



THE
OCCUPIED

A TREVOR BLACK NOVEL

CRAIG
PARSHALL

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE OCCUPIED*

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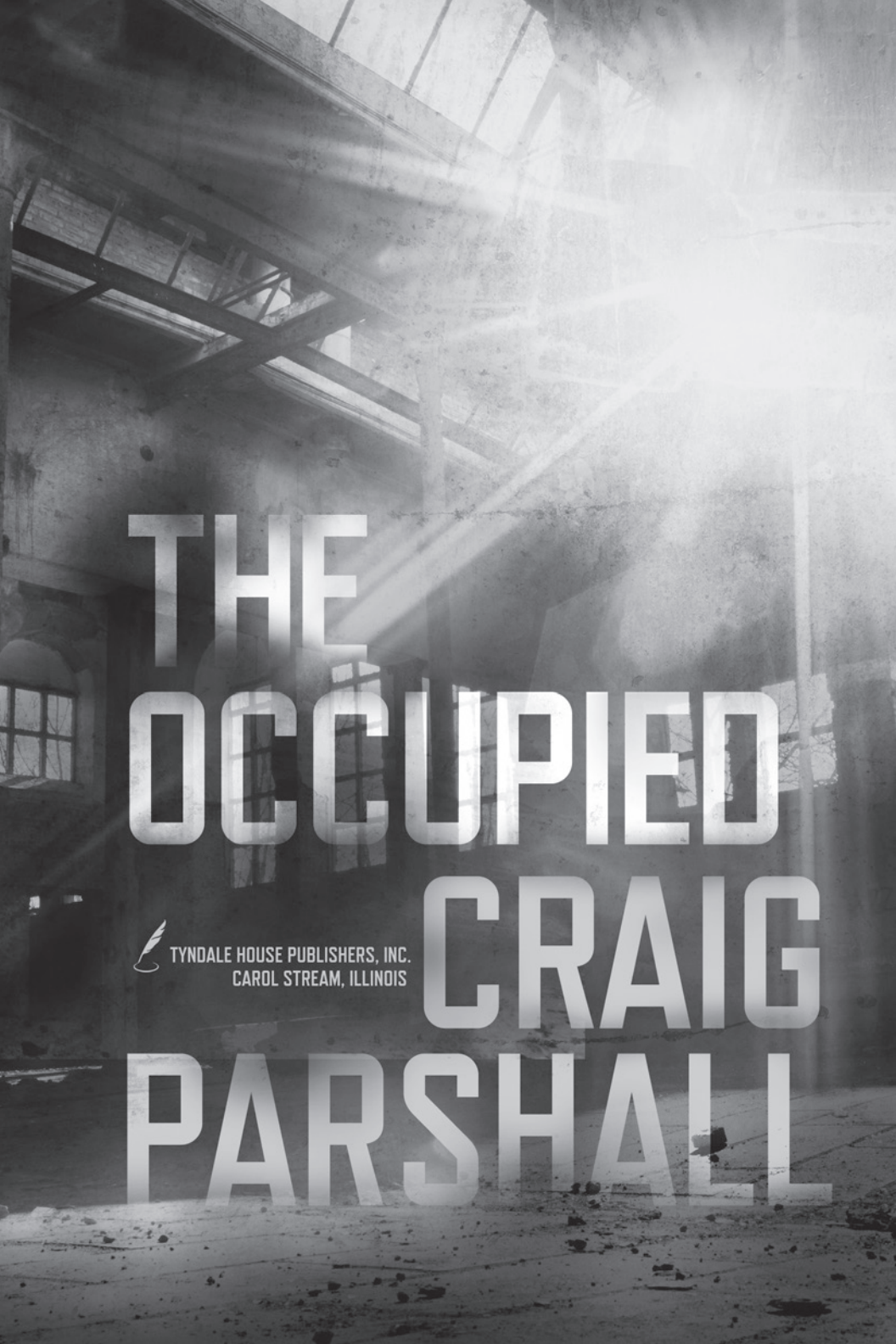
Craig Parshall has combined gritty naturalism with believable supernaturalism to produce a real page-turner.

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In his new novel, *The Occupied*, Craig Parshall takes us into the supernatural world for a thrilling ride that also educates us about the unseen realm. In the end we discover that it is crucial that we know who occupies us.

KERBY ANDERSON, president of Probe Ministries and host of *Point of View* radio talk show

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The Occupied

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The Occupied is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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PROLOGUE

I keep monsters in my peripheral vision. When you've been attacked by the horribles, you never forget.

I lean against the railing of the car ferry as it plows the waves of the Pamlico Sound, the body of water protected from the full force of the Atlantic by a chain of white-sand barrier islands. I can only afford to close my eyes for a second or two, feeling the sun on my face and the wind moist with sea spray. My Mets cap is yanked down tight against the hard gusts blowing across the steel deck as I head back to Ocracoke Island, a place laced with fishermen, odd-jobbers, and occasional hurricanes. Things are peaceful for the moment. Yet that could change in a heartbeat. The horribles don't give much warning.

Life has become a razor's edge. I pray for a trip safe from mayhem. I am ready in case it isn't.

The ferry is motoring me along the North Carolina coast, taking me back to the island that is now my home. I lean over the railing, look down to where the water is the color of gray-green slate, and watch the sea curling as the ship cuts it into whitecaps.

But I can't linger. I have the growing sense that one of them may be on board this ferry with me. So I shift position, eyeing the deck stacked with vehicles so I can study the strangers milling along the guardrail.

I catch sight of a passenger who is standing toward the rear of the ferry. He is a tall man, wide of girth, unshaven, wearing a dirty denim work shirt over a mechanic's jumpsuit, and he is standing alone at the very end of the ferry, looking out to the waters of the sound, where the wake is churned into froth. He pulls back his head and spits loudly as he launches a gob of phlegm from his mouth down to the sea.

One of my senses tells me that this man might be one of them. One of the horrors. Though I can't be sure.

Then I notice on my right, along the railing, about twenty feet away from me, a mother and father with their boy. They are smiling and talking. The man says something to the woman, and she laughs generously and links arms with him.

The couple reminds me of the women I have known. Courtney, of course. The princess of excess and regret.

And the others. How can I not think about them after everything that has happened? Marilyn Parlow, the young love of my much younger life. The flirtatious, insulting, mysterious Marilyn.

And Ashley Linderman, the smart, gutsy detective I met recently during my harrowing return to my hometown, after being away so many years.

And of course, there is Heather. Whose life remains all but a mystery to me.

I glance over to the tall, wide man standing by himself at

the end of the ferry. I could be wrong. It's possible that the special sense I have about him might be due to the ferry's diesel engines, nothing more.

To my left, I also notice a young man along the railing who looks to be in his early twenties, and judging from his skull-and-crossbones T-shirt, he is likely a tourist. Everything about him is in black—his pants, his shoulder-length hair, and, as I look closer, his eyeliner is black too. He is reading a paperback book that appears to be a paranormal novel, which grabs my attention.

I call out, loud enough to be heard over the wind and the water, "You into horror?"

"It's just vampires and demons and stuff."

"You say 'just' like it's a trivial thing," I reply. "Supernatural suspense, they call it. But I'd say *horror* describes it best."

"Describes what?" He is looking at me with his head tilted back, keeping his distance, treating me like I've morphed into a Komodo dragon.

I look straight at him. "You think dark forces are just a fantasy. The ones breaking through from the other side. Bringing death. Destruction. But that's exactly what they want us to think."

The kid snorts again and says, under his breath, "Dude, that sounds a little paranoid."

"Dude," I shoot back, "not if it's true."

I get a laugh from him. Then a question. "Dark forces, like what?"

I don't usually converse with strangers about invisible monsters, but he seems interested. So I feel compelled to lay it out. "Like the three mortal enemies."

“Wow.” He takes a second. Then, “Okay. Three enemies . . .”

“I’m telling you something important,” I warn him. Even as I say it, I know I must sound like a crackpot. But then again, who knows when the truth might break through to somebody? “First, there’s the world, and all that’s in it and all that we see, but also what we can’t. Second, the flesh—all those desires, arrogances, strivings—when we let it rule us. Last, but definitely not least, there’s the devil. That’s in reverse threat level.”

He looks out to the sea and then begins to open up the paperback to the page where he has his finger as a bookmark. “Good luck with that.”

I decide not to verbalize what I am thinking. Which is, *Young man, luck has nothing to do with it.*

He drops his hand to his side, still clutching the paperback while he walks away, perhaps looking for his car parked on the deck of the ferry. Perhaps just wanting to get away from some kooky guy with a demon complex.

I scan the other passengers on the deck again, knowing any one of them may be harboring a monster.

It wasn’t always like this. There was a time when I would carry professional business cards in a sterling-silver case tucked into the left pocket of one of my handmade Italian suits, just over my heart. The cards were heavy stock with black and gold embossing that read, “Trevor Black, Attorney-at-Law, Criminal Defense & Major Crimes,” followed by the address of my law office on the Upper East Side.

But no more. If I handed out those cards to people now, I could be arrested. The Dunning Kamera murder case changed everything for me.

I notice off to my right, a half mile from the ferry, fishermen on the far shore casting into the surf. I think about launching my forty-footer at the marina and out to the Gulf Stream. The yellowfin tuna might be running, but even if not, out there on the blue expanse of the ocean, with no land in sight, there is a chance I could get a vacation from *them*.

Or so I've guessed, thinking there might be safety on the open water. On the other hand, I keep an eye on the big guy who spits again over the railing. We will see whether my theory holds true.

Soon I will catch sight of the little harbor at the island, so I decide to wander back to where my Land Rover is sandwiched among the line of other cars, bumper to bumper, on the deck. Like other passengers now, I climb into my vehicle and shut the door and will wait until the ferry eventually docks. I can't see the harbor yet, but eventually the ferry is going to slide to a halt against the big wooden pylons that are roped together and slick with greenish ocean slime.

Then I realize that the driver's-side window of my car is down, instantly followed by a feeling like a slap in the face. That I was right all along. One of the monsters is aboard this ferry and is very close to me. And getting closer.

I turn my head slightly to the left, toward my open car window. Then out of the corner of my eye, I see him. The large man with the dirty denim shirt over his mechanic's jumpsuit who is slowly approaching my car.

A crackling sound comes over the loudspeaker, followed by a voice giving the familiar instruction about starting our vehicles and keeping them in park and how one of the ferrymen in the

tan naval uniforms will motion for us to drive forward when it is time.

The big man in the mechanic's suit has stopped next to my wide-open driver's-side window. His beefy fist is now gripping my door, so close to me that I can see the bristles of hair on the back of his hand, and he grunts in a tone that is deep and feral.

But I see another man through my windshield. He is dressed as a ferry officer, in a tan uniform, marching, arrow-straight, toward my car, and he looks unstoppable. Then, in an instant, the big man at my window vanishes. I look in my rearview mirror to find where the man has gone, but I can't see him. I look for the ferry officer. He has disappeared too. It's part of my everyday life now—this clash of kingdoms, darkness and light. The invisible war. Except, by an extraordinary series of events, I am able to see it. And I have chosen sides.

I lock my door and roll up my window. I will wait in my car for the rest of the ride until we eventually reach the island, when the steel gate of the ferry will be lowered down with a metallic groan and then a clank, creating a runway for the cars, and shortly after that I will be connected to the land. I steady myself. Soon I'll be home, though I now realize my island is no longer a safe haven. But then, I should have known that anyway. Mere geography never is.



THE FLESH

1

I was thirteen years old when my father died. His funeral was held in a large stone chapel on the grounds of the cemetery. It was my first face-to-face with death. But it would not be my last. I couldn't put it into words, nor understand it, but somehow the fact that the ceremony was being conducted in a graveyard hit me with an almost tangible image of death. Like a sad fairy tale full of ink drawings about a powerful, pitiless giant standing guard over the land of the dead, while I, hopelessly and haplessly small, shivered in his looming shadow.

My mother's muffled sobs during the service that morning were heartbreaking. Even more than her unceasing wails on the day she'd answered the doorbell and spoken to two men from the foundry. One of the men had taken me into our television

room, presumably waiting for my mother to collect herself. When she finally appeared, she sat down next to me and, in a quavering voice that was barely capable of transmitting facts, reminded me that my father had loved me. And then the worst. She told me that he had been killed in an industrial accident. I tried in my own dizzying numbness to console her, but nothing I did seemed to ease the pain. Despite that, she gathered me in her arms and told me, laboring on each word, “We are going to make it.” But I didn’t see how.

When the funeral service ended, there was a flood of faces that came up to me saying they were sorry about our loss, some familiar to me, many not. A few chose to remind me that at least death had come instantly. “He didn’t suffer,” I was told. I am sure it was meant to be consolation, tinged with wisdom. But it imparted neither. When you’re thirteen, and you know your dead father is lying over there in that burnished wood casket, the proffered wisdom of a grown-up sounds hollow and distant, and the faces of all those strange adults don’t register. Except for two faces—the ones that even now connect that day to this one, haunting my memories. I can still see those two faces.

Hoskins Opperdill was one. My father had been a quality control engineer at the Opperdill Foundry, which operated along the banks of the Little Bear River. From the few occasions my father had taken me to the foundry, I remembered it as a place of infernal noise and gargantuan machines. The plant was owned by Hoskins Opperdill, who I had always heard was the richest man in Manitou. I never heard my dad say a negative word against him. After the funeral, Opperdill strode over to

me in his suit and tie and starched white shirt. I had heard that he had a son of his own, about my age, but I'd never even seen him. He might as well have lived in a different world.

Opperdill had the stern, stiff look of a man had who had kept to matters of business his whole life, yet when he held out his hand to shake mine and patted my head, I sensed a different side.

“Your father was a fine man.”

I nodded.

“I am very sad that he's gone. Would give anything to change that. Do you believe me, son?”

Here was a grown man—a wealthy, powerful man—asking a thirteen-year-old boy for his opinion. I kept my head down at first, hot tears blinding my eyes, and I almost felt ashamed. But while the man's face was stern, his eyes were gentle, so I worked up the boldness to answer. “I'm not sure if I can believe that. I just know that my dad is gone, and it was your foundry where he died.”

He gave a sound, like he was clearing his throat. “A straight shooter, huh? Well, that's okay.” Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of hundred-dollar bills and shoved them into my hand. “Your mother's too proud to take it. Make sure she gets this. If the money-grubbing lawyers have their way, it'll be quite a while before the workers' compensation payments are straightened out.”

Everyone stepped outside and strode silently down the gravel path for a short graveside service. The pallbearers strained cautiously against the weight of their load under a brilliantly blue sky, which seemed grotesquely out of place. A smaller group

gathered around the vacant space that had been dug in the ground. I was given two red roses. One was to put on the coffin while it was still poised at ground level, which I did. The other rose remained clutched in my hand.

The minister droned in vague generalizations about a man he'd never met. I focused on the rose, trying to follow the spiraling of its petals from the outside into the center, then out again. Keeping my mind occupied, steering it away from the raw fact of why I was there. After the service was over, as I stood beside the box containing all that was left of my father, I felt a hand on my shoulder, too heavy to be my mother's. Almost too heavy to be a hand.

I turned my head and started at the sight of Mason Krim, a neighbor of ours who lived in a huge brick house at the end of our block. The word among my neighborhood pals was that Krim had poisoned cats and dogs that had ventured onto his property, supposedly leaving tainted food in bowls on his back stoop for that purpose. But then again, that could have just been urban legend, spread abroad by imaginative teens.

Krim stood hunched over and pointed to my father's casket, which had yet to be lowered into the ground, and spoke. "I know what you're thinking."

Even overloaded and shell-shocked, I still found this statement exceedingly odd.

"You're thinking," he went on, "that's all there is. Dead is dead. Gone." Then he bent toward me, closer to my face, his breath filling my nostrils with the scent of something rotten and barely camouflaged with peppermint. "Just make sure you keep your mind wide open to anything. There's things out there

you don't know yet. Things that can happen. Even when you can't see them."

Krim looked down at the blooming rose in my hand and reached out, as if asking to take it. For some reason I felt compelled to lay it in his palm. He closed his hand slowly around the soft, ruby-red petals of the rose and held it there for a few seconds. Then, with a crooked smile on his lips, he opened his hand and offered the rose back to me.

I held it by the stem, and at first just stared at this very strange man with the bent-over posture. Then my eyes drifted down to the rose. The petals that had been red and velvety were black and brittle. It was as if that flower, full of color, had been instantly transformed by Krim into something lifeless. As dead as some forgotten plant on an untended grave.

The sight of that was so startling that I dropped the rose and took a step backward. "Are you a magician?"

"The magic you're thinking of, that's for tricksters. I'm no trickster. I told you, there are things that can happen."

My mother must have spotted the interchange, because she had started to approach. As she did, Krim turned, gave her a curt nod, and then slipped out.

I had little comprehension what Krim was talking about and no idea how he did that with the rose. But in the midst of my grief and the swirling confusion of my young life, I knew that it had actually happened right in front of me. And it had to do with death, and things that I didn't know yet, things that were mysterious and inviting, and it was whispering a story to me, like a fairy tale about how, with the right secrets, the departed might be within reach, and the land of the dead could be tamed.