

*A Blue Bridge Mystery*

# WANTED

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DEAD or ALIVE

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(AGAIN)



**MICHAEL K. ZIMMERLI**

A BLUE BRIDGE MYSTERY

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DEAD OR ALIVE  
(AGAIN)**

MICHAEL K. ZIMMERLI

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### What People are saying about *Zamboni Is Not A Pasta ...*

“I absolutely loved your book. I am letting a friend with a book club read it, hoping she will get the ladies to buy it. I love how you throw some ‘witty’ things throughout. I am definitely a glass-half-full person and like positive things, so I like a book that makes me chuckle here and there.”

“... a good storyline with mystery and suspense along with a lot of informative information. I’m excited to get the next one!” – Paula

“(My husband) bought me *Zamboni Is Not A Pasta* for Christmas. I’m not a fast reader...but I finished your book already! I look forward to *Wanted: Dead or Alive (Again)*.– Trisa C.

“My daughter got me this for Christmas, and it did not disappoint. The author does a good job of fleshing out the characters and making them believable. The storyline is intriguing. It contains all of the elements of a good whodunit, combined with some Perry Mason-esque mystery, and without the grossness of most modern literature.”

“... good dialogue between the characters and some interesting geography. Any story that involves Steffens and WaHo has to be good. Looking forward to Jimmy’s next adventure.” – Robert N.

# Contents

Dedication .....	9
Acknowledgments .....	11
Introduction .....	13
Chapter 1 .....	17
Chapter 2 .....	23
Chapter 3 .....	35
Chapter 4 .....	47
Chapter 5 .....	55
Chapter 6 .....	67
Chapter 7 .....	79
Chapter 8 .....	93
Chapter 9 .....	109
Chapter 10 .....	121
Chapter 11 .....	135
Chapter 12 .....	147
Chapter 13 .....	155
Chapter 14 .....	165
Chapter 15 .....	181
Chapter 16 .....	197
Chapter 17 .....	213
Chapter 18 .....	225
Chapter 19 .....	239
Chapter 20 .....	253
Chapter 21 .....	265
Chapter 22 .....	283

Chapter 23 .....	291
Chapter 24 .....	303
Chapter 25 .....	313
Epilogue .....	321
Loose Threads .....	333
About the Author .....	339

## Chapter 15

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**T**HE TWO INVESTIGATORS PARTED IN Panera's parking lot. They knew their assignments. Jimmy was going to search the internet for more clues about Dr. and Mrs. Epps – separately and together.

Pepé was going to poke around the Brunswick Hospital to see what he could find out about the doctor – mainly to check on his interactions with the other staff. Then he'd head back out to Jekyll and ask Mrs. Epps if she had remembered anything else that might help them figure out where her husband had gone six years before.

Regarding the other case, Jimmy had already recovered the manuscript for the Lysts, but the case didn't feel finished yet. What bothered him most was not that someone had stolen the manuscript or even that someone had held it for ransom. What rankled him most was the idea that Trevor McIntosh supposedly wrote it. A man who couldn't string five words into



a coherent sentence didn't seem like the best candidate to pen a prize-winning manuscript. Trevor had supposedly written a best-seller thirty or thirty-five years earlier, but Jimmy had his doubts about that, too. He could have stumbled across the original somewhere or hired someone to write it for him. Jimmy was pretty sure there were ghostwriters even back then who would write whatever you requested for a fee. Most of today's ghostwriters seemed to live in Africa and India and would write whatever you asked in less than a week for \$25.

Jimmy was sure there were less honest and less respectable ways to acquire a manuscript, too. *Where the Ocean Swallows the Moon* was stolen from the Lysts. Who could say if it had been stolen from someone else before that? Was it possible *Growing Up Southern* found its way to daylight the same way, written by one set of fingers but claimed by another?

The library was closed, so there was no *Growing Up Southern* for Jimmy. As he drove toward home, he mentally reviewed the manuscript he had rescued and partially read. So far, *Where the Ocean Swallows the Moon* was like an autobiography, but it caused an itch in Jimmy's brain. He was simply unwilling to believe Trevor McIntosh had ever crewed on a freighter, merchant ship, or cargo ship. The man was as soft as any 9-to-5 desk jockey. Working on a commercial vessel, McIntosh's entitled attitude would have earned him a trip overboard within the first week, if not the first day.

Jimmy drove over the blue bridge, turned in his driveway, and up to his house. He parked, walked to the mailbox, and retrieved his daily portion of junk mail. As Jimmy walked across the lawn to his house, he surveyed the numerous

tire tracks the previous night's traffic had left. There had been county deputies, Wendi's car, his car, and, at some point, at least one other car potentially carrying three second-rate burglars.

That caused him to wonder how his new best friend, Gabriel, was doing. Either the police were still holding him, or someone had bailed him out. If the latter, whoever paid his bail might send Gabriel to pay another visit to Jimmy to retrieve the twenty-five hundred dollars they felt was rightfully theirs. Or worse, somebody competent.

Jimmy wasn't overly concerned about encountering the dull-witted bully. If anyone should be concerned about his release from the pokey, it was Gabriel. Jimmy was reasonably sure whoever had Gabriel on their payroll might require a pound or two of flesh in exchange for losing the two-thousand dollars. It was like trickle-down economics.

Since Gabriel had twice failed to secure the total ransom from Jimmy, odds were that Gabriel could get a virtual trip to the woodshed. Jimmy hoped that it would end there. In these times of economic recession, even the bad guys had to watch their profit and loss statements. Jimmy hoped everyone chalked up the money as a loss or a failed business venture and let it go.

Jimmy sighed. He knew it didn't always work that way.

He went inside and checked his security system. It said no threats were detected. No messages from Alexa, his digital secretary. Jimmy felt the flash drive in his pocket. He had several options. He could stay at home and read some more in Mcintosh's alleged novel, do some internet sleuthing about Dr.

John Epps from Jekyll Island, or go to Lyst Publishing in Fernandina and see how everything was in the light of day.

In the end, Jimmy opted to go to Lyst Publishing. Reading and internet searches could come later after checking in on his living, breathing clients.

Jimmy armed his security system and stepped out on the front steps. He noticed a bicycle by his mailbox, half hidden in the tall grass of the ditch, and tried to remember if he had seen it when collecting the mail. He shaded his eyes from the sun and checked the grass around the bike but saw no one. Hearing a slight creak on the little deck by his front steps, Jimmy turned his head to look, just in time to see a fist the size of a Boston Butt coming right at his face.

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Jimmy had no idea how long he had been lying on his steps and wasn't even entirely sure *why* he was lying on the steps. Suddenly, he felt rough, strong hands grab him by his shirt and turn him over. The meaty hands tore his back pocket off, picked up his wallet from where it fell on the steps, opened it, and took whatever cash was inside. Jimmy turned his head to see who was manhandling him.

Gabriel.

Just as Jimmy had figured, Gabriel had already taken a hit—literally, it appeared—for his part in the loss of revenue. His bottom lip was fat and split, his left eye a purple-brown and green, and his right eye similarly colored but swollen half-shut.

Jimmy hoped he wouldn't sport a similar look after the thug was finished with him.

Seeing Jimmy looking at him, Gabriel growled at the PI, "You're eighteen hundred dollars short, Favreaux. Where's the rest of the two thousand?"

Jimmy tried to push himself up into a sitting position, but the bruised bruiser stomped a foot on Jimmy's back and held him down. *Okay. So be it. I can talk lying down.*

"I don't have it, Gabriel," Jimmy grunted, the heavy foot on his back making breathing difficult. "It wasn't mine to keep. I gave it back to my client. Tell your boss to send my client an itemized, notarized bill if he wants the money. And don't forget to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope with it. Courtesy never goes out of style."

"Har-dee har-har, Favreaux. This isn't about my boss. It's about you and me. The Man isn't after the money anymore."

*Because he already took it out of your hide, pretty boy.* Jimmy thought. "Well, I don't have the money, so I guess you're just out of luck. Write it off as a bad investment."

The foot holding Jimmy down on the steps began pressing harder, rocking back and forth and grinding Jimmy's chest into the wooden steps beneath him. "Wrong answer, Favreaux. I'm already out the two grand, and I need it for my mother's hip replacement. You better come up with it in a hurry because if she doesn't get her new hip, she'll get cranky and come over and kick your butt into next week."

“Nice to know the family that preys together stays together,” Jimmy groaned at the oversized man. *Typical David and Goliath scenario*, he thought. *I wish I had five smooth stones and a slingshot!*

“What?” Gabriel asked, obviously confused by the word preys, thinking Jimmy was talking about prayer.

“Never mind, you big ape.” Having had a few minutes to recover from the sucker punch, Jimmy started to push up against the foot again. When Gabriel raised it slightly to stomp him back down, Jimmy rolled sideways and off the steps, leaving the bully with his foot suspended in mid-air.

“Before you make another threatening move, Gabriel, I want you to take a look around.”

“At what, Favreaux?”

“At the camera in *that* corner, the camera in the *opposite* corner, and the Ring doorbell straight in *front* of you. And you know what the beauty of a Ring doorbell is? It caught your entire attack on high-def video and recorded every word you said. You see, it records *audio*, too. And all of it is permanently uploaded to the cloud so it can be downloaded when I go to the police in a few minutes, right after you leave my property. I imagine you’ll be spending another night as a guest of the county, but my guess is it’ll be a much longer stretch this time.”

The goon looked at the cameras and the doorbell, trying to figure out how Jimmy had snookered him again.

Jimmy pulled out his phone and said, “Siri, call the Nassau County Sheriff’s Office.”

In response, Siri replied, “Calling the Nassau County Ess-Oh.”

Before she completed her reply, Gabriel was nearly halfway to his bike. Jimmy guessed Gabriel’s boss now owned his employee’s car in lieu of the money he had failed to collect from Jimmy for the manuscript.

“Nassau County Sheriff’s Office. How can I direct your call?”

“Never mind. I’ll be in after a while to fill out a complaint for an arrest warrant. This is Jimmy Favreaux, private investigator. I live over by the blue bridge.”

“Hi, Jimmy. Everything all right? Did you get things cleaned up from last night? The night deputies told me about it.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t too bad. They got there in a hurry, so the mess was kept to a minimum. But I have footage of a guy trying to take my head off and then mugging me and taking my money from my wallet. He won’t be hard to find. He was a guest of yours last night.”

“That Gabriel guy? What a pain. Fernandina Police dropped him off with us.”

“Well, he made the mistake of attacking me just now where my cameras could record him, video and audio.”

“Sweet. I’ll see you in a little while. Gotta run. Unless you have something else ..?”

“No. The call was primarily to get Gabriel properly motivated to leave. I’ll see you in a bit. Thanks again.”

“Ten-four.”

As Jimmy hung up, he remembered that he hadn’t checked the video from last night to see if he could make out who had broken into his house. Sliding around the steps and sitting down where he had been lying just minutes before, he called up the cloud where his camera videos were stored. Scrolling through several clips marked by date and time, he quickly found the timestamp he wanted.

From the doorbell’s perspective, he watched as a car pulled off the highway and drove up close to the front door. Three men got out of the vehicle, a dark sedan, two from the front and one from the backseat. They wore COVID masks, making it impossible to tell who they were. The guy from the front passenger seat was the largest, even bigger than Gabriel.

Jimmy knew it wasn’t Gabriel, though, because Gabriel had been chilling out at the Fernandina Police Department for harassing him outside the Loop when they broke into Jimmy’s house. Back to the video.

The big guy stood on the top step, put one massive foot against the door, and leaned into it, pitting his considerable bulk against the door’s integrity. After a moment, he stepped back, placed his shoulder against the door, and gave a hard push. The door popped open. The shrill system alarm immediately covered up any conversation the men made. The trio hurried inside, apparently following a pre-arranged plan as they scattered. Jimmy recalled that one of the deputies had been reasonably sure

of the number of men involved based on the places in his house they had tossed before they fled. He was right.

Jimmy couldn't see what was happening inside, just shadows going from side to side as they hurried to find the manuscript or the money. He would be adding a few indoor cameras soon, he told himself.

After just a few minutes, the men hurried back out, took their places in the car again, backed out, and took off. A few minutes later, the first deputy arrived in a cruiser. It was another minute before he emerged from his vehicle, gun drawn. Jimmy knew he wasn't finishing a drink or a last bite of supper before getting out. He had checked with his partner to find out how soon he would arrive.

The deputy had barely stepped out of his vehicle when the lights of the second cruiser became visible in the video frame. It was only about thirty seconds before he pulled in next to the first squad car. The second officer stepped out of his vehicle, weapon in hand. Jimmy stopped the playback. He knew what had happened after that. There was nothing to find inside because the bad guys had already left the scene.

Jimmy would also give the Nassau County Sheriff's Office this video in case they could recognize any of the trio who had waltzed into his home the night before. If they could ID them, that would be icing on the cake, but Gabriel was the cake. His arrogance would cost him his freedom.

Jimmy wished there had been security cameras on the playground in elementary school when he was growing up. Some grown-up bullies might not be around to harass people



today if there had been. *Or probably not.* Jimmy knew that prison did not rehabilitate the vast majority of criminals. It merely kept them off the streets while they learned a new trade inside the prison. Prisons were like colleges for developing criminal instincts and techniques. All the time in the world to learn, and “classes” conducted by the best in the business. “Best,” except that each of them had been caught. Still, techniques were traded like currency in prison, and people often came out with new skills not learned in the prison kitchen, laundry, or woodshop.

Jimmy stopped at the Nassau County Sheriff’s Office on his way to Fernandina and downloaded his videos. He filed a complaint against Gabriel, and after watching the video, the commander in charge said they would go pick the man up. Gabriel had been a guest of the county numerous times, but this time, the bully would be going away to serve time in a larger playground. He wouldn’t be the top dog this time. He would be a small fish in a large pond full of much more deliberate, nastier predators with significantly larger teeth.

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After taking care of his business at the Sheriff’s Office, Jimmy continued to Fernandina and Lyst Publishing. He looked in the vanity mirror on the back of the sun visor. Gabriel had missed Jimmy’s eye and nose, delivering a glancing blow to his cheekbone because Jimmy had instinctively tried to turn away from the motion coming at him. It still hurt like a bugger, though, and it was already starting to discolor. Still, not too bad,

and who knows – some women might like the rugged look. *Maybe Wendi's one of them.*

Jimmy wondered if Wendi would be at her desk and what she would say about his new facial decoration. He touched it and winced. He knew the bone wasn't broken, but it hurt like a son of a gun when he touched it. He carefully prodded it with a fingertip again, winced, and told himself to leave it alone. Part of him wanted to be able to withstand being touched because he was pretty sure Wendi would try to feel it and ask if it hurt. He didn't want to be wincing or, worse, yelping when she touched it. And, Lord knows, he didn't want any *tears* to leak out if she felt it. The embarrassment would end the contract for him.

Jimmy parked in the same space in front of Staples, just like every time he had been at Lyst Publishing. He walked down the long, narrow hall to the inner door, knocked lightly, and tried to turn the handle. It was locked. He rapped on the door again and waited. He was unable to hear anyone moving around inside. He knocked one more time, knowing that Hillary Lyst was relatively insulated back in his office. But no one came and unlocked the door.

Jimmy walked back down the hallway and stepped outside. He stood there momentarily, thinking, then turned to his right and started walking. Jimmy strolled past Staples and followed the sidewalk a short distance before arriving at his destination: Peterbrook Chocolatiers. He ordered a small cup of gelato and went outside to sit at the little bistro table in front of the confectionery.

Taking out his cell phone, he sent Wendi a text.

I'm eating gelato at Peterbrook. Thought you might like some, too.

He took a couple more bites before her reply made his phone buzz on the table.

Is something wrong? Why are you at the office?

Jimmy read her response, took another bite of gelato, and sent a reply.

Nothing is wrong. I just thought I'd stop and check on you guys. There was trouble at my place last night after I left.

He finished up the gelato as her text came in.

What kind of trouble? Are you okay?

I'm fine. Had some unexpected visitors while I was in Fernandina. They were looking for the manuscript or the rest of the money. Or both.

omg!

Relax. They didn't have time to trash my place before the cops arrived. Besides, I didn't have the manuscript or the money. At least not when they were there.

Are you still at Peterbrook's?

Yes.

Stay there. I'll be there in five minutes.

Jimmy got up, threw his cup and tiny spoon in a nearby trashcan, and went back inside the store, where the aroma of chocolate hung enticingly in the air. He gave in to the shop's

seductive sales tactics. He bought some chocolate-covered popcorn before going back outside to wait for Wendi.

True to her word, about five minutes after her text, Wendi pulled up and parked next to Jimmy's Nissan. She got out of her car and walked briskly toward him. Wendi was one of those women who always looked like she should be on a fashion show runway. She was wearing tight jeans, white, open-toed sandals, and a jade blouse that made her hair look even blonder than it was. Her sunglasses were perched on top of her head like she was looking at the leaves on the trees. She gave him a small smile, but her concern was evident.

As she came closer and Jimmy's facial injury became more apparent, he could see her look of concern deepen.

"What happened to your face?" she asked, reaching out to touch his bruise. He leaned back to avoid letting her touch it. She pulled her hand back quickly.

"Does it hurt? What happened?"

"It does, thanks for asking. I got sucker-punched at my house just as I was leaving to come here."

"You what?"

"That big ape I met at Mickey's Tap Room to exchange the manuscript for the cash? It was him. When he didn't show up with the full five grand, his boss apparently took it out of his hide. Gabriel had two black eyes, a fat lip, and probably had some sore spots on his torso. I'd guess he probably has some bruised ribs to go along with those pretty eyes. Oh, and get this – he rode a bicycle to my house! I'm betting his boss took his car

to cover his losses. He'll probably scrap it or sell it for whatever he can get. Either way, Gabriel let it slip that the boss isn't looking at *me* to produce the rest of the ransom. That means he took his pound of flesh from Gabriel while teaching him a lesson on following directions."

Wendi put a hand on Jimmy's arm. "The two thousand you brought back with you? That was supposed to be for the manuscript?"

"It was. But I got Gabriel so enamored with the feel of five hundred dollars in his pocket that he didn't count the money in the envelope I gave him. There were only twenty-five hundred-dollar bills in there, but it sure looked like a lot of C-notes. I told him the five hundred I gave him was a tip. Can you believe that? Gabriel believed it! He probably took the envelope I gave him and hurried back to the boss. I'd have loved to have seen his face when the boss told him he was twenty-five hundred short."

"So, he came to your house to get the money back that his boss took from him?"

Jimmy nodded. "Unfortunately for Gabriel, his sneak attack was captured in glorious color and hi-def on my security cameras and Ring doorbell, complete with crystal clear sound as he confessed to being the bagman for the manuscript ransom. When I pointed out the cameras, he just stood there staring, trying to figure out how I had outsmarted him again. When I called the Nassau County Sheriff's Office, and he heard them answer, he took off running for his bike. At that moment, I

actually felt a teeny twinge of pity for him. But it went away as soon as I felt my cheek.”

“I’m so glad you weren’t hurt worse,” Wendi said. They were sitting at the bistro table outside Peterbrook’s, eating the chocolate-covered popcorn. Wendi’s hand had shifted from Jimmy’s arm to the irresistible bag of popcorn.

Jimmy waved her off when she tried to give him the popcorn back. He said, “I just stopped by to make sure everything was fine here with you and Mr. Lyst ... and the manuscript.”

“Everything is right as rain,” she said.

“Then I’ll be on my way. I’m going to check in with Mr. Metz.”

“What for?” Wendi asked, one hand paused mid-reach into the bag of milk chocolate-covered popcorn.

“I just want to meet him and get a reading on him. I’m not convinced yet that Trevor wrote the manuscript. And if he didn’t, that could propel Metz in the standings from the silver medal to the gold. Mostly, though, I just want to get a feel for how Oscar’s taking things, coming in second and all.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Wendi responded. “Ten thousand is still nothing to squawk about. He can publish his book and do a lot of promotion and marketing for that kind of money. Or he can go the self-publish route and just enjoy having the extra money as a cushion for a change.”

“But you know what they say,” Jimmy replied. “Fifty thousand is the new ten.”

Jimmy stood up and pantomimed tipping his hat to Wendi, then walked to his car and headed to the north end of the island to a trailer park where Metz still lived in his dead mother's mobile home.