

FINAL

TRACK

Damage Done by Final Track

“Final Track injects fresh blood into the Horror genre. It gave me chills!!!”

Liz Conville – Reader of an insane number of books (100+ per year)

“A twisted mind beautifully intertwined with 80s glam rock, but enough about the author... Final Track is an exciting psychological thriller that will transport you back to a time when big haired rock stars ruled the airwaves. Can't wait for Mahoney's next adventure!”

Rich Beasley – Convivial raconteur who never left the 80s

“If you knew a book may give you nightmares could you read it? Dark, engaging and twisted like a sister, Final Track could easily become a crime fans favourite fiction book of the year.”

D. Sweet – True crime guru

“Final Track is a dark love letter to the 80s, a grisly glam-rock concept album that'll take you back, and give you chills.”

Sarah L. Johnson – author of Infractus

FINAL TRACK



Detective Mahoney Series
Book I

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First Edition

First and foremost, I dedicate this book to my husband. He continues to show me how to challenge myself, and he supports me every step of the way regardless of how strange and creepy my projects might be.

Secondly, I dedicate this book to every person out there who loves to get lost in a book. My blood, sweat and tears went into this story. It is my hope that you will be taken away to another world, even for a few hours.

NOT YOUR

FOOL

Paralyzed

A spine-prickling screech pierced through Seth's mind, slamming against his skull. His raw throat stung as he screamed again, but the only sounds escaping his mouth were mere raspy whispers. Digging deep, he frantically grasped at the scraps of energy he still possessed. He was desperate for someone to hear his cry for help. He longed for the sharp pain of tight binds slicing into the open slits in his wrists. At least then he could feel something. All feeling below his shoulders had disintegrated moments after the silver needle pierced his skin, connecting with his vein.

A fetid stench filled his nostrils. Fluorescent tubing glared down at him, electrifying his eyes. Exercising the little movement he could still control, he turned his head. The cold of his steel-slab bed chilled his cheek, relieving the heat flushing his face. Blinking hard, he tried to dissolve the multicoloured amoeba shapes floating across his sight. Shooting his gaze beyond the conical zone of light bathing him, he peered into black space. Squinting, he determined he was caged in by walls of concrete. A glimmer caught his eye. Little sparkling diamonds danced over the grey walls. His brain contorted, trying to make sense of the image his eyes were projecting to his mind.

Creaking footsteps on old wooden stairs jolted him. His predator approached, sliding his hands along the silk scarf that instilled terror within Seth upon appearance. Seth's body seized as the softness was wrapped around his skin. He could feel the noose tightening around his neck, constricting his airways and wrenching his throat. Several wispy breaths escaping his lips, he struggled to breathe. He gasped in agony. The room blurred around him.

Panic-infused thoughts thrust through his mind. *Is this it? Is this my death?* His drooping eyelids bolted open. The skin around his skull seized. *My life has been nothing more than a pathetic waste.* A chill tickled its way down his spine. His ears burned.

A flash of a man appeared in his mind. The man lifted his head, long dark hair slipping from his face. Seth stared into the man's eyes. His own eyes. The vision swelled within Seth's teetering consciousness. Blurriness dissolving, the image grew clear. Shapely lips lined in soft pink wove a dramatic dance. Eccentric wails vibrating from the imaginary man's mouth, his voice rang through Seth's mind. Entranced faces stared at the man, their eyes glazed, their bodies swaying from side to side like one giant being.

The world spinning around him, the fluorescent brightness fading, Seth began to move through the dark tunnel opening in his mind toward the brightening image. The man's voice vibrated through the air, deepening the trance of his audience. Soft pleather pulled against his legs, revealing his muscular contour. An unbuttoned, silky red blouse flowed over his bare chest. Gems glittered from the leather bands winding their way up his arms. High on his pedestal, his voice heightened, his message dominating. Looking through the man's eyes, out at the mass audience, he carefully scanned their faces, searching for the one. His gaze landing on the only pair of eyes that mattered. Her face. Her adoring eyes looking back at him. The way a mother's eyes should look at her only son.

A loud snap jolted Seth back into his horrific reality. His right cheek stung. Beads of sweat stuck to his forehead, growing in numbers until they slithered down his face. His mind raced with wild thoughts. *I'm going to die. I never made her proud. She never loved me.*

Another strike slapped his blazing cheek. The sadistic monster leaned over him, crazed eyes bulging from their sockets.

Memory Mug

Detective Mahoney's mind was free from the ghost faces that usually cluttered it. At least for a few minutes.

He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, allowing the aroma of rich dark roast to awaken his senses. He exhaled slowly, opened the cupboard, and looked at the three mugs perched on the otherwise bare shelf. He gently wrapped his fingers around a bright-blue handle and looked at the words "Best Dad" painted in summery yellow and pink. A little warmth swelled within as he held the delicate piece, his head swarming with a thousand memories. He could still feel her in his arms the day she was born. She'd been a New Year's Day baby, 1977. Had he really lost a decade? Where had it gone? *To hunting down evil. But at what cost?*

He reached for the coffee pot. As he poured, he watched the bright blue vanish beneath a jet-black pool. He leaned back against the counter, taking a long swig. Swirling the liquid around his tongue, he lingered over the smoky-sweet flavour. Rolling his head in slow circles, he released the tension in his neck. A crackle drew his attention to the eggs sizzling in the frying pan. He resisted taking them out, willing to wait until they were perfect. Longing to sink into the space of a day that wasn't filled with an unending list of tasks, he took a sip from the blue mug.

A sharp beep invaded his peaceful moment. His shoulders slumped as he reached for his cell phone perched on the kitchen table. *I hate this clunky thing.* Pushing the *on* button, he cleared his throat and attempted to sound alert. "Detective Mahoney."

“Bug,” Peggy’s voice sang back, “I know this was supposed to be your day off, but I’ve got one for you.”

He leaned against the counter. “Where?” He looked regretfully at the sunny-side-ups in the pan, like two glowing suns. His heart sank as he wondered how many days of breakfast in a box he would have to endure.

“Frog Lake Park. A family outing was ruined by a dreadful discovery. A young child found a body. Poor thing, I simply can’t imagine.”

“Got it.” He lingered a moment in the silence. “Hey, Pegs?”

“Yes?”

“This ‘Bug’ thing, it’s really hanging on, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” She giggled. “It’s your track record. You always catch the killer, always lock him up. Squash him like a bug.”

Mahoney’s lips involuntarily curled into a smirk. “I guess I’ve started my fair share of nicknames around the team.”

“Yes. And they mean it as an endearing term. You’ve built this team. They look up to you.”

They look up to a washed-out man whose mind is clouded with corpses? “All right, Pegs. Gotta kick myself into gear.”

“Take care of yourself out there.”

“Will do.”

Mahoney placed his memory mug gently on the counter and stared at it. Taking a step back, he shifted into gear. *Another day. Another body.*

Not Your Fool

Mahoney drummed his thumbs against the steering wheel, lulled by the dark inflections of the bluesy riff wafting from the CD player. It was difficult not to succumb to the beauty of his surroundings as the lines of houses dissolved into a lavish forest. An internal Zen washed over him despite the threat of a long, gruesome day lurking within the trees. A crackle echoed through the air as the tires of his burnt-orange '69 Pony rolled from the smooth pavement onto a makeshift road of soft wood chips. He was soon pulling into the parking lot that led to the lake entrance. A secluded area of immense wilderness, Frog Lake Park was a lovely spot for hiking, picnicking and family outings, right in the city's backyard.

He pulled into a stall of the nearly empty lot and gazed at the vast lake spread out far beyond where the eye could see. A million diamonds sparkled under powerful rays of sunshine bouncing off the clear blue water. Bountiful, lush green woods bordered each side. A handful of people were huddled on the otherwise barren brown beach, which formed a bridge between the water and the trees. He slid out of the driver's seat, stood up tall and adjusted his belt. Bending over, he reached back through the driver's door and stretched his arm across to the passenger side. Retrieving his well-worn charcoal derby, he settled it onto his crown. Shutting the door firmly, he took a few long strides toward the beach as he scanned the scene. A young, male officer crouched down, talking at eye level to a little girl. Her curly blonde hair fell softly around her shoulders. She held a long stick, and her pink rubber boots were covered in thick mud. An imaginary

hand tugged at Mahoney's heart. He gave his head one quick shake and took in a short but deep breath.

He looked back over his shoulder and confirmed the occupants of the parking lot. He saw a single police cruiser, a black-and-brown Jeep Wrangler, and a shiny black Ford F150 tattooed in bright-white letters: *Crime Scene Unit*. He was about to turn his attention back to the interview in progress when a glossy-blue Chevy pickup pulled up. Blake Sutton and Jack Hayes, two long-time members of his team, were soon walking toward him. He smiled to himself, wondering if they purposely co-ordinated their attire. They almost looked like twins in their matching jeans and jean jackets. Sutton's brown curls and muscular arms stood out against Hayes' buzz cut and lean figure.

Sutton slapped Hayes on the shoulder. "Yeah right. Do I look like a newbie?"

Hayes put up his fists as if to retaliate. Noticing Mahoney, they both stood at attention.

"Morning, boss." Hayes grinned.

Mahoney cleared his throat. "Good morning, fellas. Guess our day off took a turn." He gave them a stern stare.

Sutton returned in a friendly tone, "This one's on me. I actually made solid *plans* for today. Rookie move."

His stance strong, Mahoney looked at them both squarely. "Appreciate the promptness. Gut tells me this is gonna be a long one."

Sutton scanned their surroundings and chipped in his confirmation, "Yeah. I agree with your gut."

The uniform left the family to process the cruel twist their picnic had taken and marched toward them. Once he was within earshot, Mahoney flashed a glance at the polished nametag on the stiffly pressed shirt. *Geez, he looks fresh out of training. Wonder if this is his first homicide.* Mahoney extended a firm hand and asserted a certain formality. "Officer Bennett, I'm Detective Mahoney. Homicide

unit.” He nodded sharply to his right. “These are my boys, Detectives Sutton and Hayes.”

Officer Bennett returned Mahoney’s welcome with an equally firm shake and nodded at Sutton and Hayes. “The family appears to be the only witnesses. It’s early in the season, not many people venturing out to the lake quite yet. My partner is on his way to the gate to block off the entrance. Scene needs to be locked down. Medical Examiner went in to confirm the body. She called back, declared it as suspicious. I called it in. I suspect that’s when you were contacted.”

Mahoney tipped his head in acknowledgement. Movement across the beach distracted them as a tall, muscular woman emerged from the foliage. She wore matching army-green pants, covered in pockets of various sizes, and a long-sleeved shirt buttoned to the top. A mid-sized pack crammed with zippers and openings was hoisted on her back, and her feet were protected with solid hiking boots. She looked ready to take on the Bright Angel Trail at the Grand Canyon. A flicker of recognition fluttered through Mahoney’s mind until his memory clicked. *Ah yes, Medical Examiner Blackwood, I think it is.* He had seen her in passing but had never worked a case with her. The word was she was new in town, experienced in the wilderness, and employed primarily to scenes bordering the city. He had also picked up morsels of talk that she had a real gruesome background, having worked on the most sadistic cases, the likes of Edmund Kemper. She gracefully conquered the thick sand.

Being wary of touchy feelings regarding whose scene this was, as if it *belonged* to one particular organization, Mahoney resisted taking the lead.

“Detective, I presume?” Wild Woman inquired his way.

“Detective Mahoney,” he extended politely. “These are my guys, Detectives Sutton and Hayes.”

“Your guys? You’re the primary detective on this?”

Mahoney nodded his response.

“Good. Better to have everyone here and do this once. I’m Medical Examiner Terra Blackwood.” She extended her hand, and he returned her impressive shake.

Medical Examiner Blackwood quickly got things moving, bringing the uniform back into the proceedings.

“Officer Bennett, I see you were filling in Detective Mahoney and his team,” she said.

The officer straightened. “The family just got out here about a half hour before they called in. The little one was exploring the woods with Charlie.” He indicated the golden retriever sitting obediently next to the pink-booted girl. “Charlie found the body. He stopped dead, just behind some sort of run-down shack, and started barking. Wouldn’t budge. The girl tried to console him, then she saw what she describes as a *‘really gross foot with big cuts and lots of blood, sticking out of the leaves.’*” He rushed to the point, saying, “She left the scene immediately, ran back to her parents. They confirmed the foot, came back to the beach and called.”

Mahoney nodded to Officer Bennett, then addressed him directly, suggesting, “Probably a good idea to get them out of here soon. Make them comfortable, allow the initial shock to pass, and then it might be easier to dig into any details they can provide. Officer Bennett, I assume you can transition them.”

The officer nodded and proceeded to head back toward the family.

Mahoney addressed Blackwood, asking, “What did you see out there?”

“Confirmed exactly what the girl said. The only body part visible is the foot. Everything else is covered. I can’t do an examination without evidence removal. I left the crime scene techs to do a preliminary four-corners footage. Although atypical, another one will need to be done after the body is uncovered.”

Mahoney and Blackwood locked eyes. He wondered what her take on this was. She decisively answered his inquiring gaze, “Scene is going to need some real processing. Eventually, we are all going to have to go in there. The best way to minimize corruption is for us to go in together. One path in, same path out.

I'll lead so we can retrace my original steps. You'll have to be in tow with your team...if you can deal with that."

Mahoney stifled any hints of amusement. "Got it. We can handle that." He was relieved that she wasn't going to argue his team's involvement.

They proceeded to walk, lined up in a row like a mother and her ducklings, embarking on a slow trek as their shoes sunk into the soft sand. Mahoney talked over his shoulder to his guys, reinforcing the procedure to uncover whatever horrific scene they were about to deal with. "As usual, pen in one hand, notebook in the other." This had always been Mahoney's approach in directing his team so that the natural human instinct to touch things would be repressed. *Nobody* entered a scene without inadvertently taking or leaving evidence, or both.

They trudged along in silence. Reaching the trailhead, the dirt path was easier to navigate. They soon found the abandoned shack. Blackwood continued to lead the way as they left the dirt trail. She shouted back, "Use my footsteps. There are other tracks here that I purposely avoided." Mahoney immediately found himself altering his stride to shadow each of the prints where she had first trudged.

On the backside of the shack, they found themselves in a circular clearing. Mahoney stepped onto a soft bed of grass surrounded by a wall of tall trees, swaying slightly in the breeze. The sweet aroma of honeysuckle spattering the bushes was drowning in a stale smell of decay. Mahoney scanned the silent shelter, then stopped his gaze abruptly on the pasty flesh protruding from long, lush blades. He followed Blackwood as she made her way across the circle. He watched as she crouched down and took a closer look.

"The gross foot," she confirmed as she retrieved a pair of thin latex gloves from her pocket. She pulled the tight encasing over each hand. The ankle was encircled with scarlet lacerations, digging deeply into the ashen skin.

Here we go again. He had been down this path a million times before. Usually, it was a domestic situation or bad drug deal. Someone in a position that

escalates out of control, leading to a surprise exit. *Not today.* He followed Blackwood as she stood up and made her way into the wall of trees. The exposed foot led to a bed of carefully stacked branches, thick with foliage. Two men—*CST* flashing iridescently on the backs of their jackets to clearly indicate their roles as Crime Scene Technicians—were removing the branches one by one with extreme care. Their hands were encased in a second skin, protecting every potential clue from being tarnished. They were bagging and tagging every single piece that belonged to the constructed cover.

One of them paused, looking their way. “This scene is more complex to process than the usual. We did a preliminary round of four corners before anything was touched. We’ll do another set of photos after the foliage is cleared away.”

Mahoney nodded. “Let’s take our time, folks, and stay focused. Be thorough and precise. A clear path of evidence will ensure we catch this bad guy.”

“Agreed,” Blackwood said, her tone almost friendly, “first step is to allow these guys to reveal what’s hidden.” The group stood patiently, respecting the slow process. As the green blanket was disassembled, a lifeless form was exposed. When the task was complete, everyone silently took in the horrific details.

The vacant body was clothed in a long, jet-black cloak, flowing over the arms and down the legs. The arms were stretched out to each side, dark tassels streaming down, creating the illusion of eagle wings. A swarm of flies circled around the exposed flesh. Dark crimson slashes slit both wrists, from which thick black-red had oozed, now caked in place. The bloodless fingers were curled inwards, obsidian-painted nails shining in contrast. The cloak lay flat against the chest, slightly open in the front, exposing a long silver chain draped down to the navel. A large, oval pendant, the colour of an arctic ocean, lay strikingly against the pasty skin.

Mahoney stiffened slightly. *Haven’t seen something like this in a long time.* His mind reached back, searching through images of bodies. He steadied his voice and prepared the team. “Looks like we may have a young one here.”

Mahoney scanned down the corpse. The legs were encased in black leggings, the material cut in a pattern that reminded him of fishnet stockings. Openings in the skin-tight pleather flashed hints of savage dark-purple bruises. The team remained silent, taking in the gruesome intricacy unfolding before them.

Blackwood chimed in, breaking the eerie quiet, “This is a humdinger of a scene.”

Mahoney scanned back up the body. Long, raven hair feathered its way onto the shoulders, covering most of the face. His gaze was drawn in an instant to the thin lips lined in rouge, dramatically posed as if the victim had been enunciating a critical word when her last breath of life was taken. *What would you tell us if you could talk?*

As soon as the techies had completed their second round of photos, Blackwood crouched down and leaned in. She pushed the dark strands aside with care, revealing an immaculately painted face. Mahoney crouched down beside the body, not able to resist taking a closer look himself. The eyes were painted with heavy smoky shadow, high cheekbones accentuated with strokes of pink. Her makeup appeared to be applied with painstaking effort and untouched by whatever horrifying events had led to her demise.

Mahoney rubbed the scruffy bristle on his chin, continuing to stare at the sophisticated scene. *This is not the work of a beginner.*

Blackwood continued to brush aside strands of hair, revealing a neck that was brutally branded with two burnt-umber bands, circling their way around like intersecting rings. Each was rimmed in crimson. The hairs on Mahoney’s neck stood at attention. He had seen many ligature marks in his time, but not like this.

Blackwood gently pushed aside the cloak beside the oval pendant. A permanent emblem of sadistic extremes was sliced into her abdomen, leaving the words “I’m Not Your FOOL.”

Mahoney’s stomach released a slight pang. *Looks like our city just got a ramp-up in killer calibre.* He stood up tall. Clenching his jaw, he shrugged off the sense

of dread that hadn't haunted him in a long time. Shoving the images of bodies of the past out of his mind, he pulled his shoulders back and pushed up his sleeves. "Let's get to work, boys. It's going to be a long night."