

An aerial night view of a city, likely New York City, with numerous skyscrapers and streetlights. The image is heavily stylized with a bokeh effect, where many of the lights are blurred into soft, glowing circles of various colors, including green, yellow, and white. The overall atmosphere is vibrant and urban.

STUART WOODS

A STONE BARRINGTON NOVEL

FRESH DISASTERS

FICTION

Short Straw
Dark Harbor[†]
Iron Orchid*
Two-Dollar Bill[†]
The Prince of Beverly Hills
Reckless Abandon[†]
Capital Crimes‡
Dirty Work[†]
Blood Orchid*
The Short Forever[†]
Orchid Blues *
Cold Paradise[†]
L.A. Dead[†]
The Run‡
Worst Fears Realized[†]
Orchid Beach*
Swimming to Catalina[†]
Dead in the Water[†]
Dirt[†]
Choke
Imperfect Strangers Heat
Dead Eyes
L.A. Times
Santa Fe Rules
New York Dead[†]
Palindrome
Grass Roots‡
White Cargo
Deen Lie‡

Under the Lake

Run Before the Wind[‡]

Chiefs[‡]

TRAVEL

A Romantic's Guide to the Country Inns of Britain and Ireland (1979)

MEMOIR

Blue Water, Green Skipper (1977)

*A Holly Barker Book †A Stone Barrington Book ‡A Will Lee Book

STUART WOODS

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[Author's Note](#)

Elaine's, late.

Stone Barrington sat at his usual table with Dino Bacchetti and Bill Eggers. Dino was his old partner from when he had been on the NYPD, and Eggers was the managing partner of Woodman and Weld, the law firm for which Stone was of counsel, which is to say, he did the work that the firm did not wish to be seen to do, sometimes for clients the firm did not wish to be seen to represent. He did this work from a distance, at his home office in Turtle Bay.

Stone took his first sip of his second bourbon, while Dino and Eggers did likewise for their second Scotch.

"I'm hungry," Stone said. "How long since we ordered dinner?"

Eggers glanced at his watch. "Twenty minutes."

"I should have my green bean salad, hold the peppers, by now," Stone said.

"Look around," Dino said. "It's a busy night."

It was a busy night, Stone reflected, and then it got even busier. The front door opened, and in walked Herbert Q. Fisher with two hookers. Stone knew they were hookers, because renting was the only means by which Herbie Fisher could acquire company so attractive, not that they were all that attractive.

"Oh, shit," Stone said.

"Shit what?" Dino asked.

"It's Herbie Fisher." Stone looked away from the door, so as not to catch Herbie's eye. It didn't work.

Herbie stopped at Stone's table, picked up his hand and pumped it. "Hey, Stone, baby!" he yelled, forming his words carefully enough that he appeared drunk. "How's it hanging?"

"Hello, Herbie," Stone said. "How are you?" He immediately regretted the question.

"Well, I'm a lot better than okay," Herbie said. "I passed the bar today."

Stone squinted at him. "You're going to be a bartender?" Visions came to mind of customers clutching their throats and gagging.

"No, no—the *bar*. You and I are now brothers in the law."

"You're drunk, Herbie. Go away."

Herbie began searching for something in his inside coat pocket. "No, I'm not kidding. I've got it right here." He came up with a page from a newspaper and unfolded it to reveal a list of many names in small print. A circle was drawn around one of them. "See? Right here!" Herbie pointed helpfully.

Stone looked at the name. "This is a list of night students who got their GEDs, right?"

"No! Look up at the top of the page."

Stone followed Herbie's finger. "Candidates Successfully Completing the Bar Examination of the State of New York," read the title.

"It's a joke newspaper," Stone said.

"No, it's not!" Herbie said indignantly.

"You've never been to law school," Stone pointed out.

"I most certainly have," Herbie said, "for the past nineteen months, at the Oliver Wendell

Holmes Internet College of Law. I graduated summa cum laude.”

“Herbie, go away,” Stone said.

“Oh, let me introduce you to my ladies,” Herbie said, sweeping an arm toward the two hookers. “This is Suzette and Sammie. Ladies, this is the distinguished attorney-at-law Mr. Stone Barrington. He and I have worked together in the past and, hopefully, will be working together in the future.”

“Herbie,” Stone said, “you’re hallucinating. The notion that you graduated from any established law school and passed the bar is insane, and the idea of working with you in any capacity is repellent. If you don’t go away, I’ll have a waiter throw you out.”

“Nice to see you, too, Stone,” Herbie said with a wave. He took the arms of his two companions and steered them toward a table in Siberia, where a waiter was frantically beckoning.

“Who the hell was that?” Eggers asked.

“You remember that time when you wanted to catch a client’s husband *in flagrante delicto*, and you asked me to find a photographer, and Bob Cantor, who usually does that sort of work for me, was out of town and recommended his nephew, and the nephew fell through the skylight while taking the photograph?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember *that*.”

“Well, *that* was Herbie Fisher.”

“Holy shit, didn’t you have that guy shot?”

“I wish.”

“And now he’s a member of the bar?”

“No, it’s just one of Herbie’s fantasies, probably cooked up to impress the hookers.”

“How do you know they’re hookers?” Eggers asked.

Dino spoke up. “Just take a look,” he said, nodding in the direction of Herbie’s table.

One of the girls was sitting close to Herbie, exploring his ear with her tongue, while the feet of the other, toes pointing downward, could be seen to protrude from under the tablecloth. Herbie wore a beatific expression.

“If Elaine sees that,” Dino said, “she’ll grab somebody’s steak knife and kill them all.”

“Okay,” Eggers said, “they’re hookers. But that page of names he showed you was from the *Leg Review*, and they published the names today of those who passed the bar.”

“Then somebody took the bar exam for him,” Stone said.

“Probably the same guy who took G. W. Bush’s exams at Yale and Harvard,” Dino said.

Their first course arrived, and they dug in.

Elaine came over and sat down. “You ordered the porterhouse?” she said.

“Right,” Dino replied.

“For three of you?”

“It’s a big steak.”

“It’s a steak for two; you can carry home the leftovers, like always.”

“Elaine,” Stone said, “what’s the difference if three of us finish the thing here?”

“The difference is one main course,” she said. “Do the arithmetic.”

Stone was about to argue with her when two very large men walked through the front door, looking around like wolves seeking out a wounded animal. “What’s this?” Stone asked.

Dino glanced over his shoulder. “Wiseguys,” he said. “So what?”

“They don’t look like they’re here for dinner,” Stone replied. “At least, not for anything on the menu.”

The two very large men walked the length of the restaurant, then homed in on Siberia, where the girl under the table had finished her work and had joined her companions in an upright position for a glass of wine. One of the men reached across the table, took Herbie by the lapels and lifted him over

the table.

~~Stone was impressed that the lift was such that Herbie's feet had cleared the wineglasses. He watched as, braced between the two very large men, Herbie was escorted toward the front door, his feet not quite touching the floor.~~

"Dino," Elaine said.

"What?"

"Dino, you're a cop; do something," she said, nodding toward the three men.

"Elaine, I'm about to be in the middle of a steak."

"Listen, you want to fuck up my reputation here? I can't have that kind of stuff going on. Get your ass out there."

Dino heaved a sigh, got up from the table and walked out the front door, digging in his pocket for his badge.

"What's going on?" Eggers asked.

"Could be a collection under way," Stone replied.

"Or a hit," Elaine observed.

The door opened and Dino entered, supporting Herbie, who was dabbing at a bloody nose with a handkerchief. Dino walked him back to Siberia and sat him down at his table with the two hookers. Then he came back to Stone's table.

"What happened?" Eggers asked.

"Nothing," Dino replied. "I just saved his life, that's all."

Stone turned to Elaine. "Why do you allow people like Herbie in here?"

"He pays cash," Elaine replied.

The three were picking over the remains of the porterhouse when Eggers flagged down a waiter and pointed at the enormous bone. “Wrap that up for my wife’s dog, will you?”

“Bill,” Stone said, “your wife has a Yorkshire terrier; that bone will eat *him*.”

“It’ll keep him away from my shoes for a few days,” Eggers replied, accepting the foil-wrapped gift from the waiter. “You pay three grand for a pair of custom-made shoes from Lobb’s, and a four-pound canine perforates them.”

Stone looked at Eggers in wonder. “You pay *three grand* for shoes?”

“That’s a bargain; it’s five grand if you go to Silvano Lattanzi.”

“That’s more than I paid for any of the first dozen cars I owned,” Dino said. “If I were you, I’d insure the shoes.”

“Hey, that could work,” Eggers said. “I could claim against my household insurance. I mean, the deductible is only a grand.”

“They’d probably make you shoot the dog,” Stone said.

“That works for me,” Eggers replied.

“Your wife would kill you in your sleep.”

“You have a point.”

Suddenly, Herbie and his two hookers materialized at their table. He was still dabbing at his nose which had assumed the appearance of a small, battered eggplant. “Stone,” he said.

Stone winced. “What, Herbie?”

“I want to sue those two guys, and I want you to represent me.”

Dino burst out laughing.

“Herbie,” Stone said, “you say you’re a lawyer now; sue them yourself.”

“Then I would have a fool for a client,” Herbie replied, calling up the old legal maxim describing a lawyer who represents himself.

“I can’t argue with that,” Stone said, “but I will not, repeat *not*, represent you.”

“I can pay.”

“Herbie, the two guys who did that to your nose couldn’t get you to pay.”

“That’s different,” Herbie said. “Owing you would be a debt of honor.”

“And that’s different from the debt to the boss of those two guys how?”

“That debt involved sports; it’s not the same thing.”

“Try explaining that to Carmine Dattila,” Dino said. “That’s who those guys work for. Carmine would hollow you out and use you for an ashtray.”

“No means *no*, Herbie,” Stone said. “Good night.”

Suddenly Eggers spoke up. “Mr. Fisher,” he said, extending his hand, “I am William Eggers of the law firm of Woodman and Weld.”

“Hey, how you doin’?” Herbie replied, pumping Eggers’s hand.

“My firm would be happy to represent you in this matter; in fact, I would be pleased to handle the case personally.”

Stone’s jaw nearly hit the tabletop. “Bill, are you nuts, or are you just drunker than I thought?”

Eggers waved him away. "In fact, we would be pleased to represent you on a contingency basis."

"Bill," Dino said, "excuse me for interrupting, but I think you should know that Carmine Dattila is known by the sobriquet Dattila the Hun."

"Oh, Dino," Eggers said, shaking his head "don't you ever watch *60 Minutes*? The power those old guys once had has been much diminished."

"Nobody told Carmine," Dino replied.

Eggers whipped out a card and handed it to Herbie. "Mr. Fisher, please call me tomorrow morning around ten. I'll be out of the weekly partners' meeting by then."

Herbie read the card carefully, then produced one of his own.

Stone grabbed it: "Herbert Q. Fisher, Attorney at Law," it read, followed by a post office box and a cell-phone number. "Herbie," Stone said, "you only passed the bar today; when did you have these printed?"

"It was just in case," Herbie said defensively.

"And how come you were so sure you were going to pass the exam?"

Beads of sweat appeared on Herbie's brow. "I felt very confident that, given my education, it wouldn't be a problem."

"Who did you get to, Herbie? And how much did it cost you?"

"Well, if you'll excuse us, gentlemen," Herbie said with a little bow. "My ladies and I have an appointment elsewhere."

"Yeah," Dino muttered, "in the backseat of a cab."

Herbie swept his two companions out of the restaurant.

"Bill," Stone said, "what were you thinking?"

"Stone," Eggers replied, "you are obviously overlooking the public-relations effect of our handling a case against a..."

"Mafia chieftain, I believe the newspaper description goes."

"Yes, Mafia chieftain."

Dino spoke up. "Have you considered the public-relations effect of being found dead in a landfill?"

"Really, Dino, it's obvious that this Carmen...what's his name?"

"Carmine Dattila." Dino spelled it for him.

"It's obvious that Mr. Dattila has never been confronted in open court by a powerful law firm."

"Carmine Dattila has been confronted in open court a number of times by the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, who is a member of a fairly powerful law firm called the U.S. Department of Justice," Dino said. "And there ain't a mark on him."

"C'mon," Stone said, rising. "Let's get Clarence Darrow here into a cab before he decides to sue God."

Stone was drinking coffee at his desk the following morning when his secretary, Joan Robertson, appeared at the door.

“Got a minute?” Joan, a pretty June Allyson look-alike somewhere in her forties, ran Stone’s office and Stone, as well.

“Sure, come on in. Bring coffee, if you like.”

“Thanks, I’ve had mine,” Joan said, sitting down. “Time to talk of unpleasant things.”

“How unpleasant?”

“Not all that bad, really, just chronic.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, your monthly draw from Woodman and Weld just about covers my salary, the utilities and the copying machine, but only about half of what it costs you to live.”

“And your point is?”

“We need a case now and then to pay, among other things, your monthly bill at Elaine’s and to keep you in the black. You haven’t, for instance, saved any money for the past three months.”

“I’m aware of all that,” Stone said. “More or less.”

“Be more aware. Make rain.”

“What do you want me to do, chase ambulances?”

“A nice personal-injury suit that lends itself to a quick settlement would do nicely.”

“Maybe I could push somebody in front of a cab, then offer to represent him?”

“The problem is, Woodman and Weld has not been sending you much the past few months. Usually they’re good for something fairly juicy now and then. That’s how you support your preposterous lifestyle.”

“Preposterous? What’s preposterous about my lifestyle?”

“Well, let’s see: You live alone in this large house...”

“I earn my living here, too,” Stone pointed out.

“More or less. To continue, you have a country house in Connecticut; an armored, souped-up Mercedes in the garage; an airplane at Teterboro Airport; and a monthly bill at Elaine’s that could feed a company of starving marines. All of it soaks up money. About the only thing you couldn’t get along without is me.”

“You’re right, this is unpleasant.”

“Look, you rarely use the house in Washington, Connecticut. Why don’t you call Klemm Real Estate up there and put the place on the market? You bought it on a whim, and you’ve held onto it long enough to at least double your money.”

“Yeah, but it’s a good investment, better than the market, and anyway, I kind of like the idea of having a country place in Connecticut.”

“Well, it’s an awfully expensive way to get laid, Stone. Every time you take a woman up there for a few days, we get a thousand-dollar bill for drinks and dinners at the Mayflower Inn, and last time, you spent a couple of grand at a country auction, too. If it’s not that, it’s the annual Washington Antiques show. I don’t even want to think about what you spent there.”

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