

Set in the Hamptons, Behind the Hedgerows is a fictional drama about human nature and the conflicts that go with it. Filled with deceit, greed, sex, mystery, and murder, those with wealth leverage their power for control and financial gain.

BEHIND THE HEDGEROWS

By Timothy Kent Smith

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TIMOTHY KENT SMITH

BEHIND
THE
HEDGEROWS



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Prologue / April 2023

JFK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, NEW YORK

As Melanie settled back in her seat on a flight headed to Costa Rica's Liberia International Airport, she reflected on the past year, a year she had spent hunting down a man by the name of Mr. McPherson. Chasing what she hoped would be the biggest story of her career, she had all but given up hope in finding him, as apparently, he had vanished from the face of the earth.

Then, when she had least expected it, he had called her and agreed to meet with her. Her curiosity piqued, they cleaned up a number of legal concerns and settled on a fee for his granting her a one-week interview. She wondered how her former elementary school teacher in a quaint coastal town could have become embroiled in the chaos surrounding one of Long Island's largest and most sordid murder investigations.

Evasive and mysterious, he projected an air of intrigue that drew her toward him, and through his story, she hoped to find out who this man truly was.

Chapter 1

GREATER NEW YORK CITY AREA

One year earlier, Melanie Alper had returned to her home in Chappaqua from Palm Beach where she had spent Easter visiting her mother. The short vacation had not only left her feeling rejuvenated, but it also left her excited about the potential for a new project, one she could call her own. Picking up the phone, she had dialed the McKinney Literary Agency in Manhattan where she was a partner and agent and punched in the extension for Hal Davis who was the senior partner at McKinney. Admired by those she worked with, for both her editing abilities and her savvy business instincts, Melanie was Hal's favorite protégé.

Pre-Covid, she would have strutted through their corporate offices as if she owned them, stopping in the break room to fill her ever-present coffee cup before knocking on Hal's door to make her pitch in person, but those days were over. Now, all the agents worked from home, but Hal, being somewhat of a dinosaur, had leased an oversized office that he, and he alone, used. He still liked to go out his front door and head to work each morning, his designer shirt starched, his French cuffs clasped, and his bowtie straight. Well into his seventies, Hal could have retired long ago, but he could not bring himself to let go of the passion he still had for publishing. Although grandfatherly in

his appearance, he was much shrewder and more focused than one might have expected, and Melanie valued his opinions and instincts. More than anything else, she trusted him.

He answered the phone with his trademark gravelly voice, the result of his years of smoking, “McKinney Literary, Hal Davis speaking.”

“Hal, it’s your favorite agent, Melanie!”

Hal pushed away from his desk and laughed. “Well, well, you are back. How was your vacation?”

“Great, thank you, and that’s precisely why I’m calling you.” He noticed her enthusiasm and put down the paper he was holding so he could more fully focus.

“I experienced the most incredible Easter gathering at my mother’s. I sat next to a ninety-year-old widow, a millionairess who lives in Palm Beach. The tale she told me has the makings for a tremendous screenplay, or novel, or streaming series on TV.”

His interest piqued, Hal sat back in his chair and removed his glasses. “A romance, tragedy, mystery? What genre are you talking about here?”

“More like ‘Holy Shit’ meets a ‘Reality Crime Show’,” Melanie laughed. “Her story is only part of a much bigger story that took place on Long Island back in the eighties. It will make for a great summer read in the Hamptons, Malibu, or anywhere else people love to read about the obscenely rich. While

I still need to do some background research, I need to talk with you face-to-face, none of this online stuff. Face-to-face like the old days. I'm even willing to come into Manhattan."

Hal flipped open his appointment book looking to accommodate her, as any meeting Melanie called for usually turned out to be nothing but green on McKinney's ledger.

"What day works best for you?" he asked.

"Tomorrow around five would be wonderful if you can swing it?" she offered.

"How about we meet at Pappano's, say six? Dinner is on McKinney. I will book it and confirm with you."

"That sounds wonderful. And, Hal, how was your Easter?"

"Exhausting," he chuckled. "Always lots of excitement when the grandchildren visit."

Melanie smiled at the image of Hal stuck in a house filled with children.

After hanging up the phone, she pulled out a fresh legal pad, booted up her laptop, and set to work, trying her best to slow down the thoughts that raced in her head.

Late in the afternoon on the next day, Melanie took the Metro-North Line to Grand Central Station,

hailed a cab, and headed to Pappano's which was located in midtown.

At six-o'clock sharp, she entered the restaurant to find Hal already at the bar, working on a Scotch. He ordered the same for her, and they made small talk until they were seated and had ordered. Then, she began her pitch.

"First, thank you for meeting with me on such short notice," Melanie began. "I have been working feverishly since our call yesterday. After talking with the widow again, I am even more convinced that I am onto something big here, something almost too unbelievable to be true. If you will indulge me, let me start at the beginning, and admittedly, it's going to seem a bit convoluted."

Hal nodded over his escargot, and Melanie kept talking.

"When I was a young girl, I grew up on Long Island in Shady Harbor, a nice town on Long Island's north shore. I attended the public schools there, and when I was in fifth grade, we got a new gym teacher in our building. I will never forget him because he was like the coolest guy ever! Everyone loved him: all the students, the parents, and you could tell, even the other teachers. The best classes of the week were always his gym classes because they were fun and exciting, plus we learned about life, not just sports. He had a way about him that always made us feel as if we were special, as if we

had worth. He radiated enthusiasm, but as I look back, he was also observant and calculated.

“I remember he would call me Mel, which no one else ever did, and it made me feel special. Anyway, my mother got wind of it, and she lit into me, telling me that my given name was Melanie and that is what she expected everyone, even this Mr. McPherson, to call me. She was so upset, she went to school to complain, which as you can imagine was quite embarrassing for a ten-year-old girl, but Mr. McPherson, in his own charming way, apologized and had my mother eating out of the palm of his hand by the time they stopped talking. He was that charismatic! He just had a way with people, especially women.”

“This Mr. McPherson, did he have a first name?”

“Hunter. Hunter McPherson. He made such an impact on me that I have often wondered what happened to him, but not enough, I guess, to ever look him up. Until Easter, that is.

“See, at Easter dinner, this woman I am sitting next to, a Mrs. Carolyn Stevenson, tells me about a private trainer she had during the eighties by the name of Hunter McPherson. As if that is not an odd enough coincidence, she started talking about how wonderful he was, and it sounds like it could be the same person I knew as my teacher back in elementary school.”

“Well, as interesting as this all is, Melanie, I fail to see why this makes for a compelling story.”

“It’s compelling,” Melanie explained with emphasis, “because according to Mrs. Stevenson, Hunter had many wealthy clients in the Hamptons, many of whom ran in the same social circles as she did, and in learning their dark secrets, Hunter exploited them in a grand extortion scheme that netted him millions.”

Hal stopped eating and stared over his plate at her.

Melanie, letting her words resonate with Hal for a second, continued on. “Hunter took the money and split to parts unknown, unheard from again. He was never arrested, he never even went to trial for his crime, but as a result of his actions, this Mrs. Stevenson’s stepson, whom she loathed, was killed in the process, and her husband, who she was preparing to divorce, went to prison where he passed away in 2002. To quote her, ‘For all of Hunter’s derelictions, he actually did me a favor.’”

Surprised, Hal put his fork down, wiped his lips with his napkin, and mused, “That’s pretty cold!”

“Yes,” she agreed, “for sure. One might even say frigid, but certainly compelling!”

“Might well be,” he admitted, nodding his head in agreement.

“I want to take a leave from my job as an agent and author this story myself, Hal. I feel that strongly about it. It’s as if I have a connection to that time and to him.”

Hal pondered her suggestion for a minute, remaining silent. Then, “What are you working on now?”

“I have a few edits I’m finishing up, but I should be able to complete them in the next month. After that, I would like your permission to really dig into where this Mr. McPherson might be and to see if after all these years, he might be willing to talk with me.”

“You seriously want to write this yourself?”

“I do.” Melanie stated firmly.

Hal measured his words carefully. “Even if this guy is still alive, and even if he is the same Hunter McPherson, what makes you think he would be willing to talk with you after all these years?”

Melanie smiled, exuding both a slyness in her expression and that confidence she wore so well. Holding up three fingers, she counted off, “One, older people love to talk about their younger days. He is now sixty-eight. He is the right age to be our Hunter and the right age to talk. Two, he likes money. If we can pay him for his story while protecting his freedom and his anonymity, he might go for it. And three,” her smile broadening, “he called me Mel.”

Not able to stifle his laugh, Hal asked her directly, “You think he liked you enough that he’ll remember you and that you can charm him?”

“Yup, I think he did, and yup, I think I can!”

Chuckling, Hal shook his head. “Well, it is certainly not the way we do things in our business, but then again, Mel, if I may call you that, you have always been one to think out of the box, and it has always boded well for us as an agency. The profits from your projects certainly speak volumes in your favor.”

He took a sip of wine, savoring it while he further pondered her proposition.

With slight reservation he declared, “To hell with it. I am going to go with my gut and your instincts on this. You have my blessing, but I will not give you a salary or advance. For that, you will have to sell it to a publisher.”

“Fair enough,” Melanie conceded, “but I’m going to need to use the services of Roland.”

“And just how do you expect to pay the company’s private investigator?”

“Simple. McKinney will pay him as he goes along, and then when I sell the book, his fees will come out of my advance.”

“And if you don’t sell the book?”

Melanie dropped her chin and stared at him. “Really, you doubt me, your office superstar?”

“You’re that sure of this project?”

“Without a doubt,” she stated with confidence. “If I do not sell it, I will liquidate some of my stock holdings and pay back the firm. In the meantime, consider it a bridge loan.”

Hal held up his nearly empty glass, “To Hunter! May his story make The Best Seller List.”

“Ditto,” Melanie replied, beaming as she joined her boss in toasting Hunter McPherson and the secrets that he held. “Hal, I cannot thank you enough,” she added, picking up the dessert menu as she spoke.

Chapter 2

Researching Hunter's background had proven easy up until the time that he had disappeared. Then, it was as if he had fallen off the face of the earth. Melanie had started her search at the Shady Harbor Public Schools with their Personnel Office in the District Office. Although she learned that a Hunter McPherson had, in fact, been in their employ from 1976 through June of 1980, there was no one left working there who remembered him. They were all too young, and those who might have taught with him were either now deceased or had little information that was helpful to her.

Next, she reached out to Crown City State where Hunter had done his undergraduate work. Hunter was not active in Alumni Affairs so that was a dead end, but school records showed he was a physical education major there from 1971-1975, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree. He was also a member of the school's lacrosse team before losing touch with most of his teammates, but those who remembered him thought he was living on Long Island after college, and one former teammate knew he had taught at Steward University.

That clue had proven to be productive, as there, he was remembered as a great teacher and as someone who was always looking for more; as if he

were “unsettled,” was the way one former colleague put it.

Hunter had gone to Steward as a graduate student completing his Master’s degree in 1980. He was so well thought of, that he was hired as a part-time administrator and adjunct professor of Exercise Science. During his years at Steward, he had pursued doctoral work at a neighboring university and parlayed the credibility that working in academia gave him, into forming several fitness-based ventures, but other than that, the people at Steward knew little more.

His former colleague, office mate, and business partner told Melanie that Hunter had been living in East Hampton, but after the summer of 1987, even he had lost touch with his friend.

This aligned with what Melanie had learned from Mrs. Stevenson, who was now living full-time in Palm Beach at an estate on Billionaires Row, estimated to be worth upwards of sixty-five million dollars. She told Melanie she had previously sold her Manhattan and Bridgehampton properties for more than what the current Palm Beach estate was worth, and at the age of ninety, wanted to “downsize,” feeling that she did not need three residences anymore. She was “quite comfortable” in her 12,000 square foot home set on five acres.

While grateful that Mrs. Stevenson was being cooperative and forthcoming by offering the names of others in her social circle, many of which Hunter

had serviced as clients, the fact was, most of them were now either deceased or suffering from dementia. They were of little, if any, help. The one thing Melanie was sure of, was that her Hunter McPherson was the same Hunter McPherson with whom Mrs. Stevenson had spent many an exercise session.

Discussions with the County Police and local police departments regarding the arrest and conviction of Mr. Joseph Stevenson had provided little information with respect to Hunter other than what was already public knowledge. Hunter's name had been loosely linked to all those involved in the case, and his disappearance was certainly suspect, but there was no hard evidence that tied Hunter directly to any of the crimes the police had investigated.

From discussions that Roland and Melanie had with those who did remember Hunter, they all agreed that he was unassuming, not the type to be flashy and live above his means. Hunter liked simple things: Jeeps, beaches, surfing, fishing, and golf. And, although he could be charming in social settings, he was a loner and valued his privacy. There was not much to go on.

While Melanie found it easy trying to research Hunter's background using the Internet and public records, Roland was forced to take a more difficult and creative approach in actually finding the man. He suggested looking at it from a different slant. "If I lived in East Hampton, spending my days surfing

and golfing when not working, and I wanted to get lost but keep surfing and golfing, where would I go? I'll tell ya. Many East Enders take trips or own second homes in Puerto Rico, Panama, and Costa Rica because of the surf. Let's take it one step further; which of those countries also had offshore banking and no extradition treaties with the United States? We find those answers, put a golf course into the mix, and we have a place to start looking."

"Still though, that covers such a large area," Melanie pointed out.

"It does," Roland admitted, "but we can eliminate Puerto Rico. That is part of the United States, and I am sure he didn't go there. My guess would be Panama or Costa Rica, and I think Costa Rica would be more friendly to someone in his situation based on research I have done in the past on similar cases."

"Still," she responded with skepticism.

"Here's what I've already done. I've talked with people at several surf shops here on Long Island that were in business back in the eighties and are still in business today—places that are legendary like Waves Surf Shop on the south shore. They knew the surf scene better than anyone back in the eighties because they would make pilgrimages to places like Rincon, Playa Venao, and Tamarindo. I would start at Tamarindo because it is in Costa Rica, and there are several premier golf courses near there as well, although they would not have been

there back in 1987. But, if Hunter did in fact go to Tamarindo, he may still be living near there. Also, I looked up surf shops in Tamarindo that were established in the late eighties and are still in business today. There are several, and that is where I would start.”

“That might just work,” Melanie mused, her optimism guarded. “Did you call them, or email them asking questions?”

“No,” Roland replied, “and I won’t. Expats move to towns like that to drop out. Shop owners know that, and communities like those tend to become tightly knit and protective of their own. Everyone has something to hide, so they take on an ‘I won’t tell if you don’t tell’ attitude.”

“Like a bond among thieves?” Melanie suggested in understanding.

“Or politicians,” Roland offered.

“Here’s what I’d like us to do,” he went on. “You write a brief letter appealing for Hunter to meet with you. Show some emotion; come at him from your heart. If we can get a letter to him, and he remembers you and likes you as much as you think he did, it might just work.

“I’ll make multiple copies of the letter, and starting in Tamarindo, I’ll work the surf shops there and in the surrounding areas. I’ll work the golf courses too, seeing if they know of an American who

has been there for thirty-five-years. I'll simply ask them to pass the letter along, nothing more.

“If we strike out in Costa Rica, then I'll go to Playa Venao in Panama and try the same thing. There are numerous people who will fit Hunter's description, but it's all that I can really think of at this point. I'll grant you, it's a crapshoot, but it's a starting point.”

Melanie agreed, and they decided to give his plan three months. If nothing came of it, well then, so be it. ‘At least I can say I gave it a try,’ she thought.

Melanie constructed her letter, appealing, she hoped, to Hunter's curiosity.

Dear Mr. McPherson:

My name is Melanie Alper. You were my fifth-grade gym teacher during your first year of teaching at Shady Harbor, and you used to call me ‘Mel’. (You should remember because my mom met with you about your not calling me by my given name. Personally, I loved it!) I recently had dinner with a Mrs. Carolyn Stevenson, who I believe you had as a client through your personal fitness business years ago, and she told me the most incredible story.

Timothy Kent Smith

My purpose in writing to you is, as I am a partner with McKinney Publishing in Manhattan, I would be interested in interviewing you and writing your life story, on your terms, of course. Based on what I know of it so far, it is nothing short of intriguing, and I would love to bring it to life.

I cannot be any more direct and can only hope that you will at least consider my proposal. I have enclosed a business card with multiple means for contacting me.

I hope you are well. You were one of my favorite teachers, and I know other students felt the same way. To this day, I am successful, in part, due to many of the values you instilled in me as a student.

Fondly,

Melanie

(Mel)

Alper

After making multiple copies of the letter, Roland left for Costa Rica, starting in Tamarindo at a small surf shop by the name of Woody's. Having been in business since the early sixties, it seemed like it might be a good fit. After visiting a handful of other

surf shops, Roland also visited the pro shops at two golf courses, one at Gran Paraiso and one at Reserva Guanacaste.

While everyone was friendly and took his letters, they showed no sense of knowing anyone fitting Hunter's description, but Roland had expected that, and continuing on down the coast, he kept handing out letters.

Their plan resulted in a swell of crank calls and emails to Melanie's contact information. Obviously, letters had been passed on, but after three months of not hearing from Hunter, they had all but given up hope. It seemed that the well had run dry and Melanie, along with Roland and Hal, decided to take a break. Melanie returned to her work at McKinney, taking on new projects and then, when she least expected it, on a cold and snowy February morning in 2023, her phone rang.

"Melanie Alper," she had answered, picking it up on the second ring.

"Hello, Mel, long time no see."

Mel. Melanie's heart almost stopped. "Excuse me, may I ask with whom I'm speaking?"

"You knew me as Mr. McPherson, your fifth-grade gym teacher at Henson Avenue elementary school. Sprawling school with separate buildings, connected by walkways. Would have been great in Florida or California, but not in those New York winters."

Melanie, as stunned as she was, went silent.

“Mel? Are you still there?”

“Who was my classroom teacher?” she asked.

“Hmm, I can’t remember for sure, but it would have been O’Malley, Sansone, or maybe Herzog?”

The caller definitely had her attention as he knew details only someone who had been at the school would know.

“You used to ask us to run a loop you created for fitness testing. How many laps did you make us run?” Melanie asked, further vetting him.

“Quite the test you’re giving me,” Hunter said with amusement. “It’s a trick question because the answer would be that we didn’t run laps, but instead, we ran a shuttle type pattern out on the field that lay below the school. And, if I remember correctly, you used to complain about it.”

She laughed heartily at his comment because she did indeed always complain to him about that. She could not believe he remembered.

They bantered for several more minutes until she felt sure she was talking with the one, and the only, Mr. McPherson. Hunter could not help but smile as well, as he always had when kidding with her.

Over the next several weeks, they ironed out what it was that Melanie was looking for, and in her discussions with him, Hunter made it clear as to

Behind the Hedgerows

what he expected in return, always done from a burner phone on his end. Finally, he agreed to meet with her in the first week of April.

Chapter 3

GUANACASTE PROVINCE, COSTA RICA

As the flight started its final approach, Melanie looked out the window and watched as they flew down the Pacific coast of Central America, past Witches Rock, and Ollie's Point, named by the Costa Rican locals after a United States Colonel who had allegedly used this same flight path between a secret CIA base and Nicaragua while running arms to the Contras during the mid-1980's. Unlike the international airport that it is today, at that time, Liberia had been little more than his staging area.

Stepping off the plane, Melanie was immediately met with a blast of warm air—nothing like the current weather in New York. Following her fellow passengers through Customs and Baggage Claim, she eventually made her way to the rental car desk where she was handed the keys to a new Toyota Land Cruiser. While the roads she would be traveling on were paved, it had been suggested to her by Mr. McPherson that she rent a four-wheel-drive vehicle in case she ended up on one of the many, dirt sideroads. After purchasing two bottles of water from the vending machine, she found her car, loaded her one suitcase, and put her hotel's address into the car's GPS. Heading out onto the main highway, she settled in for the approximately one-hour drive to Tamarindo which sat on the Pacific Ocean, thirty-nine miles away.

Initially, Melanie passed new shopping centers and office buildings, but as her journey progressed, taking her up into the mountains, she found Costa Rica to be a study in contrasts. The landscape rapidly became more rural with sprawling cattle and horse farms with the occasional small town mixed in. The villages were all similar in that they each had a bodega, a bus stop, several mom-and-pop stores, a corral, and a soccer field, all of which were located right off the main road. The houses looked modest at best, with chickens and roosters running around the yards, and the flora, vibrant and lush, was plentiful. There were people walking and cycling along the road; the women in flowered dresses, the men wearing jeans and long-sleeved shirts, and the teenagers looking much like teenagers anywhere else in the world—dressed in shorts and t-shirts with cell phones glued to their ears.

Most of the vehicles she passed were either trucks or transport vans shuttling tourists between the airport and resorts on the coast. Traffic, by American standards, was light and leisurely, and although it was only a two-lane road, vehicles moved at a steady pace. That was, until she encountered a rancher, who, having a difficult day, was trying to regroup his cattle that had broken from formation and were now roaming on both sides of the highway. Drivers seemed to wait patiently, moving forward when they could safely do so, dealing with it as if it were a common occurrence, and Melanie suspected

that it was. The realization made her chuckle; there was no mistaking that she was in a foreign country.

Further up the mountain, she found herself creeping along slowly behind a tractor that was pulling a trailer filled with bales of hay piled so high, she couldn't believe that they didn't topple over. The tractor eventually turned left onto a rutted lane of a ranch, and she was on her way again, followed by a long stream of vehicles which had also been caught in the tractor's wake.

An hour later, as Melanie started to descend from the mountains, she caught glimpses of the Pacific Ocean, glittering like a jewel in the now, late afternoon sun. She found each new view to be more spectacular than the previous one.

Headed southwest in the Guanacaste Province of the Nicoya Peninsula, she was headed to the region's largest developed beach town, Tamarindo. Known for its long natural rock formation that jutted out in the sea, Playa Tamarindo had waves that could reach heights of twelve feet in the summer months and were made famous by Ronald Farham in the 1960's movie, *The Perfect Wave*. Ever since, Tamarindo has been a haven for surfers from all over the world.

On her final turn out of the mountains, into Tamarindo's neighboring town of Villareal, the Pacific Ocean presented itself as a majestic expanse of bright-blue sea under a slowly descending sun, taking her breath away with its beauty.

Melanie noticed that the density of people and shops had increased as she drove through Villareal with its church, schools, hardware store, garage, and grocery store.

Then, just like that, she was entering Tamarindo with the Las Baulas National Marine Park on her right and the Estrella del Sol Hotel, not far beyond.

After checking in and freshening up, she put on a pair of shorts with a casual top and headed out to the beach. She was hoping to enjoy the last hour of daylight before the sun set for the evening. The sand felt wonderful beneath her feet as she strolled aimlessly along the shoreline.

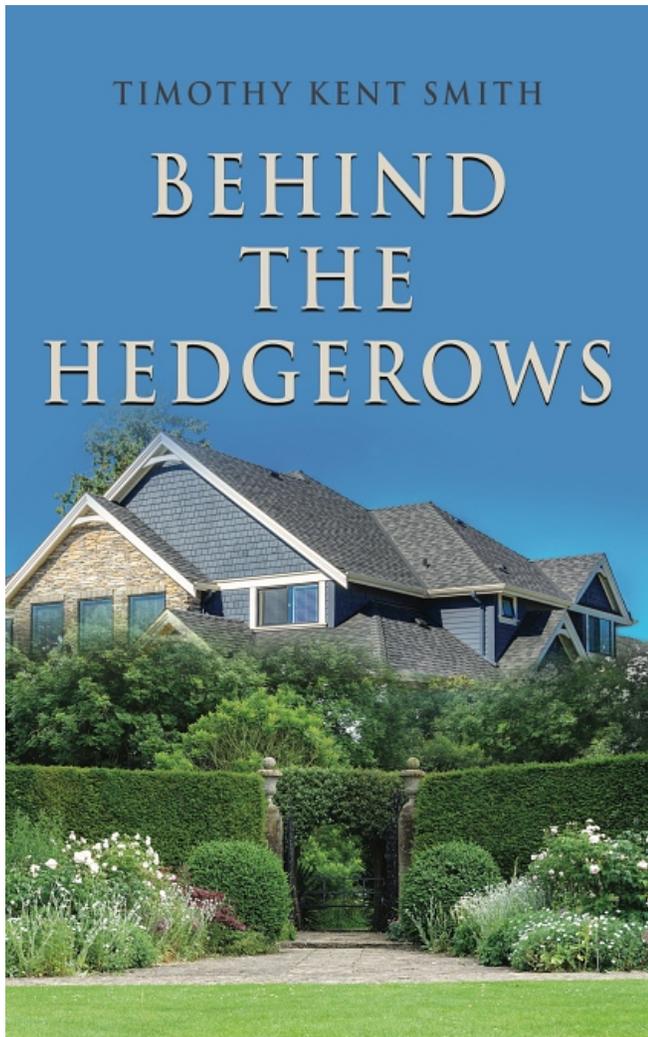
Out in the water there were surfers of all abilities. Some looked like pros, one had his dog on the board with him, and there were several people nearer to shore who were obviously beginners or taking lessons. To the left of the rock formation, there was another group of people who were surfcasting, and further down the beach, was a local family enjoying a picnic and playing bocce ball on the hard-packed sand. A group of young boys played pickup soccer nearby, their feet bare, using their sneakers to create the makeshift goals. There was a mix of tourists and locals walking the beach as they waited for the sun to drop, everyone looking relaxed and friendly. 'What was Costa Rica's mantra?' she thought. 'Pura Vida? The good life.' Melanie had

read numerous articles claiming Costa Ricans to be the planet's happiest people, and she saw nothing to suggest otherwise.

Having made her way back to the hotel, Melanie took a seat on the side of the pool, ordered a drink, and watched the most beautiful sunset she had ever witnessed. The golden orb looked so large, she felt as if she could almost reach out and touch it, and then, in a flash, it was gone.

Through the dusk, she moved to the restaurant, taking an outdoor table where she ate a light, delicious meal of fresh fish and rice. It was exactly what she needed after her long day of travel, yet still not ready to call it a day, she decided to take a short walk through the town's main business district which was lined with little more than restaurants and souvenir shops.

Back in her room by nine, Melanie showered and went to bed, wanting to be at her best in the morning. She was scheduled to meet Mr. McPherson, her man of intrigue, at ten o'clock at a small restaurant of his choosing, twenty minutes away in the sleepy town of Brasilito.



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