

Let It Burn by Steve Hamilton

Chapter One

Summers die hard in Paradise.

The first time you live through it, and because this place still has the “MI” as part of the address, you might actually expect the summer to fade away slowly like it does below the bridge. Down there, on a crystal blue day in September, the sun shining hot and bright until it starts to go down, you might feel a slight note of coolness in the air, a note that makes you think of football and back-to-school and leaves turning and all those other bittersweet signs that the season is changing. Something so subtle you might even be forgiven for missing it the first time it happened. Especially if you didn’t want the summer to end.

Up here, on the shores of Lake Superior, there’s a cold wind that gathers from the north and picks up weight as it builds its way across two hundred miles of open water, and then, on a late afternoon in August—hell, sometimes in July—that wind hits you square in the face and make its intention quite clear, no matter how much you might not like the message. Summer may not be one hundred percent done, not just yet, but it’s been mortally gutshot, and it’s only a matter of days until it’s gone.

It was late August this time around. Actual late August, meaning an absurdly long summer. I’ve got six cabins stretched along an old logging road, built by my father, and in the summer I rent them out to a particular brand of tourist who wants to get away from everything without actually going to Canada or Alaska. They’re mostly repeat customers, because there’s something about this place. While they’re here, they might go around the corner to Tahquamenon Falls, or all the way up to the Shipwreck Museum on Whitefish Point, stand there and look out at the vast expanse of water, maybe think about the Edmund Fitzgerald resting just a few miles out there, six hundred feet below the surface. Come back and spend some time at the Glasgow Inn. That’s summer in Paradise.

I was at that very same Glasgow Inn that night. I was sitting at the bar, instead of my usual place in front of the fire, having given up my chair and the chair opposite to a couple from Wyandotte. They were staying in one of my cabins, and when they asked me where they should go to eat, I had directed them here for Jackie’s famous beef stew. After that and a couple of cocktails, they looked to be quite content, just sitting by the fire and looking at each other.

As for me, well... There was nobody for me to look at. I had just felt the northern wind and had come in to inform Jackie that summer was on its last legs, something he never enjoyed hearing. Which might be why I always made a point of being the one to tell him. We have that kind of relationship, I guess. I bother him on a nightly basis, and in return he complains to me about everything in the world, including my own presence in his bar.

Oh, and once a week, he drives across the bridge to bring me back a case of real Canadian Molson.

“I don’t think I can take another winter,” he said to me, as he banged down one of those Molsons on the bar top.

“You say that every year.”

“This time, I mean it.” He’d been here in Paradise, Michigan going on thirty years now, and yet he still had that Scottish accent. He’d tell you that he’d lost it, of course, that he sounded just as American as I did. Just one more thing he was wrong about.

There was a television above the bar. The sound was off, but I was watching the Tigers play the Rangers. It was a home game, in what I still thought of as their brand-new ballpark, even though it had been a few years now. Comerica Park, one of those new-style parks that opened up into the city, showing off all of the downtown buildings I had once known so well. Three hundred miles from where I was sitting, and what felt like a thousand years ago.

“I hear Arizona’s nice,” Jackie said. “I hear it’s real nice.”

“They have rattlesnakes there,” I said, not taking my eyes off the television. “And scorpions.”

Jackie scoffed at that, but I could tell the idea had gotten to him. There weren’t any rattlesnakes or scorpions crawling around when he was growing up in Glasgow, and as for Paradise... Well, you might find an eastern massasauga rattlesnake if you really went out looking for one, but you’d probably never find one in your bed.

"Summer's supposed to last more than a goddamned month," he said. "That's the part I just don't know if I can live with anymore."

"I think we had double that this year. Besides, you love the winters up here."

He just stood there looking at me, bar towel in hand, like he was ready to smack me with it.

"It's cold as hell," I said, "it snows every day, and it lasts forever. What's not to like?"

He shook his head, looking tired, like winter had already begun.

"Seriously," I said. "You love winter because you know this becomes the best place on earth. This bar, right over there by that fireplace."

"With your sorry backside parked in front of it every night, ordering me around. You're right, it doesn't get any better."

He looked over at the couple by the fireplace.

"How old do you think those two are, anyway?"

"Hell if I know." I turned to give them a quick once-over. "Forty, maybe?"

"Forty years old and they're sitting there looking at each other like they're on their honeymoon."

"Second honeymoon," I said. "That's what they told me. They wanted to go to the most out-of-the-way place they could find without having to fly."

"Which cabin do you have them in?"

"The last one. Now that I finally have it finished." Meaning rebuilt and refurnished, after somebody burned it down for me.

"End of the line," he said, nodding his approval. "Won't be a soul bothering them there."

"You're sounding almost romantic, Jackie. Did you hit your head today?"

"Smartass." He turned away from me and started cleaning some glasses. This was the man who had survived the worst marriage in the history of mankind, to hear him tell it. Yet here he was, getting downright wistful at the sight of a man and a woman who were obviously married and didn't seem to hate each other.

Then it occurred to me. This was a bar in a town that saw its fair share of hunters in the fall, snowmobilers in the winter. Which means lots of men. Bird-watching had become the big thing in the spring lately, meaning mostly women. Then families in the summertime. A mom and a dad, yes, but also a couple of kids along to complain about how their cell phones don't work up here. The one sight you don't see too often in Paradise, Michigan is a moony-eyed couple, whether on their first honeymoon or their second.

The man caught my eye and raised his glass to me. I raised my bottle of Molson in return.

I'd been married myself once. A long time ago, to a woman I met when I went to college after baseball. A woman I didn't have much in common with, aside from the "Mc" in our last names. Jeannie McDonald, who became Jeannie McKnight, who went back to being Jeannie McDonald again. Who may have then remarried and changed her name yet again. I'm ashamed to say I don't even know if she did, or if she still lives in Michigan. If we had had children together, the story would be different, I'm sure. Or if I ever paid a cent of alimony. At least that way I would have had an address to send checks to. As it was, she just left. Just walked away. I got the divorce papers in the mail, I signed them, I sent them back to her lawyer, and then we were done.

I wonder if she feels guilty. Wherever she is now, whoever she's with, I wonder if she looks back at the way she bailed out on me a few weeks after I got shot and has any regrets.

Hell, I wonder if I'd even hold it against her now. I think I knew, way back when, that we'd never last, shooting or no shooting. I think we both knew.

I sat there at the bar, looking at my bottle as the Tigers played in silence above my head. There'd been a few women in that lost year after I left the force. Then I'd come up to Paradise thinking I'd sell off my father's cabins and had ended up staying here. Something about the place had spoken to me. Like this is where you really belong, mister. In the midst of these trees bending in the wind. On the shores of this cold lake. This stark lonely place on the edge of the world, which also turns into the most beautiful place on earth for the few days they call summer.

Then there was Sylvia, the wife of a rich man who thought I was his friend. Then Natalie, a cop from Ontario, someone who'd lost her partner, just as I had. Someone who may or may not have turned out to be the right person for me, if I had ever gotten the chance to find out.

No. God damn it. No.

I put the bottle down. This is not where you want to be going tonight, I said to myself. This is

not going to make you feel one little bit better about going back to that cabin alone.

"What's with you?" Jackie said.

"I'm fine."

He narrowed his eyes at me like he wasn't buying it. Which made it feel like the right time to leave. A minute later I was outside in the cold night air, looking up at the stars and listening to the soft waves just behind the tree line.

I got in the truck and took the left turn down that old logging road, deep into the woods, passing my one neighbor's cabin. Vinnie Red Sky Leblanc, a blackjack dealer over at the Bay Mills Casino. He'd gotten into some trouble, and I'd been watching out for him. The lights were on at his place, and everything looked normal, so I gave him a honk and kept driving. My cabin was the first, the one I'd helped my old man build back when I was eighteen years old and on my way to play Single-A ball. Back when I was young, stupid, and full of energy, and I didn't have a nine-millimeter slug sitting half a centimeter from my heart.

When I got inside, I saw the light flashing on the answering machine. I don't get a hell of a lot of calls. I hit the PLAY button and listened to a voice from my distant past.

"Hey, Alex McKnight! This is Tony Grimaldi. Remember me? I was a sergeant in the First Precinct, way the hell back when. I hope you're doing okay, and I hope you don't mind me calling you out of the blue. But I'm really just making a courtesy call, and I'd appreciate it if you could give me a call back."

He gave me his number. Then he signed off.

I stood there looking down at the machine, wondering why in God's name a desk sergeant from the old precinct would be calling me. I checked the time. I was in early, thanks to Jackie being an extra pain in the ass that night. So I figured what the hell, give the sergeant a call back.

I dialed the number, making note of the 734 area code. That was one of the new codes split off from the original 313. If you still had a 313, that meant you were either in Detroit or close enough to see it from your front door.

"Alex, is that you?"

"Sergeant Grimaldi," I said. "How have you been, sir?"

"You can call me Tony now. I don't wear a badge anymore."

A half beat of silence then, as we skipped over my comeback. I wasn't wearing a badge anymore, either. I hadn't worn one in many years.

"How long have you been out?" I said.

"It's over ten years now. Hard to imagine. But most days I don't miss it much, to tell you the truth."

"I hear ya."

"Nothing like it, of course. You know what I mean."

Another half beat.

"I know what you mean," I said. "You're absolutely right. But how did you ever think to get hold of me after all this time?"

"Well, like I said in the message, it's just a courtesy call. I play golf with a few of the actives, and one of them happened to mention you. He was going to call you himself, but I told him I'd love to catch up with you."

"Okay. Glad you did." That's what I said, but it still wasn't making any sense.

"I understand you're still drawing the disability, so obviously they had all of your contact information."

Disability. Not exactly my favorite word in the world, but I guess that's what you had to call it officially. When an officer gets shot on the job, he's eligible for three-quarters of his salary for the rest of his life. I don't make a point of telling most people that, because they'll inevitably look at me and try to see how it is I'm supposedly disabled now. I mean, I can't raise my right arm all the way anymore. I can't throw a ball, which would have been more of a big deal back when I was a catcher, I realize, but not so much now. If you really pressed me, I'd just have to tell you that I took three bullets and only two came out, and I'm supposed to go get periodic X-rays to make sure that third bullet isn't migrating closer to my heart, at which point it could kill me.

I'm supposed to go get those X-rays every year, but I don't. I'm supposed to feel guilt or gratitude or a mixture of both every time I get one of those checks in the mail, but I don't feel that, either. Mostly I just try to forget it ever happened.

"So what did you have to tell me, Sergeant? I've never gotten a courtesy call before."

"I told you, call me Tony, please. But here's the deal. You remember a case you worked on, that last year you were on the force, where you ended up putting away a guy named Darryl King?"

I was confused for exactly one second, because I never made detective and so technically I never really worked on a "case." But as soon as I connected the name to the crime, it all came back to me. You don't see a crime scene like that without remembering it for the rest of your life.

"Darryl King," I said. "In the train station."

"You forgot 'With the knife.'"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, bad joke. You know, like in that game? Colonel Mustard, in the library, with the lead pipe?"

That's cop humor for you. A way to distance yourself from the most horrible crimes of all. A way to keep your sanity.

"I've been away too long," I said. "But seriously, why are we talking about Darryl King? Don't tell me he's getting out."

"He is. Believe it or not."

"That makes no sense. He drew a lot more time than that, didn't he?"

"Tell me about it. But remember how he was, what, sixteen years old?"

"I don't remember exactly, but that sounds about right."

"Yeah, sixteen. Tried as an adult. It's been a real thing in the court lately, going back over those cases with youthful offenders."

"Like what, we were supposed to just send him home with a warning because he was a minor? Stop killing people or we'll take away your allowance?"

"Hey, I'm just the messenger here, Alex. You're preaching to the choir."

"Sorry, it's just..."

"I know, I know. Believe me. I've seen a few other cases like that. Maybe not as bad as this one. Bottom line, the kid's spent his whole adult life in prison. I don't know where's he going to live, what he's gonna do, but I do know he'll be out in a few days. Not that I expect him to come looking for you or anything."

"No, probably not. Good luck finding me, even if he wanted to."

The sergeant laughed at that. "Yeah, what, you're where, in Paradise? I gotta be honest, I had to look up where that is before I called you."

"It's a long way from Detroit," I said. "I don't think I'll have to watch my back."

"No, like I said, I don't expect this kid to do anything. I keep calling him a kid, I realize, and he's not a kid now. But you know what I mean. You just need to let people know."

"I understand. So you called me..."

"And Detective Bateman, yes."

"Wow, Arnie Bateman," I said. "Another name I haven't heard in a long time."

"Yeah, he's off the force now, too. Left right around the same time I did. Things were just getting a little too crazy in the department. More and more politics every year."

"Okay, so me and the detective. I assume you're letting the victim's family know, too?"

"The court system does that. Certainly won't be me, and no thank you, anyway. That would be a whole different thing."

"I can't even imagine," I said. "I remember talking to the husband. It's been a long time, and maybe he's moved on with his life. Gotten married again, I don't know. But in a way it probably feels like it just happened, you know?"

"Exactly. Now they're telling you the guy who killed your wife is going to walk free."

"I still can't believe it," I said. "Was it first degree murder in the end?"

I wasn't there for that part. I was in the hospital when the trial took place, or maybe I was already out of the hospital and off the force and living through my lost year.

"Second degree, I think. After they cut that deal or whatever they did. But still. It's not right."

"Well, I appreciate the call, Sergeant. It was good to hear from you."

"Tony, damn it. And you know what? We have to have a drink sometime. You ever get down this way? I live in Plymouth now."

"Plymouth? Really?" Last I saw it, Plymouth was a little town in the middle of a cornfield or something, twenty miles west of Detroit on the way to nowhere.

"Yeah, you wouldn't recognize the place now. Look who's talking, anyway. At least you don't have to look up Plymouth on the map."

"Fair point."

"But I mean it, Alex, I should have called you a long time ago. It's not right to lose touch like that. You gotta get down here so we can catch up for real. We'll have that drink, and your money's no good down here."

"Next time I'm downstate. I promise."

"You'd better, Officer. That's an order. You take care of yourself, all right?"

I promised him I would. Then we both hung up, and I'm not sure either of us really thought we'd ever see each other again.

An hour later, I was still thinking about the call. That name, Darryl King, which had been so important to me, so long ago. To the whole city of Detroit, really, in that one hot month of June. I had done my small part to bring him to justice, and then my own life had gotten turned upside down, just a matter of days later. I had had no reason to ever think about him again. Until now.

I was in my truck, rolling down to the end of the logging road, past four empty cabins. The family in the second cabin had just left that morning. That left only the couple in the last cabin, the same couple I had seen that evening, down at the Glasgow. The lights were on when I pulled up. I could see that they were inside.

I took an armload of firewood from the bed of my truck and stacked it next to the front door. Then the door opened and the man was standing there, looking out at me.

"Don't mean to disturb you," I said. "It's just getting a little cold tonight, so I thought I'd leave some wood."

"It's August," he said, with some kind of fake outrage. "It's not supposed to get cold."

He thought that was pretty funny. When he was done laughing, he thanked me for the wood.

"This has been such a great week," he said. "We really love it up here."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

"It's not even that cold in here, but I think I'll start a fire anyway. It really gets Gloria in the mood, if you know what I mean."

I just nodded at that one. Definitely more than I needed to hear, but what the hell. You're lucky enough to be alone with someone who loves you, in a nice cozy cabin at the end of the road in the most remote place you could ever find yourself in. Your real lives, all of your responsibilities and all of the demands, they're all back home, three hundred miles away. Why not pretend you're newlyweds again?

"You have a good night." I got in my truck and drove back down that lonely road to my lonely cabin. I had already made the decision by the time I got back inside.

I called back my old sergeant, surprising the hell out of him, I'm sure. I told him I'd be coming back downstate to take him up on his offer of a drink.

Then I made one more call.