

Everyone's Looking For Something

An Alex Ballantine Mystery

(Book Sample)

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CHAPTER ONE

I've always thought it was insane to start the fall semester on the Friday before Labor Day. I didn't want to be here any more than my students did.

It is always this way after a long, beautiful summer laden with free time. Professors other than myself may look at the new academic year as a chance to be innovative, having recharged their mental batteries with the time away from the classroom. After two months off I found it damn hard to get back on the horse and ride, let alone ride it well.

I had just exited a lecture hall after my first class of the 1983-1984 school year. How did it go? OK, but with this weather my heart was not yet in the groove of teaching. To top it off, the air conditioning in the room had also been on the fritz, turning it into an academic sauna. Between my not-so-great professorial style and a room full of students not yet locked into the academic mindset, the class had taken on more the feel of nap time in kindergarten instead of a college lecture.

So, it was blessing to get out of there. The late summer sun hit me like an invigorating drug. The fall had just begun to work its magic on the maples and oaks. The first tinges of color were beginning to appear in the trees. Students walked along the paths, the aura of a new semester still registering in the spring of their steps and the smiles on their faces. I slipped on my Ray-Ban sunglasses and drank in the atmosphere.

My name is Alexander Ballintine, *Doctor Alexander Ballintine*: professor of sociology, specifically popular culture, having just finished the first lecture of SOC 305: "Influences of 20th Century Popular Culture on Society." I teach at St. Ignatius College in Taft, New Hampshire, and as I crossed the campus back to

my office, my thoughts had drifted to driving just a little too fast along the one lane winding road up Mount Kearsarge; steep, curvy and not anywhere near that stuffy classroom.

Saint Ignatius College, or St. Igs, as most folks call it, is a poster child for the typical New England institution of higher education. The campus is on a hill overlooking the Suncook River on land donated to a religious order in the mid 1800's. Starting as a small religious educational institution for men in the 1850's, it grew slowly and earned a reputation as a decent liberal arts school. Then it got hit by the cultural changes of the 60's, dropped the religion courses, retired the last of the Jesuit professors and went co-ed.

It was now a fairly well-respected school known mostly for its nursing and fine arts programs. St. Igs also has a slightly atypical endowment from a defrocked priest who made a bundle in the dry-cleaning trade. His largess keeps St. Igs looking good and running smoothly. I say a little thanks you for my employment each time I pass his statue in the academic quad.

Much of the campus has the feel of a Yale or Harvard but in a smaller, rural version. Lots of brick and granite, Victorian-style architecture filled the nicely landscaped grounds. We even have the requisite duck pond with lily pads and tasteful benches along its tree-lined shore. Quite charming really in that New England, ivy-covered sort of way.

My cross-campus walk ended at the steps of Bradley Hall, a granite-faced Victorian buildings that houses my office. It looked like a background shot from some British drama imported by PBS, shrouded with ivy on the outside, dark wood and high-ceilinged tomb on the inside.

St. Igs isn't big enough to have a separate Social Sciences department (heck I'm the *only* full-time sociology prof), so I was lumped in with the English, Foreign Languages, and Psychology into a more generic Humanities Department. Our offices occupied the first floor of Bradley Hall; the second story housed the small Natural Sciences faculty. I climbed the broad granite steps and passed through the large oak entrance whose door was open to the beautiful late summer air.

Stepping into the sudden shade of the main hallway, I paused for moment to take off my sunglasses and adjust to the change in light. I was brought out of my autumnal revelry when I saw the chairman of my department standing just outside his office door, chatting with a student. He motioned me over when he saw me.

Dr. Patrick Armbruster was St. Igs German professor who had taken on all the attributes of staid German efficiency. Most academic types are pretty laid back, but this man ran our department like a battleship: the professors and staff were the crew who tolerated being under his thumb.

Armbruster was always on time, well groomed, articulate, efficient and generally insufferable. My fellow professors in the Humanities Department, however, wanted nothing to do with the responsibilities of being chairman. Thus the battleship captain still ran the ship and all of us regularly felt like conducting a mutiny.

Ours was a strained relationship, but we tolerated each other by staying out of each other's way - or I should say I tried to stay out of his. He always seemed to me in mine, since not only was he the chair of my department but also chair of the tenure board.

Tenure is that elusive aura of job security that every college professor strives for and happily prostitutes themselves to get. Yes, you are chosen for tenure based on your academic credentials: good teaching reviews, your publication history, etc. However, this was a small school so one had to also ingratiate themselves to the tenure board to show them your worthiness. To accomplish this, I'd become a member of the alumni committee responsible for among other things, keeping the donation money flowing into St. Igs.

So as a member of said Alumni committee I was obligated to attend the annual meet, greet and hit-people-up-for-cash gathering that evening. It was a chance for former students to come back to the cloister, remember by-gone days and for people like me to make sure they were now giving whatever the current recession wasn't taking and donating it to St. Igs. All this swirled through my head as I realized I'd have to stop, attempt conversation and play nice.

Armbruster looked at my black jeans and polo shirt with the air of a judge at the Westminster Dog Show about to ask the Pekinese to leave the ring. "Ah, Dr. Ballintine, I'd like you meet the new administrative assistant for the department. Alex Ballintine, Miss Daphne Norris."

I turned to look closely at the young woman I'd assumed was a student, realizing that schmoozing was now in order. I make it a point to never cross any administrative assistant. They're the ones who do the real work around any academic department, making sure the wheels of bureaucracy turn smoothly. This woman however looked young enough to be our last admin's granddaughter.

Daphne Norris was taller than average, although not as tall as Armbruster or myself (we're both about 5'10"). Her figure was rounded but not dramatically so. She also had a round face with Italian features – a slight aquiline nose, high cheekbones and dark brown eyes. The most striking thing about her though was her attire, which was atypical for what you saw in New Hampshire even on a college campus.

The hair and clothes gave the impression she'd just been in a collision between a Eurhythmics and a Culture Club music video: close cropped hair dyed bright red (like Annie Lennox) and a Boy George over-sized white t-shirt with Hebrew characters printed on it. Black leggings and a pair of red Converse high tops finished off the ensemble.

"Miss Norris will be officially starting next Tuesday, after Labor Day," continued Dr. Armbruster. "We were lucky to find someone so soon after Mrs. Chambers retired."

Mrs. Chambers had been secretary of the department since St. Igs had only Jesuit teachers, probably using scrolls and quills. The elderly woman had finally decided to take to the rocking chair when some rich alumni donated a new fax machine and one of those "personal computers" from IBM to the department over the summer. Mrs. Chambers had found the computer an affront to her secretary-hood and refused to touch the thing.

No one on the faculty knew squat about the device either, including me, though as the pop culture guy on the staff I found it fascinating from a social standpoint. These new devices had been catching on as more than hobbies in the past few years, showing up in movies and on TV shows - a sure sign to this sociologist that they were on the rise. Pundits predicted that we'd soon be throwing our Selectric typewriters in the junk pile of technological history. Mrs. Chambers had decided not to stick around for the revolution, leaving the opening for the red-haired young woman in front of me.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Norris," I said in my most professorial voice, extending my hand. The old saying goes that you only get one chance to make a first impression, and I wanted to be on her good side from the get-go, whatever her fashion choices.

"Howdy," she replied, smiling broadly and shaking my outstretched hand. Her firm, confident handshake belayed the outward impression of a pop culture obsessed woman in her early 20's. The accent was definitely New York City, but some California valley girl had crept in along the way. Frank Zappa's hit song from 1982 started playing in my head.

She gave me a quick up and down look – so quick that most people might have missed it. It was not a sexual perusal, just a simple, mature assessment: there seemed to be more to this person than met the eye and she was working hard to disguise it. Heck, there *had* to be more to Daphne Norris than her outward appearance if she'd won over the battleship captain. The thought that Armbruster had even finished the interview, let alone hired her, astonished me. Fer sure.

Well, hell this might be fun, so I smiled, ready to spring my wits on her. I'm one of those obnoxious people who are constantly making pop culture references just to see how people respond - my way of seeing how compatible I'll be with them. Call it an ongoing sociological experiment. Most people fail the test miserably.

"I hope you know how to use our new computer, just don't try to hack into NORAD with it OK?" The reference was from the movie *War Games* which had been out since June so I thought it was an underhanded throw for me. I could have gone with something much more obscure, but like I said I was trying to get on her good side.

"OK, and I promise not to change anybody's biology grade either," replied Daphne, doing a respectable Ally Sheedy impression to boot. She smiled at me with a matter of fact look on her face that let me know she'd understood the test and was willing to play the game. Not bad. I smiled back, realizing I'd met a worthy opponent.

Her smile broke into laughter, and I couldn't help but join in. Armbruster looked a little confused about the whole exchange; his normal state when references in a conversation went anywhere past the Howdy Doody era.

"I think we'll get along great Daphne," I said smiling. "Welcome to St. Igs." She smiled back as I walked away and she returned to schmoozing with Armbruster. I didn't give her another thought but had no idea at the time how much I'd be counting on her in the next week.

* * * * *

The alumni reception was being held in Smith Hall, the small theatre located near the center of Saint Igs campus. The warmth of the early September day had continued into the evening, so we'd set up tables in the reception area outside the theater and on the stone patio that extended from one end of the reception hall facing a broad, open lawn with the fine arts building in the distance. One of

those steel beam monstrosities that the 1970's had called sculpture could be seen from the patio, its accent lights making it look like something from *War of the Worlds*. Outlines of trees lining the walks around campus were visible in the gathering dusk of the early evening.

A quartet of St. Igs students was playing something baroque, setting the formal mood that can be so conducive to separating people from their disposable income. Tables were covered with white linen and arrangements of fresh flowers. Groups of alumni sat or stood around the room talking and laughing about old times. A table full of artfully arranged finger food sat along one side of the room under a Rothko-style abstract mural that filled one wall.

The place was pretty full and I was doing my best to look like I was mingling and attempting to extract promises of donations from the unsuspecting. I was really wandering about and watching the social interactions. I'm the kind of person that can sit and watch folks all night at one of these events, soaking in the conversations and the interactions. I'm not a person who *likes* to have those interactions myself, but I'm happy to live vicariously through watching them. Think Peter Sellers in *Being There*.

Professor Doris Hayes was occasionally giving me the evil eye for my feeble attempts at proactive mingling. The math professor was short, plump and lacking any sense of humor I had ever been able to discern. Hayes was also the chairman - sorry *chairperson* as she liked to say - of the alumni committee. Dr. Hayes was a big proponent of this "political correctness" stuff that was making its way through common vocabulary. I liked to make her crazy by referring to people employed by US Postal Service as "Mail Persons." It drove her nuts.

The *chairperson* was currently standing with the Dean of Student Affairs, talking up an older alumnus who had recently finished med school and opened a practice down the road in Concord. Hayes had positioned herself in such a way so she could follow the conversation as well as keep an eye on me. Such trust. Not that her concerns weren't well placed. As I said, I was much more interested in observing the social interactions of the cocktail party crowd than making donation pitches to some newly minted M.D.

I had relinquished the jeans and polo shirt from the afternoon and donned a more appropriate pair of chinos and dress shirt with blue blazer that only made it out of my closet for events like this. I'm not much to look at as people go. My ancestry is generic central European so I've got pretty generic features: an oval face with a jaw line that people have said is my best feature, brown eyes and thinning light brown hair that is racing to see if it will be gone before it turns

grey. I'm tall enough that the extra pounds I've put on in the past 5 years are hidden pretty well.

I maneuvered my way over to the food table, surveying the canapés as well as the crowd. My observations confirmed that most of the former students were from graduating classes of the last few years, although there were smatterings from earlier years, such as the new doctor being pumped by Hayes and the dean. My stomach was grumbling because of my proximity to all the hors d'oeuvres. I was working on a way to make dinner out of the spread in front of me without invoking the wrath of the alumni chair in the process.

All outside stimuli was curtailed when I eyed the large plate of shrimp that was the centerpiece of the buffet table. While loading up a seriously too small plate with cocktail sauce and seafood I heard a familiar laugh that was likely the only thing that could have broken my culinary concentration.

Diane Boudreaux was standing on the patio with her new husband, Evan Marks. She had been the one person I'd hoped would show up tonight. Diane had just graduated in May and had been something of a project of mine. I had been assigned as her faculty advisor and ended up helping her through a pretty bad patch her freshman year.

After I'd helped Diane make a decent academic career for herself I'd lost touch with her during her Junior and Senior year. We saw each other occasionally and she'd even been nice enough to invite me to her wedding that past May right after she graduated. Big affair: fancy in that snooty, exclusive, New England garden party sort of way.

I scooped up my seafood catch while Hayes wasn't looking to make my way out to the patio towards Diane and Evan, popping shrimp as I walked. The temperature was 5-10 degrees cooler outside, and I sidled up to the small grouping that stood on the flagstones chattering away, happy for the cooler air. Diane was facing me and as I approached, recognition spread over her face.

The newlywed gave me a quick, friendly little hug while deftly avoiding my heaping plate and a conspiratorial smirk crossed her face. "I should have figured you'd be here Professor Ballintine. Are you surviving?" Diane knew I was on the committee and also knew my feelings for these kinds of functions: observer, not participant.

Diane Boudreaux was not a tall woman - about 5'5" and thin in a stylish way. She was dressed in a conservative knee length skirt and blouse, black nylons and flats. Her wavy dark brown hair hung to just above her shoulders and framed a long face, straight nose, and grey eyes. She had a habit of crinkling her

forehead like she was constantly frowning. I had taken it as the habit of a person who is always trying to fit in and always concerned that she's not. Diane was doing it now while she chatted, even though she was among friends.

"Surviving, yes," I replied, "better now that I can hide in this little group of people and pretend I'm milking you for cash. Evan, how are you?" After putting down my plate on a nearby table I reached my hand out. Evan grabbed it and gave it a good firm shake. The young man looked straight into my eyes and smiled.

"Professor, good to see you again, ready for the new semester?" While I picked up my plate again and answered, I took in the young couple: just starting out on their life together, having no idea what was in store for them. I remembered that road myself, thinking back on how I'd had no idea what was coming when I'd gotten married 15 years ago. I was long divorced and seeing them reminded me I had not called my daughter in a long while.

Evan Marks was one of those people you swear you'd seen before. He was sort of a cross between David Bowie and Darryl Hall: *Let's Dance* and *Maneater* being in heavy rotation on MTV at that moment so they were on my mind. He was just north of 6 feet tall, with a youthful face, fair skin, light brown eyes and dirty blond hair cropped short on the sides but longer on top.

He was a good-looking young man with an air of utter confidence about him that had struck me at the wedding when I first met him. He had not been not a student at St Igs; I think he'd gone to the University of New Hampshire with Diane's brother David. I thought the confidence was great for someone his age, which I guessed was a year or two older than Diane.

Before I could answer Evan's follow-up question about my course load, Diane was re-introducing me to some of the friends she graduated with last May. We got into a conversation about the school and I did my best to remind them why they were all there and to get them to commit to donations. All these kids came from pretty well-to-do families, so I figured I had a good shot.

In the middle of our conversation, a freshman, filling some of his work-study time, wandered by in waiter garb with a tray of white wine in the solid stemware designed for such functions. I was surprised when Diane accepted a glass and took a quick sip in the middle of a sentence. Before I could comment, Diane quickly put a finger up in my direction, her customary smirk coming to her face again.

"Now before you say anything professor, I decided that since I was out of school *and* that I'm going into the family business, I should try to start this

again," holding out her glass for effect, "in moderation and at social occasions of course."

I had reason for my surprise. Diane's father had died suddenly about a year before she started at St. Igs and she'd been angry and adrift when she started college. Diane had found alcohol as a refuge in high school and by the time she'd started at St. Igs it had become a crutch. I'd managed to convince her to get some counseling and by the middle of her sophomore year Diane had managed a solid 3.0 average and had actually become something of teetotaler.

"Don't worry Professor, I'm keeping my eye on her." Evan put an arm around Diane and gave her a little sideways hug. Diane smiled, but it looked a bit forced. Maybe this guy was being a little *too* protective, not that Diane couldn't use some of that. She was one of those people who needed to be steered at times. More of a follower than a leader.

"Yeah, don't worry, this man's keeping me on the straight and narrow," Diane took another sip of her drink, closing her eyes as she did so, her forehead crinkled a little extra.

"Far be it for me to question a graduate of this *fine* institution," I intoned in my best sarcastic, professorial voice, popping two more shrimp in my mouth. I looked up to see Doris Hayes giving me the eye from inside the reception hall, making sure I was not hiding, which of course I was. I realized I'd better move on.

"Well, I'm off to mingle with older, more financially stable alumni. Diane, it was good seeing you again. You as well Evan." I said my goodbyes to the other students in turn and Evan gave me another firm handshake. Diane leaned in and gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

I went back trying to do my duty as a member of the committee but as the evening continued I felt increasingly weird. I started feeling flush and slightly sick to my stomach. I eyed the remaining shrimp on the buffet table and wondered how long they had been sitting out. I do love seafood, but occasionally it does not like me. I had a feeling it was turning in to one of those times.

The evening was winding down and many people had left, but I knew my obligation and was doing my best to keep in Dr. Hayes good graces, continuing to chat up the remaining alumni. However, it was becoming increasingly hard to concentrate given how I was feeling. Twice I'd been speaking to folks and caught Hayes looking out of the corner of her eye as I swayed slightly on my feet, trying to be the dutiful tenure-elect but feeling like I was going to pass out.

I was talking to the newly minted doctor - the one Hayes and the dean had cornered earlier and who Hayes insisted I speak to before she'd release me - when I felt my body decide it had enough. We were standing on the stone patio and I was doing my best to be interested in the latest pharmaceutical product for something or other and experienced that feeling we've all felt when your gastrointestinal tract is about to have its way with you.

As the doctor was getting to what he thought was the really interesting characteristic of the drug he was describing, I raised a finger to excuse myself, leaned over a low stone wall into a flower bed and puked up way too many shrimp. When I turned around, Doris Hayes was standing there, a look of incredulousness on her face. The doctor had beat a hasty retreat.

Well, heck, he wasn't going to make good doc if he couldn't deal with a little vomit, right?

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CHAPTER TWO

The Labor Day weekend passed quietly, which I was happy for since it was another 24 hours before I felt like myself again after the shrimp incident. Hayes had bawled me out and I spent a groggy 5 minutes trying to convince her that I was not drunk, thank-you very much, just food poisoned. I knew I was going to hear about all this again and not in a good way.

I hung around the house most of the weekend, doing laundry, helping my landlady pick tomatoes and cucumbers from her garden, sitting on my deck reading and going for a long drive on Labor Day. Oh, and I saw *Risky Business*, which had just opened over in Concord. I'd have to remember to mention the air guitar scene in my classes - that Tom Cruise could have a good career ahead of him, hopefully not all of it in his underwear.

Sunday night I spent sitting on my back deck drinking beer, thinking about Diane and wool gathering. Diane had been the typical freshman party student and her grades had quickly gone south - hell, they'd started in Mexico and worked their way to Patagonia.

Just before the Christmas holidays that year I had gotten a call from her mother, Sarah Boudreaux, asking for my help. The Boudreaux family was well known in Taft. The family owns a local beer distributor and are something of a fixture in town, known for their community involvement and good works.

I'd found Diane to be funny and intelligent as I got to know her, genuinely looking for someone outside of her family to help her sort things out. I had a respect for someone who was looking a way out of their hard times. I'd had to

do the same for myself a while ago. I'm typically an introvert and did not have many friends, but Diane and I had hit it off and I thought she'd genuinely been thankful for my counsel.

I had not seen Diane a lot after the beginning of her junior year, but I felt I'd made a difference in her life and felt good about it. I realized that seeing her meant more than I realized, making me think about some things I hadn't pondered in a while.

I woke up around nine on Tuesday morning and started my regular morning routine. I'm not a person who goes for fancy decorating so my place is pretty functional. It's a second floor, one bedroom apartment with a central hallway and rooms off the corridor: kitchen off to the right as you come in (with classic 1970's harvest gold appliances), bedroom and a bath on the left, then a small living room. The kitchen has a breakfast nook big enough for two, open to the living room and a door out to a small deck with a set of stairs down to the backyard.

Walking into the kitchen and looking out through the door to the deck I saw Sonny and Cher. They sat patiently on the porch rail staring in with the looks only cats have that say "Well, ya gonna let me in? 'Bout damn time ya got up."

The cats are brother and sister, grey tabbies I got from the local animal shelter when I moved to New Hampshire. They were perfect animals for a person like me: easy to take care of, no walking needed and not a lot of affection required. Before letting them in I poured out the new anti-hairball food the vet had given me, hoping this was going to stop Sonny from leaving me little fur and saliva presents to step on in the middle of the night.

I opened the door and they both sauntered in, Cher giving me a bitchy little meow as she passed and Sonny quietly making a beeline for the food bowls. Soon there was a duet of small crunching noises coming from floor level. I've learned to never try to converse with them while they were eating, so I went down the stairs to the front stoop to get the morning papers. I had no classes until the afternoon, so I was planning to putter around the house in the morning, have a leisurely breakfast and go in around 11.

I like reading the news so I get the *Boston Globe* as well as the local paper, the *Suncook Morning Herald*. The *Herald* is not a big enterprise, a twice weekly affair of two sections with mostly local news and sports, and its biggest failing, no comics. That was reason enough to get the *Globe*; Bloom County is a must read for any pop culture fanatic.

I started with the *Globe* like I normally did, not even unwrapping the *Morning Herald* from its rubber band, and looked at the front page while I made coffee. Like most Americans, coffee is the way I start my day, but I'm a picky sort. I'm not one of those percolator or Mr. Coffee types. I like to make my coffee one cup at a time thank you very much so I make it drip style. I don't buy my coffee in stores either. I have a friend out in Seattle who turned me to this local stuff out there by a company called Starbucks, who mail order you the beans. Too bad you can't get the stuff everywhere.

I made my brew and sat down to peruse the paper in my breakfast nook, Sonny coming up on the table to get a little affection and occasionally deciding he wanted to read the paper as well until I paid him more attention. The *Globe* was full of the biggest news of the week – the shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 over Soviet air space. The plane had crashed the past Thursday, but the Russians had just admitted to shooting the 747 down. The rhetoric was getting heated with the nuclear specter hanging in the words of the articles and the opinion page. After about 45 minutes I got around to the *Herald* and I was shocked by the headline that greeted me on the front page:

Walter Boudreaux found dead in Suncook River

With the subhead:

Victim's niece missing

Walter Boudreaux was currently head of Boudreaux Distributors. My former student Diane Boudreaux was his only niece.

The article continued:

Late yesterday Taft Police disclosed that a fisherman had found the body of Walter Boudreaux, president of Boudreaux Distributors, in the Suncook River just downstream from the town of Taft. The fisherman, Wayne Pawling, found the body early Sunday morning floating in brush on the east side of the river and contacted Taft Police. The body was removed from the river with the help of Concord's Water Rescue Team on Sunday at around 11 am. Police have not released details of the case but have not ruled out foul play.

Boudreaux was last seen on Saturday evening at the annual Labor Day party for employees at the offices of Boudreaux Distributors in Taft. According to several employees, Boudreaux had gotten into a disagreement with his niece, Diane Boudreaux at the affair. Witnesses stated that the argument was heated and that Boudreaux's husband, Evan Marks intervened to stop the disagreement.

Ms. Boudreaux has not been seen since Saturday evening. Mr. Marks could not be reached for comment for this story, but it is assumed that the woman is still missing as of this morning.

Detective James Wright of the Taft Police would not confirm if the two events, Boudreaux's death and the disappearance of Ms. Boudreaux, were related. "We are looking at all possibilities at the moment. It is too early in the investigation to rule out any connections." Wright told the Herald late Sunday.

Walter Boudreaux, 55, had been president of Boudreaux Distributors since 1978, following the death of his brother, William Boudreaux. The family has run the Suncook Valley beer distributor since the mid 1960's. The Boudreaux family has been active in the community for many years. Sarah Boudreaux, the widow of William Boudreaux, is chairman of the Taft Library Committee and has been active in many social causes....

The remainder of the article was background on the largess of the Boudreaux family.

I sat with an empty coffee cup in my hands and reread the relevant points of the article. I had not known Walter Boudreaux other than what Diane had told me. In fact, I'd only met him once at Diane and Evan's wedding that past June. He seemed one of those stuffed shirt accountant types who kept to himself. I knew that there was no love lost between Diane and Walter though.

Diane felt Walter could have been more sympathetic after her father's death and that Walter seemed to care more about his family's business than the emotional state of his brother's family. Diane had not been overtly nasty when she'd described her uncle, but I recalled there had been a lot of emotional charge in her words as she'd told me about him.

I don't know how long I sat thinking over my past conversations with Diane about Walter before the phone rang, startling me out of my thoughts. I reached around the corner from the breakfast nook, took the wall phone off its cradle and said a terse greeting, my mind still lingering on Diane Boudreaux.

"Dr. Ballintine? Dr. Alexander Ballintine?" the female voice was slightly weak, but it meant business all the same - I had heard the voice before but could not place it, my brain still lost in the newspaper article.

“This is Alex Ballintine. Who is this?”

“Sarah Boudreaux, Dr. Ballintine. Diane’s mother.” Now it clicked. I had talked to Sarah Boudreaux at Diane and Evan’s wedding back in June, but only briefly in the receiving line. Before that I hadn’t talked to her since Diane was a freshman at St. Igs. Her voice sounded upset, which is why I had not recognized her right away. She was one of those people who seemed to always know what she wanted, her confidence solidified by her voice and manner. I could understand why recent events might have thrown her off her stride.

“I won’t ask how you are Mrs. Boudreaux but offer my condolences on the loss of your brother-in-law.” I had done this enough in my past life that I knew what should be said to the family of the recently deceased.

“Ah, I see you’ve read the papers. Thank you Dr. Ballintine. It is quite a shock to all of us. Walter was a fine man and kept the company running smoothly after William’s death.” Her voice cracked slightly at the word “Walter,” but regained its composure in the time it took her to get to the end of the sentence. “Dr. Ballintine I will get right to the point. I’d like to see you at your earliest convenience, this morning if possible.”

Well, she might be upset but was still the no nonsense woman I remembered. “Well, Mrs. Boudreaux, I have classes to teach this morning,” I lied. I did have a desire to find out some info about Diane, but I preferred to do it on my terms. “Could I meet you sometime late this afternoon perhaps?”

“I understand from the secretary at St. Igs that your first class is not until 1:30 this afternoon. I’d like to see you before that if I could.” The composure was fully back, realizing she’d caught me in my white lie. I remembered now how this woman had persuaded me to assist her daughter 4 years ago. She was very hard to say no to, like your least favorite, pushy teacher from high school.

Well, I saw no reason to put this off now that she’d caught my fib. “OK, Mrs. Boudreaux, how about I come over in say, 30 minutes?” I made a mental note to talk to our new administrative assistant about giving out my schedule, or my home number for that matter. I might need to break my rule of not crossing the department secretary.

“Thank you for being so accommodating, 30 minutes would be fine.” the tone was now one of calm satisfaction. “Do you know how to get here?”

“I think so, is it where Diane and Evan’s reception was held?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Just park in the drive out front. See you in 30 minutes.” The line went dead without a concluding salutation and without a chance to ask why she wanted to see me.

I quickly showered, shaved and got into my normal lecture clothes for the day ahead - jeans and a dress shirt. I added my well-worn blue blazer knowing what I did about Mrs. Boudreaux's more formal tastes, then headed down the stairs and out to the garage. I live in a quiet neighborhood of single-family homes not far from downtown Taft, a mixture of older folks, like my landlady Alice Morehead, who lives downstairs, and renters who mostly keep to themselves. The difference in my place is that it sits on a double lot and includes an old three bay garage. The garage was one of the major selling points for me when I was looking for a place when I moved here.

You can't own a British sports car without having a place to work on it and keep it out of the weather in the winter. One of my few indulgences is Mary Jane, my, 1975 Triumph TR6 convertible. I bought it used right after I got my job at St. Igs. The yellow color and dark burgundy interior of the car reminded a professor at school of the wrappers on Mary Jane peanut butter taffy and the name stuck. She's in mint condition and to keep her that way I don't drive her after the snow flies. I didn't have too many more weeks to enjoy her, then it was back to the beater I drive during the winter.

The day was cloudy, hot and humid and a slight drizzle came and went. I manhandled the old garage door open, walking into the musty old three bay garage. My winter wheels, a blue, 1973 Civic hatchback sat in the next bay, my landlady's little used 1976 Chevy Nova took up the third. I immediately regretted the blazer and took it off, tossing it into the passenger seat. On days like this when I could not put the top down I wished Mary Jane had air conditioning.

I carefully backed the car out of the garage. Driving slowly out of town towards the Boudreaux house, I finally let my mind drift to the implications of why Sarah Boudreaux would call me. My past is a quagmire and the less I dwelled there, the better. That was about to change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eric Halter is a retired IT project manager who decided the Covid pandemic was a good time to re-evaluate his life priorities. He took up writing fiction and non-fiction because it's never too late to find the creative bones in your body.

He is originally trained as a geologist, so when he is not in front of the keyboard, he's out hiking to some great view or elusive outcrop. Or he's trying to improve his Ukelele playing. He has lived throughout the U.S., but currently resides in Sonoma County, California. He has an adult daughter, Emma, who he loves more than life itself.

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