

Bobby's Trace



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Sample Chapter

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Chapter One

Bobby

Bobby's eyes drew the world to his soul. No one could resist them. They winked and flirted with everyone he saw. He underscored this with a smile that blossomed to sunshine whenever he observed his fellow man, which he did often, cataloging them by size and weight and humor. Would they be interesting conversationalists? Would they feign glory and evict truth? Were they good in bed? No matter how those eyes scanned and measured, they enchanted wherever they glanced, an army falling game to Bobby's peepers despite his too-short time.

Bobby's eyes drew the world to his soul, so it was a double-fisted sadness when he died. Diminished first from symptoms — legions of purple lesions; marinating tongue fungus; dementia and incontinence, blights that faded every vital part save Bobby's eyes, but even they succumbed to the onslaught . . . in the end. Breath laden, Bobby joined the refuse of this earth, his eyes becoming nothing more than memories, drawing a solitary recollection from the man who cared for him most, the only man who attended to him at graveside — Perry Chaplin.

Bobby's eyes may have drawn the world to his soul, but his death drew only Perry to his plot. Now, we can speak the secrets.

"Did you see *her*?" came a whisper from the next cubicle.

Perry Chaplin looked up from his work, his eyes, red and puffy. He heard the voice, but, like his work, he tried to ignore it.

"I know that look," Mary Hughes said, whispering from the neighboring cubicle, the one that had a better view of *her*. Mary's head popped over the stockade rim. "Did you hear me, Perry?"

Perry rolled his eyes, and then returned to his note pile. Deadlines. Lines of code. Testing. He hadn't programmed a single line in over an hour.

"Well?" Mary persisted.

Perry shook his head, and then sighed.

"You know I can't see *her* from here. I don't want to see *her*. When she sees me, she's gonna fry my ass, but I'll tell you what. I don't give a flying fuck."

He pushed a stack of manila folders off his desk. In any other circumstance, they would have been a scattered pile of papers, but these were programming specs from the best minds at Gamma Rex Software Development LLC. So they just flopped to the gray carpeting and lay there intact. Defiant. Mocking.

"Shit."

"Perry," Mary said, her eyes scolding. "Don't start this now. She's on the warpath. If she knew . . ."

Perry glanced toward the picket, where nothing south of Mary's nose protruded.

"I told you. I don't give a flying fuck." He gathered up the folders, and as he righted them, he muttered. "I miss him."

"Shhh. Not so loud. She'll hear you. They'll *all* hear you!"

Perry wondered just how the boss-lady, Mildred Wickersham, could hear his whispering. Mary meant well. She had run interference for him since his return. But did this give her maternal rights? Perry's mother had been in the grave since his fourth birthday, and since his father disappeared in a

haze of scotch and rye shortly thereafter, the only maternal rule he had experienced came from a paternal Aunt, whose reign over him was slight, at best. No. The distaff side did not control Perry Chaplin. No one did, unless Bobby counted. That thought pushed out a tear and fostered a sigh — then, another round of *shhh*'s from Mary.

Perry sniffed. He didn't bother to blot the tear. *Let it rip*. Both employment and employer were low priorities today. He had been fine for the first few days after his return, but now every minute not absorbed by distractions belonged to thoughts of his dear, dead Bobby. Thoughts of their vacations at Provincetown — kite flying and dune wrestling; and the prancing at the T-dance in the late afternoon, where even the gulls admired Bobby's graceful moves. *Such movements*. Thoughts of Sunday walks in the park, although the joggers often distracted Bobby. This always amused Perry, because it was meant to provoke jealousy. How jealous could he be of Bobby?

More tears trickled over the lids. Perry refused to blot them, his sinuses filling, his head dully aching. If he had the balls, he would beat a path to Mrs. Wickersham's office and . . . plead illness.

Hell, I'd take off without pay.

But how? Out for two weeks for Bobby's last days and . . . the funeral. Since Mrs. Wickersham wasn't gay friendly, Perry's mourning was covered as an once-in-a-lifetime vacation to Italy. A fantasy lie. That's all Wickersham knew. That's all anyone knew, except Mary Hughes, who was, after all, Perry's closest friend now that Bobby's eyes were . . .

Suddenly, Mrs. Wickersham appeared on Perry's threshold. He hastened to blot the tear, and then tickled the keyboard, although what spewed across the screen was in no computer language known to man.

"Perry," she said.

It was usual for Mildred Wickersham to visit each employee daily. Sometimes the initial greeting was generally followed by a work progress inquiry. In this case, it stopped at the greeting, mute after that.

Perry stared at her, observing what he had seen on many mornings — a comely woman of perhaps forty-five — hard to tell with the plump. Her auburn hair swept up into a bun. Black, owl-winged glasses gave her a more bossy appearance, but not managerially severe. In fact, Mildred was a wizard — a cracker-jack programmer in her own right, who had inherited Gamma Rex Software Development from her late husband. By no means a lucky acquisition. She helped pioneer the business from pocket-change to a few millions. She was often seen bobbing back and forth through the aisles, a pencil stuck in her earflap while she reviewed each customer account against production schedules — a ritual that jump-started the globe on its orbit. Once completed, she would launch into her cubicle rounds.

Perry decided that Mrs. Wickersham was indeed on the *warpath*, probably pissed at some scheduling lapse detected in the statistical reports. So he brought his hands neutrally to his sides, and then blinked, hoping that she'd disappear. Wish granted. She shook her head and proceeded to the next cubicle.

"Mortimer," she said.

Perry heard Mortimer Johnson shuffle papers, and then babble something self-serving, his usual brown-nosing shtick, although Perry didn't hear the precise words, nor did he care. He returned to his daydream, twirling a pencil between his palms, focusing on the point. If he had been alert, he would have noticed that Mary poked her head over the cubicle top again. However, Perry was finished working today. No reason even for him to stay. He just mustered the courage to ask Mrs. Wickersham for the afternoon off. Then he could escape . . . escape into the wintry air, perhaps to the park. Sit on the lawn. Watch the joggers. Suddenly, more tears, and then the pencil snapped cleanly in two. He flinched. He hadn't pressed it hard enough to split it, yet split it he did. It distracted him

from his sadness . . . for the moment.

"That'll solve all your problems," Mary said.

He jumped.

Where the hell did she come from?

Mary had slipped over his threshold and now tucked herself in the corner. She held a wad of tissues.

"Here," she said with the fervor of a nurse.

Perry robotically wiped. He didn't want her here, although once she had invaded his space, she'd be worse than a bed bug to burn out. He liked her; perhaps even loved her. She was the closest thing to a *fag-hag*, but was married and content with her hippie, professor hubby.

Mary hunkered down beside Perry (and she could hunker — no shrinking violet this).

"When are you coming back to us, Perry? I miss you, Snooks."

Mortimer suddenly popped by Perry's cubicle, his eyes widening upon seeing Mrs. Hughes squatting at Mr. Chaplin's side. He wagged his fingers, and then smiled.

"Can I borrow your set-up disk, Perry?"

Mary stood, returning to her corner, while Perry rifled through his diskette box. He flipped through disk after disk.

"Fuck. I had it the other day." He slammed his fist on the empty box, and then shot a glance at Mortimer. "Didn't you borrow it already?"

"If I borrowed it, I wouldn't be asking you for it?"

"You've lost things before, you know."

Mary raised her hand.

"Morty, do you really need that shit right now?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't be asking, would I?"

Mortimer's glee had soured. Mary grasped Mortimer about the shoulders, ushering him toward her cubicle.

"I've got one. Use mine."

Perry stared after them, and then glanced down at the array of diskettes that had dominoed across his desk. His hands trembled, his fingers twitching. Suddenly, he swept the diskettes off the desk, a fifty-two pick up. The folders followed again, along with anything else caught in Perry's angry sweep.

Mary returned, this time blocking the cubicle from Mortimer's view. She watched him pass, the set-up disk in his hot little hand. Once gone, she stooped to the carpet, gathering up clips and post-its, diskettes and folders.

"This has got to stop, Perry."

Perry tore at his hair, and then rubbed his eyes viciously, like some mad woman in a rant.

"He's gone." Perry stammered.

"Mort's back in his cube."

"No. Not Mort. Fuck Mort." He wiped his nose. "Bobby. Bobby's gone."

"Shhh. Not so loud." Mary dropped the diskettes beside the keyboard, and then hugged Perry cautiously. "I know he's gone. What can you do, Snooks? What can you do? You shouldn't have a tear left. Where you're finding all that liquid, beats me."

Another head popped into the cubicle — the pimply technician, who was installing a network printer.

"Is everything okay in here?" Mary got to her feet, brushing herself off. Perry looked away. The technician's face flushed. He bit his lower lip and appeared dumbfounded. "Soda anyone?" he asked.

"No, Ben," Mary replied. "We're getting it together. Thanks. Unless . . . Perry, do you want

something to drink?" Perry ignored her. She shrugged. "Thanks Ben. Maybe . . . maybe a little privacy. We'll keep it down."

Ben sauntered back to his project. Perry rocked in his chair.

"It's hard," he bumbled. "I see Bobby everywhere."

Mary gazed at the ceiling, perhaps looking for the platitudes that friends are expected to blurt when other friends are hurting to their soul.

"All right, Snooks," she said, finally. "It's time for dear Mary to swoop in and set you straight." She giggled. "Forgive me. You'll never be straight."

"Not funny."

Mary settled down, placing her hand on his cheek.

"If you're seeing Bobby everywhere . . . why not clear all his stuff out; all the unhappy reminders."

"Unhappy?"

"Well, you know what I mean. I shouldn't need to pick my words. Nothing'll ever get resolved that way. You can't continue like this. You've missed work to the point of . . . well, *she's* on the warpath. Your production and work is shit. You haven't written a line of code that I haven't had to debug. It's all crap. Do you hear me? It's all crap."

"I know," Perry said. He gazed into her soft brown eyes. "You've been wonderful. And I'm sorry that I've been a shit. I'd be over Bobby if he had just dumped me. I've been dumped before. But he's . . . gone. He's never coming back. I'll never . . ."

She gripped his wrist.

"I know the feeling. I lost my Aunt Sylvia last year."

"Not the same thing. Not." Perry closed his eyes. "*Time was when love and I walked hand in hand.*"

"Quoting opera? That's a good sign."

Perry smiled dimly. He always found solace in a good Gilbert and Sullivan quote. It came to him naturally. It drove Bobby nuts, but who was there now to berate him.

"*The Sorcerer*," he whispered, annotation coming naturally also.

"Well, there's hope if you're speaking *Gilbert & Sullivan*. I'll take it as a step toward recovery." She released him. "Maybe now I can get back to work. *She's* on the warpath."

"So you've said."

Perry pulled her back. She gave him a hug.

"Are you sure you don't want a soda?" He shrugged. She bent down, retrieving a pencil. "Here, you'll need this."

Perry blinked. He glanced across the desk for the broken pencil, but unless it rolled beneath the desk in his mad whisk, it was gone, or . . . *could this be the one?* This pencil was whole — not split. Yet he recalled only one pencil on the desk today. The rest were clustered in a chipped coffee mug behind his monitor. He examined the pencil.

Odd. Magically mended?

He sighed. One more delusional thought.

"So what triggered this new wave?" Mary asked.

Perry rolled the pencil between his palms, pondering her question. There was little to ponder.

"I sensed Bobby sleeping beside me when I woke up this morning."

"That's natural, Perry."

"It was so real. I could actually hear him breathing. I felt him reaching for me . . . in the dark." The tears rolled again, but Perry caught them with the back of his hand. "But when I turned . . . when I rolled over to caress him . . . nothing. An empty bed."

“There, there.” She hugged him again. “It’s gonna happen, Snooks. I’m just worried that you’ll lose this job.”

“*And a good job too,*” Perry muttered between sniffs.

“There you go.” She released him, easing toward the threshold. She then turned about like a model. “Why don’t you get out tonight? Go to a movie. Go bowling.”

“You’ll go with me?”

“Wish I could, Snooks, but I’m booked. Maybe the weekend. Actually, why don’t you go to a bar and . . .”

“Pick someone up? Not on your life.”

“Then go to the Mall . . .”

“What, and pick someone up? How’s that different? Next you’ll have me cruising ShopRite.”

Mary’s face brightened.

“You know, a friend of a friend of Charlie’s knows this dude.”

“A blind date?” Perry shook his head. “I know *there’s lots of fish in the sea*, but I’m not ready for them.”

“You’ll be ready for the nut house, Snooks. If you lose your job, the poor house. Deadlines. We have deadlines, you know.”

Perry shrugged.

“I don’t think Bobby would approve of a blind date.”

Mary frowned, her face contorting.

“He’s dead, Perry.”

Perry lost it again. He wept without restraint, bringing Mary back.

“Be strong. Stronger. It ain’t like a cold. There’s no pill to cure you. The symptoms linger . . . linger.” She wiped his tears, this time with raw fingers. “Consider the friend of the friend of Charlie’s. I’ll get you his number.”

Suddenly, Perry stared at his desk . . . at the pencil. It was broken again — split in two. He sprang up, his chair rolling to the wall. He escaped Mary Hughes’ good intentions, heading for the lunchroom where he wouldn’t need to wonder about bossy friends, coding schedules, printer repairmen or *magical* pencils.

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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

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