

Penance
A Holland Taylor Mystery

by David Housewright

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.

PENANCE

Copyright © 1995, 2013 by David Housewright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

Forty Press, LLC
427 Van Buren Street
Anoka, MN 55303
www.fortypress.com

First 40Press Edition: October 2013 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publications Data
Library of Congress Control Number: 2013943030

Housewright, David

Penance/David Housewright

ISBN 978-1-938473-11-1

Publisher's Note

Great stories never die. Too often, however, they fade away. Each year thousands of books go out of print. Some deserve better. Much better. Forty Press has partnered with Minnesota's finest mystery bookstore, Once Upon a Crime, to ensure these outstanding stories—and outstanding authors—are once again available to discerning readers of quality fiction. Beginning with the thriller and mystery genre, Once Upon a Crime owners, Pat Frovarp and Gary Shulze will be selecting the titles for this exciting series. For those that know Pat and Gary, nothing more need be said as to their qualifications. For those who have not had the pleasure... well, you're in for a real treat.

We are happy to announce the rerelease of New York Times best-selling author David Housewright's three Holland Taylor novels, *Penance* (1994 Edgar Award winner for best first novel), *Dearly Departed*, and *Practice to Deceive*. This fine trilogy introduces the PI Holland Taylor, a retired St. Paul, Minnesota homicide detective. These three classic novels showcase Housewright's enviable writing talent that has only grown more assured with his popular Rushmore McKenzie series.

We hope you enjoy this classic trilogy and will check out our other Forty Press titles as they appear under the Once Upon a Crime imprint.

— Joe Riley, Publisher

Once Upon a Crime Series Editor

When the guys at 40 Press first approached us about publishing a "Once Upon a Crime Classics" series of reprints, the first name that came to us was David Housewright. Over time, as we gave it more thought—no real surprise here—David remained on the top of our list.

What is a surprise is that David's Holland Taylor books needed to be brought back into print to begin with. Classics? Sure. But out of print? Get outa here. The mere fact that *Penance* won the Edgar® Award for Best First Novel (and was a Shamus Award finalist, as well as being one hell of a book) should have given this series some legs. And we've taken that a little personally, making it a crusade of sorts. We've (I should probably say "I" here, Pat's an innocent) harangued editors by email, in published reviews, and once, in an incident best

forgotten, at a very public and prominent forum. But it is personal. We could have been selling these books. We have a waiting list for them. And if they had been available, we could have been selling more of David's newer "Rushmore McKenzie" books as well.

But now, seeing as you're holding this book in your hands, we can put that all behind us (but I'm sure there's an editor and V.P. out there who won't be asking us out to dinner any time soon). What's important is: Taylor's back! And though some of the local Twin Cities architecture and roadways may have since changed, these books are as fresh, timely, and dryly witty as ever.

Housewright and his Taylor trilogy have been called, among other things, "neat and twisty (Drood Review); "understated, literate" (Kirkus); "engaging, quirky" (Publishers Weekly). That's a fine and honest set of adjectives there. But being a critical success and major award winner doesn't always translate into sales. So dig into these. If you've read them before, read them again. Buy copies for your friends. (See above and repeat).

If you've never read Housewright before, stop wasting your time reading this intro (now that I'm done!) and get started! You can thank Pat and I, David, and 40 Press later....

Gary Shulze
Once Upon a Crime
Minneapolis, MN
August 29, 2013

Penance

A Holland Taylor Mystery

David Housewright



PRESS



acknowledgments

For Renée

Special thanks to Dale Gelfand, Laura Jorstad, Lou Kannenstine, Alison Picard, Judith Marie Strobel, Michael Sullivan and Renée Valois.

one

I STARED AT my reflection in the interrogation room's two-way mirror, not caring at all who might be staring back. I looked like hell: eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, stubble giving my face an unwashed look, hair sticking straight out above my right ear, pillow hair. I was wearing a sweatshirt that proclaimed the Minnesota Twins' victory in the 1987 World Series, blue jeans and white Nikes, no socks. Still, it could be worse. I could be wearing the blue-striped shorts the cops found me in when they busted down my door at 6:00 in the A.M. Instead, they let me dress before hustling me out of the house and into a squad. I thought of grabbing my drinking jacket—my blue nylon windbreaker with POLICE spelled out on the back in huge white letters—but I doubted the detectives would appreciate the irony.

One of the detectives was parked in a metal chair, leaning back against the wall just to the right of the mirror, watching me from under heavy eyebrows while trying to appear menacing. His name was Casper and he was bald and pale like the ghost. He did not speak, had not spoken since he and his partner installed me in the interrogation room. I watched him watch me until he folded his arms across his chest and sighed heavily.

"Not bad," I told him and laughed. I had used the same technique myself, often in that same room, letting Anne Scalasi question the suspect while I lurked behind her. She was the friendly, compassionate, understanding big sister. I was the Prince of Dark-

DAVID HOUSEWRIGHT

ness. We were pretty good, she and I. We had a ninety-eight percent clearance rate when we worked Homicide together. Conviction rate? Well, we could only catch them. We couldn't help it if courts let them go.

I was still chuckling when Casper's partner entered the room carrying a file folder. His name was Martin McGaney and in direct contrast to his partner, he was tall and black with a mustache and hair cut short. He glanced at Casper, who continued to stare, and then back at me. McGaney was relatively new to Homicide; he had filled the slot that opened when Annie was promoted. Casper was a six-year veteran of the division, yet McGaney was already acknowledged as the better investigator. When I first met him, his rookielike enthusiasm and undisguised adoration for his boss were almost laughable. He had settled down nicely since then.

"You know your rights," McGaney reminded me with a practiced scowl.

"Anne Scalasi," I said.

"Lieutenant Scalasi is far too busy to hold the hand of every suspect we bring in for questioning."

"Did she say that?"

McGaney did not answer.

I looked at the mirror, tried to look beyond it. She was back there, watching. I could feel her. And for the first time since the detectives wound the cuffs around my wrists, I was frightened. Anne Scalasi was the highest ranking female officer in the St. Paul Police Department, the newly promoted commander of the Homicide unit. She was also my best friend. When I was lying flat on my back in a hospital room a couple months ago, several pounds of bandages wrapped around my head, she kept a vigil at my bedside, holding my hand like a lover. Later, members of the staff would comment on how beautiful my girl was. Only she wasn't my girl. She belonged to a cop who worked the Midway District and to three kids who seemed much too old to be hers. Still, I expected her to come to my aid. The fact that she didn't could mean only one thing: I was in deep shit.

"So, Taylor, tell me," McGaney said. "Where were you Saturday night?"

PENANCE

“I was holding up a liquor store in Nordeast Minneapolis.”

That caused Casper to push away from the wall, the front legs of his chair thudding heavily when they hit the floor. “Smart ass,” he said between clenched teeth.

“Check it out,” I told him. “I’ll bet you fifty bucks someone robbed a liquor store in Nordeast Minneapolis Saturday night.”

McGaney glanced at the mirror and then back at me. He smiled. “You amuse me, Taylor.”

“Hey, if I can bring a little sunshine ...”

“Where were you Saturday night?” McGaney repeated.

“Let’s cut to the chase, fellas,” I said. “First you tell me what happened Saturday night and then I’ll decide if I’ll tell you where I was.”

“We ask the questions,” Casper told me.

“Hey, pal, don’t mess with me. I’ve been to the circus before.”

A few moments of silence passed while we all thought it over. Finally, McGaney asked, “John Brown, remember him?”

“Vividly.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“At his sentencing.”

“You said you were going to get him when he got out.”

“No, I didn’t.”

McGaney read from the file he opened in front of him: “Your exact words were, ‘It doesn’t matter, six years or sixty. I’m a patient man.’”

I had to shrug at that. It sounded like something I might have said.

“Brown was released from Stillwater a while back after doing four of six for criminal vehicular homicide.”

“Was he?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I haven’t been keeping track.”

“Bullshit,” Casper said. “Man drives drunk, kills your wife and kid, you vow vengeance in fucking open court and now you say you just forgot about it?”

“I didn’t forget about it. I just decided life was too short to spend it waiting to murder the guy.”

DAVID HOUSEWRIGHT

“You carry a nine-millimeter, don’t you?” McGaney asked.
“A Beretta?”

“No.”

“Ha!” Casper snorted. He was getting to be a real chatterbox.

“I haven’t carried for a couple months; I intend to let my gun permit lapse.”

McGaney thought about it. “Shooting those guys, going to the hospital yourself, it must have messed you up pretty good,” he said.

I turned my head away at the reference. Yeah, I was messed up. I was also angry, frustrated, embarrassed and more than a little ashamed of myself. But I did not want the cops to see any of that.

“Where were you around midnight Saturday?” McGaney repeated.

“Are we back to that?” I asked.

“Let’s bust ’im,” Casper urged, continuing to play his part.

“What charge?”

“We don’t need a charge, smart mouth. We can hold you for a free thirty-six.”

“Gee, a day and a half in county. How will I ever stand the strain?”

McGaney studied me for a moment and then said, “At midnight Saturday a person or persons unknown shot John Brown at close range with a nine.”

“In one ear and out the other,” Casper added.

“He was sitting behind the wheel of a four-by-four in the parking lot of a strip mall on West Seventh Street,” McGaney finished.

News of bloody murder doesn’t usually faze me. I’ve seen too much of it. Yet, I admit to being shook over Brown’s death. For some reason I expected the sonuvabitch to live forever.

McGaney leaned in close. “Now, Taylor, you *will* tell me where you were or I *will* put you in a cell and by the time you get out, I’ll have your license for obstruction.”

He probably could, too. The Department of Public Safety, which regulates private investigators in Minnesota, is always happy to accommodate local constabularies. However, telling the truth was going to be tricky. Between 7:30 Saturday night and 4:15 Sunday morning, I was losing twelve hundred and fifty-five of someone

PENANCE

else's dollars playing Texas Hold 'Em in a hotel suite in downtown Minneapolis. I'd been hired by a bookie named Randy who lost six thousand bucks in the poker game the week before. Six K wasn't much to Randy; it was the principle of the thing, he kept telling me. He was convinced there was a mechanic working the game but he didn't know who. He hired and staked me to find out. Twelve players sat in and left during the evening. Most of them were occasional players, guys with a few extra dollars in their jeans and a Steve McQueen attitude. A few were hustlers, a couple were professionals. None of them were likely to admit to a cop that they were gambling—gambling is illegal, after all. Well, maybe one would ...

“Heather Schrotenboer,” I said.

“Who's she?”

“She's a student at the University of Minnesota; she's working toward a master's degree in psychology. I was in a hotel suite with her from about eight until four in the morning.”

“Discussing the conflicts between Jung and Freudian theory, no doubt,” Casper said.

“Are they in conflict?”

“You were with her the entire evening?” McGaney asked.

“Yes.”

“How convenient.”

“Isn't it, though. Almost like I had it planned.”

McGaney abruptly left the room. I watched him leave, averting my eyes from the mirror, embarrassed by what Anne probably thought of my confession.

“I thought shrinks used a couch,” Casper said.

“We had a couch,” I replied, feeding his assumption.

When McGaney returned just minutes later, he surprised me by saying I was free to go. “Ms. Schrotenboer confirmed your alibi,” he said. *Why would he take her word for it*, I wondered. Especially over the telephone.

“That's it?”

“That's it.”

“What the hell ...?”

“Beat it,” Casper added.

“Don't leave town,” McGaney warned.

DAVID HOUSEWRIGHT

“Don’t leave town?” It was a stupid thing to say and only TV cops say it. Legally, I could go anywhere I pleased and McGaney certainly knew it. No, it wasn’t a warning. He was trying to tell me something. But what? He gave me a hint as I brushed past him.

“And I expect you to call when you learn more about Brown’s murder.”

He didn’t say “if.” He said “when.”

I hailed a cab on Minnesota Street and gave the driver directions to my house in Roseville. The driver was Laotian—after California, we have the largest Hmong community in America—and he drove ten miles over the speed limit with two fingers on the wheel, all the while assessing Sunday’s Vikings loss. “Football? You call that football? I don’t call that football,” he kept repeating in a thick, Southeast Asian accent.

While he rambled, I tried to reason it out. The cops go to all the trouble of dragging me to the station at the crack of dawn and accuse me of murder just to release me a short time later on the say-so of a woman they spoke to on the telephone? Something else: Cops don’t like it when private investigators become involved in ongoing criminal investigations; hell, they don’t like private investigators, period. So, why did McGaney all but order me to investigate John Brown’s murder? And where was Anne Scalasi? There was an odor to this. It smelled like ...

“Shit,” the driver said. “The Vikings haven’t been worth shit since Bud Grant retired.”

“How long have you been following the Vikes?” I asked the driver when he pulled onto the horseshoe driveway that curved in front of my house.

“Seventeen years,” he answered. “Since moving here from Muong Son.”

I gave him a nice tip but no sympathy. The Vikings have been breaking my heart for a lot longer.

I stood naked in front of the mirror, dripping water all over my bathroom’s linoleum floor, noting with distress my thinning hair and wondering how much longer it would hide the scar above my

PENANCE

right ear. Like most men, I'm terrified at the prospect of growing bald. I can see myself years from now in a scene from a Three Stooges short: I'm wearing a toupee, Curly points at it and screams, Larry knocks it off and Moe shoots it.

The telephone rang and grabbing a towel I answered it in my bedroom, half expecting to hear Anne Scalasi's voice. Wrong. It was Heather Schrotenboer.

"Are you all right, Taylor?"

"Fine. How 'bout yourself?"

"I got a call from the police ..."

"I know."

"They wanted to know if I was with you Saturday night. I said I was, but I didn't mention anything about the game. They didn't ask about the game, so I didn't say. They just asked if I spent the night with you in a hotel. I said I did."

"You did good."

"They probably got the wrong impression."

"Probably."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Not anymore."

Heather was small and blond and although she was twenty-four, she looked like a high school girl. When I met her she was wearing a blue cap that said TOP GUN and smoking long, thin, shiny cigars. When I asked her why she was in a hotel room filled only with men playing what is largely a man's game, she flashed an elfin smile and said, "Field research."

"Why did you need an alibi?" she asked over the telephone.

"It's a long story," I told her.

"I'd like to hear it. I have a class in fifteen minutes but could I come over tonight and talk?"

"More research?"

"Something like that," she answered.

Water dribbled down my bare legs and soaked the carpet under my feet. I tightened the bath towel around my waist and said, "Come on over." I gave Heather my address and a few simple directions.

"I knew you were a dangerous man when we met," she said and chuckled.

"Yeah," I told her. "You better be careful."