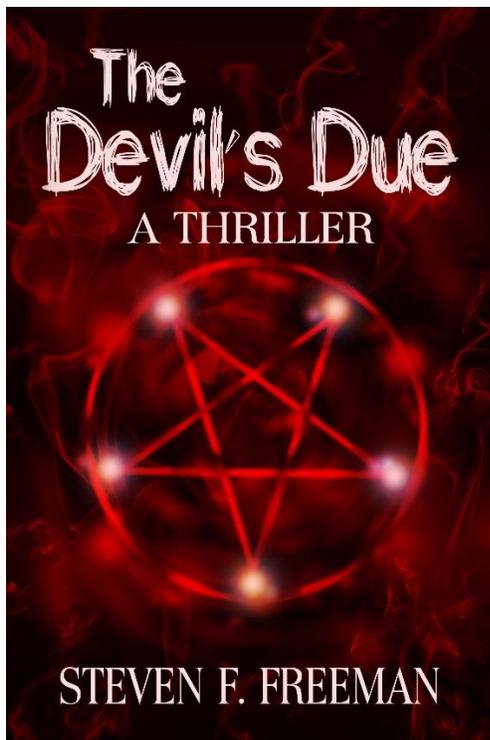


The Devil's Due: A Thriller



SYNOPSIS

Former Army Captain Alton Blackwell never thought he'd return to Afghanistan. Now he has no choice.

While on their honeymoon, cryptologist Alton Blackwell and FBI Agent Mallory Wilson receive a desperate plea for help. Resourceful Afghani teenager Mastana Meer, once instrumental in rescuing a mutual friend from Afghanistan terrorists, finds herself coerced into a nefarious plot by her Al-Qaeda uncle.

Having escaped the clutches of her terrorist uncle, the teen is days away from leaving Kabul for a better life when Alton and Mallory lose all contact with her.

As the former soldiers race to Afghanistan to search for Mastana, they battle Al-Qaeda terrorists, a resurgent cult of evil, and a web of political intrigue in which the label of friend and foe is not easily assigned. The duo must summon all their investigatory powers and combat skills to track down and rescue their young friend before her captors' evil design can be set in motion.

SUMMARY

In **The Devil's Due**, volume five of "The Blackwell Files" series former soldiers Alton Blackwell and Mallory Wilson are pulled back to Afghanistan to rescue a teenage friend whose Al-Qaeda uncle has nefarious plans for her. As they race to recover the teen, they battle not only Al-Qaeda terrorists but also resurgent cult and a web of intrigue in which the label of friend and foe is not easily assigned.

REVIEWS FOR THE DEVIL'S DUE

"[U]nlike regular series where the original is the best, damned if this one isn't the best of them all so far. The story was amazing, I love a good cross global chase and cult action, a really well thought out plot and nicely woven human elements into a lot of action...I loved it. Really found it a rompingly great holiday devouring read." **Sarah Redmond**

"I really, really enjoyed this story — the suspense and the pace are great; it actually reads very quickly because you feel you have to find out what happens next." **Elaine Rivers**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thriller/mystery author Steve Freeman is a former member of the US Army's Signal Corps, a twenty-seven year employee of a large American technology company, and an avid traveler who has visited five continents. The novels of *The Blackwell Files* draw from his firsthand knowledge of military service, the tech industry, and the diverse cultures of our world.

He currently lives near Atlanta, Georgia with his wife, daughter, and three dogs.



INTERVIEW TOPICS

- How have your life experiences influenced the novels of *The Blackwell Files*? To what extent are they autobiographical?
- What writers are most influential to your work?
- Do you anticipate future novels featuring Alton and Mallory, the two main protagonists of *The Blackwell Files* novels?
- What sets *The Blackwell Files* novels apart from other thrillers?
- How did you start writing?

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Chapter One

As Divband led his followers into the chamber, the girl inside the room looked up, her obsidian eyes wide with fright. Her arms encircled a column engraved with bas-reliefs of mythic creatures and fierce warriors. A thick knot of ropes around her wrists on the opposite side of the column kept her bound to the spot. The flicker of candles conferred a ghoulish appearance to the images carved on each of the circular chamber's twenty-one columns.

"Hello, my dear," said Divband. "What is your name?"

"Giti," replied the girl in a trembling voice as she turned her head to look at him.

"I apologize for your restraints."

"What have I done?" wailed the prisoner, who looked to be about fifteen. "Why am I being punished?"

"You are not being punished. You are being honored. Only you—a person pure in spirit and body—can fulfill the essential role in our ceremony."

"What role? What do you want with me?"

Divband approached Giti. Her flawless complexion shone through a face distorted with terror. Divband couldn't blame her. He saw how Ghoyee, his right-hand man, eyed her. A man of Ghoyee's physical enormity and lustful glances would strike fear into the heart of any living creature. But Divband had no intention of letting Ghoyee have his way with Giti. She was destined for a more important role.

"The ancient charms can be invoked only through one who has not been defiled by the world," said Divband. "You will serve as the conduit through which we call forth the black jinnd to aid our cause—and theirs."

"How?" asked the girl. "I know nothing of the ancient spirits or their ways."

"Your role is simplicity itself. You must allow us to proceed with the sacred anointments."

"What kind of anointments?" She screwed her face into a mask of skepticism.

"Just ink. I use it to draw a pattern on your body."

The teen remained silent for a moment. "And if I refuse?"

Divband sighed. "Then I would be forced to administer medicines that will ensure your compliance. But the black jinnd respond most readily to a mind that is unaltered, so I would really rather not resort to those measures. Be a good girl, and don't resist."

Giti's eyes darted from face to face but seemed to find no answer in the serious expressions she found there. Really, what choice did she have? She lowered her head in apparent acquiescence.

Divband motioned to Ghoyee and Meskin, another follower. The two unbound the girl's wrists and led her to an ancient, rectangular altar standing in the center of the chamber.

"Lie down," said Ghoyee, gesturing to the thick, stone slab.

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Giti complied, her hands shaking as she moved her body onto the flat surface.

“Bind her hands and feet,” said Divband.

“But I am not struggling!” she said, fear spreading anew in her eyes. “Why must my limbs be bound?”

“After the anointing is complete, we must leave you in here for some time—long enough for the black jinnd to sense your presence and respond. During this interval, we wouldn’t want you to have second thoughts and leave.”

“I won’t go,” said the girl. “I promise. You can’t—”

“Bind her mouth, too,” cut in Divband. “The sanctity of Iblis’ temple must not be defiled with such noise.”

Ghoyee grinned. He drew a band of black cloth from a satchel at his side, wrapped it twice through the teen’s mouth, and cinched it with a knot, rendering her mute. Then he and Meskin fastened new strips of cloth around her wrists and ankles and secured them to ancient stone rings affixed to the floor underneath the altar. The girl seemed too stunned to offer much resistance.

Divband stepped forward. He peeled back Giti’s shirt to expose a perfect abdomen. Reciting an ancient creed, he picked up a silver bowl from an adjacent table. After dipping a wooden brush into the bowl’s dark contents and wiping away excess fluid, he began to apply strokes to the girl’s stomach. He replenished the supply of ink several times before completing a dark circle. Inside the circle, he painted a series of intersecting lines, eventually forming a pentagram, the points of which ended on the arc of the circle. Only upon finishing the anointing did he discontinue his chant.

“Light the incense,” said Divband.

Four more followers set small, richly-patterned urns on the four corners of the table, then lit the sticky gum within the bowls. Tendrils of smoke began to rise, and a sweet, sickly smell permeated the room.

Divband turned to the group of roughly forty believers. “Now, my friends, we must pray to the black jinnd to look favorably upon our request,” he said, glancing at the bound figure on the table. “The ways of the black jinnd are beyond man’s understanding.”

“Powerful are the black jinnd,” came a uniform response from the assembled crowd.

In observance of the ritual’s requirements, the group began a low chant as they filed out. Before exiting the stone arch that served as the room’s primary entrance, Divband looked back over his shoulder.

The girl’s eyes, wide with fear, seemed to beg for mercy. If only she knew what the coming hours would bring.