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STEPHEN WHITE

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE PROGRAM*

WARNING SIGNS

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THRILLER FANS."

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**WARNING
SIGNS**

A DELL BOOK

2281004

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to teachers

*All women become like their mothers.
That is their tragedy. No man does. That is his.*

—Oscar Wilde

The Importance of Being Earnest

CHAPTER

I

Hands nipple high, palms up toward the night sky, Bruce Collamore started talking before the cops were even out of their car.

"I almost didn't call you guys. I was thinking that it was all too much like the O.J. thing. Don't you think? I mean, my dog didn't bark like that dog did, but I was walking my dog when I heard the scream. That's pretty close to the O.J. situation, isn't it? Anyway, that's why I almost didn't call. I'm still not sure I should have called. I haven't heard anything since that first scream. Right now, I think maybe it was nothing. That's what I'm beginning to think."

Two Boulder cops had responded to the 911. A coed team. Both were young, handsome, and strong.

The woman was a five-year vet on the Boulder Police force named Kerry VanHorn. She was a devout Christian who kept her religion to herself; she'd once even confided to a girlfriend that she thought proselytizing

should be a capital offense. She had dirty-blond hair and a friendly Scandinavian face that put people at ease even when she didn't want to put them at ease. Over the years she'd discovered that if she squinted like she was looking into the sun people took her more seriously.

She was the first out of the squad car and the first to speak to the man who apparently remembered way too much about the O.J. case. She tucked her long flashlight under her arm and grabbed a pen before she squinted up at him—the guy was at least six five—and said, “Your name, sir?”

“Collamore, Bruce Collamore.” He was wearing a ragged Middlebury College sweatshirt and an accommodating smile.

“This your house?” She gestured toward the home closest to where they were standing. Jay Street was high on the western edge of Boulder, in territory that the foothills of the Rockies seemed to have yielded only reluctantly to housing. If there was a boundary between urban and rural on the west edge of town, Jay was definitely on the side of the line that was more mountain than burg. The trees and grasses were wild and haphazard, and the curbs cut into the sides of the roadway fooled no one—this was one part of Boulder where the Rockies still reigned.

“This? My house? No. God, no.”

“You live on this street, sir?”

“Here? No, I live a couple blocks over on Pleasant. I was out walking Misty. This is Misty.” He reached down and tousled his dog's ears. The yellow Lab dipped her head and wagged her tail. Bruce Collamore and his dog both seemed eager to please.

“So . . . you were out walking your dog and you

heard a . . .” While she waited for him to fill in the blank, she briefly lost her focus as she entertained an unbidden association to a crush she’d had on a junior high school teacher she had thought was cute.

Collamore brought her back to the moment as though he were someone who was accustomed to being in conversations where the other party’s attention was wandering. He said, “A scream, I heard a scream. A loud one. Long, too. I mean, I haven’t heard that many screams in my life but it, you know, seemed longer than . . . well, a normal scream. If there is such a thing? Jeez, ‘a normal scream.’ Did I really say that? What’s wrong with me? Anyway, I think it came from that house. I’m pretty sure it did. That one. There.” Collamore pointed at the gray-and-white two-story house directly across from where they stood on the edge of the road. “I had my cell phone with me so I thought I’d go ahead and call 911. Maybe it wasn’t the right thing to do. I don’t know. I’m a little nervous. You can probably tell I’m nervous.”

She could tell. And she wasn’t sure that he was nervous only because she was a cop. That suspicion made her a little nervous, too.

His left hand was balled around the dog’s leash, so she couldn’t see if Collamore was married. When she looked back up at him she squinted, just in case he was thinking what she was worried he was thinking. “What time was that, sir? That you heard the scream?”

“Nine fifty-one.”

She wrote down the nine before she looked up from her notepad and lifted an eyebrow. The expression of incredulity interfered with her squint.

“I checked my watch when I heard the scream. You

know, the O.J. thing? I thought somebody might want to know what time it happened. It really was that kind of scream—a somebody's-killing-me scream. So, I checked my watch when I heard it." He exhaled loudly and ran his fingers through his hair. "God, this is embarrassing. I shouldn't have called, should I?"

She tried to make a neutral face, but wasn't sure she'd succeeded. She said, "No need to be embarrassed. We appreciate help from citizens. Can't do our jobs without it." But she was thinking that in most cities civilians ran and hid after they called 911. In Boulder they stick around on the sidewalk with their cell phones and their yellow Labradors named Misty. And maybe they keep contemporaneous records of their movements on their Palm Pilots. For all she knew this whole situation was already being tracked live on the Net.

Boulder.

Now she looked at the house he'd identified. The dwelling was an oasis of orderliness at the end of the block, the only home that looked like it could be plopped down comfortably in one of Boulder's more sedate neighborhoods. The owners of the surrounding houses—all of which were shabby in the way old cashmere is shabby—were either celebrating their good fortune at having modest homes in such a spectacular location or they were waiting for land values to escalate even more obscenely before they sold their fixer-upper to somebody who'd scrape the lot clear and start all over. She said, "You know who lives in this house, Bruce? May I call you Bruce?"

"Sure. Here? No, I don't. Like I said, I was just walking Misty. We come this way almost every night

about this time. Since we walk late, most of the time we don't see anyone. Certainly don't hear many screams. Actually, we don't hear *any* screams. Before tonight, anyway. We heard one tonight, didn't we, girl?" He lowered his tone at least an octave as he addressed the dog.

VanHorn watched Misty's tail sweep the ground. She said, "And that was at nine fifty-one?"

"Yes, nine fifty-one."

"Well, we'll check that out. You don't mind staying here for a few minutes in case we have some more questions? My partner and I are going to speak to whoever is inside the house."

"No, no. We don't mind at all. Misty and I are happy to stick around."

The other cop, Kerry VanHorn's partner, was Colin Carpino. He had two years on the job. He was built like a bulldog but his creamy skin was almost hairless. VanHorn sometimes teased him that she had female relatives who shaved their upper lips more often than he did. She called him Whiskers.

As they moved up the brick walk in single file, she asked, "What do you think, Whiskers?"

"I buy lunch for a week if this is anything other than a waste of time." He shifted his long Mag-Lite from his right hand to his left.

She laughed. "It's your turn to buy. You're getting lunch tonight whether this is the Great Train Robbery or the lady of the house freaking out over a spider."

Carpino hit the doorbell button by the front door. They listened as it chimed like a carillon in a cathedral, and they waited.

He knocked. They waited some more.

He hit the bell again. This time he said, "Boulder Police," right after he heard the bells begin to peal inside the house. His tenor carried in the still air. The whole neighborhood of shuttered windows and closed doors had to know now that the cops were here. VanHorn waited for lights to come on, doors to open. It didn't happen. Collamore saw her looking his way and waved at her. She didn't wave back.

Whiskers reached down and tried the latch on the door. It didn't give.

VanHorn responded by touching her holster with her fingertips. The act was a caress, almost sensual in its carelessness—and it was involuntary, like a man checking for the presence of his wallet half a minute after he leaves the automatic teller machine.

The two cops waited for someone to come to the door and tell them everything was just fine.

After most of a minute had leaked into the void between them, VanHorn said, "I'll check the back of the house." She wasn't nervous yet, but she had definitely crossed over the line that separated routine from everything else that existed on a police officer's planet. The feeling was familiar, and not entirely unwelcome. The wariness sharpened her senses. She'd been around long enough to know that wasn't a bad thing.

"I'll take a look at the windows up front here and over on the other side," Carpino said.

The north side of the house was unlit, making it difficult for VanHorn to navigate the uneven path of flagstones. Spreading junipers clotted the open spaces between the window wells. An avid gardener, she hated junipers, especially spreading junipers. She alternated the flashlight beam between the path in front

of her and the windows on the side of the house and noticed nothing that alarmed her. She fingered the switch of the radio microphone that was clipped to the left shoulder of her uniform blouse and said, "Nothing unusual on the side of the house. Just some unimagi-native landscaping. But even in Boulder I don't think that's a crime."

Carpino replied, "Yet. Hold on, I may have something up here, Kerry." His voice betrayed no alarm. She waited for him to continue. He didn't.

She stepped lightly into the backyard. A streetlight brightened the rear of the house. She reached up and touched the button on her microphone. "What do you have, Whiskers? Open window?"

"No, I'm on the opposite side of the house from you, shining my beam inside into what looks like the living room. I make a lamp lying on the floor and some broken glass. That's all."

After again caressing the flap on her holster with the fingertips of her right hand, Officer VanHorn spent a moment examining the backyard with the beam of her flashlight. Only when she was certain she was alone in the yard did she take determined strides across a pleasant brick patio, past an almost-new gas grill, and up two steps to the door that led to the house. She grabbed the knob of the metal security door and twisted it. The door opened right up. She locked her gaze on the painted French door behind the security panel and fingered her microphone. "Back door's open. Not just unlocked, but open-open. Why don't you call for backup?"

She waited for his response long enough to inhale and exhale twice. Finally, she said, "Colin?"

He said, "Sorry. I may be looking at a person's foot, Kerry, just someone's heel. Like there's somebody lying on the floor. But I can't see past the heel. If it's a foot, then the rest of the body's behind a sofa."

VanHorn sighed. "We'd better go in. Tell dispatch."

"Will do. I'll call for backup and join you back there."

Kerry VanHorn flicked up the flap on her holster and drew her service weapon with her right hand. Her Mag-Lite was in her left. Before she took another step she squeezed her biceps against her upper torso to convince herself that she'd remembered to wear her vest. She had.

Within seconds, Whiskers joined her at the back door. He, too, had his service weapon ready. He said, "The living room's in the southwest corner. That's where I saw the foot." She nodded and said a silent prayer before she nudged the French door with the toe of her shoe. She winced as the door squeaked open.

She yelled "Boulder Police" as she entered a big kitchen and family room. Shadowed light from the alley streetlamp revealed an expensive recent remodel. Cherry cabinets. Granite countertops. Big double stainless-steel sink. Appliances that disappeared into the cabinetry. One appliance she didn't even recognize. She didn't like that kitchens had developed in such a way that people used appliances she couldn't recognize.

But nothing was out of place. She could hear Whiskers's footsteps on the hardwood floor behind her. The resonant clap was reassuring. There was almost nothing she liked doing less as a cop than walking into dark houses.

The door from the kitchen led to a short hallway. Again she called out, "Boulder Police," and waited for a reply. Nothing. Carpino repeated the announcement. After she waited for a response that never came, she stepped past a powder room and saw a dining room on her right. She played the beam into the room for two or three seconds. It didn't appear that anyone had eaten in there recently; the table was covered with piles of mail. She gestured with her flashlight to reassure her partner before she turned toward the living room. At the bottom of a staircase she flicked the beam up the stairs. She spotted nothing that alarmed her but noticed an odd device on rails attached to the side of the staircase. She also noted a rhythmic *shush-shush, shush-shush, shush-shush* coming down from the second floor. The sound was familiar to her but she couldn't place it. *Shush-shush, shush-shush, shush-shush*. The rhythm wasn't out of place in a house. She was sure of that. But what was it that she was hearing?

Darn. She couldn't place the noise.

She took two steps into the living room and swept her flashlight beam in a wide, slow arc, looking for the foot that Whiskers had seen, praying that he was wrong or, failing that, that there was at least still a person attached to it.

The first thing that caught her attention was the lamp on the floor—she assumed it was the same one that Whiskers had spotted through the window. Then she saw the broken glass, a lot of it. The glass appeared to be some kind of pottery or ceramic; it must have been a big piece before it was busted.

No foot.

Lights flashed outside on the street. VanHorn

looked up and was relieved to see a patrol car slide to the curb in front of the house. Her partner whispered, "Backup's here." She adjusted the grip on her weapon and, for her own benefit, silently mouthed, "I'm doing fine. I'm doing fine."

EEEEHHHHHHNNNNNN.

A loud, noxious buzzing seemed to fill the house. The sound was bitter and sour, like aural vinegar. It blared for maybe two seconds before it stopped as abruptly as it started. VanHorn's pulse jumped when the noise started and she wheeled around to check behind her. Carpino's eyes were wide as he, too, searched for the source of the sound. VanHorn's service weapon felt heavy in her hand.

She shook her head, announcing she didn't know the source of the sound. Carpino did the same.

The buzzing blared again. EEEEEHHHHHHNNNNNN. Once again the sharp sound stopped suddenly.

The noise had seemed to come from everywhere at once.

What was it? What was it? She couldn't place it.

She yelled "Boulder Police" one more time.

Then she noticed that the *shush-shush* had ceased, and the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. VanHorn smiled. She knew what it was. The *shush-shush* had been the refrain of a tumbling clothes dryer. The buzzer was the notification that the cycle was done. Her boyfriend's dryer made the same awful noise. She exhaled and slowly refilled her lungs. "Whiskers? That was a clothes dryer, I think. At the end of its cycle."

He said, "Oh," and definitely sounded relieved.

Someone had recently started a dryer in this house.

How long did a load take to dry? Forty-five minutes? An hour?

Through the side windows she watched another black-and-white slide to a stop at the curb.

She stepped around the lamp on the floor so that she could see behind the sofa at the far end of the room. Behind the sofa was an open door. She thought it would lead back to the family room that she'd seen when she first came into the house, the one adjacent to the new kitchen. She swung the beam toward the floor behind the striped couch.

She saw the foot, paused, and then she took another step.

"Oh Jesus. Oh my God. Oh dear Jesus." If she had a free hand she would have crossed herself with it, an affectation of her Catholic past.

At the sight of the blood and the mangled tissue where the person's face should be, VanHorn felt a sour geyser erupting in her esophagus and she swallowed twice to stem the urge to vomit. She took a step back and stumbled over the broken pottery. When she returned her gaze to the body on the floor, she said, "May God rest your soul, whoever you are."

Carpino said, "What?" His voice came from behind her, maybe ten or twelve feet away.

She said, "You were right, there's a body in here, Colin. A lot of blood. Call for an ambulance, okay?"

She counted to three and told herself she was fine. But she didn't feel fine. She felt as though she should sit down to keep from passing out, but she didn't want to disturb what she already knew was a crime scene. Sequentially, she looked everywhere in the room that didn't have a bloody body. She even looked at the

ceiling. For her, the act was like looking at the horizon when she was seasick. Finally, the wave of nausea eased and her neurons resumed firing and she carefully checked the room to make triple-sure she and her partner and the guy on the floor didn't have any company.

She dropped to her knees, stooped over the body, and lowered her head to listen for breath sounds. She heard nothing. To feel for a pulse, she needed to put down either her light or her gun. For a moment she weighed her choice, finally deciding to place the torch on the carpet, and, as she'd been taught, she rested three fingers on the underside of the radial bone of the man's right wrist. She was thinking the body was that of a man. The socks were men's socks. She was pretty sure of that. An exposed inch of calf was moderately hairy.

It was a man.

She felt no pulse. She thought, maybe, the body was cooler than it should have been, but only a little, and certainly not cold. She spent a moment trying to remember the speed at which a body gives up its warmth after death—a degree an hour, was that it?—and wondered if it was possible that this man was the same person who had started the dryer upstairs. He couldn't have cooled down that fast, could he? Maybe her own fingers were hot and that's why the body felt cool. That was certainly possible.

Variables, variables.

Bruce Collamore had said he heard the "somebody's-killing-me" scream at 9:51. She looked at her watch. It was 10:17. No, if this were the screamer, he wouldn't have cooled down, yet.