

# The Secret Dies With Denny

By Tyler Midkiff

It was just past noon when they dragged me to the station. I was working a job I'd gotten through the prison work release program, so they knew exactly where to find me. I'd been out of the can a couple months, but my employers liked me, so they let me stick around. They didn't increase my pay at all, but I couldn't complain. I had nowhere else to go.

I was biting into a sandwich when two uniformed officers strolled in like they owned the fucking place and cuffed me in front of my co-workers. They each grabbed an arm, held tight and walked me out like a lot of hard work had gone into it. My boss stood near the door, face long with disappointment. I tried giving him a look like, *Hey, I'll be back in an hour. Everything's fine. I don't know what this is all about.* But I knew the score. I'd just lost another job.

By the time we reached the station, the cuffs had carved deep grooves into my wrists. Pins and needles looped out to the ends of my thumbs and back again like a weak electrical pulse, taking my mind off the situation and forcing me to sympathize with the teenage girls I'd always thought were fools for slicing themselves to get over being dumped by their boyfriends.

The hacks, a couple of giggling dicks, yanked me out of the patrol car with a few harsh words and led me down a series of hallways leading to an interrogation room somewhere in the bowels of the building. A metal table stood in the center and it, like the chair next to it, was bolted to the floor. The officers cuffed me to the chair and left, shutting the door hard behind them.

*Fuck*, I thought. *Here we go again.* The cuffs, the questioning, the sinking feeling, the law and its stone-faced indifference; memories, the kind I'd used to justify getting out of the game and taking a stab at the straight life. Drugs, hustling, theft, assault, whatever - in the old days, it could have been anything. But I knew why I was there that day and I'd planned for it. Still, the sweat dripped from my pores. The calm, collected Terry Olin was on vacation somewhere and there I sat, a sucker set to take the fall. I could've used a stiff drink, but a few deep breaths would have to do.

I studied my surroundings like a newly captured P.O.W. A lamp hanging just above my head offered the only light, which burned a bright glow onto the table, blinding me a bit and making it hard to see the outer edges of the room. There were no windows and no cameras, so I assumed no one would be watching. With no way out, I shoved that thought to the back of my mind. I must have sat there for an hour, squirming under that light like a salt-smothered slug on a hotplate.

Eventually, the door swung open with a hard turn of the lock and two detectives entered. The first was short, thin, early 40s, with thick brown hair, circular thin-rimmed glasses and a style of dress that seemed too sophisticated for a cop's salary. It revealed him as a man of taste, I thought. Or perhaps his wife dressed him that day. "I'm Detective Ron Garson and this," pointing over his shoulder, "is Detective Frank Bosco."

Trailing a few steps behind Garson walked Bosco, a hefty Slavic-looking man with wispy, thinning hair, a lopsided mustache and a stare that suggested an immense

capacity for cruelty. He looked like a medieval butcher, like a man who would enjoy getting some blood on his hands. He wore a cheap, short-sleeved dress shirt that day, which was wrinkled and yellow with sweat.

The door slammed shut behind Bosco and the two men fanned out into the room. They stood at angles, eyeballing me - Bosco with mulish disgust and Garson with a more pensive look, like he was calculating the best approach. After soaking in their first impressions, Bosco retreated to a corner of the room and took his position, looming like a sconce against the far wall.

Garson broke the ice. "I suppose you know why you're here?"

"You're investigating my wife's disappearance."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell us?"

"I don't know anything," I said. "Alyssa and I aren't speaking."

"Why is that?" Garson asked.

"Because we're separated."

"When did you last speak with her?"

"It's been weeks," I said.

"You have a son with Alyssa. Do you see him often?"

"Not since Alyssa disappeared. Her mother has custody and she refuses to let me see him."

"She has a restraining order against you."

"She doesn't want me to see my son. She never has."

"Well, she fears for his safety," Garson said. "She believes you had something to do with her daughter's disappearance."

"Yeah," I said. "She's wrong about a lot of things."

"Well, what reasons might she have to feel you were involved?"

"The same reasons *you* do, I guess. It's no secret that Alyssa and I had a fucked-up relationship. And my prior convictions don't exactly inspire any benefit of the doubt."

"Hah!" Bosco blurted. His laugh was forced, guttural and obnoxious, a revealing introduction. He tugged his hands from his pockets and detached himself from the wall, chuckling a little and shaking his head as he made his way to the center of the room. He moved slowly and, with a wave of his hand, Garson retreated to the corner of the room with rehearsed precision.

"Yeah, your record is a hell of a read, boy," Bosco said, lifting a manila folder, packed to bursting, from the table and beginning to pace the room. He licked his fingers as he turned the pages. "Theft. Possession. Arson. Distributing. Criminal Trespassing. Assault. Assault. *Assaulting an Officer*. Evading Arrest. My, what a busy boy you've been. You must think you're pretty lucky to be walking the streets."

"I've served my time," I said. "I've got a son to think about now."

"Well, that's just fucking adorable," Bosco impugned with an embellished wink for me and another for his partner. "But let's get real for a moment," he said. "You're a fuck-up. *You* know that, *I* know that, and it looks like Grandma knows that too. I'm sure she's making sure your son... What's his name? Seth? I'm sure she's making sure little Seth understands that as well."

Bosco quickened his pace and lunged at the table, striking it hard with his fists. "You killed that woman, you piece of shit!" he shouted. "Your boy is going to grow up without a mother... and without a father if *I* can help it!"

Bosco stared, unflinching, waiting for a response, but I gave none. He removed his hands from the table with a smile and continued circling the room. “All right. All right,” he said. “I can see we’re gonna get the silent treatment here. That’s fine. It never lasts. I’ve broken bigger dicks than you.”

Stroking his chin, Bosco circled behind me. He stopped, curled two fingers on his left hand and then flicked my left ear. It stung like hell. He followed with an even harder flick to my right ear.

“Stop it, dick!” I shouted.

Bosco laughed then flicked each of my ears simultaneously before delivering a hard slap to the back of my head.

“What the *fuck*, man?” I shouted.

Bosco chuckled as he circled back around to face me. “You shouldn’t complain,” he said. “Your wife got a loss worse, didn’t she? What’s that?” he asked, placing his left hand behind his ear and leaning in. “Oh, that’s right. You have nothing to say.”

As if left with no choice, Bosco reached into his pockets, removed a handful of change, and began chucking coins at my face and head. I did my best to protect myself, but with both hands bound, I couldn’t do much. *Ping! Pong! Ping!* The coins seemed to rattle around in my head. When the last one hit the floor, Bosco leaned in close to my face and smirked.

“I got a bucket of golf balls in my car,” he said. “You sure you don’t have anything to say?”

I could think of a lot of things to say, but nothing he wanted to hear. The look on my face must have been worth at least a thousand words.

“Holy shit, look at that mean face!” Bosco shouted. “Wooh! Fuckin’ psycho killer! You wanna hit me, don’t you? Yeah, you do. Career criminal. Think you’re some kind of tough guy. Just say the word. I’ll un-cuff you, beat a confession out of you and then throw you in a cell for the rest of your life. Just say the word, pussy.”

“Pussy,” I said.

“Fucking smartass,” Bosco muttered before rushing forward, slapping me across the face, and then evening me out with a slap to my other cheek moments later. My silence took bites at the back of my throat and my hands shook a little, but I said nothing. Fuming, Bosco seized the collar of my shirt from behind and twisted the fabric into the nape of my neck. “I got a special kind of hatred for wife murderers!” he shouted as he kneaded my head into the table. I tensed up to resist the pressure, but after a few seconds, began to choke weakly. “Fucking wife killer!” he shouted. “Say one word! Give me a reason to break your face!”

“All right, Frank,” Garson said as he reemerged from the corner of the room and placed his hand on Bosco’s shoulder. “Come on, Terry here *wants* to talk,” he said. “He just needs the proper motivation. That might have done the trick.”

With a shove, Bosco released his grip, throwing my head forward as he let go. *Clunk!* My head bounced off the table. It filled with stars and wobbled a bit as I sat up. My face must have looked like a radish from the lack of oxygen, and I felt a fat strawberry forming on my cheek. I saw stars until I’d gotten a few mouthfuls of air. “You fucking animal!” I shouted. “I’m in cuffs! Who the hell gave you a badge?”

“Oh, you’re all right,” Garson said. “You wanna talk, don’t you, man? You’re a smart guy. Why don’t you tell us about Denny Blanks?”

I was still trying to catch my breath. My head felt light and my voice cracked a little when I spoke. "It's all in your files," I said. "What do you want me to tell you? I haven't seen that piece of shit in like five years. Not since that day."

"Well, the plot just thickened," Garson said. "Denny was found dead in his apartment this morning, an apparent drug overdose. The coroner said it *looked* like a suicide, but who knows? You could have set it up to look that way."

"Bullshit," I said. "That guy was a fucking junkie. He probably did kill himself. He had every reason in the world to want to."

"That may be true," Garson said. "But I think you had a reason or two to want him dead as well."

"What the fuck do I care?" I asked. "I beat that fucker through the floor. I got my revenge. I did five years in prison for it. I'm not gonna raise a dead issue and risk going back for that asshole."

"A dead issue?" Garson asked. "Was it dead? *Really?*"

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I was barely out of high school when Alyssa and I first met; fucking peas in a pod, a couple of reckless kids with no real expectations and no intentions of getting serious about anything. We both drank a lot and fucked around. I had my baggage and she had hers. But one night, Alyssa's mother found us sweating under the sheets in her bedroom and kicked Alyssa out. "No problem," I told her. "You can live with me until you figure out what to do."

I had a job slinging coke and weed for a big-shot dealer at the time. I was good at it, so money wasn't a problem. I grew up with nothing, so I actually had more cash than I knew what to do with. Alyssa was no burden I couldn't handle. She moved in and all was well. We were actually pretty happy together. Not the kind of happy that makes people act all silly and stupid about shit. There was no cooing, no baby talk, and we didn't have to call each other ten times a day. I didn't let my feelings for Alyssa soften me too much, but I really fell in love with that girl. I never had that kind of thing growing up and I may never again, but who cares? All it did was fuck my life up anyways.

Like I said, we each had our baggage. Drugs, fucking, fighting, we did more living before the age of consent than most people do in their entire lives. Nobody really loved either of us, so we had each other. Alyssa's mother hung around, but that bitch doesn't know a thing about love. She sucks it up and spits out heart disease. Despite her efforts, we didn't let her get involved in our relationship.

We were content and we stayed that way for a while. That is, until I got locked up on a distributing charge. It was some bullshit, really - wrong place, wrong time - but when the judge slapped the gavel on a two-year sentence, I assumed Alyssa and I were through. No one would wait two years for me, I thought. But a few months into my term, I got a visitor; Alyssa, and she was pregnant. My stomach hit the floor and it didn't bounce back for months. I insisted on a DNA test, and when it came back 99% positive, I took it on the chin. I was gonna be a daddy.

I was 24 - a man, I guess - but I could barely take care of myself. I had every intention of going right back to the streets when I got out, but that all changed. I started

thinking about my own father and how much I hated the evil piece of shit. I thought about all the times he beat me and choked me to the floor, all the times I sat alone behind my house grinding my teeth and dabbing blood from my face with my shirtsleeve. I swore a long time ago I'd never be like him.

I pulled my shit together. I dropped a few relationships, stopped accepting deliveries of dope to run through my cellblock, burned a few bridges and nearly got myself killed, but kept my nose clean and made parole. I was 26 when I got out. My son was barely more than a year old when I held him for the first time and I hugged that kid so tight that it scared him. He cried, and so did I, and a few weeks later, Alyssa and I were married. Six months into being a daddy and I was pretty domesticated.

But Alyssa was another story. She took my release as her chance to fall back into some old habits. She was drinking a lot, hitting the coke pretty hard. She was a real fucking mess. I tried shaking some sense into her, but she was out of her mind. She lied about everything, about shit that didn't even matter.

I was miserable, couldn't sleep, and before long, I started to crack. All the changes I'd made were biting back and I knew it. I felt something awful breathing down my neck, perched upon my shoulder like some demented alter ego, whispering, urging, groaning dark pleas for something drastic. I was terrified. I wanted to leave, but knew I couldn't leave Seth with an addict. I felt trapped.

One night, feeling desperate, I stopped off at a bar for a drink. It seemed to help, so I had a few more. I fell into a black hole. I must've wandered around the city for a while, because when I woke up, it was dawn. I was draped over a park bench, puke on my clothes, black eye, wallet gone. I didn't know where I was and I still don't know how I got there. I hadn't been drunk in over two years. I guess I made up for lost time.

I stumbled into a donut shop across the street and tried washing the drunk off, but a few handfuls of water wasn't enough. I stunk and looked like hell. I wanted to strike the mirror and shatter the image staring back at me. My body ached, my head screamed, but my mind raced with thoughts of suicide, prison, the drug game, Alyssa, Seth, and how fucking delusional I must have been to think that I could change who I was, that I could live the straight life. I couldn't deny the maniac inside me, and in just a few short hours, I convinced myself it was hopeless to even try.

But I didn't have a choice. I had a son to think about and he was probably the only thing that kept me from putting a gun in my mouth that morning. He was probably the only reason I'd even bothered to survive the last year and it made me love him even more. I felt overwhelmed, etherized, palsy-stricken, as I staggered along the sidewalk searching for a place to be sick again. But there was nothing left inside of me. I panicked. I dropped to my knees, wept, and everything poured right out into the open - the rotten lump festering at my core, corrupting my insight, spoon-feeding my compulsion to destroy everything I cared about. My weak-minded bullshit was no excuse for destroying myself and for allowing my son to go down with me. I needed to do something to save him from the cycle of idiocy that ran to the roots of my family tree, but I didn't know what. And besides, all that would have to wait until after one last setback nearly ruined everything.

I expected to hear some grief from Alyssa about where I'd been, what I was doing, when I walked through my front door, but I didn't. It was quiet, like no one was

home. I was alone, I thought, until I walked into the bathroom and found Alyssa curled up on the floor, sobbing, clutching her face. There was blood on her hands and in her hair.

“What happened?” I asked.

No answer, only cries.

*“What the fuck happened?”*

Her sobs grew louder. I tried prying her hands from her face, but she resisted.

“Alyssa! Answer me! Where is Seth? *Fuck!*”

My head was swimming. I couldn’t get a word from her, so I ran through the den towards Seth’s room. He met me at the door, blanket wadded in his arms, a frightened look on his face. I slowed down and softened my expression.

“Hey, little man,” I said. “Are you okay? Can you tell me what happened to Mommy?”

“Ssshhh,” he hissed, pressing his finger to his lips. “Denny is sleeping.”

“What? Who is Denny?” I asked.

Seth pointed to his bedroom door, but didn’t say a word.

“Are you hurt?” I asked him. “Are you okay?” I inspected him and found a fat bruise on his arm. It was fresh. I felt a tunnel closing in around me and a strong force pulling me towards the end.

“Okay, Seth, go into Mommy and Daddy’s room,” I said. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Seth ran down the hallway and disappeared. When I entered his room, I found a man I’d never seen before laying in his bed. He was asleep, a bottle of Scotch on the nightstand near his head. There was blood on his hands, blood on my wife, and he was sleeping in my son’s bed. I saw red. I charged the bed, flipped the man onto his back and just started swinging. He woke after the second shot, but I kept swinging and his eyes soon shut again. Streams of blood leapt over my shoulders each time I brought my fist back to hit him again. His blood sprinkled the walls, the bed, myself. When I tired, I stopped and slumped over the body. Chest heaving, I raised my hands to my face. They were shaking, still wadded into fists. With focus, I loosened them, and when I did, they turned to mush. My knuckles were shredded, both hands broken, but I couldn’t feel a thing.

I was coherent enough only to know that the realization I’d come to moments earlier - about life and about my commitment to Seth - would have to wait a while longer. When I turned and dismounted the bloody mess, I discovered Seth standing at the door, thumb in his mouth, a blank look in his eyes, like something inside him had just disconnected. He was horrified and so was I. I was sure I’d just killed that man and that my son had seen everything. I was sure I’d killed him, but he survived.

I turned myself in several days later - when I found out Denny wasn’t dead. I’d considered fleeing, but knew that if I did, I’d never see Seth again. I was arrested, tried, convicted and sent back to prison, for five years that time.

Alyssa should’ve taken it as a wakeup call, but she didn’t. She lost herself, sucked deep into a whirlpool of addiction, self-destruction, Seth tethered to her waist. Their visits were torture - Seth seated quietly with a detached look in his eyes while his mother rambled incoherently and attempted to conceal signs of her dependency.

I know I never got the real story about what happened between her and Denny. He was an old friend, she claimed. He got drunk, needed a place to crash, woke up in the middle of the night and tried to climb into bed with her. She hit him, he hit back, and I came in just after he'd passed out in Seth's room. I didn't believe that story then and I don't now. I never believed her bullshit lies, but I really wanted to. That's the fucked-up thing about love.

Day by day, those five years passed. I was a different man when I stood before the parole board again. Older, wiser, I knew what I wanted - my boy. Nothing else mattered. I was willing to give things a shot with Alyssa again, but I'd throw her under a bus for my son. No more chances.

We spent my first day out making up for lost time, together, the three of us. But it felt wrong. Alyssa was off somewhere else, lost in her head. Her skin sunk into her face, eyes hung loose and heavy. Heroin. I knew the look. She wasn't feeling well - stomach cramps, she said - but it was more than that and we both knew it. She was falling apart.

That night, after putting Seth to bed, I tried talking to Alyssa, but the words weren't getting through. She clutched her stomach, moaned and couldn't keep her eyes off the bathroom door. I looked away when she stood up, stumbled through the doorway and locked it behind her. Minutes later, screams broke the silence.

I broke the door down to find Alyssa seated on the toilet, needle and works at her side, sobbing, screaming, clawing at her face and chest, staring down at a mass of blood and clotted tissue. She'd had a miscarriage, a bastard child I later found out belonged to Denny. I was mortified, disgusted. I knew it was over. I could never look at her with affection again. I was furious that she'd brought that man around my son again, but I didn't tell her what I knew. I bit my lip and started figuring out how I was going to get my son away from her.

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"So, what can you tell us about Denny's death, Terry?" Garson asked. He stood calmly, examining me, trained to sense weakness.

"Nothing," I told him. "I didn't even know he was dead until now, but I can't say I'll be losing any sleep over it."

"Did you know that he and Alyssa were still seeing each other while you were in prison?"

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"It's been corroborated by several witnesses," Garson answered. "They were seen together often while you were away."

My look of betrayal and disgust was genuine. It was the look of surprise that I had to fake.

"You didn't know?" Garson asked.

I shook my head. "I wish you hadn't told me."

"Oh, waahh waahh," Bosco said. "Fucking crybaby. You can't be that stupid. You knew what she was up to. Everyone did. That's why you killed her, so where's the body, asshole?"

I laughed softly, shook my head. "I don't know," I said. "You really have the wrong guy. I think the guy you want is dead and I'm guessing the secret dies with him."

“Well, don’t get all broken up about it,” Bosco said. “We’re only talking about your wife’s murder.”

The truth is, I *was* broken up about it - still am. I loved Alyssa, but she couldn’t be trusted. I’ve seen what doped-up mothers do to their children. I spent seven years surrounded by those bent degenerates in prison. It wouldn’t be enough just to leave my wife. No, she had to disappear.

Denny, on the other hand, could rot right out in the open...and he did for days. Besides being a job I’d always wanted to finish, he was also my scapegoat, better dead than alive. Killing him was easy, really, the hopeless motherfucker. Denny was a true dope fiend, so I paid an old friend to sell him a hot dose. He was used to the cut-up shit, the kind you need a monster boot to feel. Handing a guy like that a packet of 80% pure is like putting a baby behind the wheel of speeding racecar. He did my job for me.

Those detectives had no evidence of anything. I made sure of that. Trying to muscle me into some sort of desperate confession was all they had. When they left the room, disappointed, frustrated, I knew my status as a suspect was probably over. They left me alone for a while to make me sweat, but eventually, Garson returned, without his partner, to un-cuff me and let me go.

“If Denny really was behind your wife’s disappearance, then we may never find her, at least not alive,” Garson said. “But that kid still has one parent left, so don’t fuck it up for him. Now get out of here.”

I spent the next year or so diving through hoops to get Seth back - parole, court, social services; the long, knotted roll of red tape. Alyssa’s mother didn’t want to let Seth go, but he was miserable with her. Eventually, I got him back. I had a decent job by then, fixing cars, so I was able to take care of him on my own. We went for weeks without discussing his mother and then one morning he popped the question.

“What happened to Mommy?” he asked over a bowl of cereal. “Grandma says you made her die.”

I would never tell him what I knew. The secret dies with me, but I plan on sticking around for a while.

“It’s just you and me, little man,” I said. “Just you and me.”

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