university. I was already behind and overwhelmed. Did I need to spend more time on what very well may be a wild goose chase?

But I couldn't stop. I looked at those boxes of books… the potential that something belonging to and created by my father… I couldn't turn away.

I started opening boxes and looking. I looked until my back hurt, and I had to stand up and stretch. I discovered a few things: A lot of people acquired and then disposed of Reader's Digest Condensed Books. A lot of families apparently didn't hold onto the potty training books they bought for their children. And a lot of people read mystery and romance novels. Loads and loads of them.

Patti came by once to check on me. I told her I didn't know how much longer I would keep looking, and she again told me that was just fine with her.

"I wish I could get one of our employees to help you, but we're short staffed."

"That's fine."

"Our business is up with the economy being so bad. More and more people shop here for their clothes and furniture."

"I hope they buy some books, too," I said.

"They do. Books and CDs and DVDs. We sell it all. People like to be entertained when times are bad."

"That makes sense," I said.

"Well," she said, "I'll let you keep at it."

I did. For another hour after she left my side. When I first saw the box with my mother's handwriting on the side, I almost went right past it. In a thick black marker, she had scrawled "Old Books." My mother used a distinctive "d." She always added a looping swirl to the end, her own personal version of a serif font.

I pulled that box close to me and opened it. My father's books. The big-dick books, mostly spy novels. Robert Ludlum. Ken Follett. Frederick Forsyth. Eric Ambler. I went on to the next box with my Mom's writing on it. Same thing. Dad's books, but not Dad's *book.* I opened two more with the same results. I wanted to take them all. I wanted to tell Patti that they all belonged to me, and I was going to haul them away whether she wanted me to or not. I had no idea what I would do

with them. I really didn't want to read them. I just wanted to *have* them. I wanted them in my possession instead of someone else's.

And then I found the smaller box, also with Mom's handwriting on it.

The box was sealed with several layers of packing tape. The box looked old, worn, and a little beaten, like it had been shipped and moved around more than once without being opened. I couldn't get the tape off of it. I had to use a key to dig into and slice open the thick tape. It required a lot of effort. I sliced and dug and pulled until the lid came open.

The top of the box was stuffed with bubble wrap. I pulled that off. Then there was a layer of thin cardboard. I tossed that aside.

And then I saw it. The cover showed a rugged cowboy on his horse. They stood on a ridge that overlooked a small western town. The cowboy packed a revolver on his hip, and the stock of a rifle protruded from a scabbard on his horse. The cowboy looked lean and tan and strong. He squinted into the distance, toward the town. He looked capable and alone.

Across the top in thick, Western-style lettering, it said: *Rides a Stranger* a novel by Herbert Henry. I lifted up the copies on top. There were more below. Many more. I guessed the box held about twenty of them in clean, crackling new shape despite their age. They were well preserved and perfect. If what the book collectors and Detective Hyland told me was true, I was staring at a twenty thousand dollar box of books.

I had found them.

I picked up one of them, gently, like I was handling a bird's egg. I paged to the back and looked for an author bio. There was a small one. It simply said, "Herbert Henry is an author who lives in the Midwest. This is his first novel."

I went back to the front and found the dedication, the one that had caused so much trouble. It was there, just as Hyland said. "For M.A. with love."

And that was it. No author photo. No acknowledgements. Just that little bio that could have been about anyone.

None of this told me Dad wrote the book.

I turned to the back and read the copy there:

> *Brick Logan rides alone. He travels the western trail accompanied only by his horse and his Colt revolver. He rides to forget his past and the tragic loss of the woman he loved.*
>
> *But now he enters another western trail town, one more in a long line of stops he makes. And this time Brick finds himself drawn into the life of Chastity Haines, a beautiful widow and the mother of a young son. Brick helps save the town from the merciless influence of a ruthless cattle baron. But when the fight is done, will Brick choose the life of a family man and give up his fiddlefooting, trail-haunted days. Or will he forever remain alone… and a stranger.*

"Jesus," I said. "Dad."

"Did you find what you wanted?"

I nearly jumped. It was Patti. She stood over me, her smile hopeful.

"I think so," I said. I gently put the copy of *Rides a Stranger* back into the box, and then I thought better of it. "I'll take all of these." I indicated the boxes that had belonged to my dad. I took my wallet out and grabbed all the cash I had. It amounted to about seventy-seven dollars. "Here. Just take this."

"We'd probably sell these for a dollar apiece. Fifty cents for the paperbacks."

"Just take it all," I said. "For your time and trouble."

"Can we help you put them in your car?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. But I picked up the box of *Rides a Stranger* to carry on my own. Before I left with it, I reached into the top of the box and took one copy out. "Here," I said. "It's a book my dad wrote."

"Really?" she said. "Wow. I'm glad you found it."

"Do me a favor," I said. "Don't put it out with the other books. Just take it. If you have the chance, look it up on the internet."

"Why?" she asked.

"Consider it a donation as well. From my family."

Patti looked puzzled. "Okay," she said. "If my grandpa were still alive, I'd give it to him. It looks like the kind of book he'd like."

I nodded. "You're probably right."

I pulled up to the door of the Goodwill store, and the same bearded guy who had directed me to Patti lifted the five boxes of books that once belonged to my dad—and now belonged to me—into the trunk of my car. I had placed the other box, the valuable one, on the passenger seat, so I could keep a close eye on it.

The Goodwill employee took being outside as an opportunity to light a cigarette. He leaned back against the side of the building while I finished situating the boxes in the trunk. I had one stop to make. I was going to go back to the police station and give a copy of the book to Mary Ann Compton. I didn't know if they'd let her have it, but I would trust Hyland to let me know. If they wouldn't take it or guarantee its safety, I intended to find her lawyer and pass the book along there. But I wanted Mary Ann to have one.

"You live around here?" he asked.

"I used to," I said. "My parents do… well, my mom does."

My mom's house. Mom lives around here. I had to get used to saying that.

"Neighborhood's changed a lot," he said.

"Sure." I closed the trunk.

"Houses are rundown now. People don't take care of things."

"Well, thanks for your help," I said.

"My family used to shop here all the time when I was growing up."

I looked at him. "You mean at Goodwill?"

"No," he said. "I thought you grew up around here. Don't you remember the old IGA grocery store that used to be here?"

I looked at the building. It started to come back to me. There *was* a grocery store there when I was a kid, one we went to from time-to-time. To be accurate, I should say that my dad and I shopped there. Mom didn't like it. She felt it was too small, too narrow in its selection. It was possible the store closed and became a Goodwill all those years ago because a lot of people shared my mom's feelings. But Dad liked to go there. If Mom sent him out on some errand—buy a gallon of milk,

buy a loaf of bread—or if he needed something for himself—shaving cream or a newspaper or—

He always looked at the books when we went into IGA. They had a long rack of paperback books and magazines near the front of the store, and we always stopped there before we checked out. And Dad always bought a book. A spy novel, a mystery, and, yes, a western. Did he think about his own writing when he stood in front of that rack? Did he think about what might have been if he hadn't given the whole thing up for Mom and me? He never showed anything. He always seemed perfectly content, but who knew what was really going on inside of him as he looked at all of those books?

"There's a parking lot behind here as well, right?" I asked.

"That's right."

"And it looks over the lot next door? There's a fence, and you can see down into the next lot? Right?"

The guy nodded. "That's right."

"You used to come here when you were a kid. I used to come with my dad. And you know what? He used to show me the horses back there."

"Horses?"

"Yes. There was an old, abandoned house next door. Apparently, the neighborhood wasn't always great. And out back of that house, someone kept a couple of horses. They just wandered around in the yard over there, cropping grass or whatever. Do you remember that?"

The guy ground out his cigarette and shook his head. "I don't remember any horses."

"They were there," I said.

"Could be," he said and then turned and went back inside.

But I remembered. I remembered it very clearly. Dad and I used to come to the IGA, and when we came out to go the car, he would turn to me and say, "Do you want to look at the horses?"

And I always said yes. I thought it was magic that Dad knew they were there. And how did he know I would want to see them?

Did he contemplate all the western stories he could have written—*should* have written—as he looked at those horses that seemed so out of place in the middle of that neighborhood? So lonely and forgotten?

I jumped in the car and drove around back. The parking lot looked pathetic, the asphalt cracked and stained. I drove over to the edge of the lot where the rusting and rickety chain-link fence still stood. I climbed out, taking one last look at that box of books. My dad's legacy. Besides me, the most lasting mark he made on the world.

I climbed out and walked over. I put my hands against the fence, felt the ragged and flaking metal beneath my hands. I searched.

The remains of the house had sunk into the ground. Nothing remained but a pile of boards and a crumbling chimney. And no matter how long or hard I looked, the horses, of course, were long, long gone.