

DOUBTFUL RELATIONS

A SEAMUS MCCREE NOVEL

James M. Jackson



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DEDICATION

To my mother, Suzanne Montgomery Jackson

Sample

ONE

MOMENTUM, OBLIGATION, AND A SPECK of hope pulled me down the Masonic Hall stairwell and out the door. On the back stoop, I reread the text message. *Good News. Call ASAP Urgent.* The more I considered it, the more I was not reassured at nine thirty on a Friday night by the juxtaposition of “good news” with “urgent.”

“Happy June first,” Karen Miller, my real estate agent, said once we connected. “We’ve received a full-price offer on your house. It comes with a few conditions. Naturally. Inspection, which we know will be fine.”

Her tone struck me as overly cheery. I caught myself chewing my inner cheek. “You’re telling me the good stuff. What’s urgent?”

“That’s the Seamus McCree I appreciate. Always to the point. The buyer insists on meeting you face-to-face. I have absolutely no clue why, and I don’t think her broker does either. Makes me nervous.”

I wasn’t nervous; the worst that could happen was I didn’t sell my house to this buyer, which wasn’t a change from the current situation. The unusual request made me suspicious. I had never heard of such a thing. Why did the buyer need to see me? What could she want to talk about that only I could answer? Was she someone looking for the inside skinny on the shootings that had occurred there? My son’s partner, an investigative journalist, might pull such a stunt to get access to a story—but the shootings were three years ago.

Thinking about that night still gave me the willies. “Aha!” I said and chuckled. “This has all the earmarks of a surprise party. Paddy hinted he was contemplating doing something special for my birthday, but it’s a month and a half past. Did he put you up to this?”

“I’ve never met your son.”

“He knows our schedule, so he knows we’re in Ohio, only a half day from Cincy. It would be just like him to cook up something like this. You didn’t answer my question. He could arrange something without you two actually meeting.”

She laughed. “Sounds like fun, but no, I’m not part of some master

family conspiracy. Buyer's name is Beth Cunningham from the East Coast. Seems motivated. Wants closing in thirty days. I pretended to object and let them persuade me."

Something about the name tweaked a nerve. I tried to chase it down focusing on my East Coast days, but came up empty. "She's in town?"

"Leaves midday Sunday, which is not much of a window, but if you're only a half day away Lady Luck is on our side. Can you do it?"

"We were planning a leisurely drive down to Mom's next gig in Nashville. That's not until next weekend." All I'd need to do was change some motel reservations. "Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Saturday is perfect. I've already notified the two previous prospects—"

"I need to get back upstairs for Mom's finale. Tell me a time and we'll be there."

"Four thirty. By then I'll know how serious the other prospects are, which will determine our negotiating strategy."

"Tomorrow then." Maybe Lady Luck *was* going my way. This trip with Mom would be complete in another month. She was doing well enough that I could get her permanently situated in Boston and begin getting my own life in order. With Mom settled and shucking the millstone of the Cincinnati house, I could decide where I wanted to live when I didn't want to be at my camp in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I squeaked open the outside door and, feeling energized, hustled up the concrete steps, my footsteps echoing from the plaster walls and ceiling. I muscled the fire door open and heard chanting.

"Tru-dy. Tru-dy. Tru-dy."

I eyed the scene from the far corner of the auditorium. The chanting reverberated in the spacious room with its fifteen-foot ceiling and hardwood floor. To my left, the bar area was doing a brisk business. Most of the cheering crowd sat in folding chairs ordered to provide access from right, left, and center aisles. Mom beamed from her position on the low stage at the front.

Standing next to her was her most recent victim, a mid-thirties guy with more ink on him than *The Sunday Times Magazine*. A chalkboard stage right indicated she had polished the guy off with her third dart of the throw, a double seventeen, reaching the required 501 score on the dot.

I do not understand how a woman in her seventies can inspire largely male audiences to love her even as she beats the stuffing out of the local

darts players. Wherever we went, and in the last three months we had traveled all around New England, upstate New York, Pennsylvania, and now Ohio, the same thing happened. Excusing my way through the chanting crowd, trying not to interfere with the exchange of crumpled bills settling side bets, I parked myself against the center of the back wall and waited for my mother to call me to the stage.

She quieted the crowd and, as was her routine, challenged the last player to a match in which she'd throw lefty. She neglected to mention that she's ambidextrous. After winning with her left hand, she beat the guy a third time employing unusual techniques: hiking her darts, throwing them over her shoulder, standing on one leg, sitting, or doing whatever came into her mind.

We were set for her finale. She introduced the blindfolded challenge with a speech. Alone on the stage, she spoke into the microphone so softly people leaned forward to hear her. She told the story of my father's death—a cop killed on duty when I was young. She spoke of her struggles to get her children through college, and how once I had graduated she had retreated to silence for more than two decades. Two years ago she resumed limited verbal communications and now you couldn't shut her up—the crowd always laughed at the line.

I was unprepared the first time she made her speech, and bawled. Partly because she spoke of my father's death. Partly because she exposed her vulnerabilities to a crowd of strangers, something I could no more do than don a cape and fly like Superman. It had taken me a while, but I could now listen to her story without getting teary.

That night, no one talked, no one moved, no one even drank their beer while she spoke of loss and redemption. Applause pulled me from woolgathering about what tomorrow would bring. I should have been focusing on the task at hand, steadying myself instead of worrying myself into what was quickly becoming a throbbing headache. Not good, and no time for a pain reliever. Mom waited for the applause to die down before she spoke.

"I have one final proposition for you tonight. A small wager, should you choose to participate. But first, I need to accessorize."

On cue, the emcee came on stage and tied a bandanna across Mom's eyes. She tapped the microphone with her finger and at the sound the audience settled. "Give me five darts and I'll bet I can hit the bull's eye."

The crowd's murmur swelled. Mom raised her hand and they quieted. "I'll throw an exploratory dart. My son, Seamus—oh, Shay-mus, where are you?"

Her singsong calling of my name was my cue. I ambled down the middle aisle to polite applause. Once on stage, I gave her a hug.

"This is my son, Seamus. He's available and a good catch if anyone's interested. He has all his own teeth, his hair is natural, although I don't like seeing the gray—makes me feel old. He's six foot two, weighs one eighty-five. He's nearsighted, which accounts for the specs, but ladies, he has the nicest baby blues you have ever seen."

Knowing this was coming, I held my hands up in a "why me?" expression that got a laugh.

"I'll throw a practice dart and Seamus will tell me where it lands. Then I have five more darts to hit the bull's eye. Wouldn't you say the probabilities are against me? Despite that, I'll give you even odds. That's fair, right? Should I be fortunate enough to win, I'll donate my winnings to a charity Seamus helped set up to assist victims of violent crimes and their families. Because of its nonprofit status—and Seamus warns me to say this is in no way tax advice—you should endorse your checks directly to the charity to qualify for a tax deduction. If you don't have a check, we're high tech and have a smartphone credit card reader. If I lose, I hope you will be generous in donating my money to tonight's local charity. The most I ever lost was five thousand bucks. I hope you'll do me proud. Questions?"

A guy with a flushed face and prodigious beer belly yelled, "How do we know you're not cheating?"

Mom put her hands at the sides of her face and mimed a shocked expression. "My goodness. What a world we live in when people don't trust a little old gray-haired widow of a policeman. Sir, why don't you come up and check the blindfold? While he's doing that, could someone record the bets?"

The emcee hopped off the stage and noted wagers on a pad. To a mixture of hoots and claps, the doubting Thomas worked his way forward. He tried to boost himself onto the stage, but his protruding belly struck the edge. Failing a second time, and accompanied by cheers and jeers, he mounted by the side steps.

He made a big show of checking the blindfold, the darts, the dartboard, and frisking me. The audience got into his act and applauded his final bow.

The emcee gave me the thumbs up indicating he had finished collecting the bets. I took the microphone from Mom, led her to the oche—the shooting line—where I stood behind her and aligned her in front of the board exactly parallel to the line. I stepped away and she rearranged herself into her throwing stance, stepping back with her left foot, bringing in her right heel and placing most of her weight over her right foot.

This first dart was a reflection of how well I had pointed her. I held my breath, each heartbeat tapping behind my eyes. A big miss was on me. Once she settled her stance, she wasted no time and zipped a dart that thunked into the board outside the scoring circle between the one and four of the fourteen and a bit higher than halfway up the numbers. My shoulders dropped, relaxing on my exhale. Holding the microphone near my mouth so the audience could hear, I reported the dart's position to her.

She and I, (because I found myself mirroring her breathing), inhaled deeply and let it out. During the exhale she released the next dart. It stuck in the thirteen pie slice, two-thirds of the way between the outer double circle and the inner triple circle. Mom nodded understanding of my description of the dart's location. She made a minor adjustment in her feet placement, breathed in and out, and fired again.

"Nine spot, one-quarter inch out," I said and retrieved her three darts. "Two down and three to go. No pressure, Mom." The spectators, who had moved from their seats to stand close to the stage, nervously giggled at my remark.

"Easy for you to say," Mom retorted, "It's not your money on the line."

The remark received a big laugh, despite the reality that it *was* my money. Why should facts get in the way of theater?

She inhaled and released her breath, apparently did not feel centered, and repeated the process. The dart struck the outer green bull's eye. The audience exclaimed a collective shout of glee. She had picked their pockets and they cheered her.

"Green" I announced into the microphone.

Mom held out her hand, and I gave her the mic. Keeping her back to the audience she raised the mic high over her head to request quiet and, as if they were well-trained first graders, they stopped talking. "Wait. Wait," Mom said. "I didn't mean the *green*. I meant the *red* bull's eye."

The crowd shouted their disagreement. Some restarted the "Tru-dy" chant. Mom handed me the microphone and held up a hand for silence.

After a longer time, she got it. She'd made them believers. They wanted Mom to win their money, and now she was refusing them that privilege.

Part of me was proud of her uncompromising spirit. The headache part of me wanted her to declare victory so I could crash at the hotel.

She made a big show of settling in while I described exactly where in the green the dart had landed. Her movement was all upper body; Mom's feet had not shifted a micrometer from where she had thrown the last dart. A number of Catholics in the crowd now grasped the crosses hung around their necks for good luck. The beer-belly guy was actually kissing his silver crucifix. Mom took a clearing breath before she launched the fourth dart into the center red bull's eye.

The crowd roared its approval. Those close enough slapped their hands on the stage. Others rhythmically stomped their feet on the hardwood floor. "Tru-dy. Tru-dy. Tru-dy."

While I helped Mom remove the bandanna, I wished tomorrow would go as well as tonight, and I'd have my house sold.

Two

“**SUCH A LOVELY OLD BRICK** house,” my mother said as I pulled into my Cincinnati driveway. “It looks even nicer than your pictures. Tell me again why you want to sell?”

Workmen had sandblasted the brick, removing more than a century of accumulated city soot along with the recent fire damage. The wood trim was resplendent in its painted-lady colors. Good-looking wasn't the issue. “Because Abigail was shot here. Because I ended up killing a guy here. Because the bad guys tried to burn down the place.” My stomach roiled at the recitation.

“You should smudge the house and get rid of the bad vibes.”

“Been there. Done that. Didn't work. Come on, Mom, let me introduce you to my agent.”

We exited my ancient Infiniti G-20 and met Karen Miller at her Lexus. She brought a finger to her lips and motioned for us to walk with her. Three city lots down, she stopped. “Sorry for the skulduggery, but I didn't want the competition to overhear us.” She offered an aristocratic hand to Mom. “You must be Seamus's mother.”

Mom pulled Karen into a big hug. “My son's told me so many nice things about you. Thank you so much for helping him.”

Karen's eyes became all pupil, but she hugged Mom right back. My agent's unflappability was a quality I appreciated. Hug over, she faced me. “The couple I told you had an appointment earlier today? I'll eat my hat if we don't get an offer from them. The wife really gave the husband the what for because he hadn't let her make an offer last month. I finally had to push them from the house so they didn't bump into your prospective buyer. We might be able to play the couple off against the offer in hand.”

“No,” I said. “This Beth Cunningham person made a good-faith, full-priced offer. Let's try to get the couple to make a contingent offer in case this falls through.” I inclined my head toward the house. “Anything I should know before I talk with Ms. Cunningham?”

“Be your normal charming self. Are you feeling okay? You look a little . . .”

Shaky, I thought. I said, “I’ll be fine.” With the likelihood of a second offer, my concerns about screwing up this one lessened. I attributed my parched mouth to the challenges of the house itself. The sooner this was over, the better. “Showtime. Shall we?”

Before I could enter the house Mrs. Keenan yelled, “Alice! Alice, come back here.” I turned in time to catch Alice, my next-door neighbor’s pampered golden retriever, before she barreled into me. She buried her nose in my crotch while I rubbed her ears. “Belly rub?”

She flopped on her back, her tail sweeping the sidewalk. I squatted down and rubbed her chest and belly. “Okay, Alice.” I gave her a couple of solid pats. “I have something I need to do. Go to your mother before you get me in trouble.” Alice rose to her feet, gave herself a good shake, and trotted off, grinning as only goldens can do.

Mom: “Friend of yours?”

Karen: “I love golden retrievers, but their hair . . .” She checked her clothes for offending Alice hair.

Me: “I owe Alice and Mrs. Keenan a lot.”

Mom: “It won’t bother anything if I walk around, will it?”

Karen steered us by the elbow to encourage us toward the house. “You’ve never been here before, Mrs. McCree?”

I wondered how Mom would spin her decades-long institutionalization at Sugarbush that had prevented her from ever visiting me.

“Trudy—please. I’m embarrassed to say this is my first trip west of the Appalachians. I’m so glad Seamus thought of this idea to combine my passion for darts with seeing the country.”

Karen’s sales smile appeared. “Darts is such a . . . unique game.”

“I grew up living above a bar and it impressed the boys when I beat them.”

Karen was still shooining us toward the house. I delayed one final time, pointed at the plantings in front of the house. “Don’t those lilies of the valley look nice? Usually they’re squashed from the newspaper guy’s bad tosses.”

The buyer’s agent met us in the entryway. Whereas Karen was tailored suits, leather attachés, and heels made for comfort, this guy needed his mother to dress him. His getup included scuffed shoes, mismatched socks,

a bulge where his wallet stuck out of his back pants pocket. His top half combined a short-sleeved checked shirt whose buttons strained to control his stomach with a too-wide paisley tie. No briefcase for him, he carried a sheaf of papers in one hand and cheater glasses in the other. He reeked of incompetence and I wondered if the buyer wanted a private chat because she didn't trust her agent to represent her interests.

Karen made introductions. Mom commented on the ten-foot high ceilings and the bold colors I had chosen for the first floor. She decided to start her tour on the third floor and work her way down. Watching her climb the main staircase, I recalled the beautifully carved newels and balusters the fire had eaten. My heart sank. Such old-world craftsmanship was irreplaceable.

The artisans I'd hired had done a nice job rebuilding the house while maintaining its Victorian character, but it wasn't the house I had bought, the house I had once loved. My possessions had either burned in the fire or been ruined by water damage. To make the house more presentable I had rented furniture. A whiff of sawdust and paint still hung in the air underlying the fragrance of the fresh-cut flowers Karen had placed in vases around the house. With a will of its own, my gaze slid from yellow tea roses to the foyer floor where I had killed a man.

As though it had just happened instead of occurring over three years ago, I had a vision of Lt. Hastings, the head of Cincinnati's homicide unit and a personal friend, pointing to the head of the outlined body on the floor. "Seamus stood over him and fired shot after shot after shot while Abbott lay helpless on his back. Ka-pow. Ka-pow. Ka-pow. Ka-pow. Ka-pow. KA-POW."

I shivered remembering the percussive way she had pronounced those ka-pows. Hard as I tried, I could not remember the actual incident, but the memory of Hastings' demonstration accosted me in nightmares and now daymares. Already feeling wobbly, I didn't dare look into the dining room, afraid it would produce visions of Abigail lying nearly dead in a pool of blood. I had replaced all the oak flooring to eliminate any physical sign of the event. Unfortunately, I had found no way to refurbish the floorboards of my memory.

Could I ask the buyer to meet me outside on the porch? Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. With luck this was the last time I had to walk into this house.

“Mr. McCree?”

The question mark in the other realtor’s voice broke through my reflection.

“I know this is unusual, and I appreciate your flexibility. Beth is waiting for you in the kitchen.”

I edged past the agents, who headed for neutral corners. Approaching the dark passageway between the pantry and the back staircase, I realized this Beth person had closed the kitchen door. Even though it was my house, it didn’t feel right to burst in unannounced on the soon-to-be-owner. I hesitated and put my ear to the door. Nothing.

I gave the new solid six-panel door a quick double tap, realized it was insufficient, and knocked loudly. Still nothing. I opened the door and peered in.

She was looking out the window over the sink into the backyard. Her shoulders hunched in on themselves. She held her legs stiffly, as though they would collapse if she gave them permission to relax. Her clothes exuded wealth, but hung limply off her thin frame. My impression was of great sadness, but I might have been projecting my feelings about the house onto her.

Not sure how to proceed, I entered the room and said, “Um, you wanted to see me?”

Twirling fast as a shot-putter, she faced me. “I need your help, Seamus.” It was Lizzie. My ex-wife.

THREE

IN TIMES OF GREAT SHOCK my mouth either babbles without input from my brain or refuses to produce words. I gaped like a country boy dropped into Times Square.

Lizzie, now Mrs. Albert Cunningham III, had never gone by Beth. She had been Lizzie to her old friends and Elisabeth to everyone else, which explained why hearing the name Beth Cunningham had triggered a reaction, but not rung alarm bells. We had been divorced more than twice as long as we were married, and I hadn't seen her since our son's high school graduation nearly eight years ago. A pixie cut replaced the ponytail she had once used as a lure. She was thinner than I remembered and looked younger.

As the silence grew, her smile crumbled. "Surprised, I suspect." She lifted and dropped her shoulders in a movement that often preceded tears. "Maybe you should shut the door."

Fear gripped me. The only thing we now had in common was our son. "Is Paddy okay?"

"He's fine. It's—"

"Why this subterfuge, Lizzie?" Remembering we were not alone in the house, I turned the doorknob to retract the latch bolt and closed the door with a soft click. "What the hell is going on? Why are you here?"

She tucked her chin to her chest, blinking away tears. Fisting her hands, she rapped them into each other a half dozen times. "Patrick's fine," she choked out.

Before I knew how it happened she was wrapped in my arms. She sucked in sobbing gasps, and her breasts rose and fell against my chest. Her pelvis pressed against mine, and I physically responded in a way that embarrassed my logical self. That part of our marriage had never been a problem. I hoped she didn't notice. I pushed aside being peeved at the great lengths of her deception and tried for an interested but detached voice. "What's going on?"

She pulled away from me. "Tissue?"

I hadn't been in the house since the shootings and the fire over three years ago except for a number of quick inspections. "Toilet paper's the best I can do."

She shrugged, grabbed the bottom edge of my flannel shirt, and brought it up to blot her eyes. I pretended not to notice the intimacy.

"Al's disappeared." Her upper lip trembled.

A gazillion questions fought to get to my tongue first. The road jam was fortunate since I was able to say something only moderately inane, "Disappeared where?" Before she answered I added, "Better start from the beginning."

She faced the window. Speaking with a heavy voice she said, "Al went on a business trip a week ago yesterday. He was supposed to return that Friday evening late, so the first time I became worried was Saturday morning. I called his cell phone. No answer. I called his assistant, who said all he knew was Al had asked him to arrange a trip to Savannah. I called his partners. They claimed they didn't know of any trip to Savannah."

She pushed the last tears from her eyes with her fingertips. "I didn't know what else to do, so I called the airline. After hours of runarounds, someone confirmed he had flown to Savannah but had not boarded his return flight, nor had he changed the reservation. I called one of his partners again. He insisted they did not have a potential buyer in Savannah. I could hear in his voice that he figured Al had hooked up with someone and would show up when he was ready. I called my stepson to find out if by any chance he had heard anything. Chad hadn't spoken to his father in a week. He didn't think his dad knew anyone in Savannah."

"Potential buyer?" I interjected to give her a chance to breathe and me to think.

"Despite my better judgment, I followed their advice and waited until Monday to call the police. I was so out of it, I forgot it was Memorial Day. The police officer I spoke with was very polite but suggested that, given the long weekend, Al might show up that day. Perhaps I should wait until Tuesday before filing a report. I spent the day embarrassing myself by calling everyone we knew. No one had had any contact with him. I was so worried, I even asked Chad to talk to his mother and see if anything like this had happened during their marriage. Can you imagine how humiliating that is?"

I mumbled encouraging sounds.

“Someone suggested I check our credit cards, so I went online. No charges. Nothing. You have anything I can drink?”

“Water?”

“A bottle would be good.”

“I don’t live here, Lizzie. Tap water is all I have.”

Her mouth puckered briefly in a moue of distaste.

Tough. I grabbed a glass from the cupboard and let the water run awhile since I had no idea the last time anyone had used the faucet.

She took three careful sips. “That Tuesday, an ATM charge came through for \$500. I showed that to the cops. I wanted them to put out an APB for him in Pooler where the ATM was. They had me file a missing person report and said they’d get back to me.”

With deliberate motions, she dumped the rest of the water into the sink and left the glass on the counter. She screeched a chair away from the table and plopped down. “The police have nothing to tell me. His partners aren’t taking my calls anymore, and I’m picking up some kind of vibe from Al’s assistant that they think Al screwed them. Did you know they’re selling their business?”

I shook my head. “You mentioned a buyer.”

“I thought maybe Patrick had told you. I thought—” She gulped a room’s worth of air and snorted. “Patrick told me about your work with the Criminal Investigations Group. I thought maybe they could help. Can they? Will you talk to them?”

“Why didn’t you just call me?”

“Don’t stand over me, Seamus. It makes me nervous.”

I circled the table, spun around the chair opposite her, and straddled it.

She waited until I was seated. “I know you’re all about honesty, Seamus. And speaking the truth no matter the cost. Well, the truth is, I’m scared. I am really scared. Something has happened to my husband and no one wants to help me find out where he is. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat.”

She folded her hands on the table in front of her and leaned heavily on her forearms. “The truth is if I weren’t sitting here in front of you, I knew you’d refuse me. Why wouldn’t you? You don’t owe me anything. I knew you and your mother were in Ohio doing her darts thing. And I figured you were desperate to sell your house since it’s been on the market for so long. The plan came together. It’s a lovely house, Seamus. You should stay.”

She waved away what I supposed was a stray thought. “Anyway, this was the only way I’d be sure you’d see me. That’s the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Will you call them? Now? Please?”

Lizzie hadn’t gone to law school, but she had a lawyer’s craft at leading you down a path to unexpected agreements. I needed to tread carefully if I did not want to be trapped by some obscure logic I had not suspected. “I’m sorry, Lizzie. CIG works only with police departments and never makes unsolicited offers of assistance. The request has to come from the department. If you could get your local police to contact them, that’s one thing, but they’ll never do private work.”

She stared grim-faced. “Maybe *you* can help convince the police to call CIG?”

“Like that’s going to work. Some schmo the cops don’t know calls them up from Ohio and suggests they’re incompetent and should call in the resources of Criminal Investigations Group to solve a missing person report.”

“So come with me to New Jersey and talk to them in person.”

Missed that logic trap. “Al still hasn’t used any credit cards?”

“I haven’t checked today.”

I squinched my eyes shut in frustration. Under control, I opened them. “Through last night he hasn’t used his credit cards, correct?” She nodded. “And he only used the ATM once—on Tuesday?”

She pulled back from the table. “No. No! He uses it every day. Five hundred dollars. Every day. He must have lost his credit cards and he’s using cash, and—”

“And he hasn’t called you or texted or emailed or Tweeted or used Facebook or anything? I know you don’t want to hear this Lizzie, but are you sure he hasn’t dumped you? Have you been fighting? Like over their selling the business?”

I was constructing a paint-by-numbers picture: Lizzie had wrapped her self-worth in my position while we were married. Assuming she hadn’t changed, Lizzie would be against selling the partnership because she needed to be able to say her husband has this muckety-muck position or does that muckety-muck job. Present tense. Lizzie was never interested in the money per se. She was keen about its implied status. After I quit Wall Street and forfeited a sizable bonus, she was not a happy camper regarding the money I had given up.

She was even more ticked that by quitting I had caused her to lose status. Chances were her husband was fed up hearing this crap night after night and found a sympathetic ear. The partners knew of it and covered for him, which was why they weren't talking to her. He should show up any time now.

Lizzie insisted everything was fine. I was all wrong. Her eyes were doing a rumba to avoid contact with mine. The more she talked, the more I was sure she was lying about something . . . or everything.

"Look, Lizzie. The man is living off the ATM machine so he doesn't need to leave his name anywhere. Where the heck is Pooler, anyway?"

"Outside Savannah. In Georgia. But the ATM withdrawals have been from several different machines. In the city, in the suburbs, one was even across the state line in South Carolina. Something's wrong, Seamus. I just know it is. It's not another woman. I'd know. He's in trouble. Somebody's preventing him from using his phone."

"Have you checked his cell phone records to see if he's made any calls?"

Footsteps clunked down the back stairway intended for servants when the house was built in 1895. We stopped talking and listened as the footsteps reached the bottom and the kitchen door opened. My mother entered the room.

Her gaze swiveled between us. Through drawn lips she said to me, "Go with the second offer." Mom slammed the solid-paneled door behind her, rattling dishes in both the pantry and kitchen.

"What does she mean, 'Go with the second offer'?" Lizzie's voice was shrill with anger. "Wait! When did *she* start talking?"

"Paddy didn't tell you?"

"Patrick does not talk about your side of the family. What did that woman mean?"

The parallel was true. Paddy told me little of his mother's life. He had let me know she married Albert Cunningham III, who ran a hedge fund in the City, and Paddy didn't like him. "When it comes to her children," I said, "my mother is not one to forgive and forget. She thinks you screwed me over." I held up my hands. "I am not trying to get into a fight. Back to your problem." I thought I caught a lie I could call her on. "If Paddy doesn't talk to you, how did you learn of Mom's darts exhibitions and my house not selling?"

She looked abashed and spoke through a hand covering her mouth. "I follow your mother on Facebook."

I wasn't on any social media sites, but Mom had developed a huge following because of her darts. I throttled my desire to get into a knockdown brouhaha about her stalking us. I wanted Lizzie out of my life and the fastest way to accomplish that was to focus her attention somewhere else. "Did you check his cell phone records?"

"It's a business phone. They won't talk with me."

Another incongruity worked past my anger into my thinking. "Why didn't you hire a private investigator? They must do this kind of thing all the time."

"I talked to a firm one of my girlfriends used. They just didn't get it, Seamus. Even if your mother hates me, you're my last hope." She dropped her chin to her chest. "My last hope."

"Then you're hopeless." As soon as the words were out of my mouth I regretted them. Mean, small words. I knew better. I had let the molten lava of my unresolved anger at Lizzie bubble up and erupt in a hurtful way. She burst into deep sobbing.

I stood, feeling disgusted with myself. "I'm sorry, Lizzie."

"Just let me be," she said through her crying.

"Maybe I can think of something." She did not respond. "I'll be outside."

I passed Lizzie's agent in the front hall and told him "Ms. Cunningham" was making a personal phone call and would be out shortly. Mom and Karen were engaged in an animated discussion on the porch. I opened the door and the conversation stopped.

Karen recovered first. "Trudy tells me she doesn't think this buyer's serious."

I peered down my nose at Mom, "You think? How perceptive you are today." I ran both hands through my shaggy hair. "I'm sorry, Mom. That was snarky. I'm ticked at Lizzie and especially at myself—not you. Karen, can you please call up the couple's agent and tell them I'd prefer to sell to them if they match the first offer? See what happens." I read confusion on Karen's face. "Mom's right. This deal is toast. Beth Cunningham is my ex-wife."

"Oh." The surprise formed her lips into a frozen 'O.' "I'll make the call."

Once Karen was beyond whisper-hearing range, Mom patted the seat next to her and leaned in. "What is she doing here? Hasn't that woman caused you enough trouble?"

During the years Lizzie and I had been together, Mom was not communicating with anyone, so I had no idea how she felt about my marriage or my divorce. We had talked of lots of things during this trip, but Lizzie had not come up. If the slammed kitchen door had not provided a sufficient clue, the venom in her voice did. By the time I finished relating the kitchen conversation, including my bad behavior, the flame in Mom's eyes had banked. "That's terrible. No wonder she looks hollowed out."

The front door opened and the other agent emerged from the house. "My client has retracted her offer." He focused an angry gaze down on me. "What kind of a man are you to make her cry?" He stomped down the steps to his car. Over his shoulder he said, "I assume *you'll* lock up."

I chose not to flip him the bird. He had a right to be mad, even if I wasn't the one he should be angry with. "Mom, do me a favor. Check on Lizzie while Karen and I talk?"

Mom muttered under her breath as she passed me, "I don't do tears."

You're right, Mom, I thought. Maybe if you had you wouldn't have needed more than two decades of silence to heal.

FOUR

PATRICK MCCREE'S REACTION TO HIS cell phone announcing “That One is My Dad” by Keni Thomas was to feel the lead weight of guilt press upon his shoulders. He considered letting the call go to voicemail, but punched the speaker button. “Hey, Dad, how are you and Grandma?”

“Has your mother told you anything about your stepfather?”

Tension slid off Patrick’s shoulders because he could needle his dad about his phone technique, “I’m fine. Thanks for asking. Cindy’s fine too, as are Cheech and Chong. Business is going well.” His shoulders pulled in tighter at the half truth. He hastily added, “I’m glad you called. I need to talk to you. There’ve been changes.” There, finally out. “I have a meeting with your favorite bankers at All-American tomorrow.” True, but not the issue, not the issue at all.

His father chuckled. “Point taken. I’m glad Cindy and the cats and your business are all fine. Your grandmother is fine. I’m fine. I saw Abigail since we last talked and she is fine as well, although she’s in California and I’m not sure when we’ll next see each other. And now that we’re done with the touchy-feely crap, your stepfather—”

“Mom has a new husband. I do not have a stepfather. They both know I think he’s a jerk. Mom and I don’t bother talking about him anymore. He—”

“He’s disappeared.”

“See. He *is* a jerk.” Patrick wanted to shove the words back in his mouth. Not that he didn’t mean them. He did. His first reaction should have been concern for his mother, not some junior-high fist pump because he was right about Albert Cunningham III.

“I won’t argue the point.” After filling Patrick in on the details of the disappearance, he concluded, “I know I’m catching you cold, but how hard would it be to convince one of your bank clients to let you look at the video from their ATMs?”

His father so rarely asked for his help, and the one big time he had,

Patrick had screwed up. Patrick crossed his fingers to remember to discuss that before they ended the call. Why, oh why, had he not sucked it up and called his old man months ago?

“You there?” his father asked.

“Not legitimately.” He pulled at the side of his face, realized he’d uncrossed his fingers and crossed them again. “Probably not illegitimately, either. ATMs come with their own security, and Diebold, or whoever, is responsible, not the bank. Banks keep some stuff local, but they automatically transmit most to an off-site security company. When we test a financial institution’s cybersecurity, we might look at ATM accounting interfaces, but we don’t touch that aspect of the ATMs. I know TMI.” *Listen to Mr. Negativity.* “Why are you asking?”

“Your mother is at my house.” He released an exasperated sigh. “She wanted me to get CIG to help her. That’ll never happen, but if she proved someone other than your step—her husband was extracting the ATM money, the cops might get interested. And if it is him, well, at least she knows he’s alive.”

The alarm on his phone rang. He jabbed it silent. Fifteen minutes to get a salad prepared before Cindy came home for an early dinner. He pulled carrots from the crisper and began peeling them over the sink. “Sorry. Which bank?”

“Don’t know. I was fishing to see if it would work. Apparently it won’t. My other idea hinged on checking his cell phone usage, but your mother can’t because it’s a corporate account. I’m not sure what operating system it uses, but—”

“Have Mom give his assistant at Antimatter Investments a call. They often work on Saturdays, although after five is late, even for them. Lots of companies use security backup software on their phones. Not only can they check usage, they can locate the phone if it’s on and even delete its memory. That’s your best bet.”

“Unfortunately, they got sick of your mother’s pestering them and won’t answer her calls anymore. What’s that sound?”

“Me chopping carrots. I met Laurence Kleindeinst—the assistant—at their wedding. Maybe I can talk him into it. If that doesn’t work, I know some people at the phone companies.”

“You know my feelings about that. Can you try the assistant now? I guess I need to take your mother and grandmother to dinner.”

Patrick sprinkled the carrots on the salads forming in front of him. “That Indian restaurant on Clifton still there?”

“I have no clue, Paddy. The last time I was actually in Cincinnati was eighteen months ago to put the house on the market. Since then, I’ve either been traveling or up taking care of your grandmother in Boston. Driving into Cincinnati today, everything seems familiar, but under the surface, nothing’s the same. Give the assistant a call and let me know. Oh, and give Cindy a kiss for me.”

“Will do. And if that doesn’t work, I’ve got the Jerk’s cell number. I can always—”

“I’d rather you didn’t if we can avoid it. Thanks, Paddy. I love you.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

Patrick pressed the end call button and stared at his crossed fingers.

Sample