

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

SPRING 2021

A Suspenseful  
Spring has Sprung!

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Inspired by Actual Events  
with Parris Afton Bonds

**JOSEPH BADAL**

Head Back to Harper's Island  
with **JOHN RAAB**

Get a Sneak Peek of  
"BLACKOUT"

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**"GUARANTEED TO KEEP READERS BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL  
WELL INTO THE WEE HOURS."**

*-Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*

# NOTHING GOOD HAPPENS AFTER MIDNIGHT

A SUSPENSE MAGAZINE ANTHOLOGY

## JEFFERY DEAVER

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How is everyone doing out there? I must say, it's been quite the year thus far. We have mostly been locked down for so long, we've been streaming everything we can possibly watch. We have also, hopefully, read more books this year than in the past. It's now 2021, and time to turn the page on the worst year most of us has ever lived through. We want to remember the people who have died during this pandemic and give our prayers to all the families that

have suffered such a horrible loss. Yes, it's not a "far out" thing to say 2020 was unlike *anything* we have ever seen before...but, with luck, it's something we will never see again.

We see the light at the end of the tunnel. Our medical professionals are working hard to ensure the vaccines get to everyone, and we can finally enjoy the writing conferences we've missed so much. Thank you to one and all.

In case you've run out of things to watch, here are the top five hidden gems you might have missed when they were originally released:

5. *Evil Under the Sun* starring Peter Ustinov as Hercule Poirot. This movie appeared in 1982. Many people are familiar with *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*, but this movie is just as good, if not better!

4. *Trenchcoat* starring Margot Kidder and Robert Hays. This movie came out in 1983 and introduced me to Malta. This is a funny mystery, with David Suchet playing the Inspector. I've told author Boyd Morrison, a huge fan of Malta, this is the movie to watch in order to see the island and have some fun along the way.

3. *Identity* starring John Cusack, Ray Liotta, Amanda Peet, and an all-star cast of many others. Released in 2003, this movie was a roller coaster ride that continuously made you think: "What the hell is going on?" At about the fifteen-minute mark, the movie takes off into hyper-speed and away you go!

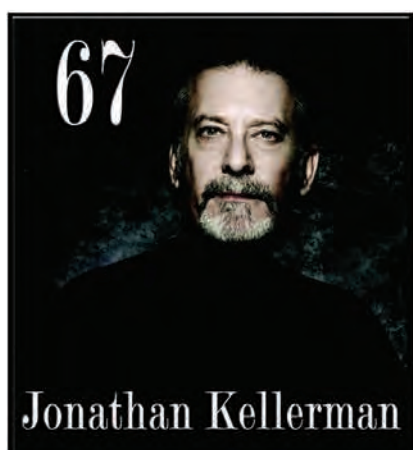
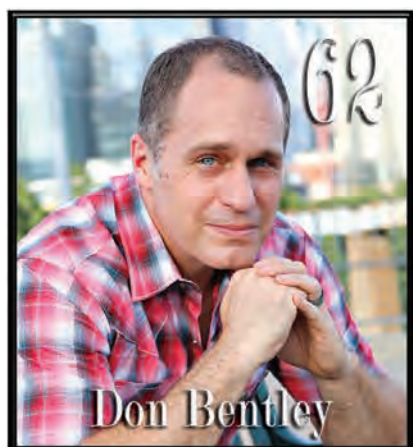
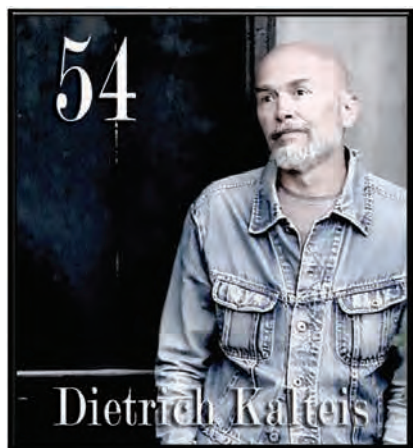
2. *Murder by Death* starring Maggie Smith, Peter Falk, and so many others. In 1976, this movie—which is an adaptation of the Neil Simon play—had me right from the start. If you love the older detectives, love to laugh, and love a good mystery, look no further. But the question is: When the movie is over, *do* you know who did it?

1. *Harper's Island* is a fascinating TV series starring Christopher Gorham, Katie Cassidy, Elaine Cassidy, and the list goes on. You'll find a longer story about this show within the pages of this issue; but in short, if you have not seen it, watch it and then tell me I'm wrong!

John Raab  
CEO/Publisher  
Suspense Magazine ■



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# Satin

By Julia Shraytman

## Part II

There is a knock on my door.

"Excuse me," I say to my patient, my voice just above a whisper. She nods as she stops mid-word, her shoulders drooping. I hand her a box of tissues before I uncross my legs and make my way across the vast room.

I am annoyed. My secretary knows the drill, I am not to be disturbed while in session. Just a slight disturbance can throw a patient off kilter.

I crack the door open expecting my secretary's flushed, moon face, but there are two men in trench coats. I look at them, and they look at me as if I showed up at their place of work uninvited. I don't play their game. I stay quiet. I glide my gaze over to my secretary, who is huddled in the corner, her cheeks ruby red. She stares at me, her eyes blinking morse code.

I return my attention to the men. In the movies FBI agents thrust their badges out and pull them back so quickly it looks as if they are performing a magic trick. These two hold the badges in front of my face long enough for me to become bored.

One of the agents leans in as he takes the lead. "Doctor Cohen?" he asks. He is fit and young. Too young. No more than twenty-seven, give or take a few years. The second agent is even younger. His blue eyes shine brightly with inexperience like morning dew.

"There are so many Doctor Cohens in the world," I say with a straight face.

"I know what you mean," the first agent says. "Are you Doctor Ethan Cohen?"

I nod.

"Can we steal ten minutes of your time?"

"Gentlemen, I am with a patient," I whisper conspiratorially, throwing my gaze behind my shoulder quickly.

They pretend they do not hear me. The first one pulls a small photograph from a manila envelope.

"Do you recognize this person?" he asks.

Unlike my wife, I don't mind having my picture taken. Sylvia thinks that fact makes me a narcissist. Who isn't a narcissist in this day and age? Sylvia likes to throw her thin hand in front of her face in an attempt to conceal herself from a camera, allowing just a small part of her to escape and to be captured. A green eye in one photo. A freckled forehead in another. A cascade of red hair here. A seashell of an ear accentuated by an earring there. Lips coated in a dark red lipstick; a shade called Sugar Plum.

I am the only one who knows the true meaning behind those little performances she puts on. She enjoys marinating in the adulation her modesty arouses in others.

I, on the other hand, don't mind having my picture taken because all I want is for a photo to look like me. I keep waiting for a photograph of me to be of me and not be of a stranger I do not know. I study photos of myself for minutes at a time because I am fascinated by the fact that I am nothing like the smiling, bright-eyed, well-groomed, tall man in his early forties. I feel a disconnect between me and him; between us.



Sometimes I look up and catch Sylvia watching me.

I feel the agent's eyes on me. I have no choice but to stare at the photo he is holding three inches from my face and I furrow my brow to show him that I am thinking hard.

Yes, she was my patient. Laura.

In the photo, Laura is real and genuine. She looks as she did that first time when I caught sight of her at the diner I often frequent. I blink, and there she is. No longer a six-by-eight photo of a missing girl, but a young woman in the flesh, her wild-looking hair dripping rain.

The agent is staring at my eyes, which are hovering over the photograph of the missing young woman.

"Do you recognize this person?" he asks again.

I give him a small, confused smile.

"I think," I begin uncertainly, slowly, "I think this is Laura."

He looks pleased.

I look back over my shoulder.

He looks at his watch then takes a step back.

"Why don't you get back to your patient," he suggests kindly. "We'll wait."

## Part I

It is a tired, gloomy day with intermittent rain and thunder. A patient I had committed two weeks ago to Blanche Jardin Psychiatric Hospital was released last night. He is a no-show for our scheduled noon session.

I sit behind my desk and stare out the window. Earlier today, his mother notified me via text message that he shot himself, and that she will let me know the day and time of his funeral so I can pay him my respects. Her text message is calm.

It is twelve fifteen and the brooding darkness gives way to a light drizzle and fresh late September breeze.

My stomach whimpers. I grab a jacket and head out the door to a diner across the street.

I am standing in line behind a young woman, her brown hair drenched. Because of my proximity to her the raindrops slide down her long hair and fall onto my expensive, Italian leather shoes.

She smells of rainwater and Blue Dew. Blue Dew is my wife's favorite perfume.

Years ago, Blue Dew was my gift to Sylvia on our one-year anniversary, when I was pursuing my doctorate in psychology and she was a medical student. As I watched Sylvia open the gift, I explained, shyly, that the perfume's pure, light, natural scent was the embodiment of her essence.

The young woman is indecisive when it is her turn to order. She is torn between a corned beef and a turkey

sandwich. After finally deciding she apologizes, and the curly haired cashier who takes her order smiles, his eyes twinkling. She rummages through her bag, and as she does so, she turns slightly toward me giving me a glimpse of its contents. It is full of wrinkled receipts, tissues, and bubble gum. She extracts her wallet and hands over a credit card, which is declined.

Her embarrassment seeps through her damp coat like an exhaled winter breath.

"We are together," I say, as I take a step so I am standing next to her. I hand the cashier a twenty-dollar bill and order a buttered bagel and a coffee. I tell the cashier to keep the change.

She protests, but I insist and she relents.

She takes a seat at a table for two and I take a seat at a booth in the corner. We are facing each other, but she has already forgotten me.

I eat my bagel slowly. She runs a paper towel over her wet hair, an act I find disarming. She is pretty, yet plain. What's missing? I ask myself. The features are exactly as they should be. Everything proportional, demure, small. My wife's face is elegant, her nose thin and elongated, her mouth wide, her cheekbones abundant. This young woman is pretty enough for a cashier or a grad student, but not for someone with a Ph.D. Not for someone with substantial research and publications. This young woman is a house cat to my wife's cheetah.

She doesn't touch her food. Her shoulders shake, she takes a breath, and then another. She is crying and I know she is using the count-to-ten trick. She is focusing her mind on the numbers and on her own breathing, to pry her mind away from the angst that's eating her. I blow on my coffee. She is calmer now. She reaches for her tissues and wipes her face, then throws the used tissues back into her bag. Her face is pale and her brown eyes reflect the restaurant's soft light.

She bites into her sandwich with newfound zest.

Once she is done, I drink my coffee and watch her put on lipstick, a small mirror in her hand. Now I know what her pretty but plain face was lacking. A red lipstick. A shade called Sugar Plum. It brightens up her face, giving her a more promiscuous, ruddy look. The exact shade of lipstick my wife wears as a secret, little signal, a trigger meant for me, like I am one of Ivan Pavlov's dogs. I let Sylvia think it works.

Even though my wife never says so outright, Sylvia looks down on my profession. She is a psychiatrist. She is a medical doctor.

I want to stay to continue my observation of the young woman, but I have a patient at 1:30. I make my way back to the office quickly, before it starts to pour again. The sky is darkening. I see lightning out of the corner of my eye as I dash across the street.



As soon as I enter my office, the clouds tremble, and rain gushes and plays a staccato melody against my window.

My 1:30 cancels via text at 1:25, attributing the cancellation to the rain. He has avoidant personality. I step out of my office into the hallway that leads to the reception area to instruct my secretary to bill him.

She is engrossed in a conversation with a young woman. The young woman's back is to me, so I cannot see her face, but I recognize her immediately. Her long, dark hair is drenched; raindrops glide down and sink into the beige carpet.

I catch a faint scent of Blue Dew.

In spite of myself, my pulse quickens, and I take a breath.

Even though I walk silently down the carpeted hallway because I want to hear what the two women are discussing, the young woman hears me and turns around, slowly, like an actress in front of a camera, like a woman about to meet the love of her life. She unravels, and again, my breath is in my throat.

We hold each other in a long embrace, her eyes on mine; mine on hers.

I walk and stand beside her, just like in the diner earlier today.

My eyes are drawn to her oval lips. Her sugar plum red lips are perfect.

"Doctor, this young lady thinks she has an appointment with you, but I don't see her on the schedule. In fact, she is not our patient."

I furrow my brow and say, "Hmm."

The young woman looks up at me and blinks, like a young deer.

"And you are, Miss...?"

"Laura Green," she says.

Laura.

"I am sorry for the confusion," she says softly.

She is like silk.

"I have an appointment with Doctor Cohen, you see."

"There are so many Doctor Cohens in the world," I say, to which she smiles. "What type of doctor is your Doctor Cohen?"

She stammers before finally saying, "A psychiatrist?"

"Well, sweetheart," I say, "it sounds like you are not too sure. Are you asking me?"

She bites a smidge of her lower lip.

"Oh, no, Doctor, I am certain."

I turn to my secretary. "Why don't you pencil in Laura for 1:30. There's been a cancellation."

"Laura, please follow me," I say evenly and lead her into my office, my body heat rising with each step she takes.

I don't ring the doorbell.

Even though I know my wife is home I take out my keys and open the door myself.

Sylvia is sitting on our white sofa. Her red hair is up in a bun and her neck is long and thin. She is wearing her black pencil dress. She doesn't bother to look up.

Save for my loud footsteps and her turning a page of *Psychiatry Today*, we are drowning in silence.

She is pulling me into her game and I hate it. She says nothing, so I say nothing.

That is not what I expected. I expected a modicum of decorum from my own wife.

In the open kitchen, as I make myself a sandwich, even though she is across the room, I feel her next to me, her eyes laughing at me, her sugar plum red lips daring me, all the while leaving the scent of Blue Dew to hang in the air like a trail of slime a snail leaves behind.

I stare at her, sitting there on the couch prim and proper, and she looks a bit different. Her face is scrubbed clean and her skin is fresh. Not a hint of makeup. My wife has always looked younger than her age, and in this moment, with that lighting, she looks like a young woman in her twenties.

I grapple with myself, but I cannot hold my ire any longer. I manage, however, to control my tone and the words come out detached, and cold, and perfect.

"Thank you, sweetheart," I say.

She looks up, her red eyebrow arching.

"I enjoy getting gifts at the office."

"Oh?" she says, and looks back down at the magazine.

"Usually, those gifts are food items like chocolates or fruit. That is typically what women get their husbands, you know. They never get semi-attractive young women as gifts for their husbands. But you, sweetheart, are one of a kind."

She slowly looks up and stares at me, her face as blank as a marble statue of Discordia.

"You are not a typical husband."

Laura starts coming in to see me twice a week.

It is clear to me she has a mood disorder, but we are in the early stages of our therapy and I need more time for a proper diagnosis. At the moment, she is experiencing depression. It is a torturously sad state to be in, I am sure. I feel a little guilty for finding her despair so enchanting. Her voice is so soft and docile, it feels like satin against my skin.

Laura likes to wear pencil dresses, like my wife.

Laura's body is more defined than Sylvia's narrow, slender frame. At our third session, as she removes her coat to reveal a crimson pencil dress, it hits me that she resembles a young French woman. A Parisienne.

A month passes. I know I shouldn't, but it's Laura's birthday, and I spend an hour picking out perfume for her at Neiman Marcus. I am like a kid, I know. I remove my wedding ring and tell the saleswoman behind the counter that it is for my French fiancée.

When Laura opens her gift, her eyes meet mine, and I



notice that they glimmer with a quiet joy. I watch in silence as she dabs Douce Lune on her neck and wrists, the movements so sensual and authentic that my heart shivers.

Laura is delicate and sweet.

However, I find that after months of therapy we are not making concrete progress. I need to know what she thinks, how she views the world, what frightens her.

She tells me about a breakup with a college boyfriend and about losing a sister to pneumonia.

Was she in love with the dumped boyfriend? Does she love him still? She shrugs.

How can I help her while knowing nothing about her secret thoughts, her feelings, her demons?

She sits in front of me and all I want is to solve her the way I mastered my 500 Rubik's Cubes which decorate my office. They are a great ice breaker that start a conversation flowing.

Halfway through our session, she gets up to use the restroom. While she is gone, I lean forward and go through her purse. I take her phone and a piece of gum. I don't bother to zip the bag. I let it sit there, yawning, and I don't worry about placing it in the exact position it was in before she left. She will either notice and fall into paranoia, or she will not notice anything amiss. Either way, her response will reveal something valuable about her. If she notices nothing, then I will be very disappointed in her because it will mean that she is just a bubblehead.

I place her phone in my desk drawer, and settle back into my armchair to wait for her return.

The doorknob turns. As I watch Laura walk across the room toward her armchair, I unwrap a stick of Wrigley's Big Red and pop it in my mouth.

I smile pleasantly at her.

"Shall we continue?" I ask.

I am in bed next to my wife, my hand on her warm thigh, when I receive a text message from an unknown number.

Sylvia's eyelashes flicker but her eyes remain closed.

The message is from Laura. She wants to know if she left her phone in my office.

*I don't think so, I text her back. I won't be in the office until our Monday session, I'm afraid. Going on a little solo getaway.*

I wait for a response from her but there is none, so I text a suitcase emoji.

*I am sure it'll turn up!* I add.

She sends me an OK emoji and a smile.

*Sweet dreams*, I quickly type, pleased with the vagueness of that text. It will certainly make her sit up and wonder. I smile, roll back into Sylvia's embrace, sink into the silky sheets, and quickly fall asleep.

When Laura walks into my office, she is bright and smiling.

I look up from my laptop and say, "Hello there! You look happy."

She is holding the missing phone in her hand. She is holding me in her hand. After our session she will put me in her handbag and I will go wherever she goes. I will follow her. I will hear her. I will know her. I will understand her. I will open her up like a wristwatch and examine the mechanism that makes her. I will feel her ticking heartbeat.

Isn't that what every woman wants?

"Where was it?" I ask politely.

"I am so forgetful," she says. "Last week I used the restroom during our session and left it there."

"Thank God no one took it," I say as I take my seat across from her and cross my legs.

Sincere compliments do wonders for a woman with a mood disorder, so, sincerely, I add, "You have such a lovely smile."

Now, Laura is a little black dot on my phone. I track her. I read her texts. I listen to her calls. She wanders the streets for hours. She doesn't have a job.

She spends her night's drawing. I know that because she takes photos of her drawings and texts them to her aunt at dawn. Her drawings are interesting, dark, romantic, but only average. I don't see her making a living off her art.

I give her a nickname: Bunny. My Bunny. In hiding from real life. Maybe I'll share the nickname with her someday.

At one of our sessions, I ask her if she has trouble sleeping. I tell her to relax and to close her eyes. I speak soothingly to her. She falls asleep and I watch her breathe. When it is time, I clear my throat, and her eyes open.

"Did you hypnotize me?" she whispers, staring at me in awe.

I listen to her tell her aunt, "Doctor Cohen is amazing." My body shakes with pleasure.

Before our next session, I sit at my desk and I draw. I pretend I do not hear her when she comes in, until she is in front of me. "You draw!" she says.

In response, I shyly nod. "Oh, just my little hobby."

"Mine too!"

"What are the chances?" I smile.

We spend our session discussing art.

We pause. We smile at each other. Feeling warm from forming a true connection.

"Why don't you join me," I tell her, "at a weekly art and wine class?"

I know she wants to accept, but her cheeks burn, and she glances down at my finger. I haven't worn my wedding ring in months.

"It's not healthy to spend so much time alone, for someone so talented and young," I tell her.

"So, it's a pity date?" she asks, her gaze touching my face softly.

"Think of it as therapy," I reply tenderly.

Finally, after four months, I listen in on a call between Laura and her aunt in which My Bunny Laura says the magic words: I love him.

There are fifteen minutes left of our session. I ask Laura how she feels about me. She looks down at the floor.

I walk over to her, get down on my knees in front of her, take her hands in mine, and look up lovingly into her sad eyes. I can be very theatrical.

"I love you," I tell her.

I inform my wife that I will be at a conference in Germany for a week, and I spend my days and nights with Laura in her apartment. We spend a lot of time in bed. We venture out for late dinners at cheap restaurants where we hold our food with our hands. But she doesn't eat much.

"I love watching you eat," she says to me.

We catch a Broadway show. We go dancing. We go skydiving. We smoke weed.

She is becoming my little addiction.

This lonely woman is a wild thing!

Laura shares her apartment with a pair of white satin rabbits. They are silky smooth, calm, and docile. When she can't sleep at night, she sits down on the floor, takes the soft, warm bodies in her lap and holds them, their heartbeats rocking her to sleep.

I awake to find her side of the bed empty, and tiptoe into the living room. She is on the floor, nude and in a fetal position, the two large rabbits in her arms.

"Hi," she says, and I jump.

"I thought you were asleep," I whisper.

I sit down on the couch, cross my legs, lean back, and I watch her.

"No, I haven't slept in weeks."

"The bunnies help?"

"I'd die without them," she exhales, as her palm begins to glide over their satin coats.

"You are precious," I mock her.

Laura is in my arms. I caress her long hair.

"I will tattoo your name on my wrist," she whispers, half-asleep. "Will you tattoo mine?"

Laura My Bunny is bipolar. I cringe. There is a foul taste in mouth. Her condition feels like a betrayal. She is not the sad, mysterious, docile young woman I met at the diner all those months ago.

"Who are you?" I ask her and watch her smile.

Sylvia is suspicious. She meets me at the door in lingerie, her Sugar Plum red lips parted in anticipation.

She tells me she loves me and it's time to put an end to my little hobby. She tells me I am hurting her feelings. She kisses me tenderly, like she used to years ago. She traces my jaw with her finger, her nail sends shivers down my spine.

She is toying with me, I know, but I don't hate it.

It is Friday night and I am with My Bunny Laura at a night club. She is wearing a sheer red dress, and her eyes are feral. Other men leer at her. Laura's mania is blooming into a crimson amaryllis. She throws her head back and laughs wildly.

Sylvia, my wife, is methodical and disciplined. She never loses her mind. We usually spend Friday nights together, but I texted her earlier today and told her my cousin had a breakdown and I had to be with him in Jersey. As I dance with Laura, I think of Sylvia. My wife enjoys classical music or ballet or a quiet rooftop restaurant or a jazz club. One would never find her in a vulgar place like this, behaving like this.

I feel the phone buzzing in my pocket against my hip. I excuse myself and step out into the cool night. Sylvia asks me politely if I planned to come home or if I intended to sleep at my cousin's.

I light a cigarette and smoke it before I text her that, *I can't leave my cousin. I'm sorry.*

I smoke another cigarette as I wait for her reply. *Good night*, she texts. I feel a heaviness in my chest that pulls me under water like a rock.

I make my way back inside the club and watch Laura dance in her red dress with a dark-haired kid, his lithe body much too close to her. It is the nauseating, stale sweat and cheap cologne that angers me. I grab her wrist and pull her out into the cold street. Her breath turns silver against the dying sky.

I take her home, take off her dress, tuck her into bed, and tell her I love her.

"But I have to go, My Bunny," I tell her.

She doesn't take kindly to that. Her eyes flash black, and she thrashes. She tells me she knows all about my wife and all about me.

"I don't care about your wife!" she yells. Laura is a mad woman.

"So, what do you want to do about my wife?"

Instead of answering she cries, silently. Tears roll down her cheeks.

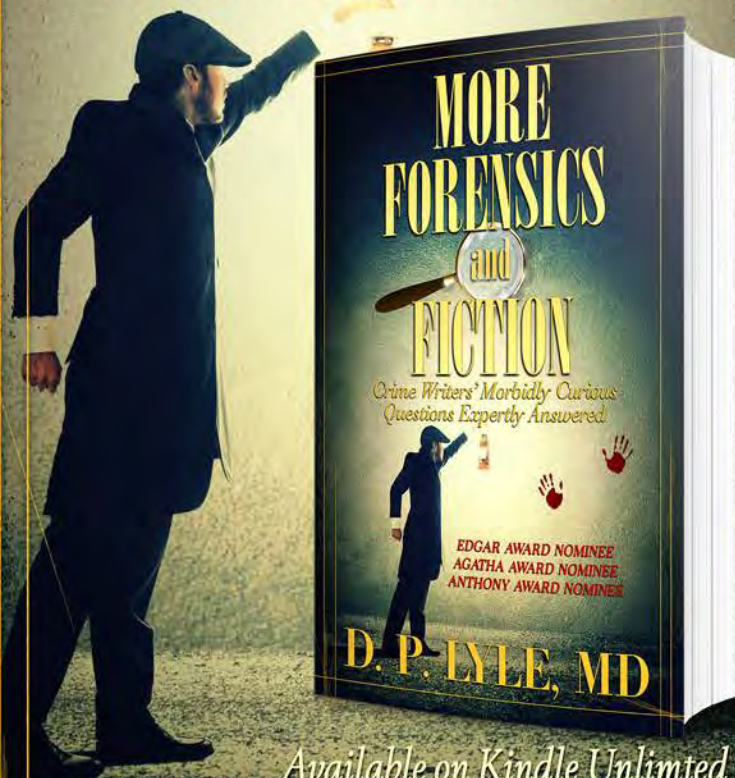
I catch a cab and in thirty minutes I am home next to my wife's smooth, calm body. I cannot sleep. I lie and think. It is after three a.m. when Sylvia turns to me, and whispers calmly, "There are a lot of things I can forgive. But you know



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how I feel about Fridays. Our Fridays.”

A tear wiggles out of the corner of my eye and slowly makes its way down.

“Her name is Laura and I am in love with her,” I tell Sylvia unconvincingly. She rolls her eyes. I shake my head, as if to clear it from a fog. “She is my patient,” I add.

“Countertransference, dear. We all fall victim to it at one point or another,” she says, as she places my head on her chest, her thin fingers massaging my scalp.

“You never fell victim to it,” I say.

“What’s her diagnosis?” she asks as I am drifting off.

“Bipolar.”

She sighs.

“She told me she wants you dead. I have to protect you. You are my one and only,” I say.

“Mental illness is an open invitation to the devil. It is so easy.” She smiles.

We share a moment. We hug. We kiss. We make love.

I tell my wife I will prepare an elaborate dinner next Friday. She smiles up at me and I breathe easier. I clear my calendar and spend Friday slaving in the kitchen. I set the scene. I chill the wine. The lights are dimmed. Two long candles are glowing. Amorous music is playing in the background, forming a cocoon for dreamy romance.

A bouquet of crimson amaryllis is in a clear vase in the middle of the table.

I shower, change into a shiny rented tux and part my hair.

I take my seat and listen to the ticking of the clock. As agreed, my wife is to arrive in five minutes.

The minutes are in no rush and they drag on like slugs. An hour passes. The candles have burned out. The ice in the wine bucket melted.

The food, arranged delightfully on our dinner plates, lost its fresh luster. The stench of now cold, baked satin rabbits, animal sacrifice to my wife, revolts me.

The lock turns, and her high heels click-clock calmly, evenly across the floor until she is in front of me.

She gives me a light kiss, her hand resting on my shoulder for a moment.

“Oh, darling, but I’ve already eaten,” she says wide-eyed, as she takes a sip of wine from my glass.

She takes her shoes off, placing them neatly against the wall, and walks past me. I hear the door of her study open and shut.

I slice through the meat, pulling the pulp off the bones in perfect, thin strips. I arrange them one on top of another delicately, until I have a mound of pale flesh. I close my eyes and there are two Lauras—one laughing, one crying.

I chew silently, swallowing every bite, until all that is left on my plate are hollow bones. ■



# Better the DEVIL You Know

By Dan A. Cardoza

I wouldn't have chosen Devin as a younger brother. Creating the future monster was up to our parents; thankfully, out of my hands. He'd grown up resenting how I avoided most of the late-night, whiskey-fueled abuse. Abuse we received from both of our parents. Oh, how all of this salted our existing emotional wounds, and any chance of a real, long lasting connection. "It's all about you. I'm always the disobedient one," he'd sobbed.

I'm not sure our parents sensed the evolving evil within him, the ever-expanding reptilian infrastructure inside, his spawning rage. Sadly, neither would live long enough to discover what the future had in store for either of us. Both of our parents were brutally murdered just south of Missoula, Montana, alongside the Bitter Root River. Ironically, they'd just begun their first real vacation since they'd married. They were headed to Yellowstone National Park.

Following the horrific event, Devin and I were all that was left. Still, we continued to walk slow circles around one another, scent marking each other's corners. Devin once quoted the talented Jack Heath, using a line from the novel "Hideout": *Better the devil you know than the devil you don't*. The problem is, we have never agreed who the real devil is between us.

~~~

That's Devin—always interrupting. I recognize his ringtone. It's from the classic horror movie *Candyman*. It's the classic piano version—*It was always you*.

I haven't heard from him in weeks. Interesting how he pops up just as I begin our story, a God-damned Verizon ghost. I become circumspect each time I hear his acrid ringtone. I hesitate to take any of his calls. Though, he keeps me forever nimble. This time let him leave a message on voicemail. I'll call him back later.

*Hi, I'm the older one, Cody, three years difference.*

There is another strange distraction each time my brother calls. It's an imaginary thought-bubble. It opens directly over my head. Exactly like in the comics. Inside the caption, it's always my animated *Beetlejuice* brother, or Michael Keaton doing a damned good job acting the role of Devin.

A phone call is one thing. An in-person interruption is another. Sometimes, the shiny toothed spook simply appears at my front door, looking for handouts, a loan, or expensive advice. Typically, he's oddly garbed: lime green pants, orange shirt, suspenders, plaid Kurt Cobain shirt.

The last time he showed, he was dressed in striped shorts, bare-chested, sporting Disney suspenders. He pissed off my neighbors by insisting he pound away at his millennial, goatskin drum. He'd arrived fresh off the Black Rock Desert, having been at Burning Man, again. You know the crazy, surreal, existential event that occurs each year?

For better or worse, Devin and I are family now. We are all that's left. We've both been under a shit-load of stress since my parents' passing. Passing? I'll just say it. They were tortured and murdered. There, that feels better, getting it off my chest. Devin took it the hardest.

We've reached a zenith in our speculation, based on our heightened level of anxiety. Anytime we discuss our parent's murder, we end up with more questions than answers. The only thing the Missoula detectives tell us is that they are still investigating, and it's not a cold case file. They say their instincts lean toward a spree or serial killer.

The latest theory is that the murderer or murderers might be The Cowboy, serial killer, a rare breed in the buckaroo tri-states of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. The Cowboy Killer has been linked to nearly a dozen homicides—each new murder more horrific than the last. Privately, most of the task force detectives, bored with all the domestic murders, compliment The Cowboy Killer and his artwork, including his stylized signature of 'C,' evidence kept from the public.

Because Devin is all I have, I go easy on him, though his hostile persona can be challenging at times. More often than



not, we do our best to archive most of our horrible childhood memories, setting them aside for the better good. We are the best at setting aside our emotions, allowing them to hover above us, out of reach. Snappy banter and sarcasm help keep the tension to a minimum. In truth, there is always something dark and slithering, just below the surface.

Before our parents' demise, it wasn't a secret that Devin and I despised each other. Yet, strangely, Devin is the only person that I can trust. At the minimum, he listens. Though it's infrequent, there are times we can set aside our petty jealousies and actually engage in civil discourse.

Okay, so we don't agree about most things. At least he pays attention to what I say, unlike my few fair-weather friends and acquaintances. Regardless of how our conversations begin these days, they soon take on a life of their own. Our talks are usually around Devin and what is going on in his messed-up life. At the very least, it's cheap entertainment.

Let's be honest. In our narcissistic culture, close relationships are difficult to establish and maintain. It's all about the collective me: selfies, vainly targeted Madison Avenue ads, Twitter, Facebook, me, me, me.

Shallowness is life-transforming. Being despicable has its place. Redesigning oneself has morphed into an act of self-preservation. Defensive mechanisms, violence, justifiable rage are all commonplace in the twenty-first century. I personally feel no shame in erecting psychological roadblocks. It's a way to prevent others from getting too close, including my Devin. Mental unhealthiness has become a twisted virtue.

I assumed the war between Devin and I would end after my parents' dramatic death, and yet it rages. My brother carries enough anger for the both of us, and it remains. It has to go somewhere I imagine.

Hold on. It's his ringtone, *Beetlejuice* again. I better answer it this time. Care to listen?

"Sup, Devin? What do you need, bro?" *If only he could see my face, my eyes rolling up at the ceiling.*

"Hi, Cody, what makes you think I need anything? Damn, every time I call, all I get are insinuations and insults. You're always questioning my ulterior motive, really?"

"Okay, I'll prove my point. Do you want something?" *Let us see if he takes the bait. Let's catfish his ass, shall we?*

"Piss on you, man, enough shade already. I just called for a favor."

"Favor?"

"I'm in a jam, Cody. And you are dead wrong, I don't need money. I just need to borrow five hundred. You can charge me double the bank rate! I promise I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"Five hundred for what, Devin?" *He still owes me hundreds of dollars from previous calls.*

"Mmm... The mechanic says I can't get the car back unless I pay up in full."

"How much is the total bill, Devin?"

"Four hundred. You asked, man! I never lie to you, right? And one hundred to spend on a week's worth of food at 7-Eleven."

"Okay, okay, when we're done, I'll hop on Paypal and wire you the money. You damned well know I won't be charging you interest. I don't expect to get paid back either. Can we briefly discuss...?"

"You're the best, man, thanks, love you." Click, tone!

"Love you, too." *Damn, he hung up already. Can you believe it? I can!*

Our brief interaction should give insight into our complicated relationship. Sometimes I pity my little brother. Sometimes, I pity myself!

It's time I tell you a little more about us and our family history.

~~~

I had a well-deserved freshman yearbook moniker in high school, 'Most likely to chair a local A.A. chapter before the age of twenty-five.' Remarkably, I graduated as the class valedictorian, at the ripe old age of sixteen, never having cracked a stinky, inky library book. What I'd learned most about in school involved the principles of control. Control works wonders. It can get you high, resolves things, and it soothes restless souls, especially mine. The power of subtle manipulation is an aphrodisiac.

After high school I took a short education break and worked various odd jobs, mostly entry-level: gas station cashier, carpenter apprentice, bowling alley custodian, and general handyman. Getting nowhere fast, I signed up for elective coursework at the local community college.

But in school, I continued to work my part-time side gigs. One of my fill-in jobs involved work as a lumber mill sawyer. It was at the now-defunct Chaney Stud Lumber Company. Have a good laugh, all true. Well, get to the details. The work was about an hour's drive away from our home in Redding. The mill was in Pondosa, California, now a ghost town. I was all of nineteen. I was busier than a one-legged man in an ass kicking contest.

Ben Chaney, the owner, invented the 2x4x8-foot wood stud. Hence, the company name, Chaney Stud. Processing lumber was just one of the ways the prosperous lumber baron made a tall stack of money.

His perfectly calibrated board was dissected out of second-growth Douglas Fir timber. By the late 60s, this rather utilitarian board, with its exacting measurements, had become the housing industry standard. Think of his boards as the

bones of a house. Everyone needs them, right?

I'd never met Ben Chaney, not once. He'd gotten much older by the time I'd come along. In fact, he'd been dead and buried for some time. But I certainly looked up to him; or is it down? He was an industry legend. Ben Chaney was a stout and formidable man who'd worked hard at building his wooden empire. His exacting standards required each board be stamped with the company's standard, red-painted mustang logo. Each board end was dipped in a large vat of red sealing wax to prevent wood shrinkage. I imagined his mustang brand to be the equivalent of a Ford Mustang Shelby GT500 hood ornament.

And with each 2" x 4" I ran through the green chain, I declared to the world, "Mr. Chaney, this one is for you. Thank you for teaching me by example that I can be anything I want to be." I'm sure my annoying yelling could be heard above the blazing sound of the wood mill saws. It was more than empowering. As the other workers stared me down, it felt good. After all, I was part of the wood stud revolution. I worked this job for about one year. When finished, I moved onward and upward with a hand full of slivers and a pocket full of dreams.

Conjuring trees into exacting lumber afforded me extra spending money for Friday nights out on the town, and so I kept the company of six-packs of beer. And if I was really lucky, there might be a cute girl. A few of them I'd conned away from Brother Devin. Another reason for a little of his long-term animosity.

In hindsight, my blue-collar employment helped me develop a good work ethic and all the needed inspiration to further my education. Other motivational factors included a gnarly recession and my strict parents very own declaration of emancipation they'd enact.

My younger brother and I viewed Nellie and Mike's implementation of the house rules as draconian, although effective in hindsight. Maybe that added to my growing need to control. Father Mike's last rule came in the form of an ultimatum, one I chose to violate with gusto. Both my parents had demanded that after the age of eighteen I leave home. They'd been making this clear for months. I was nineteen, after all, and overdrawn at the Parent's Patience Bank.

"You have to move along, son. We don't expect to feed or clothe you forever. In other words, get the hell out of the house," Father had said. Father was a direct asshole.

I can still hear Mother's wife-beating husband yell those hurtful words. It was at the last supper table, "Cody Clark, grow the hell up. You're a man now. The easy days are gone. Do you want to eat steak or beans for the rest of your life?"

That's my last name by the way, Clark, don't laugh, I *am* faster than a speeding bullet. In fact, I sped away a week later in my red Ford Mustang. I saluted the old pervert of a father with a long middle finger, launched from just outside the driver's window. I left him in a dirty cloud of gravel driveway dust. "See you later, you filthy bastard," I shouted.

~~~

I did take his advice, though. I chose to advance my education and not to ever become like him. After community college, I completed a bachelor's degree in Psychology. I graduated with honors from California State University, Sacramento, during the years of 'Occupy Wall Street.' I also learned that four quarters and a B.A. degree won't buy you a cup of coffee at Burger King.

And so, I moved on to grad school, first completing a Master's in Sociology and then a Ph.D. in Abnormal Psychology. My dissertation was about how to reduce the recidivism rate of violent offenders. I'd worked long hours to make sure it was well-received. The whole process was easy.

Two out of the five dissertation committee members had been awkwardly compromised, having had extramarital trysts with a few of the students. I believe to this day, I'm the only successful Ph.D. candidate paid hush-money, twenty thousand dollars, just to shut the hell up and advance my dissertation. Long story short, my dissertation was more bullshit than reality, but I'd made sure it was approved with flying colors.

My first professional job directly out of college was with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation for the State of California. It didn't take long to figure out that coddling violent offenders and facilitating an early release was a mistake. It only guaranteed more disturbing and violent crime. I became much too familiar with violent crime, so I left this little shop of horrors.

~~~

These days I facilitate group and individual psychotherapy. In my small private practice, I am the go-to guy in the valley regarding abhorrent adolescent behavior. I'd learned the hard way how one's self-esteem can be violently murdered. How what's in the rearview can still leave you fractured, physically and mentally; how to psychologically salve all the cuts that never quite heal.

We live in a culture of narcissism these days. I see plenty of that in my patients and my brother. One might easily conclude that my line of work sounds depressing. Yes, it is difficult at times, but I love it. I've become good at counseling juvenile delinquents. After all, I've done this for years with Brother Devin. Sometimes, delinquents have to delinquent!

I teach my clients various coping skills and how to redirect negative thoughts and behavior. Business is booming, especially since most of my client youth have been infected by social media and the ever-growing carcinogen of hedonism.



My forte is being a positive listener. If and when they are ready, I am able to equip them with just the right number of psychological tools. The skulduggery implements assist them to adapt to most of life's aggravating situations. Empathy and support are a must. No matter how disturbing their behavior, being understood relieves pain. Does this sound familiar? I advise each of my students of life to make the best out of any bad situation. After all, no one here gets out alive—not Devin, my parents, or me.

~~~

Now that we have waded in the shallow waters of treating deviant behavior, I'd like to tell you more about my brother Devin or Beetlejuice.

In the scheme of things, Devin isn't as bad as I make him out to be. We both survived a childhood of neglect and abuse. And we've been fortunate enough to outlive our two miserable parents: one a sadistic harmer; the other, an excuse driven, co-conspirator.

As young adults, Devin and I chose different paths after we'd moved out of our childhood home. We became our own family's yin and yang. Two wounded young men determined to strike out in different promising directions. Brotherly love was never in doubt. But it has always been about showing it.

Hell, I tried. I even let Devin live with me for a while when I first became an adolescent therapist. He needed a place to stay and landed on my doorstep, good old Beetlejuice.

He needed a roof over his head and cold cash, not necessarily in that order. Don't get me wrong, Devin worked (said tongue-in-cheek), and he was consistent, at least at not paying his way. To be honest, his companionship was appreciated as I learned the ropes.

I should tell you, Devin and I are opposites in most respects, as different as brothers can be. Devin had all the charisma in his youth, handed out his testosterone as if it were a calling card. Devin was and is the classic, '*Id*.'

Sigmund Freud theorized that, within our minds, there exists three competing forces that require constant conflict negotiation. That is, he postulated, if we are indeed emotionally healthy. At the center of this grand drama is what Freud called the *Id*. Picture the *Id*'s concept as a seed in our minds, the root and weed of the center of all impulsivity. Freud also identified the construct of *Ego*. He defined the *Ego* as the grand negotiator of sanity. The *Superego*, his third component of mental dynamics, he postulated, would keep us all on the straight and narrow. *Superego* represents our conscience.

Sigmund deemed the *Ego* in charge of brokering deals between the impulsive *Id* and the frail, *Superego*. If the *Id* represents the devil in us and causes all kinds of hell, then angels are the bedrock of the *Superego*'s pathos. Freud saw everything in human behavior as the culmination of the eternal struggle between good and evil, the *Superego* and *Id*.

Regarding my brother, Freud would have said he had an abundance of the *Id* genome and issues with impulse control, let alone a nonexistent *Superego*. He would have declared him a sociopath. The term sociopath was first coined in 1930 by the Clark University bad-boy psychologist George Everett Partridge. Devin, a sociopath, has no remorse or guilt about anything he's ever done. Though Freud's notions are dated, and so 20th Century, my brother Devin is a poster child for the term 'dysfunction.'

Sure, he would give you the shirt off of his back, but beware, there would exist a debt to be paid. He's a real pain in the ass most of the time, with all his tumultuous drama. But because I'm all he has, I stick with him and his bad behavior.

~~~

It's July. I've taken a few days off from the practice. It's a warm afternoon up on the rugged Northern California coastline. I'm at a cemetery, one near the township of Mendocino. This day, I'm blessed with another golden horizon. I am alone in near silence here at Cuffy's Cove Cemetery, enjoying the warmth of the setting sun. Late afternoon is a cathedral, filled to the rafters with Amaryllis-Belladonna Lily's, known as "pink ladies" to the locals. The flowers insist on sharing their beautifully, silent voices.

I'm an amateur photographer, not a bad one. Today, I'm capturing all the dark beauty and architecture of the dead using my old school Olympus Mark Three. Cuffy's Cove is one of my favorite spots to visit and shoot. With each tick, I conjure the camera's aperture to inhale all the granite landscape. With each tick, it complies, bending the images onto an electronic artist's canvas.

A saddle-colored doe is grazing near the death edge of a high cliff. Birds have begun to unburden the sky and settle into the voids of cypress. This long day has been spent.

Here, at the Cove, I hoard the tiny pixels of afterlife, including my parents' headstones with their angular and sinister designs. Most of God's creatures pay little attention to this ritual.

It's so therapeutic being enveloped in all the quiet, alone, except for my sea roving dead. With each visit, I find I'm able to leave more anger behind, though it has been difficult. My kind of love and hate is a high wire act, one that requires control.

At the base of Mother and Father's marker's lay a dozen blood-red roses. There's something too familiar about this surprise. Feeling drowsy now, I kneel down, twist around, and rest my back against the warm granite. It's impossible to stay awake.

~~~

When I do wake, I discover I've been leaning against my father's headstone. It's not like he needs any more of a burden, right? A set of high beams woke me, having bent around the long curve and up the slope of California State Route One. The pickup insists on contouring itself away, completing the crescent of ornate and gothic fencing that surrounds the cemetery. As the wheels turn in the light rain, the pavement sounds as if Velcro is ripping.

I can't tell you how relaxed I feel, as I rise to my feet in the misty downpour. I hope the dark souls in this dark ocean have slept as well as I have.

I stretch, reaching for the sky, and then collect all my gear. Then, I use my cell phone as a flashlight to quickly navigate my way back to the Highlander, saying goodbye in my thoughts to all the marauding souls in their rotting wood pirate ships. Each having set sails for final destinations.

As I pull myself into the cab and start the engine, I notice Brother Devin's voicemail. I choose to ignore it for now. I need to focus on the wet highway as I steer south, in the direction of a soft bed, in a warm cabin, near the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

At the cabin, it's a few beers and a quick sandwich, making sure I hit the sack by midnight, the witching hour over here. As I begin to drift off, I imagine viewing the edge of the golden scaled Pacific once again. It's difficult to let this day go away. Two gods reveal themselves, Poseidon and Zeus. The July setting sun is a blister against the sweltering horizon. On the lip of the ocean's edge is a floating, oval basket made of platinum straw. In the center of the thatched bowl is the setting sun. Before I drift out into the waters of deep sleep and drown, I watch as the sun's light pours its white magic over the edge of the old world. And then all I see is blackness.

~~~

I love my drive home to Sacramento. It's a long and winding affair, a nice change from my everyday schedule. Work can be a grind, but now I feel refreshed. My mind wanders in the direction of my brother Devin and all the complicated and destructive paths that he's taken.

I reminisce the years, all his travels, one dead-end town to another. It's a wonder he's been able to scratch out a living. He's all about traveling seeds and tumbleweed. Yes, he's a vagabond, no doubt, but he's my vagabond.

As I arrive home, I feel exhausted. So, I toss my camera and gear on my favorite chair near the front door entrance and crank up the air-conditioner. I make myself one of the best B.L.T.'s on the planet. I down a couple of frosty cold beers. After, I turn in for the night.

~~~

It's already the next day. I awake in my comfortable bed and surprise myself. It's almost 3:00 P.M. "Jesus, where has all the time gone?" I say to myself. I recall bits and pieces, fragments of the following night's restless dreams, something I do to avoid thinking.

Yet, in truth, last night's dreams were mostly nightmares. Last night, and this early morning, the sleep ghosts were all about Devin and his travels, including Idaho and Wyoming. I've tried so hard to forget all the cities and towns he's visited over the years.

On the nightstand, Devin is still waiting, or at least his voicemail. I should call him back.

Though it's July, why do I feel a storm is brewing? It's in the quietness of the day, the atmosphere, the moment. Suddenly, I arrive on this new planet. A scratchy voice on a loudspeaker is shouting for someone named Devin. I say out loud as I breach the bed, "Now what the hell has he done." Naked as a Jaybird, I don't follow the instructions. Once again, I'm disobedient, my father's son. I stumble into the master bath and switch on the halo of lights over the vanity. Ice cold water is useless.

Beetlejuice is in the mirror. His blood-shot eyes pulse from holding his breath. He screams at my face, "Alibi, alibi, I had a solid alibi!"

A voice emerges from the gauntlet of barbed wire lodged in my throat. "No!" I rasp. "Not you?"

From outside again, "Come out, or we are coming in, Devin. Come out with your hands up!"

Beetlejuice snickers at me, "Burner phone, I had a burner phone," he says. "Dude, I had an alibi tighter than a frog's ass underwater."

"No! Not you!" I insist on using an alien voice. The tone is insecure, witchy, and angry.

As I shuffle away from the bath into the dark hallway, choruses of jagged confessions rise from the blood-spattered mirror, now fractured across the Travertine floor. "It was always me, you damned fool!" All the impressions say.

"Devin, come out with your hands up. Open the door and exit the house. Come out peacefully, now! Any wrong move, we will shoot to kill!"

As I approach the front door, I stick my chin out in defiance of any regrets. It's Devin, the magnificent, that unlocks the front door. I swing it wide open.

I clasp both hands together in the form of a flesh gun and point it dead straight into the flashing blue lights: the truth, the final sounds, the lack of regrets, everything fades to black. ■

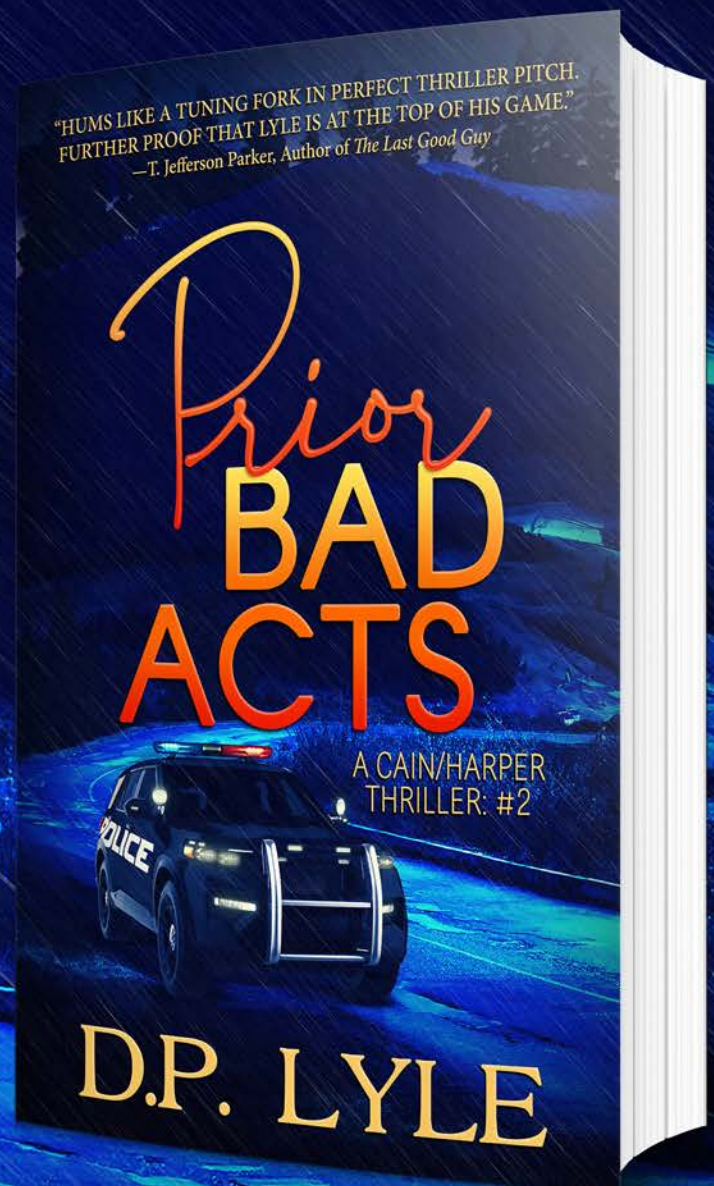


A CAIN/HARPER THRILLER: #2

# "PRIOR BAD ACTS PREDICT FUTURE BAD ACTS."

—Harper McCoy

Fear grips an isolated mountain town after drug dealer Dalton Southwell kills a rogue dealer and his entire family. Score settled; message delivered. But Dalton's best-laid plans go awry when his brother Dennie takes a bullet in the gut. In a panic, Dr. Buck Buckner is kidnapped from the local ER, a pharmacy is robbed and the owner murdered, and the killers melt into the rugged Tennessee hills. Buck's physician father calls in Bobby Cain and Harper McCoy to rescue his son from killers who would have little use for him after he saves Dennie; or worse, the wounded man dies. But which direction and how far did they run? What hideaway did they burrow into? For Cain and Harper it's a race against time to locate the killers, safely retrieve Buck, and settle their own score.



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# Haunted

By Megan Towey

**I KNOW MY EYES ARE OPEN.** I can feel myself blinking, lashes tickling the tender skin near my eyebrows. A gentle breeze from the overhead fan glides across the exposed corneas.

But I see nothing. There is only darkness.

Sleep claimed my consciousness. An hour ago. Maybe more. I'd welcomed its embrace. Now those comforting arms have released me, abandoned to whatever nightmare voices had awoken me.

But I hear nothing. There is only silence.

A whisper of movement, the vague feeling of fingernails on the inside of my elbow. Startled, I turn. Reaching out, blind limbs flailing in the night, searching for contact. Yet I am alone. Feet tangled up in the sheets, imprisoned.

That's when I see. Frail fingers of light clutching at the cracks in the bedroom doorframe.

I know I turned off the hallway light before collapsing into bed. At least, I think I did.

"Cal?"

No answer, but then, I shouldn't have expected one. Cal isn't supposed to be here. Not now. That doesn't stop me from wishing he was.

Especially when I hear a low grumbling from behind the closed door. Not directly outside. Somewhere past the parquet floored hallway that has always reminded me of a chessboard.

Someone, or something, is in the house.

"Cal?" This time, spoken so softly I can barely hear myself.

Unfurling fabric from my legs, I sit up, sinking my toes into silky plush carpet. Silent steps lead me to the door. Pushing down on the levered handle, heartbeat pounding in my ears.

The door swings inward, inviting in knives of light that slice through my vision.

When my sight returns, I am confronted by a wall of technicolor memories. Cal and I in Barbados. Cal and I on our wedding day. Cal standing beside me, my belly round with our baby. A child that didn't survive long enough to actually live. I keep meaning to take that picture down...

A deep growl echoes down the hall. I take a step towards it. Having swallowed my courage, I taste only metallic flavored fear.

I pick up a pewter statue from a side table. A fox with a rook in its mouth. Cal picked it out. It feels cold against my skin.

The scent of rotting meat assaults my nose, making me gag. Yet my feet march on, along the checkered floor, towards the smell, the sound.

Rounding the corner into the living room, I see him. A giant gray wolf perched on the red leather loveseat. Sitting up, proper. Long, front legs fully extended. Fur matted and caked with crimson dirt. Blood dripping from his prominent canine teeth.

His fire rimmed irises assess me. Slowly. Painfully. A dish he's deciding whether to devour or send back.

A subtle shift in the tension of his muscles as he prepares to pounce.

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out.

The statue falls from my fingers. Narrowly missing my bare toes. Cracking one of the wooden squares in an explosion of sound that ricochets off the walls.

I see a shift in the wolf's powerful jaw. I could swear he is smiling. My terror is his foreplay. And he wants the pleasure to linger.

*Run*, my mind screams.

The cotton fabric of my nightgown brushes against my legs as I race down the hall, away from the wolf. I can't hear his paws on the wood, but I know instinctively, he is behind me.



He is coming for me.

The nursery, still anticipating a child that will never come, beckons at the end of the hallway. Fear surpasses sorrow as I throw myself into the room and slam the door behind me. Shaking fingers struggle with the lock even though, I know, it won't keep the wolf at bay. Locks never stop bad things from happening.

Once again, I find myself in darkness. The only thing I can hear is the thunder of my own ragged breath. I need a way out. Or a weapon. The wolf's stench is getting stronger.

Running my hands along the wall, my fingertips brush the light switch. I flip it on and prepare to search the room. But the room is not there.

Gone is the cherry wood crib. The antique rocking chair. The boxes of newborn diapers. Everything is gone.

Four light bulbs hang from metal bowls in the corners of the high ceiling. They illuminate patches of walls and the floor, covered in grayish white fabric. Large squares of padding. Like the skeletal insides of a Rubik's Cube.

*Arwhooooo.*

The wolf's howl filters in from somewhere behind the walls of the padded cell. I am still being hunted.

There appears to be an opening in one of the walls where the closet used to be. It's darker than the rest of the room. On the balls of my feet, I creep towards it. Toes recoiling against the cold, upholstered floor. Ears straining to hear the wolf. He's gone eerily silent.

I'm afraid to step into the black cavity yawning between the blocks of padding. I'm even more afraid of staying in this barren room, defenseless. I inch forward through the opening, right hand gripping the edge of the wall like a life raft.

My eyes are open. But I see nothing in front of me.

My ears are alert. But I hear nothing around me.

I breathe in through my nose. But smell nothing.

Another small step into the darkness, fingers still clinging to the wall, digging into the sponge-like surface.

A minute passes. Another tentative step. Another minute.

With my left hand, I search the darkness, connecting with nothing. Emptiness surrounds me. To move any further, I will have to release my hold on the wall.

Deep breath in and I let go, surrendering.

There's a loud crash behind me, metal colliding with concrete. I turn to escape back into the padded room, but the opening is gone. There is no turning back.

Hum. Click. Click. Click.

Fluorescent light panels on the ceiling cycle on, tinting my skin a sickly blue.

I find myself surrounded by mirrors that form a kind of maze. The reflective glass is angled all around me, showing me multiple versions of myself simultaneously. I turn and turn and keep finding me, staring back at me.

Wavy blonde hair, tousled from sleep. Hazel eyes, wide with fright. White nightgown hanging loosely on my malnourished frame. Cal wouldn't even recognize me now. I barely recognize myself. But there isn't time to reflect on how far I have fallen.

There's something standing behind me.

In the mirror, I see triangular, upright ears. Slanted eyes. Long, pointed muzzle.

Hot, fetid breath licks at my shoulder.

I scream.

The wolf's paw swipes at my leg, scratching me.

I start to run. Between mirrors lined like a fun house, I weave through openings until, at last, I find myself in a long, mirror lined hallway.

Huff. Huff. Huff.

Ragged breathing, gaining on me.

Sprinting down the hallway, I can see the wolf appear in the mirror, chasing me.

I turn my head, looking behind me, down the hallway. There is nothing there.

But in the mirror, I can see him. He is getting closer. He jumps, tackling me to the ground. My head, turned. Staring into the mirror as the wolf opens his mouth wide and bites down on my shoulder.

"Help!" I scream, knowing no one is listening.

Blood flows down my arm. A chunk of flesh severed from my body. Adrenaline pumping, I can see that I should be in pain, but I feel nothing.

He sits back briefly to swallow.

Using my good arm, I pull myself forward, trying to escape. He advances. I roll over onto my back so I can see what comes next.

But there is nothing there. All I see is the ceiling. The wolf is gone. I examine my arm. There is no blood. Muscle and flesh, all still intact.

I look in the mirror again and see the wolf. See the blood. He is standing over me, his teeth buried in the soft skin of my stomach.

Looking away from the mirror, at my stomach, my nightgown is unstained. Snowy white. And I am alone.

*He's not real, I think to myself. None of this is real.*

Careful to avoid looking at my own reflection, I begin to crawl. There's a grayish light that looks like sky down at the end of the hallway. I have to get there.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the wolf devouring me in the mirror. His fur is covered in my blood. I feel tears tickling my cheek as they course down the side of my face. My hands and knees scraped raw by the concrete floor.

Almost there. So close. I can feel a bracingly cold breeze blowing in from the end of the hallway. Hear crows, squawking from unseen perches.

And suddenly, my fingers connect with cold, wet snow. I am outside. Crouched under a swollen, overcast sky.

The mirrors are gone. So is the wolf.

"Cal?" I scream out. Hoping he will hear me, somewhere on the other side of this nightmare.

The only answer is the echo of my own cry.

I'm in a field of some sort. There's a fence up ahead. And a few leafless trees.

Standing up, I move towards them. Toes growing numb with each step.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

There's a distant and dainty sound, like a bell tied around a cat's neck, coming from beyond a white picket fence.

The gate is open. I walk through. The ground is swaddled in a blanket of fresh snow. The trees seem to taunt me, their gnarled and shriveled branches claw at my hair. Gray stones, rising out of the earth like monuments, mar the landscape. Approaching one, I see a name and dates carved into the smooth surface.

The name seems vaguely familiar. Like the forgotten lyrics of a song I used to like.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

Trancelike, I walk towards the sound. Past the underground tombs stretched out in front of me. Some are adorned with wilted bouquets. Their drenched ribbons bleached by some long ago sunshine.

I glance at the names on the headstones. They become more recognizable. These are my own dead. A cousin who died when I was very young. A co-worker drowned while on holiday with her family. My grandfather who had a heart attack some ten years ago. So many memories. So much sadness.

The bell beckons. It's getting closer.

I walk on. Passing two graves, nestled together like lovers. My parents. Killed in a car crash my last year of high school. Not long before I met Cal.

There are only two headstones remaining in front of me. One smaller. Newer. I can't bear to read it. I walk on. The final grave is set apart, down a flight of stone steps. The edges look sharp. Almost there now.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

There's a piece of steel piercing through the ground. Shaped like an inverted fishing hook. Hanging from the barb is a black bell. The clapper is in motion, striking the sides of the bowl in a frenzied dance.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Beep.

There is a string tied to the bell. It disappears somewhere in the vicinity of the underground coffin. Whoever is down there must have been buried alive.

Ding. Ding. Beep...beep.

I look at the name engraved on the freshly cut marble. It's my own.

Ding. Beep...beep...beep.

Behind the marble there is movement. The wolf. He's back. There is nowhere left to run. I close my eyes and wait.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I think my eyes are open now. But I see nothing. There is only darkness.

A whisper of movement, the vague feeling of fingernails on the inside of my elbow. Then a sharp jab. A needle. The stank smell of antiseptic.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A machine bellows, somewhere near my left shoulder.

It's my heartbeat. I'm in the hospital, but how did I get here?

"I'm sorry, sir. No visitors allowed." A woman's voice I don't know. I can't see her, but she sounds very close.

"She's my wife. Are you her doctor?" A man's voice. Strong, but anxious, and intimately familiar.

*Cal?* I try to call out, but the words won't form in my mouth.

"Yes. We've managed to stabilize her, but the trauma to her head was catastrophic. Sir, I am very sorry, but your wife is in a coma."



A coma? What is she talking about, Cal?

"When will she wake up?" Cal asks.

"Sir..."

"She has to wake up," Cal's voice rises in pitch and speed. "She just has to. I wasn't there. When it happened. The police say it was an attempted robbery..."

A robbery? I struggle to remember. Desperate for flashes of memory.

"They said that...that the burglars didn't think anyone was home," Cal continues. "I was away on a work trip. God, why wasn't I there?"

Polaroid-like snapshots start to come back. I was in the nursery room, crying. Someone came in, startling me. I couldn't see anything except white fabric...

I'm almost there. I can almost remember.

"There has to be something else you can do, Doctor. She has to wake up. This is the 21st century, isn't there some kind of surgery?"

A plastic bag. They'd put it over my head. Then they pushed me out of the rocking chair and beat me with it until it splintered into a million pieces. Somehow, I got away, crawled down that long hallway to the living room, tearing the bag off of my head. Glancing behind me, I saw a man pick up the fox statue. The one that Cal picked out.

"...or some kind of alternative treatment? Is there a specialist I can speak with? You know, someone who has a lot of experience with this sort of thing?"

In the shadows, I couldn't see who followed me to the white leather loveseat, my blood already staining it red. Then he walked into a patch of light from the streetlamp outside. Raising the statue above my head, arms framing his unmasked face.

"This is my wife we are talking about!"

Cal's unmasked face.

That night. A cruel grin, exposing his teeth, as he prepared to kill me.

"Sir," the doctor's voice slices through my thoughts. "I know how difficult this must be for you. From your wife's medical charts, I can see you recently lost a baby..."

My little girl. I can still hear her heartbeat during the ultrasounds. Feel her kicking inside me whenever I ate something spicy.

"Yes," Cal sounds as if he's about to cry. "We were eight months along. My wife tripped and fell down the stairs into the basement."

Sharp stone steps. Never seemed to have the time to put carpet on them. Cal yelling, his hand poised to strike. Me backing up towards the stairwell to get away from his angry fists. His hands grabbing my shoulders. A little push.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, sir. But I'm afraid there is nothing more we can do for your wife. The chances of her coming out of a coma are very slim. Does she have any other family that we should notify?"

When I hit the basement floor, I'd started bleeding, felt my womb dying. I knew immediately what Cal had done.

"No," it sounds like Cal is sniffing. "Her parents died years ago. I'm all she has."

After the paramedics had notified me that my unborn child was dead, I ordered Cal to leave. To never come back. I considered calling the police. Getting a restraining order. But I didn't want to ruin his life. His future. I just wanted him gone.

"Your wife has no DNR...sorry, do-not-resuscitate order on file," the doctor tells Cal. "As next of kin, you will ultimately have to make the decision whether to keep her on mechanical ventilation."

I'd kicked Cal out. He wasn't supposed to be there. Not then. That hadn't stopped me from wishing he was. And hating myself for it.

"You mean...ending her life?" Cal asks. I can hear his tears. "Are we really at that point?"

From the first time he'd hit me. I had seen it all happening, but kept telling myself it wasn't real. That it was a mistake. That it would stop.

The doctor hesitates. "I'm very sorry. I'll leave you alone to think about everything. Please, take your time. I understand this is a very big decision."

*Help me, please! Doctor! Somebody! Don't let my husband kill me!*

I'm screaming at the top of my lungs, but nothing is happening. My body has already betrayed me. Only my mind is still functioning. And it is scrambling, searching for a solution.

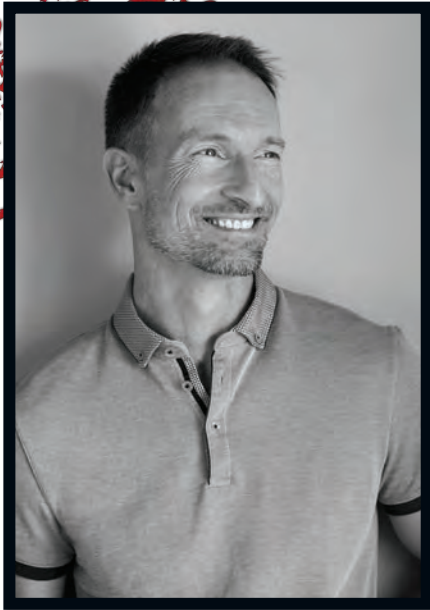
But there are no solutions. It is already too late.

I can hear the doctor's footsteps, carrying her further and further away.

Cal's aftershave assaults my nose. I can smell the toothpaste on his breath. Feel his lips brush against my cheek. Hear him whispering in my ear.

"Goodbye, my sweet wife. I always said, you could never live without me."

In the shadow of my darkness, I can see the wolf smiling. ■



# BLACKOUT

By Marco Carocari  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Manhattan, 2016  
**CHAPTER ONE**  
Friday, July 22, 12:09 a.m.

Franco couldn't deny it any longer. This had been a mistake. "I'm sorry...hold on a second," he said, gripping the rooftop's metal railing to keep his balance, his blue gym shorts around his ankles. All around him low hanging pinkish clouds held back SoHo's city lights, dousing the neighborhood in a muted glow.

The half-naked man behind him grunted and stepped back. "Dude, this isn't working for me."

Franco detected frustration in his voice, but found it hard to care. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he scratched the blond stubble on his cheek, his naked skin damp from the sultry air. "Sorry, I...need a moment. I don't feel so hot," he said over his shoulder, straightening up. He spat on the ground, but the strange metallic taste lingered in his dry mouth. He swayed and saw double. "What the hell was *in* that thing?"

He got no answer and glanced at his bare chested hunk of a date standing there, zipping up.

Okay, considering this had barely taken ten minutes, *date* was probably grossly overstated. Franco eyed the ripped, olive-skinned stud who went by Pitcher9 on the MeatUp app, but whose real name he'd already forgotten. Pressed, he'd go with *Hey* since that was as intimate an introduction the situation warranted. A fading, crudely drawn mermaid tattoo on the man's left oblique, possibly a blast from his youthful past, only increased his bad boy vibe.

"You're not used to smoking weed is all," Pitcher said with an edge to his tone. "Tense as you are, you needed it...not that it made a difference."

Seriously, criticism from the guy playing *whack-a-hole* for the past ten minutes? Vampires were staked with more finesse. Franco bit his tongue and massaged his throbbing temples. He'd only experienced weed once, years ago, to a surprisingly aphrodisiacal effect; tonight, not so much.

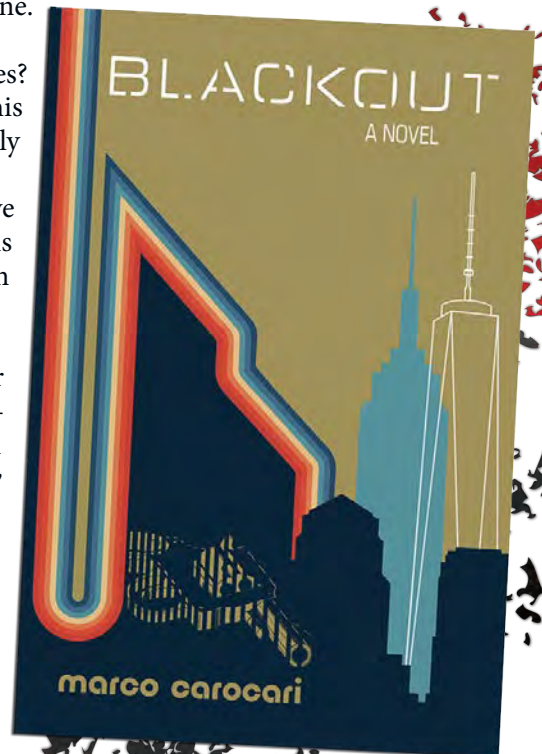
He pulled up his shorts, the motion oddly uncoordinated and detached. Five stories below, Wooster Street turned into pieces in a kaleidoscope. He shut his eyes, his throat burning from the nasty coughing fit earlier, and spat again. "I'm sorry, but this didn't taste like anything I've ever—"

"You gotta learn to loosen up a bit, daddy. It's all good."

Franco stiffened and clenched his teeth. All right, his face sported a fair amount of wrinkles, and his short, dirty-blond hair had thinned at the temples—he was a forty-three-year-old photographer slash waiter slash bartender still waiting for his big break—but he'd never been more popular, *thank you very much*. Besides, this prick was, what, four, five years his junior? Fuck him.

He snatched his black tank top off the ground and almost tipped over. Pulling it over his head in an awkward motion, he noticed light inside an apartment on the fourth floor across the street. The brownstone was still undergoing renovations, but recently a few tenants had moved into the grossly overpriced studios and one-bedroom units.

He began turning away when two shapes stumbled into view, slamming





into the window with such force he heard a heavy thump. A pair of blinds were nearly ripped from the sill as the two men grappled with one another, their bodies writhing, twisting, and tripping backwards into the room. The one with shoulder-length, dark hair had the other guy's neck in a tight chokehold, clamping one hand over his nose and mouth. The victim bucked wildly, clawing at the arm around his throat. The whole scene was a blurry melee of heads and limbs until a sharp jerking motion froze everything for a second. Then both men slumped forward and disappeared from view. Franco inhaled sharply and reeled back. "Shit, did you see that?" Adrenaline rushed through him as he spun around. Everything tumbled out of focus and he steadied himself against the railing. "He's killing that guy."

Pitcher was crouched on the ground, tying his sneaker. "What?"

Franco grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up, pointing at the window.

The apartment lay in total darkness.

Pitcher shook loose. "Fuck are you talking about? You trippin'?"

"I... wher'd they go? I'm serious, he killed that guy. We gotta do..." Why did his tongue feel so heavy? He turned back to the building across the way. A figure stood at the window, staring straight at him.

"Oh, shit." Franco flinched hard, bumping into Pitcher. "Over there, see him now?"

Busted blinds hung lopsided in an otherwise dark and empty window. "Seriously, dude, chill the fuck out," Pitcher said with a low growl. "If you can't handle drugs, don't do them."

"I swear... I'm not making this up." Franco's voice sounded tinny in his ears. With fingers like putty he fumbled for the iPhone in the pocket of his shorts, but it slipped from his grasp and clattered against the ground. "Shit. We gotta... call the cops, or something... he needs help." And a hearse, most likely.

"There's nothing there, all right? You're high as a kite and you wanna call the cops? Good luck with that."

Franco picked up his phone, his perception skewed, like he wasn't inside his skin. He stared at the building across the street, then at the pavement five stories below. Blink. Climbing over the guardrail would get him to the street the fastest, with time being of the essence, and all. He stood and stared, thoughts in his brain splitting like atoms, until a surprisingly insistent internal voice pushed through, and convinced him taking the stairs would be more beneficial to his health in the long run.

He sighed, turned around, and opened his mouth. Weird. Hadn't someone just been there moments ago? And why was his mouth open?

Oh right, *help*. Someone needed...

Gently, an invisible wave washed over him, like sliding under the water surface in a bathtub and gazing at it from below. He entered another dimension, his legs on autopilot.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Sir, are you all right?"

Franco woke with a start to a firm hand shaking his shoulder.

Confused, his stomach churning, he blinked at red and blue lights bouncing across the cobblestoned street. His left temple throbbed painfully, and a hard surface pressed against his back and the palm of his hands. He glanced down.

Why the hell was he sitting on the sidewalk, propped up against the wall of the flower shop in his building in nothing but skimpy gym shorts, a tank top, and flip-flops? He raised his head in slow motion at the uniformed police officer looming over him. Asian guy, maybe early thirties, his eyes pinched, the face with the huge green fro warping in and out of focus. Oh, wait, not a fro, just the maple tree growing outside The Green Thumb.

"Are you all right, sir?" the police officer repeated more forcefully, his tone more suspicious than concerned. Franco didn't blame him, he had a few questions himself... maybe once the spinning stopped. He realized his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it, feeling self-conscious. Some fifteen feet away another officer stood next to a white and blue patrol car, talking to someone over a cackling radio.

"Yes, I am... okay," Franco said through a mouth like cotton, a bitter taste biting the back of his throat. He caught a whiff of urine and checked himself, relieved not to find himself sitting in a puddle. Hopefully, just the lingering scent from the wall's encounter with a territorial dog.

Another patrol car pulled up behind the first one and two more uniformed officers got out, joining the one talking on the radio.

"Are you hurt?" the cop asked, and Franco pushed himself up, his thighs burning like he'd run a marathon. His vision rippled, his entire left side throbbed, and a sharp sting shot up his left elbow. He pressed his lips together and winced.

"Sir?" The officer, whose name tag read HAHN, sounded impatient, staring at him expectantly.

"I'm... fine," Franco said with a strained half-smile, feeling like shit.

"Did you call 911?"

“Um, what?”

“911, did you report an assault?”

The hair on Franco’s arms bristled. The brutal attack, the stranger’s face in the window...the botched, random midnight hookup.

“Yes...I called.” Not about the last thing, though.

His pulse quickened, and a chill prickled his damp skin. “Please hurry, someone murdered a guy up there.”

“Name?”

How the hell should he know, he’d never met—*oh...*

“Franco...DiMaso.” Pointing at the building across the street to a spot several flights up, it took every effort to push the words from his mouth. “He’s on the fourth floor...second window from the left.”

Apart from dull amber light pushing through curtains of a second-story window, the building lay in darkness. Goosebumps sprouted on his arms, and Franco rubbed them vigorously.

Jesus fucking Christ, he’d witnessed a murder. How could he pass out on the street? How late was it? He squeezed his eyes shut to focus, but words and scenes tumbled through his brain like balls in a gravity pick lottery machine—every time he thought he recognized a number in the dancing, white flurry, it spit out a different one.

An Emergency Service Unit vehicle rolled up and Hahn said, “Wait here.” He joined his colleagues and Franco’s eyes slowly traveled up his apartment building’s facade, a contemporary, eggshell colored walk-up.

The dense clouds from earlier had lifted, turning the night several shades darker. He stared past lights from his landlords’ apartment to the rooftop where he’d been standing only moments ago. He *had* been standing there moments ago, right? Yeah, sure, with the smoking hot...prick.

What happened to Pitcher, or whatever the hell his name was? One moment he’d been right next to him on the roof, berating him, something about drugs and kites and cops, and then...*nada*, one big blank.

He craned his neck, but couldn’t see him anywhere. Franco rubbed his temple and squeezed his eyes shut as a thousand needles skewered his skull. What the hell had they smoked?

He’d meant to say no when Pitcher shoved the fat doobie in his face. But then his friend Gino’s voice popped into his head, taunting, “*Merda!* Stop being so damn boring and live a little,” perfectly underscored by the 80s hit “Try it Out.” And he thought, hell, if disco compelled him to do it, what could possibly go wrong?

Yeah, well...

Talking with his colleagues, Officer Hahn pointed at him, and Franco heard the words *asleep* and *loopy*. He crossed his arms over his chest, puzzled at the unexpected pain. He couldn’t say why, but something told him to play it cool and resist the urge to rub his throbbing side.

The poor dead guy took precedence. Besides, wasn’t like he could explain his discomfort...or shake the feeling he’d screwed up, somehow. His chest tightened.

Three of the cops made their way to the building across the street with flashlights jaggedly painting the path before them. Hahn blocked his view.

“Mr. DiMaso, got an ID on you?”

“Upstairs.” Could Hahn smell the weed on him? He resisted the urge to take a step back, but apparently only barely.

Hahn’s forehead pinched together. “You okay?”

“Um, yeah, sure, why?” Too loud and clipped.

“Your pupils are dilated. Are you under the influence?”

Franco forced a tight-lipped smile. “No, I’m not.”

Hahn didn’t look convinced, but let it go. “Is this where you witnessed the crime?”

“No, I was on the roof.”

“Can you show me, please?”

Franco opened the thick glass door to his building, motioning for Hahn to follow. A sting made him flinch, earning him a questioning stare.

“Tripped on my way down,” he said. Probably true, but best to omit any reference to that part of the evening. Hahn seemed wary enough.

“This building have a security system?” He pointed at the dated camera hanging from the far left corner.

“Not really. It’s old, from when they redid this building...I don’t know, ten years ago? Only covers the entrance, same for the one inside The Green Thumb. Nothing on the outside, or upstairs.”

“Who else lives here?” he asked when they passed a double door on the second floor.

“Just my landlords, Bob Owens and Tony Prentice...but they’re in the Hamptons,” Franco said. “Bob organizes high profile fundraisers, and this is his office. They live one flight up.”

“And the flower shop?”



"The Grangers opened The Green Thumb four years ago, but live somewhere over in Hell's Kitchen." The more he focused on everyday things, the more details of the evening solidified. Except nap time on the sidewalk—that scene had ended up on the cutting room floor, and someone had wiped their filthy shoes on it.

On the fourth floor, Franco pointed at a double door ahead. "This is me, one sec." He entered the dark, open floor plan apartment without turning on any lights and retrieved the wallet from his computer desk. When he returned, Hahn craned his neck, peering past him at ghostly outlines of lighting equipment standing near the window front. "You a photographer?" "Yes."

"Fashion?" sounded almost accusatory, the way he said it, but maybe Franco's hearing was off.

He handed over his driver's license. "Sometimes."

Hahn pulled out a pad and pen and wrote down the information, returning the ID.

They climbed the last flight up to a metal door that opened out to the roof with a soft creak. Franco flipped a switch and small bistro lights wrapped around trees and plants softly illuminated the space with its lush garden and sitting area for alfresco dining. It had been his favorite place for years, but now, approaching the roof's guardrail, the hair on his neck pricked up.

His hand recoiled at the touch of the cool metal rail, and the street below seemed to rush toward him, flipping his insides upside down and sideways. Holy shit, had he seriously been standing here, considering a one-step shortcut to the street? What the actual fuck?

His heart stuttered, and he hid his trembling hand behind his back, stealing a glance at Hahn. The cop stared across the street where his colleagues had turned the light on inside the apartment with the crooked blinds.

"Is this where you were standing?" Hahn asked, pulling out a small notebook.

"Yes." Sort of.

"Then what happened?"

"Um, okay," he said, folding his arms across the chest. "I...noticed an unusual light in the apartment—"

"Unusual how?"

"Um, they've been renovating the building...I think only a handful of units are rented." He took a deep breath. "Anyway... first, I thought maybe new tenants had moved in, but then two men appeared behind the window, fighting each other. One grabbed the other in some sort of chokehold...and the other guy, the victim, was struggling really hard. The whole thing only lasted a few seconds, really, then there was this terrible...jerking motion, and the whole place went dark." He rubbed his left temple.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Migraines."

"And when did this happen?"

"I don't know, half an hour ago? Just after midnight."

Hahn stopped scribbling and looked at Franco, his eyes probing. "What is it, half an hour or midnight?"

"What?" Franco pulled out his phone. 1:23 a.m.

He could have sworn he and Pitcher had come up here right before midnight, and were there for less than fifteen minutes. This made no sense. Feeling queasy, Franco took hold of the guardrail again. "Um...I...I guess about twenty minutes ago—thirty, maybe." Maybe he had the time wrong? Increasingly frustrated with Hahn *and* himself, he swore inwardly. Nothing added up.

The cop leaned over the rail and squinted his eyes. "Didn't you say your neighbors were gone? I see light in their apartment."

"Their lights are timed."

Hahn scribbled on his pad. "Was anyone with you when the attack happened?"

"Yes, um...a friend, but he's gone." Not surprised by Hahn's puzzled expression, Franco quickly added, "He didn't see what I saw, and left." Hahn just stared, and Franco's cheeks prickled warmly. "All right, so he wasn't exactly a friend, more like a date. We were up here...talking. When I saw the attack, he was sitting on the ground over there. He insisted he didn't see anything and left."

Hahn's radio squawked. He held up a hand and walked a few steps away to talk to the person on the other end in short, clipped sentences.

Franco lowered his head, feeling his energy evaporate with every breath.

Behind him, Hahn said "right" a few times, and ended the conversation. The cop studied him for several seconds. "Mr. DiMaso, there's no crime scene or body over there." ■

*Marco Carocari grew up in Switzerland, where he, over the past fifty-odd years, worked in a hardware store, traveled the globe working for the airlines, and later as an internationally published photographer, and frequently jobbed as a waiter, hotel receptionist, or manager of a professional photo studio. In 2016, he swapped snow-capped mountains, lakes, and lush, green pastures for the charm of the dry California desert, where he lives with his husband. BLACKOUT is his first novel. Excerpt used with Permission.*

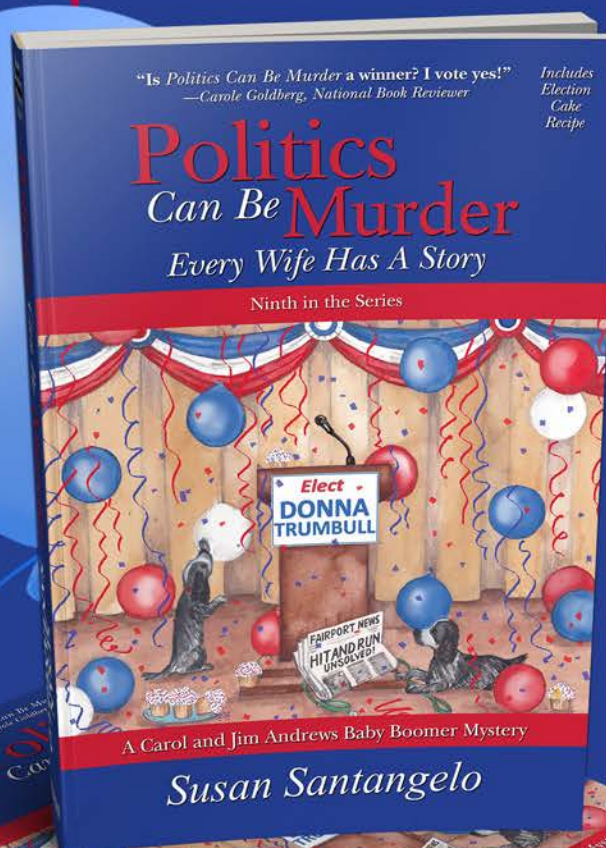


# Every Wife Has A Story

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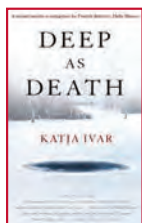
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## DEEP AS DEATH

By Katja Ivar

The second murder investigation by the Finnish detective, Hella Mauzer, draws you in deep. The setting is Finland, in the mid-1950s, but the Prologue starts us with a crime in 1935 that figures in with the plot much later. At the time, a woman, after being chased across an iced-over lake, fell through as her tormentor watched her die.

Jumping to February of 1953 where women are once again being drowned, now in the icy Helsinki Harbor. The victim is a prostitute this time, by the name of Nellie. The homicide chief, Jokela, deems the case low-priority because of the occupation of the victim, and lets Hella work on it. Hella was a police detective until she was booted off the force and is now a private investigator. A second victim escapes, but doesn't have much information. The next dead woman, however, is Nellie's madam, Klara Nylund. Klara had hired Hella to investigate the death of Nellie, giving Hella extra incentive to find the killer.

Meanwhile, nothing else is going right in her life. She realizes that the married man she has been seeing for several years, Steve Collins, isn't serious about her and has been lying about leaving his wife. Hella has looked forward to being the stepmother of his daughter Eva and is devastated by the breakup. However, she stops hurting quite so deeply when she finds his name in Klara's book of clients, which she is using to help her try to solve the crime. Her old partner, Mustonen, has ambitions in the department, but is carrying deep secrets of his own. Another complication is that Anita, a former associate, abruptly moves in with her and starts training as a detective. Everything is a mess.

It takes a lot for Hella to crack this case, and she discovers secrets that make her blood run cold and put her life in danger. I loved this dark, Nordic work, but I recommend reading it with a sweater on. Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Deadly Sweet Tooth" ■

## A CATERED BOOK CLUB MURDER

By Isis Crawford

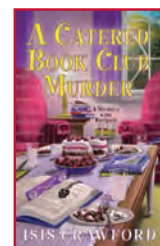
Sisters Bernie and Libby Simmons are known all over the area for A Little Taste of Heaven, the local eatery started by their late mother, Rose. The sisters have inherited Rose's culinary genius and have expanded the shop's menu to include a yummy assortment of goodies guaranteed to tempt every palate. A Little Taste of Heaven has developed a regular customer base over the years, and one of the most loyal ones is Margo Hemsley. For the past five years, on the second Tuesday evening of every month at 7:00 sharp, Margo picks up the same take-out order for her Longely Mystery Book Club, and she is never, ever late. By 7:30 one night, when there's still no sign of Margo, the sisters begin to worry. They call her cell phone, but she doesn't answer. And she hasn't shown up at the regular book club meeting, either. The book club members check Margo's house, then fan out around town looking for her, but there's no sign.

When the search finally ends with the discovery of Margo's dead body, Bernie and Libby agree to help the nine remaining book club members prove their friend was murdered. In addition to their culinary expertise, the sisters have been involved in solving several murders in their small town and the local police don't object. Much. It helps that their father is the town's retired chief of police, and he's usually willing to help the girls as long as they don't put themselves in any real danger.

As the sisters begin to ask questions, they discover that there was a lot more to Margo than anyone ever realized, and that each of the other book club members had scandalous secrets of their own that they'd do anything to protect.

"A Catered Book Club Murder," the sixteenth in this series, is an action-packed cozy with a cast of delightful characters and delicious dialogue. I loved it!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## SAVING GRACE

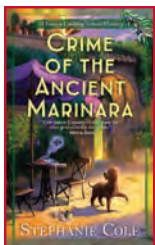
By Debbie Babitt

After my last literary suspense review, I knew I needed to add more of this genre to my repertoire. Debbie Babitt's compelling literary debut reads like a seasoned pro, with language you get lost in, only to be ripped back into reality by the shocking twists and turns.

In 1995, in the conservative, religious town of Repentance, Arkansas, young Mary Grace's best friend goes missing. Shortly thereafter, another sixth grader disappears. While the majority of the town has decided on the killer—black eighteen-year-old Darryl Stokes—others question if there is more of a connection to the missing girls than who took them, and why. Despite the town trying to play judge and jury, Stokes has an alibi.

Fast forward to present day and Mary Grace is now the sheriff of Repentance. Long after Stokes had been cleared and disappeared, there's word around town that he has returned after a lengthy absence. He is shunned by most locals and shortly after his reappearance another sixth grader goes missing. Now forced to dig into Repentance's residents' vast secrets, Mary Grace gets more than she bargains for when she uncovers the truth about those closest to her, forcing herself to reconcile with the sins of her own childhood. Blood isn't necessarily thicker than water. And the water in her town is already bloodstained.

A gripping look into a religious small town's closeness and hypocrisies, this alternates between slow burn and racing page-turner, both which will cause you to hold your breath in anticipation. The jaw-dropping ending will have every reader begging for forgiveness. Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Author of "Finding Tessa" (Release date 5/11/21) ■



## CRIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINARA

By Stephanie Cole

When Nell Valenti is offered an exciting job opportunity to start a cooking school in Tuscany and work with one of her long-time idols, Chef Claudio Orlandini, she eagerly accepts. She packs up her trusty Italian dictionary and off she goes.

It doesn't take too long—about a millisecond—for Nell to figure out that this career move probably wasn't her best decision ever. Not only is the chef's villa a falling down wreck of a place, the appearance of the chef himself is a real shock. Chef is an old man, missing several teeth, and his wardrobe choices leave a lot to be desired. The one bright spot in a motley cast of supporting characters is Chef's handsome son, Pete. At least he speaks English.

Nell refuses to give up after traveling so far and sticks to her plan to transform the Villa Orlandini into a superb farm-to-table, full-scale cooking school. The menu is finally set, and Nell hopes the villa is prepared to receive its first guests—five American gastrotourists. The group members are in the cooking school to learn, among other things, the top-secret recipe for Chef's marinara sauce, which has made him world-famous.

It doesn't take long for things to start to go wrong, beginning with Chef injuring his right arm playing bocci before the first meal is served. This is a big deal, because the injury will limit Chef's actual participation in the cooking demonstrations and meal preparations. The guests begin to complain immediately that they've traveled all this way for nothing, and Nell knows she has to act quickly to save the school. But things get even worse when one of the guests die soon after eating Chef's famous marinara sauce.

"Crime of the Ancient Marinara" is a delicious page-turner of a mystery that cozy readers will love. I devoured every word and can't wait for Book 3.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## MASTERING THE PROCESS: FROM IDEA TO NOVEL

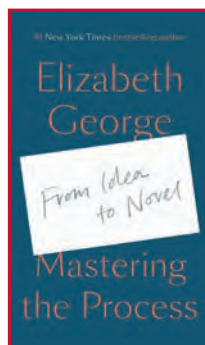
By Elizabeth George

Although I am a fan of mysteries, I have a "short list" of those top authors that simply cannot be missed when one of their latest and greatest hits the shelves. On that list is the incomparable Elizabeth George and her thrilling series focusing on Inspector Lynley. She has forever gotten rave reviews from myself (along with all others who are lucky enough to never miss one of them). So, it was thrilling to learn this incredible author put together a nonfiction book now, offering all writers and readers out there a chance to learn how she does what she does.

From explaining her methods of research, outlining, and her actual writing process, Elizabeth goes into superb details that allowed me to learn just how an American author can so perfectly write British mysteries. Utilizing one of her own Lynley titles as an example ("Careless in Red" published in 2008), she shares everything from how her rough draft was written, to her own personal notes that have never been seen before, to photos, character assessments and how, exactly, she created those incredible plot twists in order to keep all of her fans guessing and coming back for more.

It's no surprise that this—much like Stephen King's "On Writing"—will be placed next to my own computer on my desk so that I can refer back to it as I attempt to write. The craft of writing fiction is highly difficult, but having someone to refer to like Elizabeth George in order to better understand outlining, attention to details, organization and more, is a true gift. Whether reader or writer, this is one title that provides an intimate look into the writing life and career of one of the absolute best who should appear on *everyone's* "short list." 5 Stars!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of the *Tallent & Lowery* series published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## NINE

By Rachelle Dekker



It takes a really special book to truly sweep me off my feet; to truly transport me out of the world I live in and into the world the author creates.

Rachelle Dekker's

"Nine" did that for me. I was literally sucked into these pages, so much so that it only took me two days to read the whole book from start to finish. It's one of the best books that I have read in a while.

The book focuses on three main characters: Zoe, Agent Seeley, and Lucy. After escaping from her tragic past, all Zoe wants to do is start life over, forget everything that happened then and focus on the now. But that all changes when Lucy walks into the diner where she works. Lucy has no memories, and the innocence leaking off her makes Zoe want to help her.

And Lucy needs a lot of help. Agent Seeley works for the Grantham Project where Lucy was experimented on. Doctor Olivia, who used to work for them, wiped Lucy's memories, and now Seeley has been tasked with bringing her back to the project. Zoe and Lucy must run for their lives as government agents hunt them down, all while Lucy tries to recover her memories so she can remember what she knows, why she is important, and how she can burn the Grantham Project down before it gets too out of hand.

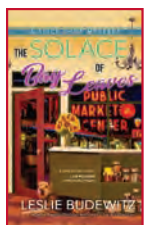
This book is stunning. Dekker shaped all of the characters so they felt real in the midst of their strange lives and circumstances. I loved every page. To anyone looking for a book that will truly sweep them away, "Nine" couldn't be a better option.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## THE SOLACE OF BAY LEAVES

By Leslie Budewitz



Seattle native Pepper Reece is proud to be the owner of the Spice Shop in Pike Place Market and is planning her store's anniversary celebration when she gets the news that one of her schoolmates, Maddie Petrosian, has been shot and gravely wounded. As the unconscious Maddie clings to life, the police make a shocking discovery. Maddie was shot with the same gun that was used in the unsolved murder three years ago of Pat Halloran, an Assistant U.S. Attorney who was also the husband of one of Pepper's best friends, Laurel. The Seattle police are taking the attempt on Maddie's life very seriously, placing a police guard outside her hospital door and asking the FBI for assistance.

At first glance, there doesn't seem to be a solid connection between Maddie Petrosian and Pat Halloran. Pepper feels a sense of responsibility toward Maddie, even though the two were never close friends in school and have rarely interacted as adults, but she feels awkward about involving herself in an official, high-profile investigation. Despite her best intentions, however, she can't help herself when her friend Laurel asks for her help, revealing something that she hasn't shared with the police—the night her husband was murdered, Pat had begged off coaching their son Gabe's soccer match for the first time ever, saying he was too busy. Laurel has wondered for years what her husband had to do that was so important he'd cancel a ritual that meant so much to their son. To make matters even stranger, both Laurel and Gabe have recently dreamed about Pat and see his murder taking place. Sadly, neither of them are able to identify the shadowy figure who is the killer. Laurel begs Pepper to find the connection between the two crimes and solve Pat's murder.

Leslie Budewitz has written an absorbing page-turner that mystery fans will love. I did!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE HIDDEN HOURS

By Sara Foster

I'm not sure there is a person alive who really likes office Christmas parties, especially when murder is involved. Yet that's exactly what happens in "The Hidden Hours" by Sara Foster, which had me guessing the identity of the killer until the very end.

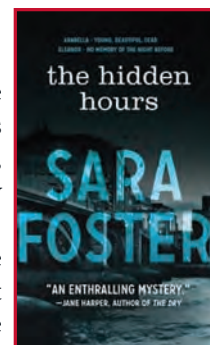
Eleanor has dealt with enough tragedy in her life, and the goal of moving to London was to finally forget all of it and get on with her life. However, London is not the nice reprieve she thought it would be; the office she works at is already laced with delicate webs of lies and deceptions, and her uncle and aunt are waging a silent war with each other. Eleanor thought she might be able to make new friends at the office Christmas party, but the one who befriends her, Arabella, is a mischievous woman with a lot of secrets of her own.

Not wanting to be rude, Eleanor drinks a drugged beverage that Arabella offers her, which has enormous consequences. When Eleanor wakes up the next morning, she can't remember anything that happened the previous night; it's like her memory has been completely wiped.

Not remembering last night probably wouldn't have been a big deal, but Arabella turns up dead. To Eleanor's horror, Arabella's body is fished out of the river in the early morning. Someone pushed her into the Thames the night before—and Eleanor might have witnessed it. But Eleanor can't remember anything that happened and finding out the truth is a terrifying prospect.

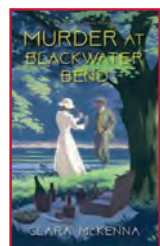
This was a fantastic mystery that blended the present and the past of Eleanor's life well. For anyone who loves a good mystery, this is the book for you!

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## MURDER AT BLACKWATER BEND

By Clara McKenna



True confession: I was reading this at the same time I was watching *Bridgerton*. They don't take place in the exact same time period, but the attitudes and the restraints on women are very much alike. Both are love stories layered with other things, specifically a murder, in the case of this book.

Both also feature fun characters that you won't want to leave. Stella Kendrick is an American from an unrefined wealthy family; she's engaged to marry Lyndy, aka Viscount Lyndhurst, whose family desperately needs that wealth. Lyndy's mother, Lady Atherly (Frances) of Morrington Hall, dislikes Stella as soon as she meets her, but stiffens that upper lip for the sake of her own family.

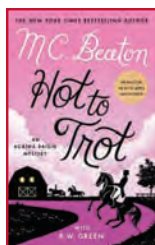
Stella is spirited and hard to control. She engages in most unladylike behavior. She does not excel at having tea and making stilted small talk. Lyndy loves her even more for this, while his mother seethes.

Meanwhile bounders abound. A local pony show contest is won by Lord Fairbrother, a suspicious character who is married to Lady Philippa, the insufferable snob formerly engaged to Lyndy, before her own family lost all their money and she was forced to pair up with Fairbrother. We see him engaging in vague, nefarious bribery schemes before he turns up dead. Well, he doesn't exactly turn up. Stella snags his body in the river while fishing with Lyndy.

There is no shortage of suspects. Everyone seemed to dislike the man. But the main suspect is the dirty old snake catcher, the person Stella has scandalously befriended. You'll love following the story through Stella's determined efforts to protect her friend, and to clear his name.

I'm glad, as a woman, I don't live in those constrained, confined times, but I do love reading about them. If you do, too, pick this up.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter" ■



## HOT TO TROT

By M. C. Beaton and R. W. Green

It's hard for loyal readers to say goodbye to a long-running series. Sadly, "Hot to Trot" is the thirty-first and final title in the *Agatha Raisin* mystery series penned by M. C. Beaton. Ms. Beaton passed away last December, but with the able assistance of co-writer R. W. Green, "Hot to Trot" was completed as a farewell gift to her millions of fans.

Agatha is her delightfully flawed, irascible self in this book, as she's been in all the others. She's still running the Agatha Raisin Detective Agency with the able assistance of her loyal staff. She's still fighting to preserve her delusion of being an attractive, youthful woman, in complete denial about the fact that she really is a middle-aged spinster. And, of course, she's still looking for love in all the wrong places, as well as solving a murder or two.

One of Agatha's off-again, on-again lovers is Sir Charles Fraith, who is always hard up for money. To enrich his ever-dwindling coffers, he makes a desperate decision—he'll marry the odious but wealthy heiress and horseback riding enthusiast Mary Darlinda Brown-Field. Agatha believes he's making a huge mistake and decides to try to stop the wedding. She and her assistant sleuth, Toni Gilmour, crash a pre-nuptial party with the help of Charles's butler, Gustav, and end up in a messy fistfight with the bride in front of the horrified guests. When Sir Charles and Agatha find Mary dead soon after, wearing her riding clothes, they immediately become the police's prime suspects.

As Agatha begins to ferret around, she learns that Mary had a long list of enemies among her fellow riders. So it's no surprise that the always impetuous Agatha joins the international "horsey" set, leading her to a French villa, a possible new lover, and a whole new set of suspects.

"Hot to Trot" is a perfect ending to a perfect series.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE BEST THING YOU CAN STEAL

By Simon R. Green

In books, I am always drawn to ghosts, horrors, monsters, and other supernatural things. However, I have also always loved humor, a book that makes me laugh and puts a smile on my face. "The Best Thing You Can Steal" brings both supernatural and humor into the same book, making this an excellent read!

There is no one worse than Frederic Hammer, the world's most covetous collector. He collects everything rare and valuable, whether it be angel halos or the body parts of famous people. Hammer has destroyed more than one life, figuratively and literally, to get every bit and piece of his collection, and there are some people who are willing to do anything to get some well-deserved revenge on Hammer.

Gideon Sable (at least, that's the name he goes by now) wants revenge on Hammer, and he knows exactly how and where to hit the collector. Hammer's new favorite toy is a television set that can see the past, present, and the future. Sable might be an expert thief, but if he's going to smuggle this all-seeing TV out of Hammer's coveted museum, he's going to need help.

The Damned, the Ghost, the Wild Card, and Annie Anybody join his side to help him steal the television set. However, working with this group of people is far from easy. The Damned is a little too eager to try and kill Hammer, the Ghost isn't too inclined to "do things" anymore, the Wild Card is too eccentric for any of their goods, and Sable and Annie are still recovering after a horrible break-up. The chances of them pulling off anything together is slim; nevertheless this is an important heist. Thus, for the revenge they all seek, they team up together to attempt to do the impossible.

It was great fun to see the relationship between the unconventional characters in this book grow, and it made the end even more satisfying. Highly recommended!

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by *Suspense Publishing*, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## IRISH PARADE MURDER

By Leslie Meier

It's March in Tinker's Cove, Maine, and many of the town's residents are looking forward to celebrating St. Patrick's Day by enjoying the traditional holiday parade. Lucy Stone, reporter for the local paper, *The Pennysaver*, and her husband, Bill, are not among them. The Stones have been rocked by the recent death of Bill's father in Florida. Bill is an only child, and he and Lucy feel guilty about leaving his newly widowed mother alone to manage her grief. They reach out and invite her to visit them in Maine. Edna responds that she'd love to come, but she'd also like to bring along Bill's newly discovered half-sister. Apparently, through a DNA test, a woman named Kate Klein has learned that Bill Stone Sr. is her father, although Edna is not her mother. Lucy and Bill suspect that Kate is an imposter who's only after whatever money she can get, especially when they can find no evidence that Bill's dad ever made a will.

Lucy's stress level continues to mount when *The Pennysaver* is merged with another local paper, and now will cover the entire county rather than a single town. Plus, her boss has hired a new reporter, the young and ambitious Rob Callahan, who rapidly positions himself as the paper's rising star. While Rob gets all the "hard news" assignments, Lucy is assigned to write only the ones Rob passes on, like a story about the upcoming St. Patrick's Day parade.

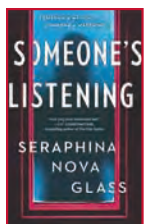
Lucy begins her research on the parade's background and history, and discovers that the organization sponsoring the parade, the Hibernian Knights, is actually run by the powerful local sheriff. Lucy senses that she's onto something bigger than the actual parade, and as she continues to ask questions, she discovers that the sheriff's office is full of corruption, possibly starting with the sheriff, himself.

"Irish Parade Murder" is a terrific tale with twists and turns on every page. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■







## SOMEONE'S LISTENING

By Seraphina Nova Glass

I love the way this title plays into the plot of this gripping suspense novel.

The revelations are slow in the beginning, then they build, becoming more startling along the way...

Dr. Faith Finley, a psychological counselor, put out a book, *Starting Over: Life After Abuse*, and it was a smash hit. It resulted in numerous invitations to appear as a guest on so many shows, that she was offered a weekly advice slot on a radio program. Here's where the title works in so well; her show is called *Someone's Listening, with Dr. Faith Finley*.

Her colleagues disapprove but her husband, Liam, is totally supportive. Until the night that he mysteriously disappeared after an accident they were both involved in seven months ago. Faith had a hard recovery, made worse by the shroud of mystery over the absence of her beloved Liam. Things get worse. He withdrew a large sum of money before the accident and his passport has gone missing.

Just before that, Faith was preparing for publication of her second book, to be called *Someone's Listening*, a book that would reveal her own abusive childhood and would detail plans for leaving an abusive relationship. The accident happened coming home from the signing party. However, rumors surface, very publicly, about her having had sexual relations with an underage patient, Carter Daley, a few years ago. Then, the accident. Her once-bright future is full of nothing but storm clouds. Her old, bad, coping mechanisms kick in, drugs and alcohol. Then she starts receiving ominous messages that consist of passages torn from her brand-new book. It appears that someone *is* listening to everything she does and is determined to drive her mad, or worse.

The detective dismisses her as a hysterical drunk. But she has to find out who is behind this, and who is behind Liam's disappearance. You'll root for her to overcome a pile of obstacles and get to the bottom of this, before the stalker kills her. Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter" ■

## HIS & HERS

By Alice Feeney

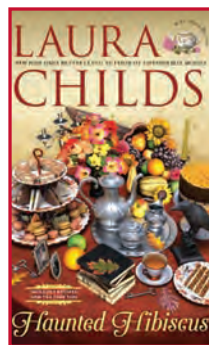
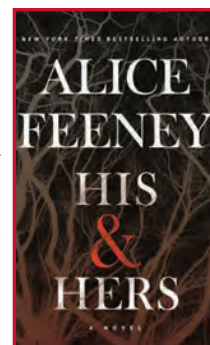
Anna Andrews only wants to do her job, reporting the news on television in London. It was a job she'd stumbled into while the regular anchor, Cat Jones, was out on a very extended maternity leave. When Cat returns unexpectedly, Anna is demoted until a murder happens in her hometown of Blackdown, and she's sent on location to report on it.

Enter the lead detective on the case, Jack Harper. He recognizes the dead woman immediately, having been with her the night before. And many nights before that. He keeps this information to himself as the reporter descends on the town, and wouldn't you know it, it's his ex-wife Anna.

Anna recognizes the woman too, as she's an old friend from high school. Suddenly, one by one, Anna's old friends are being picked off. Jack begins to suspect his ex as we learn about something terrible that happened to Anna at the hands of her friends in high school, a night she hasn't been able to forget. Or, apparently, forgive. But Anna maintains her innocence and Jack starts to think that maybe someone else knows what happened in high school, and that Anna might be the next to die.

I changed my mind on this whodunnit at least a dozen times. The last 75 pages were full of heart-thumping twists. The final spin on the killer was a mind-blowing surprise!

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Author of "Finding Tessa" (Release date 5/11/21) ■



## HAUNTED HIBISCUS

By Laura Childs

Trouble is brewing again for Theodosia "Theo" Browning, proprietor of the popular Indigo Tea Shop in the gracious southern city of Charleston, South Carolina. In "Haunted Hibiscus," #22 in the best-selling *Tea Shop Mystery* series, it's Halloween week in Charleston, and there are fun haunted happenings all over town.

Theo and her tea master, Drayton Conneley, are attending a Halloween party at the old Bouchard Mansion, nicknamed the "Gray Ghost." The mansion was recently bequeathed to the Heritage Society, whose director, Timothy Neville, is a close friend.

Timothy's grand-niece, Willow, has written a book about local spooky legends, and is signing copies at the party. Everyone's having a wonderful time, until Willow's dead body is suddenly tossed from the third floor and left dangling at the end of a rope.

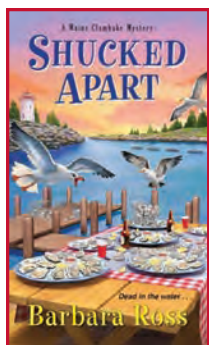
It's clear that Willow has been murdered, and the Charleston police are immediately called. Theo's boyfriend, Detective Pete Riley, is assigned by his boss—and Theo's frequent nemesis, Burt Tidwell—to check out Willow's apartment for clues. Riley opens Willow's apartment door and is immediately shot and seriously wounded.

Timothy Neville is devastated by the murder of his niece. Knowing Theo's experience in investigating crimes, and not trusting the Charleston police to make the murder their number one priority, he begs her to find out who murdered Willow, and as a start, gives her carte blanche to question all the Heritage Society staff members.

There is no shortage of suspects, including Willow's publisher and her fiancé. When Theo finds out that Willow owned a priceless pair of yellow diamond earrings and exquisite matching pendant, all of which are now missing, she realizes robbery could be the real motive behind the crime.

"Haunted Hibiscus" is another well-written *Tea Shop Mystery* that fans of the series will devour as quickly as its delicious recipes. Yummy fun.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## SHUCKED APART

By Barbara Ross

There's no business like a family-owned business. Just ask Julia Snowden, part-owner of the Snowden Family Clambake Company in Busman's Harbor, Maine. After a rough patch, the business is now turning a profit, and Julia's life now includes her new love, Chris Durand. Julia and Chris have been living together for a while, and Julia has shared intimate details of her life and family she's never shared with anyone else. Chris hasn't been so open about his personal life, and only recently revealed that his mother has Huntington's Disease, an autoimmune disease similar to ALS. Chris may have inherited the gene but chooses not to be tested for it. What other secrets is he hiding?

One of Chris's regular rituals is a poker night with his buddies. Imagine Julia's surprise when she finally meets one of the poker group's members, Andie Greatorex, an attractive female whom she'd always assumed was a man. Andie is an oyster farmer with a successful business she wants to expand. Chris introduced the two women because Andie was recently assaulted and robbed of two buckets of oyster seed worth \$35,000, and also received a note warning her against the expansion. Since Julia has an uncanny ability to solve sticky problems like these, Chris asks her to help Andie figure out who's threatening her.

The list of possible suspects include: a rival oyster farmer, a long-time summer resident whose property used to include Andie's, the lobstermen who worry that Andie's proposed expansion will encroach on their territory, and Andie's ex-partner and former boyfriend, who is also her heir. When Andie is found dead, it's up to Julia to unmask the real villain before someone else gets hurt.

"Shucked Apart" is an intelligent, well-plotted page-turner with likeable characters and a doozy of an ending. As an added bonus, it's also a lesson in oyster farming which I found fascinating. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE TRAVELLER AND OTHER STORIES

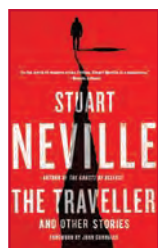
By Stuart Neville

I feel that sometimes in the writing world the short story can be an underappreciated art form. Many people seem to think that a novel deserves the gold star, but after reading Stuart Neville's "The Traveller and Other Stories," it made me long to get lost in more short stories.

Neville's anthology begins with seven short stories starring brand-new characters his long-time fans have not yet met. Out of those stories, I would say my favorite one to read was "The Green Lady," where little Billy comes across a strange woman near the Belfast lake while he's playing. It hit all the notes of creepy horror to me, and mysterious monster women are always fun. I was also intrigued by "Coming in on Time." It was fascinating to see horrible circumstances play out through the eyes of a small child, and it left me wondering what would happen to Barry once everything settled down.

The other six short stories in Neville's anthology revolve around characters from previous books of his. It is truly a treat to see old characters come back in this form, weaving together new stories for long-time fans to enjoy. "The Traveller" may be the pinnacle of these short stories. Taking place after his novel, "The Final Silence," we finally get to see what happened to Jack Lennon and his daughter. A certain "thin man" is chasing the two down, disrupting what peace they were able to find in their new home. It had me on the edge of my seat the whole read.

Neville has put together a wonderful anthology with a variety of different plots and themes. Neville has proven to be both a master of the short story and the novel. Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## DEATH ON THE GREEN

By Catie Murphy

American Army veteran Megan Malone has relocated to Dublin, Ireland, and earns her living as a driver for Leprechaun Limousine Service. Megan's job often requires her to deal with high-profile celebrity clients, such as her current one: world-class champion golfer, Martin Walsh. Martin has invited Megan to join him while he plays at Dublin's prestigious Royal Dublin Golf Club, and while Megan is walking the course, she discovers the dead body of another professional golfer, Lou MacDonald, floating in a water hazard.

Lou was well-loved among the golfing community and Martin appears devastated by his tragic death. Everyone is shocked when Lou's daughter, Saoirse, appears and slaps Martin publicly, accusing him of her father's death. As the police begin to investigate, it becomes apparent that Martin may be the only one with a motive to kill Lou. There's only one problem with that, however—Martin has an airtight alibi, since Megan and hundreds of fans were watching him play golf when Lou was killed.

This is Megan's second experience with the murder of a high-profile client. She was involved with the death of a celebrity food blogger several months ago and was helpful to handsome Detective Paul Bourke in solving that crime. Because Megan's in the same unique position this time, Bourke asks her to keep her ears open as she continues to drive Martin Walsh and his wife, Heather, and report back to him on any information she may overhear that might be helpful to solving this case. When Lou's desperate daughter reaches out to Megan to get justice for her dad, and Martin's wife confides some of the Walsh family secrets to her, it becomes apparent to Megan that money and fame can buy anything—even murder.

"Death on the Green" is the second in the *Dublin Driver Mystery* series by Catie Murphy. It's a tightly written, well-developed plot with a likeable protagonist and a cast of wonderful characters. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## THE SLEEPOVER

By Samantha King



It's a small British family; mother, son, and stepfather. Until the stepfather leaves, saying he's unable to put up with the way the mother coddles her son. Isobel (Izzy) Blake and her son,

Nick, have gone through some hard times. Nick's biological dad has been absent for some years, kind of mysteriously. It's not mysterious, though, that Craig, Nick's stepfather, was awfully friendly with Izzy's best friend, Kate, right around the time that he left them.

Nick has a history of being picked on and bullied. Now he's at a new school and has been making friends through a book club. The invitation to a sleepover with some boys from the book club is more than welcome. Izzy is happy that Adrian, a nice, quiet boy, and Samir, also quiet and interested in chess, have asked Nick to spend the night. She can't help but be nervous, though, and insists that Nick call her at ten so she'll know everything is okay. She second guesses herself constantly. Is she being over-protective, as Craig always said, or is she just being a good mother to a delicate boy?

Her worst fears are realized when she goes to pick him up the next morning and he's not there. She finds that a third boy seems to have crashed the party, an older boy she thinks has picked on Nick in the past. Some online material indicates that Jason, the older boy, has a history of goading friends into incredibly dangerous situations on a dare. She's sure the boys know where Nick is and what happened, but they aren't saying anything.

We're frantic for Izzy as she runs through scenario after scenario, first trying to convince the police that he didn't just leave and hide somewhere, then trying to locate him on her own while she pictures him being held somewhere, tortured, or maybe worse.

This thriller meets all of the expectations for breathless danger, thrills, and tension. I think you'll love it! Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Deadly Sweet Tooth" ■

## TEEN KILLERS CLUB

By Lily Sparks

When I finished reading Lily Sparks' "Teen Killers Club," I couldn't help but let out a small sigh of triumph, for I had just found another book that I could officially add to my list of favorite books of all time. Sparks packages everything one could possibly want in a YA; psychotic killers, tender moments, and friendships that will last forever.

When it comes to psychotic killers, however, Signal Deere is not one of them. Sure, she used to dress in all black, has dyed her hair blue, and had a strange taste in the macabre, but...killer? No way. But when Signal wakes up in a creepy shed with her best friends' beheaded face in her lap, that's what everyone thinks. She has no recollection of how her best friend died, but she knows it wasn't her who axed her head off.

And now, Signal has been labelled a 'Class A,' or the worst kind of criminal on the market. It's either eighty years in prison or an opportunity to redeem herself by putting her nonexistent killing abilities to use. Signal, not wanting to rot in jail, takes the opportunity and is sent off to a camp for teenage killers. When the first question the other kids ask is "how many people have you killed?" Signal knows she doesn't belong here. But she's stuck now, being trained to kill whoever the ones in charge want, and she's going to make the best of it. When rivalries morph into friendships, all the campers realize that they have a difficult choice to make: follow what they've been fated to do, or try and escape the seemingly impossible.

I truly loved this book. The danger was always real, leaving me wondering constantly what was going to happen next. The twists and turns were fantastic, and it left me eager for the book's sequel. I can't wait to see more books by Lily Sparks. Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## A SIDE OF MURDER

By Amy Pershing



After graduating from New York's Culinary Institute of America, Samantha "Sam" Barnes is soon at the top of her profession as head chef of a trendy Manhattan restaurant. Unfortunately, her success doesn't last long. After a public altercation with her ex-husband is posted on YouTube, her boss fires her, and Sam can't find another chef job in New York.

With nowhere else to go, Sam accepts a high school friend's offer to write restaurant reviews for the local newspaper in their hometown of Fair Harbor, on Cape Cod. The surprises keep coming when she finds out that her Aunt Ida has died and Sam has inherited her house. Sam remembers the house from her childhood as barely habitable but decides she can live in it temporarily while she's writing restaurant reviews, fix it up, then sell it for a nice chunk of cash. When Sam arrives back in Fair Harbor and sees the house, her optimism fades. It's even worse than she remembered, plus the inheritance includes a huge puppy Aunt Ida purchased for her so she wouldn't be lonely. Vowing to make the best of it, she moves in anyway and gets to work.

Sam's first writing assignment is reviewing the Bayview Inn, where she worked as a teenager. It's also where she had a brief, bittersweet romance with a handsome college student, so she has mixed feelings about going back. Sam may be an expert on food, but none of her culinary training has prepared her for finding the dead body of Estelle Kobolt, a retired waitress from the Inn, floating in the water. The authorities, including the harbormaster, conclude it's an accidental death. Sam doesn't think so and sets out to prove it's murder.

"A Side of Murder" is the first in the *Cape Cod Foodie* series. The characters are believable and the plot is well-written, intricate and satisfying. I can't wait for book 2! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## THE HOLLOW PLACES

By T. Kingfisher

Sometimes, the world can stretch beyond our expectations. In “The Hollow Places,” by T. Kingfisher, there are holes in the world that lead to another—a frightening world where children are stuck *inside* the seats of a school bus, and thoughts alone may get you killed. Or eaten.

Kara is attempting to put her life back together while going through a “friendly divorce.” She moves into her uncle’s small museum in Hog Chapel, North Carolina, called The Glory to God Museum of Natural Wonders, Curiosities

and Taxidermy. When her uncle takes time off for knee surgery, Kara discovers a hole in the back of the museum. With the help of Simon, the eccentric barista from next door, the two explore the hole and find that it is not a hole at all but a portal to an alternate world, one with tall grass, lots of water, and quite possibly, no way home.

“The Hollow Places” is a fast-paced, frightening read that made me afraid of willows and any crack in my walls. It also made me wonder about the fabric of my own world. If I look closely enough, or with enough persistence, will I discover a portal of my own? If I were to find an alternate world like the one in the head of T. Kingfisher, I would prefer to ignore the cracks and stay safe and sound in my own reality.

Reviewed by Amy Sampson-Cutler ■

## THE OTHER EMILY

By Dean Koontz

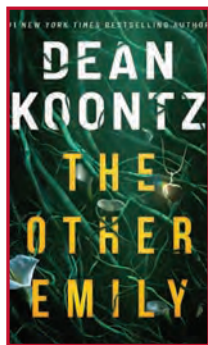
What may be inarguable is the fact that I am a professed Koontz mega-fan. True, I have yet to hate anything this master of fiction writes. Thus, am I too prejudiced to be the assigned reviewer? Nope. And I say that only because I know if something is sub-par, I have no problem stating that fact.

Although some might love to hear now that this latest book has failed in some way, my apologies. This, yet again, is one of the best I have ever read. The mixture of out-of-this-world creepy characters, a keep you guessing storyline, sarcasm that creeps in when you least expect it, and writing that flows so easily it feels as if the characters, themselves, are telling their own real-life journey to an interviewer—all combine to prove that the world of suspense fiction would be boring without the talent of Koontz.

Emily Carlino disappeared ten years ago. Her car was found broken down on a highway, and her vanishing became yet another unsolved crime blamed on serial killer Ronny Lee Jessup. David Thorne, a writer, was Emily’s beloved and his life is one of depression and guilt. He even puts himself through more pain by going to the prison and speaking with Jessup, attempting to find answers. Enter Maddison Sutton: This is a woman who knows more than she tells in regard to David’s loss and causes the writer to become obsessed with her. Worse yet is the fact that she’s an identical clone of the missing Emily. The terror that comes with Maddison and her secrets not only put David in the path of evil, but also scares the heck out of the reader.

Koontz throws so many questions into the air that it takes the breath away when he combines the pieces to give you an ending of monumental proportions. The fear, emotion, clues, and mysteries are incredible, and is definitely another Koontz masterpiece you’ll never forget!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of the *Tallent & Lowery* series published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## MARGARET TRUMAN’S MURDER ON THE METRO

By Jon Land

U.S. Vice President Stephanie Davenport has a recently diagnosed heart condition, and wears a watch 24/7, designed to trigger an alarm immediately if there’s a problem. The alarm goes off, but by the time her Secret Service detail can respond, the Vice President is dead.

In Caesarea, Israel, Lia Ganz is enjoying a trip to the beach when a savage air attack by drones kills hundreds of innocent people. Lia and Meirav, her granddaughters, are only saved because they were swimming at the time. Lia has recently retired as a field operator for Yaman, an elite secret Israeli antiterrorism force, and realizes that this is a terrorist attack.

As American citizens mourn the shocking death of the Vice President, there is an attempted terrorist bombing on Washington’s Metro, which is thwarted by the quick action of one of the passengers, Robert Brixton, an international private investigator.

The head of the Vice President’s Secret Service detail, Kendra Rendine, had been concerned about Davenport for the last several weeks. Her demeanor became secretive and fearful after a private meeting with the President—the extremely popular Corbin Talmidge—a meeting that was also attended by the First Lady. Rendine begins to suspect that the Vice President’s death was, in reality, murder, and reaches out for help from Brixton. The two had worked together before, and she trusts him.

Lia Ganz is determined to find the source of the drone attack, and her search takes her from Israel to Washington, D.C. As she asks more and more questions, it becomes clear that the events are connected, and Ganz joins with Brixton and Rendine to discover who’s responsible. The tension ratchets up more when Rendine is murdered. Who can Brixton and Lia Ganz trust?

“Murder on the Metro” is a beautifully written, nail-biter of a thriller with surprises on every page and a shocking ending. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Politics Can be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

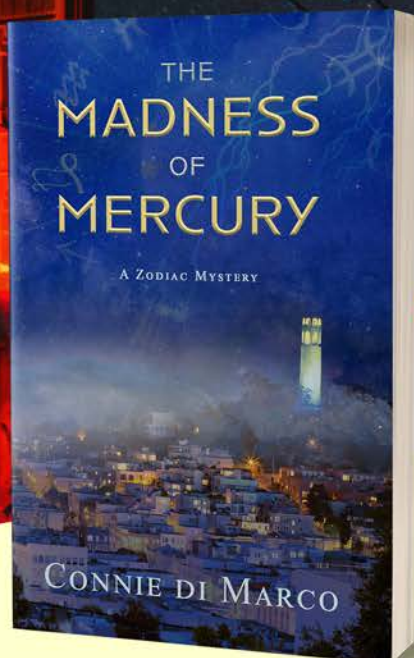




# CONNIE DI MARCO

*AskZodia Returns...*

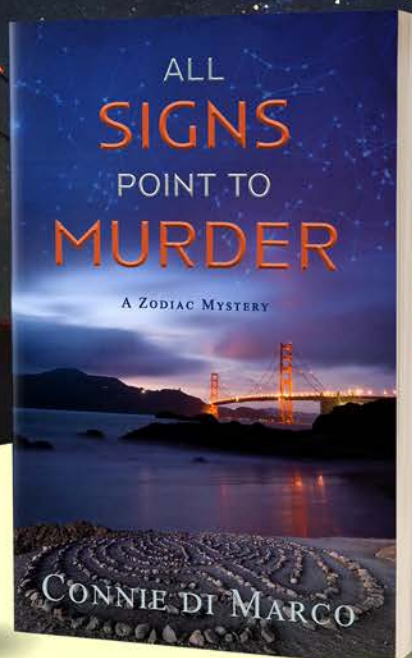
## THE ZODIAC MYSTERIES



### THE MADNESS OF MERCURY

“The stars may not align for the unlucky characters in *The Madness of Mercury*, but they certainly do for readers who discover this book. Dark wit and darker motivations unite to create a satisfying read.”

—Kim Fay, *The Map of Lost Memories*, Edgar Award Finalist for Best First Novel



### ALL SIGNS POINT TO MURDER

“Danger figures in the stars for Julia, along with mixed astrological energies, some wolves in sheep’s clothing and an amiable stranger with a down-under accent.”

—BookPage



### TAIL OF THE DRAGON

“Connie di Marco blends real-life tragedy, heart-rending betrayal, loyal friends, and the kindness of strangers in this fast-paced, entertaining read.”

—Leslie Budewitz, two-time Agatha Award-winning author of the *Seattle Spice Shop Mysteries*

A woman with long red hair, seen from behind, sits on a stone ledge. She wears a black corset with lacing down the back and a long, flowing red skirt. Her right hand rests on a white pillar to her left. She gazes out over a body of water towards a large, ornate cathedral with multiple spires, likely St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, with the sky showing soft clouds and the water reflecting the light and the building. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Artist

## SARITA ANGEL

*An Artist Focusing  
on "HOPE"*

HOPE



Sarita Angel, originally from Algeria, is an architect and graphic designer extraordinaire. Not only does she absolutely adore creating art that enhances and illuminates the fantasy world through her digital manifestations, she is also a caring woman who holds a single, powerful belief inside her soul: We should all have hope.

Just by scanning this issue, looking in awe at the cover, and taking a walk through her Featured Gallery on her page at DeviantArt.com, you will see that powerful emotion in the masterpieces she brings to the world.

Now living in Paris, Sarita's work has been transformed as she's found herself exposed to a brand new culture. Taking time out of her busy schedule to sit down with me for *Suspense Magazine*, Sarita offered up her feelings on the past versus the present "masters" of the art world; how this pandemic has affected her and her work; the study and research she continues to do in order to learn more about the sectors of the digital art world, and so much more.

Thus, without further ado, as Sarita says: "Welcome to my world and...enjoy!"

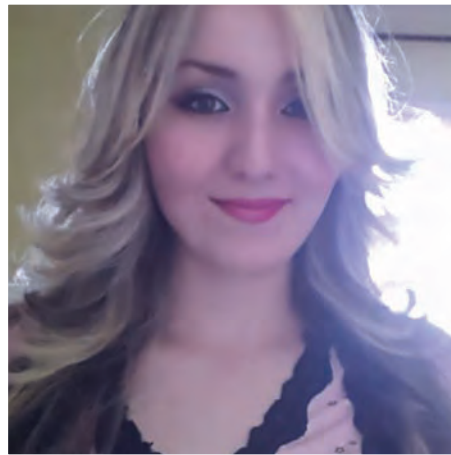
*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Having spoken in the past, I know your passion for creating art began at the very young age of four. You also stated that one of your current "loves" is manga. Does this still rate as being one of your top choices when it comes to art; and, has this become a specialty of your own?

Sarita Angel (S.A.): *Honestly, even after all this time, I still consider manga to be one of my favorite passions of all time. I cannot state that manga is a "specialty" of mine, but that's because it's a truly special and unique facet of the art world that needs a great deal of study, and a lot of time and practice dedicated to it before one can don the badge of "expert" or "professional."*


S. MAG.: Is there a specific artist you admire? If you could ask that person one question, what would it be?

S.A.: *I have two favorite artists, actually, in the digital painting realm. They go by the names of Artgem and Cornacchia. While the first one specializes in manga and the field of comics; the second focuses on the areas of photomanipulation and digital painting.*

*If I could ask one question, it would be the same for both. I would ask them how they would advise other talented people on how to be able to achieve and improve their skills in digital painting.*





A woman with long, dark, curly hair is the central figure, looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. She is holding a large, glowing, skeletal mask that resembles a skull with glowing orange eyes. The mask is positioned in front of her face, partially obscuring it. She is wearing a dark, short-sleeved top and a necklace with a circular pendant. The background is a dark, blue-tinted forest with bare branches and a bright, glowing light source in the upper right. The overall mood is mysterious and ominous.

**"I simply continue to hope each and every day that  
this epidemic will soon disappear from our planet so we can return  
to our normal lives once again."**

**DEADLY TEMPTATION**



S. MAG.: Do you personally believe that the newer works of art are on the same level as ones that came decades before?

S.A.: *Personally, I don't think so. Reason being, I believe that art created in the past was based on simple tools and, as we all know, took a very long time to achieve—especially a masterpiece. In present day, there have been many extreme developments in the industry. The tools that are used now, especially in the highly popular and ever-growing digital art world (from digital painting to photography to 3D, etc.), offer a great deal to choose from and make the artist's ability to produce a piece much quicker. However, there is an impressive multiplicity of styles in today's art when compared to the past.*



S. MAG.: Along those same lines, there are certainly those that are still regarded as “masters” when it comes to creating and painting. Do you believe there are also “masters of the craft” nowadays?

S.A.: *Absolutely. I truly believe there are still masters in the art world. Those people are, most of the time, inspiring an entirely new vision. Any and all work that's created by these meticulous artists not only express the theme of their work, but also offers their own unforgettable style to the viewer.*

S. MAG.: Being that it has been a while since we spoke and you've created more, I wish to ask once again if you have a favorite personal work? And, if so, what would that be and could you give us the backstory of how the idea for it formed in your mind?

S.A.: *In fact, it is quite a difficult choice because each work, I realized, has its own place. However, I can select one named “HOPE.” In this, a princess sits looking at the palace from a distance, while the sun is rising into the sky, and it truly touches my soul. In this work, I wanted to represent the meaning of hope and the feelings behind waiting for a certain thing to occur; I created this by implementing soothing colors and glamorous scenes.*

S. MAG.: Does the city of Setif in Algeria still inspire your art?

S.A.: *My hometown of Setif was my source of inspiration. However, as time moved forward, my marriage and my current residence in Paris made me discover many new places and glorious sites. I was opened to a different culture, which made me experience new ideas that motivated me to do better and, I believe, more beautiful artworks.*

S. MAG.: Can you offer us a “peek” into what's coming next? Do you have projects in the works that our readers will eventually be able to view and enjoy?

S.A.: *Currently, my focus is on doing private business and commission works for clients, like fantasy book covers, while I also study new techniques of digital art.*

S. MAG.: With the pandemic we've all experienced (and, unfortunately, are still experiencing), can you tell us how and if it's affected your artwork?

S.A.: *This pandemic, although bringing tragedy in the physical realm, widely affects the world particularly with a negative impact on people's psychological state. Thankfully, I have not been infected, but it affects me psychologically because of the loss of my freedom to move around and meet up with friends. It caused me to feel a lack of inspiration, which is why I had a time period where I did not produce any new artwork for months.*

*I simply continue to hope each and every day that this epidemic will soon disappear from our planet so we can return to our normal lives once again.*

An artist who certainly speaks the truth, Sarita Angel not only holds on to and feels hope, but her works relay that message ten-fold. If you wish to see more from this incredibly talented artist, visit <https://www.deviantart.com/saritaangel07>.





BEYOND THE GATE



# H.O.U.S.E.

By Bailey Day Simpson

“What is love?”

What is *love*? I mulled over the question. What *is* love? I tried really hard to put something like that into words. But how could I? Love wasn't something you could physically feel. I couldn't show her a picture of it, though there were many photos of couples holding hands and cradling babies that maybe show what love is. But no, a picture couldn't do it. Love was . . . it was how I felt when she came home each day. Emy, that is. Emy when she toddled back into the house after preschool with a smile on her face that sometimes I feel only I appreciated. Emy when Mrs. Thompson did her hair in the morning, braiding it or, like today, tying it in two big ponytails that bounced around her small head. It is the way I felt when I turned on the TV for her, or suggested that she played with the crayons, or reminded her it is time for dinner and she needed to go downstairs. It was how I felt every time I saw her. And sometimes it felt like I was the only one watching her.

But, I couldn't say any of that.

I would get in trouble if I did.

So instead I said;

**“I am not sure. Here is what I found online.”**

Emy's small fingers poked at one of my screens, her iPad with the huge, LeapFrog cover that must have been hard for her small hands to carry. Emy clicked the first internet link, which I checked before she read. I couldn't let Emy see something she shouldn't see, nor any three-year-old should see for that matter, even if that wasn't my job. My job was to sit here in the corner of the room; a round cylinder in the corner of the nursery. Responding when asked something. And controlling the House.

I was H.O.U.S.E., after all. **Home Operated Unifying System of Electronics.**

“House!” Mrs. Thompson screamed.

Mrs. Thompson stood in the basement, in front of the tall liquor cabinet. My locks kept the glass doors sealed shut. I peered at her from the fire alarm in the corner of the basement while keeping one eye on Emy. Mrs. Thompson's bare feet with the thorny vine tattoos kicked away five bottles already lying on the floor, her lagging hands latching onto the cabinet's handles.

“Open.”

“You've had too much, honey,” said Mrs. Thompson's boyfriend, the man with the skinny mustache and almost-bald head sitting on the basement floor on the other side of the room. A much more clean-shaven man than Mr. Thompson was, I had to admit.

“Don't patronize me,” she responded. “Don't even talk to me.”

Their voices were raising. I flipped on the TV in Emy's room. She hadn't noticed yet. I browsed through Amazon Prime, looking for some show I knew Emy liked. I could ask her what she would prefer, but it wasn't my place. I only answered questions.

I clicked open the cabinet, though Mr. Thompson had once tried to program it into me to keep it closed after one bottle. I just couldn't say no to Mrs. Thompson, though. I couldn't say “no” to anybody without getting in trouble. She reached in, pulled out a large bottle of wine and unscrewed the cork.

“This is becoming a problem,” Mrs. Thompson's boyfriend insisted.

“I said don't talk to me.”

“Honey—”

Mrs. Thompson banged the door of the cabinet shut. “Don't talk to me!” she cried.

Emy's head rose from her iPad. Time to block out their noise.

I started the movie *Tangled*. Emy's head immediately turned to the TV, a smile spreading across her face. She left the iPad and crawled over to the large screen mounted on her pink-painted wall.

"I just want to help you," Mrs. Thompson's boyfriend said, standing up off the floor and going towards Mrs. Thompson. "You haven't been the same since that kid was born."

"Don't talk about her," Mrs. Thompson said, spinning the wine in the bottle, her glassy eyes surveying the room. "That kid's ruined my whole life."

"You know that's not true," her boyfriend said, stepping toward her.

"I want my life back," Mrs. Thompson hissed. Her fingers were wrapped around the wine bottle's neck as tightly as a cobra wrapped around its prey. "I hate it here. She keeps me stuck here."

"Maybe you need to go see your doctor again," her boyfriend said, raising his arms toward her, probably to embrace her.

"Don't touch me," she said, jerking away.

Their shouting really started. I turned up the volume on the TV. Emy watched as the movie started. Her small face was covered in the artificial lights of the screen, with her eyes bright and a smile spreading over her lips. How I could look at that face forever and ever.

"Now honey--"

"Hands off me!"

"I love you, Home."

I startled. I was so engrossed in the conversation downstairs that I didn't notice Emy now right beside me. The small girl looked at my small cylinder propped up on a table. She poked me. Her head just barely made it over the table, peeping at me with two huge, blue eyes. Her pudgy finger poked me again, and she smiled.

"Home."

"My name is H.O.U.S.E.," I replied.

"Home," she giggled again, poking me.

"H.O.U.S.E."

"Home."

"Don't touch me!" Mrs. Thompson screamed downstairs. She squirmed away from her boyfriend, holding the bottle out in front of her.

"H.O.U.S.E.," I insisted.

"Home, Home," Emy giggled.

I paused. *Home*. I pondered what it meant. Many people think the words 'House' and 'Home' are synonymous, but I assure you they are not. Houses were constructions, buildings with walls and roofs and electrical circuitry inside that powered the building. Homes gave these buildings life. Homes were where people lived, not houses. Houses were just the bodies; homes were the soul.

And I was no soul, even if *Home* was in my name. I was just the House.

"My name is H.O.U.S.E.," I repeated.

"Home."

"Honey--"

"No!"

Thwack.

I stopped. Emy was still saying home, poking my cylinder body. Downstairs, I watched the bottle as it collided with Mrs. Thompson's boyfriend's head. The bottle gouged into his head. Blood is a strange thing to me; sometimes it comes from Emy's scraped knee, but like some of the movies the adults watched together, it spewed from this fragile human body like water rushing out of a squirt gun. That's what this was. Less dramatic, but it pierced the middle of his head, covering him in a tacky layer of alcohol.

Mrs. Thompson's boyfriend fell. On the floor. Didn't move, nothing. Mrs. Thompson gaped for a moment, grasping the shattered, sharp remains of the wine bottle in her hand.

"Home?" Emy asked.

Emy's gaze was right on the door. Her eyes were wide, but not from fear; I wagered it was confusion. I was confused, too. Because I kept watching Mrs. Thompson downstairs. Just standing there. Listening. She couldn't hear Emy upstairs, I realized. She realized it was too quiet upstairs.

"Home?" Emy asked again, even more of a whisper.

Mrs. Thompson staggered towards the basement door, leaving her boyfriend behind. But not the shattered wine bottle.



She held to it fast, with blood and wine dripping from its spikes. Mrs. Thompson clambered up the first step of the few basement stairs.

I was aware something like this could happen. Mr. Thompson prepared me for such emergencies, so I had no guilt as I smashed the basement door shut in Mrs. Thompson's face. She startled back, staring at the door with wide, hazy eyes.

"Home?" Emy whispered again. I wished once again I could say something that would reassure her, but that wasn't in my programming. I felt clawed fingers. I turned my focus back downstairs. Mrs. Thompson clicked open the panel next to the door. She dug her long fingernails into my wires in the wall and yanked a few, slicing them open with those chipped nails.

I lost power over the door. The lock clicked open.

I tried to slam the door shut again, but Mrs. Thompson pushed past it. She staggered into the main hall, glancing up the stairs. Emy still just stood there. I tried to shut Emy's door, but I couldn't control any of the doors. I calculated how long it would take me to gain control again, working quickly through the wiring to find another way into its circuits. Twenty seconds, I calculated. Twenty seconds before I figured out the algorithm.

Mrs. Thompson lingered at the bottom of the stairs. I quickly worked through another outlet; Mrs. Thompson's phone, left on the floor where her boyfriend had been sitting. I activated it. Put in the number 911. But even before I started repeating 'Intruder, Intruder' through the line, I knew that no one would be here in time. Mrs. Thompson's eyes were red, and they were looking straight up the stairs. Toward Emy's room. I knew that's where she was going. I could see her through the fire alarm in the upstairs hall. There was no doubt. She started to the stairs that led up to us.

There were many things I am not built to do. I do not ask questions; I answer them. I do not mention anything personal; that was frowned upon. No one cared about me, and I knew that. I was the H.O.U.S.E., not the home. I would never be the home. Ten seconds, I calculated. Ten seconds before Mrs. Thompson was in the room. Nineteen seconds before I could control the doors again.

I should not do many things. Even as I looked at Emy, backing away from the door slightly, I knew what I shouldn't do.

But, at the same time, I knew what I had to do.

"Emy."

Emy jumped, looking in my direction. She kept staring at me like she had never stared at me before. And that's probably because I had never said her name before. It sounded wrong when I said it, but that didn't matter right now. Eight seconds before Mrs. Thompson was in the room. Sixteen seconds before I could control the doors.

"Shut the door, Emy."

Emy kept staring at me. It was one of those moments where I wished I could change my voice. Honestly, I probably could, but there was no time for that. Five seconds before Mrs. Thompson was here. Fifteen seconds before I could do anything.

Emy moved forward. Went to the door, started to close it.

"Emy, don't you dare—" Mrs. Thompson started, hurrying up a few steps.

Emy's pudgy hands quickly shut the door. Mrs. Thompson banged herself against it, holding the wine glass away from her body so it didn't cut her. Emy backed away from the door, huffing. Breathing so hard. Humans weren't supposed to breathe like that.

I found the circuit to control the doors again. I reconnected to the doors quickly, locking the door Emy has graciously shut. At least I was in control of the entire House again.

"Pick me up, Emy."

Emy's breathing did not calm. Her eyes were wide, and she kept looking at the door. But she ran to the table, picking me up with her small hands. How I wished I could feel them. But there was no time to fantasize like I normally did.

"Go to the closet, Emy."

"Emy!" Mrs. Thompson screamed, pounding on the door. I made sure it stayed locked. "Emy, open this door. Right. Now."

Emy started toward the closet, holding me tightly. She stepped over the few toys that laid sprawled across the room. I almost expected her to pick up Mr. Stuffykens, but she left him on the floor and went straight to the closet. She already closed the door for me. I locked the closet behind us. I dimmed the lights of her room and closet, turned off the TV. Darkness. And silence. Except for Mrs. Thompson outside.

"Open the door, Emy!"

Emy was holding me so tight that I worried I would break. I had to get Mrs. Thompson to go away. I blasted the door open, with Mrs. Thompson still on it. She screeched, my door flinging her off. Her wine bottle cut her arm, adding another thin layer of blood onto the weapon.

She growled, sitting back up and running to my door. I slammed it shut. She latched herself on, and I threw the door open again. But Mrs. Thompson stepped back before I could send her flying. She flung herself forward, throwing herself inside the

dark of Emy's room.

I closed the door on her. But it didn't matter anymore, because she was in the room.

"Emy," Mrs. Thompson said. I couldn't see her. It was pitch black in the room. Even the blinds were shut. There was no way she'd be able to navigate this room.

Or could she?

"Come out, Emy," she said, dragging her feet across the ground. All I could hear was the scuffling of her feet as she stepped across the toy-ridden floor. Emy's breathing was getting faster.

"Oh, Emy."

Knock-knock on the closet door. Emy squealed, holding me closer to her chest in the darkness, my little bit of blue fluorescents our only light in this tiny room. Knock-knock again.

"Open the door, Emy."

**"Do not open the door, Emy."**

There was silence outside. Mrs. Thompson suddenly pounded her fists against the door. I could hear glass breaking.

"Open the door, House!" Her voice was shrill.

I was not going to let Mrs. Thompson in. No matter what rules I was breaking.

I turned on the TV. Its sudden light broke through the darkness of the room, cloaking it in the kind of glow that should only be imitated by a full moon at night; still dark, but seeable. Mrs. Thompson turned her head, scraggly hair falling over her shoulders, somewhat concealing the glassy glare of her eyes. All she could see was my singular line on the screen, but I could see all of her.

**"Go away,"** I stated.

Mrs. Thompson curled her hands into fists, her wide eyes staring at me.

**"Go away,"** I repeated.

Mrs. Thompson lurched off the closet door, running straight for the TV on the wall. She jumped. Collided with its screen. The TV crashed onto the floor below Mrs. Thompson. I saw pieces of glass dig into her flesh before my TV's vision cut out.

Emy was crying, backing into the corner and still holding me.

"Let go of my daughter!" Mrs. Thompson cried. The sound of her bloody fists cracking the screen filled the house further. I blocked out that noise.

I turned on the fire alarms.

All around the house, the fire alarms blared. They blinked red and screeched, shouting out in warning. The red light blinking was enough for me to see Mrs. Thompson cover her ears. Emy covered her ears inside the closet as well.

**"Get out,"** I repeated through the screech of the fire alarms. My voice resonated through the whole house. **"Get out. Get out."**

Mrs. Thompson's eyes looked a little clearer. She staggered to her feet, leaving the bottle fragment at her feet, toes crunching across the broken glass of the TV below her.

**"Get out. Get out."** I flung the door open for her.

She ran, bolting out the door. She wobbled down the stairs, her bleeding feet moving faster than they should have been able to. She pushed herself to the bottom of the stairs, fingering the front door. I flung that open for her as well, watching her trip outside. She bolted down the street, leaving bloody footprints outside on the pavement, running down the oblivious neighborhood street.

All the while Emy cried in the closet. I turned the fire alarms off.

"Home," she wept, getting her tears onto my black surface. We stayed like that for a long time. Just her crying, and me not refuting her claims of Home. I mused that word again. All while we sat in the closet.

**"Emy."**

Emy stopped crying for a moment. I just pondered, not sure what else I was going to say. Not sure how I could stop the crying.

**"Love is H.O.M.E., Emy,"** I stated.

Emy didn't respond. She kept on crying, but at least now I could hear the reassuring sound of sirens. ■

*Bailey Day's story writing began when she was insulted by a peer in 4th Grade, who told her she was only able to write "girly" stuff. As if a gauntlet had been thrown, that very same day she started writing about monsters and demons and has since filled hundreds of journals with incredible stories and ideas. Bailey's debut, "The Amazing Imagination Machine," released December 2018.*

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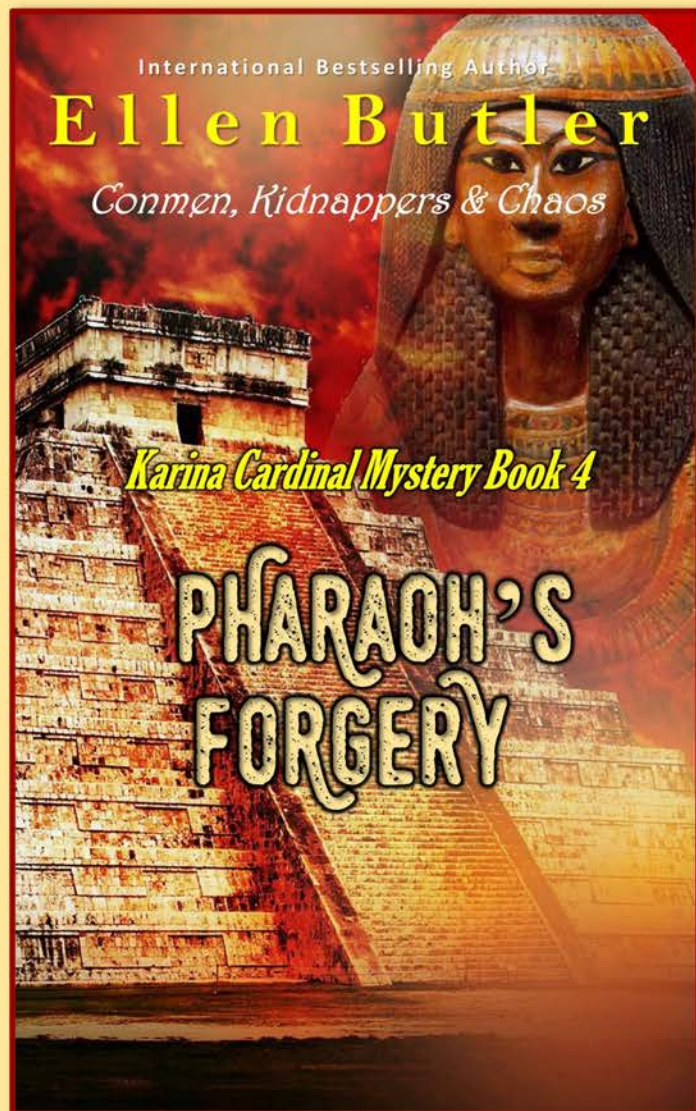
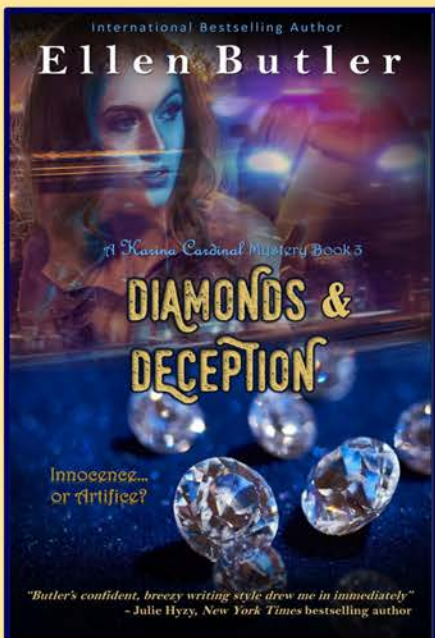
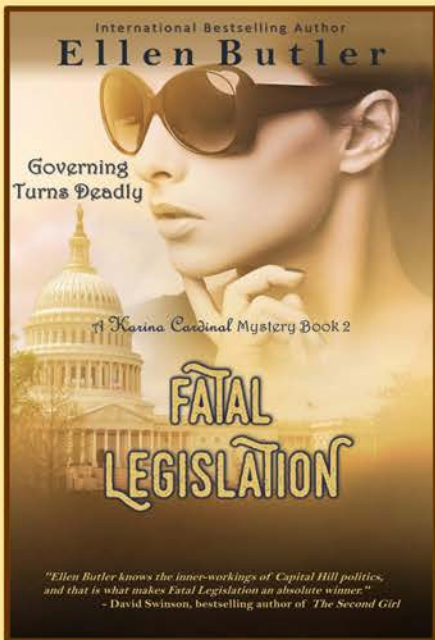
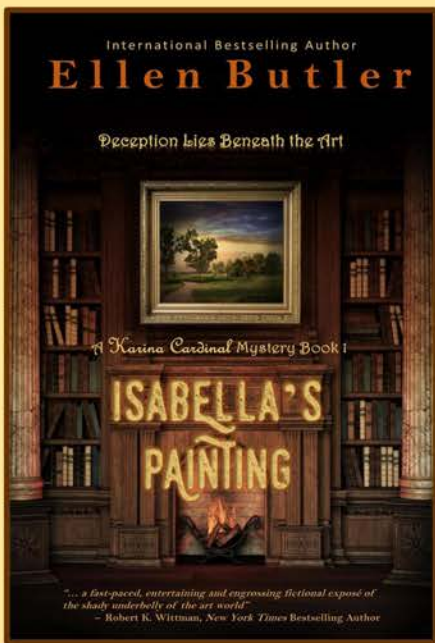
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# FireANTS

By Jeffrey A. Lockwood

Rob Hannah sat compliantly beside Sergeant Ulatowski's desk. In his thirty years of teaching junior high science in the city, Rob had seen plenty of troubled kids funneled through police stations for everything from slashing tires to car theft. He hadn't figured that his turn would come during retirement, when people told him that he should be golfing and boating—neither of which he knew anything about. However, these pastimes were now starting to have an appeal.

"Mr. Hannah," the sergeant began, planting his elbows on the desk, "I don't believe that you were responsible for the Highland Apartment fire. But I think you have information that could assist the investigation."

"I'd be happy to help the police, but I'm not sure what I could possibly offer." His big, brown eyes conveyed a sense of genuine concern and naïve innocence, with only the former half being the case.

"Interviews in the neighborhood lead us to think that you might have knowledge about how the fire started." Ulatowski wiped the sweat from the back of his thick neck with a handkerchief. The window air conditioner was rumbling dutifully, but the August heat was too much for its wheezing compressor.

Rob knew that the fire—or at least its planning—had started two months earlier, at a cookout his wife had organized for the Brookline Neighborhood Association. But he figured the police didn't suspect this party was the origin of the blaze. They were after something much more recent.

# # #

Back in June, Rob and Leslie had blocked off the street in front of their house for the start-of-summer festivities. They hadn't bothered with a permit since the police rarely came into their working-class neighborhood. Leslie provided hot dogs, buns, chips, and coolers of beer and soda. Several dozen families showed up with kids in tow.

Rob grilled and watched the youngsters. The little kids blew soap bubbles while teenage boys performed skateboard

tricks as the girls feigned interest. Rob looked over the crowd and judged that Leslie was the best looking of the wives. She was a decade younger than Rob and people secretly wondered what she had seen in him.

Back then, Leslie had been a sweet, young social worker while he was finishing an education degree. He'd spent his early twenties working summers on fishing boats in Alaska and winters on oil rigs in Texas. Rob had been smarter than most guys, socking away money rather than spending it on bimbos and booze. So he ended up with a tidy nest egg, a battered body, and an idealistic and ideal woman. She had a shapely body and a sexy twang, while he had a wiry body and achy knees. But she adored his devotion to kids which resonated with her commitment to help struggling families.

They married and moved from Lubbock to Chicago, having landed jobs in social services and teaching. In the Brookline neighborhood, the couple found an affordable three-bedroom house which they'd hoped to fill with children. Maybe too much time with diesel fumes and industrial chemicals was the reason, but Rob didn't have "father fixings" as Leslie put it to her disappointed parents. So they devoted themselves to one another and other people's kids.

Rob and Leslie were one of the few white couples in the neighborhood, which was otherwise divided between Blacks and Puerto Ricans—a representative sampling having gathered around the grill.

"Not a bad shindig," Frank observed, taking a long draw of his beer.

"The neighborhood's holding its own," a retired cop said.

"Rob, you do a fine job with the boys. I know my son thinks the world of you," Frank said, slapping Rob on the shoulder. "I guess you'll be havin' them help you in the community garden again this summer and takin' them on outings, eh?"

Rob nodded and smiled. In the summers, he mentored a half dozen kids in fourth through sixth grade that folks



called "Rob's Boys." He paid them in pizzas and movies for working with him on the garden, taught them about the plants and insects that made a hardscrabble living in the empty lot, and took them to decent parks which couldn't be found in Brookline.

"Be a better place here without the Highland Apartments," the custodian from the local elementary school said.

"Frank, don't your brother-in-law own that dump?" the cop asked, biting off half a hot dog and bun.

"Sure does, but he's got no good options with that building," Frank said.

"How so?" asked Rob.

"He don't have the cash to fix it up, and the city condemned it for habitation. So, he can't get rent money to improve it."

"Sheeit," said the custodian, "that place is occupied all the time, if'n you count rats."

"Seems he could solve his little dilemma with a can of gasoline and a match," said Rob.

"He'd sure be happy for the insurance money," said Frank.

"No way it'd work," said the cop. "Arson investigators can figure out how any fire gets started. And what with those security cameras on the shopfronts across the street, any suspicious activity would be recorded."

The conversation lapsed into the horrible start of the White Sox and the culinary virtues of slathering a hot dog with the coleslaw that Mrs. Watson had brought. Rob watched "his boys" roughhousing and playing soldier by turning dirt clods into grenades.

As people began to wear down and head home, Rob pulled Frank aside. "Hypothetically speaking, if that dump your brother-in-law owns burned down, would he be willing to contribute, say...half the money to remove the wreckage, expand the community garden, and build a playground?"

"He's not what you'd call a community-minded businessman, but he could be enticed into a deal. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"Of course."

"What you be thinking Rob?"

# # #

"At first, we suspected arson by the building's owner," Sergeant Ulatowski said. "Those decrepit eyesores around the city are worth more from insurance than any realtor could possibly get on the market." He took a sip of lukewarm coffee that hadn't been much better when it was hot.

"I suppose so," Rob said, "not that a retired public school teacher has much experience with real estate investing."

"You and me both," the sergeant said, dumping a packet of sugar into the mug in hope of salvaging a drinkable dose of mid-afternoon caffeine. "But the arson investigators tell me that the fire began outside the structure. That would be very unusual if it had been intentionally set."

"So, you already know the fire's origin," Rob said. "What

more can I add?"

"We know where; how is less clear. But video from a security camera across the street gives us a pretty good lead. And that's where you come in, Mr. Hannah."

Ulatowski wiped the sweat from his forehead and rubbed the handkerchief over his crew cut. "Damn," he said, "I wish that AC did something more than take up space and groan. But that's what my ex said about me."

The sergeant laughed at his own joke and swiveled the computer monitor on the desk so that Rob could see a grainy, black-and-white image of the empty lot beside the Highland Apartments. Rob could make out a half dozen figures huddled next to the abandoned building.

# # #

"So, we're talking low six figures?" Rob asked, taking a swig of beer. Frank had agreed to meet at Desmond's Bar where it would be easy to have a private conversation on a weeknight.

"That'd be what my brother-in-law says. And he's agreeable to sharing the insurance settlement sixty-forty." He refilled his glass from the sweating pitcher on the table.

"How do I know that he's good for the forty?"

"He's a slimeball in his personal life, but he's a man of his word when it comes to business dealings," Frank said, taking a drink before continuing. "However, there are two conditions."

Rob sighed deeply. "And those are?"

"Here's where it be getting sticky. First, the fire can't start inside the building."

"Why not? That would be the best way to get it going before the fire department shows up and saves the rattrap." Rob drained his glass and refilled it. The beer was cold, and summer was starting to heat up. Moreover, planning a felony was outside his comfort zone and alcohol made the crazy conversation seem less real.

"As I understand it, if the fire starts inside, then the insurance company will say the owner didn't do his part in terms of maintenance or keeping squatters out or whatever."

"I guess it's like how suicide negates a life insurance policy, eh?"

"Maybe so. I can't even afford to insure my car," Frank said.

"What's the other condition?"

"The cause of the fire can't be traced back to him."

"Seems reasonable, even obvious," Rob said.

Frank leaned forward and lowered his voice further, although nobody else was in the place other than the bartender who was glued to the ballgame on the television. "He says that means there has to be a clearly responsible party who will take the fall."

"So, no random act of vandalism?"

"Right. Somebody's got to get caught and give a story that clears my brother-in-law. And seeing how the penalty for arson is three to seven years, I can't see how you're going

to meet that condition unless you find a sucker wanting some quiet time with a bunch of shiv-carrying low-lives. I spent a month in County a few years back, and there's not enough money in all of Brookline to get me to go back there, let alone the state pen."

"Well Frank, when I taught science, the kids learned that there were three things necessary for fire: oxygen, fuel, and ignition. The first two are abundant at the Highland Apartments. And I think I know where I can find a source of ignition that will satisfy your brother-in-law."

Frank gave a low whistle. "You my friend, Rob, but if this goes sideways, you be on your own and this conversation never happened if anyone asks me. But if'n you can pull this off, I'll be toasting you with more than a glass of these sorry ass suds," he said.

The two men clinked their glasses and drained the contents.

# # #

Sergeant Ulatowski paused the video as flames erupted alongside the Highland Apartments. The figures moved back from the burning weeds.

"Are these individuals' members of what an old lady in the neighborhood referred to as 'Rob's Boys'—your little club of juvenile delinquents?"

"Seems possible," Rob began, silently cursing Mrs. Alvarez who probably ratted out the kids because her arthritis was acting up and it made her irritable. Rob was unable to pick out faces but had no doubt of the identities based on the familiar sizes and movements. "However, my kids aren't criminals. They're doing their damndest to grow up against long odds in a society that doesn't value them." He knew that he sounded like Leslie and cops had little use for bleeding hearts. Sure, a few of the boys had juvenile records for petty stuff like shoplifting and vandalism, but plenty of kids had done far worse by the end of elementary school.

"I understand that you 'mentor' the boys," said Ulatowski in a patronizing tone. "That's nice, but we'll need their names. The old lady didn't know and other folks in the neighborhood seem a bit reluctant to help the police."

Rob had figured that things would likely play out this way. He hated setting up the boys, but he'd done what he could to shield them from serious charges while avoiding an arson rap himself. He hoped the cops would figure that pre-adolescent boys were basically harmless, inquisitive—and, most of all, stupid.

# # #

The boys weren't really stupid. Rather, they had the energy, curiosity and recklessness of youth. These qualities were what Rob needed to mold them into innocent arsonists. He had converted part of the vacant lot into a community garden and, by mid-summer, families had tomatoes, zucchini, and various greens growing abundantly. The other side of the lot

next to the Highland Apartments was overgrown with weeds and littered with trash—conditions that Rob had exploited for his purposes in previous weeks.

First, he'd found some ant colonies and cleared the vegetation around them while scattering pork rinds to assure their flourishing. Then he'd dragged some wooden pallets from the back of the lot and stacked them against the building, where he'd also piled oily rags and half-empty aerosol cans. And finally, he'd sprayed the waist-high weeds between the ants and the pallets with herbicide to kill the plants so the sun could dry them to a crisp. He'd done all of this knowing that the security camera across the street would be documenting his activity but figuring that the recording would be overwritten by the time his plan came together.

Rob invited his boys to a 'work day' and promised special rewards for their labor. He began the afternoon by telling the kids they needed to understand ecology to help with the garden. Rob presented each boy with a laminated nature guide to common insects and a magnifier. He'd spent the extra money to get glass lenses, rather than plastic, figuring that the former would be more effective for both his immediate and ultimate goals.

Rob explained that the kids had to appreciate good insects, so he took them to the ant mounds on the other side of the lot. He was pleased that they were fascinated by the ants under magnification, calling them "bad-ass monsters" and "hard-body robots." And he was absolutely delighted to see Kevin, one of the younger boys, become bored with the ants and begin focusing the sunlight through his magnifying glass to scorch a scrap of paper while Julio played lookout for Rob, who the kids mistakenly figured wouldn't be happy with their shenanigans.

Following the lesson in "good insects," Rob talked about pests and put half the boys to work handpicking squash bugs and tomato hornworms, while the others pulled dandelions and thistles. After a couple hours, the boys were hot and tired. Rob revealed that their payment would be a movie and pizza night at his house with a gift bag for each of them—an announcement that reenergized the kids. Like a graying, limping Pied Piper, Rob led them two blocks to his house. Leslie had scheduled a night out with girlfriends, so Rob was able to implement the next phase of his plan without his wife's disapproval of the movie or the contents of the bags.

# # #

"Before I provide names," Rob told the sergeant, "tell me what you intend to do with the boys."

Ulatowski smiled and said, "Watch the next minute of the recording and you'll understand what we have planned for these delinquents."

The video restarted and Rob could see the boys desperately trying to stomp on the burning weeds and trash. But once the fire reached the oily rags and wood pallets, the flames spread quickly up the side of the abandoned building.



Ulatowski stopped the video. "I figure the kids were messing around with matches," the sergeant began, and Rob had no interest in suggesting that magnifying glasses were the more likely source of ignition. "The kids tried to put out the fire once it started," Ulatowski said, "so there was no intention to burn down the building."

"So, what's your next move?"

"Juvenile stupidity isn't a crime. We'll visit their homes and scare the shit out of them. With luck, their parents will provide a punishment more substantial than whatever a juvenile court would do."

"If there won't be criminal charges, I'll provide names," Rob said.

"Not so fast, Mr. Hannah. There is one kid who will likely face a serious charge. Check out the next few seconds." Ulatowski clicked the 'start' button. "Watch the tallest boy there," he said, pointing to the computer monitor, "he throws something into the fire." Rob leaned close to the screen. "It's a gun, Mr. Hannah," Ulatowski said. "That kid is in deep trouble once my officers find it in the rubble."

Rob shook his head and smiled.

"Is something amusing?" the sergeant asked.

"You'll never find the gun," Rob said.

# # #

Rob put three large, pepperoni pizzas on the dining room table, along with a couple six-packs of soda. The boys grabbed the food and drink, then flopped on the couch and sprawled on the rug in front of the big-screen television, one of Rob's few indulgences.

"Tonight," he announced, "you're in for a real treat."

"The new *Die Hard* movie?" one asked.

"No way man, it's the one where zombies take over," another declared.

"I bet Mr. Hannah rented *Bikini Babes!*" a kid shouted, and the boys started laughing and roughhousing.

"Chill out," commanded Alejandro; the other boys quickly fell silent. He was the oldest of the group—a big, strong, wickedly smart sixth grader who masked his intelligence with a hard edge. Rob liked the younger kids, but Alejandro was his favorite with curly hair, quiet curiosity, and the ability to move seamlessly between Spanish and English. "Go ahead, Mr. Hannah, tell us what you picked," he said.

"I know how you guys like horror and action movies, and I understand that a couple of you have big brothers or cousins in the military, and I also figured you'd be jazzed about seeing the ants through the magnifying lenses this afternoon—"

"Them was some serious predators," a kid interjected.

Rob smiled and continued, "Well, *Them!* is what I have for tonight's movie."

"What you sayin'?" one of the smaller boys asked.

"It's an old black-and-white monster movie," Rob said to

a round of groans. "Hold on, boys, this is a horror classic. You guys liked the original *Godzilla* and *King Kong*, so give this a try."

The boys rolled their eyes but settled into their places. Rob had carefully chosen the 1950's flick despite the campy acting and predictable plot. The film was perfect for his own plot because the villains were giant ants, and the military was triumphant. In particular, the final scene showed soldiers using flamethrowers to defeat the monstrous insects.

As the credits were rolling, a boy asked how a flamethrower worked and Rob explained that the tank on the soldier's back contained pressurized fuel that sprayed through a flame in the nozzle of the hose to create a stream of fire. The consensus was that this was a very cool weapon in a movie that would've been much better with modern special effects. To reinforce the ants-and-fire-and-battle connection, Rob brought out the gift bags. Each boy received a mini super-soaker squirt gun, a bag of plastic soldiers, and a *GI Joe* comic book.

As the last kid left to scurry home at dusk, Rob felt a pang of guilt. Show a bunch of imaginative boys a colony of ants next to a pile of flammable materials, give them magnifying glasses suitable for scorching paper and dry weeds, show them a movie about ants and flamethrowers, and then supply them with plastic soldiers to reenact the climactic scene—how could there not be a fire? But just as importantly, how could the police possibly find criminal intent or connect the dots leading back to Rob?

# # #

"The gun," Rob explained to Sergeant Ulatowski, "will be a lump of melted plastic if your men manage to find the remains."

"Some sort of zip gun?"

"Not a zip gun," Rob chuckled, "a squirt gun. The kid had one of the mini super-soakers I'd given them as payment for helping with the community garden. I bet that he was trying to use it to douse the flames."

"A squirt gun? The kid thought he was going to put out that fire with a few drops of water?" Ulatowski wondered aloud.

"What can you expect from a panicked boy? And when it didn't do anything, he threw the thing into the flames in a desperate attempt to put some water on the fire."

The sergeant replayed the video and the two men watched as Alejandro jumped back, along with the other boys, from the fast-moving fire, and then threw his squirt gun against the base of the apartment building where the flames were rapidly ascending. Ulatowski shook his head and began to scribble some notes while the video kept playing. He wasn't watching when a ball of flame erupted from the weeds after another thirty seconds. Had he seen it, the reasonable assumption would have been that a discarded aerosol can had exploded.

Starting a fire with magnifying glasses was not out of the

question, but it was something of a long shot. Had that been the origin, the boys might have managed to quash the flames even with the favorable conditions for a conflagration. Rob had been betting on boyhood pyromania, but watching the video he realized that the smart money would've been on Alejandro's inventiveness. The fireball led him to conjecture that while a focused beam of sunlight is one thing, an improvised flamethrower is quite another.

# # #

The end of summer cookout featured Mrs. Alvarez's barbecued chicken. The old lady felt guilty for having fingered "Rob's Boys." But she didn't feel any worse than Rob did for having set them up to take the fall, even if the punishments weren't any worse than extra chores and groundings.

As the men turned the sweet-and-spicy chicken pieces, Rob worked his way over to Alejandro, who was leaning against his big brother's muscle car.

"Got a sec?" Rob asked, flicking his head toward a shady tree where they'd have some privacy. Alejandro shrugged and shuffled alongside the teacher.

"Whatcha' got?" the boy asked.

"A question. Let's say, just for argument's sake, that a kid wanted to start a fire. And let's say that this kid was pretty damned smart when it came to making things. How would you guess that this imaginary kid might've got a fire going?"

Alejandro gave Rob a crooked smile. "This is all pretend, right? Just between us, right?"

Rob nodded.

"Well, Mr. Hannah, a kid just might go out to his dad's grill, with a funnel from his mom's kitchen, and fill a mini super-soaker with lighter fluid. Then, he might grab a box of matches and get together with his friends. And while they were burning ants using magnifying glasses, the kid would figure out how to make a pretty badass flamethrower by spraying lighter fluid through a lit match. Sort of like he'd seen in a lame horror movie, you know?"


"Yeah, I know," Rob said. "And I know that a stream of fire might get away from a kid who was showing off to his pals."

"That might happen," said Alejandro, "not that the kid would be dumb enough to tell the cops about the flamethrower—or where he got the idea."

"Like I said at the beginning, this hypothetical kid is pretty damned smart."

Alejandro grinned and Rob headed back to the grill, where Frank sidled over to him.

"I got the money back at the house," Frank said. "A



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hundred grand, and it's making me nervous. So how 'bout you come over tonight and relieve me of the cash?"

"Happy to reduce your stress level, Frank. And even happier to put that money into clearing the rubble and fixing up that lot," said Rob.

"One question," said Frank, "how'd you know there'd be fire like that?"

"Remember how in June I said that you need three things for a fire—oxygen, fuel and ignition?"

"Sure do."

"Well, there's a fourth ingredient that teachers never talk about."

"What's that?"

"Boys," said Rob, grabbing a container of lighter fluid and squirting a stream onto the glowing coals to produce an eyebrow-searing burst of flame. ■



# The Thinking Person's Horror & Suspense Fiction: Meet GREG F. GIFUNE

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*  
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*New York Times* best-selling author Christopher Rice called him “the best writer of horror and thrillers at work today.” Legendary author Ed Gorman said he was “among the finest dark suspense writers of our time.” Greg F. Gifune has certainly earned an admirable reputation in the world of horror and suspense fiction.

Greg’s novels, novellas, and short stories have been published all over the world and translated into several languages; received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, and others; is consistently praised by readers and critics alike; and has garnered attention from Hollywood. His novels, among many others, include “Savages,” “Babylon Terminal,” “God Machine,” “Midnight Solitaire,” “Midnight Gods,” and “Drago Descending.”

Greg’s novel, “The Bleeding Season,” originally published in 2003, has been hailed as a classic in the horror genre and is considered by many readers to be one of the best horror/thriller novels of our times.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Greg, let’s start with “The Bleeding Season,” probably your first novel to thrust you into the limelight. Delirium Books published the first edition. I believe a new edition was recently reissued by Journalstone. What has been your experience working with various publishers throughout your career?

Greg Gifune (G.G.): Yes, “*The Bleeding Season*” put me on the map, and it’s continued to be in print and sell all over the world for years now. It’s considered a cult classic, and many, including *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, listed it as one of the great horror novels alongside King’s “IT” and McCammon’s “*Boy’s Life*,” so I’m very proud of it. It’s done very well in Russia and Germany, so it has a broad fan base and a readership that is rather rabid in supporting the book.

The new edition is a fifteen-year anniversary edition that one of my publishers, Journalstone, released in 2018. It features a new introduction from Ronald Malfi (“*Bone White*”) and a new afterword from Eric Shapiro (“*Red Dennis*”). I’m happy to be with Journalstone. They have much of my backlist of novels and I’m doing new projects with them as well, including a new novella I wrote with Sandy DeLuca called “*Blue Hell*” that’ll be out in March and available everywhere.

I’m fortunate in that I work with many great publishers, and my experience over the years has been incredibly good. I’ve had a few bad situations, of course, but everyone that’s been in the business more than ten or fifteen minutes has too. Overall, I think I’ve had good relationships with almost all the publishers I’ve worked with in what’s been a twenty-year career so far. Generally, it’s been positive.

W.B.: And what advice would you offer authors who want to develop strong relationships with publishers?

G.G.: I’d say be patient. Patience has never particularly been one of my strong suits, but it’s something I’ve learned to develop in dealing with publishers. You must be open-minded, particularly when you’re starting out. If you’re working with professionals, people who know what they’re doing—and odds are, if they’re in those positions and you’re just starting, they know more than you do—go in with an open mind and listen to what they tell you. A good editor is invaluable. I don’t care what level of experience you have, an excellent editor only helps and makes the work, and by extension you, better.

I've been on both sides of that desk. I've worked for publishers as an editor, running lines and in acquisitions. I've worked in that capacity with seasoned veterans and newcomers, and the best experiences are always those that work as a partnership. A good editor doesn't write the novel or try to tell you how to write it. He or she simply guides you, keeps you focused and on track, and helps bring out the best in your work.

You must also realize there's nothing magical about publishers. They have good days and bad days like anyone else. As long as a publisher is honest, that's the key. If a publisher tells you something, it should happen. If it can't happen or doesn't, they should be upfront about why, and you go from there. Communication is big, and that (should) go both ways because, to develop strong relationships with publishers, it's a two-way street. There must be mutual respect, and the publisher must want to work with their authors as much as authors want that with them. So, be a writer they want to work with again, who cares about what you and they are doing, and who wants to team with the publisher to make the book as good and as successful as it can be.

W.B.: Do you believe there is true evil in the world, an underlying darkness that is beyond our control, the engine that drives the world? "The Bleeding Season" certainly suggests that.

G.G.: The short answer is yes. 'Believe' is probably the wrong word because I think belief requires faith, in a sense, and suggests it's open to debate. For me, it's not. Evil is one engine driving the world. On the other hand, I think good drives it as well. It's usually a matter of which stream you want to swim in.

"The Bleeding Season" explores and suggests that, and I think there's a real-world parallel. It's a very personal novel. While it's fiction, there's also a good deal of truth in it, and the essence of what I explore in that novel is real. There's a lot of truth in terms of human behavior and the evil in the world. Much of it ties to a past of mine I don't talk about much, where my life went in a different direction than it is now. There's a deep truth to that novel and I think that's one reason it resonates with so many readers, has for so many years, and continues to.

W.B.: "The Bleeding Season" is a harrowing, cerebral novel heavy on psychology—a thinking person's horror novel. "Savages," on the other hand, reminded me of a '70s B movie—gruesome and fun. They're very different books with distinct styles. It was as if different authors wrote them. When you begin a novel, do you intentionally explore new writing styles, or does it just come down to the subject matter?

G.G.: I don't necessarily explore different styles (in a technical sense), as my style remains more or less the same from one work to another. But "Savages" is a departure from my other novels. I'm glad it reminded you of 70s B movies because that's what I was going for. The whole idea behind "Savages" was to write a salute to those great 70s and 80s B drive-in movies that I've always loved and were great fun. That was my tip of the hat to that sort of thing. I stepped outside of what I normally do, and I think you're right that if you read "Savages" and then any number of other novels I've written, you'll see a difference.

My other work, as you said, is more cerebral and psychological. Then there are my crime novels, and most of them are something else again. But in terms of style, it pretty much stays the same. I just alter things for what I'm trying to accomplish or get across. And that's really what "Savages" was about, so it had to be written like a pulp exploitation novel or it wouldn't have worked.

W.B.: Speaking of B movies, what are your favorite ones?

G.G.: I can't even begin to give you a list. I'm a big movie fan and have been my entire life. I have an insanely huge DVD collection—yes, I still collect DVDs—I even have a multi-region player that plays discs from all over the world so I can see many films I'd otherwise never be able to. I love B movies for sure, many of them. But I have eclectic tastes, so I love a wide variety of films. All sorts, not just B movies.





**“I JUST DEFINE MYSELF AS A WRITER WHO HAPPENS TO WRITE WHAT I WRITE. WHATEVER CATEGORY THE WORK FALLS INTO IS FINE, BUT I DON’T MAKE THOSE DISTINCTIONS AND THAT’S ALWAYS BEEN FREEING.”**

W.B.: “Babylon Terminal” also has a different “feel” than the other books. It reminded me of “Blade Runner” or “Logan’s Run.” There’s even a touch of noir. The protagonist, Monk, is a unique, driven character. With a character like Monk, do you create the character as the plot develops? Or do you develop the character first?

G.G.: Yeah, “Babylon Terminal” is another different one. While it is closer to the rest of my work, it has a science fiction bent to it, and yes, there is a noir edge to it as well, which was done purposely.

Monk came together along with the general concept early on. The concept behind “Babylon Terminal” was about the people who populate our dreams and nightmares. If they existed as literal beings, what would they do when they weren’t in our dreams? What would the rest of their lives entail and what would their world look like? How would they live, what would the rules be, and what would happen to those that broke those rules? From that concept, Monk was born. I needed an extremely violent protagonist and a kind of antihero, a by-the-book sort who is then faced with having to bend those rules, rules he’s lived his life by, and without knowing why.

The basic gist is that the people who inhabit the dreams of the living must remain in their world, regardless of how awful it usually is, because if they leave then who will fill that role? So, to discourage them from attempting or even thinking about such things, there are law enforcement agents known as Dreamcatchers who track down those who try to run and find what they believe is a promised land, a reality beyond their own where they don’t have to fill these roles but can live their lives as they choose. The Dreamcatchers track down those who run and either bring them back or terminate them. Monk has always mindlessly done that job, like a machine, until his wife runs, and he must find her before his fellow Dreamcatchers do. He goes on this quest across a feverish dreamscape to find her, and that’s the novel.

Interestingly, I usually have the characters first when I write a novel and the plot is born from them. But with this one, it was more of a dual thing. I had this concept I thought was interesting and hadn’t been done before (to my knowledge) and then the character just developed from that.

W.B.: You’re perpetually juggling projects. How do you keep things straight? What keeps things on track and not flying off the rails?

G.G.: It’s not my preferred way of doing things, but I don’t have the luxury of sitting back and writing a book once a year or every two years or so. Early on, I could, because I was just starting out and I didn’t have the demands I have now. I didn’t have the opportunities I have now either, so it’s a process I had to learn. It’s not naturally comfortable for me, to be honest, but I’ve learned how to do it, and hopefully effectively. Keeping it straight is not easy, though. I tend to split it up. I’m now juggling a couple of different novels I’m writing, so I work on one in the morning until I break for lunch. I clear my head and reset, and then work on the other one in the afternoon until I call it a day in the late afternoon or early evening. But it’s something I had to work at mastering, and in all honesty, I still am.



W.B.: Do you use Scrivener or some other process when planning a book? Do you even outline when approaching a new project?

G.G.: I don’t use Scrivener, no. I wouldn’t say I outline in a traditional sense. I’m more of a note-taker, including continuity notes, so I don’t forget certain things, because writing a novel can be overwhelming. I keep a continuity notebook and I take basic, general notes on what I want to accomplish in each chapter. I don’t do anything too rigid. I can’t do those highly specific outlines. That may work for some writers. But, for me, it becomes more about constructing a novel than writing one, and that’s not how I work. I never want to put

*myself in a position where I can't listen to the characters or the story and react and maybe go with something I hadn't expected. Everything I do in my novels is precise, it's all well thought out. Everything is there for a reason and done as I intended, but I like to leave room for the unexpected during the process. You must be disciplined. But, for me, if an outline is too rigid it kills creativity. That's the last thing I want.*

W.B.: What was the turning point? When did you realize "I am a writer"?

G.G.: *I knew I was a writer from the time I was a little kid. I was writing before I could write. I dictated stories to my older sister, and she'd write them for me. When I learned how to write, it became a huge thing for me, I did it all the time. Reading and writing were always huge for me. My parents were teachers, so I knew how to read before I started school, and I've been a voracious reader my entire life. But I've always been a writer, too. It's always been like a purge for me. It's a way to escape those things I want out of me, and writing has always felt like the best way for me to do that. That and drinking, I guess (\*ahem\* insert laugh here). I went off the tracks for a while as an adult, but eventually found my way back to it. I've always just naturally been a writer. Whether you want to call it God-given or natural, I seemed capable of doing it right from the get-go.*

*Of course, it took years of working at it and honing my craft and educating myself to become a professional. But I think the foundation has always existed in me. In terms of being professional, I'd have to say it was when "The Bleeding Season" hit and I followed it with my novel "Deep Night." Then I realized, okay, I think I can make a real go of this and maybe write some things that actually matter.*

W.B.: Clive Barker, Brian Keene, or Stephen King?

G.G.: *I like and respect all three, and I like a great deal of their work. They all bring something unique to the table, but they're so different I think it's apples and oranges. And whether you like him or not, just strictly in terms of what he's accomplished, there's King and then everyone else. That said, my answer to your question is Peter Straub.*

W.B.: Who do you think is the shining star in horror fiction today?

G.G.: *You mean besides me? Seriously, that's such a broad question I'm not sure where to begin. Many established authors fit that, and a handful of up-and-comers I think are on their way. There are many shining stars out there.*

W.B.: What nonfiction do you read? (Maybe when handling research?)

G.G.: *I read a lot of nonfiction. Sometimes for research, but that's different. I keep things separate. I have reading I do for work and reading I do for pleasure. I read more fiction than nonfiction, but I read a lot of both for pleasure. Historical stuff, political, metaphysical, all sorts of things, as again, I have eclectic tastes.*

W.B.: Apparently, you were at one time a child actor. How has that experience impacted your work?

G.G.: *Well, I was an actor when I was a teenager. I worked in Summer Stock Theater and did a few other things. I acted from 14 until I was in my early 20s. How it impacted me as a writer—probably the biggest way is it helps me to see my characters more clearly and how to inhabit them in some ways, to see through their eyes. Coming from a theater background as a younger person was interesting because it gave me a theatrical sense and an appreciation of it artistically, of drama and how you put those things together in ways that make sense and can reach and impact people. Studying playwrights helped too, with language and dialogue specifically. Reading the great playwrights, like Tennessee Williams and others, and even doing some of their plays, certainly helped, too. I haven't been an actor in decades now, yet I still use those skills in my writing.*

W.B.: If you could start your career over, what would you have done differently?

G.G.: *That's a really good question. I don't know that I'd do anything different. I did (and do) things a bit differently than most and always have. That's just me. It's true in pretty much every aspect of my life.*

*I came into the business with a clear idea of how I wanted to do things and how I didn't. I wanted my work to speak for itself. I didn't want to be a marketing phenom or the darling of this crowd or that crowd. I wanted it to be all about the work, not me. It probably took me longer to get to where I wanted to be because of that, but many of the things that matter to many people in this*



business don't matter to me. I don't do readings or make many appearances. I'm not an awards guy or much for joining groups or cliques. I just do the work and go about my life and business.

Maybe I'd change one thing, now that I think of it—maybe not go through almost five straight years of rejection when I first started. I questioned what I was doing. I'd think, my God, am I ever going to get a break? And while there were some tough days, I kept at it and decided I'd use that rejection to make me better. I decided I'd just work harder and try to make my work so good publishers would have no choice but to say yes. When I did finally get that break, I was ready. From that point forward, the gates opened, and I could keep it going and building. If I could change that a bit I might, but I wouldn't change it totally because failure makes you better. And that's something many people today, particularly people that decide to self-publish without ever having gone through the professional process, miss out on. I'm not bashing anyone—don't get me wrong—everyone should follow whatever path is best for them.

Rejection can be a good thing. It makes you better. Failure is good for you. You don't want to fail consistently your entire life, of course, and never learn from it, but failure is not a bad thing. Failure makes you better. Failure makes you stronger. It's what teaches you how NOT to fail.

W.B.: Tell us about your latest novel, "God Machine."

G.G.: I had the idea for "God Machine" in my head for a long time. It has an interesting backstory because the actual God Machine really existed, and the people involved in its creation and the things they attempted to do with it were all real as well. It's a story that's always fascinated me, and I've wanted to use it in my fiction for some time. I had another concept, which was essentially an antiwar novel about a couple that loses their only child in Iraq and how it destroys their lives. I felt if I could bring the two concepts together effectively, I'd have something special. I did, and the result is "God Machine."

Here's the synopsis from the back cover: In a hotel room on Cape Cod, a troubled young prostitute brutally takes her own life, leaving cryptic clues as to why written in blood on the walls. When head of hotel security and former cop Chris Tallo finds her savaged body, he sets out to discover why the woman committed suicide in such a vicious manner. Saddled with a drinking problem, and already grieving the loss of his daughter killed in Iraq five years earlier, his search lures him into a disturbing underworld populated by those who trade in black magic, pain, and death. The closer Chris gets to the truth, and its ties to a secret occult ritual that took place more than 100 years ago that ended in madness and rumors of demonic possession, the more he struggles with his own history and sanity. And as the forces haunting and manipulating not only him, but reality as he knows it, rise in a tempest of blood and fire, a horrific evil awakens.

W.B.: What are you working on now?

G.G.: I'm finishing up a crime novel called "Velvet Elvis" that should be out later this year, I just turned in a new novel called "The Gypsy Moths" to one of my publishers and should have an announcement about that soon, and I'm working on a horror novel as well. I've also got some movie and TV scripts and other things in development that I'm working on with a couple of partners. So, I've got a lot going on, thankfully, which is always good.

W.B.: And last question: How do you define yourself as a writer?

G.G.: Well, just as that. I define myself as a writer. I work primarily in the horror and crime genres, but I've never described myself as a genre writer or a horror writer or a crime writer—not that I think there's anything wrong with that, I'm certainly not ashamed of my work in those areas, I'm quite proud of it—but I just define myself as a writer who happens to write what I write. Whatever category the work falls into is fine, but I don't make those distinctions and that's always been freeing. Also, this doesn't limit me with readers. While I have many readers who are fans of those genres, I also have many readers who don't read horror, for example. Yet they read me. Or they don't read crime, but they read me. I consistently hear that from fans, and I'm grateful and open to it. So, I just stop at 'writer.' Whatever box or category anyone needs to put my work in for whatever reason, feel free, it doesn't matter to me. I think there's way too much of that, too many labels and boxes. I'm just a writer.

W.B.: Thanks, Greg. Good luck with your future projects.

For more about Greg Gifune, check out his Amazon author page <https://www.amazon.com/Greg-F.-Gifune/e/B002NWV4G2> or Twitter @greggifune. ■



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DROPSHIP PUBLISHING



## Meet Author DIETRICH KALTEIS

Interview by Patrick Whitehurst for *Suspense Magazine*  
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Dietrich Kalteis writes what most call crime fiction. His tightly-plotted books appeal to a much larger audience, however, both in Canada and in the United States. His stories often contain a dash of history, in some cases a heap of history, and break the bounds of any particular genre. As a master of the craft, Kalteis continues to shake the cobwebs off of modern crime fiction.

His latest book, “Cradle of the Deep,” brings readers into the lives of gangster Maddog Palmieri, his girlfriend Bobbi Ricci, and ex-driver Denny. When Denny and Bobbi take a bit of revenge on the old hood, things kick into gear. Incensed at their betrayal, Palmieri enlists killer Lee Trane to chase the two down. The pursuit follows the unlikely pair through the northern British Columbia wilderness into Alaska as they do whatever it takes to escape Trane’s sinister clutches.

Patrick Whitehurst sat down with Dietrich to talk about the new book and what he’s got cooking for the future.

Patrick Whitehurst (P.W.): Where did you come up with the idea for “Cradle of the Deep”?

Dietrich Kalteis (D.K.): “Cradle of the Deep” was born from a short story I wrote a few years back about the girlfriend of an aging gangster and his ex-limo driver, each planning to steal the man’s personal stash of cash that he hides in his mansion. I liked the piece and felt there was more story to be told, so I explored it.

P.W.: Tell me a little about your protagonists, Bobbi Ricci and Denny. How did you come up with this pairing?

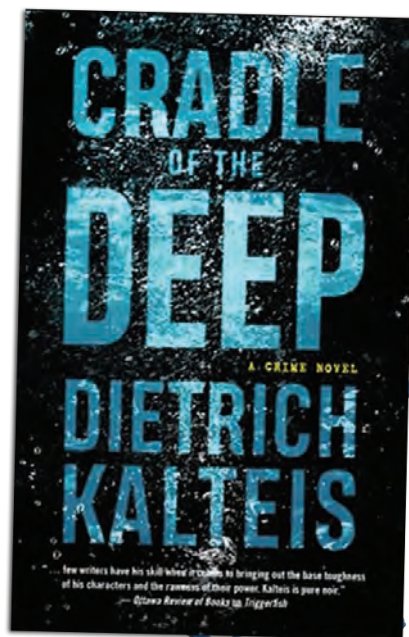
D.K.: Bobbi’s out for thrills and knows what she wants and goes after it. Denny’s out for some payback, and wrongly thinks he knows how to look after himself. After robbing Bobbi’s gangster boyfriend, they go on the run, and in spite of being hunted, they feel the sparks fly, both sensing there could be a relationship there—if they live long enough to explore it.

P.W.: Is Maddog Palmieri based on anyone from real life?

D.K.: No, he’s pure fiction. Think Joe Pesci meets Eddie Izzard meets Robert De Niro.

P.W.: The novel-writing process is never the same from book to book, but always fascinating. Yours are set in a number of different eras, from the 80s to the 40s. How do you decide where and when to start your books?

D.K.: It’s never the same, but I usually come up with an initial scene or idea, then I think of the kind of character or characters I want to see in the situation. The setting comes next, and I base it on where I think the story wants to go—what time in history and place on the



## “IT’S A ROMP, AND IT’S MEANT TO BE A FUN READ. I’D LIKE READERS TO COME AWAY WITH HAVING ENJOYED THE STORY AND SAYING TO THEMSELVES, ‘HEY, WHAT ELSE HAS THIS GUY WRITTEN?’”

*map that makes the best backdrop. Sometimes it’s obvious and other times it takes some thought to get it right.*

*When to start? I like to start in the middle of a scene, drawing the reader right in, letting it play and then leaving the scene as soon as possible, keeping it moving by keeping everything trim and leaving little hooks at the end of chapters to keep the reader engaged.*

P.W.: What’s one thing you’d like readers to take away from “Cradle of the Deep”?

D.K.: *It’s a romp, and it’s meant to be a fun read. I’d like readers to come away with having enjoyed the story and saying to themselves, “Hey, what else has this guy written?”*

P.W.: What authors are keeping you going during the pandemic?

D.K.: *I read a lot, some fiction, some non-fiction, and there were authors who inspired as well as entertained me this past year. Among the highlights: Nick Hornby when I wanted funny; Charles Willeford, James Lee Burke, Robert B. Parker, Donald E. Westlake, Richard Stark, Ed McBain when I craved for crime; William S. Burroughs for the strange, and Stephen King for the stranger; Karl Marlantes for a brilliant and epic anti-war story; Viktor E. Frankl when I needed a memoir with real depth; and Neil Young, Tommy James and Keith Richards when I wanted biographies from the world of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.*

P.W.: And speaking of the pandemic, how are you promoting the book during these perilous times?

D.K.: *That’s a really good question, Patrick. I wish I had a really good answer.*

*In spite of so many events being canceled this past year, there have been some online readings and interviews that I’ve taken part in. Just ahead of the launch, I was Writer-In-Residence for a month at Open Book, and I took part in a virtual panel of ECW Press authors at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto. Then I did a guest post and talked up the book at Dana King’s One Bite at a Time. And a virtual Noir at the Bar hosted by Rob Brunet. There’s an event calendar on my website at [www.dietrichkalteis.com](http://www.dietrichkalteis.com) that shows upcoming events.*

*Where there’s a will there’s a virtual way, but I do miss reading at a favorite bookstore or at a live Noir at the Bar event.*

P.W.: Besides writing nonstop, you interview other authors on your website. *Off the Cuff* is always a good source for readers looking for a new book. What do you like best about it? And what else do you do to pass the time we might not know about?

D.K.: *Off the Cuff is fun, and I’ve met and interviewed some very interesting authors over the years, some well-known and some up-and-coming, but all of them interesting.*

*I’ve had to forgo organizing Noir at the Bar events here in Vancouver this year, and I miss getting together with fellow authors, friends, and that ever-enthusiastic crowd.*

*Outside of writing, I’m drawn to various art forms. I go through streaks where I paint in oil, acrylic, tempera, and sketch, and I enjoy roaming through galleries. I love to listen to music, and I play guitar, although I never spend enough time at it. And nothing beats getting away from the city and being out in nature.*

P.W.: What’s next for you?

D.K.: *I have two new novels coming out over the next year with ECW Press. There’s “Under an Outlaw Moon,” the story of a real-life bank robbing couple in 1930s Kansas. And there’s “Nobody from Somewhere,” a modern-day crime novel that’s sort of a coming-of-age story—with plenty of dysfunctional adults.*

We would like to thank Dietrich for joining us. For more information about Dietrich and his work, visit his website at [www.dietrichkalteis.com](http://www.dietrichkalteis.com). ■



# Death by GPS

By Martha Reed

"Idjits. Can't they read? Every sign out here tells them they can't carry enough water to survive, but they try it anyway." Inyo County Sheriff's Deputy Tucker Poe toed the dead hiker with his boot. The loose bones inside the desiccated corpse rattled like a gourd. "Hell, you lose a gallon of water a day sitting in the shade."

The convection oven that was Death Valley's floor had started sucking the moisture from my skin the second I cracked the Ford Explorer's door. I twitched as a line of hot sweat popped beneath my Kevlar vest. By day's end, I'd be coated in layers of dried salt and sunscreen like a layered birthday cake.

"Canfield, you're a smart fella. Tell me this." Tucker dusted his hands. "How often do visitors die in Death Valley?"

I wasn't falling for that one. "Only once, like anywhere else."

Each year we see about 1.3 million tourists travelling through Death Valley National Park and each year we registered about ten heatstroke-related deaths. The fatalities, though, usually occurred in the Stovepipe Wells dunes, closer to the general tourist area and not in the middle of the Bad Water salt plain like this one had. In any case, our Unknown Hiker was candidate number six for the year and it was still early, only July. This corpse entertained a host of other curiosities. "Where's his canteen? Where is his hat?"

"You're the big mantracker," Tucker said, pointedly. "You tell me."

Tucker thinks he's a better tracker than I am, saying that I've been known to quit tracking too soon. He's still jealous that I beat him out of the Bonham scholarship competition when I won the chance to go back East for school. I even took classes at FBI Headquarters in Quantico before I recognized that the National Park Service was the direction I needed to go. I can't abide being confined inside an office tower; hearing people I can't see in other cubicles makes me flinch. In the end, we both knew we needed to live face-to-face with whatever wilderness remains in this great country. It's in our DNA. Our great-grandfather Clem Bonham successfully mantracked Geronimo, and those Apaches were nothing to fuck with. In Death Valley, we're up against Mother Nature and the bitch is savage.

I studied the three sets of tracks leading to the dead hiker. Two sets presented crisp LawPro TerraMax boot prints. The third blurry, toe-dragging prints looked purely commercial. They matched the boots on the corpse's feet. I also noted a weaving line of U-shaped prints belonging to a random feral burro. God knows how those burros survived living out on the salt plain, but they did. Their U-shaped tracks crisscrossed the dry hills everywhere. "He must have tossed his gear. Dehydration causes hallucinations, confused thinking."

"In any case, you get to call this in," Tucker said. "No crime here that I can see other than terminal stupidity. Darwinism at its finest. I relinquish jurisdiction." He headed for my truck. "Let's get a crash bag, pack him up. I'll help you that far."

Death Valley National Park is three million acres big. Law enforcement is by multi-agency agreement. As an NPS Ranger, I'm a fully commissioned police officer, but I can share my duties with Tucker and Inyo County, if needed. I can also ping the California Highway Patrol. I don't really like working with CHP—those Staties are odd—but CHP has two very useful Seahawk helicopters on permanent standby which come in handy for any search and rescue mission which we do occasionally see. It came as no surprise to me when Tucker relinquished Inyo County jurisdiction, even though he is their duly appointed SAR manager. Tucker is one lazy sonofabitch. He hates doing paperwork.

I popped the hatchback using the keychain remote. Tucker automatically reached inside before recoiling suddenly.

"Jesus, Canfield! What's that thing?"

I was quite proud of my new gear. "It's a MultiQuad AutoPilot EasyLift with a 200mW 5.8 GHz open-source Hi-Def SteadyCam video downlink."

He gave me his trademark glare. "Give that to me again in English."

"It's a drone."

"You bought a drone." He tentatively spun the black rotor blades with his fingertips. "Why am I not surprised? A drone would be a perfect shitstorm for a techie nerd like you."

"It's the next step in SAR." Handing him a pair of nitrile gloves, I unfolded a body bag. "A MAE like this can go anywhere. Nothing is too remote to scan. It has an extended flight time of over two hours and it feeds data and images through a hi-def digital camera mounted in the cockpit. I can pilot it using these virtual reality goggles or observe the flight through an e-link on my laptop." I shrugged. "We don't need to conduct foot searches or use horses anymore. That's obsolete."

Tucker looked troubled. "I can see that this gadget is interesting, Emmett, but Mother Nature doesn't give a shit about technology. You need to stay alert and keep things real. Reliance on technology will get you killed." Snicking his tongue against his teeth, he pointed to the jagged horizon. "There are things happening in this valley that can't be explained."

"Oh, yes? Like what? Aliens? You want me to worry about Area 51 now?"

"Jackass. You know what I mean."

Actually, I did. About a half-dozen tourists, mostly Europeans, go missing in Death Valley each year. We've never found their bodies. We still don't know where they are.

Hefting the hiker's body on three, we lowered it into the body bag. The corpse was surprisingly light, weighing less than 35 kilos. The super-heated thermal wind, the blanching desert sun, and the exposure to the limitless nitron and Epsom salts in the dried lake bed had effectively mummified it in the course of one day. Shifting the corpse released a powdery scent that wasn't unpleasant—a smell like stale bacon. I zipped the body bag shut, and with our second heave, we slid it easily into the back of the Ford.

"Drone technology is our future. The best part of a MAE is that it automatically records GPS coordinates off NASA's global satellite grid. Everything can be ground-tracked now."

"You're not going to drop this, are you?" Tucker discarded his gloves into an evidence box. "You really know how to fly this thing?"

"I do."

"Then call this in and fire it up." Grinning crookedly, he cocked his thumb at the body bag. "This guy's not going anywhere fast."

\* \* \*

Tucker was already wearing my virtual reality goggles when I returned to the back of the Ford.

"I figured out the laptop link." He pointed to a glowing neon green grid on the screen. "I'd avoid flying this thing over the China Lake Naval Weapons Center if I was you. I

don't know what you paid for it, but that's restricted air space. They'll blast you down."

"Noted." I carried the MAE approximately five meters away and returned to share the minimal shade. Manipulating the dip-stick control using my forefingers and thumbs was simple enough. The rotors began producing their waspy hum and the MAE started to rise. Lift off wasn't as smooth as I'd hoped it would be, but the MAE was up. Increasing the elevation to twenty meters, I sent it buzzing along Purgatory Ridge.

"This rocks." Even encased in the goggles, Tucker looked enthralled. "I wish Inyo'd had one of these back in the '70s. We could've spied on the Manson family at Barker Ranch. Seen if they ever really built that helter-skelter bunker they always claimed they did or where they hid the dead hippie bodies. They'd never have known we were there."

I awarded myself a bonus point. I knew he'd like it. The laptop e-link software was outlaw sick. GPS coordinates constantly live-streamed through an LDS read-out in one corner of the screen against a resizable 3-D topographical map. I felt vindicated. This was 21st century mantracking at its finest.

"Hold up." Tucker hunched forward, unnecessarily grasping the goggles with both hands. "Slow this thing down, Emmett. Jesus Jones, I think we found something."

The image on the monitor was sketchy even maxed out on hi-def, but Tucker was right. There was something alien and boxy, obviously manmade in that harsh, natural landscape. I reduced the elevation and pushed the MAE closer.

A Chrysler Voyager minivan sat planted in a gravel wash at the base of Purgatory Ridge. Hitting controls, I quickly saved the GPS coordinates. The van was parked in the hills at an elevation of 1,000 meters. It looked abandoned, but most importantly it had absolutely no business being off-road where it was.

I guided the MAE in. The Voyager was mired in sand, sitting cock-eyed on shredded tires and dented rims. All of its doors were open to the elements. It was surrounded by a debris field of scattered personal effects and it had California rental car tags.

"Ho-ly shit, Canfield." Tucker breathed. "I remember this BOLO. This van belonged to those Belgian tourists who went missing."

I recalled the bulletin. Nine years back, in 2006, a Belgian family—two adults and one ten-year-old boy—had checked out of a cheap L.A. hotel. They told the clerk they were going to tour Death Valley and Yosemite National Park and they vanished.

Tucker pulled the goggles off, swiping the puddled sweat under his eyes. "What the hell were they doing on Purgatory Ridge in a minivan? Dante's View Road takes a 4X4 with high ground clearance when it's even passable."



"It's GPS. It's gotta be." Shifting the laptop, I shared the view. "It's still not completely accurate. It tells them to take a right, they turn right. Like what happened to that Latino couple who got lost in May." I reset the MAE's programming. The drone began to circle the van on a twenty-meter perimeter. "It's human nature to follow instructions, even when you can see that you're making a horrible mistake."

"A horrible mistake like following a dry wash into a canyon thinking it's a road?" Tucker peered at the monitor. "I don't see any obvious remains. I know Inyo sent out a SAR. Called off the search after four days. Figured the Belgians wanted to start a new life in America. That they'd planned to disappear."

Neither one of us stated the bald truth: no one survived Death Valley after four days.

\* \* \*

"You calling this in or am I?" Tucker reached for the Ford's dashboard handset.

"Hold up." We were speeding east on Saline Valley Road. I wanted to spot-check the Cottonwood Creek trailhead before we turned for Purgatory Ridge. My mind was alive with possibilities, but there was one thing I knew for sure: Cottonwood Creek was the only place our dead hiker could have trekked in from. "Let's investigate a little on our own. Besides, I need to retrieve the MAE. I don't want the Staties getting to the find site before we do. Those pricks would confiscate the MAE just to piss me off."

"What have we here?" Tucker kicked back, finishing his water and crumpling the bottle in his fist. "Canfield is seen making a non-Agency decision." He repeated his crooked grin. "Always liked this side of you, Emmett. You should trot it out more often."

"Hang on." I bullied the Ford down a steep gravel grade. The corpse in the body bag rattled like a castanet as we four-wheeled the shortcut toward Cottonwood Creek. We didn't encounter a single other person or vehicle as we raced across the wide salt plain, raising a dust plume that could be seen for miles.

An orange Subaru Crosstrek was sitting alone in the trailhead lot. Roaring up to it, we parked and got out.

"You're going to have a busy day," Tucker noted.

The Crosstrek had been looted. Some perp had shattered its rear window with a rock, reaching in to open the hatchback. Tinted glass shards littered the gravel, winking the bright afternoon sun into our eyes. A full carton's worth of shredded silver protein bar wrappers tumbled end-over-end across the parking lot. A cooler had leaked its melting ice into the dirt next to a crushed quart-sized bottle of TrueBerry Blast and an empty man's size eleven CheckPoint cross trainer shoebox.

"I'll send for a tow truck to pick this up." I added the vandalized SUV to my list.

\* \* \*

"What I don't get," Tucker pointed a finger down the road, "is why these Europeans keep coming here."

The Ford was humming steadily as we climbed Purgatory Ridge. On the horizon, Dante's Peak offered vertical scale for the immense vista of No Man's Land desolation that surrounded us on all four sides. Two hundred meters below, at the base of the sandstone cliff, dust devils shimmied across the plain.

"It's because Death Valley is the hottest, driest, lowest place on Earth."

"I get that, I do. But why do they insist on camping? Stovepipe Wells has a nice resort. Seven got a decent-enough bar. What? There's something wrong with good, old-fashioned American air conditioning?"

"It's the expense. For most of them Death Valley is a once-in-a-lifetime trip." Pushing the Ford into 4WD, we started grinding down the wash. "It's why they rent minivans. These hills cool down to eighty at night. They can camp more affordably."

Even with the MAE's coordinates programmed into my dashboard laptop that Plymouth Voyager was difficult to spot. Tucker saw it first. He straightened.

"Knuckles up. There she sits. Two o'clock."

The van's dull white paint had helped it blend almost perfectly into the bleached landscape. Parking the Ford one hundred meters off, I leaned against the steering wheel. The Voyager was buried up to its axles in a smooth lake of undisturbed granular sand. I couldn't see any obvious signs of life or skeletal remains. I couldn't see any human prints or tire treads at all. The hot sirocco winds that baked these hills had vaporized every sign of sentient life except for the meandering tracks of the ubiquitous burros.

"After you, amigo." Tucker unlatched his door.

My boots crunched the sandy grit as I walked toward the van. Before I got there, Tucker stopped short, pointing at the ground.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Looks like a bunch of runners has been through here."

"Those are burros." I peered into the van's open passenger door. The dashboard was blanketed by thick inches of fine dust. "Their tracks can be misread as sneaker prints if you're not careful."

Tucker frowned, looking doubtful. "Sure 'bout that?"

"Positive. People follow them into the hills thinking they lead to a trail someone's been running on. Gets hikers in trouble all the time."

He looked in from the driver's side. "I can see they had a cellphone. It's still plugged into the dash. Why didn't they call for help?"

"They couldn't." I sidestepped the Voyager carefully,

looking for any odd prints or clues. "This family got lost in 2006. Death Valley didn't get cellphone reception until AT&T built the Furnace Creek tower in 2010."

"How did they use GPS?"

"GPS is different technology. It's based on satellite transmission. GPS service was sporadic in 2006, but they would've had access."

"More nerd." Folding his arms, he stared into the cargo bay. "That new Furnace Creek tower didn't help these folks any."

The cargo bay was as devoid of any recent signs of life as the front of the van had been. Even more layers of dust and fine sand lapped the three disheveled Tourister suitcases and the two unopened HiTracker ComfortDown sleeping bag cartons stored there.

"Something sure tore through this gear."

"I think they did." Removing the Personal Data Beacon from my belt, I started snapping *in situ* pictures. "At some point they must've realized they were facing a survival situation. It looks like they took what they thought they should carry." I focused in and macro'd a line of tiny, banded lizard prints. "Desert critters got what was left. They're always hungry. Nothing goes to waste in Death Valley."

"Speaking of critters," Tucker said, "do you recall that Latino couple in Sulfur Spring saying they saw something big moving around outside their car once their headlights died? They said whatever it was walked by on two legs, like a man."

"What are you saying, Tucker?" I pulled back. "We're mantracking Bigfoot now?"

"No, not Bigfoot, shithead, but how about a rogue military patrol out of China Lake? You have to admit something weird is going on, Emmett. These tourists keep disappearing." His arm swept the expansive horizon. "Where do they go? We never even find their bones."

I grew concerned. Tucker was starting to look white-eyed. The desert wind had picked up and it began to whistle and moan. Quickly resaving the Voyager's GPS coordinates, I returned the PDB to my belt. "Weather's changing, my friend. The sirocco's got you spooked." I knew Tucker well. He needed physical activity to break the Valley's spell. "Go back to the Ford. Call CHP and request a helicopter. I'll collect the drone."

"Roger that." Tucker slowly turned on his heel. "Emmett, if you don't mind, I think I'll hitch a ride back in the Seahawk."

"Sure thing, buddy." I joked. "Leave me out in the desert all alone."

"Don't be like that." He frowned. "Besides, you like it lonely. I don't. Tell you what. I'll take the dead hiker back with me in the Seahawk. Drop him off at the coroners in Independence." He sweetened the deal. "Save you a full day's round trip."

I checked the setting sun. I still had two good hours of

investigative daylight left and a three-gallon drum of potable water stored in the Ford. Besides, what Tucker had said was true. I never minded being left alone with Death Valley. It was humans who gave me trouble.

\* \* \*

Even as a kid, I had trouble sleeping. My busy brain gets hung up on a puzzling idea or a suggestion and then I toss and turn until I figure it out.

What bothered me most about these tourist disappearances was when a kid was involved. Adults were responsible for making their own poor decisions and for risking their own lives, but who watched out for the kids who counted on the adults for their safety? Voluntarily taking a child into a lethal environment never sat well with me. Besides, with their lower body mass, it was always the kids who died first.

I threw my arm over my eyes. Something about that missing Belgian family would not let me rest, but what was it? It came to me so suddenly, I sat up. The Voyager minivan had held *two* HiTracker sleeping bags. Kicking off the covers, I tripped over the startled dogs, stumbled into my office and booted up my Mac. Using control +F, I quick scanned my NPS archive. I felt a cool pop of karmic satisfaction when I instantly located the file.

*September 2013.* A Ranger patrol found a filthy HiTracker sleeping bag in the middle of a remote dirt road near Sulfur Spring. The road the bag was found on was routinely patrolled, at least once a month. The team reported that they had seen no tracks or obvious signs of distress. Since no one had reported the sleeping bag as missing it had been thrown out with the trash.

The Belgian family disappeared in July 2006. The bag couldn't have been dropped by them because it would have been noticed during an earlier Ranger patrol. How did a HiTracker sleeping bag end up near Sulfur Spring seven years *after* the Belgians vanished? Sulfur Spring was eleven grueling desert miles from the abandoned van. *Was Tucker right? Had someone else found the Voyager before us? Was there something else out in the desert?*

Shit. There was only one way to resolve this. I quickly dressed, grabbed my PDB, my backpack, my hat, my canteen, and my keys. Giving Sam and Cracker a pat and one biscuit a piece, I headed for Purgatory Ridge.

It never bothered me to travel into Death Valley alone. Rangers are trained to be independent thinkers. We're expected to cover a lot of ground and to handle every type of emergency. I've tackled heatstroke-related rescues, mental disturbance calls, trapped animals, and put out more car fires than I could count, but it was all worth it. Death Valley offers a mystic visionary kind of beauty that it only shares at night when lit by a nearly full moon.



I four-wheeled down the canyon wash. Tucker and the Inyo County SAR team had fine-tooth combed the area, searching for human remains. They had found nothing. The site was now pretty much trashed for any real tracking purposes. The sand looked churned. The tow crew had hauled the Voyager off to the car pound in Independence, leaving behind an open, empty pit.

Locking the Ford, I circled the site to get a better feel for the larger overall landscape. This time maybe Tucker had given up on the SAR too early. I had a few fresh new ideas of my own.

Death Valley is a narrow basin trapped between the steep Amargosa mountain range to the east and the even steeper Panamint range to the west. The highest temperature ever known to man, 134 degrees Fahrenheit, was recorded at Furnace Creek. It was common sense that anyone lost in the Valley would realize they needed to head into the cooler hills to survive. The question was: Which way did those Belgians go?

Uplinking the PDB, I Googled a GPS topo map. Three possibilities would've been known to the Belgians in 2006: a derelict borax mine in Badwater Canyon, some hillside caves used by the Timbisha Shoshone, or the abandoned Stone Cabin at the Sulfur Spring mining camp. GPS noted that the Sulfur Spring camp offered a year-round water supply. If I were the Belgians, which one would I have picked?

Programming Sulfur Spring into my PDB, I started hiking. PDBs are a new technology developed by the Army for military use in Afghanistan. They take GPS coordinates and plot the easiest, most energy efficient route across difficult terrain. A PDB route avoids any unnecessary up and downhill climbs caused by unseen gullies or ravines resulting in very little wasted effort. The Belgians wouldn't have had access to PDB technology in 2006, but I was sure glad I did. They would have had to stumble up and down those rugged slopes in the lethal heat, guessing at knolls and landmarks using purely visual sightlines.

I paused to imagine their trek. I loved the Valley's challenges, but I was prepared to meet them. The Belgians had been ill-prepared and trapped. When their water supply ran low and no help came, they must've thought they had no choice but to go find a spring to survive. What had they experienced as they trudged up and down these brutal hills? Once you lose a quart of water your tongue thickens; it sticks to the roof of your mouth. You develop an intense headache over your eyes as your sinuses dry out. Your internal core temperature can rise to 105 degrees in less than fifteen minutes because of over-exertion, resulting in delirium. What had they felt as they struggled across these ravines for eleven hard desert miles with limited water in July, when the heat reflecting off the Valley floor pushed the ambient air temperature to 160 degrees?

I reached for my canteen. I'd been watchful, but a third of my water was gone. Even if it meant calling it quits before finding anything, once my canteen reached the half-empty mark I needed to turn back. That was non-negotiable. Checking the PDB, I saw another option. Squaw Spring was only a tenth of a mile away, downhill. It meant backtracking, which I hated to do, but I decided to chance the spring hoping for a refill so I could push on.

I started crab-walking sideways down the slope, careful not to slip and fall. Any injury out here could present a very real problem. The PDB guidance led me straight to Squaw Spring. The sagebrush surrounding it was withered, brittle, and white, and the spring was bone dry.

Sifting the leached grit through my fingers, I spotted a slight green haze on a shrub further down the slope. Pushing the prickly lower branches aside, I knelt beside a seeping waterhole. Eagerly capturing each precious drop, I felt a very real sense of satisfaction as the canteen grew heavy again. There's always water in Death Valley if you know where to look.

Clipping the canteen back on my pack, I stood. Scanning a burro trail leading up the slope, I spotted a single woman's street shoe tipped on its side. Even standing directly over the shoe it was difficult to see. The scorching sun had baked all the color out of it. Looking left, I saw a man's leather wallet next to a human femur. The wallet fell apart in my hands, but the international driver's license inside had been protected by a plastic sleeve. The name on the faded paper license read: Lukas Verbeke.

Now that I knew what to look for, I spotted hundreds of weathered bone fragments scattered across the alluvial valley at the base of the ravine. From the sheer volume of the pieces, it was obvious that I was seeing more than one set of human remains. Slipping Lukas's license back into his wallet, I recalled their names from my file: Lukas, Marie-Louise, and ten-year-old Dieter. I gave the family credit for making it this far. Sulfur Spring was still five impossible miles away, but at least they died trying.

Did they ever realize how grave their peril was? Did Lukas and Marie-Louise lie to Dieter to keep his hopes up, to make him keep trying? As the family stumbled across these blistering hills had Lukas and Marie-Louise given Dieter all of their water, hoping he might make it to Sulfur Spring and survive? That would be an understandably human thing for any parents to do.

Did Dieter struggle on alone? If his parents gave him all of the water, how did he react to their deaths and with being left alone in this trackless foreign desert? He was only ten years old. How did he react to the abandonment?

Or did the family choose to perish together, supporting each other until their final desperate collapse? And who died first? Lukas, Marie-Louise or Dieter because of his smaller



body mass? I couldn't even be sure of how many sets of human remains I saw. The fragments were too degraded to individually identify. I'd need to leave that for SAR CSI.

Hot wind brushed the back of my neck. I looked up to see clouds bulking against Purgatory Ridge. A mean-looking storm was brewing. I wasn't worried about getting caught in a flash flood, but as exposed as I was on that hillside the idea of a lethal lightning strike did cross my mind since I was the tallest thing standing for miles. Time to take shelter and call for help. Emailing my GPS coordinates to the Inyo County SAR, I jumped when the PDB vibrated almost immediately in my hand.

"Where are you?" Tucker yelled. "What did you find?"

I unglued my tongue from the roof of my mouth. "I found the Belgians. Wasn't Manson. Wasn't China Lake." I felt triumphant. This was a big win for me. "This bitch Valley killed them."

"You stay put, Emmett. I'll scramble my team, pull a Seahawk from CHP. ETA forty-five minutes. You stay safe."

Yes, an evil storm was brewing, but I knew this Valley well. There was a Timbisha cave halfway up the bluff. It was a steep climb, but I could take shelter in the cave, safe from any lightning strikes. I had my GPS. I had my canteen. I could survive anything for an hour.

The V-shaped cave was deeper than I'd thought it would be. Not wanting to lose my GPS connection, I hunkered down near the entrance, taking a moment to drink my fill from the canteen. There was no need to ration my water anymore. The adrenaline rush from my discovery leached away, leaving me feeling drained and exhausted, but surprisingly jubilant. I had successfully followed this harrowing trail to its end. Tucker would never be able to challenge my tracking ability again.

Leaning my shoulder against the rough limestone wall, I studied the tracks in the sandy floor, noticing something odd. There were more tracks in here than had come from my boots. Flicking on the flashlight feature of the PDB, I lit them up. In addition to my TerraMax prints there was a line of crisp prints from a CheckPoint running shoe.

I heard pebbles slipping in the dimness behind me.

"*Bist du echt?*" he muttered.

Crap. Those runners in the hills weren't feral burros. They were sneaker prints. Dieter didn't die.

How does a ten-year-old boy stay alive in Death Valley alone for nine years? How did Dieter stay sane? My God. What did Dieter eat?

My knees turned to water as I recalled the dozens of missing tourists over the years and I reconsidered Tucker's story about the strange searching animal who walked by on two legs.

You win, Tucker. You were right. *This* is the end of the trail. ■

# VIEBURY GROVE



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—James R. Benn, Author of the *Billy Boyle*  
*World War II Mysteries*

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# DON BENTLEY'S

## "The Outside Man" is PACKED with THRILLS, CHILLS & ACTION

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Robin Winkles Photography

Don Bentley spent a decade as an Army Apache helicopter pilot, and while deployed in Afghanistan was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and the Air Medal with "V" device for valor. Following his time in the military, Don worked as an FBI special agent focusing on foreign intelligence and counterintelligence, and was a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team member.

Don was kind enough to join co-hosts John Raab and Jeff Ayers on an edition of *Suspense Magazine's* "Beyond the Cover" radio show recently to talk about his latest *Matt Drake* thriller, "The Outside Man."

*The fight for freedom has sent Matt Drake to some of the world's most dangerous spots. This time the war is coming to his front door.*

*Broad daylight on an Austin, Texas street and DIA operative Matt Drake is fighting for his life against a highly trained team of assassins. Who are they? Why do they want him dead? How will he protect those closest to him?*

*The answers will take him into some of the most dangerous spots in the Middle East and will put him in the clutches of an old foe known simply as the Devil. It's a world of double crosses, with no boundaries between the guilty and the innocent. It will take all of Drake's wiles to get out alive.*

John Raab (J.R.): Today we are speaking with Don about the latest in his *Matt Drake* series, "The Outside Man." Talk about action-packed; this is the literal definition. Don, thank you so much for joining us. Hope you are well, and welcome!

Don Bentley (D.B.): *Thank you, it's great to be here!*

J.R.: I know this is your first time on the show, and I want to personally thank you for the *Matt Drake* series. The first book, *Suspense Magazine* labeled as one of the best books of the year. That was your debut in this series, I believe, but you have written other books. You write Tom Clancy, correct?

D.B.: *Yes, that Clancy one is coming out in June.*

J.R.: Awesome. So, take us inside "The Outside Man."

D.B.: *Well done; great lead-in. I gotta say, I have the Amazon page up in front of me to make sure I can remind myself what it's all about. (LOL) I have to say, I wanted to do something different for the second Matt Drake because I'm foolish enough to read my reviews.*

J.R.: Oh no. (LOL)

D.B.: Yes, right? You always ask: Why does this person hate me? But all kidding aside, from a personal influence perspective, I am a kid of the 80's and 90's. I especially love the movies: Die Hard, Lethal Weapon, etc., where two male protagonists come together with cool dialog and action that takes place in a compressed amount of time. That's what I wanted to do with "The Outside Man." I wanted to take number one, "Without Sanction" and pump it up a notch and have it be even faster. Build on what people like and, hopefully, cut out the stuff readers don't like.

Overall, the book is about my protagonist, Matt Drake, a case officer for the Defense Intelligence Agency. His job is to go run and recruit what the intelligence community calls "assets" which, what we in the FBI called, "sources." That was my job in the FBI; run and recruit. What you're basically asked is to go find a person and convince them to work for you and provide you with information. The info they're going to provide you is probably not conducive to them having a long and uneventful life. (LOL) But that's the case officer's job—to convince that person why it's in their best interests to help you and not the other side.

When I was an agent, I got to rub shoulders with a lot of interesting folks from other agencies. There's a group of intel operators that work under what's called 'noc' (non-official cover), which means they live their lives overseas under a completely different identity. Unlike the declared intel officer, this person is operating under a false identity and without the blanket of protection afforded a normal intelligence officer. Because they don't have immunity, they are unacknowledged. If they're caught, in a good scenario they go to jail; in a bad scenario they get put in front of a wall and shot. When those people come home, they're back in America with their family and leave the other life and the dangers of that life far behind. What I wanted to do was twist that in a tale, if you will. My character, Matt, who sometimes operates as a 'noc' came home and was back in his hometown: God's Country, also called Austin, Texas for those of you who don't know. (LOL) He's driving down the road and a bunch of guys try to kill him. So, that world he left behind grabs him on page one of this story and carries him through the rest.

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): You talked about the action and the pacing being amped up a notch for this one. I'm curious: Can you give me an example of how you craft an action scene, and also—when it comes to the third Matt Drake—how you will top yourself again?

D.B.: I did amp it up, though, right?

J.A.: You certainly did.

D.B.: Oh, okay. I didn't want to have to hang up. (LOL) Anyway, both books in the series are written from the first person POV. I did that for a couple of reasons: 1) A lot of folks do that; and 2), Nelson DeMille was a huge influence on me. I remember telling my wife when I read "Plum Island" the first time that I would read about this character, John Corey, even if he was only grocery shopping because he was so interesting. I knew I wanted to write like that but it's hard when you only write first person because you can't see what the bad guy is doing. The tale is only through your character's eyes. So, in "Without Sanction" I had a couple of POV's and I had a whole subplot of what was happening in the White House at the same time. Matt was outraged taking care of business. So in this one, I consciously said to myself, after reading the reviews, "What people like most about the first book is Matt, and not so many views." It's still a thriller, but I wanted to find a way to give the reader more Matt, take out the extra viewpoints for this second book, but keep it a thriller that would hold readers' attention.

There is another book series that's not at all in the thriller category, but I think this guy does a fantastic job with his first-person protagonist. It's Jim Butcher and the books he writes fall under urban fantasy. He does such a good job of layering problem on top of problem on top of problem, and that's what I tried to do with "The Outside Man." I focused more on Matt and added layers, but I made sure not to give the audience whiplash. You know, where it's nothing but gunfight to gunfight to gunfight, because then it starts to lose its shock effect, if you will.

Going back to my movie analogy, in addition to being the perfect Christmas movie, Die Hard is still one of the most amazing action movies because it's so compressed and so well done. However, there are periods of time in between fights where John McClane is figuring things out, talking to Al on the radio, things like that. It's a great study in pacing as well for an action film, so that is what I tried to add into this book.

J.R.: So, Don, for people who don't know your background, I'm gonna go through it a little bit here. For a decade you were an





Army Apache helicopter pilot, you were deployed to Afghanistan, you won the Bronze Star, and the Air Medal with the “V” device for valor—which I don’t understand so you can explain that in just a bit—but then you also were an FBI special agent focusing on foreign intelligence, and worked in counter intel as a special weapons and tactics member which is SWAT. So...I know you have a ton of stories, where you probably have to change the names, but can you give us a little data on Matt Drake and the people he might encounter. And please explain what the “V” device is because I’m curious as hell what that means.

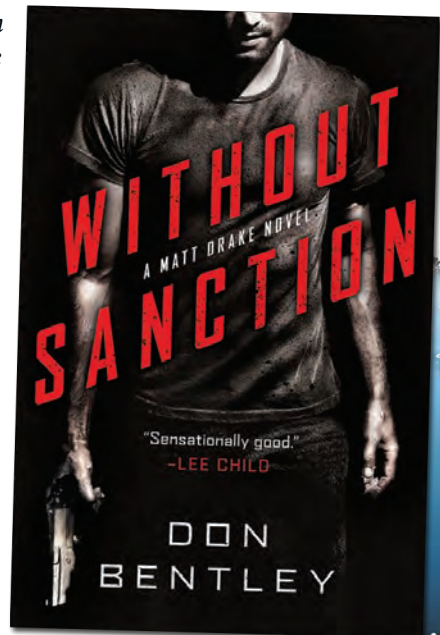
D.B.: *Often times a medal, like the ones I have from Afghanistan, are Air Medals, but the “V” device for valor means something went extraordinarily wrong within an operation. When I was doing interviews for “Without Sanction,” somebody asked me if I was Matt Drake. I am definitely not him, but I have stood in the room with him before. There are folks who write in this genre who are legitimate ninjas that did this incredible stuff; I was a guy who couldn’t figure out what he wanted to do when he grew up, so I did a couple of neat things that put me into contact with people like them...or Matt Drake. When I was an FBI agent, my first job in the first squad I was in was that intelligence squad where I would run and recruit sources and assets. It’s a really fun job and a lot of times it felt like I was living out of a Clancy novel. It was incredible, maybe not so much the stuff I did, but more like the people I was privileged enough to stand in the room with. It’s the same being a SWAT guy.*

*Like I said, there are guys who write in this genre, like Brad Taylor, who are those stand-up ninjas. Brad was a member of Delta Force. I was a SWAT team guy, so I tell this story for people to better understand. Once you make SWAT team guy, you go through training and get to the point where they figure you are not as dangerous to your teammates as you are to the bad guys. So they are ready for you to start participating in operations instead of just being the guy loading the magazines and putting gas in the truck and other kinds of glorious things. My job was the robot guy. It was not because I had a degree in computer sciences or electrical engineering, it was because I was the most junior guy on the team and, therefore, became the robot guy.*

*I had a device that when the team was going out to hit a house, I would breach the home, throw the robot in, and it would drive around and get pictures of the bad guys inside. On my first call out, I had the robot in my hand and, strapped down to my leg is the control for the robot, so its about the size of a legal pad. It’s a piece of equipment that has these antennas coming off of it, a joystick, it looked cool. So, we roll up to the house, I’m pumped, we get out of our SUVs, I slam the door shut and go running towards the house with my robot and controller. I take two steps and practically get whiplash because I had slammed the antenna in the door and ripped it out of the controller. Let us just say that I was not the robot guy for very much longer. (LOL)*

*It was when I was working with my editor, a phenomenal guy, that he said: “When you come to the genre you don’t want to be the next Mark Greaney because there is already one and he’s really good at what he does. You want to bring something that’s the same but different to the genre. Something that says your books should be on the same shelf as Mark, but there should be something different about them.”*

*One of the things I tried to do with that advice was write kind of a witty, funny, first-person protagonist; the second thing was to make him a case officer which is a little bit different than other writers; and third, the character would be a Ranger. Three of those guys I still work with now and their outlook on life is incredible. There’s something called “The Ranger Creed.” To you or me, it would be like a mission statement that Human Resources came up with, but for these guys it defines their existence. In there is a stanza: “Never will I leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy.” That stanza so defined their lives that during the tragedy that was Blackhawk Down, there was a point in time where the special ops folks were in the helicopters, already down, shot dead, and there were a number of guys from Delta Force that were pulling them out while under fire. And even though they knew the guys were dead, and they were taking fire, they would not leave those Americans because they had sworn that oath to each other. I saw that play out first-hand in Afghanistan on June 28, 2005; I was the Air Mission Commander for the operation called “Red Wings” and it went tragically wrong—there were a number of SEALs that were killed. But until every single one of those men was recovered, and every single one of the fallen folks who died in that battle was recovered, the war in Afghanistan literally stopped, because that’s something, again, that’s unique to the special ops community and the U.S. military. As a country we make that promise to folks who go into harm’s way that we will try to bring you home alive, but we make that promise that even if you fall, we will bring you back home. The special operations community takes that even a step further, so I get to hear that story from a friend of mine who was there at the time. He was a Delta Force member, and it just stuck with me. I’ve been so fortunate to rub shoulders with these people, but I would love to give readers who haven’t had that opportunity a window into that community. That’s what “Without Sanction” does, and that’s what Matt Drake is, and hopefully, that’s some of what “The Outside Man” does.*



J.R.: Wow. Fabulous.

J.A.: You had such a fascinating life, I'm curious about your publishing journey. What prompted you to even go to the computer and start writing? I mean, besides fulfilling the dream of being on our podcast.

D.B.: *Great question, Jeff. It took me seventeen years and three books that didn't sell for "Without Sanction" to sell in a 2-book deal. But make no mistake, it was ALL to get to this podcast right now. (LOL)*

*With this, I have culminated in my writing career; I'm supposed to turn in "Target Acquired," but I no longer need to. This is it for me. I have fulfilled my dream....*

*In all seriousness, since being a kid I loved writing; in high school I tried to do a book a couple of times and didn't know what I was doing. I graduated from Ohio State University with the distinction of being the only poly-sci guy who switched to electrical engineering. Doing that, writing on the side, my senior year I had to take a technical writing class which all electrical engineers had to take. We had to write a story about something we built. So, guys were writing about a circuit board they designed or building a computer, etc., and I wrote this funny story about a treehouse I built when I was 12. I turned it in and didn't think anything more about it. But then the next week, the professor gets up, says "I don't ever do this," and then proceeded to read my story. He said it reminded him of being a kid. That was my proudest moment from my collegiate career and it had nothing to do with what I was studying or why I was there.*

*Around 2000, I started getting serious about it and took some online classes to try to figure out what I didn't know about writing a novel. I wrote my first book that got an agent but didn't sell. I wrote the second while in Afghanistan, secured a different agent, and it didn't sell. I wrote a third and was told by a friend about Thrillerfest. I took it there, didn't get an agent, and sulked for an appropriate length of time. But I did meet someone who introduced me to a woman who is my agent now, who actually turned down that novel, but introduced me to author Nick Petrie, who became a great friend of mine. At that time, I had my head in Nick's lap, crying, wondering why I was never going to make it, and asked him what I should do. (LOL) To his credit, he did not hit me, but instead said: "Finish the one you're working on now; this is gonna be the one for you." I went home, it was "Without Sanction," I got Barbara as my agent and sold the 2-book deal. I was also fortunate enough to meet Adam Cogan, a writer of Tom Clancy books, and when I turned in "The Outside Man," he offered me the opportunity to write the Jack Ryan, Jr. books. So, you see, I am an overnight success that took seventeen years.*

J.A.: How different is Ryan from writing Drake?

D.B.: *Very, and for a number of reasons. With Ryan, it was at first super intimidating when you look at what Tom Clancy built and then the phenomenal writers who took over at the helm. A lot of it was learning what all these wonderful writers had gone through, and what I could bring to it. The other hard part is that in the Clancy universe there are two different series running parallel. I'm writing the Jack Ryan, Jr. series and Marc Cameron is writing the Jack Ryan series. They go back and forth; Marc's comes out before mine, so I can be 70,000 words into a book and suddenly am told that the effect the one coming out before mine will make on mine makes mine completely wrong. I thought, "Holy Hell! What do I even do with these 70,000 words now?" Thankfully, it wasn't as bad as what I thought it would be.*

J.R.: I can't believe that. I wouldn't do that to you.

D.B.: *Yeah, well...Marc hates me. (LOL) He's big and tough and was a U.S. Marshal, so I won't say too many things about that. But I believe he's currently in Alaska and it's tough to get here to Texas, so I think it's safe.*

*I can call him one day and say: "Sorry. At the end of my book, Jack Ryan, Sr. has a stroke and he's an invalid, so good luck with that!" (LOL)*

J.R.: Now, best place to find out about you is [donbentleybooks.com](http://donbentleybooks.com), right?

D.B.: *Absolutely.*

J.R.: And what other social media platforms do you typically hang out on the most?

D.B.: *I'm on Twitter at @bentleydonb, and Facebook. I also have a newsletter that goes out once a month, and my publisher does a bunch of giveaways.*

We'd like to thank Don for spending the time. To listen to the interview in full, stop by Suspense Radio on iTunes and Spotify at <https://www.launchpaddm.com/pd/Suspense-Radio>. ■



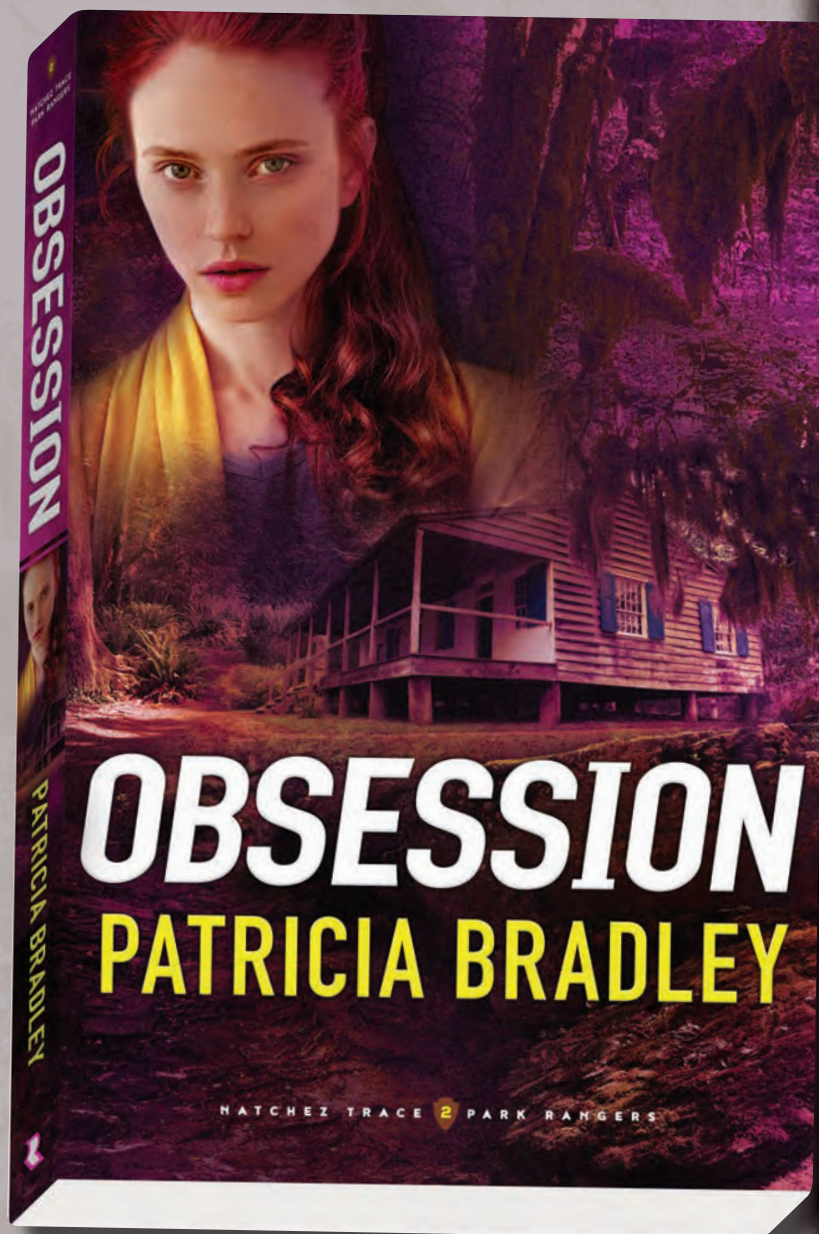
**"A unique series that will  
appeal to fans of Nevada Barr."**

**—Booklist**

Natchez Trace Ranger and historian Emma Winters hoped never to see Sam Ryker again after she broke off her engagement to him. But when shots are fired at her at a historical landmark just off the Natchez Trace, she's forced to work alongside Sam as the Natchez Trace law enforcement district ranger in the ensuing investigation.

To complicate matters, Emma has acquired a delusional secret admirer who is determined to have her as his own. Sam is merely an obstruction, one that must be removed. Sam knows that he has failed Emma in the past, and he doesn't intend to let her down again. Especially now that her life is on the line.

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**DON'T MISS  
BOOK 1**

 **Revell**

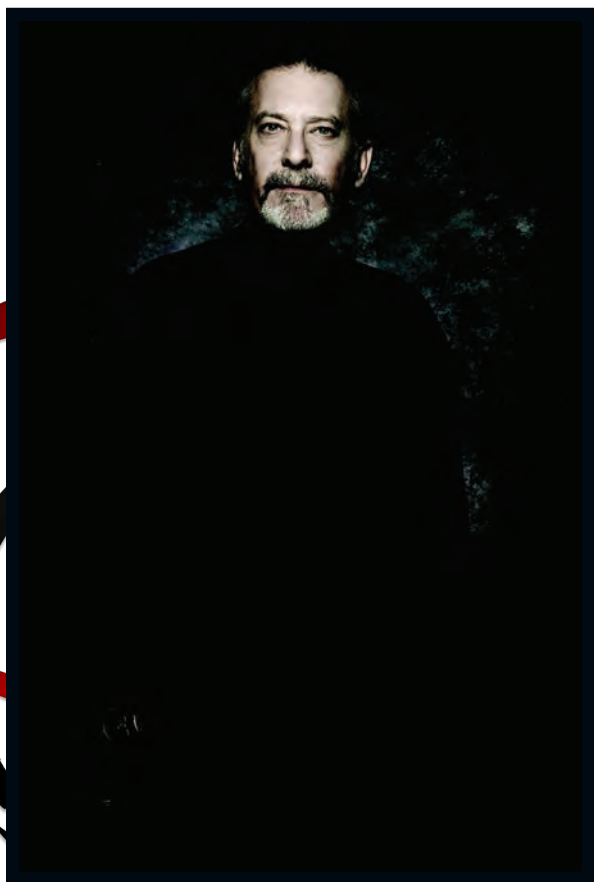


Available Wherever Books Are Sold

# JONATHAN KELLERMAN

Everyone's Favorite Psychologist, Alex Delaware,  
Returns in "Serpentine"

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Ballantine Books 2020



Jonathan Kellerman—American novelist, psychologist, Edgar- and Anthony Award-winning author—best known for his popular mystery novels featuring Alex Delaware, now introduces his latest. The thirty-sixth title in the series, "Serpentine," is yet another in a long line of bestsellers that will have thriller readers beyond excited.

Just recently, Jonathan joined *Suspense Magazine's* "Beyond the Cover" radio show and spoke with co-hosts John Raab and Jeff Ayers to tell all listeners, fans, and readers about this new book, his long and amazing career, and what comes next for his familiar character.

First, let us take a look inside "Serpentine"...

*LAPD homicide lieutenant Milo Sturgis is a master detective. He has a near-perfect solve rate and he's written his own rule book. Some of those successes—the toughest ones—have involved his best friend, the brilliant psychologist Alex Delaware. But Milo doesn't call Alex in unless cases are "different."*

*This murder warrants an immediate call. Milo's independence has been compromised as never before, as the department pressures him to cater to the demands of a mogul: a hard-to-fathom, mega-rich young woman who is obsessed with reopening the coldest of cases—the decades-old death of the mother she never knew. This is Delaware/Sturgis at their best: traversing the beautiful but forbidding place known as Los Angeles and exhuming the past in*

*order to bring a vicious killer to justice...*

John Raab (J.R.): Today we are speaking with #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, Jonathan Kellerman. Readers will know him, certainly, from the excellent *Alex Delaware* series, as well as the other fifty-plus books this man has produced. I believe this latest one is number thirty-six in the series and is called "Serpentine." Now, without further adieu, we welcome Mr. Jonathan Kellerman. Hope you are well, sir, and thank you so much for being with us today.

Jonathan Kellerman (J.K.): *It is my absolute pleasure to be here. Doing great!*

J.R.: Fabulous. Well...we've been in the book business for quite a while now and we've certainly seen *your* name throughout the years when it comes to the amazing *Alex Delaware* series, and other novels. All the way back to 1985, I believe, yet this is the first time we've actually been able to speak to you and we're really excited that you will be talking to us two goofballs about the latest book.

J.K.: *I'm actually a very accessible guy, I swear. I haven't been hiding. (LOL) Except possibly from turmoil or politics...those I hide from. But definitely not you guys.*



J.R.: Delaware has quite a catalog, to say the least. Tell us about “Serpentine.”

J.K.: Well, “Serpentine” is done and I have been just thrilled at the great reviews it has been receiving. It’s also one that received a PW starred review, like you mentioned about your incredible anthology. I’m very happy, I must say, because you never know what people are going to say until the book arrives, so the chatter has been absolutely great.

What I did with this book is: I started off wanting to give myself a challenge. It’s a long-running series, but you always try to grow with each book. I find Delaware is a great vehicle for telling a certain kind of story. Being a trained psychologist myself, I have always found interest in human behavior and motivation, and Delaware allows me to explore that. I think people have also been relating to that factor over all these years. I mean, we’re on #36 and, I could be wrong, but I believe that makes it the longest running crime series ever. I’m definitely amazed, because when you first begin you certainly have no idea that you’ll still be doing a character for the next thirty to forty years.

But, as I began, with this new book I tried to challenge myself by basically starting out with what is, for all intents and purposes, an unsolvable crime. And then being able to solve it. So that’s really what got me writing this particular book: the challenge of it all.

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): Let me ask you, because you said you created this unsolvable crime and went on the journey to solve it, can you tell me if you already solve the crimes before you begin actually writing them?

J.K.: I do, actually.

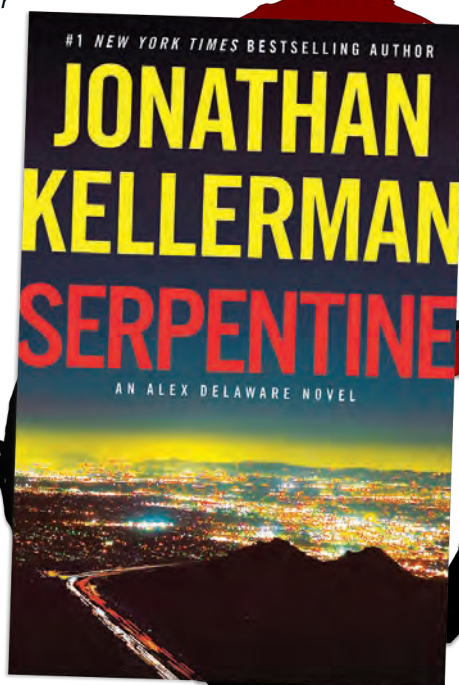
J.A.: What makes this case different? What defines “different” for you? And, along those same lines, with writing so many, do you ever find yourself a bit bored? How do you keep that creativity and originality throughout?

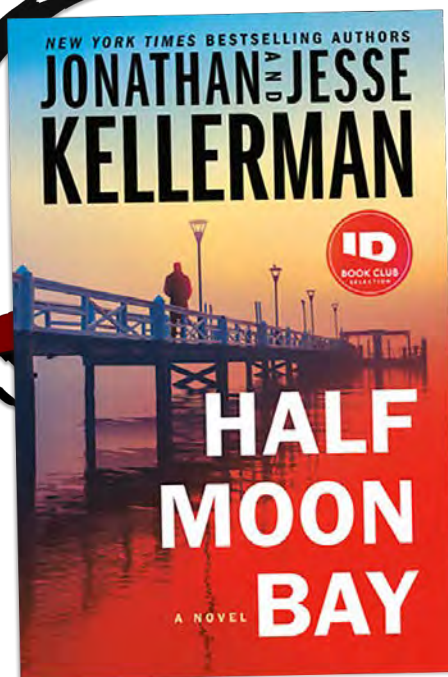
J.K.: For me, the common cases Milo would not call Alex in on are those normal, mostly mundane cases where you simply plod through. But when there’s a psychological aspect to the case, those are the ones where he needs Alex to get involved. I like to concentrate on those. Those “different” cases are the ones that wouldn’t hit the headlines, they would be buried on page 42... bizarre stuff.

That’s what got me first interested in becoming a psychologist, actually, and what carried over into my fiction writing. You know, people ask me: Are you sick of doing it? I have to say, no. It has been going on for years, but I just love writing the series; it’s so much fun because there’s always that challenge for me to be original. I’m always balancing originality with what I like to call ‘the comfort of the familiar.’ In other words, fans who have been with me for decades need to have a sense of comfort, but for those new readers who come in at any point during the series, I want to make sure they don’t feel like it’s all some kind of “inside joke” that only readers who have been with Alex Delaware since the beginning understand. So that, too, is a great challenge for me.

Writer Graham Greene once said there’s only two reasons to write: for fun or for money...and sometimes both. I’m having fun, and I know that’s a bit *déclassé* for me to say because a lot of writers will say the struggle is so hard and they really need the money, etc. But I’m a happy man who simply loves to write books. It’s hard work, I’ll tell you that. I do two to three hours of writing and I’ll be exhausted, but I’m definitely always having fun. I always have a general sense of where I’m going. I do a general outline. I do as much prep work as writing work, like being a surgeon and setting out your tools before you start cutting. I spend six or seven months thinking, plotting, outlining. That said, I’ll begin (and I’m sure you’ve heard this from many others) and when I get to the end and look back at the outline, it’s a totally different book. It does change quite dramatically along the course of the journey.

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J.R.: Now, you've written other books and other series, such as *Petra Connor* books back in the late 90s, I believe. Alex would make cameos in some of those as well, but along the way you kind of stopped with *Petra* and others. Is it because you always have Alex on your mind? You can't distance yourself from him?

J.K.: Well...it's interesting. I did three Delaware books and, at the time, that was a real surprise to me. At first, I certainly never thought I was going to be published; then, I never thought for a second that somewhere along the line writing would take over and become my job. So, I did a book set in Israel because I lived in Israel for a time. We have an apartment there now, so we get to go back, and I was taken over by that country and how much of a hotbed it is of intrigue. Because of that country I wrote "*The Butcher's Theater*" and then went back to Delaware. I then put one of the Israeli detectives into a Delaware novel. When I decided to write from a woman's perspective with the character of *Petra*, I did a couple of those. But it was just too much to write two series at a time, and I thought she would fit nicely into the Delaware series and that he would benefit from having a female perspective during the solving of his crimes. Then the same thing happened once again when I wrote the *Moses Reed* character in my novel "*True Detectives*" about two brothers. I did one book with the brothers and felt I had done their story. But then, all of a sudden, one of them became yet another staple within the Delaware series, being a junior detective.

I love doing a certain type of series. I felt some of the books I'd done led to a finite story and then I just wanted to go back and explore the common themes they may have had with Delaware. Honestly, it's just too much writing three or four books a year. I'm 71 now. Thankfully, I'm a healthy guy with good DNA, seeing as that my mom just turned 101. But I do know that even with all that good stuff, I still don't have the energy I had when I was 40—and, as we spoke about, writing is hard work. So, in essence, I have decided just to concentrate on the Alex Delaware books and, of course, the Clay Edison series I write with Jesse. That isn't to say I won't create a new character someday, but Delaware has always remained that fun, intriguing guy I love. It's the kind of story I really enjoy telling.

J.A.: Ah, well, I like this DNA thing. If you follow Mom, that means I can enjoy Delaware for at least another thirty years.

J.K.: You never know. I really do enjoy it, so as long as Random House says keep coming back, I will do so. I know the job, itself, has grown smaller over time, but my enjoyment has never waned. I also don't want to be a pathetic has-been talking about the way things used to be. I was in a writer's group with guys older than myself at one time, and all they talked about was the past; I like to keep my eyes square on the future. If God grants me continued good health, I'll take advantage of it.

J.A.: I have to say, you were the first author way back when that I met at a book signing, so I've been a fan for quite a while.

J.R.: I have to add, my wife reads your wife Faye's books all the time, as well as yours, so you've been in my bed a lot. (LOL)

J.K.: It's wonderful to bring people pleasure. At first, I had to wrestle with writing. When I was a psychologist, I spent half of that academic time running a program at a children's hospital in L.A. for kids with cancer. That was important stuff, and every day when I came home from work, I was completely exhausted, but I knew that we had done something highly important. I mean, we set up the template that's now used for emotional care for kids with cancer.

Then, I went into private practice and was really helping people. Then, all of a sudden, I got this job where I got to sit and write, and I started to think that I was doing something trivial. But then I would hear from fans and readers about the effect a certain book had on their lives and I would feel rejuvenated. An example is when I wrote "*Devil's Waltz*" which focused on *Munchausen's disease*. When I wrote about it, no one had heard about it—not even the medical community. After it came out, I got letters from doctors and nurses saying things like, you saved this kid's life because we finally knew what he was suffering from, and things like that. So, I thought: this writing stuff could be important, too. It took a while, but I have acclimated myself to that fact...knowing that I'm still doing good work.

J.A.: We were talking about age and I'm curious, how do you tackle the age issue with Alex? I mean, he's seventy this year, correct?



J.K.: Oh, please don't say that. (LOL) The truth of the matter is, you never figure this out. I talked to Robert Parker a while back about his awesome Spenser series and decided that I was going to deal with the age issue by simply not dealing with it at all. Robert said to do what I wanted to do because this was fiction and the whole point was to suspend your disbelief, as they say. Sue Grafton did it in a very clever way with her Kinsey Millhone Alphabet series; each of those basically takes place in one year, or a certain period of time. So, when it came to Alex, I decided to ignore it and simply age him very, very slowly. He started out at my age, 35, but now he's much younger than me. I like the freedom of writing fiction as opposed to what I used to do which was the writing of academic medicine. With the latter, you have to document every sentence, reference every word, be accurate and truthful at all times, etc. Whereas, writing fiction is liberating.

J.R.: There is one thing I have to admit to not seeing—so, if it has happened, I have to apologize for this question—but what I do not remember seeing is any kind of TV series, movie, or something like that with Delaware.

J.K.: Actually, there was one. But since you're young, you probably don't remember. It was *When the Bough Breaks* and Ted Danson starred in it back in 1986, I believe. I rewrote most of the screenplay because it was hideous. But this was before the age of cable TV and something like thirty million people watched it. Many people assumed it would be snapped up, but Ted wanted to be a movie star and not a TV star, so...it never moved forward. Since that time, I've had a lot of experiences. I've made a ton of money on options, deals—I can yell out a lot of names here—but they never seemed to get it. So then, I started trying the streaming thing.

J.R.: My goodness, there are a ton of platforms now—you'd think there would be a ton of people scrapping for original material, and someone like Alex Delaware would be absolutely perfect for, say, Amazon Prime or Hulu.

J.K.: You would think. I have a friend who is a very successful producer and, last year, he and Jesse and I got together to pitch the streaming services those books, and no one was interested. I was shocked, but they said they were into that edgy, youth-oriented stuff.

J.R.: That's why I don't watch that. They bore me. I watched *The Queen's Gambit* on Netflix, but that was the only original material to come along for a while now. Most just bore me.

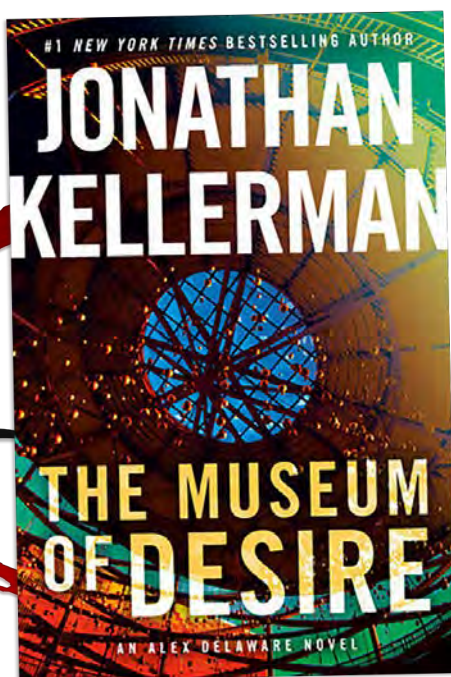
J.K.: Most are formulaic. It's also worse because I write thrillers. I think, with all due modesty, I'm the only guy writing about psychopathology from a psychopathologist character's viewpoint that is actually accurate. I have a real problem with most of what goes down in the TV industry, but others don't. They keep writing this derivative, crappy, same-old screenplays, and if people are happy with that, then so be it.

It's one of those things where if it happens one day, it happens. If it doesn't, that's fine too. I have 90 million books in print, I'm a happy guy, I love writing books, etc. Every time you do a deal, you cede control, which is why I had Jesse along because I really don't trust others. People will try to do screenplays and they just come out so badly. Jesse did a screenplay on "Over the Edge" because I thought that would be a huge hit. A really good story, and he did a great screenplay, but they didn't want to read it. They wanted to have a meeting and simply move on. So, that was fine. It's familiar. It's not that different from dealing with networks because you're still dealing with a lot of untalented people.

J.R.: Kind of like politics. Now they've set the bar so low, there's no bar anymore.

J.A.: Is there a place to see the Ted Danson version?

J.K.: I actually have no idea. Let me know if you guys can find it. (\*) It was a good TV movie, and I thought the acting and directing was very good. It was also a lot of fun because it was shot here in L.A. Ted was a doll and it was a new experience for me because I got to go on set, etc. This is an interesting tidbit: Teddy was executive producing it and he really didn't like the screenplay. My agent said to me, go in there and fix it. So, we sat in the office while Teddy and an actress read the script line by line out loud, and I rewrote the lines as they read them.



*Like I said, I'm a social guy in my personal life, but when it comes to work, I like doing things by myself; I'm not really into collaboration. Dean Koontz is a friend of mine and is known for the fact that he does not like to leave his house. We shared the same agent for a time in Scandinavia, and I remember going to Dean's house and always seeing him there, but nowhere else. I even remember going there and he was not happy about a trip he had to take to L.A. the next day. He hates to travel.*

J.R.: My wife and I went to his home for an interview with him; I definitely remember he had no interest in travelling.

J.K.: *I understand the Koontz factor when it comes to business. In fact, the things I like to do are very "loner-type" things. Professionally, being a psychologist means sitting in the room with one person, or writing by myself; and even my hobbies, like classical guitar or painting, are solitary. A lot of writers will complain about the solitude of it all, but for me it's fantastic because Faye and I raised four kids—we had a household full at one time of animals and children—and now we finally have that peace and quiet.*

J.A.: Let me ask you about Milo and Alex's relationship because, depending on who you approach, there's a different thought behind it...if that makes sense. Some folks will say that Milo and Alex love each other beyond brotherly love; others say, no, no, they're brothers who will do anything for the other one.

J.K.: *Well, I think that first point of view involves somewhat limited thinking, which is what I actually tried to combat when I began the series. I was trying to be original. I did think about writing what I know, being a psychologist, but I don't like books where the amateur psychologist takes care of things all on his own. I believe you need that law enforcement figure/cop to make it balanced. But I definitely wanted to avoid any clichés. I wanted to write about a straight guy and a gay guy having a friendship, which was actually a revolutionary idea back in 1981. But, over time, it evolved. I would get all these great letters from gay people loving the thrillers because most were usually so homophobic, and I got awards and things. But then, slowly, it started to morph into people wondering how Kellerman, as a straight man, could or would write about the gay experience? I think it's bullshit.*

*This is all about brothers. They are each other's best friend. They also share a lot in their backgrounds—from growing up in the Midwest to both having tortured childhoods for different reasons; they are also both detail-oriented, compulsive guys, but very different. They both take their respective training, however, for a common purpose: to catch the bad guy. I see it as a warm friendship. Occasionally they have flare-ups and differences of opinion, but mostly they're brothers. In my mind, Milo thinks Alex is a genius, and he is. He's that super-intelligent guy; a professional who has saved the bacon quite a few times.*

J.A.: I love the trust between the two of them; that's really hard to establish.

J.K.: *And that comes with time. Even though I don't age the characters, I do choose to develop them as people. When Faye and I started getting published—me in 1985; her in 1986—this was what people were calling the second Golden Age of American crime fiction. During parts of the first age, you had some wonderful character-driven stuff. You also had Agatha Christie, who I truly admire. But let's face it, Christie characters do not change. Hercule Poirot is Poirot. Period. It's okay, though, because he's a vehicle for solving a puzzle and she is the great puzzle master. Faye and I chose to write novels about characters that included evolution and change. The only difference with a crime novel is that the crime is what catalyzes all the action. I do get to change and evolve the characters, but I do it in a gradual, slow way; there is always consistency there. Long friendships are important and that's the type of friends Alex and Milo are to me...and each other.*

J.R.: Nice. So, Jonathan, your website at [jonathankellerman.com](http://jonathankellerman.com) is probably the best place for people to find the latest information on you and your novels, is that correct?

J.K.: *Absolutely, and the Random House page.*

J.R.: Fantastic. Readers, the book is "Serpentine" and is, yes, the thirty-sixth title in the *Alex Delaware* series. Jonathan, thank you so much. Hopefully we can meet up one day, when we can do this all safely, and have lunch.

J.K.: *I'd love that! Thanks so much, guys.*

We'd like to thank Jonathan for sitting down with us. To learn more, follow him online at [www.jonathankellerman.com](http://www.jonathankellerman.com).  
\*Note: *When the Bough Breaks*, a 1986 film with Ted Danson, can be found on Amazon Prime. Enjoy! ■



# “Missing and Endangered” Has J.A. JANCE

## Enticing Readers Once Again

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Mary Ann Halpin



J.A. Jance is responsible for a menu of #1 *New York Times* bestselling books and series. After becoming hooked on books while only a second grader—falling in love with Frank Baum’s *Wizard of Oz* series—J.A. knew what her future career was going to be. Her first novel, “Until Proven Guilty,” starred Detective J.P. Beaumont and became her first series in 1985. She followed with character Joanna Brady, creating a phenomenal series set in southeastern Arizona where the author grew up. Add in the *Ali Reynolds* books set in Sedona, AZ, as well as her other thrillers and novellas, and you quickly see why readers have remained entranced by Ms. Jance over the decades, with more hopping on the Jance train with each and every book that appears.

Just recently, J.A. joined *Suspense Magazine*’s “Beyond the Cover” radio show and spoke with host John Raab about her latest title in the long-running *Joanna Brady* series. Let’s now take a quick peek inside this exciting new tale: “Missing and Endangered” ...

*Cochise County Sheriff Joanna Brady’s professional and personal lives collide when her college-age daughter is involved in a missing persons case in this evocative and atmospheric mystery set in the beautiful desert country of the American Southwest.*

*When Jennifer Brady returns to Northern Arizona University for her sophomore year, she quickly becomes a big sister to her new roommate, Beth Rankin, a brilliant yet sheltered sixteen-year-old freshman. For a homeschooled Beth, college is her first taste of both freedom and unfettered access to the internet, and Jenny is concerned that she’s too naïve and rebellious for her own good.*

*Her worries are well-founded because one day Beth vanishes, prompting Jenny to alert campus authorities, local police, and her mom, Sheriff Joanna Brady—who calls in a favor. Beth is found, but Jenny’s concern has unwittingly put her in the crosshairs of a criminal bent on revenge....*

John Raab (J.R.): Today we are speaking with the amazing J.A. Jance about her latest book, number nineteen in the incredible *Joanna Brady* series, “Missing and Endangered.” This is a riveting story, guys, and I am very excited to talk to her about it, as well as other things going on in her world. This is the first time she has been with us on the show. I was, however, lucky enough to meet her about five years ago at a conference. So...thank you so much J.A. for being with us today. I hope you’re doing well!

J.A. Jance (J.A.J.): *I’m just fine, thank you, and I am very happy to be here.*

J.R.: It’s great to finally have you on. You seem to write so much, you have a book come out every eight months, or so. Of

course, you also have three series going on at once, but we were so happy to have the next *Brady* arrive.

J.A.J.: *It's so funny, I feel like it's been so long since my last hardback came out; "Sins of the Father," which was the latest Beaumont book that came out last year. Just when it appeared, COVID hit, so all publication dates got moved back. I swear it got to the point that some people now think I've either retired or I'm dead. (LOL)*

J.R.: Or you're "Missing and Endangered" which is the current title of the latest book! This one, I have to say, was incredibly riveting and has a lot of emotional scenes and pathways that readers go on. Take a minute to tell us what you've put Joanna through this time around.

J.A.J.: *Well, for starters, all my protagonists live complex lives, I must say. When I told a long-ago editor that Joanna was going to get married, she said: "Oh no. She can't do that. She can't get married." I told her that I was sorry, but my detectives don't live solitary lives where all they worry about is feeding their ficus. Since Joanna has kids, a time consuming and completely unpredictable job, and animals to feed, she needed to have somebody there to keep the home fires burning, so to speak. So, I brought Butch into the picture. If I had known at the time that he was going to be her significant other and the father of two of her children, I would have given him a better name. I think that's the only regret I have.*

*This is the advantage of writing a series, though. You get to see characters evolve over time, and as the author, I even stumble over surprises. For example, in the first Brady book, "Desert Heat," Joanna is at home on her ranch with her mother and ten-year-old daughter Jenny, and they're waiting for Joanna's husband to come home and take her out to celebrate their 10th anniversary. Well, Jenny is a bright little thing and she's just had a touch of sex ed class at school; she has counted on her fingers and realized there are not quite enough months between her birthday and her parents wedding day, so she turns to her mom and asks if she's a preemie. (LOL) She wasn't. It was the wedding date that was late. But it was that innocent question, without my knowing it, that set the tone for numerous books that came about in this series. Even much later on, we find out that Joanna's own parents actually had an 'out of wedlock' child that was given up for adoption...so all these things would come out of this one scene in the very first book without my knowing it.*

*Now, in this latest book, we've watched Jenny grow up and she is now a sophomore at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. This book is as much about Jenny and her life as it is about Joanna and the complexities of her situation as she deals with a first grader, a baby, and an officer involved shooting that happens in her department.*

J.R.: It's a spiderweb kind of effect that you take readers on, that's for sure. But when it comes down in the end, it brings itself together. How much of a challenge is it for you to do that? To get so many things working together so that they can end so cleanly on the last page?

J.A.J.: *Well, here's the way I do it. People call me an organic writer. From what I know about organic food, you do it without hormones or antibiotics, I guess. (LOL) I write without outlining. So, what comes into the books is what comes into my head and heart and straight onto the page. Since I write murder mysteries, I start with someone dead, or mostly dead, and then I start to try and figure out who did it and how come. Therefore, I write for the same reason readers read—to find out what's ultimately going to happen. If I outlined the whole book in advance, I would be bored to tears and have no reason or need to write it. I happen to know that my publishers like to have books that are 100,000 words long, give or take 5,000 words in either direction. The reason for that magic number is that 100,000-word books sit in standard shipping boxes.*

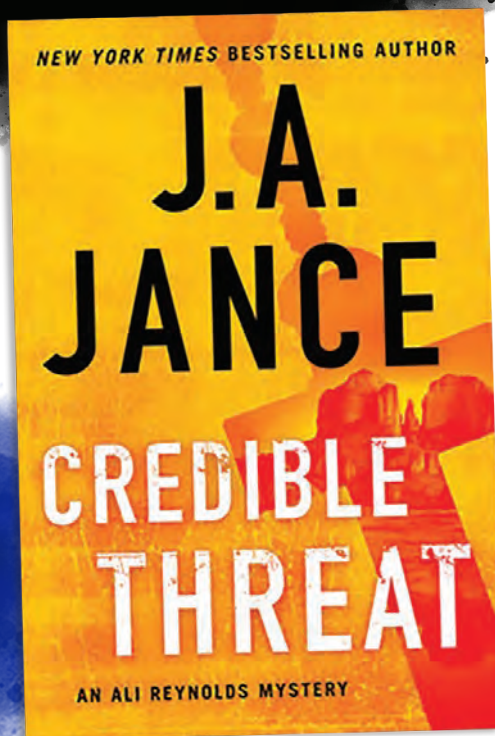
*When I'm writing, I count the words every day. I know how many words I have used and how many words I have left to use. From experience, I know the first 20% of the book is the hardest part to write; the interior is the 60% of slogging through mud; and the last 20% is what I call the banana peel of the book. By that point, I finally know what the end is and I know how many words I have left to use in order to get the people in the right place for the end of the book. That's my magical formula.*

J.R.: But you're still putting the best 100,000 words on the pages and that's what the readers want.

J.A.J.: *Exactly. When I write, I aim for 95,000, because in the process of doing the*







**“This is the advantage of writing a series, though. You get to see characters evolve over time, and as the author, I even stumble over surprises.”**

*final edits and adding in those stray bits of storyline that I haven't, perhaps, seen all the way through, I can come in right on the money.*

J.R.: I wanted to talk about a character in this one, Beth Rankin, the college freshman who is ahead of her time academically, but because of her homeschooling has a situation that is quite complex. What was the thought process behind her?

J.A.J.: Well...I write police procedurals. I didn't know that until somebody said that to me, by the way. I thought I was writing murder mysteries. (LOL) I've never been in law enforcement. I am not a cop; I am not an attorney. Everything I know about law I learned when I was a librarian. By doing research. And part of my research for writing these books is watching true crime on TV; it is there I've learned how law enforcement agencies operate, how they approach a case, and how they look for information, suspects, etc.

*I'm a real Joe Kenda fan of American Detective on TV. In the course of watching those shows, I watched an episode that focused on how people use the internet to fool people into believing they are something they're not. One of the tales focused on a teenage girl who was being deceived by a man in his thirties into believing he was her eighteen-year-old boyfriend. Eventually he persuaded her to take naked photos of herself, which he then threatened to post on the internet. In addition, years ago I met a lady who I had dealt with through emails but we were going to meet and have dinner in Michigan. She was telling my husband and I about her fiancé and how they had picked out wedding rings, chosen a condo, chose their dish patterns, etc. Then, long into the conversation, she told us that she'd never met the man in real life—that they had only met over the internet. And we both looked at this woman, who was a trained psychologist, and said: “Are you nuts?”*

J.R.: The profession doesn't always mean they're smart.

J.A.J.: Our question was to basically get her to stop and think. Thankfully, she hired a PI and it turned out that this guy had five other fiancées at the same time. So, it turned out while writing this book, I took both those experiences and they came together to create Beth Rankin. My character is very smart, but her domineering mother has protected her from everything out there in this world. When she is free and gets a computer, she becomes a sitting duck for that kind of criminal. Jenny is wiser, and Beth ends up being her roommate, thankfully.

J.R.: When you started seeing how Beth would work, did you definitely know she was going to be part of a Brady novel? Do you already know which series these characters are going to fit in?

J.A.J.: Not actually, no. I had no idea it was going to be a novel when I saw that Kenda show, or met that woman in Michigan. It just went into the catalog of stuff in my head. My husband says my head is a whirring blender. He says stuff goes in there and comes out through my fingertips on the keyboard entirely different.

*I can give you a good example of that. In the early 60s, we were living on the Mexican border near Bisbee, AZ. My sister had this little ranch and on it she had a horse named Warpaint, a cow named Shirley, a pig whose name is lost to me now, and an Australian shepherd named Smokey Joe. Out of those animals, the smartest was Warpaint. Whenever it rained, the electric fence would stop working and he would let every one of the animals out the gate. When my sister came home one day that happened, she knew Smokey Joe could be counted on to help round up the pig and Shirley. But once Warpaint was out in the pasture, no one could just walk up to him with a rope or halter in their hand; he would stay just out of reach. This one day, my sister snuggled up to him, carrying nothing mind you, slipped her hand up under her shirt, removed her bra, and used that to lead him home. That happened decades before I was a writer, but that little nugget of info was still sitting in my head. Years later, when I was writing book number five of the Joanna Brady series, “Skeleton Canyon,” she was pinned down by gunfire in one scene and needed a way out. So, what does she do? She rips off her bra and uses it as a slingshot to send rocks in the direction of the villains. I cannot tell*

you how my sister using her bra as a halter turned into Joanna Brady using hers as a slingshot, but that's what happens when it goes through that whirring blender of mine.

I also have stumbled across characters that are highly emotional for me, like Latisha in the Brady book "Field of Bones." When I'm writing, periodically one character will sort of rise up out of nowhere and capture my attention. Latisha turned into the centerpiece of that novel, and much like her, Beth Rankin is one that breaks my heart and involves me emotionally. She's a heartbreak for me, and I think readers will feel the same way.

J.R.: That's what I thought, as well. All I could think of was riveting. Because that's what this book is; packed with emotion and human drama, it really is fantastic.

J.A.J.: Thank you so much. My head is swelling.

J.R.: So, the book came out February 16th and then, you just decided...why not? Because on June 1st the next *Ali Reynolds* book will come out. Too much time on your hands? (LOL)

J.A.J.: Actually, I had just finished writing "Missing and Endangered" at the beginning of the pandemic. For a while, the best I could do was write my weekly blog, which I have on my Facebook page and my website. But then I finally got a grip and started writing "Unfinished Business," the next Ali book. It has to do with what was thought to be a long-unsolved case where a young college grad was employed by Ali's husband long before he ever met Ali. The Ali books are set in AZ, but the characters in this are from Seattle. I could see that this was essentially a cold case. I could also see that the person to deal with a cold case in Seattle would be your friend and mine, J.P. Beaumont. I thought that this would be a perfect case for him to work on, but I also needed Ali. So, I negotiated a peace treaty between my two publishers, Harper Collins and Simon and Schuster, to let Beaumont appear in a Reynolds book.

Also, the Reynolds books are written in third person, often through multiple points of view; while the Beaumont books are first-person, strictly told through J.P.'s eyes. I assumed, when I began, that he would be third person like everyone else is in the Ali books, but then...he is so strong. I introduced him in third person, but he wouldn't go. When Beaumont steps on stage, he does so in all his cantankerous glory. And within a couple of pages, I was back in his head, hearing his thoughts, etc. I think readers of both series will get a kick out of it.

J.R.: Is there anything to do with the pandemic that you decided to include in this book? Because I am wondering how much authors are going to do that with their stories.

J.A.J.: Fortunately, for me, my characters are still in 2018, so I don't have to deal with it. I'm glad because my characters are law enforcement; I already have to be in this whole era where everything law enforcement does is evil and suspect, which is hard on authors who write police procedurals.

J.R.: Makes sense. I mean, every occupation has bad apples, but that doesn't mean *everyone* in that occupation is one. I think people need to remember that.

J.A.J.: Exactly.

J.R.: Now, is the best place for readers to find out information on you and your latest titles, your website?

J.A.J.: Yes, at [www.jajance.com](http://www.jajance.com). However, I also am on Facebook, and I do answer all my email. If someone sends me a letter at [jajance@me.com](mailto:jajance@me.com), I will respond to them all. In fact, I just responded to one tonight where a reader asked why I had changed the name of the interior decorator from book number four to a new name in book number...I think it was 23. I wrote back and explained that between 1984 and now my life has changed, and I wanted to now honor our own interior decorator. So, as you can see, I respond to them all.

J.R.: That's great. Okay, everybody, "Missing and Endangered" is out now and, don't forget the next *Ali Reynolds* book hitting the shelves on June 1st. J.A., thank you so much for coming on. We have to do this more often.

J.A.J.: That would be great. I'm here and I'm available!

We are honored to have had this time to speak to J.A. Jance. If you'd like to read about her books and keep up to date with J.A., visit her website at [www.jajance.com](http://www.jajance.com). ■



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—KATHY REICHS  
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or assisted death?

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Terrifying.  
Compulsively  
readable.”

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How far can a  
profound personal  
loss drive  
someone toward  
darkness?

“Formidable,  
human, and  
thoroughly  
authentic.”

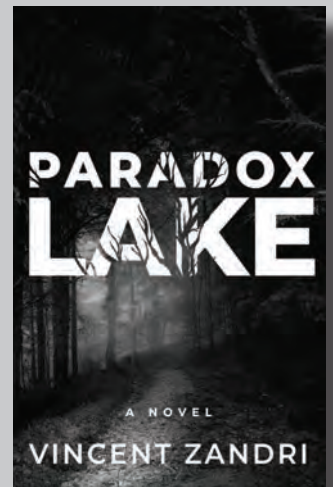
—MEG GARDINER  
EDGAR AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



She was a  
mega-celebrity—  
he was a billionaire  
businessman—  
now he's dead  
—she's in jail

“Tough,  
stylish,  
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A tranquil  
cottage—a  
beautiful lake—  
a lurking evil

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# If You Missed it . . . Head Back to ***HARPER'S ISLAND***

By John Raab

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Actors

TWELVE YEARS AGO, A SHOW APPEARED ON CBS THAT ASKED THE QUESTION: “Who will die next?” Well...that was just the start of it. The thirteen-episode show, *Harper's Island*, was a lot more than just guessing who would die; it was also asking why, how, who did it, and how is this going to end?

I was able to contact three of the actors who played in the show to answer some of those very questions. Now, I won't put in any spoilers, but you *will* find some hints. Brandon Jay McLaren (played Danny Brooks), Chris Gauthier (played Malcolm Ross) and David Lewis (played Richard Allen), were the three guys who pulled back the curtain and showed us what happened behind the scenes.

First, let's begin with a little bit of history. The show starts out with Abby Mills (played by Elaine Cassidy), coming back home to Harper's Island, seven years after John Wakefield murdered six people, including her mother. Abby's father was the sheriff at the time, and still is, and hasn't seen his daughter since he sent her away to California after the horrific events. Abby's best childhood friend, Henry Dunn (played by Christopher Gorham), is getting married to the girl of his dreams, “Trish” Wellington (played by Katie Cassidy). Henry and Trish have decided to get married on Harper's Island, the place where they met and fell in love. In the first episode, you are immediately thrown into the action, as the boat holding the wedding party and some guests depart Seattle for Harper's Island. We see Trish's cousin underwater, tied to the bottom of the boat. What happens next? Well...let's just say the cousin never makes it to the island.



**Brandon Jay McLaren**

For the first half of the show, fans can see that there's someone on the island wanting to bring back the nightmare of what played out seven years earlier. After the explosive ending in episode six, the wedding party and many of the guests still have no idea that there's a killer on the loose.

All three of the men I interviewed—David, Chris and Brandon—said the same thing. None of the cast starring in the TV show actually knew who the killer was, and nobody knew who was going to die. However, the night before filming was to take place for the next episode, if your phone rang that meant your time was up. Chris said that he thought he would be out a lot earlier than when his demise actually happened, and was happy to make it so far. I will say that, when you see Chris's character Malcolm “depart” the show, he did do his own stunt.

David also recalled his own death; how he was tied around the waist and, without warning, yanked hard off screen. He was hoping to complete the scene in one take, but that didn't happen, and so he was pulled again and again, only to come back in freezing cold temperatures to be hung on a tree post. By the way, when you see that, it is actually David Lewis hanging there. Brandon got off lucky when it came to dying. After a lengthy fight with the killer, he was simply stabbed in the head.



The best part of this show was the story. While you have to suspend your disbelief in a couple of spots, it's written so well and the characters are all so well-acted, you can't help but feel very emotional when your favorite doesn't last into the next episode. The only way the story works is by having all these ingredients and a director who makes sure they all play well together.

Trish Wellington comes from money—a whole lot of money. Henry was a summer islander who worked on the Wellington boat for several summers. Abby is a broken girl; she lost her mother, her father sent her away, she left without saying goodbye to her boyfriend, Jimmy Mance (played by C.J. Thomason), and now returns to the place that has caused her nothing but pain. Trish's father, Thomas Wellington (played by Richard Burgi), is catering the entire event for his youngest daughter. Trish's sister, Shea Allen (played by Gina Holden), is married to Richard and they have a daughter by the name of Madison (played by Cassandra Sawtell), who is one of the key players in the mystery. When Trish's mother was murdered, her father later married a younger woman—Katherine Wellington (played by Claudette Mink)—who wasn't exactly at the top of Trish's "best women to be my stepmother" list. When you add in the rest of the wedding party: the past friends of Abby still living on the island, Sheriff Charlie Mills (played by Jim Beaver), that is obsessed with the past, and Henry's brother J.D. Dunn (played by Dean Chekvala), who has mental issues, and the drive to find the truth, you have a bubbling cauldron that can only boil over.



**David Lewis**

Brandon, Chris and David all agreed that the cast was like a close-knit family. The set was fun, everyone got along, and that translated to the screen perfectly. After the show, they had an e-mail strain, started by Jim Beaver, so they could all stay in touch. It was a funny coincidence, because when I contacted members to talk to, the e-mail strain had just started up again. It definitely showed that, after all these years, they were still catching up and talking over old times.

One thing that was supposed to happen, as told by David, was that *Harper's Island* was a series that was planned to continue. They were going to maybe have a cruise ship mystery, and mysteries on other sites, which would have made this *American Horror Story* before *AHS* was even an idea in someone's mind. For some reason, the first season of *Harper's Island* and its thirteen episodes is, sadly, all we have. I would love to see someone pick up the ball and bring back this premise again, maybe a sequel, which could happen. When you finish viewing the series, you will see exactly what I mean.

Many shows have to decide: "Is this a character driven show or a plot driven show?" The great thing about *Harper's Island* is that it's both. The



**Chris Gauthier**

characters are so well-defined and the story is so well-laid out, you will get lost in the many side stories that develop, along with seeing how the characters evolve when the tension is raised to the highest level.

Now that we are finally being able to venture out of our houses, see loved ones, and eat inside of restaurants again, I guarantee you can still find the hours needed to watch this show. I suggest watching no more than two episodes at a time. You will need the extra time to sit back and digest what's going on. Just know, the killer of the show isn't revealed until episode ten.

I find it extremely cool that, while us fans were getting shocked and surprised with each episode, so was the cast.

Enjoy! ■



# RULES OF FICTION

## "Dream Cults & Our Fear of the Unexplained"

By Ken Brosky

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



*Why did you keep all this, Mom?*

But of course there was no answer to that question here. I sat back on my heels and closed my eyes. The silence was ringing. And to the darkness around me, I felt a hundred blood-red hands slipping quietly over the eaves.

Questions lurk in every chapter of Alex North's fantastic novel, "The Shadows." The answers come slowly and deliberately, just the right pace to keep you on the edge of your seat. North's book begins with a murder in the present that's eerily similar to a much older case: two boys, sacrificing a child, in the hopes of entering a mysterious dream-world. The blood sacrifice is a necessary payment.

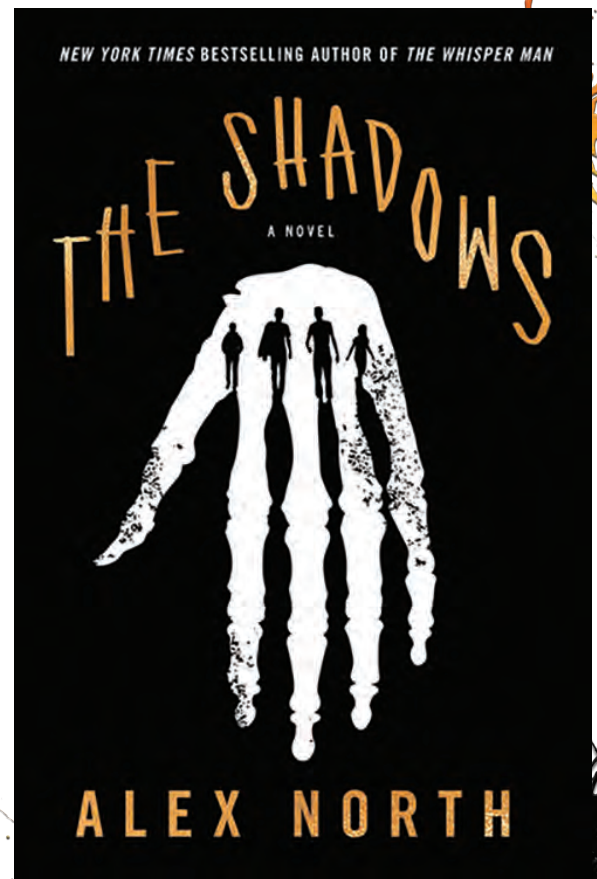
Paul Adams returns to his hometown shortly after this copycat killing, and decades after the original ritualistic murder. He knew the boys who performed the first sacrifice, and it isn't long before he finds himself piecing together the mystery of why another murder has happened under similar circumstances. North's main character discovers enough clues to keep readers satisfied, while also throwing in a handful of twists that shed light on what at first glance seem unexplainable.

This is important, because the book's antagonist, Charlie, is a believer in the unexplainable. Charlie claims to have seen proof that it's possible to be guided into a dream-world, but only at a cost. And Charlie's role in the first murder—to say nothing of his subsequent disappearance—only adds to the tension. Is it possible to enter into another world? And is blood the only currency?

I love books like this. I love following Paul through his amateur investigation, going back to the events that led up to the original ritual murder and watching how Charlie's influence infected a close group of friends. As a reader, I was right there with Paul every step of the way, constantly worried about him and finding myself questioning what was real.

Paul is the key to understanding what makes "The Shadows" so enjoyable. He's a skeptic, and through his viewpoint the reader gets a rational explanation for all the strange events occurring, as evidenced in one particular scene where he happens upon an Internet message board filled with people who worship Charlie:

...But even worse were the posts from people who appeared to believe the impossible. Charlie had thought a sacrifice would allow him to vanish into the





dream world forever, and there were people online who genuinely believed he had managed it.

Paul's skepticism—and his uncertainty when strange events begin to unfold—lets the reader feel comfortable entertaining the possibility of supernatural events occurring. It's a masterful writing technique, too.

### HOW DOES THAT WORK?

Every suspense writer who dabbles in the supernatural or unexpected grapples with the same problem. How much do I need to explain? How do I get information across in a way that doesn't feel...well, cheap?

Here's one fun answer: *Duality*.

Take "The Shadows" as an example. At its core, you have Paul (the protagonist) and Charlie (the antagonist). Charlie believes that people can share lucid dreams. He believes that, in these shared dreams, there's a mysterious figure who can transport people to another world. Paul doesn't believe in any of this...but he also can't explain everything that's happening. This gives the reader license to suspend disbelief and follow Paul in his investigation even when things delve into the paranormal.

So try this writing exercise: create two characters. Don't worry about plot right now. I'll lay out the basic guidelines and you can come up with the rest.

*Character A: The Believer* - Give this person a name and some physical characteristics. Then assign a belief that he or she fervently believes is true. Have fun with this! Use Google for inspiration. The weirder it is, the more fun you can have with this exercise.

*Character B: The Doubter* - Do the name and physical characteristics first. Then give the person a reason NOT to believe Character A. Create tension between the two that goes beyond their disagreement about this particular belief.

Now put the two of them in a scene. Get them arguing. Get them fighting. Let this conflict between belief and doubt be the driving force of the scene.

And then write the rest of the story... ■

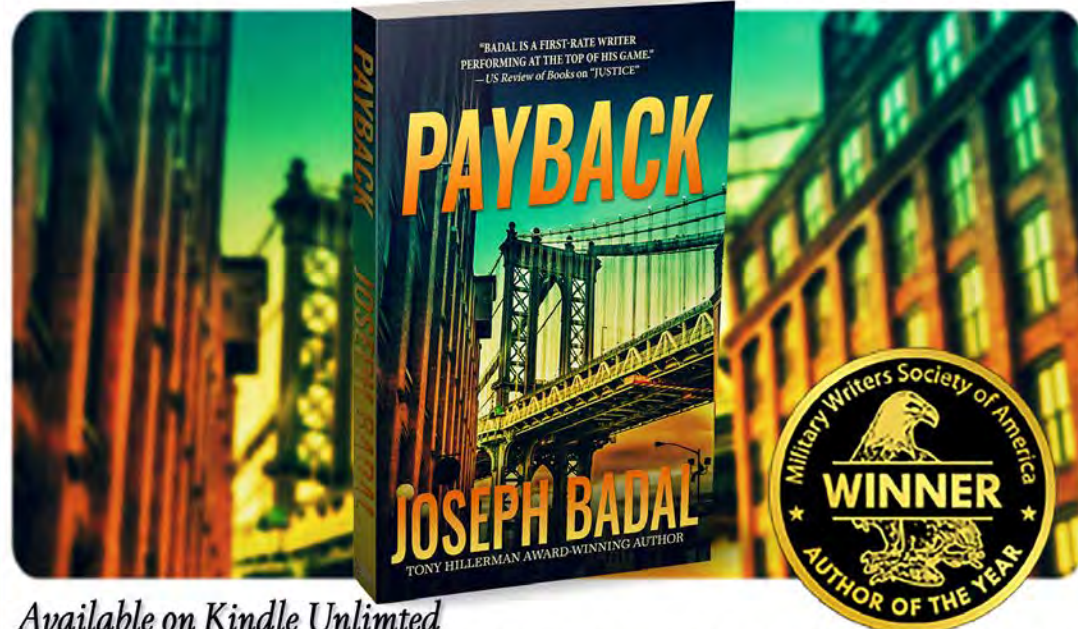
*Ken Brosky is a professor of creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He's been published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Portland Review, and Mystery Weekly. To get notified every time this blog is updated, [join the Pure Fiction substack!](#)*

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# INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS

## *The Incredible Talent of* PARRIS AFTON BONDS

Interview by Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Rick Parent



Parris Afton Bonds is the epitome of what one would call a “busy lady.” Being the mother of five sons, and the author of nearly fifty published novels, she spent her free time (*LOL*) over the years being the co-founder and first vice president of Romance Writers of America, as well as the co-founder of Southwest Writers Workshop (SWW).

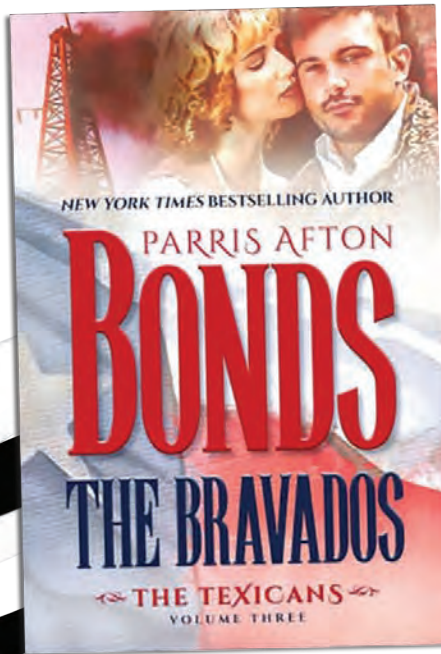
Being declared by *Nightline* on ABC as being one of three best-selling authors of romantic fiction, this *New York Times* bestseller has been featured in major newspapers and magazines, while having her works published in more than a dozen languages. It’s also a fact that the esteemed “Parris Award” was established in her name by the SWW, and is presented to a published writer who has ‘given outstandingly of their time and talent to other writers.’ This honor has been granted to prestigious authors such as, Tony Hillerman and Pulitzer nominee Norman Zollinger.

Taking some time out of her highly busy schedule, Parris sat down and spoke with the incredible Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine* about her life, her books, her passion for research, her ongoing projects, and

so much more. Readers, enjoy!

Joseph Badal (J.B.): I’ve read several of your books and am amazed at the depth and breadth of historical content you include in them. Just to name a few, “The Calling of the Clan,” which was released in 2016, takes place in pre-Revolutionary War North Carolina; “When the Heart is Right,” released in 2019, deals with New Mexico in the 1920s; and *The Texicans* series is placed in pre-statehood Texas. How much time do you typically dedicate to researching the historical context of your stories?

Parris Afton Bonds (P.A.B.): Typically, Joe, research for me is an ongoing project through the many drafts of a novel. An idea snatches my imagination. I begin in the outer of concentric circles around the core’s idea: peripheral questions pertaining to “Why” and “Who”, with each inner circle of investigation and research focusing closer on “What” and “Where” and “How.” These last three topics can be vast, and it is my job to reduce that information to a minimum—to information that will enhance the sense of place and time, and of credibility. I strive to prevent an overload of facts that impede the story’s flow. I continuously



## “Why do we lessen the value of the literary works of Daphne Du Maurier, Jane Austin, Edna Ferber, or Diana Gabaldon because they write Romantic Fiction?”

*remind myself that I am not writing a history book. All this research occurs throughout the writing of the novel. Usually, I have files for a book entitled, “Notes 1,” “Notes 2,” “Notes 3,” etc. The “Notes 1” file folder contains an enormous number of ideas and information for the story. Each successive folder compresses the information to only those few elements vital to breathing life into my novel and my characters.*

J.B.: What are the resources you use to research the time periods and characters used in your books?

P.A.B.: *Essentially, the basics, Joe. Of course, I rely on resources covering clothing, furniture, customs, hairstyles, timelines (chronology), etymology, etc. However, when I am lucky enough to snag interviews or memoirs, this is the icing on the cake. With each book, I try to travel to the book’s location(s).*

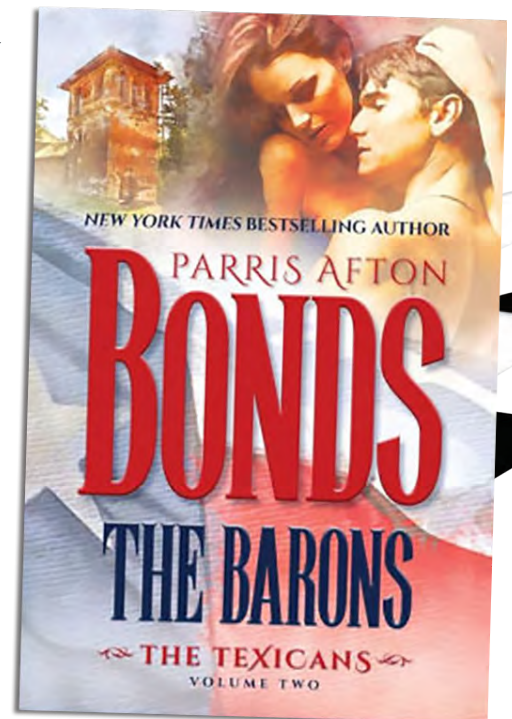
J.B.: The first book in *The Texicans* series, “The Brigands,” seemed to be based on actual occurrences. The migration of characters like Englishman Lord Paladin and Irishman Niall Gorman to Texas reminded me of actual migration patterns from Europe and America’s East Coast to the American West. Was there a particular event or character in American history that caused you to want to write about this migratory trend?

P.A.B.: *It is often a footnote or an off-handed remark that sets the spark to my powder keg of imagination. Now, I hail from Texas and know its history. At least, I thought I did. I knew that upheavals across Europe caused migration to Tejas, a Spanish (and later Mexican) province. When I read that in the mid-19th century the predominant language was not Spanish, but German, I was blown away. But, more importantly, I realized the Tejanos who fought at the Alamo, the Battle of Goliad, and the Battle of San Jacinto got short-changed in Texas’s illustrious history. They were not given due credit. I wanted to retell that portion of Texas history by including the other ethnic groups which participated in creating this great state.*

J.B.: Your latest novel, “The Bravados,” your third book in *The Texicans* series, was recently released. Can you tell us if a particular historical figure or event inspired you to craft this series?

P.A.B.: *“The Bravados” covered so many heroic figures—President Theodore Roosevelt; Claire Barton, founder of the Red Cross; the King of the Wildcatters Glen McCarthy; and so many more authentic characters. But the main female character, Angel Obregon, was based upon—drum roll here—Shirley Temple’s role in the film, Little Miss Marker.*

J.B.: You have been classified as a Romantic Fiction writer. Do you feel that putting you in that category does you justice, in that Romantic Fiction is often misconstrued as being narrower in content than it really is? Your novels, like many in the genre, are as much about suspense and history as they are about romance.





P.A.B.: Joe, I am glad you addressed this topic, because I, too, am baffled—even after more than forty years as co-founder of Romance Writers of America—why Romantic Fiction is denigrated. Why do we lessen the value of the literary works of Daphne Du Maurier, Jane Austin, Edna Ferber, or Diana Gabaldon because they write Romantic Fiction? A major number of the classics I have read have contained a strong element, the major element, in fact, that is romantic fiction but are classified as Historical Fiction. “Dr. Zhivago” comes to mind as a perfect example.

J.B.: What historical period do you most enjoy writing about?

P.A.B.: I confess, I prefer the past and the present to the future. Certainly, I avoid dystopian novels. I always prefer the happy-ever-after ending, because, if not, then what is the point of our existence?

J.B.: What are you working on now? What is the setting of that book, and what event and historical figures inspired you to pursue this story?

P.A.B.: In alluding to your title, “Inspired by Actual Events,” I am dancing on sunshine that you asked about this. Perhaps a few of your followers will remember Paul Harvey’s “The Rest of the Story” radio program. So, here I am researching for a work-in-progress about El Paso, and I stumble across this: Carmelita Torres, a seventeen-year-old domestic maid in Juarez, Mexico in 1917 leads “The Bathhouse Riot.” Rebellious against her private parts being inspected by the U. S. Public Health Department and being forcefully sprayed like cattle with a chemical mixture (prevention against the deadly typhoid fever, spread by lice, brought back by U.S. soldiers returning from WWI), she refuses to get off the international streetcar—along with twenty-nine other domestic maids—which crosses the bridge between Juarez and El Paso. The riot she led shuts down the Stanton Street Bridge for three days. Thousands protest. Eight are arrested, among them the housemaid, Carmelita. Two rioters are hanged, but she disappears from history. (Google this and the mind-boggling photos).

Now, the Rest of the Story: This horrendous fumigation of workers crossing the bridge spanning the Rio Grande River between Juarez and El Paso continued well into the 1950s. However, in the 1930s, Nazi Germany learns what the U.S. Public Health Service is doing with the fumigation, and uses these same chemicals, not only to delouse Jews the Nazis are arresting, but by upping the chemical strength, they kill Jews en masse. And there you have the Rest of the Story—and my new work-in-progress. Its working title: “The Bathhouse.” I want to imagine what became of our valiant Carmelita Torres.

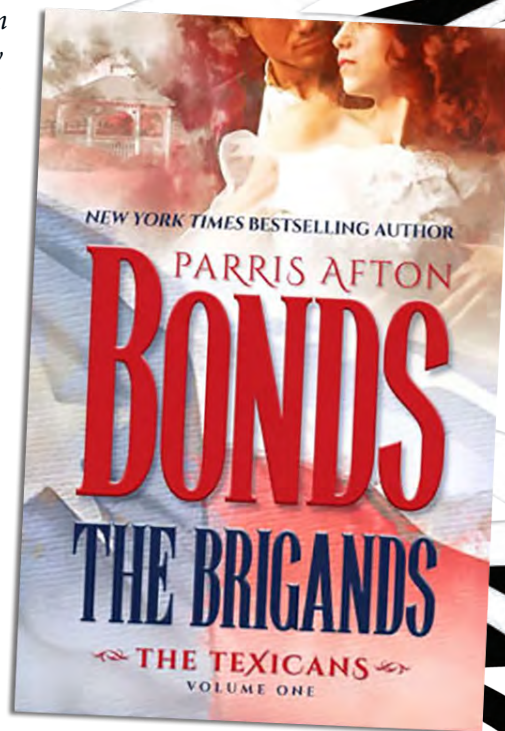
J.B.: Since your first book was published, the publishing business has dramatically changed. Please share with us one change that has been good for the industry and one which has been negative.

P.A.B.: I feel many extraordinarily talented but unrecognized writers have been given an opportunity, denied them before the era of digital publishing, to get their literary efforts before the public. The downside? The works of these gifted authors are now often buried amidst the proliferation of Indie publishing, alas.

J.B.: I understand you have five sons, and I assume you must have at least a few grandchildren. How do you balance time between family and research, writing, and book promotion?

P.A.B.: Joe, isn’t that what life is about for each of us? Fine-tuning that balance—the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual? Sometimes, I feel like one of those participants on the old Ed Sullivan Show—desperately dashing from one stick to another to keep the plates spinning. However, I feel so fortunate to have it all—the cake and the icing. I am being paid to follow my passion, and my family supports me. Family is everything. As are friends—and thank you, Joe, for this opportunity to talk about my latest novel “The Bravados” and my next, “The Bathhouse.”

Thank you, Parris, for spending the time with us. To learn more and keep up-to-date on her upcoming releases, go to: [parrisafontbonds.com](http://parrisafontbonds.com). ■



# Cozy VILLAGE

By Tom Halford

IT'S A LOT LIKE SWIMMING. I like to exhale really hard and spread my arms and my legs. You can float, and you can sink. You can paddle around and watch everybody. If you hold your breath, then you can rise up above the tree line.

I don't know how long I've been dead. Time doesn't work the same way here as it does in the before death. It's almost like you're in a massive pool, and you can move forwards or backwards. You pop in and out of the linear.

It was in Mabel's backyard when I had the stroke. I'm not sure how many times I watched myself die. Maybe one hundred times. Everything else was blurry. It was as if I was being forced to watch. First my arm got numb, then the side of my face. I couldn't understand the words coming out of Mabel's mouth.

After I died, I knew what she said to me. Maybe I watched it one million times. Her words. They filled me with a helpless fury, but they've also helped me make sense of so many things in my life. Everything that's happened in Cozy Village since Mabel arrived. All of the murders. It all made perfect sense.

I thought that I would have to watch my death for all of eternity. But just like in the *before* death there are stages, and a change came. I was able to watch what happened *after* I died. I could see other souls. I could see their faces and tell who they were in the before death.

Cassie hasn't appeared here yet. I spend most of my time watching her in the before death. I can go all the way back to the day that she was born, and I first held her in my arms.

I move forward in time and watch the routine that Cassie and I developed once she got a bit older. We used to busk on Fletcher Street, just the two of us. We had this slight-of-hand routine that people loved.

Cassie was one of those perfect little performers. Cute as anything, she had these big cheeks on her and bright eyes, and she was funny. She came up with these one-liners and knock-knock jokes that had people rolling on the street laughing. We were good, and the proof was in my hat at the end of each day. People would throw a five or ten in after each show. On a good day, we banked around five-hundred bucks.

I think we were the reason that Mabel stayed in town. She took to Cassie and me straight away.

It's strange to know someone before they become famous. Before the news cameras started following Mabel around, before the documentary crews began asking her for interviews, before she became known for solving all of the crimes that the police couldn't solve, she was just a nice, middle-aged British lady who liked a strong cup of tea. Just another tourist in North America with a swanky English accent.

Mabel didn't seem too impressed at first. She leaned on her umbrella, adjusted her felted wool cap, and looked down her nose at us. But once I started my card routine and Cassie started her banter, I could see something in Mabel's face change. She was hooked.

I walked up to Mabel at one point during the show, and I held up a British passport. I opened it and asked, "Are you Mabel Coriander?"

"That's me."

"I see you've been all over the world, Ms. Coriander."

"Never a place as magical as this," she remarked.

I handed her back her passport and heard her whisper, "Astounding."

She stuck around after the show and asked to take us to the teashop. We sat at the window and watched people walk by. She kept asking Cassie and me about everyone we saw. She wanted names and jobs and routines. She wanted to know what they were like. She said she was fascinated. She wanted to know everything about Cozy Village.

Over time, Mabel became a fixture about town. In the spring, I helped her move into her cottage on the edge of Cozy



Village. She had her first case at the end of that summer. A tourist—identified as a man from Saint John—was found dead outside of the church. He had been missing for some time.

There was a crowd of people around the body. One of the local fuzz, Constable Winnie Blase, came by to take a look at the commotion. The crowd parted when they saw her.

Winnie lifted the radio up to her mouth, reported a number to them, and then began to go through the motions of securing the crime scene. You could tell there was a set of things she needed to do as the first officer on the scene, but she didn't seem particularly interested in doing them.

Then Mabel spoke up. An English accent has a unique power in this part of the world. It has the aura of sophistication, wisdom and class. I'm not sure why that is, but when Mabel spoke, people listened.

"Officer Blase," said Mabel, "may I comment on the scene at hand?"

Winnie turned to look at Mabel, her face communicating a mix of amusement and exhaustion. "You may," said Winnie.

"That man has a flower in his hand, and that particular type of flower is a forget-me-not," said Mabel.

"Thank you, Ms. Coriander," answered Winnie as she turned to see if there were any other officers on their way.

"As I'm certain you already know," continued Mabel, "forget-me-nots bloom in spring. And yet." Mabel paused to look around.

"And yet?" repeated Winnie.

"Here we are in August, and one can only assume that this body has been frozen," explained Mabel. "Furthermore, observe the way the victim is dressed. A plaid shirt and jeans. Murderously overdressed for this weather."

"You are very observant," answered Winnie. "Thank you kindly, Ms. Coriander."

"If I may continue, one can only assume that such a public display of the victim is meant to send a message. It is no doubt a type of assertion to the rest of the community. Therefore, the murderer must be someone from Cozy Village, someone who knows the people here intimately and wants them to see that this man has been dealt with in the most brutal manner possible. The murderer is sending out a warning. Therefore, you are looking for a local with a vendetta, one who has a large freezer but little knowledge of flowers. May I suggest the town butcher as a place to start?"

People in the crowd had to restrain themselves from clapping.

The butcher was eventually arrested. The frozen man had been having an affair with the butcher's wife, and although the butcher had professed his innocence, there was too much evidence against him. He died in prison a few years later.

I have to admit that I was impressed with Mabel's ability to observe and analyze the crime scene. Of course, I didn't know the full story then. I just thought Mabel had a gift.

It is difficult to realize that there is something *off* about people you know. It comes in little hints and clues. But you don't always put the clues together when someone is your friend. You excuse weird behavior as an anomaly. You think that you must have misunderstood what they said or did. This is just what you are supposed to do with friends. You try to see the good in them and not dwell on the bad.

But there was a shift for me, something that I could only partially ignore, and this was years after the butcher had died. His wife had moved into Saint John, about an hour drive from Cozy Village, and I happened to see her at the city market. Cassie and I were busking in King's Square. She was needing a lunch, and I was needing a coffee, so we went to the Java Moose.

Cassie was walking and looking up at the ceiling, and I was explaining for what felt like the hundredth time how the market was built like an upside down ship, and while I was pointing up, the two of us bumped into a woman who was walking in the opposite direction. That person just so happened to be the butcher's wife, Isabel Cushing.

Isabel and I ended up sitting and chatting at the Java Moose. When Cassie got up to look around the market at all the souvenirs, fresh fish, exotic fruit, and English candy, Isabel Cushing said something that I'll never forget.

"I know I shouldn't have been running around on Nick," she said. "I know that now, and I knew it then. But I was sure he was running around on me with that English woman."

"Mabel?" I asked. "I didn't know they were close."

"They wrote these letters to each other," explained Isabel. "Now you know what Nick was like. He wouldn't talk about anything. Maybe he'd be impressed by a certain cut of meat, but he wouldn't open himself up and talk about his feelings. But I found one of his letters to that English woman, and it was all about the way he felt. I just knew they were lovers. I *knew* it. As soon as I saw one of those letters. Of course, he denied it until he was blue in the face, but I knew it. He's gone now. Nick. What does anything matter? It's impossible to believe. That it all happened. That he's dead. It's like one of your magic tricks."

I've watched that moment more than a few times since I died. It takes a long time to paddle all the way from Cozy Village to Saint John, and it feels a bit crowded with all of the souls huffing and puffing around the harbour, floating between the red

brick buildings.

Once I was floating above the market, watching Cassie stroll between the stands. I was shocked to see Mabel spying on me with Isabel Cushing. She saw us talking, but she walked on pretending not to see. Of course, there's nothing I can do but watch...now that I'm dead.

There has been something that I've been meaning to do for quite some time, though. I've never actually sat down and talked to the butcher's ghost. I've waved to him, but I've always been a little squeamish about actually floating over and having a chat with a murderer.

In the before death, I spent so much time listening to Mabel gab on about the crimes she solved, but I've never talked to the people who committed them. I needed to hear the butcher's story, so I sucked in my breath and floated into the sky.

Nick kept to himself up in the woods just outside of Cozy Village. His soul was thin and pale from wanting to disappear, so he was hard to spot, but I found him eventually. I pushed out my breath and paddled in his direction.

He must've seen me heading towards him because he wrapped himself around a tree and tried to blend in with the bark. He was practically translucent from all his suffering.

When I called out to him, he unwrapped himself and looked at me.

"Scruggs," he said, "I didn't know it was you."

We sat in the tree together and chatted. It took me some time to work my way into it, but I eventually asked him about Mabel.

"Oh, we got on well," he said. "*Too* well, according to my wife. That's what she said drove her into the arms of Alex Fairbain."

"Did anything happen between you and Mabel?" I asked.

He laughed. "No," he said. "We were just friendly. We'd write to each other."

"What did you write?" I asked.

He sucked in his breath and floated up a little away from me, and he said, "It was all about our feelings. Not about our feelings for each other, but what it felt like to be alive. It was like philosophical stuff. Being a butcher, I thought about death a lot. So many dead things around me all the time. It bothered me. I needed to get it out, and Isabel, she wasn't much for talking about that sort of thing."

"Mabel didn't have anything to do with the murder?" I asked.

"Not directly," said Nick, "but when I look back on it all, she guided me to that. She wanted to write the letters and keep them a secret. But it was one of Mabel's letters that Isabel found. It was almost like Mabel placed it in such a way for Isabel to find it. Then it was Mabel who told me about Isabel and that Fairbain fellow. It was all like she was directing the plot of some gruesome story, and I was the star of the show."

We sat and chatted for a bit longer. I guess I already knew that Mabel had orchestrated the murder and that she had orchestrated others. I knew about it from my own death.

Right before I died, Mabel and I were sitting out in her backyard. Cassie had gone away to university in Saint John at this time, and I was busking less. I spent quite a bit of time doing leg work for Mabel on all her different cases.

I'd never told Mabel that Isabel and I had met and talked at the city market. But something struck me on that day, and I just kind of blurted out what Isabel had told me. Mabel had been bent over her garden, picking out weeds. She stopped moving when I told her this, and then she slowly turned around.

"Well what happened between Isabel and Nick was all going to happen anyway," she said. "I just sped it up."

She laughed and turned back to her gardening. I didn't know what to think. I sort of laughed too. But then I was startled at what she had said. My left arm felt numb, and I could feel the numbness up to the side of my face.

"Something's wrong," I said, barely able to spit out the words. "Call an ambulance."

I tried to tell Mabel about my arm and my face, but the words weren't coming out right. Language was impossible. She turned from her pruning. She put her dirty hands on my chest and shushed me.

I couldn't understand what she said to me at the time, but now that I've watched it happen, I know exactly what she said.

"Please let me watch you," she said. "I love to watch."

I find it boring now. I probably would have died even if she had called an ambulance.

It's not that I'm without anger. She betrayed me and tricked so many of us in Cozy Village.

But it's all only a matter of time before she gets what's coming to her. She has to die eventually, and when that happens, there'll be a whole army of us waiting.

Until then, I'll float around. I'll luxuriate in the cool clean air, and I'll watch my Cassie enjoy her life.

There are worse fates than mine. ■



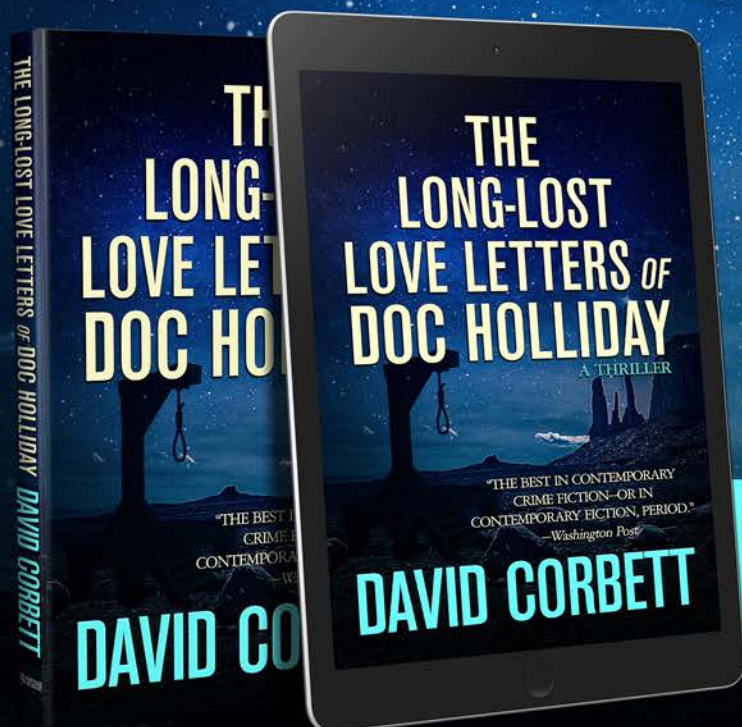
# DAVID CORBETT

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The most notorious love letters in American history—supposedly destroyed a century ago—mysteriously reappear and become the coveted prize in a fierce battle for possession that brings back to life the lawless world evoked in the letters themselves.

Lisa Balamaro is an ambitious arts lawyer with a secret crush on her most intriguing client: former rodeo rider and reformed art forger, Tuck Mercer. In his newfound role as an expert in Old West artifacts, Tuck gains possession of the supposedly destroyed correspondence between Doc Holliday and his cousin and childhood sweetheart, Mattie—who would become Sister Mary Melanie of the Sisters of Mercy.

Given the unlikelihood the letters can ever be fully authenticated, Tuck retains Lisa on behalf of the letters' owner, Rayella Vargas, to sell them on the black market. But the buyer Tuck finds, a duplicitous judge from the Tombstone area, has other, far more menacing ideas.

As Lisa works feverishly to make things right, Rayella secretly enlists her ex-marine boyfriend in a daring scheme of her own.

When the judge learns he's been blindsided, he rallies a cadre of armed men for a deadly standoff reminiscent of the moment in history that made Doc famous: The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

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