

Loose Ends

By Michael Danese

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“Listen, Les, there just isn’t any easy way to tell you this...I’m afraid it’s bad, real bad,” said the doctor to his patient.

At the sound of this, Les’ wife, Adele began to sob out loud, “Oh my God – my God!”

Les pulled her close and said, “Come on dear, let’s hear what else Dr. Brooks has to say. Please go on Doctor.”

Doctor Brooks is a kind, trusting man. He is in his early 60’s, wearing a white lab coat and a stethoscope around his neck. If you were casting a play and you were looking for the perfect doctor character, Bill Brooks would be your guy. He has been THE doctor in Stonehurst forever. Sure, there are lots of doctors in town now, but going back a few years, he was *it*. He even still does the occasional house call if he thinks it’s warranted. But this is the part of his job that he really hates. When he knows that there’s nothing that he can do to help. Especially when it’s someone like Les, whom he has known since Les was a child. So, using his most comforting voice, he looked Les straight in the eyes and told him, “It’s as I expected, an aneurism in the brain.”

Adele sobbed louder, saying, “Well then can’t you operate, or treat it, or something?!”

Dr. Brooks casts his gaze toward the floor, “I’m so sorry. There is nothing.”

Les, his voice was almost a whisper said, “How long?”

“Week, maybe two,” replied Dr. Brooks.

“A week! Oh, sweet mother in heaven, please help us!” Adele said as she began to realize the full brunt of the situation.

“So, what will happen? I mean - what can I expect?” asked Les.

“Well, your headache will continue as it has for the past few weeks, then eventually the aneurism will erupt and, well, that will be it,” said the doctor.

The two men looked at each other for a few seconds. They both knew there was nothing else to say, nothing that mattered anyway. Finally Les said, “Well, thank you Doctor for your help.” He put his arm around his still-sobbing wife and continued, “Come on, dear,” as he led her towards the exit.

You’ve run into Les Delaney a hundred times, but you never noticed him. He’s that kind of guy, he just doesn’t register an impression. He’s worked at the same bank for like, forever. He’s a

gaunt, nebbish man, about five foot five, and maybe 150 pounds. He has thinning mousy hair, and he looks about 15 years older than his 46 years.

Adele has worn her years better; she is an attractive woman who is usually taken for much younger than her years. She is taller than Les and has auburn hair cut to her shoulders. She's usually the stronger one, but this event has really thrown her.

As she was driving, Les said, "I can't say that I'm surprised at all, in fact I've suspected it for weeks. I've given this a lot of thought and I have some last wishes."

"Please can't you at least give me some time to come to grips with this?" said Adele.

"I could, but what I want is part of that," he answered.

"Okay, go on then," she said.

"What I want, and this is paramount, I want no one to know, not the kids, your friends, our neighbors, no one. I don't want to spend my last days as the subject of everyone's pity, where no one knows what to say, or starts crying when they see me. I don't want that, no way," he added.

"But Les, people need to know!" Adele insisted.

"*Why?* Why do they need to know – this is *my* life – *our* time and I don't want their noses in our business!" he retorted.

"Okay, okay, we'll do it your way," she said.

"I also have some ideas for my funeral service," he added.

"Can you wait on that for a while...please?" Adele questioned, "Let's take some smaller steps if that's okay with you."

"Fine, I'm so sorry about all of this – I know it's all so devastating to you, I'm so, so sorry," he said.

"No, honey, please, it isn't your fault, you didn't ask for this," she said.

"I know, but still, it isn't a fair deal for anyone," he said as his voice trailed off. "Let's go out to dinner, someplace nice, we'll get some wine, this game's not over yet!" he said in a forced joyful tone.

"Yes, that sounds good," she agreed.

They went to Tony's Italian restaurant, where they usually end up. The staff greeted them as always. It's a small, family-run joint with red and white checkered tablecloths, Roman statues and wall-to-wall Sinatra music. It's been the same for many years, and that's why they like it.

Barbsy, the waitress came over right away, “Hiya kids! Ya want the usual?” she said like she always did. Barbsy is Tony’s daughter and she’s been working here since she was a young teen, she’s now in her early twenties. She’s wearing a black tee-shirt and a white skirt and white sneakers. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a pony tail. Everyone loves her ever-present smile.

“Sure, sounds good,” said Les, “and also please bring us a bottle of your house merlot.”

“Comin’ right up!” said Barbsy.

“Tomorrow I going to call John and tell him I have a medical issue and I’ll be out for a week or two. I certainly have enough sick days stockpiled, enough for six months!” said Les.

“Oh, well, that makes sense,” said Adele.

“And, dear wife, tomorrow is training day for you!” said Les.

“Huh?” said Adele.

“Tomorrow you will learn everything about the business side of our family,” said Les.

“Well that sounds like a lot of fun!” she said with a big helping a sarcasm.

“We’ll make it fun. I’ll tell you about the will and who to call, all of the insurance information, credit cards, car and house titles, loans, bank and retirement accounts, how to pay the bills online, all of the fun stuff!” Les said cheerily, then he added, “as I said, I’ve given this *a lot* of thought lately!”

“And here’s your wine, and it sounds like you are having fun already!” said Barbsy.

“Celebrating?” she inquired.

“No, not exactly, said Adele, but my husband can make a funeral fun!” she added, then she got mad at herself. “I’m so sorry, Les, that wasn’t funny!”

“No, dear, please, it’s fine, that’s how I *want* you to feel!” he said in his comforting voice.

“I’ll...be back with your salads,” said Barbsy all of the sudden feeling like the third wheel.

The couple enjoyed the rest of their meal and their evening, and tried not to mention the 500 pound gorilla in the room.

The next day was precisely how Les described it. He called into work and went on a temporary sick leave. He knew it would be hard to go there and face everyone anyway. Almost all of his friends were there. He knew that the gang at the bank would take it hard. He felt pretty good, except for the almost constant throbbing of the time bomb ticking in his head. He popped a few pain pills in his mouth and tried not to think about it.

Les and Adele spent the better part of the day going over all of the financial aspects of their life. Adele has a business background, so most of it wasn't really new to her, it was just a matter of putting the names with the accounts and providers and the like. They went about it pretty businesslike. They both silently admired the strength of the other, full knowing what each other was really thinking about.

They spent the rest of the day relaxing, talking and enjoying each other's company. It was almost like they were on vacation. Except for the dull throbbing in Les' head, all seemed pretty normal. It did, however act as a constant reminder of his fate.

The next morning was Saturday, and Adele made her usual grand-slam breakfast, which Les looked forward to all week. There were perfectly turned eggs, waffles, pancakes and crispy bacon, coffee for him, tea for her and a tall glass of OJ for both of them. Again, the thought of this being their last grand-slam breakfast together crossed both of their minds, but neither of them spoke of it.

After breakfast Les read the paper. Later he went to his room and reached into the top of his closet and took out his hand gun. He put a full clip into it, put the gun into his belt and headed for the door. He grabbed a black Nike baseball cap from behind the door, along with a black oversized hooded sweatshirt. He stopped outside the kitchen, "Honey, I'm heading out for a while."

"Where too?" she asked.

"Oh, I just have a few loose ends to take care of," he replied.

"Okay, I have my yoga class at 11 with Joann, but I'll be home after that," she said.

"Fine, that's perfect, just remember..."

"*I know! I won't say anything,*" she retorted.

Les headed out and got in the car. After driving for a short while, he parked on a lonely street. He slipped on the black hoodie, put on the hat and a pair of sunglasses. He snatched the gun from the glove box and put it in his belt. He checked an address on a scrap of paper that he pulled from his pocket, then climbed out of the car, popped a few pills into his mouth, put up his hood, walked a few blocks and stopped at a door. He pushed the door bell. Nothing. He began to knock, softly, then harder. Finally the door opened a crack. "Jerry Wilson?" he asked as he removed the sunglasses.

"Who wants to know?" said Jerry.

"Hi, my name is Les Delaney, I know that you don't know me but it is very important that I talk to you."

"Important to who?" asked Jerry.

“Well, it is actually a matter of life and death, you might say,” said Les.

“Who’s life?” asked Jerry.

“Mine, and maybe yours,” said Les.

As the door opened a little more Les noticed that there was no chain, so he pushed himself in and drew his gun. Jerry was a scrawny runt in his late 20’s, even smaller than Les and he seemed to be scared of his own shadow. He was wearing blue shorts and an athletic tee-shirt, at least on someone else it would be athletic. On him it was just a hanging rag. At the site of the gun Jerry shrank a few inches and his eyes bugged out at the same time that Les became ten feet tall.

“We have a problem, Jerry,” said Les.

“I don’t even know you, man!” said Jerry.

“Doesn’t matter. I know what you did to those kids!” said Les.

“I did my time, man, I’m clean, come on, you can talk to my probation officer!” pleaded Jerry.

“Yeah, well what you got can’t be cured, and here’s my problem, I’m not gonna be around and my grandson lives in this neighborhood, and I’ll rest a lot easier if you weren’t around either,” said Les angrily.

“Come on man, think this through...” said Jerry.

“Oh, I’ve thought it through just fine,” said Les as he shot Jerry in the genitals.

Les lingered, and actually seemed to enjoy Jerry’s pain, very un-Les like, then after what seemed like hours, but was really an instant, he shot him in the chest and head. Les left him lying there face down in a flood of blood. He felt pretty good about himself at this point.

He, pulled up his hood, yanked the brim of his hat down low, and slipped on his dark glasses.

He carefully exited the house, quickly got back to the car, climbed in and checked his watch.

“Right on time,” he thought to himself.

He arrived outside of Joann’s house, or at least at the end of her street. He watched as she pulled out of the drive and headed for her rendezvous with Adele. He drove a few blocks away, got out of his car and walked through a wooded park, put up his hood and then walked to the small alley behind her house. He carefully made his way to the front door and rang the bell.

Joann’s husband, Matt answered the door and said, “Les, come on in, what brings you out this way?”

Matt was a big guy, which made him like a giant compared to Les. He was wearing a Steelers tee shirt and black shorts. He was firm, trim and toned, due to his frequent visits to the gym. His sandy hair was slicked back and wet, as he obviously just came from the shower.

“Yeah, hi Matt, I just wanted to talk to you about something that has been bothering me,” Les calmly said.

“Sure big guy, beer? Come on out to the garage,” Matt said, leading the way.

“Beer, sure why not,” said Les. Matt always called him “big guy” and Les always hated the belittling nature of it.

“So how can I help you?” asked Matt.

“It’s like this. Adele *loves* Joann, like a sister, I know how much they depend on each other,” said Les.

“Yeah, so?” said Matt.

“Well, I know, through Adele, that Joann has been unhappy for years, and I know how you’ve treated her, hurt her,” said Les.

“Yo, what give you the right to come into my house and say shit like that, I outta punch your lights out!” yelled Matt.

“Just hear me out and I promise I will never talk about it again!” Les said defensively.

“Make it snappy, I don’t have to listen to this! Actually, no, get the hell outta my house you little twerp before I bust your jaw!” commanded Matt.

At that Les drew his pistol and had a bead on Matt’s face. “No, you listen to me, *big guy*. My wife needs her more than you do. She’s wanted to divorce you for years but she’s been too scared of you, you brutish dolt. We know about every time you’ve pounded on her, threw her against the wall, cracked her ribs, and now it ends. She will have her freedom!” proclaimed Les.

“No, please, no, don’t!” pleaded Matt.

“Is that how she begged you when you were hitting her?” Les asked, but he didn’t wait for an answer. He pumped three bullets into Matt’s head. The big guy fell into a heap, right onto the big *Guinness* rug on the floor. Les took advantage of that. He rolled Matt up into the rug, popped the trunk on Matt’s Caddy and with every inch of his might he rolled the bundle into it. He was amazed that he got every bit of blood on the rug. He guessed that this ploy would buy him a few days before the body was found. He felt a little bit of bittersweet joy thinking that Adele and Joann would both be without their husbands and would have each other to lean on.

He secured his hood, glasses and hat, then he walked out through the back yard and took the long way around to his car. He drove a few miles and stopped in front of a small row home. He reached behind him and took the gun from his belt and put it in the glove box. He wouldn't need it on this stop. He got out of the car and made the short walk to the door. He knocked and right away a young girl answered. She was about seven, with curly blonde hair. She was wearing a yellow dress, white socks and shiny white patten leather shoes. "Hello, Helen!" he said.

"Hello Mr. Delaney! Dad, it's Mr. Delaney!" said Helen.

"Les, long time no see – how-ya-doin'?" Eileen, Les is here!" said Bill Murphy as he stretched out his hand.

"Just fine, Bill," lied Les.

Just then Eileen enters the small but cozy living room. Bill and Eileen are in their late thirties, with five kids, the oldest, little Billy is 14, then comes Coleen, at 12, Jimmy at ten, Helen, and finally little Marie, at four. They are not a rich family, but they are very close and happy. Eileen has flowing red hair and blue eyes. Her big smile always makes Les feel good. She went over and gave him a big hug. "It's so great to see you!" she said.

"Ah, lemme look at ya!" says Les, "you look great as usual!" he adds.

"What gives, you usually ain't around this part of town unless you have something special going on," says Bill.

"I certainly do!" said Les.

Bill is a hard-working man, and it's rare that he is ever home on a Saturday. He's run the local service station for years. And, as these things go, he's lost a percentage of his business every year for the past too many to the big box stations that come in with their fancy ad campaigns and get you-in-the-door-deals. But Bill has a strong group of customers that simply won't go anyplace else, and Les is one of them. Bill is wearing a yellow tee shirt with his station's logo, "*Bill's*" on it, and a good supply of grease, too, gray shorts and his usual work shoes.

"So, what's so special?" asked Bill.

"Well, it's like this. Remember when we had that fire?" asked Les.

"Sure," said Eileen, "But that was a long time ago."

"Maybe," said Les, "but it was a nasty time for me, Adele and the kids, and you were the only ones that came to our rescue, you gave us food, let us stay here for a few days, really took care of us," said Les.

"Aw, come on, anyone would!" said Eileen.

“Well maybe anyone would, but you were the only ones that *did*, and that’s a very kind and special memory for us,” said Les, “and now I want to pay it back.”

“I don’t want to hear anything more about it, it was the Christian thing to do, and we did it, there ain’t no paybacks!” said Bill.

As Bill speaks, one by one the other children wandered into the room.

“Just hear me out. And I’m thrilled that you are all here now. You’re right; it isn’t about payback, that was a poor choice of words. It’s about memories. You and your family gave us a special memory, and now I want to return the favor. I want to give your family a memory that you’ll all cherish forever,” said Les.

This certainly got the attention of the kids, and maybe Eileen and Bill begin to soften a bit too.

“Tell us Mr. Delaney! Tell us!” shouted Helen.

“Okay, I will, big girl,” he said as he scooped her up, “you are all going to Disney World!”

The children erupted with celebration, drowning out the protests of Bill and Eileen.

“Les, we couldn’t possibly…” began Eileen.

“You can and you will. It is all arranged. You’ll stay in our time-share in Orlando for a week,” said Les.

“Is there a pool?” asked Jimmy.

“Yes – a really big one!” said Les.

The kids began to cheer again.

“Any you’ll have passes to all of the parks in town – Disney World, Universal Studios and Sea World too!” said Les proudly.

“Oh, Les, this isn’t real,” said Eileen with tears streaming down her face.

“I’ll send everything over soon, all of the details, just promise me that you will have a great time and come away with memories for a lifetime,” said Les.

“We promise, we promise!” chanted the kids.

“Okay, I have to run to a meeting. Just always remember how special the Murphys are to the Delaneys!” Les said as he pushed his way through the hugs and kisses and back to the street.

Les felt pretty good about himself as he climbed back into the car. Then the throb in his head started and he took a few more pills. He drove for several miles to the other side of town and parked on a side street, next to a car up on blocks. He slipped the gun back into his belt, slipped on his hat and glasses, and then walked to the next street and pulled on the hood. He stopped at a run-down row-house and knocked on the door. After several minutes the door cracked open. A scrawny man stood in the doorway. Even though it was mid afternoon, it looked as if he just got out of bed, because he did. He was in his thirties, but looked older. His salt and pepper hair was shaggy and he sported a few days of growth on his face. He was wearing a yellowed tee-shirt and green gym shorts.

“Les, what brings you here? Come on in,” he said without any joy in his voice.

“Hi Billy, I’m glad I caught you at home,” said Les, knowing full-well that Billy would be there.

Billy pushed a pile of dirty clothes off of a well-worn chair and motioned to Les to sit down. Les ignored the invitation and remained standing, and Billy rolled his eyes away from Les. “Les, listen, I know that I owe you and Adele some money, and I promise I’ll have it soon!” he blurted.

“*Some* money, Billy? Three thousand dollars in more than *some* money! We both know that you’ve been saying that you’ll pay it back for, what, two years now?” said Les.

“I know, and I’m really sorry, I’ve just hit a rough patch lately,” said Billy.

“Yeah, you hit that patch in high school if I remember correctly, but that isn’t really why I’m here,” said Les.

“Really, well then why *are* you here?” quizzed Billy.

“And how much do you owe your parents?” asked Les ignoring Billy’s question.

“That’s between me and them, it’s none of your business!” said Billy as if he found a spine.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter, I know it is lots more that what you owe us, and we both know that they’ll never see a cent of it!” said Les.

“What gives you the right? That isn’t fair...” said Billy.

“Fair! Really? Fair? That’s pretty funny coming from you. We both know that you’ve been bleeding them dry for years, and when they come up short you put the touch on your sister, knowing that she always feels sorry for you!” said Les angrily.

“I’ve promised to pay everyone back, and I will! I have a few irons in the fire...” said Billy.

“Save it for someone that will believe you!” said Les.

“Tell me, do you still have that insurance policy that your dad took out on you when you were born?” asked Les.

“Yeah, I guess so, Dad held onto that, for safe keeping,” said Billy.

“Yeah, to keep it safe from you, cause you woulda cashed it in years ago! Well I’m glad he kept it,” said Les. “Here’s my problem, I’m not going to be around to insulate your sister and parents from you anymore, and I just have to stop the cash hemorrhage, so I have made a decision.”

“What decision? What are you talking about?” said Billy with some worry in his voice.

“Your dad still owns this house, right?” asked Les.

“Yeah, so?” said Billy.

“And the insurance should cover most of your debt, yes, I’m sure it will...” mumbled Les to himself.

Billy was starting to get agitated but it was too late. In a flash Les pulled out his gun and shot Billy two times in the head. Billy collapsed in a heap on the floor and blood quickly drained from the wound. It what almost appeared like a pattern to Les, he rolled up the rug that Billy was splayed on and then he stuffed the bundle in the hall closet. He wiped up a few stray blood spots with some of the dirty clothes, threw the clothes into the closet then forced the door shut. Her surveyed the area, and decided that there was no sign of a crime. He figured the body would be safe in the closet for at least several days. He pushed his way through the clutter to the kitchen, he put on his glasses and hood, then looked out of the door. The exit was quite secluded, so he quickly headed for the alley and finally wound around back to his car.

Les pulled into his driveway and just sat for a minute. He felt pretty good about himself. He was able to cover everything on his agenda, and he knew that by the time anyone found out, he would be dead, or close to it. Yes, it was a good day. The throb returned, so he fought it back with two more pills. He went into the house and found Adele sitting in her chair and reading. He went over and kissed her on the cheek.

“Good day, honey?” asked Adele.

“Yes, considering, and all...how was your class?” replied Les.

“It was fun! Then Joann and I went to lunch and did some shopping. You know, whenever Matt’s home she finds ways to be out, and that is fine with me. It was so very hard not to tell her, but I didn’t!” said Adele.

“I know honey, I am so proud of how strong you’ve been with all of this. I know it’s hard for you, but it is really better this way,” said Les.

“At first I was really mad, bursting to tell someone, but you’re right, it *is* better. Listen, the kids are coming for dinner tonight, I hope its okay and you’re up for it,” said Adele.

“Actually, that’s great,” said Les, “all in all, I feel pretty good, and it will be great to see them.”

That night Adele prepared a feast as if it was Thanksgiving, and, in a way, it was. Their daughter, Julie, her husband, Jack and their son, Little Jack arrived first. Julie is the spitting image of Adele at 24, and Les held back a quick tear when she hugged him. Jack gave him the usual firm handshake, which he applies on a regular basis at the law firm where he is up for partner. Little Jack followed up with his high-five. He is as adorable as you can imagine; a mop of blond hair and big blue eyes, wearing green Osh-Gosh bib overalls. Les certainly loves this two-year old with all of his heart. Who wouldn’t?

A few minutes later their son, Brian and his girlfriend Chantelle arrived. They are both students at State, which was Les and Adele’s alma mater. They’re home on spring break, as luck would have it. Brian is tall and slender and towers over his dad. He was a pitcher in high school, and he tried out for the college team as a freshman, but he just couldn’t play at their level. It was just as well, because his engineering schoolwork takes up all his time anyway. Chantelle is petite with shiny blond hair. She’s a nursing major. Adele and Les both hope that they’ll end up together because Chantelle seems to balance out Brian pretty nicely. There were a few times throughout the night when Adele wanted to quiz Chantelle about Les’s condition, but she fought it off.

They enjoyed their meal, toasted to “family” and when it was over they all helped Adele clean up. Julie and Jack left first, because they had to get Little Jack to bed. Brian and Chantelle left soon after, with a mention of a party someplace.

When the house was quiet again, Adele sat back in her chair in the study and got lost in her book. Les went into the garage, and it all caught up to him as he began to sob, then cry out loud for a few minutes. When he was able to pull himself together he came back into the house and was greeted by the sound of the doorbell.

As he walked towards the front door, he could see the flashing of lights on top of a police car. “No, this can’t be happening, it is too soon, I was so careful, I need a few more days!” he thought to himself. But it *was* happening. He opened the door.

Two police officers, both looked like NFL linebackers, darkened his doorway. “Les Delaney?” the first officer asked.

“Y-yes,” whispered Les.

The second officer turned Les around and cuffed him saying, “You are under arrest for murder, you have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you, you have the right to an attorney, if you can’t afford one, one will be assigned to you.”

At that moment, Adele came into the foyer and was just overcome with grief, she was crying out loud, unable to understand what was happening. Then the phone began to ring.

“What is happening?!” shouted Adele.

“I didn’t do anything to those guys that they didn’t deserve!” said Les.

“Those guys?” said the first officer, “we’re here about the murder of Jerry Wilson! Who else did you kill?”

“Adele, it’s fine, this is a mistake, call my cousin Brian, his firm will represent me, tell him about my condition...” Les spouted. “He’ll have me home tonight!”

“Don’t be so sure, this is a death penalty state!” said the second officer as he pulled Les through the door.

“Please make the call, Adele!” pleaded Les.

Meanwhile the phone was still ringing, and the answering machine finally clicked on with Les’s voice. “Hi, we can’t come to the phone right now, please leave a message.

“Les, Adele, are you there? Please pick up! It’s Dr. Brooks! I need to talk to you right away! I have great news! Are you there? Since you left my office the other day I’ve been on the internet and the phone, and what luck! I found a doctor in Switzerland that’s an expert in your case; he’s flying in tomorrow and will be ready to operate on Monday! You’ll be cured! It’s a miracle, I tell you! Please call me as soon as you can!”

As Adele listened to the message she sunk into her chair, put her head in her hands and quietly sobbed. “A miracle for sure,” she said.

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