

WIDOW FINDS ADVENTURE AND MURDER WHILE
LOOKING FOR ROMANCE.

WHEN THE BAND STOPPED PLAYING

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CHAPTER 1

That night, I went to bed early to catch up on a John Irving novel I had started earlier in the week. I hardly made it through one chapter when my eyes just wouldn't stay open. Suddenly, the telephone startled me. My book flew off the bed and my reading glasses dangled from one ear as I quickly sat up and answered the demon that disturbed my sleep. I spoke anxiously as my heart beat fast from waking so suddenly.

"Hello."

A male voice spoke slowly and cautiously. "Is this Tom Anderson?"

"Yes, this is Tom Anderson." My senses were peaking and my heart was pounding.

"This is Sergeant Morris calling from Medical Center in Baytown. I'm afraid your wife's been in an accident."

"Is she all right?"

Instead of answering, he insisted I come right away.

I slammed the receiver down. I was already out of bed and my heart felt as if it was going to burst from my chest. I dressed quickly while thoughts raced through my mind: What time was it? Where is the Medical Center? Is it still raining? How much gas is in my truck? Where are my shoes?

I hurried down the stairs still buttoning my shirt. Grabbing my keys, I bolted out the door, deciding not to wear my jacket. The rain had cleared and a steady north wind started to blow. I wished I'd taken my jacket. The

streets were quiet as I made my way through town. Medical Center was on the south side and it would take at least fifteen minutes to get there. All the way I felt a hollow, pulling sensation in the pit of my stomach, anticipating the worst. The radio was playing a country song about “honky tonk angels,” an old Kitty Wells song. Country music had always been my favorite, although not very popular in the Northeast where I grew up. I think I got that from listening with my dad before he died. I turned it off to concentrate because I wasn’t that familiar with the hospital area.

A big EMERGENCY sign lit the entrance and large sliding glass doors reflected the steady flashing lights of the ambulance and of a police car directly behind it. I wasn’t sure where to park, so I wheeled in close to the entrance, got out and approached the doors. A police officer was coming out as I entered.

“Are you Mr. Anderson?”

“Yes, that’s right. Where’s my wife? Is she all right?”

He avoided my questions and pointed toward the doors. “Just go through these doors and take a right at the end of the hallway. The nurses will direct you from there.”

I didn’t take up any more time questioning him; obviously, he either didn’t know or didn’t want to answer. I ran to the end of the hallway and turned right, right into nurse Wilson.

“I’m Mr. Anderson. I believe my wife has been hurt. Please tell me where she is!”

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“Yes, Mr. Anderson, she’s here, but I want you to sit and wait for the doctor before you see her.”

“What’s wrong? Why won’t you let me see her?”

“Please, Mr. Anderson, just sit and wait for the doctor!”

Her tone of voice suggested everything was not all right, so I sat and tried to be calm. I knew Julie was just on the other side of that door. Then it hit me.

Shouting, I jumped to my feet. “She’s dead, isn’t she? I need to see her, please let me see her.”

I started for the door. A doctor came out, placed his hands on my chest and stopped me. The look in his eyes told the whole story. I remembered that look, the look from my mother when we arrived at my father’s hospital room many years ago. It was a look of I’m sorry, it’s over, and I can’t believe it happened. We knew then, it was just a matter of time and were expecting it. However, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Julie was too young, too healthy and too bright to be gone from our beautiful world. I sat back down. Shock had set in and my mind wouldn’t allow me to believe she was dead. Maybe I could go back home, get some sleep and then she’d be there in the morning when I awoke.

“Son, there was nothing any of us could do. She was gone before she arrived here. It was quick and I’m sure she didn’t suffer.” The doctor tried to comfort me. “I think it would be best if you didn’t see her right now. There was severe trauma. I’m really sorry.” He gave the nurse a folder.

She turned to me. "Is there anyone we can call for you?"

"What? Oh yeah, my brother, I'll call him. Is there a phone close by?"

I dialed the number and let it ring several times. I had forgotten the time. It was almost one. A sleepy voice answered.

"Hello."

"Dan, it's me, Tom."

"Tom? What in the world, what time is it? Where are you?"

"I'm at the hospital Dan. It's Julie. Julie's had an accident. She's dead." Even saying it didn't make it any more real.

"Tom? Julie's what?"

"Dan, I need you, now. Can you come right away?"

"Sure. I'll be there in ten minutes."

I hung up and went back to my chair. Dan was always there when I needed him. I hated to bother him so late, but there was no one else; I didn't want anyone else. Even though we had many friends in town, we always depended on each other for companionship and comfort through the good times and the bad. It was Dan and I who rode together every night to the veteran's hospital to visit our dad before the cancer took him. Our conversations would range from everything to everyone. The ride home though, was quiet. We'd buy a six-pack of beer from a bootlegger and by the time we arrived home, we were pretty mellow. That was the closest

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bonding experience of my life with anyone, including Julie. We allowed ourselves to be free during a stressful time in our lives. I knew I could rely on him once again.

The glass doors opened with a whoosh as Dan walked quickly down the hallway. I stood up and welcomed him with a hug. I don't know if it was reality settling in or having Dan there. It was then it hit me, I started shaking and the tears started and wouldn't stop. We sat until I calmed down and could speak.

"They told me I shouldn't see her right now. I guess they're right, there's nothing I can do."

"What happened, Tom?"

"Julie was at school last night and on her way home, her car went off the road. The police are investigating it. They think the wet conditions contributed to it. Oncoming headlights may have blinded her or maybe an animal jumped out in front of her. Anyway, it happened where Highway 42 crosses the interstate, you know, the overpass, just before the barbecue place."

"Yeah, I know where you mean."

"The doctor said she was probably killed instantly."

Dan grabbed me by the arm. "Look, let's get out of here. Come stay with me and Jan tonight."

"I don't know what I want, but yes, let's get out of here! Let's go for a ride, anywhere."

I moved my truck to the hospital parking lot and got in with Dan. We drove around looking for a Seven-Eleven to buy some beer. Finally, the red and green sign

of relief came into view. I bought two six packs, just in case. As we pulled out of the drive, Dan asked.

“Where to?”

“I don’t care, anywhere ‘cept on 42.”

He looked at me and opened the first of many beers that evening. Dan had called Jan and told her what had happened and that he wouldn’t be home for a while. Jan was good about that, as long as she knew he was with me, she felt it was all right.

It was nearing six o’clock and I was getting groggy. The beer had done its job and I was ready for some sleep. Dan dropped me off at home, at my insistence, and told me to call him when I woke up. It was Saturday I was thinking as I unlocked the kitchen door and went in. The eastern sky was starting to lighten as I stood and looked out the bedroom window. The bed was askew and my book was still on the floor where I’d dropped it. Did I want to get back into bed or did I want to sleep downstairs on the couch? Either way I couldn’t escape the thoughts of Julie not coming home. My dulled senses convinced me to stay in the bedroom so I collapsed, fully dressed, onto the bed.

When I awoke, it was noon. Sunlight was streaming through the bedroom window, piercing my red swollen eyes. My head felt like it was made of lead and I couldn’t seem to raise it from the pillow. I wanted to get up and close the drapes but I couldn’t move. I turned from the window to shield my eyes and there, in front of me, was Julie’s unwrinkled pillow still waiting for her. I tried to

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close my eyes, but the sight of the pillow and the memories from last night came flooding back into my poor aching head. I wanted to get up and I couldn't, I wanted to close the drapes, but I couldn't and I wanted to close my eyes, but I wouldn't. I felt trapped. What was this hell I was going through? Then the phone rang to finish me off. I mustered enough strength and will power to answer it. It was the funeral home director, Hank Dremmond. I couldn't say anything.

"Tom?"

I finally said, "Yes."

"Tom? This is Hank at the funeral home. I know this is a hard time for you, but I need you to come see me today. It's important."

"What? Sure, I'll be in. What time are you going to be there?"

"I'm here right now. We just came from the hospital and I'll be here for another few hours. How soon do you think you can make it?"

"What time is it now?"

"It's one o'clock."

"Give me a couple of hours to get myself together. Is that okay?"

"Fine, Tom. We'll see you around three."

I hung up and lay back down. Two hours, could I make it in two hours? I knew I wasn't going to go back to sleep, but lying down sure felt better. I struggled to get up and took a long, hot shower, which always brought out the best in me; I got dressed and went

downstairs. I opened the refrigerator and found a beer to help relieve the pain in my brain. Before I left for the funeral home, I called Dan. Jan answered the phone.

“Jan, this is Tom. Is Dan up yet?”

“Yes, he’s up, but not moving too fast. How are you Tom? Are you all right?”

“Right now, I’m not sure, but I’m glad to have you two around.”

“You know we’re both here for you, any time.”

“Thank you, Jan. You both mean a lot to me and I’m afraid I’m going to be leaning on you guys for a while.”

“Here’s Dan, see you soon?”

“Right. Dan, I need you to take me to the hospital to get my truck. I have to be at the funeral home at three. Is that all right?”

“No problem. I was waiting for you to call anyway. I’ll be right over.”

Dan would be there in fifteen minutes, so I finished my beer and waited on the front porch. The sun was hot now and the air was very humid. It was like this after any rain we got. The neighborhood was unusually quiet for a Saturday, no kids running up and down the sidewalks or people out working in their yards. It was as if everything was on hold, waiting for permission to start again. At last I heard Dan’s pickup coming up Cedar Street, a ‘57 Ford, red and loud as any respectable V-8 should be. Dan was very proud of his truck. Seems like he worked on it every day; he was always doing something to it. He

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pulled into the drive and I got in. It smelled like stale beer.

"I would have been here sooner, but I got caught up in the parade downtown." He said backing out of the driveway.

"I hate to bother you with this, but I told Hank I'd be there around three and my car is still at the hospital."

"You're not bothering me. I'd be hurt if you didn't ask."

"Thanks. What was the parade?"

Dan glanced at me. "Memorial Day, today is Memorial Day."

It certainly was a memorial day, I thought.

"The rest of the country is celebrating it on Monday, but here, they wanted to celebrate it on the real day. I think that's kinda cool."

"Yeah, I guess. Is there another beer left in the cooler?"

"Yeah, I think there's a couple in there."

"Do you want one?" I opened the cooler and took out a lukewarm beer floating at the bottom.

"I think I better pass right now. My head isn't quite right yet, maybe later."

We arrived at the hospital in plenty of time to get to the funeral home. I told Dan I'd drop by later.

"Come for dinner tonight. Jan insisted."

"Thanks, I'll take you up on that."

I watched the pickup roar out of the parking lot and got into my truck. I drove to the funeral home in silence.

I was a little anxious about going, but knew I had to do it. Julie and Hank knew each other since high school and I knew it was going to be hard on him too. I arrived ten minutes early. When I entered the home, the smell started to churn my stomach. It had been a long time since I had eaten and the warm beer I drank on the way to the hospital was reminding me that I shouldn't have. Mary greeted me at the door. Hank and Mary were married shortly after Julie and I were. We both attended each other's weddings. There's something about working with friends that helps soothe the pain at a time like this.

"Tom, I'm so sorry about Julie." She gave me a hug. "I still can't believe it happened."

"Thanks, Mary. It is hard to believe. I still think she's going to be there when I go home."

"Hank's in the back, you'll be able to see her in just a while. It's really shaken Hank up, you know. We all were so close."

I followed her into the office. "I don't know how Hank deals with it all of the time. He must get used to it."

She turned to me. "You never get 'used' to it. It's like you said, you deal with it."

How I got the courage to go into that room to see Julie lying on that table, I'll never know. She looked so cold. I wanted to take her in my arms and rub her back. She hated the cold. That was the main reason we stayed in the area, even though the economy and the job market weren't that great, we had the warm weather

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most of the year 'round. When winter came, what winter we had, she was ready to bail out and move further south. Occasionally, we would vacation in Mexico or in the Bahamas during January.

Hank put on his jacket when I entered the room. "Tom, I know what you're going through, I've seen it a hundred times." "I just didn't know what to expect."

"Do you want to be alone with her for a while?"

"Just for a minute, if it's okay."

"I'll be right in the next room with Mary if you need me. Take all the time you need." He left me standing, staring at the lifeless body of the woman I loved.

I walked over to the table and touched her arm. Her skin was tight and cool. Her hair was perfect but the makeup seemed a little too much. Hank had done a wonderful job. He knew Julie was never in public with her hair out of place and with the amount of damage to her face, I guess the makeup did cover up a lot. Even though it was her body in front of me, it wasn't Julie. It was her spirit that was missing. I'd watched her sleep many times and even during those times, she emitted a glow and strength most people didn't have while awake. I wanted to kiss her, to wake her up like in the fairy tales, but I knew deep down it wasn't going to happen. As I looked at her, I could feel her presence in the room, not from her body exactly, but the whole room seemed to come alive with her spirit. A warm feeling of comfort came over me as I said goodbye for the last time. I turned and left the room.

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