

"One of my favourite new authors" *Lee Child*



LISA
MISCIONE

THE FIRST IN THE LYDIA STRONG SERIES

ANGEL FIRE

Author's note:

The setting of this book was inspired by the beauty and mood of the Santa Fe and Angel Fire, New Mexico, areas. Readers intimate with these very real places will realize that I have taken significant geographical and architectural liberties as per the demands of the narrative, my vision, and my imagination. *Angel Fire*, as well as its characters and setting, is entirely a work of fiction.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people that have had a part in the writing and publishing of this book. And for each of them I feel a unique and heartfelt gratitude:

To Heather Mikesell, in everything I have written since I met you, I have counted on your keen insight, eagle eye, and unwavering support—but have never taken it for granted.

To Carolyn Nichols, for taking the time to look at my homeless manuscript and see beneath the flaws to something better, and for bringing it to the attention of literary agents.

To Elaine Markson, my agent, for taking me on, and shopping this book with unflagging enthusiasm, finding the best possible home for it, and for enduring my neuroses with endless patience.

To Kelley Ragland, my talented and inspiring editor, who made this book better than I ever thought it could be, who, with careful guidance led me to my own voice, taking me beyond being a writer to becoming an author.

To Marion Chartoff, Tara Popick, and Judy Wong, who always believed that this day would come, even when I strayed far from my dreams.

Copyright © 2002 Lisa Miscione
Excerpt from *The Darkness Gathers* © 2003 by Lisa Miscione.

Lisa Miscione asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

Proudly published by
Snowbooks Ltd.
120 Pentonville Road
London
N1 9JN
Tel: 0207 837 6482
Fax: 0207 837 6348
email: info@snowbooks.com
www.snowbooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-905005-27X
ISBN13: 978-1905005-277

Printed and bound in Great Britain

Typesetting errors? Email corrections@snowbooks.com

To my parents, Joseph & Virginia Miscione

Who gave me the tools to build the craft on which I travel ...

To my husband, Jeffrey

The North Star,

The red sky at night,

The wind inside my sails ...

Angel Fire

Lisa Miscione

One

Lydia Strong ran. She ran until her muscles cramped, until her lungs were on fire. She ran until she couldn't run any farther. And then she kept running. She ran like she had something to prove, and would die trying to prove it, if necessary. Down the dirt drive from her home, nestled in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains north of Santa Fe, off onto the rocky path that led past the church in Angel Fire.

When she ran, she was lost and she was found. She left behind the chaos of her thoughts and fears, left behind her life, her work. In running she found an animalistic kind of peace. She was a living organism motivated only by her physical self, the desire to rest and the drive to go on, go farther, and farther still. She was only her lungs and her legs. It was painful but it

was quiet. This ritual served as Lydia's only religion these days.

She did not deny the possibility of a god or a godlike force, but organized religion...out of the question. Still, this August morning, like most mornings, she felt a tug at her heart as she ran past the small white church. The Church of the Holy Name sat proud and undeniable by the side of the dirt road. White and immovable like the moon it rose from the dust and the weeds. It was just as it was one hundred years ago, solid and righteous as if it had grown from the earth like a mountain. It was so sure of itself, its walls painted orange, pink, purple by the rising sun.

As a child, she had attended church with her mother every Sunday. It was always an event, because her mother was a devout woman. The joy Marion Strong took in the church service was contagious, for Lydia loved her mother fiercely and had wanted, then, to be just like her in every way. She was excited to wear one of her most precious dresses. She would walk with her mother proudly, imagining that people who saw them would think she was an adult, since her shoes made noise just like her mother's as their heels clicked on the sidewalk.

Once inside the church her mother would give her four quarters, two for lighting a candle for each of her dead grandparents and two for the collection plate.

They would sit in the center pew. Lydia waited with restless anticipation for the time to sing. When the organ sounded and the hymns began, with all the might of her few years Lydia would sing her heart out, for she knew all the words. Her mother would look down at her, smile and sing in her high, melodic voice. Lydia felt such a sense of belonging. Everybody, it seemed, was there for the same reason. Everybody sang together and everybody smiled and shook hands. “Peace be with you.”

Of course she hadn’t thought about it at the time, but she wondered now if her mother had missed her company when she turned into a rebellious teenager, shunning everything that smacked of institution and refusing to go to church with her “on principle.” Her mother never forced her to go; she never lectured or manipulated her with guilt. Her mother just looked away and shook her head. Lydia remembered that small break in the ground beneath their feet as the first in the chasm that would grow between them in her early adolescence.

After her mother’s death, Lydia had tried to return to the church. The loss of her mother had left a hollow place in her heart where the wind blew through. But the service seemed empty, contrived, rather than rich with meaning and faith. Not beautiful, as she remembered. And when it occurred to her that she had never been to

mass without her mother, had never entered a church without holding her mother's hand, she felt deeply sad. Rather than filling the void where her mother's love had been, her visit made her feel the loss even more profoundly. Now when people asked her about her religious beliefs she answered, "I'm a runner."

Always, as she ran past the white adobe church by the side of the dirt road, she saw her mother's face and remembered the clicking of her shoes on the sidewalk. On this August morning, the desert air still cool, not yet fully heated by the blazing sun on the rise, she thought she heard her mother's voice, almost audible, on the wind. She stopped and turned around, running in place. The sound of her own labored breathing was so loud in her head she had to quiet herself to hear anything else. But there was only the silence of sand and wind in the trees. Then, in the distance, its sound almost lost in the breeze and the Sangre de Cristos, a crow screamed. The sound was mournful and, Lydia thought, had a tinge of panic to it.

Two

Every year in the weeks preceding the anniversary of her mother's death, an agitated restlessness overtook Lydia. It interrupted her sleep, her work. And instead of lessening over time, almost fifteen years now, it had worsened. This feeling often compelled her to wander in the night, or to drive aimlessly for miles, or to do other things that she would rather forget. A battalion of shrinks had never been able to cure her. She had long given up on psychiatrists and their cabinets filled with happy pills. It was the same feeling on a larger scale as when she'd misplaced her keys or wallet and couldn't rest until she laid her hands on them again. Except that she wasn't sure what she had lost and she had the desperate feeling that it would never be found. But that she would keep looking for the rest of her life. It was something about herself that she had stopped trying to explain, something she had grown to accept.

On this night her restlessness caused her to leave home, and for the second time, run the route past the Church of the Holy Name. The clock read 11:58 p.m. when she left her house. She had been rolling sleepless in her bed when the feeling took her. She tried to ignore it, to clear her head and force herself to fall asleep. But her muscles ached for a run. And something deeper inside her ached for it, too, for the exertion and for the exhaustion that followed when her body had been pushed to its limit.

It was as if an invisible string connected to her heart had pulled her from beneath the covers, and she'd rushed to pull on her running gear, knowing the sooner she was moving, the sooner she would be relieved of the restlessness. As soon as her battered Nikes hit the road and the rhythm of her breathing was the only sound in her head, she was free.

When she reached the church she stopped running. Everything was the same as it had been that morning except, of course, the night sky. But tonight her imagination conjured a nightmarish vision of what might be behind the wooden doors. A rich offering to a strange god; murdered animals with their throats cut spilling dark blood on pristine white fur; tropical fruit, overripe and opened not with knives but with greedy fingers, spilling seeds and sick-sweet juice onto the altar. A vast array of flora, roses so red they

seemed black; orange, white, fuchsia gladiolas opened like mouths. Everything piled together, a plenty of hideous beauty wet with new death. There would be the buzzing of flies, and perhaps the echo of chanting voices somewhere from a distant room. Something she would not want to investigate – but would have to.

A noise brought her back to this moonlit night in front of the church. How many times a day did she drift away like that into her own fantasies? How many times were they so twisted? It seemed she had always been that way.

The noise came again. A soft shuffling from behind the church. She was immediately drawn toward it, her curiosity piqued. Finish your run. Leave whatever it is alone. An animal, a priest, whatever – it's nothing. But of course Lydia had to follow the noise – just to see what the darkness held.

When she walked behind the church, she came upon a garden. She had never seen it during any of her daily runs. It was surprisingly fecund, rich with exotic flowers unfamiliar to her. Surrounded by a low white picket fence, the garden was bursting with itself. A path wound through it in the shape of a figure eight, illuminated by a lamp mounted above the back door to the church, which stood open. Orange like fire, purple like bruises, fuchsia, emerald, the exotic flowers stood tall and proud like well-shod socialites confident in

their beauty. They swooned in the light breeze, bringing their perfume to her nose.

Through the open door she saw a man. Tall and thin, with curly hair the black of India ink, there was something odd about the way he moved, reaching his hand out in front of him before he committed his body to any action. He moved slowly, patting the air for a stool that stood before the altar. And as she moved closer to the door, Lydia could discern his blank stare – how he didn't use his eyes to see but rather his touch or his hearing. She realized he was blind.

It dawned on Lydia then that she had seen him before but had not noticed he was blind. The truth was that she had been drawn to the church even before she had purchased her house. Staying at the Eldorado Hotel in Santa Fe, she had driven up to Angel Fire looking for property. Lost on the winding back roads of the resort town on an early Sunday morning, she had come upon the church as it was filling for mass. On a whim she pulled over, parked her car, and entered. She told herself that she had attended the mass to see what kind of people lived in the town more than anything. But she could remember nothing about the parishioners, only the unassuming, simple wood-and-stone interior of the small building. And the man who played guitar at mass, how his music had moved her that day. She had stood in the back for a while, listening, then she left. A man

standing outside the church with a broom handed her a booklet about Jesus' love; she thanked him. A few hours later, the broker who was showing Lydia property brought her to the house she would close on soon after. It was to be her second home, her hideaway, as she spent most of her time in New York.

She had never returned to the church for mass even after she bought the house. In the year and a half she had owned it, she'd been there a total of three months, this last visit being the longest, almost five weeks now. As she stood in the night, watching the blind man, she wondered if he would sense her there but he seemed intent on what he was doing, polishing a guitar that sat on a wood table to the right of the stool. Soon he placed it on his lap, tuned it briefly and began to play. It sounded lovely but suddenly she felt like an intruder. She turned and began running again, glad to be on her way. The sound of his guitar followed her longer than seemed possible, though the desert night is silent and sounds carry.

By the time she returned to the long and winding drive that led back up to her house, she felt better. She slowed to a walk and was not afraid as she made her way through the quiet, dark cover of the trees shading the road. In spite of the horrors she had witnessed in her life, Lydia was rarely afraid for her physical safety. It was almost as though, having seen the face

of evil in her work as a true-crime writer and sometime consultant for the private investigation firm of Mark, Hanley and Striker, and even in her own childhood, it had lost its power over her. After all, wasn't that why people feared the dark: because they couldn't see what lurked there? Lydia knew what the darkness held, knew it well.

Her approach to the house triggered the motion sensors and the night flooded with amber light. Something scurried into the bushes as Lydia punched the keypad lock and stepped out of her muddied sneakers before stepping onto the bleached wood floor of the back foyer. She punched numbers into another keypad inside the door and reactivated the alarm. The lamp outside went out. She didn't bother turning on lights as she walked through the dark house; she ascended the spiral staircase to her bedroom, stripped her clothes, damp with sweat from her body, and lay upon her bed. She thought to get into the shower before sleeping but sleep came for her deep and fast.

Later that night she visited the church garden again, in her dreams. Usually her sleep, when it came, was a dark cocoon, an escape. None of the banalities and few of the horrors of her life had ever followed her there. It was the only place where her mind was ever blank.

In her dream, past the garden and through the

door, she could see the blind man playing his guitar, but she could not hear the music. It was as if a sheet of soundproof glass separated them. She did not run away, as she had earlier, but easily manipulated the latch and pushed the gate open. She walked onto the path – the flowers had changed. There was a darkness, almost a maliciousness to the way they swayed in the light breeze. She knew they were talking about her – saying cruel and unfair things that would only seem more true if she tried to deny them. She let them gibber on about her. Fuck the flowers, she thought angrily.

She walked through the garden and the open door. The blind man turned his head. He must have heard me, she thought. But his eyes seemed to have lost their blindness – he saw her.

“She’s here,” he said simply, smiling kindly.

Lydia smiled back, relieved. “Oh, you can see. I’m so happy for you.”

“The only important thing,” he said, looking past her, “is what you see.”

She followed his eyes and saw her mother. Not as Lydia chose to remember her from her childhood, but as Lydia had last seen her.

Her arms were tied over her head, her wrists bleeding and black and blue from her struggle. Though she smiled beautifully at Lydia in the way she always had, her eyes rolled back into her head and her face was