

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

TAMI HOAG

SORRY

DUST TO
DUST

DUST TO DUST

TAMI
HOAG



BANTAM BOOKS

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND

DUST TO DUST
A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Bantam hardcover edition published September 2000

Bantam mass market edition published April 2002

Bantam reissue edition / January 2004

Published by
Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved
Copyright © 2000 by Diva Hoag, Inc.
Cover art copyright © 2004 by Tom Hallman

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 00-39786
No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law.
For information address: Bantam Books, New York, New York.

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

Bantam Books and the rooster colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

ISBN 0-553-58252-6

Manufactured in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in Canada

OPM 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5

Praise for the bestsellers of

TAMI HOAG

DARK HORSE

"A thriller as tightly wound as its heroine . . . Hoag has created a winning central figure in Elena . . . Bottom line: Great ride." —*People*

"This is her best to date . . . [a] tautly told thriller."
—*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"Hoag proves once again why she is considered a queen of the crime thriller."
—*Charleston Post & Courier*

"A tangled web of deceit and double-dealing makes for a fascinating look into the wealthy world of horses juxtaposed with the realistic introspection of one very troubled ex-cop. A definite winner." —*Booklist*

"Anyone who reads suspense novels regularly is acquainted with Hoag's work—or certainly should be. She's one of the most consistently superior suspense and romantic suspense writers on today's bestseller lists. A word of warning to readers: don't think you know whodunit 'til the very end." —*The Facts* (Clute, TX)

"Suspense, shocking violence, and a rip-roaring conclusion—this novel has all the pulse-racing touches that put Tami Hoag books on bestseller lists and crime fans' reading lists."

—*The Advocate Magazine* (Baton Rouge, LA)

"Full of intrigue, glitter, and skullduggery . . . [Hoag] is a master of suspense." —*Publishers Weekly*

of 94/06

“Her best to date, an enjoyable read, and a portent of even better things to come.” —*The Grand Rapids Press*

“A complex cerebral puzzle that will keep readers on the edge until all the answers are revealed.”
—*The Midwest Book Review*

“To say that Tami Hoag is the absolute best at what she does is a bit easy since she is really the only person who does what she does. . . . It is testament to Hoag’s skill that she is able to go beyond being skillful and find the battered hearts in her characters, and capture their beating on the page. . . . A superb read.”
—*Detroit News & Free Press*

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*

ASHES TO ASHES

"Hoag has more or less taken over the serial killer genre all by herself." —*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*

"[A] compelling . . . startling story."

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"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*

"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, FL)

"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."

—*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."

—*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*

"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*

"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*

"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*

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
SARAH'S SIN
MAGIC**

And coming soon in hardcover

KILL THE MESSENGER

**TO THE VERY GOOD FRIENDS WHO
HELPED ME THROUGH A VERY BAD TIME:
BOB, BETSY, JESSIE
AND, AS ALWAYS, THE DIVAS.**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE AUTHOR WISHES to thank the following people for their help and support in the making of this book:

Special Agent Larry Brubaker, FBI (retired); Sergeant Mark Lenzen, Homicide unit, Minneapolis Police Department; Sergeant Mike Carlson, Homicide unit, Minneapolis Police Department; Commander Thomas Reding, Internal Affairs, St. Paul Police Department; Robert Crais; Eileen Dreyer; Nita Taublib; Beth de Guzman; and Andrea Cirillo.

DUST TO DUST

PROLOGUE

IT IS STUNNING how quickly it happens. How little time it takes to go from trouble to tragedy. Seconds. Mere seconds without air and the brain begins to shut down. No time to struggle. No time to panic even.

Like a boa constrictor choking the life from its prey, the noose tightens and tightens. It makes no difference what thoughts explode in the brain. *Move! Grab the rope! Get air!* The commands don't make it down the neural pathways to the muscles of the arms. Coordination is gone.

The sturdy rope makes a tearing sound as the weight of his body stretches it. The beam creaks.

His body turns slightly this way and that. The arms pull upward in hideous, slow-motion spasms. A macabre marionette's dance—arms moving up and down; hands twitching, twisting, bending; fingers curling. The knees try to draw upward, then straighten again. Posturing: a sign of brain damage.

The eerie contortions go on and on. The seconds stretch as the death dance continues. A minute. Two. Four. The rope and beam creak in the otherwise silent room. The eyes are open but vacant. Mouth moves in

a final, futile gasp for air. The most acute, exquisite split second of life: the final heartbeat before death.

And then it is over.

At last.

The flash explodes in a brilliant burst of white light and the scene is frozen in time.

1

CHAPTER

"THEY OUGHTA HANG the son of a bitch came up with this shit," Sam Kovac grouched, digging a piece of nicotine gum out of a crumpled foil pack.

"The gum or the wrapper?"

"Both. I can't open the damn package and I'd rather chew on a cat turd."

"And that would taste different from a cigarette how?" Nikki Liska asked.

They moved through a small throng of people in the wide white hall. Cops heading out onto the steps of the Minneapolis city hall for a cigarette, cops coming back in from having a cigarette, and the odd citizen looking for something for their tax dollar.

Kovac scowled down at her from the corner of one eye. Liska made five-five by sheer dint of will. He always figured God made her short because if she had the size of Janet Reno she'd take over the world. She had that kind of energy—and attitude out the wazoo.

"What do you know about it?" he challenged.

"My ex smoked. Lick an ashtray sometime. That's why we got divorced, you know. I wouldn't stick my tongue in his mouth."

"Jesus, Tinks, like I wanted to know that."

He'd given her the nickname—Tinker Bell on Steroids. Nordic blond hair cut in a shaggy Peter Pan style, eyes as blue as a lake on a sunny day. Feminine but unmistakably athletic. She'd kicked more ass in her years on the force than half the guys he knew. She'd come onto homicide—Christ, what was it now?—five or six years ago? He lost track. He'd been there himself almost longer than he could remember. All of his forty-four years, it seemed. The better part of a twenty-three-year career, for certain. Seven to go. He'd get his thirty and take the pension. Catch up on his sleep for the next ten years. He sometimes wondered why he hadn't taken his twenty and moved on. But he didn't have anything to move on to, so he stayed.

Liska slipped between a pair of nervous-looking uniforms blocking the way in front of the door to Room 126—Internal Affairs.

"Hey, that was the least of it," she said. "I was more upset about where he wanted to put his dick."

Kovac made a sound of pain and disgust, his face twisting.

Liska grinned, mischievous and triumphant. "Her name was Brandi."

The Criminal Investigative Division offices had been newly refurbished. The walls were the color of dried blood. Kovac wondered if that had been intentional or just trendy. Probably the latter. Nothing else in the place had been designed with cops in mind. The narrow, gray, two-person cubicles could just as well have housed a bunch of accountants.

He preferred the temporary digs they'd had during the remodeling: a dirty, beat-up room full of dirty, beat-up desks, and beat-up cops getting migraines under

harsh white fluorescent lights. Homicide crammed into one room, robbery down the way, half the sex crimes guys wedged into a broom closet. That was atmosphere.

“What’s the status on the Nixon assault?”

The voice stopped Kovac in his tracks as effectively as a hook to the collar. He bit a little harder on the Nicorette. Liska kept moving.

New offices, new lieutenant, new pain in the ass. The homicide lieutenant’s office had a figurative revolving door. It was a stop on the way for upwardly mobile management types. At least this new one—Leonard—had them back working partners instead of like the last guy, who’d tortured them with some bullshit high-concept team crap with rotating sleep-deprivation schedules.

Of course, that didn’t mean he wasn’t an asshole.

“We’ll see,” Kovac said. “Elwood just brought in a guy he thinks is good for the Truman murder.”

Leonard flushed pink. He had that kind of complexion, and short, white-gray hair like duck fuzz all over his head. “What the hell are you doing working the Truman murder? That’s what? A week ago? You’re up to your ass in assaults since then.”

Liska came back then, wearing her cop face. “We think this guy’s a two-fer, Lou. He was maybe in on Nixon *and* Truman. I guess the Nation wants to start calling the Bloods the Dead Presidents.”

Kovac laughed at that—a cross between a bark and a snort. “Like these dickheads would know a president if he pissed on them.”

Liska looked up at him. “Elwood’s got him in the guest room. Let’s go before he uses the L word.”

Leonard stepped back, frowning. He had no lips, and ears that stuck out perpendicular to his head like a