

## **More Praise for *Hollywood Buckaroo***

“*Hollywood Buckaroo*’s witty and engaging love-hate relationship with the industry it so vividly portrays is as entertaining as a trip to the movies itself.”

- Ed Solomon, Screenwriter, *Men In Black*

“*Hollywood Buckaroo* is not just funny and entertaining, it’s smart. Readers will not be disappointed. DeBrincat is an author with an original voice, who can be funny and challenging all at once. Don’t be fooled by this novel’s quirky, witty pace. The writing is superb – here is a writer whose writing talent shines far beyond her wit and intelligence. No plotless wonder, DeBrincat will make you laugh and admire her ability to tell an infinitely readable story and wish it didn’t have to end so soon. I realized partway through that I was holding my breath as I was reading it. Sander’s incredible experiences in Buckaroo may be strange, but they are never boring.”

- Leslie Schwartz, author of *Angels Crest* and *Jumping the Green*

# **HOLLYWOOD** **BUCKAROO**

**A Novel**

**Tracy DeBrincat**



**Black Lawrence Press**  
**New York**

*For monsieur Peel*

“Guess now who holds Thee?”

“Death,” I said.

The Silver answer rang,

“Not Death, but Love.”

— *Some tombstone somewhere*

## MONDAY MORNING

There's a Death Clock on the Internet that determines your expiration date. I enter my birthday (March 19), sex (M), height (5'9" in shoes), weight (178 on the right day), and consider the pre-determined personality "mode" options. Let's say I'm feeling pessimistic. In that case, I'll officially kick the bucket Friday, July 16, 2016, with 249,869,065 seconds left to live and counting. If I pretend my mode is optimistic, my last day on planet Earth reconfigures to Saturday, June 7, 2059, with some 1,619,220,588 seconds before I croak. That's a whole 43 additional years. Over a trillion seconds. With just one little lie, I could live longer than I've lived already, and then some. If I click the normal mode, I'll die April 14, 2034. All these dates are bogus, of course, as my current mode is neither pessimistic, optimistic nor normal. What I am is—I determine with the help of another website—numb, stunned, stupefied, paralyzed. I sit here checking boxes, calculating and recalculating my death, waiting for the taxi that will take me to my father's funeral, which began fifteen minutes (a measly 900 seconds) ago.

Forest Lawn's entrance gates are tall, black and ornate. The jacaranda trees flanking them explode with violet fall blooms. Two large white trucks and a Star Waggon's trailer are parked nearby; a handful of guys lay cable and set up lights and scrims. Great. I'm going to be even later to Dad's memorial because they're shooting a damn movie. A traffic cop in jodhpurs and knee-high boots motions for my Checker Cab to stop, then directs a hearse, limo and a procession of cars to exit the park. There is ample time to find poetry in this; Angelenos die the same way they live: in traffic.

Ample time to consider that no site, however sacred, is off limits to moviemaking. Ample time to wonder whether Mom gave in to my younger sister Ellie's constant ragging about upscaling and designing Dad's funeral, or whether Mom stuck to her guns and honored Dad's wishes for a plain memorial. Ample time to re-read the cemetery's promotional brochure, which describes Forest Lawn as the Eternal Resting Place Born of a Dream of Dr. Hubert Eaton, Who Believed, Above All, in a Christ Who Smiled. Ample time to ponder this bewildering description before the cop finally signals it's our turn to move.

As my taxi enters the gates, we pass a sleek Chrysler Towne Car waiting to exit. The back window slips down with uncanny timing, and Ellie sticks her head out for some air, something she's done for as long as anyone can remember, often causing Dad to remark she must be part dog. I duck down in the back seat, but too late. The last thing I see before gliding through the suburban lawn landscape of Forest Lawn is Ellie slitting her finger across her throat, and glaring at me. Fucking shit. No Christ smiling here.

The marble halls of the Sanctuary of Memory are shadowy and cool. Brackish marigolds and cheap carnations decorate cabinets behind which burned flesh and bone are locked and filed away. At the end of the east wing of the Columbarium of the Sanctuaries (*Columbarium Enema*, Ghost-Dad whispers in my ear), Robert Edward Sanderson lies in a simple pine casket—no brass, no carving—on a cloth-covered riser. Good on Mom. Two Filipina workers in gray uniforms collapse folding chairs that have been arranged in front of the casket on a square of red carpet. Smoke rises from two tapers, recently extinguished, in tall candlesticks. The women see me approach and back away, beckoning, “Come, come,” ostentatiously bowing themselves against a far wall. The younger of them silently speed-walks to Dad's casket and holds a lighter to the tapers, then rejoins her colleague. They both stare at the ground.

“I didn’t mean to miss the funeral.” My voice cracks as I stand there in my outdated, ill-fitting all-purpose suit, unable to move any closer to the casket. “My car broke down. I couldn’t find my jumper cables.” The red carpet swirls at my feet. I am loath to step onto it. Somehow, the red carpet means what has happened is true. Dad is dead. Life is not, as I have often fantasized, reversible.

“Pssht, pssht.” One of the ladies frowns, waving impatiently. A family of four down the hall gathers in front of another drawer. The mother weeps into a kerchief; the children are wide-eyed, holding hands. The father is somber, consoling wife and kids with constant touches and encouragement. He murmurs something, I imagine a prayer, and the others join in, their invocation echoing in the chamber. On the strength of their spiritual white noise, I move toward the casket. Dad hated the idea of spending dough on a fancy viewing box when he was ultimately going to be cremated, and would have been happy to have been rolled up in newspaper if it were legal. Instead, he’ll be launched into the afterlife in a receptacle resembling an entertainment console from Ikea. (How would it be listed in the catalog, I wonder. Mørtivit? Embålbmed?)

When I finally look inside, my gut curls in on itself. Dad’s stocky chest sinks in the middle, like a shelf that’s been piled with too many books. His complexion, ruddy from years of outdoor work, is old deli meat, jaundiced around the eyes. His lips are stitched vinyl. Some animal instinct inside me hankers for a sniff. I dare myself to breathe. If he still smells like Dad, like Old Spice and Pine-Sol and the scented hair pomade he wore to diffuse his workaday aromas, then maybe I’ll believe this is him. I hold my breath, and stumble to a chair. Close my eyes. Concentrate on the words from the family down the corridor, whatever, whoever they are.

The Saturday Dad died was one of those rare Los Angeles days when the sun sparkled in a pollution-free sky, puffy white clouds hopped around like bunnies, and the breeze made everyone’s hair look

like they just got laid. A gorgeous fucking day. The afternoon sounds of birds, weed whackers and turbo-charged vacuums ricocheted through a bucolic canyon in the Hollywood Hills. Bougainvillea vines cloaked the lush garden walls around a faux Tuscan villa while Dad and I labored to liberate its occupants' crap from a clogged sewer line. The only reason I was there was because of the flowers. Dad's other employee, Fabrizio, had an allergy attack that prevented him from working outside. This was the first outcall I'd made since I'd been banished from client contact six weeks ago. Six weeks since I'd worn the blue El-San Pipe & Drain coveralls, identical to Dad's except for "Sander" stitched above my breast pocket and "Bobby" in red above his. I noticed Dad rubbing his chest a couple times, taking shallow breaths and yawning, but each time he caught me watching, he'd turn away.

The problem at hand: a clay sewer line, riddled with roots from a nearby ficus hedge. Dad and I'd worked all morning digging a five-foot trench on either side of the short stretch of old clay line that needed to be replaced with PVC. His catcher's-mitt hands had always been remarkable in their grace, but his usual efficient moves were clumsy today. When I was ready to make the cut, I pulled on my protective mask and motioned for Dad to do the same. He ignored me. Typical. He rubbed his chest again. "You all right Dad?"

He nodded his big, balding head once, sharply, so I waved for him to stand clear; a standard safety precaution. He ignored me—also standard procedure—and nodded again.

I snapped on my ear mufflers, pulled the chain on the saw, and set blade to pipe. After easily shearing through the clay, I turned off the saw and noticed Dad's hands were clutched at his chest. Was he having trouble with heartburn? Wiping his dirty hands on his shirt? As I tried to make sense of what I was seeing, a familiar sound traveled through the cast-iron sewer pipe from the direction of the house. Before my brain recognized the sound of an untimely flush from inside, my body snapped into action. I dropped the saw and



flipped myself up and out of the trench like a gymnast, escaping being sprayed with sewage by a mere tenth of a second. Dad didn't react quite so fast. A geyser of waste burst from the pipe, exploding at his chest with amazing force. Adrenaline pumping, I lunged at Dad, wiping shit from his face, putting my lips to his, thinking *Not yet not yet not yet*. Trying to remember the steps I hadn't thought about since Duck and Cover days in grade school. Pinch. Breathe. Press.

When the lady of the house ran out on the deck to apologize for forgetting not to flush, she saw what was going on and quickly called 911. For being up in the hills, the paramedics got there in really good time. Ultimately, it made no difference. Dad's heart had already quit.

Across from the Sanctuary of Memory, artificial flowers and metallic balloons decorate headstones and statuary in rows on a grassy slope. When did people start putting party decorations on headstones? Yellow hillsides accentuate the artificial golf-green of the cemetery lawn. Beyond those, downtown's skyscrapers huddle behind a dirty blanket of October haze. There's no sidewalk here, as befits its hometown; this cemetery is made for driving. I slip my flask from my pocket and take a swig of whatever's in there since the last time I filled it. Stale, smoky whiskey singes my throat as I stroll down the middle of the road.

Below me, at the entrance gates, a director stands in the back of a truck next to a mounted camera, yapping static into a walkie-talkie. For the first time since Dad died, I am reminded of the brand-new laptop and titanium VMX3000 camcorder that recently maxed out my VISA, and my half-cooked plan of quitting El-San to write a screenplay and film it. That stupid screenplay. Bane of my life.

"Mr. Sanderson? Sandy?" The polished voice is at once reassuring, familiar and kind of fake.

That's freaky. No one calls me that except Dad, and not since I was a munchkin. I turn to look into a bespoke lapel, its perfect, tiny

stitches marching along a contoured seam. Above that, a chiseled, tan jaw below startling hazel eyes. “Paul Street.” I forget about the man’s use of my annoying nickname as he offers his legendary hand, a hand that has caressed a legion of starlet asses, pointed countless silver-gray prop guns, placed and pulled cigarette after cigarette on his snarled leading-man lips. “I was a tremendous fan of your father.”

This guy was on *Celebrity Profiles* a few weeks ago. He’s one of those actors who’s appeared in over a hundred B-movies. Science fiction, Westerns, action adventures, dramas. Noirs, comedies, war epics. Back in the forties, if there were ten movies in production in one week, Paul Street was in at least three of them. Some were okay; most were mediocre. A few of them were bad—rip-roaring, cult-worthy bad. He’s since retired from acting to become a celebrity spokesperson for beauty and exercise products, but his silver screen aura right here in Forest Lawn cemetery is undeniable and larger than life. He’s got to be close to seventy, about a decade older than my old man, but he looks years younger, his skin healthy and unlined. A *Profiles* tidbit I’ll never forget: at thirteen, the pony he was riding bolted straight into freshly-laundered sheets breezing on a clothesline. His mother looked on as the line caught Paul around the neck and sliced his throat open from earlobe to earlobe. After his recovery, Paul transformed himself from gawky teen to high-school heartthrob, and dedicated his life to his acting career.

I find myself surreptitiously studying the underside of the man’s jaw, searching for the scar that changed his life, but find nothing. He must have had an excellent surgeon.

“He loved his work, his life and his family.” Street delivers the line like a priest.

He can’t be talking about *my* father. “You’re talking about Bobby Sanderson?”

“Oh, yes,” Paul Street says, eyes closing, going private. When he opens his eyes, they’re *brimming with tears*. “Bobby was my good-luck plumber.”