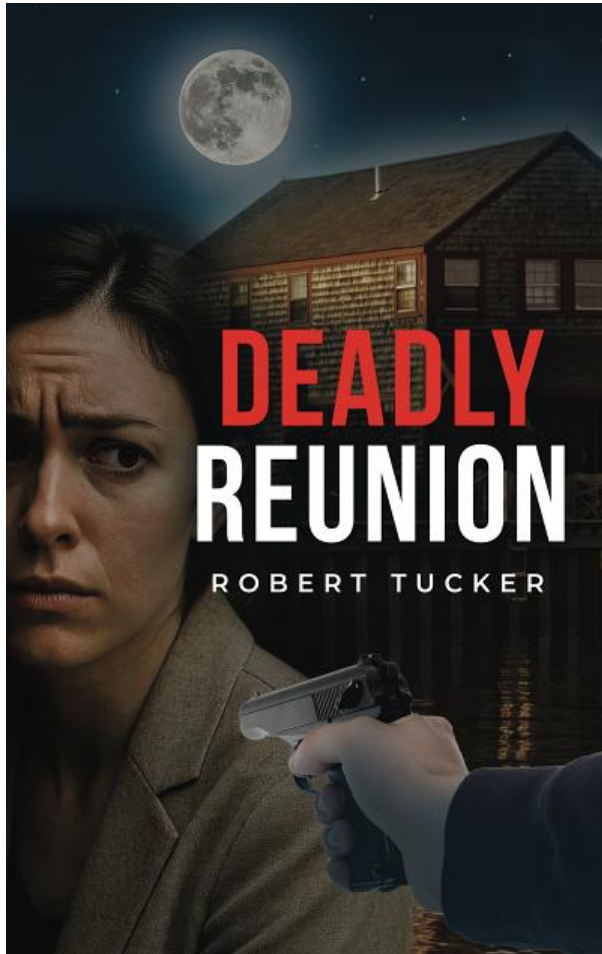




Detective Nia D'Amato is haunted by a recent shooting on Nantucket. Her weekend college reunion turns into a nightmare when an unknown assailant relentlessly pursues her, intent on ending her life.

Deadly Reunion

By Robert Tucker

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A movie poster for 'Deadly Reunion'. On the left, a close-up of a woman's face with a worried expression. In the center, a hand holds a handgun pointed towards the woman. The background shows a dark house at night with a full moon in the sky.

DEADLY REUNION

ROBERT TUCKER

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Chapter 1

April 29, 2019

Monday early morning

The blackness was total... endless... stifling to the point of suffocation. In the distance, a single point of silver floated lazily. With something to focus on, her growing dread gave way to confusion. The spot grew larger, or was it getting closer? It was not solid, but it had a perfectly circular black hole at its center. It now felt alarmingly near.

Sudden recognition triggered paralyzing terror—the hole in the middle was the bore of a stainless-steel pistol’s muzzle, pointed directly at her. Both instinct and training urged her to get away as quickly as possible.

There was no muzzle flash, only the deafening report of a gun. An instant later, the impact of the round ripping through her was the last thing she felt before a black maw devoured her.

Nia bolted upright in breathless panic. Damp hair clung to the sides of her face. Her nightshirt was soaked through, clinging to her like a second skin. She rubbed her closed eyes, then let her fingertips rest gently against her eyelids.

“How much longer will I have these damn nightmares? Ever since that day on Nantucket, something’s been off. My dreams have turned dark and frightening.”

She dropped her hands to the bed and opened her eyes. The bedroom, unlike her nightmare, was awash in light—she had

started using a nightlight several days ago, the first time since grammar school. The wall clock read just past 2:00 a.m.

“I used to enjoy taking a nap.” She swung her feet onto the floor, then stood and stretched. “I sure don’t feel that way anymore.” She peeled off her wet T-shirt, tossed it into a corner, and pulled another from the dresser. It showed Yosemite Sam holding two pistols and the words “*BACK OFF*” in bold. Nia pulled it on, then walked to the kitchen.

She stared at the half-empty bottle of tequila on the counter. “Before I joined the force, I never believed in that old cliché.” She grabbed the bottle and half-filled the unwashed glass beside it. “I love what I do, but it has a way of beating down your spirit and crushing your soul.” She took a sip, then held the glass up to the light, studying its pale gold. “This helps ease the pain, or maybe it’s just forcing me to relive that same terrifying moment.”

Nia swirled the amber liquid, loving it and hating it, wanting more but cursing the urge. She reached over, poured the rest down the sink, then walked over and slumped onto the sofa. Her mouth twisted into a frown as she stared at the silver-lettered invitation to her fifteenth college reunion on the coffee table. “I’ve ignored all those damn emails. That is exactly what I don’t need. A roomful of happy people bragging about their fabulous careers, showing off pictures of their spouses or their beautiful sons and daughters.” She glanced around the sparsely furnished one-bedroom apartment and stopped at a faded picture of her father in his Boston Police uniform, holding a Congressional Badge of Bravery Award. She picked up the invitation, considered it for a moment, then frisbeed it into the trash.

Nia shuffled to a large picture window and leaned against the sill, her breath leaving small, moist circles on the glass. She looked beyond her unhappy reflection and watched a steady stream of headlights crawl out of Boston across the white-cabled Zakim Bridge. “You’d be so proud of me, Dad. I just turned thirty-seven, I’m single, and I almost got fired by Deputy Commander Flynn yesterday.” She studied the spiderweb lazily hanging from a light over the dining room table and let out a long, slow sigh as she remembered the meeting that hadn’t gone as she’d hoped.

###

Commander Flynn’s booming voice echoed in her ears as she stood in the doorway of his office. “I told you I wanted you to stay in Boston and do some detective work *here* for a change. If you had stayed in Boston instead of going back to Nantucket, you wouldn’t have been involved in another shooting.” He ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Every time I see you, I can’t help but remember that your father was my partner when we were stationed on Berkeley Street. He was a damn fine cop who put his life on the line more than once.”

Nia looked at him, startled. *I didn’t know he was my dad’s partner.* She flashed on an image of her dad standing outside Berkeley Street in his uniform. *Where the hell did that come from?* She shook her head, trying to focus on Flynn’s words.

He stood, began to pace, then stopped and gave her a hard look. “I just don’t know what he’d think of your behavior lately.”

Her face twisted with pain and regret. She walked over and dropped into a chair tucked in a corner beside a battered filing cabinet, noting with dismay the scuff marks on her shoes. Nia rested her head in her hands. "I don't know what he'd think if he could see how I look now." Silence hung between them for a long moment, then her head snapped up, unwilling to leave things as they were. "But if I hadn't gone back to Nantucket, Captain Miller might be dead, along with many innocent civilians." She continued to gaze at Flynn, her eyes heavy with the pain of what had happened.

He looked back, studying the unhappy-looking woman in front of him. "That is true. You do seem to have a knack for turning up wherever there is trouble." He grimaced as he thought of another troubling matter. "I find it concerning that you use your firearm off duty more than anyone else in this department."

I should shut up, but I can't let that pass. "Sir, the men in this department would never be yelled at for using a firearm in self-defense. The women are always held to a higher standard." She tried to stop before the next words spilled out. "And we still have to deal with almost daily harassment."

Commander Flynn's face turned red, like a pressure cooker about to explode. He shot to his feet, eyes widening as if someone had kicked him. He spat each word with deliberate intensity. "We have procedures for handling sexual harassment, and you have never, ever filed a complaint, Detective D'Amato."

Okay. Now I know I'm screwed. He's using my full title. I should just shut up. When the hell did I ever do that? She leaned

forward, raising both hands. “You know how that rigged system works as well as I do. If I file a harassment complaint, I’ll be blackballed and assigned every shit job in the city.”

He walked back to his desk, head shaking, his thinning hair now disheveled. He hissed, “Enough.” He sat down, clenched his teeth, let out a breath, then continued. “I’ve heard enough of your baseless accusations.”

Nia clenched her fists, said nothing, and continued glaring at her boss.

Deputy Commander Flynn’s face twisted into an unreadable mix of anger and disappointment. He set his hands on the desk and let out a frustrated sigh. “I order you to take medical leave until the department deems you fit to return to active duty.”

Nia hoped he was done, but he added, “I would also like you to see the department’s psychologist to help you with your anger management issues.”

She jumped out of her chair and shouted, “Anger management issues? What anger management issues?”

He lowered his eyebrows. His words came out slowly. “You are dismissed, Detective D’Amato.”

###

Nia looked up as the shadows of distant lights danced across the ceiling. A grim smile flickered across her face. “I guess Flynn didn’t find the humor in my shouting at him, ‘What anger-management issues?’”

Her dad’s silent, solemn look across her barren apartment reminded her that being an outspoken cop was stupid and could land you in the middle of a shit storm. She knew cops had to

learn to act professionally in uniform and play the game if they wanted to get ahead. She shook her head. "I've never been good at playing the game." She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head. "Well, at least one good thing came out of it. I'll still have my salary while I'm out on extended medical leave."

Nia walked over to her computer to check her email. "Junk mail, junk mail, junk mail." "Wait. Here's one from Shannon. I haven't heard from her in a long time. I bet she's emailing me about that stupid reunion."

Hey Nia,

How the hell are you? Sorry, it's been a while since I emailed you: life and all that shit. Hey, I'm on the UMass reunion committee, and we sent out the invites on Monday. You're going, right? Can't wait to catch up with you. It's been way too long!

Love,
Shannon

Nia frowned. "Crap. I'd love to see her, but not at the reunion." She let out a resigned sigh, walked to the trash can, and pushed aside an empty pizza box. She pulled out the tomato-stained invitation and set it beside the computer. She had almost finished reading the registration details when the phone rang.

"Nia, how is the detective business these days?"

It was Nantucket Police Captain John Miller. She couldn't help but smile as she pictured his tanned face and deep-blue eyes.

"John, I've been meaning to call you. How are you feeling?"

"Well, you know we tough guys heal quickly, but now that I'm home from the hospital, I have to do these damn exercises." He lowered his voice. "I have a visiting nurse who should have been a drill sergeant."

Nia laughed. "John, don't be such a baby."

He grimaced. "Now you're starting to sound like my visiting nurse." He paused. "So, the last thing I remember is that you were heading back to Boston to chase bad guys. That must have been about a week ago, right?"

She shot a look at the calendar on the wall. *Crap. Has it really been that long? Why do I keep putting off talking to him?* "Sorry. I should have called you sooner. Things got a little crazy after I got back."

John smiled and shook his head. "Did the crime rate soar when you returned to the big city?"

"No, but I'll bet it did on Nantucket after I left."

He chuckled. "Touché. Well, you know, that's only because I've been on leave, and I hope to be back in a few more days. What have you been up to?"

Nia felt a flush of guilt. Captain Miller had stepped in front of a bullet meant for her as they descended the steps of St. Mary Catholic Church in Nantucket. "Well, I got into an argument with Deputy Commander Flynn, and he placed me on extended medical leave."

She could hear the cautious tone creeping into his reply. "Okay. I know you love being a cop, so what are you doing with all your free time?"

Coming from anyone else, she would have said she was fine with time off and let it go, but John was more than a casual friend. "Well, I try to go to the gym almost every day, but sometimes I feel a little ... lost."

She heard him take a deep breath and hesitate for a heartbeat before answering. "Okay. Why don't you talk to Flynn about a part-time role? Maybe you could get a desk job back at the station."

Her voice unintentionally rose. "A desk job? Are you serious?"

Miller could hear the disdain in her voice. He added quickly, "You know, just until things settle down a bit."

Nia knew he was only trying to help, but she hated the thought of sitting behind a desk, watching the Neanderthals in her department. "Flynn would probably love that idea." She shook her head. "I don't think I can do that." *I can picture the looks I'd get from some of the cops as they walked by.* "I'd probably just get mad and fly off the handle at the first person who asked me a question." *I do seem to get mad way too easily lately.* She looked at the picture of her father. *Could Flynn be right? Do I really want to take his advice and see the department shrink?* She shook her head, then looked away in frustration.

"Okay, so let me throw out an off-the-wall idea. Why don't you come down here for a few days to get away from everything

going on? You know you are always welcome to stay at my place for a little R and R.”

She let out a deep breath. *I wouldn't mind some time away from all this shit, but I'm not sure I'm in a good place to stay with him. I'd probably bite his head off at the first joke he made. How do I say no without pushing him away?* “I do want to see you, John, but I have a couple of things I need to take care of here.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “Sure, okay. No problem.”

Nia could hear the disappointment in his voice and frowned in frustration. *Guess I could have used a little more tact on that one.* “Hey, I need to get to my spin class, or I’ll be late. Talk to you soon.”

Chapter 2

April 1989

A thick, knotted carpet of ivy was slowly strangling the decaying brick building. At the top, imposing ramparts were meant to intimidate infidels. The aging structure was surrounded by a forbidding iron fence with rusted spikes every few feet, well hidden from the unmarked, rutted road. A dense tangle of bittersweet, witchgrass, and dead and dying chokecherry trees with claw-like branches threatened to ensnare anyone who dared approach. The building's front center was pushed forward several feet, like the narthex of a medieval church. A stone cross, coated in bird droppings, perched solemnly above a formidable pair of pitted, paint-chipped front doors.

Inside, black-robed nuns with white-rimmed faces floated silently through the cavernous interior, tending to dozens of babies. Most lay eerily quiet in their iron-legged cribs. One boy, near the middle of the room, bore a curious red birthmark like a small, angry island near the top of his forehead, extending into his wispy hair. His bright eyes searched hungrily for stimulation, but there was only barren emptiness inside the crib's high white bumpers topped with iron railings. He was alone and empty, yet not unhappy, because he did not know what it meant to be happy. One day bled into another formless

day. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow melded into one never-ending void.

Each day, smooth hands emerged soundlessly from black-clad arms. They cradled him skillfully, yet their touch was cold and impersonal. Every interaction sparked a flicker of hope, a longing for a moment of warmth, but it vanished before it could be felt or remembered. Small, fragile pieces of hopeful anticipation withered and died within the fair-haired boy.

He grew increasingly numb to any momentary stimulation from the outside world. He turned inward and created a world far removed from the desert outside, which was his life. He was alone, sheltered by a numbing cocoon. Here he would be safe from caring and craving; safe from the empty pain of a sterile, white-walled world.

Chapter 3

April 30, 2019

Tuesday morning

Nia looked around the therapist's office, feeling distinctly uneasy. *This place hasn't changed much since my last visit. It still has the same abstract print on the wall.* Nia shifted her gaze to the desk, where Doctor Young was writing in a notebook. *I wonder if all therapists keep the same obsessively neat desk.* Nia paused, unsure whether to clear her throat or say something to interrupt.

The doctor looked up for a moment. Her neatly trimmed dark-brown hair framed an oval face with piercing green eyes. She pointed her pen at Nia. "Have a seat. I'm finishing up some notes and will be with you in just a minute."

Nia dropped into a comfortable chair and looked through the blinds at the high-rise apartments across the street. *Those are new. I used to play soccer there more than 20 years ago. Every time I turn around, Boston seems to change.* Her mouth slid sideways. *But what about me? Have I changed at all since my last visit?* Nia's stomach tightened. *I remember feeling afraid. But afraid of what?*

She shifted in her chair, uncomfortable, frowning as she wondered why she was here, waiting for the doctor to finish. *I'm only here because Flynn advised me to see her.* She watched

the doctor's head bob as she finished writing and closed her notes. *But I really want to be anywhere but in her office.*

Doctor Young's clear voice cut through her thoughts. "Nia, it's a pleasure to see you again. How are you?"

"Ahh, I'm not sure, but thanks for squeezing me in on such short notice." She paused, unsure where to begin.

The doctor tilted her head, studying Nia's troubled expression. "I haven't seen you in several months. If I remember, you decided we were done then. So, what brings you back here today?"

Nia hesitated for a moment before speaking. *Does she really not know why I'm here? Okay, I'll give her the quick-and-easy version.* "Well, about a month ago, I was told to take a week off to give my shoulder more time to heal. I did, and when I returned from Nantucket, I got into a heated argument with Deputy Commander Flynn." She paused, letting out a short, disgruntled breath. "So he put me on extended medical leave and *advised* me to see you."

Doctor Young leaned forward, her glasses sliding down the bridge of her nose. She pushed them back up and spoke in a slow, deliberate tone. "Okay, but is *that* the only reason you're here to see me today?"

Nia bit the inside of her cheek. She looked away. *I should know better. There is no quick, easy way to do this.* "Well, I was angry about how he was treating me during our argument, but whatever is going on feels far more complicated."

The doctor rubbed her chin; her eyebrows knotted. She looked down and scanned the clipboard on her desk. "Well, I see you returned from an assignment on Nantucket and recently

assisted with a case involving manslaughter and a hit-and-run. Why don't we start there? I don't have the details. Can you give me some background on the case?"

Nia felt her eyes sting as she spoke. "I visited Nantucket to recuperate from a gunshot wound I got in a shootout last winter." She involuntarily rotated her shoulder. *These damn things don't seem to heal as fast as they used to.*

The doctor nodded slowly. "I remember that case. It was the last time we spoke. Please go on."

Nia let out a long, slow breath. "On my first day on the island, I decided to go for a bike ride. I was riding along a quiet street outside town when I heard cries for help and went to see what was going on. A tree had fallen on a mother and daughter resting in a hammock. I stayed on-site after the ambulance left and decided to take a look around. I found evidence of deliberate sabotage. The Nantucket police chief agreed, and we worked on the case together."

"We collected evidence that led us to investigate another suspicious death from years earlier. We began interviewing everyone connected to that death. When we tried to bring Debbie Barrow in for questioning, she fled and attempted to destroy incriminating evidence. Later, we learned she had run down a teenage girl she believed had witnessed her involvement in the tree-falling incident. She was arrested, made bail two days later, then disappeared. I returned to Boston but came back to Nantucket the following week for a memorial service."

Nia stopped and looked at Doctor Young, her face etched with pain. "It was for the girl who died of her injuries when the

tree fell.” She looked up, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. “And that’s when everything went sideways.”

Doctor Young leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

Nia let out a long, slow breath. “I’ll never forget the day. It was Saturday, April 20th. I was in the middle of a crowd leaving the memorial service when Debbie Barrow appeared out of nowhere and opened fire. Captain Miller stepped in front of me and took the bullet meant for me. He handed me his gun as he fell to the ground.” She stopped, stared at her hand, then looked up at the doctor. “I took it and shot her.”

Nia sat, staring at the fresh memory. They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. *No, no, no, not here.* A tear slid down Nia’s cheek. She stood, turned away to hide her embarrassment, and said, “I’m sorry, doctor. This was all a mistake. I shouldn’t have bothered you.” She felt the doctor’s eyes follow her to the door.

Doctor Young’s soft voice stopped her hand as she reached for the knob. “Nia?” She turned to look back. The doctor stood with her fingers tented, resting lightly on the desk, a puzzled look on her face. “You were a cop, just doing your duty. The shooting was justified. Why do you feel so upset?”

Nia shook her head, no longer trying to hide her wet face. She whispered in a choked voice, “I don’t know.” She closed her eyes, then looked up. “My work has kept me busy. Without it, I feel lost and have too much time to feel.” She looked at the doctor and whispered, “Scared. I hate feeling this way.”

Doctor Young responded in a careful voice. “Nia, you’re on extended medical leave, and there’s every reason to believe you’ll return to your job as a cop.” She tilted her head,

considering Nia, then motioned to the chair. “Why don’t you sit down? We can talk whenever you’d like.”

Nia looked back at the door, then at the chair. Her shoulders sagged as she answered in a quiet voice, “What other choice do I have but to keep feeling this way every day?” Nia met the doctor’s steady gaze, nodded imperceptibly, then walked back and slumped into the empty chair. She rested her head against the padded back, closed her eyes, and let a ringing silence wash over her.

After a few moments, she sat up and spoke in a small voice. “A cop. I’ve always wanted to be one, ever since I was a little girl who liked to play with toy guns instead of dolls.” She stopped, staring at something unseen. “I’d watch my dad go to work in his perfect dark-blue police uniform.” Her face clouded with sadness as she remembered the day he was killed in a gang shooting. “Then he died, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. What I had to do.” She met the doctor’s steady gaze. “My one goal was to become a cop like my father.” She turned away, frowning as she followed a jagged crack snaking across the ceiling. The room fell silent again.

“Nia?” The doctor reached out her hand and let it rest on the desk. “I understand how important it was for you to become a cop. You’ve worked hard, achieved your goal, and carry your dad’s death with you every day. Has anything changed? What scares you *now*?”

Nia let out a ragged sigh. “I don’t know. Without my work, I have too much time on my hands. Too much time ... to think about something that feels different, something that frightens me, though I don’t know what. I can’t quite ...” She reached

out as if to grab something just out of reach, then looked down, her face tight with frustration. She sat back in the chair and shook her head, choosing to focus on the day of the shooting. “That morning on Nantucket, Captain Miller almost died as I held him in my arms. I hated the thought of losing someone else, too.” She looked up at Doctor Young, who was watching her intently. “But we both signed up to be cops and knew we might die doing that job.” She paused, working through something. “I may not like those feelings, but I know how to deal with them.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “This is something else. Something much darker. Sometimes I feel like a frightened little girl who wants to hide.” She suddenly sat up and shouted, “That’s not me. What the hell could I be so afraid of?” Her face took on a haunted look. She stared at the doctor, let out a deep breath of despair, and slumped deeper into the chair.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Doctor Young leaned forward and asked quietly, “How long have you felt this way, Nia?”

Nia didn’t respond right away. “I don’t know. It feels like it’s been ... forever.” She made a face. “But that can’t be right. I remember being happy, but it was so long ago.” She tightened her lips and shook her head. Her eyes were fixed on something far away. “I’ve been doing okay, you know. I was keeping everything together, dealing with all the shit, good and bad, that’s happened in my life. And then there was that damn day I shot Debbie Barrow on Nantucket.”

The doctor made a quick note, then leaned her head toward her patient. "Have you talked with anyone else about what happened?"

Nia's answer came out in a rush. "No." She clasped her hands and pressed them to her lips.

"Is there anyone you're close to, or anyone else you might talk to now?"

Nia tilted her head and stared at the framed print. "Mom and Dad are both gone. I have some friends in the Department, but we aren't close. Maybe John - I mean, Captain Miller - but I think I've been avoiding him since the shooting." In a quieter voice, she added, "I'm not sure why." She pushed a loose strand of hair back behind her ear. "He called me yesterday morning and asked me to come down to Nantucket for a few days." She looked down at her sneakers and frowned. "I put him off. I wanted to talk to someone more objective first." She looked up. "I realized I had no one else to talk to." She stopped, biting her cheek. "That's why I came to see you." She shook her head and lowered her voice. "That probably makes me seem pretty screwed up."

Doctor Young gave her a slight smile. "So, when there's no one else to talk to, you come see me?"

Nia's eyes widened in realization. She rushed to explain. "No, that's not what I meant. I would have talked to John. I mean, I like him, and I think we have a connection, and we." She let the rest of the sentence trail off.

The doctor rubbed her finger along her lips. "Is there something more going on between you two?"

Nia let out a deep sigh and grimaced. “Yeah, maybe, but I’m not sure I trust my feelings right now.”

Doctor Young sat back in her chair. “Are you afraid of jeopardizing whatever it might be by talking to him about how you feel?”

Nia gave her head a slight shake. “No.” She paused, then threw up her hands. “Well, maybe. I don’t need a shrink to tell me how screwed up that is.”

The doctor raised her eyebrows, a whimsical smile tugging at her lips. “You keep doing that, and I’m going to be out of business.”

Nia let out a humorless laugh. She sat in silence for a moment, staring at nothing. “I know,” she sighed in resignation. “I need to talk to him.”

Doctor Young folded her hands and leaned forward. “Nia, protecting yourself from emotional pain isn’t wrong unless the reason for doing so keeps you from moving forward with your life.” She glanced at the clock. “I’m sorry, but I’m scheduled to see another client in a few minutes. Would you like to schedule another time to talk?”

Nia hesitated, then looked up and nodded. “I would.”

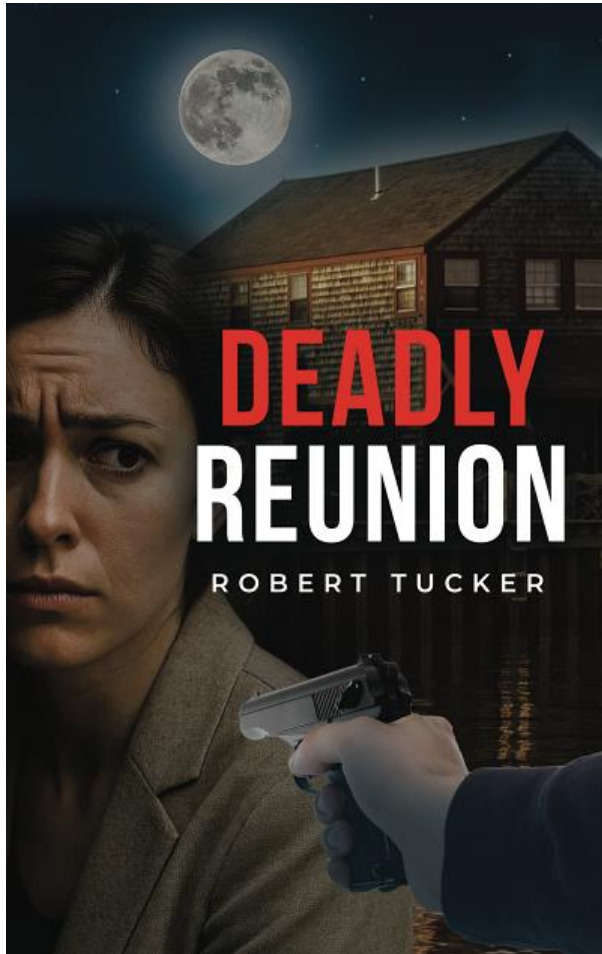
“Why don’t you schedule a time with the receptionist on your way out?”

Nia got up to leave and stopped. “I’m glad you stopped me from leaving, doctor.”

Doctor Young looked up from the note she was writing. “I think it was less about me stopping you and more about your wanting to talk about whatever’s going on.”

“Yeah, I only wish we had more time.”

The doctor stood, a look of concern on her face. “Next time, we will, Nia. I’ll see you soon.”



Detective Nia D'Amato is haunted by a recent shooting on Nantucket. Her weekend college reunion turns into a nightmare when an unknown assailant relentlessly pursues her, intent on ending her life.

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