

RATS



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**A ROSS SIEGAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER**

**Herb Padzensky**

**RATS: A Ross Siegal Psychological Thriller**

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I dedicate this book to my wife Ro who has nursed me through my learning disabilities and listened to countless rewrites with the patience of Job.

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# PART ONE

IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED heaven and earth. Then He created the firmament and animals. Feeling proud of His accomplishments, He created humans. All was wonderful, but this is where He should have stopped. In His great wisdom to create all things wonderful, God made one mistake. He created animal behavior and allowed humans to possess it.

# ONE

A WHITE, UNMARKED NISSAN MINIVAN slowed as it approached the entrance of the Second International Bank of Harbin, China. It came to a stop in the bank's customer loading space. Its windows, tinted by silver Mylar, hid the driver and riders inside.

The right-side door slid open. Five men wearing long coats stepped out. They approached the bank in a deliberate, well-rehearsed formation. They wore no masks or disguises to distinguish themselves from other banking customers. Nothing unusual. Nothing to forewarn their arrival. Nothing.

The bright sun, sinking in the late day sky, glared through the bank's large front windows. It obscured the men's faces, making it impossible for surveillance cameras to capture facial recognition images as they walked through the double doors into the lobby. No one paid them any special attention. No need. They were just five people, non-Chinese tourists, visiting this Liaoning Province city to carry out financial business.



A nod by the leader changed the peaceful afternoon scene in an instant. The long coats of the five opened in unison, exposing AK-47s. Bullets shattered the calm. The four tellers were knocked over like bowling pins. Blood and viscera splattered against the wall behind them. It happened so fast. There was no time for any of them to set off an alarm. Customers standing in the lobby froze in shock.

Another head nod and a second hail of bullets sent the helpless guard, a customer he was assisting, and two bank officers still seated at their desks reeling backwards into pools of their own blood. A pair of assailants hurdled the teller counter and emptied every cash drawer, throwing the paper money into the air while laughing at their prank. A bank robbery? Hardly.

Pleading customers, still alive, were herded to the far wall that displayed a larger-than-life portrait of Yi Cho-Se, premier of the People's Republic. They huddled together beneath the portrait as a third round of bullets shredded their bodies, splattered blood defacing the premier's image.

No witnesses survived the holocaust.

A bank desecrated but not robbed. Bodies of men, women, and children, all innocent victims, lay across each other like freshly thrown Chinese pickup sticks.

Police discovered a handwritten letter adhered to the teller's counter. It was pasted there by blood from the victims. It read:

*You have been warned to pay tribute and you chose to ignore me. I grow impatient. I demand 100 million American dollars. Disobey and I will slaughter more of your citizens. I will contact your Central Government in three days with specific instructions on where to send the money.*

*REBUS*

It was over in three minutes. This was the fifth successful attack across Europe and Asia in less than two months. More attacks were sure to happen unless Rebus could be stopped.

# TWO

HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD AT City University in Denver, Dr. Ross Siegal sat at his office desk in the behavioral studies lab, pondering what the coming year would offer. He held the dubious title of Chairman of Behavioral Science, a one-man island in a psychology department whose other professors were staunch Freudian theorists.

Intent on making this new fall term more exciting, he studied his lecture notes and new rat lab experiments. In the past, his grant requests for experimentation were often met with quagmires of red tape. This year he hoped it would be different.

The alarm on his watch, one of the few modern technologies he allowed in his life, rang. *Time to meet Simi.*

A YOUNG MAN brandishing a “JESUS SAVES” sign like a broadsword stood on a wooden crate in front of Quandary’s, the favorite

watering hole and haven of professors and graduate students. “Are we all like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah?” he said. “Must we all, innocent and guilty alike, die before God preaches his final sermon to love each other?” A few people stopped to listen; most did not.

Siegal gave a quick glance at the man as he hurried by. Simi would be inside waiting, a warm pleasure he anticipated.

Siegal rubbed his eyes as he exchanged the bright sunshine for the dimly lit bar. The smell of stale beer and greasy food from this 30-something-year-old grill permeated every cranny. Most of the two dozen red vinyl-covered tables were empty, normal for early August. Here and there, locals mixed with a few college drop-outs—nicknamed slummers by the valid university students—who pretended to brush elbows with the intellectuals in the hopes their parents would continue sending phantom tuition checks.

Siegal smiled, spotting Simi Block, one of two graduate research assistants he mentored, sitting at their regular table near the rear of the room where they could survey all without being the center of attention. They traded kisses. He then joined her in noshing the house specialty, chile con queso. They cut the heat with a popular local brewery’s quaff, Old Dog’s Leg Lager.

A forty-five-year-old bachelor, Ross Siegal stood almost five foot six, muscular, a full head of curly black hair with hints of grey around the sideburns and balding at its crown. He cared little for fashion, politics, or the world around him. Avoiding most radio or television news programs, he would not have known about any of the raids by Rebus, especially the latest one in China that would forever change his life. His modest apartment had one old-school small screen in dire need of an upgrade.

Few among Siegal’s contemporaries appreciated his creative and innovative psychological theories. Neither did they care to have

him as a friend. In turn, he prided himself in offering persistent criticism of what he considered mistakes in their thinking and research design flaws.

Simi Block, five-foot-two and just recently turned thirty, was a little fleshy in the places men seemed to enjoy. She described herself as the type an aunt wanted you to date because of her great personality. Two years prior, she survived a difficult divorce after her husband took off with the male doorman of their luxury high-rise apartment. It was this event that caused her to gain twenty pounds and commit to finishing her degree. When she became Siegal's research assistant and lover, she discovered the joy of becoming one of the beautiful women with a mind and will of her own—not a trophy as her husband saw her.

They soon were joined by BF, a young associate professor in the psychology department, and Sally Ryan, Siegal's other graduate research assistant.

The table was now, once again, filled with fearless free spirits, pathfinders on their own roads less traveled. They made a perfect band of malcontents, challenging the world's conservative dogmas. They vehemently argued among themselves but always united against the ideas of others.

Never at a loss for words, there was always a topic to discuss. Tonight's conversation was about world politics, a rarity, especially for the anti-political Siegal. BF observed they needed reinforcement. He motioned for Mary the waitress to bring an order of house specials and two pitchers of ODL to fortify their thoughts.

"Horseshit," blurted Sally, whose use of the King's English did not reflect a child of religious parents, her father a priest of their Christian church. "Those do-nothing bastards and bitches at the UN need to get laid. Hey, Secretary Segurian, you need some. Here I am." Her hands moved seductively up and down her body.

She rocked slowly, pausing around her twenty-two-year-old pointed breasts.

Simi blushed at the action and asked, “Ross, honey, would you like me to give you some of Sally’s politics in bed tonight?”

Siegal blushed back.

It could have been the beer talking which made Siegal smile in anticipation of Simi’s suggestion, or maybe his smile came from BF’s attempt to balance while standing on his chair to prove some ambiguous point.

Sitting back down, BF bent over the table and banged his glass. “Ahem. I have something very important to say.” He wobbled, acting slightly drunk and pretending to slur his words. “It’s all right to have a formal place like the U-u-u...”

“United,” the other three chimed in, laughing at BF’s lame pretense.

It only spurred him on to continue. “Yes. The UN is a perfect symposium to express problems and to ask for support.” He paused for effect. “But it is not our salvation. What we really need is a new invention of the wheel. Instead of thinking to change the U-u-u...”

“United,” chimed the choir.

“We must create an NT: a New Thing.”

The group applauded. They knew of his track record for stating the predictable future and for viewing such philosophical statements as some fantastic insight.

“You’re talking like Orwell,” said Simi.

They talked, drank and scarfed two more orders of house specials till they ran up against Quandary’s summer closing hour. All shared the tab. Siegal, with the highest income, paid the tip as usual. Sally and BF, both living with parents, had satisfied themselves earlier in BF’s back seat and went straight home. Simi and Siegal chose her apartment.

FIGHTING THE MORNING light, Siegal remained in a semi-dream state. For the first time in his life he was in love. His first meeting with Simi played out in his mind. It was the initial class day of the last fall term.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Psychology 520, Advanced Research Design.” One person, older than the mostly twenty-year olds, entered late, walked down the steps and sat in the front row. Siegal checked his computer-generated roster. “Ms. S. Block, so nice of you to finally join us. I trust an eight o’clock class is not too early a start for you.”

The class let out supportive murmurs.

Unfazed and smiling, Ms. Block nodded, acknowledging Siegal’s attempt at professorial humor, and crossed her legs as she settled in her seat. Her short skirt, one of many she wore, did not quite cover her lower body parts. And whenever she raised her hand to ask a question, her form-fitted sweaters raised to her bra line.

This mature and very sexy woman caught Siegal’s immediate attention. Her demeanor forced him to remain behind the podium in order to avoid revealing his physical reaction to her. This game played out every class day. Often she remained after class to argue a theoretical point he made during a lecture. This led to sharing coffee at the university cafeteria, dinners at local restaurants, and their first physical encounter four months later.

On this morning, he felt blood swelling in his groin and reached over searching for his lover. An empty pillow greeted him. He wanted more.

Simi’s call from the kitchen, “Breakfast is ready,” roused him out of his reverie.

Siegal reached for the sweatshirt he kept on a chair by the bedside. Simi had already claimed it. He found a pair of boxer shorts in the bottom drawer of the dresser, kept there for such emergencies.

Simi stood, facing the stove, wearing the sweatshirt, nothing else. Siegal caressed her bottom and kissed her ear. "I am the evil lord and you are my maidservant."

"I am your slave, master. But not today."

Siegal frowned at the rejection.

"I have to work on my dissertation at the library. And you have to go downtown. Save it for tonight."



# THREE

TWO TIME ZONES TO THE east, in the Oval Office, sat President Elwin Russell and his trusted Chief of Staff, Tom Danielson. Each morning, the two reviewed events from the previous day and planned strategies for the days ahead. Most often these meetings were held long-distance by messenger, phone, or secured email. Sitting face-to-face this morning was a rare exception.

A flat-screen monitor tuned to MSNBC replayed news anchor Robert Gallow's interview with United Nations Secretary General Andre Segurian.

Secretary Segurian spoke fluent English with an accent common to his country. "The world is in a state of constant turmoil led by new generations of radicals attacking countries with impunity and little fear of reprisal. We of the United Nations are attempting to resolve these issues but the leaders remain either unknown, or unwilling to negotiate."

Gallow responded, “I understand. The diplomatic process is slow and arduous. Mr. Secretary, we at MSNBC received frightening reports of what appears to be continued gangster activity across Europe and Asia, in particular mainland China. Can you elaborate?”

President Russell and Danielson watched the 10-second grainy footage of the carnage at a bank in Harbin provided by the MSNBC news staff.

Segurian avoided a response, but his facial grimace indicated he was aware of the event.

Danielson slathered a half piece of bagel with some cream cheese and put a slice of lox on it. Before becoming the President’s chief of staff, Danielson was a colonel, now retired, in a crack Navy SEALs team. He never got used to the plodding ways of world politics.

“EI, the UN is helpless in these instances. They have the strongest nations of the world as members and they show little authority to do anything of meaning. As I’ve said many times before, we need some form of world organization that is lean and mean. One that moves without all the fancy rhetoric.”

Biting into his own bagel, Russell nodded in half agreement. “I’d like to agree. But no can do, Tom. The UN does many good things. Aside from cutting off the only major international forum for smaller nations, give me a better suggestion. There’s got to be a better way. I need good an idea from you.”

Both men enjoyed their daily repartees. It was through these interactions that many important policies came out of the Oval Office.

Danielson took a sip of coffee. A smile crossed his lips.

“I can see some wheels turning in that head of yours,” said Russell, pointing his finger at Danielson.

“Don’t you think there is something odd about that release, EI? That clip came from the bank’s security camera. Right? China

would never let it become public, especially when it puts them in a bad light. What if the leak was on purpose?”

“Good point,” said Russell, slapping his fist on the table. “I recall most of the Chinese people never saw anything about the riot in Tiananmen Square, even though most of the world witnessed it. You’re thinking that their leaders had something to do with the leak?”

“It makes sense,” said Danielson. “Those guys never want to lose face in the eyes of the world. They would normally keep this event out of the press. I think they’re masking something. Something they want to hide.”

President Russell learned many years ago to trust Danielson’s intuition. As his campaign manager, he helped Russell win an upset election to Congress, and successfully orchestrated two terms in the White House. His genius for solving myriad problems at every level made him an indispensable confidant.

The television interview concluded. As Russell and Danielson returned their attention to the notes on the coffee table, the President’s red desk phone rang. They both looked toward the phone, originally installed during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Russell chose to maintain its use for selected individuals who needed to talk with him directly without lower-echelon staff determining the call’s priority. “That damn phone seems to be ringing too much lately.”

Russell answered, “Good morning, Mr. Secretary.” He whispered to Danielson. “It’s Andre Segurian.”

Danielson took his cue and left the room.

PRESIDENT RUSSELL HELD no secrets from his chief of staff. It was just proper protocol. He’d find out later if and when the President chose.

Amanda Keyes, President Russell's personal secretary, looked up from her oversized desk as Danielson entered the outer office. Miss Keyes had been with the President longer than Danielson. She first worked in his law office and then as personal aide during his stint in Congress. Russell bragged he never missed an important vote because of her.

Danielson smiled as he went directly for the coffeepot. "You look very nice today, Miss Keyes. Blue is definitely your color."

"Why thank you, Mr. Danielson." Her eyes fluttered. "If I didn't know better, I would think you are trying to flirt with me."

The two had been close to each other since Danielson became part of Russell's team. But they always maintained a businesslike attitude out of respect for their boss.

Moments later, the light on Miss Keyes' intercom blinked, summoning Danielson back. He dropped the cup and the few remaining drops of coffee into the wastebasket and went back in.

"IS SEGURIAN CALLING for a lunch date?" asked Danielson, hoping to change the frown from Russell's face.

"You can put that idea on the damn back burner. There has been lots of talk about this Rebus. As we have talked before about him, his gang slaughters everyone in sight without mercy. Yesterday was the second time in so many days that Rebus hit a bank in China demanding a ransom in order to stop. So far Cho-Se has refused to pay."

"I give him credit for that. What's Segurian's take?"

"This time was the final straw. Cho-Se's daughter and granddaughter were in the bank that Rebus raided. They were slaughtered along with the rest of the innocent victims."

"Cho-Se is begging for UN help, right? And the Sec Gen is hoping you'll put our American ass in the middle."