

An Easy Taylor Mystery

Denial

By Roland Keller



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 7, 2017

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ISBN: 978-0-9651928-2-8
(ebook, 281 pages)
\$6.75

The third in Roland Keller's Easy Taylor Mystery series, *Denial* By Roland Keller. Private investigator Easy Taylor solves the mystery and finds himself in denial.

When private investigator, inveterate gambler, and wannabe writer Easy Taylor is hired by Paso Fino breeder and importer Raul Mendosa to investigate the death of a farmhand the police say was accidental, Easy is drawn into a deal with *Books of the Dead* author and stallion owner Justin Case only to find himself embroiled in a mix-up of corpses that forces him into a horseback trek into the wintry wilderness.

Roland Keller is the longtime editor of the literary tabloid, *PKA's Advocate*, and author of *Straw Man* and the other two 'Easy Taylor' mysteries, *Pardee Holler* and *Nature of the Beast*. He and his wife Patricia live in the Catskill Mountains of New York.

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The Plunge

As he made his way up the hill, Hector Ortiz thought he could see the mares in the near distance just beyond the snow laden stone wall. They stood dark and stoic against the cold, mere shadows in the dim predawn light, barely discernible against the pale, moonlit snow. But the more he looked, the less the immobile shadows seemed to be the mares, just darker places in the rock strewn pasture.

The slope steepened and large stone outcrops jutted barefaced from the snow. Ortiz mused that, if he were a giant, the layered Catskill bluestone outcrops would be like huge steps and he could climb the hill with ease. He had the same thought each time he made the climb.

Continuing to trudge uphill, he labored in his heavily insulated coveralls. They fit just a bit too snugly across his chest, constricting his breathing and, with the cold air, making him near breathless. The crunching of the frozen snow and the rasping of his breathing filled his ears. Fifty yards along, he had to stop. As he recouped, he listened for the telltale susurrus and thud of the mares' hooves if they were on the move through the snow or the snort that would tell him they were aware of his presence, but the silence was punctuated only by the occasional rattle of a bare tree limb catching the slight air movement high above the snow.

At times like this, Ortiz both hated and loved the frigid air and the peaceful quiet of the mountain. He revelled in the beauty, but missed the warmth of his home outside San Juan, Puerto Rico. So many contrasts here, so many wonders, so many difficulties, so cold. But he got paid well, better than at the horse farm where he had worked before coming here, and here the horses were respected and treated with kindness.

And until now, here on this farm in these mountains he

had believed he was away from the gangs, the drug dealings, and the violence of his homeland. But it seemed trouble had indeed followed him. The drugs were here, too. And he knew that could only lead to violence. He did not know what to do, whether to remain silent or to go to the authorities. If he kept his secret, perhaps no one would know he knew. If he spoke up, he might become the target for revenge. But if they already knew he knew...

He resumed his trek.

With each step, Ortiz landed his boots into yesterday's footprints, avoiding having to make a new path through the foot-deep snow in favor of the packed path his daily climb had formed since the last snowfall. His deeper tracks were criss-crossed with the paw prints of coyotes hunting in the night and with yesterday afternoon's arrow shaped turkey tracks that always seemed to him like arrows pointing back in the direction from which the turkeys had come.

A few more steps, and he could hear the gurgling of the icy cold spring water splashing into the huge covered cistern that sat upon a broad, flat rock protruding from the slope. The water flowed constantly, emanating from beneath a mossy rock.

It reminded him of the Old Testament story told to him in the old church Sunday school about how God told Moses to speak to a rock and it would give forth water for the thirsty, wandering children of Israel. When in his frustration with his followers, Moses struck the rock with his staff, it so offended God that Moses was forbidden to enter the Promised Land. Ortiz gleaned two morals from that story. The first was that violent reactions were a bad idea. The second was that springs are a miracle from God and must be respected. That alone was enough to make this daily chore worth the effort. It was the closest Ortiz ever came to worshipping.

The excess of crystal clear water in the cistern flowed to a

smaller tank and from there into a network of pipes that fed the troughs in the several paddocks, providing each with a constant flow of fresh water for the horses. The cistern itself had a single, large pipe coming out of its lowest portion, the water running to the residence and always flowing in the small fountain in the residence's foyer. Without this constant flow into the troughs, the three workmen at the stable would have to carry buckets of water from the well house to the horses several times each day to satisfy the horses' daily ten gallons of thirst. It was an irksome chore that he and the other two had had to do during last summer's dry spell when the rains failed to replenish the spring beyond the needs of the household.

But now that the fall rains had been abundant and the dormant forest no longer drinking, the spring was strong, and it was Hector Ortiz's task to check the system early each morning before feeding the horses and late each afternoon after the last feeding of the day to make sure nothing interfered with the flow so that none of the pipes would freeze. He never ceased to marvel at the sophisticated simplicity of the system.

"Water always flows downhill," Mendosa had explained to him. "All we have to do is direct it. As long as God provides the water, we need only provide the containers and the pipes. And keep them clear so the water never stands still and freezes."

Ortiz could not comprehend what kept the cold, clear water from freezing in this dreadfully cold weather. Fifteen degrees Fahrenheit was to him an unimaginably cold temperature before he came north to these mountains a few years ago. Now it was routine, even in mid-December before real winter arrived. Still, the prospect of even deeper cold and deeper snow worried him, just as it always did. What if he slipped, knocked his head and lost consciousness? How long could a man survive outside in this whiteness without help if he were hurt? He reminded himself that his compadres Miguel and Diego knew he was outside doing his morning chores and

that, if he failed to be at the table for breakfast, they surely would notice and somebody would come searching for him.

Or he would die.

He told himself not to think such thoughts, to banish them, that they would invite trouble.

Approaching the cistern, he stopped to listen. The water sang off key, telling him even before he looked inside that something needed attention. He lifted the heavy, ice encrusted lid. To see better in the darker interior, he closed his eyes, counted to ten, then opened them.

A small, blackened leaf partially blocked the overflow outlet, causing the level of the water to rise gradually, threatening to spill over the rim and create an icy sheet on the snow. It would make the afternoon approach to the spring devilishly tricky, maybe impossible.

Ortiz cursed quietly, irritated that now he would have to remove his glove and reach his bare fingers into the numbing cold water to clear away the leaf. He propped open the lid with a stick, pulled the insulated glove from his right hand, planted his feet as solidly as he could, and leaned well over the water to reach the leaf.

So suddenly were his legs lifted backwards that he did not have time to scream before he splashed into the biting cold water, shocking him into a gasp that filled his lungs with the frigid liquid fire. In mere seconds, he lost consciousness, stopped his futile struggle for a handhold, and heard a welcoming chorus of angels singing him to heaven.

Uncorrected, the excess water rose in the cistern, breached the rim, flowed over the edge and onto the stone, freezing into a quietly, inexorably growing glacier.