

# JOHN SCHLARBAUM

A Steve Cassidy Mystery



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Duffy's Tavern (1975)  
Amherstburg, ON  
Canada

# CHAPTER ONE

## Friday

As we drove past the new electronic *Welcome To Amherstburg* sign, Dawn turned to me and asked, "Isn't it crazy, Steve? It's almost been a year since Emily had her baby."

"To me, anyone having a baby is crazy, but what do I know?" I answered with a smile. "I can barely handle feeding and walking our two rescue dogs at home."

At the mention of her babies, Dawn's face tightened a bit and she frowned. "I wonder what Eddie and Max are doing right now?"

"My guess is sleeping on the driveway side window sill waiting for your return – not mine."

"You're a good Fur Dad. They appreciate everything you do for them," she tried to reassure me.

"Fur Dad doesn't sound all that cool."

Dawn opened her cell phone photo app and began scrolling through hundreds of images of the boys. She stopped at one with them soaking up the sun on the back porch. "Look how cute they are!"

"You see cute, I see lazy," I laughed.

"And when you look at their Fur Mama?"

"Cute, every time."

"The correct response, Daddy-O. Happy wife, happy life."

After a lifetime of making women cry or yell or both, my sole purpose with Dawn was to make her smile and laugh. We weren't technically married but we might as well have been.

"Speaking of wives . . . earlier, I thought you were going to say how crazy it was it's almost been a year since solving Emily's fiancé's murder on their wedding day."

"I almost did, but thought I would keep the conversation light," Dawn said. "I wanted to focus on a new life, not a lost one."

"Sorry to harsh your mellow," I said with a grin. "Hopefully this visit will be less exciting . . . but more enjoyable for all concerned."

I stopped in front of the Bondy House Bed & Breakfast where

we stayed the previous year. As we retrieved our overnight bags from the back of the van our spry, early sixties hosts exited the front door, and onto the wraparound porch.

"You've arrived!" May exclaimed as she and her husband Everett met us on the sidewalk. May gave Dawn a big bear hug as if she was a long-lost daughter, while we men opted for a strong handshake. "I can't believe it's been a year since you were here."

"Time does fly," I said, trying to sound amazed myself.

"Well, it's good to have you back," May replied. "Let's get you two settled, and then we can catch up."

"I bet you have a lot of town news stored up for us," Dawn said.

"Oh, she does," Everett said under his breath as the women entered the house.

"Did I mention that we're here strictly for a vacation, and not as investigators?"

Everett laughed. "That's what you said last time, Steve. How did that work out for you?"

Climbing the steps, I said, "At the very least, I don't want to see the inside of the police station."

"That's the spirit! Keep expectations low and you're almost always guaranteed to meet them."

Almost always.

Within thirty minutes Dawn and I were checked in and unpacked in the same cozy room we'd stayed in before. There was a sense of *déjà vu* about the whole trip. We were here again for a romantic getaway in this quaint village on the shores of the fast-moving Detroit River. The Bondy House was within walking distance of a military fort, museums, and award-winning waterfront gardens brimming with brightly coloured flowers. In the nearby downtown core were a number of restaurants offering everything from delicious Italian cuisine to burgers, steaks, seafood, sushi, and numerous pizza parlours. There were also pubs, coffee shops, bakeries, and a microbrewery.

Something for everyone.

Dawn fell in love with the area when we were here last. We thought of opening a satellite private investigations office to spend

more time away from the city. We even looked at a few houses that could double as a workspace. Unfortunately, once back home reality set in. The logistics and finances for such an adventure were too high to overcome, for the time being. During the past twelve months, we continued to work mostly on insurance fraud cases, with the occasional background checks for companies and individuals, doing their due diligence on possible new acquisitions or relationships. We hooked up with an upstart agency run by three energetic young investigators to cover any marital or cheating partner files that required surveillance. As the high-profile cases we'd solved became more newsworthy, our reputation (and notoriety) grew to a point where we could pick and choose what we really wanted to work on.

Plus, I was too old and tired to hang out at singles' bars or motel parking lots, hiding in the shadows hoping to observe and videotape two people stepping out on their significant others. In the past, I had personally found myself on both sides of these types of investigations, neither being fun nor productive.

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It didn't take long for May and Everett to get us caught up on all the town's business and gossip since our last stay. There was a new mayor and council, apartment buildings and homes were going up everywhere, popular large chain businesses like Starbucks and Dairy Queen had opened, as well as several smaller chains. A few homegrown restaurants also threw their hat in the community food ring.

"There's even a rumour that a Giant Tiger discount store is going to open across the street from Canadian Tire," May speculated.

Our hosts finally got around to the biggest town news: the redevelopment of land once occupied by the popular Duffy's Tavern and Motor Inn. Run for fifty-five years by a man with the exceptionally hip nickname, Mr. Z., he closed it at the age of 92 to spend more time with his grandchildren. Without finding a buyer to carry on the family legacy, the buildings were torn down and the

huge lot was fenced in, becoming an unnecessary downtown eyesore for years.

"The town got approval to move forward with its plans to expand the Navy Yard Park river walkway, build a marina of some kind, and maybe even an amphitheater," Everett informed us.

"That sounds fantastic," Dawn said. "We just loved walking down there. To be able to explore even further will be a great addition."

During her hubby's faithful-to-the-facts report, I was watching May on the couch. She couldn't seem to sit still the whole time. It was as if she was ready to burst with some important news like people do when revealing they're expecting, getting married, or have won the lottery – or if truly lucky, all three.

"That is awesome," I chimed in. "May, I bet this is the most exciting thing you've heard for some time. I can't imagine anything more—"

"They unearthed a diary of death!" May yelled the way contestants on *The Price Is Right* TV game show do.

*Bob Barker and Drew Carey would be proud*, I thought. "A what?"

"Workers at the Duffy's site were digging with one of those – whatchamacallits?"

"Backhoes," Everett said calmly.

"Yes, one of those," May continued. "And they found an old book that turned out to be a diary from 1874!"

"How could they be so sure about the date?" Dawn asked, leaning forward.

"Each entry is dated, my dear," May replied.

"Of course, stupid me," Dawn said.

"So the page is dated, say, Wednesday, February 4, 1874, and starts, *Dear Diary?*" I asked. May nodded her head. "Have you seen it?"

"Not yet, but the Marsh Historical Collection is having an open house tonight to show it off."

I knew May was still holding back a piece of information.

"It's someone's personal thoughts from a very long time ago," I began slowly. "Aside from the timeframe and physical age of the book, what could possibly be of historic relevance? Surely, Fort

Malden has a few of these types of artifacts. What's so special about—"

"It supposedly reveals the real murderer of an Amherstburg doctor whose fortune in coins disappeared the same night he was killed!" May interrupted, now out of breath.

Dawn and I exchanged amused glances.

"Finally, a local murder case that we don't have to solve!" Dawn laughed. "This is an excellent start to our visit."

"Agreed," I said. I could tell there was more. May's expression told me so. *There is always more. Why can't things be simple around this town?* "You said the *real* murderer. What does that mean? Has this case been unsolved for over a century?"

"Well . . ." Everett jumped in, "everyone thought it was solved. You see, legend had it – has it – that a man named Jacques Viger knew about the coins, and as the town's dockmaster had access to the doctor's ship."

"That's awful," Dawn said. "Was he arrested?"

"No," May replied. "There wasn't enough evidence to prove he did the actual killing, just that he knew a lot about the doctor's personal items. Also, his dock assistant was the one who loaded the chest and other belongings onto the ship."

"I know this will sound stupid coming from a guy with a law enforcement background," I started, "but why has this Jacques Viger person continued to be the main person of interest all these years without solid proof?"

"Apparently, he was a gambler and not the successful kind. That, as well as his knowledge of the doctor's belongings and proximity to the crime scene, cast a long shadow over him," Everett responded.

"It didn't help that Viger and his co-worker were the ones who kicked down the doctor's door in the morning and found him dead . . . and broke," May added.

"Sometimes killers do find the body of their victim and call 911," Dawn said. "They mistakenly believe the detectives will be thinking, *They couldn't be stupid enough to return to the scene, so they must be innocent.*"

"So what happened to Mr. Viger?" I asked. "Did he pay all his



gambling debts, quit his job and build a mansion on the hill?"

It was May and Everett's turn to give each other a knowing glance.

"I'm not sure about the gambling debts," May began, "but the Viger family is still pretty well off today."

"Nancy Viger is a distant granddaughter of Dockmaster Jacques Viger," Everett informed us. "She's a tough-as-nails businesswoman who owns three thriving restaurants in town."

"And recently lost out on becoming Mayor by less than fifty votes," May said.

"Aside from the murder allegation, have there been any other accusations against the family, either historically or recently?" Dawn asked.

"No," Everett replied. "If anything it's just jealousy from people without such big bank balances."

"Did Nancy marry into money?" I asked.

"Never married," came May's reply. "She's very strong-willed. I'm not certain any man could match her ambition, and without a true partner, a marriage can be difficult. Thankfully I found Everett and he found me. Our fortieth anniversary is next month."

"Congratulations!" Dawn said ecstatically and then turned to me. "I hope Steve and I will last forty years together."

"It's up to Dawn. I fully expect her to move along one day. As long as it's not today, we're good."

We all laughed. I'm sure the question of why we hadn't yet married was on May and Everett's minds, but they didn't ask. Dawn and I had already come to the conclusion that getting hitched would likely be a spontaneous event, but not required right now.

## CHAPTER TWO

As another couple checked in, Dawn and I decided to take a walk down by the river and have lunch. We had accepted May's invitation to see the diary at 5:00 p.m., when the Marsh Collection's special showing began. "We'll beat the crowds," Everett had

promised. This would also free up our evening and social calendar options. Dawn wanted to visit Emily and her baby girl, as well as Martha, the almost-singer at Emily's almost-wedding service last year.

"It's so peaceful down here," Dawn said, taking my hand as we entered the Navy Yard Park next to the Park House Museum. "Being around water calms me."

"I thought being around me calmed you."

Dawn smiled. "You're like an iceberg lurking *under* the water that calms me!"

"Icebergs get a bad rap because of the whole Titanic thing," I countered. "As I recall the ship hit the iceberg, not the other way around."

"Are you saying I'm a gigantic passenger liner and it's my fault I attracted you?"

"I'm not sure an iceberg can be attracted to anything, aside from maybe another sexy iceberg passing by on a moonlit night."

"So now you're a sexy iceberg?"

"I don't like to brag . . . but, yes," I said confidently, ending (and winning) the conversation.

With almost a decade and a half age difference between us, and Dawn's natural beauty compared to my only serviceable handsome façade, I'm sure at times we came off as an odd couple. Dawn had thus far avoided the so-called quarter-century life crisis, while I was now another year closer to forty than to thirty. She was a brunette, petite, and cute, while I was the poster child of the stereotypical tall and rugged (if I say so myself) police officer, only without a moustache and mirrored sunglasses.

A large gazebo came into view as we followed the walkway to the riverfront. The last time we were here it was decorated with flowers and streamers with dozens of guests waiting patiently for the bride and groom. Now it was a sad empty shell hoping kids would play on it, or a musician would set up a keyboard to shapeshift it into a stage.

Dawn asked, "Do you think there have been any weddings held in the gazebo since Emily and Nick's was cancelled?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "It would be a hard act to follow. I

hate to even think of another anxious bride waiting for her groom to simply arrive on time."

"Emily texted me that a visit in the morning works."

"And Martha?"

"She said we could stop by *Noteworthy* today before 4:00 because she doesn't have any music lessons booked."

From our vantage point, I saw Riccardo's Italian restaurant behind the gazebo. "Okay, what about a glass of wine and a few appetizers for lunch on the outdoor patio? We can then visit Martha around the corner."

"You always know the right things to say to a hungry girl," Dawn said with a smile and a squeeze of my hand. "I hope they still have mozzarella sticks."

A few minutes later we were seated at a table closest to the water and placed our order of barbecued calamari rings, Sicilian arancini, and, of course, the required mozzarella sticks. A couple of tables away sat a man who looked familiar. I noticed a large camera bag next to him and he was writing in a reporter's notebook.

"Hi, Ron," I said, catching his attention. "How's the newspaper business these days?"

The town's resident keeper of secrets and chronicler of all the news worth fitting into the weekly Rivertown Times looked up and smiled. "Hey, Steve . . . and Dawn," he said as he got up and walked to our table. "Are you back for a vacation or are you working on a case?"

"You wish we were here working," Dawn said with a wide grin.

"Well, if it dealt with something the public should know – not like a marital case or anything personal – then sure, I'd love to talk to you about it." He paused and then announced, "As one of the new owners of the paper it's in my best interest to print important news. It doesn't matter where it comes from. Don't you think?"

"Co-owner? Look at you!" I said. "Unfortunately for your readers, we're only here for pleasure this weekend."

"Although we've already heard through the Bondy House grapevine that another local murder mystery might be solved soon," Dawn teased.

Ron looked confused for a moment. "You mean the so-called *diary of death* they dug up?" We both nodded. "Yeah, we'll see how that plays out. It's my understanding that no one has read it yet."

"Then why do people think it'll solve the doctor's murder?" Dawn asked.

"Because of the period it covers – August 1874. If it was written in February 1879 no one would care, aside from the Marsh Collection and other historians, obviously," Ron clarified. "Dr. James Samuels was killed in his ship cabin either late in the evening of August 10<sup>th</sup> or during the early hours of August 11<sup>th</sup>. Aside from the time the diary covers, I was told confidentially it was written by Mary Scott. She was the town midwife and reportedly Samuels' mistress."

"Oh, the scandal!" I cried out with a laugh.

"The story goes she was very upset he was leaving to rejoin his family," Ron said. "After breaking the news to her, she followed him out into the street and screamed, 'If I can't have you, no one can! Especially that witch in Toronto!' If that wasn't enough, her final words to the doctor were, 'You're making a huge mistake and you're going to regret it!'"

We stared at Ron in disbelief. "If that happened today," I said shaking my head, "everyone on the street would have their cell phones out streaming it live on Facebook or YouTube."

"How do we know that she said those exact words?" Dawn asked.

It was Ron's turn to laugh. "At the coroner's inquest, she proudly repeated them for the official record."

"But she wasn't charged or investigated any further?" Dawn asked. She took a sip of her wine.

"Ultimately, no one was charged with the murder," Ron replied. "They left the doctor's body and his belongings on the boat and shipped him off two days later to his wife as planned."

"Wow," Dawn said. "They didn't fool around back then, did they?"

"Out of sight, out of mind," I chipped in. "Now we've been told the dockmaster, Jacques Viger, was the killer. Did he know Mary the midwife?"

“Rumour has it every man in Amherstburg knew Mary, if you know what I mean.”

“Interesting,” was all Dawn could say.

Ron looked back at his wilting salad. “I stopped by for a quick bite before heading to Fort Malden for a story. I should finish my lunch.”

“Of course,” I said. “Will you be at the Marsh Collection for the unveiling of the diary?”

“Definitely.”

“Great. We’ll see you there,” Dawn said. “And we promise not to monopolize your time!” Ron walked back to his table. “This diary and murder are fascinating.”

I took a sip of my wine before answering, “The best part is we left our time machine at home and won’t be able to travel back to 1874 this weekend.” I lifted my glass. “I propose a toast. To rest and relaxation!”

Dawn clinked her glass against mine. “To rest and relaxation!”  
If only life were that simple.

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In the midst of our previous house-hunting venture, we visited Martha’s music store located on the main drag. She had offered Dawn singing lessons, which she took, claiming it would improve her car karaoke skills when playing her favourite band, Unfinished Tattoos. Knowing that my awe-inspiring pipes already rivaled Freddie Mercury’s on his best day, I declined but was then offered a free piano or guitar session. I also passed on those, as I had already spent (what seemed like) hundreds of hours on a piano bench between the ages of ten and twelve, as dictated by my mother. I had also failed twice as an adult to figure out how to play an acoustic guitar without hurting my tender finger pads.

We liked Martha a lot. Maybe it was because she was in her late twenties, closer to Dawn’s age than mine, and still had an optimistic youthful outlook on life. When we first met she was getting out of a relationship with a cheating loser and setting up a new life for herself, by herself, in this small village.

“By booking my appointments I can set my own schedule – a freedom I’ve never had in previous jobs,” Martha said to Dawn at the counter.

Meanwhile, I picked a guitar off the wall and strummed what I thought was a good rendition of the first few bars of *Stairway To Heaven*.

“Why not start with something simpler, like *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, Steve?” Dawn said.

“Let me create while you two compare love lives, okay?”

“Sure, sure,” Dawn replied. “Speaking of idiot men, Martha . . . since we last spoke have you avoided dating them and found a diamond in the rough yet?”

I could see Martha blush slightly as she replied, “There is this one guy . . .”

“Go on,” Dawn said, taking a seat in a comfortable yellow chair as Martha sat in another green chair nearby. “What does he do for a living?”

“Right now, Alex is in school.”

“I hope not high school,” I said without breaking my concentration on chord progressions.

“University, Steve. He’s 26 and studying to be an accountant.”

I ran my fingers roughly over the guitar strings to produce an even worse noise than before. “Wait a minute.”

“I know . . .”

“Your last serious boy toy was an accountant,” I said, putting the guitar back up on the wall, “and left you to fend for yourself alone in this town.”

“Maybe she has a type, Steve,” Dawn interrupted. “We could do a background check on this new beau if you’d like.”

Martha laughed. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary. We’ve had long discussions about past relationships and he’s been hurt in the past too.”

“I’m pretty good at judging people, especially if they are shady or not telling the truth. I have years of experience,” I boasted.

“Yeah – for being shady and untrustworthy,” Dawn cut in laughing.

“What’s the old saying – *It takes one to know one?*” I said. “Maybe

we can meet Mr. Right before we leave and I can talk with him.”

Martha thought my offer over. “Well, we were planning to go to an event at the Marsh Collection across the street tonight.”

“The Diary of Death reveal?” Dawn asked. “As a very recent resident, why would you be interested in that? Have you become a history buff because of all the War of 1812 stuff?”

“Not really,” Martha admitted. “I didn’t know anything about the diary – most of my students are in high school and don’t keep up on current events unless it involves Taylor Swift. No, it’s because Alex’s family is supposedly mentioned in the diary – well, a very distant grandfather named Claus Kilborn to be specific. He owned a local dry goods store in the 1870s, and then over the decades expanded to several new locations across the county, making him very wealthy.”

“Meaning Alex is from *old money* – the best kind. Nice,” I said with a nod. “It’s not surprising that he’s studying to be an accountant. What about his parents – are they still in the grocery business?”

“Unfortunately, Alex was only five when his mother died and his father never remarried. He owns shopping centres and office buildings all over the place.”

“Hmmm . . . another present-day mogul with ties to 1874, the year the good Dr. Samuels was killed and his fortune went missing, never to be found. Unless it was,” Dawn said with a smirk. “Tonight’s unveiling would be important to Alex and his father.”

Martha gave Dawn a quizzical look. “Do you think Alex’s distant relative is a murderer and stole the money to open more stores?”

It seemed to me Martha was genuinely offended by Dawn’s comments. This surprised me as they were said in a comical, yet conspiratorial tone. “Our host May at the bed and breakfast suggested another character from that period – the dockmaster, Jacques Viger – killed the doctor and that’s why the Viger family is pretty rich today,” I commented before Dawn could say another word. “May also mentioned the Bulger and Wallis families. Both date back 150 years or more, and who might also be interested in what the diary says, regardless of how they made their money since

1874. I know I would be, if only for curiosity's sake. And to clear my family's name."

"Oh," Martha replied slowly, "the way Alex told me the story I thought it was a fact that the dockmaster killed the doctor. Like he was convicted and jailed or hung."

A worried look crossed her face.

"It's all folklore, Martha," Dawn spoke up. "I'm sure if you asked a hundred local old-timers who they thought killed the doctor, ninety would say the dockmaster."

"I guess," Martha said. "Hopefully we'll find out for certain tonight."

To be continued . . .