

THE KIND WORTH KILLING

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WILLIAM MORROW

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CHAPTER 1

TED

“Hello, there,” she said.

I looked at the pale, freckled hand on the back of the empty bar seat next to me in the business class lounge at Heathrow Airport, then up into the stranger’s face.

“Do I know you?” I asked. She didn’t look particularly familiar, but her American accent, her crisp white shirt, her sculpted jeans tucked into knee-high boots, all made her look like one of my wife’s awful friends.

“No, sorry. I was just admiring your drink. Do you mind?” She folded her long, slender frame onto the leather-padded swivel stool, and set her purse on the bar. “Is that gin?” she asked about the martini in front of me.

“Hendrick’s,” I said.

She gestured toward the bartender, a teenager with spiky hair and a shiny chin, and asked for a Hendrick’s martini with two olives. When her drink came she raised it in my direction. I had one sip left, and said, “Here’s to inoculation against international travel.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

I finished my drink, and ordered another. She introduced herself, a name I instantly forgot. And I gave her mine—just Ted, and not Ted Severson, at least not right then. We sat, in the overly padded and overly lit Heathrow lounge, drinking our drinks, exchanging a few remarks, and confirming that we were both waiting to board the same direct flight to Logan Airport in Boston. She removed a slim paperback novel from her purse and began to read it. It gave me an opportunity to really look at her. She was beautiful—long red hair, eyes a lucid greenish blue like tropical waters, and skin so pale it was the almost bluish white of skim milk. If a woman like that sits down next to you at your neighborhood bar and compliments your drink order, you think your life is about to change. But the rules are different in airport bars, where your fellow drinkers are about to hurtle away from you in opposite directions. And even though this woman was on her way toward Boston, I was still filled with sick rage at the situation with my wife back home. It was all I had been able to think about during my week in England. I’d barely eaten, barely slept.

An announcement came over the loudspeaker in which the two discernible words were *Boston* and *delayed*. I glanced at the board above the rows of backlit top-shelf liquor and watched as our departure time was moved back an hour.

“Time for another,” I said. “My treat.”

“Why not,” she said, and closed her book, placing it faceup on the bar by her purse. *The Two Faces of January*. By Patricia Highsmith.

“How’s your book?”

“Not one of her best.”

“Nothing worse than a bad book and a long flight delay.”

“What are you reading?” she asked.

“The newspaper. I don’t really like books.”

“So what do you do on flights?”

“Drink gin. Plot murders.”

“Interesting.” She smiled at me, the first I’d seen. It was a wide

smile that caused a crease between her upper lip and nose, and that showed perfect teeth, and a sliver of pink gums. I wondered how old she was. When she first sat down I'd thought she was in her midthirties, closer to my age, but her smile, and the spray of faded freckles across the bridge of her nose made her look younger. Twenty-eight maybe. My wife's age.

"And I work, of course, when I fly," I added.

"What do you do?"

I gave her the short story version, how I funded and advised Internet start-up companies. I didn't tell her how I'd made most of my money—by selling those companies off as soon as they looked promising. And I didn't tell her that I never really needed to work again in this lifetime, that I was one of the few dot-commers from the late 1990s that managed to pull up my stakes (and cash out my stocks) right before the bubble burst. I only hid these facts because I didn't feel like talking about them, not because I thought my new companion might find them offensive, or lose interest in talking with me. I had never felt the need to apologize for the money I had made.

"What about you? What do you do?" I asked.

"I work at Winslow College. I'm an archivist."

Winslow was a women's college in a leafy suburb about twenty miles west of Boston. I asked her what an archivist does, and she gave me what I suspect was her own short story version of her work, how she collected and preserved college documents. "And you live in Winslow?" I asked.

"I do."

"Married?"

"I'm not. You?"

Even as she said it, I caught the subtle flick of her eyes as she looked for a ring on my left hand. "Yes, unfortunately," I said. Then I held up my hand for her to see my empty ring finger. "And, no, I don't remove my wedding ring in airport bars in case a woman like you sits down next to me. I've never had a ring. I can't stand the feel of them."

“Why unfortunate?” she asked.

“It’s a long story.”

“It’s a flight delay.”

“You really want to hear about my sordid life?”

“How can I say no to that?”

“If I’m going to tell you I’m going to need another one of these.” I held up my empty glass. “You?”

“No, thank you. Two is my limit.” She slid one of the olives off the toothpick with her teeth and bit down on it. I caught a brief glimpse of the pink tip of her tongue.

“I always say that two martinis are too many, and three is not enough.”

“That’s funny. Didn’t James Thurber also say that?”

“Never heard of him,” I said and smirked, although I felt a little sheepish trying to pass off a famous quote as my own. The bartender was suddenly in front of me and I ordered another drink. The skin around my mouth had taken on that pleasurable numb feeling one gets from gin, and I knew that I was in danger of being too drunk and saying too much, but it was airport rules, after all, and even though my fellow traveler lived only twenty miles from me, I had already forgotten her name, and knew there was very little chance of ever seeing her again in my lifetime. And it felt good to be talking and drinking with a stranger. Just speaking words out loud was causing some of my rage to dissipate.

So I told her the story. I told her how my wife and I had been married for three years, and that we lived in Boston. I told her about the week in September at the Kennebec Inn along the south coast of Maine, and how we’d fallen in love with the area, and bought some ridiculously overpriced shorefront property. I told her how my wife, because she had a master’s degree in something called Arts and Social Action, decided she was qualified to codesign the house with an architecture firm, and had been spending the majority of her recent time in Kennebec, working with a contractor named Brad Daggett.

“And she and Brad . . . ?” she asked after sliding the second olive into her mouth.

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you positive?”

So I gave her more details. I told her how Miranda had been growing bored with our life in Boston. For the first year of our marriage she had thrown herself into decorating our brownstone in the South End. After that, she had gotten a part-time job at a friend’s gallery in the SoWa district, but even then, I knew that things were getting stale. We had begun to run out of conversation midway through dinner, had started going to bed at different times. More importantly, we had lost the identities that had originally defined us in our relationship. In the beginning, I was the rich businessman who introduced her to expensive wine and charity galas, and she was the bohemian artist who booked trips to Thai beaches, and liked to hang out in dive bars. I knew that we were our own kind of strained cliché, but it worked for us. We clicked on every level. I even enjoyed the fact that even though I consider myself handsome, in a generic sort of way, no one was ever going to look at me while I was in her presence. She had long legs and large breasts, a heart-shaped face and full lips. Her hair was a dark brown that she always kept dyed black. It was deliberately styled to look tousled, as though she’d come straight from bed. Her skin was flawless and she didn’t need makeup, although she never left the house without applying black eyeliner. I had watched men fixate on her in bars and restaurants. Maybe I was projecting, but the looks they cast her way were hungry and primal. They made me glad I didn’t live in a time or place where men habitually carried weapons.

Our trip to Kennewick, Maine, had been spontaneous, a reaction to a complaint from Miranda that we hadn’t spent time alone in over a year. We went the third week of September. The first few days were cloudless and warm, but on Wednesday of that week a rainstorm swept down from Canada, trapping us in our suite. We only left to drink Allagash White and eat lobster in the inn’s basement tavern.

After the storm passed the days turned cool and dry, the light grayer, the dusk longer. We bought sweaters and explored the mile-long cliff walk that began just north of the inn and wound its way between the swelling Atlantic and its rocky edge. The air, that had until recently been heavy with humidity and the smell of suntan lotion, was now crisp and briny. We both fell in love with Kennewick, so much so that when we found a piece of rosehip-choked land for sale on a high bluff at the end of the path, I called the number on the FOR SALE sign and made an immediate offer.

One year later, the rosehip bushes had been cleared, a foundation dug, and the exterior of the eight-bedroom house was nearly complete. We'd hired Brad Daggett, a rugged divorcee with thick black hair, a goatee, and a bent-looking nose, as our general contractor. While I spent my weeks in Boston—advising a group of recent MIT grads that had created a new algorithm for a blog-based search engine—Miranda was spending more and more time in Kennewick, taking a room at the inn and surveying the work being done on the house, obsessing over every tile and every fixture.

In early September, I decided to surprise her by driving up. I left a message on her cell phone as I got onto I-95 north of Boston. I arrived in Kennewick a little before noon and looked for her at the inn. They told me she'd been out since morning.

I drove to the house site and parked behind Brad's F-150 on the gravel driveway. Miranda's robin's egg blue Mini Cooper was there as well. I hadn't visited the property for a few weeks and was happy to see that progress had been made. All the windows appeared to be in place, and the bluestone pavers that I had picked for the sunken garden had arrived. I walked around to the back of the house, where every second-floor bedroom had its own balcony, and where a screened-in veranda along the first floor led down to an enormous stone patio. In front of the patio a rectangular hole had been dug for the pool. Walking up the stone steps of the patio I spotted Brad and Miranda through the tall ocean-facing kitchen windows. I was about to rap on

the window to let them know I was there, when something caused me to stop. They were each leaning against the newly installed quartz countertops, both looking out through the window with its view toward Kennewick Cove. Brad was smoking a cigarette and I watched him flick an ash into the coffee cup he held in his other hand.

But it was Miranda that had caused me to stop. There was something about her posture, the way she was leaning against the countertop, angled toward Brad's broad shoulders. She looked completely at ease. I watched her casually lift a hand as Brad slid the lit cigarette between her fingers. She took a long drag, then returned the cigarette to him. Neither had looked at the other during the exchange, and I knew then that not only were they sleeping together, but that they were also probably in love.

Instead of feeling anger, or dismay, my immediate feeling was panic that they would spot me out on the patio, spying on their moment of intimacy. I backtracked toward the main entrance, crossed the veranda, then swung open the glass door and shouted "Hello" into the echoey house.

"In here," Miranda yelled back, and I walked into the kitchen.

They had moved a little bit apart but not by much. Brad was grinding out his cigarette in the coffee cup. "Teddy, what a surprise," Miranda said. She was the only one who called me that, a pet name that had started as a joke, since it did not fit me at all.

"Hey, Ted," Brad said. "What do you think so far?"

Miranda came around the counter and gave me a kiss that landed on the corner of my mouth. She smelled of her expensive shampoo and Marlboros.

"It's looking good. My pavers arrived."

Miranda laughed. "We let him pick one thing and that's all he cares about."

Brad came around the counter as well, and shook my hand. His hand was large and knuckly, his palm warm and dry. "Want the full tour?"

As Brad and Miranda took me around the house, Brad talking about building materials, and Miranda telling me what furniture would go where, I began to have second thoughts about what I had seen. Neither seemed particularly nervous around me. Maybe they had just become close friends, the type that stand shoulder to shoulder and share cigarettes. Miranda could be touchy-feely, linking arms with her girlfriends, and kissing our male friends on the lips hello and good-bye. It occurred to me that there was a chance I was being paranoid.

After the house tour, Miranda and I drove to the Kennewick Inn and had lunch in the Livery Tavern. We each got the blackened haddock sandwiches and I drank two scotch and sodas.

“Has Brad got you smoking again?” I asked, wanting to catch her out in a lie, see how she would react.

“What?” she said, her brow furrowing.

“You smelled a little like smoke. Back at the house.”

“I might have snuck a drag or two. I’m not smoking again, Teddy.”

“I don’t really care. I was just wondering.”

“Can you believe the house is nearly done?” she said as she dipped one of her French fries into my pool of ketchup.

We talked about the house for a while and I began to doubt what I had seen even more. She wasn’t acting guilty.

“You staying for the weekend?” she asked.

“No, I just wanted to come up and say hi. I’ve got dinner tonight with Mark LaFrance.”

“Cancel it and stay here. Weather’s supposed to be beautiful tomorrow.”

“Mark flew in just for this meeting. And I need to prepare some numbers.”

I had originally planned on staying in Maine through the afternoon, hoping that Miranda would agree to a lengthy nap in her hotel room. But after seeing Brad and her canoodling in the very expensive kitchen that I was paying for, I had changed my mind. I had a new

plan. After lunch, I drove Miranda back to the house site so she could get her car. Then, instead of driving directly to I-95, I got onto Route 1 and drove south to Kittery and its quarter-mile stretch of outlet stores. I pulled up to the Kittery Trading Post, an outdoor outfitters that I'd driven past on numerous occasions but had never visited. In the space of about fifteen minutes I spent nearly five hundred dollars on a pair of rainproof camouflage-print pants, a gray raincoat with a hood, some oversize aviator glasses, and a pair of high-end binoculars. I took the gear to a public restroom across from the Crate and Barrel outlet and changed into my new getup. With the hood up and the aviator glasses on I felt unrecognizable. At least from a distance. I drove north again, parking in the public lot near Kennewick Cove, squeezing my Quattro in between two pickup trucks. I knew there was no reason for Miranda or Brad to come down to this particular lot, but there was also no reason for me to make my car easy to spot.

The wind had died down but the sky was a low, monochromatic gray, and a warm misty rain had begun to pepper the air. I walked across the damp sand of the beach, then clambered over the loose rocks and shale that led to the start of the cliff walk. I moved carefully, keeping my eyes on the paved path—slick with rain, and buckled in places by roots—instead of on the dramatic sweep of the Atlantic to my right. Some of the paved portions of the cliff walk had eroded away completely, and a faded sign warned walkers of its danger. Because of this, the path was not particularly well traveled, and I only saw one other person that afternoon—a teenage girl in a Bruins jersey that smelled as though she had just smoked a joint. We passed without saying anything or looking at one another.

Toward the end of the path, I walked along the top of a crumbling cement wall that marked the back property line of a stone cottage, the last house before a quarter mile of undeveloped land that culminated in our lot. The path then dipped down to sea level, crossed a short, rocky beach strewn with chewed-up buoys and seaweed, then continued along a steep rise through some twisted spruce trees. The rain

had picked up, and I took off my wet sunglasses. The chance that either Miranda or Brad would be outside of the house was very slim, and my plan was to stop just short of the open sweep of cleared land, and position myself in a copse of hardy shrubs along the low part of the bluff. If either looked out and saw me with my binoculars they would assume I was a bird-watcher. If I was approached, I could retreat quickly to the path.

When I could see the house looming above the scarred land, it struck me, not for the first time, how the rear side—the side that faced the ocean—was stylistically opposite from the side that faced the road. The front of the house had a stone veneer with a smattering of small windows and a towering set of dark wood doors with exaggerated arches. The rear of the house was beige-painted wood, and all the identical windows with their identical balconies made it look like a medium-size hotel. “I have a lot of friends,” Miranda had said when I asked her why the house needed seven guest bedrooms. Then she’d shot me a look as though I’d asked her why she thought indoor plumbing was necessary.

I found a good spot under a stunted spruce that was bent and twisted like a bonsai tree. I lay down on the damp ground on my front, and fiddled with the binoculars till I started to get the house in focus. I was about fifty yards away and could easily see through windows. I swept along the first floor, not spotting any movement, then worked my way across the second floor. Nothing. I took a break, surveying the house with my naked eye, wishing I had a view of the front driveway. For all I knew, there was nobody at the house at all, even though Daggett’s truck had still been there when I dropped Miranda off.

A few years earlier I’d gone out fishing with a colleague, a fellow dot-com speculator who was the best open water fisherman I’d ever known. He could stare out at the surface of the ocean and know exactly where the fish were. He told me that his trick was to unfocus his eyes, to take in everything in his visual range all at once, and by doing that he could catch flickers of movement, disturbances in the

water. I tried it at the time, and only succeeded in giving myself a dull headache. So after completing another sweep with my binoculars, and seeing nothing, I decided to use this same trick on my own house. I let everything sort of blur in front of my eyes, waiting for any motion to draw attention to itself, and after I'd been staring at the house for less than a minute I caught some movement through the high window of what was to be the living room on the north edge of the house. I lifted my binoculars and focused on the window; Brad and Miranda had just entered. I could see them pretty clearly; the lowering afternoon sun was hitting the window at a good angle, lighting up the interior without causing a glare. I watched Brad walk over to a make-shift table that had been set up by the carpentry crew. He picked up a piece of wood that looked like a section of ceiling molding and held it out for my wife to see. He ran a finger down one of its grooves and she did the same thing. His lips were moving and Miranda was nodding at whatever he was saying.

For one brief moment I felt ridiculous, a paranoid husband dressed up in camouflage and spying on his wife and his contractor, but after Brad put the molding down I watched as Miranda slid into his arms, tilted her head back, and kissed him on the mouth. With one big hand he reached down and pressed her hips against him, and with his other he grabbed a handful of her unkempt hair. I told myself to stop watching but somehow I couldn't. I watched for at least ten minutes, watched as Brad bent my wife over the table, lifted her dark purple skirt, removed a pair of tiny white underpants, and entered her from behind. I watched Miranda position herself strategically along the table, one hand braced on its edge, the other between her own legs, guiding him inside of her. They had clearly done this before.

I slid backward and into a sitting position. When I regained the path I pulled my hood back and threw up my lunch into a dark, wind-ruffled puddle.

"How long ago was this?" asked my fellow traveler after I'd told her the story.

“Just over a week.”

She blinked her eyes, and bit at her lower lip. Her eyelids were pale as tissue paper.

“So what are you going to do about it?” she asked.

It was the question I’d been asking myself all week. “What I really want to do is to kill her.” I smiled with my gin-numbed mouth and attempted a little wink just to give her an opportunity to not believe me, but her face stayed serious. She lifted her reddish eyebrows.

“I think you should,” she said, and I waited for some indication that she was joking, but nothing came. Her stare was unwavering. Staring back, I realized she was so much more beautiful than I had originally thought. It was an ethereal beauty, timeless, as though she were the subject of a Renaissance painting. So different from my wife, who looked like she belonged on the cover of a pulp novel from the 1950s. I was about to finally speak when she cocked her head to listen to the muffled loudspeaker. They’d just announced that they were boarding our flight.