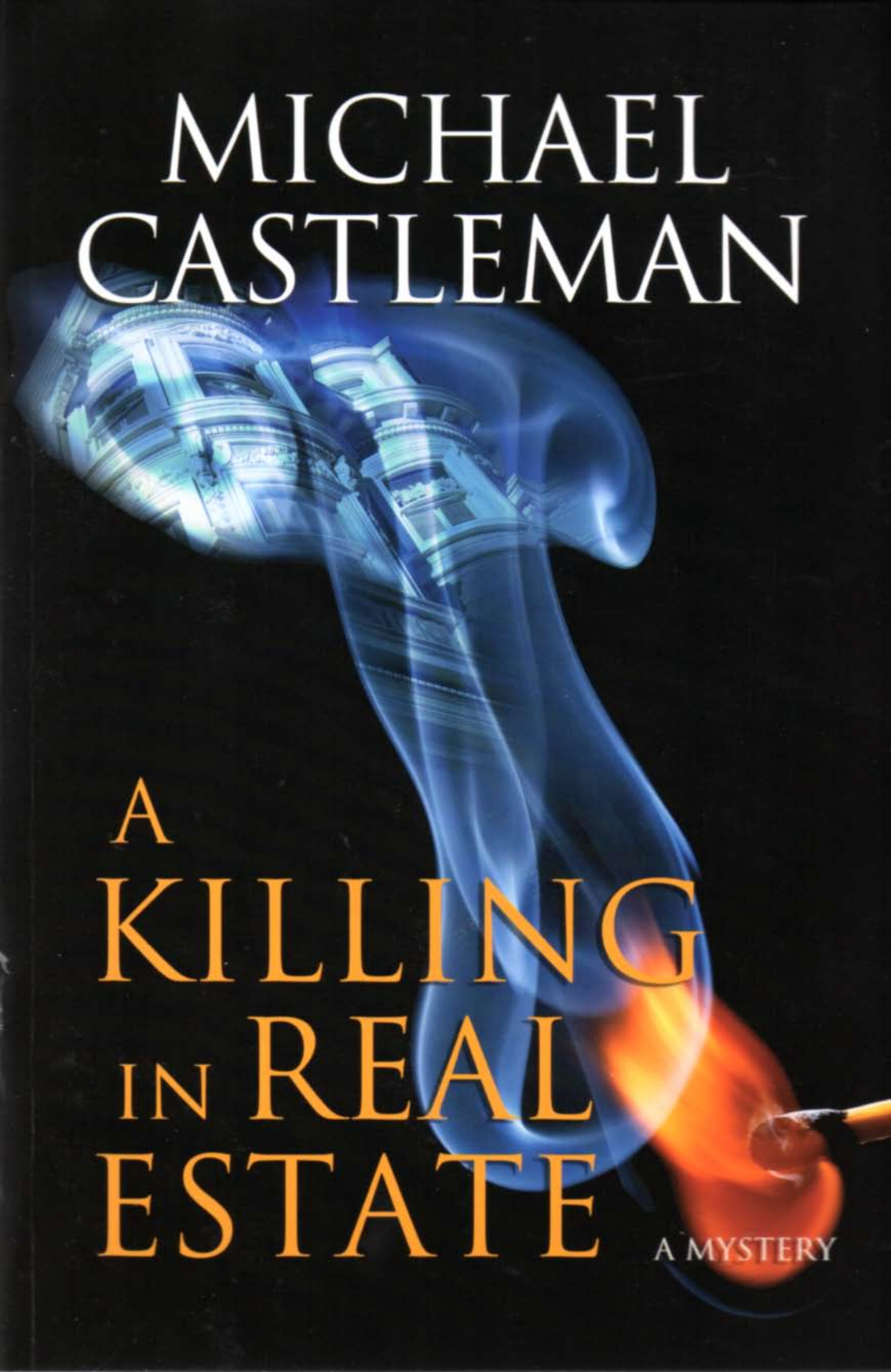
MICHAEL CASTLEMAN



A KILLING IN REAL ESTATE

A MYSTERY

Michael Castleman brings San Francisco's seamy underbelly to life in *A Killing in Real Estate*. Deftly plotted, impeccably researched, and compulsively readable, Michael Castleman is a rising star in a crowded genre. A fast-paced page-turner. Highly recommended.

—**Sheldon Siegel, *New York Times* Bestseller and Author of *Perfect Alibi***

San Francisco's Mission District is on fire

and the arsonist is at large. The morning after the latest blaze, newspaper columnist Ed Rosenberg discovers the lifeless body of his good friend and colleague naked, bound, and gagged for S&M.

As the search for the killer runs dry and the fires continue to rage, Ed launches his own investigation, plunging him into the unseemly realms of city politics, kinky sex, and family secrets.

With the looming fires striking closer and closer to home, Ed quickly realizes that uncovering the sinister truth behind the Mission fires and solving his friend's murder could put his own life in jeopardy.

Steeped in San Francisco's tumultuous history, *A Killing in Real Estate* is a fast-paced thriller that will leave the reader guessing until the very end.

Michael Castleman is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Michigan. A bestselling nonfiction author, his novels include *The Lost Gold of San Francisco* and *Death Caps*. Castleman lives in San Francisco with his wife and two children.

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A KILLING IN REAL ESTATE

— a mystery by —

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Ed Rosenberg closed the front door and tried to admire his old Victorian's new four-color paint job—though that was impossible. The smell of smoke was too intense. It stung his eyes and constricted his chest. The previous night, only three blocks away, a half-finished condo behemoth had gone up like newsprint dipped in gasoline.

A snake of fear slithered up Ed's back. The fires were now too close for comfort. The loft building wasn't occupied, but his house was. For a moment, he plunged into a vision of hell, flames shooting out his windows, ten-year-old Sonya and infant Jake screaming. He exhaled deeply, forcing the nightmare away.

Until last night, all the buildings torched in the Mission's rash of arson fires had been located a dozen blocks east of Ed's quiet street, sufficiently distant to keep him from feeling personally threatened. Last night's fire changed that. It was practically around the corner, a twenty-four-unit development whose wooden bones went up like kindling. Even now, with every breath, lingering smoke stung Ed's nostrils.

He loved his house. He'd just completed nine long years of paying an army of contractors several body parts to transform a nineteenth-century workingman's cottage into a twenty-first-century family home. He'd lived in the neighborhood for years and thought he'd made his peace with its rough edges. Now he wasn't so sure. He had a family to consider.

Ed had spotted the flames on their way home from the movie, orange tongues licking the night. He and Julie held their breath before realizing the huge blaze was a few blocks from them. Returning from taking the sitter home, Ed felt like a moth drawn to a candle. But he couldn't get close. The area was cordoned off, red and blue lights flashing everywhere. The street was mobbed. The neighborhood had turned out to watch.

Julie shut their fancy new windows, but acrid smoke still seeped in. Neither of them slept well. She woke him at 2:30. "We have to talk."

Ed knew what was coming: another position paper in favor of moving. When it was just the two of them and Sonya, the house felt fine. But when Jake arrived, Julie announced that they needed more space. She had other gripes as well. The Mission was too funky for kids. A transit village might be built at the BART station, putting them in the shadow of monster high-rises. And now arsonists were at their doorstep. The house finally showed well. They should sell it and look for a bigger place in a better neighborhood.

"It's the middle of the night," Ed groaned. "Can't it wait till morning?"

Now it was a new, smoky day. Ed felt wrung out by years of steady work on the house. He wanted to kick back awhile, enjoy what they'd accomplished, and stop bleeding money. But he found it increasingly difficult to argue against Julie's position, especially after the night before.

Ed gave the paint job a last loving glance, then descended the stairs, trying to look on the bright side. The fire was out. The sun was shining.

He cherished their home, but he wasn't about to risk his kids' safety or his wife's sanity for a lousy piece of real estate. Still, moving felt drastic. They'd lived in the Mission a dozen years. Was it always this scary? Or was he just older now, with a mortgage, kids, and a worried wife?

Ed's watch said he had time to walk to Duffy's. He wanted to walk. He needed to experience the neighborhood through the soles of his shoes. He hoped his legs could persuade him that the Mission

wasn't as risky as his head now feared. He inhaled deeply, hoping to discern the fragrance of jasmine from the vine encircling his neighbor's garage door, but the only discernible aroma was charred wood.

No doubt Duffy would have a great deal to say about the fire. Ryan Duffy was the *San Francisco Foghorn*'s urban-design critic. He covered real estate development and city planning, including, as Ed recalled, the plan to redevelop the site of last night's blaze, the old Morrissey Mattress factory, a fixture of the Irish Mission for more than a century. Morrissey's had closed in the early eighties. A dozen development plans had fallen through, and the abandoned building had become an eyesore. The city needed housing. Morrissey's was close to BART, meaning easy access to downtown. The developer's design blended well with the neighborhood. Duffy wrote a piece strongly endorsing condo conversion, calling it a slam dunk.

Duffy's article had led to an outpouring of community opinion. While a few letters to the editor agreed with him, most argued that the Mission needed housing that teachers and cops could afford, not high-end condos with granite countertops. After the approval of the Morrissey project, a neighborhood group opposing the development picketed the paper, calling Duffy a whore for greedy developers. Now Morrissey's was a charred ruin.

Real estate was part of the Business section, so Ed and Duffy worked on different floors of the *Foghorn* building. During Ed's early years at the paper, they shared a nodding acquaintance on the elevator and at Christmas parties. Then Duffy joined First Wednesday, the Sports editor's monthly poker game. Ed was a regular and quickly came to appreciate Duffy's wit and the Irishisms that had survived generations in America—lad for guy, malarkey for nonsense, footpath for sidewalk, taytoes for potato chips.

Poker progressed to lunches, Giants games, and speculation about who would be laid off next as the paper tried to survive in the twenty-first century. As Ed and Duffy became friendlier, the two couples—Ed and Julie, and Duffy and his wife, Sheila—shared occasional dinners, movies, and afternoons with the kids at various playgrounds.

Then Duffy and Sheila had their second child, and Ed and Julie fell into the bottomless pit of home renovation. When Duffy's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he stopped playing poker. Ed heard that Duffy's marriage had hit the skids. He called and e-mailed, but his buddy's replies felt preoccupied and distant. Finally, they had lunch, and a surprisingly upbeat Duffy announced that he was getting divorced, had a new girlfriend, and had bought his parents' place. He had his boys on weekends. When the dust settled, he hoped to play poker again.

Then no contact for months until one morning Duffy e-mailed Ed inviting him to brunch. Even more unexpected was Duffy's new address, a mere eight blocks from Ed. This made them brothers in the small fraternity of *Foghorn* reporters who actually lived in the city—and probably the only two over age thirty who resided in the Mission.

"Hey there, Ed." The voice evoked Arkansas, and came from within the open garage next door. "Smoky enough for y'all?"

It was Keith Andrews, half of his favorite neighbor couple, an affable bear of a man with a barrel chest, bushy hair, and a full beard the color of honey. But this morning Keith looked as blue as his flannel shirt. He uncoiled a hose and watered the jasmine. He and his partner, Calvin Liu, were training it up the trellis that arched over their garage door.

"You and Cal must have been at work," Ed said. Their crepe café in South Beach stayed open late.

"We were. A customer told us. We closed up early and got back here fast as we could."

"Fires have gotten too close for comfort," Ed said.

"Looks like somebody around here don' like gentrification," Keith said, "and that means they don' like *us*." He shook his head. "How many fires now? Feels like a hundred."

"Twelve confirmed arsons in the past four months," Ed said, quoting what he'd just read in the paper.

Keith gazed at his feet. "Calvin thinks maybe we should sell."

Ed sighed. "Julie, too. Only no 'maybe' about it. What do you think?"

"I don' know. You?"

"Same."

"Maybe we could buy two fixers close by somewhere."

Ed smiled. The two couples had bought their homes around the same time and had commiserated through each other's renovations. In the process, they'd become friends.

"You know what I don't get?" Keith observed. "If the fires are being set by poor people who've gotten pushed out by the likes of us, why burn Morrissey's? It's been closed for ages. Nobody got evicted." He shook his head and hissed, "Animals. You see they used pineapple lamps?"

Ed nodded. The *Foghorn* had mentioned that detail. Pineapple lamps were glass jars, shaped like the fruit, filled with flammable syrup and fitted with twine wicks. They were marketed as patio lamps—long-lasting, sweet-scented, and bug-repellent. But when lit and thrown, they became Molotov cocktails. The criminals had used pineapple lamps in all the recent fires.

Keith turned the hose on the hydrangea. "Fucking gangs."

Ed thought Keith's grumble could probably be traced to the *Foghorn*, which had quoted police who blamed the rash of arsons on Latino street gangs displeased about affluent whites moving into their turf.

"I miss the old days," Keith said, "when the gangs just shot each other and left the rest of us alone. These fires are killin' our values."

"Right," Ed said. "So it's not a good time to sell. That's what I keep telling Julie."

"I want to stay," Keith said. "But I don' know." He shook his head. "I just don' know."

"Me either," Ed said. "But this city was built on the ashes of arson fires." Ed wrote the *Foghorn*'s local history column.

Keith shot him a look. "Maybe so, Mr. Historian, but that was then and this is now and I got me a bad case of the shitty jitters."

"Hey, I want them to fry," Ed retorted. Then he realized he'd never devoted a column to San Francisco's arson-filled past. "So,

big guy, what got you up so early?" With the restaurant closing late, Keith and Calvin often slept until noon.

"Couldn't sleep. Dreaming about fires. You?"

"Same. And brunch with a friend."

Ed checked his watch again. If he walked now, he'd be late. But he still wanted to walk. He needed to. He called Duffy. Voicemail. He was probably scrambling eggs and mixing Bloody Marys. Ed bid Keith farewell.

San Francisco was Fog City, but the low clouds that blew in from the ocean were channeled by its many hills. In some neighborhoods, especially in summer, you needed headlights by mid-afternoon, while in others the sky remained a Mediterranean blue all day. The Mission was among the sunniest neighborhoods—when it wasn't filled with smoke. That was a major reason Ed and Julie had chosen the district way back when.

Another was BART. Trains from the nearby station whisked them from Twenty-fourth Street to two blocks from the paper in just ten minutes. Julie was the *Foghorn*'s PR director. When they'd moved in, the neighborhood had a dicey reputation that kept housing costs low—of course, in San Francisco, "low" could choke a horse. But they wound up with a sweet deal on rent, which allowed them to save for a down payment on a mortgage. They looked for a year, fretted and stretched, and finally lucked into a dilapidated Italianate Victorian on Fair Oaks, a narrow byway that hugged the hillside leading up to Noe Valley. Julie immediately fell in love with the house—its ramshackle charm and proximity to BART drew her in, but the house's greatest selling point was the fact that Fair Oaks felt removed from the Mission's grittiness. Ed agreed. His interest in the house merged with his passion for history, and it didn't take him long in the City Archive to discover that the house had been constructed in 1889 for $2,800 for a blacksmith named Mulrooney, whose shop was once around the corner.

Initially, Ed and Julie bought into the romance of renovating old homes. But years of dry-rot repair, sheetrock dust, and tussling over cabinet knobs cured them. Now, finally, their painted lady

was a reasonable facsimile of what they'd envisioned: three modest bedrooms, one-and-a-half small baths, golden oak floors, a skylight over the breakfast nook, and a little deck leading to a cozy yard. In addition, they had a sanctuary, an airy room behind the garage that accommodated Julie's sewing equipment, fabric, and yoga mat, and Ed's home office, library, files, and rowing machine. A house to love—only now Julie wanted to move. Even with all their renovations, Ed doubted they could sell for enough to afford anything larger in a better neighborhood.

A cool breeze softened the sting of smoke. Ed crossed Valencia Street, gentrification central, where second-hand stores had morphed into restaurants with white tablecloths and stemware. He strolled to Mission Street, the heart of the neighborhood, turned south, and felt the sun on his face. Overhead, palms swayed. He threaded his way through the Sunday throng: Latino families dressed for church, young mothers pushing strollers and pulling shopping carts, a pack of black-haired Latino kids on skateboards, a Mariachi band in jeans and cowboy hats, young whites in tattoos and T-shirts, and people of every age and race sipping coffee, lined up at ATMs, hefting laundry baskets, and considering cantaloupes. Most faces smiled. Ed caught snatches of English, Spanish, Chinese, and languages he didn't recognize. Mission Street smelled like pizza, espresso, croissants, carne asada, and chow mein—with faint hints of smoke and sewage. Looking at the faces, it was impossible to guess the existence of nefarious gangs lurking in the shadows lighting pineapple lamps.

Ed passed a *Foghorn* coin box and sighed. As a longtime newspaperman, he understood that journalism is to truth what law is to justice: an approximation of ideals seldom realized. He usually felt charitable about the daily distortions that passed for news, especially now, with newspapers in trouble and decimating their staffs. Mix the milk of deadlines with the rennet of the bottom line, and the cheese was bound to be peppered with holes. But there were also times when the *Horn* published articles that made Ed want to strangle someone—for example, that very morning's piece on the Morrissey fire.

Parts of it were informative: half-built loft condos, pineapple lamps, damage figures in the millions. But Ed had a hard time believing gangs protesting foie gras had set the blaze. Vandalism as class war? Sure, Mission housing prices had gotten ridiculous and a whiter, more affluent crowd was moving in. But even with all the upscale development, the neighborhood still had affordable apartments, battered pickups, and auto repair shops. Immigrants from south of the border still loitered on corners hoping for day labor. And in many doorways, the vacant eyes of the homeless still peered out from filthy sleeping bags. The Mission had been changing slowly for years. Why fires now?

Ed knew the reporter who'd written the fire story, a silly girl a few years out of J-School who lived in a distant suburb. She knew nothing about the Mission. He also went pretty far back with the editor who'd sent the piece to press, a once-promising talent until he became best friends with Jack Daniel's. Now he was a twig of deadwood who should have been pruned a few buyouts ago. The story was about fires at a housing site, but the reporter interviewed no one involved in housing or construction—just the SFPD Gang Task Force. Naturally, they blamed gangs.

Everyone knew there were rival Mexican and Central American gangs in the Mission. Every immigrant community spawned its own *Godfather*. After a dozen years in the neighborhood, though, Ed rolled his eyes when the reporter quoted a cop as saying the Mission was "ruled by gangs." That was like saying the opera was ruled by the ushers. Ed wished the reporter and her boozy editor were along for this stroll down Mission Street. They'd see a very different neighborhood.

Of course, Ed was all too familiar with the root of the problem—a serious disregard for history. *Horn* reporters had little understanding of San Francisco's transformations and how the city was still evolving, especially kaleidoscopic neighborhoods like the Mission. In his column, "San Francisco Unearthed," Ed did what he could to provide perspective, but daily mayhem had a way of overwhelming his weekly attempts at the long view.

In a previous life, Ed's history Ph.D. had landed him an assistant professorship at Cal State East Bay. But it didn't take long before he and his department chair agreed he was ill suited to academia. He drifted into journalism, wrote for the local alternative weekly, and wound up at the *Foghorn*. He started as a cop chaser, moved to general assignment, and finally a new executive editor bought his pitch to become the paper's resident historian.

The column became a modest hit. Periodically, the *Foghorn*'s book division published collections that sold well enough to finance the renovations that converted a rickety Mission shack into a sweet, if cramped, family home.

One of these days, he'd write a piece on the many forces reshaping the Mission. But bottom line, crime was down, including gang crime, and gentrification was proceeding at a canter, not a gallop—in part because the geniuses at a certain newspaper kept stoking the myth that the neighborhood was a war zone.

Still, if crime was down, who was setting the fires? Maybe Julie was right. Maybe it was time to move. Ed was eager to hear what Duffy thought. If he had bought his parents' place, he must have grown up in the Mission, which meant he'd seen it morph from Irish to Hispanic to young hipsters and arson fires. But Duffy hadn't invited him for omelets and home fries to discuss gentrification. He was interested in his grandfather.

Duffy's e-mail said he'd stumbled on a diary the old man kept during the dock strike of 1934, the biggest, bloodiest labor dispute in San Francisco history. But Grandpa Pat was no writer. Duffy couldn't understand what he was talking about, between his outdated language, striker's jargon, and his cramped, nearly illegible penmanship. He wanted to know if Ed was familiar enough with the strike to read the diary and help him decipher it.

Ed was quite familiar with the strike, a bitter dispute that caused several deaths. It culminated in the largest general strike in U.S. history—and the shipping industry's grudging recognition of the longshoremen's union. As he'd e-mailed in reply, he was happy to come for brunch and examine the diary.

Lengthening his step to avoid a deep pothole, Ed skirted the craftspeople whose wares—jewelry, ceramics, T-shirts, bongs—were arrayed on folding tables around the entrance to BART. One displayed a sign: TRANSIT VILLAGE EVICTING US! HUGE DISCOUNTS!

Ed smiled. The sign was years premature. But if the proposed developments were ever built, the spot where he stood would be the gateway to a huge apartment complex. The brick plaza and its artisans would disappear. And the Mission would become home to several thousand new upscale residents.

Naturally, neighborhood activists were up in arms. The *Defender*, the alternative weekly where Ed started in journalism, railed against "Manhattanization of the Mission." The Sierra Club was opposed on environmental grounds, and the Mission Coalition accused the Planning Department of threatening the neighborhood's Hispanic character.

Ed feared the Mission might be ruined if a forest of towers rose over the BART station. But unlike Julie, he wasn't ringing alarms. Approval was by no means assured. The Planning Commission still had to vote, and after them, the Board of Supervisors. If the plan passed, lawsuits were sure to hamstring the developers for years and force them to downsize their buildings. Ed figured his ten-year-old daughter would be in college before anything higher than four stories loomed over Twenty-fourth Street.

Ed turned onto Twenty-sixth, Duffy's block. It was a mix of weary Victorians, post-earthquake Edwardians, three-flat places from the 1920s, and storefronts that included a Mexican bakery and a boutique for the tattoo-and-piercing set called GarbAge. Duffy lived next to the bakery in a large single-family Edwardian in desperate need of a paint job. A dozen shingles had fallen off the façade and some trim boards were curling. Ed gave the building a long, appraising look. The urban design critic's parents had lived here? Apparently, they hadn't believed in home maintenance.

Ed ascended the creaky stairs and turned the antique key of the old bell built into the door. It echoed but there was no answer. Ed rang again, then knocked. Nothing. The door had a stained-

glass window, dark maroon and blue. He peered in but couldn't see much. He pulled out his phone and called. Voicemail again. He tried the door. Locked. He rang again and knocked harder. Silence.

This made no sense. Duffy should be setting the table. Where the hell was he? Why hadn't he called?

Ed descended the stairs and gazed up at the house. It was considerably larger than his place, a lot of house for a divorced dad with kids only on weekends.

Could his friend have stood him up? Ed doubted it. Duffy always e-mailed if he couldn't make poker or lunch. Not to mention that Ed was doing him a favor reading his grandfather's scribblings.

Ed climbed back up and leaned close to the stained glass. Like an old photo in a chemical bath, an image slowly emerged. The foyer led down a hall to the kitchen—where Duffy should be cooking. But Ed discerned no movement. To the right, an arched entry led into the living and dining rooms. Nothing.

Ed was about to dismiss Duffy as a thoughtless jerk, when through the dark glass something on the living room floor caught his eye. A foot, perfectly still, heel on the floor, toes pointed to heaven.

Ed leaned over the porch rail and tried to peer through the living room window. Drapes blocked his view, though they weren't completely closed. Ed leaned way out and peered through the gap.

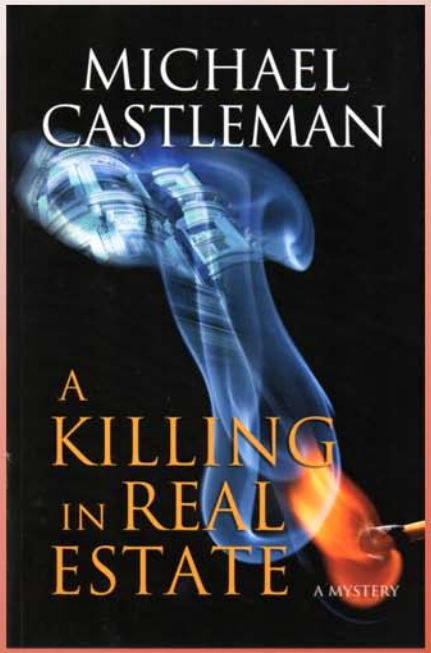
Duffy lay on his back, naked and spread-eagled, obviously dead. One eye stared up at the ceiling. The other was obscured by dried blood on the side of his head, where it had been bashed in. Nearby, a large statue of Jesus lay in two pieces. Once, it had been white. Now much of it was red. Whoever bludgeoned Duffy broke the statue doing it.

A bright red ball gag protruded from Duffy's mouth. His wrists were bound with thick rope tied to two legs of the sofa. Strewn around the room were paddles, floggers, and a riding crop.

Fighting nausea, Ed reeled himself back to the porch. As a police reporter, he'd seen corpses. But that was years ago. And none of them were friends with booming laughs who said *arra* for *all right*.

Duffy had been bound, gagged, and beaten to death. Ed felt

woozy as he stumbled into a seat on the crooked steps. He swallowed hard, pulled out his phone, and called 911. Then he dialed the paper.



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