

A book from the Norm Strom crime fiction series. Baby Shay, Designated Hitters and Knock-Out are three short murder stories, set in gritty neighborhoods of the international border cities Detroit and Windsor. It's all about the street cops and detectives who hunt and pursue the worst of the worst. Killers.

Border City Chronicles

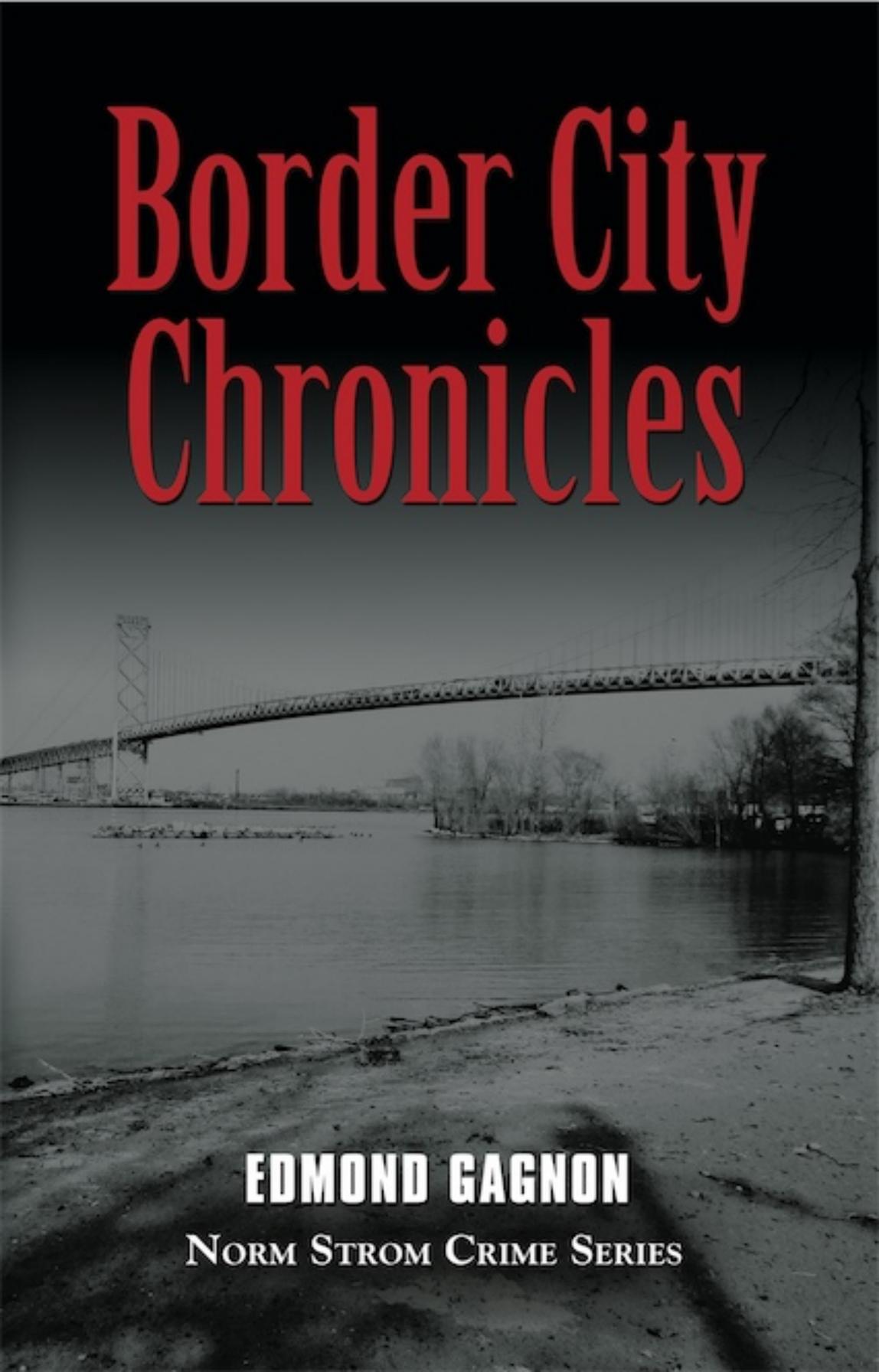
by Edmond Gagnon

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A black and white photograph of a suspension bridge spanning a wide river. The bridge has a prominent tower on the left side. In the foreground, there is a sandy bank with some debris. The background shows some trees and buildings along the far bank.

EDMOND GAGNON

NORM STROM CRIME SERIES

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First Edition

‘Baby Shay’

One

She’s Gone!

Jolene shouted at Kenny. “Turn that down, its Shay’s nap time and I gotta pick up my mom.”

The UFC announcer couldn’t describe the human carnage quick enough as Dan Severn pounded the other fighter into submission. His opponent’s face was unrecognizable, cut and bloodied from the rapid succession of vicious blows.

Kenny gulped his beer and yelled. “Kill him!” He paid no mind to Jolene, punched the air with his fist, and mimicked his hero on the tube.

Jolene snatched the remote on her way to the bedroom and lowered the volume. Taking quick stock of the empty bottles on the coffee table, she saw her man was seven beers into the two-four he’d brought home for the weekend. He ignored her whenever he watched sports or played video games. She knew better than to disturb him.

Jolene entered the bedroom and placed Shay in her crib. The baby had just finished a bottle and was nodding off. She smoothed her daughter’s silky red hair with her fingertips. The rusty color was a sore point with Kenny, and he questioned whether he was Shay’s real father.

Although born premature six months earlier, the baby was only slightly shy of her proper weight. Jolene gave her daughter a pacifier and tucked a blanket around her.

With the baby down for the afternoon, she turned to tidy herself in the mirror. Her brown hair had gotten long, reaching half way down her back. It was oily and in need of a wash, but

she didn't have enough time. She wanted to cut it but feared the grief she'd get from Kenny. He liked it long and told her to grow it to her ass. He thought that style was sexy.

The TV's volume increased. Kenny had turned it up. Jolene closed the bedroom door. She pulled off her soiled shirt and plucked her favourite tank top from a hook in the closet. Unable to fluff her oily hair, she tucked it behind her ears.

Her reflection in the mirror prompted a frown. She'd always hated how her top ribs protruded further than her small and shapeless breasts. She'd thought the pregnancy might help, but it didn't. Kenny always needled her about it.

Turning for the door, Jolene tripped over his discarded clothes. The small room was cluttered with their furniture and the baby's crib. She scooped up his stuff and tossed everything into the closet. It seconded as a clothes hamper.

Adjusting the curtains to keep the direct sunlight away from Shay, she closed the door on her way out of the bedroom. As she manoeuvred around the coffee table, Kenny held up an empty beer bottle. This was his cue for her to fetch him another, but his gaze never strayed from the squawk box.

"Will you keep an ear open for Shay?"

Jolene grabbed the beer and handed him another Labatt's Blue.

"I'm going to pick up mom, do you want me to bring you a burger for dinner?"

He took a hit off the open bottle and waved her off.

Jolene stepped off her porch and filled her lungs with the closest thing to fresh air Windsor's west end could offer. That section of the city stood downwind from the steel mill on Detroit's Zug Island. It was mid-June and summer had arrived.

Picking up her mom, meant a trip to the Chippewa Tavern. The neighborhood watering hole about halfway between her

house on Bloomfield, and her mother's place on Baby Street. Other than at home, the Chip was the only place her mother drank. Welfare cheques were in so she would be there for sure.

The bar did a brisk business with patrons cashing their government checks. It quickly filled with the usual suspects. The regulars had their own seats. Mom's was at the far end of the bar, near the bathroom. The distance was convenient given her weak bladder. Jolene sat beside her on the only empty stool at the bar, no one dared take that reserved seat. Everyone feared the wrath of Joyce Lockwood.

Jolene never cared for the Chip. Her father was stabbed and killed there in a senseless fight. She didn't drink much, but sometimes nursed a glass of white wine while she waited for her mother. Joyce usually hit the bar around noon, in time for a liquid lunch. The draft beer and shot of whiskey in front of her were her two best friends.

She slurred. "Hey honey...I shaved a sheet for ya."

The country music from the Juke box was stifled by the cacophony of loud chatter in the room. Jolene couldn't make out the song, but the melody sounded familiar. Kenny liked hard rock, but honky-tonk was more her style. She loved Tim McGraw, thought he was cute.

The Chippewa Tavern was over a hundred years old; a blind pig during prohibition, and a reputed hangout for Chicago gangster Al Capone. The neon signs and memorabilia from beer companies that hung on the nicotine-stained walls were barely visible through the cloud of cigarette smoke.

Jolene was embarrassed by her drunken mother. The bartender automatically placed a glass of white wine in front of her. Failure to do so would have gotten him a tongue-lashing from Juice, her mother's nickname at the bar. Being a regular, whose husband had been killed there, she acted like a celebrity who owned the place.

Jolene placed an order with the kitchen so she wouldn't have to make dinner at home. She lacked the groceries and knowhow, having learned nothing from her mother. Joyce usually covered her daughter's tab, a big spender with taxpayer's money.

Waiting patiently, Jolene listened to her mother incoherently try to solve what ailed the world. It was time to leave, before her legs gave out and Jolene would have to stuff her into a taxi cab. After three stumbles and one near fall on the walk to her mother's house, Jolene plopped her onto the sofa. She turned the on the TV and placed a beer beside the remote.

Arriving back home, Jolene heard the head-banging music before she got to her door. Kenny was exactly where she'd left him, on the couch with his head fallen back and mouth wide open. He was down for the count. She eyed the collection of empties, now doubled, and turned off the music. The bedroom door was closed, and Shay was quiet.

Silence was rare with the baby being colicky and crying all the time. Kenny always bitched about the noise and Jolene barely slept.

She took a deep breath and opened the bedroom door, but there wasn't a sound. She peeked into the crib. Shay wasn't there. Time stood still, until it registered with her. Jolene turned back toward the living room and screamed, "Kenny, she's gone!"

Two

Where's My Baby?

Hysterical, Jolene screamed, "Where's my baby...where's Shay?"

Kenny slowly came to, as if he'd been in a year-long coma. In his drunken stupor, he tried to focus on the two women who stood in front of him; both Jolene.

"Where is she...you're supposed to be watching her."

He rubbed his glazed eyes and stared at the woman on the right until the other one disappeared.

"Wha-whadaya talkin about? I just checked her."

"She's not here, see for yourself."

He pulled himself up from the couch, keeping one hand on it for balance. Kenny staggered into the bedroom and peered into the crib.

"She's not here."

"No shit...where's Shay, Kenny?"

Acting as if the infant had somehow climbed out of her own crib, he searched underneath it and their bed.

"You idiot, she can barely crawl, let alone get out of her crib. When did you last check on her?"

"I dunno. I guess I fell asleep."

He stumbled around the room, looking under clothes on the floor.

"She couldn't have gotten far."

"What's the matter with you? She didn't go anywhere on her own. Someone took her while you were zonked out."

He didn't comprehend the gravity of the situation.

"Maybe your mom picked her up."

"I was with my mom, you moron."

"I meant my mom...maybe she..."

Jolene cut him off.

“When’s the last time your mom saw Shay? She hates her own kids, you know that.”

Kenny parted the curtains with one hand and gazed out the bedroom window.

“Maybe she got outside, somehow.”

Jolene shook her head in disgust and stormed into the living room. “Someone took my baby...I’m calling the cops.”

She couldn’t remember the conversation. She stood and stared out the front door, shaking. Kayla, the woman who resided in the other half of their duplex, stuck her face in the screen door.

“What’s goin’ on girl, did I hear you say someone took the baby?”

“Kenny was supposed to be watching her, but he passed out. Did you hear anything?”

“Just her crying, but nothing unusual. How did he sleep through that?”

“You’d be surprised, he does it every night.”

Kayla let herself in the door.

“You’re shaking like a leaf; can I get you something...a shot of whiskey or a pill? Darrell’s got downers in the cupboard.”

“No, the cops are on their way.”

“Who the hell would take your baby? That’s sick. I’ll be right back. I gotta open some windows to get rid of the weed smell before Five-O gets here.”

Jolene remained standing in the doorway, waiting for the police. Tears flowed freely down her face, her arms too weak to wipe them away. She glanced over her shoulder at Kenny on the couch doing head-bobs, trying to stay awake.

“Maybe you should throw cold water on your face, before the cops see how drunk you are.”

“I was tired, it’s not my fault I fell asleep. Maybe YOU should get a job and try working all week. I was just enjoying my day off.”

“Maybe YOU should pay a little more attention to our daughter. I’m the one who...”

A police cruiser pulled to the curb out front. Another one came up the street from the other direction. A female cop got out of the first car. A police Sergeant parked his vehicle facing the first car, and the two officers walked up the sidewalk to the porch.

Jolene froze in the doorway. The Sergeant asked questions while the Constable took notes. “You called about a missing baby?”

Still shaking and her face soaked with tears, she stuttered her words.

“Sh-Shay, m-my baby girl...someone t-took her f-from her bed...in the house.”

“Do you mind if we come in and have a look around?”

“We’ve already looked. Sh-she’s only s-six months and can’t c-climb out of the c-crib on her own.”

“I understand, but we still have to look around.”

Kenny appeared from the bathroom. His brown hair was wet and freshly combed back, but his eyes said he was either stoned or on an all-night bender. His skinny, tattooed arms poked out of his black tee shirt like colored toothpicks. The thin moustache he’d been trying to grow all his life resembled a sickly caterpillar.

Jolene spoke up.

“This is my boyfriend, Kenny. Shay is our daughter. He was watching her while I was out, but he fell asleep, and someone took her from her crib in the bedroom.”

The Sergeant eyeballed Kenny like he was on the ten most wanted list. “Sir, please give this officer your full name and

birth date, while your girlfriend shows me where the baby was last seen.”

“What do you need that for? Shouldn’t you be out looking for our baby?”

The supervisor didn’t respond, he nodded Jolene towards the bedroom. The Constable took a step closer to Kenny.

“Sir, we need the information, so we know what to look for, and where. I’ll also need the names of all your family members, and any neighbours that you know?”

In the bedroom, Jolene pointed out the empty crib. The Sergeant swivelled his head to take in the tiny, cluttered room. He leaned forward to peer into the closet.

“Kenny already looked in there, but I told him Shay’s not capable of getting out of her crib.”

“So where were you when she went missing?”

“At the Chippewa. I went there to get my mother and take her home. I put Shay to sleep before I left. Kenny was watching TV. He said he’d keep an eye on her, but he was sleeping on the couch when I got home.”

The Sergeant parted the curtains and gazed out the window. “And what time was that?”

“I don’t know...maybe five minutes before I called you. She was gone and I freaked out. The neighbour said she heard Shay crying but didn’t see anything unusual.”

“Okay, give her name to the other officer. We’ll be canvassing the neighbourhood. Is it possible a family member took the baby without telling you?”

Jolene clenched her hands and pressed them into her stomach. All the color had drained from her face.

“No...I don’t know anyone who would...I think I’m gonna be sick.” She bolted passed the Sergeant, for the bathroom.

He walked into the living room where the Constable was taking notes. Kenny, dazed, slouched on the couch. The veteran cop studied the skinny kid, not impressed with his demeanour.

“Are there any rooms we haven’t seen yet?”

Kenny stared at a picture of Shay on the coffee table. A circle of beer bottles surrounded the photo like sentinels.

“This is it. I looked everywhere already.”

“It looks like someone’s had a few beers.”

“Yeah, so what. It’s my day off and I’m in my own house. What’s wrong with that?”

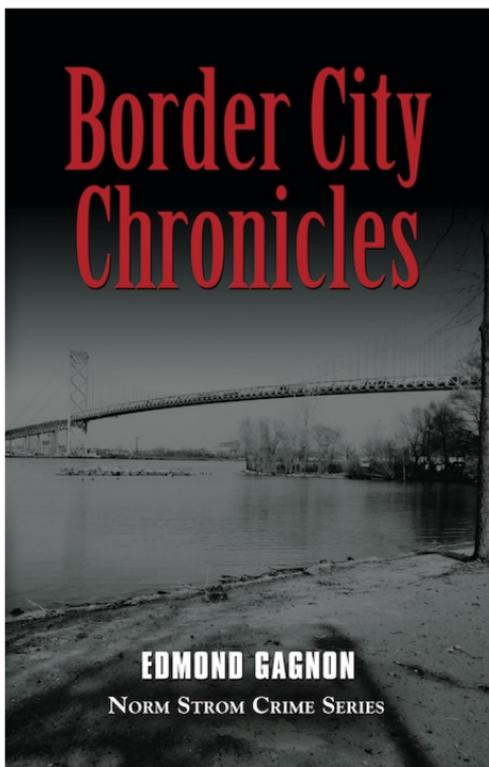
“Nothing. Unless someone took your child while you got drunk and fell asleep.”

Kenny broke from his trance and glared at the Sergeant.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. Like I said, maybe you should be out looking for my baby.”

“That’s what we’re going to do, young man. We’ll broadcast the child’s description, search the neighbourhood, and talk to everyone you know. Do you have a picture of your baby we could have?”

“Take that one.” Kenny lifted his chin to the Sergeant, signalling him to take the framed photograph on the table.



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