

*Beneath Hallowed  
Ground*

*A Modern Novel*

*Steven P. Locklin*



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# *Chapter One*

**Present Day**

**July 21**

The rain hurled down in a blinding sheet, reminding Jason Sparks what a weathered Conch fisherman had once told him—a tropical rain drenches a body down to the soul. Sparks thought the wisdom welled from a rum bottle, but now began to understand the fisherman's words.

Cursing the circumstances, he made his way along the poorly lit pathway from the parking lot to the beach condominium, trying not to stumble into the intruding palmetto bushes. The walk had lasted only a few minutes, but he already felt like he had fallen into his hotel pool back in Fort Myers. The officer ahead of him paused for a moment and pointed to the darkened mass that had to be the condo. The officer said not a word and hurried back to the dry patrol car.

It must normally be a nice job for a police officer, working on Sanibel Island. Lying a couple miles off the southwest coast of Florida, connected by a causeway, the island was a curious blend of expensive bungalows, hotels, houses, and tourist shops, all carefully blended into a landscape of beaches and wildlife marshlands. This exotic piece of the deep Caribbean was just a short drive from the T-shirt/bathing-suit culture of Fort Myers Beach. It was a great place to visit and do some shelling, sit in the sand, and dream away an afternoon.

Not a place you'd expect to be viewing a dead body during a thunderstorm.

Sparks circled the bungalow toward the Gulf side and came upon three men working in the patio area, illuminated by temporary lights. The rain, caught in the light, sparkled like ice.

"Someone here named Johnson?" Sparks had to half-shout his question over the roar of the rain.

"That'd be me." Johnson was a slight man, despite the rain gear he wore. "Are you Sparks?" Sparks nodded. Johnson motioned to the tarp and walked over with Sparks. He lifted the corner.

The body belonged to a man in his forties, slightly balding, with a mustache. He looked to have been in pretty good shape, but his face was swollen and bruised. It wasn't difficult to figure the cause of death. The knife slash stretched from one ear to the other and had cut clear through the windpipe and esophagus, nearly severing the head. There was little blood on the body—a good downpour had washed away the gore.

"You know him?" Johnson asked. The officer studied his face as they squatted over the body.

"Can we go inside and get out of the rain?"

Inside the bungalow they shook off the water and Johnson directed Sparks to an area the crew had already gone over. The rain was stronger now, the thunder more disconcerting.

"I'm Lieutenant Barry Johnson, Lee County Sheriff's Special Crime Unit." He put aside his raincoat and then managed to extract a dry cigarette. "You have ID for me? And do you know who the guy out there is?"

"I had an appointment with a Mr. Drury for tomorrow," Sparks said, pausing as he showed Johnson his identification. "If that's him out there, I wouldn't know . . . never met him."

"The bureau places you out of Washington. What's your business in Southwest Florida?"

Sparks ran his hand through his hair. He suddenly felt tired. "I don't even know if it was official business or not," he replied. "I got a call yesterday from a guy identifying himself as Frank

Drury. He knew who I was, knew I was an agent working as a special liaison with Treasury. He said he had information that could be worth millions of dollars to the government. Said he would only talk to me and would only talk here on Sanibel Island.”

“That was enough to get you on a plane?” Half statement, half question.

“I went to college in Miami and still have friends and family there. I was going to swing down to see them and take a week of vacation.”

Lightning flashed, followed immediately by the concussion blast of thunder from above the bungalow. The crew members crowded at the door, cursing and yelling that they weren’t staying out there until the storm passed. Johnson waved them in.

“Millions of dollars?” Johnson turned back to Sparks. “He wasn’t any more specific than that?”

“I would have said so if he was. He refused to be specific, insisted I meet him here tomorrow. I flew in this afternoon, checked into the hotel I told him I’d be at, and figured I would hear from him in the morning. Then I got your call ... how did you find out about me?”

Johnson moved to a handsome mahogany table against the window. It stood out in the bungalow’s teal décor and looked like a favorite piece brought from somewhere else.

“Your name and room number at the hotel were prominently displayed here on the top page of his appointment book. At least I assume it was Drury’s.”

“You’ve got a positive ID on him?” Sparks asked.

“His driver’s license, credit cards, and passport, as well as other incidental things in here suggest this place was his. We’re still early in the investigation. Hell, we’ve been here for just an hour.”

Johnson held out Drury’s address book for Sparks to see.

“But whoever killed him was very neat about it, other than the method. The room was searched—very methodically. The only things you can tell might be missing are some pages from

this book. Drury evidently kept it as a notebook as well. No smart phone or laptop around.”

Johnson was right on that assessment. Many of the book’s other pages had been taken. In fact, aside from the page with Sparks’s name on it, there were only three other pages with writing on them at all.

“Any valuables taken?” Sparks asked.

“Not that we can tell so far,” Johnson said. “Wallet is empty, but the bungalow wasn’t ransacked.”

“Professionals. They were after something,” Sparks said. “Who found the body?”

“A couple on their honeymoon came walking by on the beach and decided to cut through the property. They found the body around dusk. Can’t tell for sure yet until we have an autopsy, but I don’t think he was dead too long. The rain started heavy right at dusk.”

One of the officers approached Johnson, giving Sparks an opportunity to walk around the bungalow. The three-room unit sat by itself, away from the other ones, separated by heavy vegetation. Inside, except for the mahogany desk he had already seen, the bungalow was furnished in the typical light-colored, cool material so often seen in these vacation places. Against the far wall in the bedroom was a work desk of modern design with a computer screen, keyboard and a bookcase. The books were exclusively historical. Sparks sat down at the desk and suddenly realized there was no computer to turn on.

“You could have asked permission,” Johnson was in the doorway and his tone was clearly one of annoyance. “You’re lucky this was the first room we worked or I’d be kicking your ass.”

“Sorry. You noticed something out of place here?”

“Uh, yeah ... you think?” Johnson said.

“Someone took all of his files and decided to be safe and took the whole damn computer for good measure,” Sparks said under his breath.

“And there is something else . . .” Johnson added as he looked around the desk.

“I’ve already noticed it,” Sparks said. “There are no disks or memory sticks either. Someone took everything he had backed up.”

Johnson was done with Sparks after another half hour of questions. Still, he asked for Sparks’s vacation itinerary and phone numbers. The storm had moved onshore so the rain and wind had died down as Sparks got back to his car parked on the main road. The deputy who had showed him the way to the bungalow was still in his cruiser with the interior light on. Most of the drive back from the island, across the causeway, and into Fort Myers left Sparks wondering about the circumstances.

Why would Drury, apparently some kind of historian, pick him out of the entire U.S. Treasury Department, to call about some information? Someone must have given him Sparks’s name, since he had asked for him specifically. Drury’s urgency and his statement that the information was worth a large amount of money to the federal government was intriguing.

Approaching Fort Myers on San Carlos Boulevard, Sparks caught up to the lightning, rain, and wind of the storm cell that had just left Sanibel. With the lateness of the hour, this meant a wet walk from his car to inside the hotel.

His thoughts turned to his family in Miami. He looked forward to seeing them. He reached the hotel near the Southwest Florida International Airport. The rain reached the same intensity he had experienced on the island, and as he expected, he had to park on the outskirts of the lot. With his raincoat collar turned up, Sparks headed along the path that ran next to the lot and through an elaborately landscaped grounds, branching off to the pool area one way, the tennis courts another, and a third way to the hotel. The entrance at the end of the path, accessed by room key card, was closer than the hotel’s main lobby.

The rain was deafening and Sparks walked briskly. A flash of movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention as he came around a bend in the tree line. Moments later a

splash broke through the din of the rain. In an instant, the millisecond it takes for an image to flash through a mind, Sparks thought of Drury, his throat cut from ear to ear. Sparks's body tensed ahead of his conscious thought as an arm wrapped around his throat.

*He won't go for my throat! Back right under the rib cage! Move now!*

The figure pressed against Sparks's side and wrapped a leg around his. Sparks threw his arm back with all the force he could muster and was met halfway by the striking arm of the figure. He snapped his head back into the face of his attacker.

They staggered apart, and Sparks swung around to face his assailant. The black shape was covered in shadow, but made no effort to run or hide his presence. He crouched low with the knife still in his right hand, turned up.

A single profane word came from the dark and the shape lunged at Sparks. The knife swung up from below.

*Hand to the arm! Block!*

Sparks could tell he had the advantage in strength and quickness as he gripped the killer's arm. *Killer.* His mind raced. He had little doubt this was the man responsible for Drury's death. The two of them were locked arm-and-arm, muscles straining against each other. Though it was inches from his own, Sparks didn't look into the man's face, instead concentrating on turning the knife arm out and away from his body.

*Turn it away . . . he's concentrating on the knife . . . a little longer . . . now!*

With all of the effort his adrenaline-charged body could muster, Sparks shifted his weight to his left leg and thrust his knee into the area of the killer's groin. The knife arm immediately relaxed as the attacker gasped in pain and fell back onto the grassy slope.

Sparks staggered from the sudden loss of force against him. He readied himself for another assault. The man struggled to his feet, far from incapacitated. Sparks pulled his coat off and risked a quick glance both ways down the path.

They were alone.

Did the killer still have the knife?

The answer came as the man assumed a stalking stance with the knife again in his right hand. Sparks figured the killer had realized his target was more dangerous than first thought. He lunged with sudden swiftness—not with the knife leading but instead going straight for Sparks’s legs. The force of the blow was lessened by a quick side step, but Sparks still took enough of a hit to throw him back into the mud beside the path. The man threw his shoulder into Sparks and brought his arm up, preparing to strike. On his back, with the man’s arm against his throat, Sparks knew the blow was coming and with every bit of strength he could find, he lifted the man up as the blow came down.

The man fell to the side.

Sharp pain . . . burning.

“Hey! What the hell’s going on?” The shout came from the direction of the hotel. Despite the pain, Sparks turned toward the four shapes standing about a hundred feet away and then moved to face his attacker.

“I’m a federal agent, call the police now,” he yelled.

The killer slipped into the shadows in the direction of the parking lot.

“Hey, are you all right?” asked a youthful man, who was now standing over Sparks, along with his three companions. Two were women. “Come on, let’s go after that guy, Travis.”

“No . . . don’t,” Sparks said. “Help me up.”

Once on his feet, Sparks ran along the path to the hotel, but veered left as it closed in on the parking lot. Cutting through the tree line, Sparks reached the lot in time to see a dark sedan accelerate through the area.

He was gone.

The kids approached cautiously from behind. “No way to get a plate?” asked the first one.

Rainwater streaming down his face, Sparks’s thoughts screamed through his head as he fought to catch his breath. The burning along his left side remained.

There was a sharp intake of breath from one of the women. "God, you're bleeding."

Sparks looked down to see his shirt saturated in red along the entire left side. Nausea swept through him.

Sparks watched as Johnson pulled apart the crumpled, bloody shirt on the hospital gurney and looked at the slash in its side.

"He was trying to go up underneath your rib cage," Johnson said. "Fortunately for you it was more of a glancing slash." He turned to face Sparks, who sat on the edge of a nearby bed in the emergency ward. A resident and a nurse were applying tape to the bandage. Sparks held up his left arm, but the action didn't come without considerable pain. "You want to tell me now what this is all about, or am I going to have to call Washington and get your boss to give you a lesson on federal-local relations and how you should help the sheriff's deputies of Lee County?"

Sparks shook his head and sucked in his breath as another layer of tape was placed on his side. "He was a pro and it's obvious he's the same guy who did Drury. I believe in coincidences, but this is more than a stretch."

"A pro that uses a knife instead of a gun?" Johnson said.

"You would think a knife wouldn't be the weapon of choice. It's not one hundred percent effective, I'm living proof of that. It's messy and requires close contact." Sparks paused. "This guy uses a knife because he likes it."

"All the more reason to help me," Johnson said. "What's going on here?"

"This isn't about need-to-know crap or anything like that, Johnson. I simply don't know what Drury was all about. But it's obvious someone thinks Drury and I were a lot better acquainted."

"Or you have or knew about something he had at the bungalow."

“That’s clear,” Sparks said as he gingerly put on a new shirt Johnson had brought. “Have you got a safe house I could stay at for tonight? I’ll go back for my things in the morning. I didn’t come prepared to fight off evildoers.”

“No gun?” Johnson asked.

“I *was* going on a vacation after this little detour.”

Johnson tossed the bloody shirt to Sparks. “Vacation’s over. Something weird is going on here. Watch your back.”