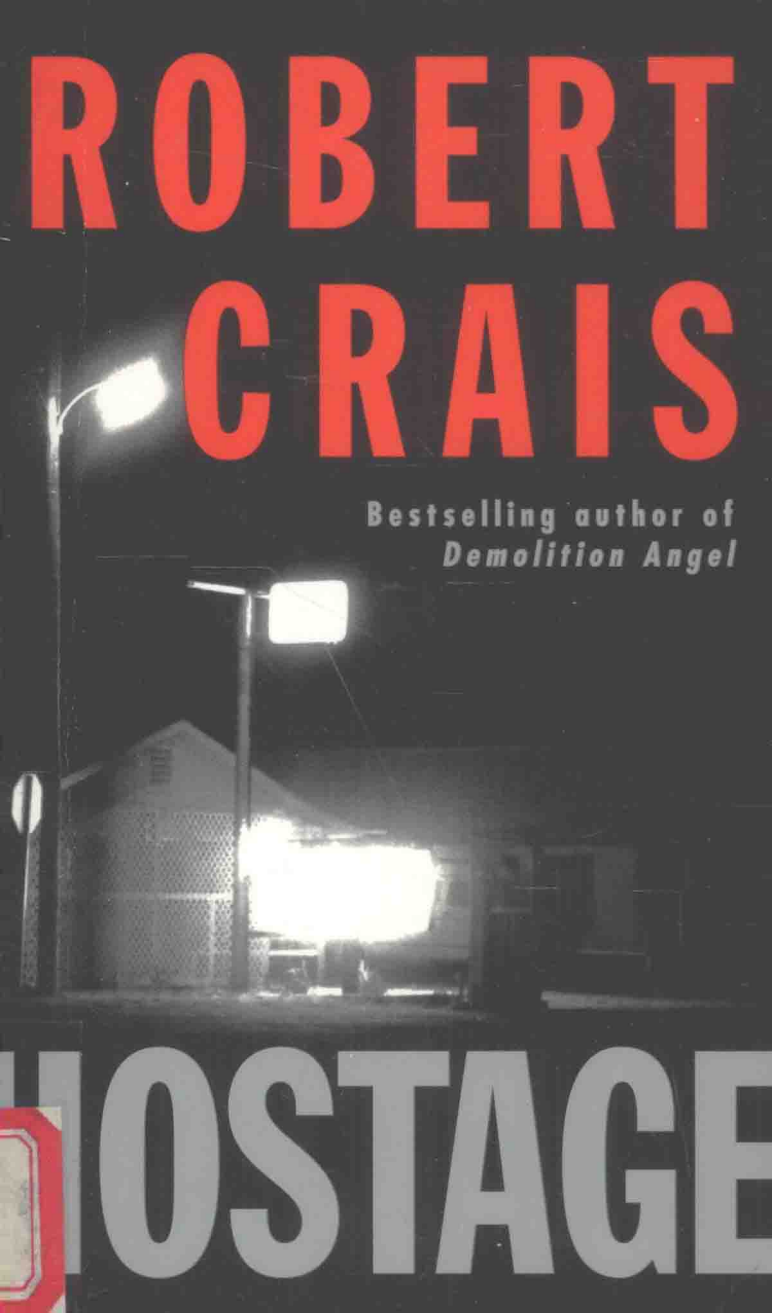


# ROBERT CRAIS



Bestselling author of  
*Demolition Angel*

# HOSTAGE



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**Robert Crais**

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TO FRANK, TONI, GINA, CHRIS, AND NORMA;  
AND TO JACK HUGHES, WHO ENRICHED OUR LIVES.  
FOR TWENTY YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP AND LAUGHTER,  
TACKY THOUGH IT MAY BE.

# PROLOGUE

• • •

*The man in the house was going to kill himself. When the man threw his phone into the yard, Talley knew that he had accepted his own death. After six years as a crisis negotiator with the Los Angeles Police Department's SWAT team, Sergeant Jeff Talley knew that people in crisis often spoke in symbols. This symbol was clear: Talk was over. Talley feared that the man would die by his own hand, or do something to force the police to kill him. It was called suicide by cop. Talley believed it to be his fault.*

*"Did they find his wife yet?"*

*"Not yet. They're still looking."*

*"Looking doesn't help, Murray. I gotta have something to give this guy after what happened."*

*"That's not your fault."*

*"It is my fault. I blew it, and now this guy is circling the drain."*

*Talley crouched behind an armored command vehicle with the SWAT commander, a lieutenant named Murray Leifitz, who was also his negotiating team supervisor. From this position, Talley had spoken to George Donald Malik through a dedicated crisis phone that had been cut into the house line. Now that Malik had thrown his phone into the yard, Talley could use the public address megaphone or do it face-to-face. He hated the megaphone, which made his voice harsh and depersonalized the contact. The illusion of a personal relationship was important; the illusion of trust was everything. Talley strapped on a Kevlar vest.*

*Malik shouted through the broken window, his voice high and strained.*

*"I'm going to kill this dog! I'm going to kill it!"*

*Leifitz leaned past Talley to peek at the house. This was the first time Malik had mentioned a dog.*

*"What the fuck? Does he have a dog in there?"*

*"How do I know? I've got to try to undo some of the damage here, okay? Ask the neighbors about the dog. Get me a name."*

*"If he pops a cap, we're going in there, Jeff. That's all there is to it."*

*"Just take it easy and get a name for the dog."*

*Leifitz scuttled backward to speak with Malik's neighbors.*

*George Malik was an unemployed housepainter with too much credit card debt, an unfaithful wife who flaunted her affairs, and prostate cancer. Fourteen hours earlier, at two-twelve that morning, he had fired one shot above the heads of the police officers who had come to his door in response to a disturbance complaint. He then barricaded the door and threatened to kill himself unless his wife agreed to speak to him. The officers who secured the area ascertained from neighbors that Malik's wife, Elena, had left with their only child, a nine-year-old boy named Brendan. As detectives from Rampart Division set about locating her, Malik threatened suicide with greater frequency until Talley was convinced that Malik was nearing the terminal point. When the Rampart detectives reported what they believed to be a solid location obtained from the wife's sister, Talley took a chance. He told Malik that his wife had been found. That was Talley's mistake. He had violated a cardinal rule of crisis negotiation: He had lied, and been caught. He had made a promise that he had been unable to deliver, and so had destroyed the illusion of trust that he had been building. That was two hours ago, and now word had arrived that the wife had still not been found.*

*"I'm gonna kill this fuckin' dog, goddamnit! This is her*

*goddamned dog, and I'm gonna shoot this sonofabitch right in the head, she don't start talkin' to me!"*

*Talley stepped out from behind the vehicle. He had been on the scene for eleven hours. His skin was greased with sweat, his head throbbed, and his stomach was cramping from too much coffee and stress. He made his voice conversational, yet concerned.*

*"George, it's me, Jeff. Don't kill anything, okay? We don't want to hear a gun go off."*

*"You liar! You said my wife was gonna talk to me!"*

*It was a small stucco house the color of dust. Two casement windows braced the front door above a tiny porch. The door was closed, and drapes had been pulled across the windows. The window on the left was broken from the phone. Eight feet to the right of the porch, a five-member SWAT Tactical Team hunkered against the wall, waiting to breach the door. Malik could not be seen.*

*"George, listen, I said that we'd found her, and I want to explain that. I was wrong. We got our wires crossed out here, and they gave me bad information. But we're still looking, and when we find her, we'll have her talk to you."*

*"You lied before, you bastard, and now you're lying again. You're lying to protect that bitch, and I won't have it. I'm gonna shoot her dog and then I'm gonna blow my brains out."*

*Talley waited. It was important that he appear calm and give Malik the room to cool. People burned off stress when they talked. If he could reduce Malik's level of stress, they could get over the hump and still climb out of this.*

*"Don't shoot the dog, George. Whatever's between you and your wife, let's not take it out on the dog. Is it your dog, too?"*

*"I don't know whose fuckin' dog it is. She lied about everything else, so she probably lied about the dog. She's a natural-born liar. Like you."*

*"George, c'mon. I was wrong, but I didn't lie. I made a mistake. A liar wouldn't admit that, but I want to be straight with you. Now, I'm a dog guy myself. What kind of dog you got in there?"*

*"I don't believe you. You know right where she is, and unless you make her talk to me, I'm gonna shoot this dog."*

*The depths to which people sank in the shadowed crevasses of desperation could crush a man as easily as the weight of water at the ocean floor. Talley had learned to hear the pressure building in people's voices, and he heard it now. Malik was being crushed.*

*"Don't give up, George. I'm sure that she'll talk to you."*

*"Then why won't she open her mouth? Why won't the bitch just say something, that's all she's gotta do?"*

*"We'll work it out."*

*"Say something, goddamnit!"*

*"I said we'll work it out."*

*"Say something or I'm gonna shoot this damned dog!"*

*Talley took a breath, thinking. Malik's choice of words left him confused. Talley had spoken clearly, yet Malik acted as if he hadn't heard. Talley worried that Malik was dissociating or approaching a psychotic break.*

*"George, I can't see you. Come to the window so I can see you."*

*"STOP LOOKING AT ME!"*

*"George, please come to the window!"*

*Talley saw Leifitz return to the rear of the vehicle. They were close, only a few feet apart, Leifitz under cover, Talley exposed.*

*Talley spoke under his breath.*

*"What's the dog's name?"*

*Leifitz shook his head.*

*"They say he doesn't have a dog."*

*"OPEN YOUR GODDAMNED MOUTH RIGHT NOW OR I'M SHOOTING THIS DOG!"*

*Something hard pounded in the center of Talley's head, and his back felt wet. He suddenly realized that illusions worked both ways. The Rampart detectives hadn't found Malik's wife because Malik's wife was inside. The neighbors were wrong. She had been inside the entire time. The wife and the boy.*

*"Murray, launch the team!"*



Talley shouted at Murray Leifitz just as a loud whipcrack echoed from the house. A second shot popped even as the tactical team breached the front door.

Talley ran forward, feeling weightless. Later, he would not remember jumping onto the porch or entering through the door. Malik's lifeless body was pinned to the floor, his hands being cuffed behind his back even though he was already dead. Malik's wife was sprawled on the living room sofa where she had been dead for over fourteen hours. Two tac officers were trying to stop the geyser of arterial blood that spurted from the neck of Malik's nine-year-old son. One of them screamed for the paramedics. The boy's eyes were wide, searching the room as if trying to find a reason for all this. His mouth opened and closed; his skin luminous as it drained of color. The boy's eyes found Talley, who knelt and rested a hand on the boy's leg. Talley never broke eye contact. He didn't allow himself to blink. He let Brendan Malik have that comfort as he watched the boy die.

After a while, Talley went out to sit on the porch. His head buzzed like he was drunk. Across the street, police officers milled by their cars. Talley lit a cigarette, then replayed the past eleven hours, looking for clues that should have told him what was real. He could not find them. Maybe there weren't any, but he didn't believe that. He had blown it. He had made mistakes. The boy had been here the entire time, curled at the feet of his murdered mother like a loyal and faithful dog.

Murray Leifitz put a hand on his shoulder and told him to go home.

Jeff Talley had been a Los Angeles SWAT officer for thirteen years, serving as a Crisis Response Team negotiator for six. Today was his third crisis call in five days.

He tried to recall the boy's eyes, but had already forgotten if they were brown or blue.

Talley crushed his cigarette, walked down the street to his car, and went home. He had an eleven-year-old daughter named Amanda. He wanted to check her eyes. He couldn't remember their color and was scared that he no longer cared.



# **PART ONE**

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## **THE AVOCADO ORCHARD**



# 1

• • •

**Bristo Camino, California**  
**Friday, 2:47 P.M.**

**DENNIS ROONEY**

It was one of those high-desert days in the suburban communities north of Los Angeles with the air so dry it was like breathing sand; the sun licked their skin with fire. They were eating hamburgers from the In-N-Out, riding along in Dennis's truck, a red Nissan pickup that he'd bought for six hundred dollars from a Bolivian he'd met working construction two weeks before he had been arrested; Dennis Rooney driving, twenty-two years old and eleven days out of the Antelope Valley Correctional Facility, what the inmates called the Ant Farm; his younger brother, Kevin, wedged in the middle; and a guy named Mars filling the shotgun seat. Dennis had known Mars for only four days.

Later, in the coming hours when Dennis would frantically reconsider his actions, he would decide that it hadn't been the saw-toothed heat that had put him in the mood to do crime: It was fear. Fear that something special was waiting for him that he would never find, and that this special thing would disappear around some curve in his life, and with it his one shot at being more than nothing.

Dennis decided that they should rob the minimart.

"Hey, I know. Let's rob that fuckin' minimart, the one on

the other side of Bristo where the road goes up toward Santa Clarita."

"I thought we were going to the movie."

That being Kevin, wearing his chickenshit face: eyebrows crawling over the top of his head, darting eyeballs, and quivering punkass lips. In the movie of Dennis's life, he saw himself as the brooding outsider all the cheerleaders wanted to fuck; his brother was the geekass cripple holding him back.

"This is a better idea, chickenshit. We'll go to the movie after."

"You just got back from the Farm, Dennis, Jesus. You want to go back?"

Dennis flicked his cigarette out the window, ignoring the blowback of sparks and ash as he considered himself in the Nissan's sideview. By his own estimation, he had moody deep-set eyes the color of thunderstorms, dramatic cheekbones, and sensuous lips. Looking at himself, which he did often, he knew that it was only a matter of time before his destiny arrived, before the special thing waiting for him presented itself and he could bag the minimum-wage jobs and life in a shithole apartment with his chickenshit brother.

Dennis adjusted the .32-caliber automatic wedged in his pants, then glanced past Kevin to Mars.

"What do you think, dude?"

Mars was a big guy, heavy across the shoulders and ass. He had a tattoo on the back of his shaved head that said BURN IT. Dennis had met him at the construction site where he and Kevin were pulling day work for a cement contractor. He didn't know Mars's last name. He had not asked.

"Dude? Whattaya think?"

"I think let's go see."

That was all it took.

The minimart was on Flanders Road, a rural boulevard that linked several expensive housing tracts. Four pump islands framed a bunkerlike market that sold toiletries, soft drinks, booze, and convenience items. Dennis pulled up behind the

building so they couldn't be seen from inside, the Nissan bucking as he downshifted. The transmission was a piece of shit.

"Look at this, man. The fuckin' place is dead. It's perfect."

"C'mon, Dennis, this is stupid. We'll get caught."

"I'm just gonna see, is all. Don't give yourself a piss enema."

The parking lot was empty except for a black Beemer at the pumps and two bicycles by the front door. Dennis's heart was pounding, his underarms clammy even in the awful dry heat that sapped his spit. He would never admit it, but he was nervous. Fresh off the Farm, he didn't want to go back, but he didn't see how they could get caught, or what could go wrong. It was like being swept along by a mindless urge. Resistance was futile.

Cold air rolled over him as Dennis pushed inside. Two kids were at the magazine rack by the door. A fat Chinaman was hunkered behind the counter, so low that all Dennis could see was his head poking up like a frog playing submarine in a mud puddle.

The minimart was two aisles and a cold case packed with beer, yogurt, and Cokes. Dennis had a flash of uncertainty, and thought about telling Mars and Kevin that a whole pile of Chinamen were behind the counter so he could get out of having to rob the place, but he didn't. He went to the cold case, then along the rear wall to make sure no one was in the aisles, his heart pounding because he knew he was going to do it. He was going to rob this fucking place. As he was walking back to the truck, the Beemer pulled away. He went to the passenger window. To Mars.

"There's nothing but two kids and a Chinaman in there, the Chinaman behind the counter, a fat guy."

Kevin said, "They're Korean."

"What?"

"The sign says 'Kim.' Kim is a Korean name."

That was Kevin, always with something to say like that. Dennis wanted to reach across Mars and grab Kevin by the

fucking neck. He pulled up his T-shirt to flash the butt of his pistol.

"Who gives a shit, Kevin? That Chinaman is gonna shit his pants when he sees this. I won't even have to take it out, goddamnit. Thirty seconds, we'll be down the road. He'll have to wipe himself before he calls the cops."

Kevin squirmed with a case of the chicken-shits, his nerves making his eyes dance around like beans in hot grease.

"Dennis, please. What are we going to get here, a couple of hundred bucks? Jesus, let's go to the movie."

Dennis told himself that he might have driven away if Kevin wasn't such a whiner, but, no, Kevin had to put on the goddamned pussy face, putting Dennis on the spot.

Mars was watching. Dennis felt himself flush, and wondered if Mars was judging him. Mars was a boulder of a guy; dense and quiet, watchful with the patience of a rock. Dennis had noticed that about Mars on the job site; Mars considered people. He would watch a conversation, say, like when two of the Mexicans hammered a third to throw in with them on buying some tamales. Mars would watch, not really part of it but above it, as if he could see all the way back to when they were born, see them wetting the bed when they were five or jerking off when they thought they were alone. Then he would make a vacant smile like he knew everything they might do now or in the future, even about the goddamned tamales. It was creepy, sometimes, that expression on his face, but Mars thought that Dennis had good ideas and usually went along. First time they met, four days ago, Dennis felt that his destiny was finally at hand. Here was Mars, charged with some dangerous electrical potential that crackled under his skin, and he did whatever Dennis told him.

"Mars, we're gonna do this. We're robbing this fuckin' store."

Mars climbed out of the truck, so cool that even heat like this couldn't melt him.

"Let's do it."



Kevin didn't move. The two kids pedaled away.

"*No one's here, Kevin!* All you have to do is stand by the door and watch. This fat fuck will cough right up with the cash. They're insured, so they just hand over the cash. They get fired if they don't."

Dennis grabbed his brother's T-shirt. The Lemonheads, for chrissake. His fucking brother was a lemonhead. Mars was already halfway to the door.

"Get out of the truck, you turd. You're making us look bad."

Kevin wilted and slid out like a fuckin' baby.

**JUNIOR KIM, JR.  
KIM'S MINIMART**

Junior Kim, Jr., knew a cheese dip when he saw one.

Junior, a second-generation Korean-American, had put in sixteen years behind a minimart counter in the Newton area of Los Angeles. Down in Shootin' Newton (as the LAPD called it), Junior had been beaten, mugged, stabbed, shot at, clubbed, and robbed forty-three times. Enough was enough. After sixteen years of that, Junior, his wife, their six children, and all four grandparents had bailed on the multicultural melting pot of greater LA, and moved north to the far less dangerous demographic of bedroom suburbia.

Junior was not naïve. A minimart, by its nature, draws cheese dips like bad meat draws flies. Even here in Bristo Camino, you had your shoplifters (mostly teenagers, but often men in business suits), your paperhangers (mostly women), your hookers passing counterfeit currency (driven up from LA by their pimps), and your drunks (mostly belligerent white men sprouting gin blossoms). Lightweight stuff compared to LA, but Junior believed in being prepared. After sixteen years of hard-won inner-city lessons, Junior kept "a little something" under the counter for anyone who got out of hand.

When three cheese dips walked in that Friday afternoon,