

Gerald L. Guy ♦ Bogmaster

# BOGMASTER

A Brownlee Siblings Mystery

By

GERALD L. GUY



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### **BOGMASTER**

**By Gerald L. Guy**

ISBN: 9798387273018

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Cover Design by Gerald L. Guy

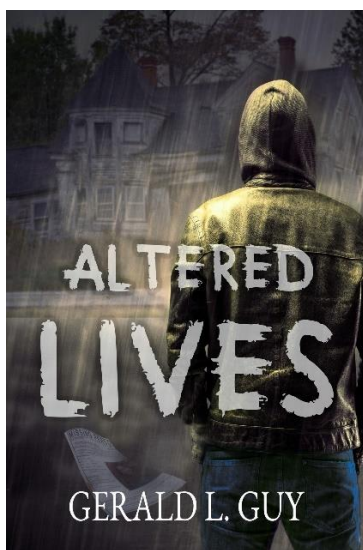
Editor: Hailey M. Guy

Publisher: [www.storiesbyguy.com](http://www.storiesbyguy.com)

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters, names, locations, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author.

## Don't miss "Altered Lives"



On his twenty-fifth birthday, adopted son Matthew Brownlee is informed his biological family — father, mother, and sister — were bludgeoned in 1981. Matt requests and is granted immediate discharge from an elite Army Ranger unit and heads to Ohio with his sister, Betsy, to solve the murder of a family he never knew. When activity stirs around the site of the grisly murders, a sleepy community awakens. Can Matt breathe new life into the cold case? What secrets are neighbors hiding? How many more lives will be altered in his quest for justice?

# Acclaim for Altered Lives

*“If you want to read a book that you can't put down and leaves you on the edge of your seat don't miss out on Altered Lives. It is a nail-biter.”*

**Anonymous Reader**

*“Great mystery. Had me guessing till the end.”*

**Anonymous Reader**

*“This truly is a brilliant thriller with plenty of twists and turns and an ending that was so unexpected. I marked it down as I get some of the words were put in the wrong order. Maybe it's an American thing, but It did irritate me slightly”*

**Kate, Great Britain**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my dear friend, Robert “Bobby” Costello of Howland Township in Trumbull County, Ohio. He has spent much of 2023 fighting cancer. Get well, buddy. We all are praying for you.

## PROLOGUE

It's been three years since Matthew and Betsy Brownlee were introduced to readers in "Altered Lives," a cold case murder mystery. The siblings became two of the author's favorite characters and are reprised in this sequel.

In "Bogmaster," the Brownlees are asked to investigate a murder that is far from cold. It's active and alive and involves the slaying of a college professor at Valdosta State University in the heart of the Deep South.

Readers may recall, Matthew is the adopted son of Michael and Joanne Brownlee. On his twenty-fifth birthday, he was notified that his biological family — mother, father, and sister — were bludgeoned to death in the small Ohio community of Kinkaid when he was just an infant. Their killer was never unmasked.

In the aftermath of the family's horrible demise, an attorney and friend preserved his ancestral home and invested his inheritance to provide Matthew with considerable wealth at the time his harrowing background was revealed. Matthew applied for an immediate discharge from an elite Army Ranger unit and relocated to Ohio with the hope of investigating and solving the twenty-five-year-old cold case.

With the help of his sister, Betsy, and utilizing skills he learned in the military, Matt and Betsy solve the murder in a matter of weeks. Enamored by the quiet, suburban community of Kinkaid, they decided to stay on and make it their permanent home.

All is well until they are summoned back to Valdosta following the murder of a renown biology professor at their alma mater. The siblings masquerade as graduate advisors for the men's and

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women's baseball clubs while schmoozing their way into the happenings that led up to the horrific homicide.

Their investigation takes several twists and turns before culminating in a surprising conclusion. Enjoy!



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“You’re mad, bonkers, completely off your head. But I’ll tell you a secret. All the best people are.”

**CHARLES DODGSON**

*“Alice in Wonderland”*



## CHAPTER 1

The growing Georgia community of Valdosta was never quiet, not with an Air Force base jammed at one end of Lowndes County and Valdosta State University nestled at its core. On this night, however, it was as if the masses had gone to bed early. Valdosta was peacefully at rest.

A train whistle blew in the distance, a dog barked and crickets sang their nightly chorus. In the distance, the roar of big rigs rolling up and down Interstate-75 mixed with the squeal of teenagers' speeding tires somewhere on Patterson Street.

It was springtime and unusually hot, sizzling enough to fry an egg on the hood of an automobile in the daytime. At night, though, it cooled down and the gentle breeze ruffled the curtains that framed open windows everywhere.

The college kids had gone home after a Wednesday night of drinking and dancing at the bars and clubs that lined Baytree Road. They provided the raucous nightlife that attracts young people, closing at midnight on weeknights so collegians could get a good night's sleep before classes resumed in the morning. Professor William Singleton remembered hearing a group of young people singing along to Toby Keith's "How Do You Like Me Now" when he crawled into bed at the witching hour.

He had just returned from an educational excursion to the Okefenokee Swamp, the storied wetlands that stretched from South Georgia to North Florida. He was glad to be home but missed the gurgling, decaying estuary he had studied for a quarter of a century. A biology professor at the university, he was considered an expert when it came to the rotting-but-living refuge, which was the largest

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of its kind in the United States.

As was his nightly habit before turning in, he walked out onto a spacious lanai, stripped off the trappings of daily classroom duties at VSU, and let every pore of his body soak in the spring humidity. If the breeze was just right, he — and only he — claimed he could smell the dark peat mats and dahoon holly that populated the swamp miles away. All he smelled this night was fumes from the paper mill, south of town. He shook his head and retired, praying the winds would be more favorable next time.

Although missing the wetlands he had spent a lifetime studying, Singleton never had trouble sleeping when he returned home from his educational excursions. He didn't go to the Okefenokee to rest; he went there to study and teach. He did it all night and all day; sleep was irrelevant. Known as "Bogmaster" by students, Singleton sometimes studied with a small group of students who came along for extra credit; other times he examined plants and wildlife on solo junkets. It was not unusual for him to get only eight hours of sleep during a 72-hour outing. The Okefenokee was his mistress and he was addicted.

He was sound asleep when the doorbell of his century home on University Circle rang, waking him and his wife. He calmly assured her it was nothing, probably a prank. "Go back to sleep, dear," he said. "I'll check it out."

Dressed in only a thin robe, the professor ambled down the staircase to the front vestibule, flipped on the porch light and opened the door. Before he could say a word, he was blinded by a flash of light that was followed by the deafening report of a firearm.

The bullet slammed into his chest so hard it toppled him from his feet. He landed on his back and took his last breath. The Bogmaster died almost instantly, his last thoughts not of his wife but of the beloved Okefenokee he never would visit again.



THE OKEFENOKEE National Wildlife Refuge makes up the headwaters of the legendary Suwanee and St. Marys Rivers. Its black waters, created by years of slow-moving currents that bolster vegetation and decay, create a mirror-like reflection. The swamp, the largest of its kind in North America, is approximately twenty-five miles wide and forty miles long. It covers almost 700 square miles, from the southwest corner of Georgia into North Florida.

It is a saucer-like depression that consists of low, sandy ridges, grassy savannas, and small islands (hammocks) that are surrounded by marshes. It was named by the Seminole Indians, who called Florida home when the region was considered uninhabitable. The word means “trembling earth,” which describes the islands that float across shallow waters.

The Okefenokee provides a habitat for scores of threatened and endangered species, such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, indigo snake, and wood stork. Its amphibian population and more than six hundred plant species have been the subject of study for decades.

At the insistence of swamp experts such as Singleton, the Okefenokee was given permanent protection as a National Wilderness Area by the U.S. Congress and President Gerald Ford in 1974. Studies of the unique habitat are ongoing.



THE REPORT of a firearm in the quiet neighborhood that surrounded Valdosta State University stirred every household in the early morning hours. More terrifying was the screech of Margaret Singleton. She already was on her way down the winding staircase with her husband’s Ruger in hand. When her husband was away foraging, Margaret kept it in the nightstand next to her bed. She was less tolerant than her husband of the pranks students liked to pull on

their professors and kept it at her side at all times until he returned.

The last thing she expected to hear was a gunshot in the early morning hours. Alarmed and frightened, she got a reckless shot off at the assailant as he or she fled into the darkness that encompassed the Singleton porch.

It was a reflex reaction, her shot delivered without aiming. She simply pointed and fired into the open doorway, shocked by the sight of her husband lying in the foyer with blood oozing from a wound in his chest. She dropped the pistol at mid-descent and raced to Willie's aid.

Margaret was the only person in the world who called the professor Willie. In academia, where he was recognized as an expert in all things about fauna and the Okefenokee Swamp, he was respectfully addressed as William. He allowed his wife the indulgence because they had been sweethearts since childhood.

It was the Singleton's neighbor, Chad Harrington, who called the police. He was the first to respond when he heard the shots ring out. From across the tree-lined street, he could see Margaret hovering over her slain husband in the lighted doorway. He dialed 9-1-1 as he raced to her aid.

Coach Chad, as he was called by his VSU peers, was a highly-regarded coach of the university baseball team. He taught only a couple of physical education courses each semester because most of his time was spent at baseball diamonds throughout the South. If he wasn't coaching, he was scouting for talent that might lead the Blazers to a second national championship.

He was sixty years old but looked much younger. His sandy hair was gently graying and accented by his bronzed skin. A widower of fifteen years, Harrington had a dimpled chin, high cheekbones, and a nose suited for Hollywood. His graying eyes could both alarm and allure.

“My god, what’s happened, Margaret” he called out as he approached the murder scene. His neighbor was holding Willie on her lap and sobbing uncontrollably.

“He’s been shot, and he’s not breathing. Help me, Chad!” the horrified woman begged.

“Help is on the way,” Harrington said.

Chad knelt at his neighbor’s side in an effort to console her, recognizing there was little he could do. Whoever shot the professor had put a bullet through his heart. The pooled blood and Margaret’s stained nightgown were the markings of a deadly confrontation. Until this night, such violence never touched the stately neighborhood that was home to tenured professors and the social elite of Valdosta.

Margaret didn’t respond. Terror and sorrow obliterated everything around her. Covered in her husband’s blood, she rocked back and forth, rambling about death coming too soon to the only man she ever loved.

“The police are on their way,” the baseball coach stated and tried to console the grief-stricken woman, who had begun to tremble in the depth of sorrow.

As more neighbors and squad cars began to show up in front of the Singleton home, Harrington placed his hands on his neighbor’s shoulders and said, “Come, Margaret. The police are here. Let them take care of William.”

As he pulled the grieving wife to her feet, Margaret noticed the many faces that were looking at her dead husband and shouted angrily at them, “Stop gawking and go find who did this!”

Harrington pulled Margaret to the living room and motioned for someone to cover William’s naked body. Wearing only a robe, William was exposed to the world.

Nobody responded. Finally, it was Beatrice Benson, a spry eighty-year-old, who carefully stepped forward. Trying to avoid the bloody aftermath, she grabbed a corner of his robe between her thumb and forefinger and flipped it over his exposed abdomen.

“I never liked the man,” she muttered. “But, in death, he deserves some dignity; everyone does.”

It was at that very moment, Paul Martin, a veteran of the Valdosta Police Department, pushed his way through the throng of onlookers on the porch and took control of the scene. It was obvious to him that the man on the floor was dead. He grabbed Benson by the shoulders and guided her to the living room and said, “You’ll have to stand aside, ma’am. What’s happened here?”

“I don’t know,” Beatrice said. “I’m just a neighbor. I heard...”

“Step into the living room with the others. I’ll take your statement after I secure the scene,” Martin ordered. He turned to his young partner, Tim Wolf, and said, “This is a murder scene. Get the names of everyone who is outside and send them on their way. Tell them an officer will come by for their statements when the sun comes up.”

Then, he called for backup.

Betty Belcher was working the night shift and answered Martin’s call. He made it on his cell phone because he didn’t want all the “scanner crazies” getting the word out before the chief had a chance to examine the scene.

“Valdosta Police Department, how can I help you?” she answered.

“Betty, this is Martin,” he said.

“Why are you callin’ on this line, darlin’,” she said. “You know that’s against regulation.”

“I’ve got a 10-54 at this location, Betty,” he said as quietly as



possible. “You’re going to want to call the chief on this one.”

“I ain’t callin’ him at this hour,” she rebutted.

“This is one of them professor types over at the college. I think he’s a VIP. I’ve seen him walking around campus wearing a pith helmet all the time. Name’s Singleton, William. “

“Hell’s bells, why didn’t you say that in the first place, young’un,” she replied. “I’m on it. Do you need the coroner, too?”

“That’s a 10-4. Back up, too, but I’ll leave that to the chief. He’ll want to handpick who investigates this one. It’s a grisly scene.”

In the living room, Benson didn’t like the fact she had been implicated in whatever took place at the Singleton home. A nonsense sort in her old age, she decided to make the best of it. Short and frail, she lived just a doorstep away and was close friends with Margaret. She joined Harrington to comfort her inconsolable friend. Finally, Beatrice said, “I think we’re going to be here a while, Coach Chad. I’m going to the kitchen to make some tea.”

She marched off as if it was her own house. Of course, Bea and Margaret had been friends for years and often chatted over tea when the professor was in class or off on one of his swamp outings. There was little with which she was not familiar on the first floor of her neighbor’s home.

She shook her head and wondered who might have had a big enough grudge against the professor to shoot him in his own home.

*“Good Lord, what was William into that brought this evil to this wonderful neighborhood?”*

## CHAPTER 2

Within thirty minutes, University Circle was cordoned off so that no vehicles could enter or exit. Chief Lawrence Penney had the entire nightshift report to the emergency and requested lead detectives Charles Long and Wayne Killebrew respond immediately.

The chief was breathing heavily when he entered the Singleton home forty-five minutes after the first shot was fired. He was pushing fifty and worried about the ramifications of a high-profile murder near the campus. He had confirmed street access was secured before running up the driveway to the house.

The door was open and the deceased lay exposed in the porch light for all to see. A small crowd still lingered on the manicured front lawn. Penney ordered them to go home, but nobody moved. Upon seeing the body, he decided to let it rest and have an officer handle the crowd. He needed to get inside.

Officer Wolf was standing guard at the front door when the chief entered. “Where’s Martin?” he asked gruffly.

Wolf nodded toward the living room.

The chief looked that way and saw three people huddled on the couch and Officer Martin nearby.

Penney turned to Wolf and stated, “Nobody other than our people crosses this threshold without my permission. Do you understand me, rookie?”

“Yes sir!” Wolf said and patted his sidearm to show his boss he had everything under control.

The chief didn’t like the suggestive gesture and leaned in to whisper in the rookie’s ear. “I know this is your first murder scene and you’re

as nervous as a kid called to the principal's office. If you pull that weapon for any reason, Officer Wolf, I'll fire you so fast you'll soil that uniform as well as the reputation of this fine department. Stay alert and be smart."

Wolf bristled and gave the chief a wide-eyed nod of understanding. Then, Penney waltzed to the living room to consult with Martin. The officer assured him the scene was untarnished; everything was as it was when he entered.

"Mrs. Singleton assured me there was nobody else in the home, chief," he reported. "I did a quick search of both floors and it is confirmed. The two people with her are neighbors, Harrington and Benson. No one else has entered."

"I know the victim's wife and Harrington. He's the baseball coach at VSU. Have you interviewed them?" Penney asked.

"No, sir. I know the importance of this case and decided to leave that to you and the detectives," Martin said.

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Yes sir."

"What is it?"

"There is a firearm lying on the steps, halfway up to the second floor, sir," Martin explained.

"Are you suggesting Mrs. Singleton shot her husband, officer?" Penney asked, the shock causing creases to squeeze his forehead and his eyes to narrow.

"Not from what I've been able to overhear, Chief. She heard the disturbance at the front door and came downstairs to investigate. She might have taken a shot at the shooter, though. I haven't verified anything. Left that for y'all."

“Smart thinking, Martin. Stay here and make sure Wolf doesn’t let anyone else into the house but our people. And make sure he doesn’t shoot anybody.”

“Yes, sir, Chief,” Martin replied and took one step toward the vestibule so he could keep eyes on Wolf, the murder scene, and whatever was about to take place in the living room.



WHEN CHIEF PENNEY entered the living room, all eyes turned his way. He was an imposing figure at six-foot-four and dressed in his perfectly-pressed blue uniform. He immediately removed his cap and strolled to where William Singleton’s widow sat tearfully between the two neighbors.

“Margaret, I’m so sorry to see tragedy has come to your wonderful home. Please accept my deepest sympathies,” he stated. His eyes showed his sincerity.

Margaret and Penney went to Valdosta High together. They were friends, but not close. Penney was a thoughtless athlete and Margaret was a scholar. Their personalities never meshed. As adults, living in a close-knit community, their paths had crossed many times and they were sociable.

“Oh, Lawrence, it is all so terrible,” she said as tears flowed down her cheeks. “Willie’s dead.”

“I know. We’re going to catch whoever did this. To do that, I need to talk with you. Do you think you can calm yourself so you can tell me what happened?”

“I’ll try,” she said, swiping at her nose with a Kleenex for the hundredth time. Beatrice squeezed her hand for encouragement. “It’s all so appalling. What kind of atrocious individual would want to kill my Willie?”

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“That’s what we hope to find out, Margaret, if you can give me a few minutes of your time,” the chief said.

He turned to Harrington and said, “Coach, would you take Margaret’s friend to the kitchen? A detective will be here directly to take your statement.”

“My statement? Why? I had nothing to do with this,” the baseball coach said, surprised he was considered suspicious.

“It’s standard procedure, Coach,” Penney explained. “You are a concerned neighbor who rushed in when you heard gunshots. The detectives will just want to ask you a few questions. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, quit being such a scaredy cat, Chad,” Beatrice said, grabbed him by the arm, and led him toward the kitchen. “Haven’t you watched ‘Criminal Minds’ or ‘Columbo’ on television? The police always ask lots of questions to assure their investigation is thorough. Hell, if the Pope was here, they’d demand a statement from His Eminence, too; you are no different.”

She turned to Penney and added, “I’ll make more coffee. Tell your men we will tell them anything they want to know.”

Penney smiled and turned his attention back to his grieving friend.

“Do you mind if I take a seat and ask you a few questions,” the chief said in the gentlest voice he could conjure.

“Please sit. I’ll tell you what I know but it isn’t much,” she said and whimpered.

“Take your time and tell me what happened here tonight,” the chief stated.

Margaret explained about the doorbell and William went to see who it was that was pranking their household.

“I was coming down the staircase when I saw him get shot,” she said.

“Did you see who the shooter was?” Penney asked, trying not to show his excitement over the possibility.

“No!” she said emphatically. “I was blinded by the flash of the pistol and then there was smoke and Willie was lying on the floor bleeding. When I got to him, he already had passed.”

The words brought on trembling sobs again. The chief grabbed her right hand, caressed it, and said, “Take a deep breath, Margaret and calm yourself. I have just a few more questions.”

He nodded to his two detectives as they walked through the living room toward the kitchen. They walked briskly and only Killebrew spoke, reporting, “Fritz is here, boss.”

That brought on another emotional eruption from Margaret. She knew who Fritz was. Fritz Formiker taught physiology at the university and was friends with her husband. He also was the duly-elected coroner, who was there to take possession of her husband’s body. It was a hard fact to accept.

Margaret bellowed.

Penney wrapped an arm around her and let her sob on his shoulder for several minutes before handing her another Kleenex and urging her to gather herself.

“I know this is hard, Margaret. But I need you to help me find whoever shot Willie,” he said. “You do want me to find this awful person, don’t you?”

She shook her head in agreement.

“Then I need you to answer a few more questions. Can you do that?”

Suddenly, she sat up straight, wiped her tears away, and said, “Yes,

I'll do it for Willie. Whoever did this is not going to get away with it. I'll tell you everything I know."

"It's very important I ask you these questions while the facts are still fresh in your mind, Margaret," the chief explained. "Now, you said you were coming down the stairs when you saw the gun go off."

"Yes, I saw a flash. And the sound was horrible."

"Who was holding the gun, Margaret?" the chief probed.

"I don't know."

"Think, Margaret. Did you see anything, clothing, hair, or unusual shoes perhaps? Was it a man or woman?"

Margaret closed her eyes and scanned her mind for any detail she might have seen.

She opened them suddenly and stated, "Blue jeans and tennis shoes. I saw blue jeans and tennis shoes when whoever shot Willie ran from the porch. That's when I fired the Ruger but I don't think I hit anything."

"You took a shot at the shooter?" Penney asked, somewhat surprised the socialite knew how to shoot a pistol, let alone a heavy weapon such as a Ruger.

"Where'd the gun come from?" he asked.

"It's Willie's. He puts it in the nightstand when he is away on his biology excursions. It's for protection."

"Was that the gun my officer saw on the stairway?" the chief asked.

"I-I don't know what happened to it. Willie was bleeding so terribly. I rushed to him, hoping I might be able to save him. But I was too late!"

Hysteria overwhelmed the woman again and Penney knew the

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interview was over. He called to Martin and said, “Tell Killebrew to send the woman back in here.”

Beatrice showed up and immediately wrapped her friend in her arms. “Go ahead. Cry all you want, dear. Bea’s here to take care of you,” she consoled. Then she looked up at Chief Penney and said, “I’ve called her physician. He’s going to come by with a sedative to calm her down. Come back in twenty-four hours. She’ll be in better shape. I promise.”

Penney smiled the best he could, given the situation. He walked to the kitchen, gave orders to the two detectives, and told Coach Harrington he was free to return to his home with one stipulation.

“Leave from the back entrance,” Penney said with authority. “I don’t want anybody walking through the crime scene.”

As the two detectives awaited instruction, he heard a ruckus at the front door.

“What the hell now?” he muttered angrily and spun to see what was going on.

**END OF PREVIEW**

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