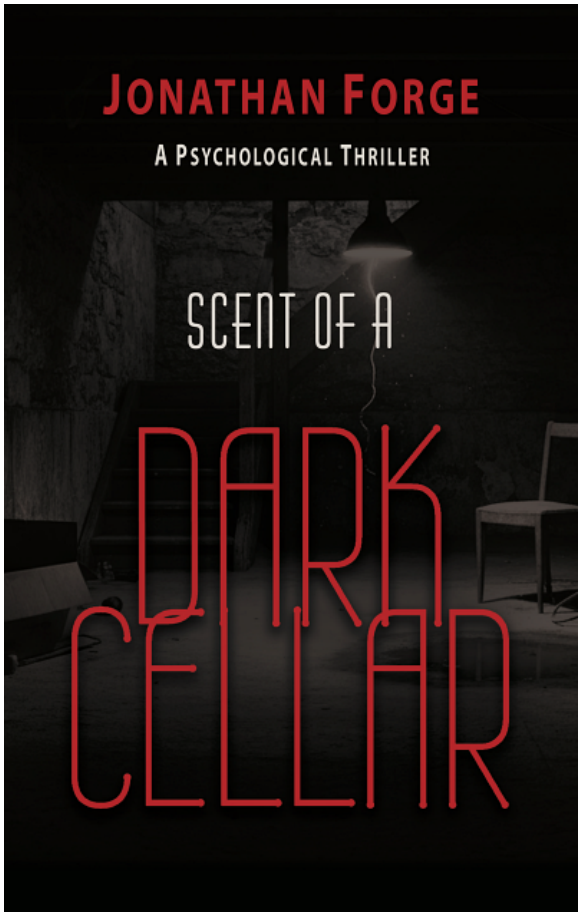


Detective Julian has never failed to solve a case. When a boy vanishes, an inexplicable smell and a fracturing sense of self suggest this one may cost him more than the truth—it may cost him himself.

Scent of a Dark Cellar

By Jonathan Forge

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JONATHAN FORGE
A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER
SCENT OF A
DARK
CELLAR

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Chapter 1
The New Case

I have always known exactly how I was going to die, but I have never once been able to remember when I was born.

The Hargrove case closed at 11:47 on a Tuesday morning, which struck me as an appropriately unremarkable time for a man like Hargrove to have his world quietly dismantled. He shook my hand at the door of my office, his grip too firm, the way men grip hands when they are trying not to cry. I returned the pressure with exactly the right amount of reciprocal force — enough to convey competence and strength, not enough to convey emotion. He cupped our joined hands with his left hand and gave another shake, deepening his appreciation. I watched him walk down the hall toward the elevator without looking back. They never look back. In my experience, people look back only when they aren't sure the thing behind them is finished. Hargrove was sure. That was my job.

I stood in the doorway for a moment, running a brief forensic inventory of the closed case. Forty-one days. Eleven interviews. Three surveillance operations. One irrefutable conclusion, delivered in a manila envelope at precisely the weight and thickness that tell a client everything before they've even opened the clasp. My record remained intact — not because I was lucky or because my cases were simple, but because I didn't stop. Stopping was not a variable I'd ever seriously entertained.

My phone rang before I reached my desk. Sarah.

"Tell me you're free Friday night." Her voice came in warm and slightly breathless, carrying that quality she had — as though my answer mattered more than she wanted me to know. I pictured her at her kitchen window, already planning something I hadn't agreed to yet.

"I have the Fetter case," I said. Which was true. It was also, I recognized in a quiet corner of my mind, the answer I defaulted to when Sarah's warmth pressed too close to the perimeter. She meant well. She

always meant well. Her heart was enormous and occasionally exhausting, and I accepted both with the same levelheadedness I showed toward everything else.

"One evening, Julian. It'll do you good to step away for a few hours. The case will be right there, waiting for you when you get back, I promise."

She wasn't wrong. I told her I'd be there. She told me she loved me in a way that required no reply, which was fortunate, since I was already reaching for my jacket.

The realization didn't arrive as a sudden, volatile panic attack; it sat neatly recorded on the very first page of my black navigation log, anchored by a rigid blue ink stroke that bled slightly into the crisp, heavy fiber of the parchment. It was a cold, clinical piece of data, unclouded by emotion, treated with the same detached forensic scrutiny I applied to every high-value investigation that crossed my desk. The entries were perfectly uniform. The handwriting was sharp, precise, and completely devoid of human tremor. Yet this investigator's foundational history was entirely blank — an unmapped sector on a chart that otherwise tracked every wave and coordinate of my existence.

Log Entry: *October 11 – 08:42. Weather: Fair. BP: 29.92 Wind: Southwest, holding steady at twelve knots. Sea: Chop 1-2ft. Visibility: 5.0 Latitude: indeterminate Heading: indeterminate*

It made little sense that I hadn't recorded our position and heading. Everything else had been meticulously logged. Flipping back through my previous log entries, I found the pages dog-eared, pliable, and wavy from the dampness. The book's musty aroma wasn't unpleasant; it was what I expected and had grown oblivious to.

Log Entry: *September 29 – 14:18. Weather: Sunny, cumulus. BP: 30.21 Wind: south, southwest, steady at nine knots. Sea: Calm. Visibility: 10.0-12.0 haze. Latitude: 41.81 North Heading: 240*

Log Entry: *October 11 – 10:03. Weather: Light precip. BP: 29:71 Wind: Northwest, northwest, 11 knots, gusts at 18 knots. Sea: Heavy chop 4-5ft. Visibility: .5 Location: Latitude: 41.30 South Heading: 174*

My other entries were complete and accurate. I'd been distracted while logging the entry, yet I couldn't understand why I'd recorded *"indeterminate"* for both latitude and heading. I didn't remember writing it. And why would I? It was as simple as reading the instruments right in front of me. My location and destination were lost, at least on paper. A gap in the record with no explanation.

Out past the bow of *The Albatross*, the ocean sliced past the mahogany hull of my 35' Alden sloop with a clean, rhythmic hiss, throwing up a spray of white foam that quickly dissolved back into the slate-gray swells. Tiny pricks of residual saltwater found their way to the vulnerable skin on my face and neck as if that were their intended target. The morning chill refused to yield to the sun's warmth without a fight. It was an aggressive chill that clawed at any exposed skin, but I remained insulated. The air smelled intensely of salt and deep, stagnant water, the ancient brine that had preserved the sea and its life for eons. The mainsail and jib propelled the bow through the choppy waves without argument, but the deeper valley on the wave's backside allowed the dark blue hull and bowsprit to float above it, almost magically — but only for a moment. With the oncoming crest and gravity, the bow slammed down onto the unyielding hardness of the next wave with a thunderous resonance, only to repeat the motion. Boom, boom, boom.

I pulled the collar of my pristine black leather jacket tighter around my throat, tugging the heavy metal zipper until it locked securely under my chin. The hide was thick and stiff, carrying the sharp, synthetic scent of new dye and oil. It was more than apparel; it was tactical armor, built to keep the outside from getting in. Inside the leather cocoon, my chest stayed warm, my breathing shallow, and my composure absolute. I was Julian. I was a private detective. I was the master of this vessel, and my reality was governed entirely by verifiable metrics.

"You are staring at the ledger again, Julian," a voice cut through the damp wind, its sharp, mechanical cadence leaving no room for comfort.

Clara, my first mate for the past few years, stood near the main mast; her posture so rigidly erect that she seemed entirely unaffected by the Alden sloop's rolling pitch. She wore a starched white linen shirt that defied the sea spray, its sharp collar framing her face with an austere, academic coldness. Her round, wire-rimmed sunglasses caught the pale sunlight, masking her eyes behind twin disks of glare. Her presence was

purely instructional, a living embodiment of rules and boundaries. She didn't lean against the rigging. She didn't adjust her balance to the waves. She simply filled the space with an unyielding, authoritative weight.

"The log is the only objective truth on this boat," I replied without looking up from the page. My voice sounded flat to me, a calculated monotone meant to project total control. "Every mechanical variable must be logged. If it isn't logged, it doesn't exist."

"A fascinating philosophy," Clara said, stepping forward. Her rubber-soled shoes snapped against the teak deck boards, each step a dry, hollow crack.

Thump Thump Thump

The thumping sound was too loud for the open water, too clean, and completely lacking the squelch of damp wood or the low groan of the timbers below.

"But your ledger is a monument to circular logic. Look at your latest entry. You recorded our speed, fuel consumption, and mainsheet tension with forensic precision, yet you can't fill in the primary field?"

She stopped beside the helm, her hand resting on the brass binnacle. Her fingers were long, pale, and perfectly manicured, showing no signs of the rough calluses that should come from handling a thirty-five-foot sailboat. She leaned down, bringing the scent of heavy starch and ancient, dusty library books into my immediate vicinity.

"What was our latitude, Julian?" she whispered, her tone dropping into a patronizing, rhythmic hum. "What is the name of our port of origin? Why isn't it logged?"

A cold prickle of friction flared along the back of my neck, where the leather collar met my skin. I didn't look at her. I couldn't. Acknowledging her question would admit a vulnerability in my defense grid, a blind spot in my mental archive. Instead, I forced my focus outward, anchoring my mind to a physical task.

I reached out with my gloved right hand and grabbed the heavy Dacron line from the jib sheet. The woven rope was rough, cold, and encrusted with dried salt crystals that bit into the leather of my palm. I pulled the line taut, feeling the massive resistance of the wind-filled sail as it vibrated through the fibers and into my bones.

I wrapped the line twice around the heavy bronze winch and secured it with a slight twist. The metal drum was cold, its surface stained with a greenish patina that smelled faintly of pennies and acid. I grabbed the heavy chrome handle and slid it into the winch's top. Then I began to grind.

Click Click Click

The winch's mechanical teeth engaged, throwing sharp metallic snaps into the air. I pushed through the resistance, using the weight of my shoulder to force the handle clockwise. The sound was loud, beautiful, and completely predictable. It was a forensic fact. With each rotation, the winch's click confirmed my presence on the deck. The sail flattened, catching the full force of the twelve-knot breeze, and *The Albatross* leaned hard to port, her gunwale dipping dangerously close to the rushing foam.

"You can grind that winch until your arms fall off," Clara continued, her voice perfectly level despite the boat's steep angle. She didn't hold on to a rail. She didn't lose her footing. She stood like an architectural column, defying gravity. "But the data is still missing. We have no registration numbers on the hull. We have no manifests in the cabin. We are a ghost ship, Julian. An investigator with no history investigating a crime scene with no location."

"The location is right there," I said, my teeth grinding as I locked the handle. I pointed my gloved hand toward the northern horizon.

One mile out, a massive wall of gray limestone cliffs rose straight from the water. The rock was pale, jagged, and heavily scarred by centuries of unseen tides. I narrowed my eyes, engaging the full analytical capacity of my mind, running a rapid, clinical geographical search through my internal database. It should have been familiar. I looked for recognizable landmarks, such as a specific crevice, a sea cave, a lighthouse foundation, or a navigation buoy. Anything that would jog my mind to our current position and heading. Nothing.

"Something's not right. Those cliffs aren't on the chart for these coordinates," I said.

My mind hit a wall — hard, featureless, built of missing data. The closer I looked at the cliffs, the more the details seemed to dissolve. The

fissures in the rock weren't deep; they were flat, dark lines etched into the gray surface. No nesting birds perched on the ledges, and no green moss clung to the damp crevices.

Beyond the top edge of the cliffs, the world simply ceased to exist. There were no rolling hills, no distant water towers, no trees, and no sky. Only a thick, unrendered white fog sat like a blank canvas directly behind the stone wall. The horizon refused to render a historical backdrop, leaving the boat completely isolated on a patch of open water that felt less like an ocean and more like a floating stage.

I looked away from the cliffs, back across the broad stern, hoping to reset my mind. There was only the open ocean behind us, all the way to the horizon. I wondered what lay beyond the horizon. Would it be familiar? Would it give me my confidence back? I slowly turned to starboard. The cliffs remained. There was a small, barely perceptible flicker between two peaks, from a lower valley that jutted slightly. A sparkle or a reflection. I looked over to Clara, but she seemed complacent, content. When my gaze returned to the cliffs, I squinted to better assess the twinkling light. Although the rock and the boat's yaw made it difficult to maintain a steady focus, the glittering effect resembled a waterfall, silently gliding over a precipice into a voracious gray fog below.

I slowly pointed to it to confirm with Clara, but it seemed to vanish before I could get her attention. It was easier to say nothing than to endure her pedagogical ridicule. I kept searching, but only the unchanged limestone cliffs remained.

A sudden, low vibration rumbled through the soles of my boots. It wasn't the natural thrum of the sea or the flex of the fiberglass hull. It was a heavy, subterranean thrumming — terrifyingly familiar.

Thump Thump Thump

It sounded exactly like a heavy wooden door being kicked from the inside, deep in the ship's dark belly.

Clara smiled, a tiny, joyless crescent that never touched her eyes. "Do you hear that, Julian? That’s the sound of your foundation cracking. You can't sail away from a harbor you don't remember."

She was goading me. I didn't feel the need to explain the probable cause of the thumping, nor did I expect any satisfaction from it. Yet I wasn't entirely convinced of my own assessment of the noise either. The odor, the thumping — my theory was pliable, but still uncertain. It could be the bilge jamming up, or as simple as something below deck becoming unstowed by the choppy water. I wasn't going to worry about it. I gripped the wooden spokes of the helm until the leather of my gloves groaned under the strain. The sky above began to lose its color, the gray clouds blocking out and shifting into a flat, solid white that matched the void behind the cliffs. The open water around us felt smaller now, closing in and trapping us in a tightening perimeter of stone — and fog. The small pillow of fog I saw at the base of the waterfall had grown and was rapidly rolling toward us. It raced across the water as though the surface were polished ice.

The fog swallowed the last of the light. The heavy grayness isolated *The Albatross*, as if cloaked in punishing solitude. The air was thick, dank, and suffocating. An inexplicable unease settled over me. I waited for the light to return, but it never did.

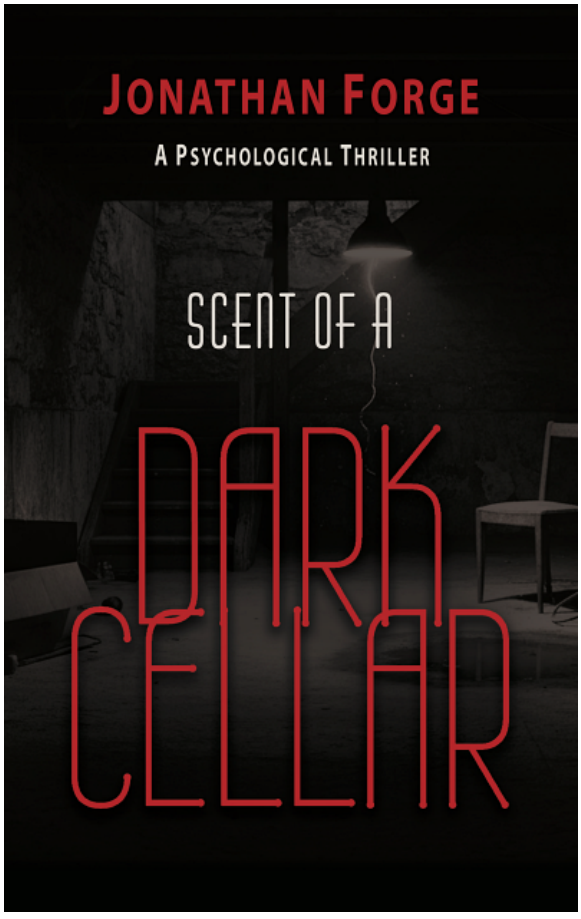
A Quick Note from the Author's Desk...

If you have been following my writing journey, you know me as **Jonathan Eaton**, the author of my first well-received novel, *Tick…The Luminous Find*. When I first entered the publishing scene, I quickly discovered that another seasoned author shared my name — causing a bit of unintended mystery before my stories even began!

To ensure you can always find my books easily, I am unveiling a new identity. Moving forward, my psychological thrillers and other mystery novels will be published under the pen name **Jonathan Forge**.

Why Forge? Aside from sounding right at home on a dark suspense shelf, it is a nod to my family roots — a subtle variation of my real surname, which traces back to a lineage of blacksmiths and wagon builders. Like crafting a piece in a workshop, I intend to continue forging intricate, mind-bending stories that keep you guessing until the final page.

Same dark twists, same voice, just a sharp new name on the cover. Thank you for stepping into the dark with me — stay tuned for the next release under the Forge name!



Detective Julian has never failed to solve a case. When a boy vanishes, an inexplicable smell and a fracturing sense of self suggest this one may cost him more than the truth—it may cost him himself.

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