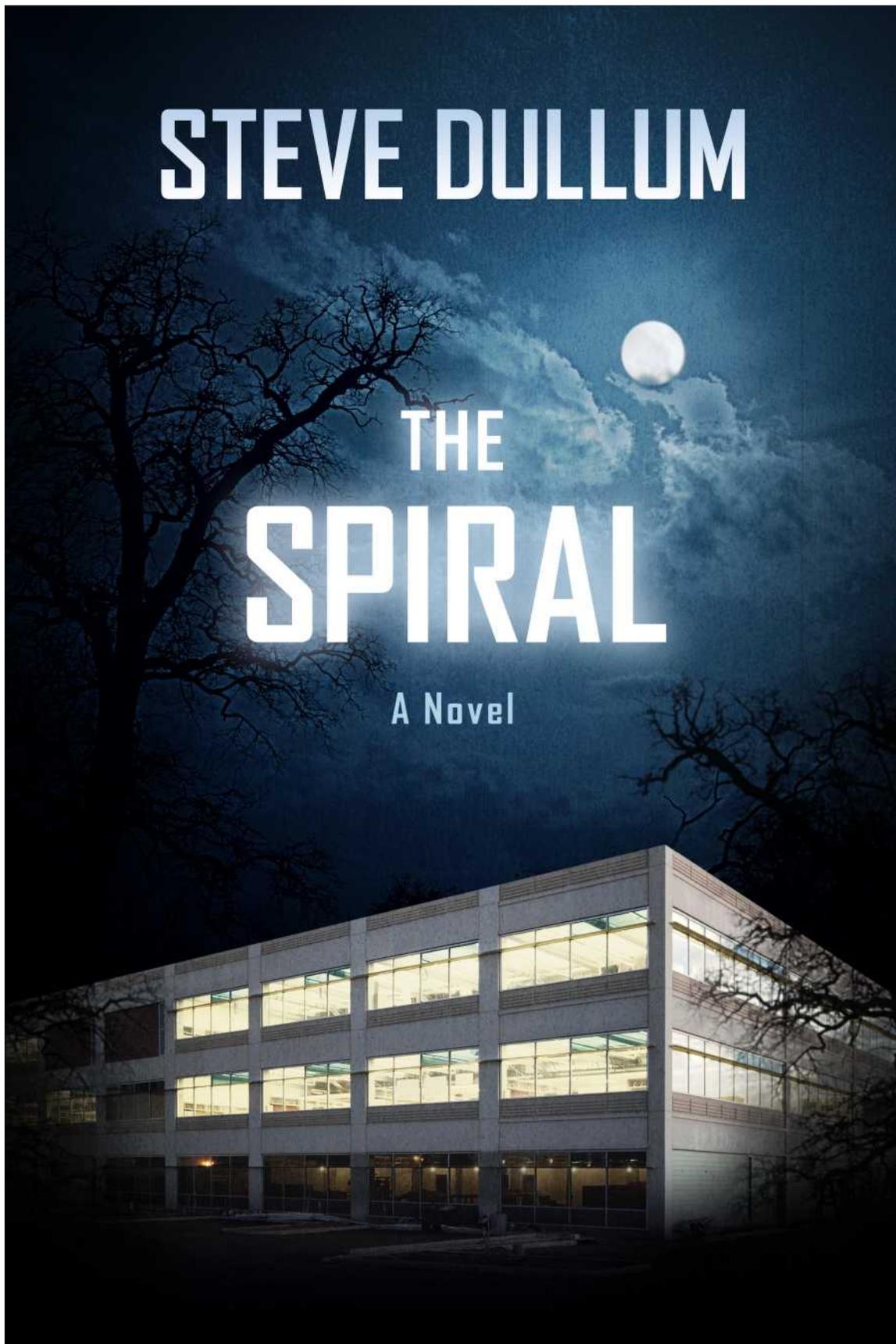


**STEVE DULLUM**

**THE  
SPIRAL**

A Novel



# **The Spiral**

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by

Steve Dullum

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“A darkening chill, nighttime arrives silent and swift.”

—D.S. Wade

## Friday Night

### Chapter 1

For the first time in years, Charles Vindbraum wished he kept a bottle of whiskey stashed in the store. As the remaining traces of daylight faded from the sky, an incessant craving for a long swallow of booze clawed his skin. He'd experienced bouts of unease before, countless times, but never to this extent. The back of his neck was in knots, his hands clammy. When the brass bell above the front door chimed, he nearly knocked over his bottled water.

"Evening, Tom," he said. "What brings you out this late?"

One final customer and then he could go home. He'd worked a long week. Perhaps a good night's rest would relieve the tension.

Tom Baxtor entered the store, scratching the stubble on his chin. "It's Helen's Euchre night, so there's a house full of women. Figured I'd get out for a bit. Screwdrivers still in aisle three?"

"Aisle two, halfway down on the left."

Charles glanced at the clock by the cash register. 8:43. Seventeen more minutes until he could lock up and flip the sign in the display window.

Baxtor moved slowly down the aisle, then crouched and carefully studied the selection of tools. Charles wished he'd hurry. A screwdriver is either the size you need or it isn't. He checked the time again and looked outside. Main Street was dark. A semi slowed for the stoplights at the end of the block, its diesel engine and hydraulic brakes groaning and hissing. The store's windows rattled, the floor vibrated. Charles flinched and wiped a thin film of sweat from his forehead. Both his hands trembled.

He hadn't been genuinely tense in ages, not since he'd rushed his wife Clara to the emergency room after she'd scalded her hand with a pot of boiling water. Never before had he allowed petty worries and perceived troubles to upset him. So why tonight? Everything was fine. Nothing at all to be concerned about.

"Good price on this three-piece?"

8:46. Fourteen minutes to go.

Baxtor straightened. "Charley?"

Startled, Charles glanced down the aisle. "What'd you say?"

"How much you want for this Stanley set?"

"Should be a sign there."

Baxtor scanned the shelf. "Don't see anything."

"On the package?"

"Nope."

Had he forgotten to label the inventory? Wednesday night he'd left the lights on in the store. A minor oversight anyone could make. Last night, however, he'd closed and gone home without counting the drawer. He also forgot to stash the tape and money in the safe, an important task he prided himself on always remembering to do.

"No matter," Baxtor said. He grabbed the package and walked toward the register.

Charles placed a black binder on the counter. "Let me see if I can find a price."

Baxtor watched him flip through the pages. "So when are you going to retire?"

Charles kept his eyes on the binder. "Why would I want to do that?"

"You're what, seventy-two?"

"Not for six months. Don't rush me."

"And what happens when the Walmart opens?"

"City Council hasn't approved that yet. A lot of people in this town don't want big box stores moving in."

"Include me in the opposition. I'd hate to see downtown Bonduel all boarded up."

Charles traced a finger along the edge of a column. "Guess I'm just not in a hurry is all."

"Set a date?"

"Figure I'm good for one more year," he said. "By then I ought to be..."

Traffic light now green, the semi worked through its gears and gained momentum. Again the floor shook.

"You okay, Charley?"

"Hmm?" He focused on the binder again. "Three-piece Stanley?"

"That's the one."

"\$18.99 plus tax, minus ten percent sale price...we'll call it an even fifteen."

8:51.

Baxtor held out a twenty.

The till clanged open and Charles handed him a five.

"Thanks, but that's more than ten percent."

Baxtor was right. Another slip. "Don't worry about it."

"I can't—"

Charles waved his hand. "It's my store, I say take it."

“Don’t retire on my behalf,” Baxtor said, accepting the incorrect change. “If this place became a flower shop, I’d have to leave town.” He turned toward the door and hesitated. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine, why?”

“No reason. You just seem...not yourself tonight.”

“Not myself?”

“Like you’re worried about something.”

Below the counter, Charles worked his fingers and thumbs, popping each knuckle. “A little tired is all.”

Baxtor lingered for a moment. “Well, say hello to Clara for me.”

“Will do. Take care, Tom.”

The door swung open, the bell dinged, and Baxtor was gone.

Charles Vindbraum stood rigid, the familiarity of his surroundings becoming distant, unfocused. His eyes sank behind heavy lids, his arms drooped at his sides. His breathing slowed, yet his heart rate increased. He felt calm and at the same time restless. Somewhere outside in the night, a car alarm sounded. He did not hear it.

He was outdoors.

On the ground directly in front of him, the shape of a small animal fleeing, darting through wet grass. Everywhere, darkness. His bare feet were weightless, his legs strong and powerful. The need for food burned.

He came upon a tree. Something cowered in the highest branches. He wanted to climb up, up, and devour. He placed his hands on rough bark and wondered if the first limb would support him. He grabbed the branch and pulled. His feet rose off the ground...

His eyes fluttered open, and Charles found himself leaning too far backward. He reached for the counter and regained his balance.

9:10, according to the clock.

He let the time swim around in his head for a moment. Baxtor had left...a little before nine? The first prick of fear lifted the hair on his arms. Had he blacked out? Possible, though he couldn’t imagine why, unless his recent forgetfulness was more serious than he’d previously thought.

*Do it, Charley, do it!*

He spun around. “Hello?”

No one answered. His pulse pounded.

He was not alone. He’d heard a voice—a woman. Whether he’d blacked out or just spaced out, nearly fifteen minutes had passed without his awareness. During his mental hiatus, someone must have entered the store. He hurried to the front door and gave it a light push. Unlocked. He leaned into the display window and flipped the sign.

Eight aisles of merchandise—four opposite each side of the cash register—provided enough space for a customer to disappear.

“I’m sorry,” he announced. “The store closed at nine.”

Silence. Except now he heard the faint ticking of the clocks in aisle six.

*Do it, Charley...you don't have much time.*

Realizing the origin of the voice, he rubbed his thumbs hard against his temples. First his memory, now voices in his head. What next?

A light gust spilled down Main Street. Specks of sand prattled against the metal base of the door.

He stepped outside onto the sidewalk and breathed in the crisp air. Everything would be okay. He had Clara, and he loved her more deeply than when first married. As far as he knew, she felt the same. And the store—it hadn't made them wealthy as perhaps they had dreamed while young and naïve, but they'd managed. Life was good. He just needed to get home and relax.

The bar crowd had picked up, as it did about this time every Friday night. Across the street at Oakley's Grill, someone had plugged the jukebox. Someone else—likely the bartender—decided the music should be loud enough for everyone in town to hear it. The current selection was one of those songs about a pickup truck, loose women, and getting rowdy with the boys. No heart and certainly no soul. Jim Reeves, Hank Williams, Marty Robbins—*that's* country music. On the opposite sidewalk, two young women strolled toward the tavern, smoking cigarettes, laughing. He watched them enter the tavern and wondered if they'd be happy come morning.

He went back inside, twisted the latch on the lock, and left the night and the pub crawlers behind.

He checked the clock. 9:20.

*9:30, Charley...you must finish by then.*

He closed his eyes and clapped his hands over his ears. "Stop it," he said. "Stop it, I'm not listening." When he opened them again, he hoped someone would, in fact, be standing there, someone who belonged to the voices.

There was no one.

After a few moments without further interior monologue, he felt better. Except for a sudden headache. "Need some Ibuprofen."

He walked to the register, unlocked the till, and placed the drawer on the counter. Tonight he'd remember to balance the books.

His office was in the rear of the store, and he had a bottle of Ibuprofen somewhere in his desk. He left the drawer and started down aisle four. Surrounded by gardening tools, he stopped. This time it wasn't the voice he'd heard. The sound had originated by the plumbing section in aisle one—barely audible, yet distinct—as if someone had knocked an item from the bottom shelf.

Many of his customers were older. Quite a few wore hearing aids. Perhaps one of them had come in and simply hadn't heard him. "Hello?" No response this time, either. No footsteps. "Is anyone in here?"

It was rare in a town like Bonduel but becoming more common every day. Last summer, stoned on heroin and armed with a hunting knife, a high school kid had waltzed into the Whirl 'N Curl hair salon, scared the two stylists out of their minds, and made off with less than a hundred bucks. A hair salon!

Charles wished he hadn't thought about that. He felt his heart beating quicker in his chest.

There were two phones: one in his office and one by the cash register. He was closest to the register. If someone had entered the store, someone with malicious intent, they would get to him before he reached it. And how would he call the police without the intruder hearing? He might make it to the office phone, but he'd be trapped. If he tried to exit through the delivery door in back, an intruder could take a leak, wash up, and find him before the massive door was even halfway open. Not to mention the squeal the rollers made when the door rose.

He continued toward the rear of the store, turned left, and peeked down aisle three, interior lighting. Clear. He crept by aisle two and the assorted tools Baxtor had scrutinized. He neared aisle one, stopped short, and searched the floor for a pair of shoes or boots. Nothing. He felt foolish: the constant clock watching, the voices in his head, the blackout or whatever that had been, and now this tiptoeing around because of phantom noises.

He peered around the corner. Aisle one was vacant. No dark figure with a hunting knife. Nothing but plungers, wax toilet seals, faucet fixtures, and shower curtain rods. He walked the aisle defiantly and reached the checkout counter without incident. He listened. Only the muffled music from Oakley's. Satisfied? Good, now wrap it up and go home.

Except his migraine had begun to throb. He noticed the uncounted cash drawer which still had to be counted. He'd first take some Ibuprofen.

Again he headed toward his office, this time by way of aisle three.

Hung ceiling fans with decorative light bulbs provided a canopy of golden luminescence. Aisle three was his favorite. If he had to spend an evening stocking, assembling a display, or taking inventory, he preferred to do it here in the cozy interior lighting section.

The voice returned as he walked beneath the first fan. Unlike before, it was faint, just a whisper on the perimeter of his consciousness.

*It's after 9:30, Charley...hurry...do it!*

He left aisle three and entered the rear hallway.

His office was the second room on the right. He eyed it intently, his mind focused on headache relief. He halted at the utility closet. An oak-stained, hollow pressboard door—one he'd seen a million times and as unremarkable as a toothbrush—it for some inexplicable reason called to him, beckoned.

He looked toward his office. Hadn't he been going there to get something? Yes, for his headache.

*The door, open it.*

Charles gave the knob a twist and opened the closet. He leaned in and yanked the string dangling from the ceiling. The light inside clicked on. A push broom, a bucket and floor

mop, a shelf containing Lysol and other disinfectants and cleaners, and the large folded awning he sometimes hung above the sidewalk. Nothing unusual.

Except...there was something else, something long. Behind the floor mop.

*Hurry, Charley...do it.*

“I hear you, and I said I’m not listening.”

He wanted to leave. Forget counting the drawer and just go home before he suffered a breakdown, because that’s exactly what this was starting to feel like. Otherwise, he’d be found here in the morning, raving mad, drooling, and curled in a ball inside the utility closet.

He pushed the mop aside to get a better look at the object, and an arctic chill slithered up his spine. It wasn’t his. How could it be? But it was. He’d dropped it once on the gravel path behind the house. Put a scratch in the metal. Under the closet light, the plainly visible marking glimmered.

He kept the 20 gauge Remington stuffed high in the rafters of his basement workshop at home. He hadn’t handled it in almost four years, the last time being an uninspired afternoon of blasting soda cans off a tree stump. Since then the shotgun had collected dust.

And now here it was, freshly polished in a closet at the hardware store.

“I’ll be damned,” he said

*The gun, Charley...take it.*

With perspiring fingers, he reached inside and gripped the barrel. He lifted the gun from the closet, held it lengthwise, and slid his hands over the smooth, wood stock. He checked the safety. The safety was on. No need to verify if it was loaded. If he looked, he knew it would be.

He hadn’t brought it here, had he? Maybe he simply didn’t remember. He’d forgotten a lot the past few days. Closing the store without counting the drawer was bad enough...but a shotgun?

*Hurry, Charley.*

He set the gun down, resting the butt on the floor.

*Your left hand...do it.*

His migraine flared. It was that maddening voice jawing inside his head. What he needed was Ibuprofen. He’d have to look for some. He placed his hands on top of the barrel.

*Good...now raise it.*

He lifted until the barrel was horizontal to the floor and aimed at his abdomen.

Stillness consumed the store. Outside, wind huffed against the display window.

Charles focused on his breathing. Slow and rhythmic, breathe in, breathe out. Relax. He closed his eyes and thought of Clara. She looked twenty-eight again, beautiful, the same as when they’d gone on their first date. Right now she’d be snuggled on the sofa with an afghan, reading or watching television. When he got home tonight, he’d tell her about his memory loss. She deserved to know. Never keep secrets. Makes marriages last.

*Not so high, Charley...away from the heart.*

He inched the barrel down to his side and pressed it tightly against the fat above his hip.

Clara would help ease his fears. If she suspected the worst, she wouldn't let on. She'd comfort him and assure him everything would be all right. And it would, wouldn't it? They had medication for everything. Might only be a vitamin deficiency. Surgery, if it came to that, probably wouldn't be a big deal, either. Nowadays most were outpatient or overnight at most. Piece of cake.

*The safety, Charley.*

He disengaged the safety.

Clara was still there, still radiant, occupying his mind like a canvas of soothing colors and textures. He couldn't wait to get home and see her. Maybe tonight was the right night to ignite romance in the bedroom. It had been a while—a long while—perhaps it was time. He smiled, a touch giddy. She had the power to invoke passion in him even after forty years together. A lucky man, indeed.

*Thumb on the trigger, Charley.*

He reached out with his left hand and carefully pressed his thumb against the trigger.

No more debate—he would definitely retire. Clara was right: life is fleeting. And all this time she'd been the only one to understand. He wouldn't wait another year. Come the end of summer he'd put the store on the market, and if there were any buyers, wash his hands of a life spent toiling and enjoy the golden years they both had earned. He would live out the remainder of his days with Clara and relish every wonderful moment.

*Do it, Charley...so others may live.*

He sucked in his breath and let his mind float. He saw himself moving about the store as he worked, growing older throughout the years, from one age to another. He saw the faces of his customers, some young who were now old, and some who were once old but were now gone. Many smiles were on those faces and just as many furrowed brows and tragic frowns born from the frustrations of life. They were all faces he regarded fondly, every one. Without them the store would have ceased to exist long ago.

*It's time...do it.*

Charles swallowed hard and conjured Clara's image again. Her face looked lovely, and a warm smile formed on her lips. He smiled back at her, pulled the trigger, and fell away into nothingness.