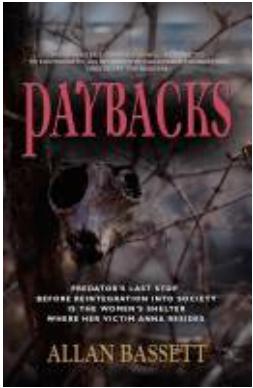


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PAYBACKS

PREDATOR'S LAST STOP
BEFORE REINTEGRATION INTO SOCIETY
IS THE WOMEN'S SHELTER
WHERE HER VICTIM ANNA RESIDES.

ALLAN BASSETT



Kelly's first love was the prime suspect in the cases of three missing teens. Anna was one of them. She now resides in Kelly's women's shelter. Kelly must return to their hometown to apply for shelter funding. She discovers the body of a senior who's come to check on Anna. Anna's abductor also arrives unexpectedly to complete her sentence at the shelter. Meanwhile, Kelly strikes up a relationship with the dead; with her neighbor Russell watching.

Paybacks

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Paybacks

Allan Bassett

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First Edition

1

The red-toqued senior on bus 135 mused about kindness being at the root of everything when the kids in back laughed and wondered aloud who let her on the ride. The warmth and temporary shelter on route to Anna's place was a blessing, as were all children. Though the kids on the bus weren't very nice.

She couldn't forgive the *perception shapers* for modelling intolerance and instant gratification because what they were spreading weren't qualities. Stealing average folk's hard-earned dough and never fixing what they broke was wrong, as was trying to shape folks to the *shaper's* liking.

Today is what counted, not the yesterdays and what led the kids to bully her. She squeezed under her waistline for the baggie. The jeweller in the town of Charlene had warned her about keeping the capsules dry and out of the sun. Condensation had gotten into the plastic. She wasn't sure if the capsules would work.

Rolled mat between the window and seat rail, she rested. Her toque down over a grey brow-line was meant to combat distractions in her head. One eye remained open. She didn't want to miss her stop.

Against the squealing hiss and ramped up laughter in back the driver did what he said he would. "This is it lady."

Collecting self and possessions was a nuisance. "You're the fellow from the Estate?" she asked the guy across from her. He had the same round cheeks and fried onion smell. She wasn't sure if it was him though, because he smiled but didn't answer.

The balled up fast food wrapper on the floor she figured was what the kids had beaned her with at the peak of their sugar rush. *Made to worship that gross national product. At least*

Allan Bassett

their weapon was soft. The act didn't hurt. The kid's intentions were what bothered her.

"That yours?"

"Oh dear." She blamed the colour of her hair for forgetting her cane, and steered clear of the word God when she blessed the estate fellow for his kindness.

Slowly up aisle toward the front of the bus. "Over seventy. Never travelled to Craggy Bay before..." she rehearsed, wanting to tell the driver.

He was gazing at the sparkler reflection on the ocean through the open doorway and didn't offer the courtesy of eye contact or a response. The driver hadn't flinched when the kids got obnoxious either. *Must be hard of hearing.*

The wind spanked her skin but not enough to rethink the plan. It took her a while to climb down those steps to the curb.

At the roadside, with her mat laced over one shoulder and cane in hand, she watched the bus brake and pull over at the next stop along the boulevard. When the fellow got off, and those nasty children didn't, her heart began to settle.

The chill on the west side of the park station overhang helped her decide that exploring could wait. A cartoon dog picture on a plastic green and yellow garbage bin made her laugh.

The off-white house across the street stood tall and square, like in the photo that Anna had sent. *Where is that note?*

The photo, attached to Anna's note discovered in time, matched the house across the road where the old lady was facing.

Satisfied that she was at the right place, she slipped the picture into the plastic poop-bin.

Her small frame fit nicely on the contoured wooden slabs on wrought iron – better than a standard bench.

Paybacks

Although the view west was mostly sky, and a bit of scrub along the bank, the ocean smelled sweet and the sound was marvellous. A shoelace tug unravelled the mat that she fit squarely over her lap down to her ankles, to combat the wind.

If Anna came out, fine, otherwise she'd take Anna's word from the note that she was safe and coping.

Grass on either side of the bench took the form of crushed velvet. Seagulls fussed on and off as the sun's reflection waned. The rhythm of the waves against the shoreline was peaceful.

A sharp snap woke her. Shutters opened and the light from inside the white house across the road had carved a trail through the grass.

Cold, she took the light as a sign, checked her tummy line for the plastic containing the capsules (careful not to displace them), rolled her mat and secured it with the same string. One last wish for Anna...“Where did that cane get to?”

Off she went slowly through the grass towards the light at the point. Her walk was tricky because the moon had failed to show.

She believed in kindness and the convenience of dumpsters. The bin at the point near the café would have made a decent night's stay if the slope weren't so steep and the container hadn't smelled of rotting perishables.

She regretted her choice of trail that she took back towards Anna's place because in some spots branch snags reached shoulder height. Too close to the cliff's edge, if she turned around she might lose her balance and tumble down the embankment. When the trail split she turned inland to a clearing where the wind sailed overhead. From her mat, which she spread out on the flat rock, she could see the ocean.

She settled on that bluff for the evening, and for good.

2

The Corrections Branch called my brother Doug to see if we could accommodate a federal parolee for three to six months. Particulars about the subject were minimal to protect her privacy rights. Rights that were a double-edged sword. Doug told them he needed time (two days) to see if an arrangement was workable.

“Victims, Doug, not offenders.”

I managed Hope House Women’s Shelter.

Doug and the bank owned the place. Doug did the numbers. “Maynard and Charlene are facing cutbacks,” he reminded. “Why wouldn’t Craggy Bay? We’re in the same district. We need this Kelly.”

“This? Who is this person?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t commit. All I’m asking is that we keep the big picture in mind. Look at this as insurance in case Social Services axe our grant.”

Hope House is for women only... except Tora by way of a proxy vote grandfather clause that any newbie resident had to accept.

“What do I tell the girls? ‘Sorry, we’re broke and forced to sell out. We don’t care about your safety.’ I’m not going to lie to them Doug. I won’t.” I snatched Doug’s Lumberjacket ball cap from atop my last year’s proposal because my dog Grady needed out for a walk.

“We can’t afford to pass this up Kelly. Please keep an open mind.”

I pushed the bay shutters outward for the cool night air to clear away Grady’s farts. “Where’s she from, and what did she do?”

Paybacks

“Twenty years for abduction. How’s the proposal going?”
Doug asked.

“You are kidding me?” I said. “Forget it!”

“I’ve committed to a trial period.”

“I want her entire file.”

“They’re couriering her case file out from Charlene in the morning,” he said. “You should have it by noon. What about the proposal?”

“Fine,” I lied about the stacks on my desk including last year’s proposal that I’d stolen catch phrases, numbers and graphs from, hardly the fresh squeeze of life the project needed. “Slower than I’d hoped.” The charade was in nine days.

“I’m to call the folks at Corrections back by four tomorrow. Call me once you’ve reviewed the file.”

“Don’t get you’re hopes up.”

“We need this Kel.”

“Shoo! Not you the dog.”

Grady’s paws were scratching the sill. He’d look at me then out the window and along the trail.

I heard and could feel someone’s weight up the stairwell and raced to dispose of the silver wrapper (energy food). Brushing chocolate bits off my work on my desk I waited. No one was there.

Across the road, as soon I unleashed Grady he took off down the trail and into some bramble. I called and looked but couldn’t find him, so I headed back and waited on the bench across from our place.

Under the stars I spent some time calling softly for my ruddy dog.

Grady returned looking like he was in the wrong. We hadn’t been getting along.

I didn’t sleep well that night with Anna’s screaming.

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When I woke that morning my mind was cluttered with work that I needed to get done.

I kept Grady leashed as punishment for not coming when he was called.

The courier guy was early.

About the box he delivered, I told the girls it was someone's case history. I hadn't told Jane or the girls about the prospective new houseguest because my gut said nix the deal.

The subject's name was vetted from the files to protect her identity pending arrangements to accommodate, the contract agreed upon and so on.

The parolee was charged and convicted in Charlene on two counts of abduction. *Abduction! Charlene!* On first browse there were plenty of reasons to kibosh the prospective arrangement. Charlene was a small town. Twenty-seven years old when charged and convicted twenty years ago. I had to know her.

Appendix C of the contract was sent to Doug.

Our prospect had come from a respectable family. She had no priors but was convicted of two misdemeanours during time served in jail. She was considered abrupt and easily influenced by others, a poor role model but not considered dangerous.

Not physically dangerous.

Grady fit a paw under his earflap, scratched, and looked up as if to say it was time we put past differences behind us because he had to go out again. Being an only dog was no excuse for not coming when called.

The Parole Board's aim to reintegrate this woman was delayed because the local halfway houses and state sponsored integration facilities were at capacity.

"I don't know Doug."

"What choice do we have?"

Paybacks

“Lots. Here’s one. Shut down Hope House. Grady and I housesit and live off social security. You send me money for the mortgage and we’ll keep things tidy until you retire at which time we’ll live in the basement.”

“There is no basement.” Athletic and analytical was my eldest brother.

“She’s from Charlene. We must know her.”

“Just about everyone at Hope House is from Charlene,” he said. “She’ll fit in.”

“What do I tell the girls?”

“The truth.”

“You’ve got to find out who she is.”

“What’s in a name?”

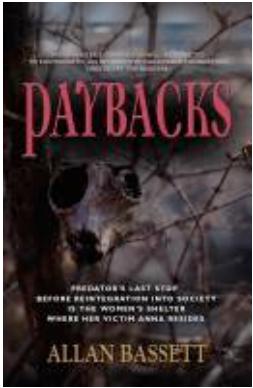
“Everything Doug. We have to live with her.”

“You’ve got her history. How about we take the interview and seriously consider the trial run on our terms?”

“Two strikes and she’s out of here.”

“Three,” he said.

“Not this time.”



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