

Pointing Fingers:

Tales of Forgiveness
and Revenge

M. A. Laborde

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CHAPTER 1

Deadly Reckoning

S*o this is what it feels like to be dead*, Marvin Lewis thought, amused. For months, ever since the doctor had given him the grim diagnosis of his terminal illness, Marvin had been preparing himself for this very moment. But he hadn't expected it to arrive quite so soon. And definitely not quite this way—by murder. And at the hands of his best friend, professional football player, Roscoe “Crusher” Adams. With Marvin's own wife, Janine, as an accomplice.

When Roscoe had delivered the fatal blow, everything had gone dark for Marvin. When he came to, he was no longer lying on the floor in his business office; instead, he was in a room about fifteen feet by twelve feet, sitting comfortably in an upholstered armchair that faced a bed. There were also a desk with a lamp and two armless chairs. On the walls were a few tasteful-but-not-expensive framed abstract prints. It was the kind of room you might find in a two- or three-star hotel; the kind of room that Marvin, a successful-but-not-wealthy certified public accountant—and definitely a frugal one—might stay in when he traveled. Or even, Marvin realized, a private room in a hospital. But more extravagant than he would want for *that* purpose, if given the choice. And he could see no evidence of any hospital-like equipment.

Marvin didn't have to wait too long to learn where he had landed. Moments after he had assessed his surroundings, a male voice addressed him. Marvin had somehow overlooked the other person, seated in a far corner of the room, beyond the direct glow of the desk lamp.

“Do you know where you are?” the man asked Marvin.

To Marvin, even more surprising than the actual sound of the voice was the realization that he was only mildly startled to discover a stranger present with him in that already strange room. The average person might have jumped out of his skin; and Marvin was really no different from the average person. Except that he was dead, as he had, not too surprisingly, deduced correctly. After all, he was a very competent—indeed, shrewd—accountant. He didn't need a computer or even a calculator to put two and two together now.

“No, I'm not sure where I am, but I'm dead, huh,” was the inescapable bottom line at which Marvin had arrived.

The stranger confirmed that conclusion with a nod. Marvin asked, “So who are you?”

“My name is Wilson,” the man responded. “I'm your caseworker. Or guide, if you prefer.”

CHAPTER 2

Dying of Envy

Angie Blake stared, puzzled, at the gun in her cousin Edna's right hand. It was Angie's own .22 caliber gun, the one that Angie's husband, Ted, had bought for her earlier that year, over her nervous protests.

For a moment Angie wondered if perhaps the last few hours of intermittent sobbing over Ted's absence on this their fifth wedding anniversary might have so blurred her vision that she had mistaken some innocent object for a weapon. Hoping to improve her focus, Angie widened her eyes and then squinted. She then noticed the object in Edna's left hand: a pillow, behind which her cousin—virtually her twin sister—was positioning with her right hand what Angie could no longer deny was indeed the .22. She now could also detect the glove on that hand.

Angie's eyes widened once more, this time in pure horror, as Edna's satisfied expression confirmed her murderous intent. Edna pulled the trigger, muffling the sound of the blast with the pillow, which was thick enough to muffle but not so thick as to misdirect the bullet's path or perhaps even trap it within the pillow's material before it had achieved her objective.

Angie's eyes briefly widened further in pain—and then fell shut as the bullet penetrated her chest wall. She was already mortally wounded as Edna stepped closer and, aiming directly at Angie's face, triumphantly prepared to fire a second shot. Instead, she lowered the gun and pillow to the previous position; the bullet made its separate entry through Angie's blood-soaked pajama top.

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Whew, what a dream! Angie thought, relieved. *Why did I have to give myself such a scare?*

Glancing down at her clothing, she detected no sign of blood. Nor was there any inkling of the pain that she would certainly have expected from having her chest pierced by a lead projectile.

Looking around her, Angie also realized that she was somewhere other than her own home. Then she remembered, *That's right, Ted and I had planned to go away for the weekend.*

Before Angie could collect her thoughts further, to try to recall where she actually was—or remind herself that, in fact, Ted *really* had canceled those plans before the weekend had arrived—a female voice that was no dream spoke her name: “Mrs. Blake?”

The formality of the address compounded Angie's surprise at the unfamiliar voice, although not to the point of anxiety or apprehension.

CHAPTER 3

Against the Grain

Harrison Van Horne gazed briefly through the passenger window of his car at the pastoral images whizzing by beyond his location on the freeway. For a moment he was tempted to interrupt his six-hundred-mile-plus journey and take a closer look along a side road or two at the grazing cows and horses and other livestock. But he resisted. He wanted to arrive at the hotel not too much later than 2 p.m., and he didn't intend to get a ticket along the way with too many side trips. Already he anticipated needing to pull into a rest stop or turnout before much longer, and the high-profile vehicle he was driving would attract enough attention from traffic police without his exceeding the speed limit—at least too excessively—along the way.

This was the last time Harrison intended to drive the vehicle: It had been a “youthful indulgence,” he had decided; now, he finally felt “grown up,” more “responsible.” (He also planned to rid himself of the light beard that he had been sporting for the past year or so. He knew his wife, Nadine, would be thrilled with *that* decision.)

His tastes had changed. Even including his politics. The rest of his family had spared no words in expressing their displeasure with that most recent development especially. (Initially, his father, Branson, had spared *all words*, not speaking to Harrison for the better part of a month. Several years earlier, politics had been an even more integral part of Van Horne family life when Branson had attempted a few forays into that arena, most recently as a candidate in his party's presidential primary.)

Harrison reflected on the three cross-country trips to the area that had preceded this one.

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Harrison's first visit had been on behalf of one of the companies owned by his father, to explore the possible buyout of a small-but-successful local family-owned bank. Branson Worthington Van Horne II had made his first few billions from crude oil. Branching out into the financial industry had helped those numbers balloon even more. Harrison was the youngest of Branson's three children with the former Clarissa St. James, a billionaire in her own right, having had the good fortune to be sired by a construction tycoon. She now headed that corporation herself.

On that first visit, as Harrison flew to the area on one of the family's private jets, his attention had been caught by the sight of a phalanx of wind turbines. He had made his second visit to the area to explore the possibility of a buyout of the wind turbine company to the end of adding to the family's

CHAPTER 4

A Matter of Honor

As the driver of the limousine opened the back door of the boutique to allow her to exit, Gina Romano stepped outside. A fur coat draped around her shoulders, Gina held a single shopping bag containing the *faux diamond* tiara that she had worn throughout the evening's festivities, which had celebrated the opening of *Royal by Design*, her upscale boutique. Her assistant-slash-store manager Candi followed, almost hidden behind the boxes and bags she was carrying to the limo for Gina.

The evening had been a total success, thanks in no small part to Gina's stroke of genius: getting media coverage by befriending Jenny Palermo, the ambitious young fashion editor of a local TV station, who had also streamed the event live on the Internet. Gina had given Jenny her start as a buyer a few years earlier, with her original venture in clothing stores: *Regina's Royal Rags* mall boutiques, the economy-priced version of *Royal by Design*.

And that night Gina had given Jenny and her crew exclusive access *inside* the upscale boutique; all other media had been kept outside—though treated “royally” enough also, to nonetheless ensure favorable coverage for this new store and all the others.

(Gina had had a few other names in mind for the new store: Originally, she had planned to call it *Fit for a Queen*, but that name was already taken. She had also considered *Regina's Royal Designs* and *Regina Romano's Royal by Design*, but ultimately settled from the shorter version of the name. Her slogan for both the economy and the more upscale version was *You Don't Have to Spend Like a Queen to Look Like One*.)

Activities inside the boutique had been completely private—by invitation only. Gina's frequent shopping sprees in Rome, Paris, and other international destinations had allowed her to meet a few ex-wives and other consorts of minor royalty. Tonight the guest list had included one duchess, the ex-nanny of a possible future monarch, even a “marchioness.” That had been sufficient to attract even some A-list celebrities.

The event had lasted from about 5 p.m. until 11 p.m. The last of the guests, indoors and out, had left by 11:30. Now, as it neared midnight, Gina couldn't wait to reach the limo; she intended to be asleep long before it reached the tunnel and headed for her island mansion.

“Candi,” she declared, over her shoulder, “I can't wait to get one of your killer foot massages!”

The words had barely left Gina's lips when the first discharge of bullets from the automatic weapon struck her. The fur coat dropped from her

CHAPTER 5

Above Suspicion

Mabel Simmons stared contentedly at passersby on the sidewalk outside the bistro as she savored the hot tea with lemon and honey; it was now a full week since the start of her retirement.

Oh, this is nice, so nice, she thought, as she set the cup down on the saucer. *Why did I wait so long to do this?*

She soon scolded herself: *Okay, Mabel, you know good and well that you had a total hoot traveling here, there, and everywhere all those years; writing about it; and getting paid to do it, to boot! Retirement was not exactly on your radar!*

Nonetheless, she had to acknowledge also, if only to herself, *this solitary journeying might actually take some getting used to after all.*

A young female voice interrupted Mabel's reverie, "Do you mind if we sit here?"

Looking at the unexpected speaker, Mabel replied, "I'd love to have company!"

Solitude can wait a few minutes longer, she assured herself.

Extending her right hand, first to the speaker and then to her companion, she said, "I'm Mabel."

"Jen."

"Julie."

As her friend Jen sat in the chair to Mabel's right, Julie set her backpack on the remaining empty one on the left and said, "Jen, I'll go get the coffees."

"Thanks, Julie!"

"So do you live around here?" Jen asked Mabel.

"I did years ago. Considering it again. Just retired. Kinda, sorta," Mabel replied. "I've been a bit of a nomad most of my adult life, you could say."

"Oh, that sounds interesting."

"It's called 'being a tour guide,'" Mabel explained, laughing.

"Really? Where all have you traveled to?" Jen asked, eyes widening with interest.

"Oh, you young ladies probably have all sorts of exploring planned, you don't want to spend your time listening to me go on about *my* past adventures. Let's just say I've been to a few continents, by land, sea, and air. But mostly the U.S. and Europe. The usual spots, you could say. And a few others," Mabel said.

Jen said, "With a little luck, we'll make it to Europe next year. We just finished freshman year of college. We were supposed to go hiking with our

CHAPTER 6

No Greater Love

As Tami and Mateo Díaz walked along the quiet residential street toward their home, fourteen-year-old Mateo exchanged a soccer ball between his hands. As they stood waiting at the red light, Mateo bounced the ball on the sidewalk, blocked it with his chest, and bent one knee and then the other to exchange it expertly from thigh to thigh.

The light turned green; the siblings crossed the street and continued walking. Mateo excitedly recounted the final few seconds of the game that had just ended that Saturday at the playground about a mile from their home—he had scored the tying goal for his team.

Twenty-year-old Tami ruffled her brother's hair, smiling. "Great job, Teo," she said, "great job!"

Four more blocks and they would be home, each alternately telling the story to their grandmother Luz. She would listen patiently, as she stood beside the stove, preparing whatever tasty dish would be dinner that night.

Neither sibling had noticed the car that had slowed as it approached them on the other side of the street, and now it had stopped. From that direction a male voice said, "*Hola, mi amor.*"

Chuy! Oh, no! Tami thought, freezing in her tracks. Instinctively, Teo moved closer to her side, no longer juggling the ball, and now also silent and standing still.

"How you been?" Tami's ex-boyfriend asked.

"Fine," Tami replied.

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes and looked at him. His left arm draped over the side of the open window showed obvious signs of regular visits to the gym in the two or so years since she had last seen him. And to the tattoo parlor.

The silence hung.

Chuy directed a greeting toward Teo, "Ay, homes, what up?"

The teenager only glared in response.

Undeterred by the frigid responses, Chuy said, "I just got back in town. You know I had to see my girl before I did anything else. I drove by your house. Little Sis sure resembles Beto; she could be his twin from when he was that age. She told me you might be on your way home. Smart as ever, she sure was right."

The siblings' silence remained unbroken.

"Why you guys got me doing all the talking like this? It's making me thirsty, damn!"

Turning his body to the right, Chuy reached within the car; he brought

About the Author

Anne Samuel is a semiretired educator and computer trainer. A perennial student herself, with a strong interest in diverse languages and cultures, she enjoys exploring both fictional and nonfictional worlds through her writing. Under the pen name M.A. Laborde, she writes primarily fiction.

Other books currently or soon to be available from the same author

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What If...?

Some 30 to 80 percent of people in countries worldwide are said to believe in ghosts.

If the spirits of the dead really can mingle with the living, why do so many murders go unsolved?

Even if murder victims had the ability to return to the realm of the living to help bring their murderers to justice, would they return? What might keep any of them from exercising such an option?

Pointing Fingers explores these intriguing questions and offers some thought-provoking possibilities in response, through the stories of a few murder victims who discover that they do indeed have that choice.

The decisions of those victims, their various reasons for those decisions, and the consequences of their individual choices might not always be what even the victims themselves would have expected.

And *Pointing Fingers* just might leave you wondering: *If such a fate did befall me, would I choose to return to the realm of the living? And if I did, how successful could I be in exposing the perpetrator to those responsible for executing justice?*

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