

**The First Two Pages: “Skeeter’s Bar and Grill” by Julie Hastrup**

From *Larceny and Last Chances*

Edited by Judy Penz Sheluk

An Essay by Julie Hastrup

Whenever my husband and I go out to eat, we prefer to sit at the bar. It gives us (and by “us” I mean my chatty husband) a chance to delve into the bartender’s story, and bartenders have *the* best stories. You’d be amazed at what people are willing to share. While everyone’s path is different, a common theme in Florida is that people are getting away from something—or someone. The farther south you are, the larger the pile of individual failures. It’s like a slide to the bottom. And the Keys are as far south as you can get and still be in the contiguous forty-eight. When I heard of an anthology call related to last chances, I immediately thought of the Keys.

The story opens with Jim feeling completely alone in the world, and I wanted to amp up his sense of failure with the people who should love him by throwing Florida’s angry weather at him. You can’t help rooting for man pulling himself up from the bottom, especially when Mother Nature joins the bad guys’ team.

Rounding the bend in the road, Jim—Sarah liked to call him James—caught sight of the enormous slate-gray shelf cloud barreling toward him like an alien ship going into battle. It blotted out the sun and the last remaining shreds of happiness in his soul. His fingers brushed the chilled leather of the passenger seat, searching for his phone and the directions it held. It couldn’t be that many more miles

to Key West. The slim red line on the screen's battery icon warned him his GPS instructions were about to end.

He'd made it 420 of the 470 miles from St. Augustine, only stopping twice. Once for gas and once to use the bushes along the side of the road. His hands cramped from gripping the steering wheel like a vice for most of the last eight hours. His eyes burned from squinting into the sun. And from crying. The gurgles in his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten since last night's rehearsal dinner. Time to pull over. But where? All the places he'd passed since leaving the mainland had been boarded up. A road trip during the forecasted storm of the season probably wasn't the best idea. Then again, he hadn't chosen the timing.

The swampland and scrub on either side of the desolate road gave way at last to a gravel drive marked by a faded white and red sign belonging to Skeeter's Bar and Grill. Tacked to it was a makeshift poster. The flapping cardboard said, "Open," in black Sharpie.

Jim's borrowed Subaru bumped its way through the slalom course of mosquito-filled potholes and pulled up next to the back of a lemon-yellow building badly in need of a paint job. It was bordered on one side by massive unpruned seagrape bushes and on the other by a covered porch made of an imaginative combination of corrugated metal, warped plywood, and cinderblocks.

Surfacing from the air-conditioned confines of the car, Jim tumbled into an invisible blanket of humidity. Simply breathing made him sweat through his white dress shirt. He pushed some overgrown ferns out of his way, stepped onto the porch, and followed the floorboards as they wrapped around the building to a breathtaking view of the vast Florida Straits.

The first plum-sized drops of rain darkened the perimeter of the open-air establishment, and Jim backed instinctively toward the bar in the middle of the otherwise empty structure. The blackness of the quickening storm blotted out the view he'd just enjoyed.

A shared experience can make two very different characters, who wouldn't normally associate with each other, become comrades. It's only because of the

storm that Jim and the bartender, Skeeter, take a break to tell of their own sorry skid to a stop in the Keys and gain each other's respect.

“Ya runnin’ to or runnin’ from?”

Jim jumped and turned to face the molasses-laden voice seeping toward him through the thick air. “Excuse me?”

“Ya gotta be runnin’ either to or from, ’cuz ya ain’t from ’round here.” The speaker, a willowy man with a salt and pepper beard, pulled a stained rag from his shoulder and wiped a glass before setting it on the bar as an invitation.

“How do you know I’m...” Jim’s voice faded as he glanced at his reflection in the mirror covering the bar’s back wall. Even after the day he’d had, his short blond hair was still perfect. He closed his lips over the whitest teeth modern dentistry could provide. Even the tuxedo he’d been wearing all day remained uncreased, with barely a smudge. “I’m not running.”

“Are too. Might as well admit it. No tourists come ’round here in the dead o’ summer, an’ the locals know to stay home when a storm’s brewin’, though this one’s gonna pass on by. Sit.” The bartender took his time getting the words out, unlike Jim’s co-workers back in DC. There, every conversation felt like an assault by a jackhammer.

Like a good dog, Jim sat on one of the stools, its foam padding held together with duct tape. He’d been following orders his whole life. First from his father, the Loudon County Sheriff, and then from Sarah, his fiancée, for the past year.

These passages portray the “Last Chances” part of the anthology’s title.

You’ll have to read to the end to realize what been stolen.

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Julie Hastrup grew up in the Appalachian region of Ohio, but her home now alternates between South Florida and a small fishing village in Denmark. Her writing stems from her travels and her business career prior to becoming a full-time writer. Julie’s work has been published by *Shotgun Honey* and *Mystery Magazine*. Professional memberships include Sisters in Crime, ITW, Short Mystery Fiction Society, and Mystery Writers of America. Find out more about Julie at [www.hastrup.com](http://www.hastrup.com).