

INVITATION

CYCLE ONE OF THE HARBINGERS SERIES

THE CALL BY BILL MYERS

THE HAUNTED BY FRANK PERETTI

THE SENTINELS BY ANGELA HUNT

THE GIRL BY ALTON GANSKY



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In this fast-paced world with all its demands, the four of us wanted to try something new. Instead of the longer novel format, we wanted to write something equally as engaging but that could be read in one or two sittings—on the plane, waiting to pick up the kids from soccer, or as an evening’s read.

We also wanted to play. As friends and seasoned novelists, we thought it would be fun to create a game we could participate in together. The rules were simple:

RULE #1

Each of us would write as if we were one of the characters in the series:

Bill Myers would write as Brenda, the street-hustling tattoo artist who sees images of the future.

Frank Peretti would write as the professor, the atheist ex-priest ruled by logic.

Angela Hunt would write as Andi, the professor’s brilliant but geeky assistant who sees inexplicable patterns.

Alton Gansky would write as Tank, the naïve, big-hearted jock with a surprising connection to a healing power.

RULE #2

Instead of the four of us writing one novella together (we’re friends but not crazy), we would write it like a TV series. There

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would be an overarching storyline into which we'd plug our individual novellas, with each story written from our character's point of view.

Bill's first novella, *The Call*, sets the stage. It will be followed by Frank's *The Haunted*, Angela's *The Sentinels*, and Alton's *The Girl*. And if we keep having fun, we'll begin a second round and so on until other demands pull us away or, as in TV, we get cancelled.

There you have it. We hope you'll find these as entertaining in the reading as we did in the writing.

Bill, Frank, Angie, and Al

THE CALL

BILL MYERS

For Angie Hunt:
The Wendy to our Peter Pan

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CHAPTER

1

There's four of us. Well, five if you count the kid. We don't know each other, we don't like each other, and we sure didn't ask for any of this. But here we are. "The probability of fate," Andi calls it.

I call it a pain in the butt.

Anyway, we each got our own version of what's been happening, so here's mine. . . .

It was Friday night. I was tired and business was slow. Time to shut down. I was already cleaning tips and grips when three white boys—football jocks from the community college—roll in. They'd played some big game earlier and it must have been a sweet victory by the way they waved around their Buds and staggered in, giggling. Well, two staggered in giggling—the one they carried between them was barely coherent.

"Hey there, Brenda." The buzz cut on the right had been a recent customer.

I glanced up from where I was cleaning my stuff. "Sorry, boys, all closed up."

He acted like he didn't hear. "We got ourselves an honest to goodness virgin."

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The one in the middle, six-three, 275, raised his head and opened his watery eyes just long enough to greet me with a Texas drawl, “Ma’am,” before nodding back off. But it wasn’t the good-ol’-boy charm that got me. It was the face. The same one I’d been sketching for over a week.

Buzz Cut laughed. “Twenty years old and not a mark on him.”

“Pure as driven snow,” his buddy agreed.

I looked at the clock. Like I said, business was slow and I was getting tired of ducking the landlord. “You got money?”

All grins, Buzz Cut dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash.

I swore under my breath and motioned them to the beat-up barber chair in the middle of the room. “Set him there.”

They plopped him down.

I popped a sterilized pack and began prepping a tip. “What do you have in mind?”

“You know,” Buzz Cut said. “Do your hocus-pocus thing.”

“My what?”

“Where you tat out his future. Like you did me.” He pulled up his sleeve to show a broken heart spurting blood from a bullet shooting through it. “I’m gonna be a heartbreaker, man.” He grinned at his buddy. “A real lady killer. Ain’t that right, Brenda?”

“If you say so.”

“Chicks go for a man in uniform. Wherever they send me I’m gonna leave a long line of broken hearts.”

I rolled up Cowboy’s sleeve and started prepping the arm.

“So do the same for him,” Buzz Cut said. “Tat out his future.”

“You really do that?” his pal said.

I reached for a blade and began shaving the arm. “I just ink what I see.”

“Well, shoot, do my future, too.”

“You ain’t got one.”

“Huh?”

They both laugh, thinking it’s sarcasm. I wish it was.

I sterilize and goop the arm, all the time staring at it.

“So how much?” Buzz Cut says.

“Free form?” It was a lie. Like I said, I’d been sketching stencils for a week. But they didn’t have to know.

“Sure.”

“Two fifty,” I said. “Half now, half on completion.”

“So that’s . . .”

Thinking wasn’t his specialty, so I gave him a hand. “One hundred fifty now, one hundred fifty when the job’s done.”

“Sweet.”

He peeled off the bills, counting as he set them in my palm. “Fifty, one hundred, one hundred fifty.”

He figured he was done, but like I said, it was a slow week and he was a slow thinker. I gave him a look and glanced at my hand, making it clear he was short.

“Oh, right.” He peeled off another fifty.

“I gotta piss,” his buddy said.

Buzz Cut nods. He motions to the empty bottle in his hand. “And it’s time for a recharge.”

His buddy leans over Cowboy and says, “Don’t go nowhere, pal, we’ll be right back.”

Buzz Cut adds, “Get some sleep. It’ll be over ’fore you know it.”

Cowboy doesn’t answer, so he shakes him. “Hey . . . hey!”

He opens his eyes.

“Get some sleep.”

He nods and drops back off.

The boys turned and headed for the door. I stared at the arm, pretending to wait for an image to form. But as soon as they’re gone, I crossed to the desk and pulled out the stencil I’d been working on—four grown-ups and a ten-year-old kid

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walking toward us. I didn't recognize the kid or two of the adults. But, like I said, I recognized Cowboy. And I recognized the woman beside him. Black. A few years older. Dreadlocks. A dead ringer for me.

The job took less than an hour. Another hour passed and still no one showed. It was late and I'd had it. I tossed down the magazine. I butted out my cigarette and crossed over to him. He was snoring like a chainsaw.

I shook him. "Hey."

He kept snoring. I shook harder. "Hey!"

He opened one eye, gave a polite "Howdy," and went back to sleep.

I shook him again. "Your friends? Where're your friends?"

Nothing.

Enough was enough. I lifted his arm and slipped under it. Getting him to his feet wasn't as easy.

"Come on, come on," I said. "A little help wouldn't hurt."

Somehow I got him to the door. I hit the lights with my elbow, staggered outside, and leaned him against the wall to lock up. I barely got out my keys before he started sliding.

"No, no, no—"

He hit the sidewalk with a thud. I finished locking up and knelt down to him. "Hey. Hey, Cowboy."

Nothing.

"Okay, fine." Prattville was safe enough. A small town in the middle of the desert. And the night was warm. He could just sit there 'til his buddies remembered where they left him.

I turned and headed toward my beater Toyota. Once I got there, I reached through the window to open the door. I glanced back at him. Big mistake. He sat there all alone and helpless-looking.

I swore and started back.

Two minutes later I'm loading him into the passenger seat.

He does his best to help, which was next to nothing. Once all the arms and legs were inside, I got behind the wheel. “Okay, Cowboy,” I said, “where to?”

He mumbled something.

I shook my head and sighed.

Suddenly the car shook as something roared overhead. I stuck my head out the window just in time to see a private jet shoot by. It was three hundred feet above us, with smoke and flames coming from its engine.

I looked around, then dropped the car into gear and hit the gas.