



AGATHA LIVELY



BY ARDATH REKHA

Agatha Lively

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Synopsis: One of the galaxy's most powerful psychic detectives, and a multiple-murderer who's gone straight and switched to the side of the law, are reunited to track down a deadly serial killer. The last time they met, she was a teenage girl and he was her only hope on a deadly, desolate planet... but are they still on the same side or not?

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Chapter 1.

None of them ever knew what I was. I never could tell them. How would *you* tell someone, “you’re a wonderful person, and I’d love to get to know you better, but you only have three more hours to live”? You can’t. You don’t. You just... try to survive it all yourself.

I spent hours with Shazza, talking, asking her questions about her life and all of the amazing things she’d seen and done. But it didn’t help and couldn’t save her. I thought, at least, someone would still know her stories after she died. I did that, to greater or lesser degrees, with all of them. It was the only salvation I thought I could give them on that grim and hideous world.

Of course that whole planet reeked of death. No matter which direction I tried to cast my senses, there wasn’t anything else. I’d never been out of an urban environment before. Despite the muck that crawls through a city — and there is a lot — there’s no comparison to what exists in nature. Beneath us were a thousand waking beasts, preying upon each other, and I had to hear every single death rattle. It got hard to pick them apart.

Maybe that’s why I drifted, the way I did, for years afterwards. It was peaceful back in my liquid cage, deep inside PreCrime. And it was easy. Too easy...

But PreCrime isn’t an issue anymore. The crash *is*.

I really blundered a few times, not realizing that the man with the aura of mortal violence around him wasn’t Riddick at all; the aura came from what was about to happen *to* him. And I wasn’t able to pick Zeke’s death out of the chaos at all until it was too late.

I still believed in fate at that point. That was part of the problem. I didn’t think people could choose their futures. Choose whether or not to kill; even choose whether or not to die. Maybe I could have done something different if I’d known. Told Paris when to duck? Ha. I tried that with Shazza and she still got torn in half.

People think that when Anderton stole me from the lab, it was the first time PreCrime went offline. It wasn’t. They don’t realize that the place was supposed to go *online* two years earlier than it did. Only I ran away.

I felt guilty about doing it. I was being selfish and I knew it... or anyway, that was what I thought. That was what they wanted me to think. I was supposed to put aside *trying* to be a normal girl, and spend the rest of my life in a pool. Instead of trying to shut out the mortal screams I kept hearing, I was supposed to open my ears to them. Instead of playing the piano, I was supposed to play the alarm system. I was supposed to become a *cog*, a *tool*. They wanted me to give up my humanity.

I didn’t want to do it. Who would? How noble can you *be* when you’re thirteen years old?

I ran away.

It wasn’t as hard as it ought to have been, either. I knew what was going on in the heads of everybody around me. It was easy to make sure I was standing in the exact spot where nobody was looking. I sashayed right into the spaceport and stowed away on the *Hunter-Gratzner* and nobody batted an eyelash — their eyes were all turned in the wrong directions. I even managed to get myself into the ship’s mainframe after launch, and picked the brains of the crew, while they slept and dreamed the dreams of those descending into cryo-sleep, for the information I needed to operate a cryo-tube.

So a girl named Agatha disappeared. And, for a little while, a boy named Jack B. Badd was born.

If only my abilities had let me see far enough ahead, I might have known what was going to happen to that ship. But the farthest I’ve ever seen is a week or two. Twenty-two weeks was way beyond my capabilities. Still is...

I woke up, trapped in a tube, in a place that reeked of death in a way D.C. never had.

Officially, right after the crash, there were thirteen survivors, counting me, and counting Owens. Actually, it was more like thirty. I felt the rest die in their tubes, while I huddled and shook in my own. I died with them each time. Several burned to death. A few fell into caves we would come to know extremely well later on, and were torn to pieces. One man lived for half an hour while three beasts ate him at a leisurely pace.

It wasn't just *like* waking up in Hell; that's what it *was*. For an hour, before Zeke and Shazza found my tube and opened it up, I thought I'd died and this was my punishment for deserting the PreCrime program.

I'd never been so close to the people I "saw" before. Johns had to drag me away from Owens; I kept wanting to sink into his mind, and somehow make him hear *me* the way I could hear *him*, so that he wouldn't have to be alone as he died. All he could think about was stopping Fry from jettisoning the rest of us. I shrugged that off. After all, I still believed in fate. If Fry had *really* meant to jettison us, I wouldn't have awakened at all, would I?

Acting like a boy was easy. I just followed everybody's expectations. There were things in their heads I didn't want to look too hard at, but anytime doubt floated to the surface of their minds, I could read it, and I'd adjust what I was doing until it was allayed again.

But I couldn't fool Riddick. And I couldn't stay away from him.

His intimacy with violent death was like a dark mirror of mine. He was the one who dealt it; I was the one who felt it. I know he liberated something inside of me. After PreCrime recovered me, I was better than I'd ever been before.

You live beside and within the head of a violent killer for a month, and you come to *know* how to read the *real* signs of incipient violence. Maybe that's why I was so much stronger than the Twins from then on.

I acted like I was more fascinated with him than I really was... I think. Sometimes I think I was rather obsessed with him. But it did seem to be exactly what everybody expected a young teenage boy might do. Apparently everybody looks back on being a teen and decides that all adolescents are maladjusted lunatics who are inclined to "key" cars and idolize serial killers. Maybe they're even right. I hardly have any basis for comparison. I spent most of my adolescence in a dream tank, living out other people's deaths. So who knows?

It gave me a good excuse to get rid of the wig, anyway. Dumb thing itched like crazy. The abrasions when I peeled it off even kind of looked like razor burn. Hair doesn't grow in cryo, and they'd almost finished grooming me for the tank when I made my break, so I only had a little bit of stubble. I'm sure the missing notices specified "bald female." So not just being a boy, but a boy with hair, was useful in throwing people off the track. But in a broiling desert, when you already have your breasts squashed against your ribs and two shirts on so nobody will notice your true gender... a wig has *got* to go.

Everybody thought I'd shaved my head to look like Riddick. I finished off the deception with a pair of broken swimming goggles and suddenly I was "the winner of the lookalike contest." I think even Riddick started to believe the act.

It didn't stop him from almost killing me, though.

I saw it in his head, right after Paris was taken. Again, the beasts were feeding before their prey had finished dying. I was staring out at them, feeling every bit of the pain coursing through his failing body... when I felt Riddick have his epiphany. He knew I was menstruating. He knew that it was my blood that was drawing the beasts along. And he was very seriously considering killing me right there and then.

If I'd been hooked into PreCrime at that moment, a ball red enough to rival Rudolph's mythical nose would have popped out.

I wonder what name would have been on it — Jack B. Badd, or Agatha Lively?

He decided not to, though. It was, at the time, a purely unemotional choice. If he killed me, Johns would have him. It'd be easy for Johns to "arrest" him again when they got to the skiff; nobody would object after seeing him take down one of their friends. And nobody would trust him enough, for the rest of the journey, to let him near enough to "deal with them" if they became problems, too.

So I was spared. But I was also on my own. No matter how much of a fawning, fannish act I put on, he wasn't going to help me. I was monster fodder to him. Mostly.

The funny thing was, he kept thinking about me with this sense of hurt. Like he'd finally met someone who actually liked him and treated him like a person, and it was in a place, and in a way, where he couldn't enjoy it and would have to let it be sacrificed.

He had strange assessments of everybody. They still don't make too much sense to me.

But he came back. My fascination for him bloomed all over again. He was home free, surging ahead... and I knew he wasn't going to help me... but he turned around and came back.

Being under that bone was one of the most frightening things I'd ever experienced. The worst part was that my mind was screaming *how come I didn't see this coming?* It was only after he came back and saved me — and yes, Fry, whom he kept having the most disturbing sexual fantasies about — that I realized I hadn't precoged my death because my number was nowhere near up.

He didn't know why he'd done it, either.

I remember being shocked by the utter despair that flooded through him right before he said "we can't make it." Right before Suleiman was grabbed. At that point his was the only mind I was tuned into anymore. I didn't dare with anyone or anything else; it all stank of death. Suleiman, Fry... Imam stank of it too because he was so deep in his grief. Comparatively speaking, the mayhem inside Riddick's head was comforting.

But why on *Earth* did it upset him that he couldn't rescue us? There was a contradiction there. One I still don't understand. But it gives me hope, especially now that...

Especially now.

Imam believed that Riddick killed Fry for more than a week. I knew he hadn't. But it took me several days to figure out a way to get Imam to believe me without tipping my hand.

After all, having gone through all of that, I deserved to be a normal girl, right?

The month on the skiff was heaven. It was cold, most of the equipment didn't work right, and we were on short rations, but it was the closest thing to true peace I'd ever felt. With just the three of us, out in the middle of space, I didn't have to feel any impending deaths of *any* kind. And after a while I even got used to the things I did have to feel and hear. I even learned how to tune most of them out.

Occasionally Riddick would fantasize about killing one or both of us. Occasionally he even came close to acting on the fantasies. It's hard to live with two other people in such cramped quarters. Imam had a few murderous fantasies of his own, too. I spent my time trying to head those off, when they began to bubble up... but there were a few times that I had killing fantasies of my *own*, when those two great big dorks got on *my* last nerve.

Their sexual fantasies were very enlightening, too. I think Imam had a lot more experience with women than Riddick did. He imagined them in great detail, creatures and characters out of the Arabian Nights, almost. Laughing, slanted eyes, delicate hands, warm mouths... it was interesting. Riddick... he imagined very different things. There was no *intercourse* in his perception of sex. He imagined pliant bodies under his firm control while he used them in ways that were *not* about reciprocity. I try not to blame him for that. I think I was the first girl he ever got to know all that well.

Once or twice he even fantasized about me. But he would stop himself almost the second it started, like *he* couldn't stand to read his mind. He'd deliberately conjure another body, another face, into my place, and he'd act awkward with me for a few hours after it happened. Apparently, to him, having a sexual fantasy about me was a worse crime than disemboweling me would be.

We really did become kind-of friends, though. As near as he ever let himself have friends. It was... nice. Not that either one of us had ever had normal friendships to draw from, but there were times that were fun. Once or twice we even flirted.

Half a week before we were found, my precog began to kick back in again, although I didn't know or understand it until much later. We were flirting and he muttered something I only just puzzled out a few weeks ago:

"Kid, you keep giving me blue balls like this and you'd better *hope* we get picked up soon."

My reply shot out before I could hold it back. "Ha. Given all the *red* balls guys like you are gonna give *me*, I think it's an even trade."

He gave me a funny look and we both decided that we had no idea what that conversation had just been about.

But yes, PreCrime was waiting for me when we were towed into the nearest station. That's what I'd felt. That's why that thing about the red balls — which I hadn't known anything about yet — popped out of my mouth.

Riddick had already slipped off when they came. Most people might call it luck, but as we'd approached the station I'd begun to have a very bad feeling, and I'd suggested he get away fast. He was out of the hangar before the team arrived to take me into custody.

And that was when I first realized that there was more than just fate in play. That maybe... people could choose.

The team came in. Imam argued with them over who and what I was and whether or not a runaway should be returned “home” without some kind of hearing to make sure she wasn’t being taken somewhere unsafe. I could barely hear it, though. I was seeing two — *two* — futures in my head.

In the first one, I surrendered to them. I went back to Earth and took up my burden like a good little girl. Imam and Riddick never saw each other again, going their separate ways on the station. The lie we’d agreed on remained intact — Richard B. Riddick was dead and his bones were lying, broken and gnawed, on a barren planet that circled three suns.

In the second, I ran. I tried to get away again. My path crossed with Riddick’s and, for some inexplicable reason, he decided to *help* me. But the team was implacable. They closed in on us, cornering us in the bowels of the station. And, realizing who I was with...

They killed him. Richard B. Riddick died, for *real*.

But I could choose my fate, I realized... and I could choose his.

I surrendered.

They took me back to Earth, and back to D.C., and the program was put back on track. And I was... stronger. Better. Somehow, my time with Riddick had made me able to see deep into the *real* nature of killings. When the PreCrime Unit first tested out the system, they’d had to wade through a lot of accidental deaths. The technicians had despaired of filtering them out completely. But when I came back, I *was* that filter. The only precognitions that came through, anymore, were homicides.

I’m glad all those deaths were prevented. Ironically, every man and woman who *wasn’t* murdered might have Richard B. Riddick to thank for their lives. But...

...nobody *else* got to choose their fate. Men and women who approached that choice — to kill or not to kill — had it taken away from them and were punished for crimes that maybe, just maybe, they wouldn’t have committed after all.

At least it’s over.

PreCrime has been shut down. The Twins and I live out in a very nice part of the middle of nowhere, where the worst premeditated murders I have to hear involve farm cats and voles.

Except that I can feel him. Riddick. He’s coming. He’s coming *here*.

Death is on its way to me again... and I have no idea what our dance will be like this time. He wants something; I know that. But I don’t know what.

Will I know in time?

I’m excited. And I’m scared. And for the first time in my life, I don’t have a *clue* what I ought to be doing. So I’m just waiting... waiting to see what my fate will be... waiting to see if I still have a choice in it.

Come on, Riddick. Hurry up and get here. The suspense is...

Murder.

Chapter 2.

I wonder if She knows I'm coming.

She probably does, now that I think about it. Murder is Her business. She probably knows more than I do, about what I need.

To hear these guys talk, She's some kind of dark goddess. I just... it's hard for me to see that. I keep remembering the foul-mouthed kid who wanted to look and act like me.

Act. Was that all it was? An act?

Anderton tells me that Her behavior changes, depending who She's around. It's why they kept Her and the other Precogs in total isolation, back before PreCrime was disbanded. As kids, they always talked and acted like the people they were in a room with. Anderton tells me it messed up their predictions.

They say She was *good*, but that after She came back from being around me, She was off the charts.

Okay, they don't know that's what they're saying. They mean that Richard B. Riddick somehow *sensitized* Her to the criminal mind. But they don't know they're saying it to Big Evil himself... they don't have the first fucking clue who I really am.

Life is weird. And there's a sick fuck watching over us and laughing his ass off every step of the way. Sometimes I think his jokes are kind of funny, myself. But I still hate the bastard.

So here's the deal. Richard B. Riddick died more than eight years ago in the crash of the *Hunter-Gratzner*. Everybody knows that. Some *other* guy survived the crash, a guy named John Ezekiel, better known as "Zeke." Nobody much cared about what *he* was up to, and we even *almost* looked alike if you squinted real hard. A month of no shaving and you had to squint anyway.

So Zeke went off to the frontiers and did a little bit of everything while he waited for Richard B. Riddick's death to be ratified, and the criminal files to be purged of things like retinal prints and fingerprints. That happened three years ago. Then "Zeke" started heading back in-system, looking for a place to have a life. Nothing fancy. Just somewhere to be.

Only he got stuck on this planet Berenda.

By stuck, I mean drafted. Yeah, it had to happen sometime. That's what you *get* when you do a dumb-ass thing like rejoin the human race. People are confusing as shit, but I kinda like them. So I didn't just get drafted... I let it happen.

I got to Berenda and there was this *problem*. Local law had gotten mixed up with organized crime money. And the crime bosses had come looking for their cash. The whole damn sheriff's office had died in a shootout over it. The mob was gone when I got there, along with their money, but nobody was left to keep the peace.

And it turned out that Mr. John Ezekiel had done some Marshalling, once upon a time.

Nobody'd ever *needed* a guy like me before. Gotta say it felt nice. It felt *amazing*. It was a lot like the way Carolyn and Jack had needed me, way back when... only this time, I wanted it. And that's how I ended up the chief lawman of Berenda Prime Colony.

Richard B. Riddick. Escaped Convict. Murderer. Sheriff. Life is too fucking weird.

Three years and I even felt like I was a whole new person. Friend to dogs, kids and little old ladies. Sometimes I almost believed my past was all a dream, and that I'd always been Mister Joe Normal.

Did I mention that God is a sick fuck?

A serial killer showed up.

Nasty son of a bitch, too. My planet was his fourth or fifth stop. He raped and murdered five women and two teenage girls before I got a bead on him, and I got it too late. He was off planet and on his way to Earth before I knew for sure who he was.

One of those teenage girls was my next-door neighbor. If I'd found that fucker just a week sooner, I could've saved her.

She reminded me of Jack, too. Cute little girl on her way to being a gorgeous woman... had a *huge* crush on me...

I never got physically ill over a dead body before, until I found *hers*. Shit. Even *now* thinking about it knots my guts.

So I followed him here. To Earth. America. Where a million homicides happen every year.

They're glad to have me. Isn't that fucking ironic? Law Enforcement is *thrilled* to *death* to have someone on their "team" who successfully profiled, identified and tracked this psycho-fuck killer.

I keep having to restrain myself from saying "it takes one to know one." That could be a problem.

And I keep hoping none of the lawmen who once hunted *me* will join the team.

They brought Anderton in two weeks ago. It's his idea to consult the Precogs. Mostly, he wants us to consult Agatha.

Agatha.

Bet you can guess how thrilled I was. Walk into a room with a certified, bona fide psychic, who can see into the deepest, darkest reaches of your heart? One who's *sensitized* to murder and murderers? Oh *yeah*, I wanted to do that. They say Slam's *nice* this time of year!

So I was figuring I'd better stay the fuck out of her radar, until Anderton said something that blew the top off my head.

"Looks like you already know her, Zeke."

What the fuck?

Little Jack, the crazy kid who crawled under my skin back on that fucking planet... is the same person as Agatha Lively? That little girl who huddled against me in the skiff is now the clairvoyant demi-goddess every badge on this planet *prays* to? "Holy fuck!" doesn't even begin to cover it.

So now we're on our way to see her. The guys have been joking that I'm acting like some religious pilgrim or something — and doesn't *that* just make me think of the Holy Man? — and they've taken to promising me that she won't disintegrate me with her Evil Eye Beams.

But fuck, she might do *anything*.

I should be heading in the opposite direction. I should be on a ship back to Berenda. What if she narcs on me?

But I'm fucking *stuck*. Every time I close my eyes, I see Penny.

She had a crush on me from the time I moved in. She was ten back then. I'd catch her watching me through the slats of the fence when I was doing yard work. She wanted to impress me. And thanks to Jack... I was receptive. Didn't think of her in terms of sex, no fucking way. But I liked having Jack as a friend. Liked how that felt. Wanted to feel it again. And I kinda knew how important it was to her that I *be* impressed.

Wasn't hard at all anyway. She was a nice kid.

Was. Fuck! That son of a bitch...

So I got to know her. Her parents thought it was great. Penny making friends with the new sheriff made them very happy. After a while I stopped thinking "if only they knew..." and just enjoyed it. And yeah, I noticed she was getting feminine. I knew when she started menstruating, even though she didn't tell anybody for three months.

She'd come over and help me with yard work. Hide out on my porch when her parents fought about money. Show up at the station after school and pretend to look at wanted posters until I invited her into my office and got her a donut. Damn, it did feel nice. People liked me... but she made me feel real.

And that fucker killed her. Didn't just kill her. He tore her apart. I couldn't let her parents see her until the coroner and mortician had finished their work. I couldn't let them remember her like that.

And I can't fucking go back to Berenda until Rathjen is dead. Nobody would blame me if I did. If I said I followed him to Earth, gave the police my information, and came home — and yeah, Berenda *is* my home now — everybody would think I'd done a great job. They'd probably be relieved to have me back.

Carolyn, I understand you now. It stops being about what people see, and starts being about what you've done, when you've rejoined the human race. No wonder she couldn't get on the skiff.

I'm here to find Rathjen and kill him.

See, there's the other problem. I'm not out for Law here, I'm out for *Justice*. The others on the team want to find him and put him away. I'm going to put him in the ground.

But it all depends on *Her*. Agatha. Jack. Shit, I don't know who or what She is. I don't even know who or what She was when I met Her. Was any of it real? Did She know everything that was going to

happen?

Anderton says She's wonderful. Says She's sweet and compassionate. That's the Jack I remember. He says I'll probably come away from the meeting a little bit in love with Her. And that's the girl I remember too.

Am I gonna end up one of Her worshippers? When I think of Her, something in my head puts Her way up high, not just on a pedestal but much higher. Her name, in my head, carries this bizarre weight.

But what will She think of me? I thought I knew, but I didn't realize that She could see right into my head, and all the shit inside. She knew exactly what I was. She'll know exactly what I am. And She'll know exactly who I am the moment I walk in. If not sooner.

But like I said, She probably already knows I'm coming, and what I want. So I guess if She was gonna fuck me over She'd have done it already.

Now I just want to get it over with.

Wish I had a bit of Her power. This not-knowing shit is *murder*.