

Excerpt From  
**AN AIR THAT KILLS**

a Novel

By

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*Third Millennium Publishing*

A Cooperative of Writers and Resources

On the Internet

<http://3mpub.com>

ISBN 978-1-947483-06-4

346 pages

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04142019

## CHAPTER 7

Although she owned a car, Lillian intensely disliked driving. Matt used to drive her everywhere, she remembered, as the dark winter trees flashed by through the train window. Except for occasional trips to the store or to pick up the kids at school. She drove so infrequently, that she often had to rehearse the operation of the car before she started out. she wasn't afraid to drive, it just seemed so unnatural to her.

Only a few weeks had passed since her meeting with Reed. She'd driven to the station to take the local train to Fonda. From there, she was riding the Empire State to Albany and had a coach ticket; she had murder in her heart and wanted people around her. Since that day in Reed's office, when the unbelievable, outrageous infidelities were revealed, she didn't want to be alone. Periods of being alone brought on nothing but depression and black rage. The nearness of strange people helped to keep her alert.

The coach was clean and warm. The mustard-colored seats faced each other and were just big enough for two. Across from her sat a big man in bib overalls and checkered shirt, wearing a Ralston's Feed cap. A woman in a plain dress, unadorned by any jewelry except for a watch, sat next to him. She wore no lipstick or other make-up, except patted little spots of rouge on her pale cheeks. They both looked uneasy, like this was their first time on a train.

Next to her, a heavy foreign-looking woman sat. She had a child on her lap and when she spoke, which at first was little, she had a strong accent. Lillian guessed it was Polish. thankful not to have a chatty woman next to her, she patted the frowning boy on the head.

"Ja. I go to visit the family in New York. I take my nephew here back to home. Ja, Johnny? Isn't dat right?" The boy squirmed and looked as if he would cry. Lillian nodded and smiled.

They rode in silence for a while, each one moving and shaking with the rhythm of the train; the sounds of the wheels mesmerizing. Lillian's mind began to drift.

"I live in Stone 'Rabia, the woman said suddenly, her tongue tripping over the double name, making it into one. "Where do you Live?"

Lillian didn't hear her. Her mind had sunk into the vortex of a deep whirlpool; seeing the woman and the farm couple and the others in the car swirling around her, like a rotating jury panel. They seemed to be pointing fingers at her, accusing her, demanding something. A wave of dizziness rode over her; a sharp pain gripped her gut. She felt faint.

"Where do you live?" the woman said, louder.

"Oh... why yes." Lillian said, reviving. "Yes. Where do I live? Oh, I live in

Johnstown." Nausea still gripped her.

"Oh. Dat's nice place. I have friends making gloves dere. Nice place."

It was still deep winter and the Mohawk river bordering the railway was mostly frozen. Long ribbons of freezing black water split the snow-covered river ice. The late afternoon sun glinted off the water, looking like twisted strips of steel. Naked trees lined the snow-covered banks; trees that in the summer, hid the river from view. Now their bare, black branches made Lillian feel cold and uneasy. She turned from the window view, but tried to avoid the eyes of the foreign woman. At that moment, the woman's head was bobbing as if it were on a spring, and once in a while, it would fall over on her shoulder and she would awake with a start. The boy seemed asleep.

Lillian took pills from her purse for the pain in her stomach. When she returned the pillbox, she saw the bright metal gun barrel buried under her cosmetics and it startled her. She had lost focus of her purpose for this trip.

A .32 caliber Beretta was nested in her purse. Matt had given it to her years ago, so she would have a way of defending herself and the kids while he was off on trips. It was a kind of affectation of Matt's, to suppose that their wealth made them especially vulnerable to burglaries and kidnapping.

She felt the hardness of the gun through the sides of the purse and thought of Joyce Hutchins and remembered her resolve to shoot this woman right through the head; a bullet between the eyes if she could control herself and shoot straight. Then she abruptly put the purse down, between her and the wall of the train. She shouldn't think of *that* now. She had learned from her parents that when you had an unpleasant chore to do, like killing a calf or a pig, you just couldn't think about it or for sure you wouldn't be able to do it. Her father wanted all his children to be able to face the "hard" things in life, and on the farm, butchering was one of them.

She remembered that day when he'd told her it was her time: time to help with the butchering of a calf. The thought of it had made her want to scream; she'd run from the barn and hid.

But he waited until he had her under control and led her to where the calves were penned. On the way, he told her about doing the hard things:

"There are many things in life a person has to do Lillian, and lots of them are hard to do. You can't always expect someone else to do those things for you. The thing is not to think about it. Put it right out of your mind and just go and do it."

Later she learned to do what he said. But that day she'd felt brutalized; she'd felt as if the cruel hammer had crushed into her own skull and she couldn't forget the strange, almost human cry the animal made at that instant.

She again became aware of the clackety-click of the train; the reassuring sound, familiar, stunningly repetitive and it brought her back to the present. The sharp pain was gone.

"Ja, in Stone 'Rabia I work for Brinkman's hotel. You know dis place?" The woman was awake again. Lillian was startled by her question. In fact, she knew the place well. She and Matt used to eat there often. It was deservedly famous up and down this area of the Mohawk for its good food and pleasant atmosphere.

Brinkman's was a large three-story colonial style building. It had a simple lobby with wicker furniture, and each room had two huge sash windows overlooking the beautiful river valley.

"Oh, yes. Well, how long have you worked there? Yes, I know Brinkman's." But as soon as she said that, she knew it was a mistake.

"How long?" The woman seemed confused and squirmed in her seat. She scolded the boy again for moving too much. "How long? Maybe it's not too long? I think maybe ... five years?"

Lillian looked out the window. She'd let herself get drawn into a conversation she didn't want to take place.

"You eat dere? You look like customer for Mr. Brinkman's."

She looked at the woman. She was stocky and pink and had a huge wart on her cheek.

"Yes, but not lately," she said with little enthusiasm. "Not for the past few years."

"You like da food? I help cook." she didn't wait for an answer. "Many big chefs work dere. Mr. Brinkman, he's always dere. He's always checking things, tasting food. He's a good man, Mr. Brinkman. Always gives us left-over food." The boy started squirming and whimpering. He wanted to go to the bathroom.

The woman, still chatting about Brinkman's, took the boy by the hand and finally left Lillian alone. When they were out of sight, Lillian stood up holding onto the seat, feeling dizzy then walked down the swaying car in the opposite direction, feeling nauseous. She was glad the child had interrupted; afraid of too much conversation, of being known, identifiable. And Brinkman's of all places. It really had been one of their favorites. Sometimes they would make the drive on Friday evenings during the glorious days of summer, passing through the rustic country side, smelling the turfy breezes moving across the newly mowed fields. Then they would have a meal you could linger over and maybe even talk about later. Sometimes they would stay the night, making love in one of the grand rooms with a huge bed and overstuffed pillows, and later sit on the covered porch and watch the twinkling lights of barges on the river. Brinkman's sat on

the brow of a hill overlooking the Mohawk. But she thought, that was all long before the financial problems; before this Joyce Hutchins bitch had ripped her life apart.

Suddenly the bouncing train lurched as it slowed and coasted into the West Albany station. The violent motion made her look down at her empty hands; with a shock she realized she had left the purse in the seat. The rolling sounds died away until the screech of metal wheels brought the train to a shuddering halt. When she returned to her seat, she noticed that the farm couple wasn't there; they must have gotten off at Schenectady but she couldn't remember. Her heart sank when she didn't see the purse. A cold sweat broke out as panic swept over her: where was the woman? Could she, would she have taken the purse? Did she see the gun?

At that moment the woman returned with the boy. She saw Lillian standing there looking dazed. "Oh, you get off here? I wonder how long we wait here?" Lillian started to interrupt her when she pointed under the seat: "Don't forget your purse." Lillian saw it now, laying under the seat. It had slipped down between the car wall and the seat edge. She picked it up and said goodbye to the woman and the boy. When she got off the train she was shaking.

Evening was approaching and the temperature started to plunge. She buttoned her coat and walked up to an empty bench at the far end of the platform and sat down. She needed to calm down before going on. After a while, she pulled a piece of paper from her purse, unfolded it and stared at it for several minutes. Written on the paper was:

*Joyce Hutchins, 114 Scotland, Albany. WA2-6718*

It had been written by Reed, who said he thought it would be a good idea to "talk to this Joyce Hutchins". Talk, indeed, she'd thought at the time. Reed's handwriting brought his presence into her mind. All the smoldering rage against this woman now flared up. Although she resisted it, Hutchins's image jammed its way into her mind. She had the gun in her hand, approaching from behind, a woman with long, loose brown hair. That's what she had seen in one of the photos the detectives she'd hired had given her; a woman with long, loose brown hair and not, she thought with fury, very attractive at all. From their investigation, it was clear that Matt had been living with and supporting this woman for several years. The images continued; she raised the small pistol slowly, trying to aim the shaking Beretta at the center of the head. She remembered in practice shooting sessions with Matt how heavy the hated small gun seemed and how hard it was to hold it steady. And then she pulled the trigger on the wavering pistol and the image disappeared.

She shuddered with the cold. "what am I doing?" she said to herself. *Keep it out. Don't think about it or you'll never do it.* She had conditioned herself to accept the consequences of her plan. No guilt. No fear of prison or even execution. And she wouldn't give herself up, even though she was resigned to being arrested.

She walked down the long platform to the small station house. The cold air had cleared her mind. Suddenly she remembered that she always got sick on trains or planes, and that's what must have caused her dizziness and dazed feeling.

She asked a white-haired man who was sweeping the floor in the vacant station when the next train left for Fonda. He shook his head and pointed to the schedule board on the side wall.

*A train should be leaving in two hours. Another would leave three hours later. I'll make the one leaving in two hours.*

She didn't take one of the waiting taxis in front of the station, but took a bus to a city square, a ten-minute ride away. From there, she caught a taxi to the 300 block of Scotland Avenue, within walking distance of 114. To her surprise, the cab pulled up in front of a new office complex. She thought it would be a private home area. She walked to the address at 100 Scotland. The building appeared to house a combination of apartments and private offices. It was past six, so most of the offices were closed. When she reached 114, she was shocked to see that it was Joyce Hutchins's office. Reed had given her the office address, not the home address.

The office appeared closed, but there was a light on inside. She debated for a second about waiting for her to leave, in case she was with a client. But then her father's words came rolling through: "Don't think about it; just do it." Her heart skipped a beat when she pushed the buzzer. She'd forgotten whether the gun was loaded or not. Then her mind raced about the safety catch on the pistol. She hadn't used the gun in years.

Through the wavy glass pane in the door, she could see a figure walking towards her. unlatching her purse, she pulled the pistol over the top of her cosmetic bag. Then she held the purse loosely in her left hand with her right ready to seize the gun.

A voice came through the door: "Who is it?"

"Joyce Hutchins? I'm looking for Miss Hutchins."

"I'm sorry, but we're closed for the day. Can you come back tomorrow? Miss Maclean can help you tomorrow."

"It's urgent that I see Miss Hutchins. Is that you?"

She saw the figure move to the door. Clicking sounds told her the lock was being opened. Lillian's heart was pounding; she felt that it was going to leap out of her throat. When the door swung open, she faced a small dark-haired woman that looked like one of her former teachers. She knew it wasn't Joyce Hutchins.

"Oh, ... hello," Lillian stammered. "I would like to see Miss Hutchins please?"

"Well, I'm sorry, but Miss Hutchins is out of town," the dark-haired woman said.

"She went to a meeting in New York. Maybe I can help you... if it's urgent, but if it can wait until tomorrow, Miss Maclean is a partner."

"Who are you?" Lillian's mind was racing, trying to plan a course to follow.

"I'm the secretary. I was just getting ready to leave."

"When will she be back?"

"She should be back by Friday. Two more days."

"Two more days? I didn't think..." Lillian swallowed hard and tried to fight off a mounting panic "I... I--"

"Is something wrong?" the little woman asked in a perturbed tone.

"No... well, yes. Yes. Look... look here. I need you... you give her a message." She looked down at the handbag that was still open. She wondered why it was open, why it seemed so heavy as if she needed all her strength just to keep it from dropping. Her head whirled like before on the moving train. "Tell her... that Lillian Barry was here. Tell her that I... came... here... to kill her." The woman's eyes flickered in disbelief. "Do you understand?" Lillian choked out the words, her lips trembling, her whole body tingling.

The woman stepped back into the office. "What in God's name... Who are you? What do you want?" her voice was cracking.

"I just told you." Lillian said, regaining some confidence, some control of her voice. "You can tell her that I ... I came... came... came to kill her," and she pulled the gun partway out of the purse so the woman could see it. "I won't come back... I came to kill her, kill... and it's done; it's done! Tell her... tell her *the cat will play while the dog's away*. She's dead! Dead! You hear me! Like my husband, the one she killed."

When the woman saw the gun, she turned deathly pale. She couldn't move; she was frozen in terror. "I... you... what... better leave, or... or I'll call police!" she shrieked, tripping over her words.

"Yes... Don't ... don't you worry, I'm leaving. But remember, remember! I'm Lillian Barry. You just... give her my message."

The woman stood there with her mouth hanging open, watching Lillian walk away. Lillian's legs were like jelly, she worried she would collapse before making it to the end of the hall. but she felt lighter, a great weight lifted from her chest, and that helped keep her moving.

It was over. She had done what she had to do. In her own mind, Joyce Hutchins was dead, with a bullet between her eyes. All the tired jealousy, the awful hate, the unbearable tension, seemed to flow painfully out of her mind.



When she reached Fonda, it was very dark. There were no cars and she stopped and stared at the black waters of the river and wondered what had brought her here; here at this ungodly hour. She felt as empty as she ever felt; It was cold; the sky shrouded in mist made visible by the few lights along the way. She made her way to a black iron bridge crossing the Erie Canal. When half way over, she leaned over the cold metal rail and holding it out at arm's length, dropped a lunch bag containing the Beretta into the freezing water. There were no cars crossing so she stared at the swirling lights reflecting off the shifting black mirrors below her and thought of the bag sinking to the bottom. *Would it slide from side to side like sometimes flat rocks would sink in the water when she was a child? Would she not slide, but sink straight to the bottom if she followed it in. Would the water embrace her in its deathly freezing grip, so cold she would lose all feeling before reaching the bottom?*

A car horn blew and when she turned to see, she almost fell, one shoe was hooked on the lower rail. She shook her head, pulled her frozen foot free, and waved. She picked up her purse from the ground where she had set it. The dark figure in the car hesitated, but then seemed to nod and slowly moved on. She also made her way slowly over the bridge, the image of the swirling waters slipping through her mind.

*That was close.*

Nervous hunger pulled at her; She hadn't eaten all day. She crossed the dark street and went into a well-lit All-Nite diner. It felt safe; the warm lights embraced her, pulling her back to reality.