



WITNESSES TO DEATH

A THRILLER

FROM DERRINGER AWARD WINNER

DAVE WHITE

Witness to Death

A Thriller

By

Dave White

To Allan Guthrie
The most dedicated, hardworking agent I know.

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“Since knowledge is but sorrow’s spy, it is not safe to know.”
-William Davenant

PART ONE

JERSEY CITY

CHAPTER 1



What would his shrink say?

John Brighton knew the answer to that. He was supposed to get his mind off Ashley. He should be at a pub with one of his buddies drinking the night away, getting in a bar fight, bitching her out, something. Instead he was circling the side streets looking for Frank's Lexus.

He could see his shrink now, sitting in the thick easy chair, legs crossed with a yellow notepad on her lap. Her elbows would be balanced on the armrests, her fingers steepled and pressed to her nose. She'd gaze at him over the top of her fingers and wait. Until the point when he'd just start guessing what she was thinking about his current mental state. He wondered if his students felt the same way once he'd decided to use that tactic on them.

John felt like he was driving in a fog, the narrowing of his peripheral vision. His chest was tight, and when he breathed deep, the air didn't seem to fill his lungs.

He made a left turn and saw the black Lexus in the driveway. The house was dark inside, with only a light on in the second floor window. John cursed himself for searching out the Lexus.

John parked on the corner, sat back and watched the front door. He was sure Frank would peek his head out at some point. Michelle had told him Frank was going to be out tonight, but she didn't know where. Some sort of work thing. But John doubted that was the truth. Not after he saw Frank talking to the girl in the hat at Starbucks a few weeks ago.

Frank came out of the house, skipped down the front steps and got into the car. *Here we go.* The Lexus backed out and pulled right past John's

Corolla. John waited a second, started the car and U-turned to follow.

He tried to keep his distance, but Frank drove fast and John needed to keep up. He wondered why they were going toward Jersey City. And again he wondered why he was doing this. What was he trying to prove? No matter what he found out, it wasn't going to be something that would make Michelle happy.

Did he want her to break up with Frank?

John spent the next twenty minutes following the Lexus along Route Three to Kennedy Boulevard. When they parked, John realized he hadn't thought about Ashley in that time.

The Lexus was backed into a spot looking at the light rail. John passed, then parked his Corolla on the corner, where he hoped he was out of sight.

This is stupid. This is stupid. This is stupid.

Frank had never done anything bad to him. He should just back out, go home, and drink. But he'd been wondering for too long about Frank. John needed to know, if only to distract him from his own problems. Whether or not he'd tell Michelle would depend on what he found out. So he sat, the motor running and the heat blowing on a frigid February night.

The train pulled into the station. John had never been in this neighborhood. He was surprised to see the number of bars and restaurants. It appeared Jersey City was undergoing some sort of revival. His image of the city was a ghetto filled with gangs, murders, and terrorist sleeper cells. That was what the news publicized, anyway. But it seemed the news missed a lot.

The train took off heading toward Hoboken or Bayonne or wherever. He turned his attention back toward the Lexus, only to see Frank getting out. John looked toward the station again and saw a group of five or six men—most of them wearing black trenchcoats—heading toward the Hudson River.

John put his hand on the key. *Put the car in drive and go home.* That was the smartest option.

Frank glanced over his shoulder in John's direction. Then kept walking. John had to know where he was going—where was the girl? She probably lived in one of the condos down the river walk. He zipped his coat, got out of the car, and followed.

The wind off the water tore at his ears as he got closer to the buildings. Frank had turned one more time as they walked. John hoped he wasn't spotted. That would be embarrassing.

He stepped through the corridor between the two buildings, squinting against the wind. He stopped and stared at the water. A lead ball formed in his stomach and his feet were glued to the asphalt. Sweat formed at the nape of his neck. He closed his eyes and listened to the waves slap against the concrete barrier.

This has nothing to do with why you're here. *Find out where Frank is*

going. You'll be fine.

Digging his nails into his palms, John took a deep breath and stepped forward.

Reaching the edge of the building—still ten feet from the edge of the river—John turned right. As he did, he saw the group of men had stopped and were looking at Frank Carnathan, who was walking toward them, albeit slower than he was walking before. One of the men, an Arabic looking one, not wearing a trenchcoat yelled, “That’s Peter!” After he spoke, he stopped walking.. The trenchcoats kept coming.

Frank stopped, dropped his hands at his sides. Then he turned back toward John and broke out into a sprint.

Behind Frank, the five men in trenchcoats pointed guns at him.

CHAPTER 2



John didn't even see Frank pull his gun. It seemed like John was still walking toward Frank, then Frank was pushing him with one hand, while holding a gun in the other. Then John was behind a wall, as the sound of firecrackers popped around the corner.

Frank backed up to join him, firing a round from his gun in the direction of the trenchcoats. John tried to inch toward him, toward the safety of someone who seemed to know what he was doing, but Frank pushed him back.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Frank asked between shots.

John couldn't concentrate enough to answer. Something hit the corner of the building, sending concrete shards toward his face. He covered his eyes, and backed further away.

"Jesus Christ!"

John's knees shook as he tried to take another step toward Frank. His throat was cold as he inhaled, trying to catch his breath.

Call the police.

John reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

"I got three of them. We have to get out of here," Frank said.

Frank took him by the shoulder. As Frank pulled, the phone flew from John's hand. They ran. John felt himself lumbering, nearly losing his balance with each step, waiting for the ground to rush up to his face. And then what? Would Frank double back to help? John was already fifteen feet behind Frank and losing ground with every passing second.

Still running, John looked over his shoulder. One of the trenchcoats came around the corner, dropped onto one knee, and aimed his gun. John

froze. He felt his mouth drop open, his eyes widen. Even the breath he took tasted like sugar water, as if his body knew it would be his last and wanted to enjoy it. A breeze whisked past his ear, then the gunman's head exploded into a cloud of red particles. And John snapped back to reality.

He turned and ran again, seeing Frank holding open the door of the Light Rail with one hand and shooting *over John's shoulder* with the other.

"Come on! Pick it up!" Frank yelled.

John stumbled ahead, trying to speed up. He tumbled through the doors of the Light Rail and Frank fired two more times and let the doors close. Three people were curled up in balls near their seats.

Frank turned his gun toward the conductor, who immediately raised his hands over his head.

"Go," Frank said. Then to John, "Got four. One left."

The train started to roll. The conductor's hands shook, and he was whispering into the CB.

"He's talking to the police," John said.

Frank didn't appear to be fazed. His eyes were scanning the train.

"Frank," John said. "Frank. He's calling the—"

"Of course he's talking to the police. What would you do? Now shut up."

"What the hell is going on?" John asked.

"I said, *shut up*."

This was ridiculous.

John was sitting on a train bench gasping for breath after being shot at. *Shot at*. He could have been killed.

John closed his eyes. Electricity started in his stomach, balled inside him, and forked into his arms and legs. It charged through his brain and he started to shake. Uncontrollable fits and tremors. He couldn't catch his breath.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God." The words tumbled from John's mouth, sending spittle flying as they did.

Frank took a step toward him. "John. Okay John, you need to—"

The train erupted in gunfire. Frank twisted and fell onto his back, aiming his gun in front of him. The last trenchcoat came through the door that led between train cars, firing blindly. Two men on the train hit the deck. A woman covered her ears and screamed.

Frank fired once and shot the gun out of the trenchcoat's hand. Like it was the Old West or some TV show. Took one of the trenchcoat's fingers with it.

The train screeched as someone hit the emergency brake. Frank dropped his gun and his assailant toppled on to him. Frank hit the guy with a right cross and then kicked him backwards. Both Frank and the trenchcoat got to their feet.

John backed into a corner.

He had once read how stoners on PCP could get so hyped up from the drug, they could withstand all sorts of punishment. The guy in the trenchcoat reminded John of that. His hand was spurting blood, and yet he was still on his feet, hands in a boxing position, ready to fight.

Frank approached him without hesitating. Trenchcoat took a swing, but Frank leaned back and dodged it. He then hit the guy with three quick punches in the stomach. The guy doubled over, gasping for air. Frank hit him in the back of the neck with an elbow. The attacker went down again.

John pushed himself to his knees and crawled further away from the two of them, not wanting a better look.

Frank was on top of the guy, his hands wrapped around the guy's neck. The trenchcoat was flapping his arms against Frank's head, but Frank didn't flinch. He gritted his teeth and leaned closer to the guy. Then slammed his forehead into the guy's nose. Blood burst from his nostrils, splattering the ridged rubber floor. Trenchcoat's legs splayed out and kicked against the ground, trying to gain traction. But they kept sliding against the ridges.

Once.

Twice.

Then nothing. Both arms hit the ground. Frank pulled the guy up by his neck and then slammed his head into the ground. Then he turned to the conductor.

"Get this God damn train started."

"I can't. It takes twenty minutes to charge everything up again after the emergency brakes are engaged."

Frank stood up, breathing heavily, blood smeared across his face. He took two steps and stared the conductor down.

"Get it started as quickly as you can," Frank said.

The conductor nodded and started to pull switches and press buttons. John heard a whoosh in his ears as the blood flowed to his brain and his vision clouded. He tried to breathe, but instead threw up all over the train floor.

He spit the bile from his mouth and wiped his mouth with his hands. Frank was staring at him, his lips tilted at the edges.

"Please, tell me what's going on," John said.

CHAPTER 3



The train took about twenty minutes to power up, just like the conductor said. During that time Frank did his best to ignore John. He wouldn't answer any questions that John threw at him, instead watching the rest of the passengers. There were only five other people. Three of them were like John, sitting on the train's floor, knees pulled tight to their chest.

Frank moved over to him and said, "Listen to me."

John opened his eyes.

"When we get to Weehawken, we're probably going to have another problem, the police."

"Oh G—"

"Shut up. You're going to do exactly what I say. As soon as the train stops, I'm going to get off and take care of the police. You're going to keep moving. Get to the ferry station and get on the boat. I've ridden it before, it should be just about to pull away from the dock when we get there."

A tremor shook John. "I can't. I lost my cell phone. I don't know where it went. It's gone. That guy, his head. There's blood. The police."

"Just do it. I'll be right behind you, and we'll sort this out."

Out the window, the lights of the New York skyline and the ferry station were getting closer. Another five minutes, maybe. John watched Frank replace his gun in his holster and took a deep breath.

The train screeched into the station, and Frank moved toward the doors. On the platform stood two police officers, hands on their weapons. A few people milled about behind them wondering what was up.

Frank took John by the crook of his elbow and pulled him to his feet. John's legs wobbled, but he kept his balance. He edged up near the double

doors, Frank standing directly in front of him. John watched a line of sweat drip from Frank's neck down into the collar of his shirt.

"Everyone stays on the train until I get off," Frank said. "That way, no one gets hurt."

A few people mumbled something, as if agreeing. Frank nodded to the conductor, who opened the doors.

Stepping off, Frank said, "Evening officers."

Just like that. John's vision blurred. *Like nothing happened tonight.*

The conductor yelled through the doors, "That's him!" As if the blood on his face wasn't enough of an indicator.

Both policemen pulled their guns and told him to freeze. Frank did the opposite.

He took a step closer to the officers, snapped his left hand out, grabbed one officer's wrist and twisted until the gun fell out of his hand. The other officer took Frank's right elbow to the jaw and went down.

"John, go!" he barked.

Frank turned toward the first officer who was still watching his gun skitter across the concrete. John ran behind them and paused for a second to watch. Out of the corner of his eye, John noticed one of the onlookers holding out his open cell phone, aimed toward them, as if he were taking a picture.

Oh no.

"John, the ferry!"

John's head snapped up and he started to run again. Frank must have flattened the other cop, because when John turned to glance over his shoulder he saw Frank sprinting right behind him.

The ferry horns sounded as John clattered up the metal ramp. He stepped on to the ferry just as it was pulling away from the dock. Frank must have had to jump a few feet, as John heard the thunk of his feet against the floor behind him. It appeared there were only two others on board.

The boat rocked once to the left, and John felt as if a rubber band had tightened across his chest. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. A deep breath through the nose. In his mind he saw one of Frank's bullets rip into a trenchcoat's chest. His saliva tasted sour. John took a few steps to the middle of the boat and collapsed on to a bench.

He watched Frank lean against the railing, twenty feet away, phone pressed to his ear.

He heard the water slapping off the sides of the boat, loud fleshy explosions. It reminded John of the gunfire. He couldn't breathe. Each attempt at inhaling got caught at the back of his throat. His cheeks felt warm and tingly. Dark clouds formed at the corner of his vision. His temples

throbbed.

He stared between his knees at the cracked floor. The boat looked like it was in need of refurbishing. He saw Frank's shoe in between his two feet. Frank must have come over from the railing.

But when Frank spoke, it sounded like he was miles away.

"What were you doing back there?"

John leaned forward a bit more and tucked his knees behind his wrists. Rocked once.

"This was a bad idea," he heard himself say.

"Yeah, no kidding."

Who was that talking? The ground dissolved into a pool of red washing over his shoes. He imagined Frank killing that guy on the train, blood everywhere, the screaming. The body going limp.

"This was a bad idea. This was a bad idea," John repeated.

"Did you at least see which way the Arab guy went? I needed to talk to him. Did you see where he ran?"

John didn't say anything, just rocked back and forth.

"Okay." He heard the voice again. "Okay. It's fine. Come on. You need some air."

He felt himself standing again, and looked up. Frank was pulling John to his feet as the floor rocked underneath him.

John was walking out from the center of the boat toward the starboard side. The ferry canted left and John felt his knees lock. He watched one of the other passengers lose his balance and fall into a pole to keep himself up. John went down like one of the men struck by the bullets.

So many people dead.

And now Frank was dragging him to the ferry's edge. Toward the water. To do what? Dump him in? Get rid of another witness? He could see the dark water sparkle under the lights from the skyscrapers.

The water.

John's muscles went tight and he froze. The slapping of the water against the ferry was louder. The gunshots went off in John's head. The edge of the boat came closer. John could see water now. See it rushing. The dead men of the night faded into Hannah's face, eyes open wide in horror.

More death.

"No," John said. "No. Let's go sit. I need to sit."

"Breathe," Frank said. "It's going to be okay."

"Not here. Not here. This was a bad idea."

Frank looked over his shoulder toward the Hudson.

“Oh,” he said. “The water. Okay. Let’s go sit.”

He pulled John back to the bench, and they both sat. John bent over his knees again and fought the urge to start rocking. He felt Frank’s hand on his back, not rubbing, just there as if to keep him steady. The sour taste in John’s mouth started to fade.

“All right,” Frank said. He sounded a lot closer now. “I know it’s hard. Death is never easy to see. Not like that. Listen to me, John, and I’ll get you through this.”

John closed his eyes again, trying to regain his equilibrium. When he did, the images of death flooded back to him and he had to open his eyes again. He stared at the floor, looked at a small pile of mud that must have come from someone’s shoe. The smell of salt and garbage from the river crowded the air.

“I want you to focus on something,” Frank said. “Look at the back of your hand. Focus on your knuckles.”

John did. He looked at the back of his right hand. The dry knuckles, cracked underneath his middle finger. The small brown mole near his third knuckle. The burning in his cheeks started to cool. He could feel the soft breeze on them. He took a deep breath and the air finally filled his lungs.

“You have to realize, John, it was them or us.”

“You shot them!” John felt the tightness coming back to his chest. He snapped his body straight up against the bench.

“I know. I had no choice.”

“What’s going on? Why were you there?”

The ferry horn blew again. They were pulling into the dock. The ferry was slowly backing into its port. In a few minutes, they’d be back on solid ground. John closed his eyes tight and breathed through his nose. The images of the dead didn’t come this time.

“You all right, John? You going to be okay?” Frank finally took his hand off John’s back.

John nodded, trying to breathe like a runner. In through the nose, out through the mouth. His shrink was going to have a field day with this. She might actually call the crazy house on him.

“Good,” Frank said. “Because as soon as we get off this boat, we’re going to go to a bar and get you a drink.”

“What about the police? When we dock.”

Frank blew air out his nose. “I called in a bomb threat across the street. That’ll distract them. Let’s get a drink.”

A drink sounded perfect right about now.

“And then, you’re going to tell me why you were following me.”

CHAPTER 4



Ashley MacDonald's heart was still pounding as she stared out of her windshield.

She wrapped her hands around the keys, which were still in the ignition and pulled a little. Then she lost her grasp on the handle and the keys fell on to the mat at her feet. They jingled when they hit. She reached down and picked them up. Her hands shook as the keys went back into the ignition and she restarted the car.

She remembered the afternoon before she and John took that weekend trip to Philly. How she sat in her car for half an hour before leaving to pick him up. She wanted to look great, she didn't want to embarrass herself or John in public. It was their first weekend away, and she went over every possible faux pas in her head. Not this time. Now she just stared down the hill, past the Light Rail. Couldn't believe what had just happened.

The radio blared in the background, the eleven o'clock news update just starting. "With your anchor..." Some blowhard who acted like he knew everything, but probably knew nothing aside from what the copy said. But someone the radio network thought the general public could trust.

Can't trust anybody, she thought.

She lifted her purse off the passenger seat, placed it on her lap, and dug through it. The purse was full—receipts, tampons, wallet, phone, comb, and post-it notes. All she wanted was a piece of gum, something to chew on while she figured out what to do next. But there wasn't any gum. No mints. Nothing.

Before she could decide what to do next, she looked out of her passenger window through the glass front of the bar across the sidewalk. The TVs had gone to the news, and on the screen was the face she thought

she wouldn't see again. John Brighton.

Ashley stared at the screen. The anchor looked directly into the camera as a small box over his right shoulder had a blurry picture of John, the words "Shootout in Jersey City" beneath them. She felt her ears burn as the rest of her body went cold. At the same time, the radio anchor announced breaking news.

Seemed everyone was getting the story at the same time.

"A bizarre scene in Hudson County, New Jersey today, as a man opened fire on the Jersey City harbor, leaving four dead along the water. The man then moved on to the Light Rail, leaving another dead. The cause of the battle is unknown, but an onlooker took a picture of a man getting off the train before he escaped on the Weehawken ferry. His photo is up on our AM 900 website. It is believed he was somehow involved, possibly even the shooter. If you see this man, call the authorities immediately. He is believed to be armed and dangerous. More on this story as it becomes available."

He gave a brief description of John for "those listening away from a computer." Ashley had seen the shootout begin, only feet from her. Peter opened fire first, and then pushed John on to the Light Rail, leaving bodies behind them. Just after the train pulled away, an Arabic guy approached the scene and picked up the guns. Ashley called 911.

The cops arrived and began cordoning off the area only minutes later.

"In other New Jersey news, the corporation Ameritech suffered a break-in the—"

Ashley turned off the radio, and then grabbed her cell phone. She dialed John, but got no answer. He had his phone off. She tried Michelle next. The phone rang three times before she answered.

"Ashley, what's going on? What happened tonight?"

Behind Michelle's voice there was a rumble of other people talking, music, and glasses clanking.

"Where are you? I can barely hear you," Ashley said.

"I'm at a bar with some people from work. Frank had to work tonight," she said, as if she didn't quite believe it. "Hold on. I'm heading outside right now."

You'd better hope he's doing his job right now, Ashley thought.

She held the phone tight and watched the :04 on the dashboard clock flip to :05. Time was wasting. She had to figure out what to do. If they went after Peter, they'd probably come after her too. The roar behind Michelle's voice dulled until Ashley couldn't hear it at all.

"Michelle, I—"

"You broke up with John tonight," Michelle said, her voice much clearer now.

“What? No. We had a fight. I didn’t break up with him.”

“He called me after it happened. Told me you ended it. Said he called Patrick too, and we both told him the same thing, get out and get a drink. But he didn’t.”

Of course he called you. Ashley felt her shoulders tighten and hated herself for it. Now wasn’t the time to be jealous.

“That’s not what happened,” she said.

“Okay, if you’re not broken up, what was the fight about?” Michelle asked.

Ashley thought about telling her the truth. Telling her everything.

Instead, she said, “John was just on the news. Did you see it in the bar?”

“No. They had the Nets on. Why was he—?”

“He was involved in some sort of shootout. People are dead. They think he did it.”

Michelle laughed. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m serious.” *I saw it all.*

“Stop messing around. First you tell him you don’t want to see him, and now you’re going to tell me he’s wanted by the police?”

Ashley sighed. What had John told her? When she told John she didn’t want to see him, just hours earlier in the car outside his apartment, she meant tonight. And he knew it.

Why shouldn’t I do this? It’ll be good for both of them

It’s stupid and it’s none of your business. Don’t follow him tonight.

Do you know something? Is there someone else?

No.

Tell me why you don’t agree with me. Why is this wrong? You’ve been acting so weird lately. You haven’t been answering my calls.

Just don’t be stupid. I can’t take you when you’re like this.

Are you breaking up with me?

She had paused before answering. Looked at her steering wheel.

Are you?

I—

John got out of her car and went back into his apartment.

Her eyes had welled up when she screamed at him. Ashley needed him to believe her. And he didn’t listen. In fact, he did exactly the opposite of what she expected. Usually, if they fought, he’d want to work it out. Stick around. This time he stormed off. She wished she hadn’t hesitated before