



THE THRILLING LEAD-IN TO THE DARKNESS

JASON PINTER

THE HUNTERS

Praise for the novels of Jason Pinter:

THE MARK

“From the opening sentence to the exhilarating conclusion, Pinter’s debut thriller gets the reader’s heart racing. Pinter is clearly one to watch.”—*Library Journal* [starred review]

“A first-rate debut from an author who dares to take the traditional thriller in bold new directions.”—author Tess Gerritsen

THE GUILTY

“One of the great new voices in the genre.”—*CrimeSpree* magazine

THE STOLEN

“The emotional dichotomy makes Parker a captivating and complex protagonist, one whose pithy observations about New York are dead on.”—*Publishers Weekly*

THE FURY

“Pinter does it again with his fourth Henry Parker outing (after the Crimespree-nominated *The Stolen*), an emotional and suspenseful journey with an engaging protagonist....a solid page-turner that would have been worthwhile value at a hardcover price.”—*Library Journal*

The Hunters

A Henry Parker Story

Jason Pinter



AUTHOR NOTE

Dear Reader—

Thank you for downloading my brand new, never-before-published novella THE HUNTERS. Now, my guess is that you fall into one of three camps:

- 1) You've read all of my Henry Parker novels
- 2) You're a new reader who recently finished my latest book - THE FURY
- 3) You have no idea who I am or what I write but decided to give this free ebook a shot.

Whether you fall into group 1, 2 or 3 I'm glad you're here, because you're literally right smack in the middle of what I consider the most exciting work I've ever written.

First, let me fill you in a little bit on how THE HUNTERS fits into my Henry Parker series. I recently published a novel called THE FURY, and in that book I introduced a storyline that will continue into my next book, THE DARKNESS. I always envisioned these two novels as bookends to one, massive story. So THE DARKNESS picks up pretty much right where THE FURY ends...almost...

You see, there's one night in between the end of THE FURY and the beginning of THE DARKNESS. Now, if you're like me, your average night might be spent having dinner, maybe watching some

television, doing work, having a drink or cup of coffee, and likely falling asleep long before the witching hour. But not these characters. And that's where THE HUNTERS comes in.

You see, even though one night is only a scant few hours between sunset and sunrise, a whole lot can happen when darkness rules the night. If you've read THE FURY, in THE HUNTERS see just how much trouble is yet to come. If you're reading my work for the first time, you'll be introduced to a world full of intrigue, violence, love, sex and conspiracies that go back decades. Whichever of these groups you belong to, I think you'll enjoy THE HUNTERS both as an exciting stand alone story, or one that complements and fleshes out characters you've grown to love and hate (some perhaps at the same time). Either way, get ready for one wild night.

Thank you for reading THE HUNTERS. Just remember, a whole lot can happen once the sun goes down...

Jason Pinter
September 2009

Cast of Characters

Henry Parker

An ambitious, idealistic young reporter for the *New York Gazette* who spends his days (and nights) in search of “The greatest stories never told.” Henry comes from a broken family, and has distanced himself from his abusive father and emotionless mother, using his troubled childhood as motivation to succeed. Due to his innate ability to always be in the right place at the wrong time, Henry tends to get in deeper than he ever thought possible, and more than once has found himself in the very crosshairs of those he has sought to investigate. Still, the passion for his work and never ending quest for the truth means that Henry won’t be backing down any time soon.

Amanda Davies

Henry’s girlfriend, who he met under typical romantic circumstance: namely Amanda saved Henry’s life while he was on the run for his life. Like Henry, Amanda is from a broken home, having grown up in foster care following the death of her parents. A lawyer for New York’s Legal Aid Society, Amanda is beautiful, tough and resilient--the girl next door who’s more likely to drink you under the table than sashay down the runway. Amanda supports Henry in every way possible, but she knows that his recklessness has led to some close calls for both of them. And Amanda is fully aware that if

Henry doesn't slow his motor down, it's only a matter of time before the odds catch up to him...

Jack O'Donnell

A New York legend, Jack O'Donnell old-school newsman who's seen and reported it all over a forty year career. Working alongside Henry at the *Gazette*, Jack has found himself in a position he never imagined: mentor. While Jack, thrice-divorced and childless, sees some of his best professional qualities in Henry, he also knows that Henry's devotion to Amanda might distract him from achieving true greatness in the newsroom. Recently Jack has suffered great humiliation at the hands of Paulina Cole, who publicly exposed his longtime alcoholism. Now, fresh out of rehab, Jack must work with Henry on the story of a lifetime in the hopes of repairing his tarnished legacy.

Paulina Cole

Take a dash of Ann Coulter, sprinkle in a little J. Jonah Jameson and top it with a slice of Judith Regan and you have Paulina Cole. Once a colleague of Henry and Jack's at the *Gazette*, Paulina has since defected to the tabloid-driven rival *New York Dispatch* where she spends her days carving her own niche by carving up those in her sights. Paulina knows better than anyone that a good story the one with the most juice, and she'll do whatever it takes to get it--even if it means squeezing blood from a stone. Paulina despises Jack, who she considers an old dog in need of being put down, and Henry, a young punk

who (unwillingly) rivals her as the town's hottest scribe. So far Paulina has shown no chinks in her thorny armor, but there is a personal side of Paulina we've never seen...and it just might lead to her downfall.

Curt Sheffield

A young black officer with the NYPD, Curt and Henry have become confidants and friends over the last few years. Like Henry at the *Gazette*, Curt has unwillingly become the face of his department, but his work ethic speaks for himself. Curt has done everything for Henry, including take a bullet for him, but what's a good friendship without a few scars?

Wallace Langston

The Editor-in-Chief of the *New York Gazette* and Henry and Jack's boss. Like Jack, Wallace has been in the newspaper industry for decades. He is devastated when longtime colleague Jack's alcoholism becomes a public scandal. Wallace sees tremendous potential in Henry, but knows his young reporter can be impetuous and reckless. Still, Henry has uncovered some of the biggest stories the *Gazette* has ever printed, and Wallace defended Henry on numerous occasions. Still, facing unrivaled competition from Paulina Cole and the sleazy *Dispatch*, Wallace knows that the future of the *Gazette* could very well be in Henry Parker's hands.

James Parker

Henry Parker's father, a cold, abusive man whom Henry has not seen in nearly ten years. Raising his family in Bend, Oregon, James Parker considered his son's journalistic pursuits a waste of time, and would constantly heap scorn upon Henry and his own wife, likely to make up for his own failings as a man. James Parker's vitriol drove Henry away from home, but when Henry uncovers a dark skeleton in the family closet, James Parker must face the son who is twice the man he ever was...but still does not know the whole, hard truth about his father.

The Fury

A legendary enigma in the Manhattan underworld who may or may not exist. The Fury's name was first whispered nearly twenty years ago when Jack O'Donnell was reporting on a rash of drug murders in New York City. A low-level dealer named Butch Willingham was brutally executed, but before his death scrawled two words in his own blood: The Fury. It was believed the dealers, all middlemen, were being wiped out under a massive consolidation of New York's criminal underground. Since then, however, the Fury has lain dormant, leading many to speculate that this shadowy figure was a mythical boogeyman. But Henry's estranged brother is found murdered, this dark figure just may be responsible.

Malloy

An shadowy foot soldier in working for an unknown boss. Malloy has striking platinum blond hair, and is more than capable of handling any dirty work (or wet

work) thrown his way. Malloy follows orders from one person and one person alone, but this seemingly emotionless machine turns out to have a major, and violent, secret of his own.

Chapter 1

It's gonna be a long night.

Those were the words I spoke to Amanda just as Jack O'Donnell left us, heading back to wherever it was that he'd left months ago. The past few days had left me drained, cold, but seeing Jack was a shot of espresso after a long sleep. I felt strong, invigorated. Strange feelings, considering I was in the middle of trying to find out who killed my brother.

Amanda and I were packing up my apartment, getting ready to move in together at a new rental farther downtown. This old place held a lot of memories, but like Jack, perhaps it was time to start over. Come clean. At some point, even the good memories are overshadowed by the bad ones, and a fresh perspective can help you hang on to the ones you want to keep and forget the ones you don't.

But as I told Amanda, it was going to be a long night, and memories didn't wash away that quickly.

Once the final box was packed, and sealed with enough duct tape to strap it to a cruise missile, we hopped in a cab and followed the driver down to our new place on 87th Street. It was a nice neighborhood, populated by young families and young professionals—which meant plenty of parks and playgrounds, and a whole lot of dive bars. Amanda and I were somewhere in the middle of those two worlds: not ready to face the mortgage and two-point-five children yet, and not quite in the mood to

wear baseball caps while spilling beer over ourselves because our team scored a touchdown. For us, the mating ritual seemed over. We preferred quiet conversation to boisterous applause. A cold bottle of beer in front of one television beat a watered-down draft in front of twelve.

God, I sounded old.

We watched warily out the window as the moving van seemed to steer directly into every pothole on the street. I cringed every time the wheels jumped, and I waited for the moment when the axle would just snap in half and all of my oh-so-valuable possessions would come flying out the back like stuffing from a slit couch.

When the van finally came to a stop, I jumped out of the cab and met the movers at the back of their van. When the driver, a man with massive biceps and an even bigger gut, wearing a back brace that could have been used in those World's Strongest Man competitions, went to pick up my stuff, I leaned in to help. Then I felt Amanda's hand on my arm.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going to help carry stuff," I said. "It's my junk, after all."

"Yeah, but you paid them to carry it. It's their job."

"I know," I said. "I'm just not used to someone else doing the heavy lifting."

"Would you feel better if I did it?" Amanda said, her hand on her hip.

"Actually," I replied, smiling, putting my arm around her, "I would."

She stood on tiptoe and gave me a small peck on the cheek. I'm not sure how wide I was smiling before, but now I was positively beaming.

It took just under an hour for the movers to transport all the boxes and secondhand furniture up to our second-story walkup. In New York, real estate prices were often dictated by how high a floor your apartment was on. A general rule of thumb: the higher the floor, the more costly the apartment. I figured in a walkup, the reverse applied. I'd rather pay more to live on a lower floor. Lugging groceries up five flights would be a bitch; two was just fine.

Once the movers were done and satisfied with their tip, Amanda and I walked into our new place. Amanda's few things were already there. None of the boxes was unpacked, none of the furniture was where it was supposed to go. The bed frame was set up, but the mattress was on its side against the foyer wall. We hefted it up, brought it into the bedroom and left it fall onto the plywood with a *thunk*.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and took a deep breath. Looked around. Amanda sat next to me.

"Everything okay?" she said.

I looked over at her. Smiled.

She was a true beauty in every sense of the word. That auburn hair that fell around her shoulders like a sunset, the small mole on her collarbone that I loved to kiss. When we met, I felt like the luckiest man on earth simply because she'd saved my life. Now, I felt like the luckiest man on earth because she'd saved my soul.

"Thinking about Jack?" she said. "I didn't know he was still alive, let alone in our neighborhood. The

least he could have done was brought over a housewarming gift.”

I shook my head. “Not thinking about Jack,” I responded.

“Then what is it?”

“Stephen. I’m thinking about Stephen.”

Amanda nodded, stayed silent. I didn’t know what to say—how would she?

A few days ago, I found out that I had a brother. A man I’d never met in my life, who until he was thirty years old had never met or tried to get in touch with me. And the day he finally did reach out to me...he was murdered.

I wasn’t exactly a good luck charm when it came to family reunions.

I checked my watch. It was nearing midnight. I’d promised Jack to be at the office early the next morning. Which meant that if I was hoping to go in refreshed, I’d have to hit the sack pretty soon. And considering that our bedsheets were sealed inside any one of twenty boxes and that it was likely underneath pounds of junk (the penalty for packing quickly and not labeling your boxes), it’d be 2 a.m. at the earliest.

Not that I could fall asleep.

There was too much at stake. I still didn’t know who was behind Stephen’s death, and I still wasn’t exactly sure what Jack had in store for me in the morning. And hardest of all, I had a beautiful girl that I loved sitting right next to me.

“I don’t think I can sleep,” I said.

“Want to unpack?” Amanda asked. “Take your mind off of things?”

“Not really,” I replied. “Just...not sure what I want to do. A little scared about how things are going to play out. Worried that this thing runs a lot deeper than I thought it did.”

Amanda sighed. She understood as well as she could, but also knew I was going through something that she wasn't a part of.

“At least let me help a little,” Amanda said.

“Oh, yeah? How can you do that?”

When I felt her lips caressing my neck, that answered the question for me.

“We don't even have any sheets on the bed,” I said as Amanda lowered me onto the mattress, throwing her leg over mine.

“Then I guess,” she whispered in between kisses, “we won't have to worry about doing laundry.”

“I like the way you think,” I said. And gave in completely. I can't say I wasn't still thinking about the next day...but Amanda had a pretty good way of making me focus on the pleasant things in life.

Chapter 2

“We’re gonna be late,” the blond man said. His manner conveyed a slight annoyance, even a sense of frustration, but he never would have let his emotions cross the line. The woman he was speaking to deserved more respect than that, and he considered any lack of patience on his part a reflection of his own personality defects, not of her tardiness.

He was a solid six foot two, and though he was wearing a bulky coat it was clear that beneath the fabric was a well-oiled machine. It was easy to tell from the way he walked, the way he carried himself, like a leopard that might move gracefully but could strike at any moment.

His hair was so blond it was nearly translucent, the dark roots only visible if you got close enough to look. And very few people got that close.

Everything she had worked for and planned for until now had come together perfectly. This was not the time to second-guess anything. When she needed to be on time, she was. When she wanted something to happen at her convenience, she made sure it did. So the fact that they were half an hour late to the meeting, and doing nothing but standing a block away killing time, may have made him anxious, but he knew there was a reason for it.

The woman standing next to him was tall and lithe, nearly six feet herself and possibly even more athletic. She was of Latin descent, and her dark skin

brought out her emerald-green eyes. Those eyes rarely showed any outward signs of emotion. But on this night, those eyes were just a little wider, a little warier. They both knew how much was at stake, how much they'd worked twenty years for.

"Should we go in yet?" he asked, making sure the words came out as pure question. No insinuations whatsoever.

She checked her watch. Her long, black hair was tied into a tight braid that flipped around like a scythe. She portrayed no hurry, and very few emotions at all. She had filled him in on her reasons for this meeting and what they hoped to achieve from it.

A rapper, she'd said. Li'l Leroy, or something like that. So many rappers had Li'l attached to their name, as though they wanted to make you think they spent their nights swinging on jungle gyms or bouncing on trampolines.

Not this Li'l, however. What he was going to do tonight would most certainly get his Li'l card revoked.

"It's time," the woman said. The blond man began walking. No time wasted with a nod or salute or even a word. If it was time, every second mattered. And then she spoke, as if she'd read his mind. "I want him to be anxious," she said. "He doesn't know what he's getting into. He doesn't know what he thinks he's buying. I want him flustered and on edge."

"Why?" the blond man asked. He felt that was a fair question. He wasn't imposing, just asking her to elaborate.

“Because once he tries the product and thinks back to this meeting, he’ll know that we came late for a reason. We’re doing him a favor by even being here. So the next time we come he’ll be sweating like a junkie. He’ll eat out of our hands if we want him to.”

The blond man nodded. Despite his shortcomings—and the man knew he had many—he had remarkable self-awareness. He did not have the calculating mind that she did, but he had enough confidence to admit it. He had the utmost respect for the woman, and if she was sure about what she was doing, so was he. So while this rationale did not completely make sense to him, he knew it did to her. And that mattered more.

His mind may not be as sharp as the edge of a knife, but it was as powerful as a sledgehammer. He may not have been subtle, but he got the job done.

The woman said, “Let’s go.”

They approached the building, located in uptown Manhattan on 135th Street off Adam Clayton Boulevard—right near the neighborhood YMCA. The building was completely devoid of tenants. Well, that was the technical truth, as there were no tenants who lived there on a permanent basis. The owner of the complex was named Leroy Culvert. Leroy Culvert was worth well over thirty million dollars.

While there were no permanent tenants, the building was not kept in a state of disrepair. It was not an eyesore like so many other unoccupied projects in uptown New York, but rather, Culvert kept it in good enough shape that it was never

approached by squatters, never frequented by junkies and never attracted the homeless population who assumed that a building in total disrepair was one where not too many people asked questions.

Culvert kept it in just good enough shape that it went unnoticed in the neighborhood. It wasn't nice enough that it would stick in peoples' minds, but not dilapidated enough that it would pique their interest for other reasons.

In fact, the dark-haired woman was moderately impressed by the security system. A reinforced steel door and roving camera setup that was partially obscured by tree branches. Just enough to keep the bad guys out without alerting pedestrians as to what—or who—was being guarded.

The blond man punched out a number on his cell phone. After two rings, a man with a deep, baritone voice answered.

“Whozis?”

“Mr. Malloy and a guest. We're here to see Mr. Culvert.”

“We ain't hear nobody buzz upstairs.”

“We don't ‘buzz.’ And we both know that your buzzer system also records fingerprints. I'm mildly impressed with your security, but Mr. Culvert knows how we do business.”

“Hang on a sec.”

Malloy smiled. He could hear mumbling on the other end. The man with the deep voice clearly said “Whatchoo want me to do?” several times. He didn't bother to put the phone on hold, just covered it with his palm.

Amateur hour.

Finally the man got back on the line.

“A’right. You can come through. Eighth floor. And you better not be packin’.”

“Don’t worry,” Malloy said. “We’re simply here to do business.”

The buzzer sounded, and the blond man pushed open the door with his elbow. He held it as the dark-haired woman entered. She gave him a quick pat on the shoulder to let him know he’d done well. The blond man nodded his acceptance.

The corridors were well lit, but the apartment doors looked like they hadn’t been opened in years. Culvert clearly had his command center and had no use for the other apartments in the building. Yet there were cameras everywhere. The blond man made a note of them. Cameras meant a security log. A security log meant there was a recording station somewhere inside the building. He would have to find it before they came back.

“Cameras,” the woman said.

“I’m on it.”

“We’re not leaving without the tapes.”

“Today?” the blond man said. If that was the case, their whole plan would change.

“Don’t worry about today. But be ready for next time.”

The blond man said he would be.

The elevator took them to the eighth floor. A white guard a shade under six-five and 280 pounds greeted them. He had a layer of peach fuzz for hair, and a semiautomatic strapped over his shoulder. His mouth nearly sank into his several layers of chins, but despite the man’s loutish appearance, he didn’t

need much dexterity to aim and pull the trigger. The rifle's safety was still on, but the muzzle was pointed at the two visitors. It wavered between them as though playing *eeny, meeny, miny, moe*.

"M4, .22 caliber semiautomatic," the woman said, gesturing at the gun. "A fine rifle."

"Glad you like it," the guard said. He had a massive chest but a doughy face, and was already breathing hard. So far neither guest was impressed with Culvert's choice in security. "Just follow me, keep your mouths shut and your hands where I can see them, or this baby here will do all the talking,"

"Fair enough," the woman said with a smile.

"What did I tell you?" Doughy said, his eyes wide.

"You told us to shut up," the blond man said, playing along.

"Okay, that's the last thing I'd better hear out of you. Come on, you freaking wiseasses. Mr. Culvert wants to see you."

They followed Doughy down the corridor. When he approached the end, he banged loudly on a metal door. Then he looked up at a camera stationed above it.

With a click the door unlocked and someone inside opened it for them. Doughy waited until the door was wide open, and then led them into the command center.

Sitting on a large, plush sofa was a black man, late thirties, thin but with the muscle tone of someone who spent their whole life jittery, on edge. His bald head shone under the soft lighting, and his goatee was trimmed to a fine layer of stubble. He

was wearing a pair of dark blue track pants and a white, wife-beater undershirt. Thick gold chains that must have weighed in the neighborhood of five pounds were draped over the undershirt. He had a drink in one hand and a gun in the other.

The blond man wondered whether he thought the gun was really necessary, considering the half-dozen other men in the room, all armed with rifles and bulletproof vests. They all watched the two guests like they were gazelles wandering into a lion's den. Easy meals on the surface, but they had to have something up their sleeves to enter such a dangerous place with such little regard for their own safety.

The gun in Li'l Leroy's hand, the blond man thought, laughing to himself, was overkill.

Two large guards came over. Doughy said, "Spread 'em, hands behind your heads" with a little too much zeal.

Both spread their legs shoulder-width apart. They placed their hands behind their heads. The guards then spent several minutes patting the guests down, looking for weapons, large and small. The blond man noticed one guard was taking his time searching the dark-haired woman.

"Neither of us has any weapons," the blond man said.

Doughy laughed and said, "Maybe, maybe not. But we also want to be sure this bitch's snatch isn't going to cut my boy's fingers off. You ready to get a cavity search, honey?"

The woman did not move. The bodyguard searching her knelt down and put his hand on her inner thigh.

“That’s enough, Fatty!” Culvert shouted. The three guards whipped around. “These folks are our guests. Now move out the way before I stick my boot up your crevice.”

“Yes, sir,” Doughy said. He motioned for the other guards to move away.

“Sit down there,” Culvert said. He was pointing to another section of the couch. In front of the section was a small coffee table. On the table was a pitcher of water, several glasses, a liter of Grey Goose vodka, several carafes of mixers, a bowl of pretzels and a dish with what looked like several grams of cocaine. “I’m sorry for my idiot brigade there. At least I know how to entertain my guests properly,” Culvert said, smiling through gold-plated teeth.

The woman and the blond man sat down. The blond man took a pretzel and ate it. The woman poured herself a glass of water and sipped from it. Then they sat back.

The blond man was reasonably sure Culvert had told the guards to make a move on the woman. That way he could stop them himself before they got physical. Come off like he was the good guy, protecting them. The blond man was not fooled.

“That’s it?” Culvert said, holding up his gun hand, surprised. “Man, most people dive right for the nose candy, or at least wet their whistle with some of the Goose.”

“We’re here for business, Leroy,” the woman said. “Playtime happens when our deal is done.”

“I can respect that,” Culvert said. “See, I’m like you. I got me a drink here, but it’s a weak-ass one.

Maybe one part gin, two parts tonic. Most nights I go half and half, but I want to keep my mind sharp.”

“We have something in common then,” the woman said.

Culvert sipped his drink. Then he held it out. One of the bodyguards came over and took the drink from him. It disappeared into the guard’s massive hand like a quarter.

“You’re here for business,” Culvert said. “So let’s talk business.”

“Absolutely,” the dark-haired woman said. She reached into her jacket and pulled out a small plastic bag. She looked at it briefly, then tossed it to Culvert. It landed on his lap, where he looked at it. He did not seem impressed.

“What the hell is this? Gravel? Shit you pave your driveway with?”

“That, Mr. Culvert, is our product,” the woman said. “And I think once you try it you’ll be absolutely certain that you will not want to line your driveway with it.”

Culvert picked up the plastic bag. It was filled with small black rocks. Culvert jiggled the bag, holding his ear to it.

“It does not play music, Mr. Culvert.”

“What do you call this shit again?”

“It’s called the Darkness, Mr. Culvert.”

“Why you call it that?”

The woman grinned. “Because when the world tries to beat you down, everyone could use the peace of Darkness.”

Culvert’s eyes narrowed. He leaned forward,

“Yeah,” he said, nodding vigorously. “I can dig that. I can see consumers going for that. See, when it comes to the consumer, you need a tag line. Something to remember. Everyone got shit going on in their lives, and you’re right—everyone needs the peace of Darkness to make it all go away.”

“I think your consumers will agree that our product does just that.”

Culvert said nothing. Then he stood up, placed his gun on the table. The small bag filled with black rocks fell onto the floor.

He walked over to where the two guests sat. He knelt in front of them, placed one hand on each of their knees. Neither of them budged.

“The reason you’re here,” Culvert explained, his eyes wide and soft, “is because you’ve promised me a product that will increase my earnings. Your words. Increase my earnings. I don’t take shit like that lightly. I’m a businessman. You might have heard me on the radio, seen one of them kids playing my music on their iPods. That’s just part of what I do. The other part is moving product. People buy my product because they trust me, and ergo they trust my products. Like that word? Ergo?”

“Yes,” the woman said.

“So when somebody tells me they have a product that will increase my earnings, I think two things: first, this person is who they say they are. The second is that this person might be full of bull. And you know what happens when someone asks me to trust them and they turn out to be full of bull?”

Culvert stopped talking. It was clear he was waiting for one of them to reply. Finally the blond man said, "What happens?"

Barely waiting for him to finish the second word, Culvert blurted, "They get smoked. And not a quick two to the back of the head. I mean, I smoke them and they family. Do you have family?" Culvert asked the woman.

"Yes," she said softly.

The blond man knew for a fact this was a lie. She was leading him on.

"Well, if your product is not what you say it is, they is getting smoked just like you."

"Please, don't hurt my son," the woman said. The blond man did everything he could to keep from smiling.

"Your son is safe...depending on how you act. You act respectfully, your son lives and you make enough money to keep him in Armani the rest of his life. You act disrespectfully, I'm gonna bury you both in an ugly grave in the middle of nowhere."

The woman looked down at her knees. Keeping up the game.

"What about you, cottontail? You got family?"

The blond man shook his head. He didn't have family. Not anymore. And he wasn't as good at playing this game as she was. If he tried to lie, he could give it away. Better to play it straight.

"Well, I'll do doubly savage on her ass then."

They both looked down. Fresh off their "scolding."

"I'm gonna take your product, those freaky little black rocks, and I'm gonna test them out. Myself.

And if I think it's the kind of product that can boost my revenue, I'll distribute it for you. What do you say to that?" Culvert asked.

"That sounds good," the woman said. "We'll give you thirty percent."

Culvert launched himself back up and unleashed a belly laugh so loud it inspired Doughy and his brute companions to laugh, as well.

"Bitch, you think I'm gonna distribute for some thirty percent? I don't do a dime lower than eighty-five."

"Fifty," the woman said.

Culvert chuckled. "Bitch thinks she can negotiate with me. Tell you what, I like your moxie, girl. Seventy-five."

"Sixty," she replied.

"Seventy. You negotiate more I'll throw your ass right out this door and you can get distributed by those assholes down by the Brooklyn Bridge, give you ten cents on the dollar because they empty the product themselves. Seventy/thirty."

"Deal," the woman said.

"Deal. *If*," Culvert added, "you are who you say you are."

"You'll be the judge of that."

The woman stood up. The blond man followed suit. They shook hands with Culvert, who had a look in his eye like he'd just pulled one over on them.

"Be back later this week. If I like it, we'll discuss specifics. Shipments. You down with that?"

"We're down with that. Let's go."

She turned around to leave. Doughy accompanied them to the front door and opened it. Just as they

stepped through the doorway, Culvert yelled at them, “Y’all call yourselves businessmen, but y’all got a lot to learn about how to be a *real* businessman.”

Doughy slammed the door shut behind them. The woman and the blond man were alone in the hallway. They did not say a word or even look at each other until they left the building and were across the street. When they were out of view of Culvert’s building, the dark-haired woman reached behind her head and undid her braid. The long, shiny hair cascaded down her back. She removed her jacket, revealing a dark tank top that showed muscle tone that belied her age.

She shook her hair out and handed the jacket to the blond man. He took it and slung it over his shoulder.

“What a small man,” she said. “The more somebody talks, the weaker they are. By Thursday, he’ll be begging us to *let* him have thirty percent.”

She checked her watch.

“The chemist?” the blond man said.

She nodded. “Thanks, Malloy. Let me know when it’s done and we’ll get the Asian.”

“Will do.”

As the blond man walked away, the woman said, “When we go back there, bring the cop.”

The blond man raised his eyebrows.

“Those fat guys take a few more bullets to bring down. We’ll need the firepower.”

“I’ll get him,” the blond man said. “The chemist. Do you want me to leave a message?”

“No,” she said. “This one needs to stay as quiet as possible. The Asian is different. Culvert is different. The chemist just needs to disappear.”

“When we get the Asian,” the blond man said, “do you want me to bring a gun for you?”

The woman smiled and turned away.

“No,” she said. “We’re going to have a little fun with this one. We’re going to carve him like a turkey and make sure everybody sees what’s inside.”

Chapter 3

Jack O'Donnell walked into his apartment, dropped his bags on the floor and stifled a sob. It had been months since he'd set foot in this place, and the last time he did that was one of the worst moments of his life. Crying, humiliated, left as a joke for the city's vultures to feast on.

Jack had spent his whole life chronicling New York. He knew every nook and cranny, every in and out, could recite from memory the history of the city from Robert Moses to Phil Spitzer. He truly felt this city was a part of him, and he would die leaving a part of himself in it.

But not like this. Not like this.

Not a broken mess, a broken man, shamed into a rehabilitation center by a vengeful competitor who wanted nothing more than to embarrass him for profit. Paulina Cole, a woman who was a parasite with a good wardrobe. Vermin who could apply eyeliner. A woman he'd worked with for years, only to fall victim to her savage muckraking.

It was Paulina who'd uncovered the full extent of Jack's alcoholism and splayed it all over the pages of her newspaper. There was no reason for it. Jack was not a celebrity. His demons would not sell newspapers like he was some nasty debutante caught with her pants down or some singer caught on film smoking a crack pipe. He was a newspaperman. That's all. Which made what Paulina did that much

more hurtful. She did it for no other reason than to humiliate him, to try to ruin his career.

And she nearly did.

Jack barely had the money for the rehab stint. He didn't even try to get the *Gazette* to cover it. Asking for that money would have been nearly as embarrassing as the stint itself. And whereas Jack had made good money over the years on his books and film options, he was not the world's most thrifty spender. Several divorces had left his savings a fraction of what they had been, and along with the drinking, he'd been known to throw a few bets down from time to time.

And now Jack O'Donnell stood there in his foyer, wondering if perhaps in some way, Paulina Cole had done him a favor.

He brought the bags into the bedroom and unpacked. Strange, he thought as he placed the folded clothes back into the closet. He'd never been one of those people who unpacked right after a trip. His duffels would sit there stuffed to the gills for a week or more before Jack finally began to run low on underwear. But now, unpacking was something cathartic, cleansing. It meant he was home.

Jack had gone to see Henry even before returning to his loft. Henry was the reason Jack checked out of rehab, the reason he was here right now. He still had a few friends at the *Gazette*, people he could trust with his ordeal knowing they wouldn't go blabbing to Wallace Langston—the editor-in-chief—or Harvey Hillerman, the publisher. And when they told him what had happened to Henry, about Stephen

Gaines and the enigma known only as the Fury, Jack knew the time was right for him to reclaim his life.

Jack had written about the Fury nearly twenty years ago. It had been a small part of a larger book—the only reason it was not more prominent was that there was a severe dearth of facts. There were rumors, innuendos, but what Jack could print and back up was scant.

Now, it seemed, Henry had stumbled upon the scent Jack had left lingering all those years ago, and it seemed like fate that this would be the story to rejuvenate his career. Jack had never worked side by side with Henry on a story before, and he was curious to see what the kid could do. Henry was young, scarily young, but had broken more stories and shown more guts than some reporters who'd been around forty years. Bloodhounds were born, not made, and the key to finding the best stories was being able to sniff them out on your own. Any reporter could have a “deep throat,” someone who handed them a lead on a platter. It took a special kind of person to find that thread themselves and pull it until the spool unraveled.

Jack had been like that. Years ago. And he wanted to believe Henry was like that.

He would find out tomorrow.

Once his bags were emptied, he stripped down and went into the bathroom. The mirror's reflection was not too kind. His gray beard had gone scraggly, his eyes had heavy bags. He did look worse than he felt, for whatever that was worth, and he hoped his appearance would not affect his job performance

tomorrow. People could sense a man who was tired, and had been through too much to perform properly.

Jack took a long, hot shower. He scrubbed away at his body hard enough to remove a layer of skin. Then he trimmed his beard, clipped his nails and combed his hair.

The reflection this time came back a little better, a little more dignified, but Jack knew that what was inside him mattered the most. Still, he wanted to feel like a new man. Or at least the man he had once been.

Jack went over to the leather sofa in his living room, plopped down and sank into the plush cushions. Comfy, he thought. Before rehab Jack had rarely taken the time to relax. Most hours spent on the couch were with a snifter of something strong, something to dull the nerves, while some idiotic show ran on the television.

Jack had been a zombie for years, and it took abject humiliation for him to realize it.

He turned the television on, flipped through a hundred channels of nothing before turning it off. When he'd exhausted that, Jack walked into his study. It was a room about twelve feet by sixteen, filled with cherry-wood bookshelves and a thick oak desk that was nearly bare. Funny.

When Jack was a young man, the only thing he wanted more than to be a reporter was to have a desk massive enough to hold all his worldly possessions. A big desk was a sign of stature, a symbol that you'd made it. And now he had that desk, and it was embarrassingly empty.

Jack did a brief inventory of the items on his desk:

- one printer, not hooked up
- two empty picture frames
- one picture of his old dog, Bubbles, who had been more of a partner than any of his wives
- one beer mug, still with alcohol residue staining the bottom. It was a miracle fungus had not begun to grow from it.
- between two heavy paperweights, first printings of the American editions of each of his books

His old desk at the *Gazette* was a third of the size, but had three times as many items on it. Fitting, he supposed, since work was really where his life took place. That was where he kept newspaper clippings, notebooks, important phone numbers. It was at home where Jack ceased to function properly. At work Jack had everything he could possibly need.

Jack went over and plucked out a hardcover copy of *Through the Darkness*. He hadn't picked up the book in years. He remembered all the aching late nights, spent hunched over a typewriter while the sun rose outside of the crummy one-bedroom apartment he rented in Hell's Kitchen. At the time Jack remembered hating it, but looking back, he couldn't think of any fonder memories.

He remembered the pride he felt when he sent the finished manuscript to his publisher, and the letter he received from his editor just days later with just one sentence on it:

This book is an American classic, and we will be honored to publish it as such.

Jack found a paperback copy on his shelf and read all the glowing praise reviewers had heaped upon it. He felt a swell of pride. This book was him, something he'd poured his heart and soul into and could never be taken away. The book was truth, it was light, and it was everything he could have been.

Only the book wasn't finished.

The Fury was out there, Jack was sure of it. He slipped the paperback onto the shelf and placed the hardcover gently back between the other books. He sat down at his desk. It was late. Much later than he'd stayed up in a long time, at least, the latest he'd stayed up while also sober.

It felt good.

Jack was nervous. Nervous about tomorrow, about seeing Henry, about what they would find.

He hadn't felt truly nervous in a long, long time.

Jack O'Donnell sat in that chair, folded his hands behind his head and decided he would try to stay awake to watch the sun rise.

Chapter 4

At three in the morning, the blond man left an apartment building in Chelsea and tucked his shirt back in. His breathing was slightly elevated. He hadn't expected the chemist to fight back.

Over the years, the man named Malloy had seen many people die. He could usually tell from a glance just how people would react when faced with death, and how readily they would accept it.

The chemist he had just killed was a scrawny man without an ounce of muscle on him. He'd spent his life in a lab, poring over texts and notebooks. He had barely lived a day in his life, and despite that, he had the temerity to attack Malloy when confronted with the gun.

Malloy had confirmed that the mixture the chemist had made was complete and potent. He also made sure that it was easily replicated. Because once the chemist was gone, the operation would be run by people following the chemist's instructions.

At first, the chemist had begged for his life. He told Malloy that he had a wife and daughter back in Panama, that he needed to take care of them. This was true, Malloy knew, but he also knew that the wife and daughter had received well over a hundred thousand dollars from the chemist. In Panama, that would go a long way.

Malloy had met the chemist nearly twenty years ago, and when he was brought over to New York,

Malloy trusted him implicitly. The man created drugs because that was all he knew how to do. Just like when people were bankers or lawyers or athletes because that's what they were born to do.

The chemist was not a bad man, and in fact Malloy did not believe he had ever even partaken in his own creations. The drugs paid the bills, so to speak, that was all. Malloy did feel a slight twinge of guilt at taking away the family's only breadwinner, but he knew that the dark-haired woman would make sure the family was taken care of.

The family was still in Panama. Their battle was not in America.

Hers was.

When Malloy rounded the corner, he raised his hand to call a cab only to see the dark-haired woman standing there, staring at him. He did not expect her to be there, but he'd ceased to be surprised by her a long time ago.

"Did he fight?" she asked.

"A little," Malloy responded. "Nothing that caused too much trouble."

"That's good. Death hurts more when you fight it."

"He begged first," Malloy said, "for his family."

"They'll be compensated," the woman responded. The chemist was dead, and three men were on their way to dispose of the body. Three men he trusted, who'd been with them a long time.

"Did he suffer?" the woman asked.

"Just for a moment, when he realized what was happening."

She seemed disappointed.

“I see no body with you. I assume someone will be taking care of it.”

There’s a butcher on the Upper West Side, done us some favors over the years. Two grand and nobody ever sees a body again.”

“Good price,” the woman said.

“We give him good business,” Malloy replied. His voice was soft, hesitant.

“You don’t think we should have killed him,” she said.

“I just wonder if it was totally necessary. From a business perspective, nothing more.”

“We didn’t need the chemist any longer,” the woman said. “At least half a dozen of our employees have been able to duplicate the process without fault. The product we gave Leroy Culvert tonight came from one of those batches and was taken by one employee who, let’s just say, enjoyed it.”

Malloy nodded. “You don’t need to convince me.”

The woman approached Malloy until they were standing barely a foot apart.

“We’ve known each other a long time.”

“Yes, we have.”

“We’ve both suffered great tragedies.”

“Yes, we have.”

“And what we’re about to get under way will be the end of what began twenty years ago. Your brother did not die in vain.”

“I know he did not,” Malloy said.

“Everything that happened in Panama has led up to this. This wheel was set in motion a long time ago. The chemist was no longer needed, and he was a link

to what happened in Panama. Nobody here knows who he is. He could have only hurt us from this point forward. A man's ability to create substances is not the same as his ability to witness calamity without sounding the alarm. I worry that the chemist could have come back to haunt us."

"And you may have been right," Malloy said. "I understand why this was necessary."

Trust within the organization had been shaken over the past few days, culminating in the death of Stephen Gaines. They did not see Gaines's defection coming. And that's what this night was about: tying up loose ends. She was right. Malloy knew this. He was still haunted by that day twenty years ago, the battle that had irreparably changed his life. Everything that happened then was leading up to now.

"The Asian is next," the woman said.

"He's waiting for us at the club," Malloy said.

"What did you tell him?"

"That he was getting a bump up. Title and salary."

"Was he excited?"

"Like a little girl getting a pony."

The woman smiled. "Good. Then let's go. And let's make sure the Asian's body is in the water by the time the morning commute begins."

Chapter 5

Amanda Davies jolted upright in bed, her shirt coated in sweat, her shoulders heaving from the nightmare she'd just awoken from. It took her a moment to get her bearings, for the world to take shape. She swung her legs around the side of the bed, then looked back over her shoulder at Henry. He was fast asleep, not quite snoring but making that *huuuunk...shhhhhhhh* noise that either kept her awake or put her to sleep, depending on her mood.

Henry was splayed on his stomach, wearing nothing but a pair of loose-fitting boxers. There was a hole in the right leg large enough for her to put her fist through. She'd pleaded with Henry to throw out any and all underwear that had any fabric detachments, but she could tell from his absent nod that he would do no such thing. It didn't bother her much, and truth be told, her scolding had much more in common with flirting than nagging. Their fights were few and far between, and any time temperatures seemed about to rise, a well-timed kiss or an "I love you" quashed it.

Amanda preferred it that way.

Her head pounded, and she quietly went into the kitchen to find a drink. The Brita pitcher was empty, and she didn't feel like waiting for warm, filtered water. Instead, she pulled out a large container of fruit punch Gatorade and took a healthy pull. She wiped her mouth and took another. Then she put it

back in the fridge, closed the door gently and sat down on the living-room couch.

She flicked on the television and muted it. A few reruns, some horrific looking jewelry being hawked on QVC, some late-night soft core porn, and a movie or two that she'd seen before and liked. Then she shut the TV off. She wasn't really in the mood to watch, but she didn't want to get back into bed while her heart was still beating fast.

She couldn't remember the dream. Strange. She used to keep lengthy journals of just about everything that took place in her until-then boring life. Chronicling everyone she met, everything she experienced, and making an amateur go at deciphering her dreams.

At some point in the past few years, the dreams had stopped leaving imprints. She would recall *having* dreams, but for the life of her, she rarely remembered what happened in them.

She wasn't sure if that was because she was more at peace now, but part of her wished she could remember what her subconscious might have been trying to say.

For some reason, right now, despite waking up in the middle of the night, Amanda did not feel tired. And she didn't know how Henry could sleep, considering what he'd been through the past week. She supposed it might have been pure exhaustion, that his body just couldn't take any more anxiety or stress without totally shutting down. She was glad for that, because when Jack O'Donnell showed up unexpectedly, Amanda knew this was only the beginning.

Jack had been gone for a long time, and his disappearance had weighed on Henry. Amanda had never felt let down like that, at least not in a professional sense. She'd been alone most her life, starting with the death of her parents when she was very young, and then shuttled between orphanages and foster care until finally settling in with Lawrence and Harriet Stein in St. Louis.

Death was different. Death left you feeling empty, not betrayed. And while he never said it, Amanda knew that was how Henry felt when Jack left.

She never wanted to worry about Henry, never wanted to be the kind of girl who waited up at night and screamed "Where were you?" when her boyfriend came in the door bone-tired.

Amanda knew where Henry was, or at least knew where he was not. Henry's only mistress was his work. She trusted him, and he trusted her. Cheating was not in their DNA, and for all their faults that was one weight that thankfully would never press down very hard.

She had begun to wonder, however, what the future held for them. Love was not the issue. She believed Henry when he said he loved her, and knew he believed her when she said the same. But being young and nearly broke in New York City was a tough way to maintain a relationship. Settling down was something so out there they might as well have talked about buying a mansion.

Amanda wanted to get married. At some point. She wasn't like most girls she knew, dreaming of the perfect wedding, waiting their whole life for one day that went by in the blink of an eye. Those girls

missed the bigger picture, that a wedding was worthless if what it represented wasn't pure. Marriage was not a celebration of that day, it was a celebration of what was yet to come. Amanda did not question her future happiness with Henry...but she couldn't help but feel a little girly sometimes. And that wasn't a bad thing.

Once the sports drink had settled her stomach and eased her headache, Amanda tiptoed back into the bedroom and snuggled in next to Henry. Moonlight streamed in through the venetian blinds, casting slits of light on the bed. Henry stirred a little, then turned over so he was facing her. Their bodies were still warm from the lovemaking earlier, and it made Amanda feel safe to have him so close.

Then Henry opened his eyes. Smiled.

"Hey you," he said.

"Hey," Amanda whispered.

"Feeling all right?"

"Yeah, just woke up. Bad dream."

"Here," Henry said. "Let me help."

He untangled himself from the sheets and wrapped his arms around Amanda. His body was warm, toned yet soft, and she felt herself melting into his arms.

"I could fall asleep like this every night," she said.

"Why don't you?" he replied.

"Hey, don't offer if it's not going to happen."

"I wouldn't. Consider this your parking space. Reserved for Amanda Davies."

"What's the monthly rate?" she said.

"You already paid it. Earlier tonight."

They both laughed, and she felt herself falling back to sleep.

“Are you excited to work with Jack tomorrow?” she asked, her eyes beginning to close.

“Excited, a little nervous. He’s never seen me in action.”

“You’ll be great,” she said.

“Yeah, I think there’s still a great story out there. Hopefully the old man can help me find it.” He gave her one squeeze, and she gripped his arms. “Good night baby,” he said.

“Henry?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t need you to tell me to be careful, do I?” Amanda said.

“Come on, Amanda,” Henry said. “What would I need to be careful of?”

Chapter 6

The first swing of the crowbar shattered Kenneth Tsang's kneecap. The second nearly dislodged it completely, ripping it away from the tendons that held it in place, rendering the entire leg practically useless.

Kenneth Tsang was lying in the basement of the nightclub where he'd spent so much time over the past few months. Tsang had made himself well into six figures working for Malloy, and had begun to trust the man completely. Which was why when Malloy asked him to be there at four in the morning, dressed to the nines, Tsang did not even ask why. He simply showed up, was ushered inside and subsequently had his right leg shattered beyond recognition.

Tsang lay on the floor, writhing in pain. At first he screamed as loud as anyone Malloy had ever heard, and Malloy worried for just a brief moment that the soundproof walls might just not hold up for a guy this sissified. After the second blow, however, the screams turned into a pathetic whimpering, and now Tsang lay there on the floor, still wearing his three-thousand-dollar suit, with one pant leg torn to shreds.

A small puddle of drool began to accumulate under Tsang's head. He'd thrown up on himself. Not surprising. Pain and fear would do that to you. He was trying to crawl away, crawl anywhere. Sad,

really. The door was locked. A blind man with no legs could get around faster than Tsang with that busted wheel. But he still crawled and blubbered and begged for mercy.

“P-p-please,” Tsang blurted, thick spittle flying out with every syllable. “D-d-don’t...”

Malloy just stood there holding the crowbar. Then the door opened and the dark-haired woman strode in. Tsang looked at her, confused, then he looked back at Malloy. For a moment, his eyes relaxed. Malloy knew exactly what he was thinking.

She’s a girl. She’s here to save me. The brutality is over.

If only he knew who this woman was.

“Hello, Kenneth,” the woman said. She knelt down by his crippled form. He tried to raise his head, but was too weak. Without hesitating, she grabbed him by his hair and jerked his head backward until his eyes met hers.

“How are you feeling?”

“P-p-please,” Tsang repeated. “Let me go. I...I swear...I won’t tell anyone.”

The woman looked over her shoulder at Malloy.

“What do you think?” she said. “Should we let him go?”

Malloy said nothing. Just shrugged.

The woman released Tsang’s hair. His face splatted against the floor, leaving another drool mark.

“Do you know why you’re here?” the woman asked Tsang.

“N-n-no,” he gasped. “I...I need to go...”

“I know this isn’t exactly fair to you,” the woman said. “In the past, we’ve only made examples out of

employees who've stolen from us. Lied to us. Betrayed us like Stephen Gaines."

"I n-n-never betrayed you," Tsang said.

"I know you haven't, Ken, I know you haven't. But Gaines is dead, shot to death. A little too professional for my tastes. Being shot in the head sucks, but it doesn't convey the same fear as, say, well..."

She pointed at Tsang's mutilated leg.

"That leg, that sends a message."

Tsang spat out, "Then...then let me go."

The woman clicked her tongue against the side of her mouth and shook her head.

"It's not just the leg, Ken. It's what they see when they find you. Or find your body. I'm not a big fan of talking to people before I kill them, but you've been a pretty loyal guy and I think you deserve an explanation."

Malloy could see fear beyond rational explanation in Tsang's eyes, the kind of fear that came not from knowing your fate, but from having no idea just how much pain you could possibly be in.

"Tomorrow we begin the most important phase in our company's history," she continued. "You're a finance guy, Ken. You understand when companies begin new phases, how important it is to make sure everyone's in line. Make sure everyone has the same goals. And do you know what the single biggest motivational tool is in any company? Do you, Ken?"

Ken shook his head. At least he tried to.

"It's fear," the woman said. "Fear of being fired. Fear of being downsized. Fear of losing an income that you worked so hard for. Fear of losing the

lifestyle you've become accustomed to. And, really, isn't that exactly why you came to work for us in the first place?"

"I won't tell anyone," Ken blubbered. "I won't tell..."

He tried to crawl again, slapping his arms against the concrete floor like a seal.

"I'm growing tired of this," the woman said. She walked over to where Ken was lying, raised her hand above her head and brought the crowbar down on Kenneth Tsang's left arm with a sickening crunch.

Tsang howled in pure agony and tried to roll over, but his maimed knee wouldn't allow it.

"Now you're triple-jointed," the woman said. "Anyone...I suppose what I'm trying to say, Ken, is that there are no hard feelings here. But right now your body is worth more dead than alive to us. Tomorrow morning, when they find you, you will matter more than you ever have in your life. Your body will create that fear we need. Two bullets in the back of the skull is a quick, painless exit. This," she said, nodding toward him, "this is something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy, let alone yourself."

"My mother..." Ken blurted.

"Will miss you very, very much." The woman raised the crowbar above her head, looking Kenneth Tsang directly in his watery eyes.

"Who...who are you?" he said, his lip trembling.

"I was given a name a long time ago," the woman said. "Beware the fury of a patient man."

Then she brought the crowbar down again.

The boat approached the dock, and the driver pulled up alongside and tied a rope to a cleat. Once it was fastened tight, he went to help Malloy with the body.

“Hey, Len,” Malloy said. “Got you out of bed, it seems.”

“First time I’ve been awake past midnight in a year,” Leonard said.

“If I had a pad as slick as yours I don’t think I’d ever leave. How’s the new flat screen?”

“Sixty-inch plasma,” Leonard said. “Just hooked up the surround sound. I could watch movies all day on that thing. Just screened *Saving Private Ryan*. I swear I thought the Germans were actually shooting at me.”

Malloy laughed. “You’re a good man, Len,” he said. “Now come on, help me out.”

The two men went over to the nondescript white van, opened the back door and hauled out a green burlap sack.

“Jesus Christ,” Leonard said. “What the hell you got in here?”

“Mutilated boy,” Malloy replied.

Leonard looked at him. “That’s not funny.”

Malloy said, “I ain’t laughing.”

“You’re serious,” Leonard said. He looked at the bag, felt it. “This feels like a bunch of mush.”

“Then that means we did it right.”

Leonard sighed. “You gotta do what you gotta do. Can I ask who this is?” he said as the men carried the bag over to where the boat was idling.

“Ken Tsang,” Malloy answered, his eyes staying on the bag.

“Fuck, man, are you serious?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Tsang was one of our best earners. Why the hell did it have to be him?”

“Because then everyone else will know how vulnerable they are. If Tsang can go down, so can anybody.”

“You don’t think you could have pulverized, I don’t know, Ben Purvis and gotten the same reaction?”

“Ben Purvis is an idiot who can barely tie his shoes. He’s going to end up dead sooner or later. He croaks, people just assume he got what was coming to him. With Tsang, people will tighten up like they’re about to get a hot poker up their ass. We need everyone alert, everyone game.”

Leonard Reeves shook his head as they gingerly stepped aboard the boat. Reeves gently placed his side of the bag onto the floor. Malloy dropped his like a sack of potatoes.

“You don’t need to be gentle with this thing,” Malloy said. “He’s deader than oatmeal. In fact, he might actually be the same consistency as oatmeal right now.”

“You’re a sick fuck, Malloy,” Reeves said.

“And you’re a rich prick, Len,” Malloy replied.

“Fair enough. Where we headed?”

“There’s a buoy out by the Marine Transfer station in the East River.”

“Ninety-first Street I think,” Reeves said.

“We’re going to tie our friend up, and then...” Malloy reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. Balloons?”

“We want Mr. Tsang here to be found right quick.”

“Did you have to make them pink?”

Malloy laughed. “I’m a romantic.”

“All right, let’s go. I want to be back in bed by six o’clock.”

“No problem. You will be.”

“Good. And hey, Malloy, did you guys take care of the girl? You know, the reporter?”

“Paulina Cole?”

“Yeah, her,” Reeves said. “Didn’t you guys have something planned for her?”

“It’s taken care of,” Malloy said.

“She’s kind of hot for an older broad,” Reeves said. “Hey, wouldn’t it be kind of funny if I screwed her?”

“After what I did to her this afternoon,” Malloy said, “I don’t think she’s going to let any strangers come near her for a long, long time. Or her daughter.”

Other novels by Jason Pinter in the Henry Parker series:

The Mark

The Guilty

The Stolen

The Fury

The Darkness

For more information about Jason Pinter and his books, visit him at:

His website—www.jasonpinter.com

His blog—www.jasonpinter.com/blog

Facebook—www.facebook.com/jason.pinter

Twitter—<http://twitter.com/jasonpinter>

MySpace—www.myspace.com/jasonpinter

Flickr—www.flickr.com/photos/jasonpinter

Goodreads—

http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/281516.Jason_Pinter

AUTHOR BIO

Jason Pinter was born in New York City in 1979, read his first book at the age of three and progressed quickly from the life lessons of Little Toot to the otherworldly epics of Brian Jacques, Terry Brooks and Stephen King. He soon began writing short stories that were, unsurprisingly, D-grade knockoffs of Brian Jacques, Terry Brooks and Stephen King. At least he aimed high.

Throughout high school, Jason dreamed of becoming a screenwriter, and took jobs at various production companies to learn more about the film and television industry, including one (unpaid) stint at Jon Stewart's Busboy Productions. Jason is proud to say he was the inspiration for The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (at least in his own mind).

During his junior year in college, Jason decided he wanted to make the leap and become a writer. Heeding words of advice from his physician who'd written a book ("The first thing any writer needs is an agent"), he began querying literary agents. The physician neglected to mention that in order to get an agent, you needed to have an actual book. Needless to say, agents were not chomping at the bit to sign up Jason's non-book.

After a half-hearted attempt to find an agent for his, um, nothing, Jason decided it could be interesting to learn more about the publishing industry from the inside. Over the summer, he took an internship at a boutique literary agency in New York, where his first day on the job consisted of

lunch at Mickey Mantle's restaurant with a renowned sportswriter. Ah, the glamorous world of publishing (cough).

Jason interned at the agency through the fall, racking up \$726,374 in E-Z Pass fees while commuting from Connecticut to New York for work and to visit his girlfriend (who later became his wife).

After graduating, Jason took a job as an editorial assistant at a publishing house. It was during that time that he began writing his debut thriller, *The Mark*. Shockingly, it was easier to land an agent with an actual manuscript, and that agent eventually sold *The Mark* to MIRA Books in a three-book deal.

When not writing his acclaimed Henry Parker/Amanda Davies series, Jason still works as a book editor. He lives in New York City with his college-sweetheart-turned-wife, Susan, and their dog, Wilson.

He is a member of International Thriller Writers and Mystery Writers of America, and a co-founder of Killer Year.

Ready for more action with Henry Parker? See how the story began in *THE FURY*, available now in print and eBook format wherever books are sold, and continues in *THE DARKNESS*, on sale December 2009.

THE FURY

Henry Parker must uncover the most devastating secret of all... His own

Am I my brother's keeper?

If I'd known I had a brother, I might have been. But he's dead—shot point-blank in a rat-hole apartment, wasted by hunger and heroin. Stephen Gaines, a man with whom I shared nothing...except a father.

For some reason this stranger who shared my blood came to me for help...and I blew him off thinking he was just some junkie. Now I'm forced to question everything I ever knew...and figure out why this man was murdered in cold blood.

All I can do for Stephen Gaines now is find his killer—and with the help of Amanda Davies uncover the whole, hard truth. If it means tracking down a vicious drug kingpin—who may or may not exist—then so be it....

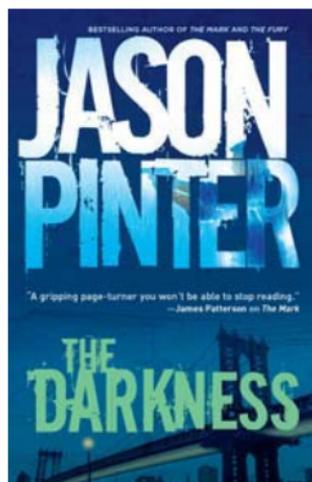
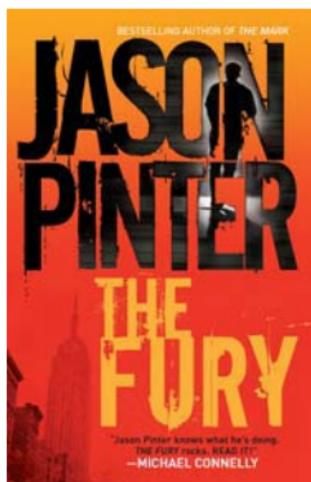
THE DARKNESS

A young man is found murdered, his bones crushed nearly to dust before his body was dumped into New York's East River.

In New York there are hundreds of murders a year, but this one is different. Somebody is sending a message. And shockingly, the victim has ties to my brother, Stephen Gaines, recently murdered by an elusive drug lord known only as the Fury.

For years this kingpin has been shrouded in darkness. Stephen was executed just as he was about to shed some light. Working alongside my mentor, Jack O'Donnell, I'm going to find the truth behind this blood-soaked curtain. But the more we reveal, the more we realize just how dark the Fury's plans are. And that no matter how brutal the violence has been, we haven't seen anything yet....

Turn the page to read a special excerpt from THE DARKNESS...



THE DARKNESS

By Jason Pinter

Chapter One

Paulina Cole left the office at 4:59 p.m. Her sudden departure nearly caused a panic in the newsroom of the *New York Dispatch*, where she'd worked as a featured columnist and reporter for several years. Paulina was prone to late nights, though many argued whether the nights were due to a work ethic that was second to none, or simply because she was more comfortable spending her time among competitive, ambitious and bloodthirsty professionals than sitting on the couch with a glass of wine and takeout.

She had left that day after a particularly frustrating conference call with the paper's editor in chief, Ted Allen. Paulina had spent the better part of two years becoming the city's most notorious scribe in no small part due to her ambivalence concerning personal attacks, heated vendettas, and a complete refusal to allow anyone to get the best of her. When her instincts faltered, she called in favors. When she got scooped, she would trump the scoop by digging deeper. And she held grudges like ordinary folks held on to family heirlooms.

Which is why, after reading a copy of that morning's *New York Gazette*, the paper Paulina used to work for and now wished buried under a paper landfill, she demanded to speak with Ted. She knew

the man had a two o'clock tee time, but she'd seen him golf before and cell phone interruption might even improve his thirty-seven handicap.

That day's *Gazette* featured a story about the murder of a young man named Stephen Gaines. Gaines's head had met the business end of a revolver recently, and in a twist of fate that Paulina could only have wished for on the most glorious of days, the prime suspect was none other than Gaines's father, James Parker. James Parker also happened to be the father of Henry Parker, the *Gazette*'s rising young star reporter, whom Paulina had as much fondness for as her monthly cycle.

Paulina had cut her teeth at the *Gazette*, and had briefly worked side by side with Henry Parker. But after seeing what the *Gazette* had become—an old, tired rag, refusing to adapt to new technologies or understand that hard news was essentially dead—she'd made it her business to put the paper out of its misery.

Nobody cared to read about the government or the economy— at least not on a grand scale. They only cared about what they saw right in front of them, day in and day out. Their mortgage payments. Their bank accounts. It was all visceral. You bought the celebrity magazine so you could make fun of the stars' cellulite with your friends. You shook your head at the news program that exposed the foreman whose building was overrun with rats because he refused to pony up for an exterminator. You scorned the politician's wife who stood silent at the press conference by her cheating louse of a husband. Paulina gave those with no life something to live for, something to chat about at the nail salon.

The *New York Gazette* was dead. It just didn't know it yet.

So when Ted Allen suggested that Paulina write an article about vampires, she was taken aback to say the least.

"Vampires are huge," Allen had said. "There are those books that have sold like a gajillion copies. Now there are movies, television shows, soundtrack albums. Hell, newspapers are the only medium that isn't getting a piece of it. Teenage girls love them, and teenage boys want to get into the pants of teenage girls. And this all scares the living hell—no pun intended—out of their parents, so you write a piece on vampires I bet it's one of our bestselling editions of the year."

"What the hell do I know about stupid vampires?" Paulina said, laughing at herself for even asking the question. She stopped laughing when she realized Ted was serious.

"Oh, I don't know," Allen had said. "Didn't I hear about some boys and girls who go around biting people on the neck because they think they can be vampires? Go interview them. Even better, go undercover and pretend to be one of them. You know, pretend you like to bite people's necks and see what they tell you."

"Ted, I'm in my forties," Paulina said. "I don't think going undercover with teenagers will fly."

"Are you kidding?" Ted said. "What's that term? Milf? The teenage boys will love you."

That's when Paulina left.

Rain beat down upon the streets steadily, with the precision of soft drumbeats. The drops splashed upward as they struck the pavement, and Paulina felt

the water soaking her ankles as she exited into the gloom. A bottle of Finca Vieja Tempranillo was waiting at home. It was a good red wine, with a slight plum taste, and she could picture slipping into a warm bath with a glass in one hand and a romance novel in the other. The rest of the bottle sitting on the ledge just within reach, ready to be tilted until the last drops were consumed. Ordinarily she was not that kind of girl, in fact laughed at those who were, but Paulina needed a night away from it all.

Paulina opened up an umbrella and stepped into the sea of New Yorkers, entering the crowded bloodstream known as the commute home. The streets were chock-full of open umbrellas, and she tried to wedge her way into the crowd without having her eye poked out by a random spoke.

As she took her first step, Paulina heard a man's voice yell, "Miss Cole! Miss Cole!"

She saw a man wearing a dapper suit and dark overcoat approaching. He was tall, six one or two, with hair so blond it was nearly white, peeking out from underneath a billed cap. He looked to be in good shape, late thirties or early forties, and for a brief moment Paulina felt her heart rate speed up. The car service company had really stepped up their recruiting.

"Miss Cole," the man said, stopping in front of her. "My name is Chester. I'm from New York Taxi and Limo. Ted Allen called to request a ride home for you."

"Is that so," Paulina said, barely hiding her smile. She knew months ago that she had Ted by the balls. Things like this proved it. Keeping her happy and pumping out pieces was worth hundreds of

thousands of dollars a year to the *Dispatch*, and the publicity she received raised the paper's profile more than their "crackerjack" investigative team ever could. That Ted would extend an olive branch so quickly surprised her at first, but if she ran the company she'd want to make sure her star reporter got home safe, sound and dry.

"Please," Chester said, "come with me."

Chester opened up a much larger umbrella and held it out. Paulina smiled at him, a big, bright, toothy smile, and stepped under the umbrella. He led her to a Lincoln Town Car which sat double-parked at the curb. Holding the umbrella to shield her from the rain, the driver opened the door. Paulina thanked him, picked up the hem of her skirt and climbed into the backseat of the car. The driver shut the door, and Paulina watched as he walked around to the front.

Two sealed bottles of water were set in a pair of cup holders, and crisp new editions of that morning's newspapers were folded in the pocket in front of her. The rain pattered against the windows as Paulina unscrewed one of the bottles and took a long, deep sip.

The driver flicked on his blinker and pulled into traffic. He headed uptown. The only sound Paulina could hear was the rubber squeaking of the windshield wipers. The only smell that of the car's leather.

"Good day, miss?" the driver asked.

"Better than some, worse than others," she replied. Traffic was bumper to bumper, and the car inched along. Paulina began to grow restless. As much as she hated taking the subway, she probably would have been home by now.

“You think there might be a faster route?” she asked, leaning forward slightly when the car stopped at a red light. The driver turned around, grinned.

“Let’s see what we can do.”

The driver made a right turn, and soon the car was heading east. When they got to First Avenue, Paulina could see signs for the FDR Drive north. He pulled onto the on-ramp and headed uptown. The FDR tended to get flooded during heavy rain, but Paulina didn’t mind chancing that to get home quicker. She watched the cars outside, eyes widening as she saw her exit, Sixty-first Street, appear in the distance. Yet instead of slowing down and pulling left toward the exit ramp, the car sped along, bypassing the exit completely.

“Hey!” Paulina said, leaning forward again. “That was my stop. This isn’t NASCAR, pay attention.”

“My apologies,” the driver said, “I must not have seen it.”

“No kidding, Stevie Wonder.” Paulina cursed under her breath. The next exit wasn’t until Ninety-sixth Street, and then he would have to loop all the way back downtown. Just like Ted Allen to hire a car service and get a driver dumber than a pile of bricks.

Traffic moved along steadily, and Paulina sighed as they approached the Ninety-sixth Street exit.

“Exit’s coming up,” she said, making sure to remind him.

“Got it, thanks, Miss Cole.”

As they approached the exit, Paulina noticed the car was not slowing down at all.

“Hey, will you slow down? What the hell is wrong with you? You’re going to miss it!”

The car drove right by the exit without slowing down one bit.

“Where the hell are you going?” Paulina yelled. The driver did not answer. “I’m calling Ted. You’ll work as a brain surgeon before you ever work our account again.”

“Put the phone down, Miss Cole.” The driver’s voice had lost all of its pleasantries.

“Screw you. Now I’m calling the cops. Forget our account. Your ass is going to jail.” She took out her cell phone and flipped open the cover.

“If you ever want to see your daughter with all her limbs intact, you’ll put the phone down right now.”

Paulina’s mouth fell open in a silent scream. Her daughter...how did this man even know about her? Paulina’s daughter lived with her first husband, a loser of a man named Chad Wozniak. He was a good father, an aspiring architect who never progressed beyond the word *aspiring*. He was a good man, a decent man, but not a provider. That’s what Paulina had wanted for her family, but in the end she had to do what Chad could not.

Abigail. She was twenty years old. A junior in college. A 3.7 average, captain of the soccer team at some all girls’ school up in Massachusetts. She and Paulina barely spoke. Maybe once every few months, and usually only when Abby’s checking account ran low. Abby was beautiful, even if sometimes this budding young woman seemed like a stranger to her own mother.

“You’re a sick monster,” Paulina said, closing the phone.

“Don’t be like that. We’re almost there.”

The driver took the FDR to the Triboro Bridge, pulling off once they'd arrived in Queens. He skidded around an off-ramp, took several turns in a neighborhood Paulina did not recognize, and slowly eased into an alleyway bookended by two buildings that looked like they were about to collapse. Paulina could see nobody, hear nobody. She was all alone with this man. Through the rain and desolation, nobody would hear her if she screamed.

The driver exited the car and walked around to the backseat. Paulina locked the door from the inside. She heard a click as the driver unlocked it with his remote. Before she could lock it again, he threw open the door, grabbed Paulina by her coat and spun her into the mud.

Wet slop splashed into her face. Paulina felt her eyes grow warm, anger rising inside of her. She launched herself at the man, her nails bared to rake at his face, but he merely grabbed her by the neck, held it for one horrible moment as he stared into her eyes.

Then Paulina felt him press something against her side, and suddenly she felt a scorching pain worse than anything she'd ever experienced. Her body twitched as she screamed. She lost control of her bladder, then dropped facedown into the mud. Paulina looked up to see the man holding a Taser, smiling.

“I wouldn't do that again. I can smell your piss.”

Paulina could feel hot tears pouring down her face. She was on her hands and knees, caked in grime, and her body felt like it had just been plugged into an electrical socket. She slowly got to her knees, managed to stand up, her breath harsh and ragged.

“What do you want?” she cried. “Money? Sex?” She shuddered at the last word, praying he didn’t, praying there was something else, something that wouldn’t leave a scar. Pain she could take, but that kind of pain would never leave.

The man shook his head. Holding the Taser, he reached inside his overcoat, rain beading down the dark fabric. The water spilled down his forehead into his eyes, but the man who called himself Chester hardly seemed to notice.

He removed something from his pocket and held it out to Paulina. She focused her eyes, then gasped.

It was a picture of her daughter, Abby. She was at the beach, wearing a cute pink bikini, standing in front of a massive hole she must have dug in the sand. The photo looked fairly recent, within the last year or so. Abigail’s eyes were bright and cheerful, her skin a golden brown. Abby. She looked so joyful.

Her daughter.

“Where did you get that?” Paulina yelled.

“Do you really need to ask? I had a dozen others to choose from. You really should tell her to be careful of what photos she posts on the Internet.”

“You’re a freak,” she spat. “What the hell do you want?”

“I want you to listen to me very carefully,” the man said. He stepped closer, still holding out the photograph. Water droplets landed on the photo but he didn’t seem to care. “A long time ago, I fought in a war. I fought alongside men and women who were like my own blood. Then, one day, we found ourselves trapped. There was one man I fought with who was like family, closer to me than anyone. He was like a daughter. A mother. A brother.”

Paulina shivered.

“That day, we found ourselves fighting for our lives. And all of a sudden, out of nowhere, someone throws a grenade at us. I was out of harm’s way, but the grenade went off right beside this man I cared about. I remember looking at him after the smoke cleared. He blinked his eyes, looked around like he was just confused. The only thing I remember more than his eyes was the splash of blood beneath him. Right where his legs had been blown clean off.”

Then, in one fluid motion, Chester held the right side of the photo with his thumb and forefinger, tore off a piece and let it flutter to the ground. It landed in front of Paulina, speckled by rain and mud.

“This is what your daughter will look like when I cut off her legs.”

Paulina felt her stomach heave, her mouth opening, her eyes burning as she cried. She reached out for the photo, but was too weak to do anything.

“Blood has its own smell. It makes you want to vomit. And imagine what happens when you see that much blood coming from someone you love.”

He gripped the picture, and ripped off another piece. Again the shred fell, twisting in the rain.

“This is what your daughter will look like when I cut off her right arm.”

“Please,” Paulina whispered, her throat so constricted she could barely talk. She closed her eyes. “Stop. Just stop.”

The man stood there, holding the mutilated picture out for Paulina to see. “Open your eyes,” he said. Paulina shook her head. “Open them!”

She did.

“I have something for you,” the man said. “I want you to take it home with you and I want you to read it.”

“What?” she said, blinking away the tears.

“When you’ve read it, I want you to write an article for your newspaper based on the information contained within. Your article will run this Thursday. If it does not, for any reason whatsoever...” The man took the photo and ripped off a piece. Then he dropped the tattered photo into the mud.

“I will cut off your daughter’s head and send it to you in a box.”

ISBN: 978-1-4268-4536-9

The Hunters

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