

**The opening pages of “Deadlines”**

**A novel of murder, conspiracy, and the media**

**By**

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“The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.”

- Wm. Shakespeare, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”

## Prelude

A horse stood on a rough balcony of rock that jutted out above the sea. The man riding the horse sat upright and immobile in the saddle. A molten sun hovered above the misty horizon, like a spotlight aimed down through a scrim of gauze.

It was late afternoon on an August day. A breeze blew inland, ferrying a briny reek of low tide, and thin ghosts of fog and spray.

At this moment, the man upon the horse did not look like a killer. He seemed like a bronze statue placed in a park. Then a cell phone chirped. The rider's hand shot up to tug the phone out of his vest. He flipped it open, glanced at the calling number, closed it, shoved the chromium slab back in his pocket without answering.

The man clicked his tongue, touched the horse with his heels. Its thick neck arched and bent, it turned out of the overlook on the coastal ridge. He directed it onto a path that led down into a valley thick with live oaks. The horse was a big white stallion, its shoulders and haunches roped by muscle. Black hooves thudded against dirt of the trail.

As they moved, the noise of distant surf rose and fell, like rhythmic roars from a stadium crowd, then slowly faded to a background mutter. Filtered by the dense green foliage, light grew soft.

The rider had broad shoulders, a thick chest. Square hands lightly held the reins. He wore tall boots, jodhpurs, a black vest over a white polo shirt, and a riding helmet. Beneath his helmet jutted a face with dark brows, prominent nose, a thin-lipped mouth and a square jaw with a cleft chin.

He bore some signs of age. Deep creases fanned out from his eyes and lips, flesh along his jaw line and chin sagged. Still, his face would have seemed handsome except for a strange blankness. He stared coldly down the trail, showing a passionless intensity, a nearly robotic demeanor.

The sea could no longer be heard. Three sounds reverberated through the still forest – faint creak of saddle and stirrup leathers, blasts of breath out of the stallion's nostrils, muffled thud of its hooves.

A quarter of a mile below the horse and rider, the same trail wound downhill to enter a grassy valley.

Making her way upward through tall grass on that pathway, a gray-haired woman walked. She led a small dog on a leash. Glasses with large, round, green frames emphasized the thin length of her face. A shabby wool coat was clasped at her waist by a single button, a purple knit cap was tugged low on her forehead.

The dog, a cocker spaniel, constantly fought her control, zig-zagging on the leash. She tugged back, rebuking him in a low, exasperated voice that also held notes of amusement and

affection. As they went up the hill, she used her other hand to poke at the earth with a carved cane of rattan. They reached the rim of the forest, then vanished between the trees.

Immediately, a golf cart hummed out of the fog, rolling along atop the grass. It halted at the spot where the woman had disappeared. A paunchy man in a brown uniform swung out. He had a mustache trimmed close, military-style, but uncut hair dangled from the back of his cap, hanging down over his collar. From bed of the cart, he pulled orange traffic cones, and a sawhorse with a sign wired to it. He arranged all these across the path.

In red letters, the sign announced, **“Trail closed today - for maintenance.”**

The security guard jumped back in his cart, steered around the sign, and drove up the trail.

A few hundred yards onward, the spaniel poked his nose into a clump of sword fern, then started to lift a fluffy leg. He abruptly put it down, jumped sideways, barked.

“What’s up, Mr. Jessup?” the woman asked. “Seen a deer?”

The dog barked again, more excitedly. Out of the thickening mist, the horse and rider loomed. The woman stared hard at them. Anger swept over her face.

“Go back!” she yelled. “You don’t belong here! This is a walking trail.”

She waved her cane. Her dog, yapping excitedly, ran in circles at the end of its leash.

The rider’s ominous advance continued.

“Erik Eiger! You goddam fool! Get out of here!”

“Shutup, old bitch.” The rider’s voice bore a heavy, yet unidentifiable, European accent.

“You it is who must go now.”

The woman’s anger advanced to pop-eyed rage. Spreading her feet apart on the pathway, she stood her ground, then brandished her cane.

“This was my father’s land! His plan stays in force! Everybody must...”

“You will be quiet!” he shouted, biting off the words.

The rider’s heavy brows knit together, his eyes glittered. He goaded the stallion with abrupt signals from reins and legs. The horse reared up to an astonishing height, punching its broad front hooves out into the misty air.

The woman was shocked. She jumped aside as best she could, stumbling and hobbling. She made it off the trail, but continued to shout at the rider.

“I’ll get you thrown out, by God! Barred from Cornu Point!”

The rider turned his mount toward her. He made the horse rear again. Broad, black hooves flailed at her face like the fists of a sparring boxer.

“You want that? Those stupid last words?”

The woman gasped. Her mouth made an astonished “O.”

The rider aped her expression, mocking her.

Her eyes bulged, her jaw tightened.

“OK, buster!” she said.

She dropped her dog’s leash to grip her cane with both hands. When the stallion’s forequarters dropped down, she whacked the horse hard atop its muzzle with her stick, trying to make it panic and bolt. But the stallion barely flinched. It snaked its neck forward, open mouth displaying large square teeth, stretching out to bite the woman. She snatched her arms away and back in the nick of time.

The rider spurred the horse forward. The woman retreated before it, staggering as she retreated, thrashing through brush below the trees. Still the rider pursued her, step by step. The stallion, aroused, arched its thick neck, made plunging strides with its great hooves.

“Stop this, stop, stop! Erik!” the woman yelled. “You gone nuts?!”

As she stumbled back, the woman swung her cane about wildly, but landed no more blows. She stumbled up against a thicket, dense and springy as a trampoline, and could move no further.

The rider spun his horse end-for-end. He gave more signals. The stallion hopped, leapt upward, then kicked powerfully outward with both back hooves. One huge hoof struck the woman full in the head – a fan of ruby droplets sprayed out into the green blur of shadow below the trees – while the other hoof crashed into her upper chest.

The old woman flew like a flung doll. She hit high on the mound of stiff brush. Her limp body hung for a moment, cruciform. A long sigh of air escaped from her lungs, her thin muscles convulsed. She slipped, twisted, slid downward, to the faint snap of twigs.

Cheek pressed to damp earth, a shattered face came to rest. The woman’s brown eyes were open, dull and staring. The little dog’s leash had tangled in the brush. At the end of that tether, it continued to leap, spin, and frantically yap.

A smile of triumph flickered upon the rider’s lips. He rode the stallion back out to the trail. He dismounted, patted the horse on the neck, praising it. From a bulging pocket on his vest, the rider tugged out a halter and lead line, and tied his animal to a tree.

The golf cart rolled up. The guard in the dark uniform nodded at the rider. He glanced down the tunnel that had been battered through the undergrowth. The old woman’s form lay at its dim end, a heap of colored wool from which poked pale, still hands, half a staring face. The guard snorted a laugh.

“Target eliminated!” The guard said. “And so’s a big problem. Finally!” He cupped a hand to his ear. “Is it me, or does it seem kind of quiet all of a sudden?”

He pointed at the rider. Then he banged palms of his hands together, to mime applause.

“May I say, sir, another splendid performance! Terrific job.”

The rider’s thin lips parted to make a gap-toothed grin, and he bowed ceremoniously.

The guard went to the rear of the cart and yanked out a blue plastic tarp, lashed into a roll by white nylon cord.

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And so Beverly Bancroft departed from our world. That feisty old dame had fought her last battle, just as her killers planned, among the shadows. And there, the specific nature of her death might well have remained hidden. Her passing did not go unremarked. But the fact that it was a murder came to light only due to determined snooping by a rather unlikely team, Sebastian and Elle.

Well, OK. And me. I did join their squad, later. But they got the big investigative ball rolling. Started me up too, by the way. They deserve all credit. However, I was the one in best position to witness the events, or speak to people who witnessed things I didn’t, or visualize certain other events by simply extrapolating from all our knowns. So, it seems up to me to tell the tale.