



# The Crime Cafe with Chapter Five of *Identity Crisis*

Written and Read By:



## Chapter FIVE

Saturday morning is one of the few times I find driving on Route 1 bearable. No traffic to speak of, so there's plenty of room to maneuver around the potholes and bumps and scars in a road that hasn't been paved in God knows how long. Normally, Route 1 is like one of those driver's ed movies—cars making sudden lane changes, darting out randomly from hidden entrances, left and right. That morning though, I cruised past the shopping centers of Beltsville, sailed right through the two sets of lights at Rhode Island Avenue, where traffic usually snarls, and breezed into College Park without even getting stuck behind a Metrobus.

I was up early because I'd awakened at four that morning with Ray on my mind for the first time in almost a month. I'd thought about him quite a bit during the month after we last saw each other. When I didn't hear from him, I decided I had a choice between driving myself crazy and not thinking about him. I chose the latter.

After an hour of alternately staring at the ceiling and the inside of my eyelids, I figured it was time to rise and shine, or at least rise. I showered, fed Oscar, scarfed down a bowl of Cheerios, and brewed a double-strength cup of dark roast to go. Then I grabbed the P.O. Box key and headed out.

The post office was on Calvert Road where it dead-ended at the railroad tracks. My route took me past the University of Maryland, my alma mater, a hilly green sweep of campus dotted with colonial brick buildings. Across Route 1 from the campus, the matching brick buildings of fraternities lined a horseshoe-shaped street. Calvert was a residential road that connected with the old U.S. highway in the nerve center of the college town where the bars were. They used to have lines out the door when you could drink beer at eighteen in Maryland. Now, the drinking age was twenty-one. Some of the bars closed, but the rest hung on, continuing to do a solid business with a still young-looking crowd.

I turned onto Calvert, and after countless stop signs, reached the post office. It was a few minutes before ten, so I listened to the car radio, tapping my fingers to the music on the wheel and feeling highly caffeinated blood coursing through my veins. At ten on the dot, they unlocked the front door and I went inside.

At the box, I paused before inserting the key and opening the little door.

Two letters were inside. Again, I hesitated before reaching for them. It's like I expected someone to run up and slap cuffs on me if I did. For checking my own P.O. Box that I didn't know I had, for God's sake.

Neither letter had my name on it. One was a piece of junk for "Boxholder." The other bore the name of Gregory Knudsen.

That guy the FBI man mentioned. What did he have to do with Tom and Melanie?

Maybe Knudsen was the identity thief. Could he have been working with Tom Garvey? Or Melanie? The box was in my legal name, clearly a woman's name, but apparently, other people could have mail delivered to it.

I still didn't have any answers. I was only assuming the P.O. Box was connected with my credit situation, but I couldn't think of any other reason for it.

I looked at the envelope again. Just a regular white business envelope. No return address. A New York City postmark from a couple of weeks ago.

I considered opening it, but that was tampering with someone else's mail, a federal offense. Wonderful. I checked the flap. Someone had done a crummy job of sealing it, only licking the middle. One slip of the thumb and ...

Reluctantly, I put the envelope back in the box. It could be evidence and was not my mail. I probably shouldn't have this box key, I thought.

I didn't really want to talk to the postal clerk—what would I say? The best place to go with this was the cops, but I didn't feel like getting into it with them either. They'd ask a lot of annoying questions, like, "Why didn't you call us when you saw her apartment was tossed?"

I wasn't quite sure. Maybe I was afraid they'd find something incriminating. Maybe it was the fact that I wouldn't have been there to begin with, if it hadn't been for Donna. Anyway, I made a command decision not to call, not sure of the ethical aspects, but based on my gut. So now what?

I decided my best bet was to put the key back where I found it. I didn't want to impede a police investigation, but I had no duty to assist them either. After I returned the key, I could check with Derry, see if they had searched Melanie's place while I had it, and come clean if I had to. He wouldn't like it, but I didn't think it would put me any higher on his shit list than I already was.

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At Melanie's apartment, I let myself in as before. I went to the bedroom and replaced the key and receipt. I was on my way out when I noticed a box on the dining room table.

It was the kind of box you might want to use for moving or storing files—I know, because it actually was full of files. Printed on the side was *Lobkowitz* along with a fancy crest of some sort. If it had been there the day before, I would have noticed.

The folders had names on them and were filed in alphabetical order. I checked one at random. It held correspondence with a bank, something about establishing a credit line.

I slid the folder back into place. I didn't want to go any farther, but I couldn't stop now. I had to check the ones beginning with *M*.

Malone, Martinez, Mazzuli. Then McCabe, McNally. And there it was.

I pulled out the file with my name on it and found the paperwork for my ten-thousand-dollar line of credit. Shit. Less than 24 hours ago, someone had left that box. The someone who'd tried to rip me off.

On my way out, I checked the answering machine. No messages, but Bruce Schaeffer's number was on her caller ID again. He had called at 11:24 p.m., long after

I spoke to him. Interesting. Her mailbox hadn't been touched. Her red car was in the same spot.

Anyone could have brought that box in. The key wasn't hard to find. Or maybe the locks were picked.

Why did Bruce phone Melanie again? Was there a connection between his call and the box's appearance? Was it a coincidence?

I wondered how many of the questions Melanie could answer.

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I spent a lot of time that weekend phoning people in Melanie's book. In an attempt at efficiency, I ignored the professional entries—doctors, dentists—and anything identified by an institutional name only. As for the rest, I figured I'd start with *A* and keep going.

Personal phone books have this tendency to collect names the way furniture collects dust and, in my quest, many of those names were about as useless. Some people I called weren't home—I left messages when I could. Some hadn't seen Melanie for years, and some barely knew her to begin with. A couple of people knew her from school, some from the bank. They expressed concern, but couldn't help me. I kept going.

By Monday, I'd slogged through to the *Ms*. I'd developed a short explanatory speech that sounded stale by the third call. I got all sorts of reactions, from skepticism to concern, hostility to apathy. I felt sorry for telemarketers. I was glad to stop and turn my attention back to legal work.

I was wrapping up for the day, when I heard a knock.

"Yes?" I said.

The door opened and a man I didn't recognize stuck his head inside. The disembodied head wore a shock of light brown hair and a genial expression.

"Excuse me, Ms. McRae? I wonder if I could have a moment of your time."

I got up and approached him. "For a consultation?" If he was a potential client, the answer was *yes*. If he was a salesman, my preference was to beat feet home to some take-out Chinese and the ball game.

The door opened all the way, revealing a sturdy frame—not fat, not skinny, maybe a slight beer belly—clothed in a pair of chinos, a Madras shirt, and moccasins. He stuck out a squarish hand.

"My name is John Drake. I'm a friend of Melanie Hayes' parents. Were you busy? I could come back."

"No, that's OK." Feeling curious, I invited him in.

Drake relaxed into a guest chair, crossing a leg over one knee. He looked a bit like an overgrown version of a kid in a Rockwell painting, complete with cheek of tan and unruly cowlick.

"Melanie's mother called a few days ago. Her folks are concerned, because they've been told she's missing. Since I live in the area, they asked me to try to contact her."

"Oh?" The wariness that rose in me was almost palpable. "How do you know her parents?"

"I've known Melanie since she was a kid."

"That's interesting." He looked like he was close to Melanie's age. "So they looked you up? Or have you kept in touch with them since they moved to New Mexico?"

Drake smiled broadly. His teeth were as even and white as Chiclets. "Arizona," he corrected me. "They live in Arizona."

"Oh, yeah. Right."

Drake's smile faded, but his green eyes continued to look amused. "I'm doing her folks a favor."

"Sure. But I don't know how I can help you."

"I understand from someone at the bank that you're her attorney."

That could only be Donna.

"Correct," I said. "You'll understand if I'm a little protective when it comes to a client."

"Certainly. Really, I have no dark motives." He spread his hands, as if he were opening himself like a book. "I'm just trying to help."

"Unfortunately, I have no idea where she is."

"Ah." He looked terribly disappointed. "I was hoping you might have heard from her."

"I haven't."

"She didn't give you a possible alternate address or phone number to contact her at?"

I shook my head.

"Not to impose, but could you possibly recheck your file?" Something seemed to catch in his throat, and he began to cough.

"No need," I said. "I've been trying to find Melanie myself. Believe me, if I had a lead in my file, I would know about it."

Drake coughed harder. "Excuse me," he said. "Got a ... bit of a tickle. Have any water?"

I inclined my head. "There's a water cooler down the hall. Help yourself."

He got up and left, hacking loudly. Maybe he really did have a tickle. Or maybe it was an old trick. It was a short hallway, but it still gave a person time to get something from your desk or off your Rolodex. I had two people pull that on me, using different ruses—a reporter who was looking for a name and phone number, and a prospective client who lifted my wallet. Fool me twice, shame on me all over. Maybe I was being paranoid. Still, something wasn't right with this guy, although I wondered what he could be looking for that he'd be able to find in that little bit of time.

I decided to meet him at the door on his way back.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut this short," I said. "I have plans."

"That's quite all right. I appreciate your time." I don't think he believed me any more than I did him.

"Perhaps if you gave me a phone number," I said. "If I hear anything, I could call you."

His expression was neutral, but the eyes still seemed amused. "Good idea." He felt his shirt pocket. "I'm afraid I don't have anything to write with."

I got a pad and pen from my desk and he wrote a number down. After he left, I waited at the window until I saw him heading down the front walk. Then I got on the phone to Donna.

"John Drake?" she said. "Never heard of him."

"This guy says he's known Melanie since they were kids."

"That's news to me."

"And you never told him that I was Melanie's attorney?"

"I've never even met him. Oh, Sam." She paused. "You don't suppose that could be ... that couldn't be the one the police were talking about, could it? The dangerous man?"

"I don't know." I didn't think so, but my pulse had quickened. Could that really be Stavos?

"He didn't seem dangerous," I said, "but that doesn't mean a thing, does it?"

"Sam, did you have a chance to run by Melanie's?"

I paused. "Oh, yeah. She wasn't home." I decided to leave it at that.

"I'm so worried."

So was I. If this was the man Jergins was talking about, he'd managed to find out I was Melanie's attorney. And if he was that dangerous, would he be satisfied asking a few questions? I didn't think so. I just wondered what his next move would be.