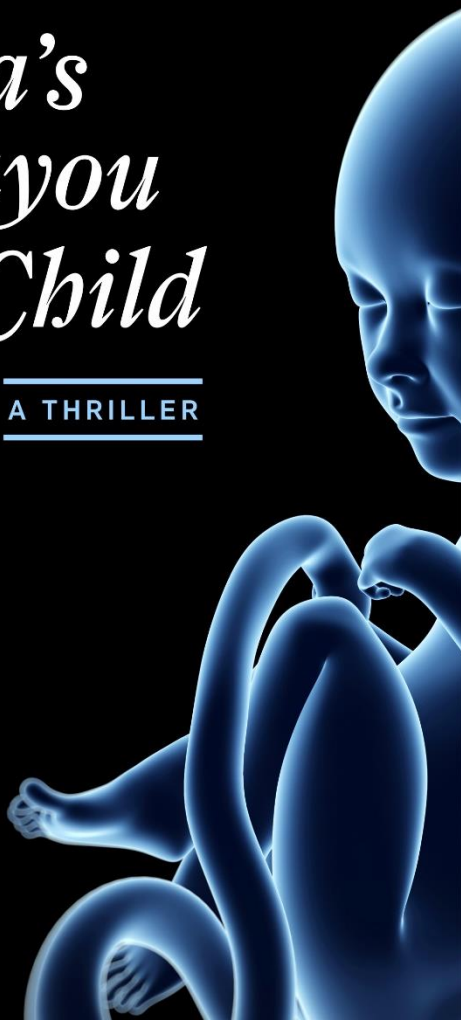


D O N A N B E R G

Award-winning Author

Aria's Bayou Child

A THRILLER



Sample: *Aria's Bayou Child*

A Thriller

By Award-winning Author Donan Berg

Unlike the movie *Silver Streak*, the Amtrak locomotive didn't crash into Chicago's Union Station. Elbowed by a man in a rush, she waited beneath a portico for her brown-tweed satchel, sorry

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she agreed to have it checked. In hand, she carried it into the vaulted-ceiling station lobby hubbub flooded by the brilliance of a high noon sun.

A woman waving her arms shouted, “Aria, Aria.”

Exhilaration exploded within Aria’s brain. *Can’t be*. The woman appeared not as emaciated as Aria remembered, but a cherry-apple-red scarf meant but one person.

Aria dropped her satchel and hugged Tillie, her protector of years gone by. “How’d you know?”

“Your aunt. My African years after you left bearable until the abductions. A year ago, civil riots chartered me a flight home. Started at the nursing home January first.”

Aria squeezed Tillie tight before she released her. “Aunt Maggie didn’t tell me.”

The glint of a twinkle animated Tillie’s eyes. “Bribed her. Convinced her you needed a surprise.”

“Baby Ruth?”

“Cost me three bars, and not those little fun-sized ones.”

Aria laughed, a genuine five-year first. Within seconds her intuition alerted her to be on guard. A lanky man in black trousers and a blue shirt open at the collar jostled others as he strode direct to where she and Tillie stood.

“Tillie, incoming, behind you,” Aria whispered as she bent forward to grab her satchel.

Fingers bent, thumbs tucked, Tillie pivoted. Her raised right elbow and shoulder diverted the oncoming man without slowing his advance or lessening Aria’s original alarm.

With a two sidesteps the man stepped past Tillie and his outstretched right hand reached for Aria’s thigh-high satchel. “I’ll take that.”

Aria pulled back. “No, no. I’ve got it.”

Beneath his hooligan-style flat hat, she glimpsed a miniature chin scar that evoked fragile memories. She dismissed the scar as common to pugilists and jailed inmates.

“Let him take it,” Tillie said. “Sorry. I should introduce LeRoy. He’s a friend of Robert, who’s the half-brother of my current boyfriend.”

The explanation befuddled Aria. Her right hand one of two hands that tugged at her satchel's leather straps.

Tillie raised both hands to her cheeks, hiding the beginnings of a blush. "Okay, it'll be, you know, easier to explain after dinner. I'm assuming you've got no place to crash, so you're coming home with me. It'll be crowded." Tillie stopped short. "Sorry, didn't want to make it sound like you'd be back in prison."

Aria released her satchel grasp. While she cringed at the word "prison" or any synonym, she chided herself for her sensitivity. "Sounded like a sleepover."

"Right," Tillie replied. "A girl's slumber party."

LeRoy lifted his chin and the exuberance of expected joy danced in his eyes. "That'll be great."

Tillie whirled toward LeRoy. "You're not invited."

"Why look at me?" Aria said to LeRoy. "Not my house."

She thought of Roscoe, the black terrier she'd loved and gave up. Maybe the neighbor girl who unofficially adopted Roscoe still lived along Cicero Avenue and Aria could again scratch a docile Roscoe behind the ears. No. She wouldn't tempt fate's disappointment by expressing aloud what would be a sweet reunion. A male voice broke through the stupor Aria had lost herself within.

"Boy, this bag is light. Bikini, I'd guess." LeRoy flashed a grin at Tillie, then Aria.

Tillie wedged herself between LeRoy and Aria. "Forget him and follow me. He drove only because I didn't want to mess with the CTA's Red Line to get us to Wrigleyville."

Aria fought to regain her depleted energy to savor the once enjoyed bustle of downtown Chicago exemplified by the commuters who shared Union Station as both an Amtrak station and a metropolitan transit terminal.

She relished a second morning of not being forced to wear an inmate's blue slacks, flip-flops and an over-starched white T-shirt. Tired arteries circulated the inhaled oxygen of freedom into her toes and longed for them to lead her to Macy's on State Street with a fantasized unexpired debit card with no credit or cash withdrawal limit.

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When Tillie stopped at a double-parked sedan, Aria's forced smile acknowledged LeRoy gallant bow when he opened for her his car's rear passenger door. She ducked in before a blast of smelly exhaust from a metro bus wafted across the Buick's roof.

From her rear seat vantage point, LeRoy displayed an intriguing profile, a rounded chin beneath a fighter's nose. His palm brushed away wavy brown hair. When he commandeered the rearview mirror to launch a flirtatious wink, Aria's protective shyness rotated her gaze beyond Lake Shore Drive's S curve to Lake Michigan's sparkling blue water and a beach crowded with July sun worshippers.

The perceived chill of the lake's breakwater spray rekindled in Aria the early morning shivers of an unheated eight-by-ten-foot prison cell.

By the time LeRoy exited at Belmont, Aria's heart, filled with God's nurtured love, struggled to fend off the growing rancor of a promising marriage stolen by a knife-wielding intruder. Her grief enhanced by the slow drawl of a New Orleans prosecutor as he preyed upon the safety fears of six senior citizen jurors to notch a guilty verdict that ignored the crucial evidence her bloody fingerprints weren't on the deadly knife.

LeRoy spoke to the windshield, "I'll stop in the street to let you out and then try to find a parking spot."

When neither woman responded, he rotated his face right to direct his words to Tillie who sat buckled into the front passenger seat. "I'm allowed to hang for a little while, ain't I?"

(Sample end)

To learn more about Author Donan Berg visit him at
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