

Steve Lawson

**THE DEADLIER
SEX**

tradition

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Option auf Morgen

Tödlicher Zwang

Forthcoming thrillers:

Deadly Desires

I, the Terrorist

*When the Himalayan peasant meets the He-bear in his pride, He shouts to scare the monster, who will often turn aside. But the She-bear thus accosted rends the peasant tooth and nail, For, **the Female of the species is more deadly than the Male.***

Rudyard Kipling
1865-1936

Chapter 1

29th November

The trial that I was reporting on in Manchester was over. The paedophile murderer was sent down for life, and that gave me great satisfaction as it was I who had tracked him across the country and tipped the police off as to his whereabouts. Having had enough of the harsh weather, I longed for my cosy little bungalow down in Kent. Leaving the court, I packed my stuff and hurried to the station to catch the first available train home.

Three hours later, upon opening my front door, there was a black flash, and the next moment Bruno was clinging to my chest. Bruno is my cat and only companion since the breakup of my marriage. He shouldn't be called Bruno at all because he is a she as I found out after taking her to a vet to treat an ear infection. However, by then it was too late to re-christen her. She purred her greeting into my ear and rubbed her face against my cheek.

I put Bruno on the floor, threw my luggage down, hung up my raincoat and accompanied by a purring cat, stepped into my office that at one time used to be the children's room. Sitting down at the small desk, I got ready to email my report to the paper. Turning on my computer, I noticed an airmail envelope lying across piles of mail that old Mrs Hodges, my part-time housekeeper and Bruno's foster mother, had placed on my desk in my absence. The letter was from the States.

I poured myself two fingers of Tullamore Dew, swallowed half of it and lit a cigarette while puzzling over who the sender was. I turned the envelope over, and holding it close to my desk lamp, made out a faint stamp showing the words "TDCJ Gatesville Women's Prison, Texas." Mystified, I slit the envelope open. There was a single sheet of cheap lined paper inside. Reading it, my heart started hammering.

20th November

Dear Steve, By the time you get this letter, I will be dead. I want to say goodbye to you as the only man I have ever loved, and because I have nobody else left to say it to. I know it has been many years since we last saw each other and you probably do not even remember me. I remember you, though, and have often thought of you over the years, reliving our first love-making and the many times after that. Bet you didn't know I was only thirteen when we met. I was no longer a virgin either, but you were far too eager to ram it into me to notice. I remember you danced around me afterwards like a full-blooded Cherokee Indian while I lay on the grass fighting for breath. I never told you, but it was always like heaven with you. No man has ever given me as much pleasure as you have.

While locked up in here, I have watched every film and every video with Charlton Heston in, that I could lay my hands on. He so much reminded me of you when he was younger. But now, I have nothing left, only the

memory of our time together. But even that will not be for long because on the 3rd December, they are executing me.

I have been on Death Row for three years now. They have charged me with triple murder. All appeals failed, and I am doomed. You will probably also not believe me when I say that I am innocent. Nobody else does either, including my lawyer. Sometimes I also think I must have done it, but deep down I know I did not!

When thinking of you, I often wished I had married you when you asked me all those years ago. But we were too young, and I had a restless itch. Still, I waited around in case you asked me again. You never did. Instead, you called me a whore and married that boring Alison. I just don't know what you saw in her.

Anyway, ten years ago, I married an African-American soldier, and we moved to Fort Hood in Texas. The marriage did not last long despite my taking American citizenship, and I was soon free and easy again to continue my search for sexual fulfilment. The prison shrink told me that what I am searching for in reality is love. He may well be right. After you and I broke up, I never found it, but must admit I enjoyed the shags on the way.

Well, Steve, goodbye. Look after yourself and have a good life. They told me it takes seven minutes to die after they inject, and I shall use that time to think of our young love and all the great fun we have had.

Bye for now, Jenny

The letter fell out of my hands and fluttered down onto the carpet. Suddenly there was a painful tightness in my chest, and as I stared down at the sheet of paper, my eyes misted over. My God, Jenny! How could you get into such trouble? I heard the Texans had one of the highest rates of executions in the States. I also recalled having read that unless an accused had the money to engage a star lawyer, the chances of escaping death were minimal.

But, of course, it isn't only the judges who are tough. Most of the population in Texas wholeheartedly support capital punishment; whether it is just or not is another matter. Not surprising, therefore, that Jenny was in deep trouble. Oh, yes, I did not believe she was guilty. Even without knowing any of the facts. I knew Jenny. She always owned up to whatever she did no matter what the outcomes might have been. If she had admitted that she had done it, that would be different. But she did not! I made a decision. I was going to her. She needed me. And right now. The only problem was how to get there. Being the only survivor of a small passenger plane crash some years ago, I was terrified of flying. But obviously, I couldn't get there by any other means. I swallowed my fear, e-mailed my closing report on the Manchester trial to the night editor, and booked the next flight to Dallas, Texas, hoping I would get there in one piece and on time.

Chapter 2

The paranoid behaviour of the airport security staff annoyed me. When they insisted that I take my shoes off, I was about to offer to drop my jeans for them also. Fortunately, I had enough sense left to change my mind at the last second. It wasn't their fault. My apprehension about setting foot on the plane was making me aggressive.

The Jumbo was half-empty. I heard only vague American voices on my restless walks up and down the aisles. I had Jenny and my fear constantly in my mind.

The sky was grey with a touch of frost on the Monday afternoon air when I landed. I was bleary-eyed, hungry and irritated. I was far too apprehensive, couldn't relax, and had slept badly the nights before. Neither did I eat anything on the plane. I just drank coffee by the gallon instead.

The security at Dallas was ten times worse than back at Gatwick, and it took an hour-and-a-half to get out into the fresh air. This time, however, it did not occur to me to drop my jeans. Those guys have no sense of humour, and they would have shot me in the bum had I done so.

I could not get Jenny out of my mind. Will I be on time? Will they let me see her? I knew the Texans were a tough lot and not at all sentimental where a major crime was involved.

I was sorely tempted to check into the nearest hotel, throw myself into bed and sleep and sleep. Instead, I

dragged myself to a car-hire office and took the cheapest car they had available. As a freelance crime reporter, I received payment on publication, which meant that my budget was often a little tight in-between. They gave me a road map of the Southern states, and after studying it, I found my way onto Interstate-35W and headed down to the south as daylight began to fade. Blazing headlights of oncoming cars usually irritated me. This time, I welcomed them. They kept me awake.

Despite exceeding the speed limit several times and risking the wrath of some patrol cop, the hundred and fifty-mile drive still took just short of three hours, and it was evening when I turned off Interstate-35 at Waco and took US-84W into Gatesville. After asking for the way to the prison, I bought a hamburger, two plastic cups of black coffee and drove out of town to find Jenny.

I found the Gatesville Women's Prison about three miles north of Gatesville. From there, I was redirected to the Mountain View Unit which they told me was the Female Death Row Facility. Soon it started to rain and blow so heavily that the windscreen wipers had a hard job coping, and visibility was close to zero. Nevertheless, a while later I found the right place just off State Highway 36.

The place was lit up like a Christmas tree. Powerful searchlights mounted on watchtowers scanned high barbed-wire fences and the sides of the hostile looking buildings. I parked the Toyota in the space marked for visitors and got out. The moment I put my foot on the

rough gravel outside, a searchlight from the nearest tower picked me up and followed me the whole way as I ran to the shelter of the gatehouse a hundred yards away.

There were three uniformed armed men inside the spacious gatehouse. A camera mounted on the outside wall focused on every move I made.

‘Can we help you, sir?’ A voice came from the loud-speaker built into the thick, bulletproof windowpane.

I looked through the window, and a big black man with a friendly face met my eyes.

‘I’ve come to visit a prisoner,’ I leant down to the microphone.

‘A bit late, aren’t you? Visiting time is long over. Come back tomorrow.’

‘I’ve just arrived from England, and tomorrow will be too late. The person I came to visit will be executed tomorrow.’

‘All the way from England, you say? Well, sorry to hear that. But as far as I know, the execution scheduled for tomorrow had been brought forward to last Thursday, and you’re too late. You came for nothing.’

‘But today is only Monday, and my information is that the execution is tomorrow,’ I said and realised I sounded desperate.

‘In this prison things can change fast.’

In my mind’s eye, I saw Jenny strapped to a gurney. Her big grey eyes wild with fear, her body arching, arms straining in the straps trying to avoid the needle, which

would pump the lethal mixture of poison into her veins. I was devastated. I was miserable and frustrated. I felt useless and angry with myself for having arrived too late. Jenny was dead. At one time she was the most important person in my life. She was my life from the age of sixteen until our separation years later. She had died alone. Without friends, without knowing that there was somebody who cared for her and shared the...

‘Sir,’ the guard’s voice intruded my thoughts. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ I said, in a trembling voice. ‘Look, officer,’ I tried to collect myself, ‘do you think I could speak to somebody in charge? It’s possible my lady friend left something behind for me.’

‘What’s your friend’s name.’

I struggled to remember, but then realised I did not know her name. She signed the letter only as “Jenny”.

‘This may sound stupid to you officer, but I only know her maiden name, which is Jenny Bell.’

‘Don’t know nobody by that name.’

‘Could you find out, please? I mean she wrote to me from here.’

‘Can you identify yourself?’

‘No problem,’ I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket. Then I remembered, I did not have my passport with me.

‘I left my passport in the car, but I’ve got this here,’ I pulled my press card out of my wallet and slipped it through a small window that the guard opened.

He checked the card, then looked at me, comparing my face with the photograph.

‘You’re a reporter, are you?’

I realised my mistake, alas, too late. ‘That’s my job, yes. But I’m here in my private capacity. As I told you, Jenny wrote to me, and I came. Hoped to give her some comfort.’

‘All the way from England. Are you a relative?’ he asked, and put my card down on the desk in front of him not handing it back.

‘Well, no, not exactly. I knew her years ago. We were together for a while. Almost married.’

‘Now if you were her brother or something, I could do something for you. We’ve strict rules here, you know. Are you sure you’re not her brother?’ he winked with a grin on his face, and I realised he was inviting me to lie.

‘Yes, yes of course I am.’ I suppose I would have consented to be the Emperor of China to get news of Jenny.

‘Okay, man. Just hold on. I’ll see what I can do.’ Turning the microphone off, he picked up the telephone then my press card, and soon I saw his lips move as he spoke into the instrument.

After about a minute, he finished talking and grinned at me.

‘You’re in luck Mr Dennison, the Warden will see you. Come inside,’ he spoke into the microphone.

A moment later there was a buzz and a door opened in the big metal gate to let me in.

‘We’ll have to search you before one of us takes you inside,’ my friendly guard said.

‘No problem, Mr Wilson,’ I read his name off the identification tag pinned to his shirt, and quickly emptied my pockets onto a table. ‘It’s kind of you to have taken the trouble.’

One of the men picked up a detector similar to the ones used at airports and ran it over me. Satisfied I did not carry anything dangerous, they let me put my stuff away.

‘By the way Mr Wilson, what’s the Warden’s name?’

‘Mackenzie,’ Wilson said.

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘What a coincidence. Cousins of mine living in America are also called Mackenzie. Maybe the Warden is one of them.’

The three men stared at me then at each other and burst into laughter.

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ Wilson said. ‘But then you’ll see for yourself soon enough.’

I had no idea what he meant but didn’t think it was important enough to pursue it. Apart from that, I was too tired and just wanted to have a word with somebody in authority before finding a hotel and falling into bed.

With one of the guards showing the way, I hurried across a yard and into an adjacent building. By now it was pouring down, and with a near gale-force wind blowing, the rain was like hundreds of needles smashing us in the face. I got drenched as I waited for the guard to find the right code pad keys in the darkness to open the

door. Once inside we both shook off as much of the rain as was possible, then went along a corridor with doors on both sides, and cameras watching. The guard stopped outside a door marked “Senior Warden”, pressed a button near the doorframe and spoke into a microphone. He gave his name, ID number, then named me as the visitor with him.

A camera mounted high above the doorframe focused in on us before the door clicked open and we were let into an office. The office was empty, but a moment later I heard the metallic sound of a filing cabinet drawer being shoved home and turning my head I noticed another room to my right, its door open.

In the meantime, my escort put my press card down on the desk and went to stand by the wall on the left with his thumbs hooked into his belt. The desk was tidy, with only a calendar, two photographs in frames and a rectangular acrylic glass plate with the name “C.B. Mackenzie” in black letters. No papers, files or any other paraphernalia one sees in offices. Two straight-back chairs faced the desk, and the only luxury item in sight was an executive chair on the other side of it.

I sensed movement to my right and turning my head, I saw a young black woman coming out of the side room with a file in her hand. She was one of the prettiest women I have ever seen. She was in her thirties, tall and slim with short hair parted on one side. She had on an anthracite trouser suit and a brilliant white blouse. A

small golden crucifix on a fine chain was around her neck. My first thought was that she was the secretary, but when she walked behind the desk and sat down in a brisk business-like manner, I knew she was not. I also knew then why the guards were amused when I speculated on a possible relationship.

She put the file down, picked up my press pass, examined it then looked up at me. I stared back at her in amazement; she had green eyes. A combination of ebony skin and green eyes I've always found arousing despite only seeing it in Hollywood films.

'You're Mr Dennison, and you're a reporter.' It was a statement, and it needed no confirmation on my part.

'Excuse me, are you C. Mackenzie?'

'Celina Mackenzie. Have you a problem with that?' She glared at me like a cat about to jump on a mouse.

'None whatsoever, why should I have? Please forgive me but I didn't expect a young woman to be running a prison.'

'Beggars can't be choosers. I'm sure you've heard that before. Bob Wilson told me you came all the way from England to visit your sister, Jenny Bell.'

'Well,' I said, and reached for my cigarettes.

'No smoking in here!' She snapped and glowered at me even before I had a chance to ask for her permission to light up. I had no idea what I might have done to irritate her, but I put my cigarettes away. I had already cut down to five a day before planning to kick the habit shortly, so I did not mind too much.

‘Well, she wasn’t exactly my sister, as such. But Mr Wilson didn’t recognise the name.’

‘What does that mean? She is either your sister or she isn’t.’

‘Well, it’s like this, you see,’ I stammered. ‘Jenny and I...’

‘Mr. Dennison, are you here on false pretences?’ Her eyes bored into mine, and it was obvious she was annoyed.

‘No, I’m not! But as I’ve just told you, the guard said you’ve nobody here by that name. Maybe I’m at the wrong place.’

‘She’s booked in here under her married name of Brown. Nevertheless, if you’re not a relative, I’m not giving you any information about her. And that’s final. Now if you’d kindly leave, I have a lot to do before I can go home. Jed,’ she called to my escort. ‘Please show Mr Dennison to the gate.’

I couldn’t understand her hostility. The only explanation I could think of was that she was angry with somebody or something not within reach. I was.

‘Look, Mrs Mackenzie,’ I tried again, ‘I’ve been in the air and on the road travelling here for the past twenty hours. I’ve had next to nothing to eat or to drink, and I’m dog tired. I only wanted to ask you if Jenny had left anything behind for me and nothing else. I don’t want any confrontation or arguments, just an answer to my question.’

‘Why are you speaking of Jenny in the past tense, Mr. Dennison?’ Her voice was a little less unfriendly.

‘Your security people told me the execution had been brought forward, and I arrived too late.’

‘How do you know about the execution?’

‘Jenny wrote to me.’

‘Why?’

‘We grew up together and were lovers for years. And she had nobody else left in the world but me.’

‘Hold up a minute, Jed,’ she stopped the guard in mid-stride as he approached.

‘You can prove this, Mr Dennison?’

‘Only with the letter she wrote to me,’ I dug it out of my jacket pocket and handed it to her.

As she read it, I noticed a small smile at the corners of her sensual lips and guessed which part she had found amusing.

‘Yes,’ she said when she finished reading. ‘I censor all letters, of course, and remember this one very well. Jenny often talked about you when I visited her. She still carries a torch for you.’

She put the letter into the envelope and handed it back to me. ‘Jenny has not been executed, Mr Dennison.’

‘No? Thank God for that,’ I was relieved and could not help some tears forming in the corners of my eyes. ‘Could I spend some time with her as tomorrow is the 3rd and her last day?’

‘There have been some mishaps with the injection mixture with the male prisoners, and the Governor suspended all executions until it’s sorted out. Jenny is back in her cell on Death Row.’

‘Clemency?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I meant she got pardoned?’

‘You mean like in the old days when if they couldn’t kill them off with the first chop or something, they were pardoned?’

‘Something like that.’

‘No, no, Mr Dennison, nothing as humane as that. Don’t forget we are in the United States of America and in Texas of all places. Here we don’t give up that easily. Here we try again, and again until they are dead. We like to execute people, innocent or guilty alike. Don’t we, Jed?’ she turned to the guard who has returned to stand by the wall.

‘Yes, ma’am, we sure do. ’Specially them nigga cree-mee-nals.’

‘And that’s the truth,’ she turned back to me.

I was tired and not at my sharpest, and it took a few seconds before the sarcasm of what they had said sank in. But there was more than just sarcasm there. There was bitterness. Bitterness of the oppressed? I wondered. Like most people, I was also aware that life for many blacks in the U.S. was not paradise. Discrimination against them was deep-rooted, and often a matter of everyday habit.

‘You sound disenchanted, Mrs Mackenzie.’ Relief that Jenny was not dead made me relax a little.

‘Nice word, Mr Englishman. But let’s not go into that.’

‘Jenny wrote that she’d been charged with triple murder. Do you know what happened?’

‘Her estranged husband was transferred back to Fort Hood, and they met in Gatesville by chance. She was lonely and hoping they might make it up, and she did her best to please him. Made porn, and screwed his buddies and fellow officers when he demanded it. Then, one day he took her to an apartment for a foursome. Jenny, her hubby and two officers recently back from Afghanistan. There was alcohol and drugs, and sex. When the cops broke the door down the following day, they found all three men with their throats cut and genitals chopped off. Jenny was lying unconscious and naked on the couch. Her whole body covered in blood. They found a knife on the floor with her prints all over it.’

‘She said she didn’t do it, and I believe her. Could’ve been a setup. Did the police not investigate further?’ I asked.

‘There was no need. The apartment is on the sixth floor. The building is air-conditioned and the windows don’t open. The entrance door was locked and bolted from the inside, and it wasn’t possible to gain entry. The cops had to break the door down.’

‘Most curious. Why were the police there?’

‘When one of the guys, a Colonel, didn’t turn up at the base the following day, a search was organised to find him. There was no response at the contact address he’d left behind, and the cops were brought in.’