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The Narrows

Written by Michael Connelly

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MICHAEL CONNELLY

The Narrows



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I think maybe I only know one thing in this world. One thing for sure. And that is that the truth does not set you free. Not like I have heard it said and not like I have said it myself the countless times I sat in small rooms and jail cells and urged ragged men to confess their sins to me. I lied to them, tricked them. The truth does not salvage you or make you whole again. It does not allow you to rise above the burden of lies and secrets and wounds to the heart. The truths I have learned hold me down like chains in a dark room, an underworld of ghosts and victims that slither around me like snakes. It is a place where the truth is not something to look at or behold. It is the place where evil waits. Where it blows its breath, every breath, into your mouth and nose until you cannot escape from it. This is what I know. The only thing.

I knew this going in on the day I took the case that would lead me into the narrows. I knew that my life's mission would always take me to the places where evil waits, to the places where the truth that I might find would be an ugly and horrible thing. And still I went without pause. And still I went, not being ready for the moment when evil would come from its waiting place. When it would grab at me like an animal and take me down into the black water.

1

She was in darkness, floating on a black sea, a starless sky above. She could hear nothing and see nothing. It was a perfect black moment but then Rachel Walling opened her eyes from the dream.

She stared up at the ceiling. She listened to the wind outside and heard the branches of the azaleas scratching against the window. She wondered if it was the scratching on glass or some other noise from within the house that had awakened her. Then her cell phone rang. She wasn't startled. She calmly reached to the bed table. She brought the phone to her ear and was fully alert when she answered, her voice showing no indication of sleep.

'Agent Walling,' she said.

'Rachel? It's Cherie Dei.'

Rachel knew right away that this would not be a Rez call. Cherie Dei meant Quantico. It had been four years since the last time. Rachel had been waiting.

'Where are you, Rachel?'

'I'm at home. Where do you think I'd be?'

'I know you cover a lot of territory now. I thought maybe you –'

'I'm in Rapid City, Cherie. What is it?'

She answered after a long moment of silence.

'He's resurfaced. He's back.'

Rachel felt an invisible fist punch into her chest and then hold there. Her mind conjured memories and images.

Bad ones. She closed her eyes. Cherie Dei didn't have to use a name. Rachel knew it was Backus. The Poet had resurfaced. Just as they knew he would. Like a virulent infection that moves through the body, hidden from the outside for years, then breaking the skin as a reminder of its ugliness.

'Tell me.'

'Three days ago we got something in Quantico. A package in the mail. It contained –'

'Three days? You sat on it for three –'

'We didn't sit on anything. We took our time with it. It was addressed to you. At Behavioral Sciences. The mail room brought it down to us and we had it X-rayed and then we opened it. Carefully.'

'What was in it?'

'A GPS reader.'

A global positioning system reader. Longitude and latitude coordinates. Rachel had encountered one on a case the previous year. An abduction out in the Badlands where the missing camper had marked her trail with a handheld GPS. They found it in her pack and traced her steps back to a camp where she had encountered a man and he had followed her. They got there too late to save her but they would have never gotten there at all if it hadn't been for the GPS.

'What was on it?'

Rachel sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She brought her free hand to her stomach and closed it like a dead flower. She waited and soon Cherie Dei continued. Rachel remembered her as once being so green, just an observer and learner on the go team, assigned to her under the bureau's mentoring program. Ten years later and the cases, all the cases, had etched deep grooves into her voice. Cherie Dei wasn't green anymore and she needed no mentor.

'It had one waypoint in its record. The Mojave. Just

inside the California border at Nevada. We flew out yesterday and we went to the marker. We've been using thermal imaging and gas probes. Late yesterday we found the first body, Rachel.'

'Who is it?'

'We don't know yet. It's old. It had been there a long time. We're just starting with it. The excavation work is slow.'

'You said the *first* body. How many more are there?'

'As of when I left the scene last we were up to four. We think there's more.'

'Cause of death?'

'Too early.'

Rachel was silent as she thought about this. The first questions that ran through her filters were why there and why now.

'Rachel, I'm not calling just to tell you. The point is the Poet is back in play and we want you out here.'

Rachel nodded. It was a given that she would go there.

'Cherie?'

'What?'

'Why do you think he was the one who sent the package?'

'We don't think it. We know it. We got a match a little while ago on a fingerprint from the GPS. He replaced the batteries on it and we got a thumb off of one of them. Robert Backus. It's him. He's back.'

Rachel slowly opened her fist and studied her hand. It was as still as a statue's. The dread she had felt just a moment before was changing. She could admit it to herself but no one else. She could feel the juice begin moving in her blood again, turning it a darker red. Almost black. She had been waiting for this call. She slept every night with the cell phone near her ear. Yes, it was part of the job. The call outs. But this was the only call she had truly been waiting for.

'You can name the waypoints,' Dei said in the silence. 'On the GPS. Up to twelve characters and spaces. He named this point 'Hello Rachel.' An exact fit. I guess he still has something for you. It's like he's calling you out, has some sort of plan.'

Rachel's memory dredged up an image of a man falling backward through glass and into darkness. Disappearing into the dark void below.

'I'm on my way,' she said.

'We're running it out of the Vegas field office. It will be easier to keep a blanket on it from there. Just be careful, Rachel. We don't know what he has in mind with this, you know? Watch your back.'

'I will. I always do.'

'Call me with the details and I'll pick you up.'

'I will,' she repeated.

Then she pushed the button that disconnected the call. She reached to the bed table and turned on the light. For a moment she remembered the dream, the stillness of the black water and the sky above, like black mirrors facing each other. And her in the middle, just floating.

2

Graciela McCaleb was waiting by her car outside my house in Los Angeles when I got there. She had been on time for our appointment but I had not. I quickly parked in the carport and jumped out to greet her. She didn't seem upset with me. She seemed to take it in stride.

'Graciela, I am so sorry I'm late. I got backed up on the ten with all the morning traffic.'

'It's okay. I was kind of enjoying it. It's so quiet up here.'

I used my key to unlock the door. When I pushed it open it wedged against some of the mail that was on the floor inside. I had to bend down and reach around the door to pull the envelopes free and get the door open.

Standing and turning back to Graciela I extended my hand into the house. She passed by me and entered. I didn't smile under the circumstances. The last time I had seen her was at the funeral. She looked only marginally better this time, the grief still holding in her eyes and at the corners of her mouth.

As she moved past me in the tight entry hall I smelled a sweet orange fragrance. I remembered that from the funeral, from when I had clasped her hands with both of mine, said how sorry I was for her loss and offered my help if she needed it in any way. She was wearing black then. This day she was wearing a flowery summer dress that went better with the fragrance. I pointed her to the living room and told her to have a seat on the couch. I asked if

she wanted something to drink, even though I knew I had nothing in the house to respond with but probably a couple bottles of beer in the box and water from the tap.

'I'm fine, Mr. Bosch. No thank you.'

'Please, call me Harry. Nobody calls me Mr. Bosch.'

Now I tried a smile but it didn't work on her. And I didn't know why I expected it would. She'd been through a lot in her life. I'd seen the movie. And now this latest tragedy. I sat down in the chair across from the couch and waited. She cleared her throat before speaking.

'I guess you must be wondering why I needed to talk to you. I was not very forthcoming on the phone.'

'That's all right,' I said. 'But it did make me curious. Is something wrong? What can I do for you?'

She nodded and looked down at her hands, which held a small black-beaded purse on her lap. It looked like something she might have bought for the funeral.

'Something is very wrong and I don't know who to turn to. I know enough about things from Terry – I mean how they work – to know I can't go to the police. Not yet. Besides, they'll be coming to me. Soon, I suppose. But until then, I need someone I can trust, who will help me. I can pay you.'

Leaning forward I put my elbows on my knees and my hands together. I had only met her that one other time – at the funeral. Her husband and I had once been close but not in the last few years and now it was too late. I didn't know where the trust she spoke of came from.

'What did Terry tell you about me that would make you want to trust me? To choose me. You and I don't really even know each other, Graciela.'

She nodded like that was a fair question and assessment.

'At one time in our marriage Terry told me everything about everything. He told me about the last case you two worked together. He told me what happened and how you

saved each other's life. On the boat. So that makes me think I can trust you.'

I nodded.

'He one time told me something about you that I always remembered,' she added. 'He told me there were things about you he didn't like and that he didn't agree with. I think he meant the way you do things. But he said at the end of the day, after all the cops and agents he had known and worked with, if he had to pick somebody to work a murder case with, that it would be you. Hands down. He said he would pick you because you wouldn't give up.'

I felt a tightness around my eyes. It was almost like I could hear Terry McCaleb saying it. I asked a question, already knowing the answer.

'What is it you want me to do for you?'

'I want you to investigate his death.'