



# KILLER WEED

*a novel*

Michael Castleman

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MACADAM CAGE

MacAdam/Cage  
155 Sansome Street, Suite 550  
San Francisco, CA 94104  
www.MacAdamCage.com

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# 1

A gunshot sounds distinctive, even over the phone, especially when followed by your wife screaming.

The sharp *bang* ricocheted around Ed Rosenberg's brain like a pinball on espresso. *Someone was shooting at Julie!* He felt unseen hands close around his neck and squeeze. "Julie! Are you all right?"

"It's Dave!" she shrieked. "Oh my God! *Dave!*"

"What?"

"He's on the ground! He's bleeding! Oh—! Ed, I can't talk. I'll call you back."

"Julie! Wait!" The line went dead. *Call Ended* flashed on Ed's screen. He jabbed the Recents button, then her number. Voice-mail. *Damn.*

Sitting parked between errands in the Mission, Ed realized he was holding his breath. He forced a long exhale and felt a sharp stab in his gut. He had only one thought: to fly to Julie, to be with her, hold her close, make sure she was all right. But *where was she?* He had no idea.

Ed stared through the windshield toward Twin Peaks. Wisps of fog blew over the ridge and somersaulted toward the Bay. He was also somersaulting—but it felt like being locked in a front-loader on high spin. First they got fired, now *this*.

Ed knew he had to calm down and remember where Julie was. Her face came to him first—her sparkling deep brown eyes, and her skin an alluring caramel mix of black and white. Her luscious lips formed a word. *Breathe.* Yes. Breathing was good—and even better after a hit, but what little remained of his stash was back home. That had been one of

his errands, but now it would have to wait.

Ed rewound to breakfast, to their usual hectic flail. As he'd filled the dishwasher and readied Jake for daycare, Julie had hustled Sonya out the door to school and run down her plans for the day. But given what had just happened—*Dave Kirsch shot!*—her words disappeared, engulfed in fog.

Where *was* she? He slapped the steering wheel so hard his hand hurt. Then the fog cleared and it came back to him: Golden Gate Park, the band shell, some rally.

A spider of cold sweat scuttled from his armpit down his side. The shot, the hot *bam* of it, so loud, so menacing. It echoed between his ears and made the breath catch in his throat. He hadn't felt this frantic since his father's stroke. He could survive the *Foghorn* shoving them out the door—he could endure almost anything—but not losing Julie.

The curtain opened on *Hell: The Movie*. He slouched over an open grave, holding the kids' little hands as their mother was lowered into the ground. He opened his mouth and forcibly exhaled the nightmare. It was *Dave* who'd been shot—Dave. Julie was all right. Or was she? Someone was shooting and she was *right there*.

Ed texted her: On way 2 band shell.

He threw it into drive and stomped on the accelerator. Tires screeched as he pulled out of the space by the cleaners' and headed from the lowlands of the Mission up to the hilly plateau of Noe Valley on his way over the ridge and down through the Haight to the park.

He hit the button for the news station. "Moments ago, San Francisco mayoral candidate Dave Kirsch was shot in Golden Gate Park. The Board of Supervisors member and marijuana activist was walking across the museum concourse when a single shot to the chest felled him. No word of his condition. Police are—"

Ed ran a yellow and hurtled across Valencia, narrowly missing two guys holding hands and walking a cocker spaniel. *Slow down. Get a grip.* But that was impossible. Someone was *shooting* and Julie was—

Ed held his breath. He was at the beach, his toes curling in warm sand, everything fine, and then the writhing Pacific reared up into a monster wave and raced right for him. He turned to run but could hardly move. He was standing knee deep in oatmeal. Their careers had been guillotined. Their finances teetered on the edge of the abyss. And

now bullets were flying. *What next?* Shot in the chest. *Fuck.* If Kirsch died—! Such a decent man, the best advocate stoners ever had, and so good to Julie. What was the world coming to?

A red light stopped him at Market Street. He reached for his phone just as it chimed.

“Julie!”

“He’s dead,” she whimpered. “Dave’s dead.”

Ed didn’t know what to say. “Sorry” seemed so feeble. His mind replayed their argument over her job. *Why give up steady work for the paper? Because I hate it. The gig’s over on election day. If he wins, I’m the mayor’s press secretary. Kirsch can’t win. Yes he can.* Then a miracle, he was rising in the polls, he was number two and gaining, and then—

All Ed cared about was Julie’s safety. “Are you all right?”

“No! Dave’s dead! Didn’t you hear me?”

The light changed. Ed crossed the wide boulevard and pulled up by Café Flore.

“I mean, are you *injured?*”

“No, no, I’m okay. But Dave—it’s *horrible*. Blood everywhere, all over Cindy!” Cynthia Miller was Kirsch’s campaign manager.

“I’m on my way. You’re at the band shell, right?”

“Hold on—”

Ed heard muffled voices.

“I have to give a statement,” Julie said, blowing her nose. “Ed, don’t come here. You won’t get close. They’ve got everything cordoned off. Cops everywhere.” To someone else she said, “Julie Pearl, media... Yes... all right. In a minute.” Then she returned to the phone. “I gotta go—”

“Wait! When will you be home?”

“No idea... I have to handle this. The first TV truck just pulled up. Oh, shit. It’s my day to pick up the kids.” Her voice caught. “Can you?”

“Yes, yes, don’t worry about it.” Ed heard a piercing siren. “What’s that?”

“The ambulance.” She sobbed once, then pulled herself together. “Oh, God, a body bag.”

Ed’s gut ached.

Julie said, “Don’t forget the spoon.” Their year-old son’s security blanket was an old wooden spoon. He carried it everywhere and slept with it. If they left it at daycare, Jake bawled inconsolably.

“The spoon, yes.”

“Now three TV trucks—and Wally.” Police reporter Wallace Turner was one of the few *San Francisco Foghorn* old-timers who still had a job. “I’m in no shape for a press conference,” Julie moaned, “but it’s show time.”

## 2

Ed felt like he'd been thrown into a pool of ice water. He was simultaneously shocked and numb. How could Kirsch be *dead*? Dave Kirsch of all people. He'd been a fixture in San Francisco for decades, first as the ex-hippie dope dealer turned guru of growing, then as the politician with the strong libertarian streak, and finally as the seriously lighthearted candidate for mayor. John Kennedy. John Lennon. Bill Graham. Some people are so embedded in your world, you take them for granted, and then *bang*, gone. Ed thought of how Julie must feel. All he wanted was to hold her as she cried, to feel her warmth, her heart beating. She was tough as steel, but even I-beams failed.

Ed knew he should return to the Mission, but his errands seemed so trivial now. He could barely breathe. Ever since the *Foghorn* had reamed them, he'd been waking up in the wee hours bathed in sweat from a recurring nightmare, the water rising, lifting him until his head bumped a concrete ceiling, the water up to his neck, his chin, his lips. Now the feeling of imminent doom had pursued him into daylight. What would become of them? He'd always considered himself nimble and shrewd, but he didn't know what to do.

A garbage truck rumbled by and startled him back to reality. He was in a bus zone in the Castro. Seagulls wheeled overhead under puffy clouds as an antique streetcar clattered by. His cheeks felt odd and he touched them. *Have I been crying?* He forced himself to breathe and worked his shoulders in circles the way Julie did to her yoga DVD. They'd been kicked in the gut and now Julie's Kirsch gig, their one



candle of hope, had been blown out. But he wasn't a widower. Julie was okay. That was the main thing.

Still, his intestines cramped as though he'd been stabbed in the gut. It seemed like just yesterday he was a newly minted Berkeley Ph.D., with a job teaching history at Cal State East Bay. But after a few years, he and his department chair both decided that he was oil on the waters of academia.

Then Ed stumbled into a job writing for San Francisco's alternative weekly, and suddenly, much to his surprise, he loved going to work. Instead of lecturing gum-cracking kids who couldn't care less, he was reaching a hundred thousand people a week and occasionally even making a difference.

After a few years, he jumped to the *Foghorn* and fell in love with Julie, the daily's PR chief. Eventually, a new executive editor bought his pitch to write a column devoted to local history: San Francisco Unearthed, which became a modest hit. San Franciscans loved their city's golden, quirky, raunchy past, and Ed had a knack for making it come alive. Macy's noticed and started paying a premium for ad placement next to the column, and every few years, the *Horn's* book division published collections that had allowed them to buy and renovate their modest Mission starter home, and now, a dozen blocks away, their second place, large enough for two kids. The new house needed more work than Jericho after the trumpets, but they hadn't worried—they had good jobs and assurances that they were safe.

*Journalism.* Ed felt acid burning his throat. As a young reporter, he'd reveled in working among the best and brightest. Now he realized that many journalists were dolts, with media pundits the biggest idiots of all. Not one had predicted that free classifieds on Craigslist would devastate newspapers. Not one had foreseen the Internet devaluing information to the point where Pulitzer Prize winners were groveling to get into law school.

Ed and Julie had survived two buyouts and three rounds of layoffs, but then the ax fell. The features editor had pushed open the glass door of his little office and said, "Sorry, Ed, you're history."

He called upstairs immediately. Julie had just gotten her pink slip—by e-mail. And what about management's promises? *That was then, this is now.*

As the sun set on their final day, Ed, Julie, and forty other newly laid off *Horn* folk gathered at The Poets, the venerable Irish bar down the alley behind the paper. Ed had written about the place, a fixture in the South of Market since the Civil War, when the neighborhood was Irishtown. He sipped one Guinness and stopped, but Julie lost count and had to be helped to the car.

Then they were offered their jobs back—freelance, at a third of their former salaries and no benefits. They'd been proletarianized, outsourced to themselves. They gnashed their teeth and cursed corporate America. Julie refused to crawl back to the paper, insisting she wouldn't be humiliated. Ed sympathized but implored her to reconsider. With young kids, a monster mortgage, savings depleted by renovations, and now paying out of pocket for health insurance, what choice did they have?

They sent out dozens of resumé's and scrambled for work like pigeons pecking the gutter for anything that resembled food. *Nothing like self-employment to catapult you out of bed in the morning.*

In addition to his column, Ed picked up a California history class at City College, but it didn't pay much. The history chair at USF said they might have something down the road, but who knew when. The California Historical Society invited him to contribute to their magazine and web site, but they paid next to nothing. And the Bancroft Library at Cal hoped to launch a new California archive project, but in this economy...

Then a buddy on the board of the San Francisco Museum e-mailed him about a Silicon Valley zillionaire who was interested in funding an exhibit on the Summer of Love. Was Ed interested in compiling research for the curator? *Is the Pope Catholic?* But that was ten days ago, and no word since. Ed wasn't religious, but he found himself praying. *Please, God, I need a job.*

He drove down the hill to Rainbow Grocery, the Mission's worker-owned vegetarian supermarket. He pulled out Julie's list, hoping the routine of shopping would lift his spirits, but no such luck. He felt lost in a cold black cave. He also felt angry, which was nothing new. He hated the paper, and worse, hated himself for believing his editor's sweet talk and plunging blithely into renovations. But this particular rage burned with a special heat. By the dairy case, he realized why. He

was furious with Julie.

When the Kirsch possibility bubbled up, she'd faced a conflict of interest. She couldn't represent the campaign while doing PR for the paper. Ed thought she should stay put. The Kirsch job was a short-term long shot, while the *Horn* was steady money. He'd begged her to be sensible, but she couldn't jump ship fast enough. Then Kirsch began rising in the polls, and Julie had embraced a rose-colored fantasy. The mayor's press secretary! Huge salary! Great benefits! Now Kirsch was on a slab in the morgue, and that dream was as dead as her employer.

Shoveling green beans into a plastic bag, Ed tried to look on the bright side. He was no longer in chains from nine to five. He could run errands on weekday afternoons when lines were short and parking plentiful. He'd gone to the bank, bought a hose, and dropped off the dry cleaning in just twenty minutes, half the time the chores would have taken on the weekend. On sunny days, he enjoyed lunch in their yard, inhaling the fragrance of the jasmine Julie and the kids had planted. And he could catch bargain matinées.

But the silver lining barely peeked out from under the coal-black cloud. Their severance was lousy and their savings were going fast. With newspapers in rigor mortis, no one was hiring, and hustling for freelance work made their former grind feel like a paid vacation. Who had time for bargain mats?

Ed filled his cart, finishing in the beer and wine aisle. Julie had written *Sauvignon Blanc*, followed by the number one, which she'd crossed out and replaced with a two. Since the big kiss-off, she'd been drinking more, but when Ed made the mistake of pointing it out, she'd retorted that he was smoking more weed, so there. He sighed and nestled two bottles into the cart.

As Ed hoisted the bags into the car, his phone chimed. He didn't recognize the number.

"Hello, Ed. Pat Lucas."

Pat was the principal at Sonya's school, and she sound perturbed. *What now?*

"I'm sorry to report that Sonya disrupted the DAP lesson and Jane sent her to me." Jane Dornacher was Sonya's social studies teacher. DAP was the Drug Abuse Prevention program that San Francisco Unified required in grades five, six, and seven.

This was a first. Never in all her years of school had Sonya ever been thrown out of class.

“Uh...” Ed slumped against the car. He couldn’t decide which felt more inconceivable: Kirsch killed or Sonya busted. He wished he could start the day over again.

Pat said, “She ridiculed the DAP program’s treatment of marijuana—and she wouldn’t shut up.” Then her tone became stern. “I detect parental influence.”

Ed liked Pat and had every reason to believe the feeling was mutual. He was in no mood for a fight, especially not today, but he couldn’t help himself. “I’m sorry Sonya got carried away, but you know the curriculum stinks.” Ed wasn’t the only parent who’d complained about DAP’s contention that weed was as dangerous as alcohol, tobacco, heroin, crack, and meth.

“I know how you feel and you know I’m sympathetic. But I don’t control the curriculum. What I control is the school, and we can’t have disruptive behavior.” Ed heard her sigh. “Now that she’s been sent to me, I have to follow procedure.”

“Meaning what?”

“A conference, the four of us, as soon as possible.”



Ed pulled into traffic and found himself staring at a bumper sticker: *Unemployment Isn't Working*. He couldn't decide if he should laugh or cry.

He parked by The Healing Center and checked his wallet. He had just enough for a quarter ounce. From a dark corner of memory, a line he'd once read flashed like neon in the dark: *Addicts buy drugs instead of shoes for their kids*. He pushed the thought away. He wasn't an addict, just a long-time pothead who also had a nervous stomach, now more nervous than ever—and weed helped. His doctor, bless him, had written the letter qualifying Ed for a card. Buying at a store beat sending cash to his old high school buddy in Jamaica Plain and hoping the stuff was packed well enough that no one at UPS smelled anything and stole it.

The Healing Center occupied in a former shoe repair shop. The little storefront had a stout metal gate with barred windows and a sign, a bright green palmate leaf overprinted with the establishment's initials, THC.

Behind the locked gate stood a skinny white kid whose dreadlocks coiled down to a Kirsch For Mayor T-shirt. "Card?" he asked.

Ed slipped it through. He wondered if the people there had heard about Kirsch. The gate opened with a metallic click.

Ed stepped inside and discovered they had. Everyone was riveted to the flatscreen mounted in a corner of the ceiling. It cut from Julie, distraught but professional, to Cindy Miller sobbing inconsolably, to a bio of Kirsch, who'd parlayed legalization activism into fortune, fame,

and elected office. The half-dozen people arrayed around the café tables shook their heads as they sucked on joints, bongs, vaporizers, and one-hitters. A few wiped their eyes.

A stereo playing reggae competed with the TV. Posters adorned the walls: Bob Marley, Legalize It, Visit Amsterdam, and the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, arm in arm, passing a doobie and proclaiming their signature line, “Dope gets you through times of no money better than money gets you through times of no dope.”

Beneath the posters, display cases offered pipes, paraphernalia, spiked confections, and several books, including two by the late Dave Kirsch, *Grow It!* (sixteenth edition) and *Grow It Indoors!* (third edition).

Ed stepped to the counter in back. Behind it, a clean-cut young man smiled under a Giants cap. His lapel pin read “Pharmacist.” Behind him, one whiteboard listed grades and prices, another a dozen brands of *sativa*, *indica*, and blends of the two. Ed was a *Cannabis sativa* man. *Indica* smelled skunky and gave him headaches.

“What’ll it be?” the pharmacist asked. A Kirsch for Mayor bumper sticker was tacked to the wall behind him.

“A quarter,” Ed said, “high-grade *sativa*.”

“Any preference?”

Ed surveyed the list, then glanced at the kid, who had to be at least twenty-one but didn’t look it. Ed realized he’d probably been getting high longer than this pharmacist had been alive. “Not really. I’ve been using Train Wreck.”

“Like it?”

“Gets the job done...but—”

“What are you looking for? Pain relief? Sleep? Tranquilizer?”

“Upset stomach.”

“Train Wreck’s good, but have you tried Ambrosia?” The young man pulled a large Mason jar off a shelf, unscrewed the cap, and invited Ed to sniff. The buds, cherry-sized and bright green with golden threads, burst with fragrance. That was nothing new. Ed had to store his stash in the shed out back to avoid stinking up the house.

“Powerful healing,” the pharmacist intoned.

Ed nodded and the kid weighed out seven grams plus a smidge more and scooped it into a plastic bag. “Free cookie? Papers? Lighter?”

Ed used a bong or one-hitter, so he didn’t need papers. And he’d

never liked eating marijuana. Dose control was a problem, and it took an hour to get off. “Lighter.”

The pharmacist dropped a disposable into the paper bag and accepted a wad of bills.

On his way out, the gatekeeper said, “Feel better.”

Ed sighed. He had problems not even his favorite medicine could cure, and now his hit would have to wait. He had to pick up the kids, make dinner, and call Julie. He pulled out his phone and held it, wishing he were holding her.





## 4

Ed tucked in Jake for the night, then poked his head through Sonya's door.

"Why do I have to be *up here*?" she whined, spreading her palms in supplication. "I want to be *downstairs* with *Mom*. She almost got *killed*!"

Ed stepped into her room, an increasingly alien realm where the floor was strewn with rumpled clothing and Barbie and Ken were being supplanted by hip hop icons foreign to her parents.

Ed groped for a reply, hoping to provide comfort while still insisting she finish her homework. "Your mother did not almost get killed. She was just nearby."

Sonya's eyes rolled in an arc so high Ed feared she might pass out. "There was *blood* on her *coat*!"

"Look," Ed said, striving for soothing, "I know you're freaked out. We all are. What happened is very upsetting, but—"

"If the *band shell* isn't safe, *what is*?"

They'd enjoyed many summer picnics there attending free concerts—rock, blues, jazz, and Sonya's favorite, big gospel choirs. The band shell had always felt like a sanctuary. Now Ed wondered if Julie would ever want to return.

Sonya stabbed a finger at him. "*Anyone* can get shot. You could, *I* could—"

"No—"

"How do you know?"

"Because," Ed said, "street shootings are pretty rare."

More eye-rolling. Ed was clearly the stupidest man alive. “They *are not*. They happen *all the time*. Tina’s uncle got shot, and now Mom’s boss and Mom—almost.”

Tina Woods was a classmate. Her uncle had been killed outside the housing project where they lived, in what the *Foghorn* reported as a drug deal gone bad.

“What makes you think anyone can get shot?”

“I *see* it—”

“Where?”

“On TV, the news. People get shot all the time.”

“Sonya,” Ed pressed as insistently as possible, “listen to me, honey. You know I’m a newsman—”

“Yeah, till you got *laid off*.” Her words dripped scorn and anxiety.

“The news makes the world look scarier than it really is.”

“But Mom could have been *killed!*”

They’d been riding this merry-go-round since Ed had picked her up, and now he felt motion sick. Someone at her after-school program had heard about the shooting and turned on the TV. Julie’s face filled the screen, which made Sonya a momentary celebrity.

Ed had hoped she would weary of her tirade and knock it off, but no. Suddenly, he felt overwhelmed by a visceral need for contact with Julie. He had to touch her, massage her shoulders, loosen the knots he knew he’d find at the base of her neck.

Looking into Sonya’s anguished face, he hated to play his trump card. The whole thing was silly, but under the circumstances, he had no choice. “You have every right to feel shaken up. Mom and I are, too. But the shooting isn’t the only thing upsetting us. Pat Lucas called. Seems someone got thrown out of class today.”

Eyes downcast, the juvenile delinquent replied, “Yeah, for saying what *you* said.”

“There’s a big difference, young lady, between conversation at the dinner table and disrupting school.”

“But Jane said weed’s as bad as *meth!*”

Ed reflected on the irony. Sonya’s social studies teacher made no secret of her semi-hippie past. At school, she was as straight as a drug rehab counselor, but once Ed had run into her and her husband huddled in a doorway by the Fillmore before an Elvis Costello show. Jane looked

embarrassed and mumbled something about the line for Will Call. Ed didn't need a calculator to do the math.

"Believe me, Jane's well aware that DAP's treatment of pot is nonsense. But if she doesn't teach it that way, she *loses her job*. She doesn't need you making her life harder."

"But you said DAP's a *lie*. Why are they teaching us lies?"

"Sonya, I hate to say it, but there's something you need to know about the adult world. Sometimes it makes no sense. But adults hate it when kids lecture them, especially when they're right. You're going to have to apologize. You know that. If I were you, I'd send Jane an e-mail tonight saying you're really sorry—and copy Pat."

Sonya frowned. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Her lower lip trembled. "I want to be with Mom."

"Finish your homework. E-mail Jane and Pat. Then you can come down and hang with us till bedtime."



Julie slumped at the dining room table, dabbing her eyes and sipping wine. A dozen friends were arrayed around her: neighbors, PR colleagues, women from her book group, former *Foghorn* staff, and a few of the paper's survivors. The table was littered with flowers, sushi, pizza, cookies, and beer and wine. A laptop displayed the *Foghorn's* obit. Several people told Kirsch stories.

"He was one of the first people I met in San Francisco," a former news editor, Ted Nello, reminisced. "He turned me on to grass." Everyone clamored for the details except Julie, who just sat there in a daze.

"It was '67. I was twenty-five and definitely not a hippie. I'd spent three years at the *Chico Enterprise-Record* reporting farm issues. I'd just been hired by the *Horn* and I was wide-eyed in the big city. Maybe two weeks into the job, I'm handed a release about a press conference for legalization on the steps of City Hall: Allen Ginsberg, the Dead, the Airplane—and someone I'd never heard of, Dave Kirsch. Ginsberg played a drum and chanted. When he spoke, he was incoherent. The bands weren't much better. But Kirsch's pitch was very together—less harmful than alcohol and tobacco, and the government could either legalize it and collect taxes, or waste millions trying to suppress it while gangsters made billions, like during Prohibition. I was impressed, so afterward, I buttonholed him for a quick quote and he invited me back to his place in the Haight, this big old Victorian by the park. When we got there, a bunch of people were passing a joint." He smiled at the memory. "I'd never seen one, but it felt impolite to refuse their hospitality." A few

people chuckled. “I made my deadline—but I have no idea how.”

Ed stood behind Julie and kneaded her neck and shoulders. She was a mess, but she was *alive*. Her skin had never felt so warm and silky, and Ed had never experienced such relief. He flashed on his momentary snit the previous evening when she’d left the garage door open. *What was I thinking?*

Loud ringing filled the room—the antique bell built into the front door. Sonya bounded down the stairs and opened it. A tall man with thin gray-blond hair greeted her by name. It was Wally Turner, the long-time police reporter who still had a job. He nodded to the group, kissed Julie’s cheek, and accepted a beer. “Hell of a world, huh? Thank God you’re okay.”

“I’m not.”

“So?” a recently laid-off sports writer asked, nodding to the laptop. “You know anything that’s not on the site?”

“They recovered the slug,” Turner said. “It’s banged up, but they think they’ll get ballistics. I swung by Kirsch’s house hoping for a gravedigger, but the cops wouldn’t let anyone near.” A gravedigger was the obligatory interview with the family of the deceased.

“Suspects?” Ed asked, pressing his thumbs into the base of Julie’s neck. He felt a strong urge to strangle whoever had fired that gun.

“None they’re talking about,” Turner said. “But he had enough enemies to fill the Cow Palace.”

Several people nodded. Kirsch was nothing if not controversial. His marijuana activism had earned him the enmity of law enforcement and social conservatives. Property interests hated him for voting to strengthen rent control. Others thought he was a menace for wanting to legalize prostitution and raise money for education by letting Native Americans build a casino on Fisherman’s Wharf.

“Any guesses?” Ed asked.

Turner shrugged. “In this town, who knows? He got more threats than the rest of the Board combined.”

“And even more lately,” Julie mumbled.

“He was moving up in the polls,” Turner said. “It was starting to look like he might win. That always brings out the nuts. His campaign turned all the threats over to the cops, but the chief of detectives told me there was no pattern. They’re following up, but they don’t have

much to go on.”

“We hired bodyguards,” Julie said.

“Yes, four of them,” Turner said, “former state police. Two were walking in front of him, two behind. And there were six cops deployed around the band shell.”

“A lot of good it did,” Ed said.

“It’s almost impossible to defend against snipers,” Turner replied.

“I know his wife,” said a neighbor, Betty Platt. “Olivia. Sweet woman. Her store’s a few doors down from mine.” Betty owned a chocolate shop on Union Street.

“His wife has a store?” one of the women from the book group asked. “Why? I thought his books made them rich.”

“Yes,” Platt replied, “but Olivia’s owned Flower Child for, oh, five or six years—flowers, houseplants, and enough hydroponic equipment to keep the city stoned for ages.”

“Vertical integration,” someone quipped. “Dave tells ’em how to grow and his wife sells the gear. Neat.”

“She’s the former Olivia Tanner of Vichy Springs, near Ukiah,” said a frizzy-haired woman seated in front of the computer—Roz Shapiro, a former *Foghorn* photographer and one of Julie’s closest friends. After seventeen years at the paper, she’d taken a buyout. Now she shot weddings and bar mitzvahs. “They graduated from San Francisco State in ’65, got married, and moved to the Haight.”

She spun the screen around to reveal several photographs: the young, preppy bride and groom at their wedding, the hippie couple at the Human Be-In—long-haired Dave wearing a magician’s cape and Olivia in a peasant dress—then the mug shot taken in ’68 after Kirsch’s one arrest for dealing; the young author hawking the first edition of *Grow It!* on Haight Street in 1971, and the middle-aged Kirsch campaigning for the Board in 2004 in front of a poster that read, “Elect the Candy Man.”

“Great song, ‘Candy Man,’” a former *Foghorn* illustrator said. “I always loved the guitar hook.”

Several people who’d been around in 1967 spontaneously broke into the chorus: “Smoke, smoke, smoke, hey, candy man. I need some more, want to feel so grand. Smoke, smoke, smoke, hey, candy man.”

“What?” someone asked.



“A local hit,” Turner said, “by...” He shrugged. “I forget who.”

“Magic Bullet Theory,” said a yoga friend of Julie’s. “Supposedly, it was about Dave.”

“According to the *Horn*,” Shapiro said, “it really *was* about him.”

“Who believes that piece of shit?” This from an editor laid off with Ed and Julie. A few people smirked.

“Whatever happened to Magic Bullet Theory?” someone asked.

“Flamed out,” Turner said. “They got a record deal but the album never happened. Their main guy, Tommy, forget his last name, got seriously messed up with drugs and alcohol. *Smith*. Tommy Smith. But for a brief moment, they were the hottest band in town. I went to a show once where Quicksilver and the Dead opened, and MBT headlined.”

“You were a hippie, Wally?” Ed asked. It was hard to believe. Turner was a successful cop chaser largely because the police liked him, and they liked him because whenever cops became embroiled in controversy, he took their side.

“Not really, but I was young and had long hair and was into the music and—” He paused, then spread his arms and sang, “I need some more, want to feel so grand. Smoke, smoke, smoke, hey, candy man.” He had a surprisingly good voice. Several people applauded.

“According to Wikipedia,” Shapiro said, “*Grow It!* has sold more than four million copies and *Grow It Indoors!* a million. And get this: the current *Grow It!* is two hundred pages, but the first edition was a twenty-four-page pamphlet that Kirsch ran off at a copy shop. One of them just sold on eBay for *fifteen thousand dollars*.”

“Well, I can personally vouch for *Grow It!*” a PR friend of Julie’s said. “I’m from a small town in Indiana. My high school boyfriend’s family had a farm. He got the book and planted marijuana out in the cornfield. Grew more than we knew what to do with.”

“After Kirsch got rich and famous from *Grow It!*” Shapiro read off the screen, “he always denied dealing, saying he was just a hippie gardener. But in 2007, for the fortieth anniversary of the Summer of Love, Grace Slick and Phil Lesh were quoted in *Rolling Stone* as saying that he *was* a dealer, *their* dealer—and he finally admitted to selling for two years, ’66 to ’68.”

The doorbell rang again. Through stained glass, Ed saw a dark-haired middle-aged man in a suit. When he opened the door, the man

flashed a badge and introduced himself as Detective Antonio Ramirez. He had the build of a fullback, with graying temples, hair swept back, and cheeks starting to form jowls. He said, "I need a word with Julie Pearl. Is that possible?"

"She gave a statement at the scene," Ed said, hoping to spare her further interrogation.

"I know. I read it. I just... a brief moment. Please."

Ed ushered him into the dining room. "Julie, Detective... uh—"

"Antonio Ramirez. Call me Tony." He directed a thin-lipped smile at Julie and nodded toward the others. When his gaze landed on Turner, his smile broadened. "Wally," he said, extending a hand to the police reporter.

"Tony." Turner shook it. "Anything?"

"Not much."

Julie took a slug of wine, girding herself for a grilling.

"I hate to barge in like this," Ramirez said. "I know you're shaken up. But if we're going to catch whoever did this—"

"Ask away," Julie said.

"Maybe we should talk in private."

"Actually, I'd rather..." She gazed around the table, drawing support from the dozen pairs of eyes focused on her. Ed stepped up and clasped her hand.

"All right," the detective said, launching right in. "Before the shooting, how long were you with Kirsch?"

"All afternoon. We had a lunch meeting, then a meet-and-greet with the Interfaith Council, then the Save the Parks rally at the band shell."

"Just the two of you?"

"No, lunch was with the staff: Cindy, Bo, Vladdy, a few others. After that, it was Dave, Cindy, and me."

Ramirez consulted a tablet computer. "That would be campaign manager Cynthia Miller, finance chief Bo LeBlanc, and pollster Vladimir Rostoff?"

Julie nodded.

"How did he seem to you? His mood?"

"Fine. Great. Vladdy had new numbers. We were winning big in the Mission and closing the gap in the Sunset."

“He didn’t seem tense? Nervous? Preoccupied?”

“No. He was happy, upbeat. Why?”

“The threats. Did he mention that someone had pushed a note under his front door saying that if he won, he’d never see inauguration day?”

“No, not a word. He always insisted all that stuff went right to the police.”

“So you weren’t informed of the threats?”

“Some of the real ones, but not all. Dave didn’t want to scare us. But Cindy knew. Have you talked to her?”

“*Real ones?*” Ramirez repeated. “You mean there were *fake* threats?”

“Sure, jokes. The other day, Cindy showed me an e-mail. ‘We’re here. We’re queer. We’re going to kidnap Kirsch and fix his hair.’”

Around the room, several people chuckled, but not the detective.

“Since you gave your statement, has anything else come to mind? Anything at all.”

Julie looked away. She inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. “No.”

Ramirez pursed his lips and ran fingers through his hair. He pulled out his wallet and handed her a card. “If you think of anything, please call.”

Julie said she would. Ramirez nodded farewell to the group and Ed saw him to the door. As he reached for the knob, his hand trembled. Kirsch was dead. Julie was alive. And he felt somewhere in between.

“Political assassinations offend me,” Ramirez said, handing Ed a card. “If your wife remembers anything...”

After everyone left, Ed and Julie cleaned up, and Ed caught himself following her from room to room like a puppy, reassuring himself that she was still in one piece. When she poured another glass of wine and headed for the back deck, he descended to his basement office and returned with the bong. He found Julie leaning over the deck rail gazing vacantly at the back fence. Ed held a lighter to the bowl. Exhaling a cloud, he offered the pipe. "Want any?"

She considered the idea. "Half a hit."

Ed reloaded and held the lighter as the water bubbled.

Julie exhaled smoke, then leaned against Ed and snaked her arms around his waist. "You okay?"

His mouth went dry, and not from the weed. He returned her hug, feeling her warmth, her heat. "I feel awful about Dave, but I'm so incredibly grateful you're okay."

"I keep seeing him spinning around, falling." She shuddered in Ed's arms.

"And I keep hearing the shot and you screaming over the phone."

"I hope I can sleep. I can't get it out of my mind."

"Well," Ed said, "here's something that might help. Jane threw Sonya out of class."

"What?"

Ed explained the tempest in a water pipe.

Julie withdrew from Ed's embrace and twirled the wine glass by its stem. "I thought you went a little overboard at dinner the other night."

“Yeah. On the phone with Pat, I flashed on what you said. ‘You’re not a lecturer anymore. Don’t lecture her.’”

“Sonya acts like we’re idiots,” Julie said, “but everything we say, she soaks it up like a sponge.”

“And here I thought she never listens to me.” Ed explained that they had to schedule a conference.

Julie leaned against the rail and gazed around what she called “the estate.” She was a New York City girl who’d never had a yard. Their first was tiny, but now, by San Francisco standards, they had a large one, and Julie loved it. The yard was her therapy and she was slowly transforming it from a wasteland into an urban Eden. *The Western Garden Book* had become her bible.

Without warning the wine glass slipped from her fingers and shattered on the brick patio. Suddenly, she was sobbing and reaching for Ed.

“I feel so *guilty*.”

Ed held her. “Why?”

“Dave’s gone,” she whimpered, “gone forever, and what am I thinking? That I just lost a great gig, and now we’re up against it, and I better find another one fast or...”

“I’ve been caught in the same loop.” Ed remembered his blaze of anger in the grocery store over her quitting the paper to work for the campaign. But the fire had burned out and the ashes had cooled.

Her sad, wet eyes peered into his. “Thanks for not saying I told you so.”

He flashed a weak smile. “Hey, it was starting to look like you might actually become press secretary.”

“I just couldn’t stay at the paper. The way they screwed us.”

“It’s okay. You’re the best and you’re very well connected. You’ll find something just as good.”

“You will, too.”

“Let’s hope.” But at the moment, he didn’t feel particularly optimistic.

Julie gazed down at the shattered glass. Ordinarily, she would have jumped for the broom and dustpan, but she just stared. “One more thing,” she said softly. “The detective asked if I knew anything else—”

“Do you?” This came as a surprise.

“I’m pretty sure I figured out Cindy’s secret.”

When Julie joined the campaign, Cindy had welcomed her warmly, and the two women had quickly become more than acquaintances—but less than friends. Cindy had a way of holding Julie at arm’s length, opening one dresser drawer but leaving the rest firmly shut, and Julie couldn’t understand why. As the months passed, she wondered if Cindy was feigning friendship while actually disliking her, but after a while, Julie decided that her new friend was sizing her up, trying to decide if she could share a big secret. But what?

“I thought you said it was about her marriage hitting the skids.”

“That’s part of it, but there’s something juicier. I think she’s having—*was* having—an affair with Dave.” She threw Ed one of her searching looks, her brown eyes lustrous as polished mahogany. “You know Dave’s reputation. And Cindy’s an attractive blonde.”

It was an open secret around San Francisco that Kirsch was a womanizer. At the paper, people joked, “How long does it take Dave Kirsch to screw in a light bulb?” As long as it takes to stuff a woman inside.

When the campaign first approached Julie about handling his media, she and Ed feared Dave might hit on her, and worried about how she might fend him off while still keeping the job. Then Ed called one of the *Horn’s* political reporters and learned that Kirsch had a strong preference for milk-skinned blondes, which meant that he was unlikely to invite Julie for drinks, weed, and disrobing. Julie was the product of a Jewish mother and a black father. She’d told him her relationship with Dave had been completely professional, and Ed chose to believe it.

“What makes you think—?” Ed asked.

“There was a definite vibe,” Julie said.

Ed didn’t put much stock in women’s intuition, but when Julie caught a vibe, she was almost always right. “And when did you figure this out?” he asked.

“This afternoon. She said she was involved with someone and loving it.”

“Did she mention Dave?”

“Not by name.”

“Did you ask?”

“Ed.”

He glimpsed his reflection in her eyes. Ed was the nosy reporter

who rarely hesitated to ask intimate questions, while Julie was the quiet hand-holder who listened patiently until people felt comfortable enough to spill the beans.

“So why do you think Dave?”

“As we walked to the band shell, I was a few steps behind them. They were laughing a lot and kept brushing up against each other. It reminded me of that Bonnie Raitt line.”

Ed knew it well, from one of Julie’s favorite albums. *We laugh just a little too loud, dance just a little too close. Let’s give ’em something to talk about.*

“Are you going to tell the cop?”

Julie frowned.

Ed’s eyes bored into hers. “Jealousy is a classic motive.”

“Cindy said Al’s clueless.” Al Miller was Cindy’s husband.

“What if he isn’t? You figured it out. Maybe he did, too.”

Ed understood Julie’s reluctance to talk to the police. She’d grown up in the Bronx as her neighborhood completed its transition from white to black and Puerto Rican. At the time, the police were still overwhelmingly white and not well disposed to the new arrivals. Julie’s late social-worker mother, for whom Sonya had been named, believed the cops caused more problems than they solved, and trained her daughter to keep her distance.

“Julie,” Ed insisted, “a man’s been murdered. If you don’t call, I will.”

Insisting she'd rather go blind than crawl back to the paper, Julie launched Julie Pearl Communications from their guest room. She moved the bed into a corner, consolidated the space devoted to her sewing machine, patterns, and fabric, and repositioned her computer desk to accommodate her new file cabinet. Then she worked the phone, e-mailed announcements to her list, and set up a web site. Years of activism in several PR organizations had graced her with a huge network. It didn't take long for her to hear from a friend down the Peninsula, who was planning a biotech conference and couldn't handle all the logistics. Was Julie interested in a four-month half-time gig?

Julie's fast start out of the gate impressed Ed. He knew she'd bounce back quickly, and the money would certainly help. But her success also made him feel worse about his own under-employment. She was smacking the ball for extra bases while he was, at best, getting walks.

He descended from the kitchen to his office behind the garage. On the way, he stopped to run his fingers along the exquisite felt of a regulation-size pool table, a lifelong dream purchased when they still had jobs. He racked up, imagining that the balls were the morons who thought that the way to publish newspapers on the Internet was to provide content for free. Smack! He ran five, missed, then ran six, and finally, the remaining four. Julie was doing the heavy lifting and his self-respect was suffering. He'd always carried his own weight but now he felt like a babe in arms.

Ed's office was larger than the cramped corner he'd used in their



previous home, and he loved the intercom that connected his lair to the kitchen and second floor. But his new workplace was as dark as a subway tunnel, which did nothing to improve his mood. His lone window looked out through the forest of posts that supported the back deck. All he saw was a thin slice of yard, as if peering from a cell at San Quentin. The contractor had said the deck could be rebuilt to let more light into Ed's office, but now, who knew when?

Ed sighed and opened his e-mail. A few students had questions about the midterm. A friend had scored an extra ticket to Dylan and wanted to know if Ed was interested. Another was organizing a surprise party. And his former editor, now his client, wanted minor changes in his latest column. Then an unfamiliar name caught his eye: Gene Simons. The subject line said "Summer of Love?"

Simons was the Internet wonder boy who was underwriting the museum exhibit on the Haight-Ashbury in the sixties. *Please God, I need this job.*

Ed clicked and his eyes raced over the e-mail. Simons wrote that he'd admired Ed's column for years, and was very interested in working with him; how about discussing the project over lunch at Farallon?

*Yes.*

Farallon was a four-star seafood place near Union Square. Ed had once taken Julie there for an anniversary splurge. Farallon, Ed replied, sure, great, love to, name your day.

Simons's e-mail included a P.S.: "You should know that I have a personal interest in our subject. My birth mother, Jackie Zarella, lived in the Haight during the summer of '67. She was a drug dealer—mostly marijuana and a little speed—who was just twenty-four in 1968 when she was shot to death in Golden Gate Park. Death of Hippie, indeed. I've moved heaven and Earth to learn who she was but I know very little and would love to learn more."

Ed kicked his feet up on the desk and gazed out the window through the posts. Shot in the park? Ed flashed on Dave Kirsch, and on Julie coming home spattered with blood. No wonder Simons was interested in the hippie Haight. But if Ed recalled correctly, the Death of Hippie parade happened the year *before* the death of Simons's mother.

In San Francisco, the summer of 1967 was known as the Summer of Love, but that was a misnomer—the Summer of Hippie Hype was

more like it. The Haight-Ashbury wore flowers in its hair for roughly two years, 1965 through 1967, when young people disillusioned with *Ozzie and Harriet* began moving into the bohemian neighborhood by the city's premier park. They felt stirred by the civil rights movement and alienated from the Vietnam War, and hoped Mr. Tambourine Man would play a song for them. Then the media arrived and blared breathless reports of sex and drugs that were, at best, exaggerated, and at worst, fiction. But the publicity brought a huge influx, a second Gold Rush—only these miners were panning for Acapulco gold.

By the end of that fabled summer, the Age of Aquarius had devolved into a new Dark Age, as desperate kids loitered on every corner and the drugs of choice morphed from weed and acid to speed and heroin. In September 1967, a group of hippies who'd lived in the Haight for more than a few months became so disgusted that they posted flyers announcing a funeral, the Death of Hippie. On the appointed afternoon, eighty people marched down Haight Street in solemn silence holding lighted candles behind a cardboard coffin—a full year before Simons' mother died. But he could be forgiven his error. He wasn't a historian.

Ed had never heard of Jackie Zarella. His fingers tapped the keyboard, starting by habit with the *Horn's* electronic archive. Then he remembered two details. The archive only went back to 1970. And he no longer had a password.

He Googled her name but didn't find much. The *Foghorn* described her as a small-time marijuana peddler who got caught in a crossfire between warring heroin dealers. The *Examiner* called her a major speed dealer's girlfriend, killed to intimidate him. The *LA Times* said she sold weed and speed and had stiffed her supplier, who'd killer her. None of the stories mentioned a son. Or an arrest.

Ed heard footsteps above. In their old house, he had to yell up the stairs; now he just pushed a button. "Julie?"

"Hi!" She sounded unusually bright.

"I might have some good news," Ed said.

He ran up the stairs. "That billionaire who's funding the sixties exhibit? He's taking me to lunch—at Farallon. Seems like I have a good shot."

"Great," she said, sorting mail. "Good luck." She handed him a stack, then opened the fridge and poured a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

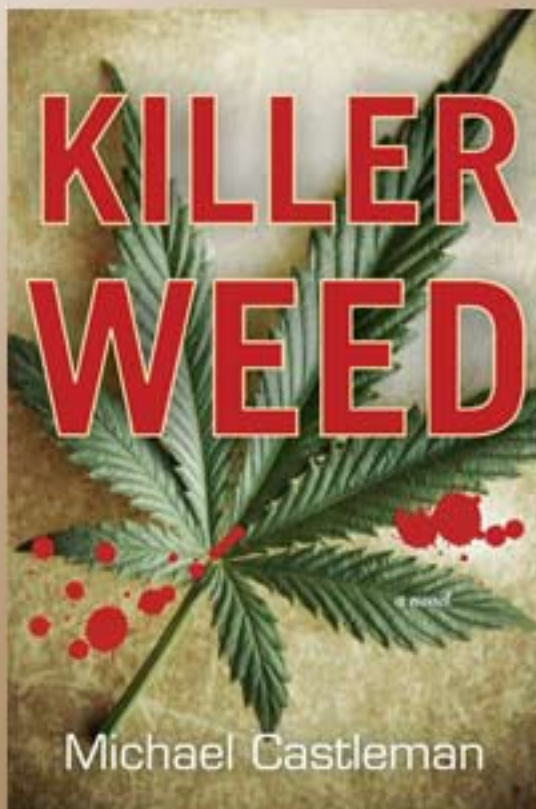
“I have news, too. Alice wants me to promote her new studios.” Alice Starsky owned Yoga Breath, where Julie took classes. The business was expanding all over town.

Ed stared at the wine glass and frowned. “Do you really need that?”

Julie’s face fell and Ed regretted the crack. After all, he was no paragon of sobriety, and at the moment, Julie was bringing home most of the bread, so who was he to question how much butter she spread?

She looked at him with the eyes of an injured fawn. “Do you really think I drink too much?”

“I don’t know. What do *you* think?”



Author's website