

**The First Two Pages: “Drop Dead Gorgeous” by M.E. Proctor**  
From *Janie’s Got a Gun: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Music of Aerosmith*,  
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An Essay by M.E. Proctor

When Michael Bracken suggested putting together an anthology that paid tribute to Aerosmith’s greatest hits and studio albums, I hesitated. I knew the band of course, and the popular songs— “Dream On,” “Walk This Way,” “Angel,” and “Janie’s Got a Gun,” which would become the title of the collection—but I wasn’t a die-hard fan. My grasp of the discography was minimal. The concept was attractive, though. I’d just toyed with an idea for a story inspired by Billy Paul’s “Me and Mrs. Jones,” a tale of extramarital affairs and bar encounters that I didn’t write in the end, but I was still in a musical mood.

Michael wanted stories based on songs from each of the band’s studio albums. When I joined the project, a few big hits had already been snatched by fellow crime writers. *Just Push Play*, the band’s thirteenth studio album was still up for grabs, and one title, “Drop Dead Gorgeous,” winked at me from the track list. It summoned pulp covers and mid-century misdeeds. I love to take a dive in the golden age of noir.

Because I’m a nitpicker, I did a quick internet search to see where the expression “drop dead gorgeous” came from. It turns out nobody used it before the 1960s. It’s fiction, and we make things up, but I took it as a sign that my fedora should stay on the hat rack. Not to mention that Steven Tyler was two

years old in 1950. He might have been testing that strong voice on his parents' ears... Anyway, the theme would be better served as a contemporary tale.

What tale I could weave was up in the air.

All I had to tickle my imagination were a title and song lyrics. They were about love and obsession. The guy in the song can't get the stunning girl out of his head. Okay, predictable. (No offense, Aerosmith devotees.)

I seldom write a story with a title in mind. The header usually pops up as I go—from a line of dialogue or a location. Even if I type a title on top of the page, it rarely makes it to the finish line. Working titles are designed to be dumped.

This was different. It had to be "Drop Dead Gorgeous."

Even if I couldn't pen a piece of retro noir, nothing prevented me from using the codes of the genre and transposing them to modern-day America. There were still femmes fatales, even if they didn't use the label, and men who fell for them.

The part of the star-struck dude seemed ready-made for Harry McLean, one of my recurrent characters. Harry is a middle-aged, Houston-based, laid-back ex-cop working for a small detective agency. I've written eight short stories with him in the leading role. He's the kind of guy who would be catnip for a gorgeous dame—I mean "striking young woman."

I had my central character. I also knew I didn't want the woman to be a corpse. *Drop dead* would not be taken literally. I've grown a bit tired of pretty girls being butchered on the first page.

So, what was the case?

I pictured a classical private detective job: surveillance. Harry follows the woman and gets obsessed with her. The kind of fascination that is not born overnight. Once I decided that the case required Harry's sustained attention for weeks, maybe months, I had a better grasp of who the woman might be. A crook, a con artist, a thief. And Harry's client is the victim, the dupe that has been taken for a significant amount, a man who harbors a grudge... A dangerous man.

Here is how the story starts.

"He'll want her done with, Harry. His kind ruminates on vengeance like a heifer chews the cud."

Harry McLean wedged his back in the corner of the velvet-upholstered booth and stretched his long legs on the seat. Now, without having to turn his head, he had a good view of the bar and the knock-out blonde perched on the central stool.

"He wants his money back, Luis. He doesn't want her dead."

"Keep telling yourself that, maybe you'll sleep better at night." Luis Garcia took a sip of his Canadian and Seven. "Mama didn't carry me in her belly all the way from San Salvador to see me working for Ray Castellan."

"You're not working for Castellan, you're working for Diana."

Somewhat true. When Diana Galindo told Harry *DG Investigative* had been hired by Castellan to find the woman who had conned him out of three million dollars, Harry's first reaction had been: *Good for her!* Anybody smart enough to hit the cartel lawyer in the wallet, where it hurt the most, deserved his heartfelt admiration. Then, what Diana said sank in.

“He *hired* us?”

In his previous life as a cop, Harry had spent countless hours trying to nail Castellán. The thought that part of his salary would come courtesy of the slime lawyer was enough to sour his whisky without adding lemon juice.

“Would you rather he ask his south-of-the-border buddies to track her?”

“Once we find her, he’ll call them anyway,” Harry said.

“We’ll just make it easy for them to chop her head off. Drop the case, Di. Let the woman run and take her chances.”

They argued. Harry threatened to quit. Diana compromised.

“We find her, we get Castellán’s money back, and we set her on her merry way. Is that acceptable, Harry? You realize recovering the money makes the case a lot more complicated.”

Right there, the battle lines are drawn. Harry shows sympathy for his mark from the start. He has a job to do, but he’d rather side with the woman against the client. He’s also aware of the danger she’s in. Despite the agreement struck with the detective agency, it’s unlikely the client will be satisfied with getting his money back. Restitution falls short. The man has been humiliated and will want revenge. Harry has been on the case two months already; he caught the woman’s trail in Chicago, lost her in Atlanta, and is now close to her again in Miami, where the story takes place. He knows that the client is impatient and might at any time decide that the detectives have had their chance and more radical measures are in order. Above all, Harry can’t afford to let the woman slip through his fingers. He’s a bit in the position of a hunter that stalks his prey in order to protect it from hungry predators. It’s a good way to get hurt.

And to make things even trickier, the woman, Charlotte, is a compulsive bandit. She just can’t help herself. She has to grift and she’s very good at it.

The case was complicated from the start. It might have been the toughest Harry ever worked on, and that was without even considering retrieving the money. The woman had a talent for changing names and appearance. She also found gullible marks with baffling ease. Some of them went to the cops to lodge a complaint—which is how Harry caught the trail—but most stewed in anger and silent humiliation. And she raked in the dough. She could have hopped on a plane and enjoyed her hard-earned wealth in the sun, but she was greedy. Castellán's millions got company.

Harry set eyes on her for the first time two months earlier in a posh suburb of Chicago. Her hair was short and brown then. He thought he had time to build a trap, but she skipped town before he could spring it. Then he missed her by a hair, a bright red hair, in Atlanta. Here, in Miami, she went by Charlotte Wainwright, was ash blond, and affected a British accent. She wore the name, the hair, and the plum grammar well. Vowing he wouldn't be caught flatfooted again, Harry asked Luis Garcia, the agency's Miami associate, to lend a hand. At this point, another line item on the bill wasn't likely to make Castellán squeal. He'd been paying through the nose for months.

Luis waved at the server and ordered refills. "How do you want to play it? We let her work the con and catch her when she collects? It looks like she's got a bite."

Charlotte had been getting more bites than she could handle from the moment she hoisted her perfect butt on that stool. Marks had been circling, mouth open and teeth bared. No surprise. She was an appetizing long-legged morsel in a cocktail dress that didn't come from the outlet mall. With what she netted she could afford haute couture. The men thought they were sharks when they were chum. They came in all sizes and were mostly middle aged. The club had fake retro Rat Pack vibes, done in chrome and glass with a generous helping of sleaze and hard liquor. Charlotte rose above it all like a pagan idol in a corny B-movie. The set was cardboard, but the technicolor was luscious. It matched her heartbreak of a smile, Marilyn before the fall. Harry felt pangs of impurity. He feared he was falling in love. Or lust, rather.

The Aerosmith song has a line about the girl's Norma Jean-like smile. I kept the smile but gave it a touch of sadness. This is how Harry sees her, as an actress on stage performing for a crowd of hungry men. He's one of them and

he's not sure his intentions are completely honest.

The rest of the story will tell how he'll balance duty, loyalty, and desire, and the choices he'll make. Some cases are indeed tougher than others.

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