

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

MARCH/APRIL 2017

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with THOMAS PERRY

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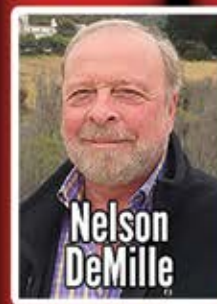
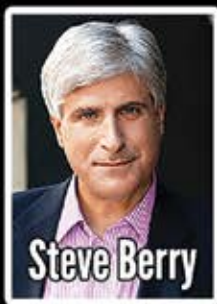
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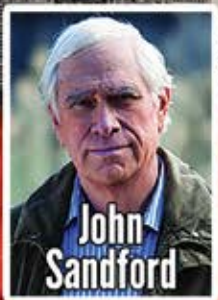
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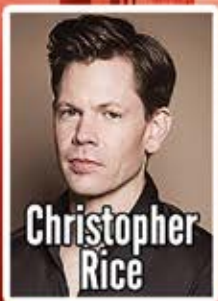
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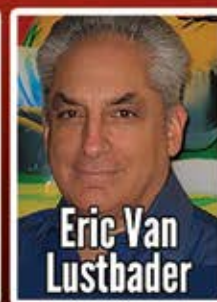
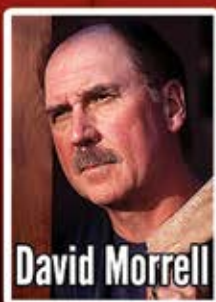


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FROM THE EDITOR

Some days I like to sit back and think about the past...

Last week I was thinking about which book, if there was one, that put me on this path to read in the suspense/mystery genre. I remembered that when I watched the movie, *Death on the Nile* by Agatha Christie, I was fascinated by the “mystery” aspect of it all. I believe I was eight- or nine years old and I

asked my mom to take me to the bookstore so I could see if this Agatha Christie person had written *more* books.

Now, that was back in 1979—no internet, no social media, and not many nine year olds were talking about Agatha Christie, so I was shocked when I saw just how *many* books she had penned. Needless to say, I quickly found that Christie was out of my league at that age. I thought maybe all mystery books were like this and I would *never* understand them.

Then a friend was reading, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.” It wasn’t a mystery, but was a tale of kids around my age heading off into a fantasy world. I fell in love with them. I read the series and it didn’t take long before I discovered “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings.” It was the fantasy side of the story that I was drawn to.

You should also remember that in 1977 the biggest movie was *Star Wars* and science fiction was everywhere. I’m going to confess a crime here. In 1981, when *The Empire Strikes Back* came out, I went with a friend. We loved the movie so much, we hid in the bathroom until the next one started and snuck back into the theater and watched it again. We told my mom that we had to wait until the second showing because the first one was sold out.

My next step was James Bond. Watching *Moonraker* and *The Spy Who Loved Me* put me deep into spy books. I wanted to find anything ever written that was ‘USSR vs. USA.’ The *Miracle on Ice* in 1981, when the USA hockey team beat the mighty Russians in the Olympics, was the true start of the Cold War for me.

Several years later, I decided to try Christie again. While I still could never figure out “whodunit?” I loved her character creation and setting from that moment on. I knew that my first instinct was right in wanting to read everything she wrote. It was a quest, one that I’ve still not quite been able to finish, since there are so many authors and stories that I want to know more about.

I still get excited when I see a new author, well...at least an author new to me, and read their book and realize that they’re an author I need to follow. I think that list is in the hundreds now and I’ll probably need three lifetimes to get through them. But it’s *extremely* fun trying!

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



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THE CHARLIE CHAPLIN TIME TRAVELLER

By Christopher Berry

What the—?

George's next bite of pizza never came. Open-mouthed, he replaced the slice in the box, grabbed the remote, rewound the clip and replayed it.

The clip was on disc two of the DVD set of *The Circus*, a silent film starring Charlie Chaplin. Disc two comprised the extras and George always watched the extras—the making-ofs, commentaries, storyboards, deleted scenes. It was the filmmaker in him, not content to just enjoy a movie, but the need to know exactly how it was done.

But this particular clip was just some footage of the film's premiere at the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood in 1928, not a feature he was expecting to offer much insight into the film's creation. And it didn't. What George found was nothing to do with the film.

Twenty seconds into the clip, following a wide shot of the crowd outside the Chinese Theatre, the camera closed in on a fake zebra, one of several temporary statues erected to represent the circus animals in the film. George's eagle eyes noticed a woman in the background, walking behind the zebra, horribly dressed in a black top hat, huge dress, heavy, hooded coat and pointed shoes.

What caught his eye was that she was holding something to her ear. Something small and flat, her fingers closed around it. And she was talking to it. She stopped and turned slightly towards the camera, then the scene faded into another.

Pizza long-forgotten, George replayed the short scene over and over. He slowed it down, zoomed in, paused.

Yup, this woman was talking on a mobile phone—in 1928—decades before they were invented.

This is nuts!

"Yeah, that is weird," said his friend, Bran, when George showed him the clip. "There's probably a pretty mundane explanation, though."

"Yeah. She's a time traveller. She's on the phone to her colleagues in the future," said George flatly.

Bran nearly spat out his beer. "Ha! You serious?"

George smirked. "No, you idiot. But sounds pretty cool, doesn't it? I've got an opportunity here."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, no one's spotted this before, as far as I can tell. So if I make a YouTube video or something, show people this clip and put the theory out that she's a time traveller, could be a great way of whipping up publicity for my films."

"Nice."

It was worth a shot. It was four years since he started his independent film production company, Yellow Fever Productions.

Four years since he decided—on his 30th birthday—to throw in the towel on full-time employment in tedious jobs and brave the financial wilderness of the self-employed newbie filmmaker, armed with just determination and a dream. It's that which had always kept him going, but the small scale of his films compelled him to think outside the box when it came to promotion.

And while he agreed with Bran—there was probably a perfectly mundane explanation for the woman in the clip—he thought he'd attract the most attention by positing an outlandish one.

He filmed a YouTube video and used it to plug Yellow Fever Productions and his recent films *Battle of the Bone* and *The Knackery*, before inviting the world's input on *The Circus*'s premiere footage. His main hope, obviously, was that the video would lead to more YouTube subscribers, more hits on his website, more DVD sales. At the same time, he was interested in whether anyone had an explanation for the woman on the mobile phone—because he didn't have one.

In less than two weeks, the video had received 1.5 million hits, his website was getting tons more traffic and sales of his films had gone up.

Mission accomplished.

And the 'Charlie Chaplin Time Traveller' became a 21st-century urban legend. There was a flood of theories about the woman with the phone. George found himself tracking comments on his video, reading articles about it that were popping up on people's blogs and even some major news sites. Lots of people said it was just digital trickery. A DVD Easter egg or something.

But that didn't sit right with George. Why hoax something that nobody but him had noticed in the seven years the DVD had been out?

There were other theories. Was she listening to the resonance inside a seashell? Was she suffering from a toothache and holding an ice pack to her face?

Ha. Nonsense. Since when do people walk the streets listening to seashells? And talking to them? And who talks to ice packs?

A new theory emerged. This 'time traveller' was just an old woman using an early portable hearing aid. Internet sleuths dug up details about these hearing aids, invented in the 20s by companies like Siemens and the Western Electric Company. George reviewed the photos and, yes, these devices—generally flat and rectangular—did loosely resemble smartphones.

Why was she talking to it? The sceptics argued that she was actually talking to herself, seeing if she could hear herself better, testing the device out.

Mmmm.

It was the most plausible explanation, George conceded. He wasn't entirely happy that he'd got to the bottom of the mystery, but it wasn't something he was going to lose sleep over.

Then came a new development. George had been holed up in his Belfast apartment for three days, squirreling away at the script for his new film. The evening had advanced on him like an unseen, time-eating monster—always did when he was writing—and he realised at half ten that he'd forgotten to eat.

He blitzed a ready-made lasagna in the microwave and garnished it with some slightly stale tortilla chips. He parked on the sofa in front of the newest episode of *Breaking Bad*, and blew a sigh of irritation when his iPhone's bouncy ringtone encroached on an intense scene. It was nearly 11 p.m.—who on Earth was calling at this hour? He paused the scene and dove to the other end of the sofa to grab his phone, which was charging on the arm.

Withheld number. He was tempted to cancel the call, but curiosity tugged his finger to the answer button. "Hello?"

"Is that George Clarke?" replied a small, muffled female voice.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"I used to work for Western Electric. I'd prefer not to reveal my name—not at this stage. I saw your YouTube video."

"How did you get this number?"

"That would take too long to explain, and we don't have much time. It won't be long before they trace my call."

"They? Who's they?"

"Whoever's rewriting the history of my company—and others."

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

"Most people now believe that the old woman in the footage you found was using a portable hearing aid. Portable hearing aids were not invented until the 30s after that clip was filmed. Not by Western Electric. Not by Siemens. Not by anybody."

George felt a dubious eyebrow poke his forehead. "Er—there's proof all over the internet, on these companies' websites, on the 'Hearing Aid Museum' site, on Wikipedia... They all say that portable hearing aids, resembling what the woman is holding, were invented in the mid-20s."

"They're lying. The information was altered, fabricated by those trying to protect the woman's identity, and the truth of

her presence there.”

“How do you know this?”

“I was high-up at Western Electric. I had access to all its records, its history. Even now it’s defunct, I still have the original, unaltered versions of those records. I know what devices my company developed and when—and I have demonstrable proof right here. Let’s meet, and I can show you. Then we can decide together what to do with it.”

“I’m not sure w—” George hadn’t decided what to make of this woman. She sounded convincing, but many liars are.

“Meet me at midnight tonight at the southwest corner of Victoria Park, just after you come over the Sam Thompson Bridge,” she said. “I will bring paper and electronic copies of what I have, and you will see that I’m telling the truth. If I don’t turn up, it’ll be because they got to me.”

She hung up before George had a chance to refuse. He returned to his warm imprint on the sofa but didn’t resume *Breaking Bad*. He scooped up the last few tortilla chips and munched away, replaying the phone call in his mind and deciding whether to yield to his curiosity’s seductive pull.

Victoria Park’s only a ten-minute walk.

Why not?

George arrived at Victoria Park at five to midnight. It was a thick, inky dark night, just a sliver of moon in the sky, barely touching anything. A single lamppost flanked the footpath on the park’s southwest corner, malfunctioning and flickering rapidly like an orange strobe light. Still the best source of light in the area, George took the risk of a headache and stood beneath it, hoping the mysterious former employee of Western Electric would show up soon.

12 p.m. came and went. A couple of people with dogs walked by—both men. *Dog-walkers at this time of night?* His watch ticked past half twelve and the beginnings of a headache gnawed at his temples, his tolerance of the private disco caused by the lamppost fading. He resolved to wait another ten minutes, remembering the woman’s last words to him on the phone: “*If I don’t turn up, it’ll be because they got to me.*”

After five minutes and a further watch-check, a broad-framed man walked briskly towards him from the direction of the Sam Thompson Bridge, dressed in a smart, camel, double-breasted overcoat.

“George Clarke?” The lamppost light strobed over the man’s face, revealing his dark, thinning hair and thick beard, which—George suspected—made him look older than he was.

“Yes,” George replied cagily.

“Detective Inspector Martin Hammond of the Belfast Police.” He opened his wallet and flashed his ‘Police Service of Northern Ireland’ badge—it looked genuine. Slipping the wallet into an inner pocket, he held out his right hand to shake George’s. “Pleasure to meet you.”

George shook his hand. His skin was cold, dry and rough, his handshake overly hard, like he was trying to assert his position—or was just a macho arsehole.

“Er—likewise,” George lied.

“Don’t worry, mate. You’re not in any trouble. But the woman you’re here to meet is.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m afraid you’ve been conned. The woman who called you—Nora Tatlock is her name. She has previous for fraud and deception offences, and identity theft. She secretly heads up an organisation we’ve been investigating. We finally tracked her down tonight, after her phone call with you, and arrested her. We’d like you to give a statement, if you’re willing.”

“Wait—what organisation?”

“It’s an organisation that fuels conspiracy theories and urban legends with falsified evidence. It’s a bit like what the Mirage Men used to do. Mirage Men were agents of the U.S. government who leaked false stories to UFO circles about aliens, secret bases, a spaceship crash at Roswell... But they did it in order to cover up what the government was really doing: developing advanced technologies to use against the Russians in the Cold War. I’m afraid there are no political or national security motives behind what Nora Tatlock’s organisation is doing. Just criminal ones.”

“Criminal?”

“Their M.O. is to instill paranoia in the subject, to encourage them to ‘find out the truth’, and eventually get them to pay money to various companies and individuals to get access to certain documents, people, places. But those who receive the monies are secretly affiliated with Tatlock’s organisation. It’s her organisation that gets paid. Think of it as a very long and drawn out fraud.”

At the start of Hammond’s explanation, George felt a pang of embarrassment inciting blood to his cheeks. But that eased quickly as he realised that Tatlock ran a sophisticated operation that lots of others had fallen victim to, and much deeper into

than he had. He now felt less stupid and replied confidently, “Inspector, I was intrigued enough to come here to meet this woman. But I would never in a million years have parted with any cash to get to the bottom of the ‘Charlie Chaplin Time Traveller’—as the internet’s calling it. If I’m honest, I really only made that YouTube video to get attention for my movies.”

“You’re lucky, then. Not all of their targets fall for it, but many do. As we both know, some conspiracy theorists see deception everywhere, and can be fanatical and obsessive about getting to truths that aren’t there. Those are the people that Tatlock’s organisation thrives on.”

While a bit unnecessarily alpha male in his manner, Hammond seemed legitimate. His story made sense, but George decided to play devil’s advocate anyway and said jokingly—well, half-jokingly, “Of course, this Nora did warn me that if she didn’t turn up tonight, it means you got to her.”

“They say that every time. It fuels the uncertainty, the mistrust. These are very clever people. Trust me, Nora duped you tonight.”

After his impromptu midnight meeting with Inspector Hammond, George gave a statement and subsequently kept tabs on the case. Ninety-five percent of him believed that Nora Tatlock was a crook, just as Hammond had described. The other five percent was niggling at him. What if they really had got to her, like she warned, and those indicting her were the real frauds? A far-fetched possibility, but a possibility all the same.

Months later, he read in the *Belfast Telegraph* that Nora had pleaded guilty in court. Three weeks after her guilty plea, George went along to her sentencing hearing at Belfast Crown Court, eager to see what she had to say.

Nora was in the dock, eyes red and full of tears. Her lawyer read out a letter she’d written to the judge, a poignant expression of remorse, fully admitting to leading the organisation Hammond had talked about and defrauding dozens of conspiracy theorists by dishonestly fueling their paranoia with fake evidence. She even had a heart-rending motive: to pay for her Alzheimer’s-stricken mother’s home care bills.

Nora had noticed George in the public gallery. Her letter went into detail about how she’d viewed the ‘Charlie Chaplin Time Traveller’ YouTube video and seen an opportunity, which is why she used her organisation’s high-tech hacking software to obtain his mobile number. As this part of the letter was read out, she looked at George, tear-wet cheeks glimmering under the artificial yellow light in the stuffy courtroom, and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Her letter begged for a suspended sentence. Unfortunately for Nora, the judge was not in a sympathetic mood and gave her six years behind bars.

That’s that then, George thought as he drove home after the hearing.

Guess it really was a hearing aid.

* * *

Gillian Flint stepped into the CEO’s office. She was tapping away at her laptop, her thin fingers like spiders scurrying out from a lifted rock. She didn’t look up. Flint waited, hands clasped together, trying to construe something—anything—from the CEO’s expression.

No such luck. Her expression was blank, lips straight as a pencil. It was an expression capable of converting into restrained delight or unrestrained fury in less than a second with no prior warning.

Nearly a minute later—the longest minute ever—the CEO looked up, eyes flaring like struck matches, and blared, “You bloody idiot!”

Flint recoiled. *Ah. We’re in unrestrained fury mode.* She’d been told the CEO wanted to see her, but no one had told her why. She’d only just arrived back from 1928, but the mission had gone without a hitch—as far as she knew.

“Ma’am, I—I apologise for...for being an idiot,” spluttered Flint. “But the mission was a success. I got what we needed...”

“Lucky for you. If you hadn’t completed the mission, I’d have tossed your useless arse into Confinement the moment you got back. You get the luxury of a chance to explain yourself.”

Dread pressed down on every organ in Flint’s torso. *Shit—what have I done?* “W-what’s happened?”

“We’ve just spent the last seven months trying to clear up your mess. Somebody damn well caught you on the phone to me in 1928. Caught you on film!”

“I—I didn’t—I didn’t re—”

The phone rang, giving Flint time to think and go over her movements. The CEO put Martin Hammond on loudspeaker. He was a detective inspector with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but secretly he worked for them. “Yes, Martin?”

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” he replied. “I have good news. Nora Tatlock has been jailed for fraud. I don’t think George Clarke is going to pursue this any further. My advice is that we no longer need to monitor him.” ■

Scarlett

By Jessica Daly

THE DREAMS WERE NOTHING SHORT OF PARALYZING, though they did not come fleetingly; each night provided a renewed despair, as I was subject to its' turmoil once again, an event that left me breathless, endangered.

It begins with the utter absence of sound, of light; I notice these things first, and cannot help but feel panicked by what loomed in the dark that I had yet to know—the darkness separates as a woman emerges, a confident blur of radiance, bringing a sudden burst of color to the vacant room. Though I now have another presence to discredit my illusion of isolation, I do not feel relieved.

“Scarlett,” she murmurs, though she does not meet my eyes as she mutters my name. Bound by fear, I crane my neck painfully to discover she is appraising herself in a mirror, examining the coolness of her expression as it is conveyed to her; she appears emotional, nearly deranged. I wonder why it is that she cannot see me, why it is that I feel horror campaign for my central attention, ignited by the sickening feeling of imbalance. I look at her as she finally looks at me.

“It’s you,” she breathes, fascinated, transfixed, as though I’m appearing as an opportunity, one long awaited. It takes only a moment for her slender hands to enclose around my throat, for the warmth of her breath to cause my flesh to crawl on the surface; it is almost immediately clear that she will soon strip me of all my air, and yet I try vehemently to cast her aside. I claw at her, into her eyes, her mouth. She remains eerily quiet amid my cries, unbothered, with a fierce sense of determination.

“Please,” I heave, dry, lifeless, a sign that I was already six feet beneath the ground on which she stood. Her grasp tightens and the pressure burns hot in my stomach, in my flame-engulfed lungs.

“I’m sorry it had to be you,” she finally whispers, and that’s when I see him. My husband stands with an unflinching stare; he appears so casual his hands could be pocketed, he could be amid conversation. I glance at him wildly, my head rearing up with panic, desperation, yet he remains transfixed.

“Henry!” I cry to him, but the finality of the situation has begun to drag me into a sudden acceptance, and my fate suddenly looms before me, evident, comprehensive; I am going to die while my husband watches.

I see a flicker of something in his expression, fleeting moments of doubt, but they are soon replaced with an empty black; it’s far too late.

When I emerge from slumber, breathless, I feel my way over to the opposite side of the bed, only to be met with a handful of unmade sheets, and realize he is gone again.

My husband and I haven’t made contact in months, though prior years have found us madly in love and eager to invest the entirety of ourselves within one another. We married early, though we had only been together for the better part of three months, him a newly graduated lawyer, me an aspiring psychologist merely twenty years old. When asked how we found each other, we tell a false rendition of reaching for the same collection of poems in a bookstore, a bound book of Whitman’s best, when we’d actually become acquainted after one too many half priced tequila shots on a Wednesday evening. We stumbled into his studio apartment after leaving the gastropub, my bra already unhooked in his hand, the rough edge of his beard rubbing my chin raw. When he kissed me I tasted the remains of his vices; tequila, of course, cigarettes, and the subtle sweetness of marijuana. I felt like I’d known him for a lifetime.

We made love until the sun opened its’ eye on the horizon, remained awake even when we were through; he made me coffee with cream from a china dish, hand rolled cigarettes while we spoke of our families, our passions, our jobs. I was unfamiliar with the concept of revealing so much to a stranger, let alone a man, but it felt entirely routine to let him in.

Even after the duration of that first night we remained inseparable, delirious with happiness and relishing in all that it

brought us. He followed me to Iowa State while I drove; tearfully, he holes up in a nearby apartment to see me after class. We'd cooked dinner together in the miniscule apartment, eating full bowls of chow mein cross legged on the kitchen floor, sharing spaghetti with tomato sauce on the Murphy bed. He let me spend the night there when I asked, curling his long frame around mine as we slept.

A decade later, he sleeps by his lonesome on the pullout in the den, watching baseball at a volume that is nothing more than a hum, and when he finally falls into a restless slumber, I can assure you he's not dreaming of me. He disregards my voice calling to him, my inquiries about his day—I tell him of mine and he stares distantly, detached. Sometimes he rises and leaves when I'm amid a sentence, at the peak of a story.

I had initially practiced in an office once I graduated, with a secretary named Janice that accompanied my patients to the heavy oak door of my office, offering Turkish coffee, flavored water, mint juleps. When we bought the house—a vast three story composed of winding stairways, French doors, and floor to ceiling windows—I opted to see my patients within my own home. I often kept notes, detailing specifics in an effort to cater to the productivity of the session; we also drank red wine at our leisure. My patients were fond of this perk.

As of late I've ceased to see patients, remaining much more occupied with my newfound paranoid thoughts of Henry having an affair; he rarely returns home before midnight, and when he does he refrains from speaking, from meeting the intent stare of my eyes, simply sidesteps me to reach the stairway as if I hadn't been waiting there for him.

Instead of seeing patients I've instead chosen to cower restlessly within the confines of my duvet, curtains drawn to create a close darkness. Henry appeared to be releasing himself from me quite quickly; I arrived home from a walk one afternoon to find all the photographs removed from the walls with nothing in their place—he'd even discarded the large wedding photo that had resided above the fireplace. I later found it in the cellar, packed away in an old crate that had once contained a record collection.

I was perplexed and astounded as I examined it, now damaged, spider web cracks concealing the evident disdain on my face in regards to my wedding dress; my mother had insisted I wear it. He hated the dress as much as I, hated the fact that I'd always been close to my mother, too close for his liking. I spent much of my time wondering with unveiled desperation what had caused the downfall of our immaculate relationship, what had been the untold final blow; he disliked my mother calling in the evenings, as her timing usually corresponded with dinner. She no longer had my father and found herself lonely often, especially so in the evenings. I often invited her to have dinner with us, which Henry also vehemently disliked.

"I never see you," Henry would exclaim through his teeth, following me into the kitchen for the serving dishes so my mother wouldn't hear, "and now you're going to let her stay for tea, and she'll be here for—"

"It's my mother," I tell him evenly, "and I'm not going to turn her away."

I recalled these small nuisances and allowed myself the terror of searching for the print of lipstick on his jaw, his neck; I pull worn collared shirts from his hamper and bunch the fabric into my face, inhaling, only to be met with the smell of smoke, and above that, nothing more; I came up empty each time. I wondered fiercely, kept it concealed by default.

Henry wasn't a fan of defiance in a woman, another quality in me he'd been surprised by well into our relationship—he rendered himself nearly obsolete when we argued, not daring to challenge my efforts for he knew I'd follow through. He'd never admitted this, though it was quite apparent. The girl he dated prior to me was a college aged bartender in hair school. The one before her could only politely be called an exotic dancer, lingering on the edges of poverty. He'd admitted these past relationships to me well into our relationship, and at first, my mind rejected the notion of his sincerity in regards to me; however, I decided to disregard it after considering our infatuation with one another. I'd assumed it couldn't be tried.

Now I sit dormant, as though the answers to my wide array of inquiries may appear on an off-chance, and I feel certain he has found comfort in another. I knew she couldn't be difficult to find.

HENRY'S GRANDMOTHER PASSED AWAY LAST SPRING, leaving behind the reputation of a pitiful liar and a passion for fulfilling the demands of her own greed. She often called the house on a semi-annual basis, requesting sums of money even I'd never seen on behalf of Henry; she fabricated tales of unpaid hospital bills, the bank overcharging for fees, men robbing her of her purse in the streets. I picked up once when Henry was working late on a case, listened to her false rendition of having her purse stolen on the train, and promptly hung up.

Henry, however, was not as immune as I. He nearly always succumbed, writing cheques with her name written in perfect cursive at the top; the sum always ignited my sudden, mindless rage.

"She's lying! Can't you see that? She's using you!" I exclaimed to him once after tearing the cheque from his hand, tossing it abruptly into the trash. "She knows you're well off;" I continue, but he waves his arms, already defeated.

"She's just broke," he sighed to me, visibly drained. "I feel bad for her. Just let it go, Scarlett."

I let it go. I let it go until the evening before her funeral when we were eating roasted duck in our main dining room, while we poured frothing champagne into glasses to celebrate Henry's win in court.

"So, as you know, my grandmother's been cremated," he says once it's been poured, his eyes avoiding mine in a deliberate fashion.

"And?" I ask.

"And, as you know, my parents sold their house to travel a long time ago. Her ashes will have to be kept here. I'm sorry," he tells me, but he's only partially sincere.

"What? She was an awful woman, Henry, she used you," I cry adamantly, watching him in disbelief. He shrugs his shoulders, already decided.

"My parents bought an urn. I have it in the cellar," he says, casting aside the rest of my objections to eat in silence.

The next day I saw the urn, heavy and purple patterned, and confirmed to Henry it would come nowhere near the inside of my home again.

Now, as I traipse through the hallway in an unsuccessful search for my husband, I see it sitting atop the china cabinet, precisely where I'd forbid him to put it.

"Henry!" I called, my voice containing evident notes of frustration, stress. I'm met with an empty silence, Henry left unaware of me shouting for him. I wondered when my voice no longer jarred him from his spell. I wondered where he wandered to inside his head, where he took refuge from what I'd thought we had. I walk down the hallway in search of him, glancing hopelessly into vacant rooms, the anger building in lieu of his presence. "Henry?" I shout again as I reach the stairs; I know he's inside, I hear baseball at a low hum in the den, the sound of him opening a bottle of beer.

That's when I hear it, the hushed sound of his voice; I feel the edges of my vision begin to turn black, the pain instant and weighted with my drowned reservations.

"Yes, I know," he was saying softly, "I always do." He's practically crooning into the receiver, a familiar hum of comfort in the past, now a defiant sign of betrayal. "I'll see you tonight," he finishes, and I feel my heart come loose from my chest, ears practically ringing to accompany my dizziness.

I retire to the bedroom with soft footfalls, climb wordlessly into our bed while ensuring I remain only on one side. I pull the covers over my head and hear the faint echo of his voice through the floor. I listen for a long while, too long; my sanity evades me. I fall asleep and dream again of the woman.

PARIS ROBERTS HAD ALWAYS BEEN A SPECTACLE IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, always in a positive aspect—she was a woman as of late, one deemed beautiful and, therefore, powerful.

She'd spent the thick of her teenage years accompanied by a wide array of boys and men, each less deserving than the last, though she disregarded this if they held her on a pedestal of sorts.

She often spent her evenings in the confines of a man's car, presumably shared with his wife judging by the tampons stowed within the glovebox, the remains of makeup upon the steering wheel. I knew precisely what they were trying to conceal, and I played their game.

They took me for expensive dinners in dimly lit establishments with white tablecloths and poinsettias on the tables, tucked our two figures together into out of the way corners, topped off my wine at a quarter glass. I could feel the omnipresent way in which they appraised me, heat and desire lingering evidently in their stare.

My mother had begun my descent into this lifestyle at a young, impressionable age. She ensured I bore witness to her drunkenly stumbling into our home in the early hours, ensured I watched how her date would pin her thin frame to the wall, lipstick smeared into his face, his neck. I wanted to be desired with such abandon, a need that couldn't be put to rest. I used to lurk in the kitchen during the mornings that followed to see her emerge, robe draped loosely around her waist, choosing to smoke avidly with a secret smile exposed on her painted face. So, when I reached the age of sixteen, I'd already adopted these self-serving habits—I became a carbon copy of her. I had a date for each night of the weekend, rarely bothering to see the same man twice, cars looming in the dark to retrieve me. I would arrive home during the watery daybreak with my underwear balled into my fist. My mother would accompany me to my bedroom, watching with approval as I discarded it into the hamper, along with black stockings, a lace bra.

"My girl," she would say with a note of pride, "just like her mom." She, herself, usually sat in a collared shirt that was not her own during these exchanges, her date just having slipped wordlessly through the door.

This quality of life continued into my twenties with renewed rewards. My vanity strengthened as I received fragments of diamond and gold, dinner by warmly flickering candlelight, even impromptu marriage proposals—I accepted anything that didn't require commitment.

I lost more phone numbers than I'd ever held on to and flowers died on my vanity every day. Then, at twenty-four, I met Henry.

I HAD A RENEWED SENSE OF HOPE THE EVENING AFTER I'D BORE WITNESS TO HIS PHONE CALL; it was not a direct result of a reciprocated emotion or a sincere apology, rather, I simply lusted for him and was, therefore, willing to forget.

I find him in the den, which is unsurprising yet ignites a certain feeling of despair as he resides so distant from my reach; he lays beneath a knitted blanket, asleep.

I recall the nights we'd spend restless with love, his hands unable to stay out of my hair, away from the gentle contours of my face. I think of him bowing forward to murmur a rendition of his adoration; I grin in regards to the memories. I relish in them.

For a while I simply stand and stare while he rests, coherent snores escaping his parted lips; when we slept in our bed together I used to nudge him gently in the kidney so it would cease. I nearly missed this small annoyance. When I can no longer bear to keep the distance between us so vast I slowly ascend upon him, overcome with emotion. I sit, brush the hair from his eyes with a delicate hand.

I don't remember when, exactly, the silence between us had begun—all I am able to recall is the sudden onset of it and harshness of it all. I clutch his hand to propel him from the sofa; we would sleep in our bed tonight, where we used to spend every night. We would fix this.

Suddenly, I notice an absence; whenever we went to functions as a unit, hand in hand amid boring talk of the firm and its' success, I would stroke the solid edge of his wedding band, a constant comfort when I was feeling depleted.

His ring is no longer on his hand. I feel like I've been struck. I drop his hand with abandon, examine his sleeping face in desperation. It feels surreal, yet the shock was not entirely unanticipated; I find myself fleeing the room, blind with a newfound hurt that burned more intensely than his voice crooning lovingly to another woman, more detrimental than the consistent radio silence.

I run to the bedroom, by my lonesome once again, retire to the notebook once reserved for my clients, now a memoir for my paranoid thoughts of Henry's sealed truths. I write until dawn, until I've perplexed myself into sedation—the words on paper are less painful than the bare finger of my husband, the untold symbol of finality, my future of neglect. I remove my own ring, throw it into the depths of the register.

"WE COULD WORK TOGETHER ON IT, YOU KNOW," Paris whispers to me—her voice is untouched velvet, yet evidently searching for telltale signs of approval. In the close darkness, I cannot gauge her expression.

"Work together?" I ask, tracing patterns across her flesh with my fingertips, gently, sending shivers through the base of her spine.

"I suppose," she murmurs. "You would have to commit to me first." I can feel the pressure of her lips upon my neck, making me tremble, weak. "Do you love me more than her? Can you choose?"

I conjure the familiar image of Scarlett's face, sweet and refined with the purest of emotion—she'd only ever felt obligated to adore me, and everything I stood for.

"What are you asking?" I whisper, though we are alone; Scarlett had dinner in the city with a client this evening. Before she left, she'd prepared lamb shanks with mint jelly, just for me. She would never leave me for the evening without preparing dinner.

"I'm asking if you love me enough to choose me," she breathes, growing exasperated. "It's time, Henry. She's miserable."

She wasn't incorrect; Scarlett had become run down with the subjects presented to her at work, shouldering much of the mental pain her clients harbored, even when the sessions came to a close. The stories haunted her, the events tore into her own sanity; she was no longer the woman I adored, simply a fragment of what once existed. There was a time when I saw fragments of the world in Scarlett's eyes, a time where her laugh sounded like bells cascading in a crystal vase, where we'd shared a love affair so perfectly timed it was nearly impossible to anticipate its' abrupt decline, the sudden coolness that stole her away.

We slip into the silence of the darkness together, bodies fusing so our minds can put the subject to rest, briefly. I know what she wants, what her ideal end result is. I am aware of the solution she has created, the solution she expects me to act on.

When she leaves I stand in the mirror alone to face myself, shoulders square, exposed. I think of Scarlett's heavy eyes, cheeks sunken and greying with age, despair. She is no longer a living vision of the woman I fell for, rather, the image of the absence of radiance, the sun in my sky inverted to emit only darkness.

I'm aware of what Paris needs, what she needs from me. I know what I need. I know how to remove the ghost in my house.

I'D BECOME DELIRIOUS WITH THE NOTION OF MY HUSBAND'S ABRUPT CHANGE OF HEART. I spent days imprinting myself into the mattress of our bed, unable to move, unwilling to exist. I wondered how long it had been since Henry had made contact with me, or genuinely looked into what I kept harbored in my eyes—months, nearly a year? The spaces in time expand suddenly to include large quantities of neglect—weeks, months I'd never be able to recover.

The next evening I rose from the depths of my covers, unaware of my hair that stood at attention, the taut flesh beneath my hollow eyes—I heard disturbances from the lower level and imagined Henry, alert, willing himself to abandon the memory of me while I lingered in such close proximity.

I steal down the stairs for a glass of red wine—the light of the television flashes sickly blues and whites across the newly empty walls, and I glimpse Henry's silhouette, jagged, all elbows. I pass him to reach the kitchen, finding, to my utter dismay, my entire collection of wine glasses sitting at attention in the dish rack; Henry had never touched a dish in his adult life, let alone washed my favorite glasses. I selected one, filled it to the brim with red—I couldn't see my face swimming in the contents, and I was grateful for this.

I passed the empty walls once again as I ascended back to the bedroom, my only solace from a vacant house of the lonesome; as I walk, the wine falls in drops like blood. I glance up when I hear a soft, feminine laugh.

My husband, mine; he sits on the sofa leisurely, head tilted back to properly appraise the woman perched upon his lap, legs spread on either side, blonde head hung low. While I was at home? While I was upstairs? The wine glass falls from my hands to smash on the linoleum as I run, blinded with a combination of shock and rage into the upstairs hallway. I campaign to shake the image. I tremble from its' wrath.

I tear through the hallway, overturning obstacles in my sight in an effort to rid myself of the cancerous dread—spreading fingers in my stomach. I come across the purple urn and I pause, red hot with unrelenting disgust, with the unlimited fear of the unknown that I feel eating me into nothing. I reach for it before I have a moment to claim an ounce of rationality, lifting it above my head, already remorseless, when I glimpse something that causes my heart to collide with my stomach.

The urn had been rotated from its' position atop the china cabinet, rendering me unable to notice prior to now... A taped photograph of my face accents the back of the urn, my smile unsuspecting.

"What—?" I manage, but an explanation evades me. Frantic, I smash the porcelain structure on the ground with a cry, expecting dusty ash to rise in a film before me, the ghost of his grandmother disturbed indefinitely. I stare down in panicked horror...the urn was empty.

"Henry!" I cry now, fearful, perplexed. I sprint into the bedroom, reach for my notebook, begin to page through to find the details of my paranoia—each page is breathless, blank. I open the back, flip madly through the middle once more—it's entirely untouched, pages clean, vacant. I'd written in this every day for months.

"Henry!" I scream again with heightened desperation—what is happening?

I barrel in the direction of the stairway in search of answers; the house is closely silent, the dark left undisturbed, nearly awaiting my hysteria. I find myself running with abandon down the staircase, screaming for Henry out of the pure terror plaguing my mind, my movements, when my foot catches and I crumple to the bottom of the stairway.

The pain is evident, instantaneous; I cry out as I feel it bloom in my shoulders, my legs. A sickly feeling sits awaiting in my stomach, the twinge of discomfort, the twinge of being on the brink of discovery.

I let my eyes lilt open slowly, the scenery around me blurry at first, coming into focus over many moments. I look up to see myself crumpled in an awkward heap, blood smeared on the floor beneath. I feel every emotion within me succumb to the demands of my hysteria, the terror paralyzing though I wish to rise, to flee from what can only be my fate. The television has been turned off. The silence that meets me is devastating, untouched by reason—I await the figures that advance on me slowly, easily.

"You really did it," a woman was saying, the smile evident in her tone. "I wasn't sure if you could."

"Of course, darling," responds Henry, who looms over me, inspecting the delicate fluttering of my throat, fighting to breathe. "She isn't dead quite yet."

"Do the honors," the woman says, and the voice can only be hers, that of the one in my dream; the realization encloses me, it turns my stomach. I look at the blood on the floor and I know what he's done for her.

"Henry," I'm whispering faintly, unable to move; he seems unaware of my quiet pleas, looming over me once more. "Henry, please," I manage, and he seizes my ankles, dragging my limp figure away from the stairway.

When I look up, I see flurries of snow collecting beyond the window, the night dimly foggy—when I'd come down for

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**SUSPENSE
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wine the grass was exposed in the backyard, our vegetable garden thriving. I now see cold, dead branches scrape the window. I'd left another world in the confines of the window, and I'd now returned to the time of my untimely demise. I saw my fate in the eyes of my husband that stood, ready to kill me. I watch it unfold as the months of silence suddenly take a position of rationality in my mind; he'd let me go, for her. I remained a passive ghost in his tainted home.

"There's some wood out back," Henry tells the woman as I fight for his attention, "we could cremate her. I have that urn upstairs." I lay horrified as my husband suggests this, and the woman smiles in agreement, and above that, something else.

"Finish her," she tells him, "you owe it to yourself to be free."

Henry drags my body towards the back door as she leaves, struggling with the weight.

"Henry, stop," I'm whispering, although I know he cannot hear me—he watches my face as he drags me, transfixed, a blank canvas upon which I hoped he would expose his fear, his realization of his loss. I think I see something flicker in his eyes, but I must have imagined it; we were close now, almost at the back door.

"I THINK I KNOW YOU," Henry whispered, staring into the haunting eyes of Paris, "I think I've met you before."

Paris smiles, caressing his skin with a touch not unlike that of a feather; soft, inviting. "Maybe it was someone like me," she whispers.

"No," he says, "I would recognize you anywhere."

Scarlett's body had begun to burn long after Henry realized that Paris was like her in many ways, mirroring her affectionate habits, acting as a suitable companion—the startling difference was that Paris desired to please him more than Scarlett ever had, more than Scarlett ever would have, given the opportunity. The woman that stood next to him was not unlike his first love, was simply to exist as an updated rendition of his wife—look, she was even wearing one of Scarlett's dresses.

Even if she could not remain an immaculate replica, he would seek out another as they lay common in the streets, prone to seduction, empty promises. He could love wholly, and never love them more than he could ever love himself.

Henry glanced into the empty windows of the house they once shared, now tainted with a tragedy of its' own accord; if you looked closely you could almost see movement, a telltale sign in the old bedroom window he once shared, notebook pages turning.

"This is all ours now," Paris breathes, following his eyes in the direction of the looming house.

"It's always been ours, Scarlett." ■

Forensic Files

Q&A: WILL ANTIBODY PROFILING HELP MY INVESTIGATOR DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TWO SUSPECTS?



By D.P. Lyle, MD

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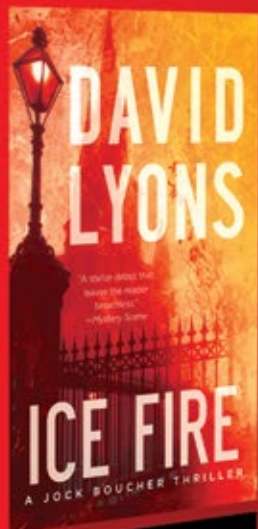
Q: My suspect had a bone marrow transplant a few years ago. DNA from blood at several crime scenes shows a mixture that is eventually resolved, with both the bone marrow donor and recipient being represented. The CSI investigating the case wishes to use the new antibody profiling assay on the samples in order to distinguish this suspect from the original bone marrow donor (who is also a suspect). Would the antibodies that are tested for in this assay differ between two people who share the same bone marrow and thus the same DNA?

A: Antibody profiling is new, unproven, and has never been used in a court case. So it is as yet not an admissible piece of evidence but that will probably happen before too long if it indeed pans out to be as good as it appears. The science behind it is that when any foreign material enters the body—things such as bacteria and viruses—the body immediately constructs antibodies against this foreign intruder. Remnants of these antibodies remain in the blood system forever. It is these types of antibodies that give us immunity to measles and other infectious diseases once we've had them. It is these types of antibodies that also make us immune to many of these diseases after a vaccination. Since each of us throughout our lives contract different bacteria and viruses and other foreign materials, we each have an individual pattern of antibodies in our system. No two people have exactly the same antibody profile—or so it seems—and this is the basis for using this profile to identify an individual. If this turns out to be as good as promised it could be as good as DNA and fingerprints.

So an antibody profile could be created from the blood left at the crime scene as well as the two suspects, and one would be exonerated while the other would be implicated. The DNA profile and the fact that one of the people had a bone marrow transplant would have nothing to do with this. Antibodies are not part of the DNA profile and they are not created by the blood but rather by immune cells throughout the body.

The bottom line is that even though your two suspects would have the same DNA profile in their blood—but different in every other tissue—they would each have their own individual antibody profile. And even if it has never been used in court, it could easily cause your detectives to focus their attention on one suspect and exclude the other. ■

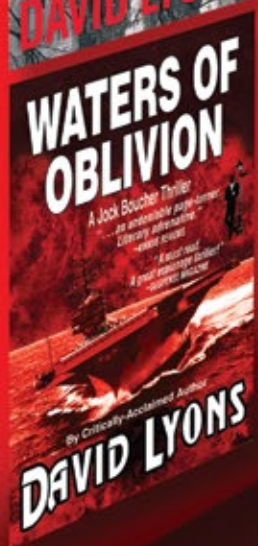
D.P. Lyle is the Macavity and Benjamin Franklin Silver Award winning and Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, Scribe, and USA Best Book Award nominated author of many non-fiction books as well as numerous works of fiction, including the Samantha Cody thriller series, the Dub Walker thriller series, and the Royal Pains media tie-in novels. To learn more about D.P., check out his websites at <http://www.dplylemd.com>, <http://writersforensicsblog.wordpress.com>, or Crime and Science Radio at <http://crimeandsciencradio.com>.



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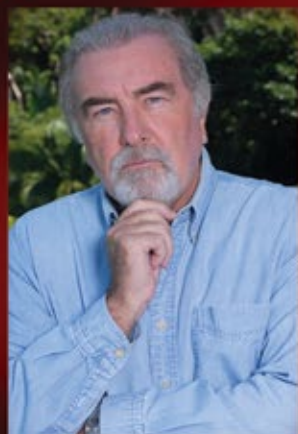
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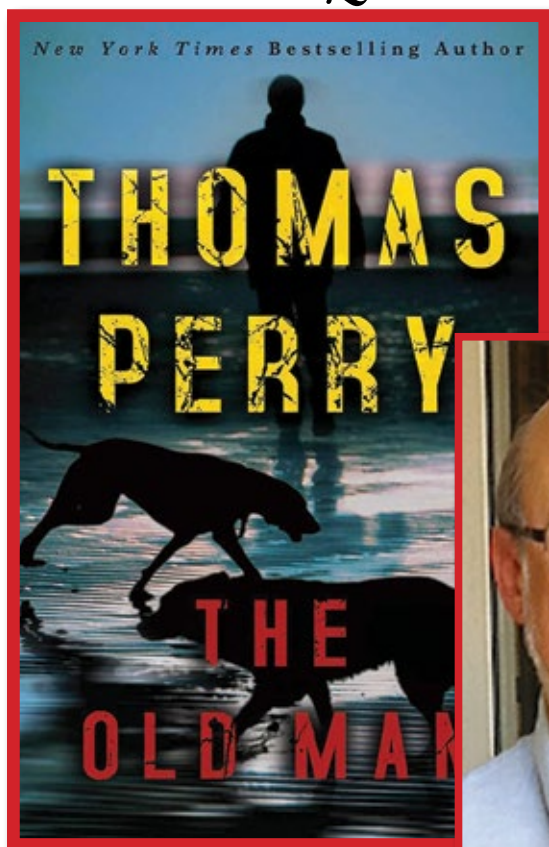
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America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

ONE OF A KIND: STORYMASTER THOMAS PERRY'S QUEST FOR ORIGINALITY

By Barry Lancet and Anthony Franze
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In this series, authors Anthony Franze and Barry Lancet interview the country's favorite suspense writers about "the rules" of fiction. In this edition, Barry sat down with Thomas Perry who shares writing wisdom learned from more than thirty years and twenty-four acclaimed novels.



Thomas Perry is on a quest. No, it's not to win literary awards or land on bestseller lists. He's done all that. After writing twenty-four novels, Perry still strives to tell an original tale, something that is not only new and fresh, but that keeps his interest.

That quest has resulted in a diverse body of work. His first novel, "The Butcher's Boy" (1982), a classic about a clever hit man, took home the Edgar Award for Best First Novel. He followed that up with "Metzger's Dog" (1983), a comic thriller said to have influenced Carl Hiaasen, among others. Flash forward two decades and there's "Pursuit" (2001), a chilling cat-and-mouse game between a psychopathic gun for hire and a tracker of dubious



background himself. The book captured the first Gumshoe Award for Best Mystery.

But arguably his greatest achievement in his lengthy and award-studded career is the creation of Jane Whitefield, a female Native American protagonist of the Seneca tribe who specializes in helping the innocent disappear so they can start a new life after escaping from those hunting them.

After five straight Whitefield novels, Perry took a ten-year hiatus from his series character before bringing her back for three more books at two- to three-year intervals, the most recent being “A String of Beads” (2015), this time with a twist. Jane must track down an old friend on the run in order to help him.

When asked why he waited so long between books, Perry’s answer was immediate: “The thing with a series is you really have to know something new about the character each time before you can start the next book. You need to come up with something that you feel is worth the reader’s time.” In the case of “A String of Beads” the new thing arrived in the form of a letter from a fan of Seneca heritage who offered up a treasure trove of new insights into the customs of the modern Seneca clan.

Not surprisingly, Perry likes variety. He doesn’t prefer a series over stand-alones, but rather the freedom to write what is new and strikes his fancy. “I have a short attention span,” he jokes.

When he finds something worthwhile, he’s off and running. His latest book, “The Old Man” (2017), follows a sixty-something former army intelligence officer living in quiet retirement until loose ends never tied catch up with him. It is a propulsive narrative hung on Perry’s inimitable style, characters, and colorful yet unpredictable storyline.

Perry’s philosophy revolves around seeking originality and offering the best he can to readers. What follows are a few of his thoughts on writing and the writer’s world.

YOUR WORK LIVES OR DIES WITH ITS ORIGINALITY

“You should strive for originality because, really, any of us writing now, if anyone remembers us after we are gone, it will be for those parts of our work that would not have existed if we hadn’t written them.”

In other words, write stories that are unique to you alone. “There is absolutely no point in being the next guy to write an imitation of, I don’t know, somebody like Philip Marlowe. There isn’t any point in doing that any more because the first guy got it better than you would.”

Perry also believes originality should be combined with personal challenge that pushes a writer to the limit. “There isn’t any point in doing anything you find easy. It’s really, I think, important to try to do the hardest things you are able to do at any given time,” he said, adding, “Your biggest job as a writer is learning how to be a better writer. If you are doing things that are harder, you’ll be better faster.”

Coming at the idea from the other side, he offers a further refinement: “If you feel as though what you’re writing is a version of something that you’ve seen or read before, then you probably ought to go write something else.”

REIGN IN YOUR EGO

“The least interesting thing about a novel is the person who wrote it,” Perry said. And the one thing that can trip writers up—no matter how successful the book—is feeling too pleased with themselves. “The thing that kills writers is ego.”

An unrestrained ego can take a writer down a number of different paths to ruin. Perry points to the two most common he’s seen during his career: “Either the person has a phenomenal amount of success that seems magical and he begins to believe that all that praise is justified. Or, his ego is injured because people don’t recognize how wonderful he is and he becomes bitter. Either one of those is essentially ego.” And, his tone suggests, the beginning of the end.



START OUT WITH SOME UNKNOWNNS ABOUT YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS

“My reader—if there’s a reader—he’s sort of like I am. He’s similar to me. If my character is somebody who interests me, who I don’t know all the answers about, then probably the character will interest the people who read my books.”

In Perry’s view it’s as much about what you don’t know as what you do. “There’s a quotation from Grace Paley, the great short-story writer. She wrote a late memoir called ‘Just As I Thought,’ and one of the things she said in it is that if you think of a character for a story and you’re really eager to write about him because you feel that you understand him perfectly, don’t do it.”

Perry likes the potential of the initially open-ended character. “What you want to do is write about the sort of person you look at and listen to and say, like, ‘What’s the matter with you? Why are you like that?’ Because what happens is that while you are trying to figure this character out, the reader will share in your sense of discovery.”

That way, he believes, the writer and the reader will be traveling the same road. “You both will be figuring this person out as you go along. You’re learning together. And I think that’s kind of an ideal situation—that you *are* learning something as you are writing it. You’re not just reporting. I think that’s the kind of character people can spend a little time puzzling over.”

Regardless of the character’s perspective, he believes it’s important to try to “present people in something like all of their complexity. I don’t really want to necessarily spend my time psychoanalyzing characters but you can give hints of greater depth or greater complexity. That seems to me to be worthwhile.”

As a final note, Perry feels compelled to add a well-considered caveat. “What works is whatever works. We recognize it when we see it.... But you would never want to tell anybody ‘don’t do this.’ Rules are useful if they are sort of helpful hints, but not if they’re strictures that you can’t ever do this. What’s wonderful is to be surprised by something good that you run across.”

And surprise comes when we stumble on an original perspective, a fresh character, an unexpected storyline. Which brings us full circle to Perry’s first thought—let’s not call it a rule—of striving for originality at every stage in order to surprise your readers and yourself. ■

* * *

* Barry Lancet is the author of the award-winning international suspense series featuring Jim Brodie. The latest entry is “Pacific Burn” (Simon & Schuster, 2016). The first Brodie book, “Japantown,” won a Barry Award for “Best Debut Novel” and the second, “Tokyo Kill,” was a Shamus Award Finalist. The fourth, “The Spy Across the Table,” releases on June 20, 2017. An American expat raised in California, Lancet has lived in Japan for more than twenty years.

**Anthony Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a prominent Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of “The Advocate’s Daughter” (St. Martin’s Press/Minotaur, 2016), a family thriller set in the insular world of the U.S. Supreme Court. Franze’s next high-court thriller, “The Outsider,” released on March 21, 2017.

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By Robert C. Madison

JACK GRIST DIDN'T REMEMBER BEING ABDUCTED. YET, THERE HE WAS.

He remembered the last case he worked back in Milwaukee. A not-guilty verdict. Lawyerly B.S. The judge bought it. His interpretation—that was the word his partner used—of the rules, came back to bite him. Constitutional rights. What about the ten women that man took apart and buried in his basement? At the strong suggestion of his lieutenant, he took time off and flew to Vegas. It felt like the right place to go, far away from the grey skies, grimy snow, and salt-caked cars.

He landed at a noisy airport filled with tiny, glass-encased smoking areas, like nicotine fish tanks, and the first or last chance at hitting the slots. He grabbed a filthy yellow Crown Vic at the airport to take him to the casino at which he would spend his vacation. The cabbie had a bum leg, his walker stowed in the front passenger seat, so Jack climbed in back. He frowned at riding in the back seat of a Crown Vic. He checked into his hotel and had dinner at a buffet before hitting the tables. Lost a week's salary. He took the elevator up to his room, hoping he'd have better luck the next day. But he certainly didn't remember being abducted and strapped down in a chair. And yet, there he was.

Jack sat at a half-moon blackjack table in a room lit only by a cone of light from a bulb hung above the table. The warm, buttery light made the deep green felt-topped table seem almost welcome. He sat in a wooden chair, his wrists sharply secured to the chair's arms with thick, leather straps. Outside the cone of light, he could see nothing except empty blackness. Even the size of the room was undeterminable. Around the table with him sat three other men, each was also strapped to a chair and, judging by the looks on their faces, similar cases of immediate amnesia. Jack sat to the left of the other men.

The man to his right wore a suit that was exquisitely tailored, yet failed to conceal his grotesque girth, the fine fabric's tensile strength tested by the man's folds. Although Jack felt a slight chill in the still air of the room, the man was soaked with great beads of sweat—dark stains of perspiration saturating his suit at the armpits. Pity. Jack figured the suit cost maybe his monthly salary back at the PD. The fat man had sandy hair that was thinning at the crown and grown longer in the front in a failed attempt to hide the balding. He wore a gold wedding band with a trio of diamonds, and on his right little finger was a plain gold ring. Skin bulged around the rings as though his flesh was slowly consuming the metal. He stared at Jack with pale blue eyes of expectation.

On the other side of the fat guy was a thin man in a navy pin-striped suit. He had a white oxford shirt and a red tie fastened in a full Windsor knot. A small American flag pin was affixed upside down on the man's left lapel. He looked to be in his early forties and wore his ink-black hair parted on the right. His shoes gleamed even in the limited light. A prominent hawk-like nose was his only distinguishing feature, and he glanced between Jack and the other two men.

On the opposite side of the semicircle sat an older gentleman wearing a light blue, long-sleeved shirt open at the collar. He was in his sixties and wore thick, plastic-framed glasses. He had a full head of gray hair and his sleeves were rolled up, showing sinewy forearms despite his age. Deep brown eyes pierced Jack's gaze with fierce intelligence. A short, gray beard was perfectly trimmed.

"What's going on?" the older gentleman asked. "Who are you all?"

"I've no idea," the fat guy said.

"Any of you remember how you got here?" Jack asked.

"I've no idea," the fat guy repeated.

"Gentlemen," came a deep voice from the blackness, as smooth as a malted chocolate milkshake left outside in July, "let's not worry about what led us here. Let's just accept that we're here and play a game."

"Show yourself," the old guy said.

From the dark emerged a man wearing a maroon vest over a white shirt and black bowtie. He appeared in his forties and had a shaved head with no facial hair, standing just over six feet with a runner's build. He moved to the opposite side of the table from the four captives and placed a silver rectangular case about the size of a small shoebox on the green felt tabletop. The light gleamed off his bald pate, his deep eye sockets concealing his eyes in shadow. He glanced at each man with the black hollows before spreading his hands wide.

"Welcome," he said. "You may call me Jones."

"What are we doing here?" demanded Hawk Nose. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"In fact, I do," Jones said. "You're Senator Elliot Sampson. Rather unfortunate situation at your hotel room."

"What do you mean?" Sampson barked.

"You know," Jones leaned forward and put the back of his hand to his mouth, offering a mock whisper, "The ooker-hay."

"I haven't any clue what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't," Jones said, and glanced at the oldest man sitting next to the senator. "Doctor Felix O'Hanrahan. Care to introduce yourself?"

"You just did," O'Hanrahan said through clenched teeth. "What's your game?"

Jones cocked his head at the doctor and leaned forward, "Why, blackjack, of course. Isn't it obvious?"

"The table is," Jack said. "But sure as hell nothing else is."

"Fair enough, Detective," Jones said. "Have you met Joseph Malieu? The perspiring gentleman to your right?"

"Hello," Malieu said.

Jack arched an eyebrow at Malieu. "Really?"

"Gentlemen, it's my pleasure to introduce you to Detective Jack Grist of the Milwaukee Police Department. You can imagine my delight when I saw him walking into the casino here in my fair city. I planned for you three, but then a legend in catching those of my craft appears, right here at exactly the right time. You really can't make this stuff up," Jones said.

"What are you on about?" O'Hanrahan said and pulled against his wrist straps.

"Of course," Jones said. "I apologize. We're going to play a little blackjack. It's what you do in Las Vegas, right? That or those infernal droning slot machines. But no, this game is much more refined. I'll be your dealer, and we'll discuss your—shall we say—transgressions through life. Shall we begin?"

"Let us go," Malieu whimpered. He struggled against the straps. Jack didn't think there was enough play in the straps to let him work any leverage. The chair legs were bolted to the ground, and just like their wrists, their ankles were strapped to the chairs.

"Sorry, we have to play," Jones said.

"Please?" Malieu tried.

"No!" Jones roared. Spittle launched through the cone of light and he slammed his palms on the table. "That's why we're here in the first place. Because you don't carry through. You don't abide by your promises."

The opaque eye sockets pivoted to each man before Jones stood tall and smoothed the front of his shirt and vest. "Now," he said, "let's begin."

Jones positioned the silver case in front of him and snapped open the two clasps on the case. He opened the lid, removing a clear plastic dealing shoe. He set it to his right and closed the silver case before moving it to the left side of the table. Jones worked his neck and stretched his fingers, sounding not unlike wet chicken bones being plucked from an overcooked carcass.

"Gentlemen," Jones began, "I assume you're all familiar with blackjack. I'll deal from my left to right, clockwise. Doctor O'Hanrahan is at first base, so we begin with him."

While Jones was speaking, Jack tried to discern details of the room. It seemed useless. The cone of light prohibited his eyes from adjusting to the darkness, his vision limited to Jones, the table, and his imprisoned compatriots. He was acutely aware that he wasn't armed. He had been when he ate dinner, which was the last thing he remembered. Again he tested the

leather straps at his wrists and succeeded only in digging the edge of the strap into his skin, a thin line of blood staining the leather.

Jones dealt the cards. He did it with practiced comfort and slid the cards face-up in front of each player. He dealt himself two cards, the second card face-down. His visible card was the queen of diamonds. He stole a glance at his hidden card and smiled.

"The queen, she's a temperamental one," Jones said, and glanced at O'Hanrahan. "Your call."

"This is absurd," O'Hanrahan said. "Why in the hell are we here? What do you hope to accomplish?"

"A great deal more than you, Doctor," Jones said. "You, a renowned radiation oncologist at a top tier hospital on the east coast. Some say the leading oncologist in the world. Your career is so advanced that you're touring and sharing your knowledge. For a hefty fee, of course. Plus expenses. But you still like to get your hands dirty, don't you, Doctor? Do procedures yourself from time to time. You just want to help."

"Of course," O'Hanrahan said. "It's my job."

"Your job is to poison those whose bodies are riddled with poison."

"A somewhat simplistic way of putting it."

"But, sadly, you can't save them all."

"No one can."

"Hit or stand, Doctor?"

"If it'll get you to shut up," O'Hanrahan said. He glanced at his cards: eight of hearts and a six of diamonds. He looked up at Jones and said, "Hit."

Jones slipped a card out of the shoe and moved it across the table. He flipped it, placing it at the top edge of the other cards. Despite himself, Jack watched and hoped the card had been a seven. It wasn't.

"Sorry, Sir," Jones said, picking the case up again and popping it open. "Jack of spades. That's a bust. Much like the bungling of your job. You lost two patients in the last three months."

Jones pulled a silver revolver from the case and pointed it at O'Hanrahan, pulling the hammer back. The cylinder gleamed in the cone of light as it revolved into place.

"Hey," Jack said, but his word was lost in the pistol's deafening roar. Jack rocked against the chair in an effort to somehow escape. The other two men mirrored Jack in vain. Malieu began to weep. O'Hanrahan's head slumped backwards and his mouth hung wide open as a long sigh escaped him. A hole smoked in the center of his forehead, wide-open eyes staring into the dark recesses beyond the cone of light.

"Ow," Jones said and placed the pistol on the felt. He stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it back and forth. "That was louder than I thought it'd be."

"Oh my god," Sampson said.

"So this is the game," Jack said.

"Yes, Detective," Jones swiveled his gaze to Jack, his voice like a rock against a cheese grater. Jack suppressed a shiver. "This is the game."

"What do you want?" Sampson asked. "You know I can probably get it."

"Of course," Jones said, bringing his attention to the senator. "You're a senior senator from the controlling party, whose heart is lined more with the bribes of lobbyists than the good intention of representing your constituents."

"So?" Sampson asked, managing a smile of his own. Jack imagined that smile had been practiced in front of mirrors to hone its honest, 'I'm-in-your-corner' look. "What can I do for you?"

"Hit or stay, Senator Sampson."

"Wait."

"Your call."

Jack glanced at the senator's cards: A Jack and a two.

"Look," Sampson said, "you can't do this."

Jones motioned towards O'Hanrahan, "I think I just showed I can. He at least saved some people's lives. Just not the right ones. You, on the other hand..."

"What if I win?"

"You're free to go."

"Really?" Sampson asked.

"I'm a man of my word."

"Ok, then," Sampson said, glancing at his cards. "Hit."

Jones slipped a card out of the shoe and once again slid the card into place, flipping it face-up. It was a four of diamonds. "Player has sixteen."

Sampson let out a breath. Malieu continued to weep. Jack found a slight bit of play in the strap holding his left ankle to the chair and while Sampson and Jones spoke, he worked his foot back and forth. He wasn't sure, but it felt as though the leather had loosened a touch. He hoped there might be an imperfection in the strap.

"I think I'll stay," Sampson said.

"A wise decision," Jones said. "Although you're used to making those spineless choices. Like how you stayed home and avoided the floor whenever controversial votes were held. If you aren't on the record with a vote, then no one can hold you accountable, can they?"

"Now that's not fair, I have a solid record on my issues."

"By yours," Jones said, "you mean your lobbyist puppet masters, yes?"

"Now listen," Sampson started as Jones glanced at his hidden card. In a quick movement he lifted the pistol and shot Sampson.

Malieu screamed.

Jack's ears rang. The muzzle flash—a horizontal orange teardrop—burned into his retina as he worked the left leg strap. It was loosening. As Malieu cried, trying to rock his enormous girth in the chair to no avail, Jones placed the pistol back on the table.

"Maybe your luck won't be as rotten, Mr. Malieu," Jones said.

"You just murdered a sitting United States senator," Jack said. "You don't just do that and get away with it."

"Unlike your last suspect, Detective Grist? Murdered four people and walked away, right past Justice's blind eye. That man is a human cancer cell. Seems to me like you really can get away with murder. So long as the cop doesn't finish the job."

"Technicality."

"Ah yes," Jones said. "Fruit of the poisonous tree, right? I followed your career very closely. The famed murderer-hunter. Featured on a short-run reality series on basic cable. No one gets away with it in Milwaukee. They even farm you out to the feds, I hear. But not this time. What happened this time?"

"You know what."

"Indeed. But it's Mr. Malieu's turn. I wouldn't be doing my job if I skipped him. And we all have a job to do, don't we?"

"No," Malieu said.

"What would you like to do, Mr. Malieu?" Jones asked, motioning towards the ten of hearts and the eight of spades.

"I don't want to play."

"But you must," Jones said, and glanced at Jack. "You see, Mr. Malieu is a hedge fund manager. He likes making money with money. Making money out of nothing, really. Moving around digits and making phone calls. And more and more money floods into his pockets. He's really very good at it. A job, maybe. A career for sure, but one would be hard-pressed to call it work."

"I'm very good," Malieu said, "I can help you."

"The senator tried that tactic. Didn't help him much," Jones said. "Besides, you didn't help your mother, did you?"

"What?"

"Packed her up and locked her in a home as soon as you could. When was the last time you saw her? When was the last time you even spoke with her?" Jones asked. "Maybe you're good at making money, but you are a failure at the job of being a son."

"I'll call her tonight," Malieu said. "I'll go see her."

Jones chuckled, and his laughter sounded to Jack like a snake shedding its skin. "It's much too late for that. You see, she died two weeks ago. Breast cancer. At least you set up a nice trust fund for her, and that helped her see the best doctors. Even got to see Doctor O'Hanrahan over there," Jones motioned towards O'Hanrahan's corpse with the barrel of the pistol. "But with her advanced age, the regimen was just too aggressive. Well, we know how it turned out."

"Oh, God," Malieu said.

"Yes," Jones said. "At this point they usually turn to praying."

"How did you know these people?" Jack asked.

"We're stalling here. The job at hand is the game, Detective."

"O'Hanrahan is Malieu's mother's oncologist? How was Senator Sampson involved?"

"Oh, that one is simple. You can probably guess," Jones said, and pointed the pistol at Malieu, its gaping black hole peering into Malieu's eyes. "What's your move, Mr. Malieu?"

"I don't want to."

"Not an option. What will it be?"

"You can't make me choose," Malieu said, and the gun roared. Malieu's substantial girth attempted to rock back in the seat. He shuddered and perspiration flew from him. He let out a harsh, pig-like guttural noise.

"Surrender, then. Not the choice I would have made," Jones said and set the pistol down.

"The senator blocked the healthcare bill," Jack said.

"Very good, Detective."

"The connection is somewhat tenuous."

"Granted. But here we are."

"And me?"

"Luck of the draw, really. Really terrible luck, if I'm honest," Jones said. Jack was working the strap at his left ankle. "You see, I followed your case in Milwaukee. I was disappointed. I wasn't a fan of that particular killer. He was sick, you see? Perverted mind."

"And yours isn't?"

"Psychopathic, arguably. But not sexually perverse. Those you try to catch are a cancer. A human cancer cell eating the souls of the innocent they take. I guess you are organic chemotherapy with a shiny badge."

"Even more tenuous."

"Tell me, Detective, have you heard of me?"

"No."

"Shame. But then, by design. I don't kill for fame."

"You do it for the same reason as any of them," Jack said. "Power. Doesn't really matter what motive. Sexual craving, fame, because in youth you were an outcast. I've no doubt you tortured animals. It's about having the power to overcome rejection. In this setting you control the outcome, so there's no rejection. You have the power to determine what happens next."

"I teach. I punish."

"Noble. But you prove my point. It's about power," Jack laughed. "Let me guess, you were a caretaker at the assisted living at which poor old Mrs. Malieu was stuck to be forgotten by her son, and you watched her waste away while her son never so much as called her. You rooted for her, and no one could help. Not a spectacular oncologist. Not even money, a lack thereof forces most into unreasonable debt as cancer eats them into early graves. Their survivors have to deal with a fiscal burden, as well as with grieving the loss of their dearly departed. And what? You saw Senator Sampson's dramatics on CSPAN, standing up and blocking a vote, pride in earning his blood money from the insurance lobby? You had enough. But it probably goes back to your own mother. Did you watch her succumb to tumors while there was no cure? Or worse, no money to provide for a cure that was just out of reach?"

Jones arched an eyebrow, picking up the pistol. He pointed it at Jack, and said, "Uncanny. Some of your details are a bit askew, but strikingly close. And while these three were easy to maneuver into my trap, you just happened along. None of these three did their jobs. And you didn't either. Now that sick bastard will kill again. Probably prostitutes, but it's still wrong."

"Prostitutes might be mothers, too. Right, Mr. Jones?"

"So, are you going to hit or stand? I suppose you could surrender, like Mr. Malieu, but that would be disappointing."

"Hit."

"Excellent," Jones said and clapped his hands on either side of the pistol's grip. He set the gun down and took a card out of the shoe, moving it over to Jack's hand. Jack's hand was an ace and a five. Both of clubs. Jones flipped the other card face-up. A six.

Jack silently cursed. He had hoped for the five, but even if it had been, what would that have meant? He took in some air, said, "Hit."

Jones moved another card forward. A three of hearts.

"Again," Jack said.

"Oh, this is getting exciting," Jones moved out another card. He held it face-down for a moment and a smile licked across

his face. For the first time, Jack could see his eyes. They were as gray as tombstones. He whispered, "Here we go."

"Just turn the damned thing over."

Jones did, and it was the six of diamonds.

"Blackjack," Jones said. He turned his own cards over: the Jack of hearts and the nine of diamonds. "The detective wins the hand."

"Guess my luck changed."

"Looks that way, sir. You cash out. Your winnings are your life."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," Jones said and pointed to the other three. "If they had the same hand, they would walk as well."

"I don't get it," Jack said. "A killer who lets victims go?"

"Maybe you don't know everything, after all. You see, I have a job to do; to teach others the importance of doing theirs. But I live in Las Vegas, so I let a game decide if those who haven't done what they're supposed to do are punished for it. I don't control what happens next, lady luck does. The power rests with the cards, not me."

Jack stared at the killer. It flew in the face of everything he knew. His blackjack hand just rejected Jones's killing plans. Jones moved around the table and stood behind Jack. He held the pistol in his left hand and with his free hand freed Jack's right wrist. He stepped back around behind the table.

"You may release yourself the rest of the way," Jones said. "You almost got that left leg free. Not sure what good it would have done you, though."

Jack released the three remaining straps and stood. He rubbed at his right wrist with his left hand to get the feeling back. His fingers tingled with countless, invisible pinpricks. "You just let your victims go? And you've never been caught?"

"It's never happened before, Detective. The hand is usually stacked in favor of the house. The players always fail to do their job."

"So the game is, what," Jack asked, "a gimmick for the papers? The Blackjack Killer? I thought it wasn't about the fame."

"It isn't. Maybe I'm just crazy."

"So I just walk away?"

"Just one more thing; you'll never see me again. This concludes our game. Congratulations on your win," Jones said. Jack heard a faint click behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a glowing red exit sign floating in the wall of blackness.

"Someone will eventually catch you," Jack said and started to move towards the door. "But I sure as hell won't be coming back to Las Vegas."

The pistol roared. ■

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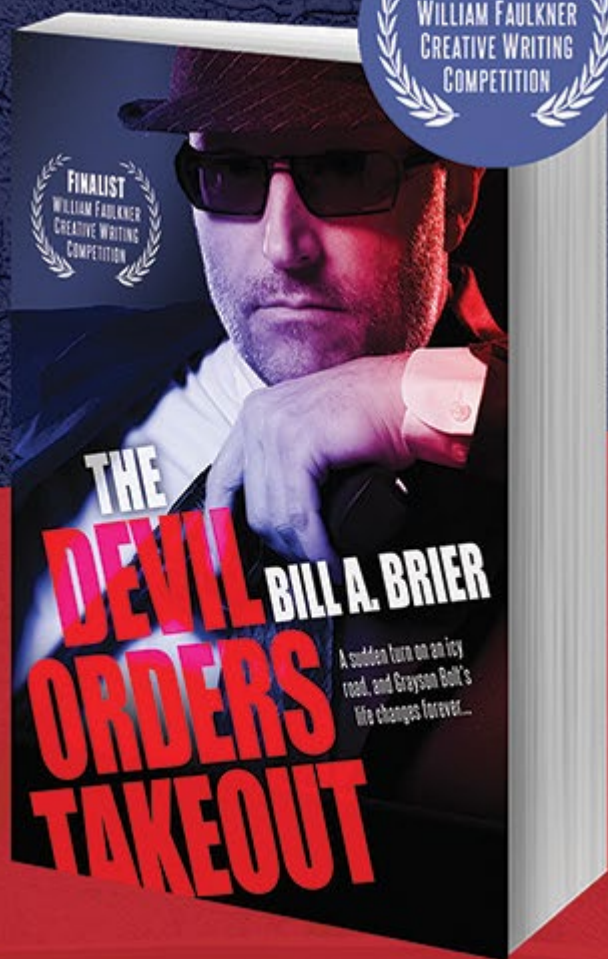
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SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

THE GERMAN

By James Patrick Hunt

Kurt Miller is driving through London with a trunk full of cocaine. Even though Kurt didn't know it was in there, the police don't believe his story and throw him in prison where he spends the next thirteen months.

This is an odd thing to happen in Kurt's life, since before his arrest he had been working as an agent and analyst for the BND, which is Germany's federal intelligence agency. He was also the man who wrote a report that was met with anger from two Americans who wanted him to change it, although he refused to do so.

Thirteen months have gone by and Kurt breathes the fresh air as he's released from the slammer and heads home to Hamburg, Germany. He can't wait to get back to his life, but what he finds waiting for him instead is a real mess. Gone is his job and his wife. Only his classic Mercedes remains, which he decides to sell in order to hunt down the people who framed him for a crime he definitely did not commit.

Utilizing contacts in both the intelligence arena and the criminal one, the facts start to appear. Carl Tanner, a former CIA Agent, is the one behind the pain and anguish that destroyed Kurt's life and family thirteen months ago. But now that time has passed, Kurt finds himself in the American political arena with Tanner, as well as a former Secretary of State who is now running for President, trying to undo the damage that's been done.

These characters and plot definitely bring the seedy side of Washington D.C. politics to life.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



ALICE & THE ASSASSIN

By R.J. Koreto

Alice Roosevelt is the wild daughter of Teddy Roosevelt, the new President of the United States. In this tale, as President Roosevelt takes office, one of the first things he does is assign Secret Service Agent Joseph St. Clair the job of protecting his daughter. The two of them get along well, in an odd sort of way. Alice tells him off for calling her "The Princess" and gives him some lessons on how to roll cigarettes. Agent St. Clair gives as good as he gets, which causes their relationship to be built on mutual respect.

Alice loves to go to the zoo and look at snakes. She also likes to talk to revolutionary, Emma Goldman, who Alice believes has information about the man who assassinated President William McKinley and set Alice's father into the Oval Office. Even though Emma tells Alice that she is an anarchist, just like the killer of McKinley, she assures Alice that she didn't have any knowledge of his plans to kill the President. But she does offer up information on what she knows in regards to the assassination.

Armed with this info, Alice and her protector decide to look into McKinley's death because they are now both concerned with Alice's own father's safety. They question everyone from a police captain to a Chinese crime boss to a Mafia Don. Although Agent St. Clair is a little skeptical of the random information, he can see that Alice believes they're closing in on the person known only as "The Archangel," who may actually be the real killer of President McKinley.

This is a really fun ride as readers run from one place to another with Alice and her Secret Agent—from the Bowery to the most elegant areas that only New York City society could claim. Even more good news comes in the fact that this is the very first title in what looks to be an incredible new series.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

BLOOD'S ECHO

By Isabella Maldonado

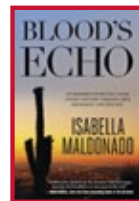
In her debut novel Maldonado pulls from her personal experience as a former cop to provide readers with a highly entertaining police procedural—a thriller with more than a touch of reality, pulled from today's headlines.

Detective Veranda Cruz, a Phoenix Police Drug Enforcement Agent and a first generation Phoenician, is proud of her family's heritage and her parents' successful restaurant business in Arizona's largest city. Her family is just as proud of her rise to power as task force leader. When her investigation into Bartolo Villalobo's cartel, one of Mexico's largest crime families, becomes part of her focus the heat is turned up, literally, and the bad guys come after her family, burning their restaurant to the ground.

This personal attack just serves as a catalyst for Cruz to return the favor. Once she realizes there is a mole in the corridors of the police department, she puts her faith in an outsider—arson investigator, Cole Anderson—who is soon kindling a flame for the pretty detective. As the intensity increases, a link between the families emerge that might just flip the investigation on its ear and challenges everything Cruz ever knew to be true.

Hang on tight for the ride of a lifetime across Southern Arizona as Maldonado rises to her written challenge to entertain, enthrall and engage readers in this high octane thriller.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■



MAN OVERBOARD

By J.A. Jance

In this great thriller by J.A. Jance, we meet a couple of outstanding characters who are polar opposites: one is saving lives and the other wants to end them.

Roger McGeary, a cybersecurity expert, has gotten his life just the way he wants after going through many years of stress and depression. But just as he's becoming happy, enjoying himself on an expense-paid cruise, Roger falls off the suite's balcony. The police are called and the accident is documented as "death by misadventure." Roger's aunt, Julia Miller, is not taken in by this very unclear phrase and is determined to find out what happened. She contacts Roger's childhood friend, Stuart Ramey, to help her solve the case. But without knowing it, she has set herself up on a crash course with a serial killer.

So begins the quest to find out who killed Roger. Into the fray comes Stuart, his friend Cami Lee, and Ali Reynolds, a journalist posing as an amateur detective. These folks are bringing the resources of the online security firm, High Noon Enterprises with them. Cami is investigating the ship, while Stuart is tied to his computer in a battle of wits against a very bright antagonist.

The man is helped by Frigg, an artificial intelligence companion created by the killer that targets victims who have lost their parents to suicide and tries to drive them to the same end. As the killer and his cyber-buddy set their sights on Stuart, High Noon must race to save him.

This is a good book and the imaginative cyber 'toys' are fun and more than a little intimidating at the same time. Offering a great ending that all thriller readers beg for, J.A. Jance has absolutely created yet another A+ title.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

VICIOUS CIRCLE

By C.J. Box

In this 17th adventure/suspense tale in the life of Wyoming Game Warden Joe Pickett, his early years come back to haunt him as he has to deal with the present members of the Cates family—a really lethal bunch.

Joe receives a phone call from Dave Farkus who tells him what he overheard in a bar. Farkus goes on to relay that this conversation was all about Joe and his family and something bad happening. Suddenly, the man is cut off, or perhaps even hung up, seeing as that Farkus is not exactly a “good friend.” After the phone call is almost forgotten, Dave Farkus disappears from a hunting trip and Joe finds himself alarmed. What is even more alarming is when Farkus turns up among the dead.

Joe does a bit of research and it seems that Dallas Cates, a dishonored rodeo star who once ran off with Joe’s daughter, April, and then pushed her out of his truck, has just been released from prison. Joe wonders if vengeance is the focus of this particular scum from his past.

The County Attorney has no trouble connecting Dallas to the dead Dave Farkus. But very high-priced attorney March Hand (who just happens to be married to Joe’s mother-in-law) has been able to get the charges dropped, leaving Dallas and his two thugs free to run the roads and look for ways to bring pain and anguish to the Pickett family. Joe suddenly finds himself moving at top speed in order to gather enough evidence to stop Dallas and put him back in prison...or into the ground before any of Joe’s family can be harmed.

C.J. Box has been bringing Joe Pickett into the lives of fans for a good, long time. Yet even after all the titles surrounding this particular character, Pickett is still a thrilling hero who gives readers memorable adventures each and every time.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

BABY, TAKE A BOW

By Jane Tesh

David Randall, Private Investigator, makes his home in his friend Camden’s boarding house. Said boarding house is a conglomeration of folks, or as David sees it, “a miscellaneous bunch of oddballs.” The owners are Camden and Ellin. Camden just happens to be a psychic, while his wife, Ellin, works as a producer for the Psychic Service Network and is always nagging Cam to get a better job.

On this day, Cam’s friend, Rufus Jackson, gets a letter from his ex-wife Bobbi, telling him that he’s the father of her baby. He and his current wife, Angie, ask Randall to look into the claim and see if there’s any truth to it.

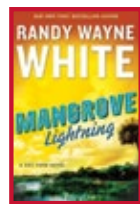
When Randall arrives at Bobbi’s house, he finds the police taking her body away and...there is no baby. It’s possible that Rufus will be the prime suspect because of the letter, but Bobbi’s been mixed up in some strange goings-on, including a plot to sell her baby to finance a new house.

Now we jump to Cam, who has agreed to sing for a concert. At this time, Cam meets Delores Carlyle, a troubled spirit who’s trapped inside a mirror and who wants to see her daughter, Beverly, one last time. She offers Cam \$30,000 in gems if he can get Beverly to come to the house. In exchange, Beverly asks Randall to find a place to live for Beverly’s son Kit, another man who is learning to be a psychic.

In addition to all the tall tales and tangled up people who are dead and alive, poor Randall has to put up with these mysteries as well as a growing anxiety that there is a baby out there and no one knows where the child is.

A really fun read. All you need is a pot of coffee and time to figure out who’s who and why, because once you begin this tale, you won’t want to stop until it comes to a close.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



MANGROVE LIGHTNING

By Randy Wayne White

Everyone has their own definition of how to categorize a great book. For me, if I lie in bed at night thinking about what I just read and wonder about what will happen next, I know I’m on to something special. That’s exactly how I went to bed while reading “Mangrove Lightning.” In this book, the twenty-fourth in the *Doc Ford* series, Randy Wayne White amps up the suspense.

Ford and his buddy, Tomlinson, stumble onto and into a mystery that is three generations deep. Someone is torturing and killing people along the west coast of Florida and using the same MO as Walter Lambeth, a serial killer and sadist, long since deceased. Randy Wayne White weaves suspense with horror as he paints a vivid picture of human suffering and the depths to which Man can descend. And yet, he also shows us the other side of the coin—human compassion and empathy. It’s Randy’s ability to show us both the darkness and the light, simultaneously, that truly makes “Mangrove Lightning” shine.

The dichotomy of the two lead characters, Ford and Tomlinson, is brilliant. A rational scientist and a spiritual “stoner,” who, when mixed together, blend for an unforgettable friendship and two of the best leads to come along in literature in a long time.

Randy Wayne White’s writing is multi-dimensional and a kaleidoscope of color, allowing the *Doc Ford* series to continue to get better with each installment.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of “Painted Beauty,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

NO EASY TARGET

By Iris Johansen

This familiar bestselling author is back with a tale that follows an animal psychic. Margaret Douglas is the “animal communicator” in question and proves that she has an ability that far outreaches all the other so-called “pet psychics.” She has an actual talent that allows her to speak to animals and hear what they have to say; she has even helped a tiger take care of an unwanted cub.

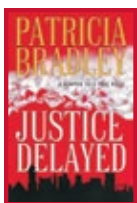
One day, she receives a phone call from Dr. Devon Brady in the Caribbean, a place where Margaret once worked. You see, when Margaret was only eight years old, she lived in the woods while making a plan to escape from an island that played home to criminal, Stan Nicos. This was a hideous man who abused young girls. She had made her escape, but Dr. Devon Brady now warns her that there are men on her trail. These men are going to attempt to return her to her enemy from the past. When she finds out that Nicos is hunting her, Margaret packs her bags and once again goes on the run.

This animal communicator soon finds herself battling a very smart man by the name of Lassiter. She must pull out all the stops, using her gift with animals, to outrace and outdo this man who will stop at nothing to get Margaret to submit.

Johansen, as always, shows that her mind never stops. Creating this odd yet suspenseful plot will have readers talking about Margaret and her abilities for a good long time to come. I do not say this often, but this is one book that definitely needs to find its way to the big screen. It’s a shame Hitchcock is dead, because this would be the perfect book for him to bring to life.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■





JUSTICE DELAYED

By Patricia Bradley

It's been eighteen years since reporter Andi Hollister's sister was killed. Yet in only three days, the killer they placed behind bars for the crime will be executed.

Police Detective Will Kincade is the killer's cousin. Not only is Will a Cold Case Detective, but he has also never believed that his cousin Jimmy took the life of the girl in question. Even more evidence of his innocence appears when a letter is received that states the man waiting for execution is actually not the one who committed the crime.

Although not what you would call a team having a common goal, Andi actually joins forces with Will to see if they can get to the bottom of this cold case before it's too late and Jimmy meets his maker. Of course, they deal with several people and odd situations that are blocking their way to the truth.

The number of characters with similar names and complicated relationships cloud reality and have Will and Andi, at some points in the tale, running all over the place. The more clues that come forward make the eventual resolution of the tale almost unbelievable, yet Will and Andi are determined to see that the right person pays for the crime.

"Justice Delayed" turns out to be a great thriller. It's a suspense that has time literally running out with each page. Bradley has combined many plots that include everything from diamond smuggling to murder to a dangerous man who no one wants to cross. Readers will have a ball trying to figure out this one.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

THE CHEMIST

By Stephenie Meyer

All Alex wanted was a normal life, although she wasn't quite sure what that would look like for her anymore. After spending years as one of the U.S. government's darkest secrets, Alex had honed a specific set of interrogation skills that made her one of their biggest assets, and greatest liabilities.

When Alex learns too much about a top-secret case, her agency chooses to keep their secret at the expense of her life and she's forced to go on the run. Changing identities and never staying in one place for too long, Alex learns to shut herself off from the rest of the human world, vowing to never trust anything except her own instincts.

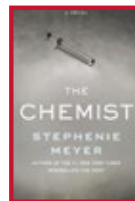
After multiple attempts on her life, her agency waves the white flag and contacts Alex to recruit her interrogation talents for a case they claim to be unable to solve. In exchange for her services, they offer the only thing they know Alex can't refuse, her freedom.

At this point, Alex decides she has nothing to lose and moves in on the target of the case, Daniel Beach. However, after a short round of "questioning" she realizes Daniel isn't who he seems to be. In fact, she begins to see holes in the case and starts to wonder whether the entire thing was simply a decoy to pull her out of hiding.

It doesn't take long for them to form a connection that puts both of their lives in danger; leaving Alex torn between her own safety and emotions she never thought she could feel again. Together, with the help of a few unlikely friends, they race against the clock to uncover the truth behind what is so important to the agency that they would do anything to prevent it from surfacing.

Stephenie Meyer does it again with a captivating story of strength, love and one woman's will to survive. "The Chemist" will draw you in from the very first page and won't let you go until the end.

Reviewed by Abigail Peralta ■



HEARTBREAK HOTEL

By Jonathan Kellerman

"Heartbreak Hotel" is another great read starring the well-known team of Alex Delaware, Child Psychologist, and Milo Sturgis, Detective.

This time around, Delaware's client is absolutely not a child; her name is Thalia Mars and she is nearly one hundred years old. Convincing Alex that she needs his expertise, she asks him to meet with her at her home at the Aventura, a very posh hotel with a very checkered past. Sadly, when Alex shows up the next day, he is unable to talk to Thalia because she is dead in her room. Worst of all, a paramedic has noticed signs that she was helped into the great beyond by a person or persons unknown.

Alex decides to find out who has done this deed, and seeing as it's a homicide, Milo Sturgis comes along. Everyone they speak to swears that they all loved Thalia. But as more information is uncovered, it comes to light that Thalia, for many years of her life, was the keeper of some pretty important secrets.

From a UCLA history professor to a long dead bootlegger, Alex and Milo must comb through the characters and the shady world of the Aventura in order to connect a present-day killer to Thalia's colorful past.

All that can be said is that this is a classic Kellerman novel. History, years of secrets, a mystery that is filled with action and suspense at all times, shadows of the mob... the author has missed nothing, yet again, when it comes to creating an awesome title his fans will not forget. Not to mention, the charming character of Thalia Mars is one that definitely deserves a round of applause.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



MURDER GO ROUND

By Carol J. Perry

There's an old saying that "one man's trash is another man's treasure." That's even true in Salem, Massachusetts, a.k.a. Witch City USA. When Lee Barrett and her Aunt Ibby read about a one-day-only public auction of unclaimed storage units, both women are up to the challenge. The rules are simple—you get to peek inside before bidding but you can't go in or touch anything. Deals are cash-only and final. Aunt Ibby insists on bidding for the very first unit, and wins. At first, it looks like all the women have bought is worthless junk. But as they search the boxes, Ibby finds a tarnished Russian samovar which she's convinced is valuable. And a battered crate holds a beautiful old carousel horse, badly in need of repair.

Lee may not have the eye for bargains her aunt does, but she possesses another unique talent. Lee is a scryer, meaning that when she looks at a reflective surface, she can see things other people can't. Dangerous things. And when she looks at the antique samovar closely, she has a sudden vision of a viciously murdered man.

Lee hopes that her intrusive vision was just a glimpse into the past, until her boyfriend, a Salem police officer, reports that a man has been found murdered outside the shop where the carousel horse was taken for repair. The police further determine that the murdered man has been following Lee and her aunt since the auction. And the carousel horse has been completely torn apart.

Lee's visions continue, and gradually she discovers the current murder is connected to: a murdered baker in Connecticut, a long-deceased neighbor, a ditzzy clairvoyant who reads palms in the local park, and Czar Nicholas II of Russia and his family.

Perry spins a fascinating yarn, effortlessly blending historical facts and fiction into a book that's impossible to stop reading until the satisfying, and surprising, ending. I couldn't turn the pages fast enough! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Second Honeymoons Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

ELEMENTARY, SHE READ

By Vicki Delany

A series debut that puts “Sherlock” and “Watson” in a whole new, fun light.

Delany introduces the world to Gemma Doyle, manager of the Sherlock Holmes Bookshop and Emporium, located in the small town of West London on Cape Cod. This incredible shop just so happens to be built at 222 Baker Street and specializes in *Sherlock Holmes* stories. It also plays home to a cat by the name of Moriarty. The shop was started by Gemma’s own Great Uncle Arthur, who claimed to be a distant relative of Arthur Conan Doyle.

Soon Gemma finds herself smack dab in the middle of her very own ‘whodunit’ when a woman abandons an original 1887 Beeton’s Christmas Annual at the store. A copy of this magazine, is one that appeared in the first *Sherlock Holmes* story, “A Study in Scarlet” and is worth a fortune on the market. When Gemma and her friend Jayne (who runs the adjoining business, Mrs. Hudson’s Tea Room) trace the woman to a hotel room, they find her strangled to death. Identified as Mary Ellen Longton, the dead woman turns out to have been the nurse of a recently deceased, *very* rich loner who named her in his Will.

Gemma is the first suspect that the police look at. Because of this, she decides to work with Jayne to clear her own name. Problem is, this trail leads Gemma and Jayne directly into another murder scene. After that, it becomes a race to solve the crimes before the police lock them both up for good.

Gemma is a fantastic character; she seems to have a terrific skill to be able to see things that the law doesn’t. Sound familiar? Gemma most definitely shares that characteristic with her celebrated literary buddy, Holmes. It’s always thrilling to find a new series. And with national bestselling author Vicki Delany behind it, this should be a humorous, captivating series that readers will absolutely love for years to come.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

BLACK FALL

By Andrew Mayne

In this new novel by the man who enthralled readers with “Angel Killer” and “Name of the Devil,” FBI Agent Jessica Blackwood returns. She’s the amazing character who has a gift for knowing things aren’t always as they seem to be. She comes from a family of illusionists, and that unconventional past is what actually aides her in her FBI work.

While on a stakeout, Jessica is looking for a serial killer in Washington, D.C. when suddenly a woman enters the apartment and attacks Jessica. The woman is holding a baby and a knife. Jessica rescues the baby, but the woman sneaks away without the agent learning the reason for the assault. As if that’s not enough, an earthquake suddenly shakes up the eastern seaboard and a very strange video appears to the masses.

When Jessica and her fellow agents take a look at the video, they find that it features a Nobel Prize winning physicist, Peter Devon, predicting this sudden earthquake and warning people about the coming of something called “Black Fall.” But the oddest part is the fact that Mr. Devon has supposedly been dead for the last eight years.

Since Jessica has recently solved a couple of huge cases, her boss assigns her to be head of this newest puzzle. With this investigation and the serial killer hunt, Jessica feels as if she’s being pulled in all kinds of directions, which actually causes her to see her family in a new light. She begins to speak with her grandfather regarding her work with the FBI. With the power that comes from her unique talents, Jessica starts down a path that leads her to a place of confusion, where her two investigations come together and she must discover what’s real and what’s fiction.

Andrew Mayne has a background of working with some of the best illusionists in this country (from Copperfield to Penn & Teller), but it is *no* illusion that this man can also write incredible books!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



HUMAN RESOURCES

By Bill Fitzhugh



Jake Trapper is a harvester working for the Southern California Company, Organ Procurement Network. He spends his free time visiting patients who are waiting for a kidney and undergoing dialysis. Jake makes friends with a patient—teenage Goth queen, Angel, who is indignant that life has dealt her a bum hand. Having met Angel’s mother, Nikki, an adult entertainer, Jake realizes that he might be the only answer to Angel’s problems, especially when the girl’s chances take a turn for the worse. Unfortunately, this ‘turn’ involves dipping into the highly illegal procurement of black market organs.

Striking a deal with a broker, Jake works out a referral plan to get rich patients in touch with an off-the-waiting-list kidney in return for a special deal for Angel. Unbeknownst to Jake, a Fed by the name of Special Agent Fuller has been tracking the black market angle after a couple of donor hearts are stolen en-route to patients. Along with bombshell, LAPD Homicide Detective Megan Densmore, the duo is watching and following Trapper, as he looks to be a likely suspect in the plot to acquire high-end organs.

Once Densmore strikes up an after-hours relationship with Trapper she helps him disguise the *real* reason he’s working the black market angle as he volunteers to go undercover to help break the ring of heart thieves.

Along with a dimwitted tattoo artist, a botched kidnapping, a Hollywood mogul and his pet spider monkey, and a failed physician with a dark side, Fitzhugh keeps us thoroughly entertained in this black comedy—the third in the *Transplant Trilogy* series.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of “Kettle of Vultures” ■

THE NIGHT BIRD

By Brian Freeman

The hero of this tale is San Francisco Detective Frost Easton. At the moment, Detective Easton is looking into the death of a salesperson at Macy’s, a woman by the name of Brynn Lansing. It seems that one night, as she was stuck in traffic on the Bay Bridge, Brynn jumped out of her car and literally jumped into the Bay, itself.

A couple of months earlier, another young lady died under extremely odd circumstances. These women were patients of psychologist, Francesca Stein, and both of them had undergone treatment with her to alter disturbing memories. As Frost and Francesca combine to investigate the crimes, the so-called killer has some new plans set in place for Francesca’s patients. It is a fact that everyone, at one time or another, deals with bad memories, and the more Frost finds out about Stein’s practice, the more he believes that someone is targeting the psychologist.

Working as a team, Frost and Stein do everything they can to discover why all of a sudden her patients are having mental breakdowns. The investigation lags in the beginning as Francesca is not willing to discuss her patients, causing Easton to wait for someone to begin showing signs of a breakdown so he can examine their life for clues. Eventually, a killer known as “The Night Bird” is found to be the one behind all this, but as they run to uncover clues and stop the ‘madness,’ Frost and Stein end up caught in a contest that may just lead them right into the sharp talons of “The Night Bird.”

Although not a difficult plot, this is definitely a psychological thriller that reads like a dark crime story, and is definitely worth checking out if you like thrillers.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

ONE BY ONE

By Sarah Cain

This story begins with Danny Ryan, a journalist now living and working in Philadelphia, meeting up with an old acquaintance. At Danny's alma mater, Furness High School, Greg Moss was the quarterback of the football team who was, like all QB's, running with the in-crowd. Back then, Danny was only able to watch from afar. It is now twenty-five years later, however, and that in-crowd has thinned out a great deal.

Three of Greg's teammates from the Furness Eagles are dead. Not to mention, Jenna Jeffords, a romance novelist, has died in a house fire; and Ollie Deacon, who went to the prom with Jenna, was shot. At this moment in time, Greg shows up on Danny's doorstep in order to beg for his help. Greg has been getting threatening text messages that have bible verses inserted in the text. But it doesn't take long after agreeing to help that Greg becomes the next victim, being murdered only hours after his meeting with Danny came to an end.

Danny begins to look into Greg's real estate holdings with a shady firm that is connected in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey. But Danny can't stop the feeling that the reason for Greg's death lies in the wild parties he used to host during their high school days.

As his investigation moves forward, looking deeper into the past, Danny discovers that there is plenty Greg was trying to hide over the years. But when Danny receives a text all his own, he speeds up in order to stop himself from being the next victim and find a way to solve the crimes before it's too late.

Author Sarah Cain has created a great installment in her *Danny Ryan* series, making this character one that all suspense readers will want to follow.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



FALSE FRIEND

By Andrew Grant

As we begin this tale, an arsonist is going after schools in Birmingham, Alabama. This particular firebug believes he can see the souls of sinners in the flames.

Enter, Detective Cooper Devereaux, one of the investigators interviewing just about everyone connected with the school system in Birmingham—a list that is amazingly long. There are even people who feel that they're not 'cool' if they're not suspects.

Cooper is working hard, as usual. This man is not one who has had an easy life up until now. Orphaned at the age of six, he grew up among the worst of the worst. At one time he made a living by stealing from criminals, which led to his eventual career choice. He has a daughter being raised by her mother. The little girl, Nicole, is a sweet child who secretly draws odd pictures and beats up her dolls.

There is also another investigator on this arson case, and that is a reporter from the *Birmingham Tribune*, Diane McKenzie. Diane is raising her own son, Daniel, who also has some extremely frightening issues. The teenager is devoted to becoming the greatest physicist in the world. He believes that his mom is not supportive of him, yet also believes that he's just too smart for his teachers to understand.

As a new school is set ablaze, the citizens of the town panic. Cooper's boss wants results. Add in the fact that Diane deliberately burns herself, and the fact that skeletons are suddenly found underneath the floor of a recently burned out school, and you have a tale that is scary and strange.

Filled with constant movement and action, this second *Cooper Devereaux* title is filled with both disturbed and disturbing folks that readers will become involved with from the second Chapter One begins. This is one detective that has an incredible future ahead of him.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



JUST TRY TO STOP ME

By Gregg Olsen



Brenda Nevins has a goal. She wants to be remembered by her "audience" as being the most creative serial killer of all time. Right now, as it stands, she's certainly in the top two and gaining ground on the leader with the killing of her husband and child which has given her a great deal of press. Unfortunately for her, yet good for the population, being in jail is really cramping her style. Not to be stopped in her quest, Brenda uses her ability to control others and her personal beauty to turn members of the jail staff into her buddies, finding some very willing accomplices to help her escape.

But Brenda simply can't be boring; she will not be satisfied with a quiet, calm breakout. So she kills her very own collaborator which causes law enforcement all across the land to come after her on the hunt. She begins to take advantage of technology and sends messages out across YouTube talking of her plans for more murder and mayhem to come. For example, she states that she will get four teens and murder them online for everyone to see.

Sheriff's Detective Kendall Stark, and forensic pathologist Birdy Waterman are on the case of this notorious serial killer. While working on all this, Birdy is also dealing with her mother's illness, while Kendall finds herself locked in a battle with a pompous FBI detective.

This killer is one in a million, and the two women following her want to stop Brenda before murders are streamed live for all the world to see. "Just Try to Stop Me" is a terrific book for people who love a little shock to their system, because it reads as a genuine headline that will strike fear into any reader's heart.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

THE DEVIL'S TRIANGLE

By Catherine Coulter & J.T. Ellison

The fourth title in this series referred to as, *A Brit in the FBI*, is a whole lot of fun.

Two FBI agents, Nicholas Drummond and Michaela "Mike" Caine are the head honchos of the new Covert Eyes Team, which is assigned the most difficult cases. The duo receives a phone call from an old enemy of theirs, a famous thief known as "The Fox." Oddly, this enemy is calling to beg for their help. She wants someone to rescue her husband, Grant, who has supposedly been kidnapped by a set of psychopathic twins.

One of these twins, the brother Alex, hired *The Fox* to steal the actual staff of Moses from the Topkapi Palace. The job was done, but the staff turns out to be a fake. Apparently the real relic is with yet another well-known religious artifact and the twins will stop at nothing to own it.

In addition, the twins' grandfather has come up with the ability to create horrible storms all over the world. It seems that he has just moved a vast amount of the Gobi Desert, and has somehow found a way to kill thousands of people. Another member of this whacko family is the twins' mother, who was working in the Gobi Desert when she came up missing. *The Fox* is on the run for stealing the wrong object and the FBI team not only decide to help rescue her husband, but they also work to find Mom and stop Grandpa from creating yet another storm that could take out even more innocent souls.

Full of action, this author duo has created a great addition to this series. Although they use artifacts that have been written about hundreds of times, they bring out a brand new location, backstory and adventure that has never been heard before.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

KNEADED TO DEATH

By Winnie Archer

The first book in a brand new cozy mystery series, readers are introduced to a fantastic character by the name of Ivy Culpepper. Ivy is a photographer living in Austin, Texas but is pulled back home to California when death comes knocking on her family's door.

Ivy's beloved mother back in Santa Linda has been killed by a hit-and-run driver in the parking lot of the school where she worked as a teacher. Ivy immediately returns home to help and be with her father and brother during this horrible time.

Back home, Ivy attempts to pick up the broken pieces of her life and start down another path. One of the things she takes on is a baking class held at the local Mexican bread shop called (*you'll love this!*) Yeast of Eden. Irony enters her world when Ivy finds out on the first night of class that her high school sweetheart (who actually ran away from her twenty years ago) is also in town.

A jolt of happiness hits Ivy, as if things in her world will go better now that she's a part of this adorable Mexican bakery run by two sisters who are lovely. The students, however, are drawn into the back alley on the night of baking class. There, they find one of the students dead inside Ivy's car.

Ivy is pulled into the investigation seeing as that the law wishes to blame the death on the sisters who own the bread shop. She works diligently to uncover clues to give to her best friend, Deputy Sheriff Emmaline Davis; yet the further she goes, the more she begins to suspect that her own mother's death may have been planned.

Readers love a new mystery series and this one opens the door to all the things that make cozy mysteries fun to read: believable characters, a terrific plot, and even some romantic banter that is sure to grow throughout future books.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

ONE PERFECT LIE

By Lisa Scottoline

Chris Brennen has just shown up to ask for a teaching job in a small Pennsylvania town. The local high school is looking for a midyear replacement for a departing teacher, and Chris is the perfect fit for the subject. He's already prepared to take on courses in Government and Criminal Justice. He's a very attractive man, very bright, and when he gets the job he gets along immediately with the students. He even lands another job serving as assistant coach of the school's not-so-very-good baseball team.

Chris is obviously too good to be true. He is so perfect that no one ever looks into his background, yet even if they did, they wouldn't find anything. There's only one snag in Chris's new life and that would be Abe Yomes, an African-American language arts teacher who might be a threat for the simple fact that Chris tells everyone he comes from Wyoming. Abe just so happens to have been born there and is happy he has someone to talk to about his home base. But, oddly enough, Yomes turns up dead from what looks to be an obvious suicide.

Chris is ready to move forward. He needs to befriend a lonely youngster, perhaps, and make them a cohort in his plan that involves a rented truck and lots and lots of ammonium chloride fertilizer. Needless to say, Chris targets three teenage boys, all of whom might agree to take part in Chris's plan: Evan Kostis, wealthy and very spoiled; Raz Sematov, who has just lost his father and is having trouble coping; and, Jordan Larkin, who was raised by a single mom. Which will work? This is where this reviewer has to stop in order to not uncover a most perfect plotline.

A definite "5-star" read, Lisa Scottoline has created yet another title you do *not* want to miss!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



THE LOST ORDER

By Steve Berry

There are very few authors who make your pulse race and actually get you to expel a bit of a scream when you open up a box of books to review and their newest title is right there on the top of the stack. Steve Berry is definitely one of those authors.

This is the latest incredible thriller featuring former Justice Department Agent Cotton Malone, and even after eleven of these books, Steve Berry once again offers up everything his loyal fans expect. From hidden mysteries to historical treasures to action-packed pages filled with rumor, gossip, secrets and so, so, so much more!

While working on assignment for the Smithsonian in Arkansas, Cotton comes across information on the "most powerful subversive organization in the history of the United States." It seems that the Knights of the Golden Circle, founded in 1854, have supposedly been watching over a treasure trove of billions in gold and silver for more than a century. Throw into the mix an "unbreakable code," a Navy pilot/spy bookstore owner, a treasure map that can only be read by finding five stones scattered around the country, and a politician who is intent on changing the actual Constitution, and you have an adventure of mammoth proportions.

U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Weston assigns Cotton the job of recovering the stones, with his fellow agent Cassiopeia in the supporting role. The chief supporter of Malone, President Danny Daniels, has just left office and yet another plot involving the death of a Senator comes to light.

The action never ends, with Berry even giving a couple of cameo appearances to people like Jesse James and Alexander Stephens (Confederate V.P.). History abounds, and Berry proves, yet again, that he has the unique talent to create a maze of facts and fiction that leave readers with a huge smile on their faces. This is most definitely a "5-Star" read!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Charlatan's Crown," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE LAST NIGHT AT TREMORE BEACH

By Mikel Santiago

Classical composer Peter Harper is on a lovely summer holiday on the Irish Coast. After spending the recent past going through an extremely messy divorce, Harper decided to travel to County Donegal, Ireland and the remote Tremore Beach. The house he's staying in is a truly silent, relaxing paradise, with his only neighbors being Leo and Marie Kogan who live further down the beach.

Peter is not exactly the nicest neighbor, or person to speak with, considering he spends a great deal of time complaining. His career is going nowhere fast and he always seems to drone and on about his tales of woe. In other words, Peter is bitter with a capital "B." This attitude and his direction of life changes abruptly one night when, after having dinner with the Kogans, Peter is struck down by a bolt of lightning.

Although some people in the small town near Tremore Beach wish Peter had attained a little pain from the incident, he instead survives with hardly a scratch. However, his mental abilities soon begin to change dramatically. Peter is now suffering some horrible headaches and, if that isn't enough, he is also getting violent visions that in fact are very real. Peter is convinced that he's either losing his mind or the lightning strike gave him the power of being able to have premonitions. His lady friend, Judie Gallagher, believes that he should see a sleep doctor, which doesn't work out at all. And when Peter's children come for a visit, he is sure that something bad is about to happen.

Not wanting to give anything away, let's just say that this book is a haunting experience. Think King 'haunting,' which makes this tale so thrilling that it places author Mikel Santiago in some truly brilliant company. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

DEAD MAN SWITCH

By Matthew Quirk

The ‘powers that be’ in the government have, at their beck and call, an underground network of US operatives referred to as Cold Harvest; their goal is to kill terrorists. It seems that this group has been found out, which has left the Special Operators and their families exposed to foreign assassins.

Cold Harvest operatives have removed terrorist threats, rescued kidnapped Americans, and stopped the movement of nuclear weapons. Trying to maintain this program’s secrecy has been more than a bit complicated. In order to try to right the boat, so to speak, it was Capt. John Hayes, military legend, who had to convince his allies that he sold out and went to work for the opposite side. During a two year span, he has lived in exile overseas, pursued as an enemy of the United States.

It is now some time later when Hayes, now retired, goes back to his former job to find that someone is killing members of his former squad and their families. Hayes investigates one death and then another, all carefully disguised as accidents. As Hayes crosses the country looking into these so-called ‘accidental deaths,’ he realizes that a former student in terror, assassin Claire Rhodes, is a suspect in the killings. In addition, Niko Hynd, a Pakistani terrorist whose operations were all but shut down by the most recent raids done by Cold Harvest is out for revenge.

With so many questions, Hayes’ job becomes even more dangerous when Hynd gets his hands on the home addresses of agents and starts to eliminate them in order to get vengeance for the killing of his father, a former nuclear engineer. Add to this a bomb waiting to go off in Manhattan, and author Matthew Quirk has created a tale that provides absolute nonstop action.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



THE NOWHERE MAN

By Gregg Hurwitz

“Orphan X” began this series that became a global fascination almost overnight and an instant bestseller in January of 2016. Now, author Gregg Hurwitz is back with his famous character, Evan Smoak, and fans will be absolutely thrilled with the story.

Just a small backstory: Evan Smoak was taken from a children’s home where he was trained and raised to be a secret killer for a ‘facet’ of the government that was being buried so deep, no one would ever know it actually existed. However, one fine day Evan left the job and broke ties with the whole dark, twisted thing. He chose instead to vanish off the face of the earth and use his formidable skills to help, rather than hurt people. From being called ‘Orphan X,’ Evan transformed into ‘The Nowhere Man.’

This time out, Evan wakes up in a locked room; nothing is familiar and he has no idea where he is or who is about to come through the door. Ambushed, drugged and hauled away to this location, Evan tries to figure out what on earth is going on. Although the surroundings are lovely, the highly-trained guards do not exactly bring Evan peace.

Being who he is, a person with nowhere left to turn makes contact with him. Time is running out for a person in trouble, and Evan must out-think and out-fight anyone who gives him problems so he can get to these people who depend on him. Only difficult part is, however, the fact that Evan is the one who’s trapped.

Hurwitz and his two Evan Smoak books are definitely a reason why the suspense genre is fantastic. Fans will be waiting for even more thrills in the future from Hurwitz and his incredible “Nowhere Man” because, quite frankly, stories just don’t get any better than this.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



A GOOD DAY TO BUY

By Sherry Harris



Sarah Winston has a problem. Three of them, in fact. The first is that she can’t seem to make up her mind between her handsome ex-husband, C.J. Hooker, currently the local Chief of Police and Sarah’s frequent “ex with benefits,” the equally handsome Seth Anderson, the district attorney for Middlesex County, Massachusetts. The second is related to the garage sales Sarah organizes for a living—she often deals with difficult clients. Case in point is Sarah’s current client, Velma Spencer, a thoroughly disagreeable woman who has hired Sarah so she and her husband, a Vietnam veteran, can downsize and move to Florida. Which brings us to problem number three—dead bodies seem to crop up at Sarah’s garage sales, and this one is no exception. Sarah’s young assistant, Lindsay, finds both Spencers bludgeoned and bloody, sprawled across the concrete floor of the garage during the sale. Mr. Spencer has died at the scene, and Mrs. Spencer is barely clinging to life as she’s rushed to the hospital.

Sarah’s day gets even more traumatic when her long-estranged brother, Luke, shows up after an absence of more than nineteen years, and begs her to let him stay for a few days. He swears her to secrecy, saying that he’s working undercover as a journalist on a story that will expose the blatant abuse of veterans’ medical benefits. When Luke’s fingerprints are found at the scene of the murder, he disappears again, begging Sarah to not betray him to her ex-husband. Rummaging through her brother’s things for a clue to his whereabouts, Sarah finds a list of local veterans, including the late Mr. Spencer. Could it be that kindly Mr. Spencer wasn’t who he appeared to be?

In “A Good Day to Buy,” the fourth in the *Sarah Winston Garage Sale* series, Harris weaves a tightly written plot, sprinkled with likeable characters, into a satisfying mystery with a totally unpredictable ending.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Second Honeymoons Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

WATER SIGNS

By Janet Dawson

Private Investigator Jeri Howard has just attended the funeral of her mentor, P.I. Errol Seville. Soon after, Jeri gets a visit from the daughter of Cal Brady. Cal has been found dead and Madison Brady is determined to prove that her father’s death was no accident.

In the past, Cal and Jeri worked for the same P.I. Agency, yet Jeri has only run into Cal once over the last few years. Madison tells Jeri that her father was fired recently for drinking on the job, but she assures Jeri that her father had beat his addiction to booze and joined AA, which is why Cal had landed a good job as a security guard for a company owned by a former friend of his from the U.S. Navy.

Cal’s body was found in the water near a place called the Cardoza Project, where he was a security guard for an area that was soon to be a ritzy apartment complex owned by Roland Cardoza and his sons, Stephen and Brice. Brice had been trying to get Cal fired for drinking and everyone working at the job thinks that he was simply drunk, fell into the water and drowned. But when the autopsy is done, it is discovered that Cal had no alcohol in his system whatsoever. Not to mention, he has bruises on his body that could have come from a fight.

As Jeri begins to investigate, she realizes that Cal has paid a very high price for some actual P.I. work he was doing, and there are few clues left behind for anyone who might be struggling to uncover the truth. But Jeri Howard does not give up and she will find the answers to Cal’s death.

This is the 13th tale of Jeri Howard, and the investigations she unravels are more than thrilling. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

PURR M FOR MURDER

By T.C. LoTempio

When a new series begins (this one entitled, *Cat Rescue Mysteries*) it's always fun and rare to say that it's so clever readers will have an absolute mental ball. Not only a great read for a cat lover, dog lovers will be taken with this too.

The McCall sisters, Sydney and Kat, are trying to save their North Carolina animal rescue, Friendly Paws. Kat has been living in the area for a fair amount of time, but Sydney has just recently moved back to her hometown from New York City following a breakup. The sisters are determined to bring Friendly Paws from the red to the black—at least, black enough so they can keep the animals at the shelter.

Kat is really into the shelter so Sydney uses her advertising background to promote the place. Sydney organizes a Cat Café that brings together a coffeehouse experience with the chance to meet cats that are available to adopt. Sydney has printed fliers and has also fallen a little in love with Toby, the shelter's unofficial mascot that just so happens to be a very large orange tabby cat.

Of course, the ladies have an enemy. Businessman/landlord, Trowbridge Littleton, wants to stop the café from succeeding and find a way to shut the sisters and the shelter down. Kat, being a very lively gal, threatens Littleton at first, but then comes to her senses and goes to see him in order to work through their problems and try to mend fences. But when she goes to meet him, she discovers that somebody has gotten there first...and killed him. Kat, of course, is suspect number one, but Sydney has an ally on the local police force, an old crush who wants to help prove Kat's innocence.

Clever, fast and fun, readers will love Toby, the sisters, and everyone else involved. Not to mention, we'll all be waiting impatiently for the next *Cat Rescue* mystery to arrive.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

MURDER AT AN IRISH WEDDING

By Carlene O'Connor

The small village of Killbane, Ireland, is abuzz with the upcoming nuptials of famed fashion model, Alice Cahill, and her handsome groom-to-be, Paul Donnelly. The wedding party, including both sets of parents, have arrived in Killbane the week prior to the nuptials, and it's clear from the start that not everyone involved is thrilled with the marriage, especially the bride's wealthy and ultra-controlling father, Colm, and snobby, spoiled mother, Susan. On the bright side for the locals is that customer traffic has definitely picked up at Naomi's Bistro, and proprietor Siobahn O'Sullivan and her family are thrilled to provide some catering services for the three-day affair.

Dark clouds immediately form over the pre-wedding festivities when the bride becomes violently sick after eating a slice of Siobahn's delicious brown bread, raising suspicions of a possible poisoning. Next, the best man, Kevin Gallagher, is found murdered in the woods after a night of hard drinking. Local garda (policeman) Macdara Flannery, good friend of the groom and Siobahn's beau, steps in to serve as best man. The wedding plans appear to get back on schedule until the inn where the wedding party is staying is burgled, and bride Alice's valuable diamond engagement ring is stolen. As the always curious Siobahn becomes more involved in the wedding plans, and learns more about the intimate details of both the bride's and the groom's families, she begins to suspect that the best man was not the intended murder victim at all. And there may be more murders to come.

"Murder at an Irish Wedding" is a real page-turner from start to finish. And what makes this book even more enjoyable are the bits of Irish superstition and lore that the author includes. A delightful trip to the Emerald Isle. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Second Honeymoons Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE SECRETS YOU KEEP

By Kate White

Leave it to bestselling author Kate White to offer a perfect "meal" of psychological thrills.

Bryn Harper is a self-help author, and a very good one at that. She and her husband, Guy, have managed to keep their marriage together even though they both work a great deal. Because of their abilities and supposed love for each other, they have been able to survive this commuter marriage intact.

Bryn, however, becomes the victim of a car accident that leaves her life hanging by a thread. While going through recovery, she finds herself suffering from horrific nightmares in regards to her own acquaintance, Paul, who was killed in the accident. Needing someone, Bryn decides to leave all behind and move to Saratoga in order to be by her husband's side full-time and stop the commuter marriage.

As they try this "new marriage" on for size and attempt to overcome the weariness that's fallen over each of them, Bryn and Guy decide to host a dinner party that will help Bryn get to know Guy's friends and business associates. Shortly after the party, however, the caterer named Eve is found murdered.

Bryn finds herself discovering many secrets when it comes to her husband's "single" life. And when another woman is suddenly killed, Bryn's nightmares increase. She and Guy have only been married for two years and lived together on a daily basis for only half that time, and she suddenly understands that she knows far less about the man than she originally thought. But is it possible he's a murderer?

This terrific story is full of mysteries, twists, turns, thrills and chills that only Kate White could come up with and put together like the perfect puzzle that causes readers' pulses to race.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

THE OUTSIDER

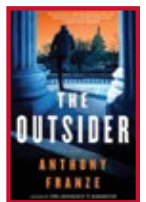
By Anthony Franze

As we delve into (yet another) extremely good suspense by writer Anthony Franze, things are not looking up for character Grayson Hernandez. Living a life that most of us actually do live, he's looking at paying back large student loans, considering he just graduated from law school. Finally, Grayson lands a job that is somewhat below what he had originally hoped for with a law certificate under his belt: he is now a mailroom clerk at the United States Supreme Court.

Being that it's the Supreme Court, however, at least Grayson has one foot in the world of law, yet he's forced to deliver mail and literally watch other young lawyers go further up the ladder, all because they went to the "right" law schools. What Grayson doesn't know is what's about to land directly in his lap. One day, after his shift is over, Grayson heads to the parking garage and walks into the middle of an assault. He saves Chief Justice Edgar Douglas, making Grayson the new favorite and bouncing him from mail delivery into the coveted job of working for Douglas as a law clerk—a job that involves the most pressing legal matters going on in Washington, D.C.

FBI Special Agent Emma Milstein is working the assault case and truly believes that it's a part of a series of crimes that include a lawyer's death, the killing of a convenience store clerk, and a fire set at a movie theater. Milstein adopts Grayson as her aide, since he's deep into the inner-workings of the courthouse. But as Grayson begins to uncover secrets being hidden everywhere, the fear of the killer getting him before Agent Milstein can do her job and snare the killer becomes a very real fear.

The mind of this author is so quick that he weaves a story so exciting it becomes a one-day read automatically. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■





THE SEVENTH SUN

By Kent Lester

The initial facts appear to be these: At three-twenty in the morning, Marine Geologist Carl Jameson was thrown overboard from a cargo ship in Honduras. Unfortunately, Carl was unable to warn anyone of a devastating discovery that might soon be “set” upon the world—there is something dwelling in the dark holds of that same cargo ship that must be kept secret from everyone.

There are also other oddities occurring. Entire crews of fishermen are mysteriously coming up missing off the coast of Central America, and the subject of dinosaur extinction seems to be one conversation that many are having.

Enter Dan Clifford, a “Prediction Scientist.” This is a scientist who utilizes basic science and scientific clues to “see” the future that’s coming quickly. By mistake, Dan Clifford is the one who stumbles upon the Marine Geologist’s corpse and teams up with Rachel Sullivan (a Marine Microbiologist) to check out what really happened to Carl Jameson and why.

They embark upon a whirlpool of undersea adventures, biological mysteries, and a few political plots reaching from Honduras to the United States Senate. By delving into all of these areas, the two scientific professionals uncover things that literally take them back to the origin of the human species. Dan and Rachel find themselves facing an indescribable ancient terror, and it’s up to them to stop it before death comes to the world.

Although characters and events are fictional (we hope), this is a story that is based on very real science. Packed with ‘ologists’ of all kinds, author Kent Lester has created a definite Crichton-worthy concept that will have everyone from suspense readers to sci-fi lovers enthralled until the very end.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

LIGHTWOOD

By Steph Post

After serving seven years in prison for a robbery, Judah Cannon (main character of this intense crime novel) returns home to Silas, Florida. There, he meets up and falls in love with Ramey Barrow, who was once his childhood best friend. This is unfortunate for Judah, as he is the middle son of the infamous Cannon clan led by his father, Sherwood.

However, Judah is determined to go “straight” and start a new life for Ramey and himself. But members of his family, who had set him up to go to jail in the first place, have other ideas. They force Judah to help them hold up a biker gang called the Scorpions for \$150,000 of booty that the bikers took for a preacher. And now... the fun begins.

Judah and family steal half of the loot that the Scorpions took, without actually knowing that half of the booty in their saddlebags belongs to Sister Tulah, a preacher who tells her followers to drink poison and give her what’s in their bank accounts. When Sister Tulah finds out about the robbing of her already stolen goods, she swears to make both the Cannons and the Scorpions pay for their mistakes, starting up a brand new war between the two.

As betrayals and revenge come at the reader like gunshots, Sister Tulah’s revivalist rants and her over-the-top violence, join forces with insincere folks. And on top of it all, Judah’s kid brother, Benji, becomes an unwanted victim. Judah, along with Ramey, takes on the Scorpions and Sister Tulah in order to set things right in a world that is plentiful with only the wrong.

“Lightwood” certainly grabs the attention and offers up some memorable lines. The author proves that even a former prison inmate can rise up to be a strange, yet believable hero.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

PRUSSIAN BLUE

By Philip Kerr

A *Bernie Gunther* novel, this story begins in the summer of 1939. The locale is an infamous one; it is Adolf Hitler’s mountaintop home in Obersalzberg. Here, a low-level official has been found murdered. Bernie Gunther and his friend Korsch are asked to look into the case, and seeing as that Hitler is coming back in one week to celebrate his fiftieth birthday, they are given just seven days to solve the murder.

The assignment is Bernie’s “reward” for being the best homicide detective. However, he knows he’d better hurry up and solve this murder as millions have been spent to secure and keep Obersalzberg safe and sound. It would be a huge problem if Hitler was to discover that a murder had been committed on the terrace of his own house. In addition, the mountaintop is home to many Nazis and it would not be good for Bernie to find that one of them was the actual killer.

Now we jump ahead to the French Riviera in the year 1956. It seems that Deputy Head of the East German Stasi (secret police), Erich Mielke, has come to Nice and no one knows quite why. He is actually calling in a debt. He wants Bernie to go to London with a small glass bottle of Thallium; there is a female Stasi agent there who must be eliminated and Bernie has been told that *he* is to be the killer. Lo and behold, Forsch, the old comrade of Bernie’s, has also shown up to make sure Bernie does the job right.

It is hard to find the right adjective to use to describe a story this fantastic. 1939 and 1956, two different and highly distinct eras in history, yet the climax of this masterpiece brings both together with a bang! This is one book of 2017 you will not want to miss.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Charlatan’s Crown,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

LIVIA LONE

By Barry Eisler

Barry Eisler delivers a hard-edged tale with his new novel, “Livia Lone.” Normally a thriller doesn’t cover a couple of decades while focusing almost solely on the titular character, but Eisler makes the story compelling throughout.

The chapters are divided between “Then” and “Now.” The “Then” chapters tell the story of Livia from when she was thirteen, living in the hill country of Thailand with her parents, her older brother, and her younger sister, Nason. Livia’s protective of her sister, who’s small for her age. When a van with three men shows up outside their house, Livia takes an instant dislike to the men. Her instinct is proved right; her parents have sold her and Nason to human traffickers.

Livia survives a hellish ocean trip where she must keep the traffickers happy since they threaten Nason if she doesn’t. She’s separated from Nason, only to be rescued in a river city in Washington state when the gang that’s taken over from the traffickers runs afoul of the law. Her rescue lands her in a different hell, though it also brings her in contact with friends who provide her a way to not only survive, but to thrive in her new country.

The “Now” Livia is a detective with the sex crimes division of the Seattle PD. But on her own time she pursues those who’ve slipped through legal punishment and delivers swift vigilante justice to them. It has all been in preparation for a moment she’s been awaiting for years. The last living gang member who was captured during her rescue will be released from prison. He’s the only link she’s found to her sister. She’ll either rescue Nason, or rain down revenge on those who harmed her.

This is not a story for the fainthearted. That said, Eisler’s style is smooth and clear, and his thorough research comes through in Livia’s story. (He also includes background notes.) The character of Livia will stay with you long after you read the last word on the final page.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■

NEVER LET YOU GO

By Chevy Stevens

I caught myself holding my breath on the very first page and the tension never let up. Chevy Stevens introduces us to Lindsey Finnegan, a beautiful young woman, who meets and falls in love with her knight in shining armor, Andrew Nash. They soon marry and have a daughter, Sophie. But we all know there are no such things as fairy tales. Andrew, already a bit possessive, starts to drink heavily, becomes paranoid, obsessive, and ultimately, abusive. When Lindsey threatens to leave, he threatens to kill her. She finally gets up enough courage to leave and devises a plan. While he's passed out, she takes her five-year-old daughter and leaves. Andrew wakes up, discovers them gone, and chases after them in a rage, crashing into another car, killing the female driver. He is sentenced to eleven years for Vehicular Homicide. The story and tension pick up when Andrew is released.

Using character POV, Stevens takes us on an emotional rollercoaster. We get to know Lindsey, Sophie as well as Andrew, and their stories. Through the use of first-person narrative spoken by both Lindsey and Sophie, we not only see their actions and hear their words, but we feel likes, dislikes, love, loss, and fear.

Put yourself in Sophie's place. You haven't seen your dad since you were five. Your mother has told you how cruel he was to her, and you have glimpses of those memories, but you also remember the loving father who read you bedtime stories. Wouldn't you want to communicate with him? Just a little? Wouldn't you be curious?

We've all heard the old saying, "A leopard can't change its spots," and "First impressions are lasting impressions." The characters and relationships Chevy Stevens weaves throughout "Never Let You Go" will have you thinking and rethinking those adages over and over again. With "Never Let You Go," Chevy Stevens takes psychological thrillers to new heights. Buckle up and hold on!

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of "Painted Beauty," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine ■

WHEN THE GRITS HIT THE FAN

By Maddie Day

The small town of South Lick, Indiana, is in the middle of a long, cold winter. Roberta "Robbie" Jordan, proprietor of Pans 'N Pancakes for only a few months, is worried about losing customers because of the bitter cold. When she's approached by nearby Indiana University's Sociology Department to host its bi-monthly dinner meetings, Robbie readily agrees.

But it soon becomes clear that not everyone in the Sociology Department is up on basic social graces, particularly Professor Charles Stilton, who takes fiendish delight in provoking hostility among his peers with snarky remarks at every opportunity. His treatment of doctoral students is even worse, as evidenced by his outright plagiarism of the research paper Robbie's close friend, Lou Perlman, has painstakingly worked on under Stilton's tutelage. When Lou confronts Stilton publicly about his unethical behavior, he blatantly denies it, provoking Lou to stalk off, visibly angry.

After Pans 'N Pancakes closes the following afternoon, Robbie suggests that she and Lou go snowshoeing together around a nearby lake. The frozen lake is a popular location for ice fishing, so when Robbie spots a dark hole in the ice, she assumes it's a fishing hole. Curious, she leans over to take a closer look, and discovers the dead body of Professor Stilton.

There's no shortage of people who loathed Stilton, including members of his own family. But when it's revealed that Lou was spotted at the lake earlier the day of the murder, she jumps to the top of the police suspect list. Convinced that her friend is innocent, Robbie begins asking questions about the late professor. And she finds the answer to whodunit where she least expects it—a lot closer to home.

"When the Grits Hit the Fan" is the third in the *Country Store Mystery* series by Maddie Day, a pen name of well-known writer Edith Maxwell. I'm not a fan of grits, but I'm a fan of this series!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Second Honeymoons Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine ■



THE DARKNESS OF EVIL

By Alan Jacobson



Jacobson's latest in his *Karen Vail* series starts off intense and never lets up for a second. Vail is helping an author named Jasmine who is on a book tour and is a bit terrified. The non-fiction account of her father being a serial killer and how she helped law enforcement put him away is a bestseller, and it also brought peace surrounding the horrible events of her childhood.

Unfortunately for Jasmine, her imprisoned father Roscoe learns about the book, and he's not happy. Soon he utilizes all of his connections inside the penitentiary to stage an escape from custody, and his main goal is to get Jasmine. And if Vail ends up as collateral damage, that would be fine with Roscoe.

The setup of the story with a fugitive going after the ones who put him in prison has been done before, but the mix of great characters, suspense, and stellar writing make this one a classic in FBI crime literature. Jacobson's research and use of various locales really stands out, and anyone who likes crime novels involving serial killers must add it to their pile.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers, a professional librarian, book reviewer, and panel master and the author of several books, the most recent being the YA mystery "The Fourth Lion" (with Kevin Lauderdale), published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine ■

GONE WITHOUT A TRACE

By Mary Torjussen



What would you do if your significant other suddenly disappeared without any warning or explanation? That's the conundrum faced by the narrator in Mary Torjussen's new novel, "Gone Without a Trace."

"I was singing as I walked up the path to my house that day." Hannah has good reason for high spirits as the story opens. She'd traveled to Oxford from her home outside Liverpool for a training course with her accountancy firm, leaving as the sun was rising. While at the class, she'd learned that she was on track for a promotion to Director at work. She's so excited that she drives the 200 miles back home without a break so she can tell the good news to her live-in boyfriend, Matt.

What she finds when she enters the house is a punch to the solar plexus. Matt is gone, and with him all evidence that he was ever there: All of his clothes and everything he'd brought to Hannah's—his collection of albums, the massive flat-screen TV he bought, the pictures he hung on the wall. When Hannah tries to call him, she finds his number's been deleted, along with every picture she had of him and every text message they'd exchanged. There isn't even evidence left of him in the garbage.

Hannah reaches out to Katie, her best friend for years even though the relationship is complicated by Katie now being with James, who was Hannah's boyfriend when they were teenagers. She can't turn to her parents, since her father sees any failure by Hannah as a reflection on him. Hannah struggles through the next few days, bewildered and humiliated, even as her determination to find Matt grows. Then cryptic text messages show up on her phone, and she becomes convinced someone's been in her house.

Torjussen draws you into Hannah's plight until you're wrapped in it like the coils of an anaconda. It's a maze of madness and obsession that holds you until the final devastating line of the story.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■

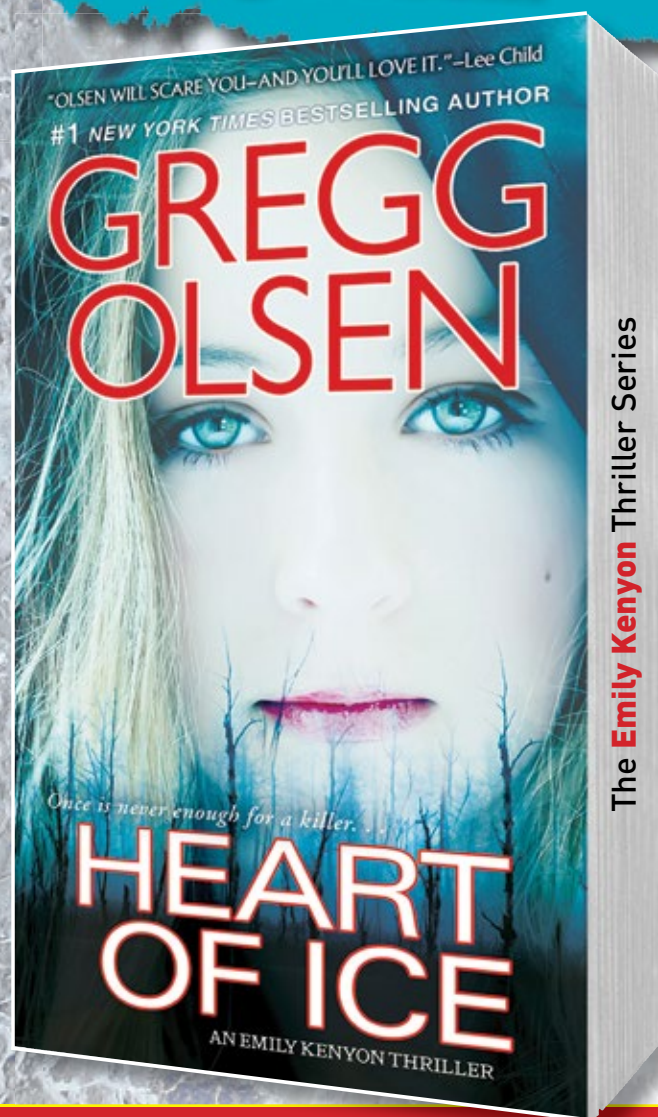
Three Bodies,
Three Different Towns.

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No Clues.

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One Chilling Read...

DON'T MISS the *New York Times* bestselling author's terrifying novel of a serial killer whose cold rush never lasts, and whose killings won't stop—until one special woman has been made to suffer...

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A woman with long, flowing grey hair and dark eye makeup holds a vibrant red rose. She is surrounded by a dense web of spiderwebs and other red roses. Two dark butterflies are seen flying in the background. The overall mood is mysterious and gothic.

Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

Welcome to Her World

Celtica Harmony
MISSING ME



Celtica Harmony (AKA: Phung Ha) is an artist who should, quite truthfully, be adorned with a badge that reads "Creative." From her career paths that include Graphic Designer and Fashion Designer; to her hobbies that are a creative conglomeration of dance, music and the love of fantasy literature, this is one soul that is all about inspiration. She has learned to breathe in both reality and fantasy in order to increase her own happiness and give that beauty back to others in the form of her artwork.

This incredible artisan was kind enough to 'sit down' with *Suspense Magazine* and talk about her interests, her love of the creative, and where she sees the direction that her life's path is taking.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG): What made you first want to be a Graphic Designer? Can you tell our readers a bit about your background...where you grew up and perhaps what inspired you to go into the artistic field?

Celtica Harmony (C.H.): *When I was little, I had a great passion for mixing pictures/photos together to create a story. Although, at that time I only had an old computer without internet and the only software I could use was "Paint" (a system software of WINDOWS). When I grew up, I attended art school in a big city. There, I had a chance to get in touch with new technologies and graphic design programs. The first time I discovered photomanipulation is when I decided: "I will follow what I always did when I was a child."*

S. MAG: You also have fashion design in your background: are there similarities between the two? Such as, does the "creative" side of fashion supply you with creative/colorful ideas when it comes to your artwork?

C.H.: *Both fashion and graphic design have the same background. Both are built by how you deal with colour and layout. While fashion is about the outfit, graphic design is larger. Everything which catches your eye (visual) is graphic design. I had the knowledge about colour and how to think creatively in art school, but being a Graphic Designer has so much to learn. So I try my best to improve myself every day.*

S. MAG: Being that your "focus" is on the goth/fantasy arena of design, is there something that led you in that direction? Such as, are you particularly inspired by fantasy movies, costume design for those "other worlds" etc.?

C.H.: *My two biggest inspirations that led me in that direction were the mystical lore of J.R.R. Tolkien's universe, and the beauty of the Gothic Victorian era. I took many ideas and inspirations around those themes.*

S. MAG: If you had to pick one mentor or artist that you are a fan of, who would it be and why?


C.H.: *I would mention "VikkiGothAngel" (Carina Grimm). She is the first photomanipulation artist that I followed. She has a great sense to her art. Each of her works has its own emotional story. Every time I see her work I can feel the pain, the vulnerability...like it speaks from her mind and her soul.*

S. MAG: What comes next in the field for you? Will you ever delve into another category besides fantasy/goth?

C.H.: *I will keep evolving with fantasy and Goth, and I will also challenge myself in abstract or Baugasm style.*

S. MAG: Designers work under other names in the photomanipulation field. What made you choose to work under the name "Celtica Harmony?"

C.H.: *I love the word "Harmony." I think it's a very meaningful word. Besides, "Harmony" has the similar sound with my*



*“I have an imaginary
world; my own world.”*

RED QUEEN

real name, so I decided to choose it as my English name. Celtica was added in my early years to distinguish my love for Celtic music and lore. Celtica is the Latin word for 'Celtic.' And Celtica Harmony is like the sound of music, like a melody...

S. MAG: You love dance (ballet) and music (violin). Do these particular hobbies allow you to rest, let the mind flow, and spawn even more ideas for your artwork?

C.H.: Yes, they do. Sometimes I feel this life is so fast and complicated and it makes me stress so much. I always come to ballet and music to ease my mind and slow down. Those hobbies help me a lot. And I really feel inspired.

S. MAG: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an artist, I would be _____.

C.H.: A musician.

S. MAG: Where is your favorite place to think and create? Is there a "special" place, perhaps, where you live that you go to be inspired?

C.H.: I have an imaginary world; my own world. I feel completely lost in this real world of today and in the modern way people around here live. So when I dive deep into my own world, I can create things and feel inspired.

S. MAG: What are some of your favorite pieces when it comes to your own work, and why are they particularly special to you? If you had to pick one that best represents you, which one would it be and why?

C.H.: My favorite piece is the 'feeling' I can create in my own work. I'm an emotional person—a work of art might not be perfect in technique, but it has to have an emotion. This could be joy, pain or death, but it makes you feel something when you look at it. I think one piece that best represents me is the sensitive emotion. Because I do everything by my feelings: if there comes a day I feel down or upset you can see my work full of gloomy colour; if I feel happy, I will create something joyful and energetic. 'Sensitive' is my strength and also my weakness.

Frankly, once you have eyed the pieces that Celtica creates—whether happy or sad—the viewer will always be 'sensitive' to the fact that she can move the mind and the heart with the excitement she brings to the art world.

To learn more about Celtica Harmony, visit her at: <http://celtica-harmony.deviantart.com>. ■



Turning *Anxiety* Into CREATIVITY



By Dennis Palumbo

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

An old (very old!) deodorant commercial on TV once proclaimed, “If you’re not a little nervous, you’re really not alive.”

Pretty sage advice, even though the only thing at stake was staying dry and odor-free. But there is something to be said for accepting—and learning to navigate—the minor turbulences of life. I’m talking here about common, everyday anxiety. The jitters. Butterflies.

This is particularly true for writers, whose very feelings are the raw materials of their craft. No matter how mundane, the small anxieties can swarm like bees, making work difficult. I’m talking about those everyday distractions, like an impending visit from the in-laws, money worries, or that funny noise the Honda’s been making.

Then there’re the more virulent, career-specific anxieties, shared by few in other lines of work: Your agent hasn’t returned your phone calls. You’re three months past deadline with your novel. You’re worried that your publisher might decide not to renew your contract.

In other words, you’re the stereotypical struggling artist: bleary-eyed, sleep-deprived, staring pathetically at a blank computer screen, hoping for inspiration and yearning for another cup of coffee, and maybe a nice piece of cheesecake. A dozen nagging, self-mocking thoughts echo in your head: You’re untalented, a fraud. You’re getting old and fat. No woman (or man) will ever want to sleep with you again. Your life is over.

These kinds of feelings are tough to deal with, to be sure, even if validated (and then gently challenged) by a supportive therapist, mate, good friend, or fellow writer who’s “been there, done that.” These deeply embedded, childhood-derived, seemingly inescapable Dark-Night-of-the-Soul feelings can, in fact, be crippling, regardless of your level of craft or years of experience.

And, as I’ve said countless times to the writer patients in my practice, struggling with these doubts and fears doesn’t say anything about you as an artist. Other than that you *are* an artist.

Frankly, this difficult emotional terrain is where an artist lives much of the time—in a matrix of triumphs and defeats, optimism and despair, impassioned beliefs and crushing deflations. In the end, it’s all just grist for the creative mill.

And, believe me, this is equally true for both beginning writers and accomplished, battle-hardened veterans.

But there’s another kind of anxiety that emerges occasionally in a writer’s life: the kind of gut-wrenching, dizzying upheaval from within that throws everything you think you know into doubt and that scares you to the very core. A puzzling, alarming career dive. A shattering divorce. The death of a family member. A spate of sudden, dizzying panic attacks.

Then, what balm is there to offer—or to receive—that doesn’t seem trivial or woefully inadequate? Catharsis and validation, the foundation of most psychotherapeutic work, suddenly feel like mere word games. Medication, while often clinically appropriate, seems at best an armoring against something primal that’s working within you.

Trust yourself. Like it or not, you're all you have.

What is a writer to do with that level of anxiety?

Use it.

Because, for an writer, when all that's left is the work, the work is all that's left.

What kind of work? Maybe numbed-out and shapeless at first; chaotic and unsatisfying. Maybe dark and ugly, or self-pitying and shameless. Maybe a blind, angry clawing at the air with inchoate feelings and inexplicable images.

The important thing to acknowledge, to accept and to make use of, is the *fact* of this anxiety—its weight, its size, and its implacability at this time in your life. For whatever reason, it's there. As immovable as a brick wall, as deep and fathomless as a sea.

And, for now, it isn't going anywhere.

So you, the writer, must ask yourself this question: Is there a character in the story I'm working on who feels such anxiety? Who feels as overwhelmed, as out of control, as terrified as I? These are the raw materials of the work. No matter what kind of story you're telling, you must inhabit those aspects of the character whose narrative you're building.

If you're willing to do so, then plunge headlong into creating the hell out of that character, giving him or her your voice, your fears, your dreads. Create situations and scenes in which these anxieties are dramatized, exploited, "acted out."

Create monologues, rants, vitriolic exchanges between characters, letting passions and behaviors emerge that may astound or alarm you; that stretch or distort or even demolish the narrative you've been working with. These problems can all be dealt with, deleted, perhaps even woven into the story later, in the cool light of day, when you have some kind of perspective.

Because to be truly in the eye of the emotional storm, to create from a state of anxiety, is to surrender any fantasy of perspective. In fact, in the purest sense, it's the ultimate act of creative surrender from which, out of the crucible of your deepest pain, you might discover a joyful, wonderful surprise.

Do this: put those trembling fingers on a keyboard, RIGHT NOW, and start stringing words together that reflect how you feel...without context, or narrative, or character. Just raw feeling, in as many vivid, living words as you can call forth.

Then look at what you've written. Feel whatever it is you're feeling. And hit that keyboard some more. Soon, I believe, you'll have a sense of the logjam cracking. You'll feel the urgency of creative expression, the palpable release of banked anxiety. Without judging what comes, *without needing it to be anything*, I think you'll find yourself creating something—even if that's just defined, for the moment, as putting words down on a page.

Does the idea of this exercise itself make you anxious? Doesn't surprise me. We're all pretty scared of creating, of writing, out of the very emotional space we'd most like to avoid or deny. It's human nature.

Besides, as famed psychiatrist Rollo May reminded us, real creativity is not possible without anxiety. In many ways, it's the price of admission to the artist's life.

Which means, for those writers who have the courage to embrace their own fears, to co-exist with potentially crippling anxiety and create anyway, the rewards can be significant. Consider artists as diverse as James Ellroy and Stephen King, Anne Rice and Phillip Roth, M.R. James and Grace Paley. They use who they are—all of who they are—as the wellspring of their creativity. Just as it is for yours.

Moreover, when all that's left is the work...the work is all that's left.

So trust it. Trust yourself. Like it or not, you're all you have.

And the good news is, that's enough. ■

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is now a licensed psychotherapist and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The Strand and elsewhere, and is collected in "From Crime to Crime" (Tallfellow Press). His acclaimed series of crime novels ("Mirror Image," "Fever Dream," "Night Terrors" and the latest, "Phantom Limb") feature psychologist Daniel Rinaldi, a trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police. All are from Poisoned Pen Press. Dennis Palumbo's articles have previously appeared on the PSYCHOLOGY TODAY website.

For more info, please visit www.dennispalumbo.com.



SWINGING

By Scott Miles

When Jim read the headline: “Fishermen Find Body in River Near Wyandotte,” he first thought calling those grifters who chugged motor-oil sized cans of shit beer and lazily casted a line every other hour ‘fishermen’ was generous. Secondly, Wyandotte is where these ‘fishermen’ found the decomposed body of his brother, Ronnie, thirty years ago.

Jim flattened the Saturday morning newspaper on the dining room table, the ink smudging under his damp, meaty paw, and he imagined his brother’s bloated body slogging through the Detroit River, lungs full of muck, the chop slapping at his head, his temple repeatedly thudding into the muddy shore.

Jim’s replayed this messy scene in his head for the last thirty years, and as he does with every dead body that’s yanked from the water near Wyandotte or Del Ray or River Rouge or Trenton, Jim put on his shoes and made his way riverside that morning to catch the story.

It was too late for a crime scene, and the only fisherman Jim could find was half in the bag. Jim stopped the man as he was lugging a bucket of unused chum back to his car. The man also had a wet paper sack with two ratfish inside. The fumes of alcohol from his maw outweighed the stink of the fish.

“They bitin’ today?” Jim said.

“Been worse.”

Jim lit a cigarette, offered one to the older black man, and while admiring the rough-hewn patches of white beard crawling along the man’s face, he asked, “You see what the body looked like?”

The fisherman looked askance, then made a jerk-off motion with his hand down near his crotch, and said, “You get off on this shit or what?”

Without a hand gesture, Jim assured the fisherman he did not get off on this.

“Fat, ugly, and purple.”

“White?” As soon as Jim asked, he regretted the question.

“Would it have made headlines if the body was black?”

“Probably not,” Jim said.

“It’s not the first dead body we’ve seen pop up over here. But they all look the same.”

Jim studied the burden in the man’s eyes. He could feel the soul of the fisherman hurtling toward the light. It was a quiet journey. The fisherman didn’t have much time on this planet. Neither one of them did.

“Badly decayed?”

“Nah. It was fresh. Still intact,” the fisherman said.

“You see the color of his hair?”

The fisherman squinted, and said, “Gray and gross. Thick, like an unwashed mop.”

Jim’s brother had hair like that, but instead had cakey coils of dirt-red hair. The neighborhood kids, of course, called him Howdy Doody or fire crotch or carrot top. Jim wanted this teasing to be some skewed version of camaraderie for his brother, but the words eventually transitioned into something cruel.

“What’s it to you?” the old man said.

“Let’s just say it’s everything to me,” Jim said. “Thanks for the info.” He gave the fisherman a five-spot and moved over to the coffee shop on Biddle to have some coffee.

Jim's father, a welder by trade, referred to it as the Funny Farm, which was a hunk of farmland his family owned, over a hundred acres located in Ontario, an hour northwest of Toronto. Woods, some veggies, some fruit—a gooseberry bush that yielded a spectacular jam—but mostly it was a dairy farm and stunk of manure. The strained grunts of cows could be heard from the main house all day long.

Jim's uncle ran the farm. Everyone called him Uncle Hernia, a name Jim didn't quite understand until he was much older, despite the man's jerk-jellied limp and scuffed mahogany walking cane.

Every summer when school ended, Jim's father drove him up to the farm where his uncle put him to work. On the ride north, his father stopped at every bar possible, each one a grubby, disagreeable tavern barely visible from the side of the road. Jim would sit alone in his father's Thunderbird, waiting for the old man to finish his beer, no keys in the ignition, the windows rolled down, the tick of an overheated car and the buggy thicket of Canadian meadows his only music.

His brother Ronnie, born nine years after Jim, stayed home with his mother, as he was much too young to do the work, which perhaps made the boy soft and lily-livered.

The work was grueling, even to a strapping teenager like Jim, but there was also solace and isolation up at that farm, leeches in the nearby lake. Jim missed his high school buddies while milking the cows, or filling the grain bins, or while catching late movies in town by himself during the weekends, or smoking cigarettes in the alley behind the diner after a piece of rhubarb pie, a cup of black coffee.

There was no one to cut up with, no one to chase with his dick. Jim learned to accept the stillness of the cool evenings, the well-articulated thrum of the mornings. Toward the end of the season was always bittersweet. Late August, the corn arrived, the harvest was plentiful, and the burnt yellow leaves fell to the earth. Jim would get some scratch from his Uncle Hernia, and he was finally able to go back home with his father, back to the roughshod streets of Detroit, the chuckholes, the bent traffic lights, civilization.

Before he could blend back in with his high school buddies in the fall, however, Jim had to help with the task of slaughtering the substandard dairy cows, bludgeoning the animals in the head with a sledgehammer. It was a daunting chore, slippery, the cow's brains often hanging loose after one good pop, grizzly skull chips lying about. Jim's natural heft helped him swing, and the older farmhands who pitched in during previous summers had already done their share. Swinging was his job, and Jim tried to be proud.

Ronnie was a rotund kid, beefy, despite the drugs, despite the burning desire to run himself ragged. Jim drank his coffee at the coffee shop and thought it must've been hard work dragging his brother's fat ass to the river. Ever since 9/11, Homeland Security has cracked down on the Detroit shoreline, but thirty years ago, and even today, there are still pockets of unused land or industrial waste spots that offer those sweet, unimpeded moments someone needs to dump a body into the river.

While Jim took up welding like his father, Ronnie dropped out of high school and moved to the city where he swiftly attended his many vices: Drugs, drink, lewd and lascivious behavior, gambling.

Ronnie's insolvency eventually landed him with the wrong people. These people knew their father. These people knew everyone's father in River Rouge. These people came to see Jim and his father after work one day. They talked in the garage with the smell of acetone and bagged grass. These people made threats against Ronnie, against Jim, against Jim's father, against Jim's mother.

The threats were useless, and Jim's father made that clear to these men in the garage. Jim's family had no collateral. They had neither money nor political power. Their only possessions were the Thunderbird, their welding equipment and their clothes, which were filled with holes from welding sparks.

"So, do your worst," Jim's father said.

"What're we going to do?" Jim asked his father after the men left.

"What *can* we do, Jim?"

That's when his father left him alone in the garage, and Jim had those same quiet but discordant moments he experienced up on that farm; lonely, hollow, only the soft drone from the inner workings of a world no one could understand toiling away in the background.

Those mornings near the end of August, to escape the cows, Jim would feign sickness. He would wake up and complain of blinding headaches, nausea, but his Uncle Hernia never bit.

"Here. Take this," his uncle said, and handed him a weathered can of menthol camphor, the tin cover dented in a way that fit Jim's forefinger perfectly. "Daub some under your nostrils. You'll be fine."

With each swing, his nostrils numb and runny, the overpowering sting of the greasy camphor blurring his eyes, Jim would sink deeper and deeper into acquiescence, realizing and then eventually accepting the fact that these cows had no other fate.

Years after his brother was found in the river, and shortly after his parents passed away (mother: aneurysm; father: cadmium poisoning), Jim inherited the house in River Rouge, along with his father's welding equipment, the hole-riddled clothes. Around this time, Jim began to notice the variety of bodies that washed up in the river: suicides, car accidents, drownings.

Once, a recreational scuba diver found a headless man stuffed in the trunk of a car resting on the river bottom. Various body parts would also float around the river. Fleshy stumps snagged on fishing hooks as fishermen jigged for walleye. Jim tracked as many bodies as he could, collected newspaper clippings, thought about joining a scrapbook club, if only to socialize about the macabre.

Jim always stopped at the coffee shop on Biddle after snooping with the fishermen, who always had more details than the newspapers. The coffee shop owner was a meddling Pole named Martin, and he quickly latched on to Jim's scrapbook game. Jim could always feel Martin watching him from behind the cappuccino station, his eyes scanning as Jim fingered the newspaper clippings, jotting down his logic, tracing maps, and enjoying the best cup of coffee this town had to offer.

"You know they have those articles online these days?" Martin said once.

"What's that?"

Martin had pale skin and thin, emaciated teeth which poked obtrusively from his mouth when he talked. "The internet," he said. "You can bookmark these same newspaper articles. Everything is archived."

Jim laughed and hastily folded up the clippings, stuffing them into his pocket.

"I know what you're doing. I know about your brother," Martin said.

Jim remained guarded, composed. "You know nothing of my brother."

"Maybe that's true," the Pole said. "But I do know he's not going to wash up on that shore again."

"It's not my brother I'm expecting," Jim said.

They pulled up in a hampered white cargo van. Jim had been walking home from Barney's Bar on the corner, besotted with gin on a Friday eve, work done, entwined with thoughts of vagrancy. A fierce man in the passenger seat jumped out of the van and decked Jim hard. On his knees, the gravel chewing into his work pants, Jim could hear crabbed moans in the back of the cargo van.

"Get up!" The kick came from a steel toe boot and vacuumed out his entire cavity.

The driver then got out of the van, too, and together they hoisted Jim off the ground. The men were a blur, an angelic but violent tandem. They slammed him against the metal wall of the van, dented, which again seemed to fit Jim perfectly. They took turns at his midsection, particularly the spleen.

The men then dragged him to the open back door of the van, forced him to look.

Inside the van Jim saw his brother bound with ragged rope, a burlap sack cinched tight over his head. Ronnie was in the middle of a conniption fit, and as he scrambled helplessly along the floor of the van, Jim noticed the floor was covered with potting mixture, errant jade leaves.

"Jim? Jim?" his brother said. "Is that you, Jim?" A fold of flab escaped his brother's shirt.

The driver of the van extended a blackjack and popped Ronnie on the knee a few times. Like a halved worm, Jim watched his brother as he writhed, inching further away from the violence.

"This is it," the passenger of the van said. He was short of breath. "Last chance."

Jim stood mute, paralyzed. The inky eyes of both men never wavered.

"Close it up," the driver said, who then approached Jim and pressed the leather truncheon to the side of his face, whispered with salty air, "we'll be back for you." Jim noticed a strip of white hair that ran along the man's otherwise black locks, the color and texture like a skunk's tail.

The van doors closed. The driver clipped Jim in the back of the knee with the blackjack and Jim fell to the ground, his head near the scratched bumper of the van, an orange tennis ball secured on top of the trailer hitch. The exhaust was strong, heating the side of his face. Jim pulled himself up, leaned his weight against the van door, felt the rumble of the van surging with life.

With a closed right fist, Jim gave the metal door a thump three times.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Then the white cargo van screeched off.

They never came back for Jim, or his mother, or his father. Ronnie's body washed up the following spring on Mud Island, across from a busy boat launch in Del Ray. His brother's right leg below the knee had been snapped off, presumably where the men had sloppily tied the cinder block to weigh Ronnie down.

As often as Jim envisioned his brother washing up on that shore, a malady he wouldn't wish upon his worst enemy (another one: his brother's hand dragging across the marshy sticks, the cattails sunning themselves without care), he was glad he didn't see the dead body. His mother insisted on a closed casket, insisted they would remember Ronnie as he was in

pictures—aloof, a freewheeling grin, an insular glare.

Jim's father remained tight-lipped throughout the police proceedings, never mentioning the visit from the men, never mentioning any insight to his son's gambling debts. Jim and his mother did the same. The detectives called them in to the station and asked all the right questions, but they didn't press, even escorted Jim's mother out of the exam room with a caring hand on her shoulder.

The local news made vague reports of Ronnie's death, which wasn't exactly mysterious or overly tragic, but rather ordinary. Ronnie's leg never turned up either, and no one ever again mentioned the cause of death or why his brother was in the river in the first place.

Jim had just bought a maple sapling at a nursery out near Metro airport when he again spotted the same white cargo van. This time it was parked. This time it was eight years after Ronnie was found on Mud Island. This time it was late summer, the days soaring by, Jim's welding life still in its infancy, the bumpy road of mild dermal abrasions and respiratory issues far, far ahead.

Earlier that spring, a bolt of lightning had downed an old pear tree in the backyard. Jim had the tree uprooted, the metal fence mended, and the sod replaced. Jim was glad the tree was gone. He hadn't eaten a pear from that tree in years, as he disliked the grainy texture, the dry residue that remained in his mouth afterwards, the syrupy fragrance from the fallen, sun-beaten fruit on the ground.

After securing the sapling in the bed of his pickup truck, the burlap rubbing his forearms raw, Jim approached the cargo van in the back of the lot. The dent from his body was still there, and he could see the trailer hitch still had the same orange tennis ball on top, just dirtier and more frayed.

Jim went back to his truck and waited inside the cab with the windows rolled down. The parking lot was calm and tranquil; only the dull, encompassing roar from low flying planes filled the air. Soon, the nauseating crawl of a headache was inching its way up his neck, and the smell of cindered wood and earthy mulch seeping out of the nursery was making him gag.

Twenty minutes later, a man Jim recognized as the driver exited the nursery carrying two potted ferns with hooks that would eventually be placed on a trellis. Jim watched the man as he opened the back of the van and situated the ferns inside, his white streak of hair now set against a backdrop of blanched gray hair. The parking lot was absent of customers but full of parked cars, the sun glinting off the windshields, the black tar pavement absorbing the last of summer's warmth.

Jim grabbed the fencing mallet from the bed of his truck, which he'd used earlier in the week to hammer in the posts of his new fence. He was also going to use the mallet to pound in the stakes of the maple tree, the stakes fuzzy and pilled like unwashed socks. Jim approached the van again, trembling. Only the legs of the driver could be seen behind the doors, his boots depressed, flecked with mud.

Picking up into a momentous jog, Jim lowered his shoulder and barreled into the van's back door, bulldozing the driver's body, the parking lot whirling. Jim opened the van door and saw that the man's body was heavy with unconsciousness. He slammed the door again into the man's flailing head to make sure.

Jim composed himself and stood over the man. He took a deep breath and began his upswing, then brought down the mallet on top of the man's head. The mallet made a soft thump. A warm trickle of snot began to seep from Jim's nose as he brought down the mallet again, and again, and again.

When Jim was done swinging, the parking lot was still vacant. Everything had happened quickly. Hooking his raw forearms underneath the man's armpits, Jim lifted the man up and then heaved him into the van next to the ferns. One of the ferns kicked over and spilled rich dirt onto the van's floor. He then rummaged through the man's pockets and found the keys. The van started without issue.

Welding the chains and weights to each limb of the dead body and then dumping the man into the river did not present a problem. The body slid in, swirled briefly, like waste in a flushing toilet, and then disappeared with slow, boiling bubbles rising to the top of the dirty river water.

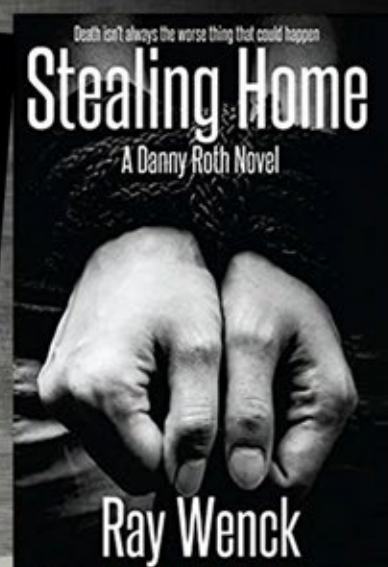
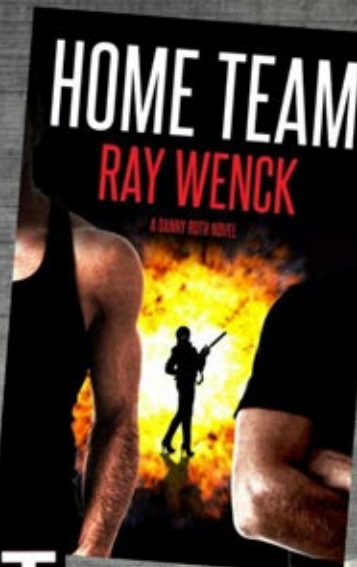
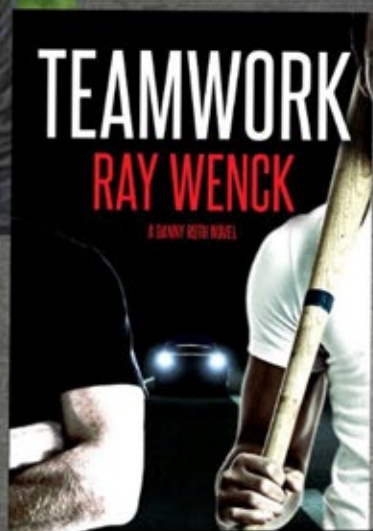
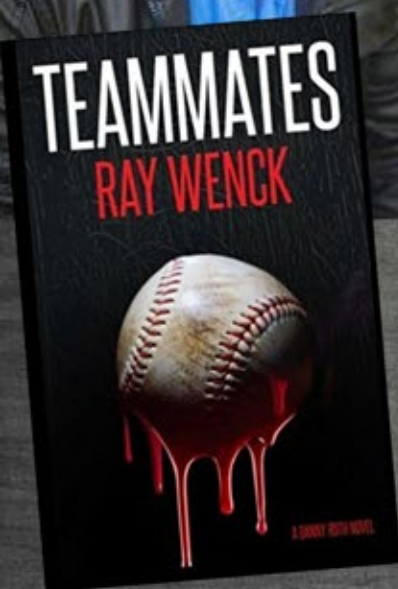
The most difficult part was deciding where to ditch the van. After cleaning it with bleach and disposing of the ferns, Jim settled on leaving it in a small industrial park near the airport. Dusk had begun to eclipse the day and brought along with it a cool wind. The walk to a nearby liquor store was almost pleasant.

The cab Jim called from a payphone dropped him off at a hoagie shop down the street from the nursery. Jim contemplated getting a sandwich for dinner, something robust with red sauce, fatty meat. Instead, he walked back over to the nursery's parking lot, which was emptier than when he left it.

The maple sapling was still in the bed of his truck, tilting somewhat to the left. Jim would plant it the next morning, and over the years, as he went down to the river whenever a dead body washed up, after eventually realizing the driver of the van was secured safely on the river bottom, the tree grew, the leaves strong with veins and a color that was most spectacular in the fall. ■

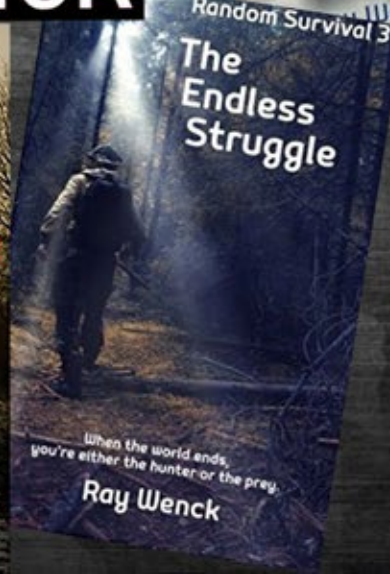


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La Gringa Digna

By Kenneth Nichols

I moved to Sayulita because there was nothing left for me in Manhattan and I wanted to be left alone. My son in the ground, my ex-husband in a multi-year project to drown out his pain by working through as many over-the-hill dancers as possible, I took my NYPD pension and my taste for tequila where I could be left alone with my desire to melt into a sunset in which I might someday see Adam again.

There were plenty of cases in Sayulita that would attract the attention of a former detective, but I haven't worked one in years. If nothing else, I've learned that there are very few people in the world that you can help and the truly innocent should get highest priority. What do I care if someone gets kneecapped for robbing a bar or beaten by vigilantes for raping a local señorita? No, I keep to myself and try to find some kind of happiness in a place that seems dedicated to manufacturing it.

You won't find me at the tourist bars, filled with Americans and other Westerners who are happy to pretend they're in a place dedicated to guilt-free hedonism. The people you'll find in those bars are dumb, anesthetized by the magic of being in a strange place. If I did feel like working cases, that's where I'd go. I'd surround myself with the untethered Spring Breakers who can't be blamed for cooking up ways to smuggle pot back to the States. You spend a couple hundred pesos here and reap tens of thousands of dollars there. It's tempting. But these kids are stupid. They rent a boat during typhoon season and end up washing up on shore with their cargo. One time, I was sitting ten feet from a trust fund rich kid who, after five Coronas, talked himself into muling four kilos of Columbian marching powder to LaGuardia. The kid was dumb enough to shout questions at the Oaxacan bartender, who wasn't being tipped well enough to inform the sucker that he was being set up as a patsy. Cuatro kilos hidden in the lining of a small carry-on? He may as well have been wearing a T-shirt that read: I'M SMUGGLING DRUGS, OFFICER. The dealers were using that kid as a token. Bust the foolish American kid, parade him around on TV—let the DEA crow about how effective they are, they'll look the other way for a dozen of the cartel's real mules.

You might say that I had a duty as a law enforcement officer and as a mother to try and talk these people out of their plans. Screw that. I'm not a mother anymore and these guys—usually guys—had more chances than Adam got.

No, I'm in La Hija de los Tepehuán, a bar for the locals, people who blow off steam after ten hours of changing stained bedsheets in the resorts or patronizing rich fishermen who think they landed a blue marlin all on their own.

Back in the Big Apple, my nickname was 'Detective PTA' because that's where I always was before speeding to the next crime scene. Here, I'm 'La Gringa Digna.' They respect me because I don't ask for fruit-filled girly drinks and I don't complain about the alternating mariachi music and soccer play-by-play that fills a dive that would be condemned as a fire hazard in the States.

It's a hot night and the bare skin that isn't covered by my cami glistens. I sit at the bar and nod when Roberto asks me if I want my usual. The place is quiet for a weeknight. I think about how lucky I am that Adam was taking Spanish before the accident. Between helping him with his homework and questioning suspects in Washington Heights, I arrived in Sayulita plenty fluent.

I sip my tequila. Shooting liquor is for the young, those who don't know how to savor the unavoidable truths of life. Sex, inebriation, grief; everything's better when you take it slow.

The kid sits at the bar a couple stools away and asks for a cerveza in that ugly American way that lets natives know you're not even trying to blend in. That tone is also a good way to attract the attention of people with bad intentions, predators who know you don't know your way around the streets or how to contact La Policía. He's a mark and doesn't know it.

Approximately 21 to 25 years of age. Slender build. Brown hair and eyes. Detached earlobes. I may be retired, but those skills never go away.

The kid's nervous as hell. He gulps from the bottle and his gaze darts around the room erratically. I knew he was going to talk to me three minutes before he did. "Eres americano?"

he asked.

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"That is a question."

"You know what I mean. Help me out. This is the kind of place where I won't find any cops, right? I'm guessing they stick to the touristy places."

I sip. "How do you know I'm not a cop?"

He freezes up.

"Relax, kid. If you're trying to avoid the local constabulary, you have far bigger problems than me."

He asks to sit beside me and I let him because I'm a woman and I must be lonely.

"I don't want to hurt anybody," he says. "In fact, just the opposite."

"Really? How's that?" Always be suspicious of people who rattle their mouths when you prompt them.

"I'm going to be a doctor. Cardiology. I've been accepted to Johns Hopkins and everything. Top scores in my pre-med program."

"Aren't you a long way from Baltimore?"

"I'm here to get closer to med school. Do you have any idea what it costs? All my friends have well-heeled parents and fat trust funds. Me? My dad was a steelworker. Died last year. Dilated cardiomyopathy."

"So you're going to smuggle some drugs for easy money."

"How'd you know?"

"Because you have no idea what you're doing and you're going to get pinched the second you set foot in the airport."

He turns toward me, the light from the dim, bare bulbs on the wall twinkling in his eyes. The grown man looks like a boy.

"I'm only talking to you in the hope you will decide you're in over your head."

"The people I'm working with; they wouldn't be happy if I pull out."

"Big deal," I say. "You take the first flight home and the worst that happens to you is your future wife never understands why you refuse to take a cruise to Puerto Vallarta."

"So what am I doing wrong?"

"First of all, you need to keep your mouth shut. I'm a retired NYPD detective. Relax. I'm just saying that loose lips give tips to la policía. What's the plan?"

"They told me that they would just strap a few packets to my groin and thighs. If there are any dogs sniffing around, it's no problem because they wrap it in something that throws off the scent."

"And?"

"That's about it. Stay calm and try to get in lines with female officers because they're not as strict."

I nearly snort tequila all over the kid. "Dumb advice. Female officers and TSA agents are more likely to search you. Why? Because of the sexist dummies who keep saying crap

like that."

"Will you help me?"

"I already did. I told you to fly home."

"No, I mean help me get the money I need for med school."

Unless they are on a payroll, not a soul in Sayulita cares about drug smuggling or those who aid and abet such crimes. Narco cultura is the secret fuel that keeps the economic engine running in little tourist towns. Why do I nonetheless look around the bar, searching the faces of the few patrons for some spark of recognition? The other reason they call me La Gringa Digna is because they respect me for my appetites, for the way I am one of them, for my status as predator, not prey.

The kid puts his hand on mine and begs, "Please. Help me."

And I am reminded of the hierarchy that remains the same wherever you go: the club-hopping little girls in Manhattan and dark-haired señoritas here target older, wiser, richer men, trading on commodities that depreciate quickly. They advertise with their beauty, their lustrous curls, their flawless skin. People like me trade on our calm wisdom and self-control, qualities that only sharpen with age. "Fine," I say. "You'll come with me, but first have another round."

I drink more quickly and he drinks more slowly, allowing him to ask more questions. I find out his name. Nicholas. He finds out mine. Jennifer.

"Have you ever helped anyone like me before," he asks, eager to wrest some control from our arrangement.

"You're the first."

"Really?" He licks salt from the heel of his hand. "It seems like you've done this before."

"I've done a lot of things before. Far more than you."

He matches my flirtatiousness with an overeager flair of his dark eyes. "I guess we'll see if I can keep up."

Drinks finished, he pays for both of us and Camarero Roberto nods at me. Respect. I may be twenty years older than Nicholas and I may be 5,000 miles away from my problems, but I'm still a woman. Like the other single locals my age, I'm not above slaking my thirst for sex. Intimacy is something different. While my heart remains closed to men, there are plenty of parts of my soul that remain open to the fleeting pleasures that young men specialize in gifting. I tell Nicholas it's only a short walk and we enter the street flush with the noise and smells wafting our way by the grace of the same gentle wind that makes the palm trees sway and cools my skin.

"So, Jennifer," he says, hooking my arm into his. "Retired NYPD detective? I'll bet lots of...you know...people try to secure your services."

"I walked away from the job and I meant it. There was nothing left for me in the States and I have all I want here."

"What is that?"

"Beautiful sunsets. A little house near the beach. Plenty

of time to drink and think.”

“The money doesn’t appeal to you? Someone like you could clean up if—”

The kid still doesn’t know when to shut up, so I stop him in the middle of the street and kiss him. He wasn’t expecting such abruptness; young men seldom do. He eases into me and our bodies make promises to the sound of the guitarrista plucking for tips nearby. Once we break, he seems to get the hint and we quicken our pace to my place.

I let him in and throw my keys on the only chair in the room. “I know what you’re thinking. Once you’re a cardiologist, you’ll have a house big enough to fit mine in your bedroom.”

“No,” he says. “It’s charming. I guess I thought it would be more...” He scrutinizes the bare walls. No television. Only a radio on a small table.

“‘More’ is an American delusion. All we have is our bodies and what we can hold in our two hands at any one time.”

We kiss again and I like that he’s different from the Mexican boys I’ve had around. No matter what you say to them, you can’t shake their misplaced respect. They imagine that making love to a gringa must be something different and magical because of the accidents of our births. If we learn nothing else in this life, it’s that we are the sum of our thousands of choices refracted through the cruel and fractured mirror of fate. “Go to the bedroom,” I say. “Get comfortable. I’ll bring us a couple of cold beers.”

The blast of the refrigerator air gives me gooseflesh. I take a deep breath and hold it in, as though doing so could turn my heart to ice. When I meet Nicholas in the bedroom, he’s texting. “Who’s that?” I ask.

“My mom,” he says, quickly putting the phone away.

“I’ll bet she’s proud,” I say. “But not as proud as if you take that first plane home. In the morning.”

“She’ll be proud when she can call me ‘Doctor.’”

“Fine,” I say, passing him a sweaty bottle. “Strip to your undies.”

He thinks I’m joking at first, but obeys. I recline on my bed and watch.

“Here’s the deal,” I say. “They told you one kilo. That’s probably going to change. If they were smart, they’d pack the coke into the aluminum tubes in your suitcase, but they’re probably not going to do that.”

I drag my hands over his shoulders. “It’s the middle of summer, so you can’t wear a jacket to hide any bulges. Instead, you wear a vest. Say you were in Mexico for rock climbing. You insist on putting some gear into your suitcase. But don’t be stupid and bring brand new gear that’s never been used. Red flag. Customs are underpaid, but they’re not dumb.”

My hands trace down his back and around his sides. He starts at my touch. “They’re going to duct-tape it hard along your side. In the small of your back. Your inner thighs...” I brush each with the backs of my fingers. “Practice walking

straight and tall while sucking in your gut. Keep a map or something hard in each pocket. If they feel something, you can just pull it out and laugh and convince them that’s what they felt. The goal is the same as it will be when you treat your first patient. Confidence. Believe you’re ready. Above all...”

“Yes?”

“Be natural. Act as though the only thing on your mind is getting home to the woman you love.”

“But I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Good. Love is overrated and only causes problems.”

I kiss him and feel our warmth commingle: the only real truth you can find in this world. He kisses like a boy. Overeager. Too much tongue. He needs to learn to pace himself. I trace my lips down his neck and to his taut chest as he runs his fingers through my shoulder-length hair.

And that’s when I notice the birthmark on his sternum. I had seen it a moment ago, but that small splotch of brown was impossible to miss with my eyes only a couple inches away. Adam had nearly the same mark on his chest. I’m overcome with the memory of all the hours I had spent tracing the mark when he was a baby as the colic kept him crying for hours into the night. Adam’s mark had been—for me, at least—the focal point of our vacation beach pictures, taken in those happy times when we were a family. The doctors had, perhaps subconsciously, used the mark as a target for their balled fists as they performed CPR on him after he fell.

I must be crying because Nicholas is stroking my head as we sit on the bed. “This never happens,” I say. “I was just reminded of—”

He presses a finger to my lips. “It’s fine. We can just go to bed. I have a long day tomorrow.”

I recline beside him. He shuts off the bedside lamp and Nicholas is rendered in shadow, looking appropriately boyish for a man who had just turned down sex because the woman, though perfectly willing, flaked out.

I wait five minutes, thinking I will tell him that I feel much better and why don’t we start where we left off. But he was asleep, the moonlight bisecting his face through the shadow of the blinds.

I am asleep when they start pounding on my door, but I’m very much awake when the men enter the bedroom, booming a cry as familiar in Sayulita as the three-note call of the tinamou. “DEA,” they shout like dogs barking. I’m already in the plastic cuffs and kneeling on the floor by the time I realize why Nicholas had been at La Hija de los Tepehuán, who he had been texting and why he was so eager to forego having sex. I guess I can’t blame him. In the days, long ago, when I worked my own cases, when I had my own husband and my own son and lasting tragedies were something that evoked sympathy in the background of my heart instead of tormenting the front of my mind, I wouldn’t have believed this was the first time I aided and abetted a smuggler, either.

■

Jessica James Brings the **WILD WEST** Meet Kelly Oliver

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



Kelly Oliver definitely has her own unique perspective. Growing up on the Northwestern range of the United States, her family tree includes a forest ranger committed to saving those trees and a logger looking to cut 'em all down, which makes for interesting characters on both sides of the paternal/maternal fence.

Her colorful ancestors help a great deal when it comes to understanding the amazing ability Kelly Oliver has to create characters who are nowhere close to the 'norm' that appears in fiction so often. A professional philosopher at Vanderbilt University, Kelly used her "backwoods grit" to gift readers with stories that bring them back again and again. During her journey she has created Jessica James, who is by far the most philosophical cowgirl you will ever meet.

Kelly Oliver was kind enough to sit a spell with *Suspense Magazine* and talk about her books, her career, and even pay homage to her "furry" family who all call Nashville home.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): As a Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University, can you tell readers if and how that particular career helps when it comes to writing

your mysteries?

Kelly Oliver (K.O.): *Philosophy is a lot like being a detective. Instead of looking for fingerprints or shards of clothing, you look for clues to the meaning of life in books and in the world around you. I always wanted to be a detective—or a teacher—when I was a kid. So, between teaching philosophy and writing mystery novels, I've got the best of both worlds!*

S. MAG.: The *Jessica James* mysteries receive a great deal of praise. People love the fact that she is a true original in a world that has far too many "norms" when it comes to hero, villain, etc. Can you speak about where and when the idea of "Cowgirl Philosopher" first came into your mind?

K.O.: *A lot of Jessica comes out of my own experience in a field that's 80% men and is full of folks who challenge 'norms.' The Vanderbilt philosophy department, like many others, was under pressure to come up with a brand, and I jokingly suggested that our brand be Cowgirl Philosophy. My posse of feminist graduate students loved that idea. And, I took it over in my fiction. Be on the lookout for "The Cowgirl Philosophy Manifesto," which will be up on my website soon!*

S. MAG.: You have worked on many writing projects over time, from anthologies to articles to scholarly publications. Are there any particular genres you wish to explore in the world of fiction other than the mystery/suspense arena in the future?

K.O.: *I've written both scholarly and trade nonfiction, dabbled with some poetry, and now the mysteries. I would love to write fiction in other genres. I'm a total Trekkie and it would be fun to try sci-fi sometime. I'd also like to write more literary fiction and slow down the pace. Right now my novels are pretty fast-paced page-turners.*

S. MAG.: The third book in the *Jessica James* world—"F.O.X."—is being released. Can you tell our readers about the new title? Perhaps give a sneak peek in regards to the plot?

K.O.: **Spoiler Alert!** *F.O.X., as the reader finds out, stands for 'Fertilized Ovum XX' chromosome; or, female. The novel is set at Northwestern Medical School where Jessica's best friend, Jack Grove, is a medical student. Jessica and Jack become embroiled in a genetic engineering scheme that nearly costs them their lives. The novel takes us through themes of genetic engineering and assisted reproduction, and enters the mysterious and secretive world of In Vitro Fertilization.*

S. MAG.: Your "furry family" is a big part of your daily life. Each author has their own individual writing world that they need in order to create. Can you tell us how a typical writing day would be for you? Would the animals be included in your surroundings?

K.O.: *When I wrote mostly nonfiction, I stood at a writing desk sipping green tea, surrounded by my three cats, and broke up writing with yoga or swimming. Writing fiction, I've taken to an easy chair, stuffing myself with cookies and Coke, still surrounded by my cats, and barely stopping to go to the bathroom. At first, writing fiction seemed so transgressive that it carried over into my every day habits. While I'm still in the lounge chair, I've gone back to green tea, and I'm trying to get back to yoga and swimming. Otherwise, writing fiction may turn out to be bad for my health!*

S. MAG.: Considering where you grew up, can you speak about those wide, open spaces of the grand Northwest? Was this a creative place that brought out that philosophical side of you?

K.O.: *My maternal grandfather was a forest ranger trying to save the trees, and my paternal grandfather was a logger cutting down the trees. They were both philosophical in their own ways. For me, the mountains and trees are my religion. I need to revisit those places as often as I can to revive my spirit. In some ways, the mountains of Montana seem far from my life as a philosophy professor, but in others, I think the earthly place I come from has served me well.*

S. MAG.: If you could choose one location that comes up frequently in your mind when you think about the next *Jessica James* setting, what would it be?

K.O.: *I've already started writing novel number four, and it will be set in Las Vegas. Vegas is such a strange and otherworldly place. It seems like a great setting for a comic mystery. Jessica will be on a quest to find "The Mesmerizer." What better place to find him than in Las Vegas?*

S. MAG.: What is it about Alfred Hitchcock that intrigues you so? Do you have a favorite movie of his?

K.O.: *Hitchcock is a brilliant storyteller who knows how to create tension and suspense without gratuitous gore. He is a master of the psychological thriller and what we now call 'domestic suspense'. He creates suspense out of everyday settings and everyday objects. My favorite Hitchcock films are Marnie and Rear*



Window, but there are so many greats!

S. MAG.: Would you be interested in ever bringing Jessica James to the screen? If so, do you have an idea of who would be the best person to portray her?

K.O.: *I think Jessica James would make a great movie or serial television character. In fact, I think we need Jessica James. I think of my novels as Feminist Millennial Noir, and there just isn't anything quite like it out there, and yet there is a thirst for strong women characters who value female solidarity and aren't vampires, fairies or superheroes, but just regular girls.*

Emma Watson would be great because of her feminist sensibilities and sweetness. Jennifer Lawrence would be fantastic because of her sense of humor and potty-mouth—like Jessica James, she seems to have more wit than grace.

S. MAG.: If you could have lunch with another creative mind, who would it be and why?

K.O.: *I can think of so many ways to answer this question. Of course, I have my philosophy heroes and heroines, and my literary favorites, both historical and contemporary. But the creative person I'd most like to have lunch with is Rosario Ferré, my dearly departed mother-in-law, and well-known novelist from Puerto Rico. She was "locked-in" by a terrible disease for the last seven years of her life. By the time I started writing fiction, she couldn't talk or communicate. I would love the opportunity to talk to her about writing fiction.*

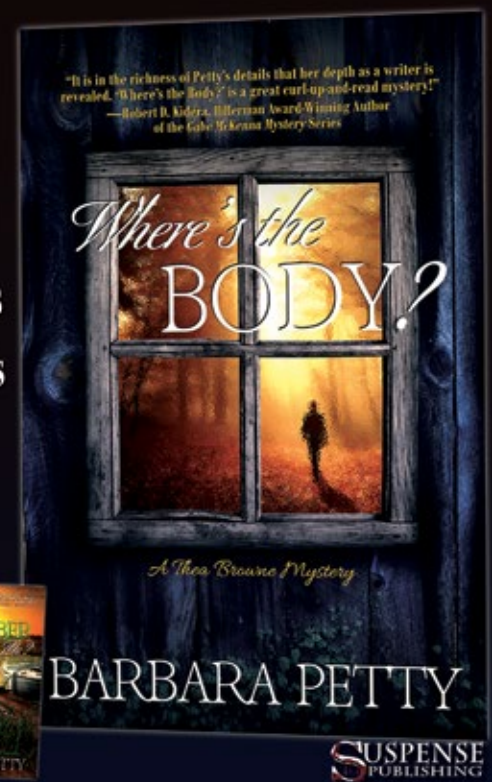
As Jessica James continues to ride the range—and The Strip very soon—and Kelly Oliver continues to ride the path of both teacher and writer, readers will continue to join the adventure and be more than happy to dub themselves the "Philosophy Posse." For more information about Kelly and her upcoming books, check out her website at www.kellyoliverbooks.com. ■



**“Everyone needs a friend like Thea Browne!
Petty’s style is sensitive and engaging, her story
is engrossing, spanning three generations of
richly-drawn characters. It is in the richness of Petty’s
details that her depth as a writer is revealed. ‘Where’s
the Body?’ is a great curl-up-and-read mystery!”**

**—Robert D. Kidera, Hillerman award-winning author of
the Gabe McKenna Mystery series**

BARBARA PETTY
A Thea Browne Mystery



LISA UNGER

“THE RED HUNTER” WILL PREY ON READERS

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Jay Nolan



Unique, inventive, experimental—many adjectives are used when describing the amazing scope of talent that Lisa Unger brings to the writing landscape. Earning both critical acclaim and millions of fans worldwide, her books have sent thrills and chills around the globe.

A task not easily accomplished, Lisa Unger has been able to walk the very thin line between literary novels and commercial thrillers, excelling by creating protagonists and villains with backstories that are not easy to forget. Each story seems to delve deeper into the human psyche, bringing not only emotions to the surface but also sending readers on fast-paced rides through the twisted minds of truly frightening individuals.

In her latest book, “The Red Hunter,” readers should prepare for a psychological roller-coaster of monumental proportions. Here, in this *Suspense Magazine* interview, fans will learn all about Lisa Unger’s personal feelings on everything from writer’s block to being able to separate “normal” life from the fictional realm that calls out to her each and every day.

We hope you enjoy.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): The intense ability you own to delve into the human psyche and produce thrillers and characters such as you do is amazing. How do you step away from the intensity of the book you’re creating at the time to (for lack

of a better term) “enjoy the normal, happy” life around you? Is it easy, or do you have a specific way of being able to separate from the characters?

Lisa Unger (L.U.): *My life is compartmentalized to the degree that I don’t think the person who sits down at the keyboard to write is the same person who gets up and picks my daughter up from school, or makes a sandwich for lunch. Whatever I’m working on tends to stay with me, in the back of my mind, after I’m done writing. It’s always spinning and I often dream about what I’m writing. But that brain is not the same brain that attends to the rest of my life. I am always present for my family, and enjoy the life we all have together. And then, I go back to my fictional world in the morning.*

When I’m very intensely into the work, usually toward the end of a novel, it tends to take over a bit. But as a mom, I can’t always attend to the characters who demand my attention. My daughter comes first. And, of course, life informs the work. I

don't think you can just sit in a box and write. You have to fill the well with experience in order to authentically inhabit character. So, finding that balance is good for the fiction...and the writer.

S. MAG.: Your fan base is immense and highly supportive. Is there a particular fan moment you can share with our readers that you will always remember?

L.U.: *Last year I hosted Lisa Gardner at an event here in Florida. I was completely geeked out because I'm a huge fan. I picked her up from the hotel and we talked non-stop as we headed to the event. She's every bit as cool, kind, and fun as she is talented.*

When we arrived at the venue, there were a couple of women gathered outside, even though the talk didn't start for a while yet. As we approached, one of the women got very emotional, with tears in her eyes. I thought she was excited to see Lisa Gardner, but she was there to see me! So that's one of my favorite fan moments—both as a reader and as a writer!

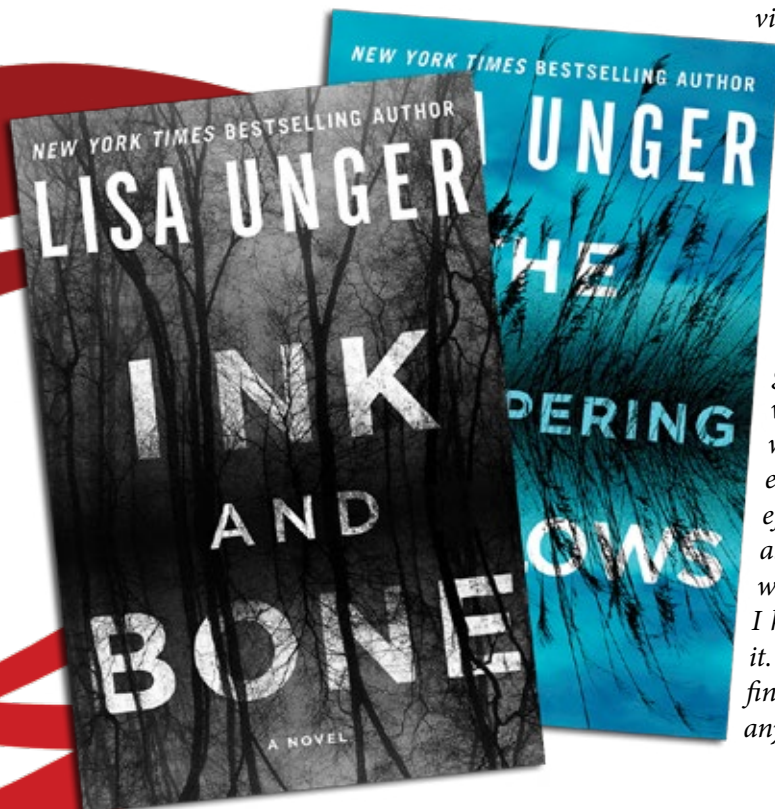
S. MAG.: What frustrates you the most about writing? Do you ever experience the dreaded “block,” and if so, is there a specific way you have learned to bring yourself out of it?

L.U.: *I don't believe in writer's block. Writing is an organic process, and like all organic process, there's an ebb and flow. Some days you can't stop the pages from flowing. And some days you're leaning heavily on your craft. But you can always write. You can always put your pen to paper, or your fingers to the keyboard and make something happen.*

Even though there are good and bad days, I don't find anything inherently frustrating about writing. In fact, it's my happy place. I'm frustrated when I must run a gauntlet to get to that place. The business of publishing has its stresses and frustrations. But with my fingers to the keyboard, I can go anywhere, do anything. Here I have all the control.

S. MAG.: Have any of your characters scared you personally? Along the same lines, was there ever a character you truly hated who you never wanted to see again, or one you loved so much you couldn't wait to see again? If so, who would they be?

L.U.: *I love all my characters, even the most twisted and deranged among them. I am not afraid of any of them; I treat them all with compassion and empathy, even those that do terrible things. There are plenty of people who stay in my head: Jones Cooper, Eloise Montgomery and her granddaughter Finley. I have a deep affection for them and curiosity about their lives that keeps me visiting with them again and again. The Hollows is a place that acts like a character and it's always with me.*



S. MAG.: Being the “Best of the Year,” earning top-pick status and reviews from other well-known and beloved authors in the industry, etc., do you ever get used to that? Or does it still make you want to cheer that your words have made all of these readers and peers so thrilled?

L.U.: *Ha, ha! No! I never get used to that! I am always so grateful and humble when people have kind words about the work. So much goes in to every novel. I live and breathe that work; I think about it constantly, dream about it, write, rewrite, edit and rewrite again. Every book represents the pinnacle of my effort and ability at the time of its writing. And much of it is done alone, without really knowing if the book is succeeding. Then it gets wrested away from you and goes out into the world. Any control I had is gone and I must wait to hear what people think about it. So, I am always grateful, humbled, and thrilled when a book finds some love out there. It's a hard world, and people rarely pull any punches. Kind words always make a difference.*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, is there a writer in history that you would love to sit down with and get their views on your books? If so, is there a question you would absolutely love to ask them?

L.U.: *Luckily, one of my favorite authors is very much alive, and I had the pleasure to meet him (and another of my favorites) last year. I had a chance to meet Stephen King at a library fundraiser where he was in conversation with another iconic writer, John Grisham. It was a thrill to meet them both.*

Stephen King is an author who inspired me as a very young writer, and his book “On Writing” is a must read for anyone putting pen to paper. I still hold out hope that one day I’ll get to have a real conversation with him. There are so many things I want to ask him, but I’m keeping those questions to myself for now. I’ll let you know if I ever get that sit down!

S. MAG.: New and upcoming writers at times get frustrated about things. As a person who makes this look so easy, are there any words of wisdom you can pass along to others out there who are striving to build characters that will make a proverbial “stamp” on the industry?

L.U.: *The bad news is that there is nothing easy about this industry. The good news is there’s only one thing you need to do either as an aspiring, new, or a veteran working, published writer: Just write. Don’t worry about the industry or putting your stamp on it, or even getting published at all. Just focus on the work. Focus on getting better, and never stop focusing on that—even after you’re published. Because the work is the only thing you control, and it’s truly the only thing that matters.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a personal background in the field of psychology? Can you tell readers how you first began your choice of career path to create such intense human experience on the page?

L.U.: *If I hadn’t become a writer, I almost certainly would have become a psychologist! I’ve always been deeply curious about the human mind and what makes us who we are. Is it nature? Is it nurture? Is it some impossibly complicated helix of both of those things? My novels are essentially my deep dive into the questions I have about people, relationships, identity, and dysfunction. The human mind is the ultimate mystery and I never get tired of exploring it on the page.*

S. MAG.: Now comes the new title everyone has been waiting to read! Can you give us a sneak peek at the new standalone thriller, “The Red Hunter?” Perhaps even a tidbit that has not been stated before in “previews” and “media packages?”

L.U.: *Two women, both victims of terribly traumatic events, take two very different paths in the aftermath of their ordeals. One seeks peace, the other wants revenge. Though traveling opposite roads, they’re on a collision course with each other. When they converge, at a broken down old house on an isolated property, they’ll have to face their demons, as well as the very dangerous men at their heels.*

All of my novels are very personal, coming from something I’m wondering about, struggling with, trying to order in my mind, or in the world. This novel is an exploration of the question I’ve been trying to answer for a while: What is the difference between justice and revenge? What do we accomplish when we punish others for their wrong doing? Can an act of violence ever be made right with another act of violence?

S. MAG.: With a great many of your characters being so powerful, are you thinking of bringing any of your titles down the path to film or T.V. in the future? If so, which would you most like to see set on a small or large screen for your fans to enjoy?

L.U.: *Hmm...it’s such a complicated question. There’s an option right now for “In the Blood,” which I’m very excited about. More to come on this! But there have been many other options for other books, as well. So I tend not to think about it very much; it’s such vapor. The only business more unpredictable than publishing is film! That said, some of the best work being done these days is happening on the small screen. It really seems that the most original, creative, genre-bending stories are being told on television. So, if it happened, I’d love to see it happen there.*

As would the multitude of Lisa Unger fans out there! For more information on “The Red Hunter,” as well as upcoming events and information, check out www.lisaunger.com. ■

THE RED HUNTER

By Lisa Unger

RAVEN LOOKED REPENTANT, BUT CLAUDIA knew that she wasn't. The girl had her head bent, and the sheets of her blue-black hair, thick and impossibly glossy, fell to hide her face. It was October. A week from Halloween, and this was Claudia's *second* time in the principal's office since school began. The first one was about grades. Raven was already struggling. *We can see from her test scores that she's capable of more*, the desperate math teacher said. *But it's like she's just not here. Not paying attention. Leaving answers blank on her test. Mrs. Bishop, she's not even trying.*

Claudia could already see it on Principal Blake's face: The Look. It was the expression that careful people, kind people got when they started to wonder if there was something wrong with Raven.

"It's difficult to start a new school," said Principal Blake. "But here at Lost Valley Central we have a zero-tolerance policy for physical violence."

Physical violence? That was new. Claudia still wasn't sure what Raven had done. She'd raced in as soon as Principal Blake had called. A bland man with a soft voice and graying head of hair, he had greeted her in the office with an understanding smile. *We've had a problem in the cafeteria. A girl has gone home.*

"Oh, really?" said Raven. "So, it's okay for *her* to be verbally abusive to me, and I just have to sit there and take it?"

"That's enough, Raven," said Claudia. She wondered if she sounded as exhausted by her daughter as she felt. The kid's capacity for outrage was endless.

"There are other ways to solve your problems that don't involve flipping a lunch tray onto someone," said the principal easily. "What did she say to you exactly? What made you so angry?"

Raven shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

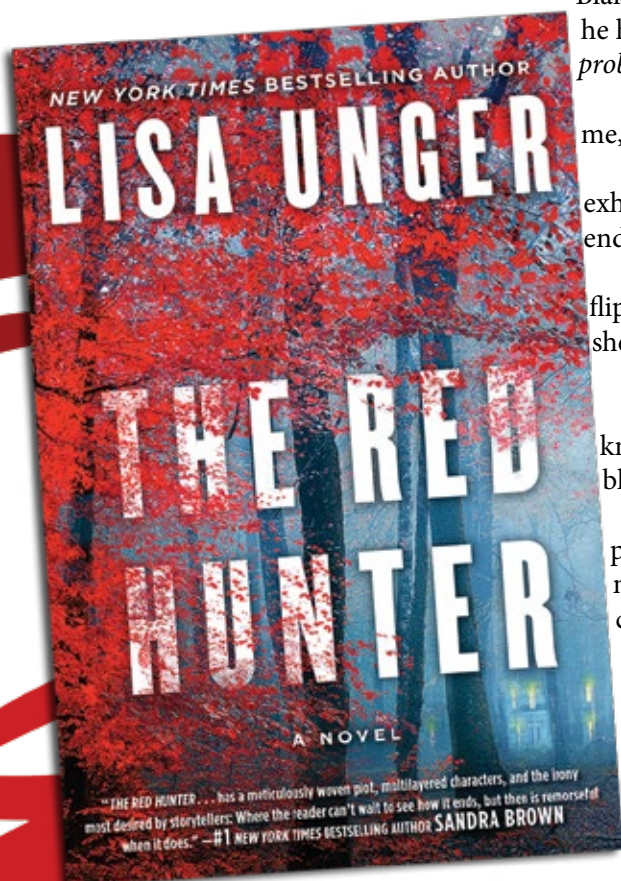
The principal answered her with a quick nod, like he got it, like he knew how cruel kids could be and how words could hurt as badly as any blow.

"I understand that bullying can be verbal and emotional as well as physical. And Clara Parker has had her moments; she's sat here with me more than once. Still, when we step over that line into the physical, that can't be tolerated."

Oh, god, thought Claudia. *She's going to be suspended—expelled.* She could just hear her sister Martha crowing, *I told you that changing schools wasn't the solution. You can't just keep running away.*

"I need a clearer picture of what happened," said Claudia. She looked at Raven, who had turned her head away.

"Apparently, Clara and a friend had some unkind words for



Raven. I am not sure what was said since neither Raven, Clara, or her friend Beth will say. But, in response, Raven flipped a tray that was in front of them, covering both the girls with food."

Claudia felt the tug of a smile but bit it back.

"It was an accident," said Raven unconvincingly. "I was picking it up to walk away and finish my lunch elsewhere."

"It was meatball and spaghetti day at school today, so it made quite a mess."

"So it's not that she *hit* anyone," said Claudia. She didn't want to be one of those parents, the kind that rushed to the defense of her obnoxious, misbehaved child. But it was important that she be clear on exactly what happened.

"I didn't hit anyone," Raven said. "It was an accident. Clara went home because I ruined her *outfit*, not because I hurt her."

Principal Blake nodded carefully, cocking his head and wrinkling his eyes a little. "People around the girls said that it *seemed like* Raven purposely dumped the tray onto Clara."

"Yeah," said Raven, sitting up a little. "All her *friends*, who were *laughing* while she was verbally abusing me."

Claudia struggled against a flush of anger, a surge of protectiveness for Raven. "So, basically," she said, trying to keep her voice mild. "A group of girls surrounded Raven, saying unkind words—to use your phrase—and when Raven got up to leave, she tipped her tray either by accident or on purpose and ruined another girl's outfit. Is that right?"

Raven gave a light nod. "It *was* an accident."

Claudia was reasonably sure that it wasn't an accident. She knew Raven's temper was a flash flood, surging against everything in its path and then quickly receding, leaving regret in its wake.

"That's what I gather," said the principal reasonably. He seemed like a nice man, trying to do his job.

"Were the other girls reprimanded?" asked Claudia.

"It's unclear what was said," said the principal. "So it's difficult to address."

"Okay," said Claudia. She took and released a breath. "So where are we with this? Is Raven going to be punished?"

"Look . . . it's Thursday," said Principal Blake. He had nice hands, long thin fingers, and a white-gold wedding band, clean, pink nails. You could tell a lot about a person by his hands. He was careful, responsible, tried to follow the rules. He laced his fingers in front of him on the green desk blotter.

"I'm not going to suspend Raven; it's not going on her record," he went on. "Let's just have her take the day off tomorrow and we can all start fresh on Monday, let her think about what happened and reflect on how she could have handled things better. Maybe on Monday we can have a conference with each girl and her parents to discuss how we can better handle conflict. How does that sound?"

It sounded like shit actually. A "day off" was a suspension, even if it didn't go on her permanent record. She would have to attend the conference alone while Raven

sulked unapologetic, and Principal Blake played benevolent mediator. This *Clara* and her parents *The Parkers* would play the injured party, and Claudia and Raven would be the outsiders. But she found herself nodding.

Claudia wanted to say something. She wanted to say thank you, and assure him that she was going to make sure that Raven understood the seriousness of her actions, but also ask that this Clara be made to understand the power of words.

Instead, there was a big sob stuck in her throat, a bulb of anger and frustration and sadness. She was afraid that if she opened her mouth, she wouldn't be able to contain it. So, instead, she just kept nodding and rose. She felt Raven's dark eyes on her. Only her daughter, and maybe her sister, knew that silence from Claudia was more serious than yelling—which she didn't do very often either.

"Ms. Bishop?" said Principal Blake. He was staring at her with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she managed. "Thank you for your patience with Raven. She and I will talk over the weekend, and of course, there will be consequences at home."

There. She didn't burst into tears. Was there any more vulnerable position than being the single parent of a badly behaved child, sitting in the principal's office? Weren't you the one being reprimanded, really? Because wasn't it, after all, your fault that your child couldn't control herself?

"Raven," she said. "Do you have something you want to say to Principal Blake?"

"I'm sorry," she said dutifully. "I lost my temper and I shouldn't have."

The principal smiled warmly. "It takes a big person to admit when she's wrong. I think that's a good start. Write me an email over the weekend, okay? With your reflections?"

Raven nodded. "I will."

Claudia draped an arm around her daughter's slender shoulders as the girl stood, gave her a little squeeze, then nudged her out the door.

CLAUDIA STOOD BESIDE RAVEN'S LOCKER while the girl stuffed her belongings—iPad, binder, dirty gym clothes—into her knapsack. Claudia had hated school—the ugly lights, the cafeteria smells, gym class, the pathetic social hierarchy where looks and athleticism trumped brains and character (not that *that* ever changed). The scent of the hallway—what *was* that smell?—brought it back vividly.

"It's not my fault," said Raven, slamming shut the locker door.

"It never is, is it?" said Claudia.

That glare, those dark eyes in that ivory skin. That full, pink mouth and ridiculously long eyelashes. Raven's beauty was shocking, frightening in its intensity, in her utter obliviousness to it. *We need to get a burka on that kid*, Martha had joked. *A body like that? On a fifteen-year-old? It should be illegal.*

Luckily, Raven's gorgeousness was tempered by the boyish way she carried herself. She *loped*. If Claudia didn't insist on showers and hair brushing, the girl would look most of the time as if she'd been dragged through a bush. And still, the way they *stared*. Men, boys, the same stunned goofy expression, eyes wide, smile wolfish on male faces young and old. Raven didn't even *see*. Claudia took to carrying pepper spray in her bag. *She's a baby*, Claudia had to keep herself from screaming. *Don't you look at her like that!*

Claudia knew that she was a fairly attractive woman still, and she'd been pretty hot when she was younger—blonde and bubbly, with glittery blue eyes. Never *thin*, never one of those waifish, patrician women she'd always admired. She was full-bodied and curvy, never smaller than a size 12, sometimes bigger than that when she wasn't watching *every single goddamn bite* of food she put into her mouth. Still, she'd turned her share of heads.

But she'd never looked anything like Raven—a princess, a fairy, a siren, men climbing towers, and slaying dragons, and crashing themselves upon jagged rocks, dying happy. More disturbing though was the way *women* looked at Raven—with a kind of naked hatred, unmasked envy. They knew what a commodity had been bestowed upon Raven, through no fault of her own. The kid had won some kind of genetic lotto. Did anyone really know how isolating it was? How dangerous? No doubt it was part of the reason Raven was drawing fire from her classmates.

"Mom!" Was it only Raven who could imbue the single syllable with so much annoyance? "You're doing it again."

"Sorry." Getting lost, drifting off into her own thoughts, being somewhere else. According to her daughter, Claudia did that *all the time*. God forbid a mother should have her own inner life.

"What did she say?" Claudia asked as they exited the building and headed to the car. She dropped an arm around her daughter's shoulder again, pulling her in. And the girl shifted closer, matching her gait.

Raven shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

And maybe Raven was right. It didn't matter what Clara had said. What was important—what had been important back in the city—was that Raven couldn't control herself, her mouth, her temper. Impulse control was the problem.

They climbed into the rattling old Ford pickup, almost an antique, still a workhorse, which she needed in her business, something she wasn't worried about scratching or dinging, something that could haul loads.

"I hate this truck," said Raven. It was a far cry from Raven's father's Range Rover, certainly.

"I know," said Claudia, pulling out of the school driveway and onto the road home.

Claudia always found it funny—not *funny* but rather interesting or notable—that one moment or really a series of moments might derail your entire life. There you are, moving along on one track, full speed. You have your destination

clearly in mind, and the journey itself is not half bad either. In fact, you're quite happy with the whole package.

And then one thing, or a series of things . . .

Maybe a woman, suffering from depression, drives her car onto the tracks a moment too late for the conductor to stop the train on which you're commuting. Your path (and the conductor's and other commuters') and hers collide. What happened to her in her life and what happened to you in yours—everything, where you were born, how you were raised, if your parents were nice, if you were bullied in school, if the gene for depression was turned on in her or not, or in you, all of these infinitesimal elements of her existence and yours lead you to be in the exact same place at the exact same moment and—KABOOM.

Or a gust of wind takes your scarf, and who should catch it but your husband-to-be, who happens to be walking past you on the same street, in the direction the wind is blowing at the exact moment on the right trajectory so that it trails beside him a flash of red and he reaches for it and turns around and your eyes meet and—SHAZAM. Love at first sight. These moments—less dramatic but equally meaningful—happened *every* day, Claudia often thought, and almost no one seems to notice how many things have to go wrong or right for them to occur.

It's never one thing that leads to a tragic accident, she was sure she'd read once—though she couldn't say where. It's usually seven things—seven mistakes, or errors in judgment, or acts of negligence. If you reverse engineer any major disaster—oil spill or train derailment or airplane crash—there are usually seven things that had to go wrong in order for them to occur.

Claudia had spent a lot of time thinking about that theory, even though what happened to her wasn't an accident by any measure. Especially in the darker moments—like this one—when she questioned the wisdom of almost every decision she'd made since that night. It was comforting in an odd way to look back and think that if she had changed any one of those seven things, she'd still be on that figurative train heading in the right direction.

The first thing was that her (now ex-) husband Ayers wanted to live in Midtown, since it was where they both worked. But she was in love with the East Village and had been since college. That was the real New York City—Yaffa Café and Trash and Vaudeville and St. Marks Books. There was still grit, even though it was very stylized now, and most of those wonderful places were gone or going. And very expensive even then. But she'd found a place she just loved on Fifth Street. Out back there was a garden, and it butted up against a church and an old graveyard, and the windows opened. It was utterly unlike the place Ayers wanted in Midtown, a tower with a doorman and central air, a pristine gym, and Friday socials on the sun deck.

Ayers was not a fan of grit. But he gave Claudia her way, because that's the kind of man he was. The kind of man who

subordinated his wants and needs for Claudia's. A good man, a darling husband who she knew right away would be a lovely father.

There were gates on the back windows, of course there were. It was the East Village and as much as New York City was gentrified, junkies still busted in and took your stuff if you didn't have bars on the windows. So they got bars, even though it bummed Ayers out. He loved unmarred city vistas. They were *nice* gates, painted white, with wrought-iron ivy and twisting branches, and they opened like French doors. Claudia was terrible about closing them and locking them. She forgot sometimes. That was two.

They had been married a year and they were trying to have a baby. Not in that sad, desperate way that people often seemed to. More in a joyful, let's fuck all the time with no protection because we're—wink wink—*trying for a baby*. They'd been trying for about eight months, and no baby. *But hey*, said Ayers, *it's about the journey, not the destination! Now take off your panties, you little tart*.

Because they'd had a glass of Prosecco, Ayers got frisky. Then they messed around, having a quickie with her underpants around her ankles and her skirt hiked up, while he took her from behind over the couch. They were late to meet his parents at Café des Artistes. She never went back upstairs in their charming duplex, but mopped up carelessly in the little bath off the kitchen, putting on lipstick and sweeping up her hair, feeling dirty and naughty and loving it because Ayers's mother was so proper. Neither Claudia nor Ayers went back to the bedroom to close the gates. That was three.

Claudia and her mother-in-law were almost exact opposites—which was probably why they got along. Claudia admired Sophie's buttoned-up, ever stylish, cool (not cold, but unflappable) demeanor. And Claudia often caught Sophie smiling at her when she rambled on, or got exuberant, or passionate. If Sophie was pressed linen, Claudia was crinoline. If Sophie was crepe, Claudia was sequins. It worked. And her father-in-law Chuck was a bear of a man, always sweet and looking sleep-tousled, with a big appetite and sudden, explosive laugh.

After dinner, Claudia tried to convince everyone to have one last drink. But Ayers said he was tired, that he had an early meeting and wanted to work out first thing in the morning. That was four.

She was drunk. No, not *drunk*. Tipsy. Not puking, falling down, ugly drunk, of course—never that. But she was bouncy, giggly, silly. OTM was the code Claudia and her girlfriends used: One. Too. Many. OTM and you might get teary, telling your friends how much you love them, or laugh too loud, or dance with abandon—even though you were a terrible dancer. Which was *fine* under most circumstances. Perhaps not with your in-laws. But any more and you were going to regret it. Any more and tomorrow was going to be a bad day. Maybe that was the real reason Ayers wanted to

go home. Because for his mother, there were limits. Pressed linen, it creased terribly. You could never tell if crinoline had been hugged too long or too tight. *I love my mother*, Ayers often said, as if such a thing needed saying. *But I remember as a kid that she only had so much patience for affection*. Claudia had no idea what that meant. Why would you need patience for affection? Claudia had maybe drifted too close to the line; there had been lots of hugging and declarations of affection (from Claudia to Sophie), and maybe Sophie was getting a little stiff. Anyway, if Claudia hadn't been OTM, she might have noticed as soon as she came home what they only noticed later: That the lights in the kitchen were on, when they hadn't been before. That a coat had been knocked from one of the hooks on the wall beneath the stairs. If she hadn't been OTM, she might have seen those things and deduced the truth before it was too late. There was someone in the apartment. That was five.

Ayers was still outside, and Claudia came into the apartment alone. Claudia had *taken on* Mrs. Swanson, their impossibly elderly landlord. Which meant that she often loaned Ayers out to her. *Oh, Ayers will help you with that. Won't you, honey?* They helped her with small things—like changing lightbulbs and getting dead mice away from Mittens, her ginger tabby. When Claudia was at the store, she often picked up eggs, bread, and 2 percent milk, dropping them off on her way upstairs. Usually Ashley, Mrs. Swanson's daughter came to take the trash out. But Ashley was sick with the flu that night, so Ayers had promised to do it. That's what he was doing. That was why Claudia went alone into their apartment. That was six.

Stumbling up the narrow duplex stairs, she'd noticed a strange smell. Something musky. She dismissed it. That was one of the reasons she'd wanted to live in the East Village, in an apartment where the windows opened. The city had a smell, especially in summer. And it wasn't just garbage and bums and dog piss. There were aromas from trees and flowers, from bakeries and fine restaurants, from baristas and something else, hot asphalt and rubber, something indefinably New York. And you couldn't smell it in Midtown. She thought absently on entering—see, she did it even then—had she forgotten to close the window? Was she too exuberant with Sophie? Was Ayers embarrassed of her? Maybe she shouldn't have told that story about her friend Misha who had recently dyed her unapologetically long underarm hair neon green and delighted in showing it off everywhere possible. Her absentmindedness often kept her from seeing things that were right in front of her. That was seven.

A lot of women don't remember the event, her doctor told her. And that must be a wonderful mercy. Because Claudia *remembered*. Every crushing, bruising, airless second from the moment he stepped out of the bedroom in front of her and grabbed her by her hair, pulling her inside and closing and locking the door. Every detail of his face from his dark eyes, to the stubble on his jaw, to the scar on his chin, to the

rank of his breath, the black stains on his teeth. He punched her with a closed fist right in the face—so jarring, so brutal, blinding white stars and pain that traveled from her jaw and the bridge of her nose, up over the crown of her head, her neck snapping back.

She struggled for orientation. No, no, this wasn't happening. Couldn't be. He pressed his arm over her throat, cutting off air. She couldn't breathe so she couldn't scream. Funny how that went. She wouldn't have thought about that. No air, no sound. She was silent, writhing. Utterly powerless against his far, far superior physical strength. She took kickboxing! She had thick powerful legs, athletic calves that *never* fit into those sleek high boots she so adored. She was bigger than Ayers—there was no carrying Claudia over the threshold, nothing that would have been pretty. They play wrestled all the time. He was strong, Ayers, but not like this. She couldn't *move*. She was as helpless as a child. His eyes. They were blank, totally blank. He didn't see *her*; she wasn't even *there*. He thrust himself into her, a heinous ripping impact. The violation. It was unspeakable, beyond comprehension, and the pain. A horrible, tearing, burning. One, two, three. He shuddered, eyes closing—release, not pleasure—and it was done. He hit her again.

Stop looking at me! A hard crack against her cheekbone.

She fell back, and he kicked her brutally in the ribs. She threw up on the floor and managed to be humiliated about it even though he was already gone, out that window that offered such a pretty view of Mrs. Swanson's garden and the graveyard. She lost herself then. Went somewhere else. The next thing she remembered was the door crashing in. Not Ayers but a uniformed cop. Why *not* Ayers? Why wasn't he the first person through that door?

"Oh Jesus," the young cop said. Claudia wanted to apologize about the vomit. Crazy, wasn't that? Then she was out again.

It was two weeks later that she knew she was pregnant. No AIDS, no other sexually transmitted diseases. It *was* possible to determine paternity in vitro, but the test was invasive and caused risk to the fetus. They both decided. She *thought* that they *both* decided (though Ayers would later claim that it was all about Claudia, that he was just doing what he thought she needed) that they didn't want to know. A baby was a gift, no matter how it was delivered. Wasn't it? They would love the child. They would *never* seek to discover the true paternity. No matter what, they'd raise the baby as their own.

Don't do this, Martha had begged. *You don't know how you're going to feel. It's not fair to the child. So it's fair to—terminate the pregnancy?*

Claudia was shocked at how unanimous was the sentiment that she should have an abortion. What a horrible word: the brutal end of something before it began. Even her doctor seemed to assume. *Do you want to schedule the D&C?* No, said Claudia. *I don't know.*

Life at any cost, then? Martha asked.

This baby is proof that even out of the most horrific possible moment, in your darkest hour, something wonderful is possible, Claudia had countered.

Martha, who was fifteen years older than Claudia, just shook her head, looked off into the middle distance as if she were the long-suffering knower of all things, just waiting for her little sister to catch up.

Ayers and I were together that night. It is equally possible that it is his child.

And if it isn't?

It won't matter. We're enough—strong enough, in love enough. It's possible. I've done the research.

Claudia remembered gazing out at the vista from their new apartment in a luxury Chelsea high-rise with windows that couldn't be opened and a doorman who looked like a professional wrestler (they'd moved within two weeks of the attack) hoping—*praying* that she was right. She wasn't right, not by a long shot. Not about that. Not about anything, it seemed, since that.

CLAUDIA PULLED UP THE LONG drive to their farmhouse. Twenty acres, most of them wooded, in a dot on the map called Lost Valley, New Jersey. *Lost Valley?* Raven had raged. *Are you kidding? You're moving us from Manhattan to a place with a name like that? It's like something out of a horror movie.* This land had been in her family for decades, bought with cash on one of her father's real estate whims—one of many. He got it for a song—\$15,000 for twenty acres in the seventies, the barn and old house falling to pieces. He'd never set foot on it in all the years he owned it, then left it to Claudia when he died.

Claudia never set foot on the farmhouse property either, until one day she got it in her head that she'd renovate the buildings and start a blog about it. Single city mom moves to the country and renovates two historic properties. She'd take pictures. Eventually it would become a book—poignant, moving, inspiring. It wasn't just about the property. It was about rebuilding in the spiritual sense. Never mind that she wasn't really a writer or a photographer, or that she didn't have *any* experience with home renovation. And she liked the name of the town. It was romantic, wasn't it? A secret place, a hidden gem, a place where magic was still possible.

Weirdly, it was all kind of working. Claudia was in fact a quite decent writer, according to Martha. And her photographs had a "certain special energy," according to Ayers. She had blog "subscribers," was "building a platform," had a query yesterday from an advertiser. And she was—dare she say it?—happy-ish. Something she never would have believed possible once. Now, if she could just get Raven on track.

"You're doing it again."

Claudia had pulled the old pickup to a stop. How long had they been sitting there, with her just staring at the barn door—which, by the way, looked like it was going to fall off

its hinges any minute?

"Jesus, Mom," said Raven, climbing out of the truck and slamming the door as hard as she could. "Wake up!"

Claudia watched as Raven stormed up to the house and slammed through the front door. You were never so acutely aware of your own flaws as you were in the presence of your child. Why was that?

The sky overhead was a menacing gunmetal. She was staring up at it when a blue car, a Toyota Camry pulled into the drive. It came to a stop and a man, a stranger, climbed out. It had been more than fifteen years since her rape in the East Village. Her heart didn't thump with alarm every time a strange man approached anymore. She didn't think every unknown person was a potential assailant. What was different about the woman she was now versus the girl she was then, was that she was prepared if he was. She'd taken a self-defense class and spent nearly a year training every Tuesday and Thursday, when Raven was still a toddler, with a former Navy SEAL named Jet. *Defense starts on approach, he used to say. Watch the body language, the eyes. Trust your instincts. If it feels like something's not right, it probably isn't.*

What she noticed about the man who got out of the blue Camry first was a careful aura, a gentleness. He hung back a bit, lifted a hand, and offered a smile. That's what good men did, they kept their distance. Selfish men, arrogant men, dangerous men, the first thing they usually did was violate the space bubble, or the respect bubble—moving in too close, or maybe making some inappropriate comment, calling you sweetie or babe. Maybe he squeezed your hand too hard when you shook for the first time, signaling his strength.

"Hey, there," he said. "Mrs. Bishop?"

She wasn't technically Mrs. Bishop. She never took Ayers' last name. Bishop was her maiden name. If she'd at any point been a "Mrs.," she would have been "Mrs. Martin," which she didn't like as much as Bishop. Raven had both their last names Bishop-Martin, which Claudia thought sounded very big and important, and had a nice rhythm: Raven Bishop-Martin. A girl could do anything, *be* anything, with a name like that.

"That's right," she said, not smiling, just standing her ground. It was so hard for her not to smile, not to be exuberantly friendly. It was a discipline, something she'd worked on. *You don't have to throw yourself into everybody's arms, Claudia*, Martha was fond of saying.

He fished for something in his pocket, withdrew a sheet of paper. "You had a flier in the coffee shop for a handyman."

Oh, right. "Yes," she said.

"I'm Josh Beckham." He ran a big hand through sandy blond hair. "Did Madge tell you about me?"

"Oh," she said. Madge, the lady who owned the bakery. Claudia, a talker all her life, had been mentioning that she needed some help with the house. And Madge suggested that she put up a flier. *We have a lot of boomerang kids around here, looking for work. One or two of them can manage to*

hammer a nail into something. She *had* mentioned someone named Josh, living with his elderly mother, taking care of her. She hadn't mentioned the sky-blue eyes or the muscles that pressed against the sleeves of his blue tee-shirt.

"Not a good time?" he said. She could see that he was eyeing the barn door.

Oh, no, she wanted to enthuse. *Thank you so much for coming. It's a perfect time. I have so much that needs doing!*

"It's fine," she said. Why did it feel rude to be calm and measured, to hold herself back? "Madge mentioned you."

He squinted at her, gave a nod. "I've been doing handyman work around here for a few years." He pulled another piece of folded paper out of his pocket. "I brought you a list of references. Folks you can call who'll tell you I show up, on time, and charge a fair price."

The sun had managed to peek out from the clouds, casting an orange-yellow glow against which he lifted a shading palm now.

"Thanks," she said. "Can I give you a call tomorrow?"

"Sure thing."

She always jumped into things too quickly and often regretted it. She had always thought that she was just following her instincts; that's how she rationalized it. But her instincts sometimes failed her because—as Martha was quick to remind her—Claudia was just too nice, too trusting. *You think everyone you meet is as pure of heart as you are. They're not, kid. We both know that.* She wanted to hire him on the spot. Instead, she was going to do as Martha would. She would call the references and then, if he still seemed okay, she'd ask him to come out and *do one thing* and see where it went from there. That was the opposite of what her instincts told her—which was to hand him her list and tell him he was hired.

He handed her a card, his list of references, and gave her a friendly nod. "Hope to hear from you."

He moved toward his Toyota, then turned back. "That door—just saying? It doesn't look safe. Doesn't have to be me. There's a company in town, Just Old Doors. They specialize in fixing them or replacing them up to the historic code. Not cheap, but they do good work. You might get it looked at before you open it again. Okay?"

She smiled at him. "I will. Thanks."

She watched him drive away. His energy. It wasn't just careful or gentle. It was sad, too. And was there something just a little bit off? When his car was gone, she released the tension she didn't know she'd been holding in her shoulders.

What was that noise? Something faint and discordant on the air. She looked toward the house in time to see Raven open her window. Music poured out. The angry tones of Nine Inch Nails slicing through the darkening afternoon. ■

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SUSPENSE THEATRE COMES ALIVE!

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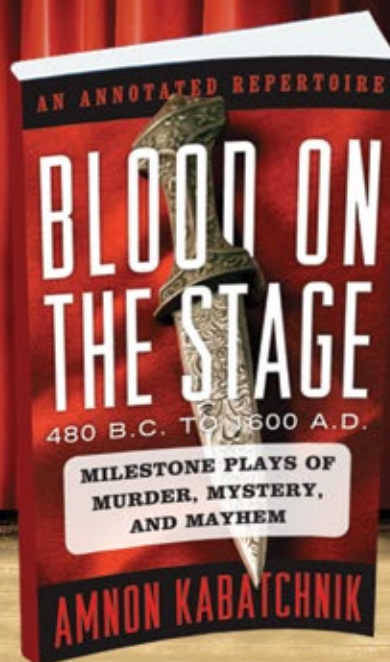
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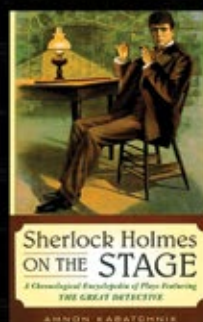
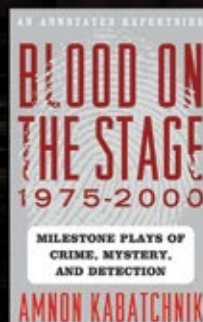
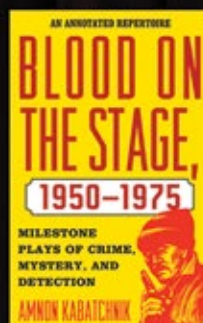
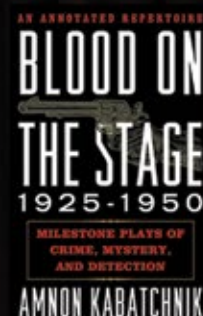
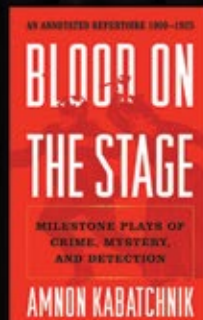
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Past Tense:

Greg Iles on “Mississippi Blood” & Wrapping up his *Natchez Burning* Trilogy

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



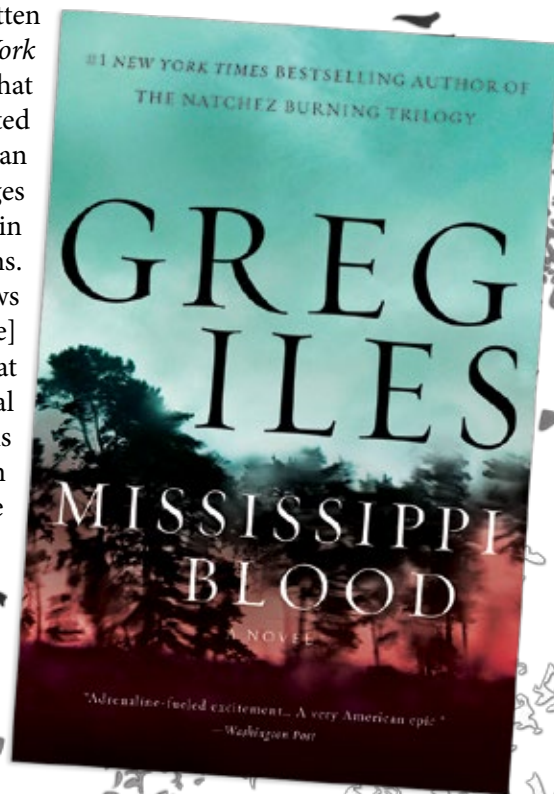
Greg Iles was born in Germany during the height of the Cold War but spent his formative years living in the Southern hamlet of Natchez, Mississippi, where he and his family now make their home. Perhaps not surprisingly, his bestselling and critically acclaimed *Natchez Burning* trilogy—“Natchez Burning,” “The Bone Tree,” and “Mississippi Blood” (William Morrow)—is set against this very same backdrop. The books feature lawyer-turned-novelist Penn Cage (who first appeared in 1999’s “The Quiet Game”); a passionate crusader for justice, Penn must revisit the sins of the past to remedy those of the present. Though Iles is a veteran of the genre—he’s written thirteen *New York Times* bestsellers that have been translated into more than twenty languages and published in

more than thirty-five countries—this project has won him a legion of new fans.

“Mississippi Blood” was released in March and received starred reviews from *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*; the latter praised: “[The] terrific conclusion to his *Natchez Burning* trilogy is a sweeping story that remains intimate... Relentless pacing keeps the story churning... The trial scenes are among the most exciting ever written in the genre.” And while this narrative may have reached its end on the page, “Natchez Burning” has been optioned by Amazon Studios—meaning that the author’s reach will continue to grow.

Now, Greg Iles reflects on bringing his epic saga to a close ...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “Mississippi Blood” marks the end of your *Natchez Burning* trilogy. What are the challenges of wrapping up such a sweeping story arc in a satisfying way—and do you ever find it difficult to balance your own creative aspirations with reader expectations?





Greg Iles (G.I.): *The primary challenge of wrapping up a two-thousand page epic is fulfilling the expectations of readers who are so deeply invested in the story. Anyone who has read three volumes of this length relates to the characters like they are real people. And when dealing with deep themes, such as family and race in America, you're in very difficult territory as a writer. Your duty isn't to please people, but to get at the truths of American life. That's a tall order on many levels.*

J.B.V.: Tell us about Penn Cage's journey. In general terms, what has he lost and what has he gained—and how do his experiences provide a take on the classic hero's journey?

G.I.: *At the empirical level, Penn represents us all: the children who must one day learn that our parents are not perfect. Unlike some of us, Penn was raised by a man revered by his whole town as a near-saint.*

So to learn at age forty-five that this is far from the truth was very tough. His journey to learn the deepest causes of his father's sins takes him on a journey through some of America's most troubling history. And traveling through that territory, you almost always lose more than you gain. Yet it's not a journey you can refuse. When it's that personal, you have to know.

J.B.V.: It's commonly said that what's past is prologue. How do these books, which are set in contemporary times, reflect that ideology—and in what ways do you feel they are particularly relevant/resonant, given the current climate in America?

G.I.: *When I began this trilogy, people had started talking about America as a post-racial society. That seems tragically funny now. No one in America would claim that anymore. So these three books—that at one time I worried might be too late for relevance—have turned out to be prophetic and even instructional as to where both danger and hope lie when dealing with race in America.*

J.B.V.: You use the South as your backdrop. How does setting enhance narrative—and what is the author's responsibility in capturing the true essence of place?

G.I.: *Setting is usually critical to a novel, but not always. In the case of this trilogy, the more primitive and naturalistic atmosphere of the South is critical to the historic backstory and the modern one as well. The South is a study in contradiction: terrible violence in a land of enveloping beauty; economic want in a land agricultural plenty. Most of all, the South is distinctive. It's as far from generic as you can get in America. And while people think they understand that South, mostly they don't. It's a land of surprises.*

J.B.V.: Your courtroom scenes have been called some of the best ever written. Given that trials tend to be relatively mundane, what's the key to creating suspense while maintaining a sense of authenticity? Also, how does creative license factor into your work?

G.I.: *Trials are by definition incubators of conflict, and conflict is a writer's stock in trade. You don't have to be a lawyer to find the drama in a trial. Of course, it would help. I try not to use creative license if I can avoid it. We live in an age where anything short of verisimilitude in fiction delegitimizes it for readers or viewers. Maybe because it's become so easy to check the reality of anything. That's quite ironic, given that our news has become so problematic in terms of distilling the truth in a polarized environment.*

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: what comes next?

G.I.: *I'm already writing my next novel, set in Oxford, Mississippi, the home of Ole Miss. And I'm also exploring some cable TV opportunities, which really excites me. That's the space everyone wants to be in now: the best actors, directors, writers—everyone. The extended drama series is a terrific format. Feature films almost can't compete with it.*

To keep up on the status of Greg's projects, follow him at: www.gregiles.com. ■

Domestic Disturbance:

Faye Kellerman on “Bone Box” & Injecting Fresh Feelings in Fiction

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Faye Kellerman has been thrilling readers since “The Ritual Bath” (1986) debuted more than three decades ago. That title won the prestigious Macavity Award for Best First Novel and introduced protagonists Peter Decker and Rina Lazarus, heralded by *People Magazine* as “Hands down, the most refreshing mystery couple around.” She has since added twenty-seven books to the venerable *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling series; the most recent, “Bone Box” (William Morrow), was published in February. *Booklist* praised: “Another solid procedural with a cast of characters who have come to feel like family to series fans.”

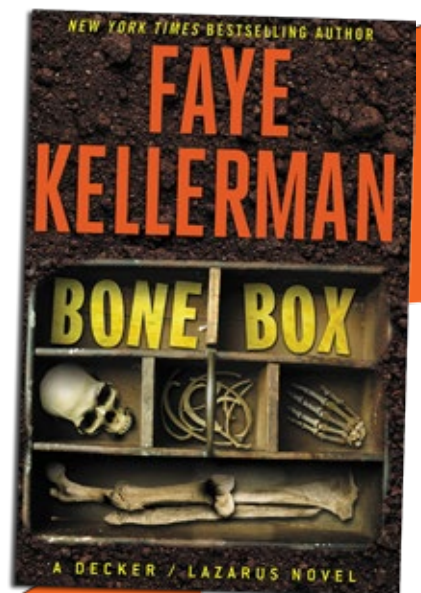
Beyond the *Decker / Lazarus* novels, Kellerman’s prolific output includes two books featuring Cindy Decker (“Stalker” and “Sweet Dreams”), a suspense horror novel (“Moon Music”), a historical (“The Quality of Mercy”), and an annotated collection of short stories (“The Garden of Eden and other Criminal Delights”). She has also collaborated with her husband, Jonathan Kellerman, on two novels (“Double Homicide” and “Capital Crimes”) and with her daughter, Aliza, on a YA title (“Prism”). There are more than twenty million copies of her books in print worldwide. Kellerman and her husband received this year’s Left Coast Crime’s Lifetime Achievement Award; she was previously bestowed *Strand Magazine’s* Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013.

Now, Faye Kellerman sinks her teeth into some criminal curiosities...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): What first triggered the idea for “Bone Box”? Also, please tell us about the significance of the book’s title.

Faye Kellerman (F.K.): A bone box is actually something that dental students—maybe medical students as well—receive in *Gross Anatomy*. Inside are disarticulated, cleaned and bleached bones used for teaching purposes. It’s not just recognizing the bones but also recognizing landmarks on the bones. I thought the title was a good play on the gravesite—also a bone box of sorts—that also deals with physical landscapes. I had used the idea of a body as a spring board for “The Theory of Death” and liked the idea, carried it forward in this novel. I know most mysteries start with a body on page one, but in both novels, it was necessary to ID the bodies first. Ergo you get the investigation from day one.

J.B.V.: This is the 28th entry in your *Decker / Lazarus* series. What has been the key to



“Creativity may come and creativity may go, but a sympathetic ear is forever.”

keeping the writing fresh for you—and how do you endeavor to balance your own creative aspirations with reader expectations?

F.K.: *I think changing the location of where Peter and Rina live has injected it with a fresh feeling. Also the addition of Tyler McAdams starting from “Murder 101,” has helped breathe a little more youth into the series. I also try to keep each mystery from repeating itself, which after 28 novels, can be a challenge. So far, it seems to be working. My readers enjoy the new with the familiar.*

J.B.V.: Your protagonists, Rina Lazarus and Peter Decker, are married. How do the dynamics of their personal relationship enhance your ability to create suspense—and, conversely, in what ways can this be a hindrance to narrative liberties?

F.K.: *Changing venues was very helpful in involving Rina. Back in Los Angeles, there wasn’t a good way to involve her unless she was part of the plot. In a small town like Greenbury, with limited resources, the police and Decker will use any help available. While she doesn’t do actual police work, she can do peripheral things like researching people. And if the universities are involved, because Rina works at the colleges, she has an ear that Decker doesn’t have. I think the limited partnership in detective work is just one aspect in the partnership in marriage. The only problems might be if Rina overextends herself, which she has been known to do.*

J.B.V.: Much of this story is set against the backdrop of a college campus. Why is this setting particularly ripe for storytelling—and what are the unique challenges of capturing the ambiance of such an institution?

F.K.: *College says so much about today’s youth. Also, it’s young kids who are away from home and that makes them vulnerable to all sorts of mischief. And while the colleges are not microcosms of the country, the setting is a unique opportunity to do an extension of the “locked room” mysteries because college is a confined environment. Also, like McAdams, it gives some youth to the series.*

J.B.V.: It’s not a spoiler to say that this book features a serial killer. What do you hope to convey about the nature of such criminals (and their crimes)?

F.K.: *Criminals come in all sizes, shapes, sexes and intellectual capacities. Serial killers have more in common with each other than they do with any other external factor. These people are incapable of empathy or sympathy. The only remorse? They were caught.*

J.B.V.: Your husband is the novelist Jonathan Kellerman. In what ways do you influence one another creatively—and are there any survival techniques that you’d like to impart on the younger generation of artsy cohabitators?

F.K.: *My rule of thumb is going to sound hopelessly old-fashioned. The partner ALWAYS comes first. Creativity may come and creativity may go, but a sympathetic ear is forever.*

To learn more about Faye, please check out her website where she keeps her fans updated at <http://fayekellerman.net>. ■

BONE BOX

By Faye Kellerman

What unfolds into a huge mystery begins with a very simple morning hike in upstate New York. Talk about a beautiful location, Rina Lazarus is having one of those “good days” that people dream about. Of course, the beauty of the woodland trail falls apart completely when Rina just happens to fall over a pile of human remains. Who’s she gonna call? Exactly. Her husband, Police Detective Peter Decker.

In seconds, the trail turns into a crime scene. It becomes even worse when it’s discovered that this body was apparently taken out by its killer years ago, which means any evidence is most likely long gone by now.

The skeleton proves to be a youthful one, which eventually leads Decker and his partner, Tyler McAdams, in the direction of students who have gone missing over time from the local Five Colleges of Upstate; a college that just happens to be the workplace of Rina Lazarus. As Peter and his partner delve further into the case, they not only identify the victim but even more skeletons are found in the area.

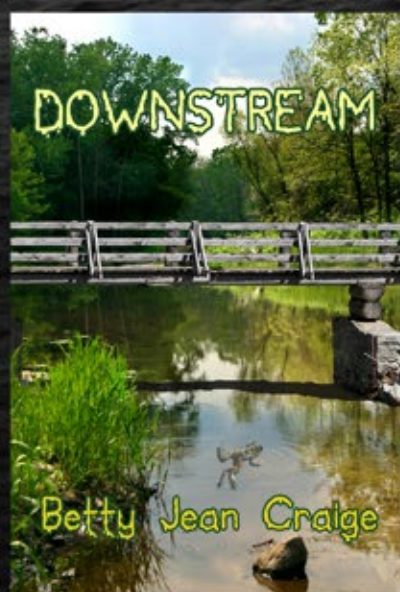
This is definitely not a one-time psycho, as more students continue to be found in the depths of the woods. As the town of Greenbury is very small, and the detectives are not welcome, poking around in the college isn’t the best idea. Therefore, Decker asks his wife to help act as a go-between and see what she can overhear within the institution’s walls. As the three of them start viewing the ‘usual suspects,’ they find that small-town folks are not very helpful. Even worse, as they search to find this psycho killer, that same person is still in the area looking for his next collegiate victim.

Faye Kellerman has continued to produce incredible books in this series. The details are vivid, the mystery is almost impossible to figure out, and the characters of Decker and Lazarus are still one of the coolest married couples in fiction.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

THE WITHERSTON MURDER MYSTERY SERIES

Georgia writer Betty Jean Craige sets her three tales of murder in the southern Appalachian town of Witherston, twenty miles north of Dahlonega, where Cherokees lived peacefully for a thousand years before the Georgia Gold Rush of 1828. There, Detective Mev Arrollo solves a series of mysteries with the aid of her teenage sons Jaime and Jorge, her husband Paco, and her Aunt Lottie, an eccentric historian who writes a column in the local online newspaper.



DOWNSTREAM

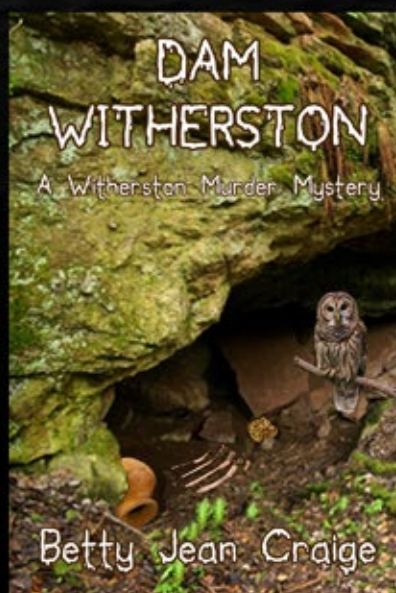
(2014)

Wealthy centenarian Francis Hearty Withers promises the 4,000 Witherston residents \$1 billion if they support his drug factory. Environmentalists protest the pharmaceutical pollution of the town's water. Withers vows to disinherit them. Before he changes his will, he dies.

FAIRFIELD'S AUCTION

(2016)

An antiques dealer auctions off Cherokee artifacts, plus a talkative African Grey parrot. In a blizzard, the parrot disappears and two people die. The town is snowbound.



DAM WITHERSTON

NEW!

The mayor's proposal to create a recreational lake motivates the discovery of two interracial murders: one in the twenty-first century of an individual with Cherokee heritage and another one in the nineteenth century. DNA analysis helps solve both crimes.

The WITHERSTON MURDER MYSTERIES
from Betty Jean Craige





DAY OF SECRETS

By Daryl Wood Gerber

CHAPTER 1

December, Present Day

I charged into the Outreach Hostel, my adrenaline jacked up from the hectic ride after the sit-in at the university. My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. It had to be Reggie, ready to chew me out. I shrugged out of my wet raincoat and scanned the foyer for her. She wasn't waiting with a sledghammer. Lucky me. *The guys in the art therapy class need normalcy, Chase*, she had said on more than one occasion. Like I didn't know. Like I hadn't been the poster boy for post-traumatic stress disorder once upon a time, not that it was ever documented. *You're their art teacher, the adult*. Did she care that I wasn't a trained therapist? Not on a bet. Because art therapy had helped me, she believed that I, a history professor and former Navy lieutenant, was gifted enough to teach the veterans at the hostel how to conquer what ate them up inside. I do my darnedest every Saturday, but face it, I am adequate at best. No one at the de Young Museum is pining for my artwork.

My cell phone rang again. *Pleading*. I ignored it while racing down the hall to the art therapy room, catching my reflection in a window as I passed. Yes, I looked ragtag. Yes, I had bags under my eyes thanks to an all-nighter grading term papers. Yes, my forehead was pinched. But at least my hair was finger-combed and my tie was straight. Reggie would have to take me as I am. If I hadn't had yet another run-in with the dean of students this afternoon, maybe I would look decent. How was the guy always able to track me down as I was leaving campus? Did he have built-in sonar? What was it about my political views that irked him? Okay, sure, I was a left of his right, but c'mon.

I darted into the art therapy room and drew to a halt, shoulders squared, chin up. The space was a hollowed-out hull. No amenities; all white and sparse. Reggie claimed that in order to clear out the mind, the environment needed to be clutter-free. She hadn't earned a therapist's license, but long story short, she would give her life for veterans. A board spanned the wall on the far side of the room—the *teaching wall*. Sheets of white paper were pinned to the board. Easels were set with brushes, paints, and a tin can filled with water.

Eight veterans, wearing white smocks over various stages of dress, were sitting on chairs set in a semi-circle. If they didn't stay seated, Reggie Ramirez—Regina the Queen—a Latina to the vets—wouldn't let them paint.

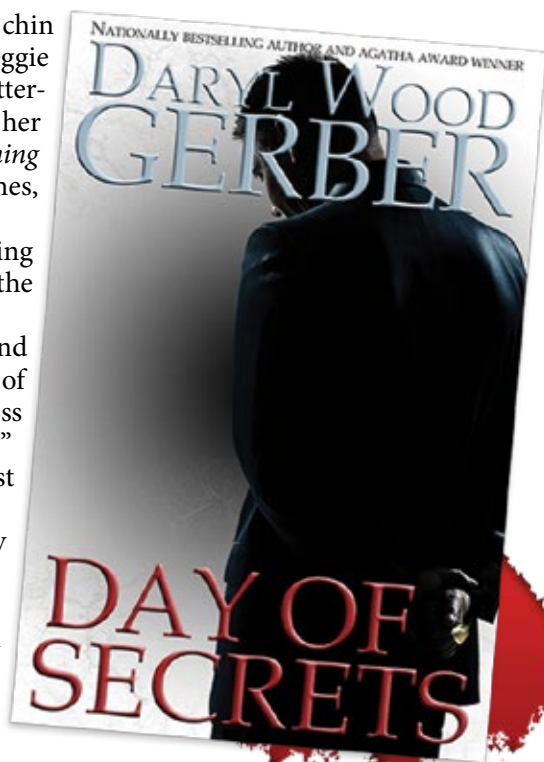
A thickset guy who sneaked sweets from the hostel's kitchen spotted me and raised his hand. He eyed Reggie, who was leaning against the rear wall, cascades of brown curly hair pulled forward over her shoulders, muscular arms folded across her ample chest. She nodded. The guy proceeded. "Why are you late, Blue Eyes?"

"A day late and a dollar short," a longhaired veteran joked. "Get it? His last name is Day. He's a *day* late."

The other vets sniggered. I grinned. I had been working with them for nearly three years. They were on the mend, which did my heart proud.

"Ahem," Reggie said, her mouth twitching at the corners as she tried to maintain her stern demeanor. "Welcome, Chase. Let's get started." No mention of my tardiness. No ribbing about my thirty-six-year-old body looking worse for wear. She would get me alone later and trash me. Gee, I couldn't wait.

I hung my coat on a rack and set my briefcase on the floor. At the same



time, my cell phone pinged. Whoever had been hounding me before had left a voicemail. Reggie gave me the evil eye. I ignored the call. "Where's Kimo?" I donned a smock. The scent of bleach clung to the fabric. "He left the campus before I did."

Reggie smirked. "Lost, no doubt."

"He doesn't get lost."

"I'm here, bro." Kimo Cho strode in and hung his umbrella on the rack. Then he set his briefcase on an empty chair and loosened his tie. He stood a little over six feet, same as me, but there the comparison ended. He was as brawny as a Hawaiian warrior god; I had a leaner athletic build. His hair was black; mine, a dusty brown. "A student consultation ran long."

"A likely story," Reggie said.

"Can it, beautiful. I'm here out of the goodness of my heart." *Translation*—my best friend had a thing for Reggie something fierce, and he had come to class to try, yet again, to woo her with his magnanimous spirit. Not every volunteer is altruistic. He took up the duty of handing out paintbrushes. "Hey, Chase, Christmas Eve dinner. You up for it? My pretty cousin will be there."

"No."

"Are you going to spend it alone again?"

"Let's talk later." Now wasn't the time. Never was better. Ever since I was five, when my mom died on Christmas, I'd hated everything about the holiday. People laughing in the malls. Carolers. TV specials. My nightmares were plagued with creepy animated reindeer and exploding ornaments. Art therapy—it helps.

"You've been date-less how long, Chase?" a vet asked.

"Long," Kimo said, answering for me while stretching out his arms to demonstrate. He knew me better than anyone. We went to high school and college together. We even joined the Navy via Naval Reserves Officer Training Corps, aka NROTC, at the same time. Neither of us considered the Navy a calling—we wanted to *see the world*—but our *lead or be led* attitudes took us far. Both of us went on to become officers. My stint in the Navy made me take war seriously. I needed to understand who and why. Subsequently, I became an expert in the field. Kimo liked what I had become, so after he was asked to leave the Navy—career would have been in his cards if he could've reigned in his temper—he went to grad school, became a history professor, and lo and behold, wound up at Weyford University, like me.

My cell phone pinged again. I picked up a paintbrush and dipped it in red paint. "Okay, fellas, let's get that junk inside our damaged skulls on the canvas today." I made a bold diagonal swoosh on the white paper taped to the teaching board.

The veteran students copied the move.

"Paint your heart," I said. "If it's family you're thinking about, put them on the paper. If you're feeling like you can't talk to someone, paint his mouth closed. Remember, as Napoleon Hill said, 'Man alone has the power to transform his thoughts into physical reality.'" During high school, at my grandmother's insistence, I had taken therapeutic art classes designed for orphaned kids. The therapist, like my

grandmother, had loved spouting inspirational quotes. Hundreds of them were emblazoned in my brain. Do they help? Sometimes.

A frail veteran raised his hand. "My father doesn't recognize me, Chase. How do I paint that?"

"Make him blind," a buddy shouted.

I made another swipe on my canvas and thought of my own father. I had never met him. Would I recognize him if I ran into him? Did I care? I used to.

Kimo joined me and glanced over his shoulder to see if Reggie was gazing at his Grade A rear end. She wasn't; she had left the room. I mouthed: *Loser*. He smirked then said, "How are you doing since the run-in with the dean?"

"Don't get me started." Weyford, which wasn't far from Stanford University, used to pride itself on offering a cutting-edge education. The dean's policies were: *Restrict fun* and *Enforce regimen*.

"I heard he had a heart attack as he was dressing you down. I also heard you saved him by using good old mouth-to-mouth."

"Nasty rumors. No heart attack. No mouth-to-mouth. Just a spirited faceoff. Though if I'd had to revive him, I would have." At least I'd like to believe I would have.

"Ooh-rah." Kimo toured the room, freshening paint water and switching out paintbrushes.

When the art therapy class ended, and before Kimo left in search of Reggie, he and I made plans for the weekend. If he didn't score with her—and he wouldn't—we would hang out, drink beer, and play basketball or video games. In the past, both of us had roamed bars; both had engaged in mindless sex with faceless beauties. We didn't choose to any longer. When the time was right, we would find the women of our dreams. Maybe. I had demons; he was picky.

On the drive home, my cell phone rang again. I hadn't listened to the voicemail left earlier. I inspected the readout: Blocked. Not Reggie or Kimo or the dean of students. I answered anyway. "Hello."

"Choochie?" a woman whispered.

My lungs constricted. The air around me turned thick. She was dead. She had died in the fire. And yet I knew the distinctive rasp of my mother's voice as well as my own. She was the only person who had ever called me *Choochie*—her little choo choo train.

"Come to the trailer. Quick. I need—"

The connection clicked off.

I stabbed Redial. No answer. ■

Agatha Award-winning and nationally bestselling author Daryl Wood Gerber ventures into the world of suspense again with her second stand-alone novel, "Day of Secrets." Daryl writes the bestselling Cookbook Nook Mysteries and will soon debut the new French Bistro Mysteries. As Avery Aames, she pens the bestselling Cheese Shop Mysteries. Fun tidbit: as an actress, Daryl appeared in Murder, She Wrote. She has also jumped out of a perfectly good airplane and hitchhiked around Ireland by herself.

Excerpted from "Day of Secrets" by Daryl Wood Gerber.

Drink to Death

By Judy Upton

Alcohol poisoning! Emily took a big gulp from her glass. She had expected the fortuneteller to give her the usual spiel about meeting someone tall, dark and handsome, not to tell her how she was going to die. In spite of being healthily cynical, it had got Emily rattled. So rattled, in fact, that she had stood up and walked straight out of the booth. When a few moments later, she decided to go back and confront the fortuneteller, the woman was already with the next customer, and refused to say any more—*unless* she booked another over-priced session. Emily had walked away. She didn't believe in this tosh anyway, and she now heartily regretted the impulsive act that had made her step into the booth on the end of the pier.

Alcohol poisoning indeed, Emily mused, taking another sip of her banana smoothie. Emily didn't drink alcohol. It wasn't through any religious objection or even reasons of health or fitness. She just didn't like the taste of the stuff. It had been at a cousin's wedding in Brighton, when she was aged seven, that Emily had taken her first gulp of wine. Wine must taste wonderful by the way everyone was smiling and laughing as they drank it. The child Emily was, however, in for an unpleasant surprise. She choked, she spluttered and she spat out the bitter vinegar, for vinegar it surely was. Now twenty-five years and three months later she had been informed that alcohol would be her eventual killer. Life could hardly get more bizarre.

At the library where Emily worked, her colleague Tom listened sympathetically as he loaded the photocopier with paper. Perhaps there was a drink that Emily hadn't tried yet, he suggested. One she would find fatally irresistible. The idea was certainly plausible. Perhaps she had been living her life unaware of the liquid elixir of personal pleasure that would bring about her doom. A quick trip to the nearest pub at lunchtime was called for.

Emily lifted the shot glass to her lips. It smelled interesting, sweet and perhaps a little like a barley sugar. When she tasted it, however, she was confronted by a taste she could more readily associate with engine oil.

"Same again, love?" asked the barman.

"Definitely not."

Back at the library Tom promised to take her out for a beer that evening. Emily agreed reluctantly. Tom had a habit of droning on incessantly in a monotone about the latest novel he'd just read, and these were always books about murderers. Until now Emily would, under no circumstances, have gone for a drink with Tom. She had often privately wondered if his interest in murder might signify something dark and unpleasant lurking beneath the genial librarian persona. Now that she knew she was to die from drink and not violence, Emily knew she had nothing to fear from his company. Perhaps Tom might turn out to be a bookish butcher, but she wasn't destined to be one of his victims. Not unless the foaming pint of beer now standing in front of her proved to be her undoing.

Emily could already smell the beer; in her glass, on Tom's breath, and in the air all around them. It smelled like unwashed socks. She gagged. Not even one pint of this lukewarm, foul concoction was finding its way down her throat. Shoving the beer glass aside she ordered an orange juice.

"I think I've been looking at this whole thing the wrong way, or rather thinking my glass is half empty rather than half full. Don't you see?"

Tom shook his head.

"It's a wakeup call." She explained, "None of us know what we'll die of, and it's certainly not worth worrying about. Up to now I've lived my life too safely, too timidly. Do you know what I'm saying?"

His expression suggested he did not.

"I gotta go, Tom."

He made a clumsy effort to kiss her on the cheek, which she skillfully avoided, although the unpleasant beery smell emanating from his lips was inescapable.

"See you tomorrow, Em."

She nodded and walked away. She wouldn't be going back to the library. She needed time out to rethink her life. A cautious, sensible, risk-free life was about to be radically re-assessed.

In one of those glossy free magazines that occasionally came through her door, Emily had seen an article that caught her interest. It was about skydiving.

"People!" Jake, the rugged instructor, boomed in his deep and seductively rough-edged voice, "Pay attention please. I suspect many of the new faces here today are imagining that they are somehow indestructible."

Emily felt herself blushing, though whether due to her proximity to a muscled man in a flying suit or the truth in his words, she was unsure.

"No one," Jake continued, "is indestructible. You could all get seriously hurt."

The only thing currently hurting was Emily's heart. In fact it was beating so fast she wondered if, as with the majority of her family, a fatal coronary was possible after all. Emily had been single for nearly six years; after her childhood sweetheart had decided he needed 'to experience more of life,' or to put it another way, experience the girl in the jewelers where he was supposed to be buying a ring. The bitter end of her near engagement had put Emily off relationships for a few years. Now, however, a dangerous, charismatic daredevil was what she craved, and as Jake approached to check her harness buckles with his big strong hands, she felt ready to take the plunge in more ways than one.

Emily's ears popped as the cold air rushed past her helmet. It was hard to keep her eyes open, but although Jake had told them all not to look down, it was impossible to resist. The weald of Kent below was a patchwork quilt of harmonizing greens and blues. Although it was rushing towards her, the squares growing so vast their edges blurred, she knew it offered her a safe, if hardly soft and gentle landing.

Suddenly Jake's hand was in hers as the group linked up mid-air. Emily felt she was approaching heaven rather than plummeting to earth. Then his fingers left hers, and they were all counting down to pulling their cords.

Slowly, gracefully, Emily drifted to the ground, legs skimming the top of the gently waving grasses. Then with a surprisingly hard bump, it was over.

Over, at least, until the next time.

Emily became a fixture at the skydiving club over the summer. By July she and Jake were dating. It was on Emily's twenty-third skydive that the problem happened. A strong headwind blew up from nowhere, catching the parachutes of the whole group and blowing them off course. Losing sight of the others, Emily heard an unfamiliar sound above and looked up to see a long tear in her parachute. Panicked, she released the emergency second chute. It was in time to slow her fall considerably but not soon enough to stop hers from being a violent landing.

'Snap!' Emily heard her left leg break and saw the bone puncture the skin. She had landed on concrete in some kind of industrial park. She moaned with pain, but then Jake was running towards her. He cradled her in his arms as he phoned for an ambulance.

"Oh baby, I was so worried. For a moment I thought you were going to land in one of the vats."

"Vats?" On the industrial estate were several large containers used to store chemicals, mainly cleaning fluids. It wasn't until later, in the hospital ward, Emily discovered from Jake that these liquids were made up largely of alcohol.

"I could have fallen in and got alcohol poisoning that way..."

"No babe, the doctor says you'd just have drowned."

After her operation, the surgeon told Emily she'd be in the hospital for several weeks. Emily was a good patient apart from the time a nurse tried to clean her wound with a swab dipped in pure alcohol.

Tom visited, bringing a few murder novels from the library, and decided to read one to her. The only thing to do was ignore his droning and think of Jake and skydiving while drifting off to sleep.

"Emily!" Jake screamed out, when his girlfriend's lips felt cold to his kiss. "Emily!" She was not asleep, but dead.

The doctors couldn't understand it. She had been sitting up in bed only an hour earlier with a friend reading to her. It wasn't until the inquest that it was discovered Emily's antibiotic drip bag had been replaced by one containing industrial alcohol.

Tom was arrested on his lunch break at the library, while reading one of his usual novels on serial killers. ■

THE VOLUNTEER

By Bill Surdenik

The whole thing was my wife, Laura's, idea to begin with. And at the time, even in those newly unpredictable days, I thought I saw what was coming.

That's when I met Dan Breyer, a volunteer at the career center she suggested eight months into my unemployment. My severance and benefits were on the cusp of running out and I needed help with my networking skills. I'd never had an ability to connect with people, to stand out and blow my own horn, and Dan was one of those strong people who could help me with that. It was his job.

We sat together in a room that felt much too small. I have claustrophobia anyway but it didn't help that each wall was no more than ten feet away on each side. I sat on a swivel chair as he took his sturdier seat across the little desk, a solid job with thick wooden legs. Dan Breyer wasn't an intimidating man; average height with thinning hair, about fifty years old. His clothes were casual and worn, tennis shoes on his feet, and the lenses of his glasses were thick and yellowed like old newspaper.

He opened a manila folder and looked over my file. I'd provided fifteen years of job history, recommendations, and what few awards I'd received. He remarked on the college I went to. "Good engineering school there," he said. "If you'd been an engineer, you'd have a job right now." The remark stung, but I didn't argue.

This was my first impression.

The ensuing thirty minutes stood still; not wearing a watch, I quickly realized that there was no clock in the room. I listened as he talked, tuning in and out, like watching someone tread water in a swimming pool. Boredom turned to irritation as his lecturing tone became abrasive and finally abusive. By the time our session mercifully came to an end, he shared his conclusions with me—conclusions that I only now understand fully. He said I had bad habits. I wasn't assertive. I spoke unevenly. And most importantly, I would never find a new job without serious rehabilitation.

This was humiliation. This was not help. Privately, I cursed Laura.

"Well, thanks for your time," I said out of polite habit. He only grinned and leaned back in his chair. He had the smug look of a schoolyard bully who'd just pocketed another kid's lunch money. I shook his hand, again out of habit.

Walking past the front desk I was greeted with the same pleasant, youthful face of the receptionist. She began to wish me a good afternoon but I cut her off, leaning toward her to speak more privately.

"Look, I don't know who thought it was a good idea..." I began, and the pleasantries on the young woman's face soured into the sincerest empathy. I told her in my best attempt at objectivity how I'd just been verbally abused by one of the people they'd hired to provide guidance and encouragement in a difficult time. The woman in the nearby office working at her computer, her door open, glanced my way but didn't rise from her seat. I was speaking quietly enough that she didn't know exactly what it was about, but there was one person who surely did. As I stood up straight, the receptionist beginning her profuse but discreet apology, I noticed Dan Breyer standing in the doorway of his office not thirty feet away. His hands were shoved in his pockets, his eyes like lasers on mine.

He won't be instructing any other candidates, was the sentence that caught my eye, plain and definitive. It was a heartfelt email from the office manager at the career center, an outpouring of apology that I could tell was primarily meant to retain me as a member, but all I cared about was that one line.

It wasn't long after, however, that another email arrived in my inbox. There was no name associated to the address. The

body of the message itself was just one ambiguous line, but still unsettling. *You should've kept your mouth shut.*

I reread it more times than I can remember. It seemed impossible that it could even be there in my inbox. After an hour or so of fixating, I picked up the phone and dialed Colin. He was one of the few college friends I had who wasn't an engineer—one of those guys Dan Breyer was certain were so much better than me. Colin was a police sergeant. He'd been a cop his whole life.

He arrived a few hours later, still ahead of Laura coming home from work. That was lucky. I didn't need her wondering why Colin was at the house in the middle of the day if it wasn't for dinner or a ballgame on TV. She knew Colin well, but still thought of him first as a cop, not a friend.

The first thing he did was read the email. He sat at my desk and did some technical digging through some code attached to the message. He was trying to track whatever trail there was to follow, but after just a minute or two gave up.

"Tell me about this guy," he said, turning away from the monitor. I first pictured and verbalized Dan Breyer's physical appearance as though I was describing a suspect to any random policeman who'd turned up at my house responding to a 911 call. Colin was polite enough to nod through my ramblings, never interrupting me. My edginess was obvious and it didn't take a cop's intuition to pick it up. Finally I got to the meat of it; what he'd said that sent me to the front desk, my struggle to contain my temper, feeling my fingers trembling and my breath shortening.

When Colin scoffed I felt my stomach twist.

"Even if it is him," he said, "he's just messing with you."

"Colin, he has all my information in that file. Not just my email but my address, my phone number, names of my coworkers and former bosses."

"He's not going to do anything," he assured.

"What about the email?"

"He's just messing with you."

"How do you know that?"

Colin shook his head. "If it'll make you feel any better," he said, and I already did, "I'll run a check on this guy and see what I turn up. Okay?"

Yes, it was okay. Knowledge is power, after all. When he left I closed my email and shut down the computer. I'd had my fill of messages and couldn't concentrate on my job search. When Laura came home we prepared dinner together and I said nothing about the email or the incident at the career center, or Colin's visit. She asked me about my day and I lied about every bit of it.

Over the weekend the email became an obsession. I didn't look at it again but never deleted it, and while Colin was doing his digging I made the decision to do a little detective work of my own at the career center.

I showed up Monday morning and went to the office of that particular manager who'd sent me the initial email, the same who'd eavesdropped on my complaint to the receptionist.

She repeated her apology with no less conviction than her written version, and I reassured her that this little incident hadn't soured my opinion of the center. I felt like some kind of VIP, one of the clients my old boss had sucked up to with steak dinners and tickets to NBA games. Once that nonsense was out of the way, I began probing. Without mentioning the anonymous email, I inquired about Dan Breyer, conveying nothing more than perfectly understandable curiosity.

"He worked in security, I think," she said, generically. Security, as a guard in uniform with a weapon on his hip... a former cop? I didn't press and didn't get much more. She seemed very much aware of the appropriateness of what she shared and was careful not to overstep any bounds. He'd joined the center shortly after I became a member, something I found particularly coincidental. It was clear, even if it wasn't spoken outright by either of us that she was uncomfortable saying anything more. So I thanked her and left it alone.

I sat through the ensuing session, tuning out the instructor, paying no mind to any of my fellow attendees, watching the little window in the closed door and waiting to see Dan Breyer's head float past. Even worse, I imagined seeing his eyes staring the way they had after our session. Of course I wouldn't, it was just nagging weakness and paranoia, but still I felt sure that it was as inevitable as my turn to speak.

I stepped outside into the parking lot afterward and found two text messages on my phone. One was from Colin. *Any more emails?* I wrote back, *No*. The second message was from Laura, a quick check-in about the session. She still didn't know about Dan Breyer or the email. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her, and I had no desire to make her feel guilty. After all, she'd recommended the career center to begin with after I'd spent months struggling. She'd tried to help me. Dan Breyer was my problem.

When I arrived home the house was dark; all the lights were turned off as I'd left them, and the newly overcast sky was blocking natural light from the windows. The sight of the house, dark and empty in the middle of the day, always depressed me, a sight I couldn't get used to if I tried. I should've been in a noisy, bright, crowded office with people chattering and

phones ringing and fingers clacking on keyboards. I should've been counting the minutes until five when I'd shut down and head to the parking garage to brave the traffic I hated so much. I would've gladly sat in five eight-hour days of traffic rather than come home to a dark and empty house even one more time.

My phone buzzed again just as I set it down on the kitchen table. There was another email and as I opened the inbox, I recognized the address: no name, no identity. My breath stopped and my eyes couldn't blink as my thumb hovered over the bold letters. I pressed.

You're a dead man.

I dropped the phone on the edge of the table and heard it clatter to the floor as I hurried to the doors, front and back, to make sure they were locked. I went upstairs and checked every window, peering out of each one, feeling suddenly imprisoned. I returned to the kitchen, snatched the phone up off the floor and dialed Colin.

He arrived several hours later just ahead of Laura again. I did nothing all the rest of the day, didn't even eat. I couldn't. I had a hard time staying still so I paced the house from window to window.

"I really think we should call the police," I said.

He was holding my phone, looking down at the screen.

"Just a minute," he said.

"He's not just messing with me anymore," I said, admittedly hysterical. "This is a death threat, for god's sake."

"I found out a few things about our friend here," Colin said. I'd somehow completely forgotten his promise when he'd left several days before. That he'd see what he could find out about Dan Breyer.

"He used to be a cop over in Gorman. Took an early, early retirement, which is to say he was forced out. He's got a prior for assault about four years back, and I'm guessing he didn't tell the career center about that little hiccup."

"So, he is dangerous," I said.

Colin nodded, conceding. "Possibly, but I don't think we should go to the cops."

Before I could object he cut me off with a raised hand.

"If we do, the most we'll get is a restraining order that won't do much about a loose cannon ex-cop. If he's really got it in for you, he's not about to play nice. Trust me. I think I should handle this myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I got his address and I was able to find out where he works." It was clear he had no intention of sharing any of it with me, but I still felt better. After all, he was better equipped to handle something like this. I'd never picked a fight, and had run away from my share.

For the first time since we'd been married Laura wasn't home for dinner. She didn't answer my calls and there were no more text messages. The house became dark and quiet. I couldn't turn on the TV or make a phone call except to Laura's cell, and I couldn't focus on anything else. It seemed like if I just remained quiet she'd emerge like nothing was wrong.

When my phone finally rang I didn't recognize the number. I hesitated but picked up in time to preempt voicemail.

"Missing something?" the voice said before I could say hello. It was familiar but in a vague, distant way. Somehow I didn't place it at first.

"Who is this?"

"I asked you a question."

Now I knew, and my back suddenly felt like a cold metal rod had been driven in, like a spear into the linoleum. I couldn't move and the air felt suddenly thick. It was Dan Breyer.

"I've spoken to the police," I said.

"Oh? Is that supposed to scare me?"

"What do you want?"

"Let's get back to my question."

Missing something? Yes, I was. But I didn't want to say Laura's name, or even the word 'wife.' My mind refused to even put her and Dan Breyer together.

"Hello..." he said.

"Yes, I'm missing something."

"How'd a loser like you get such a pretty lady?"

He was taunting me again, just like in his office. Only now it wasn't about speaking skills and charisma but about the woman who hadn't come home for dinner.

"What do you want?" It was all I could think to say.

"Good. Assertive," he said. "It seems you learned something after all."

He was enjoying this. I was back in his office for another lesson in his superiority, looking through yellowed glasses into

his sullied eyes. He was measuring his words, taking his time. The uncertainty weighed on me as he knew it would. Yet there was something else underneath, something that wasn't there in our initial meeting, the first and last time we ever met. There was an undertone of nervousness. He was relishing this cat-and-mouse but not as much as he wanted to.

"I've got her driver's license right here," he said. "Good picture. Would you like me to read her info to you?"

"No."

"Five foot six," he said. "Hundred and thirty five pounds, hair red, eyes..."

"Shut up!"

The outburst stunned even me; it exhausted me, like I'd suddenly broken into a sweaty panic attack. My legs were unstable like the swivel chair in his office and I felt like I needed to sit down on the floor. My mouth was sandy and my chest was tight.

"Very assertive," he said with undaunted, mocking laughter as I struggled to catch my breath. I wished that I could hand the phone off to Colin. I wished I wasn't alone. I remember my head turning toward the front door, my eyes tearing up, wishing like hell that Laura's key would open the lock and she'd arrive home. Of course, none of that happened. If it had I wouldn't be telling you all of this right now.

"Have I made myself clear?" he went on. I said nothing.

"Have I made you mad?" he said.

"What do you want?" I repeated.

"I want you to answer my questions."

"Yes. We're clear."

"Good. Now, this is what you're going to do..."

Thirty minutes later I was driving. Laura hadn't come home. Somehow I thought maybe she still would, that Dan Breyer had been bluffing. I talked to him no more than five minutes after he began to issue his instructions, but after ending the call I was quick to make another one to Colin. I told him every word, every detail I'd written down or could remember before pen and paper entered the picture.

I gave him the address and the time I'd been told. Breyer wanted me to meet him at an apartment building in Gorman, no more than twenty minutes from my house. It was chilling to imagine him eating and sleeping so close to where I ate and slept. Colin agreed to meet me at the address but told me not to go into the house until he found me. He told me exactly where to park. Said he'd find me. He'd wave me down. I should follow him into the building and let him do the talking. He'd even the playing field—let Dan Breyer know who he was messing with. I felt better. Even knowing that Laura had been taken, that she was being held by a lunatic, that she may not even be alive, I still managed to relax in a way that's only conceivable in such a situation.

I found the intersection Colin had told me and parked. I switched off my lights, my engine, and waited. I didn't see Colin at first, but I was a few minutes early. When he emerged from around the corner of the building kitty-corner to the apartments, the home of my wife's kidnapper, I felt myself relax again, actually managing a breath that filled my lungs. He stopped at the corner, looked straight at me through the windshield and held up his hand before continuing across the street. That was my signal. I opened the door and started after him as he pretended not to know me, stepping up onto the curb at the corner outside Dan Breyer's building.

The whole thing was very cloak-and-dagger, like a spy operation out of a movie, and I might've been able to find some enjoyment in it if I hadn't been so terrified. On the drive, I'd imagined every nightmarish outcome. It seemed impossible that someone wouldn't end up dead, and even fantasizing about that person being Dan Breyer, I still felt nauseous at the prospect. This wasn't something I could be a part of. Things like this didn't happen to people like me, if they happened to anyone at all in real life. I felt several times like I might need to pull over and throw up, but never did. There was something much bigger than my nerves and my stomach at stake.

The enormity of the courtyard made me uneasy as I walked through the gated entryway, but Colin never broke pace. He walked casually, like someone coming home while I stayed at least a hundred feet behind. I felt like I was walking into a cage where there was already one trapped animal.

Then, as I continued toward the glass-paned door, Colin stopped outside of it and waited. He never turned toward me but just stood as I approached. As I came within spitting distance he pushed open the door and held it for me, but he only spoke once we were both inside and the door was closed. Mailboxes and buzzers were to our left, a glass-paned security door directly ahead of us.

"What's his name again?" he said, looking over the names on the buzzers. I told him and he pressed the button, holding a finger up to his lips. He would do the talking.

When the security door buzzed open, I was shocked. There was no greeting through the little speaker. No, "Hello, who is it?" Then again, a greeting was unnecessary. The man on the other end of the button wasn't expecting anyone else, but still it seemed impulsive for a man like the one I'd just spoken to on the phone.

Colin went ahead of me through the door and again I followed. He said nothing and never turned to look at me as we walked down the dim, carpeted hallway. As we walked, I watched the numbers on the doors sail past, counting up in my head, and the closer we got to the number corresponding to Dan Breyer's name on the buzzer, the more the sick feeling returned to my stomach. When Colin finally stopped, I was sure I'd double over.

He held his finger to his lips again, and reached inside his jacket, turning to look back over his shoulder. There was no one else in the hall so he drew his gun. I stood at least ten feet back from the door as his hand went to the knob.

As shocked as I was when the security door magically opened, I was completely staggered when the apartment door opened as if by force of Colin's will. My instinct was to turn and run. Fight or flight as they say, and even with an armed police officer with me I felt hopelessly overmatched. But as the door creaked open Colin beckoned to me for the first time. I didn't move. I couldn't. As confused and scared as I was, my clearest memory was a torrent of shame. Here I was in this strange place at the demand of a monster, my missing wife very possibly on the other side of that open door, and I was leaving it to another man to get her back as I stood like a frozen coward.

"Come on," he said in a harsh whisper. And I did. As if in replacement of any will of my own, my legs began to work at the sound of his voice. He nudged the door further, and as I stepped into the doorway the only thing in the world became the body. Not the old, stained furniture, not the smell of grease from the kitchen stovetop around the corner, not even Laura, but the body of a man face down on the floor. For a few fleeting seconds it was the only thing.

"Laura," I said, lifting my head. And just as I did, before I could say another word or whiff the awful smell of the blood that had pooled under the body, the blow came down on my head, and then everything went black.

So now, here I sit. The memory of that courtyard with its wrought-iron gate, that feeling of walking into a cage, is almost an affectionate one. It was no cage at all. It's the last time I was free. That's irony, I guess. My trial continues but I know how it's going to end. I hear the words in court and see the faces of the jury. I can see what's coming, not like before with the volunteer, Dan Breyer. Life's become predictable again.

I almost feel sorry for Breyer, but only *almost*. Whether or not he deserved to die, to be that body on the floor of his own apartment, isn't a question I bother to ask anymore. It doesn't matter what anyone deserves. It certainly doesn't with me. I don't deserve to be in this place, sitting next to an attorney in a courtroom to hear the case argued about whether or not I murdered Dan Breyer. He was just a decoy, a pawn being used to distract me from a much bigger picture, one I couldn't even see.

But, of course I didn't kill him. You know that. But at the same time I'm sure I don't have to tell you how bad this looks. I filed a complaint against him at the career center. I went to his apartment and was found by police with his body. And to top it all off, he was killed with my gun—the one Laura and I had kept on our closet shelf for protection, the gun I'd never fired in my life. Not even for target practice. There were no other prints on it but mine. But if you didn't know me, if you were just a spectator, or worse, one of those poor saplings in the jury box being manipulated by lawyers, you wouldn't believe me.

I was upset, obviously, to be woken with such a headache only to have handcuffs clapped on me and thrown into the back of a police cruiser with nothing to stop the pain. Cops aren't quick to offer aspirin to murder suspects. Later, in the interrogation room, when they asked who hit me—who I thought hit me—I stupidly, naively said, I wasn't sure. But I'm as sure about it as anything now. It was Colin.

It was also Colin, probably, who made the anonymous call to the police, and it was probably also Colin who shot Dan Breyer with my gun before I arrived at the apartment building to meet him. I can't imagine Laura doing such a thing, shooting a stranger in cold blood. But, then again, I never really knew her like I thought I did.

She and Colin have disappeared. Actually, the exact phrasing in regards to Colin is that they're "having difficulty locating a Colin Donner." But then, why would the ones who conspired so elegantly against me hang around to assist in my defense? Excuse me if I have a laugh at the dark humor of it, but if I don't laugh these days I find myself crying profusely. I'm afraid this is one of those clichéd frame-up jobs. Sounds paranoid to you, I know, but there's no other way the pieces fit together.

My lawyer has some pretty decent investigator friends and they were able to find out that Dan Breyer was an ex-cop, just as Colin said. I'm sure the two of them go back a long while, probably all the way to the Academy. They probably had a good time cooking up this little scheme, at least until it went south for Mr. Breyer.

My official defense is temporary insanity. I'm still not sure why. I don't think it's a very compelling argument, but my lawyer seems to think so. In light of irrelevancies, like the incident that led to me losing my job and my struggle with abuse of certain substances and the record of Laura's 911 calls and all that stuff...I don't know. Whatever works, I guess. But I'm not crazy. I'm not a liar. I didn't dream all this up. The prosecutor actually has the nerve to suggest that I not only murdered Dan Breyer but also killed Laura and hid her somewhere. How ridiculous.

I still get headaches, splitting ones like the one I had the night I was arrested. I have no memory of getting them before, or of blacking out. I never used to. That's what I tell my defense team. This is all just a frame-up.

I know *you* believe that. ■

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