


HARD LINE

Michael Z. Lewin

**A
Lt. Leroy
Powder
Novel**



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There is good news for Michael Z. Lewin's growing legion of fans! Lieutenant Leroy Powder of the Indianapolis Police Department is back again, this time in charge of the Missing Persons Bureau. A Walter Matthau-like character on a bad day, Powder is dedicated, demanding, abrasive, and insulting, capable of telling a woman in a wheelchair, "You look tired. Why don't you take a load off your feet?"

The woman in question is Sergeant Carollee Fleetwood, wounded in the line of duty, to whom the department has given the choice of retirement or working with Powder. And in Carollee, Powder meets his match, a person who is able to give as good as she gets, as tough, rigorous, and conscientious as he is. If the core of *Hard Line* is their developing relationship, around this core swirl at least half a dozen cases whose complexities and dangers are often deceptively disguised.

In rapid-fire succession come a young woman claiming amnesia who has tried to commit suicide in an alleyway; the blandest of husbands, whose wife has vanished; a rooming-house transient with the habit of disappearing and taking the television set with him; the niece who never got off the bus from St. Paul; strange doings in Powder's own neighborhood of Lockerbie Square; the Monday morning caller of years' standing, always asking whether his sister has been found; and, most disturbing of all, the sudden affluence of Powder's own grown son, Ricky, whose spending far exceeds any visible income.

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This multiplicity of cases, a hallmark of the Leroy Powder novels, gives Michael Z. Lewin a chance to show his hero at his best—and worst. Once again Powder's crankily intrusive curiosity, his insistence on following through on detail (a trait that does not endear him to his colleagues), his fondness for doing the unexpected, and his hard line on the difference between right and wrong combine to dictate his actions, leading him to surprise even himself.

Michael Z. Lewin was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, but grew up in Indianapolis. He started writing during his junior year at Harvard. After a year of graduate study in England, he returned to the United States to teach school and then, in 1971, moved back to England, settling in Frome, Somerset. His *Ask the Right Question* was an Edgar nominee for best first novel. He now writes full time, except for his five-year tenure as coach of the Frome Basketball Club's nationally ranked women's team.

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HARD LINE

1

The telephone rang.

Powder looked at his watch. He let the phone ring twice more. Then he rubbed his face with one hand, and picked up the receiver with the other.

Because it was twenty minutes till the office opened, he didn't say, "Missing Persons." He said, "E one forty-four."

"Is Roy Powder there, please?" A man at the other end, being familiar.

"This is Powder."

"Cedric Kendall, County Hospital, Roy."

Powder relaxed. "How do, Cedric."

"You are almost the only person in Indianapolis I can count on to be at work before he's supposed to," Kendall said amicably. One hard-working administrator to another.

"No," Powder said. "I've just got a new sergeant coming in today, so I was clearing part of the work load in order to have a little instruction time."

"Your people don't seem to last very long with you," Kendall noted. "Or is this one in addition to the ones you already have?"

"Don't get me started," Powder said. "There are more politics here than in Washington."

"I see."

"So, what you got for me? A body needs identifying?"

"Yes and sort of."

"Elucidate," Powder said.

Powder picked up a pencil and rubbed gently on his lower lip.

"Two problems came in overnight. One *is* an unidentified deceased. Elderly male. Exposure, possibly. Alcohol poisoning, possibly. We're cutting him up this afternoon."

"OK," Powder said.

"And the other is an unidentified live person."

"Makes a change."

"Female. Young, perhaps in her late twenties."

"Unconscious?"

"No," Kendall said portentously. "Conscious but seeming to suffer from amnesia."

"Oh," Powder said.

"Two guys found her in an alley last night. They were on their way home from a bar. Sam's on Trowbridge Street, near Hoyt. Do you know it?"

"I've passed it," Powder said. "What time of night was this?"

"About one this morning," Kendall said. "According to the report I've got."

"Police report?"

"No. Ambulance."

Powder hesitated. "Do I detect from your voice that there is more?"

"For a start, she was stark-naked when they found her."

"I see," Powder said quietly.

"What the two guys told the ambulance man is that they wouldn't have noticed her but for the fire."

"Fire?"

"She was burning her clothes. Back from the road. Apparently the alley turns and she was at the bend. They spotted the light and went to look. She saw them coming and . . ." He held the conclusion for a moment.

Powder bit. "And what?"

"And she took her gun . . ."

"Jesus Christ. A nice class of patient you people get over there."

"And she put it in her mouth and she pulled the trigger."

"What happened? No bullet?"

"There was a bullet all right. But the gun misfired. Cheapo twenty-two. Then they got to her and pulled the gun out. It brought a couple of teeth with it and she was choking on the blood. They took her back to the bar and called the ambulance."

Powder thought for a moment. "The bar was open?"

"One of them owns it."

"When did the ambulance get there?"

"Quarter to two."

"Who has the gun?"

"We do. It's locked away."

"And that pile of clothes?"

"I don't know."

"How about the details for the guys who found her?"

"I've got two names here."

Powder took the names.

"I'll check the Night Cover log," he said. "And if they don't know anything about it upstairs, then maybe I'll be around. But it won't be for a while yet."

The Missing Persons Department's part-time secretary came in the private door at two minutes to nine. She was a gangly woman of twenty-two, a civilian, who worked mornings for the police in order to pay for afternoons in computer technology. How, exactly, her classes fitted with her employment Powder didn't know. But she'd been at it for nine months. And Powder did know that she flew through the routine paperwork, to be able to spend time punching away at the keys of the computer terminal in the department office, which connected to the central IPD computer.

"Morning, Lieutenant," Agnes Shorter said cheerfully as she came in. When on her feet, she was active and chatty. When she sat down she became quiet and precise.

"Agnes," Powder said, by way of acknowledgment.

Shorter sat immediately at the terminal desk and began to type on the keyboard. Then stopped. "Rats," she said. "Somebody's using what I want."

Powder didn't ask what that might be. He said, "I'm going to have to go out."

"All right."

"This Sergeant Fleetwood is supposed to be here . . ." He looked at his watch. ". . . by now, I'd have hoped."

Agnes faced him and smiled.

"I'm going upstairs, but then I'll have to leave the building. You may have to do the initiation ceremonies. Go through our basic routines."

"OK, Lieutenant."

Powder rose.

Agnes turned back to the keyboard and played a few chords.

Powder used the stairs for the trip from first floor to fourth. Using stairs was part of his diet and had almost become habit.

On the fourth, he went to the detective dayroom and checked the records for the previous night. A phone call from the ambulance service had been logged, but no file opened and no case assigned.

For the sake of formality, he noted that he was making a follow-up investigation. But he doubted that anyone would notice his notes. These days Night Cover records were treated as having the same permanency as daily newspapers. They were skimmed over in the mornings and that was that.

On the way back to the stairwell Powder passed several officers he had worked with in the past. He exchanged no more acknowledgment with any of them than a nod.

The stairs were empty.

Rather than use the back door, for Missing Persons personnel, Powder came into the department through the public entrance. Agnes looked up momentarily, but continued with her work.

Powder fussed for a moment with the chairs facing a rubber plant on the right side of the entrance. In the corner of the room behind the chairs a basket of variegated ivies and philodendrons hung from mid-way up the wall.

The main Missing Persons counter faced the door, with only one small section at the end made semiprivate by a fan-shaped barrier at right angles to the counter top. But genuinely private interviews could only take place in a small room just inside the main door on the left.

For Powder there were two ways from the front of the counter to the back. One was through the interview room, which had a connecting door for department officers. The other was through a flap in the counter top.

"Excuse me, please."

Behind Powder a woman in a bulky wheelchair, with two aluminum stick crutches holstered behind the seat like a pair of flags, was asking to get past.

"Will you get out of my way please?" the woman said again, when Powder did not immediately make way. "You may have time to stand around, but I have things to do."

Powder frowned and continued to block the wheelchair's path.

"They told me," he said measuredly, "that you would be out of that thing and walking around."

The woman blinked. She sat back and looked up at him. "Which means that you must be Lieutenant Powder," she said.

Powder's frown grew easily into a scowl.

"And you are the kid who thinks that she can do with half a body what most of us have a hard time doing with a whole one."

Sergeant Fleetwood had a choice of provocations to respond to. She said, "Hardly a child."

"How old?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Fifty-three percent of the people in this country are older than you."

"And seven months."

"Roll in," Powder said. "I won't ask you to take a seat."

Fleetwood followed Powder through the gap in the counter. Powder gallantly held the flap up for her.

"Not exactly Five Hundred standard with that thing, are you?"

"I'll be out of it full-time soon."

"And onto the crutches?"

"For a while."

"Terrific, kid. Terrific."

"I'm glad you think so too, Lieutenant."

"Generally," he said, "we use the back door here. If you think you can handle it."

"I'll find some knobs to practice on."

"Agnes over there will give you a key."

At the mention of her name, Agnes glanced up from the computer keyboard and appeared only just to have noticed Powder and Fleetwood so near to her.

Agnes said, "Hi."

Fleetwood said, "Hello, Agnes; Carollee Fleetwood."

Powder rubbed his face and glowered down at his new sergeant. "This isn't a soft billet," he said.

"Now why would I think that?" Fleetwood asked. "Certainly not because the Missing Persons Department is tucked downstairs into a corner of what used to be Traffic Fines space, or because it closes for lunch, or because it's across the hall from the public toilets. Surely I'm not so small-minded as to suggest that it is anything but the very heart of the Indianapolis Police Department's investigative arm."

Despite himself, Powder broke into a smile. "You forgot the chaplain. Right across the hall from the goddamn chaplain."

It could have been received as an offer of truce.

But Fleetwood said, "That must be handy when you need consoling."

Powder stopped smiling. He said, "I hear he does a special line in cripples."

"We're not 'crippled' anymore. We're 'disabled' now."

"Great. And while we're chatting, let me say that if you haven't got your head sorted out any better than your mode of transportation, and if you're going to be crying into your hanky all day long because you can't run around chasing bank robbers anymore, then maybe you better take your tricycle and get out now."

"Thank you for that warm welcome."

"I haven't spent five years straightening this department out to end up as a nursemaid."

"I tried to get assigned upstairs," Fleetwood said. Her conciliation?

"It was here or a pension, huh?"

"Just about."

"Terrific, kid. Really great. And do you come with your own baby bottles, or do we have to requisition them?"

"A police wet nurse comes down four times a day and puts the tit to me."

Powder rubbed his face for several seconds. He sat down at his desk and picked up some papers. Then he put them down again.

"What I ask for is two full-time officers. Nothing fancy. Could be kids for me to train up. What they send me is a crippled sergeant. A hypothetical question for you, Sergeant Carollee Fleetwood. If you were in my chair, instead of that one, what would you do?"

"I'd cut the crap and give me a chance."

Powder looked at his watch. "Well, I've enjoyed our little chat, but I've got to run. Agnes will give you a taste of procedures here. And if you find she's ignoring you, pull the plug on that damn machine. She does know how to talk. It's a matter of getting her attention."

"Excuse me, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah?"

"May I ask a few questions?"

"Sure kid, sure. Only not now." Powder left.

2

One end of the alley next to Sam's opened onto Trowbridge Street directly behind the bar. Because the alley ran in a squared-off U shape, its second opening was also on Trowbridge Street, near the other end of the block.

Powder parked in front of the bar. It appeared closed. Instead of trying to raise somebody inside, he walked along the alley. At its first elbow he found the remains of the burned clothes. Shoes, dress, underwear, belt all charred and mixed with cinders as if the fire had been put out by people stomping on it.

Powder photographed the scene from two angles with an instant-print camera. Then he scooped everything in the immediate vicinity into a plastic bag.

Before returning to his car he walked the full length of the alleyway twice, studying the dirt-and-cinder surface, and looking occasionally into the yards of the small houses that backed onto it. Sam's was the only commercial establishment in the immediate area, a brick tavern that had been around since the fifties.

Powder put his plastic bag in the trunk of his car and drove to County Hospital.

"Hello, Roy," Cedric Kendall said, as Powder entered his office.

"I don't know why you wear that white jacket. Unwary people will mistake you for a doctor."

"It happens sometimes."

Powder looked at the densely booked walls, and at the mass of paper

on Kendall's desk. "When was the last time you stuck a knife in somebody?"

Cedric Kendall smiled benignly.

"This morning over breakfast, huh?"

"You can't keep secrets from the police," Kendall said.

"I've come to see your bodies."

"Both?"

"There is no open file on the live one and while I'm here, I'll take prints and a picture of the dead one."

"We take the prints for you," Kendall said. "Part of the routine."

"All yours come in with pressure smudges. I'll do it myself."

Kendall shrugged. He wrote a note and passed it across the desk. "That will get you access to our deceased tenant."

"Guy in the icebox going to be able to read this? Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you are a doctor. It looks just like a prescription."

"And the young lady is in five eleven. I let the head nurse know someone would be coming. Ask for her at the desk in front of the central elevator."

"The patient still without benefit of memory?"

"I didn't ask, Roy. Sorry. But I've made a copy of the ambulance file on her."

"That's the Wishard service?"

"Yes," Kendall said. "They handle virtually all the emergency stuff in the county. And I've got a copy of our admission sheet for you." He handed Powder the two reproductions. And a small .22 automatic pistol.

Powder folded the papers and pocketed them. He handled the gun gingerly. "Cheap and nasty," he said. He put it in another pocket. Then he flipped an imaginary coin, caught it, and turned it on his wrist. "Heads or tails?"

After a momentary double take, Kendall said, "Tails."

"Right. I go see a lady about an identity."

The admission report had very little information on it. The woman was estimated as being in her late twenties, five five, and weighing one thirty. Hair brown, eyes blue. The only distinguishing feature was a well-healed scar at the base of her neck, which, it was speculated, might have been from operations following a broken neck.

Five eleven was a small, spare single room. The woman lay on her