



Double parking is prohibited in downtown Eastpoint. Not that anyone actually could double park on the narrow three-block Main Street, but it's on the books. It's also against the law to steal farm animals or purposely drive into haystacks. Oh, and cow tipping. That's a no-no. In my five years as Eastpoint's police chief we haven't had one violation, though I'm not certain about cow tipping, since none of our farmers or their livestock have come forward with a complaint.

I mention this to demonstrate that Eastpoint is pretty much crime free. This might have something to do with its location and values. Eastpoint lies about seventy miles east of New York City on a small patch of rich earth that most farmers would die for. And with a population of about four hundred, not counting the livestock or weekend city folks, people tend to respect each other and their property.

That's why I'm surprised on this Saturday night when my dispatcher, June Winters, a woman in her sixties who gave up farming after her husband died, alerts me about an altercation at Salty's Bar and Grill. She sounds excited. Who wouldn't be? Like I said, we don't have much crime in this town.

I wildly increase my speed to about forty in a thirty-mile-an-hour zone and pull up to Salty's in five minutes, where I find Paddy Murphy, the owner, alone and leaning against the wall of his bar smoking a cigarette, his usual equanimity showing through. He sees me, takes a hard pull on his cancer stick, flicks it in the street, and produces a wide Irish smile. That's a misdemeanor—not the smile, the littering—but I'll let Paddy slide tonight.

I emerge from the car, glance around, then shrug. "Say, Paddy, I got a call, something about an altercation. What's up?"

He spreads his hands. "Already taken care of, Hank. A misunderstanding, is all," he says in his usual pleasant singsong brogue. "Two college kids from the city were fighting over a local. It was nothing. A patron must have called it in."

I nod. "A woman?"

"One of Broderick Hall's daughters. The one who attends Columbia. I guess she wanted to show off the town to a couple of classmates. Only the gents had a few too many shots and started fighting over her."

I grin. "Typical kids. Who won?"

Paddy winks. "She did, of course. Don't women always?" He shoots a look inside the bar window. "Anyway," he says, turning back to me, "she got pissed off over their childish behavior and left."

"That's it?" I ask, disappointed.

"What can I say, Hank? I broke it up and put them in a cab." Paddy checks his watch. "They should be on the twenty-two to Manhattan as we speak. I was just taking a break. It's pretty hectic tonight."

"You want to join the force?" I ask, my crooked front teeth showing through. "You won't be subjected to that karaoke noise." I laugh, pointing to the bar with my chin.

Paddy shakes his head. "Not for me, Hank. Too boring. I'm happy serving drinks. And as for the karaoke, I tune it out."

"I hear you. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right decision to leave the county," I say almost to myself, then shrug. "Anyway, if there's nothing else going on, I'll get back to my rounds."

"Hey, it's your town, Hank."

I'm about to ask Paddy about his wife, Sheryl, when June's voice beckons me from inside the squad car.

"Looks like you're a busy guy tonight," Paddy says, removing a pack of smokes from his corduroy shirt pocket.

I hop inside the Crown Victoria. “Just a misunderstanding,” I assure June. “You can call off your gossip posse tonight,” I say, smiling into the phone.

“We have another situation, Hank.”

I roll my eyes. “June, we don’t have that many bars in town. Where to now?”

She hesitates. “It involves a friend of yours. John Hunter.”

I let that sink in a moment, then ask cautiously, “What kind of situation?”

“A woman just called, said she was walking by Hunter’s house and saw the lights on in his living room. Not that it’s unusual. After all, it’s dark outside.”

“And?” I interrupt, trying to keep her focused.

“Right. The woman noticed that Hunter was lying back on his sofa in a weird sort of way, like he wasn’t asleep. She said there was a mess around him, vomit or something.” June pauses. “The woman thinks he might be . . . dead.”

“Dead,” I repeat. “Come on, June, I just saw the guy yesterday. He looked healthy to me. Hunter probably just had one too many.”

“It’s not my theory, boss. I’m just passing along the information.”

I watch a few young patrons heading toward the parking lot. “So who’s this mystery woman who just *happened* to be strolling around Hunter’s neighborhood?” I ask with interest. “Some local walking her dog?”

“Here’s the strange thing, Hank. She wouldn’t leave her name.”

“Doesn’t sound like a local to me.”

“And she insisted that I call the paramedics before it was too late.”

I start the car engine. “Doesn’t sound like a disinterested party, either. You get the number she was calling from?”

“A blocked call. Anyway, you might want to have a look.”

I nod into the phone. “Call the county.”

“I already did. They’re on their way.”

“I’ll call in later,” I say, glancing back at the bar. Paddy must have already headed inside. I flip on the overhead light bar, make a quick U-turn, then gun the engine, hoping my drinking buddy is only fast asleep.