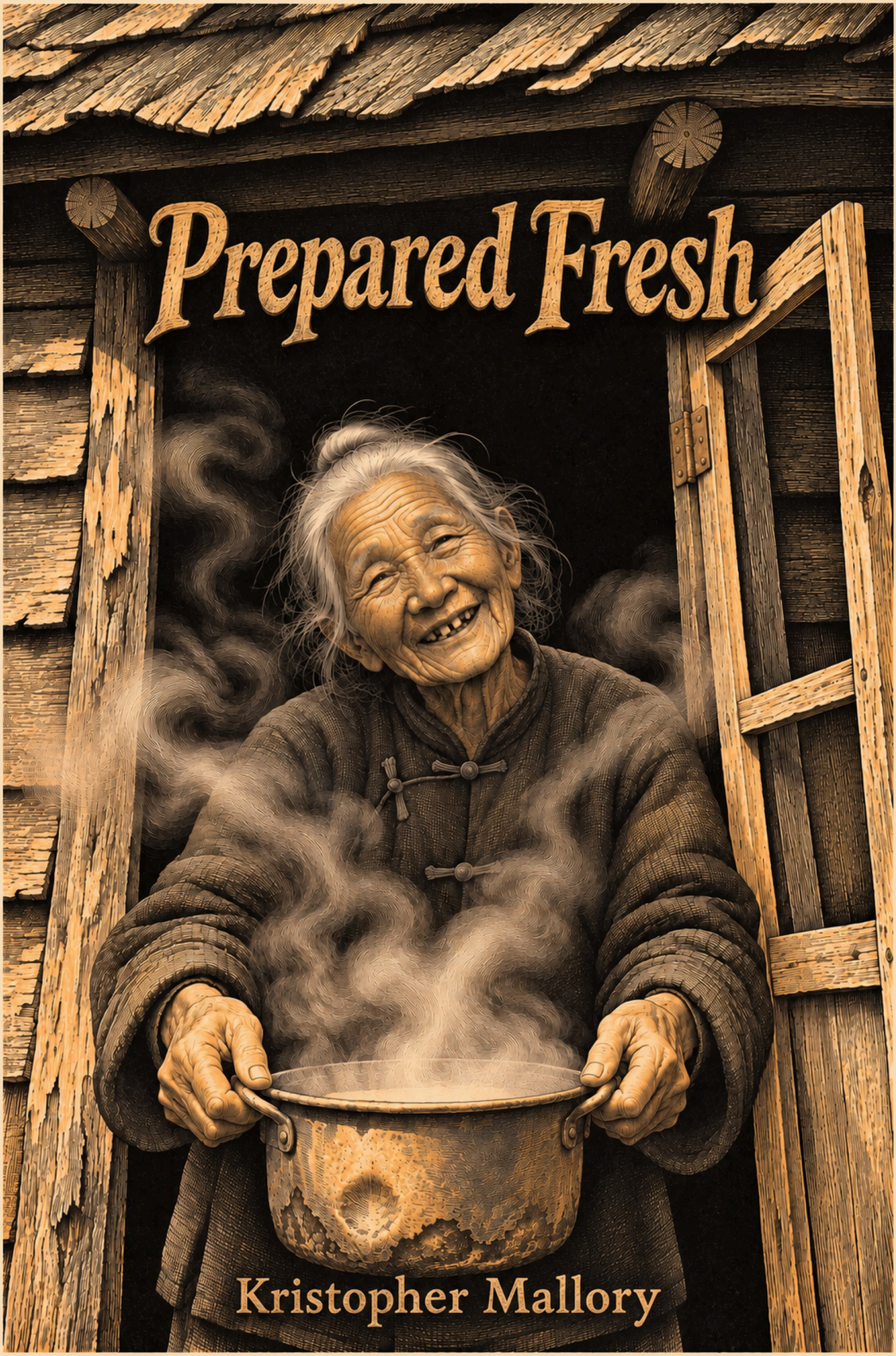

Prepared Fresh
Kristopher Mallory

Prepared Fresh

by

Kristopher Mallory

Prepared Fresh

A Sammy Fowler Story

Copyright



www.StealthFiction.com

Prepared Fresh

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Universal Transmission

The Little Old Lady

The Price To See The Dead

Attempted

A Gift Of Bone

Payphone

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The Diary

Ruined Sheets

The Scarecrow Corpse

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The Special Christmas Ornaments of Mr. Everett:

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Master Stargazer:

"A short but excellent sci-fi story. The ending is unpredictable but it logically makes sense." – *Luci*

Special Thanks

For Vic. That was his job, not mine.

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Prepared Fresh

"Your body is not a temple, it's an amusement park. Enjoy the ride."

~ Anthony Bourdain, Kitchen Confidential

In the summer of 2001, I found work as a cameraman for a pilot episode of a reality television show. The producer was going for a format like *Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations* or *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern.* Though if I'm not mistaken, neither of those shows were even on the air yet, but the concept was described as a food and travel show with a comedic host.

Prepared Fresh starring Vic Passawelle could've been a household name. Unfortunately for Vic and the producer, we ran into a slight problem while on the road.

The first segment went fine. We spent a few days driving through Amish country, making stops at all the back road markets. I'm talking about the places where outsiders seldom visit, where a *button* is as alien to them as a Martian would be to us, so imagine how they reacted to my Canon XL-1 camera.

The people were great, don't get me wrong. They were friendly and helpful. Vic and I were invited to home-cooked dinners several times. I was even allowed to film at most of them. That's really what the show was about. Vic's goal was to meet unique people and interact with them while they *prepared* a *fresh* meal. Prepared Fresh. Get it? Do ya get it? Okay, so I'm not a comedian. Vic was, not me.

Anyway, once we had the footage of the Amish meals, Vic decided to contrast that with some Asian customs. Sure, we could have gone up to Chinatown in New York, or Chinatown in California, or Chinatown in, well, anywhere. They were pretty much all the same. Every Chinatown in the United States was nothing except a carbon-copied tourist attraction. No, Vic wanted something different, so Vic persuaded the producer to fly us out to the real China — that was a mistake. A huge mistake. A nuclear mistake.

If I had to pinpoint exactly what got us into trouble, I'd say it was the language barrier. Unlike in the States, where most Asian immigrants can comprehend the intricacies of the English language, the traditional Chinese-speaking citizens standing around whichever third-rate airport we

landed at had not mastered such skills. Why we didn't land in Beijing, or Hong Kong, or any other major city where we would've found an English-speaking guide is a question I would still like to have answered. If I ever find that producer… I swear, one way or another, I'm going to make him sorry he ever sent Vic and me on that trip.

So there we were, in China. Only God knows exactly where. It was in some small village that I couldn't pronounce even if you told me the name, syllable by syllable. The taxi driver at the airport, or rather the shady guy in the rusted fifties-looking Ford truck, dropped us off after Vic explained we were doing a TV show, and we were seeking the best place around for prepared fresh food.

"Per fesh?" the shady guy asked, disgusted.

"Yeah," Vic said. "Can you take us?"

And so he took us.

Several people walked by us without so much as a nod, despite Vic's charming personality and people skills. To them, we looked like a pair of pathetic *yáng guǐzi*, the Chinese slur for white tourists — it means *foreign devil* — which, I guess, we were.

Suddenly, Vic jumped into the pothole-riddled dirt road and stopped this kid pedaling around one of those carriages that looked like a bike in the front and a chariot in the back.

"Food," Vic shouted at the kid. "Prepared Fresh! Can you help us?"

The poor kid stared at us with a look of utter confusion.

Vic rolled his eyes at me and slumped his shoulders. I shrugged. Apparently this wasn't the secret location of top-notch cuisine that the guy in the old beater led us to believe. I was about to call it quits when the kid decided he did know some English after all.

"No, no," he said. "You no wan per fesh."

"Yes." Vic nodded. "Do want fresh." Then he mock-chewed on a carrot.

The kid said no again. He looked scared. Underneath the brim of his dirty Milwaukee Brewers cap, I saw his eyes twitching. At the time, I

thought it was because of the way Vic spoke to him. Now I know better.

"Come on, kid," Vic said, then fished out a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket.

After a moment of hesitation, the kid nodded, and he timidly reached for the money. Vic and I climbed into the back of his rickshaw, and off we went. The final location was a little more than two blocks away. The kid skidded to a stop, and he pointed at an old shanty house. Vic and I stepped out of our makeshift limo. As soon as we did, the kid took off down the dirt road.

"Hey!" Vic yelled and started to chase after him.

"Let him go," I said, leaving out the part that we could see the exact spot at the bottom of the hill where the kid had picked us up. Vic relented and walked over to where I was standing.

I looked at the run-down shack, wondering how badly the kid translated Vic's request for fresh food. At first glance I thought it was a toolshed. At second glance, I still thought it was a toolshed, and you know that saying about what a duck looks and quacks like.

I was about to tell Vic we should head home when the screen-less screen door swung open. A tiny, old woman, with mostly missing or rotted teeth, materialized from the darkness of the inside. She was holding a steaming pot; the thick fog floated over the edge of the container, making her look like a witch. She cocked her head to the side, then called out to us. "Cummm, cummm! Tis way! Tis way!" Then she turned around and walked into the black void.

"I don't know about this," Vic said.

"We can always go back to the airport if you want. Maybe find another segment to match up with the Amish footage."

Vic shook his head. "No. We're here. I just hope the food's cleaner than the kitchen."

"Yeah, me too," I said, walking across the threshold.

The shack wasn't what I expected at all. Instead of an extremely tiny living space, it was actually the entrance to an underground transit. As

soon as my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, I saw the steps leading down. The old woman was standing at the bottom, looking up at us.

"Cummm, cummm, per fesh you et," she said. "Tis way! Tis way! Fesh. You like!"

Vic and I followed her down the steps, and that's when the odor hit me. It was, by far, the most mouthwatering scent that had ever graced my nose.

"You smell that?" I asked.

"Oh my God, yes," Vic replied.

The scent emanated from the pot the old woman was carrying. I wish I could describe it, but that was Vic's specialty, not mine. We followed her through a short tunnel and up some stairs into… a restaurant?

"Way-et hair," the old woman said.

"Wait here?" I asked.

"Ya, ya. You way-et hair for sit."

"Thank you," I said and bowed.

Two men came out from behind a curtain and motioned for us to follow them. I asked if I could film. Since they didn't understand a word I said, I unslung my camera and raised it to my eye. The men led us past a steel door, into a small, candlelit, six-tabled dining area. A man and a woman sat at one table to the right, and three women sat at a table to the left. The old woman came into the room from behind us, and I heard the metallic clang of the door shutting.

"Sit! Sit!"

Vic and I sat at the table furthest from the other guests. He reached out and tapped the old woman on the arm. "Can we have some of whatever that is?" Vic asked while pointing at the pot.

The old woman looked at the camera in my hand and said, "No, no. Pic your an no et per fesh."

"She wants me to turn it off," I said to Vic. "What should we do?"

"Shut it down. Let's see what happens."

As soon as I put the camera away, the old woman took the top off the pot and poured some of the broth into each one of our bowls. It smelled

amazing; I looked for a spoon but discovered there weren't any utensils on the table. The old woman saw my confusion and said, "For dip, dip. Et fesh sooooon."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the three ladies at the other table get up from her chair and lie down on the floor. I turned to see if she was all right, or if she needed any help, but her two friends were already assisting.

"What's going on?" Vic asked.

I focused my attention back on Vic. "I don't know. I think she collapsed."

"No," Vic said. "I think she's going into labor. Look!"

"What?" I whipped my head back around. The woman on the floor had a bulging belly that I hadn't noticed at first. Her legs were propped up on a chair, and she was moaning softly. I wanted to aid her, or at the very least get someone to call a doctor, but the look Vic gave me when I even hinted at interfering was enough to keep me sitting quietly in my seat. We watched as the woman's water broke and her faint moans became agonizing screams. All the while, the couple from the other table looked as if this were the most normal thing in the world. They seemed bored even.

"Yiiiiiii!" the two women said to their pregnant friend each time she bore down with an animalistic grunt. "Yiiiiiii! Yiiiiiii! Yiiiiiii!"

Suddenly the room echoed with the shrill cries of a newborn. The couple at the other table began to cheer along with the two men standing by the steel door. The whole entire scene was strange to Vic and me, but who were we to judge the ways of a culture we knew very little about? So we smiled ear to ear and clapped.

One of the women handed the baby to the new mother while the other woman sat between the mother's legs and collected the afterbirth.

The old woman walked over to the table that the three women had been sitting at. She smiled down at the baby boy, then reached in between her breasts and took out a billfold. She fanned the money so everyone in the room could see. Still smiling, she laid the bills onto the table one by one,

until her hands were empty. Then her grin faded, and her face reshaped itself into a silent question directed at the new mother.

"What the hell is going on?" I whispered.

Vic heard me. "I don't know, but we're leaving." He stood up.

The two men by the door pointed at him threateningly. They shook their heads in unison.

"Fuck," Vic said, sitting back down. "We have a problem."

I heard him, but my attention was focused on the old woman and the mother. The old woman held out her arms to each side, palms up, as if to say: *'Well?'* She stood there in that restless pose while the mother stared at her, unblinking. Then the mother gave the slightest of nods, and the room exploded in cheering.

"Yiiiiiii!"

The mother held up her baby. The old woman took him from her, and then she slowly spun in a circle so everyone could see the child in her hands.

"Yiiiiiii!"

One of the mother's friends helped her stand. They walked back to the table and began to count the money.

The other woman, the one holding the placenta, stood next to the old woman, and then she quickly wrapped the umbilical cord around the infant's neck and started to pull. Her eyes were wide, maniacal. The old woman grinned and squeezed the baby tight while it tried its best to squirm away, unable to even scream.

"Yiiiiiii!"

The attack happened so fast. I felt as if I had left my body, like I was floating above the situation, unable to react. The baby boy's face was already turning a deathly shade of blue, his little eyes bulged from their sockets, and his mouth opened and closed in horrifying shivers, begging for a breath that would not come. My own jaw dropped, mimicking the dying child. In an effort to save my sanity, my mind focused on that small detail while the rest of my body was still paralyzed by fear.

“STOP!” I heard Vic scream. He threw our table over and ran at the old woman. The two men were faster, though. One of them dove at Vic, catching him by the leg, and then the other tackled him. I heard a sickening crunch as Vic’s head connected with the table that the other couple was sitting at. Neither reacted. They still appeared as bored as ever.

The baby’s death throes ended, and all the people in the room shouted out again… even the mother this time.

“Yiiiiiii!”

The old woman dropped the small corpse on the table in front of the mother. It landed on the bills, and a few of them fluttered to the ground. The mother’s friend, the one who helped her to the table, produced a knife from a sheath hidden under her dress. I turned away, but I could still hear the sound of the blade sawing through bone.

I had that surreal feeling that allows a person to analyze their surroundings with heightened awareness. I smelled the sweet, sweet aroma of the broth sitting in front of me, stronger than ever. I looked down at Vic. His body spasmed twice before going still. A pool of blood spread out from underneath his head. I didn’t need to get closer to know that it was fatal. I looked at the old woman. She nodded her approval and hummed a little tune while the three women were busy separating organs from meat. I looked over to the couple. Their boredom was gone. They tapped their fingers on the table impatiently. Then I looked to the two men blocking the door. They shook their heads slowly, and I nodded once to let them know I understood. And during it all, I listened to the drip, drip, drip of the baby’s blood rolling over the edge and landing on the money that fell to the floor. Blood money.

My body was numb, and my hands were tingling, but I didn’t allow that to stop me from raising my index finger up into the air.

“Yes, what is it?” the old woman said in perfect English.

“Prepared Fresh?” I asked, certain I knew the answer.

She laughed. “Per fesh — prepared fresh flesh.”

Yes, if I had to pinpoint exactly what got us into trouble, I'd say it was the language barrier. I swallowed down the bile rising in my throat. Everyone in the room was staring at me, waiting. I knew in that instant there was only one way I would get out of there alive. I took a deep breath and gritted my teeth to prepare myself for the next question I needed to ask, the one thing I could say that just might save my life…

I sat up straight, smiled, then asked: "So, when do we eat? I'm starving."

"Yiiiiiii!"

Don't worry, I'm not going to bore you with descriptions of how *delicious* the meat was. That was Vic's job, not mine.

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.

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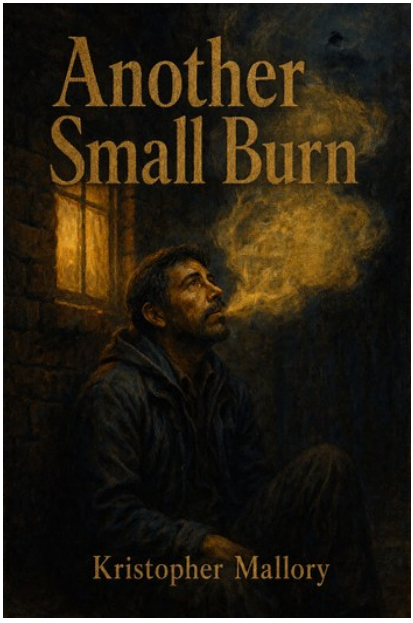
Hear It Read Aloud

Some stories are better heard in the dark.

Prepared Fresh has a complete audio narration, read by Jon, a digital voice. It runs 16 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.

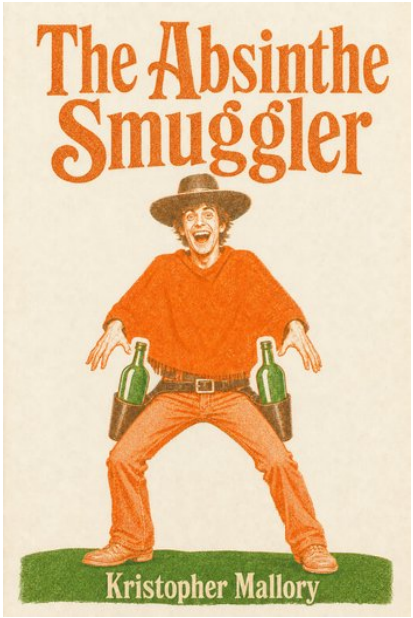
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Carlos can burn any memory into magic, the way everyone can now; the hard part is choosing which ones he can live without.

~~~~~

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.
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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.

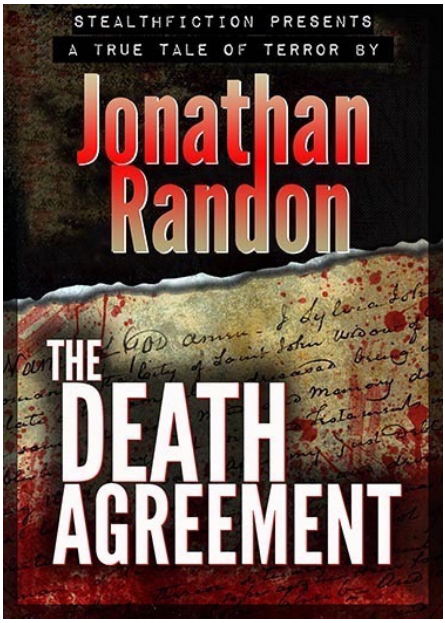
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Christmas Eve, a blizzard, and Hank agrees to sit with old Mr. Everett, twenty-two-time winner of the town's decoration contest, who insists he is not going crazy.

~~~~~

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.

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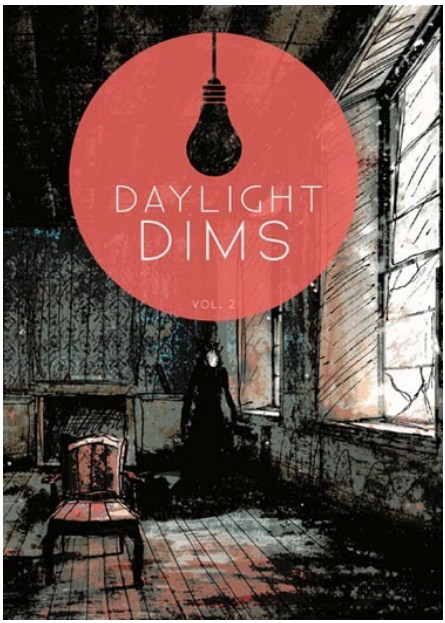
We made a pact. He lived up to his end by dying. I tried to live up to my end by following The Death Agreement.

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*
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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.

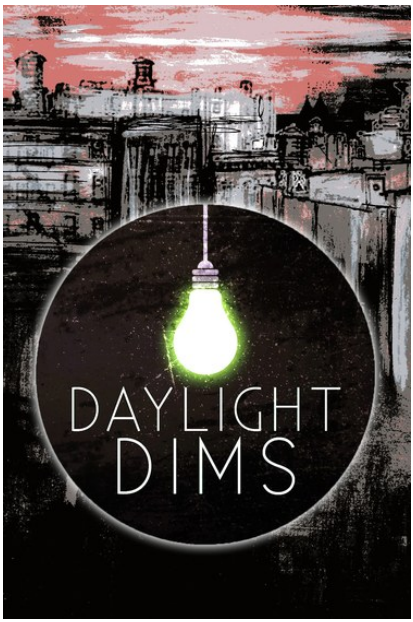
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Darkness descends again. Daylight Dims Volume Two features thirteen stories that cross the genres of surreal, dark fantasy, and heart-pounding dread. This annual horror anthology is guaranteed to twist your perception of horror. From the common, comfortable 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.

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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"*