

CHASING THE PAIN

A Marty Singer Mystery

by

Matthew Iden

Chapter One

People I trust have told me I should answer my phone more often. Since I almost hung up on the call that saved my friend's life, they might be onto something.

In my defense, two kinds of calls had been showing up lately, the *have-you-thought-about-replacing-your-windows?* and the *would you like to vote for our candidate?* variety. When this one came in, I was sitting on my front porch with my feet on the railing and my hands behind my head, gazing at the ceiling where patches of paint as big as pages in a dictionary were flaking away.

It was boring and unproductive, but I was content, so I sat there for nearly a minute with the phone in my pocket chattering like an angry cicada until, eventually, it stopped. *Score one for patience*, I thought . . . then, seconds later, it rang again. Aggravated, I pulled it out, my thumb hovering over the red button to end the call. But the world doesn't go away just because you ignore it—believe me, I've tried. I sighed, punched the green button, and said hello.

As it turned out, this call wasn't about windows *or* voting.

A woman introduced herself in a deep, confident voice as Elizabeth Reynolds. I was silent, trying to place the name.

"Elizabeth Reynolds," the woman repeated, as if to jog my memory.

"Sorry, Ms. Reynolds," I said. "Can you—"

"I'm Karl Schovasa's wife," she interrupted, then corrected herself so quickly she tripped over the words. "Ex-wife."

"How is Karl?"

"He's missing," she said. "And I thought you'd want to know."

“Why is that?”

“Because he left a message telling me you would.”

Karl Schovasa had been a U.S. Marshall and a good one. Dogged. Smart. Successful. He maintained congenial relationships with colleagues above and below him on the ladder, had a high “fugitive warrants cleared” score on the cases he solved, and avoided screwing the pooch on the ones he didn’t. It would be nice if that were all there was to say and, if I could stop there, I would.

But, throughout a career spanning three decades, he’d not only been a top-flight federal agent, he’d also been an alcoholic, dedicating himself to the bottle with as much gusto as transporting prisoners and chasing crooks.

In terms of the job, that isn’t as bad as it sounds. Heavy, habitual drinking among law enforcement officers is so common it’s cliché. By itself, it isn’t enough to end a career—if you can do the work, a lot can be forgiven, and for many years Karl had done that work well. He was, as they say, a high-functioning alcoholic . . . and better than functioning most days.

Just as retirement came in sight, however, the penny dropped in spectacular fashion. An Irish mob from Philly, working off a leak from the inside, had set out to eliminate a witness preparing to testify against the mob. Karl’s team, assigned the witness protection detail, was annihilated . . . while he’d slept off a three-day binge in a nearby motel. By some miracle, the witness and his son escaped, but Karl was ruined, professionally and emotionally.

Before he could be fired or forced into retirement, he cashed in all the personal leave he'd accumulated over years of service and made it his mission to hunt down the killers. I'd been pulled into Schovasa's orbit when the witness and his son, no longer believing in the "protection" part of "witness protection," had enlisted me in helping them construct a new identity and getting the hell out of there.

Karl hadn't appreciated my interference, but he and I had found a way to work together somewhat creakily, caught the bad guys, and reached a level of grudging, mutual respect—two crusty, middle-aged cops past their prime. We approached problems differently, but we'd both been around long enough to know that there was more than one way to skin the proverbial cat.

Where I'd faced and tackled many of my demons, though, I'd never been sure Schovasa had. The last I'd seen him, he was lying in a hospital bed, recovering from a gunshot wound, looking more than ever like a haggard King Pellinore of the Arthurian legends searching for his Questing Beast, unhappy in the hunt . . . but even more miserable when kept from it. What that Beast was, exactly, I'm not sure even Karl knew.

Post-recovery, he'd called to let me know the hospital food hadn't killed him. That had been the only contact for a year. I had no idea he'd had a wife, a divorce, or the slightest interest in contacting me if he happened to go MIA.

I met Elizabeth at Karl's place at the Audubon Fields apartment complex in Falls Church. It was one of those apartment towers that was painfully nondescript—a bland, ashen exterior where every unit had a balcony and a picture window, but not a jot of character.

Hung up by traffic, I arrived after Elizabeth. She was easy to spot, standing outside of the double-glass doors to the apartment building with her arms crossed and a hip slightly cocked. Hers was a wide face, with a rounded nose and arresting gray eyes. Her black hair pulled back into a no-nonsense bun, with a white streak running from her hairline to the crown like a bolt of lightning. A large leather handbag slung over one shoulder complemented her fashionable, rust-colored pantsuit and gold camisole top.

I introduced myself and we shook hands. “I didn’t know Karl had been married.”

“I sometimes wonder if he did.” The comment dropped like a dead fish on the table and she grimaced. “Sorry. It’s been five . . . challenging years and it’s been difficult to move on. Every time I think I’ve turned a corner, he lays this kind of thing on me.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Disappearing mysteriously. Asking me to contact strangers for help.”

“How did you know to reach out to me, specifically?”

“He left a note inside his apartment.”

I said nothing, my tongue tracing circles on the inside of my cheek. In my experience, divorcees with five rough years behind them don’t often allow each other easy access to their homes.

She read my confusion. “I’ve had a key since last year when he was shot. Prior to that, we hadn’t spoken much, but Karl simply didn’t have anyone else to help, so . . . I got him home and set him up.”

I frowned. “Is he still recovering? What made you look for a note?”

She shook her head. “A colleague from the Marshals called, asked me to check on him. Karl missed an important date, the anniversary of that terrible shooting. When he didn’t show, his friend reached out to me.”

“The anniversary isn’t something he’d avoid? Too painful, maybe?”

“Karl wouldn’t miss it if he had to crawl there. It was his form of penance.” She shifted the bag on her shoulder. “When I couldn’t reach him by phone, I let myself in.”

“And found the note?”

“In the recycling.” At my raised eyebrow, she said, “I was the wife of an investigator. If I’m going to bother checking his apartment, I’m going to cover all the bases.”

“May I see the note?”

She pulled a wrinkled page from her bag and handed it to me. I smoothed it out and peered at the crabbed writing that fit neatly on the lined paper. A date nearly three weeks past was scrawled at the top.

Liz, it read, if you’re in the apartment and reading this, I’ve been gone for a while. If you haven’t heard from me at all a few weeks from the date on this letter, call Marty Singer. He’ll know what to do. Thanks, K.

My phone number was jotted beneath my name with an arrow pointing to it. I flipped the paper over. Blank. I looked at Elizabeth, an unspoken question on my face.

“I don’t know where he went or why he would write that. You know he retired last year after that business and the weeks in the hospital. I have no idea where he’d go for weeks at a time. As far as I knew, he was sitting at home drinking and watching reruns of *The Rockford Files*.”

The words were raw, the hurt just below the surface like an old injury that hadn’t healed and still ached when touched. Unfortunately, Karl and Elizabeth’s story was one played on repeat,

worthy of its own channel of reruns: cop has a tough life, cop hits the bottle, bottle destroys marriage.

I'd had my own struggles with booze. Friends and colleagues had helped me pull myself together before I did any lasting damage but, twenty years later, I still didn't like to dwell on where I'd been or where I might've ended up. I was just thankful I'd found my way out. But not all cops—or cops' wives—were so lucky.

“The best way to figure out what he expects from me is to look around, maybe go through his stuff,” I said. “Is that okay with you?”

“Looking after his things isn't my business anymore. If he asked for your help, he must've known how you'd go about it.”

There wasn't much to say to that, so I let her show me the way to the seventh floor where lackluster, ridged wallpaper pulled the eye down the corridor. The carpeting was grayish brown, with a striped pattern meant to hide dirt and stains. Intermittent wall sconces emitting a low-wattage glow broke up the monotony.

We walked in silence to the end of the hall where Elizabeth fumbled with the keys at the door, then let us inside. She took a seat on a couch to watch as I soaked the place in.

I'd expected a bachelor pad with a décor to match that of the hallway with an easy chair parked five feet from the TV. Or, with his struggles with alcohol fresh in my mind, a slob's nest of cast-off furniture, ripped carpeting, and trash in every corner. But Schovasa had a better sense of design than I did, avoiding all the clichés, and was apparently unafraid of expressing a complicated personality through the objects in his apartment.

If his alcoholism influenced his home life, he covered it well. Sunlight streamed through spotless double-paned windows, revealing an apartment that was tidy and clean. No stray coffee

mugs or lolling beer cans, no half-empty pizza boxes or flattened chip bags. I sniffed. The apartment was a little stale from lack of use, maybe, but the air still held the pleasant smells of polish and the spa-like scent of upscale cleaning products. I knew what my place would say about me if someone were to do a spot inspection.

The furniture had simple lines and a lack of unnecessary adornment—a professor’s chair upholstered in cream-colored linen with dark rivets, a Shaker coffee table of burlled maple. I picked up a piece of ebony carved in the shape of a boa constricting a hapless boar then set it down next to its neighbor, a gleaming brass marine compass. Books on a nearby shelf ranged from potboilers to a recent volume on the history of psychedelic drugs.

In a far corner sat a tower of audio equipment and a shelf of Classical music CDs, populated by Russian composers I’d never heard of and light on the Romantics I had. I turned the power on and punched play; a riot of stormy orchestral notes blared forth and I snapped it off. In the sudden silence, road noise from the street in front of the complex took over, making Karl’s choice of music more understandable.

The walls were covered with art, from rustic and comforting—a winter scene in New England—to violent, modernist clashes of blues and gold. A man playing a trumpet in one, gouts of scarlet and black in another. Cityscapes and night scenes. The pieces were confusing, compelling. I peered closer to read the signature.

“They’re his,” Elizabeth said from the couch.

I glanced over a shoulder. “His who?”

“Karl’s,” she said. “Surprised? It was his artistic side that was always getting him in trouble. If he hadn’t been so damn sensitive, he could’ve handled things better.”

The word *things* covered a lot of ground. Their marriage. His career. His life.

“So, Elizabeth,” I said, straightening. “You said he didn’t tell you about any side work, but did he give you any hints about what he was doing? Something that would land him in trouble?”

“I don’t keep tabs on him.”

“No calls? Texts? Emails?”

“We don’t . . . do that. Not on a regular basis.” She looked down at the arm of the couch, toying with an errant thread. “Before he was shot, months could pass between calls. But since his time in the hospital, things have been . . . abnormal. We haven’t gotten back to our post-divorce footing again, so to speak.” She paused and the next words were made of ash. “Given time, I’m sure it wouldn’t be long until we were back to not speaking at all.”

“But you helped him after he was shot?”

“Yes. After his time in the hospital, he was weak and hadn’t been home in a month or more. I picked up some groceries and got him settled.”

Her voice hitched as she said the word *settled*. “Had he started drinking again?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“You left him to his own devices after that?”

“If he was healthy enough to walk to the liquor store, he could get by without me.”

“When was that? Sorry, I’m trying to build a timeline here.”

She sighed and crossed her legs. “I last saw him, face-to-face, I don’t know, three or four months ago. After that, he called once a week for a while, then it dropped down to every two or three. I last heard from him more than a month ago, a quick call to let me know he’d had his last follow-up for the gunshot.”

“Then nothing until this friend from the Marshals called you, asked you to check on him?”

“Right.”

I did a slow turn in place, unsure what to do next. Was he missing? In trouble? Did he want me to get in touch or just keep tabs on his place? Or his ex-wife? Should I go home and grab a burger and think on it?

“Look, if it helps,” Elizabeth said, “Karl never asked for a hand. It was another stupid thing he did. He’d get in over his head, wouldn’t call or wait for backup, and land himself in a mess. Leaving a note for me to contact you is not his normal MO. It would’ve cost him to write it. Which is why I imagine he didn’t leave any details, then eventually tossed it. He would’ve been . . . embarrassed.”

I rolled the note into a tube, tapped it in against my leg like a baton. “And he didn’t call you, hint at anything?”

She shook her head.

I mulled it over. The smart play right now would be to back out, make some calls, file a missing person’s if I had to—but what Elizabeth was saying about the man synced with what I remembered. And a note written in advance says a hell of a lot more than a midnight phone call or an email dashed off mid-crisis. Whatever Schovasa was involved with, he’d looked into the future, weighed the outcomes, and decided there was a chance he wouldn’t be able to deal with it. If a simple call to a buddy in the Marshals could’ve solved his problem—assuming he hadn’t burnt those bridges—he would’ve written that on the note to Elizabeth.

But he hadn’t done that. He’d told her to contact *me*.

Chapter Two

Searching a place is like peeling an onion. Top layer, middle layer, inner layer. It can be a slow process and, sometimes—like the proverbial onion—there’s nothing in the center. But I like the idea of getting a broad picture rather than falling prey to the myopia of concentrating on a single thing. Peel the top, see what there is to see, then dive a little deeper each time until everything is revealed.

Unless, of course, I hit the jackpot right away. Then I go as deep as I need to.

In this case, the jackpot was a little plastic box in the second bedroom, which had been converted into an office. Like a lot of security-minded folks, Karl had a document shredder meant to destroy his personal information, which was smart. But, based on the stack of papers next to the machine, it was clear he batched his shredding to be done every few weeks or months, which was not smart. We all get lazy, but if you don’t shred as things come in, you might as well put a sign above the stack that says, SENSITIVE DOCUMENTS HERE. Which, of course, was exactly what I was looking for.

So, with Elizabeth leaning in the office doorway watching me and approximately ten thousand law enforcement citations peering down from the office walls, I sifted through Karl’s to-be-shredded pile and found the prize.

A couple of them, in fact.

Topmost were some printouts from a handful of tourist websites, all of them centering around West Palm Beach, Florida. I squinted, skimming the text, but there was nothing specific; no hotels, flights, or forwarding addresses. Just bars, restaurants, and attractions.

On a hunch, I took the lid off the shredder and turned it over. The last page had jammed in the feed, the paper accordioned. I smoothed it out and found I was looking at a map of all the Starbucks locations in the greater West Palm Beach area. It had printed poorly but, turning it this way and that, I counted thirteen in a three-mile radius.

I grunted. The same area in DC probably had two hundred. Not that I was complaining since I worshipped at the altar of caffeine. I turned and held up the wrinkled page. “Did Karl have a particular affinity for West Palm Beach?”

“Florida?” She shook her head. “We certainly never went. Not his kind of thing.”

“What wasn’t?”

“Beaches. Swimming. Sunbathing.”

“What was his kind of thing?”

“Art. Politics,” she said. “Smirnoff by the handle.”

I went back to the shredding bin, shuffling through bank statements, doctors’ bills, and credit card statements. The medical bills were reminders of the depressing, persistent trauma that comes from getting shot. If you’re lucky enough to survive—as I had—you were treated to a lengthy, exhausting recovery that made you best friends with a dozen different medical teams in a dozen different fields. Leafing through Schovasa’s stack, I didn’t pretend to understand the jargon, but most seemed to be in the nature of checkups, rather than hospital visits or follow-up surgeries. A good sign.

As for the bank statements, a quick look told me, while he wasn’t hurting financially, any property he was looking at in Florida would be of the Motel 6 kind and not the oceanside villa variety.

There were three credit card statements, dated from the last three months, all for the same card. They had no flight or hotel reservations, just run-of-the-mill grocery, gas, and takeout bills. I had trouble deciphering a few of the charges—why can't credit card companies print the DESCRIPTION field in plain English?—but finally surmised they were a scattering of online purchases: a book, a digital movie rental, a box of wooden clothes hangers. That was it. A simple life in three sheets.

No, wait.

A single purchase for twelve dollars at a liquor store, dated a month ago. I was surprised at the jolt of disappointment I felt . . . which was swiftly replaced with confusion as I read the next line, a credit from the liquor store in the same amount on the same day. An almost instant refund, in other words.

In Virginia, you could buy wine and beer at a supermarket, but you had to go to a state-run ABC store for anything stronger. It was more or less the same for DC, and Maryland was even stricter. According to the statement, Karl hadn't purchased anything at a state store in the last quarter year except the single solitary bottle which he'd then returned for a refund a few minutes later.

I've known some alcoholics in my life. The ones that didn't already have a tilt toward scotch or whiskey or bourbon chose vodka, maybe because it seemed "clean" and didn't smell on the breath. And it did the job, of course. Anything eighty-proof and stronger usually did. Drinkers in the deep end went through a fifth of booze or more every day. Even the lightweights would finish a bottle in three.

I looked up again. "Was Karl a beer drinker?"

She shook her head. "He had a wheat allergy, believe it or not."

“Wine?”

“Hated the stuff.”

“Did he like any of those fakey alcohol drinks? The malt stuff that tastes like a margarita or rum-and-coke?”

“Karl had one drink. Vodka from the back of the freezer, straight out of the bottle. I never saw him drink anything else except coffee.”

I grunted and stared at the statement, thinking. If he didn't drink anything but vodka, then he wasn't getting his kicks from a grocery store. In other words, ABC-store purchases should show the complete rundown of Karl's alcohol consumption.

So, let's say Schovasa was an average hitter at one bottle every other day. With a decades-long addiction to alcohol, that was being generous. Ten or fifteen bucks per bottle for the cheap stuff—like the rotgut on the bottom shelf—meant spending something on the order of \$150 to \$200 a month, minimum.

Would he buy one bottle at a time? Divorced and living alone, with no one looking over his shoulder and wagging a finger? Not a chance. He'd buy a case every trip.

Was he going to pay cash for that case? Or would he throw it on a credit card? A card, naturally. Hell, he'd used one to buy a single bottle.

So, either I was wrong and he'd decided to pay cash for multiple cases of vodka for three months straight, had switched to another beverage after a lifetime of drinking vodka, or something else was going on. I folded the stack into thirds and held it up.

“Mind if I keep these until we know what's going on?”

“They're none of my business, anymore.”

I scanned the rest of the office. Sparse. Neat as a pin. None of his art hung in here; the office was all business. Besides the citations, there was a desk with a printer and desktop computer, a waste basket, and a low, three-drawer filing cabinet. I turned my attention to the desk first.

On one side of the monitor was a U.S. Marshall's branded coffee cup full of pens and paperclips. On the other was an old, empty vodka bottle, its label discolored and peeling at the corners. Shell casings, some of them bent, filled the bottle halfway.

I stared at it for a second, then turned to Elizabeth. "Is this . . .?"

She closed her eyes briefly. "That's the bottle he got drunk on the day his team was gunned down. He asked to keep the shell casings from the scene after they'd been processed."

Jesus Christ.

I turned back to the computer and shook the mouse. The screen flickered to life. A password prompt—the bane of all technologically-handicapped sleuths—stared back at me. I sighed and went to shut the monitor off when Elizabeth rattled off six numbers. I punched them in. The prompt went away and revealed the desktop.

I quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Just a guess," she said.

"Really?"

"Our daughter Katie's birthday." She paused. "She died of an overdose six years ago."

The room went very still for a long moment and I felt the pieces of a puzzle that I hadn't wanted to look at fall into place. Karl's alcoholism ramping up toward the end of his career. His and Elizabeth's divorce. The wrung-out despair I'd felt emanating from the man even during normal conversation. I thought of the absolute abyss Karl—and perhaps more so, Elizabeth—had been staring into for years and suddenly my own worries and fears were made very insignificant.

I cast about for something so say, but Elizabeth rescued me. “I’m going to scrounge around for some coffee. You want some?”

“That would be great, thanks.”

She walked out of the office and I turned back to the computer to begin my version of hacking, which is to say I looked at whatever programs Karl had left open. Technology was not really my forte, but even I had a hard time missing the website that was still active in a browser, the online presence for a sobriety group named HomeKeepers. It was based in Crystal City, basically just around the corner. I jotted down the address, then minimized the window.

The computer desktop wallpaper was a family portrait of Schovasa and a younger-looking Elizabeth missing the white streak in her hair. They flanked a late teen or early tween girl. It was one of those photos taken right before everyone had put on their “picture” face. Schovasa looked mildly surprised, Elizabeth was smiling at something about seven feet to the left of the camera.

Only the girl—from a generation accustomed to having their picture taken all the time—was looking at the camera. Honey brown hair. Blue eyes. A smile that filled her entire face, as though the corners of her mouth were about to meet her ears, her cheeks about to touch her eyes. A smile you would miss after it was gone.

I felt as though someone had pressed their thumb against my throat. Fumbling with the mouse, I pulled up Schovasa’s email to hide the desktop, but the few emails in the inbox were unremarkable and the email trash was empty. Either Karl received very few emails, he was highly security conscious, or both.

I fiddled around a bit more but came up empty. I went to turn the computer off, hesitated, then minimized the screens again and pulled out my phone to take a picture of Elizabeth, Karl, and Katie. I powered everything down then turned to the filing cabinet but came up empty. The

bottom and middle drawers were for personal finance—health insurance, coverage on his car and apartment, a couple of investments, nothing odd—including a sheaf of folders on Karl’s hospitalizations. Professional info took up the bulk of the third, but it was mostly clippings, commendations, and other bric-a-brac you pick up after decades at the same job.

I took a quick tour of the bedroom and bathroom. Much like the office, things were neat and orderly. The bed was made, clothes were hung or folded, personal items lined up on his bureau like little soldiers. There was no suitcase in the single closet, but that could simply mean that, after a lifetime of travel for the Fed, he’d thrown the thing away and vowed never to board a plane again. The bathroom was spic-and-span and smelled like talcum.

The kitchen was similarly unremarkable. A coffeemaker burbled happily on the counter as I checked the fridge. No perishables or need-to-eat leftovers. Stuff you wouldn’t mind leaving if you were going on a trip. A jar of pickles—sweet gherkins, *yuck*—bottles of ketchup and mustard, and two six-packs of Tab soda.

“Tab?” I said aloud. “Who drinks Tab anymore?”

“What?” Elizabeth called from the other room.

“Nothing.”

I opened a small broom closet. The trash can had been emptied and a clean bag put in its place, but the paper recycling was so full it threatened to tumble to the floor. Next to that was a plastic milk crate full of tin cans, plastic jugs, and glass jars.

No bottles. Unless Schovasa threw his vodka bottles out with the trash but for some reason felt compelled to recycle his pickle jars, there should’ve been a dozen empty fifths lined up here.

I returned to the living room feeling antsy and out of place. Nothing except Elizabeth’s premonition and a scribbled note on a half-sheet of paper hinted Schovasa was missing or in

trouble. For all I knew, he was about to walk through the door to see me and his estranged ex-wife having a cup of coffee in his living room after all his personal belongings had been rooted through.

I shrugged it off, willing to listen to Elizabeth's instincts and Schovasa's note. I sat down and accepted a mug of coffee.

"Find anything interesting?" she asked, sipping from her cup.

"Maybe," I said. "Was Karl involved in AA? Or getting help from a third party?"

"Not in all the years we were married. He thought he could manage his alcoholism." She paused. "No, that's not quite it. I think he decided it came with the territory. That it was just his cross to bear."

"A lot of cops think it's inevitable. Gun, badge, bottle," I said. "Did he have any big plans for retirement?"

"If he did, he didn't tell me."

"Really? Nothing at all?"

She held her hands up. "The Marshalls tried to push him out. Even without the booze, he was of an age, you know. Then, between that catastrophe with his team and getting shot, retirement couldn't have been more obvious. Yet, he was surprised when it happened, like the day was never supposed to come."

I nodded. I knew the feeling.

"Years ago, I tried to get him to talk about it, about life after retirement," she continued, "but he always answered in the abstract. *Someday*, he'd say, *when this is all over*, you know? But then someday was yesterday and he was left standing on the corner with a plaque and a gold watch and he didn't know what to do."

I shifted in my seat. This was starting to hit a little close to home.

“He has his art.” She gestured toward the walls. “He always wanted to pursue that. But, just like work, the booze got in the way.” She looked at me oddly. “Did you find something? Was he getting treatment?”

Choosing my words carefully, I told her about the HomeKeepers website. She looked out the window, face pinched. “I wish him well if he’s getting help, but if ruining a marriage didn’t do it, I wouldn’t hold my breath that holding hands with a circle of strangers will.”

“Maybe he’s the one leading the circle,” I quipped. It was lame and not very funny, but if I didn’t do something to lighten the mood, *I* was going to start drinking.

But Elizabeth took my statement at face value. “I wouldn’t be surprised. That’s the one thing Karl never understood.”

“What’s that?”

She smiled for the first time, but it was an expression devoid of both humor and hope. “If you want to survive in this world, at some point, you have to stop caring. And he never did.”