



# BEYOND THE RED LANTERN

L. D. CARANO





*Detective Eric Bacon looks into an old murder case, and suspects a cover-up. New to the department, trusting no one, and acting alone, he goes on a relentless pursuit to get at the truth. As he closes in on what really happened, his prime witness is found dead. It is ruled a suicide. Eric knows it was murder, and who the killers are, but must prove it was a homicide.*

## **Beyond the Red Lantern**

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L. D. Carano

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## **Dedication**

To Lady, Casey, and Cady for their contributions to the story by their instinctive behavior



## **CHAPTER 1**

Eric Bacon tapped the car radio scan button until he got to the twenty-four hour news station he was listening to while dressing at home. The news about a skull pulled from the water in a fisherman's net, the identity of it still unknown, caught his interest. Speculation was that it could be the skull of either Kevin Avery or his wife, Lucia. They disappeared after he was found guilty for killing Joel Hart, their abandoned automobile found on a bridge over the Piscataqua River.

Today was his first day with the Cross Mills police department. He arrived at the station just before eight, and as he entered Chief Clint Moyer's office, a police officer exited, glared at him, and then moved on.

Eric tilted his head toward the door. "That officer that just left. What's his problem?" he said to Moyer.

Moyer cracked a smile. "Promotions normally come from the ranks, but after all the interviews, I wanted you. The mayor didn't object to going outside the department to fill the detective slot, but he insisted the person's qualifications be higher than any of our men. Bottom line . . . the others didn't measure up. There might be animosity toward you by some who got passed over. Eventually they'll get over it."

"I wasn't going to pass on this opportunity. My wife Jodie always wanted to come back to her home state of Maine. New Hampshire is as close as it gets. She's applied for a teaching slot at Cross Mills High . . . hopes to get something next year."

"My son Jeff is the quarterback on the football team," Moyer boasted. "I go to all the games. Maybe we can catch one together."

"Sure," Eric agreed, though he thought it unlikely.

Moyer sat behind an oversized oak desk and leaned back in the leather chair. "You hear about the skull?" he said.

"This morning. Speculation is it may be an Avery." "It's Lucia Avery. Medical examiner confirmed it late last night. Hasn't been made public yet. Got the report right here. Threw me for a loop when that skull was found. I always felt Avery and his wife fled. Lucia's handbag was in the car, and we found bank slips for six hundred dollars in it. Withdrawals were made from an ATM. Yet we found no cash. Divers combed the area, but never found bodies.

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We figured the bodies would have been pretty much where they entered the water if they jumped. It just didn't add up to suicide."

"A strong current could move them. Lucia's skull was found miles from the bridge. What did she weigh . . . one-twenty . . . one-thirty?" Eric went on.

"We could go on speculating."

"What's your feeling now?" Eric asked. "Do you think Kevin Avery is out there somewhere?"

"Four years ago, I thought they both fled. Now I can't imagine one committing suicide and the other not. They were devoted to each other like you've never seen."

"Are we doing anything with the case?"

"It's out of our hands. The state police have it now. They're assuming Avery's still out there. Eventually they'll take the position he's dead also."

"I followed the case when I was with Hershey police. You were the officer that arrived at the crime scene and you're still not interested? I can't believe that."

"Believe it. My interest in the case ended after Avery was arrested."

"Is it possible for me to see the case file?" Eric inquired.

"Why the interest?" Moyer came back.

Eric smiled thinly. "No special reason . . . just curious."

"See Gracie. She's the desk sergeant. She'll get the file for you. But I don't want you wasting any time on it. You have other work. Gracie will also get anything else you need. She's got a bunch of forms for you to fill out. Personnel crap. Once you're settled in we'll go over your assignments." Moyer handed the medical examiner's report on Lucia Avery to Eric. "Stick this in the case file," he said, and then added, "I have to get moving. I have an appointment with the mayor. Later I'll introduce you to him. The guy's done a great job for Cross Mills. He increased the size of the Cross Mills police department. Got elected a second time. Now he's planning a run for governor. So any good work you do will help him."

Eric put the medical examiner's report inside his briefcase. "I'll touch base with you later, Chief."

"By the way . . . keep that information about Benton running for governor under wraps. He hasn't announced his candidacy, and



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I don't want him to get the impression I've been blabbing it all over town."

"You got my word."

Gracie Kenton, a short muscular woman, was proud to wear the dark blues. It always looked neat, as if it had just been acquisitioned and worn for the first time.

Eric approached her at the front desk. "The chief said you're the one to show me the ropes around here."

"I'll show you where you'll park your butt." They walked past several desks to a cubicle at the rear of the station. "This is it," she said, casually waving at the area. "You get an enclosed space, but you have to share it."

Eric glanced at two gray metal desks, back to back, each with a computer on top. "Which one is mine?"

"That one," she said pointing to the right. "Key is in the top drawer. You know how to work a computer?"

"Had one where I worked before."

"You can pull up any case file throughout the state. We also have a link to the DMV. The procedural manual is in the top left drawer." She handed Eric a small sealed envelope. "Your access code is in here."

"Is there hard copy backup of the case files?"

"In back. I'll show you where they are in a minute." She handed Eric another envelope. "These are personnel forms. Return them to me when you're finished filling them out."

Eric nodded toward the other desk. "Who sits in the other desk?"

"Perry Dunlap. He works the graveyard shift. Chances are you'll hardly see him." She smiled. "So you can consider this your private office."

Eric dropped his briefcase on the desk, took off his sport jacket and hung it on a coat hangar atop the green plastic partition. He pulled out the swivel chair and it hit the wall. "Not much room," he commented.

"Consider yourself lucky. If this force gets any bigger, the next guy will be sitting in the men's room. Is there anything else you need?"

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"You were going to show me where the files are kept. I'm going to need the file on Kevin Avery," Eric said. Gracie smiled and he looked at her, blankly. "Is there anything wrong?"

"I'm surprised you didn't ask me to get it for you like everybody else," she responded dryly.

"It's not your function."

"I know, but I don't mind. It's kind of a trade off. I'm the only woman on the force. I get to stay on the first shift . . . inside all the time. My uniform stays clean. I'll show you where the files are."

"What is your role here, exactly?"

"I work the public information and complaint desk out front. I'm close to the chief's office, so I get coffee for him every now and then and do other things secretaries do."

"And you don't mind?"

"I told you I didn't. This is a good deal for me. I'm divorced, in my middle thirties, with two teenage children. I'm here while they're at school. It works out just fine."

She showed him where the files were located and insisted she get him the file he wanted, telling him he'd probably have trouble finding it anyway.

Eric dropped the thick Avery file on the desk, loosened his tie and rolled up his sleeves. He pulled a stack of papers and the medical examiner's report on Joel Hart from the file. Following his chief's orders not to spend much time with the case, he read the report quickly and gave everything else a cursory look. He figured he'd look at the file more thoroughly on his own time. The case intrigued him. He had been enamored with its complexity. The story went beyond murder. Why would two people jump to their deaths because of one's indiscretion? Was their devotion to each other so strong that any separation from each other would have been too unbearable? As he was putting everything back into the file, he gave the medical examiner's report on Joel Hart another look. He felt something was not right. He looked at it again then shook his head. *My imagination.*

Moments later, a young man with short blond hair, steel rimmed glasses and in civilian clothes entered the cubicle, nodded at Eric, sat at the other desk and began rummaging through drawers.

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"Looking for something?" Eric asked.

"I left some notes here this morning."

"What's your business here?"

"I work here," he answered coolly. "I'm Perry Dunlap . . . and you?"

"Eric Bacon."

"You're the new detective."

Eric glanced at Dunlap's clothes. "Why aren't you in uniform?"

Dunlap smiled. "I'm off duty."

"Gracie told me about you. What notes are you looking for?"

"My class notes. I go to college at night . . . shooting for a law degree." He pulled stapled sheets of paper from a bottom drawer. "Here they are."

"You do night patrol?" Eric asked.

"No. I work the front desk. It's convenient. I go to school at night. Then I report to work and I do my studying. It's quiet at that hour. When my shift is over I go home and sleep."

"It seems everybody has a neat arrangement around here."

"Only Gracie and me and the second shift guy. The others don't like the inside work. We take it because it suits our schedules." Dunlap glanced at the folder on Eric's desk. "Looking at the Avery file."

"It's an interesting case. The chief and I talked about it earlier."

"Well I don't mean to blow you off, Eric, but I have to get going."

"Where to?"

"Lunch first, then sleep."

"Mind if I join you for lunch?"

Dunlap smiled. "What do you feel like eating?"

"It's your pick. I'm new to the area."

"You like Mexican?"

"The hotter the better."

"Then you'll like this place."

Eric shoved the Avery file in the top drawer of his desk and followed Dunlap. His first impression of Dunlap was positive, someone he could feel at ease with on or off the job.

Dunlap spotted the restaurant owner, Luis, at the other side of the dining room and waved to him. Luis came over quickly, and

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ignoring customers waiting to be seated, took Eric and Dunlap to a small table near the kitchen.

"I can see those others getting pissed at what he just did for us," Eric commented.

"He'll tell them we had reservations."

Eric glanced around the dining area. "The food here must be good. This place is way out of town, yet look at all the people here." A waitress came over and set bowls of salsa and corn chips and two glasses of water on the table. Then she took the order and left. Eric grabbed a large chip, slid it into the salsa, scooped up a large dollop, bit into it and winced. "Wow! This stuff is brutal."

Dunlap laughed. "You did say you like it hot." He scooped up some salsa and said, "Why are you looking at the Avery file?"

"The case intrigued me. Now that I'm working where it happened, I'd like to learn more about it. Kind of like a case study."

"Do you think Avery's still out there?"

"Since her skull was found, I have to believe he jumped also." He paused. "Can't waste any time looking at it. Orders from our chief."

"So you talked to Clint this morning. He tell you about Mayor Benton?"

"He did."

Dunlap smirked. "I'm sure he told you Benton is going to run for governor. The chief wants to give everybody the impression it's some deep dark secret. Whenever he mentions it to someone, he tells that person to keep it under wraps. Just like he told you."

"You seem to have him all figured out," Eric came back, smiling.

"There's nothing to figure. I've known the chief a long time."

"How long have you been with the department?"

"Five years. Started after I graduated high school."

"You can't know him that well."

"I know enough. You interested in more."

Figuring Dunlap was not going to let it rest, Eric shook his head and said, "Okay. Let's have it."

"Moyer got promoted after Benton got elected."

"I knew that. He told me."

"But you don't know why," Dunlap went on. "Rumor had it the chief was screwing the mayor's wife and she was the one that got him the promotion."

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"You can't believe rumors."

"Before he became chief, she used to come into the station to see him. He'd get phone calls from her."

"It could have been official business."

Dunlap cracked a smile. "He was screwing her."

"Why is it when someone gets a promotion it's never because that person is the best qualified?"

"That relationship helped him more than his qualifications did."

"Didn't the rumors surface when Benton ran for mayor? The guy runs for political office and it never comes up. I can't buy that."

"Never became a public issue, but I'm certain others suspected it. Anyway after he became mayor, the phone calls to the chief stopped. When she came around, it was always to see her husband."

"Scott Benton . . . the mayor's son . . . he was with Joel Hart the night Hart got killed, along with the other kid, Watkins."

"Scott's from a previous marriage. Don't know where Watkins is today, but the Benton kid is all screwed up. He drinks a lot. Seems the problems started right after that incident."

"He ever get in trouble over it?"

"DWI once."

"How was it handled?"

"You're asking if the old man interfered. He didn't. Benton won't help anybody who breaks the law, not even his son. Maybe that's why he gets elected even with his wife screwing around. The kid is like a bomb ticking off the seconds," Dunlap went on. "It's only a matter of time before he screws up big."

"He could end up hurting somebody if not himself. Mayor Benton should do something."

"How the hell do you stop it? Benton can't have the kid locked up. When Scott lost his license he went through the suspension period without getting into trouble. After that he was good for a while, but then starting hitting the sauce again."

The waitress returned with two combination platters, each with a fajita, a taco, and a burrito. While they ate they talked very little. Eric thought about their conversation and wondered how much of what Dunlap told him was factual. Yet he found himself liking the guy.

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Eric went back to the Avery file when he returned to the station. He gave the medical examiner's report on Joel Hart a closer look. Something was not right. He was certain of it, but what? He put it aside and turned on the computer. He got his password, entered it, and browsed the database for the remainder of the afternoon. At five o'clock, he put the Avery file in the top desk drawer, figuring to return it to the record's room the following morning. Then he remembered the medical examiner's report on Lucia Avery in his briefcase. He took it out, threw it a cursory look and saw what had been troubling him. He got the Avery file from the drawer, took out the medical examiner's report on Joel Hart and set it on the desk next to the medical examiner's report on Lucia Avery. There was a subtle similarity in some of the letters in the two, though John Lowery's signature was on one medical examiner report and Justin Lancaster's was on the other. Eric realized he could be looking at a forgery and needed an older John Lowery signature for comparison. He pulled up a computer file on a woman killed in a Cross Mills automobile accident. The signature did not have the clarity needed for a comparison. He jotted down the case number on a dated desk calendar page and tore it from the holder.

Tomorrow he'd look at the back-up file.

## **CHAPTER 4**

Before Gary Benton became Mayor of Cross Mills, he was an attorney and financial advisor for the Elkington Corporation—a large real estate and construction company with operations throughout New England. Hugh Elkington, the father of Benton’s second wife, Ashley, owned the company.

Benton embraced frugality. He always feared that everything could be lost. He had seen it happen to others, individuals and companies losing their property and assets only to be gobbled up by other people and companies, namely the Elkington Corporation. Benton saw nothing shameful about that, and he vowed he’d never let it happen to him. His first wife, Cheryl, spent money recklessly, sometimes for items she never used or clothing she never wore. Eventually they divorced. She relinquished custody of their son, Scott, to her ex husband. After the divorce, Benton moved to Cross Mills with Scott and she stayed in Manchester.

Ashley met Benton at Elkington corporate headquarters in Manchester and they married a year after his divorce became final. They resided in an eight room, white two-story New England style colonial. Two majestic Norway maples stood tall in the large front yard. The home was surrounded by a three-foot high fieldstone wall with two openings, one at the walkway to the front door, the other at the driveway opening.

Gary Benton set a budget document on a nearby end table. He took off his glasses, set them down and ran his fingers through his gray thinning hair. He glanced at his watch and saw that it had stopped.

Ashley entered the den. “Do you know what time it is?”

“My watch stopped. What time is it?” he asked rising from a recliner.

“It’s one-o’clock. You have to get ready. The others will be coming soon.” She smiled and handed him a long, narrow gift-wrapped package. “A stopped watch will no longer be a problem,” she said.

He tore apart the ribbon and paper, opened the box and his eyes widened as he gazed at a shiny gold Rolex. “Honey, this must have cost several thousand dollars.”

“Is that all you can say?” she said warmly. “Turn it over.”

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He turned the watch over and saw an engraved inscription on its backside. It read: *Love Ashley*. "It's beautiful, Ashley."

"Let me help you with it," she said. He removed the other watch from his wrist, tossed it onto the table and she slid the gold band over his hand. His eyes moved over her shapely figure. She was wearing a deep rose colored dress. A gold necklace caressed her slender neck. He gently touched her soft, wavy auburn hair, and she jerked her head back. "Don't touch. You'll mess it up. Now get moving."

Ashley, now thirty years old and eighteen years younger than her husband, married when she was twenty-five. She may have loved him early on in their marriage, but if she did, it did not last. She liked the role of being wife of a politician. She felt if it were not her husband, it would have been some other political aspirant. Being a mayor's wife was exciting and rewarding. The thought of being a governor's wife intoxicated her even more.

"Where's Scott?" he asked her. "I'd hate to have him around during this meeting."

"Don't worry about him," she said. "He's out for the afternoon. I let him take my car."

"He's going to be trouble for us during the campaign."

"He gets into minor skirmishes like any young man. The people understand that."

"Young man! The guy is twenty-two. When is he going to show some responsibility?"

"There's nothing you can do. You can't throw him out. That would look even worse. You leave Scott to me and you take care of your campaign."

She pushed her husband toward the door, then followed him and turned off the light.

When Moyer was asked to serve on Benton's campaign for governor committee, he said he would. How could he say no to the man that made him Chief? The first meeting came on the same day he planned to go to the Cross Mills High football game to see his son quarterback the team. Yet missing that game didn't bother him as much as the call he got from Justin Lancaster about Eric Bacon and Joel Hart.

Moyer hit the front doorbell to the Benton home.



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"You're early, Clint," Ashley said upon opening the door. "Gary and I weren't expecting you until two." She stepped outside, shut the door and placed her hand on his arm. Her soft touch aroused him and his heart began to race. He pulled back and looked into the house through the large bay window. "Don't worry, Clint. Gary is in the bedroom getting ready. You seem nervous. Is there a problem?"

"Justin Lancaster called me this morning."

"Who's Justin Lancaster?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

"He's the state medical examiner. One of my men visited him this morning."

"How do you know that?"

"Lancaster called and told me."

She looked at him, puzzled. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because my man was asking about the Joel Hart autopsy."

"Who is this man?"

"Eric Bacon. He's the new detective on the force."

"Why would he be looking into that?"

"How the hell would I know?"

"What did he find out?" she asked coolly.

"I don't know. Lancaster babbled something about dates. He said Bacon looked at the computer file. Why is Lancaster calling me?"

"Maybe it's because this Bacon works for you."

"Lancaster said we have a problem. Why would he say that?"

She brought her hand up to his face, touched him lightly and ran her slender fingers through his sand colored curly hair. "Why should there be a problem?"

He grasped her arm firmly and pulled it away. "Something tells me there is, Ashley, and somehow, all of a sudden I'm involved. Why after all these years this Lancaster calls me and says we have a problem. What the hell is going on? What is Lancaster talking about?"

"Stop it. You're hurting me."

Moyer squeezed her arm tighter, and she blurt out, "I got Lancaster to modify the autopsy Lowery performed on Hart."

"You what?"

"Don't sound so naïve, Clint. You were the police officer at the scene. You saw Hart's body. Weren't you surprised by Lancaster's testimony at the Avery trial? You never refuted it."

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Moyer let go of her arm. Then he looked around, as if thinking someone could be nearby. "I never questioned it because I had already compromised my role as a police officer by divulging information about the crime scene to you. What I told you about Hart's death was confidential. I never thought you would use the information."

"I had no choice. I couldn't allow the original autopsy findings to be released. Gary's political career would have been in jeopardy. Scott was there that night."

"Scott wasn't the only one with Hart that night."

"I know that, but I couldn't take the chance."

"And now you got me involved in this scheme of yours."

She chuckled. "You were already involved, Clint . . . with me."

"And it could cost me my job."

"You're overreacting."

"Am I? I could be part of a cover-up, and you say I'm overreacting."

"Forget about Lancaster. Forget about Joel Hart. Avery is dead. Joel Hart is dead. Forget about everything. It's behind us." She smiled. "I want to see my husband elected governor. We'll be working together toward that goal, so don't do anything foolish that will ruin my husband's chances."

Moyer looked at her, blankly. "Why would he even want me on this committee?"

"Because I recommended you like I recommended you for the chief's position."

"Your husband selected me because I was the most qualified."

"Think what you want. You would have still been patrolling the beat if it weren't for me. Let's say I did it in appreciation for your performance as a police officer, both in and outside the force," she responded wryly.

"Ashley, it's not a good idea for us to be working together again."

She placed her hand on his arm and gazed into his hazel eyes. "Don't worry, Clint, nothing will happen between us."

He yanked her arm away. Standing next to her he felt those same urges exploding within him as they did before, and he worried he'd weaken again as he did back then. They went inside and she offered him a drink. He declined. She sat on the couch and

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he chose a nearby chair. Nothing was said between them until he broke the silence. "I don't know what your husband could be expecting from me on the committee."

"Let him be the judge of that. He is very fond of you, Clint. Don't let him down."

Benton then entered the living room. He was wearing blue Dockers, a gray denim shirt open at the collar and Nike footwear. He eased back onto a maple rocker. "I'm happy you could be here today, Clint," he said. "I hope I didn't ruin any plans you may have had."

"I was planning to see Jeff play today. I dropped him off at the high school before I came here."

"I'm sorry, Clint. I forgot about the football game."

"It's no problem. He understood. There'll be more games. But I have to leave around four to pick him up."

"If working on the committee is going to be an inconvenience, I'll understand if you want to bow out."

"I'd like to help, but I just don't know where I'd fit in."

"I'm not expecting you to actively campaign for me, Clint. I need you for your input with law enforcement issues. I value your opinion. And if I'm successful, you could be my next head of the state police. So what do you say? Are you in?"

Ashley turned to Moyer. "I had no idea Gary had you in mind for the position, Clint. He never discussed it with me. You'd be the perfect choice for it." *His silence of her involvement in a cover-up would be guaranteed now. How could he destroy a chance to be head of the state's law enforcement community?*

"I'd be foolish for me to say no." Moyer wondered how much influence she *did* have with her husband's decision.

"Good," Benton came back. "But let's keep this discussion to ourselves. I haven't even mentioned it to the others."

"Who are the others?" Moyer asked.

"Tom Austin, Bryan Doyle, and Kirk Springer. They will be joining us for this kickoff meeting. All three worked for me during my first campaign for mayor. I was an underdog back then, and with their help, I pulled it off."

"Tom is a lawyer. I've known him since high school. Politics always interested him, but he always felt he lacked the outgoing demeanor to be a viable candidate. Bryan manages an advertising firm in Concord. He's an animated person. He can take banal

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topics and develop them into advertising messages that leap from television screens. Kirk is a corporate executive. He has a knack to get the best out of others, getting them to go beyond their potential.”

Shortly after Benton gave the brief bios, the three men arrived. Introductions followed, and he opened: “I plan to announce my candidacy for governor in a few weeks, so you all know why we’re here.”

Springer jumped in. “Warren Kresch is planning to announce around the same time. He’s President of the New Hampshire Senate, and he’ll get the party’s endorsement. If you announce around the same time, people may not even hear your name. It’s best if you wait until after Kresch announces.”

“Yours will be the last of the two names heard, sir,” Moyer added.

Benton looked at Moyer and smiled. “Not bad for a police officer. Thanks, Clint.” He turned to the others. “Let’s shoot for sometime after Thanksgiving. Let Kresch go with his, and we’ll take it from there. Bryan, I want you to develop an announcement speech for me.”

“What issues are you going to address?” Doyle asked.

“The death penalty is going to be a hotly debated issue,” Benton stated. “Governor Roker is pushing to abolish it. That’s going to hurt him. People in this state do not want to change the law.”

“How long has it been since New Hampshire executed anyone?” Austin asked while looking around. “Does anybody know?”

“It’s been around fifty years,” Moyer answered. “That’s why Roker wants to abolish it.”

“If it hasn’t been used, I’d say it’s been a good deterrent,” Austin stated.

“The murder rate in New Hampshire is about the same as in Maine, and Maine does not have the death penalty.” Moyer argued.

Benton looked at Moyer, confused. “If I’m reading you correctly, I’d say you’re against the death penalty.”

“I’m just pointing out that it’s not a deterrent as some believe,” Moyer came back.

“Gary’s in favor of the death penalty and I am also,” Ashley intervened. “Polls show the people in this state want to keep it. If

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we want to see my husband elected governor, we should give the people what they want.”

“Those against the death penalty sometimes forget the victim’s family and how it effects them,” Benton added. “I think of the anguish Joel Hart’s family went through after he was killed and what they may have felt toward his killer.”

“As gruesome as Joel Hart’s death was, the death penalty sentence would never have been handed down to Avery in that situation,” Moyer said.

“I am aware of that,” Benton came back testily. “I was trying to make a point on the issue.”

“Let’s not labor over this one issue,” Ashley interjected. “We have a lot of work to do this afternoon.”

“That we do,” Benton remarked. “Now what else should we touch upon this afternoon?”

During the first quarter, the Eastbridge offense moved through Cross Mill’s larger defensive line with little effort, opening holes like a seven-ten split in a bowling alley. By halftime, though, Cross Mills defense cohered and in the second half, quarterback, Jeff Moyer, on three occasions found open receivers near the end zone and rifled passes to them. With the game’s end nearing, victory appeared imminent for Cross Mills.

Eric and his family were at the fifty-yard line, eight rows up in the stands. He and Russ discussed the game’s movement with every play. Jodie feigned interest in the sport and Susan twitted. When the scoreboard clock showed five minutes remaining in the game, though he was aware it could end up twenty or more with time outs, penalties, and coaches’ changes, Eric decided to leave.

At a pizza restaurant, Susan spotted a man enter the restaurant and stumble as he approached the counter. She giggled. “Mommy, look at the man. He almost fell.”

“That’s the mayor’s son, Scott,” Eric observed, “and he’s drunk. I have to take care of this.”

“What are you going to do?” Jodie asked.

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"If he drove here, he's not leaving in a car." Eric said. He left the booth and got to the counter as the bar tender brought over a foamy draught and placed it in front of Scott. "No more for him," Eric intervened. "Take it away. I'll pay for it." He handed the waitress a five-dollar bill.

"What do you think you're doing," Scott said, his words barely coherent.

Eric moved closer to him, and speaking softly, he said, "I know you've had too much to drink and I know you are Scott Benton, the mayor's son. If you're driving, you shouldn't be."

"I'm fine. I can drive."

"I'm a police officer," Eric said. "I can pick you up for DWI. Now you don't want that, do you? So why don't you give me your keys and I'll drive you home."

Scott reached into his coat pocket, took out his keys and tossed them on the counter. The waitress returned and Eric pointed to the booth where Jodie and the children were. "Do me a favor and tell my wife to meet me outside. She'll take care of our check."

He and Scott left quietly.

Later at the Benton Home, The floodlights outside the Benton home came on when Eric pulled into the driveway. Benton and Ashley stepped outside.

Eric got out of the car and Scott followed him. "Good evening, Mayor. I'm Eric Bacon."

"You're the new detective. I heard you were on board, but I haven't had a chance to talk to you. My apologies."

"Not a problem, sir." They shook hands and Eric handed him a set of keys.

Ashley eyed Eric, suspiciously. "Is there a problem?"

"No ma'am."

"This is my wife, Ashley," Benton said.

Eric grasped her hand firmly. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Benton."

"Then why are you here?" Ashley asked.

"I drove Scott home. He had a little too much to drink. I happened to be in the same restaurant when I noticed him." Eric nodded toward the station wagon on the street. "My wife and children are in that wagon."

"Were there any problems?" Benton asked.

"We left the restaurant quietly. There was no scene."

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"Well thank you for handling this in a professional manner," Benton added.

"Glad to help before something serious happened."

"Why don't you and your family come inside?" Ashley offered.

"Thank you, but we must be getting home." Eric shook their hands again and left.

Scott crashed on the couch, and Ashley approached him. "Can I get you some coffee, Scott?"

"I'm fine," he mumbled.

"Fine!" Benton barked. "You're a mess . . . a disgusting mess. That man just saved your ass. I hope you realize that."

"No, Mr. Mayor. He saved your ass," Scott came back. "You don't give a damn what happens to me. You never have and never will."

Benton hurled the back of his hand across his son's face. "Don't talk that way to me, you poor excuse of a human being."

Blood dribbled from the corner of Scott's mouth and he rubbed the back of his hand across his chin. "What's the matter, Mr. Mayor? You don't like to hear the truth?"

Benton raised his hand to strike again, and Ashley held him back. "Don't Gary. Hitting him won't solve anything."

Benton glared at his son. "You better straighten yourself out or your ass is out of here."

"You would never throw me out. How will it look to the public? I can go on screwing up again and again and you'll never throw me out. Think what it would do to your image if you did."

"Don't push me."

"I've been thinking about leaving anyway."

"Go ahead," Benton said.

"Stop it you two," Ashley yelled. She turned to Scott. "Why don't you go up to bed? Tomorrow we'll talk when you two have calmed down."

"Tomorrow, I'm gone," Scott came back.

"You do what you want, Scott," Benton said.

Scott vaulted toward the stairway and disappeared into the upstairs hall.

### *Beyond The Red Lantern*

The following morning, Benton went to Scott's bedroom to mollify the heated exchange he had with his son the night before. He found an empty bed.

Ashley came to the room. "How could he have left without us hearing him?"

"What does it matter how he did it? He said he'd do this. I didn't believe he would."

"The boy's twenty-two. He's an adult. You can't control him anymore. We planned to see my father today, so let's forget about Scott for the time being."

Hugh Elkington, a widower for many years, resided in a two-story brick house by the Merrimack River in the northern part of Manchester. The home had eleven rooms and a spacious three-car garage. Three automobiles occupied the bays at one time. Now only his Lincoln Town Car was there, and next to it, two cold and empty stalls.

Emma, the latest of live-in domestics in the Elkington household, was getting out of a taxi as Benton and Ashley arrived.

"Your father should be in the den," she said detachedly.

Annoyed by the maid's indifference, Ashley snapped, "Take us to him."

They went inside and Emma showed them to the den. Ashley's father was slouched in a large upholstered leather chair asleep. His glasses rested on the end of his nose, and the Sunday business section of the newspaper was spread across his lap. The fire in the fieldstone fireplace had burned down to flickering embers.

Emma nudged the seventy-five year old man. "Mr. Elkington . . . your daughter and her husband are here."

He awakened slowly and lifted himself to an upright sitting position. He pushed his glasses back with his index finger and set the newspaper on a nearby table.

Emma left and Ashley took off her coat and tossed it over a chair. "Does she leave you alone often like she did this morning?"

"It's not a problem," her father said.

"I don't like it. Something could happen to you while she's away."



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"I can't expect her to be at my side all the time. She does have days off."

"You're making too much of her absence, Ashley," Benton intervened while taking off his coat. "Some of his men come by during the day. I did it when I worked for him. He's hardly left alone."

"I'm talking about strangers entering this house," Ashley said.

"I've solved that problem. I bought a handgun from one of my workers." The elderly man gestured toward the desk. "It's in that top right hand drawer."

"If you're in bed and an intruder entered your home, how would you ever get to the gun?" Benton argued.

"If the gun makes my father feel more secure, then let it be," Ashley countered.

Emma returned with a pot of tea. She filled three cups and left.

"Gary has decided to run for governor," Ashley said.

"I knew it would happen eventually," Elkington said. "When you worked for me, even before you ran for mayor, I saw politics in your future."

"We need money . . . lots of it," Ashley explained. "There'll be a primary, and Gary isn't going to get the party endorsement."

"Warren Kresch is going to get it," Elkington uttered.

"That's why it's going to take a lot of money to topple him."

"I'll give you as much as you need," her father offered.

"There are limitations set by law, Hugh," Benton said.

"We can get around that," Ashley added. "Give the money to me and it becomes Gary's and mine, jointly. Gary can spend any amount of his own money for the campaign. It's perfectly legal."

"There are federal tax rules regarding gifts, Ashley," Benton argued.

"You'll get your money, regardless," Elkington said. "I'll talk to my finance officer about it."

"Thank you, Father."

"Yes, thanks, Hugh," Benton added.

Ashley cracked a smile as she sipped her tea. This campaign is off to a fine start, she said to herself. Scott's gone. There will be no more arguments. And we will get all the money we need.

## **CHAPTER 6**

When the long daylight hours of summer gave way to the rapidly approaching short dark days of winter, he grew more despondent. It was a bad time for him—the nearing holidays, the stillness that blanketed the countryside, and the idleness that filled most of his day. He'd stand at the window and stare out to the darkness, reliving the events of a night four years ago, so vividly in his mind, the jury foreman's words so clear: "On the count of murder in the second degree, we find the defendant, Kevin Avery, guilty."

A year before the trial, Avery and his wife, Lucia dined at a small Italian restaurant. In the morning they were going to Italy to tour the country, taking in both coasts, and while there, planned to visit her relatives in Carovilli, a small town in the southern part of the country. Outside the restaurant, as he and Lucia walked to their car, Avery saw a vehicle backing up toward his grey Acura Integra. Suddenly, the sound of shattering plastic pierced his brain. He ran to his car, saw a broken taillight and yelled for the driver of the other car to stop, but the driver sped away. Avery and Lucia jumped into their car and chased after him. He eventually lost sight of the car he had been following, so he decided to forget the chase. He turned off the road, was heading home when moments later he spotted a car stopped at a traffic light up ahead. It looked like the one he had been chasing. The light turned green, the car moved out and Avery sped forward. He closed in on the car, pulled up along side of it and forced the driver off the road onto an abandoned parking lot. Then he grabbed a knife from the glove compartment, telling Lucia he'd only use it to defend himself.

Concealing the knife at his side, he raced to the other car. The driver rolled down his window and looked at Avery, puzzled. They argued about the collision and the driver denied that he was at the restaurant. The driver then shoved the transmission in reverse and Avery reached inside for the keys. The driver backed up, stopped abruptly, and Avery hung on. Enraged, he pushed the knife into the man's shoulder, Then with a dazed look in his eyes as if he could not recollect what had just happened, he backed away and noticed blood on his hand. *God, what the hell did I do?* Horror-struck, he dropped the knife, ran to his car, and sped away. The following

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morning he was arrested for the murder of Joel Hart, and he learned that Hart was not the man that backed into his car.

After the guilty verdict, Avery, out on bail, left the courthouse with Lucia. They decided to end their lives. Being apart would be too painful. But when they arrived at the bridge, he had changed his mind. He could not go through with it. Parole would come some day and they would be together again and it'd be as it was, he had said to her. For her, it could be no other way. She could not go on living without him at her side. He pleaded not to go on with this madness, but he could not her. Hands together, they began their ascent to the top of the railing, and he moved to pull her back. He lost his footing and felt his hold on her weakening, her hand slipping from his grasp. Then he lost her and she plunged to the icy river below. He wanted to join her, but the thought of bringing himself to an early demise was so terrifying. He just couldn't do it. He asked her to understand and begged for her forgiveness.

He hitchhiked to Manchester and boarded a bus to Montreal. In a restroom at the bus station, he snapped his bankcard, driver's license, and any other identification into small pieces and flushed everything away. Getting across the boarder was easier than he thought. He figured it was only because word of his disappearance had not surfaced yet, but he knew the chase for him was not far away.

He migrated west through Canada by hitching rides. He stayed in small towns and worked in bars, restaurants, and motels doing custodial work, and only long enough to get the cash he needed to bring him to his next stop. The owners of the establishments never questioned him about his past. Maybe they didn't care.

In Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Avery darkened his hair and got it cut very short. An optometrist fitted him with a pair of silver metal-framed glasses, replacing the contacts he wore for years. He was six-feet two inches tall and had dark eyes set deep beneath dense eyebrows. The weight he added during the westward trek made him appear older than his thirty-five years. He became Kenneth Angel, a name taken from a death notice he saw in a newspaper, and easy to get used to because the initials were identical to his given name. And from someone who knew someone, he obtained a Maine driver's license with his new

### *Beyond The Red Lantern*

identity. It got him across the border to Wayne, Alaska, a small town in the northern part of the state.

Perimeter lights lit up the outside of a two-story log cabin-styled home. In a fenced-in enclosure, dogs stirred about in the frigid air when a dark haired woman entered and closed the gate behind her. She cleaned the area of canine feces, fed the dogs, and put down fresh water.

Karen Wood was part Chinook. She had short black wavy hair, deep brown eyes and a skin tone that hinted her ancestry. She raised and trained sled dogs. During the summer she offered mock sled dog runs to tourists, one or two people on wheeled sleds pulled by her dogs for a quarter-mile round trip along a macadam road. During the winter, she did the real thing—slightly longer jaunts on snow-covered trails. Her dream was to do the Iditarod someday. Avery moved in with her after meeting her in Wayne. She was looking for someone to help with the dogs and he accepted willingly. It gave him a place to live. He learned sled dog racing from her, and occasionally ran short races himself. She noticed from the very beginning he had a way with her dogs. The older ones displayed a trust in him as if he had been with them since they were weaned. Karen knew very little about him. All he told her was that he was from Maine, married once before and his wife had left him. She assumed he was divorced.

Inside the house, she found Avery as she left him: standing by the window, gazing out. She took off her hooded fur-lined coat and hung it by the door. “It seems a lot colder than usual,” she said, thinking the casual opening would get a response from him.

“This time of the year is so depressing,” he responded. “The days get shorter and shorter, and daylight doesn’t come until late in the morning, and before you know it, it’s dark again. It’s tough to get used to.”

She always felt that something in his past was troubling him, yet she never pushed him to offer anything more than what he had already told her. “You should be used to it by now. You’ve been here four years.” She paused. “I guess you’ll always be a *cheechako*,” she added lightheartedly.

“What the hell is a *cheechako*?” he came back.

“It’s the Chinook word for a newcomer.”

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He cracked a thin smile. "You've been here a lot longer than I have. Maybe someday it won't bother me." He went silent momentarily, and then asked, "The dogs all squared away?"

"Buffy is nearing the end of her gestation period. She's going to have to come inside."

"I'll get the spare bedroom set up for her." He went over to her and planted a soft kiss on her lips. "Let's get breakfast."

As they approached the kitchen, she casually mentioned, "I've been thinking about getting a computer."

"Why would you want one of those things?"

"A computer will help me keep my records in order. It's better than having them piled up in boxes in the living room."

"You don't know anything about computers."

"I can learn."

"You'll never get me to touch one of those things."



*Detective Eric Bacon looks into an old murder case, and suspects a cover-up. New to the department, trusting no one, and acting alone, he goes on a relentless pursuit to get at the truth. As he closes in on what really happened, his prime witness is found dead. It is ruled a suicide. Eric knows it was murder, and who the killers are, but must prove it was a homicide.*

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