

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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SIXTY-ONE SECONDS

THE BROKEN DOLL

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Broken Doll is a collection of four short stories that recount a harrowing few weeks in the lives of a half dozen characters in the rural Midwest. The stories can be read individually—each has a beginning, middle and end—but they also interlock; some plotlines jump from one story to another, and so do some of the characters (to the extent they survive, of course!). Because the narrative moves back and forth in time, I thought it might be helpful to show at the beginning of each story where each of the stories falls on the calendar, and the duration of each.

APRIL						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
			Dodge			
		Execution Day				
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
				The Pain Hunter		
				Sixty-One Seconds		
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

Thursday, April 20, 6:04 p.m.

In the front seats of the van, the two brothers looked over the killing field.

A pleasant street, downtown, in the small Wisconsin burg.

Festive. A street fair was winding down.

Families, kids on skateboards or bikes. Some government workers knocking off for the day.

A peace that would not last.

The men, in their thirties, were in what they called the Floristmobile, an old Ford, black and painted with the words “Henrietta’s Florist” on the side, along with artwork of elaborate bouquets, roses and . . . well, other flowers. Which Steven Ross didn’t really know what they were.

Behind them, in the van proper, were gym bags and backpacks and laptops. Extra ammunition.

“It’ll work, I guess.” Travis Ross, stocky and dark haired, was in the passenger seat. He wore jeans and a faded gray tee. He scanned the wide street once more.

The older of the two, Steven, wore a blue work shirt and gray dungarees, stained from eating at Arby’s. Both were in black jackets. “It’s good.”

He said this with some authority. Neither he nor his brother had been in the army but Steven was a member of a secret supremacist group that spent nearly every Sunday afternoon in paramilitary training. It wasn’t like the SEALs or Delta Force but the men in the group were proficient at arms and tactics and had all the skills they needed to engage and kill anyone who was a threat—that is, anyone who wasn’t like them.

Skills too to pull off what they were about to.

And there was the benefit too that the rescue plan had been put together by one of the sharper minds in the underworld—the man who was paying them to be here, and paying a lot of money.

Paul Offenbach.

The van was pointed directly at the Harbinger County Courthouse but hidden from it by a large stand of bushes.

“That’s dumb luck,” Steven said, nodding toward the fair. “Good cover. They’ll have to check the backdrop before they shoot.”

The brothers didn’t have to take any such care.

Travis said, “And panic. Nobody’ll know what’s going on.”

“True.” Steven glanced at his mobile for texts. “Nothing yet.”

Travis continued to press .223 rounds into a magazine. “Couldn’t we take ’em on the road? Safer.”

“Because this’ll be his last chance. We’re out of the country tonight.”

“Last chance for what?”

“To kill her,” Steven said.

“Oh, yeah. Her.”



“Now, *that’s* troubling,” Dr. Stuart Collier whispered.

His wife, Eleanor, chuckled, brushing her long honey-gold hair from her face. The soft April breeze had been rearranging the strands since they arrived at the street fair an hour ago.

The long-limbed man was referring to what their daughter held in her arms. At an antiques booth, Chloe had fallen in love with an old-time doll, the ceramic-headed variety. At ten, in accordance with the rules of preteenagerness, she could not enjoy “kids” dolls, the plastic ones, much less the viral sort, like American Girl. But an antique like this was a perfect out. She could enjoy it as a toy, while relying on the fact it was unique and a collectible adults might like and therefore above suspicion.

She clearly adored it.

Neither parent was quite sure why.

The large, moonlike face wore an unnatural smile. The black hair was painted on and the glossiness made it appear unwashed. The cheeks were too round and rosy and suggested bloat. The eyes were open just a bit too wide, as if the doll didn't like what she was seeing. The dress was a muumuu—an A-frame of a garment, tattered at the hem. The shoes were supposedly patent leather but they'd been painted onto its feet; you could make out the toes beneath the black.

“Some of us are hungry.” Collier used an affectionate royal plural, which he often did. A joke between father and daughter.

“Pizza. Please?” From Chloe.

“Weren't you . . . ?” Eleanor didn't bother to finish. The girl had been off cheese, which was somehow an enemy of her veganism, for the past month. No point in remarking on inconsistencies. Husband and wife exchanged glances. Collier said, “Sausage and pepperoni.”

“Dad! Gross!”

So milk was in the demilitarized zone but beyond that lay the no-man's-land of meat.

The trio was typical of those here, on the streets of Upper Falls, Harbinger County, Wisconsin, families enjoying an unwound afternoon. Stu and Eleanor, married fifteen years, were late thirties, the attorney wife more athletic than the physician husband, though he led the crew in bicycling. Redheaded Chloe was beginning to sprout up. She was now less than a half foot shorter than her mother's five six, and concerned that she'd outgrow her fave sport of gymnastics, though soccer was turning out to be not so bad after all.

Their attire for the day also was typical: He was in black slacks and a cream-colored polo shirt, under a navy windbreaker. The ladies were in sweats, Eleanor in navy-blue, BOSTON on the chest, and Chloe, a gray hoodie.

The fair occupied four blocks along Douglass Street in the Falls's timeless downtown. Vendors sold antiques, organic

cosmetics, artwork, collecting cards (baseball and Magic and Pokémon), books, housewares, junk, clothing new and clothing recycled and food in all shapes and tastes and consistencies.

On one side of the fair were shops and bars and restaurants. On the other was the Harbinger County government complex—the Sheriff’s Office at the west end and here, east, where the Colliers presently were, was the courthouse.

“Wait, I’m going there,” Collier announced. One of the vendors sold vinyl. He must’ve had a thousand records in his stand. The doctor owned several nice turntables. For him it was the only way to listen to music.

Eleanor laughed. “As long as we eat before midnight.”

He’d been known to lose himself browsing.

“Twenty minutes. Tops. We’ve got pizza on the brain.”

“Chlo and I’ll be in there.” His wife pointed to an apparel store, half of the front window filled with baby clothes. Her sister was expecting.

He walked into the stand, glancing up the street at Hogan’s Tap Room. He and Eleanor enjoyed beer and pub food but never went there. It had been, everybody knew, the headquarters of the late and unlamented Tomas Wexler—who’d been the closest thing the Falls had to a Mafia boss. He’d been shot to death a few weeks ago. There were no suspects in the case, and the facts of his death and the absence of guilty parties bothered not a single person in town. Wexler had been suspected of supplying most of the meth tweakers in the county. And even more troubling had been involved in human trafficking rings.

A sign read UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT. Maybe the couple would try it. Though Collier didn’t like the looks of the big man in jeans and a red-and-black flannel shirt. He was sitting at a round metal table on the sidewalk, looking belligerently out over the crowd and sipping from a bottle that said GATORADE on the side but, from the brown color, no doubt

contained something different. He bore a yellowing bruise prominently on his cheek.

Collier continued into the record tent, ducking, though the entryway was higher than his six-foot, three-inch stature. Habit.

Straight for the jazz. As he flipped through jackets, he looked up to see a sheriff's cruiser stop in front of the courthouse. It wasn't from Harbinger County but from Vandalia, just across the border in Illinois. He noticed the thick mesh partition between front and back, and bars on the rear doors and back window.

A big man in a uniform was driving, either bald naturally or shaved. He got out and, squinting, looked around carefully, as did his passenger, a woman deputy, of pale skin, tall but much slimmer than her partner.

Collier was aware of another car arriving, engine rattling. It was an older model Honda, an odd orange in shade. Probably had been repainted. That color didn't seem stock. Its plates were Illinois.

From the driver's seat, a woman climbed out. There was something striking about her. She was Eleanor's height and build. Attractive, though gaunt, with auburn hair pulled into a no-nonsense ponytail. She wore a black leather jacket, close-fitting black jeans and a white tee. A gold badge was pinned to her belt on the left side. On the right was a large silver gun in a holster.

A detective, he knew from the color of the shield.

She and the deputies walked up the courthouse stairs. At the door she turned back, pulling aside the right bottom corner of her jacket to reveal a full-on view of the complicated pistol. He thought of a gunslinger out of a Western, getting ready for a showdown in the dusty streets of a dog-eared cattle town, Tombstone, Dodge.

Her eyes paused on the flannel-shirted man in front of Hogan's. He glanced at her, seemed to stiffen, and went back to staring at the crowds.

The detective continued to scan the area. The way she focused, the way her brows furrowed was troubling.

Something was familiar about her gaze.

He suddenly understood and smiled.

Her eyes reminded him of the antique doll's.

And he noted that he used the same word about her with which he'd described the toy.

Troubling . . .

She turned and stepped into the courthouse.

Dr. Stuart Collier turned back to Louis Armstrong.



“Order granted.”

On the bench in the old-time courthouse, the judge, a round, dark-skinned woman of about fifty, signed several documents sitting on the old-time blotter atop her elaborate desk. The centerpiece of the paperwork was the extradition order that would deliver the fortyish Paul Offenbach, a sadistic killer, into the hands of the Vandalia County, Illinois, criminal justice system.

Not many people were present to witness the significant event: the killer, his counsel, the prosecutors and assorted bailiffs and deputies. A few courtflies in the gallery.

And in the front row, a woman who would not have missed this for the world. Illinois Department of Criminal Investigations Special Agent Constant Marlowe.

She sat beside Deputies Helen Gibbs and Barry Stoller, who would transport the killer across the border to stand trial.

Though Marlowe had instigated the proceeding by capturing Offenbach here in Harbinger County two weeks ago, she'd had no part in efforts to get him back to Illinois, other than drafting an affidavit.

She was today simply a spectator.

The clerk handed the documents to Vandalia County DA Evan Quill, sitting at the prosecutor's table. The dark-haired, trim and fastidious man was about Marlowe's age. He wore an impeccably pressed suit and a white shirt and dark tie. While at trial he sometimes sported a wrinkled jacket and slacks—to make him one with the jury—when he was appearing before the bench alone, he dressed with spiff. He spoke a word or two to the woman next to him, the local district attorney, who was about the judge's age, dark of skin too and trim.

Quill rose and turned to Marlowe with a smile.

She nodded.

The two had a history that went beyond being colleagues in arms. She recalled that she believed she'd left one of her sports bras in his bedroom. She'd have to locate it before he did; she didn't want him to go to the trouble of washing and folding. He was talented at a number of things—prosecuting bad people, fly-fishing, military history, organizing shelves . . . and laundry. He would have starched and ironed today's shirt himself. She loved him in the way Constant Marlowe could love anybody, which was with a unique brand of affection—highly discounted, one might say.

Quill's pleasure could be traced not only to the fact a very bad man was now out of commission, but to a deep relief he'd be feeling. He'd been aware of Marlowe's persistence in taking justice into her own hands and, not too fine a point, murdering Paul Offenbach before he could be brought in to face charges.

The crime the man was being extradited for was the torture and murder of Marlowe's dear friend, Deputy Cynthia Hooper.

But now Quill could be assured that Offenbach was safe from Marlowe, and that she was safe from prison.

Off-the-rack justice would take it from here.

Another player was packing up paperwork and leaving the field: Offenbach's defense attorney, a squat, balding man. He had contested the extradition and—no surprise to him or his client or anyone else—had lost. Now, with better things to do,

he rose and said a few words to Offenbach, who gave him his trademark dismissive glance.

Two bailiffs walked to Offenbach and had him rise. The man was in a suit, as this was a court appearance. It was a nice one, from what was undoubtedly a substantial inventory. Marlowe didn't know how much he made at the drugs and guns and human trafficking trade he plied. Seven or eight figures a year most likely. She wasn't sure exactly what other crimes he'd committed and she didn't care. Her obsessive involvement was to catch him for only one thing: negating a single life.

Offenbach now turned to her. The compact man, with trim dark hair, was handsome, a politician's face, a media face. His deep brown eyes were as steady as her gray, both sets of pupils about the same subzero temperature. In all their interaction she'd never seen a shred of emotion, and this included a *mano a mano* fistfight in which former pro boxer Constant Marlowe broke two of his fingers—still splinted—and delivered an eggplant-shaded bruise to the jaw, just visible above the thick beard he'd grown in jail awaiting extradition.

Marlowe believed Offenbach mouthed something. His lips pursed slightly. It would not have been the B-word or C-word. When he was in the mood to hurt, the pain he inflicted would be physical; syllables were impotent. And there was something about him that suggested he would find it inelegant to use vile language. A metaphor was his silent destruction of an opponent in a chess match. He was a genius at the game, often playing a half dozen matches at a time. Occasionally he wore a blindfold.

The bailiffs led him into the back of the courtroom to the lockup, and Vandalia County Deputies Gibbs and Stoller followed.

So began the journey to the first trial of Paul Offenbach's life. He'd been investigated but never arrested until now.

Until Constant Marlowe.

The judge vanished, followed by the clerk.

Marlowe glanced to Quill and then gestured to the door, meaning she'd meet him outside. They'd have a coffee before he returned to Illinois and she continued her hunt for Offenbach's two accomplices in Cynthia Hooper's murder, presently at large.

Walking into the hallway, she turned toward the building's exit. With the stone-tile floors, mahogany woodwork, the brass fixtures and the portraits on the walls, you might think you'd been transported back in time to the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

Marlowe had not been born "Constant," which was a name from the same dusty era as this courthouse, and a male one. "Prudence" was on her birth certificate but from a young age she'd known that wouldn't do. When a sports journalist once wrote of her that many an opponent in the ring had withered in the face of Marlowe's constant onslaught, she'd thought: Yes. And had gone to the courthouse the next day.

As she stepped outside into the low sun, she thought to her late friend: *Hey, Cyn. Here we are . . . Not what I wanted for you. My checkmate would have involved a body bag.*

But it would do, she supposed.

Some justice was better than none.

Outside, she scanned the surroundings. To her right the street fair was winding down. She didn't believe that she'd been to one in her adult years. Come to think of it, ever?

More scanning. Orienting the gun on her hip, making sure the right front of her jacket was lodged behind the holster. Marlowe had practiced drawing hundreds of times. She could clear leather and acquire aim in less than a second.

In truth she didn't think there was much threat. While Offenbach was as devoted to killing her as she was him, the authorities had kept the time and place of this proceeding secret and monitored every communication between Offenbach and the outside.

Still, Marlowe was by nature suspicious. And that quality had saved her life on a number of occasions.

Her eyes spotted no threat. The only person nearby was a tall, sandy-haired man in casual clothing, lounging against the door of a white Lexus, flipping through a stack of what must have been a recent purchase: old-time record albums. He glanced up and smiled to a woman with long blonde hair and a young girl, clutching a doll, who were approaching. The two stopped to look in a storefront window.

A nice-looking family.

She recalled that the night before she died, Cynthia Hooper had asked if, when she had a baby, would Marlowe be the godmother?

Anger arose in her heart. It dwelt a moment, then she forced it elsewhere.

Anger obscured focus. And focus was everything.

She resumed her scan of the street.



Her . . .

The Ross brothers peered through the brush, studying the woman who was their target.

Weird name. Constant Marlowe. Not big but dangerous. She'd beat the crap out of Offenbach and he had some kind of belt in some kind of martial art.

Travis asked, "Why's he want her dead so much?"

"Ask Offenbach."

"I don't like talking to him. He, I don't know, creeps me out. His eyes, like they crawl into you."

Offenbach's did just that. It was a good way to put it. Steven, however, didn't mind. One of the idols of his group, the Winter Patriots, was Adolf Hitler. Steven had seen some of his speeches and the Führer's eyes did the same. Both he and Offenbach had much in common, though with one difference. Offenbach was a sadist who, in the Old Bennett Road murder, for instance, had taken a huge risk by taking the time to use a

knife and pipe lighter to the young woman. Hitler was horrific, yeah, but he never got his hands dirty.

Travis broke the silence. “I never asked. Anybody try to, you know, to do you when you were inside?”

“Nothing like in the shower or anything. The MK-20s tried to make a move. They didn’t like this.” He tapped his firearm, where, beneath his jacket sleeve, a colorful swastika had been inked. “But there were Brotherhood boys inside. They took care of me. I was kind of a hit. You know, with the charge, killing a cop.”

Steven had been arrested for the woman’s murder and held without bond until trial, two weeks ago, in Vandalia County, where a prick of a district attorney, Evan Quill, had pulled out all the stops to get a conviction. Offenbach himself had come up with a strategy to get him acquitted. He would play a good, loving father and husband and a devout Christian.

Some supremacists are in fact religious but the Winter Patriots had no time for bullshit like that. Still, he’d played the role pretty well, though it had been hard to keep a straight face when some of his buddies from the Patriots cleaned up and had pretended to be in Ross’s church. They spoke glowingly of his love for Jesus and all the good deeds he did.

Ross had never thought they could bring it off but Offenbach’s plan worked. Acquitted on all charges. They’d even tricked that asshole, Steven’s defense lawyer, who was apparently getting disbarred for taking his fee in money he shouldn’t have. Steven had never liked him.

The Old Bennett Road murder had changed all the participants’ lives in a big way. Because of that, and because of what was going down here any minute now, the brothers were going off the grid. The plane tonight would take Offenbach, Steven and his wife and Travis to Canada. Offenbach would get another plane overseas somewhere. The Rosses would drive west and reenter the US in Montana, making their way to the Winter Patriots’ main compound. Travis wasn’t into the movement as much as his brother but there was no choice. He was the “Third Man” at the murder.

And while Ross couldn't be tried again, prosecutor Quill was building a case against Travis, and that case he would not lose.

Anyway, there were plenty of unattached women in the compound. Travis, who'd always had trouble dating, could get laid anytime he wanted.

"Will we hear it from here?" Steven asked, nodding out the window.

Travis, the mechanical one of the siblings, said, "Maybe. Won't sound like much."

Steven looked at the time on his phone. "Soon."

He started the engine.

Steven got the text. "It's time. Do it."

Travis made a cell phone call and, yes, they could just hear the bomb go off in front of the check cashing storefront, a half mile away. It was Pyrodex—like black powder—and wouldn't do much damage to the fortified place but it would set off plenty of alarms, which was all it needed to do.

They couldn't see the resulting activity clearly; the Sheriff's Office was four blocks away, on the other side of the street fair. But then the lights atop several cars began to flash and the vehicles skidded away.

The number of deputies in downtown Upper Falls had just been cut by, if they were lucky, three-quarters.

Travis charged the AR-15, modified to full auto, and put four large magazines into his pocket. Steven checked his Glock and added extra mags to his pocket as well.

Gloves and ski masks.

Steven looked over the scene before them:

Marlowe, on the stairs, looking after the Sheriff's Office squad cars as they skidded out of sight, frowning.

A tall man, with light hair leaning against a white Lexus, flipping through old-time albums.

Three people, walking out of the alleyway beside the courthouse—a male deputy and a female, on either side of Paul Offenbach. His hands were cuffed behind him.

A blonde woman and a little girl, holding a doll, walking toward the Lexus.

“Ready?”

Steven nodded. “Marlowe,” he reminded him.

“I know. I’ve got her.”

Steven pressed the accelerator slowly, the van pushing through the brush toward the killing field.

Then Steven noticed Marlowe looking at Offenbach and the deputies.

She froze.

“Shit, she’s made us,” he muttered.

The woman had noticed that the cuffs binding Offenbach’s hands were not wholly closed. His wrists were free.

As Travis gripped the stubby black rifle in one hand and the door handle with the other, Steven slammed the accelerator to the floor and the van bounded forward.



6:27:46

In front of the Harbinger County courthouse a black delivery van, emblazoned with the words “Henrietta’s Florist” and a painted spray of colorful petals, crashes through a wall of bushes and skids to a stop in the middle of Douglass Street.

The doors open and two men in dark clothing and ski masks step out. Steven Ross and his brother Travis. They hold, respectively, a Glock handgun and a stubby assault rifle.

On the sidewalk DCI agent Constant Marlowe gives no reaction other than to drop into a shooting stance as she draws her silver SIG Sauer pistol and acquires a target. But before she can pull the trigger, Travis has singled her out and

fires dozens of shots her way; the gun is on full auto, and the relentless stream of bullets drives her to cover behind her orange sedan. Its windows vanish in a shower of tiny cubes.

In the alley beside the courthouse, Deputy Helen Gibbs gasps and draws her own sidearm but before she raises it higher than her waist, the prisoner she's been escorting to the street, Paul Offenbach, sloughs off unlatched handcuffs, draws a gun and shoots her in the neck.

Offenbach glances at but doesn't bother with the other prisoner escort, Deputy Barry Stoller, who is frozen in panic.

Nearby, mother and daughter Eleanor and Chloe Collier stumble back from the shooting. The blonde woman pulls her daughter to the ground but, falling, hits her head on the sidewalk hard. An old-time doll falls from the child's hands and shatters. Chloe, on her knees, over her mother, begins screaming at Offenbach. Deputy Gibbs is thrashing next to Eleanor and the woman's copious blood sprays upon the woman's face and hair.

Dr. Stuart Collier has dropped the stack of record albums he's been holding and, bending low, scrabbles for his wife and daughter.

With Travis's relentless fire keeping Marlowe and the courthouse guards under cover, Steven gestures Offenbach forward to the van, while firing as well. The killer advances but is slowed because he's gesturing madly toward Marlowe. "Kill her! Kill her!"

Deputy Stoller seems suddenly aware of the action around him and looks at his pistol but doesn't draw it. Instead, he drops to the pavement and covers his head. He's crying.

Ignoring the bullets, Marlowe rises and returns fire. One round hits Offenbach in the thigh. Staggering toward the van, the wounded prisoner notes that the Lexus Collier was standing beside bears an MD license plate and asks in a shout if he's a doctor. Collier says that he is and Offenbach puts his gun in the doctor's back and pushes him toward the van.

As they pass near Eleanor Collier, still stunned, Chloe flings a large piece of ceramic—the shattered head of her doll—at the prisoner. Just missing his eye, it cuts his cheek badly. He stumbles, pulling Collier down to the sidewalk with him.

Steven Ross runs to his boss and helps him up and together the two hurry to the van, dragging Collier after them.

As Travis shoots out the tires of the orange Honda and the Illinois police cruiser parked at the curb, Steven shoves Collier through the open back doors of the van, boosts Offenbach inside and then runs to the front. He takes the driver's seat, Travis shotgun.

As the van begins to roll, Offenbach, enraged that the girl wounded him, leans out the back door and aims at her.

Constant Marlowe notes this and sprints to Chloe, tackling her and covering her with her body.

The killer fires a half dozen rounds their way.

Then he slams the door shut, and the vehicle makes a skidding turn north along a quiet, maple-lined street, leaving the bloodstained chaos of Douglass Street behind.



6:28:47

Vandalia County prosecutor Evan Quill shook off the grip of the bailiff, who was holding him in a sitting position on the floor of the courtroom, and rose to his feet.

When the shooting had started and Quill had run for the door, knowing Marlowe was outside, the court officer had grabbed his arm and pushed him down, beside the Harbinger County DA, who was crouched beside the prosecution table.

“No, sir. You’re not getting shot and you’re not going to get taken hostage. Stay down.”

Now, after forever, the firing had ceased and been replaced by dozens of sirens. Those in the courtrooms and offices here were cautiously entering the hallway to find out who had been killed or injured . . . and what had happened.

There was nothing cautious about Quill's departure.

His heart raced; his soul was in agony. Constant Marlowe had been in the middle of what was obviously an attempt to rescue Paul Offenbach. Had she survived? She would have been targeted because she was one of the law enforcers who'd be trying to prevent the jailbreak.

But *she* would also have been in his sights because he apparently was sworn to eliminate her from the face of the earth.

Through the hall and outside, overlooking the battlefield. This term came naturally to an amateur historian of military history.

Emergency vehicles, score of deputies and other officials. Flashing strobes of colored lights. Blood covering the pavement not far away. Marlowe's orange Honda, shot to pieces. He walked closer, terrified that he would see her body inside, though she wouldn't've engaged the enemy from that position. She was a superb tactician.

He ran down the stairs, slipping and nearly falling on ejected brass. It was everywhere. The rescuers, surely the Ross brothers, had used at least one automatic weapon.

And how the hell had they found out where and when the hearing would be?

He heard two guards speaking. "She got that girl under down, covered her. Offenbach was shooting. I don't know if she got hit."

"Who?" he snapped.

"That agent from Illinois."

Jesus.

"And you don't know if . . . ?"

But they were gone.

An EMT hurried past. Quill grabbed his arm. "Dead, wounded? Where?"

The man pointed to one of the four ambulances present, this one parked next to a tent in which a vendor sold vinyl record albums.

Ignoring the pain in his back from an old injury, Quill sprinted toward the area the tech had indicated, passing by the huge bloodstain.

He paused just before he got there. Steadied himself. Inhaled deeply.

And walked around the corner of the vehicle.

No sign of Marlowe. Sitting on a low gurney were two people. One was a woman in her thirties, wearing a Boston sweatshirt, dark blue made darker yet by the blood. Her blonde hair was coated with dark-crimson gouts, which she was wiping away as best she could with blue towels and water. At the same time she tried to comfort a grim-faced redheaded girl beside her.

The medics were treating three others, two men and a woman, none of whom seemed badly injured.

Inside the ambulance was a victim who had not been so lucky. A filled body bag rested on the floor.

Oh, Jesus . . .

No . . .

He walked up close.

A voice behind him, a woman's, raspy, said briskly, "Any sightings? *Anything?*"

He turned quickly to see Constant Marlowe. She was on her mobile.

Their eyes met. His face would be radiating the relief he felt, relief born partly from the affection he could not hide.

Her face was still, revealing nothing other than the message: I'm fine. And we'll talk later. But now I have something to do.

"None at all?" she said into the phone and, with a grimace, disconnected.

She caught sight of a tall man in a gray uniform, turned from Quill and without acknowledgment, walked away.



Constant Marlowe, hands on hips, was looking at the crimson-brown Rorschach. The bloodstain where Helen Gibbs, the Vandalia County deputy, had died, her neck torn open by one of Offenbach's bullets.

Crime Scene was putting down the yellow number cards, like tiny sandwich boards. Detectives were talking to witnesses.

Sheriff Louie Braddock stood straight, to his full height, well over six feet. He examined the scene with a faint scowl. He rubbed his drooping gray mustache, which helped give the impression of an old-time lawman, and said, "We saw it before, the van."

Yes, she recalled, they had. When she'd captured Offenbach outside Upper Falls several weeks ago, the same vehicle had been waiting at a police barricade, the intersection of a highway and the narrow winding road that led to Offenbach's family's home. She remembered the driver looking her way.

The dark-haired man, she now knew, was Travis Ross, Steven's brother.

The third man present at Cynthia Hooper's murder.

The men today had been in ski masks but there was no doubt they were these two.

The sheriff barked orders about getting more squad cars into the countryside for the search. When he turned back, Marlowe asked, "How'd this happen?" Her voice was raspy by nature—no cigarettes for years—and it was now stern.

"Still piecing it together."

Marlowe said, "Last I saw, the bailiffs took him into the back. Helen and Barry were with them."

Braddock said, "He was alone in the detainee cell for five minutes. They turned him over to the deputies, who took him to the bathroom, then they left."

"You trust the bailiffs?"

"Absolutely. I know them personally. They've worked for that judge for years."

Marlowe looked up the street toward the Sheriff's Office. "Those squad cars of yours took off just before he came out. Did I hear a bang?"

He told her, "Pipe bomb, remote controlled. In front of a check cashing place. A diversion. Reduced my staff by five." He clicked his tongue. A more disgusted expression Marlowe had not seen for years.

Marlowe continued, "Let's talk about the timing of what happened here."

"Was wondering that myself."

"The bomb blew before Offenbach was out the back door. We've got ourselves an insider."

"Judas," he whispered bitterly. "The same one who got him the cuff key and the gun."

"And told the Ross brothers about the hearing today. It was top secret. Or was supposed to be."

"Sheriff." A young deputy hurried up to him. He was well scrubbed, right out of the army to judge by his shaved scalp and demeanor.

"Tommy?"

"Had a sighting. North. On 83. Maybe going to Minnesota. Canada after."

Marlowe and Braddock asked roughly the same question at roughly the same time. Her version was: "Any proof they didn't call it in themselves?"

Tommy hesitated. "This guy on the phone said the van was speeding on a curve and he nearly went into a ditch."

Marlowe asked, “And that makes it true why?”

The sheriff said to the deputy, “Check it out.”

“Yessir.” The man scurried off.

“How’re they doing?” She nodded to the wife of the hostage, Eleanor Collier, and her daughter.

The sheriff said, “The mother basically knocked herself when she grabbed her daughter and dove for the ground. Maybe concussion. Nothing serious, looks like. The girl’s fine—thanks to you.”

Marlowe had tackled her when she saw Offenbach in the back of the van targeting Chloe. She’d flung a piece of her shattered doll into his face and he was furious. The shot he fired snapped over their heads.

And then the van had vanished.

Marlowe knew now why Stu Collier had been chosen; one of three must’ve seen the MD license tag on their Lexus. They would want him to treat the bullet wound, since a hospital was out of bounds; any gunshot-related injury had to be reported. Also, in this instance, every medical center for five hundred miles had gotten a BOLO—be on the lookout—notice.

She said firmly, “We need him, Sheriff. The insider. He’ll know where Offenbach’s going. I want security footage.”

Constant Marlowe was out of jurisdiction here, in Wisconsin, but she often forgot that she wasn’t in charge.

“Get somebody on that,” Braddock said to one of his deputies, standing nearby.

She glanced at what was left of her Honda. It must have been hit thirty or forty times.

Part of the brothers’ job was to rescue their boss. The other was to murder her.

Even if she had wheels, though, where could she go? She was pretty sure the tip about the sighting was bogus. But that left thousands of square miles that weren’t north.

Marlowe happened to glance at Deputy Barry Stoller, the man who'd frozen and sought cover when Offenbach produced the gun and shot his partner. He sat with his head in his hands. She had heard it said that you couldn't be critical of somebody who falters in the face of enemy fire.

And it was true. No outside blame was usually necessary; the one who wavered would be punishing themselves every day for the rest of their life for the lapse.

Nearby, Evan Quill was on the phone.

She knew he had been relieved that Offenbach had been arrested and would be tried. Quill was all too aware that she had intended to simply murder him, for his crimes against her friend.

A crime. Yes.

But she couldn't help but think that if she'd succeeded two weeks ago—she was beating him to death with her bare hands when she was interrupted—then Deputy Helen Gibbs would be alive, Dr. Stuart Collier would be free and dozens of innocents would be safe from future harm by sadistic Paul Offenbach.

Braddock took a call, had a brief conversation. He disconnected and approached her. "Agent Marlowe. Couple things. Somebody took down the security cameras about a half hour before the judge signed the extradition order. Ross or Travis must've gotten inside somehow."

"No," she said. "Not them. Whoever it was would've been *inside* the courthouse when Ross and his brother were across the street in the van. He'd send a text or call when to set off the bomb at the check cashing place."

She was surveying the scene when something caught her eye.

Through the narrow alley between the courthouse and the building next door, she'd glimpsed a man walking quickly to a parking lot behind the government complex.

The speed was understandable; most people at the fair or working here wanted to leave the area as soon as possible. But

he was moving not only fast but furtively, in a way Marlowe called the posture of guilt. Hard to give specific characteristics to this gait but she knew it when she saw it.

Just as Evan Quill joined them, Marlowe said, “I want to check something out.”

The prosecutor said, “Do you want some help? I could—”

“No.” Distracted, she had offered the word bluntly.

Leaving the two men, she walked down the alley.

When she broke into the parking lot, she turned toward the man, large, with silver hair, head still down, as he made for a black sedan with Illinois plates.

Covering the ground quickly, and as quietly as she could, Marlowe was within twenty feet of the man, who must’ve sensed her. He stopped, dropped to a crouch and began to turn, reaching for his hip.



Dr. Stuart Collier was in the back of a utility van as it bounded over roads in southern Wisconsin.

This van was similar to the one at the center of the horrible shootout in downtown Upper Falls, the Henrietta’s Florist van—the one that Paul Offenbach and one of his thugs had shoved him into. This one, also a Ford, was newer and the exterior was white, no logos on the side.

Collier knew the wounded man’s identity, from the news. He’d been kidnapped by a longtime criminal boss from Chicago wanted for the torture and murder of a sheriff’s deputy in Illinois. The other two were probably the accomplices in the Illinois case—called the Old Bennett Road murder. The man who’d taken over driving was dark and swarthy and wide. The other, now in the passenger seat, was blond and slimmer.

After shooting out the tires of any car likely to pursue, they had sped along a series of small roads through the countryside,

avoiding the interstate and major highways likely to be blocked.

At a pull-off on Route 32, not far from the Bedford water tower, they had parked.

Wincing against the pain, Offenbach held a gun on Collier while the other two unfurled a sign of a plumbing company and mounted it to the side of the florist truck they'd just exited.

Soon they were on the road once more, a different van. A white one.

Now, they were many miles from Upper Falls, heading east at just over the speed limit.

Collier had tugged Offenbach's pants down and made an improvised tourniquet high on the wounded thigh. He also pressed a wad of paper towel onto the wound.

As he did, his elbow brushed what sat in his windbreaker pocket: it was the razor-sharp triangular shard from the broken doll. His daughter had flung it into Offenbach's face, cutting him. He had stumbled and this gave Collier a chance to pick up the ceramic triangle and hide it.

Could he somehow use it to escape?

He was determined to and to reunite with his wife and daughter.

For he knew that despite the fusillade they'd survived. A radio news broadcast the men had listened to moments ago reported that there had been only one death, an Illinois county deputy, and a dozen minor injuries. Had Eleanor and Chloe died, Collier would have simply pulled out the shard and plunged it into Offenbach's jugular, then awaited the bullets that would end his life.

It was when Offenbach gestured toward the wound and said, "So, talk to me," that an idea coalesced.

He lifted the paper towel off the wound and replaced it. "It's not good. We need a hospital."

Wiping his face with his sleeve, Offenbach frowned. “Hospital? But—”

“I’m a doctor. I know gunshots have to be reported. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then what?” the killer barked.

“I can close the wound myself. I just need the instruments, some medicine.”

Offenbach inhaled again. His still expression suggested he was not a man comfortable being given few options. Finally: “All right.”

Collier examined the man’s leg once more, replaced the bloody paper towel over the wound and applied pressure. He called to the driver, “Find the nearest hospital. Now. If you don’t, he’s going to die.”



“Don’t,” Constant Marlowe said, her gravelly voice low.

She’d drawn her SIG Sauer in a fragment of a second. “You’re targeted. Arms out to your side. Do not touch a weapon. Turn.”

The man she’d been following did as instructed.

He was Richard Avery, her ultimate supervisor in the Chicago office of IDCI. The distinguished man looked like the decorated cop that he was. He was slightly unfocused. She believed she smelled alcohol.

“Constant . . . Look . . .”

“Jacket up. Turn.”

He did.

“Stop. Left hand, finger and thumb only. Weapon on the ground, toward me.”

The Glock landed with a thunk. She retrieved and shoved it into her pocket.

He gave a laugh. “The hell is this about? You finally went around the bend? We all talked about when it would happen.”

She regarded him calmly. “You didn’t shut off the third camera.”

He glanced back at the courthouse and grimaced and, in doing so, fell for the trap. He was sweating. “You don’t understand. He threatened me, Offenbach did.”

No, he didn’t. What Offenbach did was he paid Avery money and a lot of it. Now she understood why the criminal had gotten away unscathed for so many years. He had a guardian angel.

She shook her head. “You’re the one who got me to Harbinger County two weeks ago. You fed my CI, Marcus, the intel that Offenbach was here. And he was. He was here, waiting to ambush me. And you knew it.”

She nodded as a memory surfaced. “And then that night, Offenbach told you he didn’t get me after all at the motel. He wanted you to find me. So you called. I remember you asked me where I was. Not like you were asking me what *town* I was in, or what *part* of town. But where I was exactly, so he could finish what he’d planned. But I don’t have any time for that crap now. I have one question and you need to answer it.”

“Constant . . .”

“Where are they going?”

“I have no idea.”

“Yes, you do. Offenbach told you to call in a lead that they were going north. So that means they’re going someplace else. Where?”

He blinked, confirming her suspicions. But he said only, “I told you. I don’t know. Look, I have a lot of money. Why don’t we . . . ?”

Which was more lucrative, she wondered, the drug and human trafficking business or the accepting-bribe business?

She was looking at a garage behind the courthouse. A sign read, JUDGES ONLY. In the Midwest, given the snow, a

dedicated parking space outside in the lot wouldn't cut it in January and February. "In there. Too many people here."

Marlowe gestured him in through a pedestrian door, which she closed behind her.

Avery seemed to relax, maybe thinking that meeting here meant she was amenable to his offer. "I can make you rich, Constant. Do you have a bitcoin wallet? Wait. What's that?" He was looking at her gray carbon fiber bag she'd taken from her jacket pocket. She worked the combination lock at one end. "You want *cash*? I don't have cash. Who has cash?" Irritated, as if this new wrinkle were an unreasonable demand in their negotiations.

Once the bag was open, she put into it both of their pistols, along with the Smith & Wesson .380 from her back waistband. She zipped it closed and set it on the floor near the door.

"Where are they?"

"Let me out of here. This is unlawful detainment!"

She added the offense of battery a moment later when she fainted with a right hook and delivered a stunning uppercut to Avery's jaw. He actually yelped as he staggered back and turned, stumbling toward the door.

"Nope." She tried to pull him back by his collar but he was the stronger of the two. So she leapt forward and put herself between him and his escape route. Tears of pain were in his eyes and blood dripped from the corner of his mouth.

Tongue and teeth. Not a good combination.

His anger had grown. He swung a couple of times in fury, connecting only with her defensively held limbs and once with her shoulder, which sent her back a pace. He was enraged and he was panicked.

Marlowe was as calm as ever. "Where are they?"

"I swear to God, I don't know."

Whenever a suspect invokes a deity when claiming to tell the truth, they're lying. An investigator, Avery should have

known this and come up with a better oath.

She jogged in, jabbed his belly and he turned away, like so many of her opponents in the ring seeking safe haven in the ropes, knowing she wouldn't deliver a blow to the back. And she never had, not in the ring.

This wasn't the ring.

She drove a fist into the soft flesh over the kidney. He cried out, gagging, dropping to the cement floor, staining the quite nice suit with oil and antifreeze.

"Help, help me!" His voice, distorted by the swollen flesh from a cut inside his mouth, was loud. He rolled onto his back.

As if he didn't have the strength to make a fist, he tried to slap her. She swatted his hand away and straddled him. "I'm going to start breaking the bones in your face."

Carefully angling her fist so she wouldn't snap her own metacarpals, she swung hard and collided with his cheek. He screamed but she was disappointed; there was no crack.

"East," he whispered.

"Where east?"

"That I don't know. Please, Constant, really! Offenbach said I should call on my burner and tell dispatch they'd gone anywhere but east. I know they were meeting somebody to help them get out of the state. It'd take them a couple of hours. And they were going to stay off the interstate."

He cowered and now tears of fear added to the waterworks from the pain.

"That's all I know." He was gasping.

She believed him. She'd interviewed enough suspects to spot when they'd broken and spilled all they could spill.

She stood.

Just then the door burst open and two deputies stepped in, surveyed the scene, their hands near their sidearms. Behind them was Sheriff Louie Braddock, who sighed. "Oh, my,

Agent Marlowe. I caught you two weeks ago, doing the same thing! What'm I going to do with you?"

"He's our inside man. My supervisor at DCI."

The lawman looked down at the crumpled special agent, wiping blood from his mouth and wincing as he tried to sit up. "My, that is surely hard news, Agent. But this's a crime. I hear you were a boxer. You know the law and you know fists can be a deadly weapon."

A pack of Oreos can be a deadly weapon if you kill somebody with it.

Braddock said, "Well, tell me at least you got a location."

"He doesn't know."

"Not even in general, a direction?"

"No." Her eyes fixed on Avery's, who frowned in confusion. He got the message and remained quiet.

"Well, I'm going to have to detain you too, Agent Marlowe. I'll forgo the cuffs. For now. You have any proof he got the key and the gun to Offenbach?"

She said, "Find some of the brass where Offenbach shot the deputy. I'm betting it'll have Avery's prints on it. He probably wiped the gun and the cuffs, but I'll bet he forgot about the brass."

Avery's downcast eyes and clenched lips told her this was true.

To one of his deputies Braddock said, "Cuff him. Everybody back to the command post."

Marlowe said, "I need to—"

"You need to come with me is what you need to do. He might be a shit and a guilty shit but what you did's a felony, Agent Marlowe, and I can't let this one go. Outside."

"All right, Sheriff, just let me get my purse."



With every passing minute the miles between them grew, and that thought burned in her mind and heart.

East. A couple of hours. Off the interstate but it would have to be a highway on which they could travel quickly.

Where?

She looked at a map on her phone. Route 99 went all the way to Lake Michigan, with a dozen small- and medium-size cities in between.

That seemed a likely choice.

And what was the status of Dr. Stuart Collier?

She knew that if he refused to fix up Offenbach's leg, he'd die.

And if he did tend to the wound, he'd die as soon as the last stitch was tied off.

Never angry in the ring, no. But outside those four corners, rage could descend with the neck-snapping velocity of a cyclone.

This delay wasn't acceptable.

She walked to Eleanor Collier, sitting with her daughter on a bench in front of the courthouse. In her arms the girl held the intact body of a headless doll.

"Hi," Marlowe said to the woman.

"Hi. Have you heard anything?" she asked quickly.

"I want my daddy." The girl's eyes pulsed with an anger as deep as Marlowe's.

"We're doing everything we can to get him back."

After looking around and seeing that nobody was in earshot, she said, "I may have a lead. I need your car."

"Of course, anything."

Eleanor dug into her purse. She paused, looking at her fingernails, under which were dark crescents from Deputy Helen Gibbs's blood. She found the fob and handed it to Marlowe.

“Give me your phone number,” Marlowe said.

She recited and the agent memorized it.

With a glance at the girl, she said, “That was a good throw.”

“I hope he’s blind,” the girl said sharply.

“I hope so too.”

Marlowe walked toward the family’s car but saw she had a problem. The sheriff was not far away and, on his phone, kept glancing at her from time to time. Was he speaking to her bosses in Springfield? The local DA? Maybe the federal attorney for this district?

And here too were easily two dozen officers in the frozen zone, defined by the yellow tape. Nobody in or out—no civilian, at any rate. And that was what she was at the moment a civvy, being out of jurisdiction.

Kneading the gray gun bag slowly, she saw, sitting by himself in the passenger seat of the Vandalia County Sheriff’s Department cruiser, Barry Stoller, the big deputy who’d fallen apart during the shootout. The door was open and he sat sideways, his feet on the asphalt.

She walked up to him.

“Agent Marlowe . . . I . . .” His voice caught.

He’d been working on excuses, trying them out. There’d be different ones—for his boss, for his wife, for Helen Gibbs’s husband. And now he needed a new one: for Marlowe herself.

Excuses did not play for her. She said brusquely, “If I’m going to get the men behind this, I need you to do something for me, Deputy.”

His eyes rose briefly from the patch of bloody sidewalk.

“You’re going to walk down that alley to the parking lot behind the courthouse. You’re going to find a patch of grass. And when nobody’s looking your way, you’re going to fire five or six rounds into the ground.”

Frowning, trying to figure it.

“And when the sheriff and other officers come up to you, you’ll say you saw a tweaker who was aiming a weapon your way. You fired and missed and he ran off.”

He was inhaling deeply. The tears had reddened his eyes as efficiently as CS tear gas.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do it.” He looked to his left. “That alley?”

“That alley. And Deputy?”

“Ma’am?”

“It won’t make everything right but it’ll help.”

He nodded.

Standing upright, the deputy strode off. She walked to the back of her wounded Honda and unlocked the trunk, left it lowered.

Returning to the driver’s side of the Colliers’ Lexus, she beeped unlock.

And waited.

It turned out that Deputy Stoller was certainly game. If anything, he was guilty of overacting. The air was suddenly filled with the sound of at least nine or ten shots.

For an instant, every officer present—the sheriff included—froze. Then at once, they drew their weapons and sprinted toward the parking lot. Marlowe flung the Lexus door wide, dropped into the driver’s seat and pressed the starter button. She gunned the engine and skidded to a stop beside the Accord.

She leapt out and from the trunk she quickly pulled out the green rifle bag, containing her Winchester 70 .308 hunting rifle with a Nikon scope. A box of ammo too. She pitched them quickly into the back seat and started for the driver’s seat once more.

A man’s voice said, “Wait.” It was a firm, no-nonsense command.

She looked back. She sighed.

Evan Quill stood beside the open trunk of her Honda. He stood slightly at an angle, right shoulder lower than the left. An old injury while fishing.

He'd know she somehow had learned of Offenbach's whereabouts and now intended to complete her mission to kill him.

What would happen now? She was on her way to shatter everything he stood for. And their years working together, their hours in bed made not a splinter of difference.

She regarded him with her still gray eyes, telling him she wouldn't be deterred.

It was for him to stop her, to call the sheriff.

Quill's dark eyes did not waver either. He said, "You forgot this." He reached into the trunk and pulled out body armor. He stepped forward and handed it to her.

He was one of the very few people she could smile with. She smiled now.

"Now, get the hell out of here before they figure out that the gunplay's a scam and, big surprise, you're the one behind it."



Constant Marlowe never cared for the word "hopeless."

Some endeavors were more difficult than others, some *far* more difficult, and finding the Henrietta's Florist delivery van would be one of the latter.

But difficulty, however crushing, had never stopped her.

She'd slowed at rest stops and motels and gas stations and quick marts, and she had driven around the parking lot of a small hospital.

No sign of the van.

She was convinced Avery had told the truth and they were headed east and probably on this highway.

Luck . . .

Maybe she'd stumble on them.

Or Evan Quill might call her with leads if any of the officers in Upper Falls learned where they might be headed.

If so, she'd get there as fast as she could, set up her sniper's nest, and . . .

What would happen to her after pulling the trigger three times?

The question dissolved as fast as it had appeared.

This was a woman who rarely thought much past the present.

She was about forty miles east of Upper Falls, speeding along Route 99 when she noticed two things.

To her right, several miles in the distance, danced the busy, colorful lights of a half dozen emergency vehicles parked on a shoulder. They were on Southern Lake Road, which, according to a sign under a flashing orange light, led to the town of Marsden.

The second thing she noticed was a man in dark clothing about a hundred feet up the highway. He was injured, using a tree branch for support as he moved toward her, waving.

Well . . .

It was the hostage, Dr. Stuart Collier.

The tall, lanky man hobbled forward. He was spattered with blood. His face twitched with pain at every footfall.

She sped forward, braked and rolled down the passenger-side window.

Her surprise didn't come close to his own shock—when he realized the agent who'd shot Offenbach in the leg back in Upper Falls was driving his own Lexus sedan.

He bent down, head in the window. His perplexed expression vanished. This was not the time for explanations. "First, my wife and daughter. I heard they weren't hurt but—"

“They’re all right.” Marlowe pulled out her phone and sent a text with a geotag. “I’m telling them you’re okay and where you are.”

“Can I talk to them?”

“No. No time.”

He nodded, understanding the urgency.

As she expected, the phone rang immediately. Eleanor Collier was calling back. She hit the “Dismiss” button.

“Are they still in the florist van?”

“No. White one. Ford. Similar to the first. Wisconsin plates. No signage. I’m sorry. I don’t know the tags.”

“I’m not interested in plate numbers.”

He then noted in the back seat the gun case and ammunition and nodded with understanding. He knew what her mission was.

“I would’ve done it myself,” he said in a soft voice. “Cut the femoral. In two minutes he would’ve bled out. But I’d never’ve gotten away. His thugs would’ve killed me in a second.”

She asked urgently, “Do you have any idea where—”

“The private airport in Mitchell.” Collier squinted away a burst of pain from somewhere. “I saw it on their GPS. They’re meeting somebody at eleven. I assume they meant the pilot. Going to Canada, I guess.”

She looked at a map on her phone. She could be there by 9:00 p.m.

Plenty of time to get ready.

“I need a favor.”

He nodded.

“A car should be here soon. When they ask—”

“I’ll tell them the truth,” Collier said. A frown from the pain turned into a wan smile. “That I heard Offenbach say they’re headed south to Chicago.”

Constant Marlowe nodded her thanks, typed the name of the airport into GPS and accelerated hard into the windy night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

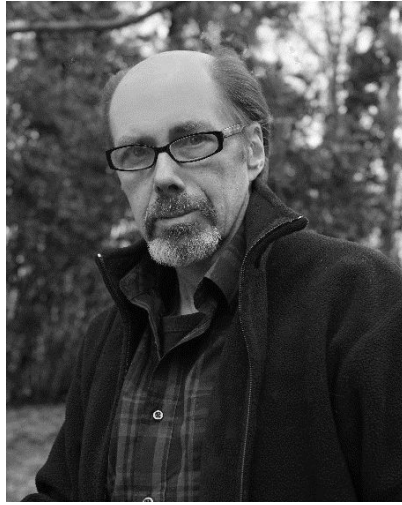


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Jeffery Deaver is the *New York Times* bestselling author of forty-five novels and eighty short stories. His books are sold in 150 countries; have been translated into twenty-five languages; and have received or been short-listed for dozens of awards, including the Edgar, Anthony and Shamus.