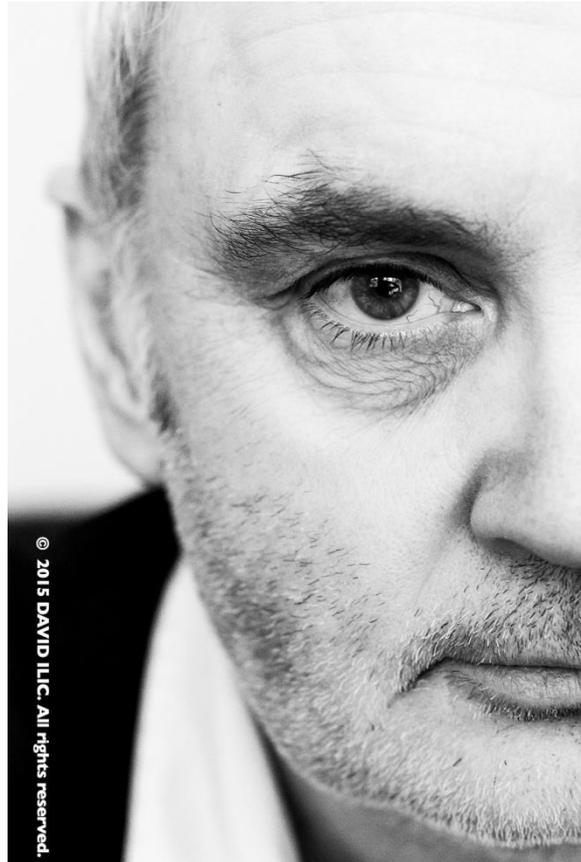


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The Transition Of Johnny Swift

by

Kerry J Donovan© July 2014



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To my family and friend (you know who you are).

Love you all.

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

#

PART ONE

Racing

Life is good. In racing and in love my life is complete.

Things couldn't be better.

#

Chapter 1

Race Day - Beginnings

Pole position.

I love the adrenaline-fuelled kick of anticipation at the start of a race. The twin dance of fear and excitement speeds my heart and tightens my gut, but can't stand the waiting.

Come on.

Traction control on.

A quick glance in the mirror reveals my only serious rival, Enrique La Tiempo, in the blood-red Ferrari. He hates it when I take pole. Hates it more when I win.

Sharp sunlight glints off my car's bright yellow paintjob and emphasises the bonnet's black logo, TBR—Team Brazier Racing. As the only TBR in the world, she's unmistakable. This new baby is the Mark IV, and she's perfect.

Her engine growls with restrained ferocity as I balance the throttle, keeping the engine note a smidge below the rev limiter. I dab the throttle again, and my powerful little car, Baby, vibrates around and through me, as visceral as a punch to the stomach. Baby, named after a character in my sister's favourite film, *Dirty Dancing*, is as desperate as I am to get on with the race.

My fingers play an impatient drumbeat on the wheel. The heat built up in the tyres over the three warm-up laps is dissipating—less heat means less grip. I glare across at the first row of three red lights over the starter's box, daring the next bank to flick on. Once the third row lights up, there'll be yet another bloody delay before they turn green.

Come on. Come on.

A blink to moisten dry eyes and clear my vision, and I'm ready for battle. But ... he's back. Sitting cross-legged on Baby's nose cone. Facing me. Haunting and silent.

Shadow-man.

Oh, fuck no. Not again! Why now?

I guess shadow is the wrong name because he's dark grey, not black. His narrow shoulders are hunched, and he doesn't have a face. He's like those wire frame animations they use to create the skeletons of movie avatars, before adding skin and clothing.

Semi-transparent arms reach toward me. A hole where the mouth should be moves in silent speech.

Jesus! Not again. Not today. Please, not today.

I close my eyes. He can't exist. He never existed. What is it?

"Get the fuck away from me!"

My helmet radio crackles. "What was that, Frank?" Pete's voice cuts through the background noise. Pete Brazier, TBR's owner, chief designer, my adoptive father—and my best friend.

I open my eyes. The thing is gone. I breathe again. "Huh? What?"

"You said something. Sounded like 'get away'," says Pete through the noise-cancelling speakers in my race helmet.

Jesus, I said that aloud?

"Er, no, Pete. Want to get away quick. Hate this fuck ... er, bloody waiting."

"Uh, right. Three minutes. Everything looks good this end. How'd she handle during warm up?"

"Perfect, as always. Baby's a peach."

"Sure is. Good luck, son. Bring her home for us."

"I will."

The race commentator, Chas Cottam, introduces the starters, his PA voice loud over the noise of eighteen race-ready engines. He starts with the back markers and I use the time to drop myself into the zone. Clear my mind. Focus on Baby and the track.

I check my periphery. It's clear. Only the other cars, the drivers, and the spectators.

What does Shadow-man want? Why today?

Stop. I need to clear my head and this isn't doing it.

He—it—can't do anything. It's only light and shade.

Concentrate. There's a race to win.

I suck air through clenched teeth. The unwanted vision won't fade from my memory, but it must. Today is for Pete and the team. I can't let anything mess with my head.

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Filter out the noise. Concentrate on the prime driving position running into the first turn. It's the second 'l' on the 'Pirelli' hoarding. That's the line I need to make the first corner on cooling tyres.

"...at number three, and in the second Force Austria, Gerhardt Schmeikel," Cottam yells. He's reached 9.5 on the Richter scale and there's still two more names to announce. I worry the poor old sod's going to burst a blood vessel before he reaches me.

"...number two on the grid in the Ferrari ..." Cottam pauses to allow time for the booing to die, "...and currently lying second in the overall Championship, give a big hand to everybody's favourite, Mr Enrique La Tiempo."

The booing rises in volume, a legacy from last year's race when the Spaniard ran me off the road and ended my chances of winning the Championship. The arrogant fucker won't do the same this year. He's not getting close enough.

La Tiempo annoys the crowd by raising his arm and rolling his hand at them.

Finally, Cottam goes for the big wind up, and the crowd's boos turn to cheers.

"In pole position," he roars, "and runaway Championship leader, I give you our very own home grown hero, Mr 'Fiery' Frank Brazier!"

The crowd is sparse; they never turn out in droves for Formula 2500, as it's only a feeder series for the F1 circus. The spectators barely fill the bottom ten rows of the grandstand, but what they lack in numbers, they make up for with enthusiasm. A squadron of spectators, mainly young women, each wearing bright yellow T-shirts emblazoned with '*Fiery' Frank 4 Ever*, wave and scream my name. Mobile phones and cameras flash. They yell louder. Their excitement raises the decibel level to rival the roar of the engines.

Now we can get down to business. At last.

I flex my fingers to relax my grip on the steering wheel, which pulses with red, green, and blue lights, and digital numbers in orange. Its individual heartbeat keeps time with my own. The wheel is an extension of me. Everything's ready.

With right heel jammed hard on the brake pedal, and left foot on the clutch, my toes tickle the accelerator pedal. Petrol spits into the injectors and mixes with air. I inhale the nose-twitching, sweet ammonia smell of high octane vapour before detonation. Gas hits the spark plugs and explodes in controlled fury as eight pistons pump, and the crank rotates at twenty thousand revolutions per minute—full throttle.

Seventeen other drivers do the same. Despite the padding in my crash helmet, the roar from the pack of race-built engines is both deafening and intoxicating. The exhaust fumes smell better than perfume on a runway model's neck.

Feather back on the gas, ten thousand revs, half way to idling, and rotate my head to stretch neck and shoulder muscles. Tension here is a killer. I can't shift the crease in the back of my fire-retardant jumpsuit no matter how hard I wriggle against the five-point safety harness.

Red lights on—set one.

My heart skips and the rate spikes, but it's nowhere near max. I'm ready. And have been for six years.
Breathe, Frank. Remember to bloody breathe.

Red lights on—set two.

Red lights on—set three.

Ready. Deep breath.

Red lights.

Come on, come on.

Green.

Go!

Right heel snaps off the brake pedal, throttle to the floor. The wild squeal of thirty-six drive tyres drowns out the engine notes for a beat, before rubber finds traction. A piledriver punches my back as Baby shoots forward. My helmet slams against the headrest, and we're away. The engine snips at the rev limiter. I'm slammed deeper into the thin padding on the seat as the g-force doubles, triples.

The stands roll and blur as I concentrate on the first turn.

Nought-to-sixty in three-point-eight seconds.

Five hundred metres later, turn one is on me. Two cars, a Ferrari and a Renault, crowd my rear wheels, desperate to take my driving line, but it's my line and I'm giving way to no one.

A shadow falls across my shoulder as I clear the grandstand and head into turn one. I shudder and narrow my focus as the corner grows in my vision.

This is a sample.

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Brake hard, cut the revs to a throaty purr, hit the apex, give it more fuel, and away. Foot down hard and up through the gears into top, watch the other cars scramble for position behind.

I race clear. The others fall back.

A flashed glance in my right wing mirror shows a black Lotus and a blood-red Ferrari touch front wheels. Tyres lock and send up a puff of blue-black smoke. They slew to the left out of sight. The Ferrari can't be La Tiempo's, or Pete would let me know.

The 'coming together' delays the other cars. I take advantage. The track ahead is empty and I stretch the lead. But it won't mean anything if the carnage behind is too great and the marshals send out the bloody safety car or stop the race.

Turn two, a one-hundred-and-twenty degree left-hander. Have to take this one steady. There's not enough heat in the tyres to attack full-bore yet, but there's clear track ahead and my line is perfect.

At the apex, I punch the throttle to the carbon fibre floor panel, and we scream through the corner. Flap the gearshift, up through fifth into sixth. We hit two-hundred-and-fifteen kilometres per hour on the short straight. The tyres are warmer now, giving me full traction and a wonderful feel for the car. Everything's on balance.

Six laps pass in a clear blur. I enter the 'hot zone', receiving subliminal signals from the seat, steering wheel, and pedals. Any changes to the car's attitude transmit directly from Baby, through the race suit, and into my central nervous system. If Baby slides, I feel it in an instant and correct. Loss of traction in the wrong place? Tyres wearing? I respond by braking earlier and being more delicate with the throttle movements.

Down five gears for turn five. Hit the entrance to the corner at ninety-eight kph in second gear, take a slice off the inside kerb, dab the throttle and bullet out. The big spoiler on the nose cone takes effect, and the front dips, giving enough grip to set the line for the next turn.

There's no feeling in the world like this. I am the car, and do no more than allow Baby her freedom. She wants to be out front leading, and it's my job to let it happen.

Lap twenty-six. Half way.

The only pit stop on the schedule is in three laps. I'm feathering the brakes to save the tyres. They're bubbling now and pitting, close to the nub. I need to protect them for five or six more minutes before the tricky part of the race is over.

The speakers crackle. Pete knows better than to speak unless it's essential. Concentration is everything.

"Frank." Pete's voice is clear. "Crash on turn six. Repeat, crash before the apex to turn six. Take the inside track. Possible debris on racing line."

"Got it. How's the telemetry?"

"Front right tyre's running a tad hot. We're monitoring it. No worries so far. Come in to plan."

I don't respond but drop into fourth and set the car up for the next turn. My twenty-eight second lead on La Tiempo is plenty, despite the pit stop, and he'll have to pit at some stage too.

This race is mine. I can't help but start whistling as I ease into the slow corner four. The tune's a Louis Armstrong favourite, *It's a Wonderful World*. Pete had it playing in the car on the way home from the orphanage. It's been my theme song ever since that landmark day.

Back through the Start/Finish line and into turn one again. No sign of the Shadow-man.

"Frank? Sorry, but that tyre's falling apart. Come in this lap. We're ready for you."

"Will do."

Shouldn't be a problem, only a lap ahead of schedule.

Turn six.

Where's that bloody debris?

There!

Shredded rubber, pieces of carbon fibre body panels, shards of metal. They're all over the racing line, but it's not a worry now I'm ready for it. The carcass of the ruined car is off the circuit, nestled deep and safe in the gravel run-off.

Drop from fifth through the gears and hit first in a heartbeat, nip inside the danger, rip up the box again in a flash, and I'm out of the turn onto the next short straight.

Spectators wave their arms as I roar past. And then I see him, again. Shadow-man sits on the engine cowling behind my left shoulder.

Damn it. Fuck off.

The grey figure stands, sharp and distinct. He's holding his arms straight out in front at shoulder level, pointing at me. He shimmers in the backlight of the sun.

What the fuck?

He drops behind as I make the turn.

Fuck's sake, leave me alone. One more hour. That's all I need. Please. One more hour and you can do your worst.

There's no sign of Shadow-man in my mirror. The steering wheel twitches. The dodgy tyre clips the inside kerb, black and white painted stripes flicker beneath my wheels, a fluttering, mesmeric blur. Shaking my head to loosen the image, I floor the throttle.

The steering wheel bucks in my hands.

#

In the pit garage, Pete Brazier frowns in concentration. His eyes dart between the video feed from the trackside cameras and his telemetry screen. The data stream shows Frank easing up on the revs as he approaches turn six. The engine note drops as the lightweight sports car steps inside to avoid the bits of rubbish.

Good man, Frank. Bring Baby home.

The telemetry shows everything Frank sees on his steering wheel and more: engine revs, oil and tyre temperature, fuel level, slew-angle, torque settings and fluctuations, and g-forces. Apart from the red hot tyre, everything's perfect.

Frank flits smoothly down to first gear—fifty-five kph. The slowest he's been since the race start. Pete allows his relief to show in a thin smile and slow nod. 'Fiery' Frank Brazier doesn't always listen to advice.

The TBR rockets out of the corner, but Frank clips the inside kerb and slides across the track.

"Bloody hell. He's all over the place. He's too tight to the inside kerb. What's he doing?"

Frank ramps up to fifth gear and hits one-hundred-and-fifty-three kph in a flash. There's a fast left in a hundred yards and Frank needs to find the racing line again or he won't make the turn.

#

The steering wheel snaps down hard right and flicks left again, nearly ripping from my hands. I try to compensate but there's something badly wrong.

The suspect tyre implodes, collapses around the wheel. A noise comes next, compressing my eardrums. Baby screams. The aluminium wheel rim touches tarmac. Sparks fly, and the car lurches towards the metal stanchions of a camera tower. My head slams against the cockpit side wall.

Sights and sounds fuse into a single tangled mess.

Grass, tarmac, bollards, buffers, gravel, and metal girders mix and tumble. I can do nothing but stare at the approaching metalwork, wait for the impact, and curse the fact that I'll never get to know Jenny Barratt now.

On the nose cone, Shadow-man smiles.

Chapter 2

Race Day Minus One - Yesterday

“Are you going to bring it home tomorrow, Frank?” Jenny Barratt asks, adding one of her welcoming, light-up-my-life smiles as I stroll through the TBR reception area.

She’s doing it again. That thing where she lowers her head and peeks over those god-awful glasses with an expression that says, “You’re nice Frank, but nothing special”. She’s trying for off-hand cool, but I know there’s a connection between us—has been since Pete hired her.

A small detour from my path to Pete’s office has me leaning against the waist-high reception counter. As nonchalant as I can manage with a thumping heart and a dry throat, I return her smile. Doubt mine works as well on the auburn-haired Jenny as hers does on me, but it’s worth a try.

On a normal day, being this close to her turns my head to cotton wool and my stomach to jelly, but today, one day before the Championship finale, things are different. It’s worse. Much worse.

She smells as fresh as a sun-warmed meadow in spring. Jeesh, when did I become so damned poetical.

Jenny is the team’s secretary-cum-PA-cum-general-helper. Been here a little over three weeks now and has rebuffed the advances of every unattached mechanic on the team.

As usual, she’s aiming for bland in her front-of-office business outfit, but fails miserably. She can’t hide the shapely form beneath the loose white blouse, buttoned to the throat and pinned with a small silver brooch. The middle-aged librarian look is rounded off by the black-framed glasses and the sweptback hair. I can’t see below the desk, but if true to form, she has on a dowdy, below-the-knee skirt or a pair of loose-fitting slacks. But I’m not fooled for one second. Dressed for defence is Jenny, desperate to ward off the lecherous advances of the pit crew—and the team’s ace driver, I suppose.

We’ve been playing our little game since the day she joined the team. Once, over coffee, before I could ask her out, she made it clear she never dates colleagues, but the twinkle in her eye when she said it gave me hope. We sort of have this unspoken agreement to postpone a liaison until the end of the race season when I leave the team. Damned if I wouldn’t prefer to drop the cool act and start begging.

“Hullo there, Miss Money Penny,” I croon.

“Drop the bad Sean Connery, Frank. You can’t pull it off.” She adds a Roger Moore arched eyebrow.

Pull it off? Is she kidding? “Why not? Too ugly?”

“Too young.”

“A compliment?”

“Answer the question,” she says. “Are you going to bring it home tomorrow?”

“I hope so.”

“So do I, Frank.”

“The title means everything to the team, and me.”

She nods and taps a pen against her lower lip. With her natural, copper-toned skin, she doesn’t need makeup. Tiny freckles dot her nose. For the hundredth time I wonder whether the lenses in her glasses are prescription, or used as camouflage to hide eyes bluer than the Caribbean at sunset.

Bloody hell, listen to me. ‘Fiery’ Frank Brazier, rough tough racing driver’s nothing but a big softie.

“Any particular reason you want me to win?” I know, but want her to say aloud that we’ll date when I leave the team.

Jenny looks up though dark lashes long as feathers. “It’ll come to you, Frank.”

Jeez, there she goes again.

Jenny taps at the monitor on her desk. “I see your online numbers are up. So many tweets. Mostly young girls lusting after the next Formula 1 pinup, I’d bet. Don’t let it go to your head, Frank.” Again, the enigmatic half-smile. “Conceit is most unbecoming in a guy. Especially a good looking one.”

“Oh Jen, another compliment? That’s two in as many minutes. Be still my racing heart. And I didn’t realise you took an interest in my media profile. No need to be jealous. I only have eyes for you.”

“Your public face is important for the financial success of the team, Frank. Your father asked me to keep an eye on it, so he can schmooze the sponsors.”

“Nothing more?”

“Hmmm.”

I try a different approach. “What’s a girl as beautiful as you doing working in a dive like this?”

She rolls her eyes and does her slow-headshake-with-a-sigh thing. The sun chooses that moment to burst through the picture windows behind her desk. Funny how often that happens when Jenny’s around.

This is a sample.

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“It’s not a dive, Frank. I have the chance to work with wonderful people”—she lowers her gaze to the papers on her desk—“your father, for instance.”

“Only him, no one else?”

The ghost smile returns and she waves her fingers towards Pete’s door. Her fingernails are manicured, short, and unpainted. “He’s waiting for you.”

I bleed out a theatrical groan. “Never answer my questions, do you? How’s a man to know where he stands?”

“Oh, Frank. You know where you stand.” This comes out as a breathed whisper I almost miss.

“Jenny Barratt, you are too, too much.”

“No idea what you mean,” she says as I head to the other side of the room. My training shoes squeak on the vinyl flooring. “Win tomorrow and I’ll give you your answer.”

The shoe tread sticks as I turn to look and nearly stumble, but Jenny has her back to me now and her shoulders shake in a stifled chuckle. I wonder what she’d look like in a nice dress—or better still, out of one.

Pete—I never call him ‘Dad’, wouldn’t look good at our place of work—sits behind his desk waiting, and we go at it again. The usual discussion over race tactics for tomorrow. We’ve been through this loads of times over the past week.

“I’m sorry, Pete, but I’m going all out for the win.” I add what I hope is a disarming smile, but the scowl tells me he’s not buying it for a second.

Pete’s hair used to be coal black. Silver threads spin through it now, but it’s still long, thick, and wavy, like mine. People say we look alike, but there’s no blood relationship. Pete’s sharp grey eyes haven’t changed much over the years. They can still see straight through my bravado and cut me off mid-rant.

“A single point, that’s all you need,” says Pete, cool and calm, as always. None of his chill temperament has rubbed off on me though, hence my nickname. “Nobody else can touch you but La Tiempo. Stay within five places of him and the Championship’s yours. Don’t screw it up pushing for another win.”

I ease out of the chair and drift across to the wide office window to stare at the rolling Northamptonshire fields I’ve known since the age of four. This normally calms me, but not today. I try a measured approach. “Out front’s the safest place. There’s no traffic. I choose the race line and La Tiempo can’t screw me over like he did last year.”

The bastard.

I catch Pete’s reflection in the window as he raises both hands in his, ‘easy son, I understand’ gesture. “We appealed and we lost. That’s life, and we move on.”

Bollocks. I’m not backing off this year.

A wind ruffles the leaves on the gnarled oak guarding the entrance to the garage compound and a pillow-shaped cloud passes in front of the sun. Its shadow crosses the car park, ripples up the factory wall, crawls over the sloping roof, and disappears away to all points east.

At least this shadow’s real.

Fuck’s sake. What’s my fascination with shadows?

I turn to face the room. The tools of Pete’s trade cover his desk: papers, blueprints, a Macintosh computer. Next to the screen is a photo of Laura, my adoptive mother. Although facing away from me, I guess the monitor will show an accounts spreadsheet. It’ll have loads of negative numbers in red. Formula 2500 doesn’t attract big sponsors.

Behind him is an architect’s desk with setsquare and protractors. Pete is old school, loves to draw the initial design by hand before resorting to the CAD system. The drawing board is free of paper—an ominous sign.

“Another thing,” I add, pretending it’s an afterthought. “If I win tomorrow, we’ll take the Constructor’s Plaque. An independent hasn’t done that for thirty-six years.”

TBR is a shoestring operation. We only run one car and one driver, but Baby is spectacular, and I’m pretty good. Modesty prevents me saying *how* good.

“I deal with the sponsors, Frank. Concentrate on the driving.”

He’s not fooling me. The Constructor’s cheque won’t pay the bills for more than a month or two, but it might help attract a bigger supporter—a bank, or a soft-drink company. Winning tomorrow is the team’s best, and probably only, chance of surviving into next year. I plant my knuckles on the grey metal desk. Pete meets my stare. He won’t blink first.

This is a sample.

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“Listen Pete,” I say, softening my voice. “You’re good at what you do, but I fly the plane and I’m top notch too. The best way to win tomorrow is from the front.” I straighten without taking my eyes from his. “Hangin’ back with the crowd in the middle of the dog-fight isn’t the way to go. I’m going for the win.”

“Why risk it? Stay with La Tiempo and the Championship’s yours.”

“And next year’s sponsorship?”

“As I said. Finances are my job.”

“But race tactics are mine. Trust me. I’m right about this.”

We face off for a moment before Pete nods and gives me his trademark crooked smile. “You know I trust you. Do it your way, but bring us the Championship, eh?”

“Will do, boss.” I take my seat again and segue—smooth as a silk blouse sliding down Jenny’s back—into a different subject. “Heard from Paula today?”

Pete nods, grimaces, and picks up one of the papers on his desk. “She called this morning.”

“Don’t tell me.” My shoulders sag. “Not coming tomorrow?”

“What can I say? Watching you race terrifies her. You know that.”

“One of her premonitions? What’s she seen this time?”

“Don’t be like that, Frank. Your sister’s artistic. Her brain works differently from ours. Takes after your mother that way.”

Our eyes slide to Laura’s picture, taken in happier times, before the Big C started gnawing at her bones. *Osteosarcoma*. An ugly word for an ugly fucking disease.

“C’mon, Pete,” I say before we become maudlin and start talking about the dark days. “What did Paula say?”

“Nothing specific, told me to make sure you took care.”

“Is that why you keep trying to make me drive like a Chelsea Pensioner? Safety first? Bollocks!” I throw my hands in the air before realising how childish it makes me look. “Fuck’s sake Pete, you’ve become an old woman. Be reading the bloody tea leaves next.”

“Less of that language, boy. You’re not too old for a thumping, big as you are.”

“It’ll take more than you, old timer. You can barely climb out of that chair these days without clutching at your poor old back. Paula and I are going to club together to buy you a walking frame for Christmas.”

Lightning fast, Pete jumps from his chair and tears around the desk. I leap to my feet and we shadow box for a moment before he pulls me into a hug and slaps my back hard.

“Get off. Don’t do hugs. And you need a shave.” I squeeze tight before pushing him away.

“Ah yes, regarding hugs,” he says with a conspiratorial eyebrow double-hike. “When are you going to ask out the delightful Jennifer?”

“Wha—?” My neck warms. Why’s the temperature in here rocketing?

“Don’t play coy with me, son. I’ve seen the way you look at her. Don’t blame you. If I were twenty-five years younger”

“Rubbish. Jenny’s a nice lass and I’m only being friendly. We’ve hardly said two words to each other since she arrived.”

“No, no. Course you haven’t.”

“Really, Pete. She must be fed up with everyone around here trying it on. I’d hate to make her feel uncomfortable at work. Being the owner’s son and all.”

“Don’t reckon she’d mind too much, lad.”

“Why? Has she said anything?” I ask, much too quickly.

Pete chortles and returns to his seat. He leans back, clasping his hands behind his head and puffing out his cheeks. “Nothing lad, but don’t keep her waiting too long, or I might forget the age difference and ask her out myself.”

“Yuck. Pass me the sick bag.”

“You cheeky little sod. Bugger off out of here and have some rest before tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” I say with a sloppy salute and turn for the door. I march through to the reception area, hoping for another brief encounter, but Jenny’s chair is empty. I consider hanging around pretending to make a phone call, but that would be akin to stalking.

I’m half way to the garage door, heading for one more check of the car’s set up for tomorrow when my mobile buzzes. I check the caller ID: Paula.

“Hiya Screech. Didn’t forget your big brother on the eve of his big day then.”

“For goodness sake, Frank,” Paula says, sounding almost pissed. “When are you going to stop calling me, Screech?”

This is a sample.

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“When the polar icecaps melt, which, given global warming, might be a week next Tuesday, little one.” Before she has a chance to answer, I add, “Pete tells me you’re not coming tomorrow. Big date with an ugly musician?”

“Shut up. Not discussing my love life with my brother. And you know I can’t watch you race. Too bloody terrifying.”

“Nah, motor racing’s safe as houses these days. You’ve seen our carbon fibre safety cage. I’d be in more danger as a passenger in your Mini.”

“Frank, be serious. I’m worried about the race tomorrow. I’ve had a–.”

“Oh, hell. Not one of your visions?” I scoff, but the memories of the Shadow-man cuts off the sarcastic comment I’m about to throw.

“Not exactly. It’s ... well ... I feel something horrible is about to happen. Had a dream last night. Lots of noise, and speed, and a whole load of broken metal.”

“What did I say? A premonition.”

“Call it whatever you want, Francis Alan Brazier, but be careful tomorrow. For me. Promise?”

Whoa. Only ‘Serious Parent Paula’ uses all three of my names. What the hell?

“Er, okay, Paula. I’ll take it steady tomorrow. Promise.”

“Liar.”

“Who, *moi*?”

“Yes, you.”

It’s only after she hangs up, that I wonder whether I should have asked if she’s ever seen a shadow person. *Yeah, right.* How do you ask a question like that without sounding like a raving nut job?

Chapter 3

Race Day - The End of the Beginning.

Travelling at over one-hundred kph, I'm showered with pieces of shredded tyre. A big chunk of steel-belted rubber misses my head by millimetres and clumps against the air intake over my head. Small pieces of rubberised shrapnel bounce off my helmet. My heart pounds and I pull warm air deep into my lungs, coughing away the dust and stink of torn, melted rubber.

Images flash. Pete beaming, tearful as he sees little Paula for the first time—Paula's first public piano recital—my first go-kart trophy—the family playing football in the back garden—Laura smiling, crying, dying—the funeral—Jenny in a clingy dress. What a waste. I should have acted sooner, and invited Jenny out on that bloody date.

Shit a brick.

The car jerks to the left as the suspension struggles with the uneven load distribution. Open mouthed spectators blur past my peripheral vision.

Shadow-man still smiles.

The carbon floor panel scrapes tarmac. Ridges and hollows rumble against the contours of the race track. The vibrations transmit through the seat and ram into my back. Everything hurts.

One saving grace. I was slow entering the last turn, and sluggish on exit. Our speed is low enough to keep Baby on the ground and we make the straight in one piece.

Christ. How did we manage that?

The pit lane is only three hundred metres away on the straightest part of the circuit, but on three wheels and a screeching, damaged rim, the car wants to veer left.

The car jags, bucks, and handles like a tiger on crack, but it holds together. My little yellow wonder is still game for the fight. With a frantic juggling of throttle, gears, and steering wheel, I keep control.

"Come on, Baby. Nearly there. Be good for me." I speak aloud, hoping she'll listen.

She bounces again. The nose cone's inner wing touches tarmac. It shatters, spraying the cockpit with shards of race yellow carbon fibre. Pieces ping off my visor. One fragment scores a jagged scratch into the clear plastic sheet, ruining my straight-line vision. I have to lift my head to see the track clearly.

The speed dips to forty-five kph, first gear. Baby is limping. A flash of red passes on my outside. I can practically hear La Tiempo cackle with glee as he hits the open track.

No. Damn it. No! Not again.

My hold on the Championship title is as tattered as the tyre.

"Pete, do you see this? I need a new nose cone."

"Already on it, son. Bloody magnificent bit of driving there." Pete's shock is clear, even through the electronics.

Baby, my gallant little darling, dips and cuts beneath me, but we crawl into the pit lane and judder to a halt. Angus' red stop sign drops in front of my eyes.

Front and rear lever jacks hoist the nose, and the rear gunner attaches the suction hose over the exhaust pipe. I keep the engine on hot idle—a screaming, cacophonous 14,500 rpm. Baby needs to stay warm, primed.

We made the pits, and I don't know how. My hands tremble and I grip the steering wheel tight. Can't show weakness to the crew. Pete's voice crackles in through the helmet speakers. "How you doing, Frank?"

Two seconds.

Wheel nuts off. Shattered nose cone, three wheels and one destroyed rim torn away.

Five seconds.

The team works in choreographed unison, not a movement wasted. They fit four new wheels. Air wrenches chatter again and lock the lugs in place.

"A bit hairy, Pete, but no worries," I answer.

And if he believes that, I have a seat on the International Space Station to sell him. Jesus, that was close.

Eight seconds.

I want to hurl, but I can't remove the helmet, so I breath deep through my mouth until the feeling passes.

Control, Frank, control. Breathe.

Bill and another guy I don't recognise because he's wearing a fireproof suit, offer up the new nose cone. It slides into place with a gentle clunk through the chassis. I point to the scratched visor. Angus waves his

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open hands, shakes his head. No spare. Damn it, I forgot to tell them I need a replacement, so I nod and give the thumbs up. The impaired sight line isn't bad, I can work through the problem, even if I have to tilt my head for the rest of the damned race.

"Take it steady for the first couple of laps. Can't tell what damage there is to the front end," Pete says, calmness itself.

"Okay, boss. Will do." I smile to show I'm cool, but no one can see it through the fireproof balaclava.

"They've cleared the rubbish and pulled the yellow flag. Everybody's flying. You'll be off the pace by nearly a minute, but there's still plenty of time. You only need to finish fifth or better. Don't go mad."

Twenty seconds.

Clutch engaged. First gear. I jog the wheel left and right to settle the steering.

The bodywork lugs snap into place. A tap on the throttle pedal and the engine roars in salute to the team; they've done a magnificent job. The lever jacks drop the car to the deck and the mechanics step away. The red sign rotates to green.

Throttle punched.

Clutch disengaged.

The rear end skitters before rubber finds traction. I'm away. Back in the race, where Baby and I belong.

Come on, Frank. Let's do this.

Tenth position with twenty-three laps to go—time enough if I'm lucky.

La Tiempo's nearly a full lap ahead, fighting for the lead with Schmeikel in the blue Force Austria. Their dogfight gives me a chance to close the gap and wrest the win away from both.

Baby isn't running as well as she did earlier. The steering doesn't react as smoothly, but it won't take long to learn the new setup, the new balance. Adapting to changes is where I earn the big money.

Yeah, right. Big money.

Seven laps to go.

I've passed seven lesser lights and sit in Schmeikel's slipstream. La Tiempo is eight seconds ahead. If I stay here, I win the Championship, but Ferrari take the Constructor's cheque. Baby is handling like a tugboat on the Thames, but the straight-line speed is way faster than the Force Austria and I make an easy pass on the outside after turn fifteen. Schmeikel is nowhere on the leaders' table and hates La Tiempo as much as me. He waves me by with a wink and nod.

I give him a fist-pump salute.

Thanks, Schimmy. I owe you one, mate.

La Tiempo's in my sights now. I have five laps left to catch the Spaniard. I jam the throttle down. The rev-limiter clicks and my Baby's engine howls with glee.

In the heat of battle, I can almost forget the wispy shadow from the nose cone and grandstand, but the haunting image never quite disappears from my memory. It's always there, in the back of my mind. Mysterious.

"Fuck you," I yell, ignoring the microphone imbedded in the helmet.

Fourth gear into the next turn. I take it hot. La Tiempo is so close I can almost smell his exhaust fumes. The Ferrari takes turn twelve too wide. Its front tyre slips over the edge of the kerb. Its rear wheels lose traction and the car spins through three-sixty degrees. Baby and I roar past.

La Tiempo smashes his fists against the steering wheel.

"And the Formula 2500 champion for 2013. I give you, Mr 'Fiery' Frank Brazier...."

Cameras flash, crowds cheer, officials rush me away from the finish line for some business with a urine sample bottle. Too dehydrated to perform at first, I manage in the end when someone runs water from a tap. The announcer's voice melts into the heady roar of the two thousand spectators who've stayed behind.

They chant my name. I need rest and recovery, but everyone wants a piece of me and I don't even get the chance to sit.

Back at the podium, Chas Cottam hands me a big-arsed bottle of champagne and I open it carefully. Spraying the expensive stuff on the ground is not my idea of having a good time. I smile and take a sip. Not bad, but give me a beer at my local any day. I raise the full bottle to the raucous, churning spectators and save the bubbly for the crew. They deserve it for giving me the best damned car outside the Grand Prix circuit. Baby took all that punishment, and my plucky little beauty kept coming back for more.

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Cottam, breathless and overcome by false emotion, pushes a microphone under my nose. “What’s it feel like to win the Championship, Frank?”

Wonder how long it took him to think that one up.

“Really great. Thanks for asking. Tough race.”

Yep, he tosses ‘em up, and I bat ‘em back. Shit-hot stuff this, eh?

Cottam throws a cheesy grin to the TV camera. This interview is being beamed straight to Sky Sports, the BBC News Centre, and a dozen screens on the racecourse. With luck, and if Chas pitches it right, the national news shows will give it a ten second airing tonight on the late evening roundup.

“What are your plans now, Champ?”

“Me? I’m gonna party with the best bloody race team on the planet.”

Pete, Bill, and the rest of Team Brazier are fifty metres away, the other side of the paddock. I lift the large silver trophy to them.

“See those guys, Chas? They’re the ones who deserve the congratulations. They gave me, pound-for-pound, the best damned car on the planet, and kept it running sweet as a nut, all season even though I did my best to tear it apart. They’re the real heroes.” I grab the mike and yell. “This one’s for you guys—you beauties. Pete, you and me, we did it!”

In the distance, Pete raises a clenched fist and Bill pulls him into a tight embrace. The mechanics dance like a bunch of drunk kids.

Shadow-man hangs above the gyrating team, arms by its sides. Its head shakes, as if saying no to a question I’ve yet to ask.

Leave me the fuck alone, bastard.

After a blink, the figment disappears into the darkness of the empty grandstand.

“... tyre burst.”

“Sorry, Chas? What did you say?”

“We thought your title chance had gone when your tyre burst. How did you manage to keep the car on the track?”

“No idea. Luck I guess. If I believed in miracles, I’d be on the phone to the Pope right now, discussing sainthood for a little yellow race car.”

Cottam pauses, presses his open hand against an ear-jack, but otherwise ignores my slight blasphemy.

“But winning the race didn’t make a difference to the overall standings in the end, did it? When Enrique La Tiempo spun off the track on the penultimate lap, you’d already won.”

“Yes, Chas, don’t know what happened there. You’ll have to ask Enrique.”

“Mr La Tiempo isn’t giving any interviews at the moment.”

“Let me say at this point”—I fix my gaze on a shame-faced Enrique La Tiempo, who stands beside me on the podium, in second place in the overall Championship—“I was nowhere near Enrique at the time.”

Don’t know why, but my apologetic smile produces a barrage of cameras flashes. I give the crowd another wave and turn to La Tiempo.

“Well done, Enrique. You did a good job. Ran me close the whole season.” I thrust out my hand.

La Tiempo sneers and leaves me hanging. He storms from the podium after passing his runner’s up silver platter to a team mate, and barges past the autograph hunters at the security barrier.

Well, nobody can say I didn’t try.

Sod him.

I adjust the peak of my race cap to block out the low evening sun. The cap obscures the faces in the crowd and silence falls. The temperature drops and I shiver.

What the hell?

Shadow-man, grey and fluid, swims through the spectators. Passes right through them. Electricity prickles my scalp. I can’t breathe, something presses down on my chest. It has never been this bad. My heart fills with a hundred litres of blood and tries to push it out in a dozen fluttering beats.

Shadow-man stops two metres away, and points at me. A brilliant, blinding white hole appears in its head where a mouth might be. The hole changes from white to orange-red flames, widens and rises, morphing into a silent scream that collapses and closes in one snapping movement.

Trembling, I squeeze my eyelids tight shut and replay the tyre blow-out in my head. I round turn six, cut tight inside to avoid the wreckage. Turn late, slow on the drive. Shadow-man appears at the edge of my field of vision, stealing my concentration. I clip the kerb. Bang. The tyre explodes. Questions hit me as hard as the pieces of shattered tyre.

Did the Shadow-man distract me on purpose? Does it want me dead? If so, why?

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Heat and sound return as someone claps me on the back.

“You did it, son. You did it.” Pete’s whiskered chin grazes my cheek. The sun returns, spreading warmth to my face. “So proud of you, boy.”

What the fuck was that? Did the thing try to talk to me?

“I thought you were toast when that tyre burst. The way you controlled that spin after the blowout. Magnificent. Absolutely fucki—.” Pete grips me by the shoulders, and studies me at arm’s length. He frowns. “What’s wrong, Frank? You look ill.”

My father’s grey eyes narrow, and for the first time as an adult, I lie to his face. “I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong. I ... I can’t believe what’s happened.”

I pull him into a hug and kiss his cheek—another first for us as adults. “We’ve done it, Dad. We’ve only bloody done it.”

Pete breaks off again and wipes his face with his sleeve. His expression reverts to its standard scowl. He coughs and lowers his voice so much I have to lean close to hear the words. “You never call me Dad.”

“And you never swear. So we’re even, right?”

He cuffs the back of my head to show how macho he is and we turn to the team and accept their cheers with fist pumps and whoops of delight.

As we stride into the garage, arms draped over each other’s shoulders, Pete leans in and whispers in my ear once more.

“When you were in the Marshall’s office peeing into your sample cup, I received three phone calls.”

I stop. All thoughts of unfathomable misty apparitions disappear into the excited background chatter. “And?”

Nobody hates suspense more than me.

Pete picks at a nonexistent piece of food that isn’t stuck between his teeth. “The first came from the bank manager asking when I’m going to deposit the winner’s cheque. Didn’t even congratulate us first.”

He turns, carries on walking. I hurry to catch up, but fans bar my way, demanding autographs. A reporter jabs a microphone into my face and I respond to more inane questions with platitudes and naff clichés before catching up to Pete who’s receiving the team’s plaudits. Even Bill Jackson looks happy and I haven’t seen him smile in the fifteen years I’ve known him. The crew roars as one, and hoists me onto bony shoulders. I’m paraded in a lap of honour around the race paddock.

“Put me down, you bloody loonies,” I scream and they half-lower, half-drop me to the concrete. A dozen gloved paws tousle my hair. They aren’t gentle about it either, and I bat them away.

I hand Angus the champagne, and the raucous mechanics gather around the canteen alcove, pulling plastic cups from a tube. Jenny wheels in a sack-barrow loaded with crates of beer and the boys stop still for a moment. Two of the younger ones rush to help and the party gains momentum.

Wow.

Jenny has exchanged her unflattering race-day coveralls for jeans and a tight top with a neckline so low it reveals a cleavage I would write songs about—if I could write songs. The auburn locks, normally pinned tight and swept away from her face, roll in waves across elegant shoulders. Her hair catches the light of the setting sun and turns to lustrous red-gold. Stunning. My heart’s racing faster than it did when I lost the tyre.

I whistle, long and low.

“Why, Miss Money Penny, you scrub up nice.”

Jenny raises an eyebrow. Her sashayed walk emphasises a slim waist and wide hips. She hands me a bottle of pilsner.

“Well done, Frank.” Her lips brush my cheek. “You nearly gave me a heart-attack when the tyre blew.” Electric blue eyes show concern and warmth.

“Thanks, Jen. I”

She pulls me into a hug so close, I’m sure she’s showing me there’s no bra under the tight-fitting blouse. A pulse of heat passes between us as she drives her hips into mine. “See you later?” she asks.

“You betcha. You’re staying for the banquet, right?”

Jenny peels out of our embrace and stands on tiptoes to whisper in my ear. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything. Wait ‘til you see what I’ll be wearing.”

Why my throat is dry with a bottle of beer in my hands, I’ll never understand. I have trouble swallowing. “I ... don’t see how it could beat what you’ve got on right now.”

She beams, pecks my cheek again and wipes away the pale lip gloss with a gentle snick of her thumb. The makeup is another first. Subtle, but spectacular, it highlights her best asset—everything. She wanders off to deal with some official team business that involves fending off more reporters and autograph hunters. Every

now and again, she checks to see whether I'm still staring at her. Her smile tells me she doesn't mind one little bit that I am.

I manage not to drool.

For the next five minutes, Pete deliberately avoids my attempts to make eye contact. It takes a further five to cut him from the herd and corral him into the corner furthest away from the drinking contest. I squeeze my father's forearm so hard he yanks it away with a yelp.

"What's wrong, son?"

"The second?"

"The second what?" Pete feigns puzzlement, although we both know what I'm talking about.

"Come on, Pete. The second phone call. Who?"

Pete purses his lips for a moment and scratches his chin before nodding. "Oh, yes. I remember. Paula called to say 'well done'."

"So, little sister acknowledged my success? That must have hurt." I grin. He knows I'm joking. "So come on. The third call?"

Pete grins. "Oh yeah. Nearly forgot. Just a sec."

He raises a finger and backs away.

What the hell's he up to?

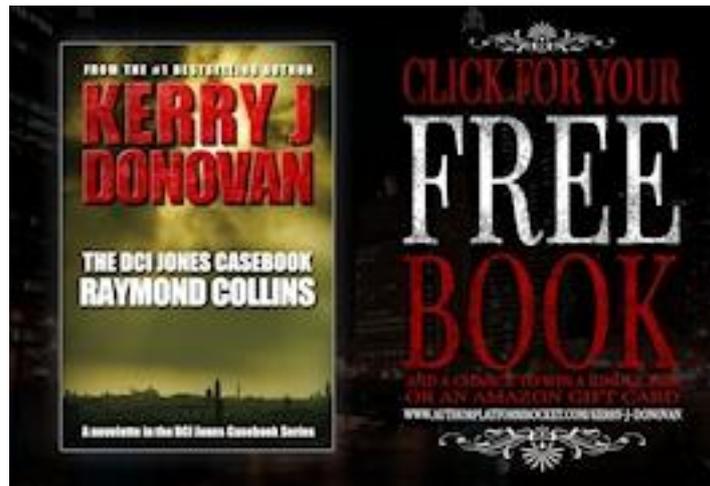
Pete yanks the largest spanner from its clip on the perforated hardboard wall and bashes it three times against a hydraulic ramp. This metal-on-metal sacrilege has the same effect as a shotgun blast in a bank—all eyes turn towards the sound.

Pete gives a genteel stage-school cough and stands tall. "Ahem. Lady and Gentlemen, I wanted to save this little announcement until the banquet, but it seems that my fiery son"—the mechanics roar at Pete's rare use of my nickname—"is too damned impatient."

Pete stretches out his arm to the boys and waves an open hand in my direction. "My dear friends in Team Brazier Racing, may I present to you the newest driver on the Blue Panther Formula 1 Racing Team—Mr Frank Brazier!"

To read on [CLICK HERE](#).

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Kerry's Newsletter

Sign up to Kerry's Newsletter [here](#) to receive notifications of future releases, and special offers (such as subscriber-only price reductions, free novels, prize draws, and free additional content). Never fear, he will not inundate you with mail.

Biography

Kerry J Donovan was born in Dublin. He spent most of his life in the UK, and now lives in the heart of rural Brittany with his wonderful and patient wife, Jan. They have three children and four grandchildren (so far), all of whom live in England. An absentee granddad, Kerry is hugely thankful for the advent of video calling.

The cottage is a pet free zone (apart from the field mice, moles, and red squirrels).

Kerry earned a first class honours degree in Human Biology, and has a PhD in Sport and Exercise Sciences. A former scientific advisor to The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, he helped UK emergency first-responders prepare for chemical attacks in the wake of 9/11. This background adds a scientific edge to his writing. He is also a former furniture designer/maker.

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Other Works

CRIME THRILLERS

The DCI Jones Casebook: Sean Freeman

Veteran cop, DCI David Jones, is tough and uncompromising. His Serious Crime Unit has the best arrest record the Midlands Police Service has ever seen and Jones wants to keep it that way.

Locksmith turned jewel thief, Sean Freeman, is the best cracksmith in the UK. He's never been caught—the police have never even come close. When Freeman's boss forces him to break into the Stafford Museum, the UK's most secure premises outside of the Bank of England he's in trouble—the Stafford is in the heart of David Jones' jurisdiction.

Someone's record is going to suffer.

The DCI Jones Casebook: Raymond Collins

A 70-page novelette to introduce Detective Chief Inspector David Jones: Birmingham, England, a sunny day in the city park. Children play, adults walk—and a man lies dead in a pool of blood. His terrified fiancé screams for help.

The assailant smiles, waves goodbye, and strolls away into the city.

DCI David Jones and his protégé, Detective Sergeant Phil Cryer, are called to investigate the most difficult of crimes—an apparently motiveless and random attack. Hampered by a lack of resources, Jones and Cryer have to act quickly to prevent a murder spree.

The DCI Jones Casebook: Ellis Flynn

When fourteen-year-old Hollie Jardine fails to return home from school, her terrified parents call the police. It doesn't take DCI David Jones, head of the Midlands Police Serious Crime Unit, long to discover a link between Hollie and convicted sex-offender, Ellis Flynn.

With Hollie's chances of survival fading, Jones and his colleague Alex Olganski risk their careers when they ignore protocol to follow Flynn's trail across the Channel into France.

What they discover in an idyllic backwater will stretch Jones' detection skills to the limit, and Alex's loyalty to heartbreak.

ACTION ADVENTURE

On Lucky Shores

In an action-packed tale of secrets and lies in small town America, Chet Walker is a man forced to make decisions that will affect his future and the life of the woman he loves.

Witness to a car crash and in receipt of a cryptic message from a dying man, traveling musician, Chet Walker, reaches the picturesque lakeside town of Lucky Shores. He faces hostility and suspicion from the locals and learns that the information he carries could unlock an eight-year-old mystery—it could also get him killed.

Josephine Dolan, owner of the Lucky Shores diner, wants to bury her past. When Walker arrives with a message from her father, she doesn't want to hear it. She cuts him cold.

When his life is threatened, Chet Walker learns the truth behind the saying, “no good deed goes unpunished.”

FANTASY THRILLER

The Transition of Johnny Swift

Before the accident ...

Frank Brazier has the perfect life. A contract to drive for a Formula 1 team. A supportive family. A stunning girlfriend.

On the surface, everything is great, but Frank keeps a secret. On race days, Shadow-man visits. He sits on the nose cone of Frank's racing car, or floats above the grandstand, waving, taunting, distracting, eating away at his concentration. An accident in the making.

After the accident ...

Frank starts hearing voices. Strange voices. Impossible voices. He's losing his grip on reality and Paula, his sister, is dying. Doctors say she is brain dead. They want to pull the plug, but Frank knows she's still in there, fighting. He can hear her calls.

One day later...

Shadow-man speaks. He says Frank can save Paula, but can Frank pay the price?

SHORT STORIES

The Collection

The Collection includes over two dozen stories ranging in length from fifty word micro shorts to a full-blown novelette. Comedy, drama, crime thrillers, romance, true-life tales, gory horror, historical epic—you'll find samples of each.

The hauntingly evocative semi-autobiographical tale, *Sweet William*, and the poignant, *The Phone Call*, are stories to tug the heart and bring tears to the eye.

In *The Long Wait*, Ryan Chisholm has spent seventeen years waiting to avenge the death of his father.

A Father's Tale is a heart-warming story of family life told in short vignettes.

At over 7,000 words, *The Chamber* is the longest in the book, and perhaps Kerry's most gruesome tale. Psychopath Porter Robinson holds Robert Forbes captive in a cellar and tells him a tale from Porter's childhood. Will Forbes survive, or will he go the way of countless other victims? This is definitely not for the people of a timid disposition.

If you enjoy your fiction in short bites and read across many genres, *The Collection* is certain to delight.