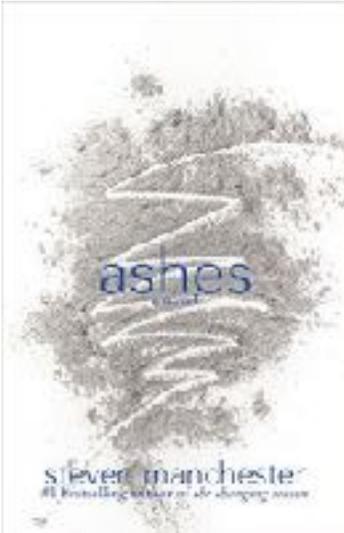


Episode 1: Serving Time

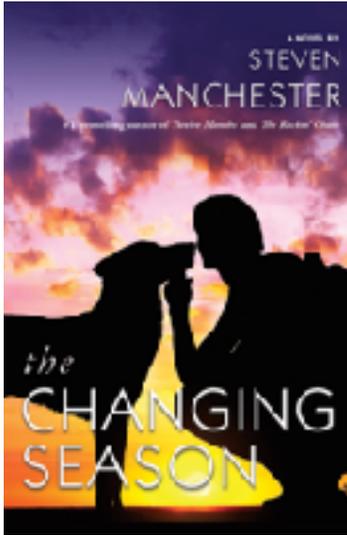
(set in the world of Ashes)



<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/ashes/id1163891110?mt=11>

As Jason Prendergast pulled into work, he shut off the ignition to his new custom pickup truck and sat back. Concrete walls, twenty feet high, were topped with coils of concertina wire, a devious invention designed to bite deeper into an escapee's flesh with every move. A guard tower loomed in the northwest corner, the silhouette of a rifleman gawking from its giant window. *Home, sweet home*, Jason thought, snickering. Built in 1875, Southeastern Correctional Center—or SECC, as it was affectionately known—was a bastion that still protected society by housing 1,400 hardened criminals behind its thick, gray walls. Jason grabbed his keys, swung open the driver's side door and stretched out his aching back. *Two more years in this shithole*, he thought, *and then I'm a free man*.

Although he'd done the same for nearly twenty-eight years, Jason showed his Corrections ID to people who knew him well. With a smile, the female officer behind the bullet proof glass nodded, the buzzer sounded and the steel trap door began to slowly slide open. Jason looked down at his ID. *It's an old picture*, he thought, *it must have been taken ten years ago*; officers were required to update photo IDs every ten years, so it was only his third since starting at the prison. He shook his head. *I was smaller then, at least in width...thirty pounds lighter and more solid*. His face had the same scowl, minus two new scars; the one over his right eye and an ear lobe missing a chunk of flesh. *And my nose isn't original either*, he thought; it was crooked from multiple breaks, all souvenirs from his chosen profession. He wasn't what anyone could accuse of being handsome, but he had something the women liked and—whatever that was—it was enough for him. What did catch him of guard was how much older he felt—not just looked—than the photo. *It's been a long road*, he thought, *and a pretty rough one*. With another shake of his large head, he added, *And I'm not quite there yet*. He slid the ID into his pocket and punched into work. *At least it's Friday*, he told himself. *Now let's go see what the animals have in store for me today*.



https://www.amazon.com/Changing-Season-Steven-Manchester/dp/1611882265/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1482435819&sr=8-1&keywords=steven+manchester

After roll call—informing the day shift that there had been an unsuccessful suicide attempt the night before, as well as several enemy situations that required close monitoring—Jason snapped a new battery into his radio and clipped the ring of block keys onto his worn belt. He was walking toward his half-year assignment, Essex III, when his cell phone rang. Fumbling the phone out of his pocket, he checked the caller ID. “Shit,” he muttered, “if it was anyone else...” He answered the call. “Hi babe.”

“Hi Dad,” Miranda said. “Hey, are you around at all this weekend?”

“Josie made plans for tonight. We’re supposed to go to some fancy restaurant out in Providence. But I’ll be home the rest of the weekend.” He slowed his gait to finish the call. “Why? Are you going to take me out to that new greasy burger joint that just opened near...”

“We have a code 70,” a male voice screamed over the radio, “inmate down, The Fort.” The radio squelched once and went dead.

At a full-out sprint, Jason told his daughter, “Love you, baby, but Daddy’s gotta go to work.” He was already gasping for air as he charged toward The Fort—also known as *The Hole*.

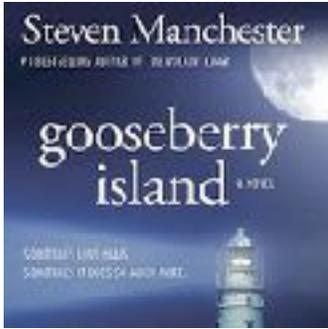
“Be safe” he heard her say just before ending the call and rushing into another unknown situation.

Jason rounded the corner and slowed his pace on the polished concrete floor. First tier inmates—locked in their cells for twenty three hours each day—were screaming and kicking their steel doors, doing all they could to contribute to the chaos. Jason followed two younger officers as they bound up a flight of stairs, their feet barely touching the floor. *I remember those days*, he thought.

On the second tier, neighboring inmates howled in delight.

“Shut the fuck up!” Jason screamed before entering the cell of the inmate that required medical assistance. Even with all his years of barbaric experience, the sight stopped him in his tracks and threatened to steal his breath away.

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http://www.audible.com/pd/Fiction/Gooseberry-Island-Audiobook/B012XF1A0S/ref=a_search_c4_1_5_srt?tl?qid=1482436204&sr=1-5

The cell floor was covered in crimson; the coagulating blood nearly blackened, some of it pooled in spots. Jason took a few steps toward the bed, his boots creating a sucking sound from the jelly beneath his feet—sending a shiver down his spine. The two younger officers, no longer as enthusiastic about offering their assistance, quickly backed away to give their sergeant the room he needed to assess the situation. Jason took another step forward.

An older inmate—pale enough to play a believable Dracula—was lying prone on his bed, his words no more than broken coughs and whispers.

“What the hell did you do, Frank?” Jason asked him.

“I...I cut up,” he gasped.

“I can see that from all your blood on the floor,” Jason said as a matter-of-factly. While surveying the scene, he spotted the two massive gouges carved lengthwise down the dying man’s wrists and forearms.

Jason yanked a blood-saturated sheet from the bed, nearly flipping the inmate onto his side. With one grunt, he ripped the sheet down the middle before wrapping the zombie’s arms as tightly as he could. “What did you use to cut yourself, Frank?” Jason asked.

“A false...” The convict paused for air. “...tooth.”

Shaking his head, Jason grabbed for his radio. “Southeast, this is 147, we need all medical personnel to report to room 24, The Fort. And call for an outside ambulance. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

Frank nodded weakly and shut his eyes.

“Hey,” Jason barked at him, his voice booming off the walls of the tiny cell.

Frank opened his eyes to slits.

“Help is on its way, Frank, but you need to stay awake. If you don’t fight off the sleep, you won’t spend another hour in this world.”

Jason watched as the slightest grin flashed across the vampire’s mouth—just before he closed his eyes again and went to sleep. *Can’t say that I*



blame you, Jason thought. If I had to live out my days in here, I'd choose death too.

As the medical personnel piled into the cramped room, Jason squeezed his way out. “He’s gone,” he reported, “and it looks like I’m the one stuck with all the damned paperwork.”

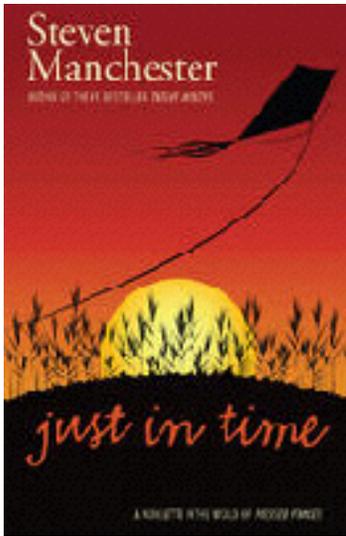
After getting cleaned up, Jason drafted his initial report before arriving at Essex III, the most feared block in the joint. Three tiers, of twenty cells each, knew two-thirds of its clientele to be lifers. These, as Jason knew, often proved to be the best inmates. Once they’d accepted their fate, they settled in and clung to a routine the way a child would its mother. Every one of them was institutionalized. After a few years inside, no man could escape it.

As Jason entered Essex III, he conducted a quick equipment and radio check before beginning his first round. Counting off one head after the other, he spotted Pauli Patricio surrounded by a circle of younger inmates.

Oddly enough, Patricio was one of Jason’s favorite characters within the inmate population. Pauli Patricio had been a vicious hit man for the Monarco crime family before he took the fall on a murder many said he’d never committed. Those same people, however, said it was probably the only crime he’d never committed. Never the less, Pauli now served the ‘book’ or a life bid, quietly spending his twilight years in the nursing home for tough guys—medium security prison.

By all accounts, Patricio was the most feared man to walk the streets in his day. The ox was an unnaturally powerful man with a will to match. He was a collector in every sense of the word, using a ballpeen hammer as his chosen tool for settling overdue accounts. By the time Jason had met him, the giant of a man was already well beyond middle age so he’d slowed down a bit. That’s not to say, however, that Pauli didn’t run things within the inmate population. He did. According to Patricio, “Essex III is my house and I don’t give a damn whether some con serves a day here or thirty years, he’s still just a punk passing through my house.”

Due to the nature of Jason’s employment, he couldn’t afford to fear the man. It was imperative, though, to be aware of the old-timer’s cruel capabilities—and *temper to match. If something goes down, Patricio has either orchestrated it, called for it or at least knows about it,* Jason



thought. *He might not have been the big boss on the street, but his very presence demands respect inside these walls.*

Patricio claimed his home at the end of the first tier in a cell he affectionately called “the penthouse suite.” For a cold-blooded killer, he had quite the sense of humor.

Jason watched as the old thug was regaling his audience with another colorful tale. “I’d been trained to kill in Vietnam and there was no better place to get good at my job,” explained Patricio. “And trust me, boys, I became very good at my job.” He looked up and made eye contact with Jason. They exchanged grins. “So when I returned home,” Patricio said, “it seemed silly to try my hand at anything else. When you’re good at something, why do something else, right?”

Everyone laughed.

Jason shook his head. *I’ve heard this same friggin’ story for more than twenty years*, he thought. Even still, he leaned against the wall and listened in.

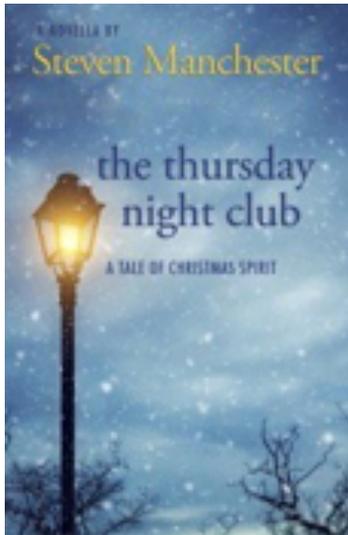
“I came back from the jungle and could’ve either gone into law enforcement or organized crime,” Patricio said, shrugging. “A life of crime seemed less corrupt to me, so I joined the ranks.”

This time, Jason laughed.

“I started as a runner, collecting for Benny O’s book. It was easy work. It didn’t take me long to learn that being successful wasn’t really about being tough but more about where I was willing to take it to, you know? And I already knew I could go all the way.” He shrugged again. “Killing’s never bothered me in the least.”

A few of the inmates exchanged nervous glances. Grinning, Jason shook his head. *Pauli’s still got his magic touch*, he thought.

“I’ve never given a rat’s ass about anything but making a name for myself,” Patricio said, grinning. “Dangerous men, I mean real dangerous men don’t have to worry about watching their backs.” While his audience leaned in, hanging on to his every word, Patricio added, “So those first few weeks I collected for Benny O, I busted up two guys so bad that one of ‘em ended up in a wheel chair. After that, I had enough street credit to open a couple new opportunities for myself.”



That's right, Jason thought, and a few months later, Benny O was found floating in the Taunton River. They said it was a company contract, an inside job. And that's when Pauli Patricio was adopted by the Monarco family. “Okay boys, story time’s over,” Jason told the group. “Break it up and get lined up for chow.”

The younger inmates looked to Patricio, who nodded that they comply.

“Welcome back to *my* house, Sergeant Prendergast,” Pauli told Jason, grinning.

“Oh, I think we both know better than that, Patricio,” Jason replied, returning the grin. Of all people, Pauli Patricio knew Jason ran his block with an iron fist. “This is my house, convict, and I’ll let you stay just as long as you behave.”

Patricio laughed. “Hey, I heard about the old man in the Fort. Bled out, huh?”

“New travels fast,” Jason said, careful not to reveal any details.

“What a shame,” Patricio said with a smirk.

“Is it?” Jason asked.

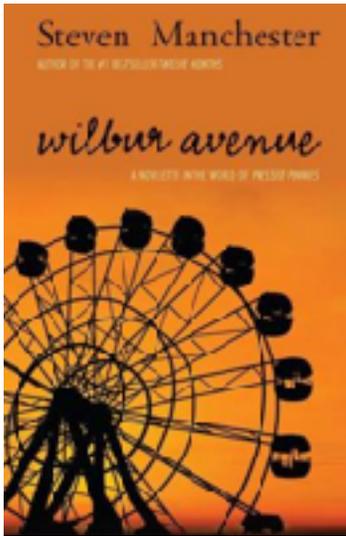
“Sure,” the con said. “I think it’s a real tragedy every time a pedophile goes down for the long nap.”

Damn, Jason thought, old Pauli’s got the drop on everyone in here. He nodded in agreement. “I hear ya. My heart breaks clean in half every time we lose one of you fine gentlemen,” Jason said, throwing every inmate—regardless of their crimes—into the same bucket. He returned the cruel man’s smirk to him.

The muscle just below Patricio’s left eye twitched; although subtle, the tick was all the evidence Jason needed to know he’d crawled beneath the man’s skin. “Oh, I bet it does,” Patricio replied through gritted teeth.

“Think about it,” Jason added, hunting for another nerve to pluck, “what would I do if I ever lost all of you?”

Patricio chuckled. “Find a real job,” he said.



You're right, Jason thought. *Unfortunately, I'm too stupid to quit this one.* He smiled wide. "Line up for chow," he told his cunning adversary. "I'm sure you don't want to miss whatever delicacies they've whipped up for you."

Patricio nodded and started to make his way toward the front of the long line. "You know, now that I think of it, Sarge...I'm going to be heartbroken when you go."

"Retire?" Jason asked.

Patricio found his smile again. "Retire, die...whatever."

"I'm sure you will," Jason said, "but rest easy. I have no plans of going anywhere for a while."

Patricio looked back and smiled, his eyes glassed over in devious joy—as though he knew something Jason didn't.

Thank God it's Friday, Jason thought before remembering he still had a few reports to write before he could kick off the weekend. He looked back at Patricio, who was still grinning. *Retire, die...whatever*, he repeated in his head.

On the way home, Jason picked up a six pack of cold pints from the back cooler at Mucky's Liquor Store. *I wonder what normal people think about when they finish the work week?* he thought.

"The Sox are playing the Orioles tonight," old man Mucky announced from behind his ancient cash register, pulling Jason into the moment.

"Who's on the mound?" Jason asked, feigning interest.

"That new kid they just brought up from Pawtucket. From what I hear, he pitches really hard...a real flame thrower."

"I'll have to catch the game then," Jason fibbed, throwing two Slim Jims and a bag of salt and vinegar chips onto the counter.

"Will that do it?" the old time asked.

Jason shook his head, scanning over the display of colorful scratch tickets. “Give me five of those new five dollar tickets. Any winners yet?”

Mucky counted out five and ripped them off the roll. “You’ll be the first,” he said, grinning.

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” Jason said, paying for his Friday night loot. Suddenly, he remembered Miranda’s call from earlier in the day. *I wonder what she’s planning?* he thought, wearing the day’s first genuine smile. *Whatever it is, it’ll be nice to see her.*



Thank you Steven Manchester 01-05-2017