

Last Night, When We Were Young

By Trey R. Barker

“Twenty years,” the rain whispered.
 Passed in the pain of a single bullet.
 Had he been able to stay with her, it would have changed everything. She wouldn’t have spent the last twenty years jumping con to con, one step ahead of either the cops or the bullets. She wouldn’t have spent twenty years lonely in bed, squeezing her thighs together for want of him.

Had he stayed with her, life would have been sweet and perfect. A house with a white wooden fence, kids, voter registration cards, PTA meetings.

It hadn’t turned out that way, but in the wee hours it did. In dreams, not only did he stay, but he saved her both from the bullet and the twenty years.

“I still love you,” she said.

Above her, his building rose into the night, topped by a copper crown that shone a brilliant aged-green in the moonlight.

“Do you love...?”

Of course he did. They had simply gotten separated by the spinning of the world. But the connection between their souls was as strong now - maybe stronger - than that last night. Twenty years old, buried under the dust and grime of day in/day out, but still there nevertheless.

He had left her because of circumstance.

And twenty years ago or not, she still thought of it as last night. No, as Last Night.

Nervous, hands shaking, she slipped into the building and asked the doorman to buzz Tomas’ penthouse.

Jazz played softly behind them.

“Tonight, right?” She straightened her skirt.

“Damn well better be,” Tomas said. “They’ve had the papers for four days. Don’t worry, they’ll sign. We’ll walk out of here with two million weighing us down.”

She hugged him. “Then we’ll go to Montana, to my Grampy’s place.”

His smile made her grin. “It’s not your Grampy’s place, it’s yours.”

“Ours,” she countered.

After she knocked, panic squeezed her neck like a cop shoving her into a cruiser.

“Chava?” The voice came through the door, muffled but unmistakable.

“Please, I need to see you.”

Snap. Snap. Snap. Three locks. All ratcheting open to their own metal cadence. The door swung and there he stood. Face still strong and handsome, build still mostly solid.

“Do you still like long, languid dinners?” she asked.

Surprise, tenderness, a trace of age, all collided in his face like watercolors

smearing on a canvas.

“Do you still like slow jazz?” he finally asked.

“Oh, God, Tomas, it’s been so long.”

Hesitantly, he took her in his arms.

She didn’t flee into them as much as return home into them. This was how it should have been. How it would have been except for Mrs. Watson.

He broke the hug. “It’s...it’s good to see you...I guess.”

“Oh, you, too.”

She twirled, a giddy schoolgirl, as she entered his penthouse. A corner place, the east and north sides floor to ceiling windows. She could see downtown, the jagged edge of the city reaching for the huge empty sky above it. Beyond downtown, past what she could see, the desert crowded in, a tight second skin around the city. Cattle. Oil. Cotton. The staples of the Texas desert.

But here there was none of that. Here there was sophistication. Jazz and wine, chrome furniture and hors d’oeuvres.

“I can see everything from here,” she said.

“Can you?” He handed her the drink and a crooked smile. “How’d you find me?”

“Reliable sources.”

“Hmmm. I haven’t used that name in a while.”

“Tomas Charenton. I heard you were on to something new.”

“Heard?”

“Reliable sources.”

“Right. I left that name behind right after you got....” His voice trailed into the rain spattering the windows.

“Shot, Tomas. The night I got shot.”

Near the couch sat the stereo. Her fingers, not quite as long, not quite as tapered as they’d once seemed, played on the switches and dials. Eventually, cool funk - he’d never been into jazz - filled the room.

“Turn it off.”

“But we have to have our music, Tomas.”

“This isn’t our music.”

“I’ve got some CDs in my purse. Marion McPartland. Chet Baker.”

He swirled his drink in the glass. “What do you need?”

Dammit, this was all wrong. In her head, in the ten thousand times she’d found him again, it had gone better. It had been smooth and perfect. This was jagged and bloody.

Like the hole in your head.

She’d seen pictures of that hole. Demanded the pictures of the doctor. She’d even tried to figure out how to use them as Christmas cards, maybe get a sympathy play, get a few bucks.

She managed to bite back her disappointment but a fresh wave of tears she couldn’t stop. “This wasn’t...wasn’t how I wanted it. I was thinking dinner.” She batted her eyelashes. “Then breakfast.”

Something dark and distasteful flashed across his face.

“Oh,” she said. “Okay. Well, I’m in deep, Tomas. I screwed up a run.”

His hand smoothed down his beard. “You’re still running?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Not for a while.”

Of course, she thought. He had found his perfect con. "What can I say? I never had the luxury of the perfect run. Until now."

"How much?"

"A mil."

"Turn the music off, Chava. It's just a bunch of notes that don't mean crap."

She was about to reply when someone banged on the hotel door.

"Now, smile and do what you do best..."

"Slow and sultry."

"Yeah," he said. "One last time. The final bang, baby, the perfect bang. After tonight, it's anything we want."

"How do you know they've got money?"

"Reliable sources."

She downed a last, bracing blast of vodka. "If these sources are so sure, how come they haven't taken these people down?"

He grinned. "They're not as good as I am."

He whistled and for a moment, it was the Tomas she'd known twenty years ago. Quick and sure, confident in every movement he made. "Pretty big."

"Pretty big for me, you mean."

An eyebrow popped up. "Pretty big for any small-timer."

"I ain't a small-timer."

"Sure you are. But that's not a bad thing, Chava. Some people just don't have what it takes to play big. They can't handle the pressure or the risk."

"You don't know me anymore, Tomas." She held his gaze hard. "I'm not some big-breasted girl decorating your arm. I can run the scores. I've been running since I got out of the hospital."

His eyes softened. "I thought you were dead."

"I know." She'd known that for years. How else to explain that he never sent a card or visited?

"There was nothing I could do, Chava, nothing."

Her anger was gone in a moment, evaporated beneath the arousing heat of memory. Twenty years ago, she and Tomas had been something to behold. "I know."

"I tried to stop her, remember? I saw the gun and tried to get it away from her."

Chava frowned. Was that what happened? Maybe not exactly, but close enough. He had tried to save her. "Anyway, I got trouble now."

"Tell me."

She stared out the windows for a long while, long enough for the rain to leave less of itself on the glass. The moon tried to shove its way through the cloud cover, tried to cast a blue-white shadow over everything.

"You're right, I don't really have the guts for a big bang. But I'm so tired, Tomas. I don't want to run scams forever. Insurance and Lotto tickets and medical and whatever. I want to retire. Like you. One big scam and then retire."

"Tell me," he said, his voice as soft as a well-worn \$100 bill.

She swallowed and laid it out. "A guy in Dallas."

"What's his thing?"

"Drugs."

"Of course."

"Hey, now," she said. "Don't be like that. Look, you've got it made here and that's great for you, but I've been hustling since I got shot. I can't afford to be choosy. Just help me and I'll be on my way."

He raised his hands, trying to calm her. "Don't sweat it. Just tell me."

She took a deep breath and refilled her glass.

"Head man is from Mexico. Brooks - that's my guy - is the bagman for Dallas. Mexico runs it all: drugs, guns, illegals, whores, boy-toys. He's got it coming north and then throws stolen American as far as south as the friggin' Falkland Islands. Leaves a little green around the border agents and boom, no problem. So Brooks and I got together about cleaning up Brooks' money."

Tomas' eyebrows raised. "Money that Brooks siphoned off from Mr. Mexico?" An understanding grin spread across Tomas' face. "So you tell Mr. Dallas you'll clean his stolen money for a percentage fee - and you did say percentage fee, didn't you?"

"I'm not stupid, Tomas."

"So you'll clean the money and Mr. Mexico will never know. Except Mr. Mexico found out and now he's after Mr. Dallas. Or maybe Mr. Dallas is already dead in a ditch and now Mr. Mexico is after you."

"Piss off, bastard." Chava tossed her glass to the floor.

Tomas smiled. "Chava, please. Sniffing out a job always makes me crazy. I'm just looking for holes, figuring out where things went wrong."

Around them, there was nothing. No sound, no light except the small end table lamp trying valiantly to illuminate the room. Shadows - angled and jagged - toyed with their faces.

Tomas frowned, then smiled, eyes twinkling. "No, that's not it at all. Mr. Mexico doesn't know anything. This trouble is between you and Mr. Dallas. You don't know how to clean bills, do you? Holy hell, you lost his money."

"Every single damn dime."

It could have been the same motel room; the same beige decor as every other hotel, the same two-bit paintings, the same bedspreads and sheets.

Same scam.

New marks.

Everything was always the same.

Except now she was pregnant.

Mr. and Mrs. Watson sat comfortably in their uptown clothes, reeking of uptown perfume. Their money was obvious. In their clothes and manner, in their shampoo and make-up, in their shoes. But before the night was through, Chava and Tomas would have some of that money.

The papers were on the coffee table, spread like a con getting a pat-down. Tomas launched into his closing speech.

She kept her smile behind her teeth. Tomas had given this speech countless times and there was always money when he did. As he talked, he refreshed drinks and lit cigars.

Chava declined the smoke and then watched amusedly as Mrs. Watson sucked long and hard.

Watching her, Chava's insides began to chill. The woman's hesitation was quiet, but clear.

She wasn't interested. She was going to bust the whole deal.

"Son of a bitch," Chava whispered.

The baby, three months along now, pressed against her bladder.

Tomas sucked his teeth, cracked his knuckles. The air was thick with her sweat, with his cologne. "And you need what from me?"

"Money."

Thoughtfully, he sipped his martini. "If there's a mil gone already, then you need at least that much to prove you know what's going on. Fine. Done."

Her heart skipped some beats, like a drummer suddenly lost in the song. It shouldn't be this easy. Tomas was tough, never gave anything for free, never helped just to help.

Except he loves me, she thought.

"But...you gotta push, Chava. We put more back in the kitty...say, a mil and a half, then tell him you've made money on his money." His face flushed, warm with invention. "Yeah. You got a great return on...an aluminum chair factory or some garbage." His fingers snapped loudly. "No, a dot-com. Tell him you've got a line into an internet firm, one that struggled through the bust. Now they're like a greenback printing press; just cranking out money. He fronts the capital and quadruples his money in six months. We'll set up a corporation. Just like the old days."

"Boilermaker."

"What?"

"The corporation we used that night, Boilermaker."

"Oh. Right. This could be sweet. He gives and we disappear."

"To Grampy's place?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, whatever."

Inside, she grinned. Maybe twenty years ago and maybe just last night but the same. No music, but the drinks were the same. No hotel but the words were the same. No marks but the plans were the same.

"Oh, Tomas, I knew you'd know what to do." She hugged him. There had been no hugs for so long, she tried to put all the words and tears and late night dreams into that hug. She tried to let him know how much she'd missed him.

"It's like when we were young, Tomas. We were young and the world was young and we were going to conquer it."

"The world was never young. Neither were we."

"We were young that night," she said, pulling back from him.

"And now we're old and it doesn't matter because--"

"Tomas?"

His eyes were hard for a split second, hard as the floor upon which she'd fallen twenty years earlier, bullet in her head; hard as the asphalt upon which she sold her ass for a few years; hard as the scams she'd tried to run ever since.

Hard as the memories that came back to her now. It had been her fabled Last

Night, but now, watching his face and smelling his skin, the memory had a different flavor. Not quite as soft as she'd thought. It was all hardening, just like his eyes.

"Doesn't matter because now there is money, right?" he asked. "In the last fifteen minutes you've refilled your bank - Brooks' bank - and everything is fine." His eyes filled with an understanding she didn't comprehend. "Good job. Bringing me this."

"Tomas," she said as she rubbed her belly. "I love you still, you know."

"Really." Not a question but a flat statement. "Everyone should have someone to love."

"Do you still love me?"

Chava held her breath. Tension filled the room as though filtered in through the air conditioner vent. Mrs. Watson held a pen dead still over an oversized checkbook.

"We need to see some good faith on your part," Mrs. Watson said. "If you're going to get my money, then you'll have to have a stake, too."

"But we have noth--" Chava clamped her mouth shut.

Tomas laughed. "What my wife meant to say was we have nothing liquid. We are currently in real estate. Properties in Montana."

"The asshole of the country," Mrs. Watson said. "Sign your outhouse or whatever it is over to the corporation." She checked the paperwork. "To Boilermaker...God, what a stupid name for a corporation. If Boilermaker needs to sell the place for capital, they've got it, if not, then in a couple years, they can sign it back over to you. Do that and I will hand you our check and sign the papers."

Chava breathed deeply, keeping her smile inside. She and Tomas were Boilermaker.

His applause split her ears. "Well done, Chava. You nearly had me. Those tears did it. I've always been a sucker for a crier."

Chava ground her teeth together.

"Great story, too, it'll get you some investors." He slammed back his drink. "But not me, Chava. I knew this was a scam before you finished thinking it up."

"You think I'm running you?"

"Aren't you?" Tomas coolly poured a second drink. Vodka with a twist of lime; his victory drink. "The details feel made up. No verisimilitude. You know that word?"

"Tomas," she said, her voice quiet and scared. "Please, this is no run, I swear to God. I screwed up and I don't know what to do."

"Chava, please," he said. "It's over, I figured it out. Now--"

Tomas' words were beaten flat by the doorman's buzzer.

"What?" Tomas growled.

"Sir," the doorman said. "There's a-- Hey, what the hell is that?"

"Did I say call her? No, I said open the door. Now do it, you son of--"

"Get the hell away from me. Yeah? What's that? Got your dick outta your pocket? Get outta here. Get--"

When the gun fired, both of them jumped. Tomas' glass fell to the floor. The shot was followed by a thump, a moan, another shot.

“Son of a bitch.” The voice came through the buzzer, warm as a fired gun, cold as a conned investor. “I’m coming, Chava.” The man laughed, a gruff sound like a body being dragged along the concrete. “And I want my money back.”

“We can get outta the life, Tomas. Retire to my Grampy’s thousand acres, you and me and baby makes three.”

“Baby?” Gently, he closed the hotel bedroom’s door. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She blushed. “You know, if we have one.”

“So you’re not pregnant?”

“No,” she lied, wanting to tell him later, over steaks and champagne.

“All right, let’s get this done.” With a nod, Tomas went back to the guests.

Ten years of runs and finally, one was going to score big, leave them lighting cigarettes with twenty dollar bills on the front porch in Montana.

Caressing her belly, she went in his suitcase to find a tie for tonight’s celebratory dinner. Beneath the socks and underwear, she found a crumpled bit of paper.

“Dr. Hondo,” it said in Tomas’ jagged handwriting. “Positive results. Congratulations. Have you thought about a name?”

Dated three weeks earlier.

Tomas’ fingers flew over the keyboard, a blur of flesh tones. The keyboard crackled and clicked like a thousand amplified clocks. Website homepages popped up, changed, disappeared.

“Damn, quit crying,” Tomas said.

“He’s coming, Tomas, he’s coming.”

Tomas played with the mouse, clicked, waited, clicked again. “I know, just calm down and we’ll be okay.” His free hand, shaking, ran through his hair. “Christ, I thought this was a scam. God, I knew you were stupid, but to steal a million dollars? To tell someone you’ll clean it and then to lose it? How goddamned dumb can you be?”

“I’m not stupid, Tomas.” Anger bubbled low inside her.

“You’ve always been stupid.” The computer buzzed and hummed and moment later, Tomas left the websites he’d been scrambling through. “Why do you think I kept you around? Because of brains? It was because I got no tits.”

The hurt was like a sound wave, something you heard coming from a distance, something that finally washed over you with a sonic boom or ear-splitting shatter. “You loved me,” she whispered.

“Bull. I got no time for love.”

“I remember, Tomas. You loved me. You got me pregnant for Christ’s sake. And you knew it!” The words tumbled out, propelled by an unknown anger, like a shadow she hadn’t realized was walking with her every step since she’d been shot. “You were there when I got shot, you tried to save me and the baby.”

Tomas turned toward her, his eyes blazing. “I did what? Is that what you remember?”

“Yeah. She shot me and you tried to save me.”

A kick rattled the door in its frame. "Open up, damn you, I want my money."
Another kick and the door flew open. A man stood, his face covered with sweat, dotted with blood. His grin seemed to suck in the world.

"Brooks," Chava whispered.

"You remember wrong, Chava," Tomas said.

Chava signed the title transfer.

Mrs. Watson signed the check.

'Pay To The Order Of Boilermaker. Two million dollars and NO/100.'

Tomas shook hands all around, stuck the check in his breast pocket.

"Shall we toast?" Tomas asked. "Then I will call Boilermaker and let them know we have achieved our financing."

While they drank a toast, Mrs. Watson dug in her purse for a twenty. "Dear," she said to Chava. "Do you by chance have change? For the valet's tip."

Change for the valet? They had just handed over two million eggs and she was worried about tipping too much? "Yeah, sure." From her purse, Chava pulled two tens.

"Got to have some ones."

"Here's a five and some ones. Give me one of the tens."

"I've got some ones, Chava," Tomas said. He stuck three singles into the pile.

"Maybe I should just tip him five. Do you think?" Mrs. Watson asked

"I'm a little short here on ones."

"Here, this should get it."

"Wait, this is too confusing, just give me the five back," Mrs. Watson said.

"We've got it. You want the ten back? No, just keep the ones. That should--"

"Wait. This isn't right. You shorted me two."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Watson."

"There's only eight dollars here. Give me my two bucks."

"I don't have it," Chava said. She ran through the money in her hand. The twenty, a ten, nothing else. "Maybe you dropped it."

"I didn't drop anything, you ripped me off." The woman stood, her face seething red. "You freakin' ripped me off."

"Hey," Chava said. "I didn't do squat. You probably palmed it, you snobby whore. You sign over two mil and you're worried about tipping the valet too much? What kind of goofy horsecrap is that?"

"Whore?" the woman shouted.

She swung suddenly, her fist like a freight train against Chava's face. Chava fell, smashed the back of her head against the coffee table. Stars danced in front of her, partnering with everyone in the room.

"Whore this, bitch." The woman's hand dove into her handbag.

When Mrs. Watson fired, Chava felt the bullet. Like someone had kicked her in the head, had smashed her with a ball bat. But the sound, that's what she knew she would remember. The thunk of the bullet smashing her skull and splitting bone. Hollow, like a fist through a thin wall.

There was nothing for what seemed like hours. Then the rustling of coats being put on. Whispered words.

"Change for the valet?" Tomas said. "I pay a thousand and that's what I get?"

“Shut up,” Mrs. Watson said. “She’s dead, ain’t she?”
“Single tap to the skull,” Mr. Watson said. “That’s what you asked for.”
“About our bonus?” Mrs. Watson asked. “For getting her to sign over the ranch or whatever the hell it was?”
“Yeah, yeah,” Tomas said.
“She really pregnant?” Mr. Watson asked.
“I hate kids and she wasn’t even that great a lay.”
The door opened, feet left the room. As someone passed her, their foot kicked her head. Pain rocked through her, then took everything.
The door closed and she heard nothing else.

“You shot me,” Chava screamed. She lunged at Tomas, gouged her fingernails into his face. His yelp filled the apartment as they fell to the floor. She kneed his balls, spit in his face.

They rolled, bumped into the couch, then against the glass-covered coffee table. It fell over, its glass top landing on edge, then tipping until it banged against the carpet.

“You shot me.”

“I didn’t shoot you,” Tomas howled.

“You had it done.” Chava jabbed him again with her knee. Why hadn’t she remembered? Why hadn’t she known that was what happened?

“Hey,” Brooks yelled. “What the hell is this?”

Tomas’ face was close to hers and it wasn’t the face she had dreamt of. It was just another face, a scared face, an anonymous face. Beneath the sound of her breathing, beneath the sound of his whistling breath, she heard her heart crack. A small crack, small enough to be painful, but not large enough to kill her or end the misery.

She leaned into him. “I loved you,” she whispered. “And you shot me.”

“Kill her,” Tomas yelled. “She tried to steal your money. Dammit, kill her.”

Chava froze when Brooks pressed the gun into her back. “Wanna get off him? It looks like you’re humping his leg.”

Moving slowly, her palms open, her hands away from her body, she climbed off Tomas.

When she stood, Brooks pushed her away from Tomas, kept the gun on Tomas. “Where the hell is my money?”

Tomas, trying to paste a smile across his face, pointed toward the computer. The screen glowed with a screen saver. “Right there, just where it should be. She wanted to snag it, Brooks. Came to me a few days ago, your account numbers in hand, wanted to disappear with the money.”

Tomas took a small step toward the computer. “I did something different.”

“Yeah, such a saint. Just wanted to do the right thing, huh?”

“No, a better thing. I invested it.” Tomas swallowed, wiped beads of sweat from his face. “Ever heard of Boilermaker.com? A sports book based in the Bahamas.” He pointed at the screen. “Got \$1.5 million in your account.”

Chava saw their mouths move but heard nothing. It was as though - in discovering the real memory - that single shot from twenty years back continued to shoot. Over and over, like the gun would never run out of bullets, like the finger was never lifted from the trigger.

She touched the scar - the wound - and expected to see blood on her fingers. She touched the wound and expected her fingers to slip into the hole in her head.

“Wasn’t even that great a lay,” he had said.

But she hadn’t remembered. She had remembered him screaming, coming to her side, propping her head up, trying to stop the bleeding. She remembered him throwing an ashtray at Mrs. Watson, calling the ambulance, screaming that he would kill Mrs. Watson.

She remembered everything.

Incorrectly.

“Made money on my stolen money?” Brooks asked. “How’d you know about this?”

“Reliable sources. And there’s no end to what we can make,” Tomas said smoothly. “All we gotta do is give enough up front to get the wheels turning. Those dot-coms that survived the bust are cash starved; people are scared to death to invest, Brooks, trust me. I can make you rich enough to walk away from that Mexican. Hell, I can make you rich enough to buy that Mexican.”

Brooks lowered the gun. “Transfer it to my account.”

“Well, I can, of course, but you really need to leave it sit, let it grow. In fact, we need to give them more operating capital.”

“Transfer it, let this go somewhere you don’t need to know about. Tomorrow, noon, I’ll be here with 75 of a pound.”

“\$750,000?”

Brooks nodded, wrote down an account number, shoved the paper into Tomas’ hand. Tomas began playing with the keyboard again. In a moment, he was done.

Chava stared hard at Tomas. “We were young once...we could have had everything. All our dreams; when the rain came down and turned into steam on the hot streets...when the snow fell and we laid together beneath the covers, touching and exploring and telling dreams. We were young and could have had it all.”

“It’s over, Chava, all that crap was years ago.” When the transfer was done, Tomas went to Chava and began to herd her toward the door.

“No, Tomas, it was last night. And yesterday. And last week. It was every second since I got shot. It was what I lived for.” She spit on his carpet. “And it was nothing. I guess I was stupid.”

“Yesterday’s news, honey.”

“So were you,” she said.

Tomas chuckled. “Chava, you lost this round. Brooks and I are going to make some real money and you’re out in the cold. Live with it and go on back to your two-bit lunch money scams.”

Chava pulled her hair back to expose the bullet scar. “Son, who did this?”

“Mrs. Watson,” Brooks said. “She tried to kill you, Mom.”

“I didn’t lose this round, Tomas, you did. We were just going to take your money. I wanted to know if we could play the master. And it would have stopped there had you shown me just an ounce of love, an ounce of decency.”

“What the hell, Chava?” Tomas backed toward his bedroom, eyes pinned on Brooks’s gun. When the gun rose, he stopped.

“You couldn’t do it, could you?” Chava asked. “You couldn’t give me a moment of something real.” She opened the door. “But I remembered, didn’t I? You couldn’t give me what I thought I wanted and seeing you, I finally remembered.”

“Look,” Tomas said. “We can work this out.”

“Give me Grampy’s place back.”

“What? Grampy’s place? I sold it right off, I...” His eyes flashed. “But I bought it back, you know? I’ve got it, I can get--”

“You’re a pathetic liar,” Chava said. She turned to Brooks. “My beautiful son. My beautiful angry son. He has been angry that he never knew his father, Tomas. I think he wanted to know his father was a good and right man.”

“Mom, please,” Brooks said. “You did good with me.”

“I’m sorry, Brooks, there is no good man.” She swept an arm toward Tomas.

“There is only him, the man who paid a woman to shoot me because he doesn’t like kids.”

“Chava, please,” Tomas screeched. “Please, we can work this out. You never told me you were pregnant.”

She jerked the note - twenty years old and in his jagged handwriting - from her pocket and tossed it to the floor. “Goodbye, Tomas, I’m so sorry we never worked out.”

“I’ll be down in a minute,” Brooks said.

Chava left the apartment, closed the door quietly, and headed for the elevator. The jazz in her head, played relentlessly for twenty years, was silent.

Trey R. Barker has published fiction in almost all of the crime/mystery/science fiction/horror markets - nearly 150 stories since 1994 - and also has a play, a short collection, a short novel, and a hardboiled, desert-noir novel ('2000 MILES TO OPEN ROAD') to his credit. He's worked as a theatrical designer and a reporter, with odd little stints as a doll assembler, karaoke salesman, and pizza cook. For the last five years, he's been a deputy with the Bureau County Sheriff's Office in Illinois, where he lives with his wife, LuAnn, and three Canine-Americans.