



The Poet

Stephanie Harris

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This distinctive action novel offers an absorbing story of love and hope in a cynical and violent world.

Stephanie Harris's sexy and suspenseful *The Poet* is a genre triumph, with unrelenting action, intriguing characters, and memorable sensuality. This page turner has delightful and unexpected twists, balancing its gory, cold-blooded crimes with a fresh love story.

Newly dumped, and overworked at her psychiatric facility job, Rebecca goes solo on a getaway trip to a secluded campsite. But she barely gets to soak up the natural beauty of the scenery—and of an enigmatic and strangely attractive hit man—before she and the other campers become the hostages of a group of unscrupulous mobsters.

Parallel to this is the story of William, a young orphan boy being mentored by two priests. Father Daniel is youthful, somewhat naive but goodhearted, and hopes to give the troubled and reclusive boy constructive outlets for his anger. Father Stephen, jaded and duplicitous, sees an opportunity to use William for his own purposes. The plot lines culminate on a singularly heinous night, through a shockingly unforgettable transformation.

Rebecca—intelligent, wry, and just bumbling enough to be personable—provides an excellent window into Jack's seedy world as a hit man and acts as a welcome and humorous foil to his cold demeanor. Their initial introductions and their ensuing attraction are used to skillfully pack a lot of tension into little dialogue.

Gory action scenes are bloody enough to be part of a Quentin Tarantino film, with all of their gratuitous, uncomfortable, and viscerally entertaining violence.

A central question begged propels the plot—and could easily spark heated debates: Is Jack's coldness a sign that he is a sociopath, or is he simply doing what he has to do? Rebecca believes he is still capable of love; Jack, in this complexity, is endlessly compelling.

Rebecca is obviously able to protect herself. She tests her captors with brazen shows of bravery, like casually pouring herself wine and sacrificing her own well-being for a young girl's. In a frustrating turn, though, she cedes all control to Jack, citing an essentialist belief that women are inherently the "weaker sex." This change severely undermines her prior bravery in the face of her male captors. Rebecca ultimately fails to be the powerful main character she promises to be but still offers a worthy foil to Jack.

The couple's sex scenes are excellently paced and are provocatively hot without being cloying or cliché. Racy BDSM elements are consensual but also risqué.

Minor characters—like Janice, a gas station attendant, with small-town pettiness and an outdated hairstyle—are entertainingly characterized and enrich the story, furthering its slightly cynical tone.

The Poet is an engaging criminal tale with a modern romance slipped in.

PAIGE VAN DE WINKLE (May 22, 2017)

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