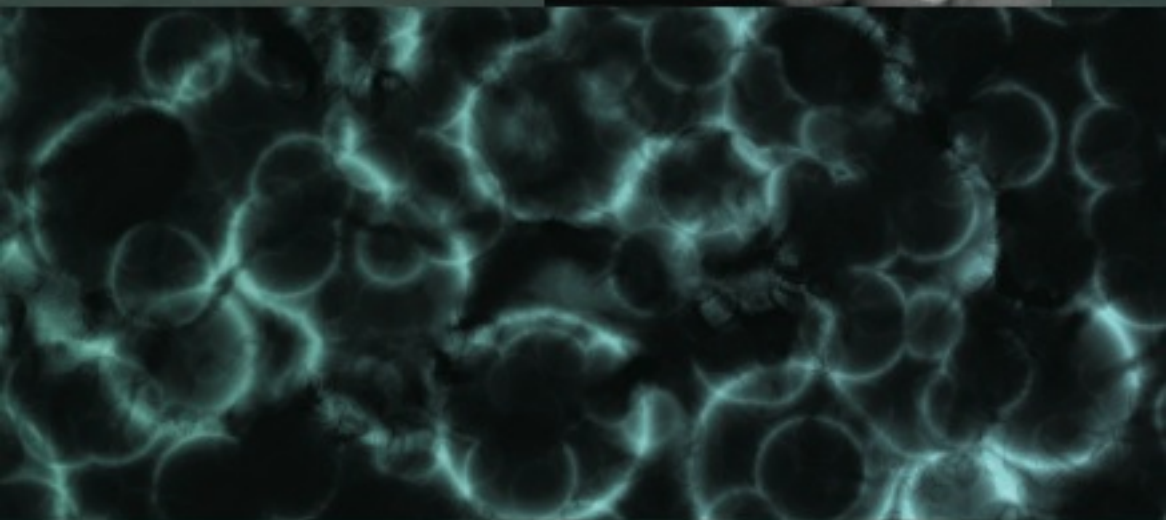


HOWARD LUFBURROW



**CROWN DECEPTION**



***CROWN DECEPTION** is set between the small Texas town of Triumph and a company headquartered in The Netherlands. Strange things are happening in Triumph, Texas. Jake Patterson, DDS and Kate Williams find themselves in the middle of this mystery when they both travel on the same flight to the Netherlands for meetings. Murder, mystery, and corporate espionage weave their way throughout the story, changing their lives forever.*

## **Crown Deception**

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# **Crown Deception**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Triumph County Morgue**

After Jake Patterson parked his car outside the morgue at the county hospital, he sat for a few minutes to gather strength to go inside. He hated looking at dead bodies.

As he approached the morgue's glass doors, he could see Paul Baker, Chief of Police of Triumph, Texas, waiting. About a year earlier Paul had talked him into helping with difficult homicide cases that required some dental expertise. Now, here he is again. Not the way Jake wanted to spend a Saturday evening.

He ignored Paul's outstretched hand. "I told you last time, never again. You know how much I hate this. I wish I'd never told you I took those classes in Forensic Dentistry. I didn't become a dentist to hang out in morgues." Bad memories flooded his mind as he anticipated the formaldehyde smell and the cold feel of the morgue. Memories from anatomy class in dental school were mixed with the painful memories of the tragic loss of his wife and parents years earlier.

"Jake, I really appreciate this and I think you might just find it interesting. Come on, let's go on into the autopsy room. Mack's waiting. He wants your opinion on something."

Dr. Mack Turner, the only pathologist and coroner in Triumph for the last four years, had brought a new level of Forensic medicine not usually seen in a small town. Although Jake hated his few experiences in the morgue, he had to admit that every encounter with Mack taught him something new about his own profession.

*Crown Deception*

As they entered the prep room, Mack waved them over to where a young deceased male laid uncovered on the autopsy table. Without even a “hello,” he launched into the case. “Gentlemen, we have here a 25 to 30 year old male, six foot three inches in height, weight, 198 pounds, and no identification present. It appears his death is due to some sort of overdose. I’m waiting on the toxicology report but it won’t be here until sometime tomorrow.”

Paul Baker interrupted. “Mack, let’s get to the point of why you asked me to call Jake in to help out.”

“Oh, sorry Chief, I get carried away sometimes. Jake, you’re going to love this,” he exclaimed excitedly. “Over here.”

Jake and Paul walked near to the body and leaned in as Mack directed him to the maxillary right side of the victim’s open mouth, propped open with a black rubber bite block similar to those used in his own office.

“Look at this.” He pointed to a porcelain crown on a tooth. “See it?”

“Looks like a normal porcelain crown,” Jake commented as he looked up at Mack.

“Exactly!”

“Okay, so you brought me here to look at a porcelain crown. I see those every day on my patients and might I add on live patients.”

Mack laughed and turned to load an x-ray on a computer screen hanging from the wall behind the body. “Well, then what do you make of this?”

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As Jake focused on the image, he saw what Mack was so excited about: a symbol on the crown.

“I found this on a routine x-ray of the mouth, hoping to get some clues to help identify this guy.”

Jake had never seen such a marking on a crown before. As he focused closer on the x-ray, he realized it was more than a symbol. There were actually two letters there: A “J” superimposed over an “M”. “Why would anyone take the time to do that on a crown?”

Paul Baker nodded. “We were hoping you could help us identify this guy. We found him about 5 miles outside of town, down under an old railroad bridge on the way out to Lansdun.”

“I can check around with some friends at the Houston Dental School. But I’ve never seen this before.”

## **Chapter 3**

### **April 19**

Morning shadows stretched across the town square as sunshine peaked over the trees and reflected off the dome of the old courthouse. It seemed a fairly average day as Jake parked his SUV and began the familiar walk to his office. The spring weather reminded him of the first day he opened his dental practice. How exciting and fresh it all had felt that day. Ten years had passed and he was now very much a part of Triumph.

This morning Jake pondered just how much he loved this little town. Nestled in the Piney Woods of East Texas, Triumph had the laid-back atmosphere of a small town, yet afforded its residents the amenities of Houston, 80 miles south. As with many towns in this area along the Texas - New Orleans border, it started as a center for the lumber trade and prospered until the lumber industry began to decline at the end of the 1950's. Within a decade, Triumph turned its attention to the tourist industry and, with the construction of Lake Triumph in 1965, began to prosper once again. Triumph became known as the gateway to the Forest and Lake Region of East Texas. Bed and Breakfast Inns and antique shops filled the town as it became a tourist destination. In 2000, Lansdun International, a biotechnology research company, announced it would open a research facility in Triumph. Two hundred families moved into Triumph in the fall of 2001 when the facility finally opened at the site of an abandoned paper mill. It was a tremendous boost to all aspects of the economy for the little Texas town.

Jake entered his office through the back door, glanced at the airplane ticket on his desk, stowed his briefcase in the corner and put on his white lab coat. He was anxious to start the day and get it over



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with so he could finish preparing for his trip to the International Dental Forum Meeting, to be held this year in Scheveningen, a seaside resort town in The Netherlands. Not only did the agenda suggest a professionally interesting meeting, but the location of the conference allowed Jake a much-needed vacation and a chance to see his grandparents. Jake knew his Oma and Opa were probably as excited about the trip as he was.

His day proved to be hectic as an already busy schedule became overwhelmed with toothache calls and patients needing to get into the office right away. It always seemed to happen, Jake thought, every time I get ready to leave town, my schedule gets loaded. Wryly, he thought there must be some sort of underground communication between his patients, triggered whenever he planned a vacation.

Sometimes he longed for the days when he used to practice in Houston. It seemed like such a long time ago, yet he had a clear memory of his years there with his wife, Annette. As newlyweds, he and Annette had bought a small house in the West University neighborhood. Together, they remodeled the post-WWII cottage, adding another bedroom to accommodate the family they dreamed of having. Yet, just four years into the dream, Jake lost Annette in an automobile accident as she visited with her parents in Arkansas. In the ten years that had passed, he often thought of what might have been. Annette would have enjoyed this trip to Europe, he thought. A smile formed on his face and distracted him from writing up patient charts.. Quickly he forced her out of his mind as he had done so many times before.

The door opened a crack after a quick knock and Franny leaned her head in, “Dr. Patterson, Mrs. Watkins is ready to get started.” She stopped and peered at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Just thinking about Annette again.”

*Crown Deception*

Franny walked in and grabbed his hand, drew him to a standing position. “Come on, Mrs. Watkins will make you feel better. She's in a really great mood today.”

As she had done many times before, Franny dragged him out of his melancholy. From the very first day he opened the doors in Triumph, she'd been his dental assistant. Her first week with him, she'd turned 21. So excited to finally be an adult, she mentioned her birthday to every patient that day. In addition to being a very adept dental assistant, Franny also set the tone in the office. Never in a bad mood, never bringing any problems from home, and never allowing others to mope, Franny filled the office with joy. Today was no different: The mood was set and all others must be joyful too.

As Jake walked with Franny toward Mrs. Watkins, his hygienist, Janna called out of her room, “Dr. Patterson, could you come and check my patient first?”

“Everything looks good here,” Jake said to both Janna and her patient, snapping off his latex gloves and moving down the hall.

Once Jake had adjusted Mrs. Watkins' denture, he retired to his office to finish up details for his trip. As he studied the meeting agenda, Franny stuck her head in again. “Dr. Patterson, we have one more before lunch so don't go anywhere!”

“No problem, take an x-ray and let me know when it's on the computer,” Jake replied.

In less than ten minutes Franny returned to the office, pulled up the digital x-ray on the computer and pointed. “Look at this. It's a really weird crown.”

The radiograph of the tooth showed a crown with a strange symbol embedded in the middle of the restoration, exactly like the one he had

seen on the man the other night in the morgue. Immediately he thought he should notify Paul about this patient, but decided he needed more information.

As he walked into the treatment room, Franny handled the introductions, “Dr Patterson, this is Peter Meijer. He’s experiencing pain in his upper right 1<sup>st</sup> molar. Mr. Meijer has just arrived here from The Netherlands and has an interview over at Lansdun later this afternoon. I was just sharing with him that your mother is Dutch and that you spent a lot of time in Leiden with your grandparents.”

Temporarily forgetting his tooth pain, Peter spoke, “Greetings, Doctor. Sprekken je Nederlandse?”

Jake smiled. “Ja, IkNederlandsegesprek met mijgrootouders.”

“Frolijk, Doctor. Goedvoorjou.” Switching to English, Peter continued, “By the way, I know Leiden. I visited there many times as a small boy. Lovely town, Leiden.”

“What a small world,” exclaimed Jake. “You arrive here from The Netherlands today and I’m flying over there tomorrow. But a toothache brings us together. So what seems to be the problem with your tooth?”

“Well, I’ve had pain ever since the root canal a month ago. The crown was put on last week before I left to come here for my interview. I just need something for the pain, please. I’ll be home in two days.”

During the examination Jake looked very carefully at the tooth that showed a poorly completed root canal and a crown. The crown looked normal from the outside, but the x-ray showed the unusual symbol. “Since you’re just here for a few days, I can prescribe you some antibiotics and something for pain. Be sure to get that tooth checked by your dentist back home,” he told the Dutch fellow.

*Crown Deception*

Seeking more information, Jake asked, “Where did you get the crown done? As a courtesy I would like to communicate with your dentist, just to let him know you were having a problem. If you could leave his name and address I will drop him a note.”

Jake figured any information he could get from the patient would be helpful to Paul. Because he had no clue what the symbol on the crown was all about, Jake decided against asking specifically about the marking. Paul will know what to do, he thought.

“Thank you doctor, I’m very grateful for your help. I’m here for an interview at Lansdun, it’s the chance of a lifetime. I will leave the information with the lady at the front desk as I leave.”

After saying goodbye to Mr. Meijer, Jake returned to his office and began to study the x-ray up on the computer screen. The digital x-ray allowed Jake to modify the contrast and color of the x-ray, trying his best to get a better look at the symbol. As he remembered his visit to the morgue, he wondered, “Could it be the same dentist? Do they 'sign' their work in Holland? Was the dead guy in the morgue Dutch as well?”

Jake picked up the phone and called Chief Paul Baker. The call immediately went to Paul’s voicemail where Jake left a message briefly describing his encounter with his patient, as well as inquiring if the man in the morgue could also be Dutch.

Jake remembered promising Paul the other night at the morgue that he would inquire with his friend at the local dental school in Houston about the weird crown. Now he had an x-ray of another tooth just like it he could share. Jake took a moment to shoot an email and copy of the x-ray to Dr. Brennan Scott, a friend and professor at Houston Dental School.

*Email: 1:30pm on Thursday April 19*

*Howard Lufburrow*

*To: BScott*

*From: JPatterson*

*Brennan,*

*I am sending you an x-ray of a patient I saw today. During the exam the crown on tooth #3 looks perfectly normal. I saw a similar x-ray with the same markings on a man in the morgue the other night as I helped the police with some dental forensics. That course you taught several years ago has resulted in more visits to the morgue than I ever wanted. My patient today is from Utrecht in the Netherlands and I am wondering if you've ever come across a marking on an x-ray like this before. Is it a European thing? Let me know what you think.*

*Jake*

*Return: 2:00pm on Thursday April 19*

*To: JPatterson*

*From: BScott*

*Jake,*

*That is some weird mark. Looks like letters or some kind of symbol. Someone would have had to go to a lot of trouble to fabricate the crown with different radiopacities. The big question is why? Let me do some research through academic channels and see what I come up with. I have a friend in Brussels at the dental school, and maybe he has seen something like this in Europe before.*

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*Enjoy your trip! Give me a call when you get back and we can discuss your crazy crown. Maybe we can have lunch.*

*Brennan*

Jake smiled. He enjoyed keeping in touch with Brennan. Even an email from him is a treat. He realized how much he missed seeing his old friend.

The day finished out rather routinely. That afternoon they saw eight more patients and still managed to finish on time. The staff had planned a short meeting before the end of the day to make sure everything would be handled during Dr. Patterson's vacation. They assured him that everything was under control. Franny said confidently: "We can do it Doc. Who do you think runs this office anyway?" They all laughed and exited the room.

"Dr. Patterson, are you leaving now?" called Franny on her way out the door.

"No," he said, "I just need to get a few things before I leave." The women warned him to be careful and told him to have a good time. They gathered their things and walked out of the office together. Jake followed and locked the door behind them and then went back to his office to get his briefcase. He opened the case and placed the plane tickets in the side pocket with his passport, meeting credentials, phone numbers, and an envelope with travelers' checks. He laughed at himself as he thought of how many times he had already performed the familiar routine and how many times he might repeat it before he got on the plane.

Jake left the office and retraced the short walk back to his SUV parked at the edge of the town square. He drove the eight miles out of

*Howard Lufburrow*

town toward Lake Triumph to his home located right on the water. Still pondering the mark seen now on two different x-rays, he wondered what it meant to each of the men and now to him.



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