

Following clues provided by a mysterious letter writer detailing a series of gruesome hangings and the theft of a neighbor's antique yacht from a Biscayne Bay canal, two novelists follow a killing trail as old as time.

Retribution

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Retribution

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Tremors erupted in Dan's groin, roiled his gut. The shudders spread to his extremities, agitated the rope. The unforgiving noose stroked Dan's shoulders, his gooseflesh neck.

The harsh caress forced thoughts of imminent death to consume Dan's mind.

This can't be happening!

Until he awakened from the depths of a bludgeon-induced black hole—Dan never considered the possibility he might expel his final breath at the end of a rope.

It's not possible!

Unable to halt the fear-induced chills sweeping through his body, Dan fought to reduce the damaging effect as the abrasive rope jerked across his exposed skin.

He lost the skirmish.

The rough-woven manila scraped Dan's skin raw—drew blood.

Dan tried to cry out.

He failed.

His throat constricted.

He bit his tongue.

Blood flowed down his throat.

Dan gagged.

Please! Please help me God!

Overcome with fear, the copper taste of his blood failed to penetrate Dan's screaming mind.

Witnessed by none able to assist him—the bizarre character of the macabre scene shifted after Dan heard an unfamiliar man behind

him. His scrambled brain attempted to place the voice but failed. It resonated without recognition.

“Calm yourself or risk bleeding to death. Ye shall die in your sins – but not by your hands,” the man said.

The man’s words added to Dan’s confusion. “I...I...What...?”

“Quiet!” The man backhanded Dan, drew additional blood.

Dan tried to stand. Two immense hands on his shoulders pressed down. Dan’s rear end slammed onto a three-legged and backless stool he used when working on his pride and joy, a half-restored 1936 flathead Ford pickup. Languid and unmoving – the antique sat to Dan’s right.

The unknown man slapped duct tape across Dan’s mouth. He rechecked the knot trussing Dan’s crisscrossed hands positioned behind his back. He did the same for the rope lashed around Dan’s feet and ankles.

Satisfied Dan’s bindings restrained his movement, the man grabbed the rope above the noose. The rope’s loose end lay sprawled across the concrete floor. The stranger remained quiet. He tightened the hangman’s noose, positioned the eight-coil knot behind Dan’s right ear.

A coarse choking cinch replaced the abrasive caress of the noose. Multiple sensations and emotions battled for control over Dan’s mind and body.

Tears welled in his eyes, cascaded down his cheeks.

His bowels loosened. He lost control of his bladder.

A blinding fear blocking all sensations except terror supplanted any embarrassment.

A woman stepped from behind Dan.

He recognized her as the woman who enticed him into his current predicament.

Their eyes locked.

Death stared into Dan’s soul.

The woman watched Dan’s struggle. Her eyes blazed with unwavering hatred.

Dan interpreted the woman’s loathing manner.

I’ll receive no mercy from her.

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The thought aroused extreme panic. Dan again attempted to scream, to cry for help, to arouse anyone within hearing distance. His constricted throat refused to emit any sound except a muffled internal groan held captive by the duct tape.

The man stepped close behind Dan, laid his hands on Dan's shoulders. Dan sensed, *what, a hint of compassion, remorse?*

The woman's voice brought Dan's momentary hopes crashing to earth. "Remember our duty, our vow. The wicked shall not triumph. He deserves death—not our pity."

The man grunted agreement. He removed his hands and plunged them into Dan's armpits. With little effort, as if Dan weighed no more than a rag doll, the man lifted him off the stool. He raised Dan six inches, twelve inches, eighteen inches above the concrete.

He held Dan without wavering.

He kicked the stool across the garage.

Dan coiled and uncoiled his legs. He aimed for the man's groin, connected.

The man didn't flinch.

He remained silent.

He crushed Dan with vice grip fingers.

Dan stopped kicking.

The woman disappeared to Dan's left. He heard a familiar sound, understood what the pair intended. She wheeled Dan's wheelbarrow into view, the one purchased new two weeks before. She positioned the red wheelbarrow beneath Dan's dangling legs. The man lowered Dan until his feet touched the red death machine.

Unable to arouse the physical or mental strength to support his weight, Dan's legs crumbled. The man maintained his grip. He positioned Dan's feet inches above the wheelbarrow and nodded at his female companion.

She took two steps, grasped the end of the rope lying loose on the concrete floor. She threw the rope over the intersection of a roof truss and cross member. The rope landed where she aimed. The loose end dangled from the truss.

The woman pulled the rope taut against Dan's larynx.

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Dan reacted by kicking out but discovered only air. He thrust again and struck the man a glancing blow. The man tightened his grip without comment. Dan uncoiled again, drove his bound feet into the man's groin.

The man refused to flinch.

Dan squirmed in an attempt to loosen the man's hold.

The woman yanked on the rope.

Dan's eyes bulged.

"Keep him quiet!" the woman said.

The man released his grip.

Dan fell towards the waiting wheelbarrow.

The woman reacted, preserved her hold on the rope. She wrapped it around her right arm and planted her feet against the pickup's front tire. She stopped Dan's fall as his knees hit the wheelbarrow.

Dan gagged, blacked out for a moment.

"Down, let him down!" the man said. He stepped towards Dan. He lifted him – relieved the pressure on his throat.

The woman loosened her hold on the rope.

Momentary hope and light replaced Dan's blackened state of mind. His feet touched the wheelbarrow and did not crumble. He stood, stopped fighting for the moment. The rope loosened around his neck.

Why? I've done nothing. I've...

The unknown man moved in front of Dan. He raised his right hand. "Whatsoever a man soweth, he shall also reap. We seek vengeance and vengeance we will have."

But, but...

"We need to take our leave," the woman said. "We need to see to the others." Without waiting for a response, she returned slight pressure to the noose around Dan's neck and tied the loose end around the front bumper of Dan's pickup. She walked under the rope, turned and faced Dan.

I've failed.

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Dan heard his final moments on earth ticking off in clanging mental seconds rather than minutes, days, months, or years—a lifetime compressed into an instant.

Dan's anguished mind screamed.

Why?

The woman's demonic gaze offered no answer.

Please, God – why?

Dan received only silence in reply.

His mind sought his wife Barbara and their children. The mental image produced further anguish.

After waving to his family from the open garage door an hour earlier, Daniel Bradwell spent a few moments lost in his thoughts.

I can't believe my good fortune. I'm the luckiest man on earth.

Married for ten years to Barbara, a beautiful and gracious woman, Dan thanked God every day for bringing her into his life. Barbara and Dan reveled in the joy and the angst faced while rearing two bright and inquisitive children, Josh, aged seven, and Holly, six in a month. The family shared a new home in a gated Orlando community. A successful actuary, Dan's career provided a comfortable living for his family and an ego boost for him.

Dan also taught Sunday school and remained a member in good standing of three different volunteer organizations dedicated to helping the poor. He held the title of block captain for the neighborhood watch group, carried a legitimate eighteen handicap at his country club, and filled in as secretary of his homeowner's association.

Daniel Bradwell fit the profile of a perfect All American good guy.

Dan stopped reveling. He watched his wife's car clear the corner three blocks away. Dan smiled, turned, and headed towards his avocation.

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Twenty-five minutes later Dan lay on his creeper, head and shoulders under the pickup, tools at the ready.

"Excuse me?" Dan heard from within the garage. The voice belonged to a woman.

Dan turned his head. From under the pickup he saw two thin ankles peeking out from beneath a bright red wool skirt. The ankles plunged into sturdy leather shoes held in front with buckle latches.

Dan pulled his creeper clear of the truck. He gazed at the unknown woman, smiled. The woman blushed. Dan stood, wiped his hands on a clean towel. "I'm Dan, Dan Bradwell. Can I help you?" He stuck his hand towards the woman, waited for a response.

The woman fixed her stare at and through Dan. She stood still, failed to respond.

"You from the neighborhood?"

The woman moved a step to her left. "I..." She glanced over Dan's shoulder towards the open garage door.

Dan sensed movement behind him before he heard it. He turned, caught a glimpse of a massive fist just before it crashed into his chin. Dan plunged into a dark void.

Dan returned to the present.

He mentally cried out.

I don't want to die! I'm not ready to die!

"Neither did we," the unknown man said. He walked from behind Dan, stood next to the woman. "Make your peace, Daniel Bradwell. Lucifer awaits you."

Dan stared at the man. A single image burned itself onto Dan's mind – an expression alternately filled with rage, with hatred, with – *What? Questions?*

Without another word the unknown man placed his right foot on the wheelbarrow's front lip.

He pushed hard – once – twice.

The wheelbarrow turned sideways and fell away.

The rope snapped taught.

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Dan's neck cracked.

His feet dangled in the air, flopped inches from the concrete floor.

Before death took him, Dan witnessed the man and the woman approach. The couple stared with hate-filled eyes.

They have four eyes. Not possible, not...

Within moments Dan stopped moving. His light and life blinked out for the final time.

The man touched Dan's wrist, felt for a pulse. Hammering moments before, the throbbing artery lay still. It announced Dan's death.

The man turned to the woman and nodded. She removed a deerskin packet from beneath the folds of her skirt. She untied the leather thong holding the packet together. She removed an inkwell, a quill pen, a piece of writing paper with a watermark reading, *Company*, and a six-inch hand forged nail. She spent a few moments writing, blew on the paper to dry the ink. She picked up the nail and poked it through the paper. She handed it to the man.

The man grabbed the nail in his right fist. He turned towards Dan hanging limp at the end of the rope and said, "May God have mercy on your soul."

Without hesitation—he plunged the nail into Dan's chest. The force of the blow sent Dan's body into a twirling dance of the dead.

A few moments later Dan's body again hung still. The man and woman held hands and together read from the paper nailed to Dan's chest. "It is a righteous thing to recompense affliction to them that afflict you."

They left the garage without further comment, without remorse, and without noticing a pair of yellow eyes watching their every move.

Surrounded by fur ranging from light gray to black, the unblinking eyes stared without emotion.

The animal remained as silent as the dead of a thousand years.

A few weeks prior to Dan's death, "How was golf?" Sarah London asked her husband Brock after he closed the door to the garage and entered the kitchen. It neared dinnertime on a Wednesday in the middle of June. Wednesday meant a usual foursome of men who dreamed of shooting par but who ended the golf round shooting only the breeze. "Get rained out?"

"After fourteen holes but since I was down three bucks, I didn't mind," Brock said. He walked to the stove, opened the oven door. Disappointed at what he discovered, he frowned. "Where's dinner?"

"Get your shower. The Strands invited us for dinner. Remember? They're expecting us in thirty minutes."

Brock held the oven door open. "I realize they're our best friends but do we have to? How about a pot roast? You could wear your saran wrap outfit and I could leer."

Sarah remained quiet. She spread her feet, pointed towards the doorway. A clenched smile escaped. After fifteen years of marriage following a brief courtship during the first semester of their sophomore year in college, Sarah continued to discover humor in Brock's bawdy teenage comments. She knew another fifteen years would produce the same results.

Brock recognized the look. He left the kitchen. He climbed the stairs to the master bedroom with one final comment. "I hope Arnie's barbecuing. Sharon's strengths aren't in the kitchen."

Sarah stuck her head through the kitchen doorway, ignored Brock's sarcastic comment. "Now they're expecting us in twenty-nine minutes. Don't dawdle."

Brock glanced over his shoulder, saw Sarah flip her blond ponytail. He grunted agreement. At the top of the stairs, Brock started to turn right towards the bedroom, reconsidered after a moment's hesitation. He crossed the hall and entered the study he and Sarah shared. Brock stepped to his desk near the window, powered up his laptop. He exposed his latest in-progress manuscript. With rapid clicks of his two fingered typing he added three new paragraphs mentally written while riding down the twelfth fairway.

Sarah walked to the bottom of the stairs, looked up. "You're not writing are you? If I don't hear the shower in thirty seconds, you've eaten your last pot roast."

"A sec."

"You're down to twenty-five."

Brock typed a quick note. He saved the manuscript, logged off the computer.

He walked by Sarah's desk on his way out of the study. He saw her screen saver, stopped.

Brock nudged Sarah's mouse, exposed a Word document. He read a few lines and realized he viewed Sarah's latest fairy tale.

Against Brock's advice, Sarah created a market writing children's stories with characters based on ancient monsters, goblins, gnomes, and other frightening creatures too vile for children of the twenty-first century.

"Goblins are playful." Sarah expressed ten years ago after she announced her intent to use malicious beasts from man's mythological past as her lead characters.

Sarah sat at the kitchen table crafting a new diet and exercise plan she hoped would encourage she and Brock to lose a few pounds. Neither approached rotund but with their genes and 'big-boned' relatives, they understood they shared a lifelong battle to preserve any semblance of a waist on their six-foot frames.

"Goblins and other ghouls have an undeserved reputation as wicked beasts. I intend to resurrect their enchanting character, their

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honorable nature," Sarah responded when Brock questioned her intent to create a new sub-genre.

Brock scowled. "Playful? Enchanting character? Honorable nature? Are you kidding? Goblins are grotesque fairies. They're twisted. They're evil. Their smile curdles blood. Their breath sours the sweetest milk. They steal human women and hide them in underground caverns. Heaven only knows what horrific and vile acts they perform on those wretched women. Goblin women steal beautiful human newborns and replace them with changelings that morph into giant monsters who eat their sleeping parents. Their..."

Sarah raised her hand. She stood, stepped within an inch of Brock's face. She peered into his baby blues and clenched her teeth. Her emerald eyes blazed. "Are you through? Yes, I believe you are." Her jaw jutted out. "Leave my creatures and my undertaking to me—and my publisher. I don't attack your predictable detective stories. I..."

"Predictable?" Brock's eyebrows shot up. His scalp tightened, glowed blood red beneath his blonde crew cut. Brock tapped his left foot. He drummed the fingers of his right hand against his thigh. For years Brock tried and failed to overcome the two habits he revealed only when nervous or agitated. "Predictable? Why I'll have you..."

Sarah sensed the discussion veering towards an argument entering a marital danger zone. She interrupted, softened her tone. "Brock?"

Brock continued his tirade—his tapping—his drumming.

Sarah called Brock's name a second and then a third time.

The nervous movements slowed with each passing second, each whispered utterance of his name. Finally, he stopped, stared at his wife. He saw her eyes pleading for understanding. Brock lost any residual anger. He replaced a scowl with a mild pout. "What?"

"Let's call a halt before one of us says something we'll regret. We're in the same profession—but different. Let's pledge not just unending love but unending support for the other's writing."

From that day forward—Brock and Sarah kept their promise.

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To date, Sarah had proven Brock and her skeptical publisher wrong. She had produced ten winners out of ten published books, including her most recent, *Mara's Nightmare*, a children's best-seller based on Mara, a goblin from Scandinavian folklore.

The ancient Nordic people believed Mara, an incubus or demon, paralyzed people by lying on them while they slept. The weight of Mara on a woman's chest often caused difficulty breathing or suffocation. Originally used in the 16th century to describe a bad dream caused by an incubus, the genesis for the term nightmare was Mara.

Sarah decided to rehabilitate the reputation of a former female wraith.

Through a series of events, Sarah converted Mara from a demonic character into a savior of children. Mara accomplished the conversion by using nightmares to warn children of imminent danger. She sent horrific images of potential destruction to the dreams of children in a small Indiana town when an unseen tornado approached. The frightened children awakened, warned their parents. Everyone survived in the cellars built for such emergencies.

Mara became a hero.

Sarah met her goal.

Brock experienced a brief twinge after he realized Sarah's new fairy tale would put her one up on him if it received the same positive reception as her other books.

Brock set the thought aside. He and Sarah never competed. They supported each other, shared successes.

Besides, she writes brief and simple children's stories. My detective novels are complex, far-reaching stories that demand...Bull. Face it – she's your equal or better. It's the reason you love her...

Brock heard Sarah yell from the bottom of the stairs. "I don't hear the shower!"

Brock set his thoughts aside.

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He walked to the master bedroom, spent five minutes in the shower. He dressed in khaki's and a clean golf shirt.

Brock met Sarah by the front door, glanced at his watch. "Two seconds to spare."

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Brock and Sarah made the short walk to the home of their friends and neighbors. The Londons and the Strands lived on opposite sides of the same canal in Stone Key, a South Florida neighborhood built in the fifties. Brock and Sarah lived on a corner lot. It gave them a canal-side dock on one side of their home and unobstructed views of Biscayne Bay and beach towns. A shared gift after they achieved writing success, the house fit their personalities and their means. Arnie and Sharon Strand lived across the canal and down three lots.

During their short walk around the canal, Brock held Sarah's hand. "I took a quick glance at your new story." A minor sense of guilt forced Brock to tighten his grip.

"So? It's okay to peek under the cover. I respect your opinion."

After a dinner Brock compared unfavorably to Sarah's pot roast, the two couples settled on the back deck to enjoy a pleasant evening under the stars. A breeze off Biscayne Bay rustling through the fronds of the tiki bar kept the rising humidity of June from covering their exposed skin in glistening and sticky perspiration. Brock recognized by mid July, breeze or no breeze, the humidity would drive him indoors to the welcome hum of an air conditioner.

Arnie reached under the bar, extracted a bottle of Rémy Martin, a gift from a client. "Rum's my drink but I couldn't say no. Help me

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finish it." His fingers combed through his thinning steel gray hair, a shade matching his eyes pleading for an affirmative response.

Brock's taste ran to gin or red wine. He begged off but Arnie insisted.

Sarah interceded. "Just one or two." She smiled, stared at Arnie. "Brock's tired after a long afternoon of golf." Her smirk amplified her words.

The Strand's deck stretched from the house to the canal. It included the tiki bar, a junior Olympic pool and a dock for *Poseidon*, Arnie's boat and favorite toy since he bought it a month earlier.

A fifty-foot Elco Flattop weighing over twenty-five tons and built during the Roaring Twenties, *Poseidon* remained one of a handful of Elco yachts still in existence. The Electric Launch Company, or Elco, began in 1893 and quickly grew into the premier builder of recreational boats for J.P. Morgan and hundreds of other notables. In the thirties, the world's wealthy considered Arnie's boat one of the most desirable yachts. During WWII, Elco switched to Navy contracts. The company built three hundred ninety nine PT boats, including PT109 made famous by John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fourth president of the United States. By 1949, demand for PT boats collapsed and recreational yachts fell out of favor. Elco closed its doors.

Brock loved the boat, the smell of its exotic woods, its sleek lines, and the fact it displayed its heritage of wealth without shame. He found himself intrigued by the boat's dark history—as long as he swallowed Arnie's fourth hand tales.

"It's the writer in me," Brock said to Sarah the day she questioned his interest.

The boat's name also intrigued Brock.

"Poseidon?" Brock said after Arnie gave he and Sarah their initial tour followed by a circuit around Biscayne Bay. "I thought boats were females. *Poseidon* is male."

"*Poseidon* has a masculine name but she's a female. Besides, *Poseidon* wasn't the first name I chose." Arnie paused, glanced towards his bride. "Sharon overruled me. I renamed her *Poseidon*."

"Overruled? I thought you were the king of your domain."

"Nah. I'm just the cabana boy. I fetch drinks, grill steaks and service my wonderful wife."

Sharon and Sarah overheard the boys' conversation but ignored the tripe. Inane conversations between the two occurred with regularity.

Arnie's Cheshire cat grin failed to elicit a comment from his wife. He returned to the discussion with Brock. "*Poseidon* served as the Greeks' sea god." Arnie laughed, turned, and bowed towards the boat. "I've hired him to protect us."

"Cute, but what about protecting *Poseidon*?"

"I have a burglar alarm, plus plenty of insurance."

"A burglar alarm you never set."

"Not necessary."

"Probably not. Burglar alarms don't stop real thieves." Brock paused, glanced at the boat. "But *Poseidon* is a one-of-a-kind. If it's stolen, an insurance check won't replace it. *Poseidon* needs protection."

"Like, what?"

"Like a system designed to prevent her theft—or at least catch the thief in the act."

"They have such things?"

"Join the new century, my friend. GPS systems track boats twenty four seven. They monitor bilgewater and battery levels. They provide two-way voice and data communication. They offer emergency SOS signaling. They..."

"You serious? Security systems do all that?"

"I gave you the short list."

"I'll look into it."

The two couples sat at the tiki bar in their normal seats. Brock faced the water and *Poseidon*. Arnie always lit the boat's interior with minimum wattage. He thought it added a hint of mystery. A night breeze carried classic rock music from a stereo aboard.

After ten minutes of conversation, Brock lifted his glass and sipped cognac. He gazed towards the boat's deckhouse, caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

Huh?

Brock blinked, swallowed, and stared. The deckhouse's interior revealed only shadows caused by Arnie's mood lights swaying in a gentle cross breeze.

Brock set his glass on the bar, stared at the deckhouse.

Nothing. My imagination must be....

The wispy shape of a woman swept across Brock's field of vision.

What the...?

Two other vaporous figures joined the woman.

Another woman – a man?

The indistinct shapes merged, separated, and coalesced again. The resulting solitary female image glared at Brock. Her eyes blazed. She formed silent words that invaded Brock's mind.

Release me! Release me!

Brock shuddered. "No!"

The woman disappeared.

Sarah squeezed her husband's arm. "Brock...Brock?"

Sarah's voice broke the spell.

Shaken, Brock returned to the conversation. "What?"

"Where'd you go?"

"Uh...uh...nowhere. I thought I saw...saw...never mind. What were you saying?"

"Hey old buddy," Arnie said. "I realize I'm not as interesting as the characters in your books but..."

Out of the corner of his eye, Brock again saw movement aboard *Poseidon*. His attention returned to the deckhouse. He glimpsed a woman in a red dress. She swept across the deckhouse windows from bow to stern.

"Sarah, can you get his attention? He's lost to another world again," Arnie, said.

Brock lost the vision, glanced at his neighbor. "Sorry." Brock tried to concentrate on the conversation but discovered his mind and his eyes swiveling from the group to the boat.

Sarah touched Brock's arm. "You okay?"

"I...ah...I think so. I keep seeing..." Brock's eyes snapped towards *Poseidon's* deckhouse. A hint of red crossed his vision, disappeared. The shadows returned. Brock concentrated on the boat, ignored Sarah. Without warning the visions reappeared. A silky smooth red haze coalesced into the smoky shape of a woman. She stared at Brock with pleading eyes. The other, a moistened image of a nude man and woman, brought immediate dread to Brock's soul. The woman glared at Brock with eyes expressing pure hatred. Shaken by the apparitions' sudden appearance, Brock blinked once, twice, three times. The images remained.

"Brock?" Sarah said. "Talk to me. I'm serious. Are you okay?"

"There...there are spirits on your boat, Arnie. Ghosts in...in the deckhouse." He pointed towards the airy images floating inside *Poseidon*.

Arnie, Sharon, and Sarah followed Brock's upraised arm. They witnessed the boat bobbing against the dock, nothing else. "You're kidding – right old buddy?"

Brock stood, walked towards the boat. "Can't you see them?" The unknown specters continued staring at and through Brock.

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Arnie stared towards the boat, discovered nothing out of the ordinary. "See who?"

"Them." Brock again pointed to the deckhouse. He turned to face his questioning neighbor.

Sarah walked to Brock's side. She glanced at the boat. "Maybe we've had enough to drink."

Brock erupted. "I'm not drunk!" He wheeled towards *Poseidon*. "I know what I see and I see..." He stopped in mid-sentence. The apparitions no longer stared at him. "They...they were there. I know they were."

Brock stepped to the edge of the dock and onto *Poseidon*. The music disappeared. The air greeting him felt dry, frigid. He sniffed. Stale, rancid air forced Brock to cover his mouth, breathe through his sleeve.

Brock's senses screamed—*winter burial chamber*. It reminded him of the vaults used to keep Maine's winter-dead until the spring thaw allowed gravediggers to prepare a proper burial site. Brock shivered, moved through the boat.

Brock searched the deckhouse. He discovered no suggestion the ghostly shadows ever existed.

He moved down the stairs to the staterooms and head.

All quiet. Maybe I did imagine...No. The air. It's...what, dead?

Brock retraced his steps to the deckhouse, poked his head into the opening leading to the galley and engine room below.

Should I...

A screech startled him, devoured his contemplations.

Release me! Release me! Release me!

Brock jerked back. "What the..." He rushed towards the deckhouse door. "Did you hear that?"

Sarah, Arnie, and Sharon shrugged as if to say, 'what now?'

"You didn't hear the shriek? It sounded like...like."

Sarah couldn't imagine what caused Brock to experience delusions. "We heard nothing. Let's go home." She turned to Sharon, whispered, "Writer's stress."

Brock turned, reentered the deckhouse. He no longer sensed the foul smell. The air felt hot and humid. Brock shook his head.

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Was it my imagination?

He returned to the tiki bar, to his perplexed wife and friends.
“I...I’m sorry. It seemed so real.”

Brock’s right hand shot to the tiki bar. His fingers drummed. His left foot tapped.

On the walk home, Sarah squeezed Brock’s arm. “The best minds play tricks.”

Brock grimaced, accepted her touch. “Thanks for the lifeline. I just never expected my mind to fail me, although...”

“Although what?”

“I don’t think it failed me. They...ah...they were real, or at least they represented real people.”

“You mean ghosts?”

“I’m not certain what I mean but I’m convinced they were not figments of my vast imagination.” Brock forced a laugh to cover his ego-caressing comment.

Sarah increased pressure on Brock’s arm, transformed her touch from a squeeze to a pinch. “Sorry, oh exalted one.”

Hours after Brock and Sarah fell into a dream sleep, a twenty-one foot runabout powered by two of the world's quietest and most powerful 4-stroke outboard engines crept from Biscayne Bay. The boat entered the canal separating the Londons from the Strands. Moving at idle speed, the only engine sound heard beyond a few feet occurred as cooling water flowed from the engines into the canal.

The runabout glided past Brock and Sarah's home, didn't slow. It slid past Arnie and Sharon's dock. The black-clad boat and driver continued their short and silent trek to the seawall defining the canal's end. The boat's operator turned the boat. It faced the bay. He placed the engines into neutral, remained motionless for fifteen minutes.

Confident no one stirred, the operator reached for the throttle. At the same instant his hand touched the handle, an outside light from the nearest house flooded the home's yard. The light beams seeped into the canal. The man and the boat absorbed the light, remained cloaked. To further hide his presence, the man crouched deeper into the cockpit. He left the boat's motors idling.

A door of the house opened and a dog scampered out. After relieving his swollen bladder, the dog sniffed the air, ran towards the canal. He searched for an entity he failed to see but whose scent he recognized—an unknown man. The dog recognized danger lurked close. He snarled. The defensive growl erupted from the depths of his throat.

"Bronson, get in here," a man yelled from the house.

Confused, the dog's head swiveled from house to canal. His growl turned to a low-pitched whine.

"Bronson, now!" The man slapped his thigh.

Deciding his loyalties belonged to his provider, Bronson bolted towards the house. He ran around the pool's far side. Nearing the house, an unknown scent caused Bronson to dig his claws into the hard surface. Hackles raised, the dog stopped. The strange scent emanated from the dark side of the house, the one bathed in shadows.

Bronson let out three fast and fear induced high-pitched barks to let the intruder recognize his presence. He stepped towards the strange animal smell, froze in place. Certain death reached his nostrils.

Bronson dropped his tail between his legs after the creature exposed piercing yellow eyes offering Bronson two choices—flight or death. Bronson chose wisely. He bolted through the door his master held open. The home's owner slammed the door behind Bronson, extinguished the light.

The black and invisible night swallowed the yard, the canal.

The twin yellow eyes grew dim but remained watchful.

The man operating the runabout waited another twenty minutes before he moved the throttle into the forward position. The boat slipped through the canal towards Biscayne Bay. Coming alongside *Poseidon*, the man again put the engines in neutral. He let the runabout slide by the side of *Poseidon* until it reached the bow. He circled to the dock. The man tied the runabout to a ladder and silently scampered onto the dock.

He first checked for any sign of an active burglar alarm on the boat. A green light on a panel in the deckhouse told him he didn't have to worry. Arnie had failed to activate the alarm.

The man untied *Poseidon's* bow and stern lines, tossed them onto the yacht's deck. He switched the shore power off, unplugged the auxiliary power cord, and coiled it on the dock. He tied off a towline to the bow cleats and flung the line into the runabout.

The man slipped into his boat. He tied the towline, put the runabout into gear. The entire operation lasted less than one minute.

RETRIBUTION

The runabout's forward movement removed the towline's slack. The man pressed forward on the throttle. The engine RPM's increased. The emitted sound remained below the threshold required to wake the sleeping. After the engines achieved thirty percent maximum power, the man experienced the first inkling *Poseidon* might succumb to the exhortations of the runabout's engines. After a few seconds, *Poseidon* inched forward. The man reduced power, guided the boat out of the canal. *Poseidon* followed the path plowed by the runabout.

The man steered the runabout and its following companion towards Biscayne Bay. He cleared the canal and motored another five hundred yards across the wide but shallow bay. He placed the throttle in neutral, allowed *Poseidon* to plow to a stop. He pulled the runabout alongside the larger boat, untied the towline from the runabout's stern, and connected it to the boat's bow cleat.

Satisfied with his handiwork, he climbed onto *Poseidon*. He untied the bow rope and secured it to a stern cleat. *Poseidon* now led. Attached at the bow by the towline, the runabout bobbed behind the larger boat. The man cranked *Poseidon's* twin diesels and pointed his stolen charge towards blue water and the islands beyond.

"I love you as well," the man said to a deckhouse empty except for his thoughts. "Be patient. In a few hours we'll be together." A smile crossed his face. He sensed a light and airy touch sweep across his right temple. His mind wandered to glorious days gone by. A rough claw scratched his left cheek, jolted him back to reality. He pushed the throttles to the stop.

Twin yellow eyes watched from Brock and Sarah's seawall. After the boat disappeared from view, the animal loped towards the Londons. Wary, the animal circled the house three times, sniffing, reflecting, and planning. Understanding its charge, the creature slinked into the night.

Following clues provided by a mysterious letter writer detailing a series of gruesome hangings and the theft of a neighbor's antique yacht from a Biscayne Bay canal, two novelists follow a killing trail as old as time.

Retribution

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