

CHOKER

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER



BY AWARD-WINNING CRIME NOVELIST

LISA TOWLES

CHOKE

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Second Edition Published January 2023
Indies United Publishing House, LLC

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ISBN: 978-1-64456-526-1 [Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-527-8 [Mobi]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-528-5 [ePub]

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022945583



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC
P.O. BOX 3071
QUINCY, IL 62305-3071
indiesunited.net

For Lee

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
but the secret sits in the middle and knows.

Robert Frost

Also by Lisa Towles

The Ridders

Hot House

Ninety-Five

The Unseen

And published under the name Lisa Polisar

Escape: Dark Mystery Tales

The Ghost of Mary Prairie

Blackwater Tango

Knee Deep

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

“Castiglia? Do you have it?” The question came as a whisper in the hushed darkness of San Francisco General Hospital’s ICU recovery ward. Nurse Alice Redfield gave an insistent stare as she awaited her answer.

Certified Nursing Assistant Kerry Stine steeled herself against the jabbing pain in the side of her head and gestured toward the bed in front of them. “Right there. And what do you mean do I have it?” she asked, wondering if the migraine had colored her tone.

Redfield had already moved on to the next patient. “It’s not there,” she said without looking up.

Kerry Stine picked up the medical chart from the slot at the bottom of patient Rosemary Castiglia’s bed. “Emergency Evacuation Procedures – Part I” was the title on the front page of what should have been, and clearly had been less than an hour ago, Castiglia’s medical chart, containing a summary sheet, doctor’s notes, lab results, etc. She shook her head and glanced in Redfield’s direction. “Who would steal a medical chart?”

Redfield glared at her over wire-rimmed glasses. “Steal. That’s the first thing you think of?”

This question reminded Kerry that she’d only been a CNA for six months and most of her training had been completely inapplicable to hospital reality.

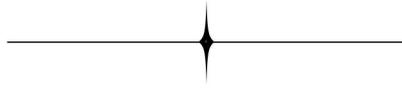
Redfield marched toward the exit door and paused. “If you wanted to steal a patient,” she whispered, “the best way to do it is to steal their chart first.”

Kerry stared at her supervisor. What a strange thing to say.

“Sure,” Redfield went on. “The chart’s got the patient’s labs and schedule of tests, which then tells you when the patient is likely to be...unattended. Get it?”

“Not really.” When the door closed behind Redfield, Kerry glanced back at the post op recovery lineup – five patients in the dark, uncomfortably chilly room purposely set to the temperature of a meat locker for infection control. To her it felt more like a morgue, except the patients were technically still breathing. Through ventilators.

Rosemary Castiglia, the oldest patient on the ward, was the only one breathing on her own. Miraculous, and no one understood it. Still with enough morphine to choke an elephant, all the lines she’d previously seen in the patient’s face were smooth now – her forehead and eyes looking younger. Was this possible? Kerry looked up and caught her own reflection in the glass – straight brown hair covering her shoulders, large dark eyes that lately looked a lot older than her years. Sleep, Kerry thought, memorizing the patient’s facial features, again acknowledging the pounding in her head. She looked at her watch – ten minutes left on her shift.



“Miss Stine?” The man paused. “Can I see you please?” Hospital Administrator Mark Ferri stood just outside the ICU entrance beside Nurse Redfield. Great. As Kerry approached, Ferri gestured. “In my office.” She always hated how Ferri talked – pausing at odd times to bring a sort of importance to his words.

“How’s your training going?” Nurse Redfield asked, glaring over thick glasses.

Kerry ignored her and followed Mark Ferri into his large office. Every wall contained a piece of matching chocolate brown leather furniture. Two stiff looking chairs, an angular sofa, and an oversized ottoman she was sure had never been touched.

“I’m glad to see you taking advantage of our training programs. That’s one of the things I’m working to revitalize here.” Ferri gave her a *good work* nod.

Kerry shook her head. “It’s not what – I mean I’d like to, but I need to stack up as many hours as I can right now. They offer the course again in six months.”

The pounding in her temples had morphed into a vice-grip squeeze. Her head vibrated so when she closed her eyes, she felt an almost bouncing sensation. Despite the pain, she couldn’t stifle the yawn the crept into her mouth.

“Am I keeping you up?” asked Ferri. He was in front of her now, leaning back against his desk. So arrogant.

She knew the body language – arms crossed to symbolize authority and their distance from each other in the hospital food chain, head lowered to feign interest – even intimacy. You’re not my friend, she thought.

“My head...I’m sorry. I’ve got a killer migraine.”

“Let me give you something for it – I get them too.” Don’t trust him, her inner voice counseled. “Fiorinal, Imitrex, Motrin with Codeine...if you ever need it, help yourself.” Now he looked straight at her. “I know what it’s like.” Ferri handed her a sealed sample packet of Fioricet. She just shook her head and looked at it. “Anyway,” he went on, “you’re probably wondering–”

“What’s there to wonder about?” she asked. “A chart goes missing on Redfield’s watch, so naturally blame it on the CNA. I understand the concept of hierarchy. Sir.”

Ferri stared, eyes slightly wider.

She crossed her legs and arms, settling deeper into the uncomfortable chair. “Rosemary Castiglia’s chart was there at 7pm, I –”

“You looked at it?” Ferri interjected.

“No, but I saw it.”

“That means you looked at it.”

Okay, so you’re a freaking homicide detective now. Note to self: watch what you say around him. Kerry rose and walked toward the door, wondering now if he’d secretly locked it. “If you’re asking me if I physically picked up the chart and pulled it out of the holder, no. I visually confirmed that it was in fact her chart, checked the patient, checked her levels, saw that she was sleeping and moved on. That’s my job.” She opened the door.

“Miss Stine, I wouldn’t leave right now if –”
The door slammed behind her.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt gratitude goes to the people who provided me love, support, encouragement, expertise, consultation, energy and care while bringing this story to fruition:

To Lee, the person I trust more than anyone – for your love, cheerleading, reality checks and extraordinary patience – you are such a gift

To my parents for your love and encouragement, for knowing and understanding me, and for teaching me to dig beneath the surface, believe in myself, and trust my own voice

To my sister, one of the wisest souls I know. You read everything I write, you provide great feedback, and you always get it, no matter what *it* is

To Missy, Gail, Kadi, Lee, and Ana for your thoughtful, helpful beta reads

To Jayne, my wonderful editor at Rebel, who published the 2017 version of this book – thank you for your wisdom, expertise, encouragement, support, and patience

To my publisher, Lisa Orban, thank you for agreeing to republish this book and bring it into the IUPH family

To my nieces Olivia and Cassidy – the sparkliest stars in the sky

To Natalie Goldberg who wrote the book that launched me on this path - *Writing Down the Bones*

To my MWA and SinC buddies – I appreciate your guidance, feedback, companionship, and friendship

And to you, my readers – thank you for investing your time and energy in my stories. It is such a pleasure to write for you!

About the Author



Lisa Towles is an award-winning crime novelist and a passionate speaker on the topics of fiction writing, creativity, and Strategic Self Care. Lisa has nine crime novels in print with a new title, *Salt Island*, forthcoming in June of 2023. Her thriller, *Choke*, was a Distinguished Favorite in the NYC Big Book Awards and was longlisted by the Chanticleer Reviews CLUE Awards. Her 2022 publication, *Hot House*, was an Amazon Kindle #1 bestseller and First Place Winner of the Book Fest 2022 Literary Award for Mystery & Crime. Lisa is an active member and frequent panelist/speaker of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers. She has an MBA in IT Management and works full-time in the tech industry in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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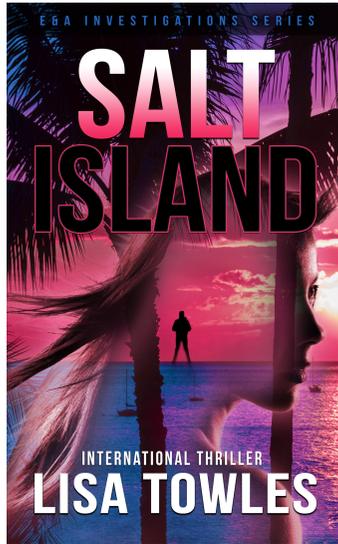
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