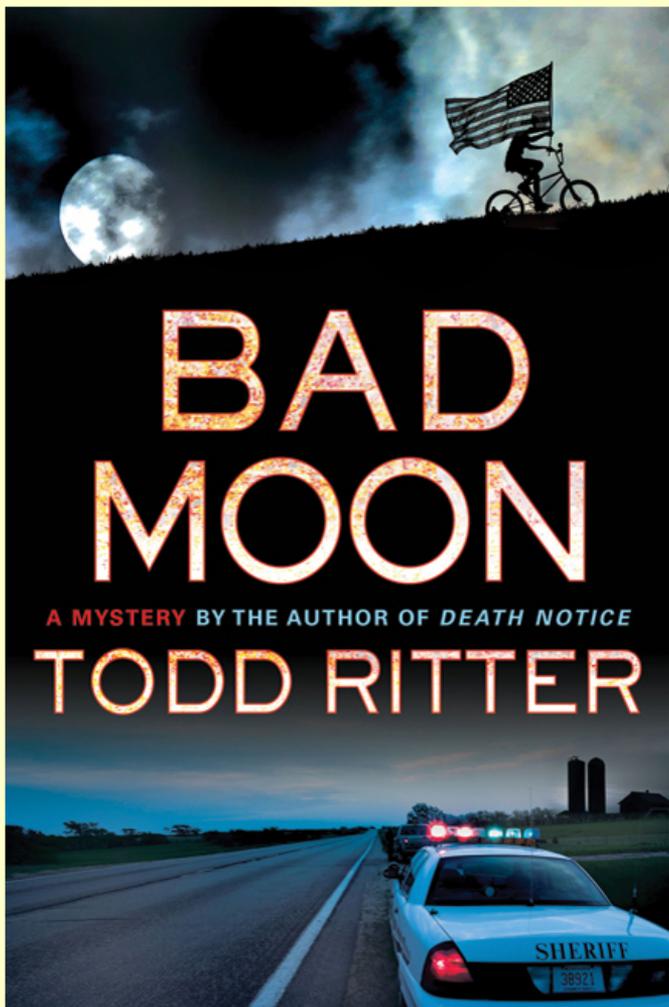


READ IT FIRST



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

BAD MOON. Copyright © 2011 by Todd Ritter. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.minotaurbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ritter Todd.

Bad moon / Todd Ritter.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-62281-7

1. Children—Crimes against—Fiction. 2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. 3. Missing persons—Fiction. 4. Small cities—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3618.I79B33 2011

813'.6—dc22

2011018799

First Edition: October 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ONE

Five minutes.

That's how much time Kat Campbell had until she needed to be out the door. Five lousy minutes to brew coffee, feed the dog, pack her son's lunch, and toast two bagels for them to eat in the car. On a good morning, all of that could be accomplished in ten minutes. But this wasn't a good morning. Not by a long shot.

The coffee was brewing so slowly it made Kat wish someone would just hurry up and invent a caffeine IV drip. One bagel was trapped in the toaster, quickly turning from golden brown to charcoal black. The other sat on the kitchen counter, waiting to meet the same fate. James's lunch so far consisted of two slices of bread and a cup of chocolate pudding. His beagle, Scooby, had already given up on the prospect of breakfast and was now chewing an empty toilet paper roll dug out of the bathroom trash.

"James? Are you almost ready?"

Kat didn't move from the kitchen counter. She was well aware how far lung power traveled in her house, and her voice would have no trouble rushing up the stairs and into her son's bedroom.

“In a minute,” James called back. It was punctuated by the sound of a dresser drawer slamming shut. Never a good sign.

“It’s the first day of school. We don’t have a minute.”

In reality, they had three, but Kat was too busy making his lunch to correct herself. She slapped some cold cuts on the bread, coated it with mustard, and dropped it into a Ziploc bag. This was tossed into James’s lunchbox with the pudding, a granola bar, and milk money. Then it was on to the bagels. The one stuck in the toaster was freed with some shaking, tapping, and the strategic use of a butter knife. The untoasted one remained that way.

Next came Scooby, who had dropped the toilet paper roll into his dinner bowl, presumably to make Kat feel just a bit more neglectful. She replaced it with kibble, refilled his water dish, and let him go to town.

By that time, the coffeemaker was squeezing out a few last drops. Kat grabbed the pot and poured half of it into a thermos. She was done, with a minute to spare.

Pausing to catch her breath, she turned to the small television sitting on the kitchen counter. James sometimes watched cartoons on it while eating breakfast on Saturday mornings. That day, it was turned to CNN, where a blandly handsome anchor was sharing breaking news.

“The space race has officially restarted,” he said. “Early today, the China National Space Administration successfully launched its first manned voyage to the moon.”

The screen switched from the anchor to a clip of China’s president hailing the launch. That was followed by footage of the launch itself—a distant shot of an ivory tower streaking across the sky. After that was a view of Tiananmen Square, where thousands of spectators cheered.

“As the entire nation watched, three Chinese astronauts took off for the moon. They are expected to reach it Friday afternoon. A successful mission would make China only the second country, after the United States, to send a man to the moon. It would also be the first time since 1972 that man has set foot on the moon’s surface.”

Kat checked her watch. Time was up. Switching off the TV, she called upstairs once more. “James, we’ve got to go. Even if you’re still naked, we’re leaving this house.”

Two seconds later, her son stomped into the kitchen wearing jeans, a Phillies T-shirt, and sneakers. The clothes and shoes were new. And expensive. At first, Kat had balked at spending so much on back-to-school clothes, but James swore up and down that he needed them to fit in. Kat realized, sadly, it was most likely true. James was entering fifth grade, a tough year for any kid, let alone one with Down syndrome. But he was a smart boy, able to keep up with the others in his class, and so far he had made it through elementary school with a minimum of teasing. In order to keep it that way, Kat was willing to shell out for new clothes. And sneakers. And a backpack, even though the one James had used last year was in perfectly good condition.

The only holdover was his lunch box, which featured characters from the movie *Cars*. Kat had assumed James would want a newer, cooler one, just like everything else. But when he didn’t mention it, she didn’t bring it up. She was all too happy to save a few bucks and pack his lunch inside good old Lightning McQueen.

Yet when Kat handed him the lunch box, James looked at her like she had just grown a second head.

“What’s this?”

“Your lunch. Or at least something that resembles lunch.”

James wasn't amused. "Fifth graders don't use lunch boxes."

"I didn't get that memo. And we don't have time to deal with it now."

"But I'll look stupid," James protested as he slung his backpack over his shoulder.

"You didn't look stupid last year."

"But that was fourth grade. It was cool in fourth grade."

"And you'll be cool tomorrow." Kat handed him his bagel and nudged him toward the back door. "But today it's either the lunch box or no lunch at all."

James sighed dramatically. It had become his usual way of demonstrating that he was right and she was wrong. Whenever she heard it, Kat felt a twinge of nostalgia for the boy who used to think everything she did was wonderful.

Once James was out the door, she reached for a small rack on the wall behind it. One hook contained the keys to her patrol car. The other held her holster. Kat removed both, putting the keys in her pocket and the holster around her waist. Below the rack was a small safe that contained her Glock. She opened it, removed the gun, and checked the safety before quickly sliding it into her holster. Then she grabbed her own bagel and thermos and left the house.

Although James didn't bring up the lunch box again during the drive to school, he was certainly thinking about it. He spent the entire trip staring at it with resignation and, Kat sensed, no small amount of trepidation. He was nervous, which was understandable. Kat was nervous, too. She remembered entering the fifth grade and discovering how different it was from the previous year. It was the same way with sixth grade. And

then junior high, which was a whole other world of cliques, peer pressure, and petty cruelties.

“You’ll be fine, Little Bear,” she said as they approached the school. “And we’ll brown-bag your lunch tomorrow.”

James’s nervous gaze moved from the lunch box to Kat. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

After sending James off with a peck on the cheek that he quickly wiped away, Kat headed to work. Perry Hollow’s police station sat a few blocks southeast of the school, but instead of taking a shortcut to get there, she turned onto Main Street and drove its entire length. Taking her time, she scanned the quaint shops and restaurants that lined both sides of the thoroughfare.

They were the heart of Perry Hollow now that the lumber mill that had given the town its name was gone. Part of her job as police chief was to make sure that heart was beating strongly. If Big Joe’s, the town’s de facto Starbucks, was closed, it meant something was wrong with its aged proprietor, Ellen Faye, and that Kat needed to check up on her. When passing Awesome Blossoms, the flower shop, she made a point to note the presence of its delivery van, which had been stolen in the past.

It was still too early for most of the businesses to be open, but the lights were on at Big Joe’s, which meant Ellen was still chugging along. The same was true at the Perry Hollow Diner, where pickup trucks outnumbered cars in the parking lot by a three-to-one margin. And sitting in front of Awesome Blossoms was a white Ford delivery van.

The sight made Kat sigh with relief, considering the hell the

town went through when it was stolen. Almost a year had passed since the end of those dark days, and Perry Hollow seemed to have gotten over the worst of it.

For the most part, Kat and James had, too.

Once she finished the inspection of Main Street, Kat maneuvered the Crown Vic down a side street and into the police station's parking lot. Two other cars were already there. One was a patrol car similar to her own. That was driven by her deputy, Carl Bauersox, who was finishing up his usual night shift. The other was a Volkswagen Beetle that belonged to Louella van Sickle, the station's dispatcher, secretary, cleaning lady, and all-around indispensable presence.

When Kat entered the station, Lou was already at her desk. She eyed the thermos and blackened bagel in Kat's hands.

"Stuck in the toaster again?"

"Yup," Kat said. "It was one of those mornings. I predict the coffee sucks, too."

She took a sip, proving herself right. The coffee was far too strong, with a bitter aftertaste that stuck in the back of her throat.

Lou shook her gray-haired head. "Bad coffee. Burned bagels. You need a man in that house."

"And you," Kat said, "need to get your mind out of the fifties."

Lou, who had been married for forty-three years, took it as a compliment.

"Call me old-fashioned, but I like not having to worry about making the coffee in the morning. Al does that. And he fixes the toilet. And mows the lawn. Plus, he's still pretty good in the bed department."

Kat didn't need to know that. Nor did she need a man,

despite Lou's insistence otherwise. She had enough on her plate already—job, son, dog. There wasn't any room on her schedule for finding and keeping a mate.

"All I'm saying is keep an open mind," Lou told her. "One of these days, the perfect man could walk through that door and you'd dismiss him immediately."

At that moment, a man did walk through the door. But Carl Bauersox, who was nice enough, wasn't Kat's type. Plus, he was married, with two kids and another on the way.

"Do you make coffee?" Lou asked him.

Carl answered with a nod. "And I fix the toilet and mow the lawn."

"So you heard our conversation."

"Yes," Carl said, his baby face growing red. "But I don't want to talk about the bed stuff."

"That's fine," Lou said. "I'll call your wife and ask her."

The deputy looked mortified, as if she'd actually do it. Lou didn't help matters by reaching for the phone. Kat beat her to it, pressing palm to receiver and assuring Carl that no calls would be made to his wife about their sex life. Ever.

"How was your shift?" she asked him. "Anything to report?"

"Not really. Speeding ticket on Old Mill Road. The Wellington kid again."

Kat arched an eyebrow. "That's his third ticket in four months, right?"

"Yup," Carl said. "I can't wait until they suspend his license so I can take a break from writing the darn things."

"And nothing else suspicious?" Kat asked. "Nothing at all?"

She knew she was being paranoid. If something had been amiss during the night, Carl would have told her about it. But

she needed to be thorough, especially after the events of the previous year. Once a town goes through the experience of having a serial killer on the loose, it's hard to return to the way things were.

Carl laid a hand on her shoulder. "Relax, Chief, everything is fine. Now I'm going to go home and give my wife something to brag to Lou about."

His uncharacteristic stab at bawdy humor made Kat laugh out loud. Lou did her one better: she catcalled at him. Blushing even more than before, Carl waved weakly and left the station.

"That's what I'm talking about," Lou said. "You need a Carl."

"What I need is a toaster oven and a gift certificate to Big Joe's."

Kat grabbed her bitter coffee and burned bagel and headed to her office. She took two steps before being stopped by another man entering the station.

"Chief Campbell. Just who I wanted to see."

Once again, it wasn't Prince Charming. In fact, Burt Hammond, the town's mayor, was the complete opposite of charming. He was tall, slightly over six feet, and as fit as someone in his early sixties could be. Yet an aura of sleaze always seemed to surround him. Maybe it was his too-white smile. Or the spray-on tan that made him the same shade as a glazed ham. Or the fact that he was a lawn mower salesman who just happened to be holding a half-price sale on election day. He won by a landslide.

Kat didn't have to deal with him very much, which was good, because she didn't like him very much, either. She had learned through the grapevine—in which Lou van Sickle was the head grape—that Mayor Hammond felt the same about

her. On the occasions when they were forced to meet, their conversations were terse but cordial.

Widening his lips into that fake grin that seemed to afflict all politicians, Burt said, “Sorry for the intrusion, but I was wondering if I could have a word in private.”

“Sure thing.” Kat led him to her office and settled behind her desk. “What can I do for you, Burt?”

The mayor remained standing, hands behind his back, head bowed ever-so-slightly. From her seat, Kat had a dead-on view of the prominent mole on his chin. Burt had been known for the mole long before he was known as the mayor. Roughly the size of a dime, it wasn’t unsightly, nor was it particularly dark. It was just so large that, once you spotted it, you couldn’t stop looking at it. Plus, it made Burt instantly recognizable, a fact he capitalized on in ad campaigns for his lawn mower dealership. There was even talk that the real mole had been removed years ago and that Burt now sported a fake one just so he’d still be recognized.

“We’ve been doing some number crunching,” he said. “Just trying to see where we stand before digging in and starting the budget for next year. You know the drill.”

Kat was well acquainted with submitting requests for more staff, better equipment, new patrol cars. Every year, all but the smallest requests were turned down on the excuse that money was tight across the board and that every department had to share the burden. So while she and Carl got to drink from a new watercooler, their eight-year-old Crown Vics would have to spend another twelve months on the road.

“This year,” Burt continued, “you’re asking for new patrol cars.”

“New Dodge Chargers,” Kat added.

Top-of-the-line ones at that. The department in Mercerville, the next town over, got some two years ago. They were sleek and safe and fast as hell, an asset Kat never really thought was necessary until the events of last year.

“Unfortunately,” Burt said, “you’re not getting them. There’s just not enough money in the budget. Nor is there any money for a new hire, even though you’ve made it abundantly clear that you want another officer in the ranks.”

“I *need* another officer.”

Burt never stopped smiling. Kat had seen more sincere grins on corpses, and she wanted to wipe it off Burt’s face with the back of her hand.

“I’m just doing my job,” he said.

“And I’m doing mine. Which is looking out for my department.”

“This isn’t just about your department. We’re all making sacrifices here.”

The word made Kat roll her eyes. “Sacrifices? Talk to the families of the people who died last year. They’ll tell you all about sacrifice, Burt.”

“I know things were bad—”

“It was a serial killer.” Kat spoke slowly, elongating every word. “Living in this town. And every day I think about the lives I could have saved if there had been one more cop on the streets.”

“Considering that death toll, you should feel lucky to still have a job at all.”



BAD MOON

BUY THE BOOK NOW

**Amazon
Barnes & Noble
IndieBound**

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BOOK

macmillan.com

