SUSPENSE
MAGAZINE
OCTOBER/
NOVEMBER 2014

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Thank you, everyone, who emailed me about my last letter from the editor. That was easily the biggest response I’ve ever received for a letter, and I don’t know whether that is a curse or blessing. I feel pressure to upstage it, but when something is perfect can you do better, or is it acceptable to simply do as well?

When I interview authors, and I pose the question to them: Do they feel pressure to write a better book?

I basically get the same answer. They don’t feel the pressure; they just want to make their current work-in-progress the best it can be. But their fans don’t feel that way. Take movie sequels: Hundreds of movies have had sequels, and you hear it all time—the sequel isn’t as good, let alone better, than the original. Does that mean that the first book in a series is the pinnacle and all the others are just sliding down the backside of the performance slope?

I would disagree with that.

Authors are a unique breed. They don’t think like you and I. They can sit down and tell a story in four to five hundred pages, and unlike a movie that takes two hours, books occupy more of our time.

Many authors use the first book in the series to set the stage. The character hasn’t been fully developed yet, nor has the setting around them. Creating a human from scratch, with emotions of love, hate, revenge, fear, etc., takes some time. Standalone thrillers generally have one, maybe two characters that have some depth to them, but the pace is so fast that such novels are more about the action and plot rather than the characters.

Now I can agree that some authors have taken their series too far. I understand that it can be very difficult for an author to say, “It’s over, after so many books I have nothing left, unless I write the same book over and over.” And that happens. I’m sure you can think of several writers who could just stop their series and move on to something else. But they get criticism for that, too. Take J.K. Rowling: She gets hit with bad reviews and complaints that “this is no Harry Potter.” No, Harry ran his course; it was time to move on. I applaud her for her decision to say it’s over.

I don’t feel it’s a curse to walk out of the gate with a successful first book in a series. I think that the reader has to take the series as a whole and see the progression of the main characters as well as the secondary ones.

Now, is this letter better than the last one? Is it as good as the last one? What about all of my letters, do they share with you a story of who I am as a person and what my thoughts are?

Only time will tell, because my story has only just begun.

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Hello from 35,000 feet. I’m in the midst of a book tour, on the way from somewhere to somewhere else! What I see in every city—besides a lot of pals and readers, hurray—is fabulous bookstores with tantalizing expanses of bookshelves. So proud to see “Truth Be Told” prominently displayed—Hurray. The starred review from Booklist says, “In Ryan’s adroit hands, even foreclosures can be sexy.” Love that. And the starred review from Library Journal says, “Drop everything and binge-read until the mindboggling conclusion.” So, hurray. Do that.

But after “Truth Be Told,” how do you discover what to read? It’s all about the buzz, right, and one friend telling another. That’s part of the fun. Still, you don’t need me to tell you to pick up Lisa Scottoline or Linda Fairstein or Tess Gerritsen or Lisa Gardner or Joe Finder—those are must-buys, right? And you’d choose them instantly. I do, too!

But each of us has our discoveries, our finds, our books that should be big on buzz. Some of mine are brand new, some not-necessarily-new but not-to-be-missed. For instance: have you read “ICE SHEAR” by MP Cooley? She’s amazing, and this chilling and suspenseful debut is proof of a real talent.

“RAGE AGAINST THE DYING”—Becky Masterman’s first novel of suspense has one of the coolest characters ever—an ex-FBI agent. Even though she’s retired, she’s still got moves and nerve and power. Terrific.

You haven’t missed Linwood Barclay’s “TRUST YOUR EYES,” have you? Go back and get it. It has the most delicious premise. It’s about . . . well, you’ll see. He’s got a new one, too.

I can’t resist adding Lisa Unger, even though she’s probably one of your faves already. Her skill with psychological suspense is unmatched. Be prepared to be creeped out and mesmerized. “CRAZY LOVE YOU” isn’t available yet—but it will be soon.

Rachel Howzell Hall, also terrific. “LAND OF SHADOWS” reveals a fresh, powerful voice—set in Los Angeles with a police officer who’s gritty and hilarious and smart.


And okay, fine, how does Sue Grafton do it? She doesn’t need me to remind you, but you have to give a standing ‘O’ for the author who paved the way for so many mystery authors, and continues to create and innovate and constantly surprise. “W IS FOR WASTED” made me cry.

Beginning our descent into—where? So gotta turn off the electronic devices. But books! You can always read. Let me know if you agree with my choices. And crossing fingers that you’ll love “Truth Be Told.”

HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN is the on-air investigative reporter for Boston’s NBC affiliate. She’s won 32 EMMYs, 12 Edward R. Murrow awards and dozens of other honors for her ground-breaking journalism. A bestselling author of seven mystery novels, Ryan has won multiple prestigious awards for her crime fiction: three Agathas, the Anthony, Daphne, Macavity, and for “The Other Woman,” the coveted Mary Higgins Clark Award. National reviews have called her a “master at crafting suspenseful mysteries” and “a superb and gifted storyteller.” Her 2013 novel, “The Wrong Girl,” has the extraordinary honor of winning the Agatha Award for Best Contemporary Novel and the Daphne Award for Mainstream Mystery/Suspense, and is a seven-week Boston Globe bestseller. Her newest hardcover, “Truth Be Told,” is a Library Journal Editor’s Pick and RT Book Reviews Top Pick, with starred reviews from Booklist and from Library Journal, which raves, “Drop everything and binge read!” She’s a founding teacher at Mystery Writers of America University and 2013 president of national Sisters in Crime.

Visit her online at HankPhillippiRyan.com, on Twitter @HankPRyan, and Facebook at HankPhillippiRyanAuthorPage.
THE WOMAN ACROSS THE TINY TABLE LOOKED AS THOUGH a tap with Shay’s little pink craft hammer would shatter her into a thousand pieces. Which you might expect, except Colleen Mitchell looked like she’d been this way forever, long before the boys went missing. You didn’t get lines as deep as the ones between her eyebrows and around her mouth in a single week.

“You’re lucky you found someone to drive you,” Shay said. “We’re supposed to get six more inches of snow by morning.”

“Lucky,” Colleen echoed, like the word was in a foreign language.

Dave took off as fast as he could without being rude. Shay knew how that went too. Most people didn’t like to be around bad luck; it was as though misfortune was contagious. But the men here in Lawton had surprisingly old-fashioned manners. In the three days since she arrived, strangers had opened doors for her, let her cut in line at the coffee shop, and even offered to carry her groceries to her car.

“I know what you need,” she told Colleen.

“Oh, I—I couldn’t,” Colleen said quickly, eying the bottle on the table. Shay had been drinking weak Jack and Cokes, smoking and thinking, before Brenda called, and she hadn’t put the bottle away because there wasn’t anywhere to put it.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean that, though a drink might not hurt. You need something to eat. I’ll make you something.”

“No, thank you so much, but I’m not hungry.”

“Yes, you are,” Shay said patiently, the way she’d talk to Leila, her granddaughter. “Come on. You been on a plane since, what, this morning? Probably didn’t have any lunch?”

“I had something,” Colleen said miserably. Her eyelids were crepey, makeup collected in the creases. Her lips were pale and flaking. She gave off a faint smell of fabric softener and sweat. And she looked like she was about to cry.

“Well, now you’re going to have something else. What time is it in Boston, anyway? An hour ahead, right? That’s almost one in the morning.”

Shay kept up a steady stream of conversation while she got the bread out of the little fridge, the ham, cheese, mustard, and put a sandwich together. Colleen answered a word or two at a time, her voice dull. Both plates were dirty, so Shay served the sandwich on a folded paper towel. She poured a glass of milk and set that down on the table too.

“Eat.”

Colleen picked up the sandwich and took a bite, chewing with her eyes glazed. Shay doubted she tasted a thing. The woman still hadn’t taken off her coat and scarf, though the RV was so cold that Shay didn’t blame her; she herself wore long underwear and a sweater under Taylor’s old sweatshirt. And that was with the generator blasting almost constantly. Brenda had come over after work to complain for the second time that Shay was running it too high. But since weather.com said it would get down to minus three degrees overnight, she’d decided to just turn it back up and let the bitch complain.
Shay gave the glass of milk a gentle push, and Colleen picked it up and drank. Like some kind of robot, like worry had taken away her will. That wasn't good. It was way too early for that, and Shay—veteran of crises since before she could walk, though nothing like this—should know.

“Okay,” she said, keeping it friendly but firm. “So let’s figure this out.”

Colleen set down the sandwich. A crumb clung to her bottom lip. “I didn't even know there was another boy until tonight. That seems . . . I’m sorry. I’m sorry about your son and the way I came barging in here.”

Shay shrugged. “The company doesn’t want you to know. Why would they? All it can mean is more trouble for them.”

Colleen's frown deepened, emphasizing the groove in her forehead. “I don't understand.”

“The company? Hunter-Cole Energy? Look, think about it. How many accidents have you heard about up here in the last couple years? Workplace accidents, where they lost workers?”

“Accidents?”

“Come on, you use Google, right? I have an alert set up on Hunter-Cole.” Shay waited for Colleen to process what she was saying, because people like her never expected women like Shay to be able to do anything with a computer. Which admittedly had been true until a couple years ago, when she started selling her boxes on Etsy, so there was that. “Any time a guy gets hurt on the job, they have this whole team that tries to bury the news, but it still leaks out if you know where to look. It’s hidden, but it’s there.”

“You mean like the man who had the seizure?”

“Well, sure. That. But everyone knows about that one.” In August, a fifty-two-year-old grandfather had a seizure, his first, and fell from the platform. He died in the helicopter en route to Minot. It might have escaped national attention—Shay would bet the lawyers were working their asses off doing damage control—but People magazine ended up doing an article. The man’s daughters were pretty, his grandchild adorable—shit like that sold. “But there’s been others. More than you’ll ever know about if you don’t keep your eyes open.”

Colleen’s chin trembled. “And you think our boys . . .”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I didn’t say that.” Too late, Shay saw the panic in Colleen’s eyes and realized her mistake. “No, come on, honey, you are not going to go there. I don’t for a minute believe our boys were hurt on the rigs. I mean, there’s protocols they have to follow, they have to call the next of kin—”

She seized Colleen’s hand and felt the tremor pass through her wrist. Her fingers were waxy and cold, her polished nails sharp against Shay’s skin. Next of kin, she shouldn’t have said that.

“If our boys had been hurt at work, they’d be busy trying to buy us off. There’d be a pack of lawyers sitting here, and instead all you got is me. It wasn’t an accident. That’s not what this is.”

Shay felt Colleen relax fractionally. Her shoulders slumped and she stared at the sandwich.

“That’s right, eat,” Shay said softly. She waited until Colleen took another bite before continuing. “So, think like the company would. The boys go missing. It could be a hundred things. Guys don’t last out here, the work’s not what they think it’ll be, they don’t like the cold, they miss their girlfriends back home. Whatever. Say twenty percent of them quit the first week, right? And that’s a conservative guess.”

A little color had come back to Colleen’s face. “I didn’t know,” she said quietly. “I don’t know anything. Paul didn’t—doesn’t—tell us. And I didn’t know where to look, who to ask. We don’t have anyone else, any friends, any of his friends . . . we’re the only ones, with a son who came out here to work.”

“Damn, not me,” Shay said, with feeling. “I know half a dozen families with sons up here.”

For a while there it was all the kids could talk about—the rig or the service, the only solid opportunities for boys who graduated from Fairhaven with bad grades and a blemish or two on their records. Fairhaven—a stupid name for a central valley town whose population was half illegal immigrants and the other half competing with them for shit wages. It wasn’t any kind of haven and it sure as hell wasn’t fair, but that’s what they had. Taylor and another boy, Brad Isley, had gone the weekend after graduation; by the end of summer, three more boys had followed them. Two were already back—homesick, overwhelmed, just plain broken by the hard work. “Anyway, the company doesn’t care, it’s just a hole to fill. They need another worm, so they hire and move on—”

“Worm,” Colleen said, interrupting. “I’ve heard that twice today. What does it even mean?”

“You don’t know what that means?” Thinking, What kind of boy doesn't share that, the first thing they learn on the job? “It’s what they call the new guys. First couple months on the rig, they do all the work no one else wants to do, they’re worms. Later they become hands, like the rest of the guys. Roughnecks, roustabouts. You know.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, the companies up here are hiring as fast as they can. A lot of times they don’t even process the applications until the boys are already on the job, just get them to sign all the releases and send them on to HR. And you know HR is in some
office building in another state, and meanwhile up here where the work is getting done it’s all about getting the boys in a hard hat and on the floor. So a couple of them go missing, they don’t care, they don’t have time to care, all they’re worried about is they don’t want any more bad press. So they hand it off to the suits, and they do their thing and keep it out of the news.”

Colleen looked like she was trying to decide whether to confide something. “They called us,” she said after a moment. “Hunter-Cole did. They called Andy at work.”

“And—that’s your husband?”

“Yes. He’s a partner at his firm, his name’s on it, so I guess he was easy to find . . . anyway, the Hunter-Cole management tracked him down. They offered their support, said they would help in any way they could.”

Shay snorted. “Yeah. I bet.”

Colleen nodded wearily. “They didn’t have any specific suggestions. So then when we decided to hire our own detective— ”

“You hired a detective? To look for your son?”

“Well, yes.” Colleen evaded Shay’s gaze; she looked embarrassed. “Someone to supplement the efforts of law enforcement up here.”

“Law enforcement up here couldn’t find their ass in a can. Sorry,” Shay added, regretting the way it had sounded. She was bringing her own issues into this, something she’d promised herself not to do.

“I just thought that someone who was dedicated to the task, who wasn’t juggling a lot of other cases . . . anyway, I had Andy call the guy at Hunter-Cole back. Just to tell him, you know, that Steve Gillette, that’s the detective, would be giving him a call? And suddenly the Hunter-Cole guy got really evasive. Started backpedaling . . . ”

“They’re trained to do that,” Shay said. “Like they learn it in law school or something.”

“So I called.” Colleen straightened in her chair. “I called the Hunter-Cole offices myself. I repeated the same thing Andy said, that Steve Gillette would want access to whatever they could show him—time cards, employment records, like that. And the whole narrative changed. They were polite, but it was like a wall went up. They didn’t so much answer my questions as promise to look into them. Get back to me later. That sort of thing.”

The anger in her voice—that was good; that’s what she would need. “That’s why you’re here, right?” Shay asked. “They told you no once too often?”

Colleen looked directly into Shay’s eyes for the first time since she knocked on the door of the motor home. “Yes. Yes. Andy wanted me to wait. He said . . . he said we should give Paul a few more days, it was probably all a misunderstanding.”

“Fuck that,” Shay said before she could stop herself. “You know, that Steve Gillette, that’s the detective, would be giving him a call? And suddenly the Hunter-Cole guy got really evasive. Started backpedaling . . . ”

“Yes. That’s what I tried to tell him.” Colleen nodded. A moment passed, and then she rested her hand on the bottle and turned it so she could read the label. “I don’t believe I’ve ever had Jack Daniel’s.”

“You want me to pour you one?”

“Maybe. Yes. Do.”


Sophie Littlefield is the Edgar-nominated author of more than two dozen novels, who grew up in rural Missouri. The mother of two grown children, she now makes her home in northern California. Visit her website at sophielittlefield.com.

THE MISSING PLACE
By Sophie Littlefield

America’s new ‘Gold Rush’ turns out to be oil fields in Williston, a few miles south of the Canadian border. Hundreds of homeless men with money descend on the small retirement town, driving the residents out and raising the rent sky high. With men drifting in and out every few weeks and Walmart being the social center of town, it’s not hard to imagine the bar fights, probably over the closest of the local floozies.

Add to that arduous hours the men work, the temporary sleeping camps that spring up over the area, safety regulations that are rumored to be swept under the rug just out of sight of OSHA—or paid off, if serious accidents happen—then it’s not surprising that a couple of young men, a few weeks into their job, simply disappear.

As far as the local police are concerned, it probably got too hard, the work was too rough on them, and they took off. Neither mother of the missing boys believes that story. Each has their own theory and combining their heads and ideas, set about to get the truth.

Colleen, a suburbanite from New England and Shay, used to trailer life in Northern California, have nothing in common but their missing sons. Tempers are frayed, blame is pointed in each other’s direction, but they hold it together long enough to make the grisly discovery.

Littlefield leads us through the snow and slush chasing red herrings, from the oil rigs to the local bars, until we figure out (spoiler alert) that in the end, this is nothing more than a love triangle gone awry. It doesn’t really leave us with a traditional happy ending, but then life rarely does. This is a story of a mother’s determined yearning for the truth no matter what and in that, we are dragged to the emotional ending as harried, exhausted, as those searching. I read this in one sitting, unable to leave the fray with the boys’ lives at stake.

MICHAEL WARREN FROZE. Under the dim, amber glow behind the bar, there were three of them—buzzed cut, clean shaven, and wiry as hell—American marines.

On time, on target, never quit.

The motto came to him abruptly, one every Special Warfare Combatant Crewman (SWCC) in the Navy knew by heart. He had been part of a Special Boat Team based out of Little Creek, Virginia, but that had been nearly a decade ago. Michael felt twisted up thinking about it, the way he did whenever he saw young, gung-ho service-members sporting their pride. As a special operations team member, he’d loved his country and his brothers more than his own life. His team had ferried the SEALS wherever they needed and extracted them during the most intense firefight.

He’d had a reason to live or die then. Michael ran one bronzed hand through his thick, black hair and held it there, the curls tickling his fingers. But there were things he didn’t like to think about either, and whenever the ache rose in his belly because he missed it all, the rest of it tore at him too—so he had to bury everything, forget the past. He’d traded badass Petty Officer First Class Warren for plain civilian Michael, armed only with a smile and a handful of witty jokes. But every now and then, something reminded him.

The smallest of the three marines was wearing a shirt with *Semper Fidelis* stretched across the back in bold print. One sinewy forearm was anchored against the brick wall. A Corona bottle, mostly empty, glistened in the other hand. Another marine, only slightly larger, leaned into the wall next to him and took a chug of his beer. The older one, in his mid-twenties, was cracking open a fresh bottle from a stash in the yellow Firebird parked in the alley. He was African American and built with more mass than the other two, more like Michael, especially back when he had been training.

A man will have a certain serration to him when he returns home from war, Michael thought. An unevenness. He is an instrument of combat, but he brings with him a kind of desperation bewildering to a society without war on its doorstep. A veteran understands that there is brokenness there, but it was the prevailing belief for those on active duty that the brokenness of combat must always be repudiated outwardly. They believed a safeguarded society must never see their hero break.

Let him stew back out here in this snake pit for a while when he gets out, Michael thought, not without resentment. It will drive some humility back into him.

In the haloed streetlight, the chiseled features and agitated, protective stance told Michael the older marine was probably a sergeant, though he probably hadn’t been one long. There was still an air of mystification clinging to him, a perplexity for being alive with all limbs intact somewhere as ordinary as a hometown bar. He had been intimate with combat, and now the sergeant’s lidless gaze squinted into the shadows, blinded by life beyond the burning.

There was another man standing immobile against the wall. He looked to be in his fifties and of Middle Eastern descent. The expression on his face was one that Michael had seen before. The two grunts started to pace, hopped up on booze and rage. Michael swallowed, dropped his hand to his side.

The feeling came again; it rose up like a dark, crestless wave. There was an incessant buzzing like flies pinned to an electric zapper beside his ear. For a moment it all rode together, an entire bayou of mad, sand-caked soldiers and villagers with wild eyes in the blackness, the terrible ringing, the shouting, and the blood. Michael ground his teeth together to find himself in the black.

“The fucking Al Qaeda sleeper cells!” the young marine with the Always Faithful tattoo demanded, sloshing his beer. “That’s what I want to know!”

The Arab said nothing.

“You in that Mosque cuttin’ deals wit’ them,” the sergeant said in a very low tone.

“Yeah, with that ugly motherfucker, what’s his name… Mr. Abdul Asad,” Always Faithful chimed in.

The captive man made a noise in his throat. The sergeant, irritated, turned toward the younger marine.

“Smith, man, that ain’t his name, you fuckin’ dumbass.” He shoved the smaller marine back.

“What? Sergeant Hayes, I thought…” the tattooed one named Smith began.

“A-rabs don’t be callin’ each other names the same way we do,” Hayes corrected.

“You mean that Allah fucking Blah bullshit?”

“The leader’s name’s Abdul-Sami bin Asad bin Ghalib...
al-Salib. Salib’s the family last name. Abdul-Sami’s the first name.

“Why the hell do they have two first names?”

“It’s a title, or some shit, means Servant of....” The sergeant turned back toward the Arab man. “Hey, wha’ do Sami mean?”

The man was still quiet.

“Come on, hajji, teach this inbred muthafucka somethin’ of yo peep’s culture,” sergeant Hayes said, mouth distorted into a half-smile, though there was little warmth there. “Servant of wha’?”

“Servant of the devil!” exclaimed the third marine who had been standing some ways away in the background.

“Patricio,” the sergeant said, “look that shit up. S-a-m-i.”

“Yes, sir!” the third marine, Patricio, said, pulling out his cell phone and fiddling with the touchscreen.

Michael frowned in the shadows. They were too drunk and getting hostile in the middle of downtown—Albuquerque nonetheless. Marines, booze, and deserts didn’t mix. A memory stirred that was both unpleasant and exhilarating. It had been some time since the blood had rushed into Michael’s hands. He ached to grip the chill steel of a rifle, to cradle something painfully real in his arms. A woman was one thing, but risk—it was a formidable infatuation, stronger at times even than love. The tiniest tingle tiptoed like soft December snow up the back of his bare neck.

*I should turn around,* he warned himself.

What was it the Navy psychiatrist had counseled him about his ‘vigilante tendencies? *Haven’t you seen enough combat, sailor? Let the other battles go....*

Before he had joined the military at nineteen, Michael had walked this same alley wearing boots not so different than the old military ones he had on now. He’d slept behind a dumpster over there, curb-stomped a man just there around the corner with the dark all around. The feeling was always at the tip of his toes, crawling over the skin of his feet, up the bones of his ankles, that awful way a man’s skull felt under his boot, how tenuous and soft we all are inside when death comes. Not far down Silver Avenue, under the stars, he had seen what a lifetime looks like as his girlfriend was shot through the head beside him, his tangled fingers slipping through hers.

Michael knew there were wars all around, all the time. There was combat in the streets, in the deserts, across the ocean where millions of stars saturate a strange sky, even behind secret doors—inside of everyone.

On time, on target, never quit.

Michael stepped into the light, boots grinding against the gravel and reverberating down the alley. The sergeant had already turned toward him.

“Evening,” Michael announced, lighting a Marlboro. His zippo reflected the streetlight.

“What the fuck do you wan’?” Sergeant Hayes demanded.

“You boys sure know how to pass the time out here.”

It was a teasing remark suggestive of the movie *Brokeback Mountain*. But there was young, hot blood and old wounds spoiling. The air was explosive.

Michael laughed a little.

“I just trying to keep you straight, shipmate.”

“Hayes,” Smith slurred. “Don’t he look kind of brown to you? Like dune coon brown?”

“Smells like shit, too,” Hayes answered, not taking his hard eyes off Michael.

They gleamed like the edge of two round bones in the yellow light.

“Gimme those,” Smith said as he snatched zip ties from Patricio, who had lowered his cell phone momentarily to pull them out of his pocket. Hayes reached back and took them, watching Michael’s face for some reaction. Anger flashed suddenly in Michael, sighed, and was gone. There was maybe a decade between the sergeant and himself in age. When Michael had first donned his special ops gear, Hayes had been someone’s whining child.

Still, it had been years since Michael had been away from that wreck in the Middle East, from Iraqis and Afghans armed with American guns, from words like honor, glory, and retribution—and from loud-mouthed, gung-ho marines. He knew the loudest ones were often the first to piss themselves during combat. He suspected that Smith might be one of those. Hayes, however, was different. He was changed in the way a man is under that purifying Mashriq sun among a thousand enemy eyes with smiling faces. He was a man who knew what he was made of when no one else was watching.

Michael estimated that Hayes was of no threat on his own. He was a man that under the right circumstances, one might sit down and have a beer with—talk about women, war, and politics; a man he could trust with his life in the field. But it was the others, Smith especially, who aroused a precipitous pack leader factor in young, slightly unbalanced Hayes. He was too new to leadership, too protective to know when to step back, swallow his pride, or call his men off.

“You got a problem wit’ somethin’ here?” Hayes wanted to know, muscles already strained for a fight.

Michael could almost taste the tension. Hayes wanted to make it about race.

Once two black boys had tried to jump Michael in elementary school over his shoes—the shoes he had earned for mowing several neighbors’ yards for a month. The boys had assumed he came from a wealthy white family and owed them the shoes for that reason alone. They didn’t know about his Hispanic side, how his stepfather’s family was made up mostly of convicts doing time in the state pen, or the fact that his father was a Vietnam POW who had not lost three of his fingers to Charlie in a prison camp so that every spic, nigger, and zipper-head in America could beat his son’s ass for being born mostly white—that Michael was more scared of facing his father if he lost the fight than getting beaten by two boys.

But after Michael bashed the side of one kid’s head with a large rock and that kid ended up in the hospital, everyone at Michael’s school started calling him racist. By the time Michael went into the military, he was sick of social divisions. He had made some friends for life of all colors and cultures.
He’d bled red for his men, and they had bled red for him. He was too old for the game that Hayes wanted to play.

“The truth is,” Michael began, “I don’t really care for what you’re doing to that man right there. It ain’t Christian.” He smiled his most disarming smile.

“What the hell?” Smith exclaimed.

“Servant of the All-Hearing!” Patricio shouted suddenly. Everyone stopped and looked at him.

“Abdul-Samit,” he explained.

“All-Hearing…” Michael said quietly, rolling the words around on his tongue evocatively.

“Listen here, cracka’,” Hayes started, “you best be turnin’ yo’ white ass back round and mind yo’ own damn business.”

“Listen, boss,” Michael retorted. “My great grandfather Billy might have done just that while his cousin Budro was out banging poor Bubba’s wife in the cotton field. I’m trying to right the wrongs here.”

Deep down inside, Michael didn’t like many people in general, whatever their background. Some of his worst betrayals were not those contrived by enemies on a battlefield but by friends at home with an Anglo last name. He had seen startling feats of altruism by Afghans in villages with half-starved children and insurgents at their back doors, as well as the kind of self-sacrificing brotherhood that mortality brings out of all good men. But there was ugliness, terrible ugliness inside of human beings, and war had ruined his belief in morality. Buttons were real, and Hayes was wearing his loudly—something he’d likely picked up from growing up black in a white neighborhood. So Michael and Hayes had a lot in common.

When Hayes lunged at him, Michael expected it. He had taken his last drink over an hour ago and had twice walked up Central Ave to the freeway and then back downtown again. He was stone sober and dodged the shot. Turning, he knocked Hayes in the back of the head with a quick jab. The hit snapped Hayes’s head forward, making him stumble. Michael’s knuckles burned, and he had to grind his teeth around on his tongue evocatively.

The other marines were already rushing Michael, so he swept Smith to the ground. The young marine was not as coordinated as he would have been sober. His rage made him clumsy and easy to restrain. Patricio kicked Michael sharply in the back, sending a stabbing pain into the slipped disc of his spine. But his adrenalin had kicked in. With two arms, he hefted his captive, rolling onto his side so that Patricio’s hefted Muscles were real, and Hayes was wearing his loudly—something he’d likely picked up from growing up black in a white neighborhood. So Michael and Hayes had a lot in common.

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When he went limp, Michael let go, watched the marine sergeant fall to the ground with a thud. He had done it all automatically, but seeing the young man sprawled awkwardly on the street like that, felt something akin to guilt—though he knew the marine would recover in a moment or two.

“You fucking killed him!” Smith cried, half blinded by booze and blood.

Shadows danced across the light as he rushed at Michael. Michael had prepared for the force as soon as he realized Smith had misunderstood what had happened, but the full impact never came. Instead, there was a squelching sound and a weird, cold feeling. The marine was staring at him, glassy-eyed and expressionless, a boy’s face with nothing in his eyes.

Michael staggered backwards, dizzily clutching at the knife protruding from his stomach. Between his fingers, the blade was lit up with the street lights, while the hot blood began to pool below, dripping down his thigh and steaming onto the black pavement. Hayes groaned a little, holding his head, and sat up.

The two other marines had gathered around their sergeant and were quiet, watching Michael scoot against the nearest adobe wall to keep from collapsing onto the ground. He struggled to pull his shirt off.

“What’s tha’ ring he got on his finger?” Hayes asked suddenly.


Smith spat out a wad of blood, then hissed, “Holy shit.”

Michael yanked the tactical blade out, grimacing, and shoved the shirt he had succeeded in pulling off against the wound. Parts of the shirt turned red quickly under his fingers. His SWCC insignia ring for SBT 20 glimmered with its skull and crossbones shaped into a gun and sword.

“Special ops,” Patricio exhaled aloud.

“I ain’t going down for this shit,” Smith said, uneasily. “I just thought he was some crazy homeless dude.”

Michael’s face twisted with the sharp pain in his belly, though he was starting to feel dizzy. His vision was beginning to diffuse into that grey fog he recognized from when he had been wounded during a firefight in Baghdad. The haze seemed to come across a black sea, out from the alleyway shadows, bringing the tide with it. He’d walked its shores for so long—sometimes he’d even stirred its depths with his fingertips. But now its cool waters came up to his toes, lapped his ankles. He felt alone.

“Maybe I should call an ambulance…” Patricio said, ready to dial numbers on his phone.

Hayes put his hand on Patricio’s arm. “He knows our names.”

“Well, what are we gonna do with him?” Smith was scared now. An assault on a combat veteran was likely to cost him his career and land him in the brig. He was young and ambitious and didn’t want to be locked away doing hard labor for a good part of his life. “Let’s just say how he attacked us first.”

Even in his clouded state, Michael understood. He had faced the same fate at one point because of a mistake he made during a mission. He almost felt sorry for the kid, but
the blood loss was making him light-headed, and it was hard to hate like that.

“There’s a camera,” Patricio whispered, pointing up to an old security camera angled towards them in the alley.

“Fuck me!” Smith exclaimed, starting to panic.

Hayes, protective of his men, said, “We’re here on leave. If that piece of shit is even working, no one here knows who we are. It can’t even see him,” he reasoned, pointing in Michael’s direction. “We got to move over there and finish it…make it look like hajji did it.” The Middle Eastern man had remained against the wall through the whole thing, his hands still zip-tied, like he was afraid to run. The three marines looked at him.

Patricio tightened his grip on his phone, didn’t move. Hayes gave him a long, threatening look until he pushed his phone back into his pocket.

“Smith,” Hayes ordered, moving out of view of the camera. “You do it.”

Smith’s mouth gaped in silent protest.

“Are you a marine?” Sergeant Hayes demanded.

The question was a familiar one, helped to break the surreal quality of the situation.

“Yes, sir!” Smith replied, grateful for the distraction.

“Do you want to stay a marine?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then, do it.” Hayes handed Smith a 9mm from out of his jacket. It had a suppressor to muffle the sound. “It’s not registered…won’t be traced.”

Smith’s face was starting to swell from the earlier brawl. It made him look soft and even younger than before. Patricio came up, wiped it down with the handkerchief he kept in his back pocket, leaving the fabric between Smith’s hand and the metal. They tried handing the gun to the Arab.

Patricio held his captive’s arms with one hand and used a utility knife to cut the zip-ties apart with the other. Smith took the gun hesitantly like it burned. Patricio came up, wiped it down with the handkerchief he kept in his back pocket, leaving the fabric between Smith’s hand and the metal. They tried handing the gun to the Arab.

The Arab approached Michael. He muttered something in Arabic. The tone was not friendly, and then he spat onto Michael’s direction. “We got to move over there and finish it…make it look like hajji did it.” The Middle Eastern man had remained against the wall through the whole thing, his hands still zip-tied, like he was afraid to run. The three marines looked at him.

Patricio crouched down over Michael and grasped the dog tags he always kept around his neck.

“Warren,” he whispered. “His name is Warren.”

Smith made a sound in his throat.

“We are Oscar Mike,” Hayes ordered, jerking his head toward the car.

The marines, like one form, turned quickly away and got into their vehicle. The headlights erupted like two great, open eyes, blinding Michael until the car lights grew dim and were gone.

High above, familiar stars glimmered with that same dispassionate aura that Michael had observed throughout the years. They glittered the same way now as they had in Iraq, out in the wild Gobi, or in exotic cities with skies bisected with curved structures. He couldn’t feel his feet anymore, but it was somewhat comforting to think that the stars had remained unchanged—whether he had killed a man or made love below their steady gaze, even when a child was born new into the world, or when a man died alone.

The Arab approached Michael. He muttered something in Arabic. The tone was not friendly, and then he spat onto the side of Michael’s face before walking away. In a way, it almost hurt worse than the wounds. The burning had faded into a terrible ache that Michael could no longer tell the source of. There was a loneliness in him as he watched the stranger’s back move further away from him. One frozen light dangled above him. He struck him as ironic to think that just beyond the wall at his back an entire lit-up bar was in motion—drinking, brawling, flirting, drowning out the noise of the world, of war and sick infants, of hunger, of grief, and how much hatred endures among human beings, forever tying knots around and between people.

Michael thought of his mother, of how it felt to be a child in someone’s arms, to be enfolded, DNA to DNA, for those few sweetly human moments in the lifetime of the Universe, to feel like an extension of someone else, to be made from the same stars and to die among them.

The shock had come. He felt himself going cold, dissolving into the street, part of the dark and the light. He had held men’s hands in these moments and wept when they left him to venture on their own into the black. Now there was an empty boat for him bobbing in the rolling waves pouring out salty and stinging from that black, fondling him in the cold, and he felt, if he could just climb in one last time—the suffering, the sadness, the remorse, it would all end.

Blood spread out, slipped between one hand and the asphalt. He thought of his wife and his two kids, how he had left the house at midnight while they were asleep without saying goodbye to drown out his recurring nightmares at the bar.

“There is no justice, son,” his father had told him once.

“There is just us.”
Every Wife Has A Story
A Carol and Jim Andrews Baby Boomer Mystery

Funerals Can Be Murder
Every Wife Has A Story
Fifth in the Series

Susan Santangelo
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Baby Boomer Carol Andrews is shocked to hear that her hunky landscaper, Will Finnegan, has died, and feels obligated to pay her respects to his family. But this Finnegan’s wake is shut down before it even starts, when Carol discovers someone has added a pair of scissors to the guest of honor’s chest. Once again, her husband Jim and the Fairport police forbid Carol to get involved. But the always curious Carol can’t help herself when one of the most important people in her life jumps to the top of the suspect list.

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This mystery puts the FUN in funerals!
FROM ACROSS THE POND

Tick tock

By Chris Simms

Time’s running out. Darren and Elaine need money for heroin. And if they don’t get it soon, ants will start crawling beneath their skin. They hope to snatch a handbag at the main train station in Manchester. But unbeknownst to them, the city has been hosting a royal visit. And the Prince’s schedule is set to clash with theirs...

TICK TOCK BY CHRIS SIMMS

The incessant sound finally forced his eyes open. There it was, sitting on the breezeblock beside the mattress. Tick tock, tick tock. Round-faced pain in the arse. He focused on its hands. Twenty to three. In the morning? he wondered. What time did we crash out? Surely later than that. He swivelled an eye.

The small rip in the bottom corner of the blanket nailed over the window frame was glowing white. Day, then. His stomach growled and he had the notion it was twisting in on itself, trying to wring out any fragment of food that might have been within it. Tick tock, tick tock. Letting out an exasperated sigh, he turned onto his back. ‘Fucking starving.’ From under the sheets beside him came a low groan. ‘Elaine? I said—’

‘Fuck off.’

He propped himself on one elbow, blinked a few times and looked down at his body. He still had his t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms on. His battered trainers poked out from the other end of the grimy sheets. Letting his head fall to the side, his eyes went to the little tray on the bare floorboards. A quick hit, just to dull the hunger. Among the paraphernalia next to the little Perspex bag was a syringe, soiled teaspoon and lighter. Frowning, he collapsed forward onto both elbows, the movement taking his upper body off the mattress and his face to within inches of the tray. Empty. The fucking bag was empty. He was about to curse her when a memory fought its way through the cotton wool filling his head. I had the last hit. After she’d passed out. Bollocks.

He raised himself onto his knees, further disturbing the sheets in the process. She yanked them back over her head without a sound. His stomach rumbled again and he got to his feet. Walking a little unsteadily, he crossed the room and stepped out into the dim corridor.

The kitchen was opposite. Opening the door revealed a room with ruptured plaster where a cooker, dishwasher and radiator had once been. In the middle of the room was a table. On it was a bottle of ketchup and a crumpled plastic bag. He looked inside, removed the final slice of bread, squirted ketchup over it then smeared it about with his finger. After licking it clean, he folded the slice over and crammed the entire thing in his mouth. The jaw muscles of his gaunt face pulsed slowly as he chewed. The first swallow sent his guts churning, reverberations spreading straight to his lower stomach. He forced the last lumps down before stepping back out of the kitchen and into the bathroom next door. A single cardboard tube was lying on the cistern. ‘Shit,’ he murmured. ‘I need to shit.’

The front door opened and his head poked out. Littering the floor of the shared hallway was the usual assortment of junkmail and flyers. Hanging from the letterbox was someone’s newspaper. Quick as a flash, he tugged it through and retreated into the little flat; a trap-door spider with its prey. The headline on the front cover announcing that day’s royal visit was torn in two as he scuttled back to the toilet.
She heard a door bang shut followed by the plastic clatter of the toilet seat. Immediately she grubbed across the bed, head emerging above the works spread out on the tray. Bastard. The last of the gear was gone. Bastard. 'Bastard!' she shouted. No reply.

When she stepped off the mattress, the floor felt cold underfoot. She slid her feet into her trainers, fingers running through her lank brown hair as she did so. Out in the corridor, she thumped a fist against the bathroom door. 'Bastard.' But the word was delivered with less venom: last to sleep got last go with the gear. That was the unspoken rule.

Dropping the empty bread packet back on the table, she checked the bathroom door was still shut before crouching at the filthy cooker in the corner to open the drawer in its base. Inside was a three-pack of Mars Bars. She ripped the wrapper off one and started to bite. The toilet flushed just as she swallowed the last of it down. 'You finished the end of the bread,' she announced, as he stepped back into the room.

'Come on,' he replied, gently prodding the sore below his left nostril.

'What?'

But the question didn't need asking. Their supply of heroin was gone and the clock was ticking on when the need for more started to really kick in.

'Train station,' he said. 'We haven't done that for a bit.'

She hovered at the chiller section, one ear cocked toward the till. As soon as she heard him say, green, not red, she lifted the tube off the shelf and stuffed it up the elasticated sleeve of her faded red top. When she joined him at the counter, the cashier was turning back with a pack of red Rizlas in her hand.

She eyed the pair of them suspiciously. 'Anything else?'

He shook his head.

'Then that's thirty pence.'

Rummaging in the pocket of his tracksuit bottoms, he extracted a few coins and held his dirty palm out.

Gingerly, the shop assistant picked out a twenty and two fives.

As they tottered along the pavement with stiff little steps, he spoke from the corner of his mouth. 'What did you get?'

She produced the tube of Dairy Lea.

He scowled. 'That it?'

'Yes.' She unscrewed the cap, tilted her head back and squirted a worm-cast of pale yellow into her mouth. Memories came flooding back. The farm out near Oldham, sitting in the kitchen as her mum placed a mound of triangular slices on the table, each one thick with creamy cheese.

'Give us it, then.' His hand was raised, fingers outstretched.

She passed it across while pressing the blob against the roof of her mouth, forcing it between the gaps in her teeth.

The gently curving concourse which led up to the entrance of Piccadilly Station was heaving. His eyes darted about. Handbags were hanging off shoulders everywhere. They continued along the pavement, a row of shops on their left. Every ten metres, he noted with irritation, there seemed to be the day-glo tabard of a British Transport Police Officer.

Behind the bus shelter to the side of the station's main entrance was an eight-metre high metal post. The CCTV camera on top of it whirred faintly as the lens angled down.

Inside the station's monitoring room, a man in a white shirt marked with Security spoke up. 'Darren Fletcher. You don't want him in here.'

Next to him was a man wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt and turquoise tie. 'Who?' he asked with a crisp, Home Counties accent.

The camera operator pressed a couple of buttons, his other hand working a joystick mounted at the centre of the console before him. The main image on the bank of screens switched to the flow of people outside. 'Him,' the operator stated, zooming in. 'Utter scrote. He'll get in with the crowd, looking for handbags.'

The man in the suit checked the digital clock on the wall. Two minutes past three. 'The cavalcade is due in twelve minutes, the train departs at three twenty-five. Can you radio your colleagues at the entrance to pull him to one side?'

The operator nodded before speaking into his headset. 'Gavin? You've got a bag-snatcher at about ten o'clock, moving towards the doors. Male, mid-twenties, shaved head with a black shell suit and dirty white trainers. Tell him to hop it.'

Fletcher saw the British Transport Police officer standing by the far side of the doors raise a hand to his ear piece. Instinctively, he changed direction, putting a large man between him and the officer. The policeman gestured to his colleague and they started straight towards him, eyes sweeping the flow of people. Fletcher kept in close to the overweight man, head ducked down. The policeman went up on tip toes as Fletcher passed through the doors. Some kind of crowd control barriers were up.
ahead and he cut into Superdrug.

Elaine trailed him in. ‘What are you doing?‘

‘Can’t believe the amount of pigs;‘ he replied, making his way to the rear of the shop. ‘Wasn’t sure if the two at the doors had spotted me.‘ Moving behind a shelving unit, he unzipped his top. ‘Swop.‘

‘You what?‘

The skin on his neck was beginning to itch and he felt sweat breaking under his arms. An hour, he thought. Even if things go well, we won’t be scoring for another hour. He jiggled from foot to foot. ‘Give us yours. Come on.‘

She peeled off her hooded top, revealing a pale green t-shirt beneath. Once they’d exchanged items, he licked his lips, thinking about the barriers. Must be a football match or something. The sleeves of her top were too short for his arms and he checked to make sure the track lines on both his forearms weren’t showing. ‘Right, we keep away from the main hall. That bit outside the coffee shop with all the chairs? Let’s try there first.‘

‘OK.‘

He moved back to the shop’s entrance, aware he was about to become visible to the station’s CCTV cameras once more. Lowering his head, he rejoined the mass of people, oblivious to the enormous plasma screen high up on the far side of the terminal.

The local news was beaming out a live report about Prince William opening a new drug treatment centre in nearby Salford. The footage showed the next-in-line-to-the-throne waving at a modest crowd before climbing into the rear of a black Daimler. The car took central position in a row of vehicles which was then led off down the street by two police motorbikes.

The camera swung back to the reporter who announced the Prince was travelling by public train back to London.

Skirting round the base of an escalator leading up to the balcony terrace, the pair made their way past a WHSmith, Boots and Orange store. The shops ended at a seating area. Waist-high canvas screens bearing the coffee chain’s logo had been erected around a cluster of metal tables and chairs. People were sipping at drinks and picking at muffins.

Fletcher sidled up to the perimeter, making a show of studying the departure screens above the entry points for the platforms. Pointing at the screen for the three twenty-five to London, he murmured, ‘Four tables along. Woman with her back to us. See?‘

Elaine’s eyes slid across. The lady was somewhere in her fifties. An expensive-looking beige leather handbag was hanging off the back of her chair, which was within easy reaching distance of the perimeter screens. Elaine gave a quick nod.

Fletcher thought about the little pub tucked away in the maze of streets making up the Northern Quarter nearby. ‘Meet outside The Crown and Anchor if I get it.‘

The control room operator narrowed his eyes. ‘Fletcher. Next to Café Gino. He’s scoping it out.‘

The man in the suit sighed. ‘Which screen?‘

‘Four. He’s changed his top somehow. Might be working with that skinny lass. The one just entering the seating area now.‘

The suited man looked at the screens displaying the view of the station concourse. Officers were positioned at the barriers at the end, preventing any vehicle from turning off the main road. He raised a handset to his lips. ‘Control Point, Piccadilly. Cavalcade status, please.‘

‘Mancunian Way, passing the University buildings. ETA, five minutes.‘

He lowered his handset. ‘I don’t need any commotion when they enter the terminal. Get that little prick lifted.‘

The camera operator flicked to another view. Four British Transport Police officers were positioned at the top of the stairs leading up from the taxi rank at the back of the station. ‘Dave. You and one other. Café Gino. There’s a male, mid-twenties, shaved head, red top. He’s standing by the side of the partitions of the seating area. Remove him from the terminal, immediately.‘

Elaine made her way between the tables, stopping before the target. ‘That chair taken?‘ she asked, wiping her nose with the back of a hand.

The woman looked up, registering the dishevelled appearance and unwashed hair. ‘Erm—sorry.‘ She gestured towards the café. ‘My husband. He’s in there getting served.‘

Elaine pretended to be in two minds over whether to sit down anyway as Fletcher unhooked the handbag and stuffed it up the red top he now wore. He started making for the stairs which led down to the station’s taxi rank. Two fluorescent jackets appeared directly in front. One officer raised a hand. ‘You!‘

Fletcher spun on his heel and burrowed back through the crowd, risking a glance over his shoulder as he did so. The two officers were trying to wave people out of the way, one of them speaking rapidly into his radio. Fletcher moved past the Boots and Orange store, realising the net would now be closing. But the bag had too much inside to give up yet.

Through the plate glass doors at the entrance, he saw more officers starting to turn their heads as a colleague waved a
hand. Shit. That left the far side doors, the ones leading out into the rear car park. He broke into a half run, knocking some kid over. The crowd thickened closer to the barriers and he bent forward to force his way between the press of bodies. Past a Cornish Pasty place and then out into the fresh air.

He ran round the corner, lungs burning. Before him a deserted service road ran along the back of the shops that lined the station’s concourse. Markings on the concrete denoted bays where delivery vehicles were permitted to unload. On the other side of the road was row upon row of vehicles.

Fletcher started towards the main road, but quickly realised he would never make it from sight before the pursuing officers appeared behind him. After fifty metres, he veered into the car park. Gasping for breath, he crouched down beside a vehicle and peeped through its windows. A moment later, three officers ran round the corner of the terminal. They slowed to a stop and looked to each side.

Up on the roof of a renovated warehouse next to the railway terminal, an officer lowered his binoculars. ‘Something going on in the car park behind the station.’

His colleague gazed downwards. ‘A guy just ran out. See him squatting behind that car? About a dozen rows in? I think those three officers are after him.’

His colleague spoke into the mouthpiece of his headset. ‘Obs Point Five to Control Point Piccadilly.’

The suited man in the station’s monitoring room lifted his handset. ‘Go ahead Obs Point Five.’

‘We’ve got an adult male concealing himself in the British Rail car park behind the station. Three Transport Police appear to be trying to locate him.’

‘You have visual contact?’

‘Yes. He’s…hang on…fourteen rows down, next to a dark blue people carrier. Renault, I think. It’s six cars in.’

The suited man turned to the camera operator. ‘Did you get that?’

‘I did, but we’ve got no cameras there. Gavin? There’s an apartment hotel overlooking you. Surveillance unit on its roof has spotted him. Fourteenth row of vehicles down. Hiding by the side of a dark blue people carrier, six cars in.’

The suited man spoke into his handset. ‘Control Point Piccadilly. Cavalcade status?’

‘Turning off the Mancunian Way. ETA, three minutes.’

Fletcher could feel his heart hammering at the back of his throat. He looked down where the sleeves of Elaine’s top had ridden up. Beneath the rivulets of black dots running down each forearm, his veins strained against the skin. They’ll give up, he told himself. There must be hundreds of cars here.

The uniform in the middle seemed to look up at a building then nod. He spoke quietly to his colleagues. One peeled off to the left, one to the right and all three started forward. Fletcher glanced in the other direction. A good hundred metres to the main road and the safety of the Northern Quarter beyond. The officers were now three rows in. They’ll give up soon, he thought. They must. But they continued to advance, one with his eyes firmly on the vehicle Fletcher was hiding behind.

A small white van appeared round the corner of the terminal, coming from the direction of the catering units used for supplying the inter-city trains with food. The officers were now eight rows away. Fletcher watched as the van pulled up in the loading bay behind one of the shops and turned its hazard lights on. A man of about twenty got out, hurried round the vehicle and disappeared through the rear door of the premises. Fletcher could see he’d left the engine running.

The surveillance officer on top of the nearby building spoke up. ‘Obs Point Five to Central Control. A van has just pulled in at the rear of one of the shops that faces out onto the concourse.’

The suited man looked at the bank of screens, wishing he could see what was going on. ‘From where?’

‘Hang on…’

Keeping as low as possible, Fletcher ran along his aisle of cars and bounded across the narrow road. He yanked the van’s door open. Yes! Keys were hanging from the ignition. As one of the officers shouted behind, he slammed the gear in first, popped the handbrake and shot forward. In the rear view mirror, he watched the three sprinting officers rapidly fall behind. ‘Come on!’ He screamed triumphantly.

Peering down from the roof, the surveillance officer said, ‘The male has just taken the vehicle! He’s proceeding towards the main road, turning right…no, he’s stopping…’

Fletcher pressed the button for the passenger side window. ‘Elaine!’
The officer on the roof spoke again. ‘He’s picked up a female pedestrian. They’ve now turned right, heading away from the station along Store Street. I repeat, away from the station.’

In the monitoring room, the suited man’s shoulders relaxed. ‘That’s fine by me. Calvacade status?’

‘We are nearing the junction of London Road. Train station is on our right.’

The camera operator pointed. ‘There they are. On number two.’ The screen showed the main road outside. Led by the two motorbikes, the state vehicles were slowly approaching.

Fletcher pulled the handbag out and tossed it onto Elaine’s lap. ‘Fuck me! Soon as I took it, every pig in that place was after me.’

Elaine was laughing with excitement. ‘I was sure they had you.’ She unzipped the bag, wondering what the smell was as she reached straight for the purse. ‘Check this!’ A fan of notes was in her hand, all tens and twenties.

Fletcher was now turning off Great Ancoats Street into some waste ground behind a derelict mill.

As the suited man watched the motorbikes turning right, something needed him. The barriers at the end of the concourse had been raised, an officer waving the royal vehicles through. ‘Control Point to Obs Point Five. Had that van approached from the main road?’

‘No—it came along a service road which leads to some kind of commercial premises at the far end of the staff car park.’

Fletcher pulled to a halt. ‘What else is in there?’

_The farm_, Elaine thought. _The smell reminds me of the farm._ The mobile phone in the handbag’s inner compartment started to ring. Elaine took the call. ‘Yeah, yeah—you’ve lost your stuff, Mrs.’ She tossed the handset onto the white bags piled up in the rear of the van.

The suited man in the monitoring room was frowning. ‘All deliveries to those shops were suspended. Can you still see the vehicle?’

‘Negative, visual contact lost when it turned off Store Street.’

Elaine looked over her shoulder at the sacks. That’s the smell, she realised. Fertiliser. She reached over her seat and opened the uppermost sack. Wires ran into the pale blue granules. And there was a little digital clock. The thing was ticking away, a few seconds off twelve.

The royal cavalcade was half-way up the concourse when, just over a kilometre away, a dull whump reverberated across the city. The surveillance unit on the roof watched a massive old building collapse in on itself before a huge cloud of dust billowed up towards the sky.

Chris Simms is the editor of Case Files, the Crime Readers’ Association’s online magazine. You can subscribe to Case Files for free at [www.thecra.co.uk](http://www.thecra.co.uk). Along with nominations for the Crime Writer’s Association Daggers (for his novels and short stories), and the Theakston’s Crime Novel of the Year award, Chris was selected by Waterstone’s as one of their ‘25 Authors For The Future’. He continues to feverishly scribble away in a small hut behind his house.

Discover more at [www.chrissimms.info](http://www.chrissimms.info) or at [www.facebook.com/AuthorChrisSimms](http://www.facebook.com/AuthorChrisSimms).
Truchaud had realized very early in his life that he wasn’t very good at comforting people. He was well aware that in the current situation he was showing little improvement. He also felt uncomfortable holding a slightly built teenaged girl so closely, who was considerably younger than he was. It wasn’t as if he knew anything about her at all, apart from the fact that she had just found her employer very messily dead.

There was one other thing he knew; she had just failed to sell him a bottle of wine. All right, so he didn’t actually want any, and that wasn’t why he had come into the shop in the first place, but she wasn’t to know that. He hadn’t even consciously looked at her face. He could see from the position of her head on his right shoulder that she had brown, shiny bobbed hair, but that was about as much as he had worked out by the time that the gendarmes arrived.

‘Good evening, Commander. I see you’re busy,’ said Captain Duquesne drily as he walked through the door, followed by a couple of uniformed gendarmes he recognized from earlier in the day. They were armed to the teeth and looking as if they might actually bite.

‘Good evening, Captain,’ he replied. ‘The body’s through there, in the office.’

The Captain and the male gendarme walked through into the office. Truchaud watched the younger officer walking in first with his gun at port. The other gendarme, a red-headed woman, remained at the door of the shop, brandishing her weapon just to make sure that Truchaud and the shop girl didn’t try to escape.

They were back out again very quickly, with the Captain already barking instructions into his handset. When he had finished, he looked at Truchaud and the girl coldly.

‘Do we know who he is?’ he asked.

‘Jérome Laforge,’ said the girl. ‘He’s the owner.’

‘And how do you know that? Did you actually touch the body?’

‘No,’ she wailed. ‘It’s his office, and that’s the same old jacket he always wears.'
Who else would it be?
The Captain ignored her question and the desperation in her voice. He continued, 'Who discovered the body?'
The girl looked at him. 'Well I suppose that was me too,' she said rather brokenly, still crying.
'And you are?' asked the gendarme, still ignoring her distress. 'Suzette Girand. I work here.'
'What do you actually do?'
'I'm a salesperson. I try to sell wine.' She emphasized the 'try', and looked up over her shoulder straight at Truchaud. He caught his breath. He had not seen eyes that green since he had last looked at 'the one that got away', so many years before.
'So, can you tell me exactly what happened?'
Truchaud told him the story from when he had entered the shop to the moment of the Captain's own arrival. The Captain then interrogated them rapidly: first the one, then the other.
'Did either of you hear any shots?'
'Not that I'm aware of, and I like to think I would recognize a shot if I heard one,' replied Truchaud.
'So would I, Commander, so would I. Now, I noticed you mentioned that you had entered the shop before Miss Girand here. How exactly did that happen?' There was a pause, and then he added, 'Miss Girand?'
She tried to speak amid the sobs. 'Well, it had been a quiet afternoon, so I crossed the road to have a cup of coffee with my friend who works in the café over the road. We were sitting where I could easily see the entrance to this place if anyone should actually come in, and I could get back to the shop long before they managed to leave again.'
'Your friend will corroborate that statement?' enquired the gendarme.
'Of course,' she said. 'Ask her.'
'I'm quite likely to do that,' he said. 'When did you last see your employer alive?'
'Yesterday.'
'So how did you get in today?'
'I have my own set of keys, so I let myself in after lunch and opened up.'
'Been a busy afternoon?'
'No. As I said, very quiet. This gentleman was only my second customer.'
Duquesne harrumphed. 'Well,' he said, 'it's not going to get any busier. We're going to have to shut the shop up for the moment, as it's now a crime scene.'
The girl let out an explosive wail, and pushed her face again into Truchaud's shoulder for a moment. Then she looked up again, more frightened. 'I'm not under arrest, am I?' she asked, her eyes opening even wider.
'Not at the moment,' he said, 'but I don't need to tell you … don't leave town.'
'But I'm due back at university in Dijon on Monday,' she said desperately. 'My tutor is expecting an essay in then, at the latest.'
'Then what you have to do is get that essay done. What will happen on Monday, we will have decided by Monday. And the same thing about leaving town goes for you too, Commander Truchaud.'
'I wasn't planning on leaving town. I've told you that already.'
The gendarme noted down their names and addresses, looking up at Truchaud when he gave her his address. He wondered whether she was the same policewoman who had sat with Michelle awhile after she had discovered Bertin's body. Duquesne looked at the crying girl with increasing irritation. 'Commander Truchaud, can I trust you to make sure Miss Girand here gets home safely? That way I can hang on to my gendarmes to investigate the crime scene. I think you had both better have one of my cards.' He issued them both with one of his business cards: Truchaud's second of the day.
'Now once you have got her home, go home yourself. If I need to see you tonight, I'll know where you are. If I don't come and see you tonight, can you come down to the gendarmerie in the morning?'
'Of course.'
'And, mademoiselle, may I also request that you stay home tonight? I would rather you weren't off gallivanting with boyfriends. I may need to be able to find you too. I will make a telephone call when I want to see you, and as soon as I know what we're to do about university on Monday.'
Truchaud and the girl left the shop, and she directed him where to go. He decided not to tell her that he had grown up in Nuits-Saint-Georges, and that he knew every street in the place.


Born into a military family, R.M. Cartmel was educated at the Sherborne School in the South West of England and Oxford. Cartmel served as a practicing doctor for over three and a half decades. “The Richebourg Affair,” Cartmel's debut novel, combines two of his lifelong loves—writing and traveling throughout France's exquisite Burgundy region. R.M. Cartmel is currently at work on book two in the Burgundy wine trilogy, The Saint-Georges Episode.
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“Ray Daniel knows what he writes and has written a winner.” — Mike Cooper, award-winning author of Clawback

“Readers will cheer for this avenging less-than-angel as she goes after some very bad people.” — Publishers Weekly

“With its relentlessly escalating tension, and prose as crisp and luminous as a fall day in the Flat Tops Wilderness, Trapline grabs a reader and doesn’t let go until the last page.” — Gwen Florio, author of Montana and Dakota

Sabrina opened the red envelope and saw one word. Mox. Soon.
**ANARCHY**
*By James Treadwell*

Narration is a gift; the power and ability to lead a reader through a tale with beauty, adeptness, and intelligence, while offering up that twinge of absolute terror, is not something given out to authors every day. James Treadwell is one of those ‘few’ who has the art of narration mastered. With every page a new event unfolds, beginning with the tale of a teenage girl who finds herself in utter fear.

Goose is an officer in a small, isolated town. She has just been thrust into a mystery that could very well end her career. The teenage girl named Jennifer was brought to the jail by Goose. The girl doesn’t speak, and will only be with Goose for a short time before she’s picked up and taken to ‘a facility’ where, perhaps, they can help extract information from her regarding an odd death. Jennifer is locked in a cell, yet when Goose returns to the jail, the door is wide open and the child has disappeared. Constable Jonas Paul is Goose’s friend. He is more than a calming influence; in fact, he never seems to get uptight about anything. And he wants to help Goose find this girl gone AWOL before it’s too late.

No one is exactly thrilled with Jennifer. Most people at the jail would rather she stay lost in the woods. After all, she’s someone that has a pall of creepiness about her, almost making her look like she has serial killer tendencies. But for the life of Goose, she can’t help but want to aid the girl. She feels something strange going on—and soon, things turn from bad to worse.

This is a fantastic novel that has a group of journeys that eventually come together. The scenes and characters are interesting, and the stunning descriptions of locations make the reader see quickly that even though the author’s goal was to write about ‘magic,’ he most definitely created it in the process.


**MISSING YOU**
*By Harlan Coben*

“Missing You” is an appropriate title for this book, because I’ve never read any Harlan Coben books and I realize, after reading this page-turning gem, that I have been missing out. Coben is an accomplished writer and after only reading the first chapter, you know you are in a professional’s hands. There are so many mysterious plot threads created that my poor tired eyes were propped open into the wee hours as I desperately read on to discover the reveals.

It all begins with NYPD Detective Kat Donovan finding her ex-fiancé’s profile and picture on a dating website, but when she contacts him he doesn’t seem initially to recognize her. She is confused, but at the same time she doesn’t have time to ponder it for long, as she becomes preoccupied with the imminent death of the imprisoned man whom she believes killed her father. He has never revealed the truth as to why her father was murdered; this is her last chance to confront him.

Amid all this emotional chaos, enter teenager Brandon whose mother has gone missing, but nobody believes him. She’s supposedly on holiday with a lover whom she met on the same dating website where Kat has spotted her ex-fiancé. As the tale unravels, nothing is as it seems, and the truth is terrifying. Kat discovers some frightening truths, as readers are treated to one of the slickest thrillers released this year.

As I closed the cover on the final page, all I could think was: I’m going to miss you, Mr. Coben. Luckily, there are twenty-five other published books of Coben’s, so I won’t be missing him for long.

Reviewed by Susan May, author of “Back Again” •

**FATAL FORTUNE**
*By Victoria Laurie*

Abby Cooper is psychic and she trusts her intuition. When the police show Abby a surveillance video of her best friend and business partner, Candice Fusco, shooting a man in cold blood, she can’t believe what she sees. Then she receives a cryptic voicemail from Candice, who has disappeared. Abby decides to go to Las Vegas to search for her friend and find out the truth. Despite the police’s suspicion that Candice is involved with the Mob, Abby just can’t believe it.

When Abby arrives in Vegas, she finds a rigged game of dirty double-dealing that might just cost her life. Can Abby find Candice and get the problem sorted out before the police track Candice down and arrest her? Can Abby protect her friend while she protects herself?

This book was a definite cut-above average mysteries and had twists and turns that kept me guessing while I was reading. Ms. Laurie has created a winning protagonist and an intricate plot that kept me up late so that I could find out whodunit. I recommend this series and look forward to the next installment. Bravo!

Reviewed by Holly Price, author of “At Death’s Door” (released soon) •

**BLUE WARRIOR**
*By Mike Maden*

Adrenaline junkies will be thrilled to know that Troy Pearce and his drone technology team are back in action.

Pearce is the CEO of Pearce Systems, a company that builds and specializes in drones and drone operations. Troy is much more at ease when he’s out in the field, leaving the executive office behind. Traveling a great deal, he and his men go around the world to help with various problems, and this time out, they are headed to Mali to help former President Margaret Myers; she’s a friend of Troy’s, and is wrapped up in a secret mission that’s all about unearthing a true ‘pot of gold.’

This rescue mission takes Pearce directly into a fight between the Tuaregs, led by a man who goes by the name, Blue Warrior, and Chinese soldiers led by a take-no-prisoners tyrant. It seems that some very rare and priceless minerals have been found in the Sahara and, instead of individual treasure hunters going for the spoils, some very powerful nations, as well as a few international companies, are coming out of the woodwork to get the goods.

Who wins will be based on who believes whom. The Tuaregs are a tribe of warrior nomads fighting for independence. The Chinese offer their help to get rid of the Tuaregs once and for all, attempting to make the Malian government believe they are only trying to provide aid. The old ‘Al-Qaeda also join the skirmish, and Pearce and company soon must understand and uncover each thread that’s being pulled, while also searching for Troy’s friend who has asked him for help in getting out of there. Utilizing the drone equipment, their courage, and a team with amazing intelligence, Troy faces the possibility of a region committing genocide all because of the basic deceit of power hungry individuals searching for wealth.

Suspense lovers will find their hearts racing because of the abundant and creative detail. The plot is rich, and the villains are…everywhere.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion •
BONES NEVER LIE
By Kathy Reichs

The beloved Dr. Temperance Brennan is back on the page, and the fan favorite forensic anthropologist is embedded in yet another incredible thrill-fest.

This time around, she’s been called in to consult on a cold case investigation. In this particular case, however, a veil of creepiness falls over Temperance, as she realizes that what she’s investigating seems highly familiar. The connection can be made between the murders of two young girls in Charlotte and Vermont to a case Temperance worked on decades ago in Canada. At that time, a hideous killer named Anique Pomerleau was responsible for the torture and murder of young girls. In addition, this horrific woman also attempted to kill Dr. Brennan who, at the time, was up north working with Canadian detective, Andrew Ryan.

Seeing as that the past may just have resurfaced, Temperance has a great deal on her mind, including resurrecting a detective to help her solve this case; a man who was not exactly the happiest of people, and who disappeared from the police force.

Tracking down Ryan, Temperance does not take no for an answer, and convinces him to go back to Canada in order to stop Anique Pomerleau once and for all. You would think that after all these years this woman would be exhausted, but now the killer seems to be stepping up the pace, murdering at a much faster rate than ever before.

A deliciously frightening plot, the reader goes on a journey that’s creepy, thrilling, and hugely surprising to both them and Dr. Brennan. As the story progresses, each twist is better than the one before, leading to an ending no one sees coming. Although Bones is a fantastic television show where no fan is absent Dr. Brennan in their lives, the amazing books that Reichs creates are still the cream of the crop when it comes to her popular character, drawing readers in for a ride that leaves them absolutely breathless.


CHRISTOPHER’S DIARY: SECRETS OF FOXWORTH
By V.C. Andrews

There is no doubt that there are very few readers out there who do not remember where this all began. The Dollanganger books by the incomparable V.C. Andrews are held in the memory of millions of readers. She presented, by far, some of the very best in YA fiction: dark, creepy, and a series that had you on the edge of your seat just waiting for the next one to come out.

Now, ghostwriter Andrew Neiderman has been delving into the Dollanganger clan, and is producing these books to expose secrets about the evil Foxworth Hall, and how the quartet of memorable kids had to enter Foxworth’s attic, while their lying mother attempted to erase them from her life so she could begin again.

Taking place in the here and now, teenager Kristin Masterwood, has lost her mother, who just so happened to have been a distant relative of Malcolm Foxworth. Kristin’s father is hired by the bank to look into the remains of Foxworth Hall and evaluate it. But once they arrive on the ghostly property, Kristin finds a certain dusty treasure: a box containing a leather-bound book left behind by Christopher Dollanganger. Kristin decides to read the book, and begins to learn all about the children and the real truths that occurred in the horrible mansion.

But the information has a strange effect on Kristin, and she and her boyfriend end up reading the diary out loud together in the attic of Foxworth. Although the Dollangangers are there in spirit, the fear that comes from the story surrounds Kristin, and how just by opening that book, she brings ‘Flowers in the Attic’ back to life.

With one more still to come in this ‘journey back to Foxworth,’ this tale is a true escape with moments that bring the past alive and combine it with a frightening present that would make V.C. Andrews extremely proud.

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

BLOND CARGO
By John Lansing

A fantastic read, this genuine thriller featuring Jack Bertolino is the continuation of Lansing’s previous tale, “The Devil’s Necktie.”

Jack Bertolino owns his own business. Most of his time is spent protecting clients, but Jack also does a little extra ‘work’ on the side for anyone who needs him.

In the previous book, Jack was dealt a horrible blow when his son, Chris, was the victim of a murder attempt. Chris was a college student and budding pitcher on the baseball team at the time of the attempt, and was shot in the arm…ending his future in sports. His father put all his will and determination into finding the man who harmed him. And it was Vincent Cardona, the local mafia boss, who aided Jack by providing him with information that led to Jack’s eventual takedown of the man who hurt Chris. When all this came to pass, Jack accepted the mobster’s help knowing full well that he would have to repay Cardona someday. . . Now is that day!

Summoned to the Cardona household, Jack is asked (told) by Vincent that it’s time to repay the favor. It seems that Cardona’s daughter has come up missing, and it’s Jack’s job to find her and return her to her father as soon as possible. Uncovering clues, Jack discovers that the beautiful, blond-haired mafia princess is the victim of a kidnapping. The door soon opens wide on a team of rich, politically-connected creeps, who are in a very special business that involves the selling of sex slaves to middle-eastern harems.

This extremely fast and well-thought-out thriller will remind some of James Patterson’s early works. The action is great right up to the end and, luckily, Jack Bertolino will be staying on the fiction scene to continue his search for any and all bad guys to come.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion
**TUNNEL VISION**
By Aric Davis

Mandy Reasoner was murdered fifteen years ago. A villain was caught back then—her boyfriend, Duke. However, there is a group now attempting to free Duke, knowing that the police interrogation that put him away led to a confession that was basically forced out of the drug-addled, exhausted boy after seventy-two hours of grilling.

Fast forward fifteen years, and we have a young man who is both killer, drug dealer, as well as P.I. who actually helps people. Whether it is to find their lost loved ones, or simply stalk the cheating wife, Nick takes many jobs. But what gives him his basic income are the substances he grows that his distributor wants. Unfortunately, Nick is about to take on a case from a frightened Mom who needs him to watch her daughter and make sure nothing ‘bad’ happens to her.

June is a young lady who looks just like Mandy Reasoner. Seeing as that Mandy was her Aunt, the resemblance is no surprise. But when her best friend, Betty, finds out about this mysterious murder that was buried and hidden from June by her own mother long ago, the girls get together to figure out what really happened. This is the subject of their school paper, and they will leave no stone unturned until they dig up the truth.

When Nick joins up with Betty, finding her more than pretty, he begins to offer information he has found out about the killing long ago, talking to her about every clue that the police swept under the carpet in order to get Duke to confess. One clue being a journal Mandy left behind—a journal that may have been used to help Duke escape.

An interesting plot, yet it gets repetitive. The reader is on edge, but the plot just keeps on coming with hit after hit. Truly, a brilliant look into the all-too-possible future of the human race.

Reviewed by DJ Weaver (WebbWeaver Reviews) co-author of “Collecting Innocents” published by Suspense Magazine

**FALL OF NIGHT**
By Jonathan Maberry

Jonathan Maberry’s newest release, “Fall of Night” is the perfect sequel to his already bestselling “Dead of Night” saga. Picking up the story right where it left off, Maberry ushers in the next installment in a zombie apocalypse that will wipe out humanity.

When the inventor of Lucifer 113 goes missing, it’s believed that Patient Zero will never be discovered…until Patient Zero goes on a pre-conceived rampage, infecting victims outside Stebbins, Pennsylvania, and the believed containment area. Who is this Patient Zero, and what is his motivation for infecting the world with a man-made virus tweaked to turn the living into the walking, eating dead?

Maberry’s apocalyptic scenario is frightening to the tenth power and the ‘creep’ factor is off the charts. To say his vision of the future of mankind is too close for comfort is understating the obvious in this horrifying tale that just keeps on coming with hit after hit. Truly, a brilliant look into the all-too-possible future of the human race.

If you are a fan of zombie tales don’t miss this one from the Master. “Fall of Night” will satisfy your blood-lust for a long time to come.

Reviewed by DJ Weaver (WebbWeaver Reviews) co-author of “Collecting Innocents” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine

**DEADLINE**
By John Sandford

Murder, money and meth—what more could a reader ask for? John Sandford’s “Deadline” is a sharp crime thriller with killer dialogue that leaves you shaking your head because it’s so good.

Virgil Flowers of the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension gets a call at three in the morning from his friend Johnson Johnson. Dognappers are afoot, stealing countless dogs in a small town in Southeast Minnesota. Will Virgil come down to solve this mystery? Of course, even if he does think it’s a bit silly to be woken up at 3:00 a.m. for stolen dogs, as he is used to murders and gun fights, not kidnapped pups.

Upon Virgil’s arrival to the small town of Trippton, a corrupt school board votes to kill the reporter who has discovered their multi-million dollar embezzlement scheme. And at the same time, a meth-cooking site has been discovered and the key dealer who may be involved in the dog-nappings is on the run. Virgil must solve all three crimes before more dead bodies are added to the count—including his own.

“Deadline,” the eighth book in the Virgil Flowers series, doesn’t beat around the bush in both its strong, colorful dialogue and straightforward prose. Sandford, the pseudonym for John Roswell Camp, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, and his journalism skills shine throughout, opting for clear-cut action and description rather than ambiguity. However, this does not leave the thriller feeling less than; the suspense is spot on, the characters are a lively bunch, and Sandford’s commentary on bureaucracy and politics is entertaining.

“Deadline” is highly recommended for gritty crime thriller lovers looking for a punchy fix. While some of the dialogue may be a bit rough for some, “Deadline” is still worth checking out: It is a delightfully smart and saucy foul-mouthed cop novel that left me chuckling out loud and wanting more. The next Virgil Flowers novel can’t come out fast enough.

Reviewed by Sara Giusti

**FIVE MINUTES ALONE**
By Paul Cleave

A sad tale of folks who definitely do not deserve what life has handed them, which made some run into a so-called ‘guardian angel’ that helped them cope.

In New Zealand, Detective Inspector Theodore Tate is a man who has had his own troubles ever since his daughter was killed by a drunk driver, and having to deal with a wife who suffers memory lapses since the accident. The man was also in a coma for a time and has recently come out of it. Detective Carl Schroder, Tate’s ex-partner, has also just come back to the land of the living from a gunshot wound, but has retired from the force. Tate is matched with a new partner, Detective Kent, and they are sent out to investigate the death of a convicted rapist who has just been released from prison. Found near a railroad track, it seems that he has committed suicide. But while looking deeper, this duo uncovers a tape that shows Smith recently stalking Kelly Summers, a woman that he attacked in the past. Tate and Kent decide to visit Kelly’s home, and come across evidence that Summers may just have gotten her revenge…but not alone.

A certain, so-called ‘helper’ is offering a deal to victims out there, a chance to spend five minutes alone with the person who has ruined their lives or harmed them in some way. Taking justice into their own hands, however, has consequences. Forensics don’t lie, and forgetting something vital is “Murphy’s Law” at its finest. But who’s really to blame? A victim getting their say, or a ‘helper’ who may just be in the game for their own personal purposes?

The plot is outstanding and the drama and questions keep on coming, in this great read that brings up a whole new thought process about criminal vs. victim. The author has done an outstanding job of asking readers ‘what if?’ people could be their own judge, jury, and executioner.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion
THE SECRET PLACE
By Tana French

Holly Mackey, a student at St. Kilda’s in Dublin, finds something on a bulletin board at the school; this has been dubbed ‘The Secret Place,’ which allows girls to post whatever is on their minds anonymously. This particular posting, however, is frightening. It’s the photo of a very popular murdered boy who attended the private boy’s school, located very close to St. Kilda’s. Written on the photo are the words, “I know who killed him.” Holly goes to the police station to see Detective Stephen Moran.

Detective Moran has been working cold cases for a while and wants desperately to try his hand at solving this murder. Teaming up with Detective Antoinette Conway, they head into the world of private education to find out what happened to Chris Harper, and why anyone would want to kill him.

The cops have their work cut out for them. Many girls attend St. Kilda’s, but there are two specific cliques that the detectives seem to think are the instigators of what goes on inside the historic doors. These cliques are sworn enemies, and spend all their time trying to get even with each other to see who will come out on top.

The two detectives throw themselves into the investigation full-force. Interrogating both schools, they ask questions in order to uncover the secrets that got this boy killed. And as they dig deeper, it becomes clear that the detectives seem to think are the instigators of what goes on inside the historic doors. The only thing that stands in the way of the secret is the bond of female friendship, which are so tightly woven that the evil they’re protecting can cause two jaded detectives to become terrified beyond belief.

Tana French has put together a definite ‘must-read.’ The investigators are slick, and the kids are sly, brutal, and pugnacious. This plot may change your view about the benefit of expensive, private education… especially at St. Kilda’s.

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

LOOT OF THE SHANUNG
By L. Ron Hubbard

In this short tale, readers follow Jimmy Vance. This is one tough newspaperman working in Shanghai who will follow a story to the very end. Like a dog with a bone, Jimmy needs that next headline and lives to solve crimes.

A story comes to his attention that has his adrenaline pumping. A well-known man named George Harley Rockham has disappeared, and his daughter, a truly stunning woman named Virginia, is asking for help in recovering her father. In addition, the person who can do just that will receive a one hundred thousand dollar reward. Let’s just say that this is an offer that the avid investigative reporter cannot refuse.

But Jimmy’s investigation turns more than difficult. Rockham is a billionaire; a man who has more enemies than Jimmy has energy, which means there are a host of people who are working diligently to make sure Rockham goes the way of the dodo. And as Jimmy begins to uncover the secrets surrounding the kidnapping, he finds himself knee-deep in a mystery involving a steamship. This transport, called Shanung, has a lot to do with the case, and Jimmy finds himself not only the focus of guns and bad guys, but also the gorgeous, Miss Virginia, who may or may not be a victim.

This is one of those tales where it’s so descriptive, you can literally smell the cigarette smoke of the newsroom, hear the click of a bad guy’s gun behind your skull, and listen to the high heels of a dame clicking on the wet cement of a Shanghai street. In other words, Hubbard gives readers a deliciously fun time in the golden age.


DEATH OF A DOG WHISPERER
By Laurien Berenson

It’s summertime in Connecticut, and Melanie Travis is hoping for some lazy days relaxing with her extended family. Melanie’s family includes her husband, Sam, their two-year-old son Kevin, her nine-year-old son Davey (by ex-husband Bob), and her imperious Aunt Peg. Oh, yes, and six Standard Poodles, who are easily the best behaved dogs I’ve ever met. Of course, they’re all show dogs, trained to be well behaved. Showing dogs is still another aspect of Melanie’s busy life.

When ex-husband Bob introduces Melanie to his new friend, “dog whisperer” Nick Walden, who has an uncanny gift for decoding “dog speak,” Melanie is skeptical at first. But when she observes first-hand Nick’s easy rapport and connection with dogs, she agrees to introduce him to Aunt Peg, hoping that, with Peg’s impressive canine connections, Nick will acquire some new clients. All is going well, and with Aunt Peg’s assistance, Nick’s client list begins to expand among the well-heeled dog owners of Fairfield County, all of whom are anxious to discover exactly what their pampered pooches are thinking.

When Nick is discovered dead in his home, his sister Claire enlists Melanie to help track down the killer. It looks like Melanie’s dream of lazy summer days will remain just that—a dream.

In this seventeenth Melanie Travis mystery, Laurien Berenson once again introduces readers to the inside world of dog shows. “Death of a Dog Whisperer” is a well-plotted tale with likeable characters—both human and canine. Boomer and I loved it. We give it a five dog bone review. Woof!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Funerals Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine •

SEEDERS
By A.J. Colucci

A recluse by the name of George Brookes lives on Sparrow Island, and is dealing with some frightening things. This once peaceful botanist was behind experiments that set free a monster, one that has a wide range and can bring the world to extinction. Not being able to live with what’s coming and the role he plays in it, George tosses himself off a cliff.

A few weeks later, George’s heirs arrive on the island. George’s daughter, Isabelle, comes with her three teenagers and her ward, Monica. Also arriving is Dr. Jules Beecher, a friend of George’s and a fellow botanist, as well as Ginny Shufflesbottom, one of those interesting English women who put up the funds for all of the dead man’s research projects. Not only have they come to this remote Canadian island to grieve but they are also there to read the Will, settle the man’s estate, and help catalog George’s possessions. Unfortunately, they will also be stranded on the island for two weeks until the next supply boat arrives. They get more than they bargain for on this unusual trip.

What is slowly unveiled is that during George’s experiments, he discovered a way for plants to communicate with humans. These plants can now speak about the pain they endure and the fear they have about what humans are doing to their planet. The plants are unhappy, and the visitors start to realize how much when the voices out in the woods begin.

The teens are sent out to find a diamond left to Ginny in the Will that is missing, and Isabelle is doing her best to keep everyone out of trouble…but the earth is about to have an uprising all its own.

Horror fans will love this one; this is a creepfest du jour. And be nice to your houseplants. Because by the end of this one, the very true reality of humanity’s destruction of habitats will definitely be looked at in a whole new way.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion •
DEAD BETWEEN THE LINES
By Denise Swanson

Devereaux Sinclair (Dev) has opened an old-fashioned five and dime store in her small Missouri hometown and it's a big change for her. To keep her business in the black, she opens her shop for local clubs to meet.

On the first night of the Stepping Out Book Club, the speaker storms out after being attacked by book club members for using sexism and scorn for small towns in his poetry. Later that night, the poet’s body is found outside Dev’s store.

Dev doesn’t want to have a bad reputation for her shop, so she decides to investigate on her own. There are two interesting men in her life: Dr. Noah Underwood and Deputy U.S. Marshal Jake Del Vecchio and both want to help her ask questions. As she gets closer to the truth, Dev realizes that she just might be the final chapter in this murder mystery if she’s not careful.

I found this to be refreshingly witty and the story is fast-paced and fun. I believe Ms. Swanson has a winning series on her hands and I am looking forward to the next installment.

Reviewed by Holly Price author of “At Death’s Door” (released soon)

THE MYTHOLOGY OF GRIMM
By Nathan Robert Brown

Before beginning this incredibly cool book, it’s important to note that this is the mythology of the Grimm TV show, and not an in-depth journey into the actual fairytales. For anyone who read Brown’s other book covering the popular Supernatural television series, you will absolutely be thrilled and intrigued by this one.

Everyone knows that the Brothers Grimm created some of the most frightening tales ever told. Far from the ‘Once Upon a Time’ stories that always provided happy endings, Grimm was all about how far you could go to scare all the children out there. And even after all this time, Grimm is still making all age groups want to hide under the covers.

Beginning with a bit of historical background, readers learn facts regarding Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. More than interesting, the author touches on the Grimm’s trials and accomplishments, from losing their father to pneumonia; to their eventual study of law. Certainly determined, the Grimm brothers tried to make the best of their modest status while surrounded by wealthy and/or noble classmates. The brilliant minds of this duo remain unmatched in fairytale circles; and the success of today’s television show proves that the name Grimm remains popular.

Covering the pilot episode and why Little Red Riding Hood was the tale chosen to begin the series, this book talks about everything from the Big Bad Wolf to the Three Bears that a young blonde knew all too well. Medieval weapons used in the show are described to fans, as well as data found throughout the book defining Grimm words (i.e.; the occupation of Ratcatcher). Every once in a while a ‘Tasty Morsel’ is also thrown in that offers a little something extra.

This is one of those fun encyclopedias that opens the door on a show that captured the imaginations of 2014, by utilizing the incredible imaginations of two brothers who spun suspenseful tales that will far outlast the series.

FOUND
By Harlan Coben

Coben has created a bevy of adult novels that forever remain in the ‘best of the best’ category. But his ‘turn’ into the YA world, with this incredible series, has also proven him to be a suspense master that can weave a plot that all mystery/suspense/thrill-chasers can sink their teeth into.

The life of Mickey Bolitar is a busy one, to say the least. The main issue for Mickey is the tragic death of his father, which has now been over eight months ago. What Mickey thought to be true is not; an exhumed coffin holding only ashes, has Mickey fired-up to discover the facts about his missing dad and track down the truth.

It is also sophomore year for Mickey and he is basically alone, except for his Uncle Myron. The bad things in Mickey’s life seem to worsen by the day. His friend, Spoon, is in the hospital; his mother is in a drug rehab program; and his girlfriend, Rachel, won’t speak to him.

Now, Mickey’s friend Ema needs his help. She begs Mickey to aid her in finding her missing boyfriend; yet the ‘boyfriend’ was only online, so it becomes more than a chore, considering Mickey doesn’t even know if the guy is real. Add in his troubles with Troy—the star player on the varsity basketball team who is most definitely Mickey’s rival and nemesis—and this kid’s life goes out of control. A drug scandal also occurs where Mickey may end up with all the blame, with Troy being, yet again, at the center of it all.

The plots and subplots are many, with Mickey getting in over his head at every turn. Coben, as always, leaves just enough on the ‘bone’ as the last page is concluded; just that little touch of mystery that’s like lightning in a bottle, reminding readers that Mickey Bolitar is far from over.

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

AMERICA’S MOST HAUNTED: THE SECRETS OF FAMOUS PARANORMAL PLACES
By Theresa Argie and Eric Olsen

One of the most interesting parts of history—whether it be American or all the other countries of the world—are the myths, legends, and perhaps just gossip that ‘stuck’ when it comes to the ghostly hauntings and fearsome past of a particular location. Asylums, cemeteries—from the tale of Lizzy Borden’s home to the strange ‘disappearance’ of Jamestown—there are particular locations that hold everyone’s interest and still cause goose bumps to this day. And when it comes to this particular work, the duo of Argie and Olsen band together to present some of the most frightening and chilling locations in America.

Not only do they tell the background of the location, but they also provide their own personal experiences. The readers can sit in their homes and read all there to know about the Queen Mary in California; the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum in West Virginia; the Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville, Kentucky; and the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, Ohio. These are just a few out of the top 10 U.S. locations that are spoken about, while attempting to unveil the truth.

With each location, the authors not only offer the background in regards to why and how the particular area/location came to be, but they also offer extra information that includes their own private moments with dead ‘souls’ that are still living and lurking within the buildings. The authors allow the reader to enter and explore each and every place mentioned, and experience what in particular the authors saw and felt in each one.

For anyone who is extremely interested in the thrill of the unknown, or getting an education of the very real places that are around us each and every day, this is one of the most unforgettable, knowledgeable, and fun books you can read.


RAGING HEAT
By Richard Castle

I’m a huge fan of the television series, Castle, and the weekly antics of the assorted cast of characters, from the mystery author Richard Castle played by Nathan Fillion to his muse and romantic partner, detective Kate Beckett, played by Stana Katic. Both of them and the supporting players only enhance the fun of the show, so it becomes more about them than the mystery of the week. On the show, Castle writes mystery novels featuring a NYPD Homicide detective named Nikki Heat, who is based on Beckett. In the cleverest way to publish a tie-in novel I can possibly imagine, Castle’s latest book is available for fans and mystery readers to enjoy. Whoever the author is ghostwriting these books knows not only the nuances and hidden jokes for true fans of the show, but also how to write a cracking great mystery.

A hole appears in the middle of the glass structure of the Hayden Planetarium thanks to a body hurtling through it. Was there a parachuting accident or something more sinister at play? Nikki Heat teams up once again with journalist Jameson Rook to solve the crime, but as they progress, the clues begin to dry up. While fighting for answers and her feelings for Rook, Heat must also prepare for a potential disaster as Hurricane Sandy begins its path northward, heading straight to New York.

This series of books, whether picked up by a fan of the show or someone who has never seen an episode in their life, will find “Raging Heat” to be a winning and compelling tale. Previous knowledge of the earlier titles is not necessary, but will be eagerly sought once the final page is turned. Feel the heat.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers, author of “Long Overdue” •

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THE FINAL SILENCE
By Stuart Neville

Raymond Drew has a mission: He wants to die in the river where he lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland. No muss, no fuss, no family—he just wants to end it all, and make sure no one goes into his house. There are things in there that he should’ve destroyed many times over, but he was unable to, and now he can’t live with it. Locking the secrets inside, Raymond heads to the pub for a final drink, and then walks straight to the river. Throwing his keys in, he follows face-first for an icy cold death.

When the body is found, Rea Carlisle is told that she is the inheritor of a house that an uncle (who she never met) used to own. The lawyer’s instructions are easy: Head to the house and look for any documents, bills, and papers before claiming the property. Seeing as that her uncle had barely any possessions, the cleaning is quick. The only thing they can’t get to is the back bedroom which remains locked and no one can find a key.

Taking possession, Rea finds a crowbar in the garage and breaks through, she sees a dark room with nothing but a desk and a light bulb. The desk has one drawer containing a notebook full of names, newspaper clippings, locks of hair, and handwritten entries—a catalog of victims.

Scared beyond belief, Rea wants to go to the authorities, but her political father asks her to wait, wanting no scandal to fall on him. Instead, she asks an old flame, Jack Lennon, for help; Jack is a police officer who’s currently on suspension. As they investigate the hideous journal, they learn things they should’ve destroyed many times over, but he was unable to, and now he can’t live with it. Locking the secrets inside, Raymond heads to the pub for a final drink, and then walks straight to the river. Throwing his keys in, he follows face-first for an icy cold death.

THE BETRAYED
By Heather Graham

Once again, Heather Graham has outdone herself. “The Betrayed” took me on a fantastic trip to Sleepy Hollow and I’d travel with Graham anytime. She never disappoints and this novel is no exception.

It’s Halloween in Sleepy Hollow and it’s started out with a bang. Maureen “Mo” Deauville, and her wolfdhound Rollo, find the head of the well-liked politician Richard Highsmith. Mo and Rollo often help the local police find people, living and dead, but this is their first head. It’s displayed on an effigy of the Headless Horseman. Mo’s unusual ability to see and talk with the dead is helpful. This time, Richard’s ghost is nowhere to be found, neither is his body.

Aiden Mahoney is awakened by the voice of his longtime friend Richard Highsmith, telling him, “They got me.” He knows in his heart that Richard is dead. He hasn’t settled into his new position in the FBI’s Krewe Unit, which handles weird cases. Aiden is not sure he belongs in this group, he pushed his ability to see ghosts to the back of his mind as a child and never let it resurface. Now he must in order to find out who killed his friend.

Time is running out in Sleepy Hollow as the bodies and heads pile up. The only survivor of this gruesome killer is a child, whose mother has just lost her head. Aiden, Mo, Rollo, and the Krewe must use all their abilities to solve these crimes. When the child is kidnapped along with a friend of his deceased mother and a cop, the team fears the worst. As the suspense increases, so do the feelings between Aiden and Mo. This chilling novel has everything: suspense, romance, intrigue, and an ending that takes your breath away.

When you think about where you grew up or where you live now, pay attention to the history of the land. Listen to the local folklore, because sometimes legends come to life.

REVIVAL
By Stephen King

We begin in a small town in Maine. Jaime Morton is the youngest in a big, loving family. It is the 1960s and life is good, quiet... and then a stranger comes to town. This is the stage for King’s latest novel, and most would agree it’s the familiar stage that fans have come to expect from the ‘master of horror.’ Tension builds, and behind the smiles await the screams. (For both characters and readers).

Reverend Charles Jacobs is moving into the community with his child and lovely wife, to take on the role of spiritual counselor for the congregation of ‘nice’ people. Charles is a fun guy, even if he’s a bit odd. He has a passion for electricity, and finds ways to relate electricity to Bible stories for his sermons, as well as lessons he teaches to the kids. He’s a good man, but when tragedy strikes, Charles finds himself forced from his job and the friends he has made, including a young man he cured with his knowledge of electricity by allowing the boy to speak.

Jamie Morton is the boy readers follow. He has a first love, a first break-up, and faces the world. Meeting up with the reverend later in life on his own journey, Jamie is dealing with some rough issues. He is heavily addicted to drugs, and Charles helps to cure Jamie so he can forget the abuse and live a good life. Turns out, this electric treatment he provides holds far more danger and horror for Jaime than he can possibly imagine.

King has put lightning in a bottle for this latest novel that promotes the chills and fear he’s famous for from the very first page. As always, when you believe something is about to happen, King makes sure it doesn’t. And when you believe you know exactly what the ending will be, King expertly proves, yet again, that he is one storyteller that will never be figured out.

Rick Putnam is a recent Vietnam vet who works as a courier for a Washington, DC television station, while trying to put his life back together after being injured in the war. It's the long ago days before digital photography and instantaneous communication, and Putnam's job is to deliver news film from the site to the TV station. It is often a race against time with a news broadcast minutes away, but Putnam has the motorcycle and the skill to do the job.

After he picks up film from a news crew doing an interview in suburban Virginia, the entire crew dies in what could have been an automobile accident. And as more deaths occur and Putnam's own life is threatened, it becomes clear that someone doesn't want a story told. And the story involves highly placed politicians in the United States and Vietnam.

Rick Putnam uses his BMW motorbike and the speed of the chase to outrun the demons of his memories of Vietnam, as well as the long black car that seems determined to cause his death. Along the way, he finds a dangerous money trail, and there are people who don't mind killing to cover their tracks. Putnam hooks up with a Native American activist who understands the legalities and illegalities of the seamy side of Washington, and is attracted to him as well. Together they narrowly escape the bad guys time after time, making good use of the new Washington Metro system, then under construction.

"Courier" is a tense story set in the days before social media, when news professionals still needed to develop film in a dark room and splice footage together. Author Terry Irving clearly knows the inside of the news business in a different time, and the suspense never lets up from the first page to the last.

Reviewed by Kathleen Heady, author of "Hotel Saint Clare"

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**YOU**
By Caroline Kepnes

Stephen King's 1987 "Misery" was one of those novels that had everyone talking. The insanity and obsession of Annie Wilkes was both mesmerizing and horrifying in equal quantities. In the same year, the film Fatal Attraction gave us the iconic portrayal of obsession with Glenn Close aiming her crazy desire at Michael Douglas. They were visceral experiences spawning a myriad of copycat plots, but I personally don't think anything has come close to creating their claustrophobic feel until I recently read "You," debut novel from talented U.S. author, Caroline Kepnes.

From the first chapter, you're sucked into the world of bookstore manager Joe Goldberg, whose instant attraction to a random customer, Guinevere Beck, takes obsession and love to a whole new level. She has a boyfriend, but that's no problem for Joe. And the demanding gal pal who gets in the way? No problem for Joe. These snags have a way of working themselves out when Joe is around. He tracks the love of his life, frighteningly via social media, and things head down a very dark and dangerous rabbit hole with some people not coming out alive. That's love, and Joe will do anything for love.

Beck is not a perfect girl; she's self-indulgent and insecure, but Joe still loves her. It's his hilarious commentary on her and her friend's failings that make this book special. You might think being inside the head of an obsessive narcissist with murderous tendencies wouldn't be the most pleasant of visits, but thanks to Kepnes's witty prose, you actually come to like Joe—he's kind of cool. Each time you open the pages you are both excited and terrified to discover what he will do next. I don't ever want to meet someone like Joe, but boy I sure do love him as a character.

Reviewed by Susan May, author of "Back Again"

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**PARIS MATCH**
By Stuart Woods

Another Stuart Woods book is on its way to the masses. Stone Barrington is back to give fans another fun-filled ride of action and suspense.

Fans are brought to the City of Light, as Stone Barrington and his police commissioner pal and wife head to Paris. The police contingent is going to a meeting that will include other justice officers from various countries, and Stone is headed there in order to be at the grand opening of l'Arrington, a first-class hotel that he just happens to own.

Stone's most recent lady love, Ann, has to stay in the states because of the amount of work she has on her plate—being Chief of Staff to the current ‘first lady of the land’ who's running on the Democratic ticket, attempting to become the first female President of the United States.

Nothing can be easy or relaxing when it comes to Stone’s life. In fact, right when the plane hits the tarmac, Barrington is informed by a CIA buddy that there are Russians in the city—former enemies who are lying in wait, gunning for Stone because of something they believe he was responsible for in the past. When Stone is driven to the hotel, there are even more people awaiting his arrival, including a woman who's a designer of couture clothing, as well as a young lady who has been a 'friend' of his for many years. The charismatic Barrington certainly has a stable of ‘pals’ that could enhance or destroy his sojourn to Paris in minutes.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S., there's a rumor going around that Stone is also involved with the lady on the cusp of making history, gossip that will certainly derail her chances of becoming President.

With threats coming in every direction, the typical 'life' of Stone Barrington will again please fans. Stuart Woods never fails when it comes to making his readers happy, and they will never fail him, as they look forward to the next Woods's creation.

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

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**DAMAGE**
By Felix Francis

This is the fourth incredible solo novel written by Felix Francis, son of the eminent mystery novelist Dick Francis, and in this latest story, the action and suspense are right on target.

Jeff Hinkley, an undercover agent with the British Horseracing Authority, is checking out a racehorse trainer that has been banned from racing for drugging the animals. Jeff is at the Cheltenham Racing Festival following his target when he sees a killing occur. The culprit is caught and hurried off to jail. But only a few days later, the horses test positive for drugs, which could be the beginning of a scandal that will set the British horseracing world on its ear.

Soon the Horseracing Authority gets a ransom demand. The blackmailer is asking for a whole lot of money, and expects the sport of racing to pay up or he/she will make sure that the entire sport becomes nothing more than an entry in the history books. He promises that the animals will continue to be drugged, and the fans and professionals can kiss their sport goodbye.

As a result, Jeff is handed a new assignment. Looking into the ransom demands, the mystery grows deeper. He finds that this person is not going to go away anytime soon, so Jeff must use his intelligence and talents to track and beat the blackmailer, who is someone that turns out to be very hard to catch.

An extremely good story for the mystery lover, and most especially the horseracing fan. With a fascinating plot, Felix Francis continues to prove that he owns the wonderful writing style of his famous dad; yet he still has the fresh voice that allows him to carve a niche in the literary world that is all his own. Readers can keep looking forward to the next mystery that will open up the gates and unveil the underbelly of the racetracks of England.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion
A PROMISE TO PROTECT
By Patricia Bradley

This novel is the second in the Logan Point series and it's easy to say that the series is continuing as smartly as it began.

Sheriff Ben Logan goes to Memphis at the behest of Tony Jackson, an old friend from Logan Point and the brother of Ben's former girlfriend, Leigh Somerall. Tony's in trouble, but as the story begins, Ben arrives in a Memphis hotel room and stare down at the dying body of his friend. Apparently, Tony has some information about the shooting of Ben's father. But as the life drains out of him, Ben still doesn't know the reasons behind why the shooting would be a subject that would make another want to take his life.

In addition, his old flame, Leigh, makes an 'out of the blue' request by asking him to take the time to protect her brother. From what, Ben still doesn't know, but it becomes too late to change course. No matter who he asks, there's no one who can tell him what or who was after Tony, and why he could perhaps have been silenced because of Ben's father.

After a bit of time, and a gut instinct, Ben decides to look after Leigh and her son, TJ, as someone may now have changed their goal to come after her. Leigh is a doctor working in Logan Point. Yes, she wanted protection for her brother, but she, personally, doesn't want anything to do with Ben, which makes his work harder. She's been carrying a secret around for years, and when Ben and his men take over her protection, that one secret might change many lives before the killers are caught.

This story is one of young love, mistakes, and the deep emotion of a mother for her child. With a little vengeance and risk thrown in to increase the adventure, this author has done a terrific job of exploring relationships, while at the same time offering action in Logan Point.

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

DECEIVED
By Irene Hannon

This next book in the incredible series, Private Justice, is yet another in the line of terrific reads by this author.

Kate Marshall is at home in rural New York State finishing a birthday cake for her son, Kevin, when a car pulls up to her house. She's been waiting for her husband and son to arrive back from a small fishing expedition, but the car contains the local law enforcement coming to tell her that there has been an accident up at the lake and her family has gone missing. Although her husband is finally found dead, her son remains a mystery.

Jumping ahead three years, Kate is now living in St. Louis running a business that helps people find jobs. Also, and perhaps even more importantly, she and her company help them rediscover their self-worth. During a quick stop at the mall one day, Kate spots a young boy riding on the escalator with his father. Upon overhearing the boy speak a very familiar phrase, Kate becomes absolutely convinced her son is not dead. Then and there, she makes up her mind to locate this boy and find out if he is the missing son she has been praying for all his time.

With the help of Phoenix, Inc., an organization that includes a former Secret Service agent, Connor Sullivan, Kate moves forward. Connor is smitten with Kate and offers to help her even though the chances of this boy being her lost son are almost nonexistent.

Likeable characters and a plot rich with suspense, this lady's books are definitely worth reading.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian & Co-Owner of The Write Companion •

ONE POTION IN THE GRAVE
By Heather Blake

Carly Bell Hartwell is a real witch. Please, take that literally. Not only is Carly Bell Hartwell a real witch, but she's descended from a long line of witches. Hey, the family that casts spells together stays together, or so I've been told. She's turned her super powers into a thriving business, the Little Shop of Potions, in her hometown of Hitching Post, Alabama, the wedding capital of the South.

Carly's witchy powers go on high alert when a young, sophisticated woman walks into her shop and starts browsing among the inventory. Turns out the woman is Carly's old childhood friend, Katie Sue Perrwinkle, now a successful doctor who's calling herself Katherine Perry. Katie Sue fled her hometown a decade ago, and now she's back to settle a few scores with her troubled family and with Senator, and probable presidential contender, Warren Calhoun, who's in town for his son's high profile wedding.

Someone in Hitching Post, Alabama is not happy to see Katie Sue. In no time flat, her room is ransacked and the local police advise her to move to another location for her own safety. Of course, good-hearted Carly takes her in. But before Katie Sue can even unpack, her body is found at the bottom of a steep canyon outside of town. Carly has to use all her witchy powers to sort out the dizzying array of suspects and motives and unmask the real killer.

Although I'm not usually a fan of any mystery that smacks of paranormal, this one had me hooked right from the first page. I guess you could say that "One Potion in the Grave" cast a real spell on me!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Funerals Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine •
THE COUNTERFEIT HEIRESS
By Tasha Alexander

The fashionable London world is abuzz when word circulates that the elusive heiress, Estella Lamar, will attend a costume party at Devonshire House, a lavish affair in honor of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. When the heiress turns out to be an impostor who is later found murdered, Emily and Colin Hargreaves set out to discover the murderer, and how the mysterious Estella Lamar is involved.

Always known as an eccentric woman, Estella came into a considerable fortune after the deaths of her parents, and has been using her time and her inheritance to travel the world. Her photographs, along with reports of her adventures in Egypt, Siam, and other far flung places, appear frequently on the society pages of European newspapers. But as Emily and Colin investigate the murder of Mary Darby, the impostor who posed as Estella, they encounter more mysteries surrounding Estella Lamar’s life.

From fashionable London in the late nineteenth century to the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, the story takes us on a quest for the real heiress, who may not even be alive, and the couple soon put their own lives in great danger.

“The Counterfeit Heiress” is the latest of the Lady Emily Mysteries series by Tasha Alexander. Rich with details of life in London and Paris, the characters move in their world of strict class divisions but with a sensitivity and complexity that makes them real. Emily is an equal partner with her husband in his work as a special investigator for the Queen, but it is clear they could only accomplish this in the upper class world in which they live.

This is a tensely written novel with satisfying twists and turns in the plot. The ending, although hinted at throughout the novel, is still surprising and unbelievable enough to be immensely gratifying.

Reviewed by Kathleen Heady, author of “Hotel Saint Clare”*

THE WOLF IN WINTER
By John Connolly

Charlie Parker is a name in the suspense world that many readers absolutely love. This shouldn’t be a great surprise, since this incredible character has been enhancing the thriller scene for fifteen years. And in this new tale, Charlie definitely doesn’t disappoint when he infiltrates a group who surely seem to be living on the wrong side of ‘crazy.’

Prosperous, Maine, is a bit odd, because even as their neighboring communities are losing jobs and wealth, Prosperous continues to live up to its name. There never seems to be any issue with the people there; if they get a little down or the money becomes tight, they simply solve the problems. Their tactics are difficult to understand, especially since the female head of town seems to stop the ‘bad’ by using ‘extremely bad’ force, opening the door for Charlie Parker’s arrival.

It is a homeless man who actually begins Charlie’s interest and confusion. He’s a man who heard his daughter had left for Prosperous for a job... which is the last thing he heard. Now, his daughter has simply disappeared, and stories of where she went don’t seem to add up. Charlie Parker is filled with compassion for the situation, but when the homeless man is found dead—his prone body made to look like suicide—Charlie brings out his ready mix of anger and intelligence and heads to Prosperous in order to solve the mystery and stop the bloodshed.

From the police to the city council to a family that’s being used and threatened in order to help the town, everything from reality to paranormal appears as Charlie Parker attempts to bring down the long, crazy past of Prosperous, Maine.

Connolly has once again brought to the page a cold, dark, frightening mystery, and placed it in the lap of one of the very best characters in the suspense business!


HOTEL SAINT CLARE
By Kathleen Heady

A young woman rises from the sea and steps out of the waves with seaweed twined in her long hair. Although it sounds like the resurrection of a goddess, it is actually the opening scene for a mysterious tale.

Two young boys collecting shells on the seashore tell the people on the stunning island paradise that they actually witnessed a mermaid come out of the sea, and ever since that silly, playful moment, the beautiful girl, Nara Blake, becomes something of an oddity.

Unfortunately, her life is not that of a mermaid. Nara is twenty-two years old, and a native of the islands who has been offered a job at the Hotel Saint Clare, which is an exclusive hotel located in the Caribbean. Thanks to her wealthy father, Nara has grown up with everything she could possibly want and has, for the most part, succeeded in making friends with the workers in the house she grew up in. But Nara wants more than anything to be her own woman, and immediately accepts the hotel job in order to work her way up the ladder of success on her own steam, and not on her daddy’s dollars.

Extremely intelligent, Nara becomes an excellent businesswoman and makes herself known all over the island. Then...the realm of island magic, the power of voodoo, and the essence of suspense takes over. Just when it seems that Nara’s world is absolutely perfect, the false sense of security explodes, and shocking events put Nara in harm’s way.

Fast-paced, this is one tale filled with twists that will keep readers interested in discovering what the real Nara is all about. The author has written a unique leading lady, creating a true ‘beach read’ for anyone lucky enough to be sitting on the sand in the Caribbean just waiting for a mermaid to appear from the sea.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion ●
PREDATOR
By Janice Gable Bashman

With a fast-paced mix of folklore, fear and romance, Janice Gable Bashman takes on iconic subject matter in this enticing read, offering up a bewitching young adult tale.

Sixteen-year-old Bree Sunderland certainly doesn’t expect her life to be irrevocably changed when she travels with her father on a research trip to Ireland to study bog bodies. She’s hoping they can spend quality time together, but the ‘father-daughter’ fun fades into the background when she literally stumbles across the find of a lifetime.

The body is in less than perfect condition; with jagged slashes, marks of violence, and a missing hand that impedes the team’s ability to determine cause of death. Bree fixes on finding that missing piece of the puzzle, and when she returns to the dig site her new discovery sets in motion a series of events that she’ll be unable to control. The hand is unlike anything the team has ever seen. Is it a lycanthrope? What else would explain the long hairy fingers and claw-like nails? More importantly, if they could harness the properties of a lycanthrope, could they save the dying?

Warnings are ignored and dangerous risks are taken, as Dr. Sunderland brings his daughter home to the States and begins applying what he’s learned with military research. But no one is prepared for the lengths others will go to get Dr. Sunderland’s findings, and what they’ll do with the data if their mission is a success.

Everyone seems to have an agenda, and Bree soon discovers that not even her own home is safe, and she’ll have to go to extreme measures in order to shield the ones she loves.

Every twist and fascinating revelation fell into place smoothly, with an ending that will leave all readers wanting more. With this kind of originality on the page, it is exciting to speculate at the surprises Bashman will unveil next.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab •

THE HOUSE OF SMALL SHADOWS
By Adam Nevill

Catherine is a young woman who is an antiques dealer, and has had a very difficult time of late when it comes to her ex-job. She has worked with therapists to get her mind back in shape, left London, and found herself a new job that seems to be working out well. Her new assignment is also exciting; her employer wants her to catalogue and value the contents of a house owned by the late M.H. Mason. Mason’s collection is stored at The Red House, and is currently looked after by his niece, Edith, and her maid, Maude.

Catherine will head there to do the job. What she does not know is that The Red House is a true ghostly mansion that is as creepy as possible. Mr. Mason was an expert in taxidermy, and the house is filled with all types of scenes that are frightening beyond description.

Oddly, Catherine is actually delighted when the caretaker niece invites her to stay. But soon, her own emotional flaws thrust Catherine into a world of sinister secrets and macabre dreams. And unfortunately, with her background comes her own nightmares that this house seems to bring to life the more time she spends there.

The characters are beyond well written by the author. Catherine is highly believable, while niece, Edith, is a bit ‘off’ and more than set in her ways. Maude is her own brand of scary, and very much under the rule of her employer. For horror lovers, the horrendously off-the-charts scenes left behind by Mason are beyond words. Dream sequences and flashbacks alluding to Catherine’s youth definitely provide a nightmarish brand of story telling.

King is still ‘king,’ but Nevill has produced a spine-tingler to remember for a good, long time. So long, in fact, that it will not be a surprise if plenty of new light bulbs are installed in readers’ houses just so they never have to go to sleep in the dark again.

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

POISON AT THE PTA
By Laura Alden

Beth Kennedy has a huge problem. At least, all her family and friends think she does. She just can’t say no to anything. She’s not only running a children’s bookstore in her hometown of Wynwood, Wisconsin, she’s also the single mom of two great kids, which leads her to become more involved in the local school system. Which, inevitably, involves the PTA. Beth can’t say no to becoming the president of the PTA, a thoroughly thankless job under the best of circumstances.

Oh, and by the way, she also keeps tripping over dead bodies, which leads to still another problem. Beth can’t say no when the chief of the local police asks for her help in solving whoodunits.

Beth’s posse, with the very best of intentions, stages an intervention and challenges Beth to let each of them take over part of Beth’s responsibilities for six weeks. Of course, Beth resists as we all think nobody can do a job as well as we can, right? She gives in, however, and even allows someone else to organize the PTA’s eightieth anniversary event.

The event is going great until Cookie Van Doorne, a local bank teller and one of the event speakers, dies under suspicious circumstances. But not until she charges Beth with the responsibility of finding out who is responsible for her death.

With a suspect list that includes many of the upstanding citizens of Beth’s hometown, including the new vice-principal of her son’s school, Beth just can’t say no to solving this murder.

“Poison at the PTA” is the fifth in Laura Alden’s delightful series. Well plotted, likeable characters, and a charming protagonist. Don’t say “no” to this one!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Funerals Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine •

TRUTH BE TOLD
By Hank Phillippi Ryan

Readers need to get geared up and ready for this exciting new novel featuring Jane Ryland, the unforgettable reporter for the ‘Boston Register.’

Jane’s newspaper is getting ready to go after the housing crisis like an angry bull; they are planning to take on the industry, with the ridiculous amount of foreclosures being number one on their priority list. But Jane Ryland has a great deal on her mind when it comes to the stories she’s working on; setting her sights on a murder that was committed in a recently foreclosed home, and what Jane refers to as a ‘puff piece’ centering on customer service in the banking world. Whether ‘puff’ or not, these particular news threads will lead Jane directly into a wealth of extremely criminal financial wrongdoings inside the banks—from foreclosures to holding mortgages to even … more death.

In the meantime, Detective Jake Brogan of the Boston PD is handed a solution to a twenty-year-old cold case by way of a signed confession. The culprit has just confessed to the murder of a young girl that happened many years ago, a case referred to as ‘The Lilac Sunday Killing.’ Unhappy with the data, Jake is sure that the man is lying, and will not stop until he solves the case that was the major headline when Jake’s own grandfather served as Police Commissioner. But as bodies begin piling up in vacant houses, a lawyer who happens to be defending the man who confessed joins the crowd searching for answers. And, soon, Jane and Jake are attempting to do their jobs without getting in each other’s way.

From a widowed attorney with his eye on Jane to a banker who may turn traitor to an expectant mother who could just be married to a killer, there are many characters in this book offering up some very thrilling twists and turns. This incredible ‘master of plot’ excels with this tale!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion •
THE SWIMMER
By Joakim Zander

In my twenties, I discovered Robert Ludlum’s “The Matarese Circle,” Ken Follett’s “Eye of the Needle,” and Frederick Forsyth’s “The Day of the Jackal,” and remember being blown away. I was hooked on them and, subsequently, read everything they wrote. Somehow over the years, I drifted away from spy thrillers. They became cliché, mostly derivative of these masters’ genre work.

I wasn’t expecting to be excited by the genre again, but Joakim Zander’s book “The Swimmer” has everything Ludlum, Follett, and Forsyth’s books did. His skill with words, the imminent feeling of suspense, and a layered, intriguing story, combine perfectly for an exciting read. What makes it even more amazing is that this is a translation from Zander’s native Swedish.

Klara Waldeen, orphaned as a child and raised by her grandparents, now lives in Brussels and works as a political aide. In another life and another country, an old spy who’d prioritized his job over his family now ponders his choices in life; his only solace, swimming. Then, on Christmas Eve, Klara is dragged into a race against time and unseen enemies via an ex-lover who comes across sensitive information. Thus begins a wild chase across Europe with pursuers who will kill to maintain their secret.

Elsewhere, Swedish lobbyist, George Lööw, is assigned a client with a suspicious agenda. He suddenly finds his life threatened and involved in the pursuit against his will. When the retired spy realizes who Klara is, he becomes embroiled in the chase. A man Klara doesn’t know, but has always wondered about, may be the only person who can save her.

After setting up the characters, this book ramps up and doesn’t let you go. Within “The Swimmer’s” unassuming cover is an explosive read that will have any spy-thriller fan rejoicing. This is the perfect thriller.

Reviewed by Susan May, author of “Back Again” •

THREAD END
By Amanda Lee

Marcy is excited to go to the new exhibit at the museum. She owns the Seven Year Stitch shop and this Textile Exhibit is right up her alley. She is going with a friend and her boyfriend, Detective Tom Nash. Before they leave, Tom tells her that they are on the watch for a possible thief.

The next morning, Marcy finds a dead body wrapped up one of the exhibits behind her shop. She calls and the police investigate. They figure out the victim is a visiting art professor who was in town for the exhibit. Marcy investigates the murder determined to figure out who killed the man, and why.

She works the investigation into her daily schedule. As she teaches, works at the store, and converses with Angus, her Irish wolfhound, she asks questions. She has plenty of suspects, but has to narrow the list down before something else happens.

A wonderful cozy mystery in a great series!

Reviewed by Ashley Dawn, author of “Shadows of Pain” published by Suspense Publishing an imprint of Suspense Magazine •

THE RECKONING
By Rennie Airth

The fourth John Madden novel is set in 1947 while England is still recovering from World War II. Rationing continues, bombsite buildings scar London, and a weary population wishes for life to get back to normal.

Within this atmospheric setting, retired Scotland Yard detective John Madden is drawn into a puzzling murder investigation when Madden's name is mentioned in a letter penned by the victim shortly before he was killed in broad daylight. Madden can't recall ever meeting the unassuming bank manager, much less knowing him well enough to be enquired about in the letter to Scotland Yard. The investigation is further complicated by additional killings, apparently committed by the same perpetrator, with no obvious connections between the growing number of victims—elderly men who mostly seem to have led lives that provide no motive for their murders.

The first half of the book is primarily character driven as the investigation proceeds slowly and with few clues. Although the well-crafted prose and interesting characters keep the reader’s attention, the story is a little disjointed. The point of view shifts from Madden to various active police officers (most of whom have worked with Madden in the past) to the soon-to-be victims and their friends and acquaintances. When the scene suddenly shifts to people and places that haven't yet appeared in the book (or the previous entries in the series), it’s clear that someone is about to be killed. While this does build a certain suspense, it contributes to a jumbled feeling as the reader tries to keep track of the growing number of characters and their relationships to each other.

As the police begin to focus their investigation on their best clues, however, the storytelling also gets more focused, and the action kicks up a notch as well. Surprising twists maintain the suspense as the coppers narrow in on the perpetrator, and many of the secondary characters get moments to shine. After a slow start, “The Reckoning” builds to a satisfying and moving conclusion which should resonate for both newcomers to the series and its fans.

Reviewed by Scott Pearson, author of “Star Trek: The More Things Change” and cohost of the Generations Geek podcast •

THE SON
By Jo Nesbo

Nesbo is a master with his Harry Hole series and again with his latest standalone novel “The Son.”

I’m a die-hard fan of Jo Nesbo and I’ve read probably every book, with the exception of his children's titles. I waited months to get my hands on “The Son” and once I opened the cover and read, “And he will come again to judge the living and the dead,” I knew I was in for a thrill ride.

Sonny “The Son” Loftus has spent the last twelve years of his young life in prison for murder. With an addiction to heroin, the drug is supplied to him in a constant flow for taking the fall for crimes he didn’t commit. Fellow prisoners confess secrets to him and there is rumor of his laying of hands. When one man confesses to Sonny, he learns a long hidden secret surrounding his father. Seeking revenge, he escapes prison to find and serve his own brand of justice to the men responsible.

The series of gruesome murders that follow his escape have the authorities and cops on a manhunt: one to bring Sonny to justice, and one to silence him. Thrown into the mix are an unexpected and touching love story and a touch of championing the downtrodden.

Nesbo’s plot line is bang on. There is not a single lull or plot hole in the book. The action is fast and the scenarios often graphic and not for the faint of heart. Sonny will, without a doubt, have readers struggling, knowing they should be rooting for him to get caught, but inevitably hoping he will fulfill his vendetta and make a clean getaway. The supporting cast is equally well written, causing readers to have emotional reactions; some favorable, some not so much.

My final thought is this: “The Son” is a thrill ride of a read that will have you struggling to put it down for fear of missing any action. Trust me; this is the read you absolutely need to take on vacation.

Reviewed by Jodi Chapters (ChaptersandChats.com) •
THE LOST KEY
By Catherine Coulter and J.T. Ellison

As I’ve known for a long time, Catherine Coulter never disappoints, and this continues with her Brit in the FBI series. Written with J.T. Ellison, this series is nonstop action with enough realism to keep you thinking and scare the daylight out of you at the same time. “The Lost Key,” the second in the series following “The Final Cut,” reintroduces us to Agent Nicholas Drummond, formerly of New Scotland Yard, now with the FBI and his partner, Mike (Michaela) Caine. On Nick’s first official day, he and Mike respond to a mugging turned murder. Little do they know where this crime is going to take them. The dying man’s last words will hold the key to life as we know it or the possibility of Armageddon.

Their investigation leads to a centuries-old secret society founded in Great Briton. Once formed to protect the Crown, its members—now international—guard the world’s greatest secrets, some of which need to stay hidden.

Nick and Mike are locked in a battle with an enemy of wealth, intelligence, and a mind so twisted he just might discover the key to world domination. We will follow the search for such a key from WWI Germany to Madame Curry to present day Scotland. Along the way, Nick and Mike find a secret so frightening that even its originator wants nothing to do with it.

“The Lost Key” will expand your mind and imagination as it takes you on a thrill ride worthy of two such great writers. Coulter and Ellison have created characters and a series that will be around for a long time and which belongs on the big screen. If you are a fan of either writer, you will love “The Lost Key.” If you have never read either before, I can’t think of a better place to start. I will be on pins and needles waiting for the next installment of a Brit in the FBI! Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of “Sin,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine •

THE LIFE WE BURY
By Allen Eskens

In this beautifully written first novel, author Allen Eskens tells the story of college student Joe Talbert, who takes on a required English assignment and ends up in a race against time to clear the name of a dying man. Talbert visits a nursing home where he interviews a Vietnam vet, Carl Iverson, who has been released from prison to die. Iverson was found guilty of a horrendous murder of a young woman thirty years earlier, and although he protested his innocence throughout his trial, he made no effort to prove it.

Running parallel to Iverson’s story is Joe Talbert’s own story. He struggles to stay in college while working as a bouncer at a local club, but must also deal with his bi-polar mother who is both unwilling and incapable of providing the proper care for Joe’s autistic brother. He is torn between his desire to get an education and start a new life, and his responsibility and love for his brother.

Joe Talbert’s own life becomes threatened as he comes closer to indentifying the real murderer and rapist of fourteen-year-old Crystal Hagan thirty years earlier. At the same time, he never loses his tenderness and vulnerability. His sense of responsibility for his brother, his attraction to the girl in the apartment next door, and his drive to prove Carl Iverson’s innocence before the man dies all come together in a strong yet vulnerable character.

Set against the backdrop of a brutal Minnesota winter, “The Life We Bury” is much more than a satisfying, suspenseful novel. This story kept me turning the pages, and it touched my heart. The characters are as real as my next-door neighbors, the story compelling, and the writing superb.

Reviewed by Kathleen Heady, author of “Hotel Saint Clare” •

NO TIME TO DIE
By Kira Peikoff

In a research lab located in our nation’s capital, a scientist is suddenly attacked and killed by his animal subjects, a group of chimpanzees. Then, a very talented biochemist who’s part of Columbia University in New York City is enticed out of her apartment and never seen again. It is no mistake that these things feel like they’re related in some way...and an agent in the Justice Department will do anything to figure it out.

Zoe Kincaid, a college student, is suffering from a rare genetic disease. Kidnapped by a group of scientists who want nothing more than to study her disease, Zoe finds herself in the middle of a strange and frightening situation. Although Zoe apparently stopped aging at the tender age of fourteen, she has had to watch her beloved granddad face extreme suffering in his senior years. So even though she is more than a bit confused and scared by the kidnapping, she soon agrees to cooperate with her abductors. These people are working on a technology to stop, or at least slow down, the aging process and Zoe has no problem with them studying her if it means it will help her granddad survive.

Not only is this a suspenseful plot but as this action-packed tale moves along at a pace that will leave you gasping for breath, the pros and cons of preventing aging are weighed. Not a medical journal in any way, and no reader needs a Ph.D. to understand, but this book offers a wealth of characters that are extremely likeable and very realistic, causing an underlying level of education, and answering the question of whether or not it would be worth it to live forever.

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

VALHALLA
By Robert J. Mrazeck

An expedition to the Greenland Ice Cap is led by John Lee Hancock. This adventurer, who loves to come upon old shipwrecks and airplane crashes, discovers a plane from WWII resting under the ice. The plane is called, ‘March Hare,’ and it crashed in December 1942.

Long ago, this was a new Flying Fortress taking off from Labrador to join the 8th Air Force squadron in England. But before the plane could arrive, it disappeared in a monumental blizzard. Hancock and his party, using all the equipment possible, ready themselves to go down into the plane and see what’s what. Hancock and his pilot, Steve Macaulay, check out the plane and arrange to have the crew brought to the surface in order to give them a proper burial. But, a snap comes up while investigating, they find yet another treasure buried under the plane that turns out to be an ancient Viking ship, containing nine Vikings that have been perfectly preserved by the freezing waters.

Markings along the ship show that the wreck occurred in the year 1016 BC, and they want to know more about it. Hancock decides to find the best scholars of Norse archaeology and bring them to the site to better study the ship and its contents. But what turns out to be an innocent find, soon turns into a mission of survival. A group appears that don’t want anyone to know about this find, as it will uncover a mystery that will change the world...and not for the better.

As a battle ensues, survivors from Hancock’s men will turn away from treasure hunting to follow the dangerous group in order to avenge their crew, and find out exactly why the Viking ship must remain forever buried in ice.

This author shines. With a huge dose of action, adventure, and a thrilling pace that will take the breath away, the depth of Norse mythology on top of everything else, makes this novel an incredible treasure.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion •
THE RIVER IS DARK
By Joe Hart

Joe Hart paints a beautiful account of real life horrors that rear their ugly heads. My heart pounded every page. With twists and turns, the story unfolds into a suspenseful thriller where the ending is excellently executed.

Eric Shelin calls 911. His parents and dog are dead. He is alone in their bedroom with it. By the police arrive, Eric is minus one arm, and it is gone.

Liam Dempsey gets a wakeup call from the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. Liam learns his brother Allen and wife Suzie were the victims of a home invasion. Liam heads to Tallston, Minnesota, to put his brother's affairs in order.

Liam remembers Dani Powell the second he sees her. His brother had married her cousin. As their relationship begins, the investigation into the double homicide takes several turns. Liam discovers his sister-in-law had a large insurance policy and Liam is the beneficiary. Liam is shocked, but he knows that would be motive. He was a Minneapolis Homicide Detective before the righteous shoot that killed a pregnant woman and unborn child. Thanks to a dirt digging reporter, the whole town knows it, too.

When the manager of Colton Inc., is found dead, the BCA arrest the town drunk, named 'Nut.' Liam knows Nut is innocent. He has been helping him conduct his own investigation. Liam and Dani must figure out what connects the murders to Colton. When Liam is attacked, he has Dani sketch a picture of his attacker.

Eric says Nut was not the one at his home. He tells them the picture is the monster. Their lives depend on the monster not getting them affairs in order.

They tell us there are no monsters, but there are. It isn't the misshapen bones or mangled flesh you need to worry about. It's the perfect looking ones whose souls are monstrous. Family blood is thicker than water. That blood runs like a river, and often times The River is Dark.


THE DARKEST HOUR
By Tony Schumacher

A stunning debut from an author who, a lot like Turtledove, brings alternate history plots to life. And this time around, it is Nazi-occupied England that gets the spotlight.

June, 1940: Winston Churchill delivers a speech in Britain's House of Commons that announces the beginning of the Battle of Britain. Churchill states that the outcome of this battle will depend on the survival of Christian civilization over the Nazi madness. He calls this Britain's 'darkest hour.' They must stand up and take the reins in order to stop Hitler in his tracks.

WWII begins and the Nazi forces are strong, with Hitler and his armies easily taking over Europe. England's biggest ally America, turns away as England becomes occupied by the Nazis, and everything from politics to war is on the table.

John Rossett is a British war hero and policeman. Living in an occupied-England, he's assigned the troubling job of rounding up Jewish citizens to send off to 'camps.' This is a job he doesn't want to do, but chooses to keep silent. John's own family has been taken from him, and he's gotten to the point where nothing matters. Humanity is lost, in his country and his heart.

When he meets a seven-year-old Jewish boy named Jacob, John's goodness is revived, and he decides to rescue him from the camps. Unfortunately, the Nazis take up the chase, hunting John down and attempting to stop them. The action never stops, as John discovers he can no longer trust his friends. Everyone he knows would give him and the boy up in an instant to save their own hides.

This is a truly dark look at the 'what if' scenarios that prove how easy things can change, and how fast people can alter their own ideals and morals when forced to do things they would never do... just to survive. A brilliant work for the history and thriller fan who wants to see the past through a truly imaginative mind.

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

WATERS OF OBLOVION
By David Lyons

Judge Jock Boucher is back and better than ever. While he and his fiancé attend the funeral of another federal judge, they find themselves in the midst of a terrorist attack. A bomb, hidden inside the deceased's coffin, detonates, killing most of the attendees including many federal judges and Boucher's fiancé. By sheer luck, Jock survives.

Once he recovers from his injuries, he sets his attention on trying to organize all of the open cases that have been delayed due to all of the judges' deaths. Picking through the files, he finds a needle in a haystack. A rather innocuous case involving the death of a Navy pilot who dies while ejecting from an experimental aircraft. A case that never should have been granted a trial has found a spot on the docket, only to have the judge who granted it, wind up dead. Waters is further muddied when the defense attorney in the case is found to have committed suicide days after the bombing.

David Lyons takes us on a journey of deceit, international intrigue, and the brink of a possible nuclear war in "Waters of Oblivion." Judge Jock Boucher is at his very best as he attempts to unravel a bees nest of corruption and greed without getting stung.

"Waters of Oblivion" is a must read. A great espionage thriller!


STALKERS
By Paul Finch

Although the title of this book may suggest one thing, it is so much more. Finch has created an intricate plot that will entice and intrigue to the very end.

Detective Sergeant Mark "Heck" Heckenberg and his team have been working on a series of cases for what seems like a lifetime. Investigating the disappearance/kidnapping of thirty-eight women, Heck has a list of victims that all lived happy lives and were the absolute best in their fields. Perhaps it is their exemplary talents that send up a 'red flag,' as it opens the door on a group that fulfills peoples' fondest wishes... for a price.

Heck has been unable to find any trace of the women and the cases are slowly driving him crazy. When his bosses get just as frustrated, they pull Heck's team of detectives and suspend him from the case. But his drive and determination to figure out what's going on doesn't diminish one little bit. The fact that his superiors send him off on a three month holiday in order to relax, helps even more as Heck becomes a one man army dedicated to finding out the truth and stopping the kidnappings.

He meets Lauren Wraxford, the sister of one of the vanished women, who decides to stick to Heck like glue until they get a break in the case. Heading into the underworld of gangsters and organized crime, the duo soon hear talk of "The Nice Guys Club," believing they have finally stumbled over a lead. But the investigation comes to a screeching halt when no one will speak of the Club and its 'work.' But Heck will not go away, making a vow to himself that these particular "nice guys" will finish dead last no matter what it takes.

This is a terrific story that will keep readers in their chairs until the very end. And the best part is, Heck will be back!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion.
THE LAST MILE
By Tim Waggoner

Waggoner creates a realistic ‘World After’ the ‘Arrival’ of the ‘Masters.’

Dan was an average guy living with his wife Caroline and daughter Lindsey. They had a good life until the Masters’ arrival when the sky changed colors and a million eyes were staring down at the world. The ground cracked; strange thorn-stalk weeds with poisonous thorns sprouted up, consuming everything. They spread across I-75 through SW Ohio, now known as The Way. But they left alone the thralls. Dan became a thrall to save his family. He witnessed firsthand the punishment the Masters served up if sacrifices weren’t made.

Dan delivered many unmarked sacrifices to his Master. His family was fed and didn’t mutilate themselves. This particular delivery should have been simple, except it wasn’t. One of the many mutated animals, a deer with antlers of bone ending in needle tips, with serrated teeth, and rhino-like hide, rammed his Oldsmobile. Then his cargo woke up; he hated that. They talked, begged, pleaded, and cried. But Alice was no ordinary sacrifice; she was a survivor. Dan didn’t know how tough the young girl was until a half-man, half-motorcycle tried to take her.

Dan maintained the upper hand, so they walked “The Last Mile” to his Master. He answered her question about if the eyes were still up there. He tells her yes and maybe always have been; watching and waiting. This makes her think, maybe there never was a world without the Masters.

It’ll be Dan’s downfall if he remembers a world where sanity ruled. Compassion and helping people was a way of life. As he presents Alice to his Master, which is a horrific fountain of blood, this idea is Alice’s opportunity. The final climactic fight is a battle of humanity between two people who used to be humane.

If the ground cracks and you see a million eyes staring down on you, remember, they’re a non-forgiving alien. To survive, you may have to forget you’re human. Reviewed by Leslie A. Borghini, author of ‘Angel Heat’ published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine.

LAST WINTER WE PARTED
By Fuminori Nakamura

This page turner, to say the least, is a translation from the Japanese. And although it is a bit difficult in some places, it is certainly an unforgettable plot that certain readers will want to see through to the very end.

A young writer is sent out on assignment; he will head to a prison in order to interview a convicted killer. The criminal in question is photographer, Yudai Kiharazaka, who is scheduled to be executed for the killing of two women he was photographing. This was a horrific murder, where the killer set the women on fire and actually photographed them as they were burning alive.

This journalist becomes more and more intrigued by this criminal and his monstrous tale, and decides he wants to write a book about the crime. But when his investigation begins, the writer soon finds himself buried in a horrific life that led to brutality that goes far beyond what the human mind can accept.

The reader is brought through various archives regarding Yudai; learning all about his sister, their lives in an institution, the neglect they suffered, as well as a group called ‘K2.’ But even with all the proof against Yudai, as well as the considerable information regarding the twisted human beings both he and his sister became because of their past, the writer actually begins to doubt the photographer’s guilt.

This is an extremely dark and certainly twisted narrative, with a plot that draws you into the very core of evil. At times reading a translation can be difficult because the language barrier doesn’t allow for the context of the story to be clear. But for the horror fan that’s truly dedicated to delving into the powers of the mind and the madness and hate that can be created by the world around you, Mr. Nakamura certainly provides those chilling moments.

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

THE BULLET CATCH
By John Gaspard

Eli Marks, a magician/illusionist, is talked into attending his fifteen-year class reunion. Newly single, Eli is planning to take some steps to approach his old high school crush, Trish. Eli has observed Trish’s husband drinking, hanging with other women, and ignoring his wife…which does not exactly make him happy.

However, the next morning when Eli crosses paths with Trish, she is a widow. Her husband’s death is ruled by the authorities as a mugging, but Eli thinks otherwise. Fortunately, he has at his disposal, connections in the DA’s office (in the form of his ex-wife), and the police department (his ex’s brand new husband), to help look into the mugging.

In the meantime, Eli’s friend, Jake, has been cast to star in a movie about a magician who dies performing a trick that took many illusionist’s lives throughout history. The Bullet Catch is the trick, and it’s where a bullet is fired directly at the magician who catches it in his teeth, hopefully not killing him in the process. Production of the movie is not going well, and Jake is thinking that the real death of the lead character would bring the movie a huge payoff at the box office.

While Eli works on this so-called mugging, he ends up hip-deep in the trials and tribulations of his pal, who is becoming more and more terrified that the ‘trick’ is going to be a true finale.

The author does a fantastic job juggling the separate plots and keeping readers’ minds thoroughly engaged. Anyone into magic will get a small look ‘behind the scenes’ at some familiar tricks and illusions, yet no secrets are unveiled. The relationships between Eli and his remarried ex are interesting, to say the least, and the pure entertainment of the industry will leave all readers hoping that there will be a ‘number three’ very soon.

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

THE LESSER DEAD
By Christopher Buehlman

A vampire meets up with his worst enemy...and they are nothing but children.

This is 1970’s New York, and for those who believe that vampires only glitter in the sunlight, this author goes for the ‘oldie but goodie’ version of vamps who are after only one thing: blood. The vamps haunt and hunt when the sky is dark, and the only things about them that glisten are their incredibly sharp fangs.

Joey Peacock is the one to follow. Living in a world now where white Saturday Night Live suits are the ‘in’ thing, Joey truly loves his life. He was only fourteen when he was changed into a creature of the night by, oddly enough, the family maid. And now, decades later, Joey enjoys the fast pace of New York City where the streets never sleep. There, he utilizes the labyrinth of subway tunnels to get from place to place. One night, however, Joey sees a rival on the subway system—a creepy rival, even to a vampire. His enemy comes in the form of little vamps who are extremely mean and extremely hungry. As all kids are prone to place. One night, however, Joey sees a rival on the subway system—a creepy rival, even to a vampire. His enemy comes in the form of little vamps who are extremely mean and extremely hungry. As all kids are prone to do, these small creatures decide that being unruly is a good thing, and they’re not about to stop.

Yes, Joey is only fourteen, but he has learned over the past forty-five years how to maintain security in the dangerous world. He has perfected his life/death routine; womanizing, feeding at night, and sleeping in the daytime with others of his ilk under the city. But Joey is more than upset to have his charming and exciting playground turned into an actual ‘playground’ of death by these children. What was once a place not safe for humans is now a place no longer serene and safe for vampires.

This is a new, fresh approach, with the author offering a wonderful plot and a mystical leading man/boy. A great story, this will also show the job of babysitter in a completely new light.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion.
DEAD BROKE IN JARRETT CREEK

By Terry Shames

Jarrett Creek, Texas, is like a great many small towns in the U.S.A.—it has completely run out of money to fund the town and any of its programs. Unfortunately for the residents, this also includes the police force that is definitely needed.

Financial scams have been perpetrated, and neighbors are up in arms. So when the anxiety and tension gets to be a bit much, the town big shots make the decision to ask. Samuel Craddock, retired Jarrett Creek Police Chief, to come back to his old post. The salary he can expect to receive is $1.00 a year until things pick up financially, and the town sees some kind of light at the end of their really dark tunnel.

Good thing he cares, because Sam does return and immediately gets handed his first murder case. Gary Dellmore, the heir to the main bank in town, is dead. This is not a real brain of a guy to begin with (rest in peace), but he was certainly not deserving of death. Or was he?

As Sam investigates, he discovers that Gary was a player, even though his wife is highly supportive of her husband and says that nothing ever happened. Sam, however, continues to unearth people who weren’t fond of the deceased, and that includes husbands and fathers of girls he chased. Gary was also the man who ruined the finances of the town by choosing to build a water park and striking a deal that was not the right one. Forced to use friends, enemies, and neighbors in order to get a full picture of Gary’s life, Sam has his work cut out for him separating the truth from the gossip in order to solve the crime.

This plot is fun, quick, and offers a town full of characters that are written so well it seems like they’re living in your own neighborhood. Shames continues to supply her fans with a winner.

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

COVER YOUR EYES

By Mary Burton

If there’s a category of ‘page-turner,’ Burton would always end up on the top of that list. This time is no different. Just read the back of the book to allow the chills to begin: “Don’t look... Don’t speak... Just prepare to die.”

A young woman, Dixie Simmons, is a country-western singer ‘wannabe’ on her way home from a gig at a local bar. Suddenly stopped by a person dressed in black, wielding a tire iron, Dixie is beaten and left on the sidewalk for authorities to find. She struggles to no avail, until her eyes close in death... “Don’t look.”

Local Nashville attorney, Rachel Wainwright, is a public defender trying to reopen a cold case of a horrific murder in the city. The victim was a young mother, who was also a ‘wannabe’ singer, but her head was missing when her body was discovered. Identification revealed her to be Annie Dawson. With this new murder, Rachel tries to obtain DNA evidence for her client, the man they say murdered Dixie. She must go head-to-head with the policeman looking into Dixie’s case, who just happens to be the son of the officer who was lead investigator on Annie’s murder. Annie’s case is decades old, and the alleged killer has been in jail ever since, but DNA was not available and the police never listened to her cries of innocence... “Don’t speak.”

Rachel unearths far more than she bargained for in her attempt to help a man labeled ‘murderer’ get out of jail by means of forensic science. She becomes involved in the lives of many shady characters, some of whom are killed in the same way that the other women were. A chilling puzzle begins, and before Rachel and the police are through, they encounter secrets, surprises, and even more killings in Music City, USA.

Fantastic work with never a dull moment for the reader. Instead of using the author’s final note, when it comes to this book: “Just prepare to... have a blast!”

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

THE FRONT SEAT PASSENGER

By Pascal Garnier

Sometimes revenge doesn’t work out the way one expects. Although his marriage has lost its spark, Fabien is stunned to learn after his wife dies in a car accident, that her companion, who also died, was her lover.

Fabien sets out to stalk the lover’s wife, Martine, with no apparent goal in mind other than to learn who she is. After following her and sneaking into her apartment, rearranging her furniture, eating her food, and washing her dishes, he discovers that she and her friend Madeleine are headed to Majorca on holiday, and he books the identical tour.

After the two women fish him out of the sea when he swims out too far, the three of them spend the rest of the holiday together. He manages to get Martine into bed, which angers Madeleine. The three return to Paris barely on speaking terms, but Martine gives Fabien her address, which of course he already knows, and her phone number on a slip of paper.

Fabien tries to pull together the tatters of his own life, as well as that of a longtime friend Gilles with whom he is now living, but is pulled relentlessly into the lives of Martine and Madeleine.

Translated from the French, “The Front Seat Passenger” is a short novel—I read it in a day—but the story is unyielding in the madness of its characters. While told mostly from the point of view of Fabien, the newly widowed husband, it is a race to determine who will crush whom in their own style of insanity. Fabien is an anti-hero; bent on revenge, but easily led. The conclusion left me wondering where he would go from there—back with his father in Normandy? This is an ironic and darkly humorous book that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Reviewed by Kathleen Heady, author of “Hotel Saint Clare” •

HOLY WAR

By Mike Bond

Just as the title states, this is a true saga that concentrates on a religious war where various factions fight for their own beliefs. Included in the thrills are terrorists, hostages, and enemies fighting in a place that simply cannot find peace.

There are three characters within these pages owning three very different points of view, and their lives come together during this truly horrific time. First and foremost, there’s Neill, a war correspondent who has been sent to Beirut on a secret mission for MI-5. He has been chosen for this because he just so happens to be the ex of Layla, who is now the wife of Mohammed. Mohammed serves as the Hezbollah leader who may just own the power to stop the war before it starts.

The second in our little trio is Andre, a commando from France who is eager to avenge his brother’s death at the hands of terrorists who bombed a U.S. military base. The third character in this huge holy war madness is Rosa, a Palestinian on nobody’s side in the fighting, except her own.

As in all hideous wars, people with various beliefs and ideals come together. Unfortunately, they come together and scream their opinion, not bothering to hear the ideas of others that could perhaps form the peace they supposedly are wanting.

This is a tale that every reader will have their own opinion on when it comes to the state of nations, religions, and the political and social forces that bring about pain and anger. It will also provide a look into how peace can be achieved, how the innocents of the world can survive, and the passion that ignites just as fast as the exploding of a bomb.

This author uses his lengthy experience to create this novel. Having been to Lebanon, Syria, and the Middle East, he definitely knows his subject. Written in a setting of one of the most horrible places, the author does a terrific job.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion •
THE PERFECT WITNESS
By Iris Johansen

Teresa Casali was still a little girl when she made the odd discovery that she could read other people's memories. But she's not the only quirky one in the family. In fact, Teresa Casali is the daughter of a mob boss.

Unfortunately, Teresa loses her father, and the man who steps up to take the head honcho role decides that the girl should actually be killed because her gift may bring about bad things for the family. This man is going to marry Teresa's mother, but he feels that having a kid that can get into his brain will make him look extremely bad. So running is her only option.

She finds a savior in a man called Mandak. This is not a man she exactly trusts, but he kills her predators and she goes with him. As fate would have it, Mandak possesses special gifts as well, and he proceeds to teach Teresa how to control her memory reading, without ever exposing who he is or what he wants. After working together for a few months, Mandak has entered a Witness Protection Program; changing her name to Allie, she goes to live with friends of his and experience a new, safe life.

After seven years, Allie gets her gift under control, learning how to block out people's memories. Finally happy, Allie has loved the couple she's lived with and is ready to graduate from college. But as always when happiness occurs, the past comes back to haunt her. With a cover that's blown and people she cares about now in danger, Teresa leaves Allie behind and delves back into her gift to take the bad guys out.

The mob, the mystery, and a little bit of the supernatural thrown in for good measure, makes this story a true thriller that will keep you glued to the pages. Cheering for Teresa as she goes from a frightened child to a strong, unstoppable woman with the help of her friends, makes for a great read.

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

WATCHING THE DARK
By Peter Robinson

DCI Alan Banks is back. Definition: Police procedure takes over in a fantastic mystery that starts with a 'bang'...or, more accurately, an arrow in the chest of DI Bill Quinn, who dies on the grounds of a police convalescent center.

Not only is this a horrific murder but there are also compromising pictures tied to the victim, which means Banks needs to be as careful as possible. He's sure the culprit has to be someone from one of Quinn's old cases, and proceeds to delve into the most likely candidates. Everything seems to lead to the second murder occurs that gives Banks a clue. The new victim is a freelance reporter who might just be the key Banks needs. Apparently, the two victims worked on an investigation six years ago; an investigation surrounding the disappearance of Rachel Hewitt—a bridesmaid who was separated from the rest of her party during the celebratory evening and who was never seen again.

Now that the reporter and Quinn are dead, Banks heads to Estonia where the girl disappeared, with Inspector Joanna Passero by his side, who has been assigned the case. The Inspector's job is to discover if Quinn might have been a shady cop. Banks isn't happy about having Joanna as a partner, and is determined to clear Quinn's name from any crooked deals or ridiculous gossip. The investigation stalls with the cold case of Rachel Hewitt, but the more Banks digs into the two killings, the more he finds that Quinn's murder and Rachel's disappearance are most definitely linked ... but the townspeople refuse to help. They act like they will do anything they can to stop the past from coming back to haunt them.

Again, this is a true example of police procedure, including the friendship and camaraderie that the profession has with one another. Plot is extremely interesting, and the calm, cool, and collected Banks, matched with the determined Inspector Passero, makes for a very magnetic dialogue.

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

COVENANT: THE BOOK OF RAZIEL
By Sabrina Benulis

This is the second installment in the series The Books of Raziel, and is a very good follow-up that will make readers continue on this author's superior journey. Not only that, this second novel clears up some very important parts laid out in the first book, "Archon," and begins as all good stories do, with... Genesis.

In book one, readers met Angela Mathers, an artist who enrolled at the Westwood Academy a year previously. The poor girl has many crosses to bear, to speak, especially when it comes to her never-ending dreams of angels and demons. Subsequently, Angela unearthed the truth that she is actually an Archon—a person with holds many great powers that will resolve the fate of the universe. But Angela also learns that with all her great power comes great danger, and she has forces that are actually working against her to make sure she fails. These forces can take many shapes and forms, and when a demon takes her friend, Sophia, and steals the Book of Raziel, Angela is forced to walk through the door to Hell in order to rescue her.

With book two, the paranormal thrillfest takes our heroine into a world full of intrigue; including angels that are heavenly and demons, who are residents of Hell that never stop working to try and possess Angela. The reality of the situation is that for all those who think that angels are the white lights and winged creatures who bless and help everyone, while the demons are dark and evil and waiting to strike—appearances can deceive. And Angela must figure out who exactly is a wool in sheep's clothing.

As this cool character begins this journey into Hell, the fun truly begins, with a new thrill waiting around every corner she travels. But it is a very good idea to read "Archon" first, because this fantasy/gothic thrillfest is definitely one series you do not want to miss a second of. Bravo!

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

THE LAST BREATH
By Kimberly Belle

Sixteen years ago, Ray Andrews’ wife Ella Mae was murdered. Ray was sent to prison for life. Now, he is dying of cancer and is released from prison on a technicality. He’s brought home to Tennessee by his brother and attorney, Cal. Gia Andrews returns from her humanitarian life to deal with her father’s impending death.

Gia and her siblings, Lexi and Bo, are Ray’s children from his first marriage. They believe their father is guilty. For Gia, seeing her siblings and the dysfunctional lives they live, coupled with seeing her father again, has her on an emotional tightrope. When she meets Jake, a local restaurant owner, he is the only thing that keeps her from going off the deep end.

With protests came out front of their home, a journalist suggests to Gia that the truth did not come out years ago, giving Gia a sliver of hope. Was Ray innocent? Did their neighbor lie on the stand? Can she make peace with her father after never visiting him in prison and thinking him guilty of murder? Once her father passes, will Gia leave Tennessee behind forever or will she finally stop running from her past?

Gia wades through the murky waters of the murder her father may or may not have committed, her siblings’ refusal to cooperate, Cal hiding behind attorney/client privilege, and even Jake, who has a few skeletons in his closet.

So many secrets and lies, so many lives ruined. Isn’t it time for the truth to come out? Will the truth bring peace or heartbreak? The story examines the affect the murder had on Ray’s children, but despite everything, in the end these people will have the chance to deal with the path their lives have taken, but they now have a choice to make about their future. This is more than a suspense novel, it is the story of family, forgiveness, and the power of love. 5 stars.

Reviewed by Julie Whiteley •
“David Lyons takes us on a journey of deceit, international intrigue, and the brink of possible nuclear war in WATERS OF OBLIVION. Judge Jock Boucher is at his very best as he attempts to unravel a bees’ nest of corruption and greed without getting stung. A must read. A great espionage thriller!” – Suspense Magazine

WATERS OF OBLIVION
A Jock Boucher Thriller
“...an undeniable page-turner. Literary adrenaline.”
– KIRKUS REVIEWS
“A must read. A great espionage thriller!”
– SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

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BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP
2014
Genre – Mystery/Thriller (R)

Nicole Kidman has not enjoyed a good run of films at the box office. Most have tanked, and after the woeful *Grace of Monaco*, you start wondering if it isn’t her. Sometimes her acting feels distant from the character, the mechanics of the process visible in her eyes. However, in *Before I Go To Sleep* that distance works very well indeed.

It’s a Hitchcockian *Memento* type thriller, Kidman playing Christine Lucas who, due to head injuries from a violent assault, wakes up every morning having forgotten everything from the day before. Her husband (Colin Firth) is supportive and loving, albeit it is clearly emotionally taxing and difficult to have to recount their years of marriage to her each morning.

Her doctor (Mark Strong) calls her every morning after her husband leaves for work to remind her that she is keeping a video diary on a camera hidden in the back of the cupboard. It is via the video that the mystery begins, with Christine telling her future self not to trust her husband. Each day we learn a little more about her, as she searches for what really happened and who she can trust.

The first half of the film is intriguing and strong, however toward the end it devolves into less than it could have been had a little more thought gone into the conclusion and setting up of the red herrings. However, if you like your thrillers a guessing game, you will enjoy this. It’s no *Gone Girl*, but the cast do a great job, and director Rowan Joffe (*Brighton Rock, 28 Weeks Later*) is certainly the master of creating a dark and claustrophobic mood on screen.

Reviewed by Susan May, author of “Back Again” •

WHIPLASH
2014
Genre – Music/Drama (R)

The synopsis of this film is impossible to describe well enough to inspire you to see it, because the concept of watching 106 minutes of a kid taking jazz drumming lessons at an elite music conservatory in New York is never going to sound scintillating. However from the opening scene, where we are introduced to Andrew Neyman (Miles Teller) during a solo drumming practice session interrupted by revered but feared teacher, Terence Fletcher (J.K. Simmons), you realize that this is no *Glee*.

As Fletcher mentors Neyman and his fellow students, you viscerally endure their physical and emotional abuse. He uses increasingly more vicious and disturbing modus operandi to elevate their performances, and you become caught up in the question the film asks: What price, success? The word “evil” flitted through my mind during particularly tense and harrowing scenes.

When Fletcher invites Neyman to join his elite band, suddenly a young man, whose musical aspirations are not considered by his family to be a worthwhile pursuit, becomes convinced that he is on the road to greatness. But his aspirations for greatness come at an enormous price. Will that price be too high?

The last twenty minutes are some of the finest acting you will see on film this year. In fact, the film is outstanding in not just the performances but in its unflinching commitment to deliver the ugliness and wonderment of the magical impact created by any art form. All I can say is how grateful I am to be a writer, where things rarely get physical. We might jokingly claim there is blood on our keyboards, but in comparison to this story and similar insights into the ballet world via the Oscar winning *Black Swan*, as far as the arts go, writers have it easy.

*Whiplash* and its leads, Teller and Simmons, and Academy Awards will be mentioned in the same sentence in the coming months. There is blood on the drum kit, and you will feel your blood pulsing as you watch *Whiplash*, too. This film dares to march to the beat of a different drum, and for that it is a marvel.

Reviewed by Susan May, author of “Back Again” •
Featured Artist
ANDREA GARCÍA
With a Little Determination...

Interview by Suspense Magazine

LADY BUTTERFLY

http://www.fairy-tales-photography.com Photo: Delphine Ayache
Our October/November featured artist, Andrea (Andy) García, was originally born in Antigua, Guatemala, a place well known for majestic architecture. Andy now resides in Brazil with her husband—also a designer—and their dog, and spends her free time doing martial arts, taking photos, and traveling. She's a self-taught, fulltime artist who spends her working hours on commissions, book cover design, and working to constantly better her skills.

Andy's distinctive style and clear personality shine through in her work, making her stand out against the masses of the DeviantArt community. We were able to chat briefly with Andy about her work process and here is what she had to say:

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Is anyone else in your family creative?

Andrea García (A.G.): My mother is very creative. She has always done a lot of crafts, and I learned some of them with her. But in terms of Photoshop, my cousin is a designer and my husband is a web designer who works with manipulations like me.

S. MAG.: When did you realize you had a passion for art? Do you ever work in other mediums?

A.G.: I think art is something I've always liked since childhood, but I started manipulations in 2009. I was nineteen years old at the time and since then, I've grown to love them more and more.

S. MAG.: Do you follow a specific process when beginning a new project?

A.G.: No, I don't. I just let my imagination and inspiration flow. Sometimes I have an idea of what I want the art to look like but in the process it turns into something completely different. So I think the best way is to just let things flow.

S. MAG.: Of all your pieces, which is your favorite?

A.G.: To be honest I don't have a favorite because I like each and every one of them in a different way. Some of them are more personal than others, some of them are special because I made them with someone else, and it is great be able to work with another artist because it helps you grow and learn new things.

S. MAG.: What is your biggest challenge professionally?

A.G.: I want to learn more about digital painting so I can start painting my own art using images only as reference to have more artistic freedom. I always like to continue learning new techniques that will improve my work.
A LA LUZ DE LA LUNA

Model: Jessica Truscott
“MY BIGGEST MOTIVATION IS GETTING BETTER AND BETTER AT WHAT I DO, BECAUSE I LIKE IT AND IT’S FUN, AND IT’S EVEN BETTER WHEN YOU MAKE SOME MONEY DOING WHAT YOU ENJOY.”

Also I would love to see my work on more books, CDs, etc.

S. MAG.: Who is your favorite artist?

A.G.: My favorite artist is my husband because he is very creative and he has crazy and original ideas. I think his work is pretty amazing and he always inspires me and supports me. He is constantly teaching me new things.

S. MAG.: What is the best piece of advice you’ve been given? Would you offer that same advice to aspiring artists?

A.G.: Never give up and to keep learning and practicing, because you can be a great artist if you want to; no matter what, you will accomplish what you want if you are determined to make it. Search for tutorials and never give up.

S. MAG.: Money, possibility of fame, or the fun of it? What motivates you?

A.G.: My biggest motivation is getting better and better at what I do, because I like it and it’s fun, and it’s even better when you make some money doing what you enjoy.

S. MAG: What do you think are your three best qualities? Worst?

A.G.: The best: I’m determined, have a passion for what I do, and I’m not afraid to face challenges. Worst: I’m impatient and stubborn.

We’d like to thank Andrea for spending time with us. You can find more information about her at http://andygarcia666.deviantart.com.
FROM THE EDGAR AWARD–NOMINATED AUTHOR OF Garden of Stones

TWO MOTHERS.
TWO SONS.
A TRAIL GOING COLD...

“A satisfying, icy thriller.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“A novel steeped in secrets and unspoken truths.”
—Christina Baker Kline,
New York Times bestselling author of Orphan Train

“With two strong, complicated women at its center...
The Missing Place seizes you with its emotional fervor from its first pages and never lets you go...
A remarkable novel.”
—Megan Abbott,
bestselling author of The Fever and Dare Me

“A powerful portrait of grief, fear, and courage as two mothers fight for truth.”
—C.J. Lyons,
New York Times bestselling author of Farewell to Dreams
AUTHOR ALEX MARWOOD SCARED THE HELL OUT OF fans with “The Wicked Girls,” and she is doing it again with her latest release, “The Killer Next Door.” Many lists are important for authors, but when a horror/thriller writer ends up on Stephen King’s Top Ten list of 2013, that is special.

“The Wicked Girls” follow two girls twenty-five years in the past having to overcome their conviction of a four-year-old girl they murdered when they were eleven. They build separate lives, but events that threaten to destroy the worlds they constructed cause the two to have to face their pasts.

Alex turned up the volume with “The Killer Next Door.” Stephen King tweeted: "If you read Alex Marwood’s ‘The Wicked Girls,’ her new one ‘The Killer Next Door’ is even better and scary as hell with great characters.”

Alex says on her website that she was raised by wolves. If that is true, you can bet her writing is just as thrilling and intense as her upbringing.

We were lucky enough to catch up with Alex and talk with her about several different topics. It’s great to be able to discover an author so early in their career, because when they hit the big time we can say we knew them way back when. And for Alex, that time is coming quick. Check out her interview below along with a short synopsis of her latest book.

No. 23 has a secret. In this gloomy, bedsit-riddled South London wreck, lorded over by a lecherous landlord, a horrifying collection quietly waits to be discovered. Yet all six residents have something to hide.

Collette is on the run from her ex-boss; Cher is a children’s home escapee; lonely Thomas tries to make friends with his neighbours, while a gorgeous Iranian asylum seeker and a ‘quiet man’ nobody sees try to keep themselves hidden. And there for them all is Vesta, a woman who knows everything that goes on in the house—or thought she did.

Then in the dead of night, a terrible accident pushes the six into an uneasy alliance. But one of them is a killer, expertly hiding their pastime, all the while closing in on their next victim...

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Can you give us your inside thoughts into the creation of “The Killer Next Door”? 

ALEX MARWOOD, MIDDLE NAME: “SCARY AS HELL”
Alex Marwood (A.M.): It’s weird, the way a book will begin to form in your brain. Usually, there will be a thought, a question that’s been washing about for years, and then something else—an event, a passing face—will kick it to the forefront. “The Killer Next Door” came out of my downstairs neighbour’s drains—quite literally.

Something that has always fascinated Londoners is the story of Dennis Nilsen, a serial killer who preyed on young men, killing at least twelve people and disposing of their bodies while living at close quarters with a number of other people in shared houses. The question that comes up over and over again in one’s mind is: How did nobody notice?

If you live in this absurdly populous city, where most people live in terraced Victorian houses with shared entrances and, often, thin walls from lackadaisical alteration works, this is a question that will inevitably pop up in your mind from time to time. It raises so many issues of how people manage to make living at such close quarters with strangers bearable, how ignoring each other’s “stuff” is as much a matter of courtesy as it is of self-preservation, how an overload of stimulation can ultimately make you immune. I’ve always wanted to do something about the other people living in those houses, rather than about Nilsen himself.

Then, as I was casting about for my next project after “The Wicked Girls,” Smelly Clyde’s drains got blocked. He’s a perfectly pleasant chap, but when he opens his windows, gusts of something old and fetid will burst from them and make the rest of us slam ours down. It was a warm summer, and his windows were open often, so there were jokes going around that he was keeping a dead body in there. When his drains seized up, we were standing over them scratching our heads as he scooped a greyish, calcified sludge from the top.

“I think it’s fat,” he said, looking at the rest of us accusingly.

Nilsen was eventually caught because the drains at his communal rooming house got blocked by adipose tissue from bodies he was boiling down on his stovetop. I could barely contain my desire to get back upstairs and start writing.

S. MAG.: You have basically six main characters in the book. Was it a challenge to make sure they all had an equal voice?

A.M.: Oh, God, yes. Though really, the voice is largely shared among four of them. I’m a terrible one for making my own life more complicated. Interestingly, though, what I do find with these multiple-narrative books is that plotting ahead of time often seems to make it more, rather than less, difficult to get the balance right. I always know the rough shape of what I’m going to do, but I’ve found that you don’t really know how it’s going to pan out until you know the people involved properly and they start making their own decisions as to how they’re going to get themselves there. I know that sounds a bit woo-woo, but in every book I’ve written, someone has made a decision that has turned my own expectations on their heads. But writing without a plot shape is a dreadfully stressful way to work, if you’re working to a deadline.

S. MAG.: When you set out to write the book, did you want to explore the emotional roller coaster a setting like this would create?

A.M.: Totally. This is what interests me about crime, and what keeps my own attention as a reader. I’m interested in pretty much every aspect of crime apart from the
mechanics of how it’s investigated. I’m interested in the bad decisions, the tiny acts of questionable morality that snowball, the ways in which someone’s interpretation of the world can get so skewed that they can justify terrible acts in their heads. And the ramifications of other people’s choices: these fascinate me.

We live in a society that loves to preach that we can all have control over our outcomes if we’re determined enough. Yet everyone has found themselves affected at some point by someone else’s decisions and struggling to find a way to make the best of them.

S. MAG.: What scares Alex Marwood?

A.M.: You know what? Ideologues, that’s what scares me. I’m terrified by the way people will throw themselves in wholesale with belief systems and, once they’ve done so, will never question them, even when confronted with incontrovertible evidence that their beliefs—political, religious, moral, ecological, economic, whatever—are actually doing damage. Did you know that if you put someone who adheres to a strong ideology into an MRSI scanner and feed them facts—facts, not ideas—that might undermine those beliefs, you can actually watch those stimuli be bounced out of their brains before they ever reach the parts that might have to grapple with them? That scares the bejaysus out of me.

Oh, and spiders, and my grandmother. Whoo, she was one scary broad.

S. MAG.: Is there one character in the book that surprised you by having a bigger voice than originally thought?

A.M.: Not so much bigger, as different. I started writing Vesta as an old girl who was facing old age in a loveless marriage, and I just wasn’t getting on with her. Her situation wasn’t interesting to me; she just felt bitter and mean-minded like the man she was married to. When she transformed into one of those brilliant spinsters whose single status no one can quite understand, whose “trap” was actually her home itself, a whole lot fell into place. As a writer you have to at least quite like your characters, even if you’re writing them for other people to dislike.

S. MAG.: If there was one book you wish you wrote, what would it be?

A.M.: This week? Barbara Vine’s “A Fatal Inversion.” I just reread it because I’m having trouble working on timeline issues in the one I’m writing at the moment, and it’s even more brilliant than I remember. She breaks so many rules—multiple points-of-view and multiple timelines in a single chapter, not signifying changes of time with changes of tense, moments of wonderful wry comedy—and the whole is just perfect. I remember reading that book in my twenties and thinking: yes, this is writing, this is what I want to do.

S. MAG.: Do you have any superstitions when you write?

A.M.: Um. I like to think of myself as a rationalist, she said, cross-legged on the bed, cat pressed against shins, having checked horoscope, while surrounded by household gods. No, none at all.
S. MAG.: “The Wicked Girls” was such a big hit for you. Did you feel more pressure to “up the action” with “The Killer Next Door”?

A.M.: Not really. Though the sudden taking-off of “The Wicked Girls” gave me a few surprising panic attacks. My lovely doctor told me that she couldn’t count the number of artists of various hues she’d had to treat for similar responses to finally breaking through. Getting what you’ve longed for can be a startlingly terrifying thing, especially if, like most people who’ve lived on low incomes struggling to get there for years, your brain has trained itself to recognize all states of arousal as yet another disaster. The physiological tells are exactly the same.

“The Killer Next Door” is actually my sixth novel (I used to write under my own name), and I’ve always been quite OCD-ish about doing the best book I possibly could, so it was more of the same, really, though with, as it were, more to lose if I were to get it wrong. I suspect I’ll feel like this about writing for the rest of my life. A bit of me wishes I’d become a forensic psychologist instead.

S. MAG.: With social media giving you instant access to reviews and reactions to your book, do you let that influence you when you write?

A.M.: I try not to. You have to write the books you write, not the books other people would have written. I am lucky enough to have an awesome editor and a wonderful agent who also has a terrific editorial eye, and I try to keep outside influence down to what they have to say.

That said, I adore the social media, Facebook particularly, possibly to the detriment of my productivity. I’ve met amazing, interesting, stimulating, entertaining, generous people, who have fantastic things to say and bits of knowledge and personal experience to contribute that I would have found far harder to access any other way. The chip fork murder in “The Wicked Girls” came straight from a throwaway gag by a Facebook friend, and it’s a wonderful place if, like me, you’re a vocab magpie. I can barely remember how I did my job before it.

One thing I’d also like to add, for other writers: once you’ve had a certain number of one-star reviews on the internet, they stop stinging. I remember the first one I received, back in 1999, hurting so much I didn’t write for a couple of weeks while I obsessed about it. Now, half the time, I just laugh and share them on Facebook. In fact, one of my best friends took one of my one-star reviews, entitled “A British Book by a Woman Writer,” set it in Comic Sans and laminated it for me. It hangs in my bathroom, next to my write-up from Stephen King. And they’re good for stopping one from developing a narcissistic personality disorder.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in the future?

A.M.: I’m working on a new book whose working title is “The Long Weekend,” but it’s coming slowly— I’ve had a bad year of slow family bereavement and it’s not been great for the concentration. It’s about secrets. Well, one huge secret that a group of people club together to keep, and the dreadful emotional toll that keeping it takes over the years.

Thanks, Alex, for giving us some time. Visit her website at www.alexmarwood.com.

THE KILLER NEXT DOOR

By Alex Marwood

This novel is about the people who live at 23 Beulah Grove in London. Does that sound innocent? Don’t read this at night, alone.

Just the landlord alone, gave me the creeps. In the Prologue, some body parts have been found in the freezer. A couple of the fingers match up with a young missing woman, Lisa Dunne. DI Cheyne finds out the residents called her Collette. But where is the rest of her? And just what is going on in that place?

The reader goes back in time and follows Lisa from her job at the bar (with lap dancing), where she finds her boss dead and, knowing too much about the financial dealings, snatches the money and runs for her life.

She lands in an ideal hiding place, the rundown rooming house full of losers and a cat called Psycho. There’s Gerard, the music teacher, who never interacts with anyone there; Cher, the Scrumper, a friendly, outgoing, pretty young black woman; old Vesta, who wants only to be able to live by the sea, where she takes an annual visit; Hossein, the intensely handsome Iranian immigrant; and that landlord. The problem is, the reader doesn’t know which one is The Lover, a person who kills young women residents and mummifies them, until they decay and he must replace them.

Even stranger things start happening. Vesta’s basement apartment is broken into, and the stinky drains, always a problem, are getting impossible. But the obese, sweating, lecherous landlord won’t fix anything until…well, things happen and it all comes crashing down.

Deliciously creepy book!

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of “Eine Kleine Murder” •

SuspenseMagazine.com
Forensic Files

**Q&A: WILL INGESTION OF BEE VENOM KILL SOMEONE WHO IS ALLERGIC TO BEES?**

By DP Lyle, MD

Photo Credit: Provided by Author

**Q:** If a person is allergic to bee venom and the venom is ingested, would the person be likely to die? Would the venom show up on a tox screen at autopsy?

**A:** Bee venom is a protein toxin and would be digested by the acids in the stomach if swallowed. And once digested it would not likely cause an allergic reaction. However, an allergic reaction would happen once the venom contacted the buccal mucosa—big term for the lining of the mouth. This could cause an anaphylactic reaction and kill the victim.

Anaphylaxis is a rapid allergic reaction to some antigen. These antigens are typically foods, drugs, or insect venoms. Common foods are peanuts and shellfish; common drugs are penicillin and iodine, which is found in many radiographic dyes; and common insects are bees, as in your story. There are a myriad of other foods, drugs, and bugs that can cause anaphylaxis in the allergic person.

This rapid immune (or allergic) reaction involves antigens (the food, drug, the bee venom, etc.) and antibodies, which are manufactured by the body and react to the specific antigen that they are directed against. This reaction is a critical part of our defense against bacteria and viruses.

The body recognizes the antigen (virus, let’s say) as foreign and builds antibodies that will recognize and attach to the virus. This reaction attracts white blood cells (WBCs), which release chemicals that kill or harm the virus, which is then consumed by the WBCs and destroyed. This process is essential for each of us to survive in our bacteria and virus-filled world.

But, in allergic individuals, this reaction is rapid and massive and causes a release of large amounts of the chemicals from the WBCs, and it is these chemicals that cause the problems. They cause dilatation (opening up) of the blood vessels, which leads to a drop in blood pressure (BP) and shock. They cause the bronchial tubes (airways) to constrict, which leads to shortness of breath, wheezing, and coughing.

This is basically a severe asthmatic attack and prevents adequate air intake. The oxygen level in the blood drops rapidly. The chemicals also cause what is known as capillary leak. This means that the tiny microscopic blood vessels in the tissues begin to leak fluids into the tissues. This leads to swelling and various skin lesions such as a red rash, hives (actually these are called bullae and are fluid-filled, blister-like areas), and what are called wheel-and-flare lesions or target lesions (pale areas surrounded by a reddish ring).

In the lungs, this capillary leaking causes swelling of the airways, which along with the constriction of the airways, prevents air intake. In the tissues it causes swelling of the hands, face, eyes, and lips. The net result of an anaphylactic reaction is a dramatic fall in BP, severe wheezing, swelling and hives, shock (basically respiratory and cardiac failure), and death.

Usually anaphylaxis onsets within minutes (ten to twenty) after contact with the chemical, but sometimes, particularly with ingested foods, it may be delayed for hours—even up to twenty-four hours. With a bee sting it would begin in a matter of minutes. Bee venom in the mouth might take only a few minutes to instigate the reaction.

Your victim would suffer swelling of the tongue and face—particularly of the lips and around the eyes—as well as swelling...
of his hands. Hives and wheel-and-flare lesions would pop out over the skin. He would begin to gasp for breath and develop progressively louder wheezing. As the oxygen content of his blood began to drop he would appear bluish around his lips, ears, fingers, and toes. This would progress until his skin was dusky blue. He would sweat, weaken, and finally when his BP dropped far enough would lose consciousness, lapse into a coma and die.

Unless treatment was swift and effective, that is.

Untreated anaphylaxis leads to shock and death in anywhere from a very few minutes to an hour or more, depending upon the severity of the reaction and the overall health of the victim. Treatment consists of blood pressure (BP) and respiratory support, while giving drugs that counter the allergic reaction. BP support may come from intravenous (IV) drips of drugs called vasopressors. The most common would be Dopamine, Dobutamine, epinephrine, and neosynephrine.

Respiratory support may require the placement of an endotracheal (ET) tube and artificial ventilation. The victim would then be given epinephrine IV or subcutaneously (SubQ) and IV Benadryl and steroids. Common steroids would be Medrol, Solumedrol, and Decadron. These drugs work at different areas of the overall allergic reaction and reverse many of its consequences. The victim could survive with these interventions.

Or not. Your call.

If you decide that your victim will die, then at autopsy the findings are non-specific. That is, they are not absolutely diagnostic that an anaphylactic reaction occurred. The ME would expect to find swelling of the throat and airways and perhaps fluid in the lungs (pulmonary edema) and maybe some bleeding in the lungs. He may also find some congestion of the internal organs, such as the liver.

He must, however, couple these findings with a history of the individual having eaten a certain food, having ingested or being given a certain drug, or having received an insect bite or sting and then developing symptoms and signs consistent with anaphylaxis.

And in the case of insects, such as the bee you are using, he may be able to find antibodies to the insect’s venom in the victim’s blood. Maybe not. So you can have it either way—yes, he finds the antibodies; or, no, he doesn’t.

D. P. Lyle is the Macavity and Benjamin Franklin Silver Award winning and Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, Scribe, and USA Best Book Award nominated author of many non-fiction books as well as numerous works of fiction, including the Samantha Cody thriller series; the Dub Walker thriller series, and the Royal Pains media tie-in novels. To learn more about D.P., check out his websites at http://www.dplylemd.com, http://writersforensicsblog.wordpress.com, or Crime and Science Radio at http://crimeandscienceradio.com.
Bestselling author Andrew Kaplan returns with his highly anticipated sequel to "Homeland: Carrie's Run" with "Homeland: Saul's Game." The books are based on the hit TV series Homeland, seen on Showtime.

Andrew made his name as a top thriller author with his Scorpion series and his excellent writing landed him the exciting opportunity to write the Homeland series. His extensive experience in the U.S. Army and Israeli Army, gave him the perfect background to bring exciting and thrilling adventures to the fans.

Andrew burst onto the scene with his first book “Hour of the Assassins,” which the Los Angeles Times remarked, “Kept me up till the late show hours... (paced) like a ride on the Magic Mountain roller coaster.”

Leading a mission to capture master terrorist Abu Nazir, CIA operations officer Carrie Mathison discovers a dangerous threat inside the Agency in this thrilling second official prequel novel to Showtime’s Emmy Award-winning hit series Homeland.

Damascus, Syria, 2009: Carrie Mathison is leading an operation to capture or kill al-Qaeda terrorist Abu Nazir. But arriving at the compound where he was supposed to be in hiding, they find it empty. Carrie is sure that someone is leaking CIA information to the enemy and has betrayed their operation, seriously threatening American interests in the Middle East. To expose the double agent, her boss, Saul Berenson, devises an elaborate ruse that will send her on the most dangerous mission of her life.

This twisting tale of international intrigue takes fans deeper into the intense world of high-stakes espionage, and explores never-before-seen details of Carrie's life as an operative in the Middle East, Saul's past as an agent in Iran, Brody's dark childhood and captivity, and events involving the trio—and other favorite characters, like Dar Adal—that will lead them to the present.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can you tell us about the book that's not on the back cover?

Andrew Kaplan (A.K.): When I met with the Homeland showrunners and studio execs before I began to write my second Homeland book (this was before any of the scripts for the TV show's Season 3 had been written), they gave me advance notice that the Brody character would be killed off in the Season 3 finale. They then asked, well, begged, me to include Brody in this book, because “otherwise Brody's story would never be told.” The show had never touched on his past or adequately addressed what caused Brody, a United States Marine, to become a jihadi terrorist.

But the book is about a lot more than Brody. There are scenes here, like one where Carrie's at a diplomatic party in Istanbul or another about Saul at a soccer match that played a key role in the Iranian Revolution, that are as good as anything I've ever done. Also, while I've written a lot about the Middle East, I don't think I've ever written anything that will help people more clearly understand what's happening in the Middle East today than this book.
S. MAG.: What unanswered questions did you leave fans hanging with in “Homeland: Carrie’s Run” that you answer with this book?

A.K.: In the first book, Carrie was devastated by the death of a love interest, Captain Ryan Dempsey. In the new book we see not only what’s happened to her since, but we also learn about the other key characters; not just who they are, but how they got that way. Where and how did Saul become who he is? How do we understand his relationship with Mira, this marriage between an idealistic, yet flawed Indian woman and a lonely boy raised as an Orthodox Jew in rural Indiana? The Saul-Carrie relationship is the axis around which the show revolves. How did that core relationship come about? I believe readers will get a completely new understanding of Saul. What about Dar Adal? Where did he come from? His ruthlessness, his uncaring about people, yet closeness to Saul? And what happened to Carrie after Dempsey? What about the men in her life? The show doesn’t tell you. The book does. All in a damn good thriller.

S. MAG.: Writing one series is hard enough, but with your Scorpion series being so successful also, how are you able to juggle everything?

A.K.: I had to put the Scorpion series on pause while I wrote “Homeland,” which was further complicated by having to coordinate on an ongoing basis with my publisher, the TV showrunners and the studio so that we remained consistent to the characters and to what was happening in the TV series. This was rendered even more difficult by late script changes and other decisions by the studio.

Also, I don’t think anyone anticipated that the first book, “Homeland: Carrie’s Run” would be such a big bestseller (five times the No. 1 thriller, No. 1 political novel, and No. 1 movie tie-in on Amazon), especially internationally. So there was a lot of pressure on “Homeland: Saul’s Game.” For a time, it sucked up all the oxygen.

S. MAG.: When writing about a topic that is big in the news today, how are you able to separate the fact from the fiction?

A.K.: Interesting question for a guy who wrote “Scorpion Winter,” based on the premise of a threatened Russian invasion of Ukraine, something that at the time my publisher was concerned was too far-fetched to be believable. How do I separate fact from fiction in the news? I tend not to believe government or NGO pronouncements, no matter which government, group or website it is. They have an agenda. If someone announces “twenty-three terrorists were killed in a drone attack,” I think, how the hell do you know? Did you count them? I do believe history.

Countries don’t have friends or allies, they have interests. When I looked at Ukraine, I looked at Russian and Ukrainian history. Russia’s interests, its concern about its naval base in Crimea, made its actions inevitable. The Middle East is a tribal society riven by religious factionalism, not a collection of countries. Only if you look at it in that context, can you start to separate fact from fiction. For me, the biggest problem our government has is not that it tries to delude us, but that it succeeds in deluding itself.

S. MAG.: What is your favorite and least favorite word and why?
A.K.: My favorite word(s) is “We've sold” and it has to come from my agent. My least favorite word(s) are “You know” followed by a pause, because it always means something negative is coming. I like the descriptive “You know” not followed by a pause, which can be very evocative. For example, I started “Homeland: Carrie’s Run” with the line: “You know how it is at Princeton on a dark winter morning, five a.m., before anyone else is up?”

S. MAG.: What one piece of advice did you receive early on in your writing career that you continue to pass along to writers today?

A.K.: One of my closest friends is Brian Garfield, Edgar-winning author of “Death Wish” and “Hopscotch.” He set out ten rules for suspense fiction that John Grisham credited with helping him write his breakout hit, “The Firm.” Rule One is, “Start with action, explain it later.” In other words, right on page one, start with fear, violence, conflict, trouble, something to make the reader turn from page 1 to page 2. I tell writers, these days, you have to hook your reader not just with the first page or the first paragraph, but the first sentence. Writers today couldn't do better than Brian's ten rules.

S. MAG.: When writing such fast-paced thrillers, how many times during the editing process do you say, “OK, let's slow things down a little and let the readers take a breath”?

A.K.: For me, it doesn't happen in the editing process, but organically, as part of the writing itself. Even while maintaining pacing and suspense, you are always conscious of a certain rhythm and sense when you have to slow it down. Transitions are good for that, particularly after a tense, suspenseful sequence. Also, the protagonists in my books, whether it's Scorpion or Carrie or Saul, are not super-karate people (yeah, Scorpion can kick ass, but that's not what makes him so effective and dangerous), but very intelligent, analytical people. They think, and taking those interludes when they pause to figure stuff out in various settings, gives the reader a breather while setting up the next move.

S. MAG.: What part of your writing do you feel you need to continue to improve upon?

A.K.: One fault I have that drives me nuts is that I often create a memorable character that appears in a single chapter or two and then disappears forever. For example, the Russian gangster, Khmelnitsky, in “Scorpion Betrayal,” one of the most wildly original characters I've ever come up with—and I have absolutely no idea where he came from—one minute he wasn't there, and then there he was. He was so dazzlingly original I tried everything I could think of to try to keep him longer in the book. The problem occurs because thrillers, particularly spy thrillers, tend to be plot-driven. Thus, once the plot no longer requires the services of a character, it's adios. I wish I knew how to solve that.

S. MAG.: What scares Andrew Kaplan?

A.K.: That there won't ever be a “Scorpion” movie. Although we were approached by producers a bunch of times, especially after Publishers Weekly did an article about me, we didn't want to go the normal option route because in Hollywood, only one out of a hundred optioned properties ever makes it to the screen. Plus you've given up control, so even if by some miracle you avoid Development Hell and the movie actually gets produced, nine times out of ten, it ends up a typical Hollywood potboiler. We didn't want that for “Scorpion.”

Twice now we've come very close to closing deals for a “Scorpion” film franchise and each time, something that had nothing to do with us or “Scorpion” killed it. Hopefully, third time is the charm.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in the future?

A.K.: The big news is that for the first time ever, four of my early books—including the original “Scorpion,” the book that started the series, and my spy novel “War of the Raven,” cited by the American Library Association as “One of the 100 Best Books ever written about World War Two”—have been released as e-books. I'm hoping readers will check them out. As for what's next for me, stay tuned.

Thank you, Andrew, for taking the time to talk with us. If you want more information about Andrew and all his books check out his website at www.andrewkaplan.com.
A while back, I was hired by a newspaper to write a review of a local author’s debut mystery novel, published by an imprint of one of the “Big Five” houses in traditional book publishing. Unfortunately, the book was awful—full of continuity errors, plausibility issues, expository dragging, and muddled plotting. The prose seemed, for lack of a better term, lumpy. Lacking in flow.

I read it through a second time, trying to find merit I might have missed in the first go-round, and noticed something strange: the book had a commercially appealing story and structure, and had none of the grammar, style, or spelling errors I associate with poor copy editing.

So what failed this book? The answer came, fortuitously, in a lunch conversation with a couple of editing colleagues on the day I was struggling to finish my review. They had invited me to join her on a panel about editing at an upcoming writers’ conference, and we were strategizing how to divvy up the talk so we wouldn’t overlap.

One said she’d cover developmental editing, since that was her specialty. The other said she’d cover copy editing and proofreading, since those were her specialties.

Ummm, I thought. What does that leave for me?

As if reading my thoughts, one of the ladies said: “You can talk about line editing. That seems to be your specialty—you know, flagging repetitive or overwritten passages, catching things that don’t make sense, stuff like that.”

“Oh,” I said. “I guess I had the idea that line editing and copy editing were kind of the same thing.”

I was assured that was not the case.

So, after lunch, I did some online research, and found out that my colleagues were indeed correct. My favorite definition of line editing comes from author Tahlia Newland: “Line editing checks whether or not the author has expressed themselves well. It improves the quality of the prose, removes unnecessary repetition, restructures sentences and paragraphs so that they flow more smoothly together, and checks the subtleties of word usage, and so on. A good line editor knows the difference between active and passive prose and can turn dull prose into something more engaging. A copy editor does not do this. They merely check the grammar on what is there, and writing that is grammatically sound can still be dull.”

And just like that, I saw the problem with the novel I was reviewing: It hadn’t been line edited.

So I wrote a negative review, but I didn’t lay the blame on the author entirely. My take was that the book was an early draft that had gone through a dev edit and a copy edit, but lacked a necessary intermediate layer of line-by-line tightening for clarity and cohesion. In my review, I blamed the acquisition editor and the publishing house for rushing the book to publication without giving it due process.

Some months later, I got an email from the author. I’ll admit that it took me a few days to work up the nerve to open it. When I did, I was surprised. He admitted he’d been angry at first—at me—and reflexively defensive about his publisher. But over time, he said, my words wormed into his thoughts and he began to wonder just what quality control he did get. So he worked up the nerve to question his acquiring editor.

And what he heard back, after some pointed exchanges, was surprising. His manuscript got a developmental edit that was aimed mostly at improving its commercial potential. And it got a copy edit and a proofread. And that was it. And that’s why his characters said things that contradicted things they’d said before, and why things that were said in dialogue were repeated in narrative, and why some plot threads got stranded on Bridges to Narrative Nowhere.

At the talk we gave, my developmental-editor colleague described her work as “flying at the ten-thousand-foot level.” My copy editing/proofing colleague’s work was more analogous to “being on hands and knees, looking for a contact lens in the carpet.”

But who travels in between? At that place above the ground but not too high up to see the fine details of the landscape? The line editor, that’s who.
Robert Dugoni has established himself over the past several years as a top legal thriller writer. His first novel, featuring his character, attorney David Sloane, “The Jury Master,” was a New York Times best seller. The ensuing Sloane titles continued to win accolades for Dugoni, and the most recent, “The Conviction,” was nominated for a Harper Lee Award.

Dugoni’s latest book, “My Sister’s Grave,” begins a new series featuring police officer Tracy Crosswhite, and the advance reviews have been stellar. Dugoni has become a popular writing teacher as well. His ThrillerFest sessions are always packed, and he has begun teaching weekend-long Novel Intensive Workshops with fellow thriller author Steven James, around the country.

Dugoni chatted with Suspense Magazine about his latest book and his writing.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Your first novel was “The Jury Master,” but your first published book was non-fiction. How did that process happen?

Robert Dugoni (R.D.): I was working all weekend building a brick patio when my wife came home and told me I needed to dress for a party. I really didn’t want to go and almost didn’t, but she said the host was a former FBI agent and might be a good contact for me. When we arrived I found a man who looked as disinterested as I to be at the party. Turned out he was an EPA agent in Seattle with a love of books and stories and a great tale to tell. Being a former journalist, I knew a good story and “The Cyanide Canary” was a tragic story with a terrific protagonist, sympathetic victim, and mind-boggling antagonist. When I wrote the proposal, ten agents wanted to represent me.

Up until that point I had written three novels but none had been picked up yet. The agency that I chose to work with on “The Cyanide Canary” also picked up those novels.

S. MAG.: What led to the publication of “The Jury Master”?

R.D.: A lot of heartache, angst, and grief. I had an agent who loved the manuscript but before he ever sent it out he died and no one else at the agency would take me on. I was cut loose. I continued sending it out, snail mail, and continued getting rejection letters, many of them. Then “The Cyanide Canary” happened and I signed with the Jane Rotrosen Agency, and they asked, “What else have you got?” They read “The Jury Master” in a day and a half, loved it, and eventually sold it to Warner Books, now Grand Central.

S. MAG.: How did you develop your hero, David Sloane?

R.D.: Sloane is an amalgamation of attorneys I worked with and a little bit of me sprinkled in. I think every protagonist has a
little of the author in him or her. I’d known an attorney who was so good, it was almost as if he couldn’t lose, and I thought that would be an incredible responsibility for an attorney, not to mention a statement about our judicial system. The truth doesn’t always win. What does an attorney with a conscience do about that? How does it make him feel to represent a case in which the client is at fault and has liability but the attorney can get him off? I’ve been on both ends of that dilemma and let me tell you, neither feels particularly satisfying.

S. MAG.: Without giving anything away, can you talk about a major plot point that ignited your fan base in “Bodily Harm”?

R.D.: I am of the firm opinion that no character should ever be safe. In fact, given all of the dangerous situations we novelists put our characters in, I think it is unrealistic that too often no one gets hurt or dies. It’s kind of like The Game of Thrones series. Part of the fun and the tension comes from the reader’s uncertainty that a character in which they are going to become emotionally invested might not be around forever.

S. MAG.: You have turned from writing about David Sloane to a new character, Tracy Crosswhite. Can you talk about her origins?

R.D.: Tracy Crosswhite is complex. She first appeared in “Murder One” as one of the Seattle homicide detectives investigating the murder of a Russian drug dealer. She was Detective Kinsington Rowe’s partner. She just came alive for me as I wrote that book. Her colleagues called her, “The Professor” because she was a high school chemistry teacher before becoming a cop. After that book I started asking myself, how did she go from being a teacher to being a cop? Then I was reading the newspaper and saw that they were taking down dams in the Pacific Northwest to restore the salmon’s wild habitat, and I read that lakes above the dams were drained. Of course I started doing the “what if” game. What if they found a body at the bottom of the lake, a crime that was never solved? I thought Tracy could be the detective on the case.

Then I continued the “what if” game and eventually came to the idea of, what if that body was a relative of Tracy’s, and what if Tracy became a cop precisely because that crime had never been solved and it had destroyed her life as well? Tracy would be emotionally scarred, but she’d also have to be determined enough and strong enough to continue pushing for answers against some formidable foes for twenty years when there were seemingly no answers to be found…until they find her sister Sarah’s body. Oh, and did I mention she is an expert marksman and lightning-fast from competing in shooting competitions her entire life?

S. MAG.: Was the research for “My Sister’s Grave” stepping out of your comfort zone since you had been writing about the other end of law enforcement?

R.D.: No, not really. It was difficult because MSG has a much stronger police-procedural element to the plot than my past books, but I’d made some great contacts in the Seattle Police Department as I wrote the David Sloane series, and as I began to hash out the story I just asked a lot of questions. Usually my research errors are when I think I know something and don’t ask the question. What I’ve found is that police officers want you to get it right, and if they don’t know the answer they’ll put you in touch with someone who does.

S. MAG.: Is “My Sister’s Grave” the start of a new series? Do you have any plans to have Tracy Crosswhite tangle with David Sloane at some point?

R.D.: It is definitely the start of a new series, but I don’t know how many books will be in the series. The reader dictates that. Series can be great for picking up new readers and keeping loyal readers, but not at the risk of the series becoming stale. I don’t want to write a story simply because I have to write another book. I feel that cheats the readers. I want every book to be written like it is a standalone, and I’ve been waiting my whole life to write it and create the characters. If I can do that, the story will be fresh for the reader and they won’t feel like they’re reading the same “been there done that” story.” For me that gets tiresome when I pick up a book and it’s the same character on the same quest, just in a different setting. That’s what I thought was the brilliance of the Harry Potter series. Same characters in the relatively same setting, but each quest was new and the characters were constantly evolving.

As for Sloane and Tracy meeting? You never know. As I said above, the reader should never feel too comfortable.

S. MAG.: Is it difficult for a man to write a compelling story from a female perspective?
R.D.: I think writing from any perspective is difficult. Just because I’m a man doesn’t mean I can write from a longshoreman’s perspective or a police officer’s perspective. You have to do a lot of research regardless of the gender of your protagonist. So I don’t fixate on the gender, but on the career. I’ve spent my life around strong-willed, competent women. My four sisters are all professionals. My mother has been a professional her entire life and still works at eighty-two. My wife is a professional. I’ve worked in a profession with competent women.

Yes, men and women are different, but we’re also a lot alike. We want certain things in our lives. I wrote Tracy to be a homicide detective trying to do her job while struggling with the loss of her sister, her own remorse and guilt, and frustrated when she can’t get answers. Those are human emotions that any man or woman can relate to and based on the early reviews they’ve struck a chord with both men and women.

S. MAG.: What can a reader expect when they pick up a Robert Dugoni thriller?

R.D.: What I’ve been told is that my thrillers have a lot more character development than many in the genre. MSG in particular has received stellar reviews on Amazon because people have really taken to Tracy Crosswhite and become emotionally invested in her. I try to write honestly and, as the novels have piled up, I try to get the story moving and keep it moving. I think writers, like every profession, learn what works and doesn’t work. For a mystery/thriller author, the best advice is Elmore Leonard when he said he only writes the parts of the books that people read. So my books have a lot of dialogue, not a lot of long transitions, and usually a mystery element to go along with the traditional “thriller” quality.

S. MAG.: You mentioned character development in your novels. What is more important to you: character or story?

R.D.: Character. Time and again I’ve had readers email to tell me how much they liked one of my novels and invariably they begin discussing one of the characters. If you can get readers to empathize with a character, to feel what the character is experiencing, then you’ve done a pretty good job. You need an interesting story to keep the action moving and interesting, but readers really want to care about the characters in the novel. So far, with Tracy Crosswhite, so good.

S. MAG.: It seems that attorneys make terrific storytellers. Why is that?

R.D.: I know a lot of attorneys who are just natural storytellers in and out of the courtroom. In law school you read short stories all the time—that’s what case law is. Every reported case is a short story about a dramatic time in certain peoples’ lives. Every case in the legal reporters has all the elements of a good story. You have your protagonists and your antagonists. Something ignites the story and sends the participants on a quest to find the answer. Along the way others are dragged in willingly and unwillingly to the quest. There is maneuvering and obstacles leading to a climax when the jury renders its decision and ultimately a final resolution of the conflict, good or bad. After a while, lawyers begin to think and talk like storytellers without even knowing they’re doing it.

For more information on “My Sister’s Grave” and all of Robert’s work, check out his website at www.robertdugoni.com.

MY SISTER’S GRAVE
By Robert Dugoni

Not only has Mr. Dugoni offered a fantastically suspenseful tale but he has also written a heart-wrenching book about two small-town sisters who grew up with wonderful parents...yet their perfect life ended in tragedy.

Tracy, the more outspoken of the sisters, has been trying for two decades to figure out exactly what happened to her sister. She has never stopped questioning the facts of her sister’s disappearance, and the person accused of killing her, even though her body was never found.

Tracy and Sarah had been at a shooting contest. When it was over, Tracy went home with her fiancé while Sarah headed back to their home alone. She was never seen again, and their happy family never recovered.

With Sarah gone, and Dad and Mom gone shortly thereafter, Tracy moved from the small town to Seattle where she became a homicide detective. It was her true calling, considering that Tracy never believed Edmund House, a convicted rapist and the person found guilty for Sarah’s murder, was the right man. And after twenty years, when Sarah’s body is found in the hills near their old home, Tracy becomes motivated to help House get a new trial as she uncovers secrets about her old hometown that she never wanted to know.

Searching for the answers while hunting the real killer down, Tracy finds out many deep, dark secrets that will not only shed light on the past, but will also bring mortal danger to herself and all others around her.

A fantastic wordsmith, this book jumps from the present back to the past without skipping a beat or confusing the reader in any way. The ending is masterful and, even though the book is long, it can be read in a day. In fact, it will be read in a day, because once author Dugoni has you, he never lets go.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian & Co-Owner of The Write Companion
FROZEN IN PLACE, ALL SENSES ALERT, the hair on the back of my neck prickling, I strain to interpret the noise I just heard, but I can’t exactly place it. A cold breeze pushes dried leaves skittering across the concrete sidewalk. Could that have been what I heard? Did I hear anything at all? I spend a few breathless seconds listening, but I hear nothing else out of the ordinary, just the wind tossing about naked tree branches and the usual hum of the city at night. Behind me, all I can see is the halo of a solitary, yellow streetlight. Everything else is black. My mind conjures all the invisible threats, both real and unreal, that could easily hide in the inky blackness. I try to reassure myself that I am just being paranoid, then quickly remember the saying, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that someone isn’t out to get you.” It sounds much funnier during the light of day than it does walking alone on this dark night. I shift the bag of groceries from my right arm to my left and uneasily turn my back on my imagined, or not, threat and continue down the street in the direction of my apartment.

I can be excused for being anxious; the entire city is on edge. Earlier this week, the police department officially acknowledged what had been suspected for some time, that a serial killer is stalking the city’s West Side—my neighborhood. In fact, the police department’s announcement was prompted by the local daily newspaper’s sensational series on the “West Side Slasher.” Though rumors and speculation have recently been running rampant throughout the city, the newspaper series, and especially the department’s official recognition of the Slasher, transformed gray imaginings into brilliant, Technicolor reality. No longer could we pretend that this gruesome series of murders was a figment of some publicity hungry reporter’s hyperactive imagination. It was now confirmed that they actually are a reality, that they are committed by the same person, and, most frightening, that they seem to be happening to random victims. Firearms dealers are reporting that handguns are flying off the shelves. It is now probably more likely that one would be killed by a skittish citizen with a hair-trigger than by the Slasher, himself.

The West Side is what is euphemistically referred to as a “neighborhood in transition.” In my younger days, we would have said that it was becoming Yuppified. I guess the current term is “gentrification.” In any case, in what used to be solely a working class neighborhood, blue-collar workers now rub shoulders with barely dry-behind-the-ears professionals, developing calluses on their butts rather than their hands, attracted by the refurbished historic brownstones and oak lined streets. Trendy art galleries are now next-door neighbors with grimy muffler shops. Chic farm-to-table restaurants and fast food joints are located in uncomfortable proximity to one another. It no longer seems out of place to see a shop solely dedicated to selling free-trade coffee with flavoring in it and foam on top. A few short years ago, the denizens of this neighborhood would have been served their coffee strong and black in a chipped ceramic cup at the counter of a diner and would have been expected to mix in their own additives—cream and/or sugar. It won’t be long before the transition will be complete and the entire neighborhood will be given over to the thirty-something lawyers, dot.com middle managers, and those folks who don’t have any more sense than to spend far more than they ought to live in a trendy part of town. It is only a matter of time before my modest apartment will soon be transformed into a not so modest priced condo and I will be forced to move. In the meantime, I am comfortable here. I can walk to work at the furniture warehouse and the crime rate is low—at least it was until the West Side Slasher arrived on the scene.

By Jeff Chesnut
Another noise! This time, there is no doubt that I hear footsteps. I whirl, holding my grocery sack in front of me, as if unconsciously trying to hide behind it, my pulse pounding in my ears, my adrenal glands pumping rivers of adrenaline into my bloodstream, preparing me to fight or fly, preferably the latter. Into the circle of a streetlight walks a young woman bundled against the cold, her flats scuffing on the concrete. She walks briskly to the corner and turns right, walking out of sight. I let out the breath that I hadn't even realized I'd been holding, shift my grocery sack back into my left arm, hoping I haven't crushed the bread in my panic, and continue on my way, mildly abashed by my reaction.

The talking heads on the morning news show had a forensic psychologist on a couple of days ago to offer her profile of the Slasher. She was probably chosen more for her perfect, white teeth and the way she fits into her snug sweater, rather than for her clinical acumen, but she did have a few interesting things to say.

“He is male,” she said, “somewhere between the late 20s and early 40s. He probably holds a relatively menial job and probably lives and/or works within the neighborhood of the murders.”

She based this assertion on the assumption that he would need a certain amount of strength and stamina to overpower and kill his victims and because of his seeming comfort with his “kill zone.” She said that to see him, you would not recognize him as a monster.

“In fact,” she said, “he is probably very normal in appearance. His next door neighbors probably don’t have a clue that they are living next to a killer.”

As you might imagine, that last statement elicited no little amount of nervous small talk in the apartment building. As we were leaving for work this morning, my neighbor, Jerry, and I teasingly accused each other of being the West Side Slasher. We were kidding, of course, but the conversation was not without an undercurrent of discomfort. I am pretty certain that there is no way Jerry could be a serial killer. He is kind of a small guy with a wife and children and a stable job as a printer. We aren’t what you call close friends, though we run into each other fairly frequently around the apartment building and I’ve even been invited to one of his barbeques, so I feel I have a pretty good handle on him. I realize that other serial killers—BTK, the Green River Killer, and others—have also been family men, but Jerry? Nah, he doesn’t have it in him. In fact, now that I think about it, the idea is almost laughable, as if having a serial killer roaming the neighborhood is a laughing matter.

Ahead, a figure suddenly emerges from the dark. Again, my breath shortens and my heart rate jumps. In spite of the chill of the night, rivulets of sweat run down my back. As the silhouette comes into closer view, I can see that he is a large man and that he is wearing the uniform and carrying the implements of a policeman. If possible, my heart races faster still, and I begin to feel somewhat lightheaded. I consciously try to slow my breathing as I’m obviously beginning to hyperventilate. The psychologist on the news speculated that the Slasher was someone who would feel non-threatening to his victims, and suggested that he could be a person in authority, possibly even a policeman or someone impersonating a policeman. A ruse like that would make it easy to get close to someone, and gain his or her trust. I shift my grocery sack to my outside arm, preparing to throw my gallon of milk, loaf of bread, and pint of ice cream in his face and run should he make a move toward me. I keep my eyes averted, not wanting to meet his gaze, but my glances confirm that he is eyeing me closely. I continue walking, head down, looking out of the corner of my eyes and breathing a silent prayer that he will pass by me.

I feel that he senses my nervousness, but when he is a couple of steps from me, he merely touches the brim of his hat, and that is it, the idea is almost laughable, as if having a serial killer roaming the neighborhood is a laughing matter.

I return his nod and manage to croak out, “How ya’ doing?” hoping that my shaky voice doesn’t betray how much of a nervous wreck I am.

It seems to me that the best protection I could have, since I don’t own a firearm yet, is to appear strong and confident, even though I feel anything but. After he passes, I glance over my shoulder repeatedly until he is well out of sight, making sure he doesn’t double back on me. When he walks out of view, I pick up my pace. I don’t like being out here alone on this street.

One of the particularly frightening things about the West Side Slasher is that he doesn’t seem to have a “type” like a Ted Bundy, Wayne Williams, or John Wayne Gacy. Because his victims are unpredictable, no one seems safe. His five known victims range from a fifteen-year-old, pretty, Hispanic girl to, most recently, a forty-seven-year-old, plain, white woman. He even counts one man, a twenty-five-year-old gay, white man, among his victims. The TV shrink called him a “killer of opportunity,” meaning that he takes his victims when and where it is convenient, not caring who or what they are. He hasn’t killed a black person yet, but she feels that may be only because no African-American has crossed his path at the wrong time or place, yet. The psychologist feels that he is not likely to slice up another man since his other male victim put up such a terrific fight, but that almost sounded more like a challenge than a reassurance to me. The only commonality between the victims is the method of death—a slash across the neck with a sharp, razor-like instrument, so deep that, in a couple of cases, there was near decapitation—and the body parts he slices from his victims, apparently for gruesome trophies. So far, he’s
taken an ear, a finger, a nose, eyebrows and, most recently, a nipple.

At the next corner, I turn left onto Campbell Street, a narrow street lined with old oaks and very dark, the only illumination being supplied by an occasional porch light. At this time of night, even passing cars are only an occasional occurrence. Even though Campbell is darker than Porter Avenue, the more residential nature of the neighborhood feels more comfortable to me and I breathe easier, not having to worry about potential danger from each passing pedestrian. The policeman really shook me up, but I have now relegated him to the back of my mind as just another false threat my nervousness conjured up. I pucker my lips, as if to whistle, but then remember my mother saying something about “whistling past the graveyard” and decide not to tempt fate. I plan on going home to see my family this weekend, and for a moment become lost in thought while thinking of my mom’s food, but I am quickly snapped back to the present by the appearance of someone ahead of me.

I can only see the silhouette of a person faintly in the gloom about half a block ahead of me, a dim figure of someone walking a little-bitty dog. I can’t tell the age of the person, but the body type looks like a young woman, though it is difficult to tell because of a bulky coat camouflaging the figure. In any case, she or he, looks slight and alone. Normally, I hate those tiny excuses for dogs, but in this case, I figure anyone who is out with one of those rat-dogs can’t pose much of a threat to me.

I quicken my steps a little bit to catch up to her. She has stopped moving as the rat-dog examines a tree. As quietly as I can, I put my sack of groceries into a curbside garbage can. Neither the dog nor its owner has noticed me, yet. The noise of the wind in the branches covers the soft sounds of my sneakers on the sidewalk. My right hand slips into my pocket and thumbs out the blade of my X-acto knife. My left hand feels in my left coat pocket, making sure the small Tupperware container is still there.

I think that tonight, I may take home a pair of lips. ■
IF YOUR FAMILY IS A TARGET, YOU HAVE TO BE A WEAPON.

"Blood Line" is a high-voltage spy thriller that redefines rogue—the Granger Spy Novel series introduces a loving family with lethal issues caught in the crosshairs of global arms dealers.

When a simple home invasion turns out to be not so simple, Ron Granger must put aside his quiet rural life and return to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Aided by his brilliant wife, Valerie, and resourceful teen daughter, Leecy, Ron must quickly decide who to believe among the calculating opportunists, shrewd criminals, and power-hungry rival agencies racing to possess the technology that will change modern warfare forever. But when Leecy is kidnapped, Ron and Val must choose between the mission and a rescue. With time quickly running out, Ron only knows one thing:

WHEN YOU CAN'T TRUST ANYONE ELSE, TRUST YOUR FAMILY.

"Sharply written, with characters that readers will be happy to see again."
—KIRKUS REVIEWS

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Available Where Books are Sold
Bestselling author Melissa de la Cruz’s latest book is “The Vampires of Manhattan: The New Blue Bloods Coven.” It comes on the heels of several bestselling young adult books, and fans can see them come to life on the hit Lifetime show, The Witches of East End.

Melissa describes her books as “hipster horror”—the memorable characters from her Blue Blood series are older and cooler than before.

Melissa’s writing career started not with suspense but with fashion and beauty. She has written for The New York Times, Marie Claire, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, and more. Melissa grew up in Manila and moved to San Francisco with her family, then headed to study at Columbia University in New York City, where she majored in English but minored in nightclubs and shopping.

Several of her books have been listed on the USA Today and NY Times bestseller lists, but when she penned her first adult paranormal book, “Witches of East End,” her career went into another stratosphere.

A brief look inside “Vampires of Manhattan”:

You’ll devour Melissa de la Cruz's hot new adult novel, in which her Blue Bloods immortals have matured and are now exposed to new challenges, new loves, new threats, and a haute, hot hipster lifestyle.

It is ten years after the great War with Lucifer, and the Coven has rebuilt. Leader of the Fallen, Oliver Hazard-Perry, plans to celebrate this prosperity by throwing a 400-year Ball—and all Blue Blood society will be there.

And then, all hell breaks loose...

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What exactly is the “Blue Blood Coven”?

Melissa de la Cruz (M.D.L.C.): The Blue Bloods coven is the new group of vampires who are still on Earth after the Redemption. They are rebuilding the vampire community after they won the War with Lucifer.

S. MAG.: With the success of the TV series Witches Of East End, you have gotten many more new readers. Where do you tell them to start reading?

M.D.L.C.: They can start anywhere—a lot of them have gone on to read my Blue Bloods series, which is great. You can definitely start there, or start at “Vampires of Manhattan.” Both will work.

S. MAG.: In “Vampires of Manhattan” emotions are at an all-time high. Would you say this is your most emotionally driven book to date?

M.D.L.C.: I don't know if I would say that. Every Blue Bloods novel is incredibly intense and the drama just ratchets up in each book. Maybe this is one of the most intense since it is the latest Blue Bloods novel, but I’m not really the person to say. :) That's for the reader.

S. MAG.: When you saw Witches Of East End on TV for the first time, did you say “Holy crap, it’s real!”
M.D.L.C.: It was really hard to process, just because it is SO surreal. You almost don’t know what to think—but once I did truly realize—WOW MY BOOK IS ON TV!!!—I just felt really, really, really happy. I just had this silly smile on my face the whole time when the first episode premiered. I have a silly smile on my face every time an episode airs. I love that show. I love the people it brought into my life; the experiences I have had. It’s a fun vacation from the book world. I understand why people are drawn to Hollywood. But I also like that I get to go back to my own world and write my books alone. Novelists are solitary creatures, but screenwriters are not—it’s very collaborative and community-oriented, which is such a nice contrast.

Also, in working now with two women now who have adapted my work, I am just in awe of their talent and how well they know THEIR medium. They are the experts, and I’m just there to cheer them on and help out in any way I can, but it’s their vision of the show and I feel so lucky that they kept the heart of the books and expanded the story lines. I’m a huge fan. (“Witches of East End” and “The Ring and the Crown.”)

S. MAG.: Which book do you wish you would have written?

M.D.L.C.: I admire a lot of books, but I don’t know if I wish I had written someone else’s. I know how hard the process is, what it takes to get to the final version. Knowing what I know, I don’t know if I’d like to have written anyone else’s really.

S. MAG.: What part of your writing do you continue to work on and improve with each book?


S. MAG.: Is there a sentence or paragraph in “Vampires of Manhattan” that you feel captures the essence of the book?

M.D.L.C.: “Come to think of it, what was a happy ending after all? It wasn’t as if once the credits rolled and the lights came on or an author wrote, ‘The end,’ you stopped living, because there was so much more of life to live, wasn’t there?”

The book is basically the story of what happens after Happily Ever After; what happens after “The End.”

S. MAG.: What is on your DVR right now?

M.D.L.C.: Witches of East End! Season Two was amazing! We are crossing our fingers for Season Three!

S. MAG.: What scares Melissa de la Cruz?

M.D.L.C.: The night is dark and full of terrors. George RR Martin was right about that.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in the future?

M.D.L.C.: The second book in the Heart of Dread series: “Stolen,” is out this November, and it’s “an action-packed adventure” starring “fierce fighter” Nat Kestal and her mercenary-for-hire-love Ryan Wesson (I’m quoting from the Kirkus review; I’m always giddy when they like my books). I’m so excited for people to find out what happens!

Also, “Descendants: Isle of the Lost” is out in May, it’s my first middle-grade fantasy featuring the teenage children of Disney’s most famous villains—it’s so so so much fun!

Also, a new book set in the world of Witches of East End that I can’t talk about too much yet, as we have not yet announced it. And the sequel to “The Ring and The Crown,” which I’m also working with a producer and a writer to develop into a television show. Hopefully we’ll get another Mel DLC show on the air soon!

Thank you, Melissa, for taking the time to talk with us. For more information about all her work check out her website at www.melissa-delacruz.com.
Chapter 1 | Omens

The alarm went off like an air-raid siren at midnight, and the hand that shot out of the bed slammed the snooze button so hard the side table shook. Half an hour later, Araminta Scott jumped out from underneath the blankets, kicking off the covers and cursing loudly. She'd dreamed she was late for work again and she was right—that wasn't the snooze button she'd hit. She scrambled into her clothes, putting on a worn black sweater over her thin black tank top, grabbing a pair of black jeans from the pile on the floor, and pulling them up over her skinny hips. She ran to the sink, splashed water on her face, finger combed her platinum bangs, and smoothed the soft, shorn hair at the back of her neck as she met her dark, baleful eyes in the mirror.

Ara wiped her hands and face on her lone, grungy, gray towel and took a rueful glance at the squalor that was her home—the nest of sheets, half-empty Chinese food containers on the kitchen counter, dust balls that seemed to be growing out of the walls like a cozy gray fungus. She should really clean this place once in a while. Or take a shower. She smelled pretty ripe, but there was nothing she could do about that now. If she was lucky and the L train was running without delays, she might just make it in time without catching heat from the chief, which she really didn't need right now. He wasn't exactly a fan of hers lately. Besides, she liked the way she smelled, like sweat and hard work, after spending the last seventy-two hours sitting on her suspect.

Policy mandated that anyone who didn't read as mortal and wasn't registered with the Coven had to be checked out. These days, that was all it took to rouse suspicion from the brass, who were still twitchy after last month's raid. Things had been relatively peaceful for the last decade since the War had ended, except for a renegade vampire or a demon popping up every now and then.

Lately, though, the Nephilim, those half-demon, half-human abominations, had started showing up in the city again in greater numbers, and just a few weeks ago the Venators had found their hive and destroyed it.

Ara had followed her guy for three days straight as he wandered around the city. So far he hadn't done anything more malicious than fail to tip the barista at a trendy coffee shop, but she'd noted his visits to a few interesting locations, secret places that were known only to their kind: the burned-out building that used to house the Repository of History; the church of St. John the Divine, where a significant battle had taken place; the old Van Alen place on Riverside Drive, the childhood home of the girl who had saved all their skins and had slain the Coven's nemesis, father of the Nephilim, Lucifer, the Morningstar, the Fallen Prince of Heaven. Schuyler Van Alen had thrust the archangel Michael's sword straight through his black heart. Rest in peace, motherfucker.

But Ara lost the trail somewhere on the Upper West Side, so she'd called it a day and slept for fourteen hours straight. Not that it was any excuse for being late. Chief was a hard-ass about stuff like that.

He was old-school and liked to remind the new recruits that he'd been battling dark angels in Hell when they were just getting their fangs.

She burst out of her apartment, boots clomping down the stairs, then abruptly turned around and ran right back up again. She must really be out of it to have forgotten these, she thought, as she stuffed her weapons—two crescent blades as
beautiful as they were deadly—into their sheaths in her back pockets and checked to make sure her gun (outfitted with silver bullets they called demon-killers for that very reason) was secure in its holster.

It was a moonless night in September, chilly, and the sidewalks were teeming with young people congregating in front of restaurants and bars even on a Sunday night: girls with glasses that were too big for their faces wearing awkward-length skirts and ugly shoes, texting furiously on their smartphones as they headed to the next watering hole; boys in suspenders wheeling old-fashioned six-speeds home, twee bow ties around their necks, who looked like they spent their days editing copy with red pencils instead of on screens until their faces were as pale and bluish as the light from their computers.

This had been quite the ghetto neighborhood once, but the tornado of gentrification that swept through broad swaths of the city during the last decade shook up Williamsburg until it was almost unrecognizable. The dirty urban landscape of bleak tenements that had once been home to junkies and starving artists was now filthy with money, was hipster central, counting bankable artists, boutique owners, artisanal chefs, and earnest young bearded men who made small-batch chocolate among its residents. She entered one of the last remnants of the former neighborhood, her favorite bodega, a shabby storefront where candy bars were kept behind bulletproof glass, and nodded to Bahir, who had her cup of coffee at the ready.

At least some things never changed.

Ara walked toward the Bedford Avenue station sipping her coffee and occasionally blowing on it through the lid to cool it down. The subway platform was filled with Manhattanites heading home, the new bridge-and-tunnel crowd, she mused, remembering that old insult, when Upper East Siders like her used to sneer at the outer-borough weekend crowd. In her old moneyed life, she never even took the subway—maybe once in a while, just for kicks, to slum with her fellow Merryvale girls. But that was as far as she went underground.

She never even touched the subway turnstile with her hands if she could help it; she would push it with her hip.

For the first thirteen years of her life Ara had lived on Eighty-Third and Park Avenue and had worn the same thing every day: a white button-down shirt, a green plaid skirt, and a blue blazer with the gold school crest. She was a Blue Blood in every sense of the word; her family used to summer in the Hamptons and Bermuda and winter in Palm Beach. She’d had long glossy hair that fell past her shoulders, and her friends were rich and popular. Ten years later, the silly, spoiled girl she had been back then, back when she was still called “Minty,” was a distant memory. But some things remained the same—she still wore a uniform, she thought, looking down at her all-black outfit. Preferred it even since it was one less thing she had to worry about. Besides, black blended in with the shadows. Fading into black was the opposite of drawing attention, and attention was the one thing Ara couldn’t afford. Not in her particular line of work. How far Minty had come since Merryvale. Good riddance. Ara missed nothing about her own life, not really. Well, maybe the manicures, she thought, examining her nails. The train clacked into the station and screeched to a halt. She pushed in with the rest of the revelers calling it a night, finding a place to stand without having to touch anyone else too closely. It was amazing how polite New Yorkers were, how they allowed each other a certain degree of personal space even when shoved up next to someone’s armpit. No one made eye contact. It was only the perverts and the weirdos who stared directly at you; everyone else kept their eyes trained above at the Dr. Zit posters or below at the grimm floor.

Ara leaned against the doors and savored her coffee, zoning out with the rest of the passengers. She got off at Fourteenth Street and caught the N downtown. It was almost one in the morning and the subway car was empty now, rattling passengers like bones in a cage.

Not a lot of people headed to the financial district in the wee hours. Ara wasn’t worried and for good reason. She was probably the most dangerous thing in there.

Her destination was the newly christened Orpheus Tower, the headquarters of the new Coven. Once upon a time the building had housed one of the most powerful investment banks in the world, but the bank had crumbled in one day, disappearing with most of the world’s wealth. The Coven had snatched the building up for a song. As Ara walked through the glass-and-chrome lobby, she never failed to marvel at just how much things had changed. Vampires no longer hid in their corescrapers, buildings that tunneled deep into the ground, as the new Regent—and he was still relatively new at ten years in, given their former leader had led the vampires for centuries—decided they had as much right to the sky as the rest of the world. She pressed the button for the top floor—security—and pricked her finger on the blood key. The elevator whisked her up and opened to a bank of surveillance screens surrounding a massive desk in front of an imposing steel door.

“Chief wants you,” the night clerk told her with raised eyebrows.

Ara sighed as the clerk buzzed her through.

Since she was already in trouble, she decided to pick up her files first. That suspect she was trailing had an unrecognizable aura; he was definitely immortal, but he wasn’t one of them. Chief might be interested to know the list of vampire hot spots he’d visited.

Her office was one of the corner ones with a floor-to-ceiling window and a panoramic view of the Brooklyn Bridge and the bright lights of the city. But as far as Ara was concerned the most impressive thing about it was the plaque on her
It never failed to give her chills. Most nights she couldn't believe she actually made it through training and was now part of this elite squad, the most prestigious and exclusive police force in the world.

She was a card-carrying badass. A truth seeker. A hunter. A killer.

_Veritas Venator._ Venators had the ability to read and destroy minds, enter and manipulate dreams. They brought death and destruction in the name of truth and justice.

The old Minty would have been terrified of what she had become, whereas the new Ara couldn't have been prouder.

"Where've you been? Chief's looking for you," Ben Denham said slyly as he walked by her office. Denham was a new recruit, a new Venator—a _noov_, still in his first year of training and overly excited about everything. Baby cops were the worst.

"Tell me something I don't know," she said crossly as she looked through the stack of case files on her desk. Her office was as disorderly as her apartment, and every folder and piece of paper was stained with coffee rings.

"Hear what the day shift found?" Ben asked eagerly.

"You gonna tell me or do I have to guess?" she snapped, annoyed she couldn't find her file. She swore she'd just left it on top of her desk before she left yesterday.

"Another pentagram," said Ben.

"Yeah? Where?"

"Sewers below Canal, and bloody this time."

"Bloody?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Juicy," he said, nodding.

"Like mortal blood, you mean?"

"Yeah." He grinned, flashing his fangs. "Tasty."

Pentagrams were popping up all over the city lately. Chalk-drawn ones against brick walls in Soho, neon spray-painted ones on billboards in Chelsea, tiny little ones scratched on the glass windows of taxicabs. A bloody pentagram? Mortal blood? In the sewers below Canal? What was that all about? Was he serious or just pulling her leg?

"Really?" she asked, looking directly at him. "This isn't just some noov bullshit you've gotten all scrambled in your soft little head?"

"Might've caught a body, too. They don't know yet. Chief wants you."

She nodded, her heart starting to pound in her chest. There hadn't been all that much action around here until she and her former partner had busted the Nephs—and Ara still felt a flush of pride when she remembered that night, when she'd empathically proven she was worthy of her badge and title. Orders from on high were to meet each threat, however small or trivial, with vigorous force and finality, and that was exactly what she did. No trial, no courtrooms—justice was meted out by the Venators' blades, by bullets from their fancy new guns. The Regent of the Coven didn't mess around.

Ara gave up looking for the file and walked down the hall and straight into the chief's office without knocking, a habit she'd been trying to break. But she'd stormed in before she remembered she wasn't all that welcome in there anymore. Sam Lennox looked pointedly toward his watch.

"What about the fifteen-minute grace period?" she protested.

"What happened, you hit the wrong button?" he asked. Chief knew her too well, and she tried not to blush.

"Sorry, Chief—they said you, uh, wanted me," she blurted, then bit her tongue.

"I did," he said. "I mean, I do," he quickly added, which made the awkwardness between them even more palpable. Sam had the world-weary air of a longtime security enforcer, a melancholy sadness underneath his gruff demeanor. He was stocky, and his hair had streaks of gray.

Her blush deepened and she looked away. The chief hadn't been too happy with the way she'd figured out where the nest was hidden.

She'd taken a Death Walk and invaded a captured demon's mind, entering its psychotic subconscious, risking her own immortal life and sanity in the process. She still shuddered when she thought about the things she'd seen there, when she remembered what it felt like being immersed in that much darkness and evil, but it was worth it. She got what she needed. When the chief found out, though, he was furious.

"Death Walks are too dangerous," he'd yelled. The dangers of jobs like theirs weren't limited to death by stray silver bullets, and that little trick of hers could have gotten her killed. But what was the point of being a Venator if you couldn't stretch your muscles? Use your powers? Besides, he'd trained her well, and the Neph hadn't gotten the better of her. No Neph would ever get the better of her. No Neph would ever get the better of her.

"So what's up?" she asked. "This about the pentagram?"

"What penta—Damn noovs talk too much. Yeah, but you can deal with that later. Called you in 'cause we got you a new partner," he said. "Starts today."

Ara frowned. She still missed her old partner, Rowena Bailey, who had recently moved up in the food chain. Ara had been offered an opportunity to move up as well but preferred to remain right where she was. She didn't want to shuffle papers and fall asleep at conclave meetings. She wanted to be in the center of the action. She liked the street. She liked the energy and the adrenaline. She also liked not having to look bullshit in the face every day and act as if she didn't see it.

"Yeah, who's the lucky asshole?" Ara couldn't get the edge out of her voice, not that she was trying that hard.

Sam motioned toward the doorway in his office. It was cracked open to the adjoining room.
Ara jerked her head and blanched.
“No way.”
The guy slouched against the wall was her suspect. The one she’d been trailing for three days.
“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said and noticed the file she was looking for was right on the chief’s desk.
“What can I say? If you had taken the time to report your findings to your superior officers like you were supposed to, you wouldn’t have wasted your time or mine,” he scolded.
“What do you mean? I was too busy doing my job. He’s unregistered. He’s immortal. He’s lucky I didn’t shoot him on sight. He has a demon’s aura.”
Yeah, but that can’t be helped considering where he’s from,” Chief agreed. “Come on, it’s time you met him.”
Ara frowned as she followed the chief into the conference room.
“Ara Scott, meet Edon Marrok.”
Edon Marrok?
Had she heard that right?
How could she not have known?
She supposed it was because the scruffy, dirty guy in the faded flannel shirt and beaten army jacket who was standing in front of her wasn’t quite what she pictured when she thought of Edon Marrok, the legendary golden wolf, one of the heroes from the final battle.
The wolves were skinchangers, keepers of the Passages of Time, creatures of the underworld, and bred in Hell, which accounted for his shady aura. They were also beautiful and powerful, and without their help the vampires would have lost the War to Lucifer and his legions.
Edon sure wouldn’t win any beauty contests right now. His hair was dry and brittle, and his eyes were red and bloodshot. His beauty was all but destroyed, a ghostly memory in the lines of his haggard face. No longer the golden wolf of legend but a dirty yellow mongrel.
He looked like he crawled out of the alleys of Nevada, not Las Vegas, but its outskirts—
Henderson, those little desert towns. Nowhere towns. Although she couldn’t help but admit there was still something magnetic and compelling about him, from the sexy stubble on his jaw to his hungry, hooded topaz-colored eyes. She looked away, trying not to stare. Trying not to let on that she was impressed, that she cared anything at all about what he’d done or where he’d come from.
Still.
The wolves had taken up their historical positions as guardians of Time, so what was Edon doing in New York? Plus, the wolves had an uneasy alliance with the Fallen; they were no fans of the vampires.
She glanced back at him, just in time to catch him shooting her a yellow grin, and for a moment it looked as if his incisors were as sharp as points.
She inhaled sharply.
“Hey, angel,” he growled, rolling his vowels like he had all the time in the world. “Looks like you’ve drawn the short straw.”
“Chief? A word?” she asked.
Sam nodded. “Help yourself,” he told Edon, motioning to the pink box of doughnuts on the table.
Ara followed the chief back into his office and shut the door.
“What the hell?”
Sam shrugged his shoulders. “He’s been helping out Venator squads all over the world, specializing in Nephilim activity. Thought you’d be best for him since you’ve been following him around anyway.”
He grinned, clearly enjoying himself.
“So why’d he spend three days sniffing around taking the vampire history tour, then?” she asked, annoyed.
“Ask him. Nostalgia? Curiosity? I fought next to him in the War. He’s a good guy. I trust him. You’ll learn to.” Sam attempted a real smile this time. “C’mon, Scott, be a team player for once.”
“Fine,” she said, gritting her teeth.
Ara stomped back into the room where Edon was finishing his breakfast. “Let’s go, wolf, but if you call me angel again, I’ll strap a collar around your neck so fast you won’t have time to beg for a dog biscuit,” she said.
“Woof, angel. What’d I ever do to you?” he asked, feigning hurt.
She considered punching him in the face but stopped short. He stood up, wiping crumbs from his mouth with a napkin.
“Come on, Scott, let’s start over,” he said and offered his hand to shake.
She took it warily. She could already tell he was going to be just another pain in the ass.
As the chief liked to say, New Coven, same old shit. She was a Venator and there was work to be done. Nephilim were back in New York, and now there was a bloody pentagram in the sewers below Canal Street.
Ara felt invigorated, her heart pumping, her fingers itching, ready for whatever monster their investigation would turn up. She would hunt them. She would find them. And, if necessary, she would kill them, even if she had to walk that dog along with her to do it.
She would uncover the secrets of the darkness and bring the truth to light. ■

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WE WANT YOUR FACE!

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Brazil, 1982: Greg Pappas awoke tied to a beam in the center of a windowless room, another man bound next to him whimpering with thick pools of drool dribbling down his chin.

Hovering over them stood a hulking Brazilian soldier known as el Delegado, brandishing a meat cleaver that glinted in the naked light cast by the single overhead fixture. Locals called this sprawling mansion-like military prison the “Torture Palace,” or “La Rua Pige Awie,” roughly translated as “nobody ever comes out.”

For good reason, since nobody ever did.

Greg had been brought here after being whisked away by the Brazilian military police. That followed a failed business negotiation to launder ten million dollars of Pablo Escobar’s drug money per week through Sao Paulo banks. He watched as el Delegado crouched and jerked the other prisoner’s hand outward, stamping a boot down on his wrist to steady it as he leaned over. The cleaver rose through the murky light and slashed downward in a blur.

“I closed my eyes and heard the scream,” Greg says today, his lips trembling and voice hushed, tugging at his gray-tinged hair clubbed back in a ponytail. His deep-blue eyes still look youthful, hopeful, face creased with lines as much from the sun as the years. “But the first blow didn’t cut all the way through. I remember hearing the blade hitting concrete and knew the second one had finished the job. I felt the blood spread out under me, soaking my clothes, and thought, I’m next.”

Three years before awakening in the Torture Palace, Greg was playing safety on the practice field at the University of Kentucky when a running back came up the middle. Greg zeroed in for the kind of hit that made him an honorable mention All-American playing for Christopher Columbus High in Miami, Florida, and collided violently with a defensive tackle who’d later play pro. His neck took the brunt of the impact, wrenching awkwardly and sending starbursts exploding before his eyes right before the world faded to black.

He woke up in a hospital bed with the naked bulb from a broken fixture shining in his eyes, asking a nurse how soon he could leave. He was missing practice, he told her, had to get back on the field, not realizing night had fallen. Greg had suffered a major concussion and compression of two major vertebrae.

“So what’s that mean?” he asked the neurologist, voice cracking and dry from the painkillers.

The look on the doctor’s face said it all. Even in these pre-concussion mania days of 1979, near-broken necks made for career-
enders. In this case, a career born dominating a Coral Gables War Memorial Youth Center league in Packer green. Charcoal stripes beneath his eyes even then. A star in the making.

Now the star was falling and there was no one to catch him. Initially, he lay in bed trying to convince himself he could prove the doctors wrong. They didn't know how tough he was. The Army did. It offered him a Congressional appointment to West Point to keep the storied family history going; his father had been the first OSS agent to operate in Nazi-held Europe.

But Greg's battlefield had always been the hundred yards between end zones. He was chasing glory, not medals and commendations. He loved the game and the game loved him back. His parents were long divorced by the time decision-time came. And at one point Greg didn't see his father, then a lawyer, for ten years; plenty of time to build his own dreams. Ironically, his father returned from a long tenure in Europe in time to attend Greg's senior sports banquet at Christopher Columbus High. It was there he learned his son had decided to pursue his own dream of playing pro football, intending to use perennial power Kentucky as a launching pad.

"Both my parents wanted me to go to West Point more than anything," Greg recalls. "But football was everything to me."

That night in the hospital, reality set in through the dull glow cast by the television droning softly in the background, where news coverage featured a drug bust outside the Mutiny, a stylish nightclub in the Coconut Grove near his hometown of Coral Gables, Florida. In the heyday of the Cocaine Cowboys, this was Miami's version of the O.K. Corral, a world entirely foreign to Greg up until that point, but no longer.

Because he was going home.

He needed to start from scratch. But there wasn't a lot of glory to choose from for a former high school All-American. Greg ended up going back to his high-school job as a parking valet at a high-end nightclub called the Alley owned by a family friend.

On a Monday night when the Dolphins were playing on television, a regular customer who was a notoriously bad tipper, and an asshole, pulled up. He tossed the keys in Greg's face and told him to leave his brand-new Rolls Royce coupe right out in front in one of two spaces under an awning; he wouldn't be staying long. Treated him like dirt, like shit. Didn't know who he should've been, only who he was now. Greg took the man's customary dollar tip and parked the Rolls six blocks away. In the rain.

"Where the fuck's my car?" Asshole asked, reemerging fifteen minutes later with an entourage of "A" listers to show off his new Rolls, expecting it to be parked right out in front.

"Back of the lot, six blocks away," Greg said, tossing him the keys.

Asshole was livid. The rest of the valets couldn't stop laughing. Instead of getting fired, the incident earned Greg a transfer to the valet service at the famed Mutiny, the prime nightspot in Miami where a spot in the VIP line was the most cherished in town. Parking cars there was like playing backyard football. Attendants flying in all directions through the steamy nights, swapping keys and stashing tips amid the neon spray of glitter and glitz, screeching away in fifty-thousand-dollar cars with white powdery sheens on their dashboards.

Located along the water on the second floor of a thirteen-story hotel by the same name, the club had become so emblematic of the era that Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young immortalized it in a song called "Mutiny." The ultimate pop-culture statement.

One night Greg was next in line when a Cadillac DeVille pulled up in front of the Mutiny and four Colombians spilled out, chatting up a storm. The driver stopped long enough to tuck a fifty-dollar bill in Greg's vest pocket.

"Put her someplace safe," he winked, grinning.

He'd barely hung the keys in the valet box when a dirt-encrusted Ford sedan pulled up across the street. Three men climbed out with law enforcement badges hanging outside their lapel pockets.

"You! Hey, kid!" one of them called. "We need the keys to that Caddy."

"What Caddy?" Greg asked him.

The agent scolded him with his eyes. "The one you just parked. The DeVille."

"Sure. Just wait a sec."

He pretended he couldn't find the keys and rushed back to the agents.

"Wait here. They must be in the VIP box inside."

No such thing, of course. The only thing inside was a collection of Miami's best, brightest and most stoned, among them the Colombians who'd tipped Greg fifty bucks. He found them in the bathroom.

"I FELT THE BLOOD SPREAD OUT UNDER ME, SOAKING MY CLOTHES, AND THOUGHT, I'M NEXT."
“Hey, guys!” Greg called to them.
No response.
“Guys!”
Still no response.
“Policia!” Greg yelled next.
That got their attention. Just ahead of the law enforcement agents pushing through the crowd, Greg led the Colombians out of the hotel through a little-known exit into the heat of the night to Peacock Park where his sister’s car was parked and gave them the keys. Then, remembering that fifty-dollar tip, he drove the Colombians’ car away through a violent thunderstorm and parked it in his sister's garage for the night.
Just doing his job. Somebody does something good for you, you do something for them.
The next day Greg chugged to work on his bicycle under a cloudless sky, roasted by the blistering sun's near ninety-degree temperatures. The Colombians quickly showed up and a sunburned Greg returned the car to them. The driver opened the trunk, shocked to find a leather satchel exactly where he'd left it. Greg watched as he zipped it open to reveal stacks and stacks of cash inside. The driver, whose name was Caesar, counted out fifty grand and handed it to Greg.
Not bad for a night's work.
Greg used the money to buy a Porsche 911 SC and gold Rolex Presidential. All of a sudden he had street cred, enough so that a friend who'd flown in from the West Coast with a bag of cash asked him to help broker a deal. If you wanted to make a boatload of cash moving drugs, Miami was where you did it. The big leagues. The show. Nowhere else even compared.
It turned out, of all things, that Greg’s grandmother’s house in Coral Gables abutted the property of a Jewish-Cuban drug dealer named Esteban Levy who was one of the early pillars on which the Colombians built their distribution network through the region. So Greg and his friend literally jumped the fence and made a deal on the spot, pulling splinters from their hands while Levy handed out beers to everyone. A toast was proposed that turned out to be the first of many, because in just a few days Greg and friend were back to do another deal, only this time they didn't jump the fence.
That was fast even by the Miami of 1979 standards, and Levy was impressed. Sure, there were plenty of dealers out there. But they seldom came from the same gene pool as their clientele, specifically the rich twentysomethings who were turning Miami into their personal playground. Greg spoke their language, had grown up in their circles, was well known around town. Just as being on the wrong part of the field at the wrong time had ended his football career, being in the right place at the right time on this field had opened a new one. Levy saw in Greg a local boy who could open up markets and clientele he couldn't reach on his own.
“I was his right-hand man,” Greg recalls. “I made deals, arranged deliveries, picked up money, opened up new business. It was an exciting fucking ride. If I wasn't going to make money on the football field, hey, I'd make it somewhere else. And with Levy I was making thousands of dollars in huge chunks at the age of twenty-one. I started at the top and the adrenaline rush was incredible.”
Like playing football. Greg had become the star he'd always dreamed of being, albeit in a different game altogether.
Another player on that field was a football friend of Greg's named Jeremy Meddlin, whose pro career with the Houston Oilers had just ended. Meddlin had a line on a Jamaican posse looking for a supplier and Greg saw this as an opportunity to further expand Levy's interests. The problem was the Jamaicans operated under an entirely different set of rules. At the initial buy, in a scene straight out of a Quentin Tarantino movie, Greg was ripped off, handcuffed and left in the apartment where the deal was supposed to go down. He managed to knock the phone receiver off its hook and dial Esteban Levy's number with his nose.
A few days later four Colombians, a hit squad, showed up to get the money back and extract revenge. They tracked down the Jamaican posse's headquarters and off they went, loaded for bear. A similarly Tarantino-like gunfight seemed inevitable until word came from Colombia over a voice beeper to stand down. With millions and millions more to be made, it wasn't worth the risk or the scrutiny it would bring to their Florida operation that was growing in
geometric fashion. At this stage of the game, guns were determined to be bad business.

The Colombians held Esteban Levy responsible for the lost drugs and money. He didn't have the money to pay them but he did have something else they wanted: Greg. And they said they'd forgive his debts if Greg came to work for them in return. Levy didn't like it, but what choice did he have? And Greg learned the hard way that in the drug world people were assets, property, to be bartered accordingly.

“It felt pretty shitty at first. But then I realized the sky was the limit with these guys, the Colombians. Esteban was a very singular person; he did everything himself. The Colombians were a gang, like a team. It was a new sport, a new game with new players and new rules. And I loved it.

“I was having the time of my life.”

In late fall of 1979, Greg was assigned to work for Alejandro Leon, one of the Colombians’ top earners in southern Florida. He moved into Alejandro's house in the Crossings, a barren development of beige town homes west of Miami that had been a You Pick 'Em strawberry patch a mere decade before. A haven for drugs and crime with concrete growing out of the ground instead of grass.

“I told Alejandro no way we could live there. If you lived this far out, everyone pretty much figured you were doing something wrong. We had to be businessmen first and businessmen would never live in such a place. The next day we moved into a house in Pinecrest.”

Pinecrest featured swatches of stately homes on big lots, the soft center of affluent suburbia dotted with basketball hoops and crystal blue swimming pools—the perfect place, in other words, from which to run a drug operation. Greg served as Leon's chauffeur and confidante, even taught him English. Leon taught Greg Spanish in return. The entire business shut down for most of December and January to allow the Colombian cadre to get the books balanced and business ready for the New Year.

Leon took Greg with him to Medellín.

“Our plane lands at the airport,” he recalls, “my head's swimming with visions of riches and luxury, and out the window I notice the luggage carts being pulled by donkeys.”

The first two weeks down there were a nonstop party, culminating in Greg being invited for New Year's up to the infamous Ochoa brothers’ horse ranch, La Hacienda Vera Cruz, that had its own asphalt landing strip. A short, squat man with black hair and eyes was already on the tarmac holding court, a trio of bodyguards riding his shadow.

Pablo Escobar.

Greg wanted to meet the boss, el Patron as only his closest associates called him, but was afraid of overstepping his bounds, a lowly American in a nest of the most powerful men in Colombia. So he let it pass, and was waiting for a ride to the ranch when Escobar came up to him. He smiled and said, “Gregory.” Then he smiled again and, as if to correct himself, said “Don Gringorio.”

Combining “Gringo” with the Spanish version of “Gregory.”

“Call me Patron,” Escobar added.

“He was short up close,” Greg recalls, “but I remember thinking he was much bigger viewed from a distance, the way everyone else did. He had this incredible charisma, presence. I couldn’t believe a man like this, this powerful, knew who I was, even my name.”

Escobar had his reasons. Most of the business was in California at the time and he saw in Greg the kind of personality to help him expand his interests in Florida where the action was. Greg returned home from Medellín shortly after to begin building his own distribution network in southern Florida on the instructions of el Patron. Not just as an ordinary cocaine cowboy, but John Wayne.

Before long, he was moving $10 million worth of Escobar's cocaine a month through the region. He had enlisted a legion of friends with

Christopher Columbus High '76 graduating seniors headed to various colleges to play football.
whom he'd grown up, even played football with, in building a network adept at effortlessly reaching the high-end young clientele the Colombians coveted for their disposable incomes, trust funds, and lavish lifestyles. Instead of parking cars at the Mutiny, Greg drove up to the club in a Toyota Land Cruiser and opened the rear barn doors so a group of young hotties known as the Cocaine Cheerleaders could spill out and move straight for that VIP line that remained the ultimate status symbol in the city.

He was Don Gringorio, the quarterback now on top of his game, until a blitz orchestrated by the DEA sacked him.

A dealer Greg had made rich named Jimmy Larson gave Greg up to the DEA later in 1981 to save his own skin. Only Larson had second thoughts at the last minute and ended up literally swimming away from DEA agents who were waiting for him in the next room to come out of the bathroom. He showed up, on foot again, at Greg's oceanfront high-rise in Key Biscayne to warn him the feds were coming. Just ahead of the law, Greg jamm ed a Walther into his pants, jumped into his thirty-one-foot Seahawk speedboat with twin KSW motors and jetted out for Bimini, where a Cessna twin-engine was waiting. He barely beat the Bahamian Defense Forces in sleek black Zodiac rafts to the scene, and hopped on board a twin-engine 402 Cessna just ahead of them docking. Awaiting him on board was a contract stone killer Greg knew only as Chu Chillo.

"Hey," Greg greeted, stowing a duffel bag full of cash under his legs. Chu Chillo just scowled as their plane soared off over the arriving soldiers.

Upon landing in Medellin, a convoy composed of men Greg had considered his co-workers and friends, men he'd partied with, were waiting on the tarmac to whisk him to Escobar's headquarters downtown. He spotted Maqua, a contract killer who always wore a priest's collar and drove around the city in a Toyota Land Cruiser missing all its doors. Eduardo Tata, one of the first Colombians he'd met in his first trip down, stood outside another Land Cruiser at the convoy's rear.

"Get in, Gringorio," he beckoned. "This isn't good."

He'd fucked up and he knew it. The Colombians ran a top-down operation, making men like Greg ultimately responsible for anything his people did, good or bad. What Jimmy Larson had done was very bad and now Greg was going to pay the price for that. He'd known playing football he could be hurt, even crippled, on any play at any moment. It was no different here, and the power he'd amassed amid the drug-fueled haze left him feeling as invincible as he had on the field.

But now all he had to show for that invincibility was an elevator ride to the penthouse level of a downtown office building where naked light shed by a pair of table lamps captured Pablo Escobar framed by French doors leading out onto a balcony.

"Standing in the room, facing Escobar, after dropping my duffel bag on the floor, I finally remember the gun and took it out," Greg recalled. "Ejected the magazine, unchambered the round, and laid the pistol down on top of the desk."

The moment froze. Nobody moved, nobody spoke.

"Here I was with twenty of the deadliest men in the world and I was the only one in the room who had a gun! This was 1981. There was no reason to carry guns. They owned the city and the violence hadn't started yet. They all just stared at each other, eyes bulging, just couldn't believe I'd do such a thing. They'd looked at me as an American they'd discovered parking cars and now I was one of them."

Elmore Leonard couldn't write this shit any better.

Escobar then pulled Greg over to the side, his eyes looking even darker and colder in the room's half-light. "You can never go home again, Gregory. This is your home now. We are your familia.”

To be continued in the December 2014 issue of Suspense Magazine.

*Jon Land is the USA Today bestselling author of 36 novels including the critically acclaimed, award-winning Caitlin Strong series, the most recent entry of which is “Strong Darkness.” He lives in Providence, Rhode Island and can be reached on the web at jonlandbooks.com.*
Diane Chamberlain
Speaks Up about “The Silent Sister”

New York Times bestselling author Diane Chamberlain has penned several very successful romantic suspense novels, and her latest book “The Silent Sister” doesn’t disappoint. Her books have been called; “incredibly moving...very sensitive...” and “brisk, atmospherically evocative” and “absorbing.”

Her first book “Private Relations,” was published in 1989 and earned the RITA award for Best Single Title Contemporary Novel from the Romance Writers of America. Diane had a brief stint writing for daytime TV, and published a variety of articles for newspapers and magazines. But her real love was always novels, of which she now has over twenty published.

She says that her stories are filled with twists and surprises and tug at the emotions. She primarily focuses on the relationships of men and women, parents and children, sisters and brothers, and the struggles with life’s trials.

“The Silent Sister” is another perfect example of her emotional roller-coaster approach. Check out the interview below, after a quick look at “The Silent Sister.”

Riley MacPherson has spent her entire life believing that her older sister Lisa committed suicide as a teenager. Now, over twenty years later, her father has passed away and she’s in New Bern, North Carolina cleaning out his house when she finds evidence to the contrary. Lisa is alive. Alive and living under a new identity. But why exactly was she on the run all those years ago, and what secrets are being kept now? As Riley works to uncover the truth, her discoveries will put into question everything she thought she knew about her family. Riley must decide what the past means for her present, and what she will do with her newfound reality.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Tell us about your main character, Riley MacPherson.
Diane Chamberlain (D.C.): Riley is a twenty-five-year-old high school counselor who returns to her childhood home to settle her father’s estate after his sudden death. As she begins sorting through his house and possessions, she discovers more than she bargained for.

S. MAG.: Riley has been put through an emotional ride for years. Do you secretly not like her?

D.C.: I love her! Yes, she’s lost not only her father, but her mother and sister as well, plus her brother is a recluse who is of little help to her as she sorts through her father’s things...Oh, and she recently broke up with her boyfriend. I intentionally isolated her from the support of others so that she develops her own backbone as she moves through the story. It was for her own good. ;)

S. MAG.: As an author, how curious are you to explore human emotions in incredible situations?

D.C.: In my previous career, I was a hospital social worker and a psychotherapist in private practice, so I have a lot of experience dealing with human emotions in extraordinary circumstances. I’ve always been amazed and awed by the way people find inner strength to cope with whatever life throws at them, so naturally that’s what I like to explore in my writing.

S. MAG.: What was your biggest challenge in writing “The Silent Sister”?

D.C.: The biggest challenge in writing this novel was deciding on the structure. I played with several different approaches before settling on the final structure, which alternates between the past and present and is told from the perspectives of two characters, using first and third points of view. It was mind-bending at times, but I believe the structure fits the story.

S. MAG.: Is there one sentence or one paragraph in the book you feel captures the essence of your writing?

D.C.: I like surprising my readers, so that’s an important part of my writing. I think these few sentences sum that up:

And then she told Celia everything. Everything! Even the things Daddy had no idea about. Even the things he couldn’t possibly guess.

At this point in the story, the reader thinks Daddy already knows everything, so the plot thickens and—I hope—the pages keep turning.

S. MAG.: What was THE SILENT SISTER

By Diane Chamberlain

Riley MacPherson is heading home to settle her late father’s estate. Both parents are gone now and her only relative is older brother Danny, who’s a veteran living in a trailer in the woods. Danny had issues with their father, and wishes to stay away from the whole process of cleaning up the homestead.

Riley soon stumbles across some things concerning the death of her much older sister, Lisa, a musical child prodigy who committed suicide because she was unable to attend Julliard. The story that had been given to Riley and Danny long ago was that Lisa suffered from depression. Lisa went out on a freezing lake one morning, and her kayak ended up being discovered in the Potomac River, stuck in the ice near their home. Although her body was never found, she had left a suicide note, so everyone believed she had killed herself, and after the tragedy, the family moved to get away from the painful memories.

Now, twenty-three years later, Riley is in the process of getting the property ready to sell, and learns some strange family secrets that she’d never known, and can hardly believe: Danny is mentally troubled after his time in the Iraq War, and his grudge against both dead father and dead sister runs far deeper than imaginable; a family friend is more than a bit nasty to Riley regarding a debt owed to him by her father; and Jeannie, a friend of her late mother’s, seems to have been overly chummy with the man who has just passed away—a man who Riley is beginning to believe was a total stranger during her lifetime.

With a murder plot added in that involves a dead sibling, the readers of this tale will be surprised and shocked by the unveiling of a truth that they will never guess up front. Chamberlain has written an excellent novel with well-thought-out plotlines that never lose the suspense lover’s interest for one solitary second. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion ■
your goal when you published your first novel?

D.C.: My first novel, “Private Relations,” was published twenty-five years ago. Back then, my goal was for someone other than my mom to actually read my book. My goals have grown loftier over time.

S. MAG.: Which character in “The Silent Sister” had a bigger voice than you originally thought they would?

D.C.: For sure, that would be Verniece, an older woman who lives in an RV park owned by Riley’s father. My Facebook readers helped me name her, and it seemed that once I christened her Verniece, she turned into someone I hadn’t anticipated and lived up to her unusual name.

S. MAG.: “The Broken String” is a short story featuring Riley. What will fans see inside this short?

D.C.: I wrote “The Broken String” after I wrote “The Silent Sister.” In it, I explore Riley’s relationship with her brother Danny when they were young. In “The Silent Sister,” I often allude to their closeness as children, but I wanted to see how that closeness developed and what it looked like. It really helped me understand them as adults to see them as kids.

S. MAG.: Is there another type of genre you wish to explore in your writing?

D.C.: I have an idea for the book I will write when I “retire,” which I hope is a long time from now. It involves time travel, something that fascinates me. If only I could travel to the future, I could write it right now!

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in the future?

D.C.: I hope to continue writing a book a year for as long as I enjoy the process and my readers want to keep reading my stories. I’m nearly finished with my next novel, “Pretending to Dance.” It’s the story of a fourteen-year-old girl, Molly, who lives on a hundred acres with her extended family during a time of tremendous family turmoil. “Pretending to Dance” has the distinction of being the only book I’ve written entirely from one point of view, but I think Molly’s a strong enough character to pull it off. I’m counting on her.

Thank you, Diane, for talking with us. To learn more about Diane and her books, visit her website at www.dianechamberlain.com.

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Aton blinked his little eyes that were set deep in their rolls of fat, and then raised them from the bao board laid out between us. He turned his gaze on the two young princesses of the royal house of Tamshe who were disporting themselves naked in the limpid water of the lagoon.

“They are no longer children,” he remarked casually, without a trace of lascivious interest in the subject. We sat facing each other under an open barraza thatched with palm fronds beside one of the lagoons in the backwaters of the great Nile River.

I knew that his reference to the girls was an attempt to distract my attention from his next move of the bao stones. Aton does not enjoy losing, so he is not overly scrupulous about how he wins.

Aton has always been high on the list of my oldest and dearest friends. Like me he is a eunuch and was once a slave. During the period of his slavery, and long before he reached puberty, his master had singled him out for his exceptional intellect and his acute mental powers. He wished to nurture and concentrate these gifts; and prevent them from being diluted by the distractions of his libido. Aton was an extremely valuable property and so his master employed the most renowned physician in Egypt to perform the castration. His master is long dead, but Aton has risen high above his slave status. He is now the chamberlain of the royal palace of Pharaoh at Thebes, but he is also a master of spies who administers a network of informers and clandestine agents across the civilized world. There is only one organization that exceeds his, and that is my own.

In this, as in most things, we are in friendly competition with each other and very little gives us greater pleasure and satisfaction than to score a coup, the one over the other.

I enjoy his company immensely. He amuses and often surprises me with his good advice and perception. On occasion he can test my skill on the bao board. He is usually generous with his praise. But mostly he acts as a foil to my own genius.

Now both of us studied Bekatha, who was the younger of the royal princesses by almost two years, although you might not have guessed that fact, for she was tall for her age and already her breasts were beginning to swell and in the cool lagoon waters her nipples perked out jauntily. She was lithe, agile and she laughed readily. On the other hand she was possessed of a mercurial temper. Her features were nobly chiselled, her nose narrow and straight, her jaw strong and rounded and her lips finely arched. Her hair was thick and sparkled with glints of copper in the sunlight. She had inherited that from her father. Although she had not yet shown the red flower of womanhood, I knew that her time was not far off.

I love her, but truth to tell I love her elder sister a shade better.

Tehuti was the senior and the more beautiful of the two sisters. Whenever I looked upon her it seemed to me that I was seeing again her mother. Queen
Lostris had been the one great love of my life. Yes, I had loved her as a man loves a woman. For unlike my friend Aton, I was gelded only after I had grown to full manhood and known the joy of a woman’s body. True it is that my love for Queen Lostris was never consummated for I was castrated before she was born, but it was all the more intense for never having been assuaged. I had nursed her as a child and had shepherded her through her long and joyous life, counselling her and guiding her, giving all of myself to her without stinting. In the end I held her in my arms as she died.

Before she went on into the underworld Lostris whispered to me something which I will never forget: ‘I have loved only two men in my life. You, Taita, were one of them.’

Those were the sweetest words I have ever heard spoken.

I planned and supervised the building of her royal tomb and laid her once beautiful but then wasted body in it, and I wished that I could go with her into the nether world. However, I knew that I could not; for I had to stay and take care of her children as I had cared for her. Truly, this has not been an onerous burden, for my life has been enriched by this sacred charge.

At sixteen years of age Tehuti was already a woman fully fledged. Her skin was lustrous and unblemished. Her arms and her legs were slim and elegant as those of a dancer, or the limbs of her father’s great war bow which I had carved for him, and which I had placed on the lid of his sarcophagus before I sealed his tomb.

Tehuti’s hips were full but her waist was narrow as the neck of a wine jug. Her breasts were round and taut. The dense golden curls that covered her head were a gleaming glory. Her eyes were as green as her mother’s had been. She was lovely beyond the telling of it; and her smile wrung my heart whenever she turned it upon me. Her nature was gentle, slow to anger but fearless and strong-willed once she was roused.

I love her almost as much as I still love her mother.

‘You have done well with them, Taita.’ Aton gave praise unstintingly. ‘They are the treasures which may yet save our very Egypt from the barbarian.’

And this, as with many other things, Aton and I were in full accord. This was the true reason why the two of us had come to this remote and secluded location; although everyone else in the palace, including Pharaoh himself, was convinced that we had met here to continue our endless rivalry across the bao board.

I did not respond at once to his remark, but I dropped my eyes to the board. Aton had made his latest move while I was still watching the girls. He was the most skilled player of this sublime game in Egypt, which was as good as saying ‘in the civilized world’. That is expecting for me, of course. I can usually best him in three games out of four.

Now, at a glance, I saw that this game would be one of my three. His last move had been ill considered. The layout of his stones was now unbalanced. It was one of the few flaws in his game that often, when he had convinced himself that victory was within his grasp, he threw caution to the winds and disregarded the rule of seven stones. Then he tended to concentrate his full attack from his south castle and allowed me to wrest control of either the east or the west from him. This time it was the east. I did not need a second invitation. I struck like a cobra.

He rocked back on his stool as he evaluated my surprise move, and when at last the sheer genius of it struck him, his face darkened with outrage and his voice choked, ‘I think that I hate you, Taita. And if I don’t, then I certainly ought to do so.’

‘I was lucky, old friend.’ I tried not to gloat. ‘Anyway, it’s only a game.’

He puffed out his cheeks with indignation. ‘Of all the inane things I have ever heard you say, Taita, that is the most crass. It is not only a game. It is the veritable reason for living.’ He really was angry.

I reached down under the table for the copper wine jug and I refilled his cup. It was a superb wine, the very best in all of Egypt, which I had taken directly from the cellars beneath Pharaoh’s palace. Aton puffed out his cheeks again and tried to bolster his anger and affront, but as of their own accord his plump fingers closed around the handle of his cup and he raised it to his lips. He swallowed twice, his eyes closed with pleasure. When he lowered the vessel he sighed.

‘Perhaps you are right, Taita. There are other good reasons for living.’ He began to pack the bao stones into their leather drawstring bags. ‘So what do you hear from the north? Astonish me once again with the extent of your intelligence.’

We had come at last to the true purpose of this meeting. The north was always the danger.

Over one hundred years ago mighty Egypt was split by treason and rebellion. The Red Pretender, the false Pharaoh—I deliberately do not speak his name; rather may it be cursed through all eternity—this traitor rebelled against the true Pharaoh and seized all the land to the north of Asyut. Our very Egypt was plunged into a century of civil war.

Then in his turn the Red Pretender’s heir was overwhelmed by a savage and warlike tribe that emerged from the northern steppes beyond the Sinai. These barbarians swept through Egypt conquering all of it by means of a weapon which we had never known existed: the horse and chariot. Once they had defeated the Red Pretender and captured the northern part of Egypt, from the Middle Sea to Asyut, these Hyksos turned upon us in the south.

We true Egyptians had no defence against them. We were driven from our own lands, and were forced to retreat
southwards beyond the cataracts of the Nile at Elephantine and into the wilderness at the end of the world. We languished there while my mistress Queen Lostris rebuilt our army.

My part in this regeneration was not altogether insignificant. I am not by nature a boastful man; however, in this instance I can state without fear of contradiction that without me to guide and counsel my mistress and her son, the Crown Prince Memnon, who is now the Pharaoh Tamose, they would never have achieved their purpose.

Among my numerous other services to her I built the first chariots with spoked wheels that were lighter and faster than those of the Hyksos, which had only solid wooden wheels. Then I found the horses to draw them. When we were ready Pharaoh Tamose, who had now grown to manhood, led our new army down again through the cataracts, northwards into Egypt.

The leader of the Hyksos invaders called himself King Salitis, but he was no king. He was at the best only a robber baron, and an outlaw. However, the army he commanded still outnumbered us Egyptians almost two to one, and it was well equipped and ferocious.

But we caught them off guard and, at Thebes, fought a mighty battle with them. We smashed their chariots and slaughtered their men. We sent them scurrying, in rout, back northwards. They left ten thousand corpses and two thousand wrecked chariots on the battlefield.

However, they inflicted heavy losses upon our gallant troops, so that we were unable to pursue and completely destroy them. Since then the Hyksos have been skulking in the delta of the Nile.

King Salitis, that old plunderer, is dead now. He did not die on the battlefield from a blow by a good Egyptian sword, as would have been just and proper. He died in bed of old age, surrounded by a horde of his hideous wives and their ghastly offspring. Amongst them was Beon, his eldest son. This Beon now calls himself King Beon, Pharaoh of the Upper and Lower Kingdoms of Egypt. The truth is that he is nothing but a freebooting killer, worse even than his evil father. My spies regularly report to me how Beon is steadily re-building the Hyksos army which we so grievously wounded at the battle of Thebes.

These reports are disturbing because we are having great difficulty procuring the raw materials to make good the losses that we suffered in that same battle. Our land-locked southern kingdom is cut off from the great Middle Sea and from trade with the other civilized nations and city states of the world, which are rich in leather, timber, copper, antimony, tin and the other sinews of war which we lack. We are also short of manpower. We need allies.

On the other hand our enemies, the Hyksos, have fine harbours in the delta where the Nile enters the Middle Sea. Trade flows into these uninterrupted. I also know through my spies that the Hyksos are seeking to forge alliances with other warlike nations.

Aton and I were meeting in this isolated spot to discuss and ponder these problems. The survival of our very Egypt was being held on the point of a dagger. Aton and I had on many occasions discussed all this at length, but now we were ready to make the final decisions to lay before Pharaoh.

The royal princesses had other plans. They had seen Aton pick up the bao stones and they took this as a signal that they were now able to command my full attention. I am devoted to them both but they are very demanding. They charged out of the lagoon splashing water in all directions and raced each other to get to me first. Bekatha is the baby but she is very quick and determined. She will do almost anything to obtain what she wants. She beat Tehuti by a length and dived into my lap, cold and wet from the lagoon.

'I love you, Tata,' she cried as she threw her arms around my neck and pressed her sodden mop of red hair to my cheek. 'Tell us a story, Tata.'

Bested in the race to reach me, Tehuti had to accept the less desirable position at my feet. Gracefully she lowered her naked and dripping body to the ground, and hugged my legs to her breast while she rested her chin on my knees and looked up into my face. 'Yes please, Tata. Tell us about our mama and how beautiful and clever she was.'

'I must speak to Uncle Aton first,' I protested.

'Oh. All right then. But don't be too long,' Bekatha chirped in. 'It's so boring.'

'Not too long, I promise.' I looked back at Aton and switched smoothly into Hyksosian. Both of us are fluent in the language of our deadly enemy.

I make it my business to know my enemy. I have a way with words and languages. I have had many years since the return to Thebes to learn. Aton had not joined the exodus to Nubia. He was not an adventurous soul. So he had remained in Egypt and he had suffered under the Hyksos. However, he had learned everything they had to teach, including their language. Neither of the princesses understood a word of it.

'Oh, I hate you when you speak that dreadful jargon.' Bekatha pouted, and Tehuti agreed with her.

'If you love us you will speak Egyptian, Tata.'

I hugged Bekatha and stroked Tehuti's lovely head. Nevertheless I continued speaking to Aton in the language that the girls so bitterly deplored. 'Ignore the babbling of infants. Proceed, old friend.'

Aton smothered his grin and went on. 'So we are agreed then, Taita. We need allies and we need trade with them. At the same time we have to deny both of these to the Hyksos.'

I was tempted to make a sarcastic
reply, but I had already annoyed him enough across the baob board. So I nodded seriously. ‘As usual you have come to the point unerringly and you have stated the problem succinctly. Allies and trade. Very well, what do we have to trade, Aton?’

‘We have the gold from our mines in Nubia which we discovered while we were in exile beyond the cataracts.’ Aton had never left Egypt, but to hear him tell it he might have been the one who led the exodus. I smiled inwardly but maintained a serious expression as he went on, ‘Although the yellow metal is not as valuable as silver, yet men also lust for it. With the quantities that Pharaoh has piled in his treasury we can readily buy friends and allies.’

I nodded in agreement, although I knew that the amount of Pharaoh’s treasure was greatly over-estimated by Aton and many like him who are not as close to the throne as I am. I went on to enlarge on the subject. ‘However, do not forget the produce of the rich black loam that Mother Nile casts up upon her banks with every annual inundation. Men must eat, Aton. The Cretans, the Sumerians and the Hellenic city states have little arable land. They are always hard pressed to find corn to feed their people. We have corn in abundance,’ I reminded him.

‘Aye, Taita. We have corn, and we also have horses to trade; we breed the finest warhorses in the world. And we have other things even more rare and precious.’ Aton paused delicately, and he glanced at the lovely child I was cuddling and the other who sat at my knee.

Nothing else needed to be said on this subject. The Cretans and the Sumerians of the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers were our nearest and most powerful neighbours. Both of these peoples tended to be swarthy and sable-haired. Their rulers find the fair-haired and light-skinned women of the Aegean tribes and of the royal house of Egypt desirable. However, the pale and insipid Hellenic women cannot stand comparison with our glowing Nilotic jewels.

The parents of my two princesses were Tanus, he of the fiery red curls, and the bright blonde Queen Lostris. They had bred true and the beauty of their two girls was becoming renowned across the entire world. Ambassadors from afar had already made the onerous journeys across wide deserts and deep waters to the palace of Thebes to convey delicately to Pharaoh Tamose the interests of their masters in making a marital and martial alliance with the House of Tamose. The Sumerian King Nimrod and the Supreme Minos of Crete were two of those who had sent envoys.

At my behest, Pharaoh had received both these ambassadors kindly. He had accepted the handsome gifts of silver and cedar wood that they presented. Then he had listened sympathetically to their offers of marriage to one or both of Tamose’s sisters, but then Pharaoh had explained that the two girls were still too young to contract a marriage and that they should speak again on this subject after both girls had reached maturity. That had been some time ago, and now circumstances had changed.

At the time Pharaoh had discussed with me the possible alliance between Egypt and Sumeria or Crete. I had tactfully pointed out to him that Crete would make a more desirable ally than would the Sumerians.

Firstly the Sumerians were not a seafaring race and, although they could field a powerful army well equipped with cavalry and chariots, they did not possess a navy of any distinction. I reminded Pharaoh that our southern Egypt had no access to the Middle Sea. Our Hyksos enemies controlled the northern reaches of the Nile and we were essentially a landlocked country.

The Sumerians also had limited access to the sea and their fleet was puny compared to those of other nations, such as the Cretans or even the Mauretanian people in the west. The Sumerians were always reluctant to risk the sea passage with heavily laden ships. They feared both the pirates and the turbulent weather. The overland route between our countries was also fraught with difficulties.

The Hyksos controlled the isthmus that runs between the Middle and Red Seas and connects Egypt to the Sinai Desert in the north. The Sumerians would be forced to march across the Sinai Desert much further south and then take ship across the Red Sea to reach us. This route would present so many problems to their army, not least the lack of water and the dearth of shipping on the Red Sea, that it might prove to be impossible.

What I had previously proposed to Pharaoh, and which I now outlined for Aton, was a treaty between our very Egypt and the Supreme Minos of Crete. ‘The Supreme Minos’ was the title of the Cretan hereditary ruler. He was the equivalent of our Pharaoh. To suggest that he was more powerful than our own Pharaoh would be treason. Suffice it to say that his fleet was reputed to comprise over ten thousand fighting and trading galleys of such an advanced design that no other ship could outrun them or outfight them.

We have what the Cretans want: corn, gold and lovely brides. The Cretans have what we need: the most formidable fleet of fighting ships in existence with which to blockade the Hyksos ports in the mouth of the Nile Delta; and in which to convey the Sumerian army down the southern shores of the Middle Sea and thus catch the Hyksos in a deadly pincer movement which would crush their army between our forces.

‘A fine plan!’ Aton applauded me. ‘An almost an infallible plan. Except for one small almost insignificant detail which you have overlooked, Taita my old darling.’ He was grinning slyly, savouring his revenge for the drubbing I had just given him on the baob board.
I have never been a vindictive person, but in this instance I could not restrain myself from having a little bit more innocent fun at Aton’s expense. I contrived an expression of dismay.

‘Oh, don’t tell me that, please! I have thought it all out so carefully. Where is the fault in my plan?’

‘You are too late. The Supreme Minos of Crete has already contracted a secret alliance with King Beon of the Hyksos.’ Aton smashed his lips, and slapped one of his own elephantine thighs gleefully. He had confuted my proposition decisively, or so he believed.

‘Oh yes!’ I replied. ‘I presume that you are referring to the trading fort to deal with Beon that the Cretans opened five moons ago at Tamiat, the most easterly mouth of Mother Nile in the delta.’

Now it was Aton’s turn to look crestfallen. ‘When did you learn about that? How did you know?’

‘Please, Aton! I spread my hands in a gesture of appeal. ‘You do not expect me to reveal all my sources, do you?’

Aton recovered his poise swiftly. ‘The Supreme Minos and Beon already have an understanding, if not a war alliance. Clever as we all know you are, Taita, there is very little you can do about it.’

‘What if Beon is planning treachery,’ I asked mysteriously, and he gawked at me.

‘Treachery? I do not understand, Taita. What form would this treachery take?’

‘Do you have any inkling of how much silver the Supreme Minos of Crete is hoarding in this new fortress at Tamiat in Hyksos territory, Aton?’

‘I imagine it must be substantial. If the Supreme Minos proposes to buy the greater part of next season’s corn crop from Beon, then he would need to have a heavy weight of silver on hand,’ Aton hazarded carefully. ‘Perhaps as much as ten or even twenty lakhs.’

‘You are very perceptive, my dear friend; however, you have stated but a small part of the problems that face the Supreme Minos. He dare not risk sending his heavily laden treasure ships to cross the open seas during the season of storms. So for five months of the year he cannot send bullion to the southern shores of the Middle Sea which in winter entails a voyage of more than five hundred leagues from his island.’

Aton broke in quickly, trying to beat me to my conclusion. ‘Ah, yes indeed! I take your point. So that means that for all that period of time the Supreme Minos is unable to trade with the states and nations that lie upon this African shore of the Great Seal’

‘During the whole of winter half the world is closed to him,’ I agreed. ‘But if he could obtain a secure base upon the Egyptian coast, his fleet would be protected from the winter gales. Then all year around his ships would be able to ply their trade from Mesopotamia to Mauretania under the protecting lee of the land.’ I paused to let him see the full magnitude of what the Supreme Minos was planning, then I went on remorselessly, ‘Twenty lakhs of silver would not be sufficient to fund a hundredth part of this activity. Five hundred lakhs is a more likely amount that he will have to hoard in his new fortress at Tamiat to carry his trade through the winter. Do you not agree that amount of silver would make any man contemplate treachery, more especially such a naturally pernicious and rapacious rogue as Beon?’

For fifty heartbeats Aton was struck dumb by the magnitude of the vision that I had presented him with. When at last he stirred again his voice croaked as he asked, ‘So you have proof that Beon, in defiance of his incipient treaty with the Supreme Minos, is planning to storm the Tamiat fortress and seize the Supreme Minos’ treasure? Is that what you are telling me, Taita?’

‘I did not say that I have proof that it is Beon’s intention to do so. I merely asked you a question. I did not make a statement.’ I chuckled at his confusion. It was unkind of me, but I could not restrain myself. Never in our long acquaintance have I seen him so lost for rebuttal or repartee. Then I took pity upon him.

‘You and I both know that Beon is a savage oaf, Aton. He can drive a chariot, swing a sword, draw a bow or sack a city. However, I doubt he is able to plan a visit to the privy without ponderous and painful deliberation.’

‘Then who is it that is planning this raid upon the Supreme Minos’ treasury?’ Aton demanded. Instead of answering him immediately I merely sat back on my stool and smiled. He stared at me. Then his expression cleared. ‘You? Surely not, Taita! How can you plan to rob the Supreme Minos of five hundred lakhs of silver and then court the Cretan for his support and alliance?’

‘In the darkness it is difficult to tell a Hyksos from an Egyptian, especially if the Egyptian is dressed in Hyksos war array, and carrying Hyksos weapons and speaking Hyksosian,’ I pointed out, and he shook his head, once again at a loss for words. But I pressed him further. ‘You do agree that such a treacherous attack would destroy forever any chances of Crete and the Hyksos ever forming an alliance against us?’

Aton smiled at last. ‘You are so full of guile, Taita, that I wonder how I can ever trust you!’ Then he demanded, ‘Just how large is the Cretan garrison at Tamiat?’

‘At the present time it comprises nearly two thousand soldiers and archers. Although almost all of these are mercenaries.’

‘So!’ He was impressed. He paused again and then continued: ‘How many men would you need, or should I ask rather how many men would Beon need to carry through this dastardly plan?’

‘Enough,’ I hedged. I would not reveal all my plans to Aton. He accepted
that and did not press me directly. However, he asked another oblique question. ‘You would leave no Cretan survivors in the Tamiat fort? You would slaughter them all?’

‘Of course I would allow the great majority of them to escape,’ I contradicted him firmly. ‘I want as many of them as possible to make their way back to Crete to warn the Supreme Minos of King Beon’s treachery.’

‘The Cretan treasure?’ Aton demanded. ‘These five hundred lakhs of silver? What will become of that?’

‘Pharaoh’s coffers are almost empty. We cannot save Egypt without treasure.’

‘Who will command this raid?’ he demanded. ‘Will you do it, Taita?’

I looked aghast. ‘You know that I am no warrior, Aton. I am a physician, a poet and a gentle philosopher. However, if Pharaoh urges me to do so, I am willing to accompany the expedition as an adviser to the commanding officer.’

‘Who will command then? Will it be Kratas?’

‘I love Kratas and he is a fine soldier, but he is old, bull-headed and not amenable to reason or suggestion.’ I shrugged and Aton chuckled.

‘You have described General Kratas perfectly, O gentle bard. If not him, then whom will Pharaoh appoint?’

‘He will probably appoint Zaras.’

‘Ah! The famous Captain Zaras of the Blue Crocodile division of the Royal Guards? One of your favourites, Taita. Not so?’

I ignored the taunt. ‘I have no favourites.’ On occasion even I can stretch the truth just a little. ‘But Zaras is simply the best man for the job,’ I responded mildly.

When I laid before Pharaoh my plan to discredit King Beon with the Supreme Minos of Crete and to drive a wedge of steel between the two powers which were potentially the most dangerous enemies we had in all the world he was amazed at the brilliant simplicity of my design.

I had begged for a private interview with Pharaoh and of course he had granted it without a quibble. He and I were alone on the wide palm-lined terrace which encircled his throne room, overlooking the Nile at its widest point in southern Egypt. Of course beyond Asyut the river becomes wider and the current slower as it passes through the territory that the Hyksos have seized from us, and flows down into the delta before debouching into the Middle Sea.

There were sentries at both ends of the terrace to ensure that we could not be overlooked or overheard by either friend or enemy. The guards were under the direct command of reliable officers, but they kept discreetly out of sight so Pharaoh and I were not distracted. We paced along the marble paving. Only now that we were alone was it permissible for me to walk shoulder to shoulder with him, even though I had been intimately involved with him from the minute of his birth.

In truth it was I who had delivered him into this world. I had been the one who caught his infant body in my hands as Queen Lostris propelled him from her royal womb with the force of a stone from a sling shot. The very first act the prince ever performed was to empty his bladder over me. I smiled now at the memory.

I have been his tutor and his mentor since that day. I was the one who taught him to wipe his own arse, to read and write; to shoot a bow and drive a war chariot. From me he has learned how to rule a nation. Now at last he has grown into a fine young man, a doughty warrior and the seasoned ruler of this very Egypt. But we are still the very best of friends. I would go so far as to say that Pharaoh loves me like the father he never knew, and I love him like the son I never had.

Now, as he listened to the stratagem that I was proposing, he stopped walking and turned to face me with mounting wonder. When I reached the denouement of my plan he seized my shoulders in hands that were hard and strong as bronze from swinging a sword, drawing a bow and driving a team of four horses in the traces of a chariot.

‘Tata, you old scallywag!’ he shouted into my face, ‘you never fail to amaze me. Only you could have dreamed up such an outrageous plot. We must begin at once to plan the finer details. Well I remember how I hated it when you forced me to learn to speak Hyksosian; now I would be lost without it. I could never have commanded this expedition without being able to pass as one of our enemies.’

It took me several hours of tactful manipulation before I could convince him that the danger of leaving Egypt without a leader at such a crucial point in our history far outweighed the glory or other benefit that he could hope to win from a successful capture of the Minoan fortress at Tamiat and the treasure it contained. I gave thanks to Horus that he is young enough to be flexible in his thinking and old enough to have learned a modicum of good sense. Long ago I learned how to sway him to my purpose without allowing him to realize that I was doing so. In the end I usually have my own way.

At my suggestion Pharaoh appointed Zaras to command the expedition. Even though Zaras was young, only twenty-five years of age—almost the same age as Pharaoh himself—he had already made a considerable name for himself, as his military rank attested. I had worked with him many times before and I knew that his reputation was well founded. Most important was the fact that he revered me.

However, before he dismissed me Pharaoh Tamose placed in my hands the royal hawk seal. This was Pharaoh’s means of delegating all of his powers to the bearer. The bearer of the seal answered only to Pharaoh. On pain of
death no man could question or hinder him in the course or commission of the royal duties.

It was customary for Pharaoh to bestow the hawk seal upon his chosen emissary with solemn ceremony in the presence of the senior members of his court, but I realized that in such a sensitive matter as this he had decided to do so in total secrecy. Nevertheless I was humbled by the trust he had shown in me.

I fell to my knees and touched my forehead to the ground before him. But Pharaoh stooped and lifted me to my feet.

‘You have never failed me, Taita.’ He embraced me. ‘I know you will not do so now.’

I went directly to find Zaras. I impressed upon him the importance of our mission and the opportunity it presented to him to establish himself in Pharaoh’s esteem. Success in this mission would set his feet firmly on the high road to advancement and royal favour. He tried unconvincingly to hide his awe from me.

The two of us drew up a list of 220 men to make up the raiding party. At first Zaras was adamant that this number was insufficient to take on the Cretan garrison of almost two thousand. When I explained the particular circumstances which I had not shared with Aton or even with Pharaoh he accepted my plan in its entirety.

I allowed him to choose his own men. I insisted only that the single attribute all the men he selected must possess was the ability to speak Hyksosian fluently. Zaras was too young to have been part of the exodus to Nubia when the Hyksos overwhelmed southern Egypt. In fact he had been pressed into the Hyksos legions at the age of sixteen. The result was that he could speak the language as though born to it, and he could pass for one of them in any circumstances. However, he was a loyal Egyptian and had been amongst the very first to revert to his true race when Pharaoh Tamose led us down through the cataracts to thrash the Hyksos at the battle of Thebes and drive their survivors in panic and confusion back into the north.

The men Zaras selected to make up the raiding party were highly trained and drilled, mostly under Zaras himself. They were all sailors as well as soldiers and had spent most of their time as fighting crews on board the river galleys, when they were not handling the war chariots. There was nothing more that Zaras needed to teach them.

I told him to divide this force into small detachments each of fifteen or twenty men so that they would not draw too much attention to themselves when they left the city of Thebes.

When I showed the royal hawk seal to the captain of the guard at the city gates he did not question me. Over three successive nights these small bands of Zaras’ men slipped out of the city during the hours of darkness and headed out into the eastern wilderness. They reassembled in the ruins of the ancient city of Akita, where I was waiting for them.

I had with me wagons laden with authentic Hyksos helmets, armour, uniforms and weapons. This was just a small part of the booty we had captured from the enemy at the battle of Thebes.

From Akita we marched on eastwards to the shores of the Gulf of Suez at the northern end of the Red Sea. The men wore Bedouin robes over their uniforms and weapons.

Zaras and I had ridden ahead of the main party. We were waiting at the little fishing village of Al Nadas on the shore of the gulf when they caught up with us.

Zaras had hired a guide whom he had employed before, and whom he recommended highly. His name was Al Namjoo. He was a tall silent man with one eye. He was waiting for us at Al Nadas.

Al Namjoo had chartered all the available fishing vessels from the villagers to ferry us across to the eastern shore. The gulf was less than twenty leagues wide at this point and we could see the low hills of the Sinai on the far side.

We crossed in the night, with only the stars to light our way.

We disembarked on the eastern shore of the gulf near another tiny fishing village. This was Zuba, where one of Al Namjoo’s sons was waiting for us. He had a string of over a hundred donkeys which he had hired to carry our heavy gear. We still faced a march of almost two hundred leagues northwards to reach the Middle Sea, but the men were trained to peak condition and we moved fast.

Al Namjoo kept well to the east of the Sinai isthmus which links Africa to Asia to minimize the risk of us encountering any Hyksos troops. Finally we came out on the rocky southern coast of the Middle Sea near the Phoenician port of Ushu. This was approximately midway between the Sumerian border and that part of northern Egypt still in the hands of the Hyksos invaders.

I left Zaras and his men encamped outside the port and went ahead with two donkeys loaded with gold ingots concealed in leather sacks of corn and four picked men to help me. After three days of bargaining with the merchants of the port I had three medium-sized galleys drawn up on the beach below the Phoenician Temple of Melkart. Each of these ships was capable of carrying a hundred men. They had cost me dearly, and there was very little gold remaining in the corn sacks we had brought with us from Thebes.

I let it be known in the port that we were a band of mercenaries travelling eastwards to sell our services to the Assyrian King Al Haturr who was laying siege to the city of Birrayut. As soon as the men were embarked we shoved off from the beach. When we reached deep water and while we were still visible to the watchers in Ushu we turned and rowed eastwards towards Lebanon. However, once we were out
of sight of land I reversed our course and headed back towards Egypt and the delta of the Nile.

There was a light offshore breeze blowing that favoured us. We hoisted the mainsails, and relieved the rowers at the long oars at regular intervals. We passed Ushu once again, but heading in the opposite direction. I kept our ships below the horizon, and out of sight of the port.

Although each galley was crowded with seventy men or more, we made good speed and there was curling white water under the bows of every vessel. By late afternoon of the second day I calculated that the Cretan fortress of Tamiat lay less than a hundred leagues ahead of us.

Of course I was in the leading galley with Zaras and I suggested to him that as we had left Ushu far behind us, we could now close in and keep within sight of the shore. It was much easier for me to navigate and judge our position when I had sight of solid land to guide me. At last, as the sun touched the surface of the sea ahead of us and darkness gathered behind us, I pointed out to the helmsman a sheltered but deserted bay with sandy beaches. We ran in until our keels grounded and then the men jumped overboard and dragged the boats up the sand.

The journey from Thebes to where we now lay had been long and gruelling but we were within a few leagues of our goal. There was a contagious sense of excitement and anticipation in our camp that evening, tempered by the foreboding which even the bravest men feel on the eve of battle.

Zaras had selected two of his best men to command our other galleys. The first of these was named Dilbar. He was a tall and handsome man, with muscled forearms and powerful hands. From our first meeting he had particularly engaged my attention and earned my approval. His eyes were dark and piercing, but he had a glossy pink scar from a sword-cut across his right cheek. This detracted not in the least from his good looks. When he gave an order the men responded to him readily and swiftly.

The commander of the third galley was a stocky man with broad shoulders and a bull neck. His name was Akemi. He was a jovial man with a bull voice and an infectious laugh. His weapon of choice was a long-handled axe. Akemi was the one who came to me after the men had eaten.

‘My Lord Taita.’ He saluted me. When first the men had used that title I had protested mildly that I was not entitled to it. They had ignored my protestations and I did not persist. ‘The men have asked me if you will do them the honour of singing for them tonight.’

I have an exceptional voice and under my fingers the lute becomes a celestial object. I can seldom find it within me to deny entreaties of this kind.

That night before the Battle of Tamiat I chose for them ‘The Lament for Queen Lostris’. This is one of my most famous compositions. They gathered around me at the camp-fire and I sang for them all 150 verses. The best singers amongst them joined in the chorus while the others hummed the refrain. At the end there were very few dry eyes amongst my audience. My own tears did not detract in any way from the power and beauty of my performance.

With the first glimmering of dawn the next day our camp was astir. Now the men could strip off their Bedouin robes and head-dresses and open the sacks that contained their Hyksos body armour and weapons. The armour was for the most part made of padded leather, but the helmets were bronze skull-caps with a metal nose-piece. Every man was armed with a powerful recurved bow and a quiver of flint-headed arrows, which were fletched with coloured feathers in the Hyksos style. Their swords were carried in a scabbard strapped to their backs, so the handle stood up behind their left shoulder, ready to hand. The bronze blades were not straight-edged as those of regular Egyptian weapons, but were curved in the eastern fashion.

The armour and weapons were too heavy and too hot to wear while they worked the oars in the direct sunlight. So the men stripped to their loin-cloths and laid their battle gear on the deck beneath the rowing benches between their feet.

Most of my men were of light complexion and many of them had fair hair. I ordered them to use soot from the cooking fires to darken their beards and skin, until they were all as swarthy as any Hyksos legionnaire.

When our three crowded galleys pushed off from the beach and rowed out of the bay, I was once again in the leading ship with Zaras. I stood beside the helmsman who wielded the long steering-oar in the stern. From the same merchant in the port of Ushu who had sold me the boats I had also purchased a papyrus map which purported to set out the details of the southern shore of the Middle Sea between Gebel and Wadi al Nilam. He claimed to have drawn this map with his own hand from his own observations. Now I spread it on the deck between my feet and anchored the corners with pebbles that I had picked up on the beach. Almost at once I was able to identify some of the features on the shore. It seemed that my chart was gratifyingly accurate.

Twice during the morning we spotted the sails of other vessels on the horizon, but we sheered off and gave them a wide berth. Then, when the sun was directly overhead, the lookout in the bows shouted another warning and pointed ahead. I shaded my eyes and peered in the direction he was indicating. I was astonished to see the surface of the sea along the entire horizon was churning white water as though a heavy squall were bearing down on us. This was not the season of storms.
'Get the sails down!' I snapped at Zaras. 'Ship oars and have the sea anchors rigged by the bows and ready for streaming.'

The furious waters raced towards us and we braced ourselves for the onslaught of the wind. The white water emitted a mounting roar as it approached.

I took a firm grip on the wooden coaming of the hatch in front of me and braced myself. Then the seething water enveloped the hull. The uproar became deafening, with men shouting orders and oaths, and the waters dashing against the ships' sides. However, to my astonishment there was no wind. I knew at once that this storm without wind was a supernatural phenomenon. I closed my eyes and began to chant a prayer to the great god Horus for his protection, and I clung to the coaming with both hands.

Then there was a hand upon my shoulder shaking me rudely and a voice shouting in my ear. I knew it was Zaras but I refused to open my eyes. I waited for the gods to dispose of me as they saw fit. But Zaras kept shaking me and I remained alive. I opened my eyes cautiously. But I kept on praying under my breath. Now I realized what Zaras was saying to me, and I risked a quick glance over the side.

The sea was alive with enormous gleaming bodies that were shaped like arrowheads. Again it took me a moment to realize that they were living creatures, and that each of them was at least the size of a horse. However, these were gigantic fish. They were packed so densely that those below were forcing the others to the surface in a tumult of waves and spray. Their multitudes stretched to the limit of the eye.

'Tuna!' Zaras was yelling at me. 'These are tuna fish.'

Upper Egypt is a landlocked country so I have never had the opportunity to spend enough time on the open sea to have witnessed a tuna migration of this magnitude. I had read so much about the subject that I should have known what was happening. I realized that I was in danger of looking ridiculous, so I opened my eyes and yelled as loudly as Zaras, 'Of course they are tuna. Get the harpoons ready!'

I had noticed the harpoons when I came aboard for the first time. They were stowed under the rowing benches. I had supposed that they were used to repel pirates and corsairs if they tried to board the ship. The shafts were about twice as long as a tall man. The heads were of razor-sharp flint. There was an eye behind the barb to which the coir line was spliced. And at the other end of the line was tied a carved wooded float.

Although I had given the order for harpoons, it was typical of Zaras that he was the first of any of them to act upon it. He always led by his own example.

He snatched one of the long weapons from where it had been strapped under the thwart, and as he ran with it to the ship's side he unwrapped the retaining line. He jumped up on to the gunwale of the galley and balanced the long harpoon easily, with the shaft resting on his shoulder and the barbed flint head pointing down at the flashing shoal of fish that was streaming past him like a river of molten silver. They looked up at him with great round eyes that seemed to be dilated with terror.

I watched him gather himself and then hurl the harpoon, point first, straight down into the water below him. The shaft of the heavy weapon shuddered as the point struck and the harpoon was whipped away below the surface by the rush of the huge fish that was impaled by the flint point.

Zaras jumped back on to the deck and seized the running line as it streamed away, blurring with speed and beginning to smoke with the friction of the coarse rope against the wood of the gunwale. Three other men of the crew leaped forward to help him and they latched on to the rope and battled to subdue the fish and bring it alongside.

Four other men had followed Zaras' example and each of them grabbed a harpoon from its place below the thwarts and ran with it to the gunwale. Soon there were knots of struggling men on each side of the boat, shouting with excitement, swearing and belowing incoherent orders at each other as they struggled with the massive creatures.

One after another the fish were heaved on board and clubbed to death. Before the last of the harpooned fish had been killed and butchered, the rest of the mighty shoal had disappeared back into the depths as suddenly and miraculously as they had appeared.

We went ashore again that night, and by the light of the cooking fires on the beach we feasted on the succulent flesh of the tuna. It is the most highly prized delicacy in all the seas. The men seasoned the flesh with just a little salt. Some of them could not wait for it to be thrown on the coals, and they wolfed it down raw and bleeding. Then they followed it with a swallow from the wine-skins.

I knew that the next morning they would be strong and eager for the first sight of the enemy. Unlike corn or other insipid foods, meat rouses the demon in the heart of a warrior.

So that night I sang for them 'The Ballad of Tanus and the Blue Sword.' It is the battle hymn of the Blues, and it set them afire. Every man joined in the chorus, no matter how rough his voice, and afterwards I could see the light of war shining in their eyes. They were ready to meet any enemy.

Described by Stephen King as ‘the best historical novelist,' Wilbur Smith made his debut in 1964 with "When the Lion Feeds" and has since sold over 125 million copies worldwide and been translated into twenty-six different languages. Born in Central Africa in 1933, he now lives in London.

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