

# Losing It

*by Scott Spinola*

## *Preface*

*The man in the baseball cap stands silently in the shadow cast by the parking lot lights. Flexing his leather gloved hands, he watches the last remaining light in the building blink out. Minutes later, Samuel Parker emerges talking loudly on his cell phone. Walking toward the only car left in the lot, Parker appears briefly in each disc of light and disappears seconds later.*

*As Parker approaches his car and hangs up his phone, the man in the baseball cap overtakes him. Two ferocious jabs to Parker's side snaps a rib and buckles him over. Moaning and howling in pain, Parker gasps for air. The man in the baseball cap slams him against the car. Parker starts to yell, but a quick knee to his gut turns the yells into fitful wheezes. The man grabs Parker and slams his face against the hood of the car once, twice, three times, then leaves him lying on the ground, moaning and holding his face, blood pouring from his nose.*

*The man paces, his face red and contorted, his teeth grinding, then looks down at Parker. Parker's eyes open wide as the man sends a swift kick into Parker's chin, smashing his teeth, then two more to his gut. Parker maneuvers himself to his knees and pulls himself up to stand leaning over the railing overlooking the channel. Streams of blood cover his battered face, one eye bloody and swollen shut, the other nearly so.*

*The man in the baseball cap grabs Parker by the hair and pulls him close, breathing hard into his ear. Parker begins to sob. His body rocks, as he stammers, "No. No. No. Please, no!" The man in the baseball cap sends a ferocious right into Parker's temple. Parker goes limp and falls over the edge of the railing, landing with a splash below. The man in the baseball cap steps up to the edge and looks down, watching the body sink into the depths.*

*When the body sinks out of sight, the man in the baseball cap staggers backward into Parker's car. He slumps to the ground, his hands clutching at his head, and sobs in great heaving gasps.*

## Chapter 1

“Crap!”

I stumbled out of bed to grab the ringing phone. It was just past 7 a.m., Saturday morning, and my head was thumping so hard it felt like my eyes would leave my skull. It was like someone put the Liberty Bell over my head and was trying to add some more cracks to it. Max’s Beachcomber began its annual end of summer blowout weekend last night and I did my best to support the cause. I planned to sleep it off this morning, then maybe stow myself in the hammock and sleep a bit more. The phone had other plans.

“Ross,” I growled into the phone, steadying myself with one hand on the dresser, not in any mood to deal with civilization yet. “A what?— Where?” Cassi told me what and where, I told her when, “Be there in 15.”

I hung up the phone then went to the kitchen and started the single serve coffee machine. Back in the bedroom I pulled on some pants I found thrown over the back of a chair, and pulled a shirt out of the closet. I yanked on the shirt, buttoned some buttons, grabbed my suit jacket, threw a tie around my neck, and shoved a bottle of aspirin and my cell phone into my jacket pocket. I grabbed my coffee on the way out the door and headed to my truck.

With lights and siren on, I made it to the beach in 10 minutes, parked by the curb, and got out. I ducked under the crime scene tape and strode onto the beach toward my deputy Stella Cassidy.

“Hey Cassi.”

“Morning Chief,” She gave me the once over and chuckled, “nice outfit. Hope we didn’t disturb your beauty sleep.”

“You’re a real hoot Cassi. Where’s Roscoe?”

"Right here Chief," Roscoe walked up behind us from the parking lot.

I wiped the beads of sweat from my forehead and sipped at my coffee, "Sun's barely up and I'm freaking sweating already. Gotta love Texas." I turned to Cassi, "What do we got?"

Cassi lead me and Roscoe to the pier.

I took out the bottle of aspirin and gulped down a handful with my coffee.

Roscoe stared motionless down at the dead man lying face down in the sand.

"A couple of joggers found this guy about a half hour ago," Cassi began. "The guy's pretty bloated and there's lots of bite marks on him. Looks he drifted by and washed up on the beach."

"ID?" I asked, looking down at the body.

Cassi handed me the man's wallet, "Samuel Parker. Houston."

I squatted down to get a closer look, rolling the mangled and bloated corpse onto its back. Its face looked like that of a very bad prizefighter.

Roscoe took in a startled breath.

I looked up into Roscoe's suddenly pale face and wide eyes, "You OK?"

"Sorry Chief," Roscoe rattled his head and turned his eyes from the body, "I just wasn't expecting that is all."

"Well don't barf on the deceased. It's bad karma," I grumbled.

Cassi looked down at me, "This guy was beaten pretty badly, but his wallet still has credit cards and cash in it so it doesn't look like a mugging gone bad."

I ran my fingers through my hair and puffed out a breath, "Somebody must have really disliked this guy and decided to let him know." I rested my elbows on my knees and looked out over the water, "Cassi, give Harbor Patrol a call. They've got a marine forensics team. Maybe they can tell us where this guy floated in from."

"Got it Chief," Cassi walked off to place the call.

I stood up and grimaced as I flexed my back. I looked down at the body again. I shook my head, then motioned for the CSU guys to bag him. I turned toward Roscoe then nodded at

the news vans beginning to gather in the parking lot behind him, "Good news travels fast." I looked back at Roscoe, "Get outta here. Go take statements from the joggers. I'll handle the press."

"Thanks Chief," Roscoe walked off, giving a wide berth to the body in the sand.

I tossed my now cold coffee into the trashcan and finished buttoning my shirt, tucked it in, knotted my tie, and adjusted the collar on my coat. I took a deep breath and exhaled forcefully, steeling myself for the circus that was about to descend on my little seaside hamlet. "A stiff on a beach. What a way to work off a bender."

I made my way up the beach to the waiting press and, for the next half hour, I answered questions about a brutal murder from reporters who had probably never covered anything more serious than a car wreck.

When I finally got back to the station it was approaching nine o'clock. I headed straight for the coffee, "Maybe some of Sand Point PD's finest sludge will cut this fog." I washed down a few more aspirin and headed off down the hall to my office. I tossed my jacket onto the back of my chair and loosened my tie.

I fired up my computer and ran a records search for Samuel Parker. I pulled up Parker's rap sheet and sent it to the printer.

I heard a knock on my door, "Hey Chief."

I turned, "Come on in Cassi. You get in touch with Harbor Patrol?"

"Gave 'em the details. Told 'em I'd stop by later."

"Good. Let me know what you hear."

"You got it," Cassi lingered in my office, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Something on your mind Cassi?"

"This town's gonna go nuts when it learns they're living in the murder capital of the inner harbor."

"Welcome to my world, Deputy," I shrugged, then looked out the window.

“Chief?”

I let out a long breath, “Five years on a beat in Queens, seven years in vice, and another six in homicide. I came down here thinking I left all that behind me. I guess if it wants you, it’ll find you.” I turned to look at Cassi, “Ever work a murder before?”

“In Sand Point, Texas?!”

I stared back out the window, “First time for everything I guess. Hang on, it’s gonna be a wild ride.”

## Chapter 2

Roscoe and I walked into the county medical examiner's office Monday afternoon and approached a woman sitting behind the desk eating a salad and reading a celebrity gossip magazine. She did not look up.

"Chief Ross, Sand Point PD. We spoke earlier."

The receptionist sighed and punched a button on her desk phone with her free hand, "Dr. Bishop. Chief Ross is here to see you."

"Thanks, Melissa. Send him in," I heard through the intercom.

The receptionist punched the button again, cutting off the intercom, then pushed a ledger across the desk without looking up, "Sign in."

I watched Roscoe sign the ledger then signed my own name on the next line and pushed the ledger back.

"Right through there," she pointed with her fork then turned her attention back to her salad and the lives of the rich and scandalous.

We pushed through the swinging double doors and entered the brightly lit, tile and stainless steel lined examination room.

"Dr. Bishop. Marco Ross, Sand Point PD."

Dr. Bishop looked up from the man lying on the table, "Hello Chief."

"Hello doctor. This is my deputy, Roscoe Bartlett."

Roscoe stared at the body and shoved his hands into his pockets, "Hello doctor."

I turned to the ME, "Do you have anything on my vic yet?"

"You must have some serious pull to get this guy on my table so quickly."

I smiled, "Yeah. AG Lopez and I go way back. We put away a few bad guys up in New York. He'll never admit it, but I saved his ass on more than a few cases."

"Wonderful. A real live superstar," Dr. Bishop gave a quick, upward motion of his mouth that he probably intended to be a smile then turned back to the table. "Well, the water's temperature and its effects on the body make it tough to give a definite time of death, but it takes a week or two in warm water for a body to putrefy to the point of floating, so I'd say he was dead at least that long when you found him."

Roscoe wiped a few beads of sweat from his forehead then crossed his arms on his chest.

"What did him in?"

He looked up from the body, "I found no water in his lungs so he was dead before he went in. He's got a few cracked ribs, a busted jaw, and quite a few smashed teeth resulting from multiple blows to the torso and head. I don't see any signs that the attacker used a weapon of any kind, so cause of death was probably severe traumatic brain injury resulting from multiple blows to the head, including a blow to the temple, which is probably the proximate cause. Mechanism of death, probably a massive cerebral contusion. Manner of death, most certainly homicide."

"OK," I nodded.

Dr. Bishop continued, "Mind you that's all preliminary since I just opened him up. I need to complete my autopsy and do a cranial exam to give you an official time of death, but that should get you started on the right track."

"Thanks Doc. Let me know what you find."

"That's the plan," he said, already peering over his glasses down at the corpse.

Roscoe and I left the exam room and waved to the receptionist who didn't look up.

When we got to the truck I put in a call to Houston PD while Roscoe stared out the passenger side window and chewed his nails.

When I ended the call, I turned to Roscoe as I drove out of the lot, "Me and Cassi are heading up to Houston this afternoon. HPD questioned our guy about his wife's murder. We'll

see what we can get off the guys who worked the case. I want you to partner up with the County Sheriff and track down any leads they got off the tip line we set up this morning. The lines are probably ringing off the hook with loonies and psychics, but sometimes you can get a decent lead or two out of the mess."

"No problem," Roscoe turned his attention back to the window and his nails as we headed back to the station.

We arrived back at the station and headed to my office, where Roscoe grabbed Parker's rap sheet off my desk. Cassi was behind my desk looking down at a chart of the harbor. She looked up as we entered, "Hey Chief."

"Hey Cassi. You got something for me?"

"Sure do. Harbor Patrol analyzed the currents for the past few days and mapped out possible dump sites in the channel."

"Great. You and I are heading up that way this afternoon."

"Come again?"

"HPD questioned Parker for killing his wife. I arranged for us to meet with the detectives who handled the case."

"Wow! Nice break."

"Sure is. We'll see if we can sweet talk some information out of the detectives up there. I'm betting the beat down this Parker guy took had something to do with their case."

Roscoe dropped Parker's rap sheet, scattering the papers across the floor. He bent down quickly to pick them up.

I looked down at Roscoe, "What's wrong with you, Roscoe? You've been jumpy all day."

"I'm fine. It's just my first murder is all. Maybe it's getting to me," Roscoe's hand trembled as he fumbled with the papers.

"I get that. I do. But you need to get a hold of yourself real quick."

"You're right. I'm sorry, Chief."

"Hey. Don't sweat it. You're popping your homicide cherry," I smiled wide, "the first one's always tough."

## Chapter 3

The bell above the door of Jack's Place jingled when Cassi and I walked into the small diner. I did a quick scan and eyeballed two men sitting at a table, backs to the wall with ill-fitting gray suits, loose ties, and heavy soled shoes. In other words, cops. I motioned for Cassi to follow me.

"You Nelson and Graves?"

"That's us," Graves's face tightened. He straightened his back and exchanged a quick glance with his partner.

I extended my hand to the two detectives, "Marco Ross, Sand Point PD. This is Deputy Stella Cassidy."

Graves let my hand hang in the air, "We heard about you. Came down from the top that you were coming to town. Seems you got some serious pull around here."

I dropped my hand and hooked my thumbs in my belt, "Look, detectives, I know we're kickin' around in your sandbox. I don't want to grind your stones on this one. We need all the help we can get from you guys. I just want to know how this guy ended up on my beach."

Graves's face relaxed a bit, "You'll have no problems with us. We heard you were OK. Have a seat Chief."

"Thanks," I pulled out a chair and sat.

Cassi sat next to me in the remaining chair.

A smile drifted over Nelson's face, "Senior Detective Jimmy Nelson," he said, emphasizing his rank, "and this here's my partner, Junior Detective Michael Graves," same emphasis. "So pleased to meet you ma'am."

Cassi nodded at the two men, "Detectives."

Graves turned to see a pair of tight, faded jeans standing beside him and looked up at the waitress, "Hey Kimberly. How's tricks?"

The auburn haired girl set glasses of water on the table, "Just fine, darlin', how are you?"

"Now I've seen your beautiful face I think I'm just fine too," he beamed a wide smile at Kimberly.

"Oh stop it, detective, you're making me blush."

"You know you're the only reason I come to this place. Cause we all know Jack can't cook!" This last a shout that drew a single finger response from the man behind the grill. Graves turned back to me and Cassi, "The owner's an old friend from high school. Nice guy."

"Well you better order something 'fore that nice guy comes out here and beats you with his spatula," Kimberly giggled.

"Let's go with the usual then. Bacon, egg & cheese burger, fries, and a chocolate shake."

"Jimmy?"

"Let me have the grilled chicken sandwich, no mayo, side salad, and a Diet Dr. Pepper. One of us needs to drive this guy to the hospital when his heart explodes."

"Ain't that the truth!" She turned to Cassi, "Ma'am?"

"I'll have a grilled ham and cheese with fries and a Diet Coke please."

"And for you, sir?"

"Same as the young lady, but make mine a sweet tea," I looked over and smiled when I caught Nelson eyeballing Cassi.

Kimberly turned to Nelson, "I'll be right back with your salad Jimmy." She collected the menus and walked off to the kitchen.

Nelson watched Kimberly walk away, "Man, that little girl makes them Levi's dance!" He turned to Graves, "When you gonna hit that?"

Graves looked at Cassi then down at his hands, his face reddening just a bit.

I jumped in to save Graves from further embarrassment, "So, gentlemen, what can you tell me about this Parker guy?"

Graves pulled out the case file for the Emily Parker murder and shook his head, "It's a bit hard to believe. We question the rat bastard on a murder up here then he washes up on your beach all beat to shit."

"Can't say the guy didn't have it coming," Nelson sipped at his water, "he was a high powered business executive. Imports exports. Millionaire by 35, beautiful wife, luxury cars, nice house on the lake, the whole bit. He was living the high life then his wife turned up dead in their living room. He called 9-1-1 all panicked saying someone broke into his house and 'Oh my God, my wife is dead! She's DEAD!'"

Graves picked up the story, "When we questioned him at the scene, he gave us a story about being downtown entertaining some clients and he came home to find his house broken into and his wife dead."

Cassi looked at Graves, "But you don't buy it?"

"He seemed credible enough, but nothing was missing from the house," Nelson cut in, "the place wasn't turned over very much and there was no sign of forced entry so it didn't look much like a robbery-homicide. She had some healed over scars and older bruises so it looked like he liked to rough her up. When we got there, she was lying on the couch with her neck snapped and a bloody dent in the wall above her."

Graves continued, "We searched the place and found some cards and notes from some guy. In the last one he asked her to leave her husband. Signed his name with this big fancy 'R.' Couldn't really make out the name. The rest was just a scribble." He looked up and smiled as Kimberly returned with Nelson's salad and their drinks.

Kimberly passed the drinks around the table and the salad to Nelson. She brushed her breast along Graves's back as she did so, eliciting a shiver from Graves and a stifled snort from Nelson, then she headed smiling back to the kitchen.

"Shut up, shit-for-brains, and eat your rabbit food," he looked over at Cassi, his face reddening again. "Sorry for my language, ma'am."

Cassi laughed, "It's OK, detective. I have three brothers. She's a pretty girl." Cassi smiled at Graves who looked quickly down at the table.

I leaned in and wrapped my hands around my glass of tea then looked over at Nelson, "So you like this guy Parker for killing his wife?"

"Damn right. The only prints in the house were Parker's and his wife's. We confronted him with the letters and he seemed surprised enough, but we could tell he was jacking us. Something was wrong about him."

Graves put a spoonful of milkshake in his mouth then waved the spoon toward the others, "His clients alibied him about the drinks downtown, and we could definitely smell liquor on him, so that part of the story checked out." He took another spoonful, "The window of opportunity was tight, but he could have made it home in time to kill her. No one at the bars were real sure of their times, so his alibi's not real solid."

Nelson shoveled some iceberg lettuce and tomato slices into his mouth then continued, "The way we see it, Parker comes home all liquored up, and his wife comes clean about the affair and spills that she's leaving him for this other guy. Parker flies into a rage, smacks her around a bit, hits her hard enough that she hits the wall, cracks her head open, and snaps her neck."

Graves took the cup away from his face, leaving behind a chocolate smile, "He panics and calls 9-1-1, giving them a story about a break-in." Graves sat back and watched Kimberly return with the food.

Nelson picked a couple of fries off his partner's plate, bit them in half, then stabbed the remains in the air, "We didn't have anything solid to take him in. His alibi may or may not put him at the scene. He had some minor scrapes on his right knuckles, but he explained them away saying he fell coming out of the bar. Everyone at the bar said he was pretty lit so that was plausible."

Cassi put down her sandwich, dabbed at her mouth with a napkin, then looked across at Graves, "You know anything about this mystery man the wife was fooling around with?"

Graves lay his burger on his plate, still chewing the chunk he took out of it, "Didn't have much to go on, really, just the cards and stuff." He wiped his mouth with his napkin, "No return addresses on the envelopes or anything, and we couldn't get no prints off 'em. Like I said, all we had was that big fancy 'R'."

"What about her friends? Anything there?" I leaned forward and shoved the grilled cheese sandwich into my mouth, taking half of it in one bite. I followed it up with some fries.

"Not too much," Nelson poked his straw at the ice in his glass, "her friends said they thought she might be having an affair but said she denied it. They also painted Parker as a real piece of work, always bossing her around in public like she was his servant girl so the abuse angle fits."

"You have no doubt it was Parker who killed his wife?" I looked from one detective to the next as I washed down some more fries with sweet tea.

Graves stopped the remains of his burger midway to his mouth and waved off my question with one hand, "None. In fact, we was fixin' to bring him in and grill him again on his alibi, maybe catch him in a lie. I reckon we won't get that chance now."

"Don't think so boys. Mind if we get a copy of the case file? Especially those letters. We need to find out who Mrs. Parker was having her affair with. Wouldn't surprise me if he went after Parker after learning about the case in the press."

"You got it," Nelson finished off his soda, picked up the dark green folder sitting next to him on the table, and handed it to me, "Our captain thought you might want to look over the file so we brought you a copy."

"Thanks detective, tell your captain I appreciate it. You've been a big help."

Kimberly returned and stood next to Graves, her thigh touching his, "Anything else for y'all?"

I looked up at Kimberly, "No thank you young lady, but I'll take that check from you when you get a second." I turned to the table, "This one's on me boys," then polished off my sandwich and the few remaining fries.

Kimberly returned and slid the check onto the table next to me. I took a quick look at it and stood, fishing some bills out of my wallet, "Gentlemen," I shook Nelson's hand, "thanks again. We'll be in touch."

Graves extended his hand and I shook it firmly. I looked at the young detective then at Kimberly. I winked at the girl, handed her the check and fifty bucks, then turned back to Graves with a wicked grin, "And would you please ask this pretty girl out on a date Graves?"

The color drained out of Graves's face and his jaw flapped open.

Cassi followed me away from the table, her hand covering her mouth to stifle a laugh. I looked over my shoulder as I opened the door and saw Nelson slapping Graves on the back and Graves avoiding Kimberly's gaze at all costs, his ears and face now red as her hair.

I smiled at Cassi as we stepped into the late afternoon sun, "Our work here is done." I put on my sunglasses and tossed the keys to Cassi as we approached my truck, "You drive."

As we pulled away from the curb, I started flipping through the case file. I got to the copies of the letters from the wife's boyfriend and read through them, "I can't believe women fall for this sappy crap."

Cassi laughed, "Maybe that's why you're still single, eh Chief?"

"And glad for it!" I proclaimed. I continued reading, "Nothing but crap in here. No mention of any people they met, or places they went, or anything else that might—" I looked up from the paper, closed my eyes, then opened them and looked back at the letter and the big 'R' of the signature. I closed the file and turned to Cassi, "Change of plans. We're going to the ME's office."

Cassi creased her brow and shot me a glance, "I thought you went there this morning?"

"I need to check on something. I hope to find out that I am very, very wrong."

## Chapter 4

We arrived at the ME's office and I was out of the truck, case file in hand, before Cassi put the truck in park. She could barely keep up as I rushed through the lobby and into the front office. The receptionist, naturally, was on the phone.

"So anyway, this guy buys me a drink and is all like, 'What's happenin', baby?' so I'm like 'Uh, BOY, I ain't your baby—'"

"Excuse me. Miss?" I tapped my fingers rapidly on the case file I was holding at my side.

"—So I turn around and start talking to my friend, Mary, you know, the girl you know? So anyway, this guy—"

I slammed my hand down on the phone, cutting off the call. Melissa jumped back in her chair, "Excuse me?!"

"I need the sign in logs from this morning."

"I was on the—"

"Now!"

"All right! All right! Keep your shirt on," Melissa opened a drawer, pulled out the ledger, and dropped it on the desk. "Knock yourself out."

"What's going on Chief?" Cassi asked.

I opened the book, flipped a few pages, and stared at the signature halfway down the page. I opened the case file and compared the signature to one of the letters. I showed them to Cassi, who looked at the letter, looked at the ledger, did it again, then looked back at me with her mouth open. She blinked twice without saying a word.

I held the ledger in front of Melissa and tapped the page, "I need a photocopy of this page." Melissa took the book and looked at it then back at me. I added firmly, "Now."

Melissa stood and walked over to the copier, "Some people. Manners would be nice." She ran off a copy and handed it to me.

I grabbed the copy and then grabbed the ledger.

Melissa, startled, said, "Hey, where are you taking that?"

I looked at Cassi. Without a word she walked off into the ME's exam room and came back with a large evidence bag. I slipped the ledger into the bag, sealed it, and made a note on the label. To Melissa I said, "Tell Dr. Bishop I'm putting this into evidence."

I bolted for the door, Cassi in hot pursuit, leaving Melissa looking very confused.

"Give me the keys."

Cassi handed me the keys and barely made it into the passenger seat before we sped out of the parking lot. When we got back to headquarters, I jumped out of the truck and ran to the evidence locker. I called over my shoulder to Cassi, "Find Roscoe!" I booked the ledger into evidence and got back to my office as Cassi walked in.

"Roscoe doesn't answer."

I picked up the phone and called Dispatch, "Beverly, has Roscoe checked in lately?— Damn! When did you hear from him last?— OK. Put a trace on his vehicle and cell phone and find out where he is. Get back to me as soon as you know anything— Thanks."

I fell into my chair and spun toward the window. I put one foot on the sill and touched my fingertips together in front of my mouth, my elbows resting on the arms of the chair. The sunset winked off the ripples on the water. After a few silent moments I spun around and pushed myself out of the chair and walked past Cassi to the door, "Let's go."

I pulled into the beach parking lot and parked by the curb. I stepped cautiously out of the truck and drew my weapon. Cassi saw me then drew her own.

As I walked onto the beach, I saw a lone figure silhouetted by the pier in the fading light. I pointed to Cassi and motioned for her to swing to the left while I went right.

We got to within a few yards of the man and I motioned for Cassi to stop, "Roscoe. How you doin' man?"

Roscoe stared out at the water, his hands in his jacket pockets.

"Can we talk about this buddy?"

Roscoe turned around slowly.

"You want to move real slow now Roscoe. Slowly take your hands out of your pockets and show 'em to me."

"I'm sorry Chief. I'm so sorry," tears streamed down Roscoe's cheeks.

"That's OK Roscoe. Let's just talk about it. First your hands."

Roscoe blinked hard, his face contorted.

"Roscoe—"

Roscoe's face relaxed, his shoulders slumped. He looked into my eyes and whispered, "I'm sorry. I loved her and he killed her—"

"I know, buddy, I know. Let's talk about this. Let's find a way out of this."

Roscoe dropped his chin to his chest and shook his head slowly, side-to-side. He slowly pulled his hands out of his jacket pocket, revealing his service weapon. I drew my gun up to center mass. My entire body tensed. Cassi stiffened but held her ground. Roscoe pointed his weapon at the sand.

"Roscoe. Don't do this. We can get through this." I took a few cautious steps toward Roscoe, "Drop the gun, Roscoe. Right now."

After a few moments, Roscoe looked up at me, his face frozen in a contorted squint. He dropped to his knees and began to sob in great heaving gasps. Then, in a barely audible whisper he said, "I'm so sorry," then yanked the gun up and drew it on me.

I screamed, “No!” and pumped three .40 caliber rounds into Roscoe’s chest. Roscoe’s eyes went wide. His mouth gaped. The gun dropped from his hand as he fell backward onto the sand.

“Oh God! Roscoe!” I shoved my gun back into my shoulder holster and lunged forward, landing on my knees beside my deputy. I pressed my hands against the growing red stain on Roscoe’s shirt, “Roscoe! C’mon man! C’mon!” I looked frantically at Cassi, “Call it in!” and turned back to Roscoe. Roscoe looked into my eyes for a moment before his eyes flickered and then were still. I put my fingers to Roscoe’s neck, then slumped back on my heels, sputtering “Roscoe—”

I stood over Roscoe for what seemed like hours, just looking into his young, still face. Cassi walked down from the parking lot and stood beside me. I looked up, “His gun wasn’t loaded, was it?”

Cassi dropped her head, “No.”

I looked back down at Roscoe. Finally, I managed, “I wish he had come to me. I wish he had said something.”

“I know,” Cassi looked into my face for a long moment. She hesitated, “We need to go Chief.”

We stood in silence for another few moments, then I lifted my gun from my holster and handed it to Cassi, “They’ll need this.”

I looked down one last time at the lifeless body of my young deputy, shook my head and whispered, “Roscoe—”

I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, “Let’s go,” then we walked up the beach to the waiting sheriff.

## Chapter 5

That night I stood with a foot on the rail and one hand on the bar, throwing shots of whiskey down my throat as a honky-tonk band stirred up the crowd at Max's Beachcomber. I pushed a shot glass across the bar, "Again, Max."

Max filled the glass, "You wanna talk, Marco?"

"No," I knocked back the shot and slammed the glass on the bar. "Again."

Max hesitated, "I think you've had—"

"Again!" I growled then dropped my head, "Please."

Max filled the glass and looked down at me.

I looked back at him, "I'm sorry, Max."

"I know, Marco. I know."

I picked up the shot and turned toward the crowd, absently watching the couples shuffle and spin as they made their way around the dance floor in a synchronized chaos. I looked down at the floor and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath, looked up, downed the shot, and put the glass back on the bar. I turned away from the revelers and spotted an open booth in the back corner. I did a stumbling imitation of a two-step through the crowd to go claim it.

I flopped down in the booth and leaned against the wall, kicking my feet up on the bench seat. I caught the waitress's eye and ordered up a Lone Star. As the waitress sauntered off to the bar, I saw Cassi talking to Max, who looked over at me and nodded in my direction. Cassi made her way through the crowd to my time out corner.

"This seat taken?"

I threw my arm dramatically at the seat as I continued to stare at the dancers and absently rubbed my left ring finger.

Cassi sat on the opposite bench as the waitress returned with my beer. Cassi ordered a whiskey, neat, and turned to me, "How you doing Chief?"

"Been better."

We sat in silence watching the dancers until the waitress returned with Cassi's whiskey.

I watched the waitress walk away for a moment, then said to Cassi, "Why did he have to get mixed up with a married woman?"

"Sometimes you just can't choose who you fall in love with."

I mumbled, "Yeah, well it ain't fucking right," and sipped at my beer as the band wound down a slow country waltz.

For a long moment, Cassi looked at me, then asked, "Who was she?"

I cocked my head and raised an eyebrow at Cassi, "Who was who?"

"The one who's got you all knotted up."

I grunted and turned my attention back to my beer, resuming the pace I started with the whiskey. The band started in on a western swing number.

I turned and put my feet on the floor under the table, took the last swallow of my beer then absently picked at the label.

"Her name was Suzi," I began, "I had just graduated from the academy and it was my first day on the beat in Queens. She worked at the corner market where we stopped for lunch and was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I was completely, totally, and innocently in love with that girl. I felt like I was a 14-year old kid all over again. After I'd been going there for a while she started coming around the counter and walking me to the door. No matter how busy they were she would walk me to the door. Then, one day, she hugged me and whispered 'See you soon' in my ear. She shook my soul and I thought my entire life would explode. It paralyzed me," a trembling smile flickered across my face and just as quickly was gone.

"I didn't do anything about it of course. I barely even talked to her. It took me a month to get up the courage to ask her out. We dated for about six months then I asked her to marry me on a carriage ride through Central Park at Christmas."

The waitress walked by and replaced my empty. I nodded.

"I didn't figure you for the romantic type," Cassi smiled and idly sipped at her drink, barely making a dent.

I chuckled, "Yeah, well, it was probably ten below but I was sweating like a linebacker I was so nervous. By some act of God she said yes. We were married the following September."

"Sounds beautiful."

"I was a rookie cop and married to the prettiest girl in the greatest city in the world," I tipped the bottle and felt the cold, crisp lager wash down my throat. "Living on a rookie cop's salary wasn't easy, but I put in some overtime and she stayed at the market so we got by. This was the mid eighties. Things were still pretty rough in New York back then, before Giuliani came in and cleaned it up. I worked the beat for nearly five years. I finally got my gold shield in 1990 and started working vice. I'd been working some pretty long hours with my regular patrol and all the overtime, so Suzi was excited about the change. She thought things would settle down and we could start thinking about a family."

I sat back, took another hit of beer and looked over at Cassi, "I'm sorry. You probably don't want to hear any of this."

She looked into my eyes, "What happened once you made detective?"

I started on the label of the new bottle, "Unfortunately you can't plan crime so things didn't get much better. I was doing a lot of undercover work and working stakeouts a few nights a month. Gang bangers don't exactly keep regular hours."

Cassi took another small sip. I took a long swallow.

"We got by, took vacations to the Jersey shore when we could. Mostly weekends a few times a summer. I thought we were doing OK. Suzi seemed happy enough. I knew she wanted kids, you know, the whole biological clock and all that, but I always thought there would be time. If I could just work my way up, I could make Captain and maybe get my own squad or something. I was really making a name for myself. Arrests were up. My career managed to survive the disaster that was Mayor Dinkins and I really felt like I was making a difference. I

didn't want to slow down. I caught the attention of the brass and moved into homicide in '97 as a 2nd Grade Detective."

I took another long drag on the bottle then put it down, making figure eights with its wet base on the table. I took a deep breath and continued without looking up.

"My time away from home was just too much for Suzi. She had an office job by then and started taking weekend trips with her girlfriends and going out with them after work. She would get calls at night and would go out to the back porch to take them, saying her girlfriend was going through a tough breakup or had a sick parent or was fighting with her husband-lover-boyfriend. I didn't think anything of it at first," I took in a faltering breath, "but I started to wonder after a few months. This was '03. That summer we caught a big case—triple homicide—and it ate up most of my days and nights. One weekend Suzi told me she was going to the shore with her girlfriends and I said fine. She left pretty angry.

"Well, I pulled an all-nighter that Friday, staking out the suspect, and when I got home the next morning my neighbor was out mowing his lawn. We chatted for a bit, then he asked where my wife was that morning, if she was feeling OK, because she usually never missed her morning run. I said she was at the shore with her girlfriends for the weekend. He looked at me funny and said he had seen her the night before at a restaurant with a guy she introduced as her cousin. I said she probably changed her plans last minute then I went inside," I finished off my beer and sat back. "Suzi didn't have any cousins."

I locked my fingers behind my head and put my elbows on the table. Cassi reached out and placed her hand gently on my arm, "Oh Chief. I'm so sorry."

I took my hands from my head and put them on the table in front of me, my fingers still locked tightly, "I confronted her and she fessed up, said she was tired of being alone all the time. I said nice of her to let me know. I'm out there serving my fellow man and she's out servicing some piece of shit banker or stockbroker or tidy bowl man or whoever the fuck. She moved out the following week. We were divorced by Christmas, two years shy of 20 years married."

Cassi grabbed my clenched hands in hers, "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, I know. And I'm the sorriest of them all. The following spring I called up my old partner Bobby Lopez, who was elected Texas Attorney General a few years earlier, and told him my story, told him I couldn't bear being in the city without her, that I was interested in a geographic cure and did he know of anything. He said Sand Point happened to be looking for a police chief, I said that's as good as any, he said with my record in New York he wouldn't even have to pull in favors, I said fine. I moved down here the next month and started over."

Cassi gave my hands a squeeze. I slid down in my seat and nodded at the waitress, who dutifully replaced my empty bottle with a full one, which was half gone before she reached her next table.

When we left, I surrendered to Cassi's demands and handed her my keys. She drove me home and walked me up the front stairs, into my house, and down the hall into my bedroom. I placed a clumsy arm around her waist, frowning drunkenly as she took off my jacket. She put it over the chair in my bedroom, then took off my tie, shirt, and shoes, "That's as far as I'm going, cowboy, you'll have to manage the rest yourself."

She walked me to my bed, where I fell awkwardly onto my stomach, a foot and an arm hanging over the side. Cassi smoothed the hair off my face and said goodnight, called herself a cab, and turned off the light. I mumbled, "night night," which probably sounded more like, "nuh nuh," as she locked the door behind her.

## Chapter 6

I stood at the water's edge with Cassi as the last crimson rays faded to the west. I took Cassi's hand in mine and looked into her eyes, "Thanks for taking care of me last night. I guess I was pretty much a mess."

Cassi waved it off, "Eh, it was nothing."

I dropped her hand and turned back to the sunset and the gently breaking waves. Cassi looked out onto the water and joined me in my silence. Finally I said shakily, "I've been a cop for twenty six years. For the first time in my life I don't know what to do."

Cassi turned her gaze from the water and looked at me. She placed her hand on my face, pulling it up to meet hers, "He was just a messed up kid who fell in love with the wrong girl."

"You talking about me or Roscoe?"

Cassi chuckled. I gave a half-hearted smile.

We stood in silence for another few moments. Finally, I bent toward her, kissed her gently on the cheek, then walked up to my truck, leaving her standing by the water as the last remaining light dropped below the horizon.

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