

All-star baseball player Brock Madison tries to find the killer of an old flame's son. In South Plain, a small town with as many secrets as residents, Brock races to solve the case before he becomes the next victim.

SOUTH PLAIN

By Michael Schutt

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SOUTH PLAIN

MICHAEL SCHUTT



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First Edition



People ask me what I do in winter when there's no baseball. I'll tell you what I do. I stare out the window and wait for spring.

—Rogers Hornsby

Is boredom a reasonable defense for murder? I've heard of insanity. I've even heard people sometimes claim to be innocent. But I've never heard of an overdose of the nothing-to-do's being used as a way to beat a murder rap.

Maybe defense is the wrong word. Perhaps justification would be better. It's not that you want people to believe you didn't do it. It's more a matter of wanting them to understand why you did do it. A rationalization. The public might be more forgiving if they could relate to your unique reason why. Maybe not, but one never knows.

"Look, I was bored, the cable was out, and my phone battery died. What else was there to do? I had to kill him, man. You understand, don't you?" Had anyone ever tried that? Probably yes, but admitting you killed someone isn't the best way to avoid prison, is it?

I also know that the leap from the doldrums to chaos was usually just one very small step, the line a very thin one between Sane City and its evil twin, Crazy Town. It was often just an error in judgment by someone you would think would know better, a miscalculation of the implications of killing the guy down the street. Most of the time when the neighbor of the guy who snapped is on the news, the neighbor says what a great guy the killer was. No one could have seen this coming. That sort of thing gets said all the time, but it's usually not true. Those people are

missing something because they didn't know where to look. They didn't even think they needed to look.

Trust me, Fargo can cross over into monotony pretty quickly, but so can any place. People in New York City get just as bored as people in Fargo. It's all a matter of how one deals with the cards one is dealt. Here, winter seems to drag on forever, and summer is more like an extended spring. I know that lethargy had gotten the better of me, the winter blues hanging around into the sunny early spring.

But I didn't kill anyone.

Instead, I went out on the town, which is what any moderately sane person would at least consider as an alternative to murder when excessive tedium rears its ugly head. In fact, for most of us, murder is way down the list. As it turns out though, this was probably a poor read on my entertainment needs. And I should have known better. It was one very small step, but in the wrong direction. We all make mistakes, of course. That's why the divorce rate is so high.

Nothing good comes from drinking. Most don't agree with me, but in this case, I'm right. Problem is, there isn't that much to choose from for nightlife options here, especially when I stopped to consider how uninterested I was in being recognized. Being famous has its benefits, don't get me wrong, but being swarmed by the fans while waiting in line for popcorn before the latest *Avengers* movie isn't always one of them. Most of the other things the city offered were best done with someone else. I didn't have a someone-else at the moment.

I considered scrolling through Netflix for something to binge while I was home alone. It sounds pathetic, I know, but we've all done it. And I'd been doing it too often through the winter months. As good as she is, there are only so many times I can watch Iliza Shlesinger do her stand-up routine before something has to change, at least for that night. I needed to get out, the masses be damned.

So instead of Netflix, I ended up in a bar on the south end of town. Or what used to be the south end of town. Folks here still call it the south side, but growth has pushed it into the center more than anything else. The city seems to stretch further and further toward South Dakota every time I come back in the fall. Mom and Dad wouldn't even recognize it anymore. The mall is only a half-mile away, and in Fargo the mall was still a vibrant, busy place, so I felt like I was half a mile from the city center.

Only two people said anything to me on my way in, and they were cool about it. "Take it easy on us this year," the guy said, and "You're even cuter in person," his girlfriend added. It was too dark for her to tell if I blushed.

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"Don't I know you from somewhere?" asked the cocktail waitress after I sat down, without bothering to take my order. I get that a lot. Her voice wasn't the only thing that had my attention. Maybe I had made the right entertainment choice after all.

"Did you see *La La Land*?" I offered, hoping the interest I heard wasn't just in my head.

"You were in that?" she asked. Her eyebrows rose in suspicion. Hey, I can sing and dance. I just don't do either that well. And I never do them in public. Why give the Internet trolls an easy way to get noticed by grabbing a video of me shaking my moneymaker while they record it on their phone? Make your own headlines, pal. I kept my vocal skills in the car, where Henry Ford intended them to be, and my dance moves were mostly just toe-taps in that same car.

"No, but I saw it too. Good movie, don't you think?" I said.

"Sure," she said, eyes narrowing. "It won the Oscar."

It hadn't won the Oscar, actually. Warren Beatty messed that one up. But why quibble about details? Had you seen this woman's eyes, you wouldn't have pressed the point either.

"Come here often?" I asked, changing the subject, I thought smoothly.

"I work here five nights a week. And that's not a very good line."

"Neither is, 'Don't I know you from somewhere,' but I was gonna let you slide."

She nodded, and waited, very nice hands on very nice hips.

"How about, 'What's a beautiful girl like you doing in a place like this?'" I tried.

"Better," she said, changing her weight from right foot to left.

"I've got a Porsche outside the same color as your eyes?" I tried.

"You've got a yellow Porsche?" she asked.

"Come outside and see for yourself."

This was a dice roll that, if it hit, would mean a much shorter night out, and a much more frenzied night on the couch. The couch could use a little action, I figured. It didn't hit.

"I don't think so. They're too small."

Which led naturally to, "Who's a guy gotta sleep with around here to get a drink?"

She smiled and with a nod toward the bar, said, "That would be Curtis, but I'll save you that hell. What do you want?"

I thought she would do just fine. She must have read my dirty mind.

"To drink, I meant," she said, still smiling.

"Of course you did. Beer, tap, nothing light."

"Sounds good," she said, and then left to get it.

The bar I was sitting in was dark and dingy. It reeked of sweat, cigarettes, and stale beer. If I concentrated, it smelled like a stray dog I took in once as a kid. He was a mangy little mongrel, but tough as hell. There were raccoon, rabbit, and even skunk carcasses to prove it. This odor, though, was probably coming from the john.

As I looked around the place, I noticed I wasn't the only person lacking companionship. Four guys in varying degrees of denim were spread around the bar, each drinking beer from a bottle. About half the little round tables had people at them, but nobody looked like a couple.

Happy hour was long past and had probably been anything but. Everyone was hunched over a drink, killing time waiting for something. Probably last call.

This wasn't a single's bar, as it didn't appear anyone was hitting on anyone else. Nor did I see any money-types celebrating another day of keeping the economy humming, or drinking away the fact that it wasn't. The place didn't even have a blackjack table, and almost every place in Fargo had at least one of those. The people here, by the looks of them, always came here and were maybe too lazy to go anywhere else. It had the feel of a place full of regulars. There was no band or disc jockey. It didn't look like anyone wanted to dance. There was a jukebox in the corner, but it had been silent since I came in. Hardly anyone was talking. The only television in the place was above the bar, and it was turned off.

Fun place.

Folks didn't come here to be entertained. They came to get drunk, and fast. I was here because I thought inebriation seemed like the best possible alternative to my early spring doldrums. This seemed like the best place to tie one on. The drinks were cheap and the place was close to empty most nights. I could get hammered at a discount and not have to talk to my fans. I know these things, because I'd been here before. It's the closest pub to my house.

I should tell you right up front, I'm a non-drinker as a general rule. I'll have a glass of champagne at a wedding, or maybe a beer at the end of a particularly hot day at the ballpark, but I wasn't completely sure how to go about getting drunk. It was a skill I had never developed. A quick check of the place told me to hunker down, shut my mouth, and start throwin' 'em back.

The leggy waitress set my beer down with one long hand, palmed the ten on the table with the other. It was in her pocket before I could tell her to keep the change.

"Seriously," she said, "I know you from somewhere."

"I don't think so," I said. "I'd remember those yellow eyes."

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"Are you in the movies or something? TV?" I get that a lot, too.

"Baseball," I told her, which was the truth.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head in confident disagreement.

"You don't think so?"

"No. You don't look like a baseball player," she said, taking an extra long look to make sure. Did she want me to pull out a trading card for identification?

"Why not?"

"It's May, for one thing. Shouldn't you be playing somewhere? Oh, unless you're not very good."

"I'm pretty good," I said, truthfully, humility be damned.

"Well, you must be retired then. I'm sorry. You look so young."

"I'm not retired. I'm hurt," I said, pointing at my knee.

After a halfhearted look, she assured me all would be well with my knee. She didn't really care, but I thanked her anyway. She left me to go wait on the town drunks.

The bar was cool in temperature, as the air conditioning was already in mid-summer form. It felt good at the end of the first warm day of spring, even with the foul stench. And, while I appreciate an afternoon of sun as much as the next pale skinned guy, this one had been a real mind-number.

I started it by catching the last few episodes of a *WKRP in Cincinnati* marathon. I remembered my dad had a Jan Smithers crush, not the Loni Anderson lust most people had then. After watching a few episodes, I couldn't disagree. I dozed in and out, but still caught the fever. Dr. Johnny Fever, that is. I think I heard him ask who would teach the children about Bo Diddley.

I looked out and saw the sun shining, so I jumped on my riding lawn mower and cut three neighborhood lawns, plus mine, while I listened to the radio. They played plenty of diddley, but none of it was Bo. I tried listening to a female doctor of something for a while too. She mostly bashed men like me for the enjoyment of the women who called her for advice. I had to stop because that woman just plain scares me.

I ordered Chinese food for dinner and ate it on my back deck. Alone. The girl who delivered it was cute, but didn't speak enough English for me to hit on her. They say love is the international language, but it wasn't love that was on my mind. I tipped her with a weak smile and a twenty and let her be.

I clicked the television back on and started punching through the channels. I don't know what I was trying to find to watch, only that I didn't find it. After watching the House debate a health care bill for much too long, I finally gave in and turned off the set.

I picked up the phone and called Skunk, a friend from way back. I told him I was thinking of going on a bender. I asked him to join me. He found this amusing. He told me how much fun it would be to see me out cold after three drinks, but still, he couldn't come. He had to work, the little bastard.

I decided to go anyway. He wasn't going to laugh at me. If I wanted to get drunk, I could do it myself, which is how I found myself in what just might be the worst bar, pound for pound, in the continental United States.

My first beer was still sitting in front of me, untouched. It had been sitting like that for maybe ten minutes. I tried to decide if I really wanted to be brought under the influence.

"Who's that for?" I asked the young waitress as she set down what looked like a glass of whiskey, no water and no ice.

She was blonde, mid-twenties, with long, very tan legs and a great rear end. Both looked outstanding in her khaki shorts. Her perky breasts showed just how cold it was in the dark bar as they poked through her green polo shirt. She was terribly out of place in this dump of a bar. Skunk would never forgive himself when I told him about her.

"The lady," she said with a half-hearted shrug and nod toward no one.

The waitress in question had almond shaped eyes that really were yellow. My Porsche really was a Ford, and closer in color to rust than anything else, though it was officially gray. Her eyes glowed beneath her drooping, sleepy eyelids. The smile she kept flashing at me looked made for a bedroom.

"I'm alone," I said. I hoped it didn't sound desperate.

I hadn't seen, or at least been able to recognize, a woman in this dive all night, and didn't really expect to. They tend to go to places where the guys still have most of their teeth, and can talk in more than grunts and puffs. Well, most women anyway. I know for sure I hadn't seen anyone I would call a lady.

"Lady said she was with you," the waitress said with another shrug, her smile fading just a little. She didn't care who was with whom, just so she got paid.

"Four seventy-five," she said as she continued checking me out. I didn't charge her for the look. This time.

I handed her a ten, waved off her attempt to give me change, not that she considered it. The view alone was worth the five and a quarter.

"Thanks for the drink," said a familiar voice coming up behind me, as the night took a turn for the better. She sat at my table with her back to the wall, facing me. She definitely was a lady.

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"Emily Ambrose, you look beautiful," I said, which was not an exaggeration in the least. I held out my hand to her, which she shook like the old friend that she was.

"Brock Madison, you look like hell," she said, which was also mostly accurate.

I was wearing cut off jeans and an old T-shirt with more than a couple holes in it. My crusty, rotting Nike basketball shoes weren't tied. Who could be bothered? I don't think I had showered that morning, which would also mean I hadn't combed my hair. So, to be fair to both of us, I hadn't tried, and Emily didn't need to.

"How long has it been, Em?" I asked, still holding her hand.

"Fifteen years," she said. "You had just been traded to Texas."

Like I tried to tell the waitress, I'm a major league ballplayer. I've been with the Texas Rangers since I'd last seen Emily Ambrose. Had it really been fifteen years? I guess it had.

Last September, in the heat of the Pennant race, I chased a hooking line drive into the left field corner at Fenway Park in Boston. I had to jump. When I did, my knee blew up, though that's not what the doctors called it. They used words like patellar tendon and ligament, of course. I can only tell you that it hurt like hell.

Still, I made the catch.

Emily Ambrose picked up her glass, which I was now sure was whiskey, gave it a thoughtful swirl, and set it down after a deep, long drink. She took out a pack of smokes and a lighter and laid them on the table, next to her glass. Smoking has long since been outlawed in bars here, but I wasn't going to stop her.

"You still smoke?" I asked, picking up her pack, ready to pull one out for her, law or no law.

"No, quit eight years ago," she said. I set the pack down. *Strange.*

"You never left Fargo?" I asked, not surprised. Things never changed much here.

She had come to Fargo for college from a small town, Mott, out in the western part of the state. This was the big city to her. And not everyone found it as uninteresting as I did that day, myself included, most days. Maybe she had stayed. I wasn't surprised.

She shook her head in response. Her gorgeous, pale blue eyes had always been her best feature. They still were, even with a few wrinkles sneaking away from the corners. They looked tired. Or was it sad.

Regarding the bar, she said, "Nice place you picked for a hang out."

"I happen to like smelly, dark, shit holes," I said. "Why are you here? Out with friends? Slumming? Some weird sociological experiment?"

Michael Schutt

Emily had always leaned more toward well-lit places where people sat and talked while they drank. She loved conversational debates about any number of topics that could sometimes drag on for hours at a time. She liked me because I was able to hold my own with her. And, I think, she liked my butt. She liked places where you could actually see your date across from you. Here, you probably were better off not being able to, unless your date was Emily Ambrose.

"I'm looking for you," she answered.



I really love baseball. The guys and the game, and I love the challenge of describing things. The only thing I hate—and I know you have to be realistic and pay the bills in this life—is the loneliness on the road.

—Vin Scully

I'd been waiting fifteen years to hear those words come out of that mouth. I hadn't exactly sat around doing nothing during that time—a man has to live his life, after all—but it was always in the back of my mind that someday, somewhere, Emily Ambrose would come around.

I said, "How did you know I was here?"

"I remembered your fascination with the underworld. You've always liked shit holes and sordid stories of the bad things people can do. It's not the most charming thing about you, but at the same time, in an odd way, it is. Anyway, this place certainly fits the bill. Plus, Skunk told me you'd be here," she said.

Ah, Skunk. Good friends are hard to come by. I blew a mental kiss in Skunk's direction.

"So, Emily Ambrose..."

"It's Emily Rogers now, Brock. You know that."

"Still married to Martin?" I asked.

Martin Rogers was my competition a decade and a half ago; a classic prick if ever there was one. He always seemed a little old for her, and not good looking enough. Maturity helps me see that now as jealousy.

I'm okay with that.

"Still married," she said, her gaze drifting away from me, back toward her drink. One thin hand wandered up and pulled at her sandy hair, tucking it behind each ear.

She seemed to want to think for a while, so I let her. I told the waitress to bring me a Coke and take away my untouched beer. She smiled and did as I asked. My life as a drunk would just have to wait.

I turned back to Emily Ambrose—excuse me, Rogers—and smiled at her. I didn't know what else to do. I knew I had nowhere else to go and I figured she'd talk when she was ready. Besides, looking at her beat most of my other options for a Tuesday evening in Fargo.

Emily was dressed in blue jeans, white deck shoes, no socks, and a short-sleeved white turtleneck that clung to her frame in a way that any straight man couldn't help but love. No one would ever describe Emily as chesty, but she did okay. And like I said, the turtleneck did the work for her.

Dad used to say women's attractiveness peaks in their late twenties. Emily was hanging on a little bit longer. In the fifteen years since I had last seen her, I had yet to meet anyone as smart, or as honest, and definitely no one as good looking.

Her left leg was crossed over her right, and I could see she had on a plain gold ankle bracelet. I wondered if she also had a plain gold chain around her neck. I had given them both to her for Christmas one year, long ago, in what had become a different lifetime. She always had worn them while we were dating. Then she married Martin, the Prick. All bets were off.

She had two earrings in each small ear, a gold stud and a diamond. Her makeup consisted of a little blush for her flat cheekbones, and just a touch of pale lipstick. Her nails were painted with a clear polish, and the only ring she wore was her wedding band. Not even the diamond engagement ring Martin had spent too much money on. On the chair next to her was a soft red leather jacket and matching purse.

"How's your leg?" she asked finally. At least she knew I'd been hurt.

"The doctors say I can most likely play by the all-star break," I said.

"Which is how long?"

"July. About seven weeks or so."

The All-Star game isn't what it used to be in the days of Pete Rose running over Ray Fosse for the win, but it was still an honor to go, or a nice break from the grind when you weren't chosen. I'd been chosen twelve times, and, even though I haven't yet played a game this year, I am ahead in the voting this year too.

"What happened?"

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"Explosion of the patellar ligament or some such thing, I think. I probably should have listened better and asked more questions."

Doctors talk too much sometimes. They could have just said my knee was done and skipped the specifics. They didn't, though, and I quit listening past the headline.

"Sounds bad." She was ignoring my sarcasm. She normally would have responded with some of her own. Or maybe she would have scolded me for my cavalier attitude toward a life-changing injury. Something was wrong with Emily Ambrose.

I said, "I should be okay. Eventually. Hitting won't be a problem. It's my front leg. Running and sliding and scratching and spitting might be trouble, though."

"And you're not getting any younger," she said. "None of us are."

"Thirty-six isn't that old for baseball these days. Not with the modern rehab equipment they have."

"How's that going?" she asked.

I sensed she didn't really care. She had always been a very direct person, straightforward in her approach to any conversation. But now she was trying to avoid talking about whatever it was she had come to talk to me about.

Narcissist that I am, I didn't mind talking about myself, so I said, "It's coming along fine. It's a lot of hard work. I think I've got a crush on my physical therapist, though, so it's all working out."

"What is she, twenty-two, fresh out of college, chesty and blonde?"

"Well, she's a he. Teddy Hayes. And what little hair Teddy has is brown I think. He cuts it too short to really tell. He's young, but I wouldn't say that young. He does, however, have a great chest." She didn't laugh, or even smile. There was definitely something else on her mind. Whatever was there must have been serious stuff.

"Mike..." she said, finally, "Remember my son, Mike?"

There were tears gathering in front of her perfect blue eyes. I nodded and said, "He's your oldest, right? Must be fourteen, fifteen by now?" I had never met Mike, nor even knew his name. He hadn't appeared yet when Emily and I were last in the same room, so saying I remembered him was a little fib. We all tell them, right?

"Fifteen, and my only child," she said.

A stream of tears broke through, and her thin lips were in full tremble. She just let them go. Emily, I must tell you, rarely cries.

"Em, what is it?" I asked, "Is he in trouble?"

No answer.

"Did he get his girl pregnant?"

Just tears.

"What's wrong, Emily?"

"He's... dead," she finally answered.

Dead? "Shit, Em," I said, "I'm so sorry."

She had always made it clear how she hated sympathy from people. I sensed this was one of those times where I should ignore that. I slid my chair around to her side, put my arm around her. She put her face on my chest and sobbed into my shirt. When she calmed down, she wiped the tears from her face and took a drink. I could tell she was ready to tell me more.

"When?" I asked.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"How? What happened? Car accident?"

"No."

"Was he sick?"

She shook her head slowly. "He was perfectly healthy," she said.

"Then what happened?"

"He was... murdered."



Love is the most important thing in the world, but baseball is pretty good, too.

—Yogi Berra

Emily's crying wasn't completely under control. Our waitress produced a box of tissues for us. Ever the capitalist, she also brought another round of drinks. Emily wiped the tears from her eyes and cheeks. She drained the last of her whiskey, picked up the fresh one. I was too surprised to say anything.

Murdered?

When Emily had composed herself, she repeated, "Mike was murdered yesterday."

It just couldn't be. Murder in Fargo happens only slightly more often than the Cubs get to the World Series. And that has only happened once since 1945.

I said, "In Fargo?"

My impression of Fargo as a smallish, crime free city wasn't exactly accurate. Not anymore. When I was young and the metro area was hovering around 100,000, I was right. But the last decade or so has shown explosive population growth, and with that usually comes increases in crime. There were a few murders every year now, but it's still not Detroit.

"South Plain," she corrected. I must have looked a little confused because she added, "That's where I live. South Plain."

South Plain is a small town somewhere in North Dakota; I knew that for sure. I was reasonably certain it was close by, as I remember seeing various sports stories about the school over the years. Other than that, I was as clueless as you are about South Plain. I was soon to find out much more.

"Where's Martin?" I asked.

"At home, with his family. His folks and brothers and sisters, their families are all there. They all came over today. His parents flew in last night from Minneapolis."

"Does he know you're here?"

"No. Well, yes. I didn't get his permission to come, but I left him a note. Told him I would be home in the morning."

"Will he come to get you?" I asked.

Martin's temper was one thing he never had under control. And he didn't like me. The last time I saw him he was conveniently cleaning his shotgun while asking me to leave. It wasn't subtle.

"No. He doesn't know I'm with you. He probably doesn't even know you've retired and come back to Fargo."

"I haven't retired, Em. I'm on the injured list. I'm hoping one doesn't lead to the other," I said.

She didn't seem to care about the distinction, nor should she have. She said, "I just wrote him that I had to get out of town, stay in a hotel for a night."

"And he won't worry?"

"I've done it before and he didn't worry," she said

I ignored the obvious opening she had given me to lecture her on what does and does not make for a good marriage. Going to the city to spend a night alone in a hotel doesn't exactly ring of marital bliss now, does it? Then again, I've never been married so what did I really now about it? And Emily sure didn't seem in the mood to hear me preach.

I said, "Why me, Em? Why did you come to me?"

I can tell you what every pitcher in the American League throws and how they pitch me. I remember which ones I've homered off of, and which ones have beamed me. But for the life of me I can't figure out what a woman wants, once we had made it past the sex part. I don't think I'm unique in that regard.

"You were always there for me before," she said.

"Our relationship was different then. For one thing, it existed. I haven't seen you in fifteen years," I reminded her. "I never even met your son."

"Well, I was sitting in the hotel room, crying, thinking about Mike. I thought back to when I was pregnant with him, getting married to Martin, the fights the three of us had."

"Good times," I said with absolutely no sincerity.

"I kept thinking about you and me and Martin. Our little triangle," she said, ignoring me.

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"Seemed like a two sided triangle to me." I wasn't bitter anymore, really.

I met Emily in college. My parents suggested I take classes in between baseball seasons, in case the game didn't work out. They called it a fall back plan. Being a good son, I did as they asked. But I never fell back.

I picked computer science as my major, because I had to choose something, and because those computers sure are fun. I didn't really have any sort of affinity for the topic, other than any other kid my age then. When I arrived for my first day of computer programming class, just short of late, the only seat left was in the back of the room, next to Emily Ambrose.

Lucky me.

She was then as she is now, except for the wrinkles. She drank whiskey, she smoked Marlboro Lights, and she was the smartest person I had ever met. Smart enough to give up the smokes, I guess. Did I mention she was gorgeous?

I spent a couple summers working my way through the San Francisco Giants farm system. Winters I would return to Fargo, and were spent making sure Emily stayed warm.

The Giants had given me a signing bonus out of high school. I used it to buy a Ford Focus. I didn't say it was a big bonus. Emily didn't give me any cash, but she rewarded me in her own way, just the same.

Somewhere in between the minor leagues and college, Martin Rogers entered the picture. I'm not sure how or when exactly, only that he did. If you're away long enough, people tend to get busy with other things. I guess Martin was Emily's other thing.

"Are you listening to me?" Emily asked from the shadows of the bar.

"Just thinking about my good buddy, Martin," I said.

She ignored me and said, "I loved you, fifteen years ago. I wanted to go with you."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I couldn't put the baby through that life."

"That life? That life has made me rich."

"But fifteen years ago we didn't know that. What if this knee injury you have now had happened that spring? Your career could have been over before it started. I couldn't do it." Obviously, she was right.

I hated that.

"Do you remember that last night together?" she asked.

"Sure. It was my birthday. I never got my cake."

I was playing for the Giants' AAA team, and the big club was making a push for the pennant that year, but felt they were one pitcher short of winning it. They

sent me and two other prospects to Texas for a veteran lefty they thought would put them over the top. He didn't. They finished two games out. His elbow blew the next spring and his career was over. That's life in the big leagues.

I got called up to the Rangers late, when rosters expanded in September. We were in Milwaukee when a big right-hander for the Brewers came in too tight with a fastball. I was the third batter hit by a pitch that night, so my teammates and his all rushed the mound to get together for some half-hearted pushing and shoving. Neither team was playing for a playoff spot, so hearts weren't really in it. I watched this face-off with pain in my eyes. He had fractured my forearm, ending my season.

I headed back to North Dakota to convince Emily it was time to move to Texas. She invited me over to her place for my birthday. Problem was, it was Martin's place by then, too.

They were married, she was pregnant, and I was just a little ticked off. No one had bothered to tell me those first two things, which led to the third. But I went anyway, full of piss and vinegar, as my mom likes to say. My idea of a perfect birthday was not spending it with my pregnant dream girl and her asshole husband.

"Do you remember the gun?" Emily asked from the shadows.

"Hard to forget a lunatic with a shotgun at his side," I said.

"He was cleaning it."

"So he said."

After dinner Martin had excused himself, saying hunting season was on the way, and he wanted to clean his guns. I was just happy to get him out of the room. While he was gone, as Emily was cutting the cake, I asked her to come with me to Texas. I was leaving that night so I could get settled, work out, and get ready for spring. I promised her I'd help raise the baby, as my own. I believe I meant it.

We talked for a long time about it, but Emily couldn't look at me. She stared at the counter, at the cake. Somewhere in there she started to cry, which brought Martin back into the kitchen.

He walked in with the shotgun at his side. I couldn't say if it had been loaded. It sure didn't look like it was being cleaned. He, naturally, wanted to know why his wife was crying. I told him she had spilled some milk. He didn't laugh.

"Emily's coming with me to Texas," I had said to Martin that night fifteen years ago. She didn't look up from the cake. She was too busy wiping her tears away.

He asked her if that was true. She shook her head and kept crying. I pleaded with Emily, just a little, but Martin was moving toward me with a rather large weapon in his hands.

South Plain

I said, "Screw you, Martin," walked out the door, and hadn't seen either of them since. Him I hadn't missed. Her, every day she popped into my head.

"Emily, I kept waiting for you to show up in Texas," I said to her now.

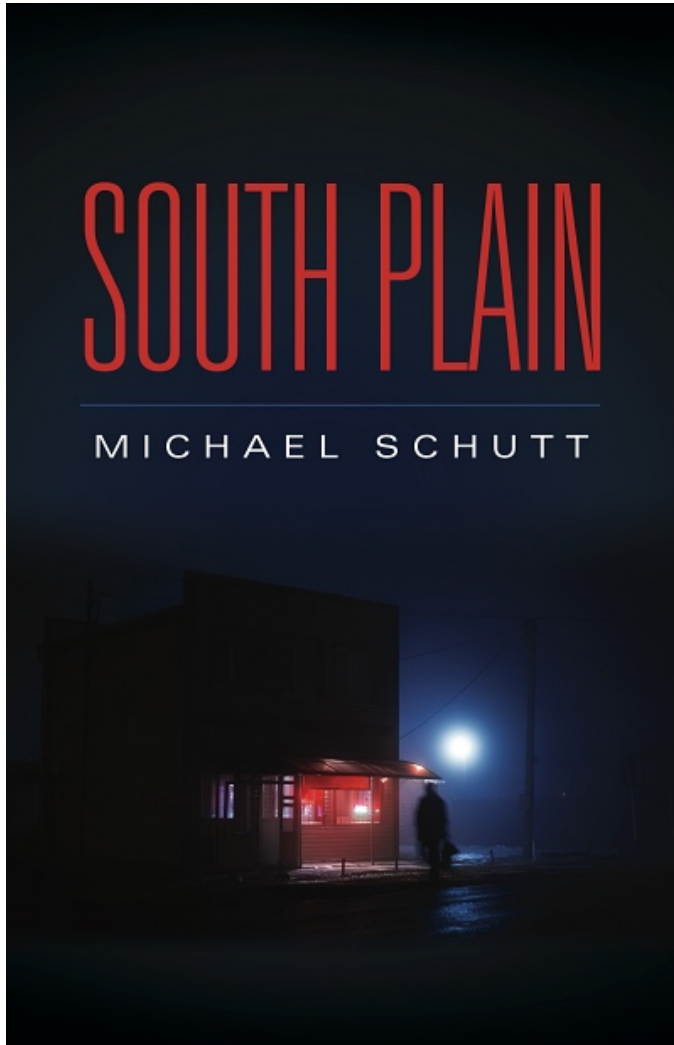
"That's sweet. When did you stop?"

"Who said I stopped?"

"I'm proud of you, Brock. You've done well. Baseball's been good to you."

She was right, of course, and I'm not being immodest. Writers and such in Fargo have been saying for years that I am the best player to come from here since Roger Maris. That's good company to be in. Maris hit two hundred seventy-five big league homers and held the single season record before McGwire, Sosa, Bonds, and the other boys came along. I've got four eighty-four in my career. Maris has his own museum in town, out at the mall. Mine, presumably, is still in development.

I always knew I would do anything I had to in order to be able to play. Baseball was my passion, my life. But looking across the table at Emily Ambrose, it occurred to me that my priorities might have been a bit misplaced.



All-star baseball player Brock Madison tries to find the killer of an old flame's son. In South Plain, a small town with as many secrets as residents, Brock races to solve the case before he becomes the next victim.

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