

11 MINUTES

A Derek Stillwater Short Story

By

Mark Terry



11 MINUTES**By****Mark Terry**

Dr. Derek Stillwater rushed to the door and pressed his hand against the palm scanner. It blinked ACCEPT, the door clicked, and he pushed his way into a long gleaming corridor and cut left into the first door. A sign in Korean and English read: SECURITY CENTER.

Secret Service agent Marion DeKalb met him at the door. Red hair, ruddy complexion, athletic build, heart-shaped face strained with tension. “Some kind of bioterror threat,” she said. “Kun says he’s waiting for you.”

Derek swallowed. His specialty was biological and chemical warfare and terrorism. A troubleshooter for the Department of Homeland Security, he was on loan to the National Intelligence Directorate and the Secret Service to help with Summit security in Seoul, South Korea. The U.S. President, the South Korean President, the North Korean President, the Chinese President and the Japanese Prime Minister and their advisors were all present.

He knocked on the door to Room 3 and stepped through. DeKalb followed. Beige paint on the walls, acoustic tile on the ceiling, air vent, speckled tile on the floor. A blade-thin Korean sat in one of two straight-backed wooden chairs, hands zip-tied together in his lap. Greasy black hair swept off his forehead. Derek guessed his age at

early thirties. The man kept his eyes focused on the floor.

Pak Kun sat across from him, a hard-faced Korean with high cheekbones and a narrow, pointy chin. When they entered, he lifted out of the chair and turned to face them. He shot the cuffs of his black suit and frowned. Kun ran security for the South Korean government during the Summit.

“What’s up?” Derek asked.

Kun squinted at him, his expression failing to mask his disdain for Derek. “As we agreed... as you *insisted*, we have reason to believe this man poses a threat to the summit.”

Derek turned to the man. “Hey. You speak English?”

The man continued to look down at his hands. Derek took a step closer. “Hey!” He reached out and tapped the man on the shoulder. “Look at me. Do you speak English?”

The man tilted his head up. Blood oozed from cuts, his face swollen and bruised. Derek glanced over at Kun. “Was there a problem?”

Expressionless, Kun said, “There was some resistance.”

Derek frowned. “Tell me what’s going on. Who is he?”

Kun slowly tilted his head like an owl considering a mouse. He handed Derek a security badge. It said: Sun Dong. Below the name was the man’s photograph. Below the photograph were Korean symbols. Derek tapped the symbols. “What’s this mean?”

Kun seemed to think about it, apparently translating in his head. “The English word, I believe, is jan... janitor. Is that right? He cleans?”

Derek nodded. Sun Dong twisted his arms so the sleeve of his blue work shirt slid up and he glanced at his watch on his left wrist, then went back to passively watching his hands.

“What makes you think—“

Kun held a radio to his lips and spoke in rapid Korean. Derek didn’t speak Korean except for a few phrases. Phrases like: “Another beer, please,” and “Where is the restroom,” and “Hurry up” and “I’m lost. Where is the subway?” He was pretty good at those phrases in seven or eight languages. He thought he recognized the Korean words for “security disk,” and the word for “computer.”

A moment later somebody knocked on the door. Kun opened it and an overweight Korean stepped in. He wore what looked like a uniform—black pants, wrinkled white shirt, black tie, black coat with a patch on the breast pocket. He booted up the computer, inserted a disk and clicked a few keys. They watched a video of a hallway. Sun Dong appeared pushing a cart in front of him. He moved slowly down the hallway toward the video camera. Appearing from below the camera strode a member of the North Korean delegation.

DeKalb said, “Who is that?”

Kun said, “Lee Lei-Hun. He’s with the RDEI.”

Derek frowned. “RDEI?”

DeKalb interrupted. “North Korea’s Research Department for External Intelligence. They spy on Japan and South Korea.”

Eyes still on the video, they watched the two men pass each other. As Lee Lei-Hun passed Sun Dong, he held out his left hand. It held a package about the size of a laptop computer. Dong took it without stopping and slipped it inside the wheeled cabinet. Lee Lei-Hun continued without hesitation, turned a corner and disappeared from view. Dong paused, raised his left hand, seemed to touch something on his wrist, and continued out of sight.

The heavy-set security agent shut the computer down. DeKalb said, “Where did he go?”

Kun said, “There was a momentary short in the video system. It lasted five minutes. When he was—“

Derek spun on Kun. “What makes you think it’s a bioterrorism threat? Is it a bomb? What was it?”

“We haven’t found it yet. The only thing Dong said when we were ... interrogating him ... was that he was bringing a plague down on the summit.”

Derek frowned and clutched at a chain around his neck. He wore juju beads, given to him by a friend who died in Somalia, a steel four-leaf clover, and a St. Sebastian’s medal. St. Sebastian was the Patron Saint of Plagues. Derek blinked, reached down and pulled back the sleeve of Dong’s blue work shirt.

On his wrist was a digital watch. It was in Stopwatch Mode. Numbers were

rapidly counting down. As Derek watched, the numbers quickly changed from 11:00.01 to:

11:00.00

Derek caught Dong by the collar and yanked him to his feet. He tore at the wristwatch, ripping it from the man's arm. "It's counting down! Kun, evacuate the damn building!"

Dragging Dong, he lurched to the door, jerking it open. The man struggled to break free. Derek turned, eyes wild, and gripped Dong's throat, squeezing. "You either come with me or I get a fire ax and cut your damned hand off."

Dong apparently understood English. His eyes grew wide and he stilled.

DeKalb was on her radio, urgently giving orders. Derek pulled Dong down the hallway, pushing his way into the main security office. Kun ran past them, shouting into his radio. Along one wall a dozen TV monitors displayed different views of the conference center. Four security agents manned computer consoles. Derek glanced around.

"Who speaks English?"

One of the women and one of the men raised their hands. Derek saw the fat man who had brought in the computer. He pointed. "Ask him to show me a map of where the video was taken."

She hesitated.

He glared at her. "Now!"

She rattled off something in Korean. Derek dragged Dong toward a palm scanner set just outside the doorway. Derek pressed his own palm against the scanner and tapped a security code into the keyboard. On the screen it flashed:

SECURITY OVERRIDE

Derek punched more keys, bringing up a menu. It was in both English and Korean. He tapped the ENTER key and twisted Dong's arm around and up, pressing his palm flat against the screen. The screen identified Dong. Derek brought up the menu again, tapped HISTORY.

A list appeared of all of the security palm scanners Dong had passed in the last 24 hours.

Derek tapped more numbers, ordering the list be printed to the Security Center's printer number two. He snapped, "Correlate his history to the map and the time he picked up the device from Lee Lei-Hun."

He glanced at Dong, whose eyes lit up with a zealot's fire. In heavily accented English, Dong said, "You will die with all your capitalist leaders. You don't have enough time."

Derek glanced at the watch. It read:

09:57.23

Derek turned, looking for DeKalb or Kun. Neither was to be found. The Korean woman acting as his translator said, "Mr. Chin says this will take a minute."

"Tell him he has less than ten minutes before we all die, so he'd better get his ass in gear."

She blinked her almond-shaped eyes, nervously glancing at Dong. She shouted at Mr. Chin, who lumbered toward them, a sheaf of papers in his hand and a floor plan of the conference center in the other. He spread it out on a nearby table.

"I am Bo-Bai Eon, said the woman. "You may call me Bo-Bai. You are—"

"Nearing panic," Derek said. He dragged Dong over to the table and pointed at a stool. He tapped the gun on his hip, a Colt .45 semi-automatic he had owned since serving in Army Special Forces. "Sit. Stay. Move and I shoot you in the head. Understand?"

Dong smiled. His teeth were yellow and crooked and the smile made him look like a cross between Satan and a used car salesman. "American cowboy. You will die soon."

"Fuck you."

Dong laughed a harsh, hyena bark.

Mr. Chin took a red marker and circled a spot on the floor plan. He spoke in Korean. Bo-Bai translated: "Mr. Chin says this is where the camera was."

Mr. Chin made an X on the hallway and a Z later on. Bo-Bai said, "X is Mr. Dong. Z is Lee Lei-Hin."

Consulting the sheaf of papers in his hand, Mr. Chin took a blue marker and numbered doorways on the map that indicated palm scanners Dong had used since

collecting the device. Mr. Chin stopped at number 13.

Derek thought: *Even on a good day, that's not a lucky number.* He glanced over at Dong to gauge his reaction. Nothing. He checked the stopwatch. It now read:

08:33.05

Derek reached over and grabbed Dong's collar. He pulled the man close, getting in his face. The collar twisted in his fist. Derek felt heat come off the man. A sour stench of nervous sweat clung to him. "You could save us a hassle and tell us where it is and what it is."

"As you say: fuck you."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He jerked Dong off the chair. To Bai-Bo, he said, "Let's go. Grab the map."

She snatched it up, studying it as they left the security office. As he headed out, Derek noted the security monitors. Almost every scene showed people hurrying along, guided by security personnel. A loud voice blared in Korean over the loudspeaker. Then it changed to what Derek thought was Chinese, followed in English:

"Ladies and gentlemen. We need to evacuate the building. Repeat, we must evacuate the building. Please proceed in an orderly fashion to the nearest exits. Repeat: evacuate the building."

Dong's eyes narrowed as he studied the cameras. Derek said, "What's the matter? Worried we're going to get everybody out of the building before your device goes off?"

Dong shook his head. "You will all die. They will not all get out in time."

A sudden wave of nausea swept over Derek. He felt his heart racing in his chest, an all too familiar feeling: a panic attack. Bo-Bai said, "Dr. Stillwater. Are you okay?"

He swallowed, biting back bile, struggling for breath. He gulped in air. "Just feeling a little stress. No problem." He closed his eyes, tried to will himself calm.

Dong laughed. "You are the best the Americans have? Doctor Derek Stillwater, correct? Are you afraid to die? Are you a coward? Run, Doctor. Run for your life."

Derek ignored him. If he moved, if he focused on the problem, if he acted, he could manage the panic attack. He made a quick check of the stopwatch. It read:

07:11.37

Bai-Bo led them to the hallway they had observed on the video. It was in the

basement of the conference center, away from where guests routinely traveled.

Derek scanned the hallway. This wasn't where the device was hidden. It was an empty hallway, a transition point. Hard tile floors, ceramic brick walls, acoustic tile ceiling cut by lights and ductwork. But on the video, Dong had disappeared beneath the cameras at the corner.

He pushed Dong ahead of them, retracing Dong's steps. A freight elevator waited, doors closed. Bai-Bo said, "He took the elevator to the second level."

"In we go."

Bai-Bo pressed her palm into the scanner. It did not respond. Derek shot her a questioning look.

She said, "They must have shut it off to facilitate the evacuation."

She removed a key ring from her pocket, sorted through them and fitted one into a keyhole beneath the scanner. With a turn of the key, a whirring sound cut the air. A moment later the elevator doors opened. Bai-Bo entered the elevator. Derek pushed Dong in front of him.

Without warning Dong shouldered Bai-Bo, slamming the female security agent into the wall of the elevator. Before Derek could react, Dong mule-kicked, catching Derek in the chest, knocking him backward out of the elevator. Staggering, Derek lunged forward. The elevator doors closed in his face, Dong and Bai-Bo on the other side.

Derek sucked in air, rubbing his chest. The stopwatch read:

06:01.72

Derek sprinted back to the Security Center. Mr. Chin met him at the door and pointed to one of the video monitors. It showed Dong, hands free, running down a hallway.

"Where's Bai-Bo?" Derek demanded.

The other man who spoke English said, "She's alive, but hurt. We're sending people—"

"Where's he going?"

The man shrugged. "The exit, I would think. Wouldn't you?" He sounded nervous. Derek thought that if they had any sense at all they would all head for the exits. He was impressed with this group's dedication to their jobs, staying on post, helping him.

Derek turned to the video monitors. Dong was running, pushing his way through a stream of people heading in the opposite direction. He shook his head. “He’s not headed for the exit. Give me a walkie-talkie.”

The man who spoke English—his badge IDed him as Lee Phong--nodded, tossing it to him. Phong ran a short-fingered hand through spiked black hair, the head of a punker, the hair of a porcupine. “Where are you going?”

“After him. He’s going to set it off manually. Give me directions.” He raced out of the security center. The stopwatch read:

04:59.99

Dashing up a flight of steps, he burst out onto the main floor. Derek found himself in a carpeted corridor lined with doors leading to smaller conference rooms. An abstract painting hung on the opposite wall, a blur of rainbow colors spattered on canvas. A small black glass globe hung from the ceiling near the corner. He spoke into the walkie-talkie, looking at the globe. “Phong, do you see me?”

“Yes. He went to the next floor.”

Derek pushed back into the stairwell, taking two and three steps at a time, shouldering into the hallway. Into the walkie-talkie: “Which way do I go?”

“Right. Go right. He’s heading toward the Jin-Shao Room.”

Derek ran down the deserted corridor. He spun around a corner and slammed into two Asians in dark suits. Everybody crashed to the floor, hurling curses in multiple languages.

Breathless, panting on hands and knees, Derek struggled to his feet. The walkie-talkie--where was it? He had dropped both it and the watch. Where were they? The two men were clambering upright, cursing, glaring at him, irritation in their eyes. He ignored them.

There!

He grabbed the walkie-talkie. “Phong, where is he?”

“He disappeared. He’s off the grid. He’s...”

Derek jumped to his feet, snatched up the stopwatch. It read:

04:00.01

“...I see him, I see him. He’s entering the Jin-Shao Room. Go straight and take a

left, then a right.”

Derek took off running. Rounding the final corner, he spotted an entrance to a small auditorium seating approximately two hundred people. The floor was tiered, the theater-style seats upholstered in maroon cloth. He blasted into the room, gun in his right fist.

He pressed the walkie-talkie to his lips. “I don’t see him. Are you—“

Sun Dong tackled him from behind. Derek dropped his gun and the watch. The Korean caught Derek in a neck lock, forearm up under his chin, choking him.

Derek gagged, trying to twist away. The world grew gray. Somewhere deep in the back of his mind his instincts, his training and his will to live sent a message to his reflexes.

Derek slammed down hard with his foot, scraping along Dong’s shin and onto the fragile bones at the top of his foot. Dong howled and relaxed his grip on Derek’s throat. Air, sweet air, filled his lungs and his vision cleared.

Derek snapped his head backward. His skull bashed Dong’s face. There was a crunch as the Korean’s nose broke, spurting blood.

Dong released him with a yell and leapt for Derek’s .45. Derek flung himself after him. They collided, rattling bones, bruising flesh. Dong kicked the gun. It skittered away, disappearing into a row of chairs.

Derek hurled himself at Dong, but the Korean scrambled away, sprinting for the back of the auditorium, heading for a doorway that led to the audio-visual control room.

Derek paused, snatched up the watch. It read:

02:57.69

Derek looked for the .45. He couldn’t see it anywhere. He knew Dong hadn’t gotten hold of it. Where was it? He was losing precious seconds hunting for it. The watch read:

02:26.08

“Dammit!” Derek turned and raced toward the audio-visual room, hitting the door with his shoulder, stumbling into the tiny control room. Projectors, computers, soundboard, a snake pit of wires and cable. But no Dong.

Fear seized Derek’s chest, twisted. An electric stingray of panic slapped at his

spine. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Where the hell was Dong?

An upward glance revealed a small hatchway, maybe two feet by three feet. Climbing onto the control board, Derek pushed it open. A narrow ladder disappeared into the darkness.

Gripping the edges of the hatch, he pulled himself up, caught the lower rung and levered himself into the area. It was a vertical crawlspace. Dark and dusty, it smelled of mold. It was lined with cables, conduits, and air and heating ducts. The ladder vibrated. Dong was climbing upward.

Derek glanced at the watch in the dim light.

01:55.33

Hand over hand as fast as he could. Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty. They were deep inside the upper infrastructure of the conference center. In seconds he caught up to Dong, who had stopped and was peeling open a section of the air duct. He glanced down at Derek in the dim light and growled, his Korean guttural and incomprehensible.

Derek caught Dong's ankle and pulled. The Korean kicked out, his booted foot glancing off Derek's brow. Derek wavered, overbalancing on the narrow ladder, then pulled himself close and tried again. His hand clamped onto Dong's ankle again. This time when Dong tried to kick him, he was ready. Derek twisted Dong's leg. Dong howled in pain, flailing at him.

Derek pulled himself up further. Dong kicked again. Clinging to the Korean's leg, Derek punched upward, snapping his fist into Dong's crotch. The Korean yowled. Flailing harder, wildly, both legs. His heels caught Derek's shoulders, head, chest.

Derek lost his balance, gripped the Korean's knee. His full weight dragged on Dong's leg. Dong cried out. "*Ggujo! Ggujo! Toejora, Geseki! Ggujo!*"

Derek held on with one arm, cocked his other and slammed his fist again into Dong's crotch. With an inarticulate scream, Dong let go.

Derek felt a moment of freefall. He had known what would happen, but the suddenness of the release caught him momentarily off guard. He flung his hands out. His right hand caught the ladder. He gripped it tight. Searing pain ripped through his palm, but his downward motion halted. His momentum swung him hard against the concrete inner wall. He hit the concrete hard, air exploding from his lungs. He caught at the ladder

with his arms, ignoring the pain in his hands and joints, and held on tight.

Dong clutched at him as he passed, scrabbling for a hold, his high-pitched scream ending abruptly with a thudding crash that sent a jarring vibration up the ladder.

Derek summoned some street Korean, a good epitaph for Sun Dong: “*Shibal nom, Geseki!*” Fuck you, you son of a bitch.

He looked at the stopwatch in a fine shaft of gray light.

00:58.03

Derek spidered up the rest of the ladder, fishing in his pocket for a tiny flashlight he kept on a keychain. Squeezing it, a narrow beam of light revealed a flimsy metal cover on a portion of the heating and air conditioning duct. He caught hold with one hand and tugged. With barely any resistance it tore away. He dropped it. It made a mild clatter at the bottom of the shaft.

Derek flashed the light inside the duct. Right there, attached to the interior of the duct by magnet, was a metal box approximately the size of a small notebook computer. He glanced at the watch.

00:38.88

Derek swallowed. His throat was dry, filled with dust. A bitter, metallic taste flooded his mouth. Steel bands compressed his chest. Blood rushed in his ears. Sucking in foul-smelling air, he reached out and opened the box, praying it wasn't booby-trapped.

00:33.16

The bottom half of the box held a row of batteries, a digital timer stripped to two buttons, an LED readout, a tiny circuit board, and a tangle of multi-colored wires. The top half held eight glass vials of cloudy liquid. They were surrounded by packets of Semtex plastic explosive.

The LED readout read:

00:28.44

Heart hammering in his chest, Derek examined the device. Although he had studied demolition and explosives as part of his Special Forces training, he was far from expert. And these were far from ideal conditions.

If he was right, the countdown wouldn't stop if he cut any of the wires. And the bomb maker had hidden the detonators beneath the Semtex.

00:21.01

The glass vials were held in place by two aluminum brackets that had been glued onto the case.

Derek stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out a Leatherman multi-purpose tool, a slightly bulky version of a Swiss Army Knife. He flicked out the saw blade, took a deep breath and proceeded to file away at the top bracket.

00:16.46

The blade cut through the top bracket with a soft pop! Derek reached in with trembling fingers and twisted it outward. He tried to snag the vials and pull them out, but he couldn't get a grip on them.

00:11.79

Derek sawed at the lower bracket. His shirt was soaked with sweat. Rivulets of sweat rolled down his face, dripped off his nose. The blade clanked against one of the vials.

He froze, heart lurching.

Derek continued. Fast.

00:08.68

Derek twisted the final bracket aside with fingers slick with sweat. He gingerly removed the eight glass vials, which were held together with elastic bands. With a deep breath, he tucked the vials in his shirt next to his skin. Gripping the sides of the ladder loosely with his hands, his shoes pressed to the outside of the rails, he dropped in a barely controlled fall toward the floor.

00:04.93

That bastard, Dong, was sprawled across the hatch. His neck was bent at an unnatural angle. His dark eyes stared into whatever level of hell was reserved for bioterrorists. Derek cursed and dragged him aside, flung open the hatch and dropped into the audio-visual control room.

00:2.01

Derek raced for the door to the auditorium, running as if a pack of demons were behind him. Halfway to the door.

00:1.00

Derek stumbled. He clutched at the vials in his shirt, staggered, caught himself. Almost to the door.

00:00.00

Three ounces of Semtex plastic explosives could take down a two-story building. Derek estimated there had been about six ounces of the explosive in the--

The force of the explosion took the path of least resistance—down the inner wall and throughout the air conditioning ducts. A huge chunk of the auditorium wall and ceiling disintegrated, a devastation of plaster, drywall, plywood, wire and metal driven by a pressure wave moving at approximately 24,000 feet per second.

Derek felt as if the hand of God had smacked him aside. Lunging through the doorway, he flew through the air, curling into a ball in order to protect the vials. Rolling, he gained his feet and continued to run as the auditorium ceiling and walls fell in, pushing a massive cloud of dust down the hallway after him. In moments he was blinded, covered with gray and white dust, his entire body peppered with splinters of wood and metal.

But alive.

And within another minute he was out the building.

Two Days Later

Derek sat in a comfortable chair on the foredeck of his cabin cruiser, *The Salacious Sally*. It was a beautiful day in June on the Chesapeake Bay. He was listening to the newest Jack Johnson album on his iPod and drinking a Guinness. Five more bottles rested in a cooler by his side. He looked up to see a tall, broad-shouldered man in a gray suit approaching from the pier.

Secretary James Johnston, head of the Department of Homeland Security, climbed aboard. “Hello, Derek. You haven’t been returning my calls.”

“You got my letter of resignation. I don’t work for you any more.”

Johnston did his best to suppress a smirk. “I checked the file. This is the fourteenth time you’ve resigned.”

“I’m not going through that again, Jim. Let somebody else save the world. I’m retired.”

Johnston sat down in the lounge next to him, reached over and pulled out a bottle

of beer. He opened it, leaned back and took a sip.

Derek scowled at him. “Make yourself comfortable. Have a beer. I guess we can be buddies now.”

Johnston stared out at the blue horizon of the Chesapeake Bay. The double span of the Bay Bridge could be seen in the distance. A helicopter thundered overhead. A pair of seagulls cawed over a slice of bread or some other bit of trash floating on the water.

Johnston said, “I sent you the report on the vials.”

“I read it and threw it away. I don’t work for you, remember? I feel like a broken record, but only purist music collectors even know what a broken record is anymore.”

“It was a particularly nasty brew of botulinum toxin. The people at USAMRIID estimate it would have killed everybody in the building within minutes. Good work, Derek.” He finished off the beer and got to his feet.

“I don’t accept your resignation. You know that.”

Derek waved him away. “I’m not a slave, Jim. I quit. I’m not doing this any more.”

Johnston leaned over and patted Derek on the shoulder. “Until next time, my friend. Keep your phone on. I’ll give you a call.” He walked away.

Derek turned up the volume on the iPod, his gaze latching on the glistening white sails of a sloop tacking across the bay. *Until next time...*

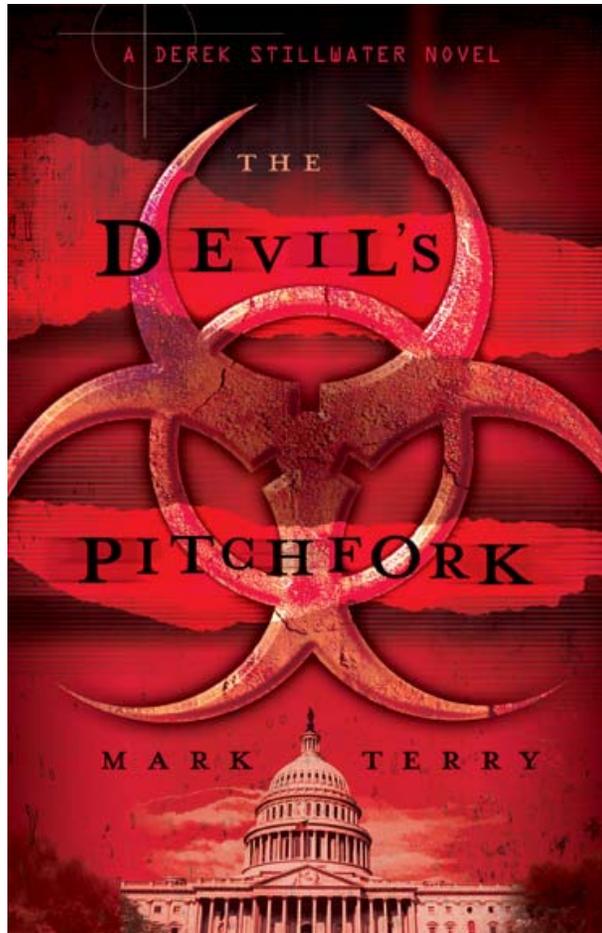
The End

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THE DEVIL’S PITCHFORK



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By Mark Terry

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Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed “11 Minutes.” I know it was a lot of fun to write. I had the idea for “11 Minutes” easily six months to a year before actually writing it. I wrote the first two or three paragraphs, saved it to my hard drive and periodically read it and did nothing with it. In June of 2006 I was attending the yearly meeting of The Association of Genetic Technologists held at the Hyatt Regency in Baltimore, Maryland when I received an e-mail from Brian Farrey, my publicist at Midnight Ink. He wanted to get moving with AuthorBuzz and other promotion ideas. We tossed around a few concepts, roughly equivalent to throwing spaghetti at the wall and checking to see if it's done.

I wanted something that could stand alone and showcase the main character, something that would resemble THE DEVIL'S PITCHFORK. And I had this perfectly good idea for a short story that would introduce Derek and be similar to the tone, story type and concept of the Derek Stillwater novels. (As of this writing I am contracted for 4 novels featuring Derek). So I promptly sprawled out on my hotel room bed with the TV on in the background, my laptop on my lap, and worked through the story. I finished it at the airport while waiting for my flight back to Michigan. I fine-tuned it over the next couple weeks, then asked readers of my blog (www.journalscape.com/markterry/) if they would like to read it and provide comments. Then I spent the next week or so tweaking the story you have here.

I encourage anybody who enjoyed this story to pass it on to friends who they think might enjoy it as well. You may print it out and distribute it free, but please, do not offer it for sale. If you are a library or non-profit organization that thinks this story might be of pleasure to your organization and wish to reprint it, you may... just don't collect money for it. Again, thanks for stopping by and I hope you enjoyed “11 Minutes.”

Best,
Mark Terry