

# **No Time for Murder**

A Novel

By Bruce W. Most

*It's not enough to be busy;*

*So are the ants.*

*The question is:*

*What are we busy about?*

~ Henry David Thoreau

*Life is just a quick succession of busy nothings.*

~ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

*There is no rest for the striver. Just beyond the completion of each goal on our life-achievement 'bucket list' looms another goal, and then another. Meanwhile, of course, the clock is ticking—quite loudly, in fact. We become breathless. And we have no time left for a calm and reflective appreciation of our twilight years, no deliciously long afternoons sitting with friends or listening to music or musing about the story of our lives. And we will never get another chance for that.*

~ Daniel Klein, *Travels with Epicurus*

## Chapter 1

When the widow of my best friend insisted that I prove his death was murder, not suicide, my first reaction was that I had no time for murder.

What with a looming deadline for a corporate history book, my daughter's soccer team to coach, daily chauffeur service for my kids, a basement-remodeling project, a family vacation to plan, a garage to clean out, pets to manage . . . well, you get the picture.

I don't want to sound like a kvetch about this. It's my choice for allowing my life to be overrun with projects, chores, errands—life's *stuff*. But hey, I'm merely honoring the American gospel of busyness. Idleness is the enemy of the soul, admonished St. Benedict. Packed calendars and lengthy ToDo lists aren't just rewarded, they're canonized.

Civic and religious obligations aside, I confess I've been chafing at this busyness stuff for a while now. The last thing I needed was to tackle yet another task.

Even murder.

Which raised the second reason I balked at Kathryn Chilton's demand. However desperately she believed otherwise, no one murdered her husband. Randy killed himself twenty-nine days ago, a reality I had yet to wrap my mind and heart around. The coroner ruled it a suicide, and I trusted the investigating detective. Bad TV shows, crime novels, and donut clichés to the contrary, cops rarely screw up these things.

"What possible evidence do you have someone murdered Randy?" I challenged from the edge of Kathryn's immaculate living room, with its half-acre of snow-white shag, white walls, and white leather furniture. The room felt as chilly as a Swedish ice hotel.

She crossed her arms. "He would never have shot himself. He loathed guns."

"Men who kill themselves usually use guns. Even men who hate guns."

"He would never have done it in the house. Not with Regan. He wouldn't do that to his own daughter."

My goddaughter aside, my days as a police reporter and true-crime writer taught me among other heart-wrenching truths the cruel reality of parents killing themselves in circumstances obscene to their children.

"Randy wasn't the man we once knew, Kathryn," I said empathetically.

That didn't sit well with her. She marched in khaki capris and bare feet to a white grand piano, which she could play like a virtuoso, snatched an open bottle of beer from a coaster, and downed a long swallow. She waved the bottle at me.

"Randy didn't leave a suicide note, either. I've hunted everywhere for one."

"Suicides often don't."

Her head of black, no-nonsense short hair shook in frustration. "He would have left a note, David. He—" She faltered. "He would have explained."

"Randy was *troubled*."

My friend's suicide did not come as a shock to those of us who knew him, and I knew him better than most. He'd returned in the fall of 2005 from a six-month National Guard tour in Afghanistan with snakes in his head, and they remained there until the day he died.

Kathryn fixed hard brown eyes on me. "Some people chose to ignore his *troubles*."

"That's unfair! He *pushed* me away, like he pushed everyone away."

"True friends push back."

I should have told her then and there to go to hell. But out of love and respect for Randy, and heart-broken by the loss Kathryn and Regan had suffered, I restrained my impatience and annoyance, and said, “When you called, you said you had something *new* to tell me regarding his death.”

She set down her beer and I trailed her gym-sculpted body down a hallway lined with family photos and political memorabilia. I sensed where we were going and I didn’t want to go there.

At the end of the hallway, she opened a door and walked into Randy’s study. I hung back. My best friend had spent his final moments here, alone. Brooding over demons none of us could fathom.

*And I wasn’t there for him.*

In many ways, his study remained familiar: the large polished cherry wood desk in the center, the deep warm wood paneling, the floor-to-ceiling bookcases with soccer mementoes and pictures of Kathryn and Regan tucked among techno-thrillers and steampunk science fiction. A nine-foot high whimsical giraffe sculpture stood in a corner like a naughty boy. Randy and I sat for hours in here, drinking Glenfiddich and pontificating on politics, sports, books, and inconsequential shit I no longer remember.

But now the once cheery room felt as chilly as the living room, airless, soulless. Its charming clutter was gone. Kathryn had clear-cut everything off his desk, including his beloved bobbleheads of Bush and Cheney, leaving only an empty outbox, a coffee mug full of pens, a telephone, and a computer.

I stared at the desk where he shot himself in the head.

Kathryn walked to French doors that opened onto a flagstone patio edged with aspen. Beyond lay the greenway that snaked through our housing development.

“Someone broke in here,” she said.

I jerked up. “What?”

She pointed to the door. “I found glass knocked out by the door handle, and papers and files strewn on the floor. Drawers were pulled open. The computer was on. It hadn’t been on since he . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“When was this?”

“I discovered it a week ago, but it could have occurred days before that. I don’t come in much. I keep the room closed. For Regan’s sake.”

Reluctantly, I stepped into the study. “Did you report this to the police?”

“Detective Watts himself came out. He dismissed it as a common burglary.”

“He’s probably right.”

She shook her head. “The timing is too coincidental after Randy’s death. Besides, what common burglar rifles through files and turns on a computer instead of stealing it? This guy went nowhere else in the house. He didn’t steal cash or jewelry or electronics—nothing. He was searching for something in here.”

I held out my hands. “Searching for what?”

“You know the sensitive work Randy did. I suspect it was Islamic terrorists.”

*Islamic terrorists?* Was the woman playing with a full deck? True, Randy’s employer, where he’d worked as chief financial officer, was an up-and-coming manufacturing company named CobenTechnologies that landed a major contract with the U.S. Army a while back to provide protective armor for military vehicles in Iraq and Afghanistan. But terrorists?

“Any evidence this burglar found what he was *allegedly* searching for?” I asked.

“I doubt it. Randy kept his classified work partitioned off in the hard drive with a password.”

“None of this proves someone *murdered* him, Kathryn,” I said.

“It’s not only the break-in. After his funeral I had a disturbing conversation with a member of his National Guard unit. The man—”

My BlackBerry buzzed. My son texting a reminder to chauffeur him from school to his trumpet lesson, then baseball practice. Proving exactly why I didn’t have time for Kathryn’s delusions. I pocketed my phone. “I need to leave to pick up Zach.”

“Will you look into it, David?” she said, rare imploring in her voice. “Convince Detective Watts to reopen the case.”

“Convince him how?”

“You’re the true crime writer. The mystery novelist. The fearless investigative reporter with the tenacity of a honey badger. Come up with something.”

Yeah, once upon a time I was all those things. Part of a Midwestern newspaper investigative team nominated for a Pulitzer. A freelance investigative journalist for national publications. Two published true-crime books on murder and high finance. As for my lone published mystery, I’d cradled the novel briefly in my hands, *David Cole Dartman* in small type on the lurid cover, before I watched it sink into the vast sea of orphaned books. Now I wrote corporate histories, inconsequential articles, and any other claptrap that pays.

“You’re confusing me with Jessica Fletcher,” I said, turning to leave. “Hire a private detective.”

I reached the living room before Kathryn cut in front of me, arms thrown outward. “Please! You’re friends with Watts. He’ll listen to you. He won’t listen to a private detective.”

T.J. Watts was the detective who investigated Randy’s suicide—and the lead detective whom I’d made the star in my first true-crime book. A sharp cop. But I would hardly call us friends. The book’s murder case took its personal and professional toll on T.J. My reappearance would only dredge up unpleasant memories.

“Watts is a good detective, Kathryn. If he and the coroner think it was suicide, it was suicide.”

I brushed by her and stepped out onto the porch. A large American flag fluttered on a tall pole in her front yard—the flag they draped over Randy’s casket at his memorial service and which she flew daily to honor his memory.

“What did Randy say to you the day he died?” she said as I headed for my Chrysler minivan.

I stopped. My stomach tightened. I half turned.

“Randy called you that day,” she said. “I saw it listed on his cell phone. You were the last call he made.”

I swallowed hard. “I missed his call.”

She closed, then opened her eyes. “Please, David, do this. Not for me. For Randy. For Regan.”

“The best thing you can do for Regan—for yourself, for that matter—is to come to terms with the reality that Randy committed suicide.”

As if I had done that.

I headed for my vehicle. Randy *had* called my home office late that Monday morning. I was in the middle of a pile of work and let the call go to voicemail. He left a message to call back. No hint of what was on his mind.

It was well into the afternoon before I returned his call.  
By then he was dead.