

Chapter 1

“To expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life and this is a softness that leads to bitterness.”

- Flannery O’Connoor

I knew immediately she was dead, half-spinning and languidly bobbing in the dark water. One arm appeared to be twisted behind her, but the other floated free, back and forth, back and forth, as if beckoning me to herself, like an Iowa Ahab, bidding me come see.

At first, I thought the drugs and alcohol were playing tricks on my eyes. Beset by insomnia, I had downed three Melatonin and three Three Philosophers Belgian ale and remained wide-eyed. So I had driven into town, walked out onto the double-arched limestone bridge spanning the Whitetail River seeking solace and looking for calm in the black water dropping down the small spillway, a smooth, uniform curtain, churning into brief curls of white water before calming and turning black again and heading on south.

I stared, thinking that maybe in doing so she might change into a mattress or a bunch of plastic wrapping or a cheap, abandoned Styrofoam cooler – anything else that would make me laugh at my first perception. But it was a body and the body was

naked and it looked like a woman and I suddenly wished to God I had not seen it.

I looked away. I looked back. It was a body, alright.

My impulse was to flee, to just go back to my truck and go home and hope someone else would find her and be drawn into whatever drama awaited. But Sheriff Payne would hear and investigate and someone would mention they saw my truck parked by the bridge in the middle of the night and then I'd have to answer questions.

The only thing for me to do now, I realized, was to buck up whatever ethical and moral mettle I have in me and go to the woman in the water. How could I leave her?

I took off, slipped went to one knee, then arose and scrambled full bore back across the bridge and down the grassy slope to the river's edge, my right hamstring nipping at me to slow down as I rushed to her, splashing into frigid, waist-deep water and reaching out to the body, not caring about crime scene forensics or damaging evidence. I just wanted to get her out of that damn water, and when I saw that she was just a girl, not even a woman yet, I charged to her side, slipped my hands under her cold arms from behind, pulled her free from whatever had snagged her, and lugged her out of the water. I placed her softly on the thick dead grass alongside the river.

The body was very cold, no longer supple, no longer anything but dead.

As soon as I set her down, I pulled off my sweatshirt and covered her above the waist, and then my t-shirt and covered her below the waist. The air was cold on my bare skin, and my jeans were wet and cold, too. I squatted down next to the dead girl and my shoes squished.

I said a quick prayer and rubbed my eyes hard with my palms. Her head was at an odd angle, so I slipped my right hand behind her head to move it a little, to make it more comfortable. I know, I know, but what difference did it make if she were dead? The point is, it made a difference to *me*.

It was then that my fingers found the two depressions in the

back of her skull. Her long, matted hair nearly obscured them, but a little exploration was called for. Stunned, I let my fingers linger under her hair to be sure. I was sure, and then, for just an instant, I was holding another dead person's head, my friend's, in the streets of Sarajevo after we thought we had cleaned up that neighborhood, the sweet smell of cordite drifting in the air like a woman's fragrance on a breeze.

My attention rushed back to the girl. Wanting to disbelieve her wounds, I laid her head back down, slow and easy. Then I just placed my right hand on her dear, lovely forehead, and moved a tangle of drenched hair to the side, away from her face. For her. For me, mostly. That's when I noticed a slash of whiteness alongside her skull. There in the dark, at first I thought it was exposed bone, but when I touched it I realized it was just a blaze of white hair slightly forward of her left ear, an anomaly in her otherwise raven hair. It looked like a fat comma or that Nike swoosh sign.

It takes about ninety-seven seconds to patrol all of Rockbluff village, so I hoped a Deputy Sheriff would come by and investigate my abandoned truck up by the bridge. The law enforcement and EMS people know my truck, a mixed blessing. So I sat there on my haunches, keeping the girl company, waiting for someone to come along.

I had thought that a look at the river would make me sleepy. That's why I was in town. Or maybe a stroll through one of the solid, middle-class neighborhoods, ambling down darkened streets with pools of light at each corner from the Olde English streetlights. Thinking pleasant thoughts of couples cuddling spoons-like in a warm bed, breathing in and out in perfect rest; of children curled up with teddy bears and well-worn baseball gloves; of old white-muzzled, obese dogs snoring on downstairs sofas.

And then I looked down at the dead girl and realized my thoughts were maybe just so much romantic nonsense – that the couples cheat and the children torture baby birds and the dog bites. Still, I cling to my soft dreams like a Congressman clings to a kickback.

I heard a car approach, pull over on the bridge, and cut the

engine. I heard a door open and slam shut. Heavy footsteps. A tube of light played along the north side of the bridge, then the south side, finding us. I squinted into the beam in my face and shouted, "Get down here!"

I thought about calling out, "Got a floater here!" like they do in movies about crime in Philly or New York or Strawberry Point, but I didn't. She wasn't a floater; she was a girl.

Deputy Sheriff Doltch, an old acquaintance, a big guy, solid and true, started my way. He slipped once coming down the bank, then came up to us, shaking his head and keeping the flashlight on the dead girl. He was muttering something I couldn't understand, then he said, "That you, O'Shea?"

"Of course," I said, glad to have the flashlight off me. "Would you call someone, Steven? Please?"

Doltch handed me his flashlight and I shut it off, leaving us in darkness and the sound of the spillway. I tried to stand up, my knees burning and my right thigh biceps a little tight, but I managed it, by degrees. I heard Doltch talking to Sheriff Payne. Then he stopped.

"Sheriff's on the way," Doltch said.

"We gotta stop meeting like this, Steven," I said, remembering the Soderstroms.

Doltch ignored my remark. "What happened?"

I looked at him. "How would I know? I was out for a walk and crossed the bridge and looked downstream and there she was."

"Sounds familiar," he said. "Like out at the Soderstrom place. Why is that, Thomas?"

"Just unlucky," I said, "but you need to know we're not talking about the Soderstrom place, Steven, so let's move on, pal." Something about my tone informed him of my displeasure with his comment and question. He shrugged his big shoulders and shifted his weight.

I changed the subject back to the girl. I said, "I have no idea how long she's been there."

Doltch seemed relieved to be back to the business of the

moment. He looked at his watch. "You were out for a walk at two-thirty in the morning?"

"Gives me a chance to get acquainted with those who serve and protect."

"Always with the attitude, O'Shea." He shook his head. I thought I saw a little smile playing across his lips, but I might have been wrong. Might've been a smirk.

I said nothing.

"Was she there on the bank when you saw her?"

"Yes. She drowned; then, to make it easy on you, she crawled up here on the grass and took her clothes off."

Doltch, quick learner, ignored my insight. "Do you know her?"

"No."

We waited a couple of minutes in silence, the three of us. The wisecracker, the cop, and the corpse. Another cruiser came from the area of the courthouse, where the Sheriff's Department is housed in the basement.

"That would be Sheriff Payne," Doltch said.

"What took him so long? Doesn't he know Holy Grounds is closed? No doughnuts until dawn." Holy Grounds is a coffee shop not far from the high school, serving excellent coffee and a wide variety of baked goods, including scones, bear claws and, oh yes, doughnuts.

Doltch said nothing, walking away and up the bank toward the bridge, grunting with the effort. I continued to look at the girl. In the dark, she looked like she was sleeping, and I guess she was. She had a sweet, untroubled face and very dark hair except for that white mark. That's all I could tell. But I was sure that Rockbluff CSI would come through again and discover the truth.

"What is it about you and dead bodies?" Payne asked scrambling down to where I was standing, rubbing the back of my leg. My knees were on fire, too, but I wasn't going to mention it and ruin my tough guy mystique.

"I had nothing to do with it," I said.

Doltch piped in. "Said he was out for a walk and just *happened* to see this girl in the river."

I didn't care for the man's tone. The sarcasm again. "Steven, if you'd like to start something, I'm sure the Sheriff would turn his back for those thirty seconds it would take for resolution." Getting snippy in my old age. Punk kids.

Doltch said nothing.

I looked back at the Sheriff. Harmon Payne's a big guy, but not big like an offensive lineman. He's about six-four and lean and wiry, and I do believe he could take care of himself. Ex-Marine, law enforcement professional. All that lovely training. He said, "Those your clothes covering her?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Thomas," Payne said. He walked over to the girl and gingerly lifted up my sweatshirt and looked, then set it back. He repeated the process with my t-shirt, shaking his head the whole time. "God Almighty" he said, and stood up.

"Another suicide, looks like," Doltch said.

"*Another* suicide?" I asked.

"Don't you read the papers, Thomas?" Doltch asked, with the sarcasm again "There was a girl found out in northwest Iowa a few months back. Just like this. They take off their clothes and jump in and drown themselves. Boy trouble usually. They leave behind poetic notes."

"No point in bothering the coroner then, is there? Just sign her up as a suicide and look for family and forget about it, right?" I said, my own sarcasm back at Doltch, holding in check what I knew about the girl's wounds. Let the officials figure it out.

An ambulance pulled up, lights flashing but without the siren. No point in waking up the villagers. The EMS people came down, lifted my clothes from the body and gave them to me, seeing as how I was the only one standing around shirtless. Steel-trap minds. They took away the girl in a dark body bag.

"You been hittin' the weights, Thomas," Payne said. Not a question.

"Now and then," I said, slipping into my tee and sweatshirt. They felt good against a sudden, chill breeze that was just cranking up, but I was afraid everything south of my belly-button was trying to turn blue.

“Deputy, you can go ahead and call it a night after you mark this off with tape, take photos, and write your report,” Payne said. The he turned to me as Doltch hiked up to his

cruiser. “Let’s you and me have a cup of coffee, unless you’re afraid it’ll keep you awake.”

“Coffee? Where? Everything’s closed,” I said as we turned and walked up the riverbank together. The sight of the dead girl was stuck in my head. I rubbed my hand across my face to stop the stinging in my eyes and nose. I hate it when that happens. I was just glad it was dark out.

“Coffee’s up at my office. I got a pot just made when Deputy Doltch called.”

“Your coffee? I’d have to be desperate.”

“Which you are.”

“Which I am,” I said. “And I’m not worried about it keeping me awake. There won’t be any sleep for me tonight.” “Indeed. Me either.”

Sheriff Payne climbed into his cruiser and turned it around and drove back over the bridge. I followed in my pickup truck. I decided the next time I couldn’t sleep, I’d just shoot myself.