

“Intelligent and compelling”

– Robert B. Parker, author of the Spenser and Jesse Stone novels

FATAL

DEEDS



a Gus Churchill, P.I. Mystery

by

Andrew McAleer

Praise for
FATAL DEEDS

“Intelligent and compelling...”

Fatal Deeds is a solid story of crime and small-town life.”

—**Robert B. Parker**, author of
the Spenser and Jesse Stone novels

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“Gus and Happy are Concordians, yet embody the strength of the American spirit wherever it might be encountered... Like Holmes’s gaslight era, Andrew McAleer’s characters and setting will continue to enlighten us.”

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It came down to what Smitty once told me, “If crime always showed on a man’s face, Mr. C, we’d have no portraits of kings.”

As I rounded the corner on that brisk September morning, crossing in front of the last remaining outdoor newsstand in Concord Farms, Massachusetts, our local newspaper purveyor Smitty waved *The Boston Globe* as if it were a flag signaling a need to grind to a halt.

“Want the 4-1-1 on the big city murder, Mr. C?” Smitty asked.

As I’m a congenial New Englander, I paused to converse with my neighbor and friend.

“Am I a suspect yet?” I asked, smiling as I dug deep into my trouser pocket to retrieve a hunk of change to consummate the deal. Paper in hand, I took a quick glance at the headlines and accompanying slug line. The prior Friday morning someone had slaughtered a Newbury Street antiques dealer named Winters by obliterating his face and skull, blasting it with what was *reportedly* a shotgun. Any murder was big news, even if it had no apparent connection to Concord Farms, and being a former sheriff, naturally I found myself intrigued by the case. Even if many New Englanders disdained them, fancy Newbury Street antiques dealers did not get bumped off very often—and rarely in such a barbaric manner.

Smitty dropped the coins into his tattered waist pouch and skimmed the article before giving me the hand off. “I don’t see your name here, Mr. C, so I guess you’re off the hook, at least according to the latest edition.”

“Don’t believe everything you read, Smitty,” I said.

“Too bad nothing like this ever happens in sleepy old Concord,” Smitty said, extending and then scratching his stubbly chin as was his custom. “Might drum up some business for the both of us.” Smitty wanted to sell newspapers, and I needed new clients, but murders were

few and far between in Concord Farms.

“We can always hope,” I said. I took another quick glance at the paper. One of my former protégées from the Concord Sheriff’s Department, Boston Detective Reva Smith, was working the homicide. I folded the paper and saluted him with it, before tucking it beneath the sleeve of my Burberry tweed jacket. “Fair harbor, Smitty.”

Smitty grinned his lopsided smile and pinned two fingers to his right temple before snapping them in my direction. “Right back atcha, Mr. C.”

The enclave known formally as Concord Farms, Massachusetts—Concord for short—resides in the rolling hills forty minutes west of Boston. Concord remains the prototypical New England village, a quiet, charming throwback to the eighteenth century, where tree-lined streets, dotted with two-story clapboard seventeenth and eighteenth century houses, meander north, south, east, and west of the circular main street. On Main Street, small shops with hardwood floors and antique glass fronts surround the courthouse, sheriff station, and fire station. Local residents are mostly third or fourth generation pilgrims whose ancestors fought in the Revolutionary War and sank roots deep into the Massachusetts soil—and Concord. Tourists flock to Concord and its neighboring towns to visit Revolutionary War sites and the homes of some of America’s finest writers, including Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thoreau.

My family consisted of fourth generation New Englanders, hailing from Plymouth, England, whose ancestors had arrived on the Mayflower after spending a few years in Holland.

I had signed on as a deputy for the Concord Sheriff’s Office soon after my return from Korea, where I had served my country as a straight leg infantry man and later as an intelligence operative. In 1962, the fair people of Concord elected me to serve as their sheriff, an office I held until 1997, when a young woman who had been my hand-selected deputy, Kate Dawes, trounced me in an election. Since that time, I have spent my days—and often my nights—working as a private detective. I mostly chase down deadbeats and dig up the missing pieces on insurance fraud cases for a couple of local attorneys who only hire me because I’ve been around long enough to swap lies from the good old

days.

* * *

I run my private investigations on the second floor of 17B Walden Street, an address right in the center of town. Locals refer to Concord Center as “the Milldam.” According to the Massachusetts Bay Colony Tercentenary Commission—and my father, a local historian of some note—Milldam was the site of an Indian fishing weir and its narrow streets had been laid out along the dam built soon after the settlement of the town in 1635.

After buying the paper from Smitty, I walked a block to my office and ran up the stairs. Before jumping into my own digs, I propped myself against the oak doorjamb to Happy Fremont’s meticulous office, located to the right of the stairs, and made my new tie conspicuous. Happy is my sole secretarial assistant and muse, the woman who had made my heart sing like a chorus from the first day she walked into my office twelve years prior. Happy had been widowed and although she made my heart leap every day, she did not seemingly share my fond regard. She remained square to her ancient roll-top desk, scratching answers into a Sudoku puzzle book, and didn’t bother to look up. “How’re you today, Gus?” my fair maiden asked.

“Not bad for a young fellow,” I said, brightening. “How’s the Sudoku puzzle treating you?”

Happy’s eyes remained glued to the *Japanese Mindgame Sudoku Book*. “Have it on the ropes, Gus.”

“Any prospects? Businesswise, I mean.”

Happy looked up briefly and shook her head—setting her neatly shorn silver hair bobbing across her pretty face—and then zeroed in on the book again. “Ixnay. No calls. No clients.”

My tie didn’t make the intended impression I’d hoped for, so I slinked into my office just a few steps down and to the right from Happy’s. Inside my digs I made a half turn to the left and perched my Caselbar linen cap on one of the scrolled hooks to my heart pine coat rack. I keep an austere office by today’s standards. No high-tech goodies. Just a few chairs, desk, phone, rug, stand up ashtray, and a plaque of Emerson hanging above my desk—a must for any self-

respecting professional office in Concord. I also have a few other trinkets to make me feel like I run a real office dedicated to the fight against crime.

* * *

That second Tuesday in September I had just completed my morning cup of Darjeeling and was tapping down a bowl of Exmoor Hunt tobacco, when I peered out my office window and took in the Milldam's morning throng. Today my view of the square consisted of three senior citizens waltzing about, four pigeons scrounging for breadcrumbs, and a truant Labrador named Shadow, practicing his talent for procuring treats from local shop owners—myself not excluded.

With my father's favorite pipe clenched between my teeth, I raised the window. The New England morning had concocted a perfect blend of sun, clouds, and breeze with just enough crisp, cool air to announce that yet another summer was fading into autumn.

Contributing to the local pulse, a van idling at a crosswalk out front wore a bumper sticker proclaiming: "Salvation is the Solution." As I pondered the implied problem, a young woman clad in a flannel shirt, worn blue jeans, and tan workboots crossed Walden Street and paused in front of my shingle, as if studying the text: "Augustus M. Churchill, Private Investigator."

After some apparent mulling, she opened, entered, and—judging by the significant creaks she made ascending the winding stairs up to my office—double-stepped to the second floor. I was pondering if the haste indicated urgency, while concurrently taking note that my antique Revere clock on the wall opposite my desk clocked her in at 9:11 a.m.

A moment later, Happy swung her lean, but hearty physique into my office, keeping one hand on the knob as she pinned the door closed behind her. She found me at my antique oak desk, pretending to be intently reading the article concerning the Newbury Street murder, while half-dawdling on my pipe. Detective Smith gave nothing more than the usual obligatory quote that the authorities were following up all possible leads.

I lifted my eyes from the paper, quickly scanned the lovely flowered frock Happy was wearing, and then purposefully revealed a shade of

distress.

“Everything all right, Gus?” Happy asked, now firmly planted in my office, arms akimbo. She didn’t look directly at my tie, but I felt sure she had noticed it and, one hoped, found it fashionable.

“Not for this poor chap.” I held up the paper, pointed to the newly departed antiques dealer, and then plopped the paper down onto my desk. “What have we today?”

“There’s a young woman here to see you, Gus. A Miss Susan Logan, and from the way she galloped up the stairs, I don’t think she knows whether she’s on foot or horseback.”

“Oh?”

“Says it’s urgent.”

I said, “Ask Miss Logan if she minds discussing her urgency in the presence of pipe smoking. I just got the Exmoor cooking the way I prefer.”

Happy gave me her flippant look before opening the door and leaning her upper torso into our foyer. “Do you mind pipe smoke, Miss Logan?”

“No. I enjoy it. My old man smokes cigars.”

I liked the sound of the young woman’s voice. “You may send her in, Happy.”

My muse peered at me, a patient smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Is there a ‘please’ somewhere in there, Gus?”

I rose, laying the pipe in the ashtray. “A whole bushel of them,” I replied sweetly, whilst silently appreciating Happy’s graceful figure—still a fine filly of a woman if ever there was one.

Happy smiled her most delicious smile, one that illuminates her blue eyes and—seemingly unwittingly—my life. “And, Gus . . .?”

“Yes?” I asked, running one hand down the length of my tie.

“Nice tie. Interesting pattern.”

“Horseshoes and haystacks. I bought it with you in mind, sweetheart,” I said, drawing out the last word, employing my half-decent Bogart impression in hopes of winning her full attention at last.

She rolled her eyes. “Last of the romantics. I’ll send in your client.”

Seconds later, my coltish visitor bounced into my office and extended a hand. “What’s poppin’, Mr. Churchill?” Susan Logan held

out a tiny hand, yet still delivered a handshake an ironworker would have applauded. She had sharp, intense blue eyes, a silver-screen smile, and a rosy complexion, which complemented her strawberry-blond hair.

“What’s popping, huh?” I love learning new expressions. “Oh, not a whole hell of a lot. What’s popping with you?”

“Bout the same,” the young lady replied, grinning, missing my elocution lesson entirely. “Nice tie.”

Obviously, she knew quality when she saw it. I offered her the overstuffed chair in front of my desk, and then settled into my slightly bruised leather swivel. Pipe canted, I settled into detective mode. “What can I do for you, Miss Logan?”

“Please, call me Susan. Saying ‘Miss’ makes me feel old,” she said, giving me an odd look. “You married?”

I cleared my throat before replying. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Ancient history.”

“How ancient?” She raised her eyebrows.

Not wishing to recount my personal history, I moved my beloved glass Walden Woods paperweight, with a picture of Thoreau etched in it, from one end of the desk to the other. “My buckboard suffered a broken wagon wheel on the way to the wedding and in the meantime, my bride-to-be got scooped by the local parson. Now, what can I do for you, Susan?”

Susan stared at me for a few moments before connecting the dots. “I have a legal question, and I figured you might know the answer.”

“A legal question, you say. Then, I have a few ‘legal questions’ that we must cover first, such as your age.”

“I’ll be nineteen in December. I graduated from Concord-Carlisle High two years ago, and I’ll complete my Associate’s in Business Administration at Middlesex Community College this fall.”

“Impressive beginning. Jumping ahead indicates intelligence. May I inquire as to what comes next?”

“I’m hoping to get into Boston College.”

“Good idea,” I said, nodding my approval. “Do you currently work?”

“Yep.”

“Yes. . . ?”

“Yep.”

My subtle grammar lesson a failure, I pushed forward. “Now that I know a few pertinent facts, what is the ‘legal question’ you wish to ask?”

She removed a package of Toastmaster Cigarettes from the breast pocket of her flannel shirt. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Yes, quite,” I said.

“But you smoke,” she countered.

“A nasty habit I picked up in the Army. Alas, I’m now too old to change my spots.”

She grinned. “You know something, Mr. Churchill?”

“Call me ‘Gus.’”

“You don’t look that old. In fact you have sexy eyes and lots of wavy hair . . . for a man your age.”

I cleared my throat. “You may smoke, if you must.”

Susan extracted a disposable lighter from her breast pocket and touched the flame to the tip of her cigarette. I offered up an ashtray and a puzzled look.

“Gus, I got myself jammed up pretty good. You see my deadbeat boss was withholding my pay, for no good reason, and I went over there to give him a piece of my mind, to make him pay what he owed me, you know? Anyway, I had quite a bit of vodka in me, and he’s such a blowhard that things got out of hand, and I pushed the envelope . . . instead of asking, I kind of used a little bit of . . . persuasion.”

She didn’t look like a thief, but if malice aforethought showed on everyone’s face, we’d have no portraits of queens—I’ll give Smitty a little credit for that one.

“What kind of persuasion are we talking here, Susan?”

“A rifle,” she said, then paused as if reflecting for a brief second. “Actually, Sheriff Dawes described it as a shotgun.”

“Stop right there,” I cautioned, leaping from my chair and dashing past Susan to summon Happy from her office. “Bring your notepad, Happy,” I said, waving one arm so my muse would sense the urgency.