

So Close the Hand of Death (A Taylor Jackson Novel, 6)

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It's a hideous echo of a violent past. Across America, murders are being committed with all the twisted hallmarks of the Boston Strangler, the Zodiac Killer and Son of Sam. The media frenzy explodes and Nashville homicide lieutenant Taylor Jackson knows instantly that The Pretender is back...and he's got helpers.

As The Pretender's disciples perpetrate their sick homages-stretching police and the FBI dangerously thin-Taylor tries desperately to prepare for their inevitable showdown. And she must do it alone. To be close to her is to be in mortal danger, and she won't risk losing anyone she loves. But the isolation, the self-doubt and the rising body count are taking their toll-she's beside herself and ready to snap.

The brilliant psychopath who both adores and despises her is drawing close. Close enough to touch....

J.T. Ellison is the NYT and USA Today bestselling author of more than 20 novels, and the EMMY-award winning co-host of A WORD ON WORDS, Nashville's premier literary show. With millions of books in print, her work has won critical acclaim, prestigious awards, and has been published in 26 countries. Ellison lives in Nashville with her husband and twin kittens.

Boston, Massachusetts 8:12 p.m.

To: troy14@ncr.tr.com

From: bostonboy@ncr.bb.com

Subject: Boston

Dear Troy, All is well.

BB

Quiet, except for the pounding of his heart.

She was home now, the week of late nights at the office finally over. He'd been starting to wonder if she'd ever make it back and was amused at the relief he felt when he saw her trundling down the street, her heavy wool coat dragging her steps. He had been more concerned than he expected, considering the stakes. This was just a game for him, after all. A lovely game.

She'd walked right past the truck without giving him a second glance. A few feet more and she was at her building. The wrought-iron kissing gate was broken, listing slightly, ajar. She pushed it open with her left hand and plodded up the steps. He watched with his head

bent, eyes slid to the side as she unlocked the door and slipped inside. She never turned her head, never thought for a moment that she wasn't safe. Her millionth mistake this week.

He'd give it just one more minute, let her get upstairs. He busied himself with the package, the hard, plastic electronic-signature tablet, the straps on the box, all the while counting.

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.

Once he hit sixty, he followed her path to the door. He pushed his finger into the white button, heard the shrill bell ringing. A woman's voice, tinny and thin, said, "Yes?"

"Delivery for June Earhart."

She buzzed him in without saying anything else. The door unlocked with a snap and he pulled it wide, allowing enough room for the handcart to fit in, adjusting his cap lower on his head. He didn't want his face to be seen. There were cameras in the foyer, he knew from earlier reconnaissance.

He thought about his target. He loved the way June looked. Brown hair, brown eyes, five foot six, somewhat lumpy, but that was just because she enjoyed her food and didn't exercise. Not lazy, never lazy. Just... padded.

He'd watched her take lunch all this week: Monday was McDonald's, Tuesday Subway, Wednesday a couple of iced crullers and a sugary juice smoothie from Dunkin' Donuts. Thursday she'd stayed in, but this afternoon she'd gone for a grinder, thick with salami and ham and cheese, with a side of potato chips. He wondered if she would smell like onions or if she'd been considerate enough to chew some gum, or suck on a Tic-Tac. He'd wager the latter; June was a self-conscious woman.

Granted, she'd walked from her office to each of these places, but she'd passed the pita joint and the all-natural juice-and-salad bar on the way. She chose the fattening food, and he knew it was because she was afraid to be alone but needed a defense mechanism to justify her single status to herself. He knew she sat in her dingy apartment, night after night, reading fitness and yoga magazines, dreaming about what it would be like to have a hard, lithe body, knowing that if she did, if she put in the effort, then she would be irresistible. And irresistible meant the paralegal from the office next door would notice her.

But she was afraid, and so dreamed only, her traitorous actions affording her a little more time. He knew she planned to join a gym at the beginning of the new year—it had been scribbled in purple ink on a list of possible New Year's resolutions discarded in her kitchen trashcan. He bet she made that resolution every year. June was the type of woman who made New Year's resolutions in November and never, ever saw them through. A woman who dreamed. A woman who would buzz a total stranger into her building because she never expected to be a victim.

His kind of woman.

The handcart made the trip awkward, bumping, bumping, bumping along the risers as he climbed. It would have helped if June hadn't ordered wine—he could have carried a normal box up the stairs. But this fit the image he had of a delivery man. Safe and unassuming, too busy with his work to be a threat.

He was at the door of June's second-story walk-up now. He straightened his cap, arranged the handcart in front of him, the heavy wooden box tied tightly to the metal. He felt in his pocket—yes, everything was there. He arranged his features into something close to a smile and knocked.

June opened the door, still a little out of breath from her climb up the stairs. She'd taken off the heavy coat but her scarf was still wound around her neck in a breathtaking knot. Face-to-face with her, he didn't realize that he'd frozen until she said, "Kind of late for a delivery, isn't it?"

Moving his lips even wider over his teeth, he said, "Yes, ma'am. Apologies, ma'am. Got behind today."

"I never thought the damn stuff would get here. Put it over there," June said, pointing to an uncluttered alcove just before the kitchen. The same alcove he'd been in last night, watching June watch television. She'd never known he was there, and he'd slipped out after she fell asleep.

He wrestled the handcart into the foyer and made for the alcove, reached into his pocket and depressed the call button on his disposable phone. June's phone began to ring. He saw a brief flicker of debate in her eyes, then she shrugged and let the door close behind him as she started toward the living room to attend to the call. The moment her back was turned, he attacked. He whipped her scarf up into her mouth so she couldn't scream, then picked her up and moved toward the bedroom. Might as well be comfortable about it.

She was struggling, so he clouted her over the ear, just enough to daze her. That did the trick. June's eyes got woozy and the panic in them dulled. He stripped her down and tossed her on the bed, but took care in removing his own clothing piece by piece, folding the brown pants with the seams in, the shirt with sleeves together, then in half. He'd need to reclothe the driver, he didn't want anything getting on the uniform. June was groggy but cognizant, and when he rolled on the condom and took her, she tried to scream and get away. But he was much bigger, much stronger, and she had no chance. All her wriggling made it go quicker than he'd prefer, but at the end, he wrapped the trailing ends of the scarf around her throat and pulled them tight...and felt another kind of release flow through his veins.

When her eyes bugged out he pulled the scarf tighter still, watching critically as her skin turned a mottled red, and the whites of her eyes began to fill with blood. After three long, excruciating, joyful minutes, she went completely limp beneath him.

He cleaned up quickly, the truck was sure to be noticed soon. When everything was in place, he unwound the scarf from her neck and tied it in a jaunty bow. He kissed June on the forehead, briefly felt sorry that she'd never make it to the gym, dressed carefully then left the apartment, locking the push button lock behind him. He was surprised at how quietly the door closed, a silent witness to the death of its owner and the stranger going gently into that good night.

The night air was brisk. Snow was coming. He turned up his collar and pushed the handcart in front of him to the delivery truck. He'd been lucky: the original driver was his size, and his uniform fit perfectly. He clambered into the truck, drove around the corner to a quiet, deserted cul-de-sac. He stripped, replaced the brown uniform with his own street clothes, struggled a bit getting the dead limbs of the driver back into the arm and leg holes, but finally had things in their proper places. He patted the empty-eyed driver on the head. Collateral damage, but necessary.

He looked out the window on either side. The street was empty, the lights off in the two houses that flanked him. He was confident he hadn't been seen. He slid out the side of the truck and started to whistle, a tune he'd long forgotten. Strangers in the night...exchanging glances...

One down. Many, many more to go.

New York, New York 10:12 p.m.

To: troy14@ncr.tr.com

From: 44cal@ncr.ss.com

Subject: New York

Dear Troy,

Hey man. I'm on schedule.

44

The bag was rustling, damn it. He knew keeping the gun in the bag wasn't a good idea. Every step he took, all he could hear was the crackle, crackle, crackle against his leg. How was he supposed to sneak up on anyone like this? And he couldn't take the gun out and carry it properly-this was New York, after all. A cop on every corner, a chicken in every pot. Tourists every few steps, wide-eyed and camera happy.

The directions had been explicit, though. The paper bag was required.

The dog made me do it. The dog, the dog, the dog.

There. He was back in character.

A light snow began to fall. He knew it was dusting his body, his head, but he couldn't feel it, he'd pulled a black watch cap over his bald scalp. He got too cold otherwise. He crossed Houston and jogged into Washington Square Park, skipping around a puddle. Crackle, crackle, crackle. Maybe if he put his hand in his pocket he could shush the noise, but no, he'd look furtive and strange walking with his hand deep in his cargo pants. He remembered the instructions. Don't draw attention to yourself. Walk tall, shoulders back, meet the eyes of those you pass. No one remembers the ones who look at you. They only remember the ones who look away.

The dog made me do it.

He spied his quarry. Two men leaning close in to one another, one blond, one dark, oblivious on the green park bench. He felt his heart soar. Everything was going according to plan. Unbeknownst to their wives, who thought their respective spouses were at the gym-or a card game, or a movie, a late dinner, a meeting run long, terrible traffic-the men came to this bench every night. They sat and talked and dreamed together. Sometimes, if they were feeling terribly risky, a finger would softly stroke a palm, or a bit of pressure would be felt against a thigh. And on the glorious nights-the ones they both looked forward to the most-after a decent interval of time, they'd slink, one after the other, to a small, dingy apartment they borrowed for their occasional physical assignations, make hurried love, then disappear back to their lives. No one could know. No one did know.

Except one. And now two.

The dog made me do it.

He walked right up to them, the fornicators. The wretched, abnormal bastards. He stopped three feet away, reached in his pocket and pulled out an American Spirit. He lit it, took a long, hard drag and blew a plume of smoke out of his nose. He knew he looked like a dragon, did it again for his own amusement.

They hadn't looked up. They were completely wrapped up in their conversation. He felt a moment of disgust-men weren't supposed to feel like that about one another, it wasn't right-but their distraction was good. He was just another guy on the street, taking a smoke break. He finished the cigarette, savoring the deep, husky burn in his lungs, then tossed the butt away into the bushes.

He glanced over his shoulder. Washington Square was strangely deserted. It must be the cold, or providence. The angel sitting on his shoulder squeaked. He ignored him, like he'd been ignoring him for the past six weeks. He was bored, and ready. Ready to have some fun.

The men leaned closer together.

He sniffed once, like he was deciding what to do, then whipped the gun out of his pants pocket. The suppressor coughed and blood burst from the wounds. Two shots, each to the head. They never knew what hit them. He crumpled the letter and tossed it at them, then fled. The sinners slumped together, gray sweats and red brains commingling on the hard cold bench, little spatters of blood dropping into the dusting of snow beneath them. He heard the drip as he left.

The dog made me do it.

He was a block away when his angel told him he wasn't crackling anymore. Son of a bitch. He searched his pockets and found nothing but the gun, his cigarettes and the lighter. The bag had come out with the gun and dropped to the ground, he'd been too caught up in the furious noises the angel was making to notice. Shit. He wasn't supposed to leave anything behind except the note. Shit, shit.

He snapped right out of character, panic invading his bloodstream.

The angel talked to him. Breathe. That's good, man. Breathe. Keep walking. It's just a brown paper bag, not like anyone can identify where it came from. He made a mental note to throw the receipt for the package of lunch bags away as soon as he got home, just in case. He didn't want to leave anything behind that might implicate him. Orders were orders, after all.

The angel was on a roll now. Fucking dog. Who blames a dog? Some crazy ass motherfucker, that's who. Dog made me do it, my ass.

He wasn't a very good angel.

Behind him, sirens started. He felt the panic start in the pit of his stomach, gone watery at the noise. He needed to go. He needed to run. He started to break away, but the angel yelled in his ear.

Walk, homey. Walk away.

He stopped, and took a deep breath. Remembered the look of surprise on their faces. Turned to look at a bar window as the flashing lights cruised past, feigning interest. Just another guy on his way home, thinking about stopping in for one more drink. Smiled into his beard.

All in all, it had been a good night.

San Francisco, California 11:00 p.m.

To: troy14@ncr.tr.com

From: crypto@ncr.zk.com

Subject: San Francisco

Dear Troy,

It's going well. Will be in touch if anything goes wrong.

ZK

His palms were sweating.

He fought the urge to vomit, swallowed hard against the rising gorge. The gloves felt tight, itchy, claustrophobic. Defying orders, he whisked them off. Cool air made his damp skin prickle. There. Better. He tucked the gloves into the back pocket of his black jeans. His grip on the gun became surer, stronger. The metal was slick, hot in his hand. He'd imagined this moment for years. Now he had a chance, a real chance, to fulfill his fantasies and make some money at the same time. Save himself from the day-to-day grind he was living. The hateful job that laid him off. The hateful house the bank was taking. The hateful car he could barely make payments on. He was homeless, broke and hungry to try his hand at murder. The money would be a nice bonus. This opportunity had come at the perfect time.

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