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# FAYE KELLERMAN

AUTHOR OF *HANGMAN*

THE FIRST DECKER/LAZARUS NOVEL

the ritual bath

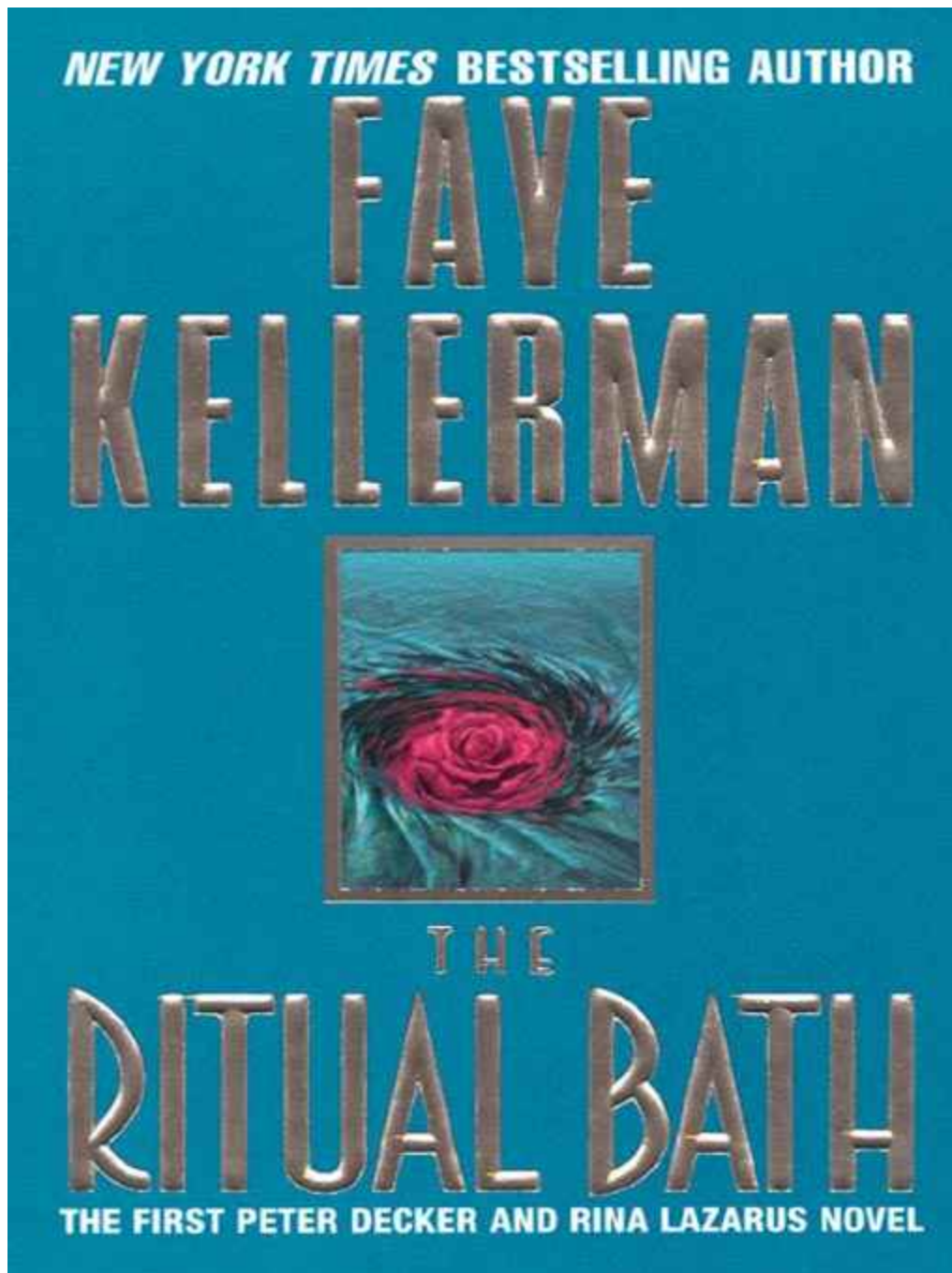
"EXCEPTIONALLY FINE SUSPENSE."

*San Diego Union-Tribune*



Synopsis:

Sergeant Decker is called to investigate a rape charge in an isolated Orthodox Jewish Community. Rina Lazarus, a young widow who found the victim, guides Decker through her suspicious community as all the signs point to the rapist's first crime not being their last.





# THE RITUAL BATH

# FAYE KELLERMAN

The first book in the Peter Decker and Rina  
Lazarus

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*For Jonathan. Ani l'dodi ♡'dodi li.  
And for the munchkins:  
Jesse, Rachel, and Ilana.*

## 1

**“The key to** a good potato kugel is good potatoes,” Sarah Libba shouted over the noise of the blow dryer. “The key to a *great* potato kugel is the amount of oil. You have to use just enough oil to make

the batter moist, plus a little excess to leak out around the cake pan and fry the edges to make the whole thing nice and crisp without being too greasy.”

Rina nodded and folded a towel. If anyone would know how to cook a potato kugel, it was Sarah Libba. The woman could roast a shoe and turn it into a delicacy. But tonight Rina was too fatigued to listen with a full ear. It was already close to ten o'clock, and she still had to clean the mikvah, then grade thirty papers.

It had been a busy evening because of the bride. A lot of to-do, hand-holding, and explaining. The young girl had been very nervous, but who wouldn't be about marriage? Rivki was barely seventeen with little knowledge of the world around her. Sheltered and exquisitely shy, she'd gotten engaged to Baruch after three dates. But Rina thought it was a good match. Baruch was a good student and kind and very *patient*. He'd never once lost his temper while teaching Shmuel how to ride a two-wheeler. He'd be calm yet encouraging, Rina decided, and it wouldn't be long before Rivki knew the ropes just like the rest of them.

Sarah shut off the dryer, and the motor belched a final wheeze. Fluffing up her close-cropped hair, she sighed and placed a wig atop her head. The nylon tresses were ebony and long, falling past Sarah Libba's slender shoulders. She was a pretty woman with wide brown eyes that lit up a round, friendly face. And short, not more than five feet, with a slim figure that belied the fact that she'd borne four children. Meticulous in dress and habit, she worked methodically, combing and styling the artificial black strands.

“Here,” Rina said. “Let me help you with the back.”

Sarah smiled. “Know what inspired me to buy this *shaytel*?”

Rina shook her head.

“*Your* hair, Rina,” said Sarah. “It's getting so long.”

"I know. Chana's already mentioned it to me."

"Are you going to cut it?"

"Probably."

"Not too short I hope."

Rina shrugged. Her hair was one of her best features. Her mother had raised a commotion when she'd announced her plans to cover it after marriage. Of all the religious obligations that Rina had decided to take on, the covering of her hair was the one that displeased her mother the most. But she forged ahead over her mother's protests, clipped her hair short, and hid it under a wig or scarf. Now, of course, the point was moot.

Working quickly and with self-assurance, Rina turned the wig into a fashionable style. Sarah Libba craned her neck to see the back in the mirror, then smiled.

"It's lovely," she said, patting Rina's hand.

"I've got a lot to work with," said Rina. "It's a good *shaytel*."

"It should be," Sarah said. "It cost nearly three hundred dollars, and that's for only twenty percent human hair."

"You'd never know."

The other woman frowned.

"Don't cut your hair short, Rina, despite what Chana tells you. She has a load of advice for everyone but herself. We had the family over for Shabbos and her kids were monsters. They broke Chaim's Transformer, and do you think she offered a word of apology?"

"Nothing, huh."

"Nothing! The boys are *vilde chayas*, and the girls aren't much better. For someone who runs everyone else's life, she sure doesn't do too well with her own."

Rina said nothing. She wasn't much of a gossip, not only because of the strict prohibitions against it, but because she found it personally distasteful. She preferred to keep her opinions to herself.

Sarah didn't prolong the one-way conversation. She stood up, walked over to the full-length mirror, and preened.

"This time alone is my only respite," she said. "It makes me feel human again."

Rina nodded sympathetically.

"The kids will probably all be up when I get home," the tiny woman sighed. "And Zvi is learning late tonight.... I think I'll walk home very slowly. Enjoy the fresh air."

"That's a good idea," Rina said, smiling.

Sarah trudged to the door, turned the knob, straightened her stance, and left.

Alone at last, Rina stood up, stretched, and glanced at her watch again. Her own boys were still at the Computer Club. Steve would walk them home to a waiting baby-sitter so there was no need to rush. She could take her time. Removing her shoes, she rubbed her feet, slipped them into knitted socks and shuffled along the gleaming white tile. Loaded down with a bucket full of soapy water, a handful of rags, and a pail of supplies, she entered the hallway leading to the two bathrooms.

The first one had been used by Sarah Libba, who'd left it neat and orderly. The towels and sheet were compulsively folded upon the tiled counter, the bath mat draped over the rim of the bathtub, and care had been taken to remove the hairs from the comb and brush.

Rina quickly went to work, scrubbing the floor, tub, wash basin, and shower. She refilled the soap containers, the Q-tips holder, the cotton ball dispenser, recapped the toothpaste, and placed the comb in a vial of disinfectant. After giving the countertops a thorough

going-over, she left the room, taking the garbage and the dirty laundry with her.

The second bathroom was in complete disarray but within a short period of time, it was as spotless as the first.

She dumped the garbage down a chute that emptied into a bin outside and loaded the towels, sheets, and washcloths into a large utility washer in the closet. Now for the mikvot themselves.

The main mikvah — the women's — was a sunken Roman bath four feet deep and seven feet square, covered with sparkling, deep blue tile. To aid the women in climbing down the eight steps, a handrail had been installed. Religious law prescribed that the water in the bath emanate from a natural source — rain, snow, ice — but the crystalline pool was heated for comfort.

What a beautiful mikvah, Rina thought, so unlike the one she'd used in an emergency six years ago. They'd been visiting Yitzchak's parents in Brooklyn. It had been wintertime and blizzard warnings were out. The closest mikvah was nothing more than a hole of filthy, freezing water, but she'd held her breath and forced herself to dunk anyway. She'd felt contaminated when she got home. Though bathing wasn't permissible after the ritual immersion, Yitzchak had looked the other way when she soaked her chilled bones in steaming water to clean off the scummy residue left on her skin.

The wives of the men at the yeshiva had been very vocal about constructing a clean mikvah — one that would make a woman proud to observe the laws of family purity. And they'd gotten their way. The tile used for the mikvah and bathroom countertops was handpicked and imported from Italy. As an extra touch, a beauty area was added, complete with two vanity tables fully equipped with dryers, combs, brushes, curling irons, and make-up mirrors. An architect was hired, the construction progressed rapidly, and now the yeshiva had a mikvah to call its own. No longer would the women have to

travel hours to do the mitzvah of *Taharat Hamishpacha* — spiritual cleansing through dunking in the ritual bath.

Rina mopped the excess water off the floor, then turned off the heat and lights. She padded down the hallway, took out a key and went inside the men's mikvah. It was comparatively unadorned, layered with plain white tile. The men had refused to heat or filter the water, but the Rosh Yeshiva was very insistent that they keep the place clean. Though she didn't have to, she mopped the floor as a courtesy.

When that was done, she relocked the door and finished off by cleaning the last pool — a small basin for dunking cooking and eating utensils made out of metal. A frying pan lay at the bottom. Ruthie Zipperstein must have left it when she had dunked her cookware. Rina would drop it off on her way home.

She dried her hands, then went back to the reception room and sat down in an old overstuffed chair. Taking out a stack of papers, she began to grade them to the low hum of the washing machine. She'd gone through half the pile when the cycle finished. As she got up to load the dryer she heard a shriek that startled her.

Cats, she thought. The grounds of the yeshiva were inundated with them. Scrawny felines that made horrible human-like cries, scaring her sons in the middle of the night. She slammed the door to the dryer and was about to turn on the motor when she heard the shriek again. Walking over to the door, she leaned her ear against the soft pine. She could hear something rustling in the brush, but that wasn't unusual, either. The yeshiva was situated in a rural area and surrounded by forest. The tall trees sheltered a variety of scurrying animals — jackrabbits, deer, squirrels, snakes, lizards, an occasional coyote, and of course, the cats. Still, she began to get spooked.

Turning the knob, Rina opened the door partway and peered into the blackness. A stream of hot air hit her in the face. The sky was star-