



DEEP, DARK SECRET

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PATRICK LEGER



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR AND BLOOMINGTONIAN
MICHAEL KORYTA PUBLISHES
ANOTHER THRILLER THIS MONTH,
EXCERPTED HERE.

As a teenager, **MICHAEL KORYTA** worked for a private investigator in Bloomington. Years later, The Innocence Project hired him to do some surveillance, ultimately uncovering evidence that freed a woman on death row. Those experiences stuck with him, and they inspired perhaps his most realistic crime novel to date. *Last Words*, which publishes August 18, follows a troubled “Innocence Incorporated” investigator who finds himself exiled in the fictional town of Garrison, Indiana, sniffing around a cold case. A girl has been killed in one of the area’s caves, a landscape that has fascinated the author since childhood. “I even had topographic maps of Indiana on my bedroom walls,” Koryta says. “Caves appeal to me because there’s the surface world that you see, and then there’s everything below. That’s true with people and with places.”

Building on the author’s already-remarkable career (Fox Studios and others have optioned most of his 10 books; Stephen King and Dean Koontz are fans), *Last Words* promises to attract a crowd at Koryta’s August 18 book-signing at Barnes & Noble in Carmel. What follows, from the opening chapter, is just a hint of how creepy things get.

IT was snowing in Indiana. Mark Novak had boarded the plane in Florida sunshine and 70 degrees, and two hours later it touched down in swirling winds that whipped snow around the tarmac. It was just beginning to accumulate, a dusting in the distant fields. The ground crew wore face masks and gloves. Passengers were pulling heavy jackets down from the overhead bins. When the flight attendant handed Mark his thin cashmere blazer, he realized that it might have been prudent to check the forecast. The truth was he didn’t even own anything like what the others were putting on. He hadn’t been north of Atlanta in five years now and hadn’t intended to be again. He’d seen enough blizzards in his youth. When he’d left Montana at 17, he’d hoped never to see snow again. Never to see a lot of things again.

The rental car waiting for him was a Ford Escape, and he was very grateful to see it had all-wheel drive.

“How bad is it supposed to get?” he asked the attendant at the exit booth as he pulled out his driver’s license. The attendant was also wearing a wool mask and gloves. Everyone here was dressed like they were prepared to rob a bank.

“This? Just flurries, my man. Not bad at all. You’ll be fine.”

“All right.” Mark put up the window fast because the snow was landing on his lap and he was freezing already. It brought back memories: an April blizzard howling out of the mountains and across the plains, Mark searching for his mother in the snow, finding her half-frozen and fully drunk. He’d left her three weeks later, taking only a backpack

and a small wad of cash secured with a rubber band.

He pulled away from the airport and got on the highway, bound for Garrison, Indiana, on a fool’s errand. Back in Florida, the board of directors for Innocence Incorporated gathered to discuss whether they had to terminate him or if a suspension and pay cut would suffice.

“Get the lay of the land and a sense of the players,” his boss Jeff London had told him, shoving a small case file across the desk. “But mostly, just get the hell out of my sight. I’ll be in touch once the board has met.”

The truth of it was that his boss didn’t want to risk Mark’s speaking personally to the board. The questions they would ask (How can you reconcile your actions with the mission of this organization?) were not questions London could afford to have Mark answer.

Thus Indiana. You wanted to keep the live grenades out of the room when you could.

He had to leave the interstate almost immediately, and then it was onto state highways blasted by strong gusts of wind as he drove first across flat farm country and then into unbroken, old-growth forest, heading southeast. He was surprised by how wooded and steep southern Indiana was. The flat fields around Indianapolis had fit with his vision of the state, but these forested hills did not. He’d been on the road for two hours before he reached Garrison and rolled into the downtown square—which was literally

a square, with a courthouse at the center and storefronts on the sides facing it, like a Hollywood set for a middle-American small town. Cue up the John Mellencamp. The square had buildings on only three sides, though. The fourth was an empty expanse, leaving the downtown feeling unfinished, as if somewhere along the line, the people who’d settled here had decided they’d made a mistake. Street signs promised him that the sheriff’s department was just a block beyond the courthouse. Step one. The case started wherever the file ended.

This was what he knew from the case abstract that Innocence Incorporated had provided: In September of 2004, a 17-year-old girl named Sarah Martin had entered a recently opened tourist cave called Trapdoor Caverns with her boyfriend with the intention of teenage romance. Noises spooked them, the boyfriend went to check things out, and the girl hid, but she did too good a job of it. When the boyfriend returned, she was missing, and he ran out of the cave and reported that she was lost. Security cameras from the cave property validated his story and his timeline. There was no indication of criminal activity. Searchers went in and had no luck finding her. Then one of the searchers, a man named Ridley Barnes whose reputation underground was without peer but whose reputation above the shoulders was not as impressive, pulled away from the search party. For days, he was considered as lost as Sarah. Then he

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returned, hypothermic and raving, carrying the girl in his arms. She was dead, handcuffed and beaten. Barnes initially claimed that he'd spoken with her, but when the coroner's time-of-death assessment called that into question, he said that he must have been mistaken. When asked to take police to the place where he'd found her, he said he couldn't remember where it was or even come close to locating it again. He then explained that he had no memory of finding the body. After that, he decided to stop talking to the police entirely. Ridley Barnes had not given an interview in the past decade.

This was what Mark knew of it. What he cared about it: nothing. There was no point in investing emotionally in this one because he'd be called off it within days. He knew it, and Jeff London knew it. Still, he had to go through the motions.

He hugged the blazer around himself and blew on his palms as he walked down the street to the sheriff's office. It was adjacent to the Garrison County jail, which was the largest building in town—that suggested promising things about the community. Inside, three empty chairs stood beside a soda machine and a bulletin board filled with pictures of local people with active warrants. They were all white faces. Across from

this was a pane of tinted bulletproof glass, and a uniformed woman stood behind it.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm hoping to speak to whoever handles your homicide cases."

"You're reporting a homicide?"

"No. I'm inquiring about one."

"Which one?"

"Sarah Jean Martin. From 2004."

Her face froze. When she spoke again, it seemed to take effort. "Is this a media inquiry?"

"No." Mark took out his wallet, found a business card, and slid it to her through a slot in the glass along with his investigator's license, which was still active, though in jeopardy. She studied both and said, "Florida, eh?"

"That's right."

"Explains the coat," she said, and then she hit a button and the door unlocked with an electronic buzz. Mark pulled the handle and stepped through and she met him on the other side. "Follow me. You can speak with the sheriff."

"His name?"

"Dan Blankenship. Don't know much about what you're getting into here, do you?"

Her age and lack of interest upon his arrival had suggested that she was waiting

to hit her 25 years and pension and walk out the door, but now there was a little spark, and it had come from Sarah Martin's name.

"I'm here to learn," Marksaid. Her expression indicated that this answer was suspicious, and she led him the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the sheriff's office, the door was open, and she entered without knocking, the way you did only after you'd worked with someone for a long time.

"Dan? This gentleman wants to talk with you. Markus Novak. He's from Florida."

"It explains my coat," Mark offered, to save her the trouble.

The sheriff was a tall man of about 60 who looked like he should be advertising pickup trucks. His hand completely enveloped Mark's when they shook. When they were alone, the sheriff sat down and leaned back in his chair as ice blew against the window behind him, a sound like tiny claws working to get through the glass.

"Florida. Bet you wish you'd picked another day to visit us, eh? Another month, even."

"It's a little brisk out there."

The sheriff smiled. His eyes didn't. Mark thought that he probably politicked just fine, as evidenced by his elected position, but probably was pretty good police, too. He looked at Mark's business card and said, "The death row outfit. I've heard of you. Only case we've had in 30 years that landed anyone on death row has already ended in an execution. I'm afraid you're a bit late."

"Actually, our case doesn't have a conviction yet, or even charges. We're exploring new ground. The victim's name was Sarah Jean Martin."

Without ever moving, the sheriff seemed to contract, as if something inside him had opened up and pulled in his exterior strength to fill the void.

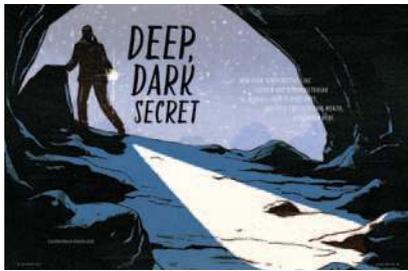
"Sarah," he said.

"Yes. She went missing in a cave 10 years ago and it was assumed she had gotten lost until a man named Ridley Barnes brought her to the surface in handcuffs, is my understanding."

Blankenship blinked at him as if to refocus. He had the look of someone who was pretending to be interested in a conversation at a party while really eavesdropping on a discussion carrying on behind him.

"That's your understanding," he said.

"Is it incorrect?" **CONTINUED ON PAGE 148**



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“Who brought you into this?”

“We received a proposal from Ridley Barnes. I’m just vetting it.” Blankenship’s professional demeanor vanished and his eyes went from unsmiling to unfriendly.

“Ridley himself.” His voice was tight. “That makes sense. Been too long since people hurt over Sarah, at least visibly, at least so he could enjoy it.”

“You think he killed her.”

“He killed her, yes.”

Mark withdrew the original letter from his folder and passed it across the desk. “Tell me what you think of this.”

“I just did.” Blankenship made no move to take the letter.

“Read it,” Mark said. “Please.”

Blankenship accepted it with distaste and then began to read it aloud, in a voice filled with contempt.

I am writing first of all to say how much I appreciate the goals of your organization. I think that it fills a hole, as there are not, as you say, sufficient funds or resources to properly pursue cases in rural locations. There are people all around this town who would tell you that I have benefited from just such a situation. I don't think they are correct, though. We're all the same in this town when you get right down to it, me and the ones who hate me and all the other people who have simply cared about that girl and what happened to her. We are all the same because we live with the not knowing.

The sheriff looked up. “Now, ain’t that touching? Ridley, he’s feeling all of our pain. Carrying it, apparently. This story come from his pen or from the Gospels themselves?”

Mark didn’t answer, and the sheriff cleared his throat theatrically and returned to reading.

We live with that every day and we think about it every day or at least some of us do.

And while some people think that if things were known then I would be in prison or maybe in the electric chair, I would just like to know what happened, the same as them. That’s all that I want to know. My question is the same as theirs—did I do it?

I expect that you will take the opinion of most people who read anything about this case, which is that I’m a liar or a crazy person because I would know if I did it. I had given up on ever explaining that but then I came across some things in a book and I thought maybe this would explain my situation better than my own words ever could. So I hope you read it and consider it and then maybe consider talking to me. Here is what was in the book, which is called Blind Descent, by a man named James Tabor.

“Supercaves create inmate dangers, warping the mind with claustrophobia, anxiety, insomnia, hallucinations, personality disorders. There is also a particularly insidious derangement unique to caves called The Rapture, which is like a panic attack on meth. It can strike anywhere in a cave, at any time, but usually assaults a caver deep underground.

And, of course, there is one more that, like getting lost, tends to be overlooked because it’s omnipresent: absolute, eternal darkness. Darkness so dark, without a single photon of light, that it is the luminal equivalent of absolute zero.”

I can’t tell you anything I experienced better than those words do it. That bit about the Rapture. You’d have to have a jury of 12 people who’d lived through it to believe me. There might not be 12 people alive who have been through such a thing as what I endured down there. But here’s the deal—it’s never going to get to a jury until we know what happened. And whether it helps me or hurts me, I can’t take that anymore. The not knowing. I just can’t take it, and I’d rather go to prison and know that I belonged there than live another day in my own skin wondering what happened. So that’s what I’m asking you for. I don’t have money. You say you don’t need money. That you only need cases that deserve attention. Well, this one always did. Still does. I’m hoping you can tell me if I did it. Best regards, Ridley Barnes.

The sheriff said the name with a disgusted drawl, then spun the letter back across the desk to Mark the way you’d flick a greasy fast-food wrapper into a trash can.

“You guys must have more money than

brains if that letter from a loon was enough to bring you up here.”

Mark couldn’t very well tell him that nobody would have considered sending someone up here if Jeff London hadn’t wanted to get Mark out of sight, so he just said, “Why so convinced that he killed her?”

Blankenship began to tick off the points on his fingers but never made it beyond the first one; as his anger grew, his counting stopped. “Because he’s the only one who knew that cave well enough to hide her in it. Then he decided to bring her back because it covered his ass. We had other experts searching in there, and they worked in a team. Ridley Barnes decided to go it alone and vanished in the cave. For a few days there, we figured he was as lost as she was. Then . . .” Blankenship’s jaw tightened. “Then he returned, with her body. She was wearing handcuffs and had been for a while.”

“Cause of death?”

“Hypothermia. Classified as a homicide investigation because Sarah died after being abducted. She didn’t die of the cold in that cave because she’d gotten lost. She had some help.”

“Had she been sexually assaulted?”

Blankenship swallowed and looked away. Mark thought the display of discomfort was odd in a man who’d spent a lifetime in policing.

“Not yet.”

“Yet?”

“My point is, somebody had kept her alive for a time. Maybe wanted to keep her alive much longer. You know the kind, like that guy in Cleveland, the one who had the girls in his basement for, what, 10 years? Hell, maybe Ridley couldn’t get it up and took out his anger on her. That happens. Guys blame their own victims.”

“Why would he produce the body if he’d succeeded in hiding her so well?”

Blankenship looked down at his right hand as he curled it into a fist and then loosened it, as if it were a required exercise, some sort of stress release that allowed him to exhibit the demeanor he wanted instead of the one that threatened.

“Because Ridley’s a game player. Because he’s a sick son of a bitch who got a kick out of the idea that by rescuing his own victim, he’d give the prosecutor a hell of a hard time using the physical evidence against

him. And that is precisely why we never got a conviction. Never even got it to court. The DNA results, her blood on him, all of that? Well, he did carry her body through a cave, didn't he? Reasonable doubt."

"It is reasonable," Mark said. "But you don't buy it."

"No, I certainly don't."

"Why not?"

"Because he claimed not to remember where he'd found her, or how. Because later he refused to speak to us. And because when he first emerged from the cave, he told us that he'd heard her voice and followed the sound to locate her."

"Seems plausible."

"It sure does. Right up until the coroner gave us a time of death that completely contradicted Ridley's story. She would have been dead before he found her, but somehow he still heard her last words?"

"What were the words? What did he hear her say?"

"Please, stop."

Mark was confused. "That's what Barnes heard the victim say, or that's what I should do?"

"Both," Blankenship told him.

"Any motive?"

"He's a deeply disturbed man. He shut down on interviews with us, but he'd told other people things about the cave that summer, including the following highlights: The cave had a soul; the cave did not like intruders; the cave required that anyone who entered it demonstrate respect. Unwelcome visitors, he said, would be treated harshly. Here's another gem: If you spent enough time in the cave, if you listened to it carefully enough, you'd learn what it required of you. If you performed those tasks, you'd be granted powers that would travel with you back to the surface. You liking the way his mind works so far?"

"Not especially. But when I ask about motive, I mean a direct connection to the victim."

"I'm well aware of what a motive is, Mr. Novak. Ridley had no direct connection to Sarah Martin beyond the fact that she worked at the cave as a tour guide all summer when he was working there exploring new tunnels and holes and pits. She was a beautiful young girl and he was a disturbed and lonely man."

"So no motive."

Blankenship's jaw muscles tensed as he

took a few deep breaths and looked at Mark as if he were wondering whether he could justify arresting him on charges of aggravated annoyance.

"I'll tell you what you ought to do right now, Mr. Novak," the sheriff said, getting out of his chair and unfolding to his full, impressive height. Mark was six foot, and Blankenship towered over him. "Don't waste my time questioning me about motive before you've even met the man. Go visit Ridley Barnes. Talk to the wrongfully accused old boy in person. Then you give me a call. You tell me after meeting him if you really think this one is worth your time and dollars. You tell me what you think about motive."

"Fair enough," Mark said, knowing that Jeff London would be furious with him for letting the interview end so abruptly but not caring because Jeff didn't want this one anyhow. As the sheriff had aptly observed, the case didn't even meet the standards for Innocence Incorporated. Jeff had exiled Mark up here to make a point, and all Mark had to do was play out the string and wait to be summoned home.

"Let me show you out," the sheriff said. They left the office and walked back down the hall and to the main door.

"Where are you staying?" the sheriff asked.

"Haven't decided yet."

"Really? All the way up from Florida without a hotel reservation?"

"Didn't realize it was peak season in Garrison."

The sheriff gave a wan smile as he opened the door. "I suspect you'll find a room still available. And you let me know what you think of Ridley. Be mighty curious to see how he tugs on your heart strings."

"I'll let you know. Say, whatever happened to the kid she went in there with? The boyfriend. He still around?"

That provoked a thoughtful nod. "Evan Borders. He's a treat. There were plenty of police who had a hard-on for him ahead of Barnes in that case. Not because of the evidence. More because of the ... character, I suppose you'd say."

"He's trouble."

"His daddy was trouble, and Evan and the Leonards, his cousins, they carry on the legacy. The three of them run 'round here like a pack of feral dogs looking for things to snap at. But they pale in comparison

with Ridley. He may be a true sociopath."

"Right."

Blankenship scrutinized Mark and said, "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Feel free."

"You people, your team or firm or whatever you are, you're in the pro bono investigation business, am I right?"

"Yes."

"I would think a man finds himself in that line of work because he cares. No offense, Mr. Novak, but I don't get the feeling that you give a damn about this."

"Until I know whether we're taking a case, I try to keep my emotional distance," Mark said. "It's tough to get invested in one when you might be pulled off it. Make sense?"

"I suppose," the sheriff said, but he didn't seem satisfied with the answer. "Something you need to consider, whether you want to preserve your, um, emotional distance or not: Sarah matters to people here. The people you'll be talking to? They don't have that distance, son."

"I'll keep that in mind when I see them," Mark said.

"You be careful what doors you knock on around here, Novak."

"That a threat?"

"Not in the least. You're just ... not acquainted with the place yet."

"That doesn't sound like a real warm endorsement of your home town, Sheriff."

Blankenship looked off to the darkening sky above the old limestone courthouse.

"Real storm's coming tomorrow, you know. If you were to want to go back to the Sunshine State, tonight would be the time to fly out."

"Going to get that bad, eh?"

"I don't put much stock in forecasts, personally. There's some calling for 10 inches of snow here, others are saying it'll be warm enough to keep it mostly rain. Like I said, I've learned not to trust them. Just to be ready. You learn the same in Florida, with the hurricanes and whatnot? Or do you trust the forecasts down there?"

"We still talking about the weather?"

The sheriff gave a humorless smile. "You're a symbolic man, are you?"

"Actually, no."

"Good, because I like straight talk. And I've given it. The weather is the weather. The warnings are the warnings. If I were you, I'd pay attention to both." ●