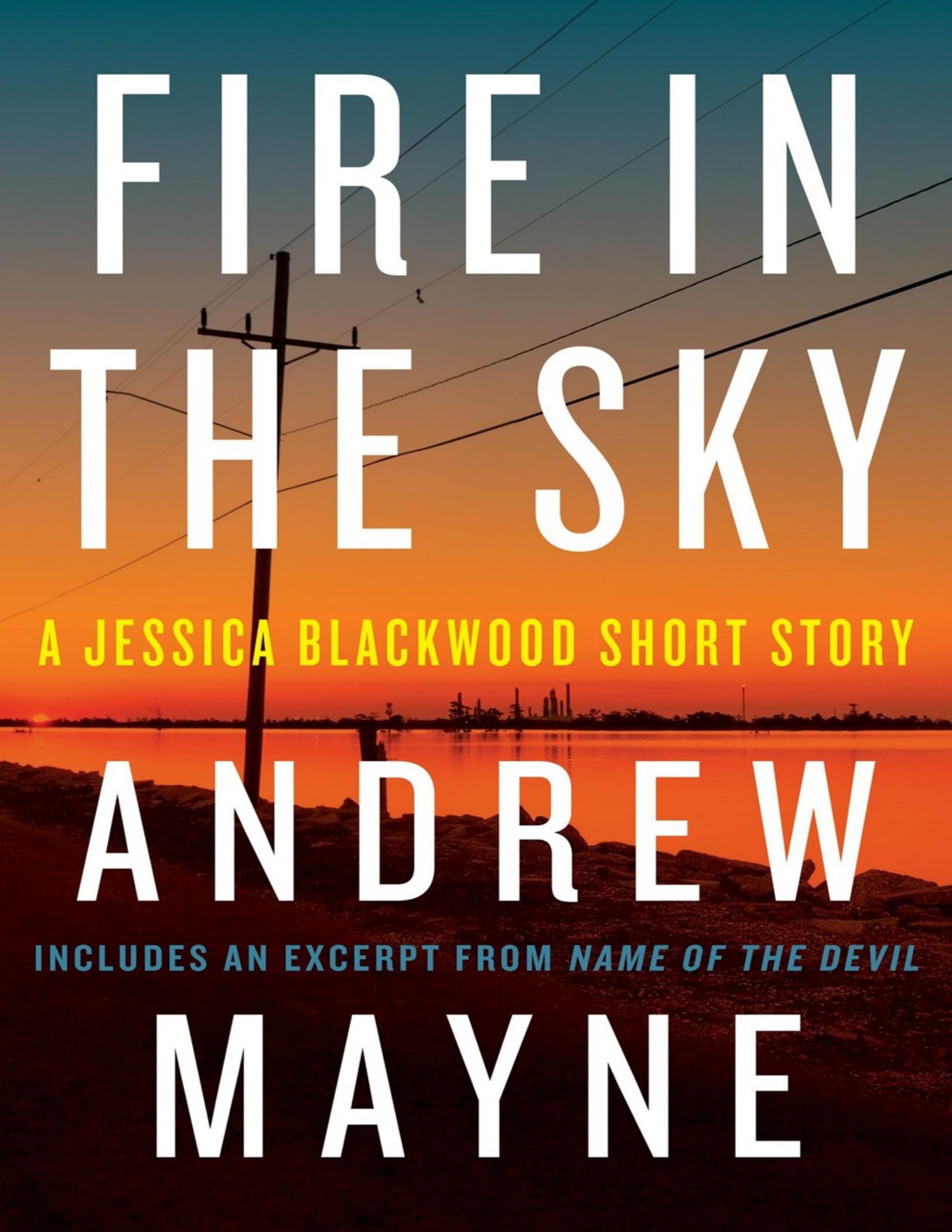


FIRE IN THE SKY



A JESSICA BLACKWOOD SHORT STORY

ANDREW

INCLUDES AN EXCERPT FROM *NAME OF THE DEVIL*

MAYNE

Fire in the Sky

A Jessica Blackwood Short Story

Andrew Mayne



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Fire in the Sky

A rust-stained fishing trawler glides down the Mississippi river sending a wake across the water, gently rocking the houseboat. Waves knock the loose pilings on the collapsed docks to either side of us. The old man called Edgar lifts his hand from the armrest of the rickety lawn chair and points a callused finger toward the western bank. Stars begin to twinkle in the blue dusk just beyond the tree line on the far shore. “That’s where I saw it,” he says with a soft Cajun accent.

Nadine and I both squint into the distance as if we can see the object he’s describing, which he saw almost fifty years ago. Black silhouettes of birds chase after insects in the darkening sky. A commercial airliner bound for Baton Rouge glows in the distance.

Nadine turns back to Edgar, her young face illuminated by the gas lantern on the bow of the boat, her blond head backlit by the setting sun on the horizon. There’s an earnest look about her. She wants to see what he saw.

I see an old man who’s told the same story a thousand times. With each telling he refines his account to make it more entertaining. With each criticism, he’s shifted the details. Maybe not consciously, keeping the story true to how he felt at the time . . . but probably not true to what actually happened.

The mason jar on the dirty wooden console by his knee is filled with an amber fluid that smells like a mixture of tea and moonshine. It must be a local thing. From the burst blood vessels on his nose and his halitosis, I surmise it’s a staple of his diet. A pocket watch sits next to the jar. Shiny and polished, it’s the only thing here that doesn’t look like it washed up on the riverbank.

Shrimping nets in various states of repair line the rotted dock next to the houseboat. Two mangy dogs of questionable breeding sit sullenly in the patchy grass, sticking their wet noses out from under an overturned wooden

boat. Kicked out of the houseboat to make room for Nadine and me, they keep watch over their master as two strangers hear his tale.

Every year for fifty years, Edgar has written to the FBI about what happened that night. Every year he receives a polite denial explaining that the bureau doesn't have the resources to look into his account. But Edgar persists. He keeps writing.

When he was diagnosed with stage-three lung cancer a few months ago, his doctor contacted a brother-in-law who worked as an agent for the FBI to see if someone would hear the man out before he died.

Edgar has become something of a joke in the small town of Picket, Louisiana, a community of ramshackle houses and trailer homes that grew to support the shrimping industry, which has now mostly moved on. Two local taverns provide the only nightlife, other than getting drunk off the strange moonshine-tea with which the older folks here seem to be slowly killing themselves.

"It was a thunderstorm," says Edgar. "Real low. You could hear the booms as they come rolling down the river like an echo in a canyon. The wind was stirring up a fuss. I was out trying to tie down the nets I'd spent all day patching."

The story comes out almost as a kind of prose. He's practiced it so many times. Nadine puts her chin on her hand and leans in. She seems fully into it. Edgar gives me a glance then focuses on telling her what happened.

"First I heard a roar. A loud one. Then there's a bright flash of light and something dark comes flying overhead." Edgar reaches his hand to the sky. "If I'd been standing here, I'd have touched the bottom of it." He stares at his hand for a moment. "It was hot. Hotter than anything I'd ever seen. Some of the lines in my nets melted. It charred the treetops as it swooped by." He points down the river. "Then it headed down there toward the bend. That's when I saw the flash."

"The flash?" asks Nadine.

"Just beyond those trees in the loop. One of the deepest parts of the Mississippi. After the flash, there was a boom. Then along comes a tidal wave across the river. The water went up five feet, clear past the dock. I almost got pulled in. I had to cling to the grass to keep from getting sucked under."

“Then, all of a sudden, the rain stops and the thunder fades away. It was over. I called the sheriff, the Air Force. All of them said it was nothing. I heard all kinds of explanations. Ball lightning, thunder, a meteor, Venus. Some said I made the whole thing up.”

“Did anyone else see it?” asks Nadine.

Edgar shakes his head. “Some heard it. I was the only fool outside in the storm when it happened.” He glances toward me, then back to the more receptive Nadine. “I know what I saw. I may not know what it was. But I know what I saw. Black triangle straight out of the sky. And it crashed just out there. I’ve gone looking. But the mud is too deep. I keep hoping the FBI folks will come out and take a look. I’ve been writing for years. I’m glad somebody finally took me serious.”

Serious is an overstatement. We’re here only to humor a dying man. Nadine and I had been asked to look into this while we were providing support for a domestic-terrorism case upstate.

This is the third case Nadine and I have been assigned together. Four years younger than me, perky and blond where I’m dour and dark, she’s like my mirror opposite. I suspect my supervisors pair me up with her as a kind of punishment. I can’t tell if I’m her babysitter or if she’s my bodyguard. I asked Dr. Ailes, my boss, that question point-blank. His reply was “a little bit of both,” then he changed the subject.

As she sits wide-eyed while Edgar regales her with his fantastical tale of the alien spacecraft, part of me wants to slap the gullible look off her face. Can’t she tell this man has embellished his story beyond reason?

Before coming out here we called the Air Force and pulled up all the records we could find. Nothing, except for Edgar’s crazy letters. I even had Ailes do a back-channel search through confidential bureau files. Still nothing.

If we’d been testing some kind of secret aircraft back then, or if some kind of bogey had popped up on the radar, there’d be something: a flight log, an incident report. There wasn’t.

“How long you been drinking that stuff?” I ask.

Edgar picks up the glass jar and swirls it around. He gives Nadine a wink. “That’s your friend’s way of asking if I was drunk when I saw it.”

“Were you?”

“Drunk?” he says, shaking his head. “Buzzed, perhaps. If I’d known I’d be having visitors from outer space, I’d have had a clearer head.”

“Why don’t you think it was a meteor?” asks Nadine.

Edgar motions toward the wooden door that leads into the houseboat’s cabin. “I read just about everything I could. Meteors, lightning, experimental aircraft. I had to throw out half my library ’cause my house was tilting to the side. None of them could explain what I saw. If you’d been paying attention”—he shoots me a glance—“you’d notice that I said the thing flew over me here then crashed back thataway. That’s what we call a U-turn. No meteor does that. I don’t know about ball lightning, but nothing in those books can explain what I saw.”

“Mr. Edgar, my father and my grandfather were magicians. Don’t take this the wrong way, but the one thing I’ve learned is that we’re not as reliable as witnesses as we’d like to believe. Even as something is happening, we’re not always seeing what we *think* we’re seeing.”

“Then what are we seeing?” asks Edgar.

“What makes sense at the time.” I reach down and pick up his pocket watch. “Family heirloom?” I ask.

“It belonged to my daddy—”

His words are cut short as I throw the watch over my shoulder. It splashes into the Mississippi. Edgar’s face slackens.

Nadine gives me a horrified look. “Jesus Christ, Jessica!”

Edgar is speechless.

I hold up my hand and make a fist. I open it to reveal the watch and place it into Edgar’s hand. “It’s just a trick.”

Nadine turns red. “Not funny.”

“I’m just making a point. We all know what we thought we saw. But obviously that’s not what happened.”

Edgar cradles the watch in his hand, staring down at it. “Then what did I see?” he finally asks.

“An ice cube from my glass,” I reply. “That’s what made the splash. But that’s not what you thought I threw.”

Edgar nods his head. “And that night?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there. I’m not going to tell you that you didn’t see what you say you did. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re a liar,

Mr. Edgar. I think you're just like Agent Cox and me. Human. Vulnerable. Prone to making mistakes."

"So that's it? You pretend to throw my watch in the river and we're done?"

"You said you've looked into this yourself. We checked everything we could. There's not much else we can do. The FBI has taken down your account. If anything develops, we'll let you know."

Edgar's shoulders sink. "I suppose that's the most I could hope for. I just wanted to make sure someone heard the story. Someone important." He gives Nadine and me a weak smile and reaches out a trembling hand. For the first time I realize how sick he really is. The moonshine-tea he's slurping down is for the pain.

As Nadine and I pass the end of the dock, his two dogs come running out from their hiding place to rejoin their master, a defeated shadow on the deck of the boat.

I suppress a shudder at the thought of what will happen to the animals when their owner is gone.

Nadine turns to look back to the houseboat. The gas lantern has been turned off so Edgar can stare at the stars. "I feel so sorry for him," she replies.

"I do too."

Nadine shakes her head as we walk away. "You have a funny way of showing it."

"I'm just being honest with him."

"He's dying, Jessica. He's got no family. Everyone here thinks he's crazy. All he wanted was someone to believe him."

"Our job is to hear him out," I reply. "It's not up to us to believe him one way or the other."

"You didn't have to do the trick with the watch."

"I was just making a point."

"You could have used something else."

"It was the closest thing," I explain.

Nadine gives me a stare. "It's the most important thing in his life. Did you see the way he looked at it? Look around you. This place has been falling apart since he saw whatever it was. That watch, that was the past.

That was the happier time. He didn't want to see what he saw, or imagine it. I think he wished he never did."

"It's the only thing that made him interesting," I reply defensively. "People want to be special. They want something that makes them different."

Nadine stops walking and faces me. "Do they? Is that what you want?"

I hesitate. All I've ever wanted to do is to fit in, to not stand out. "I just want the truth." It's a weak answer.

"Doesn't he?"

"It happened fifty years ago. There's nothing to be found."

"How do you know that?"

"What? You think there's an alien spacecraft sitting out there in the mud of the Mississippi because a chronic alcoholic saw something on a stormy night?"

"I think he deserved more than just the short shrift."

"He wanted to tell somebody official. He did. What more can we do?"

"Go out there. Have somebody look."

"He said he checked himself," I reply.

"You know how hard it is to find something out here in a place like this? Police divers could spend a lifetime and not find something without the right tools."

I shake my head. "So we call in an FBI search on a fifty-year-old UFO sighting? Let's explain that one to our bosses."

"We just spent five days with twenty other agents to ultimately entrap a community-college kid who made vague statements about building a bomb. If the FBI can spend that much time and that many resources on capturing a kid who can't even change his laptop battery, I think we can look a little more into this."

"Then what, Nadine? Chase down every ghost story? Follow up with every person who says the CIA is reading their mind?"

"It's not like that. I just think . . ."

"What?" I ask.

"I just think there's something to his story. For fifty years he's stood by it."

"There's nothing we can do. We'll write it up and file the report as we promised. You'll just have to learn we can only do so much. And that no

matter how sincere someone seems, they may not be seeing the whole picture.”

We walk back to the car in silence. Part of me wonders when this dark cynicism started growing in me.

I wake up an hour before my alarm clock is set to go off and get the phone book out of the nightstand. Nadine and I haven’t spoken since we got back to the motel. I feel guilty for the way I treated her and Edgar. I recognize the voice I’d used to talk to her. It wasn’t mine. It was my grandfather’s.

I try to think of how I’d feel if the roles were reversed. On more than one occasion, Ailes has gone out on a limb for me and one of my wild ideas. Usually they pan out. Sometimes they don’t.

I know too well how hard it is to find facts in accounts like Edgar’s. I also know the frustration of not being listened to. For Nadine’s sake, and my own, I realize it’s important that I give her a little more leeway.

She answers her door bleary eyed. “Get any sleep?” I ask.

“A little,” she replies. “Is it time to go to the airport?”

“I delayed our flight.”

“What?” she says, wiping her eyes.

“I called a salvage company. We’re going to take a look at the bend.”

“To prove me wrong?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Probably. But also to give you the benefit of the doubt. I think it’s silly, but I know what it’s like to be on the other side. If I only backed the hunches I thought were correct, I wouldn’t be much help.”

Once I understood why I reacted the way I did, it was a lot easier to see what I needed to do. Give Edgar the benefit of the doubt, not because I believed him, but because I still believed in people.

Nadine looks at me warily. “So if this goes south and we find nothing, it’s on me? This feels like a trap.”

I shake my head. “No trap. I got a salvage company to do the survey for a few hundred bucks. I’ll pay for it. The bureau doesn’t have to know. This is all on me.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She shakes her head. “This sounds like a dumb idea now. We don’t have to.”

“I insist.”

“Are you trying to teach me a lesson? If that’s the case, I get it.”

Rather than accepting my offer, Nadine is treating it like a setup. From her point of view, I’m setting her up to look like a fool.

“No, Nadine. I’m sincere. Let’s go have a look.”

“Then what?”

“We tell Edgar we gave it a shot.”

“And when we find out nothing is there?” She leans on the doorframe, thinking it over.

“So now you think nothing is there?” I reply, goading her a bit. She needs to stand up for her convictions, even to me.

“I don’t think I ever said there was. I just want us to do more than just write his story down so it can be shredded later on. Promise this isn’t a trick?”

“Honest.”

“Let me pay half?” she asks.

“Fine.”

“Hold on.” She opens her door to reveal a bed covered with maps and crumpled paper. “I’ve been doing some thinking.” She points to a map showing the bend in the river. “This is where he said he saw the crash. But he didn’t find anything there. I did some research and found a police blotter report for the following day. Broken windows attributed to some teenagers.” She points to a cluster of red dots. “See these? They’re all in a line. Only they don’t cross the river where Edgar said he saw the crash. They actually line up a few miles down here in another bend. He couldn’t have seen the actual crash point because of the tree line. It’d be easy to mistake it for somewhere else.”

“So this is where we should look?”

Nadine bites her lip. “I guess so . . .”

I give her a smile. She’s naïve, but clever. “Get dressed. I’ll call the salvage boat and tell them to meet us there.”

An hour later, Captain Lerner, probably the sturdiest-looking woman I’ve ever met, is guiding us across the Mississippi toward the center of the far bend Nadine identified. A video display maps the topography of the riverbed as we pass through the waves. Another monitor shows the readings from a magnetometer, indicating any metallic debris.

The sun is still climbing over the horizon. Nadine and I clasp our coffee cups for warmth and watch with awe as our lady Viking navigates the channel while the wind whips at her thin shirt. Bundled in thick jackets and baseball caps, we look like two lost soccer moms next to her.

“So, you two are both FBI agents?” asks Lerner with a trace of an accent.

“Yes,” I reply. “Only this is more of a favor. Not an official investigation.”

“On the phone you didn’t provide too many details. You said something maybe car-sized?”

“Yes. Possibly. We’re not quite sure.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Your money.”

“What are we looking for?” whispers Nadine.

“You tell me.”

I sit down next to her on an equipment box and speak just low enough for her to hear. “I’ve been thinking about that all night. If it’s a meteor, there won’t be much to find. We’d have to dredge the river and have a geologist look at the rocks.”

“That’s not happening.”

“I know. If it’s a UFO, well then, problem solved.”

She gives me a suspicious look. “So those are your two theories?”

“This happened in the 1960s, so I doubt it’s an unregistered drug plane. They weren’t coming in up here until the ’70s.”

“And we did a classified record search. So we know it’s not some secret Air Force craft.”

“Correct,” I answer.

Nadine gives me a long look. “You thought of all this last night at Edgar’s place, didn’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Occam’s razor, right? Okay . . . since we can rule out what people without classified clearance couldn’t know, that leaves us with two options. A natural phenomenon, like a meteor or ball lightning, that wouldn’t leave much evidence, or that Edgar really got his story screwed up.”

I nod my head.

“Damn, and we came all the way out here for that? You are trying to teach me a lesson.”

“Yes,” I reply. “If you believe in someone, believe in their hunch. Not that it’s right, but that it’s right to follow up on. That’s what Ailes does with me. It’s what I should do with you.”

“So you came all the way out here and blew your money on this to teach me that, even though you know nothing is here?”

“Pretty much. I wasn’t in a hurry to get back to the office anyway.” I also couldn’t get the image of Edgar’s dogs out of my mind. They were all he had. He was all they had. If I couldn’t spare an extra bit of compassion for the loon, then what good was I?

“We’re ready to begin the pattern now,” says Lerner. “I’m going to put the boat into autopilot and the computer will steer as we do the sweep. If the sonar sees something unusual or the magnetometer gets a ferrous reading, the boat will do a circle to tighten the pattern. Normally, this is tuned to check pipeline fittings. But it should work for anything else large and metal.” She puts her feet up on the console and starts to nap.

“I guess we wake her if we find something?” asks Nadine.

“I suppose so.”

We take seats closer to the screen and observe as the sonar maps the bottom of the river and the magnetometer scans. Watching them grows boring very quickly.

“We don’t have to follow this all the way through,” says Nadine.

“Yes, we do,” I reply.

“I get the point.”

After all this, she still doesn’t trust me. “Now it’s about Edgar. I want us to be able to tell him we did a full search.”

“Even though we know nothing is here?”

“Especially because of that.”

“Feeling guilty about the watch trick?” asks Nadine.

“A little,” I confess.

“Can I tell you something? Don’t take it the wrong way.”

“Um, sure . . .”

She makes eye contact and speaks matter-of-factly, “You’re scary. You don’t always need to do your little tricks to make your point.”

“Scary?”

Nadine tries to smile. “I mean, in that ‘strong woman’ kind of way. You’ve got that Jennifer Lawrence, Hillary Clinton, Charlize Theron thing going on. I think I’d like to be you, but then I’m a bit afraid of you.”

“Afraid?” I’m trying to understand why this is coming from a woman who’s a cop like me.

“You look like you can see right through people. It’s like you know a secret, something that could just tear a person apart. It’s intimidating.”

“I don’t mean to be. I’m just as vulnerable as anyone else.”

“Are you? You’ve overpowered psychopaths. You outsmarted a guy who nearly pulled one over the entire FBI. Your reputation intimidates people even before you walk into a room.”

“I’m just as scared about life, my job, everything as you, Nadine. Maybe more. I just hide it. I don’t mean to be scary.”

“Scary is the wrong word. I’m sorry.”

“I know what you mean, though. I used to feel the same way about my grandfather.”

“The magician?”

“Yeah. When I was little he’d teach me little tricks. Not just magic, but psychological things. Ways to seem charismatic. Ways to seem authoritative. They’re not the kind of skills you’d normally teach a little girl.”

“Like what?”

“The guru stare.”

“What’s that?”

“You know how it seems like I’m looking into you?” I lock eyes on her.

“Into my soul.”

“It’s a technique religious gurus would use. Steve Jobs did it too. The trick is to stare at someone without looking away. It’s normal to want to avert your eyes. To *not* look away means you’re asserting dominance. It’s why staring at a chimpanzee comes across to it as a challenge. It’s some kind of inborn primate instinct. They teach assertiveness at the academy, but there’s a lot more to it.”

She nods, thinking this over.

A flock of geese fly over the south end of the bend, calling out hoarse cries into the wind. I watch the sonar, pretending I can tell the difference between mud, rock and an alien spacecraft.

“Your grandfather taught you a lot,” replies Nadine, breaking our silence.

This gives me pause. “I guess he did.”

“Are you close?”

“Not particularly.”

“Sorry.” Nadine drops the subject.

“Nothing to be sorry about. Just a fact.”

“I lost both my parents to cancer when I was a kid,” she says as she follows my gaze to the geese. “My aunt raised me.”

The offhanded way she offers up this information hits my heart like a hammer. My own mother left when I was young. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” she shrugs. “It happens.”

“My grandfather isn’t a bad guy,” I explain. “He’s just an asshole. First rate. He was never abusive. Not physically. It was just his way to cut you to shreds with a word, or a look.” The words trail off. Am I like that too? Does Grandfather know how much he does that? I always assumed he did. But . .

“What about your father?”

“Dad was young when he and my mother had me. She didn’t stick around. He did his best, but grandfather just ground him down. Tore away his self-worth. My dad’s a good guy. A sweet man. He’s just quiet. It’s weird I guess, but Grandfather was more of a father figure. Dad sometimes felt like an older brother in a dysfunctional family . . .” I pause.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever poured all that out to anyone before.” I’m surprised I’ve told her this much.

“It’s because I told you my parents are dead,” she replies bluntly.

“I guess so. Here I am, singing my woe-is-me song. Ailes says you graduated magna cum laude from Kansas State and got your master’s in mathematics. Not bad for an orphan.”

“I’m not an orphan,” she interjects. “I told you, my aunt raised me. I had someone. She put everything into seeing that I succeeded.”

“I’m sure she’s proud.” Nadine wants none of my pity.

“I’m sure my parents are too,” Nadine answers with conviction.

I don’t know what to say. Lately, I think there’s as much of a chance of an actual afterlife as I think there is of finding Edgar’s UFO.

“You didn’t nod,” Nadine observes.

“Excuse me?”

“People normally nod their head when I say something like that. You didn’t do anything. You acted as if you were thinking about what I just said. As if you had to figure out the right response because there wasn’t an obvious one.”

“I’m sure they’re proud,” I reply hastily.

“But you don’t mean that,” she persists. There’s no trace of anger in her voice, just curiosity.

“I’m not much of a believer. I’ve tried. I used to wear a crucifix. Not so much anymore.”

“Why?”

“That’s a complicated question.”

“Is it because of what’s happened to you?”

I shake my head. “I’ve lived a charmed life, all things considered. I’m just not into worshipping a God that takes the parents away from little girls or allows another to have her face burned off by an abusive mother.” The scarred smile of a girl named Elsie I’ve been giving magic lessons to comes to mind. I cut her off before she can speak, “More than that, I’m just tired of believing in things simply because I want them to be true.”

“It’s what gives us hope,” counters Nadine.

“It’s what makes us animals,” I reply sharply.

“So you think I’m stupid?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You did. You called me an animal.” Her face is stoic, she sounds hurt.

“Nadine, I don’t know any more than you do.”

“You do. You’re smart, Jessica. Real smart. You’re probably one of the smartest people I’ve ever met. We’re all fools to you.”

“You’re not a fool, Nadine. I wish I could be like you.”

“Ignorant?” Her tone is sarcastic.

“Happy.”

“Happy?”

I shake my head. In my typical fashion I’ve made things worse. “Let’s drop it. I don’t mean to be the way I am. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. And on the bigger question, I just don’t know.”

Her eyes narrow. “Just answer me this: Why did we come out here? Truly to back me up? Do you really want to show me how much you support me? Or do you want to show me that you are always right? Is this all about going out of your way to prove how smart you are? Maybe you don’t consciously know the answer. But think about this. You could have asked the local sheriff to do a training exercise out here, or called in a favor with the local bureau office. What made you decide that you and I had to come out here today? Does some part of you want to see me fail? Maybe to remind yourself that the justification for your unhappiness is the fact that you are smarter than all of us?”

“Nadine . . .” My words fail me. I don’t know how to answer her. Deep down, I know there’s an element of truth to what she says. Even my overt explanation of wanting to show her that I’d back her up comes across as condescending the more I think about it.

She bites her lip and turns away from me. In the past few months I’ve seen her look stone-faced into the eyes of killers. She’s a good cop. She’s not a wimp. And Nadine is the closest thing I’ve had to a friend in a long time. I haven’t been able to open up to anyone like that for a long time. And now I’ve gone and done the one thing I always manage to do, hurt people with my bluntness.

I cringe with guilt to think that some part of me wanted to watch Nadine realize what a fool she’d been to take seriously the old drunk’s crazy story. That I wanted her to know that there was a price to be paid for her naïveté. Deep down, I resented her. I couldn’t just tell her she was wrong; I had to rub her face in it.

Maybe this isn’t about my grandfather. Maybe this really is about me.

There’s a buzzing noise that I almost miss because I’m so deep in thought. I realize it’s the magnetometer.

Captain Lerner snaps awake from her nap and checks the sonar. “We found something,” she reports without much emotion. “It’s big.”

Nadine turns to me, wide-eyed. All her anger is gone. I get the feeling her blind faith is about to be rewarded. And I think deep down I feel glad for it.

Dr. Ailes is sitting across from me in the bullpen office housed in the nearly defunct materials storage building in Quantico. Nadine was off on an assignment with a kidnap unit. We haven’t spoken much since we returned.

Each of us dived back into our regular work. The case was resolved, but not our confrontation.

Ailes's dark fingers quickly flip through the pages of the printed report as he absorbs the information. I know Nadine has met Ailes. I'm not sure how she could call me one of the smartest people she's ever met after that. He is off-the-charts brilliant. So smart that, when he got bored creating billion-dollar black-box-stock-trading firms, he called in a favor with his pal the president and took over a corner of the FBI to organize a group of misfits into a Special Cases division.

Ailes closes the folder and leans back in his chair. "So a moonshine-swilling redneck tells you he saw a UFO a half century ago, and you decide to chase it down?"

"That's the short version."

"What's the long version?"

"Richmond Edgar was the lone witness to a previously unknown Soviet MiG jet variant, designed for deep enemy penetration, on a covert mission. Said Soviet MiG encountered a lightning storm far in U.S. territory and crashed in the Mississippi. Because of the lightning storm and Edgar's unreliability as a witness, nobody took him seriously."

"But you did?"

"No, I did not," I reply.

"So this was all Agent Nadine Cox's doing?"

I nod. "All the credit is hers."

After we found the outline of the plane on the sonar, the Air Force and the FAA suddenly got real interested in Edgar's story. Our favor to a fellow FBI agent became a real Federal case and was lifted out of our hands.

"When you were out there, were you two aware that the Soviets had run several deep-penetration missions through the Mississippi Delta?"

I shake my head. "No. I'd done a record search, but it was limited to U.S. military and civilian aircraft. It never dawned on me that the Russians might have tried something so far into U.S. airspace." The thought of asking the Russians never even occurred to me.

"Well, they did," says Ailes. "Recently declassified Soviet-era documents show this was more than a onetime event. What was a onetime event was the crash of a prototype jet. The CIA has been all over that since we pulled it from the water. If someone had bothered to follow up on

Edgar's story fifty years ago, we could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. We found avionics and materials in the wreckage we didn't know about for another decade. But it's not much help now. Although the Russians have requested we return their plane."

"Will we?" I ask.

"Hell no. If I had my way, I'd park the damn thing in the middle of the quad here as a reminder."

"A reminder?" I ask.

"Don't let our skepticism turn into cynicism. Not everyone with a crazy story is crazy. Thankfully, you and Nadine don't think like everyone else."

I shake my head. "I didn't go there on a hunch. I went there to prove her wrong."

"Why?" Ailes asks, surprised.

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Or because it's complicated?"

"Both?" I feel uncomfortable telling him.

Ailes rests his hand on another folder. "I have her report here."

"Ah . . ."

He picks it up and scans the first few pages. "She gives you the credit for backing her, even though you were doubtful. Is this true?"

"In a way . . ."

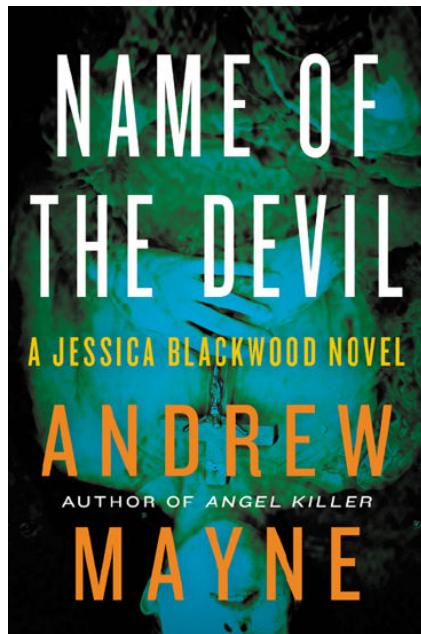
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In this electrifying sequel to the heart-pounding thriller *Angel Killer*, magician-turned-FBI agent Jessica Blackwood must channel her past to catch a cold-blooded killer consumed by a desire for revenge.

When a church combusts in rural Appalachia, the bizarre trail of carnage suggests diabolical forces are at work. Charged with explaining the inexplicable, the FBI's Dr. Ailes and Agent Knoll once again turn to the ace up their sleeve: Agent Jessica Blackwood, a former prodigy from a family dynasty of illusionists. After playing a pivotal role in the capture of the Warlock, a seemingly supernatural serial killer—and saving the Bureau's

reputation in the process—Jessica can no longer ignore the world, and the skills, she left behind. Her talent and experience endow her with a knack for knowing when things are not always as they appear to be, and she soon realizes this explosion is just the first of many crimes.

As the death toll mounts, Jessica discovers the victims share a troubling secret with far-reaching implications that stretch from the hills of West Virginia to cartel-corrupted Mexico to the hallowed halls of the Vatican. Everyone involved in what happened on that horrible night so long ago has tried to bury it—except for one person, who believes that the past can be hidden, but never forgiven. Can Jessica draw on her unique understanding of the power and potential of deception to thwart a murderer determined to avenge the past?

On Sale July 7, 2015

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An Excerpt from *Name of the Devil*

What the eyes sees, the ear hears, and the mind believes.

HARRY HOUDINI

OceanofPDF.com

“YOU KNOW WHAT you have to do,” said the distant voice at the other end of the phone.

Sheriff Jessup nodded. Moonlight glinted off the cars parked in front of the small church: the Alsops’ rusted Jeep, Bear McKnight’s new pickup truck, Reverend Curtis’s Cadillac that had been a bequest from Elena Partridge when she passed. All of them were here.

He was here.

Jessup was a powerful man. Six-foot-three, weighing close to three hundred pounds, he was more muscle than fat. The teenagers and wise-asses in town gave him a wide berth. His handcuffs usually stayed on his belt. One grip of his iron fingers on your collar and you knew you were up against a force of nature.

The occasional fool who tried to outrun the sheriff found out the former high school football player who could sprint with the best of the track team hadn’t lost much speed with age.

Jessup walked up the stone steps to the church and entered the doorway. Adam Alsop turned in the pew where he was sitting next to his wife and watched with confusion as Jessup bolted the door shut.

“Carson?” asked Adam, calling the sheriff by his first name.

Natalie Alsop, with her gray hair pulled back in a bun and the same tired eyes as everyone else, froze when she saw the ferocity of the sheriff’s expression.

Reverend Curtis and Bear McKnight were huddled at the lectern turning the pages of the church’s oversized Bible.

“Christ,” McKnight said as he saw the sheriff.

Jessup walked first toward the Alsops. Adam was paralyzed with panic as the sheriff clenched his neck, thick fingers stabbing into his throat. His wife tried pulling at Jessup’s thickly corded arm, but was backhanded so hard her head cracked against the wooden pew, knocking her out cold.

McKnight ran toward Jessup to intervene. His heavy footsteps were the only other sound in the hall besides the gurgling noise coming from Adam Alsop's mouth as he tried to breathe.

Reverend Curtis hurried to the back of the church, toward the fire exit he'd reluctantly installed after the fire marshal had demanded it. His frantic hands pulled at the crossbar. The door wouldn't open. Something was blocking it from the outside.

Curtis turned back as Sheriff Jessup grabbed McKnight by the arms and bit into his shoulder, tearing away a mouthful of flesh. Even more shocking than the savage act was the cold dispassionate look in the sheriff's eyes. It was the lifeless stare of a great white shark on the hunt. A predator that didn't see another life, only something to be eaten.

McKnight screamed and dropped, falling next to Adam's body. He tried to cover the wound with his hand, but the blood kept pumping relentlessly through his fingers until the cold, tingling sensation of consciousness fading overcame him.

Jessup kicked him aside and strode down the aisle dividing the pews. His boots left prints in the growing puddle of blood. Shreds of McKnight's shoulder muscles and skin still hung from his mouth, his face misted with arterial spray.

"Carson . . . Carson," pleaded the reverend. "I can help you. I can help you rid yourself of this . . . this thing." He fell onto his knees, hands grasped over his head in prayer.

Sheriff Jessup looked down. "Rid me of the thing? Rid me?" His vacant expression broke for a moment. He grabbed the reverend by the back of the jacket and pulled him to his feet. "I am the cleansing fire! I'm the one ridding you of the evil!" Spittle flew from his mouth, a sputtering teakettle on the verge of exploding.

Reverend Curtis futilely kicked and punched. In an act of desperation he clawed at the large man's cheek. But the deep gouges didn't even faze Carson Jessup.

Jessup punched back, breaking the smaller man's nose. He pounded again and again until the entire bridge collapsed, sharp fragments of bone embedded into his raw fist like pieces of coral.

The reverend fell to the ground in a bloody heap. The whistling sound of his breath through what was left of his nose faded.

Sheriff Jessup pulled the phone from his pocket. "It's done."

The phone had been dead for days, yet the sheriff heard a voice tell him, "Good, my son."

He closed his eyes and waited for the fire to cleanse away the wickedness and evil.

On his knees, he folded his hands and thanked the guiding archangel for showing him a clear path. He thanked the Lord for the strength to do His bidding. He thanked God for bringing this long nightmare to an end.

WHEN THE EXPLOSION ripped through the church, a sleepdeprived grad student at the Seismology Lab at the University of West Virginia jerked upright in his chair, spilling his coffee as his computer sounded an alarm. His first reaction to the sudden spike was that there had been a plane crash, or a meteor strike.

The residents of rural Hawkton ran outside to see the source of the explosion and were horrified to see the huge ball of flame rise from the direction of the old church, a bright orange plume against a plum-colored evening sky. Some felt it was an end to the darkness that had enveloped the town. Others suspected that the darkness had only just begun.

A CONTINENT AWAY, Father Carmichael sat lost in thought as he studied a nineteenth-century letter from a cavalry officer serving in Napoleon's North African campaign. The officer had found an inscription assumed to have been archaic Hebrew. The location of the inscription, Carmichael deduced, was now lost, very likely under a parking lot or apartment building. He turned the page, and as the paper disturbed the stale air of his basement reading room he noticed the smell of cigarette smoke.

Carmichael looked up and saw a man perched in the corner, watching him. Behind the orange glow of the man's cigarette was a tan face worn with wrinkles, and intense, piercing eyes. Gray hair at his temples blended into blue-black. Dressed in a dark suit, suitable for a Brussels banker, he was clearly not a visiting priest. He had the presence of someone who cared little about smoke alarms or the effect the smoke had on old books.

How the man had been able to find him down here in the labyrinth was a feat unto itself. Carmichael liked the old reading room below the

Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze in Florence, Italy, because it wasn't on any map.

He felt himself a kindred spirit of the man who had founded it some three hundred years prior. Antonio Magliabechi lived and breathed words. He was reputed to have read every one of his forty thousand books and been able to recall them in great detail, yet he paid so little attention to worldly matters that his threadbare clothes would fall apart on his body.

It was through this lens of history that French Lieutenant Chambliss was speaking to Carmichael, after a fact. The library's surroundings gave him a different context to examine these letters. Touching them was like stepping into the past.

Like his hero, Carmichael could be entirely oblivious to the world beyond the page. He'd no idea when the man had entered the room, but attributed the apparition to his mindlessness and not any stealthy intent on the man's behalf.

"You're the Mandean scholar," the man stated in English.

Carmichael had written some papers on the language and belief system of the ancient Gnostics of the Middle East. While he didn't consider himself an expert, he wasn't going to argue with his strange visitor. "Yes. I guess."

The man nodded. He reached his hand inside his jacket and pulled out an envelope and placed it on Carmichael's table. His raised eyebrow indicated Carmichael should look inside.

Carmichael slid the photograph out of the envelope. His cheeks flushed. Bottle-blond hair, a mischievous smile; he recognized the girl immediately. She was a friend of his cousin. A girl he'd met a few months ago in Austria. Carmichael had been drinking heavily that day. The innocent flirtation had turned into something more . . .

Shame wracked his guilt-trained mind. He'd confessed a week later, after much anguish. Not to his usual confessor, but to a priest in a small parish near San Marino. He didn't fear divine wrath as much as he did the long ears of the Vatican.

"I . . ." Carmichael began, not sure where the words would lead him.

The man in the corner raised a finger and wiped away the words with a gesture. His large hand reached out and landed on the photograph, concealing it from view as he slipped it back into his pocket and away from Carmichael's conscience.

There was something symbolic about the gesture. Carmichael vaguely understood there was to be no more discussion on the matter of the girl. He waited.

“Discretion can be a virtue,” the man said.

Carmichael nodded.

“You have mine, and I would like yours.”

“Of course.” Carmichael’s knee began to shake under the table.

The man reached into his other jacket pocket and removed a portable cassette recorder. He set it on the table next to Carmichael’s pad of paper and pencil.

“I need the words,” said the man. “Just the words. After the words, you’re to forget about this. Understood?”

“Yes . . .” Carmichael said, hesitantly.

The man’s stare lingered, turning Carmichael’s acquiescence into a verbal contract.

Carmichael pressed the play button and held the speaker to his ear. The voice seemed half asleep, or in a trance. The words at first sounded like Hebrew, but they weren’t. This language shared a common ancestral tongue, but had diverged a thousand years before; the closest version still spoken would be Syriac. This was different. This was a version of Aramaic—the language spoken by the Jews in Jerusalem in Jesus’s time.

Understanding spoken Aramaic is a challenge because there are no living native speakers. The closest approximation comes from analyzing Syriac, Hebrew dialects and a few other variations. There are maybe a hundred people in the world who could speak conversationally in Aramaic. While computer translation allows anyone to read the words, comprehension is a different matter. Something told Carmichael that the man in his reading room preferred a more thoughtful interpretation.

Carmichael’s nervous fingers fumbled with the machine as he replayed the tape to check his phonetic transcription. He had understood the words on the first pass, but wanted to be absolutely certain. He was also distracted by the speaker.

The man took the sheet of paper from Carmichael, quietly read the translation, then pocketed it along with the cassette recorder. He straightened the creases in his slacks and stood. “This never happened,” he said flatly.

There was something about the man that implied there would be no choice but to agree.

Carmichael waited for the man to leave. After his footsteps faded down the miles of bookshelves, the young priest leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling and breathed for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

The Austrian girl, Anya, was the furthest thing from his thoughts. The words on the tape recorder echoed through his mind as clearly as they had when he first heard them.

I am the one who walks in darkness. I am the one who is fallen.

THESE WERE NOT the words of a disciple of God. These were declarations of evil. These were the proclamations of a demon in a religious text. This was the voice of Lucifer, or another fallen angel.

But by themselves, the words weren't anything extraordinary. Not in this day and age. He'd recently watched his nephew, Pietro, play a video game featuring an antagonist who spoke in a demonic style. Carmichael only had to turn on the radio to hear a thousand sung phrases like that, or watch them uttered on television. This was different.

Context was everything.

The speaker on the tape had used an almost forgotten tongue, and he was also someone Carmichael knew—a man that, to Carmichael's knowledge, could not speak Aramaic, Syriac or even Hebrew.

Anyone could have memorized the words. But they had no business coming out of the mouth of a man of the cloth.

Least of all the mouth of the Vicar of Christ, the Bishop of Rome, His Holiness the Pope.

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FEAR

I REMEMBER THE FIRST time I experienced fear. Not a child's fear of a scary noise outside the window or an unexpected face. Real fear, the fear a young girl feels when she sees the faces of adults around her as they realize that they are no longer in control—even though they're telling her that things are going to be okay, she can see the lie in their eyes and hear the hesitation in their voices.

The old black Buick didn't scare me, not at first. I was seven and had been told countless times to look out for creepers and other weirdos. As a kid, though, this was an abstract threat, like germs or mortgages. The car was just a car following me.

I was careful, and smart enough to know this wasn't a good thing, but I wasn't *fearful*. I didn't know what it meant. The fear came later.

By this time, Dad and I had moved back into Grandfather's house and I was going to a small private school on the edge of Beverly Hills. I knew it had been a rough year for Dad, but somehow he found the money to send me there. In the evenings he'd be in the workshop, making magic tricks and collectibles to sell through ads in magic magazines. Grandfather, who prided himself on making his keep as a performer and not by selling his secrets, looked down upon this, but he kept his sarcastic comments to a minimum. He knew Dad was trying his best for my sake.

At seven I was already articulate enough for people to assume I was eleven or twelve. Letting me walk home by myself in my school skirt and Nintendo backpack didn't seem like a bad idea to my dad. Far be it for seven-year-old me to tell him otherwise.

While the other kids were being picked up in Mercedes or minivans driven by nannies, I walked away up the hill toward the sprawling house

where we lived.

A mansion that would have looked like a haunted house on a studio back lot if Grandfather hadn't made sure to keep it well-coated in paint, it was set back on a path that wound through overgrown trees and bushes, which took an army of gardeners to tame.

Grandfather cultivated a certain degree of theatricality to impress reporters and other guests. Although overrun was fine, dilapidated was not. The former implied he was an eccentric who wanted his privacy, but the latter suggested he was on the edge of financial despair.

With its pointed spires and steeped roof, the mansion was more medieval Disney than tony Beverly Hills. It was built by one of the first Hollywood studio heads, who had been heavily influenced by the fairytale stories of his native Germany.

I was only blocks away from school when I heard the car's brakes squeal as it came to a stop. With tinted windows almost rolled up, the interior was dark. I saw blue cigar smoke wafting from the small gap between the top of the window and door, then turned back to my walk.

I liked the peace and quiet of my neighborhood. Each front yard seemed like a private diorama built for my own amusement. I almost never saw anyone on the sidewalk or on their lawns. At least not a gardener. I stopped from time to time to stare through the bars, or gaps in the hedges, at some of the more lavish landscapes.

My favorite had a small curved koi pond with a bridge. The brightly colored fish liked to gather at one end, near a fountain pouring from a cement waterfall, and huddle like a rainbow tied in a knot. Occasionally one would thrash and break the surface, forcing them to line up again in a new pattern. I hadn't yet been to Japan then, but I imagined that this must be what it was like there.

At the end of the block I turned the corner. Walking under the shade of the trees, I passed the house with the large female sphinx surrounded by a circular driveway. Every now and then a heavyset man would be out washing a Rolls-Royce, and he would wave to me as I passed. I'd wave back and continue home.

He wasn't there that day. But the Buick was. It was when the car made another turn shortly after me that I got a little suspicious.

Lots of people drove through the area hoping to see a famous resident, as if they expected Paul Newman to be out mowing his lawn. The funny thing is that it was almost impossible to tell the vacant houses from the ones that were lived-in. If people went outside, it was almost always in their backyards.

The low rumble of the car engine was making me anxious so I picked up my pace, but tried not to make it too obvious. Eyes forward, I listened carefully. I was all set to run if I heard a door open. In class they'd told us the tricks a pervert might use: that he was lost, that he knew our parents. (I had retorts to all of them. Logic told me the best response would be to just get away.)

At random, I picked a back alley that ran between the big avenues fronting the houses. This was a side road the garbage men took, or where the 'help' would unload groceries. Hardly anyone else ever used it.

I didn't have to look back to know the Buick had followed me. The sound of the engine echoed down the back fences along the alley.

In my still-innocent mind, I thought of a million reasons why someone could be following me. Maybe it was a friend of Dad's or Grandfather's who was lost. It didn't matter.

At the end of one lot a long hedge ran perpendicular from the street to the avenue in front. The wall of the neighboring mansion was only a foot away, forming a dark, narrow corridor. I was certain rats, raccoons and other nasty creatures used it as an expressway to the trashcans. But it didn't matter. I ducked into the passage and ran toward the other end.

Behind me, the Buick's brakes let out a high-pitched noise as the car rolled to a stop. I could feel the eyes of the driver looking at me from behind the tinted glass. I didn't turn back. I sprinted toward the keyhole of light at the end of the path. A twig, sticking out like a skeletal finger, scraped my cheek. My blouse and skirt were covered with dry leaves.

I kept going until I reached the road that led to our block.

I slipped through the bars of the huge wrought-iron gates at the end of our driveway and clambered up it to safety.

Out of sight and no longer a threat in my mind, the Buick became just one adventure among others in that particular day. It was just one more anecdote, like when Hayley Siegel announced to our class that her sister had got her period the day before. None of us knew what it meant, but it

seemed like a big deal when she said it. From the entryway, I heard voices in the back kitchen and found Grandfather and Dad sitting around the large wooden table, looking at sketches for a new illusion Grandfather wanted to add to the show.

“Hey, kiddo,” said my dad, not looking up.

“Looks like you rolled your way home,” Grandfather remarked before crossing out something on the sheet of paper.

I poured myself a glass of milk, then scooped in some chocolate powder. Being careful to not hit the spoon against the side of the glass and get myself shushed for overzealous mixing, or a quip from Grandfather about ruining a martini that I didn’t understand, I stirred as quietly as possible before placing the spoon in the sink to be washed alongside the glass when I’d finished.

I peered between their hunched shoulders and kept as quiet as I could. They tolerated my presence as long as I avoided interrupting. If I was in a curious mood, that could be only seconds.

Dad traced a line across the page and gave me a quick glance. “Uncle Darius will be coming over tonight.”

I hadn’t seen Uncle Darius in ages. More lighthearted than either Dad or Grandfather, I always liked having him around the house. Although referred seemingly behind my back, and to his face, as a “fuck-up” by Grandfather, he seemed pretty okay to me. He was fun.

Remembering the kind of thing he should ask as a Dad: “How was school?”

“Hayley Siegel’s sister got her period,” I replied nonchalantly.

Dad’s face grew red. Grandfather let out a chuckle. “Heck of a school you’re sending her to.”

I knew I’d said something funny, but I didn’t get it. Trying to change the conversation, I said, between quiet slurps, “An old black car followed me all the way home. I tried to ditch it in the alley, but it kept following.”

Grandfather jerked around to face me. His words came out slowly, as if he were giving me stage directions. “What kind of car?”

I knew the names of dozens of cars from watching Grandfather’s mentalism act. I’d even made my own little mnemonic to remember them. My finger made the shape of a shield. “A Buick, I think?”

Dad looked to Grandfather, his eyes wide and his mouth slack. That was the moment I saw it. That was the moment I knew fear.

They knew something I didn't, and that knowledge scared them. My hand grew numb, and the chocolate milk spilled to the floor.

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BLACK BUICKS AND the novelty of fear were a distant memory to me by the time I visited the Hawkton Hellmouth. By now, fear—usually not mine, but more often my own than I liked—had become a constant element of my work. Hellmouth. The word sticks in my mind. This was how one hyperbolic news site described the scene of the explosion when the first aerial footage became available. It caught on from there. Being here in person, I decide it's a perfectly suitable name.

There's a gaping hole in the earth where the little church once sat. Nervous couples were married there. Crying babies baptized. Worshippers found solace in prayer. Now all those memories have disappeared into a huge maw screaming at the sky.

Splinters of wood litter the surrounding farmland and are even lodged in the branches of the trees. It's as if a toothpick house has been smashed under the heel of an angry giant.

The pilot brings the helicopter higher so that the technician controlling the mounted camera and laser-ranging system can get a different point of view. I can see the screen over his shoulder; the program plotting away thousands of dots to build a 3-D map forensics will use later on to decipher what happened.

It seems farcical to think that all this destruction can be captured into data points and emailed around like cat photos. The devastation, the emotion, the passion behind what happened—reduced to digital bits. But that's what a detective does. We see everything as numbered lists. Dispassionate, objective, we have to turn off our emotions and focus on the facts. Truth hides in little details. My instructor at the Academy told us the first thing we have to do at a crime scene is to forget everything we've been told about what happened—focus on the atoms.

“Any sign of our victims?” asks Vonda Mitchum, the lead investigator from the local Bureau office, over the radio.

“Negative,” replies Agent Knoll from the seat next to me.

“Try going lower,” Mitchum commands, before clicking off our channel.

“That’s helpful,” grumbles Knoll as he presses his binoculars against the window. Muscular, compact, with a head like a prize-fighter, he’s as frustrated as me with how the search is progressing.

Five hours in and we don’t have any bodies. Traces of blood were found on a few of the planks; that’s it on the victims so far. Inside the search perimeter is a truck with blown-out windows that belonged to a man named Bear McKnight. Wedged into the side of the truck is Mr. and Mrs. Alsop’s Jeep, also with shattered glass. Reverend Curtis’s Cadillac is flipped over entirely, like a belly-up turtle in the mud.

There are four missing persons and a potential fifth. Hawkton’s sheriff, Carson Jessup, is nowhere to be found. The nervous deputy can’t confirm if the sheriff had cause to go out to the church last night, but his SUV was found parked a half-mile away on a dirt back road.

“You got your map data?” I ask the young technician leaning over his plotting computer.

“I think we got enough,” he replies.

“Mind if we take this on a wider search pattern?” I call to the pilot.

“Not much point,” says the pilot, Bilson, a sunburned man who was flying for the Bureau while I was in middle school. “We ran the numbers. This is the outer limit of the radius. The debris field ends fifty yards back in.”

“I know. I understand the physics. Still . . .” I gaze out the window. Bits of the church’s white planks stick out of the brown grass and dull dirt like cat’s teeth. “But the physics isn’t telling us where the bodies are.”

“We got another hour of fuel,” says Bilson. “Fine by me.” He turns the stick to the left and brings us into a turn. Knoll and I use our binoculars to scan the trees and fields again, hoping to find some sign of whoever was in the church.

We don’t want them to be dead. In a perfect world, we’d find them sitting on the porch of a farmhouse drinking beer and smiling up at us, eager to tell the story of how they narrowly escaped death.

This isn’t that world. We know there’s at least one body, or at least part of a body, to be found. Maybe three or four more, if all the missing were in

the church.

Explosions can do different things to the human form. Stand one way, and even a small yield can rip off a limb. Positioned in another, an explosion that could knock down a brick wall might just leave you with only an earache and a mild friction burn.

But bodies usually don't just vaporize. There's nearly always something left. Whether in pieces that have to be picked up with tweezers or ones that can fit into a body bag, our victims are somewhere.

The ground search is going slowly. Every square inch has to be covered in a pattern that gets exponentially larger the farther away you move from the blast. Below me, men and women in blue and yellow clean-suits comb the area for clues. Igniters, bomb components, anything that points to what happened. Even a paperclip can tell a story. They look like astronauts on an alien planet searching for signs of life.

At first glance, the blast looks like a gas explosion. The trouble is that the church wasn't hooked up to a gas line, and it didn't have a tank. Laboratory analysis of the wreckage will give us a clearer picture. Traces of whatever caused the explosion are likely to have squeezed into the wood and fabric of the church. The charred debris can be chemically analyzed to reveal what outside substances were absorbed in the reaction.

The clues are here—at least the clues to what happened physically. But they don't explain how or why.

We have an explosion, but no victims. Just traces. Something tells me there's more to this than just a bomb or a gas explosion.

“Robin 2, why are you going out of the flight pattern?” demands Mitchum on the radio, like a scolding teacher.

“We've decided to extend the search radius,” I reply.

“Under whose authority, Agent Blackwood?”

Knoll lowers his binoculars and raises his eyebrows. He mouths the words, “Now you did it.”

“Occam's.”

Vonda Mitchum is the lead investigator, but not our supervisor. We are assisting because it's crucial to get as much information as possible in the first forty-eight hours. While the helicopter is certainly under her control, treating Knoll and me like underlings is a step beyond what is appropriate.

I decide to cut her a little slack. Obviously she's under pressure. "I apologize for the deviation. I wanted to get another angle and see if there was anything outside the radius."

"The radius is a radius for a reason. Unless you don't believe in physics, or think the victims walked out of there," replies Mitchum.

"I don't think they walked . . ." I ignore her sarcasm.

"You think this looks familiar?" she says, almost as a challenge.

This is her case, and it could be a big one. She's afraid I'm going to take it away from her by tying it into my previous major investigation. The last time I was involved in murder on such a spectacular scale, the perpetrator had been a man who liked to make his crimes look like impossibilities.

"No. I just think if you can't find something where you expect to, you might want to look elsewhere."

"You're wasting resources, Blackwood. Have the pilot return to the LZ."

"Hold up," says Knoll. He points out his window to a pale object in a tree.

I train my binoculars on where he's indicating. Something, or someone, is entangled in the branches. I see what looks like bare skin wrapped in foliage.

"Can you zoom in on that?" I ask the technician in the front seat.

He aims the high-powered camera at the tree and brings it into focus on his laptop screen. There's a vague outline of what could be a body.

We all feel that sick sensation in the pit of our stomach. What hope we had for a happy ending is gone.

"Looks like our first victim," I grimly reply. There's a flicker of guilt through my conscience as I confirm the bad news. Until now, we could still hold on to that version of reality in which they are sitting on that porch, waving at us. Now it's gone. "Send that to Mitchum, and don't forget to include the GPS coordinates."

"Do you have to rub things in?" asks Knoll.

"I don't mean to."

At least, I don't think I do.

ANDREW MAYNE AD CARD

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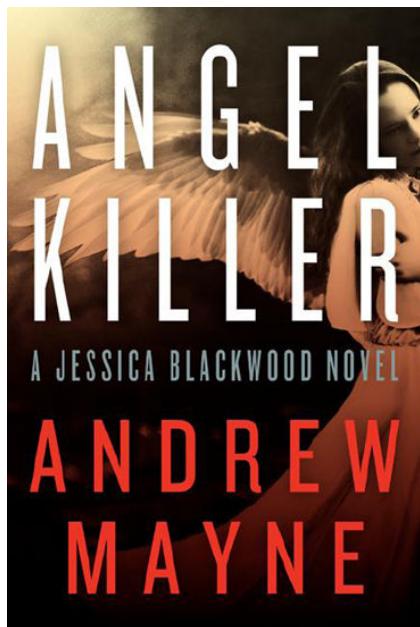
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ANGEL KILLER BACK AD

Also by Andrew Mayne

ANGEL KILLER



FBI agent Jessica Blackwood believes she's left her complicated life as a gifted magician behind her . . . until a killer with seemingly supernatural powers puts her talents to the ultimate test.

A hacker who identifies himself only as "Warlock" brings down the FBI's website and posts a code in its place that leads to a Michigan cemetery, where a dead girl is discovered rising from the ground . . . as if she tried to crawl out of her own grave.

Born into a dynasty of illusionists, Jessica Blackwood is destined to become its next star—until she turns her back on her troubled family to begin a new life in law enforcement. But FBI consultant Dr. Jeffrey Ailes's discovery of an old magic magazine will turn Jessica's world upside down.

Faced with a crime that appears beyond explanation, Ailes has nothing to lose—and everything to gain—by taking a chance on an agent raised in a world devoted to achieving the seemingly impossible.

The body in the cemetery is only the first in the Warlock's series of dark miracles. Thrust into the media spotlight, with time ticking away until the next crime, can Jessica confront her past to stop a depraved killer? If she can't, she may become his next victim.

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EPUB Edition May 2015 ISBN 9780062434371

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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