

When the daughter of Nashville's powerful Cunningham family confesses to a murder, forensic investigator Peter Dawkins arrives from New York to help the local chief of police, formerly New York's top black cop. Dawkins sees straightaway that things are out of whack in Music City. When the alleged murderer's twin offers to tell him a few family secrets, she is murdered too.

Dawkins has no shortage of suspects, starting with Charlie Cunningham himself, patriarch and chairman of Cunningham Coal, and his wife Celia, doyenne of Nashville society. Their son-in-law, Republican Senator Gerry Cramer, is being groomed for President, but standing in his way is state prosecutor and Democratic favorite Billy Ray Russell. He wants to convict the daughter and ride a tidal wave of popular sentiment straight to the White House.

The clues Dawkins unravels in his search for the killers put him directly in the crosshairs of Cunningham's devious goons, Little Tommie Mason and Eric the Albino. Dawkins quickly finds himself in real danger – at the local quarry, backstage at the Lipstick Lounge, in the basement of Nashville's biggest megachurch, and atop a floating casino in the middle of the Cumberland River on a wet and foggy night. A Scottish transplant, Megan Macdonald, reporting for the *Nashville Courier*, offers to help him but soon finds herself in harm's way too.

As Dawkins works to solve the case, he exposes a tangled web of cocaine smuggling, illegal immigration and tax fraud that reveals the dark side of right-wing American politics and its Faustian bargain with the church. As he astutely muses, "Beauty is only skin-deep, but ugly goes clear to the bone."