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End of Watch

Written by Stephen King

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STEPHEN KING

END OF WATCH

A NOVEL

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END OF WATCH by Stephen King.

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1

A pane of glass breaks in Bill Hodges's pants pocket. This is followed by a jubilant chorus of boys, shouting '*That's a HOME RUN!*'

Hodges winces and jumps in his seat. Dr Stamos is part of a four-doctor cabal, and the waiting room is full this Monday morning. Everyone turns to look at him. Hodges feels his face grow warm. 'Sorry,' he says to the room at large. 'Text message.'

'And a very loud one,' remarks an old lady with thinning white hair and beagle dewlaps. She makes Hodges feel like a kid, and he's pushing seventy. She's hip to cell phone etiquette, though. 'You should lower the volume in public places like this, or mute your phone entirely.'

'Absolutely, absolutely.'

The old lady goes back to her paperback (it's *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and not her first trip through it, from the battered look of the thing). Hodges drags his iPhone out of his pocket. The text is from Pete Huntley, his old partner when Hodges was on the cops. Pete is now on the verge of pulling the pin himself, hard to believe but true. End of watch is what they call it, but Hodges himself has found it impossible to give up watching. He now runs a little two-person firm called Finders Keepers. He calls himself an independent skip-tracer, because he got into a little trouble a few years back and can't qualify for a private investigator's license. In this city you have to be bonded. But a PI is what he is, at least some of the time.

Call me, Kermit. ASAP. Important.

Kermit is Hodges's actual first name, but he goes by the middle one with most people; it keeps the frog jokes to a minimum. Pete makes a practice of using it, though. Finds it hilarious.

Hodges considers just pocketing the phone again (after muting it, if he can find his way to the DO NOT DISTURB control). He'll be called into Dr Stamos's office at any minute, and he wants to get their conference over with. Like most elderly guys he knows, he doesn't like doctors' offices. He's always afraid they're going to find not just something wrong but something *really* wrong. Besides, it's not like he doesn't know what his ex-partner wants to talk about: Pete's big retirement bash next month. It's going to be at the Raintree Inn, out by the airport. Same place where Hodges's party took place, but this time he intends to drink a lot less. Maybe not at all. He had trouble with booze when he was active police, it was part of the reason his marriage crashed, but these days he seems to have lost his taste for alcohol. That's a relief. He once read a science fiction novel called *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. He doesn't know about the moon, but would testify in court that whiskey is a harsh mistress, and that's made right here on earth.

He thinks it over, considers texting, then rejects the idea and gets up. Old habits are too strong.

The woman behind the reception desk is Marlee, according to her nametag. She looks about seventeen, and gives him a brilliant cheerleader's smile. 'He'll be with you soon, Mr Hodges, I promise. We're just running a teensy bit behind. That's Monday for you.'

'Monday, Monday, can't trust that day,' Hodges says.

She looks blank.

'I'm going to step out for a minute, okay? Have to make a call.'

'That's fine,' Marlee says. 'Just stand in front of the door. I'll give you a big wave if you're still out there when he's ready.'

'That works.' Hodges stops by the old lady on his way to the door. 'Good book?'

She looks up at him. 'No, but it's very energetic.'

'So I've been told. Have you seen the movie?'

She stares up at him, surprised and interested. 'There's a *movie?*'

'Yes. You should check it out.'

Not that Hodges has seen it himself, although Holly Gibney – once his assistant, now his partner, a rabid film fan since her troubled childhood – tried to drag him to it. Twice. It was Holly who put the breaking pane of glass/home run text alert on his phone. She found it amusing. Hodges did, too . . . at first. Now he finds it a pain in the ass. He'll look up how to change it on the Internet. You can find anything on the Internet, he has discovered. Some of it is helpful. Some of it is interesting. Some of it is funny.

And some of it is fucking awful.

2

Pete's cell rings twice, and then his old partner is in his ear. 'Huntley.'

Hodges says, 'Listen to me carefully, because you may be tested on this material later. Yes, I'll be at the party. Yes, I'll make a few remarks after the meal, amusing but not raunchy, and I'll propose the first toast. Yes, I understand both your ex and your current squeeze will be there, but to my knowledge no one has hired a stripper. If anyone has, it would be Hal Corley, who is an idiot, and you'd have to ask hi—'

'Bill, stop. It's not about the party.'

Hodges stops at once. It's not just the intertwined babble of voices in the background – police voices, he knows that even though he can't tell what they're saying. What stops him dead is that Pete has called him Bill, and that means it's serious shit. Hodges's thoughts fly first to Corinne, his own ex-wife, next to his daughter Alison, who lives in San Francisco, and then to Holly. Christ, if something has happened to Holly . . .

'What is it about, Pete?'

'I'm at the scene of what appears to be a murder-suicide. I'd like you to come out and take a look. Bring your sidekick with you, if she's available and agreeable. I hate to say this, but I think she might actually be a little smarter than you are.'

Not any of his people. Hodges's stomach muscles, tightened as if to absorb a blow, loosen. Although the steady ache that's brought

him to Stamos is still there. 'Of course she is. Because she's younger. You start to lose brain cells by the millions after you turn sixty, a phenomenon you'll be able to experience for yourself in another couple of years. Why would you want an old carthorse like me at a murder scene?'

'Because this is probably my last case, because it's going to blow up big in the papers, and because – don't swoon – I actually value your input. Gibney's, too. And in a weird way, you're both connected. That's probably a coincidence, but I'm not entirely sure.'

'Connected how?'

'Does the name Martine Stover ring a bell?'

For a moment it doesn't, then it clicks in. On a foggy morning in 2009, a maniac named Brady Hartsfield drove a stolen Mercedes-Benz into a crowd of job-seekers at City Center, downtown. He killed eight and seriously injured fifteen. In the course of their investigation, Detectives K. William Hodges and Peter Huntley interviewed a great many of those who had been present on that foggy morning, including all the wounded survivors. Martine Stover had been the toughest to talk to, and not only because her disfigured mouth made her all but impossible to understand for anyone except her mother. Stover was paralyzed from the chest down. Later, Hartsfield had written Hodges an anonymous letter. In it he referred to her as 'your basic head on a stick.' What made that especially cruel was the radioactive nugget of truth inside the ugly joke.

'I can't see a quadriplegic as a murderer, Pete . . . outside an episode of *Criminal Minds*, that is. So I assume—?'

'Yeah, the mother was the doer. First she offed Stover, then herself. Coming?'

Hodges doesn't hesitate. 'I am. I'll pick up Holly on the way. What's the address?'

'1601 Hilltop Court. In Ridgedale.'

Ridgedale is a commuter suburb north of the city, not as pricey as Sugar Heights, but still pretty nice.

'I can be there in forty minutes, assuming Holly's at the office.'

And she will be. She's almost always at her desk by eight, sometimes

as early as seven, and apt to be there until Hodges yells at her to go home, fix herself some supper, and watch a movie on her computer. Holly Gibney is the main reason Finders Keepers is in the black. She's an organizational genius, she's a computer wizard, and the job is her life. Well, along with Hodges and the Robinson family, especially Jerome and Barbara. Once, when Jerome and Barbie's mom called Holly an honorary Robinson, she lit up like the sun on a summer afternoon. It's a thing Holly does more often than she used to, but still not enough to suit Hodges.

'That's great, Kerm. Thanks.'

'Have the bodies been transported?'

'Off to the morgue as we speak, but Izzy's got all the pictures on her iPad.' He's talking about Isabelle Jaynes, who has been Pete's partner since Hodges retired.

'Okay. I'll bring you an éclair.'

'There's a whole bakery here already. Where are you, by the way?'

'Nowhere important. I'll get with you as soon as I can.'

Hodges ends the call and hurries down the hall to the elevator.

3

Dr Stamos's eight-forty-five patient finally reappears from the exam area at the back. Mr Hodges's appointment was for nine, and it's now nine thirty. The poor guy is probably impatient to do his business here and get rolling with the rest of his day. She looks out in the hall and sees Hodges talking on his cell.

Marlee rises and peeks into Stamos's office. He's sitting behind his desk with a folder open in front of him. **KERMIT WILLIAM HODGES** is computer-printed on the tab. The doctor is studying something in the folder and rubbing his temple, as though he has a headache.

'Dr Stamos? Shall I call Mr Hodges in?'

He looks up at her, startled, then at his desk clock. 'Oh God, yes. Mondays suck, huh?'

'Can't trust that day,' she says, and turns to go.

'I love my job, but I hate this part of it,' Stamos says.

It's Marlee's turn to be startled. She turns to look at him.

'Never mind. Talking to myself. Send him in. Let's get this over with.'

Marlee looks out into the hall just in time to see the elevator door closing at the far end.

4

Hodges calls Holly from the parking garage next to the medical center, and when he gets to the Turner Building on Lower Marlborough, where their office is located, she's standing out front with her briefcase planted between her sensible shoes. Holly Gibney: late forties now, tallish and slim, brown hair usually scrooped back in a tight bun, this morning wearing a bulky North Face parka with the hood up and framing her small face. You'd call that face plain, Hodges thinks, until you saw the eyes, which are beautiful and full of intelligence. And you might not really see them for a long time, because as a rule, Holly Gibney doesn't do eye contact.

Hodges slides his Prius to the curb and she jumps in, taking off her gloves and holding her hands up to the passenger-side heating vent. 'It took you a very long time to get here.'

'Fifteen minutes. I was on the other side of town. I caught all the red lights.'

'It was *eighteen* minutes,' Holly informs him as Hodges pulls into traffic. 'Because you were speeding, which is counterproductive. If you keep your speed to exactly twenty miles an hour, you can catch almost all the lights. They're timed. I've told you that several times. Now tell me what the doctor said. Did you get an A on your tests?'

Hodges considers his options, which are only two: tell the truth or prevaricate. Holly nagged him into going to the doctor because he's been having stomach issues. Just pressure at first, now some pain. Holly may have personality problems, but she's a very efficient nagger. Like a dog with a bone, Hodges sometimes thinks.

'The results weren't back yet.' This is not quite a lie, he tells himself, because they weren't back to *me* yet.

She looks at him doubtfully as he merges onto the Crosstown Expressway. Hodges hates it when she looks at him that way.

'I'll keep after this,' he says. 'Trust me.'

'I do,' she says. 'I do, Bill.'

That makes him feel even worse.

She bends, opens her briefcase, and takes out her iPad. 'I looked up some stuff while I was waiting for you. Want to hear it?'

'Hit me.'

'Martine Stover was fifty at the time Brady Hartsfield crippled her, which would make her fifty-six as of today. I suppose she could be fifty-seven, but since this is only January, I think that's very unlikely, don't you?'

'Odds are against, all right.'

'At the time of the City Center event, she was living with her mother in a house on Sycamore Street. Not far from Brady Hartsfield and *his* mother, which is sort of ironic when you think of it.'

Also close to Tom Saubers and his family, Hodges muses. He and Holly had a case involving the Saubers family not long ago, and that one also had a connection to what the local newspaper had taken to calling the Mercedes Massacre. There were all sorts of connections, when you thought about it, perhaps the strangest being that the car Hartsfield had used as a murder weapon belonged to Holly Gibney's cousin.

'How does an elderly woman and her severely crippled daughter make the jump from the Tree Streets to Ridgedale?'

'Insurance. Martine Stover had not one or two whopping big policies, but three. She was sort of a freak about insurance.' Hodges reflects that only Holly could say that approvingly. 'There were several articles about her afterward, because she was the most badly hurt of those who survived. She said she knew that if she didn't get a job at City Center, she'd have to start cashing her policies in, one by one. After all, she was a single woman with a widowed, unemployed mother to support.'

'Who ended up taking care of her.'

Holly nods. 'Very strange, very sad. But at least there was a financial safety net, which is the purpose of insurance. They even moved up in the world.'

'Yes,' Hodges says, 'but now they're out of it.'

To this Holly makes no reply. Up ahead is the Ridgedale exit. Hodges takes it.

5

Pete Huntley has put on weight, his belly hanging over his belt buckle, but Isabelle Jaynes is as smashing as ever in her tight faded jeans and blue blazer. Her misty gray eyes go from Hodges to Holly and then back to Hodges again.

'You've gotten thin,' she says. This could be either a compliment or an accusation.

'He's having stomach problems, so he had some tests,' Holly says. 'The results were supposed to be in today, but—'

'Let's not go there, Hols,' Hodges says. 'This isn't a medical consultation.'

'You two are more like an old married couple every day,' Izzy says.

Holly replies in a matter-of-fact voice. 'Marriage to Bill would spoil our working relationship.'

Pete laughs and Holly shoots him a puzzled glance as they step inside the house.

It's a handsome Cape Cod, and although it's on top of a hill and the day is cold, the house is toasty-warm. In the foyer, all four of them put on thin rubber gloves and bootees. How it all comes back, Hodges thinks. As if I was never away.

In the living room there's a painting of big-eyed waifs hung on one wall, a big-screen TV hung on another. There's an easy chair in front of the tube with a coffee table beside it. On the table is a careful fan of celebrity mags like *OK!* and scandal rags like *Inside View*. In the middle of the room there are two deep grooves in the rug. Hodges thinks, This is where they sat in the evenings to watch TV. Or maybe all day long. Mom in her easy chair, Martine

in her wheelchair. Which must have weighed a ton, judging by those marks.

'What was her mother's name?' he asks.

'Janice Ellerton. Husband James died twenty years ago, according to . . .' Old-school like Hodges, Pete carries a notebook instead of an iPad. Now he consults it. 'According to Yvonne Carstairs. She and the other aide, Georgina Ross, found the bodies when they arrived this morning shortly before six. They got paid extra for turning up early. The Ross woman wasn't much help—'

'She was gibbering,' Izzy says. 'Carstairs was okay, though. Kept her head throughout. Called the police right away, and we were on-scene by six forty.'

'How old was Mom?' Hodges asks.

'Don't know exactly yet,' Pete says, 'but no spring chicken.'

'She was seventy-nine,' Holly says. 'One of the news stories I searched while I was waiting for Bill to pick me up said she was seventy-three when the City Center Massacre happened.'

'Awfully long in the tooth to be taking care of a quadriplegic daughter,' Hodges says.

'She was in good shape, though,' Isabelle says. 'At least according to Carstairs. Strong. And she had plenty of help. There was money for it because—'

'—of the insurance,' Hodges finishes. 'Holly filled me in on the ride over.'

Izzy gives Holly a glance. Holly doesn't notice. She's measuring the room. Taking inventory. Sniffing the air. Running a palm across the back of Mom's easy chair. Holly has emotional problems, she's breathtakingly literal, but she's also open to stimuli in a way few people are.

Pete says, 'There were two aides in the morning, two in the afternoon, two in the evening. Seven days a week. Private company called' – back to the notebook – 'Home Helpers. They did all the heavy lifting. There's also a housekeeper, Nancy Alderson, but apparently she's off. Note on the kitchen calendar says *Nancy in Chagrin Falls*. There's a line drawn through today, Tuesday, and Wednesday.'

Two men, also wearing gloves and bootees, come down the hall.

From the late Martine Stover's part of the house, Hodges assumes. Both are carrying evidence cases.

'All done in the bedroom and bathroom,' one of them says.

'Anything?' Izzy asks.

'About what you'd expect,' the other says. 'We got quite a few white hairs from the tub, not unusual considering that's where the old lady highsided it. There was also excrement in the tub, but just a trace. Also as you would expect.' Off Hodges's questioning look, the tech adds, 'She was wearing continence pants. The lady did her homework.'

'Oough,' Holly says.

The first tech says, 'There's a shower chair, but it's in the corner with extra towels stacked on the seat. Looks like it's never been used.'

'They would have given her sponge baths,' Holly says.

She still looks grossed out, either by the thought of continence pants or shit in the bathtub, but her eyes continue to flick everywhere. She may ask a question or two, or drop a comment, but mostly she'll remain silent, because people intimidate her, especially in close quarters. But Hodges knows her well – as well as anyone can, at least – and he can tell she's on high alert.

Later she will talk, and Hodges will listen closely. During the Saubers case the year before, he learned that listening to Holly pays dividends. She thinks outside the box, sometimes way outside it, and her intuitions can be uncanny. And although fearful by nature – God knows she has her reasons – she can be brave. Holly is the reason Brady Hartsfield, aka Mr Mercedes, is now in the Lakes Region Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic at Kiner Memorial. Holly used a sock loaded with ball bearings to crush in his skull before Hartsfield could touch off a disaster much greater than the one at City Center. Now he's in a twilight world the head neuro guy at the Brain Injury Clinic refers to as 'a persistent vegetative state.'

'Quadriplegics can shower,' Holly amplifies, 'but it's difficult for them because of all the life-support equipment they're hooked up to. So mostly it's sponge baths.'

'Let's go in the kitchen, where it's sunny,' Pete says, and to the kitchen they go.

The first thing Hodges notices is the dish drainer, where the single plate that held Mrs Ellerton's last meal has been left to dry. The countertops are sparkling, and the floor looks clean enough to eat on. Hodges has an idea that her bed upstairs will have been neatly made. She may even have vacuumed the carpets. And then there's the continence pants. She took care of the things she could take care of. As a man who once seriously considered suicide himself, Hodges can relate.