

Superimposed: Chapter 17 by Steve Laird

Dead men tell no tales. Dying men have one last chance. Joe Grimaldi has money and power but no time. Hired from a hospice organization, Holly Higgins' job is to help him make peace with the inevitable even as she struggles to find peace for herself. As Joe's web of secrets starts to unravel, Holly is challenged in the present by a past that has remained hidden for almost 70 years. When she is faced with a decision that could change her future, what choice will Holly make?

2014 Community Novel Project of the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

A 20 chapter multi-author collaboratively-written novel

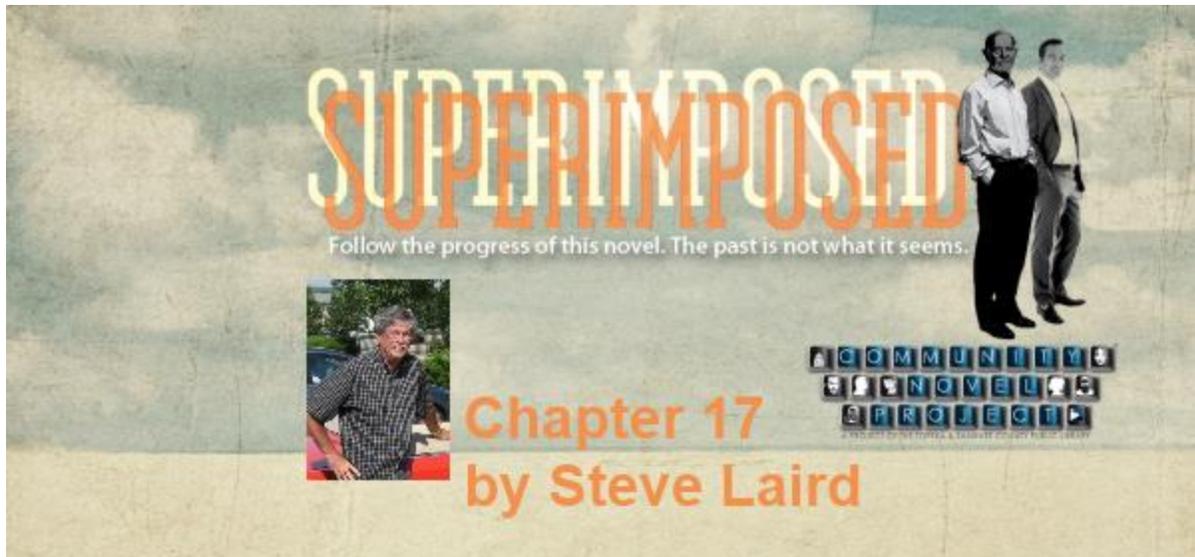
Serialized weekly from April 2014 to August 2014

Begin with Chapter 1 and get the whole story at <http://www.tscpl.org/community-novel>

The Community Novel Project is a model that may be replicated in other library and community writing groups. For information, contact project organizers Lissa Staley and Miranda Ericsson, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, 1515 SW 10th Ave, Topeka, KS 66604
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Stunned, Holly thought about the question.

What do you know about your father? She suddenly recalled one of her father's maxims. *Think before you act.* In the few short years he had been in her life, he had told her that more than once. Rather than respond with the obvious *why*, she answered with a question. "Pesha, what do you want to tell me about him?"

Pesha leaned back, sipped his wine, and said, "You tell me what you know, and I can fill in the blanks."

Suddenly, Holly began remembering other things her father had said. She had been too young to grasp the meanings, but now the words and phrases began to spill into her mind. Maybe he wasn't such a jerk after all. *Follow your gut — it's usually right.* She'd had a positive first impression of Pesha. Still, there was a growing sense of doubt. *Usually right* played into her answer. "I know he was a wise man. He was intelligent - gifted even," she lied.

"Wise and intelligent — that's all you can tell me?" Pesha said, leaning toward his laptop to check an incoming email.

Holly noticed an angry shift in his green eyes. When she had started this odyssey, her one and only task was to fulfill Joe's last wish. He had put his faith in her and died as he asked. It would be up to her alone to fulfill that mission. How her father or Pesha played into this should not matter. She had the key and the box number.

"Well, naturally, he was a bit of a ruffian and a womanizer. But, what man isn't?" *The best lies have an element of truth to them*, she thought and wondered if her father would have said that, too. She watched as Pesha studied the email, banged his fist on the table, and typed in a reply.

After punching *send*, Pesha said, "I'm sorry. I was distracted and didn't hear what you said." Holly repeated her answer for him.

“Not all men are like that. I’m certainly not.”

“So you would have me believe. *Trust me*, you said, and I have — until now. Trust only goes so far. Doesn’t it?”

“There,” she thought, “mistrust is out here in the open, on the table.” *Play for keeps*, her father had once said.

Pesha refreshed his wine and motioned to fill Holly’s. She placed her hand over the glass. “I don’t think so. I’ve had enough.”

“You don’t trust me. Tell me why.”

“You appear out of nowhere, claiming Joe as your great uncle. It could be that he is, but maybe he isn’t. Show me what proof you have.” Holly said. The safety pin and key attached to her bra dug into her skin. She brushed her arm against her side to adjust it. “You blow into my life and kill Clara when you could have just as easily pulled her off of me. Was that for my benefit... or for yours? Then, you have a convenient hasty means of escape to whisk me off to... I don’t know - Germany, Austria? Where are we? This all seems so contrived.”

“I don’t have to prove who I am. Certainly Joe must have mentioned me. You’ll have to take my word on that,” Pesha said, anxiously glancing at his laptop.

“I’ll take your word for nothing! If you were in Joe’s favor, he would have mentioned you. If anything, you’re just another family member slithering out of the sewer to claim his estate.”

“Dammit, Holly! You have no idea what is involved here. Serious issues are at stake, and it’s within my authority to keep you safe,” said Pesha, gulping the rest of his wine and slamming the glass against the wall.

“My, my, aren’t you the testy one,” Holly said. “What if I don’t want you to look after me? Am I free to leave, or am I a hostage?” She could not believe what had come over her. It was as if her father’s spirit had suddenly captured her psyche. She felt alive. If her father had been a ruffian, then she could be one too, if need be.

“Holly, you are not a hostage, but it would not be wise to go out on your own,” Pesha said, grimacing as he noticed another email on his laptop.

“Give me my phone, and I’ll be on my way,” Holly said, holding out her hand.

“I can’t do that. You have no idea where you are or how to get to Istanbul. There is so much you don’t know.” He studied the new email, hissing through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, and like you’ve said before, I’ll know when it’s time. Well, Pesha... it’s time. Tell me now, or I’m out of here,” Holly said, pushing away from the table.

“No! You can’t leave,” Pesha shouted, rising, again rechecking his email.

“So, what am I... your hostage?” she shouted back.

“No, not a hostage, it’s more like... what do you call it in your country? Ah, that’s it - protective custody.”

Challenging Pesha, Holly turned and asked, “Do those emails have something to do with me? Who is it you’re working for, and who are you protecting me from?”

Tersely, Pesha said, “Go to bed. It’s getting late. I’ll sleep here on a chair and see you in the morning. Then we can talk.” Answering his phone, he slipped out of the door into the hallway.

“We’ve been talking,” Holly muttered under her breath. As she turned into the tiny bedroom, she could hear Pesha’s angry voice echoing from the hallway.

She remembered the envelope with the letters and a gold coin. Taking it from her purse, she removed the coin. It was about the size of a quarter with a man’s face on the front and the

words *WILHELM DEUTSCHER KAISER NONIGV. PREUSSEN*. On the reverse side was a German spread eagle with the words *DEUTCHES REICH 20M* and dated 1872. Holly knew nothing about German currency, but assumed it was a twenty-mark gold piece. She wondered if it was meant as a token of the fortune promised her by Joe, or if it could have another meaning. There was a metallic clink as she dropped it back into the envelope. Of course - the cufflink. She had placed it in her pocket immediately after finding it on the plane. She had then transferred it to the envelope after she had opened it.

She opened the envelope, and the cufflink fell into her hand. She had given James a pair of cufflinks as a reciprocal gift for acceptance of his proposal. She gasped at the initials etched on the underside: *JPH*... James Peter Hardesty. James had told her his middle name, Peter, was in honor of an obscure relative from England. He could not recall the details of the story - something about the war. She felt lightheaded as hope surged through her. More hope than she had had in a year. She wondered how it had gotten onto the plane — and why?

Holly didn't want sleep to come. Visions of James filled her with an edgy high. This could mean anything. What would he do in this situation? *Think positive* - another of her father's common-sense axioms. All these years, she had been blind to the meanings. If only he had lived by them. Yes, he had deserted her and cast her off like the butts of the cigarettes he chain smoked. She was still angry about that. Tonight, though, he had infiltrated her mind. What would he do in this situation?

Then she thought again of James. *Be positive*. She had begun to believe James had pushed her aside as her father had done. She pined for him, longing more than ever to see him again. She had nearly been taken in by Pesha's handsome looks and apparent wealth. She was not yet out of his control. Not by a long shot. *Why can't he be like my father and just leave?* Sleep finally found her in spite of her effort to remain awake. She grasped the cufflink securely in her hand the whole night.

Sunlight peeped through the tiny window in Holly's bedroom. She blinked herself awake, got up, and showered. She wondered about the emails and phone calls that had so upset Pesha last night. Clearly, Pesha was not the charming aristocrat she had thought him to be, and pondered who he could be working with.

She wrapped herself in a towel and opened the bathroom door. Pesha was standing there holding a slinky blue dress from her bag. It was so sheer that she could nearly see the outline of his body through it. "Put this on; we're going to breakfast," he said, laying the dress on the unmade bed. He turned and left, slamming the door.

Holly snorted. "Bring it on, Pesha. You don't own me. I'll wear what I want."

She debated what to wear. As she opened her bags, it became apparent that Pesha had done more than select the blue dress. Her bags had been thoroughly searched, as well as her purse. Fortunately, she had pinned the key to the underside of the mattress for the night. What else could he have been looking for?

She selected a pair of Roy jeans and a red Burberry jersey tee with three-quarter sleeves. As she removed the tag from the jeans, she noted the three-hundred-forty dollar price, three-and-a-quarter for the shirt. "Way out of my league," she thought, "but man, they looked good on me, and fit perfectly." The luggage had come with an emergency sewing kit. Holly slit the underside of the tongue of her shoe, inserted the key, and sewed it back together.

Pesha waited by the door. Sternly, he said, "I told you to wear that blue dress."

"I may be your hostage, but you are not going to tell me what to wear." Holly said.

"We're going to breakfast. You should dress appropriately. Go change. Now," he demanded.

"Pajamas are what I normally wear to breakfast, but since we're going out, I guess this will have to do... won't it!"

"Have it your way. You're the one everybody will be laughing at," he snipped, and opened the door.

"I guess I'll have to deal with that. Of course, they will be laughing at you, too. Think how tacky it'll be for you to be seen with the likes of me dressed like this."

Pesha grasped Holly's arm tightly as he led her along the walkway. Despite his forceful grip, Holly marveled at the sights as they proceeded. Nothing like she had ever seen before, definitely not in Topeka. The buildings were very old, narrow, and crunched together. Most were poorly maintained. They soon turned off of the narrow cobblestone street onto a much wider and busier thoroughfare. The buildings were newer, some very modern. She pondered if this part of town had been destroyed in the war and rebuilt. She took notice of the signs, and while she could not make sense of them, she had determined that they were in a town named Aachen. She recalled one of Joe's stories about the place. Pesha lessened the grip on her arm as he guided her into a small café. As they were led to a table, Holly noticed that she was dressed appropriately. Nobody laughed at her.

The café was light and airy, a casual place like she had seen in movies or on TV. There was a buzz of conversations, which she guessed were mostly in German. Pesha, she noticed, was obviously uptight, tension prevailing over his arrogant manner. Holly was gaining confidence from the sudden change in her attitude.

Pesha, speaking in German, ordered for both of them. Holly noticed the coffee served by the waiter was stronger than she was used to, with a different flavor. She liked it. A platter of croissants and other pastries were soon delivered, along with plates of fresh fruit. Hungry, she slathered cream cheese and orange marmalade on a croissant and munched on a strawberry.

Holly glanced at Pesha and said, "What were you looking for in my bags while I was in the shower?"

"I wanted to see you in that dress. You would look stunning."

"Stunning isn't my style," she said. "I wear what I'm comfortable with. I know you were looking for something else. What is it - the key?" She bit into her croissant.

"Yes, it's the key. You aren't safe as long as it's in your possession," he said, stuffing a melon ball into his mouth.

"Joe entrusted me, and only me, with that key. He warned me something like this could happen. I made a promise I intend to keep — even if it costs me my life!" Holly's elevated voice turned a few heads.

"That could very well happen!" Pesha loudly retorted. "Finish your breakfast... we're going back to the apartment."

Holly suddenly picked up her cup and dashed the hot coffee into Pesha's face. She rose up defiantly, saying, "I *am* finished!" She turned and walked briskly away. Somewhere from within the café among scattered applause, a voice with a British accent said, "Well done, m'lady."

Running, Pesha caught up to her. "That was not very smart," he said, grasping her arm tightly, as if she might try to run. He forced her up the three flights of stairs to the apartment and unlocked the door. He glared at her as he shoved her in and threw the bolt to lock it.

Pesha was about to say something when the door crashed open explosively, knocking Pesha into and over a chair. A stranger dressed in black rushed in. With a heavy foot, he stomped Pesha in the face, turned to the startled Holly, and said, "Forgive me."

Holly staggered backward.

It was James.

Chapter 18 will be published next week at <http://www.tscpl.org/community-novel>

An Interview with Steve Laird

What is your writing background? What sort of work do you usually write?

I started writing in the 7th grade. I wrote while in Vietnam, quit, and started again a few years ago when I retired. I enjoy writing short stories, fiction and non-fiction. I often write about the ironic humorous nature of every day life. As for genre: I write mostly humor, but also suspense.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Are there books, poems, or stories that have inspired your own writing?

My favorite authors are: Janet Evanovich, Carl Hiaasen, James Patterson, Sue Grafton, James Lee Burke, Dick Francis. I am probably influenced by everything I read.

Why did you want to participate in the Community Novel Project?

I see it as a challenge. To advance a storyline produced by others is fun. I'm curious about what will happen after my chapter.

Have you ever written fiction in collaboration with other authors before?

From the 7th grade through high school my best friends and I would write stories much in the fashion of the Community Novel: each of us writing a couple of paragraphs, then handing it off to another, usually in mid-sentence.

Do you usually write in a burst of inspiration, or is your work carefully outlined? Did writing for the community novel differ from the norm?

I find outlines to be constrictive. I'll conceive a story line in my mind with a beginning and an end and allow my imagination to roam with serendipitous results. Writing for the community novel was for me, basically shooting from the hip.

What was your first reaction when you saw the chapter before yours?

I was thrilled with the opportunity to advance the storyline. In most of the prior chapters there are clues and unanswered questions. As my chapter is near the end, I liked the chance to highlight the small details in order to steer the story toward a conclusion.

What do you like most about the chapter that you contributed to the 2014 Community Novel?

I like the progression of Holly's character into more of a take-charge attitude. I think the unexpected twist at the end of my chapter could add a new dimension to the storyline.

What do you hope happens or doesn't happen in the chapters that come after yours?

I want to see Holly and James resolve the situation I left them with. I know there are several possible endings to the story. What happens is out of my control, but I am anxious to find out.

What sort of writing can we expect from you in the future? Are you currently at work on any writing projects?

I am currently re-writing my first novel, The Easter Bastard, a suspense thriller. As always, I

seem to find time to write about humor and irony in everyday things. I am considering publishing a collection of short stories.