

# **Finders Keepers**

By Angela D'Onofrio

Copyright 2016 Angela D'Onofrio

*(Smashwords Edition)*

## **License Notes:**

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only, and is being offered as a promotional item. This ebook may not be sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please encourage them to sign up for the author's mailing list to receive their own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

## **Table of Contents**

[Dedication & Foreward](#)

[The Wandering](#)

[These Children That You Spit On](#)

[About The Author](#)

## Dedication

For A.B. Funkhauser, my good friend and trusted advisor in the journey of book promotion.

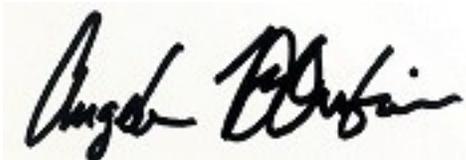
## Foreward

I've seen it said in a million places that self-published authors must offer something free to their readers...and immediately, I knew short stories were the way to go. What, exactly, to offer, was the tricky part, until I hit on something: an introduction of sorts, a teaser which would also act as an Easter Egg to both my novels. What you have here is a pair of Special Features, one for each of my novels. Each is a glimpse into a main character's past: a formative moment not relevant enough to make it into the final draft of the novel, but still special enough to stand on its own and be shared. As for the title ... both men are keepers of a sort: Buster is a bookkeeper, and Ral is a shopkeeper. I thought it suited.

**The Wandering** takes place in the year your esteemed author was born: 1982. It was a time when a quiet, suburban neighborhood with kids wandering around unsupervised wasn't the stuff of fiction. In this piece, you will meet the hero of From the Desk of Buster Heywood in his formative years, and see how he developed one of his more definitive habits.

Once you've left Buster in suburban New Jersey, we'll pull forward to Aviaro, in the summer of 1997, and I'll introduce you to Ral O'Dailigh, one of the main characters of In the Cards. These Children That You Spit On was written two days after the death of David Bowie, as an homage. You see, Bowie was the inspiration for the only character so far to appear prominently in each of my Aviaro novels: in Buster Heywood as the mysterious "Spanner", and under his own name up to dubious tricks during In the Cards.

In each of these stories, it may seem to the reader as though not much happens ... but internally, our boys are faced with choices which will shape them into the men they grow to be. I hope that you enjoy seeing these formative moments, and that you'll come back to see how they turned out.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Angel B. Dubin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a light beige background behind the text.

## The Wandering

“Hey,” Dee whispered. “Bookworm. You still awake in there?”

Buster hunched down over the mystery he was reading, his sheets over his head and an old Bakelite flashlight in one hand. “No.”

“Liar!”

At nine years old, he had already perfected the art of the slow, patience-gathering sigh. “Go back to bed before Mom and Dad hear you.”

“They’re watching some grown-up scary movie. C’mon, put that away.” His sister loomed closer, casting a shadow over the sheets.

He shifted a little, so that he could still hold the flashlight while he turned his page. “You’re blocking my light.”

“Buster,” she hissed, “would you get out here already?”

“Just let me finish this chapter.” He squinted harder, trying to make the letters swim up into focus through the dim light – then jumped as the sheets were ripped off his head.

Dee snickered, keeping one hand over her mouth to stifle the sound in an uncanny impression of a dog from their Saturday morning cartoons. “I can’t believe it still scares you when I do that.”

“You’re gonna get us in trouble,” Buster persisted, marking his spot with the dust jacket of the book and turning out the flashlight. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

“So are you. Come on, quick. Before it’s over.”

“Before what’s over?”

“The scary movie, duh. We’re going to go watch it, too. You know.” She smirked, eyes drifting toward their bedroom door. “From the stairs. Like spies. The railing’s behind the couch, Mom and Dad will never see us.”

“Yes, they will. We’ll make shadows. And spies don’t stand on the stairs and watch scary movies. And how are we going to get past the creaky spot in the hall?”

“Wear your slippers.”

Amazed at her inability to process logic, he let his jaw hang open for a moment. “Dee, making your footsteps quieter doesn’t make you less heavy.”

Dee, undeterred, was already halfway to the door. “Slippers!”

With another sigh, Buster swung his legs over the side of the bed and nudged his feet into his slippers. As much as he wanted to argue, he knew that within moments, his sister would be out in the hall, their bedroom door would be open, and even the slightest noise would carry. So he kept his mouth shut, and followed her.

The end of the hallway was illuminated by the intermittent flicker of the television in the living room downstairs. Buster remembered something he'd read about will o' the wisps - little lights that led people on through the dark, toward trouble - and the thought brought on a sudden, very clear image of Dee collecting them in a jar, like fireflies. She had already reached the top of the stairs, having circumnavigated that dreaded creaking spot in the floor, and was motioning him forward.

Buster froze. More than once, he'd left a book downstairs on the hall table, and attempted to sneak down to get it. And more than once, his mother had heard him and hustled him back upstairs, one manicured hand bunching the shoulder of his pajamas as she led him down the hall. Every time, Tessa Heywood would inform her son that this was *The Last Time He Was Going To Get Away With This*, and Buster, not yet possessing the proper sense of parental awareness, believed her. So, getting caught by both parents, and in Dee's presence to boot, did not bode well. Not so close to Halloween, when there was also the added risk of having trick-or-treating privileges revoked. Reading under the covers after bedtime was a safe breach of conduct ... sneaking down the stairs to spy on scary movies was a severe offense. But Dee was getting impatient, and her hand-waving was a little more frenzied, now. Her eyes widened, and she jerked her head to one side. It wasn't as motivating as the time she'd dropped an ice cube down his collar, but it still sufficed.

Buster sucked up his courage and took a step forward. Very, very slowly, he brought his foot down on the floor, settling his weight down as he held his breath. Someone on television screamed, just as Buster lifted his other foot, and the effect was twofold: the sound drowned out the creaking, and the younger Heywood jumped out of his skin, stumbling forward. Wide-eyed, heart pounding, he stared at the stairway, then at Dee.

Cool as a cucumber, she smiled, nodded, and waved him on.

Buster made his way to the sanctuary of the carpet-padded stairs. Together, he and Dee crept halfway down, holding onto the bars of the railing and peering through them like anxious prisoners, until they could see the television and the tops of their parents' heads as they sat on the couch.

Whatever the person on TV had been screaming about before was gone. The scene had changed to a young boy, wandering alone through an empty home. Daylight streamed in

through the windows: the picture of safety, save for the hesitant look on the boy's face. He was looking for someone, and Buster glanced over at his sister with raised eyebrows, as if she could somehow tell him what they had both missed.

Dee shrugged, then rolled her eyes and mouthed a word that she and the other kids confined to a life in suburban Deptford tended to use often: *bor-ing*. She then crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out for good measure, before looking back to the movie.

The boy on screen had reached a library of sorts – the kind you expected in scary movies, full of old bookcases, an antique globe, portraits that seemed to follow you everywhere, and a big, wing-back chair in front of a fireplace with its back to the camera. Buster held his breath, as he'd read enough mysteries to have some idea of what to expect: nothing good. As the boy walked up, craning his neck to see around the side of the chair, Buster was of two minds on the subject: he wanted to tell the boy to run away, but at the same time, he was desperate to see what he'd find. He didn't have to wait long to know.

The camera panned at an agonizing speed, mimicking the boy's field of vision, until the occupant of the chair swung into view: the desiccated corpse of an old man. His skin was stretched tight over the bones, his eyes were long-gone, and wisps of yellow hair scraggled across the cracked remains of his scalp. He was still dressed in an argyle sweater and khakis, an old leather-bound book resting in his lap, cradled by skeletal hands.

The next thing Buster knew, he was outside, standing at the end of his block, still in his pajamas and slippers. The fall air rustled his hair and brought him back to his senses, and it occurred to him that he'd stumbled straight down the stairs, through the hall, out to the foyer, and out the front door. His parents had probably noticed Dee first – that was why he'd managed to get so far. Yet the thing that bothered him the most was not how much trouble he was going to be in ... somehow, it was that he'd run in the first place. He had no earthly idea why. And so, nine-year-old Buster Heywood, rumped and still in his pajamas, decided to take a walk and think it out.

After another block, he realized that it wasn't so much the dead man in the movie that had scared him – it was getting caught. And now that that part of the equation was inevitable, he went back to the movie itself. Three houses down the road, he was thinking about how long someone must have had to have been dead to look like that. *It probably had to be an awfully long time.*, he thought. *Someone should have noticed that the man's house had been empty, by then, especially if the door had been open long enough for a little boy to just go wandering wherever he wanted.*

For a brief moment, he considered walking up to a house and seeing if the door was open, if it held something just as grisly. But before he could give the matter any further thought, the family Cadillac pulled up to the curb, and his father leaned out the window.

“Buster. It’s ten p.m, kiddo. What’re you doing?” Bill Heywood was smiling, but the expression was strained. It seemed as though he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to hug his son or strangle him.

Buster shrugged, since the initial fear was at least a block behind him. “Walking.”

“Oh, good lord,” his father muttered under his breath. “Would you just get in the car, please? You need to get back to bed. You’re lucky you got *me*, you know. Your sister’s getting the riot act.”

With a yawn, Buster pulled the massive door of the Caddy open and slid into the passenger seat, drawing the seatbelt across his chest before ducking under it so it didn’t sit over his throat. “It was her idea to sneak out. I tried to tell her wearing slippers didn’t make her weigh less.”

“Right.” Bill furrowed his brow as he put the car back into gear and headed for the end of the block. “Listen, what you kids saw ... you know that was –“

“Not really a dead man. Just a movie. I know, Dad. It’s okay. I know I’m never gonna see any real dead people. Except maybe at funerals and that doesn’t count.”

“And yet you’re three blocks down the road in the middle of the night.”

Buster shrugged. “I was just thinking.”

From that night onward, whenever possible, Buster’s mind tended to associate walking and thinking, particularly when both activities were aimless in nature. He started walking home after school instead of taking the bus, but on days when his workload was slow, his mind and feet would both wander far off track, and he’d wind up at the gas station three blocks past his house before he realized what he’d been up to. After a few such incidents, he was put back on the bus, and his walks were confined to the weekends, when he didn’t have anywhere he needed to be. Eventually, his mother took to filling the pockets of his pants with bus tokens as she folded his laundry, so that he’d have them in case he went for a stroll. In junior high, he discovered the old rail lines that ran through Deptford and criss-crossed New Jersey, leading up into Philadelphia, and New York City, and other, far more interesting points northward. Whenever he felt his mind begin to get cluttered or murky, on went the shoes, and off he went.

It worked out well, in the long run: by the time Dee fully developed her love for horror movies, Buster had a way out of having to watch them with her. With any luck, he figured, he’d never get to see another gruesome corpse again.

## These Children That You Spit On

Most people, Ral reflected, did not have their graduation parties in an ancient textile mill. There were still streamers in Charger green and gold, and a folding table covered in crock pots and platters, to be sure, but no one else in the room was anywhere near his age. The closest, he guessed, was likely Fritz, but even that was a bit of a long shot. The jittery blonde wore a letterman's jacket that hadn't seen use on a field in decades, and seemed to be trying his best not to stare at Anaias, the courier. That left only one friendly face out of the crowd that he felt he could approach: Amelia Fauzlei in her ubiquitous straw hat, fixing herself a styrofoam cup of tea. Ral stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and slogged over.

"Congratulations, Ral." It was hard to say which was softer: her smile or the cascade of copper curls at her shoulders. She shifted her lace shawl on one shoulder before it could fall away in her juggling act with her cup and the sugar canister. "Your uncle would be so proud of you."

His polite smile turned sour before he could stop it. "Yeah." Grief and pain hissed, digging their claws into his heart. "He would've taken me somewhere else, too."

Amelia put her cup down and pulled him into a hug. He smelled comfrey, witch hazel, marshmallow, and the faintest tint of patchouli: the same scent that had carried him through that agonizing summer. "I know, I know. ... But everyone here wants to celebrate how far you've come. They can't help it that they don't know how you'd want to celebrate. This is their way. We did the same thing when I graduated: it was just as awkward and strange."

"At least your trainer wasn't -"

"Oh, hush." She stepped back and put a hand to Ral's cheek, to keep him from glaring daggers at Sabrien. "You have the same spirit. Janus was banking on that."

He drew his lips in against his teeth as he tried to read her. "Y'know, I always killed it in Debate class because I knew when someone was feedin' me bull."

She turned to retrieve her tea. "It's not a lie, Ral."

"No, but it ain't all of it, neither. Nobody tells me all of it. And it cost me ... it cost me her."

The green in Amelia's eyes was livid as she looked over her shoulder. "You wouldn't want her. There's a reason Sabrien wanted you to watch Natalie Marlowe: she's dangerous."

“Only when you piss her off by lyin’ to her, apparently.” His words tasted like brussels sprouts on the way out. He made a face to match. “All that woman did was ride me wi’ guilt and tell me what I couldn’ do. I might have a degree now, but she didn’t teach me for shite, ‘Melia.”

Amelia drew in a slow breath, looking him over with care before searching the crowd. Felicia Sabrien, sleek as ever in a black sheath dress and her cat’s eye glasses, was in conversation with a tall, tired-looking man in a tailored gray suit. “She handles our business because she’s cut out for it. Felicia’s always been ruthless, Ral. I think she may have been trying to impart a little of that armor to you. ... But I’m not above saying something that stays between you and I.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“I think she went about it entirely the wrong way. You’re not the only one unhappy with how she handled things.”

“But you said it was ... his call.” Ral’s eyes widened. He didn’t look for Janus, didn’t need or want to. “He’s ... he’s the boss.”

Amusement and concern danced a spiral in the lines around her eyes. “Why are you so afraid of him?”

His hand went to the fading scars on his forearm. “C’mon. You were the one who bandaged the damn scars.”

“That wasn’t his fault. No one saw that coming, Ral. Not a one of us.”

“So you *were* there.”

“Everyone who was in that circle is in this room. I told you: we’re proud of how far you’ve come.”

He thought of other classmates, other parties, and imagined laughter, music, joy. Something inside him spit and bristled, yowled. “Fuck pride.”

“Ral.”

“No.” His breath came out in a hot huff through clenched teeth. “Shut up. Just SHUT UP!”

Everyone on the floor fell silent and turned to watch him stalk out the door. He ignored the sting of their stares on his shoulders and stomped down the stairs to the lobby. Any other day, he would have paused to admire the ironwork his uncle had done there, but instead, he blew straight through the door behind the courier’s mail counter and out onto the loading dock. On impulse, he kicked the railing, and was rewarded with a burst of pain in his toes. A sharp snarl tore from his throat as he sat down hard on the concrete platform.

The quiet buzz of grasshoppers and hot summer air answered him. At the end of the drive, across the street, a bank of power lines hummed. Somewhere nearby, the hush of tires on

pavement marked cars moving through southern Aviaro, and a warm, useless breeze stirred the layers of Ral's hair.

"It ain't fair," he muttered to the cloudless sky. "This isn't what he said it'd be."

"Who said?"

Ral started at the voice behind him. "Crowley. Geez, you scared th' shite outta me."

"I'd say you did th' same to Amelia. Call it even." He shrugged, pulling a battered pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of his denim jacket.

Ral's lips curled. "So, what, you came out here to give me hell an' tell me to get my arse back in there?"

Crowley's blue eye narrowed, but he stared out of the green one straight and true at Ral as though he had three heads. "No, I came out here for an effing cigarette. That nursemaid of yours won't let me do it indoors if she's around. I'll tell you this: she didn't used to be such a bloody prude." He sniggered, fumbling for his lighter. "Really, though. Who said it wouldn' be like this?"

Ral shifted his legs up off the edge of the dock so he could turn and face Crowley, watching the cigarette take the flame and glow, sending the first trail of smoke up into the air. He let him take the first long drag with closed, indulgent eyes, before answering. "Uncle Duncan."

Crowley blew smoke through his nose, a dragon in denim and dyed hair. "I told 'im he shoulda waited. But he wanted you in 'fore he was gone. Sentimental idiot that he was. Wanted y' to have a family."

"That turned out so well."

"Yeah, I told 'im it would. This place ain't a family, it's a job. It's - well, what it is. What we do ain't sunshine and rainbows. Just 'cuz yer Uncle loved what he did an' was good at it, an' proud ... he thought you'd be, too, jus' like his father 'fore him was."

Ral caught the scent of the nicotine on the hot breeze and pulled it in. It burned his nostrils in a way that belonged. "Your family didn't work here before you?"

"Hell, no. Haven't had a family in ages. Janus found me after mine was long gone."

The lack of regret or grief on Crowley's face was mystifying. Envy seized Ral's struggling heart and held it tight. "How do you do it?"

He took another drag and gave a crooked grin, answering him in smoke. "Do what?"

"All of it. How do you not hate it for being so ..."

"Wicked?"

He saw the tears in Natalie's eyes, heard her voice break along with both of their hearts: an echo still far too fresh. "Something like that."

“Sometimes you gotta be wicked, Ral. Sometimes you gotta tell the nice, polite ... proper folk where to shove it.” He winked. “Y’know. ‘Fuck pride’.”

The realization was as good as praise. “You think I did the right thing.”

“Absolutely. Lot of stupid choices led to t’day, and mark my word, Janus is gonna pay ‘fer ‘em eventually. S’the way this whole business of ours works. Things even out. An’ sometimes they’re a little too good. You gotta stir up some shite, sometimes.”

Ral got to his feet, arched his back, and basked in the feeling of the sun against his closed eyelids. “Now that I’m done with school ... do I still answer to Sabrien?”

“That bitch? Christ. I’d ask for a new superior, f’I were you. Duncan even asked me if I’d do it, once.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. Told him it wasn’ my call, but yeah. We were a decent team for a bit, him and me.”

“He told me you just used to go out drinking.” Ral laughed as the pieces of his memories fell into place. “I thought you were turning him into an alcoholic or something, for a while.”

“Yeah, you hated me.” Crowley gave him a wide grin and wiggled his eyebrows, which only made Ral laugh harder. “But yeah, you can ask. Tell Janus y’want me.”

“But that means I...”

“Have t’ ask Janus. Yep. Big man in the tower.” He looked up at the looming brick spire beside them.

“I don’t want to go up there.” Ral rubbed at his arms, feeling goose pimples rise.

“Y’just need a little courage, mate. The old bird’s not so scary if you can get it together. ... ‘Course, my initiation wasn’t livin’ hell, either.”

“Ugh! You were there, too...!”

“Yeah. If we’d been able t’ talk, I would’ve taken bets. That was really somethin’.”

“Jerk.” He found himself grinning, the way his uncle had when he’d said it, and knew he’d receive the same answer.

“Always.” Crowley flicked the stub of his cigarette onto the ground and twisted it into the concrete with his boot. “Now, c’mon. You need a proper party, don’cha? I say you and me bail and go get a drink.”

It wasn’t quite what he’d yearned for, Ral knew, but it was a start. For that alone, he smiled. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

## **About The Author**

Angela D'Onofrio has been writing stories since the 2nd grade, and is not likely to stop any time soon. She and her wife, Laurel, are currently chasing their dreams in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire while herding two fluffball cats and a bratty conure. When Ang isn't putting words or pictures down on paper, you can find her out and about supporting local business, or devouring the books of her fellow independent authors.

Buy the Novels at: <http://www.angeladonofrio.com>

Email: [aviario.ct@gmail.com](mailto:aviario.ct@gmail.com)

Twitter: @AngDonofrio

[Facebook Author Page](#)