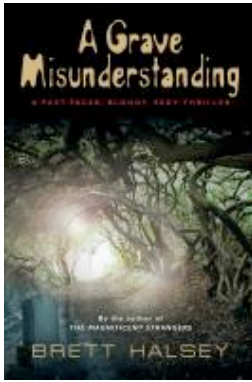


A Grave Misunderstanding

A FAST-PACED, BLOODY, SEXY THRILLER

By the author of
THE MAGNIFICENT STRANGERS

BRETT HALSEY



Young, pretty and pregnant, Ana accidentally kills her abusive husband, Mike. She and her boyfriend, Dick, hide Mike's remains in the grave of Mike's first wife. Their scheme is unearthed when the county decides to dig up the old graveyard to make way for a new highway. This dilemma sets in motion a series of betrayals, illicit sex, and more unintended murders...

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With thanks to my wife, Victoria

Prologue

"He was a no good sonovabitch, but she didn't have to kill him," Dick Winters grumbled as he paused to lean on his shovel and pushed aside a dripping lock of hair from his pale brown eyes. A sharp bolt of lightning cut through the sheets of rain that poured over the dark gloomy hill-side cemetery, illuminating its decrepit old grave stones. Dick looked down the hill as another flash of lightning revealed a narrow country lane and the figure of a woman sitting in the passenger seat of a battered VW van. "But then again...maybe she did," he sighed, and continued shoveling the soggy earth from a not-so-fresh grave.

The grave's head stone suddenly caught his attention as one corner appeared to be slipping into the wet soil. Quickly moving to steady it, he lifted his lantern to confirm the heavy slab wasn't going to fall upon him and looked at the name carved onto its face. "BARBARA MILLER", he read softly to himself in the half light. "Yes, the dear old hot-to-trot, Mrs. Barbara Miller", then he resumed shoveling.

The blade of his shovel scraped roughly against something solid under the muck at the bottom of the grave after what felt like an eternity of digging.

Dick quickly knelt down to probe with his fingers and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized he had reached the lid of Mrs. Miller's wooden casket. After a few more quick shovelfuls, Dick extended his lantern deeper into the grave and took a small prying tool from his hip pocket.

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"Sorry to bother you like this old girl," he muttered, reaching down with the tool. "You ran like hell to get away from that snake of a pirate, and now..."

The poor light, the mud and the water made it difficult to hook the tool under the long edge of the lid and work it open, but open it he did. His stomach churned at the sight and smell of the rotted female corpse inside wearing the remains of a red party dress.

Bile rose in Dick's throat as he grimaced at the ghastly dress clinging to Mrs. Miller's once shapely, now indistinct curves, and he let the casket's lid drop closed.

"How in hell did I get myself into this?" Dick muttered before plunging back into the dirty work – then he looked again down the hill, to the van standing alone in the swirling rain.

Even wet and terrified Ana Miller was an exceptional beauty. She was only in her late teens, but one could easily see she had already developed into a woman a man might do crazy things to possess.

Ana raised a hand to touch her bruised swollen left eye as she sat waiting anxiously in the VW van's passenger's seat. Unable to see through the fogged-over window, she reached to wipe clear an opening, but still couldn't see much except the vague tracings of weathered grave markers and lonely crosses pitched against the gray-black sky.

As she twisted awkwardly to adjust her position, her expression of discomfort and her extended belly revealed that she was in the latter stages of a heavy pregnancy.

Ana bit her lip and nervously turned her head to stare into the rear of the van. The sight of her dead husband's misshapen toes extending from a blood-

stained blanket made her shudder and she quickly turned away. She moved her gaze to the rear-view mirror and frowned at the sight of her own reflection. She ran her fingers through the tangled mess of her long black hair, trying in the slightest way to hide the bruise.

Ana moved her gaze to the dashboard and took a cigarette from the pack sitting there, opened and lit it, but with a sudden awareness of her swollen stomach and a pang of distaste, she cracked open the window and tossed it out.

Ana watched the cigarette's red glow quickly fizzle out in the wet mud, then she gasped with surprise when Dick's face suddenly appeared out of the gloom. He cleared the rain from his eyes and forced an uneasy smile.

"It's ready," he said. Ana lowered her dark eyes and nodded silently.

Dick stepped away from the window, and had almost reached the van's cargo door when he stopped and whirled around at the sound of the passenger door opening. Ana was standing next to the van door, the rain streaming through her long black hair, down her face and body, pasting her light cotton dress against her voluptuous, milk-heavy breasts, and firm shapely buttocks. In that brief moment Dick remembered why he was doing all of this and moved to gently grip Ana's shoulders. "Relax, it wasn't your fault," he said softly.

Ana pulled her hair nervously over her bruised eye again. "He might have killed the baby."

"He was drunk, you had no choice."

"But to bury him with Barbara," she moaned.

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"That was *my* brilliant idea honey, not yours," he said with a wry smile. "Who would ever think to look for Mike with his ex-wife?"

Ana's lips began to tremble. "But she hated him. Will she ever forgive me?"

Dick shrugged. "She's dead. And it's kind of like, what goes around comes around - she dumped him on you, and now you're just returning the favor."

Before Ana could speak again Dick covered her mouth with a kiss.

"I know you're right Dick," she responded with a deep sigh. "I'll be okay."

"That's my girl," he assured her and opened the cargo door to peer inside. He steadied himself as he reached to grab the heavy corpse. "Let's go, old buddy," he said, gripping the dead man under the arms.

Ana watched as Mike's left arm flopped over the edge of the van's rear door and dangled lifelessly in mid-air. She stared morbidly at the snake tattoo that coiled around his arm down to the back of his hand, where his wedding ring glistened briefly in a twinkling of distant lightning.

Together they dragged the body past the weather beaten markers and tombstones. Struggling against its dead weight, and inhibited by the steady rain, they fought to maintain their footing in the slippery mud as they pressed forward.

At the grave's edge, they let the body fall to the ground and Dick knelt down at its rim and reached for the casket lid. He lay chest-down in the cold mud, extended the full length of his arms and strained to hook the tool under the edge of the casket lid. With a grunt of relief he finally lifted it free, then propped

open the casket lid with his prying tool. Ana let out a cry & shuddered with revulsion at the grim picture of her older sister's decaying remains.

"Oh, Dio mio," she gasped, and made the sign of the cross. "Forgive me Barbara."

"She was nothing but a coke whore," Dick mumbled to himself as he adjusted his position to push Mike's body closer to the edge.

Ana squinted her eyes and stared anxiously across the dark graveyard, "My mother's buried over there, somewhere. I hope she can't see what we're doing. Barbara was the only family we had left."

"Don't forget your kid that's on the way," he said, giving the dead body a push and watching it roll and flop like a rag doll onto the edge. "Oh, shit," he growled as the corpse's arm caught on a protruding tree root.

Ana watched blankly as Dick took a heavy breath and freed the arm from the root, then positioned himself to push Mike's body over the edge into the gaping maw of the open casket. Ana unconsciously moved a hand to her belly while reaching with her other hand to help Dick, but at the sight of the ragged knife wound in Mike's chest she abruptly turned her head away and lost her balance. Dick blanched and stumbled backward as he saw her fall and land spread-eagle across Mike's body.

"Dick...Dick," Ana cried as she struggled to disengage herself from the corpse and keep herself from falling into the grave.

"I'm here," Dick breathed, reaching to help her.

Mike's wedding ring flashed in the lantern's glow as Dick grabbed the dead man's wrist and shook it loose from the tangle of Ana's hair. Ana remained still for a

moment, then pushed herself away from the muddy, blood-stained body. For a split second, as Ana looked back at the nightmare before her, she could have sworn she heard a hiss from the snake's head tattooed on Mike's hand.

Dick quickly moved to shove the body the rest of the way over the edge and watched it fall into the casket. It landed on its side, seemed to shiver, then tumbled over onto Barbara's rotting remains, cementing the disgustingly erotic nature of the act in his mind.

Ana picked at her tangled hair as she stared at the revolting sight, then glared at her left hand where she wore a wedding ring identical to Mike's. With a cry of revulsion, she ripped off her ring and threw it into the grave. Eager to be done with their horrible deed, she dropped to her knees and began frantically pushing at the mound of rain-soaked earth.

Dick darted his eyes and gathered his shovel, then moved to the edge of the grave where he stopped for an instant to stare at Ana's wedding ring, which had fallen between the snake's extended tongue and the matching ring on Mike's lifeless finger.

Unnerved by Ana's dogged urgency to push the entire mound of dirt into the grave with her bare hands, Dick quickly dropped a shovelful into the casket, covering both rings with soupy earth - then reached down with his shovel and closed the casket lid.

Lightning flashed in the distance, followed by an intense bead of low rumbling thunder. The rain slackened as Ana fell back exhausted. Her breathing came in short gasps as she watched Dick labor, shovelful by shovelful, refilling the grave. She stroked

her swollen stomach with grim uncertainty, and watched Dick finish his task, tamping down the muddy mound with the back of his shovel. Pausing to catch his breath, he threw aside the shovel, grasped Barbara Miller's tombstone in both hands, and strained to will it into its original position.

Dick looked to Ana with a tired, contented grin. She struggled to her feet and threw herself into the protection of his arms, raising her lips to be kissed. They held each other tightly, but suddenly the passion of the kiss died as a spasm of pain seized her belly. "Madre de Dio, Dick," she cried, "I think my water broke! I think it's coming! The baby's coming!"

"Not now, Ana," he said. "It can't come now!"

Dick grabbed his tools with one hand and supported Ana with his other as he tried to steady her, but Ana cried out again and doubled over with pain. "What can I do?"

"Hold it!" he answered desperately. "You've got to hold it in, Ana!" Dick slipped an arm under her shoulder and kept her moving through the slippery mud, until they reached the gravel path to the van.

Dick reached to open the van's passenger door, but when Ana suffered another spasm of pain he changed his mind and helped her to the van's sliding cargo door, and pulled it open. Exhausted and soaked to the skin, Ana cast a tortured glance to the graveyard before allowing Dick to help her onto the blood-smeared shag carpet of the van's floor, where Mike's corpse had lain minutes before.

Dick wiped the water from his face and hair before climbing in to help Ana get comfortable. He tensed with foreboding as she moaned and grimaced in pain.

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"We have to get some help," he said, trying to remain calm.

"Please, Dick! Please hurry!" she pleaded.

"I am!" he answered, quickly looking around for something to cover her. "I'm hurrying as fast as I can!" He frowned as all he could find was the blanket that had covered Mike's corpse. He hesitated a moment before placing it over her shoulders, then scrambled into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Ana's face contorted with the pain of her oncoming labor as the van leapt forward, pitching her roughly about as it sped along the wet, moonlit country road. She began to twist and writhe with pain as the frequency of her spasms increased.

Dick was perspiring with anxiety as his attention bounced between the road ahead and Ana's moaning behind him.

"It's coming!" Ana screamed.

"No! Wait! Please, Ana! Not yet!"

"Stop the van, Dick! Help me! Por Dios! Dick, help me!"

Dick pulled the van to the side of the deserted road and stopped. Terrified, he twisted around in the driver's seat to look at her.

"Hurry, Dick! Please, help me!" she pleaded.

Her agonized cry goaded him into action. He climbed over the seat only to see her knees up and splayed open. He adjusted his position and stared numbly as a bright flash of lightning confirmed that the bloody process of childbirth had begun.

"I don't know what to do," he groaned.

"Please, Dick... Please, do something..." she gasped, then her whimpering slackened, and her breathing became more forced and labored.

Dick reached with fearful uncertainty toward the undulating form striving to free itself of Ana's womb. "But, I don't know *what* to do," he wailed plaintively.

Ana gripped her stomach and her head fell slack in pain onto the filthy carpet of the van's floor; her vision went out of focus and her ears filled with a hum of white noise as Dick's muffled cries melted into the unnerving hiss of the snake...

CHAPTER 1

The boy knew it was a dream.

It was the same nightmare that had haunted young Mickey for as long as he could remember, but still, it always left him in a confused jumble of terror and menace.

He was following a serpentine trail through a tangle of grasping tree branches to the familiar pond a short distance from his forest home. The smoky gray night sky blanked most color from the misty landscape, except for the pulsing crimson dance of fireflies that were darting about.

Suddenly he was at the pond. And just as suddenly he was threatened by the head of a giant snake bursting up from the pond's thick burgundy surface and pressing toward him.

The serpent's body moved with a rhythmic intensity, effortlessly driving forward like a venomous beast of muscle and purpose.

Mickey froze, he could hear the echo of his teeth chattering in his ears, but still he waited as the snake's menacing head glared at him through a maroon haze.

Mickey wanted to run, but he couldn't move. "Leave me alone!" he cried, but the evil monster grew larger as it slithered closer from out of a void in the pond's quivering surface. "Mommy, Mommy," he cried as the loathsome creature continued pushing, shoving, ramming its way through to him. "Mommy, he's going to crush me." Mickey felt the pain of being mashed into a corner, but there was no corner - no way to escape. He suddenly slipped into a horrifying slide.

"Please, Mr. Snake, you're pushing me. Stop it. Don't eat me! *Mommy! MOMMY!*"

Suddenly the drone of cicadas sounded and bright rays of sun stabbed through the tall, dark forest trees that surrounded the isolated mountain pond where seven-year-old Mickey sat in his wheelchair. Mickey batted his eyes and looked around to gather his bearings. His kitten Cleo was resting in his lap - He was near the pond, just beyond his parents' chalet, the pond from the dream - but it was no longer a dream. The dream was horribly familiar, but it didn't usually come to him so strongly in the daytime.

Mickey looked down at Cleo for a moment who yawned lazily up at him, then he looked toward the pond and relaxed into the familiar reality of his surroundings. The boy's gaze refocused and his attention was caught by the antics of two dragonflies darting to and fro, playing a game of tag over the surface of the cold murky pond. The dragonflies flitted off into the trees out of Mickey's sight; at about the same time he became aware of his mother's voice calling him from beyond the stand of trees.

"Mickey! Where are you, Mickey?"

He glanced with apprehension toward the path to the chalet, then murmured to his kitten, "We're not supposed to be here. We'd better go before she comes looking for us." Mickey turned his wheelchair onto the soft earthen path and gave the wheels a firm push. His thin arms propelled him forward, until behind the protection of some foliage he stopped to stare ahead at his mother.

"It's time to come in," Ana called, from the kitchen door of their isolated little tourist motel-cafe.

CHAPTER 2

The name, CHALET HIGHLIFE, was featured over the entrance to the pseudo-Alpine building and a neon sign with two words: "OPEN", brightly illuminated in green, and "CLOSED" in dull red, were visible in the lobby window.

Two gas pumps stood on a small concrete island some distance in front of the chalet's graveled entrance, and a child's swing-set rested within a few steps of the kitchen door. The rust-flaked old VW van could be seen through the open door of a corrugated metal shed across the parking area. A County Sheriff's black and white Ford Explorer SUV was the only other vehicle on the chalet grounds.

"Where are you?" Ana called again, leaning out of the chalet's kitchen door trying to locate her son. Her long, neatly styled jet-black hair was tied loosely back, leaving only a few perfectly fallen curls to frame her face. Her freshly pressed jeans and loose-fitting sweater did little to conceal her sensual Hispanic beauty that had remained unchanged by the passing years.

Mickey slowly eased out from the cover of the foliage and smiled, "What is it, Mommy, is Dick back with my new game?"

"No, he isn't back yet," she responded with the slightest twitch of a frown, "And I want to know where you've been. You weren't out by the pond, were you?"

"No, Mommy," he calmly lied. "I was just...here."

"Here, where? I couldn't see you."

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"I wasn't doing anything," he answered with a pout. "Me and Cleo have been watching some dragonflies and waiting for Dick to get back with my new game. That's all, honest."

"Ok. Well, I'm pretty busy right now, so just stay close where I can see you – or better yet, why not come inside and play one of your other games?"

"Please, Mommy. When I'm playing inside, you want me to go outside, and when I'm outside you want me to come in."

"You're right, sweetheart. Then just stay close where I can see you, okay?"

"All right, Mommy."

Ana gave a nervous shrug, took a look around and returned inside her kitchen, thinking that if it wasn't for his nightmares Mickey would be a lot like Dick, strong willed and firmly himself. She gave a fleeting glance to a small mirror on the kitchen wall, wondering what Mickey would think if he knew that Dick wasn't his real father, then brushed her fingers through her hair, and hurried to the stove to give a quick stir to a simmering pot of her popular chili.

She took a pan of freshly baked corn muffins from the oven and placed them on the service table, then with a small knife from the rack on the table's side began to free the muffins from the baking pan. She placed the muffins on a serving platter and turned to speak through the service window into the cafe. "Mickey's playing outside with that kitten you gave him. It's practically all he does now."

Laughter emerged from the other side of the service window. The cafe's half-dozen tables and booths were empty of customers except for a tall, stocky man in his mid-forties, Sheriff Wally Barnes. A

long-time friend, Wally sat on a stool in front of the counter, dawdling over a cup of coffee. "I'm glad the boy likes her," he said, still chuckling.

"Likes her? He loves her! She's become his best friend! I'm beginning to think they're joined at the lap." Wally laughed, and watched as Ana came through the door from the kitchen wearing a proud smile. She placed the platter of freshly steaming corn muffins in front of the Sherriff. "Here you are, Wally, my hot fresh muffins."

Wally's face lit up with a light blush, and he took his time carefully savoring the sight and smell of one of his favorite treats and their chef.

"Mickey's lucky to have such a great cook for a mom!"

"I'll give him one or two when he decides to come inside."

"I'll take that one," Wally said, and watched happily as Ana slid the muffin from the platter onto his plate. "Poor little guy," he said taking a bite and enjoying it thoroughly. "It's tough for a kid like him, living up here in the wilderness with no other kids to play with."

"I know," she replied, "He could have started school in the village this year, but they don't have wheelchair access. Once I sell the chalet we'll be moving someplace with a better school and lots of kids."

Wally grinned. "And a fancy beauty college."

Ana wistfully raised a hand to her hair. With her other hand she reached for the coffee pot and topped off his cup. "That's my plan."

Wally took a sip of coffee and glanced out the window. "Where's Dick?" Ana followed his glance, and with a slight frown looked to the wall clock. "He took the pickup into Jack's for service. He should be back

by now." Wally returned his gaze to Ana, nodded absently, then both glanced toward the sound of gravel crunching under the wheels of an arriving vehicle.

A utility truck from the County Highway Department stopped in the Chalet Highlife's parking area. Three young men in their early twenties stepped out of the truck and ambled into the cafe - Chuck, a young giant with sandy hair and friendly blue eyes, Cody, his energetic, smaller, wiry buddy, and Matt, tall and lean with crew-cut hair and dark green eyes.

Chuck waved a cheery hello as the men sat on the three stools next to Wally. "Hi Ana - Sheriff. Boy, do we need a brewski!"

Ana smiled as she reached for three cold beers, catching Matt's eye,

"Sounds like you boys have been working pretty hard."

"Yeah," Chuck answered, "Things are slow at the garage, so this morning I signed on for a week or two with the Highway Department - Me and Matt here."

"I signed on yesterday," Cody chimed in. "We're on our way to pick up some extra equipment."

"Highway department, eh? I heard they're looking for gravediggers," Wally said with gentle sarcasm, and turned to give Matt a quick, professional appraisal. "And, I don't recall seeing you around here before," he said feeling the smallest hint of recognition.

Matt shrugged. "I'm just sort of passing through," he said with a trace of a southern accent, his eyes still fixed on Ana. "I had some bad luck, so I..."

"What sort of bad luck?" Wally asked.

"Well, I've been hitching around the country, just seeing what there is to see before I go back to school and get serious about life."

"Yeah," Wally nodded.

"And when my last ride stopped at the village store, I looked around and decided I'd like to stay for a few days. Marcie, who owns the place, said I could rent her back room so I grabbed my knapsack and waved goodbye to my ride. That's when I realized that I was also waving goodbye to my wallet. It must have slipped out of my pocket and fallen behind the car seat or something."

"So what are you going to do?"

"The man I was riding with was headed north, but I'm hoping he'll bring my wallet when he comes back this way. I had some cash in my pocket, but the wallet has my credit card and all my ID."

"So you're going to hang around a while, is that the idea?" Wally continued.

"Yeah, I guess so," Matt nodded. "But it hasn't been all bad. After Marcie, the first person I ran into was Chuck here and..."

Chuck joined in, "And I had just heard from Dan Jordan that he was looking for some good strong men to work on that stretch of the new highway that cuts through the cemetery. It'll be some extra money while things are slow at Grandpa Jack's garage."

"And, I need some cash to get my bike ready for some traveling," Cody added.

"You're going to kill yourself on that thing," Wally grumbled.

Ana nodded in silent agreement, then glanced away from Matt's curious, penetrating stare.

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Feeling noticed, Matt shifted his look to Wally. "It'll be some work to hold me over until," he shrugged, "Until that guy comes back through with my wallet."

"The cemetery?" Ana voiced with a confused smile, noticing that part of the conversation for the first time, as she served the young men their beers. "What are you talking about? What cemetery?"

Wally frowned. "The one where my Beth and our son, Randy, are buried. And your mother and sister... They're moving everybody to make room for the new road."

"What?" Ana's voice cracked, "What new road? When did this happen? I didn't hear anything about it."

"I don't know when they decided," Wally sighed, "I just heard about it day before yesterday."

Ana began absent-mindedly wiping down the counter as she struggled to control her nerves, then continued, "They can't do that, can they Wally? I mean it isn't right, disturbing all those poor souls. Haven't they suffered enough?"

"You don't have to tell me it isn't right Ana," he answered. "But, when those guys who run the county make up their minds, what can anyone do?"

"Yeah," Cody humphed. "Like that stupid law making me wear a helmet on my motorcycle. Nobody has a choice about anything these days."

"That stupid law is gonna save your life one of these days," Wally snapped back.

"What's wrong with those county people, Wally?" Ana protested. "Don't they have any respect? Not even for the dead?"

"You're right, Ma'am," Matt cut in. "If there's any justice, those poor souls will rise up and haunt whoever's responsible for this."

Ana looked at Matt uncertainly, then, not knowing what else to do nervously picked up her muffin platter and pushed one onto Wally's plate before offering a muffin to the others. Chuck and Cody grabbed one, but Matt indicated to his beer and politely shook his head while locking eyes with Ana, "No thank you ma'am, but I'll take a rain check, if you don't mind."

"Sure." She smiled uneasily and pushed a second muffin onto Wally's plate before retreating through her kitchen door, "I'd better go check on my chili."

The men's voices followed Ana into the kitchen. As she stood at the stove, fitfully stirring the chili, her attention was caught by Matt saying, "I get the feeling I've seen Ana somewhere before. Where's she from?"

"She's been here almost as long as I can remember," Chuck said.

"I think she's from somewhere in South America," Cody added. "But she's been here for most of her life, right Wally?"

"Yeah, Honduras," Wally clarified, "Her family came here from Honduras in *Central* America, but that was a long time ago."

"Well, I've never been anywhere near Honduras so I must be wrong." Matt's voice continued through the kitchen service window, "I wonder what a Honduran accent sounds like?"

"How about yours?" Wally asked. "Where's your accent from?"

"Mine?" Matt smiled. "I'm from down south, but I didn't think I had an accent anymore."

"I don't have an accent, either," Ana sniffed to herself, putting aside the muffin platter and giving a fitful stir to the chili pot. "I speak better American than most of the people up here."

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After lowering the flame under the chili, she moved to the partially open kitchen door where she could see Mickey laughing as Cleo made an unsuccessful leap for a low flying butterfly. Satisfied that her son was all right, she returned her attention to the men's voices. "I haven't had an accent since..." Her thought was lost when her attention was suddenly drawn to a red Jeep sliding to a stop in front of the gas pumps.

Dick, seven years older, but still trim and attractive, was in the passenger seat next to the driver, Terry, a pretty, vivacious, nineteen-year-old with her blond, sun-streaked hair held in a loose ponytail.

Ana ducked away from the door and moved to the kitchen window where she could see Dick give Terry's knee an intimate squeeze before he stepped out of the Jeep and glanced warily toward the chalet. Terry's bright blue eyes widened when she suddenly became aware of the parked Highway Department vehicle, "That's the truck I saw Chuck in, I'd better go!"

"What's he doing with the Highway Department?"

"They gave him some work."

Dick was tense as he glanced toward the chalet. "Probably one of the grave diggers."

"If I'd known you were going to be upset about it, I wouldn't have told you."

"I'm not upset," Dick growled. "Why should I be upset?"

Terry looked to the chalet, then turned to him with a smile as she put her Jeep into gear. "Grandpa Jack said your pickup will be ready in the morning. Should I pick you up?"

"Naw," he said with a cautious glance toward the chalet. "It's better if you don't."

"Okay. How 'bout I stop by the Village Store and pick up that new video game you forgot to bring for Mickey instead," she teased. "Don't you think Ana would like that?"

"You're a shit-stirrer Terry," he answered darkly.

"Yeah, I'm a shit-stirrer who'd better hurry up and get back on the road," she said with a grin, and stepped on the gas.

Ana's expression was bleak as she watched Dick gaze after Terry's Jeep until it disappeared from sight, then she quickly moved away from the window. Dick turned to look in her direction and hurried toward the kitchen entrance.

Dick had almost reached the kitchen door when he saw Mickey rolling toward him in his wheelchair.

"Did you bring my new game?" Mickey asked.

"No. Sorry son, but Marcie said it'll be in tomorrow." Dick smiled and reached to ruffle Mickey's hair. "I have to go back tomorrow. I'll get it for you then, I promise." He moved to turn away, but stopped and smiled again. "Shall I wheel you inside?"

"No thanks, I can do it."

"I know you can," Dick responded, maintaining his smile as he continued through the door.

Mickey coolly stared after him, then looked to Cleo with a silent shrug.

Ana was stiff with concern as she stood at the stove methodically stirring her pot of chili when Dick entered. Seeing that she was alone in the kitchen, Dick asked, "Have you heard?"

Ana quickly raised a finger to her lips as she cautiously pointed toward the cafe.

Dick nodded his understanding. "Don't worry about it."

Ana dropped her stirring spoon into the pot and dashed for the comfort of his arms. "But, Dick, I *am* worried! What are we going to do?"

"Get hold of yourself," he ordered softly. "It's okay, there's nothing to worry about. Not yet, anyway."

"How can you say there's nothing to worry about? What's going to happen when they start digging around? What are we going to do?" Ana suddenly paled and stepped away from Dick as she noticed that Wally had come into the kitchen from the cafe.

Wally smiled, embarrassed by his apparent intrusion. "Hi, Dick. I didn't know you were... I'm sorry, I... I just wanted to pay my bill."

Ana quickly composed herself as she moved for the door into the cafe. "Right away, Wally."

Dick smiled. "Don't charge him for the entertainment, Ana," then with a jovial wink to Wally, "It's on the house, old buddy." Dick's smile quickly faded as he watched Wally turn awkwardly and follow Ana into the cafe.

Standing in front of the cash register while Ana totaled his bill, Wally took notice of her troubled expression and turned his back to the men dawdling over their beers at the counter. "Is something bothering you, Ana?"

She leaned closer to him and softly sighed. "Well, kind of..."

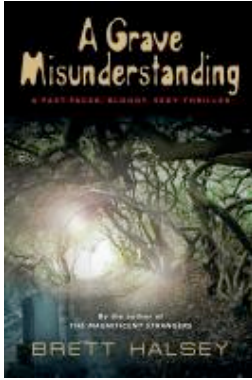
"What is it?"

"It's...the cemetery. I'm thinking about my sister. And my mother. After the fire and everything, will my poor family ever find peace?"

"I feel the same way about my Beth and our little one," he nodded solemnly, and cast a quick glance to

the three men laughing over some small joke. "We have to pray they've gone on to something better."

"God I hope so," Ana murmured as she crossed herself.



Young, pretty and pregnant, Ana accidentally kills her abusive husband, Mike. She and her boyfriend, Dick, hide Mike's remains in the grave of Mike's first wife. Their scheme is unearthed when the county decides to dig up the old graveyard to make way for a new highway. This dilemma sets in motion a series of betrayals, illicit sex, and more unintended murders...

A Grave Misunderstanding

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