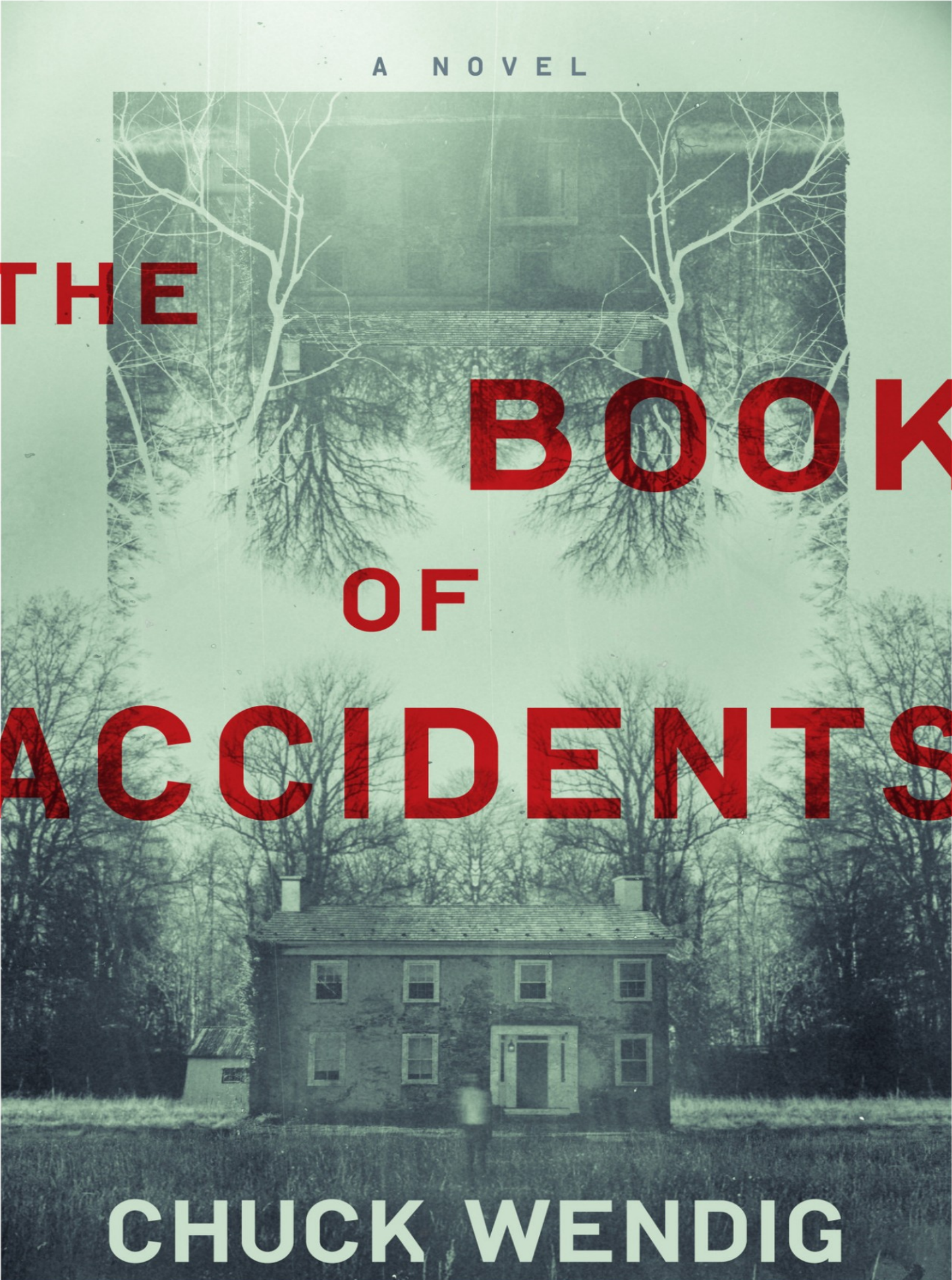


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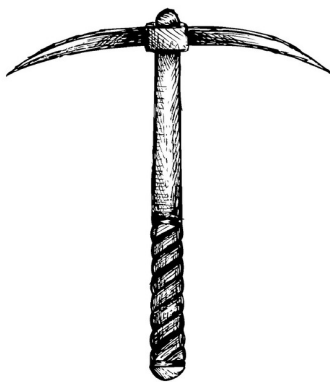


**THE  
BOOK  
OF  
ACCIDENTS**

**CHUCK WENDIG**

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WANDERERS*

# THE BOOK OF ACCIDENTS



*A Novel*

CHUCK  
WENDIG



NEW YORK

*The Book of Accidents* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*Dedication*

*Afterword and Acknowledgments*

*By Chuck Wendig*

*About the Author*



A father, Steven said, battling against hopelessness, is a necessary evil.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

May the forces of evil become confused on the way to your house.

—George Carlin

## PROLOGUE 1

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### *Ride the Lightning*

**E**dmund Walker Reese was a man of numbers. Not an accountant, or a mathematician, but, rather, a man of simple interests, and it was here and now, in the Blackledge SCI—State Correctional Institution—that he sat strapped to an electric chair, running the numbers.

Three guards walked him here.

They passed seven other prisoners on Death Row, each in his own cell.

There would be one executioner, too: an anonymous man who would throw the switch, the man who would end Edmund Reese.

It was ten P.M. on a Tuesday. Second Tuesday in March, 1990.

(Time, after all, was a number, too.)

But there were details he did not yet know, and so he asked the older guard who was slitting Edmund's prison jumper up the calf to make room for the electrodes. (The leg had already been shaved that morning, right before Edmund Walker Reese—Eddie to his friends, of which he had none—ate his last meal, a simple bowl of wholesome chicken noodle soup.)

The older guard, a man named Carl Graves, had sideburns so gray and wispy they were like bits of fog clinging to his jowls. (Though the top of his hair was dark, not yet taken by age and drained of color.) He was in his forties, maybe early fifties, it was hard to tell. A whiff of sourness on his breath: cheap whiskey, Walker thought. Carl was never drunk, not really, but he was always drinking. (Smoking, too, though here the whiskey seemed to mask the smell.) The drinking was why Graves always seemed to

hover somewhere between weary and angry. But the whiskey made him honest, too, and that's why Edmund liked him. As much as he could like anybody, anyway.

Reese chided the guard slicing the leg of his jumpsuit: "Be careful of my left leg. There's an injury there."

"That where the girl gotcha?" Graves asked.

But Reese didn't answer. Instead, he said: "Tell me more. More numbers. How many volts in the chair?"

The guard sniffed and stood up, saying, "Two thousand."

"Do you know the dimensions of the chair? Weight. Width. And so on?"

"Don't know, don't care."

"Is there an audience? How many?"

Graves looked to the window that Edmund faced—a window that had metal blinds pulled down over it. "Got a big audience today, Eddie." Graves used his nickname even though they were not friends, not at all, but Edmund did not object. "Seems people really want to watch you cook." Cruelty flashed in Carl Graves's eyes like a lit match. Edmund recognized that cruelty, and liked it.

"Yes, yes," Edmund said, unable to conceal his irritation. His skin itched. His jaw tightened. "But how *many*. The number, please."

"Behind the window, twelve. Six private citizens invited at the behest of the warden and the governor, and six journalists."

"Is that all?"

"There are more watching on closed-circuit TV." Carl Graves pointed at the camera in the corner, a camera whose vigilant eye watched the chair intently, unblinking, as if afraid to miss what would come. "Another thirty."

Reese did the calculation. "Forty-two. A good number."

"Is it? If you say so." Graves stepped aside as the other guard, a big slab of meat with a lawnmower buzz cut, stood with a grunt and began affixing the electrodes to Edmund's shorn scalp. Carl sniffed. "You know, you're special."

*I am special*, Edmund thought. He knew it to be true, or did once. Now, he wasn't so sure. He'd once had a mission. Been given life and light and a

quest. A sacred quest, he was told. Blessed, consecrated, *holy* and *unholy* in equal measure, and yet, if that were true, why was he here? Caught like a fly in a slowly closing hand. Foiled at Number Five. Only Number Five! He had *work yet to do*.

“Special how?” he asked, because he wanted to hear it.

“This chair, Old Smokey—most electric chairs have names, a lot of them are called Old Sparky, but here in PA, it’s Old Smokey—well, it’s been in storage since 1962. Last fucker who fried in this thing was Elmo Smith, rapist and murderer. And then they stopped using it. Been nine death warrants since Elmo, but all of them got by on appeal. But then, you came along, Eddie. Lucky number ten.”

Numbers flashed through Edmund Reese’s mind, doing a do-si-do square dance—again, nothing mathematical. But he was looking for something. Patterns. Truth. A sacred message.

“Number ten isn’t classically lucky,” Edmund said, twisting his lips into a grimace. “What number am I?”

“Number ten. I told you.”

“No, I mean, how many before me? Died? In this chair?”

Graves looked to the big ginger guard for an answer. Big Ginger provided, saying, “Before him, three hundred and fifty fried in the hot seat.”

“Makes you three-fifty-one,” Graves said.

Edmund considered that number: *351*.

What did it mean? It had to mean something. Because for it to mean nothing, for all of it to have added up to the sum total of a bucket of piss and shit, would kill him. It would kill him in a way this chair would not. Kill him in a way worse than those girls—

*No*, he chastised himself. *They were not girls. They were just things. Each a number. Each a purpose. Each a sacrifice.* Number One with the pigtails, Number Two with the painted nails, Number Three with the birthmark just under the left eye, Number Four with that scrape on her elbow, and Number Five—

Rage throttled him and Edmund tensed up in the chair as if he were already being electrocuted.

“Settle down, Eddie,” Graves said. Then the older guard leaned in and again, there glimmered that flash of nastiness in his eyes. “You’re thinking about her, aren’t you? The one that got away.”

For a moment, Edmund felt truly *seen*. Maybe Graves did earn the right to use his nickname. “How did you know?”

“Oh. I can tell. I’ve been a guard here on Death Row for a while, and in Gen Pop for a long time before that. Started when I was eighteen. At first you hold it all back. Keep it at bay. But it’s like water in the tides, washing up on your beach, pulling a little bit of your sand away, day after day. Soon you’re pickling in it. Brining like pig meat. It gets in you. So you get to recognizing it. Evil, I mean. You know how it thinks. How it is. What it *wants*.” Graves licked his lips. “You know, your hunting ground? Where you took those girls—”

*Those things.*

“It was near my house. Scared my wife. Scared my kid.”

“It wasn’t them I was after.”

“No, I guess not. Just the girls. Young girls. Four dead. And as for the fifth, well, she got lucky, didn’t she?”

“Number Five got *away*,” Edmund said in sorrow.

“And when she got away, you got caught.”

“I wasn’t supposed to get caught.”

A mean grin crossed Graves’s face. “And yet, here you are.” With that, the guard slapped him on the knee. “One thing you ought to know, Eddie, is that what goes around, comes around. You get what you give.”

“You also give what you get.”

“If you say so.”

They cinched all the belts, checked the electrodes one more time, and informed him of what was to happen. They asked him one last time if he cared to have a chaplain present, but he’d already refused that opportunity and did not beg for it now, for as he told them, *I have a patron in this life, and the demon is not here*. They explained, almost jokingly, that on the other side of the door was the prison superintendent, on an open line with the governor’s office just in case of any (and here Graves snort-laughed)

“last-minute reprieves.” They explained that his remains would go into a potter’s field, for Edmund Reese had no family left in this world.

And with that, they opened the metal shades.

Edmund saw the witnesses and the audience that had gathered to watch him die. They sat, equal parts horrified and eager, held rapt by those polar forces like ball bearings between two strong magnets. The executioner turned on the voltage, then the amperage, and then went to the power panel to flip the switch—which was not a comical Frankenstein-making switch on the wall you could pull down dramatically, but, rather, a simple white switch, so small you could flick it with a thumb.

And then the thumb moved and—

Edmund Reese felt the world light up around him, big and bright. All things washed out in the wave of white. It felt suddenly like he was falling—and then, the opposite, like he was being picked up by invisible hands, the way a cow must’ve felt when sucked up into a tornado, and next thing he knew, he was gone from the chair, gone from that world, not dead, no—

He was something, and somewhere, else.