



BREAKDOWN

A BUGS SULLIVAN THRILLER

DANIEL PYLE

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*For Mom.
This wouldn't exist if not for you.*



They'd been driving less than ten minutes when Bugs Sullivan saw the next rabbit.

"There," he said and pointed to a small yard on the right. "Do you see it? By the birdbath?"

Addie looked away from the road just long enough to follow his pointing finger. "Nope. Nothing." She kept both hands on the wheel and turned her attention immediately back to her driving.

The rabbit sat in the snow, not moving, not looking for food, not doing anything except staring toward the passing car and twitching its nose. Bugs hadn't expected Addie to see it—it had that glow about it, that ethereal wispieness—but he had to ask, had to be sure. The light coming off its fur could have been a reflection from a nearby porch light or the moon. Not *every* rabbit he saw was a harbinger of death.

Addie stopped at a T-junction and asked him which way to go.

"Try right," he said.

She did.

When they'd driven five blocks and Bugs still hadn't seen another rabbit, he told her to stop and turn around. Slowing just enough to keep from skidding on the ice, Addie pulled into a driveway, backed out, and pointed the car in the opposite direction.

That old familiar sense of urgency gnawed at Bugs's belly. He wanted to jump out of the car and run. Find the rabbits. Find the trouble. Help. Except, of course, that was a stupid urge. The car was moving much faster than he ever could have, especially on the icy roads; he would have taken one step, slipped, and fallen flat on his ass. And it was cold outside. And he wasn't wearing a coat. And he wouldn't have gone anywhere without Addie anyway.

"I hate being helpless."

She took one hand off the wheel long enough to pat his thigh. "I know, but you're not exactly helpless."

"Are you kidding? I'm the definition of helpless. Can you imagine me out here all alone?" He rubbed at his stubble and his droopy eyes. "Without you? Without the signs? Running around like a crazy person? They'd have locked me away ten years ago."

She shook her head. "Seven years tops."

He laughed and watched the smile spread across her face. She had a beautiful smile.

"You're not crazy," she said. The car slid on a patch of ice, and she pumped the brakes and eased the steering wheel around until she'd straightened them out.

"Says you."

"Isn't that enough?"

Now *he* patted *her* leg. "More than."

They passed the T-junction going back the other way and Bugs drummed his fingers on the dashboard.

"Come on," he said. "Where are you?" He looked left, right, left again.

"Relax."

He looked at her (or maybe he was glaring, although not intentionally). "Seriously?" The houses they passed were dark, and there weren't any streetlights on this particular stretch of road. He couldn't see much more than the illuminated street ahead and her face glowing in the dim light coming from the dashboard gauges.

"Well, I don't mean lay back and take a nap or anything," she said, "but a few deep breaths couldn't hurt." She pumped the brakes again when they slid on another patch of ice, but she didn't slow down.

"Somebody's dying out there."

"I know."

And, of course, she *did*. He didn't need to tell her that somebody almost certainly *would* die unless they made it there in time to do something about it, that it was up to them and no one else. She knew that too.

He stopped drumming the dashboard, spun his wedding ring on his finger instead. She'd never minded that particular nervous tic.

They topped a small rise and Bugs saw the next rabbit hunkered in the middle of the road. Addie didn't swerve or slow down but drove right toward it. The rabbit stood its ground. Just before they drove through it, Bugs got a good look at its flared nostrils and wobbling whiskers. Its eyes were wide but not scared. If it could

talk, Bugs had no doubt it would be saying something along the lines of *hurry hurry hurry hurry hurry*.

“This is the way,” he said, and Addie nodded. He looked over his shoulder and saw the animal still crouching on the road, looking over its own shoulder and back at them. When the rabbit disappeared, not into thin air but only into the darkness, Bugs faced forward again.

They drove past more dark houses and through a school zone that probably wouldn’t see much action for a few days unless the weather turned and the ice melted. In Connecticut, when he’d been a boy, they hadn’t missed school for anything less than a blizzard, but here in the Midwest, they didn’t have the same budget for snowplows and street salters. It would be at least a day before they cleared the roads. Chances were good that there would be plenty of happy kids and put-out parents come tomorrow.

Addie looked at him, just a quick glance. He made a big show of taking a deep breath.

“There you go,” she said and smiled again.

The next rabbit was actually two. The animals sat together on a walkway leading up to an old, Victorian house with a drooping jut of a roof overhanging the porch. This time, Bugs didn’t have to force the breath—it came out all on its own, like a sigh.

Two meant they were getting closer. There had been days and nights they’d driven for hours before finding what they were looking for, and Bugs’s nerves were always a wreck by the ends of those outings.

Outings? More like missions.

Yes, he guessed that was fair.

This time, it seemed, their mission wasn't going to take them much farther than the edge of town.

"Two more," he said for Addie's benefit.

"Already?"

He nodded.

They drove out of town, through outlying subdivisions. Bugs spotted two more pairs of rabbits, then a group of three, and then half a dozen circled around a bike some careless kid had left out on the front lawn. By the time they reached the river and the bridge leading out of their county and into the next, the animals were everywhere: on the sides of the road, hopping across both lanes, scurrying and crouching and gathering all over the place. They drove through the ghostly things, and although Bugs knew better than to expect the crunch of their bones beneath the wheels (they *had* no bones, not really—they were more like wisps of smoke than living, breathing mammals), he couldn't help but cringe every time one of the animals disappeared beneath the front bumper.

It was always like this at the end. A mob of rabbits. A furry, unnatural *sea* of the things.

"We're here," he said.

"Where? I don't see—"

But then she did, and she slowed.

The car ahead sat on the side of the road, pulled into the breakdown lane but still dangerously close to any traffic that might come sliding by.

She eased in behind the parked car and killed the engine. She left the lights on. Bugs saw the missing rear

wheel, the jack holding up the car, the man sitting on the icy ground and fumbling with the spare.

The rabbits had disappeared. They'd done their job, led the two of them here, and now they had gone to wherever it was they went between missions.

"Is this it?" Addie raised her eyebrows and frowned.

Bugs shrugged. "I guess it must be. The rabbits are gone, and I don't see anything else." He wrapped his fingers around the door handle and let himself out of the car, cringing at the frigid air that slithered in and wrapped itself around his neck like a snake. He heard but didn't see Addie getting out through her own door. His eyes never left the man sitting beside the jacked-up corner of the car. The holes in the guy's jeans showed white, hairy flesh beneath. His puffy down coat—at least a size too big—swallowed him. Stubble? He had it. Enough that you might have called it a full-fledged beard. When he looked up at the two of them, Bugs could see the red spiderwebs of vessels in his eyes. *Bloodshot* wasn't a strong enough word.

"Is everything okay?" Bugs asked. "You need some help?"

The guy shook his head and looked back toward Addie. Bugs followed his gaze. Addie stood between their car and the stranger's, her arms crossed over her chest but not quite hiding the twin bumps of her jutting nipples. They'd both left the house without grabbing their coats, which had been stupid and very unlike them. They were usually more prepared. Addie shivered and Bugs thought about telling her to get back in the car.

Except she wouldn't do that. She wasn't a sitter-by, which was one of the many reasons he loved her.

"I'm...fine," the stranger said. His voice was raspy, slurred. Bugs wondered how much he'd had to drink. "Why aren' you wearing...coats?"

"They're in the car," Addie lied. "We took them off and cranked the heat up to eleven."

Bugs watched to see if the stranger would smile at this. He didn't.

"Can I call someone for you?" He touched his pants pocket and realized he'd left his phone in the car. Stupid.

The man shook his head again.

"What happened?" Bugs asked. "Nail?"

"I dunno." Which seemed to be all he had to say on the matter. He let loose a sound that was half burp and half cough.

Bugs looked past the stranger, keeping an eye out for an oncoming car or a pack of coyotes, watching for some kind of imminent danger. Of course, the danger might be something else altogether. Maybe the jack would slip and the car would crush the guy. Or maybe there would be a problem with the spare and he'd freeze to death waiting for help. Death was coming for Mr. Tirechanger in one form or another; that was all Bugs knew and all he *needed* to know.

"Why don't you let me take care of that for you," Bugs said. "And then we'll drive you somewhere warm."

"I'm plenty warm," Tirechanger said. "Anybody needs warming up, I'd say...it's Tits over there." He ges-

ticulated toward Addie with a tire iron Bugs hadn't noticed until just that second.

He heard Addie shift. Probably repositioning her arms to cover the body parts in question.

"Let's not—" Bugs started, but before he could finish, something thumped in the back of the stranger's trunk.

"What was that?"

The stranger dropped the tire iron and started to stand.

The thump came again. A single word followed. It was muffled, but Bugs thought it sounded very much like a cry for help.

Or a warning.

He looked at Addie. Her eyes went wide.

"Look out!" she yelled.

Bugs turned just in time to see the man with the bloodshot eyes point a pistol at his head and pull the trigger.



The bullet whizzed past Bugs's ear and ricocheted off something metallic behind him. The car probably, although Bugs didn't turn to look. Nor did he glance back to see if the ricochet had taken a deadly turn toward his wife, although his mind screamed at him to do it, to make sure she was okay.

When someone shoots at you and you don't have a weapon of your own or somewhere to hide, the most important—the *only*—thing you can try to do is get the gun away from the shooter before he or she can pull the trigger again.

Bugs hunched and charged the stranger, screaming, slipping on the ice but able to keep his traction. Barely. White, pluming exhalations slipped out of his mouth and through the cold air around his head. The gunman aimed the pistol, and for one terrifying second, Bugs was looking right down the barrel, but before the loony could squeeze off another shot, Bugs reached him and threw a forearm into his throat.

Bugs hadn't built up a lot of momentum in the short distance between the two of them, but the blow was hard enough to knock the guy back into the snow. Tirechanger landed on his butt and slid across the frozen ground. The gun popped out of his hand, disappeared under the car. He brought his hands up to his Adam's apple, sucked in two short, gurgling breaths, and looked up at Bugs. *Glared* up.

Bugs had almost fallen too. He threw out his arms and just managed to keep himself upright. When he regained his balance, he shuffled and slid his way to the stranger and, before the guy could say or do anything else, kicked him in the face.

The man fell back into the snow, hands still clutching his throat, eyes rolled into the back of his head, a stream of blood running out of his busted nose and over his lips.

The kick had been a vicious thing. Brutal. Bugs had used every bit of strength he had, and it made him nauseous to have to do it, but he'd learned a long time ago that it was stupid and potentially deadly to give an attacker any kind of benefit of the doubt. In Bugs's opinion, if someone shoots at you, he pretty much deserves whatever he gets. If you show him any mercy, you might as well start shooting at yourself.

He leaned over, felt the guy's neck for a pulse, found one, and went to fish the gun out from under the car. When he found it, he tucked the pistol into the waistband of his pants.

Then, finally, he turned back to his wife.

She sat on the ground beside their car, her hand

pressed to the side of her head and a dazed look on her face. She had her knees pulled up to her chest, and she was shivering.

She's shot! Bugs thought. *He shot her in the head. No, God. Please no! Not my Addie.*

Except there was no blood. Or none Bugs could see anyway. And Addie looked more surprised than injured. He hurried over, dropped to his knees beside her, and asked if she was okay.

She took her hand away from her head.

There *was* blood.

But not a lot. Just a trickle running down her ear and a smear on her fingers and palm. She had a tiny furrow in her earlobe and another on her scalp just behind her ear. A lock of her golden hair hung from this second wound, now red and bloody at the roots, looking like it would fall off and blow away any second.

As far as gunshot wounds went, Bugs guessed she couldn't have been much luckier. The bullet had barely grazed her. A light breeze probably would have kept it from hitting her at all.

Or blown it right into her brain.

He shook his head. He wouldn't let himself think those kinds of thoughts. Addie was okay. Bleeding a bit and probably more than just a little freaked out, but okay for the most part.

A gust of cold wind blew into his back, and he winced. The temperature out here was practically arctic, and neither of them had a coat. They needed to get back into the car to warm up.

Aren't you forgetting something?

He stopped.

The thump? That muffled cry. There's someone in that guy's trunk.

Christ. He *had* forgotten. For a second anyway.

"Listen," he said. But before he could tell Addie what she needed to listen to, she glanced over his shoulder and screamed.

Bugs looked back just in time to see the tire iron zipping through the air toward his head.

Then the cold, white world disappeared behind a fog of darkness and agonizing pain.



He found the rabbit in a strip of tall grass behind the garage.

Rabbits, technically. There were four of them. Three dead.

The fourth animal, the survivor, squirmed in the bottom of the grassy depression, looking malnourished and scared. No...terrified.

Will's mom had once told him that if he touched a baby bird, its mother would kill it. Smell the stink of humanity, she'd said. This had been several years earlier, in the summer between first grade and second. Will had never been sure if the warning was the truth or a lie meant to keep him from climbing trees and hunting nests, but he'd decided to stay clear of baby birds anyway. Just to be safe. Now he wondered about the rabbit. If he reached in and touched the bunny, separated it from its dead brothers or sisters, would its mother come back and know? Would she smell the stink of humanity and snuff it out?

He didn't think so. And he didn't guess it mattered anyway. The poor little creature obviously had no mother. Not

anymore. No rabbit would have let three of her babies starve to death in a hole. Not if she could help it.

Moving slowly, not wanting to scare the animal more than he had already, he reached into the grass and ran a finger along the rabbit's side. Its ribs—thin, fragile things much too close to the surface—yielded to his touch. He was afraid that if he pressed much harder, he'd break every last one of the bones. The bunny didn't turn its head toward him, but its eye did seem to flick in his direction. Its side hitched arrhythmically as it sucked in ragged breaths.

Dying. It was dying. You could see it clear as day.

"Don't worry," Will said. "I'll help you." Not sure if he could—not sure anyone could—but sure he would try.

He eased his hand under the rabbit and lifted it carefully out of the hole, half afraid it would scratch him or flip out of his grasp and fall to the ground, sure he was doing more harm than good.

But it didn't flip or scratch, and it didn't fall. It seemed to be using every last bit of its strength just to stay alive. And it was scared. Don't forget that. Will guessed he would freak out too if some giant came along and plucked him up.

He carried the animal across the back yard, walking carefully. The last thing he wanted to do was trip and fall and crush the rabbit beneath him. When he pushed through the back door, he called for his mom.

No response.

He carried the bunny into the utility room, found an old shoebox, lined the box with a ratty but clean towel, and laid the animal inside.

Now the rabbit did look up at him. Or seemed to. It twitched its head his way and wiggled its nose.

“Just hold on,” he told it. “I’m going to get you some milk.”

He wasn’t sure if regular milk was good for a rabbit, but it had to be better than nothing. He carried the shoebox into the bathroom, found an old bottle of children’s cough medicine (for his little sister, who seemed to get sick at least once a week), and removed the eyedropper.

Or did you call this kind a throatdropper?

Didn’t matter.

Will squeezed the dropper into the sink and rinsed it off under the faucet. By the time he’d finished, the rabbit’s breathing had started to slow.

“No!” Will said. “Don’t die. Please!”

He hurried into the kitchen, grabbed the milk from the fridge, poured some into a coffee mug, and filled the dropper.

The first time he poked the dropper into the animal’s mouth, it moved its head back and let the drop of milk fall to the towel beneath it. Will tried again, and this time the rabbit licked the tip of the dropper and swallowed.

Just a tiny bit of milk. But a start.

“That’s good,” Will said. “Very good.”

He picked up the shoebox and the mug of milk and brought them both to his bedroom. He had some nursing to do.

Bugs—it wasn’t his real name, not legally, but it was what Addie called him in bed, with nothing between them but a sheen of sweat, and he thought that trumped a piece of paper in a filing cabinet at City Hall—woke

without opening his eyes. For just a second, he felt the dying rabbit's ribs and the irregular hitch in its side, saw it there in the makeshift bed he'd made for it, a drop of milk glistening on its whiskers. He thought about the eyedropper and the spot he'd cleared for the shoebox under his bed, and he tried very hard not to think about what had happened next.

Here, now, the sounds of slush splashing against the car's undercarriage drowned out those last few memories and floated him back into reality. He was in a car—lying, not sitting—and his hands were pulled behind him and lashed together with what felt like some kind of thick tape. Probably duct tape.

He opened his eyes.

Tirechanger sat in the driver's seat, hunched over the steering wheel, hands at ten and two, speeding along and squinting through the windshield like an eighty-year-old nursing home escapee. Earlier, Bugs had thought the guy must be drunk, but if he was, he was the best damn drunk driver of all time; he drove the car perfectly straight—unnaturally straight given the icy road conditions. No weaving, no sudden stops or accelerations. If this had been a driving test, the crazy fuck probably would have gotten a perfect score.

Bugs looked away from Tirechanger and over the edge of the seat. Addie lay in the footwell beneath him, eyes wide and full of tears, her upper body squeezed into the depression behind the front seat, her jumbled legs and feet folded into the twin hollow on the passenger's side. Tirechanger had hog-tied her with loops of duct tape, binding her hands over her belly and securing them to another wad of tape around her ankles with several more lengths of

the material. One last silvery strip covered her mouth. When she saw Bugs—alive and awake—some of the fear left her face, but not all of it. Not even most of it.

Bugs felt a warm, sticky patch on the back of his neck. Blood. And there was undoubtedly more of it gluing his hair to his scalp. Plus a mother of a lump he guessed would hurt like hell once his disorientation and adrenaline wore off.

The gun he'd tucked into his waistband was gone.

He leaned closer to Addie.

For a second, the footwell was a hole in the grass behind his old garage, and Addie was a hyperventilating baby bunny.

Bugs shivered and blinked.

She was his wife again. His beautiful, fantastic wife to beat all wives. His best friend. He wanted to tell her everything would be okay, that they'd get out of this, but he had his own strip of tape—slapped across his mouth and the surrounding stubble—and couldn't do anything more than mumble.

He looked deep into her eyes instead, tried to convey some sense of hope. She blinked away another stream of tears and sniffed.

They had to get out of this car as soon as possible. Bugs tried to think. He twisted his wrists, hoping for some slack and finding none. He eyed the front seat, the windows, the doors, looking for escape routes where there were none.

And then red and blue blinking lights streamed through the back windshield and a police siren warbled.

Tirechanger glanced into his rearview and cursed.

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