

The Debut Political Mystery from the Award-Winning Author  
of *Eleanor*, *The Unseen* and *Beatrysel*



THE  
BRAND  
DEMAND

BY JOHNNY  
WORTHEN

The  
**BRAND**  
**DEMAND**

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Williamsburg, Virginia

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For my children. Carry on.

## Prologue

**L**evi Anderson didn't like the smell. It was coffee and hippie and liberal and everything he despised. He hadn't touched his hot chocolate, sure he'd find an armpit hair in it from the hirsute cashier. He'd ordered it to blend in with the crowd. If the coffee shop regulars believed it or even cared, he couldn't tell.

Levi's watch put it at 10:20 a.m. The man was twenty minutes late. He was doing this intentionally, Levi knew, making him sit among the unwashed hippie scum. It was more punishment and he knew it. This man wanted him to suffer. The recycled grocery bag filled with money at his feet was just another way to make him suffer. Like this counterculture cafe with pink-haired girls, tattooed faces and piercings showing through tears in tee-shirts and jeans, this man wanted Levi to be uncomfortable. He wanted him punished. And maybe he was right to do it.

Levi thought of his options. He could just leave. He could face the consequences, resign the bishopric and apologize to his business partner for fondling his seventeen-year-old daughter. Eight times. They might not press charges if it came from him instead of this man. The Mormon church might not excommunicate him. His own wife and children might forgive him over time. He furrowed his brow. No, they wouldn't. And yes, the Church would cast him out and yes, his partner would press charges if not bullets into him once he found out.

He stared into his cocoa.

Trisha wouldn't tell, he was sure of that. But then how did this man – whose name Levi didn't even know – find out?

Levi clenched his jaw, and his calf spasmed from twenty minutes of involuntary flexing. He wondered if his face was red. He glanced around furtively at the other patrons. Still only eight of them. The violin music had changed to some kind of high feminine wailing, surely about abortions, he thought, though he didn't actually try to

make out the words.

At 10:30 the man was still a no-show. How long should he wait? Levi finally tasted his chocolate. It was tepid and bitter, not at all like his usual powdered campfire brand. He hated it.

There he was. Levi saw the man at the counter casually ordering a drink. He caught his eye and nodded. The man smiled back and dropped a ten dollar bill on the counter. What kind of drink costs ten dollars?

Once again Levi sneered at the slob of a man who'd ruined his life. He was tall enough, maybe six-foot-two, but he wore a belly that smacked of junk food and slovenliness. He loathed that kind of person. The kind of person who didn't think enough of themselves to join a club. He wore a ratty tee-shirt under a worn zippered sweatshirt. A grown man in his mid-thirties dressed like a bum. He wouldn't look out of place with a cardboard sign on the off-ramp begging for change.

"Good morning, Bishop," the man said and sat down at the tiny table. "I hope you haven't been sleeping well."

"You know I haven't," Levi said. "You've gone out of your way to ensure that I haven't."

"Yes, I suppose I have." He sipped his drink and licked the froth off his upper lip with his obscene pink tongue.

Levi wanted to reach out and slap the drink out his hand, then throw his weight into him, crash him to the ground, and strangle the life out of him.

The man glanced down at the floor and smiled. "Is that my bag I see under this fashionable bistro table?"

"Before I give you anything," Levi said, "I want to get a couple of things clear."

The man looked up, his brown eyes curious and amused, but not burrowing and dangerous like Levi was trying to make his. He put his drink on the table and leaned back, calmer by far than he should be, Levi thought. He glanced down at the guy's rounded gut under the tee-shirt and thought again what an oaf this blackmailer was.

"Bungie?" Levi said reading the man's shirt. "Is that some kind of reference to jumping off bridges?"

“No, it’s a video game company. You get stylish shirts like this when you pre-order games,” the man said, smirking. “Is that what you wanted to get clear?”

Levi mentally calmed himself, remembering Job’s trials. “This is the only pay-off I’m going to make to you. If I ever come to harm from the allegations you threw at me the other day, I’ll go straight to the police and report you as a blackmailer and see that you burn in hell for this.” He had started calmly enough but his voice had risen with each syllable. He flushed and glanced around to see if anyone was looking at him. A couple near the door holding their cigarettes out the window to skirt the Utah non-smoking laws regarded him for a moment from across the room. They turned back to their newspapers when nothing more happened.

“Actually Bishop, if the police ever got called and I ever got convicted, I’d go to jail, not hell. Hell is reserved for pedophiles and rapists.” He smiled. “As for the ‘pay-off,’ I prefer to call it ‘penance.’ And to that end I’ll ask you one question. Did it hurt?”

“No, I never hurt her. It was practically her idea,” Levi stammered.

“No, you idiot, I was talking about the penance. The money. Stay with me now. The money. Collecting the money and parting with it. Did it hurt? Is it hurting you now?”

“Darn right it did,” Levi said, feeling a little childish saying *darn*. “Yes it does. I had to sell all of my securities. I took a huge loss on a couple, and I took out a third mortgage on my summer house. If my wife ever finds out, I don’t know what to tell her. I’m not a rich man.”

“You said that last week, Bishop, and I didn’t buy it then either,” the man said. “You made a hundred-nineteen thousand five-hundred dollars last year through your multi-level marketing pyramid Ponzi scheme. Your flock has been kind enough to give you insider trading information for years, and you’re worth more than ninety-nine percent of the rest of the world.”

Levi blanched at the exact number only he and his accountant really knew.

“You have a lot of money, Bishop, but are you rich? Maybe you’re right and there’s room to argue. I think you are bankrupt – morally,

spiritually, and intellectually. You are scum and a douchebag, but you have money and the money you're giving me today is supposed to hurt. It's not supposed to kill you, just hurt you."

"So you like causing pain," Levi said. "And you presume to judge me?"

"Yes. Hell yes, I presume to judge you. I was calling you a douchebag to be kind. What you did, the trusts you broke, make you much worse than a simple douchebag. Hypocrite, predator, and child-molester come to mind."

He had said it matter-of-factly, coldly and casually. Levi blanched again.

The man reached under the table and picked up the sack. "I thought I said a hemp bag, Bishop. This isn't natural fiber."

"What?" Levi said, startled. "I couldn't find any. This is recycled plastic."

"You need to shop other places than Walmart, Bishop Anderson, but I won't hold you to the hemp. I'm sure this fluorescent green bag served its purpose."

"And what was the purpose?"

"To punish you. Man you're thick." He looked into the bag.

"You're not going to count it here?" Levi said, horror in his voice.

"Calm down. I am going to count it, but not here."

He put the bag back on the floor and looked Levi square in the face. "To be clear, if it's not all there, I'm going to start by planting doubts and suggestions in the minds of those who care. It won't be directly from me, nothing as overt as photographs or video tape unless it's absolutely necessary. No it'll be subtle, and they'll all come to the conclusion themselves, all see the truth at about the same time and then everything in your life will fall gracefully into a smoldering heap."

"Maybe I should take my bag back and go to the police."

"That would be more pain than this," he said. "If the penance were too painful, if it were fatal or close to it, you'd sense it and be unpredictable. But I'm good at determining how much pain someone like you can take and luckily for me in this case, it's about \$240,000

in used hundreds, fifties, and twenties.”

“How can I be sure this’ll be the only green sack I give you?”

“You can’t. But it will. I’m sure the fear of my reappearance will hurt you some more, that’s fine, but my assurance will let you go on, maybe even get over this and hopefully, God give you strength, you may even grow to be a better person. But, I will be watching you and if you ever screw up this bad again and think you’re getting away with it, I’ll be back, or the police will, with my tapes.”

Levi stared into a space somewhere above and beyond the smoking couple. The man took another drink of his coffee.

“Well it was great seeing you again, Bishop. Stay golden now.” The man got up to leave.

Levi broke out of his trance.

“What’s your... how did you...?” He tried to say. “What do I do now?”

“Go forth and sin no more, you douchebag.”

The man picked up the sack, took his coffee and walked out of the cafe. Levi wanted to cry or scream. He shook with rage and shame and knew his face was crimson and knew the couple at the window had heard the man’s last remark.

Carefully, lest he stumble – his legs were not as strong as they were when he came in – he stood up. He took his suit coat off the back of the chair and walked past the counter, past the couple at the door, and out into the sunshine.