


"The creepiest page-turner since *Silence of the Lambs*."
— *US Weekly*

THE BONE PARADE

MARK
NYKANEN

THE
BONE
P a r a d e

M a r k N y k a n e n

 HYPERION NEW YORK

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Norwegian Wood

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PRAISE FOR MARK NYKANEN'S

The Bone Parade

"The novel is deeply unsettling and exciting—a testament to the author's skill as a storyteller."

—*Booklist*

"A longtime television investigative reporter . . . continues his impressive transition to thriller writer with a harrowing serial killer tale in which the murderer happens to be a world-renowned sculptor of bronze works featuring families in distress."

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"A grisly page-turner."

—*Portland Oregonian*

"Irresistible suspense thriller. Outstanding is Nykanen's deep look into modern sculpture, which gives the story its weight, relish, and richness. Pages bronzed with horror."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Nykanen won an Edgar for television news coverage. That background shows. He has a great eye for description, and uses his narrator as a camera. Since his narrator is Ashley Stassler, a highly successful sculptor, that eye is highly trained and the descriptions are vivid and emotional. This novel has so many twists, even the most jaded readers will stick with it."

—*Toronto Globe and Mail*

"You won't be able to stop reading. *The Bone Parade* is soul-deep in nerve-wracking detail. Nykanen speaks directly to the reader—simply and without guile. He'll scare the life out of you."

—*Salem Statesman Journal*

Ba-WAAAAH-WAAH-WAH. *The trumpets were huge, impossibly long, and their sound carried down the mountains and across the valley and shook my belly till it felt as hollow as the thin air itself.*

Ba-WAAAAH-WAAH-WAH. *The trumpets rose over Bhaktapur, Katmandu's sooty sister city. I heard their squall as I walked to the rear of the foundry, passing the crude furnace and a plume of blackened brick where the flames had once licked their shadows.*

My guide led me down a corridor with a ceiling so low that I had to duck. His skin was as dark and shiny as a hard brown nut, and his nails looked to be claws, grown to grotesque lengths, curling back on themselves as the nails of the dead are said to grow in the secrecy of the grave. He was a Hindu in a country to which Tibetans had fled, bringing their lighter skin and godless God. A Hindu who worshipped all manner of beings.

Our way was lit by a single bulb, as unadorned as the sun, and as hard on the eyes. The corridor's mud walls appeared as stark and brittle as all the other elements in this difficult land.

I heard a scratching sound and watched where I stepped. Then

my guide spoke his ragged English, "No ladies. No ladies," though none accompanied us. I had come to Nepal alone, trekking first in the mountains with their strange monasteries, chants, and songs, and now in the final days of my trip I had found my way to this foundry.

"No ladies," he repeated, and now he sniggered, and I sensed the insincerity at once, laughter freighted with another meaning entirely; in this case its dark opposite, for he led me from the tight corridor into a cavernous room filled with the undraped female form, shelves shiny with these polished bronze figures perched in a vast variety of positions. It was a bold, blazing array. And then on the wall directly to my left, rising several feet above my head, I saw bronze women that looked as ravenous as the hungry heathens in a medieval mosaic, predators eying not the meat but the soul, their feet splayed, their sex brazenly pried open.

Bizarre? Yes, absolutely so, but appealing. I could not deny this, not even then, not even when I knew that denial was most important, and that to turn away was critical. But I could not pull back because I saw that the bronzes looked as real as life itself, and that even to glance at them was to understand the terrible turbulence that lies beneath the sleeping skin.

If one of them had moved, had taken a step to embrace me, I would have been no more surprised than a cat when the shadows in the corner come to life and scurry toward a crumb. That was how I felt standing there, no more significant than a bit of flour and fat, salt and sugar: the crumb awaiting discovery.

I was like the man who sees an unsettling sex act for the first time, who witnesses its rude depredations in a dive in Bangkok, or in a window along one of Amsterdam's narrow, infamous streets. Or who happens across a whole new world on the Internet, a strange, shifting carnal alliance that changes him in an instant, that forces him to fix on the act he has just seen for the first time, and who finds—deliriously, dangerously—that he must have it again and again and again. I had discovered the new fire that

burns up all the others, that leaves nothing but ashes in its wake.

This was the knowledge that had lain in wait through all the years. It had sought me out with a suddenness that was shocking, that forced me to say with a breath I could hardly bear, "I was this, but now I am that." This was the knowledge that had proved most disturbing of all because it gave the lie to all that I had been, to all that I thought I was. I saw in that searing moment that kindness and decency and even the barest sense of propriety can slip away in a blink and leave us not as we would choose, but as we have been chosen.

CHAPTER

1

I WALK MY NEWEST BEST friend along the northern edge of the subdivision, pause while she pees, and brush past the tall trees that crowd both sides of a wildly overgrown dirt road. It might have been formed by the cement and lumber trucks that hauled their loads up here more than forty years ago. I'm guessing the age of these homes, but I've gotten quite good at this, and base my estimates on the size of the trees and shrubs, and the style of construction. This is pure sixties ranch. Some of them have add-ons, second floors and new facades, and an architectural flourish or two; but you can't really disguise them, and in my view they'd be far more appealing with the integrity of the original vision, however flawed. You certainly cannot hide the age; subdivisions, like people, show definite signs of decay. This one, however, is in its prime, old enough for each home to have had half a dozen or more owners. Lots of families. That's important to me.

The dirt road is about a quarter of a mile in length, a dumping ground for all the dogs around here. Just about every neighborhood has a poop alley. That's why I'd "adopted" her, to fit in as smoothly as one of these poplars or maples. If someone had seen

me walking back here by myself, it would have been, Who's the guy hanging out in the woods? But with a dog I'm as natural as a breeze passing through.

She's a cutie, too, a Border collie. Black and gray and white, like the pups she left behind in the shelter. All of them had a date today with the needle. She's the kind of dog people melt over. Her life with me will be brief, no more than a few hours, and then I will release her from all future obligations. She should consider herself lucky, and if I were of the mind to bother with such banalities, that's precisely what I would call her.

We actually share similar physical characteristics—the gray hair and sharp features, middle age—as well as an outwardly friendly, even fawning manner; and as I walk toward the house I recall how often dogs and their owners really do resemble each other.

I watched them move in on Monday, and by this morning, garbage day, they already had their flattened cartons all stacked up for recycling. I admire their fastidiousness and resolve to get settled, appreciate far more than they can realize how a neatly arranged home suits my purposes far better than a haphazard arrangement of belongings, any one of which can be pried loose in violent protest. I imagine too, their art already building up neat rectangles of shadowed paint. Sometimes I respect their selections, but this is rare. There's no accounting for taste, and for the most part I don't see much of it, not in homes such as these, or on the walls of the wealthy either. It's usually crap. Will it match the couch, the carpet, Aunt Emma's crocheted cushions? These are the questions they ask, the criteria they use. It would be sad if it wasn't such a crime.

We come to a paved road where a metal post blocks cars from entering poop alley. I'm parked down the street, a van that rarely raises curiosity in a neighborhood like this. It's a windowless Ford Econoline, the kind florists and plumbers and carpet installers ar-

rive in, though I once read that an FBI profiler called them the serial killer's preferred vehicle.

Just before we step on the pavement, she squats to relieve herself again. I appreciate her discretion, and feed her a biscuit to keep her interest keen.

The house I've been watching since Monday has two stories, two shades of gray, the darker on the ground floor. White trim throughout. A brick walkway cuts across a lawn as neat as a fairway. The green almost glimmers in the afternoon sun.

They've managed to hang curtains on the first floor, which I applaud—it's certainly to my advantage—though the day of the move I noticed that the interior stairway spilled right down to the front door. Bad Feng Shui, all that energy pouring out into the street. It bodes ill for anyone living there. I doubt they know this, but they will, and shortly too.

"They" are the Vandersons. Four of them: a husband; wife; teenage daughter no more than fourteen with skin so perfect you'd want to touch it, stroke it, never let it go; and a son, perhaps nine or ten, who looked annoying even from a distance, preadolescent testosterone all balled up and ready to binge. No dog. That's very important. *Their* dogs get in the way; even the small ones can set off an alarm. Cats, on the other hand, can be amusing in their treachery. After I've finished with a family, I've had them rub up against my leg as if to say, Thanks, Buster, I never really liked them all that much anyway. But even the cats cannot remain unclaimed, not if they're part of the household, although I have delighted in dispatching a family's canary or parakeet to their eager jaws. I'm not above satisfying the long frustrated desires of felines, and I've learned a thing or two by watching them hunt and eat these birds. Parakeets, for instance, fight the hardest, and canaries sometimes die of fright. After they've been cornered, or swatted to the floor, I've seen them stare into a cat's mouth and literally drop dead.

People are pretty much the same, they have all different levels of fear, but the wonder of it is that the families I meet usually share a common degree of kindness, and I've never failed to make them feel it when it counts the most for me. I'm guessing the Vanderasons won't be any different; they appear as normal as fence posts.

They moved here from Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, to be precise. Public records are extraordinarily revealing. I always use them. I simply don't want a family that's moved from one side of town to the other, or from two streets over. Better they've made the big move, far from those who know them or might miss them in an hour, an evening, or on the day that follows. Give me a day and I'm gone for good. And so are they. Never . . . to . . . return.

I feed her a final biscuit, a blessing of sorts to her good-natured self. She wolfs it down and wags her tail. If she misses her pups, it's news to me. Together we stroll up the front steps. "Easy now," I tell her, and ring the bell. I listen carefully to make sure it works. It's not a good idea to stand around any longer than you have to. You never know who's watching. This one chimes melodically.

The door swings open. It's the boy. He promptly scrunches up his skinny face and stares at me before gazing at the dog. She wags her tail and tries to lure his interest—she's doing her job admirably—but the kid doesn't take the bait.

"What do you want?" he says as if he's known me long enough to loathe me.

"I wonder," I say as I lean my head in the door just enough to glance around, "is your mom or dad home?"

"Mom," he bleats. "Mom!"

He turns as a bustle from the kitchen grows louder. She's even kinder looking than I thought from a distance. But her voice—"Yes . . . can I help you?"—is so hesitant, so . . . suspicious.

Usually they're trusting, what with all the new neighbors stopping by, greeting them, welcoming them. What is this? An un-

friendly neighborhood? Hasn't anyone come by with a bottle of wine, or a tray of cookies? I've waited a few days for all of that to pass. By now I should be nothing more than a new face. And then I remember: they're from Back East.

I introduce myself as Harry Butler. Harry is such an unassuming name, untainted by association. Tell them Ted, and they might think Bundy; John, and they might think Gacy. But Harry? If they're young, they think of Potter; and if they're older, Truman. That's if they think of anyone at all.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but I used to live here when I was a child, and I wondered—I know this is unusual—but I wondered if I could just come in and have a quick look around and see my old room. I've just come from my mother's funeral, I've got her things out there," and here I offer a feint to the van, "and before leaving town I wondered if I could see my old house. It's been a long time since I've seen it, and I have so many great memories of the place."

This is always a key point in the transaction: by implication, I praise their taste, and show that we share a fondness for the house. That's what it's all about at this stage, finding common ground. Keeping the moment gentle.

She is ever so attractive, in a dress of all things. You don't realize how few women wear dresses at home anymore until you start doing this. I wonder if they're Mormons, if I've come upon a coven of them. Now that would be sweet payback for all those freshly scrubbed missionaries with their neat haircuts and name tags who have violated my privacy over the years. It's the dress that has me thinking. I know she hasn't spent the day at work, I've been watching. It's nothing extravagant, mind you, but the kind of frock—forgive me, but it's true—that old June Cleaver would have worn.

I am wildly stimulated. I don't know if it's her, the dress, her pantyhose, or bald anticipation, but I have to choke down the desire to keep talking, to fill the silence with words. That would be a terrible mistake. It would make me seem much too eager, like a

salesman, which of course I am: I'm selling myself and the whole notion of a lost childhood in these halls.

Some women have an especially sharp sense of survival, and have sent me on my way, and I know that if she says, No, I don't think so, I'll have to thank her for her time, turn around, and leave. I can't force the issue, and I remind myself of this as her eyes cloud and her lips clamp tightly together. But before she can speak, I am saved by her husband. I see this the moment he ambles up, all geniality and king of the castle, a big jolly looking fellow who welcomes me and says he's always wanted to go back to his own childhood home. Come in, come in, come in.

He gives me his meaty hand and leads me with practiced ease over the threshold. I hear the delicious click of the door closing. They're finished.

It's not difficult to subdue a family. You focus on the children, and let the worst fears of the parents keep their own panicky impulses in line. I have that Jolly Roger of a dad bind his son and daughter with duct tape, insisting that he do a fair job of it, or I'll do it myself.

He does do a good job, particularly with the girl, and I detect more than a little veiled hostility in the way he wraps the tape around her mouth. He does it so tightly that I can't help but wonder if she's been mouthing off of late.

When he works on his wife, her dress gets bunched up around her thighs, and I can see the panty in the pantyhose. It lures my interest, but not for long. I can ill afford a lapse, and I never suffer one. Never.

Then it's time for Jolly Roger himself to place his hands behind his back. I have the handcuffs out. I need only one pair, and I save them for this critical moment because once he cuffs himself, I can go to work on him, and then on to the other three as well; he has merely bound and gagged them, and so much more remains to be done.

"No way," he says with a sneer. "You're not putting those things on me."

This is what I've been dreading, pigheaded resistance. It's not unusual with big men, who despite all evidence to the contrary sometimes believe they're mightier than a bullet. I'm sure he sees himself as a hero. I think he's a creep. He binds his family, but not himself? What's with that?

"You don't have a choice," I say as if to a three-year-old. "Not if you want to leave here alive." And there is truth to that statement. I point the gun at his head. It's an impressive weapon, and his wife, voice muffled, starts making *oompf-oompf* sounds and shaking her head frantically. I can tell that she's run into his stubbornness before, and has no more patience for it than I. Her son takes her cue and follows suit. There's a veritable chorus of *oompf-oompfs*. The daughter looks on hollow-eyed.

"The vote's going against you," I say with a smile.

Then I cock the hammer and thrust the barrel right into his face where he can see the muzzle and smell its blue steel breath.

"Your cooperation, or . . ." I shrug, and the barrel moves an inch or two, grazing his nose as I intended it to, though truly I am reluctant to use it.

"What do you want?" he demands. It's not the first time I've heard this question of late. She asked me too, in a way that indicated she'd give me *whatever* I wanted. I laughed at her. I'll kill him.

He's still staring at the gun when I hand him the cuffs. I direct his hands behind his back, and he snaps them on, shaking his head.

"Hold still," I tell him.

"What for?"

I slap the tape on his mouth. There, there's his answer.

The dog sniffs his wife, then snorts grotesquely up her legs. The beast has a most appalling interest in her crotch, and June is squirming in real fright, as if she considers this part of the plan, that I would countenance bestiality.

I watch, and while I appreciate the added glimpses, I pull the

dog off her and dispatch the creature with a bullet to the brain. This stills her eager snout, and their protests as well.

It's growing dark as I back the van into the garage. I save June for last. When I begin to unbutton the back of her dress, she starts *oompf-oompfing* again. An hour ago she was willing to bargain with her body; now she's acting like it's the sacred trust. But just at the point when I'm really losing patience, she relents, resigned to her presumed fate. Perhaps she thinks I'll spend myself on her, and spare the children.

Her arms slip out of the sleeves, and I raise it up over her head. This way I can take my time looking. Control top? Unquestionably, though you wouldn't think she'd need it. L'eggs? Or No Nonsense? No Nonsense, I'm all but certain of it. And industrial gauge underpants with a bra that has all the appeal of day-old bread.

Her knees fall open, but no more than a foot because she's still bound at the ankles, and will remain so because I have no interest that has not already been sated. I fold the dress and put it aside, lug her to the van and promise slow death to both of their children if any of them decide to start banging on the walls.

I spend the next forty-five minutes cleaning up the dog's blood, her carcass, which I toss in the back with them, and scraps of tape. Then I vacuum over and over, and wipe down surfaces till neither fiber nor fingerprint can survive my diligence. I remove the vacuum bag and toss it into the back of the van as well. I put a new one in. They have vanished *without a trace*. I can see the headlines already. They're as predictable as murder.

We have a long drive ahead, and I can hardly take a room for the night, so I pull into a McDonald's drive-through and order three large coffees. It's horrible stuff, but with a family of four trussed and bundled in the back, I'm hardly going to troll through this miserable town for a Starbucks.

They don't shift an inch as I pull up and pay, and minutes later we join all the other headlights on the interstate. Fifty miles away,

I pull into a rest area where I dispose of the vacuum bag and paper towels. It's still too risky to dump the dog, so her ever stiffening, ever ripening corpse will have to accompany us even farther. All of them are lying back there in the dark. None of them move. They don't dare.

CHAPTER

2

LAUREN REED STEPPED OFF THE bus and caught the walk sign as it started flashing red. She hurried across the four lanes of traffic, casting a wary eye at the impatient, early morning drivers lined up to her right. One of them gunned his engine. Idiot.

Bandering Hall towered above her, six stories of gray concrete, slab upon slab of faceless floors and tall windows, ugly and urban in the mode of most modern architecture.

Her coat felt too heavy, too warm, and she decided that she'd have to retire it for the season. Spring, fickle as it was in the Pacific Northwest, had finally settled in. She'd already moved her morning run from the indoor oval at the Y to the streets and parks of Portland.

Today was critique day. As she eyed the foundry's exhaust fans protruding from the second floor of Bandering, she calculated that she could devote eight minutes to each student's sculpture. That's all she could spare, and that was figuring on no more than ten minutes for start time. Of course, some of them would wish for even less once the discussion of their work turned taut, but others would feel cheated by such miserly attention to what they considered their masterpiece.