

**by Stanley Lieber**

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## GRISHAM'S FORMULA

The Chrysler Building was destroyed at precisely 21:27 Monday night. An explosion that could be seen from space.

There were no survivors.

"I honestly don't know what you want from me anymore."

Pause.

"I mean, I'm here."

Piro stared out the viewport.

The RAGNAROK maintained her orbit in silence. What could she say? Her son was unhappy. Of Course, that made her unhappy too.

"We'll have to figure this out later," she said. "Right now we need to get ready for your father to come home."

Then she saw the explosion.

Someone or something was killing off the Actron team. There were so few of them left, by this time even the narrator was getting antsy. Alas, there was nothing for him to do but soldier on...

Piro was one of the few team members left. He took it upon himself to investigate the murders. It might have been wise for him to call in backup. It might have been wise if he'd done that, but that's not what he did.

Folks, I tried to stop him.

Being older than most of the team, Piro figured, generally, that he must know best. Most of the time this worked out fine, but the odd scenario in which the formula fizzled out inevitably led to bigger problems than if Piro had simply stopped and asked for help.

On this summer evening he decided to attend a gathering of his favored fraternal organization, the Brotherhood of Adult Published Airport Fiction Authors (BAPAFAs). It had been some time since he'd bothered to show up for one of their meetings.

He couldn't be certain that he was current on all of his dues, fees, and obligations, and thus if he would even be welcome. nevertheless he strode into the meeting hall bearing his usually relaxed (some would say smug) expression. Nobody seemed to mind his presence. In fact, it was far from clear that they'd noticed him at all.

The solemn oath to Grisham's Formula was intoned as its thick substance was squeezed oozing from its tube, into the waiting hands of the assembled congregation. Each writer accepted his helping greedily and worked the milky pomade into his scalp, careful to avoid contact with his eyes.

The formula worked.

Each writer's sales would presently advance to an artificially inflated peak, ostensibly guaranteed by tonight's obscure working. It was a sure thing, as simple as falling off an office chair. Piro was more than ready to throw his pirate hat into the ring. It had been ten (thirteen?) years since he'd sold a story. Even his blog statistics had fallen off precipitously.

This time, for sure.

At length, the other writers began to take notice of him.

He smiled, weakly.

The wreckage of the building was absolute. Seventy-seven stories, all collapsed to dust. Piro had been out, attending the meeting of suspense writers when the blast hit. Everyone else had been claimed by the disaster.

Almost everyone.

Tom was working on his hair when an unknown force shook the room. Gazing wistfully into the mirror, he had failed to notice the sound, or, indeed, even the fact that the building was rattling on its foundations. He brushed the accumulating concrete dust from his shoulders and got on with the task of studying himself in the strangely still-intact mirror.

His vast powers of concentration were seldom acknowledged. It was one of the things about himself he most wished to express to the world.

Upon exiting the men's room he noticed that something was definitely wrong. None of the tele-screens were working. The halls were strangely devoid of commercial messaging. he checked the reception area on his floor and discovered to his surprise that none of the staff were at their regular posts.

What could explain this?

Alix didn't trust the machine to do his laundry. He certainly didn't trust it to accurately record the events in progress around him. He folded his slacks and made observations of his own. Still, the facilities were being provided gratis by his employer. A perk.

New New York had changed. This went without saying (except for the fact that he'd just said it). New textures came with the new name. Perhaps they were brought on by it. In any case, such questions were beyond the scope of his contract, and therefore of little immediate interest.

The machine hummed along, picking up perhaps more than Alix had intended, so to speak, to lay down. It was all sadly audible to anyone who happened to be passing by. Alix was speaking aloud.

At 21:27, he ceased to worry.

"Nobody's going to believe this shit," Tom said, leaning over the veranda and taking in the New San Francisco dawn. "It's not a pitch we can sell."

When the other man didn't react, Tom repeated himself, this time slightly louder. "I said..."

"I heard you the first time," Piro whispered, plaintively. "Let's get out of here."

Tom did as he was told, grumbling under his breath as usual.

"What a crochets of shit."

Over the haze of the New San Francisco dawn hovered the RAGNAROK. She was ready to pick up her boys and return them to base. Or what was left of it, anyway. But one of her boys was not quite ready to go, yet.

"Look, I'm just not ready to go back there, yet, okay?"

No response.

"I'm not, like, scared, or anything. Just not ready."

"Of course," Piro said, laying a hand on Tom's broad shoulder. "In any case, our checklist is still incomplete. We've more work to do before we can return to Manhattan"

The RAGNAROK could understand unfinished business. She would wait for her boys to finish up whatever it was they were working on that was so important. In reality, she had no choice.

She rarely did.



Neither of her boys were especially sensitive to such issues. They'd simply never had to be.

"I wonder sometimes what your mom thinks about all this," Tom suddenly said.

"Never really considered it," Piro admitted, and let the matter drop. He was somewhat distracted by the task at hand, not paying close attention to Tom's usual stream of disconnected, half-formed observations. He started to change the subject.

Here, the RAGNAROK interjected.

Alix found that he was now able to focus himself upon any arbitrary time or location he could imagine. He could choose to take on corporeal form, or he could remain disembodied, invisible to those he observed.

He found the invisibility useful to his work as a detective.

He continued surveillance of the now demolished building and its former inhabitants. His reports grew correspondingly shorter. He found that he enjoyed more free time to pursue personal

interests, such as his reading, or the local night life (here, corporeal form offered its own advantages).

But still he kept his eyes on the prize. He knew why he was here. "Stick to the formula," he would tell himself. And he did.

He assumed his employer would still be tracking his progress.

**NEXT ISSUE:  
ALIX GRAVES IN MIRACLE WORLD**