

High Deceit

C.E. Waterman

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Cover Art by N. Martinez

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2019

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0245-2

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0244-5

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To the people in my life who have read and re-read my awful first drafts, who helped me make them better and who encouraged me along the way. Thank you.

1

Cindy Carroll crept to the back entrance of the warehouse, grateful early morning darkness still covered her. The door squeaked a little, and she froze, holding her breath.

"Are you going to tell me why we had to show up here in the middle of the night?" The male voice increased as he and his friend drew closer.

"Yeah, the boss explained his whole plan to me over coffee and a pastry."

"Funny, Lou." The first man laughed.

Cindy released her breath and tiptoed toward the stairs. Moonlight streaming through high windows revealed broken glass and clutter waiting to scream her presence to the drug dealers outside.

On the mezzanine, she settled into deep shadows behind a rotting wooden banister. Something whispered at her shoulder. She stifled a shriek and swatted at it. A cobweb stuck to her fingers, and she wiped them on her jeans. The back door squeaked again, louder this time. A click produced a dim glow from a bulb dangling over the heads of the two men she'd slipped past in the parking lot. She backed a little and tried not to breathe as they moved into her line of sight. A large dark-haired man carried a black briefcase. His friend brushed something off his shoulder with a flick of his wrist. The hint of a cufflink

sparkled.

"This is my best suit. If I'd known we were coming to this dump, I would've changed first."

"I'll register your complaint. Stop whining, will ya? You can buy another suit. A hundred suits."

The man she'd been waiting for, known to her as Boss, and a younger man in jeans entered through the open door at the front, their footsteps a hollow echo as they approached. Cindy ducked outside the ring of light

"Hey, Boss."

"Lou."

Lou shifted the briefcase to his other hand. "I haven't seen anyone yet."

"They'll be here. Don't worry."

Three more men entered through the front. The tallest gripped a briefcase identical to Lou's.

Boss held out his hand. "Good to see you, Leon. You got the money?"

Leon clasped the offered hand. "You got the product?"

Dust puffed up from an old wooden table as the two men threw their briefcases on top. It wobbled then steadied. Cindy scooted forward for a better look, almost touching the grimy two-by-four railing. A nail protruding from the decayed support barely held it in place. She winced. Announcing herself by falling into the middle of their transaction didn't seem like a good idea.

They flipped the briefcase locks and the others leaned in. She peered down, hoping this wasn't a giant mistake. Maybe the phone call she received had been a trap. Maybe they knew she'd been following them, and they led her here to dispose of her. She crouched lower

and inched closer to the splintery post. The cases fell open. Sure enough, one was full of money and the other one contained little white packets.

Everyone stepped back. After nods from Boss and Leon, the men who had carried the cases switched places, snapped the other's shut, and yanked them off the table.

Boss smirked. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Cindy slid away from the edge. What was she going to do? Where was Detective Clayton? Had it been a mistake to call him? Was he part of it? They couldn't get away. There had to be something she could do.

"Freeze, police!"

Finally.

"Everybody put your hands up and face the wall." Though she heard him, he remained out of her sight, under the mezzanine. He strode forward his gun drawn, alone as he had promised. What had she done? He looked so vulnerable down there by himself, facing seven men. When was she ever going to learn? Someone moved behind him.

She sprang to her feet. "Mark, look out!"

He swung around as a shot rang out. His body jerked, and he fell. Cindy screamed. A click sounded behind her, and she spun around.

"So you're the reason he showed up here."

She stared at the muzzle of a Glock. Everything else faded. She saw it move but never heard the shot.

2

Robin Clayton smiled at the very pregnant young woman. Smiled might have been an overstatement, grimaced was a better word. Another nursery. Why did she put herself through it? Why didn't she turn them over to Maggie? *OK, forget everything else and get into the head of your client.* She glanced around the spartan living room. *Come on, you can do this.* The pep talk wasn't working this time. Her face was going to crack from all the smiling.

Maggie stepped forward and held out her hand. "Mrs. Miller, I'm Maggie Schreiber, and this is my business partner, Robin Clayton. You have a lovely home."

Robin's face unstuck, allowing her to speak. "It's wonderful to meet you. How long do you have until the baby comes?"

Courtney Miller rubbed her huge belly. "I'm due in three weeks, but the doctor says they could come any time now."

"They? You're having twins?"

Courtney smiled that special mom-smile and nodded. "A boy and a girl."

"Congratulations!" Robin lowered her head and scribbled on her clipboard, hiding the tears forming against her will. She blinked them away.

Maggie produced a tape measure. "Can we see the

room?"

Courtney twirled and headed to the back of the house. "Our room is here." She pointed. "And the babies are going to be in here, right across the hall."

Square and of average size, with builder-white walls and neutral tan carpet, the room had no personality yet. Robin normally loved that in a new project.

"My parents bought these for us. Aren't they pretty?" Courtney ran her fingers along the top of one of two new cribs made from shiny dark wood.

"They're beautiful." Maggie handed Robin the tape measure and took the end to the other side of the room. "It'll be a great place to start."

While Robin called out the measurements, Maggie wrote them down. This simple act, so routine, calmed her. A nursery began to take shape in her head. She saw baby animals dancing on each wall, butterflies and daisies on one side and maybe some fun dinosaurs, not scary ones, on the other. She sighed. Yes, it was working.

Courtney led them to the kitchen and, unaware she was practically levitating, introduced her husband, Ken.

Robin had thought she'd heard someone pacing the kitchen's squeaky floor. His pacing transferred to the pen he picked up from the table. He clicked while Robin started to sketch her vision.

Maggie threw out suggestions, and Robin sketched them in. "Of course, this is a rough drawing." She placed the sketches on the table between the couple. "We can give you a more detailed idea when we've had a chance to put it together. What do you think? Is this the direction you want us to go?"

"Ooooh." Courtney clapped. "I love it. Don't you love it, honey?"

"Is it expensive?" Ken started clicking again.

Maggie gave her a slow wink.

Robin couldn't help smiling. They were so in sync. "If we paint the full mural with the animals we talked about, it will run into the neighborhood of fifty-six hundred dollars."

The pen clicked faster.

"However, we have some wallpaper left from another job. If you guys wanted to cut some of the characters out, we could paint the background and paste them in. It would look as wonderful for about half the cost of a custom mural. Is that something you might want to consider?"

Courtney beamed, and the clicking stopped.

Ken's face smoothed into a grin as he rubbed his wife's back. "I could help after work, honey. What do you think?"

Courtney's eyes sparkled, and her contagious smile made it impossible not to join her.

On their way out, Maggie promised to mail a contract the next day.

As she stepped out of the door, the wind hit Robin in the face, stealing her breath. Hugging her coat tighter around her, she hurried to the van, and Maggie started it, flipping on the heat.

Resting her hand on the gearshift, Maggie paused. "Are you OK?"

Robin adjusted the briefcase at her feet to avoid meeting Maggie's eyes. "You realize I just promised them a job that will probably cost us money, don't you?"

"Yes, but that isn't what I'm talking about."

Maggie put the van in reverse and backed out of the driveway. "I know how hard nurseries are on you. I'd be happy to work with Sara on this one."

"No. I have to do it." Did her voice sound as choked to Maggie as it did to her?

"Why?"

Robin faced her. "Because I need to get over it, that's why. It's been eight months since the last miscarriage. I need to do my job without falling apart every time it involves children. It's not the Millers' fault I can't have a child."

Maggie drifted to a stop, her eyes huge and her forehead furrowed. "The doctor didn't say you couldn't have children...did she?"

"No." Robin sighed. "I didn't mean that. I guess I'm trying to see how it feels to say it out loud."

"So how'd it feel?" Maggie eased the van away from the stop sign, mercifully not looking at her.

"Awful. I kind of wanted to hate Courtney though, you know? But how could you hate someone so young and cute and ecstatic about being pregnant?"

"I know." Maggie's tone lowered. "At least they want theirs. I don't understand how the ones who don't want babies get them and you and Mark, who are desperate to have them, can't. How fair is that?"

Robin stared at her hands. She shouldn't have complained and handed Maggie another reason to think God was this monster never giving people a break. And did she come across as desperate? She must. She wriggled her fingers, moving her wedding ring so the diamond faced out, struggling for a way out of the hole she had dug.

"Those two were cute together, didn't you think?" She removed her drawings from the case and stared at

the frolicking dinosaurs. "These dinos would have been so fun to paint." She shrugged. "It'll be fun to paste in the other ones, too. I couldn't make that poor husband disappoint his wife when she was so excited."

"Me neither." Maggie turned into the parking lot of Sunshine Interiors. "I know we'll barely break even, but I don't care. I guess we're both suckers."

Robin's musical ringtone interrupted their laughter. She fumbled the cell out of her purse and unlocked the display. Her smile wobbled. "Uh-oh, it's the chief. This can't be good."

3

Robin and Maggie raced into the emergency room. Police Chief Donovan and her husband's partner, Peter, waited by the information desk. "What happened? How is he? Will he be all right?" The questions flew from Robin's mouth before her brain could control them.

Chief Donovan stepped forward, grabbed her hands, and gave them a squeeze. "He was shot in the shoulder, a pretty clean wound. They're extracting the bullet. I'm sure he'll be OK."

Shot. The word reverberated against her skull. He hadn't said shot on the phone. He'd said hurt, not shot.

Peter gave her a hug. "The chief's right, Robin. Mark will be fine."

He eased her toward the blue plastic chairs lining scuffed white walls. People in various stages of crisis filled the chairs, either needing care themselves or watching for information about a loved one. An older woman sat in a corner alone, arms hugging herself. Was she waiting for news of a husband? She, like the detectives from Mark's unit, some sitting, some standing, watched her with a studied calm. Robin joined them, adding her less than calm face to the mix.

She tried to sit, but a combination of antiseptic and the heavy perfume of a woman a few chairs away assaulted her nostrils, and her stomach lurched.

Fighting to keep her breakfast down, she moved to the other side of the room, breathing shallow breaths through her mouth.

Maggie dropped into the chair next to her.

"This feels unreal." Robin shook her head. "I thought I'd accepted the risks when I married Mark, and after the first few years, I didn't think about it anymore." She shifted in her seat, but the plastic still pinched. "I felt safe here. The most he usually deals with is shoplifting and pickpockets." A gasp ricocheted from her chest. "You don't think they're keeping something from me, do you? They'd tell me if it was more serious, wouldn't they?"

"Of course, they wouldn't keep that from you. Someone will be out soon, and we'll know everything then."

Robin swallowed her panic. Maggie was right, it wouldn't do any good to imagine the worst. She picked up a magazine and pretended to read. Maggie fell silent, and Robin was grateful for the time to think. With a shoulder injury, Mark would be OK. He had to be. Laying the magazine on her lap, she leaned her head against the wall, closed her eyes, and tried to pray. Nothing would come. Her stomach quivered.

The routine of a busy emergency room streamed around her. A doctor spoke to a small group huddled in the center of the room. A couple of them followed him out. Good news or bad, it was hard to tell from the faces of those who remained. A young woman raced through the doors, eyes wild and searching. She found the older woman and threw her arms around her. Good to know she had someone. Robin rotated her shoulders, trying to relax.

Finally, a doctor came through the door and

scanned the waiting room. "Mrs. Clayton?"

"I'm Mrs. Clayton." Robin jumped up, and the magazine slipped to the floor.

The others gathered around.

"Your husband came through surgery very well. The bullet lodged in his shoulder, and we removed it without much trouble."

She released the breath she'd been holding. The doctor wasn't smiling. Why wasn't he smiling?

He patted his pockets and reached in for a hard candy. Unwrapping it, he popped it into his mouth.

She wanted to yank the words—and the candy—out of him.

"I'm more concerned about his head injury. He hit pretty hard, and he has a small skull fracture, so I'm listing him as critical until he wakes up."

Robin's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She couldn't get the words out.

Chief Donovan answered for her. "Thank you, doctor. When can Robin see him?"

"He's in recovery now, and we'll be transferring him to ICU in about half an hour." The doctor gave Robin a smile.

Now, he smiled?

"One of the nurses will come for you when we have him settled."

When she nodded, he left, and she started pacing. "He's not dead...he's not dead."

"Of course he's not dead, honey. Did you think that?" Maggie said.

Robin winced. Had she been chanting aloud? She stopped and sat again. "I guess so. I think in the back of my mind I figured they wouldn't tell me over the phone if he was dead."

Maggie closed her mouth. She probably agreed.

Robin sprang from her chair. Mark's parents! How could she have forgotten them? They would want to be here. "I can't believe I haven't called Silvia and Ed. What was I thinking?" She fished in her purse for her phone.

"Don't worry. Peter called, and they're on their way. Do you want me to update them?" Maggie asked.

Robin agreed and gave Maggie her phone.

"Hi, Mrs. Clayton. No, this is Robin's friend, Maggie. She's fine. She just wanted to make sure you were kept up to date."

Of course, they would wonder why Robin didn't call them herself. She glanced at Maggie, her shoulders sagging. She never would have gotten the words out without sobbing.

"The bullet's out, and he's doing well. They're moving him to ICU soon, so when you get here you'll probably be able to go right in."

She made it sound so simple. He was out of surgery, and the worst was over. Robin took a deep breath, and for the first time since she got the news, she relaxed.

About twenty minutes later, a nurse came through the door and called Robin's name. She led Robin down the hall to a door marked *No Unauthorized Persons Allowed*. The nurse pushed open double doors to a large curtain-partitioned room with a central nurses' station. She stopped at the third one from the end.

Robin's eyes moved past the figure in the bed and boomeranged back when she realized it was Mark. She stumbled, and the nurse reached out to steady her. Seeing him lying there, so helpless, caused her heart to flutter. A tube threaded into his nose, and another one

snaked from his arm to a bag of clear liquid above his head. Wires stuck out of the neck of his gown and linked him to a heart monitor. Its steady beep gave the only sign of life. His face, normally tanned, now almost matched the bandage around his head. His arms rested outside the blanket.

Robin held his hand, entwining her cold fingers with his warm ones, and raised it to her cheek. She ran her free fingers through his wavy black hair to smooth it, but the stubborn locks popped over the bandage again. When she bent to kiss him, her tears fell on his face. She grabbed a tissue from the night table, dabbed them away, and dried her eyes. "You'll be OK, honey. It's going to be OK. Open your eyes now, and talk to me."

The nurse who led her back had said she should speak to him, but she didn't know what to say. She hooked her foot on a chair leg and hauled it closer. "We got a new client today." She stroked his face. "It's a nursery for a sweet couple having twins. I know I said I wouldn't take any more of those, but I think it'll be fine. Ken, the husband, was so nervous. You would like him." She babbled on until she ran out of things to say and then sat for a while smoothing a wrinkle out of the sleeve of his gown.

Mark's parents surged through the door. Silvia burst into tears. Ed's eyes were damp and red, but he clamped his lips shut like Mark did when he was stressed. He so resembled his son, Robin couldn't help but smile. Silvia's short blonde hair spiked straight out on the sides, as if she'd been running her fingers through it. Robin wrapped her arms around Silvia and let her cry, patting her on the back. "He'll be OK. It looks worse than it is."

With everything inside, she hoped her words were true.

Silvia took some halting breaths, gave Robin a quick squeeze, and backed away. Linking her hand with her husband's, she moved to the bed.

Robin slipped out to give them some privacy. She padded down the hall to the crowded ICU waiting room. Was the whole drug task force here? Nine or ten men and women stood around talking. It seemed impossible that their small community had enough drugs flowing in to warrant a task force, but Mark had been passionate when he'd agreed to join. He was the first to volunteer, and Peter right after, as did most of the others in this room. Did the shooting have something to do with drugs?

Robin stood back for a moment, glad to see the room filled with friends. They would be as anxious as she to hear good news. Maggie, Chief Donovan, Peter, and his wife, Libby, congregated in the far corner, talking. Making her way toward them, she passed another small group, Detectives David Green and Greg Williams, and the chief's administrative assistant, Beth—all deep in conversation.

"Did you hear Cindy Carroll is dead?" Beth asked. "I heard she was found in the same warehouse as Mark."

David snorted. "I want to know three things." He held up three fingers, one at a time. "Why was he in a warehouse at that time of day? How did Cindy get shot? And why did he have that kind of money on him?" David added another finger. "Oh, and why didn't he call it in?"

Robin slowed, hoping they wouldn't notice her.

Beth tipped her head his way. "What are you

saying? Do you think Mark's working with them?"

David scowled. "Well, somebody is. Somebody's spilling information. I hear the upper ranks think it's one of us."

"You don't think it's Mark, do you?" Greg asked.

"It's suspicious is what I think. That's all I'm saying. It's mighty suspicious."

Cindy, dead? Her young face bloomed in Robin's mind, bringing a wave of sadness. It was the first she'd heard about that. And who did they think Mark was working with? She opened her mouth, but the chief reached out, pulling her into his group with her friends.

David stopped talking.

"How is he?" the chief asked.

Robin took a deep breath. "He's looked better, and he's not awake yet. The doctor tells me the surgery went well, but I wish Mark would tell me himself."

Greg shifted to join the group.

Beth and David followed.

"How about you? How are you holding up?" Greg asked.

"I'm OK." Her smile faltered. "I'll be a lot better though when he wakes up. Then is he ever going to get it for scaring me to death!"

Everyone chuckled at the old joke.

"I think it'll be awhile before they move him to a room," Robin continued. "Then the doctor will probably allow visitors."

Beth's face blushed pink, and tears welled in her eyes. "He'll come out of this, Robin, won't he?"

"Yes, of course, he will. He knows you all won't accept anything less." Strange how easy it was to say what people needed to hear. Brave words for someone

who didn't feel so tough.

When Beth and David moved away, Greg lightly touched Robin's arm. "Whatever you need, day or night, please call me."

She stiffened, remembering their discussion. "Thank you." Did he mean it? He eyed her like he wanted to say more but patted her shoulder and moved away.

Mark's parents came out, and the chief and Peter went in for a few minutes, leaving her standing with Maggie and Libby. She leaned forward, not wanting anyone else to hear. "What will I do if he doesn't wake up?"

"That won't happen," Libby said.

Maggie gripped Robin's shoulders. "You always say God is good. If He is, I don't think He would do that to you after all you've been through. You have to be strong and not say such things."

Strong? Her insides felt like warm oatmeal. "You're right, I know you're right. He's going to be fine."

The chief and Peter returned to the waiting room, and Robin went back to ICU and sat with her in-laws, all of them watching Mark's chest rise and fall. Did Maggie think this was some kind of test? If God is good, Mark will live; if not, he'll die? Robin knew, as much as anyone, that one can't manipulate God into getting what one wanted, but she refused to think of Him as anything but good. *Please, God, don't let him die.*

Failing to get Robin and Mark's parents to leave long enough to eat, Libby brought in some milkshakes.

Robin sipped hers gratefully, knowing she should eat, also knowing nothing solid would stay down. She needed a break. Taking the shake with her, she roamed

ICU, stretching the kinks out of her legs.

Patients crowded the area, so to keep from disturbing them or their families, she returned to the waiting area. New people occupied the room now, and most of Mark's friends had gone home. Maggie and Libby were still waiting, sitting next to a large potted plant. She should have let them leave hours ago.

Hopeful eyes looked up from various groups as she passed, other families obviously waiting for news. She skirted some children coloring on the floor and joined Libby and Maggie. "You guys should go home. There's nothing going on here."

Maggie shook her head and opened her mouth, but Robin placed a hand lightly on her arm. "I promise I'll call you if there's anything to report."

Maggie held her gaze. "I want to hear about any change. I mean it. Don't try to be tough now. You call me."

Robin dropped her hand and cocked her head. "First you want me to be strong. Then you say don't be tough."

Maggie blushed. "Well, I mean..."

Robin grinned. "I know what you meant. Don't worry. Tough isn't on the menu tonight. I'll let you know if anything happens."

Libby craned her neck to see around the potted plant. "Have you seen Peter?"

"He was in ICU last time I saw him. Do you want me to get him for you?"

Maggie stood. "I can drive you home."

Libby smiled her thanks and turned to Robin. "Just tell him I'll see him at home, would you?"

Maggie picked up her purse. "Who has the kids? Do we need to stop and pick them up first?"