

DEATH OF DENISE

A short sample chapter from

COLDIRON'S CURE

By John Brewer

Thank you for reading this opening chapter from Coldiron's Cure.

I hope it whets your appetite for reading the rest!

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Denise Conroy heard a muffled clatter outside. She stopped reading her book and listened to the quiet of the island night for a moment, thinking maybe a pile of lumber had fallen over in the barn. She set her book on the coffee table and stood, stretching her back one way, then the other. At sixty, even a wiry frame like hers developed some pains after a long day. She listened again but heard only the deep silence of a place populated more by goats than people.



Maybe she'd better check on Jonesy and Cheryl, who were penned up next to the barn. After thirty years of nursing and ten more spent farming and fishing on Chappaquiddick, Denise found she favored goats over people in most ways.

She opened the front door and walked across the porch, feeling the warm, moonless August night around her. A soft breeze stirred the pines and oaks cradling her little farmhouse and barnyard. None of the usual nuisances of civilization intruded here: no white noise of distant traffic, no low glow of storefronts and streetlights on the horizon, no sleeping human mob ready to rise with the dawn to fill the world with bustle. On this island, the phrase "peace and quiet" meant what it was supposed to mean.

Denise kept her flashlight off as she crossed the yard to preserve her night vision. She found the goats lying quietly in their pen. Beyond the enclosure, vines and stalks of her vegetable garden formed a shadowy mass. She turned and squinted at her trusty pickup

hunkering on the gravel in front of the house. Like its owner, the truck was bruised but unbroken after years of hard service, still capable of hauling Denise and her boat out to Menemsha for fluke or over to the Gut for some inlet fishing. Her favorite spot was the rips at Wasque Point just down the road, where the stripers that arrived in May were still running. Her fifteen-foot Whaler was moored just offshore from the Wasque boat hoist. Denise regularly pulled it out and trailered it to other parts of the island. She planned to do that early the next morning to try her luck over at Vineyard Haven for the day. The dark skeleton of her boat trailer was visible in the moonlight, sitting in its usual parking spot on the side lawn.



Something drew Denise's eye to the right. She swung around to face the barn and noted a faint gleam between the boards of the hayloft. She shifted her weight and peered up at the glow



peeking through the slits. When was the last time she'd gone into the loft? A week ago, at least. Maybe she'd forgotten to pull the string on the lightbulb up there, and it had gone unnoticed during the daytime.

The rusty wheels under the barn door squealed when she shoved it open. Inside, her tractor filled the center of the floor, surrounded by tools, bags of fertilizer, and stacks of spare wood – one of which had, indeed, toppled over. A raccoon could have caused that. Denise craned her neck to look at the yellow glow between the ceiling boards. Hard to believe she'd left the light on up there. Maybe a critter had chewed on the pull-string and clicked it on. If it was a raccoon, they

hated the light. It might have retreated down here and knocked the wood over, trying to get away. *Goddam*. Now, she'd have to go up and unscrew the bulb.

She sidled between the equipment and fertilizer bags to the ladder under the loft's trap door. She felt for the rough rungs in the dark. The faint strips of light between the boards above did little to help her see, but still, she didn't want to compromise her night vision, so she looped the flashlight lanyard around her wrist and carefully pulled herself up the thick wooden rungs. The trapdoor at the top was heavy, so she had to brace her legs and heave with her arm and shoulder to push the wooden panel until it flipped over and smacked backward onto the floor. Denise stepped up a rung and tilted her head back to peer at the rafters. Surprisingly, the space above was dark again, as if the light had gone out.



Suddenly, the air lit up in a cloud of brilliant white dust particles that sparkled like snowflakes. A blinding white light obscured everything. Denise blinked and squeezed her eyes shut against it. What the hell was going on? She perched one knee on the floor to climb up, but



the light flicked off, plunging the loft into blackness again, leaving a solid white afterglow disk at the center of Denise's vision. No raccoon did this. *Someone is up here*, she thought, blinking her eyes.

Then something scraped against the floor behind her, and Denise felt her hair being grabbed and yanked backward. A sheet of scratchy material—burlap?—dragged across her face. She reacted instinctively by trying to

raise her arms, but the heavy fabric enveloped her upper body, and a cord cinched tightly around her ribcage. She cried out in protest but was pulled sideways until she lost her balance and flopped onto the floor. She still couldn't move her arms or even wiggle her elbows. The breath under the burlap warmed her cheeks. She wasn't frightened—more annoyed, really—but during her nursing career, she'd seen enough extreme distress to realize that her reactions might not be catching up to the moment. A second restrictive band pulled tight around her legs, and she felt her body being tugged and twirled around on the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Then she fell head-first through the ladder hole.

Her legs banged hard against wood, then she felt a split-second of terrifying free-fall and a searing crunch when her head slammed into the barn floor. It knocked the wind out of her. As she struggled for breath, she experienced belated panic rising in her



chest. She managed a shuddering breath but felt the burlap constrict even tighter, then felt herself being heaved up with her feet pointing into the air as she continued to gasp for breath.

Suddenly, her head became cold. Sounds became muffled. She realized there was liquid in her eyes, rushing into her mouth, choking her. It was water.

She was immersed in water.

Denise clamped her mouth shut and squirmed mightily against the burlap, scissor-kicking her lower legs. But nothing she did relieved the watery hell enveloping her head.

Kicking was the last voluntary act of Denise's life. For forty panicked seconds she felt a sense of inchoate urgency overwhelming her mind. At the same time, the trained nurse stayed dimly aware of what was happening to her, counting the desperate seconds until she reached her

breath-hold breakpoint. Aspirated water in her trachea triggered a spasm and a gush of fluid that



filled her stomach in seconds, but her airway stayed shut, asphyxiating her as brutally as if her throat had been clamped in a vise. The Stygian nightmare seemed to go on forever, but in fact, the battle lasted just a couple of minutes. She began to think of flying

along the surface of the sea in her boat as she felt her brain shutting down. Denise had been gone for several seconds when her larynx finally relaxed, water invaded her lungs, and her heart went into cardiac arrest.

Then, the barn's interior became as still as the quiet summer night outside.



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