

A LUCKY DEY THRILLER

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REAPER

"Thrilling... falls tonally somewhere between Chinatown and the visceral street politics of *The Wire*." —*BLUE INK REVIEWS*

Monday

1

Tarzana, California. 10:41 P.M.

Frosty checked his phone screen. It was an unconscious act and only three slow-motion minutes since his last glance. Every passing second felt as if it was creeping like a caterpillar on a tenuous twig. It wasn't the waiting that chapped the twenty-two-year-old. Waiting was what he did. Waiting for Julius to hand out his next instruction. Waiting at the bodega to cash his Gran'nana's social security check. Waiting was process. After all, what was life? As his Gran'nana always say, all to livin' was about waiting to die 'n' meeting her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

No. What bothered Frosty was the San Fernando Valley zip code. He would generally call his comfort zone anywhere south of Interstate 10 and east of the 405. Crossing north of South Central Los Angeles might as well have been a snowy slog across the Canadian border. Only Canada would at least be predictably opaque with white people. Frosty could handle white people. They'd

take one look at his skinny black ass and his yellowed, alienlike wide-set eyes and be afraid. Either that or they'd overcompensate with their polite white guilt. White folk were so Goddamn easy that way.

It was the mixed bag outside South Central that caused Frosty's anxiety. The ever-growing polyglot of ethnic minorities and the assimilation from the old known demarcations of black, white, and brown—it was all too confusing to keep current.

Frosty's Gran'nana said it best:

“Used to be able to tell who was who. Now all the mixin’ makes you wanna start ev’ry conversation with, ‘What the heck kinda race is you?’”

Up until that Monday, the summer had been cooler than the usual swelter. If only it had stayed cool for one more twenty-four hour sweep and the Santa Ana winds had held at bay. Then Frosty might not have had to worry about his perfectly functioning sweat glands. Perspiration contained DNA. And everybody knew DNA was what got even the best bad guys caught. In his Jordans, black Wrangler jeans and a thin, navy blue hoodie, Frosty needed to fit into character, otherwise known to law enforcement as a “black male usual”—an African-American man in his late teens to twenties—a descriptor that, in America, fit tens of millions.

That's right. Try and pick me out of a lineup, motherfuckers.

It was the second day of July. And Frosty had made sure to ride the most obvious transit routes. The Blue Line to downtown. The Red Line to North Hollywood. The Orange Metro Bus to some Valley neighborhood called Tarzana. On that route he'd be certain to pass plenty of security cameras and, depending on their operational status, each was guaranteed to capture his image. But the average lens would record little more than a five-foot-ten-inch black man's silhouette in a ubiquitous dark hoodie. Daylight would soon be waning into a dusty twilight. If any enterprising LAPD cop had figured Frosty would be worth a stop 'n' frisk, they'd have come up with little more than a few, crumpled dollar bills, a nearly empty container of orange-flavored Tic Tacs, and a stick of cvs brand lip balm. But the gig itself would be flushed. A new plan would have to be formed.

Near the corner of Reseda and Ventura, Frosty slipped into a supermarket parking lot. Keeping his gaze just south of level, he easily marked the four security cameras, each boxed in what looked like a tin-covered birdhouse and mounted high on a light post.

Sweet. I like me lots of cameras.

Knowing that every captured move would be recorded and eventually catalogued by detectives, he slid up and down the aisles of cars, pretending to test for unlocked doors, only showing interest in the more expensive luxury brands—Lexus, Cadillac, Mercedes-Benz. The exercise lasted less than two minutes. But it was guaranteed to super-glue an easily digestible motive to the crime Frosty was designed on committing.

Frosty crossed Ventura Boulevard near the old Taco Bell and soon melted into the dark and forested residential streets of the Tarzana hills. His path was circuitous. Yet all the while he was precise about his destination. The address was locked in his head. That and he'd already visited the house on three previous occasions—the last time to conceal his murder weapon of the moment, a .22 caliber Taurus pistol which was nearly as small as the palm of his hand. Frosty had double-Ziplocked the pistol with a pair of blue surgical gloves before burying the bag four inches deep in the freshly mulched flowerbed that fronted a Tudor-styled house two driveways to the west.

It had been some twenty or so minutes since the sun had dropped below the crest of what locals called The Santa Monicas—a low-lying mountain range that bordered the Pacific Ocean, stretching east to west from Bel-Air to Point Mugu. In the gray before night—and more importantly, before the streetlamps had fully sparked, Frosty recovered the weapon, made sure to stuff the baggies in a front pocket, and did his best to make himself comfortable in a concealed corner of the empty home renovation site across the street from the target driveway. The clock on his phone read 8:43 P.M.

There was nothing left to do but wait.

At half past ten, perched on a short, sawed-off chunk of two-by-six, Frosty's bony butt began to ache as he kept shifting from one weak cheek to the other. What he'd have given for the "high

motor” his track coach had so valued. So many of his school homies were built with popping gluteus muscles which not only made for fast legs, but also made baggy jeans a cinch to hang low. Somehow Frosty had been born with an ass as slight as the rest of him. For a while in middle school, he was even nicknamed *Plank* until Frosty shut up the instigator with an after-the-bell beat-down. Though the nicknaming perp ended up in the hospital with three broken ribs and a concussion, he never ratted on Frosty for the simple fear of getting capped by any one of Frosty’s compadres—the Palmer Blocc Compton Crips.

Superiority through extreme violence, one of his O.G.’s used to say.

That’s right, Frost-man. Superior violence always comes out on top. Like that Hiroshima and Nagasaki shit. Boom-boom and it’s goodnight war in the Pacific.

A pair of headlights swept up the hilly curve. From just under an eighth of a mile away, the lights flashed across the neighborhood trees—a mix of eucalyptus, ancient oaks, and reaching cypress, with not a leaf wiggling in a non-existent breeze.

“Fuck all, it’s hot,” moaned Frosty to himself, slightly surprised to hear his own voice before he whispered back to himself, “Shoulda brought you some bottles of water, dumbass.”

The car attached to the headlights—a freshly waxed white Range Rover—accelerated past the address.

Thirst was becoming an issue. Somehow, Frosty had journeyed to the Valley already dehydrated, then marched from mass transit to mass transit before trudging into the Tarzana hills. His throat was dry and when he swallowed, his tongue stuck to the top of his mouth as if it were coated in Jif. He thought to leave his perch, search for a garden hose or a waterspout or even a half-supped bottle of Arrowhead, and quench his thirst. Only the thought itself was overruled by his wiser, quieting brain centers. He’d made personal admonitions to touch absolutely nothing on which he could leave a trace—a single solitary skin cell. Despite his thirst, leaving no trace was Frosty’s governing thought. Patience would be rewarded. Just wait it out, do the thing Julius asked, and get back to life south of the one-oh-five.

Then came another flash of headlights, only these were the whiter, more ethereal shade of Halogen. Yet despite the oncoming presence of a moving vehicle, there was zero sound of a surging gasoline engine propelling the car up the hill. If Frosty's ears were keener, he'd be able to hear the slight hum of an electric motor and the rubber-on-asphalt friction of four performance Pirellis.

But will it be my Tesla?

The battery-powered car—four doors and sleek as a Maserati sedan—softly wound down to almost perfect silence as it neared the address. The corner streetlamp threw a blue-gray cast, making the car's skin appear like a fish darting into the shallows.

Yes, sir. That's my guy driving my car.

From that moment until the ugly deed was done, Frosty's movements could almost be described as robotic. Each step had been thought through days in advance. All Frosty need do was execute his most simple plan. The Palmer Blocc Crip quickly rose and skipped in the direction of the street with speedy deliberation. As the Tesla slowed and pulled up to a residential gate, the driver's window rolled down so the gray-haired man behind the wheel could punch in a code he knew as well as his own name. When his brake lights flared, he wouldn't think to cautiously peek in either his rear or side view mirrors. It was getting late on a Monday night. The driver was probably buzzed or even drunk and, only yards from his bed, barely aware of little more than his next task—pressing the four numbers to engage the motor that would swing the gate open.

Frosty noted the seersucker sleeve stretching for the keypad and a pricey timepiece glinting in the glow of the nearby streetlamp. His Jordans made little sound as he covered the short distance across the asphalt. So far, Frosty had touched nothing besides the pistol, an item he'd be certain to take with him. He passed the pistol to his left hand, confident he'd switched the safety into the off position. Next, he automatically quickened himself as he counted out the telephone tones chirping from the tiny speaker box below the keypad.

At the open window, Frosty hooked his left arm inside the doorframe, bending sideways at the waist to make certain the muzzle of the .22 touched the Tesla driver's bristled temple. He

pulled the trigger twice, releasing a pair of high-pitched pops. The skin contact and the acoustics of the car behaved as baffles, disguising the sounds to barely more than finger snaps.

The driver jerked and lolled. His body barely had time to slump when Frosty cracked open the car door. It was when he reached across the seat to unhitch the man's seatbelt that he was assaulted by the scream.

The unholy howl came first as a blast of unwelcome air from the maw of the woman passenger. A hooker or a secretary Frosty would later surmise. She'd been both unexpected and had already thrown the lock on her own door. She was in the process of hurling herself toward the driveway when she had realized that she was still restrained by her own seatbelt. Nearly forty years old, redheaded, and her blouse unbuttoned enough to show off her new pair of surgically minted double-D breasts, she was sucking in her first breath to unleash a second howl when she discovered herself facing the small caliber muzzle.

Again Frosty squeezed on the trigger. The microsecond flash of gunpowder after-burn camouflaged the actual bullet penetrating the colored contact lens in the passenger's left eye. The woman slumped four inches, threw a quick spasm, then fell away with her legs kicking. Without the safety belt, she'd have spilled completely out of the car.

With the driver's seatbelt unhitched, Frosty tugged the male victim from the car. Next, he climbed in behind the wheel and popped the lock on the dead woman's seat belt, allowing her to crumple into a polyester pile outside her open door.

Frosty pressed down on the brake, geared the Tesla into reverse, and carefully backed onto the street. The passenger door shut itself once Frosty had shifted into drive and tested the electric car's well-advertised acceleration. In less than two minutes, Frosty was on the freeway, pointed out of the Valley, and finding himself cooled by the comfortable breeze provided by the Tesla's electric-powered air conditioning.

"Thank Jesus for mother-fuckin' air conditioning," shouted Frosty to nobody other than himself.

2

Compton Station, LA County Sheriffs. 11:03 P.M.

The pain wasn't quite excruciating. Yet the muscle memory of how debilitating it had once been wanted to convince Lucky that popping a pain pill would be more efficient than the twice—sometimes three times—daily sessions of self-induced traction. The prescribed series of stretches, contortions, and exercises were designed to build core strength and relieve the stress on his surgically repaired back. Lucky could only suppose they did as advertised, but simply recalling the old pain would trigger Percocet cravings every time he unrolled the foam rubber yoga mat he kept in his locker. He'd lie in the most remote corner of the Compton station's locker room, its permanent mildew smell filling his nostrils. He'd set a thirty-second timer on his phone and once again, begin breaking through the adhesions that always seemed to have reformed since his last horizontal bout with himself. Lucky would generally top off the session with eight hundred milligrams of ibuprofen chased by a can of Red Bull.

It was week two of Lucky's re-assignment as a Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputy. And the next check mark to address on his return-to-duty list was a name on a slip of thin, hand-cut paper. As if to save the environment, all four of the trainee assignments had been printed on one sheet of cheap white copy stock then quickly quartered with a guillotine cutter. Pretty archaic, thought Lucky, for a modern, urban police department. But this was both County Sheriff's *and* Compton where they hadn't changed the bolted seating in the lobby since it had been Compton City PD in the nineteen-seventies.

Deputy Lucky Dey flicked the slip of paper, folded it into his shirt's buttoned pocket and performed one last check in the locker room mirror. As usual, his own handsomeness evaded him. Aside from his mother's blue eyes, he saw only wreckage. Scars. A nose permanently misshapen from collisions with both cars and fists. He checked his equipment to make certain he hadn't forgotten something important like spare magazines for his SIG Sauer. Carrying either a *nine* or a *forty* was standard for uniformed deputies. Not quite what Lucky had been used to packing back in the days he'd worked as a detective for both LA County and then up north in Kern. A Model 1911 .45 was his preference. It was heavy as hell which absorbed the recoil. It was also louder and generally smacked a target harder both wherever and whenever Lucky aimed. In other words, a bad guy spanked with a .45 slug generally went down and stayed down.

"Uniform looks good," said Watch Commander Lieutenant Eugene Torres. The stout ex-Marine with a throwback mustache slapped Lucky's shoulder as they squeezed past each other in the tight corridor that shortcut through the dispatch room. "Betcha you were surprised it still fit ya."

"Desk jobs are ass spreaders," replied Lucky.

"Same with a seat on patrol," warned Torres. "Had this one T.O. who told his rooks that traffic stops were the best way to supplement the cardio. That and watching the greasy lunch breaks."

Patrol.

How many years had it been since Lucky had manned the wheel of a black-and-white? No matter. That was the deal he'd

agreed to for the Sheriff's Department to take him back. As well as the responsibility of working as a training officer saddled with two trainees a year. It wasn't quite detective grade. Yet it would have to do.

Lucky stuffed Torres's unsolicited advice with a sideways wink and stepped out into the night. The motor yard was rectangular, a hundred-yards-deep, and cast in a yellowish blaze of sodium street lamps. Sheriff's patrol units were parked like soldiers waiting for orders. Ford Interceptors, Suburbans, and the old standbys, Ford Crown Victorias. The rumors were that all the sedans would eventually be replaced by roomier, all-wheel-drive SUVs. Swell, thought Lucky. The modern-day cops' black-and-whites were simply a bunch of super-charged mom-mobiles.

His assigned black-and-white was already backed up, wheels touching the curb, gassed and ready to roll. The exhaust was smoothly belching downward in the direction of Lucky's squeaky new tactical boots. The passenger door swung wide and out stepped Lucky's trainee. Despite her own new boots and a lousy-fitting uniform cut to erase any essence of what might be considered feminine, Lucky guessed the young deputy couldn't have weighed more than one-hundred-and-ten pounds naked and blown dry.

"Deputy Dey," the trainee spoke up, assuming a strong-spined stance. "I'm—"

"No, no," interrupted Lucky, holding up a single index finger, then using it to fish that slip of paper from his shirt pocket. "Lemme see if I can get this on the first go."

Lucky cleared his throat and again snapped the piece of paper. He remained on the curb, using the extra five inches to accentuate his own six-foot frame over the trainee's five-foot-four inches.

"Deputy Mequashia Saint George," read Lucky. "I get that right?"

"Shia," corrected the trainee. "That's what I go by. Been that way since kindergarten."

"Mequashia, though," grinned Lucky. "That's pretty fuckin' exotic."

"Grew up in the West Valley," said Shia, unblanched by Lucky's f-bomb describer. "Nothing exotic about that."

“Less you live in Pacoima.”

Shia offered her open palm. Her fingers were delicate, like a hand model's, with a tinge of peachy-pink on her palms to contrast her flawless ebony skin. Shia's nails were short but manicured; her teeth, perfect rows of enamel, the probable work of a gifted orthodontist.

A real beauty, thought Lucky. Slight as she might have been beneath her Kevlar vest, even with the lowered physical bar for women recruits, she'd most likely be able to surprise most males with power well beyond her stellar looks.

As for what Shia saw in Lucky? The training officer didn't much give a rip how she viewed him. At first glance she could have seen him as a muscle-head whitey with a buzzed scalp. Or at almost forty years of age, too old for the uniform. Was he a closet racist after too many ghetto-serving years as sheriff's deputy? Or an overreaching apologist?

Whatever I am, she'll have to figure it out for herself.

All that mattered to Lucky was that she saw him for who he was: her T.O.—or Training Officer. For the next five months, he would be her boss, sensei, guru, and closest ally on earth were she to get herself into a shit storm. And working out of the Compton Station, there was guaranteed to be plenty of opportunity for that.

“What do I call you?” asked Shia, her head slightly cocked into a question mark. It was as if she was really asking, *did you really forget to introduce yourself?* “T.O. Dey?”

“Lucky,” he answered in a simple monotone. “Luck if you want to save on the syllables.”

“Lucky works,” said Shia, taking her cue as he circled around to the driver's side door.

“You up to speed on The Box?” asked Lucky upon his slide behind the wheel. The Box he referred to was the touchscreen laptop that was standard in every patrol car and mounted on a swivel for both the driver and passenger to operate.

“Top of my class, sir,” answered Shia.

“That's good,” said Lucky. “Because I'm a moron with machines.”

The comment earned him a sideways look from his trainee.

“Been fourteen years since I was in a patrol unit,” volunteered Lucky. “So in a way we’re both rookies.”

Shia, her whip-smart brain beneath efficient cornrows pulled neatly into a decorative knot at the back of her skull, appeared wisely skeptical at Lucky’s rookie remark. She’d likely heard tales of training officer shenanigans, hazing, and the general head wrecking of trainees. And this Monday night would be day one of a nearly half-year journey to full street-cop status.

“No reply,” grinned Lucky. “Smart girl... But I wasn’t lyin’ about how long since I’d been in a black-and-white. Wouldn’t worry though. Seatbelt?”

“Oh yeah. Right,” said Shia, slinging the belt across her torso until the tongue clicked into the receptacle. However, as Lucky gassed the unit forward toward the steel-reinforced gate leading out of the motor yard, she noticed her T.O. hadn’t made a move to secure his own restraint. Nor would he as he eased the Interceptor onto South Willowbrook. Shia’s eyes briefly landed on the yellow and black warning decal on the dashboard of each and every Sheriff’s patrol car:

***ALL VEHICLE PASSENGERS
MUST WEAR SEATBELT!***

“Something wrong?” asked Lucky without even glancing at her. With his right hand he double-clicked the power button on his tactical flashlight, testing the penetrating beam before resting it between his legs. The phallic appearance of the gesture wasn’t lost on Shia.

“No, sir,” braved Shia. “I’m good to go.”

3

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” harped Andre, better known in the neighborhood as Mush Man—or simply Mush. His customized shopping cart, outfitted with polyurethane skateboard wheels and a two-by-four plank for a riding step, had nearly tipped sideways on the tight street corner.

“That was almost a double bad-bad,” announced Mush Man aloud to nobody but his dogs, four big mutts he’d harnessed to the front of the cart with an organized tangle of found rope and plastic crate strapping. Each of the quartet of street mongrels was named for one of his favorite African-American heroes.

“Oprah, baby? We lose us anything?”

The black lab mix with the white whiskers at the front of the pack perked at her name, panting, then licking her lips.

“No snacks till we cash our cargo,” reminded Mush Man. He circled the stuffed cart, examining his haul of aluminum cans and bottles, mostly gathered from a warm weekend of Compton-wide

partying. “*Shit-fuck-shit-fuck*,” he involuntarily ticked. “Gotta slow us down some before we make them turns. You hearin’ me, Rosa? Hank? Yeah, I’m talkin’ at you, mutt-bags. Oprah, she the lead dog. That mean you gotta follow how she does it. *Crap, crap, crap.*”

The fourth dog, a shoulder-strong pup Mush Man named Thurgood, after the late great Supreme Court justice, sat obediently and wiggled his body for attention.

“Lookit Thurgood there. He not makin’ a fuss of nothin’ and he’s way newer than the two of y’all.”

Mush Man checked his harnesses. “Now we got four blocks up Poinsettia—*ass-cracker shit shit!*” he ticked again, chin jerking left with each nervy syllable. “Then right turn on Rosecrans. Cross the boulevard and we back north on Bullis Road. Everybody got that?”

The dogs didn’t need to answer. Their faces spoke up with every adoring tone from their savior and master. They lived for the little Mush Man, a skin and bones character who barely topped a defiant five-foot-five. His dirty curls were screwed under a black usc cotton beanie he’d long ago swiped off a chain-link fence.

“Ready, Oprah? Let’s—*suck me, suck me, suck me*—Damn it all. Mush it, girl!”

Mush Man wished like hell that it wasn’t so damned hot. Just a degree or two cooler and he might have been able to feel a breeze on his flushed cheeks, a perk of the self-made sport he’d coined as Urban Dog Sledding. Of which, Mush Man would inform any inquirer, he was a five-time world champion.

Tough sledding tonight, said Mush Man to himself. Simply and succinct. It was weird to him that the words between his ears were always clean and curse-free. Inside his own brain, there were no awkward, verbal ticks like the ones he suffered when speaking aloud. No bursts of slurs or ugly invectives. But for the mental disorder the local V.A. had diagnosed as Tourette’s Syndrome, Mush Man imagined himself cleaner than Bill Cosby.

Well, the old Bill Cosby.

“Dr. Motherfucker-*shit-crack*-Huxtable,” Mush Man said aloud.

The Compton sidewalks Mush called sled trails were cracked from age, decades of disrepair, and tree roots inching shallower in search of available water. It wasn’t much of an issue for the

dogs. But for Mush Man, the wrong bump could spill him and his valuable payload into a splash of Tecate cans and Magnum 40 bottles. On top of the challenges posed by the irregular surface, it was nearly too dark to see. Poinsettia, like most residential streets in the zip code, was poorly lit due to a lack of working streetlamps and unpaid electric bills.

Stucco-faced homes flanked the street. Domicile boxes, mostly. The houses averaged barely a thousand square feet and most were fit with burglar-proofing over the windows—otherwise known as ghetto bars.

“Whoaaaaa,” Mush commanded and braked before taking two long looks up and down the tree-lined street. There were no cars in sight. Safe for humans to cross. It was the dogs, though, who made Mush Man so careful. His mutts were trained as well as a vagrant could instruct. It was his own marginal schizophrenia that Mush couldn’t trust. Unmedicated and untreated for eight years, mental illness was Mush Man’s cross to bear. But it was *his* cross and damn anyone else who wanted to change him.

A backyard dog barked. A big, bully of a beast who’d gotten a whiff of the dog team. All the mutts’ ears swerved in unison. Thurgood barked back. Rosa joined in with a lunar howl.

“Eaaaaaassy now,” warned Mush Man as he coaxed his team onto the street. The defined and familiar sound of sixteen padded dog feet slapping the pavement was replaced by a cacophony of shallow splashes. A wetness spritzed Mush Man’s face. In what scant light there was, he could make out a low wake left behind his rickety shopping card.

The cart began to drag.

“*Shitter-shitter-shit!*” Mush Man complained, before adding a new command. “Drive hard, Oprah! Drive HARD!”

The blacktop underneath him was covered by a four-inch deep river of water, silently coating the surface before getting sucked back into the storm drains. But as far as Mush was concerned, he might as well have been fording roaring rapids in a hydroplane pulled by a team of thoroughbreds.

Then he missed the opposite driveway.

Though the four mutts cleared the curb easily, the shopping cart's front wheels stopped dead. The rear of the cart pitched forward, rotating over the fulcrum and twisting. Mush Man smartly bailed right while the cart spun left and emptied in a spray of recyclables. The clatter of cans and bouncing and shattering bottles shocked the neighborhood's silence and alerted nearly every chained or fenced dog for a square block.

Mush Man crawled onto the sidewalk. If he was bleeding he couldn't tell. Most of him was soaked to the skin. Feeling little more than bruised—and disappointed for having tossed his haul—he allowed his pups to gather around to lick him back into reality.

“Musta lost half our shit,” Mush Man confessed to his team.

Indeed, it appeared a good portion of his load had tumbled into the street and was rushing away, carried by the blackened river lit by the low hanging moon, nearly full, and magnified in a sky atmospherically tinged with summer hues of amber and yellow. A magical river where there had been none, appearing out of the darkness and flowing like a moving belt of black gelatin.

“Beautiful,” grinned Mush Man.