

END OF MEN BY CB MURPHY – **SAMPLE FIRST CHAPTER**

Chapter One

Ben stood on the patio in his bare feet, arms outstretched like a scarecrow, or Jesus. He was waiting for the sun to warm the red stones, making it impossible for him to remain where he was. He had stumbled onto this ritual and performed it religiously every day since his father died. Ben wore what he jokingly called his work clothes: cut-off jeans like he wore as a kid, bare-chested to boot. Not finding this funny, Kay he wear a shirt when he worked in the front yard.

Ben glanced at the wall of picture windows above him, but the glare made it impossible to see if his wife was watching him. But Kay was there, he knew, drinking coffee and worrying about when he would return to his normal life. When he would stop acting so strange. He knew she would stand there a few more minutes and then join the commuters flowing out of the houses around them. He knew he'd soon be alone with his plants.

Morning was the hardest part of the day. The ritual helped. All around him, garage doors opening and closing, breadwinners (mostly men) hitting the Kennedy Expressway in their BMWs, their Saabs, and the occasional minivan. He was glad Kay's hours were forgiving, though, compared to those around her, he could see that she took her assistant curator position too seriously.

Ben heard the distinctive roar of the yellow school buses driven by recovering alcoholics while electricians, plumbers, and handymen were hitching up their pants and fantasizing about the lady of the house being a nympho-mom. Hispanic maids hopped out of beater Fords laughing and waving goodbye. Men began spraying lawns with toxic chemicals from vans plastered with eco-friendly logos.

Ben knew if he could get through this last hour of the morning rush, he would be free once again to pretend the world beyond his backyard didn't exist—especially the world of jobs. Somewhere he still had (as far as he knew) a desk, a secretary, work piling up, and young men eyeing his office hungrily. He was fully aware that by all standards—Kay's, his secretary Evie's, and surely those hungry young men and some women (who had named themselves the Young Turks)—his sabbatical had already crossed over from acceptable grief into questionable sanity. He would have to make a move soon, take a stand.

The patio stones were heating up fast.

His mother, Cass, had told Kay she knew what he was doing. Ben knew she'd be confronting him shortly, shaming him into reactivating the Protestant work ethic and stop messing around with the family's good name. He could already hear her chastising tone: "I loved your father more than you, and I'm functioning normally. You don't see me skipping out on my responsibilities and walking around the yard half naked. Whatever you call this, it isn't grieving."

And in theory, Ben knew he'd agree. This thing he was doing wasn't exactly grieving, but he didn't know what it was. Years ago, he'd read an article in one of Kay's art magazines about a woman who laid on her floor for days until she found what motivated her to move. From there, she ostensibly rose and created her paintings. But Ben couldn't tell anyone about how this

woman's story reminded him of his own. Even Kay would think he was putting her on. He wished he could find what motivated him before something tragic was forced to happen.

Ben planned his days carefully and kept busy. Once the suburban world of workers had departed and the weekday hush had settled around him, he became in his mind a gardener, pure and simple, pagan and basic. A handyman, a common laborer. He loved this. But first he had to segue through the porch ritual.

He hated that Kay watched, but not enough to stop him. Besides, she officially tolerated eccentricity. It came with the territory of working for a cutting-edge "visionary art" museum, the art of the untrained and the insane. Her job brought her into contact with near-insane artists and staff every day. Ben suspected her association with the erratic didn't help his standing with her. He had always been a counterbalance to that world, the stable one who laughed off the irritating eccentricity of her colleagues and brought home the bacon they lived on.

He sensed the duration of this "period" of his was starting to scare her in a way it hadn't before. Ben took a bit of satisfaction in this. She should have known when they got married that she was getting a strange bird. Hadn't she bragged about it to her girlfriends (who worried about the ten-year age difference) that Ben had an exotic past he would rather not talk about but, nonetheless, it gave him a solid basis for understanding her world? Ben assumed that part of her fascination with him was about the generation he was from and she was not that mythic age when masses of people took mind-altering drugs and danced naked on beaches. She did not hide the fact that she wished she had been there, which made him assume that his history somehow stood in for the different experiences she wished she could have on her experiential resume. What she didn't know was that, after the wedding (after impressing her, landing her), he more or less shut up about it, like the World War II vets who killed German boys with their bare hands

only to now sit on their porches staring. Ben once overheard Kay say on the phone that he was like Jack Kerouac who had worked for his father's firm on LaSalle Street instead of going home to his mother and nodding out in an alcoholic stupor. He wasn't totally sure what he thought about that, but he accepted it. Suits and deals grew over his other life like mold covered the forest floor.

Nevertheless, Kay's arty peers saw Ben as a Willy Loman or worse—a Stepford husband tolerable mostly for the paycheck he brought home. Kay said she didn't care about the money, claimed she could go low-income and live in a trailer any time, but Ben doubted how easy it would be for her to give up the style she had become accustomed to, including an Audi with satellite radio. Her own paycheck became essentially petty cash, disposable income—mad money.

Then, out of nowhere, she wanted a baby. Ben wondered if she could still walk away and live in a trailer, with a dirty-faced toddler in tow.

He tried to force all these thoughts out of his mind. He imagined himself bombarded by subatomic particles originating from the sun: photons, gamma rays, neutrinos, negatively charged ions, and all the new particles so recently discovered their names weren't even in textbooks yet. These building blocks of the universe converged, passed through or bounced off the electromagnetic field that constituted his body, the illusion of solidity people call flesh. In Ben's imaginary science film, he saw some particles attracted to his gravitational mass, others deflected. Some were so tiny they zipped through him as if he weren't there. Some caused changes as they passed through, leaving a barely perceptible burn only an electron microscope could identify. These burns, Ben imagined, would eventually kill him through their encouragement of subtle cell mutation. On the other hand, some rare particles, he speculated,

might help. It was not impossible that, in such a chaotic and unknown swarm, one or two could knock out a cold virus or kill evil bacteria. Some things were well beyond science.

Ben could still feel Kay's eyes on him, staring critically from an upper window. She was probably drinking coffee from an oversized cup she held with two hands. He wondered if he should consider her worry a motivation for changing his behavior. He thought about what she was seeing as she looked down at him: a man in his late forties with thinning hair, a slim athletic build ("trim for his age"), and—given everything we know about skin cancer—a tan deeper than a grownup should have. She would see a man a decade older than her, but he was a man that she still hoped would father her children.

Ben wondered how strongly she was clinging to the official explanation for his odd behavior—that it was all about his father and employer, one in the same, dying a month ago. Obviously, it was hitting him harder than anyone expected, especially given the publicly combative nature of his relationship with his father. She might have taken comfort in the fact that Ben was exhibiting some erratic, spontaneous behavior, a precious human quality so valued in the decade she missed. But working against this was his maleness. What did men know about handling grief? Whatever her rationalization for not demanding he take a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (dopamine could be the issue after all)? He could feel her restraint wearing thin. Lately she had begun to snap at him and criticize him, like his father did in public. If he wanted to hurt her, he could say she was being like her father. Worse, that she had taken to talking to his mother on the phone, perhaps seeking a childhood paradigm that might explain his current behavior.

Cass, no doubt, gave her an earful.

Ben had decided that today was the last weekday of his grief sabbatical. Should he tell Kay?

Monday he would go back to work; all this Tarzan-in-the-garden nonsense behind him. He couldn't just blurt it out, though. It had to be the right moment. He was ready to be a man in the world again, to put away childish things. He was motivated.

Ben heard a click and then the sound of metal sliding against metal as the patio door opened. He turned to catch a glimpse of Kay not in her work clothes, but in a blue kimono. She touched her big toe on the red patio stones as if she were testing bath water. Since when had she started acting like the others at the museum, not caring about arriving on time? Everyone over there was always coming from or going to something: therapy, Pilates, traffic court, or volunteering for some utopian cause they assumed the museum would agree with.

"They're so hot!" she said. "How can you stand out there in bare feet?"

"I just dance around every few seconds. Wait and see." Ben raised his index finger toward the sky and wiggled his butt. Kay's laugh gave Ben a sense of relief. He wasn't so crazy that he forgot how to make her laugh.

"Wait—my coffee," she said, disappearing.

Kay returned wearing flip-flops and tentatively moved out of the dark interior of the house, shielding her eyes from the sun. She carried her yellow latte cup in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

"Should've brought my sunglasses," she said, laughing self-consciously. It was an old joke—her simultaneous disdain for, and need of stuff, lots of stuff.

Embroidered snow cranes flashed from the back of her blue kimono as she closed the sliding door with her foot. She liked to make a show of honoring Ben's obsession about keeping the house cool.

"You can do amazing things with those feet," he said, still surprised she wasn't dressed yet

for work.

Kay walked toward him, squinting, holding the phone like a visor.

“God,” she said, handing him the phone. “I almost forgot why I came out here. It’s Evie.”

She nodded at the phone.

This startled Ben. Hadn’t he made rules with his secretary about not calling him at home? Or had he just thought he had and no one called? At the moment, Evie represented the world he had been avoiding, the hapless ambassador of MM&O. She had called once before, but it had to do with where to put his father’s personal things. Evie could have called Cass, but Kay understood and had dealt with it.

Ben grabbed the phone, trying not to glare at Kay. “Evie!” he said with slightly manic gusto. It came out stronger, crazier, than he expected. In the second before she answered, he wondered if it was really her. Perhaps it was a prank by one of the Young Turks who coveted his office. Could it be something Kay was in on, something she cooked up with Cass to jar him into re-shouldering his responsibilities?

But when Ben heard the sound of chewing followed by a rapid swallow, he knew it was Evie.

“Um, Mr. Wolfe?” Evie asked in a breathless voice.

Ben had forgotten how sexy she sounded on the phone. Her voice always made him think of women in old movies. Ben could sense that Evie’s unusual formality might be foreshadowing the seriousness of her mission. Certainly there must be new power configurations coalescing since Joe the Wolf died a month ago. In the eulogy, J.P. had said the old man had died at his desk, kindly leaving out the fact that someone found him facedown in his lunch. Ben remembered wondering if one of the Young Turks might have done it. They were amoral enough, but there had been no sign of a struggle. Perhaps the reason for formality was simple: Evie was afraid of

talking to her old boss, a man everyone (even Cass who prowled the office) agreed was acting mad.

“You can call me Ben, Evie.”

“Ben. Yes,” she said, “I’m so, so sorry for calling you at home, but...”

“It’s okay, Evie,” Ben said. “I know this has been hard on you too.”

“You do?” she asked with sudden enthusiasm. “J.P.’s been great to me. He’s been giving me all kinds of, uh, new things to do.”

Ben frowned at this. J.P. was an enemy. Although he wasn’t exactly Ben’s boss, only Joe had had final authority over Ben, J.P. had to report to management the results of everything Ben did or attempted. Thus, functionally, Ben had answered to J.P., hidden power structures aside. Ben had assumed J.P. hid his resentments (and subtle affinities with the Turks) behind enlightened management phrases like “circle of trust.” In Ben’s opinion, J.P. had advanced mainly because he knew how to enhance his image with business vocabulary and character-building sports vacations.

“J.P. said you would approve,” Evie said. “Of all I’m doing, I mean.”

“I’m sure I will,” Ben said.

Kay mouthed, *what’s wrong?* from her wicker lounge chair, sipped from the latte cup. Somehow she was managing to look spaced-out, competent, and worried all at the same time.

Nothing, Ben mouthed back. But Evie’s conversation was stilted, her chewing restrained.

“Is something wrong, Evie?” he asked.

“I got another memo—from Mr. Maher?” Ben clenched up. There was a reason why they called the head of Human Resources “The Worm” behind his back. “Well, you got a memo,” she clarified. “It sounds kind of bad. He said you had used all your vacation time, and the policy on

medical—”

“I know all about that,” Ben interjected. “E-mail him back that I’ll be in on Monday.”

The chewing sounds stopped. There was no sound at all from the other end of the phone for several seconds. Then the chewing sounds started back up, faster and louder.

“Oh. That’s, um, good,” Evie said without even making an effort to act. “Can I, um, tell anyone?”

“No,” Ben said. He was winging it. “It’ll be a surprise to the others when I come in Monday morning. Maybe I can catch someone rifling through my desk.”

“No one’s been—” Evie started and then seemed to get the joke and forced a sexy little laugh. “I’ve been protecting it. Grrr.”

Ben looked at Kay expecting to see surprise, shock, possibly anger. But she wasn’t even looking in his direction. This was not how he had planned to make his announcement, though it occurred to him now that he hadn’t even thought of how he would make it. Just not like this.

Kay was staring straight out, unblinking, toward his garden. He put his hand over the phone and said, “I’m sorry, I meant to tell you earlier.”

She nodded at him and tightened her mouth.

He sketched a quick scenario. Hadn’t Kay been talking to Cass on the phone lately, more than they ever had? Maybe they had cooked up something. Maybe Kay handed the phone to him knowing exactly what Evie would say. If she knew that Evie had shocking news, she might have assumed it would be disturbing enough to shock her husband into returning to work. The convoluted possibility frightened him.

Evie had been talking for a minute or two. She was saying something about his project, Legacy Planning, the one everyone hated but he knew was right. The project would position

MM&O for the next decade of demographic shifts and market uncertainties. But it had to get past Joe the Wolf and his Young Turk sycophants. And now Joe was dead.

“You gave me tons to do on it,” Evie said. “That research and retyping...” She choked. Whether on her carrot or on emotion, he couldn’t tell. “J.P. said that project won’t be getting off the ground any time soon, so I needn’t bother doing the research and the type-up. He said maybe they would make a new department for you. You’d be the head of it. Isn’t that great? But by then he said I would probably be a broker...” She talked faster as if she wanted to get it all out in one breath.

“Take a breath, Evie.” Ben glanced at Kay. He had the impression she looked away quickly.

“J.P.’s kept me so busy,” Evie said, clearing her throat loudly in his ear. She sounded like a daughter at college telling her dad about a new course she was taking. “He said I could start working on my broker’s license and that some client contact, under his supervision, of course, would be good training.”

Ben stifled his reaction in an attempt to conceal his anger. “Have you been talking to my clients?” he asked.

“Some, yes. J.P. said someone had to help you out, and they knew me. He took some of the harder ones and gave them out to some of the boys.”

“Boys” was a somewhat nicer way that people referred to the Young Turks. And now Ben’s best clients had been handed out to them. He heard some of his own breath release itself slowly, a football crushed by an SUV’s tire.

“J.P. said someone had to reassure them that the firm was here working for them. I only talked to the old ladies, the ones who liked you.” She chewed faster, sounding famished. “I didn’t tell them to change anything.”

“Good.”

“J.P. did that.”

Bad, Ben thought. “Interesting,” he said.

In a pleading voice Evie said, “I tried to call you, but you never answered. Oh, and your mother was here.”

“My mother? What was she doing there?” Ben felt his jaw tighten.

“Cleaning out Mr. Joe’s desk.”

Damn her, Ben thought.

“Has she started sending out memos yet?” Ben asked. It was an old joke that Cass would be like those women who stepped into their husband’s job of senator or governor the minute he died.

“What else?” Ben asked.

“Is your wife still near you?” Evie whispered.

Kay sat up in her chair as if on cue. She made a display of looking at her watch and tapping it as she got up. There were the legs again, kicking out of the kimono. Ben waved.

“No,” he said to Evie. “What?”

“I found something,” she said. “Before your, um, mom did.”

“Uh-huh?” Ben said, smiling at Kay as she walked toward the house.

“Some kind of note about money. It’s, um, a note from your wife,” she said. “Handwritten.”

“To?” Ben wondered how he could be so clueless as to ask this. But Kay was not a sneak and if she was it meant he knew nothing about her. The note could be to anyone.

“To Joe the—” she said then giggled. “Your dad. He wrote something on it too. It’s hard to read, but...”

“Okay,” Ben said, flashing another smile at Kay as she walked slowly across the hot stones, lifting. She lifted each foot unnaturally high but not picking up her pace. She watched his face over her shoulder.

“He wrote ‘The end of men’ and put two dollar signs after it,” Evie said. “What do you think that means?”

“That’s fine, Evie. Just put it in a special place for me to read later. You did good. Just a second, Evie.” Ben covered the phone and turned to Kay. She stood at the open patio door, one foot raised, like a lawn flamingo. She squinted back at him.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he said to his wife before he noticed she had raised her index finger. He wondered why he was reassuring her and not the other way around.

Ben kept his hand over the receiver. “What?”

“Your mother invited us for dinner. I said yes. She’ll be so happy about you going back.”

“Okay,” Ben said to Kay. But Evie took it as a goodbye and hung up.

He had more to say to her, more to ask, her but couldn’t remember what it was.

Ben returned to his thoughts on subatomic particles. If this were the last day of his Tarzan vacation, he didn’t want to think about Evie and Cass and J.P. for the rest of the day. He especially didn’t want to think about Kay and his dead father passing notes.

Lost in his reverie, he suddenly heard a knock on the window and turned around. He was surprised when he saw Kay, now dressed, and air-kissing him through the glass. When had she gone inside? Kay was holding up something. It was the Australian aboriginal fertility doll Cass had brought her from Hong Kong. She was kissing it and rubbing it.

Ben nodded and smiled.

He didn’t understand women, not one bit. How had she made this jump? Now that he

declared that his crazy period was over, now that he'd be returning to work and a "normal" life, did Kay just assume he wanted to have sex again, to get back to serious baby making and that this time things would be better, that everything would work like it was supposed to? Why had he stopped liking sex anyway? Kay rubbed her belly with her hand as she tapped the wooden doll on the glass.

Maybe she's trying to tell me something, Ben thought. Something she's afraid to tell me in person. Could she already be pregnant? When had they last made love?

He tried to imagine himself like J.P. with a picture on his credenza. He would be holding his child swathed in Patagonia microfleece against a backdrop of Aspen.

Ben smiled and turned back to the garden. Not only did he not understand women, he didn't understand men, either. In fact, he didn't understand anything except plants. They were easy: sun or shade, wet or dry, clay or humus. No, even plants were not easy. He shut his eyes and imagined being bombarded by the very tiniest subatomic particles originating from the nucleus of the sun. These mystical particles imparted self-knowledge, and some were rewiring his brain while others repaired his libido.

And the gods of the garden said it was good.