

Loved and Lost

By Michael Strickland

Excerpt from novel

When he slowly emerged from unconsciousness, he tasted dirt. His nose hurt; he lay face down on the ground, and the weight of his head was pushing his nose into the grassy turf. He slowly opened his eyes and rolled onto his side. It was dark. Not simply nighttime—there wasn't a light to be seen anywhere. The only illumination came from a dim gray smudge on the horizon, the faint glow of a quarter moon obscured by clouds. But he'd lain there long enough for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness, and that faint light was enough to cast a slight glow on the white marble slabs surrounding him. On gently sloping hills as far as he could see, tombstones stood arrayed like silent sentinels. Occasional obelisks and statuary stood above the tombstones, like field marshals overseeing their brigades.

Another cemetery. Why do I keep appearing in cemeteries? He sat up, rubbing the kinks out of his neck. A chill that was not from the cold air settled over him. He'd been lying at the foot of one of the gravestones. He sat a moment, shivering. He didn't want to look up at the grave marker, read the epitaph. He knew what it said. He'd failed again. But he couldn't bear *not* to read it either.

Donald Franklin Patterson. Devoted Father and Husband. Chiseled words written to memorialize a loved one, to record a lifetime of memories into seven short and

anonymous words. Donald Patterson might have grown up an orphan, overcome the odds against him, and made something of himself. He might have been a spoiled youngest child of seven, been handed his life on a silver platter, and never worked a day in his life. What is devotion? Maybe he beat his wife, but provided for her and their children. Maybe he couldn't keep a job, but showered his family with love and affection. No stranger would ever get to know Donald Patterson simply by visiting his gravesite and reading his epitaph. His life was now reduced to seven short words. All that he had been, all that he had become, all that he hoped and yearned for: seven short words.

But relief flooded over Tristam. *It isn't hers*. Maybe Katy's epitaph had not yet been written in this universe. He'd certainly read it enough times, had even written it himself more than once. He felt hope again for the first time in weeks. He had not seen Katy in more than ten attempts. Maybe this time he'd finally get the chance to see her again, perhaps even speak to her.

Tristam stood up and brushed dirt from his face. It was then that he noticed the matching filigree pattern in the tombstone next to that of Donald Patterson. His wife, perhaps? She to whom he had been so devoted? It was too dark to make out a name from where he stood. He moved closer, squinted at the engraving.

Katy Lynn Patterson. His heart sank. *Loving Wife and Mother*. Tristam fell to his knees. Was it his Katy? He looked more closely, made out the dates. Yes, the birth date was hers. She died young; he looked at the date of death on the headstone of Donald. It was the same. What tragedy had sent these two to their graves together? And what had become of Katy's children?

Loving Wife and Mother. Katy had had children. Something she'd never wanted when they were together. How different had this Katy been from the one he had known and loved? Would he have even recognized her? Would she have known him? He'd never know.

He reached down and stroked the edge of the marble stone. "I love you," he whispered. Turning, he began walking down the hill to wait out the next hour in cold solitude, surrounded by hundreds of lives lived but utterly alone.