

A person wearing a long, dark coat and a hat stands on a beach, looking out at the ocean. In the distance, a long wooden pier extends into the water. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

THE
Bitter
END

GRADY E. McMEHAN



The Bitter End is a gripping tale of one man's downward spiral into a pit of self-destruction. Only the love of one good woman can save him from certain destruction and even she is challenged to the limit.

The Bitter End

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6027.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

THE BITTER END

Copyright © 2009 Grady E. McMehan

ISBN 978-1-60145-894-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2009

CHAPTER ONE

THE DUST HAD SETTLED BUT CHARLIE HAD NOT

Charlie pushed on his foot to slide his butt around on his bar stool. Just as his butt began to move, his shoe slipped on some grease and slammed, toes first, into the base of the bar. The pain was immediate. The nerves in the great toe on his right foot throbbed to life. The memories arrived right behind the pain. Like uninvited relatives at a summer cookout, they pulled up a chair, and made themselves comfortable. It was pretty clear that they weren't going anywhere anytime soon.

This was the same toe he had broken when he kicked the hell out of the electric wench on Endless Summer. To show its gratitude, the damn boat caught on fire and sunk, leaving him and Billy floating around in the Atlantic like blobs of chum waiting for the sharks to arrive. The boat was gone, but she was most definitely not forgotten. Endless Summer was now part of the island lore, and her reputation grew with every passing beer.

Fighting back the urge to scream, Charlie settled for yelling in a loud and clear voice - "Son-of-a-bitch!"

Samantha glanced his way to see if he was alright. He waved her off, signaling that he was okay. She felt a small wave of sadness wash over her. Charlie Mann was never going to change - not really. She was satisfied that in some small way he had tried to follow Captain Eddie's advice about finding a good

woman and holding on to her, but some “things” could not be changed, and Charlie Mann was one of those “things.” Besides, Charlie liked his beer almost as much as he liked his women, and it seemed to her that he was constantly consuming one and calling for a fresh one. It was a hard habit to break, and she understood that fact better than anyone on the island.

Samantha looked around her bar and saw the faces of so many of her friends. She tried to reassure herself that it would all work out for the best, but at times that was a very hard sell. Being around people who drank all day was a constant reminder of life with her father in his final years. She had cared for him and helped run this bar as the last stages of a life “well lived” came to an end.

Alcohol had left its mark all over his body and inside his brain, forcing her to shoulder the burdens of caring for a father in failing health, while she raised a daughter as a single mother, all the while making sure that her father’s business didn’t fall apart. And now here she was, running the same bar which had brought him to his knees and eventually put him in his grave.

She knew that Charlie had been through a lot too. He had found some level of respectability as a charter boat Captain and he had grown really close to Billy Bradley and Kelli, only to see them leave as quickly as they had arrived. Billy had moved back to Florida months ago. Samantha could tell that Charlie missed Billy. They were kindred spirits. Brothers of sorts. They balanced each other and life had been fun for Charlie with him around.

Kelli was gone too. She and Tony had taken his boat further north, having left with little more than a few “goodbyes” and a hug or two. One day they were sitting on the back of Tony’s boat

THE BITTER END

drinking wine, and the next morning they were gone. Whenever Charlie downed a few shots, he would admit that he missed being able to talk to her and give her grief. It was probably best this way. Together the three of them were a tough act to follow, but with any one of them missing, things became unbalanced.

Billy and Kelli had left and he had stayed. The island was, after all, his home. It was comfortable; it was familiar; it was reasonably safe. Like it or not, he had roots here. He had become as much a part of this island as the water and the sun.

A little grey was showing in his hair now, and a few more “sunshine” wrinkles had set up housekeeping at the corners of his eyes. What bothered him most were the morning aches and pains in his joints marking the wear and tear that comes from just being alive another year. When he let himself think about it, he understood that it was all part of the process. Even so, he didn’t like it and he generally denied that it meant anything at all, really. In his mind, he was still a “young” man – just not as young as he once was.

In a thoughtful moment, Richard had once called him an island “icon.” Jake, not to be outdone, had disagreed with Richard, deciding that Charlie was more like a “tourist attraction” than an icon. Wendy ignored them both and concluded that, when the light caught his face just right, he looked a little bit like a younger version of Captain Eddie. Charlie didn’t know whether he should be flattered or insulted so he did what he did best. He ordered another beer and ignored them all. Deep down, he was just glad to still be alive with most of his body parts still working.

Not that life on the island was all that easy. He could scratch out a decent living running his charter boat, and for the most part, he had become a responsible adult. He did miss having Jose' working for him, but he understood. Times had changed for Jose' too. He was married now, with his first child on the way. He kept himself busy running his own restaurant and Hispanic grocery store.

His was as much a success story as the island would allow of those who found it necessary to stay away from the mainland. One day he would get his papers and that would change, but for now, he was satisfied to stay on the island and avoid the law.

Charlie took pride in having been a part of Jose's success. He had even helped Jose' get a loan to start his business. What a laugh that had been. Charlie Mann helping someone "GET" a loan. But times had changed and the insurance money from the final sinking of Endless Summer had purchased them all a new life - of sorts.

Across the bar he could see Samantha working to train a new waitress. The new girl was cute. Maybe he would invite her back to his boat after her shift was finished, if he felt like it. If he didn't - well, so what. Sometimes sleeping alone was better anyway. After all, as an iconic tourist attraction, he did have something of a reputation to uphold. When it stopped being fun, he would know that the end was near. But that time was not now. It was still fun, and each new season brought a whole new crop of prospective playmates flooding onto his island from the mainland. Life was good, and so was he.

There were a few disappointments, but nothing he would discuss. He and Samantha had given it a try for a little while, but

THE BITTER END

Charlie was still Charlie and Samantha was still Samantha. He couldn't quit hitting on the ladies, and Samantha refused to ignore his wondering eye. She had enough to worry about without adding Charlie to her list. Running a bar and being a single mom were full time jobs. She did not need another "child" to watch. She needed a man – just not a "Charlie Mann."

On the plus side, Frankie Townes had mercifully disappeared from Charlie's life. It was nice to be able to sleep most nights without waking up every time a strange noise made its way to his brain. His experiences with Frankie had taught him all he ever wanted to know about the exciting world of Frankie Townes. Power and money were strong attractions, but dying to keep it was a drag.

For now, life on the island was more than enough for Charlie Mann. Fortunately for Charlie, the anesthetic power of barley and hops worked their magic one more time, and gradually, several beers later, those unpleasant memories of bygone days mercifully drifted back to wherever they stayed when they weren't bothering him. For a little while longer, he was once again the Charlie Mann of old, and life was good again.

As if to signal that better times were ahead, a cute young lady slid onto the bar stool next to Charlie, put her arm around his neck and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Hi Charlie – glad to see me?" She asked.

"Of course, Jane, you're my favorite girl to buy me a drink," Charlie replied with an evil grin on his face.

Across the bar, Samantha watched as Jane and Charlie traded insults and compliments. Sensing that Charlie was thinking impure thoughts as he checked out Jane's ample cleavage - showcased by a tank top designed to get attention - Samantha decided to change the direction of this particular conversation.

"Charlie, have you seen George this week?" Samantha asked. "He's usually here two or three times a week and I haven't seen him for at least a week."

"He's been over at the hospital," blurted out the attractive young lady sitting next to Charlie. "Damn! I wasn't supposed to say that. I'll lose my job if anyone finds out I broke patient confidentiality."

"Don't worry, Jane, you didn't say why he was there, so you're okay," Charlie assured her as he patted her on her forearm and ordered her another drink.

"That's true. I didn't say anything at all about him being in the Psych Ward. Oh, son-of-a-bitch! I just did it again!"

"Yeah, that last little slip of the tongue was a little more serious than the first one. So tell us. Why was he in the psych ward? And don't tell us he was just visiting an old friend," Charlie prodded.

"Charlie, you know I can't tell you that."

"I don't see why not. You've already told me he was in the hospital. Then you told me he was in the Psych Ward. You're in

THE BITTER END

so deep now that it doesn't matter. So open up girl and tell me all you know," Charlie ordered.

"It's not the same. The first time it just slipped out. If I say anything else, it would be totally unprofessional. Is this my drink? Now I suggest you tell me you're sorry that you tried to make me be a bad girl."

"OKAY, hold up here. First, I did not try to make you be a bad girl. If I had, I'm pretty sure I would remember that. Second, if I did try to make you be a bad girl, I sure as hell would not be apologizing for it. Third, I already know why George was visiting his counselor at the hospital. He has to see him every six months to get his prescriptions filled. Finally, yes that's your drink. Drink it all down and then we'll discuss this bad girl fantasy of yours. On second thought, why don't I order us a couple of Cherry Bombs and we can discuss your badness as we go," Charlie said as he winked at her.

"Don't fall for his little bad girl routine," Samantha butted in. "Let me tell you about the time he tried that line on me. He got me to dress up in his little French Maid costume. Then all he wanted to do was watch me clean his house. I was half way through vacuuming the damn place when I realized that Mr. Spicy Romantic here was watching football on TV and drinking a beer."

Samantha poured the Cherry Bombs into shot glasses and watched as Charlie and Jane downed them with one large gulp.

After about ten minutes, Charlie waved Sam over again. "Give us one more, Sam and then I have to go work on the boat," Charlie offered.

“One more round it is. Then promise me you’ll call it a day,” Samantha replied.

“It’s a deal,” Charlie promised.

Thirty minutes later, Samantha watched as Charlie limped across the parking lot and headed toward the boat ramp. He had his arm across Jane’s shoulder to steady him as he leaned on her for support. Jane was supposed to be helping him to the boat, but Sam had heard him offer to give Jane a tour. She knew damn good and well what that meant.

“Charlie Mann – you’d better behave yourself,” she called out to him. Charlie didn’t turn around, but he did wave one hand over his head to signal message received and understood.

“That’s somebody’s daughter!” She yelled in one final, useless attempt to get through to him. Then she turned her attention back to the bar. Some things never change, and Charlie Mann was one of them.

Samantha glanced down at a letter lying beside the cash register. She picked it up for the fifth time and tried to make sense of it. It was from Sloan Kelso, a local realtor. She knew Sloan well enough to know that he was not to be trusted. If they had taught ethics in his real estate school, Sloan had slept through those classes. He was an occasional customer who hit on the waitresses and worse, he was a poor tipper. If Sloan Kelso was offering to do business with you, you had better keep both hands on your wallet or, in her case, on your purse. Yet here it was, a letter notifying her that Mr. Kelso had someone interested in purchasing her business.

THE BITTER END

To make matters worse, the purchase price quoted in the letter was more than fair. Not that it mattered. With the mortgage she had on this place, even if she sold the business at his price, she'd do little more than break even. Then she'd be unemployed. The value of the business to her was the income stream it provided. It would be years before the mortgage was paid down enough to put any real money in her pocket. That fact alone made the decision process easy. Thanks, but no thanks.

She'd call him tomorrow and let him know that she wasn't interested, but it still left her wondering what the heck was going on. One thing for sure, there was more to this than an uninvited offer to buy her bar, but what was it? That thought was lost when a customer at the end of the bar waved an empty beer bottle in the air to get her attention. She waved to the customer to let him know that she saw him. She stuffed the letter back into its envelope, and made her way across the bar. Time to get back to work.

CHAPTER TWO

GEORGE, GEORGE, GEORGE OF THE JUNGLE

“Don’t look now, but here comes Mr. Personality,” Jake whispered.

“Who, George?” Richard replied.

“Who else? Never talks to anyone and never takes off his sunglasses. You got to admit, he is one of the strangest critters in this zoo we call a bar. Got to give it to him, though, between that hat of his and those sunglasses, he does make quite the fashion statement.”

“Well that’s hard, coming from you. Have you looked in a mirror lately, Mr. Dress for Success? Besides, maybe he just has sensitive eyes,” Richard offered.

“Hey! Give me a break here. I work in crap all day. Besides, it’s not like you got any room to talk. Have you looked at your self lately? You could cut your material costs in half if you worked at getting more paint on the walls and less on your shoes. Besides, all I’m saying is it’s just not natural. If I hadn’t seen him take his glasses off once or twice to clean’em, I’d swear he was wearing them to hide something.”

“Let it go Jake. Besides, the sunglasses don’t bother me nearly as much as his hair. I’ve never seen hair grow in so many

THE BITTER END

different directions on the same head. Looks like an explosion in a Kudzu patch.”

Jake laughed out loud and Richard poked him in the ribs to shut him up. Both men immediately looked down at the bar as if they were examining something in front of them. Out of the corner of their eye they could see George’s head turn in their direction, as if to see what was so damn funny. He held the stare just long enough to send the message and then he slid onto a bar stool at the end of the bar with the fewest number of customers.

George ordered his usual Seven and Seven, flipped out a small paper pad and laid it on the bar. He fished around in his shirt pocket and pulled out a stubby drawing pencil. He appeared to be examining the point for a few seconds and then, as if satisfied, he started making scribbling marks on the pad while he drank. Over the course of the next hour, George would order two more drinks, and when he finished the last drink, he would pay and leave. He was, after all, a man of very consistent actions.

George Carson had grown up within twenty miles of Admiral’s Cay and he stayed pretty much to himself. The war had left its mark on him, just as it had so many others his age, and he found it hard to make friends. He was a small, wiry man of uncertain ancestry. Some European genes had mixed with some Native American genes, and there was possibly some genetic material from a few other nationalities floating around in his gene pool. No one had ever seen any of George’s relatives, and no one in his right mind had ever been drunk enough to make that particular subject a topic of discussion. He was understood to be over 60, and he had the wrinkles on his face to prove it. His hair was a crazy mix of salt and pepper shades, and

it appeared to grow in every direction. He was certainly one odd looking specimen.

His temperament was cold and his personality was a question mark. No one had ever heard him speak out in anger, and no one had ever seen him react with any particular emotion. He was generally felt to be a loner. The only information circulated to explain the way he acted was a whispered speculation that he had been a sniper or something like that in the Vietnam War.

George always wore sunglasses and while he did shave, it was pretty clear that he did not have a regular schedule for such tasks. Sometimes he had a beard and sometimes he had a mustache. Whatever the case, he was never clean shaven. On the other hand, his clothes were always clean and he did not appear to neglect his personal hygiene. Although he was a regular at the bar, he always sat by himself when possible. If the bar was too crowded for him to have his space, he would just pay his bill and leave. He would talk to you if you spoke to him, but he seldom, if ever, spoke first.

Some years past, Charlie had made an effort to befriend George. He had even accepted an invitation from George to go hunting. That had turned out to be a most informative and yet chilling adventure. Charlie was quick to admit that the experience had left him shaken and determined to graciously decline any future invitations. When asked about the experience, Charlie would politely decline to discuss it other than to say that if George was not a sniper, he should have been. Charlie did confirm that George's ability to kill things with a single shot from ridiculously long range was most assuredly a fact. Having

THE BITTER END

confirmed that much he would close with, "Enough said," and change the subject.

George was a Vietnam Vet, that much was accepted as fact. As to the rumors of his having been a sniper during the war, that was most likely true too. One of the nurses who worked at the Veteran's Hospital said she had seen his medical file and from what little she had been able to read before the records custodian walked in on her, George had been asked to leave the military because he enjoyed disappearing into the jungle and doing freelance work. Apparently, killing the enemy was not much of a problem for George.

What did eventually become a problem was the fact that during his third tour of duty, George began to find fewer and fewer reasons to distinguish between his choice of targets. It was generally impossible to tell who the enemy was in that asshole war. A friendly would watch your back during the day, and then stab you in that same back during the night. Everyone who lived through it agreed that it was an insane situation. There was no reliable way to know who to trust, because as it turned out, there really was no one who *could* be trusted. A friendly was a friendly only as long as being a friendly was to his or her advantage. Change the situation ever so slightly, and friend became foe with no questions asked.

The only constant in the entire war was the fact that the Americans were the ones who did not belong. In the eyes of any of the Vietnamese who felt secure in expressing his opinion, it was the Americans who were blowing things up and killing other Vietnamese. No matter how noble America's intent, that fact never changed. Vietnam was their country and the Americans were nothing more than uninvited trouble makers.

The sooner the Americans left, the sooner things could begin to get back to normal. At least that's what they all thought, and looking back, maybe they were right.

That was the world George called home for three violent years between his eighteenth and his twenty-first birthdays. It was a dangerous world and it was totally unpredictable. The only way to stay alive was to stay vigilant, shoot first and ask questions later. As George was fond of saying back then, whenever he was off duty, and after he'd had a few tokes of local product, "Hey man, it's a jungle out there. It's kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten. North Vietnamese - South Vietnamese, they all look pretty much the same through a scope. My job is to kill'em and it's God's job to sort'em out. I can live with that."

Nobody ever asked him how he came to live on the island and he never felt the need to offer an explanation. Some things just were. He lived on a government pension, but he would do odd jobs for cash. The rules of employment were simple. You had to tell him exactly what you wanted done. If he accepted the job, you had to leave him the hell alone while he worked, and pay him promptly when the job was finished. Everyone agreed that if George accepted a job, he did the job exactly as agreed, and usually finished it on time. He never asked for money until the job was completed to everyone's satisfaction, and no one had ever been stupid enough to stiff him.

George was just one more of the island's quaint and colorful characters. He, and dozens more like him, made the place what it was, different but interesting. He was also a favorite topic of conversation between Jake and Richard, because they were both convinced that George made them look acceptably normal. In some ways, they were right.

THE BITTER END

As was so often the case with Jake and Richard their attention span was just barely equal to the amount of time it took to drink a beer. Before their conversation about George was finished, Jake glanced up at one of the TV screens hanging from the ceiling around the bar just in time to catch the end of an interview with some nationally famous psychic talking about her visions of where some poor missing person was to be found.

Jake abandoned his conversation about George and shifted his focus to the talking head on the TV screen. Finally, he spoke.

“Somebody please explain this to me. Here’s this woman claiming to be in touch with the spirit world and the spirits are sending her messages about some pitiful missing person who she claims has been murdered. But the message she’s get’n is all vague. If the spirits are going to the trouble to tell her something or warn her of some danger – why all this mysterious, vague bullshit? Why is it always something like – I see water nearby and there’s garbage on the ground and I hear cars going by. How’s that supposed to help? Either the spirit world is caught up in some never ending game of charades or this message from beyond stuff is nonsense. If the spirits from beyond want to tell me where the body’s buried, why not just *TELL ME*? You know, the body is buried at the end of Poplar Street, 50 feet off the road towards the creek, under some dirt and leaves next to the holly bush that looks like a cow. Now a man could do something with that kind of information – but no – that would be way too easy. Instead, the message from the spirit world’s got to be all fuzzy and confusing. What’s the use of bothering?”

Richard welcomed the change of topics. Talking about George made him nervous. Besides, here was something he could sink his teeth into.

“Jake, I swear I’ll never figure you out if I live to be a hundred. People like you go to China and then act all bothered and confused because the people there don’t speak English. You’re surprised that they all walk around talking some foreign language, like Chinese! Now there’s a surprise for you. Then you complain because you can’t understand a word they’re saying – and you come home and tell everybody how rude and stupid they were. Did you ever stop to think that maybe you’re just as confusing and rude to them?”

“Hell no! I speak English just fine, thank-you. If they want to talk to me, they could at least use words I can understand,” Jake replied in a somewhat indignant tone.

Richard straightened up. The game was on. Jake had taken the bait.

“Yeah – well maybe they feel the same way. If you want to talk to them, maybe you should use words they can understand.”

“Richard – what the hell are you talking about? I was talking about communicating with the spirit world and somehow you wound up in China. I swear, you’re getting to be about as bad as them spirit things – the way you screw up a conversation. I need another beer if I’m going to have any hope of understanding any of this.”

Richard did not intend to let him off that easily. He could tell that he had him off balance so he pressed his advantage by giving him a mental head fake to see what he would say.

THE BITTER END

“Jake, all I’m saying is that just maybe the spirits don’t speak the same language as those of us here in the land of the living. Me and you – we speak English. But maybe the spirits speak Spiritese, all symbolic and spiritual you know. Either that or they just like to mess with us.”

“Well that’s the dumbest thing I’ve heard you say this week. And, for the record, you’ve said some pretty dumb things this week. If they spoke English when they died, why don’t they speak English in the spirit world? Are you telling me that they die and then they start speaking a new language? What the hell are you drinking, man? I might want a shot or two of that myself.”

Richard could sense that he had him where he wanted him. On the other hand, if he didn’t finish him off quickly, another beer would arrive and Jake would switch to another topic.

“Jake, once again you continue to be a shining example of why your mother and father should have paid more attention to the benefits of birth control. You are clearly the poster child for contraception. How about thinking of it this way. When you die and pass over to the other side, you’ll most likely take another form. I’m pretty sure they’re not going to want you to show up looking like you do now. I can hear’em now – there goes the neighborhood! Most likely you’ll become some energy form and maybe don’t even have a mouth – now that would be an improvement come to think of it. Anyway, maybe they communicate by using thought projection. Sending images and shit across the universe and we just have a little trouble understanding their way of talking to each other.

“How about you bite me and order me another beer. I got to go to the restroom,” Jake growled and headed off to take care of business.

Richard just smiled and gave himself a mental high five. “I win!”

Samantha was restocking the coolers and trying to keep an eye on the customers. At the far end of counter, someone was waving a beer bottle over his head. She immediately recognized it as the international signal for “Help – I’m out of beer – need to be resupplied!” With the glare coming off the waterway behind the customer, he looked a little bit like Donnie Hawkins. He wasn’t of course. Donnie was dead. It still made the hairs on her forearm stand up, and brought back a flood of memories of a very sad time, not all that long ago.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LEGEND OF DONNIE HAWKINS

August had been Donnie Hawkins favorite month of the year. He loved the heat; he loved the humidity; and he loved the way the ladies dressed to beat the heat at the Bitter End. There was no air conditioning in the bar. There were several ancient fans that spun lazily overhead, but the fans did little more than piss off the flies. The only practical way for the employees of the Bitter End to deal with the heat was to wear as little as possible and sweat a lot. When the heat became too much to bear, they could always pull a cold, wet rag from one of the beer coolers and press it across the back of their neck. The shock of the cold cloth brought the user very little relief, but some relief was better than none at all.

Donnie knew that his mother didn't like the bar, but he loved it. He loved to be there when the bar was packed and the waitresses were rushing around behind the bar trying to take care of the customers. When the waitresses were hopping, so was the bar. They seemed to feed off each other.

At those times, there was a party atmosphere in the bar that spilled out into the parking lot. The bar became party central and Donnie got to sit in the very middle of it all. When everything was right, Donnie swore he could feel the carefree sense of just being alive floating in the air. On those days, the bar people partied like there was no tomorrow.

Donnie loved it when the energy in the bar reached critical mass and blew away everyone's inhibitions. On those days, fun things happened, the kind of things that the regulars would talk about for months. Donnie lived for those days, and he had a feeling that this day was going to be one for the scrapbook. As it turned out, he was right, but not in the way he had expected.

Donnie also loved to be in the bar when the crowds were light. When things were right, he would look for a character sitting alone at the bar. One who was open to conversation in exchange for free drinks. Donnie would sit down beside that person, order them both a beer, and wait for a conversation to begin. This approach didn't work all of the time, but when it did, Donnie felt a strange sense of personal satisfaction. At those times, Donnie knew that he had been granted access to a secret place where few other persons were allowed to visit.

In some ways, Donnie was a conversational "peeping tom". He loved to listen to the stories people shared with him when their level of alcohol let them relax and lower their normal defense mechanisms. When all of the elements were in place, Donnie would be treated to stories that these people would never tell anyone when they were sober. When that happened, Donnie would listen intently, as if he were afraid he would miss even the smallest detail. He knew that these opportunities were few and far between, so he made the best of each and every one of them.

These private conversations were usually soft and low. Donnie's price of admission to these events was the cost of the beer that was needed to keep the talker at the bar. That is why Donnie preferred the times when the bar was quiet and the

THE BITTER END

crowds were small. It was easier for him to hear what was being said and there were fewer distractions to interrupt the stories.

To the waitresses and regulars, Donnie was harmless. He was polite; he was friendly; and he was pleasant to be around. He didn't talk a lot, but many of the regulars saw that as one of Donnie's good qualities. It was well known to the regulars that he usually arrived at the bar in his row boat. In a boating community, that was not especially odd. Many people moved around the marina in their dinghies, but they lived on their boats. In Donnie's case it was odd only because he lived in a nearby house, and he could certainly drive to the bar faster and easier than he could make the trip in his rowboat.

On this particular afternoon, the summer heat combined with the ever present humidity to make the whole world feel like a giant outdoor sauna. Donnie waved goodbye to his mother and headed down to their dock. He climbed into his old wooden rowboat, pulled on his life jacket and pushed the boat away from the dock. With oars in hand, Donnie began to row down the inlet and over to the marina docks.

It wasn't that far, but it wasn't that close either. Even in the heat, Donnie loved the trip. He pulled the boat through the water with long slow strokes, pausing from time to time to glance back over his shoulder and make sure he was still heading in the right direction.

There were times when he considered getting a small outboard motor to make the crossing easier, but he hated the noise and most of the time, he really did enjoy rowing. He also enjoyed the attention he got when he rowed into the marina.

People noticed him and spoke. It gave him a strong sense of belonging to an exclusive club of sorts.

As Donnie tied up at the dock, he pulled off his life jacket and stuffed it into a small canvas bag under one of the seats. That same bag contained a flash light and some rain gear for the occasional summer thunderstorm. With his boat secure, Donnie made for the bar. As he headed up the walk, he could tell that the place was alive. It was going to be one of those party nights. Who knew, he might even get lucky tonight. Sometimes, when the ladies had too much to drink, they were more than a little free with their special treats. The “game” was on.

The bar was packed and most of the locals were already well on their way to becoming relaxed. Donnie pushed his way up to the bar, ordered a beer and looked for a good place to stand and watch the action. The heat and the rowdy crowd made the beer go down quickly. Donnie drank, and danced, and generally had himself a thoroughly good time.

At times like this, life on the island was very good. Before he realized it, the sun had set, darkness had fallen across the island, and Donnie continued to drink and party. It was not like Donnie to stay so late when he came by boat. Normally, Donnie headed home before it got too dark to see. The flashlight in the bag under the seat was not so much for Donnie’s benefit as it was to make sure that other boats could see the small rowboat crossing through the inlet as he headed home.

On this evening, however, several other factors would come into play. Just after sunset, a strong summer thunderstorm rolled across the island. For a while, the rain came down so hard that you couldn’t see the cars at the end of the parking lot. When the

THE BITTER END

storm finally moved on, the super heated summer air was replaced by a noticeable chill. The cool air left behind by the storm caused an eerie fog to form over the warm waters flowing through the waterway. On this evening, the fog hung over the water, and ignored the rest of the world. Stephen King would have been proud of the effect.

Even though the fog hung several feet thick just above the surface of the water, it was little more than a nuisance to most boaters. Everyone knew that the summer air would return in an hour or so and the fog would evaporate as quickly as it had formed. Donnie knew as well as the rest of the locals. So why did he decide to leave the bar and head home in that mess? That question would be discussed on a regular basis for a very long time, but it would never be answered with any degree of certainty.

The evening fog made it hard to see anything close to the water, and a strong tide was pulling water out of the marina. The fog made it hard to see and the outgoing tide made it hard to row and stay on course. The alcohol in Donnie's system made logical thinking a waste of time. When he decided to leave, he left.

Donnie's situation got worse when a large cabin cruiser decided to leave the fuel docks inside the marina and head back out into the waterway. The pilot was an elderly gentleman who knew better. He knew from experience that he should wait for visibility to improve before getting back underway. On another day, perhaps he would have listened, but not tonight. He ignored his own experience as well as the advice offered by his wife and the deck hand on the fuel dock.

Tonight he was Captain of this boat and he would damn well do as he pleased. He ordered his wife to cast off and she did. The dockhand watched as he motored his way out of the marina and disappeared into the dark. On the bridge, the Captain stood fifteen feet above the waterline, and from where he stood, the fog appeared to be only a few inches thick. He saw no reason to be concerned.

The elderly pilot then made a bad situation worse. Even though he was still inside the marina, he ordered his wife of forty years to let out some more line on the rubber inflatable trailing behind their boat. He knew that he shouldn't do this, but he decided that he didn't want his wife performing this task in the dark once they got back out into the waterway.

His wife considered challenging him on this order, but she thought better of it. She could tell that he was agitated. When he got like that, arguing with him was a waste of time. The old coot was headed for the open waters of the waterway, and he couldn't hear her if he wanted to once the boat was underway. She followed his orders and let out the line. Behind her, she watched the inflatable slide back until it disappeared in the fog behind the boat.

Some hours later, after the fog had lifted, another boater approached the cabin cruiser from the stern and noticed that the power boat's rubber inflatable was dragging a wooden rowboat behind it. The wooden rowboat's dock line appeared to be entangled in the inflatable's outboard motor. The two boats were swinging wildly behind the cabin cruiser, creating a navigation hazard to others on the waterway, especially at night.

THE BITTER END

As it turned out, the wooden rowboat belonged to Donnie Hawkins. Local boaters figured that Donnie had dodged the cabin cruiser as it left the marina fuel docks, but he had likely not been able to see the rubber inflatable trailing so far behind. Inside of the marina, he would not have even suspected that it was back there. He had most likely rowed behind the cabin cruiser as it passed and had gotten his boat tangled with the inflatable as it slammed into him.

Donnie's canvas bag containing his flashlight and life preserver was still wedged under one of the seats. Some days later, one of Donnie's oars was located in the shallow waters along shore, but Donnie's body was never recovered. The news struck home up and down the waterway. Speculation about Donnie's death was a regular topic of conversation long after the incident itself became yesterday's news. It was not so much that a nice young man had died, as it was the way he'd died.

Later that same year, Donnie Hawkins took his first step towards becoming an island legend. The bar crowd had been light all day. The weather had been border line for outdoor drinking. A fog had drifted in and out of the area all day, as if it could not decide what it wanted to do. Sam was trying to decide whether to close early and call it a day. The decision was close to making itself for her. There were only a handful of people left in the bar, and one of them was "Nasty" Nate. He was a regular, but he liked to sit by himself and drink until Sam cut him off.

Sam watched her regulars carefully and Nate was no exception. On this evening, he was acting strange, even for Nate. He had a full bottle of beer to his right and he drank from a second bottle sitting in front of him. He continued to order beer as he finished the one in front of him, but he never drank from

the beer sitting to his right. Sam was tempted to ask him about the extra beer, but she decided against it. To make things appear even more unusual, Nate appeared to be talking to himself and nodding his head from time to time as if he were agreeing with someone.

Sam hoped that Nate wasn't losing his grip on reality. There were times when she sensed he was close. He had lived a hard life and it didn't appear to be getting any better for him in his latter years. On a positive note, Sam knew that Nate was not driving. He had lost his driver's license years ago and he had never bothered to try to get it back. He probably couldn't afford it anyway.

Someone usually brought Nate to the bar from the commercial docks. If he couldn't get someone to take him back to the fishing boat where he lived, he'd call a cab. He worked as a day hand on one of the commercial fishing boats, and as part of his pay, the Captain let him live on the boat. It gave Nate a place to live and it gave the Captain a liveaboard night watchman. To Nate's credit, he never caused any trouble. Most people liked him, but they left him to himself. Nate seemed to like it that way.

As the last of the customers began to leave, Sam decided to call it a day, and close the bar. She went inside to go to the restroom first and when she returned, she saw Nate get into a cab and leave. She watched him go with a sense of surprise and a little bit of anger. For the first time since she had known him, "Nasty" Nate had left the bar without paying. That was totally out of character for Nate. Sam rang up his bill and put it under the cash register drawer. She would deal with him when she saw him again.

THE BITTER END

Several days later, Nate made his way to an empty seat at the end of the bar. He settled onto the seat and waved to Sam. Sam swung by the cash register, pulled out Nate's unpaid bar bill and presented it to him as politely as she could. The conversation that followed was a little bit unsettling, yet somehow reassuring. The Bitter End had provided the back drop for many a tall tale and more than a few outright lies, but this story moved the bar's reputation to a whole new level.

Nate would later explain to anyone willing to listen that Donnie Hawkins had joined him for drinks that night. As was Donnie's habit, Donnie bought the beer and Nate provided the conversation. Donnie was a good listener and it was hard to argue with free beer. Sam listened to Nate and she studied his face to see if he was pulling her leg. As the story unfolded, it was clear to Sam that Nate was as serious as he could be. Nate was absolutely convinced that he had spent the evening talking to Donnie Hawkins and he fully expected that Donnie would pay for the beer. That had always been their "deal."

Sam tried to explain that Donnie was dead, but Nate was clearly not concerned with such details. After a few minutes of wasted explanations, Sam gave up and pushed a beer across the bar to Nate. As she walked away from Nate, she looked over her shoulder at him and warned him that he was paying tonight, not Donnie. Nate waved his understanding and drank his beer.

Sam went to the cash register, took the unpaid bar bill, turned it over and wrote "Donnie" across the back. She opened the cash drawer and slid the bill under the tray. So began the legend of Donnie Hawkins. The Bitter End now had its very own ghost in residence. In Donnie's case, that was not such a bad thing.

Fortunately for Sam's cash flow, Donnie was not a frequent customer. He only visited when the crowds were small and when there was a lonely soul available to drink with him in exchange for conversation. These visits almost always happened when there was fog on the water. It was almost as if the fog provided Donnie a pathway to follow as he crossed from his world to the island.

As the legend of Donnie Hawkins grew, locals swore there were times when they could hear Donnie Hawkins rowing his boat across the inlet, back towards his mother's house. Some even swore they had seen the weak light from his flashlight bobbing across the water. Still others said they were all full of it, and that they should cut back on their drinking for a while until their senses returned to normal.

The death of Donnie Hawkins devastated his mother. She never forgave the bar or the people who ran it, and to her dying day, she blamed herself for letting him go that day. Only a parent who has lost a child too young could ever understand the heartbreak and pain. The hurt was deep in Ada and the need to find someone to hold accountable for her son's death was always with her.



The Bitter End is a gripping tale of one man's downward spiral into a pit of self-destruction. Only the love of one good woman can save him from certain destruction and even she is challenged to the limit.

The Bitter End

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6027.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**