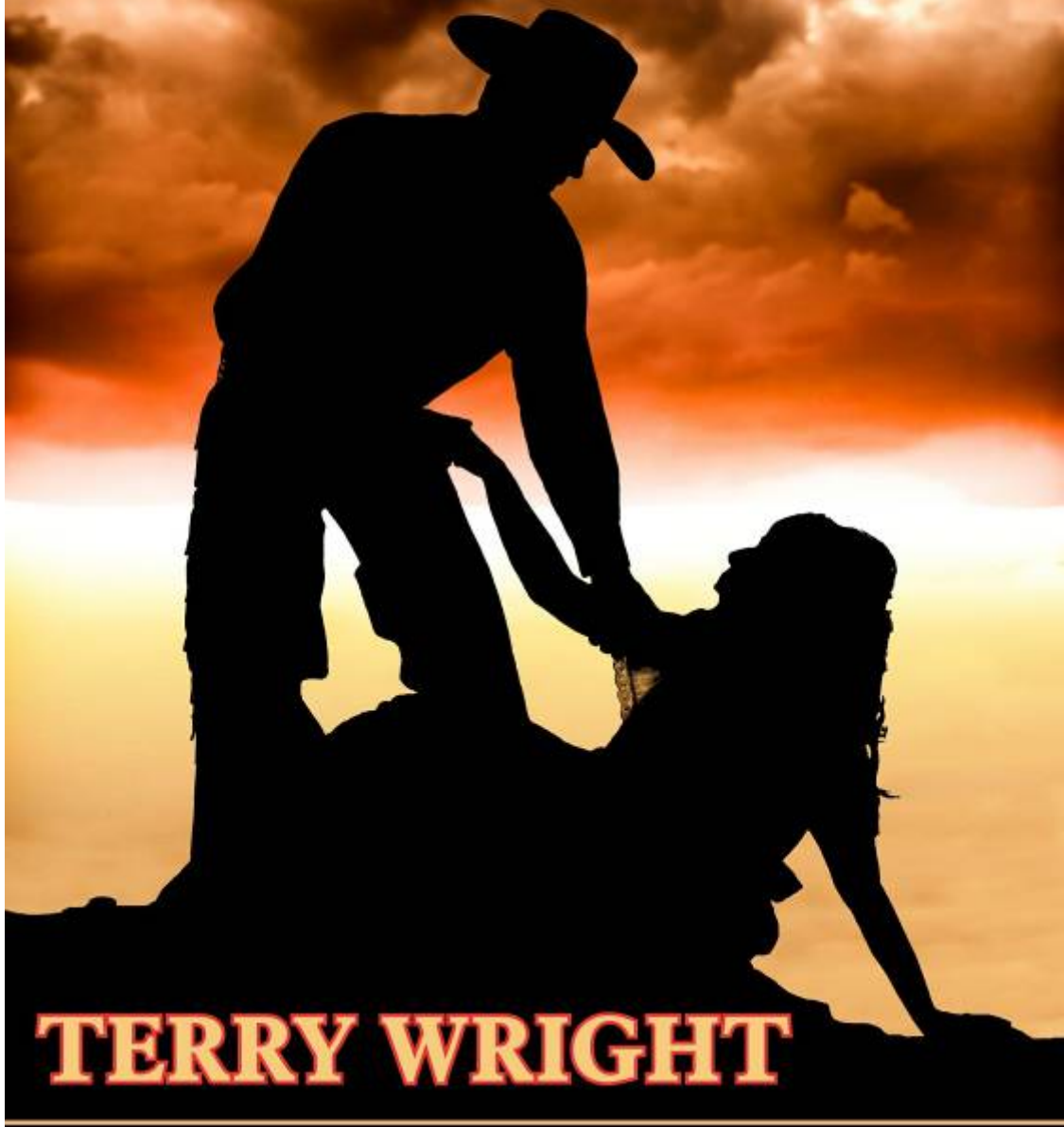


Return Me to Mistwillow



TERRY WRIGHT

Return Me to Mistwillow

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Return Me to Mistwillow



By
Terry Wright

Windblown dust swirled down Main Street, pushing tumbleweeds past hitching posts and wood-plank buildings. Jake Stratton lumbered toward Mistwillow's trading post. Weary bones ached. His hollow chest panged. Another morning had gone by and still there'd been no word from his son Robert.

Wearing ashen gray clothing, passers-by nodded. Gentlemen tipped dusty hats, and ladies curtsyed, even as the wind tore at their soiled and tattered gowns.

"Good afternoon, Jake."

He grumped. They were only trying to be nice, to be upbeat and hopeful in spite of the fact that his son was missing. Robert was a fine boy, ten years old and destined to run the family store—until that fateful day: November 7, 1882.

"Telegraph lines still down?" a man asked as they crossed paths.

"Damn storm," Jake replied. He'd never seen anything like it, day after day, year after year, the wind and dust ever-present, the sun but a smudge in a dirt-brown sky. Mistwillow, Colorado, once bustling with miners and traders and wagons and horses, had become a colorless, odorless scar on the land.

"Maybe the stage will be in today," the man said and moved off, the tempest swallowing him in a veil of dust.

The stagecoach hadn't stopped here in years, a hundred and fifteen, to be exact. So why would it come today? And if such a miracle were possible, then Robert would be on that stage, stepping down from the coach, waving to a relieved crowd of Mistwillow citizens. The sky

would clear, and marching bands would play.

Tumbleweeds rolled by. Their wish-whish-whishing sound broke Jake's reverie. Turtling his neck, he strode the boardwalk, fought the sting of tears flooding his dry eye sockets. "Robert," he prayed aloud, "when are you coming home?" The question went unanswered, as usual, and not knowing what had happened to his son sustained Jake's grief each hour of every day for what seemed like an eternity.

He came to the sign that hung from beams under his storefront porch: *Stratton's Trading Post, Established 1853*. With dirt grating his throat raw, he entered the store, bell tinkling behind him. His boots scattered inch-deep dust on the floor, dust that constantly blew in through broken windows. One day he planned to sweep. One day he planned to fix the windows.

One day when Robert comes home.

Marianne, wearing her best Sunday dress, gray with dust and frayed around the hem, greeted him from the stockroom door. "Any word?"

"Nothing." He walked to the sales counter. "No telegram, no mail."

She wiped a glass with a dusty rag, but the glass didn't get any cleaner. "Maybe tomorrow."

"If tomorrow ever comes." He'd spoken those words every day since Robert disappeared. And every day Marianne offered the same hope for tomorrow. In fact, every day she wore the same dress, and stranger still, she hadn't aged a day.

A dizzying sense of déjà vu hit him like a board, but he couldn't stop himself from asking the same question he asked her every day. "What happened to us, Marianne?"

"Eerie isn't it, the storm?"

It was more than the storm that was wrong with this town. "Day in, day out, nothing ever changes around here."

"Don't fret over it, Jake." She set down the dirty glass, picked up another and began wiping it, seemingly unconcerned that her efforts were futile. "Things change enough for me."

"You don't even change your clothes."

"Why this old dress? It's my favorite." Then she scowled. "When's the last time you wore anything different?"

Looking down at his dusty pants and threadbare shirt, he couldn't remember owning any

other duds. And he hadn't shaved in more than a century, though his whiskers remained only stubble. A bath would be nice. He sniff-checked his armpits. Didn't smell bad. In fact, he didn't smell anything at all, or taste anything, either. "We never drink, we never eat—"

"We never touch," she put in, "like husband and wife."

He missed her in that way, more than the taste of a cold beer or a juicy steak. But he wouldn't speak of such personal feelings. "You know how I feel about you."

"Then stop complaining. Change will ruin everything we have left."

"Make things worse than this? I doubt it." He leaned against the counter and surveyed his inventory of goods awaiting buyers. Stacked shelves of flour, wheat, beans, and jerky lay in dusty ruin. Wilted dresses hung from wall pegs like gray ghosts. Spider webs adorned the boot rack, and the pickle barrel had rotted out long ago. Not a single customer had come in, not a miner, not a trader, not a Ute or Cheyenne. Not since November 7, 1882.

Jake spit dust, grappled with yet another day of failure. "It's my fault." He slumped onto a stool at the counter, dirt puffs flying.

"There you go again," she said, rubbing the filthy glass. "Blaming yourself for what happened to Mistwillow."

Elbows on the counter and his head cradled in his hands, he remembered how soldiers had rounded up all the Indians and herded them off to reservations. Some said it was payback for Custer's defeat at Little Bighorn. Whatever the reason, half his trading business dissolved with a snap of the government's mighty fingers. "You're right. I couldn't fight the army."

"And it's not your fault the gold rush ended," she added. "Miners headed south to Cripple Creek or west to California."

Another big chunk of his business had moved out of the area.

And then there came the beaver shortage. He recalled the thousands of pelts traded across this dusty counter. Now beavers were so scarce in these parts that the trappers moved north to Wyoming and Montana. There wasn't even a coon cap left in town to be bought or sold. "Once the fur traders moved on, we were finished."

"So, we're in a little pinch right now." She gave up on the dirty glass, grabbed another and rubbed it with vigor. "None of it's your fault."

Jake exhaled a dusty gust. The town of Golden, to the south, flourished, having

established the nation's first commercial gardens, which supplied wheat to three flour mills built along Clear Creek. Boulder to the north became a center for education as the first Colorado schoolhouse opened there. And out on the Eastern Plains rose the metropolis of Denver, the new hub of Rocky Mountain commerce. All Mistwillow had left were ramshackle buildings and this trading post that had no customers—not a living soul with a silver Morgan to spend. “How much longer can we go on like this?”

“At least we have each other.”

“I wish Robert would come home.”

“Careful what you wish for, Jake.”

Wind screamed in through the broken windows, swaying the sheet almanac suspended from a beam with twine where it hung over the counter for easy reference. The last sheet read: *Election Day. November 7, 1882*, but there was no mention of the disaster that had fallen on Miswillow that day, an event so devastating that it had stopped time. He wanted to rip off the page, tear it up, reveal the next

Grandpa Robert had left a final wish in his will: *Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Return me to Mistwillow.*

George sighed. "Crazy or not, the trust fund is locked up until we do this for him."

"Just dump his ashes on the side of the road. Who will know?"

"I will know, Carol. He trusted me to be his personal representative. His executor.

Besides, Robert said if his final wish was carried out, he'd leave us a sign as proof to the court so we can get the money."

"What kind of sign?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Lightning? Thunder? Angels singing? A pink monkey?"

"His directions were specific. We have to spread his ashes down Main Street in Mistwillow on November 7th."

"But the town doesn't exist. He made it up."

George had to admit something wasn't right about Grandpa Robert. He was a kooky old goat.

Actually he wasn't just a grandpa. He was more like a great-great-great grandpa, but no one could be sure exactly because his place on the family tree couldn't be confirmed. He'd just showed up on the porch one day, claiming he was family. Their last names matched, so they couldn't tell him to get lost.

He'd lived to be a hundred and nine, his mind sharp as a pin when his heart gave out. All those stories about being raised by Ute renegades, robbing trains, taking a squaw at fifteen, nobody believed any of his wild tales.

And now this...a town called Mistwillow that didn't exist on any map. All they had to go on was his word that they'd find the town along this highway between Golden and Boulder. George was hard-pressed to believe Robert would put a lie in his last will and testament. The place where he'd spend eternity was at stake, so George had to give him the benefit of the doubt. Mistwillow was real. "There's got to be a signpost along here somewhere. A historical marker. A point of interest. Something."

A red sports car passed him doing ninety.

Carol crossed her arms. "We're not going to see a dime of that money, I tell you."

“If not, we’ll lose the house and have to live on the streets. The kids won’t like that much.” Times were tough in California, especially after the market crash. His career field became as extinct as the dinosaurs. “Just keep your eyes peeled.”

Rounding a curve, George saw a dust storm blowing across the highway up ahead. He tapped the brakes. Speeding southbound traffic emerged from the dirty gray cloud as if it wasn’t there. Clenching his molars, he gripped the steering wheel as he watched the red sports car that just passed him disappear into the storm without even slowing down. The driver had to be blind to the danger or just plain crazy. California drivers had a bad rap, no doubt, but Colorado drivers wrote the book...

The dust storm swallowed the Expedition in a blinding gray fury. Just as suddenly, the paved highway became a bone-jarring dirt road. George braked harder.

“What the hell is this?” George didn’t dare stop. The thought of being rammed from behind forced his foot off the brake. Blowing dirt must’ve covered the pavement like drifting snow.

Carol snapped her fingers. “Colorado weather sure changes quickly.”

“We’ll be back on clean pavement in a few seconds.” He held his breath, but there seemed to be no end to the blinding storm and the rough road. Odder yet, he hadn’t seen a single vehicle traveling in the opposite direction, like he and Carol were suddenly alone in a tunnel of churning dust.

His throat felt suddenly dry.

“There,” Carol shouted, pointing ahead. “A signpost.”

Nearly obscured by whirling dust, a lone wooden post held up a crooked, jagged-edged board with the word *Mistwillow* scrawled on its face as if it were written by a trembling hand.

“How about that.” He swallowed. “Grandpa wasn’t crazy after all.”

“It’s not on the map, George. It can’t be real.”

“What’s the matter with you? Seeing is believing.” He cocked his head to the back seat. “We found it, Grandpa.”

“Turn around, George. I’m not kidding. Go back. This is too weird.”

“Robert’s going to get his final wish, honey, his ashes scattered in the wind of *Mistwillow*. And we are going to be rich.”

The Expedition sped past the sign. It teetered and fell over.

“The stage is comin’ in,” someone shouted down Main Street. “The stage!”

Jake shot up from his stool at the counter. “Hear that, Marianne? The stage. It’s coming. Robert’s home!” He made a dash for the door.

She dropped the glass she’d been wiping. “No, Jake. Don’t go out there.” With the speed of the wind, she reached the open doorway first and blocked his exit. “It’ll be the end of Mistwillow, the end of you and me...”

Citizens gathered in the street, their gray and dusty faces wrenched with concern as they stared into the storm, waiting for the miracle to appear.

“...And them,” Marianne said. “What about them?”

From the swirling dust cloud, the roar of hooves pounding earth drew nearer.

“Who cares about them? My son is on that stage.”

“Our son.” She grabbed the front of his tattered shirt. “He’s the only reason we’re still here. We exist only in your grief, Jake.” She shook him. “Without that grief, we’re nothing.”

“But I want him back.”

“And sacrifice us all?”

“What’s to lose, Marianne, this eternal dust and wind, thirst that can’t be quenched, hunger that can’t be satisfied, our passions unfulfilled?”

“It’s better than nothing, Jake. Let the stage pass by.”

His sunken eyes hardened to granite. “I can’t.” He pushed her aside and stepped out on the boardwalk. This was the moment he’d been waiting for, the homecoming, and no amount of gloom and doom nagging would keep him away from that stagecoach.

Marianne slipped around him, put a hand on his chest. “At least let the people of Mistwillow have a say. You owe them that much.”

“Their fate is already sealed. Has been since November 7th.” He turned to address the crowd. “My son is home. Our day of rejoicing has come.”

“Your day,” a man shouted from the dusty street. “Your day, Jake Stratton.”

“We made our peace with the Lord a long time ago,” a woman put in, holding her bonnet in place with the palms of her hands. “Now you make your peace, Jake.”

Pounding hooves, snorting nostrils, and creaking leather approached at a heart-throbbing pace. After all these years, he was about to see Robert again. He could hold his hand. Hug him. They could toss a ball and go fishing under clear blue skies.

“Meet the stage, Jake,” someone else shouted. “Go to your son.”

Marianne jumped in, “But Mistwillow will be destroyed.”

“A little late to worry about that, don't you think?”

The dust cloud parted. Six black stallions in silver harness broke through, knees rising with mechanical precision, hooves coming down like pistons striking the ground. The driverless coach thundered up to Stratton's Trading Post and groaned to a stop.

“Go on, Jake,” someone said. “Open the door.”

He looked over the gray faces of his fellow citizens, saw relief in their windswept eyes. “Thank you,” was all he could say, but he said it from the bottom of his tormented soul. He turned to Marianne and hugged her. “And thanks for helping out with the store.”

“Don't open that door, Jake Stratton.”

He kissed her cheek and stepped off the boardwalk. At the coach door, he grabbed the smooth handle and felt a tremor in the ground directly under his feet.

“It's a ghost town.” George parked the Expedition in front of a broken-down building with a boardwalk, its wood planks rotted with age. A canted sign under the porch swung in the wind: *Stratton's Trading Post*.

His stomach knotted at the sight. Mistwillow, dusty and eerie, its street lined with leaning and toppled buildings, was obviously part of his past, his heritage perhaps, something Grandpa Robert had wanted him to see. But why? What was the old coot thinking?

“Creepy,” Carol whispered. “No wonder it's not on the map.”

“Something happened to Robert's hometown, and I don't think he was happy about it.”

“You're freaking me out, George.”

“Think about it. Why didn't he ever come back here while he was alive?”

Carol huffed as if the answer was obvious. “Because it's a ghost town.”

“Precisely the reason he waited to come back until after he was dead.”

“Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?”

Tumbleweeds rolled across the deserted street. George watched out the windshield and felt disjointed from reality, somehow transplanted into a realm of the surreal. Dust collected on the hood. Already the Expedition's black finish looked powder brown.

"Let's get this funeral over with." Carol shoved open the door. "I want to go home."

A gust of wind swirled in.

Turning to the back seat, George saw the urn had tipped-over. The lid had fallen off. Grandpa's ashes were spilled on the seat. What remained in the urn was still salvageable. He could set it upright, take time to say a few words before spreading Grandpa's ashes on Main Street. But before he reached back to grab the urn, he saw Carol fighting the wind as she took hold of the back door handle. The ashes...the wind...bad combination...

"Wait!"

She opened the door. Howling wind rushed in and blew open the opposite door, creating a wind-tunnel effect that flung the urn out, shattering it on the ground. Grandpa's ashes suddenly became indistinguishable from the blowing dust.

Fighting panic, George jumped out, scooped up dust and ash, and let the mixture sift through his fingers. *Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Return me to Mistwillow.* He looked up and down the windblown street, felt a presence he couldn't explain.

"What are you up to, Grandpa Robert?"

Ground rumbling, Jake opened the coach door. The dark interior beckoned him to come closer. He responded, either out of curiosity or fear; he didn't know which: curiosity of seeing Robert there, or the fear of Marianne being right about Mistwillow's final demise.

"Robert?"

The earth lifted and heaved.

"Are you in there?" He held on to the rocking coach, heard wood planks crack behind him. "I've waited a long time for you to come home."

"Father?" The voice of an angel emanated from the doorway. "Where am I, Father?"

"You're home, son." Jake couldn't hold back his tears as he spoke into the stagecoach's dark interior. "Mistwillow, son. Come out. Let me have a look at you."

A gust of wind blew gray ash from the coach. As the cloud dissipated, an old man

appeared before him: stooped over, warty chin, a boxer's nose, and hairy nostrils flaring. "Finally, we meet again, Father," Robert said in a gravelly voice, his bushy gray eyebrows cocked at an angry slant.

Stepping back in disbelief, Jake felt only repulsion for the creature standing before him. Where was his ten-year-old boy, the blue sky, and the marching bands? "You're not my son."

"My name is Robert Stratton," he bellowed. "Daddy, I'm home!"

The ground shook.

"You can't be my son."

"What did you expect? The same boy you never listened to?"

Buildings splintered and crashed to the ground. Falling debris crushed panicked Mistwillow citizens.

Robert spread his arms like Jesus Christ. "This is your punishment for killing my mother."

A porch beam fell on Jake, knocking him over. The *Stratton Trading Post* sign sailed off with the wind. Marianne ran to him, knelt at his side, and held his hand. "Why did he say that, Jake? You didn't kill me."

"He blames m-me," Jake sputtered, "that you died that day."

"It was an earthquake. How could he blame you?"

Jake coughed up dust. "Robert wanted us to go with him ... to Denver ... to the museum ... but the store needed a good dusting." Jake now realized the irony of his miserable life, eating dust. "When I told him we were staying, he begged me to let you go with him, but I wouldn't allow it. I needed your help with the store. So you stayed and you died in the earthquake. That's why it's my fault."

The ground quaked, split like forked lightning.

Robert stood against the force of the wind and shaking ground as if they were nothing and cackled, "Wanta toss the ball, Daddy? Wanta go fishing? We never did before. You never had time."

Only now did Jake understand his mistake. The store had been more important to him than spending time with his son.

On her knees beside Jake, Marianne screamed up at Robert. "It's not his fault. Get back

on that stage and leave Mistwillow, leave us be, leave the past where it belongs...in this god-awful dust.”

Robert’s eyes glowed red with rage. “He brought this dusty existence upon himself, Mother. I’m sorry you had to pay the price...I’m sorry for this whole damned town.”

Fishers in the earth slammed shut, jerked open, and slammed shut, again and again, like the snapping jaws of hell. The ground rumbled like thunder that rolled off into the distance.

Clinging to his wife’s arm, Jake feared spending eternity with his angry son. “If I said I was sorry, would that make any difference?”

“Sorry?” Robert’s voice softened. “If you’re truly sorry, you’ll give up your precious trading post.”

“But it’s all I’ve had to hang on to.”

“Then eat dust forever.”

“Dust is better than nothing,” Marianne said. “Don’t listen to him, Jake.”

He looked into her empty eye sockets. “It’s time for things to change around here.”

“Don’t say it, Jake, please. I beg you.”

It was time to set her free, along with everyone else in Mistwillow. “I’m sorry, Robert. I truly am sorry.”

Marianne screamed. Her body crumpled to dust before his eyes. The townspeople around him blurred into the storm, along with every building and hitching post, all swirling away with the wind. Robert collapsed into a heap of gray ash and became indistinguishable from the blowing dust. The last thing Jake saw, the skin peeling off his hand, his arm, the bones dissolving to dust and whirling away...and then nothing.

The earth lunged one final time, cracking plaster walls in downtown Denver, the Boulder depot, and the University of Colorado campus. The 6.2 trembler was felt from Salina, Kansas, to Salt Lake City, Utah. On November 7th, 1882, the largest earthquake in Colorado history had leveled Mistwillow. There were no survivors, except Robert, but only because he had gone to Denver that day, the day Mistwillow became lost to history forever.

The blare of a truck horn sent George scrambling for the ditch. “What the hell?” He’d damn near gotten run over. Glancing around, he couldn’t believe his eyes. The busy highway had

reappeared. The dusty Expedition was parked on the shoulder. All the doors were open. Traffic whizzed by. He shook his head, tried to get a grip on what he'd just witnessed.

The dust storm was gone. And Carol, too.

"Carol!" Heart pounding with dread, he scanned the highway up and down but didn't see her. "Carol!"

"George!" She emerged from the other side of the SUV, the same place she was standing when she'd opened the back door. Her hair was windblown, but otherwise she appeared unharmed. "What the hell happened?"

"A bad dream." He batted dust from his shirt. A really bad dream.

"I know what I saw," she said. "That was Mistwillow. A ghost town. You saw it too, right?"

He ran to the open rear door and looked inside. The urn was gone, and the seat was swept clean of ashes, replaced by the rustic *Stratton's Trading Post* sign the wind had blown in. A creepy-crawly feeling skittered up his spine. Grandpa Robert had gotten his last wish. He'd made it home to Mistwillow, a town that didn't exist anymore, for whatever reason, George would never know. However, like Robert had promised, he'd left a sign. A real sign. George had to admit the old coot had a sense of humor. "Get in." He shoved the rear door closed and jumped in behind the wheel.

Carol joined him and buckled her seatbelt. "Let's go home, George. It's over."

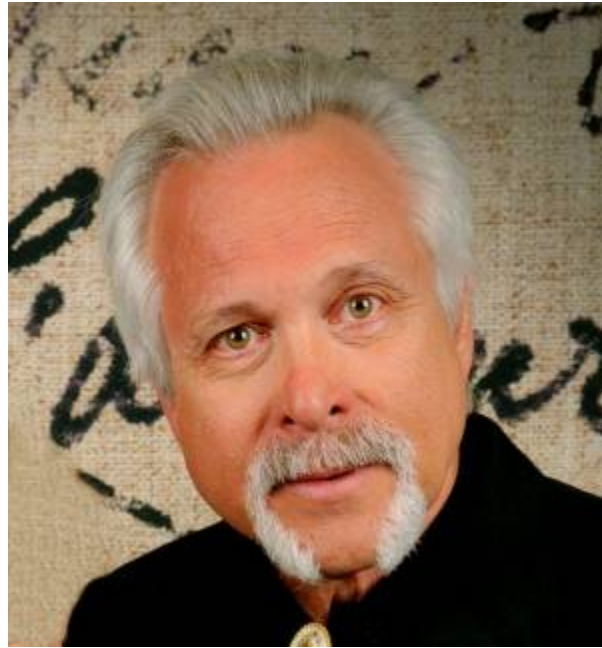
"Is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"We have a ghost in the family." Who knew what problems that would create?

He floored the gas, whipped a u-turn across the highway, and headed south under a beautiful blue Colorado sky.

About the Author



There's nothing mundane in the writing world of Terry Wright. Tension, conflict, and suspense propel his readers through the pages as if they were on fire. Published in Science Fiction, Supernatural, and Horror, his mastery of the action thriller has won him International acclaim as an accomplished screenplay writer. A longtime member of the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers, he has served on their board of directors, and for five years, he ran their annual Colorado Gold Writing Contest. He's also the recipient of RMFW's coveted Jasmine Award for 2012. Terry lives near Denver with his wife, Bobette, and their Yorkie, Taz Man.

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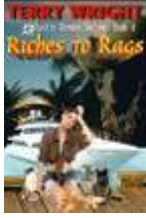
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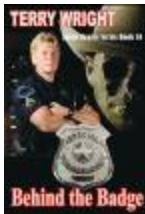
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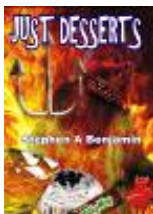
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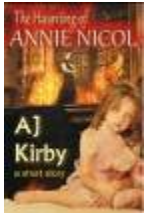
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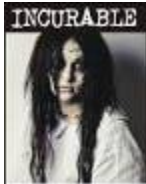
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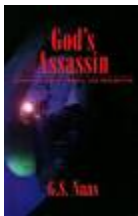
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