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All Day and a Night

Written by Alafair Burke

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ALAFAIR BURKE

All Day and a Night

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

FABER & FABER

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For John DeWitt Gregory

All Day and a Night

What would people think if they could overhear their own conversations?

"I don't know how many times I have to explain this. I go to work all day. I'm there . . . all . . . day. If I want to come home, have a beer, watch the tube, and go to sleep, it's because I'm exhausted. It's not . . . about . . . you."

"You love to throw that in my face, don't you?"

As Helen shifted in her sleek white leather swivel chair to stay alert, she could see herself posting a surreptitiously recorded excerpt of this couple's therapy session on the Internet. She imagined both husband and wife listening to it online. She pictured them saying to each other, "At least we're not like that."

"Seriously, Susan. On what planet did I just throw something in your face?"

"That you work. As if I don't. You were the one who got out pen, paper, and calculator and figured out that my salary barely covered daycare, not to mention the housekeeper on top of it. So I gave up one job and got two in return, but—no—*you're* the one who works all day."

Helen took a deep, slow breath. It was one of her regular tricks during sessions. Most people didn't notice. If they did, they'd interpret it as a sign that they should do the same. But what a deep breath gave Helen was a surge of oxygen to keep herself from nodding off. Now where were these two in the volley of husband-wife-husband-wife?

"Fine. You want me to stay home? I will." Ah, it was the husband's

turn again. "Because I would kill to have more time with Aidan. Except I'd get out of bed before ten o'clock. We'd occasionally turn off the television and get some fresh air. Maybe I'd actually take up cooking instead of watching celebrity chefs three hours a day."

"Oh, like you don't leave the office to work out in the middle of the day. Or drink at lunch. Or come home stinking of booze when you supposedly had a meeting. But that's right: you're the one who would kill to have more time with Aidan."

Helen scrolled through her client notes on the iPad resting on her lap. Aidan: was that a son or a daughter? She couldn't remember. Call her old-school, but crap if she didn't miss the days of handwritten notes on lined paper. But the iPad, she'd learned, made her type of patients feel less studied. Less examined. Less broken. An iPad made them feel like they were with their caterer or interior decorator, not a psychotherapist.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Back to the husband again. "I've told you—I'm expected to do client development. And, yeah, I exercise. Last time I checked, we belonged to a gym three blocks from the apartment that offers daycare if you're in such dire need of a break from our child. Maybe then you wouldn't feel so bad about your body that you won't let me f—"

"Don't you dare, Jack. Don't you fucking dare."

"So it's okay for us to hurl the word at each other when we're fighting, but God forbid I use it to point out we don't have a sex life anymore."

And there it was: sex. There it always was.

Helen knew that sex was only . . . sex. She knew that great sex wasn't enough to form the foundation of a lifelong partnership. She knew that bad sex could mean anything: a lack of emotional intimacy, an absolute lack of physical attraction, or a "mismatch in activity preferences" as she'd learned to call it, as when one person wanted sweet talk in front of the fire while the other wanted (or needed) the kinds of dirty, dirty things that were legal only because no one had imagined them in time to try to prohibit them.

But no sex? No sex at all between two people trying to run a shared household, and raise a child together, and put up with the rest of the world day in and day out without seeking intimacy from another person? Sex couldn't make or break a marriage, but Helen had learned one thing about sex in fifteen years of marriage counseling: it was a hell of lot easier to put up with another person's shit when you were having it on a regular basis.

"On that subject," she interrupted, "when I saw you last week, I suggested that the two of you try to set aside time to work on that aspect of your relationship." She had the script down pat: reserve time for each other, separate from stress, be your own best people for one another and see what happens. But she, Susan, and Jack all knew what she meant: get down to marital business. "Were you able to do that?"

Silence. Silence, like bad sex, could mean anything.

Helen had two children of her own with whom she'd like to spend more time. Yet here she was, at four-forty on a snowy Sunday afternoon, listening to Jack and Susan West fight. Those names. So perfect, like out of a soap opera. Somehow their appearance matched their perfect names, too. Yet they fought, like almost all of Helen's patients. They fought about everything—money, work, childcare, jealousies, and, perhaps most of all, betrayal, whether actual or perceived. They fought because life can suck and a lot of people needed help to cope with the person who was supposed to help them cope.

The truth was, Helen knew she wasn't at her best these days in that area. She had forced Mitch, after all, to see one of the city's most respected counselors, and a year of hard work hadn't saved their marriage. And so now she and Mitch were paying for two households, which meant money was tighter, which meant she now took weekend appointments, which meant she had to tune back in and pay attention to Jack and Susan and a fight that felt important to them, but which she knew was utterly mundane.

Where were they? Right. The subject of sex, followed by this moment of silence. Helen had been here many times before.

She was about to deliver her typical advice to try again when she saw Susan and Jack exchange a glance and then look away. It was Susan who smiled first, followed by Jack, whose smile turned into a laugh. And then the two of them were laughing together.

"Is this a reluctance to talk to me about your physical life together?" Helen asked. She knew from experience it wasn't, but she wanted them to choose to share the moment. So many patients came to therapy and spoke only about the worst aspects of their marriage. Discussing the better moments—however rare—helped people get past their resentments and visualize the ability to reconnect.

Susan spoke first. "It's stupid, really. I—I bought lingerie. If you could even call it that. It was—well, it was really tacky." She looked again at her husband.

"It wasn't tacky. Okay, it was trashy, but I mean that in a good way."

"It had this flap that . . . I'll spare you the details, but I started laughing, and Aidan heard us and walked in. His poor brain is probably going to be scarred. For the rest of his life, he'll flinch when he sees kelly-green lace." The woman was blushing. "Anyway, it didn't actually happen."

"Did you not notice my little home-improvement project yesterday?" Jack asked.

The smile began to fade from Susan's face. Helen knew that the couple—once again, like everyone else—had a tendency to keep score when it came to household responsibilities.

Jack explained before the tone of the conversation soured. "The door. I put a latch on the bedroom door. I thought you'd notice last night and we'd maybe resume where we left off. When you didn't say anything—"

"No," Susan said, still smiling and blushing. "I totally didn't notice. Really? You did that?"

Apparently in the bartering economy of the West family, hardware installation was roughly equivalent to trashy lingerie.

Four-forty-eight. Close enough to the fifty-minute mark for Helen, especially when the clients were two seconds away from getting down and dirty. "Why don't we continue this next week?" If she

made really good time, she'd be home to watch the red carpet coverage with the kids. It was the first Oscar night since the separation and, though the kids hadn't mentioned it, she knew they'd have something special planned.

Helen was still tapping out her session notes on the iPad when she heard a buzz from the building's front entrance. Now that money was tighter, she not only had weekend sessions, but she made do without an assistant.

"Yes?" she said through the intercom.

"Dr. Brunswick? I think I left one of my gloves up there."

She didn't see a glove on the couch, but she'd allow Jack to search for himself. She buzzed him up, cracked open her office door, and resumed typing. A minute later, she heard the hinges on the door creak.

"I didn't find it, Jack, but feel free to—"

The man standing in her office wasn't Jack West.

"Where's Jack? Sir, you need to go right now. See this?" She touched her iPad screen. "I just alerted security. They'll be here in seconds. You really should go." Would the man know she was bluffing? She thought she sounded firm, or had her voice quaked?

"You don't even recognize me?"

All these years, she had listened to normal, ordinary people like Susan and Jack West dissect every moment of their normal, ordinary lives for a reason: because she had Jessica and Sam, and she used to have Mitch. She had a family to go home to. She had a life she loved. As fascinated as she was by people with more serious troubles, she had learned she didn't want her own thoughts to live among theirs. She wanted her thoughts to be as normal and ordinary as she could keep them.

But now this man—this stranger—was in her office, and she knew she was looking at the face of hopelessness. And then she saw the gun.

PART ONE

THE FRESH LOOK

CHAPTER ONE

Ellie Hatcher was a gambler, even though she'd been raised to believe that gambling was reckless. *Foolhardy,* her mother would call it (because Roberta Hatcher wanted to pretend that she grew up in an old-money world of Tudor manors surrounded by show horses, instead of a no-money world of aluminum-sided houses encircled by cyclone fences). Worse than foolhardy, to risk money on games of chance was arrogant. Smug. To think that somehow the randomness of the universe would align in your favor was . . . unseemly.

But the way Ellie looked at it, a bet wasn't *gambling* if she knew in advance that she held the advantage. Gambling, in Ellie's view, was an investment banker with an eight ball of coke at the Venetian Hotel letting twelve hundred dollars ride on some random fat kid playing junior-league softball in Minneapolis. To gamble was to believe in luck, or fate, or the gods. Ellie, by contrast, believed in her own skills, and felt no guilt taking money from people whose own skills (or beliefs in imaginary blessings) couldn't match up. Some months, she earned more at the poker tables of Atlantic City than in her paycheck from the NYPD.

Ellie played the odds, but only when she knew the odds were in her favor. And she damn sure was *not* going to lose today's bet against her partner, J. J. Rogan.

They were in an interrogation room of the homicide squad of the 13th Precinct. Seated at the small aluminum table was a woman named Laura Bendel, who had dialed 9-1-1 three hours ago, screaming for an ambulance to save her husband. Ellie and Rogan had already listened to the recording of the call:

9-1-1. What's your emergency?
Oh my God. The blood. So much blood. Please, help.
Someone is hurt?
Seth. My husband. Please, oh my God. I need help.
Why is your husband bleeding, ma'am?
He's cut. In the . . . stomach, I think. Oh my God. I—I think I stabbed him.

The dispatcher did her job, textbook style. The name. The address. Keeping Laura on the phone, as calm as possible, until officers arrived.

Just as the dispatcher's conversation was textbook, so was the scene. A spilled Macallan bottle next to the upturned coffee table. Broken lamp. A button from Laura's torn designer blouse on the hallway runner leading to the threshold of the kitchen. The wood knife block knocked to the floor, the light-gray marble now smeared with Seth Bendel's blood, thanks to the ten-inch gourmet chef's blade protruding from his gut.

The responding officers found Laura weeping over her husband's dead body, her hand still holding the phone she'd used to call for help. "I didn't mean to. I'm so sorry, Seth. I'm so sorry. I love you. I love you." It took them fifteen minutes to calm her down enough to tell the story: he was beating her once again, and she only meant to scare him. He charged at her—hard. The knife was in her hand. Now he was dead, and she was heartbroken.

Rogan was buying the tale. Ellie wasn't. They had a hundred bucks riding on it.

Right now, Rogan's was looking like the stronger hand. A civilian aide had just entered the interrogation room to deliver four pages of medical records from Bellevue Hospital.

According to the records, Laura showed up at the emergency room with a bloody nose two months earlier, claiming that she had "*walked into a door*"—quotation marks courtesy of the attending physician, whose notes indicated his skepticism: *Followed suspected-DV protocol.* Ellie knew that if a doctor believed that domestic violence was the true cause of injury, the doctor would ask the patient directly and encourage her to report it, but would call the police independently only in the face of actual evidence of a crime. That evidence was lacking in Laura's case, so, once the doctor confirmed that Laura's nose wasn't broken, he sent her on her way with an ice pack, antibiotic ointment, and a pamphlet about domestic violence.

"What is that?" Laura asked, eyeing the documents in Rogan's hands. "Is that about me?" The two first fingers of her right hand continued to stroke the front of her throat, still red from the black Armani belt she claimed Seth had used to choke her before she wrestled free and grabbed the knife. Even after hours of hysterical crying, she was still gorgeous. Long, shiny blond hair. Clear, porcelain skin. Bright green eyes. High cheekbones. A knockout by any measure.

Ellie saw the sparkle in Rogan's eye. He was counting his hundred bucks already. Not that he needed the money, but Ellie's partner was almost as competitive as Ellie. Almost. "We got the medical records from Bellevue for last February's bloody nose. Why didn't you tell the doctor that it was your husband who punched you?"

The question might have sounded hostile to a casual observer, but Ellie knew Rogan was giving the woman a chance to recite the obvious explanation. Ellie could barely suppress an eye roll as she listened to Laura's version, once again textbook. She covered for her husband for all the same reasons most women covered for their abusive lovers: she was afraid of him, and for him, and because she loved him, when he wasn't hitting her.

Ellie was still reading the emergency physician's notes. Rogan had seen what he'd wanted to see, and now she was processing the rest. She pulled her cell phone from her jacket pocket and pretended to see a text message on the screen. "Sorry," she said. "Gotta deal with this."

She moved to the corner of the interrogation room and pulled up Facebook. Sure enough, like seemingly every other thirty-two-year-old man, Seth Bendel had a profile. Better yet, he was an active poster and hadn't bothered with privacy settings. She scrolled down the page to last February's activities. Bingo.

"Your emergency-room visit was on February 14th," Ellie said, tucking her phone back into her pocket.

"Was it?" Laura asked. "I couldn't remember the exact date."

"That's Valentine's Day. Did you and Seth do anything to celebrate?"

She gave a sad smile. "We used to, when we first met. But once we were married, we had an anniversary to celebrate instead. Seth always says Valentine's Day is more of a Hallmark-card holiday for people who don't have the real thing. Amateur night."

Rogan's eyes had moved to Ellie's jacket pocket. He knew something was up.

"The ER doc who treated you made a note: he saw you snap a cell-phone picture of your injured face before he cleaned you up." Ellie's best guess was that the doctor added the notation to aid the prosecution in the event Laura subsequently changed her mind and decided to press charges.

"I thought I might need it someday. Plus it was just something to remember. I take pictures of my food, too." Laura laughed nervously at her own self-deprecating comment.

"Or you wanted to be able to show Seth the lengths to which you'd go to ensure you had power over him. That you would tell people he was beating you. That you had evidence. That you would ruin him."

"I don't understand," Laura said, complete with a confused head shake.

"I would have been pissed too if my husband spent Valentine's Day drinking at the Soho Grand with all his unmarried work buddies." She placed her cell phone on the interrogation room table in front

of Laura. Rogan craned his neck, trying to get a better view of the screen. From his vantage point, he would only be able to see that it was a Facebook profile, but that would be enough for him to figure out that Ellie had found a flaw in Laura's story.

"Right here, Laura." Ellie pointed to the relevant post. "A 'check-in' at the Soho Grand bar on February 14th at 11:10 p.m. He didn't even bother covering his tracks. Did he tell you he got stuck at work? *Sorry to miss Valentine's Day, babe, I'll make up for it?* Or was he the type who didn't even bother to call? You just sat there in your living room—maybe even in a new dress—wondering where he was and why he didn't pick up his cell or answer your texts. Then you checked his Facebook page. Look, one of his buddies was even nice enough to tag everyone so you could see whose company your husband chose over yours."

"The time on the hospital report must be wrong," Laura said. "He came home drunk. Picked a stupid fight, like always. Then he punched me."

"Speaking of his drinking, I notice from all these many pictures your husband posted, he seemed to favor martinis."

"What about it? I don't know why you're treating me this way," Laura protested. "You told me I was here voluntarily. That I'm not under arrest. And now—"

Ellie looked at Rogan and could tell he knew it was over. "I'm trying to give you a chance to keep it that way, Laura. Just hear me out. See, he always seems to be drinking martinis in these photos. Meanwhile, this woman standing next to him in every single group shot on Valentine's Day—according to the tag, her name is Megan Underhill, works with your husband at Morgan Stanley, went to Harvard, *very* attractive by the way. She appears to favor a dark drink served in a highball glass. Could even be Macallan, like the bottle I saw thrown on your living room rug tonight."

"Sometimes he drank martinis, sometimes he had scotch."

"Fine, let's say your husband's beverage choices ran the gamut. No big deal. But here's the more curious thing. This very attractive

woman named Megan? She's not as attractive as you, if you ask me, but she's different, especially in her coloring. Olive skin. Black hair. That dark-plum lipstick she's wearing in these photographs wouldn't do much for blondes like us, and yet it would appear to be a perfect match to the lipstick I noticed on the rim of a highball glass in your kitchen sink."

"This is crazy," Laura said. "I had a drink myself when Seth first started to pick at me tonight. Sometimes it would calm everything down if I would just tell him I needed to take the edge off—like I was taking the blame for whatever imaginary slight set him off. And maybe I wear the wrong colors for my skin. I didn't realize this was a makeover session." She looked to her ally Rogan for help.

"Fine, then," Ellie said, crossing her arms. "Just tell me where I can find that lipstick in your apartment. Or your purse. Or, you know, wherever you keep your makeup."

"Um, I don't know where I put it."

"Okay, so how about the name of the color? Or the brand? Anything you can give us to help clear up the confusion."

Ellie flashed a glance at Rogan. He knew—when was he ever going to learn?—that she'd been dealing from a stacked deck all along. At her side, she rubbed her thumb and index finger together. *Pay up, partner.*

Less than an hour later, they had Laura's confession on videotape. The woman was still blaming her husband for his own death, but instead of self-defense, she claimed that the discovery of the lipstick-stained highball glass had sent her into an uncontrollable rage. A battered woman might have had a shot getting past a prosecutor, but not a jealous wife. Laura would be indicted for murder, no question; a jury would handle the rest.

Rogan was handing Ellie a crisp new set of twenties from his wallet when John Shannon emerged from their lieutenant's office to witness the transaction. "Looks like a nice wad of dough you guys got there."

Ellie could already see where this was heading. The most effort Detective John Shannon ever put into the squad room was crack-

ing wise. With money changing hands from Rogan to Ellie, his wee brain was probably overheating from the collision of potential barbs: Would it be the attractive female detective earning her money the old-fashioned way, or yet another comment about Rogan's family wealth? Lucky for Ellie, more often than not Shannon had a way of opening the door for her go-to retort.

"You mean like those wads of dough you snarf down every morning at Krispy Kreme?" She tapped out a "bu-dump-*bump*" on her desktop. "I'm sorry, man. You just make lame cop-eating-doughnut jokes so . . . damn . . . easy."

"When you got it, you flaunt it," he said, patting his oversized belly. At least the guy had as good a sense of humor about himself as he expected in others. Ellie saw his gaze move to the squad room entrance. "You don't see your man enough at home, Hatcher? He's got to come see you in *our* house? I owe him a follow-up report, so I'm heading for the can till he's out of here."

The *he* in question was Ellie's boyfriend, Max Donovan. She had only just gotten used to the word *boyfriend* to describe a relationship between two level-headed grown-ups when the nature of that relationship suddenly changed three months ago. Now they lived together. And at this minute, he was—as Shannon noted—coming to *her* house.

Max knew better than to greet her with a kiss, hug, or even a handshake in the squad room. Once he reached her desk, he simply said, "I must not have heard the music."

"Music?" she asked.

"Of whatever ice cream truck had Shannon hauling ass."

Ellie laughed, but Rogan shook his head in mock disappointment. "You two are morphing into the damn Wonder Twins, is what you're doing. You realize that, don't you?"

"The Wonder Twins didn't actually morph into one," she corrected. "They touched each other to activate their individual morphing powers. One could transform into water and its various states; the other changed into animals. *Form of*—" She held up her fist for Rogan's return tap, but all she got was a death stare.

"Don't *make* me join Shannon in the men's room. You don't want to know what that man is capable of in there."

Max feigned a shudder. "So I need to run something past you in my official capacity as a representative of the New York District Attorney's Office's Conviction Integrity Unit."

"Conviction integrity unit" was the preferred prosecutorial language for a specialized unit that reviewed what defense attorneys would call either "innocence cases" or "wrongful convictions." Ellie knew that Max viewed his recent appointment to the unit as a sign that the elected district attorney, Martin Overton, was looking at him as a potential supervisor.

Max took a seat in the worn, wooden guest chair next to their face-to-face desks. "And before you get too worried, it's not a claim from a defendant, and it's not a claim about you. This is about a conviction that was locked and loaded eighteen years ago: a serial killer named Anthony Amaro. Problem is, we got an anonymous letter. The author claims that Amaro is innocent and that the same guy who killed six women twenty years ago is still at it."

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out, not a letter, but an eight-by-ten photograph of a woman's face. He handed it to Rogan, who gave it a quick look and passed it to Ellie. "And supposedly the latest victim is Helen Brunswick."