

# DUMMY

David-Matthew Barnes

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**TORMENT**  
A CAYÈLLE IMPRINT

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# Chapter One: Strawberry Milk



Perfection was not easy to achieve. It was even more difficult to sustain night after night and day after day. Yet, this was the constant aim of Beverly Crisp—her never-ending goal. It propelled her out of bed every morning and it tucked her in every night. She craved perfection. It put a spring in her heavy step. Not only did the sense of order and organization make her heart smile, but she also knew Talbot would accept nothing less. He was particular that way. Fussy, even. And nothing mattered more to Beverly than making him happy. Because the opposite was something she avoided every way possible. Someone else touching him provoked him to display his anger on a few occasions. And the memory of each of those moments still terrified her to the core.

Beverly shook off the frightening scenes from her thoughts and focused on the task at hand. The antique grandfather clock ticking in the other room was a reminder of how fast the night was passing. The constant sound was almost maddening. It was the ultimate distraction. She needed to hurry. Dinner had to be served before she could leave and head to rehearsal. Time seemed like it was always working against her. As she bent down to a large object in a chair, she wondered why she kept that horrible old clock. Why hadn't she taken an ax to the awful thing years ago when she could still swing one? Even though there was no fireplace, the wood could still be of some use. Her late husband had inherited that clock from his pestering mother. Both were dead now, but the clock remained. Incessantly ticking, the hateful thing taunted her without mercy.

Shifting slightly and repositioning her feet, Beverly got a good grip and hoisted upward. Using both hands, she pulled the life-size male mannequin to his feet. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she dragged the well-dressed dummy from the enclosed sunporch into the overheated living room. While doing so, she stared at the back of his head, noting that a patch of his Dracula black hair was thinning. After church on Sunday would be the perfect time to fix it. She could work miracles with a needle and thread.

Already breaking a sweat, Beverly's breath caught in her throat. She stopped for a moment. The sound of her shallow gulps for air nearly drowned out that ridiculous ticking. The heavysset mannequin was making the task cumbersome. Yet, the seventy-six-year-old woman continued with fierce determination.

This was nothing new but a nightly ritual. It frustrated her, insisting she should be used to the chore by now. But Beverly's body was still not accustomed to the level of exertion it required to move Talbot from his favorite spot on the sunporch to his preferred spot in the living room—his cocoa-colored recliner. The process never got easier, but she knew better than to disappoint Talbot. Like her, he insisted on a set schedule. Any variation from one and there would be hell to pay.

If anyone had peered through the sheer peach curtains that hung in the front windows of the mobile home painted pale pink and yellow, they'd be shocked at what they saw: an old woman dragging a mannequin from one room to the next. The heels of his black shoes left tiny tracks in the carpet as she pulled and tugged, like a corpse resisting its trip to the grave.

Beverly was certainly eye-catching. At first glance, she looked harmless and quaint, like someone's grandmother, in her glittery purple sweatshirt, pastel polyester pants, and dark orthopedic shoes. Her light-colored eyes seemed to sparkle from within whenever she smiled at a stranger. Her stark white hair had a pale pink tinge to it that was only noticeable when the light caught it. Styled and sprayed into place,

her hair was a sculpted work of art. It was Wednesday, so she'd spent the afternoon at a local beauty parlor, while Talbot enjoyed his time on the sunporch. There was a freshness to her hairdo. It gave her an air of confidence that was comforting and energetic. Like she had a purpose. Something to look forward to. A reason for living.

To the many who knew Beverly thought of her in the same vein as a living godmother from a fairy tale, complete with an enchanting laugh that captured and tickled the insides of the ears of anyone who heard it. In fact, most people in the blink-and-you-miss-it town of Hazel Hills assumed Beverly was so kind she didn't have the capacity to hurt a fly, much less bury her husband and mother-in-law in the metal shed out back.

The only element of her appearance that gave a slight fright was the heavy makeup she wore. There was a grotesqueness to it, an exaggeration of her dark eyebrows, painted eyelids, and sagging cheeks caked with streaks of rust-colored blush. Her startling appearance resembled that of the kabuki doll she kept locked away in a nearby curio cabinet, complete with a dark blue kimono embroidered with tiny cherry blossoms.

On more than one occasion, Beverly's appearance had frightened small children. Typically, this happened when she ventured out to the bank or to the grocery store. Noticing an adorable toddler sitting in a shopping cart, she couldn't help but wave and smile while their distracted parent scanned the shelves. With one glance at Beverly, the child would burst into tears of terror. Later, she would recount the incident to Talbot and together they would laugh about it. Between them, she was the harmless one and they knew it. That's why the situation was so humorous each time it happened. Had the child come face-to-face with Talbot, their chance of survival would've been much less. Then they would've experienced real terror. Especially if they touched him.

While Beverly's mobile home looked cozy and lived in, it was apparent that someone lived there alone. Loneliness floated in the still,

rose-tinted air until it stuck to the wood-paneled walls, where it would die while trying to escape the tin box it was trapped in. There were no family photos displayed. No evidence of marriage, children, or grandchildren. Not a cat or an ankle-biting dog in sight. But there were a lot of dolls, including wide-eyed ones in beautiful handmade dresses locked in cabinets. Through the glass, they stared blankly as if they were watching the old television set that sat in a corner of the room. On the screen was the 1941 version of *The Wolf Man*.

Beverly moved further into the living room. It was immaculate, yet the décor was dated by modern standards. Both of her hands were still cupping the shoulders of her male mannequin. Talbot was wearing a dark suit coat, pleated pants, a pressed button-up Oxford shirt, and a periwinkle bowtie. His dark dress shoes were lightly scuffed around the edges, minor battle scars from being dragged from room-to-room day and night. Beverly struggled to get him into his recliner. Landing with a heavy thud, Talbot soon relaxed into the chair. The recliner rocked a little as he settled in. Once there, it seemed as if he were watching TV, just like the many dolls around him, who looked on from the locked cabinets, appearing anxious and hopeful that they too would be freed.

Pulling a handkerchief from her pants pocket, Beverly wiped her brow and let out a long, deep sigh. She looked down at her companion. “Talbot, I swear you get heavier every day. You’ve got to start exercising more. Otherwise, I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Each time Beverly looked at Talbot, there was an overwhelming fondness in her expression. The love she felt was so deep, it nearly moved her to tears. Still holding the handkerchief, she placed a hand near her heart, vowing in silence to continue to do right by Talbot. He deserved only the best, and she was the one chosen to give it to him.

While Talbot focused on the black-and-white movie on TV, Beverly entered the lemon-colored kitchen, and flicked on the overhead light. Quietly, not to disturb Talbot’s TV time, she put the final touches on his dinner before returning with a portable TV tray, placing it in

front of him. The legs on the tray were thin and shaky, a product of old age. Beverly knew if she weren't careful, the tray could topple over, or even worse, collapse onto Talbot and potentially ruin his classy outfit. She made sure the tray was steady before stepping back and taking the moment in. On the tray were silverware and a plate of food: a chicken casserole, canned peas, and buttery mashed potatoes. On instinct, Beverly unfolded a cloth napkin and placed it on Talbot's lap.

She then snapped her fingers and said, "Oh, I almost forgot."

Moving as fast as her tired body would allow, Beverly left the room again. Back quickly, she returned from the kitchen with a glass of cold milk, a brightly colored tin canister, and a spoon. She placed the glass on the TV tray, opened the canister, and scooped two teaspoons of strawberry powder into the milk. She stirred until the milk became a vibrant pink.

"You sure do love your strawberry milk," Beverly said, still stirring. Satisfied the milk was now the right shade, she pulled the spoon out and tapped it a few times on the rim of the glass. "There," she said, pleased.

Beverly sat down on a nearby sofa. She reached for the knitting bag, opened it, took out two needles, and began to knit.

"Eat your supper, Talbot," she said. "You need to keep up your strength."

It was only a matter of seconds before the movie distracted Beverly from her knitting. Even though she'd seen the film many times, the story always engrossed her, pulling her into another world where moonlight controlled the fate of everyone.

The telephone rang. Beverly reached for the receiver next to the sofa.

"Hello?" she said. Her eyes were still glued to the black-and-white images on the television screen. Realizing who was on the other end of the call, Beverly's smile tightened and her tone turned icy. "Oh, hello. Of course I will be there." She glanced over at the annoying clock. It



was just after six. “I’m heading out the door in a few. I have to stop off at the gas station first to pick up Jenny, but then I’ll see you at rehearsal. I think I have all of my lines memorized for the first act, but we shall see. As you seem to keep reminding me every chance you get, my memory isn’t what it used to be.” Beverly’s body was tense. Auditioning for the upcoming play at the community theater had seemed like such a good idea at the time, especially because it was a charming murder mystery called *The Candlestick of Murder*. Now, Beverly started to panic, wondering if she were in over her head. No matter how hard she tried, learning her lines of dialogue was no easy feat. “Don’t worry about me,” she assured nosey Abigail Grinblat, who continued voicing her usual concerns.

Abigail’s opinions were always unsolicited and never nice. Over the many years that Beverly had known Abigail, one thing had become abundantly clear: Abigail considered herself to be an expert on everything and never kept her opinion to herself, even when politely asked to do so.

“Abigail, I can still see perfectly fine to drive at night,” Beverly said. “And besides, I always have Talbot with me in the passenger seat. He makes me feel safe whenever I drive alone.” Beverly glanced over to where Talbot sat. She was pleased to see his glass was empty. The strawberry milk was gone. So was most of his dinner. A few bites of casserole and a mouthful of peas were all that remained. Clearly, Talbot had been very hungry. Beverly hoped he’d saved room for dessert.

“I’ll see you shortly,” said Beverly, now anxious to get off the phone and serve Talbot a few raspberry and coconut jelly cakes. She knew how much he loved them. “And when I get there, I’ll have dessert for everyone. I know how much they love my baking. They’re such a nice group of people. Well, most of them are.”

Minutes later, Beverly struggled to get Talbot from the living room and into the covered carport adjacent to the mobile home. There, her Lincoln Continental was parked. The car was decades old but still reli-

able. Beverly maneuvered Talbot into the passenger seat. To keep him safe, she buckled his seat belt and straightened his bowtie. She licked her thumb and wiped his chin clean.

“Mashed potatoes,” she said with a playful reprimand in her voice. “You’re such a messy eater.”

Once Talbot was secure in the car, Beverly closed his car door and let out a sigh. She was sweating again. Standing still, she allowed the cool night air to find her, welcoming the sensation of it against her bare arms. That reminded her that she still needed to get her coat. And the leftover jelly cakes were sitting in a dessert box on the kitchen counter. As Beverly headed back into the house, she heard a coyote in the distance. The desert was filled with them. They had terrorized Hazel Hills for years, crawling out of the shadows when hungry and devouring small dogs and cats, murdering many beloved family pets. For this reason alone, Beverly refused to take in any animals. And because Talbot would be jealous if she did.

Back inside the house, Beverly lifted her coat from a wooden hanger in a closet and draped it over her arm. In the kitchen, she grabbed the pink box. Walking through the house, she turned off the lights, except for the lamp in the living room. Coming home so late, she would need the light to avoid tripping and falling.

Back in the carport, Beverly moved around the car. She opened the back door and positioned the box of jelly cakes on the backseat, placing her coat next to it. Hoping the dessert wouldn’t spill, she slid into the driver’s seat. With the key in the ignition, she started the car. She readjusted her rearview mirror. In the reflection, she noticed her neighbor across the way had placed their garbage can out on the curb, leaving it for collection in the morning when the garbage truck would ease its way down the narrow lanes of the mobile home park. The can was overflowing. Bits of trash were picked up by the summer night wind and floated away like tumbleweeds of litter.

“My goodness,” Beverly said. “People are so messy.” She glanced over at her passenger. “Don’t you agree, Talbot?”

The mannequin’s gaze was fixed on the windshield, staring straight ahead into the inkiness of the dark night.

“Yes,” she said. “I know how much you dislike people. You always have.”

She reversed out of the carport, careful not to destroy the colorful pinwheels and plastic flamingos decorating her small but perfectly manicured front lawn. She thought the decorations gave a whimsical look to the small yard. Yet, to her dismay, her surrounding neighbors made very little effort to dress up their lawns. She wished they cared more. If they did, the mobile home park could become the cute, kitschy place it once was. Instead, it looked run down and forgotten. Beverly hated that.

Deliberately driving at a snail’s pace, Beverly and her passenger inched their way through the mobile home park as if they were on a private tour of the place. Despising those who ignored the posted speed limit signs—ripping through the residential area like a tornado—Beverly made a point of demonstrating her commitment to the law. Besides, a slow-moving driver was apt to see a lot more of its journey, including the state of the lawns of her neighbors. Beaming with an egotistical pride that bordered on smugness, Beverly felt assured, yet again, that her lawn was still the best in the park.

Reaching the exit, Beverly braked at the edge of the highway. The car sat in the center of a pool of yellow and green neon lights, cast off from the bright sign that bore the name of a place she’d called home for years: Cactus Ranch. Well aware that the snobby folks who lived in mansions on the other side of town referred to the place as Cactus Trash, Beverly felt a tinge of pride whenever she saw the illuminated sign. To her, it was a beacon, a landmark that burned day and night to remind her where home was. While the rich looked down their noses at

the place, Beverly loved Cactus Ranch, even her neighbors whose lawns would never be as nice as hers. Even if they finally tried.

Once out on the highway, Beverly glanced at Talbot, something she always did at this part of their usual journey. She wanted to be certain he had a good view of the road and that he was safe and secure. Satisfied after a quick glance, Beverly reached for a knob and turned on the radio. There were three favorite radio stations she alternated between, depending on her mood: one played jazz, another was a classical station, and the third played oldies. Settling on the oldies station, Beverly smiled at the sweet sound of Blossom Dearie's voice, who was starting the second verse of "Someone to Watch Over Me."

The music transported her back to another place and time. First, she thought of her mother. Named after the blonde goddess film star Carole Lombard, Beverly's mother was an equally stunning woman. Tall and graceful, Carole McAllister was the envy of every woman and the secret desire of many men. Except for her husband. The memory of her father's constant infidelity caused Beverly to wince. She clenched the steering wheel, trying to ignore the haunting images and bits of old conversations that seemed to torture her whenever certain songs played. Instead, she focused on the road beneath her and the way the headlights cut through the night like sharp knives. Outside, the desert was cooling off, finding relief from the harshness of the summer day. The coyotes were out, searching for something to devour, intent on not having empty stomachs when dawn came.

Memories always swirled through Beverly's mind whenever she was on the highway, approaching the outskirts of town. Driving at night often triggered a deep sense of nostalgia that would sometimes bring her to tears. Tonight was no exception as visions from her youth seemed to plague her with a relentless viciousness. Having spent her entire life in Hazel Hills, rarely venturing across the county line, the passing scenery remained the same, which once served as a backdrop for major life events.





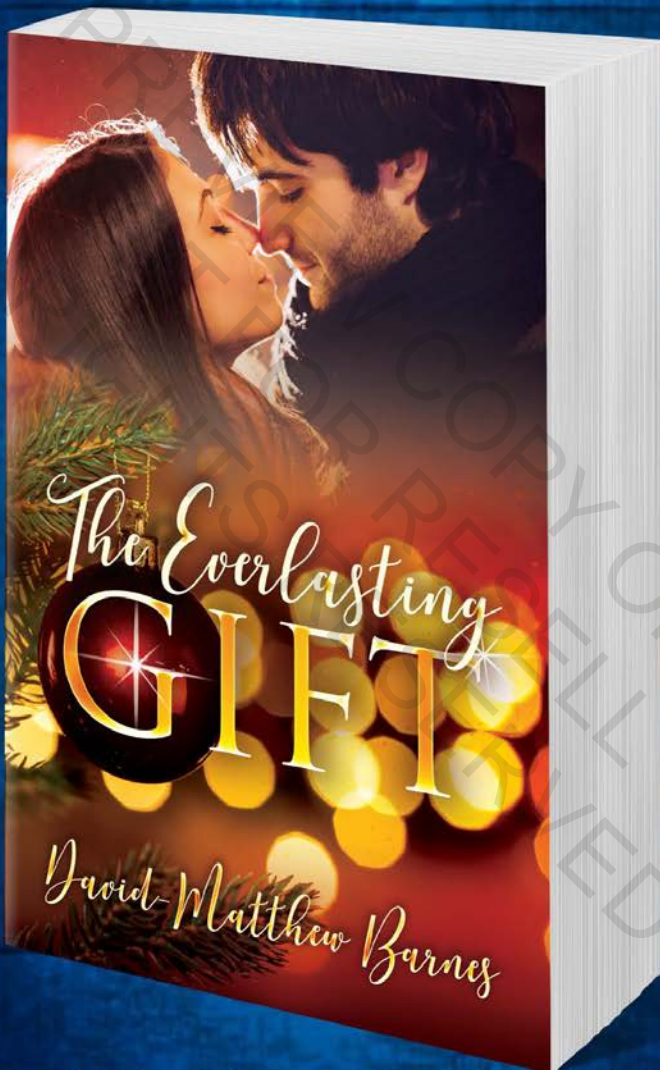
## About the Author

*David-Matthew Barnes* is the award-winning author of seventeen novels, three collections of poetry, seven short stories, and more than seventy stage plays that have been performed in three languages in twelve countries. Five of his stage plays have received off-off Broadway productions. As a film producer, he has helped bring fifty films to the screen, including many horror movies. To date, he has written eight produced screenplays. He is a graduate of the Professional Program in Screenwriting at UCLA. He lives in Sacramento, California.

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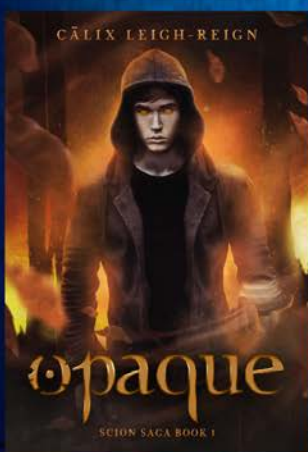
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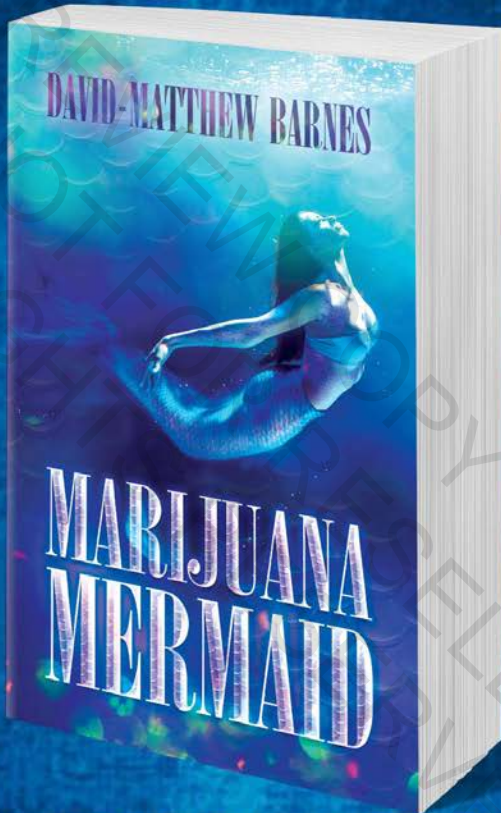


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