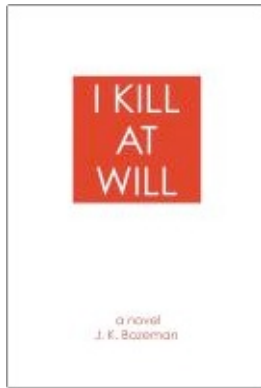


I KILL
AT
WILL

a novel
J. K. Bozeman



A retired history teacher and former Marine intelligence officer is accused of complicity in the appearance of a chupacabra (goat sucker) in his neighborhood. When the naked body of a young Latino male is found nearby, he becomes a suspect, in conflict with the ambitious young officer determined to catch the killer. He finds a third nude corpse, with vampire-like bites on his throat and a taunting note on his chest, and joins the pursuit.

“I KILL AT WILL”

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My first indication of the terror invading our quiet suburban neighborhood came on the evening of Tuesday, April twenty-seventh. I was in my bedroom watching *Frontline* on PBS when I was disturbed by a loud knocking on my wall.

I was annoyed anyone would be so intrusive. I hadn't heard the doorbell - which isn't unusual, as I lost part of my hearing in Cambodia during our failed intervention in Vietnam. Though I also often can't hear my phone ring, friends and neighbors know my number and can leave a message. Was something so urgent it required my immediate attention?!

But I'd regained my usual composure by the time I reached my front door. I turned on the porch light and was pleased to find Keith, a local police officer who lives up the street. He'd been among my more challenging students and one of my few successes.

His wife Lisa had been my favorite neighborhood child, and, when her parents retired to Lake Palestine, they left her their house. She sometimes asks for my advice or help with small household jobs her father used to do - little plumbing, electrical or horticultural problems beyond Keith's abilities.

I welcome opportunities to spend time with them and help Keith learn the skills I believe are useful, economically advantageous and conducive to self-reliance. I consider him a surrogate son and want to encourage his self-confidence and sense of competency.

He was still in uniform, but his expression - a tight-lipped grin of slight chagrin I'd seen often in class - told me the matter wasn't official nor especially pressing. I pushed open the outer glass storm door, tacitly inviting him in.

He declined by lowering his eyes, looked down at my left foot. It was warm that evening, and I'd gone to the door barefoot, but, as usual, I had on long pants. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Harrison. Have you seen Rags?"

Rags was a homely little mongrel I'd found yelping at my back door and unloaded on Lisa. "Not recently, Officer Christopher," I ribbed him for being formal, refusing to call me Matt, as I'd urged often enough.

"You know how crazy Lisa is about that ugly little mutt," he grouched, "Sometimes I think she cares more about him than me."

I chuckled; we both knew they're still very much in love.

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“If he shows up, will you bring him home?”

“Of course.” Rags had shown up at my back door several times since I’d first carried him to their front door, and I’d always taken him home.

He smiled, glancing into my eyes with his usual reluctant acknowledgment of our mutual affection, touched his forehead in an informal salute, possibly meant to acknowledge my military experience. I watched him saunter away up my sidewalk, self-consciously erect, elbows out to augment his manly dignity.

The little mutt’s whimpering had woke me early one rainy winter morning two years ago, so wretched-looking his species was barely discernible, skinny as an anatomy-class cat cadaver, shivering violently, his curly coat soaked and matted, one ear flopped over - but obviously intelligent and eager for attention.

I let him into my enclosed back porch, gave him a can of tuna, a bowl of soy milk, another of water, and called animal control before I left for school.

When I came home that afternoon the little rascal had torn open a bag of potting soil and scattered it, knocked over a plant, chewed it and my dryer exhaust hose. I could have wrung his scrawny little neck, but he greeted me with a lop-sided grin, delighted to see me.

Animal control hadn’t received a call about a small mongrel I’d described as possibly part toy poodle and some kind of terrier - and even dry and what might charitably be called so ugly he was cute, I still couldn’t find a more appropriate label.

He’d worn out his welcome with me, but I couldn’t turn him out or abandon him to probable euthanasia at the pound, so I made a round of the block hoping someone would claim or recognize him.

I found Lisa at home and took advantage of her open and generous nature. From her earliest days in school I’d been a dependable customer of her raffle tickets, band candy, Girl Scout cookies, etc., and she probably still feels some obligation.

She tried to persuade me to keep him, hinting I needed companionship. Like many fortunate newlyweds she couldn’t imagine the comforts of living alone. I didn’t mention the little mutt’s destruction and my life-long distaste for hyperactive little yippers.

My Uncle Buddy, my Grandfather’s younger brother, had a toy Manchester terrier that was very protective of a new litter, and when I was five she sneaked up behind me and nipped my Achilles tendon. Though she hadn’t broken the skin, she’d startled me, and I cried. My father gave me a

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contemptuous look, my older brother called me a crybaby, and I have ever since disliked nervous little dogs.

I said I didn't want a house dog and suspected he would damage my garden. Meanwhile, the little scamp was pleading his own case, and I left without him.

My homely but comfortable old house is at the corner of Orchard and San Jacinto Roads in south Arden, catty-corner from the Annie Webb Blanton Elementary School, and after my breakfast and casual read-through of the *Dallas Morning News*, I usually carry my table scraps and coffee grounds out back to my compost cage. In good weather, I work in my garden and police my yard, picking up school papers, candy wrappers, chip bags, etc.

Until last June I taught history at South Arden High, and I usually feel some relief that I no longer have to deal directly with the increasingly rude and unruly behavior of students. That morning, however, I was thinking of Keith and the rewards of sometimes being able to make a difference in a young life. I suppose the feeling is something like the empty-nest syndrome parents experience when they're relieved of the burden of their children, yet feel incomplete without them.

Wednesday is our day for trash pick-up, and, as I went around front to retrieve the container I'd heard emptied earlier, I found Rags - or what remained of him - on the patch of buffalo grass at the northeast corner of my yard. He had been beaten, run over, or stomped so flat he looked like a ragged scrap of filthy shag carpet.

(This wanton mutilation was probably not related to the human bodies that would soon be found within a block of it, but it was integral to my involvement in the pursuit of a serial killer.)

I wondered who could have done something so vicious, why anyone would want to harm such an appealing little creature, much less wreak such obviously sadistic damage. I regretted the trash had already been picked up, as I didn't want to subject Lisa or even Keith to such a gruesome sight.

I carried the stiff carcass around to my driveway, which opens onto busy San Jacinto Road but is partially screened by an informal barrier of shrubs that reduces the noise of traffic and gives me some privacy. Passing pedestrians were unlikely to see it, unless they turned to look.

I called Keith's cell and left a brief message, advising we spare Lisa the sight of the barely-recognizable remains, offering to bury Rags. He was at my front door shortly before noon, and, as I was in the kitchen, I heard the doorbell.

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As usual, when I'm at home during the day - most days now - and the weather is pleasant, I'd left the inner front door open and the glass outer storm door latched, and through it I could see he was no longer the self-assured officer I'd watched amble away the night before. I opened the door for him.

He entered more readily than usual. "Damn him!" His eyes were wet with indignation.

"Who?"

"That fucking kid at fourteen twenty-nine!"

I was a little surprised by his strong emotion and language. Half the men I know seem unable to complete a sentence without using some form of fuck at least once, but Keith had continued to treat me with much the same deference with which he'd kept his distance in high school.

I didn't know who he was talking about and had nothing to contribute. "Do you want me to bury him?"

"Please." He turned to leave, hesitated in the doorway. "You're too good to us."

His gratitude had a slight edge of resentment, some vestige of the resistance with which he'd met my earliest efforts to reach him. I supposed I had been visiting them too often, imposing my guidance a bit too aggressively, making him feel indebted. I didn't know how to respond; this wasn't the time - if there will ever be one - to confess how guilty I still feel about his father, a fellow alcoholic I'd failed.

Ken had been a skilled machinist at a local defense plant until his drinking had gotten him fired. We had attended the same AA group. Our leader had asked me to be his sponsor, but I hadn't felt strong enough.

He had taken a job with Halliburton - the huge, greedy, corrupt corporation responsible for incalculable waste, destruction and environmental damage - in Kuwait. Bush and Cheney were already building the staging base for their invasion of Iraq well before they cooked up the phony intelligence to justify it.

Kuwait, like most Islamic countries, is puritanical and repressive. The Koran forbids alcohol, but it's apparently cheap and abundant in the compounds where Americans are housed, and Ken apparently drank himself to death. I was told the death certificate specified hypothermia, but that was probably, as is often the case, secondary to excessive consumption of alcohol.

I buried Rags in the far corner of my back yard, thinking of all the incomprehensible malice there is in our world, giving in to grief for my

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failed marriage, the children I will never have, my beloved Grandfather, who had taught me to garden, my best friend Weldon, who I lost in Vietnam . . . until I reminded myself for the thousandth time that self-pity and resentment are my worst weaknesses - and unjustified because I've always been fortunate.

The following morning I was on my inversion table in the small front bedroom I use as an office and workout room when the doorbell chimed. It took me a few seconds to upright and extricate myself, and there was an insistent rapping on the doorframe.

The inner front door was open, and when I reached the doorway into the living room and had an unobstructed view through the glass outer door, my insistent visitor was no longer in sight - yet hadn't had time to vanish, unless the departure had been made quickly to one side. I moved closer to the door and found a police officer lurking on the side edge of the porch.

Detlev Meyer is tall, blond, blue-eyed, remarkably handsome, admirably proportioned and impressively fit - and his resemblance to Weldon, the lost friend I mentioned earlier, was uncanny. I was momentarily disconcerted and apparently failed to adequately restrain my reaction.

Somewhat wary because he'd chosen to wait out of immediate view, I pushed the door open and stepped out on my right foot, reflexively blocking his entrance, finding further cause for caution in the avid sparkle of his clear blue eyes.

Everything about him was recruiting-poster perfect: erect posture, immaculate uniform tailored to his body - broad shoulders, slim waist, not especially muscular, but perfectly maintained - down to spit-shined shoes.

"I need to discuss the recent incidents of animal mutilation in our neighborhood."

I thought he might have taken a moment for an introduction, but I invited him in.

As he entered he scanned the room quickly and sniffed as though he detected some suspicious or unpleasant odor. "Got a cold bottle of water?"

I smiled at his presumption and told him I could only offer filtered tap water, assuring him it was cleaner than bottled, which is usually just filtered municipal water contaminated by the plastic in which it's wastefully packaged.

He smirked and rolled his eyes, and I wondered if he'd come prepared to be impertinent.

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While I was getting the water, I'm sure he surveyed my living room, which was relatively dark because its windows face north and my small front yard is densely shaded by half a dozen mature trees.

As the room remains much as Karen, my former wife, left it when she moved out nearly a decade ago, it could have told him little about me, except that I'm a fairly neat housekeeper and grew up in a culture in which people don't actually do much living in such formally-furnished rooms.

He had seated himself on the couch, so I set the water on a green marble coaster already on the coffee table and sat opposite him on the love seat. He took a sip, his expression slightly disparaging, and placed the glass on the table - not on the coaster.

As this wasn't consistent with his impeccable facade, I suspected another deliberate attempt to establish dominance.

"What can you tell me about the canine carcass found on your property yesterday morning?"

"Very little, except that it was badly battered and had been dead long enough to become stiff."

"And the mutilated cat in your alley last week?"

"This is the first I've heard of it."

"Anything else about the several incidents of animal mutilation in our neighborhood?"

I adopted his brusque manner. "Nothing."

"You buried the carcass?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you call the police department about it?"

"I called a policeman - Keith Christopher."

"So he tells me. What was your hurry?"

His unsmiling third degree seemed inappropriate, a little impertinent. "It was an ugly mess."

"You didn't consider the possibility you might be destroying evidence?"

I found his curt manner annoying and grew defensive. "No. There was no blood or signs of activity near the corpse. It had obviously been tossed there post mortem."

He smirked, lifting his left upper lip - an expression I would see again in the coming weeks. "And you feel competent to make such decisions?"

"I did - until you started grilling me. I wasn't intentionally destroying evidence. Do you want me to exhume it?"

He smirked again, raising his left eyebrow in admonition, unbuttoned his shirt pocket, took out a card, placed it on the coffee table, re-buttoned his

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pocket and stood. “Would it be too much trouble for you to inform me of any similar incidents that come to your attention in the future?”

“In writing? Or will a phone call suffice?”

He stiffened and gave me a sharp look, raising his left eyebrow in admonition, obviously displeased with my irony.

I stood and followed him to the door. He certainly had my attention, and I watched him walk away up the sidewalk, as perfect a police officer as I’ve ever seen, with a bit of swagger, unbecoming because it was superfluous in such an exemplary young man.

(These aren’t our exact words during that first encounter, of course, but it was memorable enough that I feel it’s a fair rendering.)

He looked so freshly minted I assumed he was new on the job, trying to hide his insecurity by overplaying the role.

When I moseyed out my back door on Sunday, May thirty-first, thinking I would get in a little early-morning gardening and beat the rising summer heat before settling down to my usual leisurely browse through the paper, I found a naked male body on my driveway.

For a moment I wondered if I was still dreaming.

I went back inside and called 911, could hardly believe I was telling the operator in an impressively calm voice that I'd just found a body.

"What kind of body?" she asked.

Her question seemed so unnecessary I almost laughed. "Human."

I stayed on the line until she informed me a squad car would be dispatched and warned me not to disturb the crime scene. I called Officer Meyer and left a voice-mail message, then went back outside for a closer look.

The body was that of a young man, probably in his late teens or early twenties, probably mestizo, but remarkably pale. There was a note in the middle of his chest, neat black capital letters on a red square:

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It looked like a three by three inch post-it note, darker and glossier, and it adhered and conformed to the contour of his sternum. The letters were uniform, without serifs, too neat and uniform to have been hand-lettered.

The cause of his pallor was immediately discernable: There were puncture wounds on his throat, their pattern ostensibly that of a large canine, such as a Doberman or German shepherd - unconvincing, because a dog would have torn during an attack.

These punctures were distinct and appeared to have been left by an animal biting into his throat twice, once on the left, once lower on the right, on each side with the upper canines entering at or near his jugular vein and the lower gripping the opposite side of his trachea.

The body had been displayed spread eagle with his feet toward the garage - and from this and the position of his genitals I infer he had been lifted from the delivery vehicle feet first. Using his navel as twelve o'clock,

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his uncircumcised penis was at two, above and to its left a crusted area that appeared to be dried semen, and his right testicle was well upon his abdomen.

I estimate him to be in his late teens or early twenties, about five-eight or nine, one forty to forty-five pounds, slim but well-proportioned and fit, with a flat abdomen and no visible body hair between his navel and the shadow of dark beard on his lower jaw and chin.

His hair was black, fine and straight, four or five inches long on top and tapered in a conservative style, recently trimmed, blocked at his nape, short sideburns with a forward slant. (Not wanting to touch him or seem too free in my examination, I looked closely only at the right side of his face.)

Judging from the appearance of his hair, in disarray, but not recently mussed, in places standing almost vertically from his scalp, it had been wet and had dried while or after his body had been inverted. In contrast with the condition of his pubic hair, this leads me to conclude that his upper body had probably either been washed while upside down and/or his hair had been wet when he was unloaded.

His eyes, though only partly open and dried dull by the sun, in which he had probably lain for at least an hour, were dark brown, almost black. His face, turned about forty degrees to his left, was so smooth and regular it was easy to imagine that animated, with life in his dark eyes, he was probably considered handsome, almost pretty.

His mouth was open enough I could see part of his lower front teeth, which were clean and white, but probably hadn't been straightened by orthodontics.

His hands and feet were relatively small, slim and well-formed, his long fingers tapering slightly, his nails clean and well-maintained. His hands were loosely closed, but there were no visible calluses or other indications of recent manual labor.

The backs of his hands and arms, from more than half-way up from the elbow, were discernibly darkened by exposure to the sun, and his lower legs were similarly tanned, gradually from just below the knee to a more distinct demarcation just below his ankles. Otherwise, I saw no marks or blemishes by which he might be identified.

Judging by his recently-cut hair, the closely-shaved beard clearly outlined on his jaws and chin, and the general condition of his body, he wasn't poor and paid ample attention to his appearance.

(I should probably state that I had in the last year read Patricia Cornwell's *Case Closed*, about Jack the Ripper, and it almost certainly

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influenced this description. I've seen a program about the statistical study of serial killers on PBS, and I often watch *Mystery*.

I consider commercial television worse than a wasteland - a polluted junk yard - but I occasionally watch a program trying to understand its appeal and maintain some connection with popular culture. I've seen episodes of *CSI (Crime Scene Investigation)* in Las Vegas, Miami and New York, and I find the series too hyped and slick, far from realistic and convincing.)

A squad car, its lights flashing, pulled up at the curb on San Jacinto, blocking the driveway, and an officer I don't recall having seen before, got out, approached the body and observed it. Another followed him from the other side of the car, leaving the lights on and the radio scratching. (You've probably seen enough similar scenes not to need a more detailed description.)

I answered a few questions, said I'd called as soon as I discovered the body, and had no idea when it had been left, except that it hadn't been there early Saturday evening.

Both officers were Caucasian and overweight, their uniforms stretched across the bellies so tight any significant effort might have popped a button loose. One of them drawled, "Looks like another wetback."

The other shrugged. "One less t' fly home t' Burritaville at tax payer expense."

They weren't supposed to cover the corpse and possibly compromise the crime-scene evidence, but they could have been more respectful. I excused myself before another insulting remark caused me to retaliate in kind, saying I would wait inside for any further questions they might want to ask.

They were having a private consultation as I left them, both simultaneously giving me a sharp look, letting me know I wasn't above suspicion. I could easily make some more uncomplimentary remarks about their behavior, but I'm sure you're familiar with the arrogance common in policemen.

I tried reading the paper at my kitchen table, with the crime scene just out of sight behind the corner of the garage, but I was still too high on adrenalin to concentrate.

I went to my office, turned on my computer and started a description of the body - which I have since revised and refined several times. That afternoon I began this expanded account, trying to get the story and my part in it straight. I no longer thought Officer Meyer entertained suspicions, but others involved in the investigation might. Three naked male bodies found within a block of each other, now clearly serial murders, were sure to excite a lot of interest.

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Within an hour my driveway and side yard contained at least half a dozen uniformed officers and several others who signaled their official capacity with the usual displays of self-importance. The only two I saw actually investigating were identified on the backs of their dark blue T-shirts as FBI Evidence Response Team.

My general lack of trust in the competence and scrupulous behavior of police officers is probably evident - and widely shared, if not so readily acknowledged. But the feelings I've expressed for Keith and those emerging for Detlev Meyer - though still colored by considerable distrust - surely demonstrate I don't consider all of them bumbling bullies.

I don't, in general, have a high opinion of most of those entrusted with power, as they too often abuse it. I've already registered disgust with the CIA, which has too often proven itself little better than a gang of thugs, responsible for some of our nation's most egregious and counter-productive misconduct - including the overthrow of several democratically-elected heads of state in Latin America.

Its malfeasance in Iran has proven even more disastrous and longer lasting. It fomented a coup against a capable, democratically-elected leader and foisted a corrupt and incompetent Shah on that unfortunate nation, then further compounded error by neglecting to inform the Carter administration about the Shah's failing health, the growing rancor against his abusive Gestapo, and the gathering Islamic Revolution.

Do I need to mention its more recent "slam dunk" assessment of Iraq's possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction that helped lead us into another unprovoked, ruinous, futile and unaffordable war? (The right-wingers currently clamoring for a reduction of our national debt seem to have conveniently forgotten their Bush/Cheney trillion-dollar hornswoggle.)

I read a biography of J. Edgar Hoover a few years ago, and the more I learn about him, the more I despise him. (Though he was almost certainly a life-long celibate, he was probably in love with his long-time companion, Clyde Tolson.) I consider him a megalomaniac, a petty tyrant allowed to amass far too much power, which he arbitrarily used for ignoble and sometimes illegal purposes. His chief aim seems to have been the suppression of dissent - and, as I had publicly expressed my opinions about our fiasco in Vietnam, I could easily have found myself on his enemies list.

I may well have been. The colonel's threats when I returned to rehab surely indicated my brief visit to Washington hadn't gone unnoticed.

However, I have a high opinion of the FBI in general, and I was relieved to find two of its agents present.

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Officer Meyer, in uniform, came to my front door shortly before nine, and I met him with my preliminary report on the body.

He skimmed it too hastily and moved past me toward the back door. I might have found some satisfaction with his feeling so much at home, but, as I was already upset with the two policemen who had first responded, I found offense and retaliated, "You know who might be my prime suspect at the moment?"

He turned to look at me with more interest.

"Whose profession not only teaches him how to kill, but also familiarizes him with the various means of getting away with it?"

His look hardened.

"Who is potentially in this neighborhood at all hours of the day and night?"

His eyes narrowed in growing antagonism.

"And has a convenient excuse, if caught at the scene of a crime?"

"You've made your point!" he growled.

"Read my report," I insisted, "Then maybe we can discuss this further."

"Aye-aye, sir!" He gave me a sharp salute and pressed on through the kitchen to my back door.

He'd barely made it out the door when the doorbell rang and knuckles knocked on the doorframe louder and longer than necessary. Though the living room was unlighted, my visitor had an unobstructed view into the interior and had probably seen us in the kitchen doorway, silhouetted in the window beyond us. He was establishing his dominance.

He flashed a badge as I opened the door for him and announced as best I could make out his deep-voiced monotone something like, Doug (or Dave) Henderson (or Anderson), DPDCSI.

In retrospect, his mumbled name and rapid sequence of letters seems to me a deliberate attempt to obfuscate and intimidate. Couldn't he have given me a card? The badge looked genuine enough, but he hadn't given me sufficient time to read it. How was I to know who he represented?

He had on a white short-sleeved shirt with a buttoned-down collar, press marks still visible on its starched coarse cloth, and a well-worn striped silk tie he'd been tugging straight when I first glimpsed him and tugged again after he entered - another indication he meant to appear authoritative.

"I'm sure I don't need to make you mindful of the seriousness of the crime possibly perpetrated in your back yard."

"I don't see any evidence it was committed there," I responded.

He gave me a smirk, meant, I'm sure, to remind me I was unlikely to have any expertise in such matters. "I'm not here to arrest or even question you. Only to caution you not to discuss this matter with any unauthorized personnel. Especially the media. Is that clear?"

It had occurred to me the media would be interested, and I'd been somewhat puzzled that the *Morning News* had so little to report about the second body and nothing further on either body, but I'd never even considered contacting them or any other media.

"This case is potentially explosive, and we need to keep it under wraps. Don't say or do anything that could potentially obstruct, impede or otherwise compromise an on-going investigation. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear," I assured him. "Would you like a copy of my preliminary report?"

Another smirk, almost a sneer. "That won't be necessary."

I wanted to ask how he could be so sure it might not be helpful and if he'd acquired his manner watching cop shows on TV. Like Officer Meyer, he seems to have picked up the stilted, clipped, punched-up dialogue of crime shows.

"I suggest you keep that entirely to yourself."

Didn't he have enough experience of accounts to notice one might include a detail or insight not found in another?

"We strongly suggest that you do not discuss this matter with anyone other than authorized law-enforcement personnel. There can be serious repercussions for interference in an investigation. Do I need to remind you of them?"

I wanted to say, Yes, please do; they've slipped my mind at the moment. His manner, voice and words, in my opinion, exceeded any justification, possibly even any legal authority he might have, and certainly the limits of polite communication. But I managed to hold my tongue.

As soon as he left I locked the outer front door, closed and locked the inner one, came to my computer to record our interview as accurately as possible, thinking of some possible opportunity to present this and discuss his behavior with some superior who might admonish him to mind his manners in the future.

That afternoon as I was working on this my doorbell chimed. I looked out my bedroom window to find a Channel 4 News van, a camera and equipment, and, I suppose, a newsperson on my front porch ringing the bell. (Channel 4 is our local Fox affiliate, and you probably don't need to be told

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it laps up the sensational or how thoroughly I despise Rupert Murdoch . Let him print all the trash people are willing to buy and read, but he isn't an American and has no right to debase our culture and meddle in our politics. "Fair and balanced", my hind foot! as my Grandfather would say about such flagrant lies.) I closed the blinds and came back to this.

My phone was ringing, the answering machine chattering. I was being addressed as Mr. Harrison, sir, with frequent repetitions during the spiel - a ploy that has never inspired confidence in me. I turned off the ringer and lowered the machine's volume to its lowest setting.

When I ventured into the kitchen in the late afternoon, I'd received twenty-three calls, and when I last looked that night there were forty-two. I didn't know the cheap old Southwestern Bell machine was capable of holding that many.

The next morning I skipped through them. Several asked for interviews, and two were from Officer Meyer, and, as I had nothing new to add and was still a bit miffed with him, I didn't call him back.

I listened to enough of Frieda's over-excited rattle to learn my house had made the news and some young woman named Betsy Something-or-Other had announced I was apparently at home but refusing to be interviewed.

I couldn't get my car out of the garage because of the crime-scene cordon and now felt so besieged I didn't even venture out into the garden.

Shortly before noon, my doorbell rang several times, then there was a knocking on my bedroom wall. As Keith had been the only one ever so presumptuous, I had a look out my window, found my yard empty, sneaked into my living room for a glimpse through the clear central panes of the inner door, and found my inference confirmed.

Keith obviously didn't share my concern with possible intrusion. "Det's been calling you."

"I'm not answering my phone. I was warned there might be serious repercussions if I talked with anyone unauthorized."

He smiled indulgently.

"When are they going to get the crime-scene tape out of my yard?"

He shrugged, "You know those guys."

"No, I've never even met them. But if they keep it up as long as the first one, I suppose I'll have to sneak out for supplies under cover of darkness."

He chuckled in appreciation of my attempt at levity and assured me, "You're not under house arrest."

"It certainly felt like it for a while."

“Want me to get something for you?”

“I’m okay. Let Officer Meyer in on your secret knock and tell him to come by if he wants to talk.”

“Call him Det. He’s one of the best – “ he paused for a word, probably still unable to declare him a friend - ”officers I know, but he’s not half the man you are.”

I dodged his compliment. “I’m sick of the phone - and I like to look at him when he talks. He’s hard to read.”

He smiled, his eyes bright with amusement, recognizing my growing affection for Det, who is actually easy to read, his facial expressions tending toward over-emphatic. “He says the same about you.”

“That’s probably due more to some shortcoming in the reader than in any lack of candor and clarity in the readee.”

He chuckled at my word play. “Yeah, he’s smart, but nowhere near your league.”

Instead of acknowledging a second compliment - which I assure you I value highly - I ducked again, aware that he was trying to conceal his efforts to promote better rapport between Det and me. “By the way, what’s this he tells me about your saying – or implying - I was sweet on you in high school?”

He blushed slightly, as I expected. “I said you were good to me. You *were*.”

“Did he tell you I said I loved you?”

He blushed, keeping his eyes down and his distance with a deferential, “No, sir.”

I chuckled. That was probably as close to an acknowledgment as I’ll ever get.

I don’t blame him for adopting the prevailing cultural bias. Gay is currently one of the most potent, yet generally acceptable put-downs for a male of any age. If the general trend of gentrification of slurs and pejoratives prevails, I suppose sometime in the future the politically-correct term will become something like differently-oriented or sexually-challenged - though that would describe most of us most of the time, except on a screen, where our modern heroes are like the Eveready bunny on steroids.

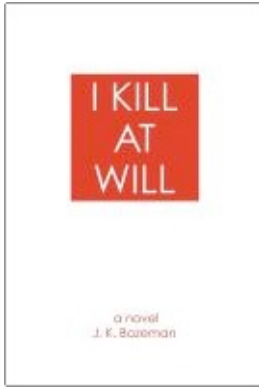
Few contemporaries of Lincoln would have thought there was anything unusual about his sharing a bed with his law partner. I had often shared a bed with my brother or a visiting cousin, but, because I had accepted the prevailing narrow-mindedness, I had refused to share one with Weldon, who I loved and trusted more.

"I Kill At Will"

I could see that Det was probably drawn to me by some need he didn't understand, distrusted and resisted. Because I was nearly as old as his father and look more like him than his father, had been a teacher and comport myself as experientially his superior, we were probably reenacting some unresolved father-son conflict.

Our bickering seems to have become a routine he'd fallen into, possibly without conscious intent. His aim, however unconscious, was to compel some show of concern – which he could spurn.

He is so mercurial, even with conscious effort, I was unable to maintain control our wrangles – and I have to admit, I found challenge and even pleasure in them.



A retired history teacher and former Marine intelligence officer is accused of complicity in the appearance of a chupacabra (goat sucker) in his neighborhood. When the naked body of a young Latino male is found nearby, he becomes a suspect, in conflict with the ambitious young officer determined to catch the killer. He finds a third nude corpse, with vampire-like bites on his throat and a taunting note on his chest, and joins the pursuit.

“I KILL AT WILL”

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