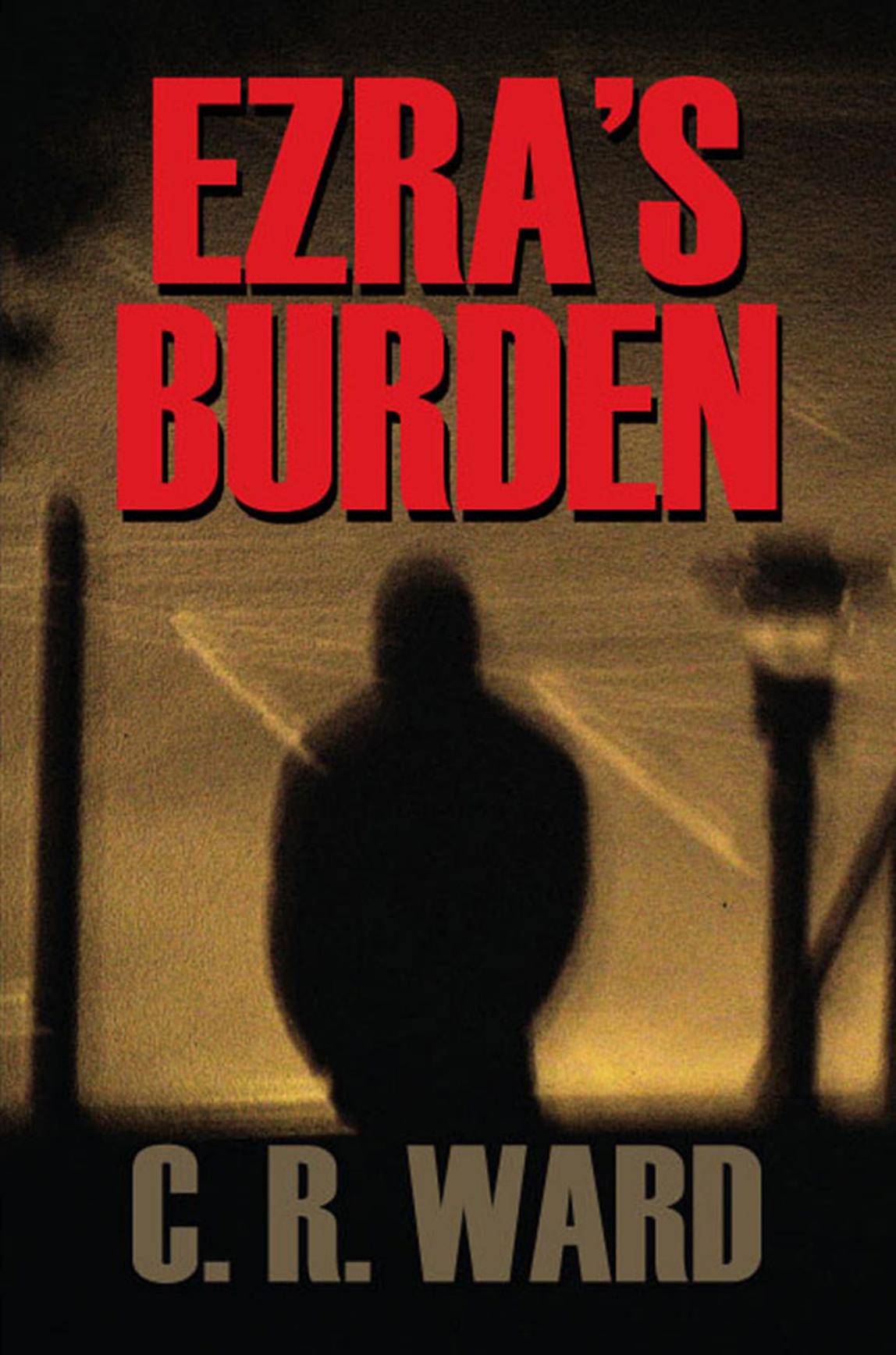


EZRA'S BURDEN



C. R. WARD

Divine Ability Series:
Ezra's Burden

By
C. R. Ward



Eloquent Books

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“Work hard and don’t suck.”
C.R. Ward

PROLOGUE

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The self-proclaimed world's greatest serial killer sat in a bar called Kamikaze nestled in the suburbs of southern West Virginia. His hair was blonde and slicked back and he wore a white shirt with a dark blazer and jeans. He knew the woman he was talking to would be considered very attractive to most people. Every man in the bar had his eye on her from the moment she walked in, but he had caught her eye. Jennifer Parker was dead in that instant; she just didn't know it yet.

The two had found a small corner to get some privacy and the conversation became sexually charged quickly. Just like he knew it would. The woman wore a red miniskirt that hugged her figure so that it looked painted on, topped with matching red heels. Her hair was long and honey blonde. Her hair was styled with hairspray, which he thought odd—most women didn't use hairspray any more. The poor woman was stuck in the eighties.

One glance at her told you what she came to the bar looking for. She wouldn't find it. Not tonight.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"My name is Willie," he said, thinking that was as good a name as any for tonight.

"Mmm. Willie, how about a drink?"

"I'd love one."

Jennifer was already drunk when she walked into the bar and probably high on some other kind of drugs, maybe heroine. He could smell alcohol all over her. How she had managed to get to the bar alone was anyone's guess. The bar wasn't very crowded because it wasn't a weekend or a college night. So the man decided to be patient, to go through the motions. Why rush? He already knew how this night would end for Jennifer.

He reached into his blazer, pulled out a lighter, and flipped it open. He peered through the fire at Jennifer and listened to the flame. The fire spoke to him. It always spoke to him. It was his motivation for almost everything he'd done in life. It was his driving force, his muse.

"Oh God, you have a lighter. Thank you," Jennifer said as she pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "I was dying for a smoke."

After two rounds Jennifer was plastered, but Willie didn't even have a slight buzz. They talked for the rest of the night until they found themselves being ushered out by the bartender.

"Where yo car, Wallie?" Jennifer slurred. She had to lean on Willie to walk. He considered changing his mind about Jennifer. It wouldn't be as fun if she was too drunk to know what was happening to her.

"Right here," Willie said pointing to a dark green Altima. "Why don't you let me take you home?"

"I wuz wondern' why you wuz make'n me wait so long."

A laugh escaped Willie as he thought of what he wanted to do to Jennifer. After an hour and a half of talking to her, he realized how annoying the woman was. She was nothing but a whore with no dreams or ambitions. She would've been suited to be nothing more than a trophy wife and she knew it.

The lights in the bar were off and the parking lot was empty. The bar hadn't been that busy so it didn't take long for the workers to cash out and leave. The bouncers had all left and Willie and Jennifer were alone within forty-five minutes of the bar closing. Willie pressed Jennifer up against his car and leaned in close. He somehow caught the scent of her perfume hidden under all the alcohol. He was rock hard now and wasn't shy about letting her know it.

He ran his hand over her breast and pulled her tighter. Willie opened the back door to the Altima and threw Jennifer inside then climbed on top of her. Jennifer's moans were soft and electric. Even though she was too drunk to talk, she was a passionate lover.

Willie reached down tore Jennifer panties off, and then unbuttoned himself. Curiosity had always been a weakness for Willie. He didn't plan on going this far with the drunken whore but he wanted to know what she felt like. Willie was large and he wasn't gentle. He hammered down on her, giving her all he had. He wanted to make her scream. He reached into his blazer pulled out his lighter and then flicked it on.

He ran the light over her skin. The sudden pain sobered her up a little.

"Wha . . . what are you doin'?"

Willie quickly took his free hand, covered Jennifer's mouth, and touched the flame to her hair. Willie knew he shouldn't do something like this in the car, but it was what the fire wanted. What the fire told him to do. He didn't stop thrusting inside her as Jennifer screamed beholding the end of her hair on fire. Willie wondered if she regretted using all that hairspray.

Willie held Jennifer down as she struggled to put out the fire in her hair. The drugs and alcohol in her system had her caught some where between extreme terror and intense pleasure. Willie wouldn't let her put the fire out. He let her scream as the fire started to scorch parts of her scalp. He reached into another pocket of his blazer and pulled out a small, but sharp knife. Blood from Jennifer's neck sparkled in the light from the fire as it poured onto the back seat like a dam busting into a riverbed.

Willie looked deep into Jennifer's pale blue eyes as the life drained out of her. He couldn't have been happier with her. She was perfect. He could see it in her eyes; Jennifer had reached orgasm as she died. Perfect.

Blood was splattered across the back seat of a dark green Altima outside the empty bar parking lot. Willie sat in the driver's seat and looked at the body in the back seat. Blood was everywhere; the body was mangled and broken, and chunks of flesh barely clung to bone.

Willie knew he had gotten a little carried away. He knew he would. He always did. He had killed enough people to

know how it worked for him. He had killed so many people that a normal person would lose track. Not Willie. Every life he had taken was his, and he made sure he kept them with him always.

He started the car, pulled out of the parking lot, and headed to his main objective. This was his last night of warm-ups. Everything that happened now would lead him to his ultimate goal.

It would be easy enough to get rid of the body in his back seat. The car itself was stolen, so Willie was calm and confident. Both the body and the car would be discarded as easily as his false name and appearance. He wouldn't be caught. He couldn't be caught.

He had killed in almost every state in the country and no one ever came close to catching him. He had terrorized towns from coast to coast, all for practice, all to come home. Death was his art, one he had crafted and mastered.

Everything he had done was a prelude. Now he was back in his small, insignificant, backwater town. He crested a mountain and saw two signs. One read: Welcome to Bluefield.

The other sign had pissed him off ever since he first saw it. It was insulting and made him want to gag every time he even thought about it. The sign read:

Bluefield
Birthplace of Dr John F. Nash Jr.
1994 Nobel Prize Winner

He was the best thing to come out of this god-forsaken town. The only comfort he found in the sign was what he imagined it should one day read. He imagined the sign that this town truly deserved: Birthplace of the world's greatest serial killer.

As he came down the other side of the mountain he saw the Frank S. Easley Bridge, the orange lights of Bluefield Avenue and the train tracks that ran underneath it. He saw Bluefield State College campus to his left and a baseball

practice field to his right. He flicked open his lighter again and looked out over the town; the fire knew what it wanted. The fire not only spoke to him, but it also showed him the future. It gave him a glimpse into things to come. The message and images were loud and clear. The whole town was already on fire. But nobody knew it yet.

CHAPTER I

EZRA

“Lord, thank you for another day, thank you for waking me up in my right mind and for the favor that I walk in because of your love for me.” That is the first thing I try to say to myself every morning. That was my prayer.

I woke up with the sun shining through my apartment window and repeated my prayer three times. Not so much as to make sure God heard me as to remind myself that I really meant it.

I stretched out across my king-sized bed and felt the same restlessness flow over me that came every morning. For some reason, as tired as I might be, I never really feel like I can sleep until the sun starts to come up. I looked at the clock and saw 7:30 on the dial.

I forced myself out of bed and began my morning ritual: push-ups until my arms burned, sit-ups until my stomach and back were sore, and three sets of curls with twenty-five pound dumbbells.

After my workout I made my way to the shower and tried to clear my head. I let the warmth of the shower flow over me, taking my time. Showers can wash away more than dirt. Sometimes when I step in, it's as though everything in my life is left on the outside. I washed away my restlessness and my nightmares.

I had to force myself to leave the shower before it turned cold and began to get dressed. As I did, I started to think of all the things that would be involved with my day. None of what was ahead of me was particularly exciting, so I seriously considered getting back into bed. It wasn't an option. I knew that if I did, I would try to stay there for another week.

Today was going to be my first day back at the Bluefield Daily Telegraph. I'm one of only two photographers on staff

there, and I hadn't been to work once in the two months since my life was turned upside down. Everyone there knew my story. Hell, everyone in the state of West Virginia seemed to know my story, so nobody at the paper had minded my absence. I don't think anyone there really expected me back at all, but I had to get my mind moving again. I was going crazy staying locked up in here listening to nothing but myself.

I wasn't happy with the idea of having to deal with everyone at work. I knew they all meant well, but who really wants to deal with the stares, the people trying not to stare, and the people who don't know what to say so they just avoid you? I knew it wasn't going to be easy for me, but I never did anything the easy way, despite my nickname.

I dressed in blue jeans, a plain red shirt, and a pair of white and red New Balances. It wasn't my normal work attire; I usually tried to look a bit more professional, but I didn't feel like going all out today. I didn't really need to dress nice for my job anyway. I just took pictures.

I took one quick look at myself in the mirror as I finished brushing my teeth and repeated my prayer. Looking at myself for several seconds, I saw my dark brown skin and the five o'clock shadow of a beard that I had decided to let grow for the time being. I made myself stand to my full height of six foot, two inches, rubbed my hand over my short hair, and took a deep breath.

Again I thought of just getting back in bed, but I knew I needed to get out and face the world. I just wasn't sure if the world wanted to face me right now.

When I was fully ready to go, I had the hardest time leaving my apartment. I was fully dressed, but I couldn't make myself leave, so I walked around for several minutes trying to hype myself up just to walk out the door. I had the feeling that I had forgotten something, but I knew I hadn't. I was just stalling myself on some level, looking for a good enough reason to stay. As I walked around I noticed that even though I've felt like crap, my apartment was still relatively well kept.

I made my way back into my room, ready to give up on my attempt and resigning myself to trying again tomorrow. As soon as I got to my room, my sword collection caught my eye. It wasn't so much of a collection as it was a single Japanese katana that I had hoped would be the beginning of a collection. I had hung it on the wall located at the foot of my bed so that whenever I sat up or just looked down from the bed, I would see it.

Standing in front of the sword made me remember how much it meant to me. I had always been fascinated with Japanese culture, their concepts of honor, the code samurai lived by called Bushido. I ran my hand along the hilt of the sword and rubbed the fabric, admired its black finish and its gold embroidered designs on the hilt and sheath for the katana.

I love swords. I respect them.

Although it was in my room where I spent most of my time over the past eight weeks, I hadn't paid much attention to it. That, if nothing else, spoke volumes as to how severe my mood had been. Swords were ancient symbols of strong, skilled warriors, a reflection of how I imagined myself to be.

The Bible compares the words of the Gospel to a sword, one that could cut down lies, lust, greed, and any other form of evil that may assault you. The Bible says the more of the word you know in your heart, the sharper your sword. Like the sword hanging on my wall, my spiritual sword was sharp and I believed it could cut through anything. I knew that there was no obstacle I couldn't overcome as long as I kept my faith and held to the Gospels in my heart. I just needed to remember to pay attention to it when things got rough.

I finally convinced myself to stop being a bitch-ass, grabbed my Nikon camera and headed out the door.

I walked out onto Pauli Heights parking lot and made my way to my 2005 black Cavalier that I liked to call Dirty Vegas. I named it the day I got it at a police auction. I was told that it was confiscated from some big time drug dealer from Las Vegas who was caught here in West Virginia. A lot of people had passed on the car at the auction because the

police found it with about ten pounds of weed and a dead body in the trunk. One could only assume that the owner was trying to hide out in West Virginia after some bad deals went down. I really didn't care who owned it before me because it was in good shape and didn't have many miles on it, which made it a keeper in my book.

It was a bright mid-summer day with hardly a cloud in the sky. After a self-imposed exile, a person forgets how nice something as simple as the sun can feel. My apartment was located in the very back of the complex next to the field of wildflowers outside my living room windows. I took a deep breath, soaked in the scenery, as I unlocked my car door and inhaled the sent of flowers and fresh cut grass before getting in the car.

Suddenly I realized that being cooped up had changed me more than I'd thought. I had never been the stop and smell-the-flowers-type of guy so I couldn't help laughing at myself. Getting out was definitely going to be good for me.

After my brief laugh at myself, my mother's laugh somehow worked its way into my thoughts. I missed her. I wished things had been different between us. I saw her face in my mind smiling at me.

My eyes watered, but no tears fell.

Being emotional just wasn't me. I didn't know how to handle it. I had cried more in the past weeks than I had in the past several years. I took in the scent of flowers again, and the shadow of a bird passing overhead caught my attention. The beauty of the day stopped me from falling into another funk. I laughed aloud, harder this time. Emotional just doesn't fit me well. I remembered my swords, both material and spiritual. I was convinced more than ever that getting out would be good for me.

I climbed into Dirty Vegas, pulled out of Pauli Heights and made my way to work, hoping any surprises of the day would be pleasant ones.

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