

**The
Camel's
Back**

**By
Brian Christopher Shea**

The Camel's Back is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to my father. I'm sorry that I didn't complete this while you were around to enjoy it. I have envisioned you reading this, feet up in your favorite recliner numerous times during this writing process. Thank you for believing in me.

Advanced praise for *The Camel's Back*

“Brian Christopher Shea has seamlessly brought together a suspenseful novel about the issues at the forefront of our modern society: the heroin epidemic, terrorism, economics, and the difficulties of raising a family in this day and age. He brings a reality that can only be expressed from a practitioner in the field. The novel is a contrast of true grit and compassion. *The Camels' Back* leaves me wanting to be a better man.”

**- Steve Palmer, former CIA Operations Officer,
U.S. Army Veteran, MIT MBA**

“A powerful and gripping novel. The character of Declan Enright is every bit as complex as the times we live in. Written from firsthand experience, Brian Christopher Shea gives us all the rare opportunity to see the internal and external struggles of those individuals who serve in the military and as first responders.”

**- Kevin Cahill, Lt. Col. U.S. Army Intelligence
(Former)4th Battalion Ranger Training Brigade
2nd Brigade 82nd Airborne Division**

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Prologue

The smell of stale cigarettes and body odor permeated the car. A dank reminder of the sea of informants who had graced the worn leather interior since the department began using the seized Acura as a soft car. The city was a different beast at night. Inhabited by a special breed that occupied the investigative efforts of Declan and his narcotics unit.

Surveillance was a big part of Declan's current assignment. He'd acquired the requisite skills to do it better than most. People rarely recognized him as a police officer. His long, unkempt hair, matted beard and tattered clothes added to his urban camouflage. A cigarette hung precariously from his lips. The embers cast an eerie glow across his rugged face.

This evening's target was a low-level heroin dealer. Most citizens saw the war on drugs as a large-scale battle that could never be won. But Declan saw its impact on the local level. The heroin epidemic had taken the northeastern United States by storm. Its effect was catastrophic. Not only were the numbers of overdose deaths out of control but so was the accompanying criminal activity. Most burglaries and larcenies were deeply rooted in the drug trade. Junkies desperate to support their habit often sought quick money. Anything to stave off the sickness, ever-present in their system.

The unit shifted its approach toward drug investigations. They now targeted the dealers responsible for or linked to, any overdose-related deaths. Declan's assignment tonight was in response to a recent fatal OD. Marisol Torres, mother of three.

He sat in the faded gray Acura at the corner of Silver Street and Broad. Waiting. Several hours had passed since Declan backed into the long, cracked driveway of a neighboring multi-family house. His bladder was relentlessly pleading for relief. Slumped in the driver's seat, he waited with his Nikon. A telephoto lens attached gave him an increased range. Declan waited patiently. The last three hours ticked slowly by. This effort for a photograph of a dealer. All he had was a street name. Lemon.

Declan's informant was reliable. As snitches go. Lemon was an unknown. *Maybe he was new to the area. An up and comer. Or more likely his*

informant was protecting him. Declan only had a limited description. Skinny with yellow hair. Thus, the nickname. So far, none of the foot traffic in front of the target address matched. Declan was on drug dealer time. No schedule to account for. Patience was integral. But tonight, it seemed his bladder would not cooperate. He eyed the empty Gatorade bottle longingly. It lay arms reach away on the passenger side floorboard. Declan seriously debated turning it into a makeshift urinal.

The radio tucked under his seat crackled to life, "Unit 37, Unit 34 and Unit 30." The dispatcher paused, allowing for the named units to respond. Never a good sign when more than two units were called. Declan perked up. The units acknowledged receipt. The dispatcher's burst of information followed, "Start heading to the intersection of Broad Street and Grove on a male with a gun." A hint of anxiety evident in the dispatcher's transmission.

Gun calls trumped drug investigations. Declan threw his car into drive. Only two blocks away. He was making fast work of the short distance.

Dispatch gave the gunman's description. "Black male red hooded sweatshirt and jeans. He's standing at the corner waving a gun." Declan accelerated, pushing the Acura's limits. He swerved onto Broad Street. Officers chimed in, updating their location. A useless waste of valuable radio time. *Get there quickly and assess the situation.* The others were a distance out. He'd be the first on scene. Declan was used to that. He was a shit magnet, often finding himself at the epicenter of disaster.

One block away. The male stood at the corner frantically pacing. Declan gave a quick radio transmission, "Enright on scene." Declan announced his arrival. He didn't want to catch a round from a pumped-up rookie. Under duress, responding units may not immediately recognize him as a cop.

Declan slammed to a stop. He exited the Acura twenty-five feet from the deranged man. Screams filled the air as his door opened. Declan made a quick, low-profile approach. He used parked cars for cover. His badge swung freely from the chain around his neck. Better visibility at center mass. Critical in high-stress situations.

The distance closed. Declan assessed the threat. The screaming man didn't notice his arrival. The guy looked stoned out of his mind. His eyes jerked like wipers on a dry windshield. Cottonmouth crusted lips. Rabid. Sweat drained from his pores. *God, how many times have I been in this position? Too many to count.* The squared muzzle of a handgun pressed hard against his temple. All bad signs.

Declan had no vest. A misstep tonight. A parked car his only semblance of protection. He rose slowly. The movement undetected. His department issued Glock 22 pressed outward. His body squared to the target. "Police! Drop the gun!" Declan boomed, going into autopilot. Experience his guide.

“Kill me! You have to! Only way out! Do it! Do it now!” Visceral anguish in the pleas. Frothy spit flew from his mouth. He was a cornered dog. Frightened and Desperate.

“What’s your name, bro? I’m Declan.” Trying to humanize himself. Harder to kill someone when you know their name. Not impossible. Just harder.

“Jamal. My name’s Jamal.” His bloodshot eyes widened. His pupils a metronome. Panic saturated his voice.

“Jamal, let me help. I don’t want to hurt you. And I don’t want you to hurt yourself either, bro.” Declan yelled. He needed to be heard. His voice was steady. Jamal’s erratic movements slowed. His attention shifted to Declan.

“I don’t give a fuck about you! Or what you want! I need to die. Just kill me! Please shoot me!” *Suicide by cop. It’s a worst-case scenario. Too scared to do it himself. He wants me to finish it for him. A shitty position to put me in.*

Jamal began screaming unintelligibly. The rantings of a madman. Tough to negotiate with insanity. Declan’s pulse quickened.

Sirens in the distance. The sound announced the imminent arrival of other officers. The surrounding buildings echoed their call. The noise and additional units could rapidly escalate things. Declan bore the weight of this increased stress. His face stoic. The epitome of calm.

A surge of urgency filled Declan. Jamal’s head on a swivel. Desperate. Declan tried to keep Jamal’s focus on him.

“Stay with me man. Nobody wants to hurt you. Put the gun down so we can figure this out.” Declan projected. His voice washed out. The background noise amplified. Exacerbated further by the incoherent rantings of Jamal.

“Jamal, drop the gun!” Declan commanded. Nothing. Jamal gave no indication of dropping it. Declan took the slack out of his Glock. He held fast at the break point.

“Take your finger off the trigger!” Declan shouted over his new acquaintance’s repetitive death wish. Jamal’s right index finger slid off and came to rest on the rectangular frame of the semi-automatic pistol.

A small gesture. But it demonstrated a level of compliance. A willingness to listen. The first sign of a potential resolution. Without violence. It also gave Declan the advantage. Action versus reaction. Jamal couldn’t win the draw now. Declan made a mental checklist. He established the point of no return. If Jamal put his finger back on the trigger, moved the gun from his head or advanced on any of the responding officers or civilians, then Declan would take the shot. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Anticipate the worst and hope for the best. The fast-paced negotiation continued. Life hung in the balance. *Please don’t force my hand.*

“Jamal, tell me what’s eating at you? I’m no shrink, but I’ll listen.” Declan did his best to convey compassion.

“My baby! He’s going to kill him! I’ve got to. Just kill me! Do it! My baby! If you don’t...” Jamal screamed. His breathing ragged. He babbled incoherently. More to himself now. It sounded like he was saying, “Me or him.” But impossible to be sure. The whisper a sharp contrast. Then Jamal went silent. Silence is bad. Lost to himself. No longer focused on Declan.

Jamal’s sudden despondency a concern. Declan continued to try to reach him. To bring him back. “Your baby? What are you talking about? Is there something wrong with your child? How can I help you if you won’t talk to me?” He hoped to stall. Slow things down. “Help me understand.”

Three officers arrived on scene. Positioned at various angles to the unhinged gunman. A rookie, Adams, stopped his cruiser behind Jamal. Declan made a subtle adjustment. He needed a clear backdrop if this broke bad. The move exposed Declan. The parked car no longer provided cover.

The backup officers added to the pandemonium. The patrolmen began yelling at Jamal. Each command different. Drop the gun! Get on the ground! Don’t move! A barrage of inconsistency. Jamal was overwhelmed. The pendulum of control swung away from Declan. A recipe for disaster. Any early gains made by Declan’s initial negotiation were quickly dissipating.

Jamal turned his gaze on Adams. An animalistic scream erupted from him. His eyes shifting their focus. *Shit. Adam’s has a taser out. Rookie mistake. Jamal’s got the drop on him.* The gun no longer pressed against his temple. It was now sweeping outward. In the direction of Adams.

Jamal’s finger back on the trigger. Conviction in his eyes. The point of no return reached. The unnatural human dilemma. Take a life to save a life. A zero-win scenario.

“Jamal don’t!” A last-ditch verbal command. The words not received. Jamal was committed.

Declan’s Glock kicked rhythmically. The tang slapped against his firm grip. The sound muted by focus. Tunnel vision created this auditory exclusion. Three controlled rounds left the Glock. Jamal crumpled to the ground. Declan exhaled. He surveyed the deadly result. Jamal down. Not moving. The blood quickly darkening the sidewalk. A testament to Declan’s split-second decision. He knew that Jamal was dead before he hit the ground.

The patrolmen were momentarily frozen. Their brains played mental catch-up. Cautiously they approached Jamal. Guns at the ready. The unresponsive Jamal was handcuffed. Lifesaving efforts were made. Pressure to the wounds. CPR considered, but the hole in Jamal’s forehead and two in the chest told the tale.

He left me no choice. It was him or Adams. Bile in his throat. The byproduct of his body’s confliction.

Declan kept his distance as the other officers evaluated the scene. The whispered conversations and quick glances in his direction. He saw it on their faces. The transparency of their judgment. *They didn’t shoot. So why did I? Didn’t they see the threat? I saved Adams for god’s sake.* A flash of anger quickly gave way to fear. *Was I justified? Righteous?*

Declan saw the on-scene supervisor, Sergeant Glenn Macalister, approach. He placed his hand on Declan's shoulder. He quietly asked, "Are you okay?" Not leaving room for comment he continued, "Good job. You did the right thing. The guy forced your hand." Pausing momentarily to take stock of Declan. "I'm not going to talk about the details. And I don't want you to talk to anyone else until the union rep arrives." Macalister, a lean man in his late fifties, had garnered a reputation for being fair and firm, looked around awkwardly and then leaned in, "I need to take your weapon. You know the drill."

Declan handed over his service pistol. Macalister then did something unexpected. He filled the void in Declan's empty holster with his own duty weapon. "No cop should be without. Especially after what you just went through." Declan shocked by the gesture. Only managed a nod of appreciation.

"I'll get that back from you later." He watched as Macalister secured Declan's pistol, minus three rounds, in the trunk of his supervisor SUV.

Emptiness filled him. An uneasy wariness washed over him. *There's always a choice. Did I make the right one?*

Declan stood twenty-five feet from Jamal's dead body. Amid all the commotion of officers and medical personnel, he had never felt more alone.