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Resurrecting Langston Blue

Robert Greer
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The Langston Blue of the title is a battle-scarred Vietnam War deserter who's been hiding out for more than thirty years in the backwoods of West Virginia. His life is reasonably serene until the day someone tries to assassinate him by blowing up his cabin. From all the signs, Blue concludes that his assailant was an old war buddy. In response to being discovered, Blue heads for Denver, Colorado, where he thinks he may have a half-Vietnamese daughter he's never met.

Into this vortex steps Denver bail bondsman CJ Floyd, an African-American who moves fluidly among other cultures while staying comfortably rooted in his own. This is the author's fourth CJ Floyd mystery, it having been preceded by *The Devil's Hatband*, *The Devil's Red Nickel*, and *The Devil's Backbone*. In his day job, Greer is a professor of pathology and medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Battered and menaced by the hard cases he has to apprehend, CJ has hired an assistant, the gorgeous and Amazonian Flora Jean Benson, a former Marine intelligence officer. CJ's girlfriend, restaurant owner Mavis Sundee, wants him to quit the dangerous business. "There'll always be someone after you," she tells him. "Second-rate thugs, wife beaters, scam artists—the drunks you spend half your days bonding out of jail. They're leeches, CJ, and they're sucking you dry."

By the time CJ becomes involved in the Blue case—through the intervention of Blue's daughter, Carmen Nguyen—it has already escalated from a simple assassination attempt into a convoluted tale of political ambition and a string of murderous efforts to cover up a horrendous war crime. The action plays itself out against the backdrop of Denver's vibrant and violent ethnic communities.

Quite apart from the main story—but threading its way through it—is the vendetta that the American Indian, Celeste Deepstream, has against CJ, whom she blames for causing the death of her beloved but drug-addled brother. When CJ isn't sifting through clues about Blue, he's fending off the very determined and lethal Celeste.

Greer excels at creating distinctive and fully rounded characters. Flora Jean is a riveting case in point, with her fashion-model looks, decisive personality, and sharp eye for piecing things together. She seems fully enough formed to carry her own series—which may well be what Greer has in mind. If there is a flaw in the author's approach it is that he introduces an excess of interesting characters and, in so doing, makes the plot itself seem less compelling.

By the time the mystery is solved and all the villains unmasked, Floyd is ready to sell his business to Flora Jean and, with Mavis's blessings, start an antique shop.

EDWARD MORRIS (August 18, 2009)

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