Kristopher Mallory



Payphone

by

Kristopher Mallory

Payphone

A Horror Novelette

Copyright



www.StealthFiction.com

Payphone

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 9798237420180
Copyright © 2008, 2026 Kristopher Mallory
Cover art by Kristopher Mallory, made with AI image tools

~~~~

Edited with Grammarly and Claude

~~~~

eBook License Notes:

You may not use, reproduce or transmit in any manner, any part of this book without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations used in critical articles and reviews, or in accordance with federal Fair Use laws. All rights are reserved.

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or the author has used them fictitiously.

Other Releases by Kristopher Mallory

Attempted

A Gift Of Bone

What I've Learned of the GPS Glitch

The Diary

Ruined Sheets

The Scarecrow Corpse

Watchtowers of Carthage Key

Another Small Burn

The Absinthe Smuggler

The Special Christmas Ornaments of Mr. Everett

The Death Agreement

Mega Millions

What People Are Saying about Kris's Stories

What I've Learned of the GPS Glitch:

"Someone needs to write a screenplay for this STAT." – *Dultsboi*

I Know What They Are:

"Best story I've ever read in my whole life. Well done." – *Simba*

Master Stargazer:

"The story is brief and to the point, well-told in an interesting structure, and evenly paced." – *Bruce*

Mega Millions:

"Nice ending note LOL You're not going to leave it like that are you?" – *Tanya*

Special Thanks

To whoever made the decision to remove the cursed payphone.

Table of Contents

Copyright
Other Releases
What People Are Saying
Special Thanks

Payphone
Chapter 1 – I Had A Good Life
Chapter 2 – Nineteen Degrees
Chapter 3 – Membership
Chapter 4 – Look Out
Chapter 5 – One Rule
Chapter 6 – Collect
Chapter 7 – Facts
Chapter 8 – Five Years Later

About the Author
What's Next?
Hear It Read Aloud
More from Kristopher Mallory
More from Stealth Fiction

Payphone

“When the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers.”

~ Oscar Wilde, An Ideal Husband

Chapter 1 – I Had A Good Life

I had a good life.

Once upon a time, I used a payphone, and ever since, I've needed to remind myself. I repeat the mantra every morning when I wake up, a thousand times during the day, and again at night when I swallow a handful of pills to force myself back into unconsciousness.

Mental health professionals have deemed my behavior a self-imposed punishment, but I call it a tribute to the past. Whether torture or vigil, the words are always on the tip of my tongue. I live in a haze of pain, waiting for the black devils to collect the debt I owe.

I had a good life.

Ah, the devils… I wonder if I'm insane. If I knew I were crazy, then maybe I could find peace and accept things that can't be changed, so I let the doctors still run their tests; I let the head-shrinks still analyze my personality. The results have always been the same: I'm a middle-aged man, healthy in both body and mind.

Laugh at that if you will, but to me it's terrifying. The problem, I know, lies not with my body or mind, but within my soul. I suffer from an invisible festering wound, and I can't take the hurt anymore.

When science fails, a desperate person might seek answers from alternative sources. I've been to Psychics, Spiritual Healers, Death Speakers, and even a Voodoo Doctor from New Orleans, but that's a whole story in itself.

What do all of these have in common? They are full of shit.

I had a good life.

Yesterday I purchased a gun. It's loaded, cocked, and whispering my name.

Sharing the truth about the payphone is the only thing keeping me from sending a bullet to tear through my head. I'm a weak person. But I'll try to be strong for as long as it takes to tell my tale.

I offer a glimpse of the argument that I'm having with myself inside of my head:

I don't want to do this.

I need to do this.

No, I do not.

I have to.

It won't help.

It might help.

It's too hard.

It must be done.

You can see what the thought of continuing is doing to me, can't you?

I had a good life…

Stop writing.

I will not put this pen down.

Stop.

I will not.

Please stop.

My mind is made up.

Is it really?

Yes.

Fine then.

For better or worse, this is how I remember it.

Chapter 2 – Nineteen Degrees

It was the day after Valentine's Day. Roughly five years ago. I was in the driver's seat, Heather sat next to me, and Jessie was in the back, watching a Disney movie. We were making our way home to Baltimore after a weekend at the in-laws' house.

The weather was terrible. An unexpected snowstorm left two feet on the ground; then the temperature went up enough to melt a few inches before it plummeted back to sub-freezing, leaving most of the roads covered in slick black ice. I could hear the small drops of hail hitting the windshield, and the radio announcer kept reporting on the high number of accidents throughout the state of Delaware. As we exited the in-laws' neighborhood, I decided to bypass Kent County's main highway and take the country back roads instead.

The heat hadn't fully kicked in, and the seats in the Durango were freezing, but they still had that new leather smell. We purchased the vehicle right before the trip because Heather was nearly eight months pregnant and she worried about safety. The down payment took over half our savings (and our old Sebring), but we were happy with our choice.

The scenic route I decided on was the one we usually took during the summer. There's over a hundred miles of beautiful countryside that's missed by taking the throughway.

Back then I used to insist on slowing down and looking at the world more closely, but that's terrible advice. Ignore it. The best thing to do is mind your own business, stay focused on where you're going, not on where you're at. You risk less that way. If there is one thing that I am, it is proof of that fact.

We must have been the only car on that stretch of road. The path in front of us showed no signs of tire tracks in either direction. I drove slowly, in part because of the conditions, sure, but mostly because of the landscape. We passed by barns, fields, and cemeteries. All of them coated

in a pristine white sheen. If I'd been alone, I would've stopped to enjoy the calming feeling that only undisturbed snow can bring.

Several winding roads and an hour or so later, I saw the marker I was looking for, a T-intersection about a half mile ahead. It's the place along the route where you can't continue straight. You either have to turn west, which leads to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, or east, which leads to parts of Delaware I'd never been to before and had no desire to visit. I remember the dash thermometer's flash caught my eye. It displayed a new temperature. The air outside had suddenly gotten colder, down to nineteen degrees. I'm originally from Miami, so to me, that is damned cold.

In the distance, the remains of an old, burned-out church appeared to be alive. Remnants of other buildings that used to be a town. I couldn't tell you how long that place had been abandoned; maybe people had left sometime in the forties or fifties, whenever it was that the interstate opened up and bypassed the town.

I've been at that intersection dozens of times, and I always got an odd feeling that I can't be pressed to describe. Before you go rolling your eyes, hear me out. It isn't so much the old town that bothered me. Most everyone's been by some old site one time or another in their life. Those types of places are common in these parts, and I've been to plenty of them. None have ever given me the feeling that I got when I came here down this road.

I can tell you exactly what causes it too. It's the payphone. It's placed at the corner on the right-hand side of the road that we were on, and the fork leading left back into Delaware. It doesn't look any different than any payphone you have ever seen, other than the fact that the sign above the phone does not say BELL or AT&T as most of them do nowadays. In bold black letters against the dirty white background, it just read: PAYPHONE.

Do you find it strange that a grown man is bothered by an oddly placed phone? It's alright. I know how stupid it sounds. But consider the following.

The last time I came this way, it wasn't just Heather, Jessie, and me, but instead a tour bus full of people coming back from playing slots at the Delaware casinos. Try to picture thirty people or more, talking and laughing, and then suddenly everyone goes quiet as they see this phone in the middle of nowhere. No one comments on it; no one says anything at all until they are out of the area, and then the conversation picks up right back where it left off. None of the people on that tour bus ever realized how quiet it got. Why? Because no one was paying attention, but their subconscious minds picked up on the fact that something just wasn't right. I wish I had realized that sooner, but you know what they say about hindsight.

Think back on your life. I suspect there are phones like this all around, just in places where, if you notice them, and I mean really notice them, you might wonder why in the world someone would put it there? That's the type of payphone this was. That's why everyone on the bus got quiet, and that's why, when I was driving that day, my eyes wandered off of the road to stare at the payphone.

"LOOK OUT!" Heather yelled.

I looked up just in time to see the shape of a large animal in our path. I screamed as I slammed on the brakes and cut the wheel to the left, but I wasn't used to the new vehicle yet, and I turned too hard. I tried to spin the wheel back to the right, but I overcorrected, and it caused the back end to skid on the icy road. Jessie screamed from the backseat. Time seemed to slow down as I tried to regain control, but it was no use; we were going to wreck.

"HOLD ON!" I screamed.

The back end went off the road into the drainage ditch. We were still moving fast. The truck seemed as if it was going to overturn, but amazingly it didn't. The tires caught traction in the icy mud, and the truck lurched to a stop.

I tried to speak, but the wind was knocked out of me. Jessie was crying, and Heather had already managed to undo her safety belt and got

out. I felt like I was going to black out, but somehow my lungs began working again. I was regaining my senses and realized exactly where I was and what just happened. I reached back to my daughter. She was crying but otherwise looked unharmed, thank god.

“Heather?” I said. Oh god, the baby, “Heather!”

I jumped out of the car and ran to my wife.

“We’re O.K.,” she said. “I think we’re O.K.”

I put my hand on her belly and felt the baby kick. He’s moving; that’s a good sign. I looked at Heather’s face. She did not look worried, which reassured me further.

I took a deep breath and felt my heart rate slow down as I let it out.

“Dad, what happened?” Jessie said. Her crying had diminished into quiet sobbing.

“I think it was a deer, Jess.”

“Is he alright?”

“Who? The deer?”

Jessie’s face reddened. She nodded.

“Yeah, darlin’, he jumped out of the road before I hit him.”

“The truck didn’t make it out so well, though,” Heather said, as she pointed to the rear of the Durango.

The axle looked like it was broken.

“Shit,” I whispered to myself.

“At least we got good insurance.”

“I wonder if they offer free towing all the way out here.” Then the more important thought hit me: “Hey, get back in the car; it’s cold.”

Heather got in as I surveyed the damage. The axle was definitely broken, and there was no way we would be able to drive anywhere on it. I got back in the car, started the engine, and turned the heat on. I asked for Heather’s cell phone. She handed it over to me, and of course, being out in the middle of nowhere, there wasn’t any service. As if on cue, we all looked at the payphone.

“Well, isn’t that convenient.”

I checked my pockets. No change.

“Hold on a sec,” Heather said, as she went to grab her purse from the floor.

“Here ya’ go, Dad.” Jessie was quicker and had already pulled out a quarter from her own tiny pink purse.

“Thanks, darlin’. Are you alright now?”

“Yes. I was scared. Better now, though.”

“That’s my girl.”

She smiled. I love her smile.

“You two stay in the car. I’m going to go try the payphone, see if we can get a tow truck.”

Heather kissed me. I could tell she was still a little shaken, but she liked to maintain a strong persona for our daughter’s sake; it’s one of the traits that caused me to fall in love with her.

I opened the door and stepped back out into the freezing cold.

Chapter 3 – Membership

There was a fresh layer of white powder that covered everything. Sometime while we were in the car, it had begun to snow. Each time the wind kicked up, miniature tornadoes rose from the light dust on the road. Even though we had just been in an accident, I still found the display absolutely beautiful.

I walked up to the payphone and had an odd sense of déjà vu.

Here was this phone out in the middle of an intersection where no one would ever use it, and here I was about to make a call. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had made a call on that phone. Somewhere in the back of my mind, another voice said, ‘Never, you’re the first. This phone is here for you.’

Logic took over, and I reminded myself that I have an overactive imagination and was experiencing mild shock. I gave a nervous laugh as I reached out a trembling hand and picked up the receiver.

I was expecting a dead line. Instead, I got the standard dial tone.

I pressed 0 for the operator. The dial tone went away, but nothing happened. There was only silence. I pressed down the trigger twice, and the dial tone returned. Then I tried 0 again, and again I only received silence. I reset the phone once again, and this time I tried pressing 411 on the keypad, which usually will give you directory assistance, but just like 0, nothing else happened.

“I think it’s broken!” I called back to Heather.

She wound down the window and stuck her head out.

“What?” she yelled.

The wind was picking up, and I had to scream over it.

“I said I think it’s broken, 0 and 4-1-1 don’t work!”

“Well, put the quarter in and try!”

“I don’t think—”

“Try!”

She ducked her head back into the Durango and wound the window back up before I could explain that the quarter should only be needed after the operator found me the number for the mechanic. Hardheadedness was another trait of hers. That one I didn't care for quite as much.

I picked up the receiver again and immediately got the dial tone. I stuck the quarter into the phone, and then I went to dial, but as soon as I heard that familiar sound of the phone sorting the change, the dial tone was replaced by a ring. It was odd, I thought, but the logical part of my brain said that it must be programmed to call the operator, or maybe the last number dialed when change was inserted.

I gave the girls the thumbs-up sign. It rang seven or eight times. No answer. The phone probably was busted after all, I thought. I was about to hang up the receiver when I heard someone pick up the line.

"Hello? Is this the operator?" I asked.

"Who is this?" the man asked. His voice was extremely deep and raspy.

"Um, we're stuck, and we need a tow truck."

"Who is this?" he asked again. He was not friendly at all.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you deaf? I want to know who you are."

"Listen, I got a pregnant wife and a kid in the car, freezing. We need a tow truck."

I gestured for Heather to wind down the window.

She leaned out and yelled, "Did you get through to someone?"

The man on the line went quiet.

"Yeah, but I don't think it's the operator. I may need another quarter!" I yelled over the wind.

"This is the operator." He paused and added a hesitant and rude "Sir."

"Here!" she yelled, holding a quarter out the window.

"Can you help us out or what?"

"Yeah, I can help you… Sir."

I gestured to Heather that it was O.K. and gave the international sign for 'wind your window back up'. The guy wasn't nice, but at least he

started to be useful. No need to waste another quarter. If I did, I might end up with a bigger Asshole on the phone than this guy was being.

"If you would… Please… give me your name… Sir."

I still can't get his voice out of my head to this day. You could feel the disgust he seemed to feel by having to say the words '*please* ' and '*sir*'.

"Patrick Levine."

"You are not a member, Patrick Levine."

"What are you talking about?"

"I am only able to serve members… Sir."

"Listen here, Bud…"

"My name is Bob."

"I don't know what kind of switchboard this phone is hooked up to. If it's a matter of money, we'll pay whatever fee it is. I just need a damned tow truck."

"Bob Belzie."

"I don't give a damn what your name is, '*Bob*'! Do your damn job and connect me to a tow company… Please."

"I think my superior will speak to you now. She will explain to you all of the benefits of membership. SIR!"

That time, the way he said 'sir' sounded a lot like 'Dickhead.'

"Fine, whatever, put him on, Bob."

"Her."

"Jesus Christ! We're freezing out here, and you're playing fucking games!"

"We don't like that language around here. Sir."

Before I could go off on him, my ear was filled with elevator music. The bastard had put me on hold.

"Hey, what is going on?" Heather screamed.

"Nothing," I said. "They just got me on hold!"

I didn't see any need to upset her more than she already was. I had to deal with people like this at work all the time. I was sure I could handle a few switchboard operators on a power trip.

“This is Miss Ferguson. I understand you want our help.”

“Ma’am, I need to get my family out of the cold. If you can’t help us with a tow truck, a cab will do.”

“We can get them out of the cold, alright,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Is anyone hurt? Perhaps we should dispatch some medical assistance, Patrick.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Ma’am.”

“You sound like a sweet boy. Please, call me Lucy.”

“Alright… Lucy. It’s cold out here. Can I expect someone will be on their way?”

“Bob will be sending someone momentarily. I just have a few questions for you about your membership package…”

It was cold as hell outside. I didn’t feel like hearing a sales pitch. She said someone would come, and that’s all I wanted to hear. I spoke over her and said, “Thanks for the help, Ma’am.” Then I hung up the phone. I didn’t even make it two steps before it started ringing.

Chapter 4 – Look Out

I never should have picked that phone back up.

“Hello?” I asked, confused.

“That wasn’t very friendly of you, Patrick. What would Heather think if she knew you treated an old lady that way?”

“Look. I’m sorry. How many times must I tell you that it’s freezing out here… wait? What did you say? How did you know my wife’s name is Heather?”

“The same way I know your daughter’s name is Jessica.”

Logic, once again, overrode my paranoia, and I said, “Oh, you looked us up in some database.” I laughed into the receiver, but even to myself I sounded nervous. “Listen, I’m going back to the car now.”

“… And I also know your wife is expecting a child soon, a boy. You want to name him after your grandfather, Charles. Heather would rather he be Patrick Jr., and little Jessie would like more than anything that you name him Seth. You both wondered why she picked that name. It happens to be the name of a boy she likes in her class.”

What in god’s name could you say to that? My mind could not even try to come up with some sort of logical explanation; it simply froze as solid as my feet seemed to be. It had to be a hallucination.

“Are you still on the line, Patrick? Patrick? Patrick Levine. Who, at the age of seventeen, stole your father’s watch and never told anyone about it- are you there?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

Those words were like a lie, because I felt like I wasn’t even in my body. It was as if I was now watching the exchange from a third-person perspective.

“Good. None of that ‘Who are you?’, ‘How do you know these things?’ garbage. That is going to save time.”

“What do you want?”

It was all automatic now. I wasn’t in charge of my own voice.

“Are you happy, Patrick?”

“Yes. Of course I’m happy.”

“Are you sure, Patrick? Do you feel like you have a good life?”

“Of course I have a good life. Please, tell me what it is that you want from me.”

“Hun!” Heather yelled. “Is everything all right? Come back to the car!”

“Tell her you are giving directions.” This woman, this witch, Lucy said.

“I…” I couldn’t seem to speak.

“… I’m giving directions,” she said again.

“I… I’m just giving them some directions!”

Why did I say that?

I wanted to hang up the phone, but it felt impossible to take the receiver away from my ear.

Heather smiled at me, and then she wound up the window.

Snow had almost fully covered the front windshield, but I could see that Jessie had climbed up into the driver’s seat and was playing with the radio.

“You say you have a good life. But could it be better? I want honesty, Patrick.”

“Of course it could be better. Whose life couldn’t?”

“You’ve thought about one day writing a novel. Dreamed of being a big shot Hollywood writer, did you?”

“Yes. Just dreams.”

“Fame and fortune?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re a realist who knows that those dreams will never come true.”

“I don’t understand what this is about.”

“I want to offer you membership. I want to offer you your dreams.”

Maybe if you were me, you wouldn’t have taken it so far. Maybe you would have chalked it up to some sick joke and simply hung up the phone.

It was surreal. But my mind shook off the cold and offered up a possibility once again that I was having some sort of hallucination.

“This is insane,” I said.

“No. This is real.”

Was my brain swelling?

“I’ve been in an accident. I am hallucinating.”

“Maybe you’re right. If you are, it doesn’t matter. Just humor me then. I’m offering you your dreams. You only need to do one thing.”

It was bait.

“What? Tell me, what is it that you want me to do?”

“Just say that your life isn’t good, and I’ll give you a better one. All it will cost you is the quarter that you used to make this call.”

Oh god. It couldn’t be real. I looked at my family, who were waiting for me to come back and sit with them in the nice warmth of the heated Durango.

I try to change the past by picturing myself hanging up the phone right then and there and going back to my family. Even as I’m writing these words, I’m trying to take it back. But nothing is happening. Nothing is changing. I can’t take it back.

I was so sure it wasn’t real.

I was so sure.

“I do not have a good life.”

But it was. I know it was. It was a great life.

“Welcome to the club.”

“This isn’t real.”

“Never talk about this to anyone, ever.”

“Why?”

“Does it matter? It isn’t real.”

“What do I do now?”

“Look out.”

The daylight seemed to dim.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“LOOK OUT!” Lucy screamed.

But then it wasn’t Lucy’s voice any longer; it was Heather’s.

“Look out!” Heather screamed again.

The wind wasn’t cold anymore; it was now warm. The crisp smell of the snow somehow was transformed into that new car smell of leather. And I wasn’t at a payphone anymore; I was behind the wheel of the Durango.

I looked up to see the shape of an animal running across the road a second too late. I slammed on the brakes.

‘Why the hell wasn’t I watching the road?’ my mind screamed at me.

There was no time to answer the question; the SUV smashed into the backside of the deer. A bloody haze exploded onto the windshield. I cut the wheel to the left too hard. But as soon as I did, I realized my mistake and cut the wheel back to the right, making sure that I did not overcorrect. Somehow I knew that if I did, we’d slip on the road and the back end of the Durango would have gone into the ditch.

Jessie screamed from the backseat.

I regained control, but it was still no use; the road was just too goddamn icy. We were skidding forward very fast, and I couldn’t see where we were going because of the blood on the windshield.

“HOLD ON!” I screamed as the truck slid to the right-hand shoulder.

We were still going too fast, and the truck was on a collision course with the old payphone on the side of the road. There was nothing more I could do. We were going to hit it.

I squeezed my eyes shut and covered my face with my left arm.

I heard a huge crash and felt the tightness of the seatbelt around my waist. Then there was only darkness.

Chapter 5 – One Rule

From somewhere far away, I heard the distinct ring of an old telephone.

“Hun. Wake up.”

Ring.

“Daddy! Daddy! Please wake up.”

Ring.

“Daddy!”

Ring.

But this time, it was fading.

Ring.

I could hardly hear it now.

“Hun, open your eyes.”

I was awake, or at least I felt like I was awake; I tried, but my eyes refused to open.

“What the hell just happened?”

“We hit a deer… and… a payphone?”

“We did what?”

“You hit a poor deer, and then we smashed into that old creepy phone, Dad,” Jessie said.

I moved my head and opened my eyes. I tried to focus on Heather.

“Are you O.K.? Is the baby…?”

“We’re alright, but it looks like you seemed to have hit your head pretty good.”

“Are you sure he’s not hurt?”

“He’s fine, Patrick. The accident wasn’t that bad. I’m surprised you handled the truck so well.”

“Yeah, lucky I guess. The truck might have flipped if I had swerved any more.”

“I’m just glad we’re all okay,” Jessie said.

“Me too, darlin’, me too,” I said.

Heather had her cell phone in her hand.

“Did you call someone?”

“I tried. There’s no service.”

“Goddamnit.”

“Watch your language in front of Jessie. You know I don’t like it when you talk like that around her.”

“I’m just angry at myself. I must have been daydreaming. I should have been watching the road. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t beat yourself up; it’s just a bent fender.”

“Mom,” Jessie said.

“What is it, sweetie?”

“The deer… he… he’s still in the road.”

I looked in the rearview mirror, and sure enough, the deer’s mangled body was lying across the white line in the center of the road. Two crows had already landed and were taking turns pecking at its eyes.

“I got to move it. Someone else could come along and hit it.”

“Do you need help?”

“Don’t be silly, you would probably go into labor if you tried to move something that big. I’ll get it.”

“Poor deer,” Jessie said.

“Just stay in the car until I get back.”

The engine had seized up when we had hit the payphone. I turned the key and gave it a little gas, but it didn’t start. I tried it again, and it still wouldn’t go.

“Mother Fu—”

“Patrick!”

“Dad!”

“Sorry, Heather. Sorry, Jess.”

“It’s all right,” Heather said, “we’ll just have to wait until someone comes. Go move the deer.”

I got out of the car and walked to where the dead deer was. Three other crows had come to get their piece of the pie. I grabbed the deer by the hind legs and began to pull it out of the road; that’s when I noticed a vehicle

coming from the same direction that we had come from. I pulled as hard as I could, and the dead deer left a long trail of blood and fur as it slid to the shoulder of the road.

The vehicle was less than a quarter mile away by the time that I had finished moving the deer. I went to the center of the road, accidentally stepping into some blood, and waved my hand to flag the car down.

It wasn't a car. As it got closer, I realized that it was an ambulance. It slowed down and pulled to the shoulder right behind the disabled Durango. The driver opened the door and stepped out.

"Howdy! You guys alright?"

"Yeah, but we're stuck."

I heard the passenger door of the ambulance slam shut and saw a woman jog to the side of our car. Heather had wound down the window, and I could faintly hear her asking if she and Jessie were hurt at all.

"Wow," the driver said, "you sure did do a number on that there old phone, eh?"

"I guess so."

"Yup," he said, shaking his head up and down.

"Did someone call you? We didn't see anyone come by."

"No, no. We were on a different call. Some lady's cat was stuck in a tree."

"Doesn't the fire department handle that?"

"Normally yeah, but, uh, it gets kind of slow around these parts, and we just felt like getting out for a while."

"Oh."

"We were heading back to town, and to tell ya the truth, we were shocked to see people who actually needed help."

Jessie must have told a joke because I could hear Heather and the female paramedic laughing. Those two always make quick friends.

"Any chance you can call us a tow truck?" I asked the driver.

"We can do ya one better. How about we give you lot a ride to town so ya can warm up and get a quick bite to eat?"

“That would be great. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. We should be the ones thanking you for giving us something to do.”

I called to Heather and Jessie and told them to get their things. A few seconds later, Heather, Jessie, and the female paramedic came walking around the car to where the driver and I were standing near the back of the ambulance.

I am not the type of married man who looks at other women in that way. I only have eyes for my wife, as the saying goes, but the female paramedic was attractive. She was younger, probably under 25. She was tall and slender. Her red hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Her blue eyes were haunting. When she caught me staring at her, I pulled my gaze away. I felt like I betrayed my wife’s trust.

“Everybody ready to go?” the driver said cheerily.

He used his keys to open the rear door. Inside, there was a stretcher, and pretty much everything else you would expect to be in an ambulance.

“Well,” the female paramedic said, “it’s kind of a bumpy ride. I’ll stay back here with you and your husband, Heather. But Jessie, you’ll have to ride up front if that’s O.K.”

“Mom?” Jessie asked.

“There’s a window between the front cab and the back,” the driver said. “We always leave it open so you’ll be able to see each other.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Heather said.

Jessie and the driver walked around and got into the ambulance. The window was about 2 feet long and wide open. Jessie turned around in her seat, rested her elbows on the windowsill, and leaned through.

“This is cool,” she said.

I stepped into the back, took hold of Heather’s hand, and helped her get in. The female paramedic followed us in and closed the door.

“O.K., Heather,” she said. “You’re going to have to lie on the stretcher. It really does get bumpy, and I would hate to see you trip or fall against something.”

Heather tried to object, but the female paramedic insisted. She still didn't give in until Jessie asked her to do what she was told. Sometimes the two girls switched roles like that. It was cute.

Once Heather was lying down and comfortable, the driver started the ambulance, and we pulled away from the road, heading towards whatever town they had come from.

"Can we turn the siren on?" Jessie asked.

The driver laughed.

"Sure!" he said. "But why don't we wait until we get closer. Your folks could use some quiet, I bet."

"This is so cool."

I sat on the passenger side bench, and the female paramedic leaned on the stretcher. Heather and she were chatting.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax. I had the feeling that everything was going to get better. Today was a bad day, but tomorrow… well, tomorrow I was going to go out and take over the world. Maybe I would start writing the book I had planned. The story was coming together nicely, and it seemed destined to get published.

"It happens all the time," I heard the female paramedic say. "The deer around here will jump right in front of you."

"Well, that's not exactly what happened here," I said.

"No?"

"No. I got distracted by the phone. I think I started daydreaming."

"Really? That can be dangerous," she said.

"Yeah…" I began to think about the accident. "It was weird."

"He's always coming up with these crazy ideas," Heather said to the female paramedic. "I don't think I'm going to let him drive anymore."

The female paramedic laughed.

I was still trying to remember what happened. The deer, the accident, the call… the call, what call?

"I imagined that I used that payphone," I mumbled to myself.

"What, Hun?" Heather said.

“I said, I imagined that I made a call on that payphone.”

“Just let it go,” the female paramedic said, “you guys are fine.”

“No. It was really odd. I must have seen the deer and imagined that I missed him, but we skidded into the ditch, breaking our axle. I got out of the car and called for some help.”

“Dad, you’re silly,” Jessie said. Then Heather and she laughed at me.

The driver and the female paramedic stayed quiet.

“I made a call. I talked to some woman. She promised that if I followed a few rules, I’d have everything I ever wanted.”

“Probably just one rule,” the female paramedic said.

“I think you’re right,” I said. “How did you guess that?”

“We get into an accident because you’re off dreaming of genies,” Heather said. “Hopefully your man isn’t as out there as mine is, Lucy.”

Chapter 6 – Collect

Lucy. The paramedic's name is Lucy, but I wasn't sure why that seemed important.

Lucy just nodded at Heather and me.

"Your name is Lucy?"

She ignored me.

The ambulance was slowing down.

"Hey, Mom, Dad… Mr. Bob must have made a wrong turn or something because we're back on the same road where we hit the deer. I can see our car up ahead."

"What?" Heather said.

"Your name is Bob? Your name is Lucy?"

"One Rule," Bob said. His voice seemed deeper and gruff. It sounded familiar.

The ambulance stopped.

"Just one," Lucy said. "Don't talk about what happened."

"Jesus Christ."

"I told you once already that we don't like that language around here!"

"What is going on? Is this some kind of joke?" Heather asked.

Her face was red, and I could see that she was breathing heavily.

"This isn't real. I'm just dreaming. All this is just a dream." I squeezed my eyes shut. "Wake up, wake up, wake up."

Lucy smacked me across the face. It didn't feel like a dream. I opened my eyes and saw that Heather had gotten up. I could hear Jessie crying from the front, and it sounded like Bob was trying to keep her from turning around in her seat as she had been.

"You could have had it all, Patrick!" Lucy screamed.

Her youth was vanishing. She now looked like she was in her late forties. Her hair was streaked with gray; the whites of her eyes were yellowing.

"God help us."

“Shut up!” Bob screamed.

“Now we have to collect,” Lucy said.

“You ready for them sirens now, sweetie?” Bob said to Jessie.

The sirens of the ambulance screamed to life. Bob started the ambulance and revved the engine. Lucy was near the front, and I stood a few feet away from her, making sure that Heather was safely behind me. I could hear her trying to get the back door open, but I refused to take my eyes off of Lucy.

She looked like she was 90. Her hair was pure white, balding in some spots. Her eyes, which used to be shockingly blue just 10 minutes ago when we were outside of the ambulance, were now dull, but evil and calculating.

“Give me my daughter and let us out of here. NOW!”

Bob revved the engine again, and Jessie was still screaming.

“Let my family go! They have nothing to do with this.”

The thing that called itself Lucy laughed.

“Fine!” Lucy said. “I’ll let your wife go.”

I heard the tires screech as Bob released the brake and pressed the accelerator to the floor. We stumbled back. The thing was fast. I struggled to remain standing with the acceleration. How fast were we going now, 70? 80? We were still accelerating. I pictured the speedometer maxed out as the engine still red-lined with torque.

She lunged forward. I didn’t expect the frail-looking thing to be that quick and that strong. She backhanded me in the face, knocking me to the ground. I heard Heather scream.

“Patrick! Help! Help! He—”

The door to the ambulance was kicked open by Lucy. She stood in the open doorway holding Heather in a headlock. The scenery outside was zipping by so fast, and still I felt like we were accelerating. 90? 100?

I screamed as I crawled my way to my wife. She was reaching for me, and I grabbed her hand and tried to pull her out of Lucy’s grip and away

from the open door. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw our own car, and that's when Lucy pushed Heather out of the back.

"AHHHH…"

"No!"

I didn't let go. The force with which Lucy threw her pulled me half out as well. I am on my stomach, trying to pull Heather back in. I have a grip on her left hand. My mind refuses to register Heather's screams, but my mind can't help but picture her legs being eaten alive by the asphalt.

"You wanted to let her go! Let…HER….GO!"

Lucy kicked me in the back of the head.

"Patrick!" Heather screamed. "Don't let me go!"

Lucy kicked me in the head again.

I held on the best I could, but my best is not enough. Her hand was slipping out of mine.

"Bye-bye, Heather," Lucy said, and she kicked me a third time in the head.

Heather screamed. Her hand slid out of mine. She… oh god, we were going so fast… her body… it… I'm sorry I can't relive any more of that moment. It happened so fast, but it also lasted an eternity. You can imagine, if you want, how she must have looked in those last moments, a woman with child, being tossed out of a speeding vehicle like a piece of trash.

Bob slammed on the brakes, and we skidded to a stop. Jessie was screaming for us. I prayed that she hadn't seen what happened to her mother.

"Please," I begged, now lying on my back looking up at the horror that was Lucy. "Please. It's me you want; let my daughter go, she's got nothing to do with this. Take me and let her live."

Bob turned off the engine. For some reason, Jessie had stopped crying. My head still hung out of the back of the ambulance, and I looked at the sky. Tears were running down the sides of my face.

The snow was coming down hard, but it wasn't white like before; this snow was dark gray. Crows filled the sky, thousands of them, perhaps millions. I saw our wrecked Durango behind us, the smashed payphone, and I saw Heather's mangled body in the road.

I pulled my eyes away from my wife and focused on the trees blowing in the wind, but I heard no sounds coming from outside. I was breathing, and my heart was beating out of my chest, but I could hear nothing from inside either. This was the complete silence of death.

I prayed to God; I asked him for help, but I knew that God was not listening. Not in this place. I defaulted on a deal with the devil, and I was suffering the consequences.

"Please. She's just a girl. She has nothing to do with this."

"Patrick… You don't get it."

"What? What don't I get?"

"Your wife and unborn son had nothing to do with this, so I did as you asked, and let them go."

"You killed them!"

"I let them go," she said with a snarl on her face, and her eyes rolled up into her head. "They are with him now."

"Don't kill my daughter! I'm the one who called you. I'm the one that made the deal. You don't have any reason to kill her. Please."

"I won't. I can't."

"Then let her leave without hurting her."

"You're right. You did call us. You did accept the deal. You did break it. So we have to collect."

"I accept that. I'm here. Take me."

"No."

"You just said you were here to collect."

"Are you that stupid, Patrick?"

"What do you want me to do?!" I screamed.

"What you fail to realize, Patrick, is that even though you made the call and took the deal… you forgot about the quarter. The quarter was your

daughter's, AND SHE IS COMING WITH US!"

"Oh god, no!" I jumped to my feet and pushed past Lucy, trying to get to the window.

"Dad, help me!"

"Sorry, Sir!"

Bob slammed the window closed before I got there. Jessie was pounding on the glass, and I was trying to break it open. I heard Lucy laughing hysterically behind me.

"Better look out, Patrick."

I was compelled to stop hitting the glass. My arms fell to my sides. I felt like I was paralyzed. Lucy limped over to me and wiped a tear from my eye with her finger, stuck out a long, disgusting tongue, and licked it.

"Salty and oh, so sweet," she said.

I tried to speak, but I either could not open my mouth or could not think of anything to say. Everything seemed to be draining out of me.

"I said, you might want to… look out."

It faded into Heather's voice.

"Look out," Heather whispered.

Chapter 7 – Facts

The sky wasn't dark anymore; it was snowing, and white. The sick smell of death somehow was transformed into that new car smell of leather. And I wasn't in the ambulance anymore; I was behind the wheel of the Durango.

I was staring at the payphone. I looked up to see the shape of an animal running across the road; of course it was the deer. Another chance! Thank you, God! I was given another chance! I released the accelerator but did not touch the brake pedal. Somehow I knew that by not stepping on the brake, we would avoid the deer and not wreck. Everything was going to be fine.

My soul was exploding with joy. "Heather! My God, you would not believe the nightmare that I just had!"

I looked at Heather, and time slowed down. Not in the sense that it feels like it, but it really slowed down. Even after everything that happened, I was completely unprepared for what I saw.

Heather was sitting in the passenger seat, covered head to toe in blood. Pieces of asphalt stuck to her face in the places where her skin was ripped away. Blood dripped from her eyes. She was cradling something in her arms and rocking slightly forward and back.

"Look out," she whispered, over and over and over again, "look out."

I turned to see the backseat. Jessie was sitting there with her hands in her lap. She looked fine, but her eyes seemed distant.

"Jessie!" I screamed. "Jessie, talk to me!"

I stopped screaming and just looked at her. She was so completely silent; it was like she was a doll. Then I looked at Heather, rocking back and forth with our son. Then I looked forward, and I saw the deer was there, right in front of the car, in midair, as if it had gone to jump out of the way when time stopped. Further up in the sky, a few crows hung like trophies on a wall.

I looked back at the payphone, the evil fucking payphone.

“This isn’t real either. These things are not my family.”

Ring.

“I’m done with these games.”

Ring.

“I’m ready to see the truth.”

Ring.

I sat up straight. Pressed the accelerator to the floor and cut the wheel as far as it would go to the right.

Ring.

“I’m ready now.”

It happened fast. I hit the deer full speed and center mass, and the engine revved, but I didn’t let up on the gas or let the wheel correct itself. The Durango flipped, and I saw the payphone just before the truck crashed into and over it.

“FUCK YOU!” I screamed.

The truck continued to roll, and I lost consciousness for what I hoped would have been the last time. I don’t remember anything else about the crash, or the third crash, if you’re keeping track.

I woke up six days later in a hospital.

Over the next few weeks, they kept me drugged up. I kept trying to tell them about who killed my wife and who kidnapped my daughter, but no one would listen. The nurses just gave each other nervous glances whenever they came in the room.

One day, the police came in to have a talk. They said they had pieced together most of what happened. They figured that I must have fallen asleep at the wheel, but was awoken when my wife must have screamed.

“But it was too late for you to avoid the animal, right?” the cop said. “You tried, but it was too late, and by turning too sharply, applying pressure to the accelerator instead of the brakes, you caused…, uh, I mean, that action caused the truck to roll several times…”

“That’s not what happened.”

He wasn't listening to me and continued, "…Your wife was thrown from the vehicle and was pronounced dead at the scene…"

"They took my daughter."

"…You sustained serious head injury…"

"They killed my wife, not me, and why aren't you looking for my daughter!"

"Sir," he said, "I understand this is difficult for you, but no one killed your wife, and your daughter was not kidnapped."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because, sir, she is downstairs in room 358 and in stable condition."

I didn't know what to feel. I didn't know what to say. Was she really alright? Had I just been in some nightmare world that my mind had built?

"My daughter's alive…"

"Yes, sir. But that's all I can tell you; I just need you to verify this report before I turn it in. If there is anything you would like to add, now is the time to do so."

I was still in pain for the loss of my wife and unborn son, but only a father who has been through a tragedy like this could possibly understand how relieved I was when I heard my daughter was alive.

I thought through everything I had been through.

Facts: My mind has always had an active imagination. I am a writer. There was an accident in which my wife was killed. My daughter is not dead. These are the things I know for certain to be true.

Too strange to be real: I'm offered a chance to get a better life by two people, Bob Belzie and Lucy Ferguson, aliases for Beelzebub and Lucifer, for Christ's sake.

Speculation: In my grief over the loss, I take a deal with the devil. My mind must have been hoping it could reverse what happened, and it did, several times over. The deer was always there to remind me about impending death. The crows were another bad omen.

Fact: No fantasy can last.

Speculation: Slowly, my dream world of the nice, safe trip in the ambulance dissolves into the reality of the accident and my loss. My wife died before my eyes when, no matter how hard I held on to her and tried to pull her back to relative safety, she was destined to fall. Then, I was back in the car. Once again trying to rebuild my fantasy, but a part of me would not accept any more lies. Time stopped for me and the carbon copies of my family. The fantasy could go no further. Nothing else could happen until I turned the wheel, hit the gas, and accepted the accident, and my loss, for what they really were.

Fact: I came up with that myself way before I ever saw my first therapist.

“Sure,” I said to the rookie cop, “that’s pretty much what happened.”

And I believed it. He believed it. The doctors believed it. Everyone believed it. Do you believe it? Well? Do you?

I’m just a guy who got into an accident and had a nightmare. Open-and-shut case. I told you in the beginning that you might come to that conclusion. But you’re a smart fellow (I hope). If you’ve paid attention to what I said, you must be wondering what changed my mind.

Chapter 8 – Five Years Later

Here I sit, five years later.

My daughter, she is right next to me.

She's 16 now.

She is a beautiful girl who looks a lot like her mother. All of the boys would try to date her.

That is, if she wasn't in a coma.

I come here every day to visit her. I watch the machines pump air into her lungs and listen to the beeping noise of the heart monitor. In five years, she hasn't spoken, but her eyes are always open, always looking through me, begging me to come save her.

I believe that my wife and son are in heaven. I believe that pure evil has taken my daughter's soul hostage. I believe that one day I may find a way to bring her back if I can keep it together. You… Well, you can believe whatever the fuck you want.

Call me crazy. I don't care. My eyes are open now.

Are you about ready to give up on me?

A few weeks after I got home, I received a package from the hospital. It was my belongings from the accident. I didn't want anything to do with it, and I set a fire in the backyard to burn it all. One of the items was the pair of sneakers I was wearing that day. The bottoms of them were stained with blood.

It didn't have to be deer blood, did it? I am just paranoid, right? I thought so, and I tossed the shoes into the fire to burn with everything else.

There isn't much left to say. It's late now, and I need to get some sleep, but take this last bit of information and chew on it:

There's one more odd fact about the payphone that I haven't shared with you yet. There was money in it. It wasn't much, only a quarter, but the funny thing that no one can explain in any logical fashion is how mine and my daughter's fingerprints got on it.

I had a good life.

Patrick T. Levine
18 June 2008 – 10:43 PM E.S.T.

THE END.



About the Author



Born near Baltimore, Maryland, Kris has been writing short fiction since he was a kid. First sharing his ramblings on Stealth Fiction and then on Reddit, where most of his stories were posted to r/nosleep. His stories have been featured on The NoSleep Podcast, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, Tales to Terrify, and Horror on the Rocks. The recording of The Scarecrow Corpse, read by Markiplier, has been heard hundreds of thousands of times. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife. And occasionally, he turns into a strawberry.

More stories: StealthFiction.com

What's Next?

LET ME TELL YOU HOW I LOST MY EYES

A Short Story Collection by Sammy Fowler

Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

~~~~~
~~~~~

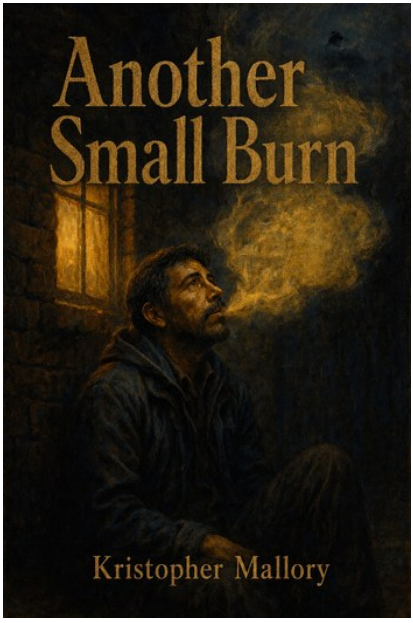
Hear It Read Aloud

Some stories are better heard in the dark.

Payphone has a complete audio narration, read by True, a digital voice. It runs 54 minutes and it's free: play it online, or download it as an MP3 or an audiobook with chapters.

Listen free at stealthfiction.com

More from Kristopher Mallory



ANOTHER SMALL BURN

This quiet horror short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

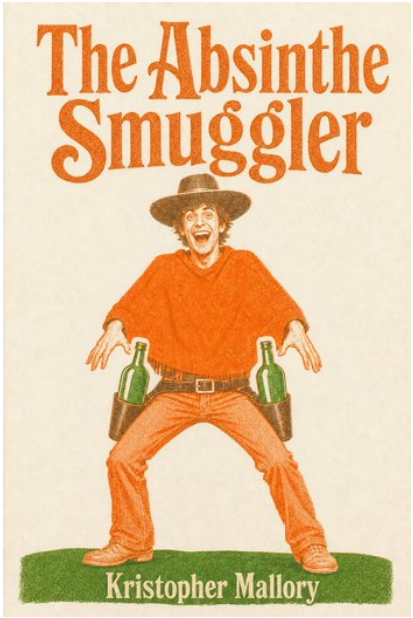
~~~~~

Carlos can burn any memory into magic, the way everyone can now; the hard part is choosing which ones he can live without.

~~~~~

Praise for Another Small Burn:

"That would make a fantastic Novella or novel, I was sad when it ended and wanted more." – *smoore*



THE ABSINTHE SMUGGLER

This comedy short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

~~~~~

A teenager on holiday in Madrid promises his friends two bottles of the green fairy, and customs turns out to be the easy part.
~~~~~



THE SPECIAL CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS OF MR. EVERETT

This Christmas horror story is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

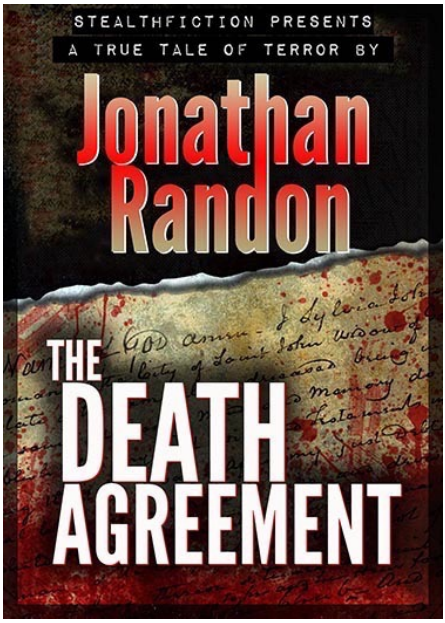
~~~~~

Christmas Eve, a blizzard, and Hank agrees to sit with old Mr. Everett, twenty-two-time winner of the town's decoration contest, who insists he is not going crazy.

~~~~~

Praise for The Special Christmas Ornaments of Mr. Everett:

"Quite a story, mixing snowy Christmas magic with delightfully dark humored chills." – *leavnsoon*



THE DEATH AGREEMENT

This horror novella is now available. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

~~~~~

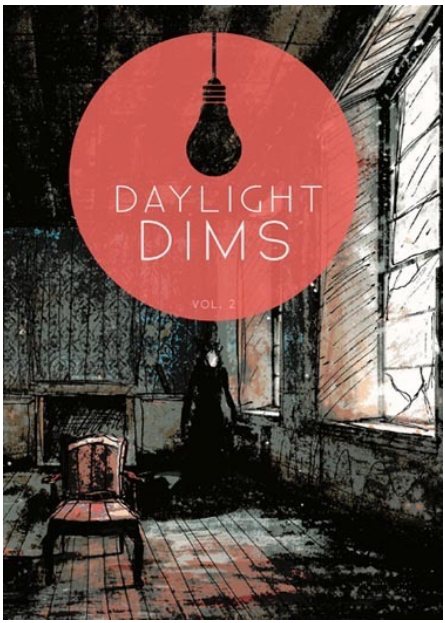
We made a pact. He lived up to his end by dying. I tried to live up to my end by following The Death Agreement.

What you will find within these pages is a true recounting of a man's life as seen through my eyes. It's almost an impossible task when some of what you see can't be real and what is real you may refuse to see… My name is Jon Randon and I'm going to tell you a story.

Praise for The Death Agreement:

"This was one of the best things I've ever read." – *GrandMoffJed*
~~~~~

More from Stealth Fiction



DAYLIGHT DIMS
VOLUME TWO

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

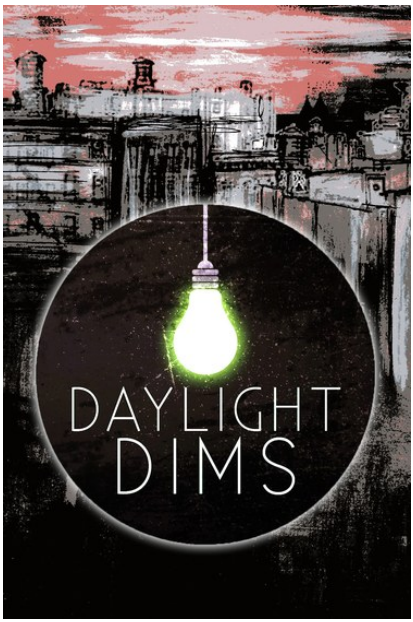
~~~~~

Darkness descends again. Daylight Dims Volume Two features thirteen stories that cross the genres of surreal, dark fantasy, and heart-pounding dread. This annual horror anthology is guaranteed to twist your perception of horror. From the common, comfortable tropes to the more taboo, these handpicked tales have a literary aspect designed to showcase what true horror can be.

~~~~~

Praise for Daylight Dims Vol. 2:

“This was probably one of the most entertaining collections of horror stories I've ever read. And I don't say this to suck up or to stroke any tail feathers. I was happy to have the opportunity to read through this before release, and I implore anyone on the fence about picking this up to do themselves a favor and take the plunge into the abyss. You will not be disappointed.” – *Human Gravy*



DAYLIGHT DIMS

VOLUME ONE

Second Edition — now with two new stories from the editors.

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

~~~~~

The editors chose 13 stories from over 100 premium submissions. DD contains some of the best horror around.

~~~~~

Praise for Daylight Dims:

"This is a fantastic horror anthology. All 13 stories are exquisite. The book was not what I expected initially, as I thought that it might be all vampire or werewolf tales. Not so! These are original stories from authors of the macabre. From dark fantasy and pure suspense to classic horror tales, it shows the extraordinary scope of fantastical fright fiction. The stories in this anthology are a tour de force of fear, which will haunt you, terrify you, and stay with you." – S. Mahaffey, *"neverjudge"*