

The background of the cover is a photograph of a city skyline at night. The buildings are illuminated with various lights, and their reflections are visible on the water in the foreground. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, golden-yellow and orange tones.

THE VULNERABLE

A SUSPENSE THRILLER

Ed DeJesus

THE VULNERABLE

Praise for
The Vulnerable

“A harrowing, thought-provoking, and utterly absorbing read...

In DeJesus’s high-stakes thriller, domestic terrorism collides with family wounds, and past choices turn deadly. The novel tackles urgent issues, including climate change, societal shifts caused by the pandemic, and opioid addiction, while staying firmly rooted in its thriller genre. Paced with precision and laced with brutal twists, this is a thriller that stays with you well beyond the final page.”

—*Prairies Book Review*

“Ed DeJesus’ *The Vulnerable* is a suspense thriller that balances high-stakes action with intimate emotional struggles, making for a gripping read. What I loved most about *The Vulnerable* was its social commentary. It’s not just a thriller; it’s a book that forces you to think. *The Vulnerable* is a strong debut that delivers both suspense and substance. It’s a great pick for readers who enjoy thrillers with multiple viewpoints, morally gray characters, and a plot that mirrors real-world issues. If you like books that keep you guessing while making you reflect on society’s biggest issues, this one’s for you.”

— Literary Titan.

“A fascinating story of crime amid the complexity of human emotion. Pulling us into three different locales, the author paints a memorable picture of treacherous secrets and the deep sea of lies that conceal them. Packed with high octane tension, *The Vulnerable* is a must-read for thriller lovers.”

— Lisa Towles, Amazon Bestselling author of *Terror Bay*

“With *The Vulnerable*, Ed DeJesus has executed a layered, complex, and highly entertaining debut thriller. Crime, domestic terror, family wounds, romance, the pandemic, climate change—it’s all here. Moving fluidly (at times breathtakingly) between Massachusetts, Florida, and California wildfires, the story crackles with energy, sharply drawn characters, and an unflinching vision of a world in which we are all vulnerable.”

— David Daniel, prizewinning author of the Alex Rasmussen Lowell Detective Series and *Beach Town*.

“In *The Vulnerable*, Ed DeJesus crafts a suspense thriller that masterfully intertwines themes of domestic violence, societal scrutiny, and the acts of violence perpetrated by and against vulnerable individuals. The character development is one of DeJesus’s strongest skills. *The Vulnerable* is compelling and incisive, deftly balancing elements of suspense with compelling social commentary. DeJesus highlights the fragility of life, the impact of violence, and the complexity of human relationships with a keen narrative! You won’t be able to put down this emotionally rich narrative. A five-star review!

—The Book Commentary

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A Suspense Thriller

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DEDICATION

For all the vulnerable people—their fate often makes us sigh. And for all who
have grieved—and never got to say goodbye.

*“Don’t waste the time. Time is the final currency, man.
Not money, not power—it’s time.”*

—David Crosby

PROLOGUE

Sept 14, 2019

Dick DeCosta helped his son carry the final truckload into Dan's new home.

Dick had the auto shop install a new catalytic converter and remove his company's signage from his Tacoma pickup before he gave it to his son. He was relieved Dan didn't want to take over his solar company. It made it easier for him to shut it down, sell his Massachusetts properties, retire early with his wife in a secure high-rise condo in Fort Myers, Florida, and not worry about leaving Dan alone.

Dick looked at the text message the Boston FBI office said was sent from a burner phone.

NEXT TIME, WE'LL EXTRACT THE DRIVER!

The police said catalytic converters were being stolen more frequently. But Dick knew these idiots didn't give a damn about the environment or the value of the precious platinum, palladium, and rhodium in his converter. This text was a direct threat from the far-right extremists who had sabotaged one of his solar farm projects and shot out the panels on the roof of another. It was more blowback for his controversial best-selling book on climate change, *Greenhouse Gases and the Gaslighters*, the existential crisis of our time.

He recalled his book's tour interview with Bill Maher two years earlier. Maher had said, "Love it. You're a ballsy Desert Storm vet calling out corporations and politicians supporting fossil fuels and gaslighting clean energy. Thank you for your service."

Against his publisher's recommendation, Dick would use a pen name for his next book.

Chapter 1

Amy Johnson was glad her shift at Walgreens ended soon. She could then pick up her three-year-old son, Jayden, from daycare. Thursday, February twenty-seventh, had been crazy with customers picking up prescriptions and supplies to prepare for the third major snowstorm this month to hit Lowell, Massachusetts.

A tall, clean-shaven man wearing a gray hoodie over close-cropped hair put a Red Bull can on the counter. She didn't recognize him without his beard and mullet until he spoke.

"How ya doin', Amy?"

"Good... Thanks."

"Wicked naw eastah comin'. No school tomorrow."

"Anything else?" Amy asked, hoping to get home before the nor'easter started.

"Hard box of Mahbos."

She placed the pack of Marlboro cigarettes on the counter, and he asked, "How's Robin?"

"She don't work here anymore." Amy printed the receipt and said, "Twelve eighty-two."

He handed her a twenty, "So, ya boy won't be in daycare tomorrow. Who watches him when you work?"

She gave him his change and replied, "My mom." She knew he didn't believe her.

He grabbed a pen from the counter, wrote on the receipt, handed it to her, and said, "Tell Robin I fahgive her. And to call me at that numbah."

Amy nodded and slid the receipt into her jeans pocket. She then scurried to clock out and rushed out to her Camry. The creep was now smoking in a Nissan Sentra. Amy sped off but couldn't lose him. When she arrived at the daycare center, they were putting a jacket on her restless son. Amy sent Robin a text.

Sean's back. He knows about Jayden 😬 You can't stay here!

After she buckled Jayden in his car seat, Sean was gone. He knew she lived in a tenement on Middlesex Street. Her phone dinged with Robin's reply.

OMG 😬 I'm sorry. Storm's coming. Can't sleep in my car. I'll freeze to death 😬
Please, 1 more night.

Amy knew Robin had to come to her apartment to get her things. She consented. Just tonight. Can't have that psycho around when the storm ends.

Saturdays never seemed to go as planned for Rebecca Bouchard. Her husband, Brandon, a Manchester, New Hampshire paramedic, was tired after shoveling. By the time they finished food shopping and put the groceries away, February twenty-ninth was half gone. The 2020 winter storms were getting more extreme.

When Rebecca got pregnant with their second child, Brandon insisted she use their safer, all-wheel-drive Toyota RAV4. He drove their ancient Dodge Caravan to work, but transmission problems sank it last month. Down to one car, Rebecca was now forced to cut back her hours at Target. So, when her younger sister, Robin O'Rourke, said they could have her all-wheel-drive Subaru Outback, they were thrilled. But they had to get it today, and it often needed a jump start.

Rebecca and Robin grew up thirty miles northwest of Boston in Lowell, Massachusetts, the melting pot mill town. Robin, who'd had a run of bad luck, was couch-crashing at Amy Johnson's Lowell apartment. Robin worked at Home Depot just over the border in Nashua, New Hampshire. She'd told Rebecca she'd transfer to the Manchester store and live with them; she'd help Rebecca with the new baby, and they could use her Subaru.

Yesterday, Robin called stressed about Sean, her abusive ex. Unfortunately, the call kept breaking up. Rebecca thought Robin said she'd be taking a bus to the Cape and wouldn't need the Outback. She'd signed over its title and left it in the glove box; they could pick it up at the bus station's parking lot in Tyngsboro. Robin followed up with a text on Saturday at 8:04 a.m.

My car won't start! It's in the guy's driveway that I've been dating. 36 Buckingham St., North Chelmsford. Keys inside. TTYL

Rebecca mapped the address on her phone—forty minutes south of Manchester. But there was no TTYL; they never got to talk later. Robin still had not replied to her text or voice message when they drove their Rav4 down Route 3 to pick up the Outback. Rebecca was worried and tried to hide it from Brandon and Brianna, her three-year-old daughter, strapped into her safety seat. They exited the highway onto Groton Road in North Chelmsford. The late afternoon sun on this leap day helped the salt melt the snow on the secondary roads.

“Turn right onto Buckingham Street,” the iPhone instructed.

Her husband slowed down as the tires crunched loudly over the snow-packed, less-traveled side street. *Almost there*, Rebecca thought. She stretched her seat belt out over her seven-months-pregnant belly, then said, “Oh look, Crystal Lake's over there.”

“It's Freeman Lake,” her know-it-all husband said, “named after Chelmsford Selectman Bruce Freeman, who got the state to fix the broken dam that flooded.”

Rebecca replied, “My dad said in the olden days, Boston's Crystal Ice Company cut up the frozen lake and hauled the ice away on sleds.” *Bet you didn't know that smarty pants.*

Fresh-plowed snowbanks surrounded rural mailboxes at the end of each driveway, obscuring the house numbers on the cottages, ranches, capes, and colonials clustered around the frozen lake. Rebecca's phone flashed 4:52; with the setting sun sinking behind

the tall trees, it would be dark soon. Her phone squawked, “Your destination is on the left.”

They pulled into a cleared driveway with enormous snowbanks and a two-car garage attached to the mudroom of a cape-styled home. They jumped out and approached the gray Subaru. Its roof was crusted with thick snow, and its body was covered in road salt. Brandon got behind the steering wheel. No keys. They spotted Robin’s phone charger on the console. But the horn didn’t work.

“Battery’s dead,” he said. “Glad I brought my jumper cables.”

They found the registration and signed title in the glove box. Brandon left the registration there and stuck the title inside the vest pocket of his EMT Jacket. Rebecca opened the Outback’s rear passenger side door; taped moving boxes and bags cluttered the inside.

“Oh no! Brandon!” she exclaimed.

An open box and a white plastic bag full of linen were smeared with blood and more on the flipped-down rear seat. Rebecca reached for a blood-stained hand towel.

“Don’t touch it!” Brandon shouted. “Get in our car and behind the wheel. I’ll check with the homeowners.”

She stepped over blood spots on the icy driveway, climbed inside the SUV, and locked the doors. Her husband rang the bell on the mudroom’s entrance. She called Brandon, saw him adjust his earbud, and heard him say, “Door’s open, Becca. I’m going in, don’t hang up.”

“Be careful,” she said as she put the phone in speaker mode in the dashboard’s holder.

Her husband—a trained first responder—had been in many dicey situations in tough inner-city neighborhoods. At six-feet-one and two-hundred-twenty pounds, the former high school wrestling team captain was strong and fearless. *He’d know what to do.* Her husband stepped inside the mudroom door and announced himself. “Hello. Anybody home?”

She heard him exhale deeply, then exclaimed, “Whoa, blood on the mudroom’s floor... and more in the kitchen.” She shivered and checked on Brianna, asleep in the back seat.

Oh God. She recalled last year they’d picked Robin up at Lowell General’s emergency room, her head bandaged, her eye swollen shut. She told Rebecca she’d awakened the night before, half-naked and missing her cash and credit card. She believed Sean’s drug supplier, Miggy Morales, slipped her a roofie and raped her. Robin then had it out with Sean. He said she probably led Miggy on and nearly killed her before the cops arrived. Rebecca and Brandon brought Robin to their home from the hospital to recuperate. Brandon said that day, “If Sean comes looking for her, I’ll break him in two.”

Rebecca knew Robin still had a restraining order on the abusive opioid addict. She hoped Sean had not found his way back into Robin’s life. Or she hadn’t fallen into another troubled relationship with the guy she’d recently met. Rebecca thought Robin finally seemed happy but withheld the man’s name from her, saying instead, “Becca, I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

Rebecca heard Brandon shout, “Hello! Hello! We came for the Outback... anybody home.

He told Rebecca, “I hear banging; it’s either upstairs or in the garage.”

Breathing heavily, he said, “Party remnants... floor’s a mess with blood and broken glass.”

A light went on in the house, and she could hear him opening kitchen drawers. He said, “Bag of weed in here. Bingo, car keys.” He paused. “I don’t believe this.”

“What?”

“Two sets of keys—both Toyotas. No Subaru.”

She heard him walking around the house until he whispered, “Shit. The banging stopped.”

She could hear his breathing grow heavier. Then suddenly, a man shouted at Brandon.

Her husband quickly whispered, “Call nine-one-one. Park in the street.”

Rebecca then heard Brandon pleading. “I don’t want any trouble. Put that down—”

She put Brandon’s call on hold, tapped 9-1-1, frantically backed the car out of the driveway, and parked on the street. A female dispatcher answered, “Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”

Rebecca explained the situation, provided the address, and added, “My husband, an EMT, is in the house. He saw lots of blood and drugs.”

“Police are on their way. Don’t hang up. Stay in your car, put the emergency flashers on.”

Rebecca turned on the flashers and noticed her daughter stirring in the back seat. Reaching back, she said, “It’s okay, Sweetie.” Patting Brianna’s head, she pushed her red wavy hair aside. She sighed, realizing how much her daughter resembled Robin as a toddler.

“You still there?” the dispatcher asked.

“Yes, comforting my little girl in the back seat.”

Rebecca then shuddered. *Did Robin get out of that house? Will Brandon get out?* She made the sign of the cross and began to pray.

Chapter 2

Officer Mick O'Malley cruised by the huge snowbanks outside the Chelmsford Seniors Center's plowed and sanded parking lot. It was ready for tonight's bingo game. The squawk box's dispatcher announced, "B and E in progress. Proceed to thirty-six Buckingham Street, North Chelmsford."

"Roger," he said, turning on the flashing lights of his Ford SUV squad car. He then took a right onto Groton Road and flew by a pulled-over car. Only a minute away, the squawk box announced another 9-1-1 call at the same address. A second cruiser dispatched: domestic violence and drugs.

After nine years on the force, the middle-aged Sergeant O'Malley figured the second call was the situation. He bounced along Buckingham Street and pulled up behind a vehicle with its emergency flashers. The driver's hand was out the window, frantically beckoning him. He cautiously approached the woman talking with a dispatcher on her phone's speaker.

The panicked, pregnant lady explained, "My sister's missing. Her car is in the driveway.

It has blood on the seats. My husband, an EMT, is in the house pleading with someone. He said there's blood everywhere. He's on hold," she nodded at her phone. "Should I switch to his line?"

O'Malley spotted the second cruiser approaching and said, "Not yet."

Too volatile, he thought. Don't want to spook them 'til we see what's in play.

The other cruiser pulled alongside him with its windows down. O'Malley said, "Kyle, hostage situation, call for backup. We'll go in now."

Officer Kyle Saxon called for backup and jumped out of his vehicle. At six feet and two hundred-ten pounds, Saxon was four inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter than O'Malley, who led the way with their weapons drawn up the icy, blood-speckled driveway. Huge snowbanks provided them cover. But the breezeway's door was ajar.

O'Malley raised his hand, "I'll go in this way. You ring the front doorbell. If no one answers, pound on the door and announce yourself."

O'Malley spotted a roll of blood-stained duct tape on the mudroom floor. He quietly approached the closed house door and listened for activity inside. He heard the front doorbell and stepped back in case anyone rushed out. There was dead silence. He then heard Saxon pounding on the front door and shout, "Police! Open up!"

Inside, a man shouted, "Let 'em in!"

O'Malley whipped open the door, his weapon aimed at a man in the kitchen, with a sharp knife in one hand and a hammer with a bloody handle in the other. The crazed bearded suspect looked toward him and glanced back at Saxon, converging from the next room.

"Drop them. Now!" O'Malley shouted.

"Woah! He's the thief!" the suspect blurted, pointing the knife in his left hand toward the open-concept living room, where the EMT stood near the oncoming Saxon.

"Ahhh, fuck!" the man screamed when Saxon's taser jolted him. He then dropped the knife and hammer, fell to his knees, and grabbed his left forearm.

O'Malley pounced on the man's back, who grunted when his chest and his face hit the floor with a hard thud and screamed after another taser strike. As Saxon kicked the knife away, the perp kicked the taser gun from his hand. O'Malley holstered his weapon, yanked the man's left arm up behind his back, grabbed his other arm, and cuffed him. The wild man groaned and squirmed on the floor. The hammer slid out from under his chest, and O'Malley kicked it aside.

A third officer charged in to help them lift the wriggling guy off the floor and slam him against the kitchen wall. Two officers then held the suspect face-first against the wall. O'Malley patted him down, found a cell phone and Subaru keys, and tossed them onto the counter.

"This is my fuckin' house!" the man shouted. "You can't do this to me."

"What's all this blood from?" O'Malley demanded.

"My hand. I had an accident." His right hand was wrapped in blood-soaked duct tape. *She put up a fight*, O'Malley thought.

"Where is she?"

"Who? ... I live alone."

"Get him outta here," O'Malley said. "I'll look around."

The other officer and Saxon muscled the angry suspect out of the house. O'Malley checked the master bedroom at the rear of the house: a messy bed, no girl or blood. The walk-in closet and the main bath were clear. He darted through the living room and bolted up the stairs. He checked the bedroom, an office, closets, and the bathroom—no signs of a struggle.

He then bounded down the stairs, where he found the basement door. He switched on its light and descended the steps to check behind the furnace and storage containers. There was no blood.

O'Malley was out of breath when he found Detective Jon Evans, with plastic gloves, snapping photos of red stains on an area rug by the fireplace. Evans had already bagged the bloody hammer and the kitchen knife. He was now walking around the blood-splattered island, snapping photos of a shattered wine glass and coffee mug on the floor. The plainclothes investigator, with a two-day stubbled beard, looked at him.

O'Malley said, "The rear bedroom, upstairs, and basement are clean."

Evans nodded. "I told the EMT to wait in the street. We'll want to talk to him."

O'Malley pointed at the cell phone and Subaru keys. "We took these from the perp's pockets after we cuffed him."

The two men soon found the perp's wallet and identification in a kitchen drawer. Evans opened the cabinet door under the sink and whistled when he pulled a blood-soaked dish towel from the trash container. He then flipped a switch to a floodlight near the atrium door, illuminating the rear deck, bloodied snow gloves, and safety glasses under a ladder. Evans then aimed his phone's flashlight around the deck and snowbanks. There were no footprints or blood in the snow; he returned inside.

O'Malley shouted from the laundry room, "Jon, look at this!"

They bagged a Tom Brady Patriots jersey in the laundry basket; it had red stains on the front and back near its bottom. They then headed for the garage and bagged the blood-stained roll of duct tape. The Toyota pickup truck's cab and bed were clean, as was the Prius in the next stall. The recycle bin and trash containers looked proper next to the shovels and snow blower.

Inside the Subaru, they found a bloody hand towel and a blood-spotted Home Depot utility knife. Half of the luggage deck was cleared; a body could have been placed there. Evans took pictures and told O'Malley, "Call for a tow truck. We need to impound the Subaru."

The two men then headed for the street. Evans removed his plastic gloves and put them and the evidence bags in his car's trunk. His phone displayed 5:28 p.m. when he called the techs to dust the place for fingerprints and retrieve blood samples. Evans told O'Malley, "Before we talk to your suspect, let's speak with the EMT."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ed DeJesus (pronounced D Geezus) writes contemporary thrillers. His award-winning short story in *Indies United's 2025 Anthology* offers a glimpse into his forthcoming memoir collection, *Simpler Times in The Spindle City*.

A technopreneur, he was President of Sightline Solar, CEO of JustZip.com, and VP of Engineering for MSL. Previously, his software work at Digital Equipment Corp was published in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Design Automation journals. He served in the US Army Reserves and opened a record store with his wife in the vinyl era.

He was born in Lowell, MA, and raised his family in Chelmsford, MA. He resides in Southwest Florida and is a Gulf Coast Writers Association member. When Ed's not immersed in his writing or at the gym, he finds joy in reading, dancing, singing Karaoke, and traveling the world with his wife and children, who reside in New Hampshire and Australia.

The Vulnerable is his debut novel. If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on Amazon and or Goodreads. For more information, visit EdDeJesusauthor.com.