

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

SPRING 2020

Inspired by Actual Events  
with Douglas Preston

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Stellar Rays:  
The Fashion for Chandler

**JANET ROGERS**

Get a Sneak Peek with

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*A Wealth of Writers!*

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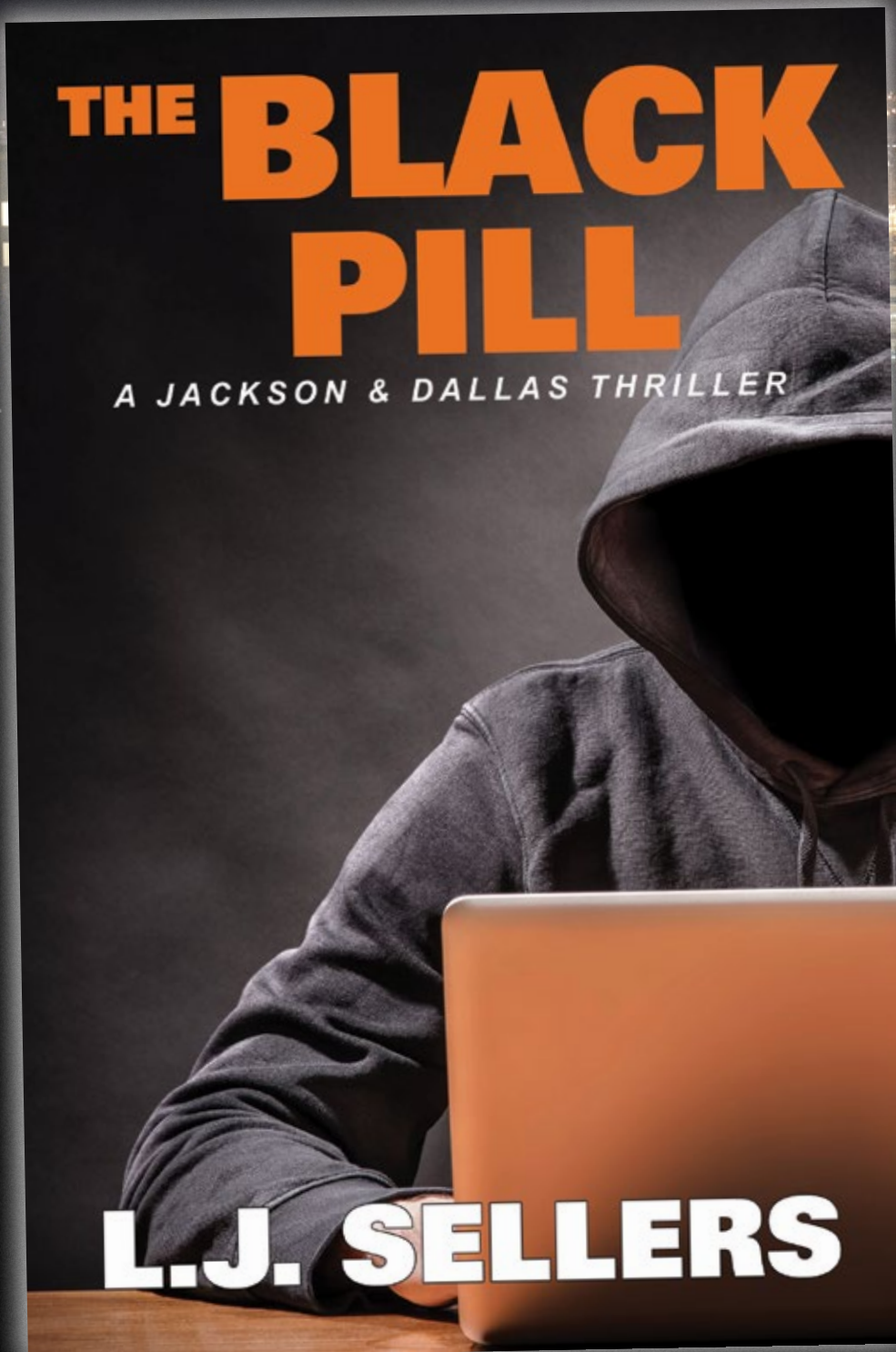
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Welcome to 2020! I know we are through the first quarter already and, man...did time fly by!

I would like to start by saying we are deeply saddened to hear of the sudden passing of thriller master Clive Cussler at age 88. Clive will be missed by all of us in the book world. His first book was published in 1973, with the emergence of his main character, Dirk Pitt. In total, Clive published twenty-five *Dirk Pitt* novels, who became one of the most popular

characters in the publishing world. Clive also had other series that featured co-authors. It started in 1999, when *The NUMA Files* was born with author Paul Kempreco. From there, incredible series came about with *The Oregon Files*, *Isaac Bell Adventures* and *The Fargo Adventures*.

This leads me to the subject of my letter.... When Lee Child announced that he would no longer write the *Jack Reacher* series, and turned the reins over to his brother, Andrew, that got me thinking: At what point does the character overtake the author in popularity? I think that when a series is made into a successful movie, like *Jack Reacher* (2012), the character enters households that might not read books at all, but now they know Reacher. Of course, in our world, Lee Child is still the brain behind the character, but for many, Jack Reacher is now known and Lee Child isn't. Another is Harry Potter. I believe it's reasonable to assume that Harry Potter is much bigger than JK Rowling. During our exclusive interview with Andrew Grant, who'll pen the next *Jack Reacher* book with Lee Child, we spoke about our favorite co-authors and the series they created. The first one I remember is "The Talisman" by Stephen King and Peter Straub; they continued their "team" effort with the sequel, "Black House." I also mentioned "Final Option"—the latest Clive Cussler book (with author Boyd Morrison) that I feel is the best in the series. And, of course, James Patterson who helped launch the career of Andrew Gross when they co-authored the *Women's Murder Club* series, among others.

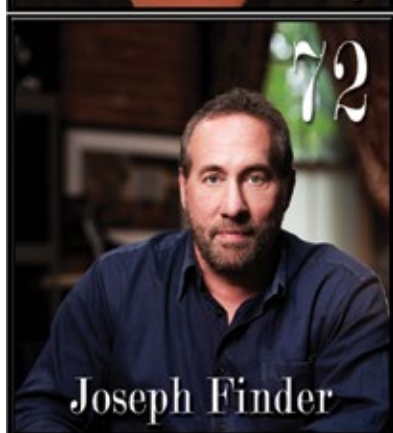
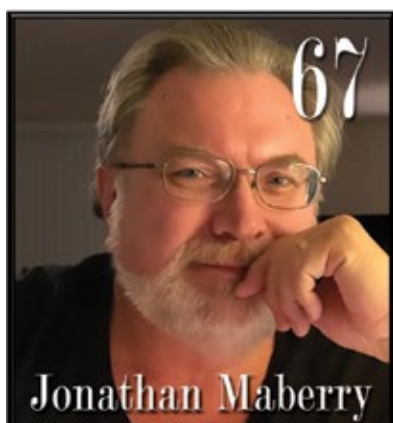
I think that Cussler's series will continue, like Clancy and Vince Flynn, because they're too popular and the publisher won't want to stop them. I wouldn't be shocked to see more and more authors make their character more of a "brand" and spin off different series as they slow down in their writing. Email us some of your favorites, or some of the series that have stopped that you would like to see come back. While you do that, enjoy the issue and we will see you again in the summertime.

John Raab  
CEO/Publisher  
*Suspense Magazine* ■



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# THE MOST

By G. Wayne Ashbee

I did it just like she asked, after she paid me, cash; total upfront. The twenty large bought her a body to look at—her husband's. I guess you could call him the “ex-husband” now.

“Where is he...it?”

“In the trunk of my car. Are you sure you want to see...it?” I was mocking her. She deserved it.

“It's not that I don't trust you. You came highly recommended, so I know you did the job. Like your agency said, ‘whoever pays you first.’ ”

“It's not my agency. I'm strictly solo—the agency is just for referrals.”

I had parked my car in the alley at the back of her townhouse—a three-story Georgian, red brick, set in a row of other expensive houses. Kinda' reminded me of that famous street in Boston. What was the name of that...? Doesn't matter. I had already checked the alley for CCTV cameras, so I had no hesitation about popping the trunk.

She was a looker, all right. In her 40s, mid-40s maybe. Never can tell with these society babes. Their money—their husband's money—buys them several years from the best plastic docs.

“Let's get this over with,” she said.

“Don't want to grab a quick pick-me-up before we do the looksee?”

I was flirtin' with her—thought she might want a little sexual release of that post-homicide tension. But she didn't want anything to do with me that she hadn't already paid for. I was not in her class; probably bangin' her skin stretcher while angling for a free boob lift.

Anyway, that wouldn't be right of me. I do have ethics; you have to in my line of work.

#

An hour earlier I had met her husband in the kitchen of a restaurant he owned—one of four, she said—a tony kind of place where the entrée is three forkfuls of some green and yellow stuff with a red liquid drizzled along the edge of a square white plate; food you never heard of and wouldn't try to pronounce.

The restaurant was closed, and all the staff had left hours before I arrived. I didn't like the guy the minute I laid eyes on him, which was not such a bad thing considering the matter at hand. It wasn't the expensive bespoke wool and silk blend suit or the gelled hair, lookin' like he was a wannabe gangster or a casino table dealer—no, it was something else. I couldn't put my finger exactly on it, but I could see why she wanted him gone. He thought he was better than her. You know, like he had more class. But even if he did have more class, he didn't have to remind her of it all the time. He was the type of jerk that would do that. I can always tell.

People like them rubbed me raw. Neither of them had real class; you know, like when you've got so much money you could afford expensive champagne but drink Budweiser instead, from a martini glass.

He took the rubber-banded thirty thou from the pocket of his trousers, looked at it, and then looked at me. He had a smirk that told me I could have asked for more—and got it.

“Just like you asked. Thirty thousand in Benjamins—three hundred of them, no sequential serial numbers. Go ahead and count it; won’t hurt my feelings.”

“Naw, I trust you. Besides, I know where to find you if you shorted me.”

He laughed. I don’t know why; I wasn’t joking.

“I figured you would say something like that. Like you said, ‘Whoever pays you the most.’ So, are you going to fulfill our agreement tonight?”

“That would be correct,” I said, and then cut my eyes as if I was lookin’ over his shoulder at something—or somebody—behind him.

He turned his head to look; guess he didn’t trust me. He had reasons not to.

There was nothing behind him, but turnin’ his eyes away gave me time to pull my silenced .22 caliber semi-auto from my jacket’s inside breast pocket. Two quick ‘fwips’ behind his right ear and he was dead before he head-banged the stainless steel chef’s table on his way down to kiss the concrete floor.

#

I pressed the car’s key fob, the trunk lid making a clunking sound as the latch released. I took hold of the handle and opened the trunk, the light illuminating the husband’s face that was already the faded blue color of a winter sky. The wife just stood there, back to me, transfixed at the sight of the corpse; once a real guy, somebody she loved, I guess, made plans together for Caribbean vacations, holidays with family, that she had canoodled with under the warmth of an eiderdown comforter on her hand-carved Jacobean four-poster bed frame.

Yeah, I appreciate the finer things in life, too.

“Um, um, um,” she whispered. “I am so sorry, honey... that it had to end like this. Or, maybe not.”

She continued staring at him, silent-like; I guess for one of those lingering goodbyes. You know, the kind you see in one of them old black and white crime-don’t-pay flicks.

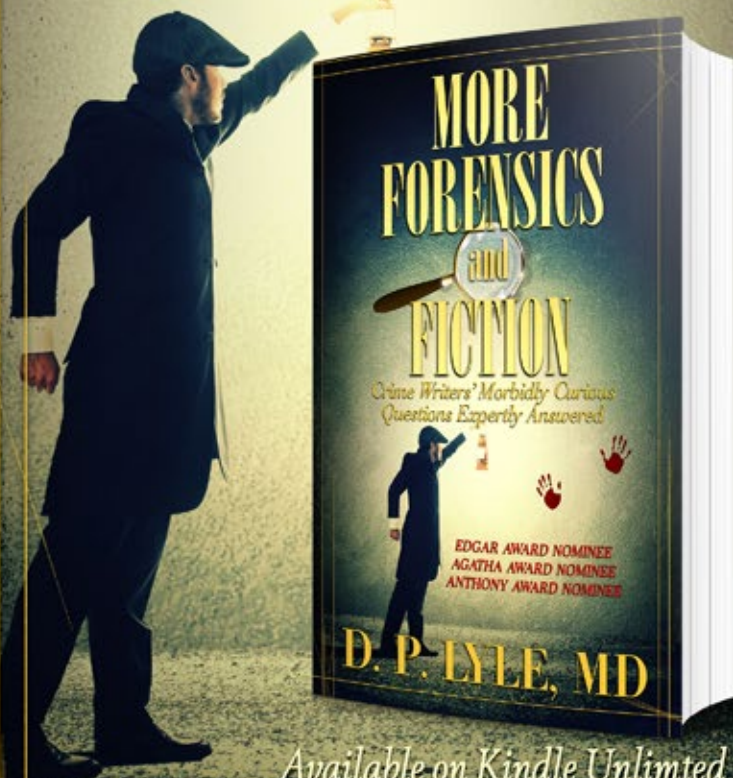
I wondered if she felt guilty for what she had done. Her voice—sorrowful, like she was delivering a eulogy. I was beginning to have second thoughts. But then: “Well, dear, like the agency said, ‘whoever pays first.’ ”

I reached into my breast pocket. “Or, sometimes, whoever pays me the most.” ■

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# A Plume Novel

By Scott McGregor

The lineup must've been three-hundred people long. It began at the table where the author sat, stretching all the way outside the building and down the sidewalk. I was hardly surprised by the turnout, considering who attended to sign autographs.

"I can't believe I'm about to meet Randy Plume," a fan in front of me said.

I couldn't believe it either, having waited over two hours. In my hands rested what I believed to be Plume's three best works of fiction: *Vampires of Sabbath*, *Jewels of Blitz*, and his magnum opus, *Edge of Shadows*. They all itched for a signature.

It wasn't far-fetched to say that Plume was on his way to becoming one of the best horror writers around the world, rivaling the likes of Stephen King and Clive Barker. Plume succeeded in merging elements of suspenseful originality and surrealistic commentary onto the confines of paper. His characters read intensely genuine and empathetic, and his use of description triumphed over the works of Lovecraft. The strangest fact to note of Plume wasn't what lied beneath his book covers, but his age in relation to his success. He was twenty-eight, five years older than myself. His first novel, *Iceman*, published when he was nineteen. Since then, he has sold seven—soon to be eight—bestsellers in America.

To really read one of Plume's novels was like integrating yourself into the domains of the fictional world, trapped in a harmony of unease and paranoia, while also simultaneously perplexed by satisfaction. An even more impressive observation to make about Plume's work was the distinction of each novel, both in storytelling and craftsmanship, like each novel was written by a different author.

When I heard Plume would promote his new book, *The Relinquished Fees*, in the Portland Public Library, I set aside all my other responsibilities to attend the meet and greet. The day arrived, and when he came into my view, my stomach jerked.

For years, I've stared at his photograph, but a picture was nothing compared to the real deal. He wore formal attire, black pants and blazer with a red dress shirt, the top two buttons undone. He was clean shaven, with freshly cut auburn hair. By all accounts, he was a handsome man, and he demonstrated a form of sophistication I yearned for. A kind of confidence provided with the success of a bestselling author.

And now, after years of admiration, I stood face to face with him.

"Hey there," he said.

The word *hi* would have been an appropriate response, if I had let it leave my mouth. Instead, I stood there silent, frozen in what seemed to be a staring contest between Plume and I. His smile loosened, and I knew I made him uncomfortable.

"Mr. Plume is a very busy man," said a stout, neatly dressed man who stood behind Plume, whose voice sounded croaky. "Please, get on with your business."

Plume turned his head and said, "Godfrey, don't be rude. These are my fans." He faced me again. "Don't mind him. Manners have never been his strong suit."

"It's okay," I mumbled.

"Books?"

"Oh. I don't have any. I don't have any published, I mean. I've written a few. One...I mean...I've started one, I guess."

Plume laughed. "No, I mean the books in your hands. You want those signed, right?"

"Yes...sorry." I handed my novels over to my idol—back to who they originally belonged—and stood there blushing, eyes glued to the floor. Could I have made a bigger fool of myself if I tried?

"Who am I making this out to?"

"Allen."

"So, you're a writer, huh?"

I nodded.

Plume scribbled down his signature on the first book. "I could tell the moment I saw you. You have that look."

"Yeah, I write sometimes." By sometimes, I meant three hours a day, studying and harnessing my craft in preparation to join the big leagues with Plume. My novel, *In the Depths of Night*, was a project currently in development, only three chapters written. The story was going to be about two backpacking college students who face the demons of their past in a single evening, right after stumbling upon an abandoned and haunted resort. The idea itself might not sound like much, but it was mine.

"So nothing published, huh?" He signed the second book.

I shook my head, thinking *he probably thinks I'm just like all the other amateurs*.

"Sir, the lineup must keep moving," Godfrey insisted.

"Give me a moment, would ya?" He signed the third book. "Tell you what Allen, why don't you send me some of your stuff on my website submissions page and I'll give it a look. Just make sure you leave your phone number somewhere in the story for me."

"Okay..."

Plume handed back his works to me, and I walked away astonished, saying to myself *did that really happen? Did Randy Plume say he'll read my work?* I opened up my copy of *Edge of Shadows* and stared in awe at the lovely signature left for me.

*For Allen,*

*May all your wishes come true! I look forward to reading your work.*

*-Randy Plume*

\* \* \*

One month later during my break at Barnes & Noble, I received an unexpected call.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Allen," a familiar voice said. "It's Randy Plume. We met at my book signing, remember?"

"Yes," I sputtered, trying not to sound too excited. How could I forget meeting my idol? "What can I do for you?"

"Look, I just got done reading those chapters of *In the Depths of Night* you sent me. Sorry it took so long. I've been incredibly busy. I wanted to tell you, well, this is exceptional material."

I felt a punch to the gut in the most soothing, orgasmic way possible. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Say, are you busy this evening? I was

wondering if perhaps you wanted to get together and talk more about your novel in detail. I think I can help you get to where you need to be."

"I'm not busy. Not at all. That sounds awesome. When and where?"

"How's my place, say, eight o'clock sound? I live on 3303 Hillcrest Drive, but that's our little secret."

I scrambled around the room to find a pen and piece of paper. "3303 Hillcrest Drive at eight o'clock. I'll be there. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Wonderful. I look forward to picking your brain."

\* \* \*

At eight o'clock on the dot, I arrived outside of Randy's estate. I guessed it to be twenty, maybe even thirty times the size of my apartment just from the external view. In his driveway sat a glimmering—and what I guessed to be very expensive—sports car.

I rang the doorbell, and seconds later, Godfrey opened the door and stared at me with his froglike face.

"Oh, hi...I uh—"

"Mr. Plume will see you in the living room," Godfrey said.

Godfrey escorted me through the house, and I found Plume sitting on a sofa, sipping on a glass of booze. "Ah, Allen, wonderful to see you. Please, have a seat."

I took a seat on his luxurious couch and said, "Mr. Plume, you have a lovely home."

"Please, call me Randy." He patted me on the shoulder, then poured me a glass full of whiskey. "I hope you like Dalmore."

"Oh, I don't drink..."

"Come on, have a drink with me. One writer with another."

Although I can't say I enjoy the taste of any sort of alcohol, I couldn't help but smile at the notion of Randy Plume wanting to share a drink with me. I took a slow sip of the whiskey and coughed.

"So, Randy—" I choked, uncomfortable calling him by his first name, "—I've been meaning to ask, how do you go about your writing? Do you prefer laptop or pen? How many words do you normally write a day?"

"Some days...most days actually, I write close to nothing. Other days, I have pages and pages of material appear before me. All my work comes from a Tinex word processor. You ever see one of those?"

"No."

"I figured. They're a model not available in the public market, but I managed to snag one for myself back when I was in college. The novels just write themselves with one of those." Randy gulped down his drink. "But enough about me. You're the man of the hour. How long have you been working



on this story you've got?"

"About, I would say, three months," I lied. It was closer to two years, but I kept that knowledge to myself. I had every chapter of *In the Depths of Night* planned. Hell, every scene and line of dialogue was sketched out in my head, but my insecurities kept me from writing it down.

"Novels can be a daunting task," Randy continued. "However, what if I told you there's a way you can have your novel written out by the end of the night?"

I almost sprayed whiskey out of my mouth with laughter. "Wouldn't that be something?" As I set down my glass, a wave of dizziness overthrew me. My hand slipped, spilling half of the whiskey on the table. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Randy. I guess I can't hold my liquor very well. I didn't mean to—"

I collapsed onto the ground.

\* \* \*

My senses returned in waves upon my awakening. First, the smell of dry metal lingered; then, the sound of what I guessed to be tongs clicking. I felt something damp run down my forehead, warm and thick. My vision blurred, steadying myself out of blackness and confusion. The first sight I made out was Randy beside a computer. Lines of manuscript were sprung onto the screen, and a small part of me giddied in excitement to learn Randy began his next novel. Until my vision cleared up, and I saw what appeared to be the lines of my opening chapter I sent Randy a month ago. I tried to move, but remained still, looking down to see my arms and legs strapped to a chair.

Then, I heard him say, "Ah, I'm glad you're finally awake, Allen."

"Mr. Plume? Where are we?"

"Please, call me Randy."

The dampness from my forehead dripped onto my arm, and I saw that my sweat was dark, and red, and not sweat at all, but blood. "What's going on?"

"Godfrey, are we just about ready?"

"Almost, sir," the croak said from behind.

"Allen, you must be wondering why I've strapped you to a chair in my remote, rather bleak workplace. Before we get into that, I want to tell you a story. I take it you've read my first novel, *Iceman*, correct?"

"Yes?" How could I not have read *Iceman*? It was a compelling tale of a post-apocalyptic ice age, and it was the book that launched Randy's career and turned Plume into a household name.

"Well, what if I told you that *Iceman* isn't strictly my property, Allen?"

"I'm not following."

"Back when I was a freshman in college, I had a best friend named Neil Robertson. Like me, he wanted to be an author, and the two of us engaged in a little friendly competition. At

least, it started off friendly.

"As time went on, I came to understand that Neil was a much better writer than I was. I often tried to surpass him. I read bullshit self-help books to harness my craft. I tried to copy the styles of other icons like Poe and Lovecraft. I even borrowed ideas given to me by other amateur writers, but none of it mattered.

"By the end of our first year at college, Neil had finished his first novel length piece, and that story went on to be called *Iceman*. I learned, instead of trying to surpass someone who was clearly superior to me, I should merely take his work for myself. So I did, and that novel went on to launch my career."

"You hired a ghost writer?"

"Not exactly. I never paid Neil to use his property. In fact, he doesn't even know *Iceman* belongs to him. Not anymore, anyways."

"I still don't get it."

"This is rather tragic. You are someone I have enjoyed talking with. You're a bright, passionate young man. I see a lot of myself in you, and you don't deserve what's about to befall. After much analysis, you have the proper craft of a true storyteller; however, I think you lack the proper motivation to truly make it in this industry. You're not willing to do whatever it takes to become a successful novelist. So that's why it's time for us to get down to business. Allen, I want to own exclusive rights to sell your story under my name."

"Wait, that's why you wanted to meet with me? You want to, what, patent my story?"

"Did you think I met all those fans out of the courtesy of my heart? I was on the prowl for new material. You won't believe the number of terrible stories I've slogged through this past month. Trivial pieces about haunted cellphones and derivative serial killers. So much of what I've read is muddled with clichés and tedious prose. But your work? Oh, I could not ignore your work. You have integrated a new sense of internal horror. The tone is so sickeningly...personal. You should feel proud of the story you've crafted. I could never come up with something this stellar, and that's why it must be *mine*."

The words I had wanted to hear for years presented themselves in the worst nightmare possible, and I countered back, "You can't have it."

Randy laughed. "I don't believe I said you had a choice in the matter."

"For fuck sake, Randy, I've only written three chapters. You can't have my story even if I gave it to you, because it's nowhere near completion. Months...years away from being what it should be."

Randy patted his computer engine twice and said, "That's where the Tinex processor comes in. Your story, the whole of your story, with fascinating characters, intricate details and

hauntingly good atmosphere, has been written out in your mind, even if you don't know it. It all lies within your head, and it just needs to be...extracted."

*Extracted.* The word hung around in my mind like a frame on a wall. My imagination puzzled together dozens of different scenarios to learn what he meant by that, none of them pleasant.

"Sir, we're all hooked up and ready to go," Godfrey said.

"Very good." Randy rose from his seat towards a mirror in the corner of the room. "What I'm about to show you, Allen, will shock you. It will horrify you, far more than anything my novels have put you through."

He rolled the mirror in front of me, and my eyes witnessed the most disheartening image of my life. The reflection revealed Godfrey standing behind me, as well my peeled back skin and exposed brain, hooked up to a mechanism from above. Three tongs held my hair back, and five cords with needled tips dangled an inch above my showcased cerebrum. Worst of all, the mechanism wired straight into Randy's Tinex processor.

Then, I did what any sane person would do when faced with such a grotesque reveal. I screamed. I screamed so hard it incited a cringe out of Randy.

"Your reaction is to be expected," Randy winced. "I've only had one writer who didn't shriek when I showed him this. Quite honestly, I do think there is something wrong with that man. Clint Burston, the one who came up with *Vampires of Sabbath*, which many of my fans have gone on to quote as *fucked up*." Randy sat down again. "I'm afraid we've reached the part where I take your story, Allen. You need to understand, none of this is personal. I just need another bestseller."

"And then what?!" I snapped. "You going to kill me? Is that what you do to all the writers you steal from?"

"Of course I'm not going to kill you. I'm not a psychopath. Besides, if I did, my sales would go down. No, I'm going to erase your memory of this event. I'm going to relinquish you from your idea, and I'm going to delete this wickedly unpleasant moment from your brain. You won't remember a thing. You'll still get to live a healthy, albeit mundane life and continue to appreciate my novels."

"Randy, please, don't do this." I continued to squirm in the chair as I begged, desperate for any sort of escape. But it was pointless. I was completely trapped.

"I could put you asleep during this process, but I find writers do their best thinking when they're awake, don't you agree?"

Randy pressed the *enter* key. The needles drove into my brain, and my head cocked back in anguish. First, it felt like someone sucked on the inside of my mind with straws. Then came the electrical, agonizing stream. My body shook violently, and my nails dug into the crevices of my palms.

Through all the pain, I kept my gaze towards the computer screen. I saw twenty pages, then thirty, forty, fifty...three-hundred-and-sixty-five pages of manuscript written out in a matter of seconds. After two years, *In the Depths of Night* was finally complete.

The voltaic sensation stopped. I gasped for breath, vision fuzzy.

"Allen, I regret to inform you that your services are no longer required."

"R—Rand—dy," I stammered, drool pooling down my lip.

"Hey, you're more than welcome to come to my next book signing."

He pressed *delete*.

\* \* \*

"Look what came in," Jane announced, tossing a hefty box onto the front counter.

I immediately registered the name Randy Plume on the label and opened up the cardboard with eager haste. "I've been waiting for this for weeks."

Jane giggled at my enthusiasm. "You always get so excited when a Plume shipment comes in."

"Can you blame me? His work is exceptional and beyond our time. He manages to integrate frightening surrealism with a mix of social commentary, and he—"

"Slow down. No need to go full fanboy."

I pulled out a copy of *In the Depths of Night*, the ninth book in Plume's bibliography. "Isn't that something to behold?"

"Tell me, what's this book about?"

"It's about two college students backpacking across the country, and in the middle of night, they stumble upon a deserted resort. At least, it seems deserted, until a bunch of ghosts appear and hallucinate them. They're then forced to face the demons of their past in a single evening." I took a moment and stared at the cover, appreciating the craft of a mastermind. "Plume is such a genius. I don't know where he comes up with these ideas."

"Didn't you meet him last year for a book signing?"

"Yeah..."

It was true, I had met him, evidenced by the signatures within my books, but I can't remember what the encounter was like. God, how could I forget meeting my literary idol?

I had his autograph memorized. *For Allen, may all your wishes come true*, he wrote to me, followed by, *I look forward to reading your work*. I'm still not quite sure what he meant by the latter half of his note, but I can hope he thought I looked like someone who might be a successful writer like him.

I hope one day—a day that may never arrive—I can come up with an idea as clever as a Plume novel. ■





# HALF-TIME

By Susan Hammerman

Lynne felt like she was doing a pirouette, balanced on a toothpick that was suspended over the Grand Canyon. She couldn't let her focus slip.

A dented metal table separated them in the interrogation room. If Lynne Googled "cop" she would have found a picture of this guy—buzz cut, mustache, big biceps, flabby stomach, clearly stupid. There was nothing to see besides the cop. The room was a blank, beige nothing of a place. It was incognito. A chameleon stretched out on a patch of sand.

"We started making the switch in fourth grade," Lynne said and flexed her wrists, so the handcuffs stopped biting into her skin. The fluorescent lights thrummed, and the sound made her itch and want to move to get away from it. The handcuffs had been snapped on after she'd taken a couple of laps around the table. She was told to stay put.

"In fourth grade," the cop prompted her to continue.

"That's when we started it. We dressed alike, except her sweater was red, and mine was whatever, yellow. She was in loafers, and I had sneakers. Her hair was in braids, and I wore a headband. At lunch, in the bathroom, we traded cardigans and shoes. I braided my hair, and she took hers down and got the headband. It was simple."

The cop leaned back in his chair. It was obvious that he didn't believe her.

He said, "You're telling me you and your twin sister have been doing this for thirty years and no one figured it out? Not even your parents?"

He clicked his blue ballpoint pen twice. The legal pad in front of him was at least six pages in. The current page was nearly covered in block print. Significant words were underlined or had boxes drawn around them.

"Well, not thirty years. I'm thirty-six," Lynne said.

"Okay. Let's start over," he said, all business.

Lynne drummed her sneakers on the tile floor. "Starting from when?"

Someone reeked of BO. It was the cloying smell of rotting meat. She thought it was him, but it might have been her. She couldn't remember when she'd washed her t-shirt or her jeans or herself, for that matter.

"Thursday." He made eye contact and waited. His pen hovered a millimeter above the pad of paper like he was willing her to say something else worth writing down.

"Can I have a glass of water first?" Lynne asked. Her mouth was so dry.

"You don't want the Diet Coke?" He pointed at the can with his pen.

"Where is Elaine? Is she in the next room getting interviewed by *your* brother?" Lynne laughed, and shook her red tangled hair to get it out of her eyes.

"Tell it to me again," he said. "Elaine is your identical twin."

They'd been through the story a dozen times. She'd memorized the words and recited them verbatim. "We have keys to each other's apartment. We meet up at lunch, trade shoes and jackets, switch jewelry, whatever. Then she goes to my job, and I go to hers. Sometimes it lasts until the next day, and I stay in her place, and she stays in mine. I walk her dog, and Elaine feeds my fish. Got it now?"

"What time did you show up at her work that day?"

"Which day?"

"Thursday," he said and flipped back to a grid he'd sketched on the first page. The grid started at eight in the morning and went to ten in the evening. Six twenty-five p.m. was underlined twice.

"After lunch, I guess."

He added marks to the grid and turned to a new page.

"How do you know what to do at Elaine's job?"

Lynne shook her fists in exasperation. Her handcuffs rattled. "That's the fun of it. We need to figure it out. If it's something important we might leave a note, but we usually just know what to do."

When they were kids, they had to clean their room and make their beds to get their allowance. Elaine knew she had to make Lynne's bed too. One time, after Elaine had tidied up like a hotel maid, Lynne had sneaked back into their bedroom and ripped the paisley comforter and lavender sheets off Elaine's bed and dumped them in the swimming pool in the backyard. No allowance that week.

"Tell me about Peter," the cop said.

Lynne didn't want to talk about Peter. She looked at her fingernails and saw blood. She'd been biting her nails again. "He's dating Elaine not me."

"Is there 'half-time' with Peter? Do you do that?"

"No," Lynne said. The cop called the switch what they called it, half-time.

"What about Peter's wife?" he asked. "What can you tell me about her?"

"I didn't know he was married."

"But when you found her in the parking lot, you figured it out?"

"Yeah. Big knife. Blood all over the place. I managed to put two and two together."

More pen clicks were followed by, "How did you know who she was?"

"I looked in her purse."

He flipped back a page and underlined an entire sentence, put a box around another word, and drew an arrow to link the two together.

"You didn't stick around to speak to the police after you made the call to report a body?"

"Not sure what else I could've done. Dead is dead, right?"

Lynne opened the can of soda. She took a swallow and coughed up a metallic taste, the taste of chemicals. Diet Coke ran down her chin. She wiped it off on her sleeve and looked at the flecks of soda that mixed with the freckles on her arm. Kids in school teased her and called her "Dippin Dots," because of the freckles that stood out on her pale skin, dotting her face and arms.

"Where was your sister when you found the body?"

"My place."

"How did you know that?"

"I called her."

"You called Elaine before you called the police? Can you explain why you did that?"

Lynne filled her mouth with soda and swished it around her teeth. Her tongue felt like sandpaper. She swallowed and said, "I was worried. Maybe Peter killed her too."

"I'm confused. Now you're saying Peter murdered his wife?"

"Sure. Husbands kill their wives every day."

"Her name was Jolie. Peter's wife." He propped a tan elbow on the table. "Jolie was pretty. Was she prettier than your sister?"

"How should I know? She was a mess when I saw her. She was sprawled out on the pavement."

He shuffled a couple of pages back and said, "You'd never seen her before?"

Lynne slid down in her chair and closed her eyes. She pictured Jolie with her long, dark hair and perfect, freckle-less skin. Dippin Dots had no chance against her.

Lynne kept her eyes squeezed shut. "I want to call my lawyer."

"You already called her. Do you want to keep talking or should we stop? You said you didn't mind talking to me until she arrives."

"Whatever." Lynne righted herself in her chair and opened her eyes to find him scribbling away.

"What time did you and Elaine make the switch that day? When was half-time?"

"Which day?"

"Thursday. The day Jolie was found."

"We didn't. We were already dressed identically."

"Some days you didn't change clothes? You planned in advance to dress the same?"

"Yes."

"How did you know to go to the parking lot after you left Elaine's work? It's three blocks from your sister's office, and in the opposite direction of your bus stop."

Someone knocked on the door.

The cop stood up and opened the door, but not wide enough for Lynne to see who it was.



"Detective Barns," the cop introduced himself through the doorway to the person standing in the hall.

"Would you like some time alone with your client?" he asked.

"Sorry?" a woman said from the hallway.

"You're Lynne's attorney?" the cop asked.

"She hasn't seen her lawyer yet?" the woman asked, her voice full of concern.

Lynne recognized the voice. Trickle of sweat skittered down her back.

"Who are you?" the cop asked.

"Her sister."

Another cop pushed the door open, peered into the room at Lynne, and said, "She told me she was here to see Lynne Climpset. She's in a suit and has a briefcase. I thought she was the lawyer."

"Yeah, it usually helps to ask," Detective Barns said.

He stepped into the hall. "How many sisters does Lynne have? Is Elaine here, too?"

"I'm Elaine. I go by Soo-jin, my Korean name."

Lynne rolled her eyes, but no one was looking at her.

"You're adopted?" Detective Barns asked.

He turned back to Lynne. His eyes narrowed as he studied her, and his forehead scrunched up like a crumpled newspaper.

Lynne knew what that look meant and didn't like it. She'd seen that look on the faces of teachers, employers, boyfriends, and strangers too. There was a hard line between before and after. Before, she was treated like everyone else. Afterwards, she wasn't.

Elaine maneuvered around the cop and stood in the doorway. She looked as gorgeous as ever. She was dressed in an expensive navy suit and had a long purple scarf draped around her neck. Her black hair was cut to her chin, and her lipstick was cherry red.

"Don't worry, Lynne. It's going to be okay," she said and pulled her silk scarf off and reached out to hand it to Lynne. "Here. Take my scarf."

"She can't have that. You can't go in there," Detective Barns said and closed the door.

Lynne was alone. She twisted her long, red hair into a ponytail, but she had no way to secure it. Their hair was completely different now.

After several minutes, the cop came back into the room. "Elaine wanted me to give you this." He held up a gold tube of lipstick. "Scarves aren't allowed."

The lipstick was a prize. "Can you take these off?" Lynne rattled her handcuffs at him.

"You're going to behave? Stay in your seat this time?"

She plastered a grin on her face and said, "Of course."

He set the tube of lipstick on the table in front of her. He unlocked her handcuffs, took them off, and clipped them on his cop's tool belt.

Lynne swiped the red lipstick across her lips. It was luscious and smelled like roses.

He held out his hand.

"Wait," she said and felt along her right ear for the gold Scottie dog earring. She took it out. Their parents gave them a matching pair of gold Scottie dog earrings when they were ten years old. A week after they'd gotten them, when Lynne was brushing her teeth, she knocked hers down the drain. She was heartbroken. Elaine had taken out one of her earrings and given it to her. From then on, they both wore just one.

"Tell Elaine that after twenty-six years, she finally can wear a matching set." Lynne placed the gold tube of lipstick and the gold earring on the cop's thick, meaty palm.

###

"No attorney? You're sure?" the cop asked again.

"She's Elaine's attorney, not mine," Lynne said. "Where is Elaine?"

"She's giving a voluntary statement about you. Her lawyer is with her." His voice was soft and steady. "Elaine said she lends you clothes from time to time and confirmed that she has a key to your place. She also told me you started showing up at her work unannounced, but she said you do not swap jobs. There is no half-time, not since elementary school."

Lynne dragged her hand across her mouth. Red lipstick came off on her palm. She held up her hand and said, "What's this then?"

The cop leaned forward, shortening the distance between them. "Elaine thought half-time, when you were kids, was to make her feel like you shared everything, when she was new to your family. It wasn't to fool people into thinking she was you, and you were her. She said that you both were so unpopular in school that no one bothered to learn which of you was Elaine and which was Lynne, even the teachers didn't know. She wondered if that was the reason you were confused."

"I'm not confused," she said.

Lynne could tell that he wanted to write on his pad of paper, but he didn't. She wanted to cry, but she didn't. If he could wait, she could too.

"Okay." He set his pen down. "I want to help you clear this up. Why don't you tell me what really happened?"

"I found Jolie. I found the knife. I called the cops."

"Jolie was shot. Did Elaine put you up to calling the police?"

"No."

"You didn't call Elaine on Thursday afternoon. She called you. Then you called the police." He made a tent with his fat fingers and waited for her to respond.

"We talk to each other all the time. Twenty times a day. I can't keep track of which calls I made and which ones she made."

The cop leaned back in his chair. "I watched an interesting video while I ate my dinner."

"I like Mickey Mouse too."

Her comment did not register on his face.

"It was video from your apartment building's security camera taken last Thursday. The video was of you, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk outside. I watched it on fast forward, because you were out there from two o'clock in the afternoon until eight at night. Which means, you were not in the parking lot, and you did not find Jolie's body."

Lynne studied the lipstick smear on her hand.

He said, "The parking lot doesn't have cameras, but Elaine's office building does. I also saw the video from your sister's work that shows her walking towards where Jolie's body was found, exactly twenty-five minutes before you called the police."

He finally stopped talking.

Lynne felt for her Scottie dog earring and remembered that she'd given it to Elaine.

He said, "Elaine is not in trouble, not unless she was involved in the murder. Was she?"

"Of course not," Lynne whispered.

He said, "Elaine discovered the body on the way to her car after work. She needed you to call the police, because she is having an affair with Peter. Is that right?"

Lynne nodded, leaned forward, and rested her head on the table. She was exhausted.

"It's okay. I understand," he said.

Lynne was certain that he didn't. Her forehead was pressed against the cold surface of the table, and her face was hidden from the cop's view, but she still bit her lip to keep from smiling.

###

Lynne stepped out of the taxi and glanced up at the balcony of her apartment. The petunias looked droopy in their bright ceramic pots. They needed water. Thinking back, she couldn't remember which had come first, discovering that Miss Goody Two-Shoes was having an affair with a married man or noticing, when she was potting the flowers, that the building's security camera was within easy reach of her balcony. Everything had fallen into place after that.

Lynne opened her mailbox and got her mail, one business envelope. Maybe it was half-time that set the plan in motion. Elaine mentioned it when Lynne borrowed a jacket from her for an interview that didn't go well. Lynne hadn't thought about half-time in years. That detail put flesh on her character's bones.

Her instructor told her to live the role—think, walk, eat, speak, dream in character. Rather than basing it on an actual person, the instructor said to build the character from true feelings and real memories, brick by brick, like a house—a house the actor inhabits, from the roof all the way down to the foundation.

The method acting classes were expensive, but ended up being a great investment, and cheaper than the iPad, which Lynne couldn't keep. She couldn't keep the security camera either. It was the same model as the building's and was now smashed to pieces, along with the iPad, and dumped across town.

Through trial and error, using her security camera, she managed to make the video running on the iPad look passable as live footage on the building's security camera. She'd fooled around with dangling the iPad on wire and a coat hanger, but a selfie stick tied to a post on her balcony worked perfectly. The potted flowers camouflaged it from the street.

Lynne pushed the elevator button for her floor. No, it was the gun that had clinched it. Taking Dad's gun, well, Dad would call it stealing. Stealing his gun was the final detail that made the plan work. The gun was not hidden across town. It was dropped within easy walking distance of Elaine's place. The police had it now. Lynne unlocked her apartment door. Convincing Jolie to meet had been the hardest part. Jolie didn't believe Peter was cheating on her. The first shot was hard. The second was easier.

That day, after Lynne got back to her place, and after she called the police, she called her mother. She called her knowing it would be the last time her mother would ask her why she couldn't be more like her sister. After Elaine's arrest, the threats to cut her off and cut her out of the will ended, too. Lynne tore open the envelope and pulled out a trust fund check. ■



# ADDICTIVE!

Hang on for a nail-biting thrill ride. Stone knocks it out of the park with this one!

*-Candid Book Reviews*



Fear.

That's what comes to mind when Sophie thinks of her childhood. Fear and pain.

She ran to protect her unborn child, and put the horror behind her. Now, twenty years later, those dark secrets have returned.

Once again, it's flight or fight and this time, she'd won't run. It's a fight to the death and one she is not at all sure she can win.

Available on Amazon Kindle, in Kindle Unlimited and in Paperback

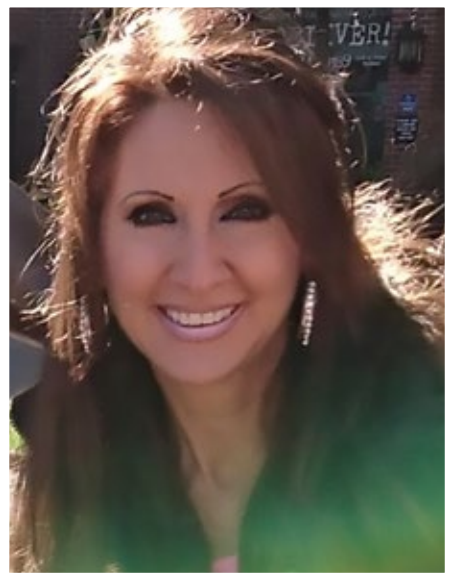
# *Murder, Curlers & Kegs*

## A Valentine Beaumont Mini Mystery

(Book 4 in the *Murder, Curlers* Series)

By Arlene McFarlane

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



I chose to play it smart and refrain from saying anything. It hadn't been an easy day for Romero either. On top of a sore foot—compliments of yours truly—and another murder case with few leads, I had an inkling he was put out because of my night with Jock.

"Okay." He released one of his aggravated sighs. "So you know where Stoaks is staying. Want to let me in on the secret?"

"It's not such a big secret. It's the old puppy mill by the airport."

"What? Forget it. Nobody's there."

"Not you, too. Everyone seems to think the place is abandoned."

"Who's everyone?"

"Alan. Jock."

"Alan?"

"The pilot. He said there hasn't been any action there in years."

"He's right. And if he's flying over the place on a regular basis, he'd know. I'm ticked I didn't think of that myself. I could've saved the manpower."

I pressed my phone closer. "What manpower?"

He took a heavy breath. "I had a couple officers investigate the puppy mill."

"When?"

"Today."

I straightened, my bag squeezed to my side. "When today?"

Papers rustled at his end. "You want an exact time, Chief, or will a rough estimate do?"

I squinted into the phone and made a face. "Doesn't matter. Forget I asked."

"Yeah, right. Upon learning of Ziggy's escape, I had some uniforms check it out first thing this morning. I figured there was a possibility he'd revisit his old haunt. But I was wrong. There were no signs of life on the grounds. Everything's been boarded up. Locked. Abandoned."

Hmm. "Okay. You win."

"Does that mean you'll let go of this idea?"

How could I argue facts with Romero, Jock...and Alan? "Consider it stricken from my brain."

"Hmph."

I couldn't remember Romero ever using a *hmph* on me before. Hearing him mutter it now sounded unnatural, skeptical. Well, I wasn't going to stand here and worry about what he thought. I said I'd strike it from my brain, and I meant it.



Of course...if something happened to make me think otherwise, I'd simply alter my course of action. That was a woman's prerogative, wasn't it?

After telling me to stay close—but not too close—to Jock, he hung up.

I pitched my phone in my bag, meditating on Romero's news. If Ziggy wasn't hiding in the old puppy mill, then where was the creep?

I was summoning ideas when a right arm came around my neck and forced me back against a solid body. My bag was ripped from my arm and tossed on the ground. A second later, I saw the edge of a straight razor right before it was pricked under my chin.

"Scream, and I'll slit your throat."

I could barely hear the soft voice at my side for the howling wind, the plane engine in the distance, and blood rushing through my ears. Somewhere in my subconscious, I was trying to determine if the voice was the same one I'd heard at Kuruc's. There was nothing I could do to confirm my suspicions, but it didn't matter. The trench-coat sleeve under my chin that I'd seen sweeping the shelf of items at the deli told me Ziggy was my captor.

"How do you like it, hmm? Not so nice having a hair tool threatening you." Despite the background noise, his soft voice once again sounded unnatural to me.

His trench coat flapped around my legs. The razor's steel edge scraped my skin. His grip was strong, making it hard to breathe, let alone find words. All that came out was a whimper.

"This ain't nothing compared to where you're going to feel this blade next." He lowered his razor hand to my groin, nudging me suggestively. "Tit for tat, shall we say?"

Fear hurtled my heart into my mouth. After all these years, Ziggy was finally making good on his promise to get back at me for maiming him and sending him to jail.

He towed me toward the woods, and I knew without a doubt if I screamed, he'd slice me on the spot.

My nails bit into my palms, my mind racing with horrible thoughts. Wait! Where was Jock? How long did it take to pay for a chopper ride? My gaze swept the dimly lit area, hoping he'd materialize.

Maybe I could keep Ziggy occupied until Jock showed up. Oh boy. Who was I kidding? Once other males met Sir Worldly, they got all chummy, asking him questions about his diverse past, boasting about their own scrawny muscles in an effort to measure up.

*Face it, Valentine. You're on your own.* I gurgled back hysteria, scanning the area again. I had to escape this lunatic, but how? Ziggy wasn't a big man, but he was still bigger than me. And without my tools, I felt weak and outmatched.

Tears filled my eyes, the reality of my situation torpedoing me in the stomach. I shivered, the chill in the night air multiplying my fears as Ziggy dragged me away from the helicopter pad. My gaze fell to my bag ten feet away, and I choked back a desperate cry.

I was going to be brutally tortured and die cold and alone, and I wouldn't even have a lousy hairbrush to fend off my killer. I felt woozy from the images I was conjuring up of my bloody, dismembered body, not found for days... maybe weeks.

I forced myself to snap out of it. I envisioned Dooley's slight, lifeless form curled up in a broken beer keg. He'd been murdered and had no one to speak for him. That wasn't going to be me. Dooley needed a voice, and so did I.

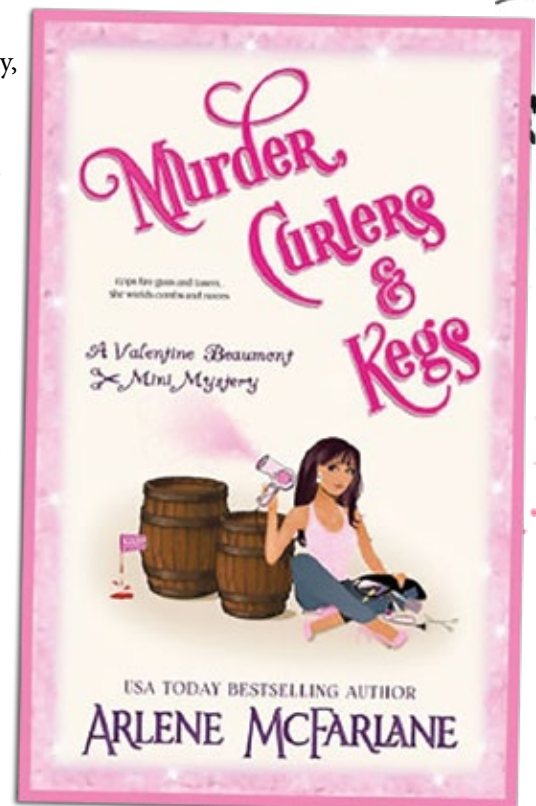
I sniffed back tears, a surge of determination swelling inside. I wasn't going to be another murder victim and let Ziggy carve me up and leave me for dead in some forest beside a small-town airport. I'd been beaten and come close to death before, and in those weakest moments I realized I had the strongest will to live.

I squirmed in Ziggy's arms, digging my heels in the ground while a plan formed in my mind. "Let me wipe my eyes," I cried. "My mascara's burning and blinding me."

"What the hell?" He stopped in his tracks.

"It'd be a lot easier for you if I wasn't writhing in pain." I squirmed again for emphasis.

"Geez, you're a pain in the ass. I heard you were a Type A, but this takes





the cake.” He jolted me up to keep my legs from buckling under me. “You’re going to be dead in a few minutes. What does runny mascara matter?”

I blinked like a madman, which I was close to becoming, pretty sure my tears were doing a bang-up job of smearing my makeup. “I can’t see!” I wailed, sniffing and sobbing, then cut it at once in outrage. “Who said I was a Type A?”

“Everyone! Brother. You’re not exactly a recluse. Every time I turn around, you’re in the news.”

“So?” I thrashed around some more, trying to get him to loosen his chokehold. “Being in the news doesn’t make me a Type A!”

“You’re impatient, strictly organized, and anxious. If that isn’t a Type A, I don’t know what is.” He secured my wriggling. “And you’re a control freak. That’s from my *own* observations.”

“I am *not* a control freak!” I yelled, attempting to get control of the situation.

He held on tight, his voice rising furiously. “You had control of that perm rod you wrapped around my bangers.”

“That’s because you were going to stick me with a knife,” I retorted angrily. “And I don’t appreciate you talking vulgar to me.” Yowza, fear was making me nervy.

“You really are something,” he said. “Excuse me for not using the proper term.”

I coughed and blubbered and sniffed, adding some moaning to the mix. It must’ve been appalling because I felt him loosen his grip.

“All right, all right already.” He produced a tissue, probably from one of his trench coat’s many pockets, and waved it in my face. The razor was firm in hand, his right arm still around my neck. “Try anything funny, and I’ll cut you open right here.”

My nose was running, my cheeks wet, and I could taste salty tears on my tongue. I snatched the tissue from his hand, wiped my eyes, and gave my nose a good honk.

“Geez.” He shook his arms away from me and my runny mucus. “You’re a mess. I should kill you now and put us both out of our misery.”

I blubbered some more. “I was quite happy until *you* came along.”

“Type A’s are never happy.” He shoved his sleeve under my nose. “And look what your crying did to my coat. Black makeup everywhere! This was right out of the Goodwill bin. A genuine London Fog. You think London Fogs grow on trees?”

I was too stunned to speak and not brave enough to turn around.

“I’m going to make you *pay* for this coat.” He spelled it out in my ear. “Right after I kill you, I’m going back for your bag and taking what’s owing.”

“I’m not paying anything for that crappy coat, dead or alive. I wouldn’t even pay to have it dry-cleaned.”

Not sure how much longer I could antagonize him, I slid my hand to my braid, ripped the elastic from my hair, and formed a slingshot. Then I spun around and fired it in his face.

*Smack.* Right in the eye!

He yelped and dropped the razor to the ground. “I knew I couldn’t trust you!” He scrubbed his eye fiercely. “You *witch!*”

I’d been called worse before, but I didn’t stop to point that out. Gulping for air, I stumbled away from him and swiped my bag off the ground. The helicopter was the closest thing to safety, and I ran straight for it.

Ziggy was on my heels, one hand to his eye, the other flailing in the air. I gathered every ounce of strength I had and hauled off with my bag, clouting him in the head.

He didn’t seem to see that coming, which surprised me since he’d met my bag straight on once before. I only hoped the *crack* was from his skull and not my blow dryer.

For a second, his eyes glazed over and rolled up into his head. Then he collapsed knees first to the ground.

I didn’t trust he’d stay down for long, and I didn’t wait to find out. ■

*Arlene McFarlane is the USA Today bestselling author of the Murder, Curlers series. Previously an aesthetician, hairstylist, and owner of a full-service salon, Arlene now writes full-time. She’s also an accomplished pianist and makeover artist. When time allows, she plays publicly and posts makeovers on her website.*

*Arlene is a member of Romance Writers of America®, Sisters in Crime, Toronto Romance Writers, SOWG, and the Golden Network. She’s won and placed in over 30 contests, including twice in the Golden Heart®, twice in the Daphne du Maurier, and most recently in the prestigious Chanticleer International Mystery & Mayhem Book Awards.*

*Arlene lives with her family in Canada. Learn more at: [www.arlenemcfarlane.com](http://www.arlenemcfarlane.com). Start with Book 1 in the series. Available here: <http://amzn.to/2gdOJKH>.*

*The Long and Short of It*

# ANG POMPANO

## on “When It’s Time for Leaving”

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Connecticut’s Ang Pompano has been writing whodunits for more than twenty years. It might come as a surprise, then, that he’s a 2019 Agatha Award nominee for Best First Mystery Novel for last fall’s “When It’s Time for Leaving” (Encircle Publications)—a charmingly comedic tale featuring down on his luck but upstanding PI, Al DeSantis. But passion and persistence are often a writer’s greatest allies, along with talent, and Pompano has been cultivating his creativity for decades.

An accomplished short story scribe, Pompano was previously published in several collections. His most recent credits include the stories “Diet of Death” in the 2019 Malice Domestic anthology, “Murder Most Edible,” and “Stringer” in “SEASCAPE: Best New England Crime Stories 2019.” He has also written academic articles, including one on the topic of teaching detective fiction.

A past recipient of the Helen McCloy/Mystery Writers of America Scholarship for a novel in progress, Pompano is a member of MWA, a brother member of

Sisters in Crime (and a longtime board member of the New England chapter), and a fourteen-year veteran of the New England Crime Bake Planning Committee.

Now, Ang Pompano shares the long and short of it...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): What was the original impetus for “When It’s Time for Leaving”—and how did the story evolve throughout the writing process?

Ang Pompano (A.P.): *About 5 years ago I started to write about a retired husband and wife who moved to the Florida Keys and became a detective team when one of their neighbors was found dead. The feedback I received was that nobody wanted to read about old people. Make them younger, I was told. It seems Geezer Lit. is becoming a thing now, but nobody would touch it a few years ago, so I made my protagonist 35 years old. I teamed him up with a female detective named Max who is just as smart, tough, and noble as he is. I’ve always liked writing older characters, though, so my original protagonist came back as Al’s father, Big Al.*

J.B.V.: Tell us about your protagonist, Al DeSantis. What of his character is drawn from your own personality, how do the two of you most differ, and what was the one thing that surprised you most as he developed on the page?

A.P.: *I think it’s more accurate to say that Al is patterned after the person I would like to be. I believe most people want to be honest, fair, caring, and dependable. I think they also want to believe that they have courage, loyalty, and self-control. What I love about writing is that not only can I give Al all of those qualities, but I can take them away as well. And sometimes I do, because*

none of us can be all of those things all of the time.

*I wanted to make Al a classic damaged gumshoe with a bad attitude. What surprised me was that he kept doing things that were nice for people, such as his ex, who had really hurt him. He kept trying to show me that he wasn't as bad as I thought he was.*

J.B.V.: Al leaves the New Haven PD and ends up inheriting the role of PI. How does this liberate him in terms of investigative latitude—and what kind(s) of research did you undertake to ensure authenticity of action(s)?

*A.P.: Al quit the NHPD because he was tired of chasing bad guys. Then his father who he didn't know was alive drops the Blue Palmetto Detective Agency of Savannah in his lap. He had intended to put that part of his life behind him. When Al investigates a murder that he intends to be his first and last PI case, he starts to realize that a private investigator does not have the restrictions that a police detective might have. For example, when he and Big Al are tracking down a suspect, they might tell a white lie as to who they are or why they are seeking certain information. Al knows a police detective couldn't do that and it does bother him somewhat.*

*As far as research, I have several friends and relatives who work in law enforcement and I picked their brains about police procedure in handling suspects, as well as everyday duties, such as filing paperwork. Sometimes it got weird in a funny way. You should have seen the reaction I got when I asked if it was possible to have sex in the back seat of a police car. (Don't worry, I kept the book PG.) I tried to sprinkle the tidbits throughout the book. If I made any mistakes, they were my own.*

J.B.V.: Much of the book takes place in Savannah, Georgia. How did you eventually settle on this locale—and in what ways does this setting enhance your story?

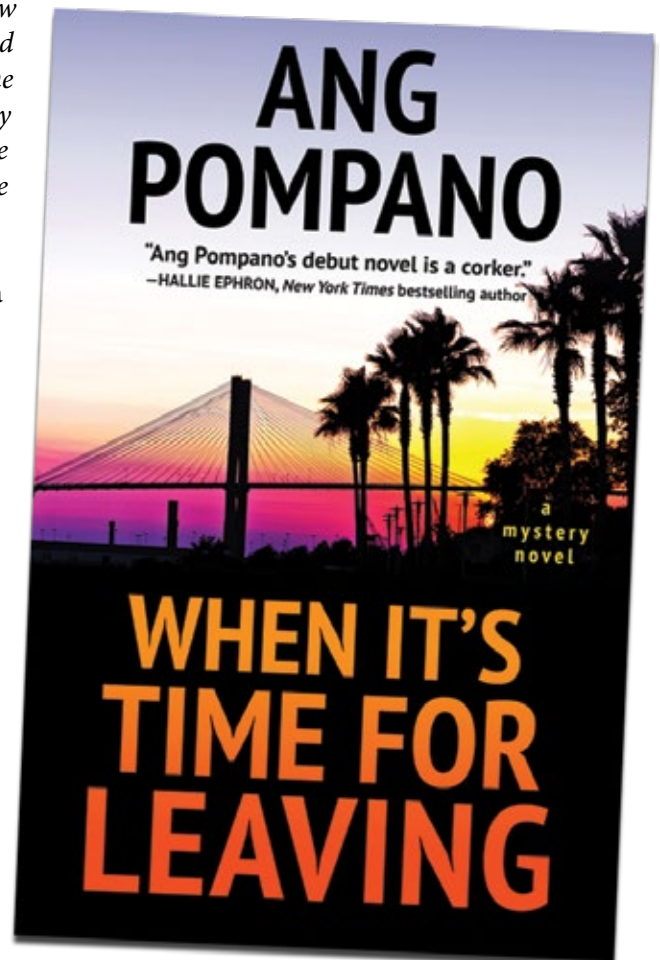
*A.P.: As I said, "When It's Time for Leaving" was originally set in Florida. The publishers my agent approached all said they had too many books set there. I had a key scene set on the Sunshine Skyway bridge. I had the Everglades, and alligators, and beach scenes in there. I didn't want to lose those passages. When I told her Carl Hiaasen and Lucy Burdette have great success writing about Florida, she informed me that I'm not a bestselling author.*

*I couldn't argue with that, so I started thinking of other places I knew well. Los Angeles wouldn't work. New York, St. Louis, Boston, would all change the story drastically. Then my wife, Annette, reminded me that Savannah was a perfect fit. It had a big bridge, and the nearby Okefenokee Swamp was full of alligators. It still took a year to rewrite because find and replace didn't cut it for me. Still it was the best move Al, and I for that matter, ever made.*

J.B.V.: Al is reunited with his father, who is suffering from dementia and living in an assisted care facility. What realities did you want to explore about this affliction (and its caretaking requirements)—and how does Big Al's condition heighten the narrative's overall suspense?

*A.P.: My father had dementia. I wanted to share some of the experiences my sister and I had when dealing with my father's illness. Eventually I concluded that whatever place his mind had him in at the moment was his reality. Who was I to challenge that? As a friend told me, "When you've seen one case of Alzheimer's you've seen one case of Alzheimer's." So, in Big Al's case, while he may not remember that Al is his son and not his partner in the agency, he still has the skills to be a good detective.*

*I also wanted to explore the challenges that a guy with traditional male ideas faced when he suddenly had to become his father's advocate. The only negative review that the book received is my favorite because the reviewer said that Maryann, the nursing home supervisor, was unrealistic and wouldn't last a week in the*





job if she acted like that. I laughed because Maryann and how she acted is the only part of the book drawn from real life.

J.B.V.: You are a veteran writer of short stories. How did the process of writing a full-length novel compare? Do you have a preference between the two?

A.P.: I enjoy writing both. I like short stories because I enjoy the challenge of telling a tight story. You have to make every word count. On the other hand, writing a novel gives me the freedom to develop more than one character and explore more than one theme. In either case I still agonize over every paragraph, every sentence, every word. I wrote a story called "Diet of Death" which was published in the *Malice Domestic* anthology, "Mystery Most Edible." I also have a novel version of the story with a different solution to the murder. I found that to be an interesting experiment.

J.B.V.: You are a longtime member of a writers group. What are the benefits of such an association—and how do you endeavor to balance your own creative instincts with constructive feedback from others?

A.P.: I've heard horror stories about some writing groups and great things about others. I'm happy to say that mine falls in the second category. Roberta Isleib (a.k.a. Lucy Burdette), Chris Falcone, and I have been in the group for over twenty years. We've been together so long because we each have our own set of skills and we respect each other's opinion. We each welcome constructive criticism because without feedback there is no growth. We know that in the end it's up to the individual to take or reject suggestions. After brainstorming my stories are always stronger.

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

A.P.: An agent friend once told me the road to publishing a novel was a long, winding one. What I didn't realize was that not only does the author have to build that road before they travel it, but they have to fill in the potholes along the way. I'm working like crazy to wrap up a final draft of a mystery novel called "Killer View." It explores the Haves and Have Nots living in a Connecticut shoreline village. Then I'm anxious to get back to the sequel to "When It's Time for Leaving." I'll keep you posted if it becomes a series. So, I guess you might say I'm still filling in the potholes on that long, winding road.

To learn more about Ang, and keep up-to-date on his upcoming projects, check out his website at: [www.angpompano.com](http://www.angpompano.com). ■

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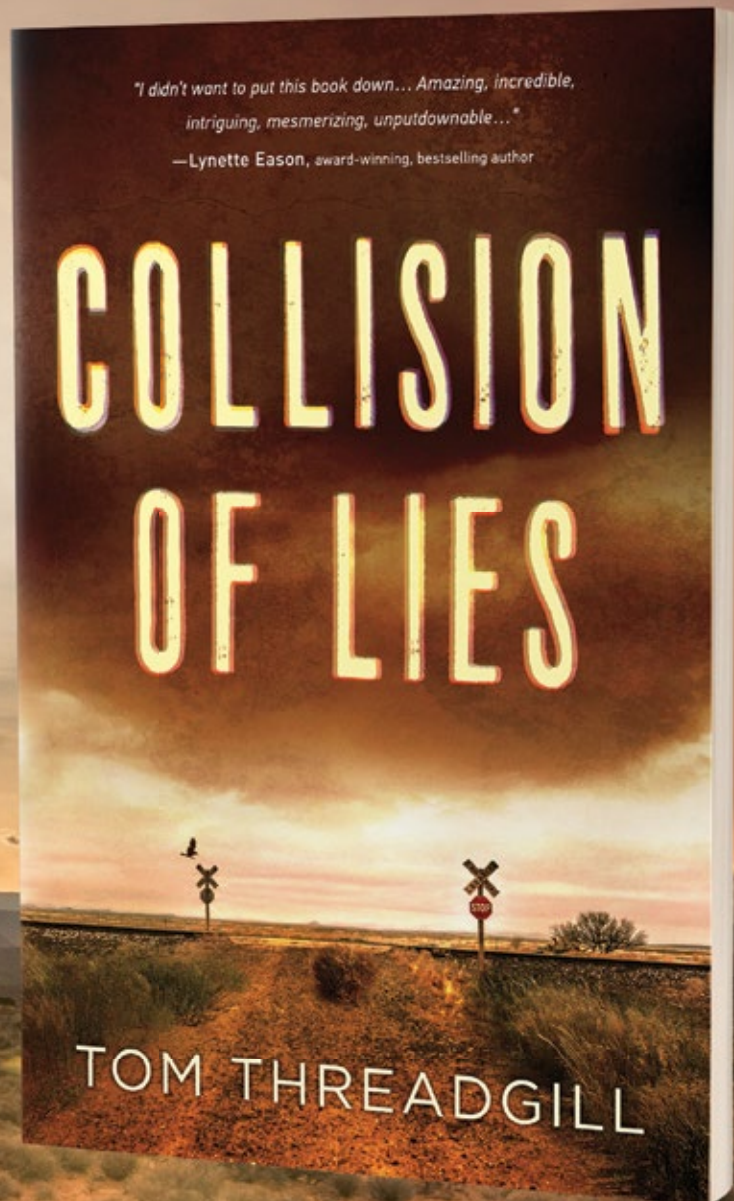


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# For Action-Oriented Female Characters, You Can't Beat **DV BERKOM**

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



DV Berkوم loves strong, intelligent, smart-ass, and kick-ass female characters. So, it's not surprising that the *USA Today* bestselling author of two action-packed thriller series features impressive female leads: Kate Jones and Leine Basso. Her drive to create such women stems from a lifelong addiction to reading spy novels, mysteries, and thrillers—and longing to find the female equivalent within those pages.

After a lifetime of moving to places people typically like to visit on vacation, she now lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and several imaginary characters who like to tell her what to do. Her most recent books include: “Dakota Burn,” “Absolution,” “Dark Return,” “The Last Deception,” “Vigilante Dead,” “A Killing Truth,” and “Cargo.” She’s currently working on her next thriller.

DV was happy to entertain some questions from us. If you enjoy reading (and perhaps writing) thrillers, you just might find her experiences and advice enlightening.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Thanks for playing along with us! Let’s start with the obvious questions. What do you find most appealing about writing series? Do you think series are easier to write and market than standalone novels?

DV Berkوم (D.V.B.): *Other than short stories, I’ve only ever written a series—I really love them. The form gives me the ability to explore the main character much more in depth than a standalone novel. Plus, I get to concentrate on the story, the setting, and the secondary characters since I’m familiar with the MC and don’t have to build her from scratch. But, easy to write? I’d have to say writing in general is about as easy as balancing on top of a unicycle in the middle of the I-5 during a Seattle rush hour, while sipping a cocktail and having a conversation with my editor.*

*As for marketing, I think having a series is definitely easier than writing one-offs. There are so many more entry points for a reader and, if they love a character, many will burn through the entire series, which helps tremendously.*

W.B.: When creating a series character like Leine Basso or Kate Jones, is the character growth and maturation planned or a natural progression?

D.V.B.: *To be completely honest, I started both series without a plan of any sort. At that point in my writing career, I was a pantsier (seat of your pants writer). I’d sit down with a sketchy idea of what I wanted to accomplish, and then just have at it. While that was terrific fun, I ended up writing myself into so many corners that I would spend hours revising scenes so they’d work. Yeah, my novels used to take a LOT longer to write back then. Now, I usually work up an outline that I try to refer to when I get stuck. I say “try” because one of my later Leine Basso thrillers, “Dakota Burn,” went entirely off the rails because I got caught up in the storyline and completely forgot I’d written one. When I finally came up for air, I read through said outline and thought, “Huh. Well, that would have worked too.”*

*So, to answer your question, character growth for both Kate and Leine was a natural progression in the beginning (re:*



pantser days), then became a bit more planned as I worked my way through each of the series.

W.B.: What do you think, will Leine and Kate ever cross paths?

D.V.B.: Lots of readers have asked me that question. I've considered it, just haven't found the right story yet. It would definitely be an interesting encounter. They're both so different: Leine is the calm, objective, capable professional; Kate is an emotional, fly by the seat of her pants kinda gal. But both are gutsy, independent women, so there is that.

W.B.: Bourne or Bond?

D.V.B.: Tough choice. I grew up reading Bond, and never miss a 007 movie, but I can say the same for Bourne. If I absolutely have to choose and we're talking movies, I'd say Bourne. The action scenes are soooo good (although I really like Daniel Craig as Bond). The books are a toss-up. I'd be happy with either.

W.B.: Let's talk about Leine for a minute. She's a former government assassin. What research was required to develop her character?

D.V.B.: If I told you, I'd have to kill you....

Seriously, since I'm not exactly an international assassin, I had a lot of help. I'm fortunate to know several folks I can turn to for information who have been in similar situations as my character. First and foremost, I have a great relationship with a former Special Forces sniper. We met through a friend's Zoomba class, if you can believe it. He made me meet him there (I'd never Zoomba'd in my life) and make a total ass of myself before he'd talk to me. It was great fun and soooo worth it. I'm also good friends with several law enforcement folks, and some people who possibly-might-have-been-okay-yes-they-were on the other side of that line. Then, once I've nailed down the human side of it, I dig deep and research as much as I can. I try to get to every place I write about, but if that isn't possible, I have friends all over the world I can rely on to help with logistics and setting.

I love to travel and have been to all kinds of places, so I can draw on those experiences, as well. I've also practiced with several different weapons throughout the years, so I have a familiarity with firearms.

As for her inner demons, we all have those to some degree. I'm great at playing 'what if' and imagining how a character would feel if such and such happened (some call it empathetic, I say neurotic), but I also have a ton of experiences to draw from. One of the many perks of growing older...

W.B.: Leine is something of a badass, no-holds-barred woman, with a bit of satire and dark humor mixed in. How much fun is she to write?

D.V.B.: Way too much fun. My whole reason for creating Leine was to show that a woman can be a badass, but also have a human side. As one reader put it, she's effed up from her past, but tries to work through that as best as she can—kind of like all of us.

Dark humor is second nature to me, so it had to bleed through into my books. "Serial Date," the first novel I wrote with Leine Basso as the lead character, was intended to be a standalone thriller. I needed a strong female who could go toe-to-toe with a cannibal/serial killer. A former government assassin seemed the way to go. Both kill, but for different reasons.

Are they really so different? I try to answer that question in the novel. The story itself came from a twisted dream I had, and I just let loose on the characters. The satire in the book (which is pretty much nonexistent in the later novels) was my response to the plethora of serial killer thrillers and reality shows on television at the time. Why not write about a reality show where ex-cons pose as serial killers and women vie for the opportunity to hook up with them? We're not that far from those kind of "reality" based programs right now.

W.B.: How much of Leine Basso is DV Berkom?

D.V.B.: Good question. There's definitely some element of me in all my books—I don't think a writer can ever really erase that, and I don't think they should. It's what makes one book different from the others. That being said, Leine's tougher, more attractive, and a hell of a



*lot better shot than I am.*

W.B.: What is your most vexing problem when writing?

D.V.B.: *You'd think after 15+ novels, things would get easier. If anything, it's harder. I tend to jump into a book with great enthusiasm, then about 15k words in I wonder what the hell I was thinking. 20k to 50k I figure it'll be my last book, since I obviously don't know what I'm doing. 55k in and I'm finding it hard to dress myself—jammies and T-shirts all the way. At 60k+ personal hygiene takes a backseat, as does anything remotely resembling house cleaning. And then it's all unicorns and rainbows because I finished the book and I can start another one. Much champagne is had and life is wonderful. It's a wonder my long-suffering partner, Mark, doesn't just live at the nearest bar.*

W.B.: If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?

D.V.B.: *Work in finance? Seriously, I probably wouldn't change much. Every writer has to go through their own trajectory. Mine has been all kinds of fun, but also filled with challenges, which is the whole point, I think. I tend to remember the lesson more if it was difficult. Sad, but true.*

W.B.: Columbo or MacGyver?

D.V.B.: *MacGyver, definitely. Action, action, action.*

W.B.: You're planning a backyard barbecue and you can invite three special guests—authors or fictional characters, contemporary or from the past. Who do you invite? And what conversation would you hope to initiate?

D.V.B.: *Papa Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, and Miles Davis. Music, writing, and sarcasm—what more could a gal want? Of course, I'd ask them all to bring their friends. And, if I could have one more guest, I'd absolutely invite Amelia Earhart and ask her what happened when she and Fred Noonan disappeared.*

W.B.: Any new authors who have snared your interest?

D.V.B.: *I'm always on the lookout for new authors. Lately I've been reading Gregg Hurwitz's Orphan X series (yeah, I know—I'm late to the party), but I also enjoy Tim Tigner, Carmen Amato, Andrew Warren, Kristi Belcamino, Mark Dawson, and scads of others that would take up way too much space to list here.*

W.B.: Who is your favorite superhero, and why?

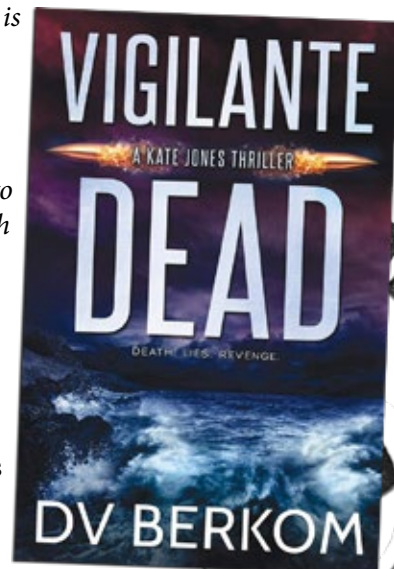
D.V.B.: *Every woman I've ever met. From my mother and sister, to friends and acquaintances, to people I've only read about, women have proven to be resilient, fearless, and amazing. I am in awe of all of them.*


W.B.: Can you tell us about your current project?

D.V.B.: *I just finished Leine Basso #10, "Shadow of the Jaguar." This time, Leine's in South America in the Amazon, searching for the member of an expedition on the trail of a kind of El Dorado—a city of gold. I wanted to write more of an action-adventure similar to "Cargo" (Leine Basso #5), and the whole searching for a lost city thing really intrigued me. The entire time I was writing the book, though, I kept berating myself for attempting such a cliché plot (especially since so many other authors have already done it so well), so I worked hard to make the idea fresh rather than a rehash of the genre. From what early readers have said, I succeeded. The book is currently available for preorder on Amazon, KOBO, Apple Books, and Barnes & Noble, with a publication date of April 18<sup>th</sup>.*

W.B.: Thanks DV for a great interview. It was fun!

For more information, visit her website at [www.dvberkom.com](http://www.dvberkom.com). To be the first to hear about new releases and subscriber-only offers, go to: [bit.ly/DVB\\_RL](http://bit.ly/DVB_RL). ■





# Lizzie Borden VERSUS Belle Gunness

By Robert Kostanczuk

Doyle didn't organize frivolous get-togethers. His social gatherings were, in his words, "designed to exercise brain muscles."

One particular think-tank event had him excited.

"This time, I have a doozy," he emailed best friend Martin who, like Doyle, was a seasoned professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette.

Doyle Griffweld taught history at that Indiana college; Martin Langthon taught English. Together, they would lead a "round-table" discussion at a Halloween-eve soirée.

It was to be a low-key affair for a couple dozen people, but would still offer snacks and punch, and welcome the wearing of costumes. The topic of discourse centered on who was the more intriguing female murderess: Lizzie Borden or Belle Gunness?

This wasn't about who ranked as the more prolific villainess but, rather, the more fascinating.

Doyle was hosting the intellectual bash at his rustic, yet palatial, home at the edge of the Tippecanoe Battlefield, the wooded site of an 1811 confrontation that spelled bad news for Tecumseh, legendary Shawnee leader.

The battleground was spread out about seven miles northeast of the Purdue campus.

That was where Doyle would often clue in students on Belle Gunness—the imposing killer they probably didn't know.

Passing as fodder for leisure chatter, the Norwegian immigrant gave Doyle the chance to pass on his ample knowledge of the woman who was up to no good on her LaPorte farm in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

"She lured suitors through newspaper ads. She wanted them to bring along whatever wealth they had. They'd do that, then she'd kill them." He would tell the young people at

a voluntary after-class "briefing."

One tidbit was always dished: "In one letter, ole' Belle told a suitor that he should 'come prepared to stay forever.'"

Like an affable uncle spinning yarns for his nieces and nephews, Doyle would invariably finish his little tale by stating that the aforementioned love interest did, indeed, end up staying forever.

The invitation to stay forever was given to Andrew Helgelien of South Dakota. His dirt-caked body was dug up on Gunness' spread after her property was scorched by a farmhouse fire in 1908. Doyle always believed that Gunness got the short end of the stick when it came to "recognition" for dastardly misdeeds.

Lizzie Borden's name was more rooted in the minds of the masses, but she only was accused of killing two people, her father and stepmother...albeit with a hatchet. On the other hand, about seven times more bodies were found buried on the Gunness farm in Indiana.

"Belle gets a raw deal," Doyle said on more than one occasion.

He would get to argue his case at the upcoming party, which, in reality, would have the feel of a book club meeting.

The odd bash took place on a windy and brisk night that almost seemed to swirl up spirits of dead soldiers and Native Americans at the nearby Tippecanoe Battlefield.

Guests included retired and current teachers, and a sprinkling of Purdue students willing to forgo the party-animal experience.

No more than 25 people were invited; 20 actually showed up.

Sid and Lily, both mechanical engineering students, had



no problem skipping a Halloween frat party for the more subdued offering at professor Griffweld's house.

Located in hilly terrain, the Doyle Griffweld tri-level home featured turrets and a gothic-style widow's railing. Stained glass windows at the doorway were infused with richly colored autumn trees and fall landscapes.

"Welcome," smiled Doyle, as Sid and Lily entered.

The professor knew them from the times they would bump into each other at the school's newspaper office.

"Help yourself to some punch or pop," added Doyle. He was a chubby, unassuming presence with bushy eyebrows and quaintly quizzical eyes that always seemed to size up the environment around him.

"Can't wait to talk about Belle," Sid beamed.

He was preceded into the house by Doyle's professorial chum, Martin.

Doyle's friend was thin, erudite and proper. Martin favored gabardine suits and bow ties. His teaching style was not interactive: he taught, you listened.

No fan of pop-culture crime, Martin still, nonetheless, knew enough about Borden and Gunness to draw a conclusion. He made his declaration at the round-table discussion, which actually took place at a grand, rectangular cedar table in the living room. An impressive bay window provided a view of rustling tree limbs and brooding night clouds.

"Lizzie Borden has her own nursery rhyme," Martin noted. He then proceeded to recite it in a sing-song rhythm:

"Lizzie Borden took an axe, and gave her mother 40 whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father 41."

Those who were gathered nodded in recognition of the rhyme.

As Martin saw it, Lizzie Borden was ingrained into criminal lore in this country. The ghoulish nursery prose helped cement that infamy, although her murdered parents didn't quite suffer the large amount of "whacks" set forth in the macabre poem.

"Belle Gunness has no such nursery rhyme, nor any particular elements that hook her into the public consciousness," Martin stated. "Belle Gunness may have slaughtered more people, but Borden owns the publicity machine. Therefore, Borden wins. She is more intriguing."

Sid wasn't buying it. "But there are more layers to the Belle Gunness story," the student countered. "She probably killed her three children. They were all preteens. There's been some talk about one or more of them actually being adopted. But whatever happened, they were found murdered."

"Their bodies were found on Gunness' land after her farmhouse burned—burned mysteriously, I might add."

Sid also pointed to her correspondence with suitors

whom she enticed into coming to her rustic LaPorte property.

"Here, I have a letter she wrote to Andrew Helgelien," said Sid, retrieving a folded-up piece of paper from his wallet.

The paper contained the content of the correspondence, which Sid relayed:

"Do not say anything about coming here. Now, sell all that you can get cash for.... Leave neither money nor stock up there, but make yourself practically free from Dakota. We will be alone with each other. Can you conceive of anything nicer? My heart beats in wild rapture for you, my Andrew, I love you."

Sid folded up the piece of paper, preparing to return it to his wallet. "Now that is good, horrific stuff," he smiled. "Kind of sends chills down your spine."

As "Monster Mash" shot off throwback vibes from a CD player, Doyle buttressed Sid's view of the woman born Brynhild Paulsdatter Storset.

"Lizzie Borden was a run-of-the-mill slayer compared to Belle," Doyle asserted. "Let's remember that Belle cracked skulls and poisoned with arsenic and strychnine. There's also conjecture that hogs feasted on the remains of some of her victims who were planted on her farm."

In addition, the point was made that law enforcement authorities removed body parts from pits on the Gunness farm. A newspaper article in Sid's possession noted that torsos, legs, and arms were recovered.

The level of revulsion could not but help to impress all eight of the people gathered around the cedar table; at least, that's what Doyle hoped.

Martin still thought Lizzie to be the more enticing, but he couldn't prevent the carnage of Belle from skittering across his mind.

The evil-doings tied to Borden occurred in 1892, but Gunness seemed to have won a grisly game of one-upmanship by racking up a high body count with a Hoosier killing spree that began a few years later.

In 1901, or shortly thereafter, Gunness had taken up residency on the 40-acre LaPorte farm along McClung Road.

She had immigrated to America a few years earlier to live with her sister in Chicago, where she started using the name Belle.

Martin knew the bio by heart.

As a kid, Belle was believed to have worked as a dairy maid in her native Norway, but there was nothing wholesome about the trail of bodies left in her wake.

Lily, Sid's girlfriend, found it particularly depressing that the bodies of Belle's three kids were reportedly unearthed, along with the remains of 11 or so other humans.

"I read where those kids ranged in age from 5 to 11..."

what a shame,” said Lily, who radiated the countenance of a studious librarian. “The kids were named Lucy, Myrtle, and there was a baby boy, but I forgot his name. The body of Belle’s adopted daughter, Jennie, was also found on the property. She was 18.

“Some of the bodies were found in the basement of the burned-out farmhouse. I heard bodies were covered with lye to dissolve the skeletons. People forget that even before Guinness had moved to LaPorte, two of her children from an earlier marriage—Axel and Caroline—showed signs of being poisoned, although their deaths were officially tied to colitis. There were life insurance policies on them waiting to be paid out.”

Lily rattled off the data like a precise, in-charge bookkeeper.

Belle Guinness ranked as a menacing serial killer, but Martin asserted that it was Lizzie Borden who better captured the imagination of the American public.

“Maybe it’s some of that East Coast bias. After all, Lizzie did her killings in Massachusetts,” Martin said.

He took a swig of apple cider laced with a little vodka, then continued. “Guinness is known for mayhem on her Indiana farm; the Midwest is always seen as a second banana to the East or West Coast. Let’s remember that Lizzie was acquitted after a sensational trial, which only added to the drama. It was an early example of mass-media coverage. This spinster, who never married, was cleared by an all-male jury.”

Martin added a salacious nugget that he felt cemented the standing of Ms. Borden as the more alluring killer. “It is said that she was seen with no blood on her shortly after the murders of her father and stepmother,” he related, being sure to make eye contact with everyone at the table.

“Why no blood on her clothes? Well, the theory goes that she committed the killings in the nude, and simply washed off the blood from her body.” He smiled. “How’s that for titillation?”

Lily blushed.

That was an element of the saga she hadn’t heard.

Doyle still was having none of it.

“Lizzie doesn’t have the market cornered on juicy soap-opera stuff,” he dryly said. “Shortly after moving to her farm in LaPorte, Belle married Peter Guinness, a butcher. He didn’t last too long, though. A sausage grinder, I believe, supposedly fell on his head and killed him. Who buys that story? The LaPorte County Historical Society says the insurance company paid on his policy, but with reluctance. Belle collected \$3,000.”

Guinness buffs knew such minutiae.

They likewise were aware that her lust for blood started before she even moved to LaPorte at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century.

She had a husband named Mads Sorenson. He died in 1900. Belle collected \$8,500 from insurance companies from his death, even though Mads displayed symptoms of strychnine poisoning.

A Purdue student named Cliff, dressed in crisp, clean bib overalls, had been sitting quietly at the table, soaking in the back-and-forth debate. But it was time to dive in.

“Belle sure wanted cash the easy way, no?” Cliff asked, knowing he was being obvious.

Doyle responded, quoting what Guinness’ sister had seemingly said: “Belle was crazy for money. It was her great weakness.”

A studious 20-year-old who was in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree in agricultural economics, Cliff qualified as a wallflower. But he was getting more comfortable with the gabfest in front of him.

“Lizzie Borden might have liked money, too,” he said, peeling off his shyness. “She and her older sister, Emma, inherited a large chunk of their father’s estate. That let them live together after the killings in a new home they bought.”

Cliff also knew that Lizzie supposedly had a distaste for her stepmom, allegedly feeling that she was siphoning off giveaways from Dad that should have been hers.

Andrew Borden was a man of means, perhaps with a dark side. Festering speculation holds out the theory that he had an incestuous relationship with Lizzie.

Is that why she snapped? Or did a Portuguese laborer hack up Andrew Borden and his wife?

The worker had supposedly wrangled with Mr. Borden over wages due him.

That sort of conjecture came up during the confab at Doyle’s house, as wind-whipped leaves pinged against the windows.

“I like the Borden case better,” Cliff summed up. “It’s a simpler murder mystery. And it’s still pretty gruesome. I like that one description of her dad’s hacked face that said his left eye had been dug out.”

Another point of interest involved Lizzie burning one of her dresses in the kitchen stove shortly after the killings.

She had contended the garment was ruined because she’d rubbed up against some fresh paint while wearing it. But was something besides paint on it?

It made for delectable murder-mystery chat.

However, Sid decided to dive in and forcefully get the conversation off of that dress. He needed to fight on behalf of his twisted gal.

“Lizzie has nothing on Belle,” he decreed. “The LaPorte County Historical Society has an actual photo on its website of the decomposing head of Ole Budsberg, one of

Belle's suitors who was dug up. Bodies were found on her farm dismembered, remember? Ole was a widower from Wisconsin who sold his property back home so he could hand more wealth over to Gunness, just like Helgelien did. Helgelien brought money to Belle from his savings."

Doyle jumped in to help out Sid's cause. "Something like 14 bodies were dug up on Belle's farm, but many experts think her overall body count, including murders committed outside LaPorte, was up around 40," the professor said.

After Doyle's statistical summation, there was a brief lull in the discussion about heinous villainesses.

In a corner of the adjoining parlor, a couple danced to Michael Jackson's "Thriller." But they were the only ones stepping lively at the subdued party.

"You know," said Sid, breaking the silence, "I think I'm gonna push for the school newspaper to run a Lizzie-vs.-Belle poll. Students could vote for the killer they like more. Hell, students could have some fun with the debate on Facebook."

Clementine had been taking it all in.

She was a Purdue librarian who was part of the cedar-table discourse, although she had done no talking until Sid prodded her to speak up.

"I don't mean to be a killjoy, but this kind of talk about brutal slayings shouldn't be taken as fun; I mean, real people died—their families suffered," Clementine said calmly, but passionately.

She looked around the table cautiously. She hoped she had not dampened the mood of those around her.

No one seemed offended or put off. So Clementine continued, "I know America tends to turn notorious murders into pop-culture stuff, but in the end, these kinds of crimes are ugly and depressing."

Doyle agreed. "Thanks for your input, Clementine," he said with a sincere smile. "I've wrestled with the notion of getting so-called enjoyment out of discussing Belle Gunness. At the end of the day, what she did is awfully terrible. Very terrible."

Doyle then filled in more details on the case.

Belle's hired hand, Ray Lamphere, ended up being charged with some of the murders and arson, but he was only convicted of the latter.

After the fire on the Gunness farm, a headless female corpse was found on the property. Some thought it was Gunness, but there is strong evidence the remains were of a woman too small to be Belle, who was believed to have weighed around 210 pounds—maybe more.

Belle Gunness may have been responsible for the headless corpse: killing a woman, decapitating her, then leaving the body behind as a ruse to make police think it was her.

Doyle then passed a photo around that showed the

notorious Black Widow with her dark hair pulled back and piled into a bun-like hairdo.

"Who was better looking? Belle or Lizzie?" Cliff blurted out of nowhere.

The query prompted some chuckles.

"Lizzie is clearly the better looking woman," Martin said with conviction. "She's kind of attractive in that Gay '90s kind of way; Belle was just too brawny looking."

"Gunness was never brought to justice," Martin added as a side note.

The night of debate was winding to a close.

"After the blaze, people thought they spotted Belle in any number of locations: South Bend in 1917, Los Angeles in the 1930s...the infamous Norwegian just wouldn't die," Doyle said with a slight sigh.

Despite Doyle's details of the Gunness saga, a show of hands at the table showed that the informal panel thought Lizzie Borden was the more intriguing of the two dubious ladies.

The alleged hatchet lady from Fall River, Mass., had triumphed.

It didn't matter that Belle had lured lovelorn men to their deaths.

It also didn't matter that the curious started to come out in droves as authorities dug for bodies around the hog pen of her farm, and as news spread that something very foul was being uncovered on the desolate property.

In the end, Gunness lost to Lizzie.

"Ya hear that Belle? You're the opening act, and Lizzie is the headliner," Doyle smirked as he mockingly addressed the spirit of Gunness.

"If you don't like our verdict, give us a sign," Doyle yelled in a voice that startled those around him. "Are you still hanging around Indiana?"

An answer might have come: An antique lamp on a nearby end table crashed to the floor.

Doyle and his debate mates gazed at each other in surprise. After all, no partygoers were anywhere near the table.

"The bulb broke," Doyle said as he inspected the bent, but sturdy, metal lamp. He brushed the bulb fragments under the end table, for cleanup later.

"Freaky," Sid muttered, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Somebody must have run past the table and bumped it, and we didn't see it," Doyle said, taking his seat once again.

But Sid's belief in the supernatural led him to feel uneasy about Doyle turning the evening into an impromptu séance.

The falling lamp confirmed that Doyle was playing with fire.

After all, Sid held fast to one particular



credo: Only no good can come of tinkering with the netherworld—especially when there's no need to.

It was evident to Sid that the dearly departed are better left alone when they're not bothering anyone.

In any event, the great Lizzie vs. Belle competition had concluded for the night, shortly before 9 p.m.

A couple of minutes later, Doyle noticed Sid scurrying out the door, while Lily was still getting her coat on.

"What's up with your boyfriend?" Doyle asked Lily.

"Oh, it was the weirdest thing," Lily answered as she wrapped a scarf around her neck. "Sid just got a text message from his younger brother that said he's having his first date tonight with a new girl named Annabelle."

Doyle's eyes grew large as Lily informed him that Annabelle was known to everybody as simply Belle.

"Same name? Same spelling as Belle Gunness?" Doyle asked.

"The very same," Lily confirmed. "She's got a reputation as a gold digger, and as being a little flaky; Sid had been trying to keep his brother away from her."

Doyle couldn't refrain from finding wonder in the coincidence. "Well...I'm sure she's no Lady Bluebeard like Belle Gunness was," he told Lily.

"Probably not," Lily agreed. "But after all this murder talk tonight, Sid isn't taking chances. He's trying to catch his brother at home before he leaves for his date. Gotta run," Lily added as she waved goodbye and chased after Sid.

"You mean he's really spooked?" Doyle called out incredulously.

Lily either didn't hear, or didn't care to answer.

Doyle couldn't help but wonder if Belle Gunness really was making her presence known tonight with the falling lamp.

In the car, a shaken Sid forgot to put on his seat belt in the rush to leave Doyle's place.

Lily quickly reminded him that he was pulling away without being buckled in.

"I know this sounds crazy," said Sid as he clicked the seat belt, "but I don't want my brother near that girl. I felt that way even before we did all this talk about Belle Gunness." Lily said she understood, although firmly holding the belief that all the Gunness talk that night had, as Doyle put it, "spooked" her date and meant nothing more than that.

Sid, in fact, couldn't get one particular visage out of his mind.

It was an infamous photo of stocky Belle Gunness posing with her three kids—Lucy, Myrtle, and Philip. Belle was not smiling in the mother-siblings portrait. Her eyes burned a glare that reflected an uneasiness, a distance; as if she didn't care to be at the formal sitting.

Sid knew that the children in the photograph had not been long for this earth. They would be murdered while still children—while still having the youthful look of happiness that the picture showed.

Gripping the steering wheel hard, Sid cursed at himself for being so paranoid about his brother's date. He couldn't fathom why he thought the choice was so dangerous. It was true paranoia, rooted in very little evidence, but it clung to him like a wet blanket.

Sid was sucked into the vortex of the Belle Gunness story, and even if it was irrational, he connected Annabelle, his brother's date, to it.

Back inside, Doyle shook his head, disappointed that Sid had become unsettled because of all the murder talk.

He never wanted such a serious reaction.

It was supposed to be mindless gab for a Halloween-eve, just like a good ghost story.

Later that night, after his guests were long gone, Doyle was drifting off to sleep when a watercolor painting fell from his bedroom wall, cracking the frame.

"Is that you again, Belle?" Doyle called out in the dark.

He was trying to find humor in the situation, but, in truth, found this second episode of a falling object to be a bit too much.

As the room creaked with typical old-house sounds, Doyle tried to figure out if the lamp and painting that both fell were signs from Belle that she hated being rated behind Lizzie. Or were they merely notifications that Indiana turf was still home for the Norwegian nightmare?

Was she 'alive and kicking' in some sense?

Things that went bump in the night usually didn't faze the amiable academic. But this time, after picking up the fallen painting, he climbed back into bed and pulled the covers over his face, like a scared 8-year-old boy would do to hide from the bogeyman in his bedroom.

If Belle Gunness was indeed making her presence known, Doyle wanted her to go away.

Things were getting more unexplainable.

He didn't like that.

He hadn't counted on that.

However, the paranormal goings-on subsided at his house in a couple of days.

At classes, about a week after his party, Doyle was told by Sid that he wasn't able to prevent his younger brother, Rob, from going out on the date with the shady gal.

The rendezvous had ended badly, according to Sid.

"They went back to my parents' house; he went to the bathroom, and when he got back, he saw his date going through his wallet—stealing money from it."

Doyle could only think of one thing: she'd been a money-grubbing vamp, just like Belle Gunness.

But wait. That was ridiculous...unfair, Doyle said to himself.

He looked for more details, and got it from Sid. It seemed the girl had claimed that she was short on cash and just wanted a couple of bucks; she didn't think Sid's brother would miss it.

But it did matter: Rob immediately broke up with her, even though she was raven-haired cute, albeit a bit portly.

The breakup was not taken well by her. She stared a hole through Rob as she got out of his car for the final time. Worse yet, she slapped him—a solid whack on his face.

For the first time, Rob thought the girl a bit dangerous. She was a transfer from another high school. Full name: Annabelle Brianna Paul.

*Brianna Paul.* Sid rolled those two words around in his head. Before marriage, Belle Gunness was known as Brynhild Paulsdatter Storset.

Brianna Paul. Brynhild Paulsdatter. The similarities of the monikers were not lost on Sid.

Or were they really that similar?

He was losing perspective.

Sid had heard that Annabelle Paul was a homecoming queen at her former school. He started scouring social media for more information.

A Facebook friend eventually came up with a photo of Annabelle in the school's weekly newspaper. The image showed the homecoming queen in tiara and sash, barely smiling. Her dress didn't have the expected vivacious color. Instead, it looked black, with a high, enveloping neckline.

But there was no denying she had a dark, gothic persona that was tempting.

In the picture, a beaming boy in a royal blue tuxedo, her escort, stood close with an arm around her waist.

Standing outside of Doyle's classroom in between classes, Sid handed the picture to the professor.

Doyle looked, and then jerked his head back in astonishment. The caption for the photo read: "Belle of the Ball, with boyfriend Phillip Gunnek."

Phillip was not spelled with one "l," as was the case of the 5-year-old child of Belle Gunness, whose body was found on her farm in 1908. But although the spelling didn't match, there were more than enough eerie links for Sid to tie a maniac from more than a hundred years ago to Annabelle.

The caption held additional details that only fueled the fire. The school newspaper also happened to mention that Annabelle's homecoming date was badly injured shortly after the photo was taken. He fell from a "high porch" at Annabelle's home, it was reported.

The caption ended with: "Phillip is recovering nicely

after two days in the hospital."

After reading the entire caption, Doyle tossed a quizzical look at Sid. "I wonder how he fell. The paper doesn't say."

"Don't know," Sid replied, tucking the newspaper under his arm as he turned to walk away. "I wouldn't rule out Annabelle, though," he said, in a parting pronouncement.

Several weeks later, Sid left campus to return home to St. Louis.

It was Christmas break.

Visiting mom and dad had never seemed more enticing.

It had been a rough semester.

Sitting on his bed, Sid was reading a magazine account of Belle Gunness that provided an historical overview of her deeds.

Sid learned that she'd run a candy store in Chicago with one of her husbands, Mads Sorenson. Sid already knew he'd died under mysterious circumstances, and that Belle conveniently collected a hefty life insurance payout from his death. But he didn't realize the confectionery shop had burned down, and Belle was on the receiving end of that insurance payout as well.

Sid smiled at the apparent devilishness of it all.

His attention was soon diverted by a little commotion in the adjoining bedroom that belonged to Rob.

Two voices could be heard.

Sid opened his bedroom door slightly to hear more clearly.

Rob's bedroom door was open.

Putting an ear to the crack in his door, Sid picked up the sound of his brother addressing the other person as Belle.

Sid's heart sank; she was back.

"Yeah, let's give it another try," Rob could be heard saying.

"Sure, let's do it; I knew I could get you back," Belle replied in what seemed a blasé, matter-of-fact tone.

Then, she let loose a chilling little laugh before speaking again: "You know what they say, a spider's web is sticky."

The words draped over Sid in a heavy, suffocating avalanche.

How could his brother go back to her? She was clearly ice-cold, with a creepy side.

Deep down inside, he knew this Belle, the 21st century version, was going to have her way.

The die had been cast.

At the very least, the dark spirit...the dark ways of Belle Gunness had grabbed the soul of the girl that his brother was talking with now.

That was the case, even if Gunness had not actually been reincarnated in Rob's young temptress.

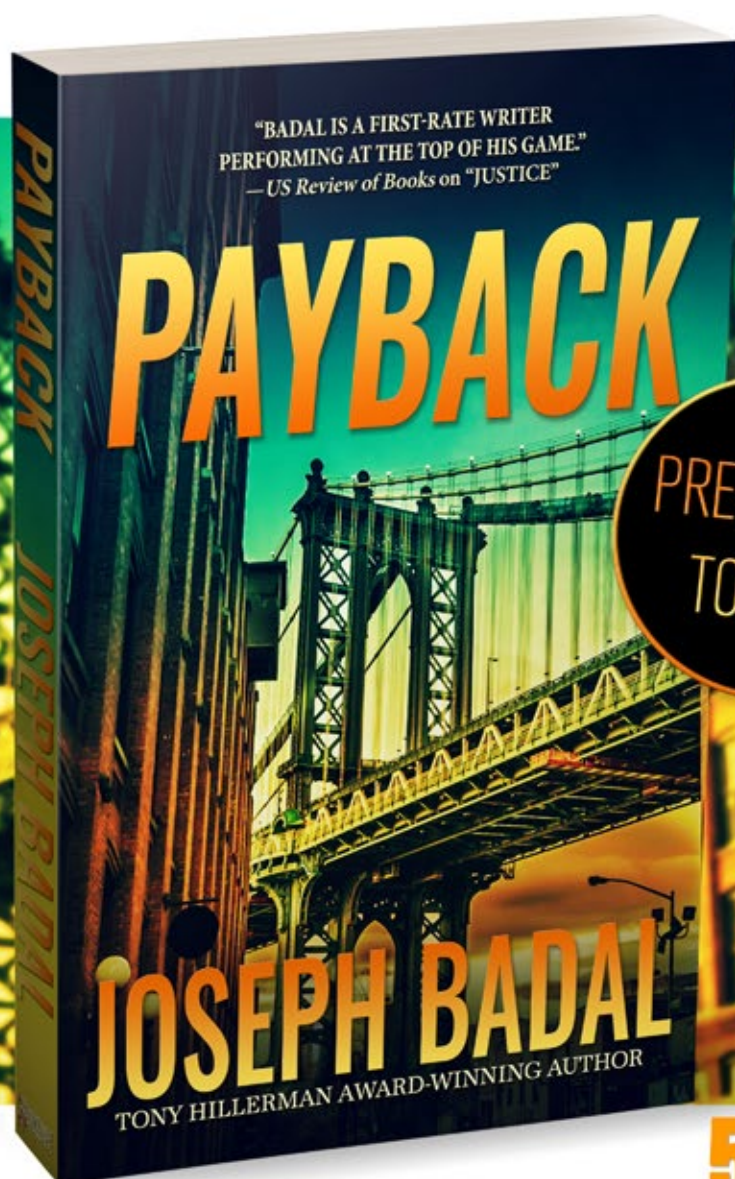
Sid could feel it in his bones. ■



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# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

## INVITATION ONLY MURDER

By Leslie Meier

The seaside town of Tinker's Cove, Maine, is agog when eccentric billionaire businessman Scott Newman purchases nearby Holiday Island. Rumors fly that Newman, an avid environmentalist, has stripped the isolated island of all modern conveniences in favor of an eco-friendly lifestyle. No electricity, no cell phone service—it's life as it was in the nineteenth century for the billionaire and his family, which includes a much younger second wife and two sets of twins. Twin set number one (by wife number one) are blonde young women, Parker and Taylor. Twin set number two (by wife number two), are eight-year-old boys, Walter and Fred.

Lucy Stone, reporter for the local newspaper, is thrilled when she and her husband receive an invitation from Scott Newman to a party on Holiday Island. Suitably impressed by the efficient way this unique lifestyle functions, she decides to write a feature story for the newspaper. When she pitches the idea to Newman, he's delighted and invites her to stay on the island for a few days so she can experience the lifestyle for herself.

Determined to make the best of her stay, Lucy begins by exploring the island to get a sense of the place. Unfortunately, her preliminary hike ends abruptly with a terrible discovery—Parker Newman has apparently fallen from the cliff and drowned. With no way for the family to summon help, the body is laid in the icehouse to preserve it until the ferry arrives several days later. Lucy and the family are coping as best they can, until the younger twins disappear while on a scavenger hunt. Clearly, something sinister is happening in what is supposed to be an idyllic place, and Lucy finds herself smack in the middle of it.

"Invitation Only Murder" is another fine entry in the *Lucy Stone* mystery series written by Leslie Meier. Highly recommended.

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



## EIGHT PERFECT MURDERS

By Peter Swanson

Swanson's "Eight Perfect Murders" make for one perfect read.

From the beginning, you know that the narrator is holding something back. But is he an "unreliable" narrator? Or just a traumatized one? The latter is reasonable, since he lost his beloved wife, Claire, by violence not that long ago.

Malcolm Kershaw, the narrator, is part owner and full manager of a mystery bookstore called Old Devils in Boston. When he first started working there for the previous owner, he was asked to do their blog. One of his entries was called, "Eight Perfect Murders," and listed eight of his favorite mysteries, ones that he felt used clever, ingenious, foolproof murder plots.

When a string of murders are committed, an FBI agent, Gwen Mulvey, comes to the bookstore to talk to Malcolm about the now-old list on the blog. She feels that three recent murders are mimicking "The A.B.C. Murders" by Agatha Christie, one of the novels on his list. The agent feels that some others are similar to the novel plots on his list also. Malcolm resists the idea at first, but doesn't resist his attraction to the agent very strenuously. Murders continue happening, sticking to the script, and both Gwen and Malcolm are in trouble.

You'll love the surprises in store for you as you uncover plots within plots.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Revenge is Sweet" ■

## MAHONEY'S CAMARO

By Michael J. Clark

Who doesn't love to nibble on a bit of supernatural suspense while sipping their crime fiction? Michael J. Clark's sophomore novel, "Mahoney's Camaro," provides just that and a bit of humor as well. Set in the Canadian summer of 1985, Steve Mahoney is a mechanic turned tow truck operator who dreams of one day owning his own shop. His life takes a turn for the macabre when he backs his tow truck into a Winnipeg crime scene to aid the police in yanking a vehicle from the Red River. It's not just any vehicle, however, but a 1967 Chevy Camaro, a cherry sight that gets his mouth watering. He soon acquires the Chevy for himself, after getting it for a song at a salvage auction. Only there's one problem, the ghost of the woman found dead and handcuffed to the steering wheel won't leave the vehicle. She wants to know who did her in and she needs Mahoney's help to find out. Add in the fact that her killers want the Camaro back and Steve's lucky day at auction turns into a nightmare. In order to rid his dream car of its spectral baggage and drive off into a crime-free life, our reluctant mechanic has to solve the mystery of her death or be killed in the process.

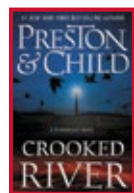
Gritty, compelling, and unique; Clark weaves a tale of car-loving woe brimming with sharp dialogue and criminal intent, and fuel injected with just the right dose of horror.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## CROOKED RIVER

By Preston & Child



This is the 19<sup>th</sup> (yes, 19<sup>th</sup>!) in the *Pendergast* series, and this character still remains the most charming, intelligent, cool, and creepy agent ever written.

This time out, Special Agent A.X.L. Pendergast is looking forward to returning to New York. He and his ward, Constance Green, have been enjoying a vacation on a secluded island but are now ready to go home. Unfortunately, their plans fall apart when Pendergast's supervisor, Assistant Director in Charge Pickett, appears on the island to ask for his help.

Something very odd has been found and he needs the "King of Oddities," so to speak, to investigate. (Now, every reviewer wants to pause here to make others wonder what on earth could be left that's odd enough for Pendergast....) Well, it seems that dozens of severed human feet have washed ashore, and they are still fresh. The Coast Guard as well as other local agencies have no idea where they came from, nor do they know where the rest of the body parts could possibly be.

More than a little reluctant to dive into the case, Pendergast does eventually agree. Reaching the barrier islands off South Florida, he's almost immediately drawn into the more than disturbing mystery. When a preliminary pathology report shows that the feet were torn from bodies in the cruelest of ways, Pendergast and others are shocked—not only by the news, but also when more feet wash in every day until the number is over a hundred.

Readers will hold their breath as Pendergast calls in a former partner, Special Agent Armstrong Coldmoon, to help him in an extremely dangerous undercover assignment. When the truth comes closer, an enemy from their past is unveiled. There is SO much to say here...but it can't be said. So, read this. As fast as possible. Preston & Child have once again created the unimaginable and you just can't miss it!

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

## ROBERT B. PARKER'S ANGEL EYES

By Ace Atkins

Popular private eye, Spenser, returns with flair under the deft hands of author Ace Atkins. In "Angel Eyes," Atkins steers the popular P.I. into the glitz and glamour of Hollywood to find an aspiring actress who has gone missing. Spenser takes the assignment from longtime love interest Susan Silverman. It's her friend's daughter, one Gabby Leggett, who has gone missing.

Spenser arrives to find the young woman vanished without a trace, leaving the wily detective to enlist the aid of his friend and former protégé, Zebulon Sixkill, to aid in the search effort. Sixkill now operates his own detective agency on the sunny west coast and knows the town inside and out. He's only too happy to help out his mentor. Spenser also runs afoul of returning character, Captain Samuelson of the Los Angeles Police Department—a guy none too happy to see the Boston P.I. return to the City of Angels. Luckily for Spenser he's got other pals in town, namely his bad guy buddies Bobby Horse and Chollo, who turn up right when he needs them. From Armenian mobsters to sleazy movie execs and nefarious self-help gurus, Spenser's going to need some friends on this case.

Atkins returns with another solid entry to the Spenser franchise by changing up his surroundings and pitting him against a cult-like organization ripped straight from the headlines. Those hoping for Hawk, a Spenser staple, to make an appearance will have to wait for another book.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■

## THE GIFT

By Louise Jensen

Readers will never forget this author's first "gift" to them when she wrote the #1 bestseller, "The Sister." It's hard to follow-up something that amazing, but it seems like Jensen had no problem at all.

As we begin, Jenna has received a donor heart from a girl called Callie. This is the one thing that can give her another chance at life and she's extremely grateful to both Callie and the family that loved her so much. But as Jenna befriends this family, she soon discovers that there's something quite creepy about the clan.

Making the flesh tingle even more...although Callie's parents seem like the perfect, loving couple who are simply grieving over the loss of their own beautiful girl, they are actually a couple that's holding onto some dark, murderous secrets that will cause Jenna's new heart to go into overdrive with fear.

Callie's sister, Sophie, seems like she's gone missing, even though Jenna is told that Sophie has been traveling overseas since her sister's death. In addition, Callie's boyfriend Nathan sheds some shocking light on the subject leading Jenna to believe that Callie did not lose her life in an accident.

Determined to uncover the facts, Jenna heads into a dark world that may just take away her second chance at life before she can escape. The word "compelling" was made to describe this plot. Doing all psychological thriller writers proud, Jensen offers up the perfect formula of insanity combined with horror, and an unforgettable twist at the end. She hit this one, like the last, out of the park!

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



## RAGE

By Jonathan Maberry

Maberry has done it again. I've been in love with Maberry's works ever since he wrote "Rot & Ruin," and this book did not disappoint. Though not about zombies, the bioweapon Maberry invents in this novel is just as terrifying.

Joe Ledger's job is to stop the bad guys—even if that means he might be becoming a little bit of a monster himself. Ledger soon finds himself up against something far worse than he could have ever imagined; a bioweapon known as "Rage." When used, ordinary people suddenly become monstrous killers. They attack without mercy, viciously tearing entire islands and cities apart. When it looks like these terrorist attacks are coming from the United States, Ledger and all of Havoc Team need to stop the extremists before war breaks out.

No one can figure out what the bioweapon is, where it is coming from, or even how it is spreading. Time is running out. And the case becomes even more vital to Ledger when he discovers that this 'Rage' may come from an enemy of his who he thought died long ago in a failed prison escape.

All the characters of Havoc Team are tough and professional, but at the same time, surprisingly human. I even found myself understanding the villains more than I thought I would. It's the perfect read if you love something dark, and it is sure to be one of those books you'll keep thinking about long after you have completed it.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## DEVOTED

By Dean Koontz

As anyone who reads my reviews knows, I believe that Dean Koontz is the "master" of everything. The man writes standalones and series with power, heart, suspense and a splash of the supernatural, and creates unforgettable characters.

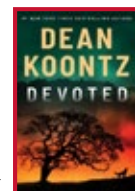
Coming in March of 2020, he once again creates a powerful story that is unable to be put down because of the characters, thrills, lessons, and chills that only he can provide. It's important not to reveal too much of what I know, but I can say that readers will meet up with Woody Bookman. He's had a rough background, with his own father dying in one of life's "freak" accidents. Woody is only eleven years of age and has not spoken one single word during any of his days on Earth.

His mother, Megan, tells him how much she cares for him all the time. Her main job is to keep Woody both safe and happy. It's difficult for Woody to be happy, especially when he believes the "evil" that took his father has now turned its sites on him and his mother. They are being threatened. Oddly enough, someone else shares in Woody's thoughts; a friend the boy has yet to meet has been listening all this time.

Enter... Kipp. Devoted, talented, gifted, and extremely kind...this is a unique breed of dog with a heart (and coat) of pure gold. Kipp can hear Woody's thoughts and needs to discover the child's location before the "evil" appears on his doorstep.

The question: Is there anything more powerful than evil, itself, has been answered by many. Some will automatically believe it's "the other side" that can defeat the most primal, depraved creatures in the world. Will it be that simple in the end? No. This is a book where the action and suspense go until the very end. And Kipp and Woody will live inside your mind, as they do in these pages, for a long time to come.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## A CATERED NEW YEAR'S EVE

By Isis Crawford

Sisters Bernie and Libby Simmons are known all over the area for A Little Taste of Heaven, the local eatery started by their late mother, Rose. They inherited Rose's culinary genius and have expanded the shop's menu from its humble beginnings to include a yummy assortment of goodies guaranteed to tempt every palate. A Little Taste of Heaven also offers off-premise catering, and Bernie and Libby are usually booked solid, especially during the Christmas holidays. When they receive a phone call from Ada Sinclair, an estranged relative of Rose's, to cater a special New Year's Eve dinner, the sisters are intrigued. Their mom never had anything good to say about the Sinclairs, so Libby and Bernie have never met them. Despite their father warning his girls to turn the job down, the sisters meet with Ada to find out what she's planning for New Year's Eve.

It turns out Ada has more on her mind than a simple dinner party. She tells the sisters about the long-ago deaths of her father and his business partner, which happened within hours of each other. The deaths were ruled accidental, but Ada has always believed otherwise. Her plan is to gather all her relatives and read from a diary she found in her mother's attic that she thinks will expose the murderer. The sisters agree to cater the party, and also serve as witnesses when Ada is reading from the diary. The guests immediately dismiss Ada's reading as another example of her overactive imagination.

As midnight approaches, one of the guests drops dead and the diary disappears. Bernie and Libby realize that Ada was onto something after all. When Ada is suspected of the murder, she drops out of sight, making her look guilty as heck. Bernie and Libby can't help feeling sorry for her, and they set out to prove Ada's innocence.

"A Catered New Year's Eve," the fifteenth in this series, is a cover-to-cover, laugh-out-loud cozy. I loved it! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Milestones Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## MATCHMAKING CAN BE MURDER

By Amanda Flower

This book kept me on the edge of my seat trying to figure out who killed the despicable Zeke Miller. The plot was well-rounded with a good list of suspects and a range of malicious and suspicious activities. The number of old acquaintances suddenly returning to the Amish village, long-time residents, and even a newcomer in town made this a very challenging mystery to solve for police and for friends Millie and Lois—one a member of the Amish community and the other from the English community—both trying to clear their loved ones of this horrendous crime.

My suspicions were correct, but I was still shocked when the murderer was revealed. By the end of the book, new romances were on the horizon and unlikely friendships were formed. Matchmaking, quilting, and murder is the perfect recipe for an Amish mystery. I also enjoyed the Amish proverbs Amanda Flower sprinkled in for added flavor. She definitely made this a fun mystery for us to try to solve.

Reviewed by Patricia Wilson ■



## A CONSPIRACY OF BONES

By Kathy Reichs



Nineteen must be the lucky number this year for thriller readers, so I would go to Vegas and place it all on #19 immediately. Not only did the amazing Pendergast get his nineteenth case in print (Preston & Child), but Kathy Reichs delivers this riveting novel that just so happens to be the nineteenth case featuring her popular forensic anthropologist, Temperance Brennan.

Temperance is still recovering from neurosurgery following an aneurysm she suffered. Trying to recuperate in the stifling hot air of Charlotte, North Carolina, Temperance's days and nights are getting worse, unfortunately, and not better. Not only is she having nightmares regularly, but she's also experiencing horrendous headaches and what she believes are hallucinations.

Receiving a series of text messages that focus upon a picture of a corpse that's missing both its face and hands, Temperance's always quick brain goes into overdrive wondering why and who sent the pictures to her. When a corpse is found in that exact condition, Tempe finds herself working outside the norm in order to identify the corpse and find out what is going on. She must not only deal with an obvious killer lurking out there, but the fact that her own boss has a grudge against her and is trying to stop Tempe from investigating the case makes her even more eager to plow ahead and solve it.

Not entirely alone, longtime associates and friends, including Andrew Ryan, her beau, and sarcastic ex-homicide investigator, Skinny Slidell, come to her aid. The small team combines their skills, talents and brand new forensic methods to uncover the truth and put an actual face to the man who is somehow mixed up in a great many mysteries.

Yet another plot with an astonishing twist and an amazing ending, readers and the many fans of Temperance will be thrilled to know that, even at 19, this author and her character haven't shown any signs of slowing down. Bring on #20!

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

## NEAR PROSPECT PARK

By Lawrence H. Levy

This is the fourth fantastic book in Levy's historical mystery series, entitled the *Mary Handley Mysteries*. If you're looking for a strong female protagonist and wish to go back in time and enjoy New York in the late 1890's, this series was made just for you.

Mary Handley, as you probably guessed, is a detective during a time when most women are not employed. Married to Harper Lloyd, a reporter, they have a nine-month-old daughter named Josephine. Although Mary has recently turned away from solving crimes in order to be with Josephine more, she must soon put the detective hat back on when a tragedy occurs in her family.

While racing after a story, Harper is murdered, and the strong-willed Mary takes it upon herself to bring the killer to justice as she tries to deal with the fact that the love of her life has been taken from her so soon.

Teaming up with Theodore Roosevelt, president of the Board of Police Commissioners, Mary must pick up where her husband left off by uncovering what it was he was after when his life came to an abrupt halt. Unlike most crimes that lead you into the dark and seedy places, Mary finds herself heading in the opposite direction. The answers to her questions, and the justice her husband deserves, lies in the snobbier world of New York's elite.

With Roosevelt's help, they soon uncover horrific plots that only the rich can accomplish. And seeing that the ones with the most money normally have the most guns, Mary has to create a way to stay safe while exposing the horrors the socialites hold dear.

Levy does a fantastic job. From poverty to murder to the treatment of women, he not only "tells" a tale, but brings so much color to his subject that it makes the reader feel like they're right there. It will be extremely hard to wait for the next *Mary Handley* mystery.

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



## THE HAND ON THE WALL

By Maureen Johnson

Murder mysteries are always a treat. They leave you wondering what happened that led to the horrific events, usually with a star detective driving the case. But the wannabe detective in this story is a little different, and she has made it her duty to solve the most infamous crime of the century.

Stevie Bell is obsessed with crime and especially the one centered on Ellingham Academy. Almost a century ago, Albert Ellingham, the founder's, daughter was kidnapped and his wife brutally murdered. But, who kidnapped his daughter? Her disappearance has become the crime of the century, for no one has even been able to find the girl's remains.

Now trouble is happening at Ellingham Academy again. After a series of horrible events, the entire campus is closed for the rest of the semester, with all the students told to go home before a wicked blizzard hits the school.

But, Stevie and her friends stay without permission. Stevie is determined to find out who has been the cause of all these "accidents" and to finally discover what happened to Ellingham's daughter. They soon discover they were not the only ones who stayed on campus. It might just be that the murders now have everything to do with Ellingham's long-lost daughter, and Stevie's the only detective in the snowed-in school to solve the crimes.

With a cast of unique and lovable characters, "The Hand on the Wall" is an exciting read. You'll be wondering the whole time who did it and rooting for Stevie with the case, and maybe a little bit with her love life as well. I highly recommend this book to anyone who loves a good mystery.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE DEEP

By Alma Katsu

Everyone knows the tragic story behind the *Titanic*; the "unsinkable" ship that sank after colliding with an iceberg. In this riveting version of the catastrophe, Katsu brings us a ghost story that is a clever and haunting way to describe that maybe something more sinister was happening aboard the famous ship.

Annie Hebble was a stewardess on the *Titanic*. She was no one special, having run away from her family in the small town of Ballintoy for her own, personal reasons. But Annie soon becomes someone of interest among the rich passengers she cares for. There is Mark and his wife, and Annie volunteers to take care of their infant child. Annie becomes convinced she was meant to meet Mark, even though she can't think of why. This becomes even more disastrous as mysterious events start happening onboard the ship, including the death of a servant boy, the illness of the infant, and a series of thefts.

But, as we all already know, catastrophe strikes the ship. Annie, who survived the fateful night, gets the chance to work on the sister ship of the *Titanic*, the *Britannic*. Though the ship has been converted to a floating hospital for the war happening in 1916, worries still linger. But all these leave when Annie meets Mark again, which Annie considers another fateful meeting. But, as they both soon discover, maybe it is more than fate. Maybe there really is a force pulling them together. And, that force just might be something that neither of them can explain, a spirit from the past who refuses to leave.

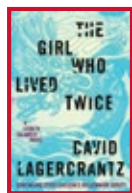
With a variety of characters that Katsu intertwines beautifully in the past and present, and rich with historic detail, this is a novel that will have you hoping all of them survive. Katsu is a wordsmith using vivid imagery and beautiful wording to create a story that will leave you wishing there was more.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## THE GIRL WHO LIVED TWICE

By David Lagercrantz



Wily hacker Lisbeth Salander returns in the sixth, and reportedly last, episode of the *Millennium* series begun by Stieg Larsson and continued by David Lagercrantz (translated from the Swedish by George Goulding). In "The Girl Who Lived Twice," Salander again joins forces with her longtime ally, journalist Mikael Blomkvist, for an adventure ripe with death and intrigue.

When a dead body is discovered in a Stockholm park, that of a homeless man with Blomkvist's phone number in his pocket, Mikael finds himself in need of Lisbeth's particular skills, only she's vanished without a trace. Salander, hiding out, is knee deep in her own work. She's traded her goth-punk look for a more business-like façade, but remains hard as nails, particularly when it comes to dealing with her evil twin sister, Camilla. Rather than stay on the defensive, our anti-hero takes an offensive stance in her ongoing family feud. Mikael and Lisbeth's two objectives may seem on very different paths, but that changes as the story unfolds, pitting Salander and Blomkvist against an adversary they know all too well. With deadly family drama, the Sherpas of Mount Everest, Russian trolls, a bit of romance, and more, Salander and Blomkvist are once again forced to overcome a daunting plot designed to see them both six feet under.

Lagercrantz has done an admirable job of keeping up with the demand left by late author Stieg Larsson in his *Millennium* series and proves once again he's capable of penning compelling stories to sate the insatiable hunger for Salander's further adventures, though she's less front and center in this particular installment.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■

## BIG LIES IN A SMALL TOWN

By Diane Chamberlain

Diane Chamberlain has always been atop my "favorites" list, since 2014. It was then that I read the amazing story, "Necessary Lies," and proceeded to read every word she wrote from then on. This time around, I don't know how, but I was even more astounded by the talent this author has to tell the ultimate, unforgettable story.

Here, readers are brought to two separate worlds and two very different time periods. Being introduced to Morgan Christopher, readers are placed in North Carolina in the year 2018.

Morgan's life is falling apart; thrown into the Women's Correctional Center for three years for a crime she did not commit, Morgan has to put her future on hold. She had dreams for a career in the art world before her life went off the rails, and while she's depressed, she receives a visitor who makes her an offer she can't refuse.

To be let out of jail ASAP, Morgan agrees to restore an old post office mural in a tiny southern town. Even though art restoration is not on her list of talents, being desperate to leave her current predicament, she takes the job and ends up finding a painting that unveils the sheer madness found in a small town.

It is 1940 in North Carolina when Anna Dale, an artist from New Jersey, wins a contest. She is set to paint a mural for the post office in Edenton, North Carolina. What should be a "fun" win turns sour, however, when Anna finds herself stuck in a town filled with prejudice and secrets that could lead to her own murder.

The complex but thrilling story of two women in two different centuries, with only a mural as a link between them, is outstanding reading. The characters are vivid, the plot is exciting, and the "reveal" is something readers do not want to miss.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## MURDER MAKES SCENTS

By Christin Brecher

Nantucket candle store owner Stella Wright is visiting Paris with Millie, her globe-trotting mother. Millie's never been a standard, stay-at-home-baking-cookies kind of mom. She's happiest roaming the world, discovering new and exotic scents that can be used to create perfumes. The pair is visiting Paris because Millie's been invited to give a presentation on "The Art of Scent Extractions" at The World Perfumery Conference. The two are having a wonderful time until they witness the horrific stabbing death of a young man right in front of them. After that, the two can't wait to get back to the picturesque island of Nantucket and Stella's candle shop, the Wick & Flame.

Stella's hoping that this time she can persuade her mom to stay longer on Nantucket before she sets off on another of her adventures, and is delighted to see Millie reconnecting with Nathaniel Dinks, who was two years ahead of her in high school. Romance blossoms for the first time in a long time for Millie, and all is rosy for the mother-daughter duo until someone breaks into the Wick & Flame one night. Then Millie suffers a blow to the head and ends up in Nantucket Cottage Hospital.

The newspapers are full of information on the stabbing, and the French police are searching for Rex Larum, an international anarchist who's been behind many recent attacks against global peace. Unfortunately for the authorities, however, Larum is a master of disguise and nobody knows what the man really looks like.

Stella begins to wonder if there could be a connection between the murder she and her mother witnessed in Paris and the sudden ominous events on Nantucket. Then she receives an anonymous note claiming that her mother smuggled a secret formula out of France, and threatening Millie's life if it isn't returned.

"Murder Makes Scents" is the second title in this delightful series by Christin Brecher. It's a fast, fun read that will have cozy mystery lovers (like me) begging for more!

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

## REPUTATION

By Sara Shepard

Aldrich University is a highly respected institution, right up there with Yale, Harvard, and the other Ivy League's. That is, until a hacker leaks the email accounts and messages of every professor, staff member, and student, and the secrets begin to fly.

The biggest and most damaging secret is that of Dr. Greg Strausser, married to Kit Strausser, who happens to be the daughter of the school's president. Evidence is leaked of Greg's affair with a mystery woman, and when Greg is found dead shortly after the hack, Kit is just one of many possible suspects in his murder case.

Willa, Kit's sister and an investigative journalist living in California, shows up after receiving a call from their father about Greg's passing. She hops on the next flight home and begins digging into the case herself. And as it turns out, everyone has something to hide, even Willa herself.

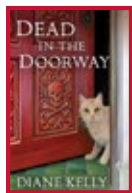
"Reputation" is filled with those highly addictive twisty moments that keep you guessing until the very end. At the end you'll be asking yourself, just how important is your reputation? And what would you do to protect it?

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



## DEAD IN THE DOORWAY

By Diane Kelly



House flipper Whitney and her cat Sawdust are on the case in "Dead in the Doorway." When Sawdust discovers a dead body in the house Whitney and her cousin Buck just bought, they realize this may kill their profits after renovations are complete, and it's time for resale if they don't find the truth behind the death.

The body was identified as a woman who lived in the neighborhood. But why was this woman in the house to begin with? Was the loose banister on the staircase to blame? Or was a murderer wandering around in this neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee? The grandson of the deceased, and previous owner of the flip house, just happened to let himself into the house using a spare key outside the front door. How was it that he didn't hear the woman cry for help? If this was a homicide, why wasn't he a victim as well? Why didn't the dead woman's husband and daughter realize she was missing from her own home and call police themselves? Does a highly coveted secret recipe or an expiring life insurance policy have anything to do with the untimely death of this woman?

It isn't long before murder suspects and alibis begin to pile up. The victim wasn't well loved by anyone—not even her own family—so that makes the case more difficult to solve. House flipper Whitney (a.k.a. amateur sleuth) is asked to keep an eye on the neighborhood and the neighbors by Detective Collin Flynn who has been assigned to the case. She goes beyond the detective's request on more than one occasion to seek answers outside the neighborhood, putting herself in danger of being a victim as well.

The discovery of the killer was quite by accident, and I was as surprised as Whitney was when she discovers who it is. You won't want to stop reading until you find out who is to blame for this homicide in a quiet Nashville suburban neighborhood.

Reviewed by Patricia Wilson ■

## THE EMPTY BED

By Nina Sadowsky

This is the second in the *Burial Society* series. Having not read the first, it was a while before I figured out what that is. It turns out to be a service, run by the main character, Catherine, to hide people when they are in danger. It's a wonderfully fast-paced thriller that takes us globetrotting between exotic locales—a fun read.

The main thread is the story of Eva and Pete Lombard. They are Americans in London temporarily for his job. They've been trying to get pregnant and Eva thinks this will happen while they're there. Pete, however, works incredibly long hours and Eva, frustrated, takes to day drinking. Pete says he's going to take her to Paris, which delights and sobers Eva. However, at the last minute, Pete announces that they'll go to Hong Kong instead. Furious at the change in plans, Eva commences drinking as soon as they check in. Pete, disgusted, takes Ambien and conks out. He's been ignoring Eva when she tells him a sinister man is following her. But when he wakes up and she's gone, he starts to think she hasn't been paranoid at all.

Another thread involves Maggie Guzman, an FBI agent paired with a new partner, Ryan Johnson. A man named Roger Elliot has reported that his wife and son are missing and Maggie and Ryan must find them.

Meanwhile, Catherine whisks a family away to Mexico to protect them until the man of the family, Steve Harris, can testify in a federal case.

The stitches running through these threads and connecting them might wrap around a powerful man named Forrest Holcomb, who is completely different things to various people.

With all these seemingly separate story lines to keep straight, and so many characters, you might want to keep a chart. The chapters bounce around among the people and places, but they are clearly labeled, so you can read it straight through without taking any notes. Yet the story is so compelling, you might want to anyway.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Revenge is Sweet" ■

## LAST DAY

By Luanne Rice

From the exquisite opening, through twists and torment, this domestic thriller weaves an irresistible story of family and friends, trust and betrayal, love and murder.

The characters take turns telling the story. Kate Woodward is the sister of the dead woman, Beth Lathrop, who is seen in the beginning, lying pregnant and dead in her home. Kate and Beth belong to the family that has run the art museum in Black Hill, Connecticut, for several generations. And one of the most valuable paintings from their collection has been cut from its frame, missing.

Homicide detective Conor Reid has a history with the family. He was the officer who broke down the door to rescue Kate and Beth from the basement of the museum twenty-three years ago. They had been tied together with their mother to a cement post by intruders who stole the same painting that is now missing (and was later recovered). Their mother choked on her gag and was dead when the girls, teenagers at the time, were found.

Beth grew up to marry a man somewhat like their father—a smooth talker and an outsider to their social set, supported by the wife's old money. Her best friend is Scotty, and their daughters are also best friends. Kate grew up to be a charter pilot along with her best friend, Lulu. The four have always remained close, thinking of themselves as the four points to a compass, dubbing themselves Compass Rose.

Detective Reid has remained smitten with Kate all these years. He wants badly to solve the case of Beth's death and get close to Kate, but Kate has remained emotionally frozen since the day she emerged from the basement. The immediate suspect is Beth's estranged husband, Pete, whose mistress recently had a baby. Beth was also pregnant when she was murdered. Reid zeroes in on Pete, but other suspects pop up. Quite a few, in fact.

Rice will keep you guessing until the very end, I promise.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Revenge is Sweet" ■

## THE SILVER EYES (FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S GRAPHIC NOVEL #1)

By Scott Cawthon, Kira Breed-Wrisley, and Claudia Shröder (Illustrations)



It goes without saying that when "Five Nights at Freddy's" came out, it became an instant hit. The popular video game where an unfortunate security guard has to stay alive for five nights at Fazbear's Pizza, a demented version of a familiar childhood haunt, where the animatronic creatures are obsessed with murder. But, Cawthon gives us more about "Five Nights at Freddy's" with this exceptionally illustrated graphic novel, giving us a new take on just what happened at Fazbear's Pizza.

The little town of Hurricane was torn apart when a series of murders happened at Fazbear's Pizza ten years ago. The only reason Charlie, whose father owned Fazbear's, comes back to town is to reunite with her buddies and remember one of their friends who was lost during the accidents.

But, the group of friends can't simply forget about Fazbear's and they go searching for the abandoned eatery. They find the old restaurant, now buried in the depths of a deserted mall. They find all the old animatronics they had loved when they were kids and revel in the good old days.

They discover that Fazbear's has something sinister lurking about when one of their current friends goes missing. There's an evil that's been plaguing Charlie and her friends even before Fazbear's was created, and it's coming back as they mess with the old pizza joint. And, of course, the animatronics may be scarier, and more alive, than they seem . . .

With a story by the creator of "Five Nights at Freddy's" and illustrations by those who originally worked on the video game, it is a perfect narrative for fans of the game and anyone who loves horror. We all may think twice about the animatronics at the local pizza parlor after reading this book.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## SOMETHING SHE'S NOT TELLING US

By Darcey Bell

The story starts with Charlotte and Eli, a posh Manhattan couple who live in a loft on the lower east side. Charlotte is a florist, one of the best in the city, and Eli, having made all his money in finance years before, is now following his passion directing off-Broadway plays.

One day, Charlotte goes to school to pick up their young daughter Daisy, only to discover she's no longer there. Not only that, but she was signed out. By Ruth. Someone who claims she's Charlotte's sister-in-law.

Charlotte indeed knows Ruth—she's her brother Rocco's girlfriend. Not a sister-in-law. When Charlotte, overbearing to begin with, panics, the story takes you back to show you how Rocco and Ruth first met, and how maybe there were signs that Ruth wasn't all there to begin with. When they finally find Daisy, their suspicions are confirmed.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ■

## IN THE SHADOW OF VESUVIUS

By Tasha Alexander

What better way is there to start out 2020 than to be given the 14<sup>th</sup> *Lady Emily Mystery*? Yes, that is exactly what this beloved author has done for readers worldwide.

Millions are already knee-deep in this bestselling Victorian series, and this time the amazing Lady Emily and her husband Colin will be solving a mystery against the backdrop of one of the most thrilling locations on the map: Pompeii.

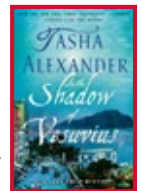
We know there has always been thrills and chills associated with Pompeii and its destruction. But Lady Emily finds there are even more secrets waiting there when she uncovers a corpse that is, quite literally, in plain sight.

She gets to this moment when an old friend of hers by the name of Ivy Brandon asks Emily to come on an excursion to Italy. They soon make new American friends: Benjamin Carter, a slightly depressed painter; and his sister Calliope, who works as an archaeologist. These siblings really act like polar opposites. But when the females of the group, along with Colin, stumble over this "fresh" corpse, they are basically blown off by the police. The law decides that the crime was nothing more than local gangsters doing what they do. Lady Emily, however, decides to solve the mystery herself.

This is not Emily's only problem, unfortunately. A young woman comes out of nowhere to claim a relationship to Emily's husband's family, and proceeds to treat Emily horribly. In addition, threats soon begin to arrive on Emily's proverbial doorstep, as if warning her to stay out of things.

Readers will not only love this book and be thrilled to see their favorite characters once more, but they will also dive right into the beautiful scenery that goes from Pompeii to Naples, and from modern to ancient days. Lady Emily is still one of those strong women who never fails to take risks in order to see that justice is done!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## DEATH IN AVIGNON

By Serena Kent

The beauty of France nearly steals the show in this one as the writer vividly describes the location where her lead character experiences a mystery of monumental proportions.

Penelope Kite had what most would call a tumultuous summer. Grateful to be settling down in Provence and getting used to her new life, Penelope is basically in love with her daily routine. Who wouldn't be? After all, we're talking about lovely evenings, amazing weather, new friends with new stories to tell, and so much more. She's doubly excited over heading to an exclusive art gallery opening escorted by the handsome mayor of St. Merlot.

But the Avignon art world becomes tainted when Roland Doncaster—who is known by many to be a somewhat controversial painter—dies from choking on an almond-stuffed olive. There are many things that this could have stemmed from; a simple accident where no one is in the wrong, to a murder by poisoning at the hands of a rival painter. Penny Kite becomes embroiled in the tragic circumstances as she tries to bring the truth to light. But as the pool of jealous lovers, charming art dealers, and new friends that until recently were unknown to Penny grows deeper, she finds her work cut out for her in order to bring justice to the fallen man.

This is the second in the series, but the author has done a fantastic job of offering data on Penny's previous case as well as her past, her more than selfish step-children, and more so that the reader never feels lost if they missed out on the first book.

A solid sequel to what will most likely be a great mystery series that fans will enjoy for years to come. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Charlatan's Crown," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## YOU ARE NOT ALONE

By Greer Hendricks & Sarah Pekkanen

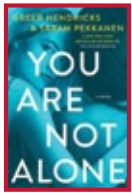
Have you ever read a book that kept you so captivated and on the edge of your seat that you just had to go share it with everyone you know, just so you could talk about it with someone else? Well, "You Are Not Alone" is that next book for you.

Shay Miller is on her way to a job interview in New York City when she watches a stranger jump in front of an oncoming subway train. Fascinated and a little obsessed with statistics, Shay begins tracing the steps of the stranger, Amanda, to try and make sense of what she saw happen. What she finds instead is an alarming number of similarities between the lifestyle that she lives and the one Amanda was living, and it only sends her head spinning further.

When she shows up at Amanda's funeral service she is approached by Cassandra and Jane Moore, friends of Amanda. They immediately welcome Shay into their lives, and Shay is completely intrigued and more than captivated by them. The Moore sisters are everything Shay never has been. They're beautiful in an intimidating way and Shay finds herself drawn to every aspect of who they are. This works out conveniently for the Moore sisters because they need Shay close and she practically runs into the palms of their hands.

Unfortunately, I can't say anything more without giving away all of the best twisty parts of the plot. Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen are masters at creating those stories that leave you guessing until the very last sentence of a book, and "You Are Not Alone" is no exception. Don't just take my word for it, read this one yourself. You won't be disappointed.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



## GWENDY'S MAGIC FEATHER

By Richard Chizmar (Foreword by Stephen King)

This is the absolutely thrilling sequel to the bestselling novella written by the incredible Stephen King and award-winning author Richard Chizmar.

Yes, we are headed back to the infamous Castle Rock. Now, you'd think that all readers would know that this is one location that plays home to some of the scariest nightmares ever shared by the entire world, but Richard Chizmar has decided to not only return, but head there alone, as he travels with an adult Gwendy back to Castle Rock.

Why, you ask? It seems some form of evil really has come home "to roost" in the small Maine town after being blown in by the last winter storm. In addition, Sheriff Norris Ridgewick and his team are frantically searching for two girls who have gone missing.

Gwendy Peterson is now thirty-seven years old living in D.C.; now unlike the self-conscious teen who spent a summer running up Castle Rock's Suicide Stairs, Gwendy still can never forget the button box that she'd been entrusted with by Richard Farris, a mysterious stranger dressed in a black suit. The box of power had granted Gwendy gifts, and in exchange she took care of it (even feeding it) until Farris returned. Although she was told by the man she'd never have to see the box again, one day it suddenly reappears without its' owner and with no instructions on what to do with it.

Gwendy's decision to return home comes not only from the box's reappearance but also from believing she can somehow help find the missing girls and stop an evil madman from completing his goal.

It must be difficult to even keep up with King, but Chizmar has done a spectacular job on his own bringing the most frightening town in America back into all readers' nightmares. Well done!

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



## THE LAST DAY

By Andrew Hunter Murray

This is one of those grab your attention debuts that take the world of thrillers to a new level. Readers meet Ellen Hopper in this tale that combines espionage tactics with unbelievable secrets that may just bring about the end of the world...again.

From the very beginning your addiction to Ellen grows. We begin in 2059. It has been forty years (yes, check your calendar) since the Earth's rotation stopped because of a solar catastrophe that changed lives and the planet for all time. One half of Earth must deal with 24/7 sunshine that causes essential problems, while the other half is bathed in darkness.

It is America that has colonized the southern half of Great Britain. Both nations live in this small area because it is the only place left where survival can be maintained. Unfortunately, when you get a lot of people in one place, chaos also reigns.

Ellen gave up her loyalty to her country when everything turned violent. She lives on a rig in the brutally cold Atlantic Ocean in order to stay far from the authoritarianism that's cropped up, almost casually. One day, however, her world is invaded by two officials from the government who demand that Ellen return to London in order to visit a college mentor of hers who is now facing death.

But her friend is not the only thing she meets up with; what she uncovers is a secret so huge that it truly will wipe out the entire human race if it's not stopped.

Every page of this one is action-packed and exciting. It is always a thrill to welcome a brand-new debut author into the world, and by starting out with this fantastic tale, Andrew Hunter Murray looks like he will be around for a good long time to come.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE UNDROWNED

By K.R. Alexander

I call it “Goosebumps” horror—the perfect clash between scary and original that gets kids turning the pages at a fast pace. I know that’s what I was doing when I read K.R. Alexander’s, “The Undrowned,” devouring it all in one day when I really ought to have done my homework.

Samantha, the protagonist, is not someone you would expect to be the hero. Samantha’s life is falling apart; her parents are always fighting and bound to get a divorce, she never speaks with her sister, and their homelife is far from stable. She thought her only friend was Rachel, but after Rachel betrays her, Samantha has nobody.

Something goes terribly wrong near the lake of their little town. Samantha can’t hold back her rage against Rachel, and one push near the lake’s edge is enough for Rachel to trip, heading straight into the water. And she doesn’t resurface, because she can’t swim. Samantha realizes the horrible thing she has done and she feels truly awful, but she can’t afford to be caught either. She tries to hide what she did, but something unfathomable happens; Rachel shows up the next day at school. Fine. Perfect. Like nothing ever happened.

Except Rachel is not herself. Something sinister is lurking about, and it is out to make Samantha’s life miserable. Whatever Rachel has become may be aiming to make sure Samantha feels everything Rachel felt as she plummeted into that water, and in the worst ways possible.

With an unlikely, but surprisingly lovable protagonist, I was enthralled by this story of Samantha and a mysterious creature from the lake. The monster is utterly superb, and the events that led up to the final showdown had me on the edge of my seat. I loved every word.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of “The Amazing Imagination Machine,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE OTHER MRS.

By Mary Kubica

Mary Kubica has done it again with “The Other Mrs.” This story follows Sadie as she and her husband Will, along with their two sons Otto and Tate, move from Chicago to Maine after Will’s sister dies. They’ve been left the house and also custody of Imogen, Will’s niece, a rebellious sixteen-year-old girl. Sadie welcomes the move after discovering Will’s affair with a woman named Camille; they all want a fresh start.

After an adjustment period, a neighbor named Morgan is killed, leaving behind her husband and six-year-old stepdaughter. The police question the whole neighborhood, and that’s when Sadie becomes aware that her own stories and timelines don’t add up. Suddenly she begins to question her own involvement. She sets out to prove her innocence, discovering that maybe Morgan wasn’t as apple-pie as she seemed. Right around this time, we discover that Camille has returned and will stop at nothing to get Will back.

The story is primarily told from 3 points of view—Sadie, Camille, and six-year-old “Mouse” who tells tales of her evil stepmother. As their lives intertwine, you’ll be on a thrill ride to the very end.

I loved the book. Twists and turns are my absolute favorite, and I had this one figured out, right up until I didn’t. One last surprise point of view blew me away! This may be Mary Kubica’s best yet.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ■



## THE HAUNTING

By Lindsey Duga

There’s nothing quite as refreshing as a good old ghost story, especially one set back in time. Lindsey Duga’s book, “The Haunting,” brought a ghost story to life for me in an old house where something sinister is lurking.

Emily knows that adoption is out of the picture for her when she’s competing with beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde girls of much younger ages around her at Evanshire’s Home for Neglected Girls. But all that changes when the Thorntons, a rich couple, come and choose Emily from amongst all the girls. Emily can’t believe her luck. She and her beloved dog, Archie, are whisked away to Blackthorn Manor, where she expects to be loved and become the child of a family she had only dreamed of before.

But something weird is going on in Blackthorn Manor. Emily sees shadows crawling around the walls. Things seem to fall apart all around her, trashing the home that she knows she’s supposed to care for. And an odd girl who seems to know the manor better than anyone keeps showing up, trying to befriend her. Emily knows the Thorntons are hiding something from her, and as more bad things start happening at the manor, Emily knows she needs to find out quick, before whatever is haunting the manor banishes Emily out of the home.

Good, creepy ghosts that wreak havoc have always been a favorite of mine. And the ghost (because yes, it’s totally a ghost) that Duga shows us at the end is scary and satisfying at the same time. If you love a good, kid-friendly ghost story, this book is definitely for you.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of “The Amazing Imagination Machine,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE RABBIT HUNTER

By Lars Kepler

Joona Linna is back! And this, Book #6 in the international best-selling series, still shows that this amazing “husband and wife team” of writers has not slowed down one bit.

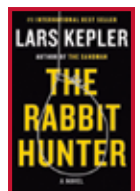
Beginning with “The Hypnotist,” these stories have remained incredible. The team’s winning formula of writing short chapters, and providing colorful and intelligent dialogue with action-packed scenes, continues to make the plotlines even more intense and enjoyable. Even the shocking “final page” wrap-up that Lars Kepler always provides is awesome in this one, and you will not believe what the twists and turns are until you dive into the pages.

At Kumla prison Detective Joona Linna is finishing out a sentence he received for assaulting an officer in the course of his last investigation. Out of the blue he’s ordered into a meeting with the Swedish Prime Minister. A brutal murder has occurred, turning the Foreign Minister into a mangled corpse. The Prime Minister is not the only one worried that other political figures could be next.

Linna is needed to uncover the plot, locate the killer and neutralize the threat that may bring down a great many people. Granted temporary release from the prison in order to do his job should be a good thing. Unfortunately, when another murder occurs quite quickly, Linna begins to see that this plot and the people behind it are more organized and violent than anyone had first thought. Working against the clock, watching the bodies fall, Linna calls for Saga Bauer’s help. And when Linna and this young Security Police detective go to work, a killer’s plan for revenge begins to reveal itself.

Jumping from “The Sandman” to this would be a chore for many writers, considering the plots are so compelling that it should take a long time to come up with them. But, yet again, Kepler’s behind another that must be seen on the big screen.

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



## THE WIVES

By Tarryn Fisher

"The Wives" follows our protagonist, who I'll leave unnamed for the moment because I don't want to give anything away. She's Seth Ellington's second wife. Which is fine. But he's still with his first wife. And he has a third as well.

Seth is a polygamist, and that works for her. She doesn't know the other wives. She lives in Seattle; they both live in Portland. She gets Seth 2 days a week, and all is well until she finds out about Hannah. The third wife. The one after her. Now, she has a name, and she has to put a face with the name. She becomes a woman obsessed, and even travels to Portland and strikes up an unlikely friendship with her. One day, Hannah shows up with finger mark bruises on her arm. Then, a black eye. She wonders: Is Seth hurting his other wives? In her quest for the truth, she finds out too much as she discovers Wife #1, another woman with a shocking similarity to violence.

This is a true psychological thriller, pulling you into the mind of a woman who thinks there's no problem with the rotating wives, until she becomes jealous. The shocking ending proves that manipulation can have its setbacks. Especially if you don't know you're dealing with a monster.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ■



## THE STRANGER INSIDE

By Lisa Unger

"Own your feelings. Speak your mind. Know your boundaries. Protect them."

That's exactly what twelve-year-old Lara Winter did when she and her friend Tess walked through the woods, right into the hands of a psychotic man and his vicious German Shepherd. Their friend Hank tried to protect them, but his small body couldn't do much damage. Lara was the only one to escape. She hid in the hollow of a tree as she watched Eugene Kreskey drag her friends away.

Now years later, Lara Winter, who changed her name to Rain, has a wonderful husband and a beautiful thirteen-month-old daughter. To concentrate on her family, she put her job as an investigative reporter and producer for National News Radio on hold.

But when someone murders Steve Markham—a local man who was acquitted of killing his pregnant wife—a year after his trial, her investigative instincts take control.

Rain had followed her father's advice to lock the day of the kidnapping in a box down deep inside her and never open it. But now, terror and rage demand to be heard.

When Rain and co-reporter Gillian investigate who killed Markham, it becomes clear the same person is also responsible for the murders of a serial killer—The Boston Boogeyman—and Eugene Kreskey. All three were killed after being acquitted of their crimes, and all died the same way their victims had.

Bad people win all the time, but what about justice?

Rain will unravel the mystery of the revenge killings, but can she keep her own dark secrets safe in the process?

Written in chapters alternating between Rain's point of view and that of a revenge killer, this psychological thriller catapults readers into the battle between good and evil, and right and wrong. We're left with the question: How far would we go to exact justice?

Reviewed by K.L. Romo ■

## THREAD AND BURIED

By Lea Wait

Angie Curtis has returned to her home of Haven Harbor, Maine, to take over the family business, Mainely Needlepoint, which does commissioned needlework for high-end clients. She's happy to live so close to her grandmother, and to find the love of her life, artist Patrick West.

Patrick has a world-famous mother, movie star Skye West. Skye has decided to make her latest movie, *Harbor Heartbreak*, in Haven Harbor, and the plot is based on a tragic romance between two young lovers that happened in town many years before. The usually reticent locals are thrilled when the movie folks move into town to shoot the film, especially when two of their own residents, college students Cos Curran and Linc Fitch, are hired to portray the doomed lovers. Angie has been recruited to help add authentic touches to the sets. Although she's initially shy to be around all the Hollywood folks, Patrick makes her feel comfortable—no easy task since his old girlfriend is one of the stars of the film.

Director Marv Mason has a reputation for pursuing pretty young actresses in his movies until he gets what he wants—both in front of the camera and on his casting couch. In this age of the MeToo movement, everyone is on high alert.

Other locals have been hired to help behind the scenes, including Leo Blackwell, a young man who arrived in town a few months ago and is now living with Dave Percy, a friend of Angie's.

When a wayward piece of sound equipment sends Marv to a sudden death, theories fly about how the "accident" happened. Since Leo was there at the wrong time, the authorities zero in on him first. Angie doesn't believe it, especially when she discovers that Marv's long-absent wife was also present.

"Thread and Buried" is, sadly, the last in Lea Wait's series. It's full of twists and turns and wonderful characters that I will miss. But not as much as I will miss Lea Wait.

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



## GENESIS

By Layton Green

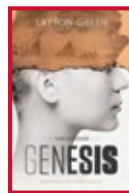
Treasure hunts are always a blast to read—from the daring adventure, the far-too real danger, and the inevitable prize at the end. It's always a type of story that leaves me wishing that my life was more exciting. But I would have never thought a treasure hunt that focuses on quantum mechanics would have been as thrilling as "Genesis" by Layton Green.

The story follows Andie, whose mother left her when she was very young. Andie has coped with the loss with help from her college professor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Corwin. So, she is terribly devastated when she hears that Dr. Corwin was found dead in Italy after one of his tours. However, soon after the news, Andie receives a note from Dr. Corwin that he must have sent to her right before he died. It's the first clue in a hunt that Andie is not prepared for, with the dire warning written that Andie is not to trust anyone. Andie tries to take that to heart, but as her adventure gets more out of hand, with people tracking her down, she and an ex-reporter named Cal team up to find what Dr. Corwin hid before he disappeared.

But what are they hunting for? Andie has the impression that Dr. Corwin was onto something big in his research, something that could change the way everyone perceives reality. More terrifyingly, Andie thinks she has seen this new reality before, during her random, but sudden, headaches she has suffered from ever since she was young. Andie and Cal are determined to find this device before an evil organization does, which will take all the wit and strength they have.

Told from multiple points of view, this story really came to life for me. The protagonists fought for what they knew was right, and scarily enough, so did the villains, thinking they were also in the right. I will definitely be reading the sequel when it comes out.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## THEATER NIGHTS ARE MURDER

By Libby Klein

Poppy McAllister is excited to open Butterfly House, the quaint Queen Anne home she and her Aunt Ginny have renovated as a bed and breakfast in Cape May, New Jersey. Her return to Cape May after a long absence has been jam-packed with surprises—some good, some not so good. Tops on the good side is Poppy's possible rekindled romance with her ex-fiancé, Tim, now owner of a successful local restaurant who hired Poppy to bake gluten-free pastries for the eatery. Tying at number one on the good side of Poppy's list is hunky Italian barista Gia Larusso, who not only has given Poppy the chance to feature her baked goodies at his establishment but has also professed his love for her. With Valentine's Day fast approaching, Poppy's being pressed by both to choose between them.

Poppy's not the only one in the family with boyfriend drama. Aunt Ginny's long-ago high school beau, Royce Hanson, has returned to Cape May to star in the Senior Center staging of *Mama Mia*. Will the spark be rekindled between them after Royce ditched Ginny years ago to become a professional actor with another high school classmate, Blanche Carrigan?

When Royce arrives at the Senior Center, he sets all the geriatric female hearts aflutter, especially Aunt Ginny's and her posse of girlfriends, nicknamed "The Biddies" by Poppy. But the course of late-in-life love rarely runs smooth as Blanche Carrigan is also vying for Royce's affection, and is doing everything she can to make Aunt Ginny's life hell.

Slated to open February 13<sup>th</sup>, the problem-plagued production seems to be cursed from the start—with stolen props, sabotage, and even a death threat. Things turn tragic when a cast member plunges to his death off a catwalk, and it's clearly murder. *Mama Mia* indeed!

"Theater Nights Are Murder" is a well-plotted mystery with great characters, a love triangle (or two), and laughs on every page. Lots of fun! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Milestones Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE OLD RELIGION

By Martyn Waites

The last thing ex-cop Tom Killgannon should be doing is helping someone in trouble. Doing so could make him a target, something he's all too familiar with. Killgannon is in witness protection and doing a pretty good job of keeping out of trouble by serving drinks in an out of the way watering hole located in Cornwall's fictional St. Petroc village, a town suffering from the Brexit fallout. No one really visits the place and it's not high on any tourist destination map. Killgannon spends his days pouring drinks and listening to the locals with a kind ear. It may be a simple life, but it's all his. This changes, however, when a teen girl from the local surfer community breaks into Tom's home and sets him on a wild course littered with chilling danger.

Seventeen-year-old Lila is on the run and needs a quick exit from her abusers; only she picked the wrong house to sneak into. Tom finds himself in a quandary when he realizes the girl is part of a larger criminal scheme. Does he help her or keep himself safe? When the girl makes off with Tom's coat, he finds himself in a desperate situation. The pilfered garment held his wallet, which contained all the details of his new life. He sets off to locate the teen, but quickly finds himself under suspicion and becomes a target. Killgannon, to save himself and Lila, must face down ritual sacrifice, desperate locals hoping their sinister plans will bring new prosperity to St. Petroc, and the nefarious Morrigan, who sees himself as the village's true savior.

Stark, creepy, and gripping until the final page, "The Old Religion" is a dark tale of English Noir set amidst the stormy English countryside, one teeming with horrific superstition.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## THE OTHER PEOPLE

By C. J. Tudor

"The Other People" is an intriguing thriller with chilling nuances of the supernatural.

C. J. Tudor, with her new title, thoroughly delves into the lives of three people whose dark stories are elusively intertwined.

Driving home one night, Gabe sees a little girl's face appear in the rear mirror of a rusty old car. Gabe knows without a doubt that it's his five-year-old daughter, and he'll never see her again. The book continues with a slow build-up, maintaining a creepy atmosphere throughout, as it alternates between Gabe, who's searching for his missing daughter, and a woman and her child on the run. *How are these people connected?*

Readers will undoubtedly be drawn to Alice's compelling character. She has a fear of mirrors and every time she looks into one, strange and otherworldly things start to happen.

"The Other People" keeps us thoroughly engaged; it leaves us guessing until the final page and concludes with twisty, unexpected revelations. This family-driven thriller will most certainly appeal to all admirers of supernatural suspense. C. J. Tudor really does excel at writing compelling passages that chill.

Reviewed by Ludwig Marzouk ■

## INTO THE PIT (FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S: FAZBEAR FRIGHTS #1)

By Scott Cawthon and Elley Cooper

The phrase "be careful what you wish for" comes to mind when I think of these three novellas by Scott Cawthon and Elley Cooper. *Five Nights at Freddy's* is officially one of my favorite horror video games, and these two bring the terror of the animatronic bear and his friends to life in these gripping tales.

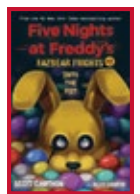
The first novella features Oswald, who just wants something better to do than read books and eat pizza over summer break. He discovers that the ball pit in the local pizza parlor transports him back in time to the eighties, when the restaurant was livelier. He starts to think summer vacation won't be as bad as he thought. That is, until one of the animatronics from the past kidnaps his dad in the present.

The next features Sarah, who just wants to be beautiful. She is jealous of the popular girls at school and thinks she could never compare to them. But then Sarah finds a robot by the name of Eleanor that can make her beautiful. Sarah soon finds out there is a price to pay for beauty that she should have thought of before she agreed to accept help from the strange robot.

The last is about Millie, who only sees the wrong in the world. Her view gets even bleaker around Christmas time, especially when she discovers that the boy she was leaning towards doesn't like her in the same way. With her obsession of Edgar Allan Poe and all things dark, Millie starts fantasizing about how beautiful death would be. Which turns out to be a bad idea, especially when Freddy Fazbear himself gets involved.

These stories are dark and intriguing. Whether you are familiar with the *Five Nights at Freddy's* series or not, reading these will surely give you chills. I find them wildly entertaining and can't wait for the second set of these novellas.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## AFTER SHE WROTE HIM

By Sulari Gentill

The first thing that needs to be said about this book is that it's truly unusual, unique, and every thriller lover should make the time to read this.

Madeleine d'Leon has a man in her life...sort of. Edward is actually a character in her next book. But the more she writes, the more he becomes the center of her world. In fact, he is all she can think about. A lot of her time is spent imagining him sitting at a desk where he pens his own novel.

Edward McGinnity is a man who can't get the name or the figure of a woman named Madeleine out of his mind. That's fine, considering she is the new heroine who will appear in his next book.

You guessed it. The biggest mystery of all for the reader is trying to decide who the real writer is and who, in fact, is the fictional character. This is not as easy as it sounds, by the way. The author does such an amazing job putting these intricate stories on paper and then intertwining them that most pages read as if the two characters are most definitely in the same room having a very real conversation together.

Wild, inventive, this book not only puts the characters together "verbally," but also shows the passion between them and leads you to a very "physical" place. Do not let the strength of this book make you shy away; nor, let the reviews confuse you to the point where you don't want to read it. "After She Wrote Him" is one that you'll remember for a good, long time to come and definitely deserves all your attention.

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

## THE TENANT

By Katrine Engberg

Author Katrine Engberg might not be known in the United States, but that's about to change, as the bestselling author in Denmark brings "The Tenant" across the pond.

"The Tenant" is a complex web of intrigue, keeping the reader on the edge till the end. It starts with a young woman being murdered in her apartment. The detectives see a link between the victim and her landlady, Esther de Laurenti, but are still unsure of motive. And when they discover Esther described the victim's murder in an unpublished mystery novel, the investigation takes a different turn.

Katrine creates some very creative characters wrapped up in a mystery that has the qualities for consideration of the best books of the year. We are very excited to see more from Katrine in the future.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



## THE MISADVENTURES OF NERO WOLFE

Edited by Josh Pachter

Subtitled 'Parodies and Pastiches Featuring the Great Detective of West 35<sup>th</sup> Street,' this anthology houses a plethora of amazing, bestselling authors who pay real tribute to Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin with their contributions.

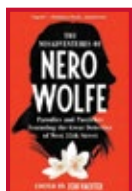
For those who don't know (which is hard to believe) Archie Goodwin is a fictional character in Rex Stout's incredible mysteries. As a witty narrator, Archie recorded the cases of his famous boss, Nero Wolfe, beginning in 1934. This book, for both the introduction as well as the stories, brings together names like Otto Penzler, Lawrence Block, Loren D. Estleman, John Lescroart, and so, so many more to flatter these characters and bring them to a brand new audience.

Rex Stout proved his detective (Wolfe) and his Man-Friday (Goodwin) to be one of the best mystery teams, rivaling that of Sherlock Holmes and his partner-in-solving-crime Dr. John Watson when Stout first released his pair to the reading world. And being that Sherlock and Watson became a part of a new generation, when the box-office blockbusters were made with Robert Downey, Jr., it is only fitting to make sure that Wolfe and Goodwin aren't denied.

A few that readers can look forward to include: memorable stories written especially for this collection by Michael Bracken and Robert Lopresti; chapters from Robert Goldsborough's authorized continuation of the *Wolfe* series; and John Lescroart's "Rasputin's Revenge" which ended up being my favorite because it actually shows Wolfe with Sherlock Holmes as his father.


You do not want to miss out on this one! A true treasure, the authors did a remarkable job offering detailed plotlines, suspense, and charm that would have left Nero Wolfe and his own creator in stitches.

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



*Walking Guen. Some More.*  
**GARY WILLIAMS**

In this third book, Gary and his dog, Guen, return to the historic streets of St. Augustine, Florida, to discuss such wide-ranging topics as Edgar Allan Poe, disco, black holes, dinosaur ghosts, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, Village People, and more. This continuing series is sure to leave you smiling, or shaking your head, or both.



**On Sale Now @WILLIAMSKNERLY**

## THE NEW HUSBAND

By D. J. Palmer

D. J. Palmer's newest thriller, "The New Husband," will keep domestic thriller admirers on their toes from page one. This time, the author unapologetically delves into the most wicked secrets that lie behind the facade of a perfect family.

Nina knows two things about her ex-husband Glen: he's been having an affair, and his body is nowhere to be found following an alleged drowning. After meeting her daughter Maggie's middle school teacher, Simon Fitch, who is grieving the suicide of his first wife, Nina finds love again. Did Nina make the right choice by inviting her soon-to-be-husband into her family, or was it her worst mistake? Surely, Simon is perfect. He loves her deeply. He wouldn't mean her any harm. Would he?

Eventually, Nina has to dig deep into Simon's past. Is he who he claims to be? What she doesn't know, however, is once she's gone down that road, there's no coming back. And the more secrets that are dredged up, the more her family's exposed to great danger.

This standalone is D. J. Palmer's very successful attempt at a domestic thriller. This author can write anything he puts his mind to, and he does it impressively. It's twisty, gripping, and will have readers staying up all night turning the pages until the final chapter.

Reviewed by Ludwig Marzouk ■





## AL DENTE'S INFERNO

By Stephanie Cole

When Nell Valenti is offered an exciting job opportunity to start a cooking school and work with one of her idols, Chef Claudio Orlandini, she eagerly accepts. It's a perfect way to bounce back after a recent disastrous love affair. So she packs up her trusty Italian dictionary and off she goes.

It doesn't take too long for Nell to figure out that this career move probably wasn't her best decision ever. Not only is the chef's villa a falling down wreck, the appearance of the chef himself is a real shock. What happened to the handsome, rugged man Nell was expecting? The one bright spot in a motley cast of supporting characters is Chef's handsome son, Pete. At least he speaks English.

The next shock for Nell is when she's told that there's a big dinner planned for the following night to kick off the cooking school plans, and the invited guests include the president of the local chamber of commerce, a contessa, and one of the most prominent food critics in Italy. Plus, the whole event will be filmed for a Netflix special. Nell squares her shoulders and decides that she's up to the challenge, and that right after the dinner, she's quitting. With the help of local nuns, a truffle-hunting dog, major rearranging and reconfiguring, and a menu to die for, she's ready. Then the film crew arrives, and the documentary filmmaker is none other than her former boyfriend, the man she fled to Italy to escape.

On the bright side, Chef and his culinary cohorts have risen to the occasion and the delicious meal is going beautifully. Until the filmmaker is found bludgeoned to death later that night, and Chef has disappeared.

"Al Dente's Inferno" is a delightful cozy mystery filled with wacky, likeable characters and a fast-moving plot. Open a bottle of chianti and settle in for a terrific read. I can't wait for the next title in this series.

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

## THE DARK CORNERS OF THE NIGHT

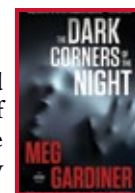
By Meg Gardiner

"The Dark Corners of the Night" jumps into high gear from the very first sentence and it just gets creepier from there. Readers are brought back into the tension-fraught world of FBI Behavioral Analyst Caitlin Hendrix, the popular lead character in Meg Gardiner's intense *UNSUB* series. This time she's facing a new, terrifying Unknown Subject (UNSUB) in sunny Los Angeles.

The Midnight Man has turned the L.A. suburbs into a living nightmare. He breaks into the homes of unsuspecting families in the dead of night, killing the husband and wife before delivering terror upon the children of the home, but leaving them alive (not to mention mentally scarred) to tell the tale of horror. One survivor shares the man's grim moniker and thus the terror of the Midnight Man begins. As these deadly attacks ramp up, the local authorities turn to the feds, specifically their Behavioral Analysis Unit and profiler Caitlin Hendrix. Hendrix, herself a survivor of a serial killer, must face her own fears head on if she's to untangle the mystery of L.A.'s newest, gravest threat.

One of the great parts of Gardiner's harrowing new tale, the third novel in the series, is that it can be read alone or as part of the overall story. Fans will of course want to start with 2017's "UNSUB," the first book in the series. Those interested in a rich, compelling psychological thriller need look no further than "The Dark Corners of the Night." Gardiner understands the ingredients for a compelling suspense tale and she fills them full of death and gritty fear.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## A COLD TRAIL

By Robert Dugoni

Bundle up! Even if it's hot out, this story will make you shiver. Give you the chills.

Tracy Crosswhite is hot on the cold trail of a murderer. Two old deaths, including that of her sister, and two new ones, all with roots tangled together beneath the surface of the frozen ground.



Tracy and her husband Dan O'Leary are in Cedar Grove, Washington, Tracy's old family home, while renovators demolish and remodel their Redmond home. They intend to keep this for their summer place and have brought along the baby, Daniella; Therese, their young Irish nanny; as well as Sherlock and Rex, the two huge Rhodesian mastiffs. Dan, a lawyer, has taken on a case to argue in the County Superior Court. His client, Larry Kaufman, owns a store on Main Street that's been in his family long enough that he doesn't want to bow to the pressure to sell it, as most of the other business owners have done. Gary Witherspoon, the mayor, is taking credit for rejuvenating the dying town and overseeing the sale and upgrading of the businesses. Dan, however, suspects something sinister is going on behind the scenes.

She didn't intend to work as a police detective for these few weeks, but when two people she knows are murdered, and there seem to be ties to her sister's killer years ago, she ends up getting involved. Very involved. The facts are misleading and nothing is as it seems to be, either for Dan's case or Tracy's.

Warning: I stayed up way, way, way too late racing to the end of this book.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Revenge is Sweet" ■

## THE SECRET BROKERS

By Alexandra Weis

"The Secret Brokers" is classic noir meets modern thriller, with just enough twist to keep readers waiting for the next installment.

Fresh off a failed romance and thrust in charge of his former boss' elite spies-for-hire business, secrets broker Dallas August has a job to do. The only problem is, something doesn't add up—from the mafia kingpin who hired him, the questionable involvement of the FBI, or the enigmatic woman he's been hired to *de*-secret. He can't put his finger on it, but the knowledge Dallas was hired to retrieve from reclusive target Gwen Marsh may be just the start of things hidden. He's just got to keep Gwen, and himself, alive long enough to figure it out.

While Weis's take on a spy thriller carries the classic elements of a crime drama, the story is as much noir as it is a love letter to the author's home of New Orleans. There are mafia bosses, shoot outs, and the requisite amount of alcohol-swilling, but there are also references to New Orleans' unique French Quarter architecture and the south's deep love of their animals, both of which give authenticity to the story.

It's more cozy than suspense, but what it might lack in glitz, it makes up for in curb appeal to readers who might otherwise shy away from crime drama—which is a good thing.

Weis has the ability to develop characters that are relatable and complex without being weighted down. Dallas August is a hesitant spy thrust in charge of his organization, a leader navigating the minefields of human resource issues just trying to keep his sanity above water. He's also a man coming to terms with his new life while trying to heal a broken heart. More interesting than Dallas is Gwen Marsh, who's very clearly not your usual damsel-in-distress and not simply an erotic fixture. She's capable, dynamic, and she has more secrets than Dallas August has a chance of uncovering, which ultimately makes the *Secret Brokers* series something to get behind.

Reviewed by Seven Jane ■





She tried to run from her past.  
**BUT HER SECRETS ARE  
CATCHING UP TO HER.**



Pecca Gallegos moved to Walton, Georgia, to protect her son and escape the dangerous lifestyle that once defined her. When a series of strange circumstances evolves into threats, Pecca finds herself confiding in an unlikely ally—her stubborn patient.

Army veteran Colton Crawford is desperate to recover from the undiagnosed disorder that is ruining his life, and his instincts are on high alert when threats against his nurse and her son force him to take action. But Colton's involvement only ramps up the danger when he uncovers a family secret revealing that whoever is after Pecca is closer—and more deadly—than they realized.

To learn more, visit [www.nataliewalterswriter.com](http://www.nataliewalterswriter.com)

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# Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

*Jonathan McFerran*  
A CREATOR OF BOTH WORDS  
& UNFORGETTABLE ART

HIDE YOUR FACE



Jonathan McFerran has a gift for creating the ‘fantastical’ realms the rest of us can only dream about. Growing up in Northern Ireland, the legends and the folklore of that stunning country truly appear in his works of art, speaking to mysticism, dark worlds, and beauty so mesmerizing that it becomes etched in your mind after setting eyes on them.

Basically self-taught, this is an artist who continues to learn and, in his words, ‘practise, practise, practise’ in order to better himself each and every day. An author, as well, he creates his own covers and is currently working on the latest book in his sci-fi series.

We welcome Jonathan to *Suspense Magazine* and are excited to share his work, knowledge, and continuing success with our readers.

*Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.):* We like to begin with a bit of backstory from the ‘incredible creator’ such as yourself. Could you tell our readers where you were born and raised; and, when did you know that being an artist was definitely your future goal/endeavor?

*Jonathan McFerran (J.M.):* I was born and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a place that inspires me deeply. I think the mysticism and folklore surrounding the island really helped nurture my love of art. I’ve always been very creative; I remember when I was younger being mesmerised by the Titanic—I’d draw and paint it multiple times. As I got older I gravitated towards recreating the Star Wars posters by Drew Struzan. It wasn’t until about sixteen years ago when I made my first foray into digital art, a couple of years later I joined DeviantArt and seeing the digital art community there really inspired me. It was then I knew being an artist was something I wanted to do full-time.

*S. MAG.:* When it comes to your creations on DeviantArt, each image—whether it be concentrated on fantasy or mystery or even the darker subjects—has one thing in common, and that is the intensity. What electrifies/encourages you when it comes to creating? And, does your locale/scenery have anything to do with it?

*J.M.:* I can take inspiration from anything. When creating my images there really are no rules as to what inspires me. In saying that, generally, music is my biggest inspiration. I’m a big lover of Symphonic Metal. I think the combination of classical music, rock and the female voice creates such a dramatic atmosphere that I can’t help but be inspired. Also things like books, films and poetry inspire me a great deal. There are also certain places I like to go that I feel give me a creative boost, such as old ruins, cemeteries and the ocean.

*S. MAG.:* Before you sit down and begin a work, do you have something in mind already, a topic or theme, or do you just “let it happen”? Are you ever surprised at the end result?

*J.M.:* Usually I have a clear idea in my mind of what I want to create. Once I have that idea I begin to piece together the puzzle of the stock images I’m going to use, or the photos I need to take. Sometimes when I’m in the middle of creating a new piece I get a further idea or change my mind to add something else in, but generally I have a solid idea of what I want to achieve before I begin.

*There have been plenty of times when I’ve been surprised by the end result. Sometimes looking at the “before” and “after” of an image I can’t believe I managed to get to the end result at all!*

*S. MAG.:* I know it’s quite impossible for most to pick a favorite, but are there a couple you can cite that you still remember after all this time? Or, perhaps, creations that you feel literally changed your life?

*J.M.:* Over the years, I have created a few pieces that stand out; one would be “Ceridwen.” Based on the book “Darkhenge” by Catherine Fisher, it is a retelling of the ancient Welsh myth of the goddess Ceridwen and the poet Taliesin. I created it six years ago and still, to this day, if I had to pick one image I’m most proud of it would be that one.

*Last year I created a new image nearly every week for the whole year and I constantly surprised myself as some of my favourite work was created during this period. One of my favourites from 2019 is a piece entitled “Silver Moonlight” based*





THE PALLBEARER WALKS ALONE



CERIDWEN



THE LAST COWBOY

on a song (of the same name) by Within Temptation, a Dutch Symphonic Metal band.

S. MAG.: Is there a genre that you haven't explored as of yet when it comes to photo-manipulations, or animation, etc., that you hope to do one day?

J.M.: *Although I've created quite a few sci-fi images, I've seen the work people can do in the genre, such as including 3D rendering—even digital painting—and this elevates their images to a whole other level. If there was anything I'd want to explore more, it would be that. Although in saying that, I'm very happy to continue my work in the dark fantasy realm. I feel I have a unique viewpoint in that field and wouldn't want to dilute it by straying too far.*

S. MAG.: Did you learn this all on your own, or did you study art in school? In addition, how difficult is it to master pathways, such as photo-manipulations and other areas?

J.M.: *Truly, I believe I learned most of what I do on my own. From about 2004, I was creating graphics (signatures) for online message boards. Then, in 2006, I joined DeviantArt and began my love of photo-illustration/manipulation. I can definitely see my progression through the years. Of course along the way I've picked up a few tips and tricks from others, but I would honestly say the majority of the skills I've acquired I did so purely with practice and trial and error—a lot of trial and error!*

*In 2010, I completed an HND in Graphic Design, but the more corporate/advertising side of the art world lacked the creativity I needed. It was helpful for things like typography and design layouts, but overall the art I made in my spare time spoke to me more strongly than the work I was doing in college. I am thankful for my experience in graphic design though; I've self-published four novels now (with a fifth on the way), and due to my experience in graphic design, I was able to create/design the cover and format the interior myself—meaning I saved a small fortune on design/layout fees!*

S. MAG.: Can you share information on your working background? Are you a freelance artist; do you do book covers for authors, etc.?

J.M.: *I would classify myself as a freelance artist. I've photographed and designed for many companies since I graduated college, from Belfast Fashion Week to Funeral Services Northern Ireland—I've seen (and designed) it all! At present, most of my existing work is available for licensing. However, if a client doesn't see an existing piece that is absolutely perfect for their project I'm also available for personal commissions for things like book covers, album art, etc. Whether you're a self-publishing author or an art director for a music label, I can create bespoke and unique art to suit your project.*



S. MAG.: Social media is a popular marketing tool for artists, writers, and others in the creative fields. How does DeviantArt, Facebook, etc., help you in your work? Do you also have a blog that readers could check out?

J.M.: *Social media is a great help. Without it I don't know how I could ever make a living from my art. It would be very challenging and most likely my audience would remain local. Social media allows me to reach so many more people. I like to think my work is very narrative-driven, meaning you could view one of my images and immediately begin to write your own story around the piece, your own haunted fairytale. The many social media platforms allow for that exposure to people who would otherwise never see my work.*

*I have a blog that I update regularly where I talk about many things; insights into my art, books, music, different tips and tricks when creating photo-manipulations, as well as some of the things that inspire me that could help other artists remain creatively active. You can check it out here: [jaimcferran.com/blog](http://jaimcferran.com/blog).*

S. MAG.: Is the art world a close collaboration of people where ideas are shared and support/camaraderie is offered? Did/do you have a mentor who you follow as well? And what advice would you give a new person to this industry when it comes to getting their work out there?

J.M.: *I think there's a great support network out there between artists; at least, in my experience, I've always felt supported and in turn have always supported others. It can be a very frightening thing, to bare a part of your soul, whether it's in a painting, in an illustration, or through photography, so to know that your peers won't judge or criticise you is a very freeing experience and allows us to experiment and push the boundaries of our own art.*

*There are many artists I follow who constantly inspire me. Artists such as: Abigail Larson, Brooke Shaden, Elandria Broughton-Sheard, LadyxBoleyn, Marcela Bolivar, Marketa Novak and Helena Aguilar Mayans, to name a few.*

*The advice I'd give new artists would be to first practise, practise, practise and when you think you've practised enough, continue to practise. Still, to this day, I'm constantly honing my craft and learning new things! Also join an online community like DeviantArt and encourage other artists to critique your work, it can only help to both further your skills as an artist and develop a thick skin. Then make a social media account dedicated to your art (if you already have personal accounts I'd advise creating a separate one just for your art). If you're really serious about getting your art out there and want to work as a freelance artist, having an official website to show your portfolio is a must. But don't expect to suddenly start getting commissions; it takes a lot of hustle, so be prepared. You'll need to be very proactive in approaching different people; art directors, authors, bands, music labels—but eventually it will pay off.*

S. MAG.: Are there any current projects you're working on at the moment? What's next for you in the art world?

J.M.: *Currently I'm in the midst of writing my fifth novel, "Fire Burner." It's part of a sci-fi series I've been writing for six years, and I'm hoping to release it either by the end of this year or at the start of 2021.*

*Art-wise, I'm currently working on a dark fairytale series of three images. Each piece, when placed side by side, will line up smoothly to reveal a complete image, like the old Victorian Myriorama cards. It's quite challenging but I'm so excited to complete it!*

We would like to thank Jonathan for speaking with us today. To find out more about this incredible artist, or to see and follow his work, go to Instagram and/or Twitter @jaimcferran, [facebook.com/jaimcferran](https://facebook.com/jaimcferran), or through his official website at [jaimcferran.com](http://jaimcferran.com). ■





# DAVID CORBETT

NAMED A TOP PICK OF 2018  
BY BOOKREPORTER

"[A]N ASTOUNDING  
MULTIFACETED THRILLER  
BRIMMING WITH INTRIGUE  
AND SUSPENSE."

—Bookreporter

NOMINATED FOR THE LEFTY  
AWARD FOR  
BEST HISTORICAL MYSTERY



The most notorious love letters in American history—supposedly destroyed a century ago—mysteriously réappear and become the coveted prize in a fierce battle for possession that brings back to life the lawless world evoked in the letters themselves.

Lisa Balamaro is an ambitious arts lawyer with a secret crush on her most intriguing client: former rodeo rider and reformed art forger, Tuck Mercer. In his newfound role as an expert in Old West artifacts, Tuck gains possession of the supposedly destroyed correspondence between Doc Holliday and his cousin and childhood sweetheart, Mattie—who would become Sister Mary Melanie of the Sisters of Mercy.

Given the unlikelihood the letters can ever be fully authenticated, Tuck retains Lisa on behalf of the letters' owner, Rayella Vargas, to sell them on the black market. But the buyer Tuck finds, a duplicitous judge from the Tombstone area, has other, far more menacing ideas.

As Lisa works feverishly to make things right, Rayella secretly enlists her ex-marine boyfriend in a daring scheme of her own.

When the judge learns he's been blindsided, he rallies a cadre of armed men for a deadly standoff reminiscent of the moment in history that made Doc famous: The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT  
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# THE NINE

By Jeanne McWilliams Blasberg  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

SAM SET HIS PHONE ALARM FOR 3:00 A.M. AND snuck out of the room so as not to wake Ethan. Entering the boiler room nine minutes later, he found Justin Crandall in his pajamas, waiting cross-legged on the floor. Justin's goofy smile and shimmering swimmer's hair were up lit by a flashlight he grasped in front of his chest.

"You?" Sam said, rushing forward in amazement. He couldn't believe Justin was the grand prize.

"Dude! I'm so pumped about this." Justin jumped to his feet and slapped Sam on the shoulder. It was a brotherly, welcoming gesture, Sam's first man-to-man, and despite the unusual setting, it flooded him with warmth.

After the back slapping and laughs, Justin adopted a more serious tone. "I need to lay out all the risks; then you can decide whether to take it or leave it," he said.

He spoke slowly, emphasizing the enormity of the tradition. He described the legacy of the Nine, its history, its exclusivity, and the honor of being tapped. Although his voice was solemn, Justin's face softened, and every so often he winked. "You'll need to take a vow saying you'll put the brotherhood above all else."

Sam nodded that he understood.

"Okay. What have you heard about us already?"

"Just . . . just rumors."

"Well, the active membership consists of three sophomores, three

juniors, and three seniors, but the alumni number in the hundreds."

"Yeah, that's what I heard."

"The brotherhood was started by nine students back in 1890. They wrote out the group's mission on an old scroll, which we still have. We'll read from it to begin the first meeting of the fall."

Justin touched on the Nine's major milestones, which seemed to have petered out in the sixties. He said interest in the group sort of fluctuated after that but was resurrected two decades later, in his father's era, when Dunning started admitting girls and increasing the number of minority students. "You see, some alumni feared those changes marked the end of Dunning as they knew it, so they resuscitated the Nine to provoke the administration and regain control."

Sam frowned.

"Don't worry—it's not like that anymore," Justin said. "I mean, of course we still try to undermine the bastards, but now we just pull pranks."

Sam laughed. "There have been some really good ones this year."

"It's gotten tougher since Williams hired Dean Harper. He was brought here to out us, to expose our identities."

Sam shook his head. "But it's like the best-kept secret on campus," he said. For example, Sam had never expected Justin, his clumsy, easygoing friend, to be one of them. In hindsight, it should have been obvious, given all his family connections.

Justin rubbed his eyes. "It's late. We should get back upstairs. But I just want you to know you don't have to worry. I'll be the one guiding you through the process."

"What process?"

"Initiation, but you'll do fine."

Sam's heart raced as he realized his acceptance wasn't a *fait accompli*. "What happens?"

"There'll be a ceremony and then a little bit of hazing, but it's fun. You'll like it," Justin said. "After you pass everything, we have meetings to decide which missions to move forward with. We've been doing a lot of stuff, but it's not high-tech, not like your robotics." He chuckled. "We want some remote-controlled stuff—stuff that's funny and cutting-edge but doesn't hurt anybody."

"And it's not, like, a protest anymore?"

"Huh?"

"Because of the girls and, like, the minorities?"

Justin stared back at Sam, as if he didn't quite understand or didn't want to deal with so pointed a question at this late hour. In the dim light, with his blond hair askew, he reminded Sam of a dopey golden retriever, with round, searching eyes and a puzzled tilt to his head.

"Nah, I mean, we're in it for the attention, and mostly the laughs," Justin finally replied. "And who doesn't like to annoy adults?"

Sam smiled and nodded.

"We need to let them know who's really in charge," Justin said, regaining momentum. "Williams thinks he is Dunning Academy. But nothing could be further from the truth. There are so many brilliant, important people who've graduated from this place, and they look out for their own. Think about it: the way Williams and Harper take themselves so seriously is actually offensive. My father and my uncle always say those two are only here to keep the heat on and make sure the food gets served. We have highly paid, avant-garde teachers and a precocious student body. It's a recipe for beautiful things, but the rules police want to get in the way."

"Like Mr. Willis?"

"Exactly! The Nine bring guys like him down to earth. And our alums support us completely."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked. It wasn't as if he'd ever seen grown men who weren't part of the staff or faculty roaming the campus.

"They challenge us to think big; budgets aren't an issue. If you need expensive electronic parts, that won't be a problem."

Sam felt his pulse quicken. "I'm dying to get my hands on some new circuit boards. The only ones we get are for the MIT competition."

"That's why we recruited you, Sam. You're the future. We need you to up our game, especially in light of this Faceless group. They're like the whole Occupy movement, exposing privilege and the like. When our alumni council learned about their stronghold on the Dunning campus, let's just say they weren't pleased. But, like I said, Faceless is only online; they don't use the tunnels."

"Wait, back up. What tunnels?"

"Sam, my boy, you have barely scratched the surface of what exists here. After you're officially initiated, Dunning will become your oyster."

Sam sat with that thought for a moment, the idea of accessing places unknown. Before Justin ended the conversation, however, he needed to ask one more question.

"Who are the other initiates in my class?" He held out hope for Ethan.

"There's Raymond, you know, on the football team? His father and grandfather were Nine, so he was guaranteed. And then there's this kid Saunders, who's smart, like you, plays soccer and runs track and is fast as hell. He's also a little bit off the radar. Dean Harper assumes we're all jocks and legacies, so we've picked a few he'd never suspect."

Sam swallowed the backhanded compliment. "Have you considered my roommate, Ethan—"

"Sorry, dude, but we have our reasons. But be grateful I fended off that jerk Max. It was tough—he's a legacy, you know."

Sam exhaled in disappointment.

"Don't worry. You're part of the special forces now," Justin said. "We'll be everything you need." He took Sam by the shoulder.

"Okay, so, what's next?" Sam asked, relaxing under Justin's intoxicating smile.

"Wait for contact to be made. It'll be over the summer. Your orientation materials will be delivered to you before school starts next September."

Sam nodded, already thinking about how he'd keep his mother from snooping through his mail. Justin slapped him again on the shoulder. He was only one year older, but his strength penetrated Sam's back.

"There's one last thing," Justin whispered, as they walked through the door.

"What?"

"It's sort of for security purposes. Just helps keep tabs on everyone." Justin handed him a first-generation pager. "If it beeps, follow the directions and call in. If it gets lost or goes missing, no problem—no data is stored on it; nothing is retrievable. But try not to lose it over the summer. It's how we'll find you. Do you have travel plans?"

"I don't think so."

"They tracked me down on my family's vacation to Italy. Delivered

my orientation package with the room service tray one morning in Florence. It knocked my socks off."

#

Sam's initiation package arrived in August alongside the Sunday paper. It was in a FedEx envelope addressed to Sam Webber, Class Three—the first he'd ever received.

"Something from the dean's office came for you, sweetie," his mother chirped, her curiosity ringing in the air.

Sam lunged for the package across the breakfast table, almost knocking over his orange juice.

"Hey, careful there, bucko," his father said.

"Where did you find it? I mean, when did it come?"

His father eyed him. "I went out on the front stoop to get the paper this morning, and there it was."

"Hmm. Dean Harper must have rewritten the rules over the summer." Sam placed it on the floor by his feet. His mother frowned, undoubtedly disappointed that he wasn't going to open it in front of her.

"Rewriting the infamous D Book—that even makes *my* job sound fun," his father said.

"Since I have you for only a few





more days, I'm going to make you some eggs," his mother said, squeezing Sam's shoulders.

"No, thanks—cereal's fine," he said. After gulping down a bowl, he let out an exaggerated yawn, stretching his hands overhead. He picked up the package and tucked it safely under his arm. "I need to go upstairs and finish my summer reading."

"Yeah, you better get on that," his father said. "Only two days before your holiday ends."

In his room, he locked the door, cut one end of the mailer with his desk scissors, and emptied the contents on his bed. After unraveling a few layers of bubble wrap, he found a spiral-bound book, about the same thickness as their community phone directory. Sam flipped open the cover and read the first page.

In the routine world of academy life, where dullness always hangs overhead, pranks bring about laughter, visceral satisfaction, and awe. And they live on for decades because of their retellings. While the administrators may believe that Dunning exists only to serve their careers, pranks are most needed. When a paranoid authority aims to restrict inquisitive youth, the Nine will respond with humor. The Nine give power back to the students, the ones Ezekiel Dunning built the school for in the first place.

Instilling such a mindset has always been the hallmark of a true Dunning education, not just for the Nine but for the entire student body. In life, there are risk-takers and those who admire the risk-takers. You are being enlisted as a steward of a centuries-old institution. Your mission is a noble one.

Sam brightened at the idea of being

noble, of being a risk-taker.

"Sweetie, do you have any dirty laundry I can throw in?" his mother called through his closed door.

"No," Sam hollered back, folding his blanket over the book.

The pager Justin had given him beeped inside his desk drawer. He hopped up to retrieve it. It read, "Delivery successful? 1 = yes, 2 = no." He pushed the number 1 and hit SEND. Then another message appeared on the small screen. He had to find his glasses. "Read entire manual before tomorrow's meeting."

Tomorrow? Sam hadn't planned on returning to Dunning for two days. He put on his glasses and began typing on the tiny keys. "I return in two days." A few minutes later, the pager buzzed. "Meeting tomorrow, midnight, in the Tomb. Read manual."

How would he get his mother to drop him off a day early for a midnight meeting? And what tomb? Willis would probably be difficult about letting him move in early, although Sam knew the dorm would be open for the international kids and the preseason athletes.

He thought for a minute, then decided he'd tell his parents he'd been invited to an end-of-summer party hosted by one of the day students. That would make his mother happy—she loved to think he had lots of friends. He folded back his blanket and returned to the manual, searching for directions to the Tomb.

#

Sam poked his way through prickly branches while thorns scratched his neck. He held a flashlight in one hand and shielded his face with the other as he followed the trail marked by pine cones. He'd convinced himself he was wandering aimlessly, until he spotted the next unmistakable upright pine cone, its tip doused with a touch of Day-Glo paint.

The instructions had been clear: wear gym shorts; keep the hood of his sweatshirt on; and, upon reaching the eighteenth pine cone, stand erect in

the clearing, keep his eyes closed, and whistle a short birdlike call.

When he opened his eyes, Justin was standing a few feet away, frowning. "It's about time."

Sam felt heat rise in his face, but then Justin's scowl quickly melted into a laugh. "Just kidding! You made it! Lighten up, dude." He took a step forward and embraced Sam. "Welcome," Justin continued. "C'mon, follow me." ■

*Jeanne Blasberg is the award-winning, bestselling author of "Eden" and "The Nine." Her debut novel, "Eden," is the winner of the Beverly Hills Book Awards for Women's Fiction and finalist for both the Benjamin Franklin Award for Best New Voice in Fiction and the Sarton Women's Book Award for Historical Fiction. "Eden" was released in May 2017 by She Writes Press. "The Nine" was released in August 2019 by She Writes Press, and is the winner of the Beverly Hills Book Awards for Literary Fiction and Regional Fiction.*

*After graduating from Smith College, Jeanne embarked on a career in finance. Even as she worked primarily with numbers, she always had an interest in writing. She made stops on Wall Street, Macy's, and wrote case studies at Harvard Business School before turning seriously to fiction. She has kept a journal throughout her life, eventually taking inspiration from her childhood writings to pen her first novel, "Eden."*

*Jeanne is the founder of the Westerly Memoir Project as well as a board member of the Boston Book Festival. She is a student and board member of Grub Street, one of the country's pre-eminent creative writing centers, where she wrote and revised "The Nine" and is currently developing her next novel.*

*Jeanne and her husband split their time between Boston, MA and Westerly, RI. They love to travel, hike, ski, and spend time on the water. She caught the travel bug during a three-year stint in Europe. She's found that her power of observation is the strongest on foreign soil, providing ample inspiration for her personal essays and travel writing.*

# BETTY WEBB

## Take a Walk on the Wild Side

Interview by Michael Barson  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



It's been a little while since we spoke to author Betty Webb. She was on our radio show very early on and we had her in the magazine probably eight years or so ago. Well, she is back now with her latest book, "The Panda of Death," a *Gunn Zoo* mystery. We are also pleased that we were able to get an excerpt from the book and you will find that along with an update on what Betty has been up to recently.

Betty Webb is the author of two prize-winning mystery series—the *Lena Jones* books and the *Gunn Zoo* series. Before beginning to write full time, Betty was a journalist, interviewing everyone from U.S. presidents to astronauts who walked on the moon, and Nobel Prize winners. Among other organizations, she is a member of the National Federation of Press Women and Mystery Writers of America.

Michael Barson (M.B.): "Panda of Death" is the sixth book in the *Gunn Zoo Mystery* series.... For many years you had been alternating between writing this one and your *Lena Jones* series, which ended last year with volume ten. Does it feel odd to be working on only one series now?

Betty Webb (B.W.): *Ah, but I'm not! I've already finished the first draft of a book that'll head up a historical series set in France. So as far as work goes, other than a lot of damp Parisians instead of sunburned Arizonans—quelle différence!—things are pretty much the same. Write. Rewrite. Rewrite again. And maybe even again.*

M.B.: The link among the novels in the *Gunn Zoo* series is having a different animal be a key element in the plot each time. How do you decide which animal needs to be integrated with each title?

B.W.: *I'm a volunteer at the Phoenix Zoo, so the star of any particular book is generally an animal that I enjoyed being with on a particular day. Animals are like people, you know; they're all different. This time around, however, I used an animal—a red panda—who I met during a visit to the San Francisco Zoo. It was love at first sight, and I wanted so badly to take her home, but they wouldn't let me.*

M.B.: The *Gunn Zoo* series is generally viewed as part of the cozy mystery category, while your *Lena Jones* series was pretty hard-boiled, with very violent crimes and traumas involved. How difficult was it for you to shift tonal gears between your approach to writing each series?

B.W.: It was very difficult, especially during the first few chapters after a switch. For instance, Lena Jones, a stone-cold pessimist (she was raised in foster homes), is physically rough, whereas Teddy, my zookeeper heroine, is a light-hearted, people-and-animal loving person. So what frequently happened when I went from writing Lena to writing Teddy, the first few chapters tended to have Teddy behaving in a vicious, Lena-like manner, and I had to rewrite them. The same thing happened when I switched from sweet Teddy to rough Lena. The first few chapters showed an easy-going Lena who couldn't shoot her way out of a paper bag.

M.B.: Can you tell us a bit about the new series that will alternate with *Gunn Zoo*?

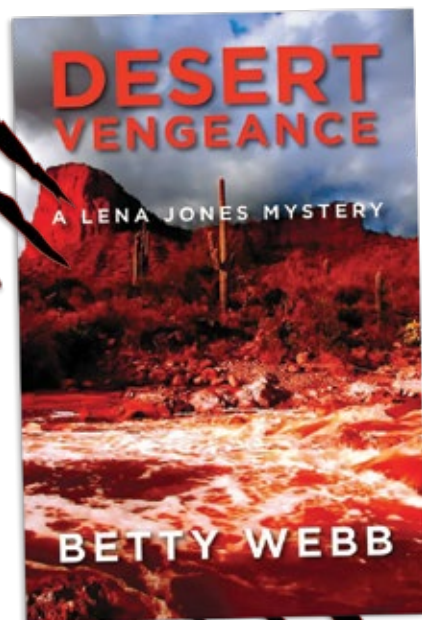
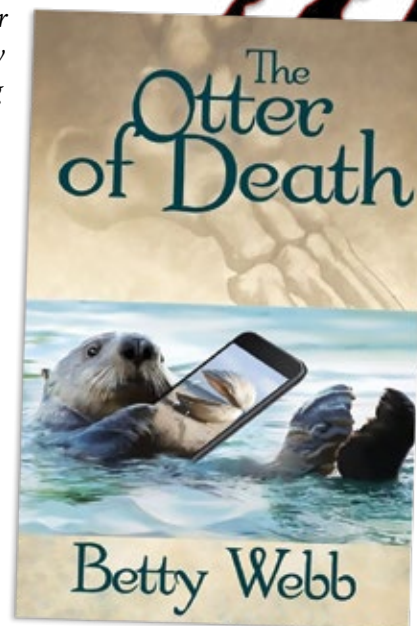
B.W.: The first book in the new series (still in the writing stage) is "Lost in Paris," set in France between the wars. My heroine is American artist Emma Barlow, whose past is decidedly murky. Due to her own traumas and moral conflicts, she finds herself among the roughest of Parisians, and has to shoot her way out. Since I've always adored Paris, I am loving the on-site research!

M.B.: Do you read any mystery authors for pleasure when you're not writing? Who among your contemporary crime writers might be found on your bedstand? And who among those from earlier times?

B.W.: I'd say that 75% of my reading is mystery and suspense—with the remaining 25% being what are considered to be "literary" fiction. As to who's on my nightstand, here are just some of my favorites: Kate Atkinson, Peter Robinson, Nevada Barr, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Jenny O'Connell, Chuck Wendig, Ann Napolitano, John Green, and Nicola Yoon. You'll notice that there are a couple of YA writers in there, so my math is obviously off.

M.B.: Having taught writing for many years, in addition to having been on staff as a newspaper journalist, what is the most galling mistake you see mystery authors making in their books?

B.W.: Ah, the list is so long.... But here are what I see most often with rank beginners (those not yet published). Their manuscripts usually show that they're not reading enough, so they don't know what's already out there. Therefore, their plots are stale, their characters stereotypical, and their styles are so long-winded that they need to be locked in a room for a year with nothing to read but Hemingway novels.



M.B.: Is there anything about the publishing industry today that you feel is actually an improvement over the state publishing was in when your first book came out?

B.W.: My first novel came out in 1976, but it wasn't a mystery. It was one of those autobiographical things I believed was the kind of serious art that would earn me a Nobel, but which my publisher positioned as a feminist comedy. Reviews were lukewarm.

My first mystery, "Desert Noir," didn't come out until 2000, after I'd had all that artsy, self-important, posturing knocked out of me during my years as a journalist. But in a way, I still prefer the Good Old Days, when most publishers weren't huge, off-shore conglomerates.

As for what I think is an improvement—I much prefer today's crazy-wild book covers to the drab covers of yore. And here I have to give a tip of the hat to Nicola Yoon's "Everything Everything," Erika Swyler's "Light from Other Stars," and Luke Rhinehart's "Invasion."

Turn the page for a sneak peek at "The Panda of Death," the newest title in the *Gunn Zoo* Mystery series. For more information on Betty and her writing, check out her website at [www.bettywebb-mystery.com](http://www.bettywebb-mystery.com). ■



# THE PANDA OF DEATH

By Betty Webb

## CHAPTER ONE

I was at the Gunn Zoo doing a live TV interview with a seven-foot tall dinosaur when I received a text message telling me a dead man had been seen floating next to my boat.

Trying not to let my alarm show, I smiled at the dinosaur—a bright orange Tyrannosaurus rex named Tippy-Toe—and asked, “So all the other dinosaurs in Dino Dell are upset that a non-dinosaur is moving into the neighborhood?”

Tippy-Toe nodded his great head. “Dinosaurs are just like people, Teddy. They have their likes and dislikes.”

While Tippy-Toe continued to explain why some of his dinosaur friends hated their new neighbor, I inched the mike over to Zorah Vega, the zoo’s director, and whispered, “Gotta go. Explain later.”

“But you can’t...” she hissed.

“Bye.”

With that, I gave the camera one more frozen smile, then vamoosed.

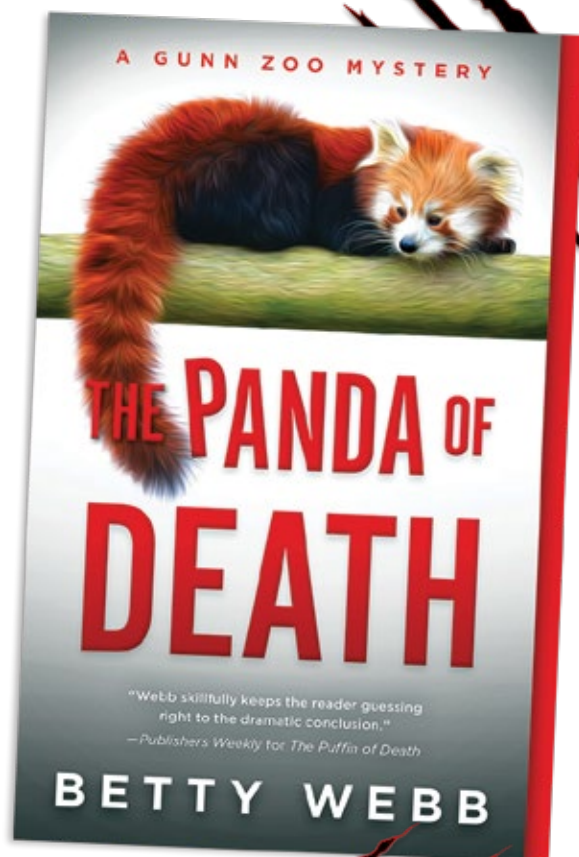
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At first sight, Gunn Landing Harbor looks like any other California seaside town, but closer inspection reveals no houses and no apartment buildings or condos. That’s because the only land in Gunn Harbor—population less than five hundred—is a narrow, semicircular spit of sand and rock that juts out into the Pacific, enclosing a natural bay. Anyone who lives here lives on a boat. I’d lived on my *Merilee* for years before marrying Joe, and I still missed waking to the sounds of gulls and the barks of sea lions.

Not today, though.

As my battered Nissan pickup sped into the harbor’s parking lot, I saw a sea of red and blue lights, along with the white van with SAN SEBASTIAN COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE emblazoned on its side, so the text hadn’t been an ill-timed joke.

After parking behind the crime scene van, I hurried to the dock gate, ran my ID card through the digital lock, then started toward the *Merilee*. At first, I was surprised not to see any of Dock 4’s other live-aboarders, but I quickly discovered the reason when Orville Thompson, Joe’s new deputy, stepped out of the shadow of a large catamaran and stopped me.



"Access restricted."

"I need to get to my boat!"

"Crime scene." Orville was a man of few words.

"What do you mean, crime scene? I thought it was some sort of accident."

He crossed his arms over his spindly chest and looked down his long nose. "Access restricted."

"You said that before," I huffed.

"Needed to."

"Where's Joe?"

"Sheriff Rejas?"

"Yeah, that Joe. The one I'm married to."

"Scene of crime."

"Which you think means my *Merilee*, right? So now what? Are you guys going to haul my boat off to the impound lot?"

"The sheriff..."

"Listen, Deputy Thompson, you can't possibly believe..."

"What the hell's going on here?" said someone behind me.

I turned around to see firefighter Walt MacAdams, who lived on the *Running Wild*, moored two slips down from the *Merilee*. His chiseled face was soot-stained, probably because he'd just put out a fire somewhere. "I've worked back-to-back shifts," he said to the deputy, "and I need some sleep."

"Don't firemen bunk at the firehouse?" Deputy Thompson said, in an unexpected rush of words.

Walt flexed his powerful muscles, never a good sign. "Since when are my sleeping habits any of your business?"

Thompson, although irritating, was no wimp, which he proved by stepping forward, closing the distance between himself and a man almost twice his weight. "Since it became my duty to block anyone from approaching slips one through twenty on Dock 4. Now please, sir, you need to step back or I'll have to..."

"Teddy, what are you doing here?" a bass voice boomed. "Oh, never mind. One of the liveboarders must have tipped you off." It was the San Sebastian County Sheriff Joseph Rejas, here to lay down the law. A touchy situation for both of us, considering I'd had the word "obey" scrubbed from our marriage vows.

Seeing the stubborn set to my jaw, my husband turned his attention to Walt, whom he guessed would be easier to push around. "Regardless of what you've been told, Mr. MacAdams, no one's taking the *Running Wild* to the county impound lot. Your boat, along with all the others on Dock 4, should be cleared within a few minutes. Until then, why don't you go over to Chowder 'N Cappuccino while we finish up? I hear the clam chowder's extra good today."

Walt unflexed. "Well, I am a bit hungry. You wanna come with, Teddy? Treat's on me."

Not yet ready to give up the fight, I said to Joe, "I take it there really is a dead man floating next to the *Merilee*. Anyone know who?"

"No comment, Teddy."

"But..."

"I said, no comment!"

If I could just get close enough to see... "Can't I make sure the *Merilee*'s all right?"

His blue eyes, gifts from his Dublin-born mother, narrowed. "Like I told Mr. MacAdams, the chowder's extra good today."

Recognizing an impasse, I followed Walt to Chowder 'N Cappuccino, where we found Linda Cushing, my tipster, slurping down chowder with the rest of Dock 4's year-round inhabitants. Emotions in the room ranged from miffed to resigned.

Chowder 'N Cappuccino had started life as a food truck, but several years ago put down roots in the guise of a small clapboard shack that offered both indoor and outdoor seating. It did a brisk business among the harbor's liveboarders, but today, with the police-enforced closure of Dock 4, the place was packed. Too upset to be hungry, I ordered a latte from the barista.

"Thanks for the text," I told Linda, after carrying my latte over to her table where she sat with Lila Conyers, owner of *Just In Time*; Gail Bauer, *Fleet Foot*; and Kenny Norgaard, *High Life*.

"Just thought you should know." Linda had lived on her sailboat for years, and the rough mercies of Monterey Bay weather made her look eighty, although she was only sixty-five. "At least they let me feed my cats before they evicted me."

"How's Toby handling that?" Toby was an orphaned white-and-peach-colored Siamese who had chosen *Tea 4 Two* as his permanent home.

"Better than me. But you know Toby, king of all he surveys, even the cops. I saw your handsome hubby petting him."

My concern for Toby out of the way, I said, "Anyone know who's dead?"

"Cliff Flaherty," they chorused.



I blinked. Flaherty—I'd seen him only yesterday—was the writer and producer for *Tippy-Toe & Tinker*, the kiddie show that starred the very dinosaur I'd been interviewing only thirty minutes earlier. That certainly explained the lack of sorrow around the table. Flaherty had been universally loathed.

"Are you sure?" I asked, feeling vaguely guilty because I'd disliked Flaherty, too.

"Him or his twin brother, and I happen to know he didn't have one." This, from Gail. A grandmother six times over, she was older than Linda yet looked years younger. "I was the first to spot him in the wake of the *High and Mighty* when it went speeding by. The harbor master needs to do something about its owner, Jervis whatshisname, before he kills someone." At this she stopped, considered what she'd said, then cleared her throat and continued. "Anyway, the wake washed Flaherty out of the channel and down by our boats. He bumped up against the stern of my *Fleet Foot*, which, ah, flopped his head around so I got a good look at his face before he floated over to your *Merilee*. Then he got hung up on her rudder."

I winced.

"After calling 9-1-1," Gail continued, "I alerted Linda and Walt, and Linda texted you. Now we're all homeless. Oh. Not you, Teddy, you're living the high life inland these days with the guy who evicted everyone."

"Just the guys on Dock 4," I muttered.

"Behave yourself, Gail," Linda snapped. "Teddy's married now, with a husband, a mother-in-law, two stepchildren, and two dogs and a cat. Surely you don't think they could all live on a thirty-four-foot boat."

"It's been done."

"Where?"

"Up near San Francisco you see stuff like that all the time."

"Geriatric hippies," Linda snorted. "Those boats are health hazards."

"You need to stop criticizing what other people do with..."

They would have squabbled longer, but Walt shut them up by asking, "Anyone know why the cops are proceeding as if Flaherty's death was murder instead of an accident?"

The ensuing silence continued until my cell began to play "The Irish Rover." As if she'd overheard us talking about her, my mother-in-law was on the line. When I picked up, she didn't even bother saying hello, just started right in, her Irish burr thicker than usual. "Teddy, since you're already down at the harbor..."

"How'd you know I'm at the harbor?"

"A newscaster broke into the *Law & Order* rerun I was watching, the one about the serial-killing priest, and reported that the scriptwriter on *Tippy-Toe & Tinker* was found floating right next to the *Merilee*. So where else would you be, luv, besides at the harbor?"

"At the zoo."

"With a murder investigation going on? I know you better than that."

So now Colleen was using the M-word, too.

"Anyway," she continued, "Since there's nothing you can do for that poor man, could you at least bring home a quart of clam chowder? I've been writing all morning and, what with everything, lost track of the time and forgot to start cooking that big roast, and you know how long those things take. But if you bring chowder, everyone'll have something to snack on until the roast's done."

After agreeing, I ended the call. Through the big Chowder 'N Cappuccino window I could see scene-of-crime specialists moving up and down Dock 4, most carrying plastic evidence bags. I shivered, even though the October day was warm.

\*\*\*

The second Joe and his minions finished interviewing everyone and reopened Dock 4, I joined the herd of liveboarders rushing toward the dock, anxious to see if rough-soled shoes had scarred prized teak decks. When we reached the gate to Dock 4, we briefly joined hands and recited a prayer for Cliff Flaherty. Although he'd always gone out of his way to be unpleasant to everyone, we gave his immortal soul the benefit of the doubt.

As it turned out, the *Merilee* hadn't suffered much damage. The slight scraping on the starboard gunwale had probably happened while the EMTs hauled Flaherty's body out of the water, but with a touch-up of varnish, my thirty-four-foot CHB trawler would be good as new.

Unlike Flaherty.

An odd thing happens when someone you dislike dies; you feel guilty because you don't feel grief. To atone, I stayed at the harbor long enough to watch the CSIs tape off Flaherty's *Scribbler*, then leave. ■

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A CONVERSATION WITH

# STEVEN F. HAVILL

AUTHOR OF “LESS THAN A MOMENT,” A POSADAS COUNTY MYSTERY

Interview by Michael Barson  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



One of the cool things about working on a magazine like ours is that you get to meet some authors you may not have had the chance to discover. Steven Havill is one of those authors. Steven has written over twenty novels, many of them in the *Posadas County* series, and with the help of his publicist, we are able to share an interesting Q&A where he talks about his latest book, “Less Than a Moment.”

*In less than a moment, unexplained intentions, then murder, upend life in Posadas County, New Mexico*

*Posadas County, sitting along New Mexico's southern border, has enjoyed a surge in visitors, jobs, and prosperity since rancher Miles Waddell used much of his inherited half billion to create an internationally renowned astronomy complex atop Torrance Mesa. Passion, not profit, drives Waddell. Yet benefits include a narrow gauge train linking the village of Posadas to NightZone. It's a boon to employees and for nature lovers, hikers, and birders as well as star gazers.*

*A ripple of unease is felt across the county with the arrival of developer—no, speculator—Kyle Thompson. Why did he and his wife quietly purchase a large scrubby acreage to the north of NightZone? Any light pollution would jeopardize Waddell's success. “Lights are like cancer cells. One comes, others follow.”*

*Unease grows with a drive-by shoot-up at the Posadas Register, its 25 shots wounding a reporter and the paper's editor. Sheriff Bob Torrez and Undersheriff Estelle Reyes-Guzman see a connection to NightZone...and worse, a connection with Torrez's own nephew. Why?*

*And then murder strikes...*

Michael Barson (M.B.): “Less Than a Moment” is the 24<sup>th</sup> book in your critically acclaimed *Posadas County Mystery* series. When “Heartshot,” your first book, was published in 1991, did you ever foresee reaching a 24th book in the series?

Steven F. Havill (S.F.H.): *I cheerfully admit that I didn't write “Heartshot” thinking that it might turn into a series...certainly not 24 titles! And I have to say that the original New York publisher never discussed a possible series with me. It was just a natural for a sequel. “Heartshot” ends with Bill Gastner hospitalized for a heart attack, so it made sense that the next story, also starring him, would begin with him convalescing. It was really with the second title, “Bitter Recoil,” that I started thinking this story might make a good series, and Bill seemed like a likable and versatile protagonist.*

M.B.: It seems the characters you created have aged in real time, or something close to it... When did you realize that protagonist Sheriff Bill Gastner—who was already sixty when the series began—was going to have to step aside for the next generation in the form of your current Hispanic protagonists, Bob Torrez and Estelle Reyes-Guzman?



S.F.H.: “Heartshot” opens with Bill fussing with modern gadgets. The second book has him well outside his comfort zone, dealing with nasty crimes up in the Jemez. The third title, “Twice Buried,” features the return of Estelle and her husband and infant son to Posadas County to begin their saga. By the 9th title, “Bag Limit,” Bill is frustrated with law enforcement, is frustrated with his role as county sheriff, and is ready to have someone else take over. Estelle has moved up in the department, and becomes undersheriff. Thus starts the team of Sheriff Bob Torrez and Estelle, which continues through “Less Than a Moment.”

M.B.: As a former teacher in and around such small New Mexico towns as Datil, Milan and Old Lincoln, you have observed a world as exotic to many American readers as Ketchikan, Alaska. Did you ever anticipate that this border area would become the backdrop to front-page headlines a quarter century later?

S.F.H.: No. New Mexico is not the same state it was in 1965 when I moved here. The pressure of surging and service-demanding population, the crush of traffic, drugs, and crime—all have left their mark. Law enforcement has become more complicated as urban issues move into rural areas. Bill Gastner, trained in the 50’s and 60’s, is clearly uncomfortable in the modern digital age. I have to admit, in many ways, so am I. I can’t imagine trying to teach a classroom of students, all armed with cell phones and iPods. And I am irritated every time I see one of those huge “New Mexico True” billboards blocking the view!

M.B.: You recently earned your degree in gunsmithing.... Could you explain what getting an AAS degree in that discipline entails exactly?

S.F.H.: The two-year program is a lot of fun and a lot of hard work, with classes dedicated to learning machining, design, and repair—a nice mix of metal and wood work. It’s also a program that constantly struggles with existence in a politically correct world. Started in 1947, how long the program remains viable remains to be seen.

M.B.: As a veteran of the publishing scene since the early Nineties, you have witnessed a number of trends and upheavals.... Are there changes to the industry you regret with the perspective of 29 years as a published author? And might there be one or two that you feel are an improvement over the business models of 1991?

S.F.H.: What a loaded question! In 1941, my father received a six-page, single-spaced typed letter from his editor in New York. I’ve read that letter many times, and the advice in it is as true today as it was then. In 1995, I received a five-page letter from my New York editor, and the advice and discussion is wonderful—and still true. Now, a writer is lucky to receive a cryptic email or tweet. We are soon going to regret turning our society over to computers and the internet. Sure, being able to ship a heavy manuscript effortlessly as an email attachment is wonderful...until some younger generation editor expects these old eyes to edit a screen version of the galley proof!

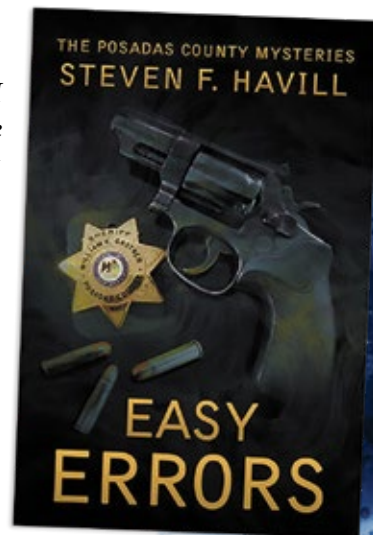
M.B.: How will the Posadas County series end?

S.F.H.: With a whimper, I suppose. Just like the possible sequels to “Heartshot” way back when, I haven’t planned the future yet. I’m in the middle of the newest yarn, with a working title of “Casual Enemies.” Will Bill survive it? Will Bobby and Estelle retire? Will Francisco finally hit a sour note? Who knows?

M.B.: Do you enjoy hearing from readers?

S.F.H.: Absolutely. It’s a real kick to talk to readers who have embraced the series, following the cast’s adventures. One reader wrote that, “reading the book was like sitting down for coffee with my grandfather and listening to his stories.” Long, productive health to your grandfather, I say.

We hope you’ll enjoy the sneak peek at “Less Than a Moment.” To learn more, follow Steven’s upcoming projects at: <https://poisonedpenpress.com/authors/steven-f-havill>. ■





# LESS THAN A MOMENT

By Steven F. Havill

## CHAPTER ONE

"You're on my shit list, bud," Deputy Edwin Hennesey grumbled as he looked up from his console. The target of the dispatcher's complaint, rookie news reporter Rik Chang, skirted the dispatcher's island and headed for the antiquated "out" basket of police reports perched atop the first of four equally antiquated filing cabinets. Chang, twenty-six years old and with a freshly minted bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of New Mexico, glanced over at Hennesey.

"Yeah, you," the deputy added.

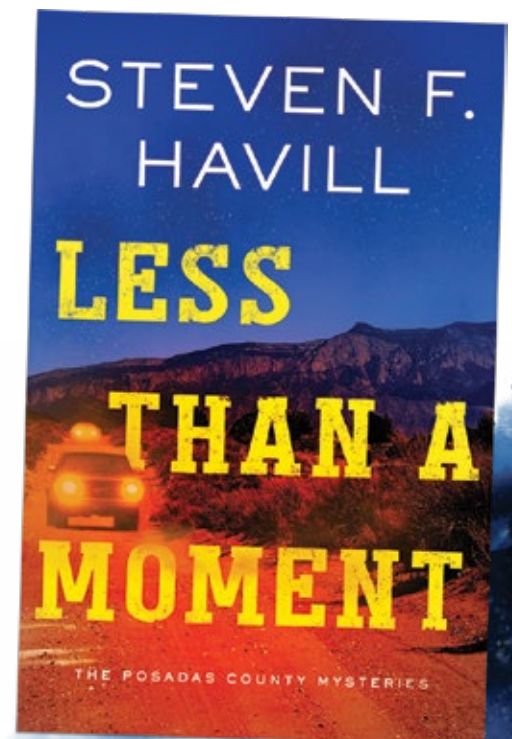
Chang frowned, managing to look equal parts contrite and confused.

"Sir?" The young reporter was likely the only person in Posadas County who referred to Hennesey by that courtesy title. Hennesey took his time closing the *Field and Stream* magazine, pushed it away from himself as if it were an empty dinner plate, and swiveled his chair. For a moment he watched the young man leaf through the report copies.

It had been a quiet Thursday night and predawn Friday. The latest edition of the *Posadas Register* had been on the streets since earlier Thursday afternoon, and any tidbit of news that the rookie reporter might glean from the slender pile of reports would be old news by the next week's edition.

By an edict from the sheriff, routine paperwork generated by deputies was not posted on any department website where it would be available to talented hackers, curious gossips, or criminals seeking to improve their education. Sheriff Robert Torrez personally eschewed computers, preferring to read hard copy reports. He didn't tweet, chat, blog, post, or link in to any of those other supposed necessities of modern life. The number of emails that he might send in any given month could be counted on one hand. He liked hard copy, and although he knew as well as anyone that the workings of the Sheriff's Department were for the most part public record, his attitude was simple: if a "public" wanted to see the paperwork, let them come into the office and ask for it, face-to-face.

What *was* routinely posted on the department's little-used website were nameless statistics reflecting the department's work...the number of violent crimes compared with previous years, the number of clumsy souls arrested for shoplifting, and responses to fires, family disputes, and all the other aggravations of modern life that required a call to law enforcement. A curious web reader could find the number of people ticketed for running stop signs, for speeding, for failure to wear seat belts, for texting while rear-ending another vehicle.



But as far as Sheriff Torrez was concerned, the job of “naming names,” if that’s what the gossips wanted, was the turf of the local newspaper.

Every morning, regular as clockwork, someone from the weekly *Posadas Register*, either publisher Frank Dayan or more often rookie reporter Rik Chang, stopped by the sheriff’s office in hopes of a scoop worthy of a stand-alone story. Staff of the *Register* could have paid a visit to the out-basket once a week, but one never knew. A simple arrest could lead to an interesting story that demanded further investigation.

Most of the paperwork in the wire basket, if not ignored as un-newsworthy, would deserve only a line or two in the standing newspaper column, “Sheriff’s Report.” As a newly hired cub reporter, Rik Chang had inherited the task of assembling the “Report” each week.

Deputy Hennesey pushed himself to his feet, making an effort to suck in his gut. He always felt a little intimidated by someone as elegantly put together as Rik Chang. Just over six feet tall, with black hair, inscrutable eyes behind frameless glasses, square shoulders, and not the slightest hint of belly flab, Chang moved with assured grace.

Hennesey jerked up his Sam Brown belt so the utility rig’s weight rode more easily above his hips. A short, narrow-shouldered man with a pear-shaped body and only a few wisps of graying hair mopped across his shiny skull, Hennesey had spent a long hitch as a security guard at one of the Albuquerque malls before seeking out small-town peace and quiet. The shopping mall’s hard, polished tile floors had tortured his knees and inflamed his plantar fasciitis. As a dispatcher for the Posadas County Sheriff’s Department, he didn’t need to walk miles every night.

Sheriff Robert Torrez was aware of Hennesey’s intellectual limitations, but appreciated his work ethic. The man hadn’t missed a shift in two years, had never been late, had never scooted for home a few minutes early at the end of the day, Friday or not. A longtime widower, Hennesey embraced the solitude of the graveyard hours. Not a lightning wit, the slow pace suited him perfectly.

At 7:35 this particular Friday morning in late May when Rik Chang dropped by the Sheriff’s Department, Deputy Hennesey didn’t favor the young man with a smile of greeting. He didn’t particularly like the ambitious, athletic, computer-savvy young man, even though Chang was not an immigrant like most of the other people Hennesey disliked.

Instead, the deputy rose, leaned over the counter, and pulled the slender bundle of reports—five days’ worth—out of the tray. With stubby thumbs, he sorted through until he found the one he wanted, an arrest report now four days old with a large Post-it note attached. He tossed the rest of the paperwork back in the wire basket.

“When I mark something *not for news*,” he said, brandishing the two-page report in question, “that means just that. You just leave it in the basket. It *don’t* go in the newspaper.”

Chang pushed his rimless glasses up and regarded the report. “Oh, that one?”

“Ah, that one,” Hennesey said, trying his best to mimic Jackie Chan. “Yes, that one.”

The young man didn’t rise to the mild ethnic slur. “Well, I saw that, sir, but I didn’t understand what was so special about it,” Chang said. He smiled hopefully at Hennesey.

“Ain’t *nothing* special about it,” the deputy said. “But now we got this.” Hennesey reached across the desk and picked up the latest copy of the local newspaper, barely hours off the press, and folded the pages back to reveal the standing column, “Sheriff’s Report,” on page six. He jabbed a finger at a paragraph near the end of the column. “This ain’t supposed to be here.”

Chang looked blank. He didn’t need to read the column, since he had written it. “It’s just a DUI,” the young man said. “It goes into the pot, along with everything else. I thought that’s what you wanted. I mean, I don’t know *why* you wanted to make sure that story got in, ‘cause we’d run it anyway, but sure enough, there it is.”

“Hey, wise guy,” Hennesey barked. “When I mark something *not for news*, then it’s *not* for news. Ain’t nothing complicated about *that*.”

Chang lifted the Post-it’s corner. “This?”

“Yeah, that.”

A slow smile grew across Chang’s smooth face. “Ah. My mistake. See, I read it as *note* for news. With the *e*, just the way it’s written.” He pulled the note free and held it out to Hennesey. “See, I saw this *note*, and I thought that maybe because the DUI was Quentin Torrez, that you wanted to make sure that he made the police blotter.” The young man smiled. “Maybe to make sure we weren’t playing favorites or something like that? So you marked it *Note* for news. Note, not *not*.”

Unsure whether or not he was being gently mocked, Hennesey’s eyes narrowed to slits, then opened wide enough to reflect some misgivings.

“I mean, I know—everybody knows—that Quentin Torrez is the sheriff’s what, nephew or something?” Chang asked.

“Something.” But it wasn’t Deputy Hennesey who spoke. A heavy arm reached past Rik Chang and gently relieved him of the *note for news* Post-it and the report to which it was attached. Sheriff Robert Torrez could ghost his six-foot four-inch, two-hundred-forty-pound frame into a room, more frightening than if he’d stomped in, arms flailing. He loomed over



Chang, one hand resting lightly on the reporter's shoulder.

After a moment, he handed the report back without comment, but kept the Post-it. He glanced first at the clock, then at Deputy Hennesey. "Pasquale's twenty?" His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

Taking a quick moment to mentally switch gears with the sudden non sequitur, Hennesey glanced at the desk log. "He was headed out to 14, checkin' up on that complaint from one of the surveyors up at the Thompsons' place that somebody was jerkin' up surveyor stakes."

For a long moment, the sheriff stood silently, perhaps waiting for some amplification. When none was forthcoming, he repeated, "What's his twenty?"

Hennesey turned and keyed the old-fashioned desk mike, eschewing the modern microphone headset that lay on the shelf in front of him. "Three oh four, PCS, ten twenty?" His delivery was crisply enunciated.

The reply was prompt. "PCS, three oh four is northbound on 56, just passing mile marker twenty-one."

Hennesey acknowledged and turned back to the sheriff, one eyebrow raised in question.

"Have him stop in my office when he comes in," the sheriff said. "When he's finished fueling and workin' his log."

"You got it, Sheriff."

Torrez lifted his hand off Chang's shoulder. "Anything in that basket is public record. Anything, any time. If something is an ongoing investigation that we don't want made public, we don't put it in the basket." He gave Hennesey one of his slow, expressionless looks.

"Yes, sir, I understand," Chang said. "And I was wondering..."

The sheriff looked hard at the young man, as if actually seeing him for the first time.

"Frank has a series planned on county budget matters, and he suggested that I ask about the possibility of doing a ride-along with some of the deputies."

"Any time, any deputy," Torrez said. "Talk with the undersheriff. She's the one who takes care of the waivers. Then talk to the deputies. It's up to them."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that. May I ask about the surveyor stake deal?"

"Keep an eye on the basket."

"Maybe I could do a ride-along with Sergeant Pasquale?"

"Check with the undersheriff for the paperwork. Then check with Pasquale. He's free to say yes or no."

"Yes, sir."

Torrez almost smiled, his heavy-lidded eyes relaxing just a bit. "You spent some time in the military."

"Yes, sir. Four years in the Navy."

"Not a career?"

"I never learned how to swim, sir."

Torrez did smile at that. "Not a whole lot of water in Posadas County." He pointed a finger-pistol at Hennesey. "Don't let Pasquale slip away without seein' me, Eddie."

"You got it, Sheriff."

Sheriff Torrez turned away abruptly and strode down the hallway toward his office. "Note for news," he muttered, and he said it just loud enough that both Hennesey and Chang heard him. ■

# WILLIAM NIKKEL

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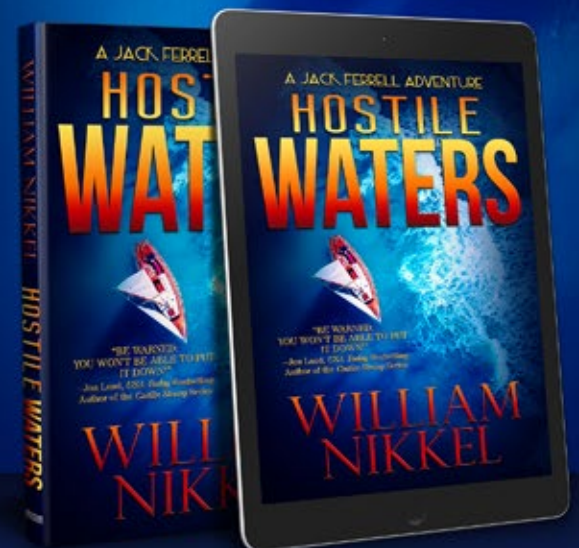
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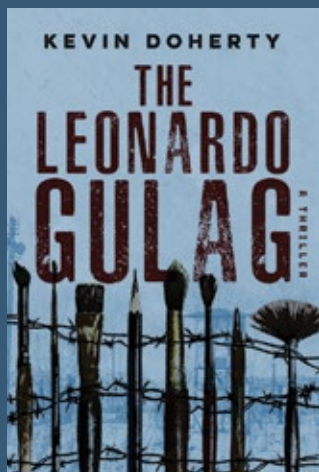
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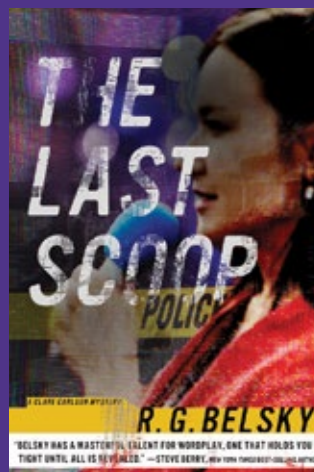


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# EYE WITNESS

By Larry Allen Tyler

Tammy was obviously upset. Pressuring her wasn't going to help, but the officer was starting to lose patience.

"Ma'am," he said. Tammy continued to look down at the floor, shaking her head rhythmically. "Ms. Harris?"

Tammy looked up.

"I need a description of the person who killed your boss."

Tammy nodded her head and then drew a long, uneven breath. The officer waited, but nothing productive followed. She drew in a second breath, held it for several seconds and then let it out with a quavering "whoosh."

A second officer stepped forward. "Detective Bailey is on his way," he said.

The first officer gave him a slight nod of recognition, but kept his focus on Tammy. "Please, ma'am. A description."

"Description?" Tammy repeated back dreamily.

The officer stifled an exasperated sigh, gathered his thoughts, and said, "Yes, a description. You said you saw your boss get killed. Do you know the person who did it?"

"No," Tammy said. "I told you, no. I don't know the person who killed him at all." Her eyes drifted over to her boss's desk in the far corner of the room. She saw his shoes and pant cuffs poking around the corner of his desk. The toes were pointed in. The officer told her to look away from the body and she did. He asked her one more time for a description. "He had brown hair," Tammy said.

"Okay, good," the officer told her. "Brown hair. What else?"

"Green eyes," Tammy said. The second officer began scribbling down notes.

"He is about thirty. And he has a small scar on his chin."

The officer squinted his eyes suspiciously. "How big a scar?"

Tammy lifted her finger slowly and pointed to the scar on the officer's chin. "About an inch long," she said.

The second officer intervened. "Not a description of Officer Ellington, ma'am, a description of the person who killed your boss."

"He has dark blond hair, is about six feet tall and he's got brown eyes, close set, a small mole on his right cheek," Tammy said confidently. She studied the second officer's face as she spoke and thought she captured his details rather well.

The first officer took over again. "Ms. Harris, is it your intention not to cooperate with this investigation?"

Tammy looked surprised. "That's what I remember,"

she said. "That's the face of the person who murdered Mr. Denton."

Detective Bailey entered the room at that moment and the first officer escorted him over to look at the body. "We have an eyewitness," he told Bailey in a hushed voice. "But I think she's a nutcase. She said she saw the murder, and all her details fit. She said she was in the next office over, filing papers."

Ellington nodded toward a door that separated Denton's office from the file room. The door had a window in it and the file room beyond it was dimly lit. "She said the assailant entered the office, had a brief argument with Denton, and drove a letter opener into Denton's chest. She said Denton staggered backwards two steps, fell against the edge of the desk and then collapsed onto the floor. She even recalls that the victim reached for the phone before he fell and knocked it on the floor behind him. But when we ask her for a description of the assailant..."

"She didn't see what the assailant looked like?"

"She says she did, but when we ask her, she just gives us descriptions of me and Officer Redmond."

"Hope you both have good alibis," Bailey said.

Ellington didn't appreciate the joke.

"She just starts describing anyone in the room that her eyes happen to land on. She looked over at that magazine in the corner and started to describe Snoop Dog."

Bailey erased his smile quickly, and asked, "So she's covering for the assailant, that's what you figure?"

"I don't think so. I just think she's a kook."

Bailey walked over to Tammy. He introduced himself and asked Tammy to describe the person who killed her boss. She responded with a description of Bailey. "Ma'am, you've just described me, not the assailant. Try again."

"That's the face I see," Tammy said. "That's who killed Mr. Denton."

"Would you like us to catch the person who killed your boss?" Bailey asked.

"Oh yes."

"Then we need your cooperation, ma'am. The sooner we have your cooperation with this, the sooner we can apprehend your boss's assailant. Do you understand that?"

Tears filled Tammy's eyes. "I am trying to cooperate," she said. "I saw everything very clearly. And that's exactly what I saw."

Bailey took a step back and began kneading the back of his neck. "I think I understand what's going on here," he said.

Tammy shrugged and shook her head. "I don't," she said. "I don't understand at all."

"You've experienced a significant shock," Bailey told her. "This has all been very traumatic for you, hasn't it?"

Tammy nodded her head. She started to cry. "Very," she said. She tried to say more, but she was crying too hard.

Bailey put his hand on her shoulder to steady her. "We're going to take you to the hospital," he said. "They can help you there. They'll calm your nerves so you can help us with the investigation. How does that sound?" He gave her a handkerchief.

Tammy wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and shook her head yes. Bailey told her she could keep the handkerchief and led her out the door.

By the time they got to the waiting room of the hospital, Bailey noticed Tammy had calmed down considerably so he decided to try again. He asked her for a description of the person who murdered her boss and she responded with a description of the receptionist who was seated in front of them. Bailey gave up and decided to let a doctor take a crack at it.

A nurse showed up and led Tammy down a hallway toward one of the examination rooms. Bailey followed behind.

As she walked down the hallway, Tammy saw her boss's killer mopping the floor at the far end of the hall. Then she saw her boss's killer looking at her from a "Quit Smoking" poster on the wall, then...there he was, big as life, leaving the nurse's station in a wheelchair; soon his wife, who was pushing the wheelchair, became the killer, too. Everywhere she looked she saw the face of her boss's killer.

"I'm going crazy," she told the doctor in the examination room.

Dr. Susan Slattery shook her head no. "You're simply under considerable stress right now," she explained. "Your reaction is perfectly understandable."

"It is?" Tammy asked, suddenly feeling a ray of hope.

"Yes, it is," the doctor assured her. She gave Tammy a little smile, a smile of reassurance like one you would give a confused child. "I want to give you something to calm your nerves. It will make you a little drowsy, but it will also relax you enough to clear away the shock and help restore your memory. I'm sure you'll see a big difference in just a few minutes."

Tammy tried not to look at the doctor's face and said, "Okay."

Dr. Slattery smiled reassuringly once again and left the room.

A few minutes later, a nurse with the face of her boss's killer entered the room holding two small paper cups. There was a blue pill in one cup and water in the other. She handed the cups to Tammy.

Trying to be sympathetic, the nurse said, "It must be

terrible for you, dear. The doctor said everyone you see looks like the person who killed your boss."

Tammy nodded. She didn't feel like confiding much to her boss's killer.

The nurse looked at the police detective. "No wonder she's so traumatized," she said. "The poor woman has no way to protect herself. She wouldn't know her boss's killer if he burst into the room right now and stood right in front of her."

Tammy's eyes widened. She looked at the two people in the room and watched more people pass by outside the door, each with the face of her boss's killer. The doctor reentered the room and leered at her with an evil murderous grin.

Tammy lifted the cup of water and took a drink.

"No," the nurse said. "That's to wash down your pill."

It was too late. Tammy had finished the water.

The nurse reached for the cup. "I'll get you more," she said.

"I can get it," Tammy told her. She spun around and walked over to the bathroom. The nurse escorted her as far as the door, but Tammy entered the bathroom alone and shut the door behind her. She pressed the lock, leaned against the door and looked at the blue pill in the cup. This was the pill that would make her drowsy. "No," she said to herself. "I can't fall asleep now. Not with the killer so close. I've got to stay awake, stay alert, stay on guard."

She poured the pill into her hand, stared at it a long moment, and then tossed it into the sink.

It rolled around briefly and fell into the drain. Tammy leaned over and watched it disappear. Being terrified is a terrible feeling, she decided, but becoming drowsy is a whole new layer of terror and she preferred to stick with the terror she knew. Besides, she realized she had to work through this problem all alone. The nurse was right. There was no one in the world she could trust.

She stood up straight and tried to collect her thoughts. If she actually did meet her boss's killer face to face, how would she know for sure? How could she protect herself? What clue would give the killer away?

Her mind was blank. Maybe the blue pill was what she needed after all, but it was gone now, and she knew she needed something, anything, to clear her thoughts.

She wiped her tear-stained face with the palms of her hands and brushed her fingers through her hair. She must look like a mess. She leaned forward to take a look at her face in the mirror above the sink and stared a long moment at her reflection.

"Are you okay in there, dear?" the nurse asked.

Tammy opened the door and looked at the doctor, the nurse, and the detective. She studied each of their faces, and felt a strange calmness. The delusion was gone. None of them had the face of the killer anymore. "Yes, I'm okay," she said. "I'm okay now."

Before she walked back into the room she squared her shoulders, looked briefly at the mirror once again, and smiled sadly at the reflection.

The face of her boss's killer, sadly, smiled back. ■



# JONATHAN MABERRY

## Talks Comics, Realistic Action Writing, Martial Arts & More!

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Jonathan Maberry is no stranger to *Suspense Magazine* readers. The man has done it all: comic book writer; suspense, horror, and science fiction writer; anthology editor; magazine feature writer; teacher; lecturer—he even holds an 8<sup>th</sup> degree black belt in Shinowara-ryu Jujutsu. Suffice to say, his list of accomplishments expands on a daily basis.

Jonathan made his fiction debut in 2006 with “Ghost Road Blues,” the first in his *Deep Pine Trilogy*. His *Joe Ledger* and *Benny Imura* novels have been hugely popular series. If you’re looking for great zombie fiction geared to young adults, be sure to check out his *Rot & Ruin* series.

Several of his works are in various stages of TV development, including his 2018 novel, “Glimpse” and his *Joe Ledger* thrillers. You’ll be seeing a lot of Jonathan Maberry in the coming years.

Despite his busy schedule, Jonathan took a few minutes to answer some questions for us.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Okay, let’s talk about your love of comics—you’ve written for quite a few. What’s the earliest comic book you remember reading and enjoying? And just how massive is your comic book collection?

Jonathan Maberry (J.M.): *When I was six, my older brother gave me a stack of EC magazines—Vault of Horror, Tales from the Crypt. Like that. They were lurid and violent and funny and frightening. He also gave me three superhero comics which he’d bought but didn’t like. Tales of Suspense #57 featuring some tin-potted cat named Iron Man fighting a guy in purple tights armed only with a bow and arrow (Hawkeye, first introduced as a villain). Uncanny X-Men #7, which pitted a bunch of teenagers with strange powers. And Fantastic Four #30, which was a whole family of super-powered people. My brother was about a year away from going off to Vietnam. I was in grade school.*

*Comics were twelve cents each, but at the time, and in my neighborhood, that was a lot of money. I had to content myself with buying remaindered copies. Comic bookstores would cut half the cover off remaindered copy and sell it for a nickel. That’s what I could afford. The first comic I bought new, whole, and at full cover price was Fantastic Four #66. I have it framed now. I loved those comics, though, and eventually I could buy every Marvel Comic that appeared on the wire rack at the local drugstore.*

*By the time I was in high school—going to classes, going to the dojo, and working part-time jobs—I was buying a stack of comics every week. I amassed a huge collection, though I stopped collecting around 1990. By then I was a college teacher and part-time magazine writer. I’d moved out of the comics’ headspace. Eventually, though, when my son was getting ready to go to college, I let him sell my collection and use whatever money he raised for a car and other things.*

Then, in 2008—about a year after my son sold the whole lot—I got a call from Marvel asking if I'd like to write for them. I had to scramble to catch up on eighteen years of stories. I bought a ton of trades (graphic novels that collect specific runs of the individual 'floppy' issues).

Now I'm very much in the comic space, though I still tend to wait for the trades rather than buy floppies. And my interests have spread out to embrace comics by other companies, including DC, IDW, Image, Dynamite, Dark Horse, and others.

W.B.: What was the first comic book you wrote for? And how did you land that gig?

J.M.: The very first comic I wrote was an eight-page Wolverine short that was a backup piece to that title's anniversary issue. It was called "Ghosts," and remains one of my favorite pieces of writing. The art by Tomm Coker was amazing. Funny thing, is when the issue came out, my last name was misspelled on the cover. They corrected it in later printings.

The way this whole comics thing got started was that Axel Alonso, then Editor-in-Chief for Marvel, had read my thriller, "Patient Zero" (St. Martin's Griffin) and said he really enjoyed the blend of action, strong dialogue, and humor. He'd been hiring novelists (Victor Gischler, David Morrell, etc.) and thought I'd be a good fit. Funny thing is, my agent and I had been strategizing on how best to approach Marvel. Go figure. The universe is funny that way.

W.B.: You wrote a good deal of nonfiction before turning your hand professionally to fiction. Do you think all fiction writers should write nonfiction to stretch their writing "wings"?

J.M.: I learned some of my best writing habits and skills from having gone to journalism school rather than, say...a creative writing program. Journalists don't believe in 'writers block' (it's a popular and deeply propagandized label we give to a whole bunch of individual challenges, each of which has one or more fixes). Journalists write their stories quick and dirty and fix it in the rewrite. Journalists can't afford to waste time waiting for the Muse to whisper in their ear: they put their asses in their chairs and write. Journalists know how to research—both deep-dive stuff and spot research. I could go on.

Oddly, even though I went to school to learn how to be a news reporter, that's one area of writing I never pursued. Instead, I got hooked on magazine features and how-to articles, and wrote over 1,200 of them, as well as thousands of filler pieces and reviews. I was not a full-time nonfiction writer, though, so I had to squeeze in a page or two every day while working day jobs like bodyguard, bouncer, jujutsu instructor, college teacher, and so on.

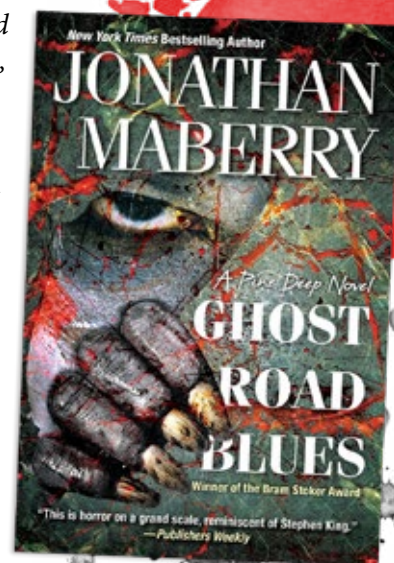
While teaching at Temple University, I wrote several textbooks—for my classes and those taught by friends. Then I shifted to small-press, mass-market paperback nonfiction books. The first three were about martial arts. The last was a hard-gear shift into an examination of the folklore of supernatural monsters. That last one was the only book I ever wrote under a pen name (the martial arts publisher insisted). I also wrote greeting cards, text for commercial products, call-floor scripts, a couple of plays, some truly appalling song lyrics, and anything else where I could make a buck from writing.

I became a full-time writer when I switched to fiction. That seems to have been where I was headed.

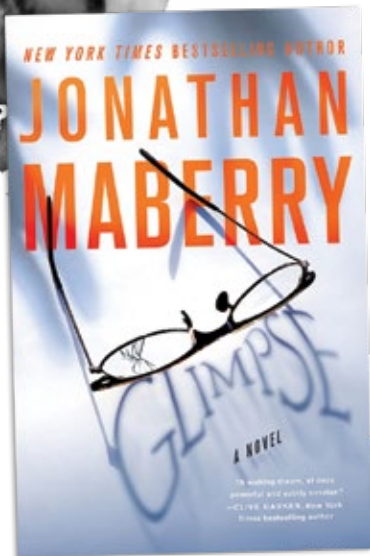
W.B.: You're a confessed research junkie. How much research is involved when you write fiction?

J.M.: I do a lot of research. I write a variety of novels under the thriller umbrella—weird science, action, horror. Each of these has one or more solid nonfiction pillars. For example, in "Patient Zero" I sought experts in the fields of epidemiology, virology, prion diseases, animal hibernation, transgenics, politics, the Iraq War, religion, SWAT tactics, weapons and tactics of Special Operations, and trauma psychology. In my latest novel, "Rage," I researched neurotoxins, ichthyology, the politics of Korean reunification, the Korean War, the politics of international trade in Asia, the international black market, the Dark Web, and so on.

I look for experts in various fields and do interviews via email or phone (or sometimes over glasses of beer). I seldom rely on published books or articles for research, though I use them as starter-points. By talking with those experts now, I get the most updated and cutting-edge details about the science or political key to my stories. Sometimes that comes with a price tag in that what they say may be so radically different from what I, as a writer and not an actual scientist, assume about certain topics. Sometimes I've had to scrap a plot and rebuild it because of what I learned from my experts, but, in the end, it makes the book much better and stronger.







W.B.: You're also a prolific writer. I wonder if you ever sleep! What's your secret for pumping out book after book after book?

J.M.: *I'm fast because I was taught to be fast. My journalism professors were good but not nice. They worked our butts off, set unreasonable deadlines and word counts, and basically bullied us into being fast. Accurate, but definitely fast. Although I hated them for it at the time, now I wish I could take each one of them out for dinner and thank them.*

*I'm also a high output writer because it's the pace I enjoy. I do my best work when I have a tight deadline and other projects waiting in line behind it. That triggers the journalist in me. And I like to think it infuses even my longer books with a greater sense of urgency.*

W.B.: You have years of martial arts experience. What often makes you nuts about fight scenes written by many other authors?

J.M.: *I'm without a doubt or apology a fight-scene snob. I understand that in film and TV, fight scenes need to be dragged out for entertainment purposes, but that isn't necessary in fiction. In all mediums, though, there are things that annoy me. Like someone punching their*

*opponent repeatedly in the face with little or no damage to their own fists (for the record: face bones BIG; hand bones SMALL). I dislike scenes where someone is outrunning a machine gun (why doesn't the gunner simply shift the barrel and lead the target?). I hate scenes in which characters do the physiologically impossible. A classic example of this is the old myth that you can use the heel of your palm to drive the nose bone into the brain. No. You can't. It's physiologically impossible. And on and on. Characters fighting with injuries that would result in shock and loss of consciousness from blood loss. Characters shaking off concussions as if they're a minor hangover.*

*I teach workshops on writing fight and action scenes. You can build one hell of an exciting action scene without ignoring the laws of physics or physiology.*

W.B.: You've also worked as a bodyguard. Did that experience influence your writing?

J.M.: *Working as a bodyguard in the entertainment industry—a job I had for four years—gave me practical experience in hand-to-hand combat. During those years I had to deal with knife attacks—and, yes, I've been stabbed, slashed, and chopped in the shoulder with a meat cleaver...all of which are no fun at all. I was shot at. I was smashed by a van. But I also learned a lot about cause and effect, about the psychology of violence, about how we react to our own human vulnerabilities, and how we manage our rage. All of this and more informs the actions and the psychology of conflict.*

W.B.: Your Joe Ledger series has been highly popular. What do you find most satisfying about writing series characters?

J.M.: *For me, the most enjoyable stories are about people rather than events. Not that the events are not important, but without a human perspective that allows us to understand the effects of the event on them, their lives, their self-awareness, their emotions and relationships, the story has no appeal. But with those elements in play, then I care about what I'm reading. I hold up the Dave Robicheaux novels by James Lee Burke, the Hap and Leonard series by Joe R. Lansdale, and the Travis McGee books by John D. MacDonald as examples of action fiction with the human experience as the centerpiece. Often it is the growth and changes (and damage) of these characters over several books that make us really care. John Sandford, Michael Connelly, and Kathy Reichs all do this so well, too.*

*My character, Joe Ledger, is tough. He's a former Army Ranger, a former Baltimore police detective, and now the senior field agent for a covert SpecOps team. Viewed from a distance he's another square-jawed action hero. But close up, he is a psychologically compromised, deeply flawed man whose emotional scars run miles deep. His damage runs so deep he can't be 'fixed.' At best, the damage can be managed in ways that make him good at his job. Now, I introduced this concept in the first novel and I come back to it in various ways in each short story and novel featuring that character. The human experience is never back-burnered in favor of pure action. As a result, I've been able to really explore what happens to someone who*



is in an ultra-high-pressure job.

In my teen post-apocalyptic series, *Rot & Ruin*, of which this August's "Lost Roads," will be the finale, I've been able to take teenage characters and force them into situations for which they are in no way prepared. Some rise, some fall. For the main character, Benny Imura, the version of him at the end of book #4 ("Fire & Ash") is radically different from the kid we meet in book #1. The series is about growth and what happens when our preconceptions about how the world is built collide with a much broader and more valid worldview.

W.B.: You worked with the late George Romero on "Nights of the Living Dead: An Anthology." That had to be an honor—and a blast. What did you learn from working with Romero on that project?

J.M.: George was a great guy and we'd become quite good friends in the last few years of his life. Despite the gruesome nature of his films, he was a gentle person, with a terrific sense of humor and one of the all-time great belly laughs.

At age ten, I snuck into a local movie house in Philly, where I grew up, to see the world premiere of *Night of the Living Dead*. It blew me away. It was visceral horror with relatable (if not likable) characters. From then on, I was a fan of the genre. I devoured every movie, TV show, book or comic I could find that dealt with Romero's kind of flesh-eating ghoul. And I marveled at how zombies—the incorrect but impossible to remove label for these monsters—grew into an incredible self-contained genre. Romero's influence can't be overstated. There would be no *World War Z*, *The Walking Dead*, *iZombie*, *Zombieland*, *Resident Evil*, *Marvel Zombies*, *Warm Bodies*, *Dan Shamble*, *Dead Set*, *Zomboat*, *Shaun of the Dead*, or even *Game of Thrones* (yeah, the nightwalkers are zombies).

George and I discussed the evolution of the zombie genre. He did not benefit that much from it, thanks to errors in filing that made *Night of the Living Dead* public domain. By the time we'd become friends his bitterness over that had faded. He was glad people still watched his films and were clearly having fun with the whole genre.

George and I would have long rambling phone calls on topics as varied as politics, reality TV (his guilty pleasure was *Project Runway*), comics, history, climate science, kids, and so on. We rarely actually talked about zombies. But that was okay, we knew where each other stood on that subject.

He was also fun to work with. I'd cooked up the idea of the anthology and brought it to him, and he was on board with only three conditions. First, he wanted to co-edit. Hell yes! Second, he wanted to write a story for it. Also, hell yes! And third, he wanted me to write a story for the book that officially connected my *Dead of Night* zombie apocalypse series (which I'd dedicated to him) to *Night of the Living Dead*. He told me that as far as he was concerned, *Dead of Night* and *Fall of Night* were 'here and henceforth the way this whole damn thing started.' He admitted that his explanation for how the dead rose (radiation from a returning space probe) made no scientific sense at all. My novels, which deal with weaponized parasites, such as the green jewel wasp and *toxoplasma*, made actual sense to him. I must admit, being told that made me ugly cry.

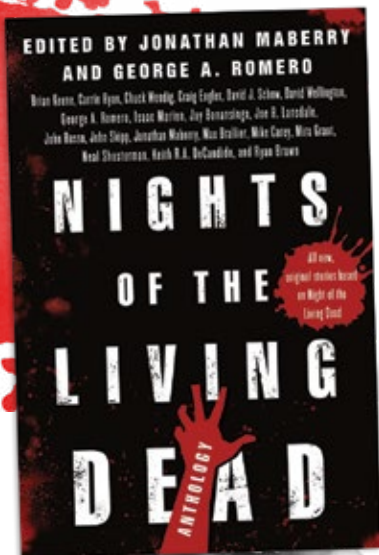


W.B.: One last question, just for fun: What are the top three essential tools for surviving the coming zombie apocalypse?

J.M.: I've given this quite a lot of thought over the last fifty-odd years. You need a sturdy vehicle with four-wheel drive because you absolutely need to flee. You need a weapon you can use accurately but without fatiguing; a nice length of pipe will work well for the average Joe. And you need a bugout kit (food, first aid, batteries, matches, etc.). Then go out and find as many uninfected people as you can and go hole up in a food distribution warehouse (they seldom have windows, they have thousands of tons of supplies, they have their own generators, and they have trucks and loading bays).

W.B.: Thanks, Jonathan. Good luck with your future ventures, both writing and film!

You can learn more about Jonathan at his website, [www.jonathanmaberry.com](http://www.jonathanmaberry.com), and his Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/jonathan.maberry.5](https://www.facebook.com/jonathan.maberry.5). ■

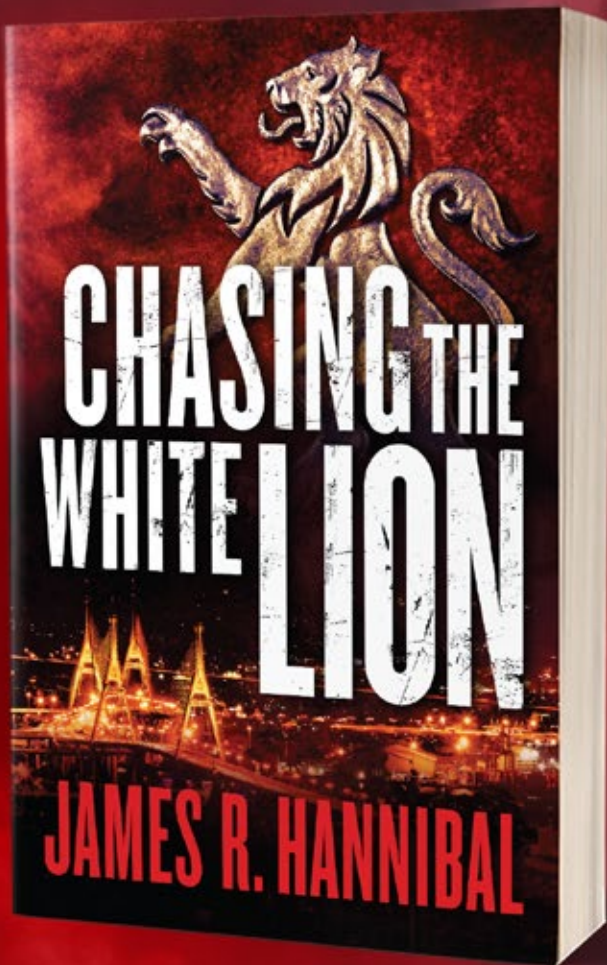




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Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
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Bestselling author Joseph Finder *never* disappoints with his writing. That truth remains as he now releases the latest *Nick Heller* book, “House on Fire.” We are honored that Joseph sat down with us and talked about the book. If you would like to listen to the whole interview you can check out Suspense Radio on iTunes, Spotify or simply go to the website.

If you are not that familiar with Joe’s work, two of his books, “High Crimes” and “Paranoia” have been made into major motion pictures. “High Crimes” starred Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd, with “Paranoia” starring Harrison Ford, Liam Hemsworth and Gary Oldman.

Check out the newest incredible title, “House on Fire,” and then check out his interview below.

*Nick Heller, private spy, exposes secrets that powerful people would rather keep hidden.*

*At the funeral of his good friend Sean, an army buddy who once saved Nick’s life and had struggled with opioid addiction since returning wounded from war, a stranger approaches Nick with a job. The woman is a member of the Kimball family, whose immense fortune was built on opiates. Now she wants to become a whistleblower, exposing evidence that Kimball Pharmaceutical knew its biggest money-maker drug, Oxydone, was dangerously addictive and led directly to the*

*overdoses and deaths of people like Sean.*

*Nick agrees instantly, eager to avenge Sean’s death, but he quickly finds himself entangled in the complicated family dynamics of the Kimball dynasty. The other Kimball siblings view Nick as the enemy, and at least one will do anything to keep him from exposing the patriarch’s guilt. And Nick discovers he is not the only private investigator employed by a Kimball scion. His old lover Maggie has also been hired, reuniting the two after a conflict when they both worked at the Pentagon years ago.*



*Nick and Maggie soon realize the sins of the Kimball patriarch are just the beginning. Beneath the surface are the barely concealed cabals and conspiracies: a twisting story of family intrigue and lethal corporate machinations.*

John Raab (J.R.): Hello everybody and welcome to a new edition of “Beyond the Cover.” My co-host, Jeff Ayers, and I, are very excited to be speaking with *New York Times* bestselling author Joseph Finder today. The latest in his popular *Nick Heller* series has just come out titled, “House on Fire,” and he has come back to talk all about that and a whole menu of other things. It’s great to see you again, Joseph.

Joseph Finder (J.F.): *Good to be here. Thank you for having me.*

J.R.: We want to jump right in! Your last *Heller* book was in 2016, “Guilty Minds.” This popular P.I. is back after a three-year hiatus; so what can your extremely excited fans expect to see with this new one?

J.F.: *Well, it starts at a funeral of one of Nick’s friends; in fact, this is a guy who saved Nick’s life in Afghanistan. The guy died as the result of an opioid overdose and it makes Nick angry. At the funeral, he’s approached by a woman she wants to hire him and dig up dirt on the family that’s behind the production of this drug. Nick is all in. Anything he can do to sort of work against the company that did this, he wants to do. It’s the story of a strange, contentious family who are at each other’s throats, and Nick’s search for a particular document. It involves Nick finally coming to terms with why his friend died.*

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): I have to say, I love being a reviewer in cases like this because I get the books early, and I absolutely loved this one. The disadvantage is I have to wait longer for the next one. Now, without giving any spoilers away, I’m wondering.... There are so many surprises in this one that I found myself shocked by some of the things that happened to your characters. In your writing process, did you see these things ahead of time or, like me, were you surprised by some of them?

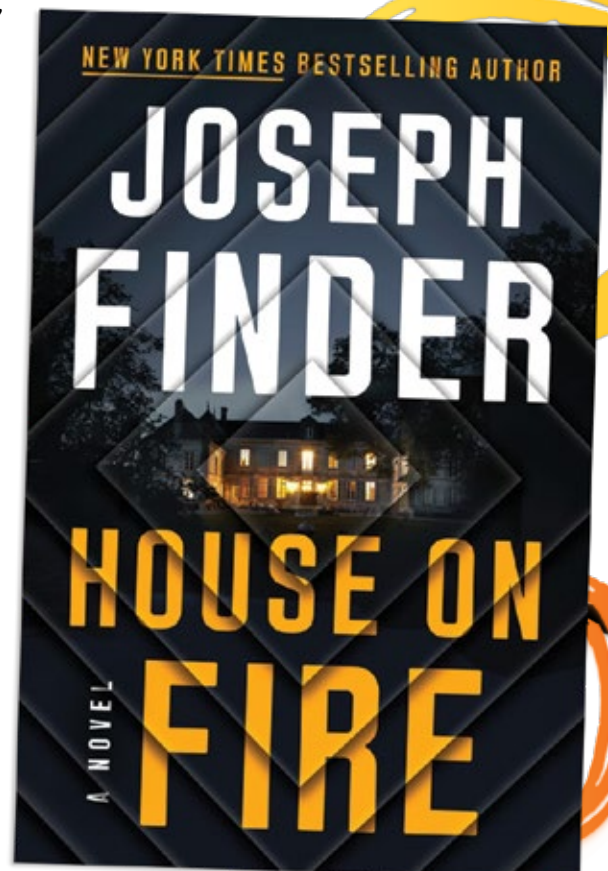
J.F.: *That’s an interesting question because, in fact, right now I’m working on my new book and writing an outline. This is actually a change of pace for me. I never did any outlining before; my process was always writing a plot up to a certain point that included the basic set-up, and then I would just sit down and start writing. With “House on Fire” I did a rough ‘beat sheet’ and not an outline, just to show me where the ‘beats’ of the story were. I would write something and think: What would the reader expect to happen next? Then I would turn left and go the other way, so I made it a point to surprise myself as much as the reader. This is definitely one of the pleasures of the thriller—to have your expectations be defeated because the author is playing a very competitive game at another level, which is what I want in all thrillers.*

J.R.: Were you clamoring to bring Nick back? Did you have this story building somewhere after “Guilty Minds,” or did it just hit you?

J.F.: *Right after “Guilty Minds” I had an idea for a standalone; I did not have a Nick idea right away. I have a file of ideas, per se, but not one that jumped out at me, so I wrote the standalone. One day, though, I was reading about the OxyContin epidemic somewhere and it made me angry to think that the companies marketing the drug knew how addictive it was but kept it silent. Doctor’s would prescribe it while being completely unaware that it was fiendishly addictive.*

*Because I was angry, I thought about Nick. He’s really good at making things right as much as possible, so that’s when I thought to myself, I want Nick to have an adventure involving a wealthy family with a dark legacy; the father is the founder of a company that made the rest of the family rich, and is knowingly marketing a drug he knows is dangerous.*

J.A.: One of the things I love about Nick is that he doesn’t back down



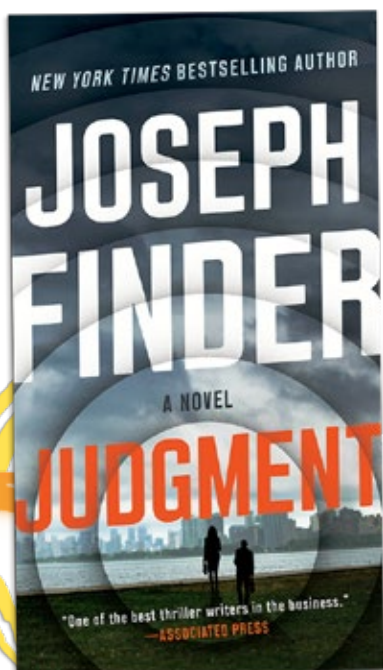
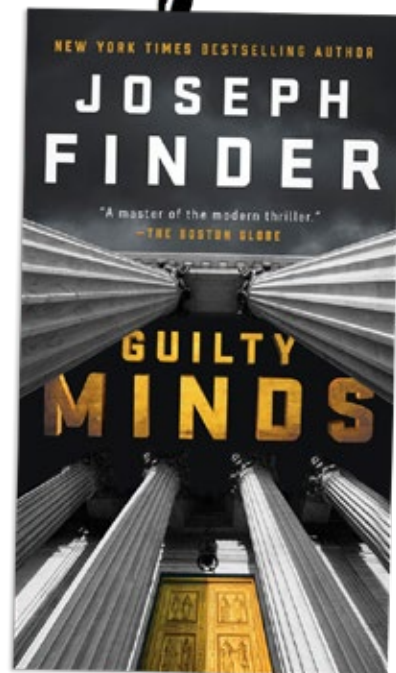
“It’s my book, so why can’t I mix first person with third? Seeing as that I’m my own boss, I’m going to follow my own rules.”

from anything and will do anything to bring justice to a situation. As the writer how, in your mind, is he fueled to do these things?

J.F.: *I think in some ways Nick is the odd man out. Not a company man, not a joiner. Instead, he’s contrarian, which goes back to the way he was brought up. He was sensitized to helping victims of bullies in particular. So that need to defeat bullies is something that’s a great pleasure to write. When my daughter was growing up, I would tell tales at bedtime and she decided that the genre of stories she liked best were “bully” stories. I would make up the story about someone who prevails over the bully and I realized there was some deep-seeded need within us to not be pushed around or tyrannized. We take pleasure when someone comes in and faces down the bully. I created Nick for this; contrarian, stubborn but also relentless. He basically, as you put it, doesn’t give up.*

J.R.: Through the series, looking back, has he progressed the way you thought he would, or has he given you some surprises that you didn’t think you’d see?

J.F.: *He gets more complex and has opened up over time. In “House on Fire” he meets up with an old lover and we get a glimpse at what his relationship with a woman was like and what he did that eventually broke them up. I wanted to show the romantic side of Nick in this book which I hadn’t done before. I also wanted to show him younger: back from the war, living in Washington and waging a campaign to bring down a general who sexually abused his girlfriend. So, not just the personal side, but the way he was before he became the P.I. we all know. It shows readers a bit about how and why Nick has regrets. Sometimes he’s too much. Sometimes he goes too far with friends and tries to help too much. There are times he had to learn when to back off, and that was one very surprising aspect of Nick for me as I watched him overstep boundaries and learn from that.*



J.A.: One of the other things I love about “House on Fire” is that we get a first person character. I was wondering what your preference was in your writing; first or third person?

J.F.: *I prefer first person, actually. I love writing it, even though it does have obvious disadvantages; if you’re in first person you generally can’t show the bad guys doing something else away from the lead character. But I decided: Who makes these silly laws? It’s my book, so why can’t I mix first person with third? Seeing as that I’m my own boss, I’m going to follow my own rules.*

*There’s something up close and personal with first person. It enables you, when you’re in that character’s head, to be more closely aligned with the person. Yet, I want to bring in the bad guys at times and have readers see what Nick couldn’t possibly see, which is why I include those chapters. I want to write the story the way it works best.*

J.R.: And if the story comes out right, that’s the whole point.

J.F.: *Exactly. I talked to an editor before starting and he said that I “had to stick with the norm.” I tell you, there’s something liberating in writing your own book the way you want to. One of the ways we create suspense and tension is by showing something happening at*



the same time as our hero is doing something else, and our hero doesn't know about it. So mixing the points of view keeps the readers intrigued.

J.A.: Can you tell us about the success you've had in Hollywood?

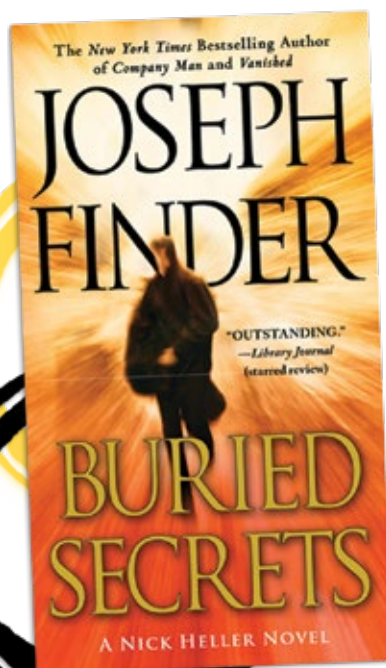
J.F.: I've had two movies made from my books: "High Crimes" with Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd; and "Paranoia" with Harrison Ford and Gary Oldman. The first was highly successful. When we sold "High Crimes," I said to my agent that if it was made into a movie (just because you sell it doesn't mean the studio will greenlight it for filming), I wanted a cameo. The agent thought that was funny because, frankly, Hitchcock was the only one who got cameos and that was because he was the director of the films he showed up in. The writer of the book is much further down the totem pole; even the screenwriter(s) are above you. I'm not sure who pulled the strings, but eventually my agent called and said it was being filmed and that I could have a cameo. I was so excited. He told me to wait because the bad news was that I would have to shave my head and play a Marine. Heck, I would have gone to SmartCuts that day but, sure enough, they flew me to L.A. and I got my head shaved and wore the Marine uniform for five days.

J.R.: That must have been so cool, though, to see your words come alive in real life.

J.F.: It was amazing. I was actually sitting in a court room that was exactly as I had described it in my book. It blew my mind when I realized that it took just me, sitting alone at my desk in the office to write this book, but it took 500 people to make the movie. Talk about a collaborative effort. It was cool to see people speaking lines that I had written. I get why people want to be screenwriters in order to see it happen all the time. When it's less of a success, and people who make the movie don't exactly follow the book, it's different. I have been at signings where people will ask me how I felt about "what Hollywood did" and how they altered it. I just tell them, I feel nothing. You see, the book still exists in its' true form on the shelf of the library or in the bookstore. To me, movies are great ads that bring moviegoers into the fold of readers who already know my work, and, more often than not, will pick up the other books to see what really happened.

J.A.: With all the books you've written, what would you say is your "brand"?

J.F.: I write suspense novels, crime fiction, and basically stories about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events. Nick is not an ordinary guy, so they're slightly different in a sense. They are always about some kind of issue that's present in our news, and they always involve the perspective of a regular person facing a large machine. Whether it's wealth, or political power or industrial or corporate power, it's always a common man or woman facing that big machine. In a sense, each of my books is a David vs. Goliath tale.



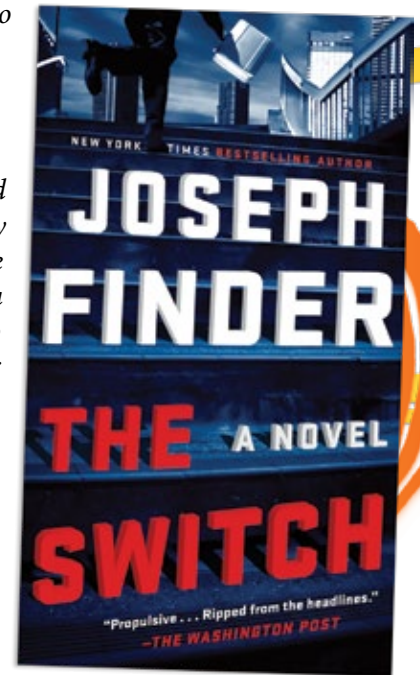
J.R.: And the best place to find out more about the books?

J.F.: The website, [josephfinder.com](http://josephfinder.com), has everything. I don't do Instagram, but I do post on Facebook and Twitter regularly. I feel like there are too many social media outlets out there and I don't want to waste my time doing silly things, like taking pictures of my meals and posting them. I mean, who cares? I also feel strongly that when a writer is putting something out, it should be interesting. There should be a reason I'm posting so as not to waste your time.

J.R.: Thank you so much for coming, Joseph. It's always a pleasure and congrats on "House on Fire." It was great to see Nick again and the story was incredible.

J.F.: Thank you, guys. It was great talking with you!

We would like to thank Joseph for coming on and talking with us. To find out more about Joseph's work, visit his website at [www.josephfinder.com](http://www.josephfinder.com). ■



# Join the hunt for the truth— **AND A TRAITOR**

When FBI agent Jack Shannon arrives in Corpus Christi, Texas, he is focused on one thing: finding the man who has been selling encrypted government secrets to the Chinese through online birding chat rooms. But when a senator is shot during a hunting trip and the woman he was with is abducted, Jack agrees to join the search—especially when he discovers that the kidnapping victim is Aubrey Grayson, a woman he was once in love with.

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# BRAD TAYLOR

Brings Bestselling Hero *Logan Pike* Back in “Hunter Killer”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Claudio Marinesco



It's so fun for us to watch an author, who we've been covering since their first book, achieve extreme popularity with readers. That description fits perfectly with our guest, Brad Taylor. We found out about Brad when he published, “One Rough Man” which is the first book in his *New York Times* bestselling *Logan Pike* series. Now, thirteen books and several e-book shorts later, here we are talking about “Hunter Killer.”

Brad Taylor was born on Okinawa, Japan, but grew up on 40-acres in rural Texas. Graduating from the University of Texas, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Infantry. Brad served for more than 21 years, retiring as a Special Forces Lieutenant Colonel. During that time he held numerous Infantry and Special Forces positions, including eight years in the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Operational Detachment—Delta, where he commanded multiple troops and a squadron. He has conducted operations in support of U.S. national interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other classified locations.

His final assignment was as the Assistant Professor of Military Science at The Citadel in Charleston, SC. He holds a Master's of Science in Defense Analysis from the Naval Postgraduate School, with a concentration in Irregular Warfare.

Check out a sneak peek of “Hunter Killer” and then read the interview we had with Brad. If you want to listen to the full interview, please visit Suspense Radio on iTunes or Spotify, or check out the website.

*Pike Logan and the Taskforce were once the apex predators, an unrivaled hunting machine that decimated those out to harm the United States, but they may have met their match. While Pike Logan and Jennifer Cahill prepare to join their team on a counter-terrorist mission in the triple frontier—the lawless tri-border region where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet—they are targeted in Charleston, South Carolina. A vicious explosion kills a friend, and the perpetrators have set it up to look like an accident. While the authorities believe this was not foul play, Pike knows the attack was meant for him.*

*When he loses contact with the team in South America, Pike is convinced he and the Taskforce are under assault. His men are the closest thing to family that Pike has, which means he will do anything, even ignore direct orders to stand down, to find them. Pike and Jennifer head to Brazil to investigate their disappearance and run headlong into a crew of Russian assassins. Within days they are entangled in a byzantine scheme involving Brazilian politics and a cut-throat battle for control of offshore oil fields.*

*Forged in combat, the Russians are the equal of anything the Taskforce has encountered before, but they make a mistake in attacking Pike's team, because Pike has a couple of elite Israeli assassins of his own. And Pike will stop at*



“Just know, everything that’s happening in the spy world is happening in the civilian world, too.”

*nothing to protect his family.*

John Raab (J.R.): Hello everybody and welcome to a new edition of “Beyond the Cover.” My co-host, Jeff Ayers, couldn’t be with

*something new.*

J.R.: Looking back at spy novels made in the 70’s and 80’s, there were so many; do you feel that military thrillers are now taking the place of spy thrillers?

B.T.: *I do. I think the heyday was right after 9/11, and now everybody is playing “Call of Duty.” But I also believe that the heart of every book is the character(s), regardless of genre. The reader has to care about the characters you write, and if they don’t, it doesn’t matter what genre you write.*

J.R.: When you look back on your debut with “One Rough Man,” how would you say Pike has changed over time? Did he follow the path you thought he would, or did he surprise you along the way?

B.T.: *I have to say, I think of these books as the ‘Pike Logan and Jennifer Cahill’ series because his partner, Jennifer, is also the lead. They’ve both grown a great deal. In Pike’s case, he began as a man with a completely broken moral compass that has grown back over time and now gets severely tested in “Hunter Killer.” Whereas, Jennifer has always been black-and-white. Her moral compass was fine and she knew exactly what was right and what was wrong. She’s now seeing things in more of a gray hue, which is the world that Pike works in. Even our government works in the gray world. Take, for instance, an easy one: No one should ever torture anybody because it’s just wrong. But...then someone says, “Well, what if that person has hidden a nuclear bomb in the city? Is it okay to torture them then?” And the answer changes to, yes. If they have a bomb and they’re a threat to others, then it’s okay to drill his kneecaps. So there’s this constant shifting of moral right and wrong depending on the event or reason that something needs to be done. Even the Bible offers up these categorical comparatives like, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ But when you’re handed a rifle in the military and told to go kill the enemy, then it’s okay. It becomes a moral act if justice is being served in that way. So both Logan and Jennifer have had to, and keep having to, deal with these types of situations.*

J.R.: Is it hard for you to keep that pace throughout and to always make sure you do have those gray areas?

us today for this exciting interview—and exciting is not an understatement. We are about to speak to *New York Times* bestselling author Brad Taylor about his latest *Pike Logan* book, “Hunter Killer.” One of our favorite guests, I can’t believe we are talking about book #14 in this incredible series. Brad, welcome back.

Brad Taylor (B.T.): *Good to be here.*

J.R.: I’m just amazed because it feels like I was just reading your debut, “One Rough Man,” that introduced Pike Logan to the world, and now we’re talking about #14. Wow.... Tell us all about “Hunter Killer.”

B.T.: *“Hunter Killer” actually came about because of the ton of research I had done for the previous book, “Daughter of War.” It’s sort of a tangential path. In the previous book, I had run across information on Russian mercenaries calling themselves the Wagner Group. The more research I did, the more I saw that these guys were taking over everything, and when I saw an article about them trying to take over the Lula oil fields in Brazil, I saw the plug for “Hunter Killer.”*

J.R.: With so many stories in this series, how are you able to keep Pike’s adventures fresh as you go on?

B.T.: *Some books are harder than others, but the truth of the matter is the world just keeps on turning and news comes up every day. I get feeds almost every morning from all over the world and sometimes there will be a little tidbit that piques my interest. The way the world is right now, it’s not difficult to find*



B.T.: *It's not difficult, actually; I think it's just based on my own past experiences. People have a sense that combat is what they show you in Hollywood films, and the good guys always win. But when you're out there, you might make a bad decision. After all, you're only human. I made the best decisions I could and not all worked out, just like all humans.*

*Jennifer is kind of growing into that person where she can now see that gray exists and not everything is black-and-white. Pike, on the other hand, is growing back into a person who knows he can't run amok and has to make decisions that take the rest of civilization's morals into account.*

J.R.: You're writing about so many people in so many different locations; how long and difficult is the research you do in order to make your locations feel so real and alive in your books?

B.T.: *Oh, quite a bit of research is needed. I mean, if I can get on the ground, I want to step foot in every place I'm going to put Pike into. In "Hunter Killer" everything I write about, from the Amazon to Rio, I went to and looked at personally. I can't get sights and smells of the battlefield, so to speak, unless I'm there. You always see something you'd never learn from Google. Unless you experience things personally, and study these different cultures, the book will not feel real to the reader.*

J.R.: When you went down to Brazil for the new *Logan* book, what were some of the things you thought you knew but were wrong about?

B.T.: *I guess most of the surprise comes from the high crime rate in Brazil. However, it's black and white in regard to where you stay away from and where you can go so that you remain perfectly safe. Such as, in a tourist area you are completely secure, but outside these areas danger awaits. And the nice thing is that the people tell you these things that you would never learn or understand from simply reading an article online.*

*I mean, I have a Special Forces background so I have certain "senses" about things, but most of the time unregistered cabbies would talk to us about everything from the government to certain places that you could not go after the sun went down. And a tale one of them told us actually does make its way into a scene of "Hunter Killer."*

J.R.: Now, being on #14, would you say that a new reader can "jump" into the series whenever they want, or would you recommend that they start with "One Rough Man" and go from there?

B.T.: *I would say that if they're going to read the entire series, then definitely start with number one and read them in order.*

*Not because you would be confused, but because you would risk hitting a spoiler. This is a compendium, so if you started with, say, "Daughter of War," you could find out where a character is right then, so if you went back and read from the beginning of the series, the surprise would no longer be there for you in regards to that character because you'd already know how they ended up.*

J.R.: This has been a long journey, thus far. How would you say it's been?

B.T.: *Nobody is more surprised than I am, actually. Here we are at book 14 and I didn't even believe I would have one.*

*For a while there I was writing two a year, which was extremely difficult. During that time I was also writing the short stories and taking two book research trips a year, so it was grinding me down to where I could barely function. That's when I calmed down a bit and went back to creating one book a year.*

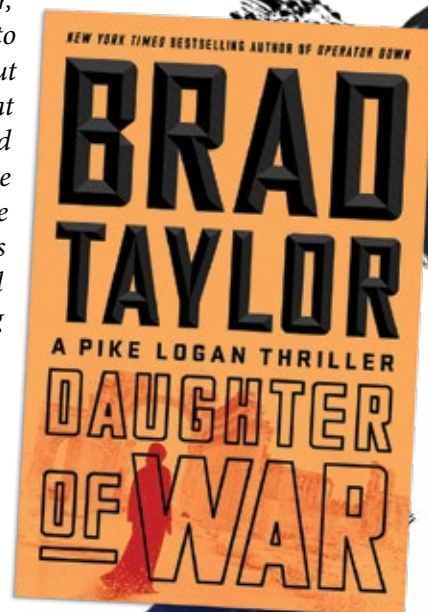
J.R.: Talk about your e-book shorts.

B.T.: *I started writing the shorts to expand on the characters, but unlike the books, they don't go in order. In fact, they skip all over the place. One I wrote was before Jennifer was even in the books, so they are haphazard. But they allow me to really flush out the characters.*

J.R.: Do you have a specific process to cleanse yourself after a book is complete, writing tales other people don't see to kind of get yourself off the military stuff before coming back?

B.T.: *It all depends on where my brain is at. You put your heart and soul into a book; you've created something that you can't just wave away. Some, like I said before, are harder than others. In "Daughter of War," I was actually going to whack a character but I didn't. And now that she exists, I like her and I have to keep her. These changes wouldn't be made and relationships wouldn't be formed if not for me flushing these characters out in those short stories. So I will write the shorts in order to better see how something or someone will work.*

J.R.: Any thought of



ever doing a standalone without Pike and Jennifer?

B.T.: *I've kicked it around at times, but I have enough stories of Pike and Jennifer in my head right now.*

J.R.: Do you allow the political environment we live in right now to enter your words as you write a book? Does it seep in, or do you try to stay away from it and not get Pike involved when it comes to your books?

B.T.: *I stay completely away from politics. I don't like it. There's nothing in my books that's political. In fact, any "Administration" in my books is always sparse. If anything shows up, the guy is usually only on a campaign stop, and I don't mention anything that's going on in our polarized world.*

J.R.: Have you ever had any comments from readers about this?

B.T.: (LOL) *Actually, I had one in regard to a book I wrote where the Secretary of State blows up in Norway. Somebody wrote and said he knew I was talking about John Kerry all this time. The funny part was, the character in the book looked nothing like Kerry.*

J.R.: Do you ever have to pull yourself back on the action so the book doesn't become like a *Terminator* movie?

B.T.: *Definitely. Characters are what matter. Think about it: If a bomb goes off in an empty, abandoned parking lot, who cares? But if two people are in a car in that parking lot, you care a lot. More times than not I get letters from an editor asking for more action, not to pull back. But, the other side of this debate is, if you have a bunch of disconnected action scenes in a book it becomes boring. You need the reader to care!*

J.R.: When you start plotting and figuring out the next book, how much of the outline actually makes it into the book?

B.T.: *I don't do an outline. Mine is more of a framework. I know the threat, the threat vector zone, and about seventy percent of the time I know how it's going to end. People call them "military thrillers," but readers have to understand that they are about an ex-military man; there are no tanks, walkie-talkies, things like that.*

J.R.: What would you name the genre?

B.T.: *I see them as murder mysteries. I mean, I think they fit three categories very well. I don't want them to be seen as only "military" because I'm afraid readers will be thinking about guns, tanks, and the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne jumping into Switzerland. These are mysteries; there is action and adventure in each,*

*and they are filled with mystery and suspense.*

J.R.: Now, you're a retired Lieutenant Colonel from the Army, Special Forces. How have you seen the world change when it comes to training and products from your time in the military to now?

B.T.: *When I was in the military, you had these shops that contained some of the coolest things in the world that the CIA came up with: bugs, trackers, etc. But what has happened is these high-tech things can now be found in the civilian/commercial market. The commercial has grown far faster than the military market. From drones to the Alexa voice system, anyone can afford and have these things in their households.*

*Every morning I get feeds and some are hacker feeds; they can tell you amazing stories about what some of these technical devices are doing in your own home, such as recording things and sending them back to the companies that made them in order to get you on lists for marketing, advertising, 1-800 phone calls—all the things that drive you crazy. And don't even get me started on cell phones and apps.*

*Just know, everything that's happening in the spy world is happening in the civilian world, too.*

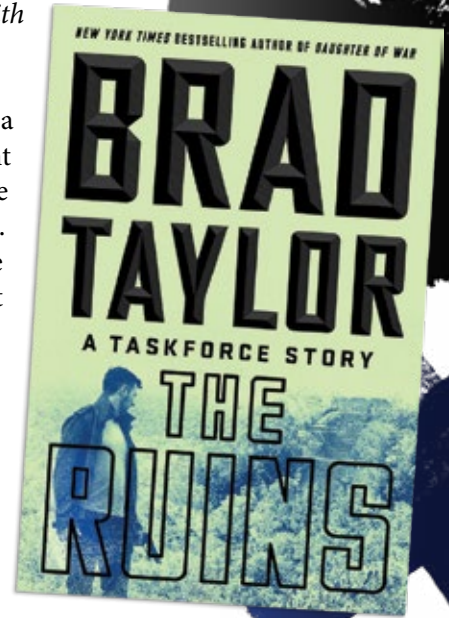
J.R.: That's creepy. So...what's the best place for readers to learn all about you and your books?

B.T.: *At [bradtaylorbooks.com](http://bradtaylorbooks.com) you'll find everything: excerpts from the books, a list of the books in order, signings and events coming up, etc. I have Thrillerfest and Bouchercon this year that I will be attending, and the book tour will be all over the country.*

J.R.: Congratulations on 14 books, man! Anything you want to add?

B.T.: *I just hope you enjoy the stories, and I'm banging away on #15 right now!*

We would like to thank Brad for joining us. For more information about Brad and his work visit his website [www.bradtaylorbooks.com](http://www.bradtaylorbooks.com). ■





# RHYS BOWEN

## Delivers Readers a Stunning Mystery with “Above the Bay of Angels”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Author Website



We are very excited to bring you our interview with *New York Times* bestselling author, Rhys Bowen. This is the very first time we have had the privilege to sit and talk with Rhys, and it won't be the last. Her latest book, “Above the Bay of Angels,” is a standalone title full of mystery and intrigue, and is yet another “gift” to all readers out there.

Having written two amazing historical mystery series’ (*The Royal Spyness* and the *Molly Murphy Mysteries*), Rhys also penned the #1 Kindle bestseller “In Farleigh Field” and the international bestseller, “The Tuscan Child,” which has sold over half-a-million copies to date.

“In Farleigh Field” was nominated for the Edgar Award, and won the Agatha Award for Best Historical Mystery, as well as the Macavity and Bruce Alexander Memorial Awards.

We are also extremely excited to announce that Rhys will be included in the new short story anthology *Suspense Magazine* is publishing in November 2020 titled: “Nothing Good Happens After Midnight.”

Now, check out “Above the Bay of Angels” and then read the interview to learn more about this memorable author. If you want to listen to the entire interview, please check out *Suspense Radio* on iTunes, Spotify, or simply go to the website.

*Isabella Waverly only means to comfort the woman felled on a London street. In her final dying moments, she thrusts a letter into Bella's hand. It's an offer of employment in the kitchens of Buckingham Palace, and everything the budding young chef desperately wants: an escape from the constrictions of her life as a lowly servant. In the stranger's stead, Bella can spread her wings.*

*Arriving as Helen Barton from Yorkshire, she pursues her passion for creating culinary delights, served to the delighted Queen Victoria herself. Best of all, she's been chosen to accompany the queen to Nice. What fortune! Until the threat of blackmail shadows Bella to the Riviera, and a member of the queen's retinue falls ill and dies.*

*Having prepared the royal guest's last meal, Bella is suspected of the poisonous crime. An investigation is sure to follow. Her charade will be over. And her new life will come crashing down—if it doesn't send her to the gallows.*

John Raab (J.R.): Hello everybody and welcome to a new edition of “Beyond the Cover.” My co-host, Jeff Ayers, can't be with us tonight because he is stranded in a Seattle snowfall and not happy about missing out on this, a first-time guest, who is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over forty novels. Her latest book is a fantastic historical mystery set in Queen Victoria's time; released on February 11<sup>th</sup> it's titled “Above the Bay of Angels.” Please join me in welcoming the incredible author, Rhys Bowen, to the show.

Rhys Bowen (R.B.): *I'm happy to be here. Thank you for having me.*

J.R.: Such a pleasure to speak with you for the first time. Now, you have a slew of books published, among them the extremely popular *Royal Spyness* series starring Lady Georgie, which is up to 14 books. But this new title is a standalone mystery; tell us a bit about it.

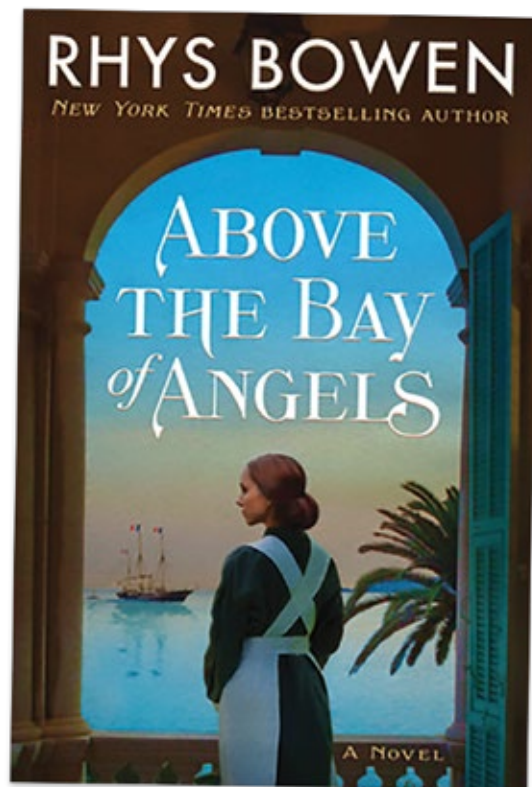
R.B.: *It is, actually, my 4<sup>th</sup> big historical standalone, and I have to say I find those a great fun to do. With standalones you can do whatever you like with both character and story, and when you're done, you can simply walk away. With a series, you always have to leave the reader in a happier place, find something new or fresh for the characters, etc., so that makes the writing a bit more difficult.*

*This new story is not only set in Queen Victoria's time, it is actually all about the Queen. The idea began when my husband and I were visiting Nice, France, a few years ago. I was standing on a hillside staring at this beautiful, big, white building with a sign on it that read 'Excelsior Regina' (i.e.: Hôtel Nice Excelsior). There was a gardener outside and I asked him if it was really a hotel. He told me that it was apartments now, but it was once a hotel “built for your queen.” I said, “Queen Elizabeth?” And he said, “No, Madam. Queen Victoria.” I had not even known that Victoria had ever visited the south of France, but I researched a great deal and found that it was actually her winter residence. In her later years, she came to Nice every winter, so they built this hotel that could hold her entire court. She'd bring her gentlemen, ladies, footmen, cooks, and more; they would travel on a private train. Apparently, she did not want anyone to know she was the Queen, even though it might have been a giveaway when you think of the troop that accompanied her there.*

*I found out that in 1897, there was a lot of intrigue about the Queen and the fact that she brought her Indian servant, Abdul Karim, with her wherever she went. There was an uproar about this fact, actually. Some believed he was a dangerous man. There was also a scheme going about how to get rid of him. The Prince of Wales was even working to have the Queen deemed incompetent to rule.*

*It was because I loved all this intrigue that I started to think of the chefs in the hotel and how she would bring her own cooks with her, and an idea began to form. What if one of those women is a cook with a secret to hide? She loves France and the cuisine, but something sinister happens, such as a person is found dead at the hands of her learned cuisine. So my heroine is a good girl from a titled family who has fallen on hard times. She finds herself having to work for a horrible, vulgar woman to provide for her little sister, and one day*

**“It was when I discovered Tony Hillerman that I wanted to write mysteries. He not only had a clever plot, but he took you somewhere and gave you insights into another's mentality and another location.”**





witnesses a tragic accident. A woman is run over in the street and as my heroine sits with her to try and give her comfort, the dying woman thrusts an envelope in her hand and says, "Tell them." In the envelope is an invitation on Buckingham Palace stationery for the now dead woman to come to the palace and be a chef. This is my heroine's moment. Taking over the identity of the woman, she seizes the opportunity because, who on earth would ever know, yet...someone, of course, does.

We have intrigue as well as lots of lovely recipes, and the setting of France: it was a truly luscious tale to tell.

J.R.: Part of the intrigue with historical mysteries is the actual time period—and setting, of course. How much research did you have to do to make this come alive the way you did?

R.B.: Let's just say, I suffer for my craft. (LOL) I spent three weeks doing a great deal of research in Nice, investigating all those bistros and tasting all those rosé wines.... No, seriously, I spent a great deal of time in secondhand bookshops, antique stores, libraries, and it was the first time my degree in French actually proved useful. I was also lucky because Queen Victoria had a great deal of material written about her.

Librarians found interesting things for me, like the brochure from when the hotel was first designed; from that, I knew who slept on what floor, etc. I found out about her chefs, what she ate, pictures of her kitchen and a whole book of menus. She loved to eat truly elaborate things; you can see that because at the end of her life, she was as wide as she was tall. One recipe I will always remember is the Lark Pie, which called for forty larks. My favorite, however, was the Turtle Soup. The recipe stated to procure a 120 pound turtle; it tells you how to kill it, take the shell out...cooking was definitely not for the faint-hearted. Most of the cooks were male because of the fact, so it was fun to have a young woman who has to prove herself in my book.

I always write about somewhere I've been before. I take in the little things when I'm there: What am I hearing or smelling? What does that particular food taste like? I want to bring it to life for my readers so they don't feel like I've 'explained' that time period to them, but more that they've been transported back to that actual time.

J.R.: Isabella (AKA: Helen) in the book is a strong female character. I know Nice and hearing of the hotel got your juices flowing, so to speak, but when did you know that Isabella was the perfect lead?

R.B.: I think because she was wronged in the beginning of the story and I like to cheer for someone who has been dealt a bad card. She comes from a titled family. Her father is the youngest, so he basically inherits nothing and has estranged himself from the family. When Isabella is a young child he's doing quite well because he's a meeter/greeter at The Savoy. But he becomes

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an alcoholic and is caught sipping the drink there, leading to his quick dismissal. The mother dies and everything begins to slip downhill. Dad becomes a pitiful creature and finds Isabella a job as a servant in a big house. She is absolutely mortified once she finds herself among these rich people who own a garment factory (i.e., new money). The woman of the house is delighted to know that Isabella is from a titled family and she would parade her in front of guests letting them know that she took the poor girl in because she had nowhere else to go, basically embarrassing Isabella in front of everyone. The woman says that if she ever tries to leave her employ, she won't supply a reference, which back in the day you needed in order to get another job. So being given this invite to the palace is the only way out.

J.R.: When you are writing, do you know where a story is going or do you write more organically?

R.B.: I know I want to write about a place and time, but the plot is organic; I did not know who the bad guys would be, so to speak, but I did know that I wanted to use 'taking someone's identity.' I had that idea about finding a person who was killed and taking her place, but I didn't want Isabella to be sleazy in any way. I know pretending to be someone else is not a moral thing, but I had her kneeling beside the lady and showing her compassion, so it was like her doing a good deed and, in fact, receiving a reward for it by getting the invitation. It is a just thing, so she's the good girl. The compassion she shows offers her a path to self-preservation and being able to help her sister. That is her way of survival.

J.R.: Now, I know you like standalones because you can do what you want and walk away, but does it ever happen that you get that itch and want to go back and write more?

R.B.: Well, I've left Isabella in a very good place. But the first standalone, "In Fairleigh Field," was about WWII and espionage and, I have to say, I have received many letters asking me what happens next to my characters. I know I could do another story, and I did leave a door slightly ajar—someone is being questioned by the gestapo—and there are quite a few protagonists. But other standalones, like "The Tuscan Child," I would leave alone.

I have so many different ideas I want to explore. I put my Molly Murphy series on hold, even though almost every single day of my life I get a letter asking me when the next one will be out. But I married her off and she has a child now, so I had to ask myself: When would I put myself in harm's way once I had a baby? The reason for solving the crime in the four books I did after she had a baby was because they were personal; family things. But I didn't want her to leave her baby at home all the time, so I put her on hold and played with these.

With the Lady Georgie series, they are just very funny and very therapeutic to write. I love poking fun at the British aristocracy; I married one of the aristocracy, after all, so we have lots of cousins with silly nicknames and I love placing them in a 'veiled' way into the books and having a chuckle.

J.R.: You write about two books a year. Where is the time for all the research?

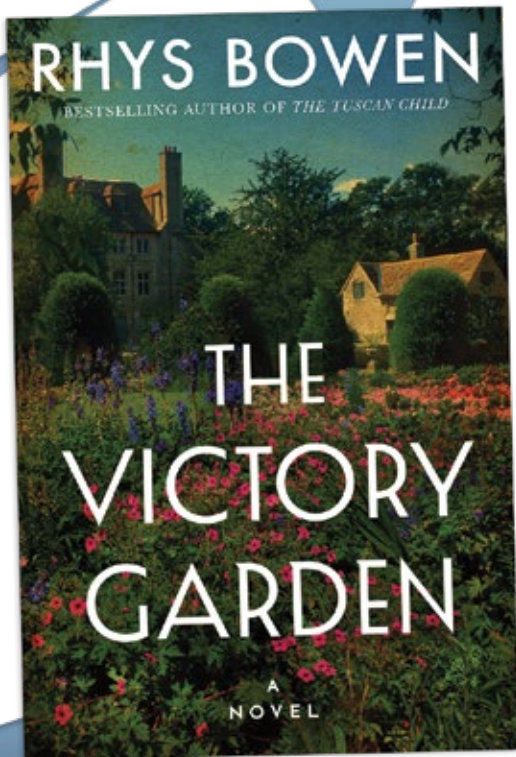
R.B.: What can I say? I'm a crazy person. I'm trying to slow down a bit. If I'm writing about Georgie, I have to do research on the background of where I'm sending her, but the ensemble cast I already know everything about, so it's easier to get going on those. The big standalones are when I have to do loads of reading, and while writing, I have to check everything. I just started one that takes place in Venice. I have maps strewn all over the place and it will definitely be a painstaking chore to get through. But, I'm excited.

J.R.: The one thing you do with Molly Murphy and Lady Georgie is write short stories to...fill in the gaps, perhaps? Will you be continuing with the shorts?

R.B.: Every now and then I like to do a short story. It's good for the fans. If readers don't get a new book right away, at least they get a short story to chew on. I've been asked to do another Christmas book based on the Lady Georgie series. The first was such fun to write (someone dying every day on the twelve days of Christmas), that I will probably do it.







J.R.: I loved Agatha Christie, and when I read your mysteries, I fall back into that same mindset when I was a kid exploring her work. Who was your influence when you were younger?

R.B.: *It's interesting. I started off very young with Enid Blyton's series, The Famous Five. It was about four children and their dog who solved mysteries and had adventures. Of course, they'd be completely improbable now, seeing as that the bad guys in those books, when caught, simply apologized to the kids; now the bad guy would just shoot them. I moved on to Agatha when I was allowed for the first time in the adult section of the library. I was overwhelmed; I worked my way through her and so many others and loved them all. Agatha's books were my comfort reads...but they never really touch your soul. I never thought someone wept for the 'body in the library.' It was when I discovered Tony Hillerman that I wanted to write mysteries. He not only had a clever plot, but he took you somewhere and gave you insights into another's mentality and another location. I was blown away by those books.*

J.R.: Do you see a difference between the questions asked by readers in the UK versus the USA?

R.B.: *Not really the questions as much as the reviews. Bookshops and readers in the UK like darker mysteries than the U.S., like Scandinavian authors. Mine do very well in libraries; the nice, middle-aged ladies like my books and the standalones have done really well in England. The other thing I find is that, since I am published in the U.S., there's a prejudice against me. I have seen reviews saying that I'm "not quite English" because of this. "In Farleigh Field" centers on a stately manor and a spy in England, not so much on WWII, itself. I received a review on Amazon that said I knew nothing about Britain, the upper class and how they talk. My husband was going to hunt that reviewer down. (LOL)*

J.R.: There is another author, one that you will actually be in the anthology with "Nothing Good Happens After Midnight" that will be published by Suspense Publishing, who says that he uses the bad reviews to cleanse himself. He finds the worst review of a book of his on Amazon, takes the reviewer's name and uses that name for the character he kills in his next book.

Authors spend so much time writing, I don't think a lot of fans understand the undertaking. They just believe you get to sit at home every day in your pajamas and it's not a "real job."

R.B.: *True. It's really the isolation. You are sitting there and writing every day for six days a week. There is no boss telling you that you're doing a good job, which is why probably most of the writers I know are totally manic. The first 50 pages for me are pure torture, I find myself saying the story will never work. By page 100, I can sort of see it forming, and by page 200, I'm galloping along.*

J.R.: Where is the best place for readers to find out all about you?

R.B.: *The website is [rhysbowen.com](http://rhysbowen.com), and it has everything. I'm also on Facebook and Twitter and, these days, Instagram. That's the good thing about social media. I can always add pictures of these amazing places, which adds a new layer to the story. Facebook lets me connect intimately with readers. Such as, if I write that 'I cut my finger this morning', by afternoon I have many readers volunteering to type my books for me.*

J.R.: This has been an absolutely fabulous conversation. Thank you for telling your tale, and I hope you come back because my co-host will be very upset that he missed out on this.

R.B.: *Absolutely, I will.*

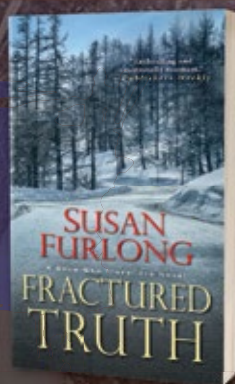
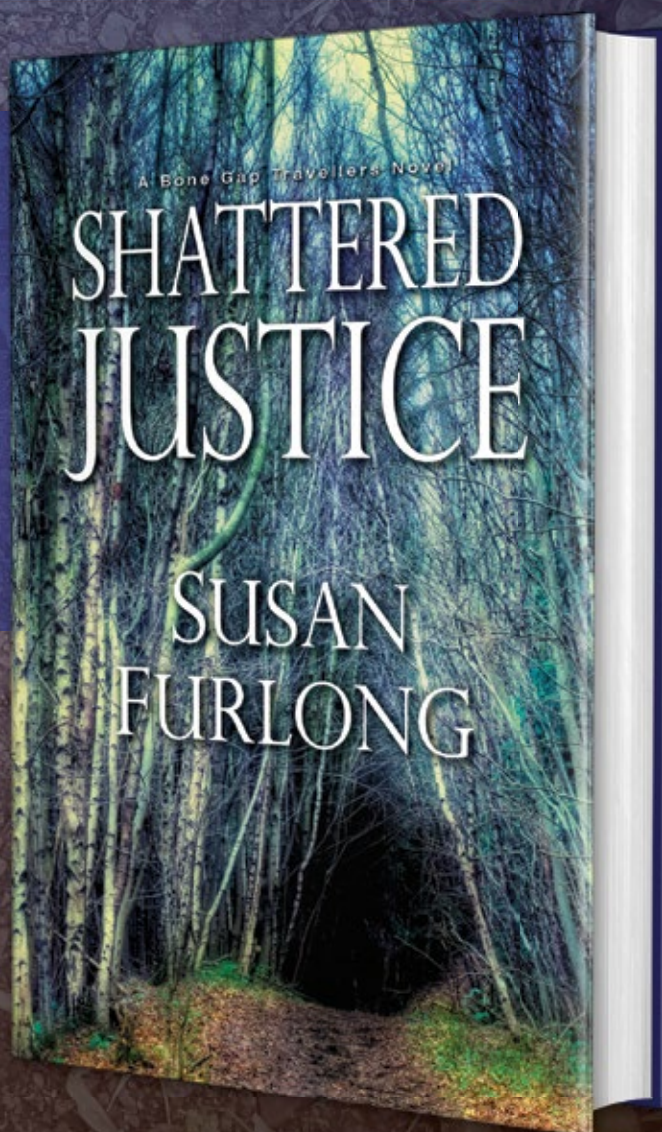
We would like to thank Rhys for joining us. For more information on her writing, please visit her website at [www.rhysbowen.com](http://www.rhysbowen.com). ■



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# The Neighbours From HELL

By Mark Towse

"Doris is back in the hospital, too. She's never been right since the fall—poor bugger. And her husband Ralph is absolutely useless. Isn't he, Derek? We took her some flowers last week, and she looked so pale. It's a real shame," Patricia said, finally sucking in some air.

Neither Ted nor Vera knew who Doris was or why they were being updated on the stranger's health.

Ted looked across to the clock on the mantelpiece and noted it was approaching midnight. "Can I get you anything else to drink, or do you need to be getting home?" he said, punctuating the sentence with a fake yawn.

"I'll have another one of these please," Derek said, holding his empty tumbler out defiantly. "You not drinking, Ted?"

"No, gave up a long time ago, Derek," he said as he collected the glass and turned to Patricia.

"I shouldn't really, not with the medication. Oh, to hell with it. Perhaps just a little drop of that sherry, please," Patricia said.

"Of course," Ted replied, wishing he had been firmer when he had the chance. "Vera, could you give me a hand?"

Vera almost leaped off the couch and followed Ted into the kitchen. As soon as Derek and Patricia were out of eyeshot, Vera mimicked placing a noose around her neck and faked a raspy choking sound.

"Thanks again for having us. Even though you're new to the area, everyone already speaks so highly of you around here," Patricia shouted from the lounge. "I can see why!"

Ted launched into a little dance then, hopping from one foot to the next and extending both middle fingers in the direction of Patricia and Derek. "It's our pleasure," he shouted back, then formed a makeshift machine gun with his hands and peppered the lounge with imaginary rounds. "Feels like we've known you for ages."

"What do we do?" his wife hissed at him,

Ted angrily sloshed the liquor into the glasses, creating little puddles on the kitchen bench. "What the hell were you thinking?" he replied with a new question. "What are these halfwits doing in our front lounge?" he continued to spit out the questions, hammering the ice pick into the depths of the

freezer with unnecessary force.

"I didn't know what to say," Vera shrugged. "She's our neighbour; she just invited herself. Besides, I told you, she's a Rotary member and said she would put in a good word for us."

"Is it us—are we too nice? Do people think we have nothing better to do in retirement?"

Vera looked at her husband; he looked tired—red eyes, pale skin, and his wrinkles looked even deeper under the stark kitchen light. "Look, we'll have these drinks and then we'll usher them out, okay?"

"Fuck the Rotary. And fuck Doris, whoever the hell she is," Ted spat, picking up the drinks and marching out of the kitchen.

"So, how did you two wonderful people meet?" Patricia asked as she took the glass from him.

"I'll let Vera answer that one. It's a long story, and I'm not sure I'll be able to stay awake," Ted said as he let himself fall back onto the couch.

Derek and Patricia gave a little snigger and turned their attention to Vera. Ted wondered if they were stupid or ignorant or a dangerous cocktail of both.

"It's not long at all, and rather uninteresting really. Ted was a detective on the force, and I worked in forensics for fifteen years. We discovered we had so much in common and, well...we've been together nearly thirty-five years now."

"So sweet," Patricia said. "Isn't it, Derek?"

"Yes, dear," he replied. "A detective? Wow, that must have been—"

"We met at a church dinner dance, didn't we, Derek?" Patricia interjected, giving her husband a gentle elbow. "He was dancing with Katie Duvall at the time—she was a whore. Anyway, we looked across at each..."

It was a skill Ted had developed over the years—the ability to tune people out. Patricia's pollution of their lounge with her limited vocabulary and tedious account of her and Derek's first encounter was becoming white noise. He found himself studying Derek's face. Broken red lines on the cheek and nose, yellow tinge to the eyes, brittle white hair—signs

of too much drinking. His body language suggested years of oppression—his spark gone. He didn't need to draw on his old skills as a detective to figure out why Derek was likely to be such a heavy drinker. He moved his attention to Patricia. Her lips continued to move, but there were no hand or facial gestures to support her little monologue. It indicated she didn't find it interesting either—as though it was the only tale she had to tell, and she'd done it a million times before. Her make-up was caked across her chubby face—thick, really over the top, and that suggested the two of them didn't get out much; that this would be a highlight of their social calendar and most likely to be discussed in-depth at the next Rotary meeting.

He didn't know how long he had zoned out for, but finally, her voice began to filter through again. She was talking about their children now and their tedious jobs and irrelevant lives. One was a lawyer and the other a doctor. She went on to tell them what cars they both drove, where they vacationed, and how big their houses were. He looked across at his wife to try and get her attention.

Vera could feel the twitch in her eye; she sometimes got it when she was overly tired, and the more she tried to stop it, the worse it seemed to get. She struggled with superficial conversations, and this one was testing her resolve to the max. She had no idea what Patricia was rattling on about; she just wanted to rest her eyes and get her house back. The clock indicated it was twenty-five past one in the morning. She continued to nod to Patricia's beat but wasn't sure how voluntary the action was anymore. It was getting ridiculous. But Derek and Patricia were slumped way back into their sofa, with no indication they were planning to leave soon.

Out of nowhere, a little giggle emerged from Vera's lips, one that attracted a fleeting scowl from Patricia. Vera's vision had turned blurry, making it look as though Derek and Patricia had merged with the couch so that only their faces extended from the leather. The voice that now emerged was a deep, slow-motion drawl—how she imagined a couch would speak. It was a comical sequence, but at the same time quite terrifying. Briefly, their guests had quite literally become part of the furniture—forever part of their front lounge.

"Tell them about our new car, Derek. She really is a beauty, guys. Would have to be, for the price we paid," Patricia said, moving on to the next topic.

Suddenly, Derek sprang to life as though re-animated. He rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Oh, she is a beauty alright. Fill us up, Ted, and I'll tell you all about it."

The vein in Ted's temple was knocking out a hefty beat, and that was never a good sign. "Of course, Derek," Ted replied. "Vera?"

And they marched together into the kitchen.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," Ted hissed. "How do we get rid of them? It's John and Theresa all over again," he said, before splashing some more of the booze into the bottom of the glasses.

He grunted. "I wish I still drank—could do with some

anti-venom for these imbeciles."

"You don't need it. Calm down, Ted; they will be gone in thirty minutes. Once we are in, we are in—we can start to distance ourselves then and mingle with the more interesting people."

She was right. Drink had been a previous crutch for both—and that didn't turn out well, both losing their jobs. He still couldn't believe his deputy had ratted on him.

"Why is it so important to you, anyway?" he asked.

"Because I have little else, Ted," she said, carrying two of the glasses through the door.

Sighing, he followed her in to find Patricia off the couch, scrutinizing the many photographs displayed in their glass cabinet.

"Are these your children?" she said, extending a long, bony finger towards a frame on the second shelf.

There was a pause. The longest of the night. And then Vera said, "No, Patricia."

"Oh, sorry, I just assumed," Patricia said. "Any photographs of your children?"

"So, Derek—about this car of yours. Please tell us everything." Ted resigned and sank into his chair.

The distraction technique worked. Derek seemed to have an endless amount of information about their new car, enough to keep him going for an impossibly long time. Just when it looked as though he was going to finish, he quickly moved on to the next bit of detail. To Ted, it was as interesting as listening to a car manual being read out loud. "Any chance of a top-up?" he finally finished.

"Oh no, were you barren?" Patricia suddenly fired.

Vera's right eye began to twitch even more profusely. "Not being rude, Patricia, but it's not something I feel comfortable talking about right now. Besides, it's late, and I think—"

Patricia took a sip of her recently replenished sherry. "Nothing to be ashamed of, Vera. God works in mysterious ways."

"Okay, I think we need to call it a night," Ted said, rising from the chair.

"Oh, no—I didn't mean to offend," Patricia quickly tried to rectify. "It's just...He made a choice for you, and you can only play the hand you are dealt."

"Did you bring a coat?" Ted quickly added.

"But we haven't told you about Brazil yet," Derek added in a strangely concerned voice.

"Ted, it's okay," Vera reassured him, turning to his wife. "We had two children, Patricia. Two girls. They died—car crash on the freeway on the way to the movies."

There was a tightening across her chest, one that she used to get on a daily basis. Her supposed best friend, Anita... driving under the influence. Four kids dead, but she survived.

"Oh, my goodness. I am so sorry," Patricia said, reaching for her husband's hand. "Me and my big mouth."

"Honestly, it's fine, Patricia. It was a long time ago," Vera said, standing. "But I am very, very tired now and—"

"How did it happen?" Patricia asked. But then quickly



followed with, "Oh, sorry—that's a bit tactless, isn't it?"

Ted looked at her with mouth wide open, before commenting, "It is a touch tactless, yes, Patricia. I really do think it's time you left now."

"I don't think we would feel right leaving now," Derek chirped in. "Patricia was just interested. Can we tell you about Brazil now? Put the sadness behind us," he offered hopefully. "Fill the glasses, Ted, good chap, and we'll move on."

Ted considered his response carefully as he studied Derek's hopeful face. He could feel the adrenaline surging through him. The vein in his head was beating ten to the dozen and his fingernails were digging into his palms.

"No," Ted said firmly. "It's after three in the morning, and we want to go to bed." He continued, "Thanks so much for coming, though. I'm sure we will see you around."

"We are not leaving like this, Ted. We've upset you and want to put it right. You should never go to sleep on an ill-feeling," Patricia affirmed, nodding for extra effect.

Ted found himself wondering if their combined skin would be enough to reupholster the couch.

Vera finally cracked. "I don't think Ted's asking anymore," she said. "We would both like you to leave now."

Ted smiled across to his wife. *Well delivered*, he thought. *Firm and not over the top*. But when he turned his attention back to Patricia, her face suggested that she'd attempted a discreet fart and gotten more than she bargained for.

"Vera, I have a lot of sway in the community," Patricia countered, raising her chin slightly as if to elevate her importance. "Not just in the Rotary, but I have friends everywhere," she continued, sniffing at the air and folding her arms tightly, like a spoiled child. "It would be much better if this ended on a good note."

The ticking time bomb in Ted's head was dangerously close to detonating. Vera looked across at him, and she knew it, too. It was supposed to be a fresh start. They would make a new home for themselves here—try again to put all the hate and grief behind them. The Rotary would have allowed them to embed themselves in the community and extend on the early groundwork they'd already done.

But she did not like to be manipulated; not one little bit. The stupid bitch had her over a barrel.

"Okay, let me refill those glasses for you," Vera said. "Oh, we should have a group photo, too," she added enthusiastically. "Ted, get the Polaroid."

Ted knew what that meant.

"Yes, good idea," Patricia said. "And again, I didn't mean to offend."

"And then we can play a game—break the tension," Vera added excitedly.

Patricia turned to Derek and smiled. "Oh, that sounds like fun, doesn't it, dear? What did you have in mind?"

Already, the pulsating vein in his head was beginning to ease. He pulled out the top drawer of the cabinet and reached inside for the camera.

"Okay, gang. Cuddle up on the couch, and I'll set it up,"

he announced.

Ted placed the camera on the table and made sure they were all in the shot before setting the timer and rushing over.

"Smile, neighbours."

As soon as the camera flashed, he went to retrieve the photo and began waving it in the air.

"Actually, Ted—that doesn't help at all," Derek added. "You can actually ruin the photo that way."

Ted ignored the bore and made his way to the kitchen, only to pause when he got to the glass cabinet—or the "trophy cabinet" as they sometimes called it. He studied the photograph of John and Theresa. Good people, he reminisced, but it was as though they had decided to make them—as grieving parents—their pet project. It was relentless; they just wouldn't leave them alone, even after endless requests. After serving them both with some chamomile tea one summer evening, he caved both their heads in with a shovel. Ted thought Vera would be angry, but when she came home, she just got on with it. She did what she was best at and wiped the scene clean. Ted visited their house after dark and made it look like a break-in; carried each plastic-wrapped body a fair distance in the light rain before positioning them on their lounge room floor. It was quite a buzz, at first.

Any compassion and empathy they had died with their children, making them outsiders in a conventional world. It wasn't a quick process by any means—the descent into darkness—but the world wasn't set up to handle people with dead kids. And, slowly and surely, they began to disconnect. Their vendetta properly kicked into gear after John and Theresa—pre-meditated violence against anyone they bore a grudge against. It helped detract from their grief. There was no getting away from it; they had come to love the adrenaline surge, and they were good at it.

Soon there would be a new photograph to add to the existing collection inside: Vera's boss; Ted's leaching brother; Vera's supposed best friend; Ted's deputy at the station; and the many others that they felt wronged by over the years.

Vera collected Derek and Patricia's glasses and followed her husband through to the kitchen.

Ted grabbed the ice pick from the counter and watched Vera as she reached inside the kitchen cabinet. She rummaged through the many containers of home-made chemicals she'd concocted over the years, and finally pulled out the roll of clear plastic. She had hoped they would not be opening the special cupboard for some time—if ever again. But they tried. They really tried.

"I love you, Ted," she said.

"I love you too, dear," he replied. "We have to stop being so damned nice, though."

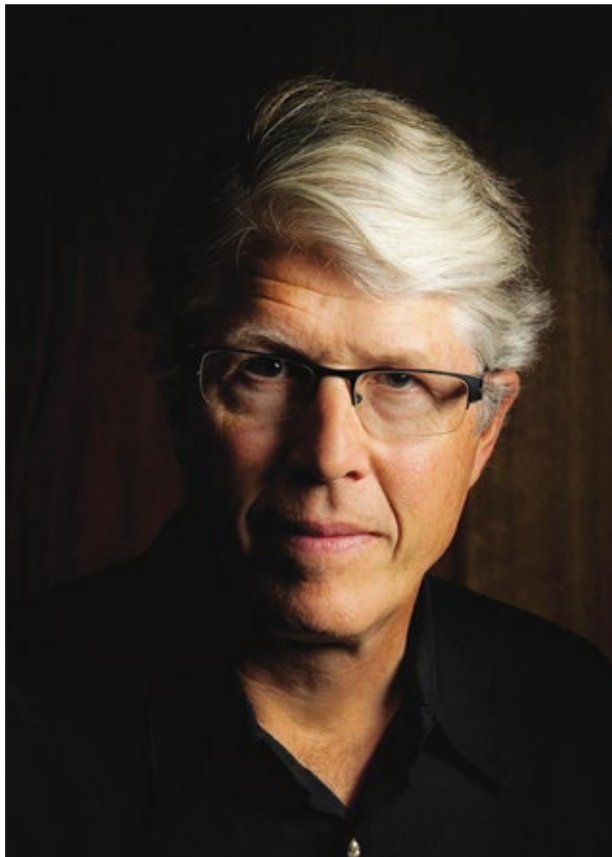
They held hands as they walked through to the lounge—Ted with the ice pick up his sleeve, and Patricia with the roll of plastic tucked under her arm.

"Who's ever heard of murder in the dark?" she asked, her finger hovering over the light switch. ■

# INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS

## DOUGLAS PRESTON *on* *The MONSTER of FLORENCE*

Interview by Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



When it comes to the highly popular, *New York Times* bestselling author Douglas Preston, his long list of works predominantly fall under the category of fiction. (Perhaps most well-known is the suspense series he writes with Lincoln Child that follows one of the most celebrated fictional detectives of modern times, Special Agent A.X.L. Pendergast.) However, with “The Monster of Florence: A True Story,” Douglas turned his focus on a very real life serial killer whose hunting grounds were based in the very beautiful, breathtaking destination of Florence, Italy.

While on a family trip, researching a novel that he was going to pen set in Italy, his path led him to the “desk” of Mario Spezi—crime reporter for the local newspaper. During their talks, Mario mentioned this infamous “monster” who Douglas, up until this moment, had been unaware. Asking to hear the details of the case, the author found himself completely compelled by the story. It was then that Spezi and Preston teamed up to bring about this nonfiction work that relates to a series of brutal murders that occurred between 1968 and 1985 attributed to this particular maniac.

Here, Douglas Preston talks about this work “inspired by actual events” that’s guaranteed to leave all readers breathless.

Joseph Badal (J.B.): Unlike most of your body of work, “The Monster of Florence” is a non-fiction book. It is a story about a serial killer who had operated in the Florence, Italy area for years. I understand that the inspiration for this book came to you during a family trip to Italy. Would you explain how you became aware of

the killer?



Douglas Preston (D.P.): *I was researching a novel set in Italy, and I wanted to find out how the police normally respond to the discovery of a murder victim. I met with Mario Spezi, the crime reporter for the local paper, who explained how the police and Carabinieri would deal with such a discovery. In the course of the conversation, Mario mentioned the case of the Monster of Florence, which he had covered for many years for La Nazione, the local Tuscan newspaper. I'd never heard of it and asked to hear the story. It floored me—it had to be possibly the strangest and most compelling case of a serial killer in the annals of crime. So I suggested we write about it together.*

J.B.: What was the one thing about the story, as it was related to you, that initially inspired you to go down the road of researching the murders and the authorities' investigations into them?

D.P.: *What struck me most was the stark contrast between the ethereal loveliness of the Florentine countryside and the savagery of the murders committed there. The Monster struck young lovers in parked cars in the hills surrounding Florence, murdering them as they made love. The case had never been solved and it had become one of the longest and most expensive criminal investigations in Italian history. The Monster was Italy's Jack the Ripper, only worse—and much more recent. It was still very much under active investigation.*

J.B.: Tell us about how you reached out to Mario Spezi, the Italian journalist, who became your co-author of “The Monster of Florence.”

D.P.: *After our first meeting, Mario and I became fast friends. He was a journalist of the old school, one of the finest reporters I've ever known, with the courage of a lion and a wickedly sharp pen. He passed away several years ago and I miss him greatly.*

J.B.: At what point in your research did you come to the decision that “The Monster of Florence” had to be written?

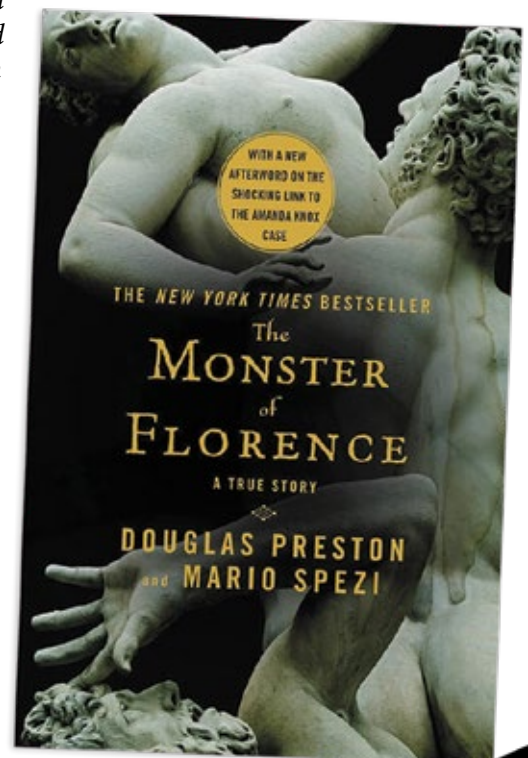
D.P.: *Right from the beginning, I knew this story had to be written. It had never been told in English and was virtually unknown to the English speaking world, although it was a story known to almost all Italians.*

J.B.: During your research, you and Spezi became targets of the police investigation, to the point that the police had a vendetta against you. Please explain why you believe the authorities turned against you.

D.P.: *Mario went on television in Italy, on one of the highest rated shows, and criticized the official police investigation. The criticism was extremely effective and it literally disproved beyond a doubt the police's theory of the crime. Rather than admit their error, the police decided to try to discredit us. That was what triggered the vendetta.*

J.B.: Please explain to our readers the connections between the investigation into the serial killer in “The Monster of Florence” and the Amanda Knox case.

**“What struck me most was the stark contrast between the ethereal loveliness of the Florentine countryside and the savagery of the murders committed there.”**



**“...never have I interviewed anyone like him, who was so arrogant and self-assured and never stopped smiling, even when we accused him of being the Monster of Florence.”**

D.P.: *Guiliano Mignini was the corrupt prosecutor in the Monster case, and later prosecuted the Amanda Knox case. In both instances he claimed a Satanic cult was behind the crimes.*

J.B.: Would you describe the actions the authorities took against you and Spezi?

D.P.: *They broke into Mario's apartment and seized his computers and archive on the Monster case. Later, they called me on my cell phone, demanded to know where I was, and came to detain me and subjected me to a lengthy interrogation, in Italian, with no lawyer present, in which they accused me of many crimes, including being an accessory to murder! I was then asked to leave the country. Following that, they arrested Mario and accused him of being a member of the Satanic cult which they claimed was behind the Monster killings. It was a tragicomedy of the highest order.*

J.B.: From reading “The Monster of Florence,” the reader will conclude that you and Spezi are certain of the identification of the killer. Has anything happened since the book was published to cause you to change your mind about that?

D.P.: *Nothing has happened to change our minds. When you put it all together, it leads to that one individual. Unfortunately, the police have no interest in pursuing our theory of the crime.*

J.B.: In the scene where you and Spezi sit down with the killer in his home, I found myself holding my breath. It was one of the most intense reading experiences I have ever had. Please describe that experience here for our readers.

D.P.: *As a journalist, I've interviewed many unusual people. But never have I interviewed anyone like him, who was so arrogant and self-assured and never stopped smiling, even when we accused him of being the Monster of Florence. He clearly enjoyed every minute of it. It was beyond chilling. And of course, his threat at the end—still delivered with a big smile—left us shaken.*

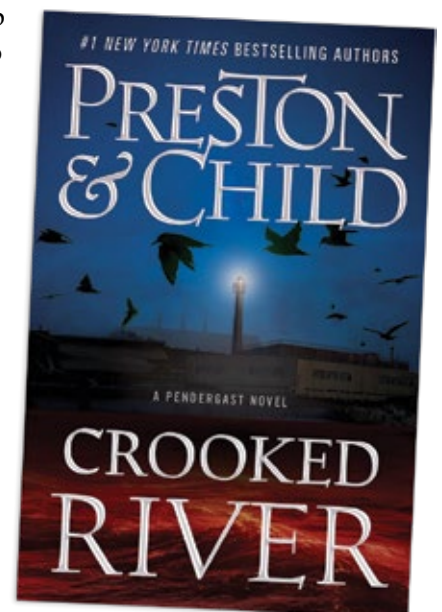
J.B.: Among many accolades for “The Monster of Florence,” *USA Today* named it a Top True-Crime Book of All Time. Has the success of the book inspired you to want to write another true-crime story?

D.P.: *No. Never. The Monster was unique. And to tell you the truth, the horror of that case and the sorrow and tragedy those murders delivered to the parents of the young people he so brutally killed, left me deeply shaken. I would never put myself through that experience again.*

J.B.: Finally, please tell us what you're working on now and when it will be released.

D.P.: I'm working on a thriller with Lincoln Child, entitled “Scorpion's Tail,” which involves the mysterious discovery of an old corpse near the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.

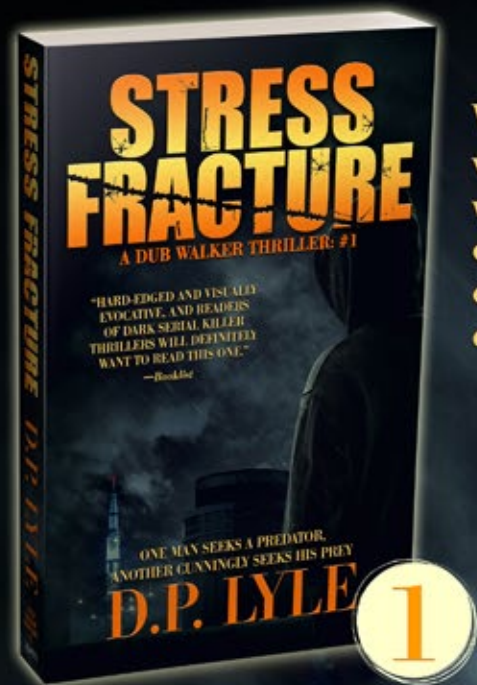
To learn more about Douglas Preston's works, upcoming events, and new projects he's currently working on, visit [www.prestonchild.com](http://www.prestonchild.com). ■





# DUB WALKER

## RETURNS TO PRINT!



When forensic expert Dub Walker's friend becomes the victim of a grisly murder, he must track down a serial killer who has been terrorizing the county. Involved in many cases, Dub thought he'd seen it all; yet this psychopath outmaneuvers him at every turn. Danger doubles when a deadly conspiracy arises, and a new horror begins.

**"DOUG LYLE WRITES WHAT HE KNOWS—AND WHAT HE KNOWS IS TERRIFIC. DUB WALKER IS A KEEPER."**

*—Lee Child, New York Times Bestselling Author*

Forensic criminalist Dub Walker is asked to find a missing girl, but when her body shows up in a shallow grave he's faced with a hideous case. As other victims arise, in order to bring justice, Dub must walk a trail of terror leading him into the world of a psycho whose lack of human decency is too gruesome to contemplate.

**"TOLD IN A WITTY TONGUE-IN-CHEEK STYLE THAT HUMORS AS IT HORRIFIES. A RENOWNED PHYSICIAN HIMSELF, LYLE IS A MASTER OF THE MEDICAL THRILLER. HIGHLY ENJOYABLE: READ THIS BOOK."**

*—Gayle Lynds, New York Times Bestselling Author*



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**SUSPENSE MAGAZINE • SUSPENSE RADIO**

# THE BLACK PILL

A *Jackson & Dallas* Thriller  
(Chapters 1, 2 & 5)

By L.J. Sellers

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



## CHAPTER 1

Saturday, September 14,  
6:27 a.m.

Bettina Rios pulled on running shoes, grabbed her cell phone from the dresser, and clicked the Strava icon. But she wouldn't start the mileage app yet. First she had to check on her mother. Across the hall, she tapped lightly on the other

bedroom door. "Mama? You awake?"

"Si."

Bettina stepped in, braced for the clutter and smell. Her mother loved glass figurines and tacky paintings and had managed to accumulate a substantial collection in the short time they'd been here. The old woman sat in her wheelchair, wearing stained sweatpants and a red sweater with holes in it, her gray hair a mess. She only changed clothes when Bettina helped her shower. Her mother hated the whole undignified process, so they didn't do it often.

"How are you?" Bettina always spoke English to Mama and encouraged her to do the same. The skill might save their lives someday.

"I no sleep." Her weak voice made Bettina's heart hurt. Mama had been so strong, so fearless. But the long journey had taken its toll, and now she couldn't do much of anything.

"Maybe less coffee." Bettina smiled gently, knowing she had wasted her breath. Her mother ate and drank whatever she wanted. That's how she'd ended up in this mess. The

stubborn woman was probably diabetic but wouldn't see a doctor or take any help from "strangers." So Bettina did it all. The situation was challenging to work around, so she kept their finances afloat with gig jobs. Her main one was really strange, but paid well.

She kissed Mama's forehead and wheeled her into the kitchen. "Fruit and toast?"

"Just toast. With *marmalada*." A crooked smile eased onto her sun-weathered face. "That counts as fruit."

"Sure." Bettina fixed whatever made her mother happy. Today, that was toast spread thick with strawberry jam. She noticed the fridge was low on cheese and wine, the two things her mother loved most, so she would make a trip to the store later. After handing over the plate, Bettina asked, "What else can I do for you?"

"*Nada*. Later, you can help me write to Ernesto." Bettina's older brother who was still in their home country. Mama waved a crippled blue-veined hand. "Go run. I'll be fine."

Feeling guilty as usual, Bettina headed out, locking the door behind her. On the sidewalk, she pressed the Strava record button and the screen changed to a map. She clicked Start and slid the phone into her fanny pack.

Jogging down the quiet, low-rent street, she squinted in the near darkness. Her eyes would adjust soon, and the sun would rise before she finished her run. She didn't care for the darkness, but in the summer months, she liked to get her workout done before the temperature rose and before she showered and dressed for the day. Using the Strava app was rather silly, because she didn't vary her route much. But she liked keeping track of her miles and being connected to others who were as obsessed with exercise as she was. All of it helped keep her accountable. If she skipped a day, one of her followers would ping her and want to know why. She did the same for them.



A wave of apprehension rolled over her. Would her ex-boyfriend use the app as a way to get to her? What a mistake he'd been. So emotional and possessive. But she'd been lonely for so long, she'd let her guard down and trusted a *chico sexy* who'd smiled at her in that special way. Bettina shook it off, reassuring herself again that using Strava was fine. Aaron didn't exercise and wasn't tech savvy, so he'd never find her that way. The loneliness of her life was nearly unbearable, and the low-key social network gave her some interaction.

At the corner, she turned left on Lombard and headed toward the river park. From there, she would run north on the bike path to the Owosso bridge, cross over, and run back on the other side of the river. The whole loop, including the five blocks to and from her house, covered four and a half miles. She'd hoped to improve her conditioning over time, but the extra weight on her petite body slowed her down.

She'd been running her whole life, one way or another. As a kid, she'd dashed around the beach with her brother, a never-ending game of chase. Years later, when her breasts developed, she'd run from gang members who wanted to rape her and claim her as their property. After they'd caught her, she and Mama had left the first time. Now she jogged to keep her brain from going *loco*—and to burn off all the cheese and chocolate she loved to eat.

Bettina approached the narrow entrance to the park and tensed, wishing for a little more daylight. Overgrown with trees on both sides, the tucked-away access lane was the only part of the route that made her feel vulnerable. She touched the canister of mace she wore around her neck and picked up her pace. As she rounded the turn, she heard something snap. Bettina jerked her head toward the noise. Nothing but eerie shadows under the overhanging trees. Relieved to see the parking lot ahead, she smiled at her own jitters.

Soft footsteps rustled in the other direction. She spun toward the sound, and a dark figure rushed at her. *No!* In a flash, he grabbed her ponytail and jerked her toward him with a stunning force. Bettina opened her mouth to scream, but his hand clamped over it. An acrid scent burned her nose.

*Oh god!* He was drugging her! She reached for her mace, but dizziness overcame her. A powerful arm squeezed around her shoulders, dragging her into the trees. As her world started to go black, her last thought was, "I'm so sorry, Mama!"

## CHAPTER 2

*Tuesday, September 17, 5:45 p.m.*

Detective Wade Jackson reached for his service weapon, and a terrifying scream erupted behind him. He spun around, heart pounding. The scream became a wail of agony. He started forward, then remembered the Sig Sauer holstered

against his ribs. He pulled the gun, shoved it into a case on the dresser, and slammed the locking lid.

A quick sprint into the hall brought him face-to-face with the problem. Two four-year-old boys had a death grip on a plastic dinosaur toy and neither would let go. The wailing came from Micah, Kera's grandson, who was rather temperamental. But the boy had been in transition for most of his short life and had lost his mother the previous year.

"I had it first," Benjie, his adopted son, was emphatic, yet calm. He'd not only lost his mother too, he'd witnessed her murder. Yet the tragic event had given him a strange mature serenity. Jackson worried that Benjie was suppressing his anxiety, but counseling hadn't brought it out.

Jackson held out a hand. "Give it to me, please."

Benjie quickly let go, forcing Micah to be the one to hand it over. An act that made his stepbrother sob.

Kera popped out of the bathroom. "What's going on?" Tall and gorgeous, his girlfriend was always a pleasure to his weary eyes.

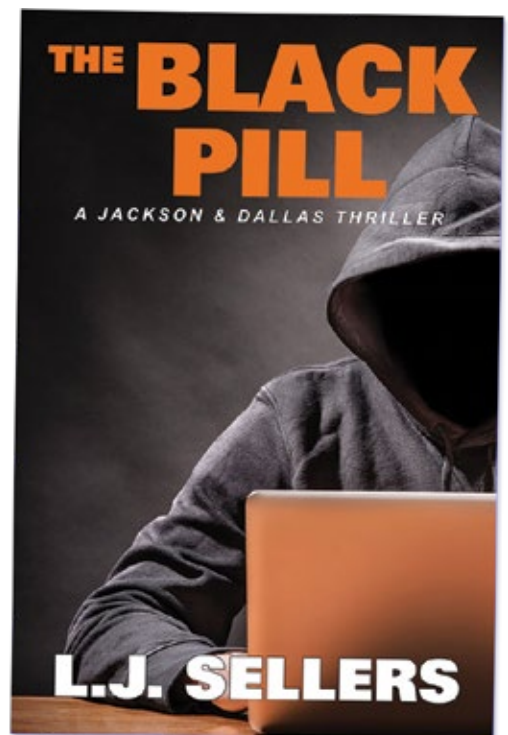
"Same old stuff." Jackson handed her the toy. "We need two of these."

"We have two!" Kera looked back and forth between the boys. "Where's the other one?"

Micah shrugged, and Benjie looked thoughtful. "Maybe in the toy box."

"Well, go find it. You're not getting this one back until you do." She shooed them off and leaned in to kiss Jackson. "I love it when you're home early and we can be a normal family."

J a c k s o n laughed. "I'm not sure there's anything normal about our scenario, but I'm happy to be here too." *Sort of.* Living full-time with Kera and Micah was more challenging than he'd imagined. Having a second young child in the house generated an energy and volume he wasn't prepared for—and the more time the boys



spent together, the more they fought. His daughter Katie, almost a legal adult now, had been quiet and easy as a little kid.

Jackson suppressed a sigh, followed Kera to the kitchen, and started chopping the onion she handed him. "How was your day?" he asked.

"Good." She put down the big knife she'd just picked up. "But I think I made a mistake in taking the job at the fertility clinic. It's so boring."

"You mean compared to Planned Parenthood." Jackson grinned. "I knew you would miss the chaos."

She smiled now too. "It's more about missing the variety of patients. I never knew who would be waiting in the exam room. All walks of life."

"Yeah, I get that in my job too." Jackson squeezed her arm. "So go back to the birth control clinic. You know they'll be glad to have you."

"It pays less."

"I know. We'll be fine. You need to enjoy your work."

"Thanks for that."

"Of course."

After dinner, Jackson sat on the living-room floor with the boys, surrounded by a rainbow of blocks. They constructed a variety of towers, tearing each one down with gusto before starting another. Next they built a mutant vehicle. He yearned for one of the kids to show an interest in real cars someday. His daughter had helped him restore a '69 GTO, but she'd done it out of obligation rather than real passion, and he'd had to sell it after his divorce. They'd also built a three-wheeled vehicle he still drove sometimes. Now that he and Kera were settled into this big rental home, he was eager to get started on a new project.

When Micah got tired and cranky, Kera read a story to the boys, then Jackson helped them get ready for bed.

"Remember, tomorrow is park day." Benjie hugged him with a tight squeeze. "I love you, Daddy." The words melted his heart every time.

He and Kera changed into pajamas, got into bed to watch a movie, and fell asleep before it ended.

Jackson woke to his phone ringing. Startled and confused, he sat up, glancing at the digital clock: 12:45 a.m. He snatched his phone from the nightstand. *Sergeant Lammers*. A strange mix of dread and adrenaline surged through him. Plus another emotion he couldn't identify.

"Is it work?" Kera mumbled, sitting up too.

He nodded, climbed out of bed, and headed into the hall for privacy. "Hey, Sarge. What have we got?"

"A dead body in the road at the corner of Greenhill and

Highway 126." A pause. "I need you to take it."

"A traffic accident?" He knew better.

"No. The victim is wrapped in plastic, and a woman motorist ran over it."

*What?* "That's a new one."

"Indeed. That's why I called you. Besides, everyone else is already overworked."

A flash of guilt. "Do we know anything yet?"

"No. The responding patrol officer dragged the body out of the road for safety but didn't try to unwrap it."

"Good. I need to see it as is." The scene flashed in his mind. A dark roadside clusterfuck—right on the edge of city limits. "But the location is inside the boundary?"

"We're assuming so."

"Do I get a team?" The Violent Crimes Unit was overwhelmed, as always, but this time it was mostly his fault for taking medical leave for the first half of the month.

"I'll send Evans out, and we'll see what develops."

"I'm on my way." Jackson stepped back into the bedroom.

Kera was on her feet now. "A new homicide?"

"An odd one. I'll tell you what I can when I know more."

"I'll make you coffee while you get dressed."

"Thank you!" She was so good to him. He pulled on the same clothes he'd been wearing earlier and retrieved his weapon from the fingerprint safe. He hated leaving the house in the middle of the night, but at least now he didn't have to wake up his kids and take them to a sitter when it happened. He'd only had a small window of time between when his daughter was old enough to be left alone and when Benjie came into his life.

Jackson stopped, suddenly worried. *Where was Katie?* Had she come home while he was asleep? No, he would have woken at the sound. Another curfew violation. Her new boyfriend obviously didn't respect his rules.

In the kitchen, while Jackson located his travel mug, Kera said, "I used the Keurig because it's faster, but don't worry, the brew is strong."

He transferred the coffee and hugged her. "Will you try to track down Katie? I don't have the time or focus right now."

"I'll text her."

"Thanks." Jackson tried not to look, or feel, upset. "I'll probably be back around four in the morning for a couple hours of sleep."

"Are you sure you're ready for this? Your surgery was less than a month ago."

"I'm fine. Yes, the incision still hurts, but it's different. A healing pain and fading fast." The abdominal fibrosis would likely grow back again, but he refused to worry about it until



it happened. "We're too short-handed for me to sit out any longer."

"And you love your work." Kera smiled.

"It's who I am." Jackson kissed her and headed out.

In the driveway, he noticed Katie's car parked on the street in front of the house. That meant her boyfriend was with her and that Aaron would likely borrow the Honda and drive it home. Jackson hated both thoughts. He jogged over, wincing at the sight of them making out in the backseat. Would he ever get used to the idea that his daughter was a sexual person?

He slapped the roof hard. "Wrap it up. Katie has a curfew!" If not for his new case, he would have hung around, making them uncomfortable.

But he was already running late. Jackson hurried to his city-issued sedan. Behind the wheel, he gunned the engine for effect as he backed out of the driveway, then stopped parallel with the other vehicle. Katie glared and rolled her eyes. Jackson pointed at the house, unsmiling. He'd accepted long ago that he had no real control over his daughter, but he maintained the right to have rules if she wanted to live in his house. Or his rental anyway. He and Kera had signed a six-month lease on this place, giving them time to look for a house to purchase. But he wasn't in any rush, and he and his brother still owned the house they'd grown up in.

As Jackson drove off, he pushed the family stuff out of his head. He had a murder victim waiting and justice to pursue.

## CHAPTER 5

*Wednesday, 5:45 a.m.*

The hot-air balloon lifted off the ground, giving Agent Jamie Dallas a rush of excitement. Not exactly the adrenaline burst she experienced when skydiving or zip-lining, but still glorious—and this excursion would last longer. As the balloon drifted higher and higher, her grin widened. She loved seeing the massive city below, laid out like a grid, shrinking slowly down to a model-scale size. The wide-open blue sky drifted with clouds at eye level, and a hawk soared by.

The pilot changed directions and headed north, and soon she spotted hills, canyons, and square plots of land below. As the city faded into the distance, an eerie silence engulfed them. Even the wind quieted, and all she could hear was her own pulse.

Her heart filled with joy, and for a moment, she forgot everything else, including the other people on the flight. She loved this sensation so much. Feeling like a bird who could fly anywhere, free from restrictions or planned routes. Above and away from everything, especially the desk she'd been stuck at for a while. Away from the crime and fear and

trauma she encountered on her job every day.

The excursion was an early morning birthday gift to herself, and she thought she might make it a yearly tradition. The only thing that would have made it better was sharing it with Cameron, who was in Flagstaff working. But she would see him for a late dinner tonight after he drove down. She looked forward to wrapping up this perfect day with amazing sex, a great way to say goodbye to her twenties.

Two hours later, Dallas strode into the Phoenix FBI office, feeling both at home and restless at the same time. Sliding into her desk chair, she opened her computer and scanned the bureau's news feed. Upstairs, a special team of agents and analysts stared at a roomful of monitors, watching around-the-clock for breaking events across the nation. Still, taking America's *crime pulse* was also her first responsibility. Nothing eye-popping stood out. Politics had so consumed the citizenry, that except for hate crimes, the rate of federal offenses had actually dropped.

But criminals never took breaks, so Dallas grudgingly opened a report she'd started about a local fraud ring run by a sixty-two-year-old woman with a gift for real estate scams. The grifter preyed on out-of-town seniors looking to buy winter homes in the area. Dallas had posed as a sketchy realtor to help bust the scammers. The assignment had taken her out of the office, but not out of town. And not deep enough undercover to suit her. She loved taking on a whole new persona to penetrate deep into a criminal ring. Just thinking about the risk sent a surge of juice through her body.

Her desk phone rang at the same time, startling her. Line one, her new boss. She picked up. "Good morning, sir."

"Come to my office, please. I have a high-priority assignment for you."

Yes! Dallas jumped up, adrenaline pulsing again. She hustled upstairs to the corner office where Special Agent Radner ran their division. Notepad in hand, she hurried through the open door. Behind his desk, Radner hunched forward, masking the full size of his impressive frame. His gray kinky hair, cut close to the scalp, contrasted with his dark skin tone, and his face was sweet to look at. She repressed a surge of sexual attraction and sat down. "What have you got for me?"

"An undercover job in Vancouver. A string of roofie rapes near the University of Washington campus."

"You want me to work as bait." The risk didn't bother her, but the lack of challenge did.

"You're exactly his type." Radner paused and gave her a small smile. "Blonde, blue-eyed, and attractive. You don't even have to change your looks."

Dallas nodded, trying to hide her disappointment. Like any good actress, she liked changing her appearance. That was part of the fun. So was changing her name, location, and personality. When she'd first taken acting classes in high school, she would have laughed at the idea that she would end up in law enforcement. Not with her sketchy parents. But here she was. "What do we know about the suspect?"

"Two of the earlier victims recall talking to a guy in his earlier thirties. They think he was dark blond and a little heavyset. But others, assaulted later, said he might have brownish hair but bald in front. So there could be two assailants."

"Or maybe he's changing his looks." Making her job harder. "Also, dark blonde and brownish could be the same color. And if the women were roofied, they might not remember the perp at all, maybe just the guy they talked to right before."

Agent Radner pushed a folder across the desk. "Six sexual assault reports are in the file, plus a list of sexual predators in the Vancouver area. I've also submitted a subpoena to the university for a list of all their male students. Once we have it, our analysts will round up photos and sort the names along any demographic you ask for."

"Excellent. Who's my local contact?"

"I don't know yet, but someone will text your burner phone after you arrive in Vancouver."

"My new alias?"

"Amber Davison. Since you're not going in deep, the UC team is generating a fake ID this time. You can pick it up on your way out today."

Her excitement mounted. When she went deep undercover, she had to wait for the DMV to create a real driver's license and for the undercover team to generate background files such as school records, social media pages, and an appropriate resume. Not this time. "When do I leave?"

"As soon as you wrap up your personal obligations. You might be gone two weeks or two months. The Vancouver police haven't had any luck tracking this perp, so we know he's careful." Her boss paused for moment. "He's also escalating. The last victim woke up in his car with the engine running. She bolted but was too panicked to get a description or plate number."

"You think he was trying to kidnap her?"

"Possibly."

"I'll be careful."

"And you'll wear a tracker."

"Of course." Dallas started to get up. "I'll book a flight for the morning."

"Wait. There's more."

An unexpected wave of apprehension hit her as she sat back down.

"We recently found a new group of online incels with disturbingly violent rhetoric. I need you to set up a profile and get inside. Maybe we'll spot our perp."

The assignment both excited and repulsed her. She'd read enough *involuntary celibate* rants to know how angry and irrational their attitudes were. "What's the URL?"

"It's in your folder, and the website is named Not Normal."

Dallas coughed up a harsh laugh. "No kidding. At least they have some self-awareness."

Radner shook his head. "Not really. They call everyone else—meaning those of us having sex—*normies*. But they take no responsibility for their own lack thereof. They blame women. For apparently failing to fulfill their social obligation to provide sex." Her boss looked perplexed and amused at the same time. "But you probably are aware of all this."

"I've done some reading on the topic. What else do we know about the members?"

"Their digital fingerprints come from all over the country. But some are probably tech savvy enough to use VPNs or proxy servers." Radner locked eyes with her, his long years on the job making his brow wrinkled. "There's also a lot of overlap with white supremacist organizations, so you have to assume anyone from the group is carrying."

"Got it." Dallas squirmed, eager to get started. "Anything else?"

"Don't meet anyone without backup." Agent Radner stood, signaling she should too. "Don't worry much about blowing your cover. This isn't an organized crime ring. Just a lone sexual predator."

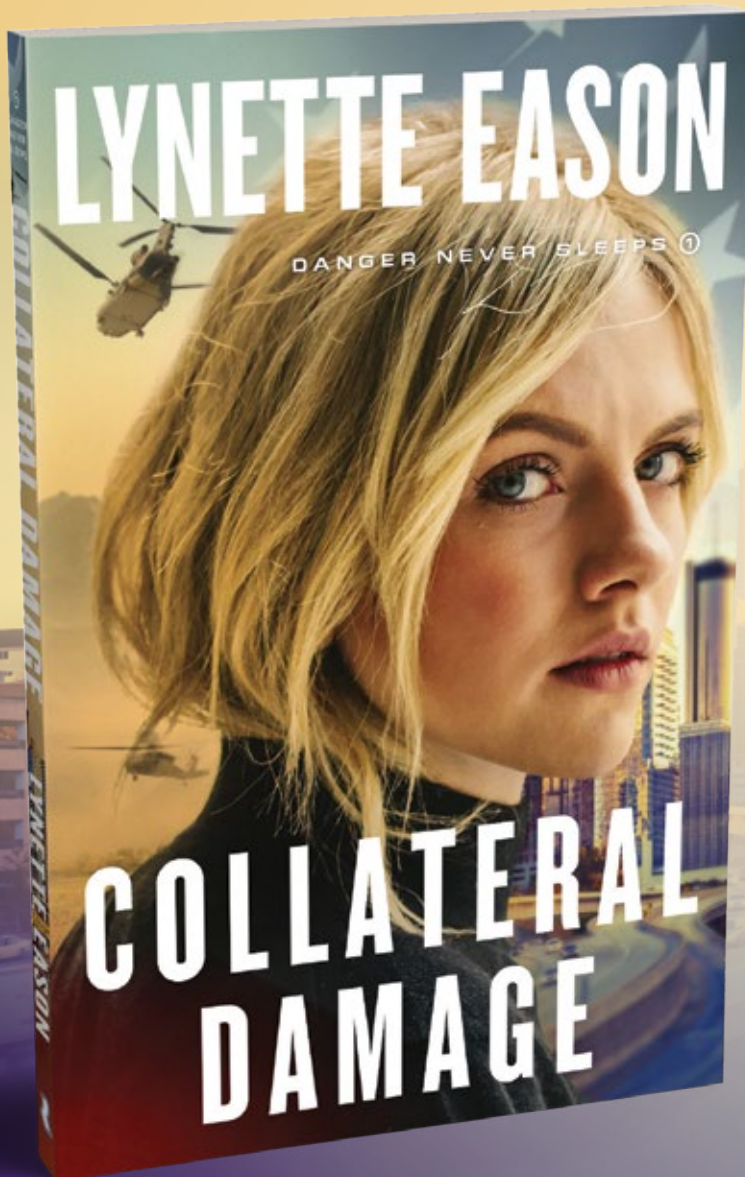
Dallas nodded. But as she walked out, doubts set in. What if the perp didn't work alone? What if he had help and support from the group? This sting might be more dangerous than they realized. ■

*Author's Note:* When I traveled to Costa Rica to visit my grandchildren, I ended up rescuing them from a dangerous cult and running through the jungle from armed men. The horrific conditions those kids were living under formed the characters' background in my new thriller, *THE BLACK PILL*.

*L.J. Sellers writes the bestselling Detective Jackson Mysteries—a four-time Readers Favorite Award winner—as well as the Agent Dallas series and provocative standalone thrillers and scripts. She resides in Eugene, Oregon where many of her 26 novels are set and is an award-winning journalist. When not plotting murders, L.J. enjoys standup comedy, cycling, and zip-lining. She's also been known to jump out of airplanes.*



They thought they left the fight  
behind on the battlefield.  
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ARE JUST BEGINNING.**



Honorably discharged from the Army after an explosion nearly killed her, former military psychiatrist Brooke Adams has set up shop to help others, but her days of helping military personnel are over. She's got her own battles to fight from her time overseas, and she's not equipped to take on more.

When Asher arrives at Brooke's office for an appointment, she isn't there—but a dead body is. When it becomes clear that Brooke was the real target of the attack—and that her secrets go even deeper than his own—Asher vows to protect her no matter what.

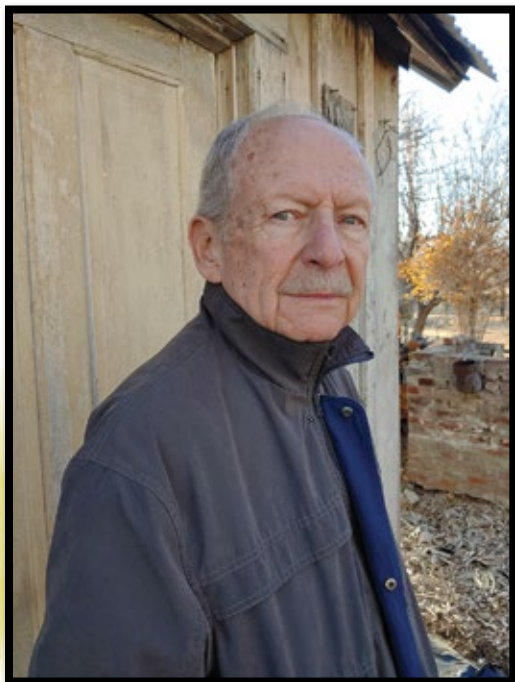
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# Stellar Rays:

## The Fashion for Chandler

By Janet Rogers

Press Photo Credits: Provided by Author



*Copper pilasters envelope the doorway to the private dining room. Undulating waves of copper frame the tiered dining area from the bar. Outsized deco chandeliers hover overhead. A mural following the trail of the Monterey Cypress rings the room at the ceiling. The walls are sculpted. It's bosomy and warm.*

You're inside the *Cypress Club*. No, not Eddie Mars' gambling joint. That was Raymond Chandler's confection, dating from his first full novel, "The Big Sleep," circa 1939. The quote is more than a half-century later, from a Ray A. March piece on a high-toned eatery opening in San Francisco. The piece gets to the wines and the cooking later (for a flavor, the article is on my website). But like the Eddie Mars' original, this *Cypress Club* knew first to put its patrons in the mood, starting before they stepped inside. The approach to Chandler's club is discreet to the point of disappearing in the oceanside fog, in among the twisted Monterey cypresses at the far end of Las Olindas. Likewise in the Bogart and Bacall movie, where it's a quiet presence behind its parking lot. You get the picture. There are night spots you only hear about. The cool appeal is

inside, for those who already know the address. Ray March's *Cypress Club* gets the picture so well, it's practically invisible. He writes: *Outside, in the dark rain the cabby slows down looking for a sign, lights. Something, but here's nothing.*

The *Cypress Club*. If you're not from San Francisco you might be looking it up, wondering about grabbing a table the next time you visit. But you're as late as I was. Chandler's version has been evergreen in print these last eighty years. The version on Jackson near Montgomery ran for a decade and closed before I ever saw the city. So, while Ray March's copy would have me queuing around the block for instant noodles, I was never there. Even so, the idea intrigues me.

I mean, what was the deal that rainy night, about a restaurant that took itself too seriously to put its name in lights? It was stylish, but what was the appeal? And after a glittering opening, what did it have, apart from eating, to pull an end-of-century San Francisco crowd to a chic dining room, name-checking a club in a late 1930s novel set in Los Angeles?

Sure, Eddie Mars' joint has scenes of its own in the dazzling Warner Brothers' movie, from 1946. What film fan forgets the night spot where Bacall glides and Bogart nods approval? But San Francisco's *Cypress Club* knew the appeal reached way past literary crime enthusiasts and classic movie aficionados. At the close of the century, 30s going-on 40s style—Deco lighting, two-tone shoes, dreamland dresses—was (and is still) an instantly recognizable look and hook, constantly recycled and generally adored. Which started me thinking. A hook for what, exactly?

The 30s through the 50s were Chandler time. The decades of his pulp writing and full-length mysteries, when his drawled lyricism shook up detective fiction and his image of southern California was so powerful it never went away. Nobody did or does hardboiled better. But his transforming of mystery writing isn't for now. For now we'll stay with the time and the place.

Like many arriving in LA in the boom years of the 1910s, Chandler was not obviously equipped for making a success. In his mid-twenties, English schooled and accented, he hadn't been prepped for this overgrowing city with its dark, religious devotion to the main chance, from City Hall on down. He jobbed around there, went to war and back, climbed the oil business



*The Cypress Club* by Ray A. March as first published  
in *StatesWest Travel* May /June 1991

[illegible]

It's where that look and hook of the 1940s takes you, if you go looking. To a mood; cynical, detached, seen-it-all and not impressed, that sold a million Marlowe stories and electrified on the silver screen. A handful of patrons at that gala opening might have known those years themselves. A generation too young to know them could only thrill to the fashion. They simply knew the *Cypress Club* was its style, and the lone trumpet twisting through *Chinatown* was its soundtrack—*played sexy*, the way Jerry Goldsmith said to, *but like it's not good sex*. For the rest, if they were curious about the times and the mood that went with the fashion, those Chandler books and movies would have put them right there. They were around. Still are. Ray March knew them. Cue a lone trumpet to let him play us out:

'Cypress Club, huh?' ■



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THEY WANTED TO KILL HIM. THEY WANTED TO KILL HIM.

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# The Name's Maier:

## Welcome to the Far East

By Tom Vater

Southeast Asia is a fascinating part of the world to live in and write about. The region is full of contrasts and extremes. It's usually hot, the cities are crazy and crowded, and the countryside is sublime. The politics are turbulent and often murky, sometimes violent. The pollution can be apocalyptic. In Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, the three countries I set my novels in, Buddhism, capitalism and cronyism all thrive. The poor see little justice, and in recent years autocratic governments have really stepped up to head off civic attempts to create more equal and open societies. Last but not least, foreign meddling has been common for centuries and the white man has done his fair share of damage, from colonial enterprises in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the USA's destruction of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the 60s and 70s.

In comes Detective Maier, a former war correspondent turned private eye. Having worked in Asia as a conflict journalist in the 1990s, Maier—single, late 40s, and based in Hamburg—is regularly sent east to look into crimes involving Germans.

Why would anyone write a series of detective novels in English, featuring a German protagonist in Asia? *Well, why the hell not?* I thought. Anything goes in fiction: There are zombie PIs out there. I knew the region and had met more than enough edgy, creepy characters, both local and foreign, on my travels, to provide rich material for gripping crime fiction. And for a while, time was on my and Maier's side.

I've lived in South and Southeast Asia for much of my adult life and write both non-fiction and fiction about this part of the world that, for all its darkness and chaos, I love. My travels have led me on foot across the Himalayas, given me the opportunity to dive with hundreds of sharks in the Philippines, taken me

to the largest human gathering on Earth in India, and offered me the chance to uncover and document recent history (often hair-raisingly dramatic, if not utterly tragic) and cultural trends and gems in the region.

On my journeys, I joined sea gypsies and nomads, pilgrims, serial killers, rebels and soldiers, war lords, dissidents, pirates and sex workers, hippies, secret agents, drug dealers, hitmen and dope fiends, cops, prophets, rock stars, artists, tattooists, film makers and fellow writers. A few of these remarkable people have become friends. Others inspired characters in my novels.

My first visit to Cambodia was brief and reckless. In 1995, I found myself in Trat Province in eastern Thailand. A fellow traveler told me it was possible to cross the border into war-torn Cambodia without a visa or passport. The following day I cruised across the Gulf of Thailand and into the mouth of the Koh Kong River in a speed boat, accompanied by a man with a suitcase chained to his wrist and a sex worker on her way home from Pattaya.

Someone wrote that Cambodia is the most dangerous country in the world. First one falls in love with it, then it breaks one's heart. The heart break was not long in coming. As I re-crossed into Thailand the following day, a young Khmer man approached me. He asked me if by any chance I would visit the country's capital, Phnom Penh. At the time there was no overland connection between Koh Kong and the rest of the country, the roads had all been destroyed and marauding armies—Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese backed Cambodian government forces—still clashed every now and then. The man asked me to take a letter to his wife. He had not heard from her in three years. I had no plans to travel to Phnom

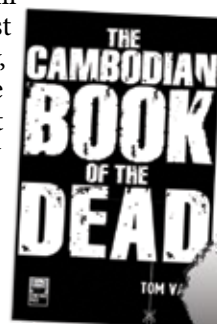
Penh at the time. His sadness was overwhelming.

A few years later I was back, for the Angkor temples, the amazing gun metal skies, the funky people and burnt landscapes, the country's crazy and dark history and its uncertain future—the small Southeast Asian kingdom really got under my skin.

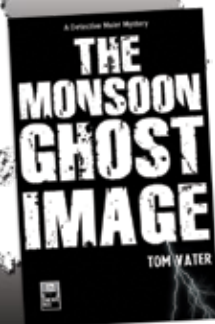
I wrote a couple of documentary screenplays, several guidebooks to the Angkor monuments, and countless articles about post-conflict Cambodia, but all that stopped short of describing what I really saw there. I wanted to tell stories that were too far out, and perhaps too close to the truth, to be featured in the media I was working for. I locked myself in a hut on the Cambodian coast and wrote the first draft of "The Cambodian Book of the Dead."

I set off from a spark I'd had about a Cambodian girl who is killed in a road accident by a foreign tourist. Neither the tourist nor the girl were what they seemed and the story soon led down into the country's darkest historical recesses. The Khmer Rouge (the Cambodian communists) genocide took place from 1975 until the country was liberated by the Vietnamese in 1979. Money, mail and commerce were outlawed and a quarter of the population died, either of starvation working in rural communes or of outright murder. The complete breakdown of everything we know as a society was still palpable when I first visited the country, and it made me think often about the history of my own homeland.

But how to put German history into crime fiction set in Cambodia?







I looked at other crime fiction writers for guidance. I read Philip Kerr's wonderful *Bernie Gunther* novels and Robert Wilson's Portugal set fiction. I was a fan of "The Man in the High Castle" by Philip K. Dick and "Fatherland" by Robert Harris.

Then I met a Khmer Rouge camera man who told me that Europeans had been present at many Khmer Rouge leadership meetings, all through the years of mass murder. I found out that several foreign embassies in Cambodia had remained open during the Khmer Rouge period. My idea that a Nazi had crossed over to Tito's partisans at the end of World War II and ended up as a diplomat in the Yugoslav embassy in Phnom Penh in the mid-70s, did not seem too far-fetched. I created the White Spider, the nemesis of my detective. (I called my detective Maier, a very ordinary German name for an extraordinary man. The name is also a nod to John D. Macdonald's *Travis McGee* series, whose sidekick is called Meyer.)

Maier is a former East German journalist who, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, becomes a war correspondent in the new Germany. After a near death experience in Cambodia—the opening scene in "The Cambodian Book of the Dead"—he turns detective. He's a solitary man who drinks vodka orange, has a dislike for guns and cigarettes, and lets his cases develop around him...slowly. I send him to Cambodia in search of the wayward heir to a Hamburg coffee empire who, as I mentioned, had killed a local girl in a traffic accident. His search leads back in time, through the communist revolution to the White Spider, the Nazi war criminal who hides amongst the detritus of another nation's collapse and reigns over an ancient Khmer temple located deep in the jungle. Soon Maier, captured and imprisoned, is forced to write the biography of the White Spider; a tale of mass murder that reaches from the Cambodian Killing Fields back to

Europe's concentration camps. He must write this, or die.

In 2012, publisher Hans Kemp and I founded Crime Wave Press ([www.crimewavepress.com](http://www.crimewavepress.com)), a Hong Kong based English language crime fiction imprint. Our first title, my first novel, "The Devil's Road to Kathmandu," was picked up by a Spanish publisher and remains in print, both in English and Spanish. Our second title, "The Cambodian Book of the Dead" was snapped up by crime fiction imprint Exhibit A in 2013. The novel sold almost 4,500 copies, mostly in the US. I signed a contract for a second Maier title, "The Man with the Golden Mind," with Exhibit A. This time around, the intrepid German detective travels to communist Laos.

A few years earlier I had co-written the screenplay for "The Most Secret Place on Earth" (<https://bit.ly/2yt1BM3>), a feature-length documentary by Marc Eberle on the CIA's secret war in Laos in the 1960s and 1970s. The Americans built 400 airstrips across Laos and trained 30,000 Hmong, an ethnic minority, to fight the Laotian communists. Supported by a huge bombing campaign—more bombs were dropped on Laos than on Germany and Japan combined in WWII—CIA handlers pushed their local mercenaries into battle until most had died. As in Vietnam, the US lost its war in Laos.

In 2001, Maier is sent to Vientiane, the Laotian capital, to investigate the unsolved murder of an East German cultural attaché in 1976, and to track down a list of Vietnam War era double agents and its author whom no one has seen in twenty-five years. Said agent, code-named Weltmeister, a man who carries secrets that could upset the global balance of power, turns out to be intimately connected to Maier's past. Henry Kissinger has a cameo appearance.

Exhibit A folded shortly after "The Man with the Golden Mind" was published in 2014. I was disappointed. But I felt that I wasn't finished with Maier. It took me a long while to return with another, final story, "The Monsoon Ghost Image," published by Crime Wave Press in 2018.

In the wake of 9/11, Maier travels

to Thailand to investigate the re-appearance of a famous German conflict photographer who had supposedly died months earlier in a boating accident off the Thai coast. Maier stumbles on a photograph shot by said photographer, of a violent interrogation conducted by the CIA at a black site in Thailand. As soon as he takes possession of the image file, Maier is hunted—by the American Secret Service, a shady German tycoon who owns an island populated by animals from Africa, and by the Wicked Witch of the East, a mysterious woman who directs Maier deep into America's War on Terror. The novel is populated by colorful characters: a shady southern belle, a psychotic serial killer with near telepathic abilities, a separatist from Chechnya, a tragic transsexual, an environmental campaigner, and a family of sea nomads, all touched by the fate of a photograph the US wants no one to see.

Since "The Monsoon Ghost Image" was published, I have co-written three crime novellas with French writer Laure Siegel which were serialized and turned into audio CDs for *Ecoute Magazine*, and have contributed the short story "To Kill an Arab" to the star-studded crime fiction anthology "A Time For Violence" (<https://amzn.to/34IYQjz>), featuring Max Collins, Joe Lansdale and Peter Leonard (son of Elmore), published by Close To The Bone, and have written a cycle of crime novellas—*Kolkata Noir*—during an artist residency with the Goethe Institut in Kolkata, India, which will be out later this year.

The *Detective Maier* trilogy is now available with Crime Wave Press, though second-hand paperback copies of the first two Exhibit A titles remain easy to track down.

To date, Crime Wave Press has published 33 crime novels and short story anthologies from around the world. Several titles have been translated or had movie rights optioned. We even made a movie.... (<https://bit.ly/2XOu7Qv>).

It's been a hell of a journey so far. ■



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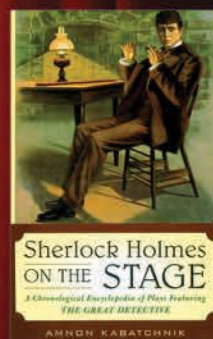
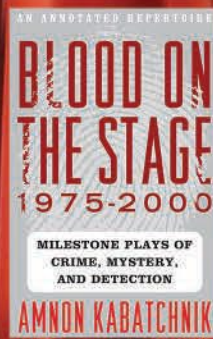
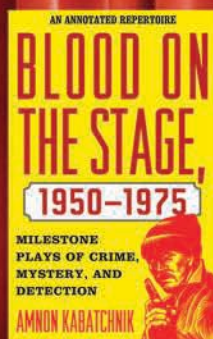
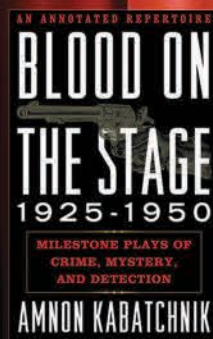
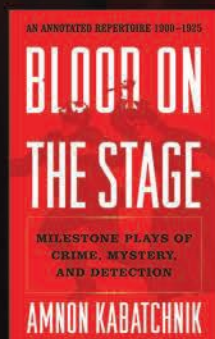
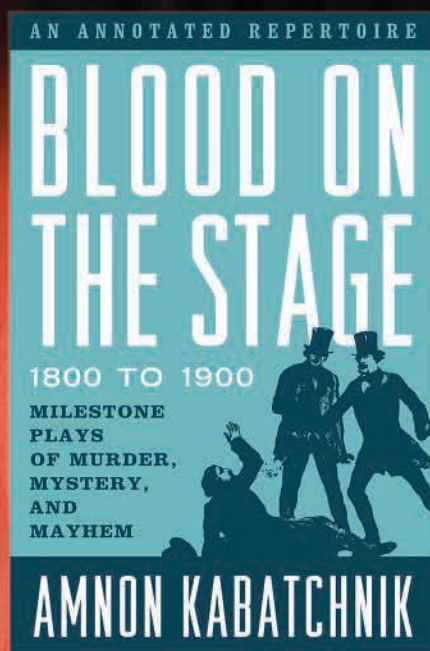
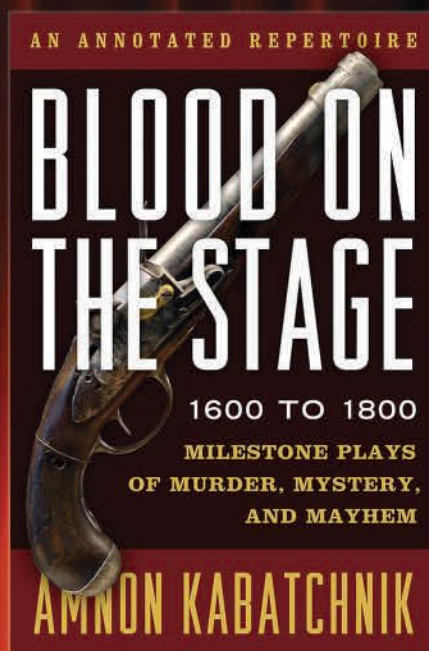
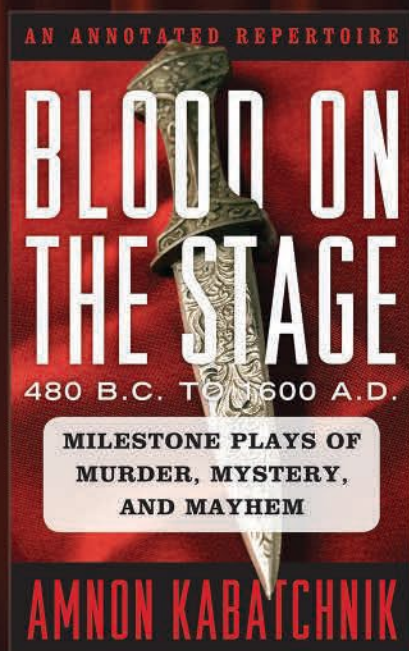
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