

# The Burial Hour

*Also by Jeffery Deaver*

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Jeffery Deaver

The Burial Hour

  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in the United States of America in 2017 by  
Grand Central Publishing

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 61867 1  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 61865 7  
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 61863 3

Typeset in Sabon MT 11.75/14.75 pt by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

*To the memory of my friend Giorgio Faletti.  
The world misses you.*

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

While the Italian law enforcement agencies I refer to in this novel are real, I do hope the fine members of these organizations, many of whom I've met and whose company I've enjoyed, will forgive the minor adjustments I've made to their procedures and locales, which have been necessary for the timing and plotting of the story.

And I wish to offer my particular thanks to musician and writer, translator and interpreter extraordinaire Seba Pezzani, without whose friendship, and diligence and devotion to the arts, this book could not have been written.

*The winter wind blows and the night is dark;  
Moans are heard in the linden-trees.  
Through the gloom, white skeletons pass,  
Running and leaping in their shrouds.*

– Henri Cazalis, ‘Danse Macabre’

I

# THE HANGMAN'S WALTZ

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

# CHAPTER 1

‘Mommy.’

‘In a minute.’

They trooped doggedly along the quiet street on the Upper East Side, the sun low this cool autumn morning. Red leaves, yellow leaves spiraled from sparse branches.

Mother and daughter, burdened with the baggage that children now carted to school.

In my day . . .

Claire was texting furiously. Her housekeeper had – wouldn’t you know it? – gotten sick, no, *possibly* gotten sick, on the day of the dinner party! *The* party. And Alan had to work late. *Possibly* had to work late.

As if I could ever count on him anyway.

*Ding.*

The response from her friend:

*Sorry, Carmellas busy tonight.*

Jesus. A tearful emoji accompanied the missive. Why not type the goddamn ‘o’ in ‘tonight’? Did it save you a precious millisecond? And remember apostrophes?

‘But, Mommy . . .’ A nine-year-old singsongy tone.

‘A minute, Morgynn. You heard me.’ Claire’s voice was a benign monotone. Not the least angry, not the least peeved or piqued. Thinking of the weekly sessions: Sitting in the chair, not lying back on the couch – the good doctor didn’t even have a couch in his office – Claire attacked her nemeses, the anger and impatience, and she had studiously worked to avoid snapping or shouting when her daughter was annoying (even when she

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behaved that way intentionally, which, Claire calculated, was easily one-quarter of the girl's waking hours).

And I'm doing a damn good job of keeping a lid on it.

Reasonable. Mature. 'A minute,' she repeated, sensing the girl was about to speak.

Claire slowed to a stop, flipping through her phone's address book, lost in the maelstrom of approaching disaster. It was early but the day would vanish fast and the party would be on her like a nearby Uber. Wasn't there someone, *anyone*, in the borough of Manhattan who might have decent help she could borrow to wait a party? A party for ten friggin' people! That was nothing. How hard could it be?

She debated. Her sister?

Nope. She wasn't invited.

Sally from the club?

Nope. Out of town. And a bitch, to boot.

Morgynn had slowed and Claire was aware of her daughter turning around. Had she dropped something? Apparently so. She ran back to pick it up.

Better not be her phone. She'd already broken one. The screen had cost \$187 to fix.

Honestly. Children.

Then Claire was back to scrolling, praying for waitperson salvation. Look at all these names. Need to clean out this damn contact list. Don't know half these people. Don't like a good chunk of the rest. Off went another beseeching message.

The child returned to her side and said firmly, 'Mommy, look—'

'Ssssh.' Hissing now. But there was nothing wrong with an edge occasionally, of course, she told herself. It was a form of education. Children *had* to learn. Even the cutest of puppies needed collar-jerk correction from time to time.

Another ding of iPhone.

Another no.

Goddamn it.

Well, what about that woman that Terri from the office had used? Hispanic, or Latino . . . *Latina*. Whatever those people

called themselves now. The cheerful woman had been the star of Terri's daughter's graduation party.

Claire found Terri's number and dialed a voice call.

'Hello?'

'Terri! It's Claire. How are you?'

A hesitation then Terri said, 'Hi, there. How're you doing?'

'I'm—'

At which point Morgynn interrupted yet again. 'Mommy!'

*Snap.* Claire spun around and glared down at the petite blonde, hair in braids, wearing a snug pink leather Armani Junior jacket. She raged, 'I am on the *phone!* Are you blind? What have I told you about that? When I'm on the phone? What is so f—' Okay, watch the language, she told herself. Claire offered a labored smile. 'What's so . . . *important*, dear?'

'I'm trying to tell you. This man back there?' The girl nodded up the street. 'He came up to another man and hit him or something and pushed him in the trunk.'

'*What?*'

Morgynn tossed a braid, which ended in a tiny bunny clip, off her shoulder. 'He left this on the ground and then drove away.' She held up a cord or thin rope. What was it?

Claire gasped. In her daughter's petite hand was a miniature hangman's noose.

Morgynn replied, '*That's* what's so—' She paused and her tiny lips curled into a smile of their own. '*Important.*'

## CHAPTER 2

‘Greenland.’

Lincoln Rhyme was staring out the parlor window of his Central Park West town house. Two objects were in his immediate field of vision: a complicated Hewlett-Packard gas chromatograph and, outside the large nineteenth-century window, a peregrine falcon. The predatory birds were not uncommon in the city, where prey was plentiful. It was rare, however, for them to nest so low. Rhyme, as unsentimental as any scientist could be – especially the criminal forensic scientist that he was – nonetheless took a curious comfort in the creatures’ presence. Over the years, he’d shared his abode with a number of generations of peregrines. Mom was here at the moment, a glorious thing, sumptuously feathered in brown and gray, with beak and claws that glistened like gunmetal.

A man’s calm, humorous voice filled the silence. ‘No. You and Amelia cannot go to Greenland.’

‘Why not?’ Rhyme asked Thom Reston, an edge to his tone. The slim but sturdy man had been his caregiver for about as long as the line of falcons had resided outside the old structure. A quadriplegic, Rhyme was largely paralyzed south of his shoulders, and Thom was his arms and legs and considerably more. He had been fired as often as he’d quit but here he was and, both knew in their hearts, here he would remain.

‘Because you need to go someplace *romantic*. Florida, California.’

‘Cliché, cliché, cliché. Might as well go to Niagara Falls.’ Rhyme scowled.

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘I’m not even responding.’

‘What does Amelia say?’

‘She left it up to me. Which was irritating. Doesn’t she know I have better things to think about?’

‘You mentioned the Bahamas recently. You wanted to go back, you said.’

‘That was true at the time. It’s not true any longer. Can’t one change one’s mind? Hardly a crime.’

‘What’s the real reason for Greenland?’

Rhyme’s face – with its prominent nose and eyes like pistol muzzles – was predatory in its own right, much like the bird’s. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Could it be that there’s a practical reason you want to go to Greenland, a *professional* reason? A *useful* reason?’

Rhyme glanced at the single-malt scotch bottle sitting just out of reach. He was largely paralyzed, yes. But surgery and daily exercise had returned to him some ability to move his right arm and hand. Fate had helped too. The beam that had tumbled upon his neck from a crime scene many years ago and severed and crushed many nerves had left a few outlying strands intact, if injured and confused. He could grasp objects – like single-malt scotch bottles, to pick a random example – but he could not rise from his complex wheelchair to fetch them if Thom, playing nursemaid, kept them out of goddamn reach.

‘Not cocktail hour yet,’ the aide announced, noting the arc of his boss’s vision. ‘So, Greenland? ’Fess up.’

‘It’s underrated. Named “Greenland” while much of it’s barren. Not the least verdant. Compare Iceland. Quite green. I like the irony.’

‘You’re not answering.’

Rhyme sighed. He disliked being transparent and hugely disliked being caught being transparent. He would appeal to truth. ‘It seems that the Rigspolitiet, the Danish police, have been doing rather important research into a new system of horticultural spectrographic analysis in Greenland. A lab in Nuuk. That’s the capital, by the way. You can situate a sample in a much narrower geographic area than with standard systems.’ Rhyme’s brows rose involuntarily. ‘Nearly the cellular level. Imagine! We think all plants are the same—’

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‘Not a sin of mine.’

Rhyme grouched, ‘You know what I mean. This new technique can narrow down a target area to three meters!’ He repeated, ‘Imagine.’

‘I’m trying to. Greenland – no. And has Amelia actually deferred to you?’

‘She will. When I tell her about the spectrograph.’

‘How about England? She’d love that. Is that show on still, the one she likes? *Top Gear*? I think the original is off the air but I heard there’s a new version. She’d be great on it. They let people go out on the racetrack. She’s always talking about driving a hundred and eighty miles an hour on the wrong side of the road.’

‘England?’ Rhyme mocked. ‘You’ve just lost your argument. Greenland and England offer the same degree of romance.’

‘You’ll find some disagreement there.’

‘Not from the Greenlanders.’

Lincoln Rhyme did not travel much. The practical consequences of his disability added a layer of complication to journeys but physically, his doctors reported, there was no reason not to hit the road. His lungs were fine – he’d weaned himself off a ventilator years ago, the chest scar present but not prominent – and as long as such matters as the piss ‘n’ shit details – his words – and low-chafing clothing were attended to, there was little chance of being afflicted by the quad’s bane: autonomic dysreflexia. A good portion of the world was disabled-accessible now – with most enterprises, from restaurants to bars to museums, offering ramps and special restrooms. (Rhyme and Sachs had shared a smile when Thom pointed out an article in the paper about a school that had recently installed a disabled ramp and bathroom; the place taught only one thing: tap dancing.)

No, much of Rhyme’s reluctance to travel and his reclusiveness were simply because he was, well, a recluse. By nature. Working in his laboratory – the parlor here, filled with equipment – and teaching and writing for scientific journals appealed to him far more than tired sights polished for tourists.

But, given what was on his and Sachs’s agenda in the next few

weeks, a trip outside Manhattan was necessary; even he admitted that one could not honeymoon in one's own hometown.

Plans for trips to labs specializing in horticultural spectrometry, or locales of wooing romance, were, though, put on hold for the moment; the door buzzer sounded. Rhyme glanced at the security video and thought: Well.

Thom rose and returned a moment later with a middle-aged man in a camel-tan suit, which he might have slept in, though he probably hadn't. He moved slowly but with little hesitation, and Rhyme thought that pretty soon he'd be able to discard the cane, which was, however, a pretty nifty accessory. Black with a silver head in the shape of an eagle.

The man looked around the lab. 'Quiet.'

'Is. A few small private jobs recently. Nothing fun. Nothing exciting. Nothing since the Steel Kiss killer.' A recent perpetrator had taken to sabotaging household items and public conveyances – with tragic and occasionally gruesome results.

NYPD detective Lon Sellitto, in the Major Cases Division, had been Rhyme's partner – before Rhyme had moved up to captain and taken over the Crime Scene Unit. Nowadays Sellitto would occasionally hire Rhyme to consult on cases in which special forensic expertise was needed.

'What're you looking at? Tan is all I had.' Sellitto waved toward his suit.

'Daydreaming,' Rhyme said. 'I wasn't looking at anything.'

Not true, but he hadn't been regarding either the curious color of or the savage wrinkles in the suit. He was noting, with satisfaction, that Sellitto was recovering well following the attack on him by poison, which had caused major nerve and muscle damage – hence, the cane. While the detective was always fighting his weight, Rhyme thought he looked better on the portly side, like now. The sight of a gaunt, gray Lon Sellitto had been alarming.

'Where's Amelia?' Sellitto asked.

'In court. Testifying in the *Gordon* case. On the calendar first thing. Should be over with soon. Then she was going shopping. For our trip.'

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‘Buying herself a trousseau? What is that anyway?’

Rhyme had no idea. ‘Something about weddings, clothing. I don’t know. But she’s got a dress already. Something frilly. Blue. Or maybe pink. Today she’s shopping for me. What’s so goddamn funny, Lon?’

‘Picturing you in a tuxedo.’

‘Just sweats and a shirt. Maybe a tie. I don’t know.’

‘Tie? And you didn’t complain?’

True, Rhyme had little patience for what he considered affectation. But this occasion was different. For all her edge and edginess and her need of speed and blunt firearms, her passion for tactical solutions, Sachs had a splinter of teen girl within her and she was enjoying the game of wedding planning. This included shopping for a whatever-the-hell-it-was trousseau and a romantic honeymoon, and if that pleased her, by God, Rhyme was more than happy to accommodate.

Though he really hoped he could convince her about Greenland.

‘Well, tell her to shop later. I need her to run a scene. We’ve got a situation.’

A ping resounded within Rhyme the way a submarine’s sonar detects something unexpected off the port bow.

He texted Sachs and received no response. ‘Maybe on the stand, testifying. Tell me more.’

Thom appeared in the doorway – Rhyme hadn’t realized he’d left. The aide said, ‘Lon, coffee? Cookies? I’ve been baking. I’ve got a couple of different kinds. One is—’

‘Yes, yes, yes.’ It was Rhyme answering. ‘Bring him something. Make a decision *yourself*. I want to hear his story.’

*Situation . . .*

‘Proceed,’ he told Sellitto.

‘Anything chocolate,’ Sellitto called to Thom’s back.

‘Easily arranged.’

‘Kidnapping, Linc. Upper East Side. Apparently one adult male snatched another.’

‘Apparently? What requires interpretation?’

‘The only wit was nine years old.’

‘Ah.’

‘Perp grabs vic, tosses him into a car trunk. Takes off.’

‘The girl is sure about this? Not a figment of her overactive little imagination, stoked by watching too much television, ruining her thumbs on video games, reading too many Hello Pony stories?’

‘Hello Kitty. Ponies are a different book.’

‘Did Mommy or Daddy confirm?’

‘Morgynn, the girl, was the only one who saw. But I think it’s legit. She found a calling card he’d left behind.’ Sellitto held up his phone and displayed a photo.

At first Rhyme couldn’t make out the image. It was a picture of a dark shape, thin, lying on a sidewalk.

‘It’s a—’

Rhyme interrupted. ‘Noose.’

‘Yep.’

‘Made out of?’

‘Not sure. Girl said he set it on the spot where he got the vic. She picked it up but the responding set it back in the same place he’d left it, more or less.’

‘Great. I’ve never worked a scene contaminated by a nine-year-old.’

‘Relax, Linc. All she did was pick it up. And the responding wore gloves. Scene’s secure, waiting for somebody to run it. Somebody, as in Amelia.’

The noose was made out of dark material, which was stiff, since segments were not flush with the pavement, as would be the case with more limp fibers. From the size of the poured-concrete sidewalk panel, the noose was about twelve to fourteen inches long in total, the neck hoop about a third of that.

‘The wit’s still on scene. With Mommy. Who isn’t very happy.’

Neither was Rhyme. All they had to go on was a nine-year-old schoolgirl with the observational skills and perception of a . . . well, nine-year-old schoolgirl.

‘The vic? Rich, politically active, connected with OC, record?’

Sellitto said, ‘No ID yet. Nobody reported missing. A few minutes after the snatch somebody saw a phone fly outta a car – dark sedan, nothing more. Third Avenue. Dellray’s boys’re running

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it. We find out who, we find out why. Business deal gone bad, vic has information somebody wants, or the old standby. For-profit ransom.'

'Or it's a psycho. There *was* the noose, after all.'

'Yeah,' Sellitto said, 'and the vic just happened to be WTWP.'

'What?'

'Wrong time, wrong place.'

Rhyme scowled once more. 'Lon?'

'It's going around the department.'

'Flu viruses – not viri, by the way – go around the department. Idiomatic expressions do not. Or should not, at least.'

Sellitto used the cane to rise to his feet and aimed his bulky form toward the tray of cookies that Thom was setting down, like a Realtor seducing prospective buyers at a condominium open house. The detective ate one, then two, then another, nodded approval. He poured himself a cup of coffee from a silver pitcher and spilled in artificial sweetener, his concession to the battle against calories being to sacrifice refined sugar for pastry.

'Good,' he announced through a mouthful of cookie. 'You want one? Some coffee?'

The criminalist's eyes swiveled instinctively toward the Glenmorangie, sitting golden and alluring on the high shelf.

But Lincoln Rhyme decided: No. He wanted his faculties about him. He had a feeling that the girl's observations were all too accurate, that the kidnapping had occurred just as she had described it and that the macabre calling card was a taunting message of a death soon to be.

And perhaps more after that.

He texted Amelia Sachs once again.

## CHAPTER 3

A plop, as water fell from ceiling to floor.

Ten feet.

Every four seconds.

*Plop, plop, plop.*

The resulting sound wasn't a splash. The floor of this old, old factory, now abandoned, was scarred from the passage of metal and wooden objects, and the water didn't accumulate in pools but eased away in crevices and cuts, as patterned as an old man's face.

*Plop, plop.*

Moans, too, as the chill autumn breeze slipped over the mouths of ducts, pipes and vents, the way you'd blow across a bottle neck to make a hooing sound. Didn't see that much anymore, no, you didn't. Because kids used to do it mostly with soda bottles, which were now plastic, not glass. Plastic didn't work very well. Beer bottles you could use but adults didn't get any pleasure out of the hooo-hooing sounds.

Stefan had once written a piece of music to be played on Mountain Dew bottles, each filled with a different amount of water to produce a chromatic scale of twelve notes. He had been six years old.

The tones the factory now made were a C sharp, an F, a G. There was no rhythm, as the wind was irregular. Also:

Distant traffic, a constant.

More distant exhalations of jet airplanes.

Not distant at all: a rat skittering.

And, of course, the most captivating sound of all: the rasping breath of the man sitting in a chair in the corner of this dim storage room. Hands bound. Feet bound. Around his neck, a noose. The string Stefan had left on the sidewalk as a grisly announcement of the kidnapping was a cello string; this noose

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was made of two longer strings, bound together to extend the length – they were the lowest and thickest strings of an upright double bass, one of those instruments that made the happy transition from classical music to jazz. Made of mutton serosa – the lining of a sheep’s intestine – these were the most expensive musical strings on the market. Each had cost \$140. They produced the richest tone, and there were world-class violinists, cellists and bass players who would never think of playing a baroque piece on anything but this. Gut strings were far more temperamental than metal or nylon strings and might go out of tune at the slightest change in temperature or humidity.

For Stefan’s immediate purpose, though, the strings’ intolerance of humidity was irrelevant; for hanging someone, they worked just great.

The loop hung loosely around the man’s neck and the tail rested on the floor.

Stefan shivered from excitement, the way any pilgrim would at the beginning of his quest. He shivered from the chill too, even though he was an insulated man – in all senses: long, dense curly dark hair dropping well past his ears, and full beard, and a silken pelt of chest and arm hair. And he was swathed in protective clothing too: a white sleeveless undershirt beneath a heavy dark-gray work shirt, a black waterproof jacket and dungarees, also dark gray. They were like cargo pants but not cargo pants because the place where he’d been living until recently did not permit anyone to have pockets. Stefan was thirty years old but appeared younger, thanks to the smooth, baby-fat skin.

The room these two men were in was deep within the sprawling place. He’d set it up yesterday, moving in a table and chairs he’d found in other parts of the factory. A small battery-powered light. His musical, recording and video equipment too.

The watch on his wrist revealed the time to be 10:15 a.m. He should get started. He’d been careful but you never knew about the police. Had that little girl seen more than it seemed she had? The license plate was smeared with mud but someone might have noted the first two letters. Maybe enough to track the vehicle to the long-term parking lot at JFK airport, where it had been until

yesterday. Using algorithms, using deductions, using interview skills . . . they might put an identification together.

Can't have that now, can we? Have to be careful.

I am, don't worry.

Stefan believed he might have spoken these words aloud. Sometimes he wasn't sure if he *thought* his messages to Her or *spoke* them. Wasn't sure if Her responses were real or not, either.

He laid the equipment out in front of him, examining keyboards and computer, cords and plugs. Switches clicked on. Hard drives hummed, adding sound.

*Plop.*

*Moan.*

*Hum.*

Good.

Ah, and the rat, too.

*Skitter.*

As long as there were sounds, distracting sounds, seductive sounds, Stefan had a good chance of keeping the Black Screams away.

So far, so good.

And now to add one more sound, one of his own making. He played a melody on the Casio. He was not an exceptional musician but, given his love, his addiction, his obsession, he knew his way around a keyboard. He ran through the music once, then twice. These were good renditions. He tried it again.

Stefan didn't pray, as such, but he did send a thought of thanks to Her for the inspiration to pick this composition.

Now he rose and walked to the blindfolded man, who was wearing dark business slacks and a white business shirt. His jacket was on the floor.

Stefan was holding a digital recorder. He clicked it on and held it close to the man's mouth. 'Don't say anything.'

The man nodded and remained silent. Stefan gripped the noose and pulled it taut. With his other hand, he held the recorder in front of the man's mouth. The choking noise issuing from his lips was delightful. Complex, varied in tone and modulation.

Almost, you might say, musical.