

# LISA TOWLES

Award winning author of *Hot House* and *Ninety-Five*



# THE RIDDEERS

A POLITICAL ACTION THRILLER

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The silent bear no witness against themselves.

*Aldous Huxley*

To Lee, the sun in my universe.

# The Ridders

A Political Thriller

Lisa Towles



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Look closely. You can see them. Ants scuttling through brush and debris in their oscillating dance of obscurity and emergence, death and resurrection, intending not to deceive but to exploit the natural patterns of nature.

Look closer and they are not ants. And it's not so random what they're doing. They're not just foraging for the most obtainable food supply. They watch. Monitor. Calculate. Track. They can sense heat, and their antennae can smell smoke. They look for forest fires to lay eggs in burning trees, their three-hundred-million-year-old DNA designed to survive uninhabitable climates.

Now reach in and peel back another layer. The stench makes your eyes water, a heat that liquefies skin and bone and, before that, an insidious cold that prowls the shadows, numbly setting the stage for the inevitable next - *rebirth*.



## PROLOGUE

**I clean my gun the same way an art collector cares for an original Picasso**—with white gloves, tweezers, soft brushes, syringes. An owner of an antique sword might use fine-grade steel wool to remove superficial rust, abrasive paste to clean the brass, and lemon juice to dislodge hardened residue. Distraction, for me, meant taking apart my precious Browning .9mm semi-automatic—a gift from our dead partner Archie Dax the night he died—scrubbing out the bore, wiping down the frame and barrel, regardless of whether it had been shot or not. Like people, guns age when they're ignored. But tonight I couldn't concentrate on anything but that envelope, and the clock was ticking to find out what was inside without actually opening it. Fifty-five hours, to be precise, within which I had to deliver something to a hotel lobby lest I got myself garroted, shot by a long-range sniper rifle, or otherwise permanently rubbed out of existence, such as it is.

Ray, my degenerate roommate, slipped past me in his swift, lopsided gait heading to the bathroom in the same dirty shorts he'd had on all week. He shook his head when he caught me polishing the polymer grips at the kitchen table.

“Keep it up, BJ,” he warned. “You'll never hit your target.”

“Is that so?” I said, feigning interest.

“It'll slip out of your goddamn hand.”

“Ray, you're a landscaper. What do you know about guns?”

He poked his head around the corner. “Dude, everything in life is about grip.”

Speaking of grip, I heard him peeing with the door open. I hate that. Two more months of this and his lease was up. Counting the days.

I got up and snagged the last beer from the fridge, knowing he was probably planning to do the same on the way back to his smelly lair at the end of the hall. I'd already found a company to do a “deep clean” the day after he moved out. If he leaves. Fuck Ray and his landscaping gig and stupid grips. I honestly had bigger problems than a slippery gun.

“I know you snagged the last beer,” he bellowed.  
I took a long, ceremonial sip. “Flush the damned toilet.” Asshole.

# CHAPTER 1

**What would you do if someone offered you** a million dollars to bring an envelope to the reception desk of a luxury hotel? That's it. Sure, a no-brainer. A relatively inconsequential risk, easy money, right? Trouble is, anything involving a million dollars might not be what it seems.

So many questions. Namely why me, BJ Janoff, should be offered this seemingly innocuous task. There were no answers available, no consultants waiting with details or clarifications. One million dollars in cash to perform this social experiment. Right now. Yes or no?

I know what my older brother Jonas would do. He'd say no because of the multitude of potential hazards his paranoid mind would concoct, keeping him tied to the past, still wearing the same ugly khakis from ten years ago, stuck in the protective bubble of his big house in Ladera Heights and his geriatric Mercedes. So, of course I didn't tell him. Yet.

Then there was Lacy Diaz, the girl-next-door-turned-lawyer, who drives a car flashy enough to get a speeding ticket if she goes over fifty on the freeway. "Hell, yeah, I'd take it," she said, with about a hundred caveats. What do you expect; she's a lawyer. "Wear rubber gloves," she said. "Ask to see the contents of the envelope first. If it's money, fan it out so you can see the bill denominations. Take photos of the payor."

"Photos of the payor?" I laughed and closed my eyes, a response Lacy inspired by pretty much everything she did. "Excuse me sir, would you mind if \_\_\_"

"I'm just trying to protect you from potential—"

"Potential. Now you sound like Jonas. His whole world is so much potential there's no room for now."

"He's your brother. You can't choose your family so get over it."

So be it.

A million dollars? Hell yeah, of course I said yes, I'm not stupid. Luckily, the task was intended for not only the most beautiful hotel in LA but the one I went to almost every morning. Sure, the cappuccinos were okay at the Peets counter, but the staff was even more noteworthy.

"Good morning," I said, loping up to the counter.

"Is it?"

"Pretty sure." I didn't let my eyes fall below Raquel's neck, given her choice of a low-cut blouse.

"Usual?"

"Yeah."

I watched the Westin Bonaventure Hotel staff moving wordlessly through their tasks today. A keen observer of human behavior, I knew something was going down when Mario the bellhop pushed an empty cart past me and lowered his eyes to the floor. No banter, humming, rapping, high fiving me. No smile.

"Hey?" I called after him. "What am I, invisible?"

Alena, who managed the daytime housekeeping staff, hurried after him toward the elevators. Her face looked like she'd been crying all morning. No makeup and she was buttoning her uniform top while she walked. Maybe I'm paranoid.

Raquel was moving slowly and clearly not interested in talking. So I took three steps to the left to get a view of the reception desk. The typical chorus line of coiffed, perky concierges today included a confused, twenty-year-old in a wrinkled t-shirt. Something, no doubt related to the FedEx envelope I'd tucked into the back of my pants, was afoot. Out of coffee sleeves, I burned my fingers on Raquel's cappuccino and hunkered low on a lobby sofa watching and sipping. A cadre of men in identical black suits marched to the reception desk. Here we go.

I calculated my distance to be roughly fifty feet from the polished, walnut counter, maybe forty-five. Lucky for me, the acoustics in here rivaled the Guggenheim and I could hear everything. One suited man in front, nine underlings huddled behind awaiting instructions. I heard the word envelope posed as a question. The misplaced pothead behind the counter looked like he might start crying any moment. He gazed through the suits into the cavernous lobby space. Don't look at me, buddy, I don't exist right now. I took three more sips of coffee then back to my morning theater.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call. Jonas, who I suppose qualified as my business partner even though I wasn't paid an equal salary, and there was no legal agreement in place that formalized our working arrangement.

"Hey, bro," I whispered.

"Hey, bro?" Repeating was one of his annoying traits. He had so many.

"What?"

"Where the fuck are you?"

"On a job," I lied. "Where are you?" I laughed inside, knowing this would unglue him. He hated the idea of my taking side jobs because he felt I was

unqualified to be a private investigator. When our partner Archie Dax was still around, we used to laugh about this. He and I were so similar. He understood me almost better than anyone. I'd only had my investigator's license for less than a year when he died, but he never thought that mattered. Said I had the right head for PI work. Aww, Arch. My world's not the same without you.

"Job? What job?"

Poor Jonas. I still hadn't told him.

"Okay look, we've got the Bergman family coming in at nine tomorrow morning and I need the..." He exhaled long and hard, specifically to relay his frustration and inspire guilt. That ploy never worked with me.

"What, Jonas—WiFi? Maybe you've heard of something called the internet. Yes, I know, and we're good."

"Router! Router. That's it."

Lord. "It's not the router, it's the modem speed and the unit will be upgraded within the hour. We're fine. Just let them in when they arrive."

No response.

"Are you crying?" I asked. "Pacing? Take your pill, Jonas."

"Fuck off. Say hi to Raquel for me."

I hung up and the phone rang again. "Dude, what?"

"And please don't wear your stupid backwards baseball hat. Please? I beg you. The Bergmans have money, a lot of it. We need that right now."

"Okay Jonas, no hat. Happy now?"

"We'll see."



Okay, so about the Bergmans. Jonas had been talking with them, Sten and Estelle, for the past two days about their vanished eighteen-year-old daughter, Anastasia, heir to their multi-billion-dollar estate, and how her net worth made her an especially enticing ransom target to what they described as "the underworld". LA's not utopia but not sure I'd call it an underworld.

Just two more errands today. First, I put a five-dollar bill in Raquel's tip vase even though she didn't see me. She still deserved it for being open at 6 a.m. and for looking so goddamn beautiful first thing in the morning. Then I held a small, black plastic ball in my hands and set it on a side table with a perfect view of the hotel's reception area. The table was on the other side of the seating area so that meant roughly thirty feet from the front desk. The plastic ball, a nanny cam designed to look like an air filter, was partially concealed by the fat leaves on a fake rubber tree plant. Unless someone moved that plant, or the filter for that matter, I'd be able to see the front desk of the Bonaventure Hotel for the next twenty-four hours via an iPhone app, which I suspect would be time enough to see why someone would pay a stranger a million bucks to deliver a stupid envelope.

## 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* (Book 2 of the E&A Series) forthcoming in the summer of 2023. Her novels *Hot House*, *Ninety-Five*, *The Unseen*, and *Choke* each won numerous literary awards. Lisa is an active member and frequent panelist of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers. Lisa has an MBA in IT Management and works full-time in the tech industry. She lives in Oakland, California with her husband and two cats. Learn more about Lisa at [lisatowles.com](http://lisatowles.com) and follow her on social media:

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And you can subscribe to her monthly newsletter here:  
<https://tinyurl.com/4a3bvdpn>

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# Hot House

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When a former CIA operative and private investigator Mari Ellwyn starts digging into the blackmail case of a federal appellate judge, she becomes targeted by a van following her, threatening notes in her mailbox, and a breach of her home. Teaming up with seasoned investigator and former detective, Derek Abernathy, the crime-savvy pair begin looking into the wrongful death of a mentally-ill college student, Sophie Michaud, as well as two journalists – one dead, one missing, who were writing a story on the dead college student with allegations of her connection to the federal judge. The two investigators must uncover the truth about Sophie Michaud before her killer makes them their next target. But more importantly, Mari needs to find her missing father and reconcile her broken past and family.

“Towles has produced a knockout novel with *Hot House*. Towles’s plot is as twisted and unpredictable as you would ever want a thriller to be. It’s this kind of action that will keep readers engaged in this suspenseful crime novel. Nowhere will thriller fans find a more engaging keep-you-on-your-toes read.” - *Literary Titan*, 5 Star Review

“A dark, edge-of-the-seat thriller. Highly recommended!” *Chanticleer Reviews*

“This meticulously constructed, remarkable mystery deftly explores people’s darkest flaws while revealing hard truths about the hidden workings of the world. A fast-paced and psychologically astute thriller.” - *Prairies Book Review*

Available now on Amazon and from other retail booksellers

<https://amazon.com/author/lisatowles>

**Salt Island**  
**Book 2 in the E&A Investigations Series**  
**Indies United Publishing**  
**Summer, 2023**