

Praises for *Tainted Justice*

“A fantastic story...I love it! Just to make sure, I reread *Tainted Justice*... the ending is so satisfying. New kind of book...a must-read for thriller lovers”

-Whitney Miller

“I am finding your book very interesting. I keep turning the pages (scrolling down, in this case) because I want to know what is going to happen next... you have a winner!”

-Bonnie Heidema

“...good story about reality, the way the world is going.”

-Maddie Wingett

“Great premise for a book...It reflects problems people are definitely talking and thinking about.”

-Laura Austin

“The first chapter certainly did jolt me at the end! ...wonderful tension there, and had me hooked once I saw Brian put the revolver in his pocket. Very well done!
... promising a great story”

-Annemarie Kline

“Good story...engrossing...intriguing political manipulations...getting more involved with the story and liking it...lots of suspense”

-Shelley Dibble

“Very exciting. The author has captured the sense of depression and panic of the characters who face what they think of as economic extinction... The story is powerful.”

-David Decarlo

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious.
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TAINTED JUSTICE

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TAINED JUSTICE

Brian Baldwin flipped the channel on the remote as he anxiously listened for the call. For a brief moment, he watched his team, the New York Giants, as they scored. Then he turned his attention to the phone and the call he was expecting. Silence. No ringing. He went back to the remote control, once again nervously flipping through channels. Just then, the mailbox door slammed shut. In one quick motion, Brian lifted his legs from the coffee table and jumped to his feet.

When he poked his head out the front door, he dug his hand into the box to reach for the mail.

"Any good news?" asked the postman.

When Brian finished shifting through the envelopes, head shaking, he said, "No. Damn. Nothing. How long will it take them to mail me a job offer?"

"Brian, I hope something good will happen soon."

The despair he felt inside sank even lower. He needed an income to fight off his creditors. Brian rocked back on his heels. "Better be soon. I am almost at the end of my road."

"Merry Christmas." The postman waved goodbye and continued his route, walking down the long walkway past the reindeer and snow angel.

Back inside the room, Brian turned his attention to a letter he received from the law office Hartman & Fried. He read it several times, each time focusing on the word "Foreclosure" at the top of the page and the date below. The tremor in his hand became more pronounced each time he read it. He dropped the letter on the table.

"How did this happen?" He wiped his moist face with his palm.

The thought of losing his 3500 square foot house with its gabled roof and gardens – a house he had worked years to earn – made his stomach roll.

He plopped down on the chair by the telephone. For a moment he stared at the floor, then dialed the bank manager's number. At the other end, the office assistant put him on hold. The earpiece played the theme song from *The Sting*. He felt stung all right. He was losing control of his life. His girlfriend walked out on him over an argument as silly as whether or not to buy milk; the limits had maxed out on all his credit cards; and with two missed payments, the loss of a job he loved, and a foreclosure letter in his

hand, the knot in his stomach grew tighter.

The manager's voice interrupted his train of thought. For the next ten minutes Brian argued against the foreclosure. In the end, he accepted the manager's assessment of his bad credit rating, and the fact that he had run out of time to put his financial life in order. Brian hung up without saying good-bye.

He stared at the floor for several minutes, then stood.

"Those bastards." Brian went to his bedroom, opened the drawer of the bedside table, pulled out his handgun, and left.

Jason McDeere entered Rose's Coffee Time. Rocky Delgado followed close behind him. As Jason expected for a typical mid-afternoon, few customers occupied the restaurant. With a nod to the waitress, he chose a corner where the closest customers were several tables away. Both he and Rocky plunged into the wooden chairs across from each other.

Noticing them, the waitress hurried over soon after delivering a check to one of her other patrons. With a glowing smile she said, "Haven't seen you in a while. What kept you away? Coffee or my service?"

Jason attempted a smile. "Both are great. Just low in cash these days." At the beginning of December 2007, he had received notice his hours had been cut in half. Back on the first of October 2007, Softek International, his employer, announced layoffs of fifteen hundred jobs by the end of the year, shedding five hundred each month. The timing was well planned to ensure that each employee would provide the necessary knowledge transfer before leaving. Everyone knew management's dirty secret—jobs were being shipped overseas.

Even now, Jason was so angry he had trouble focusing on the menu.

He wished he could have quit on the day of the announcement, but his financial situation was bad. With no prospect of finding another job soon, he'd stayed with only half the income. The company had wanted him to pass on the information he'd spent years learning so that someone else could take over his job. When he discovered how the CEO poured money into working vacations, catered lunches and limousines for those who were staying behind, he'd felt doubly betrayed. It was obvious the CEO was pampering those he needed while discarding the rest.

The waitress said, "Your company hasn't been good to its employees or us.

My business is down.”

Softtek was the largest employer in the Oregon town of Corvallis where Jason and Rocky worked. “Hope our luck will change,” said Jason as he pulled at his beard. He was sporting a two-week growth that hadn’t quite filled in yet and it made him look like a mountain man--rebellious.

“What will it be? Coffee and cake?”

“Just coffee for me,” replied Rocky.

Still trying to put on a brave face, Jason said, “Same here.” After the waitress walked away, he leaned forward. “Where’s Brian? Why isn’t he here?” He pointed to an empty chair. “He said he felt sick,” said Rocky.

“He’s been using that as an excuse a lot lately.” Jason tapped a finger on the tabletop. “It’s been hard on him since he was let go. Depression is creeping in. He’s got to pull out of it,” Jason said.

With eyes directly at his friend and eyebrows arched, Rocky said, “Situation is so unpredictable.” A sheet of concern shadowed his face.

“Rocky, I worry about Brian. He’s too withdrawn.”

Rocky sipped his water. “It’s difficult loosing a job. Each of us is handling it differently. He’ll be fine.” Rocky’s job had been spared the axe. He was indispensable as the team leader with the most experience. He would be the liaison between the local office and the one in Mumbai, India.

“Look, Rocky,” Jason said, spreading his hands palms up on the table, “Brian helped me a lot when I joined Softtek. I owe him big time.”

“He’s looking for a job. I hear he has a prospect in California.”

Jason glanced around at glum faces of some of his coworkers and leaned in further. “Brian just lost his girlfriend. That’s also weighing on him.”

Jason couldn’t help but reflect just for a moment on the friendship between him and Rocky. In 1974, almost thirty-four years ago, Jason’s father, Fred, had been locked up in a Salem jail, and one month into incarceration, he’d been found dead in his cell of an apparent cardiac arrest. Jason, too young to fully grasp the reasons for his father’s punishment, knew one thing for sure—everyone hated him for his father’s accusation of murder. The Corvallis rumor mill spewed gossip about his parents, his older brother and even Jason. Quickly, every friend and neighbor, except Brian and Rocky, discarded his family like rotten tomatoes. Rocky stuck with Jason and defended

him whenever attacks were hurled at him. His poor mom. The memory caused a chill to run through him.

The waitress approached their table, placed two coffees and two slices of freshly baked blueberry pie in front of them. "It's on the house."

Jason managed a weak smile. "It's been a while since someone has been so nice to me. You're a sweetheart."

Rocky looked down at the food with hungry eyes and bit into the pie with melting ice cream on top. "Brian is tough. He can handle it," he said through a mouthful of ice cream. After swallowing, he looked Jason in the eyes and asked, "How are you doing?"

Usually Jason presented a brave face to the world, then when he was alone retreated into his cave and wrestled with his problems until resolved. This time it was different. He felt as though he'd fallen into a deep hole and needed to tell his story. "I shouldn't have taken this job." He caressed the cup. "At the interview, they lured with the promise of job security." He blew air, "A farce. I must admit working and living in Corvallis was enticing. Now, my future looks bleak. On top of all my problems, the value of my house has gone down by thirty percent. Thanks to this sub-prime mortgage and real estate crisis." He shook his head and looked out the window. "Last August when the market tanked I sold my shipping company stock at a loss." Through pursed lips, he said, "I panicked." Telling his story to someone felt like he was able to release the pressure from inside.

Rocky looked around as though embarrassed by Jason's outburst. "You look as depressed as Brian. Snap out of it." Leaning forward, he said, "Be positive. At least you've got your health. You can find another job." Then louder, as though trying to impart confidence, he added, "With your credentials, you could get out of this town and get a job easily. I'm sure of it."

Still looking out the window, Jason said, "Yeah, I guess."

"You look tired. You need sleep."

"It's hard to sleep. All these thoughts keep churning in my head. What Softek is doing is wrong." He took another sip of his coffee.

"Welcome to America. People get hired and fired all the time."

"It's the *way* they're doing it that doesn't seem right to me." Jason's voice rose high enough to attract the attention from the customer sitting closest to him.

Rocky waved his hand at Jason to lower his voice, "Cool down. You're getting hot for nothing." Rocky smoothed his thick, salt-white hair with his palm.

Jason carved a small piece of the pie and whispered. "They have to pay." After washing the food down with another sip, Jason continued. "I had a very good job with Microsoft. I should have never quit and gone to Softek. Now, after the company secures a government contract, it's shipping all the jobs overseas. It's not fair."

"They haven't broken any law."

He paused for a moment, calculating a response. "I don't buy that. I can sue them." His voice rose again.

Rocky dropped his fork. "You're crazy. What will you sue them for? First you would need a lawyer, and you know how much they charge."

"Look, hundreds people are in our situation. It's hard enough to find a decent job in this area to support a family. These days a person's lucky to find something in fast food." Jason paused for a moment then snapped his fingers. "Class-action suit. That's what we need."

Brian Baldwin entered the main office of Softek where he had worked for the last three years. He marched past two security guards who were always talking to each other, but their hawkish eyes constantly scanned people going to and from the office. Brian pressed the security pass at the scanner. The light on it changed from red to green. *It still works.* In a half circular motion he passed through the metal turnstile. Palms sweating, he took the elevator to the twelfth floor where the office of Clint Whitney, the chief information officer, was located. After finding the office empty, he asked Gail Crawford, the executive assistant, "Where's Clint?"

"Do you have an appointment with Mr. Whitney?" Gail calmly inquired.

"No. I want to talk to him. Right away."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. Where is he? I want to see him *now!*"

Gail clicked the mouse a couple of times, peeked at the computer screen and said, "He's not in the office. It's his lunch hour. Nothing is booked."

"Where is he?" Brian asked with deadly composure. "Call him."

Gail first scanned Brian's face, then the light jacket he was wearing. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Brian Baldwin."

She used her best secretary's voice. "Brian, it looks like you're angry about something. Can we talk in the room over there?"

"Damn right I'm angry," he said, fighting back the logjam of emotion in his throat. "I'm losing everything, including my job."

"You'll find a new job. Hopefully, soon."

"No, I'll find *him*." Brian walked away.

Behind him, Brian could hear Gail call Clint's cell phone and leave a message. Then she called security.

Worried now, Brian rushed to the elevator, pressed the button and waited, tapping the travertine with his toe. When the doors opened, much to Brian's surprise, Clint Whitney appeared.

"I want to talk to you-,"

Looking at his watch, Clint said, "Now's not a good time. Make an appointment with Gail."

His former boss pushed past him, but as he did, Brian pulled a handgun from his waistband.

"In there." He waved the gun, shoving Clint into the conference room. He closed the door, "Sit down."

Under normal circumstances, Clint was immaculately dressed, not a hair out of place. Now he seemed to have lost his composure. His jet black hair was ruffled from running a hand through it. Fear gripped his face. "Don't do anything you'll regret."

"You've shipped fifteen hundred jobs overseas. Who do you think you are? Do you know what you're doing?" Brian pointed the gun at Clint's chest and cocked the hammer.

Still standing, Clint tried to speak. Brian was tired of talking; tired of the lies. He pulled the trigger. With a loud bang, the man hurled back and fell to the floor. Then he mumbled few words between gasps. Blood oozed out of open wounds in the chest. Brian ignored the ringing in his ear caused by the blast. He rushed out the door without stopping to check Whitney.

After closing the door behind him, he descended the stairs. At the ground floor he tried to push open the emergency exit but it was locked. From one end of the corridor, he spotted guards talking to two police officers. They hadn't seen him yet.

Careful not to move too quickly and risk notice, he turned around and walked to a nearby closed door. He opened the door, turned off the light, walked past the mop and hid himself behind a trolley loaded with cleaning solutions, toilet paper and rags.

Heavy footsteps passed by in the hallway next to the janitor's room where he was hiding. He held his breath, feeling trapped. He dug his cell phone out of his pocket and sent a text to Jason. *S.O.S.*

Later that day at 4:25 Jason McDeere passed through the front door of the building where he was supposed to meet with a class-action attorney, an appointment made shortly after seeing Rocky.

The elevator doors opened to an elegant reception area. Jason looked at the receptionist sitting at a desk next to a wall with a big gold-plated sign that read Lambert, Johnson & McQuire.

"I'm here to see Mr. Johnson," he said.

She checked the appointment book. "It's Mrs. Johnson. Please have a seat. Can I get you coffee, tea or soda?"

He shook his head then sat in a wing chair next to a table with a variety of magazines stacked atop it. He felt as though he were going for a job interview, where he would have to convince someone to hire him. Would he succeed in convincing the lawyer to take this suit? He peered around the lobby. A vase filled with fresh flowers stood on a semicircle table behind him. Under his feet, a Persian carpet glowed with rich colors. The law firm must be successful at what it did to afford a luxurious office and a gorgeous receptionist. A blurb on the firm's website flattered itself of going after the National Bank in a teller's case and negotiated a handsome settlement.

When he booked this appointment, he queried about the cost and was assured that the first half hour was complimentary for new clients. The clicking of high heels on marble floor tiles disturbed his train of thought.

"My name is Irva Johnson." The lawyer extended her hand, "Mr. McDeere, pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure mine," he replied. He sized her up. She looked elegant in a fitted navy jacket—a sassy blonde—very distinguished.

She led him to a conference room with a long table surrounded by comfortable chairs and a bookshelf spanning an entire wall. Other walls were graced with rare,

expensive paintings.

They sank into chairs opposite each other. Jason placed a folder on the table, “Mrs. Johnson, you’ve heard that Softek is laying off fifteen hundred employees?”

“Yes, I have,” she said, her face set in stone.

Jason cleared his throat and leaned forward, knowing that he had to make an impact on the lawyer. He explained the situation. “First, they tricked us. They hired a lot of people over a period of a year so that they could get government contracts. After showing that they had enough software engineers and had secured a contract, they fired us. They’re sending our jobs offshore. It’s not right. I want to file a class-action suit.”

“To win a case like this is very difficult,” the lawyer said, steepling her fingers.

“Mrs. Johnson, a lot of people are suffering. With the country going through a sub-prime mortgage crisis, it’s not a good time for anyone to be out of work. Companies have stopped hiring because of the credit crunch.”

“First, a court will look to see if Softek did anything wrong. Second, if such action has caused pain and suffering.”

“Absolutely. I am in pain and I am suffering. Now what’s the next step?”

“There’s no precedent for such a suit.”

“Maybe it’s time to start one.” Jason looked at her poker face, certainly he had not made any headway. He decided to play his hand. “Morally, it’s wrong. A big corporation took advantage of us. We should have our day in court.”

The lawyer leaned back and eyed Jason closely, “The defendants will fight with all the ammunition they have. And they have plenty. That’s the first thing to consider. After months of investigation, legal research and negotiations, which all cost time and money, let’s say the defendant decides not to admit any wrongdoing and, of course, decides not to compensate. The case goes to court. Once in court, what are our chances? Very slim. We don’t like to lose a case or win small. Our reputation is based on that. Also, the chance of keeping your job is almost nil. Mr. McDeere, I’m sorry,” she said, rising, “It’s not a case we like to take.”

With that, Jason was dismissed. At the elevator, he punched the wall. “Damn her!” He pounded on the elevator door with his fist. Tired of waiting, he took the stairs. As he exited the building, he threw out the paper with his scribbled session notes.

Jason decided to walk home. The crisp fresh air would help quell his rising

fear and anger. Zipping his double lined jacket up, he took to the street in a residential neighborhood of Corvallis. His body moved instinctively in the right direction but his thoughts were far away. *What to do next?* He was overtaken by an emptiness that went far beyond anything his lunch of coffee and warm pie could fill. His equally empty stomach growled with a piercing ache. As he mechanically walked, head lowered, he recalled everything that once was a part of his life. His wife and his children had left him, and his job was coming to an end.

Depressed by the many turns in his life, he found this new disappointment hard to bear, hard to shake off. He didn't want to fight. He wished a switch in his brain could turn off all the churning thoughts. Looking up, he counted the rooftops as he passed. Then he stopped. He was next to Brian's house where reindeer ornaments stood on the snow-covered lawn. Steam was his breath.

Sighing, he continued walking. It suddenly occurred to Jason that he hadn't bought any presents for his children, despite the fact that Christmas was only a few days away. He was consumed with too many problems. *Who was he kidding?* He didn't have the money to buy presents, unless he went into further debt.

He stopped walking. He lifted both hands over his lips and nose to blow air. It wasn't enough to remove the chill. With another sigh, he calculated the chances of getting his job back. He could plead with his boss. It was worth a try. He changed his direction and headed for Softek.

Frustrated, he trudged through the commercial district past the supermarket, where he noticed a crowd in front of an electronic store. It was odd to see a group of twenty or more pedestrians absorbed with a TV screen. As he moved closer, more people crossed the road to join the gathering. *What could it be? A terrorist attack?* Jason strained to catch a glimpse but there was no room between heads to see without being rude. As the crowd repositioned for a better view, he looked for an opening. A tall man moved and Jason squeezed in. His heart stopped. The caption on the screen read: Seven dead in a mass murder at Softek.

On the top left corner of the screen was a picture of Brian.