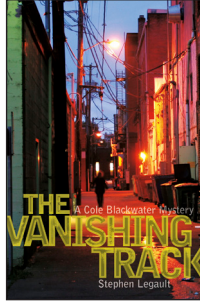


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THE A Cole Blackwater Mystery
VANISHING
TRACK
Stephen Legault

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TWO

COLE BLACKWATER COULD SMELL HORSES. He could smell the sticky sweet aroma of their bodies pressed together in the blackness of the stables beneath the barn. He could smell hay; for Cole that was the scent of green spring afternoons when the sun burnt down on the Porcupine Hills that surrounded his childhood home.

“Open your eyes, goddamnit,” said a voice, shattering the nostalgic darkness. Cole shook his head, and beads of sweat sprayed from his face onto the canvas mat below his feet.

“Goddamnit, boy, when I say open your eyes, I mean it.” The glove connected with Cole’s nose and he felt his head snap backward, but he couldn’t fall. He was suspended above the canvas mat, dangling there like meat on a hook.

“That’s all you ever were to me, boy. That’s all you’ll ever be: a fucking punching bag. You are worthless.” Cole braced himself for the next blow. It caught him in the chin and snapped his head back, a spray of blood coming from a cut that the strike reopened.

“Look at me, boy,” and this time Cole opened his eyes. The sweat and blood stung them. He blinked to try and focus on the barn.

The shape of his father swayed before him. “You think you’re *so* great. You’re nothing but a worthless drunk who can’t take care of his own daughter, who fucks up everything he touches!”

“Just like you,” spat Cole.

“Why don’t you just get it over with?” asked Henry Blackwater, pacing around Cole like a caged animal, his face shadowed in the faint light seeping through the boards of the barn. “Why don’t you just do it?”

“You first,” said Cole, clenching his teeth.

“Oh, I will. I will. But I’m taking you with me this time, son. You’re coming with me.” His father steadied Cole’s swinging body. “Got to work on my combinations,” the old man slurred. Cole closed his eyes.

Soon it would be over. He waited for the punches to stop, eyes pressed shut.

What happened next always surprised Cole. No matter how hard he

tried to keep his eyes closed, he could not help but watch. His father took the shotgun leaning against the ropes of the boxing ring and turned it so the barrel was under his chin. Then he took up a branding iron and put the crook of it in the trigger guard.

Cole shouted, “Wait—!” But his father pulled the trigger.

It was the blast that always woke him.

Cole’s eyes snapped open and he felt his body tremble, his hands gripping the damp sheets. It was five o’clock. His ears rang from the final deafening sound of his nightmare.

It was a Sunday. He knew from experience there would be no return to sleep, so he headed for the shower in the faint light of dawn. Sarah was asleep in her tiny room next to the kitchen. At ten years of age, she was all bright smiles and sunny days. He longed to keep it that way. Sarah had witnessed the collapse of her parents’ marriage thanks to Cole’s philandering ways. She was only four when Cole had been outed in the worst-kept secret in the nation’s capital—his affair with Nancy Webber, the *Globe and Mail’s* star parliamentary correspondent. When Jennifer Polson kicked him out of the house they had lived in together, it was almost a relief. Then she announced that she was leaving Ottawa to move to Vancouver, and was taking Sarah with her. Cole left Ottawa and drove west, following his daughter. He faltered in Alberta and visited the place he hadn’t set foot on for nearly twenty years: the Blackwater Ranch, tucked into the Porcupine Hills, two hours south of Calgary. And there, bore witness to the vicious end of a man who was not just his father but his tormentor. His nightmares relived the incident.

That was four and a half years ago, thought Cole, standing in the shower, his left hand pressed against the wall, his right hand limp at his side, the hot water pulsing on the back of his neck. He thought he had buried that tragedy. But then, a year and a half ago, Cole had gone back to Alberta in a desperate attempt to help save the Cardinal Divide, and the unearthing began.

The water began to run cold, and Cole realized he’d drained the tank. He turned it off and stepped from the shower. He dressed quickly, then padded barefoot to the kitchen to brew the morning coffee.

Cole took up the weekend edition of the *Vancouver Sun*. His tiny

Eastside apartment offered one large living room–kitchen area that he had tastefully furnished with ware from the local thrift store. Pushing aside some files and books on his tattered couch, Cole sat down and leafed through the paper, sipping his coffee.

On page three he found a story by Nancy Webber with the headline, “City Hall and Homelessness.” He flipped the page.

Nancy had moved to Vancouver from Edmonton in June. After the debacle in the Broughton Archipelago last spring, she had accepted a position as one of the paper’s political reporters. She could pretty much write her own ticket, she had told Cole, after winning a National Newspaper Award for the series she produced on the murder of Mike Barnes in Oracle, Alberta. She had chosen Vancouver, she said, because it was a bigger market, and because it *wasn’t* Edmonton, with its biting winters complete with freezing rain and ice fog. And though she hadn’t said so, she had been none too subtle in letting it be known that her choice of Lotusland had more than a little to do with one Cole Blackwater.

Cole sipped his coffee. He didn’t want to think about Nancy Webber that morning. Since she had moved to Vancouver late in the spring, Cole had seen her only infrequently. In July, several months after the tragedy in Port Lostcoast, Cole, Nancy, Denman, and Sarah had returned for a few days on Grace Ravenwing’s boat, *Inlet Dancer*, celebrating the life of their lost friend and Grace’s father, Archie.

The nightmares had begun in August, and Cole found that Nancy always seemed to be on his mind when he woke from them. He wanted to believe that this was simply because she was always on his mind, but he couldn’t help but associate her role in the unearthing of his past with his reliving of it every few nights.

Nancy’s professional life was now converging with his once again. Nancy had taken to the story of homelessness in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside like a feisty dog to a piece of meat. In the few months that she had been reporting on the politics of homelessness in Vancouver, many at City Hall had come to fear her, and advocates for the homeless to celebrate her. She could be just as hard on the advocates, though, pigeon-holing the more radical elements of the movement, such as the End Poverty Now Coalition, as zealots and anarchists.

Cole had been helping his best friend, Denman Scott, and his street-smart law firm, Priority Legal, figure out ways to leverage decision makers to solve the challenge of homelessness. It had been the first time in his four and a half years as a strategy consultant that Cole could actually donate some of his time. Despite setbacks in the spring, when he almost entirely ignored several high-paying clients due to his entanglement in the fish-farming problems in the Broughton Archipelago, Cole had steady work advising several of the city's growing ethically-based businesses. When Cole noticed that his friend was in need of some strategic advice on dealing with City Hall and the provincial Minister for Housing, Cole was glad to offer his professional assistance.

Cole stood and stretched, wincing. He pressed the ribs on the right side of his body, as if his fingertips could find and finish healing the cracks left by a gang of thugs who had jumped him in Port Lostcoast last spring and nearly beaten him to death. The cracked ribs had kept Cole out of the boxing ring since then. Boxing had been a good way to get back in shape, but being in the ring hadn't done much for Cole's temper. He thought about what Denman, an aikido master, had said to him after they had gotten back from Port Lostcoast.

THEY HAD BEEN sitting in Oppenheimer Park in late July of that year. They had just returned from the Broughton Archipelago.

"Why are we sitting here?" Cole had said, his back hunched, his eyes narrow, watching suspiciously as the derelicts moved about the park, pushing shopping carts. He eyed the wrapping from several syringes and wondered where the needles were.

"You want to help me with the homeless problem, right?" asked Denman, his legs crossed at the ankle, his brown hands folded together Buddha-style in his lap.

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But nothing," the lawyer said with conviction. "You can't help fight homelessness if you don't think of the problem from the perspective of these people here. Part of the reason why homelessness is so prevalent in our society is that we don't *see* these people," he said, motioning to the clusters of men and women around the park. "They are objects to us. Not living, breathing, loving human beings."

“You’ve been hanging around the Dalai Lama again, haven’t you?” Cole quipped.

“Maybe,” said Denman, looking at Cole sideways from under his flat cap. “But the truth of the matter is that everybody here has a story to tell. Every one of these people has a reason for being here, now, today. You wouldn’t believe the stories I’ve heard.”

“I bet some of them are even true.” Cole started to laugh, then held his side.

Denman nodded. “Everybody has their own take on what reality is.” He looked at his friend. “Speaking of reality, ribs still bugging you?”

“If you could call having a knife stuck into your side every time you laugh, breathe hard, or try to sleep on your side bugging . . .”

“I’ve got just the thing.”

“You’re not going to try and align my chakras again, are you?”

“I’ve given up on that,” said Denman.

“What now, then?”

“Follow me.”

The two men stood and walked across the park, heading for Cordova. They walked slowly, Cole moving stiffly.

“You had a doc look at that?”

“Oh yeah, but not much they can do for cracked ribs.”

“You’d look good in a body cast.”

Cole suppressed a laugh. “Wouldn’t help,” he said.

“Make you easier to wheel around. We could just put you on a dolly. What about a Chinese doctor?”

“Yeah, I thought about that.”

“Thinking about it help much?”

“Look, Denny. I’m from Alberta, okay? We don’t lie around with needles in us if we can at all avoid it.”

“It would help.”

“So would a good stiff drink.”

“How’s that working for you?”

“Not so good, Dr. Phil,” said Cole.

They found their way to East Pender and walked west.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Cole.

“Live in the mystery, brother Blackwater.”

They walked another two blocks and stopped. Cole found himself in front of a small area of worn grass. It was nearly noon, and the spring sun felt good after a week of rain. They stood on the edge of the green, which was little more than an empty lot surrounded by a chain-link fence. They regarded the ancient building that rose beyond it.

“Did I read in one of Nancy’s articles that the Lucky Strike is on the chopping block?”

“You read right,” replied Denman. “The Lucky Strike is where the fight over the future of single-room occupancy facilities, or SROs, in this city hits the road. There is a tug-of-war happening right now between the west side of the city and the east. The west has all the money, all the power, all the glitz and glamor and political and media savvy. The east has the drugs, the pimps and hookers, the poverty, and the homelessness.”

“Sounds like a fair fight,” said Cole.

“But the west side is running out of room. The east is starting to look pretty good to the developers. Someone wants to tear this hundred-year-old landmark down and build a twenty-five-story condo and shopping mall. So that,” said Denman, pointing to the Lucky Strike building, “is where the fight will be won or lost.”

Cole turned his head sideways as he looked at the building.

“Thanks for showing me this, Denny.”

“No problem. There is talk of some low-income housing in it too,” said Denman, “to be fair.”

“So you’re showing me this because . . . ?” asked Cole.

“Because it’s not yet noon.”

Cole flipped open his cell phone. “It is now,” he said.

“Patience, grasshopper.”

They stood at the edge of the park, and before long a small group of people had gathered, coming from all directions of Chinatown. In a few minutes twenty or so people were clustered at the center of the park. They formed loose rows and began to move together, as waves would on the sea. Their arms flowed like the wind that whisked over the water, their bodies gently turning and twisting, bowing and bending in rhythmic form.

“That’s really something,” said Cole.

“It’s called tai chi.”

“Looks a lot like dancing.”

“Same idea. This is dancing with the flow of energy all around you.”

“No disrespect, Denny, but why are you showing me this?”

“You can’t box anymore. At least not right now, can you?”

“It’s going to be at least six months.”

“Time to exercise something else then,” said Denman, reaching over and tapping Cole on the chest, above his heart.



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Other books by Stephen Legault

Carry Tiger to Mountain: The Tao of Activism and Leadership (2006)

THE COLE BLACKWATER SERIES

The Cardinal Divide (2008)

The Darkening Archipelago (2010)

The Vanishing Track (2012)

THE DURRANT WALLACE SERIES

The End of the Line (2011)

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