

THE PASSERBY

A novel

Thomas Ray Crowel

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“And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me,
it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck,
and he were cast into the sea.”

(Mark 9:42)

The old two-story farmhouse sits alone at the bend in the road. Its porch wraps from front to side. It was built in a day when there was neither electricity nor any of the things that go with it. It was designed to be cool in summer and warm in winter with minimum human intervention. Its builders are only names now. The people who put up the house and their children and grandchildren are gone now — all of the people who lived there.

On that day — twenty years ago — it probably looked well lived in. The newly decorated Christmas tree was visible from outside, through a large picture window.

If you had gone inside you could have seen, beneath the tree, three wrapped gifts next to a handmade nativity scene. There was a dog's chew bone tied with a big red bow and tucked up in the branches; a dog lived in this house. You would have also seen a family portrait on one of the end tables. Sitting between her parents in the photo is a young girl, her blonde hair resting on the shoulders of her Sunday School dress. Her smile is a pixie's smile. That's their daughter, Trudie.

The firemen who came into the house later that afternoon were in a hurry. They probably didn't notice the tree or the photo. They didn't see the family dog, which should have been there, guarding things, but mysteriously was not.

They did a quick a check; it was important to check every room. Around the corner is the kitchen, just off of it, a bathroom. The bathroom door was wide open.

In the bathtub was a naked body, face up, eyes and mouth open, stringy wet hair floating atop the water. Two distinct purple marks compressed the girl's skin deep around her throat. That's their daughter, Trudie.

Chapter 1

In our imagination, catastrophes don't happen in small-town America. We associate insanity and cruelty with big cities. But we've learned to see, those of us with long memories, that villages decay, and the social fabric rots. Hampton, like many small country towns, fell victim to the modern quick-food marts and strip malls that ringed the town. The franchises and chains choked out local business the way weeds choke out healthy plants. There was once a Main Street business district in Hampton. It included a drugstore where the pharmacist, like a druggist in an old-time magazine photo, dressed each day in a starched white coat and splashy tie and greeted every customer. The pharmacist was someone a neighbor could count on to give the best remedy for a cold, a bellyache, or other minor aches and pains. Toward the back of the drugstore was the marble-topped soda bar, where the young and old alike popped in from time to time for a healthy scoop of ice cream, a cup of coffee, or the blue-plate special, usually served up with the local gossip as a free side-dish.

The drugstore outlasted the boarded up theater. Over time, the theatre had become so dilapidated that it was only recognizable by one-time moviegoers, townsfolk who still remembered the taste of warm, buttered popcorn, waiting to be eaten once the MGM Lion roared on the big silver screen. Most now preferred the convenience of DVDs, microwave popcorn, beer and chips. Children used to pack the seats on Saturday afternoons, waiting for the "Hi-yo, Silver, away" of the Lone Ranger and the "That's all,

folks,” Looney Tunes. Now they opted for the Sunday afternoon comfort of Internet chat rooms.

Down the street had been the doctor’s office. The doctor too was a local guy. After medical school, he had decided to come back to the town he grew up in. After all, the regular doc was getting up in age and mainly had fishing on his mind. Of course, the old doc could always be counted on if his young colleague needed help, or advice — especially advice.

Most every household in Hampton had a piece of furniture with the Shones’ Furniture Store logo stamped on it in some hidden away place. Shones’ itself is gone.

As travel by horse and buggy phased out, a long time ago, most townsfolk bought either a Ford or Mercury from the models displayed inside the showroom of the Hohms’ Motor Company. The car dealership replaced the old blacksmith and livery stable — different building and different times, but the same family name, with Mr. Hohms’ son and grandson to carry on. The Hohms’ name stands for transportation. Some member of the future Hohms’ family will probably be selling the next unimaginable vehicle.

The lawyer’s office was another few steps down the street. Hampton’s only lawyer also served as its judge. His law practice mainly dealt with land squabbles and wills. As judge, he lowered his gavel on more dramatic issues — street fights and larceny. The judge was involved in many political debates, most of which took place in the back room of the local pool hall and tavern amidst poker games and after-hour beer drinking. Storytelling was always the main course in the tavern.

What helps a small town survive are the people on and about its streets. For instance, the one remaining barbershop still has a bench outside where folks can sit and

talk on a warm day. The homegrown still know each other and each other's family's family.

A final telltale sign of what the earlier Hampton once was is the little stone drinking fountain that still stands at the four corners downtown. It hasn't produced its cold water for years, and no one seems to know why or when it stopped. That's just the way it is.

What particularly defined Hampton, of course, were not just its buildings and businesses, or even the most remarkable accomplishments and crimes of the locals. The character of the town was a result of the summing up and averaging of its citizens' quirks and personalities. One might view the locals as one big extended family — folks who fought, made up, and then fought all over again. They all, at some time or another, attended the one school building together and eventually grieved together while standing at the gravesides of their loved ones, all in the same cemetery, saying their goodbyes. One small town cemetery may look like another because everywhere people are born, live, work, have children, weaken, and die. But look closely and, of course, each graveyard has its own unique roster of the dear departed.

For most of its citizens, even into modern times, it was basically impossible to escape from the Hampton families, their histories, and their almost tribal values. There was really no place to go outside Hampton, no place you'd be understood. Every member of the Hampton community knew that.

In a general sense, these folks didn't have significant differences that set them apart from city people. It was their way of living together, of being enmeshed, that made the country folk of Hampton different from the city folk of anyplace else.

The social contract was maintained by commonly understood rituals and gestures. The squabble, followed by the handshake, was the rule of order. After all, there was only one drugstore, one soda bar, one movie theater, one doctor's office. You couldn't get along without any of them.

In fact, there was only one of most everything, except for churches. Hampton had an abundance of churches, every major denomination. More than one faded whitewashed steeple still sat along Main Street. The churches offered different prisms through which to look at the world — Catholic and Protestant. You could find differences, but if you stressed those differences you'd puncture, maybe even tear, the social fabric.

So, how was it that an out-of-towner like Ray Krouse could blend in with the folks of Hampton? He would not have drawn attention to himself anywhere in America but he was a good fit in Hampton because he was raised with the same values. In the long run, he hadn't been able to escape his background either. Ray's kin had once been neighbors, kin who settled in Hampton long before it became a town. They lived in and farmed the countryside at the same time the Potawatomi Indians were still trying to save their villages and hunting grounds from the white man. The Potawatomis were eventually driven out.

Ray was able to buy back farmland his relatives once toiled, land he intended on keeping just as it was over a hundred years ago. Though Ray didn't live in Hampton, the fact that he owned four farms that totaled over five hundred acres made his name one worth knowing. Farmers were always in search of land to cash rent and grow their crops.

In time, some of the farmers and townspeople who came to know Ray began to accept him. And, when his time came, Ray decided, Hampton was where he would one day rest amongst his ancestors and friends.

Nevertheless, it can't be overlooked that Ray had been away. He had more than one prism through which to look at the world. By Hampton standards, for example, he was unusually curious.

Willow Grove Cemetery is well cared for. Like many country graveyards, it is surrounded by old trees and tucked in amongst crop fields on all sides except for the unpaved gravel road that leads in, loops, and carries you out again. As visitors entered, a weather-beaten bluebird house resting on a fencepost marked the curve leading to the water spigot.

The driver parked where they had parked before and the two got out. Ray Krouse stood next to Kick Jetton overlooking a heart-shaped grave marker. Ray's eyes fixed on the name and age of the girl lying beneath the headstone. Kick remained quiet, her tall shadow cast over the gravestone, waiting for him to speak. When Ray turned toward her for a second; he noted that the summer sun made her olive skin appear even darker.

Ray pulled his eyeglasses from the collar of his sweater and knelt down, reading the small inscription on the stone. "Kick, have you noticed that this grave always looks as if someone has visited?" he said.

"Most of them have something on them," Kick answered. Her eyes scanned the flowers, flags, and keepsakes on the nearby gravesites.

"She died in 1986, only eleven years old," Ray said.

Kick shook her head. Her eyes saddened.

“I wonder what she died of,” he added.

Kick knew Ray intended on finding out. She sighed.

Kick jumped behind the wheel of Ray’s pickup. Ray climbed into the passenger seat and when they reached the road pointed in the direction that led away from town. Kick slowed to make her turn. “Drive over to farm one,” Ray said.

Kick grinned and turned to the left. A mile down the road, at the last mailbox before farm one, was Del Pitt’s place. Del sat outside in his front yard swing, watching a new batch of barn kittens run and jump one another. The mother cat looked on from underneath the front porch. Del spotted Ray’s truck and waved.

Del was a retired farmer. His thick, calloused hands were a giveaway. “Retired,” for Del, meant overseeing several farmhands who never did thing the way he wanted. It was more work than working itself.

Ray liked Del from the first day they met, not long after Ray came back to Hampton.

Ray and Kick got out. Ray sat down next to Del. Kick knelt on the grass. The kittens started toward Kick; they knew a cat lover when they sensed one. Kick played with them, keeping an ear to the conversation.

“Del, that little Brice girl in the cemetery, what did she die of?” Ray asked.

Del paused a second. He liked Ray back, but Ray had been away a long time. “She drowned in the bathtub,” Del said finally.

“Was she epileptic?” Ray asked.

“No, she was basically healthy. Nice little girl, so far as I know. She was home sick from school that day. A lot of the kids were. Flu epidemic back in 1986,” Del said.

“Home alone?” Ray asked.

“Yep,” Del nodded, pointing to a pitcher of iced tea up on the porch. He motioned for Kick to get herself a glass.

The next hour went by quickly. Ray would circle the question of the girl’s death. Then, when it was clear that Del preferred to leave the issue alone, they’d slide off into a discussion of crops and weather, or baseball, or even politics. Ray always managed, though, to come back to the Brice girl. He kept asking for Del’s personal opinions. He smiled when Del finally told him the rumor was the little girl was killed by a Guatemalan who couldn’t speak English and lived in a trailer park near the high school. Del said the Guatemalan left town shortly after the murder. Sure looked like he was running away.

“Were there any other suspects?” Ray asked.

Del said he was out of town at the horse track that day, along with a couple pals. So as far as he was concerned, everyone was a suspect except him and his buddies. Del then mentioned Michael “Junebug” Davenport who used to be a Hampton police officer. Del thought Junebug was probably an expert on the case and told Ray that Junebug was now a Sergeant with the Keysville Police Department. Kick wrote his name down on her notepad.

Del didn’t seem the nervous type, but while they talked he smoked three cigarettes to the nub. When he settled into his last and longest silence, Ray stood, held out his hand and pulled Kick up. She set her empty iced tea glass on the porch and shooed the kittens back into the yard.

Ray and Kick headed back toward Ray's lake house, a few miles out of Hampton.

Ray had been successful in the "city." It was not a large place, only a city in comparison with Hampton. But Ray needed to get away from time to time, mostly on weekends, and buying the lake house gave him a way to come home. As he counted on his sons and managers to run his businesses, he spent more and more time writing. The lake house became a kind of a beachhead. From there he started buying up local farm properties.

Kick was used to chatting in the car but Ray remained unusually quiet as they drove through the countryside.

"What's up, Boss?" Kick asked.

Kick always called him Boss. It was hard for her to call anyone who'd been in charge anything else. She worked for Ray in his various businesses and when he started writing books, it seemed fitting that Kick would become his publicist. Also, Ray was a take-charge kind of guy, a boss by nature. They were also best friends.

Ray was comfortable having Kick do research with him. She had not only learned quickly over the years, but had actually picked up some of his habits and sayings. This was mostly okay with Ray, but at times, to tell the truth, it could be an irritation when she read his mind. He thought it was mostly up to Kick to figure out the right times to speak up and the right times to lie low.

"I don't believe that a healthy eleven-year-old girl could die while taking a bath, Kick," Ray said. "I don't think that Del ever believed it either."

He raised his eyebrows as he looked at her. She remained silent. “Hell,” he said, “when I was eleven, I damn sure wouldn’t have been taking a bath when I was home alone.”

“Girls are different, Boss,” Kick said, playing Devil’s advocate.

Ray looked at her over his tinted glasses and smiled.

Kick waited for Ray by the main desk that sat just inside the front entrance of the nearest and largest library in the city of Riverside. She had already had a conversation with a soft-spoken, grandmotherly type who showed her to the genealogy section where the city newspapers were kept. Ray followed the woman to the room. Kick told the woman she needn’t stay.

Ray gazed around the musty smelling room. He began browsing old high school yearbooks that were neatly placed next to other reference books in the room. Kick went to work at the clunky microfiche machine, running records of *The Riverside Press*. The elderly librarian peeked in on them from time to time. Each time she opened the door her perfume scent announced her presence. Ray wondered how often people looked into these records. Not often, he thought.

“Here it is, Boss,” Kick said. “‘Girl Found Dead After Fire.’”

Ray looked over her shoulder as she read: “In rural Hampton, a girl’s death is being investigated as a homicide. A fire, which began on the second story of a private residence, may have been started to cover up evidence.”

Kick glanced up at Ray, her eyes wide.

“Big story,” Ray said.

The crux of the article, dated December 12, 1986, was that the fifth grader was staying home from school due to illness. Trudie Brice was last seen alive when her mother, Ronda Jo, stopped at home over her lunch hour to check on her. The apparent murder was discovered when a passing motorist noticed smoke and flames coming out the roof of the house. He went to a neighbor's home and asked them to call the fire department. He then returned to the burning house, the article said. He entered and found the family dog, which he let outside. He said he found the girl's unclothed body, face down in the water-filled bathtub on the main floor of the house. The motorist was reported to have taken the girl from the house and tried to revive her but was unable to do so.

Kick replaced the roll of microfiche with another and began to turn the crank on the machine. Ray continued to scan the bookshelves, finding nothing of interest. He walked back over by Kick, whose next find was from a few weeks later. Trudie's death was now being investigated. Investigators believed the fire was deliberately set on the second story of the rural Hampton farmhouse to cover up what they suspect was evidence of child molestation. A police official was refusing to release the name of the passing motorist pending further investigation; but the Prosecutor did use "he" and "his" while describing the series of events. The passerby had never been a suspect, it was reported, because he had been talking with Sheriff's deputies only minutes before discovering the fire. The Hampton Fire Department alarm went off at 3:09 p.m.

Ray's mouth dropped. This wasn't adding up to him. He told Kick to go back to the first article.

“What’s wrong, Boss?” she asked. Ray just shook his head. Kick swapped out the reels, found the first article, and cranked down the page.

Ray pointed to a line buried on the inside of the paper and read aloud. “An autopsy on the body was scheduled for 5:00 p.m. today, County Coroner Ron Sellars said, during the press briefing.”

Kick leaned back and rubbed her hands, wriggling her fingers.

“They let the passerby go before they got all the facts,” Ray said.

“He wasn’t a suspect,” Kick said. Maybe she was playing Devil’s advocate again. “I don’t see why they didn’t print the hero’s name.”

“They didn’t have the time of death, cause, anything,” Ray said. “They ran this story less than twenty four hours after the murder.”

Kick photocopied the article. For another two hours, she and Ray skimmed later references about the case — interviews with and statements by the prosecuting attorney, as well as editorials. The more they looked, Kick noticed, the quieter Ray got. When something bothered him — especially when something made him angry — he could go way down deep inside himself.

Ray didn’t say a word as they crossed the parking lot and hopped into the truck.

“How ’bout I buy you lunch?” Kick said.

“Pull the truck in front of Morrow’s Real Estate Office,” Ray said. The office was really an add-on room to the Morrrows’ house.

Ted Morrow was one of Hampton’s senior citizens. More, he had been the town’s mayor for twenty years, and going way back, his day job was as a trade embalmer for

several funeral homes. He still held a political office and was never short on stories to tell. Ray and Kick had spent some interesting afternoons swapping yarns with him since they came back to Hampton. Kick referred to him as “Godfather.”

Ray and Kick sat down in front of Ted’s desk. Ted’s phone rang. Ray reached over and put his hand on top of the receiver. It was sometimes best to get right to the point. Ted saw that this afternoon Ray was interested in something more than local color.

“Ted, can you recollect anything of interest about the Trudie Brice murder?” Ray asked.

Ted paused before answering, the same way Del had. Partly he wanted to think about his answer, and partly he wanted to remind Ray that though he was almost a townie, Ray been away for a long time. Ted said he believed that he knew who killed the little girl. He paused again. Ray waited until Ted spoke.

“A local preacher name Billy Jack Hummock,” Ted said.

Ted leaned forward to tell Ray how he knew. He said that Trudie’s mother, Ronda Jo Brice, attempted to pick her daughter up from the casket in the Methodist Church. The preacher told her not to because Trudie’s bruises might show if her dress didn’t remain in place. Ted understood; he’d gotten many a body ready for burial over the years. And he’d seen Trudie’s bruises himself.

“How do you know the preacher said that?” Ray asked.

“Because I was standing next to the casket when Reverend Hummock took Ronda Jo by her arm,” Ted said.

Ray leaned forward in his chair. “You must have a reason to suspect him, right?” Ray said.

“You betcha,” Ted said. “How did the preacher know about the bruises, unless he was the one who caused them?”

But there was more than circumstantial evidence. Ted told Ray there was also talk about the Reverend and Ronda Jo being sexually involved with one another.

Kick wrote as Ted spoke.

“You know, Ted, it’s not going to be easy for me to get folks to talk about the murder. Many see me as an out-of-towner,” Ray said.

Ted nodded.

Ray continued. “But I think the real reason is because most everyone has a skeleton hanging in their closet. If I start sniffing around, I just might accidentally open someone’s closet door and rattle the bones.”

A boyish grin appeared on Ted’s face; he laughed. “You betcha.”

Ted walked over to the door leading into the interior of the house and cupped his hand, “Doris,” he said, “Doris, come here.”

Ted’s wife, Doris, walked in, holding the magazine she’d been reading. She backed up Ted’s theory. Doris had been working at her family’s gift shop, located across the street from Sauers’ Hardware Store back in the 1980’s. Ronda Jo Brice worked at Sauers’. Doris recollected that Ronda Jo usually went home sometime around noon to check on Trudie whenever the girl stayed home from school, or wasn’t over at the babysitter’s house.

Doris said that on the day of the murder, if her memory served her right, Ronda Jo left the hardware store soon after the town fire alarm went off. Doris thought it would have been sometime after three o’clock.

Talk was that Ronda Jo drove down to the house alone. She became angry when the officials at the scene wouldn't let her go into her home. Doris heard that Ronda Jo, for whatever reason, threw a rock through the picture window.

Ray wanted to know how Doris remembered so many details. Doris said she had gotten the story from someone who overheard it from Ronda Jo's husband, Stan. Doris also mentioned Betty DeHaan, the Brices' neighbor. Betty said Stan had arrived at the fire by himself. Some folks at the scene heard Stan turn to Ronda Jo after she threw the rock and tell her that she better have her purse handy to pay for a new window. Ronda Jo didn't answer him. She turned on her heel, got into her car, and peeled out, yelling and screaming from the car window. She headed back to the hardware store hysterical, leaning on the car horn and weeping.

Ray took the opportunity to ask Doris if she knew who the passerby was — the one who saw the fire in the first place.

Doris said she knew all right; it was a man named Cleve Hauser. She believed then, as she did now, that he didn't kill Trudie, because he was a schoolteacher, married with three children of his own; but there were plenty of people in town who believed that Cleve knew more than he had ever let on. Doris also repeated something Ted had already mentioned to Ray — that Ronda Jo had some kind of "entanglement" with Reverend Hummock.

"Whatever happened to Reverend Hummock?" Ray asked.

"That's another reason I think it was the preacher," Doris said. "He left town in a hurry." Ted grunted in agreement.

“Who could we see that would have pictures of Trudie, other than her parents?”

Kick asked.

“Well, Dorothy Johnson, would — the school librarian. She’d be the person to see,” Ted said. “I’m sure they have yearbooks for the middle school.”

“The main library only had high school yearbooks,” Ray said.

“Go see Dorothy Johnson, Kick, she’ll have them,” Ted repeated.

Ray sat back with his feet propped up on his office desk. He reread the newspaper articles, and then closed his eyes, resting his head on his hand. Ray knew that listening to all the rumors could be tricky business.

For the most part, he agreed with the statements made by law enforcement who’d spoken out about the story for weeks after the girl’s death. But one of them was quoted as saying that rumors were getting in the way of their investigation. That’s where Ray disagreed.

He believed that a rumor about the murder, repeated enough, just might be something worth following up on. Ray also knew he had to listen to rumors not connected with the Brice family in order to get people to eventually tell what they knew or heard about the murder. He was going to have to get real familiar with the social fabric of Hampton. He was going to have to wrap himself up in it.

“Kick, get Michael Davenport on the phone,” Ray said. “The guy Del Pitt called Junebug.”

“He’s not in. I already left a message at the Keysville Police Department,” Kick said.

Ray looked down at the list of questions he had made that needed answers. He’d gotten up at four in the morning — he couldn’t sleep — and written the questions sitting at the kitchen table. He was always prepared for interviews. There were clearly going to be a lot of them.

Kick was used to this. She would either listen in on Ray’s conversations, or type out responses from Ray’s rough notes. After twenty years, Kick had acquired the knack for deciphering Ray’s obscure or indistinct doodling. Still, she was thankful that most of the time Ray’s mind was like a steel trap. In every interview, even every phone call, Ray would begin by exchanging pleasantries and only then get down to business. Despite his casual banter, Ray remembered every important detail. A single line or a name would jog his memory, even months later.

They had a quiet morning. Ray gave Kick a couple of new ideas about his list of questions. She typed them up. Then they made a list of people who, at this early stage of the investigation, might have some information. They agreed that some of them had a lot to answer for.

When they came back from lunch, Kick found a message on the answering machine. She set down her coffee cup and played the message. Ted Morrow had managed to arrange a telephone interview between Ronda Jo and Ray. Ray pulled out a notepad and propped up the list of questions against a stack of books at the corner of his desk. Kick sat in the second chair in Ray’s office. She grabbed her notepad so she could

jot down notes. She was surprised to realize that she was a bit nervous. She dumped out the remainder of her coffee. After they went over her notes, Ray was ready.

When Ronda Jo answered the phone, Ray told her that he was a writer and that he had gotten interested in the circumstances of Trudie's death. He didn't want to reopen old wounds but said that he and many others thought there was more to the story. After he had gained Ronda Jo's confidence, he said he wanted to investigate her daughter's murder again. He let that sink in and then said he believed the murderer could be found. The phone went quiet.

"Hello? Hello," Ray said.

"What business is it of yours?" Ronda Jo asked.

Ray explained to her that murder — if that's what it was — was every citizen's business. He reminded her that her faith, as well as his own, taught that her Trudie was in a better place. But here on earth, Trudie's murderer still had to face the consequences of what he had done. Ray thought that society required this, but also that it was the murderer's only hope for redemption.

Ronda Jo asked what Ray might gain from his investigation. Ray explained that he wanted to write the true story, and bring closure to her and her husband. It wasn't a money-making proposition, he said. He just wanted to clear the record.

Ronda Jo continued to object to Ray's best efforts. The anger in her voice gave Ray an indication that their conversation was coming to an end. Ronda Jo finally said if she was interested in future communications with Ray, she would let Ted Morrow know. Ray thanked her.

Ray hung up the phone and looked over at Kick. He held out his hands.

“It’s hard for me to believe a mother wouldn’t want to know who killed her daughter,” Ray said. “When I asked her if she didn’t want the truth, she said *they* know. Who do you think “*they*” might be?”

“The police, maybe?” Kick said. “Sounded like she sure didn’t want you in the police files. Or maybe she thinks everybody already knows. She couldn’t stop you could she?”

“Not officially,” Ray said.

Ray continued, “When I told her what Ted Morrow said about Reverend Hummock’s comment to her, next to Trudie’s casket, she got all defensive and snapped, ‘That had nothing to do with Reverend Hummock’s reasons for leaving town.’”

“Why’d he leave then?” Kick said. The question hung in the air.

“Maybe she’s one of those people who don’t believe in justice,” Ray said. “Or maybe she can’t live with truth. I was just thinking if someone killed my dog, or cat, I’d sure like to know who did it, and why. And why doesn’t Ronda Jo want me to see the police files?”

“You can look at them anyway,” Kick said.

“I’d prefer to respect her wishes on that,” Ray said. “It doesn’t matter, Kick, we can investigate the murder without the files.”

Kick could tell by the tone of Ray’s voice that he was disappointed. He had been hoping for a breakthrough.

Ray went on. “She asked what made me think that I could find out who Trudie’s killer was when the Sheriff’s Department couldn’t.”

“She doesn’t know you,” Kick said. She smiled. It was an old joke between them — Ray’s perseverance.

“She’ll never get over her bitterness until there’s closure,” Ray said.

“I bet she knows more than she lets on,” Kick said.

“She’s so angry, I feel sorry for her,” Ray said. “I told her that I understand that she’ll never, ever, forget, but still, I believe if she would talk to me, I could help her.”

Kick took a deep breath. Ray was jumping on the Brice murder case and there would be no stopping until he found out who did it.

Ray handed Kick a piece of paper he’d made notes on, then helped her fill in her notes. He wanted to make certain she had down the main points of interest that might eventually have a bearing on his investigation.

Ray got up and stretched while Kick went over the notes. “Okay, Kick, we’ve got to dig deeper into this,” Ray said. “Run this Reverend Hummock down.”

Kick looked down at her notepad. “Call Hummock” was underlined twice.

“What are you smiling at?” Ray asked.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” Kick said. Sometimes Ray didn’t like to be reminded that she read him like an open book.

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