

# PRANCING TIGER



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A Thriller by

# PHILIP SINGERMAN

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# PRANCING TIGER

Philip Singerman



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For Marcia

*mi amor, mi vida*



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# Prologue



Billy Roseman saw a light on in the office of his barn. It was one in the morning, Sunday, and he had no idea who might be in there. Returning to Florida from a brief but disastrous adventure on the banks of the Rio Grande, Roseman had come directly from the airport to the track to check on his horses. Billy was injured and in a state of complete exhaustion, but neglect of animals was unthinkable to him, a crime for which there was no excuse.

Roseman trained and raced harness horses—standard-breds, as they are called. Recently, his stable had fallen into financial disarray, and Billy was in debt to nearly everyone he knew. Maybe his guest was a bill collector. They had come looking for him at stranger hours than this. Intense pain knifed through his left shoulder, he was sure his ribs were bruised, and his head was on fire from a deep gash in his forehead, hastily bandaged by a woman who had probably saved his life. The last thing he needed was a conversation with someone to whom he owed money. Then he thought about the Mexicans who had nearly killed him—who very well may have tracked him east, or called ahead to friends—and decided a bill collector wouldn't be such bad company after all.

Before walking unsteadily to the small window of the office to see who was, in fact, inside, he made sure to lock the brown envelope stuffed with hundreds inside the trunk of the Lincoln Town Car he'd rented. In the glow of the Lincoln's trunk light he saw that the envelope was flecked with dried blood. Roseman had no idea whether the blood had come from his head or from his friend Myron McBride, who had lured him to the Mexican border with the promise of a quick fix for Billy's monetary woes.

"Horses for money," McBride had said. "A simple and time-honored exchange." McBride had left the guns and the drugs out of the equation, but Billy should have known. There would be no quick fix for Billy Roseman. Not now. Not for McBride, either. Certainly not for him.

Roseman approached the window and breathed a sigh of relief. Nikki Waters's black Porsche was parked in the dark passway that ran through the center of the barn. Billy peered in the window and saw Nikki stretched out on the old leather couch, reading a book. The revolver he kept locked in his desk was lying on the coffee table in front of her.

"Hey, don't get excited," he said through the window. "It's only me. I'm coming in through the door. Leave that gun where it is."

As he eased into the room she put the book down and stared at him, her eyebrows arching. "Hey, yourself, sugar," she said. "You better sit down. I ain't gonna ask what kind of day you had. You look like you been stomped by a mule."

"Well, you look good enough for both of us," he said. He had always considered her an attractive woman, but he had never seen her in a dress before, made up with a professional model's sense of allure. Jeans, an old work shirt, and running shoes were all she ever wore around the stable where, for a couple of days a week during the past two training seasons, she had hot-walked, bathed and fed his horses, and helped him with his books. For free. For some reason he had not divined. "I like horses and I like you," she had said when he asked her. Roseman, in need of any help he could get, had probed no further.

She had one leg bent at a forty-five-degree angle, the heel and sole of her shoe resting on a cushion. He could see the top of her stocking and the garter that held it in place. After what he'd been through in the past couple of days, he thought perhaps he was hallucinating.

"Where you goin'?" he said. "Where you been? What the hell you doin' with my gun?"

"I can answer those in order," she told him. "I ain't goin' anywhere, least not for a while. I been stood up. And I got your gun out 'cause I think I'm bein' followed."



"That forty-five's a helluva piece for a lady to protect herself with," he said. "Watch out you don't blow off your foot."

The gun was a Colt Wyatt Earp Buntline Special single-action army revolver, a commemorative produced in 1964 on the thirty-fifth anniversary of Earp's death. It had a twelve-inch barrel and was gold-plated, with black rosewood grips. Only 150 had been made. Roseman had fired the gun once, straight up into the air, the day after he bought it in 1980 for nine hundred dollars, when he signed the papers incorporating his business, Quickdraw Stable.

"Shit, my uncle Jewel taught me how to use his Ruger Blackhawk when I was sixteen. And that was a forty-four," she said. "We hunted hogs with it. I know I told you that story at least twice."

"I forgot about your uncle Jewel," he said. "And huntin' hogs."

"Maybe we should take a ride to the emergency room," she said. "Get your head looked at."

"No," he said. "I'll be all right."

"Cool Babba laid some smoke on me," she said. "Jamaica's finest. He claims it's *ganja of de utmost kind*. I rolled a couple before you got here. What say you and me give it a try and find out. Maybe that'll be the ticket. For you *and* me."

"Nikki, I don't know," Roseman said. "There's places I been just recently I'd as soon not revisit in my head, not tonight."

"Well you ain't in those places now, sugar," she said. "You're here with me, who's all dressed up with no place to go. A confluence of kindred spirits. Roll with it." She lit a joint and took a couple of deep hits.

Billy leaned against the file cabinet, watching Nikki's face, watching her eyes narrow against the smoke. She smiled slightly. Should he tell her about Mexico? Maybe she already knew. He'd seen her talking to McBride a couple of times recently. All Billy had said to Fulton Tasmeeđa, his groom, was that he had to go away for a couple of days and to make sure everything got done around the barn. But that sorry asshole McBride, his friend, his late friend, always wanted to impress the ladies, always

wanted to be the hot shot. Did he talk up his big-time deal? Did McBride tell Nikki Waters about his grand scheme that left him lying in the dirt by the Rio Grande with his face blown off, unless by now they'd stuffed him in a hole?

She thought someone was following her, she said. What about him, Billy wondered. Who was after his ass? There could be a whole lot more confluence out there than either one of them had bargained for. One minute he'd been hiding in his cave, watching again and again the video of his greatest race, his singular triumph, as his life slid slowly downhill. The next minute he had stepped into the open, into the middle of an avalanche. Really, he thought, there was no difference. One way was simply quicker than the other.

He took the joint from her and smoked, still watching her face, watching her dress move ever so slightly further up her leg, rolling with it, rolling with the notion of making love to her in spite of his pain. In fact, the idea had occurred to him more than once when he watched her supple body bend and twist as she worked around the barn. Something had always kept him from making a pass at her, some elusive quality about her, some unspoken barrier that was no longer there.

They were halfway into the second joint when she called to him. It sounded like she was at the end of a long, narrow hallway. She held out her arms, beckoning; he could feel her hot breath across the room. Flashes of light jumped from her fingertips, reflected off her silvery eyelids and off the faint beads of perspiration on her upper lip. He concentrated on the light and his pain diminished.

It was warm in the office from the electric heater. He had unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it out of his jeans so that when he knelt above her on the couch it hung around her like a pink tent. She drew his head down to her, his lips to hers, drawing on him, working her tongue deep into his mouth as her fingers tore at the buttons of his fly, freeing him with both her hands.

"No," she said, when he was ready for her. "Not yet. Wait." She took his hands and placed them on the collar of her dress, above the row of buttons that ran down to the



waist. "Rip it open," she said. "Rip it so I can show you my tits. Do it. Do that for me. That's what I need."

He was in the tunnel with her now, the dope obliterating everything but her body arched under him, opening to him, and her voice, coiled like velvet rope around his head. "I want to come with you," she whispered. "Do what I need to make me come. Rip it." She raked his forearms with her nails as he tore the buttons open. Then she had the gun, somehow she had picked up the gun, holding it by the cylinder, pressing the smooth black wood of the grip into his hand, and the barrel, the end of the long, gold-plated barrel was against her lips.

"Do this to me," she said, running the barrel in and out of her mouth, running her tongue along its length, biting on it, baring her teeth. He was lost inside her then, caught up in the lasciviousness of her shredded clothing and disheveled hair and the gold barrel circled by her reddened lips, coming with her as her fingers drummed against his belly and then pulled wildly at her own breasts.

He needed air, and so he left her sleeping on the couch and stumbled into the night. He limped toward the rented Lincoln, looking for something to lean on, and lay on his back across the hood. At some point, shivering and cold but too weary and in too much pain to trudge even the thirty yards to his office, he opened the car door and collapsed on the back seat. The car seemed to be flying to a height where he was weightless. He looked down and saw a river. The river was filled with horses, swimming upstream against the current, swimming for their lives from a tall man in a long coat with a rifle who was firing at them from the bank. He could hear the rifle booming and see the water churning from the horses' frantic hooves.

They had not been alone in the office. There was someone hidden above them. This person had climbed from a stall to the narrow loft that ran the length of the barn, crept silently along a joist to a position of observation—a slit in the rough-hewn boards of the ceiling—and remained motionless throughout the couple's passion. Clad in a dark blue hooded sweatshirt, black jeans, skin-tight black gloves, and black socks pulled over sneakers so the soles would not

leave prints, the figure waited while the woman slept and the man went out for air. Finally, after more than half an hour, when the man did not return, the figure crept back down the joist, down into the stall, and over to the office door, noting on the way that the man had passed out in the car.

The figure moved quickly; there had been plenty of time in the loft to think things through. Originally, the plan was to cut the woman's throat with an ebony-handled, double-edged knife, but the appearance of Billy Roseman changed that. Now, the double-edged knife remained sheathed on the figure's hip. Instead the gun, the Wyatt Earp Buntline Special, was gripped by the long, gold barrel and the hammer was pulled back. The end of the barrel, meeting no resistance, was reinserted between the sleeping woman's lips and a gloved finger was pressed firmly against the trigger. The woman's body bucked once from the impact of the bullet and was motionless. A black-gloved hand put the gun down on the table. The hooded figure turned back to the woman, paused for just a second, removed the ebony-handled knife from its sheath, cut swiftly at the dead woman's flesh, and was gone before the echo of the revolver's roar had left the room.



# I



Just after dawn, Roland Troy, wrapped in an old plaid blanket, emerged onto his front porch with a steaming mug of coffee. He sat down in a rocking chair mounted high like a throne on concrete blocks, put his feet up on the porch railing, and sipped from the mug, watching the first shafts of sunlight sift between the tall pine trees on the far side of his pond. Soon, various shades of ocher, from deep orange to a yellow that was almost white, made paths across the flat water.

Once, the house itself had been bright yellow. Here and there, in places always shaded from the sun, the wood was colored like the horns of an old ram, but mostly it was bare. Two front windows, one on each side of the sagging porch, reached almost to the ground, their sills obscured by weeds. The porch was gone directly by the door, and across the gaping hole was tacked a blue four-by-eight-foot sheet-metal sign with white letters that read BRAKE AND FRONT END SPECIALISTS—WHEEL ALIGNMENT. Footsteps on this sign boomed and crackled like a rain of baseballs on a tin-roofed shed. It was impossible to come into the house, at least through that door, without being heard.

The night before, Roland Troy had stayed up late, putting the finishing touches on a model of a bank. Before it met Troy's satisfaction, the dimensions had to be just right. The cross streets, the parking lot, the trees and shrubs, the stores next door, the gas station across the road, all were in precisely scaled proportion to the place itself, where a robbery had occurred, two hostages taken, and a bank guard shot dead. That afternoon Troy would deliver the model to the county courthouse where the state attorney would then use it in a trial.

Formerly, Roland Troy had been a homicide detective, the best in Florida, the best in all of the southeastern United States, according to those who'd worked with him and to those he'd run to ground. Now, building models such as these was what he did for a living, though in a sense that wasn't true since he didn't need the money. The models he built were renowned for their quality. They had helped the state attorney countless times in his presentation of a case to the jury. Troy built them out of friendship and for pride. They were a way he could contribute, a way he could help out, though he never would admit it. He said he built them all for art.

Dozens of them filled a room inside his house. (Part of his deal with the state attorney, a man closer to Troy than his own brother, was that he'd get them back once they were no longer needed.) If the rate of serious crime in central Florida kept rising at its present rate, Troy reckoned, this room would house most all of it in miniature within ten years. Troy's favorite featured a giant teacup, a replica of one from the Mad Hatter ride at the Magic Kingdom. One Thursday evening, several years before, a man had shot his wife and both her lovers who were sitting all together in the cup. Troy had built two nearby rides as well to give a sense of relative distance to the scene. The job had taken him two weeks, working straight, twelve hours a day. When the trial was over a woman from Montreal who had been a witness to the crime offered to buy the model for ten thousand dollars. Troy politely declined the offer, not wanting to profit from human misery.

His coffee finished, Troy went back inside the house, but soon came out again, dressed in tan Levi's corduroy jeans and a dark green flannel shirt. He walked to the edge of the pond, climbed into his canoe, untied it from the dock and began paddling to the northeast. The morning was chilly and he had considered a jacket, but there was no wind and he would soon be warm enough from his exertion. At the corner of the pond furthest from his house, Troy eased between a tangled outcropping of mangrove roots. Here the pond let out into a narrow passage, no more than five feet wide, that someone unfamiliar with the shoreline would never have found.



The passage ran for fifty yards beneath a canopy of vines, then widened into a vast lagoon filled with cypress trees whose knees protruded from the surface like the gnarled supports of some primeval bridge. These knees, which are extensions of the tree's root system and may be up to ten feet tall, function in a way not altogether known to man. It may be that they help provide the roots with oxygen or that they help support the tree itself. To Roland Troy, they were signposts on a road map of a dark watery forest he knew like no one else. From the time he was a child he had explored this water, learned where deer and bear and panther came to drink, where eagles nested and alligators lurked. On the high ground that bordered it he had hunted and camped, searched for Indian relics and buried treasure that legend said was there. A hundred and eighty acres of this tenebrous cypress swamp was part of an eight-hundred-acre tract that Roland Troy owned. The land had been in Troy's family for five generations, ever since his great, great-grandfather bought it, back in 1883, from the federal government for eleven dollars an acre.

On early maps of the region, the dark, winding river that ran through the land appears with several different names, but Troy's grandfather, Wiley, renamed it the Coacoochee—the Indian word meaning wildcat—to commemorate his sighting of a panther on its banks.

Wiley Troy spent his life running a fishing camp on the Coacoochee and guiding hunters through his woods. Unlike other members of the Troy family who moved out, regarding Florida as nothing more than an uncultured breeding ground for snakes and insects, Wiley was seduced by the lush splendor of the land and explored every square foot of it. He grew accustomed to the extreme heat and even in the middle of summer would tramp through the woods, examining plants and searching out animal lairs. The tropical storms that tore through the region, terrifying others, excited him and filled him with vitality. It was from his grandfather that Roland Troy received his wilderness education, from him that he learned to hunt, fish and track, and to respect the land.

Roland's father was shot down on a bombing mission over Germany in 1945, when Troy was two years old. His