

A person is sitting on a dark wooden ledge in the foreground, hunched over with their head buried in their arms. They are wearing a grey hoodie, blue jeans, and sneakers. Behind them is a large body of water reflecting the lights of a city skyline at night. The skyline features several prominent skyscrapers, including the Willis Tower, which is brightly lit. The overall atmosphere is one of solitude and contemplation.

Lost Boy

A Novel By Jan Joseph

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to anyone living or dead is purely coincidental.

Other books by Jan Joseph:

Vanished: The Search for Sally Hunt

Dedication

For my friend and mentor
Michael Argetsinger

Acknowledgements

This book came from another, unpublished book called *Learning to Fall*®. When I finished the first edits of the book I found the main characters, Jackie Steinway and Jeff Peterson, haunted me, so much so that they just wouldn't let me be—they wanted a life, a story—and they prodded me into writing this book. To do that, I needed to write a backstory for them and describe how they came to get Max and grew into a family. And so, I give you the Steinway-Petersons, a complicated but loving family. I hope they make an impression on you and you enjoy knowing them as I did creating them.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped to make this book possible. First and foremost, I thank my dear friend and mentor, Michael Argetsinger, a wonderful biographer, a beautiful person, and a great friend. To Lee Green, MD, his wife, who let me borrow Michael occasionally to read and redirect my storylines, and Randy Steinmeyer, a great friend and actor who pushed me forward to have Michael read my first book. To my friends and relatives who provided commentary on several drafts of the story: Mom, Aunt Theresa, Joe DeJesus, Jinene Dunne, Richard Foreit, Marla Friedman, Linda Hoffman, Bill Lynch, Peter Kaplan, Andrea Kuchinski, Lorelei Crabb, Jaclyn McMillin, Geri Phifer, Erin Sernoffsky, Sonya Stephens, and Stephanie Whitmer. The

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Chapter 1

Jackie Steinway heard the doorbell ring and looked over her shoulder at the clock. It was a little past 3:30 in the afternoon—it would be Peri, her son’s piano teacher, for his 4:00 lesson. She walked to the back stairs, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, and called to her son, asking him to open the door.

“Yeah, Mom . . . can you get it? I’ll be down in a minute. Tell her to meet me in the basement,” Max Steinway-Peterson yelled back.

“Damn it,” Jackie swore under her breath. “Well, don’t make her wait. Her time is valuable too,” she called back.

“Right, Mom,” the boy called back.

Max, a piano virtuoso at ten, took after his father, Jeff Peterson, an Oscar-winning actor who worked under the name of Jeff Stanley. He did musical theatre, films, and now starred in a Chicago-area police drama based on a highly acclaimed film role he had created. When he wasn’t working, he taught drama at Northwestern University. Jackie Steinway had stayed home the last five years, writing her award-winning series of mystery novels.

Throwing down her dishtowel, she walked to the door. Opening it, she said, “Peri, he’ll be down in a minute, make yourself com—”

Peri was not at the door. A man pushed a gun in her face, forcing her to walk backward down the two-stair platform into the living room. *God, she thought, let Max stay upstairs . . . please.*

“Where is he?” the man said gruffly.

“Who?” she asked as she sat on the arm of the chair. “My husband—” she started to say as the man smashed her in the face with the gun, knocking her down. Blood spattered on the oak floor from a cut on her face.

“I don’t give a shit about your husband, lady,” the man spit out. “Where’s the kid? I want the kid.”

“He’s not home yet. He goes to piano lessons after school. He won’t be here for another hour or so,” she lied as she wiped blood onto the back of her hand.

“Bullshit, he comes home every day and has piano lessons here. I know,” he said gruffly. “Now where the fuck is he, bitch?” He paced angrily between the dining room and kitchen.

“He went to the teacher’s studio today for a special session,” she said loudly. Looking past the intruder, she saw Max come into the kitchen from the back stairs and peek around the refrigerator at the source of the strange, raised voice. He stood with his back against the side of the refrigerator and gasped. She looked at him, furtively hoping the man hadn’t heard him. “If you want to wait—”

In two steps the stranger was in the kitchen, grabbing Max’s shirt as the boy turned to run out the back door. Running after the man, Jackie grabbed Jeff’s Oscar statuette from the bookcase and brought it crashing against the back of his head. The force of the blow knocked him forward into Max. The man didn’t fall, steadying himself instead with his right hand on the kitchen floor as he held steadfastly

onto the boy with his left. He balanced himself, turning as he pulled the gun from his waistband, and fired pointblank at Jackie. She fell to the floor with a thud, blood bursting across her shirt and bubbling from her mouth.

“Mom,” Max yelled as the man picked up the dishtowel, the gun still in his hand, and pressed it against the back of his head. He pushed Max out the back door, pulling the boy’s jacket and backpack from the newel post as they passed the stairs. Thrusting the coat at Max, the boy put it on and they walked quickly out the back door to a waiting car.

Jackie pulled herself along the floor to a small table that held the landline telephone. She yanked on the wire until the phone fell to the floor. Taking the curly cord, she pulled the handset to her and punched in 9-1-1, whispering, “Help me” in the receiver. She coughed up blood and wiped it away with her hand.

* * *

Peri Wilson, a twenty-five-year-old master’s student in piano performance, had been hired by the Steinway-Petersons to work with Max when he was eight. Max was a talented little boy who could play almost anything by ear. His weakness was playing before an audience—he just froze. In the two years she’d worked with him, he’d come a long way. She was proud he was now able to perform admirably. Max had begun having fun playing the piano, and that had moved him along as he strived to learn more difficult and diverse pieces.

One of the things she especially liked was going to their home on Fremont Street. It was always warm and homey,

and Mrs. Peterson always included her in their family gatherings. As someone who had no family living in the States, and traveled home to Sweden infrequently, this was really appreciated, especially around the holidays.

Today, she walked up the three stairs, preparing to ring the doorbell, noticing the door was ajar. *How odd*, she thought as she pushed open the door and stuck her head in. "Mrs. Peterson," she called, stepping into the living room. She gasped when she saw Jackie sprawled on the floor in a pool of her own blood. She heard someone on the phone and picked it up.

"Hello," she said tentatively.

"This is the 9-1-1 operator, is there an emergency?"

"Yes," the girl said nervously. "She's bleeding . . . she's bleeding."

The operator told Peri a police unit and ambulance were being dispatched and would be there shortly. She asked her name, trying to keep her focused and talking. Then, she asked what Peri saw. Listening, the operator instructed Peri to get a towel and put pressure on the chest wound. She would wait on the line. The girl dropped the phone as she heard someone behind her and a uniformed policeman came in.

"Holy shit," he said under his breath as he talked quickly into the unit on his shoulder. "Can you tell me what happened here?" he asked Peri, who shook her head as she held Jackie's head in her lap and pressed a towel into the wound on her chest.

Chapter 2

Jane Peters hated when her phone rang at the end of her shift. It was usually an omen of something bad. It was a Friday and she and her partner, Jimmy Reardon, were finishing some last-minute paperwork as she reluctantly picked up the phone. She looked at the address, thinking this was just down the street from where she had lived five years ago. When the real estate market was good, she had decided she needed larger quarters and moved to a loft in Wrigleyville. This provided the young detective and her dog, Buster, more room and no snow-removal responsibilities.

Jimmy had become her partner after her previous partner, Ollie Hudson, retired two years earlier. He was totally different than Ollie. Much younger and more active, Jimmy liked to solve cases and they worked well together. When the call came in, he looked at the address and blanched. “Jesus, I know the people who live there. Let’s go.”

They sped down the street and pulled up to a brick bungalow surrounded by mini-mansions. It looked like a nice place. They walked past the officers and paramedics lingering in the living and dining rooms. Jimmy ran to the woman being loaded onto the gurney. He looked at her. She had blood bubbling from her lips—never a good sign—but she was conscious.

“Jimmy,” she coughed when she saw him, gasping, “he took Max . . . he took Max.”

“Who took him, Jackie?” he asked.

“Man . . . forties, graying hair, skinny . . . baseball jacket . . . Jeff . . .” she coughed, sending bubbly blood dribbling from her lips.

“I’ll call him. Where’s your cell?”

“Counter,” she coughed up more blood. “Location . . .”

Jimmy nodded. He’d known Jackie for more than fifteen years and Jeff for the last eight. Jeff was well-known to Chicago police officers. He’d portrayed the chief of police in Chicago on a TV show and kept the portrayal honest to the job. They respected him. Jimmy knew Jeff was filming on the west side, where much of the show’s interior shots were filmed in a studio. He walked to the counter and cued up Jeff. The phone rang once and it was answered.

“Hey baby, talk dirty to me,” Jeff said, laughing as he recognized his wife’s phone number.

“Jeff . . . it’s Jimmy. There’s been an incident at the house—”

“What,” the actor said, all signs of levity gone from his voice. “Are Jackie and Max all right?”

“No,” Jimmy said bluntly. “They’re taking Jackie to Masonic—she’s been shot—Jeff . . . it doesn’t look good. Max is gone.”

“Jesus Christ . . . Max is dead, Jimmy, how?” Jeff asked, shocked and stifling his fear and grief.

“No, Jeff, he’s gone—someone took him. Jackie said it was a man in his forties. I have to go . . . meet us at Masonic. Ask security to take you there now.” Jimmy hung up and walked to the gurney, where Jackie was fighting to stay conscious. “He’ll meet us at Masonic, Jackie.”

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Jimmy rode with his friend to the emergency room at Illinois Masonic Hospital. At the north side hospital's trauma center he walked into the bay as doctors swarmed around them. He gave as much information as he knew, saying her husband would be arriving soon. They placed her in the secure room, saved for dangerous patients, criminals, or celebrities for safety and privacy. Physicians attempted to stem the bleeding in her chest, rendered by a small-caliber handgun. They performed a bedside vascular ultrasound procedure to determine where the bullet was. Unfortunately, the remainder of the bullet was perilously near her heart.

The doctor met with the trauma surgeon on call. In hushed discussions they determined she had to go up to surgery immediately. "To hell with waiting for her husband," the doctor mumbled under his breath as she coughed and her breathing became more labored.

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