

RUNS

DEEP

R.D. Brady



Scottish Seoul Publishing, LLC

PROLOGUE

TEN YEARS AGO

UPSTATE NEW YORK

SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD STEVE KANE'S breath came out in quick pants. His palms were sweaty and the white dress shirt his grandmother had bought him was sticking to his back underneath his brother's navy blazer. He snuck a glance at the jurors from the corner of his eye. He'd heard that if jurors looked at the defendant when the verdict came in it meant they had voted not guilty.

Not a single juror looked at him.

Steve's heart pounded, and he gripped his damp hands together. His attorney, Mr. Hadley, reached over with a liver-spotted hand and clasped his. Steve held on to it for dear life, as if somehow Mr. Hadley could save him from what was coming.

Mr. Herbert, the jury foreman, stood. Steve had known Mr. Herbert since he was a kid. He remembered him coming to his third-grade class and telling them all about being a high school football coach. The talk had been dry, but the cookies he'd brought had been awesome. And Mr. Herbert had been on the sidelines of every football game Steve had ever attended. But he'd never seen him in a suit. And he'd

R.D. BRADY

never seen him nervous. Right now, the slip of paper in Mr. Herbert's trembling hands shook.

The judge peered over her glasses at the jury. "Has the jury reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor." There was a wobble in Mr. Herbert's voice, and he cleared his throat. "Not guilty of murder in the first degree."

An angry shout went up from the gallery, followed by a rumble of voices. Steve stared straight ahead, and spots began to appear around the edges of his vision. *This can't be happening. It's not real.*

The judge banged her gavel, glaring at the crowd over her glasses. "There will be quiet or I will clear the courtroom." She turned back to the jury. "On the charge of murder in the second degree, how say you?"

The paper in Mr. Herbert's hand shook even more now. He cleared his throat again. "Guilty, Your Honor."

All the air left Steve's lungs. He felt as if the strings that had been holding him up had been snipped. He stumbled. Mr. Hadley's surprisingly strong arm wrapped around him, keeping him upright.

Stars appeared in front of Steve's eyes. He sat, stunned, unable to process any of it. Behind him, the courtroom gallery exploded with gasps and shouts. People Steve had known his whole life screamed at him. Everyone seemed to have leapt to their feet. Some reporters scribbled furiously, while others rushed from the room to be the first to get the news out; the judge had declared all phones off limits in the courtroom.

The jury had gone for the lesser count of second-degree murder, not premeditated murder, which could have carried the death penalty. Steve supposed he should be grateful for that small break, but somehow he couldn't work past the shock to get to grateful.

His lawyer whispered into his ear. "Steve, they're going to take you now."

Steve stared up into Mr. Hadley's face. He didn't know if his lawyer had believed him, but Mr. Hadley had certainly fought for him, and he couldn't mistake the concern in the older man's eyes now.

"Steve, how do you feel?" "Steve—are you worried about prison?" Reporters yelled their questions at him from the front row, trying to get

RUNS DEEP

one last quote before he was whisked away from the courtroom and out of their reach.

Flashbulbs exploded in front of him and he blinked. Apparently, once the trial was concluded, the reporters weren't worried about the wrath of the judge—not when weighed against getting one final shot of the baby-faced killer. Steve stood at only five foot six, with deep brown eyes and light brown hair. He was so skinny he'd been called "scarecrow" by some kids at school. He was not the typical murder defendant.

Bailiffs surged toward the front row, trying to block the reporters. More uniforms streamed in the doors as people rushed toward the courtroom gate. Steve flinched, stumbling back, covering his eyes. But then he forced himself to step forward, straining to see past the chaos in front of him.

His eyes latched on to his grandmother in the second row. Her yellow church suit stood out in the sea of dark colors. She collapsed against Steve's brother, sobs wracking her frame. Steve choked back his own tears, willing her to look at him. He needed to see her face one last time. But she was too overcome.

His brother, though, caught his gaze. Jack gave Steve a nod as he held their grandmother—a promise to take care of her.

Two officers pulled Steve away from the table. Their faces were blank masks: no compassion, no uncertainty. They turned him around, pulling his arms behind his back.

Fear tore through Steve. *I didn't do this. This can't be happening.* He started to shake. He looked around wildly. His eyes locked on the dark-haired twenty-nine-year-old man pushing through the crowds to get to the front of the courtroom.

"Let me through. Let me through, damn it," Declan Reed yelled at the reporters as he shoved past them.

Declan flashed his state badge and pushed through the swinging doors. "Give me a minute," he said to the correction officers.

"Sir, we have to—"

"*Give me a minute,*" Declan ordered through gritted teeth.

"You've got one minute. That's it." The officers stepped back.

Declan dropped to his knees in front of Steve. "Steve, you have to

R.D. BRADY

remember what I told you. You stay tough inside. You don't let them see that you're scared."

Tears choked Steve's throat. "I didn't do it, Declan. I didn't do it."

"I know. But that doesn't matter now. Now you have to protect yourself. You shut all that away. You hear me?"

Steve looked out into the gallery, where Mr. Granger, the man who had taken him and his best friend Julie for ice cream cones once a month since he was five, glared back at him.

Declan grabbed Steve's arms. "Steve."

Declan's eyes were bright with unshed tears. Steve could feel Declan's fear for him. But there was nothing Declan could do. There was nothing anyone could do. It was up to Steve now.

Steve nodded jerkily, pulling back his emotions. "I know."

Declan pulled him into a hug. "Rely on yourself. Stay strong. And remember, there are people out here who care about you—who love you."

One of the officers stepped forward. "We have to take him now."

Declan gave a nod and stepped away. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be there, okay?"

Steve just stared at him and swallowed hard, swallowing it all down.

The officers placed the cuffs on Steve and led him through the back door of the court. They made their way down a short hall, and then one of the officers pushed open the door to the outside.

Immediately, noise assaulted Steve's ears. Even here, the crowds had gathered. They lined the sides of the makeshift pathway blocked off by wooden sawhorses and police officers.

As they passed through the pressing crowd toward the waiting police van, one spectator tried to break through. Officers pushed the man back, but it was like a starting pistol had gone off. The crowd surged.

"Get him out of here!" one of the officers yelled. Steve was shoved forward. His knee slammed into the frame of the open van door as he was all but thrown into the white corrections van.

An officer followed him in. Steve sat on the one chair that sat in the middle of the cavernous space. Chains were connected to its legs and

RUNS DEEP

along its arms. It looked like something you would put a serial killer in.

Steve sat down, his legs weak. *Or just a regular killer.*

As Steve's hands and feet were attached to the chains, panic rolled through him. He couldn't move. He took quick breaths, trying to calm his pounding heart. He watched the officer strapping him in. The officer gave the chains a tug. He was young, maybe a little younger than Declan. He didn't meet Steve's eyes. He offered no reassuring words or even sympathetic gazes. *Not for the killer of Simone Ganger.*

Flashes went off outside the van as reporters clamored to get the money shot of Steve in chains.

One last tug on the chains and the officer stepped out, closing the van doors behind him before climbing into the passenger seat.

Steve told himself to look straight ahead. But he couldn't help turning to look out the window as the driver took them past the front of the courthouse. The crowds that had gathered for the trial had only grown more agitated with the verdict. They yelled angrily at the cops that held them back. Some wave placards above their heads.

Death to the Murderer.

Justice for Simone.

God will Punish His Sins.

Declan's words floated through Steve's mind. *And remember, there are people out here who care about you. Who love you.*

Steve looked out the window, recognizing at least half of the people angrily yelling. *Yeah, but there are a lot more who hate me.*

DAY 1

"It's Monday, folks! This is Billy the Kid on KLNQ serving upstate New York. Today is going to be the last good day for a while, so get out there and enjoy it. For those of you who haven't heard, and that can only be those literally living under a rock, we have one heck of a storm heading our way. It's going to hit in the next two days, and flooding is not just predicted, it's a given. So if you haven't stocked up yet, now is the time!"

CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

AUBURN, NEW YORK

STEVE KANE WALKED down the hall, his gray Converse sneakers making no noise on the institutional tile. He watched the pale yellow concrete walls as he passed, knowing it would be the last time he would see them. He was never coming back.

“You got a ride?” Heath, the guard walking next to him, asked.

Steve shook his head. “Nah. Figured I’d take the bus. Didn’t want anyone going to any trouble.”

Heath nodded his big round head. Some of the inmates called him pumpkin head, although never to his face. None of them were that stupid.

The barred door at the end of the hall buzzed as they reached it. A tightness started in Steve’s chest.

Heath pulled the door open. “Just keep your nose clean. You’ve done real good here. Don’t come back.”

Steve stepped through, the tightening in his chest increasing, along with a little panic. “Don’t plan to.” He took a step, then turned to look back at Heath.

R.D. BRADY

When he'd arrived at Auburn Penitentiary, Heath had scared the hell out of him. Standing at six foot four, Heath had been six inches taller than Steve and had easily outweighed him by a good seventy-five pounds of muscle. Steve had been all bone. But now, the height gap was only two inches, and the muscle gap only about ten.

Heath held out his hand. "Take care, kid."

Steve almost smiled at the nickname. After being transferred from a secure juvenile detention facility in Albany due to overcrowding seven years ago, he'd been a kid in every way when he'd arrived. Heath had looked out for him, helped show him the ropes. Even warned him not to let other inmates see him speaking with him too often. Being friends with a guard could have negative consequences.

Steve shook his hand. "You too, Heath. And thanks. For everything."

Steve turned and walked quickly down the hall, surprised at the emotion he felt. It was foreign. He thought he'd shut all that down ten years ago.

But by the time he pushed his way through the heavy doors outside, he was back in control. He walked along the path beside the chain-link fence, focused on the gate at the end. When he pushed through, he stood still, hands shoved in his jeans, breathing deep, his eyes closed, his heart pounding.

Free.

He opened his eyes and looked both ways. Most prisons were located on the outskirts of town, but Auburn penitentiary was situated right in the middle of the city. He was pretty sure there was a bus stop down the street to the left. And even if there wasn't a bus, he had no problem just walking for a while until he found one.

He flipped a mental coin and was about to head to the left when a whistle drew his attention to the right.

Stepping out of a blue Toyota Prius was a man with wavy dark hair and the build of a cycling enthusiast. Nothing about the man, from his appearance to his car, suggested he was law enforcement, but that's exactly what he was—Investigator Declan Reed, New York State Police.

Declan waved, a smile on his face.

RUNS DEEP

Steve shook his head. He should have known. He walked over. “Hey, Declan.”

His blue eyes crinkling at the corners, Declan gave him a knowing look. “Thought you’d just sneak out, huh?”

“Was hoping.”

“Hop in, I’ll give you a lift.”

Steve took a step back. “Thanks, but I don’t think arriving with a cop is how I want to go. Bad enough I left with one.”

Declan gave a little laugh. “All right, but I’m buying you breakfast. Then I’ll drop you at the bus station.”

Steve’s stomach gave a growl. For the last week, he’d been planning his first meal. And the idea of it had kept him awake at nights. He didn’t care that it was still morning. New York couldn’t have changed that much. There must be a diner around here somewhere serving burgers. “Cheeseburger? Fries?”

“You got it.”

Steve smiled. “Well, all right then.” He walked around and climbed into the passenger seat, pushing aside some of Declan’s papers and wrappers. He raised an eyebrow. “Junk food? You?”

Declan shrugged. “Been a little crazy at work lately. Hasn’t been much time to eat right.”

Steve knew from Declan’s weekly visits and emails that his promotion to state police liaison with the local police, along with his regular investigator duties, was running him ragged. But the promotion had also allowed Declan to move back to Millners Kill.

Steve pulled on his seatbelt and stared at the dashboard. It looked like something out of a spaceship. I mean, he’d seen cars on TV, but the last car he’d been in, besides the corrections vans, had been an old Lincoln with dials and knobs.

Steve felt the panic rise in his chest again. Everything was different out here. The world had moved on while Steve was still stuck in yesterday.

“You all right?” Declan asked.

Steve nodded. “Yup. Just a—just a little culture shock, I guess.”

“It’ll take a little time to adjust. But you will.” Declan put the car in gear and pulled out.

R.D. BRADY

Steve didn't comment. He just glanced behind him. The sun glinted off the barbed wire at the top of the fifteen-foot fence ringing the prison. The place looked ominous.

Built in 1816, Auburn Correctional Facility was one of the oldest in the United States. A maximum-security prison, Auburn was rimmed by multiple barbed wire barriers and armed guard posts. It was a cement monster that towered over the landscape, alone and desolate. *And my home for the last seven years.*

Steve turned around and faced forward. *But not anymore.*

Declan pulled into traffic. A Hyundai cut in front of them, its oblivious driver chatting on a cell phone. Steve gripped the side of the car.

Declan glanced over at him. "Welcome back to the real world."

Steve settled back into the passenger seat, prying his fingers from the car door. After a few minutes, some of the tension that had filled him had drained out, and he found himself enjoying the ride. He recognized a couple of chain restaurants and store names. Cars drove by them and no one glanced over or gave them a second look.

It's all so ordinary, Steve thought with surprise. It had been so horrible when they'd locked him up. Screaming protesters at the court, then yet more crowds when he'd arrived at the juvenile detention center.

Yet now, when he got out, no one was here to protest his release. He'd been sent away for a decade, and it looked like the world had forgotten about him.

He didn't know what he had expected. *Maybe everyone on the street to stop and stare at the ex-con as he left the prison?*

Feeling eyes on him, he turned. Two teenage girls were driving a bright red sports car next to him. The blonde behind the wheel nudged her friend, who glanced over at him. The friend leaned over and blew him a kiss before turning at the next corner.

Steve smiled. Maybe this was going to work out after all.

CHAPTER 2

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, Declan pulled the car into the bus depot. Steve could see the bus for Millners Kill already heading down the road toward them.

Declan got out of the car and pulled a navy blue backpack from the back seat. “You sure you don’t want me to drive you? I’m heading there anyway.”

“Nah. I’m kind of in the mood to take the bus.” Steve looked away, not meeting Declan’s eyes. He didn’t want Declan to see his fear.

When he’d left Millners Kill, he’d been its most notorious resident. He wasn’t sure what kind of welcome he was going to get now, but he wouldn’t be surprised if it involved pitchforks. He didn’t want Declan in the middle of that.

Declan handed him the pack. “Here, take this.”

Steve took the bag, jiggling it. “What’s in here?”

Declan shrugged. “Some changes of clothes, a few books, a cell phone. My cell number, your brother’s, and your grandmother’s are already programmed in, and I downloaded a couple good songs onto it. Just your basic get-started bag.”

Steve looked at the bag, touched by Declan’s thoughtfulness. He still couldn’t believe Declan had stayed in touch with him the entire

time he'd been locked up. And he knew that part of the reason Heath had looked out for him was because of Declan.

Declan had been on his side ever since this whole madness had begun. He'd visited every week, helped look out for his grandmother when he was back in town, and basically made sure Steve stayed connected to the world.

A few weeks after going in, Steve had begun to resent Declan. He'd thought there must have been something Declan could have done to keep him from being convicted. After all, Declan was a state police, and both of them knew Steve hadn't committed the crime. They just hadn't been able to prove it.

He shook his head. He'd been a stupid, sixteen-year-old kid.

Over time though, Steve had come to realize that Declan had actually gone out on a limb for him. As a state policeman, he'd muscled his way into the case and tried to get more lines of investigation opened. Declan had put it all on the line to try and help him. Steve appreciated how much Declan had risked to try and prove his innocence. And now that Steve was older, he knew that just because you were right didn't mean the world was going to treat you fairly.

"Thanks, Declan." Steve held up the pack. "I appreciate this. And everything else."

Declan extended his hand. "I'm really glad you're going home." His voice softened. "You have a chance here, Steve. Take advantage of it."

Some of Steve's old anger boiled up. "Is that what I have—a chance? Because if I recall correctly, the whole town was pretty happy to see me go. Not sure they're going to be so happy to see me back."

Declan looked like he was about to disagree with him, but then changed his mind. "You're right. It's not going to be easy. But it is a chance, nonetheless. You've got your brother, your grandmother, me. We're all in your corner. We'll help you get through."

Steve saw people lining up for the bus. He studied each face. He didn't recognize any of them.

And he realized, with a start, that perhaps no one would even recognize him. Until he went away, he'd spent his whole life in Millers Kill. But now he'd changed so much.

The thought was both freeing and incredibly sad. What did it say about a person that the only people who really knew what he looked like these days were the involuntary guests of the state of New York?

Steve met Declan's eyes and saw the faith he had in him—as well as the fear. And he swallowed his sadness, hiding it the way Declan was hiding his concerns. "I know," he said. "And I'll make it work. Somehow."

Some of the tension left Declan's face. He blew out a breath. "That's good. I'll be in town later. I'll stop by."

"Um, I'm supposed to start my job tomorrow."

"At Mel's?"

Steve swallowed. "Yeah."

He'd worked at Mel's Diner before he'd been incarcerated. Every parolee needed to have a job as one of the conditions of their parole. Steve had been surprised when his brother told him Mel had offered him a position. Surprised and grateful.

"What are you coming to town for?" Steve asked.

Declan pointed at the gray sky above. "There's a storm moving in. It's supposed to be pretty ferocious. And as state liaison, it's my job to help with some of the prep." Declan looked over at him. "You know, there might be some things you could do to help."

"Yeah, well, we'll see." The bus pulled up to the curb. As Steve started to head toward it, Declan's words resonated. He turned back. "How bad a storm is it supposed to be?"

"Pretty bad. They're worried about the bridge. It's not holding up well. And it got really battered last summer with all that flooding. If there's another bad flood, the whole thing could go."

Steve knew that would be disastrous. The bridge was the only thing connecting the town to the mainland. With the bridge, they could pretend Millners Kill was a peninsula, surrounded by water. But the truth was, Millners Kill was a small island in Lake Ontario between Rochester and Oswego, connected to the mainland only by that manmade structure of steel girders. If the bridge went, they'd be in serious trouble.

"Any chance they might evacuate?" Steve asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

R.D. BRADY

Steve pictured all the citizens of Millners Creek crammed into some school gym on the mainland—and Steve standing in the middle of them.

His stomach plummeted. Just what he needed. He wanted to slip back into town quietly and get himself set up before anyone really knew he was back.

Better yet, he wanted no one to even know he had been there until after he had already left. Because that was his real plan: to get a job somewhere away from Millners Kill. Somewhere he could *really* start over.

But if the storm was as bad as Declan was suggesting, he might be crammed into a small space with the whole town staring daggers at him—if he was lucky. If he wasn’t, they’d be *throwing* the daggers. *Great.*

He didn’t share any of his concerns with Declan, though. There was nothing he could do about it anyway. “See you.”

And for the first time, Steve was glad he was going back to Millners Kill. He didn’t want his grandmother facing the storm of the century alone.

Of course, she wouldn’t be completely alone. His brother Jack would be there to help her out. Just like he had been ever since Steve had been incarcerated. But now it was Steve’s turn to shoulder some of the responsibilities.

He hiked the backpack onto his shoulder. He had no doubt Declan had also tucked some money into it somewhere. He promised himself that he would pay back every dime.

Steve got in line for the bus behind an older couple. The sign in the window read Millners Kill.

And even though fears and doubts crowded his mind, a little kernel of joy was also building. *I’m going home. I’m really going home.*

CHAPTER 3

STEVE STEPPED off the bus in front of Millners Kill City Hall. Millners Kill—population five thousand, although that ballooned to close to twenty thousand during the summer season. A sleepy little town in upstate New York where nothing ever happened.

Except for me, Steve thought as he stepped past a couple who embraced as soon as the woman got off the bus. Steve averted his eyes, but he recognized the woman—Mildred Pierce, the town librarian. Before prison, Steve had visited the library every week since he was eleven. In the summers, he and Julie had gone there two or three times a week. Mrs. Pierce had been a constant in his childhood. Not overly friendly, not mean, just someone who was always around. Steve turned his head and walked away quickly. He wasn't sure how Mrs. Pierce would react to him now.

He pulled up the hood of his gray sweatshirt, not knowing if it made him more conspicuous or less. With his height, he tended to stand out in a crowd. In prison, he'd used that height to his advantage, but now he found himself hunching his shoulders to make himself shorter, trying to blend in, or, better yet, not be noticed at all.

He kept his eyes low, not making eye contact, but watching everyone out of the corner of his eye. But no one seemed interested in him.

R.D. BRADY

Hefting his backpack higher onto his shoulder, he skirted around the crowd that was waiting to get on the bus. It had turned a little colder. The fall air cut through his jeans and sweatshirt.

A woman dropped her pocketbook right in front of him. Its contents spilled across the sidewalk. Steve didn't stop. He didn't even pause.

As he passed, though, he realized that he should have helped. He shook his head. *Crap.* Life on the outside was different. Helping didn't make you look weak—didn't make you a target. He sighed. Apparently, it would take a little longer than a few hours for him to shake off ten years of institutional life.

Steve crossed the street. He noticed the large puddle too late, his attention focused on the people around him. His gray Conversees and the legs of his pants were soaked. *Damn it*, he cursed, but he kept his expression unchanged.

As he passed McCann's Drugstore, he stared at the ground, praying no one he knew walked by. He wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

The wind tugged at his hood, trying to shove it down. Steve tucked in his chin. The wind had picked up a lot since he'd left Declan.

He made his way down four blocks, noting that the town had changed little. There were still only about two dozen shops strung along Main Street. True, the old card store had been replaced by a trendy little coffee shop, and the Blockbuster was now a Payless, but other than that all the old stores remained. The hardware store was up on the right, the supermarket on the left.

The bus had passed Mel's Diner on the way in. The thought of Mel made Steve smile. Steve had bussed tables for him for three summers, and Mel had taught him how to play poker, how to box, how to drive—all activities he had been banned from mentioning to his grandmother.

The smile faded as he realized that Mel would not be happy to see him now. He wasn't sure why Mel had agreed to hire him.

Feeling colder, he picked up his pace as he turned onto his grandmother's street. He could see her picket fence ten houses down, and his heart tripped a little.

RUNS DEEP

A handful of kids were playing soccer in the street. A soccer ball came soaring toward Steve, and he quickly trapped it with his feet.

A kid, no more than six, bundled in a red fleece jacket and hat, ran down the sidewalk. The kid came to a halt when he caught sight of Steve with the ball. "Pass it back."

Steve shifted the ball from his left foot to his right, then kicked it back using the inside of his foot. The kid stopped it with both feet, although Steve could tell it was pure luck and not talent that had allowed him to do so.

"Thanks!" The kid smiled and waved. Grabbing the ball, he turned and rejoined the other kids, all older and bigger.

Steve continued past them, but he watched them out of the corner of his eye. One kid, who looked too much like the red fleece boy not to be his brother, yelled, "Hurry up, slowpoke."

The other kids laughed. The red fleece kid passed the ball back. Then he went and sat on the stoop. Steve shook his head—the dynamics of brotherhood, consistent throughout time.

The red fleece boy waved at him again, but the others paid Steve no notice, too interested in their game. Without thinking, Steve gave a little wave back. The boy beamed at him.

Steve turned away, but the boy's smile stayed with him. There was a lot of joy in that little face.

Four houses down from the boys' soccer game, Steve stopped. He stood at the white picket fence and looked at the yellow two-story house with the big white porch. It looked like it had gotten a recent paint job, but otherwise it hadn't changed.

He'd lived the first decade of his life one block over. When Steve was only ten, though, his father had gone missing, and Steve had moved into his grandmother's house—this house—along with his brother and mom. Only a few years after that, his mom had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She'd fought it, but she eventually lost the battle. That was only a year before Steve's arrest.

Steve knew his brother had made sure their grandmother had whatever help she needed to maintain the house. Guilt nagged at Steve. He should have been here to help her as well, instead of locked away.

Jack was now a county district attorney. His job took him all over the county, but he kept an apartment in town to be close to their grandmother. And if Steve was considered the town demon, Jack was the town angel. He was always donating his time to help out, and donating his money, too, when needed.

Steve should probably have felt jealousy toward his brother, but Jack had been just as good to him, too. He'd written him every week, visited at least once every two weeks. He'd kept Steve going. Honestly, compared to a lot of other inmates, Steve had had a full-fledged support team behind him. And he was grateful.

Steve breathed in deep. He called up a few of the words dispensed in his required therapy sessions—some of the only words that had actually resonated with him: *You can't do anything about yesterday, but today is all up to you.*

He pushed open the gate and walked up the porch steps. He hesitated at the door. Should he just walk in, or ring the doorbell? He couldn't in all his life ever remember ringing the doorbell. But like a lot of things, times had changed.

He rang the bell.

He heard the shuffling steps of his grandmother, and his heart picked up its pace. "Coming," a voice called.

The locks turned, and the door pulled wide. A woman stood framed by the doorway. She had light brown hair that had only started to gray, and brown eyes just like Steve's. Those eyes registered confusion for just a moment before a smile burst across her face.

"You're early!" Bess Davidson threw open her arms and dragged him into a hug. Steve's arms wrapped around her. She smelled like cinnamon.

Memories, good ones, from his childhood assaulted him. The tightness in his chest eased, and his grip on his grandmother increased.

I'm home. I'm really home.

CHAPTER 4

HE WALKED DOWN THE STREET, watching the preparations for the storm. Most of the stores had plastic or wood covering their windows. The coffee bar owner pulled in the placard that displayed the daily quote. Today's read: "Never put off for tomorrow what you can do today."

He smiled. *Excellent advice.*

People hurried past, a sense of excitement in the air. Everyone was getting ready for the latest storm of the century.

Turning into the park, he nodded as he passed a family he knew from church, and walked over to where Lake Ontario rushed by. Normally the lake was calm, but the storm had worked it up.

He'd always loved the water, but never more so than when it stormed. The wind tugged at his coat, trying to wrestle it off of him.

He breathed in the power in the air. It felt like the whole world was on the edge of violence.

And how true that is, he thought with a smile.

Whitecaps crashed angrily against the rocks along the shore, sending a spray into the air. Even the water had a palpable anger and power to it right now.

Anticipation built inside him, and he clenched his fists, trying to hold in the laugh.

R.D. BRADY

Steve was out.

And a storm was coming.

He couldn't have planned it better. Rubbing his hands, his smile grew wider as he imagined the days to come. *Time to play.*

CHAPTER 5

DECLAN PULLED into the parking lot of the Millners Kill Police Department. The squat, brown brick building stood at the end of Main Street; a flight of cement stairs and a winding handicap ramp dominated the front, along with a flagpole. The town employed four full-time officers and five part-time, along with another half a dozen volunteers.

Declan had debated stopping by Bess's house just to see if Steve had arrived all right, but he knew Steve wouldn't have appreciated it. It was hard, though. Even though Steve was a man now, Declan still thought of him as the little boy who'd lived a few houses down from him. Or the terrified boy who had been led away from the courtroom.

But Steve was grown up now. And Declan had seen the hardness in him that prison had created. But he'd also seen signs of that young boy he'd known. Prison hadn't been able to stamp that boy out completely.

With a sigh, Declan pulled the key from the ignition and watched the flag ripple in the wind. He took a minute to try and figure out what he was going to say. He was the liaison with the state police, so he could probably make it seem like he was here about storm business. But the chief would see through that flimsy reason in a second.

Of course, he thought, watching a deputy walk up the steps and

disappear through the double doors, the chief wasn't exactly a Mensa candidate. Chief Keith Hodgkins was the same guy he'd been in high school—a bruiser. He'd made all state for football in his junior year. Declan and his friends had joked that he'd taken one too many hits to the head.

Declan clenched his fist, remembering Keith shoving him into a locker after holding him down while his friends wrote "fag" on his forehead—in permanent marker. Now that same Neanderthal was the chief—for four terms already, and a lock for a fifth.

Declan shook his head. After high school, Keith had washed out of Florida State's football program. Yet he'd come back to Millners Kill with his ego unharmed. Two years at the local community college, and he'd signed on as a deputy. Eight years later, he ran and won for Chief. And he'd remained chief for sixteen years now. Even with the complete clusterfuck that was the Granger case.

Grabbing the square box from the passenger seat, Declan opened the car door and steeled himself to face the jackass. *No, the chief*, he warned himself, trying to tamp down his old resentment. But those high school wounds felt awfully close to the surface whenever he ran into Keith.

Declan walked up the steps and held the door open for an older woman who was heading out. "Ma'am."

She gave him a small smile. "Nice to see manners haven't died."

"Yes ma'am," Declan said before stepping through the door.

Dee Pearson, who'd manned the reception desk almost since the station's inception, was under siege. The phone was ringing, and Declan could see all the hold buttons were lit up. Three people were standing in front of the desk arguing. Dee was ignoring all of it.

She caught sight of Declan and gave him a sour look. Declan didn't take it personally. On her best day, Dee wore the same look.

Declan walked around the crowd. He leaned on the desk and gave Dee a smile. "Hello, Dee."

She nodded at him. "Declan. What can we do for you?"

Declan slid the box of muffins he'd been hiding behind his back across to her. "You're looking lovely today."

RUNS DEEP

A smile lurked around her lips, but Dee refused to let it through. "I'm on to your charms, Declan Reed. They won't work on me."

Declan held his hand to his chest and sighed. "Now you're breaking my heart."

She pulled the box of muffins closer and peered inside. "Blueberry?"

"Absolutely. I had to wrestle three men, large men, to get them. That's the last box from Tops." Actually that story was only part of an exaggeration. He did, however, have to snag the box before Carl from the fire department could nab them. Luckily no fists had been thrown.

"Stores are about to run dry with the storm coming in," Dee said.

"Yeah. I'll be in town for it. I'm staying at my sister's. Keith in?"

Dee tilted her head toward the back, while picking up the phone. "He's in his office. I'll tell him you're coming."

"Thank you, Miss Dee."

Declan headed through the swinging doors to the back. Four desks for deputies stood in a square behind Dee's desk. All were currently empty.

Deputy Russell Nash, Millners Kill's youngest deputy, came barreling out of the storage room, his arms full. Declan quickly side-stepped to avoid getting run over.

Russ looked down at Declan through a heavy set of dirty blond bangs, a blush covering his cheeks. "Oh, hey Declan. Sorry about that."

Six foot four, skinny as a beanpole, Russ bore an uncanny resemblance to Shaggy from *Scooby Doo*. And the department's uniform of brown on brown didn't help dispel that image one bit. Not for the first time, Declan wondered why they had gotten uniforms that matched the building.

"That's all right. What's all this?" Declan eyed the tarps and ropes threatening to tumble from Russ's arms.

Russ shifted his load. "Storm prep. You here to see the chief?"

Declan nodded.

Russ stepped closer, leaning down. "Careful, he's in a mood."

"I'll keep it in mind. You need help with that?"

"Nah. I'm good. You going to be in town during the storm?"

R.D. BRADY

“Yeah. My dad and I are bunking in with my sister.”

Declan’s dad still lived in town, as did his sister, Sylvia. But Sylvia’s husband was in Afghanistan, and neither Declan nor his dad felt right about letting her and her kids ride out the storm alone. Besides, with Steve back, Declan wanted to stay in town anyway, in case there was anything he could do to make Steve’s transition a little easier.

“That’s good.” Russ shifted his load.

Declan eyed the precariously balanced pile, but it held.

“It’s getting crazy out there,” Russ said. “I’ve written up three traffic accidents this morning and broken up two fights. I even had to put a guy in the drunk tank an hour ago.”

“Storm’s working everyone up.”

“Yeah.” Russ’s face clouded a little. “It’s good you’ll be in town. We might need a little extra help.”

Declan eyed Russ. “Something going on?”

Russ opened his mouth but then shut it quickly as another officer came out of the hallway leading from the cells. “Nah. It’s good. See you later.” Russ headed toward the front doors, his load wobbling the entire way.

Declan watched to see if Russ made it through the heavy front doors without dropping anything. The tall officer disappeared through them without incident. *Pure luck*, Declan thought.

He turned and headed back to Keith’s office. He had the nagging feeling there was something Russ had wanted to tell him. Well, it would have to wait. There was enough going on without whatever was on Russ’s mind.

Declan was still ten feet away from Keith’s office when he heard Keith on the phone.

“Damn it, Marlene, I can’t get to your mother’s party this weekend. We have a storm coming in.”

Keith’s wife, Marlene, was rarely in town, preferring to spend her time down in Florida. She came from money, and Declan was pretty sure that was the only thing keeping Keith hanging on. Declan had absolutely no idea what was keeping Marlene in the marriage.

A silence was followed by, “Fine. You take that any way you want.”

Declan hesitated a minute, making sure Keith was off the phone. After hearing nothing more, he stepped into the doorway and knocked on the frame.

Keith looked up, and Declan was once again shocked by the man's appearance. In high school, Keith had been all muscle, but now all that muscle had turned to soft fat. Large jowls hung around his neck, and his eyes seemed to have shrunk into his head.

Apparently the doctors were right: heavy drinking and an unhealthy diet were not good for you.

"Declan." Keith leaned back in his chair. It creaked under his weight. He placed his hands over his stomach, which seemed to be straining to free itself from his shirt. "What can I do for the state police today?"

Declan leaned against the doorway. He didn't even consider taking a seat. Keith seemed to have found the most uncomfortable chairs in the history of mankind for his "visitors."

"Nothing. The state police are wondering what *you* need. Anything we can do to help with the storm prep?"

Keith shook his head. "We've got everything well in hand. But I'll let you know if you state boys are needed."

Declan glanced around the office. Marlene had decorated it: wood paneling, antlers hanging behind Keith's desk, old cowboy pictures hung at random spots, and a lamp with a cowboy boot for a base. And there was a new addition since Declan's last visit: a framed lasso over by the window, a small plaque underneath it that Declan couldn't make out.

Apparently Keith had never grown out of wanting to be a cowboy when he grew up.

Declan turned his attention back to Keith. "There's a possibility the governor might order an evacuation. He's supposed to make the decision within the next twenty-four hours."

"I'm aware." Keith narrowed his eyes, making Declan wonder if he could even see through them. "But we take care of our own here. We don't need to go running for cover because of a little rain."

Shit. Declan had been worried about just this reaction. He tried to

figure out a way to handle Keith, but the truth was, the man was as stubborn as a goat.

"Keith, they're talking about an inch of rain or more per hour. And winds almost at hurricane strength. If that's the case, evacuation would probably be a really good option. Especially considering the condition of the bridge."

Keith waved away Declan's concerns. "You've always been a worrier, Declan. Millners Kill has been through worse."

Declan opened his mouth to argue, then shut it. There was no point. Besides, Keith wasn't the one making the call. It was the mayor. And hopefully, when the time came, the mayor would ignore Keith's advice.

Declan blew out a breath, trying to keep his voice even, professional. "All right. Well, I'm staying in town for the storm. So I'll be around if you need me."

Keith watched him for a moment before speaking. "Is that because of the storm or because your little pet project is back in town?"

Declan didn't bother to pretend he didn't understand the barb. "Steve's not a pet project. But I don't mind being around if he needs some help adjusting."

Keith scoffed. "Adjusting. Yeah, let's make sure the murderer doesn't get his feelings hurt now that he's out and free to kill again."

Declan considered for only a second explaining all the very good reasons why Steve was not the murderer of Simone Granger. All the data on the many innocent people who were wrongly convicted every year ran through his mind. Already, over three hundred convicted prisoners had been exonerated around the country thanks to DNA testing—and that was only where the funds could be arranged to test DNA, and where there DNA available to test. There were also numerous studies that spoke about the inherent flaws in eyewitness testing, improper testing, inadequate counsel, and the list went on.

And then, of course, there were cases like Steve's: where everything rested on circumstantial evidence. Information that, taken individually, could never have convicted him—but which collectively looked damning.

He thought for just a minute about arguing with Keith one more

time about Steve's innocence. But he discarded the thought almost immediately. Keith had always had a blind spot when it came to Steve.

"He's not a bad kid, Keith. He did his time. Even got his college degree while he was inside. He deserves a chance."

"He killed the Granger girl." Keith paused. "Of course, you never really believed that, did you?"

Declan didn't respond. At the time of Simone's murder, Declan had been Steve's strongest supporter, next to Steve's grandmother and brother—not that it had made any difference.

Keith fixed his eyes on Declan. "Nobody's going to forget what he did. Nobody should."

Declan knew that at least the first part of Keith's statement was true. The murder of Simone Granger had shaken up the little town of Millners Kill. Simone had been seventeen years old and a straight-A student with a full ride to Stanford.

She'd also been painfully shy. The prosecutor had argued that Steve, who had been in and out of the Granger house since he was a kid, was one of the few people who Simone would have let into her home on that fateful night.

"You never could come up with another suspect, could you?" Keith pressed. "And you know why? Because Kane was guilty."

"Even if that's true, he's done his time. He—"

"Lions don't change their stripes. Once a killer, always a killer."

Declan sighed. This had been a stupid idea. He knew who Keith was. And Keith was right, even if his metaphor was wrong: *zebras* don't change their stripes. And that was especially true for Keith.

Keith had made the Granger case the centerpiece of every one of his campaigns for office. He'd been the one who'd uncovered the bloody clothes in Steve's room. Of course, he'd also been the one who'd stomped all over the crime scene, contaminating any potential DNA evidence. *And* he was the one who'd lost the clothes from lockup. Unsurprisingly, those facts had been absent from Keith's campaign ads.

To be honest, the whole police department had been woefully out of their depth when the Granger case came along. Before Simone

Granger, there hadn't been a murder in Miller's Kill in ten years, and that one had been the result of a bar fight with plenty of witnesses.

But once Keith focused on Steve, there was no changing course. He seized on everything that might be related to Steve's guilt and disregarded anything that might have helped to exonerate him. To say that Steve was railroaded would be a complete understatement.

Declan had been stationed on the other side of the state at the time, but he'd gotten himself reassigned to the Millners Kill area after hearing about Steve's arrest. Fact was, Steve held a special place in Declan's heart. After college, Declan had enlisted in the Army and had become a Ranger. And Steve, who'd been ten at the time, had sent him a Flat Stanley to keep with him. Declan wrote Steve regularly about Stanley's "adventures." That stupid cutout and the weekly letters from Steve kept Declan going when hell was literally exploding around him.

So when Steve was locked up, Declan had tried to repay the favor—writing Steve every week and visiting when he could. And the truth was, he still couldn't make himself believe that the kid he'd watched grow up had committed that gruesome crime.

"We've already gotten calls this morning about Steve being released," Keith said. "People are scared. They want to know what we're going to do to protect this town from him."

Declan stared, his mouth a little dry. *Shit.* He'd hoped Steve would have a little time to settle in before people knew he was back. "And what did you tell them?"

Keith met Declan's gaze, his eyes hard. "That it's the Millners Kill Police Department's job to protect this town. And that we will do exactly that."

Declan knew this was bad. Keith wasn't going to give Steve a chance at a normal life. He'd all but declared Steve as enemy number one. But he also knew there was no way to convince Keith that he was going about this the wrong way.

"Look, I'm not here about Steve," Declan said. "I'm here to help. So if you need anything, you let me know."

Keith smirked. "Sure, Declan, we need any help from the state I'll be sure to give you a call."

RUNS DEEP

“Okay then. I’ll see you later.” Declan turned around without waiting for a reply. *Well, this was a stupid idea.*

Declan waved to Dee as he headed out. Pushing open the outside doors, he wondered if he should run by Steve’s and warn him that the chief had it out for him. He shook his head. Steve was a smart kid. *Well, I guess “man” now.* He knew better than anyone how people in this town thought of him.

Declan sighed. *Just keep your head down, Steve.*

CHAPTER 6

STEVE WALKED through the living room. It was weird. Nothing had changed. The same red plaid couch was over against the wall across from the kitchen. His grandfather's leather recliner was parked in front of the fireplace. The old tan carpet still ran through the entire house, and the same floral wallpaper dominated the walls in the kitchen and front hall.

And yet somehow it was all different, too. The carpet and furniture were a little more faded with a few more stains and scratches. And the house felt smaller, like it had shrunk since he'd last been here. He glanced at the stairs. He could have sworn they were a little more centered as well. The paint on the walls seemed a little duller too, and he noticed some cracks in the corners of the walls. *I'll need to fix those.*

He walked over to the mantel and glanced at the pictures lined up there. There were the same ones he always remembered—his grandparents' wedding picture, his parents, pictures of him and Jack as kids—but now there were new pictures as well, of Jack, graduating college and law school.

But there were none of Steve after the age of fifteen—because everything in Steve's life had slammed to a halt at that age.

He picked up the picture on the end of the mantel. It was of him,

age fifteen, and he had his arm around his best friend—a girl with dark brown hair and braces.

“Steve, you hungry?”

Steve fumbled the picture before righting it and setting it back on the mantel. He turned around and smiled at his grandmother. “You just fed me. I don’t think I could fit in another bite.”

“Well, Jack will be by in a little bit. He’s helping with the sandbags. He thought maybe you could help as well.”

Steve felt a momentary panic at the idea of getting involved in a public event. The last thing he wanted was to dive right back into town life—but his grandmother was looking at him with such concern.

He nodded. “Yeah, well, we’ll see.”

He followed his grandmother into the kitchen. The old TV set on the counter was turned on to the local news.

“Steve, can you go turn up the TV?”

Steve crossed the kitchen and turned the knob.

“The counties of Oswego, Cayuga, and Wayne will be the hardest hit, with potentially over two inches of rain per hour. If you haven’t gotten your supplies in, folks, you need to get them in a hurry. This storm is picking up speed, and it’s going to hit our area by tomorrow afternoon.”

Steve turned it back down as the newscast gave way to a commercial break. He turned to look at his grandmother. Her face was pinched.

“Grandma? You all right?”

Her features smoothed. “It’ll be fine. They’ve been working everyone up into a frenzy about this storm. But I’m sure it won’t be as bad as they say.”

Steve took a seat at the kitchen table. “I’ll make sure the house is secure, maybe tape up the windows.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you. But I think we might need to buy the tape, and some other supplies. The stores are probably going to be completely out soon.” She gave Steve the look.

He swallowed. *Oh, good. Shopping in town.* “Yeah, well, why don’t you give me a list?”

Thirty minutes later, Steve was pushing a cart down the aisle of

Tops, searching for beef jerky. His grandmother had been obsessed with the stuff for as long as he could remember. Steve had never understood it. Even though prison food hadn't offered much, it still hadn't made him appreciate the uniqueness of jerky. Finally spying the familiar red packaging, he snagged three bags.

He looked around. This actually hadn't been too bad. So far, no one had recognized him. And it was actually kind of nice, just buying stuff. But he was still having trouble with the newness of everything.

It was the small things that kept tripping him up. The cars on the walk over here, for instance. They all looked so high-tech. And there were no pay phones anymore; everyone had cell phones. In fact, it seemed like every kid he saw was staring at a phone or some game thing. When did that happen? When did electronics take over? And it struck him as surreal to think that those kids had internet access everywhere they went. At Auburn, they'd still had dial-up.

It all made Steve feel like a time traveler who'd just been dropped in the future. Declan told him he'd catch up, but he didn't think so. He felt like he was already so far behind, he'd never catch up.

He turned at the end of the aisle.

"We need to get milk. I told you—" A blond woman banged into Steve's cart.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She glanced up. Then, gasping, she took a quick step back. It was Cheryl Summers, two years ahead of him in school and the popular girl. "It's you."

Steve went still—not sure what to say. He gave her an abrupt nod and moved his cart around her. As he passed, her husband stared daggers at him.

Steve recognized him too. He'd been a friend of Jack's.

"I can't believe they let him out," Cheryl whispered to her husband.

Steve tried to ignore their muttering, but his chest felt tight.

He managed to get the supplies they needed. Everything except for the batteries—the store was completely out. He hoped his grandma had a cache somewhere in her house, because one store was as much as he was willing to do today.

He made a beeline for the register. *Time to go.* He made a point of keeping his eyes down, only looking up enough to avoid running into

anybody else. He got in the first line he saw open. A couple was ahead of him. Luckily, they didn't seem to know him and he was pretty sure he didn't know them.

After loading his goods onto the conveyor behind the couple, he pretended to read the magazine headlines, but his heart pounded and he was overly aware of the people around him. He moved up to the cashier as the couple ahead of him finished.

"Paper or plastic?" the blond teenage girl at the register asked. Her nametag read Elise.

Steve tried to calm his breathing. "Um, plastic."

Elise leaned far enough over that her blouse fell away from her chest. "You ready for the storm?"

Steve averted his eyes. "Uh, yeah, sure."

"I haven't seen you around before."

"Yeah. I just got in town."

"Well, some people are going down to the shore tonight. Bringing some beer, before the storm hits. You should think about coming, if you're going to be in town."

Steve stared at her for a minute before her words clicked. *Holy crap. She's flirting with me.* Steve took a look at her. She couldn't be any older than sixteen.

"You work out over at Gold's? I go there sometimes," she said.

He struggled not to laugh. Work out—for fun. Right. In prison, muscle was protection. Working out wasn't a hobby. It was a religion that kept you safe. "Yeah. How much will that be?"

The girl's smile wobbled as she glanced back at the register. "\$38.78."

Steve handed her two twenties. She took her time making change, but Steve didn't make eye contact. He busied himself with looking around the store.

Finally, she handed it over. "Well, take care." She smiled, her eyes lingering on his face.

"Yeah, you too."

Steve ducked outside with his bags. Shaking his head, he gave a little laugh. Someone had actually flirted with him.

But his smile disappeared when he remembered Cheryl and her

husband. He hunched his shoulders, staring at the sidewalk. Every time someone walked past, he tensed, expecting them to recognize him and say something. He'd almost made it to the end of Main Street when a dark Acura pulled up next to him.

"There he is."

Steve glanced over, his muscles tight. Then a smile crossed his face. "Jack!"

Steve's brother got out of the car and came around it, wrapping Steve in a hug. Steve felt the stares of passersby, and it made him feel self-conscious. But Jack didn't seem to care.

When Jack stepped away, he held Steve at arm's length and looked him over. Steve did the same. There was no denying they were brothers, but Steve was a good three inches taller than Jack, and while Jack was slim, Steve was more muscular.

"You look good," Jack said. "I need your workout regimen."

Steve laughed. "It's easy. Get convicted of a crime you didn't commit, then workout every day in the yard for a decade."

Jack's smile dimmed. "Hey, that's all behind you now. Sorry I couldn't be there to meet you when you got out. I had this law conference in Albany."

"No problem." Steve shifted the bags in his hands.

Jack glanced at them. "You shopping for Grandma?"

Steve nodded.

"Did you see Elise Ingram? She's grown up pretty well."

Steve paused, not making the connection until he realized Jack was talking about the cashier. "That was Elise Ingram? Holy cow."

Steve remembered Elise as this little girl with pigtails and braces. He shook his head. Time really was marching on. Jack looked so professional: dark business suit, crisp white shirt, purple tie. Steve was pretty sure there was a matching briefcase in his car somewhere. He looked like a lawyer or a politician. *Speaking of which...* "Grandma mentioned you might be running for mayor."

Jack gave him a slow smile. "I'm tossing around the idea. But we can talk about that some other time. Right now I'm headed over to help fill sandbags along the levee. They could use you too."

RUNS DEEP

Right. Hanging out with all the good townsfolk. Fun, fun, fun. Steve held up his bags. “I need to get these supplies back to Grandma.”

“I told her I’d find you and bring you back after. She’s okay with it. And I already picked up some wood at the hardware store to board up her windows. We can do that together, after we help out.”

Steve looked away, watching people heading into the supermarket or packing their cars with their supplies. But what he really saw were the angry screaming faces that had protested outside his trial. The same Millners Kill residents that Steve had known his whole life.

He looked back at Jack. “Look, I know you mean well, but the rest of the town didn’t exactly rally to my side. They all still think I killed Simone.”

“Not all of them. Some think Keith botched that investigation so bad, we’ll never know for certain. But the fact is, you’re back. People are going to see you at some point or another. It might as well be doing something that helps out the town.”

Steve sighed, knowing Jack was right—like he always was. He also knew that fighting Jack was a useless endeavor. Once Jack was focused on something, he never let it go. And apparently, Steve’s successful reintegration into Millners Kill was his latest project.

Steve sighed, resigned to his fate. “Fine. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 7

JACK DROVE SLOWLY through Millners Kill, pointing out to Steve what had changed while he'd been away. Steve knew Jack was doing it to be nice, but the whole exercise just made it more apparent to Steve how much of an outsider he really was.

He remembered riding his skateboard down Main Street, which was good. But then he thought about how he'd never gotten to be part of another Fourth of July parade. And now he couldn't imagine standing in a crowd cheering as the floats went by. When Jack drove him by the high school, all Steve could think about was the fact that he'd never gotten to graduate from there. Never went to prom.

In fact, the more places Jack pointed out, the more apparent it became to Steve how hard it was going to be to live here. If he showed up at any of those places that, as a kid, had embraced him, he'd be a pariah.

By the time Jack pulled into a parking space behind the bait and tackle shop, the good mood Steve had developed from seeing Jack had evaporated. He was back to feeling like Steve the ex-con.

Jack put the car in park and looked over at him. "You okay?"

Steve nodded, looking through the windshield at the water. The wind had picked up and whitecaps had begun to form. "I'm going down by the water for a bit."

Jack opened his door. "Okay. I'll find out what they need us to do."

They both stepped out of the car, and Jack headed around the building. Taking a breath, Steve headed in the same direction. Jack was speaking with a big man with a clipboard. After taking a breath, Steve made his way over to the beach.

There were about three dozen people scattered across the beach. Some were filling bags. Some moved overburdened wheelbarrows. Some loaded trucks. Steve turned away from them and walked to an empty area. He stared at the dark water as it tossed and raged. God, he'd missed this. There was something incredibly freeing about being next to a large body of water. It was primal and untamed. And everyone was equal before it.

While he was on the inside, he'd tried to picture the water, but it had never resulted in the same feeling. Now he closed his eyes, breathing deep, smelling the lake in the air and feeling the spray lick at his face. A peace settled in his chest. *Yeah. This is home.*

He opened his eyes as his brother walked over. "Got our assignments." Jack held up a shovel.

Steve took it, raising an eyebrow. "You seem to be missing *your* shovel."

Jack smiled and ignored the barb. He pointed at a group of men and women farther down the bank. "You'll be helping them fill sandbags."

Steve looked at Jack in his pristine suit. "And what are *you* going to be doing?"

Jack grinned. "They need some administrative tasks done."

Steve shook his head. "Shocking. I'm doing the hard labor and you're pushing paper."

Jack whacked him on the shoulder. "Go on. It'll be good for you. Make some new friends. And play nice with the other kids."

"Shut up, Jack."

Jack might be joking, but Steve did feel like a little kid starting at a new school. A little kernel of nervousness began to build in the pit of his stomach. It was different from the fear he'd known in prison. Then, he'd been fearful of physically getting hurt. Now, he was fearful of

R.D. BRADY

what other people would say. He'd been reduced to an insecure twelve-year-old.

Steve glanced over at the group of people he was supposed to work with. They looked normal enough, and he didn't recognize any of them—but from this distance, that didn't really mean much.

"Hey, you good?" Jack said.

Steve straightened his back. "Yeah, sure."

"This is a new beginning. Show them who you are not who they think you are."

Steve nodded, his face feeling tight. "Yeah. I know. See you later."

Hunching his shoulders, Steve walked over to the group. A small guy with a dark complexion shoveling sand into a bag caught sight of him. "Hey. I'm Carlos. Grab a bag and start filling."

Steve nodded. "Okay." He reached down and grabbed a few bags and headed to an empty spot next to the pile of sand.

He paused for just a minute, but no one paid him any attention—and not in a "don't look at the criminal" kind of way, either. They were all simply focused on their own tasks. So Steve bent to his. *Well okay.*

CHAPTER 8

THE MAN WATCHED Elise Ingram as she stepped out of Tops. Her blond hair blew around her in the wind, and she impatiently tried to push it down.

He smiled. *What a pretty, pretty girl.*

Elise pulled a knit hat out of her bag and tugged it on before turning to the right and heading down Main Street.

He fell into step along with her, but on the opposite side of the street. She didn't even glance over at him. He struggled to keep the smile off his face. *Oblivious.*

Elise reached the corner and stopped, waiting for a minivan to drive by. Then she quickly crossed. He turned away, then turned again down an alley that ran parallel to Main Street. Elise would turn up again at the next corner.

He skipped a little, his joy too overwhelming to contain.

The game was on. He picked up his pace, and sure enough, Elise was just rounding the corner, turning away from him. He stepped out of the alley and hurried after her as she walked down one more block and crossed the street. He pulled down the edge of his cap and tugged up his raincoat collar.

Ahead of him, he could see Elise pulling out her phone and typing

R.D. BRADY

something, slowing her pace. He put on a little speed and moved ahead of her, juggling his two grocery bags.

The next alley was just up ahead. When he reached the opening of the alley, he pulled at the small hole in the brown bags he had created earlier. With a tearing sound, both bags ripped, and their contents spilled across the sidewalk. A few cans rolled into the alley.

“Oh, no.” He stood and stared at the mess of groceries.

A can of peaches rolled toward Elise, and she stooped to pick it up. She gathered a few more dropped items and made her way over to him. “Hey. Looks like you could use some help.”

He stood, his hands full of groceries. “Oh, thanks. Bags just gave out.”

“Oh, hey, it’s you. I didn’t recognize you.”

He smiled. “Thanks. Just pile it on top.”

Elise eyed the groceries already in his arms. “Um, are you going far? Maybe I could help carry them?”

“That would be great. Thanks.” He smiled, and together they gathered up the rest of the stray groceries.

He headed into the alley. “My car’s just on the other side. How’s school?”

“Good. It’ll be nice to have the next few days off, though. College is tougher than I expected. I have a history project due right when I get back, so I really need the time.”

Oh, you’ll have more than just a few days off. Out loud, he said. “You’re at the community college, right? First year? Do you have plans for after that?”

Elise shifted the load in her arms. “Yeah. I’ll stay for the two years and then transfer out, see if I can get into a state school.”

“Good plan. It’ll be a lot less money that way. Hold on a second.” He stopped next to an old table someone had discarded in the alley and put his armful of groceries down. With his back to Elise, he pulled the knife from the sheath on his belt, underneath his raincoat.

“You need me to take some of those?” Elise asked, leaning forward.

He smiled as he turned. With one quick slash, he opened Elise’s neck. Her eyes went wide, and she grabbed on to him. Groceries crashed to the ground and rolled along the alley floor.

RUNS DEEP

He took her in his arms and pushed back her hair. "You're such a pretty girl, Elise."

Elise grabbed at her throat, blood pouring over her hands.

He smiled. "Well, at least you don't have to worry about that history project."

CHAPTER 9

STEVE SPENT over an hour filling bags before Carlos tapped him on the shoulder. “Hey. You want to help me move these over to the levee?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Dropping his shovel, Steve followed Carlos to two wheelbarrows loaded with bags.

Steve whistled. “Well, this should be fun.”

Carlos grinned. “Why do you think I picked you?” He jerked a thumb back at the rest of the group. “I’m pretty sure anyone else would have a heart attack if they even tried.”

“Not sure *I* won’t.”

Carlos laughed. “Well, I’ll be sure to call the paramedics.” He extended his hand. “Didn’t catch your name.”

“Uh, Steve.”

Carlos gave his hand a firm shake. “Good to meet you, Steve. Now let’s get to work.”

Over the next two hours, Steve and Carlos filled wheelbarrows and moved them over to the wall of sandbags. They’d add their loads to the wall, then head back for another one. Slowly, the wall built up.

The whole time, Carlos kept up a constant flow of conversation. And despite Steve’s attempt to keep the man at arm’s length, Carlos’s

enthusiasm was infectious. Steve found himself relaxing and enjoying the man's company.

After the last sandbag was moved, Carlos swiped them two waters from the stand someone had set up for volunteers. He handed one to Steve, then leaned back against the bridge. "Well, that was some damn fine work. If you hadn't come along, it would have taken me forever. So thanks."

"No problem."

"So, what do you do for a living, Steve?"

"Um, I just started over at Mel's while I look for something."

"Hey, times are tough. I manage the lumberyard over on the mainland. If you're looking for work, you should come by after the storm. We're always looking for hard workers, and that's definitely you."

"Yeah. I might do that. Thanks."

A squad car pulled up. Keith stepped out, pulling his belt up over his stomach.

Steve's good mood vanished. *Shit.*

Keith looked around for a minute before spying Steve. Then he headed over.

Carlos watched Keith approach. "Wonder what he wants."

"Pretty sure he's not here to move sandbags," Steve muttered.

Carlos chuckled.

"Hey, Carlos," Keith said.

Carlos nodded. "Chief."

Keith nodded toward Steve. "I see you're getting to know Millners Kills' most famous resident."

Carlos glanced over at Steve, a question on his face.

Keith feigned surprise. "Oh, that's right. You weren't here when Steve killed the Granger girl. Killed her right in her own kitchen."

Steve struggled to keep a rein on his temper. *Bastard.* He started to step around Keith, but Keith shot out an arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

Steve stared him down. "What do you want, Keith?"

Keith's face turned red. "That's 'Chief' to you."

"Um, I'm just going to go," Carlos said, beating a hasty retreat. He cast a glance over his shoulder at Steve.

R.D. BRADY

Well, I guess that friendship's over before it began.

"Is there a problem here?" Jack asked, materializing behind Keith.

Keith glanced back at Jack and lowered his arm. "No problem. Just making sure your brother here is behaving himself."

Jack smiled. "Why, Chief, you wouldn't be harassing my brother without cause, now would you?"

Keith smiled in return. "Just saying hello."

Jack's eyes were hard. "Well, isn't that nice. Come on, Steve. We need to get back and board up those windows."

Steve stepped around Keith, his anger boiling.

Jack grabbed his arm, keeping his smile in place. He leaned down. "Not a word, Steve."

Want more Steve Kane? Dive deeper into the danger—grab your copy of *Runs Deep* now!!