

Praise for *White Tombs*

Named Best Mystery of 2008 by Reader Views Winner of the Garcia Award for Best Fiction

“. . . Christopher Valen addresses a very wide range of extremely relevant social issues in *White Tombs*, and this book goes well beyond being just a detective story. The characters are fantastically well developed . . . the writing is solid and elegant without unnecessary detours. Any lover of solid writing should enjoy it greatly. *White Tombs* also screams out for a sequel—or better yet, sequels.”

—Reader Views

“. . . *White Tombs* is a superb police procedural starring a fascinating lead detective. Santana is a wonderful addition to the sub-genre.”

—Midwest Book Review

“. . . Valen’s debut police procedural provides enough plot twists to keep readers engrossed and paints a clear picture of the Hispanic community in St. Paul.”

—Library Journal

“John Santana of the St. Paul Police Department is a man you will not forget. . . The book is a great read, and Santana is destined to become one of my favorite detectives. Truly a five-star read from this author.”

—Armchair Interviews

“. . . Santana is an intriguing character. St. Paul readers will enjoy Valen’s sense of place.”

—St. Paul Pioneer Press

Praise for *The Black Minute*

**Named Best Mystery of 2009 by Reader Views
Winner of the Lynda Goldman Award for Best Novel**

"The second John Santana St. Paul police procedural is a terrific thriller. . . . Christopher Valen provides the audience with his second straight winning whodunit."

—Midwest Book Review

"... Santana is an appealing series lead, strong and intelligent . . . Readers who enjoyed *White Tombs* will settle easily into this one; on the other hand, it works fine as a stand-alone, and fans of well-plotted mysteries with a regional flair . . . should be encouraged to give this one a look."

—Booklist

"... *The Black Minute* grabbed me from the first page on, and pulled me into a complex world of evil, violence, deceit, bravery and search for justice . . . While the plot is complex and anything but predictable, his storyline stays comprehensible and easy to follow. The characters are well developed, very believable and constantly evolving. The setting of the story is vivid, detailed and engaging . . ."

—Reader Views

"... There is not one reason why this book isn't a winner! Everything about it screams success. The book is masterfully written with a tightly-woven plot, visually detailed settings and well-developed characters . . ."

—Rebecca's Reads

"... Valen does a super job of keeping the suspense going as the action reaches a crescendo . . ."

—St. Paul Pioneer Press

BAD WEEDS NEVER DIE

A John Santana Novel

Christopher Valen



Conquill Press

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“He who must die must die in the dark, even though he sells candles.”

—Colombian Proverb

Chapter 1

SUNLIGHT SEEPED OVER THE HORIZON and glinted off the blood-spattered window of a late model black Mercedes. The car was parked in a park-and-ride lot in St. Paul's Lowertown, a historic warehouse district of artists' cooperatives and condo projects. Yellow crime scene tape was strung from the passenger side door handle of one squad car across the entrance of the lot to the driver's door on a second black and white.

Homicide Detective John Santana heard tires humming on the I-94 overpass as cars streamed into and out of the city, and iron wheels squealing as a train moved along the tracks behind a cyclone fence. Trapped heat oozed from the pavement and buildings like fluids from a dead body. The temperature and humidity reminded him of the town of La Victoria, Valle on the Cauca River in Colombia, where his parents had once owned a farm, and where the family had vacationed before a cloud of darkness settled over his heart and forever changed his life.

He and Kacie Hawkins signed their names and badge numbers on the crime scene log and walked across the potholed asphalt pavement. Hawkins had been wounded in the shoulder ten months ago, and Santana noted that his partner carried her left arm slightly higher than her right, despite the workouts that kept her lean, ebony body toned.

Two uniformed patrol officers wearing wrap-around, mirrored Ray-Bans stood near the front of the Mercedes. Kurt

Palmer, the larger of the two cops, was a heavy-jawed man with a pale complexion and a blond crew cut. He had a toothpick in the corner of his mouth and a tube of fat around his waist. He was laughing loudly while shaking his head at the much younger and smaller Latino cop standing in front of him.

The Latino cop nodded at Santana. His name was Sanchez, and he'd introduced himself to Santana a few months back. Like the city itself, St. Paul's police department had become more diverse. Santana knew most of the Latino cops respected him because he was the only Latino among the seven homicide detectives on the force. He never sought their attention, but he understood why other Latino cops often looked to him for guidance, and he always tried to make time for them.

Palmer stepped forward and put his large hands on his hips. "Hey, Santana. How ya doin'?"

Santana had seen Palmer around the station and knew the big cop was accustomed to throwing his considerable weight around. "You the one who found the car?" he asked.

Palmer nodded. "About four a.m. I usually make a pass at least twice a night when things are slow."

Santana could see his own reflection in the mirrored sunglasses and wondered if Palmer had left them on for a reason. "You run the plate?"

"Yeah. Car belongs to a Teresa Blackwood. It hasn't been reported stolen."

"What about a missing person's bulletin?"

"Nope."

The address Palmer recited for Teresa Blackwood was a condo complex along Shepard Road. Santana wrote it in his notebook and then said, "What do we have?"

"I flashed a beam inside and saw blood on the driver's side window and front seat. Thought I'd better let you Homicide dicks know."

Santana thought Palmer had intentionally used the word “dicks” as a pejorative rather than as a common slang term for detective. But he let it go. “Any sign of Blackwood?”

“Not that I found.”

“You touch anything?” Hawkins asked.

“No, I did not.”

“Were the doors on the Mercedes locked?” Santana asked.

“No.”

“How would you know that if you didn’t check the doors?”

Palmer’s complexion turned crimson. “Real cute, Detective.”

Santana ignored the obvious sarcasm. “Just tell us exactly what you did.”

Sanchez appeared to suddenly remember something and headed for his patrol car.

Palmer waited as the redness in his cheeks and jowls faded. “Okay, I checked the driver’s side door. So sue me.”

“Look,” Santana said. “I know you’ve been around the block and consider this a waste of your time. But you tampered with a possible crime scene. I need to know exactly what you did and when you did it.”

Blood rushed into Palmer’s pale cheeks once more, and Santana thought he might become even more confrontational. But the big cop sucked in a breath of hot air and calmed himself before speaking again. “When I saw the blood, I called it in. That’s it.”

“Anything besides the Mercedes you noticed last night?”

“I got the usual complaints about fireworks. Not much else.”

“How many passes did you make through here last night and early this morning?”

Palmer thought about it. “I made two passes.”

Santana’s experience had taught him that hesitation when answering a simple direct question usually indicated someone

was concealing information or considering a lie. He hoped Palmer would do neither. "Did you stop on your first pass or your second or both?"

"The second."

"And that was at four a.m."

"Yeah. Four a.m. Just like I said."

A large drop of sweat rolled down Palmer's cheek. As he lifted his arm to wipe it off, Santana saw a large, wet ring staining his underarm.

"What time did you first notice the Mercedes parked here?"

"Around one a.m."

"Any other cars in the lot at that time, or just the Mercedes?"

"A few."

"Anything open around here after one a.m.?"

"Nothing. You're not likely to find any witnesses, Detective."

Santana figured Palmer might be right, but he wasn't about to acknowledge it. "What made you notice the Mercedes?"

"It was the only car left in the lot at four a.m. Most cars park closer to six or seven a.m. during the workweek. But since it's the Fourth of July weekend, I wondered why anyone would park here at that time of the morning. I thought I'd take a look."

"Anything else you remember that you didn't tell us?"

Anger flamed in Palmer's cheeks again. "You dicks always think you know everything."

"You tired?" Hawkins said. "Or are you just naturally an asshole?"

Palmer swiveled his head toward Hawkins as if he were about to say something. Then he seemed to change his mind and looked at Santana again. "Are we done?"

"For now."

He gave a disgusted shake of his head.

"And Palmer."

"Yeah?" he said, his voice rising, his body tensing again.

"It was good you checked the Mercedes."

"I know how to do my job," he said. "Now do yours."

As Palmer walked away, Santana thought the big cop had lost some of his swagger. But as he lumbered toward Sanchez, who waited near his black and white, he found it again.

Santana turned his attention toward the Mercedes. The SPPD's forensic specialist, Tony Novak, was snapping a series of photographs of the car's exterior and the area where the vehicle was parked with a Nikon SLR. A second crime scene tech drew a detailed sketch.

"Morning, Detectives," Novak said, squinting against the sunlight as he pushed his black frame glasses up the bridge of a wide nose. "Today's another scorcher."

Novak had a gray mustache that matched his hair. He wore a white T-shirt with black lettering that said, SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL POLICE. LEAVE FINGERPRINTS. Because of the round, expanding bald spot that resembled a skullcap on the crown of his head, and his meticulous attention to detail, Novak had acquired the nickname of "Monk" in the department. He took the ribbing good-naturedly. Still, Santana always called him Tony. He considered Novak his closest, if still distant, friend in the department because they shared an interest in boxing.

"Lots of blood," Hawkins said, staring at the cast-off bloodstains visible on the driver's side window of the Mercedes.

Santana nodded. "Looks like the driver was beaten. But there's not enough blood to cause death. Certainly enough to cause incapacitation."

"But where's Teresa Blackwood? Assuming she drove the car and it's her blood."

Novak looked at the detectives. "I'll collect some blood samples when we check the interior. See if they belong to her. I'll need to get a medical release, John."

Santana took one side of the car, Hawkins the other. He'd mentally divided the vehicle into sections just as he would a zone search pattern. He always kept to his pattern of examining the outside of the vehicle first, looking for dents, scratches, or unusual marks. He saw nothing unusual near the front of the car, but on the driver's side door he spotted a small dent. He motioned to Hawkins and Novak. "Take a look at this."

They both came over and examined the dent.

"Looks like another car might've backed into the Mercedes," Novak said.

Hawkins leaned forward. "That would make sense. The dent is about the same height as a bumper. Maybe someone hit the car while it was parked here."

Santana squatted and peered at the dark asphalt. At first, he found nothing. Then he saw a tiny paint chip on the ground that had been dislodged from the dent in the Mercedes. He pointed with an index finger. "Here, Tony."

Novak took photos before he picked up the paint chip and placed it carefully in a small box that had a good seal. He then collected a known sample of paint from the Mercedes for comparison purposes by holding a folded piece of paper underneath the dent and using a razor to scrape off paint so that a chip fell into the paper.

Santana stretched a pair of latex gloves over his hands and opened the driver's side door. Immediately, he detected the fragrance of sandalwood and musk perfume. On the floor mat underneath the gas pedal, he noticed a crushed pink and white flower and traces of black soil. He backed out of the car and straightened. "Get a shot of this, Tony."

Novak placed an evidence-marking stand alongside the flower and soil and took a series of photographs. Then he carefully picked up the flower and held it in his thick, latex-gloved hand.

"Looks like an orchid."

Hawkins studied it for a time. "Yeah. I'd say it's an orchid." She leaned in and smelled it.

"Kind of smells like a raspberry."

"Really?" Santana said, taking a whiff. "You're right."

Novak put the flower in a paper evidence envelope, signed it, and dated it. He used a teaspoon to scoop up a sample of soil from the floor mat, placed the soil in a clean baby food jar, labeled it, and noted the location. Then he snapped photos of the VIN and the car's interior. "I'll swab the interior for prints later," he said.

Santana flicked the switch on a mini Maglite and looked under the leather seats. He didn't want to stick his hands under the seats and risk being punctured by a contaminated needle or other sharp object, but he saw nothing. He noted the odometer reading and wrote the mileage in his notebook. Next, he focused his attention on the ashtray, which was clean and empty. He leaned in and opened the glove compartment. It contained a city map, Teresa Blackwood's vehicle registration, an insurance card, and the car manual. Inside the center console, he found a CD of salsa music. He popped the trunk latch, walked to the rear of the car with Hawkins and Novak, and lifted the lid. The trunk was empty.

While Novak snapped photos of the trunk's interior, Santana and Hawkins did one sweep of the lot looking for blood drops, and then reversed positions and conducted another sweep, walking over the same ground each had previously covered, the pavement feeling hotter with each passing minute. The wind was dead, and when they stopped under the shade of the overpass, her yellow T-shirt and his light blue polo were soaked with sweat. Santana felt like he was wearing a wet rag on his back.

"Nothing," Hawkins said. "Not many places where someone could dump a body around here, except maybe the nature sanctuary."

"We better get some officers to do a sweep of the area just in case."

"I'm wondering if Teresa Blackwood is related to the child psychologist Jonathan Blackwood."

"Never heard of him, Kacie."

"He had his own weekly TV show for quite a while. But I remember reading it got pulled off the air recently."

"Low ratings?"

"Some other reason," she said.