

WHAT TIME DEVOURS

A. J. Hartley



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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PRAISE FOR ON THE FIFTH DAY

“Terrific plotting, first-rate suspense. *On the Fifth Day* is a ripping good read.”
—Kathy Reichs, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Cross Bones*

“Not only is Hartley’s novel well paced, with enough twists and turns to keep most thriller fans satisfied, he avoids the missteps of most attempts to cash in on *The Da Vinci Code* zeitgeist by focusing on the faithful rather than freewheeling conspiracies . . . this slam-bang title is a very fun, surprisingly satisfying read.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Full of historical mystery, rife with intrigue and suspense . . . a tour de force sure to keep pages turning deep into the night . . . A. J. Hartley is a rare discovery: a writer capable of challenging a reader as much as he thrills.”
—James Rollins, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Black Order*

PRAISE FOR THE MASK OF ATREUS

“*The Mask of Atreus* is the perfect debut—a high-octane thriller crammed full of long-buried secrets, treacherous betrayals, jaw-dropping twists, and a healthy dash of romance. Deborah Miller is an engaging, sympathetic heroine, who you can’t help but root for. Move over Michael Crichton—A. J. Hartley is right at your heels.”

—J. A. Konrath, author of *Fuzzy Navel*

“Rich with historical and archaeological detail, this well-constructed debut . . . celebrates the power of legend while delivering an engrossing mystery that skips nimbly between continents and cultures . . . This intricate and absorbing thriller augurs well for Hartley’s career.”—*Publishers Weekly*

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—Phillip DePoy, author of *The Fever Devilin Mysteries*

“Terrific . . . A. J. Hartley provides a fabulous whodunit made fresh by its deep historical and archaeological base and an endearing heroine.”—*Midwest Book Review*

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ON THE FIFTH DAY
WHAT TIME DEVOURS

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*To Bill, Jim, and all the teachers, colleagues, and students
who have shaped my love of Shakespeare.*

*To my wife and son,
and to the memory of Ira Yarmolenko (1988-2008):*

*“I hope that when you are reborn,
you are born as a snowflake . . .”*

What is love? 'tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure:
In delay there lies no plenty;
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

—SHAKESPEARE, *TWELFTH NIGHT*

PART I

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

—Shakespeare, "Sonnet 65"

CHAPTER 1

Thomas Knight froze, one hand on the coffeepot, the other extended to the faucet over the sink. It was still dark outside and the kitchen light should show only a fringe of green from the yew in the yard, but there was something else. Something at the window. He wasn't sure if he'd gotten a flash of it in the reflection from the percolator, or caught a glimpse with the corner of his eye, but he knew something was there, something strange. Something *wrong*.

He stood there motionless for three or four seconds, as if waiting for it to move, but he knew it wouldn't and that he would have to turn and look directly at it. Right now it was just an impression of colors that shouldn't be there—a pale oval touched with yellow and red—sharp against the blackness of the yard beyond, but when he looked at it, it would take shape and meaning. He didn't want to look.

He turned to it slowly, and even though he wasn't surprised, the fact of the thing almost made him cry out. A woman's face was pressed up to the glass.

Her eyes were wide, like she was staring at him, but Thomas didn't wave her away, or threaten to call the police. There was something too fixed and vacant about the eyes. They were unaware of him.

She was standing at the window, he supposed, but there was an awkwardness to her posture and a slight smear of something on the glass: sweat? Makeup? She didn't move at all, and Thomas took a small, reluctant step toward the window, half hoping the figure would turn out to be some store mannequin, dressed and propped there by one of his more enterprising students as an end-of-term gag.

But she was real enough. He took two wary steps toward the window.

The glass reflected black everywhere but where the face was pressed to the window, lit by the kitchen light so it seemed to float like a party balloon. He supposed she was in her late fifties. Her pale skin looked delicate and had the beginnings of translucence. She was expertly made up, her lips a trifle redder than suited her, and her teeth were unnaturally white. But it was the eyes that he couldn't shake. They were wide, fixed in something that might have been surprise.

Or terror.

One was a dull, muddy green, the other an uncanny violet.

Thomas put down the coffeepot and picked up the wall-mounted phone, his eyes still on the motionless face pressed up against the window, but he didn't dial. He would go outside first. He needed to know for sure.

The kitchen had two windows, one facing south—into the backyard—and one facing east, which was where the woman stood. Thomas stepped out into the predawn chill, cinching his bathrobe tighter as he walked barefoot onto the cold path. She wasn't visible from the front of the house and it was only when he went around the dark yew that grew on the corner and turned down the narrow path between the house and next door's dense privet hedge that he saw her. She wasn't standing exactly, which meant that she was rather taller than he had imagined, but was slumped over one of the gold-flecked au-cubas that were planted along the shady foundation. Down here the

only light was the startling and flat brilliance of the kitchen window, which had given an unearthly vividness to the woman's face from inside. Out here the light only brushed a little green and gold over the edges of the aucuba. The woman herself was no more than the silhouette of her head, her body lost in shadow.

Thomas approached her slowly, watching for movement, anything that would shift the nature of the morning's strangeness into something more mundane. She could still be just some disturbed old woman who had fixated on his house for reasons known only to herself, and who might yet bustle off muttering incomprehensibly.

"Excuse me," he said, and when she didn't respond, didn't move at all, he put his hand on her shoulder.

Then he knew. He felt the cool slickness of fluid on her shaded shoulder and he recoiled.

Too late. His touch made her shift. She rolled as she fell away from him, and the kitchen light showed the terrible concave shape of the back of her head and the blood that soaked her back like a cloak.

CHAPTER 2

Thomas was already two hours late for work but the police were still there. He had recounted every detail of the morning's grisly discovery but hadn't had much to offer. No, he had never seen her before, and no, the spot where she was lying was not where he'd found her. She'd fallen when he touched her, and he was sorry for disturbing the crime scene, but he hadn't been sure she was dead . . .

He told the story twice, once to a uniformed officer who treated him like some half-wit who had willfully compromised his investigation, and once to a female plainclothes detective called Polinski who was merely efficient. He gathered they didn't know who the dead woman was.

"No purse, no credit cards, no ID," she said. "Mode of attack suggests a mugging."

"The mode of attack?" said Thomas, unnerved by his own curiosity, but also trying to suggest he had nothing to do with it. Thomas was a big man, six foot three and broad across the shoulders. People who didn't know him expected him to be rough, physical. He had noticed a couple of the policemen sizing him up, though he suspected some of them already knew who he was.

"Looks like she was hit from behind with a half brick. We found it under the hedge. The lab has it now."

Chastened, Thomas said nothing.

They kept him sitting around for another forty-five minutes and then said he could go. When he went back inside to get his things together, he found that his hand was shaking. He checked his face in the mirror. He was pale, dead looking. Suddenly he felt nauseated and ran to the bathroom, but when he got there, nothing happened. He sat for five minutes on the edge of the tub, then drank a long glass of ice water and felt better.

Thomas dressed for work, feeling the silence of the house now that everyone had left and the strangeness of putting on his tie in the middle of the morning. He wanted to call his wife, Kumi, in Japan, just to listen to the sound of her voice until the world felt closer to normal. It wouldn't matter what she said. It was enough that they were talking again.

The wheezy grandfather clock in the hall chimed eleven. He brushed his teeth again, ran his hand over his stubbly chin, and decided to shave. He wasn't sure why, but it seemed important to go to school looking composed and professional, looking different from the way he felt.

Perhaps if everyone else assumes it's an ordinary day, he thought, it will be.

But it wasn't an ordinary day and not because of the corpse at his window. In the morning's chaos, he had forgotten that his early classes had been canceled, and the school had been closed for the Williams memorial. Thomas remembered as soon as he pulled into the empty parking lot behind Evanston Township High School.

He cursed, turned the car around and drove over to Hemingway Methodist on Chicago where Ben Williams had volunteered in the soup kitchen. The service was already over and people were drifting out, clustered together, so Thomas sat in the car

by the curb, radio off. He recognized a lot of the kids, including a number who had graduated five or six years ago, most of them black. Was it that long since Williams had been here? It didn't seem so, but then it never did, these days. Thomas was thirty-eight and had been teaching high school for a decade. Ben Williams had been twenty-three; a smart, thoughtful, popular kid and a wide receiver for the Evanston Wildkits. He had only joined the National Guard because it helped pay for college. After his tour he had planned to be a teacher, like Thomas. A week ago he had been killed in Iraq. Thomas didn't know the details.

Thomas had been his English teacher. He couldn't remember what they had studied that year. *Julius Caesar*? As soon as the title came to mind he was sure it was right, sure also that Williams had taken the lead in organizing a staging of two or three scenes from the play. The memory came back so powerfully that Thomas couldn't believe he had forgotten it, or the charismatic kid at its core. Williams had played Mark Antony. Thomas thought they had done the assassination scene and its immediate aftermath, maybe even both sets of funeral orations, but the only thing he could recall clearly was Ben Williams talking to the class as the people of Rome:

*The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest—
For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men—
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.*

Thomas was surprised at how well he recalled the lines, but had forgotten—or half forgotten—the boy who had made them memorable.

Twenty-three. If he had merely read about this in the paper, if he had never known Williams, the memorial service might have produced a private diatribe about the war, but he felt no outrage, only loss and futility. He started to frame thoughts of Williams's frustrated potential but pushed them away as clichéd. He wanted a stronger connection to his former pupil but couldn't grasp enough of him beyond that classroom *Caesar* to make the boy real. He thought of Williams but found that his own thirty-eight years weighed too heavily on him. At twenty-three he had been teaching in Japan, had not even been to graduate school yet. He *had* already met Kumi, had already fallen in love with her, in fact. Twenty-three.

Strange, he thought, *that so much of who you are was already in place so early.*

He remembered it all, the scent of his apartment in Japan, the feel of the bicycle he had ridden every day, the thrill of visiting Kumi. It was so long ago, but felt so fresh that he smiled as if he were still there in that moment, as if he had not dropped out of

graduate school, had not separated from his wife, and had not found a body at his kitchen window. He stared at his hands as they sat at ten and two on the steering wheel: big hands, they were. Strong. But the skin was tougher than it had been, not quite as smooth. He looked back to the church and wondered if losing a former student was at all like outliving your own children.

Amazing, he thought, *the way you can make everything about you . . .*

“Nature of the beast,” he said aloud.

“The beast” being?

Life, he supposed.

He sat there, replaying all he could dredge up about Ben Williams, and watched the kids filing out to cars and yellow buses, while Ben Williams’s former classmates hugged, shook hands, and swore to keep in touch.