

A Murder Amongst Angels

A Tom Logan Mystery

By Tony Piazza

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Other books by Tony Piazza

Fiction

Anything Short of Murder
The Curse of the Crimson Dragon

Nonfiction

Bullitt Points: Memories of Steve McQueen & Bullitt

Praise for Tony Piazza's other works

Anything Short of Murder

“In this delightful romp in the classic noir genre, Tony Piazza has captured the glamour and allure of the ‘hard boiled detective with a heart of gold.’ There are twists and turns galore in this imaginative tale that in places will leave you breathless.”

- Susan Tuttle, author of *Tangled Webs*

“It’s almost impossible to set *Anything Short of Murder* down once I start reading. I have a special love for Tony Piazza’s breathtaking characters. I feel their personalities jump right out from the pages and into my mind’s eye where they dazzle and spellbind me from beginning to end.”

– Cookie Curci, freelance journalist

The Curse of the Crimson Dragon

“One-time San Francisco actor turned novelist Tony Piazza has resurrected the concept of the ludicrous but exciting adventure yarn with *The Curse of the Crimson Dragon*. Enjoy living in the literature of yesteryear? Then you’ll savor leaping headfirst into these pulpish pages. The flowing action and excitement never let up, even during the expository or exotic love scenes, as Ryan faces down every kind of life-threatening situation. The sweat never stops pouring out of Piazza’s prose. If only more writers reminded us of how much fun reading was in the days of *Planet Stories*, *Argosy*, *Fantastic Adventures*, and *Blue Book!*”

- John Stanley, author of *The Gang That Shot Up Hollywood* and *I Was a TV Horror Host*

“*The Curse of the Crimson Dragon* adds up to a rollicking good read.”

- Sue McGinty, author of *Murder in Los Lobos* and *Murder at Cuyamaca Beach*

“For book lovers who complain that they don’t write ‘em like they used to, may I introduce Tony Piazza to you. I grew up reading Alistair McLean (*Ice Station Zebra* and *Guns of Navarone*). Piazza is in that spirit—old-fashioned adventure and thrills with clearly defined good guys and bad guys, a throwback to another era. I’ve read both of Piazza’s novels and each takes me back to a time and place that I enjoyed spending time.”

- Dave Congalton, radio talk-show host,
screenwriter, and author of *Ho, Ho: The Dog
Who Saved Christmas*

Dedication

I've been asked why I set my stories in the past. The answer is simple: it's because it's more nostalgic. Reading my stories is like coming home, placing on a warm robe, and scooting into your favorite slippers. They're comforting, because as soon as you crack open the cover you know what you're in for. A reliable formula—just like the novels of old, that provide action, far-away places, romance, and heroic characters you can identify with. In the cold, pessimistic climate of today we all long for escape, and I try to provide just that. A rollicking good yarn that takes readers back to a simpler era when good-guys still wore white hats, detectives used their brains to solve mysteries, and a kiss from a dame could spell either death or romance.

I'd like to dedicate this book to the writer's of yesteryear, Chandler, Hammett, Spillane, and others who fired the imagination of this youth and drove him to pen his own homage to a genre that is certainly not dead, but rare in an age of vampires, zombies, and whatever else strikes the fancy of today's younger readers.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to the countless fans, media personalities, friends, and family members who've encouraged me to keep writing these nostalgic tales. I especially want to thank my wife, Susan, who has shown me great support and has been a partner in every sense of the word through my journey as a writer. And I can never complete a dedication without acknowledging those who set the foundation—my parents, who with the blessings of God were able to provide the raw materials: books, education, and love that has helped me attain this dream of becoming an author.

Prologue

Los Angeles, the City of Angels; it's populated by citizens known as Angelinos, or "angels." Considering what I've seen as a beat cop, LA detective, and now private dick, I believe this city's title is a misnomer. It has no more angels than, say, Chicago, New York, or even Frisco. As a matter of fact, I've stumbled on more devils in this town than those supposedly sporting halos. I guess that's the nature of my job, seeing the seamier side of life, and when there is a murder amongst angels, ten to one, I'll be there.

Chapter 1

An Inopportune Time to Die

Hollywood, late summer of 1931:

Due to the depression money was still scarce, unemployment reaching around 25%, and the average family income reduced to 40% of what it was just a decade earlier. For escape, people looked to radio, movies, board games, and the Yankees. Youngsters danced to music from the big bands, and the nation listened to FDR's Fireside Chats. Food costs ranged from fourteen cents for a quart of milk to nine cents for a loaf of bread. Gambling was on the rise; people were looking for any means to supplement their incomes. Horse racing was becoming popular, and more tracks were being legalized in the states. It was a time of desperation, and people were reaching out for either diversion or a quick way to make a buck. Many turned to prostitution, alcohol, drugs, and illegal gaming. And as they became more popular and profitable, turf wars broke out amongst gangs, and bloodshed resulted. Many lost their lives, and not just the guilty, but also the innocent, who through misfortune or poor timing had somehow got caught in between.

Malibu, Monday morning, six o'clock.

A phrase kept passing through my head that morning: "an inopportune time to die." It was what the girl said the last time I saw her, and I couldn't get it out of my head. It seemed she must have been a psychic; if you believe in that sort of thing. But whether you do or don't, one thing was certain: it was her crumpled body lying midway down on a landing of the stairs.

A marine layer had spread its gray gloom over the setting. Actually it was lying low enough that you could accurately call it a fog. From the top of the cement staircase that ran up the side of the hill one could normally see a grand vista of the Southern California coastline, but all I could view that morning were sections of the two-lane Roosevelt Highway that ran fifty feet below and brief glimpses of the dull cobalt Pacific beyond through layers of wafting vapor.

"Thomas?" I heard a familiar voice shout out to me from the handful of men standing around her disheveled body. "Come join us."

I looked over at the uniformed cop that was keeping vigil at the top of the stairs, presumably to keep nosy citizens like myself at bay. At the moment his job wasn't too stressful, just myself and an early riser that was probably on his way to the beach for a morning swim. Obviously the boys from the press hadn't caught wind of this yet. The death of a famous personality under unusual circumstances usually attracts them like bees to honey. No doubt once the word went out this place would be crawling with them, and my cop friend would really be earning the taxpayer's money. And speaking of that civil servant, he saw my questioning gaze and nodded his approval to pass.

"What in da name of St. Pat, are ya doing here, me boy?" Red asked after I joined him on the landing. "When I looked up I couldn't believe me eyes."

Red Clancy was an old friend from my years with the LAPD. I'd also helped him on some recent cases, like the murder of a bit player last summer.

“I was here to talk with my client.” I looked down at the collapsed form of the platinum blonde that was being covered with a coroner’s blanket, her azure eyes glazed and lifeless. “However, I don’t think she’s in any condition to say much now.”

There was a commotion at the top of the stairs, some attendants were trying to get a gurney down the hundred or so steps that led to the landing.

“What’s the story?” I asked looking back at Red, a bitterness foaming up from the pit of my stomach. That disarranged form was once a living, breathing human being, and an attractive one at that. That is if you are drawn to painted angels. The hair coloring was from the bottle, and the complexion grease paint rather thickly applied. But I had a way of seeing the soul of an individual, and if you scraped away all her layers of her faux exterior there were still some traces of lost innocence underneath—an angel now scarlet but once lily white.

“Ask da good doctor, here,” Red replied simply, bringing the attending coroner into the conversation. I recognized him. He was with the LA Coroner’s Office when I was still in the force. His name was Carson, Dr. Frank Carson.

“Hi, Tom,” he greeted me, shaking my hand. He had already removed his gloves. “I heard you are in business for yourself.” I had become a PI after being cashiered from the force. The charges were that I roughed up a bootlegger beyond the call of duty. Truth was, what I did was no more than what normally would have been expected of me under the circumstances. The man had just finishing making a pin cushion out of my thigh with his knife. However, this man had a friend in high places, and that was what sent me walking. Fortunately, I had other friends that helped me get my own license.

“Doc,” I replied shortly, ignoring his remark. “What happened?”

“I can’t really say until I get her back to the morgue and do a more thorough examination. However, there seems to be trauma to the head and neck, but how they were administered and when I can’t say as yet. One thing is certain, her neck is snapped, so there’s no mystery about the actual cause of death.”

“How long would you say she has been dead?”

“Based upon temperature and stage of rigor mortis, I would estimate anywhere from eight to twelve hours.”

“Can’t you get it a little closer, Doc?”

“Not until I can do a more thorough autopsy.”

It wasn’t the answer I was looking for, but then again he had the degree and I didn’t. I then asked if I could get a closer look at the body. I noticed his boys were still struggling with the gurney (they were only a quarter of the way down the stairs) and so thought that there were still a few precious moments I could take advantage of before the body was to be moved. He agreed and pulled back the sheet, but before I could step forward, his photographer, seizing the opportunity, pushed in ahead opting for a few extra shots. I was forced to put off my closer examination until he finished. I therefore utilized this rude interruption to observe the position of her body. The chalk lines were already drawn around her fragile form, and seemed to emphasize the odd angle in which she was lying. If I was to guess, I’d say she just didn’t drop there, but had tumbled to the landing from some point up the staircase. The photographer finally finished flashing away, which gave me a full thirty seconds to make my own inspection. She was pretty beaten up, and the position of her head indicated to me that the doc was right. There were also some

suggestive bruises—one along the line of the jaw, and the other on the upper portion of both arms—and an abrasion along the ring finger of her left hand.

“Hey, Red,” I called to him, directing his attention to the wristwatch on her left arm. “Did you notice this?” I was referring to the fact that it was put on upside down.

“Ya know, Thomas, quite honestly I didn’t,” he admitted. “He turned to his detectives. “Did any of ya boys notice that the lady’s watch was upside down?” They all shook their heads. “Then learn from an ol’ pro.” He patted me on the back, and then instructed them to make a note of it.

The gurney finally made it to the scene, and I wasn’t about to hang around and watch them struggle to carry it with the added burden back up. It was too exhausting. I started towards the stairs when Red stopped me.

“Do ya think ya could come by HQ and make a statement later this afternoon?”

“Want to know where I was during the early hours of this morning?” I suggested jokingly.

“Naw,” he answered seriously. “But I would like to know why ya had an appointment so early in da morning, and how ya tie in with the victim.”

“I don’t have to come downtown to tell you that,” I offered. “I was here this early because she asked me, and, as I mentioned, she was my client.”

“Nevertheless, I want details me boy. Dis thing smells of foul play, and I’ll be needing all the information I can git.

I agreed and we set a time around eleven to meet at his downtown office.

I now had my own car, a brown, 1925 Packard Holbrook two-passenger coupe. No more red trolley lines for me since I came into that windfall from the Hyland case. I also rented myself a bigger office. It was in the same art deco building located at the corner of Hollywood and Gower, but a floor up, and had an ante room where I set up Rita’s desk. Of all the improvements in my life that had come out of that job last summer, I have to admit that Rita becoming a part of my world was the best. Of course I wasn’t going to let Rita know that, although I believe she already suspected. And, incidentally, she was also a damn good receptionist.

It was still early, and the traffic along Sunset was light. A traffic signal turned red, and I pulled to a stop at the intersection. “An inopportune time to die.” There it was again, that phrase coming to the forefront of my mind. I couldn’t shake it, or the image of the gal who had planted it there. A tender wick snuffed out of existence. Gertrude Hurd had a lot to live for. After five years of struggling through life stacking books in a local library between “extra” work, bit parts, and then minor acting roles in less than memorable B pictures, her dream of stardom was finally coming true. It started with a series of silent “one-reelers,” or comedy shorts she did for a studio labeled in the industry as “The Laugh Factory.” She played the second half of a pair of young struggling working women that always seemed to wind up in one crazy adventure or another. Actress Moira Moran was the brainy brunette who more or less functioned as the straight woman, and Gertrude played the ditsy platinum blonde. The combination worked, and she later carried that empty headed persona as a solo act to major comedy features, co-starring opposite some big names like W.C. Fields and the Marx Brothers. Of course with

fame came all the trimmings. Wild parties, brushes with the law—mainly for drunk driving or disorderly conduct in public—a string of whirlwind romances, and all being happily chronicled by the press. Parson’s had a field day with the comedienne’s off screen antics and christened her with the nickname, “Hurdy Gertie, the good time girl,” which seemed to stick. More recently she had got herself into serious trouble—beyond anything she or her publicist could handle, which was why I was hired.

A series of clamorous sounds interrupted my musings, and I realized that it was impatient motorists behind wanting me to move because the light had changed. My office building had a parking lot in the back. As I pulled in, the car attendant, Lester, wished me good morning in his usual overly jovial manner, quite irritating when I was in one of my black moods, as I was today. I walked through the rear entrance that led into a long narrow hall that took you to the lobby. The elevator operator was leaning up against the wall to one side of its door as I approached. He looked bored.

“How’s it going, Mr. L?” Nick asked, opening the gate for me to enter. He recently started addressing me that way. I really didn’t like it. As I stepped in I noticed *The Black Mask*, a detective pulp, lying open, face down on his stool.

“I just saw my client not much older than you lying dead on a gurney,” I responded bitterly. “How do you think it’s going?”

The answer was really inappropriate, but then again that earlier scene had left me in a slump. Still it was my problem and not the kid’s, or the car attendant’s for that matter. I decided to lighten up, and quickly apologized.

“Sorry, Nick. It’s just been one of those mornings. You think in my line you’d be hardened to the sight, but in my case I just can’t seem to ever get used to it.”

“I think I’d look for a new profession if it ever did,” he replied pulling on the lever that set the elevator in motion. Not bad reasoning for a kid. It set me thinking. The rest of the ride up we remained silent until he dropped me at my floor where he wished me a very cautious, “Have a good day.”

“Mr. Logan, there’s a visitor in your office,” alerted Rita in a low whisper, as she looked up furtively from her desk. A warning bell immediately went off in my head. For one, she wasn’t greeting me in her usual breezy manner, and two, since soon after we met she had never addressed me as Mr. Logan. I stared at her for some moments trying to access the situation, and then after seeing the quick, meaningful shifting of her eyes towards the inner office door I nodded, putting my finger to my lips, and motioned her outside.

“Go powder your nose or something,” I told her quickly. She started to protest, but I waved her impatiently aside. Once I saw that she was safely down the hall, I moved on the balls of my feet to the office next door and stepped quickly inside. Its occupant, a CPA named Meyer, looked up startled from his desk.

“Something I can do for you, Mr. Logan?” He placed a pencil behind one ear. It immediately got buried in the bush of wild white hair that was sticking out on the sides. His dome was completely bald on top; it reminded me of an egg resting in a nest.

“Yeah,” I replied, removing my .45 Colt automatic from its snug leather holster where it rested comfortably under my left arm. I snapped the safety off. “You could get

lost for fifteen minutes. I need to borrow your office.” I motioned to his connecting door, and, catching my meaning, he was out of there before I had to ask twice. Meyer was normally a nervous individual, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if he was already heading to the manager’s desk seeking a new office. As silently as possible I inched the door open. My visitor was sitting in a chair with his back towards me. I could tell from behind that he was big, and built like a boxer. It may have once been his profession, but by all indications now he seemed to be here as someone’s enforcer. As I watched I saw him drop his right arm impatiently over the armrest of his chair. He was gripping a .38 caliber revolver with tense anticipation.

“Drop it, friend!” I announced sharply.

My voice startled him, however, the no-nonsense intensity that I brought to my tone seemed to freeze him in his spot, and prevented his normal inclination to turn his head in my direction.

“Hey, like I’m here to jus talk.” He sounded punch drunk, which confirmed my earlier suspicion.

“Loose the roscoe first, friend. We don’t need it to conduct our conversation.”

“Sure, anything ya say,” he replied cautiously. “You want that I drop it on the floor?”

“How about you place it on the corner of my desk and then step away to the far corner of the room.” He started to rise slowly at my instructions, and I warned him that if he even twitched in my direction he would be eating lead. Gingerly he placed his weapon to the left of my blotter and then moved carefully around to the other side making doubly sure that he kept his back towards me. As he started for the opposite side of the room I stopped him in his tracks with the question, “If you were only interested in talking why the un-holstered weapon?”

“Just a nervous habit,” he answered flatly.

“Well, it makes me nervous too.” Another thought crossed my mind. “If you have a shiv or any other weapon, I would also consider dropping it on my desk at this time.” I then added menacingly, “If I find it on you later, I just can’t guarantee how I might return it!”

As I made that last statement he reached slowly into his coat pocket, and removed a wad of bills, new notes still neatly held in place by a paper band. He dropped them with a thud onto my blotter. When my silence indicated that he had my attention, he asked slyly, “Now, dis prove that I’m just interested in talking?”