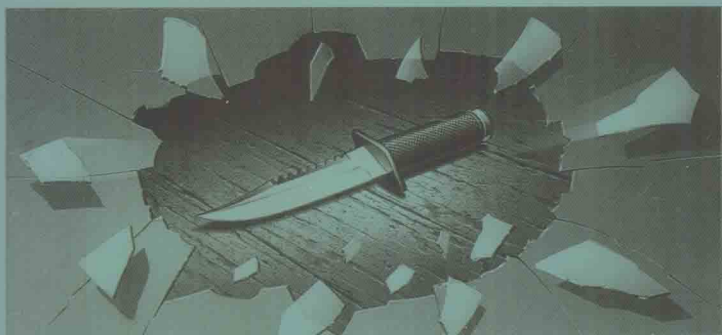


New York Times bestselling author of
Mosaic, Haven, and The Shadow Box

**JOHN R.
MAXIM**



**BANNERMAN'S
LAW**

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AVON BOOKS

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An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, New York 10022-5299

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ISBN: 0-380-73010-3

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First Avon Books paperback printing: October 2000

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1

On a cool and perfect California morning, on the last day of her short life, Lisa Benedict parked her Fiero in a quiet residential area several streets away from the gate house of Sur La Mer.

She had come by a different route this time, using only back roads and residential streets. She avoided Tower Road, which ringed the grounds on all but the ocean side. It had been tempting to make a quick pass of it, to see that all was quiet, but that would have meant driving past the surveillance cameras. Better, she decided, not to let them see her car again. The car was white, with a USC Trojans decal across the rear window, a student parking sticker on the windshield, and a crumpled left front fender. They were likely to remember it from the previous Sunday. But without the car, she felt sure, they would not recognize her at all.

On that first Sunday she had worn a skirt and blue blazer, and a pair of heels, which she'd ended up ruining. This time she was better equipped. She wore a borrowed

running suit, dark green and hooded—to hide the shine of her auburn hair—and she had muted her new white Reeboks with a bottle of Kitchen Bouquet which, she hoped, would wash out. The suit was three sizes too large and shapeless, all the better for camouflage. She would blend nicely into the thick forest of sugar pines that ringed the asylum.

She locked the car, then strapped a bulky tote around her waist, adjusting it so that her Nikon and recorder would not chafe her spine. She began jogging. Upon reaching Tower Road, where it bordered Sur La Mer to the south, she turned right, away from the gates, and paced herself with another runner some fifty yards ahead of her. *That's good, she thought. Not being the only one out here.* The other jogger, a man, faded red sweatshirt and shorts, visored tennis hat, glanced back over his shoulder but kept on.

He'd seen her. It meant she would have to keep this up for a while. She couldn't very well have him look back again and see that she'd vanished. But now he was turning, reversing his direction, heading back toward her. As he drew near, he nodded. A brief, polite smile, a flicker of eye contact. He was a man in his forties, well tanned but fleshy, not very fit.

That face. Did it seem familiar? No. Just a face. Don't get paranoid. She bobbed her head in response, then continued on, keeping the Sur La Mer estate to her left. She counted off two hundred paces and then pretended to trip as if over a shoelace. She stopped, pretending to tie it. Glancing the way she'd come, she saw the other jogger was gone.

Rats, she thought. She'd prefer to have seen him peel off toward his home. Or at least to be sure that he wasn't from Sur La Mer. Not that it should matter necessarily. She wondered what her sister would do in this situation. Better to make sure, she decided. She turned in the direction he had taken.

Keeping a steady pace, she approached the main gate, the only gate, and its video camera. The camera's stare

remained fixed, not tilting or turning as she went by. Morning dew still covered the driveway. It showed one set of tire tracks but no footprints. Satisfied, she slowed to a walk, then reversed her field once more.

All was quiet now. No people in sight. She heard no sound but the distant yap of a small dog.

She reached the place where, seven days earlier, in heels, she had struggled over the low fence and scurried for the cover of the trees that formed a living moat around Sur La Mer. She did it again, this time smoothly vaulting the fence and promptly blending, green against green, into the forest. Just inside the tree line, she lowered herself into a squat so that it would seem, if anyone came, that she had paused to relieve herself. She waited for five minutes, listening, then she checked her watch. The climb to the main grounds, she estimated, would take twenty minutes. Last Sunday it had taken nearly an hour. But this time she was dressed for it. And she had a map. She knew where the trip wires were. She would not have to feel her way.

Not bad, she told herself, for someone who'd never done anything like this before. Her sister, Carla, would be proud of her. Well . . . maybe, after bawling her out first. Lisa had asked herself, all that week, how Carla would have gone about it. Careful preparation, came the answer. Slow and easy. Except Carla, being Carla, would probably have brought a weapon of some kind. And her heart would not be pounding this hard.

"Who am I kidding?" she muttered aloud.

Carla wouldn't have done this at all. She would have thought the whole thing was dumb. Seen too many movies.

On the other hand, Carla never cared much about her grades. She had never even finished college, let alone earned a masters at the toughest film school in the country. Let alone graduating third in her class, if she could lock in an A for Mecklenberg's course.

And if Nellie Dameon, up there, isn't worth an A . . . heck, an A *plus* once Mecklenberg learns that she, Lisa Benedict, actually got her voice on tape, then nothing is.

Lisa took a breath and began her climb.

2

She had gone to Sur La Mer, on that other Sunday, with no thought of trespassing. Her intention was merely to photograph the main gate and, if she could, to sweet-talk the gatekeeper into letting her walk up the entrance road for a shot of Sur La Mer itself.

Not that doing so seemed terribly important at the time. There were plenty of file photographs of the main house and gardens. But most were fifty or sixty years old. The only recent ones, and the only color shots, were all taken from the air. And not that her thesis would suffer for want of a current shot at ground level. Nor, for that matter, were photographs even required of her assignment. But they were a nice touch. And she'd be glad to have them if she ever wanted to try selling the finished product to a magazine. Maybe, someday, even expanding it into a book. Or a documentary.

More immediately, the name of the game was impress the professor. He'd told her that permission to visit was almost never granted. Not to the press, not to film histori-

ans, and certainly not to graduate students. She would dearly love to show him that she'd actually talked her way onto the grounds.

But there was no gatekeeper on whom to bestow her most melting sweet-young-thing smile. Only the camera and a tinny male voice from a box. She tried nonetheless. She promised the voice that she would not bother the patients. She would not talk to them or photograph them. The voice was friendly enough, in a lecherous sort of way—she could tell that its owner enjoyed looking at her—but, in the end, it was firm. The rules were strict. No photographs, no admittance, no exceptions, sorry. The voice clicked off. The camera stared. She stared back. She tried looking sad. She even tried looking sexy, rubbing a hand over her breasts, head back, lips parted, her tongue running over them.

Nothing. No response.

This annoyed her. She tried to imagine that the man behind that camera was up there drooling over his monitor but she knew, more likely, that he was probably laughing and calling the other guards to come look. Lisa flushed. Glaring at the silent lens, she raised her Nikon to her eye and pressed the shutter, three times, out of spite.

This small act of defiance, while satisfying, was pointless. Lisa realized that. The inmates at Sur La Mer, the very existence of the place, were only the smallest part of her project, which dealt with the transitional period between the Hollywood silent film era and the sound era. Professor Mecklenberg called it a classic case study of corporate resilience in response to a revolution in technology. *"Imagine the gasoline engine becoming obsolete practically overnight. It was almost on that scale,"* he had said.

Lisa was doubtful at first. But Mecklenberg had lent her a few books on the subject and the more she read, the more fascinated she became. Back in 1927 many studio executives had dismissed "talkies" as a fad or, at most, a development that would be no more than an occasional novelty for years to come. As myopic as that thinking

seemed in retrospect, the reasoning behind it was solid. To begin with, the prospective cost of converting thousands of theaters to sound was staggering. The amount would exceed the industry's entire income—not profit, *income*—for the whole preceding year.

Further, all earnings from European distribution would be lost; silent films were international, but Hollywood movies would now have to be recorded strictly in English. Dubbing was unknown. Even worse, the talkies would be of dreadful quality because of the limitations of the soundstage. They would be little more than set piece stage plays on film and the actors would be allowed almost no freedom of movement. The camera, enclosed in a soundproof box, would have to be stationary. The vacuum tube microphones of the day, sensitive in only one direction, would have to be concealed in lamps and in floral arrangements and actors would have to speak directly into them without moving their heads. Location films, outdoor adventures, battle scenes and chariot races, all that contributed to the sweep and grandeur of the silver screen, were now impossible. "Why the hell," asked one studio head, reasonably, "would the public give all that up just to hear an actor talk to a potted plant?"

What struck Lisa the most, in doing her research, was the human cost of the transition. Careers of long standing were shattered overnight. Actors and actresses who were household names in 1927 could find no work at all in 1928. Some failed because their voices were totally unsuited to their screen images. Virile leading men had high-pitched voices or pronounced lisps. Clara Bow had a Bronx honk and the Talmadge sisters spoke Brooklynese. Others could talk perfectly well but not in English. One western hero, a former Texas Ranger according to studio publicists, was actually from Sweden and could barely order from an American menu. Most actors, the studios realized to their horror, had virtually no concept of good diction. Almost all, except those few with stage training, would need voice testing and diction coaches. Elocution experts, many with invented credentials, flocked to Holly-

wood where they were promptly enriched by frightened, desperate actors.

The studio heads, meanwhile, began importing stage actors in great numbers. In effect, this left them with a double payroll because many film actors with unproven voices still had expensive contracts. More than a few studio executives conspired to break those contracts through intimidation, blackmail, invoking morals clauses, and even deliberately sabotaging the sound tracks of these actors' first talkies.

Gods and goddesses one day, unemployable the next. Many had come from nothing; some were little more than hoboes, lured to the film colony by the promise of work as extras. Others had been ranch hands or cowboys, run-aways or prostitutes. A few found success, money, and adulation beyond their wildest dreams. Then, in a twinkling, they were nothing again. They lost their homes, their cars, and, quickest of all, their friends. Some became suicides. Some died of broken hearts. A few retreated into madness.

Clara Bow was one example. Nellie Dameon was another. Nellie, it was said, had been so traumatized by the sniggers that greeted her two attempts at talkies that she never spoke again. She became a recluse, entombing herself in her Benedict Canyon home until, abandoned by her one remaining servant when there was nothing left to steal, the Motion Picture Association quietly arranged for her care at a private asylum known as Sur La Mer. More than sixty years later, Lisa Benedict was astonished to learn, Nellie Dameon was still there. And there were others. No one seemed to know how many.

Sur La Mer, according to one of Mecklenberg's books, was located on the crest of a wooded hill high above the Santa Barbara shoreline. She was well into her thesis, in which this place appeared as no more than a single footnote, and had no real need, and certainly not the time, to attempt a visit. But she found herself haunted by visions of a frail old woman, silent, eyes glazed and distant, still clinging to those brief champagne years before her mind

and heart were broken. And so, on a Sunday morning, dressed nicely as if for church, Lisa drove north to Santa Barbara. She wanted to see the place. Feel it. Perhaps have a photograph or two to show for the trip.

A shot of the entrance, thanks to the voice from the gate house box, was all she was going to get. At least it was something. And it was rather a good one. There was a heavy mist that morning. The road, beyond the gate, faded into it. A nice touch. Eerie.

But she was no less annoyed. A place such as Sur La Mer, she felt, surely had nothing to hide. Why, then, deny her a shot of the main house? And she was also tempted. What, she wondered, was the worst that could happen if she were caught climbing up through the trees? How much of a fine could there be for trespassing? It was done all the time by the paparazzi, even by legitimate journalists. More likely, the most it would cost her would be a dry cleaning bill for her skirt and the scarring of a pair of shoes that hurt her feet anyway. It seemed worth it. She decided to try.

Lisa climbed back into her Fiero, fastened her seat belt, and, after consulting a road map for the benefit of the surveillance camera, drove away, looking for a street on which to conceal her car. That done, she returned on foot to Tower Road. At one point, well up from the main gate, she caught a glint of metal in a tree that extended over the sidewalk. She moved closer, looking up. She saw two more cameras there. They were fastened in fixed positions, unable to scan, and they pointed in opposite directions. She was, she realized, in a blind spot that extended for perhaps twenty yards. She had approached them nearly at right angles. She would not have been seen. Convinced of that, grateful for her luck, she climbed the four-foot fence that ringed the property.

The fence, she soon learned, was the least of the obstacles preventing easy access to Sur La Mer. First there were the pines themselves, thickly planted and rising like steps. In places, the climb was nearly vertical. Trees that might have helped her seemed to have been deliberately cut

away. Rock faces had been greased, then covered with peat moss so that any touch would leave evidence of an intruder. Peat moss, she was fairly sure, did not belong in a pine forest. Someone had definitely put it there. She paused, wondering whether this was such a good idea. As she rested, and as the rising sun began filtering through the pines, her eye caught another reflection off metal, this time on the forest floor. Carefully, she moved toward its source. She knelt.

It was a trip wire. Mostly hidden by moss. A two-foot section of it had been exposed, probably by rain, and now glistened with dew. What was this, she wondered? Why trip wires? She thought again about retreating. But now she was more than curious. Why, she asked, should a place like Sur La Mer need such a security system? Who was up there? Just a few old actors and actresses. Who would want to harm them?

She climbed, all the more slowly, gently probing the sphagnum with her fingertips. A few yards further on, she found a second wire. She would have missed the third, or she might have touched it, had not a sharp spit of flame erupted inches from her face. She blinked, waiting for the afterimage to fade and for her heart to be still. Now she saw it. The limp remains of a field mouse, eyes wide, face scorched. This wire, if not the others as well, was electrified. Composing herself, she pressed on. Just above, through the trees, she could see what seemed to be a clearing. She raised her head. Now she could see the outline of a roof. Another twenty yards.

And another twenty minutes to cover them. She moved, one step at a time, looking for more cameras, more wires, more dead animals. She found none. The climb, which might have taken ten minutes with the right shoes and without the obstacle course, had taken more than fifty. But now she knew the way. Going down would be easier. And she was there, inside, looking at a manor house so vast that it seemed to fill half the sky.

The house, built in the French château style, stood glistening as the morning sun burned through the mist and

reflected off a million flakes of mica set in granite. She knew its history. Built in the 1890s, railroad money, owner ruined during the panic of 1907, couldn't find a buyer, gave it to the state in lieu of back taxes. The state kept it in reasonable repair by leasing it for use in location shooting to the new film industry down in Hollywood and eventually leased it to the Motion Picture Relief Fund for use as a rest home.

The grounds were lovely. She had found a place behind a long low hedge from which she could see nearly all of it. A flawless dichondra lawn sloped down from the main house in the direction of the Pacific Ocean. The ocean was a full half mile distant and perhaps two hundred feet below the crest of Sur La Mer. But the skill of some long ago landscaper had made the ocean, the sky, and this place seem all of a piece. There was a good-size beach community down below, a suburb of Santa Barbara, but nothing of it could be seen or even heard from the grounds. Lisa imagined, correctly, that even if she climbed to the highest window of the main house she would see nothing that was not part of the serene little world that had been created for the members.

Members.

They were never called patients, she had learned. Nor inmates. They were members.

But why, she wondered again, all the security? She understood, she supposed, why no interviews were permitted. They lived, said one old article, in a carefully controlled reality, in rooms without mirrors. Some had no idea that they'd grown old. They dressed every day. They read scripts of photoplays that would never be made. They placed telephone calls to agents, studio heads, and columnists long dead; calls that were actually taken and answered by staff.

All very sad, thought Lisa. Such a fragile existence. So dreamlike. She found herself wondering how Nellie Dameron spent her days if she never spoke. Endlessly watching her own films? Living only within them, forever young? It seemed an intrusion even to ask, let alone to

write about it. Better to leave these people and their ruined lives in peace. Be satisfied with a few photos of the house and grounds.

Staying to the shadows and low behind the hedge, Lisa set her lens at its widest angle and took several establishing shots before zooming in on details of the architecture and landscaping. She used a full roll of film. It was enough. She was about to back away, into the sugar pines for her descent to Tower Road, when she saw movement at the far end of the château. Members, she thought. Two of them. They were in wheelchairs, being pushed to a place of shade at the edge of a flower garden. Two men. One wore an overcoat with a thick fur collar and a black Homburg on his head. The other wore a yachting cap and blazer. Winter and summer. She wondered where they thought they were. She reloaded the Nikon.

One of the men who had pushed them, casual clothing, no whites, glanced in her direction. Lisa ducked down, stepping back from the hedge. Her legs touched a marble bench. She sat.

She could see through the hedge, although not well. More people were moving about. A man, wearing a long white bathrobe stepped out onto the terrace. A towel covered his head. She pressed the zoom button of her camera and brought one knee under her, raising herself.

His body filled the viewfinder. He was stretching now, rolling his head over his shoulders, luxuriating in the morning sun. One side of the towel fell away. Lisa saw that the face, all of it, was thickly bandaged. There were holes in the bandages for his mouth and for one eye. The other was completely covered. Lisa, on impulse, snapped a picture.

The man reacted to something behind him. Lisa zoomed back to take in more of the terrace. A woman in a matching robe, her face also bandaged but not as fully, approached him holding two mugs. The woman was slender, and seemed rather tall. Her hair, ash blond, shoulder length, was brushed out. It had the look of having just been washed. Steam rose from the mugs. His held a straw.

He took it from her, sipped, and nodded thanks. She rubbed his neck, affectionately.

Someone else approached. It was another man, sport coat, sunglasses, balding, a double chin. He was speaking to the couple, gesticulating. From his body language, he seemed to be urging them . . . no, ordering them . . . to go back inside. The man with no face turned away, ignoring him. He moved with his mug to the flagstone steps. The woman joined him and, very deliberately, they sat. The second man stood, hands on his hips, glaring at their backs. He was saying something. They paid no attention. The man with the sunglasses, clearly angry, took a breath. He raised one hand and, first glancing around him, extended his middle finger. Lisa snapped him. He turned, his color rising, and stalked back toward the double doors of the château.

Lisa zoomed in on the sitting pair. From what she could see of their skin they were certainly not old. And they had lowered themselves easily, she into a lotus position. What's with the faces, she wondered? Auto accident? Plastic surgery? And why here? This is supposed to be a rest home for batty old actors.

A shadow passed over the hedge, its source behind her. Her stomach tightened.

Too late, she heard footsteps on a gravel path. She cringed, eyes closed, waiting.

"Good morning, Nellie," came a voice. "Fine day."

Not yet daring to breathe, she half turned on the bench toward the man who had spoken. He was quite old, easily eighty-five, but he stood tall and was walking steadily. He carried a large easel case in one hand and a folding stool in the other.

She hesitated. "Um . . . good morning," she said, clearing her throat.

The tall man slowed, then stopped. He cocked an ear as if Lisa's return of greeting was cause for disbelief. Now he turned and stared. Past her. Through her.

"Nellie?" His voice was tentative, not much above a whisper.

She saw that his eyes were clouded. She was tempted not to speak. But he took a step nearer, one hand raised as if feeling his way. "Nellie?" he said again. "Is that you?"

"Ah . . . no, sir. I'm just . . ."

The dull eyes found the voice. "You're not Nellie." The eyes blinked. The man frowned.

"No, sir."

"But you're sitting in her place, you know. That's Nellie's bench."

"Oh. I . . ."

"You mustn't make her think it's been taken away."

"I won't. I mean, I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"Any of the other benches is all right except that and this." He felt with his hand for the second bench, finding it. "This one is reserved for Garbo when she comes."

"Garbo," Lisa repeated blankly.

"Although knowing her," he sniffed, "she'll probably want Nellie's."

"But Garbo is . . ." She stopped herself.

It didn't matter. The old man's mind was already elsewhere. "Well, I've got to be moving along," he said. He raised his folding stool and waggled it in lieu of a wave. "Don't want to lose the morning light."

"Sir," Lisa raised her camera. It whirled three times. "Aren't you. . . . Are you Jason Bellarmine by any chance? The director?" She recognized him now. She remembered watching the Academy Awards when she was still in high school. Gregory Peck had presented him with a special Oscar for lifetime achievement. Even then, he was functionally blind from diabetes. He had to be led to the podium.

"All casting is done through my office." He walked on. "Have your agent call."

"But I'm not . . . yes, sir."

She watched as he made his way down a path lined with geraniums toward a marble terrace, where he set up his stool and easel with practiced ease. He took a blank, two-foot canvas from his case and mounted it. He squeezed a tube of red paint directly onto the canvas and

began spreading it with a palette knife, stopping now and then to inspect the horizon. There was nothing red out there. And whatever he was painting had no shape that she could see.

She had taken several photographs of the blind artist at work when the soft Pacific breeze shifted and Lisa caught a scent of jasmine in the air. She lifted her chin and sniffed, searching for its source. She looked behind her, toward Garbo's bench. She gasped, stifling a cry. An old woman, thin, even smaller than herself, was standing at her shoulder. Just standing. Waiting. Lisa recognized her at once. The vivid reddish hair, marcelled, was certainly a wig. Her cheeks heavily rouged, her enormous eyes the color of cobalt. They were shining, becoming liquid. Her lips moved but made no sound. The chin began to quiver. Lisa, recovering, bolted to her feet.

"Please," she stepped away from the bench, gesturing toward it with her hand. "I'm terribly sorry."

The tiny bosom heaved but Nellie Dameon made no move.

"It's just that I'm a fan of yours," Lisa said quickly. "I wanted to see your . . . where you sat. I wanted to touch it. I should have asked your permission." Lisa hoped that somewhere in there was the reassurance that would keep this woman from slipping over the edge.

The old woman blinked several times as if trying to comprehend what Lisa was saying. Then, suddenly, the eyes cleared. They glanced at the bench and then away. Dismissively, thought Lisa. Now, in those eyes, Lisa thought she saw the briefest flicker of amusement. She had a sense that whatever had caused Miss Dameon's breath to quicken, it had nothing to do with Lisa's use of her throne.

Nellie Dameon smiled. She raised one gloved hand toward Lisa who accepted it, tentatively, then wondered what she was to do with it. Kiss it? Curtsey? Or assist Nellie Dameon to her seat. She presumed the last.

Nellie settled daintily onto the marble bench and smoothed the folds of her robe so that the hem covered her shoes. It was not so much a robe, Lisa decided, as an