

POOP GOES THE WEEBIE



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Pop Goes the Weasel

A NOVEL BY

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This is for Suzie and Jack,
and for the millions of Alex Cross readers
who so frequently ask,
Can't you write faster?

Prologue

GEOFFREY SHAFER, dashinglly outfitted in a single-breasted blue blazer, white shirt, striped tie, and narrow gray trousers from H. Huntsman & Sons, walked out of his town house at seven-thirty in the morning and climbed into a black Jaguar XJ12.

He backed the Jag slowly out of the driveway, then stepped on the accelerator. The sleek sports car rocketed up to fifty before it reached the stop sign at Connecticut Avenue, in the posh Kalorama section of Washington, D.C.

When Shafer reached the busy intersection, he didn't stop. He floored the accelerator, picking up more speed.

He was doing sixty-five and ached to crash the Jag into the stately fieldstone wall bordering the avenue. He aimed the Jag closer to the wall. He could see the head-on collision, visualize it, feel it all over.

At the last possible second, he tried to avoid the deadly crash. He spun the wheel hard to the left. The sports car fishtailed all the way across the avenue, tires screeching and burning, the smell of rubber thick in the air.

The Jag skidded to a stop, headed the wrong way on the street, the windshield issuing its glossy black stare at a barrage of early oncoming traffic.

Shafer stepped on the accelerator again and headed forward *against* the oncoming traffic. Every car and truck began to honk loud, sustained blasts.

Shafer didn't even try to catch his breath or bearings. He sped along the avenue, gaining speed. He zoomed across Rock Creek Bridge and made a left, then another left onto Rock Creek Parkway.

A tiny scream of pain escaped from his lips. It was involuntary, coming swiftly and unexpectedly. A moment of fear, weakness.

He floored the gas pedal again, and the engine roared. He was doing seventy, then pressing to eighty. He zigged and zagged around slower-moving sedans, sport-utility vehicles, a soot-covered A&P delivery truck.

Only a few honked now. Other drivers on the parkway were terrified, scared out of their minds.

He exited the Rock Creek Parkway at fifty miles an hour, then he gunned it again.

P Street was even more crowded at that hour than the parkway had been. Washington was just waking up and setting off to work. He could still *see* that inviting stone wall on Connecticut. He shouldn't have stopped. He began searching for another rock-solid object, looking for something to hit very hard.

He was doing eighty miles an hour as he approached Dupont Circle. He shot forward like a ground rocket. Two lines of traffic were backed up at a red light. No way out of this one, he thought. Nowhere to go left or right.

He didn't want to rear-end a dozen cars! That was no way to end this — end his life — by smashing into a commonplace Chevy Caprice, a Honda Accord, a delivery truck.

He swerved violently to the left and veered into the lanes of traffic coming east, coming right at him. He could see the panicked, disbelieving faces behind the dusty, grime-smeared windshields. The horns started to blast, a high-pitched symphony of fear.

He ran the next light and just barely squeezed between an oncoming Jeep and a concrete-mixer truck.

He sped down M Street, then onto Pennsylvania Avenue, and headed toward Washington Circle. The George Washington University Medical Center was up ahead — a perfect ending?

The Metro patrol car appeared out of nowhere, its siren-bullhorn screaming in protest, its rotating beacon glittering, signaling for him to pull over. Shafer slowed down and pulled to the curb.

The cop hurried to Shafer's car, his hand on his holster. He looked frightened and unsure.

"Get out of the car, sir," the cop said in a commanding voice. "Get out of the car right now."

Shafer suddenly felt calm and relaxed. There was no tension left in his body.

"All right. All right. I'm getting out. No problem."

"You know how fast you were going?" the cop asked in an agitated voice, his face flushed a bright red. Shafer noticed that the cop's hand was still on his gun.

Shafer pursed his lips, thought about his answer. "Well — I'd say about thirty, Officer," he finally said. "Maybe a little over the speed limit."

Then he took out an I.D. card and handed it over. "But you can't do anything about it. I'm with the British Embassy. I have *diplomatic immunity*."

THAT NIGHT, as he was driving home from work, Geoffrey Shafer started to feel that he was losing control again. He was beginning to frighten himself. His whole life had begun to revolve around a fantasy game he played called the Four Horsemen. In the game, he was the player called Death. The game was everything to him, the only part of his life with real meaning.

He sped across town from the British Embassy, all the way to the Petworth district of Northwest. He knew he shouldn't be there, a white man in a spiffy Jaguar. He couldn't help himself, though, any more than he could that morning.

He stopped the car just before he got to Petworth. Shafer took out his laptop and typed a message to the other players, the Horsemen.

FRIENDS,

DEATH IS ON THE LOOSE IN WASHINGTON.

THE GAME IS ON.

He started the Jag again and rode a few more blocks to Petworth. The usual outrageously provocative hookers were al-

ready parading up and down Varnum and Webster streets. A song called "Nice and Slow" was playing from a vibrating blue BMW. Ronnie McCall's sweet voice blended into the early evening.

The girls waved to him and showed their large, flat, pert, or flabby breasts. Several wore colorful bustiers with matching hot pants and shiny silver or red platform shoes with pointy heels.

He slowed to a stop beside a small black girl who looked to be around sixteen and had an unusually pretty face. Her legs were long and slender for such a petite body. She wore too much makeup for his taste. Still, she was hard to resist, so why should he?

"Nice car. Jaguar. I like it a lot," she cooed, then smiled and made a sexy little *o* with her lipsticked mouth. "You're cute, too, mistah."

He smiled back at her. "Jump in, then. Let's go for a test ride. See if it's true love or just infatuation." He glanced around the street quickly. None of the other girls were working this corner.

"A hundred for full-service, sweetie?" she asked as she wiggled her tight little butt inside the Jag. Her perfume smelled like eau de bubble gum, and she seemed to have bathed in it.

"As I said, get into the car. A hundred dollars is petty cash for me."

He knew he shouldn't be picking her up in the Jaguar, but he took her for a joy ride anyway. He couldn't help himself now.

He brought the girl to a small, wooded park in a part of Washington called Shaw. He parked in a thicket of fir trees that hid the car from sight. He looked at the prostitute, and she was even smaller and younger than he had thought.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"How old you want me to be?" she said, and smiled. "Sweetie, I need the money first. You know how it works."

"Yes. But do you?" he asked.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a switchblade knife. He had it at her throat in an instant.

"Don't hurt me," she whispered. "Just be cool."

"Get out of the car. Slowly. Don't you dare scream. *You* be cool."

Shafer got out with her, staying close, the knife still pressed to the hollow of her throat.

"It's all just a game, darling," he explained. "My name is Death. You're a very lucky girl. I'm the best player of all."

As if to prove it, he stabbed her for the first time.

Book One

THE JANE DOE MURDERS

Chapter I

THINGS WERE GOING PRETTY WELL that day. I was driving a bright-orange school bus through Southeast on a blistering-hot morning in late July, and I was whistling a little Al Green as I drove. I was in the process of picking up sixteen boys from their houses and also two foster homes. Door-to-door bus service. Hard to beat.

Just one week earlier I had returned from Boston and the Mr. Smith murder case. Mr. Smith and a deranged killer named Gary Soneji had both been involved in that one. I needed a rest, and I'd taken the morning off to do something I'd been looking forward to for a change.

My partner, John Sampson, and a twelve-year-old named Errol Mignault sat behind me on the bus. John was wearing Wayfarer shades, black jeans, and a black T-shirt that read ALLIANCE OF CONCERNED MEN. SEND DONATIONS TODAY. He is six-nine, a very solid two hundred fifty pounds. We've been friends since we were ten, when I first moved to D.C.

He, Errol, and I were talking about the boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, almost shouting over the bus's blustery, occasionally

misfiring engine. Sampson had his huge arm lightly draped over Errol's shoulders. Proper physical contact is encouraged when dealing with these boys.

Finally, we picked up the last little guy on our list, an eight-year-old who lived in Benning Terrace, a tough project known to some of us as Simple City.

As we left the project, an ugly smear of graffiti told visitors everything they needed to know about the neighborhood. It read YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE WAR ZONE, AND YOU LIVED TO TELL ABOUT IT.

We were taking the boys out to Lorton Prison in Virginia. They would be visiting their fathers for the afternoon. They were all young, between eight and thirteen. The Alliance transports forty to fifty kids each week to see their fathers and mothers in different prisons. The goal is a lofty one: to bring the crime rate in Washington down by a third.

I'd been out to the prison more times than I cared to remember. I knew the warden at Lorton pretty well. A few years back I'd spent a lifetime there, interviewing Gary Soneji.

Warden Marion Campbell had set up a large room on Level One where the boys met with their fathers. It was a powerful scene, even more emotional than I'd expected. The Alliance spends time training the fathers who want to participate in the program. There are four steps: how to show love; accept fault and responsibility; attain parent-and-child harmony; discover new beginnings.

Ironically, the boys were all trying to look and act tougher than they actually were. I heard one boy say, "You weren't in my life before, why should I listen to you now?" But the fathers were trying to show a softer side.

Sampson and I hadn't made the run to Lorton before. It was our first time, but I was already sure I'd do it again. There was

so much raw emotion and hope in the room, so much potential for something good and decent. Even if some of it would never be realized, it showed that an effort was being made, and something positive could come from it.

What struck me most was the bond that still existed between some of the fathers and their young sons. I thought about my own boy, Damon, and how lucky we were. The thing about most of the prisoners in Lorton was that they knew what they had done was wrong; they just didn't know how to stop doing it.

For most of the hour and a half, I just walked around and listened. I was occasionally needed as a psychologist, and I did the best I could on short notice. At one little group, I heard a father say, "Please tell your mother I love her and I miss her like crazy." Then both the prisoner and his son broke into tears and hugged each other fiercely.

Sampson came up to me after we'd been in the prison for an hour or so. He was grinning broadly. His smile, when it comes, is a killer. "Man, I love this. Do-gooder shit is the best."

"Yeah, I'm hooked myself. I'll drive the big orange bus again."

"Think it'll help? Fathers and sons meeting like this?" he asked me.

I looked around the room. "I think today, right now, this is a success for these men and their sons. That's good enough."

Sampson nodded. "The old one-day-at-a-time approach. Works for me, too. I am *flying*, Alex."

So was I, so was I. I'm a sucker for this kind of stuff.

As I drove the young boys home that afternoon, I could see by their faces that they'd had positive experiences with their fathers. The boys weren't nearly as noisy and rambunctious on the way back to D.C. They weren't trying to be so tough. They were just acting like kids.