



GEORGE WRIGHT
PADGETT

Cruel
Devices

Cruel Devices

George Wright Padgett





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For Mary, who always believed.

ONE

IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH SEX, though the sex had been good at times. In fact, physical attraction had played an insignificant role in Gavin Curtis's brief affair with grad student Monica Garcia. It'd been about regaining the control that the bestselling author had felt he'd forfeited to his publicist and wife.

Josephine Garner had served as his publicist for two years before they were married, for the five years of their marriage, and ever since it had ended. They had managed to salvage the working relationship from the rubble of the divorce, and now Gavin had what he wanted—he got to make the rules again.

Usually.

"You *have* to get William something," Josephine pleaded over the receiver. "He's turning seventy-five."

Gavin glared at the picture of her on his phone and then back up at the line of people before him. He leaned back in the uncomfortable folding chair the store had supplied him with. The line went on forever, and the signing was just getting started. "I should? Why? Shouldn't he be getting me things by now? After all, my books put Regal Press on the map in the first place."

Gavin intended to get the old man something special. He just didn't know what yet. Goading Josephine was a bonus.

"Your manuscripts are the only ones that he edits since his retirement," the irritated voice on the phone said. "Look, I'm not going to argue with you about this." There was a brief pause before Josephine added, "I shouldn't have to remind you that he's your editor *and* a professional friend."

A gangly teenage boy with acne approached the table.

Josephine continued, "I know that you've got to get going to the event. I found a bottle of Cheval Blanc '64 online. We can both give it to him next week."

"Bad idea," he told her as he received the book from the teenager.

"Rick . . . uh . . . my name is Rick," the boy said with nervous awe.

Gavin nodded in acknowledgment but continued speaking to Josephine. "That's probably the worst gift you could get."

"But it's a six-hundred-dollar bottle of wine."

"That may be," he said, cradling the phone between his shoulder and ear to pick up his pen, "but Bill Cavanaugh is a recovering alcoholic. How is it that you don't remember that?"

Josephine sighed. "Jeez. I did forget that."

Gavin grinned in triumph as he signed the book. "Why can't you just buy him tickets to a Yankees game or a Broadway show? Or how about a cruise or something for him and Beverly?"

The teenager reached for the book, but Gavin dispassionately slapped his hand away.

"No, not that. He's more of a shut-in than you are except when he's doing his motorcycle thing. Oh, I'll think of something."

"Nothing too expensive. Unless I can write it off," Gavin said, watching the boy before him gnaw at a hangnail on his thumb.

"Gavin, he's your *friend*."

"Thanks, Mr. Curtis," the teenager said as he reached for the signed book for a second time. "I've read all of your work, but my favorites are the Damien Marksman novels."

Gavin raised his eyebrows and looked over his bifocals. "You've read everything and yet you favor warlock vampire detective stories?" His tone was acidic.

The fan's skinny body stiffened. He slowly pulled his hand away from the table as if he had accidentally roused a sleeping Bengal tiger. He stammered, "Y-yeah, even your short stories in *Vampyrus Magazine*."

"Everything? Ever hear of *The Serpentine Protocol*?"

"Gavin?" Josephine asked. "Who are you talking to?"

The boy tried to look away, but Gavin locked an unblinking stare on him that demanded eye contact.

"Is that something new?" Rick asked.

"Hardly," Gavin said, still ignoring Josephine's voice on the phone. "If all you've read are the vampire-detective novels of mine, you're missing out. Check out *Serpentine*. It's my espionage novel from a few years ago. It's kinda Ian Fleming with the edginess of a Palahniuk novel."

"Gavin!" the voice on the phone yelled.

He shoved his cell at the dumbfounded Rick. "Here, Nick. It's my publicist, Josephine Garner."

"Uh . . . hello, Miss Garner?"

After a moment, the teenager's face formed a smile as he relayed his full name and address to Josephine.

Gavin's smirk melted.

Gavin reached to reclaim the phone, but Rick pulled back. He respectfully held a hand up to the author while he told the woman on the other end, "Yeah, that'd be so awesome. By the way, I'm looking forward to the next movie adaptation, 'cause it'll be kickass to see all of the special effects done for Damien's slave demon from book six."

Gavin knew what was happening: the kid was caught in Josephine's irresistible energy field of excitement and affir-

mation. It's what she did—make lemonade out of lemons and all that crap. Every challenge was an opportunity in disguise to her and all those other cotton candy clouds of nonsense.

Gavin also possessed more than his fair share of charisma, but, unlike Josephine, who left a trail of rainbows and sparkly glitter in her wake, his ability to “captivate the masses” was more objective driven. His charm was an instrument to be utilized when he wanted something. “You could sweet-talk the horns off the devil,” his mother used to tell him with a smile.

As true as that was, charm hadn't been enough when it really counted. It hadn't been enough to rescue his mother from the long death-spiral of breast cancer. No, this power was best used on things like cutting ahead in line at a show or getting the best table at a pretentious new restaurant.

The paradox of it was that even though he never really “got” people, he could quickly determine what they needed to hear from him to give him what he wanted.

Part of his fascination with Josephine was that though she shared this same rapid assessment of people, she never used it against them. Most people who knew her regarded her as the high priestess of spin. They thought that it was all an act, like his was. Gavin knew that deep down, at her core, it was 100 percent genuine. She was the real deal.

Rick uttered a series of *yeahs* and *uh-huhs* into the phone as if he were the only one in the store. Gavin watched helplessly as the boy was swept away by Josephine's siren song.

It's said that opposites attract, and never was that truer than between Gavin and Josephine. While they were together, she placed sticky notes by the kitchen phone. Printed on each square was a small image of a unicorn. Gavin went through every sheet and drew a stick man impaled by the steed's horn.

She'd laughed when she'd seen the crude stick figures and had quietly erased all of the victims except for one. She'd posted that last sticky prominently on the fridge with an arrow pointing to the figure and a note. “This one is you, Gavin.

Love, Jo." The note had stayed there for over a month, until the adhesive lost its tack.

That's what she was doing now—cleaning up his mess, fixing what he'd broken, making sure that this kid whom he'd battered would leave an even bigger fan than before.

He eyed the kid as Josephine's tiny, indiscernible voice leaked from the receiver. He tried to make sense of the kid's black T-shirt: "My Clone Other Found Superintendent and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt!"

He read it again.

What did that even mean? Who were all these people? The long line made him grit his teeth.

"Oh, I'd say about two hundred of 'em or so," Rick answered, turning to face the line behind him. The back of the shirt made even less sense than the front. In big, white letters, it asked, "Got Hemlo?"

"What?" Rick now completely ignored the man whom he'd made a pilgrimage to see. "Oh, we're at the Buy-the-Book megastore in Droverton."

There was another pause. Then, looking up at the high ceiling, he answered, "I guess so. It's the one that's three stories tall. Oh, yeah, okay . . . yeah, that'd be so cool. Thank you, Miss Garner. Thanks a lot."

Rick turned back to face the table. "Yeah, he's still here. Thanks again."

Gavin snatched the phone back from the kid.

"That was awesome, Mr. Curtis. Thank you so much. I can hardly wait."

Gavin shoved the closed book across the table at him as he said with a scowl, "You're welcome."

Before the next devotee stepped forward, Gavin jumped up. He turned to face the wall behind him and whispered into the phone, "Jo, what did you just do to me?"

"Gavin, you're such an ass. Don't ever do that to a fan again. I'm sending him a box set of the entire second series and Blu-Ray DVDs of the three movies to cover for your little

tantrum or whatever that was. These people love you enough to give up time on a Saturday to stand in line for an hour and a half to spend forty-five seconds with you. You need to give them your attention. This is a part of your job."

"No, my job is to write." He hoped that she wouldn't bring up that he hadn't written anything of any substance in over a year.

"This is a part of the gig—an important part. Now you listen to me. Stop sulking about your spy novel or whatever is bothering you and get with the program here. We tried something different, and I'm glad you took a chance on something new, but this tour is about the *Shadow Soul Tracker* series. Relax and enjoy yourself. The people there love Damien Marksman. They love you."

"Love me? Of course they love me. I realize that, but they don't even know me. They know *about* me, but that's very different from knowing me."

"I know, but I do . . ."

"What? You do what?" He waited to hear the words.

"Look, Gavin. We both have a job to do. If you're getting to where—"

"I did my part. I wrote the stinkin' book, didn't I?"

"I know you don't like these things, but an author has to do them. Give me a call later and we can talk about what to do for the *Serpentine* book, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"I'm sorry that I called you at the event. I forgot you're three hours in front of the West Coast over there. I thought you'd still be at the hotel. Anyway, just call me when you get back to your room."

"I will. Thanks, Jo."

"Good. Now put on your best happy-author smile and go sell another million books for all of us, okay?"

"Wha-hoo," Gavin answered sarcastically.

"And Gavin, I *do* love you."

He thought of the sticky note with the stick figure being run through by a unicorn, now tucked in his wallet.

"Same here," he said as he gently tapped the disconnect icon on the phone.

Gavin did his best to comply with Josephine's request to "play nice." With a smile frozen on his face, he recited the words "thank you for your support" three dozen times or more. It was obvious that the hollowness of the phrase went unnoticed by the store's patrons. The fans were too gobsmacked.

He invented a game to distract himself and pass the time. With each book he signed, he imagined filling out the execution order of the person in front of him. This resulted in a more flamboyant signature, and for a few minutes, he genuinely enjoyed himself. None of the lemmings had a clue.

But reality found a way of seeping through the cracks in the foundation, and forty-five minutes later, he was ready to strangle the next person who dared to ask him where his ideas came from or if he was a practitioner of the occult because of his main character's affiliation with creatures from darker realms.

He could tell that they all believed they owned a piece of him just because they plopped \$24.99 on the counter, as if they were entitled to a sliver of his soul. He was more than the blurb printed on the inside jacket flap.

Just when he could take no more, an elderly woman in a neon-blue jogging suit hobbled up to the edge of the table. He guessed that she was in her eighties and that it was unlikely that she'd ever run anywhere in the exercise outfit that swallowed her up. From the canvas bag slung over her shoulder, she produced a thick book. It looked heavier than she was. Her veiny hands trembled slightly as the book landed on the table with a thud.

She said with an embarrassed giggle, "Oh dear, I'm so sorry, Mr. Curtis. I didn't mean to do that, but it's heavy."

"It's okay," Gavin said, leaning forward to grab the book before it fell off the edge.

It was his first novel, *Blood Stained*.

"Well, hello, old friend," he said to the book as his fingers ran over the embossed letters. The cover was worn but in decent enough shape, considering it was a first edition printed nearly thirty years ago.

The old woman beamed as Gavin said, "I forgot how thick this thing was."

He cracked the book open, and the nostalgic smell of old paper filled his nostrils. Gavin was lost in his own world as his eyes scanned the page. Reading a few lines, he chuckled. "This is great."

He flashed back to the romantic time when he'd written it—all of that glorious anxiousness, the excitement of releasing something so close to his heart. It had been a time when he'd still had something to prove to himself and to the world. It had been exhilarating, the beautiful fear of pushing himself out there, depending only on himself, like a tightrope walker high above the circus floor.

He'd bet on himself and won. But was this the grand prize—forever sharing a literary cell with his creation, Damien Marksman? Was this all there was, becoming captive to his own success?

Back then, creativity had been a raging river that he'd let carry him away downstream. Now he faced a drought, and for the last four or five books, he'd just gone through the motions. He'd sell his soul for a fresh idea that didn't include everyone's favorite vampire detective.

Judging by book sales, the so-called fans were oblivious. Each release set higher publishing records than the one before. He *was* trapped, and he resented them all for it, every last one of them. They were the prison guards confining him to this gilded cage.

But this little old lady seemed different. Perhaps she knew his farce. Maybe she saw his plight. He decided that it didn't matter. At least she had enough discernment to present this book instead of the new Marksman book.

Gavin dipped his eyes back down to the book, gently gliding his fingers across the page as if reacquainting himself with the soft cheek of a former lover. "I can still remember what it was like . . ." He flipped more pages and added with a smile, "I wrote this paragraph sitting in the back of a city bus headed to work."

He paused and then spoke as if he was talking only to himself. "This novel saved me from a life as a ninth-grade English teacher. Or, better said, it saved thousands of ninth-graders from being my literary victims."

He adjusted his bifocals. "Not too good with kids, I discovered."

"What's your name, my dear?" he asked, flicking the flair marker to the side for the two-hundred-fifty-dollar Visconti pen in his shirt pocket.

"I'm Eunice," she said. "Eunice Hodges. But it's not for me. I want you to make it to a different name."

"For someone else?" Gavin asked.

"Yes, for my son," Eunice said, clasping her hands in the middle of her chest. "His name is Doyle . . . Doyle Hodges. He just had his birthday. He's the same age as you. You both have July twelfth birthdays."

"Ah, that's a good day. So we're both fifty. Where is he? I want to tell him something."

"No, he couldn't get the day off work."

"So he sent you to stand in line?" Gavin sensed the crowd growing restless, but he didn't care. This was a *true* fan, and, judging by the age of the book, a reader who had probably been with him from the beginning, when it was still good.

"He doesn't know I'm here. I took the book from his room. We live together." She grinned as she whispered, "It's a surprise for him."

Gavin opened to the title page with newfound purpose. "Doyle, right? His name's Doyle?" He read the inscription aloud as he wrote it.

Doyle, meeting your sweet mother has been the high point of my visit to Connecticut.

Happy belated birthday to you (we Cancer signs have to stick together).

~G.L. Curtis

The smile on her face grew as she heard the dedication. "Oh, Mr. Curtis, he'll be so pleased."

"Well, Ms. Hodges, I'm glad that I could help," Gavin said as he handed the book back. "And tell your son something for me. Tell him we share a birthday with Henry David Thoreau."

Eunice was still beaming. "Really? Oh, yes, sir. He'll like finding that out."

She tucked the mammoth book back into the burlap bag around her shoulder and then paused as if she had something more to say.

The bookstore's manager—a short, plump troll of a man with a dreadful comb-over—appeared from Gavin's blind spot. "Uh, miss, the other customers . . . if you could just move over there to the—"

Gavin raised his hand, making his handler for the event fall silent.

"Miss Hodges, is there anything else for you today?" Gavin asked, motioning for the little fat man to retreat into the wings.

"Well, actually, that was for Doyle. I have something to ask for me. That was his turn. This one's mine."

Gavin chuckled as he took the Visconti pen back out of his breast pocket. "You *are* a shrewd girl. What may I sign for you?"

"Oh, nothing like that . . . just a question for you."

Gavin braced himself for the most inane question one could ask a writer: *Where do you get your ideas from?* Just when things were going so well between the two of them.

He was relieved when she didn't. She asked something of relevance. "What makes good horror? The fear of the unknown?"

Gavin repeated the words as a professor would present a rhetorical question to an auditorium of students. "What makes for a good horror story?"

He let the words dissolve in the air like vapor. After a few seconds, he conceded, "Well, fear of the unknown *can* be a contributor, but think about it—you don't know what the weather will be like next Thursday, but that doesn't scare you. Or who'll win the World Series, but you're not afraid about it. Are we the only intelligent life in the universe? I don't know, but it doesn't frighten me that I don't know."

He tucked his pen snugly back into his pocket. "The point is, there are millions upon millions of things that are unknown to us, but that's not where the fear stems from. The unknown can contribute to horror, but the kicker is control. That's where it's at."

Gavin poked at the table with a stubby index finger, emphasizing his point. "Removal of control is the main thing. Whether they realize it or not, most people are afraid of not being in control. This is more powerful than the fear of the unknown or even the fear of dying."

The line of people behind Eunice moved forward slightly, encroaching on her space. The air was electric. About a dozen hands extended, holding cell phones—undoubtedly recording the moment to post later on YouTube or other social media.

He decided to play along. They had cast him in this role of Horror Messiah. He'd act the part, turning their literary water into wine or, even better, turning it into blood. It was time to activate that good 'ol Gavin Curtis charm. With a million-dollar smile, he decided to crank the charm up to full tilt boogie.

He looked beyond Eunice into the growing sea of cell phone cameras and spoke boldly. "Think about it. If I wrote

a short story of a guy facing a firing line in the morning—a character facing certain death—that is not as scary as someone who is facing the prospect of being used by or taken over by a malevolent entity like a ghost or whatever. Stevenson recognized this and put Mr. Hyde in control of Dr. Jekyll.”

Gavin stood from his chair, and the cell phone cameras followed his ascent. “There’s a trend these days to put a character in a situation where they have no control, because a maniac killer is in charge of their outcome. We, as humans, have something basic at our core that makes us crave control any way we can get it.”

A female voice from the crowd hollered out, “But what about the occult? You know, the devil?”

Gavin scanned the faces to place the voice with the person. When he couldn’t, he answered in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “Still, control . . . it’s still all about control.”

He moved out from behind the table as he continued. “See, with God, there’s free will and all that—not very scary.”

Gavin reached the other side of the table and leaned against its edge with his arms crossed. “Now, as for the devil and his minions, those guys are all about control. Controlling the human race and all, that’s what they do, or at least try to do. Think back to the stories in your Sunday school class.”

A wave of repressed laughter rippled through the crowd. They had abandoned the line and now formed a huddle.

“I know, I know, but hear me out on this, ya bunch of heathens!”

A catcall whistle erupted from the mob, inspiring more laughter, this time unrestrained.

Gavin put a bulky arm around Eunice’s small, over-perfumed frame. The frail woman bounced with joy as if the two of them had just been crowned Homecoming King and Queen. It felt good to work a crowd again.

Yeah, it’s no wonder they love me.

Gavin's handler—the portly store manager—buzzed around, snapping pictures of the spectacle that his little book signing had become.

Gavin released Eunice and scooted into a sitting position back on the table. “Here’s the thing: control is just an illusion that we placate ourselves with. We choose to believe we have control, but that’s a fantasy of the mind. What a good horror writer does is simply pull the curtain back to give us a peek inside. Removing control results in horror, and the more controlling a character is before the writer strips them of it, the more horrific the fall.”

Removing his bifocals, he wiped his brow with the back of his free hand. “It really doesn’t matter if the character dies or what the outcome of the plot is. The reader has to confront their own lack of control in the universe, even if it’s only on some subconscious level. What horror writers do is expose this through a story.”

A pouty-looking Goth girl of about twenty nudged her way through the horde. Gavin was taken aback by the abundance of piercings on her face. The human-oodoo-doll woman asked, “But can’t the reader put down the book? Just close it up and tuck it away?”

Gavin regained his composure and looked over the top of the girl’s head and addressed the audience. “Ah, now you’re getting ahead of me. Yes, that’s exactly it. They’re scared, but they’re in control of it. The reader turns the valve that lets the fear in at a manageable rate of speed.

“They tuck the book back into the nightstand beside the bed, and everything is okay again. They’ll outlive whatever happens in the book. They come out victorious even if the protagonist of the story gets themselves snuffed out. The reader returns to the cocoon of this false sense of control, and everybody continues on their merry way.”

A voice with a Vietnamese accent rang out from the crowd. “What about a horror master like you, Mr. Curtis? What scares you?”

The group noisily echoed the question.

Gavin tried, for a few seconds, to locate the originator of the question, but he couldn't. There were simply too many people.

"I'm afraid of"—he paused for dramatic effect—"not being able to find my car keys!"

In one swift move, he pulled the Crescent Car Rentals key ring from his jacket pocket to an outburst of applause. He had them eating out of his hand, just like charming the horns off the devil.

In between guffaws, the Goth girl made an unexpected joke. "So you *can* control your car."

This inspired a few more chuckles from the room and an honest laugh from Gavin himself as he jingled the keys with the ridiculous yellow moon attachment. "Yes, I guess so. Now you're getting the hang of it. And now, before we get back to signing books—"

Before he could finish, a fire alarm shrieked. Seconds later, water spewed from the overhead sprinkler system.

The show was over. It was time to go.

Pandemonium ensued throughout the bookstore. Gavin's portly handler abandoned him, scurrying around with plastic sheeting to cover product. Playful screams and laughter echoed throughout the cavernous area as customers stampeded out of the store like spooked cattle.

Store clerks yelled instructions back and forth to each other like ship pursers panicking aboard a sinking vessel. In contrast, Gavin calmly proceeded to the front exit, his head covered with his sports coat. The cold droplets of water hitting grey tarps sounded like an endless round of applause.

Even though the crew moved at lightning speed, Gavin suspected there would still be thousands of dollars' worth of damage. He resisted the temptation to uncover the end caps that contained his latest novel, *Blood Clot*. He suspected

that if the books were damaged, the store would just order another lot, inflating the sales of that drivel.

Once safely outside, he removed his jacket from over his head. The hot July sun felt good for a change.

Some of the store's patrons had already made their way to their cars, only to find themselves in an equally chaotic exodus from the parking lot. Others took refuge in the neighboring Jamba Juice outlet to the left of the bookstore. The line poured out the door of the franchise. It was going to be a good day for their sales. Gavin wondered if the Jamba Juice manager had tripped the alarm to get all of that business. Then he smiled at his own cynicism.

The rest of the crowd—the majority of the customers—looked back at the bookstore from the sidewalk like schoolchildren anticipating the recess bell.

On the curb next to Gavin was a young, muscular black man whom he guessed to be in his mid-twenties. He wore a black Buy-the-Book apron.

"Shouldn't you be in there?" Gavin asked, pointing at the doorway.

"Nah, I'm only here for today . . . to stock. My store is 719. They had me here to help with the extra business today."

"Extra business?" Gavin asked. He was intrigued that the clerk hadn't looked at him yet. The man stared forward at the chaos inside.

"Well, yeah, 'cause of you," the clerk said as if stating a universally known fact.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, I guess."

"It's cool, it's cool," the man said as he shifted his gaze to his apron pocket. He produced a pack of cigarettes and began to light one. "I don't mind. I get time-and-a-half." He paused for some short puffs to get the cigarette going. "Yeah, time-and-a-half, baby."

A few delinquent customers exited the building, including an older man and woman who were not amused by the ordeal, as demonstrated by a stream of swear words.

"You got another one of those?" Gavin asked, pointing to the cigarette.

The man paused and then reached back into his apron. "Sure. Here, you can have the rest."

"Thanks," Gavin said, counting the three Marlboro Reds remaining in the pack. He balanced one of them on his lips and took out the Zippo also in the pack.

"Sure. I need to keep the lighter, though."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, okay." Gavin gave the Zippo back to him.

Gavin closed his eyes and inhaled the smoke deeply into his lungs. He exhaled a few seconds later, relishing the moment. He opened his eyes and asked, "Hey, can I sign something for you . . . you know, for these?"

The young man took another long drag and looked back at the doorway. "Nah, it's cool."

Blaring sirens announced the arrival of a slick, red fire truck. The party was in full swing now.

"Where are the rest of the workers?" Gavin asked. "Shouldn't they be out by now?"

"Don't worry, I doubt there's any fire. Just some jackhole pulled the fire alarm is my guess."

Gavin nodded, thinking how grateful he was to be away from the signing table. At least this guy seemed authentic, not just some wide-eyed fanboy.

Four firefighters in cumbersome gear shuffled into the bookstore, looking like they hoped to find a battle they probably wouldn't.

Gavin studied the other man, who was exhaling a steady stream of smoke. "You're completely dry. How are you completely dry? A stocker would have been in the back of the store."

A sly grin escaped from him. "Yeah, well, about that—"

"You're the only one out here who doesn't look wet. If I had to guess about who pulled the alarm, I'd have to say—"

"Smoke break," he cut in. "I needed a smoke break. That and the fact that old man Hastings fired my cousin a couple months ago."

"Hastings? Bossy little Danny DeVito guy with the comb-over? Is that the manager?"

"That'd be the one, in the flesh. Sorry if I messed up your party thing in there."

"Hardly what I'd call a party," Gavin said with a snort. "Actually, I'm grateful."

"Well, if that's true, if you don't want to hang out with your loyal subjects, you should head through that alley there."

"Why?" Gavin asked. "What do you mean?"

The clerk pointed at the people who were starting to amass and move toward them. "They look like a zombie horde from one of your books."

"Vampires." Gavin sighed as he took a step behind him. "I write vampires."

"Whatever. But they've already seen you. Make you a deal: you don't narc me out on the fire alarm thing, and I'll buy you some time here."

"It's a deal."

"Cool. Like I said, you should cut through the alley over there. Behind the bookstore is a loading dock with pallets. Hide back there, and I'll come get you when this mob scene has died down."

Then the clerk shouted to the crowd, "If I can have your attention, please! Buy-the-Book apologizes for the inconvenience, but Mr. Cutter—"

"Curtis," Gavin interjected from behind him.

"Mr. Curtis will be heading to the Buy-the-Book location at the intersection of Hearst and Glenbrook." The man went on with the authority of a traffic cop during rush hour. "Look for the red brick building about six miles east of here. Hearst and Glenbrook store at twelve fifteen. Don't be late."

Wow, this kid had a lot of moxy.

He turned to Gavin. "What are you still doing here? Go, dude. Go hide. I'll get ya in a few minutes."

Gavin was speechless. The crowd hurried to their cars like roaches running across the kitchen floor when a light is clicked on.

Gavin shook his head and laughed in disbelief. "Those people are going to be pissed when they find out."

The younger man didn't acknowledge that. Instead, he pushed Gavin firmly in the direction of the alley. "Remember, we have a deal."

"Yeah, thanks. And thanks for the cigarettes."

"Whatever. Five minutes. Don't come back in until I get you at the pallets." Gavin nodded and headed down the alley.

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No frogs were harmed in the making of this book, except for that one (and that was a long time ago).

Thanks for reading,

GWP

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Wright Padgett has always had a passion for storytelling.

Born in Houston, Texas, he grew up consuming a steady diet of science fiction and comic books. His time is divided between being a husband and father of two, a jazz piano player, a graphic artist, and a playwright. With what time is left over, he writes science fiction, horror, and the occasional mystery while sitting on the sofa next to his mini dachshund, Jenny.

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