

THE SURVIVORS

A Cal Henderson Novel

THE SURVIVORS

ROBERT PALMER



SEVENTH STREET BOOKS®

AN IMPRINT OF PROMETHEUS BOOKS

59 JOHN GLENN DRIVE • AMHERST, NY 14228

www.seventhstreetbooks.com

Published 2015 by Seventh Street Books®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

The Survivors. Copyright © 2015 by Robert Palmer. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, organizations, products, locales, and events portrayed in this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Cover image © Steve Allsopp/Arcangel Images

Cover design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

Inquiries should be addressed to

Seventh Street Books

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228

VOICE: 716-691-0133 • FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

19 18 17 16 15 • 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Pending

Palmer, Robert, 1955-

The survivors : a Cal Henderson novel / Robert Palmer.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-63388-082-5 (paperback) — ISBN 978-1-63388-083-2 (e-book)

1. Psychologists—Fiction. 2. Cold cases (Criminal investigation)—Fiction.
3. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3616.A3437S88 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015015633

Printed in the United States of America

*For WTP and TAG
and the heights of Mount Olympus.
A most amazing day.*

PROLOGUE

The wind gusted, rattling the old windows, and the four boys looked up from their game. “Ghosts!” whispered Scottie.

“Shut up,” said Alan, the oldest. “It’s Davie’s turn.”

They bent back over the board. “Five or better and he wins,” Scottie said, fingering the spinner.

They grew quiet as the sound of adult voices echoed up from the dining room on the far side of the house.

“Mom again,” Ron said. “I wish she and Dad—”

“Let’s just *play*,” said Davie. Ron and Alan were his big brothers, and he loved beating them. He played every game—checkers, cards, tag, board games like this—with the same pure intensity.

The voices rose again downstairs, loud enough so they could make out a few words, and their father cursed. That was followed by a bang. “That’s it,” Alan said. “Dad’s gone out.”

Scottie said, “We can hear them sometimes clear over at my house. My mom talked about calling the police once. She said maybe I shouldn’t come here anymore.”

“Then *don’t*,” Ron snapped.

Davie sighed and hung his head. Scottie was his friend and a constant annoyance to the two older boys—with his lame jokes and bluntly chewed fingers, his pale red hair standing on end like a cartoon character. And now he was playing with the spinner again, nudging it to the edge of the three spot. Davie’s family had owned the game for years, and none of them had noticed the quirk of the spinner. Scottie figured it out the first time they let him play, but he only confided in Davie. Any spin that started on that spot always ended on six. He shot Davie a look, jumpy and furtive, a timid rabbit look. *C’mon buddy. All set. Spin*

and win! Eight-year-old Davie didn't want to disappoint anyone, but he wouldn't take the bait either.

"Let's do something else," he said.

"Yeah, this is lame." Alan slapped the board closed, and the little plastic cars bounced across the floor.

"Like what?" Ron said.

They turned to Davie. He was youngest, but he was the ideas man here. It had been that way since he was old enough to run with the others, as if somewhere behind his dark and deep-set eyes there always was an answer. "Hide-and-seek?" he said.

Scottie jumped up. "I'm it!"

"No," Alan and Ron said together.

Hide-and-seek was a problem with Scottie. It was a special game for Davie and his family, something they all played together. Scottie was an outsider. Worse than that, when he was it, he didn't go searching for anybody. He just hid next to the base, and when the others tried to tag free, he was waiting to jump out and catch them. Rules didn't make any difference to Scottie, and no amount of advice from Davie could convince him otherwise. But that was mostly why Davie put up with him, even liked him. Scottie wasn't like any other kid Davie knew.

"I'll be it first," Davie said, "then your turn."

"OK," Scottie moped.

Ron and Alan smiled at each other. They could see the clock on the bedside table. There was only time for one round before Scottie would have to go home.

They headed in opposite directions, the three down the hallway and Davie around the corner to his parents' room. "Stay up here," he called. "Mom won't want us downstairs with her papers everywhere."

"Sure," one of the others mumbled.

They clicked the lights out as they went, leaving the upstairs dark except for the small lamp in their parents' room. They'd use the bed there as the base.

Davie went to the window that looked out on the backyard. It had started to rain, and fat droplets splattered the pane. He closed his

eyes, listening past the storm to the sounds of the other boys. When they played hide-and-seek as a family, he always teamed with his mom. They almost never lost because she had taught him the strategy. Listen carefully. Follow the others with your ears. Triangulate in your head to where they were hiding. Nothing random, all scientific. He heard a giggle and Alan muttered something angry. A door slammed—*bang*—and two more—*bang, bang*. In the closets, then. Probably the bedrooms at the top of the stairs.

He leaned into the wall to begin the count.

At fifty-seven, he heard something that sounded like the faint mewling of a cat. That couldn't be. Brookey was dead, two weeks ago. He looked out the window and saw his mother step into the yard. She wasn't wearing a coat or sweater. And the sound. The mewling was coming from her. She was crying. She'd cried for a whole day when Brookey died. Lately, she cried a lot.

She turned to face the house. The wind whistled through the pine trees behind her, and she shivered. No, she wasn't shivering but crying harder. Then she glanced up, and for an instant her eyes settled on him. Her hand moved ever so slightly, pressing down. It was a signal from hide-and-seek. *Get down, Davie. Stay quiet.*

Davie knelt, following instructions. He was always a good boy around her. From his new position, he could just see over the sill. Her hair was long and curly and blond, and the wind whipped it across her face. There was something in her other hand. Black. Heavy. Distorted by the raindrops on the window. She said something, a sentence or two, very low. Was his name part of it? He thought she would look up again and smile, maybe wave. She stared straight ahead.

Slowly, she raised her hand. Up beside her head. He'd never seen a real gun before, but of course he knew what it was. Muzzle at her temple. She lowered her face even more. The hair writhed around her eyes.

He opened his mouth to scream—*Mom don't!*—but nothing came out. It was as if a hand had clamped on his throat, strangling the words before they could form.

The gun fired. That was the *bang* he'd heard before. Not doors slamming.

Her body pitched sideways. There was no pirouette, nothing graceful—just down. She was still clutching the gun.

He kept trying to scream, but his voice wasn't there. In his head, he saw the last stricken look she'd given him as her hand patted the air. *Get down. Stay quiet.* Then his mind slipped over the edge. It was the same blank emptiness that came over him when he found Brookey's crushed body on the roadside. He'd knelt there, rigid and unmoving, until his mother found him and dragged him away.

The wind mounted again, battering the windows. He blinked and everything swam out of focus.

Davie crawled away from the window, something he wouldn't recall doing, and slid under the bed, using the springs to pull himself into the shadows. His wrist caught on a raw wire end, but he didn't feel a thing. He curled on his side with his knees to his chest and his arm impaled above him. Blood dripped off his elbow. Davie knew none of it, as he dove deeper and deeper into his own dark hole.



“Hey, there’s one in here under the bed!” the cop shouted. “Oh my God, look at the blood.”

The paramedics had just arrived, and they burst into the room, a woman and a man. The woman dropped to her knees and reached in to untangle the boy’s arm. “This one isn’t shot, only bleeding from his wrist.”

She pulled him onto the rug. “Is he alive?” the cop said. This was his first call out for a shooting, and his voice was shaky.

“Yeah. Hard to tell how much blood he’s lost. Let’s get him outside to our rig.”

The cop—Damon Thierry—led the way, shoving another cop who didn’t move fast enough off the stairs. There were three police cars out on the road, all with lights flashing. Scottie Glass’s mother sat in the

back seat of one, looking like she'd lost all touch with the world. She'd called it in.

Thierry ran to the ambulance and yanked open the doors. The paramedics laid Davie on the floor. They checked his heart, snapped a light in his eyes, then got a blood-pressure cuff on his arm.

"What have you got?" a gruff voice called.

Thierry jumped to attention. "It's a boy, Captain. Found him under the bed in the biggest room upstairs. He seemed to be hiding."

Captain Gillespie grunted. He was tall and had a raw, red face, a combination of too much booze and pent-up anger. The drive from the Montgomery County Police station in Gaithersburg had left him even more short-tempered than usual. There was heavy traffic on I-270 and another tie-up down the road in the village of Damascus. The whole state of Maryland was getting to be a damned parking lot.

"How is he?" he said to the paramedics.

"Heart's steady, but his pressure's real low. He's lost some blood. Can't say how much. Pupils are nonresponsive."

Gillespie bent in so he could see. "He wasn't shot?"

"No, just a bad cut on his arm."

"Lucky him." Gillespie stood up, rubbing a kink out of his lower back. He was going to have to start using that lumbar pillow his wife had bought him. "What a mess. Did you see what she did to her husband? Damn near blew his face off."

Thierry glanced at the boy. "Captain, he may be able to hear us."

Gillespie shrugged. "That doesn't change facts."

Lights from another police car swung over the rise in the road. This one was unmarked, so it would be the detectives. "You were first on the scene?" Gillespie said. Thierry nodded. "OK, walk me through it."

Thierry led him around the side of the house. "I'd just stopped for dinner—that new Pizza Hut." His voice was all over the place.

"Take a breath, son," Gillespie said. "Now start when you got here."

"OK. I met the neighbor out at the road. She was in bad shape. Kept screeching her son's name. *Scottie, Scottie*. She came over here looking for him and found this."

They had reached the woman's body in the backyard. Her mouth was slack, and her hair was matted with blood. Another cop, an older guy Thierry didn't know, was standing guard until the CI techs got there.

"How many vics?" Gillespie said.

"The woman here," Thierry answered. "Husband you saw in the front room. Three kids in an upstairs closet."

Gillespie sighed and rubbed his forehead. Then he stared hard at Thierry. "But you missed the other boy—the one under the bed."

"I found the bodies, checked them over, and made a quick run-through of the place. I didn't think to look under the beds."

Gillespie continued to stare.

"Sorry, Captain," Thierry mumbled. "I just missed it."

"If that boy dies, don't expect our friends in the press to miss it. And don't expect me to cover your butt either." Gillespie started to walk away. "Stay on with the detectives. You made first contact. Maybe you can help when they interview the neighbor."

Thierry said, "Sure, Captain, I—"

"*Hey!*" someone screamed from inside. "Some help in here! I got a pulse on one of the kids in the closet!"

The paramedics sprinted for the front door.

Gillespie hissed a curse and jogged after them.

The older cop kicked his toe in the dirt and chuckled. "Oops."

Thierry watched the dead woman's hair ripple in the wind, and he wondered what his next career would be like.

ONE

“D^octor Henderson?”

“Yes,” I said, scrambling to remember what Michelle had asked me. “I think I read something about interest rates changing.”

Henry, Michelle’s husband, edged forward on the sofa. “So it’s a good time to refinance. Tell her.”

Couples therapy. It’s the worst part of my job. I wouldn’t do it, but everybody’s got to pay the rent. One of my professors said that for a psychologist, couples therapy is like trying to herd lemmings. There’s rarely a storybook ending.

I said, “Mortgages are a little outside my expertise. Besides, we’ve been through this a few times before. You both seem . . . stuck today.”

“I’m not stuck,” Michelle said, crossing her arms.

I rubbed the scar on my wrist. It’s a habit of mine when I make a mistake with a patient. Michelle had a defensive streak a mile wide, and I should have known better than to use the word “stuck.” She actually was the most rigid patient I had. She wore the same sweater and shoes to every session, sat in the same spot on the sofa, always with her right leg crossed over the left. Henry was another story altogether. He was game for anything. He was fifty-six years old and in the last four months had taken up rock climbing and sky diving. He claimed to have invented streaking. The wilder he got, the more inflexible she became. Welcome to couples therapy.

“I didn’t phrase that well,” I said. “Michelle, I’m sorry.” I noticed I was rubbing my scar again and stopped. “I gave you some homework to do. Any progress there?”

They looked at each other and smiled. If I gave out gold stars, that would have earned one. “Great. Tell me about it.”

“You said I should try to do more around the house. Little things to surprise her,” Henry said. “I put the newspaper away every day, so she wouldn’t have to. And I picked up the dry cleaning. I even baked her a cake.”

“Really?” I said. “How did it turn out?”

“Must be pretty good. It’s half gone already.”

Tears immediately sprang up in Michelle’s eyes. They had remarkably similar builds: beanpole arms and legs, plump around the middle. Henry carried the extra weight proudly, but it bothered the hell out of Michelle.

He turned red and stammered, “I mean, it’s nice, you know? Nice that she made a show of liking it so much.” He goggled at me for help.

I let a few seconds pass. “Michelle . . . ?”

“Yes, I liked the cake very much.” She carefully wiped her eyes and eased the throw pillow out from behind her back. I figured she might bury her face in it, a thing she sometimes did when she got upset. Instead she hefted it once, then slugged Henry across the face.

“Hey, don’t do that!” I bounced out of my chair and snatched the pillow from her.

I thought I might have to step between them, but they both burst out laughing. “Man, Doc, you’re ticked off,” Henry said.

“Right. Now both of you calm down.”

Henry showed me his palms. “No worries.”

I headed back to my chair. “OK, what’s going on?”

“More homework,” Michelle said. “You told me to try to find a way to express myself when he made me angry.”

“So you’ve been hitting him?”

“Only with pillows and oven mitts. Towels. Things like that.”

“You don’t look too happy, Doc,” Henry said.

Right again. The zipper on the pillow had left a small cut under Henry’s eye.

I pulled a tissue from the box on the coffee table and handed it to him. “You’re bleeding.”

He dabbed at it. “Sweetie! First time you’ve left a mark.”

They giggled together, but that stopped when they looked at me. “Jeez,” Henry said, “you aren’t going to throw us out of here, are you?”

I took a breath to calm down and thought *make the best of it*.

“Did you notice what he just called you?”

She beamed. “I did. And he’s a sweetie, too.”

Getting them to express affection like that was close to a miracle. But the hitting—that had to stop.

I said, “I’m really glad you’ve taken this step. But I’m going to need you—”

The lights dimmed and a half second later came back up. It was the signal that our time was nearly up. “I need you to promise—no more hitting. Zero tolerance on that.”

“Why?” Henry said. “It works.”

So far, I thought, imagining a room with no pillows, but a lamp or maybe a baseball bat. “An inch higher, and that cut would be a scratched cornea. Now promise—no hitting.”

“OK,” they both muttered.

“But keep working, Michelle. Find a way to let the anger out and let him know about it.” I stood up. “Keep up with your journal writing, both of you. We’ll start with that next week.”

We headed for the door, which opened before we got there. It was my receptionist, Tori Desia. She stared at Henry’s eye as they passed. “What happened to him?” she said after she shut the door behind them.

“Michelle—the pillow. She didn’t mean to do it.”

“I hope not.” She straightened the sofa and put the tissue box back in the center of the coffee table. Tori ran the office like a military operation. Not that you’d expect that by looking at her. She was the most strikingly attractive woman I’d ever known. Her mother had been a Norwegian soccer star. Her father was half-black, half-Cherokee. Tall, athletic, exotic—she would have been a dream catch to anchor any TV news show. Instead she worked for me. Scratch that. We worked together. Nobody could ever claim to be Tori Desia’s boss.

“Henry and Michelle are six weeks behind on their bills,” she said. “We should drop them.”

“They’re starting to make progress.”

“And that helps the bottom line how?”

“All right. I’ll talk to them about the bills next week.”

“You do that.” She handed me a file folder. “New patient up next. Edward Gaines. Likes to be called Ted.”

I flipped through the paperwork. “It doesn’t say how he found out about me.”

She gave me an innocent look. “No it doesn’t, but you’re a psychologist. Maybe you can get him to talk about it.”

“That’s cute.”

She turned for the door. “He’s an eel, by the way. Twitch-twitch. Went to the bathroom twice in the last fifteen minutes. And a *real* hound.”

She had animal designations for all the patients. The eels were manic. The hounds were perverts. Today she was wearing skin-tight cords. Often it was a micro skirt and five-inch heels. Most every man who entered my office ranked a hound.

I said, “We could bring back the old desk with the privacy panel.”

She knuckled me under the chin. “Now what would be the fun in that?”

As she reached for the door, two sharp raps came from the other side. “Eel,” she sighed. She swung it open.

“Dr. Henderson. Hiya.” He stuck his hand out to shake. He was wearing a Baltimore Orioles cap, which immediately made me warm to him. I’d been a Birds fan since I was a kid.

“Mr. Gaines, it’s nice to meet you.”

Tori quietly closed the door, and he looked around the room. “So this is it, huh? Pretty neat. Only five blocks to the Capitol Building. You get a lot of them here? Senators, judges, whatnot?”

“More of the whatnot,” I said. “Why don’t you sit down.”

“OK.” This usually presented a dilemma for patients. Take the couch (and all the baggage that came with it) or one of the chairs (and maybe look like a hard case). Without hesitating, he grabbed the nearest chair and dragged it next to the window, so he’d be able to look outside and see me wherever I sat. He had an old backpack with him,

and he plopped it on his lap. Whatever was in it was heavy. "Let's see." He ran his finger back and forth like a compass needle. "The Supreme Court is over that way?" The finger stopped moving.

I took a seat in the other chair. "That's right."

"Good. A new place, I like to get my bearings."

"Fair enough."

Tori had been right about the twitching. Already he had crossed his legs a couple of times. He was tall, well taller than my six feet plus, and his hands were very large. He fluttered them down the armrests of the chair. Then he felt the backpack, hefting whatever was inside, some sort of security for him.

"So, what do we do now?"

"Good question." I picked his file up from the coffee table. "There isn't much background in here about why you've come to see me. Just 'anxiety.' Did another doctor refer you?"

"No."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he only grinned. His eyes flicked to my face and away, and he rubbed the armrests of the chair again.

"How about this," I said. "Why don't you tell me about yourself. That's usually a good place to start."

He seemed confused. "Tell you about me?"

"Sure. Start anywhere."

"I . . . I live in Mount Pleasant."

I'd seen the address in the file. "It's nice up there. Near Rock Creek Park?"

He nodded but said no more.

"How long have you been there?"

"Eight years, same place."

He was about my age, early thirties. That meant he'd moved there shortly after finishing college, if he'd gone to college. He started jiggling his foot; his hands were still twitching. "Anxiety" seemed to be an understatement.

"You wrote on the patient form that you work for Callister Resources. What do you do there? I haven't heard of it."

“Data research. Clerk stuff, mostly.” Then his grin came back. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“Do you like my hat?” He touched the brim. “I got it just for you.”

Every psychologist deals with unusual people. It’s what the job is all about. But he was starting to push the creepy meter. “I don’t understand.”

He took the hat off. He had ginger hair, thin and cut unevenly. There was a bald spot off-center, right of the crown. The flesh there was depressed and discolored, a wine-dark divot. Staring at me, he had a strange sheen in his eyes, intent and timid at the same time. That tickled the back of my mind, something familiar.

“Davie, it’s me. Scottie Glass.”

I shook my head stupidly and looked at the file with *Edward Gaines* on the label. I didn’t think I’d heard him right.

“Sorry about the name. I wanted it to be a surprise.” He gave a lopsided smile. That hit a vague memory too, from way back when we were kids. He’d do something wrong and give that bent grin for forgiveness. “You dope,” I’d say, and we’d be friends again. That brought it home. *Scottie Glass, in the flesh.*

“How . . . how did you find me?”

“It wasn’t all that hard,” he said.

“What do you want?” That sounded more suspicious than I intended, but I hadn’t seen him since I was a boy. I kept everything about that time boxed up, and I didn’t like being waylaid by it.

He put the cap back on, and he wasn’t smiling anymore. My mind had gone blank, then it began filling with pictures of my parents and brothers. I tried to shake that off, to say something about being glad to see him, but I couldn’t come up with any words.

He fiddled with the straps on the backpack. “I’m sorry—the fake name,” he said. “I should have called you instead.”

“I guess that would have been better.” I knew that was wrong, too. The name wasn’t a problem—or maybe it was. I felt trapped, cornered in my own office, and those old pictures wouldn’t stop coming.

He stood up suddenly and tugged the backpack over his shoulder.

“Wait . . . just tell me why you’re here,” I said.

If he heard me, the edge in my voice only made him move faster. He strode out the door and slammed it behind him.

A rushing sound filled my ears. I stared at the chair where he’d been sitting.

Tori came in. “What was that all about?”

I didn’t answer, and she stepped over and pried my hand away from my wrist. Her eyes snapped up in surprise. I’d left half a dozen deep scratches.

I got up and took my coat off the rack. Moving helped me focus. “Did you see which way he went?”