

"This clever, comedic mystery will keep you guessing until the final revelation."

—Jenifer Ruff, *USA Today* bestselling author

DEATH BY PODCASTING



ARCHER & WADE

TAKE 1

KILLER FEEDBACK



In six years of podcasting, Raspy Fuse had received many text messages, but never a death threat. He'd been editing the morning's audio recordings when the text arrived. He'd read it twice already, and now he read it a third time.

Good afternoon, Raspy. As a long-time literary podcast listener who knows the written word, I can honestly say the Under the Covers show is one of the best. Your guests are top-notch, the genre variety keeps things fresh, and the chemistry between you and Salty Remarks—is that really her given name?—is unmatched. Not to be dramatic—more like deadly accurate—I am writing to warn you that one of the three author guests you and Salty plan to interview Tuesday night intends to kill you both. Congratulations on your recent detective novel. It's your best yet.

Raspy took off his headphones and leaned back in his worn leather chair. He looked around his apartment, where posters of his favorite books graced the walls: John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Tana French's *In the Woods*, and Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. The text was more suited to a mystery novel than real life. He said the words "kill you both" out loud, which he realized as soon as he'd done it was a mistake. He first heard the squawk and flap of feathers by his Quaker parrot and then, "Kill you both, kill you both. Akkkkkk."

He twisted to the golden cage in the room's corner. "Hush, Typo."

Salty had given him the bird to remind him not to talk to himself, and the joke worked too well. The parrot wouldn't let up. "Hush, Typo. Hush, Typo. Akkkkkk."

The racket stirred Sherlock from his midday slumber. From his spot on the cool kitchen floor, the English bulldog bounded into the living area, jowls shaking, determined to investigate. Watson would have been a good name too, for an ever-loyal dog who sensed when Raspy needed his help, but Sherlock seemed to think Raspy needed him to eat Typo. The dog banged his head against the metal legs supporting Typo's cage, then barked at Typo, who squawked back. Raspy's Saturday afternoon was off to an unproductive start.

After Raspy calmed his pets, he turned his attention back to the text and re-read the words. Was this a sick joke? Or perhaps this was a different joke, a prompt from one of his competitive writer friends to see who could pull off the most outlandish character death—most mystery writers he knew possessed a little gallows humor. But the texter was not in his contacts and

the number unknown. He saw dots form on the screen and waited. The new text read:

By the way, your chances of escaping death aren't good. This author has already killed a podcaster and gotten away with it.

A link followed, and while Raspy knew the danger of clicking on unknown links in text messages, he couldn't help himself. It took him to a newspaper article about a podcaster's death, where the headline "Unsolved Death of Stacy Story" glared at him in red and black. Nothing about Stacy Story's death appeared relevant until Raspy read about the timing. The podcaster died—it said nothing about her being murdered—the day she conducted three author interviews. Raspy realized he'd held his breath when he read the authors' names. They were the same three writers he and Salty planned to interview three days from now for the biggest event of their podcast year.

Raspy clicked on the folder on his computer labeled "Author Episodes," found the sub-folder with the date of the upcoming event, and opened it. Thumbnails of three headshots appeared at the top. He opened and enlarged them side by side. There was William Z. Wisp, the poet; Della Molasses, the romance author; and Edwin Nocturne, the thriller writer. Raspy couldn't imagine being murdered by a poet, especially one who looked like a smug professor, nor a romance author. Though Della dressed to kill in a see-through blouse, he found it hard to believe she'd have much interest in a real killing. And the thin thriller writer with the nervous expression looked like he hadn't been to the gym his whole life. Raspy liked his chances in

a fistfight with any of the three. But the threat was murder, not a boxing match.

He looked back at the article and studied it. Stacy Story wasn't well-known in the podcast space. Like Raspy and Salty, she had been a 30-something writer with a day job, a podcast hobbyist who liked to interview authors and help them tell their stories. She was intelligent, with a promising future as a literary fiction writer: a graduate of UC Berkeley and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a Pushcart Prize recipient. But why did she die? She—like them—had no criminal record. Her podcast—like theirs—had good ratings on Spotify. And Stacy Story—like Raspy and Salty—had had no prior contact with Wisp, Molasses, or Nocturne before she interviewed them.

Raspy felt sympathy for Stacy Story and a stirring in his gut. If someone like Stacy Story died because she interviewed these authors, was it that difficult to believe that the same fate awaited him and Salty?

He phoned Salty to break the news. On the fourth ring, the call went to voicemail. Raspy texted her instead:

Call me. Now. It's podcast urgent!

TAKE 2

THIS IS LIFE-AND-DEATH SERIOUS



Salty Remarks swallowed the last drop of her draft IPA at the bustling Book End Bar and Grill in NoDa, her and Raspy's artsy-cool neighborhood in Charlotte, North Carolina, which was named for its main street, North Davidson. The brewery was an old favorite for Salty and her boyfriend Josh, who looked pretty fine today in his skinny jeans and tight-fitting T-shirt. She was about to order another round for them when her phone buzzed. It was Raspy. What now?

She and Raspy had been together all morning recording online with two authors and planning for their big year-end live event, and it was Saturday afternoon, time to kick back, have a few drinks, and spend some quality time in the sack with Josh. She ignored the call and gave Josh a smile.

A text followed that included the words *Podcast urgent*. It always felt urgent around Raspy, her best friend since college, so much so that she joked with him that his last name—Fuse—fit his short fuse liable to burn fast from worry. He worried most about

doing his job well, whether that be his regular job as a paralegal for a criminal defense firm or this podcast gig. “Podcast urgent” could mean sketching out the entire next season or coming up with a strategy to get an interview with the recent National Book Award winner. Salty ignored the text and motioned to the server.

Her phone buzzed again.

Where are you?

She turned the phone over, but the buzzing didn’t stop. When she flipped the phone back, there were four more texts.

Put your beer down and call me.

Take your hands off Josh and call.

This is serious, Salt.

He’d called her Salt since they’d teamed up. He was the Pepper to her salt, a lame joke about their skin color.

Life-and-death serious.

Okay, “life-and-death serious” was worth a return call. Raspy had never gone there before. She told Josh she’d be right back, then whispered in his ear what she had in mind for their afternoon, which made him smile.

She stepped onto the bar’s deck and called Raspy, who wasted no time unloading the urgent facts.

Salty took a deep breath. She eyed Josh through the window

and tapped the toe of her Converse sneaker. “Sounds like a prank, Raspy. You think one of these authors is going to kill us because we ask hard questions or pick apart their writing process?”

There was a pause on the other end. “That California podcaster’s death creeped me out. Don’t you think we should report this to the police?”

“Last I recall, you weren’t a big fan of the thin blue line, and I’m with you there.” She waved at Josh through the window and pointed to her phone. He lifted his Guinness to her, drained it, and went for a refill at the crowded bar. “If we call the police, what are they going to do? Listen to our interviews to see if we can Perry Mason them into confessing?”

She heard Raspy sigh.

“It’s Saturday, Raspy. Turn off your computer. Watch *Only Murders in the Building*. Or that PBS British crime series you and Sherlock love. Forget about this joker-texter. We’ll talk on Monday.”

“You think we should do the three interviews Tuesday night?”

Salty laughed. “Why not? I’ve never interviewed a killer before.” She heard Raspy groan, but it couldn’t be helped. They’d spent six months planning this event and too much money they didn’t have booking one of the nicest theaters in Charlotte. It would take tremendous luck to fulfill their shared dream of writing and podcasting full time, but this event could be their turning point. And maybe the hype of a few “killer” authors would be what she needed to give up her day job as a freelance ad copy writer. No way she would cancel—they’d

worked too hard for this. Besides, she wasn't a believer in authors who plotted murders instead of stories.

On the way back into the bar, she received a text from an unknown number.

Hello Salty. I presume you've heard from Raspy so I won't repeat what I told him. The reason for this text is to assure you the threat is real. Hope you survive, but live or die, what happens Tuesday night will make a great story. Good luck. As I told Raspy, I am a big fan of your podcast, and truth be told, you're the better writer. Your recent thriller was to die for.

Maybe she needed to reassess this risk.

Salty went into the bar, grabbed Josh by the arm, and pulled him toward the door. She had to relieve some tension. Two hours should be enough time. She texted Raspy in Josh's car.

Let's meet at the usual spot at 5 to talk about these killer authors.

TAKE 3

PODCAST SUPPORT TEAM THEATRICS



After Raspy received Salty's text about their 5:00 pm meeting, he called Dan Pierce, their twice-as-old-as-them podcast website guru and all-around internet sleuth.

“Got a job for you.” Raspy talked while he walked back and forth across the five feet of pacing room he had in his snug apartment, too jittery to sit.

“What? No foreplay.”

“This is serious, Dan.”

“If it’s serious, then it’s Dan the IT Man to you.”

Raspy hated it when Dan played the nickname card. Dan was always whining about getting paid late and not paid enough—though he set the prices—and said he felt the least Raspy and Salty could do was give him the respect he deserved. It was why Salty told Raspy she wasn’t dealing with the guy any longer.

Raspy swallowed his pride. “I have an important job for Dan the IT Man, if he is up to the task.”

“You’re three months behind on my bills.” Dan’s voice had an edge to it. “This is not a non-profit enterprise.”

Raspy relaxed as he thought about the upside of being murdered. He could stiff Dan. That would give him something to whine about.

“We’ll pay you.” But as Raspy said it, he made a mental note. This was going to be the last job Dan the IT Man performed for *Under the Covers*. They needed his expertise, but at what cost? He returned calls and texts late, showed irritation with new assignments, and lashed out at them about their deficient WordPress skills, which was supposed to be his area of expertise, not theirs. He brought up non-payment in every conversation, but his tone was more threatening in the last few weeks. As Dan the IT Man said often, he said again now: “I always get paid, one way or the other.”

Raspy hated to use the podcast’s limited resources for this assignment, but he needed information that was beyond a Google search, and Dan had a knack for finding things from the deepest, darkest corners of the internet. He wasted no time with his instructions, but Dan was all questions.

“What’s she to you? Why do you care how she died?”

What to tell? What not to tell? Raspy didn’t feel comfortable telling Dan the IT Man someone threatened them with murder. He might not do the job without an advance. “I care because she died the same day she interviewed the three authors we plan to interview on Tuesday. I’d like to know what happened to her.”

“Why not just wait until Tuesday?”

“What?”

“To see if you die.” Dan had become creepy too.

“Can you do it or not?”

“You’ll have my report in a few hours. But remember—”

“I know. You always get paid, one way or the other. Jesus, Dan, this isn’t *Godfather IV*.”

Raspy ended the call and tossed his phone on his sofa. When it bounced, it lit up. He sat on the sofa, leaned back into the cushions, and picked up the phone to see a text message from their one sponsor:

Have you thought about the re-negotiation request?

This was the fourth time in two days Mike’s Used Bookstore had pushed for a re-negotiation of their one-year sponsorship deal, which still had eight months remaining. Mike Reader, the owner, said the deal was too rich for him now, “since you misrepresented the number of downloads.”

They had not misrepresented the downloads because you can’t misrepresent something that hasn’t happened. They’d offered projections. Mike knew that when he signed on. The podcast needed the money and needed the time to grow, so yes, they’d thought about the request, but no, it would not happen.

Raspy swiped a hand over his chin, then texted back.

We appreciate the sponsorship and prefer to stick with the original deal. We’re working hard. Good things to come.

Seconds later, he had a response.

I knew you wouldn't agree and have set Plan B in motion.

What the heck was Plan B? Raspy did not know, but he didn't have time to worry because he had to arrange the audio team to record the live interviews with their killer authors, a task on his checklist he'd failed to admit to Salty he hadn't completed. He called the audio company they'd worked with and made it past the gatekeeper to the owner.

"My assistant tells me you want my guys for your big event on Tuesday. You've got a lot of nerve, Raspy."

Penny Leverage, the owner of An Earful Studio, had been after him for months to interview her ex-husband, Rocky Fist, saying she'd forgive their four-month unpaid bill for the courtesy, "to get Rocky off my back so he can talk about the book he wrote in prison and not because his book doesn't suck." Rocky Fist's book did suck—they must not teach writing in prison—which was why Raspy had ignored Penny's request.

"Rocky said he wants to be on the podcast?"

"He did. Said he wants to give voice to his written words. Isn't that your motto? Prison must have been boring as hell for him to tune into your show."

Raspy made a quick decision. "We'll put Rocky on the panel too. Just provide the audio team so we can focus on the interviews."

Penny snorted. "Things have changed. I need to get paid too."

"Tell you what. If you throw in your security guard, I'll pay you right after the event." Raspy didn't share that he might be dead when the debt came due.

Penny huffed. “This is the last time you break a promise to me, Raspy. My ex-husband is a lousy author but a good debt collector. Understood?”

Raspy understood that Rocky Fist had gone to jail for attempted murder. Still, an ex-con named Rocky Fist seemed like a good man to have on a panel if a murder broke out.