

Threads

a Blaine Horney mystery



Kris Karrel

“Well, there was a...a lady.” He trembled almost uncontrollably, his beady eyes grown big as silver dollars. Ok, quarters maybe.

“And?” Blaine shoved the man ahead of him toward the rear of the house, the back porch light leading them from the trees.

“She...she surprised me.” He gasped for breath at each reluctant step forward into dry grass. “She...she was dead, I think.”

“Oh, that’s a new one.” Blaine squinched his eyes to clear his mind of the glaring orange thread he’d trailed at a dead run over the short distance, the dotted line the color of a plastic Halloween pumpkin—a wet pumpkin. Take at least a beer or four, a few whiskey chasers to erase that color from his thoughts.

“You a cop or something?” the perp asked.

He pushed the suspect along in front of him a little faster. “Why’d you take out the window?”

“Well, she...she came after me.”

“The dead lady.”

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*For Bob and Connie—
May the sun always shine on your parade.*

ONE

THE PLATE of fried eggs and crisp bacon, hash browns and side of wheat bound for the cowboy seated at the counter left Doreen Miller's hand the very instant Shane Seidel's dead wife strolled right out of the grave and into the Morrison Café, a sandy-haired boy of seven or eight in tow.

Dillon Travers spun his stool lazily about to gape at the reason his breakfast was now a puddle of grease and broken china at Doreen's feet. The cook and third owner of the place in thirty years, Merle Vestry, waddled through the swinging kitchen doors, cut off in mid-gripe about waste and slack service by the unbelievable.

The four regulars sharing the corner booth—retired cowboys and ranchers in for their morning dose of coffee and gossip—were tight-lipped staring to a man. The atmosphere reeked of a creepy reverence, a quiet equaled only by the county morgue where Doreen had, years earlier, identified the mangled body of her late husband.

Shane's resurrected wife appeared oblivious to the silent uproar created by her entry, focused as she was on the boy.

"Scramble," he said, looking up at her.

"Kevin, sit down for Mommy?" She guided him to the center booth of five running the length of the picture window overlooking Main Street, then slid next to him on the orange bench seat, their backs to the door.

"Scramble," Kevin insisted, his voice rising. Small fists battered the tabletop, rocking the condiments clustered at the end of the

table nearest the window. “Scramble, scramble, *scramble*.”

Impossible, had to be. The woman was dead, her daughter, too. No one presently living in or around the small town of Morrison, Montana, knew that with as much certainty as Doreen, except perhaps Shane, who’d discovered them, or Ross Hedley, county sheriff and first officer to arrive on the grisly scene.

Dillon left his seat, damn near running out the door, breakfast apparently forgotten. Or maybe he’d lost his appetite.

Doreen wished she’d followed not a second later when the woman turned her blonde head, ostensibly looking for the waitress, and she simply unable to make her feet move until Merle jabbed her in the back.



On the first anniversary of his total devastation, Shane Seidel toasted his late wife and daughter with a shot or ten of the best scotch money could buy, then failed to quit bending his arm. Sinking beyond his usual stupor, he managed to crawl on all fours across the hand-finished hardwood floor to the new king-sized bed where he slept for the very first time. Even this righteous a wasting couldn’t prevent the visit to his personal Hell. But on this night, unlike any previous, his wife’s spirit rose out of the midst of the gore, their ten-year-old child at her side.

Susan reached out to him, as if she might bridge the gap between living and dead, yet before he could surmount his disbelief to take her hand, she and daughter, Kory, vanished like smoke dissipated by a hostile, unforgiving wind.

He roused to escape this anguish, stared long minutes through the sheer curtains at a full moon, then cried himself back to sleep.

Shane opened his swollen, scratchy eyes to sunrise and one hell of a headache, woozy and sick to his stomach, compelled by the incessant pounding on the front door to drag his worthless ass out of bed.



Sunrise capping the distant snow-covered peaks in shades of dusky rose, the Texas Ranger dumped his brown suitcase into the carpeted trunk of the leased Jaguar, thinking the worn out old thing looked ridiculous lying there. Thrift store trash in a fifty-thousand dollar wrapper. He slammed the trunk, the expensive whomp immediately swallowed by the noise of idling tractors and a gusting wind at the truck stop on the outskirts of Great Falls.

Ten large under the table, plus expenses, had put him on the road out of San Antone, that and his captain's handshake guarantee of two extra weeks leave upon his return from Morrison, a Montana town so small it didn't rate a dot on a map, any map he could find. Half the cash languished in a safety deposit box already.

He settled behind the padded steering wheel, then touched the breast pocket of the tailored suit to make sure the photo was still there.

Why the ethics of this little side job had begun to nag as the miles passed under the tires, he didn't have a clue. Wasn't like he was changing sides in the war on crime or anything. A personal favor for an unidentified friend of his captain wouldn't exactly hurt his career. Certainly. Not like he'd be stepping on any influential toes either. Hell, the case itself was cold enough, a year old yesterday. And out of his or any Ranger's usual jurisdiction, way out, whole states out.

Ten large simply to discover what he could, finger the bad guy if at all possible—with or without enough evidence to convict.

Should be cut-and-dried easy.

Especially for a Ranger with a psychic gift, one that in the blink of his mind's eye crisscrossed the world in threads. The Earth webbed in a gossamer gauze, the ectoplasmic trails of people past and present, the residue of their daily lives, any moment of which he might experience simply by crossing their paths.

Might. When it worked.

Place memory an article had called it; *events stored in the environment*. No mention of how a Ranger able to vividly sense the memory stored in a specific place might actually end up reliving some of those events cached in ye olde environment. That much he'd learned the hard way,

on vacation no less, a murder scene over five years old at the time he'd stumbled across it.

No mention in that or any other article he'd collected over the years of the damn threads leading into and away from these so-called *events*, threads his mind simply colored to life, oftentimes when least expected.

No reference whatsoever to the whispers that sometimes haunted the threads themselves—like the plans made by those two murderers at the remote scene outside of Austin on the trot to their getaway car and Dallas.

Not a word about two threads his mind had colored shit yellow and puke green trailing a host of devious thoughts through an assortment of apartments and seedy hotel rooms across three Texas cities that eventually led not only to the discovery and apprehension of the serial perps themselves, but a murder weapon complete with prints that was used in the deaths of nine other women, every case up to that time unsolved.

He wasn't about to contact any researcher or writer just to update them on a subconscious mental process he could only liken to a bloodhound sifting myriad scents in choosing the right one to track.

Wouldn't he be a laughing stock then? Or worse yet, a target for those less than desirable elements of society that might consider him a threat?

Still, when it worked, when anxiety, anger, even stress or fear didn't cloud his inner vision, the psychic gift was a perfect tool for a Texas Ranger, one that had earned him a fair amount of respect within certain circles, not to mention a coveted spot with the unsolved crimes investigative team. A mental quirk, a hitch in his giddy up that he'd be the first to admit to family and friends, the smattering of other Rangers solidly in the know that he understood even less than he might control.

Always a downside to everything. Like a hangover chases good whiskey, or a high-class escort expects to be paid, or his father's harping insistence that he strike out on his own.

The name on some mythical office quashed all consideration of leaving the Rangers. Every single time.

Horney Investigations.

Beat *Blaine Horney, PI*, or *B. Horney, Private Investigator*, but not by much.

What kind of clients could he expect to draw with a name like that? Crackpots, deviates, or worse.

Surely.

Jokes were never-ending as it was. A steady paycheck had a lot more appeal, for now anyway.

Side jobs notwithstanding.



“Goddamn it, Shane. Open this door. Ain’t you up yet?”

Sweat pasting his unruly dark hair about his pulsing temples, Shane whipped open the front door to silence Dillon’s pounding fist and cried, “What the fuck’s your fire?”

The lean, lanky pain in the ass, and best hand in these or any parts, was visibly pale, a wild look in his brown eyes. Black hat askew, hair the color of fresh mud bristled like a wire brush gone crazy about his ears. His aged red Ford pickup idled at the base of the stairs, the driver’s door hanging wide open.

Suddenly, as if he thought better of knocking, Dillon grimaced, straightened his hat with a furious swipe of his hand and pivoted on his boot heel to start back down the steps.

“Just hold on there now, Dill,” Shane said. “You come beating on my door like hell’s broke loose, then don’t have a word to say?”

Right hand waving at the blue sky, Dillon continued his descent, muttering, “Nuh-uh, nuh-uh.”

“Nuh-uh, what?” Shane asked and stepped over the threshold, the concrete chilling his bare feet.

Just as Dillon made the landing, his jiggling truck inched back, then abruptly sped up, cutting a tight semi-circle in reverse to broadside the passenger door of Shane’s late-model Silverado at better than ten miles per hour.

“Well, hell,” Shane said, shaking his head until the pain insisted he stop that nonsense.

Dillon glanced up at Shane, back to the T-boned trucks, and

then studied his boots, hand patting his shirt pocket for the cigarettes he'd most likely left on the dash.

"Might want to just shut her down there, Dill," Shane said.

He sprang to the task, behind the wheel in seconds, gears grinding, engine revving, separating the two trucks to the screeching protest of late-model running board yielding to older, heavier rusty bumper.

What'd upset Dillon so badly, Shane couldn't begin to fathom. He buckled his belt about his waist, glad of the cool morning air over his bare chest. His mouth pasty and rank, his nose announcing a shower was an absolute must, right now coffee seemed the quickest antidote to everything that ailed—physically.



Doreen turned to Merle and murmured, "She's dead, dammit. That can't be—."

"Get her goddamn order," he snapped in a hoarse whisper, then gestured at the floor. "And get this fucking mess cleaned up before someone goes out of their way to slip and sue." He hurried back into the kitchen, muttering to himself, the swinging doors whap-shushing behind him.

Chills traveled Doreen's spine on pin-needled feet, goosepimpling the bare flesh of her arms. No amount of denial, no pointing out the fact that Susan Seidel had never once styled her hair nor carried a Gucci handbag to match the fashionable sandals on her pedicured feet could convince Doreen's stony heart that her eyes were simply lying to her mind.

There she sat, Susan Seidel, the naturally blonde beauty dressed in designer jeans and a white silk shirt giving Doreen a fierce eye, as if mad about being dead for a year. And that little boy beside her, he'd looked normal enough when first he'd trailed a living ghost through the door, now growing more and more agitated, acting off somehow, retarded maybe, making faces and gesturing with his hands.

"Scramble," he wailed, writhing on the bench seat to free himself from his mother's tight arm.

Doreen fished her uniform pocket for a pen and order pad, prepared

to march across the black and white checkered linoleum to take the stunning bitch's order, stopped by a sickening realization.

Once Shane saw this woman, if she and that boy weren't simply passing through like phantom reminders of sins past, no other woman would be a blip on his radar. Not that Doreen had ever been anything more to him than just a girl in class, or a one-night stand at high school graduation, so drunk he didn't know who or what he'd fucked and cared even less. Lord, how she wanted to be...more. Not for love; no, never anything as paltry and diminishing as that.

The rumors of the house he'd built on that fine ranch of his ran along the lines of a small palace inside. Not that she'd ever seen any more of the place than various stages of completion, and that only at some distance, set off as it was from the dirt road running past the newly-graveled drive. And the one time he'd almost stumbled upon her sneaking along the banks of Old Woman Crick, dodging the cottonwoods, trying for a close-up view...she shivered anew at the recall. The closest she'd ever managed was a look inside that two-story barn his father'd built years ago, a major disappointment, nothing spectacular there.

As one, the four old men left the end booth, tossing dollar bills on the table, acknowledging the spitting image of Susan Seidel with polite smiles and nods, touches to the brims of their hats, altogether failing to hide their collective stupefaction. Weren't they all gray as death now?

"Are you on some kind of a break?" the woman demanded, her arms about the struggling boy, muffling his repetitious demand for scramble, scramble, scramble.

Doreen pasted a phony smile over her indignation. "Be right there," she said with the calculated warmth of an ice cube. "Want a menu?"

"No," the woman retorted, every bit as cold. "Two eggs scrambled for each, sides of bacon—soft—wheat toast for me, lightly buttered. A cup of coffee, glass of orange juice...for god's sake, Kevin—."

The boy twisted free of her, screeching unintelligibly, kicking the wall below the window, shaking the table, tumbling the condiments, the sugar dispenser striking the vinyl seat opposite, rolling to rest on its side in the crack.

“What about some milk for the kid?” Doreen asked.

“He’s a child, not a *kid*, and if I wanted milk, don’t you think I’d order it?”

Doreen whirled angrily about, ripping the order ticket free of the pad, scowling at Merle’s slit-eyed scrutiny through the order window cut in the stainless steel wall.

“I got it,” he said tersely, his moon face contorted in an angry grimace she’d seen all too often lately. “Get off your ass, Doreen.”

“Fuck you,” she whispered under her breath. The empty coffee cup in her shaking hand chattered in the saucer, the boy quieting by slow degrees at his mother’s indecipherable murmurs.

Bitch, that fucking bitch, nothing like Susan, sweet little Susan Seidel, all her sappy goodness ended in a gurgling rush of blood.