

# The Existential Man

by Lee Killough

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The gun muzzle gaped like a cave before the condemned man's eyes. He screamed silently behind his gag... furious, terrified, disbelieving. *I can't really be about to die.* He struggled to breathe through his smashed nose. *I can't end here, not like this!* In the mud of a riverbank, trussed like an animal for slaughter. Someone would see them. A full moon shone overhead, for god's sake! Help had to come in time to save him!

He kicked at his executioner, but his legs, cramped from hours in the car trunk waiting for dark, jerked without control. The killer cocked his gun.

Terror and fury blazed to incandescence. The condemned man glared over his gag at the shadowed face. *No! I refuse to die! And I sure as hell won't let you get away with what you've done, you fucking bastard! Somehow, some way, I'll find a way to--*

Ripping pain cut off the thought.

\* \* \*

Sergeant David Amaro shaded his camera lens from the glare of July sunlight off the river. Sweat trickled down his neck. What the hell had possessed him to volunteer for this floater call? Granted, it could be worse. At least the sodden body sprawled on the riverbank did not smell.

David focused the lens for close-ups of the shattered, exposed bone where a face had been, then on the large hole in the forehead. "Do you mind repeating your story once more, Mr. Ballard?"

The fisherman sighed. "My hook snagged off my hat and the current carried it into this backwater. When I waded in after it I saw-- his face just under the water." The fisherman paused. "Why dump him where the river's so shallow?"

David shrugged. "Intelligence isn't a prerequisite for crime. Thank you. We won't keep you any longer."

This fisherman hesitated, glancing from David to the coroner and ambulance attendants, obviously reluctant to give up the thrill of his part in a police investigation, before picking up his tackle box and trudging away.

David watched him pass the uniformed officers securing the crime scene perimeter, then turned back to the river. Had the killer dumped the body in shallow water? The woods marking the normal water level stood five or six feet back from this year's shoreline.

"How long has he been dead, Doc?"

Dr. Miles Jacobs peeled open the shirt to expose the chest. "Hard to say. The fish have done a job on all the exposed flesh so he's been in the water a while. Also notice he's mummified. I expect I'll find a lot of him gone to adipocere. Until the autopsy, my best guess is one to five years."

The skin under the shirt looked dark and leathery. One to five years... but it could be even longer. David remembered reading of adipocere, fatty tissues changed chemically to waxy material, preserving bodies for decades. "Do you suppose we can get fingerprints?"

Jacobs examined the clenched fists, cut loose from the wire binding the wrists to a concrete block. "Maybe. I'll see at the autopsy tomorrow." He stepped back. "If you'll finish we'll pack him up and be on

our way."

David pulled on a pair of surgical gloves from the crime scene kit and reached for the nearest pocket of the dead man's trousers. But as he touched the fabric, a storm of emotions blasted him... furious anger, bowel-loosening terror, driving urgency. *Get him!* a voiceless cry screamed in his head. *Burn the fucking scum who did this to me!*

"Amaro? What's wrong?"

David glanced up to see Jacobs eyeing him in concern. He ducked back over the body. "Nothing. Just a lunch hamburger versus the heat." No way would he mention the voice and have everyone accuse him of going wacko again.

The pockets contained nothing. The hands bore no watch or rings. Stepping back, David stripped off the gloves and scrubbed his hands on his thighs. But the voice continued in his head.

It raged on even with the body hauled away in a black plastic bag, and while he and the uniformed officers assisting in the crime scene investigation searched the area. They turned up trash and tracks, but none appeared more than a few months old, and all more related to fishing and canoeing than murder.

About what David expected. He had a better chance of winning the lottery than finding any relevant physical evidence of the murder after all the time and weather since--

The thought choked off in a new wave of terror. The scene blurred to a double exposure, the river running simultaneously sunlit and sheened with moonlight. Terrible chill gripped him... followed by an explosion in his head.

"Sergeant Amaro?"

The uniforms stared at him. David fought panic. *Could* he be going psycho again? He forced a grin. "I've had a vision. Of air-conditioning. Let's pack it in."

Back at the Law Enforcement Center across the alley from the county court house, David nodded to a deputy coming out of the Sheriff's Office, then pushed through the door into the detectives' squad room on the PD side of the corridor.

He dropped into his desk chair and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, willing the voice to shut up. With all the victims deserving righteous wrath-- high school kids killed by cocaine and crack, the Chaffin girl's strangulation, still unsolved after two years-- why did this one affect him so much more? The manner of death suggested an execution, a falling out of thieves.

"You all right, Dave?"

David made himself raise his brows at Lieutenant Christopher. "I'm fine."

His lanky commander rested a hip on the edge of the desk. "You look a bit like you did when..."

No need to finish. David knew what he meant.

Memory told David he kissed Jan good-bye that Tuesday two years ago and drove straight to headquarters. Except he walked in on *Wednesday* morning.

Fellow officers testified he had come in Tuesday, but left again to investigate crack and cocaine appearing in the area, and never came back. They found his car in the high school parking lot. Several students remembered talking to him. But what happened after that? He returned with a nightmare but no sign of physical injury, clean-shaven and neatly dressed... just stripped of possessions as well as memory... gun, ID, handcuffs, keys, even his watch and wedding ring. Investigation failed to trace him, and the shrinks, to recover his memory.

He rolled a report form into the typewriter. "I'm feeling the heat is all. Do you want to know about the body?"

Christopher eyed him, then nodded.

David consulted his notebook. "Dead over a year. Male, black hair, about five-eleven, mid-thirties, average weight. Possibly Hispanic. Complexion... hard to tell. Not exactly a unique description; it stretches to fit even me. Shot through the forehead with a large caliber weapon, maybe a .45."

"What's your game plan?"

He shrugged. "See if the autopsy gives us anything useful. Check missing persons reports. Run his prints through NCIC. Contact informants about criminal disputes over the past several years. The regular routine."

But David knew he lied. The anger of the dead man beating him made this one anything but routine.

\* \* \*

*He fled down a long, dark tunnel. Heavy breath snarled behind him. Terror kept David from looking back at what pursued him, but every instinct screamed against letting it catch him. Ahead glowed the end of the tunnel. The golden light there promised sanctuary and peace. David struggled toward it, breath scorching his throat.*

*Figures moved in the light ahead. David fought for breath to call. "Help!"*

*The figures turned. The breathing behind rasped louder with every step.*

*"Please help me!"*

*Why did they always just stand there! The terror behind blasted him with fetid, suffocating breath. Claws closed on his shoulder.*

*Bitter cold and white-hot heat spread out through his body from their touch. He screamed, fighting the grip. But as always the claws bit deeper, pulling him back... turning him. And as the terror came into view...*

He woke thrashing.

Jan threw her arms around him. "David! It's all right! You've had a nightmare, but it's over now and you're safe."

He buried his head against her breasts, drinking in her familiar scent, the silk of her skin, clutching at the security of her reality. "I love you."

Her cheek rubbed the top of his head. "What was it about?"

"I don't know." The truth could only worry her. "It's the kind you can't remember."

Presently she went back to sleep, but David could not make himself close his eyes again. He lay awake the rest of the night, cold with remembered terror.

\* \* \*

In daylight, the nightmare faded beneath the routine of investigation as David combed through missing persons records. Even a rat pack member must have people who cared enough to miss him. To be thorough, he went back ten years, and checked not only his department's records but also those of the Sheriff's Office and the MPs at neighboring Fort Carey. Eight men fit his dead man's description.

By noon he sat at his desk going through the eight missing persons reports. At the desk back-to-back with his, Bill Purviance snarled over a file of his own.

David raised his brows. "Your drug case not going well?"

Purviance grimaced. "I can't get a hold on this Stacey kid."

David sympathized. "I never could, either."

"He's like Teflon!" Purviance slapped the folder closed. "He smells every plant, undercover officer, and wire a mile away. I'd try sweating the supplier's name out of him, but he'd just laugh at me. And then the supplier will find another dealer and we'll be back to fucking square one. How's your floater?"

"I'm trying to identify him." Anger swirled around David. He felt the pile of flesh and bone fuming at the hospital where it waited for today's autopsy. David gritted his teeth. *Back off! I'm doing what I can.* After waiting so long to have his death discovered, John Doe could wait a few more days for retribution.

But the demand for immediate action nagged at David until he scooped together the photographs of his possibles and headed for the door.

Most of his informants rose late. Only a handful held day jobs. Like Arlie Rudd at the European Motors garage. "Do you know any of these faces?"

Arlie wiped his hands on a shop rag before picking up the photos. "You think one might be the dude in the river?" He flipped through the stack. Twice he paused, giving David hope, but when he handed the photos back, he shook his head. "Sorry, man. None of them rings a bell."

"Maybe you can think of someone who might not be reported missing because of what he was into

and with whom?"

Arlie picked up a socket wrench and leaned back under the hood of an MG GB. "I haven't heard of anything recent."

"This wouldn't be recent. It could be anytime up to five to ten years ago."

Arlie hooted. "Ten years! Man, you're talking ancient history. No one remembers that far back!"

"The killer might. You listen around, like at that midnight chop shop of yours, and see if finding this body has made anyone nervous."

Two other informants he found had no better information. Neither heard of any executions. Neither recognized the missing men as linked to criminal activity that might be fatal.

David headed for Jacobs' office at the hospital.

The pathologist relaxed in his desk chair, still in scrub clothes. "We had a time unclenching the fingers but here are your prints."

"Yes!" David snatched up the card Jacobs shoved across the desk. The squares designated for the thumbprints showed only smudges, but the fingertips produced discernable ridge patterns... all ulnar loops except for a tented arch on the right index finger. With luck he would have an ID by tomorrow. "What else can you tell me?"

The pathologist sucked on an empty pipe. "He died of a bullet fired through his frontal bone and exiting through the occipital bone. No surprises there. He also sustained multiple facial fractures... a broken nose several hours before dying, then malar and maxillary fractures postmortem. The fracture lines indicate several blows with something broad and flat."

Such as a concrete block? David's stomach lurched at the image of the killer pounding identity out of the dead face. "Any change in your estimate of the time of death?"

Jacobs shook his head. "Sorry."

So much for that. "What about distinguishing details?"

"He didn't smoke." Air hissed through the empty pipe. "X-rays show retained lower wisdom teeth, very few fillings, and old healed fractures of the distal right radius and ulna and left second and third metacarpals."

The dead man broke a hand? Driving back to headquarters, David rubbed his own left hand, slammed in a car door by an angry motorist, and grimaced in displeasure. Just what he needed, shared trauma to give the dead man added hold over him.

At headquarters he wired the prints to the FBI's National Criminal Information Center, then began calling relatives of the missing men to ask about habits and medical histories. Had their husband... brother... father... son ever broken his right arm and left hand? Did the missing man smoke? Would they please give him the name of their dentist?

The questions eliminated most of the men. They had the wrong number of wisdom teeth, and either they had never broken a bone or they broke different ones than the dead man. The three name left remained mostly because of unknown dental and fracture histories.

The watch ended without word from NCIC on the fingerprints.

\* \* \*

*The tunnel seemed darker than ever... colder, longer. David ran harder than ever, straining toward the light. Yet the horror behind gained just as fast. Its claws closed on his shoulder, and from beyond the excruciating cold and heat came the voice he associated with the dead man. No you don't! First you have to nail that murdering bastard.*

*The claws dragged David around.*

He woke drenched and shaking but, this time, without screaming. Jan slept undisturbed against him.

He sat up and stared into the darkness. Now the dead man had joined the horror. Or... *had* he just joined? One to five years ago put the death within the time frame of David's lost day. Did the events connect? Did that account for the dead man's effect on him?

Which suggested a more disturbing question. Had his vision at the river been something seen through

the dead man's eyes or... his own?

He had been hunting the drug supplier whose junk killed three kids, working the case with righteous wrath. In the darkness, David hugged his knees, his gut knotting. Had he caught up with the scum and lost control? According to the shrink, amnesia resulted from an experience so traumatic that the mind rejected all memory of it. Violating his cherished belief in law and due process could fall into that category.

He leaned his head on his knees. What had he done that missing day?

\* \* \*

The report on the dead man's prints came back from NCIC shortly before noon. David snatched the telex from the secretary and read it with fingers crossed. But the charm failed. The FBI had no match in their criminal files. He slam-dunked the telex in his wastebasket. This damned case refused to give him a break!

He fired a telex back to Washington requesting that the prints be checked against the civilian files, then shoved on his sunglasses and headed for the parking lot. It appeared he must make his own break.

First stop... Rusty Ubel at the Easy-Cash pawnshop on the road west out of town.

Opening the door brought a welcoming wave of cool air and a two-tone chime. At the sound, carrot hair and a pair of eyes appeared above the rear edge of a display case. "Sergeant Amaro. I heard you were looking for me yesterday."

David nodded. "I need to know if any of these men look familiar." He held out the three photos.

A short arm reached up from behind the display case for them. "Ah. The body in-- "

Screaming brakes interrupted him. David raced for the door. On Fort Carey Boulevard outside, a driver swore at a boy on a skateboard.

From under the arm David used to hold the door open, Rusty sniffed. "Crazy kids."

Agreed, David reflected, remembering his own skateboarding days. He and his friends not only darted through traffic, they caught tows on passing cars and trucks. It took a broken arm to convince him of the stupidity of *that*...

The thought stumbled. That break had been in his right arm... the distal end of the radius and ulna. The same place the dead man broke his.

A chill slid down his spine. First the similarity of hand fractures, now this one. What were the odds of him sharing not only physical description but medical history with a victim? And dental history. He, too, retained just his lower wisdom teeth. Still, it had to be coincidence. What else *could* it be?

David turned his hands palm up. Fingerprints would prove the coincidence. When he got back to headquarters he would--

The thought remained unfinished. The sunlight at the open door highlighted the ridges of his fingers enough to see the general pattern. David's breath stuck in his chest. The highlighting showed ulnar loops on finger after finger... except for the tented arch on the right index finger.

"Sergeant! What's wrong?"

*The nightmare tunnel stretched before him. Fiery cold claws clamped on his shoulder. The pain sapped all his strength, destroying resistance to the pull. Inexorably, he turned, and saw... a man standing over him on the riverbank, silhouetted against the moonlit sky. A gun muzzle pressed against his forehead. He glared up at the silhouette, fury raging in him. Somehow I'll get you. Then the night disappeared in excruciating noise and pain.*

David bolted for his car and gunned it out of the parking space. No! He could not be the dead man! He breathed; his heart beat; he bled when he nicked himself shaving. How existential could life be? *I think I am; therefore, I am?*

Yet the voice of the shrink two years ago murmured over his denials. He lost a day. Amnesia resulted from the need to forget some trauma. What trauma could be greater than his own violent death?

A blaring horn jerked his attention back to driving. He braked in midturn to avoid an oncoming car. After it passed, he saw why he turned, and grinned. Yes! The high school parking lot, the last place he

had been seen his missing day. Tracking himself would prove that riverbank had nothing to do with him.

In the parking lot he sat on the hood of the parked car, concentrating, willing himself to remember. But his mind remained blank. Over and over, however, his gaze wandered to the sandstone wall on the north side of the parking lot, separating the campus from Memorial Cemetery.

That seemed little to go on. Still, what else did he have? David trotted across to the wall and vaulted it.

Standing in the cemetery felt... familiar. Encouraged, he started forward between the headstones, trying not to think, just move.

To his surprise, his feet took him to the gutted old bell tower in the middle of the cemetery. He stared at it. Why come here? Connie Chaffin had not been his case.

Then, why did he think of her? Because her strangled body had been found here?

*"She was running one time and saw them."*

Someone said that to him, said it the day he vanished. A girl's voice. Who? Of course... Kim Harris, one of Connie's girlfriends. He had been asking about Brad Stacey and the Harris girl started talking about Connie. *"She saw Brad with someone."*

Saw him where? David looked around. Connie, a star of the girls' track team, ran every noon, often in the cemetery. Her failure to show up for afternoon classes started the search that ended at the bell tower. Did she see a meeting here?

She also ran along Bandit Creek, he remembered hearing. The stream had cut a ravine behind the high school and cemetery and on north through a residential area.

David slid down the side of the ravine and leaped the stream to the path on the far side, worn hard and even by the track team and local joggers. In his head his conversation with the Harris girl replayed as though it had never been lost.

"When did she tell you about seeing Brad?" he asked.

"That morning-- you know, the day she--" Tears cut off the sentence.

Had someone overheard? Did that conversation doom Connie?

That day David had followed the creek path, just as he did now... looking for places Connie could have seen Stacey and his supplier.

Passing the boundary of the cemetery and into the residential area, cold grabbed David's guts. His heart hammered. The trees arching together over the ravine reminded him of his nightmare tunnel. Balconies and windows of the Westminster Apartment complex looked down from beyond the trees on the eastern rim. Did Connie see Stacey up there? Or maybe around one of the houses along the western side? Steps led from the ravine to most of the back yards.

Steps. Memory clicked. He had climbed steps. Stone steps. To... somewhere with bright flowers. He studied the houses. Several had stone steps, but only one a greenhouse. Sight of it brought a wave of fury and terror.

He savored the emotions with satisfaction. So, the horror began up there. He leaned against a tree and let memory flow.

Answering his tap on the glass had been a grey-haired man who carried himself with military erectness. Being this close to Fort Carey, a number of officers retired here.

David showed his ID. "May I talk to you, Captain...?"

The firm chin lifted. "It's Major... Major Charles Burris, retired."

Behind the major, flowers in riotous colors filled the greenhouse. "Those are beautiful," David said.

The stiff shoulders relaxed. "Aren't they. I did some advisory work in Central America after my formal retirement and fell in love with the jungle flora. So I brought back seeds and cuttings."

Advisory work? Mercenary, he meant. It conjured up an interesting image... the major in camouflage fatigues and face paint pausing on a jungle march to admire flowers. David moved down the long benches. "They must take a lot of work." Which would keep him in the greenhouse for long periods.

"Hours every day." Burris raised an eyebrow. "But I'm sure you're not here to talk about flowers."

"True. You have a good view of people on the ravine path from here."

"The joggers and dog walkers? Yes." The major nodded.

"Do you remember ever seeing Connie Chaffin?"

The major's face went grave. "The girl strangled last week? That was so... senseless. Yes, I saw her often. But not that day she was killed, as I told the detective who talked to me. Do you have a new lead on her death?"

An intensity in his tone had caught David's ear. He eyed the major more closely. "You know how these things go... check and recheck everything." He paused. "Have you seen a boy, tall, over six feet, very thin, white-blond hair? He would probably have been in street clothes, not running gear."

Burris had pursed his lips. "Offhand, no, I don't remember a boy like that. Sorry."

But the major's pupils dilated during the description of Stacey, and dilated again while denying seeing him. Every cop instinct in David snapped to attention. *Liar*, that dilatation screamed. What if Burris brought more than flower seeds back from Central America? The man deserved checking. "Well, thank you for your time." He turned to leave.

Just as a tall, thin, white-blond boy bounded through the door. "Major, that Harris bitch told--" He stopped short, staring at David.

Two thoughts collided in David. *Jackpot!* and *Oh, shit!* Movement flashed at the edge of his vision. He ducked too late. Burris smashed a flowerpot square in his face. David's nose flattened in blinding agony that paralyzed him long enough for the other two to pin, disarm, and tie him. They emptied his pockets and stripped off his watch and wedding ring, then carried him into the garage adjoining the greenhouse and dumped him in the trunk of the major's car.

The major slammed the trunk closed. "Now, what was it you were about to tell me, Brad?"

David missed the answer, but he guessed that Stacey told Burris about Kim Harris talking to their prisoner. Burris's crisp voice came back, "...so she won't mention her conversations with the girl and cop to anyone else, but without leaving any marks on her."

Leaning against the tree beneath the major's greenhouse, David understood why no one tracked him past the high school. Fear kept Kim Harris from repeating what she told him.

So, now he had his day back... and had identified the dead man. He could no longer deny what he was. At least acceptance ended the fear. But not the hatred of his killer. What to do about Burris? He lacked proof the major killed Connie Chaffin, and he could hardly arrest the man for murdering David Amaro, despite the fingerprint evidence. The thought of nailing Burris on drug charges did not satisfy him at all. David wanted the major for murder, for his and Connie's and the kids who OD'd on the major's drugs. He wanted Burris revealed to the world as scum, wanted him blackened, reviled, hated, and, most of all, dead.

And he knew just how to do that. David bared his teeth. It bypassed due process, but what the hell did a dead man care about due process?

A great sense of freedom filled him. Humming, David mounted the steps to the yard next to Burris's and showed his ID to the woman who answered his rap on the back door. "May I please use your phone?"

When she showed him to an extension in the kitchen, he looked up Burris in the phone book and punched in the number.

"Hello?"

The major's crisp voice sent a shaft of fury through David. He did not bother hiding the anger in his voice, just whispered to keep the residents of the house from hearing. "Major, I know all about your drug business. Meet me in your greenhouse in two minutes if you don't want me talking to the police." David jiggled the switch hook and punched the Law Enforcement Center's number. "Kate, this is David Amaro," he told the dispatcher who answered. "I've learned that Connie Chaffin saw the Stacey kid's drug supplier. So the supplier killed her. He's a retired army major named Charles Burris. He also murdered my guy in the river. Send backup to 610 Franklin Drive."

He left the house, vaulted the fence into Burris's backyard, and opened the greenhouse door. Stepping over the threshold brought a shiver of remembered terror... quickly replaced by grim anticipation of vengeance.

Inside, the major stood silhouetted against the glow of ultraviolet lights over the tables. "I don't know

who the hell you are or what drug business you're talking about, but I don't tolerate being threatened."

David felt stunned. Burris did not *recognize* him? He hurled his badge case at the major. "The name is David Amaro, you bastard! Maybe you can forget a man whose head you've blown off, but I sure as hell haven't forgotten you! And your ass is mine, slimeball."

Burris opened the badge case. Now he remembered. David saw it in his face. But Burris remained composed. He tossed back the ID and shoved his hands in the rear pockets of his jeans. "You're raving. If I killed you, how do you come to be standing there? You surely don't expect me to believe you're a ghost." His right hand came back into sight... holding a .45 that must have been stuck in the back of his waistband. "Instead, I believe you're a trespasser who makes me fear for my life."

Fierce joy blazed in David. *Gotcha!* "You damned well should fear for your life." He drew his own gun.

As the .45 flashed fire, David reminded himself: *You're only as real as you believe. The bullet can't hurt you.* Sure enough, he felt no pain, though the wound spurted blood. Behind him, a section of the greenhouse wall shattered.

Grinning, David stalked toward Burris. "You're wasting ammunition, Major. You can't kill me again."

Burris tried, firing repeatedly. Amid splintering glass and spraying blood, David continued forging forward.

Burris's eyes went wild and white. "Fall, damn you!" He backed away, still firing.

Before the major emptied the clip, David forced him against the garage wall and shoved the gun upward so the barrel pointed back toward Burris himself. The next shot, by now fired in convulsive desperation, entered the major's throat and exploded out the top of his head.

As the major collapsed, David heard the whoop of an approaching siren. Relief filled him. Good. He could leave everything else to the police.

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It made a hell of a report to write. Officers arriving to back up Amaro met a hysterical neighbor with a story of hearing gunfire and running to her kitchen window to see her neighbor in his greenhouse firing bullet after bullet into a detective who had used her phone just minutes before. They found only the major's body in the greenhouse, however... amid a scene that belonged in a slaughterhouse, with blood splashed and smeared and pooled everywhere. Except for a bloody pile of clothing, Sergeant Amaro had disappeared. Lab tests showed most of the blood to be Amaro's type, and the bloody fingerprints on the edges of the tables matched his. The gun, however, bore only Burris's prints.

"What do you think happened?" the investigating officer asked Lieutenant Christopher. "Where is Amaro's body? He couldn't have walked away after losing that much blood."

Christopher had no suggestions, especially after NCIC's report on the fingerprints of the dead man in the river. They found a match in their civilian section... a law enforcement officer named David Douglas Amaro.

After comparing the dead man's prints to those in the greenhouse and Amaro's personnel file, Christopher showed it all to the chief. "What do you think about this? What should we do?"

The chief studied the prints for a long time, then returned the personnel file to Christopher. "I think we tell the press that an officer who solved the Chaffin murder has probably paid for it with his life, with his body being removed by some accomplice the neighbor didn't see. As soon as possible we'll make sure Amaro's family receives his pension. We bury the file on the river body. The rest..." He tore the NCIC telex into confetti. "The rest we forget."

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