

The Passenger

By Lisa Lutz

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“Lutz develops riveting suspense by slowly revealing the events that first sent Tanya/Amelia on the run, while pouring threats on her gritty heroine’s increasingly tenuous bids at survival. Binge-worthy fare, especially for those drawn to strong female protagonists” (*Booklist*, starred review).

From the author of the *New York Times* bestselling Spellman Files series, Lisa Lutz’s latest blistering thriller is about a woman who creates and sheds new identities as she crisscrosses the country to escape her past: you’ll want to buckle up for the ride!

In case you were wondering, I didn’t do it. I didn’t have anything to do with Frank’s death. I don’t have an alibi, so you’ll have to take my word for it...

Forty-eight hours after leaving her husband’s body at the base of the stairs, Tanya Dubois cashes in her credit cards, dyes her hair brown, demands a new name from a shadowy voice over the phone, and flees town. It’s not the first time.

She meets Blue, a female bartender who recognizes the hunted look in a fugitive’s eyes and offers her a place to stay. With dwindling choices, Tanya-now-Amelia accepts. An uneasy?and dangerous?alliance is born.

It’s *almost* impossible to live off the grid today, but Amelia-now-Debra and Blue have the courage, the ingenuity, and the desperation, to try. Hopscotching from city to city, Debra especially is chased by a very dark secret…can she outrun her past?

With heart-stopping escapes and devious deceptions, *The Passenger* is an amazing psychological thriller about defining yourself while you pursue your path to survival. One thing is certain: the ride will leave you breathless.

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Editorial Review

Review
Best New Books of March 2016 Select by GoodReads * LitHub.com * Bustle.com

“At the outset of *The Passenger*, Lutz's narrator knows that her only chance for freedom is to lose herself, and thus, leaving one dead man behind, she hits the diamond lane of America—and storytelling—with a carload of identities, including the reader, who is carried along as both passenger and pursuer. This tenacious and resourceful heroine will keep you chasing, rooting, lip-biting, and above all *reading* until you reach the ending you never saw coming. My advice: buckle up.”
—Tim Johnston, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Descent*

"A sharp, clever, and utterly compelling thriller about a woman running from the mistakes and misfortunes of her past. Terrific."
—Chris Pavone, *New York Times* Bestselling author of *The Expats* and *The Accident*

"With whip-smart writing and a breakneck pace, *The Passenger's* clever plot twists and sharp characters are sure to keep you guessing long into the night, hoping against hope that its complex protagonist isn't nearly as guilty as she seems."
—Kim McCreight, *New York Times* Bestselling author of *Reconstructing Amelia*

“[Lisa Lutz] steps smartly out of her comfort zoneto write a dead-serious thriller (with a funny bone).”
—New York Times Book Review

“The kind of suspenseful, character-driven mystery the term “page-turner” was coined for”
***—Boston Globe,* Best Books of Summer 2016 select**

“*The Passenger* is a maze of plot twists and turns that you won't see coming.”
—Chicago Tribune

“[A] dark, readable, intelligent novel…Lutz belongs in a conversation with writers like Gillian Flynn, George Pelecanos and Megan Abbott.”
—USA Today

"Binge-worthy fare, especially for those drawn to strong female protagonists."
— *Booklist* (starred review)

“When the answers finally come, they are juicy,complex, and unexpected. The satisfying conclusion will leave readers rethinking everything and immediately turning back to the first page to start again. Psychological suspense lovers will tear through this thriller, a new direction for best seller Lutz (*How To Start a Fire*). Fans of her beloved ‘Spellman Files’ series will have high expectations, and if they are open to a new genre and a darker energy and intensity, they will find her trademark independent narrator, smart writing, and rapid pace delivered here.”
— *Library Journal* (starred review)

“Lutz's pacing is excellent, and the interior monologue captures what it would be like not to have a name or, even worse, a valid ID. Lutz provides some great suggestions for going on the lam (a lot of hair dye and car

switching is involved), but at its core, this is a novel about identity: a slippery notion which depends upon both how the world sees us and how we see ourselves."
—Kirkus Reviews

"Lutz's complex web of finely honed characters will keep readers turning the pages."
—Publishers Weekly

"With *The Passenger* [Lutz] has re-introduced herself as a more serious—and intriguing—author of crime fiction."
—Washington Post

"Lisa Lutz is a brilliant writer. You need to read all of her books, but read *The Passenger* first."
—The Irish Times

"In her thrilling standalone, *The Passenger*, Lisa Lutz keeps the pace blistering without sacrificing characterization."
***—Shelf Awareness* (starred review)**

"If your idea of fun involves a dark, twisty noir about a woman on the lam—stealing cars, dying her hair in seedy motel rooms, and constantly changing her name—Lisa Lutz's *The Passenger* is the book you need. Lutz's turn at the road novel raises all kinds of vexing questions about who we are and who we belong to as her heroine tries to evade her shadowy past."
—LitHub.com

About the Author
Lisa Lutz is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling, Edgar Award– and Macavity Award–nominated, and Alex Award–winning Spellman Files series and the novels *How to Start a Fire* and *The Passenger*. She lives and works in upstate New York.

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The Passenger

Chapter 1

WHEN I found my husband at the bottom of the stairs, I tried to resuscitate him before I ever considered disposing of the body. I pumped his barrel chest and blew into his purple lips. It was the first time in years that our lips had touched and I didn't recoil.

I gave up after ten minutes. Frank Dubois was gone. Lying there all peaceful and quiet, he almost looked in slumber, but Frank was noisier asleep than he was awake. Honestly, if I had known what kind of snorer he was going to turn into, I never would have married him. If I could do it all over again, I never would have married him even if he slept like an angel. If I could do it all over again, there are so many things I would do differently. But looking at Frank then, so still and not talking, I didn't mind him so much. It seemed like a good time to say good-bye. I poured a shot of Frank's special bourbon, sat down on Frank's faux-suede La-Z-Boy, and had a drink to honor the dead.

In case you were wondering, I didn't do it. I didn't have anything to do with Frank's death. I don't have an alibi, so you'll have to take my word for it. I was taking a shower when Frank died. As far as I could tell, he

fell down the staircase all on his own. He had been suffering from vertigo lately. Convenient, I know. And I doubt he mentioned it to anyone. If I had waited for the police and told them the truth, maybe life could have continued as normal. Minus Frank.

I poured another drink and contemplated my options. My first thought was to dispose of the body. Then I'd tell the authorities that Frank left me for another woman. Or was running from a loan shark. It was well-known that he had a love for cards but no talent for it.

I decided to test my strength to see if it was even possible. I tugged on Frank's bloated and callused feet, feet that I had come to loathe—why do you have to tell a grown man to clip his toenails? I dragged the body about a foot from his landing site before I gave up. Frank had put on weight in the past year, but even if he were svelte I couldn't see depositing him anyplace where he'd never be found. And now there was a suspicious trail of blood in the shape of a question mark just above his head. I might be able to explain it away if I called the police and stayed put. But then they'd start looking at me real carefully and I didn't like people looking at me all that much.

I tried to imagine my trial. Me, scrubbed clean, hair pulled back in a schoolmarm bun, wearing an innocent flowered sundress with a Peter Pan collar, trying to look not guilty, with my hard-edged poker face dry as the desert. I couldn't imagine how I'd summon tears or sell that shattered look of loss. I can't show much emotion anymore. That was something Frank always liked about me. There was a time I used to cry, but that was another lifetime ago. My heart was broken just once. But completely.

As I sat in Frank's chair, nursing my drink, I pretended to be weighing my options. But there was only one.

Frank kept his gambling stash in his toolbox. A little over twelve hundred dollars. I packed for a short trip and loaded the suitcase into the back of Frank's Chevy pickup.

I was only leaving two people behind, if you don't count Frank: Carol from the bar and Dr. Mike.

Dr. Mike was the top chiropractor in Waterloo, Wisconsin. There were only two, so it wasn't much of a competition. He'd taken over the practice three years ago, when Dr. Bill retired. Ever since the accident, my back hasn't been right. Dr. Bill used to fix me up once or twice a month. I saw Dr. Mike more frequently. The first time he put his hands on me, I felt an electric jolt, like I had woken up for the first time in years. I came back the next week and it was the exact same thing. I came back the week after that. I missed a week and Dr. Mike dropped by the bar to see how I was doing. Frank was on a fishing trip and Dr. Mike offered to give me an adjustment in the back office. It didn't go as planned.

I couldn't trouble Carol at this hour. I'd wake her kids. Maybe I'd send her a postcard from the road.

My chiropractor worked out of an office on the first floor of his three-story Queen Anne–style house in the nice part of town. The smart thing to do was to get out now, run during those precious hours when the world thought Frank was still in it. But I had few real connections to this world, and Dr. Mike was one of them.

I drove Frank's Chevy truck to Dr. Mike's house and took the key from under the rock. I unlocked the door and entered his bedroom. Dr. Mike made a purring sound when he was in a deep sleep, just like a Siamese cat I had as a child. He kind of moved like one, too. He always stretched his lanky limbs upon waking, alternating between slow and deliberate, and fast and sharp. I took off my clothes and climbed into bed next to him.

Dr. Mike woke up, wrapping his arms around me.

“Do you need an adjustment?” he said.

“Uh-huh.”

That was our little joke. He kissed my neck and then my lips and he turned onto his back, waiting for me to start. That was his thing; we never did it unless it was my decision. I had started it, I’d continue it, and today I was ending it.

Dr. Mike and I were never a great love story. He was the place I went to when I wanted to forget. When I was with Dr. Mike I forgot about Frank, I forgot about running from the law, I forgot about who I used to be.

When we were done, Mike was massaging the kinks out of my back and trying to straighten out my spine.

“You’re completely out of alignment. Did something happen? Did you do something you shouldn’t have?”

“Probably,” I said.

Dr. Mike turned me over on my back and said, “Something has changed.”

“It’s about time, isn’t it?”

I’d felt like a speck of dust frozen in an ice cube for far too long. I should have done something about this life I had long before Dead Frank made me do something.

I looked at the clock; it was just past midnight. Time to leave. I got dressed quickly.

Dr. Mike studied me with a professional regard. “This is the end, isn’t it?”

I don’t know how he knew, but he did. There was no point in answering the question.

“In the next few days, you might hear some things about me. I just want you to know that they’re not true. Later, it’s possible you’ll hear more things about me. Most of them won’t be true either,” I said.

I kissed him good-bye for the last time.

I DROVE thirty miles before I gassed up the truck. I had one ATM card and one credit card and withdrew the $200 maximum for each. I drove another twenty miles to the next fuel stop, got a strong cup of coffee, and withdrew another two hundred on each card. Frank had always been stingy with our money. I had one credit card and a small bank account and neither provided sufficient funds to set you up, if you decided to take an extended vacation. I made one more stop at a Quick Mart, got another four hundred dollars, and dropped the cards in the Dumpster out back. I had $2,400 and a Chevy truck that I’d have to lose before long. I should have been tucking money away from the moment I got the key to the cash register. I should have known this day would come.

The truck smelled like my husband—my ex-husband? Or was I a widow? I’d have to decide. I guess I could have never married. Either way, I drove with the windows open, trying to lose the scent of Frank.

I merged onto I-39 South, leaving Wisconsin behind. I drove through Illinois for some time until I saw a sign for I-80, which I knew would take me somewhere. I had no destination in mind, so I headed west, mostly because I didn't feel like squinting against the morning light. And I planned on driving through dawn.

I hadn't brought music for the drive, so I was stuck with local radio and preachers all night long. I hooked onto a station while speeding along the rolling hills of Iowa. It was too dark to see the denuded trees and murky snow marring the barren February landscape.

The Iowa preacher who kept me company for the first half of my journey was listing the seven signs of the Antichrist. One was that he'd appear Christlike. I listened through the static of the fading station and noted a few more clues. He'd be handsome and charming. He was sounding like a catch. But then I lost reception. So it's quite possible I'll run into the Antichrist and never know it.

I toggled through the stations to another minister preaching about forgiveness. It's a subject that doesn't interest me. I switched off the radio and drove to the sound of wind swishing by and wheels on asphalt while headlights of people on a different path blinked and vanished in my peripheral vision.

I remembered the day I met Frank. I had only been in town a few weeks, hoping to land work somewhere. I was drinking at his bar, which was named after him. Dubois'. Sometimes I think I married Frank for his name. I never liked Tanya Pitts. Didn't like the first name, didn't like the last name. No doubt, Tanya Dubois was a promotion.

Back then, Frank had some life in him and I had none, so it worked out just fine. He gave me my first real job. I learned how to pull pints and mix drinks, although we didn't get too many requests for cocktails in our humble establishment. There wasn't much more to my life with Frank. We didn't have any children. I made sure of that.

After driving all night, I found myself just outside Lincoln, Nebraska. It was time to take a break and lose the truck. I found a used car dealership and traded in Frank's two-year-old Chevy Silverado for a seven-year-old Buick Regal and seventeen hundred in cash. I knew I was being fleeced, but it was better not to draw attention to myself. I wouldn't be keeping the Buick for long, anyway. I drove another ten miles to a small town called Milford and found a motel called Motel that looked like the kind of establishment that wouldn't mind an all-cash transaction. When they asked for ID, I said I'd lost mine. I paid a surcharge and signed the register as Jane Green.

I slept for eight solid hours. If I were guilty, could I have done that? I woke with a hunger so fierce it had turned to nausea. I opened the door of room 14, on the second story of the stucco building, and leaned over the balcony to catch a glimpse of the town where I'd landed. I don't think that balcony was up to code. I took a step back, spotted an unlit red neon sign for DINER.

I returned to my room, washed up, and headed out, giving myself a quick reminder: You are Jane Green for now. Forget who you used to be.

It was eight in the evening, well past the dinner crowd, so I took a seat in a booth, figuring the counter is where everyone talks. I probably wouldn't be very good at that, since I had no identity. That would come later.

A waitress named Carla dropped a menu in front of me.

“Can I start you off with anything?” she asked.

“Coffee,” I said. “Black.”

“Try it first; then decide.” She poured the coffee. “I’ll give you a minute to look over the menu.”

She was right. It wasn’t the kind of coffee you drank straight. I drowned it in cream and sugar. Even then it was hard to keep down. I perused the menu, trying to decide what I was in the mood for. It occurred to me that Jane Green might be in the mood for something different than Tanya Dubois. But since I hadn’t yet changed my clothes or my hair, I could probably last another day eating the food that Tanya liked. Jane Green was just a shell I embodied before I could be reborn.

“Have you decided, sweetheart?” Carla asked.

“Apple pie and French fries,” I said.

“A girl after my own heart,” Carla said, swiftly walking away on her practical white nurse’s shoes.

I watched Carla chat with a trucker who was hunched over a plate of meatloaf at the end of the counter. He grumbled something I couldn’t understand.

Carla squinted with a determined earnestness and said, “Sunshine, I think you need to go on antidepressants. Yes indeed, you need a happy pill. The next time you walk into my house I want to see a smile on that handsome face of yours. Do you hear me? See that sign there? We have the right to refuse service.”

“Carla, leave the poor man alone,” some guy in the kitchen yelled.

“Mind your own business, Duke,” Carla said. Then she filled more cups of coffee, called customers honey and sweetheart, and belly-laughed at a joke that wasn’t funny at all. I thought it would be nice to be Carla, maybe just for a little while. Try her on and see if she fit.

I devoured my pie and French fries so quickly even Carla was impressed.

“I haven’t seen three-hundred-pound truckers put food away that fast. You must have been famished.”

“Yes,” I said. Short answers. Always.

I paid the check and left, walking down the dull drag of the small town, which hardly deserved a name. I walked into a drugstore and purchased shampoo, a toothbrush, toothpaste, hair dye in auburn and dark brown, and a disposable cell phone from behind the counter.

The clerk, a middle-aged man with the name Gordon on his name tag, rang up my order and said, “That’ll be fifty-eight dollars and thirty-four cents.”

I paid in cash. As I was leaving, the following words escaped my mouth: “Thanks, sweetheart. Have a nice day.”

It felt so wrong, I almost shivered in embarrassment.

I FOUND a liquor store on the way home and purchased a bottle of Frank's favorite bourbon. I figured I could drink away all my memories. I paid in cash and said a mere "thanks" to the clerk.

Back in the hotel room, with the heating unit rattling out of time, I spread my bounty on the bed and tried to decide my next move. I'd known it all along, but I didn't yet have the courage. I took a shot of bourbon and plucked my phone book from my purse. I inhaled and practiced saying hello a few times. Then I dialed.

"Oliver and Mead Construction," the receptionist said.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Roland Oliver."

"May I ask who is calling?"

"No. But I'm sure he'll want to talk to me."

"Please hold."

A click, and then Beethoven blasted over the line. Two full minutes passed and the receptionist returned.

"I'm afraid Mr. Oliver is very busy right now. Can I take a number, and he'll call you back?"

I didn't want to say the name, but I didn't see any other way of reaching him.

"Tell Mr. Oliver that his old friend Tanya is calling."

This time I got only a few bars of Beethoven before Mr. Oliver's deep sandpaper voice came on the line.

"Who is this?" he said.

"Tanya Pitts," I whispered.

He said nothing. I could hear his labored breath.

"I need your help," I said.

"You shouldn't have called me here," he said.

"Would it have been better if I left a message with your wife?"

"What do you want?" he said.

"A favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"I need a new name."

"What's wrong with the one you've got?"

“It’s not working for me anymore. I think you know someone who can take care of these things.”

“I might.”

“I want a clean identity, a name that’s prettier than my old one, and if possible, I wouldn’t mind being a few years younger.” Tanya Dubois was about to have her thirtieth birthday. But I didn’t want to turn thirty before my time.

“You can’t get identities served to order,” Mr. Oliver said.

“Do your best.”

“How can I reach you?”

“I’ll reach you. Oh, and if you wouldn’t mind, I’m going to need some cash too. A couple grand should do it.”

“You’re not going to become a problem now, are you, Ms. Pitts?”

He used my name like a weapon, knowing it would feel like a stab in the gut.

“Make it five grand,” I said.

I knew I could get more, but I had gone years without asking Mr. Oliver for a dime, and I found a point of pride in that.

“Where are you?” he said.

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Wait,” he said. “How have you been?”

I could have sworn the question was sincere, like it mattered to him. But I knew otherwise.

“Good-bye, Mr. Oliver.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jessica Lantigua:

In other case, little men and women like to read book The Passenger. You can choose the best book if you like reading a book. Provided that we know about how is important the book The Passenger. You can add understanding and of course you can around the world by the book. Absolutely right, mainly because from book you can know everything! From your country until foreign or abroad you will find yourself known. About simple matter until wonderful thing you may know that. In this era, we can open a book or even searching by internet device. It is called e-book. You should use it when you feel weary to go to the library. Let's study.

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Harold Singleton:

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