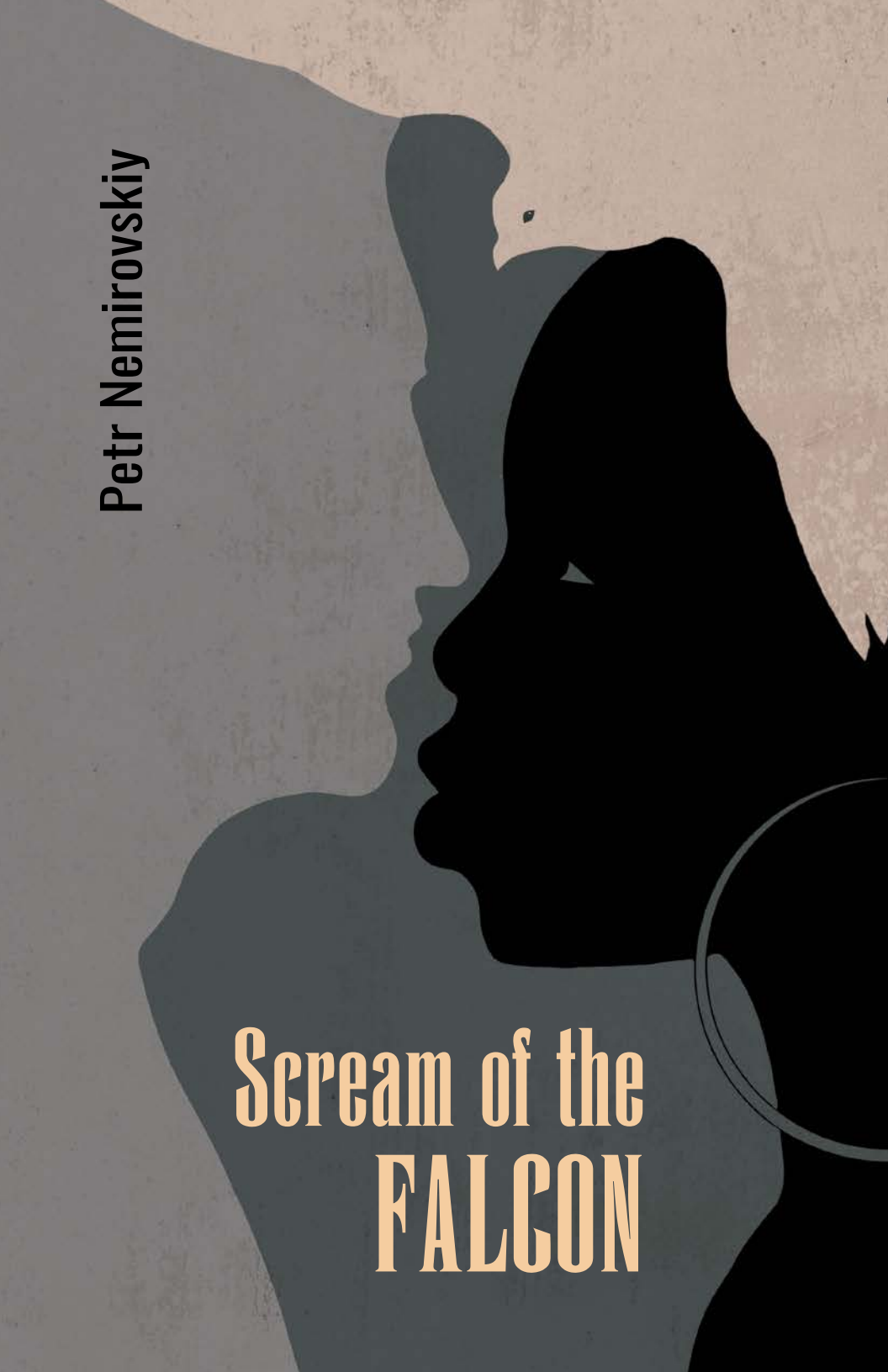


Petr Nemirovskiy

Scream of the  
**FALCON**





**Petr Nemirovskiy**

**SCREAM  
OF THE FALCON**

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**Petr Nemirovskiy**

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# **PART ONE**

# Hooked

Taking my fishing pole and a bag, I walked out of the one-bedroom co-op in Marine Park, Brooklyn, that I had recently bought and headed toward the salt marsh. It was early morning. A white dove which had nested nearby a few months ago suddenly descended to the ground. Standing motionless, it stared at me, cooing. “What’s up, buddy?” I asked. After apologizing for not having any bread or crackers, the dove took off, and I continued on my way.

Standing on some huge rocks by the shore of the marsh, I baited my hook and cast my line out into the bay, then played the waiting game. It was quiet, a light breeze chasing small waves.

Not far from me stood a man, roughly in his fifties, of medium height and decent build. He had a pleasant appearance, not without charm. Short wavy hair, combed back, framed his oval face. Upon closer scrutiny, his clear, penetrating eyes drew attention, and a good-natured smile played on his lips. He was also fishing. Squinting, he looked out somewhere into the distance, where boats chugged into the bay and the outline of the bridge was faintly visible. At times, he seemed to be deep in thought. I’d seen this man here a few times. We’d engage in fishing-related banter, like the best way to catch bluefish and such. So far in our short



conversations, we hadn't asked for personal particulars—like each other's name, occupation, or residence. Since he was carrying only minimal fishing gear, I concluded that he also lived nearby, and, like me, was not an avid fisherman, but came here to breathe in the fresh, salty ocean air, spend some time alone, and basically relax amid the surroundings.

I watched as he would repeatedly cut off a large piece of baitfish with a knife, put it on a hook, and—with a precise motion—cast his line. During one of his casts, a greedy seagull gliding by suddenly swooped on the flying bait, snapped it up, and tried to fly away with it! The man pulled on the rod to snatch it back, and after a short, somewhat comical struggle between the two unusual combatants, the bird finally surrendered, let go of the fish, and took off with angry cries. It flew to where the water was “boiling”—a school of bluefish was in a feeding frenzy on smaller fish. What the bluefish didn't get below, voracious seagulls attacked from above as the smaller fish tried to escape.

“Such beauty,” said the man, putting his hand over his face to shield the sun. “Bluefish in the salt marsh are very active now, in late summer, early fall.”

“Yes, and it's a pretty amazing sight,” I agreed, squatting on a rock.

“Whoa!” he shrieked, pulling on his rod to reel in a catch.

“Probably a bluefish,” I guessed.

“Let's hope it's a good bluefish!” He replied.

It was. He soon had it landed and began pulling the hook from its mouth.

“Come on, baby, open your mouth!” he pleaded with the fish. With one swift motion, one blow to the head with

a rock, the fish was dead. He calmly took his folding knife out and began to clean it. He removed the scales with extraordinary precision, especially around the fins and gills. Then he sliced open the fish's belly and just as carefully began to remove the intestines.

I observed him, focused on his task with a bloodied knife in his hand, then looked at the gutted and meticulously cleaned fish.

"Looks like you're performing fish surgery," I commented.

"You're right. I removed its gallbladder and transplanted the liver."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes, I'm a surgeon. I'm also head of the Emergency Room at Bethlehem Hospital. What's your name?"

"Ben. And yours?"

"Michael. Michael Harris. It's easy to remember."

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Harris."

"You can just call me Michael. Call me whatever you like."

We finally got to talking.

"Do you live near here?" I asked.

"Yes, on Fillmore Street."

"So, then, we're neighbors. I live on Gerritsen Avenue."

"What do you do for a living, Ben?"

"I work in a small outpatient clinic with mental health and substance abuse patients."

"So, it seems we're colleagues to some extent. Are you a psychiatrist?"

"Almost, I'm a psychotherapist."

"Do you like your job?"

"In general, yes. I like to work with patients. But the salary is low and the benefits are lousy there."

“Understood. Are you married?”

“Divorced, thank God. Whoa!”

The rod in my hands suddenly bent violently. I pulled it toward me and immediately sensed a strong fish was hooked.

“Wow! This looks serious, no joke,” exclaimed Dr. Harris, staring at my bent rod.

I spun the reel handle as the fish veered either far left or far right. Only a large fish could have grabbed the big hook I’d attached to the line. When the fish would swim toward me, the line weakened, as if it had fallen off. I only had to spin the reel a few times and the line became taut again. Then the rod bent sharply, and the fish, after some rest, continued the fight.

“Ah!!!” I yelled, getting exhausted from the tension.

Sweat suddenly streamed down my face like rain. I had no idea that pressure could make it flow like a flash flood. My T-shirt and even underwear—everything—became wet with sweat. I kept spinning the reel, doubting that I could bring the fish in.

“It’s a shark!” yelled Dr. Harris as I dragged a huge sand shark onto the rocks, breathing heavily.

It flopped around with an open jaw, scarlet blood spilling over its slippery gray body and flat white stomach from where the hook had punctured it. I pressed the shark’s face firmly against the rock. I wanted to kill it, that’s how much I hated it at that moment. At the same time, I wanted to kiss its bloodied mouth—that’s how much I loved it.

Sweat was still rolling down my face. The shark was thrashing its tail, trying to get out of my grasp.

“Let me help you.” Dr. Harris came over and held the shark down as I tried to pull the hook out of its bloody jaws.

I finally succeeded, and squeezing the shark tightly by the gills, threw it back into the water. The shark immediately disappeared beneath the surface.

“Swim baby, you’re free.”

“Good job, Ben,” said Dr. Harris. He was staring at me, as if judging my capabilities. “Listen, man, would you like to work in our hospital? I’d love to have you in our Emergency Room.”

“What kind of work would it be?”

“In a nutshell, we have a special zone in the ER where we place drug addicts and alcoholics, as well as suicidal and homicidal—in short, all the ‘cuckoos.’ I desperately need a specialist with experience working with these types of folks. As you can imagine it’s never boring. I think you’d enjoy it. And the hospital has great benefits—insurance, an annual raise, plenty of vacation time. Think about it. Take my number and call me when you make a decision.”

“I’m giving you the answer right now. Yes.”

## “Yellow Gowns”

It had been a few months since I'd started working in the ER. It was a decent-sized private hospital in downtown Brooklyn. I worked the day shift, but if needed I would stay late. I commuted there by car—about a forty-minute drive.

As Dr. Harris said, inside the ER was a special section dedicated to “cuckoos.” Some of them came into the ER on their own, others came by ambulance, and the rest were brought in by the police. Some had their hands cuffed and their feet shackled. Some were so drunk they couldn't stand. There was a non-stop drop-off of overdosed drug addicts. Suicidal patients were also often brought in. At times, fights broke out between patients, or they attacked the personnel.

All patients in this section of the ER were dressed in yellow hospital gowns. They had no idea that a yellow gown signaled high alert to staff as opposed to the regular red or blue gowns. Police and security guards always had a presence in this area, and any relocation of a “yellow gown” immediately caught their attention. The yellow gowns in the ER were labeled “numb nuts” in the “dimwit zone.” Sometimes in conversation between staff, things like this would slip: “Should we put this patient with the numb nuts?” or “We have the last available bed in the dimwit zone.”

Steven, a large Black psych technician, stood by the high pillar in the center of this zone, performing the role of overseer—monitoring and maintaining order. Looking at him, it always amazed me how nature could have created such a giant. If any of the patients were ever on the verge of losing control, Steven approached them, and in an unwavering voice advised them to calm down and lie back down in bed. If the patient still retained a spark of sanity, just looking at giant Steven would make them comply, albeit with resentment. Still, for those that chose to defy him, the police were called to take more drastic measures.

From this section, patients went off in different directions: some proceeded to the “cuckoo ward,” some to drug detox. Those handcuffed and shackled were escorted out by the police to precincts. There were also those whose condition had improved after spending some time in the ER on medication; they were sent home. My role was that of a so-called coordinator—along with the doctors, I decided where a yellow gown would be sent.

One of the superstitions of all ER employees is never to utter aloud, “Gee, it’s pretty quiet.” Even if two-thirds of the beds in the ER are empty and made up with clean sheets, and it’s so quiet that you can hear a fly buzz, under no circumstances should you say, “Gee, it’s pretty quiet.” As a newbie, I inadvertently broke this rule, and my colleagues immediately hissed at me: “Why are you saying that?!” This was because, unexpectedly, like a tornado swooping in on a peaceful village and quickly changing it beyond recognition, the same transformation can happen in the dimwit zone: one moment it’s calm and almost empty; the next all the beds are taken—the clean white sheets become stained

with blood and dirt; the police pacify one “psycho” yellow gown while doctors administer life-saving medicine to another who has overdosed.

\* \* \*

Such was the atmosphere in my new workplace—some of it familiar and some of it new. Yes, I’d worked with patients like yellow gowns before for many years in my career as a psychotherapist. However, the stress in the ER was incomparably higher than in the small outpatient clinic where I had last worked. Initially, I slept poorly, ate haphazardly, and lost weight.

Despite all that, I liked this place more and more each day. When a shift finally ended, I’d drag myself to the office for a cup of coffee, make some final phone calls, and fill out paperwork. I walked along a long, brightly lit corridor of the ER, nodding to doctors, nurses, and police officers walking toward me. I’d often recall how I met Dr. Harris on the shore of the salt marsh, when I caught that fateful shark. The smell of sea salt, sand, and algae suddenly penetrated my nostrils.

# All about My Father

**A**fter work I sometimes went to see my father. He lived in a rented one-bedroom apartment in a respectable Brooklyn neighborhood—Bay Ridge. Not long ago, he underwent his third heart surgery, almost immediately following a second one, and he needed care.

Until recently, we saw little of each other and spoke rarely on the phone—ever since he divorced my mother, leaving us to go live with another woman when I was 15. At the time I was glad he departed, since the family scandals and my parents' endless warring—the fault of which was my father's quarrelsome, selfish nature and his heavy drinking—would finally come to an end.

I never felt any deep attachment to him. We were very different people—different in temperament, in values, and in our outlook on life. Nevertheless, he was my father, and as a child, I respected his strength and power. To be honest, back then, I was afraid of him and poorly understood him. When he was drunk, there were instances where he beat me. I tried to go unnoticed, even hiding sometimes from him in closets so I wouldn't get in his way and then under his hands. When I was a teenager, I was always in a hurry to finish my homework before he got home from work, and then I'd run to the park, where I played basketball or



handball with my friends. I sat there with them late on park benches or on swings at the playground, and we secretly drank beer or smoked weed.

I always hoped I'd receive some sort of kindness and acceptance from my father. Whatever he did, no matter how much he insulted me, I still waited desperately for him to show me love. On rare occasions he did, but only while drunk—when he would hug me. I remember vividly how he'd press his prickly, unshaven cheek into my face. This rush of tenderness was usually accompanied by some drunken babbling about how I bore the name of his father, who once escaped from the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz during the war. "You, Ben, were named after him. Always remember that all men in our family were heroes." When he leaned into me, I grimaced from the stench of vodka. I tensed up inside, waiting for him to back off.

When he got together with that other woman and left us, I let out a sigh of relief. After that, we rarely saw each other and communicated very little. Sometimes I completely forgot about his existence, not seeing or hearing from him for years.

Oddly enough, he suddenly developed a warm relationship with my ex-wife, Sarah, when we were still together. He sometimes came to visit us, showing some grandfatherly interest in Veronica, my daughter. When my wife and I divorced, she moved with Veronica to Boston. My father's relationship with them faded.

A few years ago, the woman with whom he lived eventually got very sick, virtually falling apart. Her adult daughter took her to live with her in Philadelphia, and my father stayed in their apartment in Brooklyn.

Meanwhile, I changed jobs, drank—sometimes often and a lot—and buried my mother. Recently, my father had suddenly reappeared in my life, like a Shakespearean ghost appearing on the eve of a fateful event.

\* \* \*

“Hi, can I come in?”

“Yes, please.”

In front of me in the door stood a Black woman, around 34, medium height, slender, in gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt. My eye immediately went to her full, high breasts and her deep, dark eyes.

“My name is Amy. How are you doing? You’re Ben, Mark’s son, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. And you are...?”

“His home health aide. His doctor requested one for him after his last heart surgery, and it was approved. For now, your father is eligible for five home health aide hours daily, five days per week,” she said as we entered the living room.

“Hi, Dad. How are you?”

My father was sitting in a chair watching baseball on TV. His legs were raised on a retractable footrest.

“Hi, Ben. Still alive, as you can see.” He smiled, grimacing, with his lips shifted to the left.

I never liked that side smile; it looked more like the grin of some predatory animal.

I sat down on the sofa next to Amy, who was looking at something on her cell phone. I don’t know, maybe I sat too close to her, but as soon as I sat on the sofa and put my right hand next to my hip, for some reason Amy immediately rose, as if I posed some danger to her.

“Do you want coffee? Tea?” She asked, stepping a few feet away from me.

“No, thank you.”

“And you, Mark, can I get you something to eat or drink?”

“No, not yet.”

“Okay.” She went into the kitchen, ran the tap water, and began to wash dishes. From where I sat, I saw only the back of her short-sleeved black T-shirt.

I wanted to make love to her. Here and now. Let my father sit in the chair and watch his baseball. I’m going to retire to the bedroom with her—the doorknob there has a lock. What a great thing it is that he was given this home aide! She won’t mind making love to me, either—it’s obvious. These strange, wild thoughts seemed to have arisen on their own, against my will, and swirled through my head like a whirlwind. I rubbed my wrinkled-up forehead with my fingers. Yes, now we’re going to retire to the bedroom and make love.

At that moment, Amy looked back, as if she had overheard my inner monologue. She smiled broadly, and her big eyes flashed wildly and eagerly. I looked at and nodded toward the bedroom. She showed me her middle finger with a red-painted fingernail and turned away laughing. I chuckled in response—this meaningful silent dialogue amused me too.

Then I turned to my dad. “How are you, Dad? I think you’re better today.” I looked at him—this time with the expert gaze of a healthcare professional working in an ER. In my short time in the ER, I had gradually developed a professional clinician’s view: this is when you listen to the pa-

tient but focus your attention not only on their words but also on whether their face is pale, their breathing rate, in short, any symptoms to determine whether they are critical or not. Now, according to my assessment, though my father was somewhat pale and a bit haggard in appearance after his latest operation, he was still not critical.

“You only think I’m feeling better. In fact, I’m still unwell,” he grunted with reproach. “Today, I’ve had high blood pressure and a headache since this morning.” He sighed. “In general, things are bad.”

I frowned, feeling sorry for him.

“I called Dr. Shapiro, and he advised me to take a double dose of the blood pressure pills. Let’s see how it goes. It’s just fucking old age.” He reduced the TV volume and lowered the footrest. Then he got up and went to the bathroom.

# The End of the Novel

I took sick leave and rested for a month. I relaxed, read a lot, and listened to music. I thought about my distant past, present, and everything that had recently been happening.

One time I asked my dad what had happened to the gun. I guessed that he had taken it.

“I sold it for a million dollars,” he answered me with deep anger.

After that, we didn’t discuss it anymore.

\* \* \*

I spent a lot of time in the salt marsh in autumn, wandering along the coast and along its winding paths. I watched the amazing, bustling, and eventful life of the various creatures. The smells of salt water, damp earth, and wet rocks penetrated my nostrils. I felt inextricably merged with this world that had existed billions of years before me—a tiny particle—and which would go on well after my departure...

One day, I was sitting on the shore with my fishing pole. Suddenly, I heard, “Kee-eeee-arr!” The familiar, anxious, and joyful scream was coming not from the sky but the ground. Rising—obeying some incomprehensible force—I dropped the rod and rushed into a grove where the cries

seemed to be coming from, jumping over fallen branches and ravines, tripping and falling over exposed tree roots, and scaring stray cats and raccoons.

“Kee-eeeeee-arr!” The bird kept screaming. Its cries surrounded me, creating the illusion it was close to me and far away at the same time.

Finally, I understood where they were coming from and where the falcon was. In a torn T-shirt and covered in marsh debris, I left the salt marsh and hurried home. I was sure that Amy had returned!

To my surprise, Jason, her boyfriend, was standing in front of the building.

“Hey, bro,” he said, blocking my way.

“Hello.” I tensed all over, preparing for another “heavy male conversation.” But Jason didn’t seem to be in a fighting mood at all; on the contrary, he was somehow depressed, unhappy.

“Relax, bro. I didn’t come for that. I came to tell you not to wait for her anymore. She won’t be coming back to you. She...” He trailed off, wrinkling his forehead so hard. “She died.”

“What nonsense are you telling me?! You’re lying!”

“I got a call from her stepfather. We met when Amy and I went to Georgia to visit her relatives a few years ago.”

“How did it happen?” I couldn’t believe what I just heard.

“Seizure. It happened when she recently returned to Georgia and was looking for work. You know her story with booze, right? You know how dangerous it was for her. She was aware of it very well... Bro, you were also involved in this tragedy. If you weren’t in the picture, she would still be

with me and alive. Alive!” He scrunched up his face, looking at me intently, and tears glistened in his eyes. “Your apartment’s door is unlocked. Sorry, I came in without an invite. I left something there for you, you’ll be surprised. So long,” he tapped me lightly on the shoulder with his fist and left.

I entered my apartment. There in the living room was a book lying on the table: *Scream of the Falcon*, by Amy O’Neil. I picked up the book and skimmed through a few pages.

If I had a gun, that evening I would have put a bullet in my head.

\* \* \*

Sometime later I sold my co-op and moved to another apartment on the other side of the city, away from Marine Park and the salt marsh, where everything reminded me of... her.

# About the Author

**PETR NEMIROVSKIY** is a Ukrainian-American born in 1963 in Kiev, Ukraine. He graduated from Kiev University with a degree in journalism and started his career as a journalist and writer in 1997.

Nemirovskiy immigrated to the United States in 2000. He went on to get a master's in clinical social work in the US and has enjoyed a successful career in psychotherapy since then. On top of that, he's a professor at Fordham University, where he teaches substance abuse classes to graduate students.

Throughout this period, Nemirovskiy has continued to nurture his passion for writing. He's also worked as a psychotherapist, which has given him a deeper insight into human behavior and relationships. This has influenced and enriched his literary work. Seven of his books have been published in Ukraine and Russia. Nemirovskiy published his first novel, *A Walk Down Misery Street*, in 2022 to reach American readers.

From the beginning of the pandemic through its decline, Petr Nemirovskiy worked in the emergency department at a hospital in New York City. He transformed this experience into his new novel, *Scream of the Falcon*.





The novel *Scream of the Falcon* is fiction based on the experience of frontline Emergency Room staff in a New York City hospital living through the first and deadliest blow of the COVID-19 pandemic. The action evolves against the backdrop of the growing contagion—when in addition to multiple healthcare problems, the city grapples with issues of poverty, crime, racism, and political turmoil. The gripping and passionate drama of the main characters intricately weaves throughout the plot, adding to the artistic depth of this multifaceted novel.

The story begins on the eve of the pandemic, when the main character, Ben Horowitz—a recently divorced and overwhelmed psychotherapist who works in the ER of an NYC hospital—visits his estranged father. Ben unexpectedly finds himself attracted to Amy, his father’s strikingly beautiful African American healthcare aide, has a complicated backstory, and dreams of writing a great novel. Their casual flirting quickly turns into a stormy romance with accompanying scenes of jealousy, alcohol abuse, betrayals, and heroic attempts by the main characters to save each other. *Scream of the Falcon* reveals the tremendous power of love, which can lead us into heaven or hell.

The novel also challenges our assumptions and highlights how the human connections we make help carry us through life’s crises.

*Scream of the Falcon* is a masterpiece that synthesizes several genres, including realistic fiction, romantic tension, and mystery.



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