

The First Two Pages: “The Hack Job” by L.L. Kaplan

From *The Most Dangerous Games*, edited by Deborah Lacy (Level Best Books)

An Essay by Lisa Kaplan

“Did you kill him?”

So opens the “The Hack Job,” my playful, but deadly, contribution to Level Best Books’ anthology *The Most Dangerous Games*. When the anthology was announced, the theme seemed too fun not to give it a shot. But just what game to choose? The possibilities were overwhelming. Nothing seemed quite right until a chance encounter made the decision for me (see below).

Once I had the game, however, how best to present the story? After all, I only had 5000 words. Keep it small, keep it focused, keep it moving. The short story mantra kept ringing in my head. Fortunately, as I continued to plot, the questions of how to present and where to start answered themselves. Start when everything changes (the discovery) and make it a conversation. Well, more of a verbal chess match between the two main characters (think *Sleuth*) where the tension under the talk builds to a final twisty showdown. I then decided on a first-person point of view to make readers feel more involved in the banter as opposed to merely listening to it.

But with mostly dialogue, I knew I had to hook readers early and keep them intrigued. That was my intent with the opening line. No background or build-up.

No pretense that all was well. The stakes are set right away. Ah, a murder. Maybe.

A suspect. Perhaps. At least, something strange is going on, maybe I'll stick around and find out. My old law school trial tactics instructor might cringe at an opening accusation, but sometimes direct is best. I took a chance that this was one of those times.

“Did you kill him?”

I didn't answer right away.

We, the Chief and I, were standing near the back of the throwing alley in “Axed and Bowed,” my downtown axe throwing/archery establishment. We were alone. Sort of.

At the opposite end of the alley stood a row of targets, each in its own regulation-sized lane under high-beamed ceilings. The targets had numbered rings complete with kill-shot dots at the top for participants to hit and keep score. In the larger middle lane stood the Wheel of Fortune. On a normal day, and only during certain times, throwers tried to hit various marks on its spinning face for points and prizes. On a normal day, there wasn't a body tied to it.

Tonight though, Andrew Thaddeus “Tuggy” Johnston IV was. His arms and legs were splayed like a performer in an old circus knife throwing act. The only difference was that in the circus act, the knife thrower usually missed.

A body! Now we're getting somewhere! And the “Most Dangerous Game”? Axe throwing. Wait, axe throwing? With the wide, wide world of sports and games out there, I went with axe throwing? Not that there's anything wrong with axe throwing, but...

Disclaimer: I'm not an axe murderer or even a recreational chucker. And no, axe work wasn't part of the defensive tactics course when I trained at Quantico. But if you're a mystery writer or know any, you probably also know that we're a

strange breed and can turn any innocent venue into a crime scene. Enjoying that picnic by a tranquil alpine lake? What if a body floated to the top? Or a leg washed ashore? It's a curse. So, when I happened on an axe-throwing gallery on holiday, the inevitable occurred.

The axe-throwing gallery was set in an open mall with large windows so a passerby could see the action. I stopped, mesmerized, as the eager participants hurled various sized axes at the targets. Each successful thunk was met with a roar of approval. My brain whirled. What if one of those targets was a large spinning wheel where throwers aimed for prizes and points? And what if a body was found tied to it complete with a couple of well-placed axes? As I pondered just who I'd like to see on that twirling target, and there were a few candidates, "The Hack Job" was born.

I finally responded.

"No, I didn't kill him, but someone apparently had an axe to grind. Or should I say axes?" I pointed to the two axes attached to the Wheel: one over his head and one between his legs. "Rather appropriate. He could be a real pain in the axe."

The Chief grunted. "This is no laughing matter Abby."

I shrugged. "Just a little morgue humor. I may be retired, but old habits die hard. Oops."

As the encounter begins, the Chief and Abby have two different reactions to the body, aka Tuggy. The Chief is immediately serious and suspicious. Abby, however, is more cavalier, even a bit snarky. Why? Perhaps she's just in shock. Perhaps, as hinted, she's had experience with dead bodies before and uses humor to

deal with the ugliness of murder. Or, perhaps, there are other reasons as yet uncovered. Maybe she really did do it. After all, should you ever trust the narrator completely?

“Who’s skilled enough at axe throwing to do this?”

“No one local I know,” I replied, walking towards the body.

“No, stay back here,” the Chief commanded. “This is a crime scene.”

“Come on Chief, we need to make sure he’s, you know, out of his misery? It’s the only decent thing to do. Unless, of course, you want to check on him?”

The Chief hesitated. “Okay, go, but I’ll be watching.”

I smiled to myself. The Chief had a well-known aversion to bodies and blood. Rather unfortunate for a person in his position.

I strolled down the middle lane to the Wheel.

Though just about a year old, Axed & Bowed had a loyal following with an archery league on Tuesday nights and a throwing league on Wednesdays. It had been surprising how many people, especially females, got satisfaction from the sound of metal ‘ker-chunking’ deep into wood or an arrow hitting certain marks on the more, uh, graphic targets. The quick success of Axed & Bowed meant I’d had to move-up my plans regarding my partners, one of whom was now tied to the Wheel.

And so ends the first two pages. The reader now knows Tuggy is not just any body on the target, but one of Abby’s business partners. What are the plans she had to move-up for them? Did those plans include murder? And why? A business dispute gone wrong? Maybe, but perhaps it’s more personal. Was Abby romantically involved with Tuggy and he betrayed her? Could be. Love, as anyone who has had their heart broken knows, can be the most dangerous game of all. I hope the reader sticks around to find out.

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Lisa Kaplan is a former prosecutor who spent twenty years as an FBI Special Agent investigating everything from bank fraud to espionage. After never finding one X-file, she retired. Now she pens soft-boiled mysteries, where justice prevails but doesn't always end in handcuffs. "The Hack Job" is her debut as a published author. "Chocolate Karma," a short story involving death and chocolate, will be published in the anthology *Nefarious* (Duskbound Books), due in 2026. Lisa is also working on two full length mystery series set in Northern Ohio. She is a member of Sisters in Crime and past president of its Northeast Ohio Chapter (NEOSinC). When not plotting mischief or jogging with friends, Lisa can be found at Tails of Vermilion, her pet store for cats and dogs, where the employees volunteer and all profits fund animal causes. She's on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) as well as LLKaplanAuthor.com.