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The Man from Primrose Lane

Written by James Renner

Published by Corsair

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JAMES RENNER

THE MAN FROM PRIMROSE LANE



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EPISODE ONE

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO DAVID NEFF

David Neff missed a lot of things about his wife, but the thing he missed the most was the way she used to sit on couches, leaning against one giant pillow, her knees tucked up against her chest, her legs trailing behind her as she watched a Lifetime movie or some ridiculous reality show. He pointed out to her once, before she died, that no man ever sits on a couch like that, that it was a uniquely feminine trait. It was a little thing that delighted him. He loved the carefree way she moved her feet to the rhythm of the lights on the screen. When he finally went through her things two months after she was in the ground, he'd found a photograph of her as a child, curled up on her parents' sofa in the exact manner he remembered. He'd stuck the photo to the refrigerator. It was still there, next to the over-outlined caricature drawings of their four-year-old boy.

Like most Thursday afternoons, David was on the living room floor, in front of the couch—her couch—with a bowl of SpaghettiOs in his lap, a bag of Kettle Chips to his right, watching an episode of SpongeBob SquarePants he'd seen five times, but TiVo'd anyway. The boy, Tanner, napped upstairs.

David was a once-handsome man who had grown pudgy

around the edges. His dark hair hung too long above his eyes, a bit too gray for thirty-four. Three-day-old stubble shaded his double chin. A dollop of dried ketchup was smeared across the front of his shirt, evidence of the barely won battle that had been Tanner's lunch.

The room around David appeared to be the remnants of a livable space that had been torn apart by some sort of laundry- and toy-filled IED. Every other week, Tanner's great-aunt came by and picked the boy's clothes off the mantel, lamps, and ceiling fan, laundered them, and returned them, folded, to the boy's bedroom dresser. She collected the broken robots into dustbins, sorted stuffed frogs and Legos into their assorted tubs, and replaced the batteries in the boy's plastic-ball shooter and tiny grand piano. It only took them two days to get the room out of order again. David didn't mind the mess. And neither did Tanner.

Because his wife's death had been ruled a suicide, her insurance had not paid out and David had not been able to work a single day since. But he and the boy didn't need the money. Royalties from David's first book—*The Serial Killer's Protégé*—had climbed to the seven-figure mark a couple years ago and sales remained strong, thanks, in part, to a *Rolling Stone* article that had forever labeled him as "the best true crime writer since Truman Capote." David no longer kept track of how much he had in the bank, but he knew it was more than he'd ever imagined making in his life.

After his wife's death and until just a moment from right now, David had resigned himself to the fact that *The Serial Killer's Protégé* would also be his only book, and that that was okay, because Tanner was alive and he could live out the remainder of his days keeping his boy safe and comfortable and happy.

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But then there was a knock at the front door.

David wasn't expecting company. Tanner's aunt wasn't due for a few days. He assumed it was a neighborhood kid pushing school band–sale candy, so he ignored it. But then the knock came again, too loud to be anything but an adult.

He walked to the door and peered through the porthole. There was a man on his doorstep. A thin man with wire-rim glasses and a ring of hair circling a bald dome.

Paul.

David winced. He didn't want to see Paul. He didn't want to talk to Paul. It was Paul's fault that he wasn't able to grieve the way he sometimes felt he deserved—in a penniless gutter with other heartbroken souls.

Paul Sheppard was his publisher, the man who had read David's proposal for a book based on notes left behind by convicted killer Ronil Brune and recognized a modicum of talent. Before *The Serial Killer's Protégé*, Paul had been an exclusively local publisher, the sort that shipped glossy copies of *Cleveland Steelworker Memories* and *Cleveland's Haunted History* to local indie bookstores. Today, he kept an office in Manhattan.

Reluctantly, David opened the door.

"He's alive!" Paul shouted, raising his arms in the air like Dr. Frankenstein.

"Shhhh! You'll wake the kid," he said. He motioned for Paul to come in.

"Sorry." Stepping into the main room, Paul shook his head and whistled. "I saw this documentary on Discovery the other day," he said. "It was about this woman who lives in Manhattan and she's this ridiculous pack rat and never throws anything away. She had this path carved out in clutter she could use to get to the bathroom and kitchen."

"Yeah?" prodded David.

"You're like this far away from becoming that woman," he said. "Her family had her committed, you know."

"Thank God you're not my family, Paul," he said, smiling a little. "Don't sit on that!" He jumped to the recliner over which Paul was squatting and batted away yesterday's *Beacon Journal*. Underneath was a plastic dish that had once held a microwavable Salisbury steak dinner. David tossed it to the far corner of the room, where it landed next to a wastebasket. "I wasn't expecting company."

"I left you twenty messages. The only reason I knew you weren't dead is you keep depositing my checks."

Paul sat on the chair as David collapsed on the sofa, sending a mostly empty biggie-sized soda tumbling to the floor. "It is nice to see you," David said sincerely. "How's biz?"

"You know," said Paul, making a seesaw gesture. "*Protégé* is still selling. I think half the universities in the country are teaching it in their journalism programs, so that helps it move every semester. I just signed this new up-and-comer from Pittsburgh, whose manuscript knocks me out."

"It's not a memoir, is it? Tell me it's not another memoir."

"In fact, it is a memoir. It's about an alcoholic steel smelter who went to prison for grand theft and, when he got out, cleaned himself up by slowly constructing a jet-powered semi truck in his garage. It wouldn't kill you to blurb it."

"Is that why you came over?"

"Of course not," said Paul, a thin smile playing at one corner of his mouth. From his sports jacket pocket, the publisher pulled a bound galley of a book. He tossed it to David, who snatched it out of the air one-handed.

On the front was a grainy black-and-white picture of a grassy hill soaked in summer heat. Atop the hill sat a 1970s-era police

cruiser, its driver's-side door ajar. Behind the car stretched a row of old-growth pine trees, gnarled branches like arthritic hands. David knew this photograph. He'd discovered it, in fact, tucked into a box labeled MISCELLANEOUS in the Press archives at Cleveland State. It was a picture of a crime scene, an artifact of one of the many unsolved cases he'd written about before he'd become completely obsessed with Ronil Brune. The title of the book was *The Lesser Mysteries of Greater Cleveland*. At the bottom was David's name.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Your next book," said Paul. "That's just a mock-up, but I wanted you to see it, to feel the weight of it in your hands. It's a good cover, no?"

"It's a great cover, Paul," he said. "Only problem is, I didn't write this."

"You did. It's twelve of your best true crime articles from your *Independent days*, *Beverly Jarosz*, *Sam Sheppard*, *Lisa Pruett*. I cleaned up the language and moved things around a bit here and there—don't look at me like that, you were still learning dramatic narrative structure back then—and I put them all together into this little trade paperback. Something for next summer's beach crowd, I'm thinking. Something to tide everyone over until the next David Neff book."

"I don't need the money."

"I don't, either."

"Then why?"

Paul glanced around the room, then back at David. "I think you need something to remind you why you were ever a writer in the first place," said Paul. "A little New England collegiate lecture tour? Some free publicity in the trades? *Groupies?*"

"True crime groupies are mostly middle-aged women who look like my high school home-ec teacher," said David.

"Nobody wants to buy a bunch of old stories. Anyone who wanted to read them has read them online already."

"Ah," said Paul, raising a finger. "They're not all reprints. Check out the table of contents."

" 'The Curious Case of the Man from Primrose Lane?' "

"Your next project," said Paul. "It's the next mystery you're going to investigate, the new piece we'll use to market the book."

"The Man from Primrose Lane? Never heard of him. Who is he?"

"Geez, David. Don't you read the paper anymore?" Paul regarded his friend silently for a moment, studying his features, perhaps to discern if there was any trace of the old David Neff in there someplace. "You used to be the eternal optimist," he said. "You thought you could solve *all* of these mysteries, remember?"

"How'd that work out?"

"Are you fucking blind? Look around you. What paid for this house? These toys? The Volkswagen in the garage? Your four-year-old son's trust fund? You solved the Ronil Brune case. The most fucked-up case anybody ever heard of."

"I'm just a dad now."

"Four years is long enough to live in the dark. You told me once that you never felt better than when you were writing these articles and researching these cases. This is a new mystery to dive into."

"A little ironic, don't you think?" asked David. "You want to pull me out of my depression by making me investigate some unsolved murder."

"There's no dead kids in this one. At least not murdered ones."

"That you know of."

"Do you want to hear about it?"

David rubbed his hands together distractedly. Was he already feeling a little rush? His heart stutter-stepped in his chest. His neck itched. Yes, he remembered this well. A jonesing, a craving for something he knew he shouldn't accept. He imagined it was the way his mother must feel every time she saw a waiter pour a glass of wine in a restaurant. This was what almost ruined his marriage once upon a time. "Yes," he whispered.

"The Man from Primrose Lane was a recluse who lived on the west side of Akron, only about a mile from here, off Merriman."

"Right, I know Primrose. Wait. Are you talking about the old man who used to ramble down to the park in the middle of the summer sometimes wearing mittens?"

"I believe so, yes."

"I saw him a few times after we moved here. Strange dude. Walked like he had somewhere important to go, except I never saw him anywhere except walking. Never at the store or in line for Chinese takeout or stuff like that. Never made eye contact. Gave me the heebie-jeebies. I always thought he looked a little like my Uncle Ira on a bender. He's dead, I take it."

"Murdered."

"How could someone have a grudge against him if he didn't know anybody? Was it a burglary?"

"Doesn't look like it. It seems personal. Whoever did it hacked the old man's fingers off at the second knuckle and fed them into the blender. Sliced his palms to shreds. Then he was dragged into the living room and shot once in the stomach. Killer left him there to die. As much as they can figure, it took maybe a half hour for him to bleed out. The old man was forced to sit there and let it happen."

"Holy shit. When was this?"

Paul repositioned himself in the chair, suddenly uncomfortable. "They found the man's body on June twenty-first," he said. "June twenty-first, 2008."

"Two days after Elizabeth."

Paul nodded again.

"No wonder I didn't hear about it." David sighed loudly, then shook his head. "Suspects?"

"The police are clueless, and I mean that quite literally."

"What was the guy's real name?"

"Well," said Paul with a smile, "that's where it gets interesting. When he purchased his house in 1969, he used the Social Security number of a man named Joseph Howard King, but that isn't who he really was."

"What do you mean?"

"A year after they find the body, the police get a call from the bank. Turns out this guy had about seven hundred grand in a savings account and another three and a half *million* in stocks and bonds. Using the name Joseph Howard King, he invested heavily in technology—Apple, Google, stuff like that. But the bank can't find his next of kin, right? So they call the cops for help. By then, though, the detectives have been working the case for a year and they haven't found this guy's family, either. A probate judge gets involved because of the money. I mean, somebody's going to collect a big paycheck as soon as they figure out who it should go to."

"That money's probably the motive," said David. "Four million dollars means four million reasons to kill him, if you're an heir."

"Right. Except no family has come forward to claim it. So this judge appoints a man named Albert Beachum as executor of the estate. Apparently Beachum's family had been running

errands for the Man from Primrose Lane for years. He allows Beachum to draw money from the account to relocate the guy's remains from his pauper's grave to a bigger plot in Mount Peace Cemetery. And when Beachum says, 'Screw the police, I want to hire a private eye to track this man's family down,' the judge says, 'Fine,' and lets him pay for his own investigator. The PI uses Joseph Howard King's Social Security number to get his birth certificate. That has the guy's parents' names and the name of the hospital where he was born. So the PI goes and pulls the records from the hospital in the years leading up to and following King's birth."

"He found Joseph Howard King's siblings."

Paul touched his nose with one finger and pointed at David. "Bingo. Another kid named King with the same parents was born two years earlier at the same hospital. It's the guy's sister, Carol. So the PI's really excited, right? He's about to call this woman up and tell her she just hit the lottery. Except, when he does, Carol tells him that her brother Joe has been dead since 1932. Died in a car crash in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, at the age of six. The crash also killed Mom and Dad. Carol was at home with the babysitter."

"He stole a dead kid's ID and disappeared to Akron, Ohio," said David, his eyes wide and slightly unfocused, the look of a stoner in the afterglow of a good hit. "You know, I bet he came from Bellefonte. He probably read about the accident in the paper and remembered it years later when he needed to change his name for whatever reason. What are they going to do with the money now?"

"Everyone is fighting over it. Carol wants it, of course. Figures since this mystery man stole her brother's ID she has some right to it. She has a pretty big-time attorney working for her. The Beachums seem like nice people, but they've got a

hand in this, too, and have retained their own lawyer. On top of that, you have the Summit County executive and the mayor staking claim. Law says if you can't find next of kin, money goes to the state, but the city and county want a piece of it, too."

"And the police?"

"The police haven't said peep. And there's one more twist to this, just to complicate the picture."

"Of course there is."

"Among the old man's very scant personal effects were a bunch of battered notebooks."

David leaned forward. "And inside the notebooks?"

"Inside is the life story of a girl he apparently never met, a record of every softball game she played in, every award of merit she won in school, every boyfriend, every minor traffic ticket. All the details of her life were collected in these notebooks in scrawled handwriting they can only assume belongs to the Man from Primrose Lane."

"He was a stalker, huh?"

"Of the highest degree."

"And this girl, she's going after the money, too, I take it?" asked David.

Paul shook his head. "Nope. She couldn't care less. Which is a shame, because those notebooks are like love letters in places. Obviously, the old man cared a great deal for the girl, sorry, young woman, in his own twisted way. He never names her as his beneficiary, but almost implies . . . well, you'll have to read the newspaper clippings."

David sat on the couch, staring into the air above the television. Periodically, he scratched at the stubble on his boyish face. Eventually his eyes settled on a picture of Tanner, resting on the mantel. The boy was about two in the photograph, his

shaggy hair whipping about in the wind pulling out over the ocean behind him.

"It's a good story," he said at last.

"I know."

"Sounds like it's been mostly reported, though."

Paul waved his hand in the air. "It's been reported, but it hasn't been *written*. And there's still plenty mystery for you. Who killed him, who he really was, why he was stalking this girl . . ."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," said David. "And if I was ready to start writing again, this would be about the perfect case. But I can't."

"Why?"

David stood up and motioned for Paul to follow. "Step into my office," he said. "Let me buy you a drink."

David's home was a sprawling high-ceilinged ranch built for an Akron homeopathic doctor in 1954. The architect had deferred to the bachelor doctor's sense of style: modernism with a hint of refined hillbilly. Rock gardens sat on either side of the fireplace, used, currently, as rough terrain for a phalanx of plastic army men advancing on the kitchen. The walls lining the long hallway leading off the living room were coated in horse-hair paper, soft to the touch but frayed near the bottom where the previous tenants' cat had rubbed against it. They passed Tanner's room quietly. He lay snoozing in the middle of his bed, his knobby knees tucked under him, his butt pointed toward the sky—it was the only way he could sleep. At the end of the hall, through an oak door, was the so-called East Wing of the house.

The East Wing was essentially two rooms connected by a wide threshold. David had converted the entire space into a workroom. Bookshelves lined the walls, many filled beyond

capacity, paperbacks stacked three rows deep. Every so often the pattern of books was broken by *Star Wars* figurines David used for bookends. Han Solo kept a dog-eared copy of *The Dubliners* from slipping aside. Up front was a bar stocked with Dewar's, some gin, and a mostly empty bottle of Jameson, a gift from Paul. The fulcrum of the two areas was occupied by a Tron arcade game, which, sadly, no longer worked properly—the laser cars could not be controlled and the contraption had a habit of shocking you whenever you maneuvered your tanks. At the far end of the East Wing was David's desk, a monstrosity he'd found at an estate sale a week after his book broke *The New York Times Top 15*. Supposedly it had once belonged to the captain of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. David thought it might be cursed. The *Edmund Fitzgerald* was at the bottom of the lake. His wife was dead. And he hadn't written a single page since he had paid five men to lug it inside. Mounted above the desk was the head of a brown bear, a curio that had come with the house.

David lifted the front of the bar and stepped behind it. He fished a shot glass out of the cabinet above his head and set it down in front of his publisher. Into the shot glass went the rest of the Jameson.

"Where's yours?" asked Paul.

"If I drink, I'll lose my liver," said David. "I'm up to a hundred and twenty milligrams of Rivertin a day. They tell me that if I drink on that, even a little, it'll wreck my liver quick. Hell of a side effect, huh?"

Paul blinked behind his glass.

"And I've discovered that, to some extent, it was my anxiety that drove my writing. My paranoia. And now I never feel anxious." David shook his head. "I've tried. All that comes out is trite garbage. I can't write an original simile to save my life.

It's like . . . I dunno . . . it's like I'm comfortably numb. No more panic attacks, no more night terrors. But no more stories, either. I can't get to that place. And even if I wanted to come off it, I'd have to do it in stages. My shrink says it would take months to wean myself off the drug. So, when I say I can't, I mean, physically, I can't."

Paul upended the whiskey into his mouth. "Fuck," he said.

"Yeah."

A long silence settled in. After a while, the sounds of a child stirring could be heard drifting down the hallway, squeaky springs under gentle weight, low grunts and sniffles. Tanner would be awake soon.

"Look," said Paul at last, "everything happens—"

"Stop right there. Think about what you're about to say."

"There's a reason to things," Paul continued. "I mean it. I don't know why you were attracted to that story that gave you PTSD. But there's a reason. Gotta be."

"You can't say stuff like that to a guy whose wife drove her car into the side of a Dollar General at seventy miles an hour."

"The only reason you didn't join her was because you were on the meds. Am I right?"

David ignored him. "The universe is absurd. People want to make sense of it because we're hardwired to find reason in the randomness. We look for patterns in the chaos. See omens in coincidence. We look at the random distribution of stars in the sky and pretend they look like animals, call them constellations. For some reason, we want to give meaning to the meaningless. If you go looking for the number eighty-eight, you'll see it everywhere—the number of keys on a piano, the number of counties in Ohio—but it doesn't mean anything."

Paul wiped a tear out of his eye. Impossible to tell if it was from laughter or from the sadness he felt for David, who no

longer believed, who could no longer even write. “About the constellations,” said Paul. “I always thought that God put the planet here so we would recognize the artwork He wove into the universe.”

David drew in a breath. He was about to say something more, but then his son spoke from the doorway.

“Dad?” said Tanner. “I’m thirsty. Can I have a Fresca?”

The boy’s head barely reached the doorknob, his dark hair crumpled and slept-upon. His brown eyes looked the size of half dollars below the ragged trim of his bangs. He was a skinny boy, four years old, with long arms and long fingers, piano-playing fingers. He looked more and more like his departed mother every day.

“Think about it,” said Paul. “We’ve got time.”