

# A med student, two mafia grunts, and a murder

## "Marked Man: A Joe Gunther Novel" - Archer Mayor, Minotaur Books, 2021

Archer Mayor's 32nd Joe Gunther novel opens with alternating short passages set in two different states. In the first, a UVM medical student encounters irrefutable evidence that the cadaver he and his fellow students have been studying in anatomy class is a homicide victim. In the second, two elderly Mafia grunts, Fredo and Eddie, discuss Eddie's obsessive desire to get revenge for his failure to receive the post-prison pension he'd been promised decades ago in return for confessing to a murder he did not commit.

The medical student's discovery is sent to Beverly Hillstrom, Vermont state medical examiner; from there, the case moves to the office of Hillstrom's partner, Joe Gunther, the head of the Vermont Bureau of Investigation. The resulting story, as Mayor remarks in his acknowledgments, has "a lot of moving parts," as the Mafioso backstory slowly works its way into an investigation that requires the full-time attention of Joe and his three trusted associates, along with the part-time scrutiny of Hillstrom's journalist daughter Rachel Reiling and her friend, PI Sally Kravitz.

The murder victim is Nathaniel Lyon, an 82-year-old Brattleboro billionaire who has bought a textile factory and refurbished it as a home of about 150,000 square feet. Into this "proletarian factory version of a buffed-up Louis XIV castle," Lyon has persuaded his offspring to move, along with their families and their businesses. Each family occupies space the size of a McMansion, and in different ways, all the parents have been lured into the joint home by Lyon's nefarious influence.

The inter-relationships of the families are so complicated that the VBI requires a descriptive whiteboard sketch, helpfully supplied for the reader, to keep siblings, half-siblings, and adopted children straight. Careful identification is important, for as the VBI searches for Lyon's murderer, first one, then another member of this family dies in circumstances carefully made to look like accidents. Furthermore, investigation reveals that one of the family who is no relation

of Lyon's at all, has been involved in a real accident that Lyon has covered up—for a price.

The wonderfully thick plot, told from many points of view, becomes thicker when Joe finds that Nathaniel Lyon once lived in Rhode Island, and his name was Nick Bianchi. Joe takes a "field trip" to Providence, RI, where he finds a great deal about Nick/Nathaniel's ties to the Mafia. Meanwhile, the other three members of the VBI stay in Brattleboro, investigating the dynamics of the unloving family in the factory.

In the last 20 pages, Mayor draws all the complicated threads together; and the concluding paragraphs will surprise even readers familiar with Mayor's skill. Mirroring the increasing pace of the narrative by reading faster will lead to confusion and back-tracking. Skipping to the end would be a grave disservice to both author and audience.

Amid its compellingly described characters, mingled narrative voices, carefully orchestrated interviews, and forensic knowledge, "Marked Man" is deeply influenced by the idea of family. In the background, of course, there is The Family—a Rhode Island Mafia whose chief members have "died of drink and fatty foods," and whose powers have been greatly curtailed by legal action. In the foreground, there is Lyon's family, held together under a single roof by an enormous trust fund, but splintered by blackmail, lies, and illicit affairs.

And finally, there is the VBI, which has "been a team long enough to have witnessed life changes in one another," and whose "mutual trust and reliance" have made them as "integrated as a flock of birds, instinctively weaving and turning as a whole, free of the distracting doubts or prejudice that often plagued less experienced groups."

To readers who have followed them over the years that have turned Joe Gunther into "an older man," the VBI has become a welcome fictive family, as one suspects it has long been to its creator.



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