

BY THE AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SALT ISLAND

CODEx

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

LISA TOWLES

CODEX
A Psychological Thriller

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The mind can calculate, but the spirit yearns, and the heart knows what the heart knows.

- *Stephen King*

To Lee – my love, my North Star, and my home

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The Ridders
Hot House (E&A Series)
Ninety-Five
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Choke

And published under the name Lisa Polisar:

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Lisa Towles



Chapter 1

Present

I shouldn't be here. I know I shouldn't. But sometimes the decisions of the heart immobilize the brain and body. While my conscious intentions might challenge the tenets of logic, a more wicked part of me decided long before today that Wendell Peters must die. Exhausting all possible alternatives, in some twisted full circle, I'd been chosen for this karmic payback. Or maybe I chose myself.

Of course to those closest to him, those who reported the incident, he was already dead. I knew differently.

To see a billionaire like him living in this smelly shack filled with dying spider plants and moldy bread reminded me of all the glossy trappings I'd been avoiding. Shiny cars, new clothes, ideas that gleamed with promise at first, then faded into one of those hinged boxes we keep in the basements of our minds, dusty reminders that we've forgotten how to live. But as my favorite singer Sam Tinnesz says, the things you avoid have a way of hunting you down. Truth, he calls it. So be it.

“Hey, tighten up. Twenty seconds.”

The house technically belonged to his mother, and my associate determined that she'd be gone today, all day, at a medical appointment. Bad for her, good for us. Fat beads of perspiration slid down my forehead from too many layers of clothes, or maybe too much adrenaline. The low humidity of this part of California, most parts for that matter, meant nothing inside the confines of this stagnant sweat box. Only mid-May, it had to be close to a hundred by now. Blame everything on climate change, right? Counting down, twenty seconds till we busted through Wendell Peters' tri-level encryption. I heard the click of the front entry door, which looked like you could blow it over with one breath. But he was like that, wasn't he? A broken stereotype full of surprises. A sheep and wolf all at once—you just never knew which.

“Copy that,” I said into the earpiece. I touched the side of the house and crept under the eaves to the back, ready for the escape my partner said would happen. But no, I knew him. Wendell Peters looked like a street waif but that was his con. “You know he's not here, right? E? You hear me?”

“I hear something coming out of your mouth, just never quite sure what it is.”

Even her snippy British elitism still appealed to me, funny in a demeaning sort of way that I'd never minded. How could we be so different and emerge from the same womb? E - Elaine Mariner, born and raised in England and me, two years later, born right here in Northern California. Same father, different mothers.

The floorboards creaked under our weight as we moved through the dark interior now, informed by the night goggles and a spill of moonlight outside in the grassy yard. I took the back half of the house, rummaging through cabinets and stacks of papers, palming the undersides of kitchen drawers.

“We’re never gonna find it here,” I said.

I heard the weight of her heavy sigh in my earpiece. “And why not? You said yourself it was the last place anyone would look. Wouldn’t that make a clever hiding spot?”

“Reverse psychology, then. The old man lived twenty minutes ahead of everybody else.”

Elaine’s silhouette darkened the kitchen doorway. “Meaning what?”

“He was a finance guy.” I shrugged like she would get it. “He dealt in futures.”

“I thought you said he was a doctor.”

“Dr. Mengele, maybe. He spent his career forecasting the future. Studying trends, statistics, history, to make predictions. I’m sure he knew we’d be coming.”

I watched her roll her backpack off her shoulder and onto the floor, one hand on her hip. “Do you know how many hours it took me to get here? Yesterday, Heathrow at bloody four o’clock in the morning, emergency landing in Gatwick, boarded a different plane to JFK, then Atlanta, and I flew into LA, not SFO. That’s a five-hour drive.”

“E, listen...”

“You asked for my help, Angus. What are we doing here? And why’s it so bloody hot? Northern California’s supposed to be cold.”

“You’re whining. I hate that.”

“I’m here. We’re looking.”

“I know,” I said. “But we’re not gonna find it here. Or him.”

“You never used to be like this. Do you believe in conspiracy theories now too? Flat earth, fake moon landing?”

“I’m ignoring you.”

“Angus, I know what this is.” Her know-it-all voice. “Refusing to acknowledge one death points to a larger inability to—”

“Stop analyzing me. We’re on a mission.”

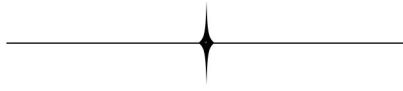
“I’m trying to help you.”

I widened my eyes, visually telling her to fuck off.

“Fine.” She heard me. Jessica was the last thing I wanted to think about right now, but that was so like Elaine, wasn’t it, bringing up the past to avoid the present, or future.

“How’s Miguel?” I asked of her drug-dealing love interest, knowing at any given point they were likely “amicably separated.” See how she liked it.

“No comment.”



We completed the task and searched each room of the abandoned safe house, wasting almost thirty minutes. Putting my night vision binoculars to use, I took pictures of random files and pieces of mail with the camera feature, while sliding my hands under mattresses, the pockets of jackets in a bedroom closet. Nothing so far labeled ADS or even BA-Vi, if those letters were actually a code. In my haste, something stopped me—my reflection in a full-length wardrobe mirror. I slid the goggles up to my forehead and took a step towards it like on a dare, an inch at a time to meet the reflection I'd so cleverly avoided for the past year. It was dark but my pupils had dilated. Same ragged crop of hair, mostly brown, lighter during summer. Same pointy nose, which Jess used to call my singular British feature, meaning the rest were Scottish from my mother's side. It wasn't a bad face, all things considered, and probably not so necessary to have hidden it from view all this time, except for the ugly truths your eyes can't help but tell you.

"Are we done now?" my sister asked with the patience of a toddler. "This isn't my idea of a good time."

"Almost. One more thing."

She moved beside me and swiveled the mouthpiece up to her left ear so we could talk quietly. I liked how her fairy blonde hair kicked up at the ends, an almost friendly gesture on an otherwise rigid exterior. I was staring at it and pointed.

"What?"

"I like it, your hair. It's a nice look for you," I said, careful with my tone, knowing she always cut her hair when a relationship ended. At least she didn't shave her head like last time. I couldn't help wondering what she was really doing here. Maybe she was running. Again.

"I don't feel like talking about—"

"I didn't ask you to. Touchy a bit?"

"Finish up. I want to get out of here," she clipped, and stood guard inside the window from behind a tweed curtain.

I moved past her to the back bedroom. "Can you hear me?" I whispered.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Remember *The Second Stain*?"

"The second what?"

She'd heard me. It was her condescending way of repeating things to make it seem like you were talking out of your ass, wasting her time and irritating her more than usual. We'd grown up watching those episodes together, each of us living in different countries but spending every summer in enchanted Half Moon Bay, staying up late watching the BBC Granada versions of Sherlock Holmes with Jeremy Brett in the title role. Favorite Holmes conversations were as polarizing as James Bond but it was the one thing we always agreed on. As a ten-

year-old boy, I thought he epitomized human intelligence in a way that indelibly shaped my conception of the world. Dig dig dig. And even if something seems like it fits, keep digging.

Imagining Holmes in his Dorchester tailcoat and pipe, I remembered the TV episode and the short story on which it was based. Dying to flip the light switch, I carefully moved two small tables to the hallway, then gently slid the bed over a few inches. A square rug remained on the floor—undetectable under the bed and too small to be considered decor. What the hell? I stared down at it feeling Elaine’s prickly presence in the doorway. Her arms were probably crossed, one finger tapping the outside of her arm.

“Looking for blood on the floor, are you?” she asked.

“Ha, you do remember.” The episode, and the story, referenced Sherlock Holmes noticing a blood stain on the floor without any blood on the underside of the rug that covered it. I pulled up the rug and tossed it onto the bed, then spread myself on all fours with my hands grasping for anything out of place. There could be a floorboard that wasn’t nailed down, a trip wire, or a trap door. The heavy varnish on the boards surprised me, slick to the touch. Was that... Wait. I stopped moving.

“What is it?”

“I thought it was something...wet.” I pulled back my hand and rubbed my fingers together, then touched them on the inside of my wrist. “Not wet. Cold.”

Elaine crept down beside me, palming the spot I’d felt, one small patch of floor that felt at least ten degrees colder than the rest.

“Get me my—”

I heard breaking glass first, then the “pop” of a bullet hitting the wall of the bedroom six feet above my head. Jesus.

“Shit,” she hissed. “How could he have found—”

“Get down.” I waited a full ten seconds before moving again. I thought I’d heard the door after the shot was fired but wasn’t certain. “Quick, help me get the room back together.”

We fumbled getting the rug on the floor, dragging the bed back over it, then we each took one of the small tables from the hall and put them back, careful to keep our heads below the window. She’d said “he”. Who...and found what? Found her? There was no time. God Elaine, who are you running from now?

I motioned for her to follow me to the next bedroom, which had a tree outside the window.

“And how do you suppose we might get out of here?” she asked.

“Alive you mean?”

As we slipped into the bedroom, the “chi-chick” of a round chambered into a semi-automatic handgun in the hallway reached our ears just before the voice boomed. “You won’t.”

Chapter 2

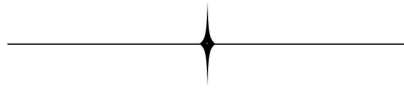
Elaine's legs were already out the window when I turned back to see the origin of the voice in the hallway. I watched her turn her head and pause. The voice wasn't familiar to me, but she knew him. Miguel?

"Follow me. Hurry," she said.

But the man was gone. I could hear the heavy footsteps heading toward the first bedroom, no doubt searching for whatever he thought we'd gotten first. That would hopefully give us enough time for a fast exit. Still, why was he hanging back now? Waiting for something?

I found myself in this mystical limbo, Elaine's swift retreat with the help of a sycamore tree, and me desperate to stop our visitor from discovering the dirty little secrets Wendell Peters had been hiding from the world. In those tense seconds, it all fell into place. Wendell, my beloved Jessica, and a whole world I'd known nothing about until now...until it was too late.

I climbed out the window, still monitoring the man's movements. I could tell he hadn't moved the bed or any furniture. Maybe he was looking for Wendell Peters himself, or maybe like us, for evidence of his research—the million-dollar missing piece. As for me, I wouldn't rest until I'd found every last detail. And only now did I know where he'd been hiding it.



With no time to debrief, I climbed onto my custom-built Ducati and Elaine in her rental car, and an hour later we were at the back door of Red Bull Diner.

The last booth, the *Angus booth* as Rudy called it, was empty and as inviting as always. I pulled a menu out of the holder, set it in front of her and we sat.

Elaine scowled in her impractical clothes, arms crossed tightly across her chest. "You've memorized the menu or you're not eating?" she asked.

"Not hungry right now."

She weighed ninety-five pounds and could eat more than a body builder. Rudy, my best friend since our Air Force days, brought two waters to the table, his dark eyes glaring.

"Don't ogle my sister," I said.

A wide grin lifted his face. "Glamorous as ever. How are you doing, sweetie?"

Elaine rose and kissed his cheek. "Better now. Banana pancakes please."

"Coming right up." Rudy Richards, owner of Red Bull Diner, nodded and lumbered off with his six-foot-four, bulky frame. Elaine put her sunglasses in her

purse, elbows on the table.

“What’s that brain of yours concocting?” Her finger rolled around in the air pointing at my forehead. “I see it. What’s going on in there? You know, don’t you, about the cold floor?”

My phone buzzed with a text. From Rudy, who was six feet away from us. *Your other best friend’s pulling in the lot.*

Dekker? I wrote back. *Shit.*

Get out of here, I’ll cover you.

“Hello?” she said. “Need I remind you of the time and expense I incurred flying here at a moment’s notice?”

“I think it’s his laboratory, where the whole nightmare started,” I said, my eyes on the door.

Rudy set a plate in front of Elaine. “Four minutes,” he said to me.

“What?”

He raised his brow.

“No.”

“I can see his car from here,” he argued. “You know what he—”

“I’m not leaving,” I said.

“He’s pulling into the lot now. Come on, man, you could still leave through the back door and he’d never see you.”

I looked at Elaine because, with her, there was no such thing as decisions. Act now with no remorse. It was one of her more enviable traits. Stuffing banana pancakes in her mouth, she side-glanced at Rudy and me. The glass door swung open with a flourish. Here we go.

“Angus Mariner...” the man announced, as if anyone else would care.

“You can’t arrest me, Dekker.”

“Who said anything about that?” Palms up.

Asshole. He’d been following me for days, bordering on harassment. I pointed to the cuffs dangling from his belt loop. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Today you mean? Last time I checked, breaking and entering was still a felony in California. I’m within my rights to bring you in for...”

“Breaking and entering where?”

“You know where. Property owned by a Mr. Wendell Peters.”

How could he have known this? “What evidence do you have? None.” Now I wished I’d ordered food. I sipped Elaine’s water instead.

Detective Walt Dekker with the San Mateo Police Department sat on one of the red swivel stools at the bar six feet from our table, arms crossed, Cheshire cat grin. “We’re gonna bring a sofa into the jail with your name on it, you know, give you someplace more comfortable to sit every time we drag you in there.”

“Fuck off. We’re eating breakfast.”

“You’re coming with me.”

“You have no proof that I entered any such property. Besides, it’s not like it’s a crime scene.”

“The man’s found dead under suspicious circumstances so it most certainly is

a crime scene.” Dekker looked at Elaine. “That’s your blue rental car, Miss? You drove that because it would be less conspicuous than Mr. Mariner’s motorcycle, I’m guessing.”

“Don’t answer that,” I told her.

“I don’t think it was a question,” she said.

“And the probable cause to warrant my surveillance would be...what?”

Dekker moved from the elevated swivel chair at the bar to stand in front of the table. And with the agility of a cat, he gently crouched, angled his head into Elaine’s neck, said “‘Scuse me” and shoved her body to the left, where he settled in beside her. Elbows and shoulders touching, Elaine handled the intrusion with the comedy and grace of everything else: she sniffed loudly and wrinkled her nose, then fanned the air in front of her face. I made a point to watch her, laugh, then stifle that laugh just as Dekker caught my reaction. It was perfect, actually. Why? Because Elaine looked like a runway model and now she’d just humiliated Dekker, changing the balance of power. I silently counted. One...two...there, he rose and stood in front of the table again.

“Sorry to crowd you,” he said to her.

“Just back from the gym? Or perhaps they turned the water off in your apartment?”

I shot her a ‘that’s enough’ look. She caught it and nodded.

Dekker needed to save face, whether he was going to arrest us or not. “How’s the search and rescue business going?” he asked with a smirk.

And how could he have known about that as well? I hadn’t told anyone, and I’d only been out on two rescues so far. The law enforcement community in Half Moon Bay and San Mateo was small. Even still, I’d asked to keep my name out of it. And that was the crux of it, wasn’t it? If I wanted to help search and rescue anonymously, why hadn’t I used a fake name? The old me, pre-accident me, would have done that and not given it a second thought. I still wasn’t back on my game yet, the game of life, the game of negotiation. I was still operating from reptilian brain survival mode. I hung my head and sighed, not caring that Dekker saw me.

“Fine. It’s going fine.” I looked up. “Kind of you to ask.”

“Oh I’m not asking to be kind, believe me.”

“No?” I asked. Elaine watched him like a firecracker waiting for a fuse.

“I know why you’re doing it,” Dekker said, back on the swivel stool, leaning against the counter. He crossed his legs, swiveled left and almost fell off the stool. But nothing fazed this guy. He could fall on the floor in front of us without his ego bruising, like he never had one in the first place.

He was baiting me to start a fight so he’d have witnesses and a more viable reason for arresting us. That way it wouldn’t be only on suspicion of a felony, but he was betting on padding it with assault and battery. I tried to remember the way my grief counselor described yoga breathing in our sessions—four second inhale, eight second exhale, something like that. I felt like pulling a blanket over my

head, because that was what trauma did to you—pulled apart your coping mechanisms so you'd go from zero to sixty in an instant. Dekker was more than just watching me. He was studying me, and seemed to understand where I was at. Still, he'd started it and had to run it through.

“I think you joined search and rescue so some part of you could rescue the wife you weren't able to save in that accident.” His voice was venomous, but his face told me he was sorry for treading on sacred ground. I could tell.

Before he even got to the word accident, Elaine popped up and would have reached Dekker's throat had I not grabbed her skinny waist. At least my reactive instincts were in good form. Dekker put up his hands in front of his face to swat her away and take a victim stance in front of the other customers in view. Bastard. And me, where was my reaction to this affront? It worried me that she was so volatile and I'd lost my ability to be wounded. Which one of those made you more human? I wondered about this, about so many things.

“Get up, Angus. You're both coming with me.”

About the Author



Lisa Towles is an Amazon bestselling and award-winning crime novelist, and a passionate speaker on the topics of fiction writing, creativity, and self-care. She has twelve crime thrillers in print with a new thriller, *Specimen*, forthcoming in December of 2024. Her 2023 thriller, *Terror Bay*, won a NYC Big Book Award, Literary Titan Award, and is a Crimson Quill Awardee from Book Viral. Her 2022 thriller *Salt Island* won five literary awards and is the second book in her E&A Investigations Series. Lisa's deep commitment to helping other authors led her to develop her Author Spotlight blog and her new YouTube author interview series, Story Impact, which gives authors a powerful medium for promoting themselves as speakers and discussing the meaning and impact of their books to readers. Lisa has an MBA in IT Management, is a communications and marketing advisor, and is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers.

Follow Lisa at linktr.ee/authortowles and subscribe to her monthly newsletter: <https://tinyurl.com/4a3bvdpn>

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