

This is an extract from the thriller novel 'Pentecost', available on Amazon.com, Kindle and iPad in Feb 2011.

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This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

Acts 2:1-4, 43

## PROLOGUE.

**Varanasi, India.**

**May 1, 1.34am**

It is said that those who die in Varanasi can achieve moksha, release from the suffering that is the cycle of repeated death and rebirth. So many people come to die here and be burnt on the ghats that the pyres burn continually day and night. They never stop burning even when the rain lashes down, soaking the firewood. Wet bodies take longer to burn but eventually they all turn to ash and are washed into the river that cleanses all sin. On this night, rain soaked the ashes into the winding Varanasi streets. Beggars shivered on the steps leading down to Manikarnika, the main burning ghat on the banks of the holy river Ganges. The ragged ones huddled closer to the burning bodies for warmth, watching as they were consumed by the sacred flames.

Behind the ghats, streams ran down the pavements, taking the excrement and rubbish of the day into the doorways and corners of the Old City. Sister Aruna Maria hurried down an alleyway behind the spice markets, trying to make her old feet move faster, stumbling a little as she pushed off the walls that loomed above her. She glanced behind, sensing that those following were close but seeing nothing yet. She had heard men come into the little church tucked away inside the holy Hindu city and speak to one of the caretakers of the convent. She listened as they asked about a stone, and had peeked around a pillar to see money changing hands. She ran then, heading for the anonymity of the streets but a Christian nun stood out in this city and she knew the men would be on her trail soon enough. The Christians were barely tolerated by the sadhus and beggars would point her direction for a single rupee. She pushed herself faster on into the labyrinth of narrow streets. How they had found her after so many years, she could not fathom, but she knew it was time to hide the stone again. They must not find it now after all this time. She was the Keeper, the latest in a long line stretching back two millenia, each of them prepared for this day. Now it seemed, they had found her.

Beneath the sound of the rain she heard running feet closing behind her and she clutched her soaked habit in her gnarled hand as she searched for sanctuary. She pulled the ivory material closer around her and splashed through the puddles that pooled in these close alleys. She had run through these streets since her childhood. She knew the markets well and was sure she could outpace this evil now. Then a figure stepped out before her, the shadows hiding his face. She knew it was the man from the church. She gasped and turned to flee in the opposite direction but another man had come up behind her. The streets, normally so busy were now empty, shutters closed and eyes turned from

her trouble.

“Calm down sister, we only mean to talk to you.”

She could tell the man was American by his accent, but although his words promised safety, she could see his eyes in the dim light. They were shining with a fanaticism she recognized, a hunger for something she and few others possessed in the world.

“I know you have an Apostle’s stone. I believe you wear it round your neck.”

He reached towards her, but she stood her ground, heart pounding.

“Don’t you dare touch me. I’m a woman set apart for God. I don’t know of this stone you seek.”

“Oh, but you do sister.”

The man waved his hand and she felt strong arms from behind pinning her, holding her still while the American advanced towards her. She began to pray then, the ancient prayer handed down by the Keepers, spoken in her own native Indian tongue but a prayer to the Christian God nonetheless. High above her head, storm clouds gathered, forming a tight vortex in shades of midnight. One hand closed around her throat forcing her head back. With the other, he found the thin cord in the folds of her habit. He lifted the stone out and over her head.

“This is what I’ve been searching for, sister. Now you will tell me what it can do.”

The rain was lashing down on the three of them now, soaking their clothes, running down their faces. The man looked closely at the stone in his palm, its roughly carved whorls in the deep grey. Sister Aruna Maria looked up into the storm and prayed aloud, her words stronger now. Thunder rolled across the sky and lightning crashed. It was as if fire was lighting up the sky above them and coming down to earth to strike the heathen. The man slapped her face hard and her head snapped sideways.

“Tell me how to use it, I must know,” he demanded.

She looked at him then, her eyes holding knowledge of ancient years, and the secrets he desperately wanted.

“You aren’t a Keeper so you can’t use the stones. The only way for you to see the power is to gather all the stones of the Apostles together, but they are lost to time and history now. They haven’t been in one place since Pentecost itself, over two thousand years ago. Their power was sent by God and then forged by the blood and martyrs of the first century, by the faith of the early Christians. Such power cannot be taken by men like you.”

He roared at her, his rage part of the violence of the storm. He tore her from the grip of the other man and threw her into the mud of the alleyway. He kicked her old body again and again, his boots crushing the breath from her. Sister Aruna Maria looked up into the heart of the storm and thought she saw a pillar of fire coming down from heaven as she

sank into blackness.

When she woke, she couldn't move, she couldn't see. She tried to scream but her throat was blocked. Her whole body was paralyzed. She could barely breathe but a small amount of air seeped through bindings that wrapped her. She screamed in her mind and panic overwhelmed her, as she gasped for breath on the edge of consciousness. She tried to rock in place but nothing happened and soon she lay still, knowing that the men had taken the stone and she had failed in her lifelong mission. She tried to work out where she was. She was lying flat being carried by people who were walking around many corners. That suggested she was on a stretcher of some kind and perhaps still in the markets. She was wrapped tightly in material and she could hear chanting. Sister Aruna Maria inhaled sharply as she realized it was the death chant of Shiva and she was on a funeral pyre being carried to Manikarnika ghat. It was custom to burn the dead as soon as possible after death and the men were trying to cover their tracks by getting rid of her body. They would pay for a quick burning amongst the many genuine dead. Panic rose in her throat as she struggled against the bonds that held her. She had to tell someone she was alive because the ghats were not far from the temple. It wouldn't be long before she was on a pyre burning alive.

Tourist boats have to stay at least two hundred meters off the shore from the burning ghats. Photos of dead bodies burning are not acceptable to religious Hindus but many boatmen make good money taking morbidly curious tourists closer. They want to see the spectacle of death laid out before them, many having never seen it so close. It is anathema to the clinical western cremation where the face of death is hidden. The burning pyres hypnotized the tourists, some staring into the flames considering their mortality, others clicking away with close-ups of cracking bones sticking out from the smouldering fires. The tourists have no idea of the bodies that lie beneath them in the water, weighed down by stones. Children, pregnant mothers, holy cows and sadhus are not burnt but sunk into the river Ganges as they will live again. Corpses often surfaced on the east bank of the river, rotting in the sun and eaten by carrion birds. This place existed for death and tonight was no different, but the tourists were unaware of the living flesh about to be burnt alive before them.

The ritual was the same for each body. The corpse was brought to the burning ghat on a stretcher carried by men and wrapped in holy saffron gold and red material, draped in marigolds. Wood was bought in advance and enough provided to burn the body down to ashes. The pyre is built and tended by the Dalit who take the wrapped cadaver from the chanting family, dip it into the holy river Ganges before placing it onto the pyre. More wood is heaped on top and then it is lit. The fires take the soul to heaven and the dead are released from the cycle of reincarnation. If a skull remains unburnt, it is

smashed releasing the spirit. The ashes and bones are swept into the Ganges, mixing with the river of life as it flows to the ocean.

Sister Aruna Maria smelled the smoke of the fires and felt herself laid down. The chanting reached a crescendo. If only she could scream or move but she was so tightly wrapped as to be paralyzed. She was lifted again and felt the shock of cool water as she was dipped into the sacred river Ganges. She began to pray desperately to her God as she was laid on the pyre and the fire began to lick her skin through the wrapping. Her prayers turned to silent screams but it didn't take long before her throat burnt through, silencing her before she died.

A cloaked figure stood by the pyre gazing into the flames as the body crisped and charred. His fingers rose to touch the stolen stone around his neck and he faded into the alleyways of black night.

**Extract from The Times of India, May 2.**

A violent storm rocked the city of Varanasi last night, with lightning starting fires across the city even in heavy rain. Scientists cannot explain how the fires burned so fiercely in monsoon conditions, but witnesses said lightning was seen in balls of red fire as well as forked flames. A pillar of fire was also seen above Manikarnika ghat on the banks of the Ganges.

"It was as if a whirling jinn was in our midst," said Rajiv Gupta, a local tradesman. Even more unusual were reports of miracles that occurred at the time of the pillar of fire. Beggars living on the edges of the ghat, drawn to the fiery spectacle, have claimed to be healed of various diseases and one man allegedly regained his sight after 20 years of blindness. Hindu priests as well as the police are investigating the claims, reportedly attributing it to mass hysteria associated with the violent storm.

## **CHAPTER 1.**

**Oxford, England.**

**May 18, 9.46pm**

Morgan Sierra sat at her desk, finishing notes on her cases for the day. She got up to refill her coffee cup periodically, the bitter black her only real addiction. The small practice was slowly gaining clients as her expertise in dealing with religious and psychological issues became known but the University still frowned on her specialty. She battled their criticism daily while balancing her lecturing and tutorial appointments. Her clinical psychology practice dealt particularly with people whose problems related to religion in some way, those trapped in cults or who claimed supernatural experiences. It had been hard work but Morgan had built up her practice to supplement the meager numbers of students she taught at the University in anomalistic psychology. The field studied ostensibly paranormal activity and behavior under scientific conditions, attempting to discover why certain phenomena existed and how they could be explained. Merging psychology and religion and everything that came between was her passion.

Even while she loved being there, Morgan thought that the problem with Oxford University was its age, and the instant kudos the name evoked. It trapped scholars and all who worshipped at their feet into ancient thought patterns with no room for change or progress. She thought of the doors in the Bodleian library with the names of the Schools written above them, inscribed in ancient hand, gold-leafed and stamped into thick oak, banded with copper. Divinity and Scientia were two separate doors. The problem, she thought as she sipped her coffee, was that her door sat between them, and neither entirely accepted her field of research. Psychology sat within the Faculty of Science and was concerned with measurement, the scientific method, statistical instruments, experiments, control, even animal labs. The Faculty of Theology sat within Divinity: between the monks of Blackfriars, the nuns of the convent of the Assumption at Headington and the Quakers of St Giles. The theology curriculum still boasted St John's Gospel in Greek, Israel before the exile and Patristics, the early church fathers. Students still debated the Trinity with arguments used by Origen and Augustine, unchanged since the fourth century. Dons wore black soutanes on Sundays, held the Eucharist and celebrated Mass. They were the faithful. Morgan felt she was an anomaly between the two faculties. She specialized in the anomalous between psychology and religion, the unexplained between science and faith, that which fell through the gap.

Morgan sat back in her chair and stretched, rubbing the back of her neck to release the knots. Thinking of the Faculty took her back to her father and growing up with him in Israel. She looked down at the picture of him on her desk, his smiling eyes

forever captured in the silver frame. His library and study of Kabbalism had first inspired her, she thought. Then she had joined the Israeli Defense Force as all young people were required to do. It had made a dent in her studies but later they had funded her training as a psychologist employed to investigate how fundamentalism affected people's behavior on both sides of the ideological fence. Morgan smiled to herself as she remembered the heated debates they had engaged in. After several years of active service, she believed that the key to any form of peace was an understanding between the faiths, a common ground. Evil and violence could be found on all sides. Virtue wasn't owned by anyone's god. Morgan smiled to herself. It was easier to think about this in the sterility of Britain, away from the religious melting pot of Israel. She traced her father's image with a fingertip. He'd be glad she was here at the University now, at least trying to reconcile with Faye. They were both attempting to create the kind of relationship twin sisters should have, even after a lifetime of separation. Although still finding their way through a minefield of history, the bonds were slowly forming and Morgan was happy to play Auntie to Faye's gorgeous daughter, Gemma. She sighed, leaning forward to finish her notes as the clock ticked towards ten.

Her assistant had left hours ago and Morgan was finishing alone before heading back to her flat in the student area of Jericho. She had been expecting a visit earlier from an American academic who had an interesting proposition for her but he hadn't shown up. She had agreed to talk with him because he had mentioned research affiliations with her old University in Israel as well as opportunities in the US which might serve her career well. Oxford also looked favorably on academics who brought in their own research grants. Maybe she would call him tomorrow, but for now it was time to head home. She began to pack up her files, preferring to start with a clean desk every morning.

Morgan's office sat at the end of Bath Place, a tiny alleyway opposite the Holywell Music Rooms in central Oxford, where the old colleges jostled with modern city shops. May was a glorious time in the city, with rare sunshine bringing the city outdoors, punting on the river Cherwell and lazing in the botanical gardens. It seemed summer had finally arrived and Morgan was glad. She still found the endless wet winters difficult after the sun baked Israeli climate. When it rained too hard, water ran down the cobblestones and under the door, soaking the carpet of the office so it smelled damp. It had happened too much the last winter but she loved being in the centre of the city and in this little nook between the Turf pub and Hertford College. The Turf had low, dark beams the size of stooped old men and the walls leached the smell of stale tobacco. She had often finished a winter's day with a mulled wine in the tiny bar. She would hear the dark wooden kegs of beer being rolled down the barrel vault, the crackle of the flames in the small hearths lit on cold nights. Now it was almost summer, time for the lively chatter of



students drinking Pimms with lemonade, spiked with mint and cucumber. These noises were the background to her office, her rhythmic day and Oxford had just started to feel like home.

The sharp knock on the door made her jump. It was far too late for anyone to be here now, but perhaps it was the American academic finally come to talk with her. The door to the practice had no peephole, no chain lock. It was not designed to keep people out. Morgan felt a rise of adrenalin, her Israeli suspicion kicking in at this late night visit, but she pushed it down with a wry smile. This was Oxford, England, not Jerusalem. A late night visit was only a dry academic with a research proposal. She walked into the outer office and opened the door.

A man stood outside, clean shaven with dark circles under his eyes, emphasized by the shadow of a nearby street lamp. His indigo pinstriped suit was expensive but understated and he carried a large manila envelope.

"Dr Morgan Sierra?" The man asked with an American drawl, she heard hints of the south in it and thought she recognized the academic from the phone.

"Yes, and you must be Dr Everett?"

"Actually, Dr Everett is indisposed but I am his research assistant, Matthew Fry." He held out his business card to Morgan. She took it as he continued.

"He asked me to come by and discuss his proposal with you. We fly back to the US in the morning so we don't have much time. Would you have ten minutes now?"

Morgan didn't sense any threat from him. Fry didn't look like a research assistant but she knew she didn't look much like the stereotype of an Oxford professor either. The lure of the potential American grant was too much to knock back. She stepped aside.

"Of course, I still have some coffee on if you'd like some."

Fry looked around Morgan's office as she refilled her own mug and poured him a coffee in the small kitchen by the office. The room was large as Oxford offices often are, a treasure house of accumulated knowledge. The room was walled with bookcases, one window high up so the night sky could be seen. The books were an eclectic mix of ancient tomes with broken, unrecognizable spines and modern textbooks, all spilling from the shelves to piles on the floor. There was even a small reading nook, a cushioned space surrounded by towering shelves. A picture of a mandala hung on the wall, a circle in a square made up of blue and red hues. Fry recognized it as one of psychologist Carl Jung's pieces from the Red Book, recently revealed to the public after years of secret storage. A Turkish rug lay on the floor, a runner with woven animals in pairs like twins. There was also a black and white photo on her desk, an old man, perhaps her father, his eyes crinkled in laughter.

Morgan came back with the coffee and in the light of the desk lamp he could see

her features more clearly. Her long dark curls were roughly tied back from an arresting face, alive with expression. Her sharp eyes were a keen blue with a curious slash of violet in the right eye. He found himself staring just slightly too long, and then said quickly, "Thank you for seeing me so late. Dr Everett is keen to have you work with us on a research project that you would be uniquely qualified for and would find challenging."

He opened the envelope he carried and spread the contents out on her desk. Morgan walked around to get a better look. She shuffled through the photos and her eyes flew directly to one image, a roughly carved stone with a leather cord threaded through it.

"The stone," she said. "That's why you're here?"

"You wear one don't you?" Fry asked. Morgan's hand flew to her throat where the outline of a similar stone could be seen through her tight-fitting t-shirt.

"It was given to me by my father before he died. Why is Dr Everett interested in these stones?"

"Our research shows that there are twelve of them spread around the world and we want to collect them together for an exhibition. They are relics from the early church."

"Surely not?" she replied. "My father wouldn't have given me something so precious to history. If it's what you say it is, then it should be in a museum, not around my neck."

"Perhaps, but given that you have a stone already and you're an expert in religious history, we'd like to employ you to find the rest of them. We would pay well for your time, as this is a project that Dr Everett cares deeply about. We have two already and we want the others as fast as possible."

Morgan said, "I think you have the wrong academic. This stone has great sentimental value to me, but that's about it. I'm not sure I'm really someone your Dr Everett would want on his team."

Fry frowned, taking a step towards her.

"If we can't have your time for the project, then we want to buy the stone from you. It's needed to complete the group. We have to have all twelve. It's critical for us."

Morgan crossed her arms.

"I think you should go now. Tell Dr Everett to put an offer in writing and I'll consider it but I can't promise anything." She indicated the way out. "Thank you for your time."

Fry started to walk towards the door, then turned and said. "We know your sister Faye has one too. The offer includes her stone. We need them both."

Just then, they heard sound of glass in the outer office.

"Get down," Fry hissed, flicking back his suit jacket and pulling a gun from a holster under his arm. Morgan instinctively ducked down behind the desk. Then the lights went out.

## CHAPTER 2.

As Morgan's eyes adjusted to the dim glow filtering through the skylight above, she could see Fry now crouched low to the floor. A flash of silver from the gun in his hand demonstrated he was ready for a fight. She realized he had been expecting trouble of some sort. She cursed under her breath, wishing she had trusted her earlier suspicions. She had lost her edge in this protected pocket of academia. She felt the cool wood of the desk on her back. She breathed deeply, trying to still her heartbeat, memory flooding back as she analyzed the situation even as she knew there was no way out. In her mind, she was back in Israel, under fire in the Golan Heights. Her husband Elian was by her side, joyous in the adrenalin of battle, and then he was dead. She had left Israel then, changed her name, escaped the military secret service for this life as an academic.

Morgan could hear two sets of footsteps in the outer room. The men were careless, didn't seem to worry about being heard. But who were they? Three years had passed since she left the Israeli forces, but those survival skills were still deeply embedded. She peered around the desk and saw Fry swivel the wingback chair to provide some cover as he prepared for the men's entry into the office. She needed to defend herself as well. Morgan felt around the base of the desk for the compartment she had fashioned in the old wood. She had first hidden the gun there over two years ago when she moved to this office, hoping never to have to use it. Despite feeling it was a crazy precaution and one that could get her arrested, she had cleaned it and kept it ready just in case. There were false passports there too, money ready to leave as if she had always known this life was temporary. The hidden compartment clicked open and her Barak SP-21 pistol was revealed. With one breath, it was back in her hand, the familiar weight giving her confidence against the invaders. She kicked off her shoes and knelt at the edge of the desk, ready to act.

A voice spoke in the darkness.

"We just want the Apostle's stone. If you give it to us, there will be no problems. Morgan, you have a nice, quiet life here in Oxford. It would be a pity to upset it. All we want is the stone. Toss it towards the door and we'll leave."

Morgan heard both the threat and the promise in his voice. She didn't understand why this stone was so important now, but she knew hers alone was not enough. Her sister Faye had one too and the men would go after her next. Maybe they were already there? Thinking of Faye, David and Gemma in the house with no idea of what was coming, she determined to keep the men there as long as possible. She called out,

"Who are you? Why do you want the stone?"

She heard Fry's hurried 'ssh' trying to quiet her. There was no time to waste though. She had never relied on anyone else to keep her safe. With Elian's death, she had learnt how

to protect herself and her own.

The voice replied. "It doesn't matter who we are or why we want it. If we have to come in to get it then I can't guarantee your safety. Give it to us and we'll leave."

Fry was preparing to fire at the door if they came in. He called out, "Backup is coming, I'm not alone here. I'm warning you to leave now."

"Then we'll be quick." the voice continued. "I'll give you five seconds to throw the stone out. Then we're coming in...1..."

Fry turned towards Morgan and whispered, "You have to get out. Just get the stone away from here."

"...2..."

Morgan held the pistol out in front of her with both hands, her eyes on the door.

"You must know my history, Fry, I'm sure you did your homework. I can protect myself and besides, there's no other way out. I have to go through them."

She moved quickly to the other side of the room, keeping low and out of direct sight of the door. She held a position opposite to where Fry crouched behind the chair.

"...3..."

"Don't worry. I've done this before."

He saw the flash of her grin in the pale light, the first dark smile she had given him, her lithe body now moving with a fluid grace, seemingly transformed by the weapon in her hand. This was Morgan the soldier.

"...4..."

The door burst in and a rattle of gunfire exploded into the room. The bastard had no intention of waiting, he wanted them both dead. Morgan fired, missed and moved position, back behind her desk as Fry squeezed off two shots. He killed the second man before being blown backwards against the oak paneled wall. It was just her and the main attacker remaining. He was protected by the bookshelf that protruded from the wall in her reading alcove. It was her shelter where she read and learnt, now it was full of cold intent in the form of a man prepared to kill her.

Morgan breathed deeply. This was her space, how dare they invade it with their guns. How dare they threaten Faye and the life she had here. She could feel rage building up. It was one of the reasons she had left the military after Elian's death. She had become too separated from her own humanity, ambivalent to killing. Her life had changed but she still had that indifference. Now it would serve her well.

The man spoke.

"It seems we underestimated you, but your colleague seems to be indisposed, so it's just you and me. If you toss me the stone, I'll just leave. Otherwise, you'll find it a slow and painful death after I've finished with you."

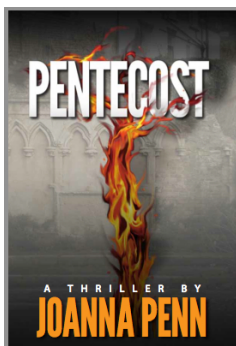
His threatening words brought back memories long buried. She had been tortured once but they hadn't broken her then and this man would not break her now.

The bookcase the man hid behind was actually a thin veneer and she knew the books on it by heart. Morgan looked at them every day, and she knew where each one sat. She could visualize their covers and knew which ones were tall and short on the shelves. There was a place where a shot would not have to pass through books or wood to hit the man, but once she stood to take it, she would be a clear target herself. She considered where the shot would need to go, then in one movement she stood and fired through the bookcase. Her first shot caught his ear and knocked him off guard. He returned fire but she moved again, ducking to the floor. The framed picture of the mandala smashed down behind him and glass crashed to the floor. She fired again, the second shot blew his head apart.

Morgan walked over to the fallen body of her assailant and flicked on the lights. She looked at her beautiful books, splattered in blood and brain matter as it dripped down the bookcase onto the carpet. Her heart was racing from the adrenalin of killing, not fear. She dropped to one knee and frisked the man for ID. Nothing, as expected, but it was worth a try. He was white, heavy-set, typical low level bad guy. All brawn, no brains, she thought. Morgan noticed that he had a tattoo on his left forearm. She pulled up his sleeve to see it better. It was a stylized horse's head, its mouth open in a frenzied braying. The lack of color made it eye-catching. It was ashen, almost as if the pigment had been leached from the man's skin to make it a paler shade. Morgan took a picture of it with her smartphone. Tattoos had a way of betraying the allegiances of their owners and it was all she had to go on for now. She turned to Fry, whose dead body was resting against the wall behind the chair. She closed his eyes out of respect but she hardly knew the man. She didn't know who this Everett could be but clearly there was another group who also wanted the stones that she and perhaps others held. There was no time to stay here now. There would surely be another group after Faye. She needed to protect her sister and her family, her own guilt about the past fueling the need to be sure they were safe. Her quiet academic life was over for now.

Morgan grabbed the rest of her gear from the compartment under the desk, her passport, cash and more ammunition. She dialed Emergency 999 on her desk phone, leaving it off the hook as the operator repeatedly asked if she was ok. She left the building, grabbed her bike and pedaled hard up Holywell Street. She headed towards St Giles and the pay phone there. She had to call Faye but couldn't risk it from her own phone in case it was tapped. She had only reached the second lamp-post outside the Sheldonian Theatre when a black van screeched to a halt beside her. Three men leapt out and pulled her and the bike inside, slamming her to the floor and driving off at speed.

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'Pentecost' will be available on Amazon.com, Kindle and iPad in Feb 2011.

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#### ABOUT JOANNA PENN

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Joanna has a website for authors and writers at <http://www.TheCreativePenn.com> where she has articles, audio interviews and videos on writing, publishing options and book marketing. She is also the creator of the Author 2.0 online program which teaches authors how to use web 2.0 tools to write, publish, sell and promote their books. Joanna is available for speaking events for authors and entrepreneurs.

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