

Detective Mateo Rodriguez is a crack-shot investigator shepherding La Jolla, California. Lifeguards find film actress Catalina Braxton dead, hands bound behind her back. While her death looks like a homicide, the coroner rules it a suicide.

HUNTER OF ILLUSIONS

By T.L. ORCUTT

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A man's silhouette is shown from the back, looking towards the right. The interior of his body is filled with a landscape scene. The upper part shows a sky with dramatic, yellowish-green clouds. Below the sky is a dark, silhouetted coastline with some trees. The lower part shows a body of water with white-capped waves breaking. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with highlights in the clouds and water.

HUNTER OF
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OTHER BOOKS BY T. L. ORCUTT

NOVELS

- 2020 *Echo of Death*
- 2019 *Pre-Existing Condition — A Novel*
(Revised Edition — BookLocker.com, Inc.)
- 2016 *Pre-Existing Condition — A Novel*
(First Edition — BookPatch.com, Inc.)
- 2011 *The Path of Return Trilogy* (Single Volume)
Jamayah — Adventures on the Path of Return
Collateral Karma
Letters from the Afterworld
- 2011 *Letters from the Afterworld*
(First published within *The Path of Return Trilogy*)
- 2009 *Collateral Karma*
- 2005 *Jamayah — Adventures on the Path of Return*

NONFICTION

- 2006 *That's What I'm Talkin' About!*
Awakening in the Land of Human Beings
- 1995 *Magicians of the Soul*
Exploring the World of Paranormal
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- 1994 *Integrative Paradigms of Psychotherapy*
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- 1989 *No Beggars Just Balloons*
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1

A CLOUDLESS BLUE SKY freshened Los Angeles on a sweltering July afternoon. Three giant portable blower fans purred and whipped a cool breeze across the monstrous movie studio with its smooth concrete floor, and towering metal ceiling resembling an empty warehouse. Catalina Braxton laid naked on shiny sheets crumpled at her knees. The round bed draped with black satin displayed a stark contrast to her white skin and ash-blond hair that crept over her smooth bare shoulders. Crushed red velvet drapes hung to the floor from an iron rod conveying the false impression windows hid behind. An ebony dresser and two matching night-stands accented a chic flair. Blood ran and dripped from her mouth.

“Cut! Cat! Hide your right nipple by raising your knee, close your crotch a smidge. This isn’t a porno flick for God’s sake, though maybe it should be. We might make a hell of a lot more money but for now, let’s focus on the art of playing sex against death.”

“Ease up, John. We’re all tired,” said Ms. Braxton, her girly and smokey voice resonating with seduction. Twenty-five-year-old Catalina of Ukrainian heritage and fifty-year-old Director John Curtis harmonized like a stern father and

naughty teenager. She was his burgeoning star attraction and he was more dedicated to the money than the fame. The two of them had scored a box-office hit on a low-budget film before, a historical western biography in which Catalina played a thirty-one-year-old Pearl de Vere, a pretty prostitute and brothel owner in 1893 Cripple Creek, the last great Colorado gold rush town. The film cost USD 2.2M and raked in USD 37M. Curtis was betting on this picture producing even better profits.

Catalina's close friend, Nicole Baudin, a French favorite at the Adult Entertainment Expo every January in Las Vegas, had dropped by the studio to watch a scene or two and smiled after sucking her straw in a tall Iced Skinny Latte. Catalina covered her nipple with the corner of the sheet, drew her knee toward her breast, and squeezed her legs closer together.

"No, that's not working. Bunch the sheet in your crotch. Perfect. Okay. Take 17. Roll 'em."

The clapper cracked like a whip. The camera rolled a single and pulled back for a wider view.

"Cut. Jesus Christ! Ross, I told you. Don't pull back here. Give me a choker. Run the lens forward until her eyes fill it and after back off a bit. I want her open eyes with the blood running out of her mouth taking center stage. Got it?!"

"Yes, John! Yes!"

"Okay. Let's go. Take 18."

Running the camera, Ross yawned. Early summer extended the daylight. The crew had started in the morning but because of camera failure, had to wait and began shooting at noon. The hot and long day had stretched initial enthusiasm into reluctant tolerance. They all had lost precious time and

HUNTER OF ILLUSIONS

money.—money no one could afford to sacrifice on a budget film.

Catalina's distracted attention caught Nicole waving good-bye and leaving the studio. Cat peeked at the clock on the wall, after six.

John barked, "Sorry, but we have to finish two more scenes. We're way behind schedule, even coming into today. I'm getting pressure from production. We'll shoot until nine!"

Ms. Braxton slammed her hand on the sheets, sat erect on the bed without covers, and shook her hair loose. She knew the drive home to La Jolla would take two-and-a-half hours. No one was happy, but since the union for SAG regulated the crew, they earned time-and-a-half after five. Not so with the actors. Braxton knew on this film, much of it financed on speculation, she would be paid on a contracted percentage of profits, period. Catalina yelled to one of the crew to pour her a vodka. He hurried over, ignored her bare breasts, and handed her a martini glass with an olive. She threw back a swallow and continued filming.

Work crept to nine. As John had promised he called it quits. Catalina slithered off the bed, took a towel strewn on a chair and the nearly full bottle of vodka. After wrapping herself in the towel, she went to her dressing room, checked her cosmetics, pulled on her clothes, said goodnight to the director and crew, and swaggered out the heavy steel door of the film studio. A warm breeze brushed the darkness of the studio streets. Looking left and right, she expected Frank Baines, her chauffeur, to be waiting but he wasn't. She fumbled around in her purse, found her smartphone, and pressed numbers.

Baines took the first ring. “Sorry, Ms. Braxton. When you were late I drove to get us some food and jammed into unexpected traffic. Must be an accident. I’ll be there in ten.”

Catalina stood alone on a barren Fox Studio street. She paced along the side of the two-story building and froze when she saw a shadow ahead of her forty yards away. With deep breaths, she backed against a wall and with her eyes searched the street again. The shadow vanished, reappeared, and walked toward her again, this time closer, but not near enough for her to even recognize whether the person was a man or a woman.

Her awaited black Mercedes limousine rolled beside her, lights outstretched far ahead but the shadow had disappeared. Cat took a deep breath. Baines jumped out and opened the rear passenger door for Ms. Braxton and guarding the vodka, she slid inside on the tufted black leather seat. Again, she inhaled in relief.

“Frank, drive ahead a bit. I thought I saw someone stalking me.”

“Yes ma’am.” Frank crept ahead on the narrow pavement between the stark buildings for an entire block, but nothing. No movement whatsoever.

“All right. Enough of this craziness. I’m tired. Take me home.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The sliding glass window between Catalina and Frank remained closed. Frank called on the intercom. “I picked up a fifteen dollar cheeseburger for you if you want.”

Catalina’s tongue swirled another olive around in her mouth and she sipped vodka from the lip of the bottle. “What

HUNTER OF ILLUSIONS

are you trying to do, ruin my figure? Pass on the burger, but thanks for the thought, Frank.”

She wondered whether the shadow might have been Jessie Vargas, her former rich husband who she'd taken to the cleaners for an awarded settlement of one-point three million and change over ten years, no alimony. Their marriage had lasted three years and Vargas had a solid prenuptial agreement but Catalina had discovered him pounding an eighteen-year-old neighbor when she came home early from a shoot in Palm Springs. The courts were unsympathetic to Jessie's pre-nup and punished his indiscretion by attacking his bank account, sizable from being the owner of five BMW Dealerships, three of them in Southern California. Jessie's anger had not dissipated, not only because he had lost his eye-candy trophy, but because the monthly payments reminded him of his exorbitant hanky-panky.

From the exhaustion of the day's filming and the drone of the road, Catalina's drowsiness jilted awake by the blaring horn of the limo. Gazing through the darkened windows into the invisible night she struggled to see a large vehicle drifting without pause into their lane. Frank kept the horn blowing and swerved hard left from lane two but the limo's left headlight scraped the concrete division of the freeway. Catalina leaned and she lowered the secrecy window. "Frank, what the hell is going on?"

Frank pulled the steering wheel right and straightened the stretch into lane one. "The Hummer that passed us forced me into the division. I had to hit the divider or it would have crashed into our right side. It kept drifting into our lane as if the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel."

“Or he was trying to kill us.”

“Who wants you dead?”

“Jessie...or the Shadow....”

“Jessie would try to kill you? Is he still that angry? He’s got plenty of money.”

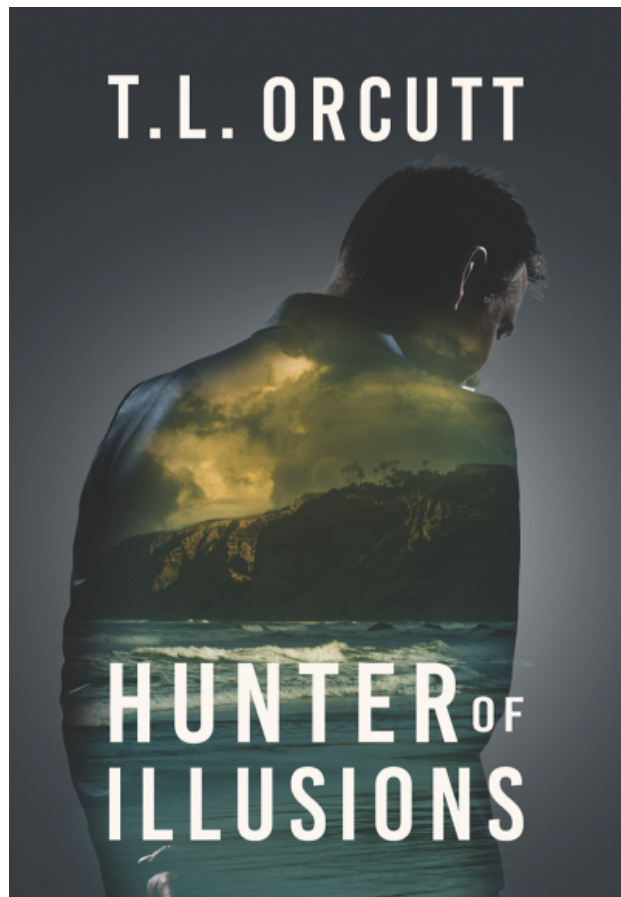
“People who have money are greedy and always want more. Same with sex. He had all he ever wanted from me—frequency and I would do anything he wanted, but it wasn’t enough. Not much different than most men but most men don’t have me!”

“I heard a NPR radio program focused on infidelity. I can’t remember the speaker’s name but he said with men who have low self-esteem and crave external validation, getting it from one person frequently just isn’t enough—they go for strange. He said the number one reason men cheat is to gain self-confidence.”

“That why I left the son-of-bitch, couldn’t keep his dick in his pants.”

Baines stretched the conversation. “You said Jessie...or the Shadow. Who’s the shadow?”

“Oh, some anonymous hired killer.”



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