

Don Harriman is kidnapped and murdered and no one seems to know why. The part owner of Blue Sun sends Private Investigator C. J. Cavanaugh a mysterious text just moments before he is abducted. The text leads C. J. down roads of intrigue, narcotics trafficking, violence and murder.

BLUE SUN: A C. J. Cavanaugh Mystery

by Michael R. Lane

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BLUE SUN

A C.J. Cavanaugh Mystery

MICHAEL R. LANE

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Emancipation
The Gem Connection
UFOs and God (a collection of short stories)

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CHAPTER ONE

The two men had surprised Don Harriman. While he was behind a closed bedroom door working on his laptop, they slipped into his house through the back door. Don sensed more than heard them. He had hoped it would not come to this. Now it was too late. Someone had found him out and sicced the wolves on him. Until then he'd been both lucky and good. It would take an act of God to save him now.

Don closed the application he was working in and started a specially-designed scrubber program that would strip his hard disk of any activity. He yanked out the power cord and the laptop battery kicked in. Don waited for a couple of deep breaths, then tossed the laptop out of the second floor window. It shattered against the concrete walkway which he was aiming for. He hoped the scrubber program had enough time to remove any critical information beyond recovery, in case the laptop was not destroyed.

He clearly heard the intruders now. They were making their way toward the stairs. If the bedroom door had sported a lock, Don would have used it to buy more time. He raced to his nightstand and yanked open the top drawer. His Glock was gone. Don had been set up.

It was too late for the police. If these men were who he thought they were, Don would not live to hear the patrol car siren answering

his 9-1-1. There was no way out. Circumstances forced his hand. He had no choice.

Don pulled out his smartphone to telephone the police when he saw a business card skewed in the corner, hiding away in the same drawer where his Glock should have been. It bore the name of someone he had been trying to get closer to, lately. He called the handwritten number on the back of the card. It went directly to voicemail. That took him by surprise. There was no time to try the office number printed on the front. He ended the call and sent a hasty text message to the same person; the sum total of which would become his brief legacy.

Two men wearing black ski masks burst into his bedroom just after Don had tossed his smartphone under the bed. Don rushed them. The second man sidestepped Don, leaving his partner to take the full brunt of his assault. Don was about to punch the man pinned beneath him when he felt something cold and hard pressed against the base of his skull.

“Move and you die,” the man he had missed said in a bland, monotone voice. Don did not need to look to recognize the business end of a pistol; one that felt as though it were equipped with a silencer. He did not move. “Where’s the diary?” the same voice said.

The man Don had tackled closed the bedroom windows and shut the curtains. Bright sunlight was reduced to back lighting, giving the room a sensuous feel. At gunpoint, they duct taped Don’s wrists behind his back, and then taped his ankles together. Don Harriman could barely stand.

For the fifth time, the man Don had missed asked: “Where’s the diary?” He was a tall man with icy blue eyes. His tone had mutated from stone cold to biting annoyance. He had yet to receive a satisfactory answer from Don. As punishment, he began to strike his captive, each preceding blow more ferocious than its predecessor. All body shots. Icy Blue was taking a page from boxing: Punish the body and the head will fall. Don could withstand the pain. For the moment, he welcomed it. It gave him something corporeal to grasp on to: life at its worst; but life nonetheless.

Blue Eyes’ shorter, brown-eyed partner remained silent and nonchalant about the whole affair. He firmly held Don’s bound wrists, now and then giving them a sharp, painful jerk. Don continued playing dumb. It was his only chance of survival. Blue Eyes hit him with a

punch that knocked the wind out of him. The blow convinced Don to try a different response other than “What diary?” It might open a door he was currently blind to; maybe buy him time for a miracle.

“If you’re talking about my real estate books,” Don said, still trying to catch his breath, “I keep them on the computer in the den.”

“Not those books—and you know it, asshole!” Blue Eyes snapped.

Don gulped, breathed heavily, then said, “Then I’m at a loss.”

“We know you’ve been keeping tabs on the business,” Blue Eyes said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Don struggled to catch his breath.

Blue Eyes got in Don’s face. The same mask openings that allowed his assailants to see and talk to him allowed Don a glimpse of who they were. Icy Blue had clear white skin, thin lips, dishwater blond facial hair, and matching eyebrows. Brown Eyes had dark brown eyebrows, white skin with brown freckles, fuller lips, no facial hair that he could see, and garlic breath. These were details that, Don knew, did him no good at the moment.

“Maybe this will refresh your memory,” Icy Blue said, punching Don twice, hard in the midsection, forcing Don to double over. Brown Eyes let go of him and Don fell face first onto the pristine downy carpet. Blue Eyes knelt on one knee, speaking directly into his ear.

“Maybe I’m not being specific enough,” he said. “We know the information’s not on the PC in the den. We know it’s not on your laptop, or any flash drives, or disks, or any other kind of peripheral you have. That leaves that little black diary you keep writing things down in. Now, where is it?”

For Blue Eyes to know about the diary, one thing had to be true. Someone had told him. Don thought about it for a moment while trying to breathe. Only two people knew about the diary besides him. One of them was behind this. Don bet he knew which one.

“My diary,” Don blurted out before wheezing for air. “Is filled” . . . wheeze . . . “with personal stuff” . . . wheeze . . . “Nothing you’d be interested in!”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” Blue Eyes said.

Don was not going to give them what they wanted. He suspected they had come to that realization as well. Anger and pride leaped in where patience and meekness should have prevailed. This game had gone on long enough.

“Go to hell!” Don said.

“You first,” Blue Eyes said.

Icy Blue nodded to Brown Eyes. Brown Eyes drew his pistol. It was also equipped with a silencer. Brown Eyes pressed the weapon against Don’s throbbing temple. Don was breathing a little easier now. An odd sense of relief washed over him as he accepted the inevitable.

“For the last time: where’s the diary?” Icy Blue said. This was it. Don closed his eyes. He tried to pray, but his mind drew a blank.

“Oh, my God!”

It was a woman’s voice. Don’s eyes popped open. All three men stared at a woman in a crisp greenhouse cleaner’s uniform, who stood frozen in the doorway. Her hands pressed to her mouth in disbelief.

“Run!” Don shouted.

Suzanne Kwong bolted. Icy Blue took after her in hot pursuit. Garlic Breath taped Don’s mouth shut. There was the sound of two people running at breakneck speed, followed by a twinkling of quiet indented by the vicious slamming of the front door.

Icy Blue returned almost as fast as he’d left. Suzanne could be heard outside, screaming her lungs out for help.

“We’ve gotta get outta here,” were the inaugural words Brown Eyes spoke. “The neighbors will be all over this place in no time. Not to mention the cops.”

For the first time, Don saw concern in Blue Eyes. *A miracle*, Don thought. *Scream, Suzy! Scream!*

CHAPTER TWO

Suzanne ran down the hedge-lined walkway to the sidewalk screaming, “Help! Somebody help!”

It was mid-afternoon on a Wednesday. Most affluent suburban Crystal Gardeners were away at work.

“What in the hell is going on?” a potbellied man with a blond ponytail said, rushing to Suzanne’s side with a loaded .45 in his hand.

“*Two men...with guns...*,” Suzanne squeezed out through her panic, sounding as winded as if she had just completed a marathon. She warily glanced at the weapon.

“What’s happening, Lock?” A brown-eyed woman with wavy hair and tanned skin jogged up to them, settling on the other side of Suzanne. Both towered over the diminutive maid.

“I don’t know, Jan. I just got here,” the potbellied man said.

“*They have...Don...*” Suzanne gasped for air. “*Men...with guns.*”

“*What?*” Lock said. “What are you talking about?”

Suzanne continued her fight for air while struggling to speak.

“Just calm down, dear,” Jan said, “and tell us what you saw.”

Suzanne took in a few asthmatic breaths. She was hyperventilating. The few neighbors who were at home trickled cautiously onto the scene.

“I saw...two men...with guns...holding Don...hostage.” The small crowd gasped.

“Where?” Jan asked.

“Upstairs...I think...they’re going...to kill him.”

The crowd broke out into a worried murmur.

“I’m going in,” Lock said, marching toward the house.

“No!” Suzanne said. “Didn’t you...hear...what I said? *They have guns.*”

“What do you think this is?” Lock said, holding up his .45. “I didn’t hear any gunshots. Did any of you?” he asked the crowd.

The consensus was no.

“In this neighborhood, a gunshot would sound like a canon being fired. That could mean Don’s still alive. All I know is: we’re not going to find out by standing around out here.” Lock turned and marched toward the house.

“Wait!” Janice said. “I’m going with you. Don is my friend, too.”

“I’m calling the police,” a plump, elderly woman wearing Mom jeans and an embroidered tunic said as Lock and Jan entered the house. She separated herself from the crowd and made the call from her smartphone. The crowd huddled around Suzanne. Her breathing remained rapid, but she felt her hyperventilation subsiding. She continued to explain, as best she could, what she had just witnessed inside the Harriman house. The captive audience offered their ears, along with sympathetic words and appeasing looks.

“The police are on their way,” the caller said a minute later, joining the others. Silence fell upon them. It seemed as though they were holding their collective breaths.

Everyone stared at the Harriman house as if it were haunted. The two were inside for a few heart-stopping minutes. For the people anxiously waiting outside it seemed much longer. When Janice and John emerged, they said they'd found nothing no men, no body, and no sign of a struggle. Suzanne remained persistent about what she had seen. The consoling neighbors had no reason to doubt her. The police were far more skeptical.

CHAPTER THREE

The weather was unusually clear and warm for early spring in Portland, Oregon. Local meteorologists were predicting a dry, hot summer. That suited me fine. I love hot weather. Love the sun. A sun worshiper in this part of the world is an oxymoron—or, perhaps, just a moron; depending on your point of view. But there is an intoxicating allure about the wet Pacific Northwest that keeps me here.

Perhaps the answer lies in the fresh air and clean water. Perhaps it's the rich diversity of deserts and mountains, lakes and valleys, rivers, beaches, and forests. Maybe it's the genuine respect Northwesterners show for the environment. Maybe it's the coalescence of nature, community, business, and art. Or just maybe it was days like the jewel I was experiencing that made bearing the months of gray climate worthwhile? Whatever it was, it had me hooked, for the time being.

I had crossed my six-foot-four-inch-long legs and eased my muscular body back against the firm wooden slats of a Waterfront Park bench. My deep green trench coat settled on me like a cocoon. My beige wool slacks gave my body room to breathe in the way that I liked. My investigative partner said my earth-brown turtleneck brought out the copper color of my skin. The same woman described me as her square-jawed, dimpled-cheeked, big handed, big feet, goatee-wearing,

full-lipped, browned-eyed, razor-sharp, Coppertone sugar bear. She was wrong about me being her sugar bear in any way. I took her word on the rest.

Before me lay the peaceful Willamette River. Behind me, a wide stretch of manicured emerald grass flowed in both directions. To my left and right, apple and cherry blossom trees lined an equal stretch of paved walkway. Serenity rested her soothing hand upon my psyche, bidding me respite. I surrendered. All around me, people stricken with spring fever were at play at the feet of nature: a touch of Eden; a smidgen of heaven. I felt it, drawn for the moment into quiet bliss.

I had recently wrapped up a routine investigation for Lunsford Insurance. A policyholder had filed a long-term disability claim on a severe back injury he had suffered while on the job. I shadowed him for two months. Everything checked out. The man was recuperating, but his back injury was legitimate. I would recommend that Lunsford continue to honor his claim. That left one case on my docket: a suspicious house fire involving an even more suspicious burn patient.

The air moved delicately. All over the city, fauna and flora burst to life. The artificial ring tone of “The Razor Rim” by Wynton Marsalis interrupted my internal retreat for the second time in less than a minute. Only Destini and Renita had my cell number. They were two people in my life I dared not ignore.

Snatching my smartphone from the nylon holster clipped to my black leather belt, I checked my voicemail only to find the call had been terminated. A text message had come in. An indecipherable message popped up on my screen. The message made no sense. *Electronic gibberish*, I thought. Turning off the phone, I jammed it back into its holster. I tried returning to my serene state of mind. The mood was gone.

Renita had coerced me into having a smartphone. We already had home, office, and car phones that included voicemail systems, along with email, video, and digital document capabilities. We didn’t need another line of communication as far as I was concerned—but not according to my tech-savvy partner.

“A smartphone is a 21st century necessity,” Renita told me. “In today’s world, you need to have instant access, so stop being a dinosaur.”

“Nonsense,” I replied. “Today’s world was in little more need of instant communication than yesterday’s. People have been suckered into believing that nonsense.”

Renita didn’t give up. She stayed on my case about getting a smartphone. Renita tried selling me on the ideas that it was a great way to stay connected to the office and was an invaluable tool to have in case of emergencies. I refused. While I loved being an investigator, that didn’t mean I wanted it to inhabit every facet of my life. In terms of the emergency angle, Renita had me there. I could see how a handheld mobile communication device could come in handy in a pinch.

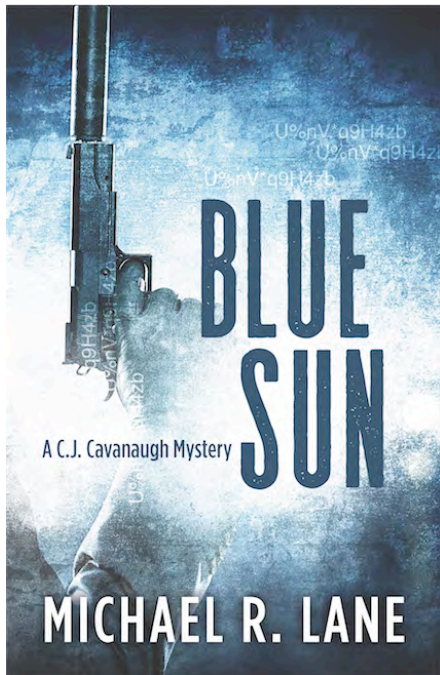
The world had gone into overkill with instant communication, as far as I was concerned. It had already redefined personal space. There was little opportunity for a still moment to pause and think. Every incident in one’s life had somehow become worthy of calling, texting, recording or video recording, posting, or tweeting about. I wondered how much progress the great minds of the world would have made if someone were phoning, texting, or tweeting them every minute about some trivial matter that could wait for another time. Peace of mind was out of the question. It made me wonder if John Lennon’s chant for an end to war could be extended to satellite communication, as well.

Renita didn’t listen. My willful partner got me a smartphone. Renita purchased it as a work tool, citing that it would make us more efficient. I still wasn’t buying it. There was nothing wrong with our efficiency. In fact, we were already incredibly efficient. Renita left me little choice. She had signed a one-year service contract on behalf of the Cavanaugh Investigative Agency. I have a soft spot for the kid. If I didn’t, I would have fired her for making such an unauthorized purchase. Renita knew how frugal I could be at times, and was banking on that to force my hand.

She was right. I wouldn’t let company money go to waste. I agreed to carry the damn thing for a year. If I didn’t like it, Renita agreed we wouldn’t renew the contract and that would be the end of it.

Destini had yet to call me on my cell. I suspected it was her way of not lending support to one of Renita’s ideas. That, and the fact she knew I often had the phone turned off. That led me to the logical assumption that the message was from Renita. I decided to check it out in case the garbled communication was important. It was time to get back to the office, anyway. I needed to finalize my back injury report.

I started toward my downtown office; but not before taking one last look around, at Eden.



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