

SELF-PORTRAIT OF
A DYING MAN

Also by Michael E. Henderson

A Beast in Venice (Redux)
The Ghost of Caroline Wald

SELF-PORTRAIT
OF A DYING MAN

A NOVEL

MICHAEL E. HENDERSON

Copyright © 2014 Michael E. Henderson

All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1505261677

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is purely coincidental.

To my wife, Karen

Acknowledgments

I could sit here all day making a list of the people who have helped in one way or another in getting this novel to what it is now. The one person I will name, however, is my wife, Karen. She's my harshest critic and my biggest fan. Without her encouragement and support, none of my work would be possible.

PART ONE

1

“Will the defendant please rise?” said the judge about to pass sentence on a burglar.

Attorney Margold James and his client got to their feet. The tired and shopworn courtroom smelled of mildew and disinfectant. The carpet, spotted with coffee stains and the black ghosts of discarded gum, covered the floor like mold. The tables were scratched and marred, and the chairs soiled by human grease.

The judge’s bench loomed so far from the counsel tables it might as well have been on another planet, contributing to its black-robed occupant’s air of aloofness, superiority, and power.

Margold stood six foot seven. His fingertips rested on the table, the defendant’s file spread open before him.

His client, a tall athletic college boy from a well-to-do but not rich family, gazed forward with fearful eyes. He had been caught in the course of a burglary, and had confessed to several others, but through Margold’s efforts, most of the charges had been dropped. The lad had entered a plea, and everyone, including the prosecutor, expected him to be home smoking weed and jerking off in his upper middle-class bedroom by lunchtime. Margold’s mind had already turned to the question of whether he would have two or three olives in his martini.

The judge, a man in his sixties with a face like a bird, gazed straight ahead while the defendant rose.

The prosecutor, a young woman plain of face and uninteresting of figure, remained seated as she eyed the defendant with crossed arms and a half smile of hopeful satisfaction.

The judge lectured the boy at length, sometimes loudly with

great animation and pounding of bench. Margold considered this to be a good sign. A loud public ass-chewing is often followed by a lenient disposition.

Yet, Margold grew impatient. Even after practicing law for twenty-five years, he felt as though the judge addressed him personally when berating a client. Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know what he did, all against the peace, dignity, and government of the State. Out with it.

The judge at last grew quiet, took a drink of water, and wrote something on a form.

Two deputies moved in behind the defendant.

Margold's pulse quickened; the boy was going to jail.

In a calm voice, the judge addressed the defendant. "Young man, you are an enigma to me. You come from a good home. You have parents who care about you. You have had many advantages and privileges that few enjoy. And yet—"

His mother stood. "Your honor?"

Jesus. Sit down and shut up.

"Please, ma'am," the judge said, "don't interrupt. You've had your say."

"But—"

"Kindly sit down and be quiet, or I'll have to remove you from the courtroom."

Margold turned to her and held up his hand for her to sit the fuck down, and to remain calm and quiet. She glared at him with narrow eyes and red face that at once conveyed fear, panic, and loathing.

The judge continued. "And yet, you break into other peoples' homes. I'll never understand it."

A terrible silence filled the room as the judge shuffled papers on his desk.

The defendant's face had flushed.

"I hereby sentence you to five years in the penitentiary—"

The boy's mother cried out, "No!"

"Silence!" the judge said. "All suspended but ninety days."

Oh boy. The lad had his pockets full of God knows what, wore a belt, carried a cell phone, and had a wallet the size of a Volkswagen, none of which was allowed in jail.

The lad's mother began to scream and cry. Her husband, his face red, brow furrowed, and mouth tight in a faint forced smile, as though expressing embarrassment for himself and sympathy for his wife, put his hands on her shoulders. The prosecutor watched the scene with her mouth open.

The judge called for order. One of the deputies handed Margold the boy's things, put the cuffs on him, and led him from the courtroom. Margold turned to face the crying mother and stunned father, and handed them the boy's belongings.

"It's all your fault!" the mother shouted at Margold.

Lovely. It was not because his client went to jail that Margold was unhappy. Little William would have gotten five to ten if it weren't for him. The arrogant little prick was guilty of a lot more than he got punished for.

The real bitter herb and glob of bile that called for about a gallon of gin to wash out of his throat was the fact that the boy's mother blamed Margold. It was all Margold's fault the boy went to jail, when in reality she ought to be on her hands and fucking knees thanking him, crawling around barking like a dog in gratitude that her son got only ninety days. He'd be out in sixty if he didn't fuck too many other inmates in the ass. Fucking enabler.

On the other hand, he sympathized with her. Here they were, professional people with a fine, intelligent son. Tall, handsome, well-spoken, athletic, going to a good university,

who did something utterly out of character with their image of themselves and their social standing. They were beside themselves. Easy to blame others under those circumstances.

When they left the room, the boy's father smiled politely, shook Margold's hand, thanked him, and said good-bye. The boy's mother glowered at him with large, red, tear-filled eyes, then turned her back.

WHEN HE ENTERED his office, his secretary was sitting at her desk typing. In her seventies, with short gray hair, ashen skin and the deep, raspy voice of a smoker of many years (now reformed), she had begun working at the law firm before Margold went to law school. Although her beauty had been obscured by booze, time, and tobacco, Margold would like to have seen her fifty years ago. She knew every client the firm had had for the past forty-five years, what their case was about, the outcome, and probably the file number. And she knew where *everything* was. It was like watching a magician when he would ask for some obscure, long-forgotten thing, and she would cause it to materialize before him. He would wave his hands around checking for strings and mirrors. The best part was that her name was Evelyn. Nobody had named a kid Evelyn since Roosevelt.

"I hope you're looking at the keys," he said, closing the door behind him.

"Ha, ha. You and Soupy Sales."

He laughed. "Christ, Soupy Sales? No one under fifty knows who Soupy Sales was."

"Too bad, he was funny."

"I know. But did you know that we put a man on the moon, and Eisenhower is not president?"

She threw a pencil at him.

“What happened to William?” she asked.

“He got five years.”

Her eyes grew large. “They took him to prison?” she wheezed, her voice like a saw cutting drywall.

“No, no. To the detention center. The judge suspended all but ninety days.”

“He’s actually going to jail for ninety days?”

“Yep, although it will probably be less with good behavior.”

She frowned. “Serves him right.”

“You have no sympathy. He was a good boy. It wasn’t his fault.”

“Then whose fault was it?”

He poured himself a cup of coffee. “It was obviously mine. His mother even said so.”

She shook her head. “Why do they always blame the lawyer?”

“Who else you gonna blame? Mom and Dad? Hell no, they only raised him. Was it his fault? Of course not; *he* was the victim in all this.”

“*He* was the victim?”

“Yeah. Somehow, in their minds, he was driven to this by circumstances beyond his control. He’s the perfect son; the model citizen. And for the court to treat him that way was just plain wrong.”

She put her gray head in her old hands.

He blew on his coffee and took a sip. “He’s obviously going to jail because his lawyer didn’t do his job. What they fail to understand is that he’s not going to the penitentiary for twenty years because I pulled a frickin’ rabbit out of my hat.”

She looked up. “He was just a spoiled brat who always got away with everything.” She slammed a file drawer shut. “There

were never any consequences for his actions. His mother always covered up for him, or made excuses.”

“*Ipsa facto.*”

She fixed her eyes on him. “Did he pay you?”

“What do you think? It’s all I could do to get out of there with my skin.”

“Guess what. Not counting today, he owes you ten grand.”

Bile rose in Margold’s throat and screamed for gin. His first instinct was to shout every cuss word he knew, and he was pretty much a walking encyclopedia of obscenity. “Obese probability of ever seeing any of that.”

Evelyn mumbled something under her gravelly breath and shuffled papers on her desk.

“Anything else I need to know about?” he asked.

“Not really. Mr. Whozits called about his neighbor again, but that’s it.”

“He can wait. I’ve had enough fun for one day. I’m going home. See you tomorrow.”

ON THE WAY HOME he stopped at his favorite liquor store. The automatic glass doors slid open as he approached, which always made him feel important.

“Good afternoon, Mr. James,” said the young man behind the counter. “How she goin’?”

“Very well, thank you. Do you know where I can get some beer?”

The young man laughed, although he’d heard that joke a thousand times.

“Never mind, I see it.”

He opened the long glass-front cooler full of every kind of

beer made in the world. He took a six-pack of India Pale Ale and went to the counter. There he grabbed a big bag of corn chips (nice and salty), a big jar of hot salsa, and a jar of jalapeño peppers. There was a football game on tonight, and he liked his salsa flaming, and his beer hoppy.

“Getting ready for the game, Mr. James?”

“Yes, sir. I punched out early, gonna relax on my patio for a while, then me and the dog are gonna watch the game.”

“Sounds like fun. That’ll be fifteen bucks.”

Outside the store stood a shabby, broken-down homeless man named Frank, who was no doubt younger than the hundred years he carried. Gaunt, unshaven, and crowned in a halo of filthy red hair, Frank leaned on the grocery cart he used to haul his stuff around. He looked at Margold with tiny wet blue eyes that sparkled in spite of the unfortunate head from which they shone. He smiled when he saw Margold.

“There you are, Frank,” Margold said. “How are you?”

Frank rubbed a gritty eye. “Can’t complain. You’re early today. They let you go?”

Margold laughed. “No, Frank, I own the joint. I just took a few hours off.”

“Well, ain’t that nice.”

Margold handed him a twenty.

Frank took the money and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. “Thank you kindly.”

He patted Frank on the shoulder. “Now, you take care of yourself.”

“Yes, sir. I will. You have a nice evening.”

HIS WIFE, MARY, was not home yet. A CPA with her own practice, she often came home late.

He had time to rig up his salsa and let it percolate and get good and hot before kickoff. Although he enjoyed cooking once in a while, what he really liked to do was dump a bunch of stuff into a bowl, stir it about, and let the flavors meld. He bought the “Southwest” style salsa with corn and black beans. All he had to do was add the jalapeños, mix them in, and wait for the game.

Mary was the real cook. That’s why they had this huge and handsomely appointed kitchen. Granite countertops, a free-standing wine cooler with two temperature zones, and the finest appliances money could buy. When she got busy in there, good things happened. Tonight, though, was salsa, chips, and beer for him, and something light for her.

He put the salsa concoction in the fridge, popped the top on a beer, and retired to the patio to enjoy the late afternoon sun, and to hopefully think of something other than today’s court case. He failed on the latter, and the whole thing played over in his mind like the kid in *A Clockwork Orange* with his eyes held open by metal prongs. He saw the look of hate and terror on the mother’s fierce red face; the sounds of her squalls; all nicely blended with the grim ambiance of the court room. The thing that always got him was how ungrateful clients could be for the help he gave them. Take this boy. He was subject to about two hundred years in the penitentiary by acts he had, without a doubt, and by his own confession, committed. Yet, he and his family expected him to prance home a free man. Did they not understand? Ninety days *was* a slap on the wrist. And now they will use it as a reason not to pay.

He shook it off and took a large pull off the beer as the

garage door opener engaged with a clank and a hum. He entered the garage through the back door just as his wife pulled in. It was only about five o'clock. He opened the driver's side door and she stepped out. He always liked to watch her step out of the car. Even in a business suit (with skirt; no pant suits for her), her legs seemed to go on forever. He kissed her and said, "You're home early."

She reached into the back of the silver Mercedes and retrieved her briefcase. "That makes two of us. What? Are the ambulances on strike?"

"That's funny. Almost."

She closed the car door and headed for the door into the kitchen. "So, what's up? Are you sick?"

He took her briefcase and followed her. "No, I just had enough for one day."

She took a bottle of white wine from the refrigerator and poured a glass. "Kinda cuts down on the billable hours, doesn't it?"

"That's what I like about you. All business." He put his arm around her. "You're home now, you can stop counting beans."

"Just making conversation."

"I came home early because today was the sentencing—"

She kicked off her shoes and sat on a stool at the kitchen counter. "Oh, right. I forgot. How'd it go?"

He sat next to her. "Let's just say that Mom is probably still crying."

"Oh."

"And they didn't pay me."

"Double oh."

"So, I'm in need of some TLC. I'm very delicate. Vulnerable."

She laughed. "You've been called a lot of things, but never delicate. You are the antithesis of delicate."

“Puleeze.”

“Would a martini make you feel better?”

“Yes, that would be lovely. Dry. Three olives.”

She looked at him over her glasses. “We’ve been married, as you would say, *since Christ was a corporal*, and you don’t think I know how you take your martinis?”

“No harm in making sure.”

She fixed him a martini and set it before him.

He tasted it. “Excellent, just like I taught you.”

“You’re beyond redemption. You forget who tended bar in college, and who introduced you to the pleasures of the martini.”

“You’re right, I forgot about that. Well, I will be eternally grateful.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Mine’s in the fridge. There’s a game on tonight.”

“Ah, right, I forgot. Salsa and chips.”

“In fact, Fred and I are going to retire to the basement and take in a little pregame action.”

“All right. Don’t make too much noise, and try not to break anything.”

“TAKE A KNEE,” Margold calmly told the quarterback.

Blue light from the big TV filled the dark room and reflected in Margold’s beer bottle. His Golden Retriever, Fred, lay stretched out at his feet, snoring.

“Six seconds left, and we’re up by a field goal. All you gotta do is take a fucking knee, and...”

The center snapped the ball, which went through the quarterback’s hands, dancing and spinning across the turf, pirouetting like a pigskin ballerina.

A monstrous lineman from the opposing team, who never has had, and probably never will again have, a touchdown, scooped it up and lumbered into the end zone. Game over.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Margold roared. “I want that butter-fingered quarterback shot.”

Fred raised his head, sighed, and put it back down. He scratched the dog behind the ear. “It’s okay, buddy, go back to sleep.”

His son, Jonathan, who would have normally been here with him watching the game, had a more pressing matter that evening. What could be more important than watching football with his old man, he could not imagine. Margold got up to get another beer and to call Jonathan to rant about this most tragic ending to the game. As he turned toward the fridge, a man was sitting in one of the large leather chairs facing the TV. Margold jumped at the sight. Fred didn’t move.

How the hell did he get in here? His first thought was to grab him by the throat and slam him against the wall. But the guy was wearing a suit. Must be one of the kooks from his wife’s book club. When Margold was down watching football, the world could come to an end and he wouldn’t notice. Maybe he should be polite. Instead of spewing the litany of obscenities that went through his mind, and in spite of the effects of six or seven beers consumed during the game, and in spite of his current state of mind as a result of the outcome of the game, all he said was, “Can I help you?”

The man considered Margold for a moment. He sat with his legs crossed, clad in an expensive suit, his haircut dapper and newly razor-cut, fine streaks of gray at the temples. Unsmiling, he said, “Yes, you may. That’s why I’m here.”

Margold had learned a long time ago not to be rude and obnoxious to anyone until he knew to whom he was being rude

and obnoxious. At least the guy had the decency to wait until the game was over to barge in. Between the beer and the fumble, however, there was a limit to the extent of his good nature. Incivility was on the tip of his tongue. But this must certainly be a friend of his wife who came down to see whether he knew where the chai was. How else would he have gotten in, and how else would he have had the balls to sit in one of his chairs looking self-important?

“By all means,” Margold said. “Please, how may I be of service?”

“I’m not sure where to begin. I’m not accustomed to coming in like this and talking to people.”

“While you work that out, maybe I can get you a drink.” Nobody was going to say a man sat in Margold James’ club room without a drink in his hand. “How ’bout some beer? Or maybe you would prefer scotch.”

“Scotch would be very nice, thank you.”

Margold poured the drink.

“Now,” Margold said, handing him the glass, “why don’t you get to the point? I need to drown my sorrows. Let’s just start with: *who are you?*”

The man took a sip of the scotch, held it in his mouth, and swallowed. “Very well.”

He hesitated.

“I don’t know why I’m finding this so difficult, but I’ll just come out and say it.”

“Please,” Margold said, pouring himself a glass. “That’s always the best way.”

“This may sound cliché, but I am known by many names.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what your friends call you?”

Again the man hesitated, swirled his glass.

At last he said, "Death. They call me Death."

Margold blinked at the man over his glasses. "What?"

"I am commonly called Death."

Margold shouted up the stairs for his wife. "Mare-ree!" He asked the man, "Are you here for the book club? If you just wanted to get a scotch off me, all you had to do was ask. Say: 'Hi, my name is Ethelrod,' or whatever, 'I'm here reading Oprah's book of the frickin' month, and I would like a scotch, pretty please with sugar on top, no ice.' I'd have given you a scotch, no problem. Any guest in my house can have a scotch, Oprah fan or not."

"She can't hear you."

"Who?" Margold asked with his face screwed up.

"Your wife. She's not here."

He shouted up to the kitchen again. "Mare!"

No answer.

"And I'm not here for the book club."

"Do an old man a favor, and just scurry on out of here before I lose my temper. I have some serious and prolonged drinking to do before I go to bed. It's already late and I have a few windmills to tilt at tomorrow."

"You must learn to relax, Mr. James, it's going to kill you. And you wouldn't kick a man out before he finished his drink, would you?"

Margold yelled upstairs again.

"I told you, she's not here."

"If you're not here for the book club, and my wife is not here, where did you come from and how did you get in?"

"That's complicated."

"I'm a lawyer. I deal with complications all day. Give it a shot."

The man held up his hand. "You seem agitated, so I'll get to the point."

"Lovely."

"I am the Angel of Death."

Margold refilled his glass and dropped into his chair. He would sit and listen to what this nut had to say, then escort him to the door, by a fistful of collar, if necessary. And from now on, the book club would be banned from the house. He can't have these pseudo-intellectuals waltzing in begging for scotch and scaring the hell out of him.

"Well, now, you must be one busy son-of-a-bitch these days." Margold said.

The man smiled. "I'm here to personally deliver a message to you."

"A message? A message from whom?"

"From me. I wanted to give it to you myself."

Margold swallowed a mouthful of scotch. "I'm listening, but hurry it up. My attention span is shortened with every sip of booze."

"The message is this: you're going to die six months from..." He glanced at his watch. "... right now."

Margold's anger rose. He stood and pointed to the stairs. "That tears it. Now get out of here."

The man leaned back in the chair, spreading his arms across the back of it. "I understand if you're skeptical."

"Skeptical might not be the right word. Skeptical means I don't believe it, but there could be something to it. I think the right word is *outraged*. *Pissed*. I'm outraged and pissed that someone would just walk in here and tell a man he's going to die."

"I understand your point of view, but bear with me. I'm serious when I say you have six months to live."

“You’re warning me, is that it? In other words, you’re telling me that if I don’t watch out I’m going to be hit by a bus, or something, in six months. Be nicer. Don’t cuss. Stop drinking.”

Death shook his head and sipped his scotch. “No. I’m telling you you’re going to die six months from now, no matter what you do.”

“I’m too drunk for this.” He thought for a moment. “Christ, I get it. I represented your wife in a divorce—.”

“No, Mr. James, I am not a disgruntled spouse. I am Death.”

“If you’re a religious nut trying to convert me. You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“No, sir. Just Death.”

Margold sat quietly for a moment swirling the scotch, staring into the distance with unfocused eyes. He was not drunk enough to believe this, but was drunk enough to do something violent. God knows he feared death almost as much as he feared being disbarred. Every time he saw someone die of some disease he ran to his doctor to be tested for it. If his doctor were not also his friend, he may not have indulged him.

“It occurs to me,” Margold said, “that you have better things to do than come in here and tell lowly Margold James when he is going to die. I mean, isn’t that shit supposed to be secret?”

Death just nodded.

“Then why bother? Just let me go through what’s left of my life, suffering, with my head up my ass, like everyone else, until the moment of death, and leave it at that? Why tell me, and why me?”

Death held his glass out for more scotch.

“And isn’t it a bit cliché, Death being a well-dressed middle-aged man?”

“I can take any form. What if I came in looking like this?”

In place of the distinguished man wearing a suit sat a teen-

age girl with purple hair, multiple piercings on her face, and tattoos covering her arms.

Death spoke in the girl's voice. "I think you'd be less likely to seriously consider anything I had to say."

"Ah."

Death returned to his original form. "As to why you, you intrigue me, Mr. James. I come in contact with many people. Every day. Most of the time at the moment of death, according to my vocation. You, however, caught my attention early on. I know you. I've followed you—"

Margold frowned. "Followed me? What are you talking about?"

Death held up a hand to calm him. "It's not what you think. From my world, which is not the same as your world, I can observe people. Watch them. I watched you for many years. Since just after you were born."

"Give me a break."

Death stood and walked slowly to a set of bookshelves and picked up a trophy. "Margold James, center for the winning basketball team in high school."

"So, you can read a trophy."

"Does this trophy say that you screwed Sarah Jane Wilhouby behind the stage curtain after the game? A celebration, if you will?"

Margold blinked and swallowed some scotch. The memory blasted back into his head. A great game. The game of a lifetime. A great sweaty Margold all champion-like, and the beautiful blonde cheerleader eager for the giant of a high school boy, and eager to display (and more) her ample tits and her tight ass. And so it was.

"Do you know you got her pregnant?"

“What? No. She fucked every guy in the school. Could have been anyone.”

“Yes, it could have been, but it wasn’t. I know.”

Death picked up another.

“Ah, the game ball from the championship football game, signed by all the coaches and players. MVP: Margold James. They sure did like having Margold James, six-four at the time, standing in as quarterback.”

“That’s right.”

“What they didn’t know is that you had a couple of your linemen break a leg of the opposing quarterback, who was much better than you were.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Could be. So maybe we should ask Jim Cavanaugh and Bill Babcock about it. I could have them here in a few hours.”

Margold felt his face flush. That cold, rainy night appeared before his eyes. Lights shining on the mud and the wet helmets. He wanted to forget the evil part and remember only the glorious part. In spite of Margold’s great height and his strong arm, the opposing quarterback was better. No, vastly superior. Something had to be done. It was the idea of one of the linemen. Teach the fucker a lesson. But was there a need to cripple him?

“We were just kids,” Margold said. “Our moral compass was... off. You can’t hold that stuff against me now.”

“You have a closet full of secrets, don’t you? Shall I continue?”

“It’s not all bad. Were you watching when I did good?”

“Of course. You saved your brother from taking a good ass whipping more than once; you rescued a puppy; you give Frank the homeless man money. You have done a lot of good. I

didn't mean to say you hadn't. I only offer proof that I know about you. Every little nook and cranny, filthy and clean. I make no judgment, I merely report. None of it has anything to do with your present situation."

"Which brings us back to *why*. You haven't answered that."

Death sat.

"You have become a jaded, cynical old man—"

"Anyone who has a reasonable understanding of this tearful and painful world can't help but despair. And despair leads to jaded cynicism."

Death smiled. "See what I mean? You have had a very pleasant life, a successful career, and a loving family. In the process of achieving these things, though, you have sown seeds of manifest unpleasantness. Certainly, you've done good; no one is all bad. But you have received a bounty in return that is out of proportion to your good acts, and little punishment for the bad."

"Oh, now—"

"For these reasons, I've decided to truncate your suffering, as you so often call it. You will have the great disadvantage of knowing the hour of your death, without having an illness that would cause it.

"When you do come to believe me, which you soon will, you will tell your family 'I'm going to die,' but they won't believe you. You will do whatever it is you do in response, and they will not understand. You will be a man telling the truth that no one believes. You will see slipping from you what you do not now treasure, but will come to treasure as the day approaches.

"And what will you do? The answer to this question, Mr. James, depends on how you want to be remembered."

“Tell you what. If you’re quite finished, take your leave by going out the way you came in. If you get out now, I won’t call the cops. I’m a criminal defense lawyer, and I’m loathe to call the cops, but I will.”

“Very well, Mr. James, I’m leaving. I know you don’t believe me, and I didn’t expect you to, but I wanted to start the clock. You and I will talk later, but remember, your time is running out, even now.”

“I don’t intend to talk to you again. Now, I don’t mean to be rude, but you have my permission to withdraw.”

The man claiming to be Death didn’t seem to notice that he had dropped a twenty-dollar bill. Margold picked it up to hand it to him, but he was gone. What are they putting in beer these days? It must be the preservatives. Nut job. At least he got a twenty out of it, which is about the value of the scotch the son-of-a-bitch drank. “And some watchdog you are, Fred.”

Fred yawned and sighed.

Margold glanced at the TV. They were still showing replays of the last play of the game. Christ, why are they beating it to death? Was the game was still on? Margold checked the time. The man claiming to be Death had been in the room about five seconds.

HE WENT UPSTAIRS to find his wife. He entered the kitchen just as the garage door opened and she pulled in. He hadn’t heard her leave. Where would she go this time of night? He needed to have a serious talk with her, but he had to be careful. With his great height and thunderous voice he could make Dirty Harry cry.

She met him at the door from the kitchen to the garage with two tote bags of groceries.

He took the bags. "Why did you go to the store at this hour? You should have told me you were leaving, particularly when it's this late."

"Sorry. You were into your game, and I had a late appointment to get my hair done. It was the only time Peter could get me in, and a bit of gray was showing." She ran her hand over her dishwater-blonde, shoulder-length hair, now free of gray. "I think he stayed late just for me. We needed a few things, so I stopped at the store on the way home."

"I wish you had told me, I was worried. It's a dangerous world we live in."

She put her arms around his neck. "You were worried? How cute. I'll tell you from now on." She kissed him, then turned and folded the empty totes and put them into the pantry.

"Wonderful. And by the way, your hair looks great. And by God, no gray anywhere."

"Thanks. Peter always does such a good job."

He turned her around to see the back of her head. "Is it shorter than usual?"

"No, he just trimmed it."

"That boy certainly knows what he's doing."

"I won't go to anyone else. How was the game?"

He showed his teeth like a growling dog. "Don't ask, it's technical."

"I take it we lost," she said as she put groceries into the cupboards.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm sorry. Did you wear your hat?"

"Yes, but it did no good. I'll get over it, though."

"Good, I hate to see you suffer."

He put groceries into the fridge. "There is one little thing I would like to talk to you about, though."

“What’s on your little mind?” she asked as she poured herself a glass of wine.

“Just as the game ended, one of your friends from the book club pranced into the basement and plopped himself down in one of my chairs.”

She sipped her wine and shrugged. “Wasn’t one of my friends. There was no meeting tonight.”

“Oh, really? You have a man about my age, nice haircut, expensive suit, in your book club?”

“No, they’re all women.”

“Ah. Well, this man came down, sat in a chair, and asked for some scotch. He told me he was the Angel of Death, and that I was gonna die in six months.”

She peered at him over her glass. “I think you’ve been making the salsa too hot.”

That thought had crossed his mind, particularly given the short time of the man’s visit. But he had the twenty and an empty glass.

“You’re probably right,” he said, walking toward the basement stairs. “Must have been a dream.”

About the Author

Michael E. Henderson lives in Venice, Italy, with his wife, Karen. In previous lives he served in the US Navy as a reactor operator on a nuclear submarine, and practiced law in Maryland. Visit his website at www.MichaelHendersonNovelist.com. He'd love to hear from you.