

'A magician, whose every plot is like a magic trick'

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J.P.  
POMARE  
THE  
WRONG  
WOMAN

It was a tragic accident.

Wasn't it?

FROM THE AWARD-WINNING BESTSELLING AUTHOR

## REID NOW

WANNA KNOW MY greatest strength? The fact I possess a forgettable face. It's true, I swear – just look at me. Late thirties, white, suburban American male – I am the human equivalent of a toast-sliced loaf of white bread. A caricaturist would struggle to find a single feature they could exaggerate on this head of mine and, quite frankly, I wouldn't have it any other way. Handsome men stand out, which means they can't do what I do; and men unfortunate enough to be uglier than me also tend to stand out. So here I am. Somewhere in the middle. Mercifully plain. Perfectly forgettable.

My haircut is unremarkable, shortish back and sides, and there's a hint of stubble on my cheeks. I keep fit, but not too muscular. Maybe the one feature that is in any way distinctive is a slightly crooked nose. Courtesy Ricky Olsen, tenth grade. It'll never be straight again.

I'm invisible in a crowd, but there's still no accounting for the power of the human memory when it comes to facial recognition. You can plan out everything but someone with a keen eye and the memory of a supercomputer will still recognise you. It happens the moment I step into the tiny reception area of the motel.

The woman at the desk says, 'You're back.'

It stops me cold.

I could turn and leave, but of course I don't. I look around just to be sure she's definitely speaking to me. There's no one else other than us two and the people on the TV screen. She's perched on a tattered office chair, looking at me with tired but kind eyes.

'I think you got the wrong guy,' I say, trying my smile on her.

'I don't forget a face. You stayed here before. Two, three years ago?' She frowns, focusing to recall the exact year. 'You look a little different this time around. It was raining.'

*Ab.* I did stay somewhere after Mom's funeral two years back, almost to the day. I was drunk, I paid cash, left as the sun was still rising, walking out to the highway where my car was parked. I didn't look back.

Mom never told me how bad her lungs had gotten. I should have visited more; I know that now. We spoke a lot on the phone, her mostly calling me, but it wasn't the same as hugging her and seeing her face in person. If only I'd moved her out near me, but she never would have left Manson, and we couldn't have afforded a retirement home in the city. I can barely afford my one-bedroom walk-up in a neighbourhood the real estate agent optimistically called *up-and-coming*.

There were only a dozen people at Mom's funeral, mostly from the home she was in for the last few years of her life, but there were also some familiar faces. When I saw Kay, I was flooded with memories of sitting out the back of her salon with the stacks of old gossip magazines and hair rollers, waiting for Mom to finish work. Marty, the plumber who used to live next door, turned up to the funeral too, still in his blue overalls, but he'd lost his wife recently. For someone to live for sixty years in one town and have so few people show up to her funeral, that was the saddest part of it all. Mom deserved half the town to be there and maybe once that would have been the case. It was my fault the funeral wasn't

teeming with mourners. Maybe they'd earthed their pain and anger through her.

When I'd approached the pulpit and said a few words about Mom, I searched the mourners for Dennis. What did I expect? Of course he wasn't there. But still I could see him in his old suit pants with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

'Ah, yeah,' I say to the woman in reception. 'Couple years back when my mom passed. You *do* have a good memory. Even I forgot I'd stayed here.'

She just nodded, knowing she was right without me confirming it.

'Anything on the ground floor?' I ask.

'Let me see,' she says, lifting an old ledger onto the counter.

She takes a long time scanning through the pages. I just stand there, casting around for something to say. My eyes settle on the TV again.

'What you watching?'

'I forget what it's called – one of those shows on Netflix,' she says, licking her thumb, turning a page. 'A crime one.'

I smile but don't say anything. She's got Netflix, but not a computer-booking system.

Another page turns. She clears her throat. 'I can give you seven if you want to be on the ground floor. Or fifteen, eighteen and nineteen are free upstairs.'

'You got anything else on ground?'

'No,' she says. 'Something wrong with seven?'

'Superstitious.' It's the truth. Seven's a bad number for me. Dad died when I was seven, and I've avoided it like the plague since.

'You definitely want something down the bottom floor?'

It's easier to make a quick exit on the ground level than one storey up, but I can't tell her this. 'I like the view.'

She gives an emphysemic hack of laughter. 'You like the view of the car park?' she says. 'I won't ask questions.'

‘If there’s nothing else, I’ll take seven.’

I pay cash upfront for a week, pocket the thin receipt that hums out of the register, take the keys and park the Camry out front of my room. Carrying my bag inside, I find an old TV, piled linen on a bed I know will be too soft, a ceiling fan and a small table. They’re all the same, motels like this.

I close the blinds, take a small multi-tool from the inner pocket of my duffel bag and use it to unscrew the vent in the wall between the bathroom and the bedroom. I take a handgun from my bag – a Glock 19, about as close to police issue as you can get – along with a stack of cash, two thousand in total, and push them into the vent. I have a false floor under the mat on the passenger side of the Camry where I could keep the gun and money, but they’ll probably be safer hidden in the room.

I sit up against the headboard with my computer on my lap, sinking into the spongy mattress. Someone who recently stayed in this room must have been smoking a pack a day based on the musty air and the way the pillow expels a weak nicotine odour. I look over at the tiny white card displaying a no-smoking sign and smile. Sometimes, the seedier, the better; people mind their own business in places like this.

I connect to a wi-fi hotspot through my phone. I check my emails and start deciding on a plan of attack for the coming days.

The job came to me via email from someone at Crown Insurance early Friday morning. I work mostly for insurance companies, but sometimes for individuals, sometimes for real-estate firms or banks. Sarah Jennings is the name of my contact at Crown. I’ve never dealt with the company before, but they’re big and reputable. It seemed like a simple job and they were offering good money, then I saw the location and my initial interest evaporated. The fee wasn’t enough to get me back to the twin towns. I sent a response

declining the offer and passed on a few contacts who might have been able to help.

Must have been that no one else wanted to investigate a woman in a coma because soon enough another email landed in my inbox. The offer had gone up, the language was more urgent. They needed someone out there within days.

Sarah followed up with a phone call, offering to pay for half the job upfront. The other half would come when I'd finished the job, and there would be more work in the future, not in Manson or Ethelton but other places. That was the kicker. Five grand, plus expenses, for a week's work. Ten grand if I could find any reason to cancel the claim.

Which is why I'm here. I need the money. In return, Sarah wants daily updates about anything I find. That's not uncommon, especially with something time sensitive. If the job were in the city, it would have been perfect, but out here, in these towns – that's the part that makes me want to reach for a drink. This place is cursed for me.

Here's the bones of the case: it happened four days ago; single-vehicle car crash; one fatality – the passenger; one hospitalised – the driver, who was put into in a coma while she underwent surgery. Crown provided me with what information they had, which wasn't much: the police report, address and occupations of the driver and passenger, that sort of thing. The deceased, Oliver Stiles, was an academic, squeaky clean at a glance. And the driver, Eshana Stiles, his wife, doesn't have anything against her name either. She works for a recruitment company that specialises in tech start-ups. She's thirty-one, no children. No reason, by the looks of it, to deliberately crash her car.

Simple, right? Sometimes insurance jobs are just about ticking boxes. It gets more delicate when someone is hurt though. I'm a mercenary in that sense; coming in to do the dirty work the

insurance assessors don't want to do themselves. The assessor can't have interviewed the driver given she's been unconscious since the crash. The hospital would have seen she was insured and her next of kin must have started the claims process.

The police have deemed it an accidental collision due to loss of control of the vehicle likely caused by a lapse in concentration or falling asleep at the wheel. They committed less than half a day to the investigation before releasing a media statement confirming the cause.

They've got bigger fish to fry apparently – I caught the tail end of a report on the radio while I was driving out here. A young woman has been missing the past few days, since the afternoon of the crash. It's the second disappearance in less than a year, with another young woman going missing from her home in August.

Call me a pessimist, but when girls go missing it seldom ends well. And in a quiet place like the twin towns, when big things happen on the same day, I can't help but link them in my mind. That's just how my brain works. In reality, people disappear all the time. More so these days with the opioid crisis. Hell, some people around here would say I disappeared.

This is the sort of rockstar case small-town cops dream of, except the Manson PD doesn't have a rockstar cop. In my time there, I was surrounded by bare-minimum officers, not the above-and-beyond types you see on TV.

I keep searching for information on my case. The insurance payout must be sizeable for Crown to bring me in as a priority; or perhaps they're acting pre-emptively, knowing the bills are coming. But unless I find a smoking gun – emails discussing their plans; witnesses prepared to sign affidavits declaring some sort of conspiracy to write their car off – I can't see how Crown's going to be able to deny paying out on the policy. And if Eshana Stiles

dies in hospital, then some other beneficiary will pocket two life-insurance payouts.

I haven't got a lot of personal detail on the couple yet. Oliver Stiles, the deceased, is Gen X, so I assumed his diet of social media would be Facebook, Instagram, Twitter but I'm surprised to find only a LinkedIn profile. He's smiling in his profile picture, which is odd for a serious academic. I suppose he's pretty good-looking. He has a military daddy look with a roguish face, but he's not really my type.

Eshana's online presence is a bit more substantial. The age gap between Oliver and Eshana is interesting. Ten years. And they moved to Ethelton four years ago. To live somewhere quieter? Maybe. Or was it a career move? He may have earned tenure at Sandown College, north of Manson. Whatever the case, it's another unknown I'll investigate.

I keep going, searching for any hint of their lives, anything that might open this investigation up. There is one thing I notice about Eshana's Facebook page that sends a crackle of suspicion through my chest: she hadn't posted for over a year until a few days before the crash.

*Looking for a trip somewhere warm and sunny. Maybe Mexico? Any suggestions?*

There are only three comments. She doesn't have a great many friends on here and most of her activity is from years ago: updates from an artists' collective; a shared post calling for an end to oil extraction from tar sands.

A comment from someone called Larissa jumps out at me.

*Cabo, it's great. You will both love it.*

Eshana's response is what interests me most.

*Both?*

*Haha maybe you can leave Oliver behind and I'll come with you. We could make it a ladies trip?*

Trouble in the marriage? Or simply the sort of joke anyone might make about their spouse?

I check her friend Larissa's profile – blonde, ski-slope nose, late thirties. I don't recognise her, maybe she's not a twin towns native. I'll have to speak to her at some stage too. If she's a close friend of Eshana's, she might have insight into her mental state in the lead-up to the crash.

Next, I look at the couple's credit scores. They own their house and don't have kids, yet Oliver's credit score is a little lower than I was expecting. Nothing alarming though: 672. And Eshana's is 698.

I search the sale history of their property. No sale price on the real-estate site, but it was listed for two-million dollars in 2018 when they bought it. Not short of a dollar then.

Google Maps tells me the house is sixteen miles northwest of here, out in the Ethelton hills. Big blocks, with tall fences and taller gates. Removed from the usual blights of the twin towns.

I could drive by tomorrow, check the place out. Eshana is in a coma in the hospital, but someone might be minding the house.

I said I'm good at what I do because I'm completely average in appearance, but it's not just that. I have an insatiable appetite to understand. I don't stop until I get to the truth. Even if it's simple, even if it doesn't earn me any more money, I keep at it until I scratch that itch.

## THE WRONG WOMAN

I open a new document, start making notes. First, I type out the facts of the case from the police report and any news articles I can find, adding NQR – not quite right – when something is suspicious.

- Car crash between 10.50 and 11.10 pm
- Couple left restaurant, The Pearl, at 10.30 pm
- Brakes were not engaged until car already veering from road (driver fell asleep?) – *NQR*
- Driver on SSRI medication – *interaction with alcohol may be contributing factor?*
- Speed was a factor – but police report suggests car was not travelling above speed limit of forty miles per hour
- Passenger not wearing seatbelt – propelled through windshield, died on impact
- Car totalled – value \$32,000
- Car serviced week of crash – *NQR*
- Next of kin, unconfirmed
- Beneficiary unconfirmed – enquiry sent to Crown, no response yet

Here's the first thing that really piques my interest: the route between the home address and the address for The Pearl, the restaurant they ate at, is just a twenty-minute drive according to Google Maps. Why is that important? The crash happened in the middle of the drive, just ten minutes from the restaurant, which means it should have happened before 10.50 pm. So they stopped on the way home? Maybe. Or they drove very slowly in the rain.

Police reports aren't always accurate either. They rely on witnesses recalling what time they arrived at the scene.

I add a note beside ‘Car crash between 10.50 and 11.10 pm’: ‘– without stopping on the way, the crash should have been around 10.40 pm’. It’s not necessarily a red flag, but enough to warrant further investigation.

I go to a local news site to see how it was reported in the paper. The reporter covering it has done a reasonably thorough job, but she’s not uncovered anything new. And no press outside of the area gave the crash any attention at all.

Police have ruled the collision accidental, with Deputy Chief Cosby releasing the following statement: ‘Obviously when members of our community pass away in these circumstances, we want to understand why it happened to prevent it happening again. Tragically, this was a driver error; a mistake any of us could make.’

Cosby made deputy chief? I taste something sour at the back of my throat. I guess the opposite of *no good deed goes unpunished* is equally true.

Most of the other local news articles are about the missing girl. I feel almost dizzy when I see her full name: Maddison Stubbs. The missing girl is Chief Stubbs’s daughter.

I remember her from a barbecue at the chief’s home years ago. A tiny blonde thing with a gap between her teeth. She was sad because the family cat had just died and no one could coax a smile out of her. She and I played snap, the sort of game you usually regret starting when you want to go drink beer and mingle with your colleagues. But the last thing I wanted to do was upset the daughter of the chief of police, and soon enough she’d forgotten about the recently departed family pet. *One more*, she’d say after each round, and every time I’d let her win again.

## THE WRONG WOMAN

No wonder it's Cosby and not Stubbs running point on the crash. The bigger crime is against the chief's family, his only kid.

'That's where all the resources are,' I tell the room. 'They're all distracted.'

A knock at the door.

My eyes instinctively go to the frosted window above the toilet, which leads out to a narrow pathway along the rear fence of the property. I can get out if I need to.

There's another knock.

I stand and silently move towards the door, thinking about the handgun in the vent.