

MORTAL DILEMMA

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Thrillers: 100 Must-Reads (contributing essayist)

MORTAL DILEMMA

A MATT ROYAL MYSTERY

H. TERRELL GRIFFIN

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In memory of my friend
Jeanie R. Austin
A Woman of Distinction
1933-2000



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing, I have come to conclude, requires both passion and dedication. Perhaps, in the absence of passion, there would be no dedication, and the author's story would never be told. I am lucky to have had the passion for writing since I was old enough to begin to understand that there was a person, a writer, behind the stories I so enjoyed. But, alas, I lacked the dedication that is necessary for the storyteller to translate the ramblings of his imagination into the written word.

The reason? I suppose it was my other passion, the law, and that passion was indeed a jealous mistress, demanding all of my time and energy. I still love the law, if not the way it's practiced today, but when I retired from the profession, I found that I had time to engage my earlier passion, writing. With the encouragement of my wife Jean, who'd seen me through college and law school and the many years of trying lawsuits, I embarked on what I term the icing on the cake of my life—writing mysteries.

So now, I offer you, the reader, the tenth book in the Matt Royal series. I hope you will find it acceptable, because you, my friends, are perhaps the most important part of the process. If you didn't read my books, I'm afraid I'd lose interest in writing them.

I am backstopped by friends who read chunks of the manuscript as they come out of the printer. They edit it, make suggestions, give

me ideas, and encourage me to soldier on. Peggy Kendall, David Beals, Lloyd Deming, Chris Griffin, and Jean Griffin are my long-suffering teammates whose input always makes my books better. This particular work is in essence the brainchild of Lloyd Deming who suggested the theme of this story. Without Lloyd's input, this book would not have been written.

I am privileged to be one of the many writers in the Oceanview Publishing stable. Bob and Patricia Gussin, the company's founders, lead by example. They are hardworking, talented, and dedicated to publishing mysteries and thrillers. They manage to keep so many balls in the air at one time that it makes me tired just to contemplate it all.

Emily Baar, David Ivester, and Lee Randall find time in their busy schedules to talk to their authors, soothe our frazzled nerves, encourage us, pump up our egos, and lend a hand to any task with which we might need assistance. I miss Frank Troncale who retired last year, but I'm happy to report that his can-do spirit thrives even in his absence.

And while I am these days engaged in my oldest dream, writing, I would be remiss not to mention the passion that underlies it all, my family. My wife Jean, our sons Greg, Mike, and Chris, our daughter-in-law Judy, and our grandchildren Kyle and Sarah are the most precious gifts that any man could have bestowed upon him. They are the collective sun around which my life revolves.

*The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.*

—William Butler Yeats



MORTAL DILEMMA



PROLOGUE

On the first day of November, in a little bar tucked away in the corner of a small shopping center on the north end of Longboat Key, I met the meanest man I'd ever known. Four days later, I killed him.



CHAPTER ONE

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30

AUTUMN WAS SETTLING over the Florida peninsula, washing away the heat and humidity of the summer. I was chugging along the beach, pounding out my daily four-mile jog as the sun rose over the mainland. The surf was higher than usual, hitting the shore with an energy that was rare for our normally placid Gulf of Mexico. Far out at sea, dark clouds streaked by lightning hung low on the horizon. There was a storm out there somewhere, and the wind it generated was sending the surf rushing our way. If the storm moved onshore, we'd have a nasty day of rain and wind, but for now the sun shone brightly on the beach and the onshore breeze permeated with the smell of the sea tickled my senses. The air was soft and sweet and cool and my mind was full of images of my girl, the wondrous J. D. Duncan. She had been off-island for three days, working a murder case in the little panhandle town of Apalachicola. It seemed longer.

She would be coming home today, starting the six-hour drive right after she and the local law had finished comparing notes. She had not wrapped up the case, but she thought she had made some progress. She said that all she could see were shadows, fuzzy images that she could not quite bring into focus. She had found no clue as to who the bad guys were and she had not come up with a motive for the murder, except that it seemed tied directly to a Longboat Key cold case that

she had been looking into, an unsolved murder that had taken place three years before. It was that connection that had drawn her north.

My name is Matt Royal. I served in the U.S. Army, saw some combat, earned a law degree and practiced law in Orlando for a number of years. I tired of the rat race the law practice had become, lost my wife to divorce, sold everything I owned, and dropped out. I moved to Longboat Key, a small island that is ten miles long and half a mile wide at its broadest point. It lies just off the Southwest Florida coast between the small cities of Bradenton and Sarasota, south of Tampa Bay, about halfway down the peninsula. I had accumulated enough money to last the rest of my life if I were careful.

In the fall, which comes late to Florida, the somnolence of our summers gradually gives way to the frenetic energy brought about by the annual seasonal migration of the snowbirds, our friends from the north who winter with us each year. The island population grows exponentially by the week until the end of February when the key groans under the staggering weight of people, signaling the beginning of the height of the season. At Easter, they begin to leave, and by mid-May, when the heat and humidity of the long summer wraps the island like a hot, damp blanket, they're gone, and our key becomes a less interesting place.

But on this late October day, the snowbirds were slipping onto the island, the early arrivals fleeing the snow that was already clogging the roads back home. Every day brought more people into the bars and restaurants and out to the beaches. It was a time to renew the old friendships that waxed and waned with the seasons.

Jennifer Diane Duncan, the woman I love, is the Longboat Key police department's only detective. She had arrived on our island a couple of years before when her mother died and she inherited a condo on Longboat. She'd been a detective on the Miami-Dade police force for twelve years and risen to assistant homicide commander before

she decided to give up the fast lane that was Miami-Dade County and move to the relative quiet of Longboat Key. Our chief of police, Bill Lester, had jumped at the chance to hire her. She wormed her way into my affections over the first year she was on the key and we became lovers. She says that's not quite the case, but in reality she felt sorry for me and took me in as anybody with a heart would take in a stray puppy. To be frank, her version is probably closer to the truth.

The murder of a young man in North Florida was the first light to be shed on a three-year-old murder case that had no leads, no suspects, no motive, and not much chance of being solved. Four days before, on a Sunday, she had gotten a call, routed through the Longboat Key police switchboard, from the Franklin County sheriff's office. A twenty-five-year-old man named Jeremy Smithson had been shot the evening before and left to die beside a county road that snaked through Tate's Hell State Forest. A Franklin County deputy patrolling the desolate area found him at sun-up, but by the time Smithson arrived at the hospital, he was near death. He knew he was dying and asked to talk to the deputy who had found him. He didn't know who shot him, but he thought it might have to do with a murder he'd committed on Longboat Key three years before.

A man had offered to pay him ten thousand dollars to kill a woman who was living temporarily on Longboat. He'd get five thousand when he killed her and another five grand at the end of three years if he kept quiet and stayed out of trouble with the law. He took the job, snuck onto the key, shot the woman through the head with a pistol he'd been provided by the man who hired him, and left. He'd spent maybe thirty minutes on the island, tossed the pistol off the Longboat Pass Bridge on his way out, and left no trace that he'd ever been there.

Smithson did not know the name of the man who'd hired him, but he gave the deputy a good description. He'd only seen him once,

when he was given the money and the pistol and was told that if he didn't get the job done within the next week, he would be killed.

The dying man asked for a preacher, and told the deputy he was sorry about killing the woman. He knew it was wrong, but he thought Jesus might forgive him and take him into heaven since he confessed his sin, even though it was to a deputy sheriff and not to a man of God. Maybe the deputy could ask the preacher to hurry. He smiled, closed his eyes, and died.

Jeremy Smithson had lived in Franklin County most of his life, and the sheriff knew his family. The boy had been in trouble since his early teens, nothing too serious, but a steady stream of small-time crimes that had once landed him in a juvenile facility and later, when he was no longer a minor, a one-year stint in the county jail. Then he disappeared. The sheriff heard that Jeremy had moved out of state and was trying to turn his life around.

When the sheriff talked to Jeremy's parents about their son's murder, they told him that Jeremy had come up with five thousand dollars about three years before. He told them he'd won it in a scratch-off card game sponsored by the Florida State Lottery. The next day he left home. They heard from him occasionally, but had not seen him since he left. He told them he had been living in Birmingham, Alabama, and working in a bar in a less-than-desirable part of town. He asked that they keep his whereabouts a secret.

He showed up at their door the day before his death, late in the afternoon, and said he'd come for a visit, but that he had to see a man who owed him some money. He'd be back later in the evening. He never showed up.

The sheriff called the Longboat Key police department to inquire about any murders on the island about the time that the young man said he killed the woman. He talked to J.D. who remembered the case. It had happened shortly before she went to work for the Longboat

Key PD and replaced the retiring detective who had investigated the murder.

After she joined the LBKPD, she would occasionally review the file, hoping to find something that the other detective had missed. She had gotten nowhere with the investigation, and it haunted her.

The victim was a forty-year-old woman from Atlanta named Rachel Fortson who was visiting her brother's Gulf-side house on the north end of Longboat Key. She was alone, and had only been in residence for two days when she was killed. The forensic technicians had gone over the crime scene with meticulous care. They found nothing, and searched again, disappointed and puzzled at the total lack of evidence.

J.D. left for Franklin County the morning after the phone call from the sheriff.

CHAPTER TWO

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30

I REACHED MY turnaround point, a beachfront condo two miles from where I started. I reversed course, slowed my pace, and churned north, my mind racing ahead to my best friend, Jock Algren, who was ensconced in my cottage, drinking himself into oblivion. He'd been there for five days, seemingly intent on exhausting the supply of bourbon I'd stocked when he called me from Beirut, Lebanon.

"Podna," he'd said when I answered the phone. "I'm on my way to the key. It's bad. Very bad. The worst it's ever been. Get the booze laid in. I might be there awhile."

"You okay, Jock?"

"No."

"Jock?"

"I'll see you tomorrow." He hung up.

I'd met Jock Algren on the first day of the seventh grade. I was the new kid in the little town in the middle of the Florida peninsula and I guess he felt it was his duty to challenge me. My family had just moved down from Georgia, and I didn't know anybody in the school. Jock was the most popular kid there and that knowledge gave a kind of swagger to his gait that I, at first, took to be a small birth defect. His popularity seemed to imbue him with certain obligations to the pre-teen society that so admired his athletic prowess and his good

looks. Apparently, his duties included intimidation of the new guy.

“Where’re you from?” he asked me on that first day of school.

“Georgia.”

“Georgia? Nothing but a bunch of fools in Georgia. Why did you move here?”

“My daddy says that when people move from Georgia to Florida, it improves the intellectual level of both states.”

That comment would have gone over the head of most twelve-year-old bullies, but Jock’s mind was among the best I’d ever met. He immediately understood the insult. “Now I’m going to have to kick your ass,” he said.

He swung at me, his fist catching me in the middle of the chest. I staggered backward, regained my footing, and charged, taking him to the ground. I got two strikes into his abdominal area before a teacher pulled me off him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Matthew?” the teacher asked, his voice restrained, his anger controlled.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Nothing? You just beat up Jock and you say you were doing nothing? You report to detention at the end of class.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, and walked toward the aging schoolhouse.

When the bell rang to signal the end of detention, I walked into the hallway to find Jock leaning against the wall. He stuck out his hand and said, “You’re a stand-up guy. You didn’t rat me out.”

I shook his outstretched hand. “Didn’t need to,” I said. “I’d already kicked your ass.”

He grinned. “That you did.”

And that was the day we formed a friendship that had lasted until now, and would continue until one of us shuffled off this mortal coil we call life. It turned out that we were both the sons of truck drivers who spent way too much of their time lost in a haze of cheap whiskey.

We were both poor and lived in houses that many of the other kids would never deign to enter. I think it was the adversity of our teen years, that hormone-wracked period when young men struggle with coming-of-age issues, that turned us into brothers. It was a time when we clung to our friendship in order to survive personal worlds that were becoming meaner and more restrictive each year. That time of travail and teenage angst cemented a bond that was stronger than blood.

It turned out that Jock wasn't a bully. He was just a guy showing off for a girl on the day he accosted me. He took his defeat at my hands with good nature and never bragged that he could have taken me. Privately, he always told me he was about to roll me off him and give me a good ass-whipping.

Jock used his brilliance to win scholarships to college and upon graduation joined the most secretive agency of the U.S. government, an intelligence group that was so buried in the bureaucracy that it didn't have a name. He became a top agent, a gatherer of information, and when the situation demanded, an assassin.

Jock always kept in touch, but sometimes he would disappear from our lives for weeks at a time. When whatever mission had pulled him away was completed, he would come to Longboat Key to decompress. For a few days, he, J.D., and I would hang out on the beach or the boat and in the bars and restaurants where we were sure to see our friends. He and I would fish and talk and reminisce, and he and my island friend Logan Hamilton would play golf and embarrass themselves with their ineptness. I finally decided that they didn't know enough about the game to be embarrassed, so they were happy as duffers.

On occasion, Jock was called on to do things for the protection of his country that disgusted him, and once in a while, when he did things that were so terrible, so deeply wrenching that he sickened of the death and destruction that he wreaked in the name of national

security, he needed what he called *the healing time*. It was those times, when he was almost overwhelmed by remorse, that he would come to my house and drink himself into oblivion. He'd tell me about his latest mission and what he'd done that had seared his soul, and on the fifth day, he'd start sobering up, running the beach, sweating the alcohol out of his system, eating great fatty meals, and visiting with his other friends on the island. By the eighth day, he'd hug J.D. and me, wave good-bye, and head back to his home in Houston to await the summons to the next battle in the terrorist war that had no end.

This time, it was different. We were in our seventh day, and Jock had cracked open another bottle of Maker's Mark before I left for my morning jog. So far, he'd refused to talk about what had sent him into his special hell. This was the worst I'd ever seen him.

Every time I asked if he were ready to talk, he'd say, "Not yet. But soon. I promise." And he would disappear into another bottle of good bourbon. I was concerned, but not yet worried. He'd always pulled out of it before, but I had long harbored the fear that there would come a time when he could not walk back from the abyss. Maybe we were approaching that time, but I had decided to give him another day or two before calling his boss at the agency.

J.D. understood Jock's need to find some solace, and my need to help him maintain, or possibly regain, his sanity, to be the friend who stood close, listened to the horror he had experienced, and let him know that at least someone understood his pain and did not judge him for his actions. J.D. would leave us to work through the healing time, and she, in turn, stood nearby to prop me up as I slogged through the miasma of Jock's life.

I was nearing the North Shore Drive crossover that spanned the dunes, hoping that Jock would be a little better when I got home. I had slowed to a walk when my phone rang.

"Good morning, studmuffin," J.D. said.

“Wow. ‘Studmuffin?’ Are you a bit randy?”

“Not at the moment, but I’ll be thinking about you all the way home. Might help.”

“We’ll see,” I said, my voice surely dripping with hope. “Are you on your way?”

“As soon as I finish up with the sheriff. It’ll probably be close to noon. I’ll grab a Big Mac and eat in the car. I should be home by six. What are you doing?”

“Just finishing my run. I’m going to check on Jock and then go to The Pub for a grouper sandwich and a beer.”

“How’s Jock doing?”

“About the same. I’m a little worried about him. He’s usually coming out of it by now.”

“Has he told you what’s bothering him?”

“Not yet, but he keeps telling me we’ll talk soon.”

“Hang in there. I’ll be home by dark.”

“Drive safe.”

“Bye, sweetie. I love you.” She was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30

THE RUN DOWN from Carrabelle in Florida's panhandle had been rough. The sea was unseasonably agitated, large swells rolling off the starboard quarter, the boat yawing, her bow dipping into the waves as she tried to climb the walls of water the stiff wind flung at her. She was constantly pushed toward the shallows that guarded the big bend area of Florida, that desolate part of the state that the tourists and snowbirds never see. The captain had furled his sails early in the trip, and relied on his sturdy little Yanmar diesel engine to push him through the Gulf of Mexico.

The man was a seasoned sailor, knew his boat and trusted her. Still, there were moments during the trip to Cortez when he'd questioned his sanity in heading out into a sea that was so uninviting. But he was under orders, orders that superseded his wants or even his safety. So he sailed on.

On Wednesday morning, just at daybreak, he'd received a phone call from his principal, a shady private investigator from Tallahassee, telling him to go to Cortez and tie up at the Seafood Shack. He would be contacted and given further instructions in the next day or two. He knew the trip involved killing somebody, because that's what he did for a living. He killed people. The name of the doomed person would be part of his instructions. That was it, a milk run, easy as pie, and a

lot of money for his effort. The man from Tallahassee had hinted that he would be killing a police officer, a detective on the Longboat Key police department. He would be paid a premium for killing a cop. The sailor knew that a detective from Longboat, a woman, had been in Franklin County investigating a murder and was trying to tie it to a murder that had occurred on Longboat Key three years before. His source in the Franklin County sheriff's office told him she would be finishing up and returning home on Thursday.

He had set sail immediately from Carrabelle, running into the teeth of the storm moving northeast across the Gulf from southern Mexico, beating his way south through Wednesday and Wednesday night. He stayed well offshore, fighting the vicious sea, intent on not being observed. When his GPS system told him he was off Longboat Pass, he turned eastward, hoisted the Mexican courtesy flag, and sailed into the sunrise and under the Longboat Pass Bridge. His boat bore the evidence of a rough crossing, and the flag would indicate that he'd come from Mexico, not the panhandle.

Early Thursday morning, he moored at the Seafood Shack Marina at the mainland end of the Cortez Bridge about two miles north of Longboat Pass. He checked in with the dockmaster, set his alarm clock for three hours, and fell exhausted into the bunk in the boat's bow. He'd rest up and stay ready to complete his mission. He'd been told that he would be there no more than a couple of days, three at the most. Easy money. Make the kill and get out. No sweat.