

# Thriller Magazine

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2

Look inside  
for 9  
riveting  
stories!





*Bringing you the best in established and new voices in the thriller genre!*

Edited by Ammar Habib

**Thriller Magazine**  
**Vol. 2, Issue 2**

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## **NOTE FROM THE EDITOR**

Welcome!

I am honored to share the 4<sup>th</sup> issue of *Thriller Magazine* with you! This publication brings together a variety of phenomenal fiction, poetry, artwork, book reviews, and author interviews. In terms of short stories, this issue offers a wide range of tales, showcasing everything from sci-fi thrillers, to brutal tales of murder, to assassination thrillers, and much more. The background of each featured author is very different as some are seasoned writers while others are new to the industry. However, what I really love about all the stories is that each one possesses its own distinct storytelling style, and the reader can feel the author's passion for their writings.

Working with all the authors and artists to put this issue together was a real pleasure. Each story and artwork presented in this issue offers something different and makes this issue whole. So sit back, take a deep breath, and let your mind get lost for a while in the breathtaking stories that are about to be told!

Sincerely,  
Ammar Habib  
Editor-In-Chief of *Thriller Magazine*

# I'VE COME FOR THE CASH

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CHRIS FORTUNATO

On the morning he lost his reporting job, Bill Courtland read the obituary of someone he had written about thirty years earlier. The obituary informed him that Paxton Higgs, a flame-throwing hurler who had gone right from his high school senior prom to a short-lived career in the majors, had been found dead on a park bench in his home town of Worcester. Bill had interviewed Paxton following his rapid descent from the Chicago White Sox at midseason and his failed attempts at regaining his luster in Triple-A. Paxton held court for the young reporter in his boyhood room in his parents' Cape in Worcester.

"I don't know what's next in my life," the young pitcher, who was a few years younger than Bill, had said as he sipped his third bottle of beer, barely understanding the quicksilver magic he had lost as if he had never possessed it at all.

As Bill drove away from his rooming house in Pawtucket, his car stuffed with his belongings and his last eight hundred dollars secure in his back pocket, the troubled words of the rugged, fresh-faced boy from thirty years earlier kept repeating in his mind.

Bill Courtland didn't know what he was going to do next in his life other than head for the bucolic pastureland of Vermont to soothe his soul. He was terrified of having nowhere to go and not knowing what to do with his life and

ending up on a park bench like Paxton Higgs. As he headed out onto the highway, the ghost of the baffled young high school star sat on his shoulders all the way up Route 89. "What am I going to do next?" a little voice whispered over and over.

Finally, Bill turned in at a rest stop and called Hank Thorpe, one of his friends still working for a daily newspaper. Somehow Hank had survived the industry-wide cutbacks and seemed to be doing everything from copy editing to selling ads.

"I got sacked, Hank."

"That's terrible, Bill, just terrible. Seems like they'll be no more reporters anymore. What are your plans?"

"I thought I'd find a little town in Vermont where everybody is nice and welcoming and rob a café," Bill said. The idea had just come to him. Better than a park bench, at least.

"Well, gee, Bill, that's an unusual career change." Hank Thorpe always managed to conjure a cheerful laugh when he knew the other person was trying to be funny.

"How about I write a piece about it," Bill said, inspiration flooding his mind. "Would you run it in the paper?"

“Actually, Bill, I don’t think anybody’s done that before.” Hank was taking the idea seriously now. “Maybe I would.”

Bill knew his old friend was a skeptical newspaperman at heart, so he viewed his tepid reaction as an enthusiastic endorsement.

“What would you pay me for it?” Bill asked.

Hank sighed. “I suppose I can get you three hundred bucks. Things are tight.”

“It would be nice to get more,” Bill said. “I’ll just have to do a string of these robberies and send you an article each time.”

“That’s fine, Bill.” Hank Thorpe maintained the upbeat tone. “This might be the kind of imagination we need to invigorate the newspaper industry.”

Bill was gratified that Hank Thorpe was giving him leeway to run with his idea. Perhaps the unstoppable blood-letting in their profession had made them both crazy. Motivated by the excitement of his conversation with Hank Thorpe, Bill Courtland arrived at Blue Lake Junction in Vermont enflamed with positive feelings. He had his S&W .357 in his bag with a full complement of bullets, but he knew he never wanted to shoot anyone. He had purchased the gun second-hand when he had to move into that cruddy rooming house a year ago after losing his last real job, for a weekly out on Cape Cod. Losing the stringer job for the online sports journal was what sent him out on the highway. Now he had become one of those older vagabonds he had read so much about.

Bill knew that the next step on this lonely road was homelessness. But for the time being,

he was optimistic. When he contemplated the potential remuneration that would come from both the robberies and the articles, he began giving a TED-talk in his brain. He imagined strolling back and forth on the stage, microphone in hand, proclaiming to an indulgent audience that he had found the promised land of survival after being kicked to the dirt at the age of fifty-eight.

He parked behind the central business block in the small town. The glittering ground-floor shops all along the block front and back along the sides formed an amber necklace around the austere redbrick three stories of the old railroad hotel that was the centerpiece to the block. It seemed like he had selected just the right place to visit. The hotel had once served the depot across the road, housing shoppers pausing for a night on the way to Boston and salesmen who had driven up from factories in the Manhattan boroughs on the way to the Vermont hinterlands to sell everything from lingerie to potato rakes. Bill’s room offered him the only luxury he needed—a bed, bureau, writing table and chair, and a tiny bathroom. It was inexpensive and as simple as a monk’s cell.

Local citizens flocked in from their homes to the little block all aglow with wine shops, interior decorating studios, vintage clothing stores, and shops selling artfully designed letterpress notecards. At some point in their sojourn, most of them ended up at the café next to the hotel, armed with their laptop computers and handheld devices. They appeared singly and in groups, all part of a diaspora, Bill imagined, from Brooklyn and Boston and other dynamic hubs where people had made fortunes at arcane jobs banging away on computers, and

now in this little hamlet in Vermont, in the comforting glow of the cozy café selling smoothies made from kale and acai berries, and serving Fair Trade coffee and vegan muffins, they found a vestige of what they had left behind.

An older man with a white beard and wearing filthy khakis sat apart from the others, sipping a glass of ice water. He looked about with what could have been interpreted as a smirk or a scowl hiding under his white beard. Back when he was a reporter, Bill would have sat with the man to pry his story out of him. But he was no longer a reporter. He was now a robber, a monosyllabic stick-up man. He'd have to assume the old man was waiting for someone to buy his fifty acres of overgrown thistle for a bundle of tech cash at which point he could retire to a little bungalow in town or maybe a trailer in sunny Arizona.

Three people worked behind the counter, but the only one who acknowledged his presence with a welcoming smile was a demure woman in her forties with short blond hair. She looked much like Petula Clark when she sang her hit song "Downtown" on TV so many years ago. Seeing the woman, Bill thought of the song's lyrics telling the listeners to forget their troubles in the bright lights of shops and cafés. The song didn't speak of robbing cafés, but that didn't stop Bill from being inspired by its uplifting lyrics.

He introduced himself and learned the woman's name was Katie.

"This café seems to do a good business," he said to her.

"Oh, yes," Katie said brightly. "People love it. You must be new here." She looked at him with penetrating green eyes.

"Yes, I just arrived. Casing the joint, you could say."

"Where are you staying? Next door at the hotel?"

"Sure am," he replied.

She smiled. He wondered what had landed her behind the counter at a small-town café in the middle of her life. The reporter in him wanted to ask personal questions, but he had other questions related to the business at hand.

"What would be the best day to rob a place like this?" he asked, wondering if her demeanor toward him might change.

"Friday afternoon, without a doubt," she said. "Cash receipts aren't deposited until Friday night. Until then, they accrue in the drawer here." She could have been describing her technique for planting tomatoes.

"How much is there on average?"

"Keep in mind that only about a third of our take is in cash. But just the same, that's about three or four hundred dollars."

He wondered what emotional resources she possessed that she could so calmly abide with his plans to rob the café. Perhaps she thought he was joking.

Bill smiled, and she smiled back in just that way you smile at someone when you begin falling for them. The following day, he invited her to abandon her place behind the counter and

sit with him for a few minutes. He continued his line of inquiry.

“When I rob the place on Friday, I would like the larger bills banded together nice and neat.”

She laughed and looked at him demurely as if he had just embarrassed her with a compliment.

“And just remember,” he added. “If I point the gun at you, I won’t shoot. Just give me the money quickly.”

When she laughed, he did, too.

“Oh, you’re such a sketch. What do you do in real life?”

“I used to be a reporter. Now I’ve lost my job, so I’m transitioning to robbery. But the good thing is that I will write articles about my robberies.”

“That’s sad, but wonderful just the same,” she said. “You get to stay involved with your profession.”

When she had departed, after giving him a second cappuccino on the house and with a wink, he began writing in his notebook about the nice woman working at the café and the old man smiling at whoever chanced to look his way and the young people deep in their laptop worlds who never noticed his existence. Over the next two days, like a good reporter, he gathered information about the woman to add to his article. But the information she gave him on one day contradicted information she gave him the following day. The timeline of her life became impossible to follow. Inquiring too forcefully would, he was certain, make her uncomfortable,

and her friendship, so easily won, might evaporate. He listened politely and accepted without question whatever she told him.

She had lived in Italy during the same time she had lived in California, and she had married for love but also for convenience as her husband was a Czech émigré seeking citizenship. The boundary between her marriage and divorce seemed fluid, and Bill could not figure out if she was living alone or with a girlfriend and if the faux-husband visited from time to time or was gone forever or never existed at all. He looked at Katie’s deceptions as sweet bouquets thrown in his direction, for it seemed he was the only person she spoke to aside from customers wanting complicated coffee drinks and gluten-free this and that.

Friday rolled around, and Bill checked out of the hotel. He settled in at the café for a rooibos tea to which he added an extra spoonful of unpasteurized raw honey. Katie brought over a sampler plate, and he thought of himself as a little chick being fed by a mother bird. Her kindness made him sentimental. He missed such tenderness in his life. He wrapped some of the goodies in a paper napkin for his ride out of town. He touched the S&W .357 Magnum Model 19 Classic in his pocket. If things got tough, he needed a way out. Just the same, he knew he’d rather shoot out a computer screen than an innocent person.

The time was two-thirty in the afternoon of a crisp fall day. Bill could smell apple pies baking in the kitchen. He should figure out how to steal one of those, too, he thought. The bearded water-drinker nodded to him when he glanced over. It was nothing special. The man offered his silent greeting to all who looked his

way. He just hoped the man wouldn't chose this time to amble over for a chat.

He breathed deeply, wondering if the tea was as calming as advertised. He would display the gun quickly to Katie, then demand the cash. After putting it into his pocket, he would walk calmly out the door.

Just as Bill was about to make his move, a young man in a fleece-lined denim jacket and wearing untied boots began shouting at Katie. He demanded the money from the cash drawer.

"Give me the money, I have a knife," the young man shouted, looking around in all directions at the café customers who stared at him studiously as though watching a play they had heard was meaningful. The old man let out a laugh that sounded like a barn door hinge needing oil. Bill tensed at the sight of Katie's frightened face.

The young man stuffed the money in his pocket and raced to the door, but just as he got there, Bill found himself launching a flying tackle at the man's thin legs. The fight was over in a matter of seconds. Bill flipped the man onto his stomach and secured his arms behind his back. A few of the coffee and tea drinkers clapped.

"Give that fellow a whiskey," the old man shouted from the corner. "And get me one, too."

"Bill," Katie said from above him. "I hope you're all right. Let me make you a fresh pot of tea."

Soon enough, two police officers carted the young thief away, and the word of Bill's heroics spread throughout the community. Bill returned to the hotel where the front-desk clerk

gave him his old room back at no charge. The proprietor of the wine store down the block invited him to a wine tasting the following Tuesday evening. A local gourmet restaurant presented him with a hundred-dollar gift certificate. People on the sidewalks said hello to him and stepped back reverentially as they would have for a gunslinger in the Old West.

Bill sat in his tiny room, completed his article, and sent it to Hank Thorpe, who immediately asked for more. "Nice twist," Hank wrote in an email. "This could be great for circulation. Keep 'em coming."

Bill invited Katie to join him for dinner at the gourmet restaurant. He told her he still hoped to rob the café the following Friday, and she said she would keep the large bills banded together neatly. She offered a flirtatious look like a kitten rubbing his leg, and then she unleashed more conflicting stories. She told him about her time in Moscow with an acting troupe and finding a dead body outside the building where the troupe was quartered, and she spoke of her time on an oil-exploration ship, monitoring the movements of mammals in response to the sonic guns used for exploration. She spoke of teaching at a prestigious girls' school in Maryland, and on and on, each story displaying her aptitude for taking engaging, though brief, roles in the world. What had happened that landed her in this small town, tending the counter at a posh little café? She never provided an answer. He felt a tenderness for Katie for he knew that moments of good fortune where life is vivid and exciting resonate and mutate more clearly in our recollection than the inexplicable calamities that befall us without warning.

Bill had begun to like Katie too much to scratch beneath the surface of her tales. She was a charming companion, and he did not wish to cause her to turn against him. She talked as though she were alone, the words inside her brain unraveling so fast she could barely keep up with them. Her belief in her stories gave her an alluring beauty like someone singing a lovely song with barely distinguishable words.

On Thursday, as Bill enjoyed his free pot of peppermint tea and a cranberry scone, he reminded Katie that his plan to rob the café the following afternoon was still active. She gazed at him with soft eyes that seemed to find truth and beauty in everything.

Finally, she said, “Oh, Bill, you prevented us from being robbed, and now you want to rob us.”

The next morning, when he reminded her of his plans for the afternoon, she teetered between accepting his words as irony and dismay at what he might actually do.

“You’re writing another article?” she asked, looking at his open notebook.

“Yes, I am writing about all of the people I have met in the town.” He had been thinking of the people at the wine tasting who had treated his opinions seriously as they would those of a celebrity. He had also stored up a lot of Katie’s stories, knowing he might find a place for them in one of his articles. “And,” he added, “I am writing about my preparations leading up to this afternoon’s robbery.”

She smiled sweetly. “The larger bills are all bound up. I found some pretty purple ribbon for them.”

Once again, he checked out of the hotel. The clerk at the front desk, seemed on the verge of weeping at his sudden departure.

“I am going to rob the café next door, so I thought it best to get out of town right after,” Bill said.

The man looked at him, startled. Then he began laughing and couldn’t stop. “Oh yes, I always get out of town quickly after my robberies,” he said, trying to be partners in the fun. Finally, he settled down and looked at Bill, waiting patiently for Bill to say it was all a joke. But the fact that Bill didn’t retract his words made it that much funnier. “Oh, Mr. Courtland, you’re too much. Next you’ll be saying you’re going to rob the hotel.”

“That’s a very good idea,” Bill said. “I would like to rob the hotel. Would you still offer me a free room afterward?”

The clerk began laughing again and practically collapsed from the exertion. He finally collected himself and, beaming with deference, extended his hand. “Bon voyage, Mr. Courtland. Good luck to you.”

“How much cash do you keep around?” Bill called from the doorway.

“Oh, you’re too much, too much,” the clerk said, losing his composure again. “Get out of here,” he said, waving his arms as though shooing a shaggy dog from the premises.

Bill deposited his bag in his car and proceeded to the café. It was two in the afternoon.

“Hi, Bill,” Katie said happily. “Which tea do you want to try this afternoon?”

“No tea this afternoon, Katie. I’ve come for the cash.”

“No tea first?” She smiled as if to humor him.

He took the Smith & Wesson from his pocket, let her see it, and returned it to its resting place. “I’d like the cash, please, Katie.”

She looked stricken. “Do you mean this, Bill?”

“I mean everything I say.” He felt insincere, knowing some outlaw must have barked out the same words years ago.

She opened the cash drawer and removed three small stacks of bills, each one bound in a purple ribbon tied in a bow. “You see how nicely organized I made the cash for you, Bill.”

“You have no idea how much I appreciate that,” he said.

All around them, people drank their beverages, stared at their laptops, or chatted with companions, oblivious to the robbery taking place.

“Are you really leaving, Bill?” Katie asked.

“Yes, it’s time to go,” he said, feeling like a cowboy departing a dusty one-saloon town and heading out onto the lonely range.

“Take me with you,” she pleaded. “Please. I’ll go as I am. I don’t need to pack. Take me out of this place, Bill.”

“I’m sorry, Katie,” he said. “I’ll always think of you.”

Bill turned and departed, knowing that if he stared into her sad eyes a moment longer, he

would lose his resolve to rob cafés and write about his adventures.

He drove out of town slowly. No sirens sounded. No police cars whooshed by on the way to the scene of the crime. He took the exit to the two-lane highway leading to Stanhope, twenty miles to the north, which he had heard was very much like Blue Lake Junction, full of cafés waiting to be robbed.

Ten minutes into his drive, the blue-red-and-white flashing lights of a police cruiser glared in his rear-view mirror. He pulled over, and a young officer approached his window. The officer leaned down, smiling broadly, and brushed away the license Bill had withdrawn from his wallet.

“I know who you are, Mr. Courtland. Once again, you are the town’s hero.” The officer offered a bright, athletic smile.

“How do you figure that?” Bill asked, wondering if the local police always joked before making arrests.

“That old man, Lester Phelps, just tried to rob the café and only got three dollars. Katie says you were protecting the store by taking away the cash for safe keeping. You must have noticed the old fellow planning something.”

“Well, I saw him sitting there every day.”

“Lester got what he wanted,” the officer said with a laugh. “Three squares and all the coffee he can drink at the county jail. Tell you what. I’ll keep these lights flashing, and you follow me back into town. You’re a hero, Mr. Courtland. Next election, you should stand for mayor. That’s what people are saying.”

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Bill turned his car around and followed the police cruiser back into town. The clerk at the hotel front desk checked him in again.

“I can still give you the same room,” he said, then he whispered with a barely contained giggle. “Robbing us next?”

“Damn straight,” Bill said, and the man convulsed in laughter.

At the café, he returned the money and Katie made him a sandwich and a pot of jasmine green tea, and he knew he would never leave Blue Lake Junction again. He would be here forever. There was no way out. Katie seemed to know that as well, for she couldn't stop smiling. But he was sure that, over time, he would have plenty of stories to tell, just as Katie had plenty of stories to tell.

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*Thank you for reading this sample of our 4<sup>th</sup> issue. If you'd like to check out the rest of the issue, you can do so [HERE!](#)*