

The background of the cover is a landscape photograph. The top half shows a sky with a vibrant, multi-colored aurora borealis or light display in shades of orange, yellow, green, and blue. Below the sky, there are dark, silhouetted mountain ranges. In the foreground, there is a dense forest of trees, also in silhouette, with some mist or fog visible between the mountain ranges.

# DANGEROUS INSPIRATION

GREG STONE



“Imagine a bunch of strangers, a secret which binds them, then follow the colours of perception and you’ll have the sort of *Dangerous Inspiration* Agatha Christie would have created.”

Andrea Purgatori  
journalist and author of *Four Little Oysters*

“*Dangerous Inspiration* is a ‘whodunit’ that draws its roots from a different era, but takes place firmly in today’s world. In fact, it’s a lot like its wry and amusing protagonist. This book is smart, but not pedantic. It is observant, but it doesn’t drown you in details. And it works just as well with a beer as it does with a nice cup of tea. But don’t think that means that you’ll be putting it down.”

Steve Schlozman, MD  
author of *The Zombie Autopsies*

“Gripping from the outset ... a good old whodunnit!”

Jenna Ward  
Professor at Coventry University  
and Director of the Art of Management & Organization

“Ronan Mezini is a hard-boiled ex-detective who likes philosophy, Shakespeare, good red wine and complicated women. He’s trying to write a book at an artist’s retreat in Vermont but gets caught up in a series of murders committed during a wild storm. Mezini likes to talk to himself, and his often hilarious soliloquies keep this whodunit moving from beginning to end.”

F. James Pensiero, Deputy Managing Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Avid mystery buffs (like myself) will instantly recognize the familiar (and beloved) tropes of *Dangerous Inspiration*, a classic homage to Christie and her ilk: a group of strangers summoned to an isolated location, their psychological unveiling during the ensuing mayhem, and the final denouement which reveals all. Within this construct, and with many winks to it throughout, Greg Stone has created a memorable group of quirky characters. Events quickly unfold in this action packed story with twists and turns leading to an unexpected resolution. I thoroughly enjoyed it!”

Ina Saltz  
Professor Emeritus, The City College of New York  
Author and Content Creator, LinkedIn Learning



# DANGEROUS INSPIRATION

*A Ronan Mezini Mystery*

GREG STONE

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

# 3

SUNDAY – 8:00 P.M.

THE RAIN SURGED when we started to eat. The water was running in rivulets down the skylights as the steady thunder supplied a bass soundtrack. We were almost finished when André came in from the kitchen, sat down in the seat at the head of the table, and addressed us again.

“My uncle says he won’t be joining us until the morning. He asked me to be the MC for the time being.”

I thought it was odd that Olivier wasn’t showing up. I had heard that he was quite eccentric and I really wanted to meet him.

“First of all, you should all be immensely proud to be here,” André said. “There are only eight of you, chosen from nearly 400 applicants. Our most selective cohort ever.”

He poured himself a glass of wine and toasted us. “Here’s to you and your, uh, interlude here.” All glasses clinked as the good cheer filled the room.

“I apologize for the weather. This Nor’easter was supposed to pass us by, but no such luck. For those of you who aren’t from New England,” André

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continued, in the manner of a high school teacher, “this happens when warm air from the Gulf collides with cold air coming down from Greenland. The result is a powerful storm that can cause incredible damage.”

“How l-long will it l-l-last?” Zane asked, nervously.

“A day or two, maybe more,” André answered. “We’ll have to stay indoors, so we’ll have a chance to get to know one another. As you know, my uncle doesn’t use a computer so there is no online information about you. Allow me to introduce you one at a time. I made a few notes about your bios.”

Pointing to Barney, he said, “This giant here, Barney Auberge, incongruously, is a champion of miniature sculptures. When people ask him to explain his work, he just says, ‘I like small.’ In his application he said he is looking forward to trying his hand at large sculptures. He plans to take full advantage of our welding studio which is full of scrap metal which we’ve been collecting for years.”

Barney raised his glass and nodded. He seemed conceited and self-contained to me. I guessed that little light or emotion would escape his gravitational pull under ordinary circumstances. *When he’s riled, he might be dangerous*, I thought. One to watch.

“Next up is Kachina Bluestone, from Rockport, Maine. Though she’s only 28, she has already published three volumes of poetry. *The New York Times* raved about her latest book *Vocalizing* and called her ...”

Looking down at his notes, he continued, “A champion of free verse who seems to be eavesdropping on our private conversations — at once literally transcribing them and turning them into a layered and surrealistic mix of accents, dialects, and patterns.”

Kachina giggled like a schoolgirl. I noticed that she had tattoos on her arms — depicting various birds and a sunrise. That made me think of Debussy’s *La Mer* for some reason, and the objects were turning into dancing ocean waves in my mind. I blinked and pushed back the vision.

“Next on the agenda,” André continued, “Mr. Zane Weaver, a transplanted New Yorker originally from Minneapolis. He has already sold a script to Amazon and two plays to Broadway producers. He’s also a fine actor. A recent appearance as Edmund in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* drew universal acclaim at the Kennedy Center in our nation’s capital. He may seem shy, but he’s as powerful as a missile on stage.”



Zane looked down. The others eyed him with a combination of awe and envy.

“As you have no doubt seen,” André said, “Pix is always shooting. My uncle calls him the Baron of Black and White. In fact, Pix regards color photography as a travesty.”

It seemed to me that André was warming to the role of Papa Bear, showing off the artists and basking in reflected glory in their achievements.

“Pix knows every cop in Baltimore,” André continued. “He can turn a grisly tableau into a masterpiece. I confess that I forget his real name.” He chuckled with his lips closed.

“It’s Edgar, but no one *ever* calls me that,” Pix said as he tipped his red porkpie hat, smiled, and shot a few more pictures of the scene. As he aimed his iPhone in Cassie’s direction, André gestured toward her at the same time.

“Cassie Poe was a prima ballerina, if I may use that expression.”

“Yes, you may,” she said with conviction.

“She started at the American Ballet Theater at Lincoln Center right out of high school in New York,” he said. “She became a bankable star immediately and would have stayed at the pinnacle, the very zenith of ‘la danse,’” which he pronounced with a French accent, “until a back injury sidelined her. After a painful hiatus, she reinvented herself as a choreographer and has garnered equal acclaim. She plans to work on some new plans here.”

“Without people badgering me in rehearsals all the time,” she said, with no small degree of irritation.

“I know the feeling,” Jetta said.

“Have you ever been a director?” Cassie asked with interest bordering on sarcasm.

Jetta looked miffed but André saved the situation with his introduction. “Meet Jetta Ortega, an LA actress who prefers serious drama to Hollywood fare. A true rarity in a town dedicated to kitsch rather than culture. She’s definitely on the brink of a great movie career.”

“From your lips to the ears of the production gods,” Jetta said. “You may see me practicing, talking to myself, but don’t mind. There are usually at least 23 ways to deliver any given line and I like to run through all of them —”

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“Jetta,” André said, interrupting her, rudely, I thought, “we are tolerant of all manner of behavior here, fortunately and unfortunately.” He continued, with quotes in his voice: “If you’re squeamish, don’t prod the beach rubble.”

“Sappho,” I said.

“Yes, indeed, one of her poem fragments,” André said, as everyone looked at me as if I were an encyclopedia. “Now meet Thalia Spiros, an abstract painter from Miami who has been burning up galleries down there.”

“I think of myself as a *painter*, not an abstract painter,” Lia said. I couldn’t help admiring her chutzpah. Barney looked at her with admiration.

“Distinction noted,” André said. “According to a recent review in *Art Forum*, Thalia —”

“You can call me Lia,” she said.

He cleared his throat and kept talking. “Ms. Spiros’ use of color calls to mind Basquiat. There isn’t a shy shade in her palette.”

Lia laughed but beamed with pride.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“And that brings us to Mr. Ronan Mezini,” André said, “a former homicide detective from Cambridge, Massachusetts. You might have read about the infamous Headline Hunter serial killer, whom he brought to justice a few years ago.” Don’t remind me, I thought. I wish I could forget that case.

“Mr. Mezini has twice reinvented himself, first as a private investigator and now as a writer. It won’t surprise you to know that we avail ourselves of the services of anonymous experts to evaluate applicants. One of them said that the first draft of his mystery novel sparkles with the wit of Chandler and the philosophical heft of Camus.”

I just smiled. I’ve never been comfortable with praise. Or criticism either, for that matter.

“I confess that I’m happy Detective Mezini is here, because of what I’m about to tell you,” André said. The mood in the room shifted quickly. Up to that point, the artists had been feeling privileged and honored to be on site.

“A letter came in the mail today. It was addressed to my uncle. It upset him so much that he didn’t want to see anyone.” He proceeded to read this aloud:

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*Dear Mr. Lanier:*

*Please congratulate the illustrious artists for their selection to your colony. They are the elite in every sense of that word.*

*I regret to tell you that their joy will quickly come to grief. Within the next 48 hours, at least one member of the community will die, though the punishment may be justified. Ignore this message at your peril.*

*This session will certainly be memorable.*

*Have a pleasant 'Interlude.'*

True to form, Jetta screamed. Zane stood up and started pacing. Barney sat back with his arms folded. He looked like he was preparing for battle. Cassie's expression, ordinarily blank, turned dark. Her eyes narrowed and she took in a deep breath.

"We should get out of here as soon as we can," Kachina said. She looked so distraught that Cassie put her hand on her shoulder to try to comfort her.

"I agree," Jetta said. She was almost shrieking. "Can't we just drive back to Burlington, or anywhere we can —"

"In this weather, that would make no sense," André said. "The wind is already gusting."

As if on cue, the windows started to rattle and the rain was pelting the roof with palpable force. "It's pitch dark and there are too many dirt roads here. We'd get stuck in five minutes," André said.

"So we just sit here and wait, then?" Jetta said. "Can't we call someone?" She frantically tried to get a signal, to no avail.

"Cell coverage is very poor here normally," André said. "And impossible with this storm."

"Why didn't you tell us about the letter sooner?" Cassie asked.

"It came in the mail this afternoon, just before you all arrived. I haven't even had a chance to mention this to Honoré." With that, his brother opened the swinging door that led to the kitchen. He looked puzzled, as if he were sensing that something was amiss but he did not know what. André signed to him rapidly, no doubt explaining the

situation, and Honoré looked concerned. He signed back with decisive gestures.

“Honoré says that anyone who tries to harm any of you will have to kill him first,” André explained.

“My hero,” Cassie said sarcastically. “That’s very reassuring but what if the person who wrote that note is in this room right now?”

We all looked at one another with apprehension and suspicion.

“Your uncle should come and speak to us,” Cassie said. “He’s the director of this place and he’s responsible.”

I did my best to keep my expression neutral. That habit was ingrained after many years of police work.

“I assume you have no idea who might have sent this,” I said.

“No. As far as I know, we have no enemies,” André said. “Sometimes people get angry when they’re rejected. But no one has ever threatened us.”

“Could this be a hoax, or some sort of elaborate joke?” I asked.

“Not too f-funny,” Zane said.

“Let me see the envelope,” I said. “You should handle it with a napkin in case there are any prints.” André wrapped it in a cloth napkin and handed it over to me. I held it up to the firelight — without touching the paper.

“The postmark is from Cleveland,” I said. “Is that significant?”

“I don’t think anyone here, or anyone that I know of, for that matter, is from there,” André said.

“It’s easy enough to fake that,” I said. “Whoever wrote this could have asked someone to mail it for him from another city. There are even services that will do that for a fee,” I said.

“Can you help with security?” André asked. He saw that I hesitated. “Or at least stay on maximum alert. Are you carrying?”

I didn’t answer.

“Can’t shake old habits, can you?” Cassie asked.

“Do you object?” I asked. She just shrugged.

*Wonderful*, I thought. Not what I anticipated. Instead of spending time writing a mystery story, I ended up in the middle of one.

Ruby, the sous-chef, walked out of the kitchen with a big bucket of ice. She seemed to be struggling so I offered to help her but she waved

me off. "I got it," she said. She opened the front door of the chalet and disappeared around the corner.

A moment later we all heard a blast that was somewhat muffled by the storm. It reminded me of a shotgun but I couldn't be sure.

Kachina screamed, Jetta started to cry, and Pix leaped immediately to his feet and started shooting with his iPhone. Instinctively I pulled out my gun, which had been hidden in a holster under my sweater, and that only made the panic worse.

"What are you doing?" Lia asked.

I ignored her comment and ran out the door. The rain was so intense that I was instantly soaked. I quickly turned around and almost ran into André who was standing behind me. We looked left and right then I saw the bucket, lying on its side, with its load of ice spilling out on the lawn. I looked in all directions and saw Ruby lying by the trees at the edge of the grass. André and I ran over and tried to comfort her but we were too late. There was a six-inch hole in the middle of her chest where her heart had been beating just moments ago. She was clearly beyond help.

My first thought was that we might be the next victims, yet nothing was stirring. There were no sounds other than the insistent rain which turned the red blood on Ruby's chef's clothes pink.

"Let's get her out of here," I said. Can we stash her somewhere?"

André motioned for me to follow him as he grabbed Ruby's arms and pointed to her legs to suggest that I should grab her ankles. We could barely hear one another in the wind. He led the way. As we walked past the windows we saw many terrified faces behind the glass.

We made our way to a storage shed nearby, placed Ruby's body gently on the floor, covered her with a tarp and headed back inside.

André was signing at a furious pace with Honoré, who looked crestfallen.

No one spoke and the silence made the terror worse. The anxiety in the room soared as high as the vaulted ceiling.

Jetta was pacing back and forth. Zane looked up anxiously. Kachina was blinking back tears.

"Was there no chance of saving her?" Lia asked. I shook my head.

"Who do we think killed her?" Jetta asked.

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“No idea,” André said. “She was a nice kid. Hard worker.”

“Well, she didn’t kill herself,” Jetta said. “You didn’t see anyone outside?”

“Afraid not,” I said. Jetta was quivering with fear.

I was about to try to say something reassuring, when Barney shouted over the crowd, “Can’t we contact the cops?” He tried his phone, to no avail.

Jetta and Zane did the same, with no signal.

“The service is never good here, as I mentioned,” André said.

“Do you mean that we should have understood you the first time you said it?” Cassie asked.

“Can’t we go to the police on foot?” Jetta asked.

“No chance,” André said. “The nearest police station is in Hightower. It’s about 25 miles away, over a couple of mountains. Might as well be in Chicago with this storm.”

“Our only protection is one guy with a gun,” Lia said.

“Then again, this is Vermont,” Zane said. “D-doesn’t everyone own guns here?”

“Maybe, but not us,” André said. “I never liked them. There’s a reason why my ancestors named this town Tranquility.”

“This place doesn’t seem too tranquil at the moment,” Jetta said. “Don’t take this personally, Detective, but how can you protect all of us?”

“I wish everyone would just call me Ronan, or even Mez,” I said. “Remember, I’m not a cop anymore. I do know that Ruby was an ex-con, though.”

“How can you tell?” Cassie asked.

“Her body language,” I said. “The tentative way she acted. As if she was grateful.”

“For what?” Jetta asked.

“For the opportunity to work here. I’ll bet she was paroled recently, right?” I asked, looking at André.

“Yes,” he said.

“What did she do?” Cassie asked.

“She got involved with the wrong crowd in high school,” he said. “An abusive boyfriend forced her to drive a getaway car in a series of

robberies. After they were arrested, she took a plea and did a couple of years in prison in St. Johnsbury.”

“Were there guns involved?” Cassie asked.

“Yeah, but she didn’t use them,” André said.

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Jetta said. “This is all really scary. Did she testify against her boyfriend?”

“Yeah, but he’s still in jail,” André said. He was beginning to look defensive.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Jetta said. “I’m sure he has lots of friends on the outside. One of them may have shot her. And maybe he’s the one who threatened us.”

“Yeah, and he’ll come back to finish the job,” Cassie said.

Honoré had been following this conversation and started signing vigorously. He looked chagrined.

“What’s he saying?” Cassie asked.

“He says we shouldn’t judge her too harshly,” André said. “She was a good person. Doing well in culinary school. And trying to make new beginnings.”

“I guess that’s not possible anymore,” Barney said.

“That’s one way to put it,” I said.

Honoré shook his head and started to sob. He walked away, apparently in embarrassment.

“Can we all spend the night together here, André?” Jetta asked. “It would be much safer that way.”

“I suppose so,” he said. “We have enough sleeping bags and air mattresses to go around. We keep them on hand because many of the artists like to sleep under the stars when the weather is clear.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “What if Honoré, André, and I escort everyone back to their chalets so that we can all bring our clothes here?” I was thankful that I could at least suggest something to do. Taking any action was better than sitting and worrying.

“Works for me,” André said. He signed to Honoré, who nodded. “We’re glad to help.”

“And we should trust these terrific twins because?” Barney asked, pointing to the twins. André bristled, as did Honoré, who seemed to sense hostility from Barney’s body language.

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“We’ll all watch one another,” I said.

“Better bring warm clothes, it gets chilly here at night,” André said.

“All right, let’s get started,” I said. “Unless there are any objections.”

“OK by me,” Pix said.

“Suppose the killer is one of us?” Kachina asked. She had given voice to everyone’s fear.

“If so, it might be an educational experience for all of us,” Barney said.

“Yeah, I can see the headline now, ‘Screwed at Interlude,’” Cassie said.

“Let’s be shrewd instead,” I said. My rhyme wasn’t clever, but at least it defused the tension, if just for a moment. I proceeded to take charge. “André, you and I can take Jetta and Kachina back.” He flicked a switch and turned on the floodlights outside. The beams reflected off the spears of rain.

Jetta and Kachina looked around apprehensively, as if they were afraid to leave the safety of the group. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m armed, remember?”

“And how do we know *you’re* not the psycho?” Cassie asked.

“You don’t. But you’ll just have to trust me, I suppose, for now. If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll take the bullets out of my gun.”

“Leave ‘em in,” Barney said. “If the asshole makes a move, put one in his skull.”

Honoré motioned to Cassie and Lia, suggesting that he’d accompany them.

Cassie eyed him as if he had bad intent.

“André, tell him I can take care of myself,” Lia said brusquely. With that, she turned and walked toward her chalet.

Cassie shrugged and left with Honoré.

As André and I walked out with Kachina and Jetta, I confess I was dejected. I thought I had left all this madness behind. I was tired of shaking hands with violence. Two words came to mind: fear memories. From what I’ve read, that’s what PTSD is all about. Please understand that I’m not scared. I wouldn’t shrink from danger, it’s just that I don’t want to risk my life and make my son an orphan. Bad enough that his mom is unavailable.



The storm was roaring. The water was rushing down the slope past the buildings. Little rivers appeared on the lawn, pushing the grass every which way, and forming rapids. The water was deep enough to support a kayak.

People kept turning around, watching one another, and scanning the woods for potential intruders. Visibility was poor and that increased the anxiety. Adrenalin was no doubt surging in all of us. For some reason, I kept an eye on Barney, who was silhouetted against one of the floodlights behind me. He seemed to be moving with quiet menace. There was an aura of repressed savagery about him.

Reflexively, Pix was shooting, holding his jacket over his phone to keep it dry. “D-do you think you can sculpt fear, Barney?” Zane asked.

“Like what I see on your face now?” Barney said.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before starting his communications company, Greg Stone spent a decade in journalism, as a writer at Time Inc. in New York and as a TV reporter in Minneapolis, Boston, and on PBS. *Dangerous Inspiration* is his first novel, though he has written two business books on storytelling and creative marketing. Greg lives just outside Boston with his family. He was educated at Harvard and Columbia.



## Synesthesia alters detective-turned-novelist Ronan Mezini's perceptions. But can it help him find the killer?

Detective-turned-novelist Ronan Mezini has skewed perceptions because of a condition called synesthesia, which for him transforms sounds into colors. These visions give him unusual insights that help him solve the case. So when a collection of eccentric – and possibly violent – creative people come together at an elite artists' colony in rural Vermont, murders occur in rapid succession and suspicion falls on everyone as Mezini unearths the founding family's secrets.

*Dangerous Inspiration, Greg Stone's first novel, is a brilliantly written story that is captivating and had me reading it from start to finish without stopping. It has many intriguing twists and turns, the prose is deft and elegant and the end sublimely surprising.*

Sanjiv Chopra MD, MRCP, FRCP  
Professor, Harvard Medical School  
Co-Author, *The Two Most Important Days*

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