



I'm relieved to find a Suffolk County Fire-Rescue and Emergency Services vehicle parked in Hunter's driveway, but as my eyes shift to an unmarked car parked across the street, I get a knot in my stomach. Inside, I find a couple of jock-types snapping pictures, collecting evidence and joking like they're at a frat party. Upon seeing me in uniform they give me a polite hello.

"Say, Hank."

I turn, and after recognizing the short, balding detective with a Dunkin' Donuts gut, offer a thin smile. "Earl, it's been a while."

He smiles back. "Too long. Never thought I'd see you on your turf. Not on business, anyway."

"Me neither," I agree uncomfortably. "What's going on?" I motion to Hunter, who is deadpan on the sofa, his head facing the ceiling, his right hand hanging motionlessly. My drinking buddy, a handsome *GQ* guy, is wearing a white t-shirt, which is dotted with vomit, and a pair of jeans stained from who knows what.

Earl approaches, extends his hand. "First, let me apologize for jumping the gun before you got here. The front door was open when we arrived."

I shoot a look at the door, then back to Earl.

"We were hanging around when the call came in. It sounded like someone died." He pauses. "Guess they were right."

I shake his hand quickly as my eyes study Hunter, whose once-animated dark brown eyes are now dead like the rest of him.

"You would have called us anyway," he says, his tone friendly.

My eyes remain on my friend. "Looks that way, doesn't it?"

"So technically, you're in the middle of a crime scene."

I regard his remark and turn back to him.

"That's the way we found him," Earl adds. "Normally, with all that shit around him, it would appear that he just choked on his own vomit."

We exchange looks. "I'm not sure I follow. It wasn't an accident?"

He motions me away from the others. "Your neighbor here killed himself." He waits for my reaction. In spite of my homicide days, I'm struggling to accumulate enough brainpower to let Hunter's apparent suicide sink in.

"You sure?" I finally ask.

He offers me a pair of elastic gloves, and when I snap them on, hands me a single sheet of copier paper.

Two thoughts strike me as I begin reading Hunter's last message to the world: *I know John Hunter isn't suicidal; he's too egotistic. And vain. But if he were suicidal, his would be Eastpoint's first. I know this because I was born here. People don't kill themselves in Eastpoint!*

"As you can see, he didn't have much to say," Earl says with a shrug. I nod after reading it for the second time. "It's his signature," I tell Earl, glancing around for a computer. Earl must sense my interest and tells me it's in the study.

"Interesting," I say, handing back the note.

"What's that?"

“The note. It’s short and to the point, nothing like his flowery romance columns.”

“No way! He’s that Hunter?” Earl blurts out. “Shit, I read the guy all the time. He’s good.”

“Was,” I correct.

“Right.”

“He was a good friend,” I add with a touch of sadness. “I just saw him yesterday.”

“Never hinted about doing himself in?”

I shake my head. “He was always upbeat.”

“Sounds like he was good at hiding whatever was troubling him.” Then Earl adds, like one of Hunter’s columns, “If it was about a woman, he didn’t heed to his own advice. No one is worth killing themselves for.”

“Guess not, but I knew him pretty well. It wasn’t about a woman.”

Earl smiles. “Maybe that was the problem.”

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