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a short story

By Jenny Medenwald

PART ONE

Laid off. Twenty-three years at Attica High School and Superintendent Cross had only handed Albert a folded up letter and his outstretched hand, skirting around something that sounded like his version of an apology and well-wishes for whatever came next. Albert had no idea what came next. He'd intended on remaining there, teaching ninth grade literature for at least another decade. Then he and Lenore had plans to retire somewhere warm, Florida perhaps. They'd heard good things about Palm Springs. Frank and Sarah relocated there the previous summer and the pictures Sarah posted on social media more closely resembled postcards. Now it looked like they would need to postpone those dreams. Maybe indefinitely. How would he tell Lenore?

Albert finally found the strength to move to his desk and began sorting through the well-organized piles of papers, report cards, and other miscellaneous items. He hadn't even finished grading the last of his students' Shakespeare essays. One paper title caught his eye and he smiled, realizing he'd never have a chance to praise the student for his creativity.

"I suppose I'll leave them for my replacement," he said aloud to the empty room.

Thirty minutes later and the classroom looked generic and unidentifiable. Hard to stomach considering it was once a place that was so obviously him. The few belongings he cared to take with him he'd tucked gently into his worn leather briefcase. He glanced at his pocket watch and—having to squint a bit more in the darkening room—noticed the time was just past five o'clock. Lenore would be home from her shift at the bookstore by the time he walked through campus to the homey two-story brick house just on the outskirts of town.

He could smell the roast before setting foot on the limestone steps and breathed in deep, mesmerized by the smell of dinner filtering through the fall night air. The bibliophile in him created a description in his mind. *The smoky aroma wafted through the fall night, stirring memories buried long ago.* He shook off the old habit. At the moment it was only a stalling tactic.

"Albert? Is that you?" Lenore's voice from inside broke his concentration. He nearly chuckled to himself until he remembered his current circumstances. How would he tell Lenore?

"Well, Albert, dear, we'll just start our retirement a little earlier than expected," Lenore said when he confessed. She'd wrapped her arms around his thinning waist and laid her head on his chest. "Think of all the time you'll have on your hands. Now, go wash up. Dinner's almost ready."

Weeks passed and Albert still found himself unable to come to terms with the fact that he was no longer a teacher, no longer needed, no longer confined to a typical workday. Men from his generation didn't generally find it appropriate to discuss their feelings—and

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he'd damn sure tried to suck it up—but one night as they sat on the back porch and welcomed the sunset with the change of the seasons, Albert finally said something to Lenore about the depression that seemed to cinch tighter every day that passed.

Lenore was quiet for a moment, her hands even slowed to a stop from the knitting project she'd been working on before she spoke. She liked to keep her hands busy. Something about idle hands she was always fond of saying. “Your mind is too accustomed to being occupied for the majority of the day. You need something to keep you sharp, interested. Say, why don't you try to write that book you always talked about? You never were good at just relaxing,” she said, reaching a hand out to rest it on his. He absentmindedly grasped it and took her words to heart. Leaning back into the chair, he closed his eyes and considered her suggestion. It *had* always been something he'd talked about doing. Why not now?

“You know, that's not a bad idea. What's the worst that could happen?”

PART TWO

Albert had always had an affinity for murder mysteries and thrillers. Late nights and rainy afternoons spent tucked into a worn armchair and beneath the yellowed glow of a floor lamp racing through stories of murder, intrigue, robberies, and deception. And so tonight, the stormy sky rolling in fast and furious, Albert settled down into the floral cushion with a legal pad and well-sharpened pencil and began to jot down a few ideas. The wood paneling that covered the walls made the space seem cozier, darker. The perfect environment for plotting a thriller. His hand hovered above the paper, ready to follow the path of his brain and spill a bestseller onto the page.

Only nothing came.

There were too many questions floating around his mind. *What would lead someone to commit a crime? How does one go about getting a gun? Is picking a lock as easy as they make it look in the movies? How does it feel to kill someone? Is there adrenaline? Terror? Both?* Albert began a list.

Lenore came to say goodnight and Albert was surprised to find he hadn't moved in hours. Frustratingly, he had more questions than scenes, but he figured that was better than a blank page. First thing tomorrow, he decided, he'd go to the library to check out a few books to launch his research. Before he turned out the light, he made sure that his notebook and pen were directly in front of the chair, ready for more ideas first thing in the morning.

The Arcadia Library was small, but still boasted stack after stack of books, novels, stories, and encyclopedias. The scent of well-worn pages full of a mix of facts and adventures floated around amidst the dust mites the light caught from the eastern facing window. Having visited his local library only a handful of times in the past (the high school library was always more convenient and better stocked) Albert stared and pondered the overhead directional signs, fists rested on his hips. Romance. Non-fiction. Biography. Aha. Reference. He marched right towards the aisle, past an elderly woman in the large print section and a teenager loitering in the middle of the entrance hall engrossed in his phone. The array of books was astounding and Albert ran his fingers along the spines, waiting for inspiration to strike so he knew which to grab. So many to choose from...

Thirty minutes later Albert carried his stack of books to the register, avoiding the raised eyebrows of the platinum blonde PTA mom scanning the barcodes. He gave her a sparkling smile and hoped she wouldn't ask any questions. Instead, she packed the books neatly in the canvas bag he found in the laundry room and he was on his way.

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Armed with hundreds and hundreds of pages on crime, police procedure, and criminal psychology, Albert settled back into his well-worn chair to digest his newfound information on psychopaths and serial killers.

Over the next several days, Lenore came and went; Albert always showed up for dinner and listened intently as his wife described her day spent volunteering at the assisted living facility. Then they retired to the den where Lenore worked on her knitting while watching reruns of *Seinfeld* and Albert scoured his library books, taking copious notes in the hopes they'd result in some semblance of an outline. The feeling that he awoke with in the morning, that excitement and energy zipping through his veins, he hadn't felt in years. And it was all thanks to this newfound hobby.

Much to his surprise, it only took Albert a matter of days to draft the outline for his novel, which he decided to call *Revenge*. The title might change, but it was enough to get him going. He wanted to dive right in, but first he knew he needed a synopsis...

Alan Foster, fired from his job as an accountant, decides to exact revenge on those who took everything from him. For the first time in his life, he feels an addictive power from frightening and tormenting those who treated him so poorly. But what he doesn't realize is that what goes around comes around. And revenge is coming for him...

Well, that came easily enough. Albert nodded to himself as he reread the paragraph. And now, for the opening scene...

Alan's anger courses like ice through his veins. His fury knows no bounds. How dare they try to get rid of him! Never one to resort to violence, Alan decides to take the high road (his mother would be so proud) and instead writes a letter to the board of directors.

For the next several hours, Alan carefully composes a well thought out, ten-page (double-spaced) letter that he believes includes enough evidence to either a) reinstate him as a partner at the firm, or b) convince the board to grant him some type of severance from the company. It's completely void of threats or foul language, and after several read-throughs (including one final reading out loud) he's confident that it contains the message he's looking to convey.

Alan carefully folds the sheets of paper, using a fingernail to crease the bends, and slides the letter into a manila envelope.

Alan hasn't left the house in days, but his keys remain in a metal tangle on the kitchen counter. He scoops the keys with his right hand, slides his wallet into his back left pocket, and slams the garage door in defiance. A pair of binoculars he purchased years ago for a bird watching stint is the last item he throws in the passenger seat. Let's see what they think about him now.

The drive to the offices of Renner & Bowen takes significantly less time than Alan is accustomed to, what with the lack of traffic at one in the afternoon on a Tuesday. In fact, it's almost panic-inducing the rate at which he arrives to begin his vengeance. Okay, well not exactly vengeance. More like a legal threat. Threat?

Albert scratched his head, sifting through the thousands of words he knew to find just the right one. Then he remembered the sage advice of so many who came before him: the first draft is to get the story out. Subsequent drafts are for perfecting the words and timing, sentences and descriptions. And so on he strode...

Terrified of being recognized (and possibly desperate), Alan gives himself five minutes of deep breathing and self-encouragement before striding up to the once-familiar entry way. The humiliation of having to be buzzed in through the front door isn't lost on him, especially since Kimberly used to offer him the sweetest of smiles when he strolled through those doors. Five days a week for nearly fifteen years. And now...

"Alan, how can I help you?" Alan is unable to determine if the tremor in her voice is real or a product of his imagination, so he plays the nice guy card.

"Hey, Kimberly. I'm just here to drop off some paperwork for Brent. If you could just see that he receives it, I'd really appreciate it." Alan slides the envelope across the marble desktop and Kimberly tentatively reaches out to grab it with her French tip acrylic nails, pulling the envelope towards her without taking her eyes off Alan. Not wanting to frighten her further (after all, it's not as though she had any impact on his current situation), he presents her with a smile and turns to leave. A glance over his shoulder as he crosses towards the parking lot lets him know that she immediately picked up the phone as he left. Good. Hopefully that means she's calling Brent.

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Alan settles into the driver's seat and pulls the binoculars out of their case, aiming straight for the window he knows to be Brent's office. Sure enough, after five minutes or so, Brent walks through his office door with a few other partners in tow. He tears open the envelope. Alan can practically see Brent's eyes track the words he'd printed mere hours ago. And then, in the kind of slow motion that only happens in the movies, Brent rips Alan's letter in half, and half again, and throws the discarded pieces in the trash, laughing so hard his head rears back. Alan grips the steering wheel, wishing Brent would slip and fall, cracking his head on that ridiculous roll top desk on the way down. Blood coating his unprofessionally long hair, pooling around him, soaking the carpet...

Albert shivered. He hadn't quite intended for the story to get so dark so quickly, but he supposed that's what happened when one used real life as a blueprint. And that got him thinking. How much more realistic could he make *Revenge* if he were to go through the motions of watching those who took everything from him laugh in his face? He was quite sure that wouldn't really happen. Superintendent Cross had no reason to bear Albert any ill will. But he wanted this book to be as realistic as possible. After all, isn't that what made other novels so addicting?

And so, Albert put a slight pause on *Revenge* and crafted a letter to the administrators of Attica High School. Then he opened the door to the storage room in the basement and stood before stacks of dusty boxes. When Lenore caught him digging around in the shelves, she confronted him.

"Albert, what is it you're looking for?" she asked, hands on her hips. Her tone was gently chiding, more concern for Albert hurting himself than the mess he'd made.

"The binoculars. Do you happen to know where they are?"

Lenore dug through all of two boxes before she produced the set and handed it over to her husband. "And just what are you up to?"

"Research," he said, grinning wide.

Her cheeks softened into a smile. "Good for you. Keep working on that book of yours. I don't need you underfoot all day while I try and keep house. And dinner will be ready in an hour!" she shouted from the top of the stairs.

Several days later, Alan relocated from the armchair in the den to the old desk in the basement. Might as well act like a writer.

After two cups of coffee, he set off to imitate Alan's revenge...

When his letter doesn't have the intended intimidation effect, Alan decides to take his revenge one step further. Late one night he breaks

into the main office and locates a stack of HR files in the hopes to find dirt on those who wronged him. It's a tricky business...

Albert paused, tried to imagine what one of those lock-picking kits really looked like. And functioned. Did they even exist? Perhaps he'd overcomplicated things. Maybe it would be much easier to break into a locked building than he thought. And once again, he'd come up against an action that would be much easier to describe if he were able to act it out himself.

"Well, might as well see how much I can figure out on my own," Albert said to the empty room. Lenore was away visiting her sister in Michigan, gone two nights already and wouldn't return for another three. That should allow Albert plenty of time to determine what sort of research he'd need for the remainder of the book and complete it before Lenore's return. He didn't want her worrying incessantly. She did that sometimes. Always fretting and reminding him of things he needed to do, items to pick up at the grocery, which remote to use for the TV. He shook his head just thinking about it. No, he'd work hard over the next few days to complete his tasks. With any luck, he'd have a manuscript draft to show her when she returned.

Attica High School sat alone in the dark with only a select few floodlights to deter mischievous adolescents and infatuated teenagers. Thankfully, Albert was fully knowledgeable on the location of other, more well-hidden motion lights and cameras. His original intent was merely to sit in his car in the parking lot. That way he would be more easily able to describe how one would break into a massive building in the dark. But the longer he sat and stared, inevitably more questions regarding the mechanics of things popped into his racing mind, and so he decided to get out of his car. Sneak around a bit. Just enough to get a better idea of the level of difficulty for his main character, Alan.

The air was thick, hanging around him in a blanket of fog that—if just for a moment—distracted him from the task. He was busy thinking about just the right words to describe the night to make the reader *feel* as if they were in his shoes. Dark, nearly starless except for a few exceptionally bright bursts of light in the heavens. If only there was a Halloween soundtrack in the background, it could be a music video.

As he pondered, Albert wandered the school grounds, examining windows and doors. He carefully avoided the cameras but missed a motion light and the instant it kicked on, it was as though a police chopper hovered above, blinding him with a light so bright he could hardly open his eyes to escape. Albert shielded his face, hoping at least to locate his car, when he heard the sirens. The motion light must have triggered a silent alarm to the police. Dammit. Why couldn't he just pay attention as Lenore always told him to do?

The whine of the sirens seemed at least a ways off so if he could haul himself to the car, he should be able to scoot out of the parking lot before anyone was the wiser. He tripped once, twice, the second time almost crumbling to his knees; his hands scraped the

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edge of the blacktop where it met the grass. Albert cursed himself, his old joints, before finally reaching his car, a non-descript beige Toyota. *Sort of like me*, he thought. The car engine turned over several times before finally catching, and with it, Albert's heartbeat, which had seemed suspended in light of the surprise.

The car tires screeched against the pavement, lurching onto Sycamore Street as Albert hit the gas, the glow of blue and red rotating lights visible around the edge of his rearview mirror. He hadn't even notice he'd been holding his breath until he let it out in a whoosh, his lungs burning from the effort.

With renewed energy, now armed with additional information for *Revenge*—and heightened adrenaline from his near run-in with the law—Albert prepared to write the next chapter. In the morning. All this research was exhausting...

Swiftly and quietly in the dark, Alan copies page after page of the HR personnel files of his former coworkers, supervisor, and board members. And now, he holds in his hands each of their personal addresses and phone numbers. Placing the files back where he found them, Alan sneaks back out of the building, leaving not a single trace that he was there.

Sitting in his car flipping through dozens of black and white pages, Alan tries to be reasonable about his next move. He furious, that's for sure. But threatening these particular individuals (what with their high-powered attorneys and security guards) isn't going to get him anywhere but locked up.

Perhaps the first step is to merely visit their homes, get a feel for what they're like outside of work, understand what kind of private life they lead. Spouses? Lovers? Children? You never know when that kind of information could come in handy. He makes sure to grab the binoculars and a baseball cap as he heads out the following morning before the sun rises...

Though she was still visiting her sister for another few days, Lenore called Albert each afternoon to check in. When she asked (regularly) what he was up to, he only responded with "research". She didn't push him, and he knew he'd at least given her the impression of being happy and occupied. The two things she'd been most concerned about since he was let go.

Taking a break from writing, Albert decided to continue his research. While he didn't technically know where everyone lived, he'd at least visited the homes of Principal Mahoney and Superintendent Cross thanks to holiday parties and other social gatherings

over the years. And so, confidence peaked thanks to his previous escapades, Albert decided to continue his imitation of Alan's adventures...

Parked along the curb, engine rumbling and headlights off, Albert sat in the dark outside Charles Cross's sprawling ranch. If he was honest with himself, he wasn't even sure why he was there. Hell, he could've driven to *any* house to get the feeling of Alan's character. But instead, and for reasons still beyond his understanding, Albert decided to make that night as realistic possible.

"Alright then," he said aloud to himself. "What would Alan do sitting outside Brent's house?" Albert brainstormed for several minutes and decided that destruction of property might be a good first step. Nothing violent, just annoying and potentially costly. Something to cause a scene. It was just the kind of crap Alan would pull. Albert twisted in his seat, searching for appropriate items to throw. When he was a kid, he and his brother threw eggs at Celia Mercury's house because she made fun of them. Eggs. That wasn't a bad idea. Certainly not anything Albert had on hand but surely he could improvise...

It wasn't toilet paper, and certainly not eggs or rocks, but the roll of paper towels wedged beneath the passenger seat would do the trick. A quick glance from side to side down the street to ensure he was alone in the dark and Albert crossed over to Charles' lawn. A rush of adrenaline smothered his nerves and he picked up his pace, grabbing the loose end before throwing it in a flourish over the perfectly trimmed hedges lining the sidewalk. Up and down he ran, until the very last white square settled in a puddle. A light flickered on in a window towards the back of the house and Albert didn't even look behind him as he jumped in the car and sped off down the street.

Alan is done fucking around. They didn't take him seriously when he told them how he felt, so now he's going to show them.

The night is pitch black so when Alan kills the headlights two blocks over from Brent's mansion (he's lucky the subdivision isn't gated), he waits in the car for ten minutes to allow his vision to adjust. He always knew his hunting hobby would come in handy down the road. It was all about giving yourself the best odds against your prey. When he's sure he's as prepared as can be, he grabs the carton of eggs, a broken brick, and a small can of lighter fluid, and marches down the street. Porch lights glow and Alan suspects this is the type of neighborhood with house after house of alarm systems, motion sensors, and cameras so he keeps to the shadows, slinking along to blend in. A dog bark off to his left startles him so much his foot dips off the curb and he curses under his breath at his now-throbbing ankle. The most dangerous moments are traipsing through backyards—sometimes over fences—to make it to his

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destination. You simply never knew what lurked behind people's houses. Could be anything from dogs to sharp yard tools to the business end of a gun.

Finally he arrives, panting more heavily than he'd like to admit, but in one piece all the same. He surveys his target, his arsenal of weapons. Each will draw attention in its own way, so Alan needs to find the most sensible order. Eggs (not quite as loud), then lighter fluid, then brick (loudest noise), then match (blazing light)? That seems reasonable. He doesn't have time to waste going through each scenario. He damn well should have done that on his way over here, but he was too preoccupied with picturing his enemies' faces when they see his destruction. Some kind of joyous mix of terror and respect.

Ready, set, GO!

Albert was so excited by the progress on his book (and how realistic it seemed thanks to his diligent research), that he fell asleep at his desk in the basement, completely forgetting that Lenore was scheduled to arrive home early the following morning.

So when Lenore casually questioned him at breakfast about the notes she saw the previous night when checking on Albert, he had to think quickly before responding.

"Oh, those are just my research notes. It's the best way for me to brainstorm," he said nonchalantly, when really his heart was thudding its way up his throat. What did she see? Was she worried he was going crazy? Was he going crazy?

"Those were some pretty detailed notes, Albert. Is the book coming along?"

"Swimmingly," he said, turning his cheek as she bent to kiss it.

Albert didn't think Lenore suspected anything out of the ordinary, but he committed to being more careful moving forward. He was sure no one would understand that what he was doing was solely for the book. Not because he actually inhabited any ill will towards the individuals. He simply needed to see for himself how his main character would behave. The research was vital to making his story seem more believable. Still, it might be nice to speed things up a bit, so he didn't have to hide his actions any longer than necessary. It was exhausting keeping these secrets from Lenore.

The next day Albert awoke with an idea: instead of small moments here and there, he needed to spend the entire day as Alan. That way he could truly get a feel for what his character would do, how he would behave and react

Once Lenore left for her shift at the bookstore, he changed clothes, brushed his hair in a different way, and made a list of places to go where he could experiment with giving Alan's name instead of his own, making choices Alan would make, and so forth.

His first stop of the morning: renting a car he thought a character like Alan might drive. Albert pondered this heavily over his morning coffee. Alan was an accountant, and he was single so he wouldn't have anyone but himself to support. He wasn't so conservative that he'd only buy American, and he would want something a little more luxurious. A quick internet search later and Albert settled on a BMW M5. Sleek and showy. Alan would certainly want to draw attention to himself. Which made this even trickier as Albert's personality was in sharp contrast. Still, in the name of research...

Starbucks was the first stop. Albert was careful to give Alan's name when the barista asked and ordered a black coffee instead of his typical latte. His confidence notched up after his first performance, he strolled out the door and nearly choked on the coffee. Despite the burning in his throat, he didn't allow himself to spit it out and instead swallowed hard, wondering how on earth people could drink dirt water. Still, the rest of the day held promise, spread out in front of him like a yellow brick road. Next stop: car dealership.

It had been a number of years since Albert had a need to rent a car, so he was a little surprised at the minimal paperwork required to permit someone to walk away with the keys to a *very* nice vehicle.

The Beemer was about as new as they come, only three hundred miles or so according to the odometer, and it was a dark, thick blue the color of the deepest ocean. His hand shook a little as he accepted the keys from the employee and Albert hoped it went unnoticed. It would be horribly embarrassing to have the attendant change his mind about allowing Albert—Alan to the gentleman working behind the counter—to drive away. But he said nothing and Albert turned to leave, grinning from ear to ear. *This should be fun*, he thought to himself.

First things first, he took the Beemer for a little spin, the skill of manipulating a manual transmission coming back quickly, like riding a bike. He floated down country roads, testing out the speed and relishing in the thrum of the engine. This beast certainly wasn't anything like his trusty Toyota.

Eventually his adrenaline slowed and he pulled into a business office parking lot. It was early morning on a Thursday so the lot was nearly full of cars. He pulled around to the far side of the lot, backing into a spot so he could people watch as working professionals made their way into the building.

Watching these people walk into their jobs like everything was normal started to get under his skin, an itch that made him fidget in the soft leather seat. *Why did he have to lose his job? Superintendent Charles never really gave an adequate reason. Sure, the school's budget had been tightening over the last few years, but surely every school was in need of an English teacher.* And then it hit him: Albert made a very good salary for a

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small town teacher. He'd be willing to place bets on the school giving him the boot to hire someone younger and for much less money.

And this simply infuriated him. After everything he'd done for that school, the dedication to the students, volunteering for any number of events, late nights spent grading or drafting lesson plans. There was a possibility he would've been willing to take a pay cut in order to stay on. Why hadn't they bothered asking?

His thoughts turned from contemplative to angry to violent in a matter of seconds. A slippery slope of tangled emotions without an appropriate vent. His anger grew and morphed until he couldn't hold it in anymore and he exploded, punching the steering wheel and simultaneously slamming his foot to the gas. The sound of the horn surprised him as much as the rapid acceleration beneath him. Albert could've sworn he had pulled the e-brake, but apparently not as he helplessly watched the Beemer glide mere feet across the lot in half a second, straight into a black Mercedes sedan.

Now in full panic mode, the car alarm screeching in his ears and creating an even larger sense of distress, he peeled out of the parking lot and back to the car rental company. Later he'd be shocked that he was even able to return to the rental company since he didn't have any recollection of the drive.

The previous gentleman was gone and a middle-aged non-descript brunette had taken his place. Her bored face didn't so much as twitch as Albert breathlessly described a hit-and-run situation while he was in the store. The growing pit in his stomach led Albert to be convinced she wouldn't believe him—had no reason to, really—but luck must've been on his side.

“Not a problem. We'll just run it through the insurance card you left when you signed the paperwork,” she said in a monotone voice, never taking her eyes from the computer screen. Albert couldn't believe his luck. He encouraged her to call if they needed further information from him and she nodded, dismissing him with her silence. Concerned she'd suddenly change her mind, Albert hurried to his car, wondering how long it would take her to realize that the man who rented him the car never asked for proof of insurance...

Having successfully added destruction of property to his list of accomplishments, Alan contemplates his next move. While wandering the aisles at the grocery store he lists off ideas he thinks would bother or hurt Brent the most. And then it hits him: his precious car. To compliment his asshole personality, Brent recently upgraded to a cranberry red Maserati, relishing in all the attention it was getting him, both around the office and around town. Alan only knew that because Brent couldn't shut up about it. In fact, it was all he talked about. Well, that and his mistress, Tatiana.

Alan has already broken into Brent's neighborhood once, so he doesn't think he'll have much difficulty repeating the process. The

question is what to do to Brent's precious car. Alan eventually lands on cutting the brake lines. The speed limit in a five-mile radius of Brent's home is less than thirty-five miles an hour, so barring any unforeseen road conditions, Alan wasn't looking at murder or anything ridiculous. He wasn't even sure if it would be considered attempted murder...

Albert paused for a moment, half his brain wanting to quickly research whether cutting brake lines in a car qualified as attempted murder or just assault of some kind. Better to keep going and edit later. He was just getting to the good stuff...

Alan shook his head. What did it matter? He was already too far into this plan to turn around now. Revenge was dirty and he was just going to have to be okay with a few stains. Damn near impossible to keep your hands clean in the revenge business, actually.

His plotting spans nearly three days as he brainstorms the best time and place to get close to Brent's car without witnesses or raising any suspicion. After a time, he realizes that his best bet is to follow Brent around for a few days to learn his schedule, note the times he walks away from his car, and in what kind of location.

That settled Alan rewards himself with a steak and a bottle of merlot for dinner. A celebration before war.

Albert stopped and noticed the shaking pen in his hand. A tremor he hadn't observed before? Or the fear of being caught from his escapade earlier beginning to radiate through him? It wouldn't do him any good to worry on it. It was late, after hours. All the workers at the car rental store had gone home for the day, as had any investigators or insurance adjusters who might have added his name to a list of suspects...

He shook off the worry and got back to business. The best thing right now was just for him to try to take his mind off those events and focus on Alan's much more difficult task.

Two days into his recognizance and Alan has already confirmed Brent's very simple and easy-to-follow schedule. Five am, wake up; five-thirty, head to the gym for a spin class followed by a series of weightlifting exercises; seven am, head home for a quick shower and cup of coffee before heading out for work, arriving at the office just before eight am. From the looks of it, the gym is going to be Alan's best opportunity to get in and out without being seen. It's still dark outside, most individuals who show up aren't giving any attention

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to their surroundings (stupid, if you ask Alan), and they're all in a rush to get inside and out of the cold air so they aren't liable to notice the shadow of a man quietly hunched over a car in the darkened parking lot. If he times it just right, he has about ten minutes between the end of one class and the beginning of another. Sure, there might be a few randoms who show up, but thankfully for Alan, Brent parks his precious car as far away as possible from other, less careful car owners.

Day Four: Alan has accounted for all possible scenarios, security cameras, curious do-gooders, and surprises, and timed himself to ensure he slips away uncaught within a given time period.

Eyeing his watch, he notes the last straggler for the five-thirty spin class swing the door open. The second the door closes Alan is out of his BMW and under the hood of the Maserati, clipping the steel wires just as the video showed him. Four quick snips with his brand new cable cutters and a quick drop of the hood and he's done it.

Alan rotates his head slowly from side to side, as if stretching his neck, eyeing the area for any onlookers. The parking lot is dark and quiet so he slinks back to his car, turns the engine and pulls out of the parking space. Only to see a dark figure standing on the sidewalk by the front door of the gym, hands in his pockets, hood pulled low over his eyes, watching Alan carefully. Not wanting to allow the figure to take down his license plate, Alan accelerates out of the parking lot and into the dark. He glances once in his rearview mirror, uncharacteristically concerned that the figure has somehow followed him, and ends up clipping the bumper of an abandoned car on the side of the road. The impact is enough to deploy the airbags and Alan shakes off the sway of unconsciousness. He needs to get home. Stumbling out of the car, still slightly disoriented from the crash, he alternates between a walk and a jog, eager to distance himself from the scene of the crime.

Home and slightly numb from the ankles down, Alan puts on a pot of coffee and shakes as he sorts through his wallet for his insurance card. That's his only option, right? Report his car as stolen so when it's found he's nowhere near it. He wonders how good of a look the figure got, if he could give details to a sketch artist or spot Alan in a lineup. Hopefully not and the police will just suspect that whoever stole Alan's car can also be placed at the gym and potentially be fingered as the one who cut Brent's brake lines...

The following morning Albert awoke with a start, flashes of the day before floating back from his memory. He wasn't sure what he should do. Torn between confessing everything to Lenore and hoping she had some brilliant idea he hadn't thought of, destroying all the evidence and pretending it never happened, or continuing with his research with the knowledge that he was *almost done*.

A rumble in his stomach reminded him that he went to bed last night without dinner and thus, should probably put "food" at the top of his to do list. At least he could decide his next move while filling his belly.

The drive-thru line was busier than usual for the time of day and so Albert waited his turn, inching forward as each car rotated through to place their order and move ahead to the windows. The morning was hypnotically calm, a cool breeze wafting through the open window and Albert let his mind wander. Inevitably, it led back to his novel in progress and what other research he really needed to complete in order to improve the plausibility. As he daydreamed, a patron stepped in front of the car and Albert's immediate thoughts were: *What would happen if I let off the gas and let my bumper hit that man?* He pinched his eyes shut, trying to picture the rounded bumper smashing into the man's knee, the joint bending sideways and the man subsequently curling down to grab his injured leg. So what next? The car would roll over him completely? Or perhaps push him out of the way? What if the car in line behind Albert then ran into him? Would the man writhe—

Albert was a solid five minutes into describing the pain the man would suffer when he stopped himself. *Who had he become?* A terror wrapped around his throat. What if he'd opened a Pandora's Box of crime with all his stupid "research"? Why did he start this project to begin with? He was *happy* before. There wasn't anything missing in his life. And now, if things continued down the path he was on, Albert was worried he'd be charged with several misdemeanors, if not felonies. Suddenly the sun felt like a spotlight, sweat beaded along his hairline, and the heat trapped beneath his Colts sweatshirt.

Careful to avoid anything in the path of his bumper thanks to his overactive imagination, Albert pulled out of line without even ordering, having lost his appetite thanks to his rapid downward spiral.

For hours, Albert drove around the country, passing cows and fields, barns and wooden fences, all a blur from the speed and the tears threatening to fall. It was dark before he realized it and he knew he had to go home eventually. He'd never been a religious man, but he prayed this was all a dream and that somehow he'd wake up tomorrow morning still a high school English teacher.

It was late when he got home and Lenore was already asleep. She'd left him a plate in the oven (chicken cordon bleu with mashed potatoes and asparagus) and a post-it note on the

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counter telling him she loved him. The dinner looked and smelled delicious, but Albert wasn't sure he could stomach food at the moment. Instead, he quietly got ready for bed and curled up beside her, terrified of the man he was becoming. He wished he'd never created Alan. That night, Albert dreamed he'd turned into Alan...

After exacting bloody vengeance on his ex-boss and his coworkers, Alan goes on a rampage, taking revenge on all those who have wronged him. Just before Alan punches a mirror and grabs a shard of glass to attack Brent and the others, Albert awakes drenched in sweat...

PART THREE

The moon was hanging high in the sky when Albert tiptoed down the basement stairs, gathering his pad of paper and any notes he'd taken regarding *Revenge*. He first carried them to the safe thinking he'd hide the evidence before he realized it wasn't secure enough. Instead, he'd snuck out to the backyard, his breath puffing out in mists around him when he scattered the papers into the fire pit and dropped the match, Alan and all his felonies literally going up in smoke in front of him.

The sound of their doorbell is what awakens Albert the following morning and his heart thuds against his ribcage. *This is it*, he thought. *They've finally tracked me down*. He knew it was cowardly, but he hung back, allowing Lenore to answer the door, and listened intently from the top of the stairs. Perhaps he was fooling himself, but he only hoped they were there for some reason other than to arrest him.

Slinking down the stairs, he could hardly make out the policeman's voice so he inched closer, the sound of his wife finally coming through clearly.

"Sir, you can't be referring to my husband. Albert was recently diagnosed with dementia and couldn't possibly be to blame for any of the things of which he's accused."

Dementia? Albert scrunched his face in puzzlement. He'd had his regular physical a few months back, same as he did around his birthday every year, but there'd been no mention of dementia...

Albert couldn't make out the officer's response but then heard Lenore again. "Seems like the car rental is the only connection you have and what I can tell you is that our identity was stolen several weeks ago. I imagine the fake name given at the car rental facility is the real culprit and he's running around blaming everything on Albert."

Albert smacked himself in the head with the heel of his hand. *How could he have forgotten that debacle?* It wasn't so much an identity theft as it was their credit card number had been stolen, but as he heard the front door close he realized Lenore had successfully turned their attention away from him. *Did she even know what he'd been up to? What exactly was she up to?*

Still in a daze, Albert managed to walk down the remaining few steps and into the foyer. Lenore was just locking up when she turned around, a sweet smile on her face. What would she say to him? Would she kick him out? Tell him that his adventuring had gone too far? Would she leave him?

"Good morning, dear. Say, how about you work on a nice romance or adventure novel next?" she said, kissing his cheek before disappearing into the kitchen.

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Other books by Jenny Medenwald:

Hell on Heels

The Lucky Strikes

You Belong to Me

I'll Be Watching You

The Lightning Riders

Every Move You Make

She Dreams in Color

Next in Line

Every Breath You Take

About the Author

Jenny was born and raised in the Midwest and has since settled in Indianapolis. Once a Midwest girl, always a Midwest girl, she supposes. Not enough snow for her liking, but at least Indiana experiences all four seasons.

She loves: coffee, the smell of fresh cut grass, red wine, winter (mostly the snow), bonfires, summer concerts, rainy days curled up with a good book, tattoos, all animals, the ID channel (it's research!), the hubs and, of course, writing. Not necessarily in that order.

She hates: obscenely hot weather (sweating without exercise or a bathing suit is just awful), rude people (why?), and bad grammar (come on now). Also not in that order.

Thanks to a copywriting job that didn't actually provide 40 hours of work, Jenny wrote her first book not long after graduating with an English degree from Indiana University. You can only play solitaire so long. Since that magical moment she hasn't been able to STOP coming up with ideas and as such, has several young adult novels published (mostly thriller and fantasy). So safe to assume there are always more coming...