

JONATHAN KELLERMAN

A N O V E L

BILLY STRAIGHT



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KELLERMAN



RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events in it are inventions of the author and do not depict any real persons or events.

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To Faye. For Faye. At the core, it's always Faye.

“Unique is she, my constant dove, my perfect one.”

SONG OF SONGS, 6:9

BILLY STRAIGHT

CHAPTER 1



IN THE PARK YOU SEE THINGS.

But not what I saw tonight.

God, God . . .

I wanted to be dreaming but I was awake, smelling chili meat and onions and the pine trees.

First, the car drove up to the edge of the parking lot. They got out and talked and he grabbed her, like in a hug. I thought maybe they were going to kiss and I'd watch that.

Then all of a sudden, she made a weird sound—surprised, squeaky, like a cat or dog that gets stepped on.

He let go of her and she fell. Then he bent down next to her and his arm started moving up and down really fast. I thought he was punching her, and that was bad enough, and I kept thinking should I do something. But then I heard another sound, fast, wet, like the butcher at Stater Brothers back in Watson chopping meat—*chuck chuck chuck*.

He kept *doing* it, moving his arm up and down.

I wasn't breathing. My heart was on fire. My legs were cold. Then they turned hot-wet.

Pissing my pants like a stupid baby!

The *chuck chuck* stopped. He stood up, big and wide, wiped his hands on his pants. Something was in his hand and he held it far from his body.

He looked all around. Then in my direction.

Could he see me, hear me—*smell* me?

He kept looking. I wanted to run but knew he'd hear me. But staying here could trap me—how could he see anything behind the rocks? They're like a cave with no roof, just cracks you can look through, which is the reason I picked them as one of my places.

My stomach started to churn around, and I wanted to run so badly my leg muscles were jumping under my skin.

A breeze came through the trees, blowing up pine smell and piss stink.

Would it blow against the chili-burger's wrapping paper and make noise? Would he smell me?

He looked around some more. My stomach hurt so bad.

All of a sudden he jumped ran back to the car, got in, drove away.

I didn't want to see when he passed under the lamp at the corner of the parking lot, didn't want to read the license plate.

PLYR 1.

The letters burned into my mind.

Why did I look?

Why?



I'm still sitting here. My Casio says 1:12 A.M.

I need to get out of here, but what if he's just driving around and comes back—no, that would be stupid, why would he do that?

I can't stand it. She's down there, and I smell like piss and meat and onions and chili. Real dinner from the Oki-Rama on the Boulevard, that Chinese guy who never smiles or looks at your face. I paid \$2.38 and now I want to throw it up.

My jeans are starting to get sticky and itchy. Going over to the public bathroom at the other end of the lot is too dangerous . . . that arm going up and down. Like he was just doing a job. He wasn't as big as Moron, but he was big enough. She trusted him, let him hug her . . . what did she do to make him so mad . . . could she still be *alive*?

No way. Impossible.

I listen carefully to see if she's making any sounds. Nothing but the freeway noise from across the east side of the park and traffic from

the Boulevard. Not much traffic tonight. Sometimes, when the wind blows north, you hear ambulance sirens, motorcycles, car honks. The city's all around. The park looks like the country, but I know the difference.

Who is she?—forget that, I don't want to know.

What I *want* is to put tonight on rewind.

That squeaky sound—like he took the air right out of her. For sure she's . . . gone. But what if she *isn't*?

Even if she isn't, she will be soon, all that *chucking*. And what could I do for her, anyway? Breathe into her mouth, put my face in her blood?

What if he comes back while I'm doing it?

Would he come back? That would be stupid, but there are always surprises. She sure found that out.

I can't help her. I have to put this all out of my mind.

I'll sit here for ten more minutes—no, fifteen. Twenty. Then I'll get my Place Two stuff together and move.

Where to? Place One, up near the observatory, is too far, and so are Three and Four, even though Three would be good 'cause it has a stream for washing. That leaves Five, in the fern tangle behind the zoo, all those trees. A little closer, but still a long walk in the dark.

But it's also the hardest one to find.

Okay, I'll go to Five. Me and the animals. The way they cry and roar and smash against their cages makes it hard to sleep, but tonight I probably won't sleep anyway.

Meantime, I sit here and wait.

Pray.

Our Father in heaven, how about no more surprises?

Not that praying ever got me anything, and sometimes I wonder if there's anyone up there to pray to or just stars—humongous balls of gas in an empty black universe.

Then I get worried that I'm blaspheming.

Maybe some kind of God *is* up there; maybe He's saved me lots of times and I'm just too dumb to know it. Or not a good enough person to appreciate Him.

Maybe God saved me *tonight*, putting me behind the rocks, instead of out in the open.

But if he had seen me when he drove up, he probably would've changed his mind and not done anything to her.

So did God *want* her to . . .

No, he just would've gone somewhere else to do it . . . whatever.

In case You saved me, thank You, God.

In case You're up there, do You have a plan for me?

CHAPTER 2



MONDAY, 5 A.M.

When the call came into Hollywood Division, Petra Connor was well into overtime but up for more action.

Sunday, she'd enjoyed unusually peaceful sleep from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M., no gnawing dreams, thoughts of ravaged brain tissue, empty wombs, things that would never be. Waking to a nice, warm afternoon, she took advantage of the light and spent an hour at her easel. Then, half a pastrami sandwich and a Coke, a hot shower, and off to the station to finalize the stakeout.

She and Stu Bishop rolled out just after dark, cruising alleys and ignoring minor felonies; they had more important things on their minds. Selecting a spot, they sat watching the apartment building on Cherokee, not talking.

Usually they chatted, managed to turn the boredom into semi-fun. But Stu had been acting weird lately. Remote, tight-lipped, as if the job no longer interested him.

Maybe it was five days on graveyard.

Petra was bugged, but what could she do—he was the senior partner. She put it aside, thought about Flemish pictures at the Getty. Amazing pigments, superb use of light.

Two hours of butt-numbing stasis. Their patience paid off just after 2 A.M. and another imbecilic but elusive killer hooked up.

Now she sat at a scabrous metal desk opposite Stu, completing the paperwork, thinking about going back to her apartment, maybe doing

some sketching. The five days had energized her. Stu looked half-dead as he talked to his wife.

It was a warm June, well before daybreak, and the fact that the two of them were still there at the tail end of a severely understaffed graveyard shift was a fluke.

Petra had been a detective for exactly three years, the first twenty-eight months in Auto Theft, the remaining eight in daytime Homicide with Stu.

Her partner was a nine-year vet and a family man. Day shift suited his lifestyle and his biorhythms. Petra had been a nighthawk from childhood, before the deep blue midnights of her artist days, when lying awake at night had been inspirational.

Well before her marriage, when listening to Nick's breathing had lulled her to sleep.

She lived alone now, loved the black of night more than ever. Black was her favorite color; as a teenager she'd worn nothing but. So wasn't it odd that she'd never asked for nighttime assignments since graduating the academy?

It was adherence to duty that brought about the temporary switch.

Wayne Carlos Freshwater crawled out at night, scoring weed and crack and pills on Hollywood side streets, killing prostitutes. No way was he going to be found when the sun shone.

Over a six-month period, he'd strangled four streetgirls that Petra and Stu knew about, the last one a sixteen-year-old runaway from Idaho who he'd tossed in an alley Dumpster near Selma and Franklin. No cutting, but a pocketknife found at the scene yielded prints and led to a search for Freshwater.

Incredibly stupid, dropping the blade, but no big surprise. Freshwater's file said his IQ had been tested twice by the state: 83 and 91. Not that it had stopped him from eluding them.

Male black, thirty-six years old, five-foot-seven, 140, multiple arrests and convictions over the last twenty years, the last for an assault/attempted rape that sent him to Soledad for ten years—cut down, of course, to four.

The usual sullen mug shot; bored with the process.

Even when they caught him, he looked bored. No sudden moves, no attempt at escape, just standing there in a rancid hallway, pupils di-

lated, faking cool. But after the cuffs went on, he switched to wide-eyed surprise.

Whud I do, Officer?

The funny thing was, he *looked* innocent. Knowing his size, Petra had expected some Napoleon full of testosterone, but here was this dainty little twerp with a dainty little Michael Jackson voice. Neatly dressed, too. Preppy, brand-new Gap stuff, probably boosted. Later, the jailer told her Freshwater'd been wearing women's underwear under the pressed khakis.

The ten-year Soledad invitation had been for choking a sixty-year-old grandmother in Watts. Freshwater was released angrier than ever and took a week to get going again, ratcheting up the violence level.

Great system. Petra used the memory of Freshwater's moronic surprise to get herself smiling as she completed the report.

Whud I do?

You were a bad, bad boy.

Stu was still on the phone with Kathy: Home soon, honey; kiss the kids for me.

Six kids, lots of kissing. Petra had watched them line up for Stu before dinner, platinum heads, sparkling hands and nails.

It had taken her a long time to be able to look at other people's kids without thinking of her own useless ovaries.

Stu loosened his tie. She caught his eye, but he looked away. Going back on days would be good for him.

He was thirty-seven, eight years Petra's senior, looked closer to thirty, a slim, nice-looking man with wavy blond hair and gold-hazel eyes. The two of them had been quickly labeled Ken and Barbie, even though Petra had the dark tresses. Stu had a taste for expensive traditional suits, white French-cuffed shirts, braided leather suspenders, and striped silk ties, carried the most frequently oiled 9mm in the department, and a Screen Actors Guild card from doing bit parts in TV cop shows. Last year he'd made Detective-III.

Smart, ambitious, a devout Mormon; he and pretty Kathy and the half-dozen tykettes lived on a one-acre spread in La Crescenta. He'd been a great teacher for Petra—no sexism or personal garbage, a good listener. Like Petra, a work fiend, driven to achieve maximal arrests. Match made in heaven. Till a week ago. What was wrong?

Something political? The first day they partnered he informed her he was thinking about shifting to the paper track eventually, going for lieutenant.

Preparing her for good-bye, but he hadn't mentioned it since.

Petra wondered if he was aiming even higher. His father was a successful ophthalmologist, and Stu had grown up in a huge house in Flintridge, surfed in Hawaii, skied in Utah; was used to good things.

Captain Bishop. Deputy Chief Bishop. She could imagine him in a few years with graying temples, Cary Grant crinkles, charming the press, playing the game. But doing a solid job, because he was substance as well as style.

Freshwater was a major bust. So why didn't it matter to him?

Especially because he was the one who'd really solved it. The old-fashioned way. Despite the Joe Clean demeanor, nine years had made him an expert on streetlife, and he'd collected a stable of low-life confidential informants.

Two separate C.I.'s had come through on Freshwater, each reporting that the hooker killer had a heavy crack habit, was selling stolen goods on the Boulevard at night and scoring rock at a flop apartment on Cherokee. Two gift-wraps: precise address, down to the apartment number, and exactly where the dealers' lookouts hung out.

Stu and Petra staked out for three nights. On the third, they grabbed Freshwater as he entered the building from the back, and Petra got to clamp the cuffs.

Delicate wrists. *Whud I do, Officer?* She chuckled out loud and filled the arrest form's inadequate spaces with her elegant draftsman's hand.

Just as Stu hung up his phone, Petra's jangled. She picked up and the sergeant downstairs said, "Guess what, Barbie? Got a call from the park rangers over at Griffith. Woman down in a parking lot, probable 187. Tag, you're it."

"Which lot in Griffith?"

"East end, back behind one of the picnic areas. It's supposed to be chained off, but you know how that goes. Take Los Feliz like you're going to the zoo; instead of continuing on to the freeway, turn off. The blues'll be there along with a ranger car. Do it Code 2."

"Sure, but why us?"

"Why you?" The sergeant laughed. "Look around. See anyone else but you and Kenny? Blame the city council."

She hung up.

"What?" said Stu. His Carroll & Company foulard was tightly knotted and his hair was perfectly combed. But tired, definitely tired. Petra told him.

He stood and buttoned his jacket. "Let's go."

No gripe. Stu never complained.

CHAPTER 3



I PACK UP MY PLACE TWO STUFF IN THREE LAYERS OF DRY cleaner's plastic and begin walking up the hill behind the rocks, into the trees. I trip and fall a lot because I'm afraid to use the penlight until I get deep inside, but I don't care—just get me out of here.

The zoo's miles away; it will take a long time.

I walk like a machine that can't be hurt, thinking what he did to her. No good. I have to put it out of my mind.

Back in Watson, after trouble with Moron or any kind of difficult day, I used lists to keep my mind busy. Sometimes it worked.

Here goes: presidents, in order of election—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Quincy Adams, Jackson, Martin Van Buren . . . the shortest president.

Oh shit, here I go again, down on my knees. I get up. Keep going.

Back in Watson, I had a book on the presidents, published by the Library of Congress, with heavy paper and excellent photographs and the official presidential seal on the cover. I got it in fourth grade for winning the President Bee, read it about five hundred times, trying to put myself back in time, imagine what it was like to be George Washington, running a brand-new country, or Thomas Jefferson, an amazing genius, inventing things, writing with five pens at one time.

Even being Martin Van Buren, short but still boss over everyone.

Books became a problem when Moron moved in. He hated when I read, especially when his chopper was busted or Mom had no money for him.

Little fuck with his fuckin' books, thinks he's smartern everyone.

After he moved in I had to sit in the kitchen while he and Mom took up my sleeper couch watching TV. One day he came in the trailer totally blasted while I was trying to do homework. I could tell because of his eyes and the way he just kept walking around in circles, making fists and opening them, making that growling noise. The homework was pre-algebra, easy stuff. Mrs. Annison didn't believe me the one time I told her I already knew it, and she kept assigning me the same work as the rest of the class. I was speeding through the problems, almost finished, when Moron got a container of bean dip out of the fridge, started eating it with his hands. I looked at him, but just for a second. He reached over and pulled my hair and slammed the math book on my fingers. Then he grabbed up a bunch of notebooks and other textbooks and ripped them in half, including the math book, *Thinking with Numbers*.

He said, "Fuck this shit!" and tossed it in the trash. "Get off your fuckin' ass, you little faggot, do something useful around here . . ."

My hair smelled of beans, and the next day my hand was so swollen I couldn't move the fingers and I kept it in my pocket when I told Mrs. Annison I'd lost the book. She was eating Corn Nuts at her desk and grading papers and didn't bother to look up, just said, "Well, Billy, I guess you'll have to buy another one."

I couldn't ask Mom for money, so I never got another book, couldn't do homework anymore, and my math grades started going down. I kept thinking Mrs. Annison or someone would get curious, but no one did.

Another time Moron ripped up this magazine collection I'd put together from other people's trash and most of my personal books, including the presidents book. One of the first things I looked for when I finally located the library on Hillhurst Avenue was another presidents book. I found one, but it was different. Not as heavy paper, only black-and-white photographs. Still interesting, though. I learned that William Henry Harrison caught a cold right after his election and died.

Bad luck for the first William president.

This is working; my head's clear. But my heart and stomach feel like they're burning up. More: Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce . . . James Buchanan, the only president who never got married—must have been lonely for him in the White House, though I guess he was busy enough. Maybe he liked being alone. I can understand that.