



Ezra Riley, a hardened Montana rancher, is taken secretly to the White House because of his gift for interpreting dreams. His visit there unleashes attacks by an elderly master spy and his human creation, Blue Man.

Blue Man

By John L. Moore

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BLUE MAN

"Blue Man is a gem."

— Bill Johnson
Bethel Church, Redding, CA

A Novel

JOHN L. MOORE

author of the award-winning *The Breaking of Ezra Riley*

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Monday, November 1

Washington, D.C.

Davis Browne turned his collar up against the November chill and decided to take one more walk around the tree-lined block. The note he'd found in his locked office at American University that morning had made him cautious. Who used paper messages anymore? People who didn't trust the Internet, that's who.

The note read: Kafe Krazee, 10 o'clock, backroom.

Nothing on his desk had been disturbed, and the drop of Superglue on the drawer holding his Colt Combat Elite .45 was intact. He chided himself for being predictable. Every weekday at 10, he left the university and briskly walked eight blocks to this no-Wi-Fi coffee shop. The spacious front room—lit by large windows and crowded with plants—was popular with college students who found the unwired setting rebelliously fashionable. The backroom, quiet and windowless, was unofficially reserved for faculty. Browne made the trek daily to unhinge his damaged knees and fuel up on a single dark mocha.

Another reconnoiter completed, he stopped next to the shop to surveil his background in the window's reflection. A dark blue Lincoln Navigator parked on a side street caught his eye. Its windows were tinted, but Browne could make out a large, male form in the driver's seat. He sensed the driver staring at him. The SUV didn't sag on its axles, so Browne guessed it wasn't armored. Other than this, the usual customers and pedestrians busied the street: students, professors, a stray businessperson or two, city maintenance workers, and harried mothers with a need for caffeine. He glanced at his own reflection: clean-shaven, thinning blond hair, pale, calculating blue eyes. He thought by not wearing sunglasses, he'd appear more

benign, but he didn't. He still looked like a government intelligence agent, even if he were an unemployed one.

At five minutes after 10, he walked into the shop, nodded at the baristas, mouthed *my usual*, and parted a sheer curtain open to the backroom. Four people sat singularly at scattered tables. Three were obviously professors. The fourth was a middle-aged woman whose stress was solvent. She had to be the contact. He went to her table and took a seat in a wrought iron chair.

"Good morning, Mr. Browne," the woman said. She did not offer her name. She looked like someone who badly needed a cigarette but never smoked.

"Good morning," Browne said. The woman's face was familiar, but he couldn't place her. She was short, buxom, and stylishly dressed in a black sweater and a gray tweed skirt and jacket. Her hair was tinted a light brown, and she wore reading glasses. Early fifties, he guessed. He knew better than to ask her name. The "lady in gray" would suffice for now.

"You wanted to see me?" Browne asked quietly.

"I understand you do some consulting," she said.

"When I have time. I'm employed at the university."

"No," she corrected him. "You have an office at the university. You do research and substitute teaching while you wait for a position to open up, but your last real job was at Homeland Security Investigations, and that ended a while ago."

Her acerbic tone helped him place her. She was an unofficial advisor to the United States President, a patron and power broker who stayed off-camera and behind the scenes. "The previous administration eliminated my DHS position," he said.

"That position is being restructured, but I am not here to debate your career status, Mr. Browne. I have an immediate situation that requires travel and discretion."

“You have my attention.”

“Have you seen POTUS on television recently?”

“I try not to watch television.”

“Have you heard rumors?”

“Some say he’s not looking well.”

A barista brought Browne’s mocha and started to ask if he wanted anything else, but a sharp look from the lady warned her away.

“The President is well,” the woman said. “But, he’s exhausted. He’s had the same reoccurring dream the past eight nights.”

“Nightmares?” Browne asked. “Eight nights in a row?”

“Perhaps not a nightmare, no one knows. The President refuses to share the dream’s content with his staff. But, it is disturbing and keeps him awake.”

Browne cut her off. “I am not a psychoanalyst.”

“One has been tried with no success.”

“He has his own medical doctor. Surely he’s been given something to help him sleep.”

“Sleeping pills don’t stop the dreams. They only make him more disoriented in the morning.”

“There are plenty of psychics—”

“Not an option,” she said curtly. “Bad optics.”

“Preachers?”

“He’s been prayed for.”

“Hypnotists?”

She shook her head. “Not a consideration for security reasons.”

Browne sipped his mocha and leaned back in his chair. “So, what do you want from me?”

“First of all, silence. This meeting did not happen. Should you take the assignment, you will speak to no one about it. And, if you don’t take it, you will not talk about it.”

He understood the threat. “Go on,” he said.

She slid a folder across the table to him. As files go, it was thin: a quarter-inch thick. “This would be humorous if matters were less desperate,” she said.

Browne laid a hand on the folder without opening it. “Who’s in this?” he asked.

“A rancher in Montana.”

He smiled. “And this pertains to the President’s dreams? You have to be kidding.”

“I wish I were.” The lady looked at Browne thoughtfully. “I have an older sister,” she explained. “In an anxious moment, I confided in her. She’s an evangelical Christian. The emotional type.”

“A Charismatic?”

“Yes, one of those. She follows preachers on the Internet and jets around the country to their conferences. My sister thinks the man in that folder can help.”

“How so?” Browne asked.

“She says he has a gift for interpreting dreams.”

“A cowboy in Montana?”

“He’s a writer, too, it seems. He has had some minor work published.”

“But still,” Browne said, holding up the file. “A cowboy in Montana?”

“My sister is zealous, Mr. Browne, but sincere. I trust her.”

And you are very desperate, Browne thought. He drummed his fingers on the file. “You want me to fly to Montana and check this guy out?”

“A private jet is waiting at Hyde Field.”

“I don’t know—”

“You will be compensated generously.” She paused and arched her eyebrows. “And your daughter’s tuition at Bennington is not inexpensive.”

Browne frowned. The mentioning of family members was not fair play. “My standard rate is a thousand a day,” he said. “But, this is hardly a standard case.”

“Name it,” she said coolly.

“Twenty.”

“Done,” she said. “If he seems legitimate, get him on the plane. But vet him all the way back. If you have doubts at any time, tell the pilots to turn back.”

“You want him brought to the White House?”

“I will personally escort him.”

“By tonight?”

“This evening.”

“What if he isn’t home?”

“He’s home,” the lady said. “We’ve had eyes on him.”

Drones or satellite? Browne wondered.

“And he is alone,” the lady continued. “His wife boarded a plane this morning for Brazil. It seems their third grandchild has just arrived. She’ll be in Rio for two weeks.”

Browne stared at the folder. He didn’t mind flying to Montana. He had little to do at the university.

“If you do this, the administration will be in your debt,” the lady said.

“And if it doesn’t work out the way you want?”

“We will note that you are a team player, and you keep the \$20,000.”

Browne held up the folder again. “It’s thin,” he said.

“The basics are there. Tax information, credit card receipts, medical records. You will be hindered some in that he doesn’t use a cell phone.”

“No coverage where he lives?”

“Limited, I’m told. Consequently, this individual has no Smart devices at all, nor is he on social media.”

“Not even Facebook?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. He’s old school.”

“He sounds like a dinosaur. How do we know the President will even meet with this *dream interpreter*?”

“I have influence.”

“What if this cowboy doesn’t want to go to the White House?”

“No coercion, he doesn’t have to come. But if you believe he is legitimate, be as persuasive as you can be.”

Browne nodded. Any easy \$20,000, he thought, no matter how one looked at it.

“The issue of discretion applies to him as well. He must be made aware of that.”

“I understand.”

“There are concerns,” the lady said, nodding at the folder. “The past few years, he’s purchased a lot of ammunition, and it is Montana, after all. Make sure he has no ties to white supremacists, militias, or survivalist cults.”

“That’s what I do best,” Browne said.

She slid a package across the table. “This is an encrypted sat phone. Keep your personal cell phone turned off.”

“I don’t have it with me.”

“And your pistol?”

How did she know about it? he wondered. “Still in my desk,” he said pointedly.

“Stay at this table for five minutes after I leave,” the gray lady said. “When you go outside, an Uber driver will be waiting for you.”

“I didn’t bring anything with me. My laptop...”

“You won’t need it. Everything you require is on the aircraft. My number is encoded into the phone. Call me as necessary.”

He watched her rise and walk away. She was a compact package of gravitas, Browne thought. Someone who could make heads roll.

Browne finished his mocha and smiled. How a day could suddenly change. Now, who was this cowboy grandpa with the supernatural gifts?

He opened the folder.

A title page read: “Ezra Riley—Miles City, Montana—USA—b. 1952”

On the next page was a photo of a man on a horse.

6

The gray lady did not look out the windows as the Sikorsky S-76C helicopter touched down in remote western Virginia.

The few visitors to this secluded estate, set like an island in a sea of state forest lands, knew the rules. It was allowable to view the granite manor, stables, and swimming pool, but it was forbidden to peer north into the thick evergreens.

The lady knew what was behind the veil of trees. Above ground were satellite dishes and antennas, but below the Virginia soil was a complex containing a gymnasium, living quarters, and a small “chapel.” The chapel had gold-plated walls and a pyramid-shaped quartz crystal from Malaysia that stood nine feet tall and weighed six thousand pounds.

This subterranean sanctuary is where Blue Man lived. The lady in gray had never seen him. She hoped not to but knew it was inevitable that she would.

She walked briskly from the helipad to the house, entered without knocking, and traveled down a marbled hallway to a large study behind oak doors. She felt small under the towering mahogany bookcases, Oriental tapestries, and mounted heads of wild sheep and goats that stared down with yellow glass eyes. She seated herself in an ebony chair with crushed velvet padding and waited.

Moments later, a slender, elderly man, supported by a cane carved from African Blackwood, entered silently and took a chair across from her. His thinning silver hair was oiled and combed back; his eyes were a watery blue.

“Your man is in the air?” William Anderson Hall asked.

“He is.”

“Does anyone know the content of the dream yet?”

“No, and I have to be careful not to inquire.”

“Do you believe the President will share the dream with Riley?”

“I think so. There is growing desperation amongst the staff.”

“Blue Man is unsettled.”

“Unsettled? Does he know the dream?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way. He is concerned about Mr. Riley.”

The gray lady was surprised. “He doesn’t, I mean, *you* don’t believe this cowboy is for real?” she asked.

“You doubt your sister’s evaluation?”

“She’s sincere but prone to hyperbole.”

“Blue Man isn’t, and he is restless.”

“But, Riley is a nobody.”

“A nobody? How is it he has the ears of several influential preachers in the nation?”

“Perhaps they find him entertaining?”

“Or perhaps he’s accurate.”

Hall’s concerns bothered the lady. “If this cowboy interprets the dream, isn’t that what we want?” she asked.

“Yes, we need to know the dream.”

“And Riley’s interpretation?”

“Only if it is correct, and who would know? The dream itself is crucial. Riley is only a tool.”

“But, the President has been very secretive, and Riley has signed a confidentiality contract.”

“You must be in the room when Riley is told the dream.”

“In the room? I can’t guarantee that.”

“You are the person delivering the interpreter.”

“Yes, but I’m not *that* close to the President. He hasn’t told the dream to his chief of staff. I don’t think he’s even told the First Lady.”

The old man sighed deeply, but the exhale was hardly heard.

“This could be a problem,” he said. “Blue Man provokes nightmares by activating repressed memories and anxieties. Judging by the President’s reactions and secretiveness, whatever is buried in his subconscious is serious and, therefore, of value to us. We don’t have to know the dream, but it would be beneficial.”

“If we don’t learn the dream, what was this all for?”

“It was a field test for Blue Man, and he has proven his worth.”

“Then do we even need Riley now? Should I have the plane turn back?”

“No, no. There is still a chance we can benefit. I am actually interested in Riley’s interpretation, and who knows, perhaps the President will allow you to stay in the room. We have to let it play out.”

Hall brought an arthritic hand, lined with lavender blood vessels, to a forehead speckled with liver spots, then waved the hand as if shooing a fly.

“But, Browne is another matter,” he said. “We have a lot invested in Browne, but there is a time to cut one’s losses.”

“Immediately?”

“No, we will play him a while longer. He may be of further use.” He closed his eyes as if resting.

The lady rose and left. She did not need to be told when a meeting was over.

Moments later, a soft rap sounded on the study door.

“Come in,” Hall said softly.

A lithe form entered and seemed to glide across the floor to a chair in the shadows. Blue Man moved as lightly as lint.

“Are you feeling okay?” Hall asked.

A barely perceptible nod came from the head in the shadows.

“I need you to shift focus.”

Another nod.

“In a few more hours, Mr. Riley will be meeting the President. Starting now, please concentrate on Davis Browne. Can you do that?”

A nod.

“And some focus on this cowboy, as well?”

Another nod.

The old man gestured, and Blue Man rose and moved like air toward the door. As his hand, the color of glacial ice, touched the handle, the old man’s voice came from behind him.

“I am very proud of you,” Hall said. “Very proud.”

Blue Man nodded and left.

Ezra lay in the dark, trying to make a decision. He'd just watched his best bet for shelter drive away and crash in a coulee.

He could try crawling to the pickup, but he wasn't sure what he'd find when he got there. *If* he got there. There was no chance he could drive a truck and trailer out of a ravine, but the truck's lights should still work, and if the engine started, he'd have heat. But would anyone find him there? No one was likely to look for him until Anne got home.

When would that be?

He could crawl back to the corral for shelter, but the corral offered little more than a windbreak.

If he could find matches he might be able to start a fire. A big enough blaze would surely attract attention, but Ezra wasn't ready to start a prairie fire.

Everything seemed to involve crawling and trying.

He didn't know the extent of the wound in his side. It was seeping blood, but Ezra didn't feel sick from infection or blood loss. The broken collarbone and ribs hurt, but he didn't consider those injuries severe.

His primary disability was the ankles. He couldn't walk or stand.

He'd kept the little LED flashlight and put the beam on Simon's wound. Ezra was relieved to see the rip was ragged but superficial. Simon would have a scar, but that would add to his appeal.

Crawl to the truck?

Crawl to the corrals?

Try to start a fire and hope it didn't spread and burn out the neighbors?

Okay, he thought, where do I really need to be?

He needed to make it to the county road. That distance was two miles by pasture road or one mile cross-country.

Cross-country was out of the question. Too many hills and gullies.

Monday night traffic on the county road was unlikely, but it could happen, and if he were lying on the road holding a large horse, he'd be seen, wouldn't he? Maybe not. A loaded semi-truck might run over him. *There's a cartoon for Barn Wall*, he thought.

If he were a better horse trainer, he would have taught Simon to lie down, and he'd try crawling on him.

Simon might still be the answer. In blading the pasture road, two- and three-foot banks were left at its sides in several places. If he could lead Simon to a bank, maybe he could crawl on him.

My night is filled with crawl, try, and maybes, he thought.

It was time for some *can* and *will*.

Could he crawl on his hands and knees? He hadn't tried that. Ezra put Simon's bridle reins in his mouth, and by using one fist on the ground, he slowly and painfully raised himself to his knees. Everything hurt, but he was tired of admitting that.

I'm not as injured as I think I am, he told himself. His ribs were cracked, not caved in. The collarbone was broken, but it wasn't piercing the skin. One ankle was broken, but maybe not the other—it might only be badly sprained. The wound in the side? That was his one concern.

He shuffled on his knees. *This is going to be slow*, he thought, *and it's really hurting the knees*.

Simon stepped up beside him. Impulsively, Ezra stuck his good arm through the stirrup, held it tight to his chest, and clucked several times, cueing Simon to move. Simon stood still.

"C'mon, boy." Ezra clucked and clicked, but having been trained to stand while Ezra mounted, the bay was as immobile as a rock.

Ezra let himself back down. He needed a stick to hold in his mouth and poke Simon in the belly. He felt along the ground and found one.

“Unbelievable,” he said. “Praise God.” He put the stick in his mouth.

Rising, Ezra, holding the reins in his hand, placed his arm through the stirrup again, hugged it to his chest, turned his head, and poked the horse.

Simon flinched, turned, and looked back at him.

Ezra poked him again.

Simon shook his head.

Again.

This time Simon took a step.

Ezra straightened his legs behind him and crooked the worst ankle over the better one. Then he poked the horse again.

Simon set off at a walk. Ezra steered him with the reins held in the fist that was tight against his chest.

Ezra kept poking. His mouth prickled with slivers. Pain in his shoulder, ribs, and ankles hit him like lightning strikes.

Stay conscious, he told himself. *Stay conscious*.

It seemed to take an hour, but Ezra finally felt a bank to his left. He spat the stick out and cued Simon to a stop. The bank was on his injured side. Upright on his knees, Ezra used his right arm to elbow himself up, and pushing off with the least-injured leg, he wallowed onto the berm. A tug on the reins brought Simon up beside him. Ezra rose, put the reins in his mouth, used his strong arm as a brace, pushed off with the least painful leg, and floundered into the saddle.

Did it, he thought. Systemic shock was a wonderful thing.

How long until the shock wore off?

He didn't want to think about it.

He lay across the saddle like a dead man. Gripping the saddle blanket with his right hand, he swung the right leg around.

His mind became a black canvas streaked with white, yellow, and red flashes as pain arced through his nervous system.

Better than mescaline, he told himself.

If I lose my sense of humor, I'm dead.

He raised his torso, letting the reins slacken as they slid between his teeth. The left side of his body was rigid with pain. The arm dangled, the ribs felt collapsed, and the foot bobbed like a toy on the end of a string. He reached up and took the reins in his hand.

I'm horseback. I can do anything now.

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Billings Gazette

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John L. Moore

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“Moore is such a gifted writer...the pleasure comes from his wonderfully constructed prose.”

New Man Magazine

“*The Breaking of Ezra Riley* is a sincere, well-written book.”

California Cattleman

“Moore is a master of suspenseful plotting.”

Butte (MT) Standard



Ezra Riley, a hardened Montana rancher, is taken secretly to the White House because of his gift for interpreting dreams. His visit there unleashes attacks by an elderly master spy and his human creation, Blue Man.

Blue Man

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