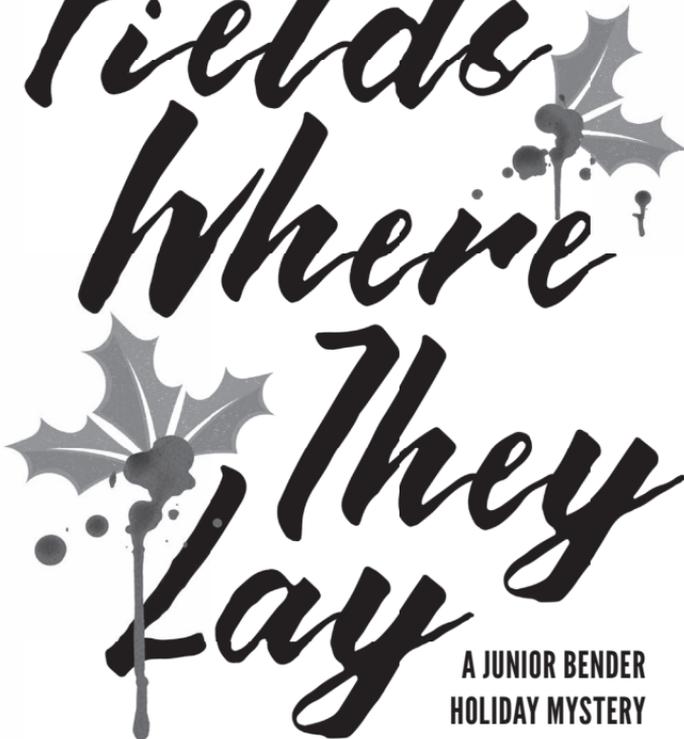


*Fields
Where
They
Lay*

The title is written in a large, elegant, black cursive font. The words are stacked vertically: 'Fields' at the top, 'Where' below it, 'They' below that, and 'Lay' at the bottom. To the right of 'Fields' and 'Where', and to the left of 'They' and 'Lay', there are decorative elements consisting of stylized holly leaves and clusters of berries on thin stems.

A JUNIOR BENDER
HOLIDAY MYSTERY

TIMOTHY HALLINAN

**SOHO
CRIME**

PART ONE



SHEPHERDS ABIDING IN THE FIELD





The astringent December sunlight looked, as always at this time of year, like it had been ladled into the smog with a teaspoon, like vinegar. The watery light and the goop in the air had softened shadows so that the whole composition seemed as flat as a painting, perhaps titled “Field with Lump and Cars.” The lump, a hulking, windowless, three-story ellipse with a flat roof and stains shaped like dirt icicles running down its outer walls, was in the center of a field where herds of sheep or cattle might once have grazed but which was now covered in flat black asphalt, marked in white diagonal parking lines to create an enormous her-ringbone pattern.

The pattern was visible because there weren’t very many cars, and the ones that had arrived were scattered around the lot as though the visitors wanted to avoid each other, perhaps out of embarrassment for being there at all. Later, I would realize that the outlying cars belonged to employees, dutifully obeying a rule that was intended to free up closer spaces for customers who probably weren’t coming.

A huge electric sign on a concrete pillar that stretched higher than the top of the building was blinking its sales pitch in red and green. It read:

EDGERTON MALL PRESENTS
TWO SANTAS!!!!!!
HO! HO! HOOO!

Two Santas.

And I was going to be stuck here until Christmas.

Only one thing came to mind, so I said it. “Bah,” I said. “Humbug.”

Santa Number One, if you were reading left to right on the top row of security monitors, was a lot thinner than Santa Number Two, with a sharp, bony face and a ropy neck that plunged unconvincingly into his yards of scarlet padding before blossoming into Santa’s expected bulk, something like the way the narrow shaft of an onion flares abruptly into a bulb. His belly may have been bogus but his merriness was almost authentic, at least at times. Santa Number Two had the requisite girth and the rosy cheeks of yore, but his *Ho! Ho! Ho!* rang hollow, and if his eyes had been the barrels of *Star Trek* phasers, there would have been a pile of fine ash at the foot of his plush red-and-green throne. Several perceptive kids had gotten a glimpse of those eyes and backed away fast, feeling behind them one-handed for Mom.

“Two Santas in one mall,” I said. “Says a lot for the critical-thinking skills of American retailers.”

“You got no idea,” said Wally Durskee. Wally, who was occupying the chair next to mine, was a short, serious security guy in a tight green polo shirt that was stretched over so much muscle he looked almost cubic. His carrot-colored hair was in rapid and premature retreat, and he’d developed a nervous habit of fingering a bit hopefully the newly vacant acreage above his forehead. He had the moist fish-white

complexion of someone who never gets outside when the sun is shining; a spatter of freckles as a genetic accessory to the red hair; and small, deep-set black eyes, as reflective as raisins, that tended to jump from place to place, a tic he'd undoubtedly developed from a great many days trying to watch thirty-two surveillance screens all at once, as we were at that moment. The jumpy eyes created an impression of unreliability, although he seemed straight enough. "You shoulda been here four days ago," he said. "Line out the front door, kids screaming, mothers having anxiety attacks. Cleaning crew swept up a couple handfuls of tranquilizers next morning, and not all legal, neither. They got into a fistfight over them. One-hour, ninety-minute wait to get to Sunny Claus's damn lap. Kids peeing in line. Some limp washcloth emailed cell phone pitchers to Channel Four and they sent a news crew. On TV it looked like the Syrians trying to get through the checkpoints into Germany."

I said something that must have sounded sympathetic, because Wally said, "And the only Sunny we had then was Dwayne down there, and kids'd scream to get up to him, take one look, and then scream to get away from him."

"Dwayne is the fat one?"

"Yeah. Dwayne Wix. Even I can't stand him, and I like everybody."

"Fire him."

"Sure, right," Wally said. He blocked the headline with his hands: "SHOPPING MALL FIRES SUNNY CLAUS. Anyway, he's not our employee. We hire a contractor for all this stuff."

"Yeah? What's it called?"

"Ho-Ho-Holidays," he said. "Sounds like a stammer, don't it?"

“It do.”

He lobbed a suspicious glance at me but resumed his narrative anyway. Wally was a guy with a lot of narrative and no one to resume it for. “So the contractor threw in Shlomo there at the other end, half price, because it was their job to make crowd estimates and stuff.”

I said, “Shlomo?”

“Shlomo Stempel,” Wally said. “The skinny one. Kids like *him*. Better than Dwayne anyways.”

I said, “Okay.”

“Why, you got a problem?”

“No, why do you—”

“What do you think, there’s a tonload of unemployed Sanny Clauses this time of year? You can’t put an ad in the paper says, *Christians only*.”

“No,” I said. “I just don’t hear the name Shlomo all that much. You know, it’s not like Aidan or Max or Justin or whatever all the kids are called these days.”

Wally was regarding me as though he thought I was likely to charge him at any moment. “You think Sanny Claus would object?” It was apparently a serious question.

“No,” I said. “I think Sanny Claus would be thrilled to be impersonated by Shlomo Stempel.”

“Great guy, Shlomo,” Wally said. He started to say something else but picked at his eyetooth with a fingernail instead. “So anyways, that’s why there’s two of them.”

“At opposite ends of the mall.”

“It’s a long mall,” Wally said. He smoothed the miniature desert on his head, which was already smooth. “Seventh longest mall west of the Mississippi.”

“Really.”

“Wouldn’t kid you. Not my style. Long story short, the

place is so long there's probably some kids, they only see one Sanny Claus." He looked back at the screens, and doubt furrowed his brow. "If they're really little."

"Well," I said, "that's good. Kids today have enough problems without worrying about whether Santa Claus is a committee." I stood up. The two of us were occupying creaking wheeled office chairs behind a scratched-up console, sticky with ancient spilled drinks, in a dark, cold, windowless room on the third floor, the low-rent floor, of Edgerton Mall. From time to time Wally toyed with one of the controls in front of him, making one of the cameras in some store somewhere in the mall swoop sickeningly left or right or zoom in and out.

"Where you going?" Wally said.

"Just getting up. So, yesterday someone added up the shoplifting reports from all the stores and discovered that it was way out of line."

"Fridays," Wally said. "This is Saturday," he added, making sure we were on the same page. "Stores submit their weekly reports on Friday and the security company, the guys I work for, plugged them into a spreadsheet overnight, and it spiked like Pike's Peak. You been to Pike's Peak?"

"Yes," I said, and Wally's face fell. He undoubtedly had a lot of narrative about Pike's Peak, all bottled up and ready to pop. "It's a whole week's worth of losses, right?"

"Right." He made one of the cameras pan and then zoom dramatically but his heart wasn't in it.

"How out of line is it?"

"Like Pike's Peak. Maybe a hundred, hundred and twenty percent gain. Or loss, I guess. You know, a gain in the *loss*." He sketched an acute angle, point up, in the air. "Pike's frigging Peak."

“Does the software break the data out on a day-by-day basis?”

“No. We get a one-week dump of numbers from each store, and that’s what gets fed in.”

“Why does it come to you?”

“Lookit my shirt. What does it say?”

He was waiting, so I said, “Sec—”

“Security,” he said over me. “We get the data ’cause it’s our asses when it goes kerfloey like this. Look, I’m not really sure who you are.”

“And you haven’t seen anything odd from up here.”

“If I *had*,” he said in a tone that suggested he’d taken most of the blame that had been ladled out during his lifetime and he was continually on the lookout for more, “you wouldn’t be here, would you? And I’m still not sure who you—”

“But you were told to help me out, right?”

He replayed the question mentally, squinting at the wall behind me. When he’d finished combing it for ambiguity and trick clauses and, I don’t know, the Oxford comma, he said, “Right. But who *are* you?”

“I’m a theft expert,” I said.

I could hear him swallow.

I don’t want to spring this on you too suddenly, but things are not always what they seem. One way we often perceive human artifacts—you know, the world of airplanes and washing machines and books and office buildings and shopping malls and easily available facial quality tissue—is to see them all as different things, things that exist independently of each other, brought into existence by separate processes and for different reasons. And that’s certainly one way to look at it, and if it makes you happy, skip to page eleven.

But *another* way to look at the man-made world is to see it as an extension of or even a parallel to the so-called “natural” world, in which thousands of seemingly different plants and animals and rocks and things seem for some reason to cluster thickly in certain places and more sparsely—or not at all—in others. And if you ask yourself why this pattern of uneven distribution arises—what the connective tissue could be—the answer that’s certain to come to you sooner or later is *water*. Water is, in a sense, the chord, albeit inaudible, that produces and supports all those individual tones: water shapes the landscape; water erodes the rocks and distributes the minerals; water is the vital force behind the oldest redwood, the laciest flower, the man-eating tiger. You’re probably already ahead of me, but I’ll say it anyway: The “water” of the man-made world is money.

The underground river of money, kept thoughtfully out of sight by those who manipulate it, is the unifying element that ties the man-made world together, that supplies the necessary vitality to produce everything from a fancy doorknob to a five-way traffic light, from a one-room shack to a roadside grapefruit stand to the New York Stock Exchange. Without the flow of money, these artificial landmarks could not spring up to decorate or desecrate the landscape and to impinge on our lives. And with money, as with water, you have *no idea* where it’s been.

The clear liquid in the almost comically sanitary bottle of *aqua pura* you buy at the grocer’s has probably passed through both business ends of multiple living organisms, a couple of sewage plants, and a poisoned river before evaporating to fall as pristine snow mass on some picturesque Colorado mountain and from there to melt into the stream or fill the aquifer tapped by the bottling plant. There’s no

way to tell. Just as there's no way to tell in a glittery mall full of gift wrap, candy canes, bright ribbons, sugar-stimulated children, and the repetitive racket of seasonal music where the money that waters that mall has come from.

If it's a big enough project, there's a pretty good chance—in fact, I'd say it's just shy of a certainty—that some if not all of that money is dirty. And in the case of the Edgerton Mall—the name of a nonexistent neighborhood chosen to conjure up visions of graceful, trailing willows, kids on bicycles, picket fences, and an overwhelmingly Caucasian population—the money flowing beneath *that* temple to Mammon, currently in the million-dollar throes of celebrating a millennia-old birth into poverty so abject that the child was delivered in a stable . . . well, the river of money down there was *filthy*.



I couldn't give Wally much detail about why I was in the Edgerton Mall because I was pretty sure it could have gotten me—or him, or both of us—killed.

Much earlier that day—just *three days before Christmas*, as my daughter, Rina, had reminded me in the half-octave-up tone that designated spoken italics—I'd had a wakeup call, literally, from a woman named Trey Annunziato, whose control over an ambitiously brutal San Fernando Valley crime family was increasingly tenuous and who felt I owed her a favor. I disagreed, but I kept my argument to myself, what with discretion being the better part of a possibly violent death—a fate that befell, much more frequently than the statistical norm, those who didn't do what Trey wanted them to do. Hastily dressed and largely uncombed, I showed up at Trey's walled-in Chinese fantasy compound down near Northridge at the appointed time. (Trey had once shot someone in the knee for tardiness, which is the kind of thing that sticks in the memory.) A grim thirty minutes later I'd driven back out of the compound with a very bad taste in my mouth.

I had an hour and some change to spare before I was scheduled to show up for the meeting Trey was sending me to at the cumbersomely named Wrightwood Greens Golf

and Country Club. So I called Louie the Lost and asked his voice mail whether he could drop whatever he was doing and meet me at the Du-par's coffee shop in Studio City he and I occasionally frequented. There was nothing special about the place except that it was convenient to both of us and it was where my mentor, Herbie Mott, had taken me after my first professional burglary at the age of seventeen.

Du-par's had a lot of sentimental value.

As I pulled into the parking lot, my phone rang. Louie.

"Can't do it," he said. "I got no wheels. Tell you what. Get me two pieces of cherry pie—no, one cherry and one apple—and come down Ventura a mile, mile and a half to Pete's Putt-Putt Hut. You know it?"

"Sure," I said. Pete was a so-so mechanic whose lack of skill was offset by a profound lack of interest in who actually owned the cars he worked on.

Louie said, "Think they got punkin?"

"It's after Thanksgiving and before Christmas," I said. "Any coffee shop that doesn't have pumpkin loses its pie license."

"You think? Huh. Okay, then. Punkin."

"Instead of what?"

"Why you gotta confuse everything? Gimme some punkin and one of them other ones."

"Fine." I hung up and went in and got what was certain to be the wrong pie.

Sure enough, about six minutes later Louie said, "No apple?"

I opened the back door of my white Toyota and took out a piece of apple.

"Kid's learning, Pete," Louie called to a pair of shoes protruding from beneath a car. The shoes contributed a grunt

of nonlinguistic agreement. The car Pete was buried under was a black Lincoln Town Car, Louie's favorite personal ride and also his go-to when someone needed a legitimate-looking limo. I'd driven it myself not so long ago. It brought back some really rotten memories, so I said, "Can we go in the office or something?"

"Sure. You remember the coffee?"

"You didn't ask for coffee."

"Do I gotta do everything?" he said. "Okay, but that means the pie's on you."

"You have coffee, Pete?" I asked.

"You don't want to drink it," the shoes said.

I followed Louie into an office that looked like it had recently been waxed with used motor oil and then buffed with a uniform coat of grease until everything was a restful, if shiny, sort of Confederate grey. Many large glossy calendars with pictures of tires on them had been hung randomly on the walls. "Jesus," I said as my feet almost slipped out from under me. "Should have brought my ice skates."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. So? What's the emergency?" Louie swept aside some sparkly Christmas cards, heavily accented with black fingerprints, to make room on Pete's desk for the pumpkin pie. One of the cards fell over and emitted a few tremulous notes of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" before lapsing into an embarrassed silence, like the kid in a choir who accidentally sings out on the upbeat.

"So," I said, "I've got to go talk to a guy named Tip Poin-dexter."

Louie was sliding his feet experimentally across the grease on the floor. "Tell you what," he said without looking up. "Here's my best suggestion. Go get your passport. Go get *all* your passports. Then go to Pakistan with a lot of plane

changes and double-backs and new names along the way. And stay there. Hey, you know anyone looks just like you?"

"No."

"Too bad. You could use a double." He sat in what I guessed was Pete's chair, the only one in the room, and swiveled it silently back and forth a couple of times. Pete kept it well oiled, but then I figured Pete's primary purpose in life was to keep everything well oiled. I put the second piece of pie, the apple, next to the pumpkin. "This is the kind of situation," Louie said, "a guy who's like your twin or something, would come in really handy. And you should make yourself the beneficiary on his life insurance. In fact, tell you something: except for the double, I got someone who could *arrange* all that. She's a nice girl, too. Disappear you so good you'd be looking for yourself."

"So Tip Poindexter, despite having a name that would look good on a butterfly, is not actually—"

"It's a made-up name," Louie said. "When he first got here from Russia he had a kind of brainy American girlfriend, brainy by his standards anyway. She taught him to play Scrabble to improve his English, and she spelled out *tipping point*—"

"That's two words," I said.

Louie wagged his head from side to side. "He was an immigrant then, so what did he know? Lotta Scrabble points in 'tipping point.' She won the game. For all I know, a couple years later he figured out she cheated and had her thrown out of a helicopter, but at the time, when he needed a name with some vowels in it, he came up with Tip Poindexter."

"What was his original name?"

"With no vowels, who can pronounce it?" Louie said. He pulled out the plastic fork I'd stuck vertically in the pumpkin

and dropped it into a wastebasket full of wadded, greasy paper towels. Then he picked up the piece of pumpkin pie, minus the paper plate.

“Russians have vowels,” he said. “They may be short on some stuff, but vowels they’ve got.” Louie took a bite out of the filling and tucked it in his cheek. “He comes from a place near Sochi, you know, where the Russians put on those weird Winter Olympics with all the fake snow, but his name was from some old language, whole alphabet only had a couple of vowels. It was like that TV show where they’re always trying to buy a vowel, except for them the answer was always no. For hundreds of years.”

“Ubykh,” I said. “Last person who spoke it died twenty, twenty-five years ago.”

“Musta been a lonely guy,” he said around a mouthful of pie.

“Thousands of great, vowel-free puns lost forever.”

“From what I know about the place, they probably talked mostly about goats and snow.” He took another bite of filling.

Louie was the closest thing to a friend I had in the crook world, although, since his commodity was information, our relationship stopped a few feet short of full and open. He’d been a getaway driver until a wrong turn after a diamond heist went mildly disastrous and word got out that he could barely find his way out of his own driveway. After sitting around for months like Norma Desmond waiting for the phone to ring with the next job, he packed it in and went into business as a telegraph, with a sideline in unregistered and often souped-up cars as a sort of nod to his past as a driver. What he lacked in his sense of direction he made up in memory; if he’d ever heard something, he remembered it, and he made sure he heard pretty much everything.

He licked one of the craters he'd made in the pumpkin pie and said, "If you're going to do business with Tip Poindexter, maybe you oughta pay me in advance. Five hundred."

"After all these years?" I said, reaching for my wallet.

"Long time ago I heard something Irwin Dressler was supposed to have said."

I stopped counting and listened. Irwin Dressler was in his nineties now but still the King of Shade, the mobster who had done more than any other to shape modern Los Angeles. I said, "Yeah? What?"

"He said, back in the old days when someone who was operating at the B or C level all of a sudden went after someone in the A level, they'd say, 'Kid's got a lot of spirit.'"

I said, "That's the most boring thing you've ever told me."

He held up the hand with the pie in it. "And later, when the B-level guy showed up with a couple hundred bullets in him, they'd add a clause on. 'Kid had a lot of spirit,' they'd say, 'but not much judgment.'"

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Well, if you're gonna pass on Pakistan or the girl I got who can make you disappear, I'd suggest that Trey, with the personnel problems she's been having lately, is a kiss under the mistletoe compared to Tip Poindexter. If you're gonna piss anyone off, I'd pick Trey. Just don't show up for the meeting."

"So what does he do?"

"You got your Christmas shopping done?"

"No," I said. "I do it all on Christmas Eve."

Louie sat almost upright. My Christmas shopping habits seemed to engage him more than my imminent death. "What? You kidding me?"

“Give me a reason,” I said, “even a bad one, for me to kid you about Christmas shopping.”

“Junior.” He swiveled from side to side in the chair, apparently organizing his thoughts. “I seen you *diagram a burglary*. You drive home like you got the Shadow tailing you two cars back. I ask you, you think it’s gonna rain, you check your phone. This is not, like actors always say, consistent with your character.”

“I have issues,” I said.

“With Christmas.”

“Look,” I said, feeling my face heat up, “shrinks spend half their time prying out their patients’ issues with their *mothers*. If I have a—a few—issues with Christmas, well, *there we are*. It’s my problem, not yours, okay? Are we still friends?”

“Sheesh,” he said.

“So, yes, I do my Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve. And?”

“And you might want to change that,” he said. “Get it done early, like before you meet Tip. Wrap it, too. Write the cards. Get them all ready and then give them to someone to hand out for you, just in case. Tip is, ummm . . .” He finished eating the pumpkin off the pie crust and tossed the crust in among the oil-sodden paper towels. “You know,” he said, “to me, punkin pie is the taste of the holidays. The smell is pine but the taste—”

“Tell it to Hallmark. What *about* Tip? I mean, what does he do?”

“Well, *now* he’s a big-time money guy. Backs housing developments, fancy hotels, apartment complexes. Got a shopping mall, even. And since money needs a little muscle from time to time, he supplies that, too. Few years back he

cleared all the houses in a straight line about four miles long to make room for one of those toll roads, all on the force of his personality. I mean, people sold in a *hurry*. But when he first got here, he was an importer.”

“Importing what?”

“Girls from Eastern Europe. Fly them into Mexico, pay coyotes to walk them over the border, and I’m talking in groups of thirty, forty at a time. Haul them from Arizona to Los Angeles, make his mark on them—”

“His mark.”

“Well, first it was three knife cuts in a row way high on the outside of the arm, just above where a short-sleeve blouse would end. Like a sergeant’s chevron, you know, but straight, not those upside-down Vs. Three lines, parallel, just deep enough to scar. Anywhere they went for the rest of their lives, he could get someone to make them roll up their sleeves, and *hey there*: identification. Then later he got himself a dog, and some asshole dog doctor told him about the chip, you know? The chip they put in so the dog can be identified anywhere? So he started putting those in, paid the vet extra to handle it, and told the girls that they were like transmitters, right? Said he had a gizmo he could turn on any time and see where everybody was.”

I said, “This is a hell of a Christmas story.”

“You wanted to know who he is, well, this is who he is. And the girls, they got trafficked off to massage parlors, cat houses, outcall operations, traveling house trailers—like the Good Humor Man, but with, you know. All over the country. Hundreds and hundreds of them. He owned part of the businesses, he got part of the girls’ cut. The only recession-proof industry, money coming out of his ears. And then, after eight, nine years, he hooked up with some of the other

Rusky mafiosos who got on one of Putin's wrong sides and had to haul ass out of the mother country, and they put him into other businesses. Legit businesses, even. Now he hosts fund-raisers for political candidates and plays golf and polo and gets his picture in the *Times* and is married to something you'd have to look at five or six times to appreciate fully."

"Get up," I said.

"Why?"

"Because it's my turn to sit is why."

"Jeez," Louie said, picking up the piece of apple pie. "I'm older than you." But he got up.

"Much better," I said. The chair had one haunch higher than the other so I was at a slight angle off the vertical, but with my knees feeling so weak it was hard to care.

"Why's he want you?" Louie was using his fingers to peel the top crust off the pie.

"I don't know. Trey said he needed an expert."

"Like I said, get your shopping done. You got a will?" He dropped the triangle of crust, which he'd managed to remove intact, into the trash. "On a diet," he volunteered. "Promised Alice I'd look out for my carbohydrates." Louie had a big, round Mediterranean face, the kind of face that it was easy to envision peering down into a jumbo bowl of pasta or singing opera, perhaps at the same time, and slightly curly, almost pretty, hair that he'd fought with for years until he finally just grew enough of it to pull it into a tight ponytail. I'd gotten to know that face very well, and looking at it now, I had a pang at the thought that if Tip Poindexter killed me, I'd never see it again.

"Would you miss me if I got killed?" I asked.

"Sure I would," he said. "So would Rina. So would Ronnie.

Even Kathy.” Rina, as I’ve said, was my daughter, Ronnie my relatively new and impermeably mysterious girlfriend, and Kathy was my ex, Rina’s mom.

“That’s not many people,” I said.

“Yeah?” he said, taking a bite out of the apple filling. “Well, listen, I’ll send extra flowers.”