

# ONE

FEBRUARY, 1997

*Monday*

“Steven.”

My name has never sounded so poetic - so angelic - than when spoken from the lovely lips of Maria Antonio.

I closed my eyes and squeezed my fingers around the bottle of beer in front of me. I didn't - couldn't - respond to her immediately. I wasn't trying to antagonize her, but I needed a moment to steel my own resolve. It had been almost thirteen years since we'd last seen one another; all of them long and torturous - at least for me.

I tried to conjure up the image of her that I'd stored in my memory. I saw her auburn hair blowing playfully in the breeze and her laughing at a now forgotten joke, as we sat on the back porch of her house. She was seventeen and the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen.

Now I sat terrified at the reflection I'd surely see of her in the mirror behind the bar, if only I had the nerve to look up from my hands.

“There was talk that you were dead.”

Again, I didn't know how to reply. Her mere presence mesmerized me. Her closeness. Her perfume.

Suddenly the bar felt as still as death. Like an old black and white snapshot.

What had possessed me to come back here? Sure I had a job



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to do, but was this current situation - one I had known would occur - worth the two thousand dollar budget I'd been given?

"If you don't say anything in the next five seconds, I'll have to come to one of two conclusions," she said defiantly. "That you've become an arrogant s.o.b. over the years and you have no intention of talking to me ever again. Or that you are as deaf as a tree stump. Personally, I couldn't care less but I've got things to do, so the clock starts ticking down now."

"Can I assume you were the one who started the 'Steve Is Dead' rumour?"

"The lump at the bar speaks! Someone call the Pope."

I pushed away the beer bottle, turned slowly on my bar stool to face her and braced myself for the deserving slap I knew would be coming.

Yet when our eyes finally met something strange happened. I immediately saw in her's the one emotion that I'd hoped I never would: Pity.

The quick intake of air confirmed she had noted the three inch scar that ran down my left cheek, from the base of my eye to the jawbone. I could only imagine what her reaction would be if she saw the ten inch scar that ran horizontally across my stomach, where an irate gang member had attempted to gut me like a fish.

The right words to say to her continued to elude me. I was simply too captivated by her to speak. The long flowing hair I used to love to brush away from her face was now cut short and very stylish. Her face still held that youthful cheerleader glow and she looked as thin and athletic as she had in high school.

I thought it ironic that in good faith - probably matched with a certain degree of malice - she had come to confront me for past transgressions, but instead was now the one being confronted.

"Oh, Steve," she managed to say as her eyes involuntarily began to water. Then without hesitation she raised her right hand and caressed my face, tracing the scar with the backs of her fingers. "I had no idea." Her voice then trailed off.

I held her gaze and took her hand in mine, only to realize that she was clutching something in it. Even before she revealed it to me, I instinctively knew it was a thin gold chain from which a heart shaped locket hung.

"I came here to give this back," Maria said, regaining some of her composure as she opened her hand.

"Don't you mean *throw* it in my face?"

She smiled for the first time. "Yes, that's what I meant," she replied as we both shared a brief nervous laugh together. "You always knew what I was thinking, even when I didn't have a clue myself."

"What can I say, it's a gift." I looked at her hand. "Just as that was," I said, as I gently folded her fingers around the chain. "It's part of the past. Our history. And regardless of what a jerk I turned out to be, when I gave you that locket I loved you more than life itself. Nothing's going to change that."

I could see that she was clearly distressed.

"Look," I continued, "I don't have the right to tell you what to do. That chain and locket may hold the key to, or symbolize, everything bad that has happened in your life since graduation. So if you want to throw it in my face as a form of - what do they call it, *closure*? - then I'll understand. Really. But in all honesty, I'd like you to keep it."

Maria looked if not confused, than a little embarrassed.

"I just thought you might like it back, seeing as how it was your mother's," she finally said.

"She's the one who told me to give it to you."

The revelation brought another smile to Maria's lips. "I know. She told me in the hospital. Just a couple of days before . . ." Maria stopped as I took a long swig from my bottle. "I never really got to talk to you after she died. Then when the funeral was over, you just . . ."

"Vanished?"

"Yeah, vanished."

She began to look very pale and uncomfortable in my presence. "I guess I'll keep this - for now at least," she said, sliding the chain into her pant's pocket as she wiped tears out of the corners of her eyes.



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"It's good to see you again, Steve," she said haltingly, "but I've really got to go."

I watched helplessly as Maria ran out of the bar and out of my life. It was then I caught my reflection in the bar's mirror.

"Could you be more of an ass?" I asked my twin.

"Are you talking to me?"

I turned to my right and saw the barkeeper eyeing me suspiciously. "Just talking to myself," I explained sheepishly.

"Do that often?" the barkeep asked with an amused smile.

"Only when I'm alone."

"If that scene that just played out is any indication of how you treat women, I suspect you're by yourself quite a bit."

I let the comment slide and threw a five dollar bill down on the bar. As I walked out into the bright afternoon sunshine, I internally berated myself for being so stupid. Since leaving Delta, I'd thought about seeing Maria again every day, but when I finally had the opportunity to straighten things out I'd blown it.

I replayed our brief encounter and dreaded the fact that I knew nothing about her current life.

Was she married?

Did she have kids?

Did she still live in town?

On the off chance she worked in the vicinity of Scooter's Bar, I slowed my pace as I walked by the businesses that made up the downtown core and glanced in the windows.

No luck.

She had vanished into thin air, just as Barry Jones had seven years earlier. Or so the story went.

Although I figured the Jones file was a dog, I hoped I'd be able to relocate Maria before skipping town a second time.

If I couldn't, maybe the private investigation field wasn't for me after all.



My first task was to find the library. Make that the new library. The one I'd often frequented as a kid had been torn down in order to make room for a recently rebuilt town hall. I learned from a passing teenager that the "place where they keep the books" had been moved two streets south, and was now part of the community centre.

Entering the centre, I braced myself for an onslaught of "welcome backs" from people I'd known growing up, but no one paid attention to me. In fact, no one seemed even remotely familiar looking.

*This may be a good thing*, I thought, as I made my way through the lobby, past the swimming pool entrance and then into the library itself.

"May I help you?" a female voice inquired.

I turned expecting to see Mrs. Jameson, the one and only librarian from my youth. What I saw however, was an attractive young woman I guessed was nineteen, smiling in my direction.

"You're not Mrs. Jameson," I quipped.

"Mrs. Jameson?" the woman replied apprehensively. "Oh - Mrs. Jameson - the old librarian."

"Yes. Is she still in charge?" I asked, taking in my spacious surroundings.

"Actually," the woman started hesitantly, "Mrs. Jameson checked out her last book - so to speak - a couple years ago. Didn't you see the memorial plaque as you came in?"

"Must have missed it," I replied.

It dawned on me that a lot of people I knew as a teenager - young or old - had in the intervening years moved onto greener pastures (literally and figuratively speaking).

"I'm sorry to hear that," I added.

"I may not know *every* title here, like Mrs. Jameson did," the young librarian said with a warm sincere grin, "but I bet I can help you find whatever you're looking for."



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I watched her for a couple seconds, studying her face and body language. She seemed so innocent. The nineteen year old females I was accustomed to dealing with were usually stoned out of their minds and selling their bodies on the streets. Then something in the way her lips curled upwards at the corners of her mouth sent a pulse of recognition to my mind.

"Your first name wouldn't happen to be Linda, would it?" I asked.

"How'd you know that?" she replied astonished.

"I went to school with your brother Keith. Your last name's Burkhard, right?"

Now she studied me for a few seconds. "I'm sorry. I don't remember you," she responded.

*And why should you?* I thought. *You were probably all of six or seven years old the last time we were in the same room together.*

"I doubt you would. I'm Steve Cassidy. My family lived on Salisbury Drive. The big yellow house at the end of the street."

"I remember that place," she said, her face brightening. "It had two large pillars on the front porch."

I stood confused. "You talk as though it's no longer there." A pain shot through my system, with the sudden realization that my childhood home was, in fact, one of the things that had moved on since my last visit.

"You didn't know?" Linda watched as I shook my head. "There was a fire - maybe a year ago. It burnt to the ground."

"Was anyone hurt?" I asked in the steadiest tone of voice I could muster.

"Oh no - it was empty at the time."

A sickening, empty feeling filled my chest. Why hadn't anyone tried to contact me? Surely someone in town would have had the decency to call and tell me that the house my father had built with his own hands had been reduced to ashes.

But as quickly as my blood pressure reached critical mass, it began to drop back down to a more manageable level.

The truth was the house no longer belonged to my family anyway. After leaving town, I'd arranged for the place to be sold and its contents auctioned off. At the time, I felt it was the only way to escape the past, which would in turn allow me to start afresh somewhere else. Or so I'd hoped.

Departing with no forwarding address also would have hampered any local contact, I reflected.

"Are you all right?"

The intoxicating fragrance of Linda's perfume was the first indication that she was now standing in front of me, (even though I had no recollection of her getting up from behind her desk).

*I've only been back for a few hours and already I'm losing it*, I thought fearfully.

Linda didn't wait for a response. "Why don't you come over here and sit down?" she said, taking me by the arm to a nearby reading table. "You suddenly don't look so hot." I silently followed her lead and sat in the chair she'd pulled out. "Can I get you some water?"

I took inventory of all the emotions her face conveyed and could not detect the slightest trace of pity. She was genuinely concerned about my well being.

*Amazing*, I thought.

"No, I'm fine. Really," I stammered. "I just . . . ah . . . need a second to regroup."

"Take all the time you need," she said cheerfully. "But remember, we close at eight tonight."

Just then a boy about seven came over to the table and asked Linda for help finding a book on beetles.

"I'll be right there, Christopher," she said as the boy wandered back to the children's corner. "As for you, Mr. Cassidy, is there something I can help you find - or are you still regrouping?"

"I think my group has been re-established, thank you. And please call me Steve. Only my enemies call me Mr. Cassidy and I don't think you fit into that category."



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"Okay, *Steve*," she said sarcastically. "What brings you here today?"

"Telephone books actually. Local ones for the past eight years."

"I was expecting something a little more challenging," she replied with a laugh, "but maybe you're just testing me. In any case, the books you require are on the reference shelf against that wall."

"Thanks," I said, returning her smile.

"Just doing my job."

I watched as Linda made her way over to the beetle boy and knew instinctively that she would someday be a candidate for Mother of the Year. Unlike me, she radiated love and patience for kids and their thousand and one rapid fire questions. Not that I don't like children, I do. Just as long as they aren't mine, of course.

My mind drifted back to my meeting with Maria and I wondered if she had any children. Angry with myself for the lost opportunity to find out, I stood quickly and dashed the thought out of my head, trying hard to concentrate on the task at hand.

The phone books were slim, which wasn't surprising as the ten or so communities represented had populations ranging from 266 to 2540 - excluding the City of Kelsey Lake listings.

I started with the 1989 directory and quickly located a listing for "Barry Jones" of 15 Duke Drive in the Town of Delta section. I wrote the information in a small police notebook (one of many I'd kept after leaving Vice), and continued to look in the telephone books for the following seven years. Each one contained the same listing, name, address, and number. Apparently, the soon-to-be widow had never called the phone company to request a name change. It also indicated that Mrs. Jones and her two children continued to reside in the same house which Mr. Jones had left on March 20, 1990, never to be seen or heard from again.

Was there anything sinister with the grieving wife's actions, or in this case, inaction?

Probably not, I concluded, but thought it was curious nevertheless. Just because I couldn't stand the idea of living alone in my

house after my parents had died only months apart, didn't mean Mrs. Jones should feel the same way. Besides, unlike my Mom and Dad who were planted in the ground, Mrs. Jones fully expected her hubby to waltz back in the front door at anytime.

Still the idea seemed macabre.

I closed the current phone book but then reopened it. For the next several minutes I read line by line each of the Town of Delta's listings. With each discarded name, my spirits fell. There were no listings for Maria Antonio, or M. Antonio, or for that matter, any other surnames with the name Maria preceding it.

"Are you looking for my number?" Linda asked as she took a seat beside me.

She had again seemingly materialized without warning, catching me off guard.

"Actually . . .," I began to stutter - nervous for reasons I couldn't explain.

"I'll save you time," she said pointing to a listing in the open book.

"L. Brooks? You're married?" I looked at her ring finger and found it bare.

"Was married," she replied happily. "The best - and worst - six months of my life."

"But you're what - nineteen?"

Linda blushed ever so slightly. "You transplanted city guys know how to load on the charm, don't you?" I just stared back at her. "I'm twenty-two," she finally said. "That's plenty of time to screw up one's life, at least temporarily."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . ."

"What - make me feel good about myself?" I returned her broad smile. "Why don't we just drop this topic, okay? Cause I've always been told that you're only as old as you feel."

"I guess I would agree with that," I said.

"So if I'm twenty-two, that makes you . . ."

"Fifty-four." It was my turn to catch her off guard. "Well," I began to qualify my answer, "physically I'm only thirty-one, but I feel



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like a fifty-four year old."

"And how would you know what a fifty-four year old feels like?" Linda scoffed light-heartedly.

"I used to date much older woman," I deadpanned.

"With lines like that I don't suppose many women your age would find you interesting," she replied with a smile that quickly turned into an uncontrollable laugh.

I concede it was a funnier line than mine. What I thought was even more humorous though, was that twice within the past hour two perfect strangers had correctly identified that my love life was in need of repair.

Was I really that transparent?

"So are you glad to be back home?" Linda asked in a gentle tone, when our mutual laughter died down.

I thought about it for a moment.

"After a rough start, it's definitely turning out to be better than I'd hoped."

A short time later, I left the community centre feeling somewhat rejuvenated. Not only had I met a beautiful intelligent woman, who had never once alluded to my very noticeable facial scar, but she had invited me to her apartment the following evening for dinner.

Now if only the Jones file could be resolved so effortlessly.



I debated what I should do next. The thought of driving past the empty lot where my house once stood depressed me. I then toyed with the idea of finding Linda's apartment building to decide if I should spring for a bottle of wine or a six-pack for our little get together. (I quickly came to the conclusion that a nice chardonnay would go great with her infectious smile.) I even dismissed the notion of touring past the Jones place for a look-see - at least for now.

Although it was still relatively early, I went back to the village's only motor inn to go over the case file again. A few hours later how-

ever, I was awakened by a car horn honking outside of my window. I then glanced at the pile of papers sprawled across the bed, ones that I'd been reviewing when the need for a siesta overcame me. I straightened out the documents I'd slept on and picked up a few more strays off the floor. As I put them back in the folder, I hoped I hadn't lost any.

Not that it would matter a great deal. The case was simple enough: On March 20, 1990, at 8:15 a.m., 45 year old Barry Jones - after kissing his wife goodbye and telling his two boys to behave in school - walked out the front door of his residence, entered his brown Buick and then drove off the face of this wondrous green planet. Or so it would seem.

Now seven long years later, Mrs. Jones was petitioning the courts to declare her chronically absentee husband legally dead, at which point the Global Insurance Company would have to pay out Barry Jones' life insurance claim.

Terence McCormick, Global's chief adjuster, had assured me that in most disappearance cases the company went along with the local police department's reports and settled very quickly. But when the policy was for \$750,000 and taken out by Mr. Jones only three months prior to pulling a Houdini, the company (as one would imagine) needed to confirm if the initial investigation had been run by Elliot Ness or Barney Fife.

I promised the adjuster I would do my best to find out.

"Just one final thing," I'd said as I took the case folder from McCormick's hand. "Are you hiring me because you think I can do the job, or because you think people will talk more freely to a *local* boy?"

"Both," came the reply.

I then looked at the attached cashier's cheque and knew the clock had begun ticking.

I had one month before Mrs. Jones' petition was rubber stamped by a judge.

One month to find out what really happened that fateful morning.

And most daunting of all: one month to come face-to-face with my own demons and past indiscretions.