

STATE UNIVERSITY OF MURDER

a nick hoffman
mystery



LEV RAPHAEL

Also by Lev Raphael

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A Nick Hoffman
Mystery

Lev Raphael

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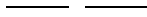
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For the plotmeister

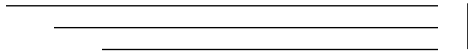


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Do not open your heart to evil. Because—if you do—evil will come... Yes, very surely evil will come... It will enter in and make a home within you, and after a while it will no longer be possible to drive it out.

—Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile*

Part I



UNIVERSITIES HATE SCANDAL more than Dracula hated sunlight, so there were major changes at the State University of Michigan after a mass shooting that had targeted me and my partner Stefan.

Well, cosmetic changes, anyway, which were meant to *seem* major. That's how university administrators respond to a crisis that can damage their "brand" when they haven't been able to keep malfeasance from making headlines: with the appearance of action rather than the real thing. Committees are formed, mission statements are concocted, press releases are issued, and the public is promised dramatic results.

And so thanks to a crazed gunman, our university acquired what it proclaimed in a rah-rah press release was an inspiring and transformative new slogan: *People Power!*

Rumor had it on campus that despite approval by lick-spittle deans and other administrators, various faculty members had complained to our tyrannical, image-obsessed President Boris Yubero that this catchphrase, developed by a hip, expensive New York PR firm, sounded suspiciously "radical." Hadn't it been used in the Philippines or somewhere else to overthrow a government?

The slogan irked Stefan, who was an introvert and not given to complaining. He was our department's writer-in-residence,

though, and words mattered to him deeply. Stefan wasn't one of those usage bullies who erupts when people split an infinitive, but he hated bureaucratic cant.

“What the hell does People Power mean on a college campus? Nobody has real power here except administrators.”

“Power,” I said, “and the best parking spots.”

President Yubero—who claimed descent from Spanish grantees—had apparently swatted objections down in the spirit of Humpty Dumpty lecturing Alice: “It’s going to mean whatever the hell I want it to mean.” That attitude was typical. He was a millionaire hedge fund manager who had donated heavily to GOP campaigns locally and nationally, served as ambassador to Singapore under President George W. Bush, and had been anointed by the arrogant, secretive Board of Trustees in a closed-door session without any transparency at all. Faculty had complained that he had no connection to education whatsoever, but the board praised his “dedication to core American values.” If that sounded old-fashioned, it fit a man who was a dead ringer for obese and walrus-mustached President Taft.

When Stefan and I returned from our long summer trip to Europe after the end of May’s traumatic events, we also discovered that our department, which is where the shooting took place, had been rebranded by the Board of Trustees in an attempt to erase all memory of the carnage. We were no longer teaching in the Department of English, American Studies, and Rhetoric (EAR for short), but now worked in the somewhat more euphonious English and Creative Writing Department.

This name change was not discussed by anyone but the trustees, and privately. The department found out just before the beginning of the fall semester. Of course, some faculty members had objected to being “erased”—but without a union, and demoralized in general due to the rising tide of adjuncts teaching courses that used to be taught by tenure-track professors, it didn’t matter.

“Everyone with tenure is a dinosaur, anyway,” Stefan said.

“We’re all doomed. I don’t know why a sane person would start a university career now.”

“Well, SUM likes having *some* of us around. We’re decorative, like an organ grinder’s monkey.”

Stefan grinned. “Can I use that line in a story?”

“Absolutely. My lines are your lines.”

Stefan and I had faced other realities after coming back. As if my colleagues and I were some unruly, possibly subversive mass of factory workers in old Soviet Russia that needed an ever-watchful commissar to guarantee our loyalty, President Yubero himself had picked our new department chair.

This was a gigantic break with precedent. The department wasn’t allowed the time-honored chaos of feuding, backbiting, and vote-trading that usually went along with the lumbering search, interviewing three candidates after arguing about who would make the cut, and then final selection—which of course had to be approved by the Dean of Humanities—all that before a department chair ascended the shabby throne. Like little kids deprived of one more viewing of their favorite memorized DVD before bed, the department sulked and seethed. More than usual, that is.

You’d think that an outbreak of violence would have fostered some kind of solidarity among the survivors, most of whom avoided each other for numerous reasons, but it only made people feel more embittered, more besieged. And of course the ravenous new hires just wanted to forge ahead, stomping anything in their path like Godzilla in Tokyo.

Yubero’s choice for our department chair was audacious, probably directed by that same PR firm, and it was also humiliating. He picked a celebrity who outshone even the Harvard, Yale, and Stanford Ph.D.s we had managed to entice to SUM. The new chair was a telegenic French academic who was a third cousin of the French president.

Napoléon Padovani had the kind of lean, six-foot-two frame photographers loved to drape barefoot across antique sofas even

when the accompanying article was meant to be serious. He was so handsome and so well known as a *bon vivant* that he'd been profiled in magazines ranging from *The Atlantic* to *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *Men's Health*, and *People*—which meant that we knew far too much about him already.

We knew that he published not just in his native French but also in German, Swedish, Polish—and even Albanian. There were interview clips of him on YouTube speaking fluently in all those languages, an improbable and intimidating assortment even for a European.

“Why would anyone learn Albanian?” I asked Stefan, but neither of us had an answer.

We knew about Napoléon's morning kale-protein shakes, his exercise regimen (and personal trainer, who he had actually brought over from France), his divorce from a Danish supermodel and affairs with an array of French actresses, his ridiculous abs, even the hair products he used on his improbably thick and lustrous black curls. We knew he wore Charvet ties, Ferragamo shoes, and Lanvin suits. We'd seen numerous photo spreads of his “modest” family château in the Dordogne.

Hateful at a distance, he was despicable in person in the eyes of our ragtag, querulous department, which was so historically derided on campus as a nest of misfits that the recent shooting hadn't generated much sympathy for us from other departments. That's how bitter, divided, and ugly a place the State University of Michigan was. In department meetings, Padovani was so proper, so precise, and so amiable, faculty bristled at his manner. No matter how you dressed or comported yourself, he was so effortlessly, impeccably regal that he made my peers feel as if they'd showed up unwashed and wearing yoga pants, a torn tank top, and flip-flops.

Like many upper-crust Frenchmen, Padovani had weaponized his sense of style. He was like an elegant version of a skunk—that overpowering charm could be felt for miles.

“Do call me Napoléon,” he confided with a glowing smile