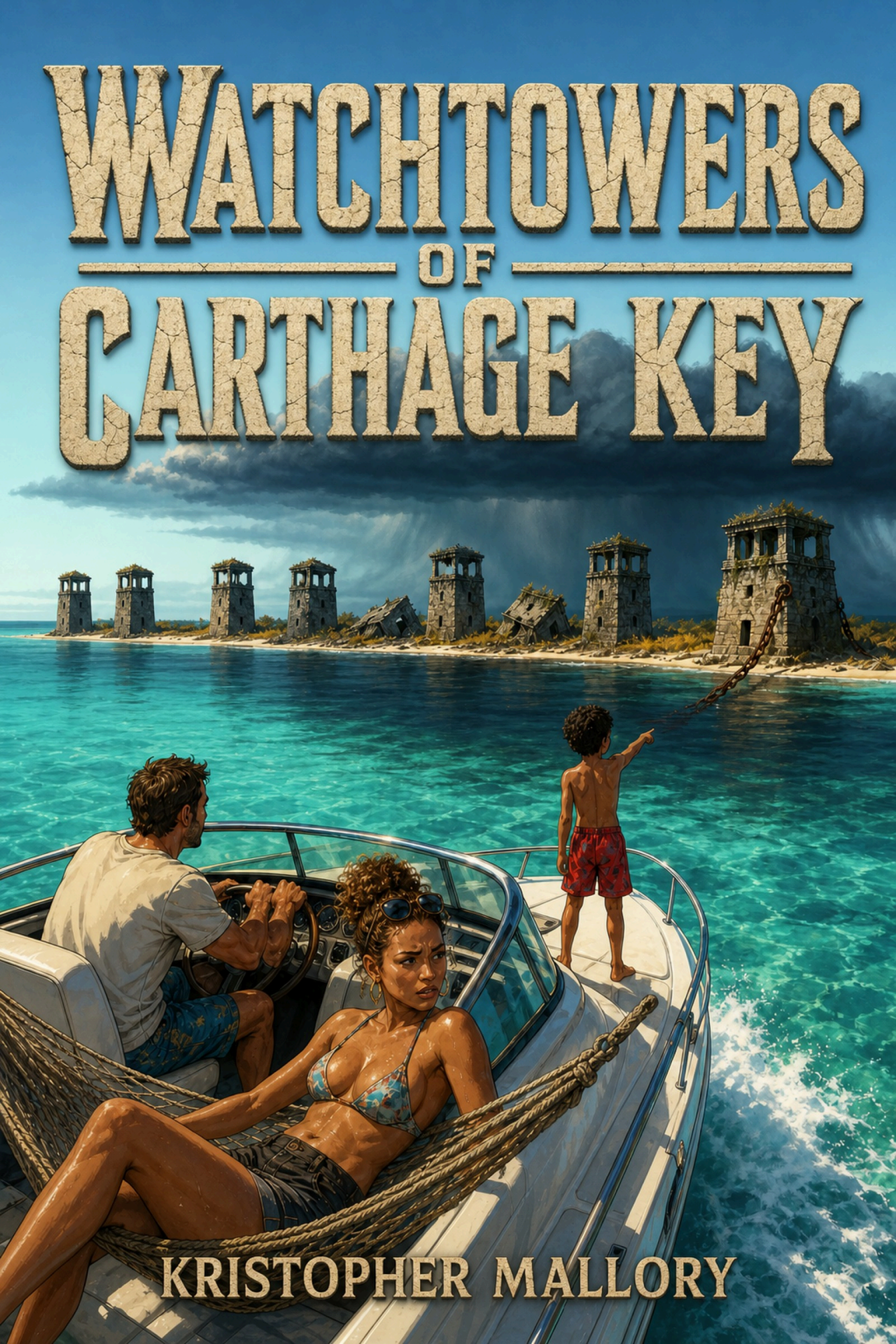

WATCHTOWERS
OF
CARTHAGE KEY
KRISTOPHER MALLORY

Watchtowers of Carthage Key

by

Kristopher Mallory

Watchtowers of Carthage Key

An Island Horror Short

Copyright



www.StealthFiction.com

Watchtowers of Carthage Key

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Special Thanks

To Carthage, which never had a key.

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Watchtowers of Carthage Key

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

~ H. P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature

Mainland Florida disappeared behind the horizon, leaving my girlfriend, her son, and me surrounded by the open Atlantic. I revved the boat engine, enjoying the warm wind and the ripples of sunlight dancing on the crystal-clear water.

Jordan tugged on the back of my shirt. “Where are we going?”

“I told ya…explorin’. Now, go bother your mother.”

“Hey!” He kicked my leg.

Lindsey sat up in the hammock, beads of ocean spray glistening on her oiled, mocha skin. “Cut it out, boys. Momma’s busy working on her tan.”

“Yeah, yeah…we’ll be there soon anyway.”

“But *where*?” Jordan shook his hands above his head.

I shrugged.

Truth was, the place we were going didn’t have a name. Hundreds of small islands dot the Floridian coast. Most of them are uninhabited and unclaimed. Looking for a fun way to bond with Jordan, I had searched the maps online for one to visit. I chose a spot farther off the coast than I originally wanted to travel because large structures appeared to stretch along its sandy beaches, like a row of dominoes.

While staring at the computer monitor, I wasn’t sure if the shadows were playing tricks on my eyes. I checked around the web and couldn’t find anything about the place, except a crude drawing of the general region with the joke caption written in pirate text: ***Here There Be Monsters.***

Honestly, I didn’t expect much to come from the excursion. At the very least, I thought checking out the small bit of land would be a good day trip. Lindsey loved to sunbathe, and Jordan always enjoyed adding to his seashell collection. And even if those structures turned out to be geological, I wasn’t going to get upset. The island didn’t matter. I just wanted to spend time with two people I cared about.

A sense of adventure had washed over me the moment we left the marina. Once Florida was out of sight, I set the course to the unnamed island and took in all the beauty the sea had to offer.

“It’s a nice day,” I said. “Thank you for coming out with me.”

Jordan said, “Thanks for bringing us. Still not going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope.”

As we sped through the salty spray, I told stories of islands full of lost pirate treasures while Jordan listened in awe and Lindsey kept watch for the occasional acrobatic dolphin or sailfish. We laughed and played as the morning wore on. I even let Jordan man the helm for a while.

We were enjoying the trip, though after a few hours, the first signs of impatience stole my amusement. We should have been getting close, and I had expected to see a few seagulls circling in the sky. Without any hint of land, I began to worry.

Lindsey joined me at the helm and kissed my cheek. “Marc?”

“Yeah?”

“How much longer?”

I checked the map again. *Are we on the wrong heading?* I wondered.

Jordan, standing at the bow, began jumping and waving his finger at the horizon. “Look, an island!”

I let out a relieved sigh. “That’s it. We’re here.” I squinted. “But I think that’s a key. Bit strange this far out.”

“What’s a key?”

“I got this!” Lindsey cleared her throat. “Jordan, keys are formed on top of coral instead of from volcanic eruptions. So in other words, most of the sand you see isn’t really sand. It’s the bones of millions and millions of tiny, dead, sea creatures. *RAARRR*!” She turned toward me. “Right?”

“Um…close enough. How did you know that?”

“Two semesters of oceanography.” She winked and then went back to her hammock.

I navigated the boat over a reef toward a small lagoon. Black coral reached from the ocean floor, harmlessly scratching at the bottom of the hull. Jordan dropped anchor where the water was shallow enough for us to swim to shore.

“Wow,” Lindsey said, staring at the huge square structure at the edge of the cove. “It looks like the ruins of some sort of ancient lighthouse.”

“Yeah, but I saw six of them on the map. Even if this used to be a shipping lane, no one would need that many lighthouses around a small key. I think they were watchtowers.”

“Six?” She scanned the beach and then nodded at several piles of boulders scattered across the bank. “Six left standing, maybe. I bet there used to be more.”

The rocks were the remnants of another watchtower—a fallen sentry sinking below the shifting sands.

“I think you’re right.”

Lindsey gave the monolith a worried glance. “This isn’t a good idea, Marc. We should head back.”

Jordan whispered, “Do you think people still live here?”

“No,” I said. “Listen, just stay near the boat. I want to have a quick look around, and then we can go. Fair enough?”

“Okay. But please hurry. This place is creeping me out.”

Lindsey stayed on the boat while Jordan and I swam to shore. Halfway there, I began to sense something wasn’t quite right with the water.

“I don’t see any fish,” Jordan said.

That’s it, I thought. *Something must have scared them away.*

“Swim faster, Jordan.”

“Why, is there a shark?” He laughed.

“Just swim faster.”

We paddled hard until we reached the beach, both of us out of breath.

Lindsey yelled, “You okay?”

“We’re fine! I’ll be back in ten.”

“I want to go inside with you,” Jordan said.

“No way,” I replied, looking up at the watchtower. The top was like an open gazebo, with a moss-covered, crumbling battlement held up by eight stone pillars. “Stay on the beach. I don’t want you out of your mother’s sight.”

Jordan huffed, picked up a flat rock, and skipped it across the lagoon's calm water. I patted his head and then climbed up the bank to the base of the watchtower.

The design was militaristic in nature—perhaps a Civil War outpost, or maybe a relic from the conquistadors of the sixteenth century. Either way, I was sure the island had once been a fort.

How old are you? I wondered.

I ran my hands over the smooth rock wall. A studded iron band wrapped around the foundation, thick as a bank vault door. On the ocean side of the watchtower, links of heavy chain, like those found on an ocean liner, stretched from the metal band out into the surf. The anchor point was a notch and lever system, though the turning wheel was missing. I imagined it had been used to pull a ship closer to the beach or to keep it stabilized during a strong storm.

After admiring the ancient ingenuity, I walked to the top of the dune next to the watchtower and examined the key as a whole. Other than the towers, the key appeared no different from any of the other uninhabited masses. Then once again, I felt as though something was wrong with the place, like the island was somehow angered by our trespassing…

I pushed the silly thought to the back of my mind and hiked down the other side through the knee-high brush, most of it dead, shades of yellow and brown.

A sudden scream prickled the hair on my nape. I whirled and charged back toward the inlet.

"Jordan!" Lindsey called.

I reached the peak of the dune in time to see her dive into the water. I slid down the slope as she swam fast to shore. Jordan backed away from something on the beach, still screaming. When I reached him, he hugged me tight.

I quickly looked him over—he wasn't injured, just frightened.

"What is it, buddy? You're okay."

Lindsey hurled herself up the bank, kicking sand as she ran. “Is he hurt?”

I patted his curly black hair. “No, I don’t think so.”

“The shoe,” Jordan said, pointing behind Lindsey.

She tilted her head to the side. “What? What are you talking about?”

Looking past her shoulder, I caught sight of a dirty old sneaker lying in the weeds, far above the high-tide line.

Snakes? I wondered.

“Lindsey, take him,” I said, prying his arms from my waist. I retrieved the sneaker and nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw the severed foot inside, bones dry and skin like leather. I dropped the shoe and looked from Jordan to Lindsey, holding each other in the large shadow of the watchtower. A ringing echoed in my ears, drowning out the sound of birds—only there hadn’t been birds, or the sound of any other wildlife.

“What is it, Marc?”

“We need to go. Now!” The key was a dead zone. My gut instinct told me a predator had marked the territory and chased away anything it hadn’t killed.

I ran into the water, treading and swimming. Lindsey and Jordan were right behind me. I dove and swam faster underwater, wanting to radio the Coast Guard as quickly as possible.

That’s when I first saw it—a massive black shadow coming in from the deeper sea.

“Get back! Get back!” I waved them to shore.

Seized by fear, my arms refused to paddle. *Swim,* my mind screamed. But which way? I was closer to shore, but I *had* to reach the boat.

“Shark!” Jordan’s call broke the mental block.

I dove again and pressed on as quickly as possible. The thing was so massive and fast, growing larger with each heartbeat…but it didn’t move like any shark I’d ever seen. Instead of darting straight toward me, the shadow slashed left and right, quick as a stinging bee.

Suddenly, a second one jetted past my field of view. Then there was a third, and a fourth, and then too many to count. Underwater, my scream oscillated my eardrums as I spun, searching for the direction of the next encounter. The things were around me like a vortex, lashing like soundless whips.

I swam like a madman, and somehow I made it, but just as I gripped the first rung of the ladder, the boat vanished. It was taken so fast—somehow ripped down under the waves—that the force twisted my shoulder out of its socket. Then the suction pulled me under before my mind could comprehend what had just happened.

I caught a better glimpse of what had taken the boat, then fought my way back to the surface. Lindsey and Jordan were on the sand screaming incoherently, but I was petrified; all I could do was gasp for air and wait for death to take me.

The shadows in the water weren't separate creatures. No, they were all smaller pieces of a beast prehistoric in size.

Violently, I was pulled beneath the surface again and couldn't tell up from down. Head over feet, I tumbled through the thrashing whitewash, lungs burning for air. Then my head cracked against the hull of my boat, and everything went black…

* * *

As the sun touched the horizon, Jordan found me half-buried in sand near the center of the key, bleeding from a gash above my eye. The thick, bitter taste of salt was the first thing I recalled, followed by the searing pain in my shoulder. Though I don't remember what had happened after the thing pulled me to the ocean floor, I know neither of them had seen it. If they had, a glimmer of insanity would've been present in their eyes.

As I lay on the dune, assessing my wounds, Lindsey paced back and forth.

"The lagoon receded so fast," she said.

"What?"

“The riptide pulled you down. I was sure you were dead.”

“It wasn’t a rip, it—”

“We ran into the tower before the tsunami came crashing in. The water chased us up the steps. Marc, we almost didn’t make it.”

I sighed. “You did the right thing. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“And you’re lucky to be alive.”

Depending on your definition of luck, I thought.

Though she wasn’t ready to face the truth, she was right. Somehow I had survived with only a dislocated shoulder, a nasty bump, and maybe a few cracked ribs to accompany my lacerated back. I stood, testing my weight. It would hurt to walk, but I could manage. The injuries were nothing compared to the *bigger* problem.

Jordan cried, “What are we going to do? You told someone where we were going today, *right*?”

“Of course,” I lied.

Leaning on Lindsey’s shoulder, I looked at each of the crumbling watchtowers in turn, then at the grim landscape. Scattered across the sands were pieces of wreckage from my boat, broken links of the thick shipping chain, and other useless debris—total destruction. The way everything was soaked in salt oddly reminded me of the destroyed city of Carthage.

“You look like you might have a plan,” Lindsey said.

I nodded. “I think others have been stranded here—many, many others trapped exactly like us. Maybe even the people who built up the place. We need to use a watchtower to signal help.”

“But the sharks sank our boat,” Jordan said. “They’ll do the same to anyone else.”

“*Not sharks.*”

Lindsey furrowed her brow. “What?”

“Nothing…it isn’t important. Right now, we need to find supplies. Just don’t go near the water.”

* * *

We all went our separate ways, planning to check around the island for anything of use. I only found a few bone fragments of a long-dead castaway in one standing tower, and an old, rusted sword in another, but little else. Along the way, I passed several fallen towers, nothing left except broken stone and iron links.

The sky was crimson by the time we met back at the watchtower overlooking the cove. Lindsey hadn't found anything helpful, only some tattered clothing and an empty soup can. Jordan had discovered a few glass bottles and suggested we craft a message to launch into the Atlantic—a swell idea, probably the best that any of us had thought of…if only we had found a pencil.

A large brass basin stood in the center of the gazebo level of the watchtower. I brought up a bundle of devil grass and driftwood. Though it took a while, I was able to build a decent fire using some dormant camping skills. We sat near one of the stone pillars and looked out over the darkening sea.

"At least it's warm," I said.

Jordan traced one of the markings etched into the pillars. "What do you think these mean?"

"I don't know. They look like crude hieroglyphics."

Lindsey stood and raised her voice. "I want to make a fire in each tower. The rescue party will have a better chance at finding us."

"I'll go."

"Your arm…" She sighed and then whispered low enough so that Jordan couldn't hear, "No one knows we're out here, do they?"

"No."

"And it wasn't sharks?"

"No."

Lindsey walked away, then paused at the edge of the stairs, seemingly wanting me to say something that would make the situation better.

"Mom, I'm hungry," Jordan said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"I know. So am I," she replied.

I kept quiet. Besides, I didn't have all the answers, but I had read stories of stranded families in hostile environments. Sometimes people turn to cannibalism when the hunger grows sharp enough. First eating those who were already dead before turning on each other. Maybe that's what happened to the owner of the shoe, or maybe his foot was the leftover of the creature's last snack.

I wondered how long Lindsey's body would sustain Jordan and me, and when our eyes met, I swear she was thinking the exact same thing about my body.

In either case, Jordan would be next, no doubt.

"It shouldn't have to come to that," I said, shaking my head. I took in a deep breath, tasting the salt once more. "There's something else about keys that differs from islands…they don't have any natural sources of fresh water. We'll die of thirst first."

Lindsey stormed away carrying a flaming branch to light other signal fires. Jordan and I sat in silence, waiting for her to return; it wasn't the quality time I had hoped to spend with the boy.

The sky darkened, and one by one, the bright yellow lights sparked to life in each of the watchtowers. When the last was lit, the crash of a massive wave jarred me to my feet. Water spread across the key, sweeping away what had remained of my boat. Then something roared louder than a howling tornado. My face went numb as my heart clenched.

It was back.

"We got to get Mom!" I grabbed Jordan by the shirt, and white-hot pain shot up my arm.

"Help me!" Lindsey called from the top of the closest watchtower, and then screamed. The scream was cut short as her body ripped in two, and the halves fell to the sand below. A split second later, the fire in that tower suddenly blinked out.

Jordan tried to yell for her. I held my hand over his mouth, muffling his cries.

“It’s too late. She’s gone,” I said and released my grip, allowing him to run off to be gutted, too, if that’s what he wanted. Instead, he just stood there, shaking like a leaf in his red swimming trunks.

Our watchtower began to tremble. I rushed to the edge and looked down. Though dark, the chain appeared to be taut in the moonlight, and the whole tower vibrated from the tension. Then my eyes were drawn to the other towers. Each light vanished as a long, spiky tentacle reached in below the battlement.

The fires!

“Jordan, quick, put it out!”

A tentacle shot by my neck, nearly decapitating me. Deadly black barbs protruding from the slime-covered arm dripped black liquid. It lashed again, and I jumped back, almost falling from the edge. Jordan stomped at the flames, ducking as the trunk blindly twisted around the room. He smothered the fire while avoiding the barbs as they stabbed at the air. When glowing embers were all that remained in the basin, the tentacle slowly retreated.

Panting, I looked out across the sea, following the mass of flesh as it gyrated away. “Are you all right?”

Jordan gripped my hand and let out a hopeless whimper. Then he ran from the watchtower, howling an unearthly sound reserved for those who have had their sanity ripped to shreds.

My heart broke for the poor boy as he crawled across the sand-drift over to the top half of his dead mother. It was my fault. I had killed her by bringing them to the key, but my mind was too far gone to feel the pain.

Behind the dunes, against the backdrop of an ocean of stars, the colossal creature stood in the open sea. It roared again, and I understood how meager we humans truly are. Dozens of chains hung from its neck and tentacles. Most of the bindings were broken, and the few remaining were pulled tight against the watchtowers that still stood. It had been captured long, long ago, and the passage of time had not calmed the hatred for the gaolers and their fire.

Slowly, the massive black frame lowered into the water, disappearing under the waves. I continued to stare out at the serene night, certain no one had ever survived the key. Like those thousand fierce tentacles hiding just below the surface, I quivered…and patiently waited to be free.

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

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Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

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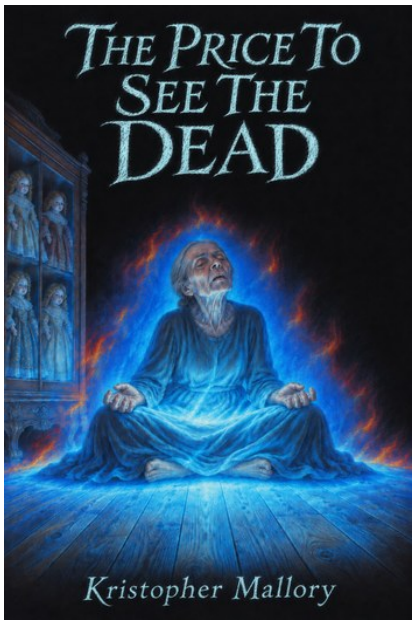
Some stories are better heard in the dark.

Watchtowers of Carthage Key has a complete audio narration, read by Jon, a digital voice. It runs 20 minutes and it's free: play it online, or download it as an MP3 or an audiobook with chapters.

Watchtowers of Carthage Key placed third in Chilling Tales for Dark Nights' June 2014 Short Horror Writing Contest. Their full production of the story was released on YouTube on 1 March 2015.

Listen free at stealthfiction.com

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THE PRICE TO SEE THE DEAD

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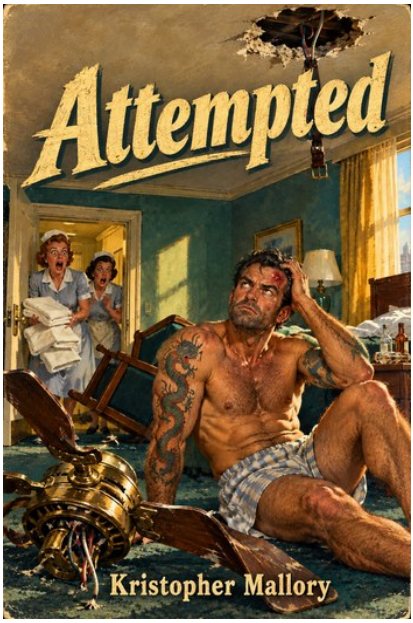
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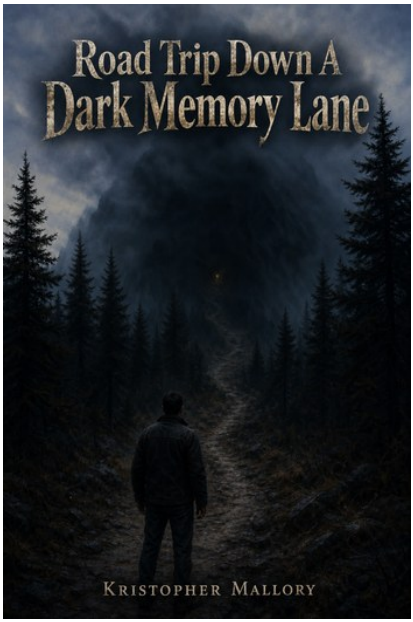
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A former detective spends almost all his money on a decent hotel room to go out in style, then finds that dying is the one case he can't close.

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~~~~~

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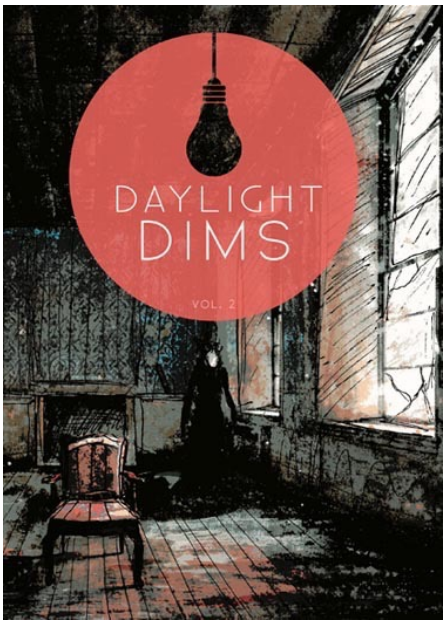
Patrick Levine's family wrecks their new Durango on an icy back road beside a dead town, and the only payphone for miles has a dial tone.

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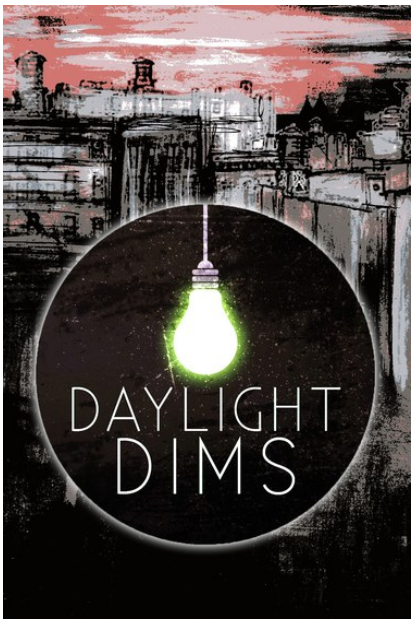
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