

NO TIME FOR MURDER

Bruce W. Most

Big Sleep Press

*It's not enough to be busy;
So are the ants.
The question is:
What are we busy about?*
~ Henry David Thoreau

Life is just a quick succession of busy nothings.
~ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

There is no rest for the striver. Just beyond the completion of each goal on our life-achievement "bucket list" looms another goal, and then another. Meanwhile, of course, the clock is ticking—quite loudly, in fact. We become breathless. And we have no time left for a calm and reflective appreciation of our twilight years, no deliciously long afternoons sitting with friends or listening to music or musing about the story of our lives. And we will never get another chance for that.
~ Daniel Klein, *Travels with Epicurus*

Chapter 1

When the widow of my best friend demanded I convince the police that her husband's death was murder, not suicide, my first reaction was that I had no time for murder.

What with a looming deadline for a grimly dull corporate history book, my daughter's soccer team to coach, daily chauffeur service for my kids, a basement-remodeling project, a family vacation to plan, exercising, a garage to clean, pets to serve, passwords to manage, lost socks to find . . . well, you get the picture.

I don't want to come across as a kvetch about this. I'm the one who's allowed my life to be overrun with projects, tasks, errands—life's *stuff*. But hey, I'm merely honoring the American gospel of busyness. Packed calendars and lengthy to-do lists aren't just honored, they're canonized. Idleness is the enemy of the soul, admonished St. Benedict, which, if true, guarantees my soul is safe and sound.

Family, work, and religious pearls of wisdom aside, I confess I've been chafing at this busyness crap for a while now. The last thing I need is to tackle yet another task.

Especially murder.

All of which would be laughable were it not so deadly serious.

Which raised the second reason I balked at Kathryn Chilton's demand. However desperately she believed otherwise, no one murdered her husband. Randy Chilton killed himself twenty-nine days ago, a brutal reality I'd yet to wrap my mind and heart around. The county coroner ruled it suicide, and I trusted him and the investigating detective. Bad TV shows, crime novels, and donut clichés to the contrary, cops rarely screw up the manner of death.

"What possible evidence do you have someone murdered Randy?" I challenged from the edge of Kathryn's immaculate living room, with its half-acre of snow-white shag, white walls, and white leather furniture. The room felt as chilly as a Swedish ice hotel.

She crossed her arms. "He would never have shot himself. He loathed guns."

"Men who kill themselves usually use guns. Even men who loathe guns."

"He never would have done it in the house. Not with Regan. He wouldn't do that to his own daughter."

My goddaughter aside, my former days as a police reporter and true-crime writer taught me among other heart-wrenching truths that parents killed themselves in circumstances cruel to their children.

"Randy wasn't the man we once knew, Kathryn," I said empathetically.

That didn't sit well with her. She marched in khaki capris and bare feet to a white grand piano, which she could play like a virtuoso, snatched an open bottle of beer off a coaster, and downed a long swallow. She waved the bottle at me.

"Randy didn't leave a suicide note, either. I've hunted everywhere for one."

"Suicides often don't."

Her head of black, no-nonsense short hair shook in frustration. “He would have left a note, David. He—” She faltered. “He would have explained.”

“Randy was *troubled*.”

My friend’s suicide did not come as a shock to those of us who knew him, and I knew him better than most. He’d returned in the fall of 2005 from a six-month National Guard tour in Afghanistan with snakes in his head, and they remained there until the day he died.

Kathryn fixed hard brown eyes on me. “Some people chose to ignore his *troubles*.”

“That’s unfair! He *pushed* me away. Like he pushed everyone away.”

“True friends push back.”

I should have told her then and there to go to hell. But out of love and respect for Randy, and heartbroken by the loss Kathryn and Regan were suffering, I restrained my irritation and said, “Who would kill Randy? Why?”

“I don’t know. That’s your job to find out.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “When you called, you said you had something *new* to tell me regarding his death.”

Kathryn set down her beer and I trailed her gym-sculpted body down a hallway lined with family photos and political memorabilia. I sensed her destination and I didn’t want to go there.

At the end of the hallway, she opened a door and entered Randy’s study. I hung back. My best friend had spent his final moments there, alone. Brooding over demons none of us could fathom.

And I wasn’t there for him.

In many ways, his study remained unchanged: the large polished cherry wood desk in the center, the deep warm wood paneling, the floor-to-ceiling bookcase with soccer mementoes and pictures of Kathryn and Regan tucked among techno-thrillers and steampunk science fiction. A nine-foot-high whimsical giraffe sculpture stood in a corner like a naughty boy. I’d spent hours in this room with Randy, drinking Glenfiddich and pontificating on politics, sports, books, and inconsequential shit I no longer remember.

But now the once cheery room felt as chilly as the living room, airless, soulless. Dead. Its charming clutter was gone. Kathryn had clear-cut nearly everything off his desk, leaving behind only an empty outbox, a coffee mug full of pens, a telephone, and his computer.

I stared at the desk where he had shot himself in the head.

Kathryn walked to French doors that opened onto a flagstone patio edged with aspen. Beyond was the greenway that snaked through our housing development.

“Someone broke in here,” she said.

“What?”

She pointed to the door. “I found glass knocked out by the door handle and papers and files strewn on the floor. Drawers were pulled open. The computer was on. It hadn’t been on since he . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“When was this?”

“I discovered it a week ago, but it could have occurred days before that. I don’t come in here much. I keep the room closed. For Regan’s sake.”

Reluctantly, I stepped into the study. “Did you report this to the police?”

“Detective Watts himself came out. He dismissed it as a common burglary.”

“He’s probably right.”

She shook her head. “The timing was too coincidental after Randy’s death. Besides, what common burglar rifles through files and turns on a computer instead of stealing it? This guy went nowhere else in the house. He didn’t steal cash or jewelry or electronics—nothing. He was searching for something in here.”

I held out my hands. "Searching for what?"

"You know the sensitive work Randy did. I suspect it was Islamic terrorists."

Islamic terrorists? Was the woman playing with a full deck?

True, Randy's employer, where he'd worked as the chief financial officer, was an up-and-coming manufacturing company named CobenTechnologies that landed a major contract with the U.S. Army a while back to provide protective armor for military vehicles in Iraq and Afghanistan. But terrorists?

"And you what—think these *terrorists* killed him and then returned a week later to rifle through his office?" I couldn't keep the incredulity out of my voice.

"It's possible."

"Any evidence what this burglar was searching for or whether he found it?" I asked.

"I don't think he found anything, whatever he was looking for. Randy kept classified work partitioned off in the hard drive with a password."

"None of this proves someone *murdered* him, Kathryn," I said.

"There's more. After his funeral, I had a disturbing conversation with a former member of his National Guard unit. The man—"

My BlackBerry buzzed. My son texting a reminder to chauffeur him from school to his trumpet lesson, then baseball practice. Demonstrating exactly why I didn't have time for Kathryn's delusions. I pocketed my phone. "I need to pick up Zach."

"Will you look into it, David?" she said, rare imploring in her voice. "Convince Detective Watts to reopen the case."

"Convince him how?"

"You're the true crime writer. The mystery novelist. The fearless investigative reporter with the tenacity of a honey badger. Come up with something."

Yeah, once upon a time I was all those things. Part of a Midwestern newspaper investigative team nominated for a Pulitzer. A freelance investigative journalist for national publications. Two published true-crime books on murder and high finance. As for my lone published mystery, I'd cradled the novel briefly in my hands, *David Cole Dartman* in small type on the lurid cover, before I watched it sink into the vast sea of orphaned books. Now I write corporate histories, inconsequential articles, and any other claptrap that pays.

"You're confusing me with Jessica Fletcher," I said, turning to leave. "Hire a private detective."

I reached the living room before Kathryn cut in front of me, arms thrown outward. "Please! You're friends with Watts. He'll listen to you. He won't listen to a private detective."

T.J. Watts was the detective who investigated Randy's suicide—and the lead detective I'd made the hero in my first true-crime book. A sharp cop. A good man. But I would hardly describe us as friends. The book's murder case took its personal and professional toll on T.J. My reappearance would only dredge up unpleasant memories.

"Watts is a good detective, Kathryn. If he and the coroner think it was suicide, it was suicide."

I brushed by her and stepped out onto the porch. A huge American flag fluttered on a tall pole in her front yard—the flag they draped over Randy's casket at his memorial service and which his wife flew daily to honor his memory.

"What did Randy say to you the day he died?" she said as I headed for my Chrysler minivan. I stopped. My stomach tightened. I half turned.

"Randy called you that day," she said. "I saw it listed on his cell phone. You were the last call he made."

I swallowed hard. "I missed his call."

She closed her eyes. Opened them. “Please, David, do this. Not for me. For Randy. For Regan.”

“The best thing you can do for Regan—for yourself, for that matter—is to come to terms with the reality that Randy killed himself.”

As if I had done that.

I headed for my vehicle. Randy *had* called my home office early Monday afternoon. I was in the middle of a pile of work and let the call go to voicemail. He left a message to call back. No hint of what was on his mind. No agitation in his voice. No urgency. No hint of a farewell.

It was late afternoon before I returned his call.

By then he was dead.

Chapter 2

I shuttled Zach—late—to his trumpet lesson and settled in the waiting room as a cacophony of badly played instruments bleated from the warren of rooms. Not Zach’s instrument, to be fair. He’s actually pretty good.

I opened my laptop to work on my corporate history book—my usual pattern during breaks in cab service—but I couldn’t focus. Not in the aftermath of Kathryn’s startling claim that Randy was murdered.

I browsed news headlines, stock market summaries, and a video of cats playing pianos on some hot new website called YouTube. I sank my head back against the wall and cursed the She-Devil.

Beyond my lack of time and her fool’s errand to spin suicide into murder, I wanted nothing to do with the woman. I didn’t like her. I didn’t trust her. Never had.

A mean-spirited thing to say about my dead friend’s wife, I know, but there’s no kind way around it. For all I loved and admired in Randy, I never understood what he saw in Kathryn. Yes, both had been top college athletes, but God had recruited them from different planets, and I don’t mean Venus and Mars. Kathryn was abrasive, self-absorbed, and humorless. Randy found her fun and loving. An East Coast drama queen to his long-haired West Coast surfer boy. He lived on tofu while she lived on some meat-heavy Paleolithic diet.

And their politics! My god, talk about night and day. Randy was a staunch liberal who bitterly opposed the war in Iraq. Kathryn was a rising Republican political star who rah-rahed invading a sovereign nation without just cause and who urged young men to fight and die for God, country, and Big Oil. She was the minority leader in the Colorado state senate, and was being groomed for bigger things: U.S. representative, governor, senator. Over Glenfiddich, Randy often chuckled at the irony of being a liberal husband to a conservative politician. I didn’t see the humor.

My wife Poppy and I got to know them years ago when our daughter Lindsay joined a local high-level soccer team Randy coached. I liked him immediately. He was patient and inspiring with the girls. Both families lived in the same homeowner’s association. We had dinners together, drinks after games, attended the same school functions, that sort of thing. But Kathryn rubbed me the wrong way from the get-go. Poppy was no fan, either. Part of it was Kathryn’s in-your-face politics, to be sure, but more than anything it was her self-centered, grating personality. In spite of her, Randy and I spent considerable time together, just the two of us.

I feared for him when he and his unit shipped out for Afghanistan, even if he was attached to a National Guard transportation company, not an infantry unit. Worse, it irritated me observing Kathryn on the home front publicly burnishing her rising political star by touting her husband’s patriotic sacrifices fighting “rag-head” terrorists abroad.

But more than anything, I blamed the very fact Randy was in Afghanistan on Kathryn.

He enlisted in the National Guard at the age of forty following 9/11. While all of us were stunned and angered by the attacks, even at the time I suspected Randy’s fervent display of support and patriotism was more for Kathryn’s political ambitions than his true beliefs. Then came the invasion of Iraq. While too many liberals conned themselves into supporting the invasion, Randy, like myself, viewed it as unjust and a strategically bad idea. Then the U.S. Army’s armor contract

landed in his employer's lap. Randy and I debated the pros and cons of his continuing to work for an employer that had suddenly become a defense contractor providing material for what we considered a wrong-headed war. Ultimately, he decided to stay, reasoning that although he didn't support sending troops to Iraq—Afghanistan was a different issue—he could at least help keep them alive with the protective armor his company manufactured for military vehicles. Again, I suspected Kathryn was behind Randy's rationale.

Proving my fears, Afghanistan was where Randy met his demons, and now he was dead because of them. A suicide I believe Kathryn's hawkish war views ultimately triggered. A casualty of the war as surely as if the Taliban had put a bullet in him on Afghani soil.

Now Kathryn wanted me to play amateur sleuth. To what end? Help wipe away her responsibility by making him a murder victim rather than a man who couldn't face the world she had put him in?

Kathryn was right about one thing, however: I *had* failed to push back against the barriers Randy erected between us after his return from the war. I wasn't the friend he needed during his difficult times. For that, I felt guilty. In my defense, I supposed, Randy had become a different man when he returned, and I didn't want to be friends with his imposter. So I retreated into my busyness, avoiding him as though he'd contracted an infectious disease from the Afghan desert.

Not much of a defense. Yet while I refused to play Jessica Fletcher for Kathryn, I did find curious the timing and nature of the break-in at Randy's study. It would have been easy for the burglar to slip in from the greenway, hidden by aspen and shrubbery, maybe in the middle of the day when Kathryn was at work and Regan was at school. Perhaps the least I could do was call Detective T.J. Watts to sound out why he thought it was nothing more than a simple neighborhood burglary.

Chapter 3

I stood in the kitchen slathering veggie cream cheese on my bagel. It had been four days since Kathryn tried badgering me into investigating Randy's death. I had yet to find a spare moment even to call Detective Watts regarding the break-in, let alone conduct an "investigation."

Soccer-shoe cleats click-clacked across the tiled floor. My thirteen-year-old daughter entered dressed in her blue and white soccer uniform, carrying a matching athletic bag branded with our team's Blue Thunder logo, ready for our Saturday match. She'd risen early and eaten breakfast at the kitchen table, like civilized people. That was Lindsay Dartman: organized and on time, though hazy on the house rules.

"No cleats in the house!" I said.

She couldn't hear me. Earbuds slithered from her iPod while she texted on her Nokia in coded shorthand understood only by teenagers, monkeys, and professors of obscure languages. I raised a hand. She froze and pulled out an earbud. Incoherent music fogged the kitchen.

"Huh?"

"No cleats in the house," I enunciated. "Go outside and aerate the yard with them."

She tossed that half-lidded contempt passed down by generations of teenagers. "C'mon, Dad, like we gotta go now. Celica called. She, like, needs a ride. Amy's going to be at her house, too."

I glanced heavenward. Officially, I was the team's coach, though more often I felt like the team's bus driver. But we couldn't leave behind our starting goalie, even if she was named after a car. Plus, Amy was a dependable defender.

I waved off Lindsay and she click-clacked out of the kitchen. Poppy entered, chatting on her phone via her wireless headset. Actually, her laugh preceded her, a laugh I fell in love with from the first moment I heard it at an otherwise forgettable party. Her mane of black hair spilled haphazardly over her shoulders. As she listened to the caller, she scanned the kitchen.

My keys? she mouthed.

I frowned. She was dressed in office attire, lugging a patented-leather briefcase, her purse—no, more a beach bag—looped over her shoulder.

"You're going to work?" I asked. She nodded. I flashed dismay. "It's Saturday. You're supposed to take Zach to band practice this morning," I half-whispered. His middle-school jazz band was putting in extra rehearsal time for a regional band competition coming up in a few weeks.

"I gotta go, Ginny." Her baby sister. "The usual family crisis." She set down her briefcase and popped a bran muffin in the microwave. "I informed you yesterday I had to go to the office this morning. Last-minute glitches in the Edison contract."

"You never told me."

Poppy gestured toward a laptop sitting on a small oak secretary. Family photos scrolled across the screen. “I entered it from work late yesterday afternoon as soon as I found out.”

Her schedule was more nuts than mine, what with her recent promotion to a high-powered executive position at a large nonprofit home health care and hospice organization, *two* book clubs, playing bass guitar in a cover band called The Workaholics, and the usual merry-go-round of cooking, exercise classes, and PTA meetings.

Hell, the entire Dartman household was in over its head. If a network ever creates a reality TV show called *America’s Busiest Family*, the Dartmans will be among the finalists, if not the outright winner.

I threw up my hands. “Pardon me for not checking in with command central every fifteen minutes.”

“It’s the only way to keep this family organized,” she said as she funneled coffee into a large silver thermos.

The Dartman household used to function fine with a simple paper calendar. As the kids grew older and activities mushroomed, we graduated to a large dry-erase board augmented by sticky notes and scraps of paper slapped to the fridge by souvenir magnets. When that spiraled out of control, we brought in the heavyweight, the laptop with an online family organizer. Each family member was responsible for keeping their schedule up to date in the organizer, which everyone could access from their personal computers and cell phones. High tech and efficient. A consumer version of software designed for corporate entities to maximize employee productivity. Personally, I longed for the old calendar version with Colorado landscapes or women seductively cradling power tools.

I checked the kitchen clock. “I can’t take Zach. I’m already late leaving for our soccer match and I just learned I have two girls to pick up on the way.”

She paused to think, a luxury in this household. “I’ll call Sylvia. Maybe she can take him.”

The microwave dinged. Poppy wrapped the muffin in a napkin, snatched a container of raspberry yogurt, and dropped both into her purse. She pulled out her phone and speed-dialed.

“Keys?” she muttered again.

“Try the mail table.”

“Sylvia,” Poppy said to her friend as she hurried into the entrance hallway. She returned moments later jangling keys as she gave Sylvia the details. She scooped up her briefcase and thermos. Moments later she gave an awkward thumbs-up that Sylvia could take Zach to practice. I interrupted to ask if he was out of bed.

She shook her head. Still talking to Sylvia, she headed for the garage with her precarious armload of stuff. I opened the door for her and blew her a kiss as she breezed by.

Lindsay returned, this time wearing flip-flops. “Let’s go, Dad. We’re late.”

“In a second.” I hurried by her and headed upstairs.

“Daaaadddd!”

I took the stairs two at a time. I found Zach sound asleep, despite enough sun streaming through the windows to send teenage vampires scurrying back to their coffins.

No doubt Zach had been up late posting on his “Kids United for America Free of the Hodge Brothers” website. He disliked the boy band so much he’d launched a website devoted solely to ridiculing what he viewed as their cloying trendy lyrics, appalling lack of musical talent, and fictional stage personalities. He posted parody interviews, satirical versions of their lyrics, and nasty commentary from other anti-Hodge Brothers teens, all while listening to ennui-rich bands like Mutilation, Apathy, and The Dumpsters.

I didn’t know what all the fuss was about. Trendy lyrics, appalling lack of musical talent, and fictional stage personalities was hardly new. In my youth, if you didn’t like a band, you didn’t buy their records or go to their concerts. With the internet, however, people couldn’t seem to ignore what they didn’t like. They had to make a worldwide crusade out of it. The internet had created an obsession to comment on *everything*, even when the issue would be better served by silence.

I weaved my way through the archeological strata of teenage clutter and the cloying smell of Axe body spray. Poppy and I requested the EPA to declare Zach’s room a Superfund site, but have yet to hear back. Bureaucracies!

I jostled him. “Get up, Zach.”

Barely perceptible body movement followed by a low moan easily mistaken for death rattles.

“Your mother can’t take you to rehearsal this morning. Mrs. Edmonds will pick you up.”

More muffled moaning.

“You need to be ready in forty-five minutes. I’m leaving with Lindsay, so you’re on your own, son.” A disconcerting thought.

A car horn reverberated from the garage as I came downstairs. I stuck my head in the garage, held up a “one sec” forefinger, and dashed back into the kitchen, “*Daaaadddd!*” trailing behind me. I smushed the bagel halves together and wolfed a bite as I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

On the way out, I glimpsed a screensaver image rolling across the laptop on the secretary: Poppy and I hiking in a mountain park near Evergreen, back in the halcyon days before our life schedules blurred beyond recognition.

I paused for a moment, a touch of self-reproach coursing through me. I hadn’t mentioned to Poppy my conversation with Kathryn. Not certain why. She would have strongly disapproved if I’d agreed to help Kathryn. Yet I hadn’t. There was nothing to hide or try to explain. She would have been as astonished as I was by Kathryn’s claims. And as dismissive. Yet she would have wanted to know of Kathryn’s beseechment. Randy’s death had hit her hard, too.

So why had I said nothing?

Chapter 4

We arrived late to our assigned field at a sprawling soccer complex south of Denver. Our opponent, The Red Machine, was running through rigorous warm-up drills, their coach barking out commands as if it were a Navy Seals training camp, while our girls milled about like lost puppies. A supporting cast of parents, grandparents, and friends had established respective beachheads along the sidelines, their portable canvas chairs with mesh cup holders lined up behind team banners staked into the ground. Our side appeared restive. This was a battle against one of the top club teams in the region. Any moment I expected to see a war-painted Braveheart gallop along our sideline, whipping up the troops.

What I got instead was Randy's widow steaming in my direction from the soccer pitch. Her daughter Regan was already there. I hustled Lindsay and the other two girls off to gather up the lost puppies and start warming up.

"Have you talked to Detective Watts?" Kathryn said as she arrived.

"I never said I would." No way would I mention I planned to if I ever found the time. Otherwise, I'd never get her off my back. "I said you and Regan need to come to terms with—"

"It's murder, David. Why can't you believe me?" She whipped off her designer sunglasses. "You protecting that detective pal of yours? From his incompetence?"

My neck muscles tightened. "I don't have time for this. I have other commitments, too. Like this soccer team."

The team your husband coached until he killed himself.

I became Randy's assistant the year before he left for Afghanistan, even though I didn't know squat about soccer and he was a former collegiate soccer star with dreams of going pro until a knee injury betrayed him. Following his death, several parents lobbied me to take over coaching duties, despite my protests that I was wildly underqualified. Blue Thunder was not your average weekend rec team. It was an elite club, which meant far tougher opponents, more practices, long weekends of tournament play, travel, parents looking for their children to enhance their college resumes, and a coach who knew what the hell he was doing. But without a coach, the team would have dissolved. Poppy and I felt it was important Lindsay and the other girls continued to play, so I capitulated.

Besides, what right-minded father in his mid-forties wouldn't leap at the opportunity to coach a pack of gangly pubescent girls?

Kathryn dug into her purse and retrieved a folded piece of paper. "Here's a list of people you need to talk to in addition to Detective Watts."

"This isn't the time," I said. I started toward our girls. Lindsay, bless her, had rounded them up and was running a pass, dribble, and shoot drill, their ponytails bobbing in the sun.

“Detective Watts and that woman partner of his didn’t talk to these people,” Kathryn went on. God, she clamped on like a Portuguese Man o’ War.

Mercifully, the referee whistled for the teams to take the field. I left Kathryn holding the piece of paper.



“Great try, Regan,” I yelled moments after her shot on goal missed by inches. Groans rose from our beachhead. It was our first serious scoring opportunity in a scoreless first half.

When I turned away, I spotted Joel Linwood for the first time, standing alone at one end of our sideline. It struck me that it might be worth talking to him about Randy. They’d become tight in the months leading up to Randy’s death. In fact, Joel was the one person Randy had not pushed away after his return from Afghanistan. Joel might have a sense of the state of Randy’s mind in his last days, maybe even whether the break-in might be connected in some way.

The middle of a soccer match wasn’t exactly the best time and place to ask investigative questions. Especially with the risk that Kathryn would notice us and wonder whether we were talking about Randy. But in light of my life’s insane schedule, it was the best I could do. I waved Joel over. He caught up as the teams battled midfield.

“The girls are playing tough,” he said. He was a large, thick man with wire-rimmed glasses, two silver rings in one ear, and a shaved head covered by a blue bandana.

“Andrea’s playing well,” I said.

His daughter was a solid midfielder, though it must be difficult for him to watch her play these days. He and his wife Denise separated three months ago. Andrea stayed with her mother while he found his own place. Their separation was the fallout from the stress and pain of losing their son Jimmy eighteen months before, courtesy of a roadside IED while on patrol in the second battle of Fallujah.

We fell silent and watched the game a few minutes before I leaned over and said low-voiced, my eyes remaining fixed on the action, “I need to ask you something about Randy.”

“What?”

A grinning Happy Buddha, I used to think of Joel. Now the ever-present grin was gone, replaced by perpetual sadness in his voice.

“You went to The Dugout with him after our last game, right, days before he died?”

“Yeah.”

Joel and Randy had frequented the popular sports bar in recent months, usually without me. It had hurt, Randy pushing me away like that and forming a special bond with Joel. I could understand why. Both men had suffered grievously from the war. Randy returned alive, though damaged, while Joel’s son returned in a flag-covered casket. They shared something I couldn’t, and wouldn’t have wanted to. Still, it hurt.

Hence, Randy’s invitation to join them that last Saturday he was alive had caught me by surprise. So surprised I had to beg off because I’d already committed to the siren call of chores and errands. Next time, I said. How could I prophesize that two days later Randy would be dead?

“Did he say anything odd that day?” I asked.

Before Joel could answer, I yelled as two of our players plowed into each other going for the ball. “Talk to each other, girls!”

“What do you mean, anything odd?” Wariness crept into Joel’s voice.

“Randy left a message on my phone the day he died. Wanted me to call him, but I never caught up with him. Any idea why he called?”

I’d replayed Randy’s message countless times, straining for clues in every word, hidden meanings in his inflections. Had his call been a final desperate attempt to reach out to an old friend? Had he called hoping I would talk him out of killing himself?

Nothing. No hint of a final goodbye, no hint they were his last hours.

Shouldn’t there have been something? If he were about to kill himself, wouldn’t his voice have betrayed him?

“Why are you asking?” Joel asked.

I didn’t want to divulge to anyone that Kathryn was pushing me to look into her cockamamie claim of murder. But Joel was someone I could discreetly ask whether there might have been something deeper behind Randy’s decision to kill himself besides snakes in his head.

I took in a deep breath. “This is just between us, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Kathryn believes someone murdered Randy. Not suicide.”

He turned his head sharply toward me. “What!”

“Shh.” I eyed She-Devil sitting in a portable chair with mesh cup holders and shaded under an attached umbrella. Fortunately, she was not surveilling us. She was half-watching the game while monitoring her phone. No doubt checking her latest polling numbers.

“That’s preposterous!” Joel said in a banked voice, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. “Why in God’s name would she believe that?”

Trying to explain Kathryn’s paranoid theories would be difficult under the best of circumstances, let alone during a soccer match. But amid the ebb and flow of the game, I wedged in her rationalizations for murder, particularly the break-in committed by *Islamic terrorists* hunting for CobenTechnologies’s classified defense work.

“Were you aware of the break-in?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. “News to me.”

“The police dismiss it as a common burglary, but I have to confess the timing and circumstances are suspicious.”

Joel scoffed. “C’mon, David, the bitch is a conspiracy freak. She thinks aliens crashed at Roswell and all liberals are their descendants.”

The ball veered out of bounds. The ref’s whistle trilled. Red Machine substituted yet again. The team appeared unexpectedly fatigued. I cheered on our girls. They were more than holding their own!

I looked at my stopwatch. The first half was nearly over. If we could run it out in a scoreless tie, we had a chance against this team in the second half.

Play resumed and I turned back to Joel. “Did Randy ever say anything to you that might suggest a motive behind the break-in?”

He hesitated and looked away, as if trying to focus on something in the back of his mind. “Nothing that comes to mind.”

Investigative journalists develop a special antenna for hesitations. Some are innocent delays while the interviewee marshals a thoughtful reply; but often they signal the person preparing to withhold information or outright lie. Before I could probe Joel’s hesitation, however, cheers erupted along the opposition sideline. I jerked around to see Red Machine girls sprinting away from our goal, their parents whooping and clapping, their coach fist pumping as if he’d just won the Super Bowl.

Damn! They’d scored.

“They were offside, ref!” screamed the father of one of my players, shaking a finger at the goal box and the right-sideline judge.

I hurried down the sideline. The father turned his fury on me. “They were offside! You saw it, didn’t you, Dartman? It was so obvious it was—”

“It doesn’t make any difference, Rick. I’ll handle it.”

Most soccer parents can’t distinguish an offside from the penalty box. Though in fairness, our girls were visibly upset by the non-call.

Angry realization clouded the father’s face. “You didn’t see it, did you, Dartman? I saw you over there yapping with Joel. You had your head up your ass when you shoulda—”

“That’s enough, Rick!”

The father stomped off, vowing he would see to it the team parents fired me as coach.

I pow-wowed with the ref, the line judge, and the opposing coach. The goal stood. The whistle trilled, signaling the end of the first half. Dammit. Down one-zip!

I huddled up our disconsolate girls for a pep talk and strategy session. The assigned snack-mom passed out sliced oranges. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed Rick drumming up support for my ouster.

I prayed for his success! One less task on my to-do list.

As our huddle broke for the second half, I noticed Joel had retreated to the edge of the spectators. His wife Denise sat on a blanket twenty yards away. But his eyes were on me, not her or his daughter.

Had he withheld something about his last time with Randy?

Or was he watching me because he was thinking what I was thinking—I was as loony as Kathryn if I even entertained the notion that someone murdered Randy.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Poppy and the kids went to church. I, being of little faith, and Sunday mornings being a good time to work without family interruptions, settled in my office with a carafe of coffee, without which civilized life would not be possible. But I was barely into my book project, a corporate history commemorating the one-hundred-year anniversary of a major insurance company, when the doorbell rang.

Who the hell rings the doorbell on a Sunday morning? I peered out my second-story window to the porch below.

Shit!

I scurried downstairs to the front door. Draco, our over-caFFEinated family Chihuahua that Lindsay named after a *Harry Potter* character, barreled in from the kitchen, barking as if prepared to take on a pit bull.

“Shut up!” I said. I detested yappy teacup dogs. Chihuahuas didn’t rate as canines. They’re bats that barked. I opened the door.

“Good morning, David,” said Kathryn Chilton. She appeared dressed for church. “We haven’t had a chance to go over my list of people for you to talk to.”

She’d called my cell phone twice after Saturday’s soccer match. I’d ignored the calls. Fortunately, she hadn’t called the house phone.

“It’s Sunday morning, Kathryn. I’m working.”

“I won’t be long. We’re on our way to mass.”

Her silver Ford Expedition sat parked in my driveway for all the neighbors to see, Regan in front wearing earbuds, head bobbing to a song only she could hear.

“Kathryn, I’m not going to talk to a bunch of people you have on a list. This is a wild goose chase. A detrimental one to you and Regan.”

“What about the break-in?”

“Look, I’ll admit the timing and the circumstances are odd, but as I said before, that doesn’t prove Randy was murdered.”

“Have you spoken to Detective Watts?”

“No.”

Draco barked again and I shooed him away. Kathryn used the opportunity to infiltrate the entryway. She removed her sunglasses and looked around.

“The family’s at church,” I said, making a show of glancing at my watch. “They’ll be home any minute.”

“Then let’s make this fast.”

“Let’s not make it at all, Kathryn.”

“There’s more evidence you need to hear. I think it will change your mind.” She glanced toward her car. “I could wait until your family returns. Poppy might like to hear what I have to say. I know she thought a lot of Randy.” She turned back toward me with a challenging tilt to her head. “Or have you already told her about the break-in?”

No, Poppy would not be pleased to learn Kathryn wants me to steal valuable time out of our harried family schedule to play Jessica Fletcher or Colombo.

“All right, all right. Say your piece but make it quick.”

She hooked the temple of her sunglasses down the front of her blouse, dug into her purse, and handed me the folded piece of paper she tried to pawn off at the soccer match. I left it folded.

“The police never investigated beyond the autopsy and the physical evidence of the break-in,” she said. “They didn’t talk to Randy’s friends or colleagues. And most important, they didn’t talk to this former National Guard soldier that Randy knew. He—”

I raised a hand. “Before you proceed any further, Katharine, are you *certain* you want me poking into this? Or convincing Detective Watts to reopen the case?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“I’m asking because I’ve done a lot of investigations. They can take you places you don’t expect. Places where you may not want to go.”

“Someone murdered my husband, David. Your friend. I want you to prove it.”

I shook my head slowly for emphasis. “Even if I look into it, I can’t promise that.”

“You will. I know you will. Let me background you on the people on the list you need to talk to.”

I reluctantly retrieved a steno pad and pen from my office. When I returned, I found Kathryn in our airy living room, light streaming through high windows. She’d settled in my favorite easy chair, though I spent less time in it than the dog. I sat opposite her on the couch and unfolded the list of names.

Detective Watts

Mark Nowicki

William McKee

Joel Linwood

Evans

Captain Lawrence Stiles

I recognized the first four names. Besides Detective Watts and Joel, Nowicki and McKee had been friends of Randy.

“Who’s this Evans?” I asked.

“He was in Randy’s National Guard unit. He lost a leg when they were in Afghanistan. He was at the memorial service. A tall man in his twenties, scraggly beard, long unwashed hair. He sat in the back by himself. You might have seen him.”

“Dressed in shabby fatigues?”

She nodded. The man was difficult to miss. Most of Randy’s work colleagues and friends wore attire mourners typically wear to funerals. A sizable contingent from Randy’s

National Guard unit attended in pressed fatigues or dress blues. But this Evans guy looked as if he slept in his clothes. When the service ended, he'd slipped out a side door, favoring his left leg.

"He may be the most important name on the list," Kathryn said.

"Why?"

"Because he said something disturbing to me after the service."

"What?"

"There's more behind your husband's death than you realize, Mrs. Chilton."

I made her repeat it to be certain I wrote it down accurately. "That's awfully vague, Kathryn. What did he mean by that?"

"I have no idea. That's all he said before he took off."

"When did he say this? I saw him scoot out after the service. And he wasn't at graveside."

"Regan and I went back to the cemetery later in the afternoon. He was standing by the grave."

Kathryn had buried Randy at Fort Logan National Cemetery in southwest Denver. I doubt he wished to be buried in a military cemetery. Not that he disrespected the men buried there, but by then he'd grown disenchanted with the war and his own involvement in the overall war effort. But Kathryn wanted the pomp and circumstance of a military burial. Beneficial for her political career. An honors detail presented her with the large American flag draped over his casket. A live bugler played "Taps." And with her usual political stagecraft, she softly touched his casket in grief, recorded for maximum exposure by several local media outlets.

"He didn't notice us until we were almost on him," Kathryn said. "He started to walk away. I left Regan at the grave and caught up with him. He wouldn't give me his name at first. Just said he was in Randy's Guard unit and served with him in Afghanistan. He offered his condolences and said Randy was a good man, even for being an officer. He said it with a smile. I asked him again for his name and he said Evans."

I tapped my pen against my notebook. "He was in uniform. Did his nametag say Evans?"

"The tag was missing."

"Rank?"

"No rank, either. He said he lost his leg to an RPG and wears a prosthetic. I thanked him for his service and his sacrifice. These are brave young men, David. They've sacrificed a lot. They deserve your support." She let the words linger.

I bit my tongue. I wasn't going to get into a debate with her over the specious criticism that if you don't support the war you aren't supporting the troops.

"Anything else about him?" I asked.

"He was jumpy the whole time. He was hiding something."

"More likely he's struggling from the war, Kathryn. Like Randy. His leg was blown off, for God's sake. He didn't want to hang around a bunch of people in a reception line."

"I believe he wanted to say more. But Regan arrived and he fled. I never realized how fast a man can move with a prosthetic leg. I didn't think much about his comments until after the break-in. Then I began to wonder what really happened to Randy."

There's more behind your husband's death than you realize.

Had Kathryn, in her inimitable conspiratorial delusions, misheard the man, her synapses rewriting what he said into something she wanted to hear? Or had she made the whole damn thing up, to pique my investigative juices?

I stuck an asterisk by Evans's name. "Where would I find this guy—if I were to try to find him?"

"Talk to Captain Stiles, Randy's superior in their Guard unit. He's on the list. A by-the-book soldier. He should be able to tell you where to find him."

Great. A scavenger hunt.

She gave me phone numbers for everyone but Evans. I pointedly looked at my watch. "Anything else?"

"I saw you and Joel Linwood talking at the soccer match."

"Just chatting about the game," I lied.

A car horn honked. I jumped up and went to the window, panicked that Poppy and the kids were home early. Nothing except Kathryn's car. Her phone vibrated behind me.

"Regan's texting her impatience," she said.

"We need to wrap this up, anyway." Poppy planned to stay to rehearse the children's choir but I didn't want to push my luck.

"You need to know something else," Kathryn said, unmoved. "Randy secretly met someone shortly before his death. Maybe someone on that list."

"Secretly?"

"He went out the Thursday evening before he died. He was gone for three hours. I assumed at the time he was in one of his moods. He was drinking hard that day and was pretty down. I was worried he might . . . harm himself."

"What makes you believe it was a *secret* meeting?"

"He hurried out right after he got a phone call in his study, but he wouldn't say where he was going. Said he needed to get out of the house."

"Perhaps that's all he did."

"He was lying. Not for the first time. He went out other evenings, too, without saying where he was going. That wasn't like him."

Yeah, well Randy wasn't Randy in his last months.

The horn honked again. Kathryn stood and we walked to the front door. Regan was still listening to music, but looking our way this time. I couldn't read her expression.

"How's she doing?" I asked.

Regan was special to me. It was a pleasant surprise when Randy named me her godfather, an anointment that did not go down well with Kathryn. Despite Mario Puzo giving the word a bad name, I embraced the once-honored religious tradition. I attended

Regan's birthday parties, baptism, and other special events. She even came to call me Uncle Dave, though now it's Coach David like all the other soccer girls call me.

God, how Randy's death changed everything.

Kathryn shook her head sullenly. "She could be doing better."

"What's wrong?" I was extra sensitive to Regan's moods these days, not only out of concern for her but for Lindsay and the rest of the team. When I was Randy's assistant coach, I was sorta the team psychologist, helping him keep the girls focused. Premier club team or not, many days their attention was less on soccer than on boyfriend issues, who was in whose clique, or that they were having a bad hair day. Shifts in moods can sweep through a team like the Black Plague through a medieval village. Randy's suicide might be one generation removed from these kids, but that didn't mean it wasn't infectious.

"I ran into a mother of one of Regan's friends at school," Kathryn said. "She expressed condolences for Randy being killed in Afghanistan."

"Afghanistan!"

"That's what Regan told the woman's son at school—that her father died fighting in Afghanistan."

I shook my head sympathetically. "Children have a difficult time accepting a parent's death. Especially suicide."

"No! Her fib tells me she doesn't believe her father killed himself any more than I do."

"Come on, Kathryn, why would she believe that?" I paused. "Unless that's what you're trying to sell her."

"I'm not."

"Then it shows she's having a difficult time accepting that her father committed suicide. Like you."

Like me.

Anger flared in her face, but she appeared to bite back any harsh words. "Please, for Regan, investigate this."

I looked at the list of names, then toward Regan, staring at us from the SUV, then at Kathryn. "Tell you what. I'll make a deal with you."

"What deal?" Her tone conveyed that she didn't make deals. Life was her way and no one else's.

"I'll talk to Detective Watts. Or try. He may tell me to screw myself. I'll also poke into these other names. See if I can find your phantom Evans."

"Good."

"But you have to do something for me in return."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"If I can't turn up anything that persuasively suggests it was murder, you drop this nonsense. Have a heart-to-heart with Regan. Better yet, take her to grief counseling. Better still, *both* of you go. You want to continue to delude yourself, that's your business. But don't lie to your daughter. She needs to come to terms with the hard truth."

Kathryn's mouth pouted.

"It's tough, I know," I said. "I'm struggling with it myself. But if Regan doesn't address it now, it's going to be that much more difficult when she's older."

"He was murdered, David. I know he was."

"Deal or not, Kathryn?"

Intransigence radiated from her body. Through gritted teeth, she said, "You have to make a good-faith effort to investigate."

"I will. I promise."

I remained in the doorway as they drove away. What foolishness had I committed myself to? What would I tell Poppy? Or not?

Randy's death was suicide. I was certain. Yet might there be a different truth behind his death?

The break-in. The "secret" meeting, according to Kathryn. Was this all her fantasies? Outright lies? Or leads to something deeper?

There's more behind your husband's death than you realize.

I couldn't shake the image of Regan sitting alone in the car with her earbuds, telling lies to the world, and to herself, about her father's death. If there were more to Randy's death than the simple suicide of a troubled war-ravaged man, I had a moral and personal obligation to uncover that truth. As I had as an investigative reporter. I owed my best friend that much . . . for my goddaughter's sake . . . for Randy . . . for myself.

As for Kathryn . . . hell, what was a little murder investigation between adversaries?



I returned to my upstairs office and brought up one of my many to-do lists on the computer, the list for personal and household tasks. I sat for a moment, pondering the ridiculously long single-spaced list, weighing my priorities. I hesitated. When I commit something to a to-do list, one of two outcomes are possible: either I finish the task and delete it, or it sits there nagging me as it drifts down the list along with all the other nagging jetsam I intend to complete yet never seem to get to.

Why do I always delude myself into believing I can do everything set in front of me? When it comes to piling tasks on my plate, I'm the archetypical fat guy dragging two trays through the cruise ship buffet line.

This particular task could not be allowed to sink toward the bottom, to go unfinished. I needed to check it off quickly and efficiently, and get my life back to normal.

A quarter of the way down the first page, between **Cat to vet** and **Pick faucet for remodel**, I typed in a task I never could have imagined would appear on any of my to-do lists:

Investigate Randy's death



Thank you for reading the opening chapters of *No Time for Murder*. I hope you enjoyed it. If you want to find out where David Dartman's investigation into Randy's death takes him (yes, there are more murders), the book is available on Amazon in eBook (<https://amzn.to/3SnBkQ0>) and paperback (<https://amzn.to/3VDdtX>) formats.

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