

**ACCIDENTS CAN HAPPEN... FOR A PRICE**

# **FUN & GAMES**

THE FIRST **CHARLIE HARDIE** THRILLER

**DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI**





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DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI



  
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***FUN & GAMES***

DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI



Also by Duane Swierczynski

*Secret Dead Men*

*The Wheelman*

*The Blonde*

*Severance Package*

*Expiration Date*

*Dark Origins* (with Anthony E. Zuiker)

*Dark Prophecy* (with Anthony E. Zuiker)

*For David Thompson*

Che sempre l'omo in cui pensier rampolla  
sovrà pensier, da sé dilunga il segno  
perché la foga l'un de l'altro insolla.

— Dante

Purgatorio, canto 5, lines 16–18

You're the type of guy that gets suspicious  
I'm the type of guy that says,  
"The puddin is delicious."  
—LL Cool J, "I'm That Kind of Guy"





THE PIERCING screech of tires on asphalt.

The screams—

His.

Your own.

And then—



# 1

*It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye.*

—Popular saying

## Los Angeles—Now

SHE DISCOVERED Decker Canyon Road by accident, not long after she moved to L.A. A random turn off the PCH near Malibu shot her up the side of the mountain, followed by twelve miles of stomach-flipping twists and hairpin turns all the way to Westlake Village. And she *loved* it, hands gripping the wheel of the sports car she'd bought with her first real movie check—because that's what you were supposed to do, right? Blow some of that money on an overpriced, overmuscled convertible coupe that popped a spoiler when you topped 75. She never cared she was going thirty miles faster than any sane driver would attempt on this road. She loved the ocean air smashing into her face, the feel of the tires beneath as they struggled to cling to the asphalt, the hum of the machine surrounding her body, the knowledge that one twitch to the left or right at the wrong moment meant her brand-new car, along with her brand-new life, would end up at the bottom of a

ravine, and maybe years later people would ask: *Whatever happened to that cute actress who was in those funny romantic comedies a few years ago?* Back then, she loved to drive Decker Canyon Road because it blasted all of the clutter out of her mind. Life was reduced to a simple exhilarating yes or no, zero or one, live or die.

But now she was speeding up Decker Canyon Road because she didn't want to die.

And the headlights were gaining on her.

The prick had been toying with her ever since she made the turn onto Route 23 from the PCH.

He'd gun the engine and then flash his high beams and fly right up her ass. She'd be forced to take it above 60, praying to God she'd have enough room to spin through the next finger turn. Then without warning he'd back off, almost disappearing...but not quite.

The road had no shoulder.

No guardrails.

It was like he knew it and was trying to spook her into a bad turn.

Her cell was in the dash console, but it was all but useless. The few seconds it took to dial 911 could be a potentially fatal distraction. And what was she going to tell the operator? Send someone up to Route 23, seventeenth hairpin turn from the middle? Even the highway patrol didn't patrol up here, preferring to hand out speeding tickets on Kanan Road or Malibu Canyon Road.

No, better to keep her eyes on the road and her hands upon the wheel, just like Jim Morrison once advised.

Then again, Jim had ended up dead in a bathtub.

The headlights stayed with her. Every few seconds she thought she'd lost them, or they'd given up, or—God, please *please please*—driven over a bump of asphalt where a guardrail should

be and tumbled down into the ravine. But the instant she thought they might be gone...they returned. Whoever was behind the wheel didn't seem to give a shit that they were on Decker Canyon Road, that one slip of the wheel was like asking God for the *check, please*.

She was almost two miles along the road now; ten to go.

Her Boxster was long gone; traded in after the accident in Studio City three years ago. Now she drove a car that suited her age—a leased Lexus. A car for grown-ups. And it was a fine machine. But now, as she took those insanely tight turns in the near dark, she wished she had the Boxster again.

Decker Canyon Road was notorious for two things: the rusted-out chassis of cars that dotted the hills, and its uncanny ability to induce car sickness, even with safe, slow drivers just trying to make their way up to Westlake Village in one piece.

She felt sick to her stomach now, but she didn't know if it was the road doing it to her, or the events of the past few days. The past few hours, especially. She hadn't eaten much, hadn't slept much. Her stomach felt like it had been scraped from the inside.

She'd been up for a job that seemed like a sure thing: producers, director, writer, star all in place, a guaranteed fast-track green light. It was a supporting role but in a higher-profile movie than she'd done in years. A role that would make people notice her again—*Wow, she's in that? I was wondering where she'd been*. And then it all had fallen apart in less than an hour.

She'd spent the majority of the past week in her Venice apartment, brooding, not able to bring herself to take much interest in feeding or watering herself or even turning on the satellite cable—God forbid one of her pieces of shit appear, or worse, a piece of shit she'd been passed over for.

So tonight she'd gone for a long late-night drive—the best kind in L.A. Enough wallowing. She wanted the ocean air to blast



away the malaise. Blasting away the better part of the past three years would be nice, too...

And then the headlights were back. Rocketing toward her, practically up her ass.

Number of accidental vehicle crash deaths in the United States per year: 43,200.

She stomped on the accelerator and spun the wheel, tires screaming as she made—barely—the next finger turn.

The bastard stayed right behind her.

The worst part was not being able to see much beyond the span of her headlights and having to make lightning-fast decisions, one after the other. There was no room to pull over, to let him pass. If passing was even on his mind.

She wondered why she presumed it was a *him*.

And then she remembered why. Of course.

At some point she knew Decker Canyon Road crossed Mulholland, and there was even a stop sign. She'd happily pull over then and give him the double-barrel salute as he drove by.

How much farther was it? She couldn't remember. It had been years since she'd been on this road.

The road continued to snake and twist and turn and climb, the tires of her Lexus gripping asphalt as best they could, the headlights bobbing and weaving behind her, like she was being pursued by a forty-foot electric wasp.

Finally the road leveled out—a feature she remembered now. From here, the road would ease up for a quarter mile as it ran through a valley, followed by another series of insane uphill curves leading to the next valley. A few seconds after, everything seemed to level out—

—then she gunned it—

60, 70, 80

—the electric wasp eyes falling behind her—

90

*Ha, ha, fuck you!*

The Lexus made it to the next set of curves within seconds, it seemed, and all she had to do now was slide and skid her way along them and put even more distance behind her. She applied some brake, but not too much—she didn't want to lose momentum.

Halfway through the curves, though, the electric eyes returned.

*Goddamn it!*

Right on her, curve for curve, skid for skid. It was like the car behind her was mocking her. Anything you can do, I can do better.

When she finally saw the red glow of the Mulholland stop sign out in the distance, she decided to fuck it. Hit the turn signal. Slowed down. Used the bit of skirting that now appeared on the side of the road. Go ahead, pass me. I'm stopping. I'm stopping and probably screaming for a while, but I'm done with this. Maybe I'll take a look at your license plate. Maybe I'll call the highway patrol after all, you reckless asshole.

She pulled the Lexus to a skidding stop, her first since the PCH, which felt like years ago. Then she turned left and pulled off to the side.

The car followed her, pulled up next to her.

*Oh, shit.*

She reached for her cell and power-locked the doors at the same time. The other car appeared to be a goddamned Chevy Malibu, of all things. Some kind of bright color—it was hard to see in the dark. The driver popped out, looked over the roof, made a roll-your-window-down gesture.

Phone in her hand, she paused for a moment, then relented. Pressed the power window lock. The glass slid down two inches.

"Hey, are you okay?" the guy asked. She couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded young. "Something wrong with your car?"

"I'm fine," she said quietly.

Now he moved around the front of his car, inching his way toward her.

"Just seemed like you were having trouble there. Want me to call somebody?"

"On the phone with the cops right now," she lied. She had her finger on the 9 but had stopped. Go on, press it, she told herself. Followed by two ones. You can do it. That way, when this guy pulls out a shotgun and blasts you to death, your last moments will be digitally recorded.

"What the hell were you doing, racing up my ass that whole time?"

"Racing up what? What are you talking about? I didn't see anybody on the road until just now, when you slowed down. I almost slammed into you!"

The guy sounded sincere enough. Then again, L.A. was crawling with men who were paid to sound sincere.

"Well, we'll let the police sort it out."

"Oh, okay," the guy said, stopping in his tracks. "I'll wait in my car until they show up, if you don't mind. It's a little creepy, being out here in the middle of nowhere."

She couldn't help herself—she flashed him a withering *Duh, you think?* look.

But that was a mistake, because now he was looking at her—*really* looking at her. Recognition washed over his face. His eyes lit up, the corners of his mouth lifting into a knowing smile.

"You're *Lane Madden*. No way!"

Great. Now she couldn't be just an anonymous pissed-off woman on Decker Canyon Road. Now she had to be *on*.

"Look, I'm fine, really," she said. "Go on ahead. I guess I was imagining things."

"Uh, don't take this the wrong way, but should you even be driving?"

Lane's brain screamed: *asshole*.

"I'm fine."

"You know, I don't mind waiting, if you want to call this in, or check in, or whatever you have to do."

"Really, I'm okay."

The guy seemed to know he'd pushed the ribbing a little too far. He smiled shyly.

"You know, I promised myself when I moved here, I wouldn't be one of those assholes asking for autographs everywhere he goes. And I'm not. Just wanted to tell you how much I'm a fan of your movies."

"Thanks."

"And you're even prettier in person."

"I really appreciate that."

After a few awkward moments the guy got the hint, walked back to the driver's side of his Malibu, and gave her a sheepish wave before ducking back inside his own car and pulling away into the dark night.

Lane sped through Westlake Village, caught the 101. It was an hour or so before dawn. The freeway was as calm as it ever gets. She took a series of deep, mind-clearing breaths. Maybe when she had enough oxygen in her brain she'd be able to laugh about all of this. Because it was sort of funny, now that it was over.

Sort of.

The Malibu guy hadn't been riding her ass; he'd simply been