



The Water Column

Aran Jane

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Aran Jane's *The Water Column* plunges into a mystery from the get-go.

Wolf Holzinger appears in a student's Chicago high-rise apartment seemingly out of nowhere, then plummets to his death. It is declared that Wolf, an experienced climber, died due to misadventure, but his dairy mogul father is less than convinced. Even more curious is the fact that another man fell to his death in Chicago at nearly the same time. To ferret out the truth, the elder Holzinger enlists the help of Lila Piper, an in-house investigator for a crack personal injury lawyer. Her search for the truth forms the backbone of the story, leading to some truly unexpected revelations.

Lila herself is no ordinary investigator. A former drug addict and high-class call girl, she's equally comfortable hanging with lowlives and mixing with the upper crust of society. After a wayward youth, she's settled back into normalcy thanks to ongoing treatment with an experimental machine that calms her mind. But upon digging into the circumstances behind Wolf's death, she unearths layer upon layer of conspiracy, tying the Holzinger family to the CIA, drug-smuggling operations, and even more covert organizations.

The book moves at a pace that maintains its suspense. Lila is feisty but uncertain about her place in the world—a likable lead. Her investigation leads her to Mark, a retired Navy sonar man who may know more than what he's telling; Sofia, Wolf's ex-girlfriend who harbors a secret of her own; and Sofia's cousin, a Venezuelan party girl with a direct connection to Hugo Chavez. As hired assassins menace Lila and everyone dear to her, she begins to suspect that she herself may be a puppet on a string, doing the bidding of an unseen villain.

Drawing its title from the concept of diving to the bottom of a body of water to unearth answers from the sediment, the text underscores how treacherous the shifting sands of truth can be. It incorporates heady elements of speculative science fiction, as well as humor because of supporting characters like a duo of operatives known as Barney and Betty and a bickering pair of retired spies.

The Water Column goes to some far-out places, and its final third reframes everything that has gone before with some truly uncanny revelations. There's no mistaking the level of imagination at work, but a healthy suspension of disbelief is required to buy into the numerous twists and turns. While the text maintains a firm grasp on Lila, it's less successful at rendering the other characters in dimensional ways. As the conspiracies and counterconspiracies pile up, the true heart of the story—Lila's personal discoveries—is shortchanged.

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