

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2020

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# NOTHING GOOD HAPPENS AFTER MIDNIGHT

A SUSPENSE MAGAZINE ANTHOLOGY

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Welcome to the summer of 2020... unlike *any* summer we have ever been a part of. To say that we are living in weird times is an understatement. When my wife gave me the idea for this ‘Letter from the Editor,’ I struggled with the topic. You see, I wanted to make sure that my position was one of compassion and not judgment; after all, we have enough of that today.

We are living in a society that seems to have thrown out one of the most important parts of our justice system: innocent until proven guilty. We see a story and, depending on our political views, we either immediately believe it or think it’s a lie; we don’t wait to see the response from the other side. Compassion is being able to look at *both* sides and understand that everyone wants the same thing—to be happy and not to suffer.

In our writing community we have to understand that we have a lot of different views and opinions on basically every topic. Our goal is to make writers better and make writers’ careers better. When we allow a culture to form that loses that compassion for all writers, we now have a divided community. When this division becomes louder than the cause, the writing community is no longer about writing; it’s about everything else. My plea to the writing community is this: Put politics aside. Let’s *all* work together to push the cause forward—getting writers to be better writers.

John Raab  
CEO/Publisher  
Suspense Magazine ■



\* \* \*

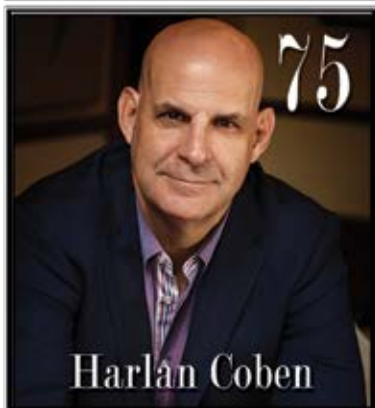
Mary Lignor, a lifetime librarian and lover of books, was lost last month after a long battle with Alzheimer’s. A beloved mom to one of us, a reviewer for many of you, and a true friend to all of us, she is *greatly* missed every day.

\* \* \*

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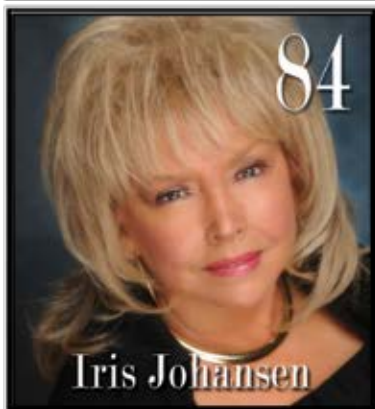
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# The GORDIAN *Knot*

By Buck Buchanan

My name's Mickey Hanratty. I'm a cop. Well, actually, a private dick. My Old Man, and his Old Man, were real cops. When the first Hanratty came over on the boat and landed in Boston, he picked the one job an Irish immigrant could get. By now, third generation, it's in the genes. When I couldn't handle the politics down at the station, I gave them back my badge. But I couldn't fight what's in my blood, so now I work behind a door that reads: "A-1 Detective Agency." Yeah, I don't eat real well.

Anyone who calls me a dumb Mick has got me two ways—by name and by birth. And I figure, if someone wants to think I'm dumb, why disappoint him? So, I try to keep it simple.

Take my latest case.

I'm doing what I'm best at—waiting, with my feet up on the desk and my eyes on the ceiling. Then she comes in the door. She's right out of a Mickey Spillane paperback; great legs, hips molded into a tight black skirt, breasts fighting for release from a sheer silk blouse, and the whole throbbing mass of womanhood cinched together by a thick, black belt that surrounds her tiny waist. She has long blonde hair, cobalt blue eyes, and a wide pouting mouth perfectly lacquered with dark red lip gloss. I prove I'm a gentleman by taking my feet off the desk.

"Are you Mickey Hanratty the Private Detective?" she asks.

She pulls up a chair, crosses her legs, and lets her skirt hike up over her knees. She's going to give me a show. As she leans over and displays her ample cleavage, I see it's going to be a double feature—legs and breasts. I figure I'm there to enjoy it.

I remember to answer her question. "Yes, Ma'am," I reply.

"I'm looking for my boyfriend. He missed our date two nights ago; I haven't seen him since. I need to find him."

My mind does a quick checklist. She wants to find him because, a) she loves him; b) she's got her hooks into him and doesn't want to lose the bucks; or, c) none of the above. I'm a cynic. I go for b). I ask her, "Is there any chance he might be in money trouble?"

She gives me the offended stare. "What do you mean

by 'trouble'? Tom is a lawyer in a very respectable firm. He wouldn't be involved in anything shady. But in this city, who knows?" Her head drops, and the stare is now aimed at the floor. "He could have been mugged, or hurt, or lying in a hospital somewhere...alone. I'm just so worried."

The show changes from "sexy" to "worried." She bats her eyes, pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at her nose. I hear a couple of dainty sniffs; she even manages to squeeze out a tear that starts to roll down her cheek.

"Have you called the police?" I ask her. "Reported him to Missing Persons?"

"Yes, I did. But they weren't interested. Said he had to be missing more than forty-eight hours.... They said he might have his own reasons for not letting me know where he had gone." She smiles in a way that tells you she's been there before, that the world picks on her type of woman, and what can she do? "I had the feeling that, as just his girlfriend, I didn't have any status to complain—you know?"

She was right. The cops wouldn't listen to her. They were so overloaded, they wouldn't listen to anybody, unless a body was dropped right in the lobby of Precinct #8.

"I'm two hundred bucks a day," I tell her. "I'll need a thousand dollars up front. No returns if I find him sooner than five days." It sounds like a lot of money, but I figure her lost boyfriend is making two hundred bucks an hour.

She writes out a check. I tell her how to spell my name and ask for hers, even though I can read it on the check—Sara Jane Jackson.

"Now, Miss Jackson, please give me all the information you can on your boyfriend. Name, address, place of work, physical description. Just keep talking until I tell you to stop."

She gives me all the details. His name is Thomas Mannheim. He works at Jones and Donner, the most prestigious law firm in Boston. He lives on Beacon Street, the high priced part of town, drives a brand-new Mercedes and keeps a Lamborghini in the garage of his multimillion-dollar townhouse. He was supposed to pick her up for dinner two nights ago. He never showed. The people he was close to include his five law partners and his secretary. The last person to see him was his dentist, who fixed some fillings the



afternoon he disappeared. She gives me a list of the names and addresses of his partners, his secretary, and his two biggest clients.

I ask her, "Did he have any life insurance, Miss Jackson? Do you know who his beneficiaries might be?"

She chokes a little bit on that one. She flutters her eyes as she thinks it over. "I...I really don't know, Mr. Hanratty. We were very close. But Tom didn't tell me about all his financial matters."

"Do you have any photographs, any description of him?"

She pulls a photograph out of her purse. It's a picture of the two of them, arms around each other. They're staring at each other as if they've never met anything so wonderful. He looks about forty-five, maybe one hundred eighty-five pounds, six feet tall, good build. I ask her for her address and telephone number and give her my most professional smile. "We'll do what we can, Miss Jackson. There's probably every chance in the world that your boyfriend is alive and well. However, I'll check all avenues."

She bats the eyes one more time. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Hanratty," she simpers, and out she goes.

I get a last good look at her hips as they swivel out the door. I sit back in my chair, feet back on the desk, hands behind my head. She's given me a lot of threads to work with; partners, secretary, business acquaintances, times, dates. In my mind, I go over her description of him; where he lives and what he's got. Could he be living a little high on the hog, even for two hundred bucks an hour?

When my grandfather came over on the boat, he didn't have an education, but he was smart enough to keep food on the table. It doesn't bother me if people tell me I'm not much better than he was. I've just been fed a few more books, got a little education in me, even know a little bit about ancient history—the Greeks and the Romans. But, as I said before, I'm no different than my immigrant ancestor: an Irishman who likes to keep it simple.

I sit back and think about a story from ancient Greece—"The Gordian Knot." It seems this king, Gordius by name, had created a knot made out of a thousand twists and turns of rope. It was so complicated that he challenged anyone in the whole world to untie it. The person who solved the riddle of the knot, it was said, would rule the world. People came from near and far, but they couldn't undo the knot. Then, along comes Alexander the Great. He takes one look at the knot, exclaims "Eureka" (that's Greek for "No Sweat!"), unsheathes his sword, and with one blow cuts the knot apart.

I mentally look at all the loose threads Sara Jane Jackson has given me—the twisted trail dotted with Tom Mannheim's secretary, partners and business acquaintances. I'll talk to one who'll tell me to talk to another—who'll tell me then to talk to others. I'll come up with more leads, and I'll come up with more dead ends. I'll keep following the threads that may get me hopelessly lost or may finally get me to where I'm supposed to go. I'll be running around in my own detective

version of a Gordian knot.

So I think, "Eureka!" I don't try to trace the threads I've been given; instead, I pick up the phone, call the local morgue, and ask if they have a John Doe on ice that fits the lost boyfriend's description. They say they've got one—badly burned in a fire, hardly recognizable—but they can still tell he's a male, about six feet, one hundred eighty pounds, and he still has his teeth.

I look up Sara Jane's address and drive over around dinnertime. She's in one of those townhouse apartments where each door leads out into the street. I only have to wait for half an hour before she comes out; to go to a restaurant or to get groceries, it doesn't really matter, as I'm not going to take long. I go up to her door and do a little B and E—actually, just Entering, seeing as a credit card under the spring lock is all the Breaking I have to do. I go into her bedroom, find the phone and plant a bug.

I've got nowhere else to go. I figure I'll just sit in the car and wait. She's back in a couple of hours—nice of her not to keep me past my bedtime. I give her a few minutes to settle down, then I call her from my cellphone. "Hello, Miss Jackson? Mick here. I have an update. I checked with the morgue. They've got a John Doe that fits your boyfriend's description. I'm sure it's nothing, but I should check it out. If I can get Tom's dental records, I should be able to positively prove, one way or another, if it's him."

She does a little blubbering. She's good. Then she says, "I'll call Dr. Griffith in the morning. I'm sure he'll make his files available to you of something so important." Then she hangs up.

I bet myself five minutes. I lose the bet. She dials out in two. Her voice comes over the line, clear and sweet to hear.

"Hello, Tom? He went for it—hook, line and sinker. He's calling the dentist first thing in the morning. When he matches those teeth with Griffith's records, you're a dead man."

A male voice replies, "Nice going, honey. I won't be too dead to help you spend all that nice insurance money. First stop, Costa Rica?"

I check the number she's dialed—I can look the address up in the morning. I stay on the line. I like things simple; I also like things neat. I've still got a question in my mind—did they stiff someone and plant him, then plant the dental records? Or, are they splitting three ways with the guy at the morgue and the dentist? Did they just wait for the right John Doe to show up at the morgue, and then take the con from there? I'm not going to get the answers, for after a bit more gushing back and forth, they hang up.

I sit there in the car, imagining the look on her face when I deliver her boyfriend to her—alive and well. But I think I'll give it a couple of days.

There's another old Roman saying I learned in school: "Caveat Emptor." It means, "Let the check clear before you produce the goods." ■



# LAW and DISORDER

By Stephen M. Feldman

Drago slid the revolver from his shoulder holster and checked for a chambered round. The Ruger Super Redhawk would thunder like a Harley when he fired one of those .44s, but nobody in this neighborhood would care. He pushed into the abandoned building and edged up creaking stairs rank from piss and puke. Stopping at 4D, he rapped his wolf-head ring against the wooden door.

Drago shoved his Ruger into the holster and smoothed his black leather sports jacket. He'd wanted the Professor and his two lieutenants to hear the knock but not to shit their pants. Drago couldn't remember the assistants' names—one had a ponytail and one was bald. Former students of the Professor, they'd realized they could make more money dealing drugs than practicing law. Maybe they'd failed out before reaching that conclusion. Soon it wouldn't matter one way or another.

Drago straightened his shoulders and concentrated on his Russian guise—Raskolnikov, a nice Dostoevsky reference these idiots would never comprehend. He hoped to squeeze in some writing that night, at least for an hour. Business first, though. He knocked again, harder this time. Feet shuffled inside, but the door didn't move. "Open up, shitheads."

"Rasky?"

"No, it's the Vicked Vitch of the East." Drago hinted at a Russian accent without overdoing it.

"What?"

"Open the fuckin' door."

A deadbolt clacked. Lieutenant Ponytail opened the door six inches and peered out. He had a Glock drawn, pointed toward the ceiling.

"Boo," Drago said.

Ponytail flinched.

"You going to let me in?" Drago said.

Ponytail glanced behind Drago, saw he was alone, and pulled the door open. He tucked the Glock into the waistband of his jeans.

*Too bad*, Drago thought, as he stepped inside. *There goes the timing.*

The deadbolt snapped shut behind Drago.

"What the hell you doing here?" the Professor asked. He looked the part—of a professor, not a drug kingpin—scruffy red beard and tweed jacket with elbow patches.

Drago surveyed the room for surprises. Nothing. The Professor didn't have any muscle other than Ponytail and Baldy. All as expected. Broken shades covered the windows, shafts of gray light filtering in. Two empty pizza boxes lay open on the dusty wood floor. In the far corner, an oversized, black, hard-sided suitcase stood upright on its wheels.

Drago grinned.

"Is something funny, Raskolnikov?" the Professor asked, trying to twist his question into a threat.

"Every-ting and no-ting. The appearance of the random."

The Professor glanced at his two lieutenants and said to Drago, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Didn't you say you teach at the New York Metro School of Law?"

"The Manhattan campus."

"Strange." Drago feigned bewilderment, furrowing his brow, angling the scar that slashed his forehead. "I checked the Metro website. You're not listed as part of the faculty."



The Professor stepped back, rubbing thumb and finger through his moustache and beard. "I'm an adjunct professor. I teach criminal law and procedure. You got a problem with that?"

"No prrroblem. I wanted to know more about your legal system. You Americans seem so prrrroud of it." Drago nodded, wondering if he was overdoing the accent. "You are a member of the bar? Da?"

"Why? You want to hire me?" The Professor looked at Baldy. "Do you believe this guy?"

Baldy shook his head. "He didn't answer your question, Professor. He's not supposed to be here now."

"You must have been the star student," Drago said.

"So, smartass, why are you here?" the Professor asked again.

"You got the shipment? I thought you might want some backup."

"That wasn't the plan."

"I'm an independent thinker," Drago said.

"Independent thinking gets assholes killed in this line of work."

"You can't blame a guy for trying to help."

"Maybe I can."

Ponytail moved to Drago's left, while Baldy moved to his right. *Good*, thought Drago. *Things are looking up, but no reason to wait for propitious developments.*

"If I wanted your help at this stage," the Professor said, "I would've told you. You'll have your chance later."

Drago's pale blue eyes flashed toward the door. "What the fuck was that?"

"What?"

"You didn't hear it?"

"Not a damn thing." The Professor looked at Ponytail. "What about you? Hear something?"

Drago didn't wait for an answer. He pulled out his Ruger and rushed to the door. "There it is again."

Ponytail slipped his Glock from behind his waistband.

Drago spun the deadbolt, cracked open the door, and peeked into the hallway. "Shit!" He slammed the door. "We're screwed."

Drago turned back to the room. The Professor and Baldy now had their guns drawn also.

"It's about fucking time," Drago said.

"Put your gun down, Rasky," the Professor said.

"Why?"

"Because I asked."

"Da." Drago raised his hands in surrender, the Ruger's black-rubber goosebumped grip still pressed against his right palm.

He enjoyed the sweet metallic taste of adrenaline for a moment. Then, smirking, he angled the revolver and fired.

He nailed a bead of sweat dripping between the Professor's eyes.

"What the—" yelled Ponytail as he rushed at Drago.

Drago shot Ponytail in the chest, swung him around, and used him as a shield when Baldy fired.

Drago put a .44 into Baldy's head.

The explosions from the Ruger left Drago's ears ringing. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, then inspected the bodies. All dead. "Vat's da prrroblem, Professor?" Drago laughed. "Rrrrough day at vork?"

He knelt and searched the Professor's pockets until he found a small key. Drago tried it in the suitcase. It fit. He laid the suitcase flat on the floor and opened it. White powder wrapped in dozens of tightly packed plastic bags filled the interior. He nodded and closed the suitcase.

Drago straightened up and squinted, as if gazing into the distance. He remained still and silent for fifteen seconds, then pulled his smartphone from his jacket pocket and tapped his voice recorder app.

"Idea for scene in novel," he said into the phone. "At some point, the mob double-crosses the protagonist, the killer. He's trapped. How to escape?"

Drago hit stop and stared at his phone for five seconds. He smiled crookedly and tapped the app again. "What is protagonist feeling when double-crossed?" he said. "Do his feelings help or hinder his escape?" Drago grinned, then shook his head and returned the phone to his pocket. "Damned good stuff."

He pocketed the key and wheeled the monstrous suitcase toward the door, skirting puddles of blood. Maneuvering down the stairs and out to the street left Drago sweating and cursing.

He slammed his car trunk, locking the drugs inside, a temporary warehouse at best. Sparking a cigarette, he inhaled deeply. Did his protagonist need a profounder flaw? He shrugged, then reported the shooting and requested backup. ■

## SPECIAL PREVIEW FROM MICHELLE DUNNE



Michelle Dunne is the Irish author of “While Nobody Is Watching.” Born in the harbour town of Cobh, Co Cork, Michelle joined the Irish defence forces at the age of 19. During her career she progressed from recruit to infantry soldier to peacekeeper with the UN, and then on to become one of the first female instructors in the Irish infantry. “While Nobody Is Watching” draws from her military experience and the type of relationships, thick skin and nicely warped sense of humour which forms there. But also covers the mental health challenges soldiers all over the world are faced with and later have to learn to live with in the *real* world, away from the folds of their military family.

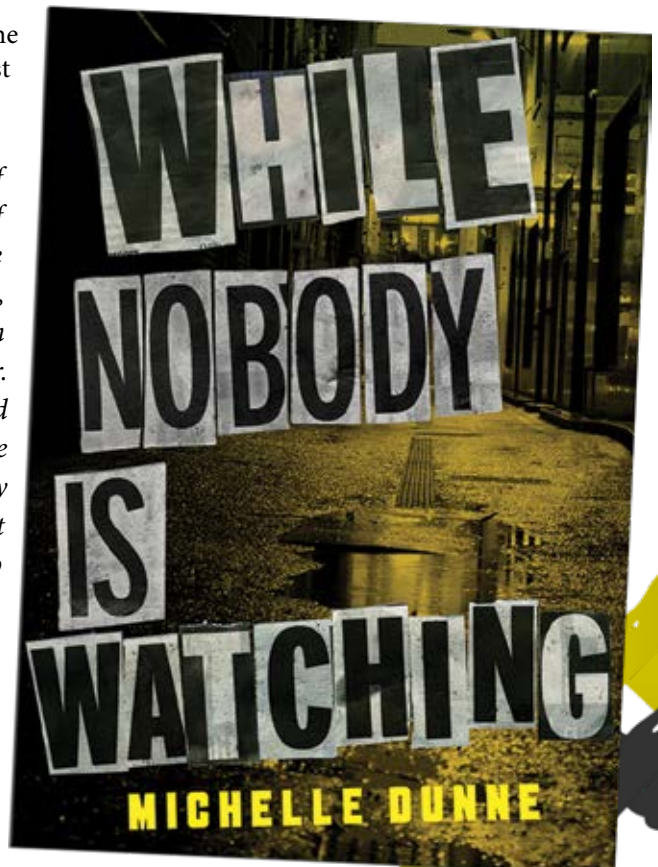
“While Nobody Is Watching” is Michelle’s third book, and she’s now busy working on her next project “Playing the Game,” based on her own military experiences. When she’s not clacking out stories on her keyboard, she busies herself bringing therapy and training to the residents and staff of nursing homes and hospitals around Ireland, and when she’s not doing *that*; she runs—as fast as her legs will carry her.

# WHILE NOBODY IS WATCHING

By Michelle Dunne

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

*The high pitched ringing in her ears was enough to drown out the rest of the world almost completely, though she was becoming vaguely aware of the dirt in her throat and the metallic taste of blood. A lot of blood. She forced her eyes open and stared straight up at the beautiful clear blue sky, oblivious for now to the carnage all around her. Her arm weighed a ton when she tried to move it and before she could, someone closed in on her. He was hovering above her, casting a long shadow as his body blocked out the sun. She shifted her gaze to see that it was Lenny Jones, but he didn't look like Lenny Jones. He was wearing a thick outer layer of grey dust and he was shouting, though no sound was coming out. She couldn't tell if he was shouting at her or not, because he kept looking from her, to something else, and then back to her again. She turned her head to see who else was there, but whoever it was, she could only see his back over the mound of dirt between them. He was using his right hand to steady himself against what used to be a car, as he hunched over something, and he too seemed to be shouting. But he didn't hold her attention for long, as her eyes drifted to the large, jagged, metal fragment that was jutting up*





out of her shoulder. The world was still silent except for the ringing, which suddenly intensified as a white hot pain flashed in her head and she realised that she was screaming. So hard in fact, that suddenly she had no air left in her lungs and like her head, they burned. Lenny's face was right next to hers now, nudging her, licking her cheek...

Lindsey jolted awake and grabbed the nearest thing. When she realised it was Frank, she let go and swung her legs out of bed, and with her elbows resting on her knees, she lowered her head into her hands. Frank moved with her and nudged the side of her head until she looked at him and finally hugged him in thanks for waking her. It wasn't the first time that someone or something in the dreams had turned out to be Frank doing the job he was born to do. As if her seven-year old German shepherd didn't have enough problems of his own. The poor dog hadn't had a full night's sleep in weeks.

She turned towards him and scratched his ears with her shaking hands. 'You're too old for this shit, aren't you buddy?'

He held perfectly still as she rested her head against him. Her heart was beating a tattoo in her chest, but his warmth, and the rise and fall of his chest calmed her like it always did.

He whined as she got up and headed for the wardrobe, but he came and stood beside her, his body pressed against her bare legs as she rested her forehead on the wardrobe door. Her t-shirt was drenched in sweat even though her body shook with cold, but she couldn't bring herself to move for what felt like an hour. It was more like ten minutes, but when she finally got dressed it was in sweatpants and a vest despite the weather. It was four in the morning, still pitch dark and raining hard, which was the only time she dressed like this; when she was certain that no one would see her and when she knew that going back to bed would be futile.

'Remember the days when one little Benzo would do the trick, Frankie?' she asked the dog, in a voice that struggled to make its way out. But she still managed a wry smile for his benefit.

He looked up at her and waited for her to continue.

'I know, I know,' she replied, as if Frank was the one who'd reminded her that one little pill soon led to two, which soon led to half a bottle. Eventually no matter how many she took, they failed to make a dent in her sleep problems. However they did a good job at turning her brain to mush, so these days she did the only other thing that could possibly help.

'Get some sleep, sweetheart.' She kissed Frank one more time before heading for the door and minutes later she was running full tilt through the almost deserted city streets in the driving wind and rain.

Most Cork people didn't know the side of the city where Lindsey preferred to run. They knew the streets of course, but not how she knew them. They knew the vibrant, friendly, bustling Cork City that was portrayed in *The Lonely Planet* guidebook as one of the top ten cities in the world to visit. But Lindsey stuck to the side streets and alleyways that at this time of night she shared only with the heroin addicts, hookers, teen gangs and drunks. She weaved her way through them and around them with her heart racing, her scars on full view and breathing in perfect rhythm with her stride. Any one of them could take her eye out without a second thought, but she didn't worry about that, because she knew that they'd never catch her. Most of them didn't even see her.

But someone did. She knew that for a fact, too. By now Lindsey had come to assume that she was never alone, no matter how things might seem to the contrary. Someone was watching her, maybe even now, as she sprinted with the noise of the wind rushing in her ears and a deluge of rain bouncing off the ground around her. She could still feel it. She'd been feeling it for weeks; at work, at home and even here, in the middle of the night when the rest of the world was sleeping, she could feel eyes on her. At first she assumed that it was her unreliable imagination. It was to blame for so much these days and seemed to take pleasure in torturing her. But then the notes started to arrive. Someone was *telling* her they saw her, that she wasn't always alone when she thought she was, and as her heart hammered against her chest, a part of her hoped that they'd show themselves tonight.

As she turned down another side street, into the wind, she picked up the pace even more so the five miles to where she was headed passed in the blink of an eye. Finally, she stopped and bent over with her hands on her knees in front of the old, thick, metal door with the flaking grey paint, barely visible through the collage of spray paint depicting everything from Bob Marley's joint smoking face to an, *I fucked your mother* confession. To the naked eye the tiny laneway looked deserted, but the derelict buildings on either side of the metal door hid a lot. On the far end of the lane was Angel's adult store, open 24/7. Behind this street was the bus station, which always attracted a select crowd at night, and the street opposite was the city's red light area.

'S'you again,' mumbled the gaunt, bleary-eyed man who was sitting in the opposite doorway. 'Are you real?' He stared

right through her for a few seconds and then he laughed, like something truly hilarious was happening in his head.

He was young enough and looked relatively clean considering, but was clearly off his head. As he was every time she saw him. He was as familiar to her as the metal door, but this was the first time he seemed to notice her. It was the first time she'd seen him notice anything.

'You speak,' she replied, despite telling herself not to.

She kept her eyes on him as she worked the key off the rubber band that was knotted around her wrist. Her heart was still pounding, partly from the run and partly because of this guy, yet she took her time. The laughing soon subsided and all that remained was a slight grin. His eyes weren't focused on anything and he didn't look like he was about to move anytime soon.

'Give's a few bob?'

'What for?'

'Jam,' he grinned.

She took a step towards him and studied his face. He didn't look like he'd been on the streets for too long. His pale, freckled skin was still in relatively good nick, but he wasn't dressed for the outdoors. He never was, with his denim jacket and jeans.

'How long have you been here?'

He shrugged. 'I'm always here. What I can't figure out is, why are *you* here?' He wagged his finger with a smile that said, *I know exactly why you're here.*

'You think you know me?' she took another step towards him. Could he be the one?

'The girl who plays with knives,' he grinned, looking at her scars. 'How about that few bob?'

She didn't have a few bob and if she did, she wasn't about to pump it into this man's veins, so she didn't reply. She doubted very much this guy could get it together for long enough to insert himself into someone's life without being seen, so she was done talking to him. She turned her back on him and headed towards the metal door.

'Stuck up bitch,' he mumbled.

She ignored him as she let herself in, quietly closing the door behind her.

The building was once upon a time a small bag factory, but now the concrete shell of the ground floor was home to Street's Boxing Gym. Street himself lived upstairs on the second floor and above that was a disused attic space with a leaky roof. Street's was nothing like the swanky, air conditioned gyms that were dotted all over the country these days. Here, the smell of stale sweat and dampness permeated the air, not helped by the fact that the tiny windows just below ceiling height hadn't been opened in years. Not since the bars went up on the outside. The concrete floor was painted red and the walls had been whitewashed sometime in the distant past. The ring took up the most space and there was a heavy bag and a speed bag on either side of it. Medicine balls and weight plates were lined up neatly near the pull up bar. Ropes and gloves hung from various hooks, a long bench ran along each wall, and a locker filled with spare gear and first aid equipment stood in the far corner next to Street's tiny partitioned office, and that was about it. One shower, one toilet and no mirrors. That was Street's. This wasn't the first time she'd found herself there in the middle of the night and it wouldn't be the last.

Drenched to the skin, Lindsey didn't waste time gloving up, nor did she wrap her hands, which she knew she'd probably regret later. But for now she wanted to feel it all. She wanted enough pain to eliminate the images that were burning in her brain, so after a short series of deep breaths she charged at the heavy bag, putting her whole body into every punch until she couldn't feel her knuckles any more. Her wrists screamed in pain and her shoulders felt like they were about to leave their sockets. Thirty-two minutes exactly left her spent, at which point something moved upstairs. She grabbed the bag to stop it from swinging on its chain and she stood still, listening, but all she could hear was blood rushing in her ears.

There was an old rubbish bin filled with ice water in the corner, behind the heavy bag. There always was. Most of the ice was melted, but it was still cold enough to burn as she lowered her hands in, clenching and unclenching her fists as she slowly dipped her arms up as far as her shoulders. She got on her knees, submerged as far as she could into the bin, as her face contorted in pain and her stomach clenched, but she made no sound. This would be her saving grace for today. She knew it and soon her body relaxed. Her stomach unclenched and as a board creaked overhead, she stood up, shook off the water, and left quietly, locking the door behind her. ■

*20020 Michelle Dunne; reprinted with permission from BAD PRESS iNK.*



# Runaway

By Joseph Manion

YOU COULD DRIVE A LIFETIME AND NEVER HAVE A THING LIKE THIS HAPPEN TO YOU. For me, it started just after sunset as I eased the black Hyundai up to the curb with my Lyft sign on. The requested destination was deep in downtown DC, near the granite-chiseled federal buildings, and the pickup was where Yuma Street skirts the University of DC campus on one side, and a string of gated embassies on the other. The GPS put me right where the rider was—only, the rider wasn't. I reached for my cell to sort it out when a small woman darted like a sprung cat from behind one of those stodgy sidewalk trees. In her wake fluttered a turmeric-colored headscarf and loose fabric from a paprika-red dress.

She jumped into my back seat, slammed and locked the door; not an acceptable protocol in my wagon. Twisting around, however, I saw nothing a forty-six-year-old, former All-City lineman need worry about. Instead, the dim streetlight sketched a young woman with fair skin, glossy black hair, almond eyes rimmed in dark liner—and that's as far as I got as her thin fingers held the headscarf around the lower half of her face. On her lap rested her phone and a tiny travel case; tiny, like her.

Her breathing was fast and shallow as a wounded bird, but the determination in her eyes was knife-like. She opened the travel case and retrieved a handwritten note that she held inches from my face. It read: "You will please take me to where I can become a citizen of your country."

*Oh Jesus-God*, I thought, my instinct launching a flare. I'd been shuttling riders since lunch and had a pot roast in the crock with plans to watch the Nationals take the field against the Dodgers on the west coast. But now this.

"No can do, Miss. State Department's closed. Anyway, you'd best go to a lawyer first for that sort of thing." That's when I better saw the eye make-up, badly applied.

I clicked on the dome. "You got an ID? Minimum age to ride solo is eighteen."

"I am in danger," she said without hesitation. "I need to disappear." Her diction was formal, classroom-perfect, and shaped by an accent I couldn't nail. She looked in the direction of the embassies, then back to me, her voice now urgent and hushed. "Can you not just drive me away from here?"

The reason for the note became clear. She didn't want to use her voice—which was that of a girl.

"Please!" she insisted, tightening the scarf across her mouth.

I take younger runaways straight home; if I can talk them into it. That is, if what's waiting back at home sounds safe enough. But either way I wasn't going to leave a girl on the street after dark—especially one dressed like her with no likely clue of what might be drooling in the shadows. So I left the dome on and pulled away, hoping to sort this out. I didn't mention we were headed to the Metro Police station off Wisconsin fifteen minutes away, as I was sure she'd bolt at the next intersection. In my book, it was the only logical destination should this not work out.

Checking the rearview, she let the scarf down from her face. Sure enough, just a kid. I put her at fourteen, tops. She was having a tough time holding back tears. I took this to mean she was reconsidering, like the impulsive ones sometimes do when their rage is short-lived. They remind me of an ocean wave that thunders onto the beach, roaring and spewing foam before just flattening out and coasting up the sand to a silent standstill...only to be handcuffed by gravity and pulled right back from where it came. In that way, some runaways go back home in the first few hours. I figured to talk her up and see if she was one of those.

"Name's Malcolm Cummings," I said. "You got a name?"

Nothing.

"What Embassy you from?"

Silence.

"I'd be happy to take you back to—"

"No!"

I shut up and drove.

Her case snapped open again. In the rearview, I could see her swabbing the goop off from around her eyes, so I took that moment to ponder if Sergeant Angelo D'Amato would be on duty at the station. He was one of several I'd grown up playing football with (and against) that had turned cop, along with other cops I'd met playing in DC's adult flag league. My age, Angelo was now behind a desk in the precinct that encompassed the diplomatic quarter. He once told me that most embassies have an outrageous pile of parking fines left unpaid due to diplomatic immunity—a festering thorn in the side of the MPD. Angelo's years on the force had worked the starch out and he now scratched backs, legally of course, saying he could sometimes get an embassy to pay their pile if a favor was done them. Perhaps like returning a runaway nice and neat and out of the public eye. *Quid pro quo*, the bread and butter of the nation's capital.

We turned south onto Reno Road. Fenced boundaries glided past off our left belonging to the embassies of Brunei, Pakistan, Ghana, and Ethiopia, their somber flags illuminated by spotlights. I wondered if one of them was hers because she seemed to relax after these foreboding buildings receded behind us. She lowered her window halfway making the vitality of the evening air immediate and causing a strand of hair to escape her scarf, and dance free. I adjusted my angle to the mirror to catch more glimpses of her. She sat naturally erect now, calm and self-possessed, with her chin level as she appeared to weigh her thoughts. The determination I'd witnessed before hardened her expression, but her eyes were softer now as though concern had dug a foothold. It was not the only time that evening she flipped back and forth between the impulsive girl who'd jumped into the car and this one, who displayed the cultivation and grooming of a young woman, making her exact age a mystery.

At a red light, she said, "I apologize to be so . . . to have been so difficult. Thank you for trusting me."

"Well, okay. You sounded like you needed to get away from there, is all."

"Yes."

"Then you're okay just driving around for now?" I didn't mention the police station.

"I am enjoying this for now, Mr. Malcolm."

I was amused at her using my first name thinking it sounded formal and familiar at the same time. To keep her talking, I asked, "Just curious, but you call all adults by their first name?"

"Of course not." She said this as if it were commonly known. "But you have no title. If you did, I would call you by it." She looked into the rearview as if unsure how I would take her comment. "I do not mean that in a bad way. Amir is my bodyguard and friend, and has no title. He does not mind I call him Amir. I do not know you, so will call you Mr. Malcom."

No more discussion on that, apparently. "Fair enough. And what's your title? Princess?"

Turning her head toward the open window, she said something I couldn't hear but that could have been, "Not anymore."

We were headed west on Newark by this time, a few minutes from the police station.

"Tell me about the danger you talked about."

She lowered her eyes and spoke frankly. "My father brought us to America last week so my sister could be introduced to her betrothed. This man, he is a minister at the embassy. It has been arranged."

"So, they just met. And they're getting married?"

Her voice heightened, the formality slipping a bit. "She does not like him. My parents say love will come. They always say that, even when the man is older and not warm. Not like in America where you are free to marry the person you love."

I thought about the woman I loved and married. And divorced. Truth was, she divorced me after the topic of kids ate us up like a cancer. You see, I had not ruled children out at the beginning because, objectively speaking, I get along with young people. Even enjoy being an uncle to two nephews and a niece. But kids change the center of gravity in a marriage in ways you can't predict, so I came to decide I wasn't willing to change my life in that way, and said so. I had certainly been willing to go on as we always had. My wife, however, exercised her own freedom by exiting a marriage that would never fulfill her. Shell shocked, I suppose I was numb for the longest time. What I mean to say is that, yes, I was numb. I picked up a brief habit. By the time I crawled out of it a year later, she had remarried.

"You're right," I said. "We get to marry who we want here. But why do you think this always ends good?"

"I know this because I watch Hallmark."

Out of respect, I struggled not to laugh out loud. "You mean the Hallmark TV channel?"

"Yes." Her voice brightened, and she seemed younger again. "My sister, Baseema, watches Hallmark with me. It is the only English station I am permitted to watch in the palace. This is how I learn America is the land of happy endings."

I swallowed my smile as we snagged another red light and I turned to face her. The swarm of commercial lights from the busy intersection threw color on her unblemished skin. "Ahh, I see. So you want to be a citizen here because you'll get a happy ending?"

"I do not want Papa to arrange someone like Baseema got. Her life is no longer her own. With freedom you get happy endings."



The light went green and we moved along.

She was entirely sincere. Her simple words wiped the smile from my face. Freedom. *Such a complicated issue in America.* Over my shoulder, I asked, “Your sister is prepared to live with it. Why not you?”

“She suffers quietly, and believes this will make her more deserving in the eyes of God. I believe our God does not approve of wrong things if it is possible to change them. Baseema and I love each other, but we fight about this.”

The MPD station was two blocks away. I was getting unnerved by second thoughts. She was incredibly naïve about the world, but not about what it meant to have her hopes crushed and to lose control of her future. I respected that. But what struck me, what I couldn't ignore, was her willingness to leave behind a life of extreme privilege for this freedom she so highly valued. As a driver I sample humanity on a daily basis; I do it all day long. Most of what I hear is rewarding but I also hear my share of self-pity coming from the backseat. By contrast, I found myself wanting to make sure things went okay for her. I could have had a daughter her age.

A block away patrol cars came and went like wasps around a nest. The station's harsh fluorescent lights and the expectation of grinding paperwork now made it seem like a premature dumping ground. I also weighed the possibility a newshound from *The Washington Post* would read the blotter about a royal runaway, then get the details from a cop hoping to pocket a little beer money.

No, the best thing was for her to go back voluntarily. No cops, no press, no documentation.

I pulled over and left the engine running. This wouldn't be easy. I had to be firm, but not too firm.

“We need to discuss your lack of options,” I said.

Her dark eyes expanded into shiny pools, then tightened in defiance. She glanced at the door lever. Freedom was just inches away.

“Please don't,” I continued. “You're free to go, of course, but I'm beginning to think I'm your best option.”

Her line of sight drifted over my shoulder and through the windshield to the MPD station. Thinking of her inexperience, she may have considered the police station a sanctuary. After all, in her land a person's title came with more rights than it did age.

“I hope you can appreciate this would all be different if you were older. Because you're legally a minor the police are going to make you uncomfortable until you tell them where to take you back.”

“Why is this? I am willing to give up my title to be like any American.”

“Which I can appreciate. But unless you're getting abused the authorities will return you. It may not be fair, I know, but please trust me on this. The best thing you can do is tell me which embassy is yours.”

She sat polite and stoic with both hands in her lap and searched my face, like it was the Rosetta Stone to this outside world she knew so little about. The air was thick with our stubbornness, but I didn't flinch. I wanted her to see I was entirely sincere, hoping to reach a rational core in her that I believed she possessed. I thought I detected a flicker of understanding—but was wrong. She wasn't ready to accept so direct a defeat, wasn't ready to acknowledge the inevitable. The powerful wave was not ready to slide back into the sea.

“Mr. Malcolm, I believe you mean what you say. But might I be dropped off somewhere else?”

I could have said “No.” Should have, of course. I could lose my job driving a minor to somewhere other than the cops; or, worst case, be accused of kidnapping. But the square truth is that I wanted to be there when it ended. And in my eyes, she was a risk worth taking.

“There's plenty of well-lit places still open. Would you like to see the Washington Monument?”

“They will remain to be seen my entire life. Do you know, Mr. Malcolm, where I can find the finest ice cream?”

\*

“Here you go,” I said, sliding the banana split in front of her at an outdoor table at Thomas Sweet, long-time purveyors of homemade confections. It was almost 9 pm and traffic in the Georgetown neighborhood was loosening. “Enjoy. They're like therapy. I ate a lot of these right here when I was your age. That's how I got to be so big.”

“You are a large man, but not as large as Amir.”

That didn't make me feel any better.

Her eyes widened at the triple-scoop masterpiece before her. Her palace etiquette didn't prevent her from shoveling into it like any kid, spooning through the chocolate while telling me how she slipped out of her embassy through the kitchen loading dock, out past the dumpsters, and how exciting it felt to be among normal people.

I pointed to my face where a spot of marshmallow crème had stuck on hers, and handed her a napkin. “Look, running away isn't the thing to do.”

She shifted her thin body in the spice-colored garment, piling loose fabric into her lap to keep it off the grimy sidewalk below.

“Our family is always on display, and many things are expected of me. Such as a husband who is a stranger.”

Her spirit hadn't flagged like I'd hoped, and by the time she started in on the vanilla I wondered if I'd read her correctly. I knew enough to not force the topic, however. Then as she retraced her actions just before fleeing, her voice slowed and her expression changed. She seemed to listen to herself as she described, in affectionate terms, “Papa's” unknowing face when just a few hours before she had claimed an early bedtime and hugged him goodnight, and how he made her laugh as he always did with his scratchy mustache. How later, when Amir saw her enter the kitchen, she convinced him—deceived him, actually—telling him that she was just going in for a snack.

As she spoke, her unfocused eyes appeared to be witnessing her actions, her expression seemed to ask: “What will I now do without Amir's friendship and protection?” But what brought it home was Baseema, and the realization her sister would shoulder the distress of her future husband silent and alone, and without a sister's understanding. She didn't say these exact words, of course. It was said in the drift of her voice as she followed her thoughts back to the people she loved, words that began to sound like warnings. I witnessed the incoming wave slow its advance and valiantly claim its farthest reach, suspend, then start to fall back...

She stared off into a different time and place.

“You have a lot of privileges others don't have. You could use them when you're older. You know, like Princess Diana changed what it meant to be a princess. Look at how she made people think in new ways.”

“Princess Diana?”

I whistled loosely. Before her time, perhaps. “Do you go to school?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, focusing back on me. “I have tutors.”

“Close enough. Start asking them tough questions. Like about who Diana was, and about everything that matters to you. Ask why there are arranged marriages. Demand to receive newspapers and to see different news stations. Read about the world until you find that thing, you know, that *you* were meant to change.”

She nodded, but this was clearly not the easy path she had envisioned an hour ago. Laying her spoon down, she looked at me as though considering me seriously for the first time. Her fine, dark eyebrows lifted, and the question that followed gave me a satisfaction I couldn't explain.

“Do you feel free here, Malcolm?”

I drew in the humid night air and tasted the scents of the city, my city. “I make a living here. It's a simple life, sure, but I like it. I've been free enough to do just what I want.” Then I thought about the string of gripes I stitch together while driving alone between fares. Not the ones every person has a right to—potholes, jaywalkers, the price of gas, that sort of thing—but the other gripes that are more personal, that we sometimes think are beyond our control, not our fault. “There's always a better version of freedom worth fighting for,” I continued, “but happy endings are also about the choices we make.” She listened calmly, too polite and young, I think, to ask another question.

At that moment, from the sea of inconspicuous activity along the street, the conspicuous stranger emerged. He left the black limo with diplomatic plates in a tow zone, wore a black suit, and as she had said, was a very large man. He crossed P Street, wading through cars at the light, stopping between them to check his phone, scanning the crowd—homing in on the “Find Me” function that any savvy American runaway would have switched off.

Amir gravitated in our direction from behind her. By reflex, I stood up from our table and made eye contact, hoping uselessly that my size might defuse the situation. He glared at me and bee-lined. Still seated, she traced the line from my eyes to his, causing her to turn. Seeing her, Amir's grim face became round with smiling cheeks of uncontrolled relief. When he met us his concerned expression returned, however, as he bent his ear down to hear her speak in a fast-paced tongue. During this flurry of words, his expression relaxed. He looked up at me and nodded.

“Thank you,” he said. We shook hands.

I drew her a step or two away, careful not to touch her. I said, “Traditions don't change easily, but there's a chance your parents will see how important this is to you now. Once they calm down.” I fished out one of my Lyft cards and handed it to her. “And when you come back to Washington years from now, we can go again for ice cream.”

“Or maybe to the State Department,” she said, and I got to see her smile that one time. She took my hand and shook it awkwardly. “My name is Farhia. I should have said.” Then Amir motioned to the car and they quickly departed.

I didn't go home. I sat back down, satisfied to steep in the activity that surrounded me. Women with small bags exited a boutique that was closing and hurried past, speaking excitedly, while a well-scrubbed, young professional with ear pods skimmed by on a scooter, noiselessly threading the crowd. There was a terrier on its last walk of the day pulling against its oblivious owner who held a phone so close it lit up his face, and I remember taillights burning red and amber over the warm, shiny asphalt. Scents from the late-night grills tumbled by in the breeze and reminded me of my pot roast at home, but I was no longer hungry. These things were all very familiar to me, but on that evening, they seemed almost precious, yet incomplete, as I watched the remaining scoop of strawberry melt in front of the empty chair. ■



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# From Chasing Down Russian Subs to Writing Intense Suspense: Meet **D.B. COREY**

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



D.B. Corey didn't begin writing until he was in his mid-50s, after a wealth of interesting life experiences including a stint in the military and a career in IT. He now writes high-action suspense/thrillers that keep readers on the edges of their seats with expertly crafted characters and stories loaded with surprise twists and turns. If you enjoy intense fiction, D.B.'s got the goods!

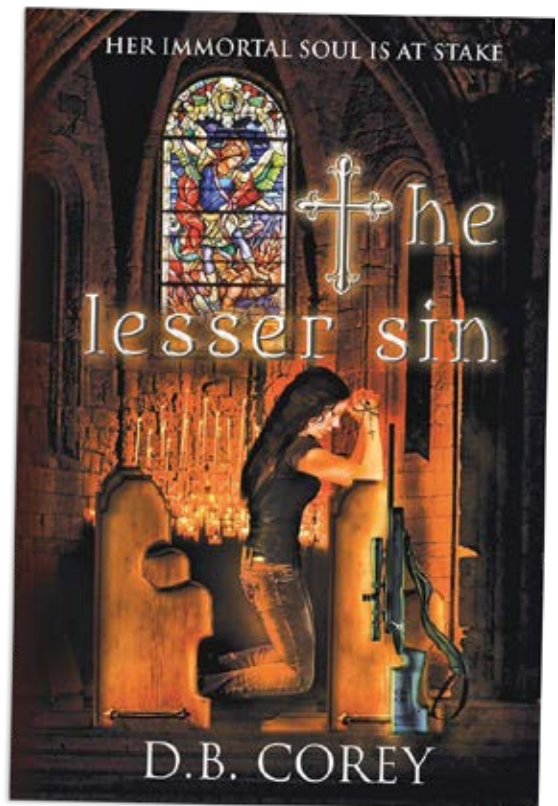
I met D.B. a few years ago at the Creatures, Crimes, and Creativity conference, and we immediately hit it off. I appreciate his willingness to answer a few questions for us.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Your first novel, "Chain of Evidence," was published in 2013. Two more books, "The Lesser Sin" and "The Unforgivable Sin," have been published since. How has your approach to writing changed over the years?

D.B. Corey (D.B.): *I'd like to say I keep my nose to the grindstone, write for hours on end, and have no social life. But I actually write when I feel like it. I guess that's why it takes me 18 months to write a novel. Self-publishing allows me to do that as there is no deadline, so to speak. I lean toward series writing now, though. When I finish the Hanna Braver series, I'm going to bring Moby Truax (from "Chain of Evidence") back as a stand-alone series character, which differs greatly from writing a connected series of novels.*

W.B.: "The Lesser Sin" and "The Unforgivable Sin" are the beginning (I think) of the *Hanna Braver* series. In both books, Hanna is a CIA sniper in conflict over her profession and her Catholic faith. Just who is Hanna Braver?

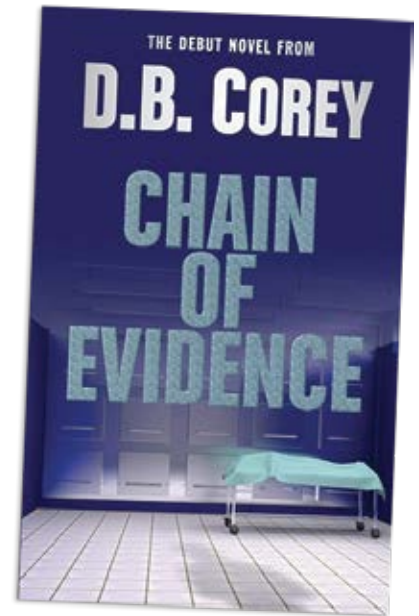
D.B.: *Yes—book 1 and book 2, with book 3 on the way. Hanna is a product of my imagination. I've always been intrigued with anti-hero, vigilante justice; the hero that does the wrong things for the right reasons. What better reason is there to do the wrong things than when justice fails you and the ones you love suffer? I didn't want a demure housewife who was wronged and must learn weapons, Kung-Fu, tactics, etc., like in *Peppermint* or *The Terminator*, so I created Hanna Braver, a gal with eyes like a hawk who works as a sniper for the CIA. That was fine for external conflict, but I wanted some gut-wrenching internal conflict as well. So, I threw in a healthy dose of my wife*





**“One can also find interviewers, reviewers, and bloggers that will help get out the word. There’s help there if you look for it.”**

*Maggie, a devout Catholic. I ended up with a strong female protagonist who is a woman of faith that kills within the confines of war, but struggles with her steadfast beliefs when she decides to commit murder and avenge her dead sister, thus jeopardizing her immortal soul.*



W.B.: Are you planning another novel in your *Hanna Braver* series?

D.B.: *Oh yes. Three is the charm as they say.*

W.B.: Have you considered writing outside the suspense genre?

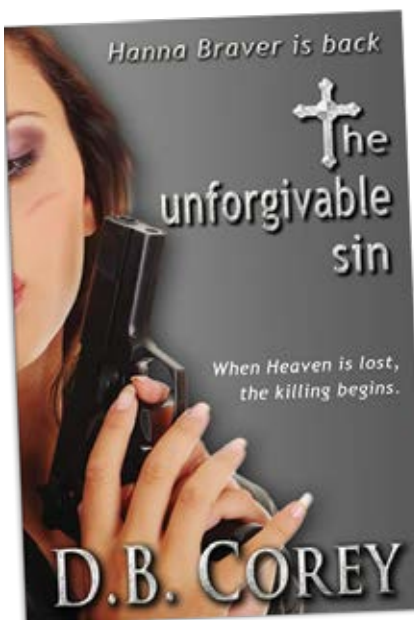
D.B.: *I think “Chain of Evidence” was suspense/police procedural, but I think the Braver series is more action-oriented with elements of suspense running through it. When I think of suspense, I think of Alfred Hitchcock. He said (and I paraphrase), “It’s not the bomb that creates the suspense, it’s the minutes leading up to the explosion.” Truer words never spoken. I have putted around with Twilight Zone type horror, though. I have several ideas I’d like to get to one of these days.*

W.B.: Mickey Spillane, Dashiell Hammett, or Michael Connolly?

D.B.: *Spillane. I like his gritty characters, settings, and dialogue.*

W.B.: Have you written any short fiction?

D.B.: *I have. Several of which appeared in the Creatures, Crimes, and Creativity (C3) anthologies and one in “Insidious Assassins.” Others are as yet unpublished.*



W.B.: After college, you joined the USNR flying aircrew aboard a Navy P-3 Orion chasing down Russian subs. How has your military experience impacted your writing career?

D.B.: *Hardly at all. I guess if I wrote military fiction, I would incorporate some of my experiences for authenticity.*

W.B.: A traditional publisher published your first novel, but you decided to self-publish after that. Why did you take that route?

D.B.: *A mix of frustration and a feeling of futility. I wrote “The Lesser Sin” in a year, had it professionally edited, and shopped it around to a dozen or so agents for about six months. Got a lot of “doesn’t fit our needs at this time” or similar responses. I determined that landing an agent/editor/publisher is mostly luck and timing. Maybe they were having a bad day. Maybe the wife ran off with the mailman. Maybe they have no vision (case in point, J.K. Rowling). So, I decided to see what the self-publishing industry could offer.*

W.B.: As a self-publisher, what have you found to be the most difficult? For most self-



publishers, managing marketing of the books seems to be the largest issue.

D.B.: *This is true. I am not a salesman and know little about marketing. But I found marketing avenues that take some pain out of it. Smashwords (eBook only) is free and has the distribution. Amazon and Lightning Source, the same. And others. Most charge a fee to produce the book(s). The issue here is the learning curve required to format the books yourself, although some will do it for you for a price. BookFunnel (\$100/year) is another marketing tool I use. But these require patience and stick-to-itiveness. One can also find interviewers, reviewers, and bloggers that will help get out the word. There's help there if you look for it.*

W.B.: What are you reading these days?

D.B.: *It's easy to read topflight writers like Patterson, Connolly, Cornwell, Flynn, and Clancy, but they don't need the money. Now I spend my reading dollars on writers I know personally. I've read John Gilstrap, T.J. O'Connor, Austin Camacho, Bryan Nowak...a couple more. But I'm currently reading Tom Young's latest, "Silver Wings, Iron Cross," a historical depiction of a downed American pilot and a deserting U-Boat officer forced to rely on each other to escape Nazi Germany. I met Tom at the C3 conference several years back and happened to sit at the table next to him during the author signing segment. I noticed there was a military aircraft on the cover of his book. Since I am former Navy and served aboard a P-3 Orion sub-hunter, I asked him if he flew in the service. Turns out, he's the real deal—saw Middle East action in the Air National Guard as a Flight Engineer aboard a C-130 Hercules. We hit it off immediately.*

W.B.: What are you working on now?

D.B.: *The third and possibly last installment in the Hanna Braver "Sin" series. No title yet, but it's sure to include the word "Sin."*

W.B.: Last question, just for fun: What movie script would you like to rewrite?

D.B.: *Law Abiding Citizen. I'd have had Clyde Shelton complete his mission, much in the same way as Charles Bronson in Death Wish.*

W.B.: Thanks, D.B. Good luck with your next writing endeavors!

You can learn more about D.B. at his website [www.dbcorey.com](http://www.dbcorey.com) and at his Goodreads page at [www.goodreads.com/author/show/7098522.D\\_B\\_Corey](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/7098522.D_B_Corey). ■

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*—James R. Benn, Author of the Billy Boyle World War II Mysteries*

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# STAND-UP AND COMICS AND HORROR, *OH MY* JASPER BARK

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



**JASPER BARK HAS A PROBLEM STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE.** Much to our entertainment, he's embraced this lifelong ambition to find trouble and use it as the content for his writing. His broad experience has given us incredible horror stories, comics, and even a children's "pop-up" book of Leonardo da Vinci's inventions. There's not much the man can't do, creatively speaking. Plus, he has a distinct, if somewhat warped, sense of humor. Interviewing him proved to be an adventure.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Let's start by dispelling a rumor. Do you really write in the nude?

Jasper Bark (J.B.): *Only when I'm trying to summon a Batrachian Daemon to spitball story ideas. But that has its drawbacks because those daemons are pretty possessive when it comes to their ideas, and there's nothing worse than being taken to court for plagiarism in a hell dimension. I mean, jeez, their legal system, talk about Kafkaesque.*

*Plus, as I'm constantly explaining to my wife, and the mailman, technically it's not nudity if I'm dripping in Yak's blood.*

W.B.: You once performed (and maybe you still do) stand-up poetry. How did that happen? And did stand-up comedy have anything to do with it?

J.B.: *Did comedy have anything to do with it? I guess that would depend on how drunk my audiences were.*

*I have worked as both a stand-up and a performance poet over the years. Stand-up gigs pay much better than poetry gigs. At one point I combined the two, so I could cover twice the number of venues with the same set. Hence, stand up poetry.*

*I began stand-up when I was 15 years old. There weren't any comedy clubs in the North of England where I lived, which was very blue-collar. In those days, the comedy clubs were all down in the south of the UK, which was much richer. So, I played working men's clubs, which had cheap beer and blue comedians. I used to skip school and hitchhike to the venues. Technically I was way too young to be in any of those places, but they let me in for some reason. I think it was because I looked about 12, had a potty mouth, and the customers found it hilarious.*

*I left school at 16, which you could do in the UK back in the '80s, and, having no qualifications and no other trade, I led a hand-to-mouth/gig-to-gig existence as a stand-up and actor throughout my late teens and twenties, eventually making quite a few 'blink and you'll miss me' appearances on TV. It was the closest I could get to running away to join the circus.*

W.B.: Some of your fiction runs to erotic horror, with a side of dark humor. Is this an intentional recipe (erotic fiction + horror with a dash of humor) or one that just comes naturally to you?

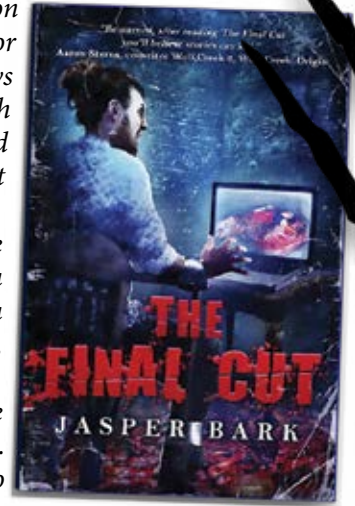
J.B.: *I think it's a little of both. Comedy, horror, and erotica are closely connected in a number of ways. First, they tend to be dismissed, or looked down on, by mainstream literature, so they're*



interesting places to do something subversive. Second, they're genres that want a specific reaction from their audience. At a basic level, they all involve building tension and then releasing it. For comedy, the release is a laugh; for horror, it's a scream; and with erotica, it's...y'know... I've always viewed horror as a particularly dark form of humor. It's a jet-black school of comedy where the laugh freezes in the throat and becomes a scream. Then again, most comedy involves people in awful and embarrassing situations too. We laugh as a way of distancing ourselves from their predicament because, if we didn't, we might shudder instead.

Horror is also an extremely stimulating and exciting genre; it gets the heart racing in the same way that a piece of really good erotica might. Think how much your heart races watching a slasher movie, and how much it races the first time you take someone to bed. There's always been a subconscious link between Thanatos (the death drive) and Eros. That's why, with the right person, horror films are surprisingly good date movies.

I love the visceral nature of all three genres. I love the fact that they provoke a reaction in the audience. I don't just want to make the reader think, I want you to laugh out loud in some passages. I want you to put the book down and jump on your lover, in others, and occasionally I want to make you lose your lunch. So that's why I tend to mix them up. I don't just want you to put down one of my books and say: "Hmm, well, that was nice."



W.B.: Your novel "The Final Cut" is about two filmmakers who are forced to watch a snuff film. The plot is a mix of crime, horror, and urban fantasy. I'm curious. How did you research this one?

J.B.: In my late twenties/early thirties, I had more financial responsibilities. So, with no training, experience, or qualifications, I talked my way into becoming a national film and music journalist. I made many contacts in the British Film industry, at every level, and I even worked on a few films and commercials. So, I basically called up some old friends, and they introduced me to the latest generation of indie filmmakers, who were very willing to indulge me and answer my questions.

On the crime side, certain members of my family are up to their necks in all sorts of dodgy stuff. So, I've grown up with hard men and criminals of all stripes. Some of them have killed people, both in the military and outside of it, so a lot of the violence comes from things I witnessed growing up or things I was told about. You might say the stuff I write is a way of dealing with the trauma of that.

Regarding the Mesopotamian and mythological aspects of the novel, they have fascinated me for decades. I've not only read widely in the field, but I've also viewed many of the artifacts in museums and archeological sites in London, Paris, Naples, Berlin, Heraklion, and Ephesus.

W.B.: Your story "Stuck on You" is a perverse and disturbing tale about a man fused to a corpse after sex (lightning was involved). Can I assume you're in need of a therapist?

J.B.: Oh, most definitely, but being a jobbing writer, I couldn't afford a good one. But this is sometimes where the universe karmically pays you back. Because writing about all my inner demons is the best form of therapy I could hope for, and I get paid to do it.

As a reader of my work, you get to visit the mind that dreamed up all this twisted stuff. But, when you're done, you get to put the book down and go home. I have to live here all the time. So, I need some way of dealing with that.

W.B.: Do you think horror writers use their fiction to exorcise their demons?

J.B.: With a few notable exceptions, most horror readers and writers I've met are lovely, stable people. That's because we have a place to explore all our mental and emotional problems. Horror is a way of facing up to our dark sides, of admitting there are sides to our character that we're not proud of, that we have dark impulses and ideas. It's not only a way of owning up to the worst in ourselves, it's a way of playing with it, so it no longer has the same power over us. I think of it as dancing with my dark side.

W.B.: Da Vinci, Jack Kirby, or Dr. Seuss?

J.B.: Oh, now, this is SUCH a difficult question for me. You see, I wrote a best-selling children's book all about Leonardo da Vinci's inventions, that was translated into multiple languages. I've been to see his original paintings in galleries all around the world. I even looked a little like some of his subjects when I was younger. When my youngest daughter, Ishara, was three, she saw his painting of St. John in the Louvre, in Paris and perturbed the guards by running right up to it and shouting "Daddy!" Maybe I'm flattering myself, but I like to think we'd have gotten on rather well if we'd ever met.



*On the other hand, my first professional fiction work was writing comic books, mainly for the European market. It was how I supported myself through most of the 2000s. It is impossible to overplay Kirby's importance to the medium of comics. No other creator has had such an impact and influence on the medium, and it's doubtful they ever will. Every one of us who ever worked in comics worked in his shadow.*

*Then there's Dr. Seuss. I learned to read with Dr. Seuss. I had every one of his books as a kid, and I bought every one of his books for my kids when they were little. My daughters and I can still quote every word of "Fox in Sox" and "Green Eggs and Ham." I've also—and this might surprise you—published quite a lot of children's poetry, but I bet it won't surprise you to find that Dr. Seuss was a big influence.*

*So, to summarize—I'd sleep with Leonardo, marry Jack, and shoot myself to save Dr. Seuss. Though I'm not sure my wife would be pleased with any of those decisions.*

W.B.: As I mentioned earlier, you often perform your work. You've written and performed an audiobook, "Dead Air: Broadcasts from Beyond," about the dead telling their stories via radio frequencies. What can you tell us about creating an audiobook?

J.B.: *I'm certainly no expert on this matter. I worked as a vocal artist when I was younger, and I've recorded radio plays and spoken-word albums. Audiobooks weren't any different. For me, creating the audiobook involved me going into several recording studios in London and performing the stories into a microphone. In one instance, we had to use a booth inside a heavy metal radio station. This was fine while the tracks were playing, but the booth wasn't properly sound-proofed, and the DJ liked to rant and howl. Every time a track finished, I had to stop in mid-sentence while he screamed into the mic, then resume when the music started again because you could hear it in our booth.*

*Apparently, I'm a very demonstrative recording artist because the technicians and producers used to think it hilarious to see me hunched over the mic, pulling faces and waving my arms around as I told the story.*

*We did "Dead Air," like one of those old-time radio horror shows, like Lights Out, Inner Sanctum, and The Witch's Tale, complete with sound effects, original music, and a horror host. I'm not sure if it's my best work, but it's certainly an entertaining listen.*

W.B.: So, zombies?

J.B.: *They're a bit overdone these days, aren't they? But it's a subgenre that just won't die. It's even more impossible to kill than its subject matter. Just when you think it's finally done, someone comes along with another clever re-invention and it lurches at you again, desperate to feed on your brains, and your billfold.*

*My work in the subgenre came out just as the juggernaut was gaining traction at the end of the 2000s. My novel, "Way of the Barefoot Zombie," is set on a hidden Caribbean island where the billionaire entrepreneur, Doc Papa, has a captive colony of zombies. Here he teaches the aspiring super-rich how to free their 'inner zombies' by living with the zombies, dressing, eating, and even killing like them, so they can make a 'killing' on the market.*

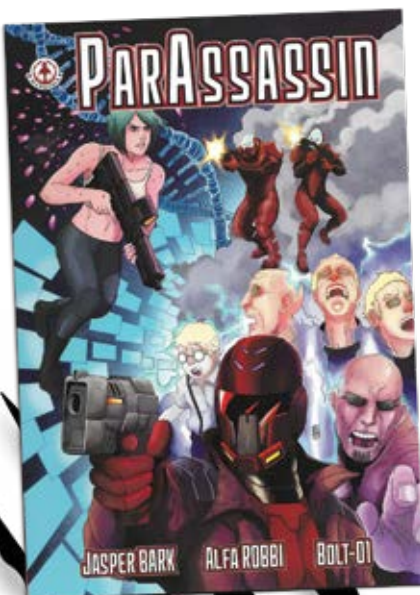
*My graphic novel, "Bloodfellas," is set in the prohibition era. The tag line is: When there's no room left in hell, the dead will turn to crime. It's set in Atros City, which is overrun with gangs of the undead, known as Ringsters, all under the iron fist of crime lord Papa Sang, who controls the supply of Ascension, a mystical drug that actually lets you visit heaven.*

*As you might have guessed, my take on zombies is not the least bit post-apocalyptic. I'm rather old school in this and go for a voodoo approach. While researching voodoo, I met some very interesting practitioners, took part in some wild ceremonies, and it has become a running theme in a lot of my work.*

W.B.: You've also written graphic novels, like *ParAssassin*. When writing a graphic novel, what is your approach? Do you visualize the story like a movie? Or see each scene as a panel in a comic? Just how does this work?

J.B.: *Comics writing is a separate and specific language. It's neither literate nor visual, but both at the same time. It has its own rhythm and grammar, and you need to learn this to first read and then write comics.*

*A comic script breaks the action down into panels, captions, and dialogue. It's a document that's intended to communicate the story to the art team, so they can tell the story visually. The art team can be one person, or it can be a penciller, an inker, and a colorist. All of them have specific tasks important to how the story is told and read. As a*



writer, you have to communicate not only character and setting to them, but also movement and flow between panels. You have to do this in as few words as possible. Comics writing is all about economy of text. You're not drawing the story, the artists are. Give them just enough to inspire them without bogging them down in detail.

The script is also a guide for the letterer who will put in all the word balloons and captions. If you want to do anything clever with these, or include sound effects, you have to let them know that in the script, too.

Finally, a good script is there to make the editor aware that you know what you're doing so they will only intervene when they need to, to stop you from looking like an idiot—as all good editors do.

W.B.: Coffee or tea?

J.B.: I prefer a cup of cold crocodile tears, with two sugars, and one of those little paper umbrellas.

W.B.: Your novella "Quiet Places" is described as "cosmic folk horror." What does that mean? Did you invent the genre?

J.B.: Cosmic folk horror blends the conventions of 'folk horror,' typified by movies like *The Wicker Man* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*, as well as books like Thomas Tryon's excellent "Harvest Home," with the tropes of 'cosmic horror' that might be found in the work of writers like Clark Ashton Smith and Laird Barron. I think it was probably invented by Algernon Blackwood, back before anyone had ever combined the words 'folk' or 'cosmic' with horror. Another example of this sub-subgenre might be John Langan's excellent novel "The Fisherman," which came out not long after "Quiet Places."

W.B.: You're having dinner with Harlan Ellison, H.P. Lovecraft, and Shakespeare. What are you guys talking about (aside from how much fun it is being dead)?

J.B.: Harlan is a pretty contentious guy, so he's badgering Shakespeare about who really wrote his plays. Shakespeare is tight-lipped about this, but he does complain about the fact that the actors never speak his lines as they're written, and no one gets the humor in his clown scenes. I avoid saying: "That's because they're not the least bit funny," because I know Harlan will point this out at great length.

Howard (Phillips Lovecraft) refuses most of the food courses, preferring a little soup and dry bread and some malted milk for dessert. He does, however, keep filling his pockets with food from the other dishes to eat later. Harlan, Will, and I pretend not to notice this.

W.B.: What are you working on now?

J.B.: I've actually written four novels, all of which are awaiting publication. I can't say anything about one of them, but the other three are part of a trilogy called *Draw You In* that will be published early next year by Crystal Lake Publishing. The story is a love letter to the history of horror comics, but it also involves an epic road trip across multiple states and the secret history of the U.S. government.

I've also launched a horror webcomic, in which I appear as a horror host.

W.B.: And, last question, just for fun: what's your favorite "it's so bad, it's good" movie?

J.B.: I think that would definitely have to be *Troll 2*. I watched the documentary *Best Worst Movie*, all about the underground phenomenon surrounding this film, first. Then I saw the movie itself was on Netflix. I asked my eldest daughter, Freya, if she'd like to watch it with me and she agreed.

We planned on watching the first ten minutes, rolling our eyes and then switching it off. But instead, we sat there with our jaws in our laps, unable to look away for the whole movie. It was utterly compelling for all the wrong reasons.

Freya loved it so much she made my wife and her boyfriend, Ralph, watch it with us again. She forces poor Ralph to watch a lot of things, including all three *High School Musical* movies.

Poor Ralph, the things some people will do for love never ceases to amaze me.

Thank you for chatting with me, Weldon. I've had a blast.

For more about Jasper, visit his website at <https://jasperbark.com>. To get a taste of slightly bonkers personae, watch a video promo for his novel *Way of the Barefoot Zombie* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJAuN0GmZI8>. Jasper is also a regular contributor to the new satirical current affairs site, *Coffee Beans and Conquest*, which can be found on Patreon at <https://jasperbark.com/a-bad-girls-guide-to-making-a-killing>. ■

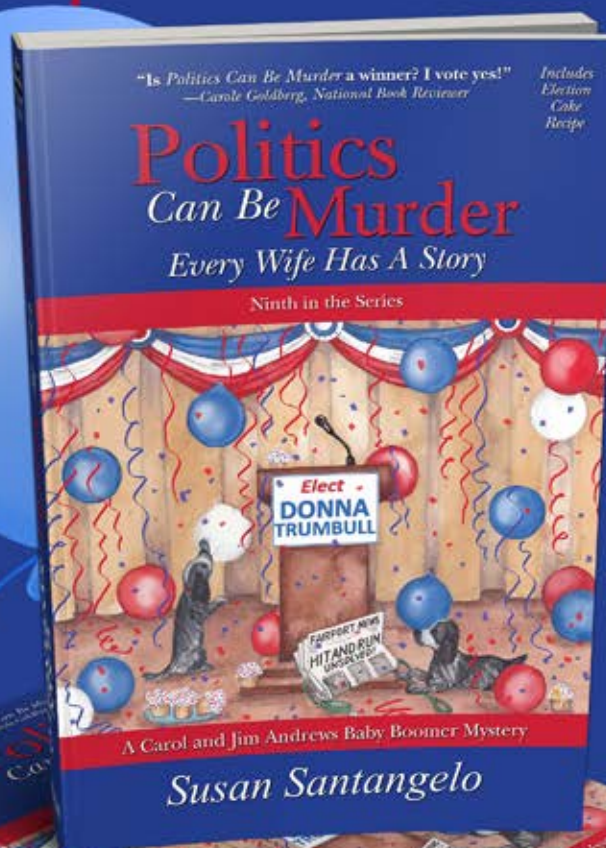


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# Mismatched Maggots

By Jeffrey A. Lockwood

IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THE MAGGOTS, KAYLA MARLEY'S LIFE AND HOWARD GRAHAM'S DEATH WOULD HAVE BEEN SO MUCH SIMPLER.

"I'm deeply saddened by Dr. Graham's death," Marley said. "My company had a research contract with him, but I knew him only professionally. So, I doubt I can add anything to your investigation of his tragic suicide."

Detective Dave Williams thought she sounded authentically empathetic and looked genuinely alluring. In his estimation, if the woman hadn't been the Vice President of Research for Vita Vape, she could've been a glamour model. She most certainly appeared out of place in the stark interrogation room. For his part, Williams was fairly tall, a bit dark, and somewhat handsome, but nothing to match his captivating person-of-interest.

The professor's body had been found in his office on Monday by his technician who notified the campus police. They were more than happy to call in their city counterparts to deal with a potential crime scene. The lab tech had accessed Dr. Graham's office on Saturday evening in search of a data file and everything was normal at that time, so it appeared that the scientist put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger on Sunday, when nobody was around to hear the shot. Suicide in the high pressure setting of a major research university was not terribly unusual, and recent professional setbacks apparently pushed him over the edge.

"We initially believed his death to be suicide, and that's what leaked to the press. But in the last few days some troubling evidence emerged," Williams said.

"I haven't seen Dr. Graham in more than a week, so I can't imagine what I might add," Marley said.

"Let me describe the situation, as it's been explained to me. Of course, as a scientist you should feel free to correct my understanding." Marley gave a compliant shrug and crossed her long legs which Williams found as distracting as her blonde hair, blue eyes, and full lips. "It seems that when the clean-up service arrived on Monday afternoon, a teaching assistant in the biology department took a morbid interest in the remains. To be specific, the fellow was slated to teach a summer course for high school students interested in science. He'd overheard the cleaners talking and thought it would be absolutely engrossing, if you'll excuse the term, for his future class to do a lab project on forensic entomology using insects from an actual death scene."

"That's surely a violation of some university policy, if not the law," Marley said.

Williams contemplated the legalities—along with Marley's fragrance. Whatever she was wearing had an exotic, floral scent. Was that the perfume his former girlfriend adored, even more than she admired that musclebound numbskull at her gym? His name was Sean, but what was the fragrance called? *No matter*, he thought, *focus on the interview*.

"Perhaps so. But here's the real problem. The cleaning crew put several maggots into vials of alcohol for the teaching assistant. As he explained to me, most of the little worms..."

"Technically, they are larvae, not worms," she interjected.

"Right. So, most of the larvae wiggling around in the brain tissue on the wall were tiny, no larger than a typewritten 'i.' But two maggots found in a partially open desk drawer were ten-times larger. According to this biology instructor, they were at least three days older than the little ones. He'd heard that the professor had shot himself the day before, which would explain the mini maggots, but their big pals were inexplicable."

“With all due respect, Detective Williams, I’m a biochemist not an entomologist, and I can’t imagine what any of this has to do with me.” She uncrossed her legs, shifted forward in her chair, and put her hands on the battered table, indicating her desire to end a pointless conversation. “I have several important meetings today. So if we’re done, I’d like to leave.”

“We won’t be much longer,” he said. She sighed deeply and leaned back with a hint of an eye roll—a holdover from her teenage years of dealing with authority, including pesky parents and parish priests. Marley had learned that overbearing authorities usually lacked confidence.

With thirty years on the force, Williams did not doubt his interrogation skills. “You said that you worked with Dr. Graham in a contractual capacity,” he began. Given that the professor was a scrawny geek and the vice president was a Norse goddess, Williams didn’t figure the relationship was anything more than professional, but the terms were worth clarifying. “Can you describe your arrangement?”

“I don’t know why you’re asking,” she said.

“It’s what investigators do. I’m sure that you want us to get to the bottom of his death.”

“Of course. As you know, I’m in charge of research for Vita Vape, one of the largest manufacturers of e-cigarettes and associated products. We’ve acquired fifty million dollars in venture capital to pursue what will be the biggest breakthrough in the history of these devices.”

“Let me guess, a new delivery system for THC to entice pot heads.”

“Better. Androstrenol.”

“Andro—what?”

“Androstrenol is a human sex pheromone. When the chemical is released from an e-cigarette, it makes the smoker seem attractive to women who inhale second-hand vapors.”

“So what did Dr. Graham contribute to this innovation?”

“His skills as a natural products chemist. We contracted with him to determine which of several formulations released the highest concentration of pheromones.”

“That fits with what I was told by his technician. Dr. Graham was heading to a national conference where he planned to announce a major finding at a special session on ‘Recent Discoveries.’ This gathering evidently draws plenty of media types in their never-ending pursuit of hot technology. In fact,” Williams continued, glancing at the cheap digital watch he’d worn for years, “the professor was scheduled to be speaking just about now.”

“I have no doubt that Dr. Graham would’ve made quite a splash, within limits.”

“Within limits?”

“Yes, he could’ve announced the existence of a formulation that allows a potent, behaviorally active ingredient to persist for up to twenty minutes.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“Absolutely. The pheromone is not normally heat stable. But we’ve developed a chemical stabilizer, the structure of which Dr. Graham could not reveal as it is proprietary—an industry secret, if you will. However, his data even without the chemical structure of the stabilizer would have created tremendous buzz.” Marley smoothed her skirt. “Now I really must be getting back to work.”

“There is one more thing that you can help with, Ms. Marley,” Williams said, giving no indication that he intended for her to leave. “What you’ve told me would make sense, except that I asked the professor’s technician to review the files on Dr. Graham’s computer. And what do you think he found?”

Marley gave an exasperated sigh. “I’ve no idea.”

“Oh, I doubt that. He found data from some apparatus called a mass spectrograph—”

“A mass spectrometer,” she corrected.

“Right. One of those things. What matters is that all of the formulations of VV1624, which I surmise is the code for your product, released various compounds upon heating. Would it surprise you to know that one of these byproducts was a potent carcinogen? Maybe it was this unfortunate finding that he intended to reveal at the conference.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of such data,” she said, although an arched eyebrow suggested otherwise. “That chemical analysis was not acquired through our contracted protocol.”

“So, you didn’t know anything about these findings?”

“I did not,” she said forcefully. “Moreover, by going public with any such data he would have violated the nondisclosure terms of our agreement. That would have terminated a very lucrative contract. And, if our CEO and lawyers were so motivated, it would have meant the end of Dr. Graham’s career. They would’ve destroyed him.”

“You’re sure?”

“Quite sure, and I’m also positive that I’m done with this game of make-believe,” she said, rising to her feet.



“Ms. Marley, I can formally detain you as a material witness, but that involves time consuming paperwork and public records that you probably wish to avoid. So take a deep breath and count on today being singularly unproductive in terms of your corporate agenda.”

“I’ve given you everything I know,” she snarled, returning to her chair.

“Maybe so, but let me tell you something I know,” Williams said. “Having interviewed the head of the biology department at the university, I learned that if Dr. Graham was sued by your company—a scenario that I explored based on his technician’s speculations—it might turn out to be a boon in terms of his academic standing. You see, he’d be able to say that his ethical obligations had trumped money, and academics just love that sort of crap.” Marley rubbed her thumb along her manicured fingernails in feigned disinterest. “As you surely know,” he continued, “contract work with industry is not highly valued by university faculty. It’s considered ‘dirty money’ versus the unadulterated funding from government grants.”

“I am aware of this pretense. Isn’t it odd that academics have contempt for research of value to the businesses that employ their graduates?” she asked disdainfully.

“I see your point, Ms. Marley. But the reality is, if Dr. Graham had gone public with the carcinogenic risks of your product, he could’ve presented himself as a whistleblower. And *that* would’ve been a homerun for his floundering university career.”

“A ‘homerun’ as you put it would not be of much use if our legal department sued him into poverty.”

“You fail to understand the mind of a professor, as did I until his department head explained how things work. Dr. Graham was virtually a monk with a vow of poverty. His bank records revealed that the fellow didn’t have enough money to pay the cost of a fine dinner for your attorneys. His job was his life, and the poor bastard was desperate for tenure.”

“I have no idea why Dr. Graham’s personal struggles are relevant to me,” she said.

“I’m getting to that. You see, on his desk we found some crumpled papers, including a letter from the National Science Foundation informing him that his grant proposal had not been funded. To add to his despair, there was also a wadded up reply from what I am told is the top journal in his field letting him know that a major paper from his last funded project was rejected.”

“That would explain his sense of suicidal despair. You seem to have neatly solved this case. May I go now?”

“We’re nearly done. You’re right about Dr. Graham having reason to kill himself, but it’s also true that his toxicology data would’ve been lethal to your company. And I can’t seem to fit that into the whole story.”

“There’s nothing more to fit into the sad tale of a despondent scientist. That he evidently had some preliminary data about my company’s product is a footnote, along with probably a dozen other projects he had underway.”

“That makes sense, but what doesn’t make sense is those three-day old maggots found in his open desk drawer.”

“I imagine that there is considerable variation in development rates of fly larvae, but you’d have to consult an expert on such matters.”

Williams nodded agreement. Until he’d interviewed the teaching assistant, his knowledge of insects was limited to the roaches that infested the department’s breakroom and the black flies that cursed his summer fishing trips.

“I did, and that teaching assistant with a Master’s degree in Entomology couldn’t explain the disparity. So I thought maybe there was something unusual about Dr. Graham’s body, itself. And that shifted my curiosity to another expert. I asked the Medical Examiner to go one step further than usual.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning a very thorough chemical screening of Dr. Graham’s blood. And can you guess what he discovered?”

“I’m not interested in playing games, Detective.”

“Oh, this is no game, Ms. Marley. In games, a player can get out of jail free.” Williams rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward, catching a whiff of cinnamon and that spice in Earl Grey tea. *Dammit, what is the name of that fragrance?* He was now genuinely annoyed with the distraction.

Marley was beginning to feel like an adolescent being grilled by one of the nuns at Holy Rosary Catholic School, recalling the time she was caught letting a boy reach under her plaid, uniform skirt.

“The ME reported that Dr. Graham had a lethal concentration of nicotine in his system,” he paused to see if Marley would react. Her head cocked ever so subtly. “An amount that only could have come from ingesting a concentrated dose. Your vaping fluids are loaded with nicotine, I believe.”

Marley gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “I would guess that the professor poisoned himself before pulling the trigger to assure that if the bullet failed, the chemical would succeed.”

Williams put his hands on the table and leaned forward. “Nice try, but the fact is that you needed him silenced,” he said to rattle her affected confidence. “From telephone records, we know you called him on Thursday. And from campus security cameras, we also know he left the parking lot after work that day and drove south—away from his apartment.”

"He probably went on an errand," she said unconvincingly.

"Perhaps. But his path made me wonder about yours. We accessed Uber records and learned that you were driven from your apartment to Chez Paris that evening, which is south of campus. What struck me as peculiar is that you ordered an Uber when you have your own car. Now, why would a person pay to be driven a few miles into the city?"

"It's safer for a woman to be dropped off at a restaurant," she answered with a discernible quaver. "There's so much crime downtown, it's dangerous to walk from a municipal parking lot. I'm sure being in your line of work, you understand."

"I understand that in the last six months, the only time you've taken an Uber has been to the airport. Now, I'm sure that a prosperous and attractive woman such as yourself has dined downtown during that time."

"My job is demanding, so I don't get out much," she said.

"But it appears you get out on the weekends. On Sunday, the campus security cameras captured a woman driving Dr. Graham's car into the Life Sciences parking lot. It was a cloudy day but she was wearing sunglasses. She drove around to the side of building where there are no cameras but on the way, the car turned and through the driver's side window you can make out that she had a blonde ponytail about the length of your hair, poking out from a baseball cap."

"There must be thousands of women fitting that description." Her lips trembled slightly.

"Probably so, but we've impounded the professor's car. And while your fingerprints aren't in our records, it will be a small matter to secure them and determine if they match what our technicians are lifting from the steering wheel."

"I admit to being in his car when he drove us to various laboratories and facilities." She paused, adding, "And a couple times he asked me to drive because I knew the locations."

"How convenient, Ms. Marley," he said. "You're a smart woman—clever enough to invent explanations on the fly. And flies had been the problem from the beginning. They are the only creatures, other than you, who knew the truth about Dr. Graham's death."

Williams let silence reign. He was good at using quiet as a weapon. Very good. A full minute passed and he could see Marley swallowing hard. He was used to questioning suspects who were smarter than he was but they, like Marley, hadn't been through a hundred interrogations and so lacked the emotional intelligence to deal with such high stakes situations.

"Ms. Marley," he began, "the way I see it, there's a lethally poisoned scientist and the very real potential for a lethally injected corporate vice president." As her eyes began to fill with tears, Williams saw his chance to shift from severe interrogator to 'good cop.'

"I'm not interested in punishing people; just in solving crimes," he said softly. "However, my recommendations to the District Attorney carry weight, and cooperation is taken into account when it comes to sentencing." Williams let her sniffing be the only sound filling the room.

"You'll help me?" she asked.

"I'll do what I can, if you're forthcoming."

Marley wiped angrily at her tears, as if they were responsible for her situation.

"Okay. Dr. Graham called me on Friday with his toxicology data and said that his 'professional ethics' required either that the company reveal the results or he'd do so himself. I knew he was grasping for some way to cast himself as a moral hero and earn tenure as a paragon of academic virtue."

"You told him as much?"

"Of course not. I played along and proposed that we meet to discuss the matter and our mutual interests in saving both his career and my product."

"And he agreed?"

"After a fashion. He insisted that we converse in a public place."

"That would've been Chez Paris."

"Yes," she said.

"So, you brought along the one lethal weapon at your disposal."

There was a long pause as Marley knew that she was about to leap into a confession from which there would be no escape. But her only hope was that the detective was good to his word about appealing to the prosecutor on her behalf.

"That's right. I drove into the city and we met for dinner. When he was distracted by a waitress way out of his league, I dumped three e-cig cartridges into his drink. Within a few minutes, he excused himself and rushed to the men's room. When Dr. Graham came back, he was pale and shaky. He said he felt like he was coming down with the stomach flu. The restaurant staff helped me get him into his car which the valet brought to the front."

"And then?"

"I drove around downtown until he went into convulsions and died." She paused to remember the long minutes as he retched and moaned. "He suffered less than the laboratory animals they use in his department."



"After that, I'm guessing you drove back to your condominium, parked somewhere dark, and stuffed him into the trunk. Then you called for an Uber to take you back to the restaurant so you could pick up your car. Well done, I must say."

Marley smiled briefly, her confidence returning. The tears had dried up, and she eagerly accepted Williams' judgment of her prowess. Her crying had released another trace of fragrance, something like pear brandy and Cointreau—the sort of spicy, honeyed liqueurs that Williams's last date, a woman too sophisticated for a cop, ordered with grave pomposity.

"And that just left you with the problem of how to stage the suicide, eh?" he asked.

"Yes. I could've taken his body to the office that night, but waiting until Sunday made much more sense."

"I'll bet that you knew about the departmental policy from Dr. Graham. The faculty are so driven by their work that their boss decreed Sundays as off limits. The department head explained to me that he was trying to impose a semblance of work-life balance for his young, anxious faculty."

"That's right. I spent Thursday night searching the internet for information on the process of decomposition. I learned that rigor mortis fades within about thirty-six hours of death, which provided me with the opportunity to arrange the body. According to my research, a corpse might begin the early stages of bloat, depending on the temperature. So, I put a shower curtain under him to contain any fluids and moved his car into a shady spot. The weather forecast was for cool days with light drizzle, which I figured would keep him reasonably fresh," she said.

"But it appears that you didn't look into the insects that were likely to find your hidden treasure."

"I knew flies laid their eggs in dead bodies. But I figured they wouldn't be out and about in chilly spring weather. And he was inside the trunk of my car, after all."

"And I know from working homicide that it only takes a short spell of warmth and a tiny opening for flies to find a buffet for their maggoty offspring. There were a couple hours of sun on Friday morning which I used to grab a coffee at the Starbucks down from the station, and the flies apparently used them to find a corpse in the car trunk down from your condo."

"I've always said that thorough research is the key to success," she said. "I guess mine wasn't as complete as it should have been."

"But here's what I don't get," Williams continued. "How did you know that there would be those rejection letters in his office to provide an ideal motive for his apparent suicide?"

"I didn't. Research is vital, but sometimes luck beats preparation, even in science. In fact, I planned to put a suicide note on his desk alluding to intolerable pressures. I had a file of handwritten pages from his laboratory notebook, so I spent Friday afternoon practicing his script. I brought my best forgery with me when I took his body to campus, but I scrapped that plan when I came across the letters on his desk. I figured that with a bit of staging, they'd explain his suicide quite effectively."

Williams could sense in Marley's tone a growing desire to share her exploits. With a bit of ego stroking, he could tap into her sense of superiority over an academic stooge who society naively deemed virtuous and pure. Not only was she more capable than the nerdy researcher who knew nothing about the world beyond his laboratory, but Williams could tell she relished her physical dominance over the professor.

"You have an impressive ability for extemporaneous problem solving. I'd guess that skill probably comes from needing to be nimble in the complexities of the business world." He let the compliment sink in for a moment, then continued, "However, moving the body from your car to his office must've been a real struggle."

"Not at all," Marley said with evident pride. "He was a scrawny little shit. I stuffed him into a packing box that I picked up from the store on Saturday, and nabbed a dolly from the loading dock at Vita Vape."

"So, you drove him to campus Sunday morning. It must've been a little tense driving a dead guy's car with his corpse in the trunk." Marley shrugged to convey her toughness, which is exactly what Williams hoped. She was on a roll and only needed the occasional nudge to keep from wobbling.

"I obeyed the speed limit all the way to the university," she said. "I knew there were no security cameras on the side of the building—just the one aimed at the parking lot."

"And your disguise wasn't half-bad, given that you sensibly assumed there would be no reason for the police to link you to Dr. Graham's death. You executed an impressive plan given the cards you were dealt in terms of time and resources. I can see how you made vice president."

She flashed a crooked smile at Williams, and he wondered for a moment if he'd overreached. But Marley had grown used to ingratiating flattery from those beneath her, which included Detective Williams in her estimation.

"I slipped on a pair of gloves and got the gun that he kept in the glovebox of his car. He had told me a few weeks ago that it was there for protection when he worked late. The wimp couldn't defend himself against anyone bigger than a sixth grader."

"And I suppose he had a building key in his pocket?"

"Yes, I checked for that and the gun before I drove to the university. I figured nobody would be around given the department head's policy. It was a simple matter to wheel Dr. Graham to his office and deposit the body." Marley was proud

of her ruthless cleverness and her brutal honesty.

“Well, Ms. Marley, you did more than summarily dump Dr. Graham onto the floor. There was—how did you put it?—‘a bit of staging’ involved. In fact, it was this element of your plan that so very nearly convinced us that we had a simple case of suicide by a distraught university professor who couldn’t handle his impending failure to earn tenure, and thereby secure a lab-coated life of test tubes.” He paused a moment, then added, “It’s a pathetic man who martyrs himself on the altar of academia, unlike those of us who do real work in the real world.”

Williams figured that mocking academic self-importance would resonate with Marley, and he wanted to give her the impression that cops and corporate executives were on the same side in their disdain for ivory towered fragility.

Marley fell silent. She’d grown up Catholic but hadn’t been to Mass in twenty years. However, the nuns’ descriptions of souls smudged with sin being cast into the fires of hell came rushing back. And somewhere in the deep crevices of childhood memory, the magical power of confession to purify souls gave her hope. Detective Williams was no priest, but in some inchoate way she sensed that if she could rehearse a confession with him, then repeating the sordid tale for an actual priest might provide salvation.

“And the gun, Ms. Marley?” Williams asked. He needed her to finish the story for the video camera recording the interview.

“Yes, the gun,” she said almost wistfully. “I pulled him into his desk chair, and while arranging his desktop to find the best place to put the suicide note, I found the rejection letters...” Her voice trailed off and she stared into space. “I crumpled the letters on the desktop and managed to sit him more or less upright.” She paused again. Williams waited in silence, not wanting to break the spell as she revealed the final moments. “I rummaged through the top desk drawer to find a key to his lab because I needed to find something to muffle the sound of the gun, just in case somebody was in the building. I hadn’t thought of that before. It’s hard to think of everything...”

Again she stopped and slowly shook her head. A long stillness fell, as if she had run out of emotional momentum.

“And then?” Williams finally said to nudge her forward.

“And then I saw a lab coat hanging on the back of his office door. I wrapped it around the gun,” the words coming faster now, “put the barrel to his temple, and pulled the trigger.” She took a deep, tremulous breath.

“You were probably rattled by the damage done by a jacketed 9mm. So you wanted a breath of fresh air to calm your nerves before leaving, just in case you ran into someone. Right?” Williams was guessing, but he needed to fit the maggots into the picture.

“Yes,” she sighed. “I opened the window. To be honest, I thought I was going to throw up and couldn’t make it to the restroom. But, I composed myself, stuffed the lab coat into the packing box, and wheeled it back to the car. Then I drove it to his apartment, tossed the evidence into a dumpster, and walked home.”

“You walked? That would’ve been something like five miles, but it explains why there were no more calls to Uber.”

“I was wound up pretty tight and the long walk cleared my head.”

“An ironic choice of words, Ms. Marley. The way I figure it, while your head was getting clear, a few maggots crawled out of Dr. Graham’s nose or mouth. Or maybe the concussion of the bullet knocked them loose. In any case, they ended up in his desk drawer. Meanwhile, a fresh round of flies were drawn to the odor of decay which promised a bounty for their maggoty offspring.”

“If only I’d remembered to close the window,” she said.

“If only the university had bothered to put window screens in the old section of the building,” he said.

“If only that teaching assistant had respect for the dead,” she said.

“If only the cleaners hadn’t found the older maggots,” he said.

They sat there looking at one another until a smile formed at the edges of Marley’s lips. Williams lifted an eyebrow and gave a little nod, inviting her to share her bemusement.

“I was going to rise to the top of corporate research,” she said. “I could’ve named my salary with any company if the pheromone project had succeeded. An e-cigarette emitting vapors to attract the opposite sex would’ve been a billion dollar product. And it might have happened, if not for the smell of death released by a homely, introverted scientist—the customer profile our marketing department sought to entice—attracting creatures with a very different agenda.”

Williams signaled to the two-way mirror and an officer came to the door of the interrogation room to arrest Ms. Marley, advise her of her rights, and take her to a holding cell.

As she was leaving, a final whiff of her perfume lingered. *Woody, musty, fruity—what the hell was that perfume? Sean... something? No, that was the asshole’s name.* He started to get up and give up. *Wait...that was also the name that the woman at the cosmetics counter said was “the maker.” Sean John; some hip-hop guy. It was his fragrance.*

He inhaled slowly through his nose and the name of the fragrance came rushing back. *Unforgivable.* ■



# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

## THE SECOND MOTHER

By Jenny Milchman

With prose so lyrical, you can almost hear music as you read them, Jenny Milchman has written a hard-hitting psychological thriller that is Hitchcockian in its style. As you begin to read “The Second Mother,” you can almost hear Rod Serling say, “Welcome to the Twilight Zone.”

In “The Second Mother,” we find Julie Mason (Weathers) broken and grasping for mere existence. She is guilt-ridden over the loss of her baby girl. A death for which she feels responsible. A death unforeseen. A memory she copes with and dulls with the help from a bottle of scotch.

In a moment of clarity, Julie decides the only way she can stop her downward spiral is to leave the small mountain town of Wedneskyull where she grew up and where everyone is like family. Julie finds a teaching position on Mercy, a small island off the coast of Maine. Julie hopes a new location with new people will help her heal.

From the first page to the last, it seems Julie cannot catch a break. For every step forward, she stumbles two steps backward. From deception and lying, to people who are not as they appear, Julie finds that life on Mercy is no different from life in her hometown. It is a small community run by a powerful and power-hungry family. For Julie to help those on Mercy that may be even more broken than she is, she must face her past before she can deal with her present, and hopefully propel herself into a better future.

Jenny Milchman has written a tension-filled, provocative, nail-biting thriller that will have your heart pounding and your hands shaking as you frantically turn page after page, thirsting for more.

The idiom, “the end justifies the means” has never been more prevalent than it is in “The Second Mother.”

Somewhere in the heavens, Alfred Hitchcock and Rod Serling are looking down and smiling at Jenny Milchman.

Reviewed by J. M. Leduc ■



## THE SEA OF LOST GIRLS

By Carol Goodman

Tess Henshaw’s phone rings at 2:50 AM. She answers too late and sees a text from her son, Rudy. She texts back, a casual question about the trouble she’s sure her son is in. Eleven minutes pass before he answers.

When she picks him up, there is blood on his sweatshirt. Later she learns his girlfriend, Lisa Zeller, is dead.

Tess and her husband, Harmon, are teachers at The Haywood School, a former refuge for girls rife with tales of those who’d vanished over the years. Were they disturbed teens who’d run away from their lives, or was there something more sinister at play? After years of ghost stories and missing girls, now another girl is dead.

It seems Tess’s life mirrors the school play of *The Crucible*—girls making accusations that no one believes. And haven’t the men at the school always thought complaints were just hysterics?

Will Tess discover the key to why girls at Haywood disappear, and will she be able to save her son in the process?

In her usual style, Goodman uses fairy tales and myths to tell her stories and combines the tales and lessons of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Crucible* in this modern narration of greed, power, and the need to control.

“The Sea of Lost Girls” will have readers considering how shame prevents the revelation of truth, and how some buried secrets must be unearthed for a soul to survive.

Reviewed by K.L. Romo ■

## DEAD TO HER

By Sarah Pinborough

In Savannah, even the elite have cliques. And when Marcie marries Jason Maddox, she’s just “the second wife,” the product of a former affair.

Trying hard to fit in as a former waitress/other woman, Marcie wants to make connections in Savannah’s inner circle. When Jason’s boss William returns home from a trip abroad with a new twenty-two-year-old wife, Marcie notices Jason’s tongue wagging. Convinced that Jason is going to leave her for Keisha, she’s forced to befriend her—only to find out that Keisha only has eyes for Marcie. They begin an affair and as her lust takes over, Marcie starts to question everything about her marriage, including Jason’s lies and late-night phone calls. When William ends up dead, not only do Marcie’s marriage secrets unravel, but so does the life she left in Boise when she fled to the south. Even Keisha has motives and suddenly everyone is a suspect as Marcie realizes that everyone she aspired to be has something to hide.

With an affable cast of characters, no one is who they seem to be as arrests and secrets come to the surface, and Marcie finds she has to clear her own name before it’s too late. Because the last person she was accused of killing died the same way.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ■



## PERFECT LITTLE CHILDREN

By Sophie Hannah

*New York Times* bestselling author Sophie Hannah gets under our skin in her latest book, “Perfect Little Children.” Hannah, known for bringing Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot back from the dead, has drawn a richly crafted, sinister image with her latest literary effort. In it we meet mom Beth Leeson and her perfectly happy little family.

Hannah’s compelling story begins with Beth traveling the wrong road in Hemingford Abbots, a small village in the United Kingdom, as she’s off to take her son to a nearby soccer game. She decides to stop by her old friend, Flora Braid’s, home. Not to visit, as there’s a painful history there, but just to see her. It’s been twelve years since they last spoke after all. But when she parks outside Newnham House for a little stalking, Beth gets the shock of her life when she spies an older Flora getting out of her car with her children. The children haven’t aged at all, not a single day since she last saw them more than a decade ago. Beth questions her sanity but cannot doubt what she sees with her own eyes. Young Thomas and Emily haven’t aged. How can this be? For Beth, it’s a question that will take her on a dark and twisty path.

Hannah shows her skill on each page as “Perfect Little Children,” for lovers of crime and mystery, becomes the *perfect little* page turner. Her talent at tension, and building upon it subtly, make this a great addition to the pantheon of great 2020 reads.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## LIGHTS ALL NIGHT LONG

By Lydia Fitzpatrick

It is always a thrill to see a debut author come into the world and put forth a story that is not only completely captivating, but also can't be put down until the very end. Lydia Fitzpatrick has done just that with "Lights All Night Long."

Coming to Louisiana from Russia, Ilya is a fifteen-year-old exchange student who is genuinely excited to start the adventure of a lifetime in the States. The only problem for Ilya is that he's obsessed over what happened to his older brother, Vladimir, back in their small hometown. When he was chosen for the exchange program, Vladimir vanished into the seedy Russian underworld containing drugs, scum, and murder. Right before Ilya departed for the States, three young women were found murdered in town and Vladimir was imprisoned.

With the help of Sadie, a person who has her own secrets she doesn't want revealed, Ilya works hard to uncover the reasons why Vladimir did what he did. What he ends up uncovering, however, is a whole different set of facts that prove Vladimir was actually protecting him. By leaving town and moving on to this new experience, Ilya has finally been able to learn the truth.

Readers will be amazed at the strong bond between these brothers, and find themselves highly involved in a cool murder mystery. This is one debut author I will watch, because if her first book is this good, I do not want to miss what comes next.

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



## LITTLE SECRETS

By Jennifer Hillier

Marin Machado has it all; a doting husband, a career she loves, and a son who is her entire world. However, everything good in her life comes to a screeching halt in the four seconds it takes for her to turn away from her four-year-old son, Sebastian, in a busy shopping center just a few days before Christmas, only to find him no longer there when she turns back.

Fast forward sixteen months later and Sebastian is still missing. Marin and Derek couldn't be further from the couple that they once were, and Marin battles suicidal thoughts on a daily basis. Sometimes the only thing keeping her from committing the act is the daily, "you alive?" text from her best friend, and former boyfriend, Sal.

The investigation into her son's disappearance is basically non-existent at this point, and the only thing keeping Marin's head above water is the reminder that the private investigator she hired, Vanessa Castro, is still looking for him. Marin has made Vanessa promise to share everything she finds, no matter how insignificant to her son's case. But when what she uncovers is Derek's relationship with a younger woman, Mackenzie Li, Marin channels all of the sadness and grief she's been feeling into something much more dangerous... rage.

After getting drunk and agreeing to meet Julian, a man her ex-con best friend Sal calls "a fixer," Marin finds herself wiring two-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars into a charity account to have her problem, Mackenzie, "taken care of."

"Little Secrets" is the first book by Jennifer Hillier that I've read, and I can honestly say that it won't be the last. She managed to weave together one of the most twisted, in a good way, and intricate story lines I've read in a long time. She also deals with tough subjects in a way that make you truly feel things for the characters, as if you're going through their struggles right along with them. This book belongs at the top of your must-read list.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta

## THE DILEMMA

By B. A. Paris

The bestselling author of "Behind Closed Doors" is back with a well-written, emotional and heart-wrenching family drama.

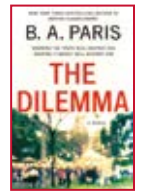
In "The Dilemma," Livia is having a party she's been planning for a very long time. But what her husband Adam doesn't know, is that she's keeping a terrible secret from him. How can she tell him that although she loves her daughter Marnie, she's glad she won't be there to celebrate with her?

When the party's over, Adam will be faced with an unbearable decision, one that will risk ripping their family apart in the worst way possible.

Fans of B. A. Paris will be thrilled to discover that "The Dilemma" has the author's mesmerizing signature style. There's a menacing atmosphere that you can feel within the first pages of the book, and it keeps the reader eagerly turning the pages until the final outcome. Paris knows how to shape each of her characters and explore their inner human depths very meticulously.

If you enjoy reading celebrated authors such as Liane Moriarty and Diane Chamberlain, "The Dilemma" is absolutely worth diving into. This is a heart-rending journey you won't be able to forget.

Reviewed by Ludwig Marzouk



## RIGGED

By D. P. Lyle

Jake Longly is back in this fourth installment of the bestselling series, and author D. P. Lyle has once again written a plot that keeps Longly fans and all thriller readers on the edge of their seats.

Tommy "Pancake" Jeffers is like most people in the world. He had a first-love back in his day, 6<sup>th</sup> grade to be exact, and has never forgotten sharing his first kiss with her all those years ago. Also like most people in this world, Pancake never really assumed that he'd see Emily, his childhood sweetheart, after they'd grown up.

Now, however, Emily is headed for a divorce. Living in the "artsy" town of Fairhope, Alabama, she's in the midst of leaving her husband and embarking on a new future. Longly Investigations is charged with researching all the financial aspects of the couple that will be involved.

A dark cloud of worry forms, however, when Emily doesn't appear for the meeting that was set up with Longly. Things go from nervous to nightmarish when her body, along with the body of Jason—one of the two men she's been dating—are found murdered. They have been executed, and Pancake immediately calls in Jake, Nicole and Ray for help.

Pancake is determined to find justice for the woman who once stole his heart when they were only kids, but as the investigation moves forward more suspects and motives seem to come out of the woodwork. From a man who will soon be Emily's ex who just happens to have an alibi that would stand up in any court; to a boyfriend who could very well have been jealous over Emily dating him and Jason at the same time and wanted to get revenge—the possibilities of why she was killed quickly add up.

It's the truth that readers will love to sink their teeth into this one. The plot is fantastic, the action is fast, and Pancake steals the heart.

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





## THE BOY FROM THE WOODS

By Harlan Coben

It was thirty years ago that a boy by the name of Wilde was found living in the woods. He owned no memory of his past, no family, nothing. He was simply living off the land and stealing from homes during the times he needed to in order to eat.

Fast forward three decades and a teenage girl goes missing. Oddly enough, the man who still has no memory of his childhood will be joining up with a longtime Coben character we all love to find out what happened to this girl.

Naomi Pine is her name, yet not even her own father seems to take her “disappearance” seriously. One person who does, however, is the sarcastic, intelligent, seventy-something TV criminal attorney, Hester Crimstein. Because of her grandson, Hester knows about Naomi’s background and the pain she experienced being bullied at school. Hester also has a connection to Wilde, a connection I will not reveal here, that causes her to ask him for his help. He has some truly unique skills that she knows are a necessity to find Naomi alive.

Wilde has absolutely no desire to return to the community he never fit in with, but he also can’t just leave Naomi out there without trying to help. Soon Wilde finds himself back in a world full of greedy, vengeful people with secrets too powerful to mention. But as Hester and Wilde come together to save Naomi, uncovering these secrets become priority one, putting a target on both their backs.

This bestselling, popular author has done it once again. This powerful suspense has a definite beginning, middle and end, but do not be surprised to see this “team” in a series of stories to come. Hester is still a charmer and Wilde already has found a place in this particular reader’s heart. I can’t wait to see them again!

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

## FROM BEER TO ETERNITY

By Sherry Harris

Chicago native Chloe Jackson has driven to Florida to fulfill a promise she made to her recently deceased best friend, Boone Slidell. Before Boone left for his final tour of duty in Afghanistan, he asked Chloe to go to Emerald Cove, in the Florida Panhandle, and help his grandmother run the Sea Glass Saloon if he didn’t return.



When Chloe arrives in town, she’s surprised to find out that Boone’s grandmother, Vivi, isn’t the frail little old lady she’d imagined. Plus, the feisty Vivi makes no effort to welcome her, despite knowing about Chloe’s close friendship with her grandson. Knowing that Vivi wants her to leave, Chloe fakes car trouble and convinces Vivi to hire her.

Chloe tells herself that she’s only in Emerald City temporarily, but she can’t help being seduced by the laidback vibe, the beautiful sandy beaches and pristine waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The Sea Glass is an institution in the Panhandle, attracting a mixed clientele of sunburned tourists and local business owners. The most eccentric business owner by far is Elwell Pugh, who’s started making a fashion statement by sitting at the bar nursing a beer and wearing an armadillo shell on his head. Although the locals are tolerant of Elwell’s unusual attire, he’s scaring away customers, which makes Vivi very unhappy.

Chloe is closing up the Sea Glass one night and overhears a heated argument between Vivi and a mysterious man. When she takes out the trash a few minutes later, Chloe discovers Elwell’s dead body, and the police zero in on Vivi as suspect number one. As Chloe snoops around in an attempt to clear Vivi, she discovers the idyllic lifestyle masks an underbelly of secrets, lies, and shady characters desperate enough to kill.

“From Beer to Eternity” is a terrific start to Sherry Harris’s *Chloe Jackson, Sea Glass Saloon Mystery* series. I absolutely loved it. Can’t wait for Book 2!

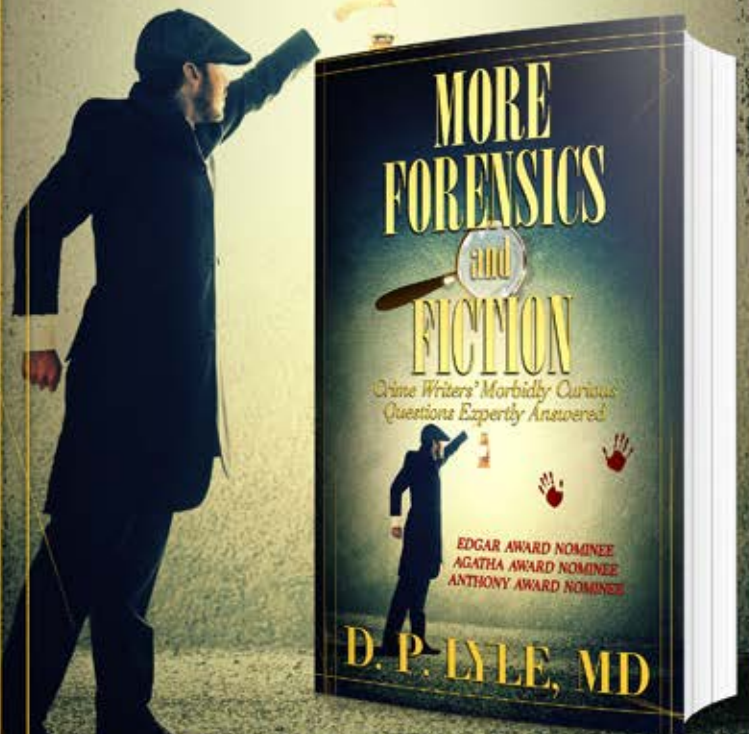
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## LOVE SOLD SEPARATELY

By Ellen Meister

Readers will love Dana Barry! She's one of those people who just throws rules and regulations out the window when it comes to life, love and career. She's single, bright, free and an actress in her twenties. Unfortunately, her luck does run out and life slaps her upside the head.

Losing her job, Dana heads to an audition for the Shopping Channel; they need lovely faces, great smiles, and people who have the ability to sell, sell, sell! Dana feels this is perfect for her, seeing as that she knows how to entice people. And, sure enough, she lands the TV job.

What should be cool and exciting becomes the opposite once Dana realizes that this job is basically just like working at any other office, complete with snide remarks and people who just don't like each other. Soon, the major hostess of the show is found dead. No one is exactly crying in their milkshakes, since this woman was a diva who liked to make the rest of the staff as angry as humanly possible with her mean ways.

The suspect that everyone believes is responsible is not; and Dana knows that for a fact. But she's up against some real power in the form of a handsome detective. Is Dana afraid to take this guy on? A little. But she's also an actress trying to launch a career, and she won't be denied.

Author Ellen Meister has already proven she can bring to life a heroine that not only is strong and spicy, but one that has the ability to deal with things that most "manly men" would shy away from. Remember Dorothy Parker? If you don't, read Meister's novels "Dorothy Parker Drank Here" and "Dorothy Parker: The Other Life" for even more entertainment. Witty and charming, this is a great summer read!

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



## THE GLAMOURIST

By Luanne G. Smith

Witches have littered our popular culture ever since the ancient days, but this may have been the first time I was ever introduced to a "vine witch." A witch with an impeccable ability to detect and brew the best wines was a refreshing twist on what I normally thought of when witches came to mind.

To say Elena's life as a vine witch was easy would be a lie. Elena has come into trouble in the past, such as getting wrongly accused and being put into prison for a short amount of time. Elena's hoping to move on with life and live in her vineyard with her fiancé, but troubles with the Ministry of Lineages and Licenses comes up. Forget Elena's prison time; her past with her parents is now coming into question. Because Elena's parents were *veneficas*, poison witches, no one seems to trust Elena with making wine that does not have a dose of toxin mixed into it.

But, the minister says that there may be a way for Elena to get her vine witch license back. Elena had a friend in prison, Yvette, who murdered a man and is now on the run. If Elena can help bring her in, they will give her the license back.

Not giving into bribery, Elena instead does everything she can to help Yvette clear her name. Yvette seems to have power, but it is weak compared to other witches and no one knows why. Yvette also carries around a strange book that a certain gang seems to want, and badly. Elena helps Yvette discover the mystery of her past, her book, and her hidden power and finds out a little more about herself than she bargained for.

This book had a splendid ending that made me instantly excited for the sequel. I cannot wait until Smith's next book comes out so I can fall in love with the eccentric and wonderful cast of characters again.

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

## THE LOOK-ALIKE

By Erica Spindler

Erica Spindler triggers some of our primal fears and rips the rug right out from underneath us with an unexpected final reveal in "The Look-Alike."

Sienna Scott returns to her childhood home to confront her past, just in time to stumble upon the dead body of a young woman, leading her to believe she might have been the killer's target. And now Sienna must investigate who is behind this gruesome crime before they strike again.

But is the perpetrator really after our protagonist, or is it the paranoid delusions that have long haunted her? And who could have killed beautiful brown-haired Madison Robie, stabbing her eighteen times?

While racing through the pages of "The Look-Alike," I was stunned by Spindler's writing and storytelling. The way she combines the suspense, atmosphere, characters and their emotions is incredibly appealing and will also leave you chilled to the bone.

The descriptions are raw and the characters are well-crafted. The plotline succeeds to capture the magic of Spindler's previous novels. With that being said, this certainly is a gripping novel that will keep psychological thriller addicts entertained from beginning to end.

Reviewed by Ludwig Marzouk ■



## FINAL JUDGMENT

By Marcia Clark

This is Clark's fourth *Samantha Brinkman Legal Thriller*. The scene opens on Bora Bora, with Samantha and her new lover, Niko Ferrell. Back in the states, Niko makes his living teaching Krav Maga. Samantha has finally relaxed enough to trust him, in spite of her control freak, suspicious nature. The idyll is shattered when Niko gets a phone call telling him that his friends and his mother have all been wiped out in a financial disaster. They all invested in Gold Strike Enterprises—after he told them it was a sure thing.

Niko's mother, Sophia, lost everything. That wouldn't make her destitute, since her son is more than capable of surviving the losses and could support her, but she's a proud woman. So proud, she works herself up to becoming gravely ill. The two men at Gold Strike, Bryan Poser and Tanner Handel, each come to Niko and tell him, in confidence, that the loss is the fault of the other person. Niko seems angry enough to kill them both. Only one turns up dead, and Niko is the obvious lead suspect.

Samantha rallies her team, Michelle—office manager and BFF, and Alex Medrano, the investigator and skilled hacker. She also has somewhat of an ally in her biological father, Dale Pearson, senior homicide detective on the LAPD force. Financial crimes are uncovered, along with a call-girl operation that operates in the sinister shadows of LA, and, worst of all, pedophilia. As everyone on the team digs deeper, and the Gold Strike partner who wasn't murdered, Tanner, disappears, more and more signs point to Niko's guilt. Samantha proceeds to either clear him or convict him, which will break her heart and smash what has been her only chance at a good relationship.

The plot proceeds through high and low, throughout LA and the environs, keeping us on the edge of our reading chairs, late into the night.

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



## DERAILED

By Mary Keliikoa

“Derailed” follows private investigator Kelly Pruett as she looks into the shocking death of Brooke Hanson, who was pushed in front of a moving train.

The cops think the case is a slam-dunk, Brooke was drunk and she fell. Her mother Georgette doesn’t believe it and hires Kelly to look into the circumstances surrounding what she calls a murder.

At first, Kelly gets the same information the cops had. Brooke was drunk, she was escorted out, and no one ever saw her again. But as Kelly’s questions ruffle feathers, others come out of the woodwork with information. She discovers that not only did Brooke lie to her parents about what she actually did for a living, but also about where she lived. When someone connected to Brooke also ends up dead, Kelly follows the clues, digging into Brooke’s sordid lifestyle, and everyone becomes a suspect. And Kelly gets more than she bargains for when she discovers Brooke’s sister’s true identity.

As it becomes clearer that Brooke was indeed murdered, Kelly’s own life is put in danger. Someone knows she knows, and that someone wants to shut her up, too.

This ride was more twisty than a tornado! I had it figured out on page 50. And page 100. And page 150, and so on. You’ll constantly be convinced you’ve figured it out until the final twist reminds you that you’re no PI—leave that to Kelly Pruett. The first in a series involving the sassy and smart PI leaves me anxiously awaiting the next. A fantastic debut from Mary Keliikoa!

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ▪



## EASTER HAIR HUNT

By Nancy Cohen

Hairstylist extraordinaire Marla Vail always goes out of her way to help her clients, no matter how inconvenient their requests may be. So when Bonnie “Blinky” Morris asks Marla to come to an Easter egg hunt at Tremayne Manor to style her hair after she finishes playing the Easter bunny for the children, Marla readily agrees. No way does Blinky want a hair (hare?) out of place for the fancy luncheon that follows.

Blinky is late returning to meet Marla at the end of the hunt, which is odd because Blinky is never late for anything. But Marla’s a patient person and realizes Blinky must be hiding somewhere close by and changing from her costume into street clothes so the children won’t figure out it was her. When the owner of Tremayne Manor, Lacey, enlists Marla’s help to gather up any eggs the children hadn’t found, Marla is happy to help, figuring she can gather leftover eggs and catch up to Blinky at the same time. She’s shocked to find the missing Easter bunny, still in full costume, lying face down on the ground. Frantic to save her friend, she immediately calls 911. When the police arrive and remove the costume, instead of Blinky they find the dead body of Paolo, the estate’s head gardener. Next to his body is a priceless Faberge egg from the estate’s private collection. Where is Blinky and how in the world did the gardener end up dead in her costume?

Unlike other amateur sleuths, Marla has an inside track with the local police department—she’s married to Detective Dalton Vail. And he values her uncanny ability to figure out clues the authorities often miss. With no shortage of suspects, Blinky still missing, and a blessed event looming, Marla really has her work cut out in this one. “Easter Hair Hunt” is the sixteenth in Nancy Cohen’s *Bad Hair Day* mystery series. Cozy fans will love it. I did.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Milestones Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ▪



## THE GIRLS WEEKEND

By Jody Gehrman

June Moody and Sadie MacTavish have always been the best of frenemies. Self-named ‘The Fearless Five,’ June, Sadie, Em, Kimiko and Amy have known each other since college. But life has caused them to drift apart and June is somewhat grateful for the distance. It’s hard enough to see Sadie’s perfect life through the lens of social media. After all, she has the career and family that June always believed should have, and could have, been hers.

After years of silence, Sadie sends a message to the girls inviting them to spend the weekend in her home to celebrate Amy who is expecting. Against her better judgment, June agrees to attend. However as soon as she arrives, she can hardly stomach the thought of facing Sadie and Ethan, Sadie’s husband, and June’s “one that got away.”

The weekend starts off tense, but manageable. Activities fill the days and alcohol fills the nights. All is fine until the girls wake up to find Sadie is missing. The only clues as to what may have happened are a blood-stained staircase and a cell phone on the floor. To make matters worse, no one has any memory of the night before after they started drinking, and it is beginning to look more like one of them is responsible for whatever happened to Sadie by the minute.

As they try to piece together any semblance of what might have happened, it becomes clear that everyone had their own motive for wanting Sadie gone, even the people living in her own home. She not only had a strained marriage, but also a rocky relationship with her teenage daughter, Dakota.

June quickly begins to look like the most likely suspect and all the girls begin to question each other’s involvement, as well as their own. Their relationships begin to unravel when, more than anything, they need to be stronger than ever.

Captivating and exhilarating, “The Girls Weekend” will take you for a wild ride, one that you won’t want to get off of.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ▪

## THE SUNDAY GIRL

By Pip Drysdale

When Taylor’s ex-boyfriend puts an embarrassing sex tape of her on the internet, all she wants is revenge. Unfortunately, she also still wants him. Angus is a cheating, lying, self-centered narcissist who finds ways to blame Taylor for everything that goes wrong in her life—including the uploaded footage. Every time she tries to leave, he works his way back into her life with flowers and promises. And she lets him.

But she still wants revenge.

After reading a book called “The Art of War,” she puts her plan in place to ruin his life and help her escape. Before long, she’s got him in trouble with his job, his building, and his friends. What Taylor doesn’t know is that Angus is one step ahead of each of her carefully crafted nuisances and the tables are turned. With her own job on the line, she wonders if she’s gone too far. But the domino effect is impossible to stop as it all comes crashing down—literally. Now, Taylor has to be careful as the cops question her, and she has to remember which lies were told to which people.

A fascinating and addicting read into the psyche of a woman who’s in love with the idea of love and can’t see past the manipulation.

Reviewed by Jamie Lynn Hendricks ▪

## MURDER TAKE TWO

By Carol J. Perry

The city of Salem, Massachusetts is famous for its seventeenth century witchcraft trials, and is also the setting for the popular mystery series penned by Carol J. Perry. Each book has a touch of the supernatural included in its plot, and the newest one, "Murder Take Two," is no exception.

The chief character in the series is Lee Barrett, a field reporter for WICH-TV, which means she gets to cover events all over the city as they are actually happening. Lee's boyfriend, Pete Mondello, is a detective on the Salem police force, and she shares her home with her research librarian aunt, Ibby, and a large orange gentleman cat, O'Ryan. Lee is also a scryer—a person who has the ability to see things in reflective surfaces that other people can't. Many of these visions, which happen without Lee's control, are violent and can be a clue to solve a crime.

In "Murder Take Two," a revered local professor at Essex County University, Sam Boyd, is found brutally murdered in his bedroom. What's particularly unusual about this crime is that its method replicates the murder of wealthy Captain Joseph White that happened over two centuries ago. A young assistant professor, Cody McGinnis, is arrested for the murder. Cody had a motive to kill the professor—he had recently been denied a tenured position because of Boyd. Cody's two uncles, retired policemen and good friends of Lee's, are convinced Cody is innocent, and enlist Lee, Aunt Ibby, and two of Ibby's best friends to help them prove it.

One of the many things I enjoy about this series is how the author frequently bases a plot on an actual historical event. In this case, the Captain White murder. "Murder Take Two," is both a page-turning mystery and a fascinating history lesson. I loved it!

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



## 28 SUMMERS

By Elin Hilderbrand

Mallory Blessing is on her deathbed after being diagnosed with cancer. She's given her son, Link, instructions to call a phone number that's tucked safely away on a slip of paper in her nightstand, but she doesn't give him any other details. When a man, Jake McCloud, picks up the phone, Link believes there must be some kind of mistake. Jake is the husband of Ursula Degournsey, the woman leading the 2020 presidential election. Jake asks Link why he's calling, although he's pretty sure he already knows the answer. And then... we're swept back to the summer of 1993, where Mallory and Jake's story begins.

Mallory is young and unsure of who she is or wants to be. She's living in New York City with her best friend Leland, although their relationship is rocky at best. Everything changes for her when she receives the news that her aunt died, leaving her a cottage on the island of Nantucket. She packs up her life in New York and never looks back. When her brother asks her to host a small "guys" weekend in lieu of a bachelor party at her new cottage, she agrees. But, when her brother's college roommate, Jake McCloud, gets into her car that first Labor Day weekend, they both know their lives will never be the same.

Mallory and Jake end up making a pact: they will go about their lives without one another, except for one weekend a year when they'll meet on Labor Day at Mallory's cottage. They're each other's "Same Time Next Year" based on the first film they watched together. Despite their longing desire to be together, their lives are on different paths, and readers follow their relationship, one weekend a year, for the next 27 summers.

This is by far my favorite Elin Hilderbrand book yet. It's filled with love, longing, and loss. My only complaint was that I needed more summers because I wasn't ready for it to end; though, I'm not sure I ever would have been.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## GAME OF DOG BONES

By Laurien Berenson

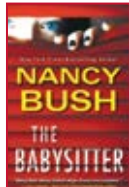
Dog shows are always competitive. But in no other show are the stakes higher and the prizes more coveted than at the granddaddy of all dog shows, the Westminster Dog Show. To have a dog deemed perfect enough to compete at this show is a high honor. And to be chosen to be a judge at this competition is the pinnacle of many dog breeders' careers.

Melanie Travis, her husband, Sam, and the members of her family are involved in the world of all things canine. But no one is more involved than Melanie's crusty aunt, Peg Turnbull, a well-respected breeder of standard poodles. When Peg is tapped to be the judge of the Non-Sporting group at Westminster, it's a really big deal, and the family treks into New York from their home in nearby Stamford, Connecticut, to watch Peg. The Sunday before the official show starts, Peg is giving a lecture on poodles at the host hotel, and rival poodle breeder, the slimy Victor Durbin, is determined to upstage her. Victor was ousted by the Paugussett Poodle Club, of which Peg is a driving force, for unethical practices, and he wants revenge. The hostilities between Peg and Victor culminate in a loud confrontation the night of the judging. A few hours later, Victor is found stabbed to death and Peg is at the top of the police suspect list.

Melanie is no stranger to ferreting out the truth where unexplained murders in the dog world are concerned. Since Peg's professional reputation is formidable, and her contacts in the world of poodles are limitless, the two put their heads together, confident they can unmask the real murderer before the authorities do.

"Game of Dog Bones" is Book 25 in the *Melanie Travis* mystery series. Not many talented writers can keep a series fresh for so long. Laurien Berenson is one of the few who does it every time!

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



## THE BABYSITTER

By Nancy Bush

When Jamie Whelan begs her older sister, Emma, to take over her babysitting job for the Ryerson twins so she can sneak off to a party, she never imagines the outcome. Emma is attacked while she's babysitting, stabbed multiple times in the back, leaving her alive but mentally never the same. Emma needs constant care, something their mother expects Jamie to take full part in because she blames her for the accident. As soon as Jamie is old enough, she leaves town, gets married, and has a child. She only returns to help care for her sister when she gets word that their mother has passed away.

Jamie is a single mom now to a teenage daughter named Harley. When they move back to town, Harley is quick to make friends with some of the other teens. When one particular friend, Marissa, gets offered a babysitting job, she asks Harley to join her. And it's at none other than the Ryerson household, where Emma was attacked and where one of the Ryerson twins from Jamie's past has now grown up and settled with his own twins. Jamie forbids Harley from joining Marissa, and when an attacker shows up at the home while Marissa is babysitting, Jamie knows that it's no coincidence.

Emma has flashes of the past from the night she was attacked which send her into fits, and Jamie works to understand the bits of memories she can pull from Emma during these episodes. Is there a serial killer come back from twenty years ago for the babysitters in this small town? Or could it be something more? "The Babysitter" is one you won't want to miss.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



## DEJA DEAD

By Susan Kiernan-Lewis

At the age of sixty, Claire Baskerville's entire life has just been turned upside down. She and her husband, Bob, are on a romantic trip to Paris. Claire's father also lives in Paris, and even though they are not close, Claire is thinking of contacting him while she's there. The trip doesn't begin well. The hotel Claire booked online turns out to be a little shabby. After spending one uncomfortable night in their hot room, the couple switch to another, cooler one. Then, determined to enjoy themselves, Claire and Bob head out to do some sightseeing. Bob, pleading jet lag, returns to the hotel before Claire to take a nap. When Claire returns a short time later, she finds him brutally murdered.

After an intensive grilling by the two detectives assigned to the case, she flies back home and plans Bob's funeral. At the wake, she notices that one member of his office staff, Courtney Purdue, is more overcome with grief than even Claire is, and realizes that Courtney and Bob were having an affair. Things get even worse when she learns that Bob left her completely broke and deeply in debt. Then her father's wife phones to tell her that her father has died. But the good news is that Claire has inherited his apartment so, lacking any other options, she heads back to Paris.

Once there, Claire realizes that she can never move forward with her life until she finds out the truth about Bob's brutal death. In spite of a genetic brain anomaly that makes it impossible for her to remember faces—even those she's just seen moments before—Claire sets out to find her husband's killer.

"Deja Dead" is the first in Susan Kiernan-Lewis's new *An American in Paris* series. With surprises, twists and turns on every page, it's a roller coaster of a ride and I loved it!

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



## LADY RIGHTS A WRONG

By Eliza Casey



At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many women were getting new ideas about how they wanted to live their lives. They were no longer satisfied to be what men allowed them to be. Changing this ebb and flow of life created a lot of waves, so not many women were willing to fight for their human rights. Even riding a bicycle was a daring act of courage for a woman of that era.

Although written with fictitious characters, "Lady Rights a Wrong" is about the suffrage movement and the price that was paid for women's rights to voting. We meet a leader for this equal rights movement of the early 1900s. Amelia Price is a strong woman who challenges the system. She is admired by the few who agree with her ideas and unsupported by everyone else including most women and men, her own husband, and her daughter and son-in-law.

When Mrs. Price dies from a fall, Lady Cecelia isn't satisfied to let it go as an accidental death. Having a dangerous encounter herself as she gets closer to the truth of the suffragette's death, it makes her more confident that Mrs. Price was pushed down those stairs in an act of rage.

Truths are indeed revealed, and an emotional climax leads to instant, but surprising, justice for Amelia Price's death.

Reviewed by Patricia Wilson ■

## CREDIBLE THREAT

By J. A. Jance

J.A. Jance, bestselling author of the *Ali Reynolds* series (among others) brings Ali and her crew at High Noon Enterprises back to take readers on yet another harrowing, suspenseful journey.

We meet Rachel Higgins. It's been years since she lost her son to an overdose, but the nightmare seems to keep on going. Rachel has learned the reason why her son turned to drugs all those years ago: it was because he had a secret that he couldn't deal with. He suffered in high school; not because of a bully, but because a pedophile priest turned his world into a living hell.

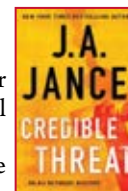
This grieving mom strikes back, setting her sights on the Catholic Church's biggest role model locally, the Archbishop Francis Gillespie. The woman has hatred in her soul and vengeance on her mind.

Receiving threats, the archbishop tells the police and, to his dismay, the law ignores them and tells him they're not credible. The only other path for him to choose is to turn to Ali and her husband, B. Simpson, because they're personal friends.

B. is not even in the States at the time; he's on an emergency call, so to speak, in the area of cybersecurity. So Ali is left to track down the person who's threatening the archbishop and stop bad things from happening. But when the archbishop is assassinated by an unknown shooter, Ali must "team" with a homicide cop in Phoenix to prevent more people from getting killed. What Ali doesn't understand is the more she entangles herself in this case, the crazier the killer is turning and seeing Ali as a brand new target.

Jance continues to pen novels that keep you on the edge of your seat. Not only do the characters become personal favorites, but each plot is unique and continues to show why Jance is one of the most popular bestselling authors out there.

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



## THE RETURN

By Rachel Harrison

I love a good, chilling horror—especially when monsters are involved. I love it when an author introduces me to some new monster that makes my goosebumps rise, but Harrison gives us a new layer of depth when it comes to the main monster in her book, "The Return."

Julie went missing two years ago. Everyone thought she was dead after she went hiking by herself and never came back. But her best friend, Elise, never stopped believing Julie was alive. She just refused to believe, even though everyone tried to convince her otherwise.

Turns out, Elise was right about Julie. Julie shows up on her front porch two years later, not remembering anything about what happened the last two years. Some say she is lying, that it was all a scheme so she could get on national news, but Elise doesn't believe that either. All she wants is to see Julie again after so long.

Her wish comes true, for Elise, Julie, and two of their other friends plan a girl's trip to the Red Honey Inn. The setting is perfect, picturesque, but something is not right, and it has to do with Julie. The once vegetarian is now eating meat raw. Her skin is flaking, her hair is greasy, and she needs some desperate dental work done. Something weird happened to Julie in the two years she was gone, and Elise cannot believe that Julie doesn't remember anything. When things start going awry in the inn, Elise and her friends just may not believe what they've gotten themselves into, or just what happened to their friend Julie.

This is more than an awesome monster story—it's also a story of friendship. It was nice to see the friendship of their whole group blossom as they opened up more to each other than they ever had before. This book was a refreshing horror. Highly recommended!

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

## MOUSSE AND MURDER

By Elizabeth Logan

Charlene “Charlie” Cook is finishing her first year of law school in San Francisco and realizing that a career as an attorney isn’t the way she wants to spend the rest of her life. She misses her home state of Alaska, particularly the Bear Claw Diner, the cozy restaurant her parents own in the tiny town of Elkview. She’s thrilled when her mom and dad decide to take an early retirement and offer Charlie the chance to take over the Bear Claw so they can travel.

After an appropriate training period where Charlie learns all the tricks of keeping the diner running smoothly, her parents leave on their first trip. Charlie has some ideas about updating the menu, including tweaking the time-honored recipe of bear claws, the pastry for which the diner is named, by adding chocolate to the recipe. After getting the green light from her baker/mom to give it a try, she bakes up the first batch, which she thinks has turned out great. But when she shares the new bear claw with the restaurant chef, Oliver Whitestone, he goes ballistic on her, quits and storms out of the diner.

Charlie feels terrible and is reluctant to fess up to her parents about Oliver’s stormy exit, particularly since her mom and Oliver have been good friends for years. She feels even worse when Alaska State Trooper Cody Graham—the local law enforcement officer, known to everyone simply as “Trooper”—finds the chef’s dead body and it’s clear that he was murdered. So, of course, Charlie is the first one Trooper interrogates, especially since it appears that Oliver was murdered soon after their argument. Fortunately, Charlie doesn’t spend too long on the suspect list, and when she tells her parents about the murder, her mother tasks Charlie with helping Trooper find the real killer.

“Mousse and Murder” is an entertaining, well-plotted mystery with an engaging cast of characters I can’t wait to meet again.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Politics Can be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## STRANGER IN THE LAKE

By Kimberly Belle

This international bestselling author of six novels of suspense has hit it out of the park once again!

In “Stranger in the Lake,” readers are taken to a quaint, lakeside village to meet up with a charming couple who are truly in love. Charlotte is a woman who has caused a bit of gossip in the past, including some snide remarks and opinions. This is not a shock, considering we’re talking about a really small town where people have nothing better to do than voice their own opinions. And they love talking about Charlotte and her first marriage, as well as her more than humble past.

Paul is the wealthy man Charlotte has married. A widower, Paul lost his first wife in a tragic drowning. Although Paul and Charlotte are now happy together and both have gotten a second chance at love, a day comes that brings with it a true nightmare. The body of a young lady is found in the exact same spot where Paul’s first wife was discovered. Coincidence?

Charlotte feels as if she can’t breathe. The fact is, the “stranger” found in the lake is actually a woman she saw her husband talking to the day before the discovery, yet Paul tells the police that he never met the woman. Charlotte has no idea why he’s lying, but soon other dark secrets are exposed. She must fight between keeping their marriage together because she knows Paul is a good man; and the fact that the more she uncovers about her beloved, the more possible it is that her own body could be found floating in the same spot, very soon.

This is a mysterious book with secrets unfolding at a rapid pace. Even the reader struggles with the fact that the wonderful Paul could be involved in any of this. When the truth is revealed, however, the book is sure to become one of your favorite, unforgettable, “must-read-again” mysteries.

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

## THE WIFE STALKER

By Liv Constantine

“The Wife Stalker” is told in alternating points of view, switching between Joanna—the woman who has devoted her life to Leo and their kids, eight-year-old Evie and six-year-old Stelli—and Piper, the “other woman” who is looking for a new start and finds it with Leo.

Leo has been in a depressive state for months and Joanna is searching for something to pull him out of it. When he meets Piper, however, his world is turned upside down. He’s suddenly livelier and happier than he’s ever been. When Joanna’s mother hurts herself and needs care, Leo is quick to suggest that she leave the house and go stay with her mother. When all of Joanna’s belongings show up at her mother’s home a short time later, she’s devastated. She doesn’t trust Piper around the people she loves, and she’ll do anything to protect what’s hers.

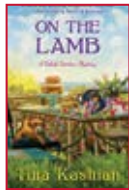
In true Liv Constantine fashion, this story wraps with a twist that you just won’t see coming, no matter how hard you try. This one is definitely a must-read!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



## ON THE LAMB

By Tina Kashian



Thank goodness it’s almost spring in the seaside town of Ocean Crest. Winter is a tough time for the local merchants, with few tourists wanting to walk the boardwalk in blustery winds to gaze at the Atlantic Ocean.

One of the harbingers of spring is the annual Bikers on the Beach gathering that raises funds for injured veterans as hundreds of cyclists arrive in town, eager to participate. Lucy Berberian, now the manager of the Kebab Kitchen restaurant, is excited about the projected uptick in patrons, as well as her decision to finally move into her own apartment. Plus, her romance with handsome restaurant chef Azad Zakarian—the same person who dumped her right out of college—is back on track again. Life is good.

The biker rally is kicking off in high style with a bonfire on the beach. Lucy is going at the invitation of her friend, motorcycle enthusiast Michael Citteroni. Lucy invites a few friends to come along with her to the bonfire, including Melanie Haven, who owns Haven Candies on the Ocean Crest boardwalk. Just as the fire is beginning to crackle, Melanie has a nasty public confrontation with her landlord, Gilbert Lubinski, who accuses her of not paying her rent and threatens to evict her. A short time later, the landlord is found dead, a piece of saltwater taffy lodged in his throat.

Naturally, the police focus on Melanie as their suspect of choice. But Lucy’s not so sure. When Melanie begs for Lucy’s help, how can she refuse? As Lucy begins to dig more into the landlord’s background, she discovers that the list of locals who had reason to want Gilbert dead include an almost-ex-wife, some of Michael’s biker friends, and the landlord’s business partner. Plus, it seems that the dead man was also operating a loan shark business on the side.

“On the Lamb” is the fourth in Tina Kashian’s *Kebab Kitchen* mystery series. It’s a delicious, fun read. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Politics Can be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES

By Sarah J. Maas

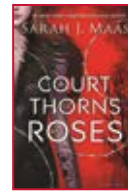
When thinking about fairies, cute pictures of small people with wings that can conjure magic come to mind. It is always refreshing when a new idea surfaces, and experiencing Sarah J. Maas spin fairies into something unlike the ones I've known from childhood put a smile on my face.

Feyre lives in the aftermath of a world torn apart by a fairy-human war. Even though a treaty keeps the deadly fairies from using humans as slaves, that doesn't mean the gruesome creatures don't still haunt human lands. Feyre lives in hatred toward the fairies, just like most everyone living on the human land, but they have faded into the background of her life. Feyre would much rather have a decent meal on the table for her family, which is hard to come by in winter.

However, fairies come charging into Feyre's life after she accidentally kills one. Though she would never admit she feels even a smidgeon of remorse for the kill, her life is turned upside-down when the treaty she never read forces her to go live with the fairies for eternity. Tamlin is the high fairy who whisks her away, and while she still tries to keep her hatred for the fairies alive, a passion strikes between them that can't be ignored. But there are more things to worry about in this new world. There is a blight attacking the fairies, one that forces them to wear a mask on their faces that drains away their magic. The blight may start seeping into human lands, too, and Feyre knows she must stop it before it can affect her family she has been dragged away from.

This book had me glued to the pages. There was a powerful passion, but also beautiful imagery, awesome monsters, and seamless world-building. It was well worth the read.

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



## GRACE IS GONE

By Emily Elgar

With "Grace is Gone" we get another amazing outing from this author who takes fans into a close-knit English community that must deal with a tragedy that leaves a mother dead, makes a daughter disappear, and unveils secrets you will not see coming.

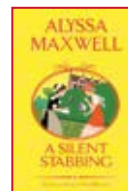
Living in Ashford, Cornwall, is a beloved family. Meg Nichols, and her daughter, Grace, are two people this small town loves. Meg works hard caring for Grace, a child who has suffered from illnesses but manages to always wear a smile. Meg has also lived in daily fear, praying that her abusive ex would not come back and kidnap Grace, like he tried once before.

Jon Katrin is a local journalist who is responsible for writing an article about Meg and Grace that brought about repercussions on the town and his own marriage. So when he finds out that Meg is dead and Grace has been taken, he knows that he should stay as far away from the story as humanly possible. However, there is also that thought that he can make amends for the past if he can help find Grace and bring her back unharmed.

Cara is yet another in town that feels guilt. She was the neighbor of Meg and Grace but doesn't feel good about the friend she was, so she 'teams' up with Jon to make her own amends and search for the missing girl. Problem is, as their investigation proceeds, secrets are unveiled that bring up far more questions than answers about what, exactly, occurred.

Elgar does a fantastic job of telling the tale from various points of view that include personal looks at the case from various characters' eyes, and entries from a diary left behind. This thriller will chill you to the bone and open the always closed doors that exist in small towns that have lots of personal tales to hide. A great read with an ending that will both surprise and shock you!

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



## THE TRAITOR'S PAWN

By Lisa Harris



This is an interesting blend of romance and thriller. The damsel in distress, Aubrey Grayson, is duck hunting, although doesn't have a rifle with her, when her companion is shot. She runs after the shooter and is kidnapped when he overpowers her but does not shoot her. The man who was shot is Papps, an old family friend and a Texas senator. FBI Agent Jack Shannon, with whom Aubrey has a history, is in the area, Corpus Christi, Texas, on an official mission of his own that involves finding someone who is selling secrets to the Chinese.

Jack had loved Aubrey, but never declared himself when they all lived in this area. In fact, she started seriously dating Jack's brother and he, broken-hearted, moved away. When Jack turns up, he is just as reticent as he was when he was younger, but knows he still loves her. She actually loves him, too, but thinks that it would destroy their friendship if she let him know that. So, against this backdrop, they begin to realize that her kidnapping, from which she escapes, is connected with his case and they must work together to find the culprits. It goes deeper than that, though, involving much family angst and soul searching until they untangle the espionage web.

There's betrayal, high adventure, and thrills in store when you read this.

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

## A SILENT STABBING

By Alyssa Maxwell

Lady Phoebe Renshaw and her maid, Eva Huntford, are very good friends—an unusual occurrence in the snobby British post-World-War 1 era that's the setting for this book. The two women are close in age, and Eva has served members of the Renshaw family for years. Their bond has become even stronger since the two can't help getting involved in solving a murder mystery. Or two.

Lady Phoebe feels very strongly that her family should be involved in the regular activities in their quiet village of Little Barlow, so when the local church sponsors a charity relief drive to help families of war veterans, she and Eva volunteer to help. Eva's married sister Alice also pitches in. During the sorting of the charity donations, Eva and Lady Phoebe witness Alice getting a little too cozy with a former beau, Keenan Ripley. Even more worrisome is the loud quarrel that erupts between Keenan and his older brother, Steven, about the future of the orchard the two co-own. The orchard is losing money and Steven wants to sell out to a loud-mouthed American, who will turn the orchard into a tacky vacation resort. The entire village is up in arms about the potential desecration of their peaceful hamlet.

Steven has been hired as head gardener at Lady Phoebe's family estate, Foxwood Hall, after the sudden and mysterious retirement of Alfred Peele, who had held the position for years. When Steven is found impaled by a pair of hedge clippers soon after the public argument with his brother, Keenan is arrested for his murder. Lady Phoebe and Eva are certain he's innocent but are totally unprepared when they finally face the real killer.

"A Silent Stabbing" is a first-rate historical mystery, the fifth in *A Lady and A Lady's Maid* series penned by Alyssa Maxwell. I always enjoy spending time with Lady Phoebe and Eva, and this book is a welcome diversion in these uncertain times. Highly recommended.

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

## SHUNTOLL ROAD

By Leslie Wheeler

Boston library curator Kathryn Stinson is taking a two-week trip to the Berkshires. A popular mecca for tourists no matter what the time of year, the Berkshires are known for spectacular foliage, a thriving visual art scene, picturesque country inns, and exceptional musical festivals like Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Kathryn, however, is drawn back to the town of New Nottingham because she hopes to rebuild her romance with Earl Barker, the handsome man she wrongly suspected of murdering his late lover.

On her way into town, Kathryn gets a phone call from Brandy Russo, the local realtor who's been hired to sell the house she's been renting, with bad news. The house has just been sold to a New York real estate developer, Niall Corrigan, who plans to tear it down and turn the property into upscale, ritzy housing. Outraged, Kathryn is determined to put up a fight to block the sale, which puts her in direct opposition to Earl, who has been hired by Corrigan to clear the land for the new development.

Kathryn realizes she has to tread carefully in her opposition or she will risk alienating the man she loves. But when Corrigan starts to intrude into her own personal space by showing up—and staying—in the house while she is still living there, Kathryn feels violated and even threatened by his presence.

This book is not just Kathryn's story, however, it's also the story of a seemingly picture-perfect local family: Gwen and Tim Waite, their soccer-playing son, Billy, and their rebellious teenage daughter, Scarlett, who's the perfect replica of her mother in her younger days. In more ways than one. Gwen is hiding a terrible secret, something that Niall knows and Gwen is terrified he'll reveal to her loved ones.

Leslie Wheeler has written a heart-thumping tale of good and evil, secrets, lies and unrequited love that keeps the reader guessing until the very end. Wow!

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



## THE WOMAN IN THE MIRROR

By Rebecca James

Set in 1947, readers join Alice Miller as she takes the job of governess to the twins of widower, Captain Jonathan de Grey. Journeying to the English countryside of Cornwall, Winterbourne is a bit scary from the start.

Her new employer is charming and the children, Constance and Edmund, seem to fall in love with Alice. Her emotions swirl as she suddenly feels like being a part of their little group will help heal her own broken heart. But, her hopes are too good to be true.

Soon, on the outside, Winterbourne Hall takes on a far more sinister look, like a monster enveloped in the fog. Inside, the "kind" twins suddenly seem to be teasing Alice and trying to hurt her in deceitful little ways. The Captain, as well, seems to transform from charming to cruel, and Alice feels like a ghostly presence wants to throw her out of the manor.

Switching to the present, readers find themselves in New York with Rachel Wright. Rachel learns that she is, in fact, a descendant of the de Greys and is the direct heir to Winterbourne. Adopted as a baby, this is news to Rachel who now becomes excited to finally get answers about who she is and where she came from. Upon investigation, however, Rachel finds far more than she bargained for when her trip to Cornwall unveils a tragic legacy that has brought down many generations of the de Grey family before her.

From a twisted mind to pure madness to the reveal of a woman who is the ruler of Winterbourne and will not allow anyone to call it their own, this book has it all. And, as always when it comes to author Rebecca James, this book is written so well that you will swear you're standing in the Hall and battling this malevolent past all by yourself. A true "gem" in the world of suspense.

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

## THE GUEST LIST

By Lucy Foley

It's a wedding. It's a celebration. Drinks are flowing. Old stories about being teenagers together are being told. There's eating, dancing, cake cutting, and speeches. Everyone is having a good time. Until the lights go out, and there's a murder.

It's Will and Jules' wedding day, and they've invited all their friends to an island off the coast of Ireland. But they're all harboring secrets, strangely enough, tied to the same person. There's Hannah with the dead sister. There's Olivia with the bad breakup. There's Johnno with a grudge. There's Aoife with a secret brother. And finally there's Jules, the bride with an ex at the wedding.

When someone ends up dead, secrets bubble to the surface publicly and privately as they all scramble with their newfound knowledge. The roller-coaster ending twists and turns like a telephone cord, until you find out who wanted revenge the most.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ■



## DEAD LAND

By Sara Paretsky

V.I. Warshawski, that legendary detective that Paretsky brought to readers years ago, is back and better than ever!

If anybody knows the worst and best of Chicago, it's V.I. Warshawski. However, there's a world of darkness in the arena of politics that brings V.I. into a new game that she may not want to play. But she can't turn away, considering her own goddaughter, Bernie, has drawn her into a battle over land use of lakefront property that's heating up.

What happens in what seems like the blink of an eye, is bad men have created a world where buildings and public parks have been overtaken by billion-dollar projects that no one saw coming. As money continues to change hands, V.I. ends up in the middle of a deal because Bernie carelessly falls in with bad guys as she tries to rescue a woman named Lydia Zamir.

Once a well-known singer/songwriter, Lydia found herself living on the streets after the love of her life was gunned down beside her during a mass shooting. Without thinking, this woman has Bernie jumping into a situation that will have her and V.I. standing against vicious developers who will do anything to get what they want. When another murder occurs, taking out Bernie's own boyfriend who works for a group called SLICK, V.I. finds herself knee-deep in this mess.

Clues arise and soon a mysterious man named Coop is the "light" in this, one of V.I.'s darkest cases. She becomes certain that by finding Coop, she'll be able to uncover why SLICK members are being killed and who is behind it. As a terrifying conspiracy unfolds before readers' eyes, you'll become mesmerized watching V.I. find a way to stop the deaths and show some political leaders for what they really are: deadly liars.

V.I. and her creator once again offer a new engaging tale of suspense, thrills, chills, and slimy politics that always, deservedly, puts them on the bestseller lists.

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



## MURDER IN AN IRISH COTTAGE

By Carlene O'Connor

Summer has made its official appearance in the lovely village of Kilbane, County Cork, Ireland, and nobody is enjoying it more than newly engaged Siobhan O'Sullivan. Siobhan is anxious to make a good impression on her future mother-in-law, the prickly Nancy Flannery. But the road to pleasing the dotting mam of Siobhan's fiancée, the handsome Macdara, is anything but smooth, and Nancy is determined to keep it that way. Both Siobhan and Dara are members of the Garda, the Irish police service, and often butt heads in their approach to a case they're both working on, but opposites attract, right?

When Dara's blind cousin, Jane Delaney, frantically calls Dara for help, Siobhan agrees to go with him to Ballysiogdun, the rural hamlet Jane and her mother, Ellen, now call home. The couple is shocked by the tragedy they discover when they arrive. Jane is outside the cottage, hysterical. Inside, Dara's aunt lies dead on her bed. A pillow on the floor, a nearby overturned teacup, and the physical appearance of the deceased indicate the woman has been both smothered and poisoned.

Because the murder didn't happen in their jurisdiction, Dara and Siobhan are warned by the local guards not to interfere in their investigation of the crime, which they both ignore. As they begin asking questions of the locals, the couple discover that Ellen is the most recent of several inhabitants to die mysteriously at the cottage. The villagers believe the cottage is cursed—built on a fairy path—and have wanted it torn down for years. Although the superstitious townspeople blame evil fairies, especially since the murder took place the night of the summer solstice, Siobhan and Dara, of course, do not.

"Murder in an Irish Cottage" is the fifth in Carlene O'Connor's delightful mystery series. I love all the characters the author has created, and the teasing way the plot unfolds in each book. Highly recommended! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## PULP FRICTION

By Julie Anne Lindsey

This brand new *Cider Shop Mystery* is nothing less than great. Not to mention, the covers on these books are absolutely adorable!

Readers find themselves back at Smythe Orchards in Blossom Valley with Winona Mae Montgomery and her Granny Smythe as they get ready to start "pickin'" the next healthy apple crop. It was because of Winnie putting together the new cider shop that the family business is now lucrative all year round. People are even taking the time to book Winnie's shop for family events, such as huge weddings—with one happening in June.

On the day of the big celebration, the barn she loves is absolutely filled to the brim with a family and their friends and relatives having a great time. There's only one thing that can really spoil the positive thoughts Winnie has now and, unfortunately, that one thing is just what happens.

Hank, Winnie's ex, who still dotes on her like they've never stopped being the "happily married couple" gets into a huge fight with the groom. Hank runs off after it's over, so that should be it... right? Wrong. Soon the groom turns up as a corpse after being hit, supposedly, by the car that was going to lead him and his new wife to their honeymoon destination. It is believed that Hank was behind the wheel, and now that he's gone missing, Winnie takes it upon herself to figure out exactly what happened.

With the characters being as colorful as those covers I mentioned earlier, and the stories being extremely detailed with cool endings, Miss Lindsey has truly brought this small village in West Virginia to life. My advice: Bring on Book 3 as fast as can be so I don't have to miss these guys too long.

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



## THE NIGHT SWIM

By Megan Goldin

Rachel Krall became a household name when evidence she shared on her podcast, *Guilty or Not Guilty*, led to the freeing of an innocent man previously convicted of killing his wife. Now, in season three, her podcast returns with live coverage of a trial in small town Neapolis; here, the town's golden boy, Scott Blair, is being prosecuted for the rape of sixteen-year-old Kelly Moore.

On her way to Neapolis, Rachel stops for a bite to eat. When she returns to her car, she finds a letter on the windshield with her name on it. Although Rachel is well known, it is mostly because of her voice. She has worked hard to keep her face out of the public eye due to the nature of her podcast, but someone has recognized her. After reading the letter, Rachel is shaken. The note, signed by a woman named Hannah, is a cry for help. In it, she claims that her sister, Jenny, was murdered twenty years earlier in Neapolis and that it was written off as an "accident." Hannah knows that her sister's death was no accident; even though she was only ten at the time, she was there the night the atrocity happened. She now needs Rachel's help to bring the truth to light. Rachel can't stop herself from delving into both the current trial and this murder from the past, and what she uncovers is incredibly unsettling.

This story is difficult to read, simply because of the nature of the subject, but enthralling in a way that makes it hard to put down. Megan Goldin delivers a story with multiple points of view that almost literally "put you in the jury box," as Rachel says at the end of her podcast episodes. You won't be able to stop reading until you see how this one is solved.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## THE SOUTHERN BOOK CLUB'S GUIDE TO SLAYING VAMPIRES

By Grady Hendrix

As soon as I read the title for Hendrix's new book, I was hooked. Who doesn't love the idea of a book club slaying vampires? When I started this book, I soon discovered that it was so much more than just a horror novel, with depth running through every character, making me love this book even more.

Patricia is a normal, everyday housewife who takes care of her children and supports her husband through his new endeavors. But that seems to be the only thing Patricia does, and raising two kids on her own is wearing her down. At least life is relatively safe in the Old Village where they live. So safe, however, that Patricia is starting to yearn for something more exciting to happen in her life. The only excitement she ever gets now is from her small book club where they regularly read books about serial killers.

Patricia's wish for excitement gets out of hand when her elderly neighbor attacks her in her own yard. This happens about the same time the neighbor's nephew, James Harris, moves in. Patricia wants to be friends with James Harris, but several kids have disappeared in places around the Old Village since he moved in. No one believes Patricia that he has something to do with the disappearances, but when danger touches too close to home, and to her own children, she realizes she will do anything to stop this threat, even if it means losing the trust of her book club.

The twists in this book continually shocked me. I found myself going through an array of emotions; angry that no one believed Patricia and stunned at what James Harris does. For any adult who seeks a terrific horror starring a good mother, I recommend "The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires."

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

## DEAD IN DUBLIN

By Catie Murphy

American-born Megan Malone has relocated to Dublin, Ireland and earns a living as a driver for Leprechaun Limos. One of her favorite passengers is well-known food blogger and restaurant critic Liz Darr, who frequently visits Ireland with her husband, Simon. The couple's latest trip to Dublin turns into a nightmare when, immediately after having dinner at a local restaurant owned by one of Megan's dearest friends, Fionnula Canan, Liz collapses at the feet of the statue of fabled fishmonger Molly Malone and dies. Simon, knowing no one else in Dublin but Megan, turns to her for support as the local garda (Irish police) investigate the shocking death. The restaurant is immediately shut down in case the death was caused by food poisoning, but an autopsy reveals that Liz was deliberately poisoned.

Liz's distraught parents arrive from the States and try to make sense of what has happened. To add to the family's agony over Liz's death, someone is posting new footage on the food critic's blog accompanied by Liz's own voice singing the Irish folk song, "Molly Malone." The family asks Megan, who is a bit of a computer techie, to see if she can trace the source of the disturbing posts. The suspense ratchets up even more when a second murdered body—that of Fionnula's business partner, Martin Rafferty—is found inside the closed restaurant.

The police have already zeroed in on Simon as a possible suspect for the murder of his wife, especially when it's revealed that he had a gambling problem and often resorted to selling drugs to pay off his debts. But Simon had no reason to want Martin dead—he didn't even know him.

"Dead in Dublin" is the first in the cozy *Dublin Driver* mystery series. Great plotting, likeable characters, and a tour of the sites that make Dublin so special combine to make this title a terrific read. I can't wait for Book 2!

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



## THE PERSUASION

By Iris Johansen

Personally, the very first time I met up with forensic sculptor Eve Duncan, I was hooked. To this day, she remains one of my all-time favorite characters. So when this, Book #27 (if you can believe that) was placed in my hands, I was beyond happy, shut the world out, and read until well after the sun set.

This time around, Eve's daughter, Jane, is the one who finds herself in a killer's line of sight. What occurs next is Eve and her love, ex-Navy Seal Joe Quinn, give the job of keeping Jane protected to Seth Caleb, Jane's longtime love interest. They tell him to keep her safe no matter what. Seems like an over-the-top psychopath who happens to be incredibly intelligent, has become more than a little obsessed with Jane's artwork.

Seth has proven before that he loves Jane and will be her most willing and powerful protector. He's determined to make sure the psycho gets nowhere near Jane, yet when something occurs that has the monster standing in front of her and wanting nothing more than to take her and end Seth's life, the suspense goes from fantastic to absolutely spell-binding.

The romance is as strong as the suspense, as Jane and Seth attempt to stop a frightening man while also dealing with their own deep emotions for each other. And, as it always was with Eve and Joe, this is one story where it will take both male and female fighting together to bring down an evil that won't be stopped easily.

Johansen never ceases to inspire, shock, reveal and unveil secrets, and draw you into a story from beginning to end. Although this may be the twenty-seventh tale, and counting, the action has not faded in any way, shape or form in any of this series' titles.

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

## SILENT SHADOWS

By Natalie Walters

This is a sweet romance tucked into a thriller, with some Christian fiction overtones.

The characters are original and the suspense part of the plot will keep you terrified and guessing. The romance part will keep you reading, and rooting for... well, you'll see.

Pecca Gallegos is a nurse working at a rehab facility for military vets, Home for Heroes, it's called, in the fictional town of Walton, Georgia. Pecca has a son named Maceo who has a prosthetic leg. They've recently moved to Georgia from Texas and Maceo is having a hard time dealing with the change. In fact, he gets into a fight and is suspended at the age of seven. Pecca is stressed by that, but even more so by the phone call she gets on the way to the school from her brother Adrian. She left El Paso, Texas because Maceo's father, her ex-husband, Javier Torres, is in prison there because of his involvement in a gang called South South Barrio, SSB. Adrian tells her that Javier is up for early parole and there's chatter that the SSB is looking for her and Maceo to testify on his behalf at the hearing. That is something she definitely does not want to do.

Meanwhile, there are a couple of interesting men at rehab who make Pecca's heart quicken. One is David Turner, an Army veteran who connects with her son. The other is Colton Crawford, veteran Army Captain, who has a rare psychogenic movement disorder. His background in football makes him an instant friend of Maceo also. As the story develops, it becomes obvious that someone has found out where Pecca now lives and is terrorizing her. With the life of her son in danger, Pecca wonders if she can ever escape from the poor choices of her past. She will have to rely on new friends to keep herself and Maceo safe. But can she trust them?

I enjoyed every twist and turn of this riveting adventure.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Deadly Sweet Tooth" ■

## HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

By Liz Fenton & Lisa Steinke

Fenton and Steinke use *Groundhog Day* as the backdrop for an emotional tale where they give readers a look at how far a person will go to save the life of someone they love.

This story wraps around Dom and Mia. Over ten years ago they had been ready to walk down the aisle. Unfortunately, that day never came. Fast forward ten years and Mia and Dom once again "bump" into each other. Dom believes this is a second shot at love. Yet again, tragedy strikes when they go out and Mia loses her life. Dom makes a wish, asking that he be given a chance to save Mia's life and do "that moment" all over again.

Next day, Dom wakes up and his wish is granted; Mia is alive, and he has that second chance to change the course of Fate. Every single day, however, the ending occurs the exact same way.

Dom becomes obsessed and tries everything he can to find the answer on how to save Mia so that the happily ever after part of their lives can happen. By slowing down time, Dom learns truths about himself that he failed to recognize before. He swears he will watch Mia die over and over again if that means he can save her once. But will his sanity slip after watching a tragedy unfold day after day? Or, will a magical moment happen and allow Dom and Mia to live a life together? You'll have to read to find out.

Coauthors on seven novels now, Fenton and Steinke have proven they are a team to be reckoned with. They work together perfectly and the characters and plots they come up with are memorable and should find a way onto the big screen one day. For me, they're a duo right up there on my "must read" list beside Preston & Child.

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





# SOME SECRETS CAN'T STAY HIDDEN



Zoe Johnson has spent most of her life living in the shadows, never drawing attention to herself, never investing in people or places. But when a wide-eyed, bedraggled teenager with no memory walks into the diner where Zoe works, everything changes.

Now, against her better judgment, Zoe, who has been trying to outrun her own painful memories of the past, finds herself attempting to help a girl who doesn't seem to have any past at all. With little warning, they must follow the only sure thing they know: a woman in Corpus Christi, Texas, hundreds of miles away, will either save them . . . or be the last person to see them alive.

Connect with Rachelle on Facebook  
**@RachelleDekkerAuthor**

## YOU BETRAYED ME

By Lisa Jackson

One of the most popular and scandalous family's returns and, just like always, they bring with them a fantastic, fast-paced suspense.

This particular tale focuses on James Cahill. Although he's part of the famous Cahills of San Francisco, James has tried to make his own way and has done a good job at it with his construction business. Is he perfect? Heck, no. He also loves the fact that he can basically bed any woman with his looks, charm, and bad boy image. Unfortunately, he gets to a point where he may have played the wrong woman, after all.

The fact is you need a chart to remember James' hook-ups. And when he wakes up in a hospital—beat up, bruised, and bandaged—it is he who can't remember the woman who visits. Slowly, the memories return and he realizes that his visitor is a woman he's been cheating with, and her name is Sophia. The thoughts come back even quicker, reminding James that his girlfriend, Megan, found out about Sophia and has now, quite literally, gone missing.

James is bugged by Megan's sister, Rebecca. She knows something evil is behind her sister's disappearance, and even the cops jump on board with this theory and start asking questions, too. Even though he's highly medicated, James is frightened; he states that he has no idea where Megan could be, yet something makes him think he should.

While James is attempting to learn what happened, a woman shakes as she sits in a room, trapped, desperate for freedom. James certainly has come from a family who have proven they can do some dastardly deeds, but is James following in their footsteps? He betrayed Megan with women, but is he really horrible enough to lock her in a room and leave her there? The reveal that bestselling author Lisa Jackson provides will stun readers to their very core. What can be said here is: Do *not* miss this one! Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Charlatan's Crown" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## STRONG FROM THE HEART

By Jon Land

It has been said that a protagonist either has an external struggle to deal with, or an internal struggle to overcome. Rarely do you find a book where the main character has to do both. Jon Land has the uncanny ability to write characters who are in constant battle against the bad guys while fighting their own internal battles. In "Strong from the Heart," Jon is at his best.

The external battles our main characters face are daunting. Everyone but one person in a small Texas town died at the same time without discrimination. A seventeen-year-old gifted soccer star overdoses on pills. The pill mills of Big Pharma are being shut down all over Texas, yet there seems to be a never-ending supply on the streets. These are the battles faced by Caitlin Strong, a fifth generation Texas Ranger, and her close-knit group of friends, Cort Wesley Masters, and Paz.

Jon Land does what no one does better and knits these threads into one spell-binding tapestry that makes us cling to every word and flip page after page with sweaty palms. But what makes "Strong from the Heart" stand out from an already incredible series are the internal struggles. Land takes us to where he has never taken us before and where very few writers have ever attempted. He shows us the antithesis of each character, their flaws and weaknesses by placing them in another character.

The main yin and yang we witness is between Caitlin and her half-sister, Nola Delgado. Nola appears to be everything Caitlin isn't—cold, unmerciful, and heartless...but is she? Are we looking at two distinct personalities or are we looking at the same personality from a different perspective? This is for us, the readers, to find out along with Caitlin, herself.

This is the most intricate and personal Caitlin Strong novel to date and the one that will linger in the back of your mind for weeks, if not months, after you have finished reading it.

Reviewed by J. M. Leduc ■

## DEATH BY AUCTION

By Alexis Morgan

Abby McCree inherited a large house in Snowberry Creek, Washington when an elderly aunt died a year ago. Also included in the deal were a supersized dog, Zeke, and a smaller house and its handsome tenant, former Special Forces officer Tripp Blackston. Both males are fiercely protective of Abby, which comes in handy because since she moved into her new home, she keeps finding dead bodies.

When Tripp asks Abby to organize a bachelors' auction to raise much-needed funds for the local veterans' group he's part of, she agrees right away. What Tripp hadn't expected, however, was Abby's insistence that he be one of the prizes—a date for a UFO-themed dance two weeks later. Of course, she has a secret plan to bid on him, herself.

The evening gets off to a rocky beginning when the fundraiser's auctioneer, radio personality Bryce Cadigan, arrives very late to the party. But the show must go on, and Tripp is the last bachelor to strut his stuff on the "runway." Just as the bidding starts, a gorgeous blonde offers \$5000 for the date with Tripp and the bidding comes to a surprising end. The blonde is Tripp's ex-wife, Valerie, who wants to rekindle their relationship.

Abby is anxious to pay Bryce his fee and end the event, but he's busy talking to people he knew from his school days, who aren't happy to see him. The tension in the room escalates as Bryce needles as many of his old friends as possible during what was supposed to be an upbeat party. When Abby finally tracks Bryce down to pay him, she finds his dead body in his car. And the last person to be seen in public with him was Tripp's ex-wife.

"Death by Auction" is book 3 in the *Abby McCree* series. It's a well plotted, cozy mystery filled with just the right balance of tension and humor to keep readers guessing until the last page.

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

## STANDOFF

By Patricia Bradley

The reading community can already agree that Patricia Bradley knows how to deliver a cool series, so it will be no surprise to state that "Standoff," the beginning of a new series entitled, *Natchez Trace Park Rangers*, is an awesome read.

People will first learn all about the Natchez Trace National Parkway, a road that runs exactly 444 miles, stretching from Nashville to Natchez. Natchez happens to be the oldest town on the Mississippi River, and the road is used by those who wish to experience a peaceful, perfect drive.

Looking at the Parkway from a different POV, however, is park ranger Luke Fereday; he sees that the road is more often than not being utilized by criminals who wish to move drugs back and forth. Luke is sent to Natchez so he can gain access to the organization that is literally running this drug ring. But when Luke shows up to a stakeout just a tad too late during his undercover work, he finds the murdered body of John Danvers, a good friend and a fellow park ranger.

It is John's daughter, Brooke, who takes it upon herself to find out who killed her beloved dad. But because of her need to investigate, she also places a target on her back and Luke suddenly feels like he has to keep her safe. Trouble is, he also feels like he's falling head over heels in love with her at the same time.

The mix of suspense and romance works in every series by this award-winning author, and these new characters are on par with her *Logan Point* books that took almost every romantic suspense award you can think of. I know it's only story number one, but I already want to thank Patricia Bradley for yet another powerful, memorable, thrilling series!

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





## THE FINAL DECEPTION

By Heather Graham

Everyone will be over-the-moon excited for this, Book #5 of the *New York Confidential* series, where FBI agent Craig Frasier and psychologist Kieran Finnegan (favorites of both mine and yours) are on the hunt. They must capture a serial killer who has escaped, and author Heather Graham delivers their harrowing journey as she always does: perfectly.

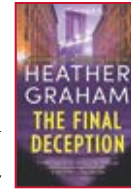
Kieran has faced a lot of hard cases, meeting up with nightmarish people during her career as a psychologist. But if she had to pick one of the worst cases, a murderer known as the Fireman stands at the top of her list. When she made her assessment of this demon, she knew there was nothing else to be done than lock him up and throw away the key. Which is what was done. Now, however, Craig is standing at a crime scene that matches the ones that monster left in his wake. What makes it worse is the fact that the news has reported the Fireman has made his escape from prison.

The law gears up for the manhunt, as Kieran and Craig team up to figure out if the Fireman has already gone back to work; if someone close to him has been taken on as the man's apprentice; or, if someone else is now doing these evil deeds because they want to release their own madness on the city using the Fireman's ways.

Following this horrific journey brings the team to Finnegan's Pub, a location that transforms the Fireman and this manhunt into a deeply personal war.

After writing more than two hundred novels and winning a variety of awards for excellence in writing, Heather Graham has not waned in the least bit. Her plot was intelligent, fast-paced and frightening at all times, and the team of characters still keep the reader's attention to the very end. I, personally, hope another two hundred can be gifted to the reading public before Graham ever thinks of closing up shop.

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



## STOP AT NOTHING

By Michael Ledwidge

Fisherman and scuba instructor, Mike Gannon, witnesses a luxury Gulfstream jet crash into the ocean northwest of the Bahamas. He can't call for emergency response because a getaway marlin just broke his antenna. When no one comes for a rescue, he dives into the wreckage to look for survivors, and what he finds surprises him.

Six men who couldn't be more different in appearance, but all with a bluish cast to their skin, and what appears to be dried blood under their noses and on their shirts. All dead—there is nothing he can do.

As he prepares to leave the scene, two metal cases float toward Gannon's boat—one contains a unique military-grade handgun and the other, a treasure of money and diamonds. Gannon concludes it must be a drug deal gone bad and makes a split-second decision—he takes the treasure. Yes, it's stealing, but it's drug money, and he really needs it.

Ruby Everett is an Office of Naval Safety investigator who's called to the scene of a plane crash. Arriving at the crash site, the coast guard tells her that plans have changed. They'd performed an initial dive, but then the military made the wreckage off-limits.

What no one knows is that the young coast guard diver has a secret video of the dive footage, which he shares with Everett. She can tell from the video that something is terribly wrong. And then the diver disappears. The FBI investigation makes Gannon nervous, and when a news report contradicts everything he knows about the crash, he's sure someone in power is running a cover-up.

When Gannon and Everett's paths cross, it's clear they've become targets, and the pair run for their lives, trying to determine who is friend and who is foe. As the government tracks them with artificial intelligence, they know they must get proof of the cover-up to stay alive.

The scheme they uncover is more deadly than they thought, but what the government soon discovers about Gannon proves lethal.

Reviewed by K.L. Romo ■

## HOME BEFORE DARK

By Riley Sager

Twenty-five years ago, Maggie Holt's parents (Ewan and Jess) moved into a Victorian estate set in the woods. They spent three weeks living inside Baneberry Hall before they ran away in the middle of the night like demons were on their tail. The story would have been buried, if not for the fact that Maggie's father penned a nonfiction book called, "House of Horrors" afterward. He wrote all about this house, the ghosts that dwelled there, and the horrific spirits that he encountered. Baneberry became as popular as the Amityville house and the book brought skepticism with people believing that the whole thing was a giant farce.

Maggie was far too young to remember any of the three weeks spent there and is also a firm believer that her father was, in fact, writing a fiction book. She doesn't believe in ghosts, period. So when Maggie is told she has inherited Baneberry Hall after her father dies, she returns. Not because she wants to investigate, however. Being a restorer of old homes, she wants only to renovate Baneberry and sell it as fast as she can.

She meets up with many people when she returns who are more than alive, and more than upset that the book created a dark shadow for the entire town. Trying to ignore these people, Maggie soon finds herself fighting a whole other kind of foe—one she never believed was possible. The more time she spends inside Baneberry, the more she discovers that her father may just have been telling the absolute truth after all.

Sager does a fantastic job presenting this mystery. Although, you may think this will be another "Amityville" going in, it is definitely not. By telling the tale from Maggie's present-day homecoming, mixed with chapters from her father's nonfiction book, readers will be amazed by the secrets and lies this house holds within its' walls. Pick this one up, ASAP. You will not be disappointed.

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

## THE LAST PIECE

By Imogen Clark

At its core, "The Last Piece" by Imogen Clark is a beautiful story about the delicacy of family, and is a read anyone can find a piece of themselves in. As you read through the perfectly crafted words, the Nightingale family begin to feel as though they are your own. With each page, the Nightingales meld their way into your hearts and lives and teach us something eternally valuable, the importance of family.

The Nightingales have always been a fairly typical family. They live in a beautiful home in Yorkshire, and the couple, Cecily and Norman, raised three beautiful girls. First came Felicity, the eldest and most prim and proper. Two years later came the twins, Lily and Julia, who were peculiarly born 7 weeks apart. The three Nightingale girls have grown to be established young women who have always stayed close to home to tend to their parents. So one day, when their mother disappears to Greece with no explanation, they're all at a loss for words.

We quickly find out that the family is not as typical as they appear, and the Nightingale girls are not only three. All the way in Greece, lives a fourth Nightingale girl, Marnie Stone. At the raw age of 16, Cecily gave birth to Marnie, and was forced to give her up. Marnie's existence was hushed away and was Cecily's long kept secret. As much as Cecily yearned to know her eldest daughter, she had no contact with the girl or even a name to track her down. So when Cecily received a letter in the mail instructing her to come to Greece, it turned her world upside down.

Will they be a big happy family like Cecily has always dreamed? Cecily has no idea what's in store for her when she steps into a yoga retreat in Greece—only that her life will change forever because of it—and we all want to be a part of this exciting journey. Reviewed by Rebecca Santangelo ■



## THE DIVA SPICES IT UP

By Krista Davis

Event planner Sophie Winston has been working non-stop and she's looking forward to a break in her hectic schedule before the whirl of holiday parties starts. But an unexpected and very necessary renovation project in her Old Town Arlington, Virginia home makes her re-think her plans. So when her ex-husband Mars approaches her with a way to make some hefty cash by becoming a ghostwriter, Sophie eagerly accepts. The cookbook's previous ghostwriter, Abby Bergeron, has mysteriously abandoned the project, leaving former actress and aspiring lifestyle expert Tilly Stratford—the book's "author"—in a panic. Tilly's also married to Congressman Wesley Winthrope, a current high-profile client of Mars, so there's a lot riding on Sophie's ability to get the project completed by the book's launch date. No slouch in the cooking department herself, Sophie agrees to test out some of Tilly's recipes using the comments that Abby has already provided.

Sophie discovers that ex-husband Mars had dinner with Abby the night she disappeared. Mars claims that Abby was very nervous during their dinner, ended their date abruptly, and then he dropped her off at home. The always curious Sophie tries to find Abby, checks out her house, and finds the dead body of a woman curled up in the downstairs freezer. But it turns out that the dead woman is Mia, another neighbor, and Abby remains missing. Is she a murderer? And why would she kill Mia?

Meanwhile, Sophie's on-again, off-again childhood friend, Natasha, discovers that Charlotte, a half-sister she never knew she had, has arrived in town. Natasha throws a dinner party to welcome her, but instead of a festive celebration, Charlotte is found badly beaten and near death in Natasha's backyard.

"The Diva Spices It Up" is full of surprises as author Krista Davis teases readers with one plot twist after another. This series just keeps getting better! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## KILLER CHARDONNAY

By Kate Lansing

Parker Valentine's dream of a wine bar in Boulder, Colorado featuring her own wines is finally coming true, thanks in large part to her determination to succeed and a bequest from her late aunt Laura. Even though she's confident in the high quality of her wines, when opening day at *Vino Valentine* comes, Parker has a bad case of the jitters.

Bolstered up by her able assistant, Anita, Parker begins to serve the handful of customers who come. But her nerves go on overload when Gaskel Brown, a well-known local food and wine blogger, shows up to review the wine bar. He orders the chardonnay, but only takes a sip and dumps the rest of the wine out, pronouncing it terrible. Parker tries desperately to salvage the situation by offering him another kind of wine, but Gaskel refuses and stalks off to the rest room.

Praying the rest of her customers haven't noticed the critic's reaction, Parker becomes concerned when the critic doesn't reappear after an unusually long absence. Parker thought her opening day couldn't possibly get any worse, but it does when she discovers Gaskel's dead body. The police toxicology report determines he was poisoned with an additive to Parker's wine. In no time at all, *Vino Valentine* becomes a mega social media star for its "Killer Chardonnay," and Parker decides she has no choice but to investigate the critic's murder before she is totally ruined.

When Max, a customer who was at the bar that day, calls and says he has information about the murder, Parker goes to meet him. But he doesn't come. He's also found dead from the same poison that was added to the food critic's wine.

"Killer Chardonnay" is the first in the *Colorado Wine Mystery* series by Kate Lansing. Not only is it a well-written mystery with engaging characters and a fast-moving plot, it offers fascinating information on how wine is made. Highly recommended.

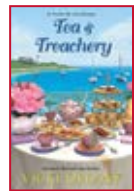
Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## TEA & TREACHERY

By Vicki Delany

Lily Roberts is living her dream. She's running her own traditional English tea shop on the bluffs overlooking beautiful Cape Cod Bay, Tea by the Sea. But sometimes a dream has strings attached. In Lily's case, the reason she's been able to open her shop in such an ideal location is because of the largesse of her feisty grandmother, Rose Campbell, who offered Lily the use of a small building adjacent to her own bed and breakfast for the tearoom. The generous offer came with even more strings—namely that Lily also take over the cooking and serving of Rose's B&B guests. Lily agrees, and the tea shop becomes an overwhelming success.

Grandma Rose is fiercely protective of the local natural environment. So when a neighbor wants to sell his property to an aggressive real estate developer, Jack Ford, who's pushing to change the zoning so he can build a golf resort, Rose openly and loudly opposes the sale. Tensions build into a public confrontation where Rose is heard to threaten the developer. The morning after the argument, Lily and her best friend, Bernie, go for a walk and discover a man lying dead at the bottom of the stairs to the beach, and when Lily investigates, she finds out the dead man is Jack Ford. At first, the death appears as nothing



more than a tragic accident. But when local police detective Chuck Williams hears about the recent argument, he decides murder and sets out to prove Rose is responsible.

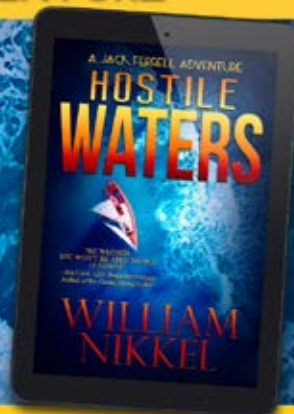
Despite all the damning evidence against her, Lily is determined to prove her grandmother's innocence. The more she pokes around with the assistance of her lifelong best friend, Bernie, the newly hired and handsome gardener, Simon, and Rose herself, the more she finds people who wanted Jack Ford dead.

"Tea & Treachery" is a fun read with likable characters, a fast-moving plot, and a satisfying ending. Cozy writing at its best. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## A JACK FERRELL ADVENTURE

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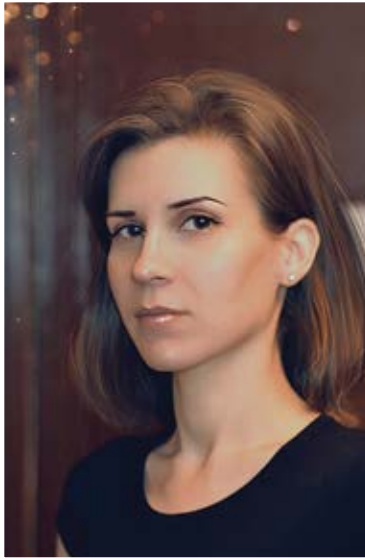
# Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

*Helena Nikulina*

**AN ARTIST WHOSE WORK FITS THE  
PEARL OF THE BLACK SEA TO A "T"**

*Necromancer's Heart*



**H**elena Nikulina, an artist of stellar proportions, makes her home in the Ukraine. It's no wonder a woman of her talent lives in Odessa, which is sometimes referred to as "the pearl of the Black Sea" because of its rich, multicultural scene. Raised against the stunning scenic backdrop of the Black Sea coast, Helena was in love with painting from a young age. Although her passion was definitely centered in the world of "creative expression," painting and art was not something she thought would be her career.

Thankfully, for all those out there who are looking for inspiration, or an artistic mentor who can show them the way to creating masterful and memorable pieces, Helena ended up going back to the artistic realm later on, and has continued ever since to make some of the best work out there.

She was able to take a pause and talk with *Suspense Magazine* in regards to her history, her favorites, and her own future outlook.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Can you provide readers with information on your home in the Ukraine, and when you knew that being an artist was definitely your future endeavor?

Helena Nikulina (H.N.): *I live on the 9th floor of a multi-story building in the city of Odessa, which is a major tourist town set on the Black Sea Coast.*

*I have always loved to paint, but I never really thought that this painting would become my profession. Initially, I graduated from the Faculty of Geography of the Odessa University. But after a few years, I returned to drawing again.*

S. MAG.: Where does your encouragement come from that allows you to create your brilliant ideas? Do you have a muse?

H.N.: *I have no specific muse, but I am inspired by a lot: games, books, movies.... With my imagination, even a simple walk down the street can bring ideas for art. For example: Where many see only an old tree, I see a monster creeping.*

S. MAG.: When you first sit down to create a work of art, do you have a plan already in mind, or do you create "off the cuff," so to speak?

H.N.: *No, I always have a pretty clear plan and I clearly see the picture in the final. Of course, I can change something during the development of the work, but basically all the work first happens in my head.*

S. MAG.: Is there a specific area or genre you haven't explored yet, when it comes to putting together a piece, that you hope to indulge in one day?

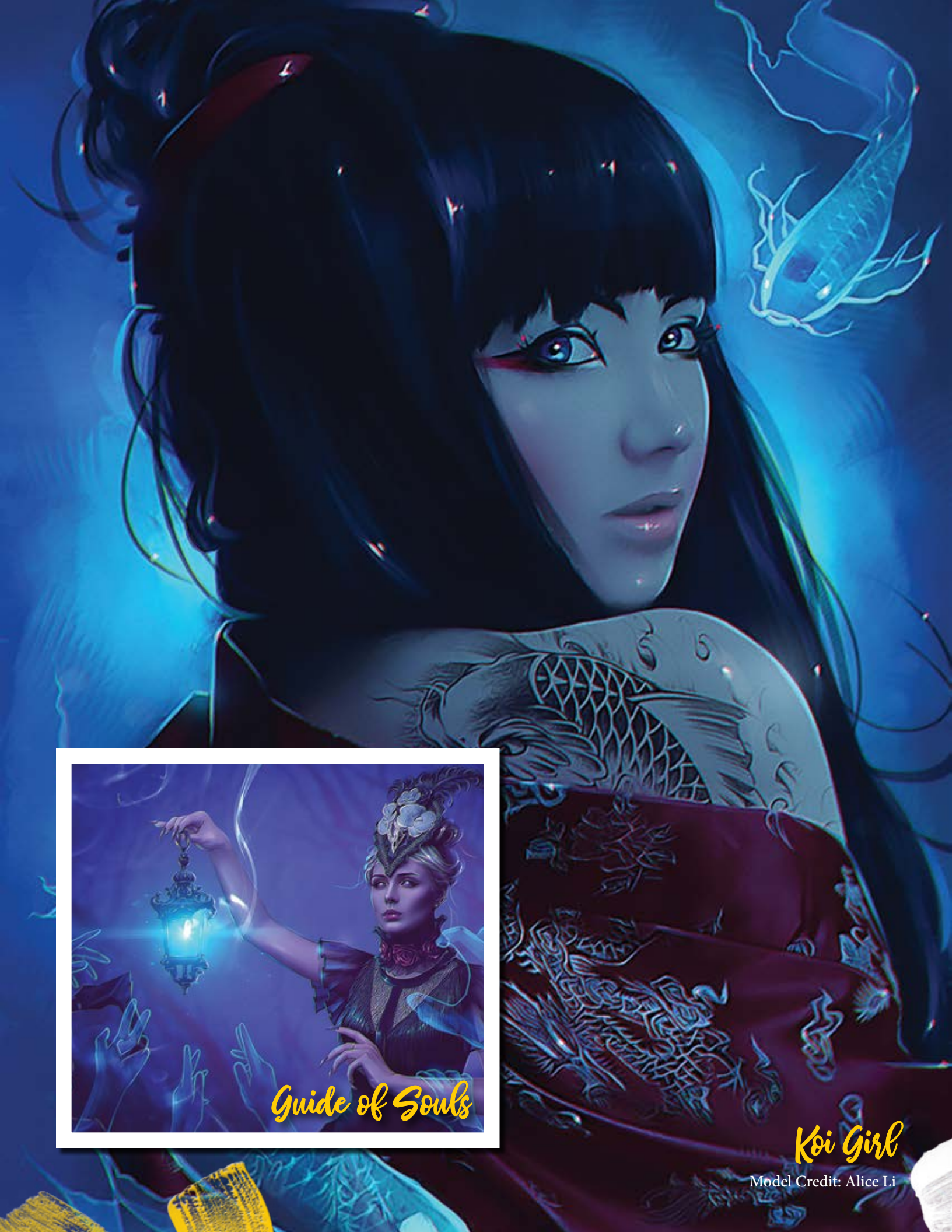
H.N.: *These are probably landscapes. I started with them, but then I moved on to portraits—both as personal works and commissions. I would like to return to matte painting at some point, as well.*

S. MAG.: Even though I'm sure there are many, can you speak about some of your favorite pieces?

H.N.: *Favorite art replaces each other over time. At the moment, they are "Raven Witch" and "Gothic Night." I love the gothic, dark atmosphere and I hope I managed to capture it in these pieces.*







*Koi Girl*

Model Credit: Alice Li



"Raven Witch" is a portrait of a witch in motion and surrounded by her servants; ravens. She reaches for something off-screen, and we can only guess what or who she sees there. "Gothic Night" is a fan art of Castlevania, which I really love.

S. MAG.: As a freelance artist, have you worked with authors in the past on their book covers?

H.N.: Not yet. I drew illustrations for magazines, but not book covers. Although I would be interested to try, perhaps. I have always loved to read, and even though they say here that 'one cannot judge a book by its cover', it is still a **very** important element.

S. MAG.: What is a great idea/comment you remember that came from one of your fans?

H.N.: Last year I was offered to create a series of 8 illustrations: "Angels of the Elements." This consisted of Angel of Water, Moon, etc. It was a great idea, and I really had fun doing it.

S. MAG.: When a writer gets stumped or can't think of anything right away they get "writer's block." Is this the same for artists? If so, what do you do to get that fire back to create something new?

H.N.: Yes, of course, this is an "art block." The most important thing is not to "burn out," so to speak. That is, prevention is much better here. Do not force yourself to draw something that is not interesting, do not work around the clock, and make sure to rest. Games help me a lot to distract myself.

Also, it helps you to just draw for yourself, things that are exactly what you like.

S. MAG.: What's a piece of advice you'd give to an artist just starting out when it comes to creating and marketing their ideas on sites like deviantArt?

H.N.: Draw what you like, and your viewers will definitely find you. Learn and improve your skills. Try to participate in different events and contests. And be yourself; draw in your style.

S. MAG.: Are there any upcoming events or jobs you'd like people to know about for the future?

H.N.: I always put all my pieces on deviantArt first. There are also links to other resources where you can find me.

The plans for the next six months are to finally start a series of fan art on the game TES4: Oblivion, and then return to matte painting, which I miss.

To get a look at the amazing pieces Helena makes each day, check them out at: <https://www.deviantart.com/nikulina-helena>. ■





“The plot is **fantastic**,  
the action is fast, and  
Pancake steals the heart.”

—*SUSPENSE MAGAZINE*

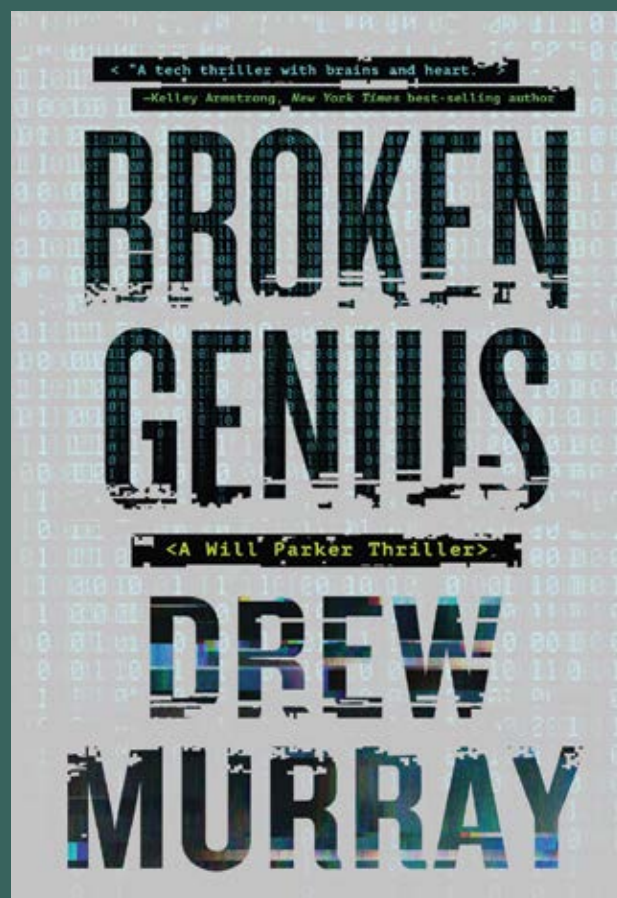


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# MANIAC AT ELM FALLS

By Andrew Benzinger

Sam could feel fiery rage erupt from the headlights of the beat-up, black Chevrolet as soon as he pulled out in front of it. He was about an inch ahead of the pickup, so he sped up to put breathing space between them.

He felt a twang of guilt—he really did—but what was he gonna do? Pull over and apologize to the guy for not seeing him around the corner? The roads back here were about as dark and convoluted as the average Dean Koontz yarn.

It was an honest mistake, but the pickup driver must've taken it as a challenge. After a brief moment of begrudgingly allowing a couple car lengths to linger between them, the truck started devouring the distance. Two lengths became one. Half.

"Jeez, get a load of this guy," Sam muttered between gritted teeth. That sneering grille was practically in Sam's trunk, setting the interior of his car ablaze with heavenly headlights. The blatant tailgating carried on for another minute before Sam's lips turned up in a preemptive, devilish grin. So the aggressive hick wanted to get cozy? Alrighty then.

Sam tapped the brakes—just a feather's tap, but it was enough to bring the truck's grille into a casual kiss with Sam's rear bumper. Metal struck metal, jolted reality into cold focus. The unpleasant bump seemed mutual for the rival truck because Sam saw those headlights slow to an abrupt and dazed stop on the empty road behind him. He watched the lights recede behind a bend in the road, swallowed by the woods.

The whole thing felt like some confused encounter at a bar, an off-beat misunderstanding that left both parties at an uncomfortable loss of breath. Nothing too off-putting, just something that called for a breath of fresh air.

Sam rolled down his window. The cicada-filled darkness embraced him.

He sighed and relaxed his fingers around the wheel.

He'd check the bumper later, but the damage was likely all in his head. For now, he had to focus on what to say to Martha's parents at the dinner table. Meeting her parents for the first time was supposed to be the scariest thing happening tonight. Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" kicked on between waves of backwoods white noise, and Sam turned the melancholic tune up. *What a voice.*

Suddenly, blinding light flooded the interior of Sam's car, like an unfortunate fishbowl placed on a sunny windowsill. He caught the silhouette of a figure hunched over the wheel of the truck racing towards him, just before the headlights burned suns in his rearview mirror and made discerning the mystery man's identity impossible. The truck lay on his horn as he once again came within a car length of Sam, weaving back and forth on the open road like a drunk shark hounding for blood.

"What the hell?"

Sam blamed pure animal instinct for what he did next. That...and the worst luck south of Pennsylvania.

He thrust his left hand out the window in a proud, one finger salute.

A hand stuck out the pickup's open window, too, aiming a revolver with a shiny, skeletal snout winking in the beams.

Sam's world shook as he yanked his hand back inside, heart and brain sprinting to change gears. An unmistakable sharp blast rang out above the two roaring engines.


"CHRIST!"

A warning shot? A near miss?!

His car wasn't hit; at least, he didn't think so. Sam launched at the first opportunity that offered escape: just ahead, a dirt path shot off the road. He skidded onto the trail leading God knew where. The roads back here were a damn maze, but he had to lose his tail somewhere!

Dirt road shot under Sam's car faster than he would've ever thought possible. The violent vibrations of the wheel





shook his arms to Jell-O. The speedometer screamed 55 and climbing as he flew clear over potholes peppering the path. Branches reaching out from the corridor of trees thrashed the windshield, nearly battering him off the trail.

But the pickup kept relentless pace behind him. The gun no longer hung out the window. Both drivers clutched their steering wheels tighter than virgins to their v-cards. This narrow roller coaster didn't leave room for mistakes. Twisting the wheel a quarter inch left or right would spell certain death.

In the distant darkness, Sam spotted a lake, nearly inconspicuous in the moonless night. He had maybe ten seconds before the road yanked an unforgiving left to follow the steep bank. But the pickup couldn't see a thing past Sam. Sam gripped the steering wheel with bloodless fingers, and his stomach clenched into knots in his chest.

Seconds before the turn, the revolver reappeared out the pickup window. Sam waited for the inevitable shot to pierce the back window in a beeline for his neck. But Sam didn't slow down. Not until the literal last second.

Then he stomped the brakes and twisted the wheel harder than he'd ever dared before, more than half expecting to somersault ass over teakettle to a watery death. But his car's starboard tires took the pressure of the curve and followed his arduous command, arcing mere inches from the edge of the drop off. The pickup wasn't so lucky; he had no time.

The truck's headlights blinded Sam before they drifted to the bank in a confused, dirt churning half-turn. The truck plunged into open air, half-flipping on its descent to the water in a window shattering crash. The sound shook the forest night. Not as piercing as a gunshot, but just as blunt.

Sam had come to a stop, overlooking the pickup's reenactment of the *Titanic*. He watched the totaled truck slipping below the lake's surface through the passenger window as droves of cicadas and radio snow filled his car. "In Dreams" had been supplanted by white noise sometime in the chase.

He should've gotten out of the damn car. Should've seen if the driver was alive. Instead, he jerked forward and retched without warning, releasing nothing, and then promptly made a three point turn and headed back the way he came.

He slowed when he got to the main road and checked both ways six times before pulling out. He drove light years below the speed limit. Barely a quarter mile down the road, Sam turned into Martha's driveway and scaled the short gravel gradient towards a lonely porchlight glowing between the trees.

He parked by the porch and emerged from the faintly smoking vehicle, stumbling for the front door. He knocked, and Martha answered with a rosy expression plastered on her face. But her smile peeled right off when she saw his

downright shitty countenance.

"Sam, are you okay?"

"There's been an accident. Call 911," he said, as she opened the door wide and stepped inside.

Martha's mother was in the middle of setting the table. She turned when she heard the exchange at the door. "An accident?"

"Some...some maniac," and with that, his voice failed him.

"Sam, honey, please sit down." Martha's mom ushered him into a seat and ran to the rotary phone in the kitchen.

He almost collapsed into the chair, running a shaky hand through his hair and locking his eyes on the wall. Row after row of prized animal heads and horns and hunting rifles flowered the plaster above. Martha took the seat next to him, offering a lukewarm hand in his. He felt sick.

"I'm dialing now. Can you tell me what happened? Where?" her mother's voice drifted from the kitchen.

"It was, uh, some guy. Least, I think it was a man, and I think he was alone. He got mad when I pulled out in front of him. Started chasing me with a...gun pointed out his window. Chased me onto a dirt road that came out to a lake—"

"The old logging trail off Elm Falls? Lake Redding?" Martha piped up, "That's right near here."

"That's probably it." Her mother nodded, peering around the kitchen door frame with the handset at her ear.

"We were driving so fast. And he...he drove into the lake," Sam breathed.

"Thank God you're okay. How awful. People are crazy. So crazy. People, people, people," Martha murmured a stream of truisms. Then, as if saying it quieter would make it less horrible, she whispered, "What happened to the driver?"

"I-I couldn't see him. Must've been belted in. Knocked unconscious. It was sinking...sunk."

Silence. Sickening silence. From the kitchen, her mother spoke with dispatch, labeling it an "accident" same as him.

Because it was an "accident." That's what it was. A terrible, mixed up accident that the stupid gun nut brought on himself...

Still on the line, Martha's mother motioned her daughter to close the front door; it gaped wide. Martha patted Sam's shoulder in an animatronic motion of comfort and left his side to shut it.

She grasped the doorknob and paused, squinting into the darkness beyond the stoop. Then her expression shadowed over, and Sam's heart thudded against his ribs. Eyes still focused on whatever was out there, Martha called out in a strange tone: "Maah? Daddy's back from the store. But he isn't in the pickup. He...he's carrying his revolver."

When Martha and her mother looked at one another, they realized Sam had disappeared. ■

# Best Laid PLANS

By James Aitchison writing as Mike Rader

I DON'T USUALLY WAKE UP WITH A DEAD WOMAN IN MY BED. I did that morning in Rome, her naked flesh as cold as charity.

I picked up the phone and called the desk.

"Fisk in Room 301. I want to report a death."

"Signor?"

"I want the police. Someone's been murdered."

The Italian babbled. I repeated what I'd said, then walked across the room and unlocked my bedroom door.

When the cops came, the senior one spoke enough English to get by. His name was Bellini. Inspector Bellini. He could have impersonated an Italian waiter, except for his eyes. They belonged to a lizard.

We soon established that I'd picked up a hooker in a bar, smuggled her into my room, and woken up to find her dead. Actually, strangled to death.

"I've been in Rome just two days," I explained. "And I've never seen her before last night, Inspector. Maybe her prints will be on file. I don't know."

"There were no signs of forced entry."

I had an answer for everything. After all, I was an investment consultant. "I can explain that. I think we were both in a hurry to get to bed."

"And during the night...you heard nothing?"

"No. Just as well, or maybe they'd have gotten me, too."

"They?"

"Her pimp, or whoever it was that killed her. Check the CCTV."

"This hotel doesn't have any."

I knew that, of course. That was why I had chosen the hotel.

He continued to stare at me. "Tell me, Signor Fisk, can you recall whether she was wearing rings when she came to your room?"

"No."

"You can see the marks on the ring finger of her left hand."

I looked. "You're right. Maybe she took them off before she went to...work. Or maybe she was divorced. That's why she did what she did, to make money."

"Signor Fisk, do not be offended if I ask you something."

"What?"

"The murdered woman is naked, but her clothes are not here. In fact, no clothes, no purse, no rings. But you are wearing pajamas?"

I glanced into the corner where I'd slung my clothes. "After we had...after we did the business, I got cold. The air-con. So I put pajamas on." I shot him a quick, nervous look. "I also didn't want to meet you and your men in my birthday suit."



Bellini's men took lots of photos, took my passport, and took the body away.

"Do you need a doctor, signor?"

"No, I'll be okay."

"Don't leave Italy."

"How can I? You've got my passport."

I GAVE IT AN HOUR, THEN WENT DOWNSTAIRS to room 204. Joanna let me in, her lips as hungry as mine.

"Sam, I was so worried."

"No need to be." I showed her the inspector's card. "Bellini bought it."

"What if they find out she was your wife?"

"Don't see how," I told her. "You've got her purse, her rings, her clothes, her passport, right?" I went over the plan again. "Sylvia's passport is in her maiden name. Her flights and hotel were booked under that name; not Fisk. Her fingerprints shouldn't be in any database anywhere in the world. I checked in here alone and called her at her hotel, told her that my hotel was nicer and to come over for the night. I smuggled her in through the restaurant, no one saw us. We're in the clear."

"We've done it, then?"

"Yes." My lips were hungry again. "Now, all we have to do is go to her hotel and clear out her things without anybody seeing. Her room key was in her purse, right?"

I TOOK THE KEY AND WENT DOWN FIRST, earning stares from the staff: some sympathetic, some hostile. No sign of any cops. I asked the guy at the desk where I could find the nearest medical clinic or hospital. Told him I was suffering from shock. He gave me three business cards and a leaflet, told me how sorry he was for what had happened. I thanked him and went outside.

I hailed a cab. I gave the driver the address of Sylvia's hotel and went straight up to her room. An hour later, Joanna checked herself out of my hotel and joined me at Sylvia's. She brought the shopping bag stuffed with Sylvia's purse and clothes. It took us five minutes to pack the rest of my wife's things.

"Take it with you when you check out. No one will remember how many suitcases you had when you arrived. Anyway, you bought a case that would match hers. So, no problem."

We took the suitcase from Sylvia's room to Joanna's room.

"Tonight you take both suitcases to the airport. You can dump her stuff when you get back to Sydney."

"When will you follow?"

"I don't know. I have to wait for Bellini to return my passport. A day or two, I guess."

I returned to my hotel. Joanna called me at seven from the airport. "I'll see you back in Sydney."

AN HOUR LATER I WAS STILL PUMPED WITH adrenaline when the door buzzer rang. It was Bellini and two of his men.

"Signor Fisk, we need to talk."

"You've solved the case?"

"I believe we have, *si*."

I congratulated him. "You guys don't mess around."

He sat down and immediately wiped the smile off my face. "You were very clever, Signor Fisk. You killed your *wife* and removed all her identification. It was a neat plan."

He ignored my protests and went on, reciting my plan chapter and verse. "As I understand it, your wife flew in first. She arrived in Rome two days before you. You said you had work to finish in Sydney before you could join her. When you arrived in Rome, you checked in at this hotel and asked her to meet you here for dinner. Then you told her you had a little surprise. You'd taken a room for a 'second honeymoon.' You brought her upstairs, she undressed and went to bed with you. While she was asleep, you strangled her. Your accomplice came in, removed her clothes, purse, and passport."

It was time to stop being the meek tourist. I got outraged. "Inspector, I think you should stop right there. I'm here alone. And I've never seen that woman before—I told you that." I ramped up my temper. "Is this what happens to tourists in Rome? You frame them for murder? You make wild accusations against innocent people on holiday?"

Bellini waved me to be quiet. "Signor Fisk, I received an anonymous tip. By telephone, from a woman who asked for me by name. We traced the call to the airport."

An icy band clamped my stomach. It all became clear. Joanna! What a cold nerved, calculating bitch. But why had she betrayed me? Then I remembered.... When she reached Sydney she would have access to the bank account with a quarter million in it. And then she would disappear.

"The woman told us everything," Bellini purred on. "Certainly, enough for us to charge you with murder. You thought that we would never discover the woman in your bed was your wife. That was your most serious mistake."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember? I asked you why you were wearing pajamas while the woman in your bed was naked."

"And I told you. I was cold."

"It had bothered me," Bellini went on. "The truth was, you didn't want us to see your back."

His men closed in. One forcibly removed my shirt. The inspector rested an accusing finger on the tattoo above my left shoulder blade.

"Our anonymous caller was very specific about your tattoo. The murdered woman had a tattoo above her left shoulder blade, too. Don't you think it is more than a coincidence that you both have identical tattoos?" He sneered. "Tokens of love, perhaps?" ■

# HE MAY BE THE KEY TO SOLVING ONE OF THE GREATEST UNSOLVED ART HEISTS IN HISTORY

## Praise for the Coffey & Hill series

**“A thrill ride.”**

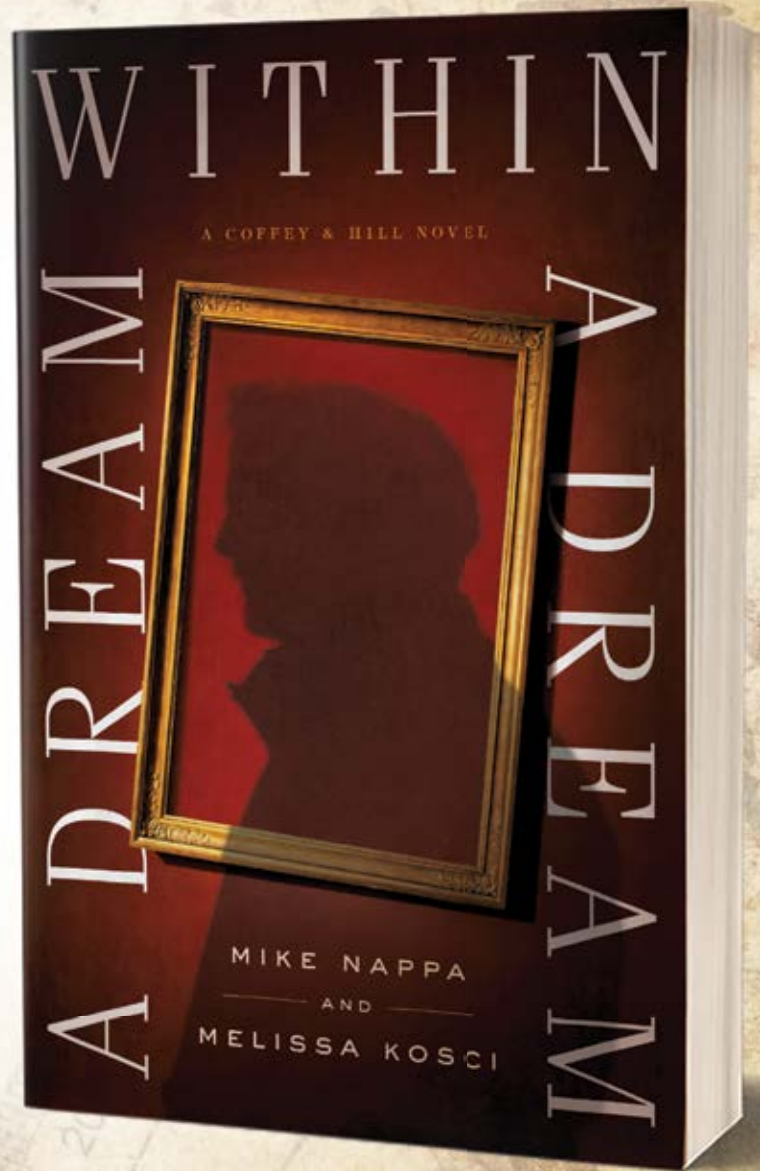
—**Tosca Lee**, *New York Times*  
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**“Impossible to put down.”**

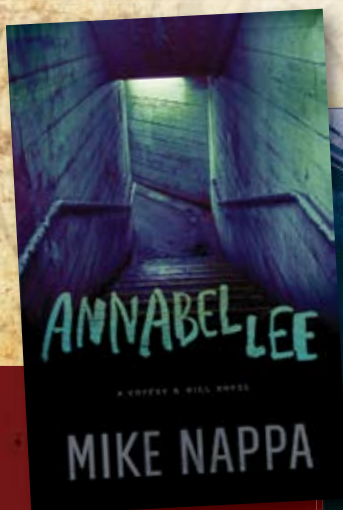
—**Lois Duncan**, *New York Times*  
bestselling author on *Annabel Lee*

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# RILEY SAGER

## Masters *all* the Bumps in the Night

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
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Riley Sager, the pseudonym of an author who lives in Princeton, New Jersey, released his brand new book, “Home Before Dark” just last month. Being his fourth thriller, this author is one who has proven again and again that he knows exactly how to write tales that teeter on the line between psychological thrillers and horror novels.

His first book, “Final Girls,” became a national and international bestseller that has been published in more than two dozen countries and won the ITW Thriller Award for “Best Hardcover Novel.”

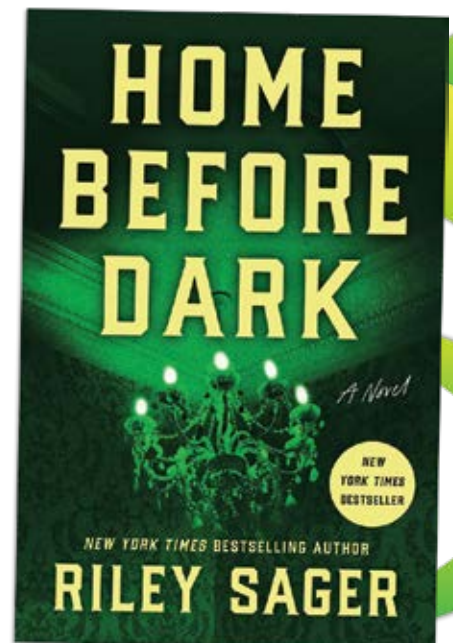
Having the Master of Horror, Stephen King, himself, blog about Riley’s incredible work also helped open doors and bring a huge audience to Riley that he is grateful for to this day. Taking some time away from the fifth novel he’s currently working on, Riley joined *Suspense Magazine*’s “Beyond the Cover” radio show and spoke with co-host John Raab about this new title, his ability to write dual storylines, and to share

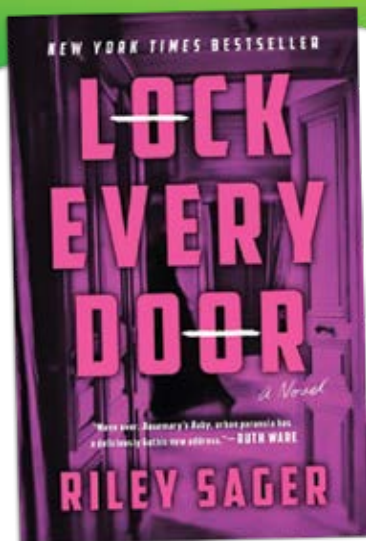
some “very cool news” regarding Hollywood.

John Raab (J.R.): Welcome to the show, Riley. It’s great to have you with us. I would love to begin with your new book, “Home Before Dark.” I have to say that I absolutely love ghost stories and everything that goes bump in the night, which means I absolutely love your books. Can you tell us a bit about how that idea came about, and give our listeners more information about this fantastic plot?

Riley Sager (R.S.): *Well, thank you for that, John. It’s great to be here. I have to say that this new title definitely offers many bumps in the night. When it comes to the plot, it’s actually two books in one.*

*It’s about a family in 1995, who purchased and moved into a Vermont estate called Baneberry Hall. In the middle of the night, however, just 20 days after moving in, they fled and said they’d never go back ever again. The father proceeded to write a book about the estate and their terrifying experiences inside the walls. This book went on to become a bestselling horror memoir—quite similar to the Amityville horror story. The daughter, only five years old at the time, remembers none of these ghostly experiences,*





but she truly believes that her father made it all up. Twenty-five years later, when her dad passes and she inherits Baneberry, she returns in order to fix it up and resell it. That's her job, actually, being a house flipper. But another thing she wants to do is find the truth about why they really left so long ago.

It's her return to this house, and it's also the full text of the book her father wrote, combined into one to make the plot. So, the chapters alternate. You do start to see similarities after a while between what he wrote and what she's experiencing in the present day.

J.R.: How did you come up with this idea?

R.S.: It really started when I was listening to a podcast called "Stuff You Should Know." They do shows on different topics and one episode was focused on the famous Amityville horror and the Lutz family. I was part of the general consensus that believes these things that the Lutz family said were all made up. But even after everything, these people continue to swear that it's true. I started to think about the Lutz children and thought they would be really cool characters. I envisioned this memoir that may or may not be true, even though most people believe it's a lie, and how one of the children could head back to the so-called haunted place years later; I thought that might be a very cool story to tell.

J.R.: That's so true. I remember the original of that movie back in the 70's. I actually sat through it when I was only eight years old. My sister was babysitting and dragged me to the theater. I have to say, I was scared for a week; I thought I saw green stuff coming out of my walls. When I grew up and researched things, I was in the camp that believed it was all made up. But, you're right, no one has ever talked about the kids. All I know is that they left Amity, NY and moved all the way across the country to Washington, I believe.

R.S.: Exactly. Which made having a kid turn grown-up a fascinating character to write about for me. She was this innocent bystander in my story, yet because of her father's book, she grew up in the shadow of his tale. She talks about how she was the freaky kid who lived in a haunted house and teased in grade school, as well as how the "haunting" made her popular in her high school years. So over her entire life this house has always been with her, and now she needs to know the truth.

J.R.: And I heard you had some cool news to share with us about the book?

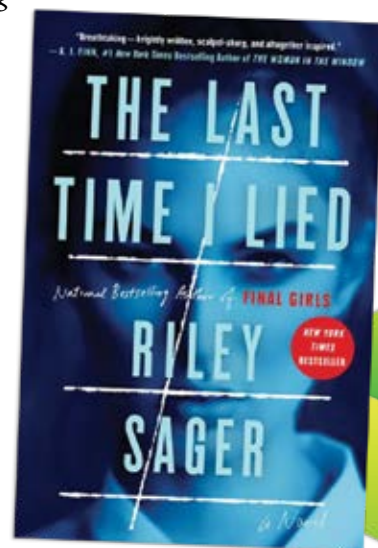
R.S.: I do! "Home Before Dark" has been optioned for film by SONY Pictures, and the producers of Stranger Things and The Arrival. It's really, really cool. With this current pandemic and everything in Hollywood being on hold, I don't know the future of the development stage, but I had great conversations with several production companies that were interested. I loved talking with them to "see" my book as being something other than a book. It is all really new and exciting to me.

J.R.: How did they get their hands on it?

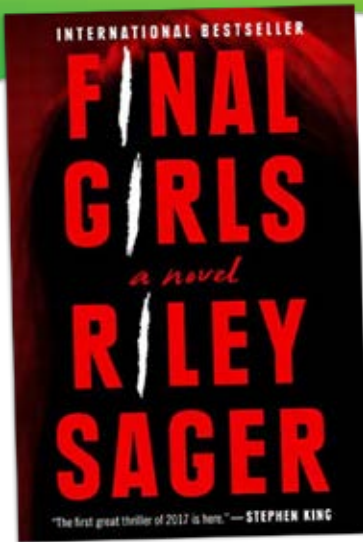
R.S.: I'm very lucky, actually. I have a super film and T.V. agent who has been with me since "Final Girls." All four of the books have been optioned in some form or another, and this agent is just extremely good at knowing the right people to send these things to. The response was surprising. I have to say, I'm a pessimistic, self-critical writer. So when a producer calls and says they really loved my book, it's like wow...that is so cool!

J.R.: Did they mention any specific thing that spurred their excitement to get this book on screen?

R.S.: They liked the vision of separating the past and the present. Lots of psychological thrillers have an unreliable narrator. In this, the unreliable narrator is a book within a book, so it's a







“I think I’ll stick with standalones. I prefer them. I like the challenge of creating a new world, new style, and a new plot each time out.”

*different way to visualize everything. On screen, to have both the look of Dad’s world as well as the present-day world of his daughter would be fascinating to see.*

J.R.: Now, all four of your books have been standalones. Will you keep to that plan, or do you ever see a series down the road?

R.S.: *I think I’ll stick with standalones. I prefer them. I like the challenge of creating a new world, new style, and a new plot each time out. I think with a series, you’re sort of beholden to what came before it. There are certain characters that you could never kill, or couples you could never break up in a series...so the longer it goes on, the less interesting I would find them to write. Maybe it’s different for someone with a long-running series, but once I’m finished with a book, I’m tired of it. I want to move on. Now, of course, you talk about it while you move on to the next book, but by the final edit I don’t want to read it again.*

J.R.: I understand that, actually. I talk to a lot of musicians (I love both books and music), and they say they won’t go back and listen to an album again. They’re just tired of it. I think it was Eddie Van Halen who said he had to listen to an album once because he forgot how to play some of the songs completely.

R.S.: *I understand that now. Back in the day, I would hear about musicians who would need lyric sheets or cheat sheets because they forgot the words or how to play a song. But now I get it. I get asked questions now about the books, like in a virtual library interview a few weeks back, and I could not answer the question because I literally didn’t remember.*

*My mom is actually a stickler for a series. Mom will read them all to the bitter end. I want something new and different, though. So staying away from series and having a new plot each time is what keeps me excited. I love to build a brand new world.*

J.R.: Now, you’re from Pennsylvania and live in New Jersey. Why did you decide to set this new novel in Vermont?

R.S.: *I’d done a book event in Manchester, Vermont, and stayed at this B&B on top of a hill that had been owned at one time by RKO Pictures. It had this great backstory. While staying there, I thought, “I should set a book in a place like this.” I didn’t know what book at the time, but when this idea occurred to me, my mind immediately went back to this B&B. I loved the place and thought it would be the perfect setting for a house where creepy things happened and things went bump in the night.*

J.R.: Will you be moving around the United States with the settings of your books?

R.S.: *It depends. I tend to stick to the East Coast because I’m more familiar with it. My next novel is set in Pennsylvania. But I would love to one day set something in an exotic locale in order to give myself an excuse to live there for a few months... maybe Bora, Bora!*

J.R.: When you look back at your four fantastic books, do you ever pinch yourself knowing that you’re a full-time writer? After all, most definitely still have a day job.

R.S.: *Oh yeah, there are days where I have to pause and say, “Is this really my life?” “Is this really happening?” I understand how lucky I am, because I know this is something that does not happen to a high percentage of people.*

J.R.: Ghost stories are still timeless, though; I have to say. These new suspense titles are filled with a lot more technology and conveniences, but with ghost stories you still need the element of the characters. I think it's a lot more intimate than today's thrillers.

R.S.: *Yeah, I agree. Someone on social media said my books were their own genre. I try to walk that fine line between horror and psychological thriller, but that wasn't intentional by any means. I don't consider myself a horror writer.*

J.R.: That's a misconception, too. People seem to associate horror with gore, and that's not true. I think writers feel a stigma when classified as a "horror" writer, as well. But if you watch the original *Halloween*, there was zero blood in the entire movie. It was built off the music, characters, suspense—no gore anywhere.

R.S.: *Exactly. That was an amazing movie. It was all about tension, and I like the fact that I do that in my books and leave out all the tech.*

*When you choose a title like, "Final Girls," I know it will draw a horror audience. But I feel it's more psychological with horror elements, and I try to maintain that recipe with all of my books. If you want to classify them as horror, I'm fine with that. I don't feel there's a stigma there. And I truly believe that with horror you can say so many potent and interesting things and get away with it, and not feel like you're preaching.*

J.R.: That's the great part. People will try to emulate that creepy tension, but you get it right. That's why you're successful.

R.S.: *I also have to thank Stephen King. I lived up to his words, so people thought I might be the real deal.*

J.R.: You impressed the master.

R.S.: *Yes. His words opened up a whole audience and a lot of doors that I couldn't have opened on my own.*

J.R.: I take it [www.rileysagerbooks.com](http://www.rileysagerbooks.com) is your website and the best place to find out news and information?

R.S.: *Yes. I also have a newsletter that you can sign up for. I'm also on the others; I'm good with Twitter and Instagram, but not really that great with Facebook. Honestly, it's too much work to keep up with everything on Facebook. I feel bad about it, but can't do it all.*

J.R.: Are you sticking with one book a year, or are there other plans in the future?

R.S.: *This is the thing: I'm not sure how much I can do, but my publisher is keeping me busy. Next year will see the release of the next one. It will be another standalone in the psychological/horror vein, but I'm stepping away from the haunted house. Been there, done that, and I'm looking forward to trying something new. All my books have had flashbacks or dual timelines, so the challenge for this new one is to write a straightforward, real-time thriller and see how that goes.*

J.R.: Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

R.S.: *Actually, yes. The cover of "Home Before Dark" is special. It glows in the dark. I had to say that! When I saw the color, it was cool, but it legitimately glows in the dark.*

J.R.: So if it's on your bedside table, you have no choice but to look over and see it there, and *have* to read the rest.

R.S.: *Exactly!*

It was a pleasure talking to Riley. To learn about all the fantastic projects he has coming up, and to sign up for his newsletter, head to [www.rileysagerbooks.com](http://www.rileysagerbooks.com). ■



Delving Deep:

# ANDREW MAYNE

on Magic, Mystery & “The Girl Beneath the Sea”



Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*

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Andrew Mayne scuba and Andrew Mayne Shark\_Friends Credit Discovery

Here’s a mystery for you: Amazon Charts and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Andrew Mayne says, “I spend 99% of my time doing the things I want to do and then trying to cram all the responsible things into the remaining 1%.” And yet he has managed to balance successful careers as a writer (with more than a dozen novels to his credit), magician (whose fans call themselves “Mayniacs”), television personality (Discovery Channel’s “Andrew Mayne: Ghost Diver” and A&E’s “Don’t Trust Andrew Mayne”), and podcaster (“Weird Things”). That certainly gives the illusion of productivity!

Mayne’s newest, “The Girl Beneath the Sea,” is the first book in the *Underwater Investigation Unit* series featuring diver Sloan McPherson, an auxiliary officer for the Lauderdale Shores PD who specializes in evidence recovery. The saga draws upon Mayne’s own water-based South Florida childhood, but with a bit of murder and mayhem thrown in for dramatic effect. Indeed, it’s during one such adventure that Sloan discovers the freshly dead body of a woman with ties to her past—and soon realizes that there are powerful forces at work who would like nothing better than to see her sleep with the fishes.

Library Journal praised: “Mayne writes with a clipped narrative style that gives the story rapid-fire propulsion, and he populates the narrative with a rogue’s gallery of engaging characters ... [A] winning new series with a complicated female protagonist that combines police procedural with adventure story and mixes the styles of Lee Child and Clive Cussler.”

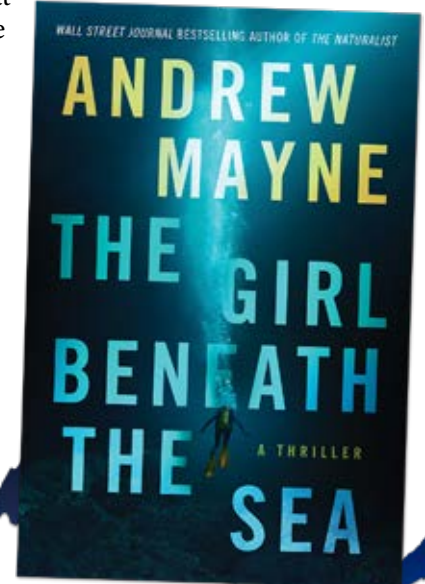
Recently, Andrew Mayne delved deep to reveal the tricks of his trade(s)...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “The Girl Beneath the Sea” is the first entry in a new series. What inspired you to create a new canvas—and how does this book work as both a standalone and an introduction to a larger story arc?

Andrew Mayne (A.M.): *I grew up on the water in South Florida and have been wanting to use that experience as a backdrop for storytelling. The next step was finding the right character to navigate through that world. This book introduces us to Sloan McPherson at the moment in her life when she’s discovered her true calling.*

J.B.V.: Your protagonist, diver Sloan McPherson, is the quintessential complex character. In what ways does she exhibit both strength and vulnerability—and how do these qualities enliven and endanger her simultaneously?

A.M.: *Sloan is brave in many ways outwardly, but on the inside she has a lot of doubts about herself. Her family is a bit of a train wreck and being a member of it carries a lot of baggage in the eyes of others. She’s eager to prove herself and in some cases this puts her into jeopardy. She jumps headfirst (sometimes literally) into shallow water.*



J.B.V.: Sloan and her ex, who co-parent ten-year-old Jackie, have a refreshing relationship. Can you talk about their dynamic? How do they exemplify the non-traditional families that are so prevalent in today's world?

A.M.: *Sloan had her child when she was still figuring out who she was. Although she loves Jackie's father, Run, Sloan didn't want people to define her by him since he comes from a wealthy family and her family has hit some rough times. Despite that, she maintained a healthy relationship with her daughter's father because she wanted her child to have stability.*

J.B.V.: The book plays out largely against the waters of South Florida. How do you endeavor to make setting its own character within a book—and what might readers be surprised to learn about the area, given the nature of the crimes that unfold there?

A.M.: *I focus on what makes a place different. For example, I like to draw attention to details that you might not notice from a photograph or first glance, like how walking across sawgrass means sidestepping into watery muck and achieving cold ankles because your socks are soaked.*

*There's water everywhere and there's stuff in it you'd never think about. From cars to prehistoric animals, Florida has it all.*

J.B.V.: The technical components of the book (diving, navigation, recovery, etc.) are skillfully rendered. What kind of research did this require on your part—and how do you then weigh the presentation of authentic detail with the demands of narrative momentum?

A.M.: *I grew up scuba diving, and while I was in the middle of writing this I was preparing for my Shark Week special for Discovery Channel. Although I was deep into dive tables and air mixes for some of the technical diving I was doing, I made a decision not to make the book read like a dive manual and focus more on the visceral experience.*

J.B.V.: What of your skills as a magician are transferrable to writing crime fiction—and how does the idea of the sleight of hand apply specifically to “The Girl Beneath the Sea”?

A.M.: *I think my background as a magician makes me think about misdirection in plotting. I'm always asking how I can put something in front of people without them realizing it's there until I want them to.*

J.B.V.: You are a man of many talents and interests. How do you balance the demands of your work while maintaining a sense of fun—and what advice would you offer to those who struggle with finding the confidence and/or time to embrace their own creativity?

A.M.: *I'm a bad example. I spend 99% of my time doing the things I want to do and then trying to cram all the responsible things into the remaining 1%.*

*I think if you just start making things—stories, outlines, anything—over and over, eventually you'll understand what you're capable of doing and not be so worried about what the world is going to tell you.*

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

A.M.: *For the next book I took inspiration from an actual Florida cold case that was eventually solved. And Sloan may have decided to pursue law enforcement in a more meaningful way, but she still has a lot to learn about being an investigator.*

To learn more about this very talented author, please go to:  
<https://andrewmayne.com>. ■



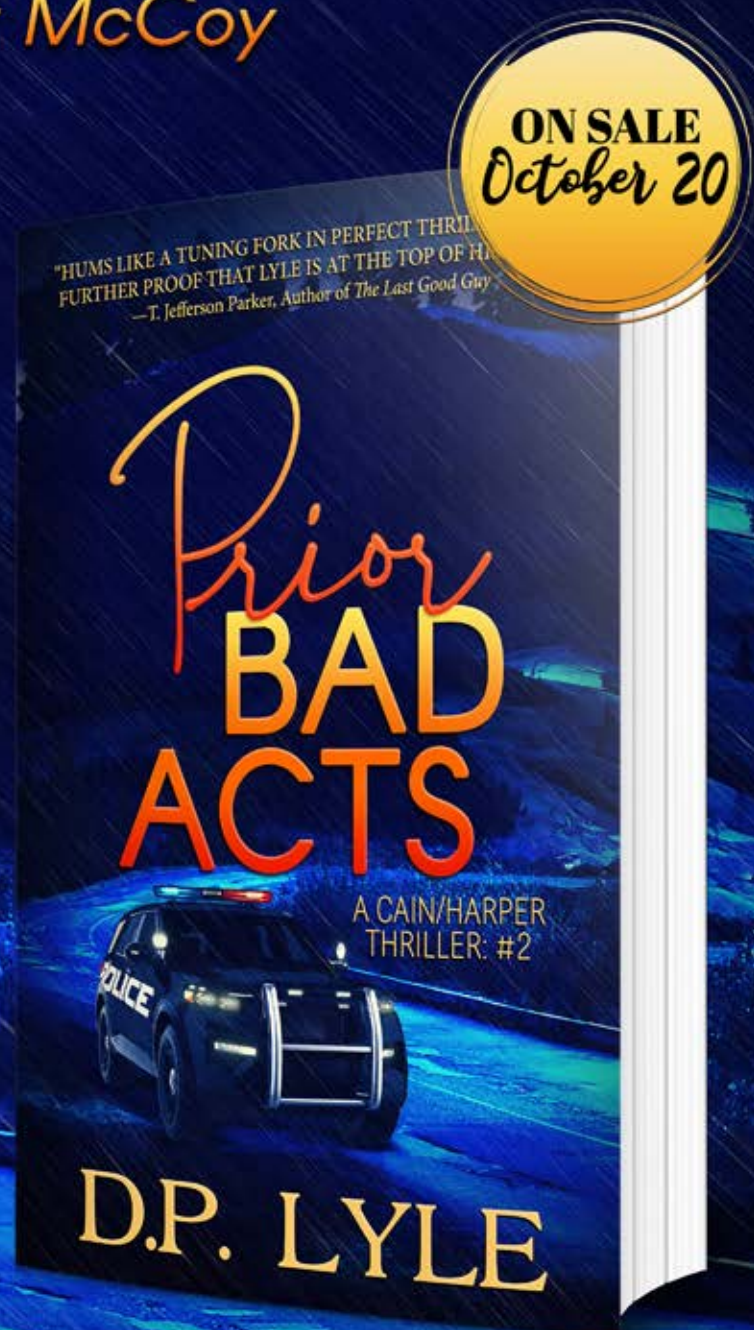


A CAIN/HARPER THRILLER: #2

# "PRIOR BAD ACTS PREDICT FUTURE BAD ACTS."

—Harper McCoy

Fear grips an isolated mountain town after drug dealer Dalton Southwell kills a rogue dealer and his entire family. Score settled; message delivered. But Dalton's best-laid plans go awry when his brother Dennie takes a bullet in the gut. In a panic, Dr. Buck Buckner is kidnapped from the local ER, a pharmacy is robbed and the owner murdered, and the killers melt into the rugged Tennessee hills. Buck's physician father calls in Bobby Cain and Harper McCoy to rescue his son from killers who would have little use for him after he saves Dennie; or worse, the wounded man dies. But which direction and how far did they run? What hideaway did they burrow into? For Cain and Harper it's a race against time to locate the killers, safely retrieve Buck, and settle their own score.



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**SUSPENSE**  
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# The Watering Shed

By Joe R. Lansdale  
Press Photo Credit: Karen Lansdale



Published just in time for the 30th anniversary of the not-so-dynamic duo's first appearance, "Of Mice and Minestrone," the brand-new *Hap and Leonard* series collection is chock full of Joe R. Lansdale's inimitable blend of humor, mayhem, and insight, and featuring never-before-seen stories, a selection of the boys' favorite recipes from Kasey Lansdale, and an introduction from *New York Times* bestselling crime author Kathleen Kent. This excerpt from "The Watering Shed" proves that even as young men, Hap and Leonard had a nose or, better yet, a mouth for getting into trouble.

WHEN ME AND LEONARD WERE YOUNG MEN, we decided to drive out to the Watering Shed to drink. We were underage, but we heard Shank figured if you could drive and had money, you could drink. I didn't even drink, but the Watering Shed was a kind of rite of passage, and we wanted to go there just to prove our balls had dropped. It would be our first visit.

Leonard, being black, wasn't exactly welcome. Though on the books East Texas was integrated, a lot of white folks were having a problem embracing it.

I think Leonard half-hoped he'd be denied, and that he could cause some trouble over it. Leonard has always been kind of angry, and he may have been even more angry then.

There was also this: he was queer as a six-toed cat and proud of it, and was as tough as a nickel steak and so masculine he made the macho tough guys look like they wore lace panties and shaved their balls.

The Watering Shed was well out in the woods, down by the river, and there were stories about how people went out there and didn't come back, were later found in the river. Shank was known to settle some matters with a baseball bat or a cutoff shotgun he kept behind the bar. As for the clientele, well, let's just say they weren't sophisticated.

Frankly, I don't know how it happened, but since Leonard and I met, we had become friends, and had bonded because of certain incidents, and truth was, we were moving beyond mere friendship and were becoming like brothers. Him being black and me being white broke some unwritten rules, and me hanging with him and him being queer, that just made it all the worse as far as many Southern folk were concerned.

When we got to the Watering Shed, there were a few cars parked out front, and the night was settling down on the world, and there was a glint of silver moonlight on the tin roof. We went in, Leonard bold as a cold, bare titty at a strip show, and me a little nervous, like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

When we entered, you could have heard a microbe drop.

There was tobacco smoke in the air, and it was a little warm, and it smelled funny, an accumulation of sweat and alcohol. It wasn't packed inside, just a few folks here and there. Near the door was a round table, and there were four men at the table playing cards and drinking beer.

At the bar were two others, and in the back, at two different tables, a couple of men sat sipping beer. Joe Shank, who I



knew from around town, was behind the bar. There wasn't a woman in the place.

It wasn't me they were looking at, of course, it was Leonard, black as an eggplant, cocky as a rooster. He sauntered over to the bar like Wild Bill Hickok, leaned on it, said, "Bartender, how about a beer?"

"How about some money?" Shank said.

Shank was a big redheaded guy with a big belly, but he gave you the immediate impression of someone who would charge a rhino, thinking he was going to run into its mouth and come out its ass.

Leonard paid for the beer, and Shank placed a bottle of Jax in front of him and used a church key to pop the top.

I ended up sitting on a stool next to where Leonard was standing. There was a large, flyspecked mirror behind the bar, and the bottom of it was covered by the tops of liquor bottles. I could see the men at the table by the door in it, and it was easy to turn my head and see those who were at the end of the bar and in the back. They seemed to have gone into comas, but the ones at the table by the door, they looked alert, like hungry lions that had just noticed a gazelle had wandered into their path.

"You want a beer, Hap?" Leonard said.

"No," I said.

"You might ought to have one," the bartender said.

"That's all right," I said.

"No," said the bartender, "you might ought to have one. You're taking up a drinker's space."

"You got ghosts for drinkers?" Leonard said, taking the beer Shank had set in front of him, tossing back a deep swig. "It's not like the house is full and there's a line at the door."

Shank made a grin so thin you couldn't have slipped a razor blade between his lips.

"Come into this bar, you buy a drink. You can pour it in your boot or take it in the shitter and pour it down the drain, you want, but you buy one. That, or some other liquor. What will it be?"

"A beer," I said.

"Don't want it, don't have to buy it," Leonard said.

"Yes, he does," said Shank. "He has to buy it."

"It's all right," I said.

"Not if you don't want it," Leonard said.

"Want it or don't, he's got to buy one," Shank said.

"He's gonna buy a beer," said a man at the table. I glanced at him. He was the only man at the table below thirty, probably not a whole lot older than us. He had a long face and fat lips and a lean body made hard by work, and a gleam in his eye like a man looking for a slight.

"You buying?" Leonard said, looking over his shoulder at the man at the table.

"What's that?" said the young man, turning his head slightly, like maybe if he did, Leonard's color might change.

"You heard me."

"Don't think I did."

"Ought to get your ears checked then," Leonard said.

"Get them flushed out or some such, 'cause I know I'm talking clearly. You heard me, didn't you, Hap?"

"I heard you."

Shank said, "That's enough. Kid, buy a beer or hit the road."

"Sure," I said. "Jax. Whatever."

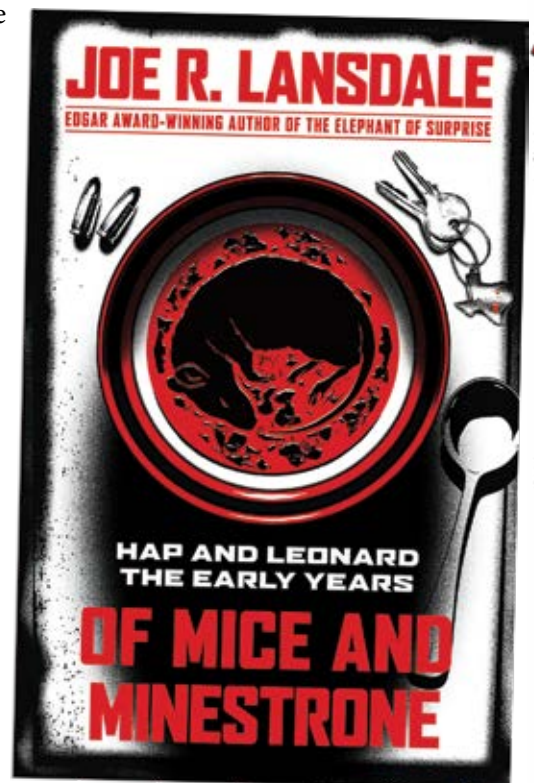
The two men at the far end of the bar picked up their beers and drifted toward the back, to a free table.

Shank went to a cooler and brought me back a bottle of Jax and set it in front of me and used the church key to pop the top off. The beer hissed a little and foamed over the rim, and I could smell the alcohol from it, a smell I've never liked.

"Enjoy," Shank said.

I looked in the mirror, at the young man at the table. He was staring at us, and not because he was trying to figure our dress size. I let the beer stay where it was, forming a wet ring on the bar, and carefully watched him in the mirror.

Leonard had turned around so he could lean his back into the bar, and he was looking at the young man and smiling between sips. He has a great smile,



like a shark.

The young man said, "Shank, I think you've done let this establishment go to the fucking buzzards."

Shank said, "That's enough, Philip. That's plenty. Times change. I get paid whoever buys a beer. A turkey comes in here, wants a beer, I'll sell it to him he's wearing pants and he's got money."

"Turkey came in here, he might get plucked," Philip said.

"Only in that I jack up the prices," Shank said.

"Ain't that the truth," Leonard said. "I could have had a beer and barbecue sandwich for the price you ask."

"Then you need to go somewhere where they got a barbecue sandwich," Shank said.

"But I'd miss the company here."

"Yeah, well, it might not be as good as you think."

"Naw," Leonard said. "It's fine here. Right, Hap?"

I didn't answer. I eyed the front door without being too obvious about it. I wondered if we could make it if things got out of hand.

"I don't like your kind of business, Shank," Philip said.

"That's all right," Shank said. "You don't have to like it."

One of the men at the table gently scooted his chair back, creating a bit of distance between him and the conversation.

"Bottoms up," Leonard said, and drank the rest of the beer with a series of gulps. He put the bottle on the bar, said, "How about another one?"

"You pay, you drink," Shank said, and went to get another Jax. He came back with it, placed it in front of Leonard, opened it with the church key, nabbed the empty, and carried it away.

"There was a time when a nigger knew his place," Philip said.

"All right, now, goddamn it," Shank said, tossing the bottle into a big can behind the bar. "I told you enough is enough. You need to hit the road, Philip, and now. Don't let your shirttail catch in the door when it closes."

Philip turned red as a new rose.

"I can't believe you'd talk to me like that," Philip said. "I come in here all the time and spend good money, and this nigger and his nigger-loving friend come in, and now you're on their side."

"I'm on my side," Shank said. "I'm running a business."

I glanced at Leonard. He was sipping his fresh beer, and didn't seem to have a care in the world. It was like he might be gathering up thoughts for future plans that evening, though I was beginning to feel any plans we might want to make were about to be cut short. ■

*Joe R. Lansdale is the Edgar Award-winning author of more than eighty novels and short story collections. He has won multiple awards in crime, Western, fantasy, and horror fiction. His work has appeared in films and on TV shows such as Hap and Leonard, the film Bubba Ho-Tepp, and Batman: The Animated Series. Lansdale lives in Nacogdoches, Texas.*



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# JOEL C. ROSENBERG

Captures Readers with his Latest  
*Marcus Ryker* Thriller

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



Bestselling author Joel C. Rosenberg recently made his debut on Suspense Radio. Joel's books are known for not only ripping from the headlines, but making some of those headlines. His latest, "The Jerusalem Assassin" is the third political thriller in his *Marcus Ryker* series.

Joel sat down with co-hosts John Raab and Jeff Ayers to talk about this new book that has literally been called a "home run" by many. Let's take a look inside this amazing tale...

*Marcus Ryker has spent his entire career studying killers. One thing he knows for sure: a peace summit is the ultimate stage for an assassination. President Andrew Clarke is determined to announce his historic peace plan*

*from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. But when senior American officials who support the plan begin violently dying, Clarke orders Ryker and his team of CIA operatives to hunt down those responsible and bring the killing spree to an end. When the Palestinians denounce the American plan, the Saudis signal they may be ready to forge a historic treaty with Israel. Could the Saudi king's support be the missing ingredient that will lead to peace at long last? Ryker soon uncovers a chilling plot to kill the American president. A well-resourced international alliance is dead set against the peace plan. They will stop at nothing to strike a blow against the Americans and seize leadership of the Muslim world. With all eyes on Jerusalem and the president in the crosshairs, it's up to Ryker to eliminate the terrible evil that's been set in motion. The fate of the region depends on his success. He has 48 hours....*

John Raab (J.R.): Welcome to another great "Beyond the Cover" show here on Suspense Radio. Tonight, myself and my co-host Jeff Ayers will be sitting down to talk with a man who many people believe has some sort of future-seeing ability. Joel, it's great to have you here.

Joel C. Rosenberg (J.C.R.): *How did I know you were going to say that? (LOL)*

*It was U.S. News & World Reports, speaking about my second book, when they called me a modern-day Nostradamus. I've*

been trying to live that moniker down ever since. I have to say, I'm not a clairvoyant. I do not call "Miss Cleo" in the middle of the night for plot ideas. I promise.

J.R.: Well, you have a heck of an intuition. Let's talk about this latest book.

J.C.R.: Actually, for those listeners who may not be familiar with me, I want to take a brief step back to the first novel. I began "The Last Jihad" in January of 2001. The first page puts readers in the cockpit of a jet plane that's been hijacked by radical Islamist terrorists coming in on a kamikaze attack mission against an American city. That was 9 months before September 11. That's how my first novel begins, and the place happens to be Denver—not NY, D.C. or PA. The plot leads from that mission to the fictional American president declaring war on Saddam Hussein and him losing power. That's the actual arc of the first novel.

I was finishing it; I was only a couple of chapters away from being done on the morning of September 11. I was living at the time with my wife and kids in D.C., fifteen minutes away from Dulles International Airport where flight 77 was being hijacked. It was flown over our house and into the Pentagon. When the book released in November of 2002, people had never heard of me because, of course, I'd never written a book. Eleven weeks it remained on the New York Times bestseller list. People wondered... how did he write this? Now, there were differences, but it almost felt as if it was ripped out of real life.

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): Well, yes. And then in a later book you also spoke about the death of Yasser Arafat, too, which also came true.

J.C.R.: That was the next year with the second book, "The Last Days," which is when U.S. News called me "Nostradamus." It was uncanny. Because with that book I had this convoy driving into Gaza as part of the peace process and it was attacked. Six days before the release of the book, the real U.S. convoy was attacked; then U.S. News wrote: "Watch out Arafat." Then, thirteen months later, he was really dead. You can't plan for these things. I wasn't predicting the future. But my plots were eerily similar to the trajectory of real life events, which is what put my novels on the map early on.

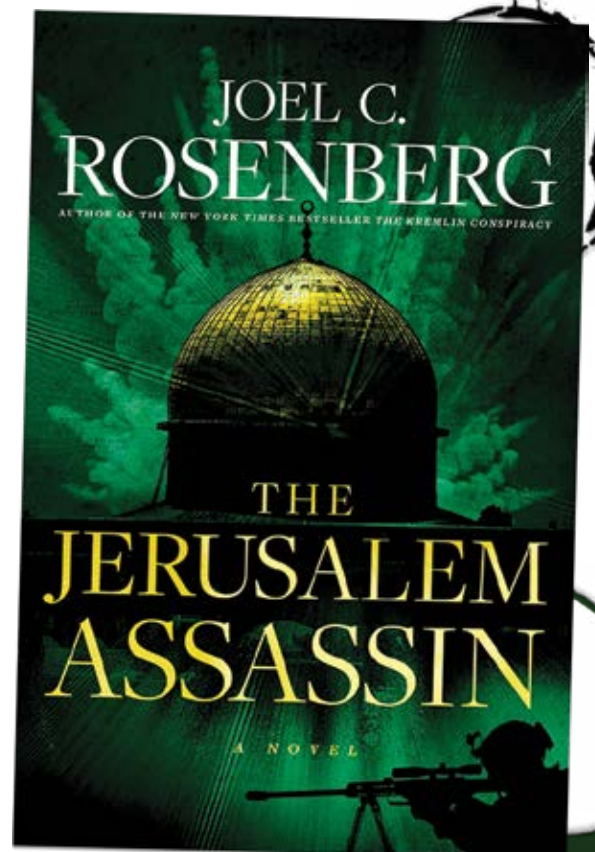
J.R.: So, talk about this latest series and Marcus Ryker. Where and when did he come about?

J.C.R.: I've taken a different journey than a lot of thriller writers – for better or for worse. My first five books had the same character. Then I did a trilogy. My last three have starred Marcus Ryker, but they are not a trilogy. I know those who write thriller series' usually write franchise characters, like James Bond. But Ryker wasn't meant to be one. He is a Marine, and was introduced in "The Kremlin Conspiracy" followed by "The Persian Gamble" and now this.

We met Ryker at a very young age, however, when he was in college and saw 9/11 unfolding on TV. He goes the next day to the Marine recruiting station and joins. He takes you to combat in Afghanistan, later Iraq, but when he comes home and joins the Secret Service and marries his college sweetheart, you go on a real journey.

Most novelists will give you the backstory of their character on the 20th or so book, but I decided to do it differently. I wanted readers to really know him. He does get recruited by the CIA but he has a cover in the U.S.

**“BUT POLITICAL THRILLERS CAN HAPPEN AND HAVE, SO THERE'S A LINE BETWEEN ENTERTAINING AND DOWNRIGHT SCARY. I WORK HARD TO MAKE SURE I DON'T CROSS THAT LINE.”**





government working for the Diplomatic Security Service (DSS), which is sort of the State Department's version of the Secret Service, where Marcus protects bigwigs, ambassadors, etc. All his family and friends believe he's working for the DSS but he's actually working for the CIA.

As this novel unfolds, the American president is planning to unveil a new Middle East plan to make peace between Israelis and Palestinians. However, a number of senior U.S. officials involved in drafting the plan start getting assassinated early on in the book and this rattles the president. He's not really sure what's going on, yet an unknown terror group takes credit for the deaths. Just as he's about to pull the peace plan, he gets a back channel message through Ryker from the Saudi government who tells him, although they're not a big fan of the details in the peace plan, they're ready to explore peace with Israel. So, basically, if they are invited to Jerusalem for a high profile summit with the Israeli prime minister, with the U.S. president hosting, they will come. The president is excited even though the security team around him thinks he's nuts to go to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and have a peace summit on one of the most dangerous and volatile pieces of real estate on the planet. The president does it anyway and puts Ryker in charge of securing the summit. Now...all factions are converging on Jerusalem.

J.R.: It's almost like I'm watching the trailer of a suspense movie. When you're writing, how hard is it for you to keep that fast pace?

J.C.R.: It's very much a challenge. You're trying to thrill; if your reader's heart isn't going at 150 mph and they're not up all night, then I'm doing it wrong. I write small chapters where each closes with a cliffhanger. Like a Pringles potato chip, I like to think you can't eat (read) just one. I actually feel elated over the fan mail I get when a reader is cursing me on Facebook in the morning saying they have to go to work but my book kept them up all night. This tells me I'm doing it right.

Depending on the scenario, it is hard to keep pace through the entire book. You have to give time for people to breathe, too. This one opens big, with a horrifying mass shooting inside a church, so it takes off like a shot. But I also find ways to build the suspense. I have to accelerate, and slow down a bit, then accelerate again. The last fifty pages or so, however, I want to make sure you can't put the book down. That's ultimately what all thriller writers are going for. I want you to be pulled into the adventure and be left breathless. If that's done, then maybe the reader will pick up another one.

J.A.: I'm curious to know how you research your novels.

J.C.R.: As far as research is concerned, I was actually a political consultant. I lived in D.C. for 24 years; the first 10, I worked for a range of political leaders. Every single one of them lost. It got to the point where my friends would ask me to work for the opponent because I had the kiss of death on me. (LOL)

It was frustrating but I learned a lot. Most political thriller writers haven't worked in politics, but that was beneficial for me; I did work for interesting people who put me in interesting places and also help me create the novels. When the first two books became successful, I would get invited to dinners or coffee with some true bigwigs. A three star general at the Pentagon wanted to talk over lunch one day. I've never served in the military, so he's become a great source. When we moved to Israel, which is where we live now, in Jerusalem, I used to joke with my boys that they would probably get drafted and have a chance to serve in the Israeli military. Their dad is old and fat and flat-footed, so the only reason to draft me is if they need a hostage. (An old Woody Allen joke there.)

The former CIA Director, he and his wife contacted me and my wife. They'd been reading the novels and wanted to get to know each other. The vice president and I met because he'd been reading the novels back when he was in congress, and now we have a lunch regularly. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, was reading my novels in congress, too. The research has gotten easier for me because of these doors opening that I had not anticipated. The king of Jordan became a reader of my novels and invited us to Jordan for five days to get to know him; and now the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia is reading the novels and has invited me to get to know him. A very controversial figure, but he's reading these books. Now, my books are fiction, so I am NOT saying he's headed to my hometown of Jerusalem to make peace. But how many novelists get to head to the president of Egypt or the prime minister of this or that? I don't think I deserve it, but I am using these opportunities in my work.

J.A.: That's amazing. Real world experience right there.

J.C.R.: Exactly. I didn't have to work in government; my guys lost, after all. But these guys are fascinating. Former President Bush sends me notes; he's reading the books now. I didn't set out to write for these guys. I wanted to write for those folks out there who don't have the extra time or money to read a novel; I wanted to give them something they'd enjoy. These bigwigs step up my game, of course. They know what their life is/was like in politics and know all the worst case scenarios, so I have to write one that's

*plausible and chilling enough, but still fiction, in order to keep these bigwigs' attention.*

J.R.: Now, the *Bennett/McCoy* series was closed. How far do you think Ryker will go? And, when you're exploring a new series, is it because you wish to explore a new character or a new agent in a different way?

J.C.R.: *Yes, I've enjoyed picking characters with a different angle and building that character by taking him or her through different international scenarios. With Ryker, I am now considering the possibility of a franchise character. With the Bennett/McCoy series, I knew at the start that John Bennett, being a Wall Street strategist who gets recruited to work as a senior advisor for the president, didn't have the skill set of the CIA and, at that time, I did not know prime ministers or CIA guys to help me. With Bennett, I knew I'd run out of plot options that were plausible.*

*The J.B. Collins series was also fascinating to write. But he was a NYT foreign correspondent who gets drawn into these odd scenarios. After a while, with his skill set, I knew I could not create plausible plotlines over and over again.*

*With Ryker, I wanted him to be a former CIA agent. I wanted him to have skill sets but also wanted him to be in a dark place in his life. I don't know why, but I wanted him to be vulnerable and flawed, in a place of crisis, and have those skills from being a Marine and a CIA operative in order for him to get drawn back into a life that he was done with...and a more dangerous life, at that. Ryker has that chip on his shoulder. In the first book he even talks about spending his entire life protecting his country and his leaders, but not being able to protect the people closest to him, so he has that need to go back.*

J.A.: That's amazing. I'm wondering, how does your faith manifest in your novels?

J.C.R.: *Actually, I'm an interesting blend. Jewish on my father's side, I was born and raised in Brooklyn. My mom comes from Methodists, Daughters of the American Revolution, that kind of stuff; so...two totally different worlds. She's from a small town, but they were both gnostic when they met and married, and eventually they became evangelical Christians.*

*I try to put some of that in my novels. They have to thrill, of course, and I'm never preaching, but faith is important to me. What intrigued me about Tom Clancy back in the day was Jack Ryan dealt with life and death moments all the time but he, and the others around him, never thought about the end for themselves. No faith-based questions. I do think about that. I think faith is important, especially with life and death. One of my main characters in a past series was Muslim and working with the CIA; I've had characters with all backgrounds. Ryker is a Christian but not outspoken. It does affect his life and decisions because Ryker's faith is a restraint on him. He's not an assassin. He doesn't feel comfortable killing the next bad guy that steps in front of him. But he has a job and has to make moral, ethical decisions, which is actually a challenge for him.*

J.R.: With COVID-19, the world has been taken into a place that no one has ever seen before. You were quarantined in Jerusalem, where you are, were you not?

J.C.R.: *Yes. I was at the beginning of a U.S. book tour for this title when the world spun out of control over the pandemic. The Israeli Foreign Ministry stated that if you had Israeli citizenship, you needed to get home because they were going to close the borders. I got on the next flight, knowing I was being quarantined for fourteen days. But I thought that meant just sitting in my house. My wife told me no. A car was at the airport with keys on the seat. I waved to my family and a driver followed my car and theirs home. I went through the apartment and locked myself in the master bedroom, told that I couldn't come out for 14 days. The family set food and water at the door, texted me, and talked to me through the door, but it was a strange, new world.*

*People asked me why, if I was supposed to be Nostradamus, I didn't write a book about a pandemic. I'm glad I didn't. Right now, no one would read it. These are supposed to be fiction. When something does happen that hurts your family, job, etc., that's not entertaining. This is a big challenge in political thrillers. People don't like horrific things to ever happen, but they like reading Stephen King because it is total fiction. They don't believe it could ever happen, so they can be entertained.*

J.R.: You want to read a book to get away from life.

J.C.R.: *Exactly. If you're reading "Star Wars," you already know the chances of running into Darth Vader in an alley behind your house. But political thrillers can happen and have, so there's a line between entertaining and downright scary. I work hard to make sure I don't cross that line.*

For those interested in learning more about Joel and his books, you can find him on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and at [www.JoelRosenberg.com](http://www.JoelRosenberg.com). ■



# MAKING MY FICTIONAL SERIAL KILLER EVEN SCARIER THAN THE REAL THING



By R. G. Belsky

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**THE BEST-KNOWN SERIAL KILLER OF OUR TIME IS SON OF SAM** (aka: David Berkowitz) who terrorized New York by killing six people and wounding seven others during the infamous Summer of Sam in 1977.

I covered the Son of Sam story as a young journalist at the *New York Post*—from the first connection between the murders; to the taunting notes he sent the media and police; the panic that consumed the city as people stayed home and women dyed their hair blonde because he seemed to target brunettes; and finally, to his capture and conviction.

And so when I wrote “The Last Scoop,” my new suspense novel about a fictional serial killer, I clearly was inspired by—and borrowed from—some of my own real life journalistic experiences with Son of Sam, Ted Bundy, Zodiac, the Night Stalker, and other legendary serial killers.

One of the most frightening things about all of them was their total disregard

for the human lives of their victims. I spent a lot of time going over quotes like this before writing my novel.

“I am a monster...I just wanted to kill them.” —Son of Sam

“I like killing people because it is so much fun.” —The Zodiac Killer

“I love to kill people...love all that blood.” —Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker

“What’s one less person on the face of the earth anyway?” —Ted Bundy

For me, as a fiction author, the challenge was to create a serial killer in my novel who was even scarier than these real ones I’d covered doing so many horrible and terrifying things over the years.

I still remember the day in our newsroom at the *Post* back in 1977, when news broke that the police had linked a series of unsolved murders to one killer—the man later known as Son of Sam. That would lead to months of fear and panic and death as Son of Sam become the most sensational crime story in New York City history.

But I have always wondered what would have happened if the police hadn’t connected those murders so quickly. Would Son of Sam have continued to murder people without anyone knowing there was a serial killer out there? And would there have come a time when he went public himself because he wanted media attention for his deadly work?

Those were the kinds of questions I tried to deal with when I created my fictional serial killer for “The Last Scoop.”

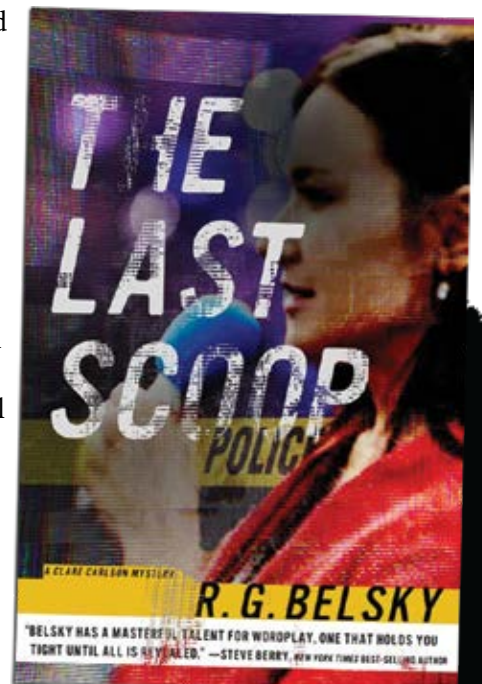
The solution I came up with was to give this serial killer in my book a terrifying twist that none of the actual ones ever had.


No one even knew my serial killer existed.

I called him the secret serial killer.

Here’s how I describe it in my book:

“There is a misconception by the public about the serial killer phenomenon—a





“One of the most frightening things about all of them was their total disregard for the human lives of their victims.”

mistaken belief that a serial killer always seeks media attention. This is fueled by all the movies, all the TV shows and all the thriller novels about serial killers.

“This is true for many serial killers. Like Son of Sam or The Zodiac Killer, and others who taunted police and the public with messages boasting about their rising body count and threats of future victims. Yes, they did crave the public spotlight.

“But there is an even more dangerous kind of serial killer: The serial killer we don’t know about until it is too late. Carrying out murder after murder quietly—over a period of years and in many states and cities and locations around the country—without anyone noticing the connections between all these killings.”

I give my serial killer a name, too (most serial killers have nicknames). I called him “The Wanderer.” Because, unlike Son of Sam in New York or Zodiac in Northern California, he wandered around the country picking his victims almost randomly as he traveled from state to state.

I suppose part of the inspiration for that was Ted Bundy, who murdered at least thirty women—maybe as many as fifty—starting his killing spree in the Northwest and then moving all throughout the country during the 1970s and ‘80s before eventually being caught and executed in Florida.

Ted Bundy was different from Son of Sam and most serial killers in another way, too. He was handsome, suave, charming. He lured his female victims to their deaths by convincing them he was a nice guy before overpowering them. My fictional serial killer character is much like that—smart, cunning and well-spoken, instead of being a chubby, troubled, social misfit like Son of Sam turned out to be as David Berkowitz.

Now this wasn’t the first time I’ve written about a serial killer in my novels—I’ve featured them in the past.

In “Blonde Ice,” written in 2016, the serial killer is a woman.

You see, I was fascinated by the fact that there have really been no pure female serial killers in our crime history—that is, women who simply kill for the thrill of it like Son of Sam, Ted Bundy, the Zodiac Killer and the rest of those infamous names. Most women who’ve killed multiple victims did it for a specific reason, like murdering husbands for insurance money, nurses who killed patients out of some kind of “angel” complex, etc.

The closest there ever was to an actual female serial killer was Aileen Wournos, the prostitute who killed seven men in Florida. But even that began because she claimed the first murder was in self-defense against a man who attacked her. My character in “Blonde Ice,” on the other hand, was sexy, smart and deadly—more like the kind of fictional character screenwriter Joe Eszterhas (an old pal I went to college with in Ohio) created in Catherine Trammel for the hit movie *Basic Instinct*.

In 1997, I wrote about a serial killer called Loverboy who was much more like a Son of Sam or Zodiac character. He had killed numerous women in New York like Son of Sam, but then disappeared like Zodiac did in the early 70s. When a series of similar murders start, no one knows if Loverboy is back or this is a copycat killer. No one ever caught Zodiac, found out why he killed people, why he stopped killing—or if he is still alive.

Meanwhile, here’s two more real life serial killer quotes for you to think about...from Son of Sam and Ted Bundy:

“I was literally singing to myself on the way home, after the killing. The tension, the desire to kill a woman had built up in such explosive proportions that when I finally pulled the trigger, all the pressures, all the tensions, all the hatred had just vanished, dissipated, but only for a short time.” —Son of Sam

“Murder is not about lust, and it’s not about violence. It’s about possession. When you feel the last breath of life coming out of the woman, you look into her eyes. At that point, it’s being God.” —Ted Bundy

Scary stuff, huh?

Well, wait until you read about my serial killer, The Wanderer, in “The Last Scoop.”

That’s the great thing about writing mystery suspense fiction—you get to take terrible people like Berkowitz and Bundy and make up stuff that makes them look even more terrible in your book. ■

*R. G. Belsky is an author of crime fiction and a journalist in New York City. His newest mystery, “The Last Scoop,” was published in May by Oceanview. It is the third in a series featuring Clare Carlson, the news director for a New York City TV station. The first Clare Carlson book, “Yesterday’s News,” came out in 2018. It won the David Award at Deadly Ink for Best Mystery of 2018. “Below The Fold,” the second Clare Carlson mystery, was published in 2019. Belsky previously wrote the Gil Malloy series—“The Kennedy Connection,” “Shooting for the Stars” and “Blonde Ice”—about a newspaper reporter in New York City. Belsky, himself, has had a long career in the New York media as a top editor at the New York Post, New York Daily News, Star magazine and NBC News.*



"BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN . . . EXPERTLY CRAFTED."  
—JON LAND, *USA TODAY* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

# TIE DIE

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MYSTERY

MAX TOMLINSON

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written as it  
is expertly  
crafted."

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# *A Spirited* **CONVERSATION**

By Arthur Shattuck O'Keefe

**T**he spirit phone has arrived by special delivery: a revolutionary device for communication with those who reside beyond the veil. Sold exclusively by the Edison Manufacturing Company. Patent pending.

Mr. Vanderloop signs for the package. The two delivery men take their leave. He is now alone. (His housekeeper is off today.) He gazes at the corrugated paper box sitting atop the old cherry desk in his study, illuminated through the window by the morning sunlight.

Next to the box sits Mr. Vanderloop's desk-top calendar. It is beautifully crafted in brass with an ornate floral design, fabric panels behind glass display the date: Saturday, 2 September. Being a perpetual calendar, it does not display the year: 1899. Nearly three years to the day since his wife succumbed to the flu. The calendar was a birthday gift from her.

Delivery of the spirit phone had been arranged by a special agreement, made prior to the public announcement of the machine's existence. Mr. Vanderloop has a friend who has a friend at Tammany Hall, center of New York's infamous Political Machine, which pulls all the strings on municipal policy in exchange for various favors (see, "bribes"). His friend's friend is in turn a friend—or at least an acquaintance—of Thomas Edison. (It is an open secret that Edison needed Tammany Hall connections to get approval for his Manhattan electrification project in the '80s.)

Mr. Vanderloop, who lives modestly (in his own estimation) on inherited wealth in a less fashionable part of Westchester, considers himself fortunate in not needing to forge such unsavory relationships to gain an advantage. In the case of the spirit phone, the friend of the friend of the Tammany Hall functionary who knows Edison brought it to Mr. Vanderloop's attention a week ago, as they were having lunch at Delmonico's Restaurant in Manhattan.

Mr. Vanderloop's initial reaction was sheer disbelief. "*Preposterous*," he rejoined after a moment of speechlessness. "Spiritualist claptrap. Sounds like a glorified Ouija board. Edison, you say? Perhaps the man has simply lost his mind. Didn't he try some harebrained scheme for magnetically separating iron ore from rocks a few years ago? A complete failure, and an expensive one to boot. Then there was his wrongheaded attempt at discrediting alternating current. This spirit phone thing sounds even less plausible. He scored some wins with his light bulb and phonograph, but the only thing he seems good at these days is self-promotion."

"Perhaps so," his friend replied. "But the spirit phone is going to be announced in the press on Monday morning, and Edison will be demonstrating it at Columbia College the same evening. He wouldn't be doing so if it weren't a sure thing. He wants to get some models out on the market right away, and you know how these things work. Supply and demand. You wouldn't want to be left out in the cold once a waiting list forms. You can be one of the first hundred people to own one."

"I plan to buy one as well," his Tammany Hall-connected friend added.

So, Mr. Vanderloop was persuaded. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. The price of two hundred dollars seemed rather steep, but he could afford it, and was assured that if dissatisfied he could return the item for a full refund.

According to the subsequent press accounts of the Columbia College demonstration, Edison definitely attained contact



with something. At least, there was a voice coming out of the spirit phone, and no evidence of fakery was found. Whoever spoke identified himself as a being on a higher plane of spiritual evolution, and requested details on the metallurgy of the machine Edison was using to contact him. Edison demurred, but his assistant then suddenly began shouting that the device contained silicon carbide, gold, and silver, before Edison shut him up. (There are apparently five other metals in its composition, but the patent is pending.) Strange. Was the “spirit” mesmerizing Edison’s assistant somehow? And why should it care what the thing is made of?

Mr. Vanderloop found it vaguely disturbing to read, and for several days afterward considered cancelling his order.

**H**e walks up to his desk, opens the box, and peers inside.

Within, attached to a rectangular wooden base, is a slender, dark grey metallic cone, narrow end down. From the base protrudes a coiled up electrical cord, at the end of which is a screw plug, identical to that of an incandescent lamp. Next to the cone, attached to the base horizontally, is a metal cylinder with a switch next to it. The electromagnet. The machine more or less matches the descriptions he has read in the papers.

Next to the device sits a small booklet titled *Edison Spirit Phone Model SP-1 Instruction Manual*. He removes the spirit phone from the box and sets it upon the desk.

He peruses the manual. It is very brief. Three pages detailing how to activate and use the machine (which has been amply described already in the press), and advice to keep ferromagnetic metals away from it, so as not to potentially impede its function. It should also be kept indoors and, so far as possible, away from dampness, extreme cold, and extreme heat.

Removing the lampshade from his desk lamp, he then unscrews the incandescent light bulb and replaces it with the screw plug of the spirit phone. Sitting down, he switches on the electromagnet.

A low hum emanates from the spirit phone, and even in the bright morning sunlight he detects a faint blue aura; a glow that envelopes it.

Now or never, he thinks, and begins to concentrate intensely upon the personality of she whom he wishes to contact. He then speaks.

“Gladys Vanderloop, I wish to speak with you.”

Silence, but for the low humming of the machine.

“Gladys Vanderloop, I wish to speak with you.”

“Howard.” The voice is faint, tinny, slightly distorted. But unmistakable. It is the voice of Gladys. His wife. His dead wife. And so begin their conversations, which are wonderful, and moving, and joyful. At first.

Gladys wants to know how he has been doing since she passed on, and he tells her. At her urging, he does most of the talking. It is a spirited if rather one-sided conversation.

It is like this every day, and he spends most waking hours in his study. He has barely eaten or slept. His housekeeper seems concerned, and gently reminds him whenever the hour grows too late, or dinner has been waiting on the table for over an hour. She crosses herself whenever she has no choice but to be in the spirit phone’s presence. The days pass.

**I**t is Wednesday, the 6th of September, their fifth day of conversation. The sun has just set, and the blue glow of the spirit phone is the room’s only illumination.

“Gladys,” he says.

“Yes, darling?” comes the sweet, tinny voice.

“I’m so happy we can talk. I’ve missed you so. It’s been hard.”

“Yes. I’ve missed you too, dear.”

“Yes. It’s just that...I’ve been doing almost all the talking. I want to hear how you’re doing. About life where you are. About everything.”

“Yes.”

“Well, then. Can you describe daily life in the spirit world? Is it like a replica of the physical world, or something completely different?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes, that’s wonderful, dear.”

“What? Perhaps you’re growing a bit too tired to converse any more. We could try again tomorrow.”

“Yes, darling.”

“All right, then. Good night, Gladys.”

“Good night, Howard.”

**I**t is the evening of Thursday, the 7th of September. The spirit phone, activated, again faintly illuminates the study in blue. Mr. Vanderloop has spent much of the previous twenty-four hours considering his situation. He has decided to try an experiment. He dreads what he is about to do, yet is anxious to do it.

“Gladys.”

“Yes, darling?”

“Is reincarnation real?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Is reincarnation false?”

“Yes, dear.”

“There is one true religion, correct?”

“Yes, dear.”

“So, there is no one true religion, correct?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I had a very nice dinner prepared by Mrs. Hogan, my new housekeeper. Roast turkey with giblet gravy. Apple pie for dessert.”

“That’s wonderful, darling.”

“It was much better than the lunch she prepared. Cow dung sandwiches on rye bread with live maggots on the side.”

“That’s wonderful, darling.”

“Lately I’ve been thinking about setting fire to a few orphanages.”

“Yes, dear.”

“You see, I’m actually Jack the Ripper.”

“That’s wonderful, darling.”

“Oh, shit,” whispers Mr. Vanderloop.

“Oh, shit,” says the sweet, tinny voice.

“Are you Gladys Vanderloop?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Are you something else, pretending to be Gladys Vanderloop?”

“Yes, dear.”

“My God. Whatever you are, you can’t even think.”

“That’s wonderful, darling. My God, whatever you are, you can’t even think.”

“You’re like a parrot. A damned parrot.”

“Damned parrot. Damned parrot. That’s wonderful, dear.”

Mr. Vanderloop switches off the spirit phone and removes its plug from the lamp socket. He screws in the light bulb and switches on the desk lamp. He places the spirit phone, with its manual, in the corrugated paper box it was delivered in.

He feels empty, cheated, devastated. Yet there is also a deep, abiding relief as he sits, head on his desk, and releases the great, wracking sobs that resonate through his body. The fallen tears on his desk stare back at him as, silently, he asks his wife for forgiveness. If somehow she can hear him.

**I**t is now the morning of Friday, the 8th of September, 1899. Mr. Vanderloop wishes to contact his Tammany Hall-connected friend to arrange the return of the spirit phone. Also to warn him, though he has probably already figured out what’s wrong. For Mr. Vanderloop’s friend was also among the first one hundred spirit phone purchasers. He recalls that the man is, like himself, a widower who has not remarried.

The man’s housekeeper answers the door, and in a grave voice informs Mr. Vanderloop that his friend has passed away of a sudden illness. He senses something amiss in the housekeeper’s story, and will later learn through mutual friends that it was not, in fact, an illness. His friend hanged himself in his study, the spirit phone on his desk, switched on. ■



# HARLAN COBEN

## TALKS THRILLS, CHILLS & HIS PERSONAL CLIMB TO THE TOP

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Claudio Marinesco

Master storyteller and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Harlan Coben, once again mesmerized readers with his latest book, “The Boy from the Woods.”

Not a surprise, of course. With over 70 million books in print worldwide, thirty-one mysteries with twists and turns that take the breath away, and being the mind behind some of the most fantastic TV shows and movies, Harlan Coben is one of the most popular suspense/mystery writers in the world.

Let’s take a brief look at his latest hit:

*Thirty years ago, Wilde was found as a boy living feral in the woods, with no memory of his past. Now an adult, he still doesn’t know where he comes from, and another child has gone missing. No one seems to take Naomi Pine’s disappearance seriously, not even her father, with one exception. Hester Crimstein, a television criminal attorney, knows through her grandson that Naomi was relentlessly bullied at school. Hester asks Wilde, with whom she shares a tragic connection, to use his unique skills to help find Naomi. Wilde can’t ignore an outcast in trouble, but in order to find the girl he must venture back into the community where he has never fit in, a place where the powerful are protected even when they harbor secrets that could destroy the lives of millions... secrets that Wilde must uncover before it’s too late*



John Raab (J.R.): My wonderful co-host Jeff Ayers, and I, are very excited to talk with the well-known, highly-popular thriller writer, Harlan Coben, on this edition of “Beyond the Cover.” Welcome.

Harlan Coben (H.C.): *It’s a pleasure to be here.*

J.R.: “The Boy from the Woods.” Absolutely incredible. Can you tell us how it came about, and your decision to turn a minor character from other novels into a major one in this particular book?

H.C.: *Well, Wilde is a new character, true. For fans who have been reading my work for some time, however, they will recognize Hester Crimstein. This 70-year-old, wise-ass attorney has been in a number of books, mainly for comic relief. When it comes to Wilde’s creation, I saw this kid playing one day and started to wonder what it would be like if a kid was lost in the woods for, say, six years, just wandering around, speaking fairly normally, living off the land or breaking into houses for food at times, but had absolutely no recollection of parents, a hometown, a background or a life before the woods. I then imagined thirty years had passed and he still knew nothing. Now, another kid goes missing and he has to help find them. That was the basic idea and*

premise of the book.

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): I have to ask, seeing as that we are talking about someone not fitting into society whatsoever, while you were writing this, did you foresee the clashing of societal norms being part of the plot?

H.C.: A little bit, but I'm often driven by what I've previously done—the challenge to try not to do the same thing again. This is my...32nd book now? I lose track. With my other characters, like Myron Bolitar in that series, they are very social. Most of the guys I create live with families or they're all about friendship, but this guy is really a loner. Instead of living with anyone, he goes back to this eco-capsule, as he calls it, in the woods all alone. Part of it was wanting to see what that would be like and still making him a character that people could like and get on board with. And part of it is, without being left or right, this might be one of my more political books.

J.A.: I was going to ask you, because you usually don't write about political things. Can you be a little broader about how that happened this time around?

H.C.: Well, I thought it was more about this being the fault of society. And, again without being left or right, how it's a danger when we worship any sort of human being and how easily we are manipulated by human beings versus the system, itself. I talk a little about that, but it was also just a good plot—the story of a man trying to find a teen and things going haywire. And while I usually say that the repercussions for my crimes are quite small, because they usually stay within a family or a town, what ends up happening in this could really affect the entire world. I normally don't do that, but I thought this would be an interesting way to explore that thought.

J.R.: When you started to think about characters and their development, did you have the thought that this could be a series at the beginning or at the end?

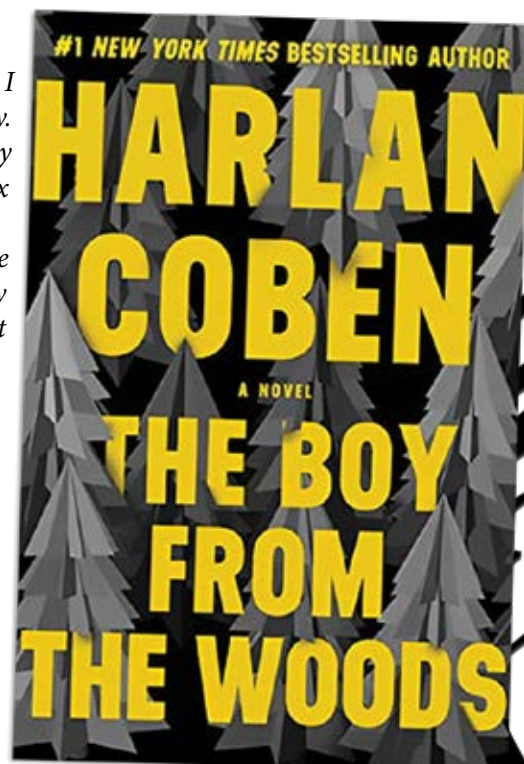
H.C.: Fairly early on. In the first couple of chapters, I thought about making this a series. I know a lot about Wilde's background, but it would slow this book down if I explored it all. Maybe over a series of books I could, so I leave one door open at the end for possibilities. Don't get me wrong, there's a distinct beginning, middle, and end. But I usually finish the character. Like Simon Greene in "Run Away," the book before this one; I knew Greene wouldn't be coming back again. With this, however, I kind of knew that Wilde and Hester would ride again.

J.A.: What do you see yourself writing more of in the future?

H.C.: I never really know. I usually react to what I've done before, like I said. I wrote one book that came from 37 different viewpoints affecting a tiny community. Then, something like "Long Lost" was told from Myron's POV and was completely different. I like to do a few books with a female lead, as well. I really like to mix things up.

Here, we not only have Wilde, but Hester is also new and different because she's even exploring a romance in this one. She also shares something incredibly specific with Wilde, so that was fun to explore and watch them bond throughout the book so well.

**"If I knew all I know now back then, I would tell authors not to look at their Amazon rankings; just write."**







J.A.: I wanted to comment on that because I truly enjoy the characters who come back, like Hester. How much do you know about the book when you're sitting down to write it?

H.C.: *I usually know the beginning and the end, that final twist. I think this one has a pretty good last twist. But I know that when I write. I know very little in between. Like traveling from where I live in New Jersey to Los Angeles, I might just go to Tokyo for a visit or end up somewhere else. I never know.*

J.R.: Jeff brings up a good point because there's a big thing/debate going on about organic writing versus the outlining process. Sounds like you have the idea and then organically let it grow from there. Talk about when characters jump out at you; can you name one or two in this book?

H.C.: *That actually happens in a lot of books, where a character wasn't going to be as big or as small as they became. I've created a character that I felt would have a chapter or two and ended up lasting a long time, like Hester. She came round about 25 years ago when Myron encountered her in a false move; now, she's been in almost every book in small ways ever since. I also had another character, Loren Mews, who was supposed to be in "The Innocent," and ended up staying around for five straight books in a minor or major slot. Myron's whole relationship at the beginning of his series was with a girlfriend named Jessica Culver. I put him in a one-night-stand moment, if you will, with a woman who I truly believed would never come back after the prologue of "The Final Detail," yet...they get married. So you never really know. That's part of the fun, watching the character go in a completely different direction.*

J.A.: I cannot wait for this: Talk about Netflix's "The Stranger."

H.C.: *I am so excited. When the trailer hit, it blew up—in a nice way. I've worked on it and seen all eight episodes, and it's great. Even if you know the ending because you read the book, this will still shock you. You can go to Netflix.com and see all the series' there, like "The Five," "The Woods," and now "The Stranger." I want to say that this is my favorite, but I reserve that. I had a screening in London though and the reaction was extraordinary.*

J.R.: I know you have two being made now. What is the deal with these being made only in foreign countries? Does America not like you? (LOL)

H.C.: *The world loves me, even America. (LOL) But filming in these specific locations adds to the reality. I had a French film made of "Tell No One." It was directed by Guillaume Canet and won many awards. The books still appear on America's "Top Ten" lists, but they also appear on these countries lists. I also sell more books overseas than in the U.S. But I enjoy it. I love the fact that a lot of the stuff is being made in foreign countries.*

*Netflix, I believe, made the deal with me hoping we could shoot these in foreign countries, so I think it's a win/win. For example, "The Woods" has finished being filmed in Poland, so it's a Polish original from Netflix's perspective. I sell a lot of books in Poland, so it will be big there; however, it will also be seen here because when they press that "magic button" at Netflix, all episodes end up in 190 countries immediately. So, that's cool.*

*I do want to remind people, however, to grow up and watch a show with subtitles or dubs. People always complain about that. When you open your mind up to watch things with subtitles, you open up a new world of great TV and movies. The whole world has been doing it for years, so America has to stop complaining. "The Woods" in Poland; "The Innocent" will be in Spain.... Read subtitles! You don't want to miss great things because of that. British TV has been a hit. Everything from "Broadchurch" to "Line of Duty." We always complain how bad American TV is, so spice it up and watch shows from around the world. I promise, you won't regret it.*

J.A.: Why haven't we seen Myron hit Netflix yet?

H.C.: *Actually, Netflix doesn't own Myron; I do. I've held him back. We'll see what happens, but I'm much more careful with him. I have more to say, so I'll keep writing Myron.*



J.R.: You've met so many fans. Can you share a funny little book signing story with us?

H.C.: *Most aren't what you would call funny, but I can tell you a truly memorable one. It was my very first signing—for "Play Dead" back in 1990. It was Thanksgiving weekend and was being held at Waldenbooks inside a mall. No one knew who I was, of course, so there were no sales and the store had been smart and ordered only four copies of my book to be on the table. People approached, asking where the bathroom was; another wanted to know if they had the new Stephen King novel. This little old man comes shuffling over to me at one point as I was just about ready to leave. He comes over, points to my book and asked if that was mine. He asked me what the book was like and told me that this had always been his dream. To one day have a book in a book store. He said I was lucky and walked away. I'll never forget it.*

J.R.: Because you can look back now, after everything great has happened, and always remember the struggle.

H.C.: *Exactly. In hindsight, struggling is great. Because the author who makes it very quickly will never have that appreciation. I was lucky. It also inspires me, to remember what it was like then. You appreciate where you are, and work hard to keep it happening. I'm enormously grateful. Most of the stories I hear about from fans are things like, how one of my books got them through something. A man, with his wife and two kids, handed me this note one time that told how he did something wrong once and went to prison for it. He said one of my books got him through and he became a better husband and father because of it. He wanted to pose for a picture with me, his wife, kids, etc. I was moved. And if you're an author and don't get moved by that, you're in the wrong business.*

J.A.: The first time I saw you, you talked a bit about the early covers for the *Myron Bolitar* books. You called it the "Bleeding Balls" series. (LOL)

H.C.: *Yeah. Hemorrhaging sports equipment on the covers back in those days. People will email me about how they self-published books and wondered why they weren't selling like Grisham. My first bestseller was my tenth book in. Those early Myrons that you're talking about were paperback originals, only in mass market with the first printing being fifteen thousand copies. I received an advance of \$5,000. By the fourth one, I was making \$6,000. So, it wasn't overnight by any means. I wasn't expecting it to happen overnight, either.*

*If I knew all I know now back then, I would tell authors not to look at their Amazon rankings; just write. Because frankly, if I had known what a pimple on the ass of publishing I was back then, I probably would've given up. There's no way of knowing what will happen. So don't worry about things like that, you just have to keep writing the next one.*

J.A.: You even wrote a kid's book, right?

H.C.: *Yes. "The Magical Fantastical Fridge." I had a friend, a wonderful artist named Leah Tinari, and I love her artwork. I had a cute idea and we had a lot of fun doing it. Leah has done a couple since then, and it was a great experience.*

J.R.: Is your website the best place to reach you and find out your information?

H.C.: *Yes, HarlanCoben.com. I came up with that all by myself, by the way. (LOL) But my Facebook is Harlan Coben books, so I messed up on that one somehow.*

J.R.: You're active on the sites, and you have a newsletter?

H.C.: *I'm fairly active on all of them. And people can sign up for the newsletter. They are coming out once a month, or so. We'll see how it goes. Lawrence Block says his newsletter is free and worth every penny; I say mine is free but you're probably getting ripped off.*

You won't be ripped off at all. It was a pleasure talking to Harlan, and to know of his fantastic projects coming up for one and all to see. To learn more, head to [www.HarlanCoben.com](http://www.HarlanCoben.com). ■





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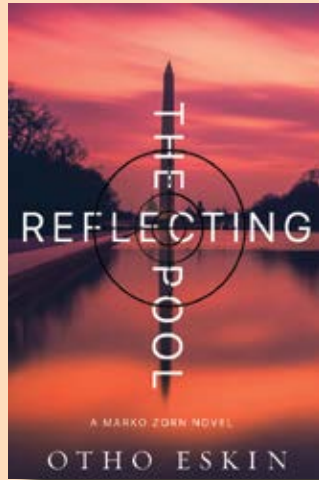
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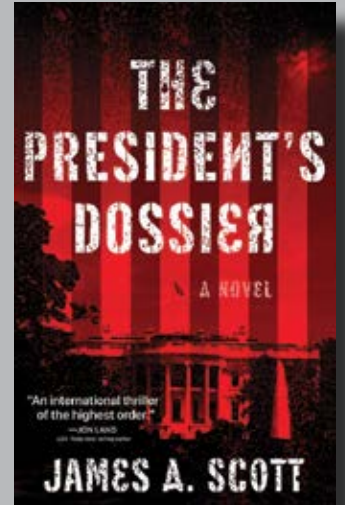
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*The Journey Continues Through*

# KAY HOOPER'S CHARACTER-DRIVEN WORLD



Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Claudio Marinesco

Kay Hooper, the incredible *New York Times* bestselling author of more than sixty books, has recently begun the creation of a new trilogy “within” her popular *Bishop/Special Crimes Unit* long-running series. This, the 19th SCU book is titled, “Hidden Salem.”

Just recently, Kay joined *Suspense Magazine*’s “Beyond the Cover” radio show and spoke with co-host John Raab to tell all listeners, fans, and readers about this new book, her long and varied career, and how her character-driven world has continued to grow and prosper over so many years.

First, let us take a look inside “Hidden Salem”...

*A town shrouded in the occult. An evil that lurks in the dark. The SCU returns in a hair-raising novel. Nellie Cavendish has very good reasons to seek out her roots, and not only because she has no memory of her mother and hardly knew the father who left her upbringing to paid caregivers. In the eight years since her twenty-first birthday, very odd things have begun to happen—crows gather wherever she goes, electronics short out when she touches them, and when she’s really upset, it storms. At first, she chalked up the unusual happenings to coincidence, but that explanation doesn’t begin to cover the vivid nightmares that torment her. She can no longer pretend to ignore them. She has to find out the truth. And the only starting point she has is a mysterious letter from her father delivered ten years after his death, insisting she go to a town called Salem and risk her life*

*to stop some unnamed evil....*

John Raab (J.R.): Kay, thank you for being here. I have to say, my wife and I are avid readers of yours. Whilst my wife reads every book in a row, I have jumped from here to there and just love the world you’ve created. I’ve also noted that you like to put together trilogies within your *Bishop/SCU* series. Can you speak a little about that and how this new *Hidden Salem* trilogy came to pass?



Kay Hooper (K.H.): *Thanks for having me, John. I have to say, I like challenging myself. One of the reasons the series is “broken up” into trilogies is because each set of three has its own tone, own set of characters, or very specific subject to be focused on within those specific three books. So, with each, I try to make it a little bit different.*

*I knew when I started the Bishop/SCU series, it would be a long running series. But I didn’t want it to become one of those things where the reader opens the cover of a book and basically thinks, “Okay, something bad is going to happen and the SCU will ride their white horses in and save the day, etc.” Making the books different is key for me. The difference in this new “Hidden Salem” series is that all three stories take place in the same town. (As usual, I have a fondness for small mountain towns.) But this town is different; it has been isolated for a lot of years. They’re not completely off the grid, per se, but geographically they’ve been isolated. The town is run by five families that founded the town long ago. Referred to as “The FIVE,” they run all the major businesses and the town is very healthy economically. It’s a nice town, but then creepy things start to happen.*

*The book first drops you into this town and you soon realize that a member of the SCU is there; the only person in town who knows she’s an undercover agent is an authority who asked her for help. Three people have gone missing. They were last seen leaving the town—no one seems to know why—and they never came home. Friends and family have put the word out, but these three are adults, so it’s hard to put out a missing persons’ report. Anyway, the story begins with the SCU member walking by a man on the sidewalk where she “hears” telepathically why he’s panicking; his thoughts are racing, talking about a dead body that he found on the mountain near town. And...we’re off and running on the next trilogy.*

J.R.: Did it ever happen that you felt like a set of stories could go past three books?

K.H.: *Well, each book in a series is self-contained; they each have a beginning, middle and end. I do have recurring characters from other Bishop/SCU books from the past—they seem to “pop” up at a variety of different times. Each trilogy has its own set of characters, however, and a new mystery that gets resolved by the end of it all. There was one time I thought I had a trilogy, though, but someone “popped” up in that and it ended up taking me over three books to actually kill that character.*

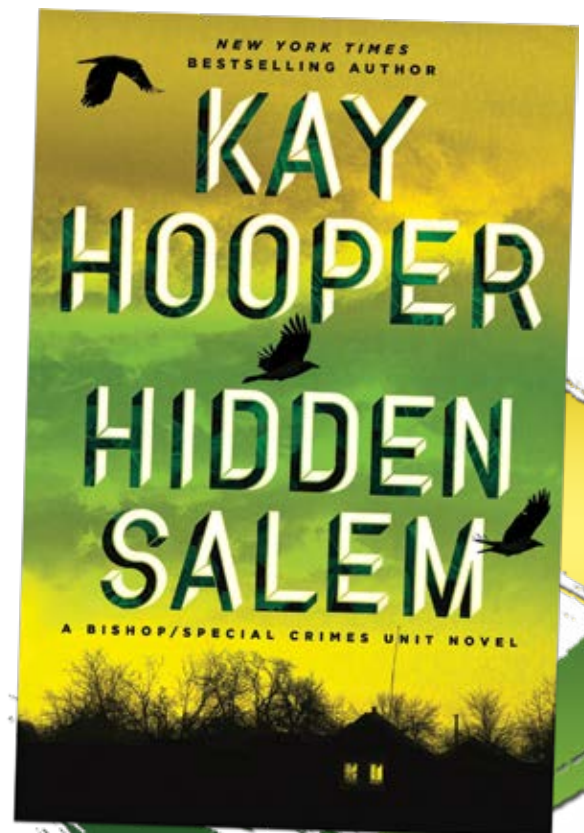
J.R.: Your books are definitely more about characters than plot.

K.H.: *Yes. In each trilogy I explore the nature of evil in some way, but each book is a distinctly different story. These three belong together because they all belong in “Salem.” But you don’t necessarily have to read them in order, because they do hold up on their own in regards to bringing the plot to a close.*

*I usually know the characters/cast ahead of time, but this trilogy has thrown me a curve. I thought I had my characters lined up for the second book, but six from the past have “popped” back up. I’m finishing that one up now.*

*There are characters that I always get emails about, though, from readers asking if they will show up again. And I honestly don’t know. Hollis Templeton, for example, one of the fan favorites, was actually intended to be a victim and be taken out in the prologue of a book. I thought she was dead; I wasn’t really sure why I even named her. A chapter or two later in the story, she “popped” up in the hospital. Then, more than three years later in “story time,” she became an active agent with a very distinctive personality.*

**“I LOVE TO GIVE YOU  
THE THRILL AND THE  
SCARE, BUT I WILL MAKE  
SURE THAT EVERYTHING  
COMES OUT OKAY. I LIKE  
HAPPY ENDINGS.”**



J.R.: With so many characters that each have special skills or supernatural talents, how do you keep track of it all?

K.H.: *I keep telling myself that I'm going to develop a 'bible' of them all that I can put on my website. I have a ton of notes and, while working on a new series, I have gone back and re-read the books myself. I have created character bios, too.*

*The most difficult thing I had to do was switch from seeing these books as happening in "real time." The first books came out in 2000, and I was producing a book a year, with each character growing older way too fast. So I started to condense everything into "story time" so that the entire trilogy takes place in much less time. It's part of the author's playtime to work with different scenarios happening in various amounts of time, and such.*

J.R.: You get each going quickly, I must say. And because your books are so character-driven, the reader truly gets to immerse themselves mentally into your world.

K.H.: *I'm glad about that. I've always been that way, myself. Whether books, movies, or TV shows, everything is about the characters. I look back on the first books I did, and even though they were light romances, they were also character-driven. I hate getting into a book and getting tied up in the plot but have no idea why the character is there or how the plot will affect them. The human mind fascinates me, which is probably why I was first attracted to psychic abilities and special crimes; the whole idea of actually hunting evil was exciting for me. It fascinates me to watch the heroes among us that are beating back the dark constantly, committed to punishing people who harm others; that takes commitment, and I feel very strongly about that. The rule of law is very important and helps make us a better society. I've gotten plenty of opportunities in this series to explore the best and the worst of humanity*

J.R.: What is your biggest challenge when you sit down to write? Do you ever ask yourself, "How do I do this better?" when beginning a new book or trilogy?

K.H.: *That is always a challenge; I want the next to be better than the one before. When I first sit down I decide on keywords that will appear in each book of the trilogy to tie them together. Then, I have to come up with the title before I can ever begin. The end title very rarely changes from the working title. Every once in a great while I'll get argued out of the title, but it rarely happens. I generally don't outline the book but I do a summary for the publisher, contract, etc. Like I said, though, I could work off the summary and all of a sudden an idea hits and...Hollis "pops" back up!*

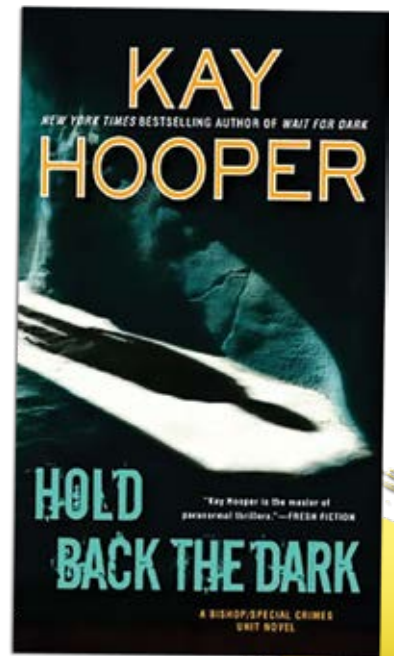


J.R.: Then comes the organic.

K.H.: *Exactly. I'm very much an organic writer. I follow notes; a theme is there, the puzzle is set, but I start writing and other characters arrive. And then it's like, well...if "she's" here, then "he" has to show up. The beginning can be slower for me than for those authors who outline. As I write, I get the shape of the story; a third of the way through I feel like I have a navigational fix. I know this is what I'm doing, here are the characters, now let's see what will happen.*

J.R.: Now, is there a subject you won't touch?

K.H.: *The only thing really that doesn't fit into the series is in one book I "hinted" that some members of the SCU were consulting on terrorist cases. Truth is, I couldn't tell a story with a terrorist. I can understand a serial killer; a broken mind. But I can't understand a person who sets out to destroy people because of some ideological reason. Makes no sense to me. Like bullies, who I don't understand either. These are two mindsets that I can't get into or I don't want to. So I doubt you'll ever see me write a book with a terrorist/bully element.*





J.R.: I see that...your books are more personal when it comes to characters, too. Terrorism would be global and take away some of that personal feel.

K.H.: Yes. A terrorist might be a person or a group going after another, which is the plot. But I want to see the faces of my characters and get to know them—the faces of both the good and bad guys. Even the bad, though repellant, should be fascinating. Also, mine are truly fiction. They might be horrible and bad things are happening, but you know that you're okay. You can simply close the cover and they go away. Now, especially with everything going on in this world, it helps to read the thriller and see bad things but know at all times that you are still safe.

I love to give you the thrill and the scare, but I will make sure that everything comes out okay. I like happy endings. This could be from twenty years of writing romances, but I think it comes from me. As a reader and a person, I'm eternally optimistic. It doesn't have to be sugary or tied up neatly, but you have to give the reader the feeling that the good guys won another round and the planet is better than it was before.

J.R.: Now, the best place to reach you is on your website?

K.H.: I am in the process of updating it. It's pretty current, but I do want to put that "bible" about the SCU characters up and possibly do some short essays or articles on the website. I also have a Facebook personal page and an author page. The latter is about the books and series, answering fan questions, and so on. The personal page is the one I give personal opinions on. I like social media a great deal. More people are writing, expressing themselves in words, and for a while we weren't doing that. My only suggestion to fans is, don't use text speak. I like people to say what they mean and not abbreviate anything. I do call people out on that. But there are very articulate people expressing themselves in long posts.

J.R.: I always tell people, when they want to write for the magazine and ask how many words is the limit, I say that I don't want it until it's done. That's how many words I want.

K.H.: Writers must kiss your feet. (LOL) I do have to say, I wrote four novellas and the first was the hardest thing to write in my life. I was limited to 2,500 words. By the last one, I did a mental adjustment in order to fit in to limits.

Again, I think romance writing helped me because with series romances you have roughly 200 manuscript pages (depending on font, typeface, etc.), so that taught me to write fairly clearly and not wander down another tangent. I was lucky to learn because when I switched to contemporaries, because things were changing, everybody was doing a romance line and had to have 4 or more to publish a month. They were selling like magazines and I was able to learn to write more quickly to satisfy demand and support myself. Your shelf life was short also. Two to three weeks your books were available, but then the next one had to come along. So it was a solid foundation to learn how to write and tell a story working within certain parameters and rules. I got to the point where I knew I could push the envelope, per se, and still get the job done.

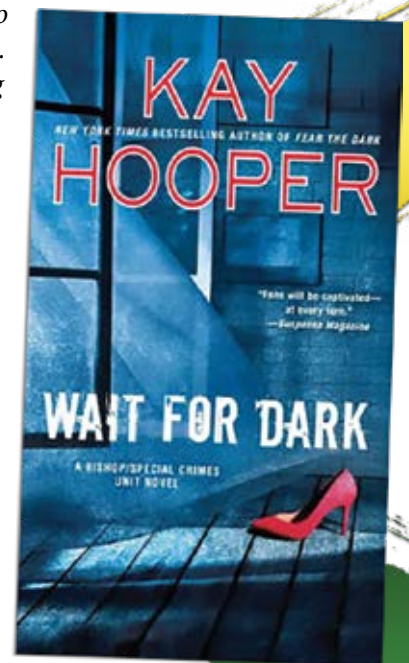
After so many books, I'm also to the point where I know how not to panic like I used to. When I first began and got to a point where I didn't know how to end something or get out of something I would go into a panic. Now I take a breath, turn off the computer, walk the dogs, remind myself that I've done this before and all I have to do is trust myself. The next day, I turn the computer back on and it's fine. But...I still have to remind myself.

J.R.: And we're just all players in that game and world of yours.

K.H.: (LOL) I love that people enjoy my game and my world. The reader fan mail I get is what really pleases me. The fact that the readers love the characters and, like I said, even ask about past ones in the hope they'll come back in another book, is great. To me, the characters are family. So when they ask things, I can tell them.

There're a lot of people in my head right now. They don't interfere with my normal life, but when I sit down and listen to them, they're a whole lot of fun!

As was their author to meet and talk to. To learn more about Kay and her work, head to [www.kayhooper.com](http://www.kayhooper.com). ■



# IRIS JOHANSEN

## Spotlights *Eve Duncan's* Next Generation in "The Persuasion"

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Louis Tonsmeire



We are pleased to welcome back to the magazine bestselling author Iris Johansen. Iris's latest book, "The Persuasion," is number twenty-seven in the *Eve Duncan* series.

Iris is the *New York Times* bestselling author of "Your Next Breath," "The Perfect Witness," "Live to See Tomorrow," "Silencing Eve," "Hunting Eve," "Taking Eve," "Sleep No More," "What Doesn't Kill You," "Chasing The Night," "Eight Days to Live," "Blood Game," "Deadlock," "Dark Summer," "Pandora's Daughter," "Quicksand," "Killer Dreams," "On The Run," "Countdown," "Firestorm," "Fatal Tide," "Dead Aim," and many more. And with her son, Roy Johansen, Iris has coauthored "The Naked Eye," "Sight Unseen," "Close Your Eyes," "Shadow Zone," "Storm Cycle," and "Silent Thunder."

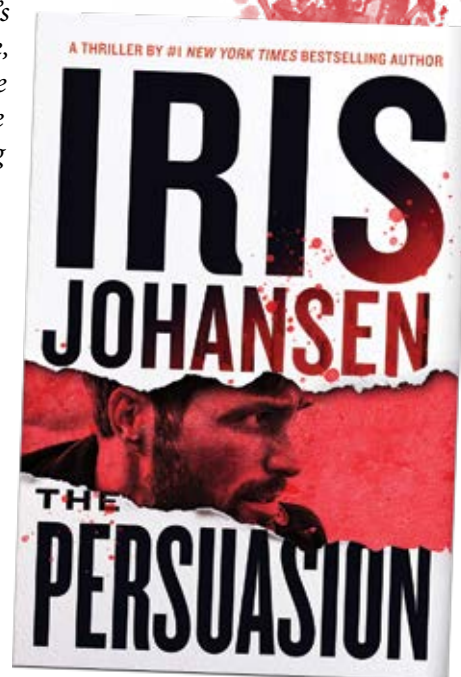
Let's take a look inside "The Persuasion" and then check out the interview with Iris below.

*When she becomes a madman's target, Eve Duncan's daughter, Jane, must team up with longtime love interest Seth Caleb in this suspense novel from the #1 bestselling author of "Smokescreen."*

*Forensic sculptor Eve Duncan and ex-Navy Seal Joe Quinn are about to give Seth Caleb their trust for the most important duty of his life: keeping their daughter, Jane, safe at any cost. Her talent as an artist has caught the attention of a brilliant psychopath with a violent past.*

*Seth, Jane's strongest ally and fiercest protector, is determined to keep her out of danger, but that becomes nearly impossible when Jane is forced to take matters into her own hands and confronts the madman who wants her for himself...and wants Seth Caleb dead.*

*As Jane and Seth chase down their bloodthirsty adversary, they finally commit to a life together—in the culmination of the epic love story that fans have been eagerly anticipating. As the two come face-to-face with danger, one thing is made clear: it will take both of them working together to confront and defeat this evil.*

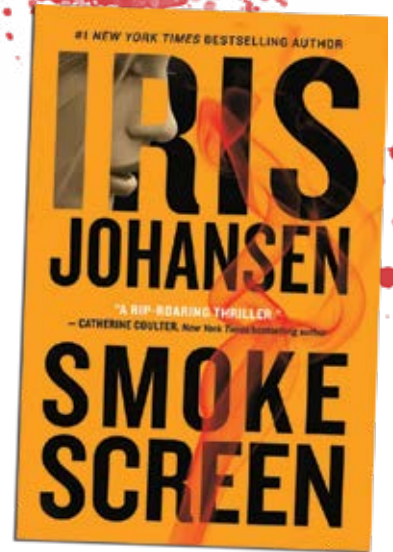




"I've always had great editors and they permitted me to tell the stories that I wanted to tell."

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Can you begin by giving us a "sneak peek" at "The Persuasion"?

Iris Johansen (I.J.): *"The Persuasion" is a slam-bang thriller featuring Jane MacGuire, Eve Duncan's adopted daughter, and the sensual and fascinating Seth Caleb, who I receive more fan mail about than any man except Joe Quinn. I had to bring them together, and I did it with a chilling plot fraught with sexual tension about murders, cults, stolen artwork and intricate schemes. But I couldn't leave Eve Duncan, Joe Quinn and their son, Michael, on the sidelines, so I brought them into the book with their own powerful stories. It was great fun.*



S. MAG.: Looking back on when you first "joined forces" with Eve Duncan—I can't believe it was 27 books ago with this release—did you know then that Eve would be around this long? Did you always know this was a series in the making, or was it ever a standalone in your mind?

I.J.: *No, when I first wrote "Face of Deception," I thought it was going to be a standalone novel. But I became fascinated with the characters and Eve's profession as a forensic sculptor. By the time it was finished I knew that I'd write at least one more Eve Duncan book. One became two, and then three and so a series is born...*

S. MAG.: As the writer of these amazing books, has there ever been a 'bore' in the process? Do you have a certain process where you "step away" from these characters in order to gear up for the next one to be written?

I.J.: *No, I've never been bored by the series. The characters became family and the family kept growing and I've created the world in which they live. I live in that same world and I miss them when I write a book that's not Eve Duncan. Which doesn't mean I don't do it. I've created other series and standalone books because there was a story to tell and I had to tell it. Sometimes I connected those books to the Eve series, other times I didn't. It's always tempting because I know those characters so well.*

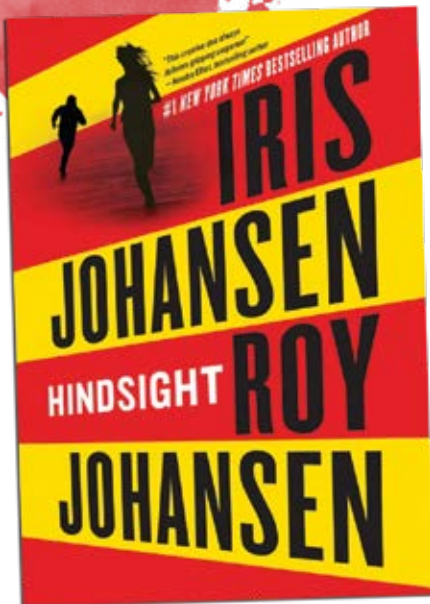
S. MAG.: It is quite a success to write a character(s) that basically becomes part of so many fans' lives because they've been reading for so long, following their story. Do you believe that there is ever an end for Eve; or, do you see her handing the reins for good to her daughter Jane one day and simply retiring? If so, how do you feel a writer can say "goodbye" to someone who has filled their own daily life for so long?



I.J.: *I can't imagine Eve ending. There are always stories to tell when you have a vivid, intensely human character like Eve. I'm just finishing an Eve book now that I'm finding very intriguing. She's surprising me again. I'll keep writing Eve as long as she and the readers want me to go on.*

S. MAG.: On a more personal note, can you share one of your most memorable moments with a fan? There must be so many stories, of course, from the events you've had, but is there one that truly stands out? Or, perhaps even gave you extra energy to write the next book?

I.J.: *One moment that stands out concerns an autographing I did several years ago in Grand Rapids. I was signing books when I noticed an attractive young woman at the back of the line. She had a beautiful golden retriever on a leash. I'm a dog lover, so naturally I was intrigued. When she got up to the table, she handed me a book to sign and then told me that she had read another book I'd written that had changed her life. It was the story that*



concerned a young woman who had a wonderful search and rescue dog she took on rescue trips. The dog's name in my book was Monty, and this woman who was asking me to sign had been so impressed by that story she had gone into Search and Rescue herself. She had named that beautiful retriever Monty after the dog in my book. I was very touched. I recently heard from her again and she sent me a photo of Monty. He is retired now, still fit and beautiful, and was playing with toys in her yard. Talk about a happy ending and a lovely memory.

S. MAG.: Bucket lists?

I.J.: *I don't really have one. I've traveled all over the world. I have friends and a wonderful family. I just want all of us to remain well and happy. That's more than enough for me.*

S. MAG.: Can you share with us a time where you were surprised when Eve or her friends and family took a road you weren't expecting? Is having a character not go the way you originally foresaw an excitement for you, as well as the reader?

I.J.: *Every now and then there comes a surprise I'm not expecting. Once in one of the early Eve books, when Eve and Joe were having problems, she became attracted to another man. Nothing serious but it could have been upsetting if I hadn't caught where it was drifting. In another book I realized halfway through the story that the man I was setting up as a hero had become really boring; I had to kill him off and bring in a flawed but more interesting character.*

S. MAG.: A bestseller such as yourself has certainly been doing this for some time. Were there ever any fears for you in relation to the publishing path; or, have you always been comfortable right out of the gate?

I.J.: *I've always had great editors and they permitted me to tell the stories that I wanted to tell. But writers are never comfortable. We always wonder if we could have done better, worry if readers will like what we've written, and then we start on the next book and just hope it will be better than the last one.*

S. MAG.: What is your personal favorite characteristic of Eve? Do you have one you wish she'd change about herself?

I.J.: *Her sense of dedication to her work and her devotion to family are my favorite characteristics in Eve. I relate to both of them. Characteristics I'd like to change in her? None that I can think of. She does make mistakes, she has many flaws, as we all do, but that makes her human. I wouldn't take one of those flaws away or it would rob her of the humanity that makes her Eve Duncan.*



S. MAG.: Can you share with us what you're working on for the next release?

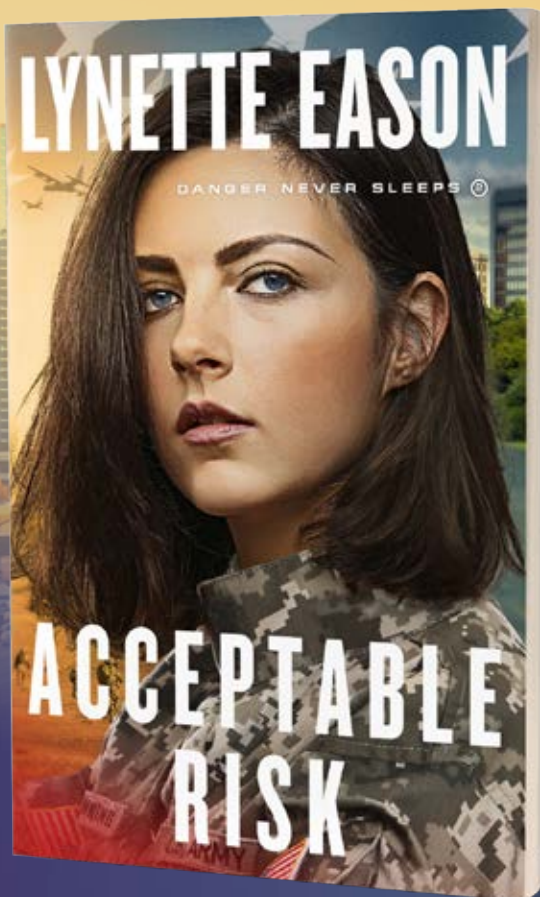
I.J.: *The next book coming out will be "Chaos." I really liked this story. Margaret Douglas, who you might remember in earlier books, has a big part in it. It's full of danger and daring rescues and takes place in the jungle and a mountain stronghold. You're going to find it very different. I introduced some new characters that may be my new favorites. Particularly Gabe Korgan, who I may be in love with. Though John Gilroy runs a close second. Who can resist Indiana Jones? I hope you enjoy it. I loved writing it!*

We would like to thank Iris for joining us again and talking about her latest book. For more information about her upcoming projects and events, check out her website at [www.irisjohansen.com](http://www.irisjohansen.com). ■

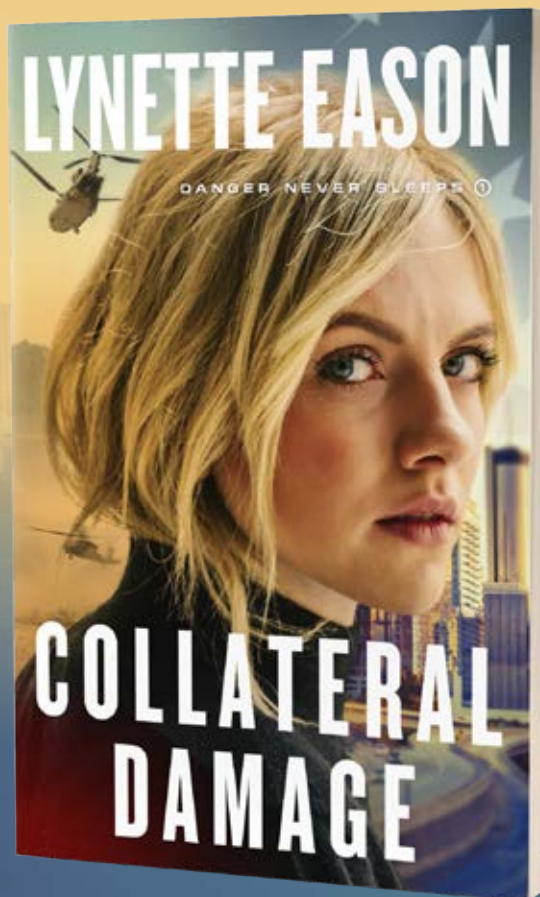


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# WRITING A MURDERER

OR HOW I SUGGESTED THAT YOU “BUY MY BOOK”

By Ronald S. Barak  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



## WRITING IS JUST WHERE IT STARTS.

There is more. Oh, so much more. That is, if you are a novelist who isn't just writing for yourself (a noble calling) and who wants anyone other than your family and neighbors (if even them) to actually read what you write. Or if you are not (yet) a branded, big-name author with an invested, devoted following—that rare but impressive small group of authors who I will admirably and enviously refer to as “Big Shots.”

What exactly is the “more” to which I refer?

For convenience sake, I'm going to break it down into two categories:

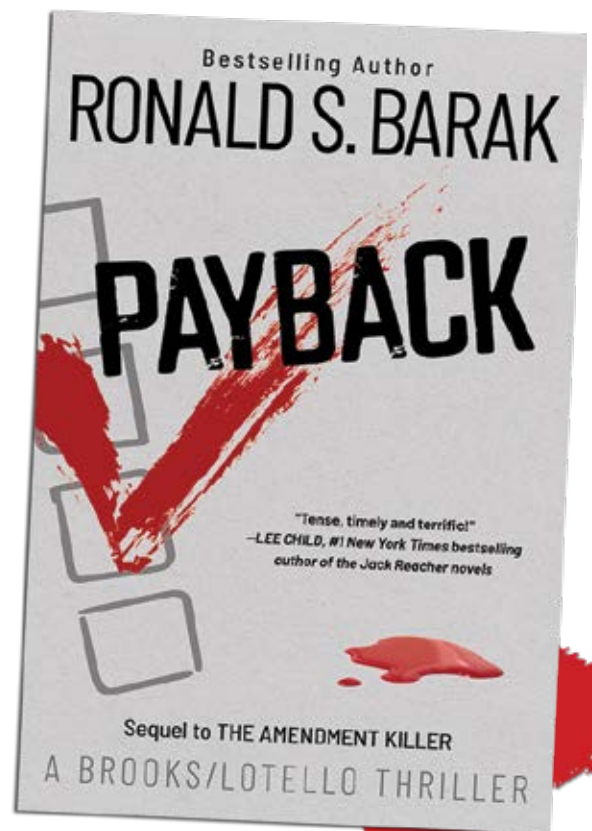
The first category is what many novelists are doing or arranging to have done for them. This is the boring, tedious stuff I hate doing and leave to others to do for me to the extent that it doesn't break the bank (spelled “MY” bank). I also don't worry about the ROI (return on investment)

of these activities as much as the wife says I should. As a whole, these are the things that are fairly ineffective, unless you are one of those Big Shots I mentioned above, in which case it works because they really don't need it to work. Kind of like those banks who prefer to lend only to those who don't need a loan.

In the second category, we have what few, if any, novelists are doing or arranging to have done for them. This is the creative, fun stuff that I love as much as I love writing my novels. These are also not cheap . . . but they work.

In that first group, we can include coming up with a great title and back-cover synopsis for your novel; designing a good book cover and interior; figuring out where your book is going to be sold and at what price points; how you're going to get it reviewed; how and where you're going to get it publicized, promoted, and advertised; and how you're going to get it endorsed by authors and other influencers. If you want to know more about how to do those things, Google will gladly provide you with a long list of experts who will tell you how to do all that or how to hire them to do all of that for you for a mere pittance that will likely turn out to be more than you will make from your writing. Enough said about that by me.

With the space I have left, I'm going to tell you about category





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two—the creative, fun stuff that actually works. To begin, and to be sure, writing exciting blogs, newsletters, and guest articles (like this one) will work—to the extent that “exciting” and “blogging” aren’t oxymoronic and mutually exclusive.

What will be more effective—and is certainly a lot more fun—at least until this lane becomes as clogged as writing blogs and newsletters and posting on social media is . . . wait for it . . . producing videos. Not just boring videos that are nothing more than visual versions of blogs, posts, and newsletters that just say, in one way or another, “Buy my book.”

Because a picture is supposedly worth a thousand words (the approximate length of this article), let’s take an example (maybe three). Consider the latest novel in my *Brooks/Lotello* thriller series, “Payback,” released in March about a writer wannabe (who also happens to be a serial killer) at a weeklong annual writers conference where literary luminaries start mysteriously dropping like flies, simply because our writer thinks he is not receiving the respect and attention he deserves. It is allegedly patterned after a well-known writers conference, and most readers of mystery, crime, suspense, and thriller novels will instantly recognize the literary stars. One beta reader asked me if “Payback” is autobiographical!

That started me thinking. Watch *Writing a Murderer*, the eight-part video series that I scripted, produced, and co-starred in (I’m the cute one on the left) to promote “Payback.”

The eight free episodes, each around 2 to 3 minutes long, aired every Tuesday and Friday evening throughout March on my YouTube Channel which you can access at <https://youtube.com/ronaldsbarak>. You can binge watch it now, but you could only watch the latest episode (and earlier ones) when you logged onto my YouTube Channel. And to discover the twist at the end, you had to stick with the series until the final episode when all was revealed! There were no spoilers.

Why did I put *Writing a Murderer* together? First and foremost, because it was different and fun, especially getting to be a ham in front of the camera and mixing it up with Charlie, the serial killer. Second, because I was looking for a creative way to promote the release of my latest novel, “Payback.”

Did it work? I will tell you this much. As of the writing of this article, *Writing a Murderer* has been watched more than a quarter of a million times in less than two months, and its views were still growing at the rate of about 125 per hour, 24 hours per day at last glance. For those who weren’t math majors and don’t have their smartphones handy, that’s about two additional views every minute, or about one every 30 seconds, around the clock, seven days a week. That doesn’t exactly make me a rock star, but it’s not bad for a novelist, and it certainly hasn’t been bad for “Payback.”

Earlier, I promised you three examples. Not to disappoint, here are two less circumspect and more traditional videos I developed to promote the two earlier novels in my *Brooks/Lotello* thriller series: <https://bit.ly/2UXH3jY> and <https://bit.ly/3aEx0a9>.

Can you craft your *Writing a Murderer*, too? You won’t know until you try. ■

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# INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS

With **SHELDON SIEGEL**

Interview by Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine*  
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A *New York Times*, Amazon, and *USA Today* bestselling author, known for his works of modern legal courtroom drama, Sheldon Siegel continues to engage readers with his fantastic writing. His books have sold a million copies worldwide, from the *Mike Daley/Rosie Fernandez* series featuring San Francisco criminal defense attorneys Mike Daley and Rosie Fernandez; to the thriller novel, “The Terrorist Next Door,” featuring Chicago homicide detectives David Gold and A.C. Battle.

Born on the south side of Chicago, at first Sheldon’s chosen career path was not leading him to creating memorable books. Attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, moving on to graduate with a Juris Doctor from Boalt Hall at the University of California, Berkeley in 1983, he has been in private practice in San Francisco for over twenty years, specializing in corporate and securities law.

However, thankfully for book lovers everywhere, Sheldon began to create works that have amassed a multitude of die-hard fans. We were lucky enough to speak with Sheldon about his books, where his very cool cases are drawn from, and even acquire his “Top Ten” list of tips to give readers out there who aspire to one day write suspense.

Joseph Badal (J.B.): I’ve read every one of your novels and have thoroughly enjoyed them. I know that they are fiction, but I can’t help but be left with the impression that many of your plot lines, characters, and the cases that Mike Daley and Rosie Fernandez work on are inspired by actual events. Is that true? If so, please give us one example of where you used actual events for inspiration.

Sheldon Siegel (S.S.): *Several of my books are loosely based on actual events, but the stories that I’ve ended up writing were considerably different than the true cases. For example, in my 2019 novel, “Hot Shot,” a tech billionaire dies after he receives a “hot shot” of heroin from a young woman that he met on one of those “sugar daddy” sites that seem to be all the rage these days. The story is based on a mashup of two real cases. The first was a case where a Silicon Valley executive, from a company whose*



name you would recognize, died after he received a shot of heroin from a young woman that he met on a sugar daddy site. The second was the death of John Belushi, who died after he received a so-called “speedball” cocktail of heroin and cocaine at a hotel in L.A. While the story in “Hot Shot” was patterned after a couple of real events, the book played out differently than in real life. While the stories sometimes start with real-life events, they always take on a life of their own and go in directions that I don’t always anticipate.

J.B.: Your characters are as colorful and as well fleshed-out as any characters in the mystery genre. Have you drawn on actual persons in constructing your characters?

S.S.: Yes. My protagonist, Mike Daley, sounds just like me. My wife, Linda, says that I’m not even pretending to write in a separate voice anymore. I’m just channeling what’s inside my head. Mike’s law partner and ex-wife, Rosie Fernandez, sounds just like Linda (and, like Linda, Rosie is always right). Linda and I get along a lot better than Mike and Rosie. That’s why we’ve been married for thirty-two years. Even though I write in a voice that’s similar to my own, my background isn’t similar to Mike’s. While I’ve been a lawyer for thirty-seven years, I’ve never handled a criminal case (not even a parking ticket). And I’m not a Catholic ex-priest from San Francisco. I’m actually a Jewish guy from Chicago. Several other characters have characteristics of people I know. Mike’s brother, Pete, is a lot like my brother, Ben. It took Ben three books to figure out that I was writing about him, and now he wants royalties. Many of the other characters in my stories combine characteristics of people I know in real life. In more recent books, my friends and colleagues have asked me to name characters after them, and I’ve been happy to oblige. Most of those characters turn up as judges or expert witnesses in my books. I always let them read their parts to make sure that they’re happy with their fictional counterparts.

J.B.: Of all the characters you’ve written about, which one is your favorite? Why?

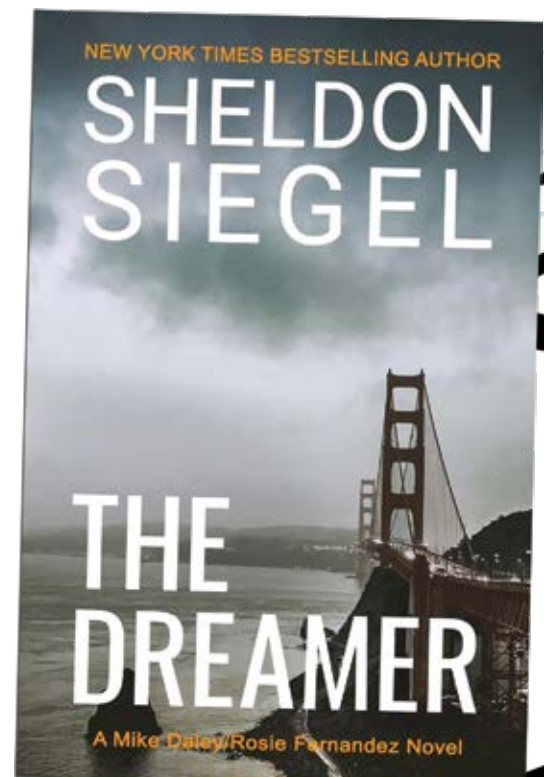
S.S.: The protagonist, Mike Daley, is my favorite because he’s the narrator and I write my stories in first person, so he’s onstage all the time and he sounds just like me. Mike also gets to say all the stuff that I never get to say in real life. And through Mike, I get to nail all of the people who have been mean to me in real life (although I change the names of the guilty in my books). For your readers who are aspiring writers, here’s a little friendly advice. If you want to nail somebody in your book, the trick is to give the fictional character just enough characteristics of the real person so that your friends know who you’re talking about, but the real person won’t recognize himself. Writing for spite and revenge is a great motivational tool. My second favorite character is Mike’s law partner and ex-wife, Rosie Fernandez, because she sounds just like Linda. My third favorite is Nick “The Dick” Hanson, a ninety-year-old private investigator who pops up in every book in unexpected places. He’s a tenacious P.I., but he’s also very funny, and he’s Mike’s connection to old-time San Francisco. He’s going to live to a hundred and ten.

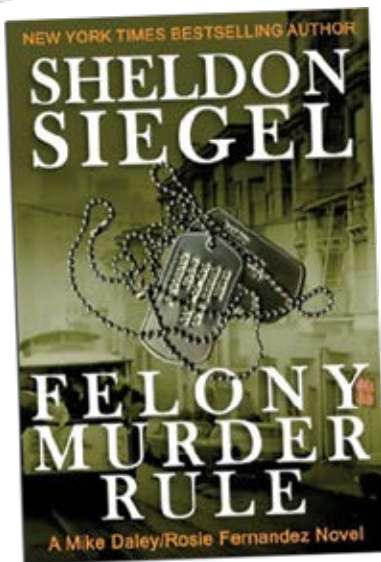
J.B.: I am frequently approached by friends and even by strangers with ideas for future storylines. Has this ever happened to you and, if so, have you ever been able to use one of these ideas as the basis for a plot?

S.S.: I get this all the time. While I’ve gotten countless ideas for storylines, I’ve only used one suggestion in a book. One of my colleagues pointed out a story of a Silicon Valley advertising executive who was killed by the police on San Francisco’s Sixth Street skid row. In real life, the exec had stopped to buy drugs, was caught by the cops, jumped into his two-hundred-thousand-dollar Mercedes, and tried to drive away. The cops opened fire when the guy almost hit a police officer. The story that I wrote, “Final Verdict,” involved a rich guy getting killed on Sixth Street, but it didn’t involve a police shooting.

J.B.: Your most recent Mike Daley/Rosie Fernandez story, “The Dreamer,” was released on March 26. Please tell us about this 11th in the series.

S.S.: As you might surmise from the title, Mike and Rosie represent a Dreamer—a young woman whose parents brought her from Mexico to San Francisco illegally when she was a baby. Her father died, and her mother





**“If you want to nail somebody in your book, the trick is to give the fictional character just enough characteristics of the real person so that your friends know who you’re talking about, but the real person won’t recognize himself. Writing for spite and revenge is a great motivational tool.”**

*remains undocumented. The young woman is a stellar student and obtains Dreamer status. Then she’s accused of stabbing her boss, a talented and abusive celebrity chef at a high-end restaurant in the gentrified part of San Francisco’s Mission District. Even if Mike and Rosie can get her off, there’s a good chance that she’ll be deported after the trial—regardless of the*

*verdict. It’s a very timely subject. I tried to focus less on the political issues and more on the human issues. For example, the accused has a younger sister who is only four years old. If the accused and her mother are deported, what would happen to the four-year-old (who was born in the U.S. and is therefore a U.S. citizen)? It’s a complex story where everybody has something to hide (including members of Mike and Rosie’s extended families).*

J.B.: The reason that I enjoy your books so much is that they are not only well-told tales, but your writing is clean and tight. Please tell us about your writing process. Specifically, what sort of editing process do you employ?

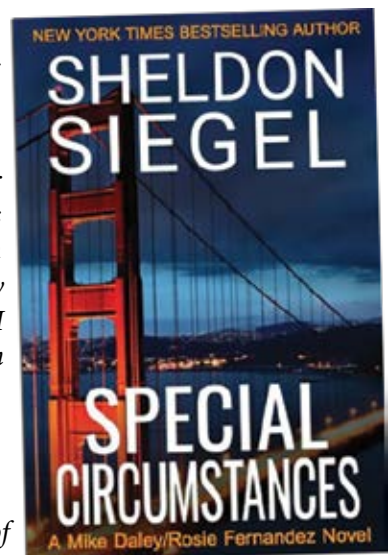
S.S.: *Thanks. It’s harder than it looks, but it’s a great job. Sitting in front of a computer and making up stories is a lot easier than lifting bags of cement all day!*

*I start every story by thinking about where Mike and Rosie are in their lives at the beginning of the story, and how they will change by the end. Then I try to think of a “hook.” For example, the hook in “The Dreamer” is that Mike and Rosie will represent a Dreamer who is accused of killing her abusive boss. Next, I try to figure out the beginning and the ending (who did it, how, and why). I do a very light outline (about three pages; that’s little more than a bunch of chapter titles). Then I start writing and I outline in greater detail about fifty pages ahead of where I am at any given point in the manuscript. I focus a lot on the first one hundred pages because if you make a critical mistake in the set-up, you’ll pay for it later. Once I get to page one hundred, I try to write straight through to the end to see if the story holds together. I can’t tell if a story is going to work until I write the entire first draft. I always write too long and have to cut substantially. Then again, it’s easier to cut than to add. I do at least six full drafts. The first takes about six months. The second takes about a month. The third and fourth drafts take about a week. The last couple of drafts take a couple of days—at that point, I’m looking at specific issues and clean-up items. When I get to the sixth draft, I show the manuscript to a friend who is a public defender and another friend who is a judge. They make sure that the legal stuff is technically right (although in real life, trials never happen exactly the way they do in novels). At the same time, I show the books to a couple of writer friends and my copy editor, a retired secretary from my law firm who has an excellent eye. I gather everybody’s input and do final edits and the book is ready to go.*

*I would also note that, about seven years ago, I reacquired the rights to all of my earlier books, re-edited them, and re-published them myself. I have published the last four new books myself. As a result, the responsibility for editing falls mostly on me. It also means that I can release the books much more quickly than I used to when I was published traditionally. I enjoy having the control over all editorial and publishing decisions, but it’s also a big responsibility. I think it would be very difficult for a first-time writer to do this without substantial input from an experienced editor.*

J.B.: What’s next for Mike and Rosie?

S.S.: *I recently finished a Mike and Rosie short story called “First Trial,” which tells the story of*



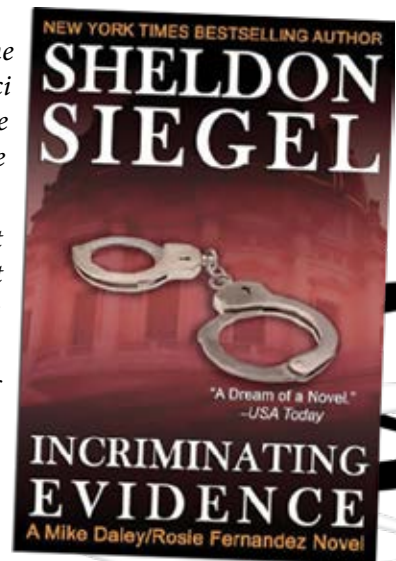


how Mike and Rosie met at the San Francisco Public Defender's Office in 1983. It's available for free to people who sign up for my mailing list via my website. It was a lot of fun to get into the time machine to figure out what Mike and Rosie and many of my recurring characters were doing twenty years before the events in my first book, "Special Circumstances." I have also written about a hundred pages of the first draft of the twelfth Mike and Rosie novel. The working title is "The Final Out." Mike and Rosie represent a young man accused of bludgeoning a high-powered sports agent to death behind the ballpark after a Giants game. I'm having a lot of fun with it. I sure hope the ending is going to work.

J.B.: Finally, what advice would you give to our readers who aspire to write suspense?

S.S.: Sheldon's Top Ten List:

1. *Your first job is to entertain your readers.*
2. *It's all about character. If the reader doesn't develop a rooting interest for your hero in the first chapter, they're unlikely to move on to the second chapter.*
3. *Voice is critical. You should write in a voice that's comfortable for you and fits your story. For example, I couldn't possibly write noir. Your narrative voice must be authentic and personal to you.*
4. *It's helpful to understand the conventions and reader expectations of the crime fiction genre. You can defy conventions if you'd like, but you'd better do it very well.*
5. *Don't try to write to current market trends. By the time you finish your story, the market will have moved on. In the past decade, we've gone through the "Da Vinci Code" phase, the "Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" phase, and, more recently, the "Gone Girl" and "Girl on the Train" phase. Don't try to redo somebody else's work. Write your story. If your writing is strong enough, you'll find an audience.*
6. *If you want to be a writer, you need to like the process of editing. It's been said that writing is rewriting. Nobody gets it right the first time. If you don't like sitting in front of a computer for long periods and playing with prose until the words line up in the right order, this probably isn't a good career for you.*
7. *Try to write a little every day and at the same time every day. This is difficult if you have a day job. My goal is between five and ten double-spaced pages of new material five days a week. Some days I hit my goal, and many days I don't. Progress is measured in baby steps. First drafts are always unreadable. Second drafts are a little less unreadable. By the third or fourth draft, you'll have something that isn't embarrassing.*
8. *If you get stuck, move to another part of the story and write a scene that you're going to need later. You don't have to write the story in order, and you can always stitch it back together later. That's why they invented word processing.*
9. *Avoid prologues, epilogues, and flashbacks. Start your story when something big is about to happen and keep moving forward. If you skip around in time and place, it will be harder for your reader to follow.*
10. *Finally, it's a cliché, but read a lot and write a lot. Read authors whose work you admire to see how they put their stories together. When I first started thinking about writing a courtroom drama, I read books by John Lescroart, Scott Turow, Richard North Patterson, Lisa Scottoline, and Steve Martini. I read the stories with a critical eye for structure and pacing. In a couple of cases, I "reverse engineered" the books and outlined them as I went along to see how and when the authors introduced characters, developed their plot lines, and paced out their novels. I wasn't trying to copy their styles and I would, of course, never plagiarize or borrow somebody else's ideas. I found this to be more helpful than reading a lot of books about how to write books. If you'd like to read a couple of books about the art and craft of writing, I would suggest Anne Lamott's "Bird by Bird," and Stephen King's "On Writing." Most important, it's better to spend your time writing and practicing your craft than reading books about writing!*

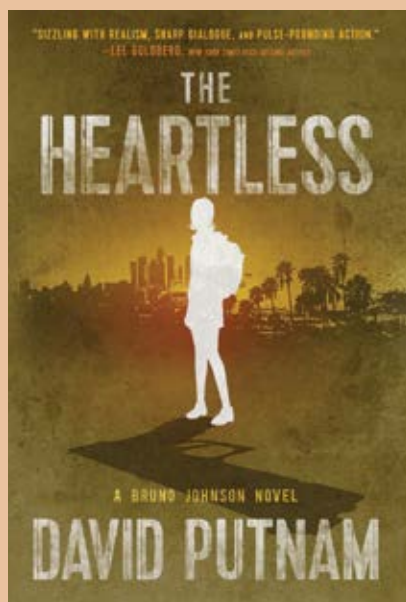


Listen well: Sheldon is a true professional when it comes to writing some of the best fiction out there. To learn more about his upcoming novels and events, head to [www.sheldonsiegel.com](http://www.sheldonsiegel.com). ■

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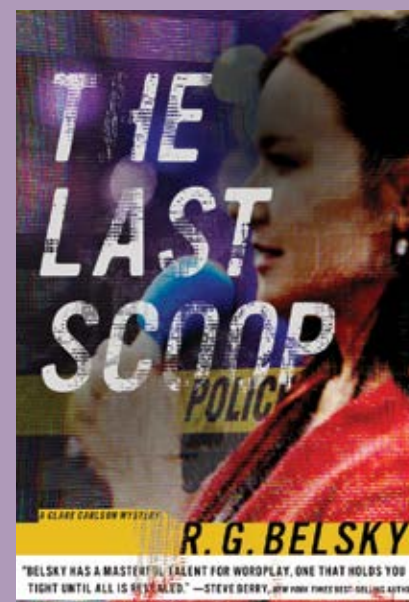
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## Soldiers of Freedom *761st Tank Battalion & Writing*

# Patton's Black Panthers:

The First African-American Tank Unit to Fight in U.S. History Changed the Course of WWII and Transformed Race Relations in America

By Samuel Marquis

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



In “Soldiers of Freedom: The WWII Story of Patton’s Panthers and the Edelweiss Pirates,” Book 5 of his *WWII* series, historical fiction author Samuel Marquis recounts the courage, tenacity, and long-term impact of the 761st Tank Battalion, the first African-American armored unit to see action in U.S. history. Fighting under General “Old Blood and Guts” Patton in the grueling Lorraine campaign in France, the Battle of the Bulge, the Rhineland, and in the final conquest of Nazi Germany, the Black Panthers had to fight two wars at once: one against the German Army, the other against the racism of their fellow white soldiers. In their fight for freedom, they changed the makeup of the modern U.S. Army and paved the way for the civil rights movement.

In late 1945 and early 1946, the triumphant armored warriors of the 761st Tank Battalion—the first African-American tank outfit to fight in U.S. history, handpicked by General George S. Patton, Jr. himself—returned home from WWII along with 1.2 million other black veterans. While their white counterparts in the U.S. Armed Forces took part in ticker-tape parades to great fanfare and received

five-star treatment from a grateful nation, the Black Panthers quietly resumed their daily lives in a country that cared little about their contributions and sacrifices in Occupied Europe.

The painful truth was they had not changed a nation, as they had set out to do when they had first signed up to fight Tojo’s and Hitler’s seemingly invincible armies in the spring of 1942. In fact, they found themselves in many ways more at the beginning of a struggle for civil rights than at the end as returning Negro soldiers. Having served their country with distinction during the largest and most violent conflagration in human history, Patton’s Panthers returned to second-class status and with expectations that were deemed unacceptable to many of their white compatriots. After laying down their lives for Uncle Sam, they were shocked to return to a Gestapo-like police state where most of them still could not vote, use public facilities, sit beside whites on buses or at lunch counters, or find work at anything but the most menial of jobs.

And yet, in time, the brave actions of the 761st on the battlefields of Europe would garner the men the recognition they deserved, pave the way for an integrated U.S. Army, and lay the foundation for the post-war civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In “Soldiers of Freedom: The WWII Story of Patton’s Panthers and the Edelweiss Pirates,” Book 5 of my *WWII* series, I explore this dichotomy of the “Greatest Generation”: its morally repugnant mistreatment of veteran African-American combat soldiers who should have been acknowledged as heroes. “Soldiers of Freedom” is told largely through the eyes of two real-life historical figures: Sergeant William McBurney, a twenty-year-old tank main gunner in the 761st from New York

City; and “Old Blood and Guts” Patton, commander of the U.S. Third Army in which McBurney served. Together, these two very different soldiers—one a young, soft-spoken, Black enlisted man from humble roots; the other, a middle-aged white career army officer with a profane tongue from an upper-class background—liberated France and Belgium, fought in the grueling Battle of the Bulge, crossed the Rhine to conquer Germany, and liberated the Gunskirchen concentration camp in Austria.

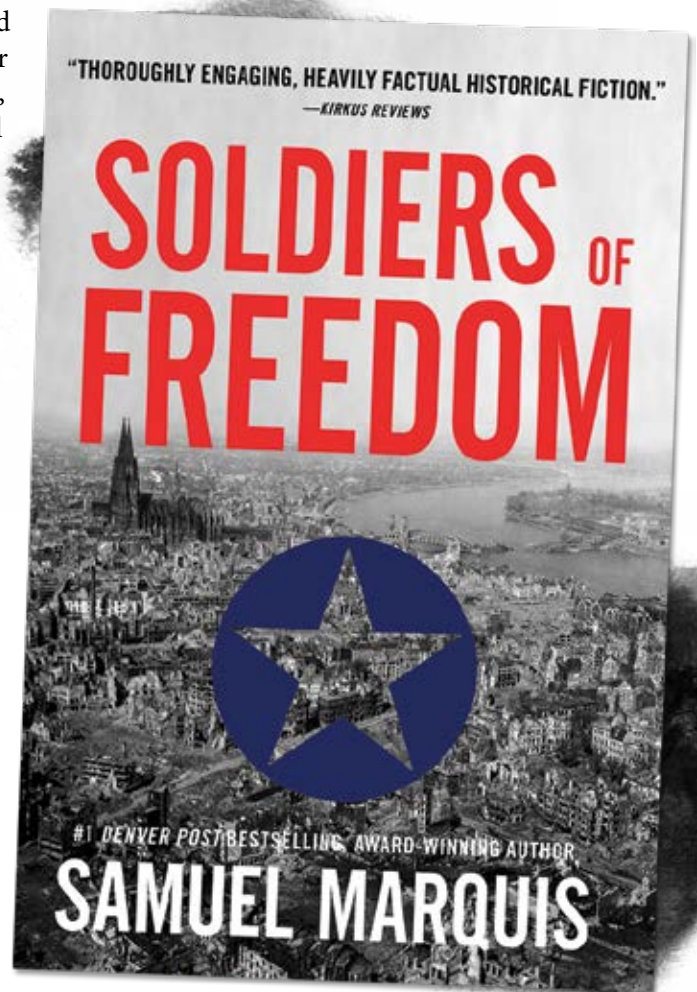
Because I wanted to capture the authenticity of McBurney and the Black Panthers, as well as the legendary Patton, most of the scenes in the book are based on well-documented battles, speeches, and events that these two soldiers of freedom directly participated in. In fact, at virtually every turn I used their actual words based on primary references, such as journals, memoirs, government files, interviews, contemporary transcripts, military documents, and other directly quoted materials.

Why? The answer is simple: I happen to believe that historical accuracy is important as long as the facts are known, and that the truth must come first and foremost above the storytelling or modern-day political correctness. In the book, bronze-star winner McBurney and the highly decorated Patton are both sympathetic protagonists. Though they are, first and foremost, heroes who fought the good fight against the Nazis in the name of freedom, I show them at both their best and worst because that is who they were and that is what the historical records allow. Consequently, they are portrayed, I believe, as closely as possible to reality, as only-too-human, flawed human beings who sometimes do stupid things but usually for the right reasons. In writing the novel, I researched the most crucial historical events these two American warriors experienced in 1944-1945 to showcase their different perspectives and highlight their contributions to the war and to history. Historical truth, I believe, resonates with readers. That is why I also included a detailed “Afterward” and “Bibliography” at the end of the book to give more background on the legacy of these two important, yet very different WWII figures.

But the main reason I wrote the book and stuck to the known history as much as possible was to tell the true story of the Black Panthers, a WWII outfit very few people are aware of. The 761st’s contribution to the war and to history was indeed far-reaching. During its circuitous 2,000-mile-blitzkrieg across France, Belgium, Germany, and Austria, the first Black armored unit to fight in U.S. history succeeded in crushing virtually every Wehrmacht and SS unit thrown in its path. During combat actions from November 7, 1944 through May 6, 1945 (183 days in action), the 761st destroyed or captured 331 enemy machine-gun nests, 58 pillboxes, and 461 wheeled vehicles; killed 6,246 enemy combatants; and captured more than 15,818 enemy soldiers. They paid a heavy price for their country: the unit suffered thirty-six men killed in action, including three officers, and 39 officers and 221 enlisted men fell wounded in action. Total casualties pressed towards 50 percent, a disproportionately high number for a comparatively small outfit that fought alongside behemoths like the all-white 26th Infantry Division and the 4th Armored Division. The battalion also lost a whopping 71 tanks in battle, more than one and a half times its original allotment.

These are, of course, the raw statistics of bona fide heroes. And yet, when the Black Panthers returned from a pacified Nazi Germany in 1945-1946, it was readily apparent to the men in the battalion that America had never really cared for them and, in fact, had mostly forgotten them. In the roar of postwar America, most people didn’t even know of African-American service on the battlefields of Europe. The 761st’s service might as well not have happened, so few people knew or even cared.

In the end, though, the Black Panthers were able to win their fight for recognition from their countrymen and to transform race relations in America for the better. After the war ended, the distinguished service of the 761st Tank Battalion, Tuskegee Airmen, and other African-American combat units helped convince President Harry S. Truman and other high-ranking government officials to desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces in 1948. And then, after thirty-three years of intense lobbying by the unit’s veterans, the battalion was belatedly awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for “Extraordinary Heroism” by





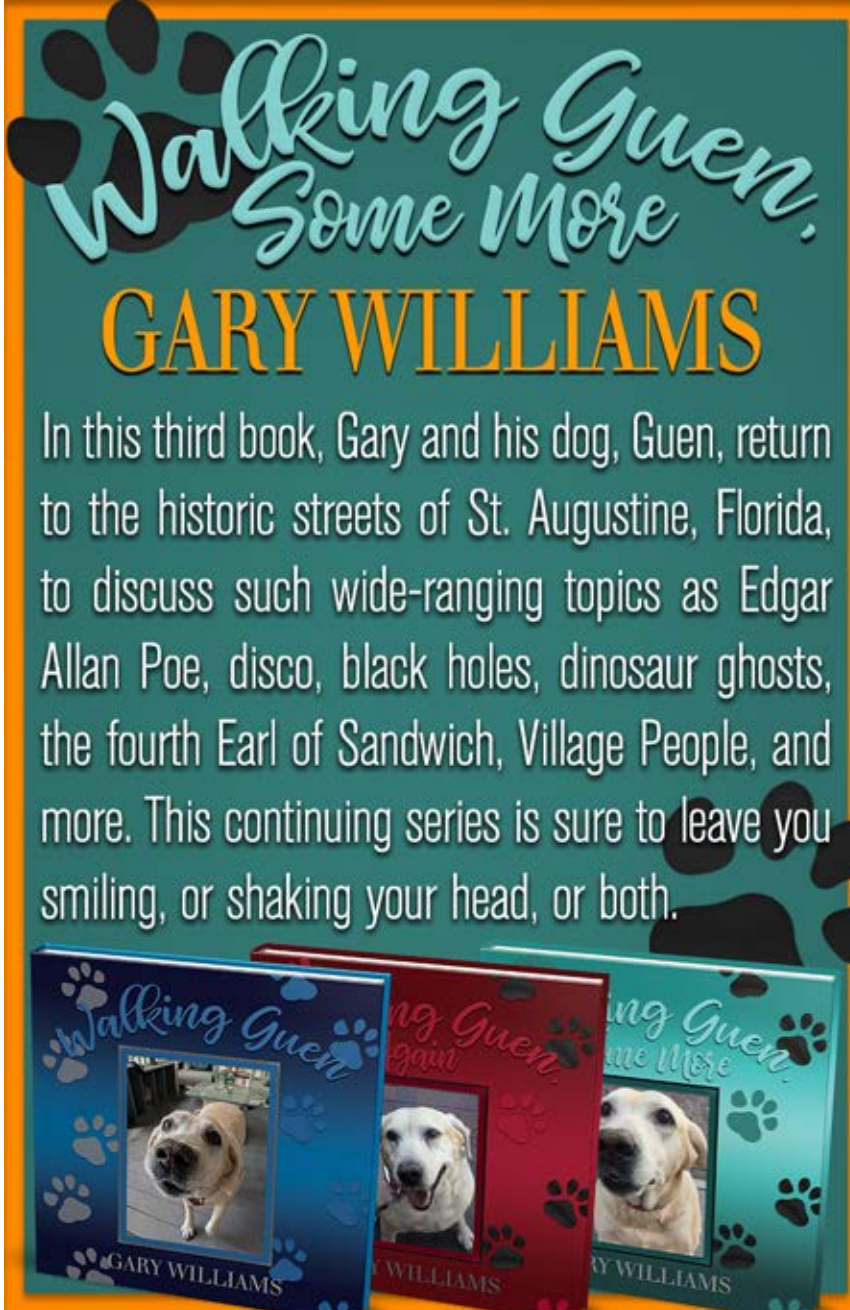
President Jimmy Carter on January 24, 1978.

The final award stood as a single citation for all the 761st's actions during the war and read: "The 761st Tank Battalion distinguished itself by extraordinary gallantry, courage, professionalism and high esprit de corps displayed in the accomplishment of unusually difficult and hazardous operations in the European Theater of Operations from 31 October 1944 to 6 May 1945.... Throughout this period of combat, the courageous and professional actions of the members of the 'Black Panther' battalion, coupled with their indomitable fighting spirit and devotion to duty, reflect great credit on the 761st Tank Battalion, and the United States Army, and this Nation." Most importantly, the government finally acknowledged that "racial discrimination and inadvertent neglect on the part of those in authority" had played a role in the previous disapprovals for the citation and that "the climate created by the Army commanders could only have made it difficult to provide proper recognition for a 'Negro' unit during the period 1944-1947."

The first step to reconciliation is admitting you were wrong, and President Carter and Uncle Sam finally did right by Sergeant William McBurney of Harlem and his fellow tankers, who had frozen their asses off at the Bulge and liberated the Gunskirchen concentration camp in Austria by bashing down the gate in their Sherman tanks. Though the citation should have come thirty-three years earlier, it was ultimately the struggles of Patton's Black Panthers—at home and abroad, within the armed forces and outside it—that led to the construction of a stronger U.S. Army and a greater nation. Since the new millennium, African-Americans make up around 20% of the U.S. Armed Forces (and no longer are they merely cooks, stevedores, and drivers), and Black officers in the services stand at 5%-7% in the Navy, Air Force and Marines and 10%-15% in the Army.

And that's why I wrote "Soldiers of Freedom": not only did the Black Panthers defeat Hitler and Nazism and rescue Jews from concentrations camps, they ultimately changed America itself for the better. ■

*The ninth great-grandson of legendary privateer Captain William Kidd, Samuel Marquis is the bestselling, award-winning author of a World War Two series, the Nick Lassiter-Skyler International Espionage series, and American historical fiction. His novels have been #1 Denver Post bestsellers, received multiple national book awards (Kirkus Reviews and Foreword Reviews Book of the Year, American Book Fest and USA Best Book, IPPY, Readers' Favorite, Beverly Hills, Next Generation Indie, and Colorado Book Awards), and garnered glowing reviews from #1 bestseller James Patterson, Kirkus, and Foreword Reviews (5 Stars). Book reviewers have compared Marquis's WWII thrillers to the epic historical novels of Tom Clancy, John le Carré, Ken Follett, Herman Wouk, Daniel Silva, and Alan Furst. His website is [samuelmarquisbooks.com](http://samuelmarquisbooks.com) and for publicity inquiries, please contact Books Forward at [info@booksforward.com](mailto:info@booksforward.com).*



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# BLOOD POISONING

By Joe Giordano

My morning began by picking up eighty-seven-year-old Molly Hart, running naked on Utica Avenue. Try getting *that* image out of your head. My squad car was unmarked, and Molly imagined herself as twenty and ready for action.

"Hi, Blue Eyes," she said.

I invited her to take the back seat; her face crumpled into disappointment when I didn't join her. As I drove to her house, she cycled between banging on the steel grill separating us, and sulking. Her husband Bill also suffered from Alzheimer's, and when I rang at their asphalt-shingled, row-home, he came to the door naked to the waist, wearing red-striped pajama bottoms and one Minnetonka slipper on his right foot. His facial expression stuck on surprise as I tried to explain the purpose of my visit.

I took his elbow and ushered him to my car, thinking that he would calm her down. Instead, Molly screamed that she wasn't having sex with an old man. Bill straightened, disclaiming that he was married to "that crazy woman."

I put him into the front seat and smoked a Lucky Strike as the two of them hurled insults at each other. A guy and gal from social services arrived who knew the couple. They explained that Bill and Molly drifted in and out of awareness and would be more actively supervised. Molly blew me a kiss as she was led back to her house. I sighed in sadness. I'd known her for most of my forty years, from when I'd trick-or-treated she and Bill as a kid.

My name's Bragg, and I'm a homicide, gold-shield detective. While I waited for social services to arrive, I sighted advertising fliers strewn around a red-smearred, concrete stoop a few homes down and across the street from the Harts. Peter and Grace Blanchard had been another Halloween target, but I lost contact after Grace passed a dozen years earlier. I'd attended P.S. 53 with Laurel, their daughter. Blonde, not unattractive, but the boys avoided her because she'd rat out our escapades to teachers.

I radioed dispatch at Brooklyn South that I'd be further delayed and ambled over to the gray-painted house. I rang, knocked loudly, and then peered through a gauze curtain spotting Peter on a floral couch with his head lolling against the wall. If he were asleep, he would've awoken with my banging, so exigent circumstances required a forced entry. I slammed the heel of my Florsheim black loafer against the wooden door and broke through. Inside, the odor of death stabbed my nostrils. Once I checked his pulse, I called the coroner and donned blue shoe baggies and latex gloves.

Seventy-three and living alone. On an end table next to the couch sat a half-finished tumbler of water beside a plastic druggist-vial of Amoxapine tablets. When the medical examiner read the prescription, his eyebrows rose.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Tricyclic antidepressants have given way to safer drugs like Zoloft. About a decade ago, they were a major cause of poisoning because the therapeutic amount is too damn close to a fatal overdose. These days, doctors only prescribe them for the most severe cases. I'll conduct some tests, but I'm betting that the Amoxapine killed Mr. Blanchard."

Peter died wearing a brown knit tie and houndstooth sports jacket. In my examination of the house, everything was neat and tidy, and he'd made his bed. His stamp album and magnifying glass sat on the kitchen table beside a stack of new purchases waiting to be added to the collection. In the bedroom a small-caret, round-diamond ring in a black jeweler's box sat atop a receipt dating the purchase from the previous week. A recent photo depicted Peter and a blonde woman, probably in her sixties. Smiling, they held onto each other like teenagers.

Peter took care of himself, pursued hobbies, and had a love interest, none of the signs that come with clinical depression.

I approached my supervisor, Lieutenant Dixon, a grizzled African American, to open a homicide investigation.

He clutched the medical examiner's report as he spoke. "Blanchard offed himself. No signs of a struggle, the pills weren't forced down his throat. Nothing suggests murder."

"The guy showed an interest in life not typical in suicides."

"Depressed men can collect stamps and pine for women. A doctor prescribed the antidepressants for a reason. Maybe they were working. Almost certainly, Blanchard took the overdose by mistake. Don't waste time on hunches when real homicides need solving."

I huffed in frustration, but Dixon had a point. I needed evidence that Peter had somehow been induced to overdose.



When I got off duty, I began my unofficial investigation by canvassing the homes on Peter's block.

My third stop encountered Mrs. Poole, steel-gray, clear eyes, thin, early seventies. She answered her door in a blue cardigan. She spoke with an English accent. "Young Mr. Bragg, I haven't seen you in dog years."

I flashed my credentials.

"Oh ho, Detective Bragg. Come in. Would you like some tea? I've just brewed a pot for myself"

"That's most kind. I'm checking with neighbors about Peter Blanchard. Anything you could tell me?"

Lace covered the armrests of her brown couch. She poured from a white, porcelain pot. "White? Two lumps?"

I nodded. She added sugar and milk before handing me a china cup. "Shame about Peter's passing." She made a wry smile. "I had my eye on him, but he was interested in a younger woman. At the senior center, Evelyn and he were cozy together. She's sixty-two."

"They dated?"

"Well," Mrs. Poole smiled, "I suppose you could call it that."

"Did you get the impression that Peter was troubled or depressed?"

"Not depressed, but you remember his daughter Laurel? She was a bit intense. Children sometimes reverse roles. She pressed him to sign a power of attorney, giving her financial control over his life. She's a partner in one of the law firms on Court Street."

"Please tell me more."

"Last week at the senior center, Laurel spoke loud enough for me to hear. She ordered Peter not to get married."

"How did he react?"

"Peter pouted, then his voice rose. 'I'm your father. When did you become my boss?' He didn't explain himself to Laurel, but I understood his feelings. The nights, alone, when the prospect of death creeps into your bed and turns your heart crystal-cold and your stomach sour. That's when you crave someone warm and comforting beside you. Young people know nothing about mortality. He changed Laurel's diapers, yet she wanted to strip his right to make decisions."

"Did Peter have money?"

"He rose to hold a corner office at an insurance firm."

"How did their argument end?"

"Peter was defiant. He told Laurel that he'd purchase an engagement ring for Evelyn."

Laurel was divorced, without children. I planned two stops before I'd confront her.

Doctor Chase, the prescribing physician for the tricyclic antidepressants, had an office in a low-rent section on Atlantic Avenue. Patients filled his waiting room out into the hallway. The nurse receptionist, a tight-curl woman in her fifties looked displeased when I flashed my badge.

"You must wait for the patient with Dr. Chase to leave. Take a seat if you can find one."

I stood at her desk. "Is the doctor always this far behind on patients?"

"Dr. Chase takes Medicaid and Medicare. There's no shortage of old or poor people."

"Do you have the patient record for Peter Blanchard?"

"HIPPA regulations, everything's confidential."

"He's dead."

"Talk to the doctor."

When Chase became free, I stepped into his examination room. He had thinning hair.

I flashed my badge. "Do you recall prescribing tricyclic antidepressants for Peter Blanchard?"

He blew out a long breath. "New patient. Came in with his daughter, Laurel. She did most of the talking. She said that Zolofit made him twitch and wet the bed and insisted on Amoxapine."

"He overdosed and died."

"Damn. His daughter assured me that she'd supervise his medication before I wrote the script. If she intends to sue, I'll testify to that in court."

My next stop was the senior center. I recognized Evelyn by the photo in Peter's house. Grief had deepened the lines around her eyes.

I introduced myself. "My sympathies for your loss. May I ask you some questions?"

She shrugged an agreement.

"Was Peter depressed?"

She sighed. "As we get older, down periods creep in. My doctor prescribed Zolofit to blunt the lows. Peter took something similar."

"Actually, he was on Amoxapine."

"I don't know the difference."

"Had he mentioned troubling side effects?"

"Peter never complained about anything. Why?"

“Unfortunately, he died of an Amoxapine overdose.”

Evelyn’s eyes became wet. She looked away. “So unfair.”

I reiterated my sympathies before I left.

Laurel Hogan, nee Blanchard, wasn’t a named partner in her firm. She invited me into her office. The greeting wasn’t warm.

She said, “Detective wasn’t the career I would’ve predicted for you. If you’re here to dip my pigtails in an ink well, you’ll notice that I now keep my hair short.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Should I be investigating your father’s death?”

“Detective, I have work to do.”

“You’re the executor of your father’s estate.”

“Naturally.”

“He owned his house free and clear and his 401K was seven figures.”

“My father was frugal.”

“He hadn’t changed the beneficiary from your mother Grace.”

“Not important. I’m his only heir.”

“Fortunately for you, he and Evelyn never married, otherwise she would’ve received everything.”

Laurel’s voice rose. “What are you implying?”

A distinct chocolate bouquet emanated from the Starbucks coffee cup sitting on Laurel’s desk. I pointed. “You always drank chocolate drinks.”

“Every morning. My singular indulgence.” She stood. “Thank you for your expression of sympathy. I don’t suppose I’ll see you again for another thirty years.”

She extended her hand. I didn’t rise.

“Your father didn’t need the Amoxapine that you intimidated Dr. Chase to prescribe.”

Her eyes flickered.

“You poisoned your father.”

“Get out of my office.”

“That’s not a denial.”

“I’m calling your superior.”

I stood. “By the way, the laxative in your chocolate milk when you were twelve. The quick exit you took from Mrs. Sibley’s class? That was me.” I left.

When I arrived at the precinct, Lieutenant Dixon frantically waved me into his office. “Laurel Hogan called and reported that you’re harassing her over the death of her father. I told you not to pursue that matter.”

“She poisoned her father to avoid the loss of a considerable inheritance.”

Dixon’s face looked doubtful. “You have proof?”

My eyes dropped.

Dixon continued. “What do I always say about a cop without evidence?”

“He’s a loudmouth with an opinion.”

He sat back with a shrug.

I asked, “How do you deal with the frustration when you know that a suspect is getting away with murder?”

“I kiss my wife, telephone my children, and try to keep perspective on what I do and don’t control.”

“I’m not married.”

“What’s your alternative? Become a vigilante and join the bad guys? You’re too good a detective to do something stupid.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I left his office.

I held the crushed Amoxapine tablets inside a plastic pouch. The Starbucks barista had prepared the law office’s coffees with the Café Mocha cup labeled “Laurel Hogan,” set them aside for pickup, and walked away. No security cameras. Ironic justice awaited my judgement.

Was I certain Laurel was guilty of killing her father? Yes.

As heinous a crime as patricide was, should I cross the vengeance Rubicon?

I sighed and left the shop, tossing the Amoxapine packet into the trash.

I bought a dozen red roses and drove to Molly Hart’s house. When she opened the door, her face brightened at the sight of the flowers, and she said, “Thank you Detective Bragg.”

A better ending to a crappy day. ■

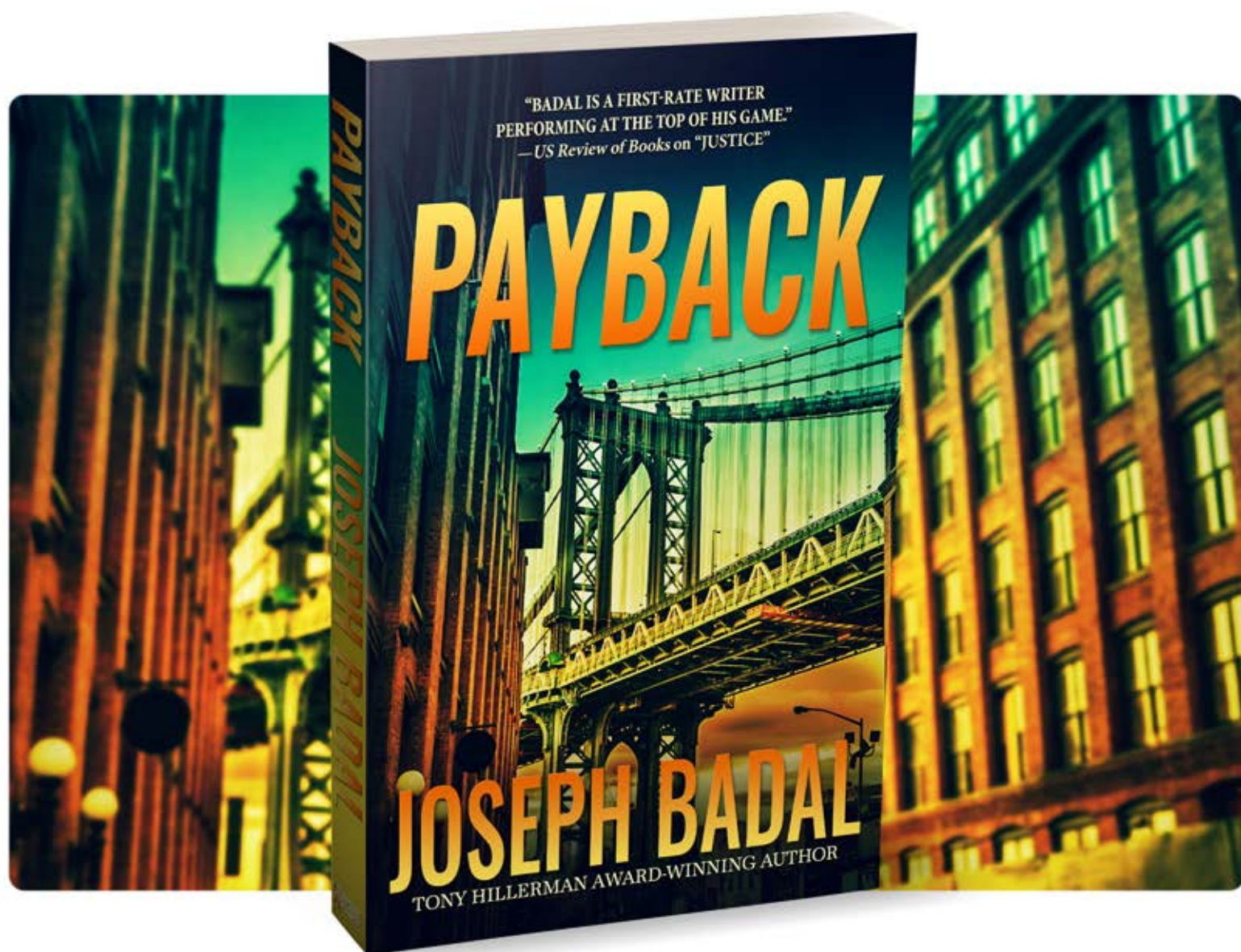
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