



everlasting life

a denton ward and monty crocetti mystery

william mize

"William Mize has the rare, raw talent that is found in a mere handful of novelists..."

Deborah Adams

Everlasting Life

Everlasting Life
A Denton Ward and Monty Crocetti Mystery
By
William Mize

Other Books in the Denton Ward and Monty Crocetti Series:
Book 1: Resurrection Angel
Book 2: Everlasting Life

Everlasting Life
A Denton Ward and Monty Crocetti Mystery
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This book is dedicated to

James C. Rowan

Seminole High School, Seminole, Florida, Class of 1979

A true friend, a talented artist, taken too soon.

"The strength of the vampire is that people will not believe in him."

From the film, "Dracula", 1931

"Modern man must rediscover a deeper sense of his own spiritual life. To do this, he is obligated to struggle with evil, to confront his own shadow, to integrate the devil."

Carl Jung

"But those rare souls whose spirit gets magically into the hearts of men, leave behind them something more real and warmly personal than bodily presence, an ineffable and eternal thing."

James Thurber

One

To Denton Ward the emergency room waiting area was a swarm of motion – blue scrubbed aides, nurses, doctors and orderlies moved throughout the hallways with quick efficiency.

It was a swarm of noise – the dull buzz of conversation, the rhythmic cadence of overhead pages, the shrill ring of telephones.

It was a swarm of emotion. The fear of loved ones dying, the jubilation of a new birth or positive diagnosis, the anger at an unjust God ruling that death was the proper end.

It was all too much for him. The movement, the sound, the noise, the emotions, they all washed over him like a tidal wave, threatened to drown him, suffocate him.

He could feel the sweat on his brow. He could feel his heart slam against his chest. He could feel the voices start to murmur inside his head.

He thought he would go mad, but he had to be strong.

He had to hold it together.

He had to have a drink.

It was a thirst, a need that lived deep inside Denton. It was a dark animal, crouched in the corner.

Pain brought out the animal.

Fear brought out the animal.

He put a few coins into the soda machine, pressed the button marked *Sprite*. He cracked open the can, then poured some of the soda down the drain of the nearby water fountain. He looked left, looked right, then reached into the pocket of his trench coat. He pulled out a small airplane

bottle of vodka, twisted the cap off with his teeth. He held the neck of the bottle over the opening in the aluminum can.

“C’mon,” he whispered. “C’mon - ”

Denton took a deep breath and tried to calm his shaking hand. As he poured, some of the vodka splashed on the rim. He touched the can to his dry lips and sipped it clean, determined to get every drop necessary to appease the animal. He threw away the empty bottle and took a full, long drink.

He let out a sigh, closed his eyes and tilted his head back. He could feel the vodka burn the length of his throat and into his stomach. He could feel the warmth spread throughout his body.

He felt safe.

He felt sane.

The animal was satisfied.

The voices became quiet, his heart began to slow down.

“Better?” Monty Crocetti was leaning against the soda machine, her piercing blue eyes evaluating Denton with each passing second.

“Yeah,” he said. “A little bit.”

Monty reached out and rubbed his shoulder. “Scared?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Growing up in a mental institution will make you kind of jittery around hospitals.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “The answer’s yes to that, too. I just feel so helpless. He’s my best friend. He’s my lawyer. One minute he’s trying the case of his career, waving that damn fountain pen around, in front of millions of people on Court TV and then next minute he’s on the floor, barely breathing. Minute after that he’s in the hospital emergency room and there’s nothing I can do to help him. Nothing.”

“I know baby.” She touched his hand that held the can. “But you’re a psychic, not a faith healer. I’m a private eye. My job is to investigate people, not diagnose diseases. We’re both just human, and all we can do is sit out here and wait.”

“Are you sure we couldn’t go wait in the car?” Denton tried to smile, turn his discomfort into a joke.

“You big silly.” Monty slid her arms around Denton’s waist, the bangles on her wrists colliding. She pulled herself close, buried herself under the folds of his black trench coat. Her black leather jacket blended in, allowed her camouflage and safety in his arms. She placed her head on his chest, careful not to get her red lipstick on his starched white shirt and tried to find his heartbeat. After a few seconds she found it. With each beat, her own heart seemed to match it. She could feel them coming together, become one. She held him tighter. Denton kissed the top of her jet-black flat top and she sighed.

“How was the ambulance ride over?” he said.

“Rough,” she said. “I tried to sit down and hold his hand, but the two paramedics were all over him and kept pushing me out of the way. Then there was the starting and the stopping and the siren and the shouting.” She let out a long sigh. “I’m frazzled.”

“You want some of this?” He held out the can.

She frowned. “Maybe a little bit.” She took a baby sip, coughed, then handed the can back. “Holy crap.” She coughed again. “I don’t see how you drink that stuff.”

“Lots of practice.”

She growled at him.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s like you eating tofu.”

“Being a vegetarian is not the same thing as being a - ”

“A what? A drunk? Is that what you think I am?”

“No baby, no,” she said. “You know that’s not true. I know why you do it. I just worry sometimes.”

Denton frowned and decided to steer the subject away from himself.

“How is he? Do we know yet?”

“Not yet. Doctor’s still looking at him. Shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“God, I hope he’s gonna be okay. Maybe it was just a fainting spell.”

“I’m sure he will be.”

“He didn’t look good, though. He looked skinny. Skinnier.”

“He did look pretty pale,” Monty said. “I didn’t even recognize him when we walked into the courtroom. His jacket just kind of hung on his body.”

“Maybe he’s just lost weight because of all the stress. This case is pretty important, I mean, a kid could get the electric chair or whatever just for defending himself against some rednecks.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Monty said.

“But what if he’s not?” Denton looked into her eyes. “What’ll we do then?”

“We’ll do whatever we can.”

“You’d stay home then, wouldn’t you?”

Monty’s eyes narrowed. She pushed herself away from Denton and crossed her arms. “So that’s what this is all about.”

“What?”

“Me going to San Francisco. I told you, Den – it’s my family. It’s my sister’s wedding. I’m the Maid of Honor. I gotta go.”

“But that was before Nicholas - ”

“Don’t put this on Nicholas.” Her arms remained crossed and her voice lowered to a hiss. “If Nicholas needs help, either him or his doctor will get on the phone and call for help, and when he does we’ll be there for him.”

“But if you’re out there - ”

“Then you’ll handle it.”

“Me? You have got to be kidding. Can you imagine me having to go to a hospital every week to take him to his appointment or something?”

“Well then, if you can’t help, you’re going to have to get out of the way.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’ll have to let go.”

“No way.” Denton stood up straight and his jaw went tight as he spoke. “There’s no way that I would abandon him.”

“I didn’t say abandon him. I said let go of him, in that Buddhist, Zen sort of way. You’re going to have to let go of me, let go of him, let go of everyone, eventually.”

“You? Let go of you?”

“Of course.”

“But we’re engaged - ”

“No, no baby - ” She brushed his cheek with her hand, tucked an errant lock of his long, blonde hair behind his ear. “I don’t mean like that. I mean that you’re gonna have to let me go on vacation. You’re gonna have to let me go on business trips, you’re gonna have to let me go, period.”

“But what if he’s dying?” Denton pleaded. “How do I cope with that?”

“That’s the answer everyone’s got to come up with on their own.”

“How’d you answer it?”

“Sometimes with God,” she said. “Sometimes with a good cry. Sometimes just by looking at you. These things make me feel strong.”

Denton was silent for a moment. He looked into her eyes and he felt calm. He felt strong.

“You’re right.” He took a deep breath, looked at the *Sprite* can, then threw it in the trash. “I’m just a little off right now.”

“This is what I’m saying.” Monty took a step closer and returned to her place next to him. “Let’s not talk about that stuff right now. Let’s just pray that Nick’s okay and we can get him and you the hell outta here.”

“Amen to that, sister.”

The storm around the couple continued, the colors, the sounds, the chaos of the hospital swirled around them; but between them, in the center, in the eye of the storm, it was peaceful.

Quiet.

Safe.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too, baby.”

A tap on Monty’s shoulder broke the reverie.

“Miss Crocetti,” the nurse said, “they can see you now.”

Two

Denton and Monty were shown into a small office, where Dr. James Ray was sitting. Standard diplomas and certificates were on the wall; one from Johns Hopkins slightly askew. Requisite family photos on the desk and on the bookshelves.

Family, but not the nuclear family. One of Dr. Ray and another man. Smiling, squinting into the Florida sun, arms draped around each other like sweaters, to comfort and warm.

“Mr. Ward, Miss Crocetti – please - ” He motioned with a thin hand to the two hard back chairs before him. Folders, magazines and journals lay stacked neatly beside the far chair. “Thank you both for coming in, I appreciate it.”

“Thank you for seeing us,” Monty said.

“That’s quite alright,” he said. “I know how much the two of you mean to him, how close you all are.”

“So you’ve been his doctor for a while?”

“More than either of us would like to admit,” he laughed.

“So what happened?” Denton said. “Can we take him home now?”

“Den - ” Monty hissed.

“Not quite yet,” Dr. Ray said. “He’s very weak and needs to rest and get some of his strength back.”

“Can’t he do that at home?” Denton said. “He’s got a pretty nice condo. We can take him right home, tuck him in and get him taken care of.”

“If he had a cold, I’d say yes, but unfortunately that’s not the case here. It’s a bit more serious than that.”

“Serious? Didn’t he just faint?”

"I'm afraid that Nicholas is very, very sick, and this fainting spell is just a symptom of a larger problem."

"Sick?" Denton said.

"Oh God." Monty dug her crucifix out of her shirt and kissed it.

"What?" said Denton. "What is it?"

Dr. Ray exhaled and ran a hand through his long graying ponytail. He pushed his thick glasses up on his nose and looked at Denton and then Monty in succession before he spoke.

"Nicholas has AIDS."

"Big deal," Denton said. "Millions of people have it. Let's get him out of here."

"Den," Monty said. "Will you stop it?"

"It's okay," Dr. Ray said. "It's okay." He raised his hand to keep the peace. He exhaled, paused, then spoke.

"You're right, Mr. Ward," he said. "Millions of people do have it. But right now, Nicholas doesn't just have AIDS."

"There's more?"

"There's more."

"Jesus," said Monty, who again kissed the cross around her neck.

"Like what?"

"God – where do I begin?" The doctor seemed to be getting older before their very eyes. As he listed each infirmity, a year – a decade seemed to be drained from him.

"Diabetes." One finger up.

"Hypertension." Another finger up. "His blood pressure is through the roof. All this stress, his crappy diet, which leads us to his heart problems." Third finger up. "He's got coronary artery blockage that you couldn't dynamite out, but we really can't operate because of -"

"His AIDS," Monty said.

"And he's just been diagnosed with Kaposi's."

"What's that?" Denton said.

"It's a predominantly HIV related cancer."

"I can't believe this." Monty was clutching the crucifix. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Denton didn't move. Didn't look at the doctor.

"This is wrong -"

"No, I'm afraid not -"

Denton shook his head. "No. No way. He looks fine."

"Looks can be deceiving, Mr. Ward."

"I want a second opinion."

Dr. Ray smiled. "So did he. I've known him for fifteen, twenty years, and even he didn't believe me when I told him." He reached out and picked up a tattered and wrinkled manila folder. He put it in front of the pair. "It's all there, Mr. Ward. Second opinions, third opinions. Blood work. T-cell counts. Arteriograms. Biopsies. Everything."

"I just don't understand - "

"Let me explain it to you this way, Mr. Ward. Imagine that you are a soldier, in the field. Carrying say, 5 hand grenades. Now imagine that each of those hand grenades has had their pin pulled. And you have no idea which one will go off first. Which one will kill you. That's where Nicholas is right now. He's put up a good fight, but right now, I'm thinking that the fight is almost over."

"Bullshit," Denton said. "I refuse to believe that."

"Whether you believe it or not, Mr. Ward, it's true."

"That's a monster." Monty was focused on the medical folder. "So he's had it for a while?"

"Quite some time." Dr. Ray said. "Of course it started with the HIV test coming back positive. That was about 10 years ago. But then as his practice started to go south, and his stress levels and lifestyle went to crap, so did his body."

"I can't believe he didn't tell us." Denton was slumped in his chair, eyes focused on the folder, and on another distant point, a thousand miles away. "We're his friends."

"Everyone handles it differently," Dr. Ray said. "Some tell their loved ones immediately, others after time, others battle it in silence or in anonymous support groups."

"And Nick?" Monty asked.

"I think he battled it alone."

"Oh God." Monty wiped her eyes, tried to hide her tears, tried not to smear her mascara. She failed at both.

Denton reached over and took her hand into his, laced their fingers together.

"And now what?" he said.

"We move on," Dr. Ray said. "As best we can."

"How?"

"Together."

"You've done this before?" Monty asked.

"Oh, yes." Dr. Ray smiled a sad smile and then picked up the photo on his desk. "This was my husband. That's not the official word for it, but that's what he was." He brushed off the dust. "Man, we were so young back then. Just out of college.

"We were at Six Flags over Georgia. He just had to ride those damn roller coasters. Couldn't go to Busch Gardens - 'They're made out of metal. Real roller coasters are made out of wood' he'd say." He passed the picture over to Monty. "That was one of our last good days together before I had to start working my internship for twelve to eighteen hours a day and then watch him die for whatever was left out of twenty-four."

"I'm sorry," Monty said.

"Me too," Denton said.

“It’s quite alright,” Dr. Ray said. “It’s probably the first of many depressing conversations we’ll have during this time.”

“Probably.”

“So where do we go from here?” Monty was on the edge of her chair, back straight, feet on the floor.

“It’s his life,” Dr. Ray said. “All we can do is be there for him.”

“And we will.”

“But for right now, he needs rest.”

“What about drugs?”

“I hate to say it, Miss Crocetti, but he’s really beyond drugs.”

“Are you going to keep him here?”

“Maybe a day or two, enough to get him back on his feet. After that he can be taken home, as long as there’s someone there with him.”

“What?” Denton said. “Like pill taking or pillow fluffing? Hell, I can do that.”

“It’s beyond fluffing pillows, Den - ” Monty said.

“Quite right,” agreed the Doctor. “It’s like taking care of a small infant, except this one can communicate to you exactly what he wants. Or doesn’t want. Things like giving him a bath or shower, washing his hair, shaving him, giving him his medications, brushing his teeth, taking him to doctor’s appointments, feeding him - ”

“No problem,” Denton said. “I can do that.”

“I’m afraid that this is more of a job for a trained caregiver.”

“Like who?” Denton said.

“Like me,” said a voice from behind them.

Three

The trio turned around to face the striking young woman who stood in the doorway of Dr. Ray's office.

"Hello," She extended a hand. "I'm - "

"Adrienne!" Monty squealed. The diminutive private eye was out of her chair and in front of the woman in a second.

"Monty!"

The pair hugged and rubbed each other's back.

"How are you doing, girl?" Monty took a step back to examine her friend. Tall, thin, and regal with hair the color of a bat's wing and braided in a single strand down to the small of her back. She wore the requisite blue scrubs with a long sleeve white T-shirt underneath. A few bangles and leather straps on each wrist accented her pale, almost translucent skin.

"Clean and serene, baby," Adrienne said. "Clean and serene."

"How many years?" Monty asked.

Adrienne reached in her pocket and pulled out a white plastic fob key chain. "12 years. And you?"

"Fifteen." Monty smiled. "But no key chain."

The pair laughed and looked each other up and down some more.

"I take it that you two know each other," Dr. Ray motioned to a chair for the nurse to sit.

"Yep," Monty said. "Been a million years."

Denton coughed the *Introduce Me* cough behind Monty's back.

"Sorry, baby." Monty touched his shoulder. "Addy, this is Denton Ward. Den, this is Adrienne, whose last name I actually don't know. We never used them at meetings."

“That’s okay,” Adrienne laughed. “It’s Flaherty, a good Irish last name.”

“Meetings?” Denton asked.

“Yeah,” Monty said. “You know those Thursdays when I told you I was going to kickboxing practice?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, after kickboxing, I’d go down to St. Mary’s for a Narc Anonymous meeting.”

“Narc? As in narcotics?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Den – honey – you don’t go around telling everyone that you’re going to meetings to make sure your heroin habit doesn’t come back.”

“I’m not everyone. I’m me.”

“We’ll discuss this later, baby.” She put a single finger on his shoulder and pushed him down into his seat. “Right now we’re here to talk about Nicholas.”

“Exactly.” Dr. Ray opened the file folder. Adrienne had opened up her Palm and was busy pecking notes into it.

“Adrienne will be Nicholas’ home care and hospice nurse,” Dr. Ray said. “She’ll be responsible for doing all those things that we spoke about earlier – his day-to-day care and things of that nature.”

“Excellent,” Monty said.

“And remember,” Denton said, “Money is no object. I want Nick taken care of.”

“I’m doing this for free,” said Adrienne.

“What?”

“Free. As in no charge.”

“Why, may I ask?” Denton’s eyes narrowed behind his dark glasses.

“Let’s just say that I’m returning a kindness and leave it at that.”

“Yes,” Monty said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“What about references?” Denton said.

“I have five pages of references and I’ll be glad to send them to you, along with phone numbers and addresses, if you like.”

“That would be great.”

“What’s your e-mail address?” She held the stylus poised over the Palm, ready to write.

“I have no idea.” Denton looked at Monty, who just sighed and shook her head.

“You don’t have an email address,” she said.

“I should, though, shouldn’t I?”

Monty shook her head. “That’s okay Adrienne, you and I will get together later and discuss this - ”

“Right.” Adrienne smiled and touched the screen of the Palm. “Now the first thing I want to do is visit his condo and make sure it’s ready for him.”

“Ready for him?” Denton said. “What’s that mean?”

“Things have got to be changed. Moved around. Nick’s going to be weak and need some help moving around.”

“Changed?”

“Yeah,” Adrienne said. “I go through and make sure that it’s got things like handrails on both sides of the stairs, good lighting so he can see where he’s going, make sure all the lamp or appliance cords are covered up, you know, just do a general safety inspection for the patient, to make sure that he’s going to be safe and not hurt himself. Lay in medical supplies, that sort of thing.”

“Wait a minute,” Denton said. “You guys are talking like this is some sort of long term thing, like he’s going to be laid up for weeks or something. He’s going to want to get back to work, and he’s going to want to go back and win that trial.”

“Den,” Monty said, “you need to realize that Nick’s legal career is just about over.”

“No - ”

“Yes,” Dr. Ray said. “Nicholas is exhausted. He’s burned his candle at both ends about as much as it’s going to be burned. We’re down to a bit of wax and a little bit of wick.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that he doesn’t have long to live and right now his main concern should be getting well, getting strong and having a quality of life that affords him some comfort and equanimity before - ”

“Before what? He dies?”

No answer from Adrienne.

No answer from Dr. Ray.

“That’s bullshit,” Denton said. “Bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit, Mr. Ward,” Dr. Ray said. “It’s the truth.”

“No.” Denton slumped down into his chair. He looked at the floor, looked at the white, white tiles beneath him.

“I can’t lose him,” he said. “I don’t know what I’d do without him. Go crazy. Something.”

Monty rubbed his back. “It’s gonna be okay. Adrienne’s here and she and I are gonna get together and make sure Nick’s condo is all set up just the way it should be and then when he comes home, you can go over and visit every day.”

“Really?” Denton looked at Dr. Ray, looked at Adrienne.

“Sure.” Adrienne said. “No problem at all. Like Monty said.” She gave Denton a sincere smile and then turned to Dr. Ray with the stylus at attention.

“So he’s on a BRATT diet right now?”

“Yeah,” Dr. Ray said. “Keep it simple and let’s make sure he can keep food down and get his basic nutrition for a day or two, before we change anything.”

Adrienne tapped a few times on the Palm. “I see.”

“You see?” Denton perked up in his chair. “What’s that mean?”

Adrienne smiled and touched Denton on the arm. “Nothing. Really. I know you’re feeling out of the loop right now, but later on, I’ll sit down with you and Monty and I’ll tell you what everything means and what we’re talking about. You can give me the third degree if you want to, and I won’t get up until you’re satisfied. Deal?”

“Deal.” Denton exhaled and rubbed his eyes.

“I hope you’ll trust me, Mr. Ward,” she said. “I take good care of people. It’s what I do.”

“It’s okay,” Monty said. “He’s just a little - ”

“I can speak for myself.”

Monty stopped speaking, withdrew her hand from Denton’s shoulder.

“I just want him to be okay,” he said.

“So do I, Mr. Ward. Trust me, so do I.”

“Okay,” he said. “That’s all I got for now. But we’re gonna have that talk.”

“You bet,” she said. She turned her attention back to Dr. Ray. “I’ll download his chart from the nurses’ station and get your orders and meds.”

“Great.”

“What about a DNR?”

Dr. Ray shot a glance at Denton, who was staring at the floor, and Monty who was staring at Denton.

“Yep,” he said.

“Living?”

“Yep.”

“Excellent. POA?”

“Yes.”

“Sweet.” Adrienne clicked the Palm closed then stuck it back in her spacious scrub pocket. “We’re ready to roll.”

The sound of footsteps running was a distant thunder. A vision of blue against the smoked glass door of Ray’s office. A thud as they hit the door and wrestled for the knob. The door flew open and an out of breath nurse spoke five words between gasps.

“Mr. Shanley. He’s in trouble.”

Four

Adrienne was first out the door, followed by Monty, then Denton and then Dr. Ray. People, patients, all were a blur as they moved down the hallway, as they followed the nurse to Nicholas' room.

They pushed open the door and made their way into the room. Nicholas was a frail, thin hand that could be seen above the nurses and support staff that surrounded him. A band around his wrist made him a number, made him a small cog in the large overpowering wheel that was the hospital. His arm fell to his side, his shoulders went limp and the EKG machine started beeping.

"Nicholas?" Denton pushed his way to his friend's side. "Nick?" He looked at Adrienne who was already by Nicholas' side, gauging the situation, looking at the readouts.

"Out." Adrienne's eyes met Monty's and the two looked toward the door. "Now."

"No." Denton's knuckles were white against the steel bedrail.

Monty grabbed Denton and pulled. "Let's go," she said. "Let them do their job."

Monty pried Denton's fingers off the bedrail. She hauled him toward the door, step by step, as they worked on the lawyer.

"I'm sorry for what I said in there," Denton said. "Just please save him -"

Adrienne had joined Monty attempting to move Denton out of the room. "He's going to be fine." Her eyes met Denton's and they were firm and fierce and did not flinch. "I promise." She turned away from the pair and began to work in unison with the collected nurses, the beeps and alarms filling the room like angry wasps.

“Okay.” Denton relented and allowed himself to be led out of the room.

The door hissed to a close, the beeps became fainter and fainter, until soon there was nothing but the sound of silence. Denton looked through the small window and watched. He saw his friend, not moving, not reacting, the calm center of the storm.

He saw the nurses that surrounded him, a blur of blue, waves rising and falling against a white bed sheet sky. Their hands moved to instruments, to read-outs, to monitors, each person doing their own choreographed part in the waltz.

Denton closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were filled with tears, and his tears became rain upon the sea.

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