

Die A Stranger by Steve Hamilton

Chapter One

On a clear, warm night in June, a small airplane is flying low over Lake Huron. It's a Cessna, a single-engine four-seater. The pilot is flying alone. The back of the plane is filled with the cargo, all wrapped up tight in plastic bags.

The plane's transponder is turned off. The pilot is flying by sight only. At such a low altitude he is undetectable by radar. As he approaches the airstrip in Sandusky, Michigan, he can barely make out the dark runway. It's a tiny airport, after all, and it's been closed for hours. But he does the one simple thing that all pilots know how to do. He keys the microphone five times in a row on the ARCAL frequency. That sends the automatic signal to the beacon on the ground, which then turns on the approach lights, the runway edge lights, and the taxiways. These lights will remain on for exactly fifteen minutes. More than enough time to land and then to take off again. It's one part of a simple, perfect plan.

A truck is waiting next to the runway, with its lights off. The two men in the truck will transfer the bags to the back of the truck. Working quickly, they can do this in under three minutes. This is also part of the plan. Just as simple and just as perfect.

Except that the two men in the truck are not the two men the pilot is expecting. That's where the simple, perfect plan begins to break down.

You can only imagine the pilot's surprise when he lands and finds two strangers waiting for him.

The two men who were originally waiting with the truck, they'll be found handcuffed to the fence at the end of the runway. When the two newcomers have emptied the plane of its cargo, the pilot will be allowed to leave, with a very simple and very clear message he'll carry back to Canada, to the people who sent him across the border in the first place.

The deliveries will not stop. Two men handcuffed to a fence, with guns pressed against their heads... Everything that happened on this night will be merely an inconvenience. It will not interrupt the transport of high-grade marijuana into the United States from Canada. Not when there's so much money to be made.

That's how this business works, no matter what the product, no matter which border. New business arrangements are made. New partners replace the old partners, if they're muscled out of the deal. But the planes keep flying.

It may have been a warm night at that little airport in Sandusky, Michigan. But I

was three hundred miles away, due north, sitting in front of the fireplace in Paradise, Michigan, where it was a good twenty degrees cooler. We don't rush into summer up here. Of course I had no knowledge of anything happening on that airport's runway. Or any airport's runway, for that matter. I found out about it two days later, the same way most other people did. I read the story in the newspaper.

I still pick up the Detroit News most days, even though it's a world away and it feels to me like a million years ago when I actually lived and worked in the Motor City. But old habits die hard and I need my daily news fix. What the current mayor was up to, how the Tigers were doing and whether they had a chance to go all the way again. Like 1968. Like 1984. The story about the hijacking on the runway caught my eye and I read the whole story, complete with local reaction, how futile it would be to try to stop these small airplanes from landing late at night. How you can't turn off the automatic runway lights because God forbid an airplane would need to land in a legitimate emergency. How you can't station somebody at every tiny backwoods airstrip twenty-four hours a day. How long and porous the border was between the States and Canada, and how this kind of smuggling has been going on in one form or another, dating all the way back to Prohibition.

That part was easy to understand. When you had a boat full of liquor coming across the lake, you took your chances that hijackers might be waiting for you. Now it was indoor-grown hydroponic marijuana, at which apparently the Canadians are just as handy as they were for producing those bottles of Old Cabin Whiskey back in the day. Now it was an airplane instead of a wooden motorboat. But the basic idea was the same.

It was the kind of story that made me think back to my own days as a police officer, how it sometimes felt like I was the little Dutch boy trying to plug the hole in the dike. That's really as much as I thought about it. It was an interesting story, but I forgot about it five minutes after I folded up the paper and had my second cold Molson. How it could have any effect on me or on anybody I knew, that was something I wouldn't have been able to imagine, even if I had known enough to try.

I had no idea that this incident on a lonely runway three hundred miles away would mark the beginning of that strange roller coaster of a summer for me. But looking back on it now, that was Event Number One.

Event Number Two? That was an Ojibwa funeral.

Chapter Two

A funeral shouldn't take place on a perfect day. I've had a strong feeling about that for most of my life. No, funerals should happen only when it's raining. Or when it's freezing cold. Or preferably both. It should hurt to be there, is what I mean. It should hurt right down to your bones when you're standing there on the edge of a grave site, as you're looking down at the box being lowered into the ground. You should have to hold your coat tight around your neck as you stand there taking the physical punishment for still being alive, for still being able to feel anything at all. While the man says ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the wooden top of the box should be splattered with rain and mud. Instead of tears drying fast on a perfect sunny day.

I haven't attended any more than most men, but there are two in particular I'll never forget, and both of them were on days that were heartbreaking enough without having to be so horribly, wrongly beautiful.

Especially up here in the UP. I mean, for God's sake. You get maybe a dozen picture-perfect days in a year. Maybe twenty if you're lucky, or if you happen to have an extra-loose definition of picture-perfect. Either way, a day like this is too rare a thing up here to spend crowded under a big white wedding tent that's been drafted for the occasion. You shouldn't have to sit there holding a plastic cup of nonalcoholic fruit punch, hot and miserable in your only suit, looking out across the parking lot to where the boats are tied up on the water and feeling like the rope to your own personal anchor has just been cut forever.

Of course, this time it's not my anchor I'm talking about. Not today. It wasn't my friends and family gathered under that tent. No, I was there, according to the little booklet they gave me, to "celebrate the long and happy life" of one Hazel Nika LeBlanc, a woman who had been pretty much royalty around here. Hence the huge turnout. She was a direct descendant of the family most responsible for the existence of this place I was standing on. The Bay Mills Indian Community. She had been the living heart and soul of this place, and her influence went well beyond it. As a counselor and adviser. As an oral historian and a resource to Indian colleges all over North America. The kind of person who could spend one hour on the phone and end up with a hundred different people working on that day's big problem. None of which you'd even suspect just looking at her. So quiet and soft and round and with those big glasses. You wouldn't find out how much power she could generate unless you happened to be on the other end of it. A place you did not want to find yourself, believe me, if she wasn't happy with you. She had been like a mother to the whole reservation, that much was certain. But she was the literal birth mother to four children. Three of them were still alive to mourn her this day. One of them was Vinnie Red Sky LeBlanc.

Vinnie was my neighbor, the only other person to share the old logging road that wound through the woods to my cabins. He was my friend, maybe my best friend, even though he was half a generation younger than me. Even though he'd disappear for days at a time, and I'd drive right past his place with absolutely no

idea where he was. Even though there were gaps in his personal history that I could never fill in. Things he wouldn't talk about, ever.

Even though the friendship had once all but ended, and we'd gone weeks without speaking to each other. He was always there for me, if I really needed him. He'd saved my life more than once. So of course I was here for him today.

I had lost my own mother when I was just a kid, so that much I could relate to. That was the first of those perfect-day funerals. Me standing next to my father, trying to hold it together. I don't remember much else, but I do remember it being a pretty small affair. Twenty, thirty people? Hell, I don't know. But it wasn't like this. It wasn't the whole town showing up to say goodbye. Or to celebrate a long and happy life, whatever kind of face you want to put on it. It didn't feel anything remotely like a happy occasion when it was my turn to be the grieving son, and I was sure it didn't feel any better to Vinnie.

Of course, the whole thing had started days before. On the night Hazel Nika LeBlanc died, the neighbors gathered in her yard to build the fire. They watched over it and kept it burning every single minute between then and today's official service, which was held in the little Catholic church up the road. There wasn't enough room to hold everybody, so I didn't even try to get in the door. Extended family only, I guess. Although around here that could still mean a hundred people.

After that service, everything moved up to the graveyard on top of Mission Hill, all the cars nosing their way slowly up that steep road. With no guard rails, nothing to stop you from rolling over that steep drop-off. If it had been an icy winter day, they probably would have had to dig a few more grave sites.

Once we were all at the top, filling up that old burial ground, the priest and the medicine man held court together, the Ojibwa burial ceremony taking place now that the Catholic funeral Mass was over. The Catholic part, hell, they've been doing that around here for at least 150 years, and the Ojibwa part, with the four-day journey to the west, the tobacco offered to the spirits, some of the ceremony even done in the original Ojibwa language... I guess that part's been around a little bit longer, like say a few thousand years. But somehow it all worked together and we all stood up there in the sunlight, looking out over Spectacle Lake and Monocle Lake just below us, and beyond that, the endless horizon of Lake Superior.

When it was done, we all drove back down the hill, nobody in any kind of hurry. The crowd ended up down the street, at the golf course. That's where the big white wedding tent had been set up, and it was almost blinding in the sunlight. I stood there on the outer edges, trying to catch a glimpse of Vinnie whenever I could. He had two younger sisters, and each of them had a husband, a baby, and another kid just old enough to run around through people's legs but not old

enough to understand what was going on. Someone would end up chasing them down and returning them to their parents. They'd stay put for about five minutes and then take off again. There were cousins, too. I can't even guess how many. I knew Buck to say hello to, a few others to nod to and give them a quick smile.

I looked around the place for Vinnie and finally saw him standing across the street, on the edge of the casino's parking lot where it runs close to the shoreline. He was standing there looking out at Waishkey Bay. There were maybe a dozen boats tied up, but the parking lot was almost full. No matter how beautiful it was outside, or how heart-breaking this occasion, how many different good reasons you could come up with for not spending your summer afternoon inside a casino, still there were plenty of people filing in with a burning need to lose their money.

It was a big building, of course. There was something like fifteen thousand square feet of gambling space and a conference center and two restaurants and a hotel with 150 rooms. Vinnie worked here dealing blackjack so I knew what this place meant to him. He led downstaters on hunting trips in the fall, but that was nothing like a full-time job with benefits.

As I crossed the street, I heard some people laughing as they walked through the front door, ready to hit those slot machines. There were two fountains set in the bay behind the casino. They were both spraying water high into the air, and as I stepped next to Vinnie the white noise drowned out every other sound around us.

"How you holding up?" I said.

He took one quick glance at me and turned back to the water. Dark hair hanging free down his back. Wearing that suit I had seen only once before. At the last funeral, a few days after we brought his brother's dead body back home from Canada. That day had the common decency to be cold and miserable. That's the one thing you can say about that day.

"Place is packed," I said. "Your mother meant a great deal to pretty much everybody."

Vinnie nodded.

"It's a lot to deal with all at once," I said. "I can see why you needed a little break."

He nodded again.

"Just wanted to check on you. I can leave you alone now."

"No," he said, finally speaking. "Stay here for a bit."

I stood with him for a while, looking out at the water. Then I opened up my little booklet and took one more read through it. I felt like I should say something, but I couldn't think of one word.

"Why do we do it?" he finally said to me.

"Why do we do what?"

"Why do we go through life every day without even noticing all the things we're missing?"

"I don't know," I said. "But you're right. We shouldn't take one single day for granted."

This is the kind of insight you have at a funeral, I thought. Two days later, you've already forgotten it – that promise you may have made to yourself, to wake up every day and realize what a gift you've been given.

But no, Vinnie seemed to have something else in mind. Something more specific. More troubling.

"All we have is time," he said. "That's all we're given. You ever think about that?"

"Sometimes. Not often enough."

He turned to face me. His eyes were red. "I'm serious, Alex. This isn't something you put on a greeting card. This is real. You're given a certain amount of time on this earth and absolutely nothing else."

I looked at him. I didn't try to agree with him. Clearly that wasn't what he wanted from me.

"You don't get any back when it's done," he said. "You don't get to do anything over. One shot through and then you're done."

"Vinnie, are you okay?"

"The last time, I saw her..." He stopped himself, swallowing hard and looking back out over the water. "She was almost gone. She could barely talk. We were all there, my sisters and me, just standing over her, you know. She looked up at me. You know what she said?"

"What?"

"She said, 'I'm glad you came back. It's been so long. Look at your children. Look at how they turned out. I'm so proud of them. I'm so glad we made them

together. No matter what else happened, it couldn't have been all bad.”

He stopped again, took a deep breath.

“That’s what she said, and she was looking right at me. Right in my eyes. She reached up and took my hand.”

“You mean she thought…”

“That I was my father, yes.”

“Well, okay,” I said. “She was kinda out of it, right? I mean, with the drugs and everything.”

“He’s been gone a long time,” Vinnie said. “But I guess you never forget, huh? What your old husband looks like?”

“No. I don’t imagine.”

“He must have looked just like me, right? If she took one look at me and thought I was him?”

There was an edge to his voice now. I didn’t say anything back. I just waited for him to work this out, whatever it was that was bothering him.

“That’s the thing,” he said. “I don’t even know if I look like him or not. I haven’t seen him since I was like, what, six years old?”

“You’ve got pictures?”

He looked at me again. We were getting into one of those things he rarely talked about.

“If my mother had them, we didn’t see them. She didn’t exactly have his portrait over the fireplace.”

“He’s in prison, right?”

That was as much as I knew, the basic facts of the matter and not much else. I knew it had all happened before I moved up here. Before Vinnie left the reservation and bought the property down the road from my father’s cabins.

“Yes,” Vinnie said. “He got drunk and ran over four people. Three of them died.”

I knew Vinnie had some pretty black-and-white views on drinking. I’m sure this event in his father’s life, even if it had happened years after he left, on the other side of the country, was probably a big part of it. Bottom line, you do not want to

get drunk in front of him and attempt to get into a motorized vehicle. Especially if you're a tribal member. He'll knock you flat on your back and throw your keys into the bay if he has to.

"He was already long gone by then," Vinnie said. "This all happened way out west somewhere. A thousand miles away from here. My mother didn't tell us about it. We had to hear it from one of my aunts."

These were new details for me. The things he left locked up inside, and probably never would have said at all if not for the sad heart he was carrying around on this one day of his life.

He picked up a rock from the lawn and threw it into the water.

"If he left when you were that young," I said, "that must have been hard on your mother. Raising all four of you on her own."

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the understatement of the year. If you do a little more math, you realize that this went all the way back to the years BC. Before Casinos. Before the King's Club opened up just down the street, the first Indian-operated blackjack casino in the country. Before the much bigger Bay Mills Casino, in whose shadow we happened to be standing. Before the jobs and before all of that money to be shared by every member of the community.

There were shacks here, all up and down this road. Little two- and three-room shacks no bigger than my cabin, but filled with entire families. When the casinos came, they tore down the shacks and they even moved a few of them down by the prison, for families of inmates to sleep in when they came up visiting. You can see the shacks lined up there by the road when you drive to the airport, each a monument to the past.

Now it's all nice split-level ranch houses with vinyl siding and basketball hoops in the driveways. A typical middle-class development, or at least you'd think so if you happened to miss the sign as you drove by it. Welcome to the Bay Mills Indian Community.

But going back to the old days, when it was one of those shacks and you were happy to have it, and a minimum wage job that would last all year long if you were lucky. What a hard life that must have been for an Indian woman on her own, raising four young children.

"How'd she do it?" I said. "I can't imagine."

"You work," he said. "You take care of business. One day at a time. That's what she always said to me."

“Can’t argue with that,” I said.

“You always watch out for your family.”

That’s the tricky part, I thought. That’s how Vinnie grew up, right here on this reservation, surrounded by his entire extended family, brother and sisters and parents and aunts and uncles and cousins. I’ve been in a house or two here on the rez, so I’ve seen small glimpses of how that must have been. Nobody in your family needs to knock on the door. They just come in, they make some coffee, they sit down, they talk, they argue, they fight, they kiss and make up. Every hour of every day, it’s an earsplitting pandemonium of family all around you. And it’s everybody. That’s the thing. You live here on the rez, everybody is family.

To be surrounded twenty-four hours a day by so many people who care about you, who would gladly lay down their lives for you. I’d last one week. Maybe two. Then I’d lose my mind. I’d have to get the hell out of there, go somewhere far away where I could be by myself for a while. To hear myself think again.

Vinnie had the same impulse, apparently, because that’s exactly what he did. He worked and worked and saved his money, and as soon as he could swing it, he moved off the reservation. He bought the one free lot on my father’s road and built his own cabin there. I can imagine him on the day he put the roof on, the way he must have sat down on his own chair in his own kitchen and breathed the longest sigh of relief in the history of mankind. Finally, some peace. Some silence.

His family never forgave him.

They still loved him, of course. But he carried a mark now. He was different in a way they couldn’t understand. I had a feeling that even Vinnie himself couldn’t explain it. Not really. It was just something he had to do.

Even now, with Vinnie standing here on the edge of the water, away from the crowd of family under the big tent, I could feel at least a dozen sets of eyes on our backs. There’s Vinnie, the wayward son, who moved a full thirty miles down the road to live in his own little house like a hermit. Along with his good buddy Alex, who’s obviously not a good influence. A strange white man who doesn’t need any family, either. Who’s always dragging Vinnie into one mess of trouble after another.

Yeah, even on a day like this, I could feel it. Fair or unfair. Although I suppose that part about dragging Vinnie into trouble was dead accurate.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This is my mother’s day. I don’t know why I’m thinking about my father. It’s just that, when she thought I was him...”

“Give yourself a break,” I said. “You’re dealing with a lot today.”

“Yeah, well, I probably need to go see some more people now.” The edge was gone from his voice now, replaced by a vague unease. I knew his batteries would be completely drained by the end of this long, hot day. “But I’m glad you came. I appreciate it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“There’ll be a sweat tonight. You feel like coming?”

I’d done it before, more than once. You go to cousin Buck’s backyard and you strip down to your underwear, no matter the weather. He’s got the hot rocks piled up in the middle of the hut, with all the old rugs thrown over the top to keep the heat in. He pours the water onto the rocks and the steam rises and fills your lungs. He adds the sage, that old healing medicine, and you feel your whole body releasing like a fist that’s been clenched for too long. I could have used it that day, but something told me to leave Vinnie to his family.

“You go ahead,” I said. “I’ll catch up to you later.”

Of course, I knew “later” would probably be a while. An Ojibwa funeral starts a good four days before the burial, and then keeps going. I had a feeling this one would set a new Bay Mills record.

“I should go back,” he said. But even as I walked away, I could see him still standing there by the water. Alone and apart, with his family and everyone else in plain view but not close enough to touch him.

It was going to be a long week for Vinnie LeBlanc. That much I knew. And this time I couldn’t help him, not one bit.

As I walked back past the tent, I overheard a hundred conversations going on at once. Remembering “Nika.” The last time somebody saw her or talked to her. Something she did one day for somebody else, long ago or just last week. A few yards farther and another conversation, about some inconvenience at the border, how long someone had to wait to cross the bridge. It all sort of caught up to me at once, how many unmistakably Canadian accents I’d been hearing all day without really noticing. But it made sense. Of course they’d come from Canada. There were just as many Ojibwa on the other side of that border, and the border was right there, out in the middle of that water, so close you could walk to the other side when it was frozen. I could see Ontario from where we were standing, those windmills turning in the far-off hills.

Of course they’d come, I thought. From miles and miles around.

Some of them Vinnie would know. Most of them would be strangers.

Before I got into my truck, I turned one more time and caught my last glimpse of him. He had finally gathered his nerve and was walking back to the tent.

I kept thinking about him as I drove home. Those thirty miles from the rez to Paradise, on that lonely beautiful road that follows the shoreline, all the way around Whitefish Bay. The weather stayed picture-perfect, like a consolation of pure sunlight on such a sad day. There wasn't a hint of trouble on the water.

But of course the trouble was there, just below the surface. That cold, cold water. Just ask the crew of the Edmund Fitzgerald, all of them still out there, not twenty miles from the safety of land.

No matter how beautiful the day, before you can do anything about it, without any warning at all.

The storm will come.