

# STRANGER 456

A THRILLER



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**Best-selling author of Triple Cross & Cover Up**

"A non-stop thriller. Peter Lance's years of tenacious investigative reporting pay off. STRANGER 456 is a riveting probe into the mind of a psychopath."

- Det. James Moss (NYPD Homicide Ret.)

# 1

THE PSYCHOPATH WHOM THE FBI SUSPECTED of killing thirty-seven women leaned in over the autopsy table. The body of a female lay face up. Blonde, in her early twenties, her green eyes were opaque in death. The young woman's arms lay open at either side of the stain-less steel table. Her inner wrists had been stitched with sutures which the killer had used once he'd removed the trochar and the last drops of embalming fluid.

When he was finished making her up, he would transfer her body from the table to a gurney on a sheet of opaque plastic so as not to bruise her skin. He needed to pose her before lividity turned her perfect white belly to purple. But first he had to mark her - to designate her position in his master work.

He looked across at his table of instruments. When he found what he wanted, he switched it on. There was a sharp whirrrr that resonated against the 40 foot walls of the cavernous space. It was empty now and dimly lit except for a wall of scaffolding on each side that ran up the 4 stories to the roof. The space had been designed as a charnel house, but the killer thought of it now as his church. His basilica.

He dipped the tip of the tattoo needle in indigo ink. Then, ever so gently, so as not to bruise the nape of her neck, he turned the subject's body over and swept her mane of blonde hair forward. Finally, with the

precision of a neurosurgeon cauterizing a tumor, he leaned in and etched a series of tiny letters at the base of her neck: J:20:14-18.

When he was finished, the killer ducked under the scaffolding and walked into his office where he scanned a wall. It was covered with pictures. There were snapshots, drivers licenses and missing person photos from seventeen states. Dozens of faces of men, women and children of every age, size and weight.

Each one of them had been marked with a Sharpie in the same sequence as the tattoo: I 6:8-12, D 32:6-22.

The killer never thought of these people as victims – merely subjects - and now, on the bottom row, he found the DMV registration of the woman he'd just embalmed: Marlee Jane Hofstadter. She'd been a sophomore at the University of Indiana. On October 28th she'd vanished from a laundry room in the basement of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority house.

The killer removed the push pin that fixed her license to the wall and used a Sharpie to inscribe the same combination of letters and numbers on its face: J:20:14-18.

When he was done, the killer unlocked a metal file cabinet and pulled out a journal; a brown banker's ledger that he'd covered in duct tape. He flipped through pages illustrated with drawings of celestial creatures locked in unnatural acts with devils and other beasts. The illustrations of demons and angels fornicating were interspersed with rows of numbers.

Finally, on a page next to the name of Marlee Jane, he recorded the tattooed sequence.

There were two places on the killer's own body where he, himself, had been inked. An inch under his left wrist, below his cuff line, was the same set of numbers and letters he'd inscribed on his subjects: M 10:31.

On the bottom of his right foot there were three tattooed letters: W.A.R. the initials of his hero's adopted name: W. Axl Rose. The killer had never known his own parents. He'd been raised in a series of foster homes throughout the Midwest. But in his early teens, he came to identify with the lead singer in Guns N' Roses who had survived an abusive childhood.

Since he'd found his true calling, the only people the killer ever talked to, had *died* before they even knew his name. He was a loner, an enigma, with no social ties. He had no friends or associates, not even a pet. But as he spoke to his inner demons and filled out the elaborate pages of his journal, he began to use a corruption of Rose's first name: Axel.

Now, as he finished writing, he felt a jolt to his frontal lobe. It was as if a nail gun had shot a four-inch projectile into his brain. He almost blacked out for a moment, then gritted his teeth and recovered, rushing across to an old wooden desk and pulling open a drawer full of medicine.

There were prescription pill bottles from pharmacies across the far west — part of the booty recovered from his subjects.

Axel searched frantically for a vial of Oxycontin, but had to settle for prescription strength Midol. As the next spike drove into his choroid plexus, he popped the cap and dry swallowed a handful of capsules.

Hyperventilating, he dropped to the floor and pressed his fingers into his skull. He bit his tongue to distract himself and slowly willed his pulse to go down. Sitting in the corner of the half-darkened office, he tried to focus and then remembered that the make-up job had to be done before the subject's white skin began to mottle. He pulled himself up and held out his left hand.

Still trembling, he willed it to stop. Then he placed his index and middle fingers against his neck, forcing his pulse to subside.

When he was calmer, Axel walked into the embalming room and found the makeup he'd recovered from the young "Indian woman" whose wallet contained a Nevada license that read "cosmetologist."

On two consecutive nights he'd watched her park her blue Olds Alero in the employees' lot of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas where she worked preparing the showgirls. In the neon light off The Strip he couldn't be sure of her precise skin color, but he coveted the makeup bag that she carried in and out of the casino each night. It was just after two a.m. on the third night, when he followed her home and waited until she made her regular stop for beer and cigarettes at a 7-Eleven.

Hiding now in the shadows of the empty lot, he popped open her trunk and climbed inside with the hood ajar. He cut the wire from the lock that would have ignited a *Trunk Open* light on her dash and broke the bulb on the inside of the hood so that when she opened it to retrieve her dry cleaning, she would barely have time to react before he was on her.

Minutes later, the woman emerged from the store carrying a plastic bag. She got into the Olds and drove off. Axel held the trunk closed and waited until she pulled into the garage below her condo a few blocks away. She got out and he heard the snap of her stiletto heels on the concrete of the garage floor.

She began to walk toward the rear of the car, but then stopped. He heard her unzip a purse and pop the cap off a vial. It was probably lip gloss. He felt himself getting hard as he thought of her checking her reflection in the driver's side window while she made herself beautiful for her boyfriend inside.

It was moments like this that excited Axel the most; knowing before his subjects did, that they had only minutes to live.