

Sue Grafton

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IS FOR WASTED

PAN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

Two dead men changed the course of my life that fall. One of them I knew and the other I'd never laid eyes on until I saw him in the morgue. The first was Pete Wolinsky, an unscrupulous private detective I'd met years before through Byrd-Shine Investigations, where I'd served my apprenticeship. I worked for Ben Byrd and Morley Shine for three years, amassing the six thousand hours I needed for my license. The two were old-school private eyes, hard-working, tireless, and inventive. While Ben and Morley did business with Pete on occasion, they didn't think much of him. He was morally shabby, disorganized, and irresponsible with money. In addition, he was constantly pestering them for work, since his marketing skills were minimal and his reputation too dubious to recommend him without an outside push. Byrd-Shine might subcontract the odd stretch of surveillance to him or assign him a routine records search, but his name never appeared on a client report. This didn't prevent him from stopping by the office without invitation or dropping their names in casual conversations with attorneys, implying a close professional relationship. Pete was a man who cut corners and he assumed his colleagues did likewise. More

problematic was the fact that he'd rationalized his bad behavior for so long it had become standard operating procedure.

Pete Wolinsky was gunned down the night of August 25 on a dark stretch of pavement just off the parking lot at the Santa Teresa Bird Refuge. The site was right across the street from the Caliente Café, a popular hang-out for off-duty cops. It might seem odd that no one in the bar was aware that shots were fired, but the volume on the jukebox exceeds 117 dB, roughly the equivalent of a gas-powered chainsaw at a distance of three feet. The rare moments of quiet are masked by the high-pitched rattle of ice cubes in dueling blenders where margaritas are whipped up at a rate of one every four and a half minutes.

Pete's body might not have been discovered until daylight if it hadn't been for an inebriated bar patron who stepped into the shadows to take a leak. I heard about Pete's death on the morning news while I was eating my Cheerios. The TV set was on in the living room behind me, more for the company than the content. I caught his name and turned to catch a night shot of the crime scene blocked off by yellow tape. By the time the news crew had arrived, his body had been loaded into the ambulance in preparation for transport to the coroner's office, so there was really nothing to see. In the harsh glare of artificial light, a somber female reporter recited the bare facts. Pete's immediate family must have been notified by then or she wouldn't have mentioned him by name. Pete's death was a surprise, but I can't say it was a shock. He'd often complained of sleeping poorly and had taken to wandering the

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streets at all hours. According to the reporter, his wallet had been stolen along with his watch, a knock-off Rolex with a faux-platinum band. I guess robbers these days can't distinguish the genuine article from the fake, which meant that Pete's death wound up being more about impulse or cheap thrills than profit. He was a man with a propensity for risk, and it was only a matter of time before Lady Luck caught up with him and pushed him off the cliff.

The story about the second dead man is more complex and takes longer to articulate, especially since the facts emerged slowly over a matter of weeks. The coroner's office called me on a Friday afternoon, asking if I could ID a John Doe who had my name and phone number on a slip of paper in his pocket. How could I resist? Every good mystery takes place on three planes—what *really* happened; what *appears* to have happened; and how the sleuth, amateur or professional (yours truly in this case), figures out which is which. I suppose I could put everything in perspective if I explained how it all turned out and then doubled back to that phone call, but it's better if you experience it just as I did, one strange step at a time.

This was October 7, 1988, and it looked like things were as bad as they were going to get. On the national front, congressional spending was a whopping \$1,064.14 billion and the federal debt was topping out at \$2,601.3 billion. Unemployment hovered at 5.5 percent and the price of a first-class postage stamp had jumped from twenty-two cents to twenty-five. I tend to disregard issues over which I have no control. Like it or not, the politicians don't consult me about economic

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policies, budget cuts, or the gross national product, whatever *that* is. I might voice an opinion (if I had one), but as nearly as I can tell, nobody pays the slightest attention, so what's the point? My only hope is to be the master of my own small universe, which is centered in a Southern California town ninety-six miles north of Los Angeles.

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, female, age thirty-eight. I rent office space in a two-room bungalow with a kitchenette and a bathroom on a narrow side street in the heart of Santa Teresa, population 85,810, minus the two dead guys. Since I'm the sole proprietor and lone employee, I operate on a modest scale, supporting myself by doing missing-persons searches, background checks, witness location, and the occasional service of process. From time to time I'm hired to establish paper trails in legal, financial, or property disputes. On a more personal note, let me say that I believe in law and order, loyalty, and patriotism—old-fashioned values that might seem woefully out of date. I also believe in earning an honest living so I can pay my taxes, cover my monthly bills, and tuck any surplus into my retirement account.

When I reached the coroner's office, I was ushered into a bay with the curtain discreetly pulled around the ceiling track. Though curious, I wasn't apprehensive. I'd done a quick survey and could account for the people I knew and loved. There were those who orbited my world in a wider gyre, but I couldn't think of one whose death would have had a significant impact.

The dead man was stretched out on a gurney with a sheet pulled up to his chin, so there was nothing of

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an intimate nature in evidence. He was not someone I recognized. His skin tones were gray, underlined with a pale gold that suggested liver issues of a profound and possibly fatal nature. His features had been softened and flattened in death, angles worn as smooth as stone over which water has poured for thousands of years. The human spirit does more than animate the face; it lends character and definition. Here, there was none.

The decedent (to use the official term) appeared to be in his early seventies, white, and overweight in the manner of those who forgo their nine servings of fresh fruits and vegetables per day. Judging by the bulbous nose and broken veins across his weather-darkened face, he'd enjoyed alcohol in sufficient quantities to pickle the average adult. Sometimes the dead seem to sleep. This man did not. I studied him at length, and there was not even the faintest suggestion that he was breathing. Whatever spell had been cast over him, the effects were permanent.

His body had been discovered that morning in a sleeping bag on the beach where he'd hollowed out a place for himself in the sand. His campsite was just below a bank of ice plant that flourished between the bike path and the beach itself, a spot not immediately visible to passersby. During the day, the area is popular with the homeless. At night, the fortunate among them secure bed space at one of the local shelters. The unlucky ones are left to flop where they can.

The beachside park closes thirty minutes after sunset and doesn't open again until 6:00 A.M. According to Municipal Code 15.16.085, it's unlawful to sleep in any public park, public street, public parking lot, or

any public beach, which doesn't leave much in the way of open-air habitats available free of charge. The ordinance is designed to discourage transients from sacking out on the doorsteps of area businesses, thus forcing them to set up makeshift quarters under bridges, freeway overpasses, bushes, and other places of concealment. Sometimes the police roust them out and sometimes they look the other way. Much of this depends on whether the local citizens are feeling righteous about the poor or indifferent, as is usually the case.

Preliminary examination suggested the man had been dead for close to eighteen hours by the time the coroner's investigator got in touch with me. Aaron Blumberg had been hired by the Santa Teresa County Coroner's Office in the mid-'70s, just about the time I left the Santa Teresa Police Department and went to work for Ben Byrd and Morley Shine. The year I opened my office, Aaron was recruited by the Kern County Sheriff's Department, from which he'd recently retired. Like many law-enforcement junkies, he was ill suited for a life of leisure, and he'd returned to the local coroner's office some six months before.

He was a man in his sixties with a softly receding hairline. The top of his head was covered with gray fluff, like the first feathering out of a baby bird. His ears were prominent, his cheekbones pronounced, and his smile created long creases that bracketed his mouth like a marionette's. We stood in silence for a moment and then he checked my reaction. "You know him?"

"I don't. I take it he was homeless."

Aaron shrugged. "That's my guess. A group of them have been congregating in that grassy patch across the

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street from the Santa Teresa Inn. Before that, they camped in the park adjacent to the municipal swimming pool.”

“Who called it in?”

He took off his glasses and polished one lens with the end of his tie. “Fellow named Cross. Seven o’clock this morning, he was out on the beach with a metal detector sweeping for coins. He had his eye on the sleeping bag, thinking it had been dumped. Something about it bothered him, so he went out to the street and flagged down the first black-and-white that came by.”

“Was anyone else around?”

“The usual posse of bums, but by the time the paramedics arrived, they’d all drifted away.” He checked his lenses for smears and then resettled the glasses on his nose, tucking a wire stem carefully behind each ear.

“Any signs of foul play?”

“Nothing obvious. Dr. Palchek’s on her way out. She has two autopsies on the books, which puts this guy at the end of the line, pending her assessment. Since Medicare went into effect, she doesn’t do a post on every body brought in.”

“What do you think he died of? He looks jaundiced.”

“Not to be flip about it, but what do any of these guys die of? It’s a hard life. We have one just like this every couple of months. Guy goes to sleep and he never wakes up. Could be hepatitis C, anemia, heart attack, alcohol poisoning. If we can ID the guy, I’ll canvas the local clinics in hopes he’s seen a doc sometime in the last twenty days.”

“No ID at all?”

Aaron shook his head. “Note with your name and

phone number and that was it. I inked his fingers and faxed the ten-print card to the DOJ in Sacramento. Weekend's coming up and those requests are going to sit there until somebody gets around to 'em. Might be the middle of next week."

"Meanwhile, what?"

"I'll check his description against missing-persons reports and see if there's a match. With the homeless, their families sometimes don't care enough to fill out the paperwork. Of course, it works the other way as well. Street people don't always want to be located by their so-called loved ones."

"Anything else? Moles, tattoos?"

He lifted the sheet to expose the man's left leg, which was shorter than his right. The knee cap was misshapen, raised in a thick knot like a burl. The flesh along the fibula was laced with red ropes of scar tissue. At some point in the past, he'd suffered a devastating injury.

"What happens if you never find out who he is?"

"We'll hold him for a time and then we'll bury him."

"What about his effects?"

"Clothes on his back, sleeping bag, and that's it. If he had anything else, it's gone now."

"Ripped off?"

"That's possible. In my experience, the beach bums are protective of one another, which is not to say they might not confiscate the stuff he had no further use for."

"What about the note he carried? Can I see it?"

He reached for the clipboard at the bottom of the gurney and freed the clear plastic evidence bag in which the slip had been placed. There was a picket fence of

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torn paper along the top, the leaf apparently ripped from a spiral-bound pad. The note was written in ball-point pen, the letters uniform and clean: MILLHONE INVESTIGATIONS with the address and phone. It was the sort of printing I'd emulated in the fourth grade, inspired by a teacher who used a mechanical pencil and the same neat hand.

"That's my office," I remarked. "He must have looked me up in the yellow pages. My home number's unlisted. Wonder what a homeless guy wanted with a PI?"

"I guess they've got problems just like everyone else."

"Maybe he thought I'd come cheap since I'm a girl."

"How would he know that? Millhone Investigations is gender neutral."

"Good point," I said.

"At any rate, I'm sorry for the wasted trip, but I thought it was worth a shot."

"Absolutely," I said. "Do you mind if I ask around? Somebody must know who he was. If the guy needed help, he might have confided in his cronies."

"Do anything you want as long as you keep us in the loop. Maybe you'll find out who he is before we do."

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

I sat for a moment in the parking lot, jotting notes on a succession of index cards that I keep in my bag. There was a time when I trusted more to memory. I was raised by a maiden aunt who believed in rote learning: multiplication tables, state capitals, the kings and queens of England and their reigns, religions of the world, and

the periodic table of elements, which she taught me by the judicious arrangement of cookies decorated with blue, pink, yellow, and green frosting, numbers piped onto each in a contrasting color. Oddly enough, I'd forgotten that particular exercise in child abuse until the previous April, when I walked into a bakery and saw a display of Easter cookies. In a flash, like a series of photographs, I saw hydrogen, atomic number 1; helium, atomic number 2; lithium, atomic number 3, working my way as far as neon, atomic number 10, before my mind went blank. I am still able to recite long portions of Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" at the slightest provocation. In my experience, this is not a useful skill.

When I was young, such pointless mental gymnastics were the perfect training for a game played at various birthday parties I attended. We were briefly shown a tray of objects, and a prize was given to the little girl who remembered the most. I was a whiz at this. In fourth grade, I won a pocket comb, a ChapStick, a small bag of marbles, a box of crayons, a nicely wrapped bar of motel soap, and a pair of plastic barrettes . . . really not worth the effort in my opinion. Eventually, mothers became annoyed and hinted broadly that I should share the bounty or cede the floor. Having a keen sense of justice even at that age, I refused, which pared down the number of invitations to zero. I've learned in the years since that the simple expedient of written notes relieves the beleaguered child in me from burdening my brain. I'm still resistant to sharing bounty I've acquired by fair means.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I thought about the

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oddities of life, that something as insignificant as a slip of paper could have a ripple effect. For reasons unknown, the dead man had made a note of my name and phone number, and because of that, my path had touched his. While it was too late for conversation, I wasn't quite prepared to shrug and move on. Maybe he'd meant to make the call the day he died and his mortality caught up with him before he could act. Maybe he'd thought about calling and changed his mind. I wasn't looking for answers, but it couldn't hurt to inquire. I didn't anticipate long-term consequences. I pictured myself asking a few questions, making little or no progress, and then letting the matter drop. Sometimes the import of a minor moment makes all the difference.

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On my way back into town, I stopped at the car wash. For years I owned VW Bugs, which were cheap to run and possessed a certain quirky charm. A full tank of gas would get you almost anywhere in the state, and if you suffered a fender bender, you could replace a bumper for pennies on the dollar. This more than made up for the minimal horsepower and the smirks from other drivers. I'm a jeans-and-boots kind of gal myself, so the lack of glamour suited me just fine.

My first VW, a beige 1968 sedan, ended up in a ditch after a fellow in a truck ran me off the road. This was out by the Salton Sea, where I was conducting a missing-persons search. The guy was intent on killing me but managed to inflict only modest damage to my person while the car was a total loss. My second VW sedan was a 1974, pale blue, with only one minor ding in the left rear fender. That car went to an early grave, shoved into a big hole after a slow-speed chase on an isolated stretch of road up in San Luis Obispo County. I've heard that most traffic fatalities occur within a two-mile radius of home, but my experience would suggest otherwise. I don't mean to imply that the life of a private eye is all that dangerous. The big threat is my being

bored half to death doing title searches at the county courthouse.

My current vehicle is a 1970 Ford Mustang, a two-door coupe with manual transmission, a front spoiler, and wide track tires. This car had served me well, but the color was an eye-popping Grabber Blue, much too conspicuous for someone in my line of work. Occasionally I'm hired to run surveillance on an unsuspecting spouse, and the persistent sight of a Boss 429 in close range will blow a tail every time. I'd owned the Mustang for a year, and while I was no longer smitten with it, I was reconciled to Mustang ownership until the next kick-ass miscreant had a go at me. I figured I was just about due.

In the meantime, I tried to be conscientious about maintenance, with frequent servicing at the local repair shop and a weekly hosing down. At the car wash for \$9.99, the "deluxe package" includes a thorough interior vacuuming, a foam wash, a rinse, a hot wax, and a blow dry with 60-horsepower fans. Ticket in hand, I watched the attendant ease the Mustang into a line of cars awaiting the conveyor track, which would ferry it from view. I went inside the station and paid the cashier, declining the offer of a vanilla-scented doohickey to hang on my rearview mirror. I moved over to the waiting area's long spectator window and peered to my right, watching as the attendant steered the Mustang forward until it was caught on the flat mechanical tramway. A white hatchback of unknown manufacture followed right behind.

Four panels of trailing cloth bands wagged soap and water back and forth across the top surfaces of the car while whirling cloth skirts pirouetted along the sides.

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A separate cylinder of soft brushes caught the front grille, merrily scrubbing and polishing. There was something hypnotic about the methodical lather and rinse processes that enveloped the Mustang in a blanket of sudsy water, soap, and wax. That I considered the process enthralling is a fair gauge of how easily entertained I was at the time.

I was so engrossed that I scarcely noticed the guy standing at the window next to me until he spoke.

“That your Mustang?”

“Yep,” I said and looked over at him. I placed him in his early forties, dark hair, good jawline, slender frame. Not so good-looking as to annoy or intimidate. He wore boots, faded jeans, and a blue denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His smile revealed a row of white teeth with one crooked bicuspid.

“Are you a fan?” I asked.

“Oh, god yes. My older brother had a 429 when he was in high school. Man, you floored that thing and it tore the blacktop off the road. Is that a 1969?”

“Close, a 1970. The intake ports are the size of sewer pipes.”

“They’d have to be. What’s the airflow rate?”

“Eight,” I said, like I knew what I was talking about. I walked the length of the station’s window, keeping pace with my car as it inched down the line. “Is that your hatchback?”

“I’m afraid so,” he said. “I liked the car when I bought it, but it’s one thing after another. I’ve taken it back to the dealer three times and they claim there’s nothing they can do.”

Both cars disappeared from view, and as we moved

toward the exit, he stepped ahead of me and pushed open the glass door, holding it for me as I passed in front of him. One car jockey slid into the front seat of the Mustang while another took the wheel of his car, which I could see now was a Nissan. Both cars were driven out onto the tarmac, where two sets of workers swarmed forward with terry-cloth towels, wiping away stray traces of water and squirting shiner on the sides of the tires. A minute later, one of the workers raised a towel, looking over at us.

As I headed for my car, the Nissan owner said, "You ever decide to sell, post a notice on the board in there."

I turned and walked backward for a few steps. "I've actually been thinking about dumping it."

He laughed, glancing over as a second worker nodded to indicate that his car was ready.

I said, "I'm serious. It's the wrong car for me."

"How so?"

"I bought it on a whim and I've regretted it ever since. I have all the service records and the tires are brand new. And no, it's not stolen. I own it outright."

"How much?"

"I paid five grand and I'd be willing to let it go for that."

By then he'd caught up with me and we'd stopped to finish the conversation. "You mean it?"

"Let's just say I'm open to the idea." I reached into one of the outer flaps of my shoulder bag and took out a business card. I scribbled my home phone number on the back and offered it to him.

He glanced at the information. "Well, okay. This is good. I don't have the money now, but I might one day soon."

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“I’d have to line up a replacement. I need wheels or I’m out of business.”

“Why don’t you think about it and I will, too. A friend of mine owes me money and he swears he’ll pay.”

“You have a name?”

“Drew Unser. Actually, it’s Andrew, but Drew’s easier.”

“I’m Kinsey.”

“I know.” He held the card up. “It says so right here.”

“Have a good one,” I said. I continued to my car and then waved as I got in. The last I saw of him, he was heading left out of the lot while I took a right.

I returned to the office and spent a satisfying half hour at my Smith-Corona typing a report. The job I’d just wrapped up was a work-related disability claim through California Fidelity Insurance, where I’d been accorded office space for many years. Since CFI and I had parted on bad terms, I appreciated the opportunity to ingratiate myself, a reversal made possible because the executive who fired me had himself been fired. This was a gloat-worthy turn of events and the news had lifted my spirits for days. The recent job had been gratifying for more reasons than the hefty paycheck. The responsibility of an employer for the health and safety of employees is governed by state law, and the follow-up to a workplace accident usually falls to the insurance company. Not all private insurance companies write worker-comp policies, which requires a property and casualty license. In this case, the injured man was married to a CFI executive, which was why I was brought in. Being skeptical by nature, I suspected the

fellow was malingering, coached by a spouse well acquainted with the means and methods for milking the situation. As it turned out, I was able to document the man's incapacitation, and his employer made sure he was afforded the benefits he was entitled to. Cynicism aside, it makes me happy when two parties, whose relationship could turn adversarial, resolve their differences to the satisfaction of both.

When I finished typing the report, I made two copies on my newly acquired secondhand copy machine, kept one for my files, and put the original and one copy in an envelope that I addressed to CFI, which I dropped into the nearest mailbox as I headed for home. I was caught up on work, and for the moment I had no new clients clamoring for my services, so I'd awarded myself some time off. I wasn't thinking in terms of a bona fide vacation. I'm too tight with a buck to spend money on a trip and there wasn't any place else I longed to be in any event. As a rule, if I don't work, I don't eat, but my checking account was full, I had three months' worth of expenses covered, and I was looking forward to a stretch of time in which to do as I pleased.

Once I'd reached Cabana, I followed the wide boulevard that ran parallel to the Pacific Ocean. We'd had fog and drizzle the day before and the skies were sufficiently overcast to generate a fine mist. As it happened, rainfall total for the month would later register a touch over 0.00 inches, but for all I knew, the sprinkle heralded an epic tropical storm that would soak us properly. The lingering damp suggested a change of seasons, Santa Teresa's version of summer giving way to fall.

A mile farther on, at the intersection of Milagro and

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Cabana, I turned into one of the public lots and nosed into a parking spot that faced the Santa Teresa Inn. I figured as long as I was out and about, I'd try to make contact with those who might be acquainted with the man in the morgue. This was a neighborhood I knew well, the halfway point in my usual three-mile morning jog. It was now late afternoon and the beach path was populated by a cross-flow of walkers and cyclists, tourists peddling foot-powered surreys, and kids maneuvering their skateboards as though surfing the pipeline.

The homeless I saw in the early morning hours were often still huddled under a deadweight of blankets, sheltered by shopping carts piled high with their belongings. Even for nomads, the urge toward ownership is apparently irresistible. Regardless of social status, we derive comfort from our *stuff*; the familiar warp and weft of our lives. My pillow, my blanket, my small plot of earth. It's not that the homeless are any less invested in their possessions. The dimensions of what they own are simply more compact and more easily carted from place to place.

The sun was making its slow descent and the air was getting chillier by the minute. I set my sights on a trio lounging on sleeping bags under a cluster of palms. As I watched, they passed a cigarette from hand to hand and took turns sipping from a soda can that had probably been emptied and refilled with a high-test substitute. In addition to the censure against snoozing in public, consumption of alcohol is also prohibited by municipal code. Clearly, the homeless can't do much of anything without risking arrest.

It didn't take much sleuthing to locate the spot where

the John Doe had been found. Just beyond a shelf of ice plant, someone had constructed a tower of carefully balanced rocks, six by my count, each stone settled on the one below it in an artful arrangement that appeared both stable and precarious. I knew the sculpture hadn't been there the day before because I'd have spotted it. At the base, a motley collection of glass jars had been placed, each containing a bouquet of wildflowers or blooms confiscated from the yards of homeowners in the area. While jogging, the only way I have to keep my mind occupied is by a free-form internal commentary about external events.

I focused on the three transients, two of whom were regarding me without expression. They didn't seem overtly threatening, but I'm an undersize female—five foot six, one hundred eighteen pounds—and while capable of defending myself, I'd been taught to keep my distance from any assemblage of idlers. There's something edgy and unpredictable about those who loiter with no clear purpose, especially when alcohol is folded into the mix. I'm a person of order and regulation, discipline and routine. That's what makes me feel safe. The anarchy of the disenfranchised is worrisome. In this case, my wariness was superseded by my quest for information.

I approached the threesome, taking a mental photograph of each in turn. A white kid somewhere in his twenties sat with his back against a palm. He sported dreadlocks. The sparse shadow of facial hair suggested he'd shaved maybe once in the past two weeks. I could see a sharp angle of bare chest visible in the V of his short-sleeve shirt. The sight of his bare arms made me

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cross my own for warmth. His shorts seemed light for the season. The only items of substance he wore were heavy-duty wool socks and a pair of hiking boots. His legs were cute, but that was about it.

The second fellow was African American, with a full head of springy gray hair, frosted with white. His beard and mustache were carefully trimmed, and he wore glasses with metal rims. He was probably in his seventies, decked out in a pale blue dress shirt under a herringbone sport coat with frayed cuffs. The third fellow sat cross-legged in the grass with his back to me, as round-shouldered and squat as a statue of Buddha. He wore an imitation leather jacket with a rip under one arm and a black knit watch cap pulled down to his brows.

I said, “Hi, guys. I don’t mean to intrude, but did any of you know the dead man who was found out there this morning in his sleeping bag?”

As I gestured toward the beach, it occurred to me that the detail about the sleeping bag was superfluous. How many dead men in any guise had been discovered at the beach in the past twenty-four hours?

The fellow with his back to me rotated to get a good look at me and I realized my mistake. It was a woman, who said, “What business is it of yours?”

“Sorry. I should have introduced myself. Kinsey Millhone. What’s your name?”

She turned away, murmuring a four-letter word, which was audible, owing to my keen appreciation of bad language. I’m occasionally rebuked for my salty tongue, but who gives a shit?

The white kid spoke up in an effort to present a

friendlier point of view. Without quite meeting my gaze, he said, "That's Pearl. This here's Dandy and I'm Felix."

"Nice meeting you," I said.

In a gesture that I hoped would convey both goodwill and trust, I held out my hand. There was an awkward moment and then Felix got the message. He shook hands with me, smiling sheepishly, his gaze fixed on the grass. I could see grungy metal braces on his teeth. Was the welfare system in the business of correcting mal-occlusions these days? That was hard to believe. Maybe he'd been fitted as a teen and had run away from home before his dentist finished his work. His teeth did look straight, but I questioned the wisdom of sporting orthodontia for life.

Dandy, the older gentleman, spoke up, his tone mild. "Don't mind Pearl. It's almost supper time and she's hypoglycemic. Brings out a side of her we'd just as soon not see. What's your interest in our friend?"

"He had my name and phone number in his pocket. The coroner's office asked me to ID the guy, but I'd never seen him before. Were you aware that he'd passed away?"

Pearl snorted. "We look like fools? Of course he's *dead*. Why else would the coroner send a van? He was laying out there still as stone an hour and a half after sunup. Down here, come daybreak, you better be on the move or the cops will bust you for loitering." Her lower teeth were dark and widely spaced as though every other one had been yanked out.

"Can you tell me his name?"

She measured me, sizing up my capacity to pay. "How much is it worth to you?"

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Dandy said, "Come on now, Pearl. Why don't you answer the lady? She asked all polite and look how you're doing her."

"Would you butt out? I can handle this myself if it's all the same to you."

"Fellow passed on. She wants to know who he is. No reason to be rude."

"I asked why it's any of her concern? She ain't answer me, so why should I answer her?"

I said, "There's nothing complicated going on. The coroner's office wants to contact his next of kin so his family can decide what to do with his remains. I'd hate to see him buried in a pauper's grave."

"What difference does it make as long as it don't cost us anything?"

Her hostility was getting on my nerves, but I didn't think this was the time to introduce the notion of sensitivity training when she was already "sharing" her feelings. She went on. "What's it to you? You a social worker? Is that it? You work for St. Terry's or that clinic at the university?"

I was doing an admirable job of keeping my temper in check. Nothing sets me off quicker than belligerence, warranted or otherwise. "I'm a private investigator. Your friend must have found my name in the yellow pages. I wondered if he'd had a problem he needed help with."

"We all need help," Pearl said. She held out a hand to Dandy. "Gimme up."

He stood and pulled her to her feet. I watched while she dusted imaginary blades of grass from the back of her pants.

“Nice making your acquaintance,” Dandy said.

The white kid took his cue from his companions and stubbed out the last half inch of the cigarette. He stood and took one last sip from the soda can before he crushed it underfoot. He might have left it in the grass, but since I was standing right there watching him, he tucked it in his backpack like a good Boy Scout. He gathered his sleeping bag, bundled it carelessly, and secured it to his backpack with a length of rope.

Clearly, our chummy conversation was coming to an end. I said, “Anybody know where he was from?”

No response.

“Can’t you even give me a hint?”

The white kid said, “Terrence.”

Pearl hissed, trying to shut him up.

Meanwhile, I was drawing a blank. “Which is where?”

Felix was staring off to one side. “You ast his first name.”

“Got it. Terrence. I appreciate the information. What about his last name?”

“Hey! Enough. We don’t have to tell you nothing,” Pearl said.

I was about to choke the woman to death with my bare hands when Dandy spoke up.

“You have a business card? I’m not saying we’ll get back to you, but just in case.”

“Of course.”

I reached into my shoulder bag and took one out, which I handed to him. “I jog most weekday mornings, so you can always look for me on the bike path. I’m usually here by six fifteen.”

W is for Wasted

He examined the card. “What kind of name’s Kinsey?”

“My mother’s maiden name.”

He looked up. “You happen to have any spare smokes on you?”

“I don’t,” I said, patting my jacket as though to verify the fact. I was about to add that I didn’t have any spare change either, but it seemed insulting as he hadn’t inquired about my financial state. Pearl had lost interest. She grabbed her shopping cart and began hauling it toward the bike path, wheels digging into the soft grass.

When it was clear the three were moving on, I said, “I appreciate your help. If you think of anything useful, you can let me know.”

Dandy paused. “You know that minimart a block down?”

“Sure.”

“You pick up a couple packs of cigarettes and it might put Miss Pearly White in a mood to chat.”

“She can bite my big fat ass,” Pearl said.

“Thanks a bunch. Really fun,” I sang as they ambled away.