

As
Dog
is my

WITNESS

Another Aaron Tucker Mystery

Jeffrey Cohen



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To Evie, my favorite girl, who more
than anyone I know, deserves to
have a book dedicated to her

PROLOGUE

Damn, it was cold!

If this was what December felt like, Michael Huston was not happily looking forward to February. Still, he thought, zipping up his coat just a little higher, there were worse things than walking your dog, even on a freezing night like this one.

The dog, a Dalmatian named (appropriately enough) Dalma, was taking her sweet time doing what walks are for, so Michael steered her toward what was her favorite spot, in front of the house that belonged to Tom Molinari, North Brunswick, New Jersey's mayor. Through Thinsulate gloves, Michael fingered the plastic bag he'd bought at Shop Rite for pooper-scooper use.

Michael hadn't wanted a dog, but now he found he liked the quiet time spent every evening with Dalma—it not only led to some inspired thinking, but heightened his senses. Noticing a strange sound coming from the green house on the corner, winter and summer, he tried to determine what it might be (it turned out to be the motor for a fish tank aerator). He enjoyed making up stories about the strangers who walked by with their own dogs, and wondering how close he might be to the truth. He even liked the act of cleaning up after Dalma because it made him feel like a responsible citizen: there's some poop that won't be left on the street!

Tonight, however, he was in a hurry, and it wasn't just because of the cold. His wife, Karen, had made a point of kissing him twice before he left with the dog tonight, and he knew what that meant. It would be good to get home quickly.

In seven years of marriage, Karen and Michael (and he always gave her top billing) had established a very strong unspoken understanding—they knew each other so well they didn't finish each other's sentences so much as each other's thoughts—and two kisses placed on the lower lip clearly meant “come back soon—I'll be waiting for you.”

Come on, dog!

Michael, anticipating a night most men only dream about, thought a lot

about his marriage—something most men rarely do. The majority of married couples, he believed, were on autopilot after the first year. They stayed married because it never occurred to them not to stay married, but they certainly didn't put the time and thought into the relationship that couples like Karen & Michael (he also thought of them with an ampersand between their names, like a corporation's logo) clearly did, and that was what put them in the rarefied company of People Whose Marriages Were Still Love Affairs.

Dalma took her sweet time (she knew that once she was done, it would be a quick sprint back to the house, and her crate for the night), but eventually, the lure of Mayor Molinari's lawn, with all its fond memories and aromas, was too much to resist, and she assumed the position.

Michael felt for the plastic bag in his pocket, and took it out, inverting it so the Shop Rite logo would be on the outside when he was done with his task. Most people didn't care about such details, but he did. He wasn't sure why.

Having completed the clean-up, Michael steered the dog back in the direction of home. Because his marriage was the central point in his life, the thing around which everything else revolved, the upcoming night of passion with a woman he'd known—and slept with—for nine years was an all-consuming thought. He barely noticed the patch of ice in front of Mr. Indik's house, but managed to avoid slipping on it at the last second. Come on, Dalma, we're only two blocks away!

*He was so lost in the reverie of anticipation that he hardly noticed the man in the brown parka approaching him. Otherwise, Michael would have seen the big, hooded, fur-lined coat like the one Elliot Gould wore in the movie M*A*S*H. In other circumstances, he would have seen the hood obscuring the man's face.*

And in all likelihood, Michael would have seen the strange-looking antique pistol in the man's right hand. Not that it would have done him much good.

Michael's last thought was: "How can that guy go out on a night like tonight without gloves?"



Part One

FRIENDS

Chapter One



“Does it *have* to be New Jersey?” Glenn Waterman, tan, tall, flaxen-haired, and handsome—damn him!—was leaning back in his leather chair, resisting the impulse to put his feet up on his enormous modern desk, the one with the state-of-the-art flat screen computer monitor on it. For the sake of our conversation, he had removed the telemarketer-style headset from his ear, but he kept glancing at it, like a dog commanded to stay with a piece of red meat just barely out of reach.

“Yes,” I said patiently. “It has to be New Jersey. I wrote the script about New Jersey because I know New Jersey. In fact, I think New Jersey pretty much becomes a character in the script. If you move it to, say, Oregon, it’s not going to make sense that people act or talk that way.”

Glenn had summoned me to Los Angeles, as far off my normal turf as you can get without leaving the continent entirely, to discuss the twenty-fifth screenplay I’d written, *The Minivan Rolls For Thee*, a lighthearted murder mystery that . . . well, I’ve told that story already. Trust me, it was necessary for the proposed movie to take place in New Jersey.

Waterman’s company, Beverly Hills Films, was not, in fact, headquartered in Beverly Hills, which makes sense if you’ve ever dealt with anyone in the movie business. It was in Santa Monica, in as nondescript an office building as you could find in Southern California. But his office, in a corner with lots of windows, naturally, was impressive, much as Waterman intended it to be.

If he liked the script, Glenn's company would purchase what in the movie business is called an "option," which is something akin to a rental agreement. The production company gets to take the script to studios to beg for money to produce it, and the writer (that's me) can't let anyone else do the same for the term of the option agreement. In return, the production company (that's them) gives the writer (that's me) money. That's the theory, anyway.

Since Waterman had paid my airfare from Newark to L.A. and put me up in a nearby hotel, I figured he had some interest in the script. He was now "giving notes," which means he was telling me everything that was wrong with the script he had told me, almost a month ago on the phone, was "brilliant." Things change quickly in Hollywood. If you've ever been there during an earthquake, you know exactly what I mean.

"I guess," he admitted finally. "Would be cheaper to shoot it in town, though."

"Anybody around here ever heard of the backlot?" I asked.

"They never use the backlot anymore," he said with a sneer. "Movies for The Disney Channel use the backlot. Feature films go on location."

"So go on location to New Jersey," I suggested.

"We usually go to . . . other areas," Glenn said.

"Yeah. Usually to Canada, because films are cheaper to make up there. But I'm willing to bet you can find a part of Alberta that looks just like New Jersey."

He brightened. "I'll bet you're right."

"It's movie magic, Glenn," I told him.

As producers go, Waterman wasn't a bad guy, which is like saying that the shark felt really bad about eating you, but, hey, he was hungry and you were a mackerel. Waterman didn't brutalize his assistant in front of me (I can't vouch for anything that went on outside my presence), always offered me a Diet Coke when I got to his office, and only made me sit in the chair in front of his intimidating desk when someone

else was involved in the meeting. Otherwise, I could use the couch, which itself was larger than the living room of my Midland Heights, New Jersey home.

“Aaron, on page 64 . . .” Waterman was moving on to another note, and we’d been at this for three straight days.

“Is this a big one, Glenn? I have a plane to catch in . . .” I checked my watch dramatically. “An hour and a half.” I was lying; my flight was actually in two hours, but I’d heard enough nitpicking already—things that wouldn’t make the script one iota better, but would still be changed as evidence of the producer’s “brilliant creative input.” Besides, I was worried about making my flight. This was Los Angeles, and driving from the parking lot to the next traffic light could take a half hour.

“Go,” he said. “Go home to your wife and kids. And do the rewrite fast, Aaron. We have to strike while the iron is hot.”

I picked up my canvas bag, and stopped halfway to the door, which meant I was only 50 yards from leaving the office. “The iron is hot? We have a hot iron?”

I’ve been talking this up, Aaron,” he said, looking hurt. “People know me. They’ll want to know what I thought was so terrific. Make it better, and we’ll have ourselves a deal.”

“If my agent finds out I’m working on the script without an option agreement in place, she’s going to squawk,” I said, knowing full well that my agent, based in Cleveland, would have welcomed any interest in my scripts, even if it came from Hitler Wasn’t Such A Bad Guy Productions, and they wanted me to work for free, forever. Margot was not exactly what you’d call a scorched-earth negotiator.

“Don’t worry. I have confidence in you. You fix it, and you’ll have an option soon.”

Great. He had such confidence that he was sending me on my way to do more work on a screenplay he’d initially loved, and giving me no money to do it. I guess there’s confidence—and then there’s confidence.

I made the flight with a little time to spare, after having convinced the crack Los Angeles International Airport security team that the part-metal object in my pocket was a guitar capo, which it actually was. Unless they thought I could take someone hostage by changing their key, I presented no actual threat. The fact that everything in the security area was labeled “LAX” didn’t inspire overwhelming confidence, but I could only hope they knew more about who was a terrorist and who wasn’t than I did.

I got out my cell phone before the flight attendant made the announcement to turn all electronic devices off, something which still sounds to me like a line from a science fiction movie. I pushed the “1” button and held it for a couple of seconds.

Abigail’s voice, my favorite sound in the world, broke through from 3,000 miles away. “Hello?”

“This is an obscene phone call.” The woman to my left, in her mid-sixties, gave me an involuntary glance.

“Oh, good,” said my wife. “I haven’t had one in hours.”

“We aim to please. I’m on the plane.”

“Thank goodness,” Abby sighed. “I’m tired of being a single parent.”

“How are they?”

“Leah misses you,” she said. “And I’m pretty sure Ethan finally noticed you’re gone. He complained about walking the dog, but didn’t say it was your turn.”

“Well, it’s been four days. He was bound to catch on sometime. Have I gotten any work calls?”

“A couple from the *Star-Ledger* and one from Lydia at *Snapdragon*. She says they don’t have anything now, but she’s not forgetting about you.”

“Neither is Bank of America, and they want their mortgage payments made on time,” I groaned.

“I’m still gainfully employed, Aaron,” my wife reminded me.

“We’re not getting thrown out on the street anytime soon. Oh, and you’ve gotten four phone calls from Lori Shery.”

That was odd. “Lori? What’d she say?”

“Just to call her back. She obviously doesn’t know you were away, and I haven’t talked to her. I just heard the messages on the machine.”

“She probably wants a free column for her newsletter, but she usually emails,” I said. It was odd that Lori would call, and four times in a day—I had talked to Abby the day before—meant it was important. “Well, there’s not much I can do from here. I’ll call her when I get home.”

“Which will be soon,” Abby said.

“It’s touching how much you miss me.”

“It’s garbage night, and Ethan can’t lift the cans all by himself.”

“Stop it. Your devotion is getting me aroused.” The woman next to me looked up at the “call flight attendant” button, and seriously considered pressing it.

Abby’s voice turned serious. “I’ll be glad to see you, honey,” she said. “You know that.”

“I miss you guys more than I can tell you in a public place,” I answered. “I hate being away.”

“How’d the meeting go? Did you get the option?”

I wasn’t interested in telling her what a bad negotiator I am. “They’re saying I have to turn off the cell, Abby. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home.”

“That means no, doesn’t it?”

“See you soon, honey. I love you!” I hung up.

So I’m a bad negotiator, a liar, and a coward.