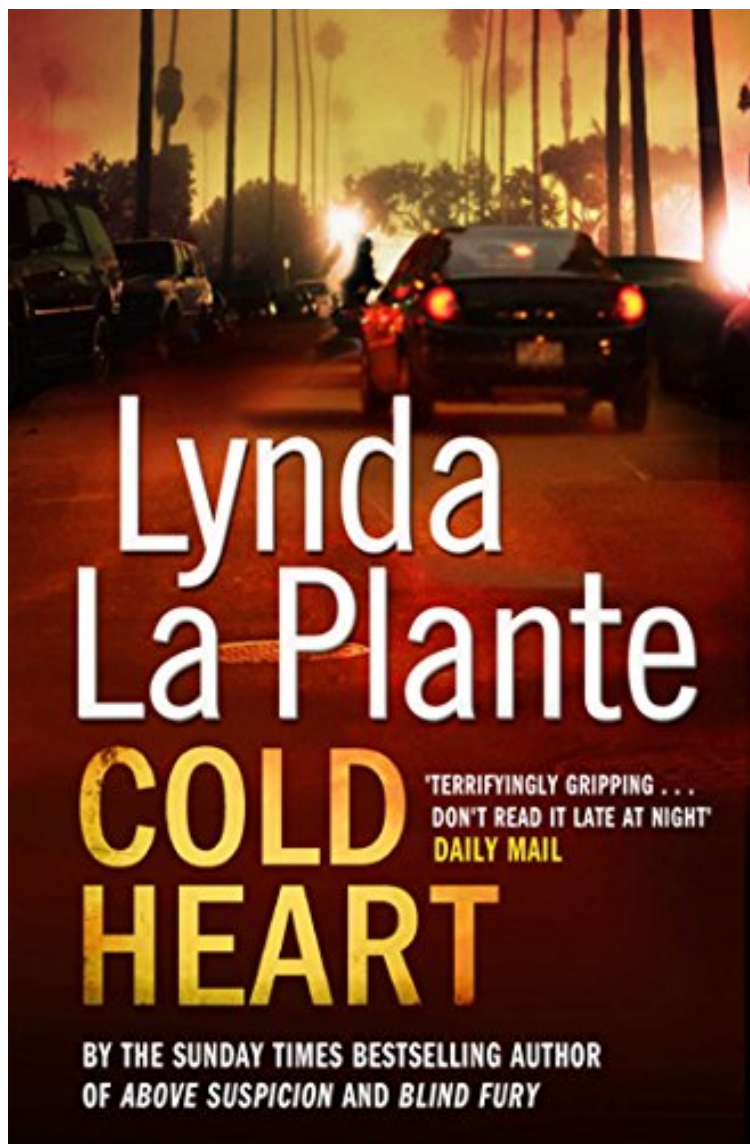


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# Cold Heart: A Lorraine Page Thriller (English Edition)



*Par Lynda La Plante*

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMovie mogul Harry Nathan's lonely death in a Beverley Hills swimming pool is the beginning of a trail of lust and conspiracy leading to the darkest corners of the international art world. Private investigator Lorraine Page faces her toughest fight ever as she takes on the case for fading starlet Cindy Nathan, Harry's third wife. Lorraine believes the grieving widow's story. Unlike her ex-colleagues in the police department who have already charged Cindy with murderExtraitAugust 12, 1997Lorraine Page of Page Investigations had not yet moved into a new office, though she had already used part of her cut of the

million-dollar bonus from her last case to move from the tiny apartment in Los Angeles she had shared with her former partner, Rosie, who had now married Bill Rooney, the ex-police captain who also worked with them. The couple had recently departed for an extended honeymoon in Europe. The lost feeling hadn't happened for a few days. She had been so caught up in making plans for the wedding, choosing what they would both wear, and the laughter when they forced Rooney to splurge on an expensive suit that had made the rotund man look quite handsome. Everything had been fun, particularly now that they had money to spend. It was not until Rosie and Rooney had departed that it really hit home: Lorraine missed them. Waving good-bye at the airport had almost brought the tears that didn't come until a few days later. She had been sitting in Rosie's old apartment, now hers, looking at the wedding photographs, and she had no one to share them with, no one to laugh and point out how funny it had been when Rooney spilled champagne on his precious new suit. There was no one who would understand the three of them standing with solemn faces and their glasses raised. Rosie's and Lorraine's had, of course, contained ginger ale, but they had raised their glasses for a private toast to their absent friend, Nick Bartello, who had died on their last case. The photographs, like the small apartment, held such memories, some sweet, some so very sad, but they had made Lorraine decide to buy another place. It had not been an easy decision but she couldn't stand the ghosts--it made the loneliness even worse. Lorraine's new apartment was on the upper floor of a two-story condominium built on an old beach-house lot right on the oceanfront in Venice Beach, one of four or five blocks where the little houses were so closely packed together that there was no room for front or back yards. Walking around the kooky old bohemian neighborhood, she found she had already fallen for its lively energy and charm, and she loved being near the beach. Lorraine didn't think of herself as "kooky" or "bohemian"; in fact, in her neat suit and blouse she looked slightly out of place, but the neighborhood reminded her of when she had been married. It had been tough, trying to juggle her job as a rookie cop and bring up two young kids while her husband studied at home and worked nights in the local liquor store. Money had always been tight, but friends were plentiful, and there had been so much love. Lorraine had money now and she wanted, needed, more friends like Rosie and Rooney. Deep down she ached for all the love she had lost. While viewing the new apartment, she had caught a glimpse of herself in a full-length mirror. Staring at her image, from the well-cut blond hair down to her slim ankles in low-heeled shoes, the ache had suddenly surfaced, making her gasp. It didn't matter how long ago she and Mike had been divorced, how long it had been since she had seen her daughters, the pain was still raw. In the past she had obliterated it by getting drunk, but she was stronger now. She could still feel the dreaded dryness in her mouth and feel herself shaking, but she forced herself to follow the real-estate agent around the rest of the apartment. "I'll take it," she announced. "Just one thing, though. Do the other residents allow dogs?" She lit a cigarette. Tiger, the wolfhound/malamute crossbred canine who had belonged to poor dead Nick Bartello, was now Lorraine's responsibility, and she needed to be near an open space where she could walk him--clearly, the beach would be perfect. "I don't think that would be a problem. I presume--""Tiger," Lorraine interjected, using her right hand to indicate with a patting motion that Tiger was about the size of a toy poodle. "I presume he's housebroken. The landlords do have a proviso with regard to animals." "Oh, yes, he's the perfect gentleman indoors, professionally trained, exceptionally obedient." Crossing her fingers behind her back, she hoped that this would soon be true. She didn't want to risk losing the apartment: it felt right, it felt safe. "I think I could be happy here," she said softly, and flushed with embarrassment: it sounded stupid. But the agent smiled warmly, eager to do the deal but rather surprised that this elegant if rather nervous woman hadn't even asked to see the kitchen. Lorraine insisted they drive to the real-estate office to finalize the sale. She required no mortgage, and arranged a certified check for the full amount. "I'd like measurements of all the rooms so I can order furniture, curtains . . ." She waved her hand and, as she did, the agent noticed there was no wedding ring--in fact, she wore no jewelry at all. As Lorraine stood up and bent forward to pick up her purse, her silky blond hair slid forward, revealing a jagged scar that ran from the corner of her eye, a scar that makeup couldn't hide. Driving back to Rosie's, she recalled her assurances about Tiger. It had proved impossible, so far, to housebreak or instill any kind of normal dog behavior into him. Rooney and Rosie had both tried, but he had become a liability during the prewedding arrangements. He would either attack anyone who came into the house or disappear for days on end, and no matter how long they all cajoled him and fed him biscuits, he point-blank refused to wear a collar. Eventually, Lorraine had booked him into a kennel for extensive schooling with a former police-dog handler. If this failed it was unanimously decided that he would be joining his old master Nick Bartello--nobody had been able to train that son of a bitch either. When she got back to the apartment, Lorraine phoned the kennel. Tiger was progressing but they

suggested an extra two weeks' training. They did not elaborate and Lorraine was quite pleased--she needed time to furnish the new apartment. She decided not to take anything from Rosie's place but to start from scratch and buy everything new. At the same time she had resolved to do something about her scar, the scar that reminded her of who she had been, of what she had been. She no longer needed to force herself to look at the ugliness it represented. She wanted to put her past behind her, once and for all. Lorraine felt as if she were high--she could hardly sleep. The shopping trips to the Beverly Center to buy furnishings and things were like stepping back in time. She selected everything she thought she would need, from a bed, dining table, and large white sofa to wineglasses, lamps, dishes, and silverware, and arranged for it all to be delivered to the apartment. She wanted everything to be ready for her release from the clinic and she didn't want to lift anything, carry anything, or move so much as a book. The surgery was extensive. She had decided to have a full face-lift, to be done at the same time as the operations on her scar, which was deep and required skin grafts. She decided to remain at the clinic, pampering herself with beauty treatments, until the wounds had healed. She was still paying for Tiger's "rehabilitation" and the kennel was beginning to worry that he would become a permanent fixture, but Lorraine assured them that she fully intended to take him back. When the surgeon, who had not allowed her to look at herself, finally held up a mirror to her face, she wanted to celebrate, to kiss and hug everyone close by. "You're a very beautiful lady, Lorraine," the surgeon said softly, as she cocked her head from side to side, drinking in her smooth, scarless cheek, her perfect eyes, the taut skin beneath her chin. He leaned in close. "Mind you, I can't take all the credit. You have a wonderful bone structure. I just did a little suction beneath your cheekbones, ironed out the laugh lines," he continued, pointing out what his magic knife had done, taking pride in his work. He asked the nurses their opinion, but Lorraine didn't hear: she felt as if she were looking into her soul and it made her gasp. "Happy?" the surgeon asked, lifting his funny bushy eyebrows. "I used to look like this," she whispered, wishing Rosie could be there to see the new Lorraine. While in the clinic, Lorraine had worked out and eaten well and, on her release, she felt better than ever before. She gave her entire wardrobe to charity and hit the designer shops with a vengeance. She had never spent so much, so fast. She had always had good taste but now she went for quality, and for the first time in her life she never looked at the price tag. Next she bought a brand-new Cherokee and a secondhand Mercedes, the car she had always dreamed of owning. It was in perfect condition, with only twenty thousand on the clock, immaculate leather upholstery, a CD player, and a telephone. As she flicked open the makeup mirror it lit up and she sat smiling at herself, her new beautiful self, as the salesman hovered. "Yep, this'll do nicely." By mid-September, she had found a comfortable office in a small three-story complex on West Pico Boulevard. Los Angeles had rapidly changing fashions in office buildings--as it had in pizza toppings and nail extensions--and although the building had been erected only five years earlier, the gleaming mirrored exterior was already considered behind the times. But as far as Lorraine was concerned this was an advantage, as it brought the rental more within the range she felt justified in paying. There was an elegant lobby and a pleasant Filipino doorman, good security, and--the biggest advantage--right across the street was Rancho Park with acres of grass for Tiger to run in. She thought about him, but kept putting off calling the kennel to say she would pick him up. The air-conditioned office, tastefully decorated and filled with plain ash furniture, also boasted a bathroom and kitchen, plus a reception area furnished with sofas and a coffee table. page investigations was printed in letters of gold leaf on the main entrance door by the electronic, security-coded intercom. The letterhead, cards, and office equipment were chosen with meticulous care. Only the old computer from her last office was retained. Ready to begin work, Lorraine deliberated over the wording for newspaper and magazine advertisements before committing to six-month runs. She then contacted three secretarial agencies, and asked that applicants should send their r?sum?s before she interviewed them. By October, appointments had been scheduled with the three applicants she felt were most suited to the job. Still running high on her own adrenaline, she didn't see them all: midway through the first interview she decided to offer the job to Rob Decker, even though she had really wanted a woman. Decker was about twenty-eight, tanned, blond, and good-looking, had worked mostly for television executives, had even tried acting himself, and his account of his unsuccessful thespian attempts made her laugh. He had a top shorthand speed, understood computers, and had a deep, laid-back voice that harked back to his theatrical endeavors. He was fit, with a tight, muscular body, and was wearing an expensive tan linen suit, pale blue shirt, and suede shoes with no socks. He had a Cartier wristwatch but, thankfully, no other jewelry. He carried his r?sum? and other details of his varied career--knowledge of weapons and shooting skills--in a soft leather briefcase, with his karate certificates and gun license. With her history, Lorraine would have found it difficult to acquire a license, but it wasn't the fact that she would have

a gun-toting secretary that impressed her--she just liked him. Decker was relaxed but not too relaxed, respectful but not obsequious, and when she asked why he had applied for the job he shrugged, admitting without any embarrassment that it sounded better than working tables at a bar and that money was short. His last employer had refused to give him references, which had made it difficult to get a decent job. Lorraine was confused: she had references from his last employer in front of her on her pristine desk. Rob nodded toward the paper, and said he had typed it himself. When she asked why he had no reference from his last employer, he told her that he had refused to go down on him and, equally candidly, that he was gay. Then he had laughed and added that she probably knew that already, and probably he wouldn't get this job either. "Yes, you have." Lorraine surprised even herself. She hadn't given it as much thought as she should have. Decker's handshake was strong and he assured her that he would not let her down. "I hope not, Rob. This is very important to me--I want the agency to succeed more than you will ever know. Maybe when you get to know me better you'll find out why, but in the meantime, when can you start?" "Why not right now? We need some plants in here, and I have a contact in a nursery--I get the best, half price." Lorraine went over salary and office keys, discussed hours, and then, almost as an afterthought, asked if he liked dogs. He told her another anecdote, about when he had worked in a poodle parlor, and she said that Tiger was not exactly a poodle and needed firm handling. Just before Decker left he seemed suddenly vulnerable, and Lorraine liked him for that too. She knew Rob Decker would become a good friend. The following morning, Lorraine looked over her office. As promised, Decker had bought two ficus trees in copper buckets, a mass of pink and white impatiens in a glazed terra-cotta planter, and a deep square plain glass vase, which he had filled with Casablanca lilies and placed on the little table in reception. The whole place seemed to have come alive. He had left on her desk a note of the cost of each plant and a receipt, plus watering instructions. He had also bought coffee, tea, cookies and skimmed milk, and a new percolator, which he insisted was his own, so that not only was there a sweet fragrance from the blooms but a wonderful smell of fresh coffee. There were no calls and no work offers, so at lunchtime Decker and Lorraine went off to buy some exhibition posters and prints from the Metropolitan Museum of Art shop, as the office walls were bare. He also talked Lorraine into stopping off to pick up an elegant halogen floor lamp to put in reception, a swing-arm graphite lamp, a violet glass ashtray for her desk, and--having divined her sweet tooth as though by magic--a jar of jelly beans. By three o'clock their new purchases were on display. The advertising had, as yet, failed to generate any work, but she was not disheartened; she knew things would take time, and during the afternoon they had been able to get to know each other better. Lorraine never divulged everything about her background, but Decker knew she had been a cop, and knew she had had a drinking problem. In fact, he was such a good listener she felt that she had told him more than she really should have, but he was equally forthcoming about his life and his partner, with whom he had lived for eight years--Adam Elliot, late forties, a writer for films, TV, or laundry-detergent commercials, still hoping to crack the big time before he turned fifty. They left the office at six. Not one phone call had come in: it was Thursday, October 23. Decker had asked Lorraine if she would like to have dinner over the weekend at his place, but despite the offer of chicken marsala and chocolate pie, she had declined. She felt that perhaps she should keep a little distance between them. Friday was just as silent, telephonewise and jobwise, and they had talked even more, had lunch together again and discussed how they should rethink the ads. Decker suggested they use Adam to reword them in a way that might grab a potential client. Again Lorraine refused his offer of lunch or dinner over the weekend. The initial buzz of her getting her new life together began to dry up. She didn't feel so confident anymore and even her new face began to annoy her: she was so used to flicking her hair forward over her scar, but there was nothing to hide anymore. She began to wonder if it had all been make-believe and the old Lorraine still lurked, ready to pull the new one down. She wished she had accepted Decker's invitation, as she was alone the entire weekend, going over her accounts, adding up her bank balance. She was still in good shape financially as well as physically, but she had spent a lot of money on pampering herself, and seeing it in black and white made her a little scared at her foolishness. Maybe she should have taken her time, but it was too late now--the money was gone. She had just over two hundred thousand dollars in her account--a lot--but at the same time she knew that, realistically, she could not keep the office and Decker running without some finances coming in. Still, any new venture needed time. But despite her forced optimism, something was eating away at her. She awoke early Saturday morning with a faint voice in her head, telling her over and over she didn't deserve this new life. As if on cue, the phone rang. It was three o'clock in the morning. "Hello," Lorraine said suspiciously. "Hi, blossom, how's things?" "Rosie?" "Yeah, guess where we are? No, I'll tell you, Vienna! My God, Lorraine, it's unbelievable!" Lorraine lay back on the

pillow as Rosie listed, at full volume, the restaurants and sight-seeing tours. It was so nice to hear her voice, even if it was earsplitting. She sounded so close, as if she were in the next room. "Hey! How's life? You found a guy?" "Nope, not yet, but I'm looking." "Well, you make sure you don't get one that snores!" Lorraine smiled as Rosie continued to fill her in on the trials of sleeping with Rooney, never once pausing for breath. "Hey, you there? Or did I just bore you off the phone?" "No, Rosie, I'm still here, making notes in case I meet my Mr. Right." She could feel Rosie's smile. She gave her the new office address and phone numbers, and she could hear Rosie repeat them to big, bulbous-nosed Bill Rooney. Then she put Rooney on the phone and he complained about the cost of the call and then said, so softly, in a voice she would never have expected from the old, hardened cop, "You know, Lorraine, I've got a lot to thank you for. Not just for making us a load of money, but if it wasn't for you, I'd never have met the woman who's made me happier than I ever thought possible." There was a long pause and Lorraine could hear his heavy breathing at the other end of the line. "I love her so much," he mumbled, and then repeated it, sounding almost in tears. Rosie grabbed the phone, laughing. "He's drunk--but he tells me that every day. Nice, huh? Hey, I better go. We'll send you postcards, bring you presents and . . . Oh, yeah, can't wait to see your new place." Lorraine said good-bye. It didn't matter that Rosie had shown little or no interest in what was happening in her life because right now, it didn't feel too wonderful and she couldn't see anyone in her future saying he loved her. Lorraine was lonely--deeply lonely. Later that morning she went to her local AA meeting, the only social life she had. She still couldn't rid herself of the feeling of isolation: it didn't make her want to drink, but it made her think, and face the fact that she had no friends. She started thinking about her ex-husband and his family. She had not seen her two daughters for a long, long time, and though they knew where she was, they had made no contact. She often thought about going to see them, but always talked herself out of it. She didn't want to disrupt their lives any more than she had. She was glad when Tiger's trainer, Alan Pereira, called to say that the dog training was now complete, he would bring Tiger home. Lorraine perked up, even put on some makeup, then laughed at herself. Some weekend date, the return of Tiger. Tiger was returned, subdued, wearing a collar in rainbow colors, his coat freshly washed, and his teeth cleaned. She had not realized how big he was, or how thick and beautiful his coat. She'd also forgotten his piercing large blue eyes. "You got one stubborn son of a bitch here," Alan said, and Tiger's blue eyes were doleful as he first sat, then went through stand, stay, and heel. Lorraine was even more impressed when, on the command "Bed," Tiger slunk to a flower-printed foam basket and lay down. He remained quiet, head on paws, as she cooked her supper, came like a lamb, and sat when she slipped on his leash to take him for his evening walk. He performed his necessary functions, returned, ate his meal, and returned to his bed. It was about twelve o'clock when Lorraine was woken up by something tugging at her sheets. She sat bolt upright, to be met with Tiger's face, and to see his two massive front paws on her bed. "Bed. Go to bed now." He slunk to the door, tail between his legs, nosed it wider open, and disappeared. In the morning she woke to find the dog's prone body stretched out beside her, with just six inches between them, comatose and snoring gently. Lorraine nudged him and, still with eyes firmly shut, he gave a low growl, his jaw opening a fraction to reveal his cleaned white fangs. She thought of Rooney snoring, and smiled, but then said with great authority, "Bed, go to your bed. Now." The tail thumped, just a fraction. "I mean it, you're pushing your luck. Step out of line, pal, and it's the big kennel in the sky, you understand me? You're only on remand, Tiger." He was motionless, eyes closed, just a flicker of his tail. "Okay, you can stay . . . just for a few minutes, you hear me?" She lay there, feeling the huge weight of him beside her, then squinted at the bedside clock. It was six o'clock. "You know what time it is?" she said, turning on her side. She went back to sleep and at some point between the hours of six and seven-thirty, that six inches closed. When she next opened her eyes, he was sleeping nose to nose with her, one paw gently resting across her chest. "I don't believe this . . ." But she couldn't resist rubbing his ears. Cleverly, he never opened his eyes, just gave a long, satisfied sigh. Before they went out for a morning jog, Lorraine discovered that Tiger had chewed two of her new shot-silk cushions and destroyed his floral bed. On returning, he was not interested in dog food, but devoured her cereal, nuts and fruit with natural yogurt. He followed her into the bedroom, nosed open the shower door, and padded after her while she dressed. He remained at her heels throughout the day, sat close to her on the sofa watching TV, and no amount of loud yells made him return to the living room when she got into bed. He wasn't a fool, and instead of climbing onto the other side of the king-sized bed, he lay down beside it. But he was right next to her in the morning, his breath hot on her neck. "Hey, this has got to stop, pal," she said, but then blew it by hugging him close, and he knew he had her. She just could not resist his love, because that was what she felt from the giant animal--love, pure, unadulterated love--and already they had, although she hated to admit it, gotten into a

routine. All his training, with the exception of allowing her to slip on his collar, had gone out the window. Tiger had moved in on Lorraine as no man would have dared to, and he loved her with a passion. He sat in the passenger seat of the Cherokee, his nose out the window and his ears blown back by the wind. Decker was overwhelmed by Tiger, who growled at him, teeth bared, until Lorraine shouted at him, "Shut up! This is friend, this is Decker." "Jesus Christ, Mrs. Page! He's enormous. What on earth kind of breed is he?" "Mixed, wolfhound and--" "Donkey?" Tiger was not too sure about Decker or the office. He made a slow tour of each room and cocked his leg on one of the ficus trees. "You sure as hell aren't a poodle," Decker said warily, but when the telephone rang his attention was distracted. He snatched it up--this was the first call that had come in. "Page Investigations," he said coolly, as a pair of ice-blue eyes stared him down across the desktop. "May I have your name? Mrs. Page is on the other line right now." Decker jotted down "Cindy Nathan," glaring back at Tiger. "Who is it?" Lorraine whispered from her office doorway. "A Cindy Nathan, just wait a second." Lorraine watched as Decker flicked the phone onto speaker and held it for one beat, two beats as he grinned and gave her the thumbs-up sign. "Cindy Nathan, that is N-A-T . . ." said a low voice, spelling out the surname. "I have that, Ms. Nathan," said Decker, "and may I ask what your inquiry is about?" "It's not an inquiry. I want Lorraine Page--is she there or not?" Tiger gave a lethal growl, but as Lorraine pointed at him, he shut up. "I'm sorry, Ms. Nathan, but, as I said, Mrs. Page is on the other line. If you could just tell me what your inquiry is. I am Rob Decker, Mrs. Page's secretary." "Really? Well, Rob, as soon as she gets off the other line, get her to call me. It's urgent." She dictated a number and hung up. Decker swore, scribbling down the numbers. Lorraine threw up her hands. "Jesus Christ, did you get the number? If that was our first case you just lost it." He leaned back in his chair. "You don't know who Cindy Nathan is?" Lorraine was furious. "No, I don't. There's a lot of people I don't know, Decker. I had a long time when I didn't recall my own name. So who is she?" "She's Harry Nathan's wife." "Really, and who the fuck is he?" she snapped. "The head of Maximedia, the movie studio, though they do a lot of other stuff, too. He used to be married to Sonja Sorenson." Lorraine leaned on his desk. "I never heard of her either." Decker rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Lorraine! She's big in the art world--she owned a gallery on Beverly Drive but moved back to New York after they divorced. Harry Nathan used to do spoofy, goofball comedies--Killer Bimbos Ate My Neckties kind of thing, though lately it's been more like Ate My Shorts, if you get what I mean." He gave her a meaningful look. "Not exactly family entertainment, shall we say? So, you want to call her? Or would you like me to connect you, ma'am?" He jotted the number on a yellow sticker, holding it up on the tip of his forefinger. Lorraine snatched the note and banged her office door closed--only to have to open it again as Tiger threw himself at it, barking. "Get out," she yelled. Then she sat down at her desk. "She said she wanted me to call her?" she called to Decker. The intercom light flashed. "Yes, Mrs. Page, and she seemed a trifle hyper. Shall I get Mrs. Nathan on the line for you, Mrs. Page?" "Yes!" Cindy Nathan was in her silk Hermès sarong, barefoot, clutching the cell phone and staring into the deep end of the swimming pool. Henry "Harry" Nathan was floating facedown in it with a thin trickle of blood still coloring the bright blue water. She heard the police sirens, saw the Hispanic servants hovering by the industrial glass-brick doors with which Harry had replaced the former French windows and leaded diamond panes. Her phone rang. "Cindy Nathan," she answered flatly. "This is Lorraine Page. You called me and . . . hello? Mrs. Nathan?" Cindy's voice was barely audible. "Yes." "This is Lorraine Page, of Page Investigations." "Are you a detective?" "Yes, I run an investigation company." "I want to hire you, because I'm just about to be arrested for my husband's murder." "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" "I didn't kill him. I didn't kill him." Cindy stared at the body. "I need you, please come immediately." She reeled off an address, then hung up. Lorraine stared at the phone, then shouted to Decker, "She's hung up, did you get that?" "Yep, I got it. Maybe she read the ad--probably in Variety." Lorraine replaced the receiver and walked into reception. "What did you say?" "I ran an ad for you in the Hollywood Reporter, plus one in Screen International, Variety--" "What?" Decker rummaged around his desk and laid out a fax. "I told you Elliot was good. He suggested the wording." "Elliot?" "My partner, Adam, but I always call him Elliot, he always calls me Decker. I said we needed him to beef up our ads, and . . ." Lorraine's face had tightened. "What?" "They only ran yesterday, I told you. I said he was good." "Lemme see," she said tightly. "Sure, you paid for them." Decker passed over the fax. Lorraine read it in disbelief. It was not really an ad, more a treatment for a TV show: "The best, the one agency that caters to the people that need discretion . . . money no object . . . clients too famous to name. private investigation means what we say--private. If it's blackmail, stalkers, drug abuse, underage sex, call us--no case too small, too dangerous, too notorious. We issue a confidentiality contract as standard." Her jaw dropped as she read the list of high-profile cases with which Page Investigations was supposed to have been

involved. "My God, this is disgusting." "Good, though." "But it's a pack of lies. You can't say we worked for these people when we didn't. I've never read anything so ridiculous." "Maybe, but you'll never get anyone to query it--most, as you will see, are dead. We can say we acted for River Phoenix, but who's to know we didn't because he can't . . ." Lorraine reread the list of dead movie stars, studio producers, executives, bankers, politicians--even Jackie Onassis's name appeared. "This is a gross distortion of facts," she said. "Yes, I know, but we got a result. Cindy Nathan." Lorraine leaned on his desk. "You should have run this by me first. This is illegal, unethical, and we could be sued. These people may be dead, but they'll have relatives, and lawyers. Pull the ads this morning, Decker." "Will do, Mrs. Page." She turned at her door, serious. "You never do this kind of thing again. You have to have my approval for any ad, in fact, for anything going out of this office. Is that clear? I'll call in when I know more--and give Tiger a walk if I'm not back this afternoon." "Yes, Mrs. Page." She closed her office door as Tiger threw himself at it. Lorraine got into the Cherokee and drove rapidly through Century City to take the short cut behind the Beverly Hilton and into Beverly Hills; she smiled, as she always did, as the signs of wealth and ostentation began to increase as steadily as the gradient of Whittier Drive. As the properties grew larger, hedges and trees grew thicker to keep out prying eyes, but behind them could be glimpsed an assortment of architectural styles. The more traditional bungalows and hacienda-type dwellings rubbed shoulders with mock everything else--Dutch Colonials and Cape Cods, Art Deco, Tudor follies, steel-and-glass boxes that had been futuristic thirty years earlier. Lorraine knew she must be getting closer to the Nathan property. She was now on the borders of Beverly Hills and Bel Air, and after a quick glance at Decker's directions, she drew up at the enormous bare metal gates, with Gestapo-style searchlights mounted on the posts. A man was waiting for her. "Are you Lorraine Page?" he asked. "Yes, I am." He was thin, balding, and nervous. "I am Cindy Nathan's lawyer. She has insisted I speak with you, but I want you to know that I have already contacted my own investigation advisers and all this is now in the hands of the police. They have taken Mrs. Nathan in for questioning but I'm sure she'll be released without charges as soon as the facts have been established. Right now, the position is . . . very confusing." Lorraine nodded. "I'm afraid it is. You see, I don't know exactly what has happened." "She shot her husband. Harry Nathan is dead. The police are at the pool now, there's forensic and paramedics and . . . I can't allow you to come inside. I have to go to Mrs. Nathan." Lorraine smiled. "Maybe I should come with you, as Mrs. Nathan was adamant that I speak with her." "That is impossible. You will not be allowed to see her. As I said, this is police business now." "Really?" "Yes, there's nothing you can do here. I will, of course, pay you whatever retainer was agreed, but as I said, the police are taking care of this now. So if you would let me have your fees to date . . ." Lorraine hesitated. "Do you have a card?" "I'm sorry, yes, of course." He passed it over. "The police are not allowing anyone access to the premises." Lorraine looked at his card: joel h. feinstein, attorney-at-law. "Fine, I'll send you my invoice--but just as a matter of interest, is Mrs. Nathan being held at the Beverly Hills PD or elsewhere?" Lorraine drove east on Santa Monica Boulevard and turned left on Rexford into the bizarre new complex of heavy Romanesque arches and colonnades that now housed the Beverly Hills Police Department. She knew it was unlikely that she would be allowed to see Cindy, even if she announced herself as a private investigator engaged by Mrs. Nathan. She was thinking about what moves she could make when an officer she knew, who had done some private work for her on a previous case, walked up to the car parked directly in front of her: James Sharkey, still as fat as ever, still hauling his pants up over his potbelly. "Hi, how ya doing?" She locked her car and headed toward him. For a moment he didn't recognize her, then gave her a brief nod while digging in his pockets for his car keys. When she asked about Cindy Nathan, he started to unlock his filthy, dented Pontiac. "I need ten minutes with her," Lorraine said quietly. Sharkey laughed and shook his head. He was about to open the car door when Lorraine moved closer. "You on the case?" she asked. She knew he was, just by his attitude and the way he looked furtively around the parked cars. He jangled his keys. "Meal break. Lady is pretty shook up--not talking straight and asking for raspberry milk shakes . . . with chocolate toppings." Sharkey wasn't putting himself on the line, but she could take the lady her milk shake, maybe palm the female officer, Joan, who was watching her. Sharkey pocketed five hundred dollars and Lorraine went for the milk shake. He had promised he'd have a word with Joan. He lied, he always had been a cheap, lying bastard, as Lorraine discovered when she had to pay another two hundred to persuade Joan to take a toilet break. Cindy was not held in a cell but in an interview room in the basement of the station. Lorraine walked in and put down the hideous-looking drink. Cindy was very young, so small that Lorraine towered above her, with a heart-shaped face as perfect as her superwaif figure. Even though she wore no makeup and her blond hair was twisted into a knot and secured with what appeared to be a barbecue skewer, all of Lorraine's plastic surgery, health

clinics, and exercise paled beside this woman, who was so astonishingly beautiful. Added to her perfect features was a sweetness and vulnerability, whose impact was immediate. Perhaps the reason she had called in response to the ad run by Decker was that she was as innocent as she looked. "I'm Lorraine Page," Lorraine said calmly. Cindy's brow puckered. "I'm sorry, who?" "I'm a private investigator. You called my office, we spoke earlier." "I didn't do it! I didn't kill him, and Mr. Feinstein won't believe it." Lorraine sat down and took out a notebook. "Do you want me to investigate the circumstances of your husband's death, Mrs. Nathan?" "I guess so. I mean, can they keep me here? I've told them everything I know. Is this for me?" She prodded at the froth on the milk shake with her index finger, then licked it. "I don't know what has been agreed, Mrs. Nathan. Just tell me about what happened. Did you make a statement?" "I can't remember. I called the police and I called Mr. Feinstein and told him I found Harry in the pool. I was sleeping and . . . then I heard the gunshot. I guess that was what I heard. It wasn't all that loud, though, just a sort of dull bang." Lorraine was making notes but keeping half an eye on the open door. "Then what did you do?" "I got up and went onto the patio. I could see the pool, I saw Harry, and I called out to him. He looked like he was swimming, floating but . . . well, he didn't answer, so then I went back into the house, and through the sunroom, and . . ." She chewed her lip. "When I got closer, I could see the blood, an' he wasn't swimming at all, and he had no trunks on, facedown." "Did you touch him--I mean, go into the pool?" "Oh, no. I ran back into the house, I was hysterical, an' then I called the cops." "Then you called my office?" "What?" "After the police you called my office." "No, no, I never called you. I thought maybe someone had called you for me, understand? I mean, why would I call you?" It was odd, Lorraine thought. Cindy Nathan was behaving very strangely for someone whose husband had just been murdered, especially when she was a prime suspect and about to be charged. She seemed more distracted than upset, twice unfastening her hair and retwisting it around the wooden spike, asking why there wasn't a straw for the shake. "So you did not ask me to meet with you?" "No, I just said so. What's going on?" Lorraine tapped her notebook. "Well, I don't know either, but if you want me to look into your case, if you feel you need me--" "Do you think I should have someone? I mean, are you a lawyer?" "No, Mrs. Nathan, I'm a private investigator, as I said." Lorraine handed the girl her card, but she hardly looked at it. "I don't know what I should do--maybe wait for Mr. Feinstein. He'll tell me what I should do. Right now I'm all confused." "It must be terrible for you," Lorraine said quietly. Cindy lifted her delicate shoulders. "Mr. Feinstein'll sort it out, I guess." "I hope so, and please feel free to call me if you do want me to investigate the death of your husband." Joan returned, crooked her finger at Lorraine, then jerked her thumb, indicating for her to leave, immediately. Cindy didn't even look at Joan. "Right now I'm more worried about what's going to happen to me, because I didn't do it. I never shot Harry, but a lot of his friends won't believe it." "Why?" Cindy Nathan gave that little shrug of her shoulders again. "'Cause I was always threatening him. I never got around to doing anything, though." "Well, somebody did. You're sure it was your husband in the swimming pool?" Joan became slightly aggressive. "Come on, don't get me in trouble. Out now." Cindy Nathan's wide, cornflower-blue eyes stared at the wall. "Yes, yes, it was him, facedown. It was Harry, all right." And two big tears rolled down her cheeks. Lorraine went out of the building, down the curving walkway that looked more like the approach to a smart office complex than to a police department. As she bleeped open the Cherokee with her alarm key, she saw Cindy Nathan's lawyer standing by a black Rolls-Royce, parked on Rexford, arguing with two uniformed police officers. So heated was their exchange that they paid Lorraine no attention as she drove past. The following morning, Decker was already brewing coffee and collecting the leaves the ficus trees seemed to shed every night, when Tiger bounded in, almost knocking him off his feet. "I've got all the newspapers. Mrs. Nathan was released without charge last night. She's front page in most of the tabloids." Lorraine glanced over them. "Well, until I hear back from her, there's not a lot I can do. She was very . . ." She frowned. She'd been thinking about her meeting with Cindy Nathan since the early hours. "She wasn't exactly flaky, just, I don't know, not reacting the way she should have. I mean, she didn't seem to understand . . ." "The trouble she's in?" Decker inquired, carrying Lorraine's coffee into her office. "Yeah, I suppose so. Maybe she was in shock. They give any more details about her?" "They certainly do. It was her automatic, by the way, slug taken from Nathan's head." "What?" "She also inherits the house and about half of Maximedia, as his widow," Decker said. "Well, she won't if they can make a murder rap stick to her." "Mmm, well, according to the L.A. Times, it looks like that's a sort of foregone conclusion." He rummaged through the paper to find the rest of the leading article from page one. "Apparently Cindy Nathan threatened to shoot her husband last month at Morton's restaurant. They had a big argument in front of a packed dining room, and they had to drag her out." Lorraine sipped her coffee. She was now leafing through all the various papers, in which Decker had marked the relevant stories

in green felt-tipped pen. "She said she never called us," she remarked, lighting a cigarette. "Well, that's ridiculous. Of course she did. And we've got it taped." "You taped the call?" "All calls. I protect you at all times, ma'am." He slipped his headphones on. "Play it for me, would you?" Lorraine continued reading, glancing at the pictures of Cindy Nathan being assisted into the lawyer's Rolls with her hands covering her face. The press had worked fast: they also had numerous glamour shots of her--she had been in a TV soap for a few weeks, but most of the photographs were sexy poses in swimsuits and lingerie. "Shit, she's only twenty years old," Lorraine said, not that Cindy had looked older--it just surprised her that she was so young. At the bleep-bleep of the answering machine she looked up. Decker was searching for Cindy's call. He eased off his headphones. "I fucked up, I can't find that call." "Jesus Christ, Decker, this is important. We need that recording. Cindy Nathan said she never made that call. If Cindy didn't, somebody did, someone who knew Harry Nathan was dead--maybe because they had shot him, understand, sweetheart? That call is very important." Decker was flushing bright red. "You spoke to Cindy on the phone and met her. Did you think it was the same voice? I mean, do you think she made the call?" Lorraine lifted her hands in the air. "I dunno . . . and I'm not wasting time thinking about it. Like I just said, let's move on. I'm down seven hundred dollars on this fiasco." Decker was dispatched to get any back issues of articles on Cindy Nathan, while Lorraine read every newspaper he'd already brought in. Harry Nathan had been married three times and there were photographs of Kendall Nathan, his second wife, a thin, dark woman who looked to be in her late thirties, and Sonja Sorenson, the sculptress, a tall, formidably elegant woman with prematurely white hair. Lorraine clipped out the pictures and the accompanying coverage, then tossed the rest into the wastebasket. The phone rang and made her jump but she waited a moment before she picked it up. "Page Investigations," she said brightly. It was Decker, speaking from the car phone. "Hi, it's me. Turn the TV on. It just came over the radio. Cindy Nathan's been arrested for the murder of her husband." Lorraine hurried into reception and switched on the TV. There was Cindy Nathan, almost hidden by a battery of cameras, being hurried into the police department. Feinstein, her lawyer, his arms wide, was trying to protect his client. She looked tiny and frightened, in a simple white linen dress. Lorraine sat on the edge of the sofa with Tiger at her feet. Then she shot up, tripping over Tiger as she snatched up a tape and rammed it into the VCR. At that moment Decker returned. "Quick! Video this, will you?" She passed him the remote control. They recorded the coverage of Cindy Nathan's arrest every time it was shown--a lot was repetitive but they learned that she came from Milwaukee and had left at fifteen after winning a beauty competition. A few modeling jobs followed, and then her short stint in the soap opera Paradise Motel in which she played, not very well, a maid. Harry Nathan was more handsome than Lorraine had expected, a tall, lean, muscular man with dark hair, worn quite long, and a dazzling, though somehow charmless, smile. The still photographs of him were glamorous, mostly taken at society functions, premieres, or Oscar nights, with celebrities on his arm. His associates from the studio said in interviews that Nathan would be greatly missed by all who had ever had the pleasure of working with him, and his secretary, in tears, was so distraught she could hardly speak. Lorraine continued to watch the news coverage at home. It said nothing new. There was no mention of where Cindy Nathan was being held pending arraignment. Nathan was a self-made millionaire and renowned art collector, who had moved from making commercials to directing zany comedy movies, which had been a big hit back in the eighties. He had then turned his attention to producing rather than directing, and had moved gradually toward cheap, adult-oriented movies on the verge of porn. Lorraine was about to call it a night when, channel surfing, she caught an exclusive interview with Harry Nathan's second wife, Kendall. It struck her that there had been neither comment nor reaction from the woman who had been married longest to Harry Nathan, Ms. Sorenson. Kendall Nathan whispered that she was deeply shocked by events, and also felt compassion for Cindy. She had been married to Harry Nathan for four years and knew better than anyone that he had been difficult to live with, but their divorce had been amicable, and she had continued to enjoy a deep friendship with her ex-husband. They had also remained business partners. Then she gave a tremulous smile, her voice breaking. "Harry was always an honorable man whose many friends will be devastated, as I am, by his tragic and untimely death." Most people would have focused on Kendall's performance as a grieving woman, but Lorraine was trying to ascertain whether it could have been Kendall who had called her agency. The next morning's newspapers were full of the update on the shooting, and as there were no other job prospects, Lorraine and Decker cut out all the articles and pinned them together with the previous day's. At twelve they had a call from a Mrs. Walgraf asking for an appointment with regard to her divorce. At two o'clock another appointment was booked and, to Lorraine's astonishment, a third call came in at four. The next two days were busy. After being held at the Cybil Brand Institute for Women in the female facility of the Los Angeles

County jail, Cindy Nathan was duly arraigned on charges of murder, pleaded not guilty, and was released on bail, security set at three million dollars. No one saw her leave the courthouse--she was taken out through a small back entrance because of the number of press waiting outside. Her lawyer read a statement on her behalf: she was innocent and begged to be left alone to mourn the loss of the husband she adored. She would give no further press statements or interviews before the trial as she was pregnant. Feinstein assured the press that he was confident that all charges against his client would be dismissed, and that Mrs. Nathan needed rest and care. Her pregnancy was in the early stages and the stress of her arrest had made her ill. She was now afraid, Feinstein ended, that she might lose the child for which she and her husband had prayed. Three days after Cindy Nathan's release, Lorraine had traced one missing daughter, and had discovered that Mrs. Walgraf's husband had obviously been preparing for his divorce for many months before his wife had become aware of his intentions. Mrs. Walgraf did not have the money to pay Lorraine, who would not press her--she felt sorry for the woman. "Well, let's hope we get something a bit more financially rewarding next," Decker said. Lorraine yawned. It was almost time to leave. Tiger was stretched out on his back on the pretty cherry-colored sofa in reception, his legs in the air. "He's not supposed to get up on that," she said, irritated. "I know, but you try and move him!" The phone rang and Decker snatched it up. It was the main reception downstairs. He listened, then covered the receiver. "It's Mrs. Nathan. She's downstairs. She wants to see you." Lorraine smiled. "You know, I thought I'd hear from her again. Ask her to come up." Lorraine put on some fresh lipstick and ran a comb quickly through her hair. She was just checking her reflection when Decker tapped and opened her door. Tiger was barking and tried to get into the office between Decker's legs. "Mrs. Nathan to see you, Mrs. Page. Sit!" Tiger slunk off to the sofa and lay flat with his head on his paws. Decker closed the office door and returned to his desk, wishing he could be privy to the conversation. He was beginning to like the job. He'd been worried during the past week as there had been little to do, but now he couldn't wait to make a quiet call to Adam Elliot to tell him who had arrived. Cindy Nathan wore dark glasses, a short powder-blue dress, white sandals, and a silver chain and padlock, fastened tightly, like a dog collar, around her neck: a gift from her loving spouse, Lorraine had no doubt. She didn't have a purse, just a small white-leather wallet. "Please sit down. Sorry about my dog. He's supposed to be trained, but he hasn't got it quite right yet. Can I offer you tea or coffee?" "No, nothing, thank you." She was perched on the edge of the chair. "How are you?" "Oh, I'm fine, get sick in the mornings, but they say the first few months are the worst," Cindy said. "Do you have children?" Lorraine nodded. "Two daughters. They live with their father." She said it quickly, wanting to avoid a long conversation about births and pregnancies. "Harry's other kid didn't live--this would have been his only child. It would be terrible if it was born in prison." Lorraine looked at her fingers. "Do you think that's a possibility?" "That's why I'm here. I need someone on my side." "What about your lawyer?" "Oh, I have a whole team of lawyers, L.A.'s best." "And what do they say?" "Oh, they seem pretty sure I did it. They don't say it, it's just how they ask me all these questions, over and over." "Do you know what the evidence is against you, Mrs. Nathan?" Cindy looked down at her toenails, painted electric blue. "Well, the gun was mine." "Are your fingerprints on it?" "Yes." "And they have the gun?" "The police found it in the bushes by the pool." "Did you fire it, Mrs. Nathan?" "Yes." "But you've said you did not kill your husband." "Yes, but you asked if I fired it and I did," Cindy said, with a childish sort of exactness. "A few times, just practicing. Once I fired it at Harry, but I missed and there were blanks in it anyway." Lorraine picked up a pen and twisted it in her fingers. "Did you fire your gun on the day your husband was found dead?" "No." "Where did you leave it the last time you used it?" "In our bedroom, on my side of the bed, in a silver box. Harry had guns all over the house--he was paranoid about security. He had a license, and he even had a gun in his car." "Could I come out to the house, Mrs. Nathan?" Cindy nodded. "Will you say that you're going to give me a massage? I don't want them to know. I don't think they would like it, you know, me hiring you without telling them." "Who are you referring to, Mrs. Nathan?" "Oh, the lawyers and the staff." Lorraine leaned back in her chair. "Did you love your husband, Mrs. Nathan?" "Yes." "As his widow, are you his main beneficiary?" "I get the house and the stock he had in the company, and his second wife, Kendall, gets his share in the gallery on Beverly Drive, though the will says that if there should be issue of our marriage, then the kid would be the main beneficiary and I get a lot less. The most valuable stuff is the art in the house--Harry was a collector. Feinstein says it's mine as part of the contents of the house, but Kendall's got some attorney to write claiming she and Harry agreed to split it so her half wasn't his to leave. There's something about Sonja too, but Feinstein says it won't add up to more than a few mementoes. It's all very complicated . . ." Her voice trailed off. "I'll come and see you tomorrow, all right?" Cindy nodded, then opened her wallet. "You gave me your card, so I got

the check all ready. All you got to do is fill in the amount. I don't know how much you charge, but I want you to look after me, exclusive, so that will be extra, and I'll pay extra because I don't want you to tell anybody that you're working for me. If it gets out, I'll deny it, and I'll get one of my fancy lawyers to sue you. Do you have client confidentiality?" "Of course." Decker ushered Cindy Nathan out of the office and into the elevator, while Lorraine remained at her desk, staring at the looped, childish writing. She had suggested Cindy engage her on a weekly basis, and said it would be three hundred dollars a day plus expenses. Cindy had counted on her fingers, then leaned over to use Lorraine's felt-tipped pen. "I'm going to pay you five thousand dollars a week, and I want you for a month to start with. Then, if everything works out all right for me, I won't need you anymore." When Decker returned, Lorraine held up the check between her fingers. He took it and looked stunned. "Shit! Twenty grand! What in God's name do you have to do for that?" Lorraine perched on the side of the desk. "Long time ago, one of the boys arrested this old guy for passing dud checks. When he was questioned he shrugged his shoulders and . . . he was crazy. He'd found the checkbook in a supermarket." "I don't follow. What's that got to do with Cindy Nathan?" "I think she's crazy--the elevator's certainly not quite going to the top floor. I wouldn't be surprised if that check bounced.

On the other hand, she's a wealthy widow." Decker chuckled. "Well, hell, let's bank it first thing in the morning, and if she's out to lunch we're laughing." Lorraine clicked her fingers to Tiger. "Yeah, you go ahead and do that. Oh, that phone call Cindy denies making." Decker nodded. He still felt awful about the recording. "Cindy has quite a high-pitched voice. If she got hysterical, like she'd just shot her husband, it's likely her voice would go up a notch. Whoever made that call, if my memory serves me well, had quite a deep, almost throaty smoker's voice." She gave him that cockeyed, smug smile. He said nothing. Lorraine still hovered at the doorway. "Did Mrs. Nathan come with a chauffeur?" "I have no idea," Decker said. As the door closed behind her he shut his eyes, tried to remember the voice. Had it been deep, throaty as she had just said? He could not remember. According to the doorman in the lobby, Cindy Nathan had walked into the building. He had seen no driver, and she had not left keys for the valet-parking facility. She had asked him which floor Page Investigations was on, and then used the intercom phone to the office. "I'm sorry if I did anything wrong," the doorman said apologetically. "You didn't," Lorraine replied as she left, with Tiger straining at the leash. But she knew intuitively that something was wrong. Nothing quite added up. She felt good, though, and she was twenty thousand dollars better off. Page Investigations was up and rolling. *Revue de presse* Praise for Lynda La Plante's previous crime thrillers *Cold Shoulder* "The scenes keep moving as if their wheels were greased, and there is terrific energy in the simple, driving, cinematic plot." --The New York Times Book "This gripping crime story . . . strong-arms its readers--all the way to its double-whammy climax." --People "Rarely has a British novelist penetrated the cultural undertow of American crime and law enforcement as shrewdly and incisively as Lynda La Plante in *Cold Shoulder*. Raises enough issues of power, gender, sex, and corruption to keep the pages turning almost by themselves." --San Francisco Chronicle *Cold Blood* "Great fun . . . The intricate plot slaloms from Los Angeles sex clubs to New Orleans voodoo priestesses without letting the reader up for air." --Los Angeles Times "So compelling that La Plante risks having her TV credentials eclipsed by her distinction as a crime novelist." --People "Complex plotting and a merciless eye toward human nature." --Chicago Tribune "La Plante is so knowledgeable about good detective work that we're nailed to our seats." --San Francisco Chronicle