



RAPID READS

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COLEMAN

VALENTINO PIER

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When PI Gulliver Dowd locates a street kid's missing dog, he thinks he's simply done his good deed for the day. But when the boy is discovered unconscious and left for dead not far from Valentino Pier, Dowd sets out to find the attacker and why the boy was targeted. What Gulliver uncovers by way of bizarre clues—amidst threats of danger to himself and his loved ones—leads him on his most curious case yet.

Called a “hard-boiled poet” by NPR’s Maureen Corrigan and “the noir poet laureate” in the *Huffington Post*, **Reed Farrel Coleman** has published seventeen novels. He is a three-time recipient of the Shamus Award for Best PI Novel of the Year and is a two-time Edgar Award nominee. He is an adjunct professor of English at Hofstra University and lives with his family on Long Island. For more information, visit www.reedcoleman.com.

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but when the kid is found badly beaten the next day,
Gulliver uncovers a new mystery.



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CHAPTER ONE

Gulliver Dowd had one new message on his cell. His guts knotted up as he listened. The woman was panicked. He could hear it in her voice. It was a voice he knew too well. One he had hoped he would never hear again. The woman's daughter was gone. He had warned her this would happen. And it had.

Nina Morton's voice was cracking now. She was crying. Begging for Dowd's help. He had found her daughter once. He could do it again. She just knew he could. He could do anything when he put his mind to it. Hadn't he become a licensed private

investigator? Hadn't he earned his black belt? Hadn't he become a dead shot? All of this in spite of his deformed body. And Nina swore she would do anything for him. Even marry him if that's what he wanted. All he had to do was find Anka again. Gulliver stopped listening. He erased the message.

It wasn't that Gulliver's heart didn't ache. It did. It ached all the time. It would ache for Nina until the day he died. But sometimes you can't save people from themselves. Nina was like that. She had been Gulliver's high school girlfriend for two months. Those were the best two months of his life. The names people called him didn't matter. Midget. Runt. Dwarf. Freak. They couldn't hurt him. Not as long as she was in love with him. He was Superman as long as he had Nina. It didn't last. Gulliver knew that nothing good ever lasts.

That was eighteen years ago. He had spent seventeen of those years hoping Nina would come back to him. And last year

she had. Presto! Like magic. Black magic. She had betrayed Gulliver. She had betrayed her daughter. She had betrayed herself. And now the girl was gone again. Gulliver didn't think the girl would ever be back. But he took no joy in being right. He took no joy in Nina's loss. He knew what it was like to lose someone forever. No one deserves that kind of pain.

His mind went to Keisha. She was gone too. Forever. People don't come back from the grave. He had been so proud of his adopted sister when she graduated from the police academy. He looked at Keisha's picture in the frame on his desk. Her beautiful black skin. Her fierce eyes. Her wary smile. All set against her dress blue uniform. Then he remembered seeing her in the morgue. Cold. Dead. Lost to him. He still didn't get how it had all gone so wrong. How could someone murder a cop in cold blood? How could they do it in broad daylight? How could seven

years go by without the killer being caught? How? How? How? Gulliver had asked himself these same questions every day. He got no answers. But it never stopped him. He would find her killer some day. He would never give up. Never. It's what kept him going.

Now he was crying, his tears bitter as lemon juice. His squat body shook. Sometimes Keisha's murder made him angry. So angry he could explode. Days like today, he was just sad. Sad for Keisha. Sad for himself. When he was like this, there was only one thing to do. Gulliver dialed Steven Mandel's work number. He and Mandel had known each other since they were little kids. Each was the other's best friend. Gulliver's only real friend.

"What's up, Gullie?" asked Mandel.

"Have a drink with me tonight, Rabbi." Gulliver had always called Steven that. He wasn't sure why. But it fit. Steven was wise and loving. He always had been.

“Can’t. Business. You sound weird. Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Gulliver lied. He did that sometimes. Lied. In that way he was like everybody else. Not much else about him was.

He had to get out of his loft. The walls were closing in on him. He wasn’t much of a walker. With short legs. Uneven legs. He wobbled. At least they knew him around Red Hook. No one pointed. The local kids didn’t giggle. Not anymore. He was like a crack in the sidewalk that everyone had gotten used to.

Gulliver looked up and down Visitation Place. Red Hook was quiet. Kids were in school. It was a day that said winter was finally gone. The sky was so blue it almost didn’t look real. There wasn’t a cloud anywhere. The sun was strong and warm on his face. Gulliver’s face. That was God’s cruel joke. God had built him out of spare parts. Mismatched parts. But he had given Gulliver Dowd a handsome face. A mild

breeze blew in off the harbor. It smelled of the salt from the ocean. That's what got his attention.

He hobbled along Van Brunt. Down Van Dyke. He ran out of street at Valentino Pier. The pier was a finger of concrete that stuck out into New York Harbor. It was named for a hero fireman. A dead hero. There was no shortage of those in New York City.

Gulliver liked it here. The view was amazing. At the end of the pier, the Statue of Liberty stared back at him. To his left, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Staten Island. New Jersey. To his right was Lower Manhattan. The new Freedom Tower rose up above all else. Keisha said she had watched the World Trade Center towers fall from the pier.

It was an odd day. A day to recall sad things. But also a day to take a step back. A day to watch tugboats. Water taxis. Ocean liners. Helicopters. Seagulls. A day to lose yourself in the rush of the harbor. He needed

to lose himself. He had been busy lately. He hadn't slept much. He'd spent weeks in Boston working an art-theft case. He'd gotten the paintings back. And a nice finder's fee from the insurance company.

Gulliver had once worked almost all missing-children cases. Not anymore. Not in the year since he had found Nina's daughter, Anka. Nina had lied to Gulliver. She'd told him Anka was *his* daughter too. He was crushed when he found out it wasn't true. That Anka was someone else's girl. After that he couldn't handle missing-children cases. It hurt too much. The wound was still too fresh. He was thinking about Anka. How pretty she was. How smart she was. How talented. How for a few days she had been his. That's when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around.

"Yo, mister. You seen my dog?"

The boy was maybe ten years old. He was already four inches taller than Gulliver.

But he was a skinny kid. A street kid. Gulliver knew the signs. A dirty face. Crooked teeth. Underfed. Untamed. Faraway eyes. Nervous like a cat. Ready to pounce or to run. Gulliver had spent a lot of time with kids just like this boy. Runaways ended up on the street sooner or later. Even the ones with money would find out it doesn't last too long. When the money runs out, there's only one place to land. The street. Gulliver often started his searches for runaways on the street. This kid was different. He wasn't a runaway. He didn't end up on the street. He came from the street.

"What kind of dog is it?" Gulliver asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "A dog dog. I don't know what kind."

"Big or little?"

"Kinda little, I guess. He's this long." The kid held his hands about a foot apart. "And he's this tall." He held one hand a foot

above the other. “He got kinda a scrunchy black face. His eyes go this way and that. And he don’t smell too good. He got brown and black fur and some white.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ugly.”

Gulliver laughed. “Your dog’s name is Ugly? I like that.”

The kid smiled. It was a nice smile, in spite of his crooked teeth. But a wary smile, like Keisha’s. Keisha had been in foster care before Gulliver’s parents adopted her. Love and trust didn’t come easy to her. Love and trust didn’t come easy to street kids either.

“How long has Ugly been missing?”

“Two days.”

Gulliver wanted to ask the kid a thousand questions. Where were his parents? Had he ever gone to school? Where did he sleep? When did he last eat? But he only asked simple questions. Ones that wouldn’t spook the kid. He knew that once

he started asking hard questions, the kid would take off.

“My name’s Gulliver Dowd. I live at Visitation Place. You can ask people about me. They’ll tell you I’m okay.”

“I know. I seen you around. You’re the little man that finds people.”

“I find lots of things,” Gulliver said. “Maybe even dogs.”

The kid smiled again. “I miss Ugly.”

“I bet he misses you too. Where did you see him last?”

“Over by Coffey Park. He saw a squirrel or something and took off after it. I followed him. He’s ugly, but he’s fast.”

Gulliver reached into his pants pocket. “I’m going to get my wallet out and give you my card. Okay?”

The kid stopped smiling.

Gulliver thought he knew why. “It’s okay if you can’t read. You’ll learn. There’s lots of things I learned when I was

old already. No one thought I could learn them, but I did.”

The kid pumped up his chest. “I can read. It’s just that the letters get all crazy sometimes.”

Like this kid’s life wasn’t already hard enough. “Here’s my card and twenty dollars.”

That set off alarm bells. “What’s the money for?”

“For food. Some for you. Some for Ugly. You can pay me back someday after I find your dog. Deal?” Gulliver held out his hand to the kid.

The kid took it and shook it. “Deal.”

Gulliver wagged his finger at the kid and winked. “Go get something to eat. Check with me tomorrow.”

The kid turned and ran. It was only a few seconds later that it hit Gulliver. He didn’t know the kid’s name. He shouted after him. Too late. The kid was gone.