

BAD BARGAIN

by
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FADE IN

INT. BALLROOM - NIGHT

A thumb rolls a wedding band around a finger, spinning the band, a nervous habit.

The ring, and habit belong to HALE DENNING, 30's, attractive in an intellectual way. Dressed in a tux, standing at a podium supporting a bust of Edgar Allen Poe, an Edgar Award, Hale is proud and anxious.

HALE

The secret of my success is no mystery. I am what I am because of my wife, Parker.

He gazes into the grid of tables, directly at a gorgeous woman of like age, PARKER DENNING. As glamorous as her gown, Parker turns heads.

HALE

I'm here because a very pretty woman agreed to marry me if I finished my first novel. And Parker, it was the best bargain I ever made.

(grabbing Edgar)

I wish to thank mystery readers everywhere. And I promise my fans another Parker Hale novel this year!

The room erupts with applause as Hale waves the award.

INT. HOTEL SUITE - NIGHT

The door opens. Lights flick on. Hale and Parker, inebriated, stumble into a classy suite. Hale clutches the Edgar as they kiss, as happy as a couple can be. Success, triumph, lust, and youth.

Parker breaks the kiss and skips into the bathroom.

Hale sets the Edgar on the bed and strips, tossing clothes everywhere. In boxers, he sinks to his knees before the Edgar, paying homage to the award. He stares in disbelief. He's arrived.

Parker emerges from the bathroom. In panties, she's one sexy vision.

Hale jumps to his feet and opens his arms.

Parker cups one luscious breast and blows a teasing kiss.

HALE

Gimmee!

She laughs naughtily and scampers to the bureau. From her purse, she plucks an inhaler. She pinches a swollen nipple as she takes two quick puffs. Drops inhaler, sprints across the carpet, and leaps into Hale's arms. Locked in a kiss, they fall on the bed to rub bodies.

Their bouncing rocks the Edgar before it topples on its face.

INT. EDIE'S OFFICE - DAY

The Edgar sits on a glass-top desk, as immutable as a sphinx.

A ring bedecked hand plucks the award.

The hand belongs to EDIE CRAWFORD, Hale's agent and the occupant of this high-powered office, a tribute to success. An ample woman, she's good at what she does.

EDIE

I'm going to have one of these made
for my trophy case.

Eddie walks to her chair opposite Hale and Parker.

EDIE

Coffee, tea, water?

PARKER

Coffee, I'm allergic to tea.

HALE

Coffee.

Eddie hits a button on her desk.

EDIE

I negotiated a three book deal.
100K per.

HALE

Screen rights?

EDIE

Ours. By the way, where is the
screenplay for Murderous Spirits?

HALE

First draft is finished. Give me one more week, and I'll give you a winner.

EDIE

It's 100K when you deliver with a 50K rewrite option. Sooner is better.

HALE

Blame Parker. She craves attention.

PARKER

You married an orphan, remember?

Eddie tosses the Edgar to Hale who catches it niftily.

EDIE

Bring in another Edgar, and you'll be the king of mysteries.

PARKER

He'll finish the screenplay even if I have to cast a spell.

HALE

That's Margo's job.

EDIE

Margo?

PARKER

Our neighbor. She's a witch.

EDIE

If she has a spell for writer's block, I have clients who will keep her in toadstools for life.

HALE

Work for me, Edie. Where do we stand with the stage play?

EDIE

The director thinks you're gay

Hale and Parker laugh, and Edie joins them. An ASSISTANT enters with two coffees.

INT. ZENO'S CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

A well-appointed room with long table, leather chairs. Parker and Hale sit across from ZENO MINUIT, their over-sized money manager. The table is strewn with balance sheets, projections, charts, and snack food.

ZENO

With the market on the rebound, you should look for a tax shelter. Say, a farm.

HALE

Tax shelter?

ZENO

If you reinvested the bonds, your growth would--

HALE

That's our getaway money, Zeno.

ZENO

Their liquidity makes them low yield.

Hale merely shrugs.

ZENO

This isn't a Parker Hale whodunit. We're talking real money.

HALE

If the market crashes?

PARKER

We'll have a tax shelter we don't need.

Zeno throws up his hands. Enough.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - DAY

A rambling farm house in the New England countryside. The spring sun finds Parker planting flowers. A breeze, a brush back of a lock of hair, a reach for the inhaler in her pocket.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale stands at the window, gazing down at Parker. With a sigh, he turns to his desk, his computer.

His room is full of books, framed awards, a hangman's noose, a crossbow, murder paraphernalia. It's neat, everything in its place.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BASEMENT WORKSHOP - DAY

Hale taps a nail into a wooden frame on a long workbench. An array of tools and woodworking implements are neatly arranged.

He finishes the frame and grabs a rolled up marquee poster. He unrolls it inside the frame. The poster displays a faceless man immersed in a snow storm. The movie title-- WHITE DEATH.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Parker and Hale eat spaghetti. He touches her nose with a hunk of garlic bread. She grabs his wrist and bites the bread.

HALE

What do you know about demons?

PARKER

There are no demons.

HALE

What do people believe about demons?

PARKER

How should I know? I planted four flats today.

Parker coughs, and the cough turns into a wheeze, a breathing problem.

HALE

Need it?

She nods and points. Hale scrambles to the counter, grabs her inhaler, and hands it over. He watches as she puffs.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Perky nipples raise a silk chemise as Parker rubs cream into her face at a makeup table.

Behind her, in boxers, Hale flips open a loaded revolver and lays it on the bed.

PARKER

Did you hear about the Seward boy?

Hale moves back two steps.

HALE
What landed Josh in rehab this
time?

PARKER
Speed.

Hale leaps forward, snatches the revolver off the bed, and rolls on the floor, flipping the cylinder closed. He comes to one knee, firing position.

PARKER
One knee or prone?

HALE
Watch.

Hale repeats. Opens the revolver, places it on the bed, leaps, grabs, rolls but remains in prone firing position.

PARKER
Prone is better.

HALE
On top is better.

PARKER
(laughing)
That so?

As Hale rises, Parker leaves the table and moves close. She reaches down to grab his crotch.

PARKER
Does this pistol work?

HALE
Top or bottom, it fires even when
wet.

PARKER
Hmmm....let's find out.

She kisses him and pulls him onto the bed. He places the revolver on the table, and his hands roam her.

HALE
God, I love you.

She bites his ear.

PARKER
How many shots does this thing
carry?

HALE
Care to count?

INT. COUNTY LIBRARY - DAY

Hale sits at a table laden with books, research on witches, demons, magic. He opens a large, old tome and finds.

A demon stares back, a demon that looks curiously, like Groucho Marx.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale at his computer. He clicks the mouse several times and on the screen pops a demon face. This one is pure evil.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - YARD - NIGHT

Hale consults a book by flashlight, nods.

He steps into the middle of a hexagon he's staked on the ground. He sits cross-legged, snaps off the light, and watches a full moon emerge from the trees.

EXT. MARGO'S GARDEN - DAY

Sunshine bathes Hale as he strides through a formal garden. Walks, benches, flowers, plants, trees, blooms and colors, a botanical feast. He rounds a corner and stops.

On hands and knees, in floppy hat, MARGO mortars a brick walk.

HALE
Margo, I thought your garden was
complete.

MARGO
Ever really finish a book, Hale?

HALE
Touché. Got a minute?

Margo stands, and she's a gnome. Short, round, radically short haircut, she could be 40 or 60.

MARGO
Many minutes.

HALE

What do you know about demons?

INT. MARGO'S HOUSE - PORCH - DAY

Margo's screened porch is wicker and leafy plants. Hale sips tea. Margo examines plants, picking at them. She wears gold bracelets inscribed with runes.

MARGO

Demons are persnickety, but they play fair.

HALE

I thought demons were evil.

MARGO

Some are, but they are rare. Who wants to associate with evil?

HALE

I'm plotting a story where the murderer convinces the police a demon caused the victim to commit suicide.

MARGO

Ooooh, I like that.

Around the corner of the house walks BRENDA SEWARD, 50, grayish. A blockish woman of strength yet not brittle. She stops and peers through the screen.

BRENDA

Margo?

MARGO

Hello, Brenda. I'm here with Hale Denning.

BRENDA

Hello, Mr. Denning. Margo, I don't have much time. I want you to go ahead with that agreement we discussed.

MARGO

Are you sure? It's irrevocable.

BRENDA

You can still do it?

MARGO

Oh, yes.

BRENDA

Thank you. I have to run. Rehab is releasing Josh.

With that, Brenda leaves.

HALE

Isn't she the mayor?

MARGO

Not any more. Need the name of a good demon?

HALE

A whole biography.

They laugh together.

INT. DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM - DAY

Hale edits a manuscript. Red pen, white paper, he crosses out and writes in. Door opens, and Parker emerges, as vivacious as sunshine.

PARKER

Are you a writer?

HALE

Hack.

PARKER

What would a hack say to an O2 level of 95?

Hale stands and sweeps Parker into his arms.

HALE

You're going to live forever.

PARKER

Probably long enough for a picnic.

EXT. CREEK - DAY

Parker and Hale on a plaid blanket by a clear brook. Sunshine, chicken, wine, grapes, two people in love. Hale's head in Parker's lap.

PARKER

Then, the murderer races up the stairs to the roof.

HALE

He has asthma. How's he gonna run stairs?

PARKER

Asthmatics are not invalids.

HALE

They can't run stairs.

PARKER

I'm asthmatic, asshole.

HALE

The most beautiful asthmatic in the world.

Pissed, Parker looks around. Across the creek rises a cliff, 30' of pocked stone, mossy in spots.

PARKER

Asthmatic, huh?

She dumps Hale and jumps to her feet. She heads for the cliff, wading through knee deep water.

HALE

Parker!

She reaches the cliff and climbs, fishing for holds. She's untrained but a gamer. Up she climbs, shoes leaking water.

Hale notices Parker's inhaler. He grabs it and walks to the creek.

HALE

You forgot your inhaler.

PARKER

Screw the inhaler.

Hale watches and wonders what to do.

Halfway up, Parker labors, her breath shallow. But she keeps climbing.

Hale hears her wheeze. Shaking his head, he wades through the creek and climbs after her.

Parker searches for holds. Panting, she wavers, her foot slips, dislodging rocks. She hangs.

Below, rocks pelt Hale, cutting his cheek. He looks up as Parker regains her hold.

HALE
PARKER?

She doesn't have the breath to answer. She has to do this.
Reach, pull. She nears the top.

Hale climbs as fast as he can.

Parker's hand reaches over the top. First one, then the other, a shove, a heave, and she lunges over the edge. She crawls a few feet and collapses, rolling on her back, wheezing. She's in trouble.

Hale propels himself over the top. His scrapes bleed, a cut on his cheek, out of breath. He scrambles and puts the inhaler in Parker's mouth. He pumps it for her, and she sucks in medicine. Two puffs.

He falls on his back and sucks wind.

PARKER
(whispers)
See?

HALE
The murderer races up ten flights
and spends an hour recovering.

Parker swings an arm, her hand smacking his chest. He grabs her hand and kisses it.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - EVENING

Fingers fly over the keyboard, a writer on a roll.

Into the room sweeps Parker. In summer dress, she leans over his shoulder and places a check on the keyboard.

HALE
Zeros R us.

PARKER
Think a successful mystery writer
can take his wife to dinner?

Hale grabs the check, whirls, and pulls her onto his lap.

HALE
I love you almost as much as this
check.

PARKER
Such flattery.

They kiss madly.

EXT. RESTAURANT DECK - NIGHT

Parker and Hale eat under brilliant stars. A breeze rustles her hair. They hold hands and watch the rising moon.

BRENDA (O.S.)
I want another drink.

The loud voice turns Hale.

Across the deck, Brenda sits with her HUSBAND. Brenda is drunk, sloppy drunk. Her Husband reaches across, and she slaps away his hand.

BRENDA
Not on your life. Get me a scotch.

Husband considers a moment before he stands, tosses down his napkin, and walks out.

BRENDA
COWARD! SCOTCH, DAMNIT!

Brenda looks about, a lush desperate for a drink.

Hale studies Brenda, puzzled.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Hale eats breakfast and reads the paper. A strip of bacon, turn the page, stops.

A photo with a caption--LOCAL YOUTH WINS SCHOLARSHIP. Below, the youth's name--JOSHUA SEWARD.

Hale frowns. Before he can read, Parker enters. Nose red, cheeks flushed, lopsided smile.

PARKER
I've got a cold.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- DAY

Parker lies in bed, intravenous tubes, oxygen, saline, antibiotics, the regime. Hale sits at her side. Parker's doctor, TOD NEMOURS, a handsome mid-40's man certain of his good looks and skill, stands on the other side.

TOD
Her lungs are like overstretched rubber bands, no elasticity.

HALE
And?

TOD
Pneumonia. Breathing treatments
should prevent anything worse.

PARKER
(gasps)
No ventilator.

HALE
(to Parker)
Just concentrate on getting well.

Tod's look says getting well isn't guaranteed.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN -- DAY

Hale types. Tired, not so neat at the moment.

Phone RINGS. He ignores several rings before he grabs it.

HALE
Yeah?

EDIE
(on phone)
You're tough to reach. How is she?

HALE
Home tomorrow if no setbacks. But
she's not right. That'll take a
while.

EDIE
I hate to press, but you're on a
deadline.

HALE
Almost finished. And before you
ask, it's good.

EDIE
I never doubt. Send it. Ciao.

Phone clicks dead. Hale returns to this computer.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN -- LATER

The last page emerges from the laser printer. Hale adds it
to the stack, removes the flash drive, and places it on top.
Finished. Yawns, stretches. Rises and rubs his tummy.

INT. LOUNGE -- NIGHT

The local watering hole, a trendy place, almost empty at his hour. Hale slips to the bar. BARTENDER glances over.

HALE

Beer.

Bartender does his thing and slaps down a mug.

Brenda enters and parks in front of a scotch two stools from Hale. Alcohol has wreaked damage on her. Hale glances over, surprised.

BRENDA

Buy you a drink?

HALE

(holding up mug)

Got one, thanks.

An awkward moment, and maybe Hale wouldn't speak if he weren't seeking a bit of companionship.

HALE

Congratulations.

BRENDA

Congratulations?

HALE

On your son...the scholarship.

BRENDA

Thank you. Bargain struck, bargain kept.

HALE

Can I ask you a question?

Brenda finishes her scotch, pushes the tumbler for another, and waves on Hale's question.

HALE

Why did you give up politics?

She studies him with one eye closed as the Bartender pours another scotch.

BRENDA

My son. Joshua and politics don't mix.

Hale might pursue this, but Brenda pushes away from the bar. She sways.

BARTENDER

If you're going to puke again, take it outside.

She gives the Bartender a sneer, turns, takes a step, and collapses.

The Bartender does nothing, as if this happens every night-- maybe it does.

HALE

911?

BARTENDER

Her husband used to come for her. Now it's a cab.

Hale looks from Brenda to the Bartender.

HALE

Where does she live?

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE DRIVE - NIGHT

Hale's car pulls into the drive. He climbs out, goes to the passenger side, and hauls out Brenda. Closing the door with his hip, he helps her walk.

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Holding up Brenda, Hale rings the doorbell.

Nothing.

Grabbing her purse, he fishes out her keys. After trying a few, finds the right one. Unlocks the door and hauls her inside.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

A light flicks on in the hall. Light spills over the bed. Hale hauls Brenda into the room, manages to get her on the bed. He removes her shoes and stops. Having completed his good deed, he leaves.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - HALL - NIGHT

Hale comes down the stairs, into the foyer. He's about to leave when something catches his eye in the parlor.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - PARLOR - NIGHT

In the doorway, Hale fumbles for the light. Finds it.

Light reveals a room of campaign items. Banners, fliers, signs, buttons, pens, flags, bumper stickers. All in red, white, and blue. All say SEWARD FOR GOVERNOR. The room is packed with campaign items.

Hale grabs a bumper sticker. Is it real? Taking the sticker, he flips off the light and leaves.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Parker in bed. Pale, weak, she breathes oxygen from a green tank and has a thermometer in her mouth.

Thermometer beeps, and Hale takes it. He looks at it and shrugs.

Parker cries.

PARKER

I don't want to go back.

Hale sits on the bed and takes her in his arms.

HALE

It won't be for long, just till your fever goes away.

PARKER

You can't let them put me on a ventilator.

HALE

No, no, never. I promise.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - DRIVE - DAY

Summer on the wane as Hale sets a watermelon on concrete marked with tape.

He steps back to consider his contraption, a cinder block suspended from the second floor window. His hand drifts toward the release as a car pulls into the drive.

He turns. Brenda steps out. She has shrunken and aged, but then boozing does that. He waits as she shuffles forward.

BRENDA

Mr. Denning?

HALE

Hello.

BRENDA

I owe you more than a thank you,
but I doubt you'll accept anything
else.

HALE

We all need a helping hand once in
a while.

BRENDA

I would have dropped by sooner, but
my memory isn't...

HALE

Would you like a drink?

She smiles, and he realizes he's bitten his foot.

HALE

Lemonade or something.

BRENDA

I don't want to keep you from...

She looks at watermelon and cinder block.

HALE

It can wait.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - DECK - DAY

Brenda and Hale sip iced tea in the sun .

BRENDA

Once I determined where I had
been...the bartender complimented
you.

HALE

Can I ask a personal question?

She looks at him and waits.

HALE

Why did you quit politics?

BRENDA

I don't--

HALE

I was in your house. I saw the campaign posters.

BRENDA

I drink, Mr. Denning. I thought you knew.

HALE

I'm a writer. When someone does a one eighty, I'm intrigued.

She studies him as if she wants to tell him something.

HALE

There's your son too. He kicked drugs and won a scholarship.

BRENDA

(raising one hand,
lowering the other)
Not all tides raise all boats.

HALE

What does that mean?

BRENDA

(rising)
Time for me to go.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - DRIVE - DAY

Brenda and Hale stand before his contraption.

HALE

Please forgive an inquisitive writer. I didn't mean to pry.

BRENDA

If you want to satisfy your curiosity, talk to Margo.

HALE

Margo?

BRENDA

What is that for?

Hale smiles, hits the release. Cinder block falls and splatters the watermelon.

HALE

Murder by cinder block.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

A trendy restaurant where movers and shakers 'do' lunch.

At a table by the window sit Edie and Hale. Lunch finished, coffee served.

EDIE

Bottom line, bucko, you have to meet your deadlines.

HALE

I'm over-committed, especially with Parker in the hospital.

EDIE

You're not there yet.

HALE

What?

EDIE

Retirement. Your royalties aren't enough.

HALE

Everything I've ever done was for Parker. If caring for her slows me down...so be it.

Eddie smiles and throws wide her arms.

EDIE

You don't think I can sell devotion? By the bushel, tiger, by the bushel.

Hale laughs, but his laugh is cut short by a phone ringtone. He pulls it out and answers.

HALE

Hello.

The conversation is short and one sided. Hale hangs up.

HALE

The hospital. I have to go.

He stands, shakes Edie's hand, leaves.

EDIE

I hope she's all right.

Eddie reaches across and nabs Hale's untouched dessert.

INT. HOSPITAL HALL - NIGHT

Hale and Tod stand outside Parker's room.

HALE
You put her on a ventilator.

TOD
We had no choice. Her lungs are
shot.

Anguish haunts Hale's face. Parker is losing the battle.

TOD
We want to try lung reduction
surgery.

HALE
What?

TOD
We remove dead tissue so the
healthy tissue has more viability.

HALE
The chances are four in five that
she won't get off the ventilator!

Tod waits. Hale has to come to this decision by himself.

HALE
I have to think.

TOD
The longer--

HALE
Damn it! She's my wife!

Tod smiles and backs off. He starts to pat Hale's shoulder but changes his mind. Simply leaves.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Parker is on a ventilator. Ashen, asleep, pumped with tubes and monitors, she's closer to death than anyone ever wants to be.

By her side, Hale faces a decision no one should have to make.

Parker looks so vulnerable. He reaches out, takes her cold hand, and rubs it, trying to warm it.

Tears run down Hale's face.

EXT. MARGO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hale raps at the door. He hits repeatedly--until a light comes on.

INT. MARGO'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Margo's kitchen is more garden than kitchen, plants everywhere. She sips tea. Hale sips coffee, and he's wired. His feet tap.

HALE

She's dying, and they want to cut her up like a paper doll.

MARGO

I'm no doctor.

HALE

But you can help, can't you? The way you helped Brenda.

He looks at Margo who betrays nothing, an unreadable gnome.

HALE

She wouldn't tell me exactly, but you did something.

MARGO

I explained about demons.

HALE

Demons can save Parker?

MARGO

You find that amazing?

HALE

If a demon can do it, turn him loose.

MARGO

There is no free lunch.

HALE

Anything, I'll pay anything!

MARGO

(raising one hand,
lowering the other)
The universe must remain in
balance.

Hale leans forward, as earnest as a TV evangelist.

HALE
Parker is my life. Make the deal!

Margo stands and regards him.

MARGO
I recommend you sleep on it.

HALE
She'll be dead by morning.

With a not-too-sure look, Margo leaves. Hale looks at his watch.

INT. MARGO'S BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single candle in the middle of a table. Margo stands on one side, Hale on the other. Light flickers off vials and beakers and glass, shelves of things indistinct and unknowable. Between them a single sheet of paper.

MARGO
You understand the terms and conditions?

Hale hesitates. What he's agreed to is difficult.

HALE
Yes.

MARGO
Sign the agreement.

He signs the sheet.

She drips red wax onto the paper.

MARGO
Thumb print.

He reaches out, and she grabs his wrist.

MARGO
There's no going back.

He removes her hand and puts his thumb in the wax.

MARGO
Bow your head.

Hale bows. Margo produces scissors and clips a hunk of hair.

HALE

Hey!

Margo places the hair inside a jar and screws on the cap.

HALE

(rubbing head)

That seals the deal?

MARGO

Oh no, I just wanted a souvenir.

Hale chuckles.

HALE

That's it? No blood?

MARGO

Remember! The bargain changes both of you.

Hale frowns. What might change?

HALE

When does it take effect?

MARGO

Now.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Hale stands next to his car, staring at the moon.

HALE

Demons, yeah. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He starts for the hospital entrance.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Parker hasn't changed. Tod stands next to her bed, taken with her beauty.

Hale enters. Tired, wild, he's had one harrowing day.

TOD

I'm glad you're here. We need to get her to surgery.

HALE

Take it out.

TOD
What?

HALE
The ventilator. She never wanted
it. Take it out.

TOD
Remove the ventilator and she dies.

HALE
It's not a request, it's an order.

TOD
I don't kill my patients.

Hale goes crazy, grabbing for the tube.

HALE
Goddamn you! Take out THE DAMN
TUBE!!

Tod grabs Hale, and they tussle. Hale prevails, tossing Tod
against the wall. Hale grabs the tube.

TOD
Wait! Wait, I'll do it, OK?

Tod moves forward and pushes aside Hale's hands.

TOD
When she dies, you sonofabitch, I'm
calling the police.

Hale says nothing, watches Tod work on the ventilator tube.

TOD
I'll give you one more chance to
come to your senses.

Hale doesn't answer. Tod works. In a minute, no ventilator.

TOD
Stupid bastard. You're the one who
doesn't deserve to live.

Tod steps away. He grabs the phone and dials as he watches
the monitors.

TOD
Code blue, room five twelve.
Hurry!

Hale watches, waiting for Parker to breathe. Fear, anxiety, and hope twist his face. He leans over the bed, turning his cheek to her mouth. He waits, an inch from her lips.

Behind, Tod prepares for resuscitation, moving equipment out of the way.

Hale waits, joy or despair?

Parker breathes, her breath kissing Hale's cheek.

Tod stops and stares as Parker coughs, gasps, and draws in a huge breath. He can't believe this.

Hale rises and smiles at the woman he has brought back from the dead.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale hits his computer. Fingers hum. He stops, leans back, and yawns. Above him is the SEWARD FOR GOVERNOR bumper sticker. He checks his watch. Late. He stands, plucks pages from the printer, stacks them, and leaves.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Moving day. Parker, in a wheelchair bedecked with balloons and ribbons, is wheeled out by Hale. Flowers in her lap.

They wave to nurses and doctors. Tod races up and plants a kiss on her cheek. He falls back as Parker sweeps away.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Hale carries Parker into the bedroom and gently sets her on the bed. Parker is ecstatic.

PARKER

You know, I haven't felt this good since fifth grade.

Hale unpacks her bag, setting medicine and inhalers on the nightstand.

PARKER

What did they do?

HALE

Miracle cure. Didn't they tell you?

PARKER

Only that they've never seen anything like it.

HALE
Get used to it. You're well.

Parker wraps her arms around his neck and pulls him down. Giggling, she kisses him. It's been a long time.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - LATER

Parker sleeps. She wakes, tosses off the sheet to expose a delicious body. She reaches for an inhaler. She starts to puff and stops. She doesn't need the hit.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - HALL - DAY

Dressed in a short robe, Parker steals down the hall. She hesitates, then leaps through a doorway.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Parker frowns at the empty den. Computer runs a screensaver of Ravens, black birds whose beady eyes stare at her.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - YARD - DAY

Still dressed in robe, Parker walks through the grass, past bushes that would have spiked her allergies in the past. She shows no symptoms.

She reaches the end of the yard where Hale has staked out an 10x10 plot. With pick and shovel, Hale digs footings along the strings he's stretched.

PARKER
What's this?

Hale looks up, shirt soaked with sweat.

HALE
A project.

PARKER
Next book?

HALE
Maybe.

PARKER
You're not writing?

Hale leans on his shovel.

HALE
On a break.

Parker regards him with a look of doubt.

PARKER
Can't you rent a machine to dig
ditches?

HALE
I have to do it by hand.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Parker and Hale over a Chinese dinner. Parker throbs with energy. Hale looks as if he's labored for a week.

PARKER
What are you building?

HALE
I'm not sure.

PARKER
You know how good I feel?

Hale looks at a Parker who has the energy of a teenager.

PARKER
Let's do something.

HALE
Can I pass? The digging...

PARKER
Tomorrow night...dancing.

She walks her fingers across the table and lets them dance up his arm. Then, she takes his hand and places it between her breasts.

PARKER
Tonight, your fingers can dance
here.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker chops carrots which she adds to a kettle of soup. More healthy than spinach, she looks lovely.

Hale enters, dressed in jeans and leather gloves.

HALE
That smells heavenly.

He leans, and she plops a bite of carrot into his mouth.

PARKER
I thought you were writing today.

HALE
Finished.

PARKER
Already?

HALE
I'm pacing myself.

PARKER
Hold that thought. Dancing,
remember?

Hale reaches down and grabs her ass.

HALE
Close dancing.

With a quick kiss, Hale heads for the door.

PARKER
Hale.

He turns.

PARKER
Remember when I was allergic to
tea?

Parker picks up a cup and sips.

PARKER
Nothing.

HALE
More cure than you bargained for?

With that, he's gone. Parker returns to her soup.

INT. LOUNGE - NIGHT

A DJ spins CDs for an older CROWD that enjoys close dancing. Hale, Parker and two couples move easily, confidently from long practice. Parker looks delicious in a slinky dress.

PARKER
We used to dance only at weddings.

HALE
You ran out of breath.

PARKER
I can jitterbug now. What story
are you working on?

HALE
A continuing story of sorts.

PARKER
Parker Hale?

HALE
Something a bit different.

PARKER
I think all that digging has warped
your brain.

From out of the dark comes Tod who taps Hale on the shoulder.

TOD
Mind if I dance with my favorite
miracle?

Hale relinquishes Parker with good grace.

HALE
Take good care of her.

TOD
I always do.

As Doctor and Parker whirl away, Hale returns to his table.
He sits and watches Parker laugh.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

Footings dug and poured, a stack of lumber to one side, Hale
works on the frame, hammering 2x4's. Falling leaves signal
the onset of autumn.

EDIE (O.S.)
What the hell is that supposed to
be?

Hale turns and finds Edie staring.

EDIE
Wouldn't it be easier to run to Wal-
Mart and buy a shed?

Hale slings his hammer in the loop on his leather belt.

HALE
Penance comes in all sizes.

EDIE
Penance is for the guilty. Say,
that's not a bad title for a Parker
Hale novel. Speaking of which,
where is it?

HALE
You received my letter?

EDIE
I received a piece of dreck. You
can't quit.

HALE
I have quit, Edie. It's over.

Hale grabs a 2x4, lays it on sawhorses, and prepares to
measure his next cut.

EDIE
What do you mean over?

HALE
I'm not writing any more.

EDIE
Parker says you write every day.

HALE
I'm dry, Edie. I don't have it.

He measures, draws a line, and grabs his handsaw.

EDIE
What happened?

He looks at her, his face betrays nothing.

EDIE
A few months ago two novels, a
screenplay, and a two-act comedy.
You're dry? I know dry, Hale. You
aren't it.

HALE
Writers go dry in different ways.

EDIE
Self-pity too?

Hale WHACKS the stud with his saw.

HALE
 Damn it, you think I like not
 writing?! I hate it, hate it, but
 it's over. That part of me is
 dead. Do you understand? Dead!

Eddie backs up. This isn't the writer she knew. She stares
 as Hale sets his edge and saws viciously.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Parker, dressed in workout clothes, grabs a bottle of water
 from the fridge and drops it into her athletic bag.

Hale enters, carrying five manuscript boxes.

HALE
 Volleyball tonight?

PARKER
 I told you this morning.

Hale shrugs, bad memory.

PARKER
 Why don't you come with me?

HALE
 I gave up sports in high school.

PARKER
 It's that damn shed of yours.

HALE
 Shrine.

PARKER
 Shed, shrine, it's all you ever do!

HALE
 Have a good time.

With that, Hale sets the boxes on the table and leaves.

Seething, Parker grabs her bag.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - ATTIC - EVENING

Hale climbs the steps with a large box in hand. He moves
 across the attic to place the box among others. The box
 holds murder paraphernalia--crossbow, noose, knives, blow
 gun. He picks up the noose and looks at the rafters.

With a wry smile, he drops the noose into the box.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - EVENING

Hale stands next to a barrel where he burns scrap. Flames lick at wood. Behind him, the shrine is framed, an outline against the fading sky.

Hale opens a manuscript box, takes out a few typed pages, and drops them into the fire. He watches the pages curl and burn before he dumps the entire box.

As flames eat the paper, Hale adds the box.

INT. GYM - EVENING

Parker stands on one side of the volleyball court. She's one of three WOMEN on this coed team. The MEN are overweight and slow.

TOD (O.S.)
Yo, Parker!

She turns and sees Tod on the other side of the net.

TOD
Prepare to get your butt whipped.

PARKER
Promises, promises.

Everyone laughs.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - NIGHT

Hale tosses framed awards into the fire.

INT. SNACK BAR - NIGHT

Parker, Doctor and other players sit a table, sipping beer.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - MORNING

The den has been stripped of parapanalia, awards, posters. Books remain, along with the computer, bumper sticker, and on a shelf above the computer, the Edgar.

Hale types away, doing what has become so familiar.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Parker, a bit hung over, slips into the kitchen. She shivers in her sheer robe.

Lighting a fire under the tea kettle, she looks out the window.

The leaves have fallen. Bare trees stand sentinel over the shrine where Hale lays brick, walls two feet tall.

Parker turns away from the window, and the look on her face isn't wonder. Her patience wears thin.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

Hale sits on a pallet of bricks and pours himself coffee from a thermos. He looks at the bare trees, the promise of winter.

Parker arrives and sits next to him.

PARKER
I signed up for a cooking class.

HALE
You didn't tell me.

PARKER
You're not always here. I mean, sometimes... Dinner is in the fridge.

She stands, and he grabs her hand.

HALE
Have you talked to Margo since you left the hospital?

PARKER
No, why?

HALE
She's a good cook, isn't she?

PARKER
What's wrong, Hale? Why can't you tell me what's wrong with you?

He lifts her hand and kisses it.

HALE
I'm working through some...in time...I'll make a deal with you. Let me finish this, and we'll sit down for a real talk.

She runs her hand through his hair lovingly. Then, she leaves this enigma to his shrine.

INT. COOKING CLASS - EVENING

In apron, Parker sits at a counter.

Into the room strides Tod. He spots Parker, and he grins. He parks himself next to her.

TOD
Hey, I thought all women knew how to cook.

PARKER
It's not a chromosome thing. You?

TOD
My wife left two months ago. She has to find herself. I got tired of carry out.

PARKER
I'm sorry.

TOD
No great loss, she couldn't cook either.

They laugh. This friendship has leaped to a new plateau.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Parker enters the empty kitchen. She sets down purse and cookbook and opens the fridge.

Hale's meal hasn't been touched.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Parker enters. The computer displays those enigmatic ravens.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Parker enters. Empty. Where is Hale?

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - YARD - NIGHT

Parker strides toward the Shrine. Something is there but what?

PARKER
Hale?

No answer but a muffled SOB.

PARKER

Hale?

A louder SOB.

Parker moves into the semi-finished shrine where Hale huddles in a corner. He CRIES. She sits beside him.

PARKER

What? What is it?

HALE

Oh, god, Parker, I miss it so much.

PARKER

Miss what?

HALE

All I ever wanted was to write novels and love you.

PARKER

You can, you will...

HALE

I can't, and I want to so much.

PARKER

Shhh, it's OK. You just need discipline, what you used to have.

HALE

Help me, Parker. Please, help me.

She rocks him and holds him, whispering, consoling.

PARKER

You're going to be fine. Just like old times. You'll see. The next Parker Hale novel will be the best one ever.

Hale sobs, inconsolable. Parker holds and wonders.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Sleepy, yawning, Parker enters. She heats the tea kettle and spots a note on the table. Hale is gone.

EXT. MARGO'S HOUSE - GARDEN - MORNING

Margo, in heavy sweater and gloves, prunes a bush. As she works, Hale paces back and forth.

HALE
What happens if I quit?

MARGO
Ever wonder why some plants stay
green all winter?

HALE
I know, but I don't know, you know?
I mean, who believes in demons.

MARGO
It's a mystery to me.

HALE
Who believes in witches for that
matter.

MARGO
But then, some plants don't lose
their leaves either.

HALE
No offense, Margo, but your
profession lost credibility
centuries ago.

MARGO
Plants never question what they
are.

HALE
There really is no deal, is there?

Margo turns and freezes him with her stare. He locks gazes
with her.

MARGO
The. Universe. Must. Stay. In.
Balance.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale works, typing at breakneck pace. Parker, hair wet from
a shower, steps inside, smiles, and backs out.

Hale pauses, grabs the mouse, and clicks a couple times.

On the screen...WORD COUNT: 995

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker slaps a recipe on the counter. She's surrounded by fresh vegetables, pots, pans, cruets of oil, chef tools. Concentrating, she pulls a sharp knife from a block.

Hale steps in, looks around, and sniffs.

HALE
Homework?

PARKER
You're gonna love it.

HALE
Gotta run. Interview.

PARKER
Anyone I know?

HALE
Former mayor.

Hale kisses her cheek and leaves. Parker grabs a cucumber and slices.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Brenda's hands shake as she accepts a cup of coffee. Cup and saucer rattle. Someone takes back the saucer, placing it on the table next to her.

The hands belong to Hale who settles in a chair. The room looks unchanged, as if placed in stasis.

BRENDA
Thank you.

HALE
I know what you've done.

BRENDA
Done?

HALE
Margo. Oh, she didn't say exactly.
I figured it out.

Brenda says nothing, sipping coffee carefully.

HALE
I made a bargain too.

BRENDA
Mr. Denning...

HALE
What I bargained for doesn't
matter. I need to know if it's
real.

BRENDA
Real?

HALE
What happens if I renege.

She studies him with bloodshot eyes and a face scarred by
dissipation. She lights a cigarette and waves at a photo of
her son.

BRENDA
He's almost done with his first
semester. Straight A's, no
addictions.

HALE
But why? I mean--

BRENDA
He almost died.

HALE
You don't believe in Margo, do you?

She exhales smoke and coughs deeply, a hack. Hale watches
her spit phlegm into a tissue.

BRENDA
He's going to be a doctor, a
brilliant doctor.

HALE
You're killing yourself for no
reason.

She laughs, exposing yellowed teeth.

BRENDA
Look at me. I don't have so far to
go.

Hale recoils, regarding her with pity and puzzlement.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Hale finishes the last bite of dinner. Parker watches anxiously as he pats his lips with a napkin.

PARKER

Well?

HALE

Do I get to fill out a comment card?

PARKER

No! Tell me!

He reaches across and takes her hand.

HALE

It was ethereal.

She squeals and jumps up, landing on his lap and kissing him.

PARKER

You mean that?

HALE

Like my life depends on it.

She kisses him deeply, passionately, and his hands run over her. He has her shirt over her breasts in a moment.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Naked, Hale and Parker lie tangled in the sheets, the end product of wild sex.

The alarm buzzes. Hale opens one eye, slaps off the alarm, and glances at the clock. Swallowing hard, he extricates himself from Parker. He shakes her.

HALE

Wake up.

PARKER

Go away.

HALE

Come on, wake...

Parker slowly emerges from sleep.

PARKER

What time is it?

HALE
Almost midnight.

PARKER
Are you crazy? Waking me at
midnight?

She tries to roll away into sleep, but he grabs her.

HALE
Humor me. Pretend it's New Year's.

PARKER
Go away.

He wrestles her awake. Holding her, tickling her.

HALE
This could be a new life for us.

PARKER
What are you talking about?.

He grabs his watch.

HALE
One minute. Count it down with me.
You make it through the next
minute, and the good life returns.

Parker eyes him, and she's pissed.

HALE
Fifty-five, fifty-four...

PARKER
You know how nuts you are?!

HALE
Forty-seven...

She grabs a pillow and bats him with it.

PARKER
What's wrong with you?

HALE
Forty...

Suddenly, Parker stops, a funny look on her face. She drops the pillow and tries to breathe. Nothing.

Hale rocks to his knees, looking at her, watching.

Parker whirls and scrambles to the nightstand. Her hand closes on an inhaler, and she tries to puff. She can't. She can't breathe.

Hale watches her eyes grow large. The sudden attack mystifies her.

HALE

Shit!

He hustles. Naked, he slides off the bed and races out even as Parker reaches for him.

Fear and betrayal fill her face as she tries to follow. But she's slow, unbreathing, panicking.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Hale, naked, races to his chair. He plops down and hits the key. The Ravens screensaver disappears, showing a recipe instead of his document.

HALE

Damn!

He clicks the mouse, loading his work.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Parker tries a tentative step and collapses to the floor. Not breathing.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Panic drives Hale as he waits for the file to load.

HALE

Come on!..Come on!

He glances at his watch.

11:59:51

His file comes up, and he types, fingers flying. It can't take ten seconds before he stops, grabs the mouse, and clicks.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Parker gasps and breathes.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Hale runs out.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Hale zips into the room and almost steps on Parker. He drops to the floor and cradles her in his arms as she sucks in huge breaths.

HALE
It's OK...you're going to be OK.

She clings to him.

HALE
You're going to be OK.

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

Parker, in bra, sits on an examination table. Tod breathes on his stethoscope to warm it and places on her back.

TOD
Deep breath.

Parker knows the drill, lovely breasts rising.

TOD
Sudden attack?

PARKER
Out of the blue.

TOD
Any idea what caused it?

PARKER
My stupid husband woke me.

Tod moves the stethoscope down her back.

TOD
They sound clear. What happened?

PARKER
Couldn't breathe. I tried my inhaler, but it didn't help. Then, Hale ran out.

TOD
Ran out?

PARKER
Yeah, seemed odd. I tried to follow but passed out.

TOD
And you just started breathing
again?

She nods.

TOD
Show me what you took.

Parker reaches inside her purse and hands him the inhaler.
He holds it up and presses. No mist.

TOD
Empty.

Parker grabs the inhaler and tries to puff. Nothing.

TOD
Doesn't Hale take care of your
medication?

PARKER
It's been so long since I needed
it.

TOD
Exactly.

Parker and Tod exchange looks.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

The shrine has a roof, a single door, no windows. The brick
is chest high, and Hale works in heavy jacket and gloves.

Parker appears. Her red nose says it's cold.

PARKER
Looks good.

HALE
Hi...what did Tod say?

PARKER
Mystery attack. Couldn't find
anything wrong.

HALE
And?

PARKER
We're invited to dinner.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Tod's family room is large, airy, full of light. Hale is parked in front of a huge screen TV, munching snack mix and sipping beer. A Thanksgiving turkey dances across the screen.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker and Tod work side by side. Steam rises from pans. Thanksgiving dinner in the making.

PARKER

I asked him to get a checkup, but he won't.

TOD

You think it's physical?

PARKER

Doesn't it sound like a chemical imbalance?

Parker opens the oven to baste the turkey.

Tod sips wine and admires her wonderful backside.

TOD

Changes in behavior can be caused by any number of things.

She glances over her shoulder to find him staring at her ass. Blushing, she straightens.

PARKER

B...but he's so different.

Parker grabs her wine.

TOD

If it gets too bad, I'm here for you.

She stops and looks at him. He moves to her, cups her chin, and kisses her.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Hale watches as a team scores a touchdown.

HALE

Score!

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker hears Hale and breaks the kiss. She moves away, sipping wine. Tod smiles.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY

A dinner to die for. Amidst the china and crystal and silver lie the remains. Parker sits between Hale and Tod, stuffed and grinning.

TOD
So the devil says, 'bend over and grab your ankles. This is not your lucky day.'

Parker and Hale laugh. Hale wipes tears from his eyes.

TOD
S..so tell me, Hale. What the hell happened the other night?

PARKER
I had a reaction.

HALE
My fault. Won't happen again.

TOD
No harm done. What book are you working on?

HALE
Book? Oh, yes....well, it's about a man who murders his wife.

Parker frowns, unaware Hale is writing anything.

HALE
He hires a demon to do the job.
(laughs)
But the demon botches it, and the husband has to finish. Only, and you'll love this, the husband still owes the demon!

Hale guffaws. Parker and Tod don't fathom.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Hale drives. Both have had one glass too many.

HALE
That cooking class is paying
dividends.

PARKER
You never said you were working on
a book.

HALE
I had to tell him something.

Parker stares at him. Does she still know this man?

HALE
I loved the devil's food cake.

Hale howls with laughter. Parker merely stares.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

Brick finished, Hale paints trim despite the cold.
Snowflakes signal that this paint job won't last.

PARKER (O.S.)
Isn't it too cold to paint?

HALE
Yeah, pretty stupid.

Parker stands to one side of the ladder, touching it. A push
and Hale tumbles.

PARKER
I'm going Christmas shopping.
Then, class.

HALE
Have a good time.

PARKER
You know, this is getting old.

Hales looks at her and smiles.

HALE
Almost finished.

PARKER
Back to novels?

HALE
A job.

Parker shakes her head, turns, and walks away.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale, cradling a steaming cup of coffee, settles before the computer. He clicks off the Ravens screensaver. He cracks his knuckles, looks at Edgar, and types.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Tod, dressed in a robe, spoons rich, dark chocolate pudding into a dessert dish.

HALE (V.O.)

The demon was tall, handsome in a horrific way. His green scales glistened with vitality.

Tod tops the pudding with a spoon of whipping cream, a flourish.

HALE (V.O.)

Powerful muscles rippled beneath the scales. When he smiled, his fangs glimmered in the candlelight.

Tod delicately adds a perfect, red cherry.

HALE (V.O.)

His sharp claws clicked as he moved his fingers. The danger made him more appealing.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - HALL - DAY

Tod carries the dessert dish and a spoon through the house.

HALE (V.O.)

His scent was strong, powerful, reminding her of a warrior glistening with sweat.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Tod enters a big room with huge bed and mirrored ceiling.

He sits on the bed, displays the pudding, and spoons off the cherry.

HALE (V.O.)

His guttural voice was laced with evil, enticement to enjoy a thousand forbidden pleasures.

Tod spoons the cherry into the mouth of a naked Parker. She chews slowly, provocatively.

HALE (V.O.)
 She ran her hands lightly over
 scaly muscles. His strength made
 her shiver.

Tod takes the dish and smashes the pudding in the middle of
 Parker's naked chest. With passionate pleasure, he smears
 pudding and cream all over her breasts.

HALE (V.O.)
 The demon's hand cupped her breast,
 and the roughness of his scales
 aroused sinful pleasure.

Tod plants his face on Parker's chest and begins to lick and
 eat, smearing and tonguing those marvelous breasts.

HALE (V.O.)
 She felt a fire within, a hot
 passion that melted her.

Tod comes up for air, his face a mess of pudding and cream.
 With abandon, he kisses Parker.

HALE (V.O.)
 The demon's size frightened her.
 Yet, his power lured. Her burning
 grew into an ache. Even if he hurt
 her, she had to have him.

The kiss breaks. Parker's face as messy as Tod's. Tod dives
 to eat again. Parker throws back her head in delight.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale types, working.

HALE (V.O.)
 As the demon's massive arms
 embraced her, she knew she could
 never return to mortal men.

He stops, looks at the screen, and seems ready to retch.
 Instead, he sips coffee.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Parker and Hale eat silently. The strain shows. She sips
 wine. He picks at his meal.

Across the room sit Brenda and her son, JOSH, an ordinary
 young man whose vices almost poke through a veneer of
 civility. Brenda's plate remains untouched, even as she
 belts down scotch. Despite the booze, she looks proud.

A Waiter arrives. Brenda signs the credit card slip. Draining her glass, her embarrassed son leading, they cross the room, passing Hale.

BRENDA
Good evening, Mr. Denning. Have you met my son, Josh?

Hale stands and shakes hands.

HALE
Nice to meet you. This is my wife, Parker.

BRENDA
Josh made the dean's list.

JOSH
Mother.

BRENDA
I'm very proud of him. I wish he could say the same about me.

Brenda laughs, further embarrassing everyone.

BRENDA
Your bargain, Mr. Denning, is it working out?

HALE
As well as can be expected.

Josh, impatient, tugs at his mother.

BRENDA
We have to go. Mother-son bonding seems finished for the night.

With a nod, Josh and Brenda leave. Hale sits.

PARKER
What was that about?

HALE
Mother-son bonding.

PARKER
More like lush-son bonding.

HALE
Have you started learning desserts yet?

PARKER
Changing the subject?

HALE
Exactly.

INT. MARGO'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Margo pulverizes plants and herbs with a mortar and pistle, a la some alchemist. Parker watches, sipping tea.

PARKER
He needs help, Margo. He has
writer's constipation or something.

MARGO
What would you have me do?

PARKER
I don't know. Isn't there some
herb, some...I don't believe in
magic, but...some spell or
something?

MARGO
I'm afraid your husband's problem
can't be cured with St. John Wort.

PARKER
Then what?

MARGO
Wouldn't it be better to accept
what's happened?

PARKER
Yeah, right. What are you making?

Margo shows her the powder.

MARGO
A cure for melancholy.

PARKER
Make mine a double.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

High school, English composition. Christmas decorations,
politically correct and non-denominational. Hale stands in
front, armed with an oversized deck of Tarot cards.

HALE

In the third Parker Hale mystery,
The Eye of the Mind, the killer was
a psychic. I taught myself to read
Tarot cards.

He walks down a row of bored students.

HALE

If you want to create realistic
characters, you must research.

He stops in front of a pretty GIRL and fans the deck.

HALE

Pick a card.

The Girl slips out one.

HALE

Show it to the class.

She does...Death.

HALE

Oh my, the death card. If I were
superstitious, I'd say someone was
about to die--or maybe it's just
your romance.

The class laughs, and Hale moves on.

HALE

The point is that you can't create
a believable character unless you
gather information.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Lovemaking over, Parker and Tod lie naked beneath the sheet.

PARKER

I gave him his best ideas.
Remember the Eye of the Mind?

TOD

Never read it.

PARKER

I'm the one who told him to make
the killer a psychic.

Tod reaches over and rubs her breast through the sheet.

TOD
Can you read my mind?

PARKER
I gave him the perfect murder. But since it was perfect, he couldn't use it. You don't solve perfect murders.

Tod turns and nuzzles her chest.

PARKER
I gave him the name too. He wanted to call his detective Percy O'Keefe. Is that a stupid name or what?

In earnest, Tod pulls down the sheet to get to skin.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale demonstrates on blackboard, drawing an arc from CHAPTER 20 to CHAPTER 2.

HALE
The art of mystery writing is firing the revolver in chapter twenty that you described in chapter two.

BOY
Is there such a thing as a perfect murder?

HALE
Certainly, but perfect murders are never discovered. Hence, they aren't murders. They're accidents or suicides.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Fully dressed, Parker and Tod break a kiss.

TOD
Do you really want to be married to a substitute teacher?

Tod helps Parker into her coat.

TOD
He tried to kill you, you know.

PARKER

What?

TOD

In the hospital. He was going to rip out your ventilator.

PARKER

You removed it, right?

TOD

He made me. Only a miracle saved you.

Parker stares. This is news.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Hale types, plinking keys slowly, perhaps laboring to find the words.

Parker enters, damn pretty.

PARKER

It's Christmas Eve. Can't that wait?

HALE

Fifty more words?

PARKER

Fifty?

HALE

One thousand words every day. Rain, shine, sickness, one thousand words typed and saved.

Parker turns away, but anger bubbles. She turns back.

PARKER

What is it with you?

Hale looks over his shoulder.

PARKER

A thousand words a day and no novels? What the hell are you doing?

HALE

Bargain made, bargain kept.

PARKER
Writer's block? Is that it? You
can't conjure up those Chinese
puzzles any more?

HALE
No writer's block.

PARKER
Then, what? Tell me. I married a
mystery writer, and goddmanit,
you're not him.

HALE
Remember Percy O'Keefe?

PARKER
Dumbest name I ever heard.

HALE
Yeah, dumb name, but one hell of a
detective. Guy never made a
mistake. Always got the girl.
Brought murderers to justice.

PARKER
Is there a point here?

HALE
Percy O'Keefe's last case.

PARKER
You wrote it early but never
published it because the detective
died.

HALE
He didn't die. He lost the gift.
The bullet took out that bit of
brain where his brilliance resided.
After he recovered, he no longer
made those marvelous connections.

PARKER
You've lost your writing gift?

HALE
Yes, no, yes, I guess. A self-
inflicted wound. But to your
benefit. Do you understand? To
your benefit.

PARKER
Yeah, I'm benefiting like hell!

Parker marches out. Hale pauses a moment before he returns to slow typing.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - NIGHT

Snow falls prettily through the dark. Bundled, Parker stands on the walk and watches. Hale joins her.

HALE
Snow is quiet, isn't it?

Parker says nothing.

HALE
Remember White Death? Parker Hale follows footprints into the snow storm. They stop, and he realizes that his own tracks have filled in behind him. He's lost.

PARKER
I gave you the solution.

HALE
I couldn't let him use his cell phone as a beacon.

PARKER
What does White Death have to do with anything?

Hale wraps an arm around her waist.

HALE
I can't write novels any more. The why doesn't matter. But I still need to write every day.

PARKER
Or what, you'll die?

She moves away.

PARKER
It's Christmas Eve, Hale. I don't want to fight.

She heads into the house. Hale watches the pretty snow.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - NIGHT

A Christmas tree fills one corner. Hale enters with an armload of fire wood that he dumps in a wood box. He sticks a couple on the fire.

Across the room, Parker sips wine. Over her head hangs the WHITE DEATH poster.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Christmas morning. In pajamas and robe, Hale opens his gift, a double billed Sherlock Holmes hunting hat.

Parker, in robe, opens her gift, a chef's apron. In the pocket of the apron, a jewelry box. A diamond pin shaped as a spatula.

They both smile.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

A huge designer tree fills the window. Hale, sipping beer, watches basketball on the TV.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker hand mashes potatoes, adding garlic. Tod adds garnish to a plate of carrots.

TOD
What does he write?

PARKER
I don't know. He won't say.

TOD
Every day?

PARKER
A thousand words.

TOD
That's like what, a novel every six months?

PARKER
Should be, but he doesn't rewrite, not like he used to.

Tod moves past Parker, pinching her ass.

PARKER
Hey, not with him around.

TOD
Why don't you leave him?

PARKER
Because of the bonds.

TOD
Bonds?

Tod takes lettuce from the fridge and returns to the platter.

PARKER
During the last market correction,
Hale got scared and sank a ton of
money into bearer bonds. I don't
know where they are.

TOD
I have plenty of money.

PARKER
It's my money.

TOD
You'll get half in the divorce.

PARKER
Not if they can't find it.

Hale enters, shaking his empty beer.

HALE
If they can't find what?

PARKER
Oysters. The stuffing won't be
right if we don't find oysters.

He pulls a beer from the refrigerator.

HALE
Fine by me. Oyster dressing is
overrated.

PARKER
So it would seem.

Hale and Parker exchange amused looks. A cat-and-mouse game.

INT. CAR - DAY

Parker and Hale head home over snow covered roads.

HALE
You're pretty tight with the good
doctor.

PARKER
We cook together.

HALE
He has a girl friend.

PARKER
What?

HALE
You know what a snoop I am. I went through his medicine cabinet. The guy stocks more condoms than Walgreens.

Parker stares straight ahead.

HALE
Red, blue, green, ribbed, lubricated. He's got some wild jellies too. Red-hot cinnamon. Gotta wonder how that might tingle.

PARKER
R...right.

HALE
The warning label said to use sparingly. If you don't, what, the bedroom smells like a bakery?

Hale breaks into laughter. Parker joins weakly.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - YARD - DAY

Hale, bundled, wearing tool belt and hauling a box, lumbers through deep snow toward the shrine.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Parker sneaks in. She slides into Hale's chair under the bumper sticker, clicks off the Ravens screensaver, and opens his files.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

Hale mounts a black, wooden raven on the corner of the shrine roof, a sentinel. Ravens on the other three corners stare without sight.

The ladder shakes, almost pitching Hale. He grabs the roof and looks down.

Parker, angry, has two hands on the ladder.

PARKER
Demon romance?

She shakes the ladder again.

HALE
You read my work.

PARKER
Work? You call demon erotica, no,
demon pornography work?

She rattles the ladder, and Hale clings.

HALE
You don't understand.

PARKER
I want a divorce!

Hale hangs on as she shakes.

PARKER
Hear me?! A divorce!

HALE
No!

PARKER
No? NO?!! HAH!

She rips away the ladder and lets it fall to the ground. She stomps away.

Hale hangs on the roof, hands slipping.

HALE
PARKER!

Too late. Hale falls, landing on his back. His breath gone, he lies there, blessing the snow. In the background, Parker trudges on. Hale looks up.

The last raven lists perilously to one side.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Parker packs a bag. She meticulously folds each item, as if in no hurry to leave.

Hale limps into the room.

HALE
Where are you going?

Parker won't answer.

HALE

You have no family, so where?

Parker gives him a figure-it-out-if-you're-so-smart look.

HALE

In a very real sense, your
existence depends on me.

Parker gives him no answer.

HALE

Parker, don't do this. Talk to me.

Parker finishes packing, as controlled as a robot. She
closes the bag and smiles.

PARKER

You'll hear from my attorney.

She marches out.

HALE

Parker!

No answer. He looks around. He tries to kick the bed, but
his leg gives out, and he falls on his ass.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Hale sits in front of his computer, but he's not typing. He
stares at he screen.

HALE

Screw her!

He pushes back and stands. Gets as far as the door before he
turns and trudges back to his chair. Slowly, he types.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Tod spritzes a plant with mist. Doorbell RINGS.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FOYER - DAY

Tod opens the door. Parker stands on the stoop, bag in hand.

PARKER

I need a place to stay.

INT. ZENO'S OFFICE - DAY

Zeno on the phone with Parker.

ZENO
I'll give you the same advice I
give all my clients. Stay married,
work it out.

PARKER
(on phone)
What does half amount to?

ZENO
Well, the last six months have been
hard on assets. If the bonds are
kicked in--

PARKER
He still has the bonds?

ZENO
How would I know?

INT. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE - DAY

Parker sits opposite an older, well-heeled ATTORNEY, white hair and a leer.

ATTORNEY
I am required to advise you to work
things out. Have you tired
counseling?

PARKER
Isn't this a no-fault state?

The Attorney raises his eyebrows.

PARKER
I get half, right?

ATTORNEY
Roughly.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale subbing in English composition again. He wears his Sherlock Holmes hunting hat.

HALE
Whether you write mysteries or
essays, you must consider
structure. Words build sentences
that build paragraphs that build
chapters that build books.

He takes off his hat and flings it across the room at a coat tree--misses.

HALE

You work on structure every day.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Parker and Tod and a candle light dinner. Wine, crystal, romance and gourmet food.

Tod toasts Parker who clicks goblets and sips.

INT. ROCK CLIMBING CENTER - DAY

Parker, in tights, shoes, sport bra, ties a rope to her harness. Behind her stands an EMPLOYEE, who will belay her. She tightens the knot and starts up a 30' wall. The Employee takes up slack.

She's half way up the wall when Hale arrives. He sizes up the situation and taps the Employee on the shoulder.

HALE

I'm her husband.

The Employee relinquishes the rope, and Hale belays Parker.

Parker pauses. She looks down and spots Hale who waves.

HALE

Hi.

PARKER

Go away.

HALE

We need to talk.

PARKER

I have two words for you--
restraining order.

HALE

Don't be that way.

Parker climbs, ignoring Hale who takes up slack as she goes. Sweat coats her arms and back.

Hale watches, admiring a woman who has come a long way.

Hardly out of breath, Parker reaches the top and climbs over the lip to sit on the ledge. She looks down. Hale smiles.

PARKER
Bring me down.

HALE
Gonna talk?

PARKER
You're a poor listener.

HALE
Then, you can sit a spell.

Parker is not one to sit a spell. She looks around and spots a support cable running from wall to floor.

She scoots across the top and reaches the cable. With abandon, she attaches the clasp on her harness to the cable and unties the rope. Then, looping hands and legs around the cable, she zips down.

Hale watches as Parker does a controlled slide, landing on her feet. At the bottom, she detaches her harness.

HALE
Parker, I just want to talk.

PARKER
Yeah? Where are the bonds?

HALE
Bonds?

PARKER
Bearer bonds, Sherlock. What did you do with them?

She marches to his face.

PARKER
Don't give me that I can't remember bull. Where are they?

HALE
Let's go somewhere and talk.

PARKER
(tapping his chest)
Not until you produce the bonds, bucko.

HALE
I--

PARKER
 If you think holding them gives you
 an edge, remember how much money
 Tod has. I don't need them. I
 want them.

With that, she whirls and marches off.

HALE
 Love you.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Hale pulls a pot pie from the oven. He sets it on the table
 to cool and opens the paper to the crossword puzzle.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ready for bed, Hale rummages through a dresser. He finds one
 of Parker's silk chemises. He looks at it, sniffs it, and
 carefully spreads it on her pillow. He climbs into bed and
 turns off the light.

INT. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE - DAY

Hale sits across from a deathly thin female ATTORNEY, a
 crone.

ATTORNEY
 Have you tried counseling?

HALE
 She won't consider it.

ATTORNEY
 She's asked for a restraining
 order. You're dangerous?

HALE
 I write...I used to write mystery
 novels. I know something about
 murder.

ATTORNEY
 I see.

HALE
 I love her. I'd never harm her.

The Attorney has heard that line a million times.

INT. CONVENTION HALL - EVENING

A vast space full of kitchen utensils, accessories, knives, pots, pans, gadgets. Things only a culinary maniac would desire.

Past the stalls wanders Parker. She pauses and picks up a knife, testing its sharpness on a carrot offered by the vendor. She slices the carrot with vengeance.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Tod removes a whole chicken from the oven. Using cleaver, knife, and fork, he cuts the chicken apart and debones, adding meat to a casserole.

INT. HALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

The oven beeps. Hale removes a frozen dinner. He peels back foil to reveal overcooked chicken and dried peas. He makes a face but takes the dinner with him.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Tod finishes the casserole, pops it in the oven, and sets the timer. He plucks a piece of meat off the cutting board and chews. The microwave BUZZER makes him jump. He sucks in. Oops, the chicken lodges in his wind pipe.

INT. CAR - EVENING

Parker flips on the radio. Strains of PHANTOM OF THE OPERA fill the car.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Realizing what has happened, Tod grabs the phone and dials 911.

He can't talk. He tries, but nothing comes out. Frustrated, he tries a self-himelich maneuver, slamming his fist into his chest, to no success. Desperation pushes him from the room.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - EVENING

Cradling dinner, Hale sits. He sets dinner to the side. Licking his fingers and wiping them on his shirt, he types.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - EVENING

Tod, running out of oxygen, staggers into the room. He falls on the arm of the couch, trying to dislodge the chicken.

No dice.

INT. CAR - EVENING

Parker drives, dials her phone. Busy.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - EVENING

Tod struggles erect and throws himself on the couch again. This time, his effort is weaker. He bounces off the couch and falls to the floor.

EXT. TOD'S HOUSE - DRIVE - EVENING

Parker's car turns into the drive.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - EVENING

Hale types, leans over, and grabs a bite of food.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Parker enters. Phone BEEPS. Oven BUZZES.

PARKER

Tod?

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - EVENING

Hale pauses long enough to fork a bite of food.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - EVENING

Parker enters and sees Tod. Outside the SIREN and LIGHTS of an emergency vehicle blink through the window.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Black-clad mourners surround a grave. Snow falls silently. Among them, Parker.

INT. TOD'S HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Still in black, Parker enters the room and collapses on the couch. Fatigue and despair overwhelm her.

Into the room charge twin BOYS, 10, one chasing the other. They scream no particular words, whip once around the room, and disappear.

Parker watches, amazed.

Behind the boys comes Tod's separated WIFE. Thicker, older, grayer, she carries something red. She pauses a few feet from Parker. An amused smile graces her face as she shows Parker's red silk teddy with several slashes.

WIFE

I think you have time to rescue
some of them.

INT. EDIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Edie eats a Danish, sips coffee, and talks on phone.

EDIE

No, Parker, Hale hasn't completed
any new work for six months.

PARKER

(on phone)
And royalties?

EDIE

Regular but diminishing. Mystery
writers are only as good as their
last book.

PARKER

Half of that?

EDIE

Don't divorce him, Parker, you
can't live on half.

Phone clicks dead. Edie hangs up and bites the Danish.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

On ladder, Hale tries to straighten the leaning raven.

PARKER (O.S.)

Hey!

Hale turns and spots Parker trudging through the snow.

Hale slips down the ladder, practically falling in his haste.
At the bottom, he faces Parker.

PARKER

I want to come back.

HALE

Why?

PARKER

I need a place to live.

HALE

For how long?

PARKER
I still want a divorce.

If Hale ever possessed the strength to say no to this woman,
he lost it long ago.

HALE
You can have the guest room.

Parker turns and marches away, leaving Hale to watch.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Hale sips coffee, reading the paper. Parker enters. Half
asleep, disheveled, she's surly. Starts her tea and plops at
the table.

HALE
I have a class.

Parker waves a hand.

HALE
We need to set some parameters.

She gives him the evil eye.

HALE
Not all tides raise all boats.

PARKER
I'll get a job.

Hale's turn to give a look.

PARKER
I'll cook.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Parker enters this neat den. She pauses. Then, she
searches. She pulls books, reaches behind, feels, and moves.
She searches for the bonds.

The Edgar and ravens watch.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Parker feels under Hale's clothes in a bureau drawer,
searching. Where are the bonds?

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BASEMENT - DAY

Parker runs her hands over Hale's woodworking tools. The sharp edges bring a smile to her lips. But no bonds.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - ATTIC - DAY

Parker rifles through the boxes of murder paraphernalia. She picks up an 8", black commando knife and admires the edge.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Hale types, a bowl of popcorn next to him.

Parker sticks in her head.

PARKER
I'm going out.

Hale looks, but she's already gone.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Parker sips wine at the bar. Two stools away plops Josh. He looks and realizes who she is.

JOSH
I...hey, Mrs. Denning, right?

PARKER
Good memory.

JOSH
Yeah, well, I...you haven't seen...

PARKER
Your mother?

He nods.

PARKER
No, she hasn't been here.

JOSH
Thanks, if you see her?

PARKER
What's your number?

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Hale types, his daily stint. He stands, moves to his bookcase and reaches for his dictionary.

It's not there.

He frowns. In this well-ordered world, the dictionary didn't move itself.

He takes the dictionary from its new spot, starts to look up a word, and stops. He drops the book and runs.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - NIGHT

Hale takes the WHITE DEATH poster off the wall. He feels along the back, the bulge. He sighs and rehangs the poster, making sure it hangs straight.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale demonstrates a hangman's noose, slipping it over his head and showing how the knot snaps the vertebrae.

INT. DINER - DAY

A greasy, steamy, smelly crowded diner at lunch time. Every stool taken, every table full, a rush of ORDERS and SHOUTS and SCRECHES and TALK.

INT. DINER KITCHEN - DAY

Laboring over the hot grill, wet with perspiration, overwhelmed by orders, Parker smashes down a spatula, pissed.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Backpack over shoulder, Josh enters. Stops.

On the bed, dress hiked up to thighs, covered with her own vomit, lies Brenda. A son can't face a more disgusting image.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Josh dumps his fully clothed mother in the shower and turns on cold water. She lies under the cold spray, hardly moving.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Josh strips the bed, tearing off sheets. Degrading work.

INT. DINER KITCHEN - DAY

Parker fries eggs. A thick WAITRESS passes, grabbing a handful of Parker's ass.

When Parker glares, the Waitress makes a circle with thumb and forefinger and sticks her tongue through the circle.

EXT. DINER - DAY

Parker stands in a cold alley. Snow drifts prettily past. Down the alley, a DRUNK urinates against a wall. Parker turns away in disgust.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Josh enters with sheets, starts to make the bed, and stops. He looks around and runs out.

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

Parker, still in stained diner uniform, sips beer, at home with the DERELICTS and BLUE-COLLARS in this seedy place.

Josh enters and comes to the bar, looking around.

PARKER
She's not here.

Josh looks but doesn't recognize her.

PARKER
Parker Denning.

JOSH
You don't...

PARKER
Not exactly high fashion, right?

JOSH
You stink.

Parker gives him a you-think-your-farts-don't-smell look and pats the stool next to her.

PARKER
Do yourself a favor.

Josh takes a seat, and Parker signals for a beer. In a place like this, a 7th grader wouldn't get carded.

Bartender delivers the beer, and Josh sips.

PARKER
Why do you bother?

JOSH
She's my mom.

PARKER
She's an embarrassment.

Josh rises, but Parker pulls him into his seat.

PARKER
Let's face facts, Josh. You'd be better off without her.

JOSH
You're on a luxury cruise?

PARKER
I have my own problem.

They look at each other, and a bit of understanding passes.

PARKER
What was the worst thing you did while you were on drugs?

JOSH
That I remember?

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BASEMENT - NIGHT

Hale looks at a large square of wood, 24x24, four-inch-thick block. He picks up a wood chisel and takes that first tentative cut, a curled shaving drops off.

INT. PARKER'S CAR - NIGHT

Parker and Josh sit in her parked car.

PARKER
Quid pro quo. Know what that means?

JOSH
You scratch my ass, I scratch yours.

PARKER
Precisely. I've worked out my share of murder plots, so you do as I say.

JOSH
Yeah, sure.

Parker reaches over and grabs his chin.

PARKER
You screw this up, and you'll be running Internet scams from your cell and praying your bunk mate likes to jerk off.

His attention gained, Parker releases him.

PARKER
We fix your problem first.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BASEMENT - NIGHT

Hale works the wood, shavings all around. The plaque shows definition--a face of some kind.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale sits at the desk, Sherlock Holmes hat in place, as students file in. Students grin. This should be fun.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - DAY

Parker enters, moves to Hale's desk, opens a drawer. She removes the revolver and a box of cartridges. She loads the revolver.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Brenda, fully clothed, snores on the bed.

Door opens. Josh goes to the nightstand, grabs her purse, and dumps the contents on the bed. He takes cash and credit cards from wallet and leaves the mess.

Brenda stirs, eyes fluttering open.

BRENDA
A....Josh?

JOSH
Go back to sleep.

BRENDA
You're leaving?

JOSH
I'll be back.

She reaches out, grabs his hand, and gives a squeeze. Eyes close. She's sleep. Josh wipes his hand on his shirt and leaves.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale sits cross-legged on the desk.

HALE
Who is considered the father of the American mystery?

GIRL

Poe

HALE

That's right, Edgar Allen Poe.

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - DAY

Josh steps out the back door and pulls it shut. He glances around before he kicks the door.

Door wins. Josh falls on his ass.

Frowning, Josh rises, winds up, and gives door a vicious kick, shattering the jamb. He pulls shut the broken door and leaves.

HALE (V.O.)

In honor of Poe, the Mystery Writers of America present an annual award named the Edgar.

INT. CAR - DAY

Parker drives with the intensity of a predator.

HALE (V.O.)

Poe was the first to write of the detective, how someone solved murders.

INT. CAR - DAY

Josh drives. Loud music, fingers drum the wheel.

HALE (V.O.)

The greatness of Poe is not his style, which is dated, but his structure, the mystery plot.

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Josh tosses credit cards in a dumpster.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Brenda wakes, eyes popping open.

With urgency, she rolls out of bed and staggers to the bathroom. The sound of her RETCHING fills the room.

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - DRIVE - DAY

Parker's car pulls into the drive.

EXT. ATM MACHINE - DAY

Josh accepts money, card, and his receipt which he carefully stores away.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Brenda exits the bathroom, wiping her mouth. She looks awful. She's about to pass out when she spots the purse emptied on the bed.

Panic spreads her face. She staggers to the nightstand, opens a drawer, and removes a small automatic pistol.

INT. PROBATION OFFICER'S OFFICE - DAY

A tiny government office with metal desk and vinyl chairs, bureaucratic indifference. Behind a desk piled with folders sits Josh's PROBATION OFFICER, a black man whose face hasn't seen a smile in a decade.

PROBATION OFFICER
Show me your arms, son.

Josh pulls up his sleeves and displays his arms. Probation Officer marks his records.

PROBATION OFFICER
Restitution?

JOSH
I sent a cashier's check for fifty dollars.

Jose hands over a receipt.

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - HOUSE - DAY

Parker arrives at the battered back door. She looks around before carefully pushing it open.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker enters. She takes the revolver out of her purse.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - HALL - DAY

Brenda edges along the upstairs hall. Hung over, hands shaking, she shouldn't carry a weapon.

She pauses at the stairway, wary.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - HALL - DAY

Parker moves stealthily. Pauses and looks.

A room full of campaign stickers, placards, posters--SEWARD FOR SENATE.

Parker frowns but doesn't stop.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - STAIRWAY - DAY

Brenda sways at the top.

Parker sticks her head out.

Brenda fires.

The shot misses by a mile. Parker jerks back.

Parker hugs the wall, shivering.

BRENDA (O.S.)
Leave now!

PARKER
Brenda? It's Parker Denning.

BRENDA
Parker?

PARKER
Hale asked me to stop by. He said
you had an editing job.

At the top of the stairs, Brenda searches her brain. What job?

PARKER (O.S.)
I'm coming out. Don't shoot.

Parker puts the revolver in her purse and enters the hall.

Brenda points a shaky pistol until she recognizes Parker.

PARKER
It's me, Brenda.

BRENDA
(lowering pistol)
I thought you were a burglar.

Parker starts up the stairs.

PARKER
I'm sorry to frighten you. The
back door was unlocked. No one
answered the bell.

Brenda shakes her head. Her life has gone to hell.

BRENDA
I...I...

PARKER
I understand.

Brenda staggers and pitches against the rail, about to fall
over.

Parker hurries, grabs Brenda. Looks about to push her over.

PARKER
Let me help.

Parker gently pulls Brenda away from the railing.

INT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Parker helps Brenda into the room and onto the bed. Parker
makes her comfortable. She takes the automatic and places it
on the table.

PARKER
Can I get you something?

BRENDA
Aspirin.

Parker goes to bathroom and returns with aspirin and a glass
of water.

She helps Brenda down the aspirin.

BRENDA
Hale sent you?

PARKER
You didn't talk to him?

BRENDA
No...I don't think...god, my head
hurts.

PARKER
Sleep. It will soon get better.

Brenda closes her eyes.

BRENDA
Josh is gone?

PARKER
Yes.

Brenda reaches out and pats Parker's hand.

BRENDA
I'm glad I didn't shoot you.

PARKER
Me too.

As Brenda drifts away, Parker opens her purse and takes out her revolver.

She hesitates and then picks up the automatic from the table.

PARKER
You know, sometimes I think you and Hale are linked.

BRENDA
We are...but not in any way you'd understand.

Parker places the pistol close to Brenda's head.

PARKER
I guess not.

She pulls the trigger. Brenda's head jerks.

Parker places the pistol in her purse.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale takes off his Sherlock hat and places it on the desk.

HALE
So you see, Poe was ahead of his time. Who knows what masterpieces he might pen today.

INT. PROBATION OFFICE - DAY

Probation Officer is almost finished with his checklist.

PROBATION OFFICER
Community service?

JOSH
Four hours at the seniors center.

He hands over a note.

PROBATION OFFICER
Very good.

JOSH
I'm done, right?

PROBATION OFFICER
You've completed the terms, but
you're not finished until released
by the court.

Josh nods.

PROBATION OFFICER
No hard feelings, but I never want
to see your sorry ass again.

JOSH
I'm past that.

Probation Officer looks at Josh as if Josh has no idea what
he's over.

PROBATION OFFICER
A word of advice. Avoid your old
friends.

INT. CAR - DAY

Parker drives down the street. She fights panic.

Sound of a HORN!

Parker slams on her brakes, already past the stop sign she
didn't see.

In front of her, a car passes, and the driver, a WOMAN,
stares at Parker.

Parker mouths I'M SORRY and continues on her way.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - LAUNDRY ROOM - DAY

Parker strips, tossing her clothes into the washer. Naked,
she grabs a robe and starts the washer. On her way out, she
grabs a bottle of bleach.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - SHOWER - DAY

Parker stands under the spray and pours bleach over her
hands.

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - DAY

Josh comes upon the shattered back door. He takes a deep breath and takes out his phone. Dials 911.

JOSH
 (on phone)
 My back door has been kicked in.
 I'm afraid someone might be inside.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - DEN - EVENING

Hale stares at his screen. He types; the words flow.

Parker enters. She carries a glass of wine and a beer.

PARKER
 Hale?

He turns, surprised by this act of kindness.

PARKER
 I heard it on the news.

She hands him the beer.

PARKER
 Brenda is dead. Murdered this
 afternoon.

Shock freezes Hale. For some reason, he can't fathom this.

PARKER
 I thought you might want to know.

HALE
 I...poor Josh.

Parker studies Hale and sips her wine.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Parker and Hale, in black, stand with mourners. In front, by the grave stands Josh.

Josh's hands fidget with nervous fingers.

INT. DINER KITCHEN - DAY

Parker grills hamburgers. Grease and steam rise around her as she sweats.

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Parker steps into the alley. She leans against the wall, thankful for the break.

JOSH (O.S.)
Yo, Parker.

She turns. Josh grins from behind the dumpster.

Parker looks over her shoulder for witnesses.

PARKER
What the hell are you doing here?

Josh's grin is too big for his face, as if he's high--he is.

JOSH
Just wanted to thank you for a job well done.

PARKER
Are you crazy? Get your ass outta here.

JOSH
I...well...had to...thanks, you know?

PARKER
What are you on?

JOSH
Little of this, little of that.

PARKER
We talked about this. Go.

JOSH
You'll call?

PARKER
Damn you. Leave!

JOSH
Still want it, Parker?

PARKER
You little shit! Go!

Parker doesn't wait for Josh but whirls and enters the diner.

Josh's smile fades, and he frowns before he staggers off.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - NIGHT

Hale plucks the WHITE DEATH poster off the wall and hauls it out.

EXT. BRENDA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Josh weaves around the corner, half dazed, high. He fumbles in his pocket, taking out keys, facing a repaired door. Humming, he dances as if needing to pee.

He can't quite find the keyhole.

From the dark, a figure slams into Josh, driving him off the stoop and into the snow. A brief scuffle and Josh is flat on his back, pinned. It's Parker.

PARKER
Listen, you little piece of bird
crap.

JOSH
What, what?

Josh struggles, and Parker slaps him hard.

PARKER
Damn you, listen to me!

JOSH
Parker?

She slaps him twice.

JOSH
Stop.

PARKER
Listen.

She raises a gloved hand, and Josh cringes.

PARKER
What the hell do you think you're
doing?

JOSH
I didn't think.

PARKER
You screw up now and we both go to
prison. HEAR ME?!

Josh giggles, like it's a joke.

PARKER
Are you high? Goddamn you, what
are you on?!

JOSH
(sings)
On the good ship, lollipop...

Parker rolls off, flips Josh on his stomach, and jams his face into the snow. She kneels on his head as he flails.

Some seconds, perhaps longer than Josh can hold his breath. She slips off, grabs his hair, and jerks up his head.

PARKER
Gonna stay clean, Josh?

Josh sputters, spitting snow.

JOSH
What the fuck--

Parker jams his face into the snow and kneels on his head. Josh's efforts grow weak.

She jerks up his head.

PARKER
Your choice. Stay clean or die
here and now.

Josh gasps, unable to speak. Parker slap his face.

PARKER
You gotta answer, Josh. Cause
silence says no to my ears. Clean?

Josh doesn't answer. Parker shoves his face.

JOSH
Clean....clean.....

Parker jerks back his head, and Josh grimaces.

PARKER
Remember that, Josh, pristine.

She shoves him away, stands, and walks.

Josh rolls to his back, gasping. A yellow stain on the snow where Josh pissed himself.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BASEMENT - NIGHT

An inch deep compartment in the back of the plaque. Hale sands the edges. Running a finger over his work, he's satisfied. He grabs a stack of certificates.

He places the BEARER BONDS in the compartment.

He takes the top, and carefully fits the piece into place. A neat, snug fit.

Using a glue gun, he seals the joint. The bonds are hidden.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

On a snowmobile, Parker screams across a pure white field. Josh follows on a second snowmobile. An SEWARD FOR SENATE bumper sticker plastered on the front.

They enter a woods.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The snowmobiles wind slowly through the trees. Parker leads. Josh follows.

She slips around a tree and turns, the rear of the snowmobile slipping over the edge of a cliff.

She climbs off as Josh stops.

Below the steep cliff runs the creek where she and Hale had their picnic.

She moves to the edge. Josh joins her. She smiles, and pulls out Brenda's automatic, pointed at Josh.

Josh's grin shrinks. What the hell is going on?

Parker laughs, grabs the pistol by the barrel and tosses it into the creek.

Josh's grin reappears.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Hale sips coffee and reads the paper. Parker enters, in robe and disheveled.

HALE
Bad night?

Parker ignores him and starts her tea kettle.

HALE
Working today?

PARKER
Day off.

HALE
It's supposed to snow. Winter
storm, blizzard.

Parker plops at the table and grabs the paper as he stands.

HALE
I have class.

He leans over to kiss her cheek but thinks better of it.
With a shrug, he leaves.

After he's gone, Parker turns on her cell phone and leaves it
on the counter.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale leans against the windows. At the front, a BOY reads
his composition.

BOY
The perfect murder is first and
foremost a murder. Everyone knows
it's a murder.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Josh steers a snowmobile. Snow billows as he goes. He slips
past a tree and stops by the cliff. He climbs off, grabs a
steel cable and a bracket and walks to a thick tree.

BOY (V.O.)
But knowing it is a murder is no
help, for the clues do not point to
the murderer.

Josh slips the bracket around the tree and tightens it with a
wrench. He attaches the cable and tugs. Solid.

BOY (V.O.)
The clues point to either another
suspect or to no one.

Josh takes the coiled cable from the snowmobile and hurls it
out, down the cliff, and into the creek. With a grin, he
climbs on the snowmobile and shoots away.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Hale looks out the window at a bank of dark clouds.

BOY

Thus, the clues are no help in
finding the murderer.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Josh splashes into the creek and retrieves the cable. He hauls it to a tree and another bracket he has already installed.

BOY (V.O.)

The perfect murder should not
merely foil the investigators. The
perfect murder should invoke
symbolism and satisfy an ascetic
need.

Josh pulls taut the cable and locks it in place. He leans on the cable that stretches from cliff to tree. Tight.

He climbs on the snowmobile and roars away.

BOY (V.O.)

A drug dealer might be murdered by
lethal injection, an assassin by a
bullet between the eyes, an
adulterer murdered in bed.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Dressed in a towel, Parker enters. From the bureau she takes out silk long underwear.

EXT. TAVERN - DAY

Josh parks his snowmobile in front of a highway bar. He slips off, looks around, and heads inside.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Josh smokes in a corner booth of a small tavern, a place where the restroom walls are covered with phone numbers. Suit open, he warms as a WAITRESS sets down a mug of beer.

After she leaves, he pulls a plastic bag of colored pills from his pocket. He looks around before he downs one with his beer.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

Snow falls as Hale, on ladder, mounts the wooden plaque he has carved. There's a face on the plaque, but it's not discernible.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Parker grabs her cell phone. She dials, and the phone BEEPS. Low battery.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE - SHRINE - DAY

Hale puts the last screw in the plaque. He has never straightened the crooked raven. Snow falls, although not thick.

PARKER (O.S.)

Hale?

He turns. Parker stands a respectable distance away.

PARKER

Can we talk?

He simply looks.

PARKER

Please.

INT. DENNING HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Hale and Parker stand in the kitchen. Parker has not taken off her coat although Hale has.

PARKER

I...I can't talk here. Can we, maybe, drive?

HALE

I haven't written anything today.

PARKER

We won't be gone long.

HALE

I'll get my keys.

Hale leaves. Parker goes to Hale's coat, takes out his cell phone and replaces it with hers. She grabs the coat and walks out.

INT. CAR - DAY

Hale drives. Parker rides.

PARKER

Did you ever think it would end like this?

HALE

I never thought it would end.

PARKER

You know, when I was in the hospital, on the ventilator, I thought I would die. Isn't that crazy?

HALE

I wouldn't let you.

PARKER

Something wouldn't let me.

HALE

Me. I made a pact. If you lived, I would quit writing mysteries.

She looks at him as if he's nuts.

PARKER

A pact with god?

HALE

God wouldn't be so demanding.

PARKER

You're not making much sense.

HALE

Remember when I talked to Margo about demons?

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

A drunk and high Josh grins. On the table stand several empty mugs. He pulls out his plastic bag, fewer pills too.

He looks at his watch. He stands, slaps money on the table, and zips up. Time to roll.

EXT. TAVERN - EVENING

Snow falls heavily as Josh starts the snowmobile. He's high, grinning as he shoots into the growing storm.

INT. CAR - EVENING

Hale drives through the thickening snow. The wind picks up.

HALE

I cut a deal. I don't think
telling you is allowed, but it's
too late now.

She looks at him.

PARKER

What a load of crap. You saved my
life by trading with some demon?

HALE

Not some demon, the demon of the
shrine.

PARKER

You know, that's probably the
stupidest plot you've ever
invented. If you didn't want to
write, why not just say so?!

HALE

Margo said you'd never believe me.

PARKER

A demon? Sure thing, Faust, you
sacrificed your career for me. How
dumb do you think I am?

Hale has no answer.

PARKER

Stop the car.

HALE

What?

PARKER

STOP THE FUCKING CAR!

Hale pulls to the side.

EXT. CAR - EVENING

Parker gets out and marches into a field of new fallen snow.

Hale gets out the other side.

HALE
Parker! Parker, this is crazy.
It's a winter storm!

Parker doesn't answer but marches on.

Hale looks from car to Parker. He slams the car door, and starts after her.

Parker has a good lead as they cross the field. Hale follows.

EXT. FIELD - EVENING

The storm worsens, but Josh doesn't care as he rips across the field.

EXT. FIELD - EVENING

Parker breathes hard as she pushes through the snow and storm. She glances over her shoulder but sees nothing in the gloom.

Hale follows. Snow and gloom hide Parker.

He pauses, glances over his shoulder. The road is gone. He is alone in the snow storm. He looks ahead, Parker's tracks.

He follows her tracks.

INT. WOODS - NIGHT

The dark is nearly complete as Josh negotiates the trees. He's not cold, too drugged for that.

He comes upon the creek, his headlamps shining on the water. He looks to one side and spots the cable. Killing the engine, he settles down to wait, pulling a beer from his pocket.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Parker struggles through the woods. Dark and snow could disorient her. Yet, she pushes ahead.

Behind, Hale is intent on the tracks. He's cold; the wind picks up.

Parker passes a tree, and her foot slips over the edge of the cliff. She grabs the tree to keep from falling. Pulling herself back from the edge, she looks left and right. Which direction?

Deciding, she edges along the cliff.

In the woods, head bowed, Hale follows.

Parker searches and spots the steel cable. She backs up several paces, takes a running start and leaps wildly off the cliff, catching the cable. She dangles a moment, fighting to hang on.

She loops legs around the cable and descends.

Suddenly, her hands and legs slip. Instead of slowly descending, she shoots down the slippery line.

Not able to see, not knowing where the end is, she slips off and falls into the creek, splashing.

She struggles to her feet, out of breath. She wades out, looking for Josh.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

In the woods, Hale finds the place where Parker almost slipped. He manages to avoid the cliff and move toward the cable.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Below, the wet Parker spots the snowmobile. Josh asleep on top.

Parker arrives and kicks Josh, knocking him off the snowmobile.

JOSH

What the...

PARKER

Let's get out of here.

Josh scrambles, but he's slow, drunk and high. Parker notices, but she's shivering. Snow swirls. Josh starts the snowmobile, climbs on. Parker climbs behind him, and they start off.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Hale stops. Did he hear the snowmobile, or was it the wind? Snow flies. He starts forward.

He comes to the end of the tracks, the cliff.

He stops. No tracks?

He looks around. Where did she go. As in a novel, the tracks vanish, leaving him alone in the middle of a snow storm.

HALE
PARKER!!

No answer but the wind.

He moves forward, looking for tracks. Nothing. He turns and backtracks. Nothing. No tracks, no Parker, nothing.

HALE
PARKER!!

He's alone, utterly alone.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Josh flies, too fast. Impaired, he barely sees a tree in time to avoid it. In avoiding one tree, he slams into another.

Snowmobile stops. Josh and Parker go flying.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Unable to find Parker or a trail, Hale does the only thing he can do. He turns and backtracks. He hurries now. Snow falls fast. The wind keens.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Parker wakes in the snow. Blood has congealed on her face. She pushes to her knees, stands, takes a step and howls in pain. Something is wrong. Gritting teeth, she limps to the snowmobile.

The snowmobile is totaled, not going anywhere.

PARKER
Josh!

No answer but the wind.

PARKER
JOSH!! GODDAMN YOU!!

Josh doesn't answer.

Pissed, in pain, she limps away, shivering.

Five steps, and Parker stumbles, falling with a SCREAM. She looks back.

Josh's lifeless eyes stare at her. His head sports a bloody split, his body quickly freezing.

Parker scrambles despite the pain. With a grimace and a CURSE, she rises and limps away.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Snow covered, frozen, Hale is a snowman trudging through a wall of white. Intent on the trail, he shuffles, drained. His lips tremble.

The trail fades. The snow has fallen too fast. His tracks are nearly full.

A step.

He stops.

The snow is even, no trail, no clue.

Shivering, his face frozen, he looks into the storm. Which direction?

An idea strikes. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He turns it on, dials, and gets nothing. He shakes it, hits it. Nothing.

Dead battery.

He looks at the phone, laughs, and tosses it away. Chuckling, he pushes ahead.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Parker limps, dragging one leg. Pain sears her. The storm hammers her. She stops, half frozen, trying to find her bearings. She pounds her fist angrily.

She looks at her watch.

11:59

Her face lights up. She pats her pockets and pulls out Hale's phone.

Her breath catches.

For the first time in a long while, she recognizes telltale asthma. She flips open the phone and dials 911

She gasps. The attack worsens.

OPERATOR
What is your emergency?

Parker tries to answer, but she can't. She has no breath.

OPERATOR
Please state your emergency.

She fumbles for her inhaler, practically ripping it out of her pocket.

OPERATOR
If you cannot speak, please stay on the line.

The attack deepens. She takes a hit on her inhaler.

No help.

OPERATOR
Stay on the line. We're tracing the call.

A second puff.

Zip.

She can't breathe. She tries, but nothing happens. Panic widens her eyes. She puffs once, twice.

Nothing.

OPERATOR
Stay on the line. Help will reach you.

Parker tries to speak, but she has no breath. She takes another puff. Might as well inhale car exhaust.

She takes one desperate step and collapses.

Staring at the phone, Parker dies.

OPERATOR
Please stay on the line.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Hale moves so slowly he seems to be standing still. Frozen, beyond shivering, he has reached the end. Too tired, too cold, he stops.

He tries a step and stumbles and sees--a half-filled track.

He's back at the cliff, having walked in a circle. He understands. It's over.

He glances about and spots a tree. Slowly, he goes to the tree and sits against it, out of the wind. He doesn't notice the cable above his head.

He closes his eyes and reopens them. He settles, trying to get comfortable. Then, he closes his eyes and sleeps.

EXT. DENNING HOUSE SHRINE - NIGHT

The crooked raven graces one corner.

The plaque is pelted with snow, and the snow has added a mustache that makes the face look oddly like Edgar Allen Poe.

FADE OUT

THE END