

DEATH WARRANT by Bryan Johnston

EXCERPT

Prologue

Jesus, thought Joey, stopping to catch his breath while simultaneously chastising himself for using the Lord's name in vain. They'd said the hike was challenging, even by hardy Norwegian mountaineering standards. But he didn't realize "challenging" was code for "your lungs will be bleeding." Probably not too demanding for a younger person, but he grudgingly admitted he no longer fit that demographic. Those advancing "middle-years" made his little adventures even more important to him. He took a swig from his water bottle and checked his watch. He'd been making good time. "That's why you trained for six months, dummy," he reminded himself for the umpteenth time, not that anyone could hear him. He'd seen a few hikers coming back down the mountain, but to his surprise he hadn't seen anyone else making the ascent. He'd purposefully picked the least touristy season that didn't include several feet of snow to make his bucket list trip, but still, he'd expected to see a few more people. Not that he was complaining; he was enjoying the solitude. With one last cleansing breath and the taste of copper dissipating from his mouth, he got to his feet for the final push. On the climb he'd taken to talking to himself, carrying on conversations out loud, playing the part of all parties involved. He'd found it highly entertaining, and it helped keep his mind off the lactic acid burning in his thighs over the five-hour climb.

"Why in heaven's name does it have to be Norway? It's so far away," Joey said out loud in the closest resemblance of his wife Joanie's patented exasperated tone. He'd had thirty years of marriage to fine tune it.

"Because that's where the Trolltunga is, hon!" Joey replied.

He vividly remembered when the holo-brochure had arrived. "Have you ever seen anything like it?" he'd asked her. She hadn't. The 3D image projected by the brochure had been impressive, and even his wife couldn't deny that. The Trolltunga was a rock formation that sprang 2,000 feet straight up above the north end of a Norwegian lake whose name Joanie never could pronounce and was

topped with a cliff that jutted out preposterously far, like an enormous plank of a pirate ship. Watching the image slowly rotating over the brochure on their dining table had sealed the deal.

Joey could taste the copper again but powered through. He knew he was almost there.

“Should have brought the stick, genius,” he grumbled to himself. “That’s what hiking staffs are for.” But he’d been afraid some careless baggage handler would damage it. The staff had been too important to him. The entire Boy Scout Troop had carved their names into it along with the final inscription, “Thanks for all your years of service.” He wasn’t sure who was prouder of the gift, him, or Joanie. Regardless, the staff would have been a help.

His research showed that the round-trip climb would be about 22 kilometers—45,000 steps—and the equivalent of climbing and descending 341 floors. He guessed he was right around floor 170. Almost there.

As he rounded a large boulder, he thought back on all his training, preparation, and admittedly, the inconveniences he’d put Joanie through, and recited one of his wife’s favorite admonitions, “Joey Dahl, I swear you will be the death of me.” But then what he saw stopped him in his tracks. At that moment Joey felt complete validation. He also instantly understood what made the Trolltunga such a draw for thrill seekers. The cliff’s edge reached out so far that the photo op was one for the books, the type of picture you frame and hang in your den. A conversation starter.

Bragging rights. The other church deacons were going to be sick of hearing about it.

“Oh, babe,” Joey said, more to himself this time, “I wish you were here to see this.” But even six months ago he knew that was never going to happen, what with her condition, but she was never going to begrudge him this trip. He’d been dreaming about it for years.

It took a certain person, one immune to heights and vertigo, to walk to that cliff’s edge and look out. Joey was one of those people. He set up the small, portable tripod he’d brought and mounted his mobile device, his optic, to take pictures and video remotely. He couldn’t wait to show it to Joanie and the kids. Through a little trial and error, he eventually got the framing right and strode out to the edge. He turned to face the camera and spread his arms wide in a “look at what I achieved” pose. The optic’s camera lens clicked once, twice, three times.

And then the bullet hit him right above the left eye.

Joey Dahl dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut, toppling backwards off the cliff, falling into space. Like a base jumper without a wingsuit or parachute. His body tumbled down the

sheer cliff face, yet he never quite hit the side. His body stayed clear of the rocky wall, due to the sharp drafts from the lake below. The constant pushing away from the wall, managed to keep him undamaged, bullet wound aside, until he finally met the ground below, by a lake whose name his wife never could pronounce. By then, however, he'd been long dead.

Six thousand miles away, a room full of people in finely tailored suits and skirts were watching intently, applauding with their approval. One of them, a woman with severe bangs, all business, smoothly pivoted from the wall of monitors, her eyes drawn to another, smaller screen where a series of numbers were appearing in real time. She allowed herself a trace of a smile. The ratings were in. Perhaps not matching those of the pop star's demise from last summer, but still better than management had expected. Enough to trigger her bonus. Maybe she'd take the kids to Six Flags.

Chapter 1

JANUARY

If you're going to be summarily executed, you'd at least want the place that's arranging your death to have a couple of nice rugs. Just for appearances. Nobody wants to be offed by some fly-by-night outfit that considers Ikea the height of corporate décor. As it turns out, I needn't have worried. I really didn't know what to expect, they don't show the offices on the commercials. I knew it probably wouldn't be like walking into a tax-prep firm on a strip mall—some tiny space filled with cheap furniture, all pleather and particleboard. It is anything but, and instantly fills me with a good vibe and reinforces my belief that I am making the right choice. The entry doors are an artistic combination of rich amber-hued wood, glass, and burnished metal, most likely brass, but buffed dull to appear understated. Classy. You feel like you are walking into a place of importance, where critical decisions are made on a by-minute basis, which I guess they are.

Upon entering I'm greeted by a kindly gentleman with open arms. "Welcome, Ms. Percival, we're so pleased to see you," he says with utter sincerity. "Our receptionist will take care of your every need."

It takes me a second to realize the man is a hologram. I take a step closer and poke at it, which the holographic gentleman tolerates with a smile. Only the subtlest flicker gives away its true identity. From more than a few feet away you'd swear the man was flesh and blood. Holos are common these days, but this one takes the cake. The technology they have here obviously is top shelf stuff. Based on the greeting, they had me scanned and identified the moment I stepped through the front door.

I immediately pick up on the smell: lavender. It's subtle but noticeable. Upon deeper consideration, the perfect scent. It's probably the world's most relaxing smell. Smells have a stronger link to memories than any of the senses, and I can feel myself imprinting the scent with the experience. What did my high school teacher always say? Smells ring bells. True that. I'll probably go to my grave associating that smell with this place. Ha, go to my grave, bad choice of words for this visit.

The lobby floor is a combination of real hardwoods and Persian rugs so soft you instantly want to take your shoes off for the sheer sensory experience. The space feels more like the lobby of a four-star hotel: tasteful, elegant, contemporary without pressing the issue. The woman behind the reception desk is perfectly in line with the ambience. She is probably in her late thirties, attractive but non-threatening. I like the cut of her jib, as my mom used to say. Her clothes are professional but still

fashionable. If I were to guess, they were most likely chosen for her by a consultant, like news anchors choose their clothes to project an image of trustworthiness. When I approach the desk, her face lights up with one of the most endearing smiles I have ever witnessed. I lean in a bit and squint to make sure she's real. Yep, carbon-based life form.

"How may I help you?" she asks, and I absolutely believe she means it. "I'm here to get whacked." I mimic guns with my fingers, firing off a couple rounds at her before blowing the non-existent smoke from the barrels. When I'm nervous I say stupid stuff. Stupid or snarky. Stupid, snarky, or sarcastic. I've been attempting to pare it down to just one for the last ten years with mixed results. I try to sound like being here is no biggie, but my voice sounds shrill in my ears, and I seriously doubt my anti-perspirant is up to the challenge.

The woman, unfazed by my cavalier attitude, nods with a soft, endearing smile. "Of course. You can speak with one of our sales associates. Please take a seat. Someone will be with you in a moment."

She gestures to a cozy waiting area with a half-dozen comfortable looking chairs, one of them occupied by a distinguished looking woman idly paging through an issue of *Vanity Fair*, one of the last media hold outs that still clings to the quaint notion of publishing on paper. I can see an A-list actress of some substance gracing the cover, dressed in a bold red riding jacket, khaki jodhpurs and knee-high boots. I can practically hear the baying of the hounds. The actress is currently all the rage and the expected shoo-in come award time for her role in a recent high-profile drama that has captured the country's imagination. A period piece that boasts betrayal, star-crossed love, and overcoming staggering odds in the face of adversity. Or at least that's what the trailers led me to believe.

I turn back to the receptionist. "So, how's it work?" "Pardon?" she asks innocently.

"I mean, do you get to choose? Sniper shot? Blown up? Pitched into a vat of acid? There was one episode, brutal, they dropped a piano on the guy, like in a cartoon." I also yap when I'm nervous.

The receptionist's smile doesn't waver. "I remember it well." She gives me a polite nod and says, "Your sales associate will answer all of your questions," and then tips her head in the direction of where the woman with the magazine is sitting.

With a wink I fire off another round at the receptionist, holster my hands in my pockets, and turn toward the waiting area. Jesus, she must think I'm a moron. I take a seat several chairs away from my silver-haired counterpart. She glances up at me and gives the tiniest of polite smiles— held a beat longer than is socially necessary—before turning her attention back to her magazine. In that singular

moment we become confederates, there for the same reason, and she is acknowledging to me with that brief exchange that regardless of my race, sex, social standing, or political leanings, that I—we—are about to become members of a rather unique club. All for one, one for all.

My distinguished clubmate looks distinguished, well, prominent. The cut of her suit speaks of dinner parties of the well-heeled, where talk of debutantes and cotillions is not simply language of earlier generations. And that's what's puzzling. I'd simply assumed this place was not frequented by the 1 percent. I mean, why would they need to resort to this measure? They're all loaded. They've got the means to provide for their family members without going to the extremes this joint provides. It then dawns on me that maybe not everyone here is doing this for the money. But why else? Fame? Boredom?

A moment later, a slim middle-aged woman with flawless hair approaches and addresses my clubmate. She rises to her feet, shakes the proffered associate's hand, and off they go. It is now just me and the glossy A-lister.

I don't even have a chance to pick up the magazine before my appointed sales associate arrives to greet me. If there ever was a physical embodiment of warmth and compassion, he stands before me. He introduces himself as Benjamin and I can no sooner call him Ben than flap my arms and fly to the moon. To call him Ben would be an affront. This is Benjamin, the type of man who walks one step behind his wife, who enters a room of strangers with his hand on the small of her back to let her know he's right there with her. Benjamin is clearly a man who listens more than he speaks and gives careful consideration before he does. This is my three-second impression.

Benjamin appears to be maybe a decade older than me, in the early throes of middle age with salt-and-pepper hair, receding, in baseball terms, at the power-alleys of his forehead.

He wears a nice-fitting suit of deep blue with the thinnest of pinstripes. His shoes, brown, match his eyes. It's the eyes that support everything. His whole demeanor, his warmth, radiates from those dark twins. But I can see upon further review that the smile that rides along with them is what seals the deal. The smile and eyes work in tandem. One without the other, strong, but together, unimpeachable. I would buy a Rolex out of the trunk of this guy's car.

Benjamin shakes my hand and asks me to join him in his office where we can chat. That's what he says^¾ chat, not talk. The perfect word to set my mind at ease.

Just two pals.

His office is small but nicely appointed and has a window overlooking a wooded urban park. The lavender scent follows us into the room, which I appreciate. Benjamin offers me a seat in front of his desk and takes the chair behind it. The desk is tidy, with nothing but a couple of framed family photos, a World's Most Okayest Employee mug, and a glass computer tablet mounted on a small, low-profile frame to keep it upright when he chooses to use it in that position.

Benjamin steepled his hands on his desk and fixes me with those molten lava cake eyes.

"So, Frances," he begins. Not Ms. Percival, but Frances. "You'd like to learn more about . . ." He glances at his glass tablet and looks up with a small smile. ". . . how to get whacked."

"Pretty much. And by the way, you can call me Frankie."

"Then Frankie it is. And by the way, it's okay, you can call it by its official name, a death warrant."

"Fair enough."

"How much do you know about the process?" Benjamin asks evenly. He says process with a long o. Benjamin has what used to be called a Trans-Atlantic accent. You'd hear it all the time in ancient movies with actors like Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant. It's halfway between a British and American accent. Like something taught at a New England boarding school. It sounds divine.

I shrug. "Not much. How come there's hardly anything about it on the Internet? I mean, that's pretty crazy that you're able to keep it so hush-hush."

Benjamin nods and smiles compassionately. "It is rather amazing, isn't it? You'd think someone would talk. Somebody always talks. I'm embarrassed to say I really don't know."

And I believe him.

"And yet virtually nothing shows up in the media," I observe, probably a little more pointedly than intended.

But Benjamin doesn't seem to mind. He holds his hands out, shoulders arched in the classic Beats me pose. "Those are the interior machinations of the machine that are a mystery even to me. Ask me what time it is, and I can tell you. Ask me how the watch works, and I can't. Much of the information is purely on a need-to-know basis."

"And you don't need to know?" I ask.

"Way above my paygrade. We're highly compartmentalized." He can see my skepticism. "Rest assured; I can answer most of your questions."

He settles back into his chair and that's when it occurs to me. The eyes. Brown. The receptionist's eyes were brown. The other sales associate's eyes were brown. Don't ask me how I notice this, it's what I do. I notice things. Little stuff that often is of no consequence. That's why I was always a fan of Sherlock Holmes mysteries. He noticed things. While others saw, he observed. I thought that was cool. We were kindred spirits. Of course, his gift of observation made nonsense of mine, but the one thing I have going for me is that I am nonfiction. I live in the real world. What I don't have is the benefit of Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle ensuring that I can spot a scuff on a shoe and divine that the culprit had brushed it against a curb in a rush to catch the number five bus. It's bullshit, but it's entertaining bullshit. Instead, my ability to notice things on a high but more realistic level has made me reasonably successful in my career—I'm a mentalist. My job is to observe. Take note. Listen and connect dots that others don't see. I suppose I could be a cop or a private investigator, but that seems like work. Being a mentalist, on the other hand, is fun. We're like magicians, but without the corny patter. Do I really have the gift of divination and clairvoyance? Sometimes it sure as hell feels like it. Let's just say I've got a knack. However, a byproduct of my keen perception is an overactive imagination. I'll sometimes see things for more than they are. But it does make life more interesting.

Back to the brown eyes. Of course. Brown eyes are soft, they're compassionate. Blue eyes are striking, but in a place like this you don't want striking, you want everything to be the Xanax of appearance. Calming. I'll bet every public-facing employee here has brown eyes. In fact, I would imagine they're all screened by a team of consultants to within an inch of their lives to fit specific criteria. A place like this probably only hires people who radiate kindness. I wonder how they measure that? There's got to be some way to quantify a person's level of kindness and compassion beyond spending five minutes in a room with them. With today's technology, I'm sure someone's found a way to figure out the analytics. To make it measurable.

Benjamin breaks into a smile no less cozy than an electric blanket. "So, what would you like to know?"

"Uh, how about you tell me what you can, and I'll ask questions as they come to me."

Benjamin gives a short nod. "Certainly. Let's begin with the 30,000-foot view, and for clarity's sake, I will use vernacular that I'm technically not supposed to: You will be killed, and your death will be televised."

"Pretty damn clear vernacular," I say.

Benjamin is all smiles. “I know, right? Gets to the meat of it pretty quick.”

“What did you mean by vernacular you’re not supposed to use?” I ask.

“Part of our internal policies. Company culture.” Benjamin says amiably. “Our programs are to be referred to as ‘episodes,’ not ‘shows.’ There are no ‘victims,’ but ‘participants’ or ‘souls.’ And all ‘participants’ will be shown the highest respect and dignity.”

“Mighty neighborly of you.”

“Thank you,” says Benjamin, looking sincerely appreciative of my comment, despite its snark. “Let me see if I can guess your next question,” he asks. “How does it work?”

“You’ve done this before, Benjamin.”

“Once or twice. We’ve got plenty of packages to choose from, depending on your budget, time frame, and other factors.”

“What kind of factors?”

Benjamin turns his eyes to his glass tablet, makes a few taps and swipes to call up the necessary information. “Do you care if it’s clean or messy? Quick and painless or would you rather feel the experience? Do you want a run-of-the-mill termination or something more exotic?”

“Who the hell wants to feel the experience of dying?”

“You’d be surprised. There are some people who want to embrace their last moments on earth. I’m told they think that’s when they feel most alive.”

“That’s whacko.”

“Preaching to the choir here, Frankie.” Just a couple of pals. “What do you mean by exotic?”

Benjamin leans back in his chair and stares up at the ceiling for a moment, collecting his thoughts. “Well, there was one we did a few years back that struck me as outside the lines, as well as being spectacularly challenging.”

“What was that?”

“Piranha attack. And he lived in the city.” “No shit?”

“That one took some serious production to pull off. We had to bring in twice our normal crew. But it was worth it; the ratings were outstanding.”

“How outstanding?” I ask.

“Are you familiar with ratings?” “A little.”

Benjamin taps on his glass tablet. “Piranha attack 48.8 rating, 71 share.”

He informs me that a rating point is a percentage of the total viewing population being polled and the share is the percentage of that population that's watching at that moment. So that meant almost half of the country was watching and 70 percent of those who had their TVs, computers, or optics on were tuned in. I wonder what the other 30 percent were watching.

"Holy crap! Those are Super World Bowl numbers."

"Actually, a little higher."

"And I read that a thirty-second ad in that game runs for ten million dollars."

Benjamin ruminates for a beat. "10.2, last I checked."

This is where the rubber meets the road, where the money comes into play.

"So, how does it work? Money-wise, I mean."

Benjamin clasps his hands in front of him and his face takes on an astonishing look of grace. I don't know what they are paying him, but it isn't enough.

My brain is having a difficult time reconciling the fact that this man who looks and sounds like a warm bath works for a company that kills people for profit.

"Certainly," he says. "This is why you've come in. So your family will be sufficiently provided for after your passing."

His demeanor strikes me as that of a funeral director talking costs for the casket, flowers, and organist. A tricky balancing act. Put the client at ease while doing your job to assure you're keeping the company in the black, so the owner can continue to pay his gas bill, the mortgage, and take his kids to Disneyland.

"If you choose to move forward with our services you will pay a fee, earnest money, as it were, again based on some of the criteria I listed earlier—time frame, complexity." Benjamin pauses for an instant, like it's important to him that the following line land properly. "The up-front fee is to ensure we aren't seen as preying on the desperate."

"I can see how some might get that impression," I reply with a straight face.

Benjamin smiles at my understanding. "Once our service is rendered and your passing is confirmed, your designee—the dependent, as it were—will receive a percentage of the advertising revenue brought in by the televised production."

"And I'm guessing the more elaborate the production, the higher the ratings, and therefore more money for the . . . what did you call it? The designee?"

Benjamin cocks an eyebrow. “Usually, but not necessarily. I’ve seen some pretty pedestrian terminations receive quite robust ratings because of the backstory involved.”

“Backstory?”

“Well, a background that may give the episode a little more drama. Let me give you an example.” Benjamin does the glance-at-the-ceiling thing again, drawing on memories. “There was one episode where the method of death was a simple blow up. Explosives set to go off at a designated time and location. Nothing overly dramatic. But what gave it an extra twist was that on the day of the scheduled event our client decided to take his dog for a walk. An unexpected deviation from his normal schedule. We were embarrassingly unprepared for this. All our research gave us a 99 percent chance that he would be alone at the time of detonation. But as fate would have it, that miscue on our part became a ratings bonanza.”

“What did taking his dog for a walk have to do with any of that?” I ask.

Chris Miller had no idea Max, the gray-muzzled little lab mix padding alongside him, was causing conniptions in a television studio four states away. Well, padding was generous, it was more like limping, or waddling; Max was pushing ninety-eight in people years and built like a kielbasa sausage—mostly due to Chris’s soft heart and table scraps. Chris figured Max could eat anything he damn well pleased for as long as he lived. Seven years previously, Chris and Max had been hiking in Zion National Park when Chris fell down a crevasse and was pinned. He only had enough water to last about a day. But Max had run for help, just like in the classic Timmy-fell-down-the-well scenario. Ever since, Chris spoiled his aging mutt mercilessly.

And that’s what the people in the television studio hadn’t foreseen. “How long before he’s at the optimal detonation coordinates?” asked the director. He dabbed an already moist handkerchief across his brow for the dozenth time in the last fifteen minutes.

“Ten minutes,” replied the field producer, an edge to her voice. She was crumpling and uncrumpling a paper cup in her fist that moments earlier had been half filled with water which she had slugged down, desperately wishing it was something stronger. “My team has the space cleared. No civilians present. At least for now. For the time being, everything is go.”

Nothing was go, thought the director. Things were far from go. But he had to keep a lid on it. He glanced up at the bank of monitors covering the control room wall. A half dozen or so showed audiences from around the globe watching the action. Most at impromptu Death Warrant parties. The public did seem to bond in these instances. The director liked to see how the audience was reacting to the circumstances; it helped him craft the story arc and emotional payout by seeing first-hand what they were responding to. At that moment the audience members were generally freaking out. Nobody wanted to see a cute, albeit fat, little dog blown to bits. In the pre-show the audience is given the opportunity to know the method of termination. It was impossible to guess which way they'd lean from episode to episode. Sometimes they wanted to know, other times they wanted to be surprised.

On this night, however, the votes were for knowing. When the hosts shared that the death would be delivered by explosion, the initial reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Detonation was always a crowd pleaser. But the closer they got to boom-time, the antsier the audience became. They didn't know the exact moment, but they did know that a little dog was more than likely going to be caught in the line of fire. Thus, the freaking out.

"How could nobody have seen this coming?" shouted a large, imposing executive from the back of the room, a hint of a German accent in his voice. Not a soul dared make eye contact or a feeble excuse; that would have been career suicide. In circumstances like this they resorted to their training, experience, and professionalism, which ran in abundance in this control room. They were the cream of the crop and liked to think they were prepared for any emergency.

The director turned to a small, earnest looking man huddled over a computer screen in the corner of the studio. "Stats. What the hell? Why the dog? He was supposed to be solo."

The lead statistician gave a shrug. "Over the past 245 days since the job was approved, the featured participant made a nightly walk to this park 232 times." The man glanced back down to his monitor. "He always left between 6:00 and 6:10 p.m." The statistician turned back to the director. "It was, to use a more colloquial term, his evening constitutional. You could set your watch by him. Over those 232 times he brought his dog along a grand total of two times." The man pointed at his screen. "Based on our numbers, the odds of the featured participant taking the dog were less than 1 percent. Well below our threshold."

The field producer cleared her throat. “Uh, evidently one of those new doggy cafes just opened on the far side of the park. You know, one of those trendy coffee shops that sell dog biscuits along with cappuccinos? Our, um, best guess is that Mr. Miller may be taking his dog there for a treat.”

Back over in the corner, the statistician shrugged again. “Human nature is always the wild card.”

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