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FAMILY.

A KILLER AFFAIR.

TOGETHER AT LAST.

THIS

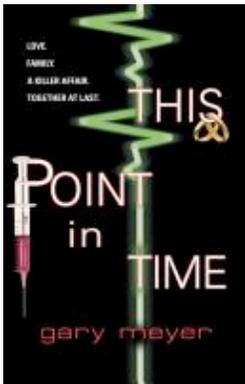


POINT

in

TIME

gary meyer



Can murder save this marriage? Mitch and Melody Ambrose, a 50-something suburban Massachusetts couple in the throes of "empty nest syndrome," are drawn into the investigation of a suspicious death at a local nursing home. What the two ex-journalists uncover sets in motion a series of life-rattling events and revelations. Along the way, they also re-discover each other and the victim's far-flung family is brought together with a common purpose of avenging his death.

This Point in Time

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Was it lust or was it love?

Melody grimaced to herself as the question returned to her head like a pesky fly. It was an issue both important and ridiculous in the scheme of things this Friday morning.

But as Melody pulled on her light blue, loose-fitting turtleneck sweater — grateful to be facing a day free of the black garments that had dominated her wardrobe for the two days of Charleton Paginni's wake and funeral — she couldn't shake the after-thoughts from a rare night of passionate lovemaking.

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PROLOGUE

Winter 2009

When Charleton Paginni closed his eyes for the final time that late winter day, he was optimistic.

He had a new friend, something he certainly never expected or sought at age 83. And this young fella, Mitch Ambrose, was sharp as glass shards. Funny, too. Just like one would expect a former newspaper reporter to be, at least from some decades-old stereotype Charleton had in his mind.

The otherwise-crusty octogenarian, coming from the machismo school of friendship, was embarrassed about how much he looked forward to Mitch's weekly visits. He always made sure his room at the Charles Murphy Nursing Home was clean and his mind was nimble — ready for the good-natured jousting that always began their hour of conversation about a wide variety of topics.

In just the few short months since his youngest daughter had arranged for Mitch's visits, Charleton had become certain this new person in his life would succeed where his attorney had failed in bringing closure to the trouble spot that had banged around his brain for 30 years.

Mitch said he and his wife, Melody, already had located his one-time lover, now an accomplished attorney. Soon the couple would be contacting her. Then it would only be a matter of time, Charleton felt sure, before they would find the child she gave up for adoption — his child.

But for now Charleton was just tired. This annoying lethargy had kept him bedridden for days, forcing the home to cancel his last two visits with Mitch. Now this new nurse, so friendly and nice, was

Gary Meyer

bringing him yet a new medicinal drink. She assured him the orange-colored concoction soon would have him up and around.

But he was still so tired. Within minutes after she left, he closed his eyes. Within seconds, he was asleep. A deep sleep. Too deep to hear the door to his room open in the dark morning hours. Too deep to feel the blanket and sheet lifted at the base of his bed. Way too deep to fight, or even notice, as his once-passionate heart suddenly came to a halt.

CHAPTER ONE

Autumn 1978

Lynda James couldn't get her mind off sex.

"You are one sick puppy," she mentally scolded herself, smiling wanly as she slowly settled her 20-year-old bottom on the high-topped stool behind the reception desk at the student library of Western State University. Gratefully, a friendly female voice interrupted her carnal brain waves.

"Don't forget to put those new economics books up on the shelf," called Marsha Templeton, her fellow work-study student, as she pulled on her green sweatshirt with Western embroidered in script across the front. Marsha was ending her latest four-hour shift at the reception desk and heading back to her dorm. Outside, a crisp and colorful western Massachusetts fall afternoon awaited her. Lynda, herself wearing a black turtleneck sweater over blue jeans, was taking over the Thursday desk duties, which would take her up until 8 p.m.

"Anything going on?" Lynda asked.

"No, very quiet," said Marsha. "A few loud freshmen, you know, upstairs, that's all. But that was like a few hours ago. They're gone."

"Grrreat," Lynda said, pushing her eyes open wide in an exaggerated show of relief. She could use a nice uneventful few hours to cram in some required course reading. That was the nice benefit of the job; long periods of silence. All a receptionist had to do was check members' identifications and look inside departing patrons' purses or bags. Students of Western and anyone else with a free membership card were

Gary Meyer

allowed to enter. To break the monotony, there were the occasional filing tasks, either in the card catalogues or bookshelves.

Lynda bid Marsha a “see ya” and opened her economics textbook. But in a matter of seconds, thoughts of groping, coupling naked bodies returned.

Lynda was confused. Her post-puberty experiences with young men were not living up to expectations. All the kissing, clutching, rubbing — sometimes kinda nice, sometimes very weird. Mostly the latter, actually. A few pleasurable moments had come and gone, but nothing like what she heard others talk about. Books, movies, TV shows, music — they all depicted a rapture, an ecstasy, a bonding. Lives are changed forever by the experience. Lynda felt none of that and longed for all of it. Her thoughts of it produced a shiver of excitement. Her face felt hot, her legs weak.

She raised her eyes from the “Economics of Supply” and peered across the room. At the far end, two rows of couches faced each other, with a low table between them. A classic New England fall scene — oak, maple and pine trees with seasonal changing leaves of yellow, red, and green — was visible through the window behind them. A student occasionally walked past the library desk, retrieving a book from the stacks or heading off to the basement bathroom.

“Excuse me?”

A man in his late 40s — early 50s? — was standing beside Lynda’s desk.

“Oh, hi,” she said, quickly recognizing the regular visitor. He began to show his library card. But Lynda smiled and waved a backhand.

“I’ve got it, Mr. Paginni” He grinned back, a warm, friendly expression that gently crinkled the areas beside his brown eyes like the folds in soft leather. Lynda looked down shyly and blushed.

“Hi Lynda, how are things today?” he asked as he thrust his hips through the turnstile.

This Point in Time

“Great,” she responded, automatically. “Got some big-time reading to do, though. As always,” she laughed.

“Yes, I’m going to guess that, uhhh, you have other interests, too, though,” he laughed back, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh yeah. Yeah. A few,” she said with another short laugh, again glancing downward.

He headed off to the magazine and newspaper racks, his daily afternoon destination. Lynda looked back down at her book. Her face still felt warm. She suddenly could feel her legs. And the area between them was moist. She hoped he hadn’t noticed her reddened face.

Out of the corner of her eye, she checked out Mr. Paginni from behind as he leaned over and picked out the Boston Globe from the wooden rack. She knew next he would check out the Wall Street Journal. Then some days he perused the latest issues of several news or financial magazines. If any hadn’t arrived yet, he would ask when they were expected. The library had long been a routine stop on his way home from a job as a Berkhampton businessman, he once told her.

Thinking about her plans for the upcoming weekend, Lynda mused that, for a young woman, she already knew way too much about routine. Once again she was not optimistic about her chances for excitement in the coming days. However innocent in their set-up, her pursuits always ran into the great sexual morass. Parties, movies, dining, sitting around the student lounge — it all devolved into coupling. Lynda called it the “bottom line.” Even for a novice like her, it grew tiresome.

She hoped her library job would be a diversion and perhaps a chance to form a variety of relationships. Instead, all of the down time only left her with new streams of sexy thoughts. Primarily, she began to fantasize about — of all things — being with an older man. “Gross,” she thought at first. Then, with time, she got used to the idea. Get some experience. Be with a real man. Learn a few things. Get away

Gary Meyer

from the experimenting, the searching, the mutual exploring. Graduate to the big leagues.

Specifically, she wondered: How about Mr. Paginni? With his full head of salt-and-pepper hair, fit build, warm smile, cool demeanor — kind of attractive, really.

The idea had a trashy side, of course. A ring on Mr. Paginni's right hand told her he was married. This carried some weight with Lynda, who had been raised a Roman Catholic. But she wasn't strict about her religion, even skipping Mass and sleeping in on Sunday mornings while at school. And Mr. Paginni's legal attachment would be a good thing, Lynda reasoned. No way would there be a chance of mistaken intentions. This is about sex, buddy. No strings. A few months of rapture and good-bye, thanks so much, see ya around.

She was using a diaphragm to prevent pregnancy — something she obtained from the university health office, without her parents' knowledge — but had considered obtaining birth control pills. Most of her friends had gotten some. This was the 70s, after all. "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar." "Love the One Your With." Women are starting to take control of their bodies, their sexuality.

But Lynda was scared of taking pills. She liked the control that a diaphragm provided. Still, the damn thing did require some work and tended to dampen rapturous spontaneity, which was exactly what she found herself craving at this point in time.

Lynda had to struggle mightily to keep her thoughts away from the potential nasty aspects of a liaison with an older man. First and foremost was the image of her own beer-bellied 55-year-old father. There would be the good chance that the man could prove to be just an older version of the ignorant teenage slobs she was trying to outgrow. But her head also entertained images of sexy older men like actors Paul Newman and Steve McQueen. Just maybe Mr. Paginni...

Lynda attempted to refocus on her book, but her attention was drawn instead to a trio of students — two girls and a boy

This Point in Time

— noisily descending the stairs to her right. They were laughing at something one of the girls said. Lynda gave them a barely audible “shhhhhh.” The threesome shot back annoyed looks but went silent. Being upperclassmen, their maturity overcame their fun-loving instincts. “Damn kids,” thought Lynda. With that less-than-attractive image of her peers, and the return of silence, Lynda’s non-academic thoughts again regained firm control.

She contemplated her ability to attract an older man of her choosing. Most of the forward young males among her acquaintances told her she was a “fox.” Her softly featured face, with its wide brown eyes surround by shoulder-length auburn hair, had a natural beauty. Since pre-teen experimentations with a variety of the hippie-era looks of the late 1960s, she had settled on a face free of makeup. Below the neck, she kept her 5-foot-7 frame fit with regular visits to the swimming pool and workouts in her room. She had been a three-sport athlete in high school. The result was a shape of fashion-magazine quality: firm breasts snugly challenging size 35C cups, tight abs and a round bottom that pushed sweatpants to their limits.

With her hormones bubbling like lava, the passing interest shown her by Mr. Paginni had strangely excited her. He was unimposing, really. Medium height, short-cropped hair that once had been black but now was dominated by white strands. Clean-shaven, he appeared as nicely built as a 50-something man could be. His most impressive feature was a broad, happy smile that easily crossed a ruddy, experienced face. She liked him.

“God, could I be any hornier?” she thought, grimacing.

A young man entered at her right, flashing his student ID. Lynda nodded her OK.

From appearances alone, Lynda thought Mr. Paginni looked like a good sex partner. And her few up-close encounters, advancing from the early “hi-hi” exchanges to general talk about the library’s magazine collection, found him

Gary Meyer

accessible. She caught him checking out her chest. He grinned at the “gotcha.” She grinned back, shyly, if a tad permissively.

Could there be more? She would have to make the first move. If he did, she would be turned off by its crassness. But Lynda had never “picked up” a guy. Her stomach roiled at the prospect. So she put it off day after day. What’s the rush, she reasoned?

Today they were alone on the first floor. The time seemed ripe. But she could see he was deep in concentration over the Globe entertainment section. She knew that normally meant he was minutes from leaving. Her stomach, unfed since mid-afternoon and now a bit nervous, gurgled. He rose slowly from the maroon-cushioned high-backed chair and returned the Globe to the rack. He stretched his back, with arms high in the air. Lynda heard a slight crack.

His sweater was tied around his waist. He walked toward Lynda. Her heart pounded as he spoke first.

“Well, have a good weekend,” he said. He smiled at her. She was ready. She swallowed hard.

“Yes,” she responded, looking down at the desk and then slowly up into his eyes. “Got anything, you know, wild planned?”

CHAPTER 2

Autumn 2008

Mitch Ambrose was not happy with the year 2008. He wasn't really pleased with how the entire new millennium was going, in fact. And fielding questions from Melody, his wife of 30 years, never made things any easier.

"Is today your swimming day?" she asked, squinting at him over her bifocals from across the living room.

At age 54, Mitch had joined the "aquatics club" at Western State, a college twenty minutes from their home in Berkhampton, Mass. His doctor told him he needed to lose twenty pounds or risk getting diabetes. Four months of swimming laps for a half hour, three times a week, had brought him halfway to his goal of 190 pounds. His wife, meanwhile, while dagger-sharp in most mental areas, had been stubbornly unable to grasp the Monday-Wednesday-Friday routine.

"Yes. This is Wednesday, swim day," Mitch muttered grimly from his easy chair, without lifting his own bifocaled eyes from the Berkhampton newspaper he held across his lap. Early-morning sunshine streamed in from the window over his left shoulder, making the printed words readable. Then it hit him.

"Uh," he began, his pitch lowered even further, "actually no. I mean, this is Tuesday. I'll be home all day." He hated being wrong. But age was the great equalizer, he was beginning to realize.

Melody, sitting across from him in an antique caned rocking chair, gave Mitch's response the silence it invited. She wanted to ask him to pick up something from the grocery store. But, put off by the distance in his voice, she would simply get her vitamins herself on

Gary Meyer

the way home from work. The store was midway between her office at the Lawrence Department of Planning and the couple's house, a two-floor white Victorian wood-frame structure about a half-mile down rural Miller Road.

She continued checking over the couple's latest credit card bill in her right hand. With the other, she pulled up the coffee cup to her lips from the nearby end table. The caffeine smell and warm cup comforted her like her grouchy husband no longer did. After a minute or so, she glanced up at the brightly dawning day.

It contrasted with the daily Ambrose fog that was again settling inside their nearly two-century-old house. Few words would be spoken. Those that did escape would most resemble elevator conversation; surface talk, quickly rendered. This was the empty-nest world of middle life

For Mitch and Melody Ambrose, now 30 years removed from their bubbly, talky, love-everlasting start. Mitch had heard the comedian Woody Allen refer in an interview to his parents' relationship as "the long truce." He found that apt for his own situation. Years of disagreements over everything from food selection to choices in child rearing had left a bloody battlefield. But they were committed to staying together so they adopted an unofficial peace plan of surface pleasantries.

Much of the commitment stemmed from the fact that the couple's loving start had produced two promising male offspring. And that Ambrose foursome swirled through the small-town New England life of youth-centered activities for the better part of two decades.

Mom and dad put in 60-hour workweeks at the daily Berkhampton Press, first as reporters, then as editors about three-fourths up the pecking order. Outside work, they hustled to accompany sons Leigh and Marshall through a barrage of school and social activities. Leigh took on three sports, Marshall drifted into musical theater, both at Berkhampton High and the surrounding communities. They shared above-average academic success.

Their associations became their parents' associations. When they ended, with both boys heading off to colleges at least one plane ride

This Point in Time

away, Mitch and Melody were not ready. Like a wholesale replanting of shrubs around a homes' foundation, the parents had replaced their eroding journalistic dreams with hopes and aspirations for their children. All available financial resources, padded by inheritances from both their sets of grandparents and parents, were poured into those pursuits. That left little for anything else, including now travel to California or Chicago to continue even part-time involvement in their sons' college lives.

When they reached their mid-50s, the couple decided they'd had enough of stressful newspaper work. It was time to start smelling at least some of the roses they had repeatedly passed by over the years — the art exhibits, movies out of the mainstream, concerts — and, at least for Mitch, to put together a healthier lifestyle. At the same time, the news business had changed. Shrinking circulation, multiple changes in ownership over the decades, constant turnover in staff — all had combined to leave an operation skewing toward younger reporters and a style of journalism — more feature-oriented and less in-depth — that rankled both Ambroses.

Melody had restructured her life around her new job, gained through her old newspaper contacts. As secretary to the planning board, she was the prime contact for the new housing subdivisions, business relocations and related actions for the town of just under 10,000 people.

Mitch had taken on a string of part-time, instant-cash jobs: telephone book deliveryman, "secret shopper," stockroom worker at two mall department stores. He also had done some freelance writing and signed up for temporary help assignments. But even those opportunities had dried up in a crippled local economy. Decades of moves southward by local manufacturing plants had brought the area to its knees as the new millennium approached. And then, after a nearby U.S. Air Force base was shut down in the late 1990s, thousands of residents departed as if on a time-release pilgrimage.

Mostly, Mitch Ambrose had long days to fill. To make the hours pass, he reluctantly tackled projects around the house. His handyman skills were limited to hammer-and-nail 101 but he could handle a telephone with aplomb, contacting contractors to get the roof fixed,

Gary Meyer

house painted, bathroom tiling replaced, new basement stairs built, gutters replaced. His verbal skills were otherwise kept sharp by a running dialogue with Yogi. This was his canine sidekick of the Labrador persuasion, chocolate variety.

Mitch's hope was to get the house in shape so he and his wife could get it on the market at a good price and afford a move to a smaller structure somewhere closer to his sons or other family members in California or New Jersey. While New England winters are a blessed event to millions, Mitch had come to dread them. Three months of sub-freezing temperatures clogged his daily coping mechanisms. He fought against calling it depression, and hated using the nuevo-term Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). But his doctor put that acronym in his file and prescribed use of a sun-simulation lamp twenty minutes a day. It didn't help but it was good for his eyes, at least.

Melody Ambrose was not subject to such mood swings. She was no winter enthusiast, for sure. But cold winds could blow, tree leaves change color, snow drifts pile high, icicles hang low from roofs...and her psyche retained its brick-and-mortar base. A good few hours at work, a well-written book passage or a clever TV show were enough to get her through the day with a smile. Conversely, Mitch's moodiness, a demanding landowner at the office, inattentive store clerks, a rude telemarketer, shallow local TV news reports...such were the elements that could put her in a funk. Unlike the days-long disappearances for Mitch's pleasant demeanor, her foulness would only last a few hours. Unless she hadn't heard from her two boys for a few days. Then her nerve endings became particularly raw.

Still, both Mitch and Melody would readily acknowledge their situation, while not day-to-day giddy with wonder and pleasure, was good. Their income from investments and Melody's salary kept them comfortable. Their sons' education was paid for by inheritance money received from the estates of their fathers, who both had passed away in recent years, and grandparents.

Painful health problems had come and gone — Mitch with cataract surgery after a detached retina; Melody with a kidney stone

This Point in Time

— and left them both in reasonable shape. Neither took regular medicine outside vitamins and natural supplements. Both exercised daily and maintained low-calorie, limited-meat diets fitting their age.

They kept things surface pleasant. Life went on, even without love. The long truce held firm. At this point in time, they still shared a begrudging mutual respect. At worst, they simply hated little things about each other, like his cynicism about life and her desire to please all she encountered, even at the expense of family.

The descent into this relationship had been slow, drifting downward with each disagreement, each silent treatment, each snide comment — over career direction, home maintenance, extended families or future plans. Neither had strayed sexually, but how much of that was because of circumstance — lack of opportunity — and how much from loyalty was open to debate.

Even with all of that, though, Mitch could look at Melody and see glimmers of the woman that 30 years ago deeply stirred his passions. She retained her lanky 5-foot-7 figure, widened just a bit with child-birth hips and tush, topped off with a pretty, friendly face; her easy, infectious laugh was decorated with a ready, disarming smile.

On doctor's orders, she was taking calcium supplements to maintain her strong, erect posture, and her once-long brown hair now was kept at about jaw length. Natural spiraling curls gave it a 1920s' flapper look. Occasionally, she would pull it back behind her ears. She had left makeup off her face until recent years, when she sometimes lined her eyes to give them some definition. Her wit also was had remained earthy and sharp. In sum, she was attractive, in a mature way.

And her writing skills had been legend in her days as a reporter, bringing her several honors atop the generally glowing admiration of fellow workers and the community.

Melody likewise was still vaguely drawn to the good-mood Mitch, whose appearances were about as frequent as robins in winter. The mid-50s husband remained a "looker" in her book. The slim physique of his youth had returned after a few years of weight

Gary Meyer

gain (although no one but his doctor and Melody seemed to notice the extra poundage on his 6-foot-2 frame).

He let his lower face become covered with bushy facial hair for a beard-growing contest held as part of his community's bicentennial celebration in the late 1980s. Sensitive Anglo skin had always made him dread shaving, so he re-grew the beard shortly after becoming an editor and reducing his appearances in public. Twenty years later, the growth had settled around his lip and jaw as a close-cropped full beard, now salt-and-red pepper rather than the original dirty blond. As such, it matched the short sprouts that still covered much of his dome.

Out of this ruddy face could come the disarmingly funny and perceptive words that still managed to charm many, including Melody. At those times, she allowed herself to fantasize about someday being one of those elderly couples she spotted from time to time, holding hands as they walk through an airport or the mall.

To rub things in, the monthly magazine put out for local seniors, "55 Plus," recently ran an article, "75 Years of Young Love." It was subtitled "In Love After 75 Years of Marriage" and featured a photo of 95-year-old Connie holding tight onto 98-year-old Sam, her hubby of 75 years. Melody sighed out loud when she came across the piece. She imagined herself someday enjoying that closeness. Then reality — in the form of a crass comment or reminder of arguments past — slapped her back to her senses. There would be no physical contact with this husband, she knew, regardless of any occasional spurts of attraction.

Mitch's personality had stood him good stead as a news reporter. In his 20s, his doggedness and instincts had earned several top awards from state and local journalism organizations for community service and investigative reporting. He described his approach as the "four Ps of being a good reporter": patience, persistence, pleasantness and pluck.

But now Mitch was mostly bored as he searched for something new to take up his waking hours. He perused the want ads in his old newspaper daily but found nothing promising. Today, he was desperate enough to take note of one ad seeking companions for

This Point in Time

nursing home residents: “Companions Wanted,” it headlined. “Males and females, to visit men and women living in nursing homes for conversation, board games, walks, short trips, document preparation, letter writing, etc. Apply box 431.”

Mitch laughed and read the ad for his wife, who had gotten up from her chair and was heading to the dining room. She turned and pushed her lips upward in what could pass for a smile or mild constipation. She remembered something her boss, Reginald Desantis, had told her just a few days before.

“You know, I heard that Charleton Paginni — remember him? — he’s in the Lutheran Home and looking rather bad,” she said. “Reggie said his daughter — I think he said daughter — she was asking people for just such a person who would come over and visit him once in a while. All his children live out of town and since his wife died — when was it, 2004? — he has had no one to talk to. None of his relatives live around here.”

Mitch looked up from the newspaper.

“Yeah, I always kind of liked old Charley. I mean I remember he used to coach baseball and soccer when his kids were young and he was still hanging around the field when I was coaching Leigh’s teams. Nice guy. Funny.”

Melody remembered him, too, from the family’s baseball days a decade ago.

“His wife was quiet,” she said. “Just sat and watched the games. If he’s missing her, it’s probably more as a sounding board. You know, she must have been a good listener.”

Mitch threw the third and final section of his paper on the floor beside his chair. He would retrieve it later for the recycle bin. He called after Melody, who now was in the dining room, putting on her thigh-length light denim jacket to prepare against off the early-fall chill outside.

“You know, that sounds like easy money — going to visit someone in the nursing home. I wonder how much time is involved and how much money they pay.”

“Well, I’ll ask Reg if he has a phone number for the daughter, if you want. Or you can just call that number in the paper.”

Gary Meyer

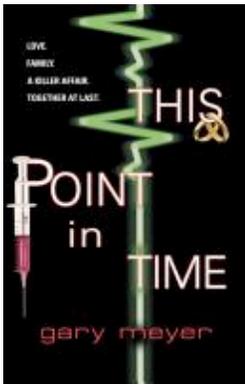
“I’d like to try Mr. Paganini first. At least it’s someone I know a little and could feel comfortable around. Otherwise, it could be kind of weird. I don’t know. Maybe not. I’ve never given it much thought. But if it would get me out of the house for a few hours, it may be worth a try — bring in 50 or 60 bucks a week.”

Melody headed for the side door that leads to the garage.

“OK,” she said, grabbing the doorknob. “I’ll try and get the info or maybe, I don’t know, even Reg could call her for you. See ya.”

“See ya,” said Mitch, barely audible. He was heading to the bathroom. But he called back to Yogi, sprawled out and deep in sleep on top of a warm sunlit spot on the wood plank floor.

“Yo-man. Could you survive without me for a few hours a week?” He asked the question again, taking his voice an octave higher in the odd, pet-owner way of saying everything twice. Yogi twitched his legs, still snoozing soundly as Mitch closed the bathroom door.



Can murder save this marriage? Mitch and Melody Ambrose, a 50-something suburban Massachusetts couple in the throes of "empty nest syndrome," are drawn into the investigation of a suspicious death at a local nursing home. What the two ex-journalists uncover sets in motion a series of life-rattling events and revelations. Along the way, they also re-discover each other and the victim's far-flung family is brought together with a common purpose of avenging his death.

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