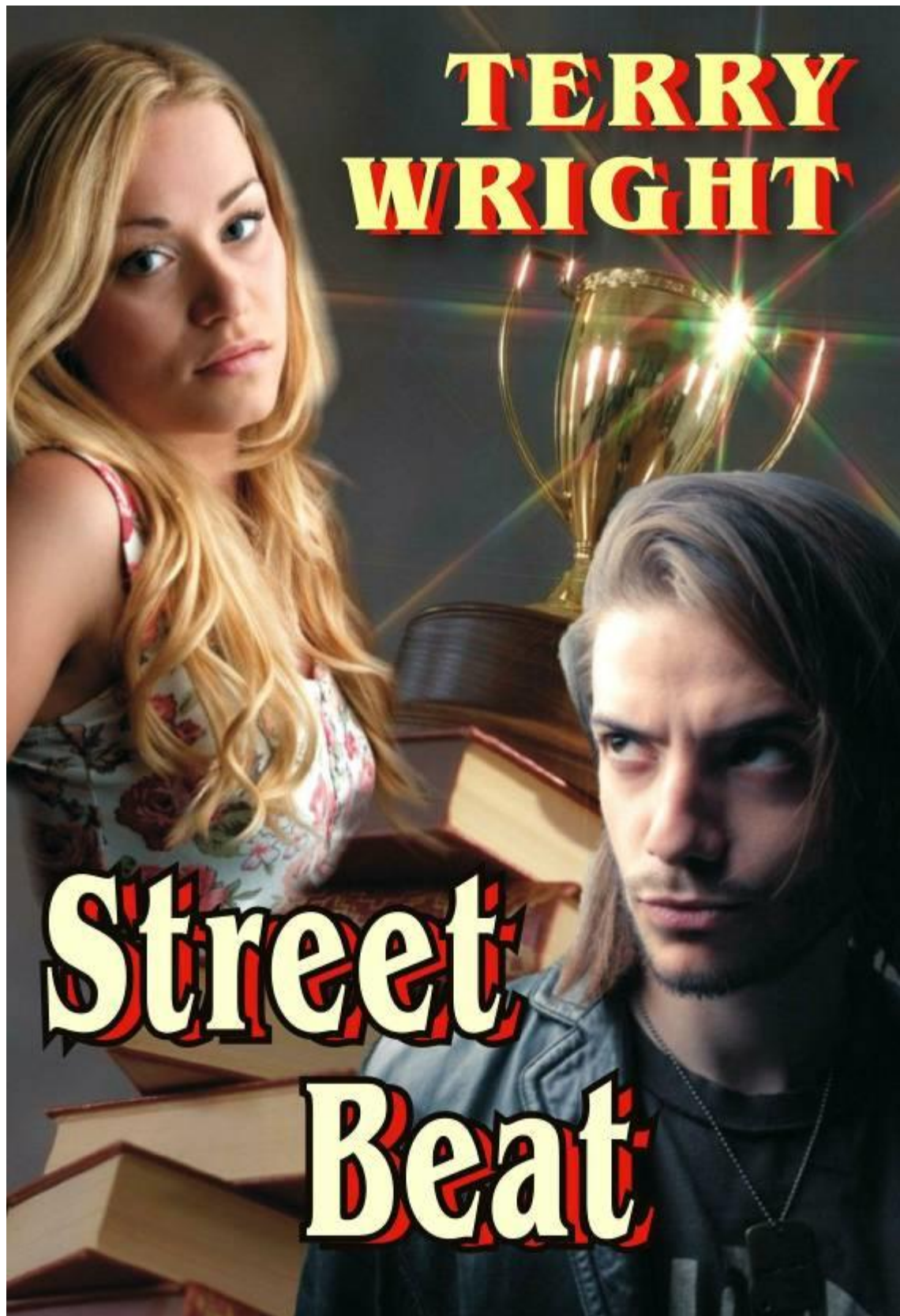




Street Beat

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By
Terry Wright

The Denver Post newsroom buzzed with activity. Phones rang. Keyboards clacked. Maggie Hunter, a junior reporter with spiky black hair and blistering red lips, sauntered from the room to join her fellow reporters gathered around the cappuccino machine in the lobby. Towering behind them, the awards wall bore witness to the professionalism of these journalists:

The Best of the West, Freedom of the Press.

In the center of this gold-plated array hung a framed portrait of Karen Dare with her trademark strawberry curls and sparkling blue eyes. Her bright smile beamed down on her colleagues. She was the pride of Denver, the sweetheart of the Post, the woman who constantly took the spotlight from everyone around her.

As Maggie approached the cluster of reporters, she overheard Editor Bruce Holloway addressing the group. "Have you heard the news? Karen Dare is a finalist for the Pulitzer this year."

"For Street Beat," someone put in.

Maggie gritted her teeth and poured herself a cup of coffee. *The bitch has all the luck.* She dumped sugar into the cup and turned toward the men. “Well, whoopty do for her.”

Bruce shot Maggie a cross look, adjusted his striped tie. His Perry Ellis suit fit his stocky frame loose as a burlap bag. “She deserves the award, the recognition.”

Maggie scoffed. “Just because she gets all the good assignments.”

“She’s a good writer.”

“I’m a good writer. She’s an ass kisser.”

“Karen is the best writer we have. She knows what Denver needs to be great. To be safe. So cut her some slack.”

“There you go, Bruce, always sticking up for her.” Maggie sneered at him, thinking of the time he’d taken Karen to Hawaii. The hanky-panky that must’ve gone on. “We all know how she made it to the top.”

Bruce squared his shoulders. “Don’t you have an article to finish?”

“You’ll see.” Maggie’s cheeks heated. “One day she’s going to screw up, and I’ll be the best writer this newspaper has ever seen.” She sauntered back into the newsroom with her over-sweetened coffee and a sour taste in her mouth.

* * *

Sitting at her newsroom workstation, Karen Dare pinned a fourth photograph to her *Street Beat* story board. Similar to the others, this crime scene photo showed a woman sprawled on her back, her limbs tied and staked to the ground, and her head buried under a pile of sand.

Victim number four.

There was no pattern to the killings, like Ted Bundy who targeted coeds or Son of Sam who shot young couples. These victims had nothing in common. None were sexually assaulted. None were robbed. So what was the motive?

And why the sand?

She glanced at her computer screen: *The Sandman Strikes Again*. Her award-winning column, *Street Beat*, gave Denverites a brutal look at crime in their city.

The phone rang.

“Newsroom,” she answered.

A man’s voice said, “Maggie?”

Not again. “Sorry,” she said, “the office phone lines are messed up. Who’s calling?”

“Her father.”

“Try extension 211.”

“That’s what I dialed.”

“Then try my extension, 215. They get crossed sometimes.”

“Thanks.” The line clicked dead. Setting down the receiver, she wondered when the phones would be fixed.

On the keyboard she typed: *Victim number four*—

“Karen,” Bruce said from behind her.

She stopped typing. A chill skittered up her spine. His voice conjured up memories of Hawaii. The surf. The sun. His smile when he’d asked her to marry him.

She’d said no.

Marriage meant having kids. PTA. Little League. There’d be no time for her career. She swiveled in her chair. “What is it now, Bruce?”

“Are you getting any flack from Maggie?”

“I’m getting her calls, which means she’s probably getting mine.”

“I mean, has she said anything to you...you know...about the Pulitzer? Has she been cordial or mean to you?”

“She’s the jealous type, so what?”

He gazed at her a long moment.

She breathed dead air between them.

“Karen—”

“Please, Bruce. Don’t.” How many times did she have to tell him she hadn’t changed her mind? She wasn’t going to change her mind. “I’ve got work to do.”

“There’s more to life than *Street Beat*, you know.” He strode off.

She wanted to stop him, make him understand how important this column was to her, but the Sandman reined in her emotions. She sighed and returned to the keyboard.

Victim number four was found yesterday—

* * *

Maggie sat at her desk, fuming. This job was supposed to be her big break. Instead, she floundered in the shadow of Karen Dare. There had to be a way to discredit her.

Shoving aside her article, *Dog Grooming Scam*, Maggie groaned. How could she win any

awards with this crap she had to write?

The phone rang.

She picked up. "Newsroom."

"Maggie?"

The voice made her nerves prickly. "Dad?"

"I see the Pulitzer nominations are out. Your name isn't on the list. Tell me it's a mistake."

"I've got a problem here."

"Do you want to end up punching cows again?"

"I'm trying."

"Try harder." He hung up.

She slammed down the receiver. "Sorry to disappoint you, Dad." She hated his stinking cows. The only way she'd ever get his approval was to win an award of some kind. The Pulitzer preferably, but she'd have to get rid of Karen Dare to do it.

The phone rang. Maybe he was calling back to apologize. Fat chance! "Newsroom."

"Karen?" a gritty voice said.

Damn phones! "Who's this?"

"I enjoy your column, *Street Beat*."

Another fan of the competition. "Listen, mister—"

"I'd like to meet you in person."

"What for?"

"The fifth victim. Need I say more?"

Maggie's heart jumped. "Sandman?"

"I admire your work, Karen. If you come alone, you'll be safe. Call the cops, you'll be dead."

Karen? Dead? Champagne excitement bubbled up inside. "Okay. No cops." She could see it already: *Street Beat by Maggie Hunter*. She grabbed a notepad and pen. "When and Where?"

* * *

How much longer must Denver endure the Sandman's reign of terror? Karen typed.

Maggie interrupted. "Karen, I've got a lead for you."

Frowning, she swiveled around. Maggie had never given her anything before. Her colleague's face beamed with a genuine smile. "What kind of lead?"

"It came in on my line. The phones, you know." Maggie held out a note. "Some guy wants to talk to you about the Sandman."

"Did you ask him why he didn't just call the police?"

"He reads your column." She jabbed the note at her. "Big fan, I guess."

Karen reached for the note but hesitated taking it. "It's probably a prank."

"Sounded legit to me." She placed the note on Karen's desk within easy reach. "If it were me, I'd meet him."

"He didn't leave a phone number?"

"Just a time and place. It's your story." Maggie sauntered off.

Curiosity goaded the reporter in Karen to read the note.

6 PM — CASA BONITA — I'LL FIND YOU.

A hot flush crept up her neck. If this was a lead that could help the police find the Sandman, she should follow up on it.

She grabbed her purse and slipped out of the newsroom.

* * *

Casa Bonita restaurant resembled a Mexican villa complete with a rock cliff waterfall and diving pool. Mariachi Bands strolled the walkways, serenading diners. As Karen waited to be seated, a vein throbbed in her temple. She hoped the informant would show.

A server escorted her to a table overlooking the pool one floor below. Settling into a chair, she put down her purse, smoothed her summer dress, and scrutinized people passing by. No one paid her any mind.

Cap guns popped. She looked around, spotted two cowboy actors on the cliff-face stage.

"Ya got me, sheriff." One tumbled off the cliff and into the pool below.

Applause and fiesta music erupted.

Karen peered over the railing. In the lighted pool below, the cowboy swam under the cliff rocks and out of view.

"Hello, Karen."

The gritty voice behind her made her jump. Being distracted, she hadn't seen the man approach. He stood six-foot, had his hair pulled back in a pony tail, and wore a tan corduroy

jacket.

Her breath hitched, but she fought to remain professional. “Please, sit, sit down.”

With eyes the color of volcanic ash, he glanced around then took the chair opposite hers. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” His smile seemed more wicked than alluring. “I enjoy reading your column.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re a great writer.”

She moved her purse aside and leaned forward. “Do you have information about the Sandman?”

A frown creased his brow. “I thought you understood. It’s me. I’m the Sandman.”

Terror tied a hard knot in her stomach. “You—?”

“The fifth victim, remember?”

“Fifth victim?”

“I told you on the phone.”

Maggie hadn’t mentioned that. Instinct told Karen to run. Scream. Get away. But the reporter inside her forced calm. *Think. Ask questions.* “You’ve killed five now?”

“A man this time.”

Slowly, she leaned back in her chair, putting distance between herself and the killer. *Stay focused.* “Why?”

“He lied to my mother, cheated her out of forty acres.” His ashen eyes saddened. “She’s dead now, you know.”

“I didn’t. I’m sorry.” What else was she supposed to say? Her hands were clenched fists in her lap. *Relax. Breathe.* “Why are you killing innocent people?”

“They’re not...” he shouted, then lowered his voice. “Innocent.” His face flushed with anger. “I had to make them pay!”

Fighting panic, she wiggled her fingers. The Sandman was a revenge killer. *Don’t piss him off.* “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to write my story.”

“Why me?”

“You tell the truth.”

Okay. The Sandman trusted her. He’d probably tell her anything, like why his choice of

murder weapon. “Why sand?”

A malicious smile twisted the corners of his mouth. “What’s at the bottom of an hourglass?”

That was easy. “A cone of sand.”

“Their time ran out,” he rasped.

She blinked. Horrific but true.

A gruff voice shouted from somewhere in the room. “Sandman! Let me see your hands.”

Karen cringed, glanced around. Cops were closing in, guns drawn.

Fiesta music stopped. Someone screamed.

The Sandman bared his teeth at her. “I told you to come alone!”

“I did.”

“Get on the ground!” the cop ordered.

In one powerful lunge, the Sandman leaped from the chair, threw his arms around Karen, and dove over the railing. She screamed. The pool rushed up so fast she couldn’t catch another breath. She hit the water hard. Sinking, she kicked for the surface, but he forced her down through the light and under the cliff rocks.

Her lungs seized.

Everything went black.

* * *

Karen coughed. Gaspd. Opened her eyes. She was laying on her back, under a tree, sunlight glinting down through the branches. A bird chirped. Shivers skittered up and down her body. Freezing shivers. Frightened shivers. What the hell had happened?

She tried to sit up but couldn’t move. Her arms and legs were tied to stakes in the ground. The picture of victim number four flashed in her mind, unleashing a wave of hot panic down her backbone. She started struggling to free herself, but a gritty voice stopped her.

“Before I kill you, I want to know how such a brilliant writer could be so stupid.”

The Sandman!

He stood over her with a bucket held in gloved hands.

“What did I do?”

“I told you no cops or I’d kill you.”

“I didn’t call the cops.”

He tipped the bucket, releasing a spill of sand.

Squeezing her eyes shut against the grainy cascade, her guts clenched with nauseating fear. The horror his other victims had endured was now hers.

Victim number six.

Her time was running out. She thrashed her head back and forth, flinging sand. “Why are you doing this?”

“You lied to me.”

“Maggie took your call. Not me.”

He stopped pouring. “The dog grooming reporter?”

“She must’ve called the cops.” Karen opened her eyes in spite of the grit leaking in. “I didn’t do anything.”

He knelt beside her and produced a hunting knife.

She braced for a stab of pain. “Please, don’t kill me.”

“I believe you.” He started cutting the ropes.

“You’re letting me go?”

“I don’t kill innocent people. Besides, you’ve got a story to write.”

“I do, yes, I will.” Thank you, God. She vowed to attend church every Sunday.

Her arms and legs freed, she scrambled to her feet. She had no shoes. Pine trees towered around her. A gully to the left. Heart racing, she backed up. He could change his mind at any second. Grab her. Kill her. Like the others.

“Go!” he shouted.

She ran downhill to the gully. The hard ground chewed the nylons from her feet. She kept running. Tears stung her eyes. Uncontrollable sobs escaped her throat. She was alive. She’d survived the Sandman.

The gully was strewn with boulders and downed trees, obstacles that slowed her progress but not her thoughts. She couldn’t go back to work as if nothing had happened. Maggie had tried to get her killed. Next time she might succeed. But who would believe such a wild story? The cops? Bruce?

Bruce! She hadn’t thought of him, not once during the perceived last moments of her life. And *Street Beat*, not once. An epiphany arose. What an empty life she’d lived, centered on a career that wasn’t important enough to earn a parting thought.

How sad was that?

She had some serious soul-searching to do.

* * *

After sleeping by a fallen log, Karen awoke the next morning, her body shivering with hypothermia and her stomach grinding with hunger. On aching bare feet, she followed a rutted road that led to a cabin. The hope of finding food drove her to the front door.

She knocked.

No answer.

Testing the door latch, she found it unlocked and pushed her way inside.

Dust and clutter lay everywhere. Denver Post papers were strewn across furniture. Curtains sagged. Dirty dishes infested the sink. On the table sat a computer.

A warm wisp of hope rose inside her.

Rescue!

She rushed to the keyboard, brought up the desktop, and found the Internet icon. But recalling her epiphany, she hesitated to click the mouse. Did she really want to leap back into her work? Let Maggie have another crack at her?

And Bruce?

The reporter in Karen said, "*Open the browser,*" but the woman in Karen said, "*Give me a break.*"

Besides, what was the rush?

The refrigerator beckoned her. She discovered vegetables and potatoes, enough to make soup. Not having any money to pay for what she took, she decided to clean up the place.

* * *

Jake Witting drove his pickup down the rutted road, headlights bouncing over rough terrain. He'd spent the day on the lower range erecting a new fence, by himself, since his brother had left, in a hurry. Hiring a new hand was on top of Jake's to-do list, but good hands were hard to find.

The cabin came into view. An unexpected glow from the windows shot panic through his lean frame. He slammed on the brakes.

A burglar?

Or maybe it was John. Maybe he'd returned. That didn't seem likely. He'd vowed to never come back.

Jake shut off the truck, sat alone with his frantic heartbeat.

It had to be a burglar.

Quietly, Jake climbed out of the truck and pulled a shovel from the bed. Slinking to the porch, fear clung to his back like a sick monkey. What if the burglar had a gun? This shovel would be little defense. He trod over squeaky boards to the door and pushed it open.

An unbelievable sight met his eyes. The place was cleaned up.

Holding the shovel like a club, he stepped in, shifting his gaze to and fro for an intruder. His nostrils embraced a delicious aroma wafting from the kitchen. A steaming pot on the stove reminded him of Mother's cooking. What kind of burglar cooked and cleaned?

John's bedroom door was closed. He must be back. With a jumpy stomach, Jake nudged the door open with his foot. A night lamp glowing from the dresser illuminated a woman sleeping on the bed. Surprise stole his breath. He skulked toward his uninvited guest.

Her face looked familiar. He'd seen her picture in the Denver Post. *Street Beat*.

She stirred, fluttering sleepy eyelids.

Now he felt like the intruder. "Hello there."

Her eyes popped open. She sprang up with a gasp and scooted to the wall. "Don't hit me."

He lowered the shovel. "I didn't mean to frighten you, ah, Karen, Karen Dare, right?"

She squinted. "Do I know you?"

"Jake Witting. I own this ranch, well, my brother and I. We read your column. Big fans. What are you doing here?"

"I fell asleep. I'm sorry ... I'll leave right away."

"Are you lost?"

"I was almost murdered."

"Who would want to kill you?"

"The Sandman," she whispered.

Jake felt a chill. Not for her, but for himself.

* * *

At the kitchen table, Karen dished up a bowl of soup for Jake. "He wants me to write his story," she said. "But I don't know what makes him tick."

"He chose the right person to figure it out."

“I can’t even figure out my own life.”

He glanced up from his bowl with a doubtful look on his ranch-weathered face. “You’re a Pulitzer finalist. Your life must be very rewarding.”

She huffed. “If I died, who would care? No husband. No kids. No family. Just *Street Beat*. It took nearly getting killed to show me how shallow my life really is.”

He spooned soup.

She watched him eat, her gaze traversing his troubled gray eyes and fashionable two-day beard. Warm butterflies fluttered inside. Her curiosity for him grew, not reporter curiosity, but Karen curiosity, a path seldom traveled. “I can’t go back to work. Maggie might try to get rid of me again. If I go home, Bruce will hound me to marry him. I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re welcome to stay here.”

The invitation floored her. “I couldn’t impose.”

He looked up. “My brother’s not using his room, and I need some help on the fence.”

She knew nothing about fences. “I don’t have any shoes.”

He smiled. “My mother’s boots should fit you. Since she died, I kept a chest full of her clothes.”

His dead mother’s clothes? “Are you sure it’s all right?”

“She was a *Street Beat* fan, too. She’d be honored.”

* * *

With a heavy heart, Bruce stopped by Karen’s workstation. Fresh flowers had been brought in, now fanned out from a vase on her desk, yellows and blues and reds. Her shoes, retrieved from the Casa Bonita pool, were enshrined with her purse by her computer. Tears welled in his eyes. Thirteen days had passed since she was last seen...with the Sandman.

Missing and presumed dead. The official status based on the killer’s history.

“You have to let her go,” Maggie said from beside him.

“It’s hard.” Tears slipped down his cheek.

“Since you dropped her column, *Street Beat*, daily sales are down. You could lose your job over this.”

“I know.” But it seemed so hard to care, right now.

She set a soft hand on his shoulder. “Let me write *Street Beat*.”

Blinking back tears, he took a deep breath and accepted the inevitable. “All right. Run

with it, Maggie.”

What else could he do?

* * *

The morning sun warmed Karen’s face. Thin air filled her lungs. Wearing leather gloves, cowboy boots and jeans, she felt invigorated shoveling dirt and planting fenceposts. Down the fence line, Jake unrolled barbed wire, his cowboy hat shading his rough, handsome face.

This was the life, mountains towering around her, the smell of pine on the breeze. Cutting her ties with the Post and *Street Beat* had instilled in her life vitality and worth...

“Karen,” Jake called from the pickup’s tailgate. “Take a break.”

...and maybe a little romance.

Strolling toward him, she peeled off the gloves. She felt sexy, the way her new blue jeans hugged her thighs, the way her cotton shirt rubbed her nipples, the way his eyes sparkled as he watched her approach. Having kids didn’t seem like such a bad idea. PTA. Little League. With Jake. Why not?

He handed her a water bottle from the cooler. “It’s cold.”

“Thanks.”

He lifted her up on the tailgate, sat next to her, and wiped sweat from his neck with a red bandana. “I’m going into town tomorrow.” He took a swig from his bottle. “You want to come along?”

“Promise you won’t buy me anything this time?”

“No.” He tilted back his hat and put the cold, wet bottle to his forehead. “Ahhh.”

She thought she would melt. How badly she yearned for his lips on hers, his strong arms around her. But not one kiss had they shared, not one in three weeks.

Should she make the first move?

Did she dare risk their budding relationship?

* * *

The afternoon sun plunged behind a billowing thunderstorm. Jake stopped the truck in front of his roadside mailbox. The Denver Post sleeve cradled a newspaper. He gave it to Karen riding shotgun and accelerated down the road.

“It’s happened,” Karen said, reading from the paper. “*Street Beat* by Maggie Hunter. She finally got what she wanted.”

“But is she any good?”

“Listen to this. *The Sandman fell into Karen Dare’s trap at Casa Bonita.*” She shut the paper. “It’s a lie!”

“Is that her way of saying you’re a hero?”

“When the Sandman reads this, he’ll think I lied to him. He’ll find me. He’ll kill me.”

Panic rocked her voice. “What am I going to do?”

Jake’s mouth felt dry as the dust kicked up by the rising wind. He understood the danger. The Sandman’s sick obsession—

“I have to go back.” Karen folded the paper. “Maggie’s got to recant her story.”

He didn’t want her to leave. Who would protect her? Pulling off the road, he parked under a stand of pines.

“Why are we stopping?”

He shut off the engine.

Thunder rumbled overhead.

Gripping the steering wheel, he closed his eyes. She needed to know the truth. It could cost him her trust, her respect, maybe even her love, but the truth could save her life.

“Jake?”

He set his cowboy hat on the dashboard and twisted in the seat to face her. “There’s something I haven’t told you.”

She stared at him with stormy blue eyes.

“The Sandman...he’s...he’s my brother.”

Her jaw dropped.

“Those people John killed, they weren’t good people, not to my mother, not to him, and I know it wasn’t right what he did—”

“You son of a bitch!” She grabbed the front of Jake’s shirt. “You knew?”

“He needs professional help.”

She pressed him against the door. “Why didn’t you tell the police?”

“I couldn’t.”

“He’s killing people!”

“I promised my mother I’d protect him.”

Thunder cracked overhead.

“And now he’s going to kill me!”

"I'll fix it."

Her anger-taunt lips, so close to his, her hot breath sweet as cinnamon, he fought the urge to kiss her.

"I'll turn him in."

Her blue eyes calmed. "You...will?"

"I don't want to lose you, Karen."

"You...don't?" Her lips parted slightly.

Raindrops pelted the pickup, the noise of stampeding hooves.

He slipped his arms around her, expecting her to pull back and hoping she wouldn't. "I care about you more than you know."

She kissed him, long, hard and deep.

* * *

Bruce sat behind his desk, the Post open in front of him. *Street Beat* by Maggie Hunter. It made him sick to see Karen's legacy gone.

Maggie barged in, all smiles. "Did you read my column?"

He felt pistol-whipped, just nodded.

"Now who's the best writer?"

His computer chimed in a new email:

Bruce, Make Maggie recant her story or the Sandman will kill me. Karen.

Shock hit him like a low punch. "She's alive."

Over his shoulder, Maggie read the message. "This can't be happening."

"Karen's alive!" The words suddenly felt like a blow to the sternum. He sank back in his chair and stared at his knees. Icy fingers gripped his heart. Where had Karen been all this time?

Why hadn't she called?

Because she didn't want to? God, please don't let it be so.

* * *

Karen stood on the porch and kissed Jake goodbye. His eyes sagged with sorrow. He was going to the cops to turn in his brother.

"I don't like leaving you here alone," Jake said.

"I'll be all right." She had to finish the Sandman's story.

"See you around noon." He climbed into the truck and drove off.

She waved, hoping the cops would find John before he read *Street Beat*.

At the computer, she typed her story about the Sandman, her scrape with death, and her new life with Jake.

A knock at the door startled her. She'd been so engrossed in her writing that time had flown by; it was already past noon. Jake should've been home by now, but the door was locked. She rushed to it and flung it open.

An old woman stood on the porch, her sweater too heavy for the warm day. Behind her, a parked van: *Myrtle's Dog Grooming*. At her feet: a bucket of sand, stakes and a coil of rope. She reached under her sweater and pulled out a taser.

Karen's brain processed the danger faster than she could slam the door. A jolt knocked her to the floor. Searing pain tore through her. She couldn't breathe.

"When they find your body," the woman said, uncoiling the rope. "They'll blame your murder on the Sandman."

That voice. "Maggie!" Gritting her teeth, Karen tried to get up but couldn't override the spasms in her limbs.

"I'm not recanting my story." She looped the rope around Karen's neck and pulled. "It's my column now."

Gagging, Karen fought to stay conscious. Jake's image flickered in her mind. Their life together was just beginning. She couldn't let it end. Not without a fight.

Hot adrenaline spilled into her bloodstream. She cranked her body around, grabbed the rope and pulled Maggie off her feet. She hit the floor face-first, gray wig flying.

Karen jumped on Maggie's back, grabbed her hair, and pounded her forehead on the floor. "You stupid bitch! You lied."

"Is that so?" a gritty voice said.

Karen froze.

The Sandman stood in the open doorway.

Had he read *Street Beat*? Whose story did he believe?

Which one of them had he come here to kill?

* * *

Jake wrestled the truck up the rutted road. A van parked in front of the cabin alarmed him, but on the porch, a woman struggling with a man made his heart pump dread.

Karen?

John!

He stopped the truck and bailed out, grabbed a shovel from the bed and ran for the porch.

“Let her go, John.”

Crazy-eyed, he held Maggie by the throat, hostage-style, a knife to her ear. “You have a choice, Jake, tend to Karen inside or try and stop me.” He stepped off the far end of the porch.

“I told the cops everything,” Jake shouted. “Turn yourself in.”

“I’ve got one more killing to do.” He ran toward the forest, dragging Maggie with him.

Jake wanted to chase him, but Karen’s fate drew his attention to the cabin. He tossed the shovel and charged inside, found her wriggling on the floor, hogtied like a steer trussed for branding.

“Karen!” Pulse racing, he dropped down and untied her. “You okay?”

“He made Maggie tie me up.” She threw her arms around his neck and breathed panic in his ear. “Now he’s going to kill her.”

“I know.” But Jake couldn’t let that happen. He pulled Karen to her feet. “Stay here.”

“I’m going with you.”

Outside, the heavy whap of helicopter blades stopped him. Engines roared. Sirens wailed. An army of police vehicles plowed up the road.

Dizzy with disbelief, Jake stood on the porch and watched cops swoop into the forest with their K-9s and automatic weapons.

Dogs barked.

Maggie screamed!

Gunfire rang out.

Icy dread seized Jake’s chest. “Give up, John,” he muttered, fearing the worst. “Please just give up.”

* * *

A speeding Denver Post SUV approached the cabin. Karen saw Bruce driving. Her stomach churned up acid. She didn’t want to talk to him.

The SUV slid to a stop. Doors sprung open. Bruce jumped out and rushed toward her, his face wrenched with concern, but he stopped at the porch step, glanced at Jake and back at her.

“Karen... What’s going on here?”

Cops hauled John from the forest in handcuffs. Maggie followed, stooped and shaking, a

cop at each elbow.

Karen shivered with relief. “How did you know?” she asked Bruce.

“Maggie got a call from the Sandman, a tip to your whereabouts, but she took off when I called the police. Turns out they had a report from Jake Witting. We put two-and-two together, figured Maggie was on her way to the Witting ranch. We got here as fast as we could.”

She gazed up at Jake. “It’s over.”

Nodding, his solemn stare was on his brother as the cops stuffed him into a police van.

She felt Jake’s body tremble. Hot tears filled her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Jake.”

“Maybe now he’ll get the professional help he needs.”

“You did the right thing, turning him in.”

“If I hadn’t, I would’ve lost you.”

Those butterflies took flight.

“So, Karen,” Bruce said with an uneasy crook on his brow. “Are you coming back to work now?”

She shook her head and hugged Jake. “I’m staying here.”

Bruce looked gut-punched. “What about your career?”

“There’s more to life than *Street Beat*, you know.”

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 and Supernatural, 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 runs their annual Colorado Gold Writing Contest. Terry lives near Denver with his wife, Bobette.

Terry invites you to visit his Website at www.terrywrightbooks.com where you'll find more information on his short stories, novels, and screenplays.

Enjoy these short stories and novels from Terry Wright



The 13th Power Quest, Book 1 (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/the13thpowerquest.html>



The 13th Power Journey, Book 2 (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/the13thpowerjourney.html>



The 13th Power War, Book 3 (TWB Press, Coming Soon)

<https://www.twbpress.com/the13thpowerwar.html>



The Grief Syndrome (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/thegriefsyndrome.html>



The Duplication Factor (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/theduplicationfactor.html>



Undead in Paris (TWB Press, 2017)

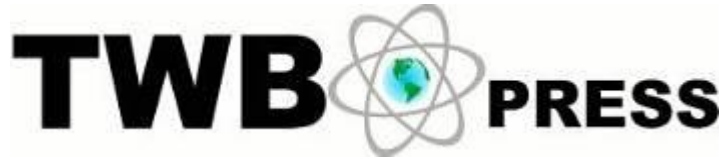
<https://www.twbpress.com/undeadinparis.html>



Justin Graves (TWB Press, 2020)

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