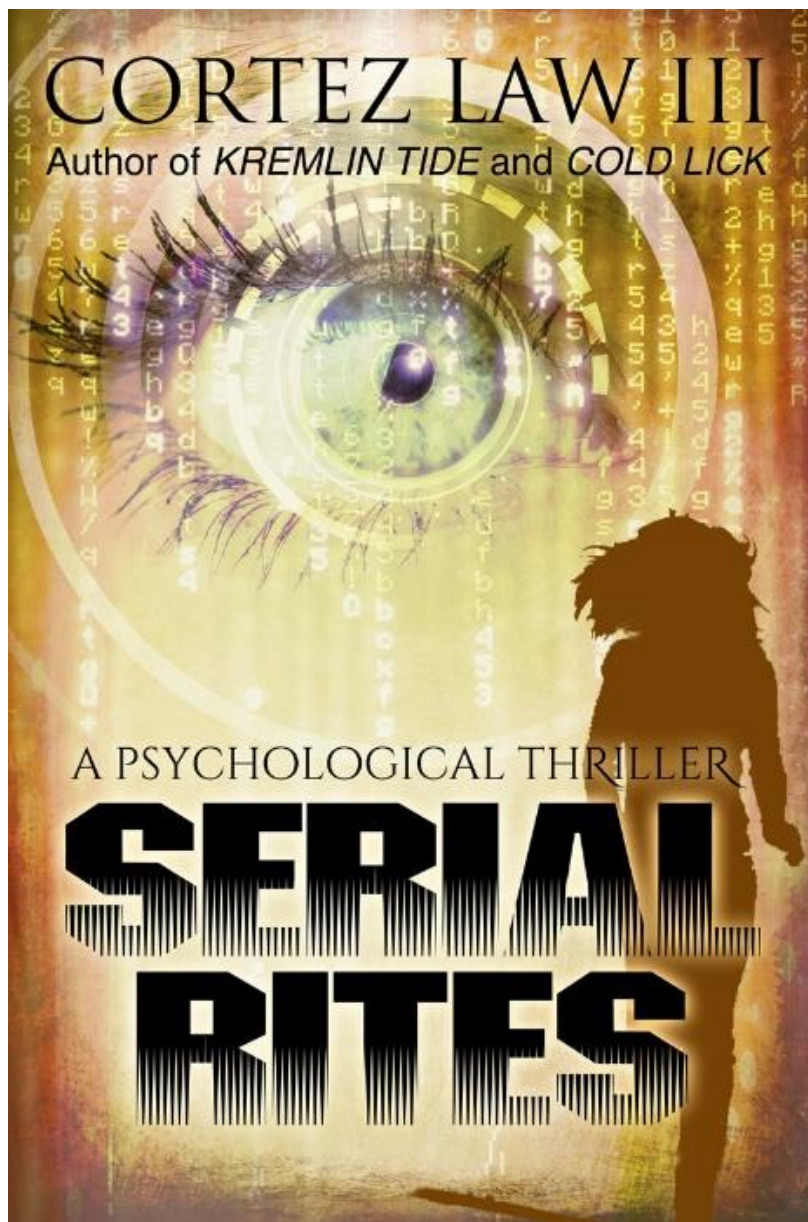


CORTEZ LAW III

Author of *KREMLIN TIDE* and *COLD LICK*



A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

SERIAL RITES

1

Standing In The Gap Church
275 Fairburn Road
S.W. Atlanta, Georgia
Saturday, July 19, 2014
3:00 P.M.

Oh no, there it was: Pressure. The weight of responsibility was upon Malcolm like the hot summer weather in Metro Atlanta. He watched the procession as it marched down an aisle in the double-decker blue carpeted amphitheater-like sanctuary that at capacity seated 8,500.

The house of well-wishers stood to their feet in unison. White, yellow, pink, and red ribbons and like colored flower arrangements decorated the portable gazebo settled upon the multi-stepped pulpit where he and the pastor waited. Lynette, his wife-to-be, who wore an elegant lace bridal gown with a train that filled up the main aisle spaces behind her, closed the distance to him. Though he stood some feet from her, he saw she smiled, and he returned it. Of course, her father and in a few official minutes, his father-in-law, Trent Warner, escorted her. He cried, and she tried her best to comfort him and still hold it together. One of the main reasons he loved his bride was her strength. Simultaneously, it was funny to see since Trent was such a macho father.

The estimated 1,000 supporters elicited heartfelt “Ah’s” as they witnessed the scene. After what felt like a shortened millennium on a long leash, she stood before him. They smiled, faced each other, and turned to their man of God, Pastor Elmer Brookins. A smile cracked the fifty-five-year-old cream complexion black man’s face who adorned a multi-colored robe before he commenced.

Malcolm’s consciousness faded in and out. The ceremony was dream-like, but the reality was that in a few precious moments before God, their families, the church members, and friends, Lynette’s welfare was in his hands; it was upon his shoulders. They agreed to do this only once in their lives.

In the next instant, something shattered. Again, as if in a dream state, he and Lynette viewed behind their stances at the pulpit. A Ford Explorer SUV drove through one of the stained-glass windows, which depicted a serene scene of heaven in majestic blues, purples, yellows, reds, greens, and oranges.

With caution, several men approached the damaged vehicle. A black man and black woman appeared unconscious in the front seats and leaned against the airbags on each side.

“Call 9-1-1!” Pastor Brookins said.

“Got it!” a member yelled.

“You okay, baby?”

“Yes. Not on our wedding day, Malcolm.”

He hugged her when a couple of men on either side of the SUV checked the vitals on the pair. Then, both men shook as sounds sizzled in conjunction with their actions. In the next moment, the men slid down the SUV as the front seats jammed the occupants into the dashboard. As others now closed in on this latest movement, bullets ripped the air. The driver and passenger were dead.

Congregates ran from their pew spaces. Four persons dressed in all black armed with Uzis emerged from the back seats of the Explorer. Two of the attackers dropped Taser weapons into a black bag and then with the others aimed at the wedding party.

Malcolm heard the hysterics and saw the shattered glass and Uzi shells that bounced off the blue sanctuary carpet like *Raid* sprayed roaches. He pushed her to the floor, and they crawled between rows of seats near the podium. He slid along the carpet and tried to reverse the situation.

Malcolm flung his vision back toward Lynette. She held her emotion with tight lips and nodded her okay. This scene was like an old grainy black and white home movie. He knew that day with ‘A.C.’ was the source of the reference, but anger blanked the memory. His neck sensed the heat from the fast projectiles that splintered the seats and walls. Bullet smoke trails crisscrossed like torpedoes in the water. The attendees’ screams filled the rafters as they ran over one another to escape. Same as a vapor, the assault, and ensuing chaos only took a couple of moments. Then, a blood-curdled scream erupted behind him from the throat—

“Lynette!”

Seconds later, a black double-breasted suit that hung off a man of dark chocolate pigmentation sprang into action. Orlando Queen II, a fit late thirties man who stood five feet ten inches tall, hightailed it after the assailants. Then stiletto heels softly clicked-clacked on the carpet beside him before their owners whipped them off. An early thirties black beauty of bronze named Pepper Love in a gorgeous white lace bride’s maid dress tossed her bouquet of flowers into the seats. Orlando flipped back his suit jacket, crossed his arms, jammed his hands into a pair of gun holsters along his waist, extracted a couple of Glock Gen4 Model 22 .40 calibers, tossed one to Pepper who caught it and aimed at the attackers through the broken windows and walls.

“Police! Freeze!” Pepper said.

Orlando thundered a two-bullet assault, and a couple of them fell. Pepper fired four rounds and dropped the two remaining attackers. The driver, whose dark blue sedan idled, saw his fallen comrades. He sped away as tires screeched and smoke plumed in the embroiled scene.

Before the car fled and cleared the church parking lot, an Atlanta police cruiser slammed into it and spun it 360. The patrol officers slung the squad car doors open and aimed their pistols. Then they shouted for the driver to exit the vehicle. Instead, the driver pointed a nine-millimeter and discharged through his windshield. The patrol cops returned fire. The driver died.

Malcolm snatched off his tuxedo and eased it onto Lynette's frame as she contorted her back in pain.

"I'm sorry, baby."

He heard sirens in the distance. Lynette stroked his hand with the wedding band, lifted it to her mouth and kissed it.

"I love you, husband."

"Don't talk. Sssh—"

"Don't blame...God. I'm going...home."

She smiled at him like it was any other day of their lives together. Her grip tightened then loosened. Moments later, her hand slumped and fell upon her torso and took his with it. Her head tilted toward his knee as she opened her eyes and looked up at him. Malcolm hung his head, Pepper froze, and Orlando cried.

Then, Malcolm laid her flat on the floor and started CPR with a vengeance.

"Come on, baby. Breathe, breathe, breathe. In the Name of Jesus, breathe."

Pepper managed through tears, "Malcolm, she's—"

"No, she's not. You shut your mouth, or you can leave. Anyone lacking faith, get out.

Come on, baby. Breathe. Please breathe, Lynette."

Malcolm refused to believe God sanctioned her death. He's a good God all the time. They kept the faith, they stood their ground, and they were more than conquerors. Today started a new life together with His blessing. Pepper and Orlando grasped him on both sides.

"Back...off...now. Thanks."

They complied as he continued his efforts for five more minutes when the paramedics arrived. He refused to relinquish his labor for the love of his life. Finally, he gave way after a few more minutes to the medical team who duplicated his actions and then some

before they ceased. Malcolm jumped in and commenced once again for five more minutes until tears bathed his face, and his lips stammered for coherent speech. Pepper consoled him best she could when Malcolm snatched one of Orlando's Glock Gen4 .40 cal from his two-sided holster. Everyone ducked, screamed, and ran for the splintered and bullet-ridden cover that was the formerly intact pews. He directed the gun at the ceiling with teeth bared, and anger etched on his countenance like a crazy man.

“So help me God—Why, God? Why?”

He screamed at the ceiling until his voice cracked then fired Orlando's gun until the clip emptied. He maintained tension on the trigger with the weapon as it emitted its rapid-fire clicks. The roof spat its particles and dust atop animate and inanimate objects alike. He screamed again before he lost his breath and collapsed backward on bended knee. Some of the paramedics rushed in to help him while others sustained ministrations to Lynette. Orlando cracked in his emotions. Pepper, not sure who to attend to, dropped to her knees until she doubled over.

**Cascade Park Apartments
80 Paschal Street
S.W. Atlanta
Saturday, September 20th
10:00 P.M.**

Saturday, July 19th was a day that lived in infamy. His infamy. Malcolm's semi-automatic Glock Gen4 Model 22 .40 cal glistened as the full moonlight cast sharp zebra shadows through the partly closed blinds upon the walls, bed, and his hands. Pictures of he and Lynette were everywhere. That hadn't changed since the disaster.

Earlier he took the full clips out but left a single bullet in the chamber of the weapon to do the job. He packed an overnight bag full of his personal toiletries and police paraphernalia. If done here, it smelled of an attempted SOS albeit too late. No, he decided to travel far away and do it, so no one knew.

It was a few months later, and he believed the community was still too scared to notify the police of all the clues that it held. Not even for him. According to police interrogations backed up by the *Atlanta Daily Post (ADP)* newspaper report, what the community disclosed was the perps were members of the Gangsta 40 Posse or G-40 for short. Their new member initiation was to kill a high-profile cop. The gang's kingpins denied any of the accusations. Their recollections entailed the kidnapped couple's coercion to drive the SUV into the church to initiate the assassination attempt. The police pursued the SUV, but...That day was the perps' Judgment Day.

He felt a queasy stomach's contents discomfort and moved to go to the bathroom, but as he stood, his legs quivered, and they collapsed the rest of him onto the bed's edges. He gasped. Desperation gripped him. It dared him to live and dared him to die. It was a

stalemate. Sure, he possessed wisdom, but now his sanity challenged him. Insanity said to live, and insanity said to die. So, wisdom said what, then?

His face shook as his eyes flooded with tears of remembrance. His sight blurred, he slammed his eyes shut and exhaled. When he re-opened them, rational thoughts immersed in his mind: He saw his father, mother, brother, and the rest of the family. He thought of the school years, the sports, the dates, his friends, and work. He thought of the church, the house they wanted, her family and Lynette. As if that weren't enough, he flashed back to 9/11 and the horrific sight of that second airplane as it crashed into New York's World Trade Center building; thought of the one that crashed into Washington's Pentagon and the brave passengers that fought the terrorists to their deaths in Pennsylvania.

He homed in on Police Chief Harriet Davis' planned actions for him that included as much time off as he needed, psychiatric examinations, continued church attendance and medication not necessarily in that order. The time off threatened his headstrong belief that the Detectives Division needed his leadership for maximum effectiveness.

He glanced at the night stand. His gold shield that shone at him from the moonlight lay upon his Bible. He needed to discover the real reasons why the Gangsta 40 Posse tried to assassinate him but instead Tasered two and killed seven members of *Standing In The Gap Church* which included Pastor Elmer Brookins and Lynette. Any way he sliced it, *It* was back, and there was no way to deny *It* any longer. *This situation was insanity.*

Just then, he heard a voice in his head that said, '*Do it.*' Wisdom said it was the devil. But he knew that God was a good God and not a God of death. Judgment from God that resulted in death was one thing, this was something else altogether. Nevertheless, this was the easiest way out that he knew even though it was a cowardly act from one of Atlanta's finest. He dropped the gun onto his lap. He was a Christian, surely Jesus understood all this.

"I'd rather be with you and Jesus in heaven than down here without you in this sewer even if my wisdom's ignorant."

So again, wisdom said what, then? He raised the Glock .40 cal in his right hand and pointed it at his mouth. The cold steel weapon of death wasn't so anymore since he'd held it for the last five hours which was his daily ritual. It was as warm as Lynette's hands that day.

He raised the gun to his forehead and placed his right index finger on the Glock .40 cal's trigger. He squeezed his eyes closed, opened them, mashed them shut again, gritted his teeth, dropped his weapon to his side and huddled himself in a bawled out and heaped mass of humanity on his bed.

2

**Intersection of Metropolitan Parkway &
Dill Avenue
S.W. Atlanta
9:30 A.M.**

About forty *Standing In The Gap Church* Soul Winning Team members, with sweatshirts that said the same, were in one part of Southwest Atlanta witnessing to the poor, disenfranchised and hopeless.

Leading the way were a black man and a white man in their mid-thirties and two black women in their mid-twenties, respectively: Brian Taylor and Jake Norton were five-year veterans of the team. Ann King and Veronica Salley, two easy-on-the-eyes sister girls since forever, had about two years under their belts in the ministry outreach. An observer of the team who tagged along with them was a six-foot-two one-hundred and eighty pounds, cork-colored, thirty-something, eagle-faced black man named Shepard Cush.

For at least an hour all of them taught, prayed, and handed out gospel tracts to the indigenous. In a significant number of instances, the predominately black neighborhood residents responded positively and committed to attending services via the church's bus pickup schedules.

Brian sighed. "Jesus, help us, black men."

"Metro black and blue," Shepard said.

"What's that mean?" Veronica asked.

"Is this not urban America's black eyes and blue bruises along with the assortment of crimes?"

They nodded in agreement.

Shepard dressed in a gray pin-striped suit with like ostrich textured shoes and Croton watch that SOS refracted sun rays whenever he moved. He towered before three middle-aged black men in drab clothing whose masked faces of curiosity, boredom, despair, and stupor reigned supreme.

"Excuse me, sir—"

Man One named Otis cocked his lumpy-shaped medium afro head upwards. "Hey, this is Saturday mornin', not Sunday mornin'. You a day early for that religion jive, homes—"

With two cigarettes in his mouth the second man named Clarence, echoed, "Yo, say that my brotha."

Willie, man number three with a ‘George Jefferson’ cul-de-sac do, wasn’t about to be outdone as he stepped into Shepard’s face with verbal venom.

“All talk. Gotta church on every corner but the peep’s in the master’s house ain’t the ones needin’ help—”

“Yeah, it’s the ones in the outhouse. Bet that ain’t preached on Sunday mornin’,” Otis said.

“So, you don’t want to hear anything I have to say?”

“Boy don’t need a GED to figure that one out!” Willie said. He shared laughter with the others.

“I’d drink to that!” Clarence coughed out between puffs.

“Ah, you drink to anything. Save ya’ little paper distribution for some other sucka’!” Otis said.

Nodding, Shepard slipped a hand into a pants pocket, acquired his wallet, and smoothly fanned nine \$20 bills.

“What little paper were you talking about?”

All three men exclaimed, “Whoa!”

“Now, can we talk?”

Shepard taught to the trio for a few minutes and mesmerized Brian, Jake, Ann, and Veronica by his passion and knowledge of the Word of God. When Shepard finished, the moist-eyed trio received gospel tracts, \$60 each and a multitude of hugging.

“You got our bus schedules so see you in church tomorrow?” Shepard asked.

The men consented. Now, Shepard joined his emotional colleagues and walked further down the street to other shacks. He stepped up to a sleeping black man almost hidden amidst the garbage cans, clutter, jagged pieces of glass and buzzing insects. The new team member knelt before him and moved some of the garbage with his feet.

“Hello? Is anyone home?”

That’s when Shepard realized the man’s entire being had what appeared were tails that protruded from his shirt and jacket collar, coat, pants pockets, and several that moved in his mouth. Gasps echoed behind him.

Shepard grabbed the man with both hands straightening a body so thin and frail he resembled one of those impoverished children from Africa. When he pried his mouth ajar with a stick, several blood-ridden rats scooted out and scampered away causing more exclamations of fear behind him. The man's tongue was half gone. He used that stick to open the man's shoddy, dust-filled, nicotine and body smelling overcoat. That's when he noticed rumbling within the man's stomach from the inside. Upon further inspection, he noticed toward the man's waistline that his overcoat, shirt, and pants were blood-stained. His nostrils flared.

"Say it isn't so."

Brian knelt beside him. "I take it he's dead?"

"I take it."

"Is he?" Ann had asked before she ran off to hurl.

The other homeless men and members of the church group arrived questioning the findings and comforting each other. Shepard used the stick to probe the coat again to uncover a couple of decomposed fly and ant infested rats along the man's sides.

"Whew! We got some sick—Call the police, Jake."

"Why do that, Brian?" Shepard asked.

"*Why?*" Jake asked.

Amidst amazement, the new observer gracefully removed his wallet once more from his pants pocket, flipped it open and exposed a golden shield over his shoulders to the masses.

"Am I not Metro Atlanta's black man and blue uniform? Detective Shepard Cush, Atlanta Homicide."

About a half an hour later, Atlanta Police Zone 3 patrol officers wrote down Ann's, Veronica's, Brian's, and Jake's account of the scene.

Detective Shepard Cush bent down before the corpse near the officers with the yellow 'Police Line Do Not Cross' tape cording off the area. Small yellow black numbered cone evidence markers stationed about the order of the proposed crime scene events. Also, flashing patrol car lights, other uniformed officers, and the Crime Scene Unit appeared. Shepard wore latex gloves and persisted to inspect the deceased.

"Photographer?"

“The name’s Howard Pullman. But call me, Howie.”

“Howie, make sure you get pics of the rats too—”

“I know the order of events, Detective.”

“Come now H.P., when have you ever known me not to direct the CSU troops?”

Officer Pullman yanked his camera away from his face surprised at the source of the command. They shared mutual smiling.

“Is this a mirage? Malcolm?”

Officer Pullman walked toward Malcolm. Shepard stood up from the corpse as the pair embraced one another.

“I’m truly sorry.”

“I know and thank you. Bag those rats for Victor or Carl as evidence ASAP.”

Pullman smiled, “All business like always.”

Malcolm’s coffee with cream shaded head pitied the remains. About six feet tall, his lion-like regal face of power commanded respect and feared nothing. In a form-fitting black sweater with matching khakis, he weighed a muscular two-hundred pounds.

The photographer studied his friend. “How’d you know—You okay, Malcolm?”

“I heard about a homeless man found dead down here on my scanner. I wondered if—it’s Gerald. Gerald Royale IV. I counseled him a lot and put him in a shelter.”

“Well, I’m sorry...again.”

Malcolm muttered to himself, “The innocent don’t even have a chance anymore. Wake up from your slumber, God.”

“Excuse me, Sergeant Hobbs?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Shepard Cush, your new partner in crime if you will.”

“I don’t, but we all have our orders. Little formal today, aren’t we?”

“Did I not attend a late-night prayer vigil, drove the mean streets, ate breakfast and helped the ministry outreach all while getting a feel of the ATL community?”

“I don’t know if you did or didn’t and honestly don’t care. You’re not due for your first official day until Monday, Detective Cush.”

“And you’re still on administrative leave until mid-October, Sergeant Hobbs.”

Malcolm ceased scanning the corpse, stood up and pivoted into Shepard’s face. Pullman and some other officials slowed their working of the scene.

“Understand this, *Detective*. You were in homicide for four years; but that was Columbus, not Atlanta.”

“Is not the Buckeye different from the peach, sir?”

Malcolm closed what little space remained between them.

“I don’t like wise guys on either side of the law. Treat me with respect as your superior officer in this division in this city. I’ve earned it for twelve years with *eight* in homicide. You on the other hand, to me, are starting over. Round up those homeless witnesses for interrogation and make sure to canvass the area for others outside the murder scene as well *Detective*.”

With hesitant head nodding, “Yes sir.”

“Victim was stabbed multiple times lacerating the abdominal wall. An autopsy will pinpoint other precise particulars. Probably the victim or the perpetrator compacted or re-fitted the sliced flesh.”

With Assistant Medical Examiner Carl Stockton diagnosing, Malcolm stepped up to Gerald Royale IV still supine on the ground with his torso exposed. He attempted to remain composed.

“You’re thinking surgeon or med’ student runnin’ a black market organ scheme?”

The late thirties Wolfman Jack doppelganger blond man in Coroner’s Jacket shrugged at the new voice. “It’s all possible, but of course the autopsy will confirm any missing organs. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

He extended his hand to shake.

“Detective Shepard Cush,” he returned a hand for shaking, “I don’t officially start until Monday—”

“T.O.D., Carl?”

“Based on lividity and rigor, a-ah, I’d say the wee hours of this morning.”
Malcolm swayed his head. That’s eight innocent people taken before their time since his wedding day including Gerald, he thought. *It* returned.

“Wait, what have we here?”

Malcolm and Shepard peered closer at the deceased again as Carl perused the corpse while inquiring.

“What...is...this?”

Carl pulled out of the wounded interiors of Gerald Royale IV a plastic zip lock baggie with a black plastic toy horse inside. In addition to this, he saw what appeared to him as a flesh-ripped bloody number Nine on Gerald’s chest via some knife.

“Perhaps the perp’s a horse racing aficionado, Sergeant?”

“Worth checking into though Atlanta has no horse racing that I know about.”

“What about dog races? Is not NASCAR big here?”

“Yes on the latter and to my limited knowledge, not much on the former. Dust it for prints, Carl.”

“Do I comprehend the animal motif?”

“Douse the suspense, Detective.”

His expressions displayed much mouth gum while flexing his lips, “You dirty rat, you dirty rat, o-oh I’m going to get you see yeah, yeah.”

Malcolm smirked, “Okay, Gerald told on him with something big enough to be killed over. I’ll buy the angle, but not the performance.”

“Isn’t everyone a critic?”

With low-key amusement, Carl lifted a dead arm.

“Let’s turn him over on his stomach.”

Malcolm jumped in on the right side with Shepard at Gerald’s feet. Over the frail man flipped. To the surprise of all his back exhibited a pair of blood drawn eyes.

“Okay, Detective. *Gerald saw* something that the perp did or the *perp saw* something Gerald did.”

“Or the vick had better watch his back,” Carl said.

“So somebody ratted on Gerald or vice versa over a horse, dog or NASCAR event in the ninth race or lap?”

“I detect some things far more sinister than a track junkie, Detective Cush.”

“Which are?”

Malcolm tore his gaze off the victim and seared them into the face of the newcomer.

“That the perp has done this before. That perhaps eight other bodies await discovery. That he’s taunting us. But now after seeing this, I know for sure it’s just the beginning.”

3

Obsession Night Club
400 Marietta Street
Downtown Atlanta
11:45 P.M.

Another jammed packed Friday night in a dance club that sucked up much square footage at the intersection of Marietta Street and Jones Avenue. *Obsession* touted itself as the perfect blending of soul, R&B, pop, house and hip-hop offerings with live nationally known acts to independent and under-the-radar major-label bands. The double-tiered dance floor's reflecting chrome interiors dulled significantly from the conglomerate of red spotlights that showered the energetic assemblage below it. Such was the frenzy to the beat and ambiance that it was like Big Brother Red beheld his kingdom and seduced his subjects to pay homage with the sweat of their brows and the gyrating of everything else. It was one of the reasons Selena loved to party here.

Selena Monet was a late twenties woman of multiple ethnicities. Standing five-foot-six and weighing 125 pounds she possessed smooth butter pecan hued skin, straight black hair with French manicure and pedicure. Her voice, she'd been told on more than a few occasions, was as erotic and sexy a melody as any man had ever heard pillow talk or not. Entrenched in a stable career, which intimidated some men, tonight she used that same intimidation by wrapping herself inside a white knee length dress with a copious flowing of reflective golden speckles with white stilettos. One of the club's white boy toys named Todd made his pitch for her affections. Had he or any of the others succeeded tonight? Her hand covered her budding smile when one of his white counterparts interrupted his weak mack.

"Excuse me. May I?"

"Sorry, you may not. The lady and I were talking—"

"Excuse me I say again and here's \$50 for the pleasure of allowing me time with the queen of the night. Are there any takers?"

Selena raised eyebrows at the 'Johnny-Come-Lately' decked out in a red pinstriped Armani suit. He fondled a Ulysses Grant from an inside jacket pocket and waved it like a checkered flag to all the men in the vicinity that stalked the wares of the possible dance partner. Several hands had jostled for the cash before one belonging to a black man seized it with a face that would surely win him a nomination as president of a glee club. The other contenders' malcontent, including her dancing partner Todd, withered with a myriad of passer-by potentials.

Just like she thought, his mack was weak.

“The sage wisdom of my father and mother says don’t bite the hand that feeds you and this cash is a night out at Maggiano’s or Copeland’s,” the black man said.

“The love of money is the root of all evil, huh?” ‘Johnny’ said.

“Am I going to dance with one of you?”

“Enjoy the company of Mr. Grant and have a goodnight guys.”

Todd kissed Selena’s hand. Her eyes twinkled at this man in a Brooks Brothers suit ensemble emphasizing the autumn colors. Weak mack, but nice touch with the kiss, she thought. He loosed her hand then the black man provided his sweet sorrow shots.

“I love the kindness of strangers. Perhaps another time, beautiful. Au revoir.”

Selena’s eyes danced when the gentleman in all black including designer sweater, shirt, slacks, and black/white duotone Stacy Adams enveloped her smooth hand from Mr. Pin-Stripe, lightly and politely osculated, released it and like a phantasm amid the dancers was no more. Mr. Pin-Stripe re-attached himself to his queen.

“Now, shall we?”

She sat next to him at a booth in the reddened lighting. Selena figured the fit blonde man with the Cheshire cat smile was in his thirties and stood around six feet two. Now she wanted to know if what the man said space shuttled, buoyed or Titanic-ked with what the man did.

“Have I just met Donald Trump, Jr., or are you the man with no name?”

“Clint Eastwood.” He swigged his bottled Miller Genuine Draft. “I’m Steven.”

“Hola, Esteban. I’m Selena. What prompted you to attempt to buy my company for the evening? I put stress on the word attempt.”

“My competition was rather possessive of you all night, Selena. Plus, you turned away many an offer, so I deciphered the other pretenders chose the wrong partner to success. Everyone has their price except you, of course. You’re priceless.”

Selena’s eyes jigged again with a twist of curiosity. “So, if he hadn’t wavered?”

“I’m a lover and not a fair fighter. Let’s leave it at that.” He inhaled centimeters above her neck. “Hmmm, Chanel No. 5 doesn’t do you justice.”

“Excuse you?”

“You’re at least a ten.”

She grinned and patted his hand. “Kudos to your olfactory senses. What’s the secret?”

“I pay attention to what women are; their essences or what makes a woman a woman. It didn’t hurt that I worked in retail selling women’s fragrances for years.”

“Well, that’s proof positive that the nose knows.”

“Now, the real test is: What am I wearing?”

“I always liked deciphering clues and solving puzzles because I’m the Trivia Queen Champion. Bring it on.”

He summoned her to move in a bit toward his neck. She sniffed several times. Her crinkled brows said it all.

“Oh Selena, and I was so synchronized in my aromatic schematics.”

“Your what?”

“Where are we?”

“*Obsession* Night Club.”

His own eyebrows wiggled up and down on the insider information that just became known unto her. Her face painted the ‘Cute, Steven’ response to his cleverness.

“Trivia yes, but trivial. Let’s just say you won.”

“Oh, don’t be a sore loser and I usually do. Let me be frank, Selena: I’m attracted to you, and I believe you’re attracted to me. So, unless you’re married, engaged or dating, I have to ask if you would be opposed to a private nightcap.”

“That translation means am I the kind of woman who’ll give in on the first date?”

A voice bellowed behind them, “The answer to which you’ll never find out, G’!”

Ernest Brown was a hulk of a black man over six feet tall and over two-hundred pounds of rock solid muscularity. Thirty-two years old, he decked himself out in a smooth collection of Phat Farm attire with coordinated colors of red, white, and black on his sweatshirt, white khakis, black Lugz boots and tightly braided hair.

The encompassing question with him to inquiring minds on the right side of the tracks was what’s he up to these days? Selena thought. To all who knew or at least suspected something, he was the penultimate poster child for a smoke and mirrors/cloak and dagger

act that resurrected memories of Houdini. So again the question that begged an answer: Was the man Oscar worthy or trudging along nine-to-five like everyone else? Selena sighed at not just the intrusion, but because she was too predictable in her choosing of party places.

“Ernest not tonight and not again, please. We’re just talking, capisce?”

“What does an old car have to do with it?”

Steven raised an eyebrow at that one. “Goodnight, Selena. A pleasure to meet you.”

“No. Stay.”

“No! Leave, now!”

“Violence begets violence, Ernest. Selena, thank you—”, he bent down to whisper in her ear, “and be careful. He’s a drug dealer.” He left the scene with a quickness.

“What’s the matter with you, girl? Lettin’ some dude get all up on you!”

He grabbed her arm and yanked her off the chair. Whoa! Those days were over, Selena thought. She was almost—one set of thoughts depressed another set of thoughts as she yanked her arm back. He hadn’t an inkling who he dealt with. It may be way past time he found out just who she really was.

As the scene continued, Steven watched from the dance floor as the bouncer arrived. He struggled with Ernest before calling for reinforcements. Steven’s nostrils caught a whiff of Eau de Toilette when it breezed by him. A leggy blonde turned a smidgen of her head to him escorted by brilliant smiling and he took the baited hook still trying to spy Selena while avoiding clashing with patrons.

Steven and the leggy blonde strolled amongst the chit-chatting multi-ethnically chic near *Obsession’s* port of entry/exit. The curvaceous beauty cut the silence.

“Well, it’s past my bedtime.”

“It’s only something after one. How about a nightcap and you pick the place?”

“As tempting as that invitation is, how about a rain check say Sunday night?”

“Can I have your number?”

“Call me.” She gave him her business card and left for *Obsession’s* parking spaces.

“Bon appetite my sweet, Sarah.”

Steven watched her pivoting to him with that radiant smile before he turned and left. Smiling himself, he departed too, looked down at the card and tapped it against a palm. She drove past him in a gold Nissan Altima, blew the horn and waved at him as she disappeared into the night.

Turning in the lot, he spotted his car. At once, someone pushed him in the back, and someone else locked his arms behind him.

“What the—”

“Quiet, pretty boy!” a gruff voice said.

Unable to stop the momentum, at least two men rammed him into the side of a neighboring building with a wicked boom! He unlocked one arm from behind his back, swung it, an attacker ducked, and he struck the building grunting in pain. In blinding fury, his arm was pinned behind him once more. Limbs punched and kicked him to the point he lost his breath. In another instant, someone dragged him off near some bushes by the building and resisted lying face down on the pavement.

“He’s yours, man!”

“Give me that bat!”

He fought hard but never hollered. The bat cracked his back that forced him to his knees and pulled his other attackers along with him.

“Man, this sucker’s strong!”

“Not for long! Take this!”

“Somebody’s comin’!”

“Turn this dude over so I can see his face!”

His colleagues did just that holding him by all his limbs; his legs challenging the one man to stabilize him. He saw the man with the bat and with a black ski mask on like the others closing in on his personal spaces.

“Not so tough now huh, man?”

“Said we were gonna scare him a little—”

“Yeah, this is too much!”

“He’s scared ain’t he? Mission accomplished.”

“I can’t go to jail, amigo!”

Man One’s gone.

“I got your attention now huh, homes?”

The bat-wielding aggressor bent his arms backward and rammed the wooden instrument across his stomach. Through clenched teeth, he regurgitated his beer onto his Armani suit jacket as well as his black and red lined shirt and tie. Man Two’s hysterical.

“We go now, or you’re on your own!”

He let go of the other arm and ran as Steven doubled over onto his stomach.

The ‘bat’ man stood over him. “Thank God for saving your life—”

“And me.”

A gun hammer clicked. ‘Bat’ man swiveled around and dropped it on the ground with a dull thud. He approached the voice in surrender.

From the darkness stepped Selena with a snub-nose .38 held rock steady in her arms with right index finger hovered over the trigger.

‘Bat’ man slowed his advancing toward her. He eased a hand up to remove the ski mask. “Ernest, what are you doing? Step away from the body!”

“Where’d you get the gun, Selena? Look, no one loves you like me. We need time 'cause it heals old wounds.”

“Pronounce ditto to the victim.”

Ernest turned and viewed the dark scene behind him. Arrogance crept upon his face in the near darkness. Innocence personified.

“What victim?”

Selena stepped to him in an 180-degree semi-circle moving from the jagged edges of the building’s outlined structures and the nearby street signs. Once into the light, she confirmed with mouth agape: The body was gone.

4

Goliath Fitness

Tower Place Office Complex

3340 Peachtree Road

Atlanta

6:45 P.M.

He counted to himself: Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and thirty. He dropped the twenty-five-pound plate to the floor with a thud startling other patrons. So much for gym etiquette but what was anyone going to do about it? Anyway, five sets of 30 repetition crunches in the books. Standing up from the bench of the club's exercise room meshing of chrome and steel, he dried himself off with a towel. Draining his bottled water, he thought of his next move.

Viewing himself in a series of mirrors adorning a yellow Gold's Gym tank top and sweatpants, he knew very few men withstood his physical power. Not challenged in that area and rightfully so, he used intelligence putting down any threatened posturing from his enemies. That's an example of his intellect on a smaller scale that set him apart from his peers: Picking and choosing his fights wisely.

But as of late he felt he softened. Not physically, but his mindset's intensity relaxed far too much. Lapsed thinking accrued into lost ground in any area of life. That's when *It* controlled him instead of him controlling *It*. It seemed when he minded his own business, trouble found him an emptied and cleaned house to occupy. Was that justice? What had he done to deserve an unprovoked invading of his person like that?

Nietzsche once said in part: "...And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." Humph. Every time he viewed himself in the mirror, that quote came to mind. Did he like what he saw? Humph. Life was what it was. He accepted it and himself. What was the Serenity Prayer? "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." Humph. Well, he finally got it. He accepted the fact that contrary to his younger days, he wasn't omniscient. Listening to his elders starting with his parents was akin to *Halley's Comet*.

It was true that sin had its pleasures for a season. The problem was that only encompassed three months. Sin lost something, and that something was the excitement. But, he never changed his entanglement with it though he supposed that changed one day.

Challenged to accept the fact that he was a rebel, he imagined himself as a neo-James Dean. It took a while, like most of his adult life, but he accomplished it. He tried to infuse his passion for intelligence gathering with anger, resentment, bitterness and a host of other emotions into a potential corporate power broker. A career as a lawyer or doctor or working in government was more desirable and pleasing to his parents, but in time he found himself on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks.

He lifted his shoulders and squeezed his trapezius muscles. In preparation for this weekend, he worked on his ‘traps’ with 495-pound barbell shrugs and 150 pounds of the dumbbell variety. His physical strength was only half the battle; the other was mental intelligence. One without the other equaled a severe lack of master planning and execution. He headed for the locker room.

About twenty minutes later, he smelled fresh as daisies. He thought about the near forty years on this planet. That enabled him to possess the wisdom to know the difference between a choirboy and a politician, the wisdom to know the difference between a silver spoon in the mouth and Horatio Alger novels and the wisdom to know the difference between idle threats and words of malicious intent.

He dried his face and exhaled. In his gym bag was his Armani cologne. He caressed the bottle like he would a woman in the pit of her back intertwined in an embrace, running his fingers gracefully from the bottom to the top of its spine. He rubbed the cologne underneath the chin and along the back of his neck.

Afterward, he completed his transformation by slipping onto his thick torso a tailor-made suit. He always had his clothing fitted an extra size for his future growth. That’s another sample of his intellect on a smaller scale setting him apart from his peers. He exuded power and success. In a word: Money.

He stepped from the humidity of the club’s locker room, strolled through the lobby and into the crisp night air. He was Southern Comfort and tonight, his Georgia Peaches awaited his entrée. He smiled.

In the covered parking garage, he popped his car trunk and tossed his gym bag inside adjacent to an overnight bag. Packed in that second bag were undergarments, towels, personal hygiene products, comb, brush, belt, shoes, polish, black box, handcuffs, police shirt and hat, badge, holster, and a Beretta .9mm semi-automatic.

He pulled out of the bag a spiral notebook and carried it with him inside to the driver side. Humph, like Michael Corleone said in *Godfather III* modified to fit his life, ‘Just when he thought he was out, *It* pulled him back in!’ *It* told him to reflect upon the night he quickly abducted the catalyst of his mission in Atlanta, so he silently read his notebook’s entry transcribed from his digital voice recorder:

I watched as he disappeared into the shadows frantically looking for a way out. He strained to sit up on an elbow, accomplished that, swung his feet to the ground and now sat in the midst of the woods. He squinted into the darkness where I went off to the right of the wooded area. He saw nothing and stood up on bound ankles. Gathering his balance for a brief second, he hopped to the left away from my exit area. Putting two consecutive bounces together without falling, he peered behind him. No one...or so he thought.

He faced front again and bounced four straight times scouring the darkness for an exit or some object he could hit me with. He held his breath and jumped again shooting for four straight toward what he perceived to be light. He had no alternative but to go for it. Nailing the fourth hop, he stepped into a mass of silken spider webs as thick as a blinding rain. He screamed through his duct-taped mouth as his shivering signaled he felt the constant and gentle crawling of the arachnids from head to toe on his bare flesh. Too, a horrific smell caused his nostrils to flare. A-ah, smell my sweet Garden of Putrefied Flesh. After tonight, Glade should make a 'Remains of Royale' fragrance.

Swiveling left and right he lost his balance and fell down onto the cold ground bouncing off something that braced his fall. Welcome to my maze you rat fink. From nowhere that light brightened, and his pitiful muffled screaming bellowed again from the sudden illumination and what he saw: A closed casket that to his further amazement was opened by me. There was no one inside. My voice boomed over him.

Well, that was to your own detriment because as you've discovered, you've walked into not a den of thieves nor a nest of vipers but a web of spiders. I don't know what kind and I don't know if you've been bitten. Most likely they scrambled to get out of your way. Then again, they may see your intrusion as grounds for an attack. I would suggest before you fall and break your neck that you lay down in the opened coffin and rest. Oh, never mind hurting the remaining spiders. They find their way in, out and around these parts. Mr. Royale IV, get in the coffin now.

Almost involuntarily, he bent his now knocking knees to flop into the coffin onto his face. Shaking uncontrollably now, he gasped for air and mumbled incoherently.

I know, I know, why the coffin you asked? Well, if you look at your shoddy little life filled with drugs, alcohol, and lusts, you have to ask yourself if anyone else would care enough to do so. But I do, Gerald. Think of this as your going away present; a cheap eulogy and funeral befitting your caliber of the soon-to-be-deceased. Humanity has an odd sense of humor, and God must have an even odder one to allow what he does on this dirtball planet. But Gerald, time heals old wounds especially if murder is involved. That's all for now though I do want to add my own unique touch to these proceedings. I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to death by a means that only I know. I won't keep you from eternity any longer. Goodbye and goodnight. I slammed the coffin shut.

5

The Arbors at Lenox Apartments

485 Buckhead Avenue

Atlanta

7:00 P.M.

Selena and Ernest sat on her black leather couch in the middle of a living room group worth about \$10,000. A monster entertainment center housed a 46" flat screen TV, a stereo system, DVDs, CDs, and videos. Dixie Jazz motif paintings, African statues, masks and flags of Mexico, France, and America, touched off the decor in the upscale second-floor apartment in the ritzy Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta.

Had she forgiven him for the other night at *Obsession*? She allowed him into her house, didn't she? What that proved was nothing since she permitted that all the time despite whatever he did to tick her off which was usually everything he did.

"All right, it's DVD Sunday, and *Safe House* with Denzel is the choice!"

Ernest bent the *Atlanta Daily Post* newspaper she read down to her lap.

"Naw, naw, let's see somethin' else cause you gonna be Denzelin' all day and I don't wanna hear it."

"O-o-o, I think my man is jealous. But, it's my way or the highway tonight."

She stared at him down on his knees in his black, red, and white *Atlanta Falcons* Michael Vick #7 football jersey with black Calvin Klein jeans and Timberlands. Sometimes she liked to take those braids tying them around his big head and mouth. Okay, girl, he's coming on with the charm. Was the light red, yellow, or green? He kissed her knees then both hands and as he knelt upon the sofa's middle pillow, both cheeks. Okay...green light but a sign said, 'Dangerous Curves Ahead.' Aiming at her lips, she sprung an index finger to his mouth. Toll Booth! That'll be a dollar, please.

She arose from the sofa as he matched her movement. He grabbed and kissed her hands then he held her waist. His big masculine hands sent electricity throughout her body and now curled her toe knuckle hair...maybe just fifty cents.

"Not so long ago you was a bad attitude 'I-can't-say-how-bad-in-your-crib' woman when no one wanted you. A Miss Ice Princess snappin' at G's like a nasty, 'I-can't-say-what I'm-thinkin'-for-the-same-reason', woman. I like a sister with attitude, but you was too much. I saw you wasn't happy. I knew I could change that."

She rolled her eyes to heaven, hell and back to earth.

“Anyway, that’s the real world, not silver screen fantasy. Now, I be wantin’ a chicken sammich. Go on and get the grub, girl.”

He smiled and gently kissed her lips. She nodded acknowledging the point made. Girl, that was too easy. And that surprised whom? He smashed through the toll booth barrier without paying and was soon apprehended...like later tonight. She smiled and got the food ready.

He bared his cell from his pants pocket and dialed after the coast cleared. Keeping his voice’s volume down, he started.

“Yo D.C., peep this: I was right but stay on point. I’m weavin’ a tangled web, but it’ll work. Peace.”

About an hour later, the pair emerged outside her apartment complex. Selena wore a loose fitting black knit sweater with tight black jeans. Black high-heeled pumps elevated her height another inch. He popped the locks on both doors of his green 2010 Cadillac Seville by keyless remote and settled within. He popped back out and sighed. He trotted over to her side and opened her door. She smiled, he smirked. Once settled in again, he cranked the Caddie’s engine. The tire’s golden rims sparkled from the street lights and rolled the rest of the vehicle left out of the parking areas onto Buckhead Avenue. Seconds later, a red Chevy Camaro started and eased out of a parking space along Buckhead Avenue following the Cadillac.

-END-

Cortez Law III is the author of five independently published books. The romance novel, *My Brother's Keeper* (2001), the Atlanta X-Men Homicide Squad suspense/mystery/thriller novels *Kremlin Tide* (2014), *Cold Lick* (2015), *Serial Rites* (2017) and *Shadow Doctors* (2019) along with the science fiction/thriller, *S.Y.P.H.E.N.* (2015) and the horror novella, *Evil Realms* (2019). He resides in the Metro Atlanta, Georgia area. Visit him online at <https://www.cortezlaw.net>.