

E & A INVESTIGATIONS SERIES

SALT ISLAND

INTERNATIONAL THRILLER

LISA TOWLES

SALT ISLAND

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For Lee
whose love makes everything possible

“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.”

-Arthur Conan Doyle

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The Ridders

Hot House

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Choke

And published under Lisa Polisar

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The Ghost of Mary Prairie

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Knee Deep

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SALT ISLAND

A Thriller

Lisa Towles



Prologue

Imagine hearing nothing but seagulls and rolling surf for hours at a time. No talking, dogs barking, TVs, cars, empty enough to hold a thought in your head, idle enough to inspire daydreams. And when the shudder of fear shakes you back to earth, you're still in your proverbial hammock drinking in the countenance of paradise with the same hungry, cynical eyes. Could it be real, this place? Was it as safe as it appeared? Yes but for the ephemeral shadow in my heart, warning me that nothing was as it seemed, asking what the hell I was doing here.

I'd been half asleep, lulled by the seesaw movement of the ferry and unfazed by a sudden rocking from another vessel. Quality sleep had become a rarity these days, like a shooting star or the aurora borealis over North America. My slitted eyes glazed over the blue expanse leaving everything, everyone, behind. Time, when slowed, allows new things to slip into your awareness. The low drone of the motor under my feet. Squawking seagulls. Coconut sunscreen. And then sometimes the human body prepares you for things, alerts like a buzzing in the hands, stomach clenching, the shadow of a migraine. Uncertain which came first, I spotted a ghoulish shape in the water at the same time an anguished howl sounded behind me at the stern. The first scream was higher in pitch, probably the little girl I noticed earlier, clasping hands with her father beside her; the second a moment later, an older woman, scream muffled by clammy palms, then the sobbing of utter shock.

Both its color and shape seemed unnatural, not white enough to be the feathers of a gull, too large and round to be the head of any marine animal, its pallor unmistakable. I'd seen enough of death certainly. It's the stories that always got me. The jarring interruption, mouths left open as if caught mid-conversation, the dark specter appearing unannounced in its languid cloak. How old had this person been? Married, single, lawyer, lobster fisherman? The body drifted close enough at one point that I caught sight of a wound on the forehead, likely pecked by sea birds leaving a red/brown indentation centered between the already hollowed-out eyes. I wondered if the bottom half of him had been eaten by sharks.

Fully awake now and unmoved from my position on the bench seat along the starboard side, I did what I'd been trained to do all those years: watch and listen, observe without reacting, gather scraps of usable intel. I'd learned that from him, my father. The spy. Truth be told, I couldn't see a corpse without thinking of him. Even now, though he was only technically missing and never actually pronounced dead. This floating cadaver still felt emblematic of that loss and its resulting wound. Whether dead by accident, natural causes, or specific intent, someone would miss this man. Who was he and how did he end up here?

The Tortola Fast Ferry crewmembers patrolled both decks gathering passengers to the front of the vessel, evading direct questions, reassuring them we'd be on our

way again shortly. We'd been stopped for thirty minutes awaiting a rendezvous with a U.S. Coast Guard vessel. I debated whether to identify myself as former law enforcement to the crew. The risk, of course, was that I wasn't supposed to be here in the first place, and what could I do, really? One crewmember had already started interviewing the little girl who'd first seen the body. They seemed to have the unexpected crisis well in hand.

One crewmember with a short, blonde ponytail was interviewing a man two rows behind me. She introduced herself as the First Mate, asked him if he needed anything, and waited. Tricky, wasn't it, finding out who knew about the dead body jouncing to the surface without specifically asking. Whether the twenty-something crew had been trained in this type of emergency response, they weaved calmly with discretion through rows of antsy passengers. Listening and attending.

"Miss, is there anything you need?" the young woman asked gently from behind my left ear. She stepped around me to the left, crouching in front of my bare, crossed legs.

I stared, unblinking.

"Did you see—" she began, to which I nodded. There was a tacit moment of understanding between us. "Could you come with me please?"

I followed her to the bow, where we met with a tanned, wiry man about her age, another crewmember, both clocking in around five foot seven. Me at six feet in flats, I sighed at the familiarity of another awkward moment.

"I saw the body in the water," I said to them, saving time. "I know several other passengers did as well."

"We're asking that you not share what you saw with anyone else. We don't want to upset anyone. Are you alright? Can we bring you anything?"

"I'd be happy to provide a statement," I said. "Are we still in US waters?"

The two crewmembers exchanged nervous looks. The guy glanced behind me at the other passengers, probably wondering if anyone else heard my question.

"I'm guessing that's the million-dollar question right now?" I asked. "I'm not a maritime lawyer but I imagine this presents an interesting tangle of jurisdictions."

"The Coast Guard's en route and will be taking statements from any passengers who saw anything," the second mate said.

I knew I was right. We were going to be here a long time.

My seat was the perfect vantage point for observation. Unusual that the young girl who first noticed the body was the only child on board; the rest of the ferry's complement looked like mostly older tourists in baggy clothing and straw hats. I craned my neck to the right but couldn't see the body anymore. I suspected the crew had corralled it off the port bow somehow.

I watched the small Coast Guard RIB, their fleet of rigid, inflatable boats, approach at high speed, slow, then dock beside us. Two officers, armed, boarded the ferry in about ten seconds, reminiscent of the five seasons of *Sea Patrol* I'd binge-watched. Interviews started with the young girl. I could hear everything, especially the officers' request to speak to the girl without her father. No deal, apparently, as he

remained crouched beside her, hand on her shoulder. Next was the gray-haired woman whose muted scream I'd heard after catching sight of the victim. Ten minutes later, I was summoned to the huddle, where I stood with the two officers. Phones out, ready to type their interview notes, I offered my business card to start the conversation.

"E&A Investigations," one said. "Private investigator?"

"Yes."

"Your name?"

"Marissa Ellwyn."

The other officer leaned in to look at the card. "And...Abernathy? Is he here as well?"

"Derek Abernathy, my partner. No," I answered, smiling to myself, remembering our first case together and now two years later we were officially partners. Enough to warrant business cards anyway. That felt good.

"Are you on a case right now?" one of them asked.

I laughed with a flourish. "Oh no, just a short vacation. Amazing what a few days in paradise can do for the soul, you know? Minus the body of course."

Neither so much as cracked a smile.

"So how does maritime law come into play here?" I asked.

One officer looked down at the card and peered closely. "Is this your mobile number or your office number?"

Evading my question. That said something right there. "They're both listed."

"Can you describe what you saw in the water and when exactly that was?"

I checked the old, scratched watch on my right wrist. "About forty minutes ago now, I saw something white bobbing up from under the water. I assumed it was a seagull feasting on some fish, but the object looked round and bulbous. I saw the forehead, then the shoulders, and then I heard that little girl scream."

Both men were scribbling. "How about before that? Any disturbances on board, loud noises, any commotion?"

"I was asleep. It was very quiet."

They were pretending to write but stalling to see if I'd blurt something out in my apparent nervousness from talking to law enforcement. It was a well-used tactic. I kept my eyes fixed on the ocean current and couldn't help but notice dark clouds gathering overhead.

"What will you be doing in Tortola?" the one asked me, eyes on his notebook.

"Swimming, mostly."

"You don't swim in southern California?" the other officer asked, eyes wide and mocking.

"I'm too warm-blooded for those waters. Besides, who has time to swim when you're working, right?"

They left me alone after that, but I was sure I hadn't heard the last of the U.S. Coast Guard. It was another twenty minutes before we started moving again, during which time I pretended to read, viewing a man over the tops of my sunglasses. They all looked the same – balding, edgy – this one met that description, and he had a sidekick seated near him, a younger, darker-skinned version. It didn't look like either

of them knew I was watching them watch me. Maybe they didn't. Not everyone's a spy, right? Then again, the older one kept finding things to do that kept his view in my direction rather than looking out into the water. It's the ocean. Why was I more interesting than that? Okay sure, I was six feet tall with long red hair. But this didn't feel like a pickup. They seemed like operatives here to observe a potential asset. Maybe that asset was me, and some things never changed.

Chapter One

St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands

There's something inherently naughty about hiding out from the world, solo travel, pursuing a secret mission. Despite its provocative appeal, I couldn't help admitting to the obvious avoidance in my actions. Family matters I didn't want to deal with, a case I didn't want to investigate. And now a body floating in the water begging for my attention.

It had been eight months since my kidnapping and, sure, I was running away from my life, searching for the father who didn't want to be found – by me or anyone else. My partner Derek and Ivan, LAPD Chief of Detectives, clicked into red alert every time I went off somewhere alone now. It's okay, guys, I thought, replaying the conversations, while my eyes drank in the immutable aqua sea, Tortola rising ahead of me like a bright promise.

My father, from whom I learned how to vanish, loved it here. He thought the British Virgin Islands possessed a power unique from any other Caribbean Island. My mother, in her taciturn way, loathed the times he escaped here alone, without her, without me or my brother, thinking all the while he'd shackled up with an island princess free of our sophisticated worries. But I understood him. I still do, and I refuse to talk about him in the past tense because we've not received a scrap of evidence to support the idea of his death. Except for the postcards, which I was sure no one knew about but me, Richard Ellwyn had been missing for over two years.

When I was little, my father traveled for work, gone for months at a time. To let me know he was safe, he'd send postcards with nothing on them but three little lollipops in the bottom left corner each time, which I came to recognize as his secret signature just for me. Only later, when I learned of the Ellwyn legacy and the family's Coat of Arms, did I understand the significance of the lollipops: a succession of three open chalices with long, thin stems supported by three horseshoes beneath them. Two months ago, I received a postcard from Magens Bay Beach on St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. Unlike the armchair travel inspiration of those postcards, this one had another intent—blank with three lollipops and one word carefully penned on the bottom edge: *Tete*.

The peril of close relationships, though, is that it's not so easy to disappear. Duga, my friend and associate, had learned my vanishing acts by now and understood, implicitly, that they were vital to my survival and a way to unify the

fragmented strands of my work and life. That is, my double life.

Derek. I'd tell him eventually, maybe tomorrow morning when I was tucked in my hotel four thousand miles away, obviously omitting the new developments. And Ivan, well, that required more strategy. For him, the lie included *down with the flu*, so when he inevitably trolled past my Santa Monica house in a squad car, he'd see my car in the driveway and be partially certain of my safety.

I'd spent last night at Picara Pearl Villas in St. Thomas where, upon check-in, I received another postcard sealed in a letter-sized envelope with my name written on it. I recognized the terrible penmanship and tore it open to find a picture of Tortola. Was he here, observing me? I looked down at my favorite watch to see that we'd arrive in Road Town in ten minutes.



The water here, my God. I could lean over the edge of the ferry, cup it in my hands, and swallow it like a restorative tonic. Tortola, up close, resembled the shape of opened arms. One place in the world still pristine, unsullied by the profane, modern world. Well, partially sullied by a body in the water. I remembered, only now, the other ferry that passed us just before I caught sight of the corpse. It looked about the same size as our ferry, but I couldn't recall any other details. Could that craft have dumped the man's body? Maybe it was a fishing boat. And maybe I'd imagined it altogether.

I was gathering my two bags when my phone buzzed in my pocket with a text. One of the perks of the Road Town Fast Ferry was an offshore mobile phone network with cell boosters to help connectivity while on board. I pulled out my iPhone and glanced at the message – Derek Abernathy, partner, friend, and the last person I wanted to talk to.

Sorry yr sick, I made you some soup. About to bring it over. You awake?

Shit. Shit, shit. I sent an SOS text to Duga, who could get to my house in five minutes.

Dude, Derek's on his way over...to my house!! Are you nearby??

Duga replied with a rolling eyes emoji.

Come on Duga, my good friend, I'll be back in 2 days. Cover for me? Name your price.

Health insurance? 401k matching?

Really? This again?

Meanwhile, I ignored Derek. I had the flu. Right?

Just tell him where you are, no? Duga wrote.

This is personal, and not something I want to share. With you, yes. No one else.

It was a dirty trick and I didn't care. I knew Duga would like hearing the singularity of our long friendship and, for that reason alone, he might drive to my house and tell Derek that I was curled up in the recumbent spoils of a sickbed: chicken soup, a box of tissues, and analgesics, hopefully preventing him from getting Ivan involved. Ivan had seen this routine before, and would no doubt realize what I was doing...and who I was looking for. In all honesty, Derek would, too.



We came to BVI when I was five, and again when I was ten. Back then, it held a mystique I didn't find anywhere in Middle-of-Nowhere, Minnesota, or later in LA. Tortola measured up in all the usual ways to an island retreat – warm, welcoming, slow, and colorful. They even used US dollars. I'd always sensed something forbidden, though, about its beaches, its streets, and inhabitants. I could never put my finger on it, but I always had my father to lean on for reassurance.

With no sign now of the man who'd been watching me, I disembarked and waited in a short queue.

“Name, Miss?” an official-looking man asked.

I leaned forward two inches. “Marissa Ellwyn.”

“Welcome to Tortola,” he said with a wide smile. I was sure he'd said those words a hundred times already today, but the smile looked genuine.

I still clutched the postcard, a little girl clinging to the father from her childhood. Was that quaint, or desperate? Of course, he could have gotten someone else to write my name simulating his physician's penmanship. Why though, and who? It had to be him.

I walked along the concrete ferry dock, scanning for a bench to set down my bags and suck the warm, sweet air deep in my lungs. My father loved it here, so different from our life in LA and the earlier years in Minnesota. I could see here, on the water's edge, what he had been running to. But I might never know what, or who, he was running from. My mother, or me? Come on Mari, don't go there.

I had to admit to the spark in my heart at seeing the postcard under my door in St. Thomas. Another part of me, though, the wiser part, wondered. Was he watching me right now, or paying someone else to report back on my movements? If he was here on Tortola, it seemed only logical that he lived here. Another thing he'd taught me – start with the most logical explanation first.

“Thank you so much,” I said to a bellman near the ferry dock who carried my two bags to the front of a taxi line. No Uber in BVI yet. I stood back to assess him: tall, white shirt with black pants, 200 pounds, sixty years old. At the hotel in St. Thomas, I'd printed a photo of my father from my iPhone in a 4 x 6-inch size. I slid it out of my handbag and studied the man's face, then slowly held it in front of him.

The face expanded into a wide smile. There were lots of flavors of smiles.

“You are looking for someone, no?”

“That could be said of anyone. Right?” I countered.

The man's smile vanished as he took the page from my hand, then examined the photo and my face back and forth. “Yes, I see the resemblance.”

“Does he look familiar at all?” I asked, realizing that I would likely be asking this question over and over.

The man shook his head. “Don't worry.” He handed the page back to me and held it as I tried to grab it from him. “This is an island. No one can hide here forever.”



I booked one night at Sebastian's on the Beach because it was close to the ferry dock, food, bars, and stores in case I needed any supplies right away. I travel light so

I knew I'd be needing something. I checked into my second-floor room in a well-maintained colonial structure and, naturally, ended up on the balcony gazing at the landscape of Cappaon's Bay. What was wrong with me? How could anyone look at this water and feel dark inside? I couldn't help but feel eyes on me, lurking cowardly behind binoculars, shielded by diaphanous curtains, or maybe on a balcony just like this cloaked behind a spray of bougainvillea. Was it my father, or maybe the staring man from the ferry? Were they wondering why I'd come, wondering if my heart would welcome him, or curse him for running? I looked out and shook my head. "You summoned me," I said into the warm air. "Now tell me what you want."

About the Author



Lisa Towles is an Amazon bestselling, award-winning Bay Area crime novelist and a passionate speaker on the topics of writer support and strategic self-care. She writes standalone thrillers as well as her E&A Investigations thriller series. Lisa attributes part of her success to the fellowship and support she receives from membership in Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, International Thriller Writers, and from her trusted relationships with local, independent bookstores. Lisa has an MBA in IT Management and works full time in the tech industry. Learn more at lisatowles.com or indiesunited.net/lisa-towles.

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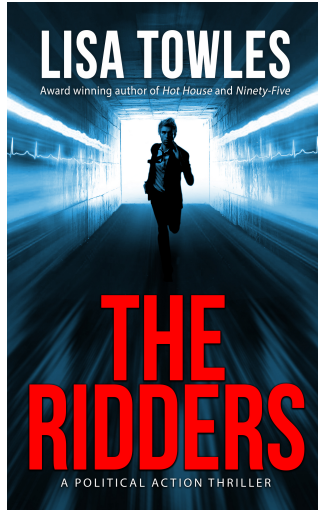
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The Ridders



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