



The Innocent - Ryan Lock #5

By Sean Black

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Chasing the truth, Ty, along with his business partner, Ryan Lock, begin to uncover a sinister conspiracy of silence in a sleepy Minnesota college town.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is a writer, and a hero, to watch." - **The Daily Mail**

"This series is ace. There are deservedly strong Lee Child comparisons as the author is also a Brit, his novels US-based, his character appealing, and his publisher the same." - **The Bookseller**

"Black's style is supremely slick." - **The Daily Telegraph**

"Sean Black writes with the pace of Lee Child, and the heart of Harlan Coben." - **Joseph Funder, New York Times Bestseller**

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From the Author

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Chapter Two

Fourteen years later

Harrisburg, Minnesota

Malik Shaw climbed into the front cab of the Dodge Ram pick-up he'd bought to deal with the harsh Minnesota winter that lay ahead. He patted his lap, and the family dog, a six-year-old golden retriever called Flint, launched himself into the cab. The dog clambered over Malik's lap and settled himself in the middle of the truck's bench seat. As Malik started the engine, the dog nudged his elbow, as if to say, 'Let's get going already.'

Malik glanced down at the text message that had woken him less than fifteen minutes ago - *Prob at the stad*. The number had been withheld, but the message had been signed *Mike*. Mike was one of his assistant coaches.

It had taken Malik just a moment, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, to decode the truncated message: 'Problem at the stadium'. He had slipped out of bed, careful not to wake his wife, and called Mike. He went straight to voicemail. There had been nothing else for it but to get dressed and go check it out.

Taking his time, Malik backed slowly out of the driveway and turned the nose of the truck toward the end of the cul-de-sac, Flint beside him. He pulled out onto Buffalo Drive, skirting the University of Minnesota campus, with its red-brick buildings.

A lone campus-security patrol car slowed as it passed him in the opposite direction. Malik stopped, and pressed the button to lower his window. The officer, a doughy white kid who looked barely old enough to be driving, never mind in uniform, leaned out of his window, greeting him with a grin. 'Hey, Coach! Tell me we're going to win tomorrow.'

'Bet on it,' said Malik. 'Hey, you get a call about something happening at the stadium?'

'Nope. Everything's quiet. Hey, you want me to come with you?' the young cop asked.

'No,' Malik said quickly. 'You're good. It's probably nothing.' If it was a prank, the last thing Malik wanted as coach was the head of campus security, an officious overweight asshole called Tromso, getting involved and making a mountain out of a molehill.

'Okay. Well, holler if you need us,' said the cop, his window gliding back up as he took off.

Malik watched him go, taking a second or two to wonder at the power of sport. A lone black man driving around a Minnesota college town late at night could usually expect an encounter with law enforcement to

play out a little differently. But make that black man the coach of the college basketball team and it was a whole different story. Not that Malik minded his celebrity status: he didn't. It was just that he'd seen enough to know that it wasn't about him. The real star was sport. He was just a lucky guy who got to bathe in its reflected glory.

He came to the intersection with Main Street. He drove straight ahead, past the administration building, and hung a left onto Wolf Road.

There was a Wolf Road in every town across America. It went by different names but the destination was always the same. It could be a small, open high school football field burning bright under Friday-night lights, or an indoor cavern of a basketball court, surrounded by ghetto-murder streets, or a college stadium vast enough to shame a pro team.

The names changed, the physical form of the battlefield varied, but the destination remained the same. At the end of the road lay a temple of hopes, dreams, failures and fight-backs. No towns worshiped more devoutly than those who had not much else to shout about. In these places, places like the one to which Malik had brought his family, defeat tasted more bitter than it did elsewhere, and victory sweeter.

It was part of the reason he had taken the job in the first place. He could have gone to Florida as an assistant coach for twice the salary they could offer the head coach here. He could have gone to a similar-sized college in New Hampshire that, courtesy of some seriously wealthy alumni, had an annual endowment ten times what they had at Harrisburg. Hell, he could easily have secured a post somewhere that didn't require snow chains for three months of the year. But he hadn't.

Malik had come to Harrisburg because he knew he could make a difference to people's lives. And that was all he had wanted to do. God had granted him a gift, and he wanted to go where that gift could do the most good. It sounded cheesy, but it was the truth. When it came time to meet his maker, Malik knew that what mattered more than money, acclaim or any of the other superficial, materialistic nonsense the country obsessed about, was the difference he had made to the lives of others.

Malik pulled up his Dodge at the small side entrance used on game days by the coaching staff and players. That was when he noticed the dark grey sedan tucked in next to the entrance. It stood out because, apart from his truck, the rest of the stadium parking lot was empty.

He turned off his engine and got out, leaving the dog in the cab. He walked over to the sedan and peered through the windshield. There was no driver, and no one in the passenger seat.

Malik walked round the car. There was no one in the back seats either. The car had a Minnesota license plate. There were two bumper stickers. One announced that the owner was a college alumnus, and the other read 'Go Wolves.' Malik racked his brain: had he seen the car before? Alumni who hung out around the stadium were hardly a rarity, though they tended to show up for practice or pep rallies, rather than at midnight the night before a game.

He dug his cell phone from his pocket and snapped a picture of the car. There was likely a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why it was there, but in case there wasn't ... He put his cell back in his pocket, and let the dog out of the truck. Flint immediately ran over to the sedan and cocked a leg against the rear wheel.

Choking back a laugh, Malik unlocked the side door of the building and stepped into the narrow hallway that led toward the locker rooms. The dog at his side, he stopped to take a deep breath. He loved the smell of these places. That mix of sweat and floor polish did it for him every time. It was the scent of hard work and challenges faced.

He walked past the locker rooms, heading for the caretaker's office. The office was unlocked. The alarm system inside was unarmed. Usually it would have blinked red if the alarm was on, but tonight it was flashing green: disarmed. Malik glanced to the side entrance door. That had definitely been locked. The two things didn't square, unless the caretaker had forgotten to activate the alarm.

He kept walking. He pushed open a set of double doors that opened straight onto the court and walked to

the center. He looked at his watch. It was a minute to midnight.

As the seconds fell toward twelve, he closed his eyes. That was when he heard it. At five seconds to midnight.

About the Author

To research the Ryan Lock series of thrillers, Sean Black has trained as a bodyguard in the UK and Eastern Europe, spent time inside America's most dangerous Supermax prison, Pelican Bay in California, undergone desert survival training in Arizona, and ventured into the tunnels under Las Vegas. A graduate of Columbia University in New York, he also holds a Masters degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford University, England. The Ryan Lock books have also been translated into Dutch, French, German, Russian and Spanish.

For more information you can visit his website at seanblackbooks.com

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