

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

TAMI HOAG

"WITHOUT A DOUBT...
ONE OF THE
MOST INTENSE
SUSPENSE WRITERS
AROUND."
—*Chicago Tribune*



DARK
HORSE

TAMI
HOAG

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A Bantam Book

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Praise for the bestsellers of
TAMI HOAG

DUST TO DUST

“Compelling and expertly told. Plot lines smolder and ignite as the suspense builds. The result leaves . . . the reader scorched.” —*USA Today*

“[This] wintry tale of crime and punishment packs a powerful thrill. Bottom line: Good cops + bad cops = killer suspense.”
—*People* (Page-turner of the week, starred review)

“*Dust to Dust* breathes new life into the old good cop vs. bad cop genre. . . . A roller-coaster ride of a thriller that will leave fans awaiting the next installment.”
—*New York Post*

“Sharp dialogue and an unusual plot make this a highly engaging outing for Hoag.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“Practice must make perfect after all because Tami Hoag . . . just keeps getting better. . . . Hoag not only develops her characters, she also thickens the plot with every chapter, until there is no alternative but to keep turning those pages.” —*The Orlando Sentinel*

“As a master of complex plots, Hoag is adept at faking readers into thinking they’ve figured out what’s happened, only to shatter their theories. *Dust to Dust* continues the tradition.” —*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

“In this well-crafted thriller, Hoag sets a complex plot in motion and gives it a powerful, emotional center.”
—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A classic whodunit with many twists and turns and a surprise ending.” —*Booklist*

ASHES TO ASHES

“Hoag has more or less taken over the serial killer genre all by herself. . . . [Her] stories . . . have a way of burrowing into the dark parts of the unconscious and planting seeds of terror.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“You’ll want to lock the doors while you’re reading. . . . Hoag does her homework and gets the details right in this creepy story. . . . Powerful.”
—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“An up-all-night read.” —*The Detroit News*

“[A] detail-packed thriller . . . *The Silence of the Lambs* comes to mind more than once.”
—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Hoag has a way of sneaking up on the reader in superior thriller tradition. . . . She neatly sidesteps the graphic crudeness of some of her competitors, while still providing enough surprise twists and stomach-turning carnage to satisfy any heebie-jeebie enthusiast.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Absorbing . . . always interesting . . . Once again, Hoag doesn’t disappoint.”
—*New York Post*

“Promises to keep readers up reading into the night. . . . A lot of bang for the buck.”
—*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*

“[A] compelling . . . startling story.” —*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Chilling . . . Patricia Cornwell wrote thrillers that had readers turning the pages until 3 A.M. Now Hoag is keeping readers up all hours.”

—*Sun-Sentinel*, Fort Lauderdale

“If ‘page turner’ is a term too easily used, Ms. Hoag has restored its legitimacy. Her stories shock us, shake us, take us to the darkest edges of criminal conduct. There is talk of a movie. Word is it could be the next *Silence of the Lambs*. *Silence* was not one of my favorite books. *Ashes to Ashes* is. So if anyone asks, I’ll say don’t wait for the movie. You’ll be cheating yourself.”

—*The Cincinnati Enquirer*

“We who know a little about Tami Hoag’s novels lock the doors, grab a bowl of popcorn, and settle down for an often unsettling read. With *Ashes*, we need to look over our shoulders every chapter or so because the evil therein gathers momentum with every move a serial killer makes.”

—*The Detroit News*

“This is a winning psychological thriller that will attract fans of Thomas Harris.”

—*Booklist*

A THIN DARK LINE

“*A Thin Dark Line* is chilling, it’s atmospheric, it’s even romantic; but the novel’s best achievement is its making readers constantly interrogate their ideas about justice and revenge, their own presumptions of guilt and innocence.”—*Us* magazine

“This mystery defies you to put it down, and when you’re done you’re damn glad you didn’t.”

—*The Detroit News/Free Press*

“Hoag deftly demonstrates that the search for truth is rarely straightforward. Important clues are cunningly buried, and the book’s tension is as sustained as it is palpable.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“Hoag’s tale, with plenty of twists and turns, is a great way to spend a quiet weekend.”
—*The Orlando Sentinel*

“Hoag writes big, full stories with complex characters and situations. She doesn’t shrink from the raw side of crime and the dark side of human nature.”
—*The Cincinnati Post*

“With a flair for dialect and regional atmosphere, Hoag captures the essence of the Cajun family and working relationships while injecting suspense and heart-pounding terror into a violent tangle of justice, innocence, treachery, and public opinion. A thoroughly engrossing read.” —*Booklist*

“Killer suspense.” —*Booknews* from *The Poisoned Pen*

“Hoag has evolved into a fine thriller writer. [She] displays a firm grasp on locale [and] there’s plenty of suspense in waiting to see how it will all resolve. Psychopathic villains are common enough, but Hoag has managed to endow hers with a scarred entourage that provides a tragic note.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Hoag is always a good gritty read.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

GUILTY AS SIN

“A chilling study of evil that holds the reader until the shocking surprise ending.” —Phillip Margolin,
New York Times bestselling author of *The Associate*

“A page-turner.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“Accomplished and scary.” —*Cosmopolitan*

“As the criminal’s clever plot unravels . . . the tangled relationships that lie just beneath the surface of Deer Lake are tantalizingly revealed.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A tantalizing whodunit . . . A compelling narrative that will leave readers guessing as to the outcome.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

NIGHT SINS

“Lock the doors and windows and turn on all the lights. . . . A knuckle-whitening, spine-chilling thriller.”

—*New Woman*

“*Night Sins* is nerve-shattering, explosive entertainment. This is suspense at the highest level.”

—Michael Palmer,

New York Times bestselling author of *Fatal*

“This is a book best read in a well-lit room, with the certain knowledge that all locks are securely bolted and all closets uninhabited. We *are* all afraid of something, and Tami Hoag has a good handle on what it is.”

—*Mostly Murder*

BANTAM BOOKS BY TAMI HOAG

Ask your bookseller for titles you may have missed

DARK HORSE

DUST TO DUST

ASHES TO ASHES

A THIN DARK LINE

GUILTY AS SIN

NIGHT SINS

DARK PARADISE

CRY WOLF

STILL WATERS

LUCKY'S LADY

**This book was inspired by the adventures
of Tess and Mati. May there be many more,
and may they live to tell the tales.**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I have several people to thank for sharing with me their professional expertise as I wrote this story. Lieutenant Ed Serafin, Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, Robbery/Homicide division. Robert Crais. Eileen Dreyer. Jessie Steiner. Mary Phelps. And most of all, Betsy Steiner, true friend and partner in international intrigue.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to my other world.

In my life away from my desk, I am a competitive equestrian. In fact, I've been a rider longer than I've been a writer. Over the years horses have been my joy, refuge, therapy, salvation, and comfort. I've ridden in nearly every equestrian discipline, from barrel racing to jumping. When I was thirteen and my girlfriends were baby-sitting to earn spending money, my father was bringing home young horses for me to break to saddle.

Several years ago I settled on the equestrian sport of dressage as my out-of-office passion. Dressage is all about control and precision and the mastery of imperceptible cues between rider and horse. The ultimate result is something like equine ballet, which appears elegant and effortless but requires the same physical and mental fitness as power yoga.

I began competing in dressage in 1999. Being me, I didn't ease into the sport. I have one gear in everything I do: full-on. I bought a wonderful—if difficult—horse named D'Artagnon from Olympic rider Guenter Seidel, and within a year's time went from my first dressage competition to being a nationally ranked amateur rider in the U.S. Dressage Federation. At the end of my first season, my coach, trainer, mentor, and great friend, Betsy Steiner (a world-class rider herself), encouraged

me to bring D'Artagnon along with several other horses from her stable to Florida for the winter season.

Every year top equestrians from the East Coast, Midwest, Canada, and Europe migrate to Wellington in Palm Beach County to spend three months in constant training and competition in some of the most prestigious dressage and jumper shows in the country. Thousands of horses and hundreds of riders converge to create a fascinating world, a world driven by the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat, and lots of money. A world populated by the ultrarich and the very poor; celebrities, royalty, and ordinary people who scrimp and save year-round in order to "do the season"; philanthropists, dilettantes, professionals, amateurs, con men, and criminals. People who love horses, and people who love to exploit people who love horses. A world with a glamorous surface and a tough underbelly. Yin and yang. Positive and negative.

By the end of that first season in Florida, my imagination was running wild with story ideas that would blend my two worlds. The result is *Dark Horse*, a classic private-eye novel set against the backdrop of international show jumping. I hope you enjoy this glimpse into the dark side of my other world.

If you come away from this book thinking the horse business is all bad, I'll tell you that's not so. Some of the finest, kindest, most generous people I have ever known have been in the horse business. But on the flip side of that coin, some of the most vile, vicious, loathsome people I have ever known have been in the horse business. The horse world can be a world of extremes and amazing adventures. I've had horses drugged, horses stolen. I've been stranded in a foreign country with a sociopathic horse dealer who canceled my transporta-

tion home. I've masqueraded as a groom and flown in the belly of a cargo plane with a horse bent on killing me. But these adventures don't happen every day. Every day I go to the stables and find friendship and partnership and calm within my soul.

My own horses appear in this book, in Sean Avadon's stable. But, in answer to the inevitable question, Elena is not me (if my life were so exciting, when would I write a book?). However, I do agree with her when she says, "On the back of a horse I felt whole, complete, connected to that vital place in the center of me . . . and the chaos within me found balance."

**DARK
HORSE**

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

FADE IN:

**EXTERIOR: PALM BEACH EQUESTRIAN CENTER—
SUNSET**

Flat, open fields of scrub stretching to the west. A dirt road running north onto equestrian center property and south toward small horse farms some distance away. No one around. The fields are empty. No people, no horses. Sunday night: everyone has gone home.

Erin stands at the back gate. She's waiting for someone. She's nervous. She thinks she's here for a secret purpose. She thinks her life will change tonight.

It will.

She looks at her watch. Impatient. Afraid he won't show. She's not aware of the camera filming her. She thinks she's alone.

She's thinking: maybe he won't come, maybe she's wrong about him.

A rusted white van approaches from the south. She watches it come toward her. She looks annoyed. No one uses this back road this time of day. The gate to the show grounds has already been chained shut for the night.

The van stops. A masked assailant leaps out.

ERIN

No!

She starts to run toward the gate. He catches her arm from behind and spins her around. She kicks him. He backhands her across the face, knocking her sideways. She wrenches free of his grasp as she stumbles, and she tries to run again but can't get her feet under her. The assailant knocks her down from behind, coming down on top of her, his knee in her back. He pulls a hypodermic needle from the pocket of his jacket and rams the needle into her arm. She makes a sound of pain and starts to cry.

He pulls her to her feet and shoves her into the van. He slams the door shut, gets in the van, the van turns around and drives away.

Life changes in a heartbeat.

FADE OUT