

DEAD END

Craig Faustus Buck

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The scumbag pulls up to the valet stand in a BMW worth over a hundred grand the way it's tricked out. I guess I should have expected him to show up sooner or later. Kama Sushi is a celebrity magnet and, depressingly, Dr. Luke Vico qualifies.

He's with a bleached blonde just barely of drinking age. Through the windshield I see her shouting, but a hundred grand buys a lot of soundproofing so I don't hear her until I open the passenger door: "You lying piece of...." He slaps the end of her sentence out of her mouth with the back of his hand. Before I can react she's out of the car, running into the restaurant, sobbing.

Vico takes his time climbing out of the driver's seat. It's all I can do to keep from knocking him flat when I hand him his ticket. But I'll be damned if I'm going to give him the grounds to have me locked up for assault.

“Well, well, well,” he says with a patronizing grin. “If it isn’t *Ex*-Detective Beltran. I see you’ve come up in the world.”

“Fuck you, Vico.”

“Just keep your filthy fingers off the change in my ashtray. I’m going to count it before I leave.”

As if I’m morally bankrupt for parking cars, but it’s okay for him to smack his girlfriend around, not to mention what he did to Angela Landau. He walks away gloating, leaving me to ponder what I might put in his gas tank to rot the engine slowly enough to remove me from the suspect list.

I push the button to power up the luxury coupe and head toward the overflow lot, floating over potholes like they were salt flats. I’ve got to give the guy credit for his taste in cars. I’m feeling giddy from the lush aroma of Napa leather when an Irish setter bolts into my path. I hit the brakes and the Beemer stops sharply, throwing me so hard into my seatbelt that I feel a black-and-blue sash start to bloom on my chest. But one lucky setter trots off untouched.

Something catches my eye in the passenger footwell. A woman’s five-inch stiletto shoe, shiny emerald green, maybe satin. But what ices my spine is the splotch that covers the toe. Against the deep green it’s impossible to tell the color of the stain, but

it's dark. Could be motor oil or paint or ketchup, but some vestigial cop's intuition tells me it's blood.

I'm guessing it's a size seven. I don't check to find out because I don't want to touch it for two reasons, the first being I'm living out of my car and can't afford to lose this valet gig if anyone sees me messing around in a customer's ride. And second, I suspect there's a chance this shoe might wind up in a crime lab.

No one voluntarily exits a car wearing only one shoe unless she's in a cast, in which case the good foot wouldn't be wearing a spike. As I back the BMW into a space, I imagine a struggling woman being wrestled out of the passenger side, losing a shoe under the seat as she kicks and screams.

Dr. Vico is the most notorious killer ever to walk free from a courtroom. And because I was the one who botched the chain of evidence, the last thing I want to do is leave my prints in his car on a fuck-me pump with a possible bloodstain.

I drum my fingers on the leather-trimmed steering wheel as I eye the shoe. When they discovered the mutilated body of Vico's girlfriend, Angela Landau, the coroner determined she'd been alive for three days before finally succumbing. She'd been a music major at UCLA, a violinist, twenty-two years old when Vico duct-taped her to an old ping-pong table in the basement rec room of an

abandoned house and stripped her naked with a scalpel. Then he took his time carving immaculately calligraphed obscenities all over her body until she'd finally, mercifully bled out. Everyone knows he did it, but in a wildly publicized case, the LAPD and the D.A. were unable to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. Mostly because of me.

I was one of four homicide dicks assigned to the case. On my way from the scene to the crime lab I made a ten-minute detour by my house to grab a lunch bag from my wife. I had evidence in my trunk. By the time Vico's hit squad of eight-hundred-dollar-an-hour lawyers got finished, my leftover meat loaf sandwich had turned into a wanton extravaganza of evidence-tampering.

Now, out of nowhere, I'm getting a second chance at blood evidence against Vico? *I swear, Your Honor, he just happened into my lot and I just happened to park his car and there just happened to be a blood-stained shoe on the passenger side that implicated him in a murder.* The defense team would have an orgasm over that chain of custody. This whiff of salvation is too ironic to be real. Vico's got to be setting me up. As if Dr. Look-Good doesn't have enough to do between reviving the faces of aging actresses and torturing young ones to death.

I'm startled by a rap on the window. I look up to see my friend and boss Dougie gesturing for me to get out of the car. I open the door.

"Sorry," I say.

"What the hell, Johnno, you jerking off in there? We got three cars backed into the street."

I climb out and his face morphs from anger to pity.

He says, "Look, I know it's weird that Vico came in, but you gotta let this thing with him go, man. It's gonna take you down, you don't let it go. Just 'cause he ain't in a cage don't mean *you* gotta be. Free yourself, Johnno."

That's easy for Dougie to say. His life isn't shrouded in the image of Angela's partially decomposed, blatantly exposed young body clad only in dried blood, splayed within the rectangular white border of that green Devil's altar, eyes still wide with terror. How am I supposed to free myself from that?

I follow Dougie to the valet stand, still consumed by that shoe. If it *is* drenched in blood, there's a lot of it. That was no shaving nick. I pocket the Beemer keys for the time being and hop into a Subaru Outback that smells of stale French fries.

Maybe that shoe is some message from God for me to stop Vico from killing again. I wouldn't put it past him to have the stiletto's owner stashed

somewhere, maybe still alive, trapped naked in some cold basement, screaming uselessly into her gag, hoping to die before Vico comes back. But maybe that's what he wants me to think. Maybe he's just toying with me for his own demented pleasure, savoring my misery like a hard-won trophy.

I park the Subaru and hustle back down the alley toward the restaurant.

If he's playing some sick game, why did he wait four years? Unless he didn't know where I was. It's not easy to find a guy who's living out of his car. But even if he did know, would he really waste his time devising some far-fetched entrapment scheme? Not likely. Why take the risk if there's nothing to gain? He's a psychopath, not an idiot.

As I hang the Subaru keys on the nail-board I see Dougie patting his pockets, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Kama Sushi is one of the few joints in town that still gives matchbooks away. I pull one from my pocket and give him a light.

Gut instinct never failed me as a cop and the one I've got now is giving me a bellyache. That shoe is no joke. Vico must have another victim, maybe still alive, and I could be the only one who knows it.

I open the front door of a Volvo for a grimacing woman. Dougie opens the rear to release two preteen boys punching each other's shoulders. Some lives are simple. I hand Mom her ticket as she

tells the boys to knock it off or she'll make them order vegan.

I climb into the Volvo.

I'd go to the cops but my credibility is even lower than my pride. If I hadn't skipped dinner to spend that night working the Angela Landau crime scene, I might not have been so desperate to eat something the next morning. And if I hadn't stuck to the truth on the stand they might never have found out about that fucking ten-minute detour. And if I hadn't blown my top on TV when they let that weasel's ass walk, I might still be working homicide. And if I hadn't put my fist through the living room wall, my wife might not have left me. But impulse control was never my strong suit—maybe the only thing Vico and I have in common.

I nab a rare spot on the street for the Volvo. The sounds of nearby Ventura Boulevard throb in the night. I look up at the full moon and I see the overhead lamp above that ping-pong table illuminating the horror.

If Vico were playing some sick joke, why use real blood? Any dark liquid would do. I'd get suckered into taking the shoe to the police, they'd test the stain and find soy sauce from some sushi mishap and I'd be the laughing stock of the blogosphere all over again.

I walk back down the alley watching Dougie lean back against a light pole and blow two streams of smoke like a cartoon dragon. His long white ponytail shines in the moonlight. He inhales and holds in the smoke to savor the toxins.

I imagine Vico's latest victim imprisoned in his basement, terrified, suffering a slow, excruciating death.

I feel the Beemer's keys impressing my thigh through my jeans and try to remember whether I'd noticed the shoe in the footwell before I braked for the dog or whether the sudden stop had dislodged it from beneath the seat. If it hadn't been there to begin with, I should have jammed it back under. If it *is* evidence of a crime, I just served it up on a platter for Vico to find and destroy. I feel like screaming.

I tell Dougie I'm taking my break, then go looking for Pablo, the Bolivian actor-slash-busboy. I find him grabbing a smoke by the kitchen door.

"Pablito."

"Johno. Sup?"

"I need some gloves," I say, then as an afterthought, "and a pencil."

He sticks his cigarette in his mouth, squints from the smoke and rubs two fingers together. "Buck fifty, Huevon."

I dig six quarters from my pocket and hand them over. He drops his smoke and disappears

through the door. I follow him into the kitchen and while I wait for him to collect my booty I bum a piece of Juicy Fruit gum from the sous chef. It's so sweet it zaps the roots of my teeth.

Pablito has to go out to the hostess station to steal the pencil so it takes him a minute to get back. He hands me a yellow number two and a handful of cheap plastic food gloves.

"Don't say I never gave you nothing," he says.

"You didn't."

I walk out and squeeze behind the dumpsters so Dougie doesn't see me head back to the Beemer. I kneel by the passenger side, pull on two gloves and open the door. The dome light glares for a second but I jab the switch in the jamb with the Juicy Fruit to kill the light and keep it that way until I'm done.

I look at the stiletto. I'm nervous about touching it, like it's a live wire, but I clench my jaw and grab it by the heel. Size seven. I was dead on. I can tell it's expensive, not because I know jack about women's shoes or because I found it in a hundred-thousand-dollar car, but because, even through the food gloves, the satin feels as soft as a woman's breast, a texture I vaguely remember from before my debacle cost me, in rapid succession, my job, my house and my size-seven-shoed wife.

I sniff the stain hoping to recognize some foodstuff. No such luck. I lick the tip of my middle finger and touch the stain. A trace of red transfers to my glove. I'm struck by a dumb urge to taste it. The idea disgusts me. I can almost see the pathogens squirming around on the tip of my finger, tiny creatures in a scarlet tar pit. But logic is little more than a condiment for the dread and hatred that's consuming my better judgment. Like an addict with a dirty needle I can't stop myself from plunging ahead. I take a tentative lick. The rusty taste of blood confirms my worst fear.

I know that no woman's going to accidentally walk away from a car wearing one pump. I know the slimebag has no compunction about beating women. I know the last time our paths crossed he'd tortured and murdered an innocent girl. And I know there's a lot of blood on that shoe. All of this builds to a gruesome conclusion.

I shove the shoe back under the seat and make sure it's wedged in tight so it'll still be there when I come up with some reasonable cause to persuade the police to search his car.

I try the glove box. It's locked. This doesn't surprise me, considering the asshole's the kind of guy who counts his parking change, but it's a wasted precaution since Einstein gave us his own key instead of a valet key. I unlock the compartment and

do a quick check of the contents. According to his registration, he lives on Malibu Road. A beachfront address. He's moved up from the condo overlooking the 405 in Westwood where he was living when he murdered Angela four years ago. I guess infamy isn't a career killer for a plastic surgeon. Celebrity has its perks, no matter what its source.

I find a discarded menu on the ground and pencil his address on the back.

After I lock the glove box I retrieve the Juicy Fruit, ditch it in a dumpster with the gloves and go back to the valet stand to hang up the keys.

Twenty minutes later, a cab pulls up. Luke Vico comes out of the restaurant with the blonde following two steps behind. She's got a smoking body, the kind that strains the seams of her cocktail dress making every guy within eyeshot pray for weak thread. I'm surprised I didn't notice it when she arrived. I guess I was blinded by rage. She walks with her head bowed, the bruise on her left cheek starting to discolor.

Vico opens the cab for her and, as she gets in, he gives her a shove, sending her sprawling across the back seat. Her head smacks into the opposite door. He tells her to fuck herself then throws two twenties on her back and slams the door.

As the cab pulls away I retrieve the keys to get the asshole's BMW. I make sure to fart in the car

before letting him in. He stiffs me on the tip before he even has a chance to smell it.

At closing time I slip into the Kama Sushi men's room for my nightly routine. As I brush my teeth, I stare at the mirror and wonder who I'm looking at. The face isn't mine anymore. My brow resembles the tracks of a drunken plowman. My eyes glow green, but from the fluorescents, not from within. It's a face of last resort, worn and torn, like one of those "before" pictures in a plastic surgery ad. What the hell happened to me?

I spit out, take advantage of the toilet, then walk the three blocks to the nearest street parking that isn't permit only.

The sight of my aqua '64 GTO convertible gives me a momentary thrill. Her stacked quad headlights greet me like a lover's eyes. I call her Marylou and she's the object of my desire, if a bit cramped to live in. She is also the one and only thing of beauty I was able to salvage from my former life. I had to give up my half of the house for that car. Not the smartest financial move I've ever made, but on the other hand, that house was never going to get me from zero to sixty in four-point-six seconds.

I run my hand over Marylou's "Bobcat" badge, handcrafted from Bonneville and Catalina nameplates, then I climb in and drive over to my usual overnight spot behind a pet store in Van Nuys.

I lower the Cone of Silence, which is what I call putting a sunscreen across my windshield and taping cardboard over the windows. With all my earthly belongings packed to the headliner in the back, the passenger seat doesn't have much room to move but I tilt it back as far as possible to get some sleep.

Marylou is usually my secret cocoon, my tranquil inner sanctum where I can cuddle up and close the world out. But tonight, thoughts of that damned shoe keep circling inside the car like hungry sharks.

After a half-hour of turmoil, I can't take it anymore. I ignite the Bobcat's souped-up 389 and head for Malibu, taking the freeway south and looping through Santa Monica to the Pacific Coast Highway. The moon rakes the ocean like a spotlight in the balmy night. I drop the convertible top and let the salty wind whip my hair as I eat up the asphalt doing sixty.

By the time I reach Malibu Road it's after one. I turn off PCH and slow to a crawl. The adrenaline rush of the open highway gives way to the hush of the dark two-lane cul-de-sac. The ocean can be heard but not seen on the far side of the wall-to-wall houses, but beneath its roar, Vico's neighborhood seems eerily quiet. There aren't many cars parked on the street, but each one is worth more than the home I once cherished. The moon, now over

the water, leaves the fronts of the houses in shadow making it hard to see their addresses. I finally get out of the car and light a match. The address I see is within striking distance of Luke Vico's, so I pull Marylou onto a sandy shoulder and douse her engine.

An owl hoots as I walk down the road. I count houses until I think I've found the right one then light another match to double-check the address.

The front of the Neo-Mid-Century house is a stark concrete wall broken up by three steel garage doors, a steel front door, six asymmetrically spaced square steel-framed windows and a steel garden gate cut into a two-story sheer wooden wall made of horizontal varnished twelve-by planks. The place feels like a fortress.

About a quarter of a mile down the road I passed a public beach access gate so I head back in that direction, carefully counting the houses as I go so I can find Vico's from the ocean side.

I reach the gate to find it locked. So much for public access. But it's short enough to scale so I lumber over. A few concrete steps take me to what would be the beach if the tide wasn't high. As it is, the waves surge through the pilings below the raised houses, crashing into the seawall beneath them.

A woman's scream startles me. Then I realize it's the cry of a passing gull. I'm jumpy and I don't like it. The fact that I have no plan doesn't help.

I head back to the car to watch the house until the tide goes out.

By the time the sky turns from charcoal to ash, a thick morning fog has rolled in, reflecting the state of my sleep-deprived mind. The dashboard rally clock says five forty-eight and since I spent three weeks restoring it, I trust it to be within a few minutes of the truth.

I drive to a gas station for a pit stop and sustenance. I use the restroom then buy a large cup of coffee and some cellophane cuisine. I pay the four bucks with quarters and walk out feeling lighter. The coffee clears my head as I resume my stakeout on Malibu Road.

Three hours later, Vico's garage door rolls up. I watch the BMW's backup lights glow and I think I catch a whiff of brimstone. I recognize Vico when he pulls out and I slide down so he doesn't see me as he passes. But I'm sure he notices my GTO. Even in L.A., a pristine Aqua Bobcat stands out.

Once the BMW rounds the curve to put me out of rear-view range, I get out of the car and walk up to Vico's front door. Before I look around I want to make sure no one else is home. At least no one who's not taped down. I ring the bell. No one

answers. I ring again and bang on the door for good measure. Nothing.

I hustle back to the access gate and hop over. What a difference four hours makes. At low tide, the water line is a good six feet lower and sixty feet farther out to sea. The beach is wet and hard-packed, easy to walk. The moist sand has been patterned by receding rivulets of salt water, giving it the appearance of fallen leaves.

I make my way down the beach to Vico's. From the sand, the house looks well-maintained but old. It's some sort of Cape Codish style, a completely different look from the modern façade in front.

Behind me in the growing light, two snowy egrets wade the surf, looking for breakfast. A brown pelican skims the chop, doing the same. The breeze smells briny from beached kelp.

A set of weather-beaten steps flows down the north face of the house, ending at a platform suspended mid-air about three feet above the sand, a testament to the erosion of the coastline. The house itself juts over the beach, half on a foundation behind the seawall, half extending out on massive redwood pilings. An isolated tide pool juts out of the sand in front with a red starfish the size of a catcher's mitt clinging to the craggy black rock.

It's early. There's only one other person on the beach and he's walking away with his back to me. I scan the neighboring decks and windows and see no other potential witnesses. So I walk to the platform and hoist myself on to steal my way up the steps. My nerves feel taut like a violin string at the snapping point.

There's a deck off the bottom level but it doesn't connect to the stairway. I hop the railing to check it out. An oversized sliding glass door faces the deck. It's locked and the oiled teak mini-blinds inside are closed tight.

I climb back over the railing and head toward the upper floor. The steps end at a modest back door. There's a hose and a cold water shower just beyond it with sand on the landing from rinsed feet. This level has a deck as well, but it's too far from the side stairs for me to gain access.

I pull on a pair of the food gloves I got from Pablo and try the back door. It's locked. But the window beside it is closed only by an old-fashioned sash latch. I examine the sill for an alarm system. I don't see any wires or sensors, but that doesn't mean there aren't any. I don't care. At this point a B-and-E first offense is the last thing I'm worried about. He kept Angela alive for three days. That's all I'm thinking. I pull out a credit card, slide it between the upper and lower sashes and jimmy the latch.

I open the window and step back, prepared to bolt down the stairs if I hear an alarm. When I had a house the alarm had a forty-five second grace period to let you punch in your code. That's how long I wait. I also listen for the phone to ring. If there's a silent alarm, the security service won't dispatch a unit until they call the house to make sure the system wasn't accidentally tripped. At least, that's how it works at the restaurant.

I glance down at the beach to make sure no one's watching, then I wriggle through the narrow opening into the house.

There's a washing machine beneath the window. I slide across it and swivel onto the floor of a utility room. I try to still my nervous shakes to listen for any sounds of life in the house. It's useless. The incessant pounding of the surf could drown out a rock band.

The back door is key-bolted outside and in, so I leave the window open to allow for a quick exit if I need one. I keep my eyes scanning for movement as I edge into the kitchen. It has acres of black granite and opens onto the living, dining and den areas—one huge great room overlooking the vast, restless Pacific. The room surrounds a large two-story atrium with a broad floating staircase leading down. The opening is so big that I can see the master bedroom on the lower floor from where I stand. I

decide to start downstairs on the assumption that the most logical place to stash a captive or a body would be as far as possible from the public rooms of the house. At least, that's where the sociopaths I arrested in the past usually stashed their victims.

I descend the stainless steel steps, taking one at a time, then stopping to listen. I land in a large square terrazzo court with four rooms leading off it. The master suite, straight ahead, has a double door, wide open. The bedroom itself could grace the cover of *Architectural Digest*. Lots of polished wood and stainless steel and glass, all curved and sculpted as if right angles were for mere mortals. I figure I'll search this room last since the open door implies that no one's trying to hide anything. I do, however, take the precaution of walking through to unlock the sliding door I'd seen before from the lower deck, just in case I have to make a quick exit from down here. I'm pretty sure I can make the fifteen-foot jump to the sand without spraining anything.

The door to the left of the master opens into a cheery bedroom that's being used as an office. I check the closet and bathroom. No body, no blood, no mate to the green shoe. The computer's on, but when I touch the spacebar to light up the monitor, I'm faced with a logon screen. I move along.

The door behind the stairs opens into a narrow room that runs the full width of the house.

Built into the coastal rock with a concrete floor, it's cold and damp. It's got the feel of a storage room, but two single beds imply that it doubles as a spare guest room. There's a closet on one side and a small window on the other that would look out on the outside stairs if the blackout shade wasn't down. In the near dark on a large workbench, I can just make out a motionless lump. It's wrapped in a blue plastic drop cloth and it's body-sized. My hackles spring to life.

I sniff the air for a whiff of rotting flesh but I get only mildew. I flip on the light and approach the lump.

My hand shakes as I reach out to draw back the edge of the plastic. I see a rolled-up leopard-spot rug. I check the end to see whether there might be something concealed within, but it's tightly rolled. I run my hand across the top to make sure there's no bloat in the middle, but it's flat. No body.

I open the closet door and find banker's boxes stacked high. None are large enough to accommodate a corpse unless it was dismembered, and if that was the case, I assume I'd smell it. I open a few anyway and find them filled with medical files.

On my way out I notice a barely visible blotch on the floor, peeking out from beneath one of the beds. I push the bed aside to reveal a stain, about

the size of an ironing board just slightly lighter than the ash-gray floor and pinkish in hue. It could be a blood stain. It looks like someone worked hard to bleach it out but the porous concrete refused to give up its gruesome memento.

I'm reaching out to touch it, as if to forge some sort of emotional bond, when I hear a door slam. It sounds substantial, like the front door.

I imagine floorboards creaking under footsteps above, but the ocean muffles the possibility of my hearing them. My first impulse is to make a break for the deck, but as I peer out the door I see Vico cross the great room into the kitchen. He'd be able to see me in the atrium from almost anywhere upstairs. If he were to call the Malibu cops they'd have plenty of time to lock down the cul-de-sac before I could run the quarter-mile down the beach, scale the gate and get back to Marylou. I figure my best bet is to hide and wait, hoping for a chance to sneak out before he finds me.

I quietly close the door and flip off the light in case it leaks over the threshold into the atrium. The room is pitch black except for a dim line of daylight rounding the edges of the window shade. The trickle of light reminds me of the utility room window I left open. I imagine Vico seeing it and grabbing a weapon to search the house. I can see the

headline: “Vico Trial Screwup Shot Dead in Vico Home Break-in.”

A bead of sweat rolls down my side. The stifling smell of mold makes me feel like I’m breathing sludge. Claustrophobia tightens my chest as I stand frozen, my ear to the door.

I hear a door close in the atrium. The room to my left! He must have seen the damn window. He’s searching the house! It’s just a matter of time. I wonder if he’s got a gun. If I’m lucky he’s only got a fireplace poker or a chef’s knife. I feel like my adrenaline is pumping through a fire hose now. As a cop I used to find the rush exhilarating; now it’s a problem, an obstacle to the composure I need to think my way through this. I pray to God I get out of here alive, just in case the prayers of an atheist count.

I flatten myself against the wall by the side of the door, hoping to get a jump on him when he comes in. Time slogs by. No more sounds come from the atrium over the white noise of the waves. Yet I have no trouble hearing my heartbeat pound my temples.

The door crashes inward. It smacks my nerves as it smacks the opposite wall. No one follows it in. I hold my breath, my cheek against the cold wall by the doorjamb, my eyes peeled for some sign of movement. After a moment a man’s right

hand snakes around the jamb and pats the wall for the light switch. I take advantage of surprise and grab his hand, twisting it back and around to bring him down with the wrist lock I learned in the Academy. I hear him scream in pain as he rotates through the door and falls on his back. His gun clatters across the room into the dark.

I bolt toward the master bedroom, heading for the deck. He tackles me from behind. I go down hard, hitting my chin on the floor. My bottom teeth slice through my lip and hammer me with pain as I stare out at the blue Pacific.

“You’re a piece of shit,” Vico hisses. “No one’ll believe you now.”

His words pierce my heart like curare darts. *Detective Johnno Beltran, frustrated by his personal decline and enraged by the outcome of Luke Vico’s trial, breaks into the acquitted defendant’s house to do a better job of framing him the second time around.* I’ve not only destroyed what little credibility I have left, but I’ve lent credence to Vico’s prior accusations of evidence tampering, not to mention destroying any chances of finding his newest victim. I’m furious at my own stupidity.

I kick wildly at Vico, knocking him off me long enough to stumble to the glass door. But as I slide it open he jumps me again. We both go flying onto the deck. As my head smacks into the railing, I

catch a glimpse of a redheaded woman strolling the beach, looking right at me, her hand flying to her mouth.

I twist and knee Vico in the nose. Blood gushes out. I spring to my feet, but before I can climb over the rail, he's up and swinging a chair. I feel a metal leg slam into my head and I'm momentarily stunned, thinking that a second blow could kill me. I raise my arm to block it but the chair knocks me across a tiled wrought iron coffee table. My hand falls on an abalone shell ashtray and I jump up swinging. He's got the chair raised over his head for another strike, leaving himself open. The thick shell hits him hard in the temple and he tumbles backward over the railing.

I hear a woman scream, then all I hear is the sea. I step to the railing and look down at Vico, his leg bent at an impossible angle. Six inches north, he would have hit sand but instead he hit the tide pool. His head is split wide open on the sharp black rock and his blood is dyeing the water red like the starfish.

Time stops. Waves don't crash, wind doesn't whistle, gulls don't caw. A black hole of silence. Then the world explodes back to life. Still screaming, the redhead runs up the beach, sand flying from her heels. She drops to her knees a few

yards from the body and pulls a cell phone from her pocket.

My thoughts are shrapnel, ricocheting in my skull. I killed a man. Am I going to hell? He was a beast with Angela's blood on his hands. Maybe the blood of others. Will that bear any weight in court? In heaven? I broke into his house. Can I still claim self-defense? The redhead must have called 9-1-1. Should I haul my ass out of here? Do I have any chance of getting away? I feel woozy, maybe concussed. I couldn't run if I wanted to. Can the redhead ID me? Even if she can't, someone's going to remember Marylou. Everyone remembers a cherried-out Bobcat. And that'll lead straight to me.

I hear sirens, ever closer, wailing like bomb survivors mourning their newly dead. Maybe Vico planned it this way. Suicide by ex-cop and a big fuck-you, all in one fell swoop. It doesn't really make sense, yet it does to me. Angela died bound. Vico died free. I'll die in prison.

I close my eyes and strain against the choke chain of reality. I just want to be back in the Cone of Silence, safe in the haven of my '64 GTO, rocking gently to the rhythm of my own heart in the sweet soft bosom of Marylou.

A sound slaps me back to the here and now. A woman's voice. Did I imagine it? Another gull? It seemed to come from inside the house. I step back

into the master bedroom and hear her again, clearly this time, from upstairs, calling down.

“Baby? Did you ever take my green Manolo Blahnik to the cleaners?”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Faustus Buck is an author and screenwriter. His debut noir crime novel, *Go Down Hard*, which was First Runner Up for the Claymore Award at Killer Nashville before being



published by Brash Books in May 2015. This short story, the prequel to his novella *Psycho Logic*, was a 2014 Anthony Award nominee.

Among his six nonfiction books, two were #1 New York Times bestsellers--one pop-psychology the other pop-gynecology. His short film, *Overnight Sensation*, was nominated for an Academy Award. He was one of the writers on the seminal miniseries *V: The Final Battle*.

His indie feature film, *Smuggling for Gandhi*, is slated for production in 2016.

He is on the board of the Mystery Writers of America and President of its SoCal chapter.

He lives with his wife and curious idiosyncrasies in Los Angeles, where noir was born.