

An excerpt from:

EDEN LOST

A Paranormal Mystery

by

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San Miguel Allende Books
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, October 9, was one of those days you mark in your mind, you recall what you were doing when you heard the news, even what you were wearing. Not that it was anything as big as a presidential assassination or a terrorist attack. This isn't Washington or New York; only our small city of Eden Valley, Arizona, population 19,400. Yet, for those of us who lived through it, terror was a big part of it.

It began with a call from Mayor Lucy Burk that afternoon. I was sitting at my outdoor desk on the terrace right outside my home office. It's just an old wooden kitchen table with a sun-faded oilcloth over it; we're not fancy here. She called me because I'd been the mayor who preceded her. My term had ended three months before.

"It's started up again, Barrett," she said. "I was hoping I'd never have to say that. I haven't called anyone else, yet, but I'm going to have to make some kind of statement for the press. They've already caught the scent, and you know they're going to run with it. Maybe you could help me."

"My god! Not after twelve years?" The tone of her voice was measured and controlled, but I could hear the stress in it below the words. This was information I'd half expected when I was in office, but I was never forced to confront it.

"It sure as hell looks like it, except that this time the victim's a boy, seventeen years old. It happened yesterday afternoon."

"Who is he?"

"His name was Planchet, Scott Planchet."

"I think I've met him. Mandy knows him." Mandy is my 15-year-old daughter. "Are you sure it's the same manner of death?"

"I've got the autopsy report in front of me now, and I've already compared it with the ones from before. I got them from Semple an hour ago."

Doug Semple's an ex-Marine who's our police chief. With a staff of thirty-five, he'd probably need twice that if we were close to the border, but we don't have those immigration problems much up here in the mountains.

"I'll spare you the gory details," Lucy went on, "but the kid's throat was ripped out. You wouldn't want to see these photos. I sure wish I hadn't. The press has already got some of the story, but you won't see it on page one until tomorrow."

"Then get ready for a flood of phone calls. Did Semple say whether he thought it might be a copycat killing?"

"After twelve years? That's a long time in coming, don't you think?"

"Well, what else could it be? Dwayne Belisle was killed by a mob, so I hardly think he's come back to do it again."

"And I don't either. Anyway, I sent a copy of the autopsy over to Dr. Marcus. He did all the earlier victims."

"Lucy, let me know how I can help you with this. Whatever you need."

“Well, thank you for that. What would you say to reassure the public? I suppose I should’ve been, but I wasn’t ready for this. I’m still just learning my job.”

“I’d say something like this: ‘Even as our thoughts go out to the victim’s family, the city government is focused 100% behind the police department’s effort to make sure there are no more killings.’ Underline the last three words. Don’t go on and on about it, and make your statements short and easy to quote. That way the press can’t edit them in a way that serves their message.” When she hung up I wasn’t sure she was reassured, but I had given her a good quote for the press. When I was first in office I had a tendency to over-explain the issues every time I made a public statement.

Twelve years ago, Dwayne Belisle had been caught leaving the scene of his sixth murder, at least that was the assumption, because the manner of death was the same as in all five earlier cases. By that time Eden Valley was so anguished by the previous murders of teenage girls within an eight-month period that the town had become an emotional powder keg. The police had been on overtime patrols for months. People looked out at their neighbors with suspicion as they drew their drapes at dusk. Agents from the FBI, with an expert on serial killings the state government had brought in, all spent time investigating without any result. A radio talk show host in Phoenix dubbed us “Murder Valley, Arizona,” and it stuck. Tourist traffic dropped to nearly zero, not that it was ever that great. We’re mainly just a place to stop for lunch and gas up on the great Arizona highway system, or to settle into your mobile-home park and dream the rest of your life away as the air conditioner throbbed.

Most of the time when you see someone reading in his car here, it’s a map.

By the time Dwayne Belisle was caught in the act and killed by a mob, Eden Valley was so keyed up that parents accompanied their teenage daughters everywhere. Dating virtually stopped, except for mass gatherings in public places. One of our three movie theaters went out of business. If you were observed looking at a girl under twenty on the street, your life was at risk. I was in my third year of teaching at Valley High then, with no thought of ever running for office. All the teachers used to gather on the sidewalk to watch the buses load, and a police car accompanied each of them as it dropped the kids off on their doorstep at the end of the day.

Worst of all, when it was over, even when Wayne Belisle’s body was released by the authorities and buried in a private ceremony by his family, an irrational fear persisted in Eden Valley that has never fully dissipated. Everyone who lived here then was scarred by that same deep and lasting wound. Today, even after twelve years have passed, parents are still overprotective of their children, and the kids of this generation are clearly more tentative than the last. Now our new mayor, Lucy Burk was telling me we’d gone right back into that familiar terror.

After I hung up I sat in the same place in my outside study for a while—a terrace with long mountain views where I’d launched my new writing career. I’d been starting out with a bit of a memoir about my days in college. It was no more than a way of putting my toe in the water; it wasn’t something anyone would want to publish, or even read. I

thought of it as no more than an exercise, a way to loosen up and see whether I could put a story together. In the light of these events, it now seemed frivolous and silly. Light-minded and chatty, it was a frothy tale of beer by the pitcher and pizza by the slice. Each time I read it I was more aware how sentimental and self-indulgent it was. Writing the dialogue—inventing it, really, after twenty years—made me aware how superficial we all sounded on paper. Looking around, I realized that Mayor Lucy’s call had already cast a palpable shadow over my second-floor terrace, a private space that’s my refuge from the past, and my springboard to future writing success.

I walked back into the house and called Mandy’s name. When she didn’t answer I knocked on her bedroom door. I expected no response, and there was none. I rattled the knob and found it locked, so I knocked again. After a long moment she appeared, wearing a pink sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off ragged at the shoulders, and a pair of jeans with the legs cut off at the highest possible point. If this outfit made a statement, it would have to be that no limb could be covered to any degree whatever. Her fingernails and toenails were shiny black, and on her feet she wore black flip-flops with an orange plastic flower on the band. The effect looked like Halloween, which wasn’t far off. I made a gesture to her with both hands of pulling the ear buds out so I didn’t have to shout to be heard.

“Sit down,” I said, hearing the tinny sound of rock music from the buds in her hands. “I’ve got some shocking news.” I wanted her to appreciate how serious it was without conveying that Leslie, Mandy’s stepmother, and I were panicked about it. Leslie hadn’t heard the news, yet, but I knew what her reaction would be.

“What?” She didn’t sit. A note of impatience soured her tone.

“There’s been a murder in Eden Valley. The victim was someone you know.”

“So?”

So? Her voice carried no curiosity. Why had I bothered to interrupt her for something trivial like a person she knew being murdered? Mandy stood with her hands on her hips, not looking at me. This was not unusual; I felt like she hadn’t looked directly at Leslie or me in a long time. Even the pavement outside in the street was more interesting to her than I was. Perhaps remembering my own behavior at this period, I had long dreaded this age in Mandy. When her mother, Celeste, died when Mandy was an infant, one of the first thoughts I had, when I could think clearly again, was how difficult it was going to be raising a daughter without a mother. When I married Leslie, Mandy was just at an age—four—when she was starting to ask why she didn’t have a mother like her friends, and I thought that deficit would finally be cured by Leslie’s presence in her life before it had done much damage. The truth was, that although she’d gotten along well with Leslie for several years, she was now just another person for Mandy to ignore.

I’d heard of low-impact aerobics, but we were engaged in low-impact parenting, where whatever you did had no noticeable effect.

There were times, like now, when I couldn’t help but recall the Mandy of five years ago, when she’d started her own doll hospital. She solicited the damaged and worn

dolls of her friends and hauled them to our house, where she recruited Leslie to stitch up or even replace the torn clothes while I repaired fractures and scrapes with epoxy and paint. I had taken it as an early hint that Mandy might find her place in life in a service career of some kind, like nursing or pediatric medicine. I started to tell her in more detail about my teaching job, which was then in its final year. From the questions she asked, I began to feel she really understood some of it. Naturally, my foremost fear as a parent was what effect Celeste's absence had had on Mandy's first four years. Sometimes you could only see it emerge later, but I was starting to think we might have dodged that bullet.

But like an unexpected gale, a sea change had come over Mandy at puberty, an effect whose origins I couldn't define, since it felt like more than merely an irruption of hormones. I'd had no experience with puberty in girls, and having no sisters, I had no detailed expectations of what behavior to expect, either, so it didn't surprise me. It was disturbing, but I still didn't understand it. Leslie said she thought it was a manifestation of that age; one of many ways girls could be, going through that difficult time, and not especially the best one, in Mandy's case. My teaching experience had always been confined to high school juniors and seniors, kids beyond puberty. Not that they didn't have their own issues, but what I was seeing in Mandy was not something I'd ever seen in my classroom at Valley High.

"Mandy, don't you want to know who was murdered?" I felt like shaking her until her head wobbled, but instead I only gently placed my hands on her shoulders. She shook them off in a shudder.

"Sure, 'cuz I'm busy. Tell me quick, then." All thought of her in a service career had long since died a solitary death.

For a moment I tried to assess how well she might have known Scott Planchet, but her social life had been so opaque to me for several years that I came up with nothing. She never volunteered information, and you'd have to have her followed to get any facts.

"He was a kid in school, Scott Planchet." I didn't intend to give her much detail.

She shrugged and tossed her hair back. "Sad, but he's older. Is that all?"

Older was apparently a measure of irrelevance, of being a candidate for discard. I knew this already, since how relevant was I in her life anymore? I nodded slowly as she walked away with a shrug.

"I want you to be careful when you're out, OK? Look out for strangers. Eden Valley's got serious problems again, alright?" I thought I could see, from the angle of her neck and a slight further twitch of her shoulder, that she'd heard me, but she didn't respond. I'd taught enough high school kids over ten years so that this attitude was not unfamiliar to me, but I'd never understood what was behind it. I thought of it as cultivated indifference. It was a way of not appearing to care about anything, of an unreasoning cynicism so deep you could never cut through it. I had seen it mostly as an attitude about learning. After all, why bother, if nothing matters?

I watched Mandy pull the door closed behind her, putting the ear buds back in with the other hand. Below her shoulder-length, thick, auburn hair, letters on the back of

her sweatshirt read, SCUM. There were times when I couldn't believe Mandy was my daughter, not only because of her attitude, but from her physical appearance too. My hair had been blond when I was young, for one thing, although now it had darkened to an undecided shade of brown. Celeste's hair had been black; she was part Hispanic, as a lot of people are in this area. The two together didn't yield auburn, but you never knew what other genes for hair color were in the genetic mix. I stood staring at Mandy's closed door for a moment, expecting nothing much. It was hard to underestimate her responses; no matter how little I expected from her, I always got less. Finally, knowing I'd get nothing else, I went downstairs to find Leslie.

Our house sits on two acres of a modest rise that's full of dips and hollows on the south edge of town. Here the houses are spread out. Across the entire front, ours has a deep shady porch. On the end that's shadiest on summer afternoons hangs a porch swing I made myself years ago. Next to it is a breakfast table. Tucked beneath is the single garage door. We're just high enough to have the kind of view over the city of Eden Valley that you might get from a fourth floor window downtown, if any of the buildings were that high. None are. Two stories is the normal height. Aside from a level apron of sandy yard in front, the lot slopes toward Carson Avenue. This is our main street, and by the time it gets out as far as our place, it's more like a country road—still paved but meandering nowhere special. The houses are set on big informal lots, and sited to accommodate the uneven terrain. The upper level, where I work, has three bedrooms, the smallest of which is my office. It opens onto the shaded terrace that has the long mountain views to the west.

Eden Valley was just a valley before it was a town. A geologist once told me it had long ago held a wide, shallow river that was fed by more than a dozen springs bubbling out of the surrounding slopes. Many of those springs were still active when the town was founded around a watering hole toward the middle of the 1890s, but the river was long gone by then. Water was still plentiful only because the wells were often near the surface. Here trains stopped to refill their boilers. The surrounding ranchers dug irrigation ditches and prospered with both crops and livestock. In the surrounding hills, turquoise and copper were soon discovered. The copper was never economically viable, but interest in the turquoise persists to this day, mostly as individuals working small claims with hand tools. The most important reserve of that jeweler's resource is the old Jezebel Mine, on the property of the Belisle family—where Dwayne Belisle, our local serial killer, grew up and is now thankfully buried. A lot more time will have to pass before he's regarded with the same kind of affection that people feel for Billy the Kid, another killer who passed through these parts long ago. At least the people he killed were also armed, but not as fast.

Now the plentiful springs are only a memory. The water table has retreated and the town subsists on much deeper wells. Our largest industry is idleness, and it's been brought to a high degree of skill here, as retired snowbirds kick back on the porches of

their immobile homes and watch the scattered clouds drift eastward toward New Mexico, coasting along on the flow of gin and memories.

I found Leslie in the garage putting away some gardening tools. She was wearing an old striped work shirt of mine like a smock, and a pair of battered jeans. When I came in, she brushed a lock of her dark hair back from her deep brown eyes with a leather-gloved hand. She had that look of fulfilled weariness she often displayed when she'd been working in the yard and making a visible effect on this harsh and stubborn environment. When her expression changed I knew she was reading disaster in my face. I believed then you could never put one over on Leslie, and I never tried.

"I got a call from Mayor Lucy," I said. "The killings have started again."

She pulled off a dirty leather glove and put her hand over her mouth. "What? Oh My God! Who was it?"

"A kid named Scott Planchet. He was seventeen."

I went through what I knew about it. I also knew Leslie's first reaction would be to chain Mandy up in a lightless corner of the basement and install steel grills over the windows. Mine wasn't much different.

"So it's going to be boys who die this time around?"

"You can't be sure of that. Maybe it's already over. It might only be one this time."

"Did you talk to her yet?"

"I tried to. It didn't seem like she gave a damn."

"Of course she gives a damn. That's just her protective coloring. Sometimes you're too ready to take her at face value. I'll go up and talk to her. I'm not going to let her toss this off like she does everything else. This is a tragedy that affects all of us."

Leslie threw her gloves down on the bench next to her tools and disappeared up the stairs to the main level.

I wasn't surprised that we both assumed the killings wouldn't end with Scott Planchet's death; it would be the start of a series again. That's one of the effects that remained with us from twelve years back.

This new tragedy put me in a reflective mood, and it wasn't only about being apprehensive for Mandy's safety. With the first wave of killings, I was in a different place. My life was at a more formative stage. To be revisited by this disaster now was far more challenging. I guess I have more to lose this time.

Part of this was that I'd been thinking recently that I was doing pretty well. At thirty-nine, I had just finished a four-year term as mayor of Eden Valley. At a \$5,000 annual salary, it was the lowest-paid job on the entire city payroll. The city founders had believed the position ought to go to someone who didn't need the money, someone in a payback mode after a successful career in business. I got their point, but it was awkward at times to think that the guy who swept out my office at the end of the day made four times what I did. I usually made sure I was gone before he arrived so I didn't have to see

the look on his face as he emptied my wastebasket. He'd been in one of my classes when I was still teaching, and I'd ranked him near the bottom that year.

I ended my term as mayor without being known as much of an innovator. Other than launching a subsidized preschool program for the children of working moms, I'd focused on strengthening existing programs, and maintaining and improving the city's physical plant, its streets and utilities. In my last year, we even banked a modest surplus. I had known for most of my term that I wasn't going to run again. The job was too much about filling in the tiny voids between all the other jobs in city government, meeting needs that had never been anticipated. It also required too much schmoozing with companies that thought they might want to put up a plant or a branch office in Eden Valley. Most of them liked our tax structure, and many liked our political attitudes, which were pro-business.

Yet often they were spooked by our water problems, once they looked into them in detail. If it wasn't that, they didn't care for our demographics, and were afraid they couldn't get employees with the kind of training they wanted. I bought a lot of lunches for people I didn't ever see again. At the end, I spent a week briefing the incoming mayor, Lucy Burk, on what was going on in every department. She owned a realty agency and thought the position would do her some good. Lucy Burk didn't need a big paycheck either. There was usually enough slack time at city hall so she could slip away for property closings, which weren't that frequent. When my term was over, the only things I took away with me were the leadership experience and the nameplate from my desk: Barrett Chase, Mayor. It now sits on the much smaller desk in my home office, resting on a surface of distressed pine rather than polished walnut. Behind the desk chair, on the back wall, is my framed certificate from Rotary, thanking me for my support.

I'd taught English before my run at politics, and I was able to quit that with relief to run for mayor, because I'd done something everyone wants to do—I won the lottery.

Not one of the really big ones, not like the Powerball, but a second-rate affair that paid me a mere \$1,000 a week for life. It came with a guarantee of twenty years in case I overindulged my success and died young on a barroom floor, so it was worth just over a million dollars at a minimum. Still, even if it was not the end of the world, it was a life-changing experience. My parents had started a college fund for Mandy before her birth, never dreaming what would happen to Celeste, and it was planned well enough to look like it would cover four years at Arizona tuition costs, when she was ready. The proceeds from Celeste's life insurance from her job at the highway department went into my savings, and the mortgage insurance we'd prudently bought paid off the house. It didn't make me feel any better, but at the time, it certainly took the heat off things financially.

Gradually, I realized I had known for a while that I was tired of teaching. After ten years, I was sick of the same majority of juniors and seniors every year that flat out didn't give a damn about learning. The lottery made it possible to kiss all that goodbye with no regrets, and run for mayor. From my experience in the school system, I had a few ideas about changes that ought to be made. As usual, no one could be found to oppose

my nomination. It often took some arm-twisting to get anyone to run. My cheerful, upbeat face was plastered all over town.

Looking back now at the way I burned out on teaching and then got tired of my only term as mayor, it makes me wonder if I don't have a bit of the rolling stone in my personality. Now I was making my next move.

Toward the end of my final month in office I'd located an online creative writing program where I didn't have to be seeking a bachelor's degree to enroll. I could take only the courses that interested me. It was going to be the next phase of my life, and if it didn't ever pay much, I could still get along fine. By that time I had realized that teaching American literature was mainly a way of getting close to real writing without taking the risk of trying it seriously myself. Think of who you came up against if you did. Joyce? Faulkner? Where would I ever be in that lineup? The fact that it didn't matter now gave me a new kind of freedom. I called it a lark, a term I'd never used before about any of my earlier efforts. But life was somehow lighter now, freer from consequences. More than anything else, the fact that the teen killings had started up under Mayor Lucy's regime rather than mine confirmed that.

Of course, there have been some dark spaces in this benign tableau of life in the high desert. Celeste had died giving birth to Mandy. It was before Eden Valley had its own hospital, and that night the clinic was manned by an intern. I guess he must have been considered competent by the people who trusted him with that job, but Celeste, at twenty-three, hemorrhaged to death in delivery. The young doctor wasn't able to stop the flow of her blood. Mandy was fine. This was before Jack Marcus, our present doctor, came to town. I've since gotten to know him well, and I can imagine what he would have said at that time: sometimes there are situations you just can't understand, no matter how smart and how experienced you are. Science is good, but it doesn't explain everything that happens. He was right; I've never been able to explain it to myself since, in fifteen years. I forget exactly when it was that I stopped trying, but I truly have.

Now the murders had started again. Who would be able to explain that?

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