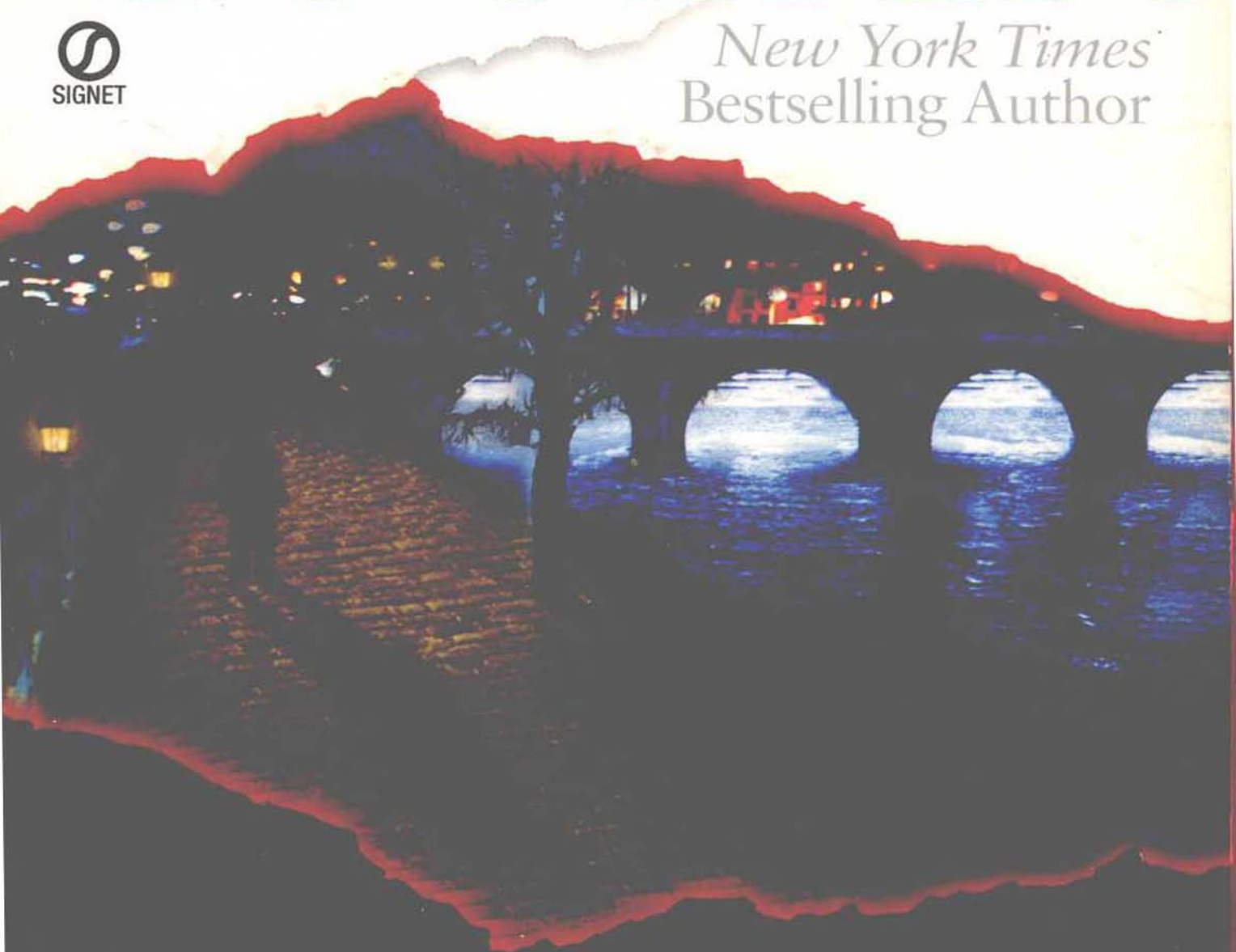


CATHERINE COULTER



New York Times
Bestselling Author

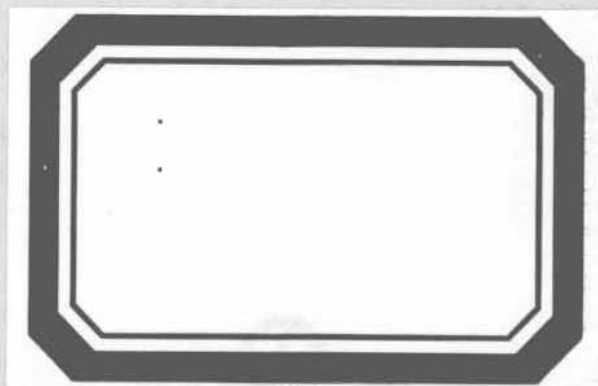


FALSE PRETENSES

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CATHERINE
COULTER



A SIGNET BOOK

SIGNET

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**PRAISE FOR NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CATHERINE COULTER**

“Her plots are like rich desserts—sinfully delicious and hard to pass up.”

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Anton C. Pogany



New York City Present

The reporter shoved the microphone into her face. "Do you think Dr. Hunter's testimony is going to get you off, Mrs. Carleton?"

"No comment," snapped Rod Samuels.

"Come on, Mrs. Carleton, do you think the jury will believe the shrink?"

A snicker. "Nothing like a handy witness waiting in the wings."

"The D.A. is furious, Mrs. Carleton. What do you think the verdict will be, Mr. Samuels?"

"Not guilty, of course," said Rod Samuels.

Her face showed nothing, she said nothing, merely stared straight ahead, aware of Rod's hand holding her arm firmly, pulling her toward the limousine. Timothy's silver Rolls-Royce. He'd been so proud of it, so proud. "*What do you think, Elizabeth? Just feel that finish. It's something, isn't it? Even old dour Drake approves.*"

"Is the D.A. right, Mr. Samuels? Did you bribe the shrink?"

"What will Elizabeth X do if she's freed?" shouted another reporter.

"Spend all her dead husband's money, that's what!"

Elizabeth X. Elizabeth Xavier Carleton. So clever, those reporters. She had been the notorious Elizabeth X for over six months. She felt Rod tighten his grip on her arm. She felt the jolt when he shoved a reporter aside. The door of the limousine was open, Drake standing beside it, his face a cold mask, his mouth an angry thin line. At what? she wondered vaguely. At the surprise witness for the defense? At the endless harassment from the media?

Rod pushed her into the limousine and quickly seated himself beside her, grabbing at the door handle.

"No comment!" he shouted at the sea of reporters as one hand searched for the window button.

The windows were electric and wouldn't work without the motor being on.

He slammed the door. There was a loud yelp. A reporter's sleeve was caught in the door. Rod cursed, opened the door, released the sleeve, then slammed it again. Elizabeth watched Drake quickly make his way around the car and open the driver's door.

A flash went off in her face, then another, and another.

She lowered her head, her pupils shrinking at the bright pricks of light.

How many times had Rod shouted "No comment"? How many times had she been blinded by flashes? Who cared anymore about her? She wondered why Rod didn't have a comment this time. *Because he believes you guilty of Timothy's murder, that's why.*

"Are you all right, Elizabeth?"

She nodded, saying nothing, not turning her head to face him.

"It's almost over," he said, and with a deep sigh leaned back against the rich gray leather seats. "Keep your head down. There are TV cameras as well. It will be over soon, Elizabeth," he repeated. "No matter what Moretti tries, he won't break Christian Hunter."

Was it over? She still vividly saw Anthony Moretti's face distorted with disbelieving rage at the defense witness. The ambitious D.A. of New York City had headed this case since the beginning, a case he had no intention of losing.

Until the surprise witness for the defense.

Until Christian Hunter, who had testified with calm, nearly insolent conciseness, had made him look like a fool.

"What is your name, sir?" asked Rod Samuels.

"Christian Hunter."

"What is your occupation, sir?"

"I am a doctor."

"Dr. Hunter, where were you the night of July 10 of last year?"

"I was walking in the Village, alone, until about eight o'clock."

"And after nine o'clock, Dr. Hunter?"

"I went into a bar on Greenwich, the Flying Moon. I stayed until midnight."

"Did you see the defendant there?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I spoke to her, bought her a drink—a daiquiri—and we talked until midnight. Then I escorted her to a taxi."

"Have you ever seen the defendant again, Dr. Hunter? Or spoken to her?"

"No, I have not."

"You are certain it is the defendant, Mrs. Elizabeth Carleton, you were with?"

"Positive."

"You are equally certain of the times?"

"Positive."

"Dr. Hunter, six months is a long time ago. How can you be so certain of the date?"

"I was thrilled to meet Mrs. Carleton," Christian Hunter said. "I have been a fan of hers for five years, now. For me it was like meeting the President."

"Thank you, Dr. Hunter. Your witness, Mr. Moretti."

Anthony Moretti stared at the man in the witness box. He had thought at first to simply look at the jury, shrug, and have no questions for this obviously lying cretin. Now he knew he couldn't get away with it. Hunter looked unruffled, completely in control, almost bored. Who was this Hunter anyway? Hell, it wasn't fair that the prosecution had to disclose every god-damned thing they had and the defense could pull a stunt like this. He calmed immediately. It was a setup, pure and simple. Someone had bribed Hunter. He'd demolish him, show him for the crook he was. That bitch would go to jail, he'd escort her there himself.

Moretti walked calmly toward the witness box, paused a moment, gave Hunter a long look, and shrugged. He heard the surge of excited whispers from behind him.

"Dr. Hunter, what is your specialty?"

"I am a psychologist."

"I see. So you're not a real doctor, then? You didn't attend a medical school."

"No, I did not. I have a Ph.D. from Harvard."

He's a fake, a damned fake shrink. "I see. And just what do you treat?"

"What I treat depends on what walks through my door."

Laughter.

Moretti showed no reaction. He waited for the laughter to die. "Do you treat many liars, Dr. Hunter—pathological liars?"

"Never treated them, Mr. Moretti. One doesn't treat one's friends, after all."

More laughter.

Slippery, smart-mouthed bastard.

"Why, Dr. Hunter, psychologist, didn't you come forward at the time of Mrs. Carleton's arrest?"

"I was in Greece. I returned only one week ago. I had no idea of what had happened in my absence."

"What were you doing in Greece?"

"I was holding my sister's hand while she gave birth to a seven-pound boy, then divorced her husband."

Laughter. The open court had played in Moretti's favor during the trial, but not now.

Moretti bit his cheek. He felt the excitement radiating from Rod Samuels, the damned bastard. He felt the tension building from his staff, heard them shuffling papers behind him. He saw the jury leaning forward, intent, all twelve of them, hanging on every word.

Moretti calmly examined his fingernails. There was an ugly hangnail on his thumb. "Wouldn't you say," he asked, not looking up, "that six months is rather a long time for hand-holding and being away from your practice?"

"You don't know my sister. Nor do you know my practice."

More laughter. Judge Wattson Olney's gavel came down in three quick bangs.

"You don't read newspapers, Dr. Hunter?"

"Not while I'm overseas, no."

"One would think, wouldn't one, Dr. Hunter, that an educated man, a psychologist, would keep himself informed of world events? This particular event has appeared in papers all over the world."

Christian Hunter sat forward very slightly. "That is why I returned, Mr. Moretti. My sister happened to mention the trial, and I recognized Mrs. Carleton's photo."

"I see," said Moretti with a fairly creditable sneer. "You didn't want to be responsible for this poor innocent woman being found guilty?"

"That's right, Mr. Moretti."

Moretti stared at him. "Ah, the baby was born by then?"

"Yes, but the divorce wasn't yet final."

Moretti paused, drew himself up, cast a derisive

glance toward the witness, then an I-told-you-so look toward the jury. "How much were you paid to return to New York, Dr. Hunter?"

"Objection!"

Judge Olney frowned. "You will not badger the witness, Mr. Moretti."

"But, your honor—"

"I would like to answer, your honor," said Christian Hunter.

Olney frowned at the witness. If the man had been bribed, a possibility that Olney found quite likely, he was a master of the game. Slowly he nodded. Let the man hang himself if he wanted to. Moretti would tear his gullet out.

"After my testimony, your honor, I should be delighted to review my portfolio with Mr. Moretti and let him speak to my accountants. I have no need for money. I have more than enough for my needs. I cannot be bribed."

The buzz of conversation increased. Olney pounded his gavel, impressed in spite of himself. He'd been so certain, so very certain that the pale young woman was guilty. But now . . .

It was then that Moretti realized that it was *the* Christian Hunter. Christian Westford Hunter—a psychologist, sure, but one who didn't need to do anything except belch in satisfaction after he ate the goddamned haute-cuisine meals prepared by his French chef.

He hated smug, rich bastards like Hunter. Psychologist, bull. A hobby, nothing more. Why was he saving her neck? Why?

But Moretti wasn't ready to throw in the towel, not yet, not by a long shot. If need be, he could get a postponement from Judge Olney. The judge knew the bitch was guilty. He asked in a deceptively bored voice, "Why do you think, Dr. Hunter, that Mrs.

Carleton didn't state that she was with you that night?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Hunter said, glancing briefly toward Elizabeth. "She didn't even know my name, except for my first name. Perhaps she thought no one would believe her."

"Your honor," said Moretti, "please instruct the witness to confine his answers."

"Your question, Mr. Moretti," said Judge Olney, "didn't require a simple yes or no."

"Did you know that Mrs. Carleton didn't ever mention that she was in this bar with you? I believe that requires only a yes or a no."

"No."

"Don't you find that curious, Dr. Hunter?"

Christian Hunter merely stared at him.

"Don't you find that curious, Dr. Hunter?" Moretti smashed his fist down on the railing of the witness box.

"Very well," said Hunter. "As a psychologist, I know of many cases of trauma where the person completely blocks out what happened. It is a defense mechanism, you see."

"You're saying that Mrs. Carleton blocked out murdering her husband?"

"Objection, your honor. The district attorney is twisting the witness's words."

"Sustained."

"So, Dr. Hunter, the defendant blocked out meeting you? A case of convenient amnesia?"

"I believe it is a strong possibility. I had the impression that Mrs. Carleton was disturbed that evening. She didn't know I was a psychologist, of course, and—"

"You wanted to pick her up? Go to bed with her?"

"Objection, your honor!"

"Sustained."

"Didn't it occur to you—within the past week, of

course—that she was disturbed because she was planning to murder her husband?”

Rod Samuels said nothing at all.

Christian Hunter smiled. “I fail to see how that is possible, Mr. Moretti. As I understand it, the murder was committed during the time Mrs. Carleton was with me. I do not believe that planning anything is a crime. If it were, I should say that our judicial system would collapse in no time at all.”

“As a psychologist, wouldn’t you say that murdering with an ice pick—excuse me, a *silver* ice pick—is more the act of a woman than of a man?”

“I don’t have dealings with murderers, at least none that I know of. Your opinion on that would be more to the point than would mine.”

“Do you think, Dr. Hunter, that anyone from the bar would recognize Mrs. Carleton? Back up your tale . . . story?”

Christian Hunter shrugged. It was an elegant shrug that dismissed Moretti from the human race. “I suppose you would have to inquire,” he said. “However, I tend to doubt it. The bar was dark and I fetched the drinks. We were seated in a high-backed booth.”

“Very dark, Dr. Hunter?”

Hunter smiled. “It was light enough so I could see a filling in one of her molars.”

Moretti was battering his head into a stone wall. Rod Samuels knew it. Elizabeth Carleton had never testified, so she couldn’t be examined by Moretti. The jury knew it. The jury believed Hunter. It shone from their faces like a beacon. Rod Samuels found Elizabeth’s hand beneath the table and squeezed it. It was cold as ice and limp.

He hadn’t told her about Hunter.

Moretti tried again. “You are certain, Dr. Hunter, that it is the defendant, Elizabeth X—Elizabeth Xavier Carleton—you were with that night?”

“Positive.”

"Why? How can you be so positive when the bar was dark? After all, lots of people have fillings in their molars."

Hunter showed no signs of embarrassment, no signs of anything at all. His thin face was impassive. When he spoke, it was clearly without guilt. "She is a beautiful, interesting woman, in dim light or in bright. I was alone. She was alone. We began a conversation. I quickly realized who she was. That is all."

"Just why do you think a beautiful, interesting, *married* woman was alone in that bar, Dr. Hunter?"

"Search me."

Damn you, you Ivy League bastard. Moretti felt his armpits grow damp. He was losing and there was nothing he could do about it. Still, he had to try.

"You didn't ask her?"

"No. We spoke about her career. I'd heard her play at Carnegie Hall every time she'd performed there. She's quite good. I have a fondness for Bach, as it happens."

"Did you know that her husband was sixty-four years old?"

"No. We only talked about music."

Elizabeth closed her eyes. The limousine slipped into the traffic on Sixth Avenue, headed uptown. She wondered vaguely when Drake would cut over to the East Side. She wasn't in the mood for sightseeing. She saw Christian Hunter in her mind's eye. She would never forget Christian Hunter. Tall, slender, intense blue eyes, a face both sensitive and intelligent, perhaps a bit too long, a bit too thin. A professorlike man who had an English look, a tweedy look. He seemed an aesthete, a man who rarely dirtied his hands in this world. But that wasn't true. A psychologist saw a lot, perhaps too much. And he had handled Moretti well, with little apparent effort.

She had never seen him before today in court.

Who was he? What did he want?

She felt Rod's hand holding her arm again. Drake cut through the park and crossed Fifth at Eighty-fourth. She looked briefly toward the Metropolitan Museum. Hordes of people, as always.

There was little traffic as he went eastward to Madison, then turned uptown to Eighty-fifth. The neighborhood was quiet, tree-lined, old. Drake turned smoothly into the driveway. It had actually been two residences years before, but one couldn't really tell, for the bow windows on the second floor were identical, the entrance to the east blocked up and covered with shrubs. She looked up as Drake helped her out of the limousine. She loved this house, all four stories of it. It had a mansard roof, so French-looking that it always made her smile, remembering her years in Paris. And there were narrow black iron grille balconies at the second floor and at the fourth. From the outside, the house was unobtrusive, nearly severe save for the romance of the roof and balconies. It fit in well with its neighbors. No one would ever guess that one of the richest men in the world lived there.

She walked silently beside Rod into the lobby. It was a lobby, she thought, and it was in a house, and there was a doorman. Gallagher looked up and smiled broadly at them.

"Liam," Rod Samuels said curtly.

"I heard about the witness on the radio, Mrs. Carleton," Liam blurted out. "I am relieved, ma'am."

"Thank you, Liam." Was he the only one who believed her innocent?

Rod escorted her to the ornate 1920's elevator that Timothy had installed intact from an old building he had torn down on Wall Street. It creaked and groaned as it ascended, as was proper, as Timothy had wanted. How many times had he grinned and rubbed his hands together when the thing lurched between floors? "*Makes me feel like a ten-year-old again to hear that, Elizabeth.*"

"Thank you, Rod."

He started. Those were the first words she'd spoken to him since they'd left the courthouse.

"It's nearly over now, Elizabeth. You'll be acquitted. Moretti can have the week postponement—he can have a month—it won't make any difference. He won't break Christian Hunter. This time next week, we'll be celebrating."

Elizabeth flexed her fingers unconsciously in an exercise she'd done away from the piano since she was five years old.

"Will we?" she said.

The elevator slugged to a halt. Rod pulled the wrought-iron gate open, stood back, and waited for her to exit directly into the foyer.

"I'm tired," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I think I'll sleep for a week once Moretti has thrown in the towel."

How odd mundane things were, she thought. She'd been selfish and inconsiderate. "Please, Rod, come in for a drink. You know you're fond of Kogi's martinis."

"Yes, I think I will. This time next week, Elizabeth, it will be champagne."

She said nothing. A Japanese man, who came only to Elizabeth's chin, burst into the living room, smiling widely. He was wearing his white coat and black slacks and his prized mustache was brushed and gleaming.

"Welcome, Mrs. Elizabeth, Mr. Samuels. I am pleased."

"Thank you, Kogi. I believe Mr. Samuels would like one of your famous martinis."

"Certainly, Mrs. Elizabeth."

He deftly took her coat, gloves, and purse, then provided the same service for Rod. Kogi had been with Timothy for fifteen years, and he'd stayed on. Stayed on with his master's accused murderer. He'd never said a word to Elizabeth and she had been too much of a coward to ask him what he thought.

"Please to sit down," said Kogi.

Rod sat on the pale gold sofa. Elizabeth wandered about the living room, a marvel of modern sculptures, most of them naked women and men in bronze and marble. One large woman was posed in front of the bow windows. Several Rodins were among the collection. So much chrome and glass and silk, not to mention the twenty-foot Tabriz in pale peach and blue that covered the thick white carpet. Very expensive, all of it, and very elegant, and about as subtle and restrained as the celebration for the Statue of Liberty. Elizabeth didn't actively dislike it, she simply ignored it for the most part. Her eyes went to the seven-foot Steinway grand piano set in the far corner by another set of long windows. Timothy had bought it for her as a wedding present, three years before. On the wall beside the piano were three Picassos, from his Pink Period. Two of them were nudes, pathetic figures against their rose and terra-cotta backgrounds.

Elizabeth walked toward the piano, forgetting Rod, forgetting the awful nightmare that had begun seven months before.

She sat down, flexed her fingers, and began Bach's Italian Concerto. She loved the key of F. It was so elegant, much more so than the furnishing of this elaborate mansion. And Bach was so clean and predictable, every chord she played calling for the next and the next, in an even pattern, an even flow.

She didn't open her eyes until she reached the second movement. She couldn't play it. It was slow, haunting, sorrowful. She ached and hurt.

"Would you like something to drink, Elizabeth?"

She blinked up at Rod, who was standing beside the piano, merely looking at her. What did he think? she wondered. He always looked so cool, so in control, so impenetrable, with those dark eyes of his.

"Perhaps a glass of Chablis." She saw Kogi from