

# Joe Gunther and colleagues cross state lines

*“Fall Guy,” Archer Mayor. Minotaur Books, 2022*

The book opens on a cold late-winter evening, as Joe Gunther looks down a Vermont hill at the flashing strobe lights dominating the scene he is about to join: the state police, sheriff’s deputies, Joe’s colleagues at the Vermont Bureau of Investigation, the EMS, and the local fire department are gathered around a Mercedes-Benz deserted in a ditch. The car, Joe’s colleague Willy Kunkle explains, is registered in New Hampshire to the wealthy Lemuel Shaw; it was reported stolen five days ago, but abandoned recently. Well, not entirely abandoned. There’s a dead body in the trunk, soon identified as Brattleboro resident Don Kalfus. The car’s back seat is filled with stolen goods, among them several cell phones; one of these is a New Hampshire phone featuring recently-trafficked child porn pictures. That discovery leads to the VBI’s joining their New Hampshire colleagues in the task force Internet Crimes Against Children, thus setting up cross-border cooperation that allows the VBI to retain jurisdictional control over a case that leads them from Brattleboro to the New Hampshire seacoast to the White Mountains.

The case raises many issues, so Joe and his three colleagues quickly set up separate investigations. Joe and some New Hampshire colleagues go after the child porn trafficker; Kunkle conducts interviews with Kalkus’ mother and lowlife contacts; Sammie Martens and Lester Spinney interview Shaw and his wife. Mayor is at his best in such scenes, which all portray the skill with which the VBI colleagues gradually peel away the lies and bluster they encounter. And yet, they all agree, there is something about the case that isn’t coming through. Kalfus, a broad-ranging, successful thief, stole both the Mercedes and its contents; so how did he end up in its trunk? One of the cell phones in the Mercedes is an old flip phone, which belongs (or more likely, belonged) to Scooter Nelson, a preteen boy whose disappearance some years ago baffled the VBI. In Joe’s words, the boy disappeared without a trace, “as if he’d been grabbed by a flying saucer.” So how,

all these years later, could his phone have appeared in the trunk of the Mercedes? Still puzzling over that issue, the VBI learn of another death—and, as Beverly Hillstrom (Joe’s significant other) reveals in the autopsy Joe insists upon, it’s possible that the death was not of natural causes.

Gradually, the pieces start to come together, resulting in an electrically exciting climactic scene ... followed by a quiet conclusion with an unexpected twist. As always with Mayor, don’t skip to the end.

“Fall Guy” is the first of Mayor’s mysteries since “Bomber’s Moon” (2019) that focuses simply on Joe, Lester, Willy, and Sammie, the four members of VBI, instead of also incorporating Hillstrom’s journalist daughter Rachel and her friend PI Sally Kravitz. The young women’s absence is probably a matter of economy; the case is tremendously complicated, and the VBI’s New Hampshire colleagues add plenty of extra characters. But in focusing on the VBI, Mayor gives himself time to develop the characters of Joe’s three associates, whose lives Joe’s fans have been following for many books.

We find that Lester loves Hampton Beach, NH—but especially when it’s empty in winter. We find that Willy, no matter how difficult with his colleagues, is an artist at drawing out criminals—and we see him stop in the middle of an evening interview to read to his daughter Emma on Facetime.

We find that Sammie often feels guilty for being away from Emma, even though she knows the kid is happy. And we see, time and time again, how much Joe Gunther cares for the three people he works with. These touches, along with Mayor’s flair for describing lowlife places like Hughie’s bar or the horrific apartment of Kalfus’ mother, furnish a substantial

part of the pleasure of reading “Fall Guy.” Fans can justly look forward to Mayor’s quiet observations, just as they have in the previous Joe Gunther novels, book after book, year after year.



## One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

