

DEADLY FOCUS MEDIA KIT

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I. Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Mystery to Be Published by Literary Wanderlust

Denver, CO, January 1, 2018—The first book in the Vega & Middleton series, *Deadly Focus*, will be published by Literary Wanderlust in spring 2018.

When Los Angeles news photographer Lucy Vega's uncle, a formidable Hispanic businessman, is killed in a car accident in Malibu during a violent El Niño storm, Lucy and reporter-colleague Beatrice Middleton are out to prove murder.

Lucy discovers secret underworld involvement by Mexican cartel members, and bent on finding answers, she travels to Mexico, where she meets a handsome but burned out CNN war correspondent. Trailing the cartel deep into their own territory, they soon find that corruption and brutality are rampant, and Lucy must risk all to find the truth behind her uncle's murder.

According to a four-star review in Colorado Book Review, "Lucy Vega, Bea Middleton, Ray Truckee, and the lot are likeable and genuine, and Hinkin does a good job of portraying the trust, camaraderie, and friendship that develops between people when they have been working together for a while, often under tense circumstances. While the Middleton of Vega & Middleton takes a bit of a back seat to Lucy in this book, Bea is a strong, capable, entertaining character in her own right. Hopefully we'll see more of her in a future Hinkin novel. Until then, Lucy and her wild, page-turning exploits in a remote Mexican jungle will definitely satisfy those looking for a story chock-full of adventure and chicanery with a tough, tenacious, and tender heroine at its heart."

Deadly Focus is set for publication on April 1, 2018.

About Sue Hinkin

Sue Hinkin is a former college administrator, television news photographer and NBC-TV art department staffer. She lives with her family in Denver. Sue can be found online at www.suehinkin.com.

About Literary Wanderlust

Literary Wanderlust publishes well-written novels and short story anthologies in the romance, science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, women's fiction, and mystery/suspense genres, as well as nonfiction. Visit us at www.literarywanderlust.com.

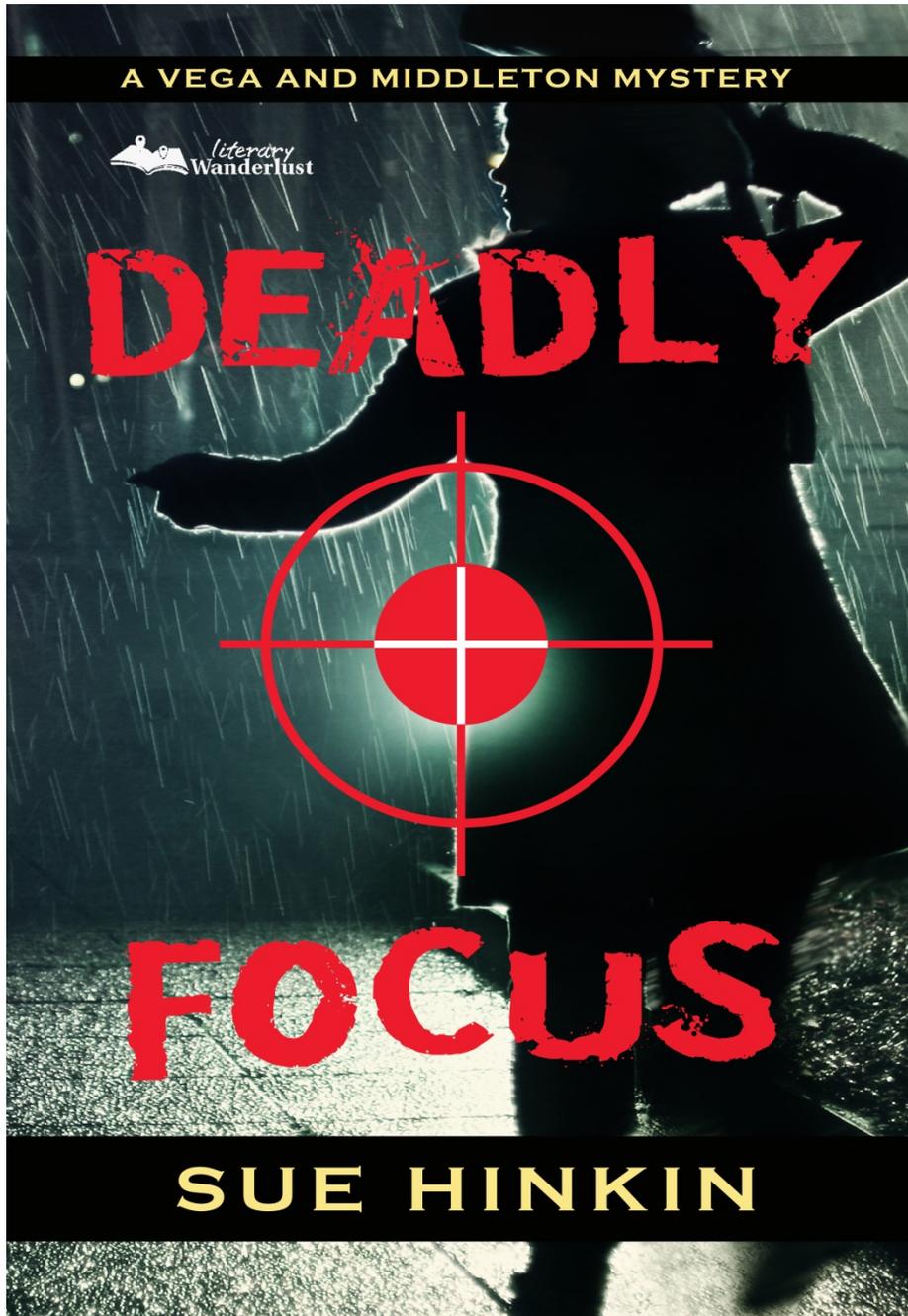
II. Author Biography

Sue Hinkin is a former college administrator, television news photographer and NBC-TV art department staffer. With a B.A. from St. Olaf College, she completed graduate work at the University of Michigan and was a Cinematography Fellow at the American Film Institute. She lives with her family in Denver.

III. Author Photo



IV. Book Photo



V. Sample Q&A

Can you describe what your book is about in one sentence?

When Los Angeles news photographer Lucy Vega's uncle, a formidable Hispanic businessman, is killed in a car accident in Malibu during a violent El Niño storm, Lucy and reporter-colleague Beatrice Middleton are out to prove murder.

This Vega & Middleton novel is the first in a series featuring the partnership between two very different women in the news business who are friends, colleagues, and occasional foes, but ultimately family.

If you read Michael Connolly, Robert Crais or Tess Gerritson's Rizzoli & Isles, you will enjoy this action-packed series.

What is the theme of *Deadly Focus*?

Coping with loss and embracing the power to overcome trauma. Life can turn on a dime.

How do you develop your plots and characters?

I watch, listen, and read.

Plot ideas come from everywhere—life experience, media, friends and relations, overheard conversations and sheer imagination. Once you have the essence of a plot that you can initially express in a logline (which will probably change and evolve if it's any good), and are clear on what's at stake for the main characters, then the story begins.

I'm not a writer who outlines very much—I'm a "pantser." I may, however, outline a particular chapter or scene if I need focus. Beyond that, once I have the general plot and characters, I step onto the mystery bus, strap in and take the ride.

Once a plot is in mind, I figure out how the characters would deal with the challenges of the story and grow as people along the way. I don't have all this information locked up before I begin to write—much of the character's personality comes out during the process of writing and editing. Each crisis demands a decision by the characters and dealing with the consequences of that decision should make for great tension.

Here are the things I consider when a character is coming to life:

- Appearance & style
- Personality strengths, weaknesses & vulnerabilities
- Family background & overall backstory
- Passions
- Driving motivation
- Profession & interests
- Traumatic experiences/hardships to overcome

- Habits/quirks
- Geographic ties

As I move into a series with a growing host of players, I've created a "character bible" with thumbnail pictures of all my folks with a couple sentences summarizing their role.

What was your favorite part of writing *Deadly Focus*?

I love spending time with my characters. I've also lived in most of the locales I write about and enjoy recalling the details that made the places and experiences there rich and unique.

Give us some insight into your main character. What does he/she do that is special? What are his/her character flaws?

Lucy can be reckless and impulsive in her drive to find the truth. She is also riddled with anxiety resulting from PTSD brought on by a car accident that killed her family when she was about eight years old. She was the only survivor. Her resistance to being a victim can propel her into denial of her own vulnerabilities.

Bea struggles with what it means to be a "good parent" and the guilt she feels with every mistake. She has two failed marriages and a child from each. She will do anything for family and friends—this passion to protect her own, personally and professionally, can push her into risky situations.

If you could spend time with a character from your book, which character would it be? And what would you do during that day?

Aside from Lucy Vega and Bea Middleton who are my solid girlfriends, I'd choose Bea's 16-year-old son, Dexter. We'd go to one of his basketball games at Santa Monica High School, do some editing on a high school documentary digital video, then eat homemade sweet potato pie with whip.

Tell us about the conflict in this book. What is at stake for your characters?

Good vs. evil, retribution, justice, trust and reliance on family (in whatever form of family it takes) to overcome adversity.

Lucy and Bea must find justice for Lucy's murdered uncle, stop a brutal villain whose vendetta against the duo is personal, and thwart a Mexican drug cartel bent on controlling the American black tar heroin trade.

What was one of the most surprising things you learned in creating *Deadly Focus*?

Writing *Deadly Focus* was a personal journey through which I learned to be a writer. I had no clue when I started this book that I'd be working on it for so many years through so many chapters of my own life. The story has changed and evolved as much as I have.

Even during the writing of this novel, I never imagined it would ever be a *real* published book. The incident that changed my thinking in that regard was when Michael Connolly and James Lee Burke's agent, Phil Spitzer, asked for a full manuscript. I'd had at least a hundred previous rejections. I seriously almost had a coronary when I received the request. I met Connolly that week at a book signing in L.A. and told him that Spitzer wanted to read my novel. He shook my hand and said, "Phil never requests anything, good for you."

Ultimately Spitzer rejected the book because it turned into too much of a romance—I was in a romance writer's critique group at that time and was just figuring out that I was a hard-core mystery writer. He was right to reject it, but the fact that he liked the writing changed my life. I went from a dilettante to seriously thinking: I CAN DO THIS!

And more credit where it's due—without my critique group from Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers, I would never be a published author. I have learned so much in this irreverent, supportive, smart group where I feel like I can risk anything. What a gift!

How do you choose which genre to write in?

It chose me. I was a Nancy Drew junkie as soon as I learned how to read.

What makes your book different from other books in your genre?

My work is very multicultural with diverse characters. Beatrice Middleton is from an African-American family in Savannah, Georgia. Lucy Vega was born and raised in Southern California by a Mexican mother from Guadalajara and a Norwegian father from Oslo. After the family was killed in a car accident, Lucy's Mexican uncle and his Norwegian housekeeper took over her upbringing. I've found many people afraid of writing characters of different races and ethnicities from their own—afraid of a making a mistake that reveals a hidden bias or unrealized prejudice. But that's our world today—a huge, wonderful melting pot—so I want to embrace it even if I screw up or stumble across my own areas of ignorance and insensitivity. It will be an opportunity to learn.

My women characters are very independent, smart, passionate, a little reckless but very effective at what they do. Lucy and Bea both have great integrity, hearts of gold, and would risk anything for family and friends. Despite differences in age, race, and experience, their values are such that they are true sisters under the skin. I have been blessed with wonderful women friends and colleagues from whom to draw inspiration.

Because of my film/TV background, my scenes are often cinematic and visual.

The books ride the line between mysteries and thrillers.

Of all the characters you have created, which is your favorite and why?

I love all my children but the friendship between Beatrice and Lucy is the driving force in this series.

Along with a high-pressure job, Bea is up to her ears in parenting challenges. I'm looking forward to see what her youngsters, Alyssa and Dexter, bring to the series as well as her childhood friend Rio Deakins, a professor and PTSD expert at Emory University in Atlanta.

Now independently wealthy and in love with an alcoholic former CNN war correspondent, life is good for Lucy but she doesn't trust it. I'm looking forward to seeing how she copes with her new situation, especially when she finds out that her nemesis is still alive and has made his final transformation into a monster, salivating with appetite for Lucy, Bea and their most vulnerable loved ones.

Tell us about your background. What made you decide to pursue writing?

Born in Michigan post-WWII, I grew up in Chicago, the oldest of three sisters. My mother was a schoolteacher/poet/philosopher/feminist from an Iowa farm family. Her mother, also a schoolteacher before the eight kids, was the first woman graduate from what is now Kansas State University. My dad, a tall, red-haired, cigar-smoking, social justice-type Presbyterian minister, was an infantryman in WWII. I think he was severely traumatized by his experiences in Germany and France but never talked about it until the very end of his life. I will always be deeply thankful for their unconditional love.

Books were everywhere in our home as were discussions of ideas—mostly political, theological and psychological. It was a good crucible for becoming a writer and creating characters. From early on I was drawn to strong female protagonists like Nancy Drew, Ozma and Dorothy Gale from L. Frank Baum's series. Carolyn Keene, bless her, had no idea how many young girls she encouraged to go into mystery writing! I authored and penned illustrations for my own Nancy Drew books.

As a young adult, I worked as one of the first woman TV new cinematographers. The challenges of being a woman in that role were legion. I actually think I got the job because the station had at least one FCC sex discrimination suit against them and they had to hire a female or risk their license. The door opened and I jumped through. Several years later, I was accepted into the Cinematography Fellowship program at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. In L.A., I worked in the TV industry, most notably in the NBC-TV Art Department /Radford Lot. I call the experience summer camp on steroids. Seeing scripts weekly reinforced that I had the ability to write at that level but the time wasn't right in other aspects of my life.

All along, my husband, daughter, and wonderful friends have been extremely supportive, which has been huge. My daughter is my best beta reader. I believe in the ancient Greek concept of *kairos* time. Unlike *chronos* time, which is the systematic marching of the hours in order, day by day, *kairos* is the coming together of time, experience, readiness and opportunity to create the "right time." My right time seems to be now.

What is your writing process?

I work in the mornings for about four-five hours. In the afternoon I take care of busy work. Then I like to work again at night. On the weekends, I try to write in the mornings, then take the rest of the day off. The story, however is always working in my mind. Sleeping (lack of) can be an issue when the book gets rolling in my head.

Tell us about the challenges of getting your book published. How did it come about?

It's been about a 30-year process interrupted by full-time work, family, kids—the usual and unusual crises. I wish I were one of those people who needed little sleep and could start in working on my book after the rest of the house was finally asleep or at the crack of dawn. Not me, unfortunately. Most writers face this multitasking frustration—particularly women, who have so much to juggle.

I met Susie Brooks at the 2016 Colorado Gold Conference when, mid-conference, I staggered up to the registration desk desperate to see if there were any more mentoring appointments left. I desperately needed career guidance. There weren't any more openings. Susie probably realized that I was about to break down sobbing so she hauled me over to an empty seat and I told her my story. I'd finished several books, received positive feedback including manuscript requests, then didn't hear anything from anyone. It had all dropped into a black hole.

Susie read the manuscript and offered me a contract. I was shocked and thrilled. Before committing on the spot, I took some time to really learn about the latest publishing trends and I came to the conclusion that working with a new indie publisher was right for me. I want to be part of the team and help us all succeed.

My biggest hurdle to overcome with immediately embracing indie publishing was my mindset that I had to have an agent before anything else could happen. Times have changed significantly and at this point I don't think having an agent would provide any advantage to me. I suspect agenting is going the way of publishing—it's one option, but not the only one, and not necessarily the best one for many writers.

What kind of feedback have you had from your readers and editors?

Not being published yet (hopefully, in early 2018), the only readers, other than my critique group, have been my betas. I've gotten excellent, helpful feedback from this small group. My manuscript was also a mystery finalist in the Colorado Gold Contest. That award was incredibly motivating.

My editor/publisher, Susie Brooks from Literary Wanderlust, has been terrific. Her feedback and critique have made the manuscript stronger. It's really important to have an editor who gives you meaningful feedback that makes sense for your work. If feedback doesn't hit that intuitive chord, you're probably not going to be a good match.

If you knew then (before embarking on the journey of publishing through Literary Wanderlust) what you know now, what would you tell yourself?

I would remind myself that there are a million different paths to success. Be open to whatever route the universe presents for you to pursue. Do your due diligence, then take the leap of faith and go forth.

Please give us a quick list of the pros and cons for the traditional publishing route.

I have seen friends choose all routes and I think traditional publishing with a small press is perfect for me. I don't want to spend the hours and hours necessary to do-it-all-yourself, although the payoff can be terrific if you hit the right niche market. The Big 5 publishers seem to demand the author pretty much give up all involvement and control of any aspect of the publishing process once the contract is signed. An indie publisher takes on the heavy lifting of editing, production, distribution and marketing, yet seems to welcome the author's feedback if it's constructive. No one has more at stake than the writer and an indie publisher can use that energy, particularly for help in marketing. I also like being part of a team which the indies seem to encourage.

In summary:

Self-publishing—you're on your own.

Hybrid publishing—you're on your own with minimal support.

Indie publishing—you're on the team.

Big 5 publishing—you're the machine.

What is your favorite genre to read?

Mysteries, thrillers, and epic sagas.

What are some of your favorite authors or books?

I'm a voracious reader. George Eliot, L. Frank Baum, Carolyn Keene, Bram Stoker, Leo Tolstoy (love the Russians), Dorothy Sayers, Ellis Peters, P.D. James, Michael Connolly, Robert Crais, Sue Grafton, Patricia Cornwell, Sarah Paretsky, John Sandford, William Kent Krueger, Adam Johnson, James Lee Burke (Dave Robichaux series), Steig Larsson, and Jo Nesbo, to name a few.

Who are your readers and why will they love your book?

Mystery-thriller writers are my tribe, but hopefully, the stories are engaging enough for anyone to enjoy.

What other projects are you working on?

I've finished #2 in the Vega & Middleton novel series, entitled *Low Country Blood*. It features Bea Middleton as she returns home to evocative Savannah, Georgia to deal with an aging mother, family intrigue, and a murdered fifteen-year-old nephew.

Book # 3, *The Burn Patient*, has Bea and Lucy together again in Los Angeles facing a war for control of the black tar heroin trade and Lucy's nemesis, Gary Mercer, is back from the presumed dead. Burned beyond recognition, he's hell bent on Lucy's fiery destruction.

Book # 4, *Dark Web, Shiny Fishes*, is taking shape in my head. Bea's son Dexter's former science teacher, now a UCSB Marine Biology doctoral student, has disappeared on her way to purchase a rare koi she discovered on the Dark Web. Lucy and Bea must find her before she falls victim to a disgraced ocean scientist's sado-sexual mermaid snuff fantasies and throws her to the sharks, literally.

Do you have a day job in addition to being a writer? If so, what do you do during the day? What motivates you to write?

Most of my "writing career" I worked full-time in the entertainment industry and in higher education. I retired/quit my job at the University of Denver last summer after several incidents warned me in no uncertain terms—life is short, do what you love. *Now.*

I think the motivation to write is embedded in my DNA. I'm also a Taurus—relentlessly persistent. I've thrown up my hands and walked away numerous times but I'm driven to tell stories, so I always sit back down and start writing again. When I did stop writing it was because life overwhelms with other things—family, work, health crises, etc. Most of us can't "do it all" at the same time unless we have paid help. Even then . . .

Why did you write *Deadly Focus*?

It began as a true story from when I worked as a TV news cinematographer back in Michigan. Livestock throughout the region had been poisoned by a highly carcinogenic organo-phosphate pesticide. Tragically, all the cattle had to be exterminated. The rest of the plot grew up around that incident and morphed and changed into *Deadly Focus*.

I lived in Southern California for many years and despite having "no weather," over the years my home in the hills near the Los Angeles-Ventura County line had been damaged by floods, mudslides, earthquakes and brush fires. So, when stuff happens in SoCal—it's big. I wanted to weave the weather into the story almost as another character.

Who did you write *Deadly Focus* for (audience)?

I don't think about writing for a particular audience, just about telling a good story.

Where can we find you online?

My website at www.suehinkin.com.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Passion, Practice & Persistence are my mantra.

- A writer should love telling stories, write the stories, and keep writing the stories.
- Find an awesome writers group where you feel support even in the midst of difficult feedback.
- Embrace risk-taking and failure (rejection by agents does not mean failure).
- Trust the process.
- It's never too late.

What are the most important elements of good writing? According to you, what tools are must-haves for writers?

A compelling plot, authentic characters, meaningful challenges to overcome, conflict in the process and a strong writing craft are key.

Openness to feedback is also critical to success. Much is said about writing being such a lonely vocation but I've found it amazingly collaborative. Find your writer's tribe and give each other thoughtful supportive feedback. Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers has a wonderful array of groups all over the Denver metro area and beyond.

What question have you always wanted to be asked in an interview? How would you answer that question?

Question: If you could be any character(s) in fiction, who would you be? (I'd have to pick characters who lived full, eventful lives and came through it all with a sense of maturity, acceptance and peace.

My younger self wanted to be Ozma of Oz, a wise old soul in a girl's body who guides seekers with wisdom and compassion.

In my middle years I would have liked to have been Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* or Claire Beauchamp in *Outlander*—someone beautiful, daring, and romantic who has a lot to learn, but learns well and scores a happy ending. I adored Queen Boudicca, but her life was pretty grim.

I'm a major Miss Jane Marple fan but today I'd probably choose to be Ellis Peter's Brother Cadfael. He had a very worldly secular life as a younger man (war, travel, marriage, children) and then retired to a monastery in his later years to be a herbalist/healer and solver of mysteries. He's a quiet, confident soul who's done it all and still contributes to his religious community in many important ways. I'm drawn to older characters who are good role models for aging with grace and purpose because that's where I am in my own life.

Do you try to be as original as possible? Or do you prefer to stick to what you know your readers and publishing house are looking for?

I try to be myself and write what inspires me, hoping it might touch others along the way.

When did you first experience the power of literature?

I've always loved reading and being read to. I was knocked out by the *Oz* books and *Nancy Drew*. *Middlemarch* changed my life. I love the English writers of that era. *War and Peace* and *Dr. Zhivago* were captivating. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was also amazing. Recently, I've been drawn in by the Scandinavian mystery writers like Steig Larrson, Henning Mankell, and Jo Nesbo.

How much time do you spend writing per day/week?

Full-time—actual hours vary.

What do you tend to edit out of your books after the initial writing?

Too much backstory too early and wordiness. I also wander across points of view.

What are the hardest scenes for you to write?

The final scene—so much to tie up and summarize.

Any last thoughts?

Do more of what you love. You are not too old, and it is not too late.

VI. Book Synopsis

When Los Angeles TV news photographer Lucy Vega, whose family was killed in a car crash, investigates another crash during the worst El Niño storm in decades, she is horrified to learn the victim is her uncle.

Though the medical examiner declares the death accidental, Lucy suspects otherwise. She sets out on a murder investigation of her own, and soon discovers secret underworld involvement by Mexican cartel members.

Bent on finding answers, Lucy travels to Mexico, where she meets a handsome but burned out CNN war correspondent who helps her trail the cartel deep into their own territory. Corruption and brutality are rampant, and Lucy must risk all to find the truth behind her uncle's murder.

VII. Sample Chapter

CHAPTER 5

Brent Lucas, a rangy, blond USC broadcast journalism student, sat alone in the KLAQ newsroom working on his economics term paper while finishing up the last slice of pepperoni pizza with extra cheese. As the news production intern, he monitored the station's police scanner after the eleven o'clock news until six in the morning, two graveyard shifts a week. He would type a summary of each evening's events and email the file to the a.m. news director and his minions.

Tonight, the usual late night reporter hadn't shown up.

Word in the office was that the guy was a drunk going through a bad patch and was about to be canned. In lieu of a reporter, if something significant was streaming, Brent had been instructed to contact the on-call producer at home, at any hour. The chatter coming in over the scanner could be something.

Brent wiped his hands on a crumpled napkin, slugged down a big gulp of Dr. Pepper and reached for the phone. It rang about ten times on the other end.

Instead of voicemail, a groggy response came through. "Vargas."

"Hey, Ernie. It's Brent in the newsroom."

"Who?"

"Brent," he sighed, "the intern."

"Oh, Brent. Yeah." Ernie yawned. "Sorry, I'm so out of it. The baby's got colic. Finally fell asleep. Infant hell." He yawned again. "So, what's up?"

"Something just came through on the State Police emergency band. A car went off Kanan Dume Road down past Pepperdine. I think the driver is some friend of the governor. They said Scanlon himself called 9-1-1. The name of the victim wasn't mentioned but it might be worth checking out for the early edition."

Vargas didn't respond. Brent could sense that the exhausted new father would do just about anything not to have to go out tonight. And the weather, well, Southern California didn't have much weather, but when it happened, it was bad, and the mountain canyons were treacherous.

"Okay, Brent. Could be newsworthy," he finally said.

The baby began to wail again in the background. Brett could hear Ernie's wife weeping. This was obviously the part of new parenting that wasn't featured on the Family Life Network.

"Honey, I'll be right there," Vargas called, desperation edging his voice. Then he whispered to Brent, "Listen, kid—there's no way I can leave my family right now without losing my marriage. Lucy Vega's up in Malibu house-sitting for her uncle. Give her a call. Number's on the board. She can run out and see what's going on, grab some set-up shots and a sound bite. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry to bother you. Good luck with the baby."

Brent hung up the phone and silently vowed that the Boston terrier mix pup he had rescued from the shelter was as close as he'd ever get to child rearing. Then he hit a few buttons and brought up Lucy's contact info.



It was two in the morning when her cell phone rang out with a dreamy Celtic tune—a soothing sound to wake up to, usually. Lucy rolled over toward the charger on the nightstand. Her eighty-pound yellow Lab mix, Maddie, snorted, stretched, and oozed across the warm space Lucy had just vacated on the bed.

She pushed her long, tangled dark locks behind her ears; the old St. Olaf College T-shirt Lucy wore clung to her slim body. Who the hell was trying to get her at this hour? She groped for the phone. Although she wasn't on call, the ID identified the newsroom. She hit *call back*.

The line picked up immediately.

"This had better be good," she said, rubbing her eyes.

The contrite intern explained it all quickly.

"Yeah, Brent, okay, uh-huh. You're right, no point in Vargas coming out here, it's only about fifteen minutes down Kanan. Okay. I'm on my way." She clicked off the phone, turned on her bedside lamp and sipped the last inch of day-old Diet Coke from a dented can. Yuck. She'd grab a hot cup of coffee and some oatmeal at the Paradise Cove Beach Cafe after she finished with the accident assignment.

Throwing off the flannel sheets, Lucy headed for the bathroom. She took a one-minute shower, threw on jeans, a sweatshirt, rain boots, a waterproof jacket with the station logo, and jogged across the stormy yard to the garage. Maddie at her heels beelined it to the dog door at the Spanish rancho style main house and

disappeared outside. The pup knew the drill. The plastic flap *thwacked* shut behind her.

As Lucy pulled out, the door to the house opened. Eighty-year-old Elsa Christianson, her father's cousin from Norway who was both Uncle Henry's housekeeper and Lucy's quasi-grandma, waved her down.

"Everything okay, sweetheart?" She wrapped a pink chenille robe tightly around her small, petite form. Skinny legs rose from tan UGGs. Her beagle, Bugle, poked his head out the door and sniffed. Maddie's face appeared above his. A doggie totem pole. They playfully snapped at each other and disappeared into the house.

"Go back to bed, Elsa. Just a routine on-call thing."

"Okay. But be careful honey. We've got to work on that special dinner tonight for Henry. Gotta whip up those Mexican-Norwegian tortillas. But no lutefisk this year. Salmon or sea bass, I promise."

Lucy laughed as she recalled that disastrous culinary experiment from many years ago. Pickled Norwegian whitefish was something that did not have wide appeal, even smothered in salsa. "I'll be back soon. Love you."

"You too." The old woman closed the door and waved through the window. The pups' heads appeared next to her for a moment then they all disappeared, probably heading toward the kitchen and treats. The motion-sensor porch lights extinguished.

Lucy couldn't shake the sense of discomfort that had been niggling at her since she got the call from the intern. It was a rough night, but it felt like something beyond the weather threatened. Water and hillside would be flowing down the mountain along with boulders that could wipe a semi off the road. Another crazy *El Niño* storm. But this was all part of her job. She pushed the lever that engaged her Jeep's 4-wheel drive.

In the deep-gray light of a rainy pre-dawn, a murder of black crows circled overhead before descending *en masse* into a stand of sycamore trees along the bloated, churning expanse of Medea Creek. Several of the big inky birds fought over a bloody morsel that screamed and struggled, then quieted. Finally, one of the winged creatures managed to secure the dying prey in its beak and disappear into the low, leaden sky.

Pulling into a turnout just north of the third tunnel, Lucy eased to a stop between a Los Angeles County fire rescue vehicle and a Malibu cop car—both empty. No other news folks had arrived but it wouldn't be long. She hopped out, grabbed her gear and headed for the fire road that scaled the edge of the canyon and led down to the water. The loose, decomposing granite scree and slick adobe mud created an added struggle to the trek.

Lucy zipped the video camera into the front of her jacket in hopes of keeping it dry and secure. Despite its nylon cover, the lens was getting wet and she hated those blurry, rain-pocked weather shots the other camera operators cranked out. She knew her cinematic tastes were classic in the midst of a period where halting, unfocused, and blurry were supposed to give the viewer a sense of raw "reality." Reality was way overrated. She'd learned that early.

As Lucy made her way down to the scene, the L.A. County Fire Department backhoe tractor began pulling a wrecked silver Lexus sedan out of the creek. Her uncle had one just like it. Lucy looked forward to his coming home tomorrow, which was now, happily, today. She and Elsa would make those tacos with their delicious dill, mayonnaise, red onion, and cabbage salsa. The salmon would be wild caught from Alaska. Pricey, but worth it.

As she cautiously hiked her way down to the edge of the creek, one of the firefighters she'd befriended on other stories gave her a quick wave. Taut chains screeched in protest as the backhoe shivered and the car struggled to emerge. The windows were rolled up. The car's interior resembled an untended aquarium, full of greenish water slowly draining. The windshield hadn't shattered. The passenger side door and the pleated rear end appeared to have taken most of the hit.

A body floated against the glass. Lucy swallowed hard and held down a pang of nausea. Anxiety built in her diaphragm and the roar of the ocean rose in her ears. This was too close, too close to home. To the brutal loss of her family in a similar catastrophe.

I'm okay, I'm okay, she told herself. Focus on the story, on the work. The work saves you, always has.

Lucy clambered up the bank a bit to get a better angle on the accident, careful not to slip on the sharp rocks. She took a wide shot of the roiling water surging toward the Pacific a mile away.

Documenting the dangerous, hard work of the first responders, she grabbed a close-up of the whitewater moving an empty surfboard along the shore then shifted focus to her friend the fire department rescue worker in a bright yellow rain suit.

As the car finally cleared the shore and settled on a sandy berm, he tried to open the car doors with some kind of slim-jim tool but they wouldn't oblige. One of their colleagues appeared with the Jaws of Life but after a quick consult, he grabbed an ax and smashed in the windshield.

Water gushed forth like murky vomit. The floating body slid into view atop the Lexus' silver hood. A shoeless foot tangled against the steering wheel.

Lucy screamed, shook her head and stumbled backward. Surely, she was hallucinating. This couldn't be real.

Her camera dropped to the ground. For a moment, she was paralyzed.

She swallowed a sob then rushed toward the ruined car. Oblivious of the hands reaching to restrain her, Lucy threw herself into her uncle's cold, dead arms.

VIII. Blurbs & Testimonials

“One of the more suspenseful and fully engrossing books I’ve read in a long time, DEADLY FOCUS grabs you in the first chapter and never lets go. With a gift for instant and vivid characterizations, Sue Hinkin has created a highly sympathetic heroine in Lucy Vega whom you will never forget and will want to follow as the series unfolds. Lucy’s raw sorrow and constant struggles are so truly written and common to the human heart that your soul will recognize and feel them deeply. Thriller, mystery, and mainstream readers have a new author to follow and enjoy, year after year. Keep ‘em comin’, Sue!”

—Sonja Massie, author of more than 60 published works including the highly acclaimed Savannah Reid Mysteries under the pseudonym G.A. McKeveatt and the bestselling novel *Far and Away* adapted from the movie by Ron Howard starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman

None of this would be happening if she had just let him jump. She wouldn’t be sitting in a windowless prison in the-middle-of-nowhere, Mexico, if she had just let him jump off the ledge of that dive hotel in Hollywood, California. Not that Lucy could have probably actually done that — she’s a good person, after all, but it certainly would have made her life much easier. There’d be no murder, no poisoned cattle, no Mexican drug cartels, and no sexy CNN correspondent. But then, where’s the fun in that? And S.A. Hinkin’s *Deadly Focus: A Vega & Middleton Novel* certainly is fun.

Deadly Focus’s main protagonist is Lucy Vega, a smart, headstrong reporter who gets drawn into a world of political intrigue beyond her imagining when her uncle is killed in a car accident. While wet roads and bad weather are officially to blame, Lucy suspects something more sinister is at play, and decides to find out what really happened. Her sleuthing takes her to a far-flung village in Mexico, where she uncovers an international heroin operation abetted by corrupt law enforcement and a priest who is not near as holy as he seems. She also discovers that her imprisonment in Mexico and her uncle’s death on the Pacific Coast Highway are much more connected than the geographic distance would suggest.

This is the first book of the Vega & Middleton series. Lucy Vega, Bea Middleton, Ray Truckee, and the lot are likeable and genuine, and Hinkin does a good job of portraying the trust, camaraderie, and friendship that develops between people when they have been working together for a while, often under tense circumstances. While the Middleton of Vega & Middleton takes a bit of a back seat to Lucy in this book, Bea is a strong, capable, entertaining character in her own right. Hopefully we’ll see more of her in a future Hinkin novel. Until then, Lucy and her wild, page-turning exploits in a remote Mexican jungle will definitely satisfy those looking for a story chock-full of adventure and chicanery with a tough, tenacious, and tender heroine at its heart.

—Four-Star Review, Colorado Book Review

Chasing the truth about her uncle's death, a gutsy television news photographer uncovers corruption and finds love in this debut thriller.

On assignment covering a man threatening to leap from atop a Hollywood hotel, Lucy Vega, a photographer for a local TV news station, realizes she knows the potential jumper. Naked and high on meth, Gary Mercer, the station's former head of photography, comes off the ledge thanks to Lucy's coaxing. Safely inside but crazed, he admits to Lucy a past crime—his mother didn't die because of a fall; he murdered her by throwing her down the stairs. Afterward, he denies his confession and turns on Lucy because she knows the truth. A year later, working for heroin kingpin Luis Alvarez, who's "kind of an El Chapo meets Al Capone," Mercer learns that Lucy's Uncle Henry, representing California in economic talks in Mexico City, has become a problem for the drug honcho's operation. Mercer volunteers to eliminate Henry, making his death look like a car accident. Henry raised Lucy since she was orphaned as a child, and his death devastates her. She starts digging into the circumstances surrounding his crash. After killing Henry, Mercer accepts Alvarez's diabolical assignment involving chemical companies linked to pharmaceutical subsidiaries. Lucy begins connecting the dots, and her investigations into Mercer's and Alvarez's activities get more dangerous, but she does share lighthearted times with her colleague Bea Middleton, a divorced mother of two. Bea's love of pole dancing and designer duds makes her an unlikely best bud for no-nonsense Lucy, but the pair clicks. Lucy also eventually clicks with a new man, but will he be blue-eyed, former Special Ops soldier Brent Lucas or handsome documentarian Michael Burleson? Hinkin, a former TV news photographer, skillfully portrays irredeemable characters as well as likable but flawed ones in this first installment of the Vega and Middleton Mystery series. There's a healthy mix of ethnicities, ages, and religions (at the news station's holiday party, the executive playing Santa alternates his red cap with a blue yarmulke). Descriptions are vivid; a line of taillights becomes "a blood red trail creeping east." Although the story moves briskly, editing could bring the 400-plus page count down considerably with no noticeable omissions. And despite the series title, this tale is more about Vega than Middleton. Still, the book is a promising debut.

An exciting series opener that delivers murder, drugs, and romance.

—Kirkus