

CANDYLAND

HUGH O. SMITH

Writer Shaun Harmon should be the happiest man alive. His novels are best-sellers, Hollywood just made one of his books into a hit movie, and he and his daughter recently left the Bronx and moved into a huge home in the New Jersey suburb of Willows.

But, all Shaun's success comes at a price. His wife dies just as he achieves his dreams, the words that used to come so easily to him won't come anymore and the affluent new town he's moved to is not quite what it seems. Soon, Shaun finds that the town harbors dark secrets, secrets that it would do anything to hide.

Even kill.

Chapter 1

Shaun sprinted through the back door of his house, past the pool and onto the broad expanse of lawn. The adrenaline gave him clarity, every blade of grass stood out and the fireflies flickering lights stood in stark relief against the dark backdrop of Willows Lake. He felt his daughters' weight in his arms and her breath, hot and afraid, against his neck.

He should be panicked, but he wasn't. Strangely, all he could think about was how to use this experience in his next novel. After all, Shaun Harmon novels were known for moments like this, a hurt and bleeding hero running in the dark, using his wits to escape harm and defeat the bad guys. If he were writing this scene, the hero would be injured but unflappable, working out the ways to use the everyday items around him as weapons even as he weakened from blood loss.

He ran across the grass, his mind working to find a way to describe what was happening.

Early evening had given way to full on night. Fireflies were the only light, but his eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. The grass was damp from the evening's rain, soaking his bare feet and the cuffs of his jeans as he ran.

That was okay, he thought, but not dramatic enough.

He looked right, then left. Nowhere to run except straight ahead into the dark waters of Willows Lake.

Too dramatic, he thought, and not strictly true, he had choices. He could...

Tanya's terrified breathing in his ear brought him back to reality. Usually he couldn't shut her up, but now her wide and terrified eyes did all the talking.

"It's gonna be okay baby, don't worry, everything's gonna be okay," he whispered to his daughter as they ran.

He hoped.

Shaun ran around to the side of the house, sticking close to the building, cursing the floodlights that activated at his movement. He stopped to peer around the corner. His Range Rover sat in his driveway and his hopes flared, only to be dashed a moment later when he realized that it sat on slashed tires.

"Fuck," he hissed under his breath.

Usually Tanya was quick to admonish her father when he let loose the occasional swear word, but terror had rendered her mute. He peered around the corner once again, looking and listening for their assailant. Seeing and hearing nothing, he scurried across the open expanse of driveway then took refuge behind his SUV. There was no sign of their attacker and he took a moment to smooth Tanya's hair out of her eyes.

“It’s gonna be okay Princess,” he said again, trying hard to sound convincing. Tanya’s eyes were wide open and staring down at his side.

Shaun didn’t look.

He didn’t have to, he could feel his t-shirt sticking to his skin, soaked with blood. There was no pain yet, adrenaline was probably delaying its onset, but Shaun had no doubt it would come soon. In his second book, *Van Cortland*, his hero was injured by a serial killer operating in the Bronx. He’d had his hero chew periwinkle leaves and apply them to the wound to staunch the blood flow. Or was it dandelion? He couldn’t remember. His friend Nelson’s *Abuela* had told him that when he was writing the novel. The old woman had insisted on taking him out and actually showing him how to chew the leaves and apply to the wound. He put his hand to his side and they came away red and wet.

He put his hand to his side and it came away wet and red with blood. The knife had been sharp. So sharp the cut was almost painless. He’d only realized he was hurt when...

Oh, now you want to write, he admonished himself silently. He should be running for his life...their lives, but his mind kept on trying to find the words. Writer’s block had plagued him for months and now, in the most unlikely of moments was when the words chose to come to him again.

He knew they had to keep moving but he hesitated a second longer, trying to stay calm long enough to weigh his options. His first thought was to return to the back of the house but there was nothing for them there except the dark waters of Willows Lake (maybe that line would work after all)and the dilapidated boathouse that he’d been meaning to demolish since he bought the home six months ago. He glanced out at the lights twinkling in the homes on the far shore of the

lake, there were far more homes there than on this side, if he were alone he would chance the half-mile swim but making an attempt with Tanya was out of the question.

He thought to creep along the trees that lined his driveway until he reached the main road, but with Tanya in his arms, his wound, and no shoes on his feet, he doubted he would get very far.

To his west was the Murphy estate but it was over three quarters of a mile away, they'd never make it. His neighbors to the east, the Kings, were much closer, but their house was empty. An elderly couple, the Kings spent much of the year in their Florida home. There was no one there and no help for him, then he remembered the old Duracraft fishing boat that Gerry King kept. The King's had invited Shaun and Tanya over shortly after they'd moved in and Gerry had proudly showed off the lovingly maintained boat he'd rescued from a junkyard and restored. Shaun didn't know the first thing about boats, sailing hadn't been a part of his Bronx upbringing, but he figured that if they made it to the boat he could at least start it. They didn't have to go far, only to the other side of the lake, then they would be safe. Course of action decided, he glanced toward the house again then ducked into the trees.

Five minutes later Shauna and Tanya emerged onto the edges of the King's property. There was no sign of anyone about, but Shaun paused at the tree line and sat down in the dirt. Tanya was a very petite child, one of the smallest in her Kindergarten class but terror made her a dead weight in his arms that was becoming heavier by the minute.

"Let's rest here honey," he said, trying to put her down.

The scared little girl shook her head and held onto him for dear life.

"We're only gonna rest for a minute princess, I'm not going anywhere I promise."

Gradually, Tanya loosened her grip and he placed her on the warm dirt. Her eyes were wide in the dark and he kissed her forehead gently.

“We’re going to be all right honey, don’t you worry,” he said.

He knelt in the dirt next to his daughter, looking and listening. The King’s property was dark except for a dim spotlight that illuminated the front of the massive home. Except for the cicadas there was no sound.

Shaun mapped out the route in his mind, then turned to his daughter.

“We’re going to run into the King’s backyard then go get Mr. King’s boat and ride across the lake. Sounds good?”

Tanya’s response was to hold up her arms and Shaun lifted her up and held her close. She snuggled her face into the space between his neck and shoulder and wrapped her tiny arms tightly around his neck.

Shaun took one more look around, then keeping low, ran along the side of the King’s property hugging the tree line. A minute later they were at the back of the King’s property and he paused again, looking hard into the darkness for any sign of movement. He saw none and ran down the slope of King’s back lawn and down the steps to the dock and the boathouse.

Now that they were here, he began to question his idea. What if the boathouse was locked? What if the boat was in dry-dock already? What if he couldn’t get it started? He shook off the doubts and turned the boathouse doorknob. The door pushed open with a tiny squeak that sounded as loud as a gunshot in the darkness. Shaun put Tanya down and stood for a moment to get his eyes used to the murk.

The boathouse was large and immaculately kept. There were two spaces for boats, one occupied with the Duracraft, the other empty. On each wall were shelves and hooks that held the various canoes and kayaks that the King's grandchildren were constantly paddling on the lake.

Shaun recalled Gerry King explaining that the boat was small, only seventeen feet, but in the darkness it loomed huge in front of them. Shaun lifted Tanya onto the deck and opened the hatch he remembered led to a storage compartment below.

"Get down there honey," he whispered. "We'll be safe soon."

Tanya quickly did as she was told and Shaun sat in the pilot's seat, trying to remember Gerry's lessons. The throttle was to his right and he put the engine in neutral and began to turn the key, but stopped when he realized that the boat was still tethered to the dock. He jumped off the boat and as he undid the line he heard the squeak of the door opening.

"So predictable," a voice said.

Shaun turned to see the business end of an oar coming hard and fast at his face. He ducked, and the oar passed harmlessly over his head but as he moved backwards he tripped over the line that tethered the boat to its berth. He fell hard, the breath knocked from his body. He jumped up quickly and ducked another blow that again missed his head but this time struck his shoulder a glancing blow that caused him to stumble backwards. Flailing wildly for balance, his hand found the material of his attacker's shirt and they stumbled back together and splashed into the dark water, going under as the terrified Tanya screamed for her father.

Chapter 2

Two months earlier

Shaun peeked through the curtains at the audience, trying hard to stifle his amusement at the standing room only crowd that had come to the Willows Reading Club to hear him speak. The audience was mostly white, very well dressed, and firmly ensconced in the one percent. Ironic, since the Willows Reading Club was formed almost two hundred years ago by members of the Underground Railroad with the express purpose of teaching escapes slaves to read and write. Now, the original purpose of the club was largely forgotten, made up at it was by the wives of investment bankers and Wall Street types who, even now, were in their offices making money as fast as their wives and mistresses could spend it.

“Can I get you anything Mr. Harmon?” The chipper young girl, whose name Shaun couldn’t believe actually was Muffy, asked. She’d been hovering around for a few minutes, tasked with taking care of him while he prepared for his talk.

He closed the curtain. “No thank you, I’m good,” he said.

The truth was he wasn’t good, far from it. He hated these events. In the minutes before he spoke his stage fright kicked in and his stomach became a big knot. He usually found somewhere to hide before he went on but the Willows Reading Club, although elegant and obviously exclusive, was small and didn't offer too much in the way of hiding places. People probably thought the great author was being quiet to collect his deep thoughts but in actuality it was all he could do not to vomit his lunch up on their shiny hardwood floor. The nervousness usually passed as soon as he stepped onto the stage but the minutes before were no kind of fun.

The young woman still hovered, obviously wanting to say something.

“Mr. Harmon,” she finally said. “I hope you don’t mind me saying so but OHEMGEE you are my favorite writer in the whole world and I can’t believe we live in the same town, I mean, it’s such an honor to meet you, I love everything you write, you’re amazing.” She held Shaun’s newest hardcover in her hands. “I was wondering if you would…”

“Muffy, why don’t we give Mr. Harmon a chance to gather his thoughts before his speech,” a voice said from behind the wide-eyed young woman. The voice was cultured, low and very sexy. Jessica Rabbit with a finishing school education.

Trudy Willows-Brown stepped out from behind Muffy and gave Shaun a dazzling smile.

“Oh. You’re right. I’m sorry Mr. Harmon, I really didn’t mean to…”

It’s okay…um, Muffy,” Shaun said. He could barely say her name without want to laugh. “You weren’t bothering me at all. Tell you what, catch me after the speech and I’ll sign your book, okay.”

“Muffy could you go get Mr. Harmon a Cherry Pepsi please, I left some in the icebox special for him.

“I’m so sorry Mr. Harmon,” Trudy said after Muffy eagerly ran off to get his soft drink. “I hope she didn’t bother you too much, it’s just that she admires your work so much. We don’t get many celebrities in our small town. Much less one that lives here.”

“I’m hardly a celebrity,” he said. “And please call me Shaun,” he said.

“And I’m Trudy,” she said with a smile. “I think I’ll have to disagree with you about the celebrity part. You’re one of the most famous writers in the world. The President of the United States said you’re his favorite author, your books have been on every best-sellers list and they just made a movie out of your first book. I’d say that grants you celebrity status.”

She extended a hand and he took it. He expected a well-manicured, soft hand but her nails were short and the hand was hard, and calloused with a strong grip. His surprise must have shown because she laughed and pulled her hand back.

“Horses.”

“Excuse me?”

“Horses. I’ve worked with horses since I was old enough to walk. You have to have a strong grip, and manicures don’t really survive too long when you’re on horseback most of the time.”

“Have you been around horses much Mr. Harm...Shaun?”

“Not much. My mother took me for a horseback ride once for my birthday when I was about six, but that’s about the only experience I’ve had.”

“That’s a shame, all children should get a chance to be around horses.”

“Maybe, but there’s not much chance of that in the South Bronx.”

“Well, now you’re here in Willows where’s there’s plenty of chance. This is your open invitation to bring your family by our farm anytime.”

“It’s just me and my daughter,” Shaun said.

“How old is she?”

“She’s five. She just started kindergarten over at Candyland.”

At the mention of the prestigious local school, Trudy’s face darkened but she regained her composure quickly.

“My daughter goes there too, she’s in the sixth grade. Five? What a great age! I have the perfect horse for her, his name is Puddles, my daughter started out with him, he’s perfectly gentle and...”

Trudy caught herself and laughed.

“Look at me Shaun, I chased poor Muffy away from you and now I’m here doing the same thing.”

Shaun smiled.

“I don’t mind at all,” he said, and meant it.

There was something about Trudy, despite her obviously expensive clothes and patrician air that calmed him. He hadn’t been living long among the wealthy, a class that he was now a part of thanks to the massive success of his books and the resulting hit movie, and he felt constantly off balance among them.

“That’s very gracious of you,” Trudy said. “But I think I’ll leave you to gather your thoughts. She turned to go but turned back to look at him.

“They told me you had a way of making a lady feel...at ease. They were right. Good luck with your talk.”

She smiled and walked away before Shaun could ask her what she meant. “They” said? Who were “they”? Before he could speculate any further she was gone.

A moment later footsteps approached and his agent, Sara Diamond, appeared with a Cherry Pepsi.

“I intercepted some teeny bopper back there with this,” she said, handing him the soft drink.

He greeted Sara with a kiss on the cheek, before accepting the soft drink from her.

“I see you met the local gentry,” she said, as Shaun sipped the soda.

“Who, Trudy?”

“Trudy? My God. She even has a snooty name,” Sara said, rolling her eyes.

Shaun said nothing. He loved Sara, if it weren’t for her none of his success would have occurred. She was the only agent out of the fifty or so he’d sent his manuscript to who had

bothered to even respond to his queries. Since his success, plenty of other larger, more established agencies had contacted him, trying to woo him away from Sara, but she'd believed in him when no one else did, and that earned her a loyalty that would never waver. She got him, more importantly, she got his work. She believed in it and fought for his manuscripts like a mother tiger defending her cubs.

Shaun took another sip of his soda and glanced at his agent. As usual, her butt was prominent in her tight skirt accentuated by the insanely expensive heels she was addicted to. Her top was equally as tight and her enhanced cleavage tried its best to bust out of it. She fit in perfectly in New York City where she was another hard-driving fifty-something with dyed roots. Here in Willows, among the tasteful pearls and Prada she stood out like a roach on a wedding cake. She didn't care. Sara had nothing but contempt for the wealthy women of Willows and did absolutely nothing to hide it.

She parted the curtain and looked out onto the growing audience.

“My God, it's like shark week out there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just look at them. Predators in tasteful pearls. All come to get a look at the big, handsome, Bronx import.”

“Sara, please...”

“I don't see why you couldn't just stay in the city. If you wanted suburbs, you could have moved to Westchester. What's wrong with Scarsdale? Chappaqua even. There's plenty of rich people there and I wouldn't have to drive for three damn hours and pay a hundred dollars in tolls to see you.”

“It’s only an hour from New York and not anywhere close to a hundred bucks in tolls. Stop exaggerating.”

“Whatever. It’s far.”

She took the Pepsi from him and sipped.

“I do appreciate the pool though,” she said.

“Are you saying that you're staying the night and taking advantage of my pool?”

“Fuck no. I’m saying I’m staying the entire weekend and taking advantage of your pool AND your hot tub. Plus, we have some business to go over, so get used to this face buddy, you’re putting me up for a few days.”

Sara smiled at him, and he smiled back. He enjoyed having her around and his daughter Tanya loved her too. He was about to reply to Sara when he heard the microphone come alive and the hostess begin the introduction. He squeezed Sara’s hand, plastered a smile on his face, and walked onto the stage.

THANK YOU so much for reading this excerpt of Candyland!

I'd love to let you know when it's available so please click the link below to sign up for my no-spam newsletter and get a **FREE** copy of my novella ***SOC CER MOM*** and be the first to know when new books are coming out. I'll also be sending you excerpts of my books and other cool stuff.

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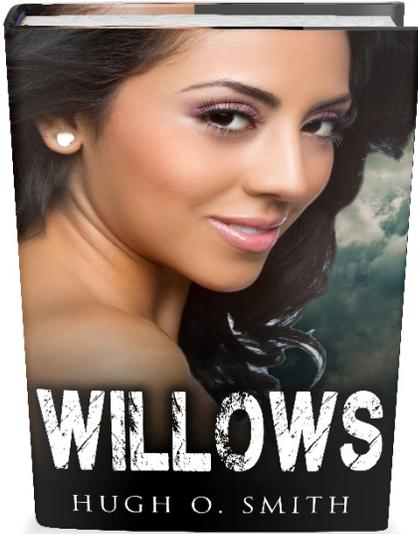
I truly hope you enjoyed this excerpt of Candyland; I'm excited for you to read the entire book! But, until that's out, I hope you enjoy ***SOC CER MOM***.

Thanks again,

Hugh

Other Books by Hugh O. Smith

WILLOWS



Marcus has found the love of his life. Tami is everything he could ask for and more and he can't wait to settle down and start a family in Willows, the small suburban town they were both raised in. Their plans are derailed by Tami's secrets. Secrets that turn their quiet suburban existence into a powder keg of lies, lust, and depravity. Marcus' plans for a perfect life is twisted into something unrecognizable and he learns that sometimes, even faith and love aren't enough to save you.

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Tony is young good-looking and successful, the ultimate ladies' man. Everything about him, from his clothes to his apartment, to his uber-confident swagger is designed to be a trap for the women who catch his eye. Tony has no immediate plans except to advance his career and continue with his playboy ways. Then one day he meets Olivia, a beautiful plus-size executive, and he sees a way he can do both.

Olivia is new in town, but certainly not new to the ways of the player. She knows that no man can treat her the way she deserves so she doesn't even try to find one. As far as she's concerned, life is just fine without the encumbrance of a boyfriend or husband. When she meets Tony, she sees him for exactly what he is, a playboy looking for a good time. She's wise to his playboy ways but still, she wouldn't mind spending a little time with him.

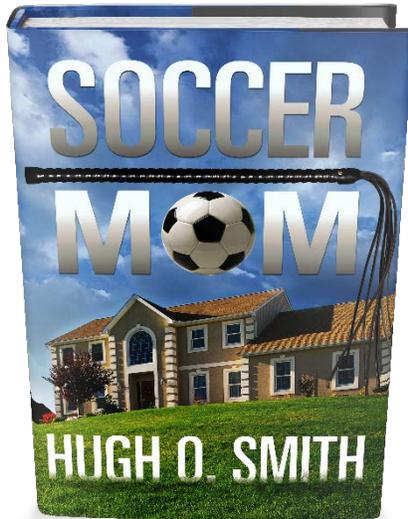
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hugh O. Smith is the author of *WILLOWS*, *GREEN EYES AND GOOD HAIR* and the novella *SOCCKER MOM*. His short fiction story *SOUTH SOUTH BRONX* appeared in the Zane anthology *Caramel Flava II*. Hugh is a contributor to the writing site *TheWriteLife.com*. Originally from Jamaica, Hugh credits his Jamaican upbringing and its rich storytelling tradition for his writing inspiration. His website is www.hughosmith.com

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