

BY THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF TERROR BAY AND CODEX

THE WEIGHT OF
**COLD
THINGS**

A THRILLER

LISA TOWLES

THE WEIGHT OF COLD THINGS

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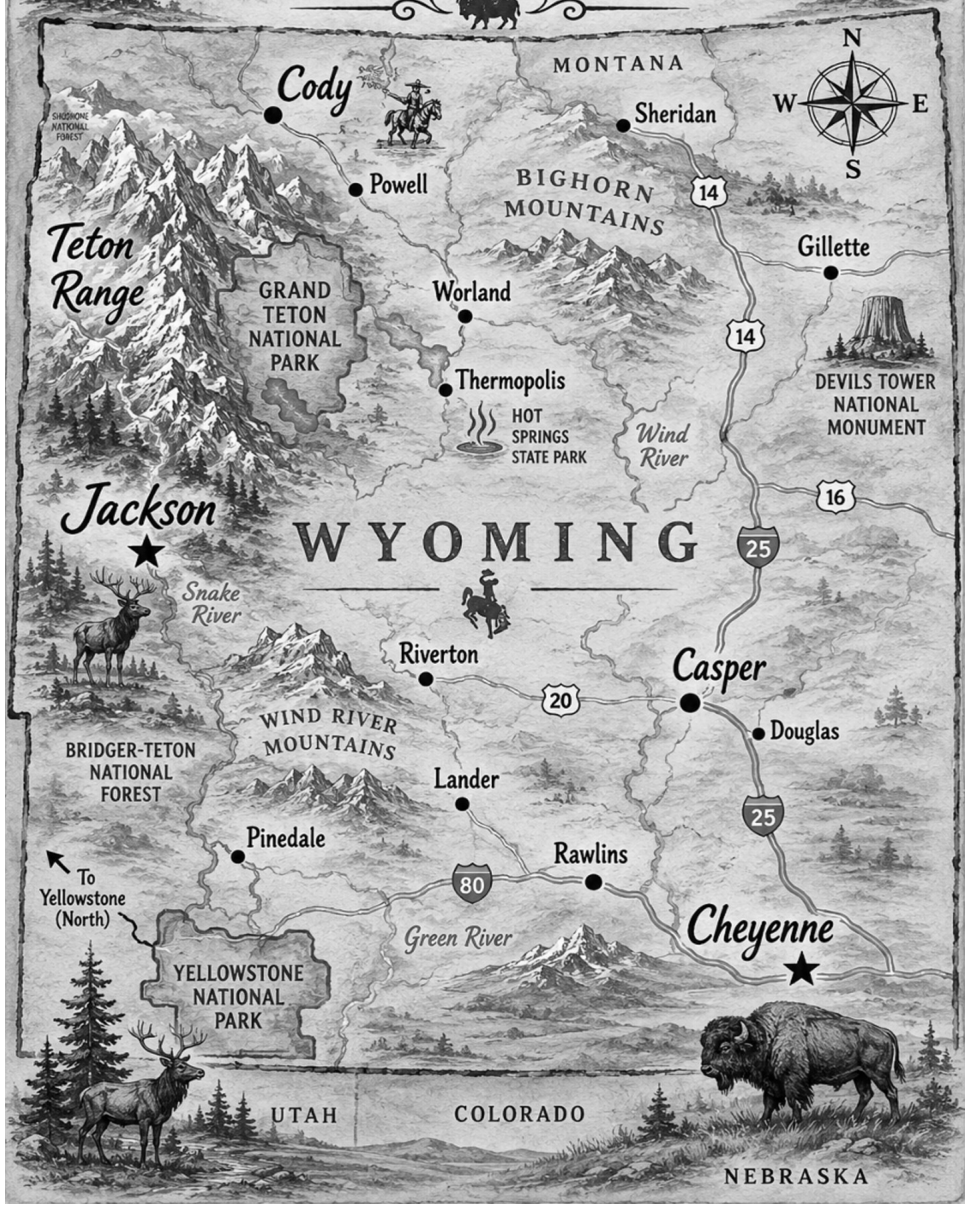


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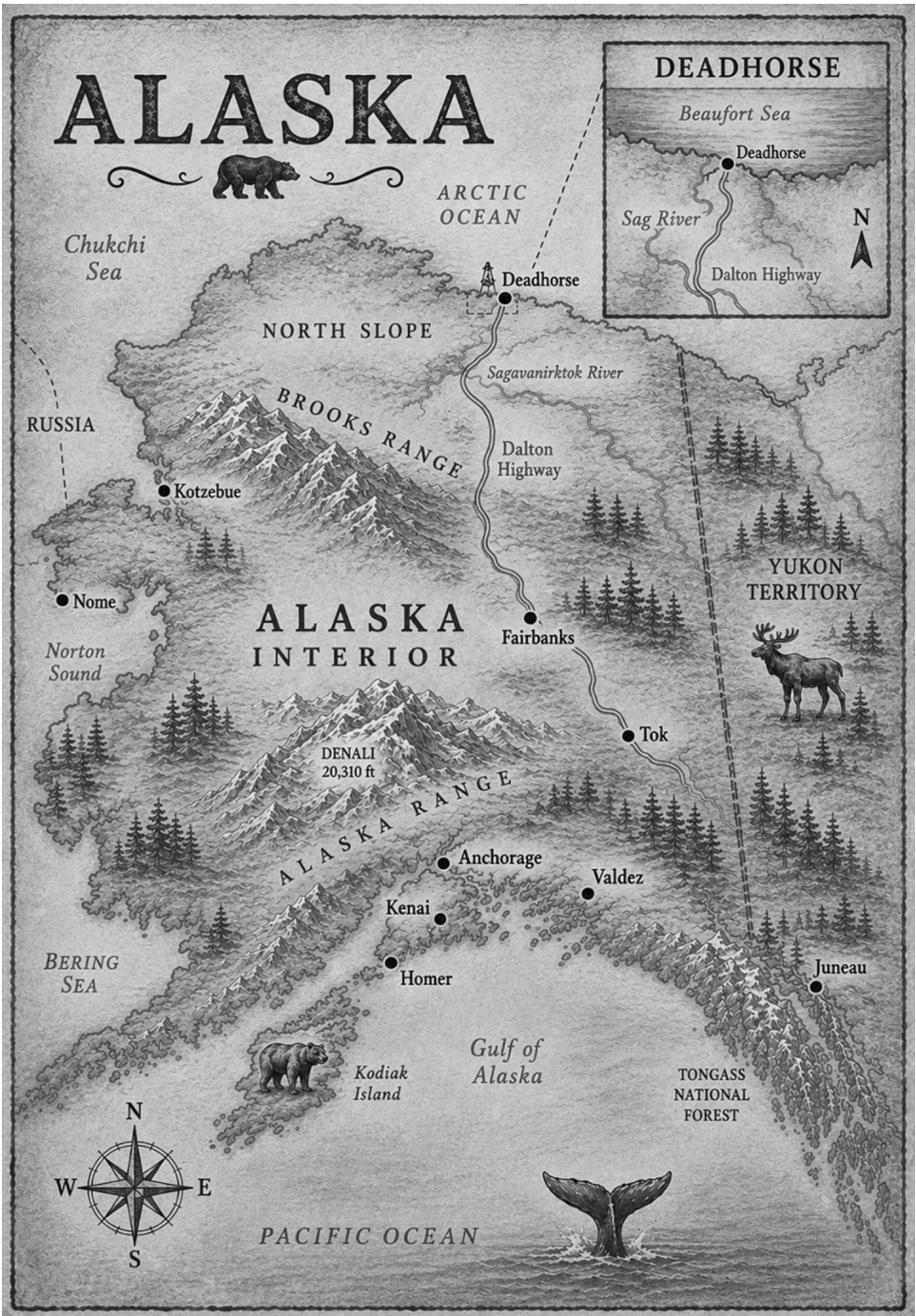
"Everything is green and brilliant and neon-colored under the ice.
I feel as if I'm being sucked into the realm of the dead."

Peter Høeg, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*

WYOMING



ALASKA





Prologue

Winter, 1974 - Prudhoe Bay, Northwest Alaska

They gutted an iceberg with two sticks of dynamite, forty years ago when the shabby construction camps rose on the iconic Dalton Highway. Oil was struck in Prudhoe Bay in 1968, setting off an irreversible string of events: an ecological nightmare, an eight-billion-dollar pipeline transporting crude oil 800 miles south from the North Slope to Valdez, and passage for seventy thousand oil workers to the most menacing outpost on earth: Deadhorse.

A stolen scrap of bread. Chronic insomnia. Drug abuse. One worker snapped, nicking dynamite from the munitions depot, flailing his arms, all the while forgetting how fast the detonating cord burns to the quick. The shock wave bulleted shards of ice in every direction, thrusting the assailant twelve feet in the air in a whirl of fire and black smoke. He became the first prize, the Number One. His victim, the second man, escaped.

It took two days for the particles to clear the air, finally revealing an exquisite, dome-like crevasse in the ice the depth of five residential garages — one after the other in a long, hollow train. Except this garage had no yard outside because nothing grew in this place but resentment. No gas grill on a redwood deck, no family huddled in the adjacent house. Only the unrelenting cold and ice: on the floor, walls, ceiling. He loved it that way, the Caretaker, the exclusivity of his access and the singularity of his dark secret.

That spring, the suited men came in droves sporting fine clothing and city shoes to explain the gravity of their problem, which later evolved into their pitch. Well, their problem had just solved itself, hadn't it? No one knew about this place and nobody but him would ever find it.

Some secrets were just not for sale.



Chapter 1

Present Day

December 18 - Inglewood Ranch, Cody, WY

I could feel it in my bones, this unspeakable energy of change. Not a buzz, it was more like a low hum I could almost hear when I closed my eyes and got real still. I'd woken with it today, of all days, this visceral knowing that despite the regularity of my errand, it would have a disruptive impact on my life, such as it was. My work in Jackson, a five-hour drive from our family ranch in Cody, was an odd arrangement to begin with, and the two-bedroom condo I rented near the Teton County Sheriff's Office was uninhabitable without AJ. Even still, there was something else in the air today. Cholo, our ranch hand and my lifelong friend, sensed something too, though it wasn't his way to articulate his thoughts. Instead, he put cinnamon in the coffee, his quiet way of offering comfort. I could smell it the whole way in from the barn.

I'd gone out before first light, watching the fluff of gray dawn cover my beloved Inglewood, hoping to shake the image of a recurring dream and to brush AJ's quarter horse, Rain. At first, it was to console him, knowing horses had unique and profound ways of grieving. Lately, though, the cold vigil seemed more about me. *Rogue*, the word had been coming to me since AJ's death — a blurry dream-hand opening to a tiny piece of paper on which a single word was written. Was it him reaching out from his watery grave? What did it mean?

Cholo passed me a cup when I reached the kitchen, shutting out the ten-degree wind chill behind me. I unzipped my coat and sipped quietly just inside the door, letting the hot coffee slide down my throat, waiting for whatever his face was preparing.

“Been three weeks now.”

I nodded, three weeks since Sheriff Peter Barrett disappeared — my boss, mentor, now another silent ache in my heart.

“I heard about the fire,” he added. “How many is that now?”

“Does it matter?” I asked him. “Seven.”

“You think they’re connected. Don’t you?”

I shrugged, pretending. But any sane person would. “I’m not an arson investigator. Bryce at the State Fire Marshal’s Office is looking into it.”

“Really?”

I laughed. “Come on. Bryce has a good team working for him. I know two of those guys.”

“They haven’t been out here since Thanksgiving.” Cholo stared back, thick brows angled over large, black eyes.

“I know, okay? What do you want me to do? I’m not the sheriff.” The words caught in my throat.

“You never know about people,” he said with that quiet wisdom I’d never seen in anyone else, like he understood the longings in my heart for answers that hadn’t yet come. Peter Barrett, Jackson’s most beloved sheriff, vanished three weeks ago today.

Cholo was right about Bryce, too. Interagency politics aside, I’d need to call and follow up on the arson investigation they said they were running. Add it to the growing list.

He took a long sip, still watching me.

“Well, spit it out already,” I said.

“I can’t take you to the airport.”

“It’s alright, I’ll get an Uber.”

Cholo’s jaw was set tight but his eyes were uncertain, like he was trying to think of an excuse but couldn’t do it.

“What’s the big deal?”

“Woody’s gonna take you.”

“Woody!” My voice cracked like a whip. I set the cup on the counter with a clunk and rezipped my coat. Ah...the cinnamon. Son of a bitch.

“He wants to talk to you.”

“Does he now?” I grabbed the warm mug for reinforcement and sucked down the last three gulps. “Does he want to talk about how he stole two of our horses, stole money from me? He robbed us, Cholo, all of us. And by doing so, he broke something precious.” I didn’t like the sound of that word, precious. Made it seem like Woody was important to me, and despite the intrusive logic of that truth, there was no place for Woody here anymore.

“He says he’s sorry.”

“Not to me he didn’t. Besides, sorry’s just a word.” Already mad at seven in the morning, great. I zipped my coat and turned my back to him, facing the door. “A real apology is a change in behavior.” My eyes were wide as I waited for him to take my challenge. To come to Woody’s rescue, explain how the drugs made him do it or the excuse-of-the-day.

Still fuming, I left via Uber at 7:30 a.m. without another word to either Cholo or my dad. Woody could kiss my ass as far as I was concerned. I’d have to pay for my cold heart, of course. The world has a quiet way of keeping score.



By 3:00 p.m., I was standing on the corner of Wave and McClellan Streets in Monterey, California. Eleven hundred miles away in historic Cannery Row, a sliver of sea was visible between the brownstones on Lighthouse Avenue. The sun felt warm on my face and bare arms. Mid-December in California, I’ll be damned. A premonition, I couldn’t put my finger on it, made me take notice, warning me to be careful. Something bad was coming.

Ash was right, I was loath to admit. There were holiday decorations and tacky music everywhere, but it just didn’t feel like Christmas in a hilltop penthouse overlooking the ocean, waves beneath me reflecting a cloudy sky. The beauty of California’s coast was unmistakable, but in my heart, Christmas was indelibly marked by snow.

“Is that you?” Cholo asked me later, answering his mobile on the third ring.

“I guess. Some version of me, anyway.”

“What are you doing out there, Gree? You hate California.”

He knew, of course; we’d discussed it back and forth for weeks. Why go now, why go at all? After being on and off the market for ten years, my mother’s condo had finally found a buyer. I came here to sign papers, to once again acknowledge the sting of her death and bring my feet one step closer to the present. But that wasn’t what he was asking. Like all Cholo’s questions, they were part real world and part spirit world. I knew what he meant. I just wasn’t sure I was willing to answer yet.

“How’s Dad?” I deflected.

“He’s concerned about how it will look to the community, you leaving town after Peter’s disappearance.”

“I don’t recall asking his opinion.” He was right, though. It was too sudden, but it would be a short trip. Besides, everything was broken right now anyway.

“No, but he’s always willing to share it, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” I laughed.

“He’s splitting wood right now,” Cholo said.

“Great idea for a man who just had a heart attack.”

“Come on, it was a mild one. He didn’t even know he was having it. Besides, it’s gonna be zero tonight. We’ll be using that wood.”

I guess I shouldn’t complain. The fact that they were staying in the same house, after such a long standoff, was nothing short of miraculous and I had nothing to do with it. Maybe the rock of resentment got too heavy to haul around anymore. I was dying to know who thawed first, but I’d never ask. You didn’t do things that way out here. Not in Wyoming, not in this family.

“Could you make sure he’s got a jacket on? For God’s sake keep an eye on him. If left to his own devices he’d chop wood in a—”

“Gretchen.”

It was my dad’s voice now, Ash Gooding, former Sheriff of Park County, who to this day insists on calling me by my birth name instead of the nickname my mother gave me.

“How’s sunny California?”

It was meant as an insult. Everyone in town got lots of mileage from the fact that I wasn’t a native of Wyoming, even though I’d lived there since I was five.

“It’s midnight, Wyoming time. What are you doing up this late? Do you miss me that much?” I joked to an awkward silence. I rambled on for a while, telling him about the dark orange sunset I’d seen from the balcony after signing a four-inch stack of papers. Hadn’t they ever heard of digital copies? Apparently, this mortgage company insisted on paper-everything. Ash listened. I heard the clinking of ice in his glass. Would this be his third or fourth by now? I decided not to mention the wood chopping.

“You didn’t tell her?” he mumbled to Cholo. “Mmm.”

“Tell me what?”

A murmur of conversation in the background. Maybe his hand was covering the phone. And maybe this was what Cholo was hiding from me this morning.

“Dad, what is it? Tell me.”

“I can’t. Gotta show you. Guess we’ll have to wait till you get back.”



Sonofabitch. I knew my dad, and that meant no manipulation or psychology would wriggle out of him whatever he was keeping from me.

After signing over ownership of what had been my mother's dream home, I left the key with the bankers and took with me a cedar box of my mother's mementos, which I would undoubtedly squirrel away somewhere and forget about for the next decade. All the better, right? Avoidance, since AJ's death six months ago, had become a sort of new religion. Didn't avoidance almost always turn to cancer somewhere down the road?

When I got back, I didn't bother going home first before looking for Ash. He'd planted an evil seed of dread and apprehension, and he knew it too. Maybe punishing me for something; he's a Gemini after all. I flew into Cody from San Francisco instead of Jackson, where I'd worked for the past twelve years as deputy sheriff under Peter Barrett, one of the kindest men I'd ever met. Why did I feel like Ash's secret had something to do with him? The buzzing in my bones this morning...maybe that was the warning. Jesus, no. Not that. The vague comfort of the word *missing* was too hard to give up.

Three in the afternoon to Ash Gooding meant five o'clock somewhere. There's this ratty bar on the edge of town called Stagecoach, Ash's favorite. Drafty as hell with dusty floors, swivel stools, and random darts scattered on the floor looking for their board, threatening tetanus. Weird part about it was that the owner isn't a wrinkled prune of a man but someone belonging on the cast of *Below Deck*, a body intended for board shorts, tanned legs and a white polo shirt hauling up ropes with three-ply triceps. He was trying to be unassuming in a plain brown t-shirt stretched out at the neck, pretending he didn't care about his looks. His artificially-whitened smile betrayed the deception - laughing eyes with something sinister behind them, a joke no one knew about but him.

"How's it going?" the guy asked.

I exhaled. "G&T, please. Been a long day."

"Coming up."

When Runway Model set down the glass, I suddenly didn't feel like talking. The weight of air travel, of the milestone I'd crossed and today's sad anniversary, burned behind my eyes. They watered as I took the first swallow. I turned on the stool to look around. Ha, I knew it.

"Ash," I said, walking across the creaking floorboards. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"Drinking here alone, that's what."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You can come to my house in Jackson and drink with me. Wouldn't

that be nicer?"

He laughed. "Not necessarily. Besides, too long a drive."

"Look, you can stay here and punish yourself for Mom's death all you like. I know what day it is."

The slap of the men's room door distracted us from the tension. It was a sad old story with no ending. I smelled Cholo's Irish Spring soap behind me. I turned, my left arm involuntarily reaching for him, tugging the frayed edge of his Carhartt jacket.

"Well." I stood back a ways. "You two got real chummy in the one day I left town." They were looking sideways at each other in some silent communication. Ranchers at a bar in the middle of the afternoon; it didn't make sense. "What's the deal?"

Cholo nodded. "You'd better sit down."

About the Author



Lisa Towles is an award-winning crime novelist and a frequent speaker on the topics of marketing, branding, and creativity. She's written 15 thrillers including the E&A Investigations thriller series. She is the founder of the Story Impact platform, which includes her podcast, a literary magazine, workshops, and her consulting work as a Book Coach. Towles has an MBA in IT Management and is a veteran marketing and communications strategist for Bay Area tech firms. In 2026, she launched the nonfiction book, *The ME Factor: Your Secret Weapon For Author Visibility*. Learn more about her books at lisatowles.com and the Story Impact platform at storyimpactconsulting.com.

Acknowledgements

Every thriller begins with a character announcing themselves to me — and the deep hunger and curiosity to follow where they lead. The fun part is listening, learning their voice, pulling the thread. The hard part is discovering that the threads of the story are sometimes tethered to interior parts of my own landscape I might have preferred to keep private. Writing this kind of fiction is a conscious choice, and I believe the reward for that courage is a character who might stay with you for a long time. And once you have a complete story, the real work begins to prepare a manuscript for its readers.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the following people who offered their expertise, wisdom, generosity, and patience:

To my husband Lee, the ultimate searcher — who inspires me more every day through his compassion, creativity, and insight. None of this would be possible without you.

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And to the wonderfully supportive readers of this book and my other books — thank you from the bottom of my heart for your honest reviews, comments, support, and feedback.

Terror Bay



Psychological Thriller

Indies United Publishing House, 2023

**In a coma, death says,
“Take my hand. I’ll show you a world of truths and lies.”**

After surviving a gunshot wound to the head, San Francisco homicide detective Kurt Farin is placed in a medically induced coma. In his unconscious state, he can't shake the vivid image of a mysterious woman—Genevieve Lucas—who appears to be summoning him. How does he know her name, and is she even real? Kurt's unshakable quest to find her leads him to Puget Sound, where he discovers a shipwreck and a shocking secret that can't possibly be true. As he digs deeper, he realizes his fate is inextricably tied to the enigmatic woman...and a long-lost treasure that's been submerged for centuries. Pairing up with his former SFPD partner, he follows clues that lead them to Alaska and northern Canada. But can he still trust him, or anyone for that matter? Risking his physical and mental wellness, Kurt follows his instincts and will stop at nothing to find out the truth about Genevieve.

Winner of the NYC Big Book and Crimson Quill awards, *Terror Bay* is one man's frantic quest to validate a vision that changed his life, expose an

organized crime ring, uncover a centuries-old buried treasure, and deliver himself from the horrors of his past. Fans of psychological thrillers will love the pace and complexity of this tangled tale of justice and rebirth.

“A rollercoaster ride of suspense, intrigue, and psychological tension” – *Readers Favorite*

“A brainy, dazzling read” – *The Prairies Book Review*

Winner of the NYC Big Book Awards

Winner of The BookFest Awards

Reader's Choice Book Awards Finalist

Excerpt - Prologue

She knew. In her bones she knew they shouldn't be there, and not just for legal reasons, but for all the tangled, convoluted nuances of maritime law that would undeniably stand in the way of ownership, should they find it. According to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, Canada shared maritime boundaries with Greenland and Alaska. That meant Admiralty Law regulations, plus anything involving old ships could be subject to the Abandoned Shipwreck Act. None of that mattered, though, did it? She'd already found it but hadn't followed the rules. Did she ever?

The captain had warned them of the storm, so she knew the risks and the timeline. Her gut told her she was too far in now to ensure enough air to reach the surface. But how could they possibly turn back knowing what they now knew, seeing what they'd seen? The unmistakable shape of a ship's hull still shockingly intact, a spectral hand and wrist outstretched and frozen, pointing to a door, now corroded in rust and thick barnacles, barely attached to its hinge. Around the front, a shocking face glared, jaw open, of maybe an original sailor or more recently a salvage diver, knowing what fate would become him, recognizing his killer and certain of no escape.

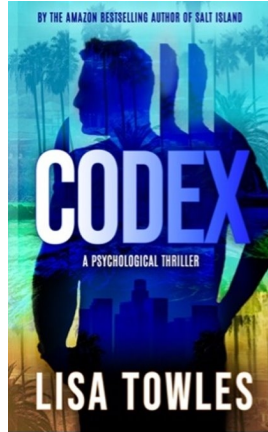
The eyes, laughing almost in the hollowed skull, had found it - the artifact no one in over two hundred years had thought of. She pictured the skeleton fragment as a living being, diving with antiquated equipment,

slithering through the tight opening without his tank so he could grab it quickly and return in time to breathe. How many divers had perished from these temptations before? If he'd found it, that meant he'd done his research, knew exactly where to look, and had a cool enough head to hold the weighty secret in his heart. But how could he have known that one random British sailor had earlier in his life been a privateer on board a pirate ship and kept a king's ransom worth of valuables hidden in the hull for twenty years? How could the man have known this... without being the man himself? Or maybe an ancestor.

Just one more moment, a few more feet and finagling her way through the narrow hole in the rusted hull. This had to be the place; it even looked like all her years of research foretold. In the flash of a moment, she felt the pulse of that threshold, knowing this was the line, the same line the dead diver before her had stood. Now or never.

The storm on the surface made it the wrong day to dive. For her, it was the right day to die.

Codex



Psychological Thriller

Indies United Publishing House, 2024

**A whistleblower, a fatal car crash, and a ghastly coverup.
Risk is nothing when you have nothing left to lose.**

FBI Agent Angus Mariner is off-grid after losing his beloved wife in a tragic car accident. Out of nowhere, he's approached by an eccentric old man, a billionaire, who gives him a three-million-dollar helicopter...and is discovered dead the next day. Mariner becomes a person of interest and later a suspect in that investigation as well as the death of a vagrant found on the beach near his residence. While investigating the dizzying turn of events, he is contacted by a journalist, who shares details of secret work his wife had been doing just before her fatal accident. Digging into what feels like unlikely allegations brings him to two unthinkable truths: his wife was a whistleblower about to expose a ring of corruption linked to the eccentric old man, and the fatal car crash was no accident. Out on a limb with no one left to trust, he must decide if he alone can expose the organization's terrifying agenda and bring meaning to his life's greatest loss.

"A genuine page turner. Fast-paced and ingenious." - *The Prairies Book Review*

"Comparable to works like *Gone Girl* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, this novel stands out with its unique blend of psychological depth and thrilling suspense." - *The Book Commentary*

Winner of the Pencraft Awards

First Place Winner of The BookFest Awards

Longlisted for the Chanticleer CLUE Awards

Excerpt – Chapter 3

The old me, the before version would be halfway down the beach by now, following the shooter with the cops behind me. But things change when your heart falls out of your chest. That invisible symbiosis with the brain is unerringly stunted, like neurons that stop growing, cells that stop replicating.

I hadn't heard any footsteps running away from the beach, but a car sped off just now, no tires screeching but obviously someone was in a hurry to get out of here. I kept my iPhone light off and didn't bring a flashlight. I'd trained my eyes, after sleeping outdoors every night for a year, to adjust to pitch darkness in seconds. I jogged in and out of the rocky ledge that overlooked the north side of the Half Moon Bay jetty, knowing somewhere down there was a man whose light was dimming. There, just ahead, I caught sight of a dark mound, but when I approached, it was a coat that felt like a summer weight wool suit jacket. Old me, FBI-me had known about such things, had nice clothes and a place to wear them.

It would be an hour, still, before the sky was light enough to see anything. By then, he could be dead. So I did the next best thing.

"911, what is your emergency?" said a female operator after making me hold for thirty seconds.

"I just heard a gunshot fired near where I live, and before that a man was being chased."

I provided a few more details, none of which were the ones they really needed, like a description of the victim or the assailant. How far away was I from the shooter when I heard the shot? Hard to tell, at night, in the dark, under the roar of ocean waves. I estimated one hundred and fifty feet. I asked them to send an ambulance and said the man might still be alive, but

I couldn't see him.

"Do you know for sure the victim is a man, sir? You didn't see him, correct?"

"No, I didn't see him. But I heard him. He said no, no, over and over, as he was running down the beach."

"And an assailant was chasing him at that point?"

"It sounded like two people running," I said.

"An officer will need to take a statement from you. Are you at home right now sir?"

The dispatcher used the word home. That was the problem, wasn't it? I got triggered easily these days. At the sound of the word, I found myself fumbling for keys, changing out of sneakers to put on boots, and crunching over Rudy's gravel walkway to my motorcycle. It was the same morning ride I took every morning, ostensibly to find myself. Forever looking.

But today's ride was to escape.

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