

E & A INVESTIGATIONS SERIES

# HOT HOUSE



THRILLER

LISA TOWLES

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For Lee, the sun in my universe

Secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of both our hearts:  
secrets weary of their tyranny: tyrants willing to be dethroned.”

– James Joyce

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# HOT HOUSE

## A Thriller

Lisa Towles



# PROLOGUE

*(Texting)*

*Hey*

*Hey*

*How'd it go?*

*Um*

*Did he buy it?*

*No*

*WTF...we had a deal*

*Wife came home early*

*Shit, what happened?*

*I slipped out*

*The window? LOL*

*Front door*

*Did she see you?*

*IDK. He's so smooth he could explain away another woman in bed with him*

*Would he have made the transaction?*

*I think so*

*Does he like it that much?*

*No, not it. You*

*Can you try again?*

*He won't deal with me*

*Why not?*

*He said sending a courier was insulting*

*So arrogant*

*From you, he'd buy anything*

*What did you think of him?*

*Nice smell, not bad looking for an old guy*

*You took a big risk for me*



*No big deal  
Tomorrow then?  
You know what he wants. I think you want it too  
No way, gross  
I know you Sophie  
I just wanted to sell one of my pieces, my first sale, yknow?  
He had a message for you  
What?  
Said you left your appointment book in his office  
Really  
What?  
I don't have an appointment book  
So what does that mean?  
Means he's a player  
Or he just wants to see you again  
Maybe  
He's a judge, what do you expect  
I expect he'll get whatever he wants*

# CHAPTER ONE

*6 months later*

**Nothing good ever happened on** a day you spilled black coffee on a white silk shirt. I jerked upright at 7:55 a.m. having missed a seven o'clock meeting with a prospective buyer, still plagued with the thought of the dark gray van tailing me again last night. Sure, I could tell myself fairy tales about how prosaic gray was for an automobile color, or how Ocean Park was a suburban neighborhood with lots of kids that required transport. But that was no soccer mom in the van.

The first note arrived with uncanny speed, almost too soon when you consider how many steps are involved in investigating a murder. I mean, I'd barely scratched the surface when I came home and found an index card in my mailbox. Handwritten in tall thin letters with a fine, red Sharpie, "STOP". And back then, I'd barely started. I thought it was some kind of joke instigated by my senile neighbor who digs up objects from her front yard and delivers them to our front porches.

By the time I'd taken the judge's first two blackmail notes to the forensics team I contract work out to, a second card arrived—this time in a plain, white business envelope, no return address, same message. This told me two things: whomever was threatening Appellate Court Judge Conrad McClaren was somehow threatened by my investigating the matter, and that finding the "who" and "why" now held more significance than I thought. But there was a third reason, one I'd barely even acknowledged to myself, about why I had to find these answers. The fate of my family and my heart depended on it.

# CHAPTER TWO

**A classy, dark green Land Rover**, maybe ten years old, the kind you'd see in an REI magazine ad, pulled into the dirt lot, out of place in this part of LA's Fashion District. I squinted and rolled in the binoculars a quarter slide and lingered behind the dusty blinds of the tiny window knowing the neighborhood would (or should, I hoped) raise questions.

A man climbed down from the awkward height of the car and stretched his six-foot-three, maybe four, frame and took in the questionable surroundings. It's not much, buddy, I know. I have my reasons. I stirred three sugars into a clean mug of fresh coffee while I watched him approach the unsightly door of my work-trailer. I could see the wheels turning. I pre-empted our first encounter and jerked open the door with a thrust that activated the almost daily pain in my shoulder.

"Of course this is it, it's the only door in the building." I smiled at the wise, untrusting face and well-tailored suit jacket. A nice surprise.

A perfunctory glance at my chest, then the coffee, and his hand extended like a lever. "Derek Abernathy."

Unmistakable Beantown accent. Light hair, gap-toothed smile—I always liked that—bad skin, and earnest green eyes. My mother would say drug use from the bad skin, and she thought gap-teeth were indicators of a big heart. I'm usually wrong about first impressions. We'll see.

"Come in." I moved to the dingy, fake leather sofa, passed him the cup, and motioned him to one of the almost-matching chairs. He sipped, I saw a half-smile, but he caught it quick enough, then another sip.

"Nice place you got here." He looked around. A smart ass, good. A useful trait.

"Let's say the location is...advantageous," I said of my dingy work-office on East 8<sup>th</sup> between Downtown LA and the Fashion District. It was the hood, if there ever was one.

The eyes widened and glanced left and right. "For what exactly?"

Really? He didn't get it? I know, I dragged him out to this forsaken place through my cryptic Craigslist ad that read, "Business Partner needed for human behavior research."

I pointed east. "Next door is an importer/exporter specializing in Asian swords; down the hall they make fake IDs, passports, driver's licenses; and on the north side's a travel agent that books Hawaiian Zodiac trips."

"Oceanfront property in Arizona?"

I tried not to, but I let a crack of a smile slip through. I liked him. "Something like that."

"Couple meth dealers and you got yourself a party."

Derek Abernathy, I said his name to myself over and over.

"You haven't told me your name yet, Miss...Ms...Mrs..."

"Mari."

He nodded, like he'd categorized me into a certain something. "Mari-what?"

"E. Mari E. That's my name."

"Are you, like, a rapper?"

Now I was the coy one, folding my arms, sliding deeper into the couch, which pinched something in my shoulder.

"All right, fine. How'd you know I like Sweet'n Low?" he asked with an attitude now that wasn't there a minute ago. "And not only that but three. Where do you even buy that shit nowadays?"

"I'm a private investigator, Mr. Abernathy. It's my job to know stuff about the people I work with."

"Oh, is that what we're doing? Working?" He didn't hide that he was both amused and flattered.

"This is a conversation," I clarified.

"What do you need me for?" he asked, emphasis on the *me*. "You seem to know about me already."

I watched him squirm in the chair fumbling with a part of his sport coat he'd accidentally sat on. "Some," I admitted, "but not all salient facts can be found on the internet. Some are found when looking through... your garbage..."

"You didn't."

"Talking to your landlady." I cracked up now, couldn't help it. "Your paper boy."

"As in newspaper? What century are you from? And I own my home, for like two decades."

"I know, and in a much nicer neighborhood than this."

He wriggled out of the jacket now, folded it, and laid it neatly on his lap, then his elbow nearly tanked the coffee on the side table, catching it just in time. I stifled a laugh.

"Silver Lake's okay, a little too hipster for me. Too many funky coffeeshops with bad art on the walls."

"Are you an art aficionado?"

A sardonic snort and his eyes widened. "Let's say I know what's good and what's not."

Omigod, I thought, but held my reaction in check. “Look, we’re both private investigators. What’s wrong with a little collaboration?”

He sat back and crossed his arms, waiting. Now it was my turn to perform, and I knew after one second’s meeting him that tight pants and a pushup bra wouldn’t get me far in this case.

“Mr. Abernathy,” I said pouring myself coffee, unsweetened, “you’re good at something I’m not. There’s a difference between locating someone who doesn’t want to be found and pulling them out. I’m good at research, damn good in fact. I’m a blood hound. What you’re good at, or so your reputation suggests, is the completion tactic. Drawing someone out, or ‘collecting’ as I call it, is one thing, but getting them to stay in one place long enough to identify them and make an arrest is another thing altogether, and with this clientele,” I looked around the room, “you better move fast.”

The man crossed his legs, pulled a pair of chic glasses from his front jacket pocket, and slid them on.

“That’s a nice look for you,” I said in earnest.

“I’m sensing the pitch is coming and I want to see your face clearly.”

He was funny, and that alone was worth ignoring any less desirable traits. “I’m looking for a guy,” I said, and the face changed from one that frequently smiles to a worn-down groove of mistrust. “What?” I asked.

He rose, showing me again that he was taller than me. Damn. I’m a six-foot-tall woman so that’s significant. “Get yourself a bounty hunter then.”

“I need a partner, all right?” I replied, one click too loud. I drew in a breath and remembered the goal. “I need backup,” I revealed more gently, strategically unmoved from the couch and staring at the floor. “I’ve been watching you for weeks. I needed to be sure.”

“Of what?” Annoyed now. “And watching what specifically?”

“Just tailing you driving around town, down to Encinitas to a bar next to that hookah lounge. No serious breach of privacy occurred, I assure you.”

He slowly sat back down, shaking his head.

“All right, a blackmailer,” I admitted, purposely giving him the impression that he’d gotten something out of me.

“You’re the victim?” he asked.

“No, a federal judge.”

“Really.” Raised brow. “They hired you?”

“Sort of. It’s a family friend.”

“Well Miss E, by the looks of your trailer, I wouldn’t picture you having family friends in high places but I’ll take your word for it. So, the blackmailer witnessed a crime that this federal judge, your family friend, allegedly committed, and the judge wants you to find the blackmailer so we can...what exactly?”

I stood, grabbed my purse, my keys, turned off the coffee maker, and stood at the door.

“Wait. We’re done?” he asked.

“I’ll pay you five hundred dollars a day for every day that I need you,” I said and pulled out my iPhone. “I’m texting you now so you’ll have my mobile and I’ll

message you tomorrow. Venmo okay? Or if you're a dinosaur and prefer PayPal or cash, that can be arranged."

"You've been following me for weeks, you've got my mobile number, my Gmail...what's my mother's name?"

"Doreen. Deceased. Sorry." I made a lemon face.

"Don't I need to, like, sign an employment contract, read your business conduct guidelines for proper office behavior, read your EEOC statement?"

I waved my hand and nudged him out the door while I locked it.

"Who's your Human Resources Director?" he said, walking down the stairs.

"Oh, you'll be meeting him tomorrow."

He stopped and turned. "Really?"

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Abernathy, I'll be in touch again shortly," I replied and held out my hand. He was reading my face the way you read a legal document. "What?"

"My mother always warned me about tall women."

"Always listen to your mother."

# Praise for *Ninety-Five* by Lisa Towles

"A delightfully peculiar, intricate, and engaging mystery." - *Kirkus Reviews*

"Punchy narration and pithy dialogue, fast-paced yet introspective fiction. Suspense and technical jargon abound in this internet-age thriller." - *US Review of Books*

"Marked by its striking execution and razor-sharp dialogue, the novel places Towles among the best of the genre. Readers will look forward to more of Towles's work." - *The Prairies Book Review*

"A riveting thriller, will keep you on your toes and eager to know what will happen next." - *San Francisco Book Review*

"A well-written romp through college and adult underworlds... a standout in the genre of new adult thriller reads." - *Midwest Book Review*

"This sprawling tale of crime and intrigue is a winner and it is hard to not get engaged with the realistic and likeable young protagonist...A compelling thriller and a propulsive read for fans of crime and YA fiction." - *The Book Commentary - 5 stars*

"Ninety-Five travels, one might say, at 95 mph, and Lisa Towles breaks up the narrative into sixty seven short chapters, so the pace is relentless. The novel is a dazzling trip into a dystopian techno-nightmare – a place where Alice Through the Looking Glass meets The Matrix, with more than a touch of Twin Peaks." - *Fully Booked*

"Towles' writing is sharp, witty, and engaging. She sets up an intriguing puzzle that gripped me from the first chapter and wouldn't let go." - *M.M. Chouinard, USA Today and Publisher's Weekly bestselling author of the Detective Jo Fournier series*

"A wild, intelligent, and imaginative page-turner." - *Sarah Lovett, Bestselling author of Dangerous Attachments and Dante's Inferno*

"Heart-poundingly intense and palpably realistic, Lisa Towles' new thriller yanks you into a story that you cannot put down." - *Louis Kirby, MD, Bestselling author of Shadow of Eden*

"Ninety-Five is a heart-pounding, non-stop thrill ride with a devilish puzzle at the heart of it. Forget edge-of-your-seat, you'll be up and pacing around the room. Highly recommend." - *Benjamin Bradley, Author of crime thrillers such as Welcome to the Punkborns*

# 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 eight crime novels in print, including *Hot House*, *Ninety-Five*, *The Unseen*, *Choke*, and under the name Lisa Polisar *Escape*, *The Ghost of Mary Prairie*, *Blackwater Tango*, and *Knee Deep*. Her next title, *Salt Island*, is the second book in her E&A thriller series and will be forthcoming in late 2022. Her thriller, *Ninety-Five*, was released in November 2021 and won a Literary Titan Award for Fiction. Her 2019 thriller, *The Unseen*, was the Winner of the 2020 NYC Big Book Award in Crime Fiction, and a Finalist in the Thriller category of the Best Book Awards by American Book Fest. Her 2017 thriller, *Choke*, won a 2017 IPA Award and a 2018 NYC Big Book Award for Thriller. 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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And to my readers – my most sincere gratitude for buying and reading this book. I hope you enjoy the journey, and books 2 and 3 in this series will be forthcoming soon. If you like this book, please submit a review about one thing you liked about it

on Amazon and Goodreads.

To all of you, Thank You