

House Call

Early Sunday afternoon Stewie returned from grocery shopping. He set the bags down on two chairs that never made it back under the kitchen table. He got a glass of water, sat down on the couch, and put his feet up on the coffee table. Grey crept in through the windows slats but he figured he still had time to put the groceries away before going to work at *Charlie's*. He rubbed his temples, bent over, and picked up a couple of aspirins spilled on the floor late last night. He saw the remote under the coffee table, debating surfing the TV. *It ain't like mu headache's going away.*

He muttered, not caring about not having an audience, "Stew, you're a chump, listening to them saying you need to stay in shape for Christmas. Christ, it's two months off! Sucker punched you with 'Bushmill or Jameson, you choose,' and then something about the fighting Irish..."

A knock on the apartment door startled him and he yelled over his shoulder. "Yeah, yeah. OK, who is it?"

"Sergeant Manuela, Madison Police. I'm looking for Patrick Stewart Kelly."

Stewie hesitated before he got up and went to the door. *Me? Haven't been called Patrick for years.* He half-opened the door and glanced at the extended ID as the officer sidestepped into the apartment.

"Come in. I haven't been called Patrick since I was a little kid. I've been Stewie for ages. How can I help you?" A frown spread across his face.

"Let's sit down."

Stewie returned to the couch and pointed to an old easy chair.

Sergeant Manuela cleared his throat. "Do you have a brother, Thomas Delmore Kelly, living in New York City?"

"Yeah, Del. I tried calling him a couple of days ago, didn't get any answer. But he's always out hustling – East Coast lifestyle thing. His birthday's mid-December, I was thinking about going out in a couple of weeks to visit. Has something happened?"

"I'm afraid it's not good news. Apparently, he was killed last week. I'll ask you to look at a couple of photos in a minute, but first, does your brother own a classic Corvette, black?"

Stewie's voice cracked. The hangover he was fighting won. *If I can only go to sleep, I'll wake up and this will be a bad dream.* "Yeah, that's Del. Ever since we were kids he wanted one. Finally bought one about thirty years ago. First time I saw it was when he picked me up at LaGuardia. I flew out for Pop's 60th birthday. Yeah, it was the end of April. He had the top down. Nuts, we wouldn't do that here."

Sergeant Manuela took two faxes out of a large manila envelope. "These are untouched and are not pleasant. If one glance is enough to rule out it's not your brother, tell me. I'll put them away and leave." He put them on the coffee table in front of Stewie. A quick glance was enough.

"Yeah, that's Del. Doesn't look too good, does he?" His stomach rumbled and he lurched off the couch and ran into the bathroom. Five minutes later, he was back, water dripping from his hands and face. He stuttered, "What happened?" He was too afraid to ask if he was murdered.

Sergeant Manuela put the faxes back in the envelope. "This is being run by a Lieutenant Stanley, one of New York's finest. I got the file this morning, was asked to do the legwork in Madison, and contact you. Not many details yet, but the police don't want family to see this for the first time on the TV news. Your brother was a John Doe until Thursday night. His body was found by a runner a couple of miles from Kennedy Airport on Tuesday. No ID on it. Thursday another Good Samaritan called about a black Corvette, red leather seats, abandoned in a junk yard not far from where the body was found. The car was riddled with bullet holes and trashed. Cops used the VIN number to pull up your brother's name, address, and his license photo. Saturday they ran out to his home in Bayberry Beach, talked with a neighbor, a Mr. Wilson, who said he hadn't seen your brother all week. They showed him the pictures and he confirmed it looked

like Del. He was the one that gave the police your name and number. New York called us, probably wanting to check, get an address and a number on you. The folder was in my pile when I came in.”

Stewie struggled to catch his breath, reached for the water glass on the coffee table, and drained it. *This ain't real, pure bullshit, some Halloween prank the guys got up.*

Manuela stood and took the glass from Stewie's hands. “It's OK. Here, you stay seated; let me refill this.”

It was a small apartment. The Formica kitchen table pressed against the back of the couch. The sink was on the far side against the wall; the refrigerator was wedged to the right, crowded in the corner. Sergeant Manuela passed the glass to Stewie and returned to the easy chair. “Here, sip slowly. No one knows how they'll respond to such news and there's no right or wrong way. Some people break out in hysterical laughter; others throw things across the room. You need to cry, go ahead.”

Stewie drained half the glass, placed it on the coffee table, stood abruptly, and began pacing back and forth between the couch and TV. “Shit, shit, shit! Tell me this hasn't happened!” He looked over at Sergeant Manuela who quickly got up and stepped towards him.

Stewie stamped his foot and faced him. “OK, you tell me: what the fuck am I supposed to do?”

“Not much you can do right now. Lieutenant Stanley is point on this case; he's not working today. He'll probably call mid-morning tomorrow. I've put his name and number on the back of my card. You can call me here in Madison if you have any concerns or if you think of anything that might help. Did Del have any enemies? Things like that.”

“Nah, Del was a good guy, wouldn't hurt a fly.”

They both sat down. Manuela cleared his throat and asked in a soft voice, “Take your time. Let me know if I can do anything. Can I call a friend for you, someone to come, keep you company? If they need a ride, I can get them.” He tried joking, “But not if they live in New York.”

Stewie smiled. “Thanks. That's a good idea. I'll call Tom; see if he can come by. Yeah, and I'd better call *Charlie's*, I tend bar tonight. Give me a couple of minutes.”

“No problem. I'll step out in the hall, call the station, and give them an update.”

Stewie mouthed, “OK,” and went to call. The old dial phone was on a small table in the hall outside his bedroom. Five minutes later, he slammed the phone back in its cradle.

Manuela remained in the doorway watching as Stewie walked down the hall and backed up against the side of the couch. “Are you going to be all right?”

“Yeah. As much as can be expected. Tom said he'd be over in thirty – bring something to eat. I'm guessing he'll stay the night. I spoke with Chuck. He offered his sympathies and said his father would be happy to stand in for me, even send over chicken-fry if I wanted. Yeah, I'll be OK. You need to go, that's ok.”

“Tell you what, why don't I make us a cup of tea or coffee? You sit there and give things a chance to settle in.”

“Sure. Tea would be fine. The pot's on the stove, mugs and tea bags are up on the left above the sink.”

They drank the tea in silence. Manuela put his mug on the coffee table. Stewie took it and his, still half-full, to the sink, ran some water over them, and inverted them in the drainer-rack. “Look, Tom should be here in ten minutes, I'm fine. I think I need to be by myself a bit.”

“I understand. Again, I'm sorry for the bad news, and remember, you have my card – feel free to call anytime.” Sergeant Manuela closed the door quietly on his way out.

Stewie wandered back to the couch and sat, his thoughts flitting from when he and Del were kids, to his move to Madison, their father's death in Las Vegas, back to Short Beach – round and round without any pattern. Twenty minutes later, he didn't hear when Tom knocked on the door. Only when he kicked loudly did he break out of his funk. When he finally opened the door, Tom was standing there with a brown bag in each hand.

“Hi, Stewie. Del getting killed really sucks. I’m sorry. Maybe they made a mistake. I got Tillie’s chicken salad and a six-pack of Capital. Should help some. If you’re hungry, we can sit at the table. Otherwise, let’s grab a cold one and sit on the couch, pretend nothing happened.”

Two beers later, Stewie confessed. “I knew something was wrong soon as the cop said ‘Patrick.’ I worked it out after he left. I was nine when my father gave me the Red Rider wagon, ‘Here, Paddy my boy, is your birthday present. It’s what you wanted.’ That was when I told him I wanted to be called Stewie, said I was a big boy and didn’t like being called Paddy.”

“Wow, Stewie, amazing how memories come back at crazy times. But you know, I’m getting hungry. Let’s have another beer. Tillie’s chicken sitting on the table waiting for us. Don’t want to let it fly off.”

“Yeah, ok.”

Stewie managed to do justice to the chicken. Tom cleared the table, retrieved his jacket from where he’d tossed it on the easy chair, and got a small baggy from the zippered inside pocket.

“And here we have Tillie’s special dessert, one-bite brownies. Help you sleep, that’s for sure.”

“Tom, there’s Lake Front Ale in the fridge in case the chocolate gets stuck on the way down.”

An hour later Stewie tried to stand. “Oops, I may need help here, Tom.”

“No *problema*. Till suggested I spend the night. She’ll call my boss in the morning – explain the situation. It’ll be cool. You should have a friend with you. I’ve crashed on your couch before and brought something to read.”

Tom helped Stewie to bed. When he went to check on his friend later, he heard the snores halfway down the hall. He smiled and took another cookie when he got back in the kitchen.

Stewie slept soundly. In early morning hours, he dreamed of his Red Rider wagon.

Red Rider Wagon

Stewie tossed in his sleep. After he turned twenty-one he was a steady drinker and rarely remembered any of his dreams. The snatches that he did recall invariably made him uneasy for the rest of the day. *Ta told us of his father's River Liffey and how the Doddler and Poddle fed it. He told me Liffey was Gaelic for life but his life was a bottle or two of Guinness and a God Bless. My river must be the Letha so I can forget.*

However, he dreamed of the Red Rider wagon, of Mr. Meizel and the magic nickels, and his disastrous ninth birthday party.

Patrick Stewart saved all the nickels Mr. Meizel gave him. Mr. Meizel was the tailor who did his father's white shirts in a special way for Mass so they wouldn't hurt his neck. He would find them behind his ears, balanced on the top of his head, and even once stuck to his chin. This happened almost every time he was there. He saved them in a pickle jar hidden underneath his underwear. He didn't even tell Del where he hid "Mr. Meizel's Magic Moola."

"Del, I'll buy a new red wagon and we'll collect deposit bottles on the beach in the summer – save enough and we'll no longer be poor Irish. Mom can take the bottles to the A & P in town where she buys all the food. She's a good customer and they'll have to redeem them."

Paddy told his father at the beginning of the month that he was saving all his magic coins. "I'll get myself my own Christmas present. I'm saving for a Red Rider wagon. Tell Ma I don't want no cake or party. I only want the wagon. Really, Del and I need it to make money this summer. We'll be able to pay for our own movies, even have enough for popcorn, you'll see." He knew he was hinting but didn't care. He was going to save his moola not wanting to use it to buy the wagon, Christmas presents, or even a present for his brother Del's birthday on December 15.

But his mother had found a sports coat at the church rummage and hinted, "I know you boys have been saving from your allowance, but if you each give me fifty cents we'll say it's from all of us. He'd be proud to wear it to church, could brag about what his boys helped buy."

The boys reluctantly gave their mother the money. Del muttered to Paddy, "Gee, it was enough before to make him a crummy birthday card. Not fair. My birthday's close to Christmas and everyone tells me to wait a week and I'll get a bigger present. Yeah, who'd believe that?"

Earlier that month Walter O'Malley agreed to move the Dodgers to Los Angeles. Del was upset: "They finally win and they leave Brooklyn! That's not fair!"

Paddy rejoined, "Who cares as long as Dad gets me that Red Rider wagon! They're bums anyhow."

The boys' mother, Katherine, was excited. Her second cousin, Michael Delevan, and his wife, Margaret, were coming the Saturday before Christmas for cake and ice cream to celebrate Del's birthday. Margaret promised to bring her three youngest girls. Katherine baked four different pan cakes on Thursday. She frosted and decorated them Saturday morning putting strawberry jelly between the layers. Her husband promised to take the boys to the Jewish grocer on the corner for the ice cream.

She warned him, "Make sure he's open on Saturday, not like your Mr. Meizel. And make sure he puts two quarts of ice cream in a bag with our name on it. I want to make sure it's nice and cold when I serve. Two hours in our freezer and it will be mush."

Katherine explained to Margaret how they didn't give gifts in public, "So as not to embarrass anyone. The boys know every day is special and the Lord gives us our life – that's special enough."

The children had seconds and the cake and ice cream were finished. Everyone said what a fine party it was. At three, Mr. Delevan gathered his family and stood at the door, his jacket hanging over his arm. He made believe that he was startled.

“Hey, my jacket seems to have gained three pounds but it was me eating two helpings of cake and ice cream. It was delicious, Katherine, thank you for inviting us. But hmm, what’s this under here?”

He unfolded the jacket and came out with a small package wrapped in birthday paper.

“Indulge me, Cousin Kate. It’s for Paddy, a boy’s adventure story. With five girls, I couldn’t resist.”

He handed it to Paddy who was standing with his mouth open. “Read, son, and the world will be opening to you.”

Katherine reminded him to say thank you.

As soon as the door was closed, Thomas Patrick was all smiles. “Well, Paddy, my son, you’ve been patient enough. First, I need to water the daisies. You wait in the living room and keep those eyes closed. I’ve got something for you myself seeing how Christmas is only four days off.”

Paddy blushed and elbowed Del, whispered, “You’ll see, Mom hinted Dad got what I wanted. We’ll be rich by the end of the summer.”

Thomas Patrick excused himself and rushed upstairs. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

They heard the toilet flush. Thomas Patrick struggled down the stairs. A thump and a bump and he announced. “Be OK to open those eyes now.”

On the floor was an old wagon, the name on the top slat faint, and the boards at best a faded pink.

Paddy’s face fell as his father lifted him and put him in the center of the wagon.

“This’ll be yours, Paddy, me boy’o, make this a Christmas you won’t forget. Not much to look at but we’ll get on it this week. Get paint and polish from the hardware store in town. You’ll see. Be looking new before the New Year and you taking it around the block. What you think, Paddy-o?”

Paddy had never seen such an old wagon. He wanted to cry, keeping his complaint, “Ta, it says ‘poor Irish’ in neon,” buried deep inside his heart. He swallowed his anger and disappointment, puffed out his chest, and said, “Thanks, Dad. We’ll make it look great. But I’m a big boy now and don’t want to be called Paddy. Call me Stewie. It’s my name too. Yeah, Stewie’s a big boy’s name.”

Thomas Patrick saw the sadness in his son’s eyes. “Sure, son, Stewie it is then.”

On Tuesday, he came home early with a can of red paint, a paintbrush, and metal polish.

“Happy birthday again to you, Stewie. You being all of nine and a big boy may as well get you painting your wagon. We’ll be taking it outside, paint it on old newspapers. Keep the sidewalk from getting red and the neighbors from complaining.”

Stewie struggled to untangle the sheets and rushed to the bathroom to pee. He steadied himself, his left hand on the wall behind the water closet. He grimaced at the sound of his stream hitting the water and tried unsuccessfully to stay on target. He rinsed his hand and splashed water on his face. In the weak morning light, the face in the mirror groaned back at him. He knew he wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep after the dream but went back to bed where he tossed and turned for the next two hours.

The memory of the red wagon was partially chased away by the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen. As he woke, he recalled Del trying to comfort him that night in their cramped bedroom. “Don’t worry, Stewie, we’ll still be able to get lots of bottles.”

Devil's Lake

Tom watched Stewie stagger into the kitchen and reach for a cup of coffee.

"Nice to see the warrior's alive...way to go, Stewie. How're you feeling this morning?"

"Been better. I was out as soon as my head hit the pillow. Had a weird dream of when I was a kid. I wanted a new Red Rider wagon for my birthday but Dad came home with an old piece of junk we had to fix and paint. Saved my money for it too. I wanted it so Del and I could collect bottles on the beach in the summer for the deposits. We'd be able to save up and get our own things instead of Goodwill clothes. All the kids teased us about being poor Irish.

"I never knew how hot the sand could get. I quit. But Del must have been more motivated and went into business for himself the following summer. He tried to get our ma to keep it secret. Yeah, with all those bottles clunking around in the trunk of the car!"

Tom heard the underlying animosity and tried to get Stewie to refocus.

"Hey, I know, why don't we split another one of Till's cookies with the coffee? I kind of remember your brother did the pretty straight and narrow. But you both had a couple when you went out to Devil's Lake that time, right?"

Stewie dumped the rest of his coffee. "Yeah, I told him to come out for my 30th birthday. We spent a long weekend together. A real blast. I tried to show him what's nice about the Midwest – took him to the University Arboretum, Student Union terrace. And you're right, we had that memorable picnic at Devil's Lake.

"I was tending bar at *Charlie's* by then, that's where I met you. It was you that suggested I take him to Devil's Lake. Tillie left her cookies in a plain brown bag with my name on it in front of my door that morning."

Tom bushy eyebrows went up and down once. He laughed. "Now who else would it have been then? You know, I bet that was the first time Del ever got stoned."

Stewie stopped and moved his head around in circles. "Yeah, and Till's cookies again last night. OK, I remember how it was that summer when I was nine. We went down to the beach the last week in June. I was pulling the wagon and Del was telling me to pull it straight. I remember Del bitching, 'Stewie, straight. What are you thinking of? People see you going like that, think we're drunk, trash Irish, not even poor Irish.' Well, I suppose, but it was either pull the wagon or ask the people for their bottles. Seemed too much like begging to me. I tried to make Del do that. 'My wagon, I get to pull.'

"Besides, Del was chubby and cute, he even had freckles. I thought we'd have better success if he asked. Heck, I did him a favor...basic sales training. Told him to smile and ask the lady, 'Miss, can we have your bottles?' I kept reminding him we'd make enough for Saturday movies and popcorn."

Tom frowned. Stewie's empty cup was dangling at a strange angle. "Hey, guy, I made a full pot of coffee. You go sit on the couch and I'll pour you a fresh cup. What about that cookie?"

"Going to pass. That cop last night said I should get a call from New York's finest. It wouldn't surprise me if Del's lawyer also called. Talk about memories – seems like yesterday when Del called, he was coming up on the big 5 - - 0. His voice was deep, serious. I thought he'd gotten married. Right away, he starts in: 'Stew, you've met my lawyer friend, Ron Abbot, when you come out last time. I had him do my will, power of attorney, all that stuff. Anything happens to me Ron will give you a call. He's cool.' Fuck – it was only a couple of years ago!"

"No cookie then?"

“No, no cookie. But, since you asked about Devil’s Lake...that was a buzz. We weren’t sure it really happened. With Tillie’s special cookies, I wondered if Del and me didn’t hallucinate the whole thing. Man, did we ever have the *hungries*. Good thing we got extra take-out from Ella’s Deli on our way out of town.”

Tom laughed. “I remember you couldn’t wait to tell everyone what happened. Worked the whole length of the bar. No escaping you that next weekend. ‘Hey, I was out picnicking at Devil’s Lake with my kid brother. You wouldn’t believe what we saw.’ Heard the story so many times I could tell it myself back then. Not sure I can do it now that I’m an old fart. I know you and Del were chilling on the beach there, pigged out on deli sandwiches and Till’s cookies when these guys pull up in a Woodie-wagon, small rowboat on top.”

“Yeah, like you say. We took in some rays on the beach to warm up. Then did a little hiking. I never told Del about the rattlesnakes; he’d have been on the plane back to New York before I could wash the sand off my feet. We had the deli when we got back to the beach. Shared a beer, split a cookie, and nodded off.

“We woke when we heard this wagon pull up. Sounded like it was riding on its shocks. No wonder, three *humongoes* got out – each 250, 300 pounds minimum. Two untied the boat on top, flipped it, and brought it down to the edge of the lake. The third unloaded the wagon: couple of coolers, tackle boxes, boat cushions, rods, and a 5-horse ancient Evinrude motor. They loaded the boat and pushed it out until the water was up to their knees.

“Two got in. Water came up almost to the gunnels. I elbowed Del to keep quiet; any one of them could have crushed both of us. No way was that boat going anywhere! The third guy came back from parking the wagon and climbed on board. The water’s to the top of the gunnels. He started the motor and as it headed out the bow plowed under and the boat filled. None of them said a word. I whispered to Del, ‘Shut it!’

“Well, the three climbed out, one on each side, one at the stern, and slowly pulled the boat, totally filled with water, back to the beach. Not a word. Two of them started unloading the boat while the third went for the car. They emptied the boat and flipped it to drain while they reloaded the car. Then, still no one’s talking, they put the boat on top, tied it down, got in, and drove off.

“As soon as the car was out of sight Del and I split a gut laughing. Del said, ‘I can’t believe it. Did that really happen? Fuck, your Midwest is strange. No way.’

“I told him we should crawl over and put our hands in the tire tracks, see if they’re really there. We did that. Del kicked the treads and whooped up a dance. He was nuts. Tillie’s cookies are too much for city slickers.”

Tom smiled. “No wonder your brother tried to stay away. Yeah, best to remember the fun times you spent together.”

Tom got up, refilled his mug from the pot on the stove, raised an eyebrow at Stewie to see if he wanted more himself. “Nah, Tom, thanks,” then Stewie observed, “We look like sick cows.”

Tom cackled. “Ha, ha, or should I go, MOO, MOO?”

The phone rang and Stewie said, “I’ll get it.” He remembered to use his full name. “Hi, this is Patrick Stewart Kelly, can I help you?”

“Yes, Patrick. This is Lieutenant Stanley in New York. I’m heading up the case on your brother’s murder. Our sympathies. Sergeant Manuela called, said he talked to you. How are you doing and is this a good time to talk?”

“I guess it’s as good a time as any. Let me grab a chair. Rough night last night. Hang on a minute.” The cord on the phone almost stretched into the kitchen. Stewie’s face said it all, nothing very nice.

Tom shook his hand indicating he understood what Stewie meant, swung a kitchen chair around for Stewie., and went to retrieve the notepad and pencil from the phone stand.

“Go ahead. I’ve got a pad and pencil ready if I need to write anything down.”

“The Sergeant said he wrote my number on his card. Got it?”

“Yeah. I put it under a refrigerator magnet. I can see it from here. So, what’s happening?”

“Early stages, gathering information. Your brother’s neighbor, Mr. Wilson, gave us your name, number, and the name of your brother’s lawyer – Ron Abbot. We’re going to ask for a warrant to make it legal to go into your brother’s house if that’s all right with you. Don’t think we’ll find any clues, but we may as well be thorough. At this point, it looks like a carjacking gone bad and worse. Prelims indicated two crews of shooters. One did your brother and the other the car. The car was in a junkyard down the road from where they found your brother. Car probably got riddled with bullets when the first crew tried to unload it, got greedy or stupid, and caught it themselves. There’s a creek runs behind the junkyard; we got our divers in there as we speak.

“Look, eventually we’d like you to come out, officially ID the body. You can help us in case the perp was someone your brother knew – business or personal. His lawyer said Del worked hard and mellowed these last years, didn’t have any aggressive edge. ‘Doubt that this was a deal gone bad.’ But he and Del were friends, that’s what he’d say. We got to look anyhow. We’ll stay in touch. Probably end of this week or early next week would be good if you can fly out.

“You come out early, please call. Think of anything, call me or Sergeant Manuela. Any questions?”

Stewie scratched his head and moved the phone to his other ear, staring open-mouthed at Tom. Eventually he said, “No. I think I understand. I’m kind of in shock now...so may as well stay here with my friends. I’ll keep in touch. Yeah, I don’t think Del would hurt a fly. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes, senseless killings never make sense. Thanks and again sympathies from the team.”

Tom took the phone and put it back on the stand. “You OK?”

“Yeah, the Lieutenant told me they know diddly-squat. Thinks one crew of turds shot my brother for the ‘vette and a second off’d the first. Trouble is, they shot up the car, shattered the fiberglass and took a few souvenirs. Dumb and dumber. Yeah, I’ll be OK, thanks.”

“Great. Hey, Stewie, I’m getting hungry. Do you want to go out, get something to eat? Or I can cook eggs here if you’d like. Till said she’ll bring over a casserole for supper.”

“That’s sweet, Tom. You and Tillie are great friends. Yeah, these walls are getting to me. Let’s go out. But I’ve got to shower first – I feel like shit and probably smell like it too.”

He turned and stumbled back to the bathroom. He first ran the shower as hot as he could take it and then finished off cold. He felt marginally better. He toweled off cursory and then wrapped the towel around his waist. He wiped the condensation from the mirror with his hand and stared at his image. “Face it; you’re not getting any prettier with age.” He scratched the grey stubble on his chin and slowly turned to look at the back of his head. “Your hairs not doing much better either.” He finished drying with a hand towel and ignored the damp spots when he got dressed.

Tom looked up from his book. “You’re looking better Stewie...well, barely. Ready?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you drive my beater – we can go to a drive-through or find a diner on Washington Avenue. Any greasy spoon will be fine as long as it’s quiet.”

An hour later, they’re back in the apartment. Stewie plopped down in the easy chair. Two seconds later, he got up and started pacing.

“This really sucks, Tom. What am I supposed to do? I know absolutely *nada* about Del’s business, and as far as his friends – well, the only ones I’ve met are the lawyer the cop mentioned and a guy he played handball with a couple times a month, Hank something or other.”

Tom shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe you should drink some water. You go sit on the couch; I’ll get a couple of glasses.”

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang, breaking the silence. Stewie jumped up and practically ran to the phone.

“This is Stewie.”

“Hi, Stewie. This is Ron Abbot, your brother’s attorney. We met a couple years back when you were in New York to visit Del. You both came to my office to sign papers. I’m sorry to be calling under these circumstances; Del was my friend too. Is this a good time to talk? It shouldn’t take fifteen minutes.”

“As good as any. Go ahead. I know I’ve got to come to New York, but I don’t want to come and sit on my hands. Yeah, and there’s my brother’s funeral.”

“I understand. The funeral must wait until they release the body, and they want you to do the official ID on that. They’re going to search Del’s house to see if they can find any new leads. I told them to check with you and get a search warrant. They’d want to keep everything strictly legal in case anything turns up. Sergeant Manuela can help you with any paperwork in Madison. They should be able to finish the rest of the preliminaries this week. If you want to come in before the weekend let me know. I can meet you at LaGuardia. My wife and I are empty nesters and would be happy to put you up. Del probably came for supper once a month.”

“Thanks. I’ll probably stay at Del’s like I did when I visited. He set up the guest room with me in mind. My old fishing rod’s hanging above the window and a picture of me with my first striper’s over the bed. Think he’d want that. Always billed himself as *the younger brother that cares*. But thanks for the offer.”

“What about travel arrangements?”

“Easier for me to do it from here. Local lady, Amy, comes into *Charlie’s* where I tend bar, works for a travel agency here in Madison. She’s done arrangements for me before.”

“Super then. She should ask for a bereavement fare. I’ll call if anything changes and let you know when to come in. Del made his funeral arrangements in advance, paid in full. I’ll give them a heads-up. Everything should go smoothly. If there’s anything you’d like me to do, any questions, call me any time.”

Stewie scratched his chin with the mouthpiece and rubbed his eyes with his other hand. “No, I don’t think so. Thanks for calling.”

Tom was back in the easy chair. “Stewie, everything OK?”

“Yeah. Looks like I can sit and wait here until they release the body. Fly out Friday or a week from now. Discount fare too. Woopie-do!”

Stewie collapsed on the couch.

Tom made a face and looked up at the ceiling. “Beer time, Stewie?”

“Yeah, beer time, Tom.”

They nursed a couple of beers until four-thirty. They were both startled when the phone rang. Tom looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. “That must be Tillie. I’ll get it.”

He kept his back to Stewie and answered softly, “Kelly’s. Hi, Till. I thought it was you. Yeah, Stew’s hanging in there. Super. I’ll tell him you’ll have a casserole over at six. Bring another six-pack of ale. Great, thanks, love you.”

He returned to his chair. “That was Till. She’ll be by in an hour with a casserole and more beer. We should take a walk, get a little fresh air.”

Stewie pushed off the couch and grunted. “Yeah, sure.” The room spun. “On second thought I think I better lay down for a while.”