

A black and white photograph of hands holding a wooden cross. The hands are positioned as if they are holding the cross together. A small red dot is visible on the left hand. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the hands and the wood of the cross.

DELUSIONAL

The Toni Barston Series

Terri
Breneman

Delusional

TERRI BRENNEMAN



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Other Titles
by
Terri Breneman

Anticipation

Borderline

Compulsion

About the Author

Terri Breneman was born and raised in a suburb of Kansas City. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and Sociology from Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas. While living in Germany, she earned a Master's degree in Counseling. As a psychotherapist she specialized in Borderline Personality Disorders and worked with high-risk adolescents, juvenile sex offenders and their victims. She also worked with a multiple personality disorder client for one year. She decided to change careers and graduated from St. Louis University School of Law. After one year of private practice, she was fortunate enough to find her current position as a Research and Writing Attorney working in federal criminal law. She also supervises students earning their Master's degrees in Social Work.

Delusional: The presence of one or more nonbizarre delusions that persist for at least one month. Psychosocial behavior is not markedly impaired. Grandiose delusions may have a religious content such as the person who believes that he or she has received a special message from God.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed., Text Revision. Washington, D.C. American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.323-325.

Chapter 1

“I can’t believe he stole asparagus. I mean, who steals vegetables?” Toni Barston shook her head. As an assistant prosecuting attorney at the Fairfield Metropolitan Prosecutor’s Office, she’d seen her share of burglars.

“Are you sure it was him?” Victoria “Boggs” Boggsworth was standing next to Toni. She was the top investigator in the prosecutor’s office and Toni’s lover and partner for about a year now.

“Well, I suppose he could have been framed, but he was standing right next to it in the living room and I sure as hell didn’t put it there, did you?” She was both amused and frustrated.

Boggs laughed as she picked up their seven-month-old kitten, Little Tuffy. He was a tiny little guy, but very tough, hence his name. His gray fur was medium length, his chest and four paws fluffy white. His tail was only about two inches long, having been amputated before they rescued him. It looked like a little propeller when he was excited or naughty, which was often.

Boggs ruffled his fur and put him back down. He flew across the hardwood floor in the living room, his feet sliding and skidding as he went.

Toni picked up the single spear of asparagus from the floor and chuckled. “Look. He actually chewed it.”

“That is so bizarre. What kind of cat eats asparagus? Where was it anyway?” Boggs asked, looking at the gnawed vegetable.

“It was in the colander in the sink. I’d just washed it for dinner.” She turned and pointed toward the kitchen, thinking as she did so, that it was a ridiculous gesture. *Like she doesn’t know where our kitchen is? Jeez.* A slight movement caught her eye. “Little Tuffy!”

The little thief was pulling on yet another spear of asparagus, and at the sound of Toni’s voice, he yanked harder, the spear almost as big as he was. He jumped off the black granite countertop and scurried across the floor, the asparagus still in his mouth. He was dragging it between his legs, struggling with his treasure as he tried to run faster. As Boggs attempted to intercept him, he dropped the stolen goods and bolted up the stairs.

“We’ve got a *real* cat burglar here.” Boggs laughed as she picked up the second piece of asparagus from the kitchen floor. “I guess we’re going to have to be careful of what we leave out. Mr. Rupert never does that.” She rubbed the giant head of their other cat who was sitting on the island in the kitchen, washing his face. The twenty-plus pound cat looked at her with a bored expression.

“Mr. Rupert is more subtle than that,” Toni said proudly. “And when *he* does something, he plans ahead. For example, if he’d have stolen a spear, he’d just lay on it and we’d never see it.”

Mr. Rupert seemed a tad bit offended by the comment regarding his girth, but he ignored them and began to bathe himself in a determined and noisy sort of way. Toni kissed his head.

They finished preparing their dinner of grilled chicken, wild rice and steamed asparagus, minus two spears. After eating,

they took their large glasses of Riesling and headed up to their rooftop deck. They'd purchased this three-story brick building in the warehouse district about four months ago and had taken full advantage of this outdoor space. There was a Jacuzzi in one corner and several chairs, plus a table on the far side. The backs of their chairs could be fully reclined so they could gaze at the stars without severe neck pain. They each sat and stretched out their legs.

"I can't believe how warm it still is for the first of November," Toni said.

"I know. This is great. Sweatshirt weather. I could easily live with this until Thanksgiving," Boggs replied. "Then I'd like it to be really cold for a day. You know, to get into the holiday mood?" She laughed. "You don't think I'm being too specific for Mother Earth, do you?"

"Absolutely not. It works for me." Toni sipped her wine, then glanced to her left. "Hey, look. He's working on his loft again." She pointed to the building across the alley and down one from their home. From their vantage point, they were just a little higher than the third floor and since there were no window treatments over there, they had a clear view of the man. If they leaned over the short wall that surrounded their rooftop deck, they could see one entire side of his house.

Boggs reached behind her chair and picked up a small black leather case. She pulled out a pair of binoculars. "It looks like he's taping the walls to paint."

"Again?" Toni leaned closer, straining to see what the man was doing. "He just painted last week." She glanced at Boggs and chuckled. "And you're cracking me up with those binoculars. When did you bring them up here?"

"Last week," she said, adjusting them. "Maybe he didn't like the color."

"I guess. That's a lot of work, though." Toni took another sip of wine.

"He seems nice, don't you think?" Boggs asked. "A little shy, but nice."

“Shy?” Toni put down her glass. “I wouldn’t classify him as shy. He seemed kind of strange to me. I talked to him for at least ten minutes. And I thought you said his name was Joe.”

“Yeah, Joe Jackson. Why?”

“I met him by the Dumpster in the alley and he introduced himself as J. I thought I’d misunderstood, so I repeated it and he said yes, just plain J, one letter.”

“Hmm. Maybe it’s his nickname. He obviously felt more chummy with you than me.”

“I suppose. I’m just a chummy kind of gal.”

“He was probably hitting on you,” Boggs said, adjusting the focus on the binoculars. “If I were him, I’d hit on you.”

A buzz interrupted them and Boggs reached down to press the button for the intercom at the front door. “Yes?”

“Hey, you guys it’s me, Vicky. Buzz me in unless you’re not in a position to do so at this moment. But if that’s the case, buzz me in anyway and I’ll make myself at home in the basement.”

Boggs pushed the button again. “We’re up on the roof.” She pushed a second button on the elaborate security system, allowing their visitor to open the front door. Vicky Carter was a Fairfield Police Detective, senior grade, and longtime friend. She appeared on the deck a few minutes later, holding a cold beer.

“Help yourself to a beer,” Boggs said, grinning.

“Thanks so much. I think I will.” Vicky sat in the chair next to Toni, twisted open the bottle and sighed. “What a crappy day. What’s wrong with the world?” She tossed the bottle cap into an empty planter.

The comment surprised Toni because Vicky was normally very upbeat, seldom letting anything get her down. She’d had a brush with death about a year ago and never complained. She still had a visible scar across her neck, but she never covered it or seemed to give it much thought. For her to be bitter about anything was entirely out of character.

“What’s wrong, hon?” Toni reached out and gently touched her leg.

Vicky sighed again and took a long swallow of beer. “I just

came from a hideous crime scene.” She closed her eyes, her body shuddering. “The victim was one of the bartenders at The Cat’s Meow, Maggie.”

The Cat’s Meow was a popular lesbian bar just around the corner. Toni had chatted with Maggie only a few days ago and complimented her on her new hairdo. “Holy crap, Vicky. What happened?”

Vicky drained her beer and stared at the empty bottle, her eyes probably seeing an image far more sinister than a beer label. She didn’t answer.

“Tell you what,” Boggs said. “I’ll get you another beer if you promise to spend the night.” After Vicky slowly nodded, Boggs gently removed the empty from her clenched hand and disappeared downstairs. She returned a few minutes later with a large bucket containing ice, four beers and a wine bottle. She opened a beer for Vicky and refilled Toni’s glass and her own.

Vicky downed half the beer before raising her gaze to meet Toni’s. “She was... she was stoned to death.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Toni scooted her chair a little closer, draped her arm around Vicky’s shoulders and noticed that tears were rolling down her cheek. Vicky’s expression seemed to be a mixture of disbelief, grief and disgust at the state of humankind. Just seeing that display of emotion from her friend caused Toni to blink back her own tears. “Oh, God, Vic. I’m so sorry.” She pulled a Kleenex from the pocket of her sweatshirt jacket and pressed it into Vicky’s hand.

Vicky took a long, deep breath, wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt, blew her nose and sat up straight. She tossed back the rest of her beer and smiled faintly. She cleared her throat before speaking. “Thanks. God, it was a mess. This one is really hitting me hard.” She took another deep breath before continuing. “Maggie was apparently zapped with a stun gun first. He put duct tape on her mouth and then taped her to a chair in her own damn living room. Then this monster literally stoned her to death.”

“Oh, my, God.” Toni was stunned, shaking her head in

disbelief. She thought of Maggie being absolutely terrorized and the image made her sick to her stomach. *Who could do such a thing?* She struggled to understand the absolute inhumanity of this insane act. It made no sense. None.

“Is there any decent evidence?” Boggs was leaning forward in her chair and her words broke the silence, bringing Toni back to reality.

“It doesn’t look like there’s much. He must have been wearing gloves, but get this. He brought his own fucking rock! Oh, and he left a Bible. Nice touch.” Vicky reached for another beer. Her entire body shuddered, as if in an attempt to shake the killer’s energy from her own.

“Shit. What kind of maniac does that?” Boggs leaned back in her chair and the three were silent for several more minutes. The gravity of what had happened made the air feel heavy around them. “Any leads?” Boggs finally asked.

“Nothing solid yet. We took Maggie’s laptop in for the tech guys. And then there’s the duct tape, the rock and Bible. The lab guys seemed to do a very thorough job. It looks like the guy might have showered afterward, so we pulled the drain for evidence.” She sighed. “We talked to neighbors, but no one heard or saw a thing. I left a couple uniforms there to knock on some doors where no one was home earlier. We’ll see if anything comes from that.” She took another gulp of her beer. “Damn, days like this make me question my career choice.”

“I know, Vic.” Toni touched her arm. “But you’re damn good at what you do and you’ve helped so many people. Just sit here a while with us and decompress.”

Vicky nodded, leaned back in her chair and stretched out her legs. She glanced across the alley after taking another long pull on her beer. “Is he painting again?”

“Yeah,” Toni said, glancing over at the loft.

“Have you met him?”

“We both have,” Boggs said. “I think he’s kind of shy, but Toni doesn’t think so.”

“What’s his name and does he have a record?”

“His name is Joe Jackson,” Toni said, chuckling. “And I have no idea if he’s got a record or not.”

They continued to watch the man tape his walls, passing the binoculars back and forth. As Vicky handed them back to Boggs for the third time, she laughed. “This is pretty Peeping Tom-ish, don’t you think?”

“I like to think of it more as a neighborhood watch program,” Boggs said.

Vicky shook her head, smiling. “Hmm,” she said, glancing at her watch. “I guess I should give Claire a call. She should be home by now.”

“How is Claire, doctor extraordinaire?” Toni asked. Even though the feeling of Maggie’s murder was still with them, she was glad the topic had changed.

“She’s great,” Vicky said, smiling just a bit. “You know, I’ve never had much luck at long-term relationships.” She sipped at her third beer. “But now that you mention it, we have been dating almost four months. I think that’s a record for me.” “Would you like to bring her over for Thanksgiving? We’re having quite the feast. We’re cooking the turkey, mashers, cauliflower surprise, broccoli-rice casserole and pumpkin chiffon pie. But if you show up, you have to bring something.”

“I’ll see if Claire has to work or if she’s planning something with her family. But count me in for sure. I’ll probably bring an apple pie. Who else is coming?”

“Who isn’t coming would be easier,” Boggs said. “Toni invited everyone we’ve ever met.”

“Oh, be quiet.” Toni leaned over and kissed Boggs on the cheek before looking back at Vicky. “I made out the invitations last night, but since you’re here I’ll give you yours and save a stamp.”

“Well, God knows you two need to watch your money.”

Boggs grinned and shrugged. “Hey, every penny counts.” Vicky was the only one of their friends who knew that Boggs was a millionaire several times over. She’d inherited about five hundred thousand dollars when she was eighteen from an eccentric great

aunt. Over the years she'd invested wisely and at forty years old, she was more than comfortable. The purchase of the house had been her first expenditure. And although they had the ability to be extravagant, she and Toni lived on their incomes.

Vicky's cell phone rang. "Speak of the devil. It's Claire."

Toni looked at Boggs and motioned with her head. "We're going downstairs Vicky, take your time." She pulled a reluctant Boggs out of her chair and they went down to the kitchen on the first floor.

"Why'd we come in?" Boggs asked.

"Because she needed some privacy." Toni rinsed their glasses and put them in the dishwasher. "She's had a really emotional night and a few beers. Did you really want to overhear that conversation?"

Boggs wrapped her arms around Toni and pulled her close. "Yeah, you're right. It might have gotten a little raunchy." She kissed Toni's neck. "And it's none of our business." Her hand slid under Toni's shirt. "And I've got better things to do."

Toni pulled away, a little breathless. "I hate to stop a good thing, but, hello... we've got company."

Boggs dropped her hands and grinned before giving Toni a long kiss. "Can't blame a girl for trying." She got a bottle of water for each of them and led Toni into the living room. "Let's just sit here on the couch and wait for Vic to come down. I'll even turn on the fireplace." She laughed. "I still can't get used to being able to literally 'turn on' the fireplace."

Toni waited until Boggs had hit the remote for the fire, then curled up next to her on the couch. It was a large cream color microfiber sofa with down-filled cushions that were soft and comfy. A matching loveseat was near the fireplace with two club chairs made of a worn brown leather to round out the seating. Three oversized ottomans were pushed up against the wall. There were several lamps in the living room, but they were turned off. The only light came from the fireplace and the 55-gallon fish tank on the far wall.

"Want me to turn on the television?" Boggs asked.

Toni glanced at their large flat screen mounted above the fireplace. “Nah. Let’s just sit here and enjoy the fire.” She snuggled a little closer to Boggs. “I can’t believe what happened to Maggie.”

Boggs put her arm around Toni. “I know, babe. I know.”

Toni cringed at the image in her mind. The thought of someone being literally stoned to death was almost beyond comprehension. She’d heard of some horrific things in her life, both as an attorney and as a psychotherapist, but this act of violence hit her hard. It was brutal and senseless, indicating to her a mind that had fallen off the edge of sanity. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly in an attempt to let go of that negative energy. Boggs squeezed her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. She felt a little better just being this close to Boggs.

Mr. Rupert ambled into the room a moment later and hopped up on the couch, plopping down on her lap. He never seemed to notice that his twenty-plus pounds made him a little too big to be a lap cat. Little Tuffy bounded into the room after his brother and joined them on the couch. After Mr. Rupert glared at him, Little Tuffy apparently took the hint that Toni’s lap was not available and instead draped himself over Boggs’s free arm.

“We’re safe here,” Boggs whispered after the boys had settled in. She pulled Toni even closer and the four of them waited in silence for Vicky to come back downstairs.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

