

Praise for Joni M. Fisher

“A gifted storyteller, Joni Fisher writes with energy and passion that comes to life in her characters. *North of the Killing Hand* is an intricate and suspenseful read that grips the reader from start to finish.”

—John Foxjohn, International, *USA Today*, and *New York Times* bestselling author

“*South of Justice* is a multilayered, intricate, and suspenseful page-turner you’ll want to read in one sitting.”

—Diane Capri, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Hunt for Jack Reacher thrillers

“Past secrets test the bonds of family loyalty and a fledgling love affair. The unwavering strength of the protagonists, their commitment to the truth and to each other will have you cheering for *South of Justice*.”

—Melissa Hladik Meyer, author of *Good Company*

“Bottom line is: *South of Justice* is a multilayered romantic book that will grasp your attention and lure you to read it in one sitting.”

—SeriousReading.com

“*South of Justice* is fantastic and fun—a crisp and suspenseful story. Fisher makes a wonderful entrance as a crime fiction writer. I can’t wait for *North of the Killing Hand*!”

—Timothy D. Browne, M.D., author of the Nicklaus Hart medical thrillers

“Joni M. Fisher weaves a tale of passionate love, undying loyalty and enduring friendship between strong characters bound together and

tested by deep-rooted principles. Curl up in your favorite chair with a tasty snack and a refreshing beverage—you won't want to move until you've turned the last page of *South of Justice*."

—Donna Kelly, author of *Three-Ring Threat*

"A fabulous start to an intense series with a large cast of characters I couldn't help but love and cheer for. Fisher is a master weaver of intrigue and strong characters willing to go the distance to get things done while keeping their love strong."

—K.D. Fleming, author and Golden Heart winner

"Tightly written, complex characters, intriguing plot—all the ingredients for a great read! This debut book is a winner, and I am looking forward to more books in the future."

—Diane Burke, award-winning author of inspirational romantic suspense

"I really enjoyed this book. It was well written and the twists and turns had me turning pages deep into the night."

—Vicki W. Tharp, author of *Don't Look Back*

ALSO BY JONI M. FISHER

South of Justice

North of the Killing Hand

West of Famous

Joni M. Fisher

West of Famous

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May we be true friends and appreciate them.

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. 1 .

Martina Ramos opened her eyes in hazy darkness on a cold floor that reeked of vomit and a chemical she couldn't identify. When she lifted her head, her pulse pounded her temples, so she eased back down with a groan. She believed she could feel the rotation of the earth.

Draping one hand on her belly, she felt sequins and groaned. Somehow, she'd ended up on the floor in last night's party dress and heels. She had specifically asked for nonalcoholic drinks at the club because she couldn't afford the negative publicity storm from public drunkenness. Miami during spring break meant hundreds of hormonal college coeds were watching her in person and through social media. Staggering and puking in bushes would have damaged her carefully crafted image.

Her best friend, Nefi, would have kept track of her drinks so no one could slip her alcohol or a roofie. Nefi would have protected her from this hammering in her skull. Tall, dangerous Nefi would have told those people arguing in the room upstairs to shut up. People sensed immediately that Nefi didn't threaten or bluff. Ah, but her bestie wasn't here.

Neither was her boyfriend, Oscar. She was on her own. Her friends and family didn't know where she was because she couldn't tell them.

She tenderly rubbed her head. Her hair was stiff and stuck to her forehead. Was that puke? She slowly tucked in her arms and legs and rolled onto her hands and knees. She couldn't tell if she was swaying or the room was, but it had to stop. Forcing her eyes

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open, she squinted in the dark.

The voices grew louder. What on earth were people arguing about this early in the morning? She expected more civilized behavior than this at a five-star resort. *Enough*. Time to complain to management.

She thumped her shoulder against something. Disoriented and fighting vertigo, she reached for the wall and touched a small ledge, like the shelf under the sink in her room. Was this the bathroom? The floor was cold. She'd been hungover before but passing out on the bathroom floor was a first. It didn't take much alcohol to knock a one-hundred-twenty-pound woman off-balance.

She had to get on her feet to clean up. Her body ached, all stiff and heavy and drained of strength. This was like the flu but worse. Maybe food poisoning? The room pitched. Her head throbbed. And the odd chemical stench invading her nostrils didn't help.

The shouting upstairs stopped. Finally, peace. She tipped sideways and rolled onto her back. As her body turned, the room seemed to amplify her movement so that even flat on her back it felt as though the room continued to roll. She shook her head to stop the sensation. Planting her hands flat at her sides, she waited for the motion to end. When it continued, she breathed slowly. In and out, in and out. What was going on?

Dehydration? That led to headaches and hangovers. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

Water. Get water.

To reach the sink she had to stand. She reached out and grabbed the shelf under the sink. She sighed. She'd stayed in so many hotels over the last few weeks she couldn't orient herself in the room without light. Bracing for another attempt to stand, she squeezed the edge of the shelf and ordered her body to stand so she could get light and water.

A hatch in the ceiling flung open. Bright light streamed in

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through a rectangular hole in the ceiling.

"She's awake," a deep voice announced.

Martina squinted upward at ugly work boots connected to dirty pants topped by a loose, wrinkled sweatshirt. The man's face was obscured by a shadow. *Who is this guy? Wait a minute. Resort rooms don't have ceiling hatches. And no one said there'd be construction. This can't be right.* Believing she was stuck in that gauzy fog state between sleep and consciousness, she sighed heavily. "Wake up. Wake up." She patted her face.

A man bent forward, revealing a green mask that covered his face.

A second man wearing a black mask stepped into view. The masks didn't fit the kind she'd seen on other construction workers that covered the nose and mouth. These masks looked like knit ski masks with holes for eyes and a mouth.

Weirdest. Dream. Ever.

"Climb up."

Climb? Oh, for pity's sake. She wearied of bizarre dreams. Maybe she was hallucinating. Maybe someone put something in her drink. LSD? Rohypnol?

Too tired to resist, she decided to play along and get it over with. She glanced around. Surely enough, her hand held a step protruding from the wall. She stared at it as if it had materialized by magic at the man's command. Why was the guy wearing a mask in Miami? Light streaming in from the hatch burned her retinas and illuminated tanks, pipes, cables, and a long propeller shaft. The rocking motion suddenly made sense. That smell wasn't paint. It was diesel. What the—?

"Now!" barked the man in the ugly work boots as he leaned over the hatch. His voice was higher than the other man's and raspy like a smoker's.

She struggled to her feet as the drumbeat in her head played faster. She turned and grabbed the step and climbed out of the engine hold as carefully as possible in three-inch heels and a tight,

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red sequined party dress. At least this wasn't one of those naked-in-public dreams. She was, however, way overdressed for boating.

As she climbed from the hold, the men backed away. Black Mask kicked the hatch shut. The two argued in gibberish. She rubbed her eyes against sunlight glaring through windows. This dream had amazing detail. The guy in the green mask had pale arms and a bit of a beer gut. Tattoos covered Black Mask's muscled arms up to the sleeves of his black T-shirt. In one hand he held a razor. Wait. No. A Taser.

Martina's mouth dried up and her lungs overfilled. *Uh-oh. Bad dream.* Standing on the mid-deck near the chart table, she counted three exits. The men flanked her, blocking two sliding glass pilothouse doors. Green Mask stood near the helm control panel. The windows revealed water in all directions edged with green strips of land. Blazing sunlight burned through the third exit on the far side of a combination galley and salon area. Vertigo threatened to tip Martina off her heels, so she knew she couldn't run. Stupid, pretty shoes.

"I told you she'd get sick," Green Mask said.

"Shut up."

The boat rocked her off-balance, and she fell against the chart table, where a hoodie covered a stack of large navigation maps. This hideous nightmare was so detailed it frightened her. The sights and sounds felt scary real. She grabbed the table's edge, slipped off her shoes, and tugged the hem of her party dress halfway down to her knees. In psychology class, she'd learned about lucid dreaming. Creative types, like the poet who lived in her dorm, used lucid dreaming to tap into their subconsciousness. The poet had developed a test to know when she was dreaming. In dreams, she said, the laws of physics didn't matter. A dreamer could fly or walk through walls or turn back time. Martina decided to test Sir Isaac Newton's law of gravity. She dropped one shoe.

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Not only did gravity work, but both men failed the gentleman test by leaving the shoe on the floor. Once on the floor, the shoe did not move, proving Newton's first law of motion. Doubt crept in Martina's mind about being in a dream state.

"Just do as you're told, and you won't get hurt."

"Says the man with the Taser." Martina blinked at the man wearing a black mask. "Where are we?"

"This is the middle of nowhere." Black Mask's voice had an Eastern European accent. Slavic? Russian?

Green Mask pointed to a dark passageway that dead-ended at the forward stateroom. "Go in there and sit down."

Fear heightened her awareness. Close to forty feet from bow to stern and thirteen feet wide, the layout and size of the boat meant this was a recreational trawler. With the engines and generator off, the silence reminded Martina of something she dreaded while sailing with her family—dead calm. Dead calm on a boat with two masked men in the middle of nowhere. She hadn't signed up for this.

Who were these creeps in ski masks?

She eased down the steps. Swaying through the narrow passageway, she passed a small stateroom on her left and the head on her right, toward the master stateroom at the bow. Dominating the space was a queen berth with narrow pathways around it. For a second, it looked inviting. She sobered at the threshold and braced her hands on the doorjamb. "Whoa. Waitamminute. Waitamminute."

Hands shoved her toward the bed. She spun around and raised one shoe and one fist into a fighting stance. Nausea and vertigo surged through her, so she took deep breaths.

"Sit on the bed. Face the camera."

A small video camera was mounted on a tripod to the left of the doorway. Beside it, clamped to an open cabinet door, was a battery-powered lantern. Two portholes fed a little light into the otherwise dark master stateroom. A chill raced through her. Bile

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surged up her throat. Fear swept away hope about fighting her way out of the stateroom with a shoe. She longed for a minute to clear her head. This nightmare threatened to turn from creepy to terrifying.

Green Mask eyed her. "Think we ought to clean her up?"

"Why not?" Black Mask stepped into the head and ran water. He emerged with a damp towel and handed it to his partner, who gave it to Martina.

"You have something on your face." Green Mask half pointed, half waved toward the left side of her head.

"I'll puke again if you touch me." It wasn't an idle threat. Who knew how much was left in her stomach? Watching the men, she scrubbed her forehead and the left side of her face and hairline until it wasn't sticky. She then tossed the towel on the floor by the camera.

Green Mask handed her a paper with large type printed on it. "Read this loud and clear when I tell you to." He switched on the lantern and the camera. "Sit here."

She glanced through the message on the paper and gasped. According to the note, she had, at best, until Friday to live.

"Read it." Black Mask pointed the Taser at the paper.

No. It wasn't possible. This was a terrible mistake. It would never work. She leaned against the bed, which sat on a raised platform. Her hands dropped to her sides. Her eyes burned. Her head hurt. Everything was wrong. Wrong. So horribly wrong. The situation was surreal. She had to make it stop. She refused to believe she had only four days to live, but fear seized her.

If I die in a dream, do I die in real life?

As her heart raced, she grew alarmed she might die in her sleep from panic. Everything was wrong. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. To force herself awake, she shouted, "Nooooo."

Her mind registered two realities in rapid succession. One, Black Mask stepped toward her. Two, blinding pain exploded through her body.

. 2 .

Monday, April 19, 2010

Vincent Gunnerson entered an interview room at the Jacob Javits building, the New York City office of the FBI, where two women in business suits sat across the table from Special Agent Lenny Lorenzo. A normally gregarious guy, Lenny was so Italian through and through that people joked he couldn't talk with his hands tied. Lenny clasped his hands on the table and looked up at Vincent with uncharacteristic weariness.

Vincent shut the door and took a chair beside Lenny.

"These ladies are Mrs. Campbell and Miss Chen. They claim they have urgent information to share about a video Mrs. Campbell received this morning at ten." Lenny's tone suggested the ladies were wasting his time. "When I asked them why they waited until three in the afternoon to share this information, they said they would share it only after we met certain conditions. Ladies, this is Special Agent Vincent Gunnerson."

Their conditions? Vincent eyed Mrs. Campbell, a fortyish woman with blonde upswept hair and large clunky jewelry. She wore a white silk, low-cut blouse under a bright green jacket. Miss

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Chen had jet-black shoulder-length hair and looked thirty years old tops. Dressed in all black, Chen hunched over her smartphone, repeatedly brushing her fingers across the screen.

Mrs. Campbell squared her shoulders and addressed Vincent, “We get crazy fan mail all the time, but this is a first. We want you to verify that this...message is a hoax. So far, we haven’t found it posted on any social media, but if word gets out there, well, we want to be able to say that the FBI says it’s a hoax.” She nudged her companion.

“Nothing on social media so far.” Miss Chen looked up at Vincent and sat up straighter. She sneaked a peek at Vincent’s left hand.

Vincent did not reciprocate because he didn’t care if she was single or married. He turned his attention toward Lenny instead. “Have you seen the urgent message?”

“Nope.” Lenny tapped his pen on a pad of paper. The corners of his mouth twitched, signaling he had noticed Miss Chen’s sudden shift of attention.

“What is it you do that generates fan mail?” Vincent asked Mrs. Campbell, who seemed to have authority over the younger woman.

“Oh, not us. Our client,” Mrs. Campbell whispered as if the entire office might be eavesdropping. “We also need your word that whatever happens, our client won’t be named in any way in the news.”

Lenny leaned his elbows on the table. “We don’t control the news.”

“What’s your client’s name?” Vincent asked.

“They don’t want to say,” Lenny deadpanned. “They aren’t lawyers evoking client confidentiality. In fact, they’re from the Campbell Agency. They represent,” he said, sliding a business card across the tabletop to Vincent, “performing artists.”

Performing artists was vague enough to encompass actors, dancers, musicians, or those self-proclaimed performance artists

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who occasionally took their clothes off in Central Park and smeared paint on each other while shouting poetry. Vincent sighed. "So, are you going to hand over your entire client list and make us guess which one you're talking about, or do you have only one client?"

Mrs. Campbell arched an unnaturally dark eyebrow at Vincent. "Do we have your word you'll keep this out of the press?"

"No." Vincent and Lenny answered at once.

Miss Chen glared at Mrs. Campbell until the older woman squirmed. "Our client is Ruby."

"We need her full name," Lenny said with his pen poised over a legal pad.

"Oh, come on," Mrs. Campbell said. "She's had two platinum albums." She looked at Miss Chen as if for confirmation that everyone in the world recognized the name.

Miss Chen shook her head. "Wrong demographic." To Vincent, she said, "Roxanne Wharton is a pop singer. She's known as Ruby."

Lenny bristled. "All right, so you have a video fan message that you want us to prove is a hoax. Did you take it to the police?"

Mrs. Campbell leaned forward. "I thought the FBI handled kidnappings."

A chill swept the room as Vincent and Lenny inhaled sharply.

"Give us whatever information you have right now." Vincent's voice had lowered to an authoritative whisper.

Mrs. Campbell fumbled in her giant gold-studded leather purse, jingling her collection of gold bangle bracelets in the process, and pulled out a palm-sized bikini-clad figurine. She stood the doll on the table in front of Vincent.

He glared at the toy.

Mrs. Campbell pulled the figure apart at the waist, revealing a jump drive. She slapped the pieces back on the table. "It's a video."

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Treating it as evidence, neither agent touched it.

“How did you get it?” Lenny asked.

“It came attached to an email. I made a copy on this Ruby drive.” Mrs. Campbell waved at the tiny plastic body. “It’s a promotional item from her first platinum album.”

Vincent and Lenny exchanged a look, silently debating who would watch the video. While still adjusting to working together, they had fallen into the good cop and bad cop roles, with Lenny as the good cop. Overall, Lenny had excellent people-handling skills. Vincent had already forgiven him for the notable lapse in judgment when Lenny had turned a particularly deceptive suspected drug dealer into a protected informant. With plenty of guilt to share for that debacle, it was time to let it go. Lenny was his new partner, like it or not, and as the senior agent, it was Lenny’s call.

“Go ahead. I’ll extract more info from the ladies,” Lenny said. His weary tone made Vincent wonder how much time he had already spent trying.

Since Vincent didn’t have to concern himself about fingerprints, he picked up the top half of the bikini figure, stood, and strode from the room with all the dignity he could muster while holding a bikini-clad doll.



Martina stared through the porthole of a small stateroom at water and swamp. After five hours of watching for boat traffic, she had neither heard nor seen another boat. Black Mask was right. They were in the middle of nowhere.

The men had forced her to record the message. After being Tasered, she’d been too terrified to resist or ask questions. She surmised from the way her face stung and the bruise on her knee

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that she'd kneed herself in the face during her uncontrollable, violent thrashing from being zapped. Right after the message was done, they had moved her to the smaller stateroom and run the generator for an hour.

They probably needed power to send the message. She prayed the message would reach the right people.

Since then, she'd finished a bottle of water in sips and kept it down. Her dress smelled of urine, her damp underwear stuck to her skin, and every muscle in her body burned. Crying had left a wet spot on the fabric under the sequins. None of that mattered.

She needed to find a way to escape. First, she needed to know where she was. Second, she wanted to know how she'd gotten here.

Even nowhere existed at a specific latitude and longitude. She remembered Saturday. They'd simply had to go to the hottest club in Miami to be seen by the highest concentration of social media climbers. The club owner had given them a prime table overlooking the dance floor, where they could see and be seen. He'd comped their drinks. The last memory she could dredge up from her zapped brain was heading to the ladies' room.

Had she been moved from Miami by car or by plane before being brought onto the boat?

Swampland surrounded them. All swamps looked the same to her. Snakes, buzzards, alligators, and other deadly things lurked in the water. For all she knew, she could be in Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, or the Bahamas. Maybe even in Central America, or South America. The only reliable thing she could determine was an approximate time of day by reading shadows outside. In the morning, shadows pointed west, at noon they shrank, and in the afternoon and evening, they pointed east.

Judging from the shadows of mangroves on the water in the distance and the unrelenting heat and humidity, it was midafternoon. Compared to weather during her school years in England, this felt sweltering.

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She eyed the screened porthole. Was it big enough to squeeze through? She touched her left pinky to the edge of the opening and spread her left hand. Her piano teacher had measured her hand's reach once at seven and one quarter inches. It took the width of three more fingers to fill the space to the opposite edge of the opening. She lowered her hands to her left hip and belly. Nine inches from her left hip came to just past her belly button. No way. Her hips were four inches too wide to fit through the porthole. The same curves that Oscar adored trapped her.

She slumped back on the bed. She longed for food, a shower, fresh clothing, her cell phone, and the shelter of her father's embrace. None of which seemed forthcoming.

She found herself reaching for her missing cell phone often. It had become an electronic appendage. She kept it within reach when she slept or showered or studied. Her calendar, contacts, a clock that adjusted to her current time zone, photos, email messages, text messages, games, books, internet access, map directions, and social media links existed on her phone. In effect, her phone connected her to the world. To be without it was to be isolated. Dad had bought the latest technological wonder phone along with an international calling plan for her twenty-first birthday. Nefi had given her the protective case that sparkled as if covered in diamonds. Her beautiful, precious lifeline was gone. The creeps had probably dropped it in the water.

She sighed. The more her mind cleared, the worse her situation looked. No one knew she was missing. The couple traveling with her on the party circuit had seemed pleasant enough, but they hadn't really liked her. They didn't pretend they wanted to get to know her either. Their attention was as empty as their air kisses. Magazine writers referred to them as "the beautiful people." The entourage consisted of trust-fund kids whose parents paid for their Ivy League educations in the expectation they would make the right connections to build their bright futures.

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Instead, the beautiful ones drifted from parties and fashion shows in the spring to Mediterranean beaches in the summer, art shows in the fall, and winter skiing in Switzerland. They could differentiate a Renoir from a Monet. They kept the private numbers of celebrities on their phones. They bypassed long lines to enter dance clubs. Restaurants always had a table waiting for them. Everyone greeted them like long-lost friends, but they were the loneliest people Martina had ever met. Being with them was like living in a Mardi Gras ball where everyone kept their ornate painted leather masks firmly in place. They assumed everyone had an angle or wanted something from them. Since they didn't know whom to trust, they didn't trust anyone.

The beautiful people probably didn't even notice she was gone. If they were out of bed, they would be sunning by the pool or enjoying a massage.

Her college friends wouldn't be any help either. They didn't expect her back at Oxford until the twenty-fifth to sit exams. She had lied to them about going home to Virginia for break. Her best friend thought she was on campus studying. She had also lied to her family and to Oscar, who had begged for one week of the six-week break. "Name it. Tokyo, Maui, New York, Paris." Oscar's deep voice had caused her heart to flutter. His job paid well enough to make it happen.

If only she had spared one week for him. But no. She had committed to six full weeks of make-believe partying with strangers in Europe and America. It had sounded too good to be true. She should have read the contract more carefully. Her big brother, Ruis, had a saying: "When someone tells you a lie you want to believe, it is still a lie." She'd assumed his advice was about trusting men. She should have applied the advice more widely. No one had mentioned the possibility of getting stinking kidnapped!

Her lies taunted her. Father was right. He said, "All lies come with a price."

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As much as she preferred to believe her life had enormous value, she knew no one was looking for her. She would be lying to herself to believe otherwise. How long did she have before her captors discovered her biggest lie?

Please, dear God, keep them clueless for as long as possible.

Muted voices sounded outside. She pressed her ear to the stateroom door. They spoke in gibberish again. A few words reminded her of a female Russian classmate. They might as well have been speaking in Aramaic or Elvish or Klingon. She blinked, freeing pent-up tears.

If only this ordeal were a nightmare, or a prank gone bad... She willed this mistake to end. The idea that she was on her own far from civilization because two strangers wanted money was too terrifying to accept. She prayed for this mistake to be over, for an opportunity to turn back time, just this once. As the youngest child in her family, she often called for a do-over when she was losing a game.

She really needed a do-over, a reset back to the time she had her phone and her freedom. She'd even be thankful to be back at the crowded club dancing to techno music. In the do-over, she wouldn't drink at all and she'd stay away from that shadowy corridor to the bathroom, the last place she remembered being before waking up in this nightmare.

Footfalls sounded above, shattering her fantasy do-over. Once again in isolation, fear clawed at the edges of her thoughts about the value of her life. For the sake of survival, she had to stop cowering in the comfort of fantasy. She had to accept the unblinking truth of the situation.

She was at best a bargaining chip; at worst, entertainment.