

"A female Walter Mosley." Eileen Dreyer

CHASSIE WEST

author of *Killing Kin*



KILLER RICHES

(HASSIE WEST

KILLER

RICHES



AVON BOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

AVON BOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, New York 10022-5299

Copyright © 2001 by Chassie L. West

ISBN: 0-06-104391-5

www.avonbooks.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Avon Books, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

First Avon Books paperback printing: April 2001

Avon Trademark Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. and in Other Countries, Marca Registrada, Hecho en U.S.A.

HarperCollins® is a trademark of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

1

I DON'T CLAIM TO BE PSYCHIC, BUT AS SOON AS the phone rang, I knew it meant trouble. I could sense it, smell it, even though the ring was no different than usual, a raucous electronic bleat more like a Bronx raspberry than the jangle of a bell. And I'd been on edge most of the day, waiting for the call from Nunna, my foster mother, to let me know that she and her new husband, Walter, were back from their month-long honeymoon.

I glanced at my watch. Six-thirteen; later than I'd thought. I'd been packing with such single-mindedness that I'd lost track of time.

The phone rang again. I crossed the room to answer it, my cane thumping against the bare hardwood floors. I picked up the phone. "Nunna?"

"This ain't Nunna. Leigh Warren, right?" It was the voice of a stranger. Male. Caucasian.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Don't you worry about it," he said, his voice hoarse, his breathing raspy, labored. "Why ain't you here where you're supposed to be? Everything's gone wrong and it's all your fault!" He began a coughing fit, the deep, phlegm-filled hack of a heavy smoker. "Now you listen, 'cause I'm not saying this twice. Since you ain't here, I'm takin' your granny and grandpap."

“What?” Who the hell was this?

“Right now they’re okay,” the voice continued. “Whether they stay that way is up to you. Do what I say and I’ll turn ’em loose. Try something smart and you’ll be planning their funeral. No cops, no feds. Nobody. Am I clear?”

Uneasiness slithered up my spine. “Look,” I said. “You’ve obviously got the wrong number, because I have no grandparents. And if this is how you get your jollies, I suggest you see a therapist PDQ. Now—”

“Shut up! I don’t give a shit whether they’re blood kin or not, I’ve got ’em. Want me to read off their driver’s licenses? Nunnally H. Layton. Nunnally. What the hell kinda name is that? Five-eleven. Hunnert and eighty pounds. This ain’t no pipsqueak here, is she? Birth date June second, nineteen and twenty-five. Walter Lee Sturgis. Five-ten. Hunnert and sixty-five pounds. Birth date—”

“All that proves is that you have their licenses,” I interrupted him, still resisting. “For all I know, they could have lost them somewhere or you could have stolen them. So why should I believe you? Let me speak to Nunna.”

“You’ll speak to her when I’m ready to let ya and if you don’t shut your yap, I may just flush the little pink pill she been yammerin’ on about taking at six o’clock right down the toilet. You ready to listen now?”

The only way he could know she took them at six A.M. and P.M. is if she told him. “Please, don’t hurt them. What is it you want? I don’t have much money, but—”

“Shut up, goddammit! I talk, you listen. Forget money. Money won’t do me no good. All I want is what’s owed me, what’s mine. You got it, I want it. You bring it to me, or else!”

“Bring you what?” I yelled. “What is it you want?”

"My medal! It was supposed to be mine and I mean to get it!"

"Medal?" I swiveled on the crate, eyes scanning the knickknacks on the etagere, the paraphernalia on the walls. I made a rapid mental inventory of the flotsam in my jewelry box. Nothing remotely fit the description. "What medal? I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Bullshit! Either I get that medal or your folks are dead! I'll call you back."

"When?" I shouted. "What time?"

The response was a dial tone.

I slammed the phone down, picked it up again and punched 1, Nunna's number on speed dial. It rang and rang and rang. No answering machine for Nunnally Layton Sturgis. "If nobody answers," she told me, "anybody with a lick of sense will know that either I'm—I mean, we're—not home, or don't want to be bothered, and the reason's nobody's business but mine. I mean ours." Marrying again at seventy-five, she had yet to adjust to thinking of herself as plural as opposed to single. But I'd let the phone ring twenty times. If Nunna had been there, she'd have answered out of sheer aggravation.

I replaced the handset and sat, hog-tied with indecision. I had to do *something*. But what? Don't jump the gun, I told myself. It's a prank. It had to be. All I had to do was confirm it.

Grabbing my cane, I hurried to retrieve the black hole of a purse I'd left next door in 503, where I'd been bunking with my friend Janeece for the last couple of weeks. Rushing back to the apartment in which I'd lived for the last seven years, I rooted in my bag for my address book, so old that rubber bands had long since replaced the spiral binder. Flipping pages, I found the telephone number for Mrs.

Elias, Nunna's neighbor. I began to dial, then disconnected. I didn't dare tie up the line. If he called back and the line was busy, no telling how he'd react. I'd have to use my cell phone.

Mrs. Elias picked up on the first ring. "Yes, whaddaya want?" Mrs. E. considered Mr. Bell's invention a nuisance to be borne with rudeness.

"Hi, Mrs. Elias. This is Leigh Ann." Here in the North I might be just plain Leigh. Down home in Sunrise, I was Leigh Ann or the response would be "Who?"

"Leigh Ann, bless your time. Ain't this a nice surprise? You married yet? That Dillon of yours won't wait forever, don'tcha know."

There were no secrets in Sunrise. "No, ma'am, but it's on again for next month. I'm just checking. Have Nunna and Walter gotten back yet? I thought you might have seen them drive up."

"Well, yes'm, I did. I'd been watching for them in that big silver thing they wasted perfectly good money on."

I collapsed in relief, so happy that I'd checked down home before making an idiot of myself.

"Coulda took a train or a bus if they needed a bathroom close to hand," Mrs. E. rambled on. "But no, they—"

"What time was that, Mrs. Elias?"

"What time was what?" she asked.

God, give me strength. "What time did they get back?"

"Let's see now. Musta been around two. She didn't call to let you know she was home? Tsk. I reckon she'll phone you up when they get back."

In other words, they'd gone to return the Airstream and were perfectly all right. "What time did they leave?"

"Couldn'ta been no more'n ten or fifteen minutes later. Didn't even take their suitcases in. 'Course they might have unloaded while I was on the phone. My oldest called

about then. Did I tell you he got a new job? He's assistant principal—"

It was break in or this could take the rest of the day. "Did you actually see them, Mrs. Elias? You saw them both go into the house and come out again?"

"Well, now I didn't say that. I saw them go in, but by the time I went back to the window after I got off the phone with Robbie, that trailer thing was at the end of the street. Dern near clipped Martha's mailbox goin' around the corner too."

So it was possible that Walter might have brought Nunna home and then left to return the trailer without her. Still, she would have phoned.

"Mrs. E., would you please go next door and see if Nunna's there? If she is, ask her to call me immediately?"

"You think she might be sick or something? She must be not to ring you right off. I'll go right now. You want to hang on?"

"Call me from Nunna's," I suggested. "Just punch the two on her phone."

"All right. Poor Nunnally. Probably at death's door. I'd better get on over there in case she needs an ambulance." She banged down the phone, leaving me deaf in one ear for a couple of minutes. And I'd been in a panic for nothing.

I'd almost convinced myself of that by the time the phone rang, enough so that I expected to hear Nunna's voice. Unfortunately, it was Mrs. Elias's.

"Leigh Ann, nobody's here. And I was right, they didn't leave their suitcases. Musta been powerful hungry though, because they ate. You should see this kitchen." She sounded scandalized. "All these dirty dishes in the sink. I thought Nunna was a better housekeeper than that. I'd straighten up for her, but I've got to get dressed. Auxiliary meeting, don'tcha know. Now don't you worry. I'm sure

she'll call as soon as they get back. Say hello to Dillon for me." Never one to say goodbye, she slammed down the phone again.

My uneasiness returned. Unearthing my Sunrise directory from the box in which I'd packed it, I looked up the number for Aubrey's Wheels To Go and called them. Mr. and Mrs. Sturgis? No, they hadn't been by, but there'd be no reason for them to return, unless they were having trouble with the Airstream. It had not been rented, it had been purchased. Evidently Walter had future plans for life on the road.

I tried Walter's son, Monty, the current mayor of Sunrise, hoping he might have heard from his dad. Answering machines at his office and home declared him on vacation until Monday week, eight days from now.

Frustrated, I flipped through Sunrise's white pages, trying to figure out who else I could call. There were any number of places Nunna and Walter might have stopped. I got busy with my cell phone again and interrupted the dinners and newscasts of everyone I could think of who might have spotted my errant foster mother and her husband, trying not to alarm them. No one had. There was nothing I could do but wait for the next call. I just prayed it would be from Nunna and Walter.

Too antsy to sit still, I tackled another carton, watching the numbers on the digital clock flip at a slug's pace. I'd been at it all day, packing like a madwoman, cramming things into boxes with little regard for their fragility or tendency to wrinkle. If something didn't survive the move to Duck's condo, so be it. The point of the exercise was to get done as much as I could as quickly as I could, not because the wedding was imminent, but because I couldn't stand being in this apartment any longer.

There's nothing like returning from a few weeks away and walking in on a corpse growing mold in your kitchen to spoil a place for you. I had Duck, my sweet, levelheaded fiancé of a detective on the D.C. police force, to thank for that, even though technically it hadn't been his fault. Regardless, the memory of the remains of J. B. Thomas in my kitchen had ruined the apartment for me.

Granted, I might have moved in with Duck as I'd originally intended, but couldn't bring myself to do it, not yet. Both Nunna and Duck's mother assumed I was no stranger to Duck's bed, but neither would have approved of our living together without benefit of the "I do's" and "I wills," and I thought too much of those two grande dames to go against their wishes, especially Nunna's.

Technically my foster mother, Nunnally Layton Sturgis had taken me in after the death of my parents and had raised me as her own. I owed her everything. Walter was a recent addition to the equation, Nunna's high school sweetheart who'd returned to Sunrise as a retiree. They'd jumped the broom just last month. I'd never seen Nunna so happy. Now this. *Goddammit, why didn't the son of a bitch call?*

And what medal was he talking about? As a cop on the job, I'd been awarded a couple of commendations but that was it. The only medal I'd ever received had been for winning a spelling bee in the sixth grade and I'd lost that years ago, probably to Lila Mae Whittaker, the class kleptomaniac. Besides, who would kidnap a couple of senior citizens and demand a plastic disk the size of a quarter with "#1" stamped on it as ransom?

I was in the john, drying my hands, when the phone rang. Forgetting I'd left my cane in the living room, since I rarely needed it anymore, I spun around, yelped as pain un-

der my kneecap reminded me that today, at least, I did. Hopping out to the hall, I grabbed the phone.

"What took ya so long?" he demanded. "You ain't trying to tape this, are ya?"

Why hadn't I, a former cop, thought of that? But this wasn't the job. This was personal, the woman in peril so close to my heart that I couldn't think straight.

"I was in the bathroom, okay?" I snarled, panting. Pain made me angry, and reckless. "I'm tired of this! If you've got my folks, let me speak to them. Either you put Nunna on the phone or I'm hanging up. You got that, buddy?"

"Okay, okay," he said. "That'll prove I'm not just blowing smoke. Then we talk business. I want what's mine."

I heard the receiver hit a hard surface, then his voice, gruff, muffled, yet threatening.

"Leigh Ann, baby?"

"Nunna." It was her. This wasn't a nasty joke, wasn't a bad dream. "Nunna, are you all right? And Walter?"

"We're fine. Listen, baby, there's nothing you can do to help us—"

"Got that right," her captor seconded from nearby.

"—so don't feel guilty about it," she said, rushing. "Marry your Duck and be happy. We'll be watching from heaven. And don't forget, everything you'll need for our final arrangements is in the bank."

"Hey, what the hell kinda talk is that?" the voice I was growing to hate shouted.

I heard Nunna's protest, Walter's muffled explanation, then the bastard returned to the phone.

"All right, you've talked to her. Bring me my medal or these old farts are history, understand? I don't care, see? They ain't nothing to me. Nothing." His speech had deteriorated to an unintelligible mumble.

I sat down, shivering. "Don't hurt them, please. You want a medal, I'll get one for you from somewhere. What kind? Just tell me."

The question seemed to anger him. "What do you mean, what kind? The Silver Star, that's what kind. And don't think you can just pick up one from some hock shop and I won't know the difference. I'll know his when I see it because one leg of it got bent in a accident. Turned a Jeep over on it. Cried like a baby over it, too. It shoulda been mine and they gave my medal to him."

"Him who?" I yelled.

"Your ol' man, that's 'him who'! Your lieutenant rich college-boy daddy!"

"What?" He couldn't be serious.

"It shoulda been mine. Wasn't my fault I couldn't carry that kid any further. Lieutenant rich boy comes back and gets him too. So they give him the medal. Had to hand out a certain number to blacks or it would look bad. It should'a been mine! You bring it to me. You bring it or these people are dead!"

"Look, my father's dead!" I said. "He and my mother died in a fire when I was five. Everything burned. There was nothing left, I swear to you! Nothing!"

"Took it home," he said, as if I hadn't spoken. "To his mama. Had to make her 'n everybody in the family proud of him, prove himself. His old lady, she's the one's got it. So you go get it."

He must not have heard me. "Listen to me, please. I was five when my parents died. I knew nothing about them, barely remember them. Some distant cousin of my mother's took me first, then a second family of cousins. Finally Nunna took me home with her. All the cousins have moved; we lost touch with them years ago."

He coughed. "Don't care. It's mine." He began another round of rambling, which I interrupted out of sheer desperation.

"Look, I'm trying to explain that I never knew anything about my father and his family."

"Lieutenant rich boy lookin' down his nose at me, showing off pictures of his sisters, his house, fishing with his old man on their boat, always throwing his family in our faces . . ." He sounded as if he was running out of breath and steam.

"Didn't you hear me?" I yelled. "I don't even know where my father was from!"

"Maryland, Delaware, one of those dinky little states. This old lady says you're smart, been to law school and all. That means you're smart enough to find my medal. You got one of those cell phones?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Number. What's the number?"

I couldn't remember, couldn't dredge it up from my memory bank. "Just a minute." As soon as I picked it up, the number popped into my head.

"All right," he said. "No more talk. You got a week. I'll call you on your cell number next Saturday and tell you where to leave the medal then. Call the cops on me, these folks are dead. I'm dyin,' so I got nothing to lose. You get my medal or your Nunna and her old man got seven more days to live."

2

“OKAY, MS. WARREN, LET’S GO OVER THIS AGAIN. What time did you get the first call?”

All right, I admit it. I had an attitude about the FBI, for no good reason. They had never interfered with a case I’d worked on during my years as a D.C. cop; in fact, I’d never even met anyone who worked in the building at Ninth and Pennsylvania Avenue. But I’d seen any number of agents—you can’t avoid them in the nation’s capital—and there was an air about them, an aura of perfection that set my teeth on edge.

But kidnapping is kidnapping, and whether I liked it or not, I needed their help. I had called them from Janeece’s phone, had run it all down to them and had then waited, pacing the floor, for them to arrive. I had also tried to reach Duck, but was informed that Detective Dillon Kennedy was in a meeting somewhere. I couldn’t even bawl on Janeece’s shoulder. She was out looking for a dress for my wedding to the aforementioned turkey, since she’d appointed herself my maid/matron of honor, the ambivalence of the title due to the fact that she was between husbands. So I was in one hell of a state by the time the two agents and a couple of tech types got off the elevator.

To give them credit, albeit grudgingly, they came prepared. The tech types swept the interior of 501 wall to wall

and pronounced me bug-free. I took the squeaky cleans next door to Janece's while the techies did whatever it was they needed to do to trace and record the call if and when the maniac phoned again.

And ten minutes into the interview with the squeaky cleans, I realized that they knew more about me than I knew myself. I assume they'd had to satisfy themselves that I wasn't some nutcase yanking their chain.

All I knew about them was that the blond one with the crewcut, whose round face gave a first impression that he was pudgy when he really wasn't, was Special Agent Pinkleton. The other one, Special Agent Grayson, had the kind of boyish features that made him look like a high school hall monitor trying to play grown-up. One glance in those Scotch-brown eyes and I knew he was nobody's pushover. These guys were professionals. Still, I found myself resenting having to repeat the events for a second and third time.

"The phone rang at six-thirteen, and I know for a fact it was six-thirteen because I looked at my watch before I answered."

"And why is that again?" Grayson asked, his voice non-committal yet somehow disbelieving in tone.

"Because I'd expected to hear from them earlier, that's why."

"You were concerned because you hadn't." Pinkleton, with one of those questions that sounded more like a statement.

"I was and I wasn't. I thought they might have stopped at a flea market outside of Sunrise, in which case there'd be no way to predict what time they'd get back."

"Where's this flea market?" Grayson asked, gold Cross pencil and leather-bound notebook at the ready.

I gave him the location and expressed a certainty that if

they'd gotten that far, Nunna wouldn't have been able to pass on it.

"Okay. The call. What did he say again?"

With a deep breath for patience, I went through it again, trying to repeat it verbatim, which was difficult, given the rambling nature of part of the nutbag's rampage. "He had a really nasty cough. Deep, full of phlegm, so I wasn't surprised when he told me he was dying. That's what scares me. That he has nothing to lose."

"Assuming he was being truthful about his intentions," Pinkleton said.

I bristled. "If you'd heard him, you'd have believed him. He's wacko. I tried to make him understand that I don't know squat about my parents, but he didn't care. He wants the medal and I've got a week to come up with it. So what happens now?"

They exchanged a look before Grayson spoke up. "Well, someone's trying to reach the local authorities in Sunrise—"

I groaned and his brows hitched toward his hairline. "Look, the local authority—singular—amounts to one elderly gentleman named Nehemiah Sheriff. He's smarter than he looks, but I'm not sure how much help he can be, working alone."

"Well, actually, contacting him is a courtesy," Grayson said. "Our agents in the field office will be in charge of the investigation at that end."

"Treat Chief Sheriff gingerly, then," I warned him. "He's as crusty as a loaf of stale bread and as territorial as a bull moose when it comes to Sunrise. But he's a good man and your agents would be well advised not to be patronizing. I mean that."

They exchanged another glance and Grayson nodded.

"I'll pass that along. We'll be working this from a number of angles. If we can trace their return trip, we can get a line on where your folks were intercepted and hopefully determine whether the kidnapper befriended them somewhere earlier, perhaps even traveled with them."

"I don't think that's how it happened," I said, recalling Mrs. Elias's description of Nunna's kitchen. "I'm pretty sure he was waiting for them at Nunna's."

Two pairs of eyes, laser-beam sharp, homed in on me. "Why do you think that?"

I related Mrs. Elias's dig about Nunna's lapse in house-keeping. "My foster mother would never leave dirty dishes in the sink. Never," I repeated, for emphasis.

"Are you sure about that?" Pinkleton asked. "They might have been tired or in a hurry to return the trailer."

"Look," I said, wanting to make sure they understood in no uncertain terms. "The Airstream was theirs, not a rental. That's beside the point. I lived with that woman from the time I was seven until I graduated from college. If Nunnally Layton had accidentally slashed an artery and was bleeding to hell and gone, she'd get those dishes done before she called the ambulance so they wouldn't see her kitchen in disarray. That's how she is. And the only way that guy could have taken her out of the house with the kitchen in that state was at gunpoint." That image floated behind my eyes. "Oh, God," I whispered.

"Don't worry. Keeping them alive is the only leverage he has," Grayson said, before removing a phone from his briefcase. He crossed to a far corner of the room and dialed. "We'll have someone check the house. If you're right, he had to have left fingerprints, or something that will help identify him. Grayson," he said into the phone, and turned his back.

"By the way, Ms. Warren, we'll need a copy of their