

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

APRIL/MAY/JUNE 2019

Profiling a Killer

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*Domestic Suspense:
More than a Game*

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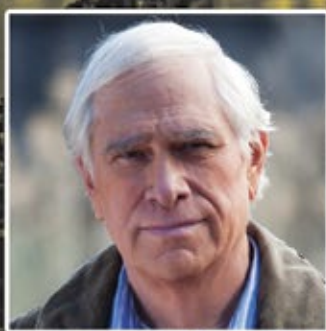
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In the world of publishing and book selling, one thing is known for sure: it can and will change in an instant. I've spoken about this topic several times on the radio show, but I've never written a "Letter from the Editor" based on the subject, so I think it's time.

The largest brick-and-mortar bookstore chain is Barnes & Noble. What you may not have noticed as of yet, however, is that Barnes & Noble is up for sale. Now...what does that mean for the book business? Well, that depends on if the

news is true or not. The new "buyers" are looking to close more stores and make other stores smaller; more boutique. When B&N brought in Starbucks, you knew they were trying their best to keep people in the store. But when everything is up for sale—yes, that table in the front; the display rack; the new release shelf; the summer reads table, *all* of it is up for sale—if you aren't a big publisher, you can't afford it.

So now, smaller publishers and self-published authors will have less space to compete. If you are a big author that relies on the sales from B&N in order to make the *New York Times* Bestseller List (because Amazon numbers are not reported to the Bestseller List, but that's a whole new conversation), you will be affected as well. Either way, if you're an author used to selling 100,000 copies through B&N, that path will be gone. (But the big authors will always get their share.) Who this hurts the most are mid-list authors that sell maybe 10,000 copies through B&N. Those sales will fall, and could fall by up to fifty or sixty percent.

If the B&N news is correct, Amazon will probably gain more market share, as they are the largest seller of print books. But for the consumer who likes to browse the stacks in a bookstore, you'll feel the pain. Hopefully more independent bookstores will be able to get those customers, but they'll have to be in the perfect location to nab them.

While the Kindle has won in the eBook wars, the B&N Nook version is on life support, to the point where Microsoft pulled out their money a couple of years ago. The future of selling books for authors that don't have a big marketing engine behind them, will be eBooks. This trend should have been embraced by authors, probably over five years ago.

Authors are always looking for marketing tips and asking what they can do to sell

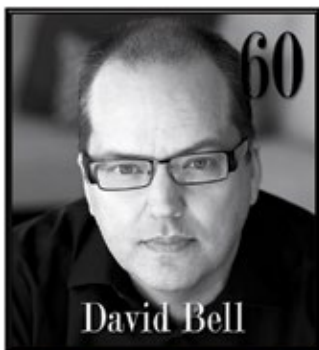
more books. Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? What works for some, might not work for others. You need to *know* your audience so you can focus more on the places that cover your genre. Don't go to a mystery magazine if you write sci-fi fantasy; you probably won't find the readers you're looking for. Doing research is more important than ever. Don't worry about when your book was published, keep researching and keep your name out there. Books never die, they just change covers.

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



<https://www.deviantart.com/jassysart/art/My-Sweet-Little-Cardinal-769962265>

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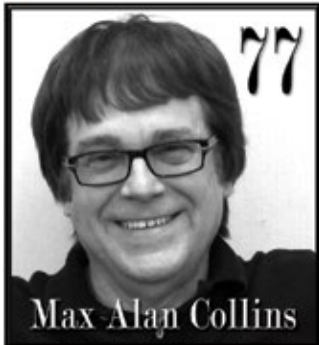
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Researching the DARK SIDE of Humanity

PATRICIA BRADLEY ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING & HER NEW THRILLER “JUSTICE DELIVERED”



By Patricia Bradley
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RESEARCH. As a writer who loves the research aspect of writing, I discovered early on that I could spend (hours) days seeking information for my stories. I’ve even used research as an excuse to check out my settings. Would that every book could be set somewhere like Hawaii or Alaska... but, I digress. Or not. Because I can’t always visit the settings, I rely on YouTube and Google Earth, and just plain search engines. There are articles on every subject known to man in those search engines. Did you know that the National Institute of Justice has a [forensic database for paint, shoe prints and beyond?](#)

Another thing I’ve learned is that experts in almost any field like to be interviewed. And don’t be afraid to call—the person can only give one of two answers—yes or no. Most of the time it’s yes. And you really can’t mess it up. My first call to a local homicide department went something like this:

Receptionist: Homicide.

Me: I, ah...am writing a novel, and I...uh, mmm, need to talk to someone.

Receptionist: Hold just a moment, please.

Then she connected me with a captain who met with me, and over several lunches we discussed how murderers get away with murder, and other great topics. So, you see...you can’t mess it up. And it does help to offer food. We even had a nearby family scoot their chairs away from us.

The hardest book I’ve ever researched is “Justice Delivered,” the fourth book in my *Memphis Cold Case* novels. My research led me to personal interviews with women, mostly teens, who’d been trafficked. I met with women who had escaped their captors, and we talked about what it was like for them. I also belong to Advocates for Freedom, an organization in Mississippi dedicated to ending human trafficking. Through this organization I’ve had an inside peek at this \$150 billion dollar a year business. I’ve learned how trafficking works, about the life of a trafficked person, and why it’s so hard for women to break away from their pimps.

In “Justice Delivered,” Jasmine’s fellow-trafficked friend Lily is trying to get her to run away from their pimp:

“No...” Lily’s chest barely moved. “Can’t breathe.” Her feverish eyes locked on to Jasmine’s. “Promise.”

Jasmine wanted to promise, but after the “modeling agent” sold her to Blade, she’d tried to get away. Escaped three times. She rubbed the scar inside her forearm. The first time, a cop found her and took her back to Blade. He branded her with his initials and beat her until half her ribs were broken. The next time, he locked her in a closet for a week. The last time, he’d beaten her and locked her in her room for three weeks with nothing but moldy bread and very little water. She never tried again.

Pimps use beatings, threats to the trafficked person’s families—anything that will tighten the pimp’s hold until the victims give up. Lily’s death pushes Jasmine, who later becomes Carly Smith, to trust the women giving out coffee and Jesus tracts.

Some readers have asked why I wrote the book. After I learned about human trafficking, I couldn’t *not* write it. I had no idea it existed on the level it did. Most people I encounter have not a clue how prevalent trafficking is in today’s society. While “Justice Delivered” is fiction, I hope it touches readers in a real way. I hope they become more aware and educate themselves on how to fight this crime.

The United States has an epidemic of teens running away from home. In 2017, one in five teens who ran away from home was trafficked. One year later, that statistic went from one in five to one in three. It is a tragedy to the women who are caught up in this business. For the trafficker, it’s nothing *but* business. This is a scene from the viewpoint of one of the traffickers in “Justice Delivered.”

A traffic light caught him, and he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. The five girls they’d left behind in Hernando rankled him. Fifteen thousand dollars lost. But perhaps he should focus on the positive—he’d escaped with fifteen of them and the cop’s kid. A thought niggled at the back of his mind. Blade would bet the cop would give more than fifteen thousand to get her back. Maybe there was a way to milk this situation. Get the cop’s money and still sell the kid to the cartel. He’d have to think about it.

I’ve learned not to research certain things late at night. Delving into research that takes me into the mind of a serial killer, a drug trafficker, a kidnapper, sociopaths—not something I want on my mind just before bedtime. It stays with me. The darkness. The anger, and sometimes the circumstances that turn a person toward the dark side of life. It’s research I usually resist until my story quits talking to me. But as writers, we must know how they think.

Once, my research took me to a site that asked how to tell if you think like a sociopath. Of course I clicked on it. And the answer is...how you answer this question:

You are at your mother’s funeral. Someone very nice looking hits on you, asks you for a date. You say yes and give that person your phone number. When there’s no call, you kill your sister. Why did you kill your sister?

If you’re a sociopath, the answer is: so that person will come to the funeral and you can see her or him again.

Aren’t you glad that wasn’t *your* answer?

Research is a fascinating subject that draws me down many rabbit holes. It takes me places I’ll probably never go and allows me to write about things I’ve never experienced. So embrace it, but don’t use it to procrastinate! Guilty as charged. ■

A 2018 Carol finalist and winner of an Inspirational Readers’ Choice Award in Suspense, Patricia Bradley lives in North Mississippi with her rescue kitty, Suzy. Her romantic suspense books include the Logan Point series and the Memphis Cold Case Novels. “Justice Delivered,” her fourth Cold Case Novel released April 5, 2019.

When she has time she likes to throw mud on a wheel and see what happens. To learn more, check out: www.patriciabradleyauthor.com/blog.

In a time of social and political unrest, you might as well take a break and traverse the oldest city in the United States with a man and his dog.

GARY WILLIAMS

In this second installment, Gary and his dog, Guen, return to the historic streets of St. Augustine, Florida, to discuss such wide-ranging topics as sporks, speed humps, James Bond, Common Core math, a gigantic water bowl, Antonio Banderas, and a superhero Dachshund named Edgar.



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SPECIAL PREVIEW FROM PATRICIA BRADLEY

JUSTICE DELIVERED

By Patricia Bradley

PROLOGUE

JANUARY 2010

Jasmine eased out of her cell-like room and down the dimly lit hallway. Two light raps on another bedroom door brought no response, and she turned the knob and slipped inside.

Moonlight filtered into the darkened room through narrow slats on the window. Labored breathing coming from the bed sent her heart spiraling to the floor. It was almost time to go, and Lily was still in bed. She eased closer, noticing that the thin blanket shook.

“It’s me, Jasmine,” she whispered. “You have to get dressed.”

Lily didn’t respond. If she wasn’t ready when Blade came to get them, there would be consequences. Jasmine touched her shoulder, feeling the tremor in the girl’s body. And the heat. Her hot skin made Jasmine wince.

“C-can’t . . .”

She knelt beside the bed and smoothed the girl’s hot brow. She was pretty sure from the way her friend had been coughing that she had pneumonia.

Lily’s eyes fluttered open, and she turned toward the only window in the small room. “It’s dark already?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry—maybe they won’t make you go tonight.” Even as she said the words, Jasmine knew they would.

And if Lily didn’t bring in her thousand dollars, Blade would beat her or worse.

“I-I have t-to. C-can’t go in the H-hole again.”

The Hole was why Lily was sick. A week ago she’d had a toothache and begged off hitting the streets. And for two days he’d shut her up in a tiny room in the basement of the house where they lived. With no lights and only the bare floor to sleep on, she’d come out of it disoriented and feverish.

“You’re too sick to get out of bed.” Jasmine swallowed and lifted her chin. “I’ll tell Blade I’ll see your clients tonight too.”

“They won’t let you,” Lily said. She tried to sit up and fell back on the bed. Tears dropped from the corners of her eyes. She tried to take a deep breath and fell into a fit of coughing. When she got her breath, she slipped a bracelet from her arm and pressed it into Jasmine’s hand. “I’m not going to make it, Jaz.”

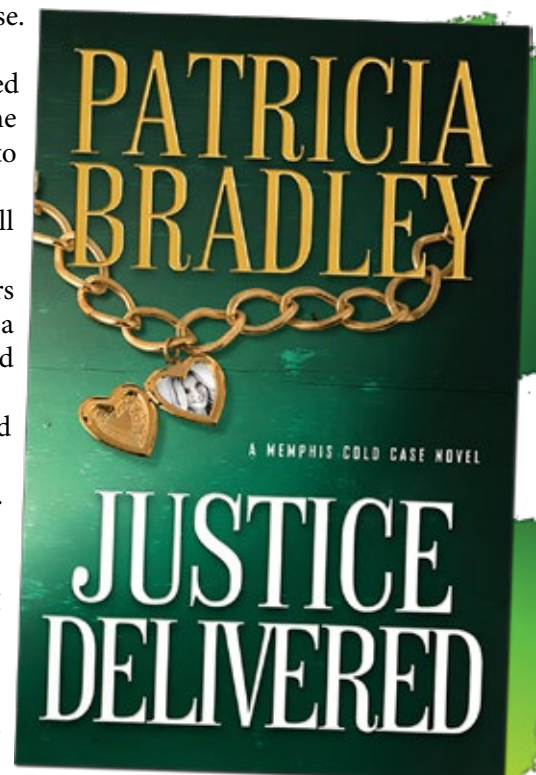
Jasmine clenched the thin chain in her hands as if holding on tightly would make Lily well. She didn’t know what she’d do if Lily died. “You have to make it.”

“I’m so c-cold.” She squeezed Jasmine’s hand. “Jaz, you . . . have to . . . forgive . . .”

“Lily, don’t ask me to do that. These men don’t deserve forgiveness!” she whispered fiercely. Someone had given Lily a Bible, and after she started reading it, she’d changed.

“None of us deserve forgiveness . . . and it’s for . . . you. If you don’t forgive . . . it will eat you alive.”

She didn’t have to ask if Lily had forgiven Blade or the one responsible for



her being sold into prostitution. Peace showed on her face. Jasmine gripped the bracelet tighter. Her anger at Austin King and Blade was all she had to hold on to, and she wasn't letting it go.

Lily closed her eyes briefly. She tried to breathe deeper and triggered a spasm of coughing. When she got her breath, she turned, and her eyes pierced Jasmine.

"You have to find a way to get out of here. Find those women."

Last night four women from some shelter had brought coffee and doughnuts to the girls on the street. She'd ignored them, but Lily had talked to one of the ladies. Jasmine shook her head. "I can't leave you like this. I have to get medicine and bring it to you."

"No . . ." Lily's chest barely moved. "Can't breathe." Her feverish eyes locked on to Jasmine's. "Promise."

Jasmine wanted to promise, but after the "modeling agent" sold her to Blade, she'd tried to get away. Escaped three times. She rubbed the scar inside her forearm. The first time, a cop found her and took her back to Blade. He branded her with his initials and beat her until half her ribs were broken. The next time he locked her in a closet for a week. The last time, he'd beaten her and locked her in her room for three weeks with nothing but moldy bread and very little water. She never tried again.

They both jerked as Blade's voice thundered from the front of the house, ordering the women to assemble for the ride into town.

"Those women . . ." Lily's breathing grew shallower. "They . . . will . . . help."

Jasmine couldn't think about trying to escape again. "They may not be there. Blade will probably drop us off in a different part of the city," she said, looking toward the door when he shouted her name. Maybe if she told him how sick Lily was, he'd get help for her.

She turned to tell Lily she'd be right back and her heart stilled.

Lily was dead.

EARLY APRIL 2012

At a coffee shop near Nashville, Carly Smith typed "Lia Morgan" into the Facebook search engine, then chose Tennessee's second largest city for where to search. It had been ten years since she'd seen her sister, and she was probably married by now. Still, there couldn't be too many Lias in Memphis.

She hesitated with her finger poised over the enter key and closed her eyes. It had taken two years after she escaped Blade to get the courage to look for her sister. Two years and a name change. What if Lia wanted nothing to do with Carly? She wouldn't blame her. The feeling of worthlessness she struggled with daily washed over her. The psychiatrist she saw every two weeks had told her it would take time to put her past behind her, but Carly didn't believe she'd ever be free of her fear and shame. Opening her eyes, she pushed aside

her hesitation and tapped enter.

While she waited, Carly fingered the gold bracelet around her wrist. Chains looped together with a locket dangling in the middle. She'd had an artist draw Lily's likeness for the inside of the locket. *Lily*. She would never have stood for Carly's self-pity.

She straightened her shoulders as only one Lia Morgan popped up on her screen. Carly studied the small image. The woman in the photo had shorter hair than she remembered . . . but it was definitely her sister. She clicked on the name, and Lia's Facebook page opened.

Oh, wow. Evidently her sister was a freelance photographer. That shouldn't surprise Carly, not the way Lia had always gone around with a camera in her hand. She studied the page. Portraits, sports, events, crime scenes—Lia covered it all. And based on all the awards she'd received, she was good. A phone number for her studio was listed on the sidebar, and Carly put the number in her phone.

Should she call her? She wished her friend Jamie was here—she'd know what to do. Her fingers hovered over the call button. What if Lia hung up when she told her who she was? Lia was bound to be angry with her for just dropping out of her life. Carly pressed her dry lips into a thin line. No. She couldn't do it. Not today. But she saved the number and slipped her phone in her pocket.

A week later, Carly sat in the same coffee shop, tears stinging her eyes as the barista set an oversized cupcake on the table. Another of the employees lit the one candle. "You shouldn't have done this."

Jamie Parker smiled. "I couldn't let your birthday go by without a celebration."

The barista cleared her throat, and Carly jerked her head up. "Please. Don't sing 'Happy Birthday' to me."

"No one is singing to you," Jamie said with a laugh. "I still remember last year at the restaurant. I thought you were going to have a stroke. Now make a wish and blow the candle out."

Carly paused, then leaned forward and blew out the flame. Everyone around her clapped and she nodded her thanks, resisting the urge to fan her heated cheeks.

"What did you wish for?" Jamie asked when they were alone again.

Carly busied herself with cutting the cupcake. All day she'd been thinking about birthdays past that she'd spent with Lia. "You have to help me eat this," she said.

"Of course, but what was your wish?"

"If I tell, it won't come true."

"Oh, come on. That's just for kids."

She put half of the cupcake on the extra plate and pushed it toward Jamie.

"Is it about your sister?" Jamie asked.

Carly nodded.

"You should call her."

"That's what my psychiatrist says."

“What’s holding you back?”

Carly almost wished she hadn’t told Jamie about finding Lia on Facebook as she thought of all the reasons she hadn’t called and settled on the main one. “What if she doesn’t want to see me after she learns where I’ve been?”

“You’re not to blame for what happened to you. Not like me, and if my family can forgive me for the mess I made of my life, your sister will welcome you with open arms.”

Jamie reminded her of Lily. Always pushing her out of her comfort zone. No doubt the reason she’d bonded with her in the recovery home.

“Besides,” Jamie said, “you had no way of knowing the man who offered to make you a model was into human trafficking.”

“Even a seventeen-year-old should have known when something was too good to be true.” She fiddled with the turquoise pin adorning the scarf around her neck. He’d been so convincing when he said she could make \$10,000 a week.

“You’re looking at it from ten years on the other side,” Jamie said softly. “What’s the worst that can happen if you call her?”

Rejection.

When Carly didn’t answer, her friend said, “From what you’ve told me about Lia, she doesn’t sound like someone who would reject you for something you couldn’t help.”

Jamie knew her well. Carly scraped at a chipped nail as memories of her big sister teaching her to swim and climb on a horse flashed through her mind. Lia had always looked out for her and never seemed to mind when Carly tagged along. *That* Lia would accept her. “You’re right, and when you encourage me, I think I can do it . . .”

Jamie touched Carly’s arm. “Call her right now.” She nodded toward the patio. “You can have privacy out there.”

Carly glanced through the window at the empty tables. Could she? She pulled her phone from her pocket. “Pray for me.”

“You know I will.”

Maybe God would hear Jamie’s prayers.

On the patio, a cool breeze touched her cheek as Carly scrolled through her contacts until she came to Lia’s name. Her thumb hovered over the number, and she almost returned the phone to her pocket. *No*. It was time, and she pushed the call button before she could change her mind.

“Lia Morgan Photography. How may I help you?”

Hearing Lia’s voice took her breath away. *Say something.* She couldn’t. Her vocal cords were frozen.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

“Y-yes,” Carly said.

“How can I help you?”

“It’s me . . . Heather.” The name felt strange on Carly’s tongue. She’d discarded Heather years ago. Along with Jasmine, the name Blade had given her.

“I see,” Lia said with an impatient sigh. “I suppose you need money for a plane ticket.”

“What?” Her heart reeled at Lia’s brusque tone.

“Don’t act like you didn’t read the article about Heather that came out in the *Commercial Appeal* today. Every time a reporter runs a story on her disappearance, at least half a dozen kooks call, claiming to be her. You’re the third one today. The first one wanted me to fly her from California so we could be a family again. The second caller just plain wanted money. What do you want, the reward money?”

“Reward? What are you talking about?”

“There’s a \$10,000 reward posted on Memphis CrimeStoppers.”

It took Carly a few seconds to process that someone had actually been looking for her. “I don’t know about any reward.”

“I’ve heard that before too.”

“You mean people can actually claim a reward for turning themselves in?” This reminded Carly of the arguments they’d had as children at the breakfast table. Lia, older and more logical, rarely backed down. “Look, I’m sorry about your other calls, but this one is for real. I’m your sister.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “You . . . don’t sound like my sister. You don’t even sound as though you’re from the South, for that matter.”

It hit Carly. While she’d recognized her sister’s voice with its Southern accent right off, Carly had forgotten she’d lost her drawl long ago in New York and hadn’t picked it up again when she was moved to Atlanta. “What if I asked you to meet me at the Natchez Trace State Park?”

There was a gasp on the other end of the line, then Lia asked, “Why there?”

“Because it’s where we spent a week every summer with our parents until they died.”

Silence filled the airwaves. “Oh my goodness,” she whispered. “It really is you.”

“Yes, it really is.”

“Where are you? And where have you been? Are you all right?” Lia’s voice rose as the questions tumbled out.

“I’d rather explain in person,” Carly said.

“I can be at the state park in two hours.”

“It will take me about the same amount of time. How about the restaurant there?”

“Okay, but how will I know you?”

“I’ll know you,” she said, glancing down at the clothes she wore. “But I’m wearing a plaid scarf and a white sweater over skinny jeans. Give me your cell number, and I’ll call you if I’m running late.”

Lia rattled off a number and Carly wrote it down. “You have my number on your caller ID.” Then she said, “You looked good on Facebook. That’s how I found you.”

“Why haven’t you called before?”

“I’ll answer all your questions when we meet. And please, don’t tell anyone I called or where we’re meeting. Not even Gigi and Frank.”

“But they’ll be so happy to know—”

“No!” She bit her lip. Her aunt and uncle had never approved of her, and she could only imagine their reaction

when they heard what had happened to her. Carly didn't want their reunion tainted with Gigi and Frank's disapproval. "You can tell them after we talk, if you still want to."

If they showed up with Lia, Carly would silently disappear.

Two and a half hours later at the Natchez Trace State Park, Carly sat at a corner table with a cup of dark roast and studied the people in the restaurant. She fingered the turquoise pin that held the GPS tracker she always wore somewhere in her clothing or her hair. Today she'd snapped it into a customized pin that held her brightly colored scarf in place. Tomorrow she might wear it in a barrette. Either way, she would not be without it—if she were ever kidnapped again, she wanted someone to be able to track her. Right now that was the people at RLT Security.

An overhead fan circulated cold air, making Carly shiver even with a sweater on. She rubbed her arms. Why did restaurants freeze you to death? She wished she'd told Lia she would meet her outside and turned to stare briefly through the bank of windows across the back of the room. The trees around the lake looked as though an artist had filled his palette with every shade of green known to mankind and dabbed it on the trees. Maybe they could move down by the lake once her sister arrived . . . if she came.

Restless, she glanced toward the door again. Lia wasn't coming. Carly unclasped her hands and five seconds later gripped them again, jumping as her cell phone announced a text. Maybe it was Lia. No. Jamie.

Did you make it safely?

Yes. She's not here.

Seconds later her cell phone rang. "Are you okay?" Jamie asked.

"Yes. No. What if Lia doesn't come?" The door opened and a Tennessee state trooper ambled into the room. For a few seconds, Carly struggled to breathe against the adrenaline pumping through her body. Some days it didn't matter how hard she worked, the sight of a policeman threw her into panic mode. "I have to go."

"What's wrong?"

Carly tracked the trooper as he walked to a table and pulled out a chair. "A s-state trooper just came in."

"Don't panic. Just close your eyes and picture a calm lake, with swans paddling in a circle . . ."

"You sound like my therapist." She glanced out the windows again. "And I don't have to close my eyes for that." A deep, cleansing breath stilled the fluttering in her chest. She could do this.

"You were getting better about that. What happened?"

Nothing had happened. She'd just gotten better at hiding her fear of the police. "I guess it's the stress of contacting Lia."

"Most cops are not like the ones in Blade's back pocket."

Carly wished she could believe that, but she'd seen too much corruption and too many instances of cops turning a

blind eye to human trafficking and drugs. She looked up as the waitress stopped at her table and held up a coffeepot.

"Would you like a refill, honey?"

Still holding the cell phone to her ear, Carly nodded. As soon as the waitress moved on, she glanced toward the door again. Her breath stilled. Lia stood just inside, scanning the room. "She's here."

"Good," Jamie said. "Don't rush anything."

"I won't. And thanks for being a good friend." Keeping her gaze on Lia, Carly laid her phone on the table. The Facebook photo didn't do her sister justice. Unlike Carly, who had inherited their mother's ash-blond hair and translucent skin tone, Lia had gotten their father's darker coloring. Dark brown hair, blue eyes, and skin that easily tanned. They looked as though they came from different gene pools.

She waved to get Lia's attention, and their gazes locked. Lia's face showed no recognition of Carly as she slowly approached the table. Doubt shrouded her face. The waitress stopped her, and after she nodded, the waitress sped toward the kitchen.

Then her sister stood at the table, her gaze still riveted on Carly.

She'd thought Lia might recognize her. But the last time her sister had seen her, Carly's hair had been jet-black, and she'd been super thin, almost anorexic. While she wasn't overweight, she'd filled out in a healthy way. The weight gain had changed her face, softening the sharp angles of her jawline and rounding it out.

"What did you call me at the breakfast table when we argued?" Lia demanded.

Carly laughed that her sister still remembered their morning arguments. "Gorilla. You called me Stinky." Then she inhaled deeply. Lia still wore the same perfume. "And you're wearing Joy. Just like me." She held her wrist up.

Lia bit her lip, and her eyes widened. "It's really you. All the way here, I kept preparing myself for disappointment." She pressed her fingers to her lips as her eyes turned shiny. "You don't know how long I've prayed for this, and down deep I knew one day you'd come back."

Maybe Carly should try praying more often. But it was hard to trust that a God who allowed her to be sold into slavery would hear her. She brushed the thought away as the waitress returned with a cup and filled it with coffee.

"Can I get you two anything else?" she asked.

They both shook their heads. "We'll order something later," Lia said, then she turned to Carly and studied her again. "I would not have recognized you if we'd passed on the street." She cocked her head, and Carly shifted her gaze away from Lia's scrutiny. "Unless I saw your eyes, and then I might wonder if it was you."

It'd been a while since Carly had worn the colored contacts that dried her eyes but effectively hid the gold starbursts ringing her irises. Maybe she should start wearing them again.

"I would have known you, and thank you for coming."

Carly cringed. Her voice sounded stilted, and an awkward silence fell between them. Now that Lia was here, Carly didn't know what to say. Even though they were sisters, the years apart had made them strangers.

"I'm so sorry I didn't ask you to move in with me," Lia blurted.

"Move in with you?"

"Yes. I knew it was bad with Gigi and Uncle Frank, but I was living in the college dorm with a roommate. I didn't have anywhere to put you." Her chin quivered. "It was my fault that you ran away."

The pain in Lia's face pierced Carly. All these years her sister had lived with guilt? "Didn't they tell you? I'd moved out and was staying with whoever would give me a place to sleep until I could get a job." It was one reason no one had reported her missing right away. She took a deep breath. "I didn't run away, either. I was kidnapped and sold into sex trafficking."

Lia paled. A gasp escaped her lips, and then she dropped her gaze to the table. "No," she whispered.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

Placing her hand on her chest, she brought her gaze back to Carly's. "Please, tell me that didn't happen."

"I wish I could."

"How?"

She'd known Lia would want to know, but that didn't make the telling easier. How to start? "I met a modeling agent. He promised me a job and lots of money if I would go with him to New York. You know how much I wanted to be a model." She paused to take a breath. How stupid she'd been. The memories of those first days assaulted her, and she sought the gold bracelet around her wrist.

"When we got to New York, he turned me over to a man called Blade, and the modeling job turned out to be in adult entertainment. When I said no, Blade kept me locked up in a tiny room with no food until I agreed. That's when I found out the modeling agent had sold me to Blade."

No need to mention the beatings she endured or what happened the times she tried to escape. Especially since her matter-of-fact words had evidently stunned Lia into silence. The once-cold room suddenly felt like a sauna, and Carly peeled the sweater off. "I finally got away from him two years ago. By then he had moved me to Atlanta. There were some ladies there who ran a shelter for trafficked women. They got me out of Georgia, otherwise Blade would have found me."

"Who is this Blade?" Color had returned to Lia's face, and her jaw clenched. "What's his last name?"

"I have no idea." The scar on her left arm throbbed, and she rubbed it with her thumb. "Blade is the only name I ever knew."

Lia shifted her gaze to Carly's arm. "How did you get that scar?"

She glanced down, remembering the smell of her seared skin when Blade pressed the red-hot *B* just below her elbow. "The first time I ran away and Blade caught me, he branded

me with his initial. A surgeon removed it earlier this year."

Lia winced. "Who was the New York agent?"

"He went by the name Austin King, but I'm sure it was fake. I've searched the internet and there's no New York agent by that name. None of the photos I found matching Austin King turned out to be him."

"How did you meet him?" Determination crept into Lia's voice as she took out a notebook and pen.

Every moment of their meeting was stamped in Carly's memory. "Logan Donovan had taken me to a party at his mother's, and she was not at all happy I was there, so I was kind of staying under her radar and sitting in a corner. King approached me and said he'd been watching me all night, and had I ever considered being a model. I should have checked him out, but I was seventeen and stupid."

"If he was at one of Jacqueline Donovan's parties, I'm sure you thought he was on the up-and-up."

"That's exactly what I thought. We set up a meeting for breakfast to iron out the details, and then he left the party. I should have asked Logan about him."

"Why didn't you?"

Carly made a face. "It's going to sound dumb, but King told me not to mention him or the modeling gig. That someone would try to mess it up." She shook her head. "That should have been a warning flag, but he told me how that had just happened. Another girl was all set to go to New York with him and she told someone. Her parents got wind of it and wouldn't allow her to go. I was the lucky girl who got to take her place. Pretty sure it was all a lie and there never was another girl."

"Oh, honey, he knew how to manipulate you."

"Do you think Jacqueline could have set me up with him?"

Lia paused in her note taking. "I've been to Jacqueline's parties. Some of her guests can be a little offbeat, but she'd never knowingly associate with someone dealing in human trafficking. Did you know anyone else at the party?"

"There were a lot of people there, even Gigi and Frank." She searched her memory bank. "Jared Donovan . . . and a couple of friends of Logan's I'd met . . . I haven't thought about them in years, so I'll have to work on remembering their names."

"Yes. I'll need them. But I really have a hard time believing Jacqueline had anything to do with it."

"She didn't like me." Carly played with the gold chain around her wrist. "She wasn't pleased that Logan had brought me, or that he was even dating me—I wasn't upper class enough for him. I used to think that was one of the reasons he took me out—he liked irritating his mother. I don't know if she would have gone that far, though."

"He was too old for you," her sister said.

"You're probably right. Logan didn't know I was only seventeen. If he had, he never would have asked me out."

Lia rubbed the handle of her cup with her thumb. "I barely remember you dating him, but I was working to

finish my bachelor's, totally swamped."

"I didn't understand why I rarely saw you, but I do now," Carly said with a rueful smile. When Lia looked puzzled, she added, "I'm getting my bachelor's now."

Lia grinned, her smile stretching big. "Oh, Heather, that's wonderful."

"Yeah, it is. And I don't go by Heather anymore. After I escaped, I changed my name to Carly Smith."

"Carly?" Lia's lips curved into a smile. "That's a wonderful name. It means strength."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I almost named my little girl that."

"You have a daughter?" Carly had missed out on so much. "Tell me about her, and what's been going on in your life."

"My daughter is five. I met David when . . . you went missing. I kept running into him whenever I went to see the detective that worked on your case. We were married a year later, and Alexis was born three years after that."

"Alexis." Carly liked the way it rolled off her tongue. "Did you choose it for any particular reason?"

"I liked that it means helpful or defender, and Lexi is certainly both—even as a five-year-old, she makes sure no one bullies her friends. I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't follow in her daddy's footsteps."

"What do you mean?"

"He's a sergeant with the Memphis Police Department."

A shiver chased over her body. Of all the men Lia could have married, why did she have to choose a policeman? "I'm sure he's nice." It was all she could think of to say. "But I'm glad you hadn't changed your name on your Facebook page."

"That's my photography page. My married name is Raines."

"Are you happy?"

"I am now that I've found you." She stared down at the table, then raised her gaze. "Why did you wait two years to contact me?"

Another question Carly had known was coming, but it was still difficult to explain. "I wasn't a nice person that first year. I was really messed up and living at a recovery home."

"Recovery home?"

"Drugs had been the only way I could cope while I was . . ." Carly looked down at her clasped fingers. "Anyway, after I was clean, well, let's just say when you've been in the situation I was in, it's hard to face people, especially those you care about."

"But it wasn't your fault."

"That's what my psychiatrist keeps telling me, but it doesn't change the shame."

"You shouldn't feel shame over something you had no control of."

Almost the same words Jamie used. Carly looked up into Lia's tender gaze. "One day I hope to believe that, but I'm not there yet. Just now, it took every ounce of courage I had to tell you what happened."

"Why? Did you think I'd turn away from you?"

"I didn't know how you would react."

Lia's face hardened. "Whoever is responsible needs to pay, and I'm going to find out who it is. Can you describe this Austin King?"

"No!" Lead settled in her stomach. She hadn't dreamed Lia might go after King. Carly leaned forward. "Please, just let it go. It's too dangerous for you to get involved."

Her sister lifted her chin. "I've been trying to find you for ten years. I can't let it go. What happened to you might happen to someone else. And what if I'm coming in contact with him every day or even occasionally? Austin King probably wasn't even his name, and I wouldn't know him."

"He wouldn't look the same."

"He couldn't have changed that much. What did he look like?"

Carly should have seen this coming. Lia had always been her champion and protector, and once her sister set her mind, there was no changing it. Slowly, she took a sketch from her purse. "I had a forensic artist draw this from my description, and it may not even look like him now. I was pulling from eight-year-old memories. He would have been maybe forty then, so he'd be close to fifty now."

Lia studied the sketch then raised her gaze, her eyes round. "This is Austin King?"

A cold chill ran over Carly's body. "Do you know him?"

"I don't know for sure, but he looks so . . . normal, and I was expecting a monster, I guess."

"But you do think you know him?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure."

"Who is he?"

Her sister shook her head. "If I accuse someone without being certain, it could ruin his life."

"How will you find out?"

"We have a shelter for women who've been on the streets. I'll talk with the person running it. Either the director or one of the women might recognize the sketch. Or maybe the name." Then Lia leaned forward. "Why haven't you returned to Memphis and taken this to the police? They're equipped to find this man."

"Cops don't care about victims of human trafficking," Carly said.

"The ones I know do. Please, come back with me, give this information to David."

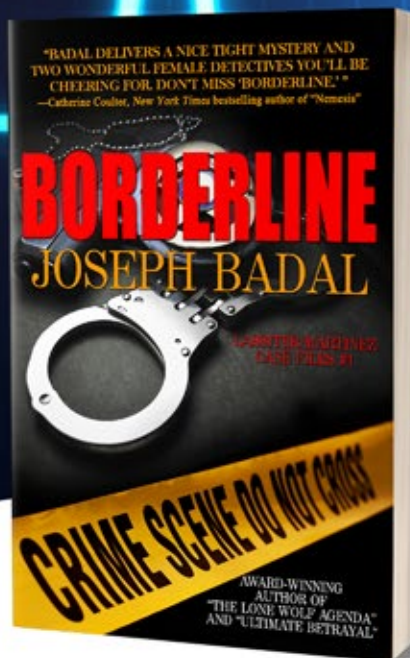
Lia's husband probably wasn't on the take, but he could be. So many she'd met in her past were. Her fear of cops wasn't the only reason Carly hadn't pursued finding Austin King. Going to the police meant reliving every day she was on the streets. She worried a hangnail on her thumb. "I just can't." ■

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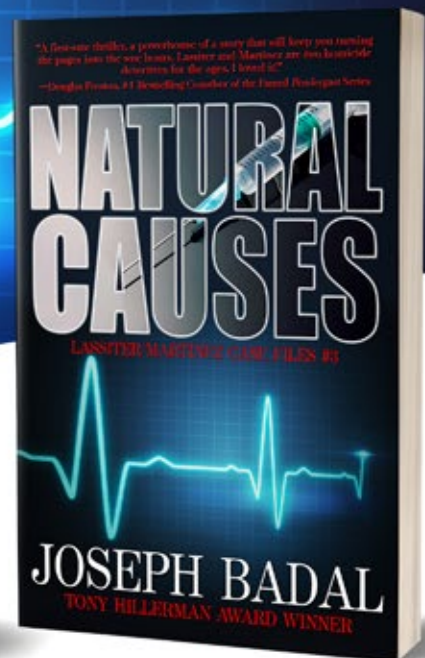
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The Last Time We Played SCRABBLE

By Sheila Lowe

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HE STOOD AT THE FRONT WINDOW, watching the detectives climb into their big detective car—a Crown Victoria, he thought, not caring when the driver bent to look back and saw him there. For a while, he had expected them to put him in the back seat, take him away with them. They always looked at the husband or boyfriend first. A wrenching sob from somewhere deep in his soul rattled into his throat, choking him.

She's gone. Sylvia's gone. Oh, my god.

The detectives drove off into the early morning, on the way to their next interview, no doubt. At least it wouldn't be early enough to wake whoever that person was. He had to admit, though, they were polite enough when he came stomping to the door in response to their loud knocking.

"Are you Jay Weisman?" the tall black man in a charcoal grey suit had asked. His younger partner, a Hispanic woman in navy blue, stood behind and below him on the next step down.

"Yes, I'm Jay Weisman. What's up?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Weisman. I'm Detective Bouchard, Ventura PD. This is Detective Rodriguez. May we come in?"

He'd wanted to press them, to ask why. Anything to delay what must be inevitable. But he had stepped back, albeit reluctantly, pulled his robe closed over his nakedness, and allowed them to follow him into the single-wide mobile home.

"Are you acquainted with a Sylvia Lawrence, Mr. Weisman?" Bouchard asked before Jay could tell them to wait while he got some clothes on.

The way the detective said it made him go still. He ran a hand through his unruly tangle of hair, taking too long to answer. "You must know I am or you wouldn't be here."

The detective's face remained as still as stone. "Can you tell us where you were last night between the hours of ten PM and two AM, sir?"

"Right here, watching TV," he said, too quickly this time, trying to stem the panicky feeling rising in his chest. "I went to bed early. What's going on? Has something happened to Sylvia?"

"Let's have a seat, sir," said Bouchard. "We have a few questions for you."

Jay led them into the living room in a daze and sat in his Shaker rocking chair, gesturing the pair to the Queen Anne loveseat. He had hung on to it when he and his wife closed the antique store and divorced fifteen years ago. She had taken almost everything else.

"When did you last see Ms. Lawrence, sir?"

"She came over last night around five-thirty, we had an early dinner—I'd cooked some chicken breasts in the crockpot. Sylvia brought a salad and bread. After dinner we played Scrabble. The board is still out on the kitchen—" He broke off. He was talking too much.

"What time did Ms. Lawrence leave here, sir?"

Jay pondered the question for a long moment. He cared little about time, never paid attention to it; didn't need to. It had been a long while since he'd had to punch a clock. That was the best thing about taking early retirement. "Around nine, nine-

thirty, I think. I'm not positive."

"That's a pretty early night. Any reason why she left at that particular time?"

"She, I—she said she had some work to do at home. It was on her mind, so she left."

"What would you say her state of mind was at that time?"

"Fine. Just like always. Now, would you tell me what's going on? What's happened?"

The two detectives exchanged a glance, an almost imperceptible nod. Again, it was Bouchard who spoke, watching him intently. "I'm sorry to tell you, sir. Ms. Lawrence is dead."

Jay had started shaking then. His whole, not inconsiderable body, shot through with adrenalin as the fight-or-flight response kicked in.

"Mr. Weisman, are you okay? Mr. Weisman? Get him some water, Rodriguez."

He felt a slight rush of air as Detective Rodriguez brushed past him, heard the faucet running in the kitchen. Moments later, a glass was being pressed into his hand but he couldn't hold it steady. Water sloshed onto his bare knee. His heart was racing; he couldn't catch his breath.

"He's hyperventilating," said Rodriguez, stating the obvious. Then, in a loud voice: "Mr. Weisman, listen to me. Listen to me, sir. Take a deep breath. That's it. Let it out slowly. Do it again. Slowly."

Jay forced himself to obey. Once he had stopped gasping, he asked, "Was it an accident? Did something happen on her way home?"

The detectives paused, waiting for him to get a better grip on himself. He stared at their stony expressions, waiting.

"She was found stabbed to death in her home," Bouchard said baldly.

Jay could not stop himself from crying out.

"There was no sign of forced entry. It appears Ms. Lawrence knew her attacker and let him into the house. Do you know of anyone who might want to harm her?"

"No! She's the sweetest, kindest person you could ever meet. Who would—someone *stabbed* her?"

"What were the TV shows you watched last night, Mr. Weisman?"

He had to think about it. Everything felt unreal, as if he were floating through a bad dream. "Some of the old ones. *Gunsmoke*, *M.A.S.H.* Then the news."

The questions continued. What were the plots of the vintage episodes he had watched? What were the news items? He could barely marshal his thoughts to answer.

Sylvia had no next of kin, Jay told them. Once they became a serious couple, they had each prepared a living will and a power of attorney naming each other.

At last, the two detectives left him with a promise to return with more questions.

He was lying on his bed, his pillow soaked with tears, when someone knocked on the door again. He sat up, scrubbing a hand across his face, and pulled on the khaki shorts he had been wearing just before he and Sylvia made love last night. *Oh, my god. Sylvia.*

The screen door creaked and a voice called out, "Jay, what's taking you so long? Let's go!"

He was still getting into his tee-shirt when his visitor—a short, blonde woman decked out in expensive gold jewelry over a red silk blouse and crisp white trousers—appeared in the bedroom doorway. "You're not ready yet? Did you forget we were going to breakfast? C'mon, I'm hungry, let's go."

Jay stared at her as if she was a stranger. "Sylvia." Her name came out as a croak.

The blonde sneered. "What'd that bitch do now? Did she break up with you again? I told you she wasn't—"

His stomach twisted. He gestured her away with his large hand. "Shut up, Marlene. Shut up! She's dead. Sylvia is *dead*."

Marlene's mouth dropped open. "What did you say?"

"The cops showed up here at 6:30 this morning. Someone stabbed her. In her house."

"Omigod, Jay. I—I don't know what to say."

He pushed past her, into the tiny den where he spent way too much time in the battered recliner. He plopped down into it now. Marlene pulled the chair out from his untidy desk, sat in it, and scooted close enough to grab his hands. "What do you think happened, Jay?"

"I don't know, Mar. I don't know. She let the killer in. Maybe it was a robbery gone bad."

"She wouldn't let a robber in. She must have been seeing someone else."

"No way." Jay gave a low moan. "She wouldn't do that to me."

"A jealous lover could have been watching her and followed her home."

"Oh, God, Marlene, don't even say that."

"Was she here last night? Is that why you didn't answer when I called?" Marlene threw him a smirk, as if he was not in a state of shock. "Were you and Sylvia doing the nasty?"

Jay scowled back. "Yes, she was here. She heard your message and it really pissed her off. We had a fight about it. She left."

"Shit, Jay, I hope you didn't tell the cops that."

"Of course not. Dammit, Marlene, why do you always call at the worst moments?"

"Aw, you know how it is. I get so lonely, and we've been together for way longer than you've known Sylvia."

"It's been a long time since we were 'together.'"

She reached out to stroke his arm. "Aw, I'm sorry if it caused a problem."

A problem? He wanted to yell at her, but that was not his style. Yes, it had caused a problem, hearing another woman's voice bleating on his old-fashioned answering machine while Sylvia was astride him, looking beautiful and mysterious in the moonlit bedroom. Marlene's whining about how much he was hurting her by not picking up the phone had been the abrupt end to the sex. Furious, Sylvia had grabbed her clothes and stormed out, the last words she would ever speak to him were angry: "I'm done sharing you with that woman. Call me if you ever decide to fix the problem." Now, he would never have an opportunity to fix it. Why had he dragged his heels?

Would Sylvia still be alive if they hadn't had that spat over the other woman last night? Grief and shame tortured him. He dropped his head into his hands. "I need you to go, Mar."

He knew that if he looked up, he would see her disappointment. Marlene was the needy type. He had explained to Sylvia a dozen times that they were just friends, that she was just someone to hang out with. Sure, they went to the gym together a few times a week, then out to lunch; an occasional garage sale on the weekend. But those were all activities Sylvia didn't enjoy, so why shouldn't he do them with a friend? Yet, despite his reassurances, he could feel her resentment simmering every time she knew he and Marlene had been out together.

"I want to be here for you, Jay," said Marlene now, pleading. "Please don't make me leave."

"I need to be alone," he said more firmly. "I'll call you later."

He ushered her to the door and watched her drive away, the same way he had watched the detectives.

Jay.

Certain he had heard Sylvia's voice, he spun around. Quick as a flash, he saw her. Across the living room, through the small kitchen, she disappeared into the den. She was wearing the jeans and sweatshirt she'd had on when she left last night.

He dashed across the room, calling her name. At the den's doorway, he pulled up short. Too tiny and crowded with books and papers for anyone to hide. The room was deserted. It must all be a nightmare; he must be sleepwalking.

"Sylvia? Where are you?"

As he stood in the doorway, a breeze ruffled his crazy, untamable hair; the hair Sylvia so loved to play with. She would brush it and braid it when he let her, as if he were an oversized doll.

The room suddenly filled with the scent of her favorite perfume, Poison, and a strong sense of her presence. Was he losing it?

Jay had never been much of a believer in the afterlife. When his parents died and then his brother, he figured that was the end of it. Dead and gone. Sometimes he would attend the Unitarian church for the camaraderie and the free lunches. Suddenly, his anguished mind was opening to something new.

As if being led by an invisible hand, he turned to the kitchen table. More interested in bedroom games than board games the night before, they had left the Scrabble game unfinished.

Absently, Jay picked up the velvet bag Sylvia had bought to replace the cheap one that came with the board. A handful of lettered tiles had spilled out onto the table. As he reached down to return them to the bag, Jay stiffened in shock.

The tiles formed three words: *Mar killed me.* ■

Like her fictional character Claudia Rose in the Amazon #1 Bestselling Forensic Handwriting Mysteries series (Suspense Publishing), Sheila Lowe is a real-life forensic handwriting expert. Author of the acclaimed "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Handwriting Analysis," "Handwriting of the Famous & Infamous," and Handwriting Analyzer software, she is president of the American Handwriting Analysis Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes education in the area of handwriting, and on the board of directors of the Scientific Association of Forensic Examiners. Sheila holds a Master of Science in psychology, teaching and lecturing around the US, Canada, and the UK. Her latest nonfiction book is "Reading Between the Lines, Decoding Handwriting." She lives in Ventura, California, with Lexie the Very Bad Cat. Despite sharing living space with a feline, however, Sheila does not write cozies. She describes her books as medium-boiled psychological suspense.

Your *Shrinks* Might Need TO BE SHRUNK



By Dennis Palumbo
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As a former Hollywood screenwriter, now a licensed psychotherapist and mystery author, I have more than a passing interest in how therapy is portrayed on screen and on the page. That said, I've noticed that in recent years, whether in some best-selling crime thriller or on your average procedural TV drama, the therapists depicted are usually pretty quick-on-the-draw when it comes to diagnosing characters in the story.

For example: To explain a suspect's behavior to the investigating detectives, shrinks in these novels and TV series toss out easily-digestible diagnoses like "psychopathic," "schizophrenic," or "borderline personality disorder." As if these terms explained everything the cops (and readers or viewers) needed to know about the person being discussed. In my view, not only is this lazy storytelling (psychological symptoms taking the place of character development) but it's clinically debatable.

The problem starts with the DSM: "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders." Used as the premiere diagnostic bible by mental health professionals worldwide, the DSM has been predominately responsible for the labeling of an individual's behavior, in terms of whether or not it falls within the range of agreed-upon norms. As such, it's been both praised and reviled over the years. Praised because of its concise descriptions and categorizations of behavioral symptoms; reviled because of its reinforcement of stigmatizing attitudes towards those whose behavior is deemed "abnormal."

In fact, there's an old joke about how clinicians use diagnostic labels to interpret their patients' behavior. If the patient arrives early for his therapy appointment, he's anxious. If he's late, he's resistant. And if he's on time, he's compulsive.

Nowadays, however, it's becoming clear that the joke may be on us. Diagnostic labels are thrown around quite casually by people who ought to know better (i.e., therapists on TV news programs), as well as by people who usually don't (i.e., writers of mystery novels and procedural crime TV shows).

For the latter, it's perfectly understandable. With rare exceptions, most writers depend on research—and such tools as the DSM—to provide their psychologist and psychiatrist characters with the right lingo. This not only makes these characters sound like the mental health professionals they're supposed to be, but it also allows the writer to describe the bad guy's psychological problem in a way that the reader understands. Plus it makes the shrink character seem wicked smart.

However, as I said, it can also lead to lazy storytelling. In too many mysteries and thrillers nowadays, the shrink character need only say that someone's a psychopath and—in an instant—a whole series of inexplicable or horrendous behaviors are explained away. To the question of why the bad guy did what he did, the answer is simple: he's crazy.

In other words, so much for developing a vivid, relatable backstory for this character. Or creating a motive that makes sense. Or for acknowledging, as the author should, that most people are too complicated to be reduced to a set of easily determined symptoms.

Which is why I feel that crime writers—especially those who make use of therapists in their stories, either as protagonists

Diagnostic labels, like practically everything else nowadays, follow the dictates of trends.

or “experts” brought in to help the hero or heroine—need to take care not to use a one-size-fits-all model of diagnosis when it comes to describing a character in the story.

There’s another problem with this, one which I think writers need to be aware of. Diagnostic labels, like practically everything else nowadays, follow the dictates of trends. Remember how, not too long ago, every other child was diagnosed with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]? Or Asperger’s? Well, forget about those. Now the “hot” new label, regardless of age, is Bipolar Disorder [what used to be called manic-depression]. Lately, whether you’re a movie star, teen heartthrob, politician, or athlete, you’re not cool if you’re not bipolar.

Not that there’s anything wrong, per se, with labels. Nor with the idea of a common vocabulary so that all us clinical geniuses can communicate with each other. It’s just that, if we’re speaking honestly, diagnostic labels exist primarily for the convenience of the labelers. Which is fine, as far as it goes. But how far is too far? Especially for crime writers?

In my opinion, “too far” is when authors give their therapist characters an almost clairvoyant ability to declare (with God-like conviction) what’s going on in the mind of some suspected bad guy. Because—as any working mental health professional will tell you—facile, off-the-cuff interpretations of a patient’s psychological state rarely end up being accurate. And can even do great harm.

Once, when asked how he worked, Albert Einstein replied, “I grope.” Frankly, that’s what most good therapists do, too. They grope. That is, if they truly respect the therapeutic process—and their patients.

In my own series of mystery thrillers, my lead character, psychologist and trauma expert Daniel Rinaldi, does a lot of groping. Trying to make sense not only of his patients, or some suspect for which the Pittsburgh Police are seeking his expertise, but of himself, too. His own motives, prejudices, needs.

As a therapist in private practice for over 28 years, I’ve grown to appreciate the vast differences in temperament, relationship choices, communication styles and beliefs of my patients—and how these translate into behaviors, both healthy and harmful. Which means I’ve been forced many times to challenge the orthodoxy of my own profession, and to pay attention to the potential danger of reducing people to a simple diagnostic category.

I think all of us who write mysteries owe our various suspects and bad guys the same consideration. As well as try to keep our shrink characters’ smug, self-congratulatory opinions in check.

After all, despite being fictional, they’re still only human. ■

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is a licensed psychotherapist and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine, The Strand and elsewhere, and is collected in “From Crime to Crime.” His series of mystery thrillers (the latest of which, “Head Wounds,” was named a “Best of 2018” by SUSPENSE MAGAZINE) features Daniel Rinaldi, a psychologist and trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police. For more info, visit www.dennispalumbo.com.

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DOMESTIC SUSPENSE MUCH MORE THAN A GAME OF “CLUE”

By Ellen LaCorte
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Over the years, there have been many books that have been made into board games. For Jane Austen fans, there’s “Marrying Mr. Darcy.” For the Harry Potter set, there’s “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets Trivia Game.” There are even mysteries that transitioned to the game set, such as “221B Baker Street Master Detective Game” and “Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective.” While it’s surely fun to see your favorite novel translated into a board game, there is often something missing when going from multi-dimensional prose to the flat one-dimensional board. And that missing item is often a fully drawn character. It may not be important in a board game that you know everything about the potential killer or victim, but it is imperative in a novel—particularly in domestic suspense—that you become fully immersed in the personalities, are completely attuned to their idiosyncrasies, and are thoroughly engaged in their potential motivations.

Take “CLUE,” for example. In this game, players wander around the board which features rooms in a mansion, attempting to solve the mystery of ‘Who Killed Mr. Boddy’, with which weapon, and in what location. The original game of “CLUE” involved six players. Someone murders Mr. B., whose body is found in one of the nine rooms. Players must identify not only the killer, but the location and the weapon of choice, which was either a candlestick, knife, lead pipe, revolver, rope, or monkey wrench.

In 2008, Hasbro decided to update this game by adding three additional players, increasing the number of rooms in the mansion to include a spa and a guest house, and by enlarging the arsenal with a dumbbell, trophy, and poison. In addition, over the years, the company also changed or slightly enhanced the limited bios given for each of the suspects.

Let’s look at Ms. Scarlett, who was originally portrayed as a typical femme fatale: in her twenties, attractive, blonde, and cunning. In 1972, she was changed from a Caucasian to an Asian woman who smoked cigarettes in a holder. But in 1996, she was shifted to a brunette, again Caucasian, and then, in 2002, her backstory was more thoroughly developed so that she was the daughter of Mrs. Peacock. They were, however, not on speaking terms.

Then there’s Colonel Mustard, who was originally imagined as the stereotypical “great white hunter.” Often portrayed as a military man, dignified and dangerous, he was possibly in his thirties or forties, and was a clean cut gentleman. In later iterations of this character, he becomes an elderly buffoon type in a tweed suit, complete with a mustache and fuzzy mutton chops. By the 1972 revamp, he’s wearing a monocle.

Ever wonder why Hasbro, with a wildly successful board game like “CLUE,” decided it was necessary to shake things up? Sure, to keep up with the times. Maybe, as an answer to political correctness. Perhaps, to maintain the freshness of the characters, locations and weapons.

But I think it’s more than that. Yes, it’s only a board game, but Hasbro must have considered the benefits of participant

engagement. The reality is that we become more invested in the outcome of a mystery if we, as thoroughly as possible, can identify with the characters. If Ms. Scarlet (the second *t* was dropped in the North American version after 1963) isn't speaking to Mrs. Peacock, does their shaky familial relationship make us more willing to believe Ms. Scarlet is fundamentally unsteady and therefore could have definitely killed Mr. Boddy in the library with a knife? Knowing that Colonel Mustard is someone to take less than seriously, could we really identify him as a coldblooded killer wielding a lead pipe above his befuddled head?

But these are just skeletons of descriptions, and let's face it, "CLUE" players are less interested in the characters' full backstories than in winning the game.

In my genre, domestic suspense, it is imperative that the characters be fully drawn. After all, domestic suspense focuses on regular families thrown into irregular situations. We need to be able to see ourselves in those characters and imagine ourselves in those situations.

Think of "Gone Girl" by Gillian Flynn, a story about Nick and Amy Dunne's marriage, which has dangerously soured. Considered the golden child of the family, Nick held a job as a journalist in New York City before he was laid off. His wife, Amy, was also lauded as a child. In fact, her parents featured her in their book series, "Amazing Amy." She is both beautiful and strategic—always three steps ahead of everyone else. Writing personality quizzes, Amy also works in NYC but is laid off, too. Nick and Amy ask her parents for financial help but still can't afford to live in the City and must move to Missouri, where Amy becomes increasingly resentful toward Nick. There are universal themes here with which we identify: tension between couples, money problems, in-law stressors. Readers really get to *know* these characters, and as we watch their marriage unravel—leading to a disastrous outcome—we, too, are forced to look inward to consider how well we really know ourselves and those closest to us.

In another domestic thriller, "Big Little Lies" by Liane Moriarty, we are introduced to Madeline, who is irritated by her daughter's increasing closeness to her ex-husband's new wife. Madeline's friend, Celeste, is being beaten regularly by her rich banker husband. The newest to their group, Jane, was raped and then left to raise her son on her own. We become immersed in the affluent lives of these female friends who must maneuver through marriage, jealousy, rage, and abuse—all themes which, for many, are the fabric of everyday life. And throughout, there are moments where we are left to wonder, would we have handled these situations, particularly the astounding ending, in the same way?

In these novels, since the characters and situations are so familiar, we naturally become fully invested in the question: "How would I react in these kinds of circumstances? And knowing what I know about these people, how would I solve these mysteries?"

In "The Perfect Fraud," my debut domestic suspense novel, two women with deep secrets are thrown together by an unexpected meeting that plunges both their lives into chaos. Readers are introduced to Claire, a psychic who doesn't actually believe she possesses these skills. When she meets Rena and her ill daughter, through an unexpected seat change on an airplane, Claire must reassess everything she thinks she knows about herself. But it's a sick little girl whose fate hangs in the balance. You begin to realize that Claire, besides putting on her faux psychic skills, has a fractured relationship with her mother and a tentative love connection with her exceedingly patient boyfriend, but she's resistant to change anything about her current situation. Rena, who has had a troubled childhood and has her own problems with her mother, is overwhelmed with finding the best possible care for her daughter, Stephanie. According to her mommy-blogs, she is dedicated and committed to her efforts. But things are not as they seem for either of these characters.

Unlike the game of "CLUE," in these novels there is no mansion, no color coded suspect token, no tiny toy weapon, and no sketchily described players upon which to draw conclusions about who done it, with what, and where. Instead, you are presented with fully developed authentic and deeply human characters, and intimately familiar settings to engage and intrigue your mind as you attempt to solve the fascinating mysteries in each.

You might be interrupted in a game of "CLUE" if, say, your mom calls you for dinner or the dog eats one of the game pieces. You might not finish. In domestic fiction, it's imperative that the characters be fully realized and that the reader strongly identifies with them. You need the reader to stay with you to the finish, and to truly enjoy the journey right through the glorious end. ■

Ellen LaCorte had a thirty year career in Human Resources, which introduced her to plenty of unique and interesting characters. "The Perfect Fraud" is her debut novel. She lives and writes from Titusville, New Jersey, very near to where Washington crossed the Delaware. She and her husband have two grown sons.



CRIME *and* SCIENCE RADIO

WITH AWARD WINNING AUTHORS

D.P. LYLE, M.D. & JAN BURKE

THE BTK KILLER & OTHER SERIAL MURDERERS

An Interview with Psychologist and Author DR. KATHERINE RAMSLAND

Interview by D.P. Lyle, MD and Jan Burke
Press Photo Credit: Crime and Science Radio



In this special *Crime & Science Radio* interview, Dr. Katherine Ramsland sat down with D.P. Lyle and Jan Burke to discuss her remarkable resume, and her five-year project that recently came to fruition with the publishing of her informative and chilling work, “Confessions of a Serial Killer: The Untold Story of Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer.”

Listeners and readers will hang on every word while learning about Dr. Ramsland’s project; her endless hours of phone calls and prison visits with the infamous Dennis Rader; and how her passion for wanting to learn what makes a person become a serial killer has blossomed into writing a list of fiction and non-fiction that has garnered her a mass of diehard fans.

Not only did the good Dr. speak about her BTK experience, but she also talks about her new, upcoming supernatural thriller based on Jack the Ripper lore that already has a sequel in the works. So sit back and enjoy this time with an incredible writer and a true master of the psychological realm.

D.P. Lyle (D.P.L.): Katherine’s resume is a long one. She is one of the most interesting guests and great friends to both *Crime & Science Radio*, as well as to Jan and myself. We are thrilled to be having her with us once again. Welcome, Katherine.

Dr. Katherine Ramsland (K.R.): *Thank you so much for having me. It’s great to be here again.*

Jan Burke (J.B.): Hi Katherine. Let us begin with you telling us a bit about your education and career.

K.R.: *Absolutely. Well...when I left high school, I was never going back. And now...I have four graduate degrees. So, never say never. (LOL) I majored in psychology and philosophy at first and received a Ph.D. I taught in the field of philosophy for years, but one day decided the ‘heck with this.’ At the same time, however, I was also attaining several Masters in psychology. One was in clinical psychology; one was in forensic psychology; and I also sort of detoured into experimental psychology—cutting off*

the heads of rats and that sort of thing. I quickly decided that was not what I wanted to do with my life. And when I became a therapist for a bit, I realized I was just a voyeur, and not really a therapist, so that was not the career for me. Forensic psychology really ended up being the place I wanted to be. And, perfect for a voyeur, because there are a lot of stories to be told about people.... (LOL)

But when I ended up writing for the "Court TV" website, it launched my writing career in a very big way.

J.B.: Let us back up to where your initial interest came from in psychology. Why did that peak your interest in the first place, and why was forensic a path to take?

K.R.: *Truth be told, cute professors. (Which I believe is the beginning of many careers.)*

Actually, when I got into college it was three years past the time when most people head in because I'd hitchhiked around the country right out of high school before stumbling into college. So when I got there, I was a bit more mature, and putting myself through school. I was doing the double major of psychology/philosophy but psychology was more resonant with me. I was really curious about humans and how they would get from who they were as babies to who they eventually became as adults. The most extreme of these people being offenders and mass murderers. I truly was interested in finding out why and how these people become what they are. And still, that particular interest is what intrigues me the most.

D.P.L.: I know you teach and write for many and in many magazines and websites, etc. Can you tell us a bit about who you frequently write for and how you come up with the topics you wish to discuss?

K.R.: *I write for "Psychology Today" every week, and when it comes to topics, I usually just write about something that strikes me in the news. I just did one that was a collection of cases; four cases of kids who wanted to become serial killers and started off by knocking off their friends. I will sometimes also do thematic things, like cognitive maps and how that affects observation techniques and forensic science, whatever strikes me. I also write an article for the "Sisters in Crime" newsletter and have done that for about seven years now. Here, I will offer articles focused on writing, such as psychological tips for your characters.*

I also wrote for "Serial Killer Quarterly" since it began but, unfortunately, it recently folded. I also used to write for "Forensic Examiner" for a number of years, but I'm not doing that anymore. I loved writing in narrative, non-fiction style and exploring new cases, so "Serial Killer Quarterly" closing down is a real shame.

D.P.L.: Let's talk about some "dark stuff" I know you like so

well.

K.R.: *Okay (LOL) let's go dark.*

D.P.L.: People listening may or may not know classic cases of serial killers, except for the more famous ones. But there is a process to breaking them into categories, such as mass, spree, and serial. Can you give us a thumbnail on these?

K.R.: *I will be happy to give you a thumbnail and tell you how it has changed. The original designation was 'multicide' in order to cover everything. Then the three categories came about. The first is mass murderer, and depending on what criminologist you ask, the definition is when three, four, or more killings occur in a single incident or a loosely related incident, which you can see how vague this is. For example, if you get a guy walking around the neighborhood killing people, like Howard Unruh in 1949, whose 'Walk of Death' killed 13 people during a 12-minute walk—well, this is a mass murderer. Or, at least, the experts think so.*

A spree murderer is someone who has the same mass murderer mentality, but something sets them off and they continue killing over various geographic locations and across days, weeks, even months. The same precipitating event/anger is there, but they have stretched out their "spree" for much longer than a mass murderer would.

A serial murderer was someone who committed three or more murders, in three or more incidents, in three or more locations, over three or more days (or even months, or years), with a cooling off period in between. This definition was changed by the FBI, who put out a publication that you can find on their website, deciding to eliminate "spree" killer as a category and changing "serial" to someone who kills at least two victims in at least two separate incidents. They took out the reference to a cooling off period and various locations, because we do have serials who bring victims back to the same location. However, researchers still find the three categories to be useful. Criminologists, forensic psychologists, all still talk about them separately, even though the FBI decided to eliminate one. It is easier and more helpful when gathering information to adhere to all three.

J.B.: And when you look at serial killers, they are not the same. What are the more common motives you see, and the various differences you've found between them?

K.R.: *I'm glad you asked. I actually wrote a book to address exactly that because I got tired of people believing serial killers only did it based on sexual issues. But there are many motives besides sex. One stems from greed, killing for profit; eliminating witnesses is sometimes part of it, as well. Certainly lust is there, but the feeling of power or control over a victim is also a strong motive, along with deviance or psychosis. We*

also have those psychotics who are on a personal mission. There was one, Herbert William Mullin, who believed he was going to save the entire state of California from being washed under by earthquakes, by killing 13 people (which he ended up doing). Some are motivated by ritualistic kinds of things, which is also not the same thing as lust. Rituals and occult issues that can become an addiction. Some are anger based, they have a personal mission to do things like, rid the world of prostitutes.

You have to look at the cases individually. We have approximately 2,000 from across the globe, and sometimes the killers will be motivated in a cultural way. For example, take Japanese serial killers versus American. Whereas many American serial killers have lust as a main factor, Japanese killers most often have a motive of profit or greed. You can't discount the cultural influences. Because I'm in the realm of psychology, I tend to look at things case specific in order to find out why and how these killers became what they became. When you try to group them together, I think you lose a lot, because there are a lot of factors in each person's individual life that led them to do these horrific things.

J.B.: Now Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, is one of the most famous and heinous killers, with a long and sordid history. Why did you decide to write about him?

K.R.: Actually, I did not decide to write about him; I got pulled into it unexpectedly. A woman started to write to him when he got arrested because her desire was to write a book with him. She ended up collecting hundreds of letters from him. I met up with her on Facebook one day and I asked her about what happened with the BTK Killer project? The woman, oddly enough, had a book of mine she was using as a "guide," and she asked me to take the project over. She said she just couldn't do it anymore.

Now, just saying "yes" wasn't simple. I had to be approved because his life rights are owned by the victims' families. There is a conglomeration in place and it is they who benefit from the book, not I. I had to go through various legal channels for them to approve me as the writer. Then, Dennis Rader had to approve me. So, in essence, I didn't choose him, he chose me. When everything was in place, I began this five year odyssey to find out why and how he became what he became.

D.P.L.: I assume you had many interactions with him and the families. Can you tell us what that was like?

K.R.: I did meet with them, the families, and I did stress that this was his book and not theirs. Meaning, they did not want to put their personal tales in it, running parallel to his. I told them not to look at the book or even think about it. I called it a "guided autobiography" where he's writing about himself and his experiences. I, because I have the training in psychology, would simply lead him.

I told all of this to some of the victims' families who wanted to be a part of it, and met with their attorneys, etc., and they agreed. They would get the money, but they should not be bothered with the book, itself, because it would be about his views.

This man has definite "hypographia," which is what I call it. He writes long, long letters about all of it. We also had prison visits, which were ineffective, because when you're in a maximum security prison the guards hover, everything is recorded, so there is little you can do. But on the phone, the weekly phone calls we had, a lot of work got done. We used codes to communicate in depth, because the phone calls are taped too, but a lot of work got done through the calls and his letters.

D.P.L.: Can you give us an example of a code?

K.R.: It was something he used to test me, actually. He would send me a bunch of newspaper clippings with things circled, and wrote half an alphabet on them and then sent the other half to someone else. So between us, we had to meet up and piece together what each of the letters corresponded to on the circled items in the newspapers. One of my favorites is when he said: "I understand you're collecting recipes of the three layer kind." I would think to myself, "What? I don't even like to cook." But what he meant by three layers was BTK. Every B that was circled became a different letter, etc.

He would then send me items circled and I would have to try and figure out what he was getting at. And, I have to say, it took a while. Then we had to change the code from time to time, and then eventually I created a very elaborate code based on things that would resonate with him. So our final communications were through the alphabet/code I did. Everything changed then, the trust was there. It doesn't mean he wasn't lying to me. I'm sure he was sometimes. But I also have an advantage because I knew the D.A. very well and she gave me a lot of stuff on Rader, including the police videos. I had that perspective, mine, the other woman's, and several other people he was writing to. So I could see the video and attain more of a hawk's eye view on his behavior with others.

In fact, I just gave a presentation at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences on how I gained understanding of the BTK Killer. I was able to see all of these layers of behavior because I had a number of different views of Rader interacting with various people. That, I thought, was probably the most revelatory tier I could have.

D.P.L.: Readers and listeners probably don't remember all of the BTK facts, being that he was arrested so long ago. Can you offer a brief overview of what he did, for those who may not know much about him?

K.R.: I would say they probably have a vague knowledge of

who he is, and he is probably the most famous living serial killer right now, seeing as that many have passed away. Dennis Rader was in Wichita, and began his killing spree in 1974; an entire family of four became his first murder victims. He went on and eventually killed ten, and then got away with it all. He resurfaced after twenty-nine years and began to play a cat-and-mouse game with police. He wanted more notoriety and he wanted to play. He hadn't been watching his back at this time. Getting away with it for thirty years had made him famous, but when he resurfaced things had changed. We had DNA, etc., and new technology (and dumb data given) brought him down.

He was a family man, was a central part of a church congregation, and he defied many, if not all, serial killer standards we have. He is an interesting study because of the way he developed into a serial killer. What he did and why he did it is unique. And, like the Green River Killer, he got away with it for such a long period of time.

J.B.: What made him do it?

K.R.: Well, he began by reading true crime and mysteries as a kid, like Ted Bundy did, and it became an ambition of his to become a serial killer. And that was in the 1950s, when even the phrase "serial killer" didn't exist. He was intrigued by things like the H.H. Holmes story, and Harvey Glatman ("The Lonely Hearts Killer"), and The Boston Strangler in '62. He already had fantasies of binding women, and trapping women—truly elaborate adolescent fantasies. Serial killers who operated along those lines inspired him to go after this weird ambition he had as a teen, but he didn't begin right away.

He actually went into the military, got married, built a family, and it wasn't until he was laid off from a job that he got angry. Then he became a man having these fantasies and who was now angry and had lust building up inside him. So a variety of things had to happen for him to become what he did.

J.B.: And then he gave himself up in an almost comical way, correct? Can you tell us about that?

K.R.: Well, I also thought at first it was comical, the way he screwed it up after being unknown for thirty years. But as I learned more, I realized that I wasn't giving him enough credit. He was careful. He already knew how to use computers in 2004 and 2005, and he was already planning on putting all his records on CD's to store in a safe deposit box. He was doing this so in case he died, someone could find them and see what he'd done. That way, the BTK legacy would be out there.

He asked an officer, who he knew was in the digital crime area, if police could trace someone using a computer disc. Of course, back then, that area did things poorly and he did ask an officer who truly didn't know all the information. The officer told Dennis that the police could not track someone

down using a disc, even though that was not true. Dennis was tired of taking notes, then copying them, then finding another copier and copying more, then having to find another copier to copy more, etc. So he was happy to learn this information so he could simply put the information on a disc. The other was just too much work.

He made a mistake by confirming the fact that a criminal could not be hunted down by a disc, but the other guys he asked did know that the technology could be traced. The disc he was using was one he used for church business. One thing led to another and police showed up at the church and asked the pastor if there was a Dennis on the property. The pastor said yes, and confirmed that he'd let Dennis use the church computer.

Now, Rader did have a computer at home, but it wasn't working. So his arrest wasn't comical, it was more unlucky. He was really trying to be careful but his computer crashed and he just so happened to talk to the one investigator who really did not know the facts, so it was a web of errors that brought him down.

He did naively develop this sense that he and the cops were buddies and that the cops would be honest with him. So it was funny that Rader was actually upset that the cop lied to him. There is that weird, childlike quality about him. When we talked, he was aghast at the fact that people would lie to him. Even though he would do far worse. We even started playing a game of chess once and he had the nerve to say to me, "Don't cheat." I was like, "You're a serial killer and you're telling me not to cheat?"

And that's one trait many of them have in common. Like John Wayne Gacy; he was a man who tortured and killed teenage boys, yet would go off preaching about family and religion like he could take on the moral high ground. Rader calls it cubing, or compartmentalizing yourself. Organized predatory serial killers can think in compartments and live in different moral universes, but do not feel it at all. Rader truly has a wall up between what he believes in and how he acted. It all depends on the mental room he's in at the time as to what he sees, feels and says. For me, being in psychology, this was the most interesting part. You want to ask: "Can't you see your contradictions?" A normal person would be embarrassed by them, but with these guys, it's impenetrable. They literally don't feel the wall and don't know what you're talking about.

D.P.L.: What other commonalities did you find between Rader and other serial killers, as well as contrasts?

K.R.: There are some who he adhered to, like The Ripper, because they/he/she got away with it. He liked Bundy because he commanded so much media attention and was sort of the suave guy. The Boston Strangler he admired because of the strangulation methods used. So there were certain role models he adhered to and others he ignored. There are other serial

killers who study them and communicate with them, but they are few and far between.

J.B.: They become Facebook friends?

K.R.: Sometimes. For example, we had a healthcare serial killer here, Charles Cullen, who wrote to Donald Harvey (“The Angel of Death”) and asked about his techniques and how he got away with his crimes for so long. But mostly people do not think they’re going to be someone like H.H. Holmes, so that makes Rader different. He had role models that drew him into it, rather than having a sexual need to do it. Similarly, however, he kept journals, mementos, and wanted to relive the crimes and feel that ultimate power. He was leading a double life. He thought of himself as a spy, and that was one of his fantasies that he needed to be clever like that. And he was. After all, getting away with it for thirty years certainly made him unique.

D.P.L.: I hear you have another project coming up, “The Ripper Letter,” and I hear it is going to be kind of a supernatural thriller based on ‘Ripperology’? Tell us about that.

K.R.: Actually, it all started with my literary agent who wanted me to do something vampiric, but different. I’m not really a Ripperologist; I’m not up with the people who have worked on this subject all their lives. One tale that interested me, though, focused on an occultist group that cropped up during the time of Jack the Ripper. These occult groups were associated with medieval coding systems, and whatnot. So they actually got me interested. I thought if this particular cult started in 1888, when The Ripper was in London doing his thing, and one of their members was a viable suspect for the killings called in by the police, and that cult had roots in other interesting things—that started it. I began writing because of this particular tangent I found, and it grew into an erotic supernatural thriller, so to speak. I created this supernatural world of unique beings who were protectors of the codes. Everything is read through erotic codes; it couldn’t be plain old codes. I even pulled in a device that Napoleon used to try and predict what he was going to do, but I charged it up with erotic power. It was fun.

J.B.: So, what now?

K.R.: Well, the sequel to “The Ripper Letter” is next. Gosh knows I don’t want to give that up. So that’s the fiction project at the moment. But for nonfiction I am writing a book called, “Forensic Investigations: Methods from Experts” where I interview a number of people from first responders to blood spatter pattern evidence detectives, etc. I pulled in my local coroner and various detectives. Essentially, I start a chapter with a case and have the experts talk about what they do. I call it my “un-text” book, because I hate textbooks, so I wrote it

like Malcolm Gladwell meets CSI. We get to talk to the experts, go out with them into the field, and see things up close. Then, instead of the typical Q&A, there are “thinking problems” based on these cases so the reader would have to ‘apply’ the practical stuff they just learned from the experts.

J.B.: I’m dying to ask. Can you tell us a bit about how it differs being a woman talking to a serial killer, rather than what one of your male colleagues has to face?

K.R.: Oddly enough, women interviewers have an interesting advantage, depending on the serial killer, of course. Yes, as we know, some serials absolutely despise women. So you can get them all riled up and get more out of them because they’re angry that you’re there in the first place. A great example of this comes from Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer. There was an FBI agent who interviewed him at length by the name of Mary Ellen O’Toole, and I watched the tapes of those interviews. Even though he was clear about hating women and wanting to rid the world of the “prostitutes,” she was able to talk in a soft, soothing way that made him lean forward in order to hear what she was saying. He was leaning towards her and, slowly, he started to reveal things. There was no way these things would have been brought to light by a male interviewer; even if the male tried to be buddies, there would still be that ego between them. Women have that advantage of being soft. You can play on that and use it to draw them in to this female energy that they despise and crave all at the same time.

“Bates Motel” was a great TV show that I actually began watching with Rader. We would talk about the latest episode on our weekly phone calls. That TV show focused on the love/hate dynamic that a female can exploit and a male cannot, giving the female an advantage. I would have never watched the show because I thought it sounded corny, but Rader said I should watch it because “they’re getting at something there.” After he said that, I started to watch it. Every week we would talk about a storyline and he would end up offering more and more information about himself. The characters and the episodes were metaphors about how he developed into a serial killer. These shows were a great path to get him talking indirectly, and I learned a lot.

J.B.: And the face-to-face visits; what were they like?

K.R.: What was interesting is that the first time I was there, he didn’t know I was. They bring me in a different room and I see them hand-cuffing him to the chair in his little booth. He’s talking gruff, putting on a show for them. “What, do you think I’m Hannibal Lecter?”

When he realizes I’m there, he completely transforms. I knew at that point, he plays to his audience. He wanted the guards to know one thing, and for me it was a smile and, “Did you have a nice trip?” He didn’t know I saw all the stuff

leading up to this. But, like I said before, with the monitors and the guards, you couldn't say anything but pleasantries. It was the long letters he wrote and the detailed drawings he sent that were the most effective. He would draw a lot of stuff, like torture fantasies that were very elaborate.

D.P.L.: Wasn't he big on plastic bags? Suffocations?

K.R.: Actually, that came late in his fantasy life. He'd read a work of fiction and thought he'd try it, but it wasn't his thing. He had a lot of different devices he would use and try out on himself, so a lot of the book is devoted to the variety of fantasies he had, and how he would go shopping for things.

Then the fantasies evolved, of course, from an adolescent to a forty-year-old man. In the end, he drew for me the ultimate thing he was going to build. He loved barns and silos, you see, and he would fill them with torture devices in all these kinds of layers. He drew this elaborate torture silo and I said to my editor, after the book was complete, that I didn't care what or how she did it but the sketch had to be put in the book. I mean, it was all right there in the drawing; the complete maturation of his fantasy life. And I was the only one who had it. He'd given me the original. So, essentially, I got to that point where a serial killer trusted me.

Hence, you have to be careful about the birthday cards you get to send them in jail. I found one that read, "I better not be late with this, because I know you'll kill me." And I certainly couldn't send it, but I thought it was funny. It was a challenge year to year because they don't make cards for people in jail for serial killing. This year I was shopping and this elderly man comes up to me after watching me read through almost every card. He said: "Honey, it doesn't matter what it says, it only matters how much money you put into it." I thought that was great.

I will tell you one thing I found chilling, though. I was trying to get hummingbirds to my outdoor deck and I was in a store looking at a magazine that had an article about hummingbirds. Rader ended up sending me that exact article that he'd cut out from the magazine when he heard me talk briefly about my hummingbird project. I was extremely chilled by that.

There were many adventures along the way when it came to this project, and I never thought it would take as long as it did to complete. But I do think it is a much higher quality work because of the amount of time I put into it.

J.B.: And we remind our listeners, all that time spent will benefit the families of the victims.

D.P.L.: This has been wonderful, Katherine. Thank you so much for being here and we will get you back again down the road. I, for one, can't wait to read the book and I am excited about reading "The Ripper Letter."

K.R.: Thank you, Dan. And I assure you, you'll never be the same after reading that one. (LOL) ■

Dr. Katherine Ramsland, Director of the Master of Arts in Criminal Justice program at DeSales University, also teaches the forensic psychology track. She has published over 1,000 articles, stories, reviews, and 59 books, including: "The Mind of a Murderer," "The Forensic Science of CSI," "Inside the Minds of Serial Killers," "The Human Predator: A Historical Chronicle of Serial Murder and Forensic Investigation," "The Ivy League Killer," and "The Murder Game."

Presenting workshops to law enforcement, psychologists, coroners, judges, and attorneys, she has also consulted for several television series, including CSI and Bones. She also writes a regular blog for Psychology Today called "Shadowboxing" and consults for numerous crime documentary production companies. ■

Originally aired on Crime & Science Radio; 2017.



D.P. Lyle is the Macavity and Benjamin Franklin Silver Award winning and Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, Scribe, and USA Best Book Award nominated author of many non-fiction books as well as numerous works of fiction, including the Samantha Cody thriller series, the Dub Walker thriller series, and the Royal Pains media tie-in novels. To learn more about D.P., check out his websites at www.dplylemd.com and <http://writersforensicsblog.wordpress.com>.



Jan Burke is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author. She has won the Edgar for Best Novel, and the Agatha, the Macavity, and the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Readers Award for Best Short Story, among other honors. Her books have been published internationally and have been optioned for film and television. Jan is the author of over thirty short stories. Her work in nonfiction includes serving as the associate editor (with Sue Grafton) for MWA's Handbook, "Writing Mysteries." Her forensic science and criminal justice columns appear in Sisters in Crime's InSinC Quarterly.

A nationally recognized advocate for the improvement of forensic science, she has led efforts that resulted in new laws to aid in identifying remains and better funding for labs. She has spoken before the National Institute of Justice, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American Society of Crime Lab Directors, and other organizations. She is a member of the advisory board of the California Forensic Science Institute. She has coordinated forensic science programming at several mystery conventions. She co-hosted the podcast Crime and Science Radio with Doug Lyle.

Jan has taught at the UCLA Extension, Book Passage, and at numerous conferences and conventions. For more information, check out her website at www.janburke.com.

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SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

ONCE A LIAR

By A.F. Brady

If you are a reader who is enthralled by courtroom dramas and thrillers involving unforgettable sociopaths, then this is the book for you.

Peter Caine is a ruthless defense attorney operating in Manhattan. On the outside, people see him as a handsome, charming, intelligent man who knows his job to the letter. What people don't see is that he's as cold and heartless as one can possibly get. He defends the most disgusting predators ranging from rapists to pedophiles, and has the skills to allow them to keep their freedom and keep right on being menaces to all of society.

His life, however, is about to go absolutely crazy. One of his former lover's—a woman by the name of Charlie Doyle—has been murdered. Charlie is also the daughter of the Manhattan DA, a man who is not only a professional enemy of Peter's but also holds the "seat of power" that allows him to make Peter the main suspect in his daughter's brutal death. The DA will stop at nothing to lock Peter up for this crime, and quickly heads out on a journey to avenge his daughter by putting Peter behind bars once and for all.

Now, Peter is not a nice man, by any stretch of the imagination. But is he cold-hearted enough to have killed Charlie? He has little time to prove his innocence. And as the evidence continues to mount against him, Peter must turn back to some of his past mistakes and secrets in order to try and figure out what his next steps are going to be.

Readers will love the plot and characters, but they will be enthralled by the end of the book as the truth of who killed Charlie Doyle, and why, comes to light. Brady has done a fantastic job of providing a thriller that most definitely earns space on any suspense lover's bookshelf.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

SUNSET BEACH

By Mary Kay Andrews

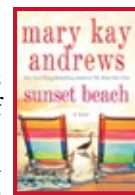
There's nothing I like more than a book that takes you somewhere, and it gets bonus points from me if that place just happens to be a beach. Throw in a little romance and a bit of mystery, and I believe you've found the perfect combination.

Drue Campbell has run out of family, job opportunities, and money when her estranged father, Brice Campbell, shows up after twenty years of being absent from her life. Reluctant to let anyone in, she finds that she has no other choice but to give him a chance when he offers her a job at his law firm, and the keys to her grandparents' once idyllic beach house on Sunset Beach. Just when she thinks working for her father can't get any worse, however, she discovers that he's married to her former best friend from eighth-grade, and that Wendy, her new stepmother, is also her boss.

When a former client shows up at the office demanding to speak to Brice and is quickly shooed away, Drue takes it upon herself to re-examine the case files only to discover that something isn't right. An unsolved murder and a payout far too low for the circumstances find Drue playing detective, questioning witnesses and sneaking onto private property. Afraid that her father may be the direct link, she keeps her work quiet, only to end up in the kind of trouble that only he can help her out of.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that just when I thought I had the mystery all figured out, I was wrong! Mary Kay Andrews has managed, once again, to weave relatable characters, a dreamy location, and enough twists and turns together to keep you turning pages until the end. "Sunset Beach" deserves a top spot on your summer reading list. Trust me when I say: "You won't want to miss it!"

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



MURDER IN RED

By Jon Land



The latest installment of the long-running *Murder, She Wrote* tales, "Murder in Red," interjects a dose of adrenaline into the series. When Jessica's friend goes to a private medical clinic that just opened up in town for a routine procedure, and ends up dead, it forces Jessica into undercover action to see what is going on.

On the surface, Jessica's friend's death looks like a serious medical mistake, but Jessica isn't satisfied with that answer. While having to use all her skills, Jessica is able to uncover that what is seen on the surface is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Jessica dives deeper into the business of the medical clinic and discovers that her friend was not the victim of medical malpractice; in fact, she was murdered. Now she is caught having to figure out the mystery, or more deaths will occur.

Author Jon Land has penned the last two installments in the series. Land, being a thriller writer, has had to balance the delicate pace of a mystery with the thriller elements that want to push the story faster. He's been able to find that balance in "Murder in Red." If you're a fan of Land's thrillers, "Murder in Red" will excite you and make you a fan of mysteries. If you love cozies, this book will not only give that feel, but you'll also feel the hair on the back of your neck stand up with its thriller pace. This is definitely a 'must have' book.

Reviewed by John Raab ■

MAGIC FOR LIARS

By Sarah Gailey

If this debut novel is a foreshadowing of what to expect in the future, it is no wonder that Sarah Gailey is being called "a rising star" in the field of fiction.

In this thrilling, intelligent investigative noir, readers are introduced to Ivy Gamble. Ivy is the exact opposite of all the Harry Potter's in the world. She was a girl born with the ability to do magic, yet she never wanted this ability to begin with. In fact, she'd rather be just your normal, everyday person. Or... would she?

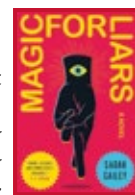
The premise of the tale is that Ivy Gamble is happy with her life; everything but her estranged twin sister, Tabitha, who also is quite gifted, is fine with Ivy. One other thing you should know, however, is that Ivy is an absolute liar.

Tabitha, the gifted sister, is a teacher of Theoretical Magic at The Osthorne Academy of Young Mages. Ivy is a detective. She meets up with her sister once again when a murder is discovered at the Academy and Ivy is suddenly drawn in to a place of power, secrets, and the home of a murderer who may just take Ivy out next.

These two sisters come together as Ivy not only sets her sights on finding the killer and solving the crime, but also on keeping her sister safe and somehow sparking their long-lost relationship once more.

The scenes are thrilling, the sisters are cool, and the sharpness for fantasy writing is evident from word one.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





A NEARLY NORMAL FAMILY

By M.T. Edvardsson

Yes, we are talking about a brilliant legal thriller here that has all the ingredients readers are looking for: a murder, a trial, and an odd choice for a killer, all wrapped up in the story of a very memorable family.

Told in three sections from each member of the small family, readers are taken through the mystery from the viewpoints of the father who is a pastor to the outside world and an overcontrolling man to his family; the rebellious teen named Stella who has a lot to share regarding the family and its vices; and the absent mother who “checks out” on a daily basis as she lives the majority of her life in courtrooms as a successful attorney.

The accused standing trial for the brutal murder of a man fifteen years her senior, is eighteen-year-old Stella. This is an ordinary girl from what others call an upstanding local family. No one can figure out why Stella would possibly kill some shady businessman that she had no background of knowing in the first place.

Her pastor father and her lawyer mom are also locked in an odd place. They want to save their daughter, yet because of who they are and the backgrounds they have, they feel like their morals are being tested. They don’t understand how or why Stella is even a suspect in this crime, which opens the door to learning what exactly they will do, and what lengths they will go to, in order to save their own child.

The author has done a brilliant job with this story, keeping the reader riveted at all times as the tale of a truly intricate family is brought to life.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

KNIFE

By Jo Nesbo

Stunning. Intense. Breathtaking. Those three words could make up my entire review of “Knife,” the new *Harry Hole* thriller (#12 in the series) by international bestseller, Jo Nesbo, but that would be an injustice. This book is so much more.

From page one, you will be riveted to your chair as you white-knuckle the book in your hands. You’ll be immediately drawn into the world of a killer. A killer so evil that you will feel nothing but hatred and disgust every time his name is mentioned.

If you have yet to meet the protagonist, Harry Hole, you’ll quickly note that he encompasses the best and worst of what a protagonist should be. He is a broken man with more faults than you can count, yet he is a brilliant detective. A man lost in his own vices. You’ll meet Harry through the fog of alcohol. As the curtain of booze is pulled aside, Harry doesn’t remember much (if anything) about the night before. A snapshot in time he wishes he could retrieve.

When Harry’s estranged wife is found murdered, Harry turns back into the brilliant detective he once was, in spite of his vices.

The twists and turns in “Knife” are enough to make your head spin. Although this next phrase gets thrown out a lot in reviews, trust me: “You will not figure out who the true villain is until the *very* end.”

Jo Nesbo has written the perfect thriller. A plot thick with intense imagery and nail-biting terror, and a protagonist so broken, you can’t help but want him to win.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of *The Kiche Chronicles* ■



THE BETTER SISTER

By Alafair Burke

You know just from the title that this is going to be a winner; you also know it’s a “must read” from the simple fact that Alafair Burke is the author. (I mean, who can ever forget “The Wife”?)

In this labyrinth, we have two sisters and a Manhattan lawyer who ends up dead. Now, the sisters are estranged. Perhaps that’s because one of the sisters is the widow of the now deceased man, and the other is his ex. Talk about a murky past.

The youngest sister is Chloe Taylor. You know the type: A+ student, ambitious to the point where any boss would kill to have her on their team, etcetera. And even though she’s the youngest in age, her head was always on straight, she always maintained her focus, and she was most definitely in charge. Nicky is the older sister, but where Chloe is the epitome of success, Nicky was never ambitious.

Chloe went to an Ivy League school and Nicky was happy for a while, marrying an up-and-coming lawyer by the name of Adam Macintosh and starting a family by bringing their boy, Ethan, into the picture.

Without giving too much away, let us say tides turned and Chloe became Mrs. Macintosh. But after Adam is murdered, it is Ethan who brings his biological mother back into their lives. The police start to focus on Ethan as being the culprit, and it is then that the Taylor sisters must put old hatred aside in order to dig up secrets from their own family that should have stayed buried.

From word one, Burke has created a nonstop thriller fest. At times you don’t quite know what Taylor sister to root for, if either, but at other times one of them will seem awfully familiar... perhaps reminding you of your own “beloved” sibling. Definitely something to talk about around the next Thanksgiving table.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE DIVA SWEETENS THE PIE

By Krista Davis

Sophie Winston is known all over Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, for the ease in which she can whip up a meal guaranteed to please even the pickiest of palates. She’s also the obvious choice to oversee Alexandria’s annual Pie Festival, and the competition for this year’s event is fiercer than ever. The drama surrounding the contest really ratchets up when celebrity judge Patsy Lee Presley (no relation to Elvis), arrives. Patsy Lee is the host of television’s most popular cooking show, and got her start in the business in a local restaurant. As the pies begin baking, and

the weather gets hotter, it becomes clear to Sophie that not everyone in Old Town is happy to have Patsy Lee back home. The morning of the contest, Patsy Lee really becomes the center of attention when she collapses and dies. It’s clearly murder—in this case, caffeine poisoning—and the suspect list includes several people who are close friends of Sophie’s.

The Pie Festival goes on and people come out in droves to pay homage to the late celebrity. Stories also begin to circulate about Patsy Lee’s meteoric rise to domestic stardom and the way she treated people at the beginning of her career. The pool of suspects widens to include Patsy Lee’s jilted ex-husband, a resentful ex-mentor, and a former best friend, just to name a few, each person with their own reason to want Patsy Lee dead. As Sophie begins to ask questions about Patsy Lee’s early life in Old Town, she realizes that this murder may have ties to another local murder several years before.

“The Diva Sweetens the Pie” is the twelfth in the *Domestic Diva* mystery series penned by Krista Davis, and all the characters readers love are back and in top form, including Sophie’s ex-husband, Mars, and arbiter (in her mind) of all things that are in good taste, Natasha. It’s another delicious mystery, and I loved it!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “In-Laws Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

RAG AND BONE

By Joe Clifford

This is the 5th book in the incredible *Jay Porter* series, and the vibrant tales keep getting even more exciting as the series moves along.

After being framed for murdering an associate, Jay Porter took his handyman gear and spent ten months on the run. He used this time to look for a hard drive that had data to prove that his long-term nemeses, Adam and Michael Lombardi, were law-breakers who should be thrown in jail for life. Unfortunately, he has yet to find the proof he needs, and has now returned to his hometown of Ashton, New Hampshire.

In essence, he's given up. Without the hard drive he has no hope of being left alone and proving his innocence. Also painful is the fact that he hasn't spoken to his son in almost a year, which is breaking his heart even more.

Jay has nothing left. What he does is take a charity assignment from his old friend and lover, Alison Rodgers. He stumbles across the fact that the fire at Alison's former rehab farm was most likely started by the evil Lombardis a while back in order to force Alison to sell. This is a new light; a new hope. If Jay can prove that the Lombardis did this, he will be able to finally put the scum away and perhaps get a chance to right his own life in the process. But since he's on the wrong side of the law at the moment, Jay must take the mantle of power in his own hands and do all he can to see that justice is finally done.

This has been an incredible series since book one, and the locations, characters, adventure, and excitement look like they will last through more books to come. (Fingers crossed!)

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

A LADY'S GUIDE TO ETIQUETTE AND MURDER

By Dianne Freeman

This, Freeman's cool debut novel, picked up a 2018 Agatha for "Best First Novel." If that is not sufficient enough to make you want to read the book, then you should also know that this novel is set in two wonderful realms: Victorian England and New York High Society.

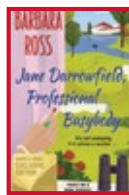
Frances Wynn, American-born Countess of Harleigh, is still recovering from the death of her husband, Reggie. He died as he lived, a philanderer with a roving eye in the arms of his mistress, which makes this even more distressing for the widow. However, Frances isn't surprised. After all, she was well aware their marriage was nothing more than a sham; he was simply from a rich American family who was brought in to aid an English aristocrat whose family money was dwindling.

Once he died, Frances freed herself from her money-grubbing relatives and established a home of her own in London—far away from the old, stuffy country estate. She is just about to welcome her younger sister, Lily, into town, who is staying with Frances to enjoy her first London season.

In the midst of choosing a suitor for her sister, Frances receives distressing news: Scotland Yard is now considering Reggie's death "suspicious" and believes that a young gentleman caller of Lily's may have been involved in the murder. Dissatisfied with the lack of speed and progress being made by the local law, Frances takes it upon herself to solve the mystery while also keeping her own wealth of secrets hidden from view.

The next book in this series is on its way, thankfully, so it's nice to know that there will be more to satisfy our reading pleasure very soon.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■



JANE DARROWFIELD, PROFESSIONAL BUSYBODY

By Barbara Ross

It's never too late to start a new career, as the recently retired Jane Darrowfield finds out in the most unexpected way. All she wanted to do was help a friend whose daughter had recently become engaged to a young man who was, in the mother's words, "dead behind the eyes." Jane agrees to do a little checking, and discovers that the man has two other fiancées and, as everybody knows, three's a crowd. Word spreads in Jane's hometown of West Cambridge, that she's the person to contact to fix "situations." And, presto, Jane's in the busybody business.

Things change when Paul Peavey, from the local residence for active seniors, wants to pay her to fix "the community's social dynamics." Intrigued, Jane agrees to move into the senior home "undercover" for a short time to observe the situation and make possible suggestions.

As Jane quickly discovers, the mature set can be as immature as high schoolers. There are a variety of cliques: the popular kids, the leather jacket bikers, and the artists, just to name a few. And they all dislike each other intensely.

Bill Finnerty, the ringleader of the popular kids, rules the golf course. The leather-jacketed Mike Witkowski runs the game room and hates Bill's guts. When a food fight erupts between the two men during Jane's first lunch there, Jane decides that what these people really need is a full-time babysitter. But she resolves to give the place a chance, reminding herself that she's being paid for the first time ever to help diffuse a situation. She's feeling confident in her prowess until the first dead body is found on the golf course.

This is the start of what I hope will become another long-running series by Barbara Ross, who also pens the terrific *Maine Clambake* mysteries. I loved it!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE BONE CHARMER

By Breeana Shields

This is a fantastic YA suspense that will thrill readers of all ages.

Saskia lives in an odd world. Her village believes that the source of all power in the universe comes from bones. Their die-hard belief is that people should look to bones to understand the future, find out about the past, and expose secrets, lies, and those who keep both in the present. Saskia knows this life very well. She should. After all, her own mother is the village Bone Charmer, who is the designated 'seer' that performs readings for the entire town of Midwood.

We begin the tale on the day of Saskia's kenning. This is a special bone reading that determines the future career of a seventeen-year-old. And even though it is the one thing she does not want to do, the kenning reveals that Saskia is to be trained as a Bone Charmer (in order to follow in her mother's footsteps).

The worst thing about this is the fact that Saskia knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that her mother actually saw more than one "path" for Saskia to take, yet she "announced" the one she knew her daughter didn't want. When an argument between them ensues, one of the bones breaks, which is a sure sign of bad luck to come. When Saskia finds out that the broken bone was infused with extra magic, she realizes that her own future was split into two paths automatically; dual paths she will have to walk that will endanger her life no matter what she does.

This author has done a difficult, yet amazing job of writing dual storylines, told from two separate POV's, yet both from Saskia as she lives these lives separately. The concept is extremely cool and the writing keeps you involved. You will be surprised to see just how many twists and turns Saskia's lives take.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE BODY IN THE WAKE

By Katherine Hall Page

It's not often that a mystery comes along that is pure pleasure to read from the opening paragraph to the all-too-soon ending. Readers of Katherine Hall Page's *Faith Fairchild* mysteries have been enjoying that pleasure since the first book in the series, "The Body in the Belfry," debuted, introducing us to transplanted Manhattan caterer Faith, her minister husband Tom, and, eventually, their two children, Ben and Amy.

"The Body in the Wake" is the twenty-fifth in this series, and the characters and plots are just as fresh and entertaining today. The newest book takes readers from the Massachusetts hamlet of Aleford to the Fairchilds' summer home on Sanpere Island, Maine, where Faith has some time to herself for a change. But, alas, when Faith and her dear friend Sophie Maxwell take a quick dip one hot summer afternoon, they discover the body of a drowning victim in the pond. At first, the death appears to be a tragic accident, but locals can't help but wonder who the mysterious stranger was, and what his weird tattoo could mean.

Faith resolves, just this once, not to get involved. Samantha Miller, the daughter of her best friend and neighbor Pix and her lawyer husband, Sam, is getting married on Sanpere Island and Faith is doing some of the catering. Pix is already a nervous wreck, worrying that things will go wrong with the wedding, and then the mother of the groom—whom Pix has never met—shows up and ratchets her stress level up even more. In addition, Pix's new neighbors are accusing the Millers of vandalizing their property and want them arrested. Faith's priority is to help her friends, but as the body count rises, she realizes she has more to deal with than just planning menus.

"The Body in the Wake" is an intelligent, well-plotted, satisfying mystery with some twists at the end that I loved. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



WHEREVER SHE GOES

By Kelley Armstrong

Whenever I receive a new book with the name Kelley Armstrong on the cover, my pulse races just a little bit faster. After all, her bestselling YA and adult novels, such as the amazing *Otherworld* and *Rockton* series' are among the best reads out there. So, it will come as no surprise to hear that this latest psychological thriller from Armstrong is absolutely superb.

Aubrey Finch is a single mother who is now sitting at the precinct in order to report the kidnapping of a child. Not her own, thankfully, but a crime she saw with her own two eyes when a young boy was taken against his will from a park. The odd part, to the police, is that no parent/parents have come forward to report their child missing, which makes Aubrey's story improbable to the officer, at best.

Now, you have to understand, Aubrey has her own odd background that has caused people to gossip behind her back and question her sanity. Aubrey was once a stay-at-home mom who no longer has primary custody of her own daughter. But if they knew the real story why—the fact that Aubrey walked away from the home because secrets from her past came back to haunt her—perhaps people would be more understanding of her situation. Of course, Aubrey can't tell anyone the truth about her life, even the people she loves the most. So she must put up with the whispers and now must endure the fact that no one is taking her very real story seriously. If she wants to save this boy, she must do it on her own.

Readers need to buckle their seatbelts before getting on this thrill "ride," because this gripping story of what a mother will do in order to save a child, *any* child, is one that will stay with you for a long time to come.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine*

A MATTER OF WILL

By Adam Mitzner

Will Matthews is a broker on Wall Street. His hope from the outset was that his career was going to make all his dreams come true. Unfortunately, that hope is laid to rest when he finds himself on the firing list.

When things are at their darkest, a mysterious, highly wealthy man by the name of Sam Abaddon enters Will's world. Now, landing Sam as a client will restore all of Will's hopes. In fact, he will literally be catapulted into that luxurious world he's always dreamed of. On top of that, Will has also found the woman of his dreams through a dating app: an attorney by the name of Gwen Lipton who just so happens to be making a name for herself as she participates in a huge murder trial.

It seems like only a second has gone by and Will has gone from being a failure to being on top of the world. Sam invests heavily with him, changing Will's life forever. But what changes it even more is the day he and Gwen witness a murder.

This crime causes his new life to explode. Soon, he learns far more about the benefactor who swooped in and brought him his dreams. Will has also been placed in a harrowing position. He can tell what he knows about the criminal conduct of Sam, or keep his mouth shut and hope the penalties of law will be easier to take than the consequences of Sam's wrath.

"A Matter of Will" is a true drama filled with greed, murder, and courtrooms. I haven't read a book in this category *this* good since Grisham delivered "The Firm."

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



ALL THE WAY DOWN

By Eric Beetner

Dale Burnett hasn't always made the right decision. Whether that's taking money from mobster Tautolu Losopo (known on the street as "Tat"), or ignoring his wife when his guilt begins to weigh on him. Being a cop, it's a heavier guilt than most would feel. It's also one of those things that tend to catch up with you. When his double life is discovered, the dirty cop knows he's facing hard time. If all that isn't bad enough, his puppy dies.

Timing is everything, of course. For Burnett that comes in the form of a kidnapped news reporter held for ransom by none other than Tat, himself. It just so happens the reporter, Lauren O'Brien, is the daughter of the mayor. With Burnett's connection to the crime boss, the police force decides they have one gamble and that's sending one expendable, dirty cop to plead for Lauren's life. If he can get her out, they figure they won't have to send in SWAT, which never ends well for anyone. Should he succeed, Dale might get a little boost when he stands in front of the judge. To do that, however, he'll have to get to the top of a mob-owned skyscraper, rescue the reporter, and make it... *All The Way Down*.

Eric Beetner spins a violent, terrific yarn in his latest book that's sure to appeal to hardboiled crime aficionados and action lovers alike. It's got the grit of noir fiction, shades of the film *Die Hard*, and just enough emotion to get you to the end. "All The Way Down" is one hell of a page-turner.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



AN ELDERLY LADY IS UP TO NO GOOD

By Helene Tursten

When you're done reading this collection of short stories, do not be surprised if you want to visit Gothenburg, Sweden to "see" the apartment this protagonist, Maud, dwelled in, almost as much as a *Doors* fan wants to see Jim Morrison's grave.

Maud is eighty-eight years of age. She is the lone survivor of her clan. Her father passed on when she was eighteen and her mother and mentally-ill sister, Charlotte, followed...eventually. Maud needs the apartment she's in and will do anything to keep it. This is when readers are presented with the first tale: "An Elderly Lady Has Accommodation Problems." In this unforgettable read, Maud has suspicions regarding another tenant (Jasmine). Jasmine is being far too nice and bringing gifts to Maud's doorstep. Taking on the ruse of "confused old woman" Maud uses her acting chops to delve into the reasons why Jasmine is trying to befriend her, and if she'll have to take Jasmine out of the building permanently.

"An Elderly Lady on Her Travels," opens the door to Maud's trips abroad and offers up a reason as to why her murderous ways should continue.

"An Elderly Lady Seeks Peace at Christmastime," focuses on how bitter and angry Maud became when she had to take care of her sister; and, ultimately, how Charlotte died from falling down the stone steps inside the apartment building.

In "The Antique Dealer's Death," and the last tale, "An Elderly Lady is Faced with a Difficult Dilemma," a mystery ensues where a dealer of antiquities ends up dead in a locked room inside Maud's apartment.

This lady will do anything to live in peace until the day she dies, and she most certainly uses all of her intelligence to make that happen. This is a fantastic collection of tales. Don't miss it! Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



CHARITY'S BURDEN

By Edith Maxwell

Quaker midwife Rose Carroll doesn't let the cold of the 1889 Massachusetts winter stop her from checking on the pregnant women under her care, as well as those she's already helped bring new life into the world. But sometimes, she's faced with a crisis she's not prepared to handle on her own. This is the case when Rose looks in on Charity Skells, a poor woman who's recently given birth to her fifth child, and now appears to be suffering a miscarriage. Rose quickly has the woman admitted to the local hospital, but Charity dies. Her death hits Rose hard, and she wonders what else she could have done. Charity's parents have nothing good to say about their son-in-law, Ransom Skells, and hold him responsible for neglecting his wife, thereby leading to her death.

The more she thinks about Charity's symptoms, the more Rose believes that Charity was the victim of a botched mechanical abortion—a forbidden procedure. Rose begins to ask questions about locals who advertise "medical help for women in need," and learns that Charity's husband may be involved with a young woman whose mother is suspected of offering illegal abortions. A coincidence? Or something much more sinister? She also meets a disgraced local physician who apparently offers the same service, but when she confronts him with her suspicions, he denies it. With more suspects emerging, there's another, brutal death, and this time there's no doubt it was murder. Rose is anxious to share what she's learning with her usual ally, Detective Kevin Donovan. But there's a new police chief in town who forbids Rose to get involved.

"Charity's Burden" is the fourth in Edith Maxwell's *Quaker Midwife* mystery series. Not only is it a well-plotted, intelligent mystery, it also shines light on how women were treated—and, in many cases, mistreated—by people they trusted for help in desperate situations. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

NEVER LOOK BACK

By Alison Gaylin

Before you sit down to read "Never Look Back," get a good night's sleep, brew a large pot of coffee, and set aside a day committed to nothing but this complex and tension-filled story.

Alison Gaylin has crafted a tale that will have you guessing from the first page. "Never Look Back" is rife with misdirection carried on the shoulders of a large cast of well-developed characters. You won't want to put down this book.

Reviewed by Joseph Badal, Amazon #1 Best-Selling Author of the *Lassiter/Martinez Case Files* Series, published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE CUTTING ROOM

By Ashley Dyer

"The Cutting Room" is a well-written, complex, and harrowing tale that will keep you on the edge of your seat trying to identify a narcissistic serial killer. Margaret Murphy and Helen Pepper, who write as a team under the name Ashley Dyer, have constructed another intriguing police procedural that is full of tension and misdirection. There's enough of Edgar Allan Poe, Peter James, and Michael Connelly in "The Cutting Room" to make every mystery reader's heart beat faster. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Joseph Badal, Amazon #1 Best-Selling Author of the *Lassiter/Martinez Case Files* Series, published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

ONE FETA IN THE GRAVE

By Tina Kashian

It's the dog days of August in the New Jersey seaside town of Ocean Crest. And when it's mid-August "down the shore," that means end-of-season food festivals and fun in the sun along with the heat, humidity, and boardwalk games the shore is known for. And, in this case, murder.

Archie Kincaid has been in town less than a year and the abrasive store owner has managed to make enough enemies to fill the local telephone book. Tops on that list is Harold Harper, whose boardwalk shop is near Archie's. They've been in fierce competition since Archie arrived, and there's nothing Harold likes more than goading Archie every chance he gets. And vice versa.

Several local business owners have been asked to serve as judges for the annual sandcastle-building contest. One of them is Lucy Berberian, now managing the Kebab Kitchen, a family restaurant owned by her parents. Archie has also been asked to serve as a judge. Bad idea, since Archie's nephew, Neil, is a contestant. Anyone besides me sense nepotism going on? Oh, yeah. When the other judges find out about the relationship, which Archie has neglected to share, Neil is eliminated from the contest and Archie is eliminated as a judge. Needless to say, he goes ballistic, and takes his anger out on Katie Watson, the contest's head judge and Lucy's best friend. After a heated argument between Archie and Katie, overheard by many, the humiliated Archie stalks off to lick his wounds.

Lucy decides to take a run along the beach to calm her nerves, and discovers the body of Archie, shot dead, under the boardwalk. Despite no shortage of suspects, including both a girlfriend and a wife nobody knew Archie had, the police zero in on Katie as the prime murder suspect.

"One Feta in the Grave" is the third in the *Kebab Kitchen Mystery* series. It's a fun read that cozy lovers will enjoy.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



BITE CLUB

By Laurien Berenson

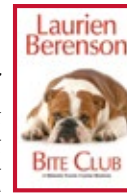
It's summer vacation for Melanie Travis, and she's looking forward to a break from her job tutoring special needs children at a prestigious Greenwich, Connecticut private school and spending time with her family. To be accurate, Melanie has two families, human and canine. Her immediate human family consists of husband Sam, a professional dog handler, and two sons, fourteen-year-old Davey and four-year-old Kevin. Her canine family includes five gorgeous Standard Poodles—all show dogs—and Bud, a rescue dog of unknown parentage who enjoys getting into trouble. Plus Melanie's crusty, irascible but still loveable Aunt Peg, who's been raising and showing Standard Poodles for years. Much of Melanie's summer will revolve around dog shows, but she's also determined to carve out a little time for herself.

An avid reader, Melanie decides to start a book club and call it the Bite Club because... why not? And since she's known for sticking her nose into situations that inevitably involve a dead body, naturally the books they'll read will all be mysteries. The first meeting is a small group, and includes Melanie's best friend Alice and Alice's new neighbor, Evan Major. The recently divorced and shy Evan shares his home with a Bulldog puppy. Clueless as to how to train his puppy, he turns to Melanie (at Alice's suggestion), for guidance. Melanie reluctantly agrees.

Evan arrives at the second Bite Club meeting with a badly bruised face, which he claims is the result of a recent car accident. He's anxious to continue training his puppy, despite his injuries, and Melanie makes a date to meet him at his house the following day. When she arrives, she finds the puppy running loose outside and Evan dead inside. The suspect list is long, and includes members of the Bite Club, Evan's greedy ex-wife, and his own brother.

"Bite Club" is another satisfying title in Berenson's *Canine Mystery* series. Boomer, Lilly and I give it our highest rating—ten dog biscuits!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



FINAL EXAM

By Carol J. Perry

The city of Salem, on the north coast of Massachusetts, is famous for its seventeenth century witchcraft trials. It's also the setting for the popular *Witch City* mystery series penned by Salem native Carol J. Perry.

Lee Barrett, the protagonist of the series, has settled into her new job as the field reporter for Salem's WICH-TV. Her job requires that she and her camerawoman, Francine Hunter, cover events as they happen and bring them to viewers in a timely manner. Many assignments take the pair to unusual locations, such as an abandoned stone quarry on the outskirts of town. They'd gotten a tip (don't ask me how, because I can't reveal a secret source) that the police were sending divers down to search for something in over a hundred feet of murky water. Much to everyone's surprise, the divers discover a vintage red Mustang with human remains stuck sideways under a huge chunk of rock, and labor to bring it to the surface.

Other reporters would have been told to leave the scene once the car and its grisly contents were discovered. But not Lee, who's in a position to get inside information about the case because her sweetie is a detective on the police force. Oh, and there's one more thing that gives Lee a unique advantage—she's a scryer, a person who has the ability to see things in reflective surfaces that others can't, which often helps the local police.

Lee shares the old family home with her aunt, Isobel Russel, a.k.a. Aunt Ibby. When Lee shares the discovery of the vintage sports car with Ibby—the same night that Ibby is hosting a meeting to plan her high school reunion—Lee's shocked by her aunt's emotional reaction to the news. Could her beloved aunt be hiding a secret that's been buried for over forty years?

"Final Exam," the eighth in Perry's series, gets an A+ from me! This series just keeps getting better. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE INVITED

By Jennifer McMahon

Helen and Nate decide to strike out on an adventure and give up their secure teaching jobs in the City to move to a very rural setting. There, they intend to build a new home.

Living in a small trailer on the acreage they purchased, the couple slowly learns the ropes of putting together the house, as well as navigating the small-town folks and their small-mindedness when dealing with outsiders.

Helen makes friends with a teenage neighbor and her aunt, and together they explore the plot of land. They follow some of the myths that circulate around the Vermont town about how the land once belonged to a local witch. (No wonder the place went for a song!) A creepy part of this myth that they learn about, is that hidden in the bogs crossing the land allegedly lies the body of Hattie Breckenridge.

Helen decides to use building materials from local antique stores and long forgotten buildings to create their home. And, of course, all of these materials supposedly have links to the ill-fated Breckenridge family. She feels that by doing this, it will give their new place a sense of history. However, it also seems that Helen and Nate could be creating a gate to a very dark world that threatens to collapse the couple's new life.

McMahon blends her historical tale of rural Vermont with some crafty ghost stories and makes it impossible for the reader to turn away.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■

METROPOLIS

By Philip Kerr

The beloved Bernie Gunther has returned in his final installment, and this time the fantastic author, Philip Kerr, allowed readers to go back in time and stand by Bernie's side during his first few weeks working on Berlin's Murder Squad.

The year is 1928; Bernie is a twenty-something man in the city of Berlin. Of course, he's not your average young man. Bernie has seen four years of blood-soaked war, so he has "street smarts" that most cops don't own. When he gets promoted and leaves the Vice squad behind, Bernie ends up embedded in a monumental murder spree. These killings are violent, and the victims are the prostitutes and wounded ex-soldiers who are basically ignored in this chaotic city.

It would be hard enough if these murders were the only thing on Bernie's plate but, unfortunately, the evil Nazi party has begun to infiltrate Bernie's daily life, as well. And even though the government is trying to hold on to control, the Third Reich is showing signs that they are most definitely taking over.

As Bernie investigates and ends up knee-deep in an underground network of evil, he does find an odd bit of romance with a sarcastic make-up artist who picks him up when he feels like there's nothing but failure in front of him. But *will* Bernie fail, or is this just a stepping stone in a long career ahead?

Berlin during the time of the Third Reich's reign is a perfect location to spotlight desperation, suspense, and death. Philip Kerr mastered both his plots and his characters, making this one thriller you do not want to miss.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



MURDER IN GALWAY

By Carlene O'Connor

Tara Meehan is taking her first trip to Ireland on a sad mission: she's honoring her late mother's final request to spread her ashes in the place where she was born; and apologize to her brother, Johnny. Tara's visit gets off to a bad start. As she's carrying the urn containing her mom's remains, some of the young lads decide to have a little fun by playing catch with it and snatch it out of her arms. As Tara tries to retrieve it, the urn falls toward an unsuspecting passer-by, the lid opens, and the man ends up covered in ashes.

Tara is anxious to honor her mother's other request, to connect with Johnny Meehan, the uncle she's never seen who runs an antique business, Irish Revivals. Tara hopes to discover from Johnny why her mother left Ireland so suddenly, never to return. When she gets to his cottage, she discovers a man...bludgeoned to death. Tara assumes that it's her uncle, and she is devastated that his life ended so violently, especially since now they'll never be able to connect. As word spreads around Galway that Johnny Meehan is dead, Tara finds out that public opinion suggests that he may have brought it on himself because of his recent outbursts of paranoia, which made him a lot of enemies.

Johnny goes from poor murder victim to prime murder suspect in a flash when the police determine that the dead man is really Emmet Walsh, Irish Revival's wealthiest client. Tara is stunned by this unexpected news, and despite the fact that she's never even met her uncle, is determined to prove his innocence. Once she can find him, of course.

"Murder in Galway" is an entertaining start to a new cozy mystery series by Carlene O'Connor, who also writes the successful *Irish Village Mysteries*. It's challenging to write two series with a similar setting and make them completely different, but O'Connor has pulled it off brilliantly.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



MILADY

By Laura L. Sullivan

In a way, this book actually fits present day quite well, even though it is set in the 17th Century during the time of the Three Musketeers and all their action and adventure. Why, you ask? Because this book is all about a strong female lead in a male dominated society who almost all readers have heard about before.

Milady de Winter had her own style when it came to wardrobe, men she slept with, as well as men who got on the wrong side of her who she cleverly took from this world. She was also the avid foe of the Musketeers. Notorious in her own right, regaled by the legendary Alexandre Dumas, she returns here penned by one of the best historical novelists we can claim today. But Laura Sullivan adds twists to this delightful character, making her into a rather unlikely heroine.

We learn about Clarice (AKA: Milady) and how she came into this world through a match between a Frenchwoman and an English baron who is as slimy as they come. Clarice is sheltered, to say the least, but through her life she learns all about the art of healing, as well as how to hide secrets and conceal murder. When she "meets up" with her father out of the blue, Clarice finds herself knee-deep in the deceptive court of King James I of England. It is here she begins to forge her own path through bad advice and sometimes unhealthy suitors until she's thrown in the path of D'Artagnan and his beloved Musketeers. You come away with a new admiration for Milady while standing side-by-side with her as she delivers her tale of survival and intrigue.

This is historical suspense at its finest, which is exactly what this author is fantastic at delivering. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

KILLYPSO ISLAND

By J. Kent Holloway

Every once in a while, a book comes along that harkens back to a time when noir fiction was at its prime. A time when readers were enthralled with "The Maltese Falcon" by Dashiell Hammett and "The Big Sleep" by Raymond Chandler. A time when these titles would have graced the tops of the charts and found a place on people's nightstands.

J. Kent Holloway's "Killypsso Island" is reminiscent of these great mysteries.

As I read, I could envision Humphrey Bogart playing the part of the main protagonist, Captain Joe, an ex-World War II soldier who has forsaken *civilization* and is living in the wilds of the Caribbean on the island of St. Noel. Captain Joe makes his living transporting Rum and other sundries for the right price. Along with Joe, we meet his friends: Trixie, a voluptuous saloon singer who is another transplant from the *civilized* world, as well as The Candyman and Angelique Lagrange—husband and wife and the island Voodoo Priest and Priestess, among other colorful characters. These characters become more vibrant and shadier with every turn of the page.

Holloway takes us on a raucous, fast-paced adventure full of international intrigue, island mysticism, and a bit of romance. With twists and turns on every page, this *whodunit* will keep you guessing until the very end.

If you're a mystery lover or just someone looking for a great book, grab a copy and a Rum Runner complete with a tiny umbrella and a slice of pineapple, slide into the closest hammock you can find, and dive into a phenomenal summer read. Holloway has proven that he is not only one of our best paranormal authors but also an incredible mystery writer as well.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of *The Kiche Chronicles* ■



WE WERE KILLERS ONCE

By Becky Masterman

This is a revamped, new twist on a classic real-life murder that makes Masterman's fourth thriller beyond memorable.

Brigid Quinn is a retired FBI Agent, and even if you have read none of the books preceding this one, you'll have no problem finding this lead character extremely smart, savvy and likable.

For a little history, the Clutter family was written about in Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood."

It was back in 1959, that this family of four were brutally murdered in Holcomb, Kansas. Perry Smith and Dick Hickok were convicted and executed for the crime, and Capote wrote about the investigation and solution. However, the spin Masterman takes, opens a new door that no one ever thought to open before.

Brigid Quinn and her husband, Carlo, a former priest and university professor, are doing all they can to enjoy their retirement years. But when a letter is found hidden away in an old box of Carlo's things, dating back to his time working as a prison chaplain, a prisoner from the past destroys their calm, peaceful retirement.

Jerry Beaufort is a man just released from prison. He has spent decades behind bars and all he wants to do is live out the rest of his years in a normal, everyday life. He wants to put the past behind him, but somewhere he knows there's a handwritten record of his time spent with two brutal murderers back in 1959. A written record that, if found, would open up a can of worms that would literally destroy any chance of Jerry having a second shot at a good life. Tracking this letter puts Jerry directly into Brigid Quinn's way, and the mystery that evolves is a non-stop, thrilling ride.

Readers will be enamored with this perfect mix of non-fiction and thriller. The author has done an amazing job combining both together for a never-before-seen conclusion.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



RECURSION

By Blake Crouch

In his second novel exploring psychic phenomena and time travel, Crouch takes us on a magnificent journey “seen” through the eyes of neuroscientist, Helena Smith, and police officer, Barry Sutton. As Smith works on a way to stop and/or cure her mother’s Alzheimer’s, Sutton struggles with the loss of his teenage daughter and subsequent divorce.

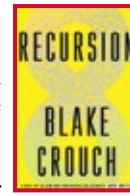
When Smith is approached by a large corporation with lots of cash to spend on her scientific explorations, she finds herself wrapped up in a program that she never expected. Her knowledge is put to use to reverse time; to allow people to go back and alter the past. Unknown to her at the time, however, is the fact that people who use this ability have false memories of times past. It becomes a national disease: False Memory Syndrome (FMS).

Sutton has seen his share of suicides from people afflicted with this disease. Kidnapped off the street, this shadow organization introduces him to the methodology of the syndrome and afflicts him with it, allowing him to stop time and be sure his daughter is no longer the victim of a hit-and-run. But... what will the consequences be? You see, as time moves forward and the date of her death comes around, Sutton, his wife, and their daughter still all experience memories of her death.

Thrown together, Sutton and Smith become unwitting partners in the fight against FMS. They try to find a way to stop the whole world from extinguishing itself as Smith’s scientific data becomes a weapon in the hands of every government entity.

Crouch gets pretty detailed in the scientific jargon, but never goes so far that the average mystery reader won’t be able to comprehend the plot. In a mix of thriller and science fiction, Crouch definitely shows us how the future “could” be scary as hell.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of “Kettle of Vultures” ▪



THREAD ON ARRIVAL

By Lea Wait

Angie Curtis has returned to her childhood home of Haven Harbor, Maine, to take over running the family business, Mainely Needlepoint, which does commissioned needlework for decorators and other high-end clients. Angie has given up her job as an assistant to a P.I. in Arizona for what she expects will be a quiet life. She’s happy to live close to her grandmother and her new husband, many old friends, and especially to find the love of her life, artist Patrick West.

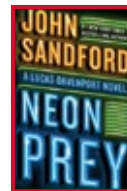
Like many towns, Haven Harbor has its share of interesting characters. One such person is Ike Hamilton, who’s been a fixture in town for decades although he’s fallen on hard times and supports himself through a small disability check and by collecting deposit bottles for resale. Most of the locals are happy to help Ike out by saving bottles for him and providing him with food whenever possible. So when harmless Ike is found stabbed to death in the ramshackle shed he now lives in, it’s a shock for the entire town. Suspicion falls on Luke, the troubled teenage boy whom Ike had recently befriended, who discovered the body.

Angie and her teacher friend, Dave Percy, believe the boy is innocent and reach out to help. Dave even offers Luke a temporary home. But their faith is shaken when they find out Luke is using a fictitious name and was a suspect in the death of his parents.

Angie and Dave decide to retrace Ike’s bottle-collecting route for clues, and discover that simpleminded Ike knew many people’s secrets and talked about them freely. Suddenly the suspect list is much longer, and includes people who are pillars of the community. Then, the murderer strikes again.

“Thread on Arrival” is the eighth in Maine author Lea Wait’s *Mainely Needlepoint Mystery* series. Like all of Wait’s previous mysteries, it’s a real page-turner all the way to its shocking motive and surprise ending. I just loved this book. Keep them coming!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “In-Laws Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ▪



101

By Tom Pitts

It’s one thing to steal a little pot, but quite another to take a chunk of cash from a biker gang.

That’s the trouble facing Jerry Bertram in “101,” the latest nail-biter from Tom Pitts. Lucky for our young protagonist, salvation comes in the form of his scrappy mother, Barbara, and her nefarious connections to the underworld, namely a tough-as-they-come pot grower by the name of Vic.

Jerry flees into the hills of Humboldt County to seek out the one man his mother believes can save him. As it turns out, Vic has a sweet, fully-staffed operation. He furnishes Jerry with a remote place to hide out as a favor to the young man’s mom. Neither Jerry nor Vic realize trouble is about to come pounding up the mountain. The Dead BBs biker gang, their handler Vlad the Inhaler, and a cop with a grudge against Vic, all turn their gaze on the rugged pot farm. When Jerry brings in his girl, Piper, Vic begins to see the hassle that will soon come knocking. He quickly realizes they have no choice but to get off the mountain. Only... it’s too late. What follows is an intense game of cat-and-mouse through the Humboldt wilderness, where gunshots and terror rule the night.

There’s no cruise control on this 101. This is a book with the pedal to metal—a fantastic ride only Pitts could captain. Readers of his other books, like the tough-as-nails “American Static,” know what they’re in for when they start turning the pages. They won’t be disappointed here. For those new to his writing, “101” is a perfect place to begin.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ▪

NEON PREY

By John Sandford

You can always count on John Sandford. His latest *Lucas Davenport* story, “Neon Prey,” is a riveting, pulse-pounding thriller with a hero you will love and a diabolical killer who will haunt your dreams. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Joseph Badal, Amazon #1 Best-Selling Author of the *Lassiter/Martinez Case Files* Series, published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ▪



SCARLET FEVER

By David Stever

When a good-looking dame with striking red hair tosses \$20,000 on your desk, any self-respecting P.I. would pay attention to what comes next. Johnny Delarosa is no exception.

Former cop, Delarosa and his partner, Mike, smell a big payday if they can just complete the mission—find two million in missing dollars. It’s a mystery with very few clues. Did I mention the money was stolen from the mob?

With little to go on, and a client, Clair, who perhaps is not what she seems, the two P.I.’s, and a new green but gung-ho secretary, Katie, take on the Port City Cosa Nostra. Seems like every scum-bag, wanna-be gangster (and a few made men) are scurrying around like rats, all wanting to put a claim on the money, should it be found.

Stever’s latest offering is a wink and a nod to the hard-boiled detective of a Chandleresque style and offers up a great adventure yarn and a stay-ahead-of-the-competition thriller.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of “Kettle of Vultures” ▪

MURDER'S NO VOTIVE CONFIDENCE

By Christin Brecher

It's Memorial Day Weekend on the island of Nantucket, Massachusetts, just off the coast of Cape Cod, and the locals are looking forward to the official start of the summer tourist and destination wedding season. Memorial Day also means it's time for Figawi, the island's annual, raucous, one-of-a-kind sailing competition.

Nantucket candle store owner Stella Wright is thrilled when she's tapped to design special candles for Jessica Sterling's Memorial Day nuptials. She's particularly proud of the two-foot high unity candle that will be used as part of the official wedding ceremony. Since Jessica's father is deceased, she's invited her Uncle Simon to walk her down the aisle. Simon hasn't been part of the family for years, and his presence upsets many of the guests. However, even though nobody likes Simon, nobody is prepared for the sight of him when he's found bludgeoned to death the day before the wedding, and the murder weapon is Stella's seemingly indestructible unity candle, now split in two.

The bride is determined to go ahead with her wedding despite what is clearly murder in the family, and Stella has to work hard to create a new candle in time for the ceremony. But as she works, she can't help but wonder who hated Simon enough to kill him. The issue becomes personal when it becomes clear that other brides who've hired Stella to create candles for their own special day are cancelling orders like mad, and Simon's death could put Stella out of business for good. Stella decides to do some sleuthing, despite being warned not to interfere by the town's sexiest cop, a man she's known since grammar school. With the help of a charming reporter, she's determined to unmask the killer.

"Murder's No Votive Confidence" is a charming mystery with believable, likeable characters. Check it out.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE SUMMER WE LOST HER

By Tish Cohen

Matt and Elise Sorenson are far from being the perfect couple. After years of putting their individual needs first, their marriage is at its breaking point and neither knows how much more they can take. But then, it gets worse. On the trip that's supposed to bring their family closer together, they lose the one thing equally important to them, their daughter Gracie.

It's been an expensive few years for Matt and Elise as all of their money and resources have been put towards Elise's career as a competitive dressage rider. She's moments away from her chance at the Olympics, and to help alleviate some of the burden, she and Matt decide to sell his late grandfather's lakefront property in the Adirondack Mountains. Matt's grandfather, Nate, whom he idolized, was practically Adirondack royalty and they're basically guaranteed an easy sale. But when Gracie goes missing in the midst of all the hustle and bustle of preparing the house for market, the world around them comes crashing down.

As they work tirelessly to find their daughter, Matt and Elise struggle to find support in one another. Instead, Matt leans on his neighbor and first love, Cass. He also discovers that his beloved grandfather wasn't the man he thought he was, and as it turns out they have many more enemies in this small town than they first knew.

With each passing moment, Matt and Elise feel crushed by the weight of their missing daughter. If they find her, will they ever recover from the things they've said to one another? The things they've felt? And worse, what if they don't find her at all?

In "The Summer We Lost Her," Tish Cohen explores just how far two people can be pushed apart before they're forced to come together. This book covers everything from loss to love, and the power of what it means to be a family. Readers will be hanging on until the very end.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

THE ABSOLVER: ROME

By Gavin Reese

Michael Thomas, former cop now priest, discovers the power of justifiable homicide over murder. So much so that his employers pull him into a shadow organization that the Catholic church is using to rid the world of those lost forever to heaven.

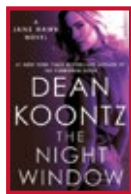
Using priests to sanctify the killings of monsters amongst us, and allowing those priests to administer the last rites and absolution at the time of death, is a storyline explored by many. Opus Dei and the Illuminati have been broached by many a novelist. This novel reminds me a little of David Morrell's "The League of Night and Fog."

Whisked away to rural Wyoming, to a six month boot camp from which all but a few are expected to graduate, Thomas and his cohorts are sent through a vigorous physical and religious training run by a zealot who was probably a Marine Corp sergeant major in another life. As their skills are honed, they wonder what exactly is in store. They're kept in the dark the whole time waiting to see why they were chosen for this type of intense training.

When the plot all comes together, we go along for the journey as Reese, a former cop himself, guides us through the moral morass that these absolvers find themselves tangled in. It is an exciting rush, and the author prepares us well, as the trainers did for the assassins in waiting.

This is the first in what I hope is a long series of novels as we are transported around the world seeking monsters to destroy.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■



THE NIGHT WINDOW

By Dean Koontz

It is no wonder that every time a Koontz book appears in this world that I, as well as millions of other fans across the globe, go positively crazy over it.

The *Jane Hawk* series continues with this 5th book and it is one of the most heart-pounding of them all. For those who have not witnessed the first four books, I suggest you do it now, because you do not want to miss one second of this incredible journey.

Jane's ultimate quest is to bring to light, and then take down, the powerful men behind a secret operation that's destroying lives. Quite literally, these people are using a new technology to control all of society by altering the minds of citizens. They are turning people into robots; programming them to do unspeakable things.

This began as a personal quest when Jane lost her husband to this sick way of "thinking" and she had to hide her son and go on the hunt. This time out, however, the bearers of evil are coming too close to her child and Jane must find a way to stop them. Although she may have just been a sole operator at the beginning, others have come out of the woodwork to offer their help. Problem is, some of these mind-altered people are now going violently out of control, leading up to a climactic battle between good versus evil.

Walking this path with Jane has made readers see just what a complex character she is and how her dedication and love for her family has driven her to continue. Riveting, provocative, mind-blowing, exciting... pick your favorite adjective and insert it here. Koontz has always been a mastermind at writing, but with Jane he has gone to a new height, creating a female hero who has most definitely found her place in history.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

CARI MORA

By Thomas Harris

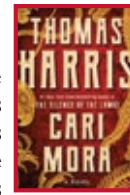
If anyone is going to create a character or story that will scare the pants off you, this is the man who will do it. From the creator of Hannibal Lecter, this tale is all about the consequences someone must face when living with evil, greed, and the ferocity of a dark obsession. This is not a setting of a dimly-lit prison with a killer behind glass, however. Here we walk the beautiful white sand of the Miami Beach waterfront. Although it looks like paradise, it does have a history of violence.

Beneath a mansion located on Biscayne Bay, twenty-five million dollars in cartel gold awaits the lucky one who finds it. Pablo Escobar is now dead, and will never be able to retrieve this fortune. Enter, Hans-Peter Schneider. A ruthless, intelligent nightmare, he has plans to steal the gold but, unfortunately, the young caretaker of the Escobar mansion, Cari Mora, is also looking for the loot.

This does not change Hans-Peter's mind. After all, being a peddler of the flesh, the plans he has for Cari are more than disturbing. His interests are macabre to the nth degree, and this complex cat-and-mouse game he must play with a very smart woman who survived many unspeakable things in her own past, not only thrills Hans-Peter, but also the people reading the words that have been penned by this master of suspense.

These are two solid characters: A woman who will not go down without a fight versus a man who is absolutely crazy and finds himself desirous of the woman marked by war in her own country. Not since Agent Starling and Lecter have I felt that sense of respect for one another, as two characters attempt to take the other one down in a blaze of glory. And as it was with Clarice and Lecter, no reader will forget this duo anytime soon.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



RESTAURANT WEEKS ARE MURDER

By Libby Klein

Poppy McAllister is excited to open Butterfly House, the quaint Queen Anne home she and her eccentric Aunt Ginny have renovated as a B&B in Cape May, New Jersey. But when her ex-fiancé Tim offers her a spot on his team in the upcoming Cape May Restaurant Week challenge, Poppy jumps at the chance. Her dream has always been to be a professional chef specializing in gluten free pastries. The opportunity to cook beside Tim is a plus, and an opportunity to decide if she wants to rekindle their relationship or succumb to the romantic overtures of local hunky Italian barista Gia Larusso. One downside is the other member of Tim's three-person team, his condescending partner Gigi, who has the hots for Tim and enjoys few things more than putting Poppy down. Another problem is that Gia's mama, the terrifying Olivia Larusso, is also competing, and matches Gigi's condescending attitude with giving the evil eye to Poppy every chance she gets.

Restaurant Week seems doomed before it starts. The original inn that's been booked to house the celebrity judges cancels and Poppy offers to house them at Butterfly House. This turns out to be a huge mistake, and she and Aunt Ginny quickly get fed up with their demanding guests. Then another competitor, Adrian Baxter, who attended the Culinary Institute of America with Tim years ago, accuses him of cheating while they were in school and warns him in front of everyone not to try anything funny. That's just the beginning of what turns into the competition from hell as ingredients for the meals are mysteriously switched and Tim's accused of sabotaging the contest. Relatively harmless pranks escalate into real hazards, including an exploding deep fryer. Then one of the judges dies after eating a bite of Poppy's cannoli, turning her into a prime suspect.

"Restaurant Weeks Are Murder" is an inside, irreverent look into the high profile world of celebrity culinary arts. Hilarious! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE SENTENCE IS DEATH

By Anthony Horowitz

Anthony Horowitz's "The Sentence is Death" is a fascinating and clever work of fiction. Horowitz tells the story through the thoughts and observations of a Dr. Watson-like character who is an avatar of the author himself. This wonderful book is reminiscent of the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and will have the reader begging for more.

Reviewed by Joseph Badal, Amazon #1 Best-Selling Author of the *Lassiter/Martinez Case Files* Series, published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE FIRST MISTAKE

By Sandie Jones

There are readers who say new books churn out the same old suspense as the ones that came before. For those who had the privilege of getting their hands on this author's debut novel, they already know that's a lie.

Alice is on her second marriage. She misses her first husband, but Nathan has given her all she craved: a home, kids, and more. Alice has her best friend Beth beside her... but Beth may be deceiving.

Nathan begins acting like another person around Alice, and the story unveils secrets and lies you won't believe. I know what you're thinking. You've heard this before... right? Nope! Advice: Read this!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



STRONG AS STEEL

By Jon Land

How do you spell Jon Land? A question to be answered later.

Land does not just exceed genre expectations with "Strong as Steel," he defies genre limits. It would be an injustice to call this a crime novel, a police procedural, or even a thriller because it's much more.

In the 10th novel in the *Caitlin Strong* series, we find fifth generation Texas Ranger, Caitlin Strong, up against something much greater than she has ever dealt with. She not only has to fight against the evil in front of her, but also the evil that confronted her father, Texas Ranger Jim Strong, twenty-five years prior. And like her father, she finds that good and evil are not black and white.

In "Strong as Steel," Land blurs the lines between the supernatural and natural, faith and science, friend and foe, and between family and... family. He takes the reader on a journey, and not just one of a horrific crime and its possible outcome, but also on a journey of discovery. Just like in our real lives, readers will have to decide just how blurred the aforementioned lines are and how to straddle them.

Through the characters of Caitlin Strong and her closest friends and colleagues, Cort Wesley Masters, Guillermo Paz, Jones, and Captain D.W. Tepper, we will be taken on a juggernaut where our own ideas of faith, science, family, and the supernatural will be tested. But in the end, we'll have a clearer understanding of all the above.

I'm in awe of Land's ability to take separate threads of a story—separated by decades—and bring them together in mind-blowing clarity. I'm like a kid at a county fair, full of excitement and adrenaline, when I get to open and devour the next *Caitlin Strong* novel.

Whether you are already a fan or a new reader, get ready to sink your teeth into what just might be the best novel of 2019. So...how do you spell Jon Land? Provocative. Brilliant. Fearless!

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of *The Kiche Chronicles* ■

Who'd Murder A Dying Man?

BADGE *or* NO BADGE

She Intends to Find Out...



Read The Beginning!

Veteran Chicago journalist Tracy Clark's **HIGHLY-ACCLAIMED CHICAGO MYSTERY SERIES** continues with **PRIVATE DETECTIVE AND FORMER COP** Cass Raines making powerful enemies as she **INVESTIGATES THE SUSPICIOUS DEATH** of a dying man as a favor to a friend...

“Compelling, suspenseful, and action-packed.”

—*Library Journal*, **STARRED REVIEW**

By Jeff Ayers



AVENGERS: ENDGAME 2019

Genre – Action/Adventure/Sci-Fi (PG-13)

A saga that began in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man* reaches the end, and with so much buildup and such a large cast of characters, the odds of having a terrific payoff were astronomical. Thankfully, the film not only works, but even exceeds expectations. With the snap causing the elimination of half the galaxy, the survivors wallow in misery and contemplate how to move on with their lives. The plan to fix things is not only bold, but also provides an opportunity to focus on the individual heroes and their journeys to that moment. It should not work, but it does. What's next for the Marvel Universe? ■

MEN IN BLACK: INTERNATIONAL 2019

Genre – Action/Adventure/Comedy (PG-13)

Chris Hemsworth and Tessa Thompson take the popular franchise and attempt to take it to new heights. The established universe in the three previous films is imaginative, but the story this time fails to engage. Agent H and Agent M are assigned to protect a high-value alien visiting Earth. When things go wrong, Agent M receives what seems like a crystal, but is a deadly weapon that could destroy a world. Revelations meant to surprise are already telegraphed in the story, and

part of the story constraints make it difficult to like some of the characters. It would have helped the suspense and the narrative if the “twists” came sooner. ■



TOY STORY 4 2019

Genre – Animation/Adventure/Comedy (G)



The ending of *Toy Story 3* was perfect, so when this movie was announced, I was skeptical. I love the characters and wanted to see them again, but it needed to be a good enough story to warrant moving on from the last one. I should not have worried. *Toy Story 4* delivers another emotional ride that introduces some fun new toys while taking our favorites on a journey for their souls. The young girl Bonnie makes a toy at kindergarten orientation that is a plastic spork with googly eyes that she calls Forky. While the other toys try to explain his new role, he thinks of himself as trash and continuously searches for the nearest garbage can. This film is a blast, and the folks at Pixar have done it again. ■

POKEMON DETECTIVE PIKACHU 2019

Genre – Action/Adventure/Comedy (PG)

I thought this was going to be a snooze-fest. With no knowledge of any of the various creatures that inhabit this “universe,” I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly the filmmakers were able to immerse the viewer into the world, and how they balanced a line between keeping the fans engaged while having novices understand all of the various details. Justice Smith



plays Tim, who arrives in a town that is a successful blend of humans and Pokémon. His father, a police detective, has died and he wants answers. When he finds Pikachu, voiced by Ryan Reynolds, running around his dad’s apartment, they decide to work together to find solutions. The humor appeals to both kids and adults, and while the story might seem predictable, it does have a couple of surprises to keep everything moving. ■

ALADDIN 2019

Genre – Adventure/Comedy/
Family (PG)



With Will Smith as the Genie, the story follows the same beats as the original animated classic with a couple of exceptions. One is the creation of a friend to Princess Jasmine named Dalia, and Princess Jasmine herself is a strong woman who can kick ass. While it is refreshing to see

this change, it turns Aladdin into a bit of a wimp and the main villain Jafar into an afterthought. Jafar is never scary or a threat since it’s obvious Jasmine could eliminate him with just a glare. It makes for an interesting dynamic. ■

Jeff Ayers co-hosts *Beyond the Cover* with John Raab, and is a freelance reviewer for the *Associated Press*, *Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. He is the author of several books in the worlds of both fiction and non-fiction, including “*Voyages of Imagination: The Star Trek Fiction Companion*” and the thriller “*Long Overdue*.”

“A delicious glimpse at what happens when the veil between the two worlds unexpectedly parts. I dare you to put this book down!”

—Suzanne Giesemann, Author of
“Messages of Hope”

PROOF *of* LIFE

SHEILA LOWE
A BEYOND THE VEIL MYSTERY
WWW.CLAUDIAROSESERIES.COM

After recovering from amnesia five years ago, Jessica Mack never told anyone she had started hearing voices from the spirit world. Now, forced to use her “gift” to help find missing four-year-old Ethan Starkey, she can no longer ignore the voices. Time is running out for little Ethan as Jessica, and Sage Boles, a man with a mysterious past, are guided by the voices to a séance, where they hope to get clues to the child’s whereabouts.

Available on Kindle Unlimited & Where Books are Sold SUSPENSE PUBLISHING

Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

A woman with long brown hair in a bun, wearing a purple gown, stands in a magical garden. She is holding a small butterfly. In front of her is a large, ornate, glowing gate with intricate scrollwork. The garden is filled with purple flowers and a small green bird is visible in the lower left corner.

JASMINA SEIDL

*Artistic Passion Explodes in a
Rainbow of Color*

MAGIC GATE

Credit: <https://www.deviantart.com/jassysart/art/Magic-Gate-Version-2-773162566>



When you catch sight of Jasmina (AKA: Jassy) Seidl's websites, the first thing that draws you in is her stunning use of color. From the vivid sunsets to the lone images set in fantastical worlds, this is one artist whose imagination stuns the senses and causes you to lose yourself in the images she creates.

A German digital artist and graphic designer, Jassy also offers eBook/Book/Blu-Ray and CD Covers. Her expertise crosses many lines, from digital painting to photo manipulation to wallpaper, 3D art and graphic designs. Whether entering her personal website or the one she has created on DeviantArt, it is not a stretch to say that for hours you could explore the many galleries she has amassed. Pages where the incredible pieces perfectly match the vivid themes and titles given to the galleries, such as "Galactic Dreams" and "Abstract Worlds."

Jasmina was kind enough to take a moment and step away from her imaginative creations to speak more about her passion.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Jassy, let us begin with your initial desire to become an artist. Did this start at a young age; or, as time went by, did you notice the extreme gift you quite obviously have for creating such memorable work?

Jasmina Seidl (J.S.): No, not necessarily. But what I can say is that I was very creative from childhood on. I began creating virtual scenes and works about twenty years ago in a forum. It was approximately seven years ago that I registered with DeviantArt... and just continued. I had many role models there. I learned a lot from them. Although I have never considered myself to be particularly talented or even an artist, there were those from DeviantArt who made me feel more and more like a picture: "I'm very talented and an artist." When I always said no to this, they told me that I was, quite simply, wrong.

S. MAG.: You state in your bio on DeviantArt that you are a fan of the niche: Fantasy & Romance. Are these the styles, so to speak, that you have a great passion for?

J.S.: Yes, actually. I love to set my design focus on landscapes, including the beauty and intricacies of both flowers and animals in various settings.

S. MAG.: Can you explain to readers the definition for your job: Official Beta Tester that you list on the website? How did you get into that field? Did you study Graphic Arts in school?

J.S.: The job was actually offered to me by DeviantArt. I have not attended a graphic/trade school or anything similar, however. I basically taught myself everything. Extra education comes from dealing with and learning the many graphics programs at an artist's disposal.

S. MAG.: Do you use your talent to work with others on their projects, such as book covers for writers? And, if so, how do you like "transforming" a writer's plot and characters into a cover that nabs the reader out there?

J.S.: Yes, my past does include designing eBook, CD and book covers for printing. I also do many things with graphic design, like creating websites for others, buttons, backgrounds, and banners for both Facebook and YouTube. I also complete designs for devART groups (journals, etc.), and ready-made pictures that others can tinker with. I also have a love for animation, so I do many designs and works that are animated. That's just part of what I do.

When it comes to working with authors, I feel that writers help make a book cover really



JUST A LITTLE WALK

Credit: <https://www.deviantart.com/jassysart/art/Just-A-Little-Walk-738531183>



BLUE DREAMS

flash! I have no specific method; I make it all out of the feeling and my own emotion for the work.

S. MAG.: Your use of color in your work is absolutely phenomenal. How did you, personally, get to be such a master of the craft?

J.S.: *Wow! I thank you for the compliment. I must say, I do not see myself as 'master' of the subject right now. I am learning new things each and every day. But I've always thought I had a good feeling and a sense of color—what fits together, combinations—not only in the virtual, but also in real life.*

S. MAG.: Are you a mentor for others?

J.S.: *No, I'm not a mentor to others. Except in the quiet, about which I know nothing.*

S. MAG.: What is the best advice you could give to an up-and-comer in this day and age who wants to hone their artistic talents? Is there a place you would recommend they go to in order to get their work exposed and start building followers?

J.S.: *I must say, I learned a lot here on DeviantArt, and I can and will recommend it to anyone. There are great artists from whom you can learn so much. It is important to get acquainted with others in the industry, by researching and logging into the many online platforms where you can show your own works. With time, the rest comes on its own.*

S. MAG.: When you come upon a moment in time where you get “artist’s block,” is there a place you can go to that puts you back on track?

J.S.: *Personally, I just surf across the internet and have always been successful. There are so many great artists and graphics out there that inspire you.*

S. MAG.: I assume you like the world of social media; do you find it rewarding to get feedback and comments from fans, fellow artists, etc.?

J.S.: *I do like social media very much. It is a great way to meet others and, yes, it's definitely worth using in order to get feedback.*



S. MAG.: What is up next for you in the artistic world? Is there something fans can look forward to seeing that you are working on at the moment?

J.S.: *Nothing concrete, actually. Art is very spontaneous for me. I get a picture in my head and I just have to turn it into a work as good as I can create.*

Being a fan of this particular artist, you'll see that she does justice to every one of those images. We'd like to thank Jasmina for her time. If you are interested in seeing more of her work, purchasing her creations, or finding out more about Jasmina, visit her website regularly at: www.jasminaseidl.com. ■

WITNESSES

By Sharon Love Cook



Arnold Smukert spotted the elderly couple standing a few feet away from the crosswalk. He applied the brakes on his Subaru wagon. He wasn't sure if the couple was attempting to cross the street or if they'd merely stopped to rest. The crosswalk was on the old Shore Road, a beat-up stretch of blacktop that saw little traffic during the week.

He waited, sighing at the pair's indecision. Were they even aware they were standing at a crosswalk? The elderly woman, wild-haired and thin, hung back while her companion tugged at her hand. They were probably residents of the nearby retirement home, Shady Nook. Arnold's aunt had once stayed there while recovering from a hip fracture.

He lowered his window and waved to get their attention. Finally, the man stepped off the curb. Immediately his companion yanked him back.

As Arnold sounded his horn, a sudden movement, reflected in his rearview mirror, caught his attention. A glossy, deep-blue BMW sedan was barreling towards him. Arnold had little time to brace himself before the crash. It was accompanied by the sound of crushing metal and breaking glass. He lurched forward, his seatbelt digging into his ribs. His glasses flew off, hitting the dashboard.

He glanced in the mirror. A dark-haired man behind the wheel threw a cigarette out his window. Arnold caught his eye and made a forward motion with his hand. He moved the Subaru ahead several yards until he was half off the road, two tires on the sidewalk. The BMW stopped a distance behind him.

When Arnold shut off the ignition, his hands shook. He tried to take a deep breath but his chest was tight. He pressed his fingertips to the side of his neck to monitor his heartbeat. As he silently counted, a sharp knock on the window startled him. It was the driver. Hands on his knees, he peered in at him. Seen up close, he wasn't as young as Arnold had originally thought. He was middle-aged and wearing blue metallic sunglasses, the kind favored by young people.

"You okay?" he asked when Arnold lowered his window. He added, "Why in hell were you stopped in the middle of the road?"

"Why?" Arnold sputtered. "I was letting those people cross."

"What people?" The man stood and looked up and down the roadway. The elderly couple had disappeared.

"They were right there," Arnold said, "at the crosswalk." He wanted to get out to inspect the Subaru's damage, but felt light-headed. Best to stay seated until the police arrived. "Did you call the police?" he asked.

"I'm not sure if I have my phone," he said. With that, he headed back to his car.

Arnold removed his cell phone from the glove compartment. He rarely used it; Claudia insisted he keep one in the car. He punched in the numbers and stated his location. When he finished, he considered calling Claudia but decided it would alarm her too much.

He glanced at the rear mirror. The driver was half-turned in his seat, a phone pressed to his ear. The BMW's front bumper sagged over the right tire. Other than that, Arnold could see little damage.

Minutes later a police cruiser arrived, followed by a fire truck. The vehicles parked ahead of the Subaru. The BMW driver, having removed his sunglasses and donned a navy blazer, went to meet them. Arnold struggled to get out of the car. His neck and shoulders were stiff. He stood, holding on to the car's door for support.

The cop called to him, "Sir, do you want an ambulance?"

Arnold shook his head. "I'm a little stiff, but nothing seems broken." To demonstrate, he shook one leg and then the other.

"Sir, remain seated while I get this driver's information."

Arnold lowered himself back inside. The cop's sharp tone made him feel like a kid, banished to his room. He watched the proceedings. Soon the firetruck drove away. The BMW driver and the cop shook hands, the man quickly walking away. He passed Arnold without glancing at him.

When the cop finally approached, Arnold opened his door but the officer held up a hand. "Give me your registration and driver's license." Arnold handed them over. The cop scribbled on a form attached to a clipboard. He said, "Tell me what happened."

Arnold told about stopping at the crosswalk while waiting for the elderly couple standing there. "As I waited, the BMW plowed into me. He was obviously going too fast and not paying attention. Probably texting," Arnold added.

The cop continued writing and said nothing. In the silence, Arnold felt pressured to say more: "After coming around that curve in the road, there's plenty of time to stop . . . if you're paying attention."

The cop moved to the back of the Subaru. As he inspected the damage, he continued to write.

Arnold turned his head gingerly to peer at him. "Officer, I'd like to get out and see the damage."

He nodded. "Fine, but be careful. There's broken glass."

Arnold made his way to the back of the Subaru, holding on to the car for support. He sighed when he saw his crumpled bumper, the broken tail lights, the dented rear door. "The repairs will be expensive," he said, "but least it won't be my insurance company paying for it."

The cop tore a pink sheet from the clipboard and handed it to him. "He claims your car was backing up in the road when he arrived. Any truth to that?"

Arnold stared at him. "Backing up? Why would I be backing up? I was waiting for a couple of old people to cross the street. Otherwise, they'd have darted out in traffic."

"No need to get upset, Mr. Smukert. Where did the couple go?"

"They probably ran off when he plowed into me. Must

have frightened them."

"That's too bad," the cop said. "As witnesses, they could confirm your account." He put the clipboard under his arm. "Call your insurance company and make sure you fill out an accident report online. You'll find the website on the sheet I gave you." He indicated the Subaru. "You're okay to go home, but don't drive with broken tail lights. You'll get a ticket."

The cop nodded to him and drove away. Arnold got back in his car. He searched for his eyeglasses and found them on the floor mat. The cracked right lens had fallen out of the frame. As he slowly drove home, he heard the tinkle of glass hitting the asphalt. When he arrived at his house, Claudia listened to his account and insisted he have a hot bath. As it was too late to call his insurance agent, Arnold went to bed.

He slept poorly. The next morning he sat hunched in pain on the edge of the bed. His neck and shoulders were tight. Claudia wanted to call his physician. He told her to quit fussing over him. In the bathroom he shook two aspirins into his hand.

Claudia peeked in at him. "Why don't you visit my chiropractor?"

"Because I've got a list of things to do," he snapped, "thanks to Mr. Norman Trent."

He'd gotten the BMW driver's name and address from the police report. Trent, age forty-six, lived at Chapel Crossing, the slick condo building that was once St. Peter's Church, the Smukert family's parish. Arnold had served as an altar boy while his mother had sung in the choir. After the church was sold and converted into condos, he had gone to the developer's open house, out of curiosity. When he saw the statue of St. Peter, once set in a grotto on the church grounds and now overlooking a paddle-board court, he'd left in disgust.

Later, his insurance agent listened to Arnold's recitation of the crash. "So sorry, Mr. Smukert," he said. "Any injuries?"

Arnold mentioned his stiff neck and shoulders before blurting out, "Listen, I'm told this Trent fellow claims I was backing up in the road when he came along."

"It's what he reported to the police."

"That's a lie! I was stopped at a crosswalk, waiting for a couple of elderly pedestrians. I figured they had dementia and would run into the road any minute—"

"Did the officer get their statement?"

"They ran away," Arnold said, "when that maniac slammed into me."

"That's too bad. It'd help to have witnesses." Before hanging up, he said, "Shall I email a list of approved auto body shops?"

"Fine. In the meantime, I've got to visit a car rental place. I assume the driver's insurance will cover the cost."

The agent paused. "I can't give you that information right now, Mr. Smukert."

“Why not?” Arnold asked loudly, but the agent had already hung up.

That afternoon, Arnold watched the Subaru being loaded onto a flatbed truck. He returned to the kitchen and paced back and forth. Skipper, their little Maltese terrier, traipsed behind him, his nails tapping the tiled floor. Arnold couldn't stop ruminating about the crash. His life had been disrupted due to one reckless driver. If that wasn't enough, it looked as if the driver wouldn't be held responsible. When he could no longer stay cooped up at home, Arnold attached a leash to Skipper's collar. Maybe some fresh air would calm him down.

They walked the quarter mile to the village center. In front of the post office, he surveyed the shops on Main Street. Although he rarely patronized the local stores, he decided to try the new coffee shop. Along with their overpriced coffee, they might offer a treat for Skipper. He tugged on the leash and they headed off.

He tied Skipper to a wooden bench outside the shop. Inside, a group of young people sat around a low table, their flip-flops planted on the furniture. Arnold suspected they were students from the nearby Addison College. *Layabouts*, he thought, *with nothing to do but spend their parents' money*. How different his college years had been. He'd squeaked by on a scholarship and by working six days a week in the college cafeteria.

Now he approached the clerk at the counter. He ordered a coffee and asked if she had a small cookie “for his dog.” He turned to the door where Skipper peered in, his tiny paws pressed against the glass.

“Oh, he's adorable,” the clerk said. She took a small, plain cookie from a glass case. “Can I give him this?”

“I'm sure he'd like that,” Arnold said.

He smiled as the clerk approached the door. The young people lounging around the table watched her feed Skipper the cookie. A girl asked, “Is that a poodle?”

“No, he's a Maltese,” Arnold said, turning to her. His smile froze. Sitting in the center of the group was Norman Trent, a pair of eyeglasses perched on his head. “It's you!” Arnold said, his face growing hot. “What's the idea, telling the cops I was backing my car up? That's a lie, and you know it.”

Norman Trent stood and raised his hand like a traffic cop. “Excuse me, these are my students and you're interrupting our class.”

“Is that so? Well, sorry to inconvenience you, because you've inconvenienced me plenty. Right now I'm in severe pain and without a car, thanks to your reckless driving.”

In the silence that fell over the room, Skipper barked, straining at his leash. A young man leaped up, phone in hand. “Want me to call the police, Mr. Trent?”

“No, Zack, this man is leaving.” He stared at Arnold with narrowed eyes. “If he doesn't, then you can call.”

The clerk put a hand on Arnold's arm. “Sir, your dog had his treat. You'd better go now.”

As Arnold headed for the door, he turned to Norman Trent, saying, “You won't get away with this.”

Two days later, Arnold drove his rental sedan to the senior center. He parked in the lot and spent a few minutes figuring out how to lock the car's doors. The key's configuration was complicated—just like his life the past few days. Inside, he asked the woman at the reception desk, “Is Smitty here?”

“If he is, he's probably in the pool room.”

Arnold knew the way. Since his retirement, he'd visited the senior center a couple of times a week, taking advantage of its three-dollar lunches and fifty-cent coffee. It was where he'd met Smitty, a retired correctional officer. Smitty always knew what was going on in town and the “real” story behind it. The man was resourceful; thanks to Smitty, Arnold had gotten a good deal on a snow blower. Smitty seemed to know everyone and if he didn't, he knew how to find out. At Christmas, Arnold had given him a bottle of bourbon.

Smitty was alone, bent over the pool table. Arnold knocked before entering, as if the room was Smitty's private domain. As always the man wore a sweatshirt with the sleeves torn off. Arnold stood against the wall, clutching a coffee cup. Eventually Smitty turned, saying, “What's up?”

“Something I want to talk to you about.”

Smitty nodded, glancing at the door. “Close it.”

Arnold shut the door. While Smitty continued to play, moving around the pool table, Arnold described the accident on Shore Road. “I found out he lied to the insurance company *and* the police. If he gets away with it, my premiums will soar. At my age, I could be considered a bad risk.”

Smitty straightened and asked, “What's the guy's name and where does he live?”

Arnold told him, impressed that Smitty didn't need to write it down. “It's the former St. Peter's Church, now condos. Find out what you can, will you, Smitty?”

“You gonna be here Friday, around noon?”

“I can be,” Arnold said.

Smitty opened the door. “I'll see you then.”

Before walking out, Arnold clamped a hand on Smitty's shoulder.

When he returned home, Claudia told him the car rental agency had called. They could offer Arnold a senior discount, but the rental would cost him forty dollars a day.

His good mood vanished. “What? They can't charge me. It wasn't my fault.”

Claudia sighed. “I told them that, but the other driver's carrier refuses to pay. They said you were cited.”

Arnold pressed his palms to his head. “Norman Trent's

caused a major disruption in my life.”

“Calm down, dear. Remember what Dr. Golden said—anger is harmful to your arteries.”

“Shut up, Claudia!” Arnold raced up the stairs to call his insurance agent.

The following day Arnold visited the Shady Nook Senior Living Facility. He parked in a small visitors’ lot. The rambling wooden structure had a broad lawn set back from Shore Road. A woman sat with three elderly residents who dozed in the sun. Arnold stared at the trio. None resembled the two at the crosswalk.

He entered the front door. Inside, two elderly residents in wheelchairs slowly propelled themselves down a hallway. Another resident leaned on an aluminum walker, making slow progress. Arnold studied them; none looked familiar.

A broad-faced woman wearing an ID tag that identified her as the administrator, approached. Arnold introduced himself. He explained about the accident and the two elderly people who’d witnessed it. “I think they may be patients here.” He glanced about him. “Do you mind if I look around, see if I can spot them?”

The administrator drew her shoulders back. “Mr. Smukert, our guests are residents, not patients. Now, you say this couple was outside, and unsupervised?”

“Yes,” Arnold said, “just the two. It’s important that I speak to them. They were the only witnesses.”

“I’m sorry, but if they were alone, without staff, they would not be our residents. The Shady Nook population is *always* supervised.”

“I see,” he said. “Could I take a look, just to be sure?”

She marched to the door and held it open. “Thank you for dropping by, Mr. Smukert. Sorry we can’t help you.”

Arnold gave her a sour look. Outside, he walked to the end of the scuffed flagstone path. There he turned and looked back at the house, scanning the windows and grounds, searching for the old couple. He stood there until the administrator appeared at the door and glared at him. He turned and moved on.

On Friday he met Smitty at the senior center. They got coffee from the kitchen, Arnold paying for both. Smitty led him outside to the parking lot. They sat on worn canvas chairs under a crab apple tree adjacent to the lot.

“This here’s my office,” Smitty said, grinning. He took a sheet of paper from a pocket in his jeans. “I got your information.” He unfolded the sheet and read from it: “This guy, Trent, he’s a professor at Addison College. He teaches ‘film studies’ or somethin’ like that. My source said he made a documentary that won a big award—not an Oscar, an Emmy. That’s why the college lets him make his own hours, hold classes wherever he wants. He’s good for their image. Parents

find out he’s head of the department, they’re willing to pony up fifty grand so junior can attend Addison.” He snorted.

Arnold leaned forward. “Is that all you learned?”

“Cool your jets, man. This dude’s been married twice. He’s a drinker, and what you call a ‘ladies’ man.’ The college settled a lot of dough on a student who claimed he’d knocked her up. He’s been warned.” Smitty scanned the sheet. “Trent hangs out at the Blu Moon, a fancy bar downtown that charges thirteen bucks for a martini.” He took a sip of his coffee, staring at Arnold over the cup’s rim. “You want someone to straighten him out about that insurance business?”

Arnold raised a hand. “No. I appreciate it, but I’ll take care of this myself.”

Smitty grinned, giving Arnold the once-over. “What’re you gonna do, make prank phone calls?” He chuckled at his joke.

Claudia Smukert was surprised at her husband’s suggestion—dinner at the Blu Moon Cafe. “You’re always saying the downtown restaurants are overpriced. If we go, you’ll spend the entire night complaining.”

“We might as well patronize the local places, if only once.”

That evening they pushed open the smoky-glass door where retro-neon letters spelled out *Blu Moon Cafe*. “Would you like a table by the window?” the hostess asked.

“That would be lovely,” Claudia said.

Arnold pointed to a booth near the back of the room. “We’d like to sit there.” To Claudia he said, “The glare from the lights would hit me right in the eye.” What he didn’t mention was how visible he would be, sitting by the window. Much better to be hidden in the back, in order to observe Norman Trent. Arnold hoped he’d be there that night.

As the hostess led them to their table, Arnold spotted his tormentor at the bar, surrounded by four or five college-age kids clustered around him. Arnold ducked his head. His heart beat faster.

The hostess handed them menus and left. As they studied the contents, Arnold asked, “What’s tapas?”

“They’re small meals,” Claudia said, “that originated in Spain.”

“Small meals, big prices,” he grouched. “This is New England, not Spain.”

“Now, dear, you promised to save the complaints for later.”

Arnold’s attention drifted to Norman Trent, holding court at the bar. The young people around him hung on his every word. Arnold wished he’d brought his cell phone. He’d tip off the town’s licensing board; those kids didn’t look a day over eighteen.

During dinner, he surreptitiously glanced at the bar until Claudia asked, “What are you looking at?”

Arnold shrugged. "I'm just surprised by the bar patrons. Do you know a Martini costs thirteen dollars?"

Claudia laughed. "In that case, you'd better stick to beer."

After paying their bill, the Smukerts worked their way through the crowded restaurant. As they approached the bar, Arnold glanced at Norman Trent. The man sat slumped, his eyelids half-mast. Earlier, while heading to the men's room, he'd swayed and then fumbled for the door. As Arnold studied him, a plan formed in his mind.

For the first time that night, he smiled.

Arnold rested his back against the rough trunk of a tall pine tree. It was one in a cluster of trees behind the Chapel Crossing condominiums. Arnold was familiar with the stand of trees. They once separated the priests' rectory from the church. As an altar boy, Arnold would carry the leftover donuts from Sunday's coffee hour to the rectory kitchen. Old Monseigneur Sheehan would fish a quarter from the pocket of his cassock and press it into Arnold's palm.

For the past two weeks, Arnold had stood there at night, staring at the back of number seven, Trent's condo. Three or four nights a week, around midnight, the man drove the short distance from the Blu Moon to his condo. He'd park, often sloppily, in an assigned dimly-lit space. Sometimes when he was too drunk, a young woman drove. She'd help him from the car and sometimes stay the night.

Arnold waited for the right opportunity, knowing it would happen eventually: Norman Trent would arrive home, alone and befuddled by booze. Under cover of darkness, Arnold would make his move. He had a feeling it would happen tonight.

Now he picked up the baseball bat and ran a hand over its smooth surface. He took a couple of practice swings, liking how it felt in his hands. Arnold had played varsity ball in college until it conflicted with his cafeteria job; he'd had to quit the team.

When the shiny BMW arrived at eleven fifty-five, Arnold stepped back into the shadows of the trees. His heart thudded so loudly, he feared it would be heard. A few moments later, the driver's door opened, flooding the BMW's interior with light. Arnold released his breath when he realized his victim was alone. He would finally get his revenge.

Trent lowered a foot to the pavement. Holding on to the car door, he pulled himself to an upright position. He stood, swaying and looking up at the moon. Arnold crept closer, gripping the handle of the bat. The man stood with his back to him, one arm draped over the car door as he contemplated the moon. Arnold silently moved closer until he was directly behind him. He braced himself, gripped the bat's handle and swung back. Before he could complete his swing, Trent collapsed, falling to the ground in a drunken heap.

Too late, the bat flew from Arnold's hands. It bounced

off the BMW's rear window, making a cracking sound before ricocheting off. Arnold retreated to the sheltering pines. Before running off, he glanced back at Norman Trent. The man was on his feet and staggering toward his door.

Friday afternoon found Arnold driving his newly-repaired Subaru on Shore Road. He'd gotten into the habit of taking that route, hoping against hope to spot the elderly couple. As he fiddled with the car's radio, he saw, on the opposite side of the road, the old couple. They walked stoop-shouldered in the direction of the hill.

Arnold immediately pulled over onto the grassy shoulder. He braked and rolled down his window, shouting, "Wait!" The pair slowed to peer at him. "Please, wait," he called and opened his door. The couple exchanged frightened looks and hurried on.

"No, stop!" Arnold waved his arms wildly. It was his only chance to talk to them. He bolted into the street, desperate to keep them in his sight.

At that moment, a landscaping truck was approaching the bend in the road. Music blared from inside the cab where two young men, heading for home, passed a joint back and forth. As they rounded the corner, they spotted Arnold in the road. The driver, his reactions slowed by marijuana, slammed on the brakes. The tire-screaming impact sent Arnold's body flying into the heavy thicket bordering the road. The driver turned off the ignition. The two leaped out of the truck.

Moments later, Norman Trent, driving his BMW on Shore Road, spotted the commotion ahead. A truck, its hazard lights flashing, was stopped practically in the middle of the road. Two men stood outside, peering into the bushes. Norman slowed to give the truck a wide berth.

As he passed, he glanced in his rearview mirror. The cracked glass of his back window offered a distorted view. He winced. He had a good idea who'd smashed it: Kristen. Right from the start he'd suspected the girl might be bad news. However, she was beautiful and seemed devoted to him. She'd taken the breakup in stride, yet he should have known. Now he'd have to handle her with kid gloves. The broken window was a warning. If he wanted to keep his cushy job at the college, he'd better wise up. No more drinking during the week. No more vindictive female students. He'd have to mend his ways, at least until the end of the semester.

Now he passed a Subaru at the side of the road. The driver's door was open, the motor still running. He shook his head. Must have been an accident back there. ■

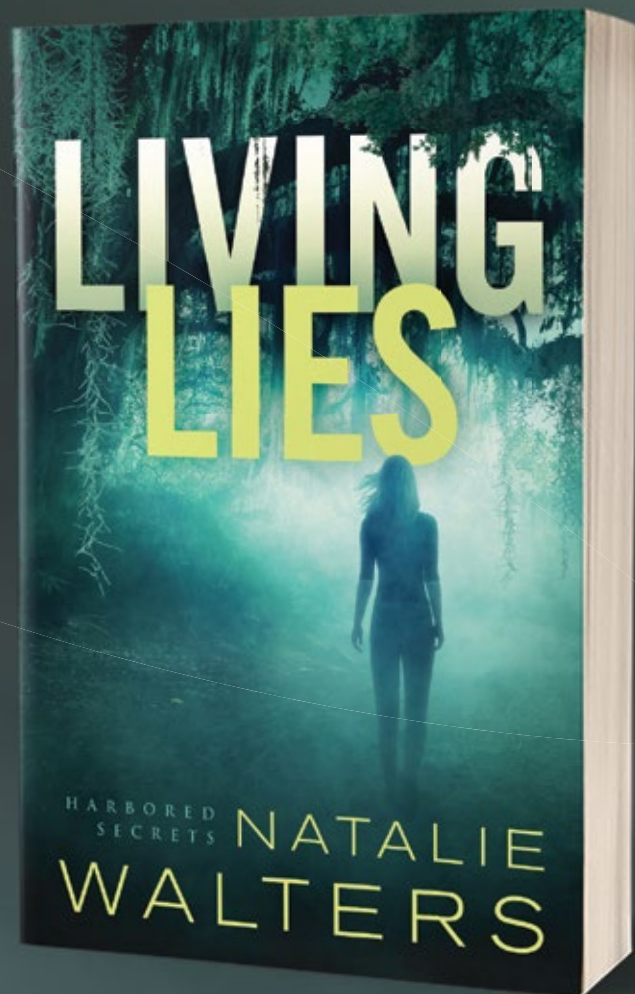
Sharon Love Cook of Beverly, Mass., is the author of the Granite Cove Mysteries, originally published by Mainly Murder Press (Granite Cove: Come for the chowder, stay for the murder). Her short mystery stories have appeared in a number of publications. She is also a cartoon/illustrator, having illustrated the covers of her Granite Cove Mysteries.

In the little town of Walton, Georgia,
everybody knows your name—but
**NO ONE KNOWS
YOUR SECRET.**

At least that's what Lane Kent is counting on when she returns to her hometown with her five-year-old son. Dangerously depressed after the death of her husband, Lane is looking for hope. What she finds instead is a dead body.

Lane must work with Walton's newest deputy, Charlie Lynch, to uncover the truth behind the murder. But when that truth hits too close to home, she'll have to decide if saving the life of another is worth the cost of revealing her darkest secret.

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DEBUT AUTHOR

LAYNE FARGO

Releases Her "Temper" to Great Reviews

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Katharine Hannah

We are very pleased to bring to you author Layne Fargo as she talks about her book, "Temper." "Temper" is her glorious debut and coming out of the gate with wonderful reviews.

With a background in theater and Library Science, Layne has certainly been a part of the arts/book world for some time. Like most debut authors, however, she had a bumpy journey from start to finish. The one thing that really helped her out was "Pitch Wars." It was there that she was able to realize her book needed help, and was able to get it. She learned the process of taking a bad first draft and turning it into a story that any agent and/or publisher definitely wanted to have.

Take a sneak peek into "Temper" below. You will see, it's *really* good.

After years of struggling in the Chicago theater scene, ambitious actress Kira Rascher finally lands the role of a lifetime. The catch? Starring in Temper means working with Malcolm Mercer, a mercurial director who's known for pushing his performers past their limits—onstage and off.

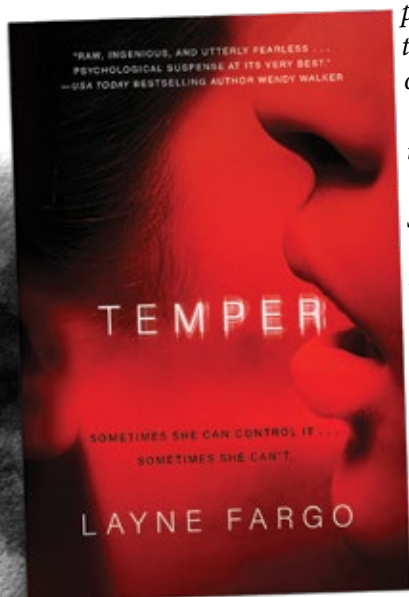
Kira's convinced she can handle Malcolm, but the theater's cofounder, Joanna Cuyler, is another story. Joanna sees Kira as a threat—to her own thwarted artistic aspirations, her twisted relationship with Malcolm, and the shocking secret she's keeping about the upcoming production. But as opening night draws near, Kira and Joanna both start to realize that Malcolm's dangerous extremes are nothing compared to what they're capable of themselves.

An edgy, addictive, and fiendishly clever tale of ambition, deceit, and power, "Temper" is a timely, heart-in-your-throat psychological thriller that will leave you breathless.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Part of your resume (such as, having a Master's in Library Science), certainly shows that you are a great lover of the written word. Where/when did your passion for writing first develop?

Layne Fargo (L.F.): I've been writing since I was a little kid—storybooks about animals, plays about hidden treasure (which I forced my grade school friends to act out), lots and lots of Star Wars fanfiction. I started writing more seriously in my late twenties, when I did National Novel Writing Month for the first time and realized I was, in fact, capable of writing a whole novel (writing a good one, well...that would take a few more years).

S. MAG.: Is there a character in your debut that blossomed and became more intricate



than you first imagined they would be as your writing went on?

L.F.: For the first few drafts, “Temper” was entirely in the point of view of the protagonist, Kira. When I decided to alternate chapters with another character (the theater’s Executive Director, Joanna), it opened up the whole story. Joanna started out as a very minor character, and I really got to know her through the process of adding her POV to the book. Now I can’t imagine “Temper” without Joanna’s voice!

S. MAG.: Can you tell us some unknown facts when it comes to your debut?

L.F.: The book had a different title originally, but after I signed with my literary agent, she suggested renaming it “Temper,” which is the title of the play the characters are putting on in the novel. I love the multiple meanings of the word, referring both to anger and to “tempering” metal. The latter is basically what Malcolm does to Kira in the book: put her under a lot of stress to see whether she’ll emerge stronger or snap.

S. MAG.: “Temper” is already receiving great reviews. Can you tell our readers about how this project/idea first came to life? And perhaps share some of the ups and downs in regards to writing that first novel that could help other future writers out there?

L.F.: “Temper” was originally inspired by a real-life abuse scandal at a Chicago theater company, though the story took off in its own direction from that initial spark of inspiration. Writing it was a fairly torturous process, because I had no idea what I was doing in the beginning! But the only way to learn to write a book is to do the work, struggle through it, and learn as you go.

S. MAG.: Being an alum of the “Pitch Wars” mentoring program, can you offer more information on what that program does and how it perhaps has affected your own personal writing path?

L.F.: “Pitch Wars” changed my life completely. My manuscript was in really rough shape when Nina Laurin picked me as her mentee in 2017, and her brilliant editorial eye helped me turn it into something that actually matched the book I envisioned in my head. I’ve made some of my best writer friends through the program, and I’m a mentor myself now. Last year, I mentored an incredibly talented author named Halley Sutton, who recently signed with my agent, Sharon Pelletier. Keep an eye out for Halley’s feminist noir novel “The Lady Upstairs,” sure to be hitting bookshelves in the near future!

S. MAG.: Will “Temper” be a standalone or part of a series? And along those lines, what are you working on now?

L.F.: “Temper” is a standalone. I miss the characters every day (even Malcolm, that bastard...), but I don’t know how I would continue their stories after what happens in the book. Right now I’m working on another psychological thriller, about a college professor/serial killer who hunts abusive men on the campus where she teaches.

S. MAG.: As a fan of the haunting psychological thriller, do you have other favorite genres that you wish to tackle one day when it comes to future books?

L.F.: I’ve always been obsessed with spooky Gothic stories, and I have plans to write a modern Gothic family drama one day.

S. MAG.: What is an exciting event coming up that you’re looking forward to taking part in? Are you a fan of social media and meeting you readers through various sites?

L.F.: I’m counting down the days to ThrillerFest in New York this summer! I’m definitely a fan of social media, and I love interacting with readers. I even read my Goodreads reviews, which I know authors are not supposed to do. But I’ve loved seeing what everyone has to say about “Temper,” even when it’s not so nice.

S. MAG.: Do you have your own favorite authors? Is there a book out there in the world that you wish you had been the writer of; and, if so, why?

L.F.: I have so many favorite authors, it’s hard to choose. But my top three are probably: Gillian Flynn, Leigh Bardugo, and Margaret Atwood. If I could have written any book in the world, though, it would have to be “Station Eleven” by Emily St. John Mandel. That book is a work of literary genius. I’ve read it multiple times, and I sincerely believe people will still be reading it hundreds of years from now.

S. MAG.: From outlook to job to daily routines, how has getting this debut published changed your life?

L.F.: I still have the same day job I did when I wrote “Temper,” with no plans to leave anytime soon. I’m lucky enough to have a full-time, work-from-home gig, which is ideal for writing. I’ve always considered myself an organized, Type ‘A’ person, but becoming a published author has really stretched my productivity systems to the limits. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming, but I also appreciate that it’s forcing me to get creative and find better, more efficient ways of working.

We would like to thank Layne for taking the time to talk with us. For more information, please visit her website at www.laynefargo.com. ■

Segue to Suspense:

WENDY WALKER

on “The Night Before” & Crossover Success

Interview by John B. Valeri *Suspense Magazine*

Press Photo Credit: Bill Miles



Bestselling author Wendy Walker could be the poster person for successful career transitions. A former financial analyst for Goldman Sachs & Co. and family attorney in Fairfield, Connecticut, she began writing while raising her three sons. Those initial efforts—“Four Wives” (2008) and “Social Lives” (2009)—were marketed as women’s fiction titles; Walker also edited multiple “Chicken Soup for the Soul” compilations. It wasn’t until darker undertones emerged in her third manuscript that she was encouraged to shift her focus to psychological suspense.

The result was “All Is Not Forgotten” (2016)—an Amazon Best Book of July 2016 that also hit national bestseller lists and was optioned for film by Warner Bros. “Emma in the Night” followed in 2017, earning starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*; the title was also nominated for Book of the Year by Book of the Month Club and made best of/ recommended reading lists from Indie Next, LibraryReads, Barnes & Noble, and *Entertainment Weekly*.

Walker’s third genre offering, “The Night Before” (May)—a tale of two sisters, long-buried secrets, and an internet date that spirals out of control—continues that tradition of excellence. *Kirkus* praised, “Walker’s clever misdirection paves the way to a truly chilling finale, and she has plenty of insightful things to say about the blame placed on women by society and

themselves for the idiotic, careless, and sometimes downright evil things men do. Twisty and propulsive.” Further, A.J. Finn (“The Woman in the Window”) enthused: “A dazzling hall-of-mirrors thriller: ferociously smart, furiously paced, and—best of all—honest-to-goodness surprising. All hail Wendy Walker.”

The author generously took time to reflect on the genesis of her new novel, how her impressive background informs her fiction, and what inspired her recent transition to writing suspense...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “The Night Before” is your third thriller. What appeals to you about this framework—and how does this title benefit from your conceptualization/crafting of the previous two?

Wendy Walker (W.W.): *Strong character development, psychological issues, and impending peril. For me, these are the three ingredients for a page-turning read—my favorite kind of book. I’m easily distracted by life. Between my kids, and work, and taking care of a house, it’s so easy to put down what I’m reading and never pick it up again. But when a story gets into my head,*

and I simply have to know what happens, I'll set everything aside to find out. And when I do, I'm left with the feeling that I've truly escaped to another world. I think that's what entertainment is all about!

My latest thriller, "The Night Before," benefits from the amazing reader feedback I received for "All Is Not Forgotten" and "Emma in the Night," and also from keeping a watchful eye on the evolving appetite of readers everywhere. I made sure to give my new characters emotional depth from their troubled backstories, as well as relatable psychological struggles. But I picked up the pacing by using a split time-frame. Readers get to go along for the ride, hour by hour, as a date spins out of control the night before, and be a part of the search for answers the morning after. It's my hope that no one will put down "The Night Before" until the last page has been turned!

J.B.V.: Sisterhood is a unique bond. Tell us about the dynamic between Laura and Rosie. How do their differences heighten the narrative tension?

W.W.: Giving Laura and Rosie a strong bond, but making them different, was essential to telling the story of "The Night Before." While they shared the same childhood in many ways, their father's inability to love Laura, while adoring Rosie, serves to highlight the issues Laura has as a grown woman. These issues have caused her to choose the wrong men time and again, and question her judgment as she gets to know the stranger on her date. And because Rosie witnessed Laura's anger as a child and young woman, she is keenly aware of Laura's volatility, and this gives rise to the twist in the book. Rosie is more concerned about what Laura might have done to her date than what he might have done to her. And, of course, their love for one another helps to elevate the emotional tension, as Rosie searches for her missing sister.

J.B.V.: Laura goes missing after an internet date. What compelled you to write about this timely topic—and how do you endeavor to take a "ripped from the headlines" premise and twist it so that readers are both satisfied and surprised?

W.W.: Having been single again for over a decade now, and living in a world with other single men and women who brave Internet and app dating, I became fascinated by two things. First, the ease with which people can and do lie about themselves. And, second, the way we take the limited information provided to us, and construct a three-dimensional person in our minds—before even meeting the stranger on the screen. This often leads to disappointment, but sometimes to dangerous situations. I've come across real life stories involving deception about jobs, age, appearance, marital status, and intentions. People can and do use these sites to secure everything from a free meal to a place to live to cold hard cash. I wanted to construct a story that included this theme of deception, but also turn the assumptions about the plot upside down with an unexpected twist at the end. Hopefully, readers of all ages will find Laura's story relevant, haunting and, in the end, shocking.

J.B.V.: Rosie lives in the Connecticut suburbs while Laura has resurfaced from NYC. How does setting enhance story (town vs. city)—and in what ways were you able to draw upon your own CT roots to create an authentic backdrop?

W.W.: For years, I've wanted to write a story that included part of my own childhood, growing up next to a 70-acre monastery. Times were different then. Children from all ages would roam our dead-end street looking for other kids—and trouble! We built forts, played in swamps, and even encountered a strange man dressed as a vampire.

"I WAS ALREADY TRENDING DARKER IN MY NARRATIVE VOICE, AND I HAD BOTH A LEGAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND FROM WHICH TO DRAW MY STORIES."



When I began establishing Laura's dark backstory, I knew it was the perfect place to incorporate my childhood memories. There's something about wooded areas that lend themselves to fear. There are places where people can hide from sight, and encounter others who are hiding. They're also remote, making them great settings for crimes where there are no witnesses. Flashing back to Laura's childhood, and her home near the woods, also enabled me to engage the friends from her childhood who become central in the search to find her.

J.B.V.: You got your start writing women's fiction. What inspired you to switch genres—and how has your utilization of suspense developed with this progression in storytelling?

W.W.: I owe this transition to my wonderful and insightful agent, Wendy Sherman. I had recently written a third women's fiction novel after taking some time off to get my law practice back on track. As Wendy and I worked on revisions, we came to believe it was too dark for the genre, and Wendy worried it wouldn't take off. She suggested I try my hand at psychological suspense. I was already trending darker in my narrative voice, and I had both a legal and psychological background from which to draw my stories. But I had to research this genre because it was new to me! At the time, I had only read more traditional legal thrillers. When I discovered the components of this newly popular genre, it was a watershed moment. Being able to write about the landscape inside a character's head, rather than a physical setting, was pure bliss. I wrote "All Is Not Forgotten" in about two months and never looked back!

J.B.V.: You previously practiced family law. How does your background as an attorney inform your fiction? Do you also find that it influences your threshold for believability as a reader?

W.W.: My legal career has been instrumental in my writing. After taking 14 years off from corporate litigation to be home with my kids (and write women's fiction), I rekindled my career in the area of family law. It was in this practice area that I learned about the many psychological disorders and dynamics that impact families, children, and relationships. So, when I began writing psychological thrillers, I had all the tools I needed! I don't know everything about the disorders I come across and learn about, but I know enough to devise a plot. From there, I consult with experts in psychology to ensure accuracy in my descriptions, and the actions and thoughts of my characters. I think it's very important to do this work, gain this knowledge, and be authentic. The reality of these disorders (how people who have them actually behave and respond to situations) is often different from what's presented in popular culture, and far more intriguing! When I speak about my books to a live audience, the conversation always steers toward the dynamics of these disorders, because they are truly fascinating.

J.B.V.: You also studied Economics (and Political Science) and later worked in finance. Have you found that this expertise colors your view of writing as a business? If so, what lessons have you been able to transfer from one career to another?

W.W.: The first lesson I learned when I became a published author was that almost nothing I know about business—from my studies or work as a financial analyst at Goldman Sachs—could be applied to the publishing world!

First and foremost, it's still a business based on face to face interactions and relationships. I've seen this change slightly over the past decade, but editors and agents still spend much of their time in face to face meetings, often over a meal. During these casual, lingering conversations, agents learn which types of books an editor wants to publish, and which authors an editor likes best. These personal, old school interactions are often the beginning of an author's career. Another difference is that, unlike other businesses that can analyze the past and make predictions, in publishing there's still no magic formula to predict which books will work. It's a mysterious combination of unpredictable tastes, changing societal preferences, and marketing.

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

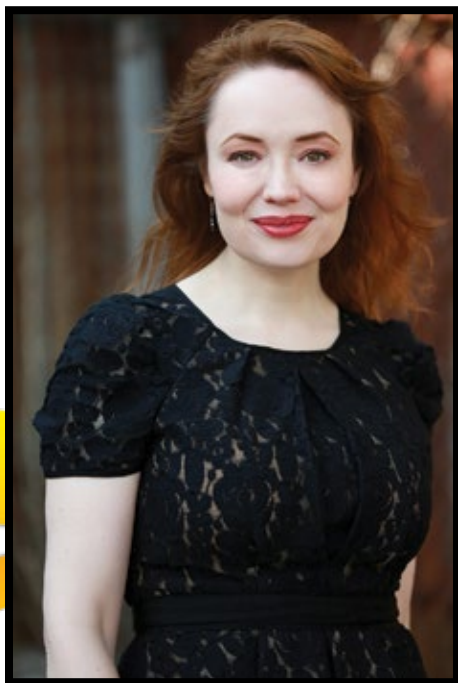
W.W.: I just finished the final edit on my next thriller about a woman who disappears on a dark, stormy night in a remote part of Connecticut. She's on her way home after visiting her son at his boarding school, when she runs out of gas and accepts refuge from a stranger and a young girl. Two weeks later, after the trail to finding her has grown cold, her older daughter gets a new lead and returns to the eerie, desolate town where her mother disappeared. Using a split time-frame, we follow both women as their choices lead them further into danger!

We would like to thank Wendy for a great interview. To stay current on her upcoming releases, check out her website at www.wendywalkerbooks.com. ■

Shadows of New York:

HILARY DAVIDSON

on “One Small Sacrifice,” PTSD & Truth in Fiction



Interview by John B. Valeri *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Hilary Davidson has a backlist that belies her years. In addition to the three books in her award-winning *Lily Moore* series—“The Damage Done,” “The Next One to Fall,” and “Evil in All Its Disguises”—she’s written a hard-boiled thriller, “Blood Always Tells,” eighteen non-fiction titles, and scads of short stories for publications, including *Ellery Queen*, *Thuglit*, and her own fiction collection, “The Black Widow Club.” The Toronto-born, New York City-living author was trained as a journalist, and is a veteran of travel writing. Translation: “I don’t know what writer’s block is.”

It’s a deadline-driven background that’s served Davidson well: She’s won two Anthony Awards as well as the Derringer, Spinetingler, and Crimespree awards. Her newest, “One Small Sacrifice,” marks a new creative chapter—the first book in a new thriller series, *Shadows of New York*, for the Amazon imprint Thomas & Mercer. NYPD detective Sheryn Sterling has had her eyes on Alex Traynor—a wartime photojournalist suffering from PTSD—for a year, since the “suicide” of his friend, Cori. When Alex’s fiancée, Emily, goes missing, Sheryn believes she might finally get her man—but the witnesses to that fateful night are at odds with each other and her theory. Is Cori’s death the key to Emily’s disappearance?

“One Small Sacrifice” has been warmly received by critics and contemporaries alike. *Kirkus* praised, “A thoughtfully plotted and skillfully characterized procedural mystery...It’s easy to get drawn deeply into the various motives and secrets of each character because it’s so perfectly human for all of us to keep things hidden, even from those we love.” Further, Harlan Coben enthused, “Davidson’s latest novel is her best work yet...a fast-paced winner. Highly recommended.”

Recently, the author kindly reflected on the genesis of her new series, as well as the personal and professional experiences that have informed her career...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “One Small Sacrifice” marks the beginning of a new series. What inspired you to embark on this new venture—and how does this first book serve as a standalone while also introducing a larger scale story arc?

Hilary Davidson (H.D.): *I’ve written a series before—the Lily Moore series, starting with “The Damage Done”—and the stories were all told from Lily’s first-person perspective. I loved working on them, because of the characters and because Lily’s voice was so strong in my mind, but I also sometimes found it limiting to only represent one character’s perspective. When I started working on “One Small Sacrifice,” I was very conscious of wanting to represent different perspectives: the suspect at the center of the case, the police investigating a crime, shady characters, victims. I wanted to present a fuller picture and show the reader what’s going on in the minds of different characters. When you write from a first-person perspective, it’s easy for a reader to have sympathy for your main character, because her world view subtly becomes the reader’s world view. It’s much more complex in “One Small*

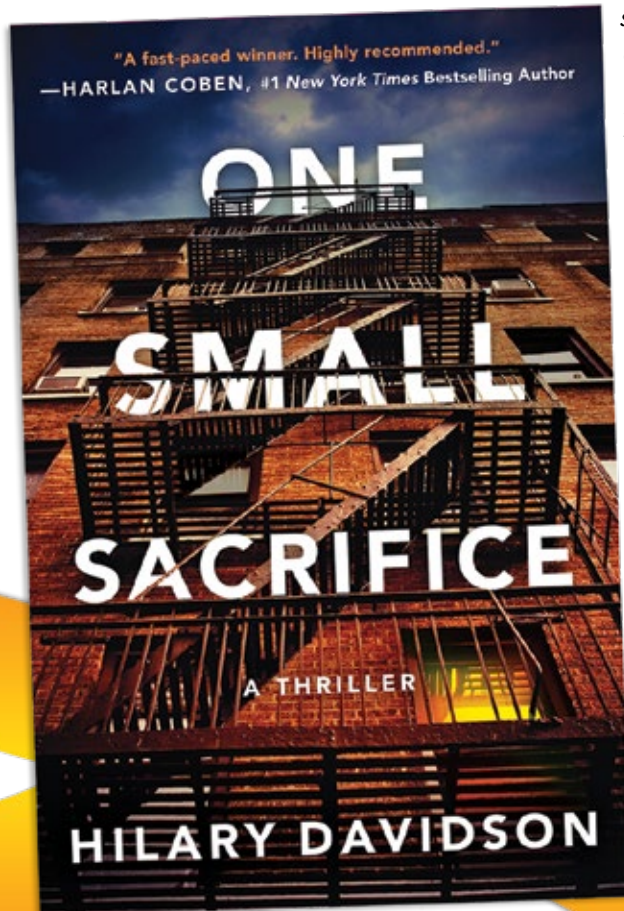
Sacrifice,” because the reader doesn’t know who to root for. When you see the world through Alex Traynor’s eyes, you experience PTSD with him and understand the guilt he’s carrying; when you see the world through Detective Sterling’s eyes, you understand why she views Alex as a threat and why she believes he needs to be locked up. It’s a complicated balancing act.

J.B.V.: Your protagonist, NYPD Detective Sheryn Sterling, has a painful past that colors her world view, which can be both advantageous and detrimental. How does her personal life influence her professionally—and in what ways can that cloud her judgment?

H.D.: *Sheryn is operating from an interesting perspective. She’s from a military family, and she has seen up close what PTSD can do to a person, how it can overwhelm you and make you do things that you wouldn’t consciously choose to do. It gives her a powerful measure of empathy for Alex, because she has a strong idea of how much he’s suffering. She doesn’t hold him responsible for reactions he can’t control. At the same time, her experience makes her more certain about the danger Alex poses to others. PTSD exists on a spectrum, and it’s not fair to infer that just because one person turned violent because of it another person will, too. I think everyone’s got biases and blind spots based on their personal history; it’s true for Sheryn, and also every other character in the book.*

J.B.V.: The narrative alternates perspectives between Sterling and her prime suspect, Alex. What was your plotting process like to account for this—and how does such an approach both humanize your characters and heighten the overall suspense?

H.D.: *From the perspective of suspense, it was absolutely terrific. Switching perspectives between these two main characters (and a couple of others I won’t name, because that would lead to spoilers) allowed the action to keep moving forward dramatically. “One Small Sacrifice” is a fast-paced book, but because the story unfolds in close third person, the reader knows exactly what each character is thinking when they’re with them. Telling the story that way allowed for a lot of intimacy with the characters—the reader gets to know them so well, and understand their minds and their lives and where they’re coming from, even when they make terrible decisions. As a writer, I empathize with all of them, even when a character does something obviously wrong, like lying to the police in a way that impacts the course of the investigation. On the other hand, it was a serious challenge from a plotting perspective! It meant that when I switched perspectives, there was a jump in the story. All of the characters’ storylines needed to keep moving forward, and that meant the timing of certain reveals and scenes was really tricky. I literally had to plot out each character’s arc chapter by chapter on index cards to make it all work together.*



J.B.V.: Earlier in your life, you experienced an incident of workplace violence. How did that inform your depiction of PTSD—and what did you want to convey about the condition?

H.D.: *My first job out of college was in a government office in Toronto, and a veteran with a grudge came in one November morning determined to kill everyone who worked there. We were insanely lucky, because he’d tried to get guns and grenades, but he got impatient when his original*

“IMAGINATION IS ESSENTIAL,
BUT I TRY TO GROUND
EVERYTHING IN THE REAL
WORLD AS MUCH AS
POSSIBLE.”

plan didn't work out, and instead decided on arson. He came in, poured gasoline from one end of the office to the other and started a fire. We were on the seventh floor of an office building, so there was no easy way out. Miraculously, everyone got out alive, but some people were injured so badly they couldn't come back to work. It was something that haunted me for a long time afterwards. I started having paranoid thoughts in public, wondering if a stranger was about to attack me. I had nightmares and insomnia. I never talked about it except to my co-workers in that office, who had similar feelings. At the time, I didn't know what PTSD was. Later, when I started learning about it, I thought it only applied to people in war zones. If there's one thing I'd want readers to take away from the book, it's how prevalent PTSD is and how under-diagnosed it is. I felt a lot of shame over what I considered my "crazy thoughts," and I never want anyone else to feel that way.

J.B.V.: Let's talk about abounding plot twists, which are a hallmark of your books. Have you found that there are certain keys to achieving revelations that both surprise and satisfy? Also, do these moments tend to be preordained or more spontaneous, or some combination of the two?

H.D.: *When I start writing a book, I have a really strong sense of the characters but only a faint sense of the plot; basically, I know where the book is going to start and where it's going to end up, but I have no plan for how to get there. All of the plot twists come from the characters. Sometimes I joke that I feel like I'm channeling ghosts on the page, because I have no way of explaining how I know the characters so well, as if they're people I've met in real life. They inevitably end up surprising me as I write, and I think that's why my plots twist the way they do—I'm the author and still I'm shocked by some of the things that happen. Everyone's process is different, but for me, focusing on the characters lets the book develop in an organic way. When a big reveal or twist happens, it's rooted in something the reader already knows about the character. That gives it a bigger impact than a twist coming out of the blue.*

J.B.V.: You've been a New Yorker for many years now. Tell us about the city's unique energy and how it lends itself to the atmospheric embellishments of your book(s).

H.D.: *I moved to New York in October 2001—right after 9/11 happened. It was such a sad time to be in the city, but watching it come back to life afterwards was incredibly inspiring. New York is a place where people come to make their dreams a reality, which gives it a crackling energy you can feel. It's also a place with a gargantuan gulf between rich and poor, and you sense that tension. Manhattan in particular is a tiny place, so those extremes are in your face all day long. I set most of "One Small Sacrifice" in Hell's Kitchen, because it's traditionally been a poorer neighborhood, though now it's gentrifying at a rapid pace. The new ultra-luxurious Hudson Yards development just opened on its doorstep at 34th Street, and a change like that sends shock waves through the area.*

J.B.V.: You have a background in journalism (and other works of non-fiction). How did that discipline inform your transition to novelist, both in terms of discipline and skill—and do you believe it helps you to achieve an essence of truth in your fiction?

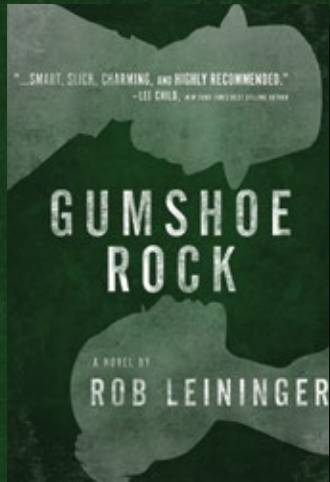
H.D.: *On a practical level, being a journalist taught me to write every day whether I felt inspired to or not. In particular, being a travel writer was great training, because it forced me to work from some odd places—like on a late-night bus next to a crying baby—and you learn how to block everything out and work. I don't know what writer's block is. That's not to say every day is equally productive—sometimes I have to tear up what I've done and start over—but that's all just part of the process. I think your question gets at another way my journalism background influences me: I like to stick to the truth as much as possible in my books. The settings are real places, unless there's a legal reason I have to change them. The war photographers I reference in "One Small Sacrifice" are all real people, including the ones who killed themselves after being haunted by images they took. Imagination is essential, but I try to ground everything in the real world as much as possible. That means I've had to do some interesting research—visiting a morgue and shooting at a gun range come to mind—but I think it helps when I'm confronting a blank page.*

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

H.D.: *It's a busy time right now, because I'm about to go on tour for "One Small Sacrifice," and I'll be doing events in New York, Denver, Scottsdale, Houston, St. Louis, and Toronto. I can let you in on a secret: my next book featuring Detective Sterling just got its title! It's called "Don't Look Down," and it will be out early in 2020.*

To learn more, follow Hilary at www.hilarydavidson.com. ■

“A stunning bit of bravura writing!”
—BOOKLIST

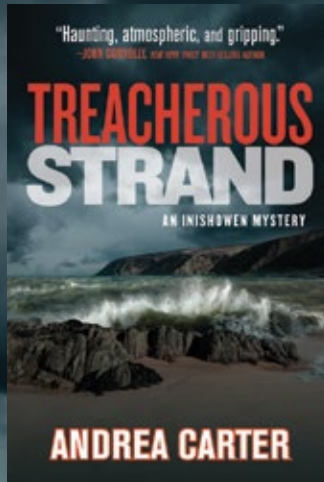


ON SALE AUGUST 6

Former IRS field agent Mortimer Angel has been in harrowing, lethal situations before and has suffered incalculable losses, but none more horrifying than the trap embedded in *Gumshoe Rock*.



“Hugely entertaining and satisfying.”
—LIBRARY JOURNAL
(STARRED REVIEW)



ON SALE SEPTEMBER 3

When a woman's body washes up on a remote beach on the Inishowen peninsula, Solicitor Benedicta 'Ben' O'Keeffe is first consumed by guilt—the woman had been her client. But when suicide is dismissed as the cause, Ben cannot let it lie and unearthes local secrets long buried.

“Delivers equal quantities of action, history, secrets, and conspiracies ... definitely an entertaining romp.”

—STEVE BERRY
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

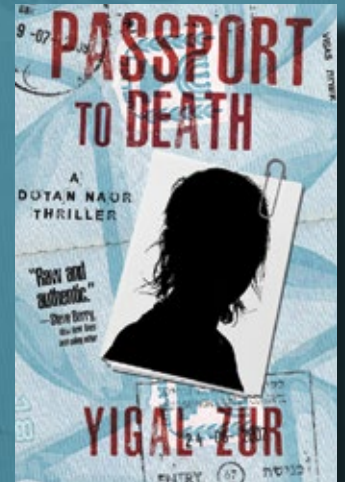


ON SALE OCTOBER 1

An authentic Stradivarius violin—thought to hold codes to ancient treasure—turns up in Romania. Michael Knight and partner Lex Devlin are hired to see it lands in the rightful place. But Russian, Chinese, and Romanian gangs centered in Boston want the code and all of them are hot on the trail.

“A twisty, propulsive story ... This book has it all.”

—LEE CHILD
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



ON SALE NOVEMBER 5

When the passport of a missing Israeli girl that Israeli private investigator Dotan Naor is looking for in Thailand ends up in his hands during his first taxi ride in Bangkok, he's suspicious that someone is playing him. But who? And why?

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LORI ROY

TALKS ABOUT HER LATEST HIT: “GONE TOO FAR”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Val Ritter



We are very pleased to be able to spend a few minutes with two-time Edgar Award-winning author, Lori Roy, to talk about her latest release, “Gone Too Far.”

Lori Roy’s debut novel, “Bent Road,” was bestowed the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel by an American Author. Her work has been twice named a *New York Times* Notable Crime Book, and included on various “best of” and summer reading lists. “Until She Comes Home” was a *New York Times* Editors’ Choice and a Finalist for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel. “Let Me Die in His Footsteps” was included among the Top Fiction of 2015 by Books-A-Million, and named one of the best 15 mystery novels of 2015 by Oline Cogdill. “Let Me Die in His Footsteps” also received

the 2016 Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel, making Lori the first woman to receive an Edgar Award for both Best First Novel and Best Novel, and she is only the third person to have done so.

“Gone Too Long” hit the shelves June 2019. Here’s a sneak peek inside the book...

On the day a black truck rattles past her house and a Klan flyer lands in her front yard, ten-year-old Beth disappears from her Simmonsville, Georgia home. Armed with skills honed while caring for an alcoholic mother, she must battle to survive the days and months ahead.

Seven years later, Imogene Coulter is burying her father—a Klan leader she has spent her life distancing herself from—and trying to escape the memories his funeral evokes. But Imogene is forced to confront secrets long held by Simmonsville and her own family when, while clearing out her father’s apparent hideout on the day of his funeral, she finds a child. Young and alive, in an abandoned basement, and behind a door that only locks from the outside.

As Imogene begins to uncover the truth of what happened to young Beth all those years ago, her father’s heir apparent to the Klan’s leadership threatens her and her family. Driven by a love that extends beyond the ties of blood, Imogene struggles to save a girl she never knew but will now be bound to forever, and to save herself and those dearest to her.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Having won so many accolades for your titles, can you tell readers what it was like when you first began down the writing path? Was there one thing that brought about your interest in writing long-term?

Lori Roy (L.R.): Before I was a writer, I was a tax accountant. But when my husband and I decided to move from our home in Kansas City, I took the opportunity to step away from the corporate world so I could stay home with my children. As I wanted to continue to build a career during those years, I began to study the craft of writing. Ten years later, after having written two books I never tried to publish, I wrote and sold my first novel, “Bent Road.”

S. MAG.: Along similar lines, can you talk about where your gripping ideas come from? Have they been inspired by certain “true crimes” or “real-life situations,” or do they literally just come to you?

L.R.: With the exception of my most recent book, setting has always been the first thing to inspire a story idea. Once I’ve settled

on setting, my research has generally led me to a historical event that not only informs on the characters and plot, but also on society at large.

S. MAG.: Looking back, is there one character during the writing of your books that became a much bigger facet of your story than you first believed they would? If so, who would that be?

L.R.: *I can look back on each of my books and see a character who surprised me, but I hesitate to name those characters because the revelations surrounding them are often key to the suspense I try to create.*

S. MAG.: Has one character ever moved you to create a series, or do you prefer standalone projects?

L.R.: *Though I'm not adverse to the idea of a series, I haven't yet touched on a character who has inspired me to give it a try.*

S. MAG.: Do you have personal favorites of your own? If there was one author (past or present) that you would love to be able to sit down and have a chat with, who would that be and what question would you be dying to ask them?

L.R.: *I would love the chance to talk with John Steinbeck about his work and specifically about his experience with "Grapes of Wrath."*

S. MAG.: In regards to social media there are a lot of split decisions out there, so to speak. Are you a fan and/or believer that social media is one of the best marketing tools for writers? Are there problems with it that you would tell up-and-coming writers to avoid?

L.R.: *Social media is a terrific way for authors and readers to connect. I do, however, worry about the amount of time lost to social media. My advice to up-and-coming writers is to value the connections you can make with other writers, but always remember that the craft of writing is not learned on Facebook or Twitter. The first goal must always be to write the best book you can write.*

S. MAG.: Will you be at Thrillerfest this year? Are there events that you love to attend in order to meet fans, catch up with other authors, etc.?

L.R.: *I won't be attending Thrillerfest this year, but I'll be at Bouchercon and the Tampa Bay Festival of Reading this fall. Additionally, the tour schedule for "Gone Too Long" is currently on my website at LoriRoy.com and it will be updated as dates are added.*

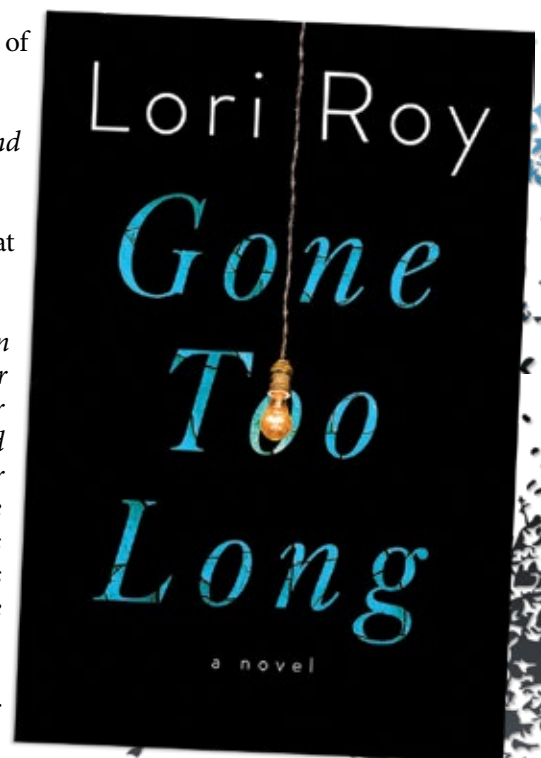
S. MAG.: Is there a genre that you wish to one day write in that you haven't as of yet?

L.R.: *With my last few novels, I've settled into the intersection of crime fiction and Southern Gothic, and I anticipate staying in this space for the foreseeable future.*

S. MAG.: And, yes, I must...can you end by letting excited readers know what you're currently working on?

L.R.: *I'm working on another thriller, this time set in Lake County, Florida in the 1950s. While the book is in the early stages, I'm working with a character who, having struggled with a mediocre career as an actress in Hollywood horror films and having been caught up in the McCarthy era of blacklisting, has fled California and an abusive husband for her sister's home in Central Florida. After settling into small town life, which includes being an aunt to her young niece and nephew, she has found a new love and is reveling in her celebrity, which is larger in the small town than it ever was in Hollywood. And then, driven by this bottomless need for fame and attention, she makes a mistake that leads to one harrowing night for her and her young niece and nephew.*

We would like to thank Lori for taking the time to talk with us about her book. For more information, please visit www.loriroy.com. ■



The Pulse-Pounding Prose of DAVID BELL

Continues as “LAYOVER” Hits the Shelves

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*

Press Photo Credit: Glen Rose Photography



David Bell is an author we have featured before. There is a good reason we keep speaking about his books; simply put, they're great. We brought David back to talk about his latest release, “LAYOVER.”

David Bell is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of eight novels from Berkley/Penguin, including “Somebody’s Daughter,” “Bring Her Home,” “Since She Went Away,” “Somebody I Used to Know,” “The Forgotten Girl,” “Never Come Back,” “The Hiding Place,” and “Cemetery Girl.” His work has been translated into numerous foreign languages, and in 2013, he won the prestigious *Prix Polar International de Cognac* for Best Crime Novel by an International Author.

You have to make sure you check out this book, but here’s a little sneak peek to whet the appetite:

Joshua Fields takes the same flights every week for work; his life is a series of departures and arrivals, hotels and airports. During yet another layover, he meets Morgan, a beautiful stranger with whom he feels an immediate connection. When it’s time for their respective flights, Morgan kisses Joshua passionately, lamenting that they’ll never see each other again. As soon as Morgan disappears in the crowd, Joshua is shocked to see her face on a nearby TV. The reason? Morgan is a missing person.

What follows is a whirlwind, fast-paced journey filled with lies, deceit and secrets, as Joshua tries to discover why Morgan has vanished from her own life. Every time he thinks one mystery is solved, another rears its head—and his worst enemy might be his own assumptions about those around him.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Because you are an absolute genius at creating them, can you talk to readers a little about the notorious femme fatales you’ve written about? (Where the concept for them comes from, etc.) And, is there one specific character that you have a strong affinity for?

David Bell (D.B.): *I certainly believe that great characters make for great stories. There are only so many ways to maim, murder, or kidnap someone, but if the people doing those things are interesting, then the reader will go along for the ride. There’s no one method for creating characters. They come from all over the place. Bits of people I’ve known, people I’ve observed, people I’ve heard about, and people who wander in and out of my imagination.*

In terms of having a favorite, I’d have to say I really like Morgan in “LAYOVER.” She’s the catalyst who sets the whole story in motion. And she has a lot of secrets, going all the way back to her childhood. It takes a while for the reader to learn them all,

but when they do I think they'll be surprised. I know I was.

S. MAG.: Talk to us about what many are already calling the “best summer read” – your book, “LAYOVER.” Perhaps give readers a sneak peek into the plot that can't be found on the back cover.

D.B.: *Our protagonist, Joshua, meets Morgan in an airport. They talk in a bar, have a couple of drinks, and hit it off. Then Morgan announces that she has to go and gives Josh a passionate goodbye kiss. Once she's gone, he looks up at the TV and sees Morgan's face on the screen. It turns out she's a missing person, and the police desperately want to know where she is. It's really a story about the ways a brief encounter can change a life. And the story also asks how far someone should go to help a stranger who might be in trouble. And what if you find out that person might have caused some of the trouble...then what do you do?*

S. MAG.: Many writers love to talk to up-and-comers and help them get their start, so to speak. What is it like, being an associate professor of English at Western Kentucky University, and teaching students in the MFA program in creative writing? Do you come across a great deal of talent? And, when it comes to advice, what is something you would say is the best thing about writing; as well as one thing you would tell others “not to do” or “stay away from” when looking into a future writing career?

D.B.: *I enjoy teaching because the students are young and enthusiastic; therefore, I can pretend like I'm young and enthusiastic when I'm around them. A lot of the students I teach, both graduates and undergraduates, have talent. But I also try to remember that it takes a long, long time to develop that talent. I've published ten books, and I'm still learning. I see my students at the beginning of the race, and they have many miles to go before they get anywhere. I have to remind myself—and them—of that.*

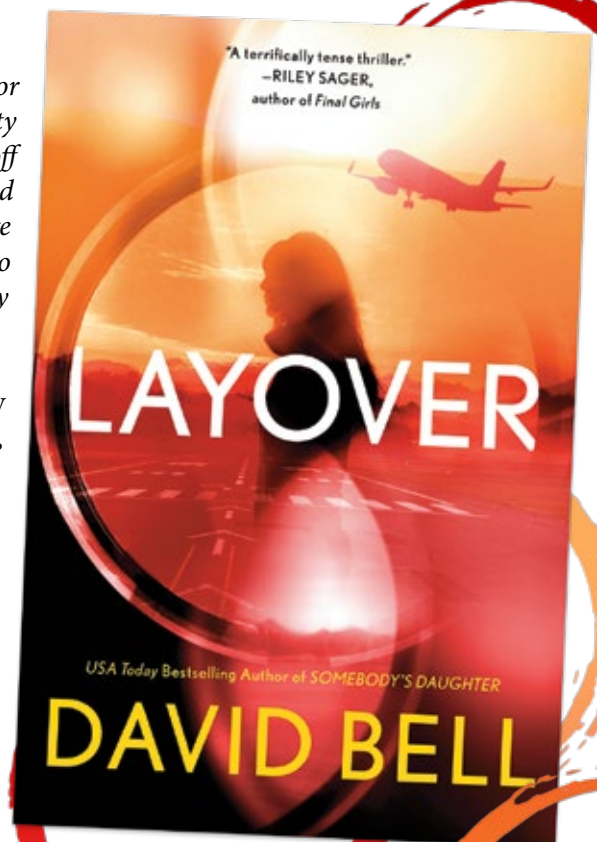
The best advice I can give about writing is to write the book you would like to read. Don't worry too much about what is selling. Don't try to imitate others. Figure out what unique thing you have to say, and something will fall into place. As far as things to stay away from, I would say, don't think that publishing a book will change your life radically or eliminate all of your problems. Published or not, you still have to wake up in the morning and face everything in your life. You're still going to be you, published or not.

S. MAG.: When it comes to these tense, chilling plots you're responsible for, can you talk a little about how these tales come to you? Are you one who plots out the entire story in your head before beginning, or are you one who basically sits down one day and just starts typing?

D.B.: *I definitely like to plan the story before I write. There are a few reasons for that. One is practical. I'm writing a book a year while teaching at a university and trying to have a semblance of a social life. I can't afford to get too far off track in my writing. But the outline is also a security blanket, like having a road map before you start a long car trip. (And I know people use their phones more than maps. Just go with the metaphor here.) You might occasionally exit to look at a roadside attraction, but you always know to get back on the highway and head north. You can't get too lost with a good outline.*

S. MAG.: In your bio, it's stated that you like to take “walks in the cemetery by your home.” Is this one of those places that inspires you to write? If not, do you have a favorite location to write in that does bring that inspiration

“The best advice I can give about writing is to write the book you would like to read. Don't worry too much about what is selling. Don't try to imitate others.”



to you?

D.B.: *The cemetery by my house is beautiful and peaceful—full of big, old trees and wildlife. If I go early enough, I might see a fox or a deer and plenty of birds and squirrels. Hey, and Duncan Hines is buried there! But I like to walk in the morning because I can plan the day's writing as I walk. I think about what I have to accomplish in the next couple of chapters, and by the time I get home, I'm ready to get after it. As far as other inspiring locales...my in-laws live in Florida, and we spend a lot of time down there as well. They live close to the Intracoastal Waterway, so that's a pretty inspiring view. Sometimes I'm writing down there and a pod of dolphins swims by. I make sure to stop and look when that happens.*

S. MAG.: What are your opinions in regards to social media and how it helps and/or hurts authors out there? Do you believe it is a solid marketing tool that helps with sales, as well as collecting new fans?

D.B.: *Social media is a valuable asset for writers. Obviously, it's a great way to communicate with readers. I can tell them what I'm doing, and I love it when they write to me and ask questions or make comments about my writing. It's true that social media can't do everything for a writer, but I think it's a valuable way to build a readership. And I've been able to connect with so many of my fellow writers. We have great conversations, even if I've never met them in person. And I've learned about so many great books just from seeing other people's posts.*

S. MAG.: Do you have other genres you wish to tackle one day that you haven't as of yet? And if so, what would those be, and what is it about them that appeals to you?

D.B.: *I'm a big fan of historical fiction. One of my favorite writers—and one of the best writers I've ever read—is the late British author Rosemary Sutcliff. She wrote "The Eagle of the Ninth," "Sword at Sunset," and many others. While I probably wouldn't write about Roman Britain the way she did, I would like the challenge of writing about some time or place in the past. Maybe that's because it would be very different from the contemporary thrillers I write now. After all, it might be fun to write a book in which characters couldn't rely on cell phones and social media for help.*

S. MAG.: Being that your work has been translated into numerous foreign languages, and you also won the prestigious *Prix Polar International de Cognac* for Best Crime Novel by an International Author (2013), when did you know you had "made it" in the writing world and had achieved the type of success you'd always wanted? In addition, have you ever had difficulties with writer's block and, if so, can you tell others what method you used to get by that and move forward?

D.B.: *I think it would be dangerous to ever think I've made it. Who really ever makes it? Really? We're only as alive and vibrant as the next book we're writing. The past doesn't mean much. I will say, though, the more books I write the more confident I feel. If I've written a book before I can write one again in the future. Right?*

I think writer's block or getting stuck is really about hitting a wall with a particular project. When I feel stuck I just get up and take a walk. Or I read something. Or maybe I pack it in for the day and come back fresh the next. But the key thing is—you have to come back! If you don't come back quickly then the whole thing stalls. Deadlines are a good cure for writer's block.

S. MAG.: What books are you currently working on?

D.B.: *I'm finishing a new novel tentatively called "The Request." It's about a guy who agrees to carry out a simple request for a good friend...and ends up suspected of murder. This is why I never agree to help my friends do anything. I'm kidding about that... kind of.*

S. MAG.: Can you tell readers what is up next for you when it comes to events (festivals, fairs, etc.) that you might be attending?

D.B.: *I'll be on tour with "LAYOVER" this summer during the month of July. I'll also be at Bouchercon in Dallas and Thrillerfest in New York. Check out my website and social media for all the updates. I'll be out there somewhere hoping to meet you.*

We would like to thank David once again for taking the time to talk with us. For more information on David and all his releases, please visit www.davidbellnovels.com. ■

HAVE YOU HEARD?

Authors are Making (a lot) Less Money. Here's what it really means.



By Alan Jacobson
Alan Jacobson Press Photo Credit: Corey Jacobson

The findings have been tabulated and the data parsed. The results of the Authors Guild landmark years-long study on author income trends are surprising. And yet they are not. The hundreds of thousands of authors who cash a royalty check—other than the few hundred making a disproportionate percentage of the income, sales, and advances—have long known that the income trend has been downward: fewer sales, lower payouts, lower per-unit retail selling prices.

The Guild study, the largest survey ever conducted of US-based published professional authors, spanned eighteen participating organizations and five thousand authors. Mary Rasenberger, executive director of the Authors Guild, said that the goal was “to gain a comprehensive picture of what it is like to be an author today—how authors in general are doing economically and how different types of authors and sources of income have been affected by the tectonic shifts in the industry.”

Moreover, Rasenberger said that the study provided authors with key data they need to navigate today’s publishing industry. “The skill set that it takes to be a successful author, the financial incentives (or disincentives)—as well as the opportunities—are all changing, and authors need to be armed with that information.”

Of the survey’s respondents, 74 percent wrote fiction and 56 percent wrote trade (commercial) fiction. The results are therefore extremely meaningful to novelists who write, or aspire to write, thriller, suspense, and mystery works.

Consider this one figure: the federal income poverty line for a family of three is \$2,252 per month, or about \$27,000 per year. A little later, this figure will be compared to what the Authors Guild study found to be the median income for authors. Is it more—or less? (I write suspense for a living...do you think I’m going to give you the answer up front?)

For now, let’s drill down a bit farther to better understand who the responding authors were. Of those surveyed, 46 percent were traditionally published, while 27 percent were self-published and 26 percent were hybrids (traditionally published authors who also self-publish).

And the envelope please...

The survey results, as noted earlier, were surprising both for the percentage drop since the previous studies and for the amount of money professional authors earn nowadays. “The median incomes for American authors are less than half of what they were just ten years ago,” Rasenberger said, when compared to the Authors Guild’s previous member income study results.

Peter Hildick-Smith, principal of the Codex Group and author of the Guild survey, put the results in perspective: “The number of published authors in the US has increased by at least a *million* in the last ten years as the low cost, digital self-publishing market has exploded, with virtually all barriers to book publication eliminated. At the same time, total US book sales have grown minimally. As a result, having a million more authors taking slices of that same size book sales pie means virtually every author’s slice will be much smaller. It’s basic math. Unfortunately, the industry’s great expectation for eBooks to dramatically increase the number of new book buyers and thus grow total market sales never materialized.”

The Authors Guild called the findings a “crisis of epic proportions for American authors.”

That said, the results were not all gloom and doom. According to the Guild’s survey summary, self-published authors were the only group to experience a significant *increase* in book-related income (including royalties, subscription income, subsidiary rights, etc.—but excluding other author-related sources like paid events, editing, coaching, translation, and “related”). This is a rise of 95 percent from 2013 to 2017. Rasenberger added that “self-publishing is very much on the rise and is increasingly a part of the overall author income landscape.”

However, that good news must be viewed in context: self-published authors still earned 58 percent less than traditionally published authors in total 2017 author-related income. Moreover, among all authors surveyed who ranked in the *top decile* for author-related earnings, self-published authors earned 50 percent less than traditionally published authors in the same uppermost group (a median of \$154,000 versus a median of \$305,000).

The realities of authoring in 2019

The publishing industry has been undergoing substantial change for the past twenty years: from the ways in which people spend their recreational time to the collapse of bookstores large and small, including the loss of over two thousand mall bookstores, to the point where physical bookstores now account for less than one-third of all book units sold.

Simply stated, online sales now account for two-thirds of book purchases. In addition, commodity pricing pressures (paper, ink, real estate/warehousing, fuel, and other trucking/shipping costs) have necessitated restructuring, economies of scale, and megamergers of the major houses. On top of this—or because of it—eBooks saw a reboot in 2007 under the seasoned hand of Amazon and became a massive hit, transforming book retailing (and author incomes) in unforeseen ways. It’s been the most significant upheaval of publishing since the printing press.

Consider some of the challenges authors have navigated: evaporation of newspaper book review sections; reduction in recreational reading time as people ramp up “screen time”; to wit, they stream movies, take, edit, and share photos and videos with their phones, play videogames, watch YouTube videos, post and communicate on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram...as well as the old standards: they go to bars, movie houses, comedy clubs, theaters, etc. The competition for eyeballs is fiercer than ever.

While the demands on people’s time have exploded, many authors feel that the populace has experienced a societal reduction in their attention spans. But world-renowned child psychiatrist Bennett Leventhal, MD, feels that there is another explanation: “There isn’t a lot of evidence of an increase or decrease in attention span in larger society. Rather, there has been a change in what captures the attention of people. To the detriment of authors, this has proven to be a challenge as they have not figured out ways to be more attention grabbing than videogames, internet videos, social media, and even film/television.”

Leventhal, an avid reader of thriller and suspense novels, has also worked as a consultant in Hollywood (including the Bruce Willis hit film, *Mercury Rising*). As to what this means going forward for authors, “I suspect we’ve moved to an era in which a well-turned phrase, the careful introduction of a character, or the detailed and twisting plot is no longer sufficient to capture and sustain attention.”

That is certainly a sobering assessment. And the data shows that Leventhal is correct. While the National Endowment for the Arts’ most recent (2017) national survey of US adult book reading does not show a statistically significant decline in the percentage of Americans reading books (52.7 percent) versus 2012, it does show a significant 8 percent decline in the percentage reading fiction: only 41.8 percent, down from 45.2 percent.

After some additional thought, Leventhal posited that “perhaps the novel [in its current form] lived longer than one might have ever expected. The question before you and your fellow storytellers is how the art form will evolve or be reborn in its next iteration. For as long as humans have existed, they’ve loved a good story. The demand (and, hence the market) will always be there. You folks just need to figure out how to fill the need.”

The industry did make one such attempt, while trying to navigate the depths of the Great Recession: eBooks 2.0 reshaped the landscape and gave birth to a previously inconsequential industry—self-publishing—while also giving legacy publishers the ability to adjust pricing on the fly, with a few clicks of a mouse. It also had the potential to breathe new life into previously out-of-print books—and provide a newfound source of income for seasoned authors or their estates.

But as is the case in any business in a capitalist society, there were unforeseen consequences. Amazon effectively set the list price for a new release at \$9.99. The result was that readers felt they were being overcharged if a publisher released a front list title at \$14.99 or even \$12.99. (I recall getting one-star reviews on Amazon because “I” was gouging the reader—but my publisher set the price; as the author, I had zero control over pricing.)

The reduction in book prices did not stop at \$9.99, however, as it quickly trended steeply downward. Self-published novels hit \$1.99 before settling at \$0.99...and even free, or virtually “free” through fast growing book subscription programs,

like Kindle Unlimited and Prime Reading. As my dermatologist—an avid reader of my novels—joked, “All due respect, but a roll of toilet paper costs more than that.” (For a more comprehensive discussion on current trends in publishing, see the article I co-authored with Peter Hildick-Smith in the December 2018 issue of *Suspense Magazine*.)

Books have thus been commoditized, whereby a majority of readers shop—or choose their books—according to cost rather than content and quality of writing. Book services, like Kindle Unlimited—have done to books what streaming did to music—reduced the content creator’s reimbursement for each time someone listened to a song or read a book.

However, the similarity between music and book publishing ends there: while some musicians can make up this drop in revenue—and rely less on income from sales of their songs—by selling concert tickets (and attendant merchandise), authors have no equivalent source of income. With the exception of Michelle Obama, we can’t hold readings in arenas where thousands of people will pay to hear us speak. Moreover, our products are usually one-and-done. Unlike a songwriter who receives royalties every time a song is played on the radio or streamed, when someone reads a book, the author gets paid once. If she reads it again, the author doesn’t get paid again. And if—*gasp*—that book is sold to a used bookstore—which resells it to another reader—the author, publisher, and agent get paid...nothing. This is not a rare occurrence: according to Peter Hildick-Smith, used books now account for nearly one-quarter of all books bought online and in stores. In fact, the used book market is now a multibillion-dollar industry, and unfortunately not one cent makes it back to the individuals who created those works in the first place, the authors.

I once had a bookseller boast that he had resold my debut novel, *False Accusations*, twenty-five times to different customers. He thought it was fantastic because he had made a fair amount of money off the same product. I thought it was *not* so fantastic, as I had earned only \$2 for that copy, even though at least twenty-five people had *bought* it.

The economics are thus stacked against authors. For readers, however, the cost to buy and read books has plummeted. And that would lead one to believe that readership and literacy have soared in response. But it hasn’t.

The numbers tell the story

What is, and has been, the result of this precipitous drop in pricing—and author income? First, for perspective, let’s revisit the number I mentioned earlier regarding the federal poverty line for a family of three: \$27,000 in annual income. The latest data shows that full-time traditionally published authors earned median book-related income of \$12,400. Yes, that’s less than *half* the poverty level. For full-time authors who engage in supplemental writing-related activities—teaching, editing, translating foreign works, ghostwriting—their median total author related earnings were \$20,300, still 25 percent below the poverty line.

As if \$12,400 wasn’t bad enough, approximately 25 percent of *all* participating authors surveyed earned \$0 in book-related income in 2017. That’s not a typo. Zero. Of those who are *full-time* authors, 18 percent earned \$0 in book-related income during the same period.

Beyond the numbers

But, one might say, authors are content creators and artists, not merely a data set. And that means their anemic income has an impact on them as people, heads of families, providers, and contributing members of society.

As a result, full-time writers must work multiple jobs to earn enough money to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. Authors who have written books for decades and have made a living writing have now been handed the reality that it’s no longer a sustainable career.

“What’s happening now is something I call the ‘censorship of the marketplace,’ ” said bestselling author Douglas Preston, president of the Authors Guild. “These are the books that are not even written, because a talented author couldn’t make a living and was forced to take another job. This censorship is pernicious, because it suppresses diversity, it stifles unusual or unpopular ideas, and it silences the voices of marginalized communities.”

According to the Authors Guild, the precipitous drop in earnings “raises serious concerns about the future of American literature—books that not only teach, inspire and elicit empathy in readers, but help define who Americans are and how the U.S. is perceived by the world.”

That’s not hyperbole.

In addition, if an author is working full-time, and perhaps participating in family activities, there is not much left over to write a novel, let alone finish it within a year’s time (if you go longer between books, you risk having your audience forget about you). This means there’s less time to do research, plot, and create. The result risks further degradation of the novel as an art form: shorter, simpler stories, less accurate and less complex characters. None of this is a positive for anyone who cares about diving into a well-written story.

Against this reduction in the amount of time authors have available to create and hone their craft, they now spend an

average of 7.5 hours every week on marketing and promotion. The role of marketer is now a core element of the writer's discipline in this century, in both time and financial investment. It is no longer a task the publisher assumes beyond an initial push at launch. Authors have had to commit to a 14 percent increase in time commitment over the past five years—a 39 percent increase for genre writers.

Unfortunately, even though this is now a basic fundamental requirement to be an author, this time- and resource-intensive effort to get noticed literally does not pay off: only 8 percent of all published authors, across all genres, realized a significant increase in book-related income, while “literary authors” who have not adapted sufficiently to this new reality made among the least of all—their book related income is down 43 percent.

The last word(s)

What does all this mean? Now, more than ever, building a writing career likely means you will need a primary occupation that pays the bills and helps you sock away as much money as possible into savings and investments while you write, release and market your books, and establish yourself. Once an earnings pattern is established and you are confident that you have a readership that will (1) be aware when you release a book and (2) purchase it, you can consider cutting back on your primary employment—or keeping it as a safety net in case the writing career derails.

If you intend to provide for your family, the whims of publishing and the uncertainty of readership going forward is enough to suck years off your life in the form of unrelenting pressure. It's also difficult to be creative when you're a stressed-out wreck.

But like the far reaches of space, there are pinpricks of light visible amongst the blackness. Anyone can now publish a book digitally with zero barrier to entry. When I started my writing career in 1994, the only viable ticket was getting signed by an agent—which could take years, if at all—and then securing a contract from a publisher. The odds were almost akin to winning the lottery.

The definition of “author” in the twenty-first century has significantly morphed from the twentieth-century definition we've all held dear. While expectations need to be reset, millions more can now experience the joy of publishing their work. However—and this is a key point—making a livelihood out of it, much as millions of YouTube creators aspire, requires a far more cautious approach.

“I don't believe being a published author was ever a guaranteed ticket to fame and fortune,” Hildick-Smith said. “Expectations have always been hugely inflated. They're just a lot more deflated now with the million-plus new authors overwhelming an already crowded market.”

Authors, particularly those who actively engage in marketing their work and their brand, have become entrepreneurs. “Everyone wants to do a start-up these days and be on *Shark Tank*,” Hildick-Smith said. “A former client and senior marketing executive from Wiley, who then moved to Microsoft, was planning on leaving and asked for my advice, having founded the Codex Group. She said she was ‘passionate’ about a particular business idea. I told her she has to be a great deal more than passionate to make it work: more like *insanely obsessed*. Nothing less will come close, and even *that's* usually no guarantee.”

To this point, I was recently asked to participate in a professional career day at my fraternity. I would be interviewed in front of undergraduate students and would field questions about the writing profession and publishing industry.

Ironically, the invitation arose a couple of weeks after the Authors Guild study was released. I was happy to give back, but I was conflicted over the message I wanted to convey. The trends of the past twenty-five years have not been kind to authors. Did I want to encourage young people to pursue a career where the rewards are intangible and the ability to support a family unlikely?

But without art, without the *literary* art form, our society will feel its absence. Literacy has been in decline, and without quality writing to read, engage, and *move* the consumer of that story, this decline will only accelerate.

I decided to tell it like it is, provide the students with the facts, and let them go in with their eyes open. As we authors know, writing is often not a chosen profession, but a calling. We write because we must. But that does not mean we have to be blind to the realities of the marketplace.

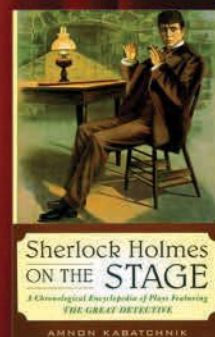
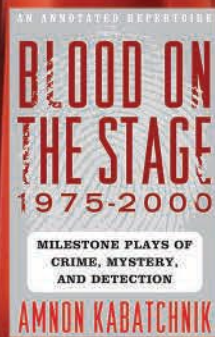
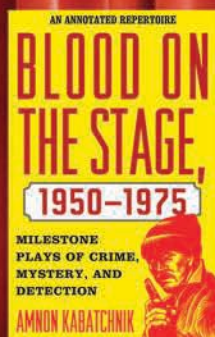
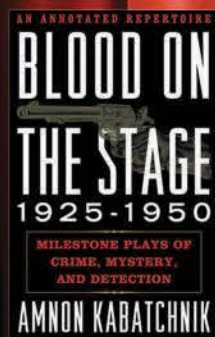
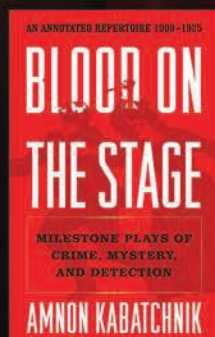
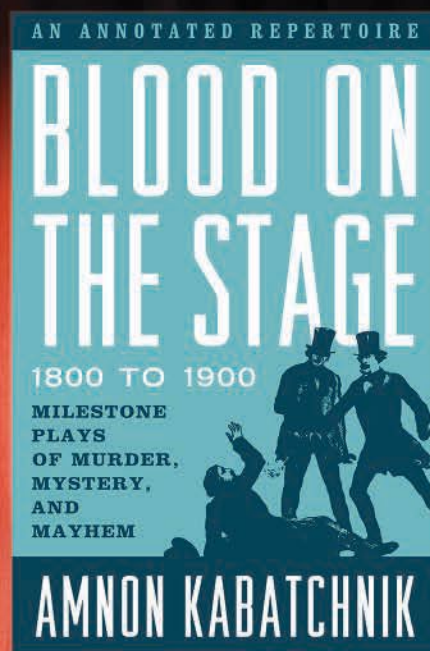
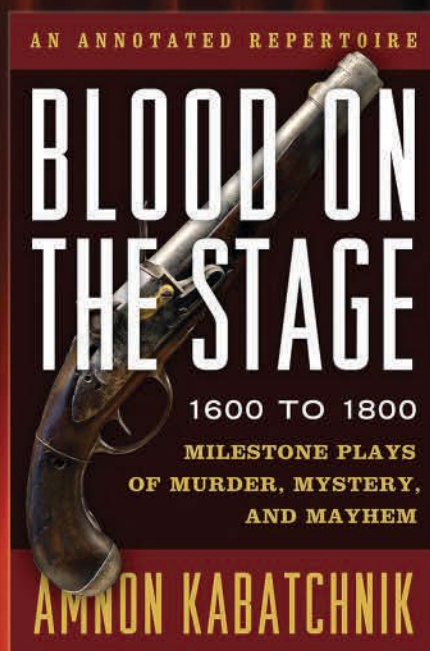
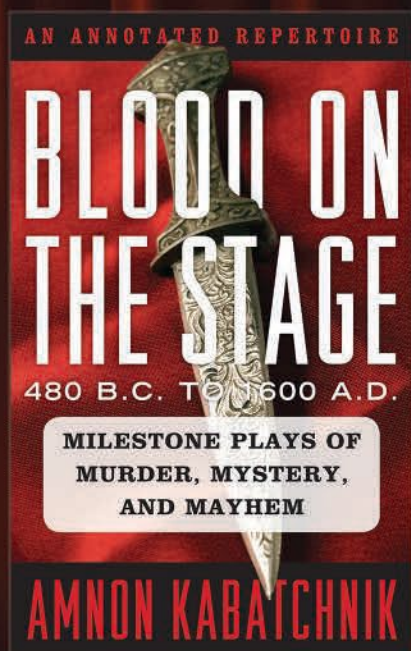
Thanks to the Authors Guild, we have data by which to make such career choices. The full study [can be found here](#). ■

Alan Jacobson is the award-winning USA Today bestselling author of more than a dozen suspense novels in the [FBI profiler Karen Vail](#) and [OPSIG Team Black series](#). His books have been published internationally and several have been optioned by Hollywood. His debut novel, “False Accusations,” was adapted to film in the Czech Republic. Jacobson is active on Facebook ([fansofalanjacobson](#)), Instagram ([alan.jacobson](#)), Twitter ([@JacobsonAlan](#)), and his website, [www.alanjacobson.com](#).

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PROFILING A KILLER

By Natalie Walters

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What does a killer look like? Where do they work? Eat? Do they have families? Go to church? Here's an interesting fact: "John Douglas, a former Chief of the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit and author of *Mind Hunter*" says, 'A very conservative estimate is that there are between 35-50 active serial killers in the United

States' at any given time.' " (*Huffington Post*) And if you're active on social media, you may have come across a "Fun Fact" regarding how many murderers you walk past in a lifetime, along with the reassurance that "they didn't kill you."

As a suspense writer, I get to imagine all kinds of killers and motives but the reality is, all I have to do is watch the nightly news. A tragedy strikes, the suspect is apprehended, and you'll see it over and over again—interviews with friends, family, and neighbors who had *no* idea they were working, living, or vacationing with a murderer.

What causes them to snap? To act upon the anger boiling inside that pushes them to pull out the gun, the knife...the poison? I find no answers that will satisfy. If you've ever watched a murder trial you can see the relief on the faces of the victim's family is short-lived, because no matter what sentencing the killer receives, they are offered nothing that will justify the act of violence against their loved one.

In my current novel, "Living Lies," I explored the burning questions I was left with after watching a news story regarding the murder of a girl by her two supposedly best friends. How shocking it must've been for the town to realize a heinous crime was committed by teenagers for no other reason than opportunity. I couldn't wrap my head around such unexplained viciousness, so I started to write.

I envisioned a murdered teen. Her body dumped in the marshy wetlands of Coastal Georgia. Young, full of potential, this seventeen-year-old had the whole world in front of her and now she was dead. Why? One of the things I've learned, from craft books on writing and workshops I've attended, is that, as a writer, I need to give as much attention to my villain as I do to my hero or heroine. I need to flesh out the background and personality, digging as deep as necessary to find out what caused him or her to choose murder as the only option.

I'll admit that creating villains might be one of my favorite parts of the novel writing process, and I think it's

because I can satisfy the *why* of the crime. Knowing the *why* doesn't alleviate the pain caused by the action, but it at least gives me an insight as to what would push a person so far as to take another life. Through the beginning drafts of "Living Lies" I struggled a great deal with who killed Sydney Donovan. It took a lot of soul-searching and the advice of a trusted critique partner to develop a character with the right motive and a background that would lead to them having everything to lose, and nothing to lose, all at the same time.

Just like we want heroes and heroines with depth: What is their dark moment in time, what are their fears, and dreams? What drives them forward? What will they risk everything for? What's the line they won't cross? Writers who don't take advantage of asking these same questions of their villains are missing out on an opportunity to immerse their readers into the story world where they might question what *they* would do if faced with the same decision.

Here are a few questions writers might consider when they create their villains:

- *Motivation.* What motivates your villain? Greed? Power? Vengeance? This is the perfect chance to find out the why.
- *Dark Moment.* What happened in your villain's past that pushed them to the point of no return? Abuse? Poverty? Loss?
- *Love.* What does your villain love? Family? Patriotism? Discover this and offer your readers a chance to empathize with your villain, or better yet, question their one moral line in the sand!

Remember, your villain is a person too. The most impactful villains are those that have believable stories themselves. Don't believe me? Look at all of the anti-hero movies (*The Godfather* or *Deadpool*) filling the screens. As much as we love heroes—we have a special appreciation for villains that we hate to love.

Create those kinds of villains, and it will cause your story to linger with the reader long after the pages have been turned and the book shelved. ■



Traveling 'Down the River' with **DIANE FANNING** *Exploring True Crime vs. Mystery*

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
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It was a lot of fun to sit down with true crime author Diane Fanning and talk about her latest book, “Death on the River: A Fiancée’s Dark Secrets and a Kayak Trip Turned Deadly.”

As a writer, Diane has served on the executive committees of the Writers’ League of Texas and the Heart of Texas chapter of Sisters in Crime. She is also a member of Mystery Writers of America.

Her book, “Written in Blood,” was nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award. But the most fulfilling thing for Diane as a true crime writer was the role she played in finding justice for wrongfully convicted, Julie Rea Harper. (The story was featured on “20/20.”) She also has been very gratified with the email she has received from staff members at Domestic Violence Shelters around the country who’ve called her title, “Gone Forever,” an important book for women.

Here, you can see a little sneak peek into her latest book, before checking out her interview...

A DREAM GETAWAY. A REAL-LIFE NIGHTMARE...

It seemed like the perfect romantic afternoon: a kayaking trip for two on the Hudson River. But it ended in tragedy when beautiful, blonde Angelika Graswald called 911 to report her fiancé, the handsome and athletic Vincent Viafore, had fallen into the choppy frigid waters. Authorities assumed it was an accident. But when the bereft bride-to-be posted videos of herself doing cartwheels on social media—shortly before Vincent’s body was found—suspicions of murder rose to the surface.

After hours of questioning, Angelika made several shocking admissions. She said she felt “trapped” and fed up with Vincent’s “demanding” sexual lifestyle: the nightlife, the strip clubs, the three-ways. “I wanted him dead,” she had said, even though she insisted that she didn’t kill him. But as more lurid details emerged—including a \$250,000 life insurance policy—a killer question remained: Did Angelika remove the plug of her fiancé’s boat...and knock away his paddle as he sank?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What inspired you to first start writing true crime?

Diane Fanning (D.F.): When I was nine-years-old, a man stopped his car and asked for directions. He wanted me to show him on his map, but when I stepped up to the car, he was exposing himself. He latched on to my upper arm and tried to pull me into the car. At that moment, another vehicle came up over the rise and honked its horn. He dropped my arm and left the scene. As a fan of “Dragnet,” I knew what Sergeant Friday would want me to do. So, I memorized his license plate number.

When I got home, my mother called the police. They stopped the car and discovered evidence in the trunk that, a month earlier, he had raped and murdered an eight-year-old girl.

Many years later, I saw ten-year-old Krystal Surlis on “48 Hours.” Her experience deeply resonated with me. She watched serial killer Tommy Lynn Sells murder her friend Katie before slitting her throat and leaving her for dead. After emerging from

surgery, she worked with a forensic artist and, as a result, he was identified that night and a two-decade-long murder spree came to an end. Krystal instantly became my hero and I had to write her story.

S. MAG.: How do you separate your own biases about the events of a crime from your writing objectively about them?

D.F.: *No one always has a conscious awareness of pre-existing bias they bring into any situation. I attempt to be vigilant in identifying and acknowledging them and adjust my writing accordingly. I believe my objectivity in the writing process in the body of the work, is helped by knowing I have a place to express my feelings and viewpoints in the Afterword of the book. All of my true crime books have that section at the end where I editorialize on the crime, the people involved, and discuss my experiences writing that story.*

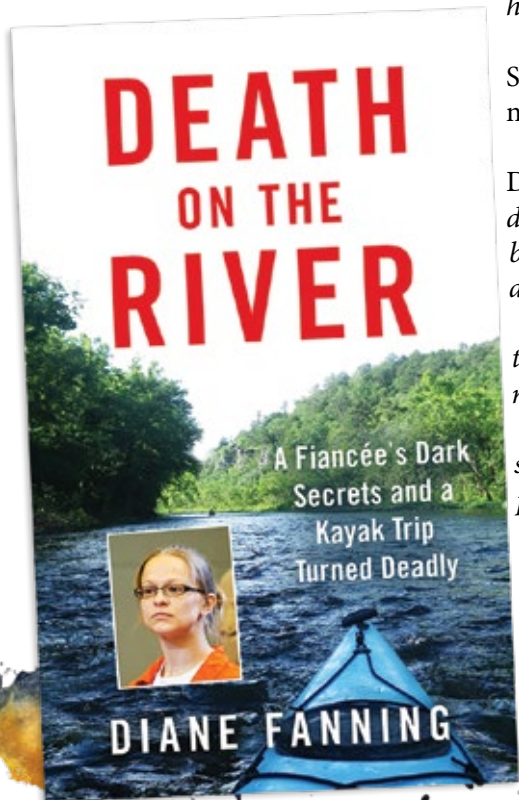
S. MAG.: What is the most challenging part about writing true crime? What is the most difficult book you've ever had to write?

D.F.: *The biggest challenge in writing true crime is gathering the necessary information and then finding corroboration for it. Everyone I interview is not equally credible. For example, one person told me a horror story about their childhood. I didn't know whether to believe it or not. Fortunately, I was able to track down the mother who confirmed the information, and said, "So what? A lot of people have worse lives but don't go around killing people." That response explained a lot.*

It's hard to say which book was the most difficult one to write—I could give reasons for every one of them to be on the top of that list. I find gruesome and graphic crimes painful to recreate, which would make "Through the Window" and "Baby Be Mine" tie for first place. However, I also find it agonizing when I feel a strong connection to the victim, putting "Gone Forever," "Written in Blood," "Under Cover of the Night" and "Bitter Remains" at the top of the scale. I suppose there is one troublesome thing that tops them all: the death of a child. On that basis, I would have to point to "Sleep My Darlings" and "Mommy's Little Girl."

S. MAG.: You appear on the TV show *Deadly Women* often. Has this effected how you write true crime, and if so, how?

D.F.: *I've discussed nearly one hundred cases on *Deadly Women* over the past 12 years. Before the producers assigned them to me, I had little to no familiarity with those particular crimes. To do the shows, I must study everything about each one. I believe knowing about a greater array of murders with that level of intimacy and depth broadens my outlook and understanding of the perpetrators, the victimology, and the methods of homicide and its investigation. Having this added dimension of knowledge helps me explain many facets of the story to my readers.*



S. MAG.: In addition to 14 true crime books, you have also published 11 mystery novels. Do you prefer writing true crime or mysteries, and why?

D.F.: *To me, the question is like comparing puppies to daffodils. I like each one for different reasons. With true crime, I love the intensity of the research, the puzzle-building aspect of assembling the facts, and the ability to learn more about people and crimes with every book I write.*

In novel writing, on the other hand, I can kill whomever I want. If I don't like the direction a story is heading, I can throw in a twist. I have the freedom to be more naturally creative, and because of that, I can get into the flow more readily.

The major difference on a personal level is that the creation of a novel is a more solitary task, and that of a true crime book requires lots of interaction with other people. At times, I crave one or the other, making writing both perfect for me.

S. MAG.: Is there anything else you would like to add for our readers?

D.F.: *My 15th true crime, "Death on the River," was scheduled for release on April 30. I hope everyone will enjoy it.*

We would like to thank Diane for taking the time to talk with us. For more information on Diane and her writing, please visit www.dianefanning.com. ■

“I HAVE MADE MY SHARE OF MISTAKES, AND I’M NOT SHY ABOUT DISCUSSING THEM, BUT LOOKING BACK, I DON’T THINK I WOULD HAVE DONE ANYTHING DIFFERENTLY.”

.....

Mystery Writer
JEFF MARKOWITZ

Talks About Murder, Mayhem & the Mystery Writers of America

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Jeff Markowitz is the author of the darkly comic mystery, “Death and White Diamonds,” as well as three books in the *Cassie O’Malley* mystery series. Jeff is a proud member and supporter of the International Thriller Writers and Mystery Writers of America, and is always open to discussions about the craft of writing, wherever he may be. He can often be found at conferences, readings, and other writers’ events. Jeff was happy to answer a few questions for us.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Let’s talk for a minute about your most recent novel, “Death and White Diamonds,” which won a Lovey Award and a David Award. It’s a departure from your *Cassie O’Malley* books. What sparked you to step away from that series?

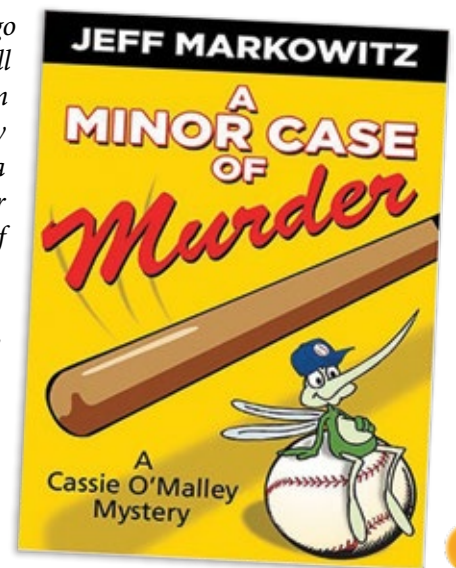
Jeff Markowitz (J.M.): *I have tremendous respect for authors who write series and keep their stories fresh and smart. But my preference as a writer and as a reader is for standalones. I love starting a new story with no preconceived notion of what kind of story it’s supposed to be (other than good, and perhaps funny, and hopefully publishable). So, when I came up with*

the idea for “Death and White Diamonds”—a man who isn’t certain whether he killed his girlfriend—I knew it was a story that I needed to write.

Did you ever have one of those days? You know the kind, when nothing seems to go right? Richie’s girlfriend suggests a romantic getaway, promising him a weekend he will never forget. So why can’t he remember what happened when he finds her lifeless body on the beach? Richie is fairly certain he didn’t kill his girlfriend, but his memory is hazy. Only one thing is clear: When Lorraine’s body is found, he’s going to be the prime suspect in a murder investigation. If her body is found. Disposing of the body turns out to be harder than Richie could have imagined. Losing it, however, is easy. Did you ever have one of those day? And we haven’t even gotten to the bad part yet.

W.B.: Your first novel, “Who is Killing Doah’s Deer?” the first in your *Cassie O’Malley* Mystery series, was published in 2004. You retired in 2018. How did you find time to write before you retired?

J.M.: *I wrote “Who is Killing Doah’s Deer?” at 5:30 in the morning before heading off to work. I wrote “A Minor Case of Murder” while nursing a cup of coffee in a coffee shop waiting to drive my then-teenage son home from fencing practice. I’m not exactly sure*



when I wrote *"It's Beginning to Look a lot like Murder."* The point is, we find the time for things that are important. I'll let you in on a little secret, though. Now that I'm retired and it's easier to find the time, I find it harder to maintain my writing routines.

W.B.: Before retiring, you were heavily involved in services for children and adults battling with autism. You were the President and Executive Director of the Life Skills Resource Center. Has this experience impacted your writing in any way?

J.M.: *My professional work taught me how to observe and describe behavior, how to determine the function of behavior by examining the relationship among antecedents, behaviors and consequences. That has surely had an impact on how I structure scenes. But it's a very small answer to a very big question.*

With the exception of one short story, I've never written fictionally about an individual on the spectrum. But I spent 43 years creating community-based programs, services and supports for children and adults with autism. That experience shaped my values and impacted everything in my life, including, in ways I may never be able to articulate, my writing.

W.B.: You're currently the President of the New York Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America. I'd like to spend a little time discussing your involvement with the MWA and its benefits. I think the readers of *Suspense Magazine* would be interested in learning more about the MWA. Let's start with, why join?

J.M.: *As writers, we spend an inordinate amount of time engaged in conversations with imaginary characters. Now and then, it's a good idea to talk to real people. MWA has lots of people, more than 3000 of them at last count, and in my experience, if you buy the first round, they're happy to talk to you.*

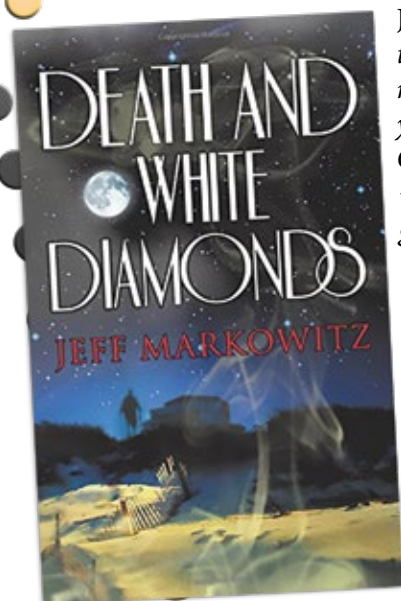
To be serious for a moment, the reason to join is to become part of a vibrant community of writers (mysterywriters.org). Members participate in the activities and events that best meet their needs. For example, in the New York Chapter (mwany.org) we have monthly meetings that include social and informational elements. We bring in guest speakers who talk about aspects of the craft and the business of writing. We administer a mentor program and a scholarship for aspiring writers. We hold write-ins and readings. We speak at libraries. We participate actively at mystery conferences and at book festivals.

So, there are many good reasons to join. But perhaps the best reason to join is that your voice matters. By becoming a member, you help shape the writing community that we want to become.

W.B.: The New York Chapter extends beyond New York. What states are included in your regional chapter?

J.M.: *MWA, nationally, is divided into eleven regional chapters. When you join the national organization, you also become a member of your regional chapter. The New York chapter covers New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Delaware and West Virginia. The chapter has 660 members.*

W.B.: What personal satisfaction do you get as the President of the Chapter?



J.M.: *Quality, in any organization, happens when you have the right balance between forces that promote change and forces that promote stability. When you have too much stability and not enough change, you become stagnant. When you have too much change without stability, you have chaos. Listening to members and finding that balance is how I view my role as Chapter President. So, I'm proud to build on the good work of the many Chapter Presidents who have preceded me, without being limited by the way we've always done something. I get great personal satisfaction when the chapter tries something new and members tell me they like it.*

W.B.: You often do readings at various events—for example, *Noir at the Bar*. Many writers would like to perform at readings but are hesitant because they fear speaking in public. Any advice?

J.M.: *If you have an opportunity to read at an event, just get up and read. It's a great way to become part of a supportive community of writers and readers. It will make you a better writer. And it's fun. So, get over it. Really, just get over it.*

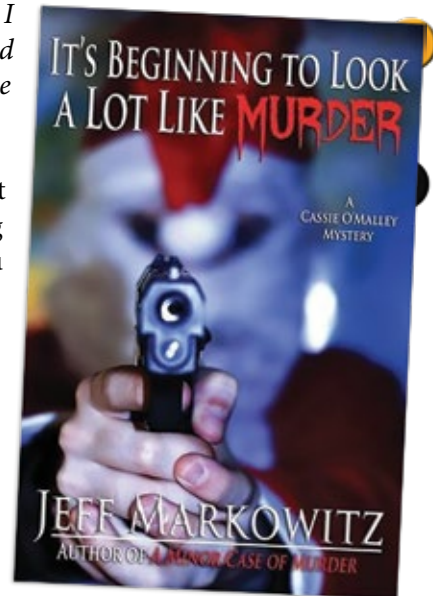
I worry sometimes that we place too much emphasis on the importance of meaning.

That we have made reading too practical. (It is, I admit, an odd thing to worry about; but I worry, nonetheless). Because a love of the written word owes as much to how words sound as to what they mean. Books come alive when you hear the rhythm and the melody of the words on the page.

W.B.: On a similar topic of sorts, you often attend writers' conferences. I first met you at the *Creatures, Crimes, and Creativity* con several years ago, and we had some interesting discussions over drinks. I know you also attend the *Deadly Ink* convention. What do you find most valuable about taking part in these events?

J.M.: *In 2005, I was debating whether I could afford to fly to a mystery writers' conference in Chicago. A friend gave me a wonderful bit of advice. "If you want to be a real writer, you have to start going to the places where the real writers go." And so, I went to Love is Murder. I attended the "official" panel discussions in the conference meeting rooms, and the "unofficial" discussions in the bar. I met authors, editors, publishers and readers. I became part of a community of writers with similar goals.*

Love is Murder is no more (more's the pity) but I attend two or three writers' conferences every year. And my reasons have not changed much since my first writers' con—to attend the official panel discussions in the conference meeting rooms and the unofficial discussions in the bar. To catch up with authors, editors, publishers and readers. To celebrate my membership in the community of writers.



W.B.: Looking back, what would you have done differently to enhance your writing career?

J.M. *I have made my share of mistakes, and I'm not shy about discussing them, but looking back, I don't think I would have done anything differently. I did what I could do at the time, balancing my work life, my writing life, and my personal life. We talked earlier about the benefits of joining Mystery Writers of America. I joined MWA in 2004, but I didn't participate regularly until 2014, so I didn't take full advantage of my membership. I would advise aspiring writers to take full advantage of every opportunity that comes their way to enhance their writing career.*

W.B.: Can you tell us about your current project?

J.M.: *"Hit or Miss" combines a coming-of-age story and a detective story. It's inspired by a true crime that took place on Long Island, NY, in 1970. I'm currently shopping the finished manuscript.*

When you're twenty-one years old, it can be hard, under the best of circumstances, to balance the demands of your father and the desires of your girlfriend. For Ben Miller and his girlfriend, Emily Bayard, circumstances are far from perfect. Emily's mother, Mrs. Rosalie Bayard, has been murdered. Ben's father, a detective in the Fifth Precinct catches the case. It's not long before evidence suggests that Dr. Bayard may have hired a hit man to murder his wife.

"Hit or Miss" is set against the backdrop of the cultural and political unrest associated with the war in Viet Nam. As Detective Miller conducts the homicide investigation and Dr. Bayard attempts to keep an affair with his secretary secret, Emily and Ben find themselves attracted by the politics and lifestyle of the counterculture. "Hit or Miss" raises questions that were important in 1970, and still resonate today—questions about the rights of free speech and assembly, about equal rights for women and about end-of-life decision-making.

W.B.: And, last question, what do you enjoy most about writing?

J.M.: *With every book, there is period of time when I carry the story around in my head. I nearly forget that I'm the only person who knows the story. Then I start to get the story down on paper. The characters begin to assert themselves, forcing me to rethink the story. And if I'm lucky, there comes a time when the story that's been stuck in my head, gets stuck in a reader's head. That's what I enjoy most about writing.*

W.B.: Thanks, Jeff, for spending a few minutes with us.

For more on Jeff Markowitz, check out his website at jeffmarkowitz.com. ■

Lawful Intent:

LINDA FAIRSTEIN

on “Blood Oath” & 20 Years of Alex Cooper



Interview by John B. Valeri *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Katherine Marks

Linda Fairstein has been thrilling readers for more than two decades with her suspense novels featuring New York Assistant District Attorney Alexandra “Alex” Cooper, who prosecutes sex crimes much like the ones depicted on “Law & Order: SVU.” Her books are imbued with authenticity, which can be attributed to the author’s own celebrated tenure running Manhattan’s Sex Crimes Unit from 1976 to 2002; they also uncover the hidden histories of some of the city’s most prominent landmarks and locales, ensuring that readers are educated as they’re entertained.

Alex and her comrades, NYPD detectives Mike Chapman and Mercer Wallace, first appeared in “Final Jeopardy” (1996), and have recurred in eighteen subsequent international and *New*

York Times bestselling books that have been translated into more than a dozen languages. This body of work has also earned Fairstein—who is the recipient of numerous honors for her legal work and philanthropic efforts—accolades, including the Nero Wolfe Award for Excellence in Crime Writing in 2008, and the Silver Bullet Award from the International Thriller Writers in 2010.

This March marks yet another milestone achievement: the publication of the series’ twentieth entry, “Blood Oath”—a story that finds Alex Cooper exploring past and present events as she mines the depths of Manhattan’s secretive Rockefeller University. *Publishers Weekly* called the book a “solid entry,” noting: “Fairstein’s vast experience of working as a pioneer in sex crimes investigations enables her to make Alex’s efforts both plausible and fascinating.”

Ms. Fairstein recently took time to reflect on Alex Cooper’s evolution, and her own...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “Blood Oath” is your 20th *Alex Cooper* novel. Congratulations! Upon reflection, how has Alex changed over the years, how has she stayed the same, and in what ways do you expect her to continue to evolve moving forward?

Linda Fairstein (L.F.): *Thank you for the congratulations, John! I pinch myself because there are times I can’t believe that “Blood Oath” is the 20th novel in my Alex Cooper series. I can remember exactly where I was—in the back seat of a taxi cab on Park Avenue in New York City—when my agent called to tell me that there was a publishers bidding war for the unfinished manuscript of the first book, “Final Jeopardy.” She said that one of the bidders asked whether I thought I could do two books. “Two?” I said, because of my fierce love of series crime fiction. “I’d like to do ten.” And now, this is number 20. So it’s really a dream come true.*

As in all series, the protagonist and continuing characters really need to evolve over the years—that’s important to me, as a writer, and of course good readers demand it. Alex hasn’t gotten much older—I have chosen not to age her in ‘real time’—but she has matured emotionally and professionally. That’s one change, evidenced in recent books as she was kidnapped and had to recover from that trauma, just as her victims have had to do. What is the same about Alex is her loyalty to friends and colleagues, her passion for doing justice, and her strong sense of integrity—those are all hallmark traits. Readers will see her continue to evolve as the nature of criminal conduct changes (i.e., international terrorism, computer-driven crimes, sex crimes in the aftermath of the



#MeToo movement), and will also see how her relationship with Mike Chapman contributes to her growth.

J.B.V.: This book finds Alex back on the job after a leave of absence, and after having fallen under suspicion herself for a game-changing crime. In what ways have those experiences informed her psyche—and how might her personal and professional ambitions change as a result?

L.F.: After the kidnapping in “Devil’s Bridge,” it was unrealistic to think that Coop could get right back into the intensity of her work as a prosecutor. So in the novels that followed, she was trying to recover—stubborn at first, in thinking she didn’t need professional help. One of the things I love about fans is that they tell you what they like...and what they don’t. I got a lot of mail complaining about the fact that Alex Cooper was whining too much after her victimization, which amused me. So in “Blood Oath,” the story opens with Coop coming into the courtroom to face down a judge who was bullying one of her assistant district attorneys. I think the experiences she endured as a victim and as a suspect, and the loss of her long-time boss, ended up giving her renewed determination to stay strong and fight to get back on her feet. I’m hoping this will restore the faith that Coop’s fans place in her.

J.B.V.: Alex is tasked with investigating a case in which the victim reports past sexual abuse by a prominent official. In what ways is this premise illustrative of the energies and emotions of the #MeToo movement—and how does the story allow you to explore the complexities of advocacy when confronted with a controversial case (and other factors, such as delayed reporting, public scrutiny, media interference, etc.)?

L.F.: The case at the heart of “Blood Oath” is complex and truly representative of the issues every prosecutor confronts when faced with a very sensitive and potentially high-profile investigation. I drew heavily from my own experience—thirty years as a prosecutor, twenty-six of which were spent leading the country’s pioneering Special Victims Unit—to create the conflicts Coop faces as she takes her witness through the system. The victim is a young woman with a difficult personal past, in that her mother—a single mother—died when Lucy was just a kid...and then she witnessed the homicides of two friends. All that before she was groomed by a sexual predator. Is she telling the truth? Is her story supported by any evidence? Is it compelling enough to take on a prominent public figure? And is it the right thing to do? Senior prosecutors have dealt with every one of these issues at one time or another, in the heat of the media glare, and I try to put that all into the story to heighten the tension between Coop and the defendant...whom she actually knows. I’m not sure that I have ever worked so many real elements of a case into the plot of one of my novels, which was both fun to do and a real challenge as well.

J.B.V.: As always, you explore a New York institution: here, Rockefeller University. What was your point of entry for this particular place, and what do you hope readers might glean after having read the book?

L.F.: My self-branding has become the inclusion of a New York City landmark in each of the novels—something that I love learning about, as well as introducing the reader to. At dinner one night two years ago, I had the great pleasure of sitting next to a brilliant scientist who works at Rockefeller University. Like most New Yorkers, I have walked and driven past the elegant wrought-iron gates of Rock U on Manhattan’s Upper East Side thousands of times, without ever knowing exactly what went on inside. My dinner partner invited me in to give the scientists a lecture about forensic uses of DNA, and in exchange, I asked for a tour of the ‘campus.’ The Rockefeller Institute was founded in 1901, by John D. Rockefeller, as a research facility to study cures for infectious diseases. In 1910, a 30-bed hospital was built on the grounds. Today, if someone were to get off a plane and be diagnosed with a rare infection, like Ebola, they’d be sent straight to Rockefeller. By the way, there are no undergrads there—it’s just a graduate facility for PHD students, and they do ground-breaking work to prevent disease. It’s just opening the readers’ eyes to this unusual kind of facility—25 Nobel Prize laureates have been from Rock U—and to its historical significance. Oh, and did I mention the mysterious underground tunnels and things like that? All true.

J.B.V.: Past and present events come together as the narrative unfolds. What is your plotting process like to account for this? Also, more generally, what do you believe are the keys to building/maintaining suspense—and how do you weigh organic developments vs. pre-planning?

L.F.: Yes, in “Blood Oath,” in large part because the crime reported by the victim occurred a decade earlier, the past and present collide in the storytelling. That’s one of the reasons the case is such a problem for police and prosecutors investigating the facts and applying the law – the age of the complaint. We’ve all seen a lot of that in the news lately, haven’t we? I do a lot of plotting in advance of writing—readers of crime novels are pretty sophisticated about expecting stories that make sense by the time you get to the resolution of the mystery. But I am very comfortable now, in ways that I was not when I started to write books, that as I get into the storytelling, ‘things’ change; ‘things’ happen as characters interact, so they often go in different directions than in the original plotting. I love the flexibility of that in writing books—it keeps the process lively and vibrant for me, as well as (I hope) for the reader.

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next—both for Alex and for you?

L.F.: I’m a very superstitious person! I can’t bring myself to reveal where Coop goes next, but it will obviously be in a setting she has never before explored. And #21 is still untitled. I love doing book tours, and I have a terrifically vigorous one (thank you to booksellers, librarians, and loyal readers!) planned for “Blood Oath.” By then, I’ll be ready to reveal something more about Coop’s next caper.

We love it when Linda stops by. To stay up to date, check out www.lindafairstein.com. ■

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—STEVE BERRY, *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

VANISHING IN THE HAIGHT

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—*BOOKLIST* (STARRED REVIEW)

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Storyteller for Hire:

MAX ALLAN COLLINS

on “Girl Most Likely” & His Roots in Writing

Interview by John B. Valeri *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Max Allan Collins has enjoyed a decades-long career that's both prolific and prestigious. A self-professed “storyteller for hire,” he's written books, comics, movies, plays, and any number of short form pieces across a variety of platforms. Named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America in 2017, Collins has also earned an unprecedented 23 Private Eye Writers of America Shamus Award nominations, winning two for his popular *Nathan Heller* novels. That series also garnered him the PWA Hammer Award for making a major contribution to the private-eye genre; further, Collins received the PWA Eye Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016. His other works include the *New York Times* bestseller “Saving Private Ryan,” the *USA Today* bestselling “CSI” television tie-in series, and the graphic novel “Road to Perdition,” which served as the basis for the Academy Award-winning film starring Tom Hanks. Additionally, the author has collaborated with his wife, Barbara Collins, on fourteen books written under the pseudonym “Barbara Allan.”

Collins's newest, “Girl Most Likely,” is the first title in a thriller series for Amazon's Thomas & Mercer imprint. The book introduces twenty-eight year old protagonist Krista Larson, the youngest female police chief in the country and the daughter of a well-respected, recently retired homicide detective. Their scenic, sedate hometown of Galena, Illinois, becomes a hotbed of controversy when Krista's ten-year high school reunion—and the reemergence of TV host Astrid Lund, once voted “Most Likely to Succeed”—culminates in a triple murder investigation that traverses the country but has roots in their very own community. While “Road to Perdition” famously explored the father/son relationship, “Girl Most Likely” is grounded in the dynamic between dads and daughters who have shared a traumatic past.

Criminal Element reviewer Gabino Iglesias noted: “Collins is a talented storyteller and his clean, straightforward style shines in this novel ... He also manages to keep the suspense strong throughout... which is something rare in contemporary whodunits. Furthermore...he switches to second person a few times when the killer is in action. These chapters keep the story fresh and add a creepy, bloody element that balances out with the dialogue-heavy portions of the book.” Additionally, *Booklist* called “Girl Most Likely” a “well-wrought tale,” while Authorlink praised, “small-town America and its characters come to life under Collins's deft touch.”

Recently, Max Allan Collins took time to reflect on the origins of his new book as well as his roots as a writer...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “Girl Most Likely” is the first book in a new thriller series featuring Police Chief Krista Larson. What was the impetus for this new undertaking—and how do you feel that it marks a continuing evolution of your work to date?

Max Allan Collins (M.A.C.): *I wanted to do a novel that got away from the noir protagonists I'm usually associated with—*

Nathan Heller, a private eye involved in the major mysteries of the 20th century, my hitman Quarry, and P.I. Mike Hammer, in the novels I've been completing left behind by Mickey Spillane, one of the major hardboiled writers of the last century. I love characters like those, and the melodramas they are wrapped up in. But this time I wanted to look at protagonists who were like someone you might know. Also, since I was contemplating a thriller/mystery hybrid, I wanted to go with the notion of a person or persons who were more real, less iconic, more next-door-neighbor, caught up in something larger than life. And to some degree there's an element of the Nordic noir novels and TV series that often deal with protagonists who seem like real people, caught up in a wild serial killer plot. The Nordic noirs also tend to deal with socially-conscious themes, which also appeals to me, if I can keep that aspect from feeling heavy-handed.

J.B.V.: There is a father/daughter relationship at the heart of the book. How did you endeavor to bring this dynamic to life, and in what ways do the characters' shared experience(s) offset some of their more transparent differences?

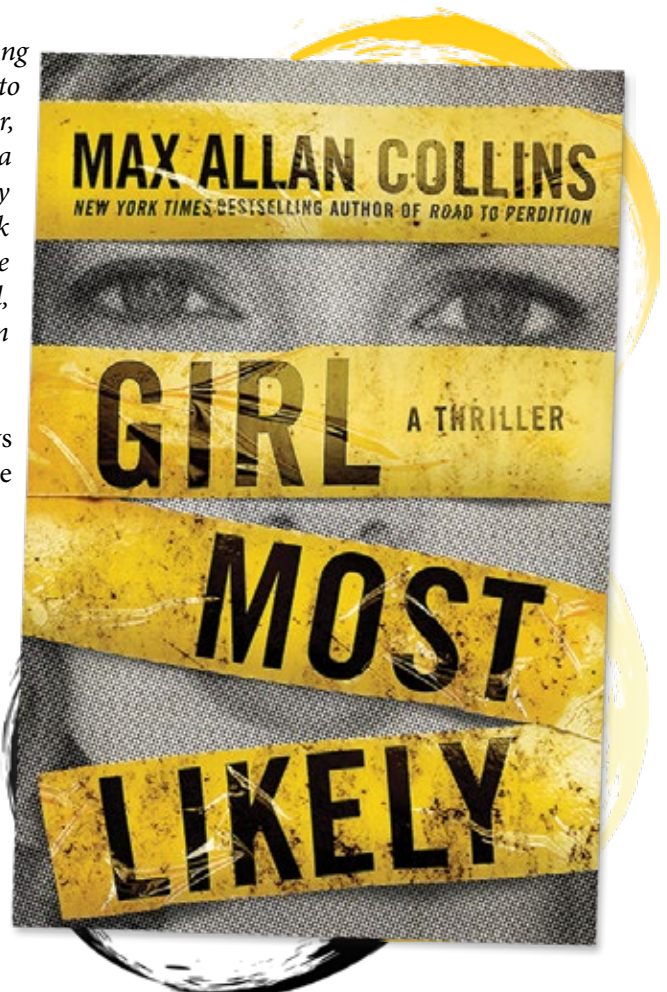
M.A.C.: I've often looked at a parent/child relationship—"Road to Perdition" is perhaps the best example, but also the two "Mommy" indie films I wrote and directed, about a sociopath mother and her young daughter—so that seems to be a theme that generates a lot of my ideas. Part of what I was up to comes strictly from the desire to appeal to both female and male readers, and younger and older readers. So we have Krista Larson in her late twenties and Keith Larson in his late fifties. The trickiest part is that they are very much alike, just of their respective generations, so there isn't a huge political, generation-gap type thing going on. And while both have senses of humor, neither is the snarky smart-ass repartee you might find in, say, the Quarry novels or even Heller or Hammer. My wife and I write about a mother and much older daughter in our Antiques series, under the "Barbara Allan" joint byline, and they share a distinct and even over-the-top humor between them. What joins Krista and Keith is their shared loss—Krista's mother, his wife, dying of cancer six months before—which they deal with quietly and in a stoic fashion. The easiest thing would be to put them at odds, giving conflict to everything, but that wasn't what I was after.

J.B.V.: The action unfolds against the backdrop of a high school reunion. How is this premise inherently dramatic—and in what ways does it lend itself to organic character development (i.e., revisiting adult characters who knew each other as children)?

M.A.C.: I've wanted to deal with a high school reunion for a very long time. My wife Barb and I have gone to all of ours, and it's fascinating to see how people try to put on their best face—what they choose to wear, who they still flock to after all these years, how the wallflower is now a knockout, how the star quarterback now is bald with a gut—it's all funny and sad and interesting. Putting a murder or two into that mix struck me as having great possibilities. Krista, in this novel, has to solve the murder of a childhood friend—a girl she was close to until high school, when they drifted apart. This brings in memories and emotions that can be explored while the mystery unfolds.

J.B.V.: You use a small Midwestern town as your canvas. In what ways does setting enhance narrative—and how does this placement suit the story you wanted to tell?

"I look at myself as a storyteller, and frankly a storyteller for hire... one who lies for fun and profit, as I believe my friend Lawrence Block once said."



M.A.C.: *Writers, and especially reviewers, often say that a setting is an additional character in the novel, which may be overstating it, but not by much. Mood is set, in some cases more than just mood—the conservatism of a town, or for that matter the liberalism, can create problems and issues. Galena, Illinois, is a scenic tourist town, a beautiful, historic spot with 3000 residents and 65 restaurants and over 100 hotels, motels and b-and-b's. So the color that brings gives a writer something to work with, but also the odd situation a police chief—and Krista is the nation's youngest at 28—faces when the town itself is so small but a million or more visitors will come there during a given year. I am working on the sequel now, which involves a music festival that brings thousands to the little town.*

J.B.V.: Portions of the book are told from the killer's perspective. What are the unique novelties and challenges of utilizing such a viewpoint—and how do you avoid prematurely revealing identity?

M.A.C.: *That was tricky, no question. But I felt it would be effective to put the reader into the “you” of second person, the way a subjective camera in a film like the original “Halloween” does, but even more overtly. I also wanted to keep the sex of the killer a secret, till late in the novel, to widen the suspect possibility. Not easy. It required calculation and even a kind of calibration. Another challenge is that we are chiefly following detectives investigating a case about which the reader has information the investigators don't.*

J.B.V.: “Genre” books are often (unjustly) maligned in the literary vs. popular fiction debate, yet crime stories are rife for exploring deep themes. What appeals to you about the who/why-dunit—and how do you see such work as transcending superficial judgments?

M.A.C.: *Conflict is the engine of a story, or a good story in my view. And crime provides the central conflict in a mystery or suspense story. And while that may sound superficial, remember—mystery stories are about the really big topics. In writing noir over the years, I frequently get the “nothing but sex and violence” criticism about this kind of narrative. Well, sex is life and violence is death, and those are the big topics...everything else is just in between.*

J.B.V.: You are prolific across formats—including visual arts. Though each discipline is distinct, can you talk about how they relate to one another—and the ways that your work in one area might inform your conceptualization or execution of a project in another realm?

M.A.C.: *You ask that question in an admirably articulate manner, but I'm going to answer in perhaps an occasionally crass manner. I look at myself as a storyteller, and frankly a storyteller for hire...one who lies for fun and profit, as I believe my friend Lawrence Block once said. When I see young writers label themselves as mystery writers or comics' writers or screenwriters or whatever, I think, “You should be all of those.” Since early childhood, I've loved books, comics and movies, and when I set my sights on a career in fiction writing, I tried to understand the needs and techniques of all those forms. People assume I come up with something and say, “What's the best medium in which to tell this story?” The reality is, what market is available? If I can't find an editor interested in a prose novel that I think is worth doing, I might seek a graphic novel publisher for the project. As a freelance writer since college—in the early 1970s, it pains me to say—I have written novels, non-fiction, short stories, articles, essays, review columns, video-game scripts, trading cards, comic strips, comic books, screenplays, and plays. That's how a storyteller avoids real work. My last real job, not counting a brief sojourn teaching creative writing at a community college (part-time), was sacking groceries.*

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

M.A.C.: *As I mentioned before, a sequel to “Girl Most Likely.” It's called “Girl Can't Help It” and it deals with another reunion—of a one-hit wonder band from the New Wave era. For the first time, I'm drawing upon my experiences in rock 'n' roll, having played off and on, mostly on, since the late sixties. Krista's new boyfriend is the son of a late member of the band and is filling in for his father on bass. Keith and his late wife used to follow the band in their college days, and he was their roadie for a while, again, in college. I should say that I originally conceived it as a prequel, dealing with the case that got Krista promoted to chief. But when I began it, that approach didn't feel right. I may eventually do a prequel, but I hope to do enough Krista Larson thriller/mysteries to make readers familiar enough with her and her dad to really want those questions answered.*

Follow Max Allan Collins at: www.maxallancollins.com/blog. ■

FIT RIGHT IN

By Keith Raffel

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Cruising north on Route 106, I spotted the sign for Woodstock—Woodstock, Vermont, that is. I was a longtime fan of the area’s cheesy pizzas, craft beer, and small-town bookstores. Besides, a quick glance at the fuel gauge surprised me—the needle was quivering an eighth of a tank above empty. That did it. The steering wheel swung to the right practically on its own.

The car’s windshield wipers worked double time to clear the slush off the windshield as I wended my way downtown. April it might have been, but around here spring was MIA. Only three days before, Mother Nature had dropped a foot of snow on New England.

Apparently not too many locals had the same hankering as I did—scarcely a car was parked on Central Street. I pulled into a plowed space and started to trudge down the street. I stopped dead in front of a window where a display featured Rachel Kushner’s novel *The Mars Room*. A dozen other novels also set in a prison surrounded the guest of honor including a beautiful new hardback edition of my childhood favorite, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which I’d reread for the umpteenth time just a few months ago. It was as if the bookseller had targeted me. A small sign in the corner of the window proclaimed I was about to enter Vermont’s oldest

independent bookstore. A large cloth banner hanging above it announced the store was reopening under new management. Too bad. When I’d last been here six years ago, I’d liked the old management just fine.

I pushed the door open. Nothing obvious had changed since my previous visit. I could’ve been stepping back to the days of yore before venality had taken up occupancy in the White House and my divorce had become final. Still the sound system was playing the same old rock music, now the Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love.” Peering at the book titles brought me back to the present—to a mid-morning Tuesday late in the first quarter of the 21st century.

The store had only one main room, and I was alone in it. From a whiff of perfume in the air, I figured the bookseller must be busy somewhere in the back. After I snagged a copy of the Dumas classic and Kushner’s latest, I sidled over to the one bookcase of crime fiction—reading mysteries and thrillers was to me what eating dark chocolate had been to my ex-wife. I picked up a paperback version of *An Arsonist’s Guide to Writer’s Homes in New England*—it seemed appropriate—and moved over to the half dozen cases of fiction on the left wall and tucked a copy of *Pachinko*—I’d read a rave review in the *Times*—under my arm.

“Hallo?” I called out. Then the same again, but louder.

No sound other than the music, this time “Helpless” from Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young. I creaked open a door between shelves in the children’s section and found myself looking into a storeroom, not much bigger than a jail cell, filled with opened boxes of virginal volumes. The door to the bathroom was open and revealed a toilet, washbasin, and mirror. I spotted no living thing other than a single daddy longlegs scurrying across the white porcelain of the sink.

Any litany of my many faults would not include larceny. I resolved to leave cash for my purchases as I emerged from the backroom. The screen of the register looked open and ready for business. I took the wand and waved it over the QR code on the back of the Kushner book. Twenty-seven dollars. I did the same on the next three. Eighty-nine dollars and ninety-eight cents. I congratulated myself on my handle on basic arithmetic. Ninety-five dollars and thirty-eight cents with tax. I pushed the enter button, the cash drawer opened, and I made myself change.

As I slammed the drawer shut, the front door opened. A tall steel-haired woman over seventy shook herself off like a wet dog.

She unzipped her quilted olive coat and propelled herself toward me. "Temperance Leverett," she said and extended her right hand. She didn't wait for an answer. "You must be Paul Kellogg. We're so glad you and your wife are taking over the store. The town might well have curled up and died without this place."

Her grip was just right, firm not dainty, friendly not familiar. She asked if we had *Circe* by Madeline Miller in stock. I told her yes, but if she was going to read that riff on Homer, she needed to read Emily Wilson's new translation of the *Odyssey* first. While I rang up her purchases, another two women came in.

"Temperance," they said in unison. She introduced me as Paul Kellogg. One of the new customers was a romance reader, and I sold her the new Sandra Brown and a stack of paperbacks. The other loved Michael Connelly, and I sent her out with his newest *Harry Bosch* and the trade paper of Jane Harper's *The Dry*.

A wife and husband were next to come in. After discussion, I recommended the just-published Meg Wolitzer for her. When the man said he enjoyed World War II novels, I pointed out Mark Sullivan's *Beneath the Scarlet Sky* and Andrew Gross's *The One Man*, both in paperback. The store filled up as the day went on. I didn't have time to eat or visit the spidery lavatory in the back. It's as though I were tending a fully stocked grocery store throwing its doors open during a famine.

Half a dozen patrons were still milling around the store at six, the posted closing time, when the door swung open to reveal a woman whose red hair was pulled back into a ponytail and whose sharp face was striking if not beautiful. As she came toward me, her long legs split open the bottom of her rain-darkened trench coat with each stride. She held her arms out and said, "Paul, darling. How was your first day?"

No words came to me as I was encircled in her arms. When I stand at attention, the crown of my head can graze the six-foot mark on a doctor's scale. She was as tall as I was. Her warm breath on my neck gave me cold shivers. My own arms rose as if under remote control and reached around her. I breathed deep and knew the source of the suspicion of perfume I'd detected earlier.

She held me at arm's length. "You seem to have survived opening day."

The remaining customers were watching us, three overtly and three with sidelong glances.

The recently arrived stranger broke away from me and went over to the closest customer, who had the cookbook *Ottolenghi* open. She stuck out her hand. "Davina Ruthven," she said. "Welcome to Mount Tom Books."

"Emma Torrance," the aspiring chef said.

"What great recipes," Davina Ruthven said as she grasped the aspiring gourmet's right hand with both of hers. "The black pepper tofu is my favorite."

Ms. Torrance grinned and a few seconds later I was

ringing up the book and wrapping it in gift paper for the impending birthday of her sister in Paris—Maine, not France.

The church bell tolled the half hour by the time the last customer left. The woman I now thought of as Davina clicked the lock on the door and pulled down the shade.

She came over to the register and jostled me aside. She hit a couple of keys. "Oh, my God. You sold over thirteen hundred dollars today. That's way more than the business plan calls for. This may not be the money pit we were afraid of."

She threw her arms around me again, and this time delivered a kiss with a tongue that probed for secrets. I remembered how to respond.

"Let's go home and celebrate," she said.

I wasn't expected anywhere. What did I have to lose? "Okay," I said.

She pulled out her phone and started tapping. "A pizza, half plain cheese for you and half veggie lover's for me. Greek salad for you and Caesar for me. *Viva la difference!* Why don't you move your car in the back, and I'll drive us home?"

"Um..."

"The weather won't be any better tomorrow. Don't even think of biking in. I'll drop you off in the morning."

She put her long fingers under my chin and again the inside of my mouth was briefly invaded by the velvet sword of her tongue. She broke away after a couple of seconds this time. "No time to dilly-dally. We need to beat the pie home."

By the time I hopped into her black Audi, the cabin was already warm.

"We're going to have to order more books," she said. "One of the women was looking for *Circe* and we didn't have it."

"Yeah, sold all four of them today."

She patted my left thigh. She fiddled with the audio controls, and we were engulfed by Judy Collins asking if anyone knew where the time goes. What with the music, the metronomic swish-swish of the wipers, and the squelch of the tires through the slush, we didn't need to talk.

After two or three miles on Route 4, she turned left onto Mill Street. A couple more minutes and a couple more turns and we headed up Fletcher Hill Road. Finally, we veered into the shoveled driveway of a timbered house and, after a poke at the opener, into the left side of a two-car garage.

"I'm going to use the loo," she said. "Would you pour me some of the white that's already open?"

The entry from the garage opened into a mudroom, and I spotted the kitchen beyond. I heaved open the stainless-steel doors of a Sub-Zero refrigerator to reveal enough food for a dinner party of sixteen. Inside at eye-level stood a half-full bottle of Cakebread Chardonnay. I snatched it and a bottle of Switchback Ale that squatted on the shelf below. A little rummaging for a wine glass and a bottle opener and we were in business.

I took a long pull of ale. Liquid courage in hand, I went searching for my host. "Davina?" I called out.

She came around the corner and said, "Don't be mad. I'm sorry to take so long."

"I'm not mad," I said.

"You called me Davina, not Davvie like usual. That's a

sure sign you're irritated."

The doorbell rang.

The pizza was even better than the beer, and the healthy Greek salad salved my conscience. I picked up the napkin to wipe my face, and Davvie stuck out her hand. "Give it to me," she said.

She dipped the tail of the cloth into her water glass and wiped around my mouth. Tilting her head back to inspect her work, she said, "Missed something." She leaned forward and removed a remaining speck with a flick of her tongue. "I do love Ramunto's sauce." She stood and took me by the hand. "Let's celebrate."

I followed her up a staircase whose risers were split logs. We entered a room dimly lit by fireplace flames that had not yet consumed much of the wood fuel. No wonder it had taken her so long when we got home.

We stopped next to a wrought iron bed in the far corner of the room. "It's been a while," I said.

"Not that long," she said and started unbuttoning my shirt. I shrugged my shirt the rest of the way off, and she yanked her silvery sweater over her head. After a minute or two of fumbling, unbuttoning, and kissing, we fell naked onto the bed's quilt.

I needn't have worried. My chest was still heaving as she nestled her head against the crook between my shoulder and neck. I rubbed my hand through her hair, and she gasped when I touched a scab.

"How did that happen?"

"Clumsiness," she replied.

When she dozed off, I got up. On the dresser was a man's leather wallet. Inside, through the plastic window, I could see a driver's license. I squinted in the flickering light. It belonged to Paul Kellogg of 420 Fletcher Hill Road, Woodstock, Vermont. The photo could have been me. It would fool almost anyone.

I turned around. Davvie's eyes were wide open. "I found your wallet on the kitchen table this morning," she said to me in a low voice. "Dear, you really shouldn't drive without your license."

* * *

On the ride in the next morning, I grunted in response to her comments on the local weather and the cesspool in Washington. She chalked it up to morning grumpiness. In fact, I was trying for the life of me to figure out what was going on.

Even though we arrived ten minutes before opening time, a trio of women were chatting by the front door waiting for the shop to open. Davvie escorted me to the register, gave me a light kiss on the lips, and left. All appeared normal to the onlookers. Hell, it almost felt normal to me. So, what to do? I sold books. During a brief break in the onslaught of customers around three, I checked on the day's volume. Fifteen hundred dollars. I locked up and drove my Subaru back to the house on Fletcher Park Road. Davvie wouldn't be home till six, and I needed time there alone. On a day that bore faint hints of a tardy spring, the road slush had melted away. It would take a few weeks of similar weather to make

the glistening snow in the woods do the same.

Once back inside, I examined the end of the closet filled with men's clothes more carefully than I had in the morning. What I tried on fit far better than the oversized, faded tee shirts, button-downs, khakis, and jeans I usually favored. My feet slipped comfortably into the mishmash of desert boots, bit loafers, and running shoes on the floor rack. The bedroom next door had been converted to a library cum office. On oaken shelves stood a few hundred volumes ranging from James Cain's noirish thrillers to Nick Bostrom's rant on artificial intelligence. I'd read almost every single one of them.

A nineteenth century partners' desk took up the middle of the room. The first drawer I opened contained credit card slips. Those signed contained a hasty scrawl that might've read "Paul Kellogg." The middle drawer on the other side of the desk was locked. That security precaution yielded to a little jiggling with a souvenir letter opener from Edinburgh Castle. On top lay a Department of Defense security card for Fort Meade, Maryland. The photo of Davina against a red background was a good one. The box for contractor was checked. Beneath the card was a two-month-old edition of the *Vermont Standard* headlined, "Mt. Tom Books Saved by Massachusetts Couple." The front-page story featured a photo of Davina and her husband Paul Kellogg in front of the bookstore. This time I couldn't even swear the grainy likeness wasn't me. But on the date the photo was taken, I'd been elsewhere. Last night I'd shied away from asking Davvie what she did for a living. Wasn't I supposed to know? The story called her "an independent software security consultant." How independent was a security consultant who worked at Fort Meade?

Under the first paper lay another, an older edition of the *Boston Globe*. Before I unfolded the brittle, yellowed pages, I knew what date it was. Again, the story I cared about merited a front-page banner headline. A car had crashed through the median and caused an eight-month pregnant wife to lose her baby. The driver-husband's blood alcohol level was .09 percent, one one-hundredth above the legal limit. The DA's office argued that without the impairment caused by the drinking, he would've avoided the other car. In addition to the baby, the husband lost the case—he pleaded guilty to vehicular manslaughter—and his wife—who divorced him. I'd been a lawyer. I knew in Massachusetts that a viable fetus counted as a "person" under the state's vehicular homicide statute. The photo of the husband leaving the courthouse resembled me less than the ones on the driver's license or in the *Standard*. But this time I knew it *was* me.

Before our divorce was final, my wife took as much from our savings and brokerage accounts as she thought she deserved. It was far more than half, but who was I to argue? She sold the house on Brattle Street in Cambridge, and this time left me half the proceeds. I received this accounting from her lawyer, not her. She never visited me in the North Central Correctional Institution in Gardner. In the prison, I'd advised my fellow inmates on their *pro se* appeals in return for fentanyl. When, after four months, I swallowed a handful of the little blue pills, a guard found me. The infirmary

doctor told me his injection of Narcan had saved my life, but in my mind, it only meant more time imprisoned in this hell called Earth. The rest of my sentence I spent in a haze, reading novels checked out from the prison library, walking the yard to keep in shape, and crafting legal arguments for my clients—who no longer paid any fee in drugs or money for my services. I refused to see anyone from my old life, but no one tried more than once except my sister and eventually she gave up, too.

I opened the laptop on my side of the desk. I rubbed my index finger against the touchpad and the screen popped open. No password protection. The screen said, “Welcome, Paul.” Microsoft Office was loaded, but there were no saved files. I opened the browser. No history of web surfing here either. It was either brand new or scrubbed clean. I searched Davina’s name on Google. The only references were to the stories about opening the bookstore. No Twitter account. No Instagram. Nothing on Facebook.

I’d finished detecting and plopped down in a roomy club chair in the living room. Next time I checked my watch it was 5:30. I got up and walked over to the kitchen. I took out a package of chicken breasts from the Sub-Zero, found a drawer of sharp Henckels knives, and set to work.

“Oh, my God! Why haven’t you ever done this before? Why didn’t I know you could cook?”

Davvie’d returned, but I didn’t hear her because of the sizzle of the chicken piccata cooking in the cast iron pan on the stove.

Ten minutes later we sat at the dining room table eating the Caesar salad with homemade croutons.

“I found all the ingredients I needed for dinner in the fridge.” I paused. “Except for anchovies.”

“We can pick up a few tins next time at the market,” she said. “To us, now and forever.” She held up her wineglass.

My mind still was nowhere near its razor-sharp, pre-accident best as I tried to wrap it around how I’d been converted from convict to bookstore owner in my first week out of Gardner. Yet, here I was. Or was I? Was I really out of Gardner? Was I still in my cell incarcerated in some hallucinatory dream? I guess it didn’t matter which.

I clinked the cut crystal of her glass with my frosty mug of beer.

“In two weeks it’s Earth Day,” Davvie said. “Let’s have a big store event. Maybe we could get Bill McKibben to come down and talk.”

“Do you think he’d come?”

“We don’t know if we don’t ask.”

She downed the port and stood up. “Who knew port was an aphrodisiac?” she said as she sat down on my lap facing me. She slipped her hands under my shirt and ran her fingers up and down my chest. I reached under her blouse, unhooked her bra, and reciprocated. Sixty seconds later we were fucking on the dining room rug.

Davvie was right—it didn’t hurt to ask. By Earth Day we had a display in the front window celebrating everyone from John Muir to Rachel Carson to guest of honor Bill McKibben. The store couldn’t hold 150 people and a few dozen had to wait outside. Mr. McKibben was a great sport and repeated

his talk in a second session. Reporters from the *Vermont Standard*, the *Addison Independent*, and even the *Boston Globe* interviewed McKibben and Davvie. Jane Lindholm from Vermont Public Radio asked Davvie and me about our so-called courage in being independent booksellers in the Age of Amazon. We sold out of all 90 copies of McKibben’s *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* and had a record day of \$4200 worth of books sold.

All this was too good to be true. Somehow, I’d bought into answering to another man’s name, wearing his clothes, and sleeping with his wife. I know I should’ve left things alone, but I wasn’t comfortable with happiness, at least not this kind. Late that night in bed with Davvie’s curls splayed across my chest, I asked, “What came before me?”

“I don’t like thinking about him,” she said.

“Me neither,” I replied. “He wasn’t good to you?”

“No.”

“But you were going to open the bookstore with him,” I said.

After a long moment, she said, “He hurt me.”

“Hurt you how? Mentally? Physically?”

“Both.”

“So, you ended it.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Good,” I said.

“What about you? What about before me?” she asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No, I don’t,” she said. “Can we stop talking about what came before?” She caressed my cheek.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

I embraced both her long body and, by saying nothing more, a strategy of denial.

Around eleven the next morning, drops of rain were bouncing off the store awning with the rat-a-tat of a machine gun. No one had been in the store since I’d opened it. That left me time to think—never a good thing. I went to the refrigerator in the storeroom and levered the cap off a beer. I’d never drunk in the bookstore during the day before. When I next looked down, the bottle was empty. I had another. If I ever had a chance to escape, this was it. I went to the back door and put my hand on the knob. It rested there for a long moment. Then I jerked the door open and started toward my car. Where was I going to go? Drive around the block? Or head for Labrador? I stopped. The front left tire was flat. Sopping wet, I went back through the door and sat on a stool till I stopped dripping. Davvie gave me a ride home later, and I put on the spare tire after work the next day.

A few weeks later, on Memorial Day evening, Davvie and I lay naked in bed.

“I have so much fun working in the store with you on weekends,” she said. “Do you think I should give up consulting, so I can work there during the week, too?”

“You’ve got to go someplace?” I asked.

“Got to go down to D.C. tomorrow.”

“Having you in the store everyday would be wonderful. But financially speaking we’d be putting all our eggs in one basket. The way it is we have portfolio diversification.”

“I hate the traveling. I hate being away from you.”

"They don't give you much notice," I said.

"More and more, not much notice. One more reason I don't like it anymore."

In truth, I did like having her in the store with me. As did the patrons who read fantasy, romance, or Russian novels, or nonfiction with an environmental or technological theme. Once they'd figured out Davvie was only in on weekends, they stopped coming in during the week. I kept busy enough though with my own corps of customers who read mysteries, thrillers, bestsellers, British novelists, biography, and history. We did make a good team.

When I awoke the next morning, she was gone, on her way to the nation's capital. The morning was warm enough to ride my bike into town.

When I twirled the store's hanging sign from closed to open and unlocked the front door, Temperance Leverett was waiting. Within minutes, we were arguing over which of the two feuding English sisters wrote better novels, Margaret Drabble or A.S. Byatt. I favored the former and she the latter. Within ten minutes, we had an audience of half a dozen. After twenty minutes neither of us had budged, so I offered up Penelope Lively as a compromise, and Temperance graciously accepted, leaving the store with a copy of my favorite Lively, *Heat Wave*. The spectators bought up our entire stock of thirteen Livelys, Drabbles, and Byatts.

I was home by six-thirty which left almost two hours till sundown. I hiked a couple hundred yards up Fletcher Hill Road to Beaver Creek. What had been a slow trickle a few weeks ago was now a white torrent, if not exactly the Snake River. I wandered off the road into the woods. The warm weather of the past few days had melted all the snow except for an occasional patch on the north side of a boulder. I decided to take a shortcut through the woods to our place.

After ten minutes of trudging on spongy earth, I looked up to see the deck of our house cast in yellow lights. I tripped and fell. I cursed myself for not keeping eyes down. I looked behind me to give some skank eye to whatever exposed root or half-buried rock was the villain. Something black protruded a few inches and, like Arthur pulling out Excalibur, I yanked it free. My right hand was grasping a dirty knife. I spit on my fingertips and rubbed the blade. A Henckels chef knife. I'd cleaned off a shiny spot surrounded by purplish brown grime and dirt. What the fuck was a kitchen knife doing here?

I turned on the flashlight app of my phone. Its glow showed two long parallel skids about nine inches apart amid the grassy vegetation. They went deeper into the woods and back toward the house. Which way to go? I followed them in the direction of the house. I stopped at the wooden stairs up to our deck. I dug my own right heel into the ground and dragged it. The mark it made added a matching third skid to the two I'd been following.

Without any conscious reflection, I knew when the skids had been made—just as the April blizzard hit a few days before I arrived in Woodstock. The events spooled in my mind like a horror film. A corpse had been dragged from the house into the woods. The skid marks had been preserved by a blanket of snow. The knife had been inadvertently dropped on the outbound journey. The hunt for it proved

futile because in the time between dropping and searching, the knife had been buried by the blizzard. I shuddered. If I followed the path the other way, chances were I'd find a grave where the skid marks ended, a grave where the original Paul Kellogg lay.

When Davina had walked into the bookstore on that day, she already knew of the resemblance between me and Paul Kellogg—the *Globe* article in the drawer attested to that. But had she also known I was coming this way? Hell, she had an ID card from Fort Meade. I'd bet no computer or network was safe from her. Had she deduced I was on my way to surprise my sister who taught at Middlebury, something my sister didn't even know? Had she hacked my car's GPS to follow my progress? For that matter, maybe she'd fiddled with my gas gauge—when I'd filled up at the Sunoco station, it had taken only six gallons, not the expected twelve. Did she worm her way into the prison library system to learn my taste in books? That would explain the enticing display in the bookstore window and the home library seemingly curated for me. Only one coincidence and it might have been happenstance, or providence, that made me turn off the road and toward her. We were way past that.

What to do? Become an avenging angel? How could I after what I'd done? For what I did, I was either innocent, in which case I should never have gone to prison; or guilty, in which case I should have roasted in hell for all eternity. Thirty months, the minimum sentence, in Gardner did not fit either alternative. And what about Davina? Who was she? A murderer? Or an abused woman who'd defended herself?

If the former and she killed me, too, I probably deserved it anyway. If the latter, a life of books, beer, pizza, and Davvie might make the years ahead bearable. And either way, death awaited me in the end, as it did us all.

So, should I go find the first Paul Kellogg, dig him up? What for? I didn't go back into the woods. Instead, I walked back up the road to the creek. In the gloaming, I hurled the knife into the white water.

* * *

Davvie was back from her business trip when I returned from the shop the next afternoon.

In bed that night, she put her head on my chest and said, "I think I'm going to work in the store with you full-time."

"Good."

I stared up at the ceiling.

After a few minutes, she asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"Life," I said.

"How appropriate. I'm pregnant."

I started to cry. ■

Keith Raffel watched over the CIA, NSA, and other three-letter agencies as counsel to the Senate Intelligence Committee. He's also run for Congress, founded a software company, managed a DNA sequencing business, and published five thrillers. A longtime resident of Silicon Valley, he's spending this year as a lecturer and writer-in-residence at Harvard.

GUILTY

By Laura Elliot

Press Photo Credit: Ronan Considine

PROLOGUE



The night has laid claim to Cherrywood Terrace. Street lamps pool the pavements and burglar alarms wink from the walls of slumbering houses. A chink of light escapes between old Mr. Shannon's bedroom curtains. He never sleeps at night, or so he tells her, staying awake with crosswords and books of poetry in case death comes calling in the small hours to catch him unawares.

In the room next door her parents are sleeping. Her father's faint, rhythmic snoring is the only sound to break the silence as she rummages through the clutter at the bottom of her wardrobe. From deep in the toe of a boot she has outgrown, she removes a phone and reads the last text she received. The one she has ignored until now. The challenge is clear. It's dangerous, high-risk, reckless, unnecessary. She doesn't have to take it on yet, even as she repeats these words to herself, she feels a coiling excitement, the giddy fever of knowing she can do it—will do it—and no one will ever call her a

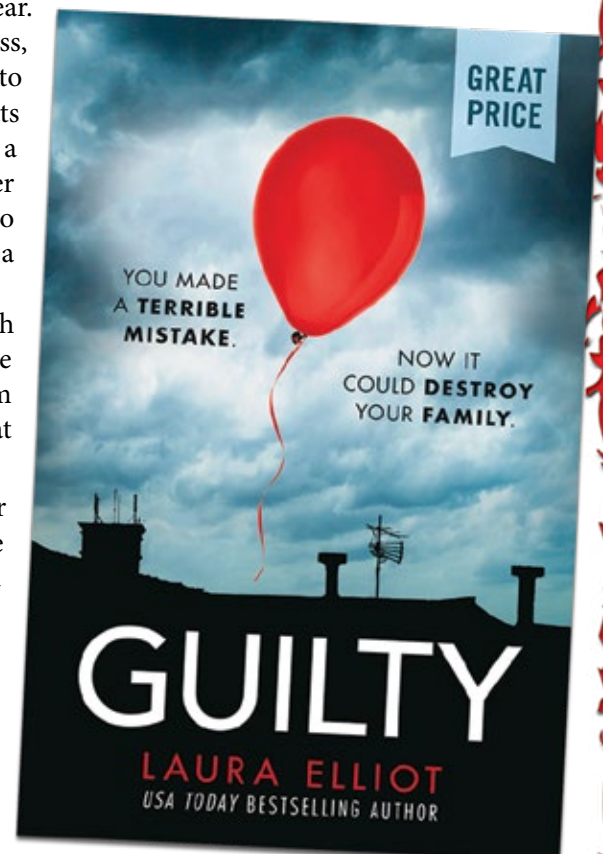
coward again.

She shoves cans of spray paint and a torch into her backpack, along with the phone. Better change her trainers for boots. Turnstone Marsh will be swampy in places. She pauses on the landing. Madness, she thinks. Why am I doing this? But anger has pushed her this far and it remains the barb that drives her down the stairs.

Out on the terrace she hesitates and looks toward a house on the far side. She was there earlier, silently entering and leaving the same way. She shrugs the memory aside and walks swiftly to the end of the terrace where a pedestrian lane provides a short-cut to Turnstone Marsh.

It's darker here. Her footsteps sound too loud. The wind tosses her hair as it tunnels between the high walls on either side of her. She sees it flailing in the shadow cast before her and pauses, afraid she is being followed. All is silent when she looks back. No footsteps behind her, none coming toward her. She reaches the end of the lane and crosses the road to the marsh.

Bells of white bindweed flutter like specters in the roadside hedges and



she hesitates, torn between the desire to return home and burrow under her duvet and the need to continue on and complete the challenge. She climbs an embankment and jumps down on to the spongy grass. The humps and hollows of the marsh are familiar to her. This is where she used to ride her mountain bike when she was younger, but her surroundings look different now, eerie and threatening. She takes the torch from her backpack and sweeps it over the jagged outline of Toblerone Range. She remembers the struggle to cycle to the top peak, then the exhilarating ride across the humps. The thrill of descending without stopping or falling off. Now, she is facing an even bigger challenge and she is anxious to complete it before her parents awaken and discover she is missing.

She follows the path by the river. The ground is firmer here, safer than walking along the grassy trails. At the end of the marsh, she crosses Orchard Road and stops outside the haunted house. The gate is padlocked. She shines her torch along the boundary wall and finds a gap where the bricks that have broken away provide her with a foothold to climb over.

The outside walls of the house are covered in graffiti. Last year, the front door was removed and used for a Halloween bonfire. At the entrance, the smell of mildew forces her to a standstill. She asks herself once again why she has taken on such a senseless dare. It's white-knuckle, crazy stuff. A man died in this house. Seven days dead before he was discovered by the postman. His ghost could be waiting inside, ready to wail at her when she steps over the threshold. Even if ghosts don't exist, there will be rats watching her, waiting to bite.

She turns to leave, then changes her mind. She must go forward if she is to reclaim her position with The Fearless. She climbs down the steps into the basement. In the beam from her torch, she sees old, moldering furniture, rusting pots and pans. She almost trips over a horse's saddle. Slashed open, its fleece, scraggy as a crow's nest, spills from the interior. She takes the cans of paint from her backpack. The walls are already covered in graffiti, stupid swirls and squiggles and angles and curses. That's just vandalism. She believes graffiti should have a purpose. It should make a statement. A protest against authority, particularly parents who've forgotten what it's like to be young. She positions her torch on the floor and sets to work.

It's done. She videos her art with the Fearless phone. The cover loosens and flaps against her hand. Impatiently, she pulls the phone free and films the junk strewn across the basement. This will add atmosphere to her video. Paws skitter across the floor. She sprints toward the stairs.

At last, she's out in the open. The fresh air feels damp on her skin and she can breathe freely again. The anger that gave her the courage to complete the challenge turns to relief but she feels regret, also. She has broken a promise she made to someone special. She pushes this stab of guilt aside and argues with herself that friends are more important. Belonging matters. And she will be back in the circle again—right in its center—after tonight.

A briar snags her jeans. In the darkness, it feels as if a hand has gripped her ankle to prevent her escaping. She bends and pulls at the material, swears softly as the phone slips from her hand into the long grass. By the light of the torch she finds it. The cover has fallen into a patch of thistles. Prickly leaves sting her fingers as she tries to pluck it free. She leaves it there, anxious to be gone from this spooky, derelict site.

She clammers through the gap in the boundary wall and jumps down on to Orchard Road. Once outside, she videos the gate and the exterior of the bleak house where the ghost of Isaac Cronin roams through the moldy rooms.

She presses record on her phone and shouts, "A message to The Fearless. It's done. No one can ever call me chicken again." She spins across the road, giddy with triumph and a story she is longing to tell. The moon pearls the sky, shining coldly and mercilessly down on the last exhilarating moments of Constance Lawson's young life.

CHAPTER ONE

Day One

It began with a phone call. Still sleepy, Karl Lawson reached for his mobile on the bedside locker, surprised to see his brother's name on the screen. Justin never rang in the morning. An early riser, he was usually on the M50 by now, hoping to reach Junction 9 before the peak-hour traffic slowed everyone down.

"Is Constance with you?" he asked before Karl had a chance to speak.

"No," he replied, the abruptness of Justin's question snapping him fully awake. "Why on earth should she be here at this hour?"

"Has she been in touch with you this morning or last night?"

"I haven't seen her for a few days. Why? Is something wrong?"

Justin hesitated, as if choosing his words with care. "She's not in her bedroom. I thought she might have called over to talk to you."

"Talk about what?" Karl left his bed and crossed to the window, from where he had a view of his brother's house. Justin's

car was still in the driveway.

"Things were a bit fraught here last night," Justin admitted. "And she usually runs to you when she thinks we're trying to clip her wings."

Fraught was probably a euphemism for blistering fury, Karl thought. He was familiar with the rows Constance had with her parents. She was the eldest of three and often complained that her upbringing had been a dress rehearsal for the siblings coming up behind her. Justin was right in thinking she could have confided in him but not on this occasion.

"Was it a bad row?" he asked.

"Apart from telling us we'd ruined her life, no worse than usual," Justin replied. "But that's neither here nor there at the moment."

"What was the row about?"

"Does it matter?"

"If you thought she'd come straight to me then, yes, it does matter."

"We're not allowing her to attend the Blasted Glass concert."

"Ah, for God's sake, Justin, you can't—"

"We discussed it with the other parents." Justin cut across his protests. "We all agreed that the girls are too young . . . and they are. You should have asked our permission before you told them you had those tickets."

"I'd no idea there'd be a problem. They've been looking forward to that gig for weeks."

"I don't want an argument about this," Justin snapped. "Right now I need to find her or she'll be late for summer camp."

"Have you phoned her friends?"

"Jenna's already done so. They've no idea where she is. They texted each other last night about the concert. Hate rants about parents, I should imagine, but Constance never mentioned anything about where she was going this morning . . . or if she planned to go out during the night." Justin's voice sharpened, as if the latter possibility was too dangerous to entertain.

"Night? Constance would never go out at night." Even as he spoke, Karl knew this was untrue and the alarm he sensed behind his brother's questions added to his disquiet.

"What about the riding-school?" he asked. "Doesn't she help out in the stables when she's on her school holidays?"

"Not without telling us . . . usually," said Justin. "But you could be right. I'll check there. It's either that or she's training in the park with the Harriers."

"I presume you've rung her mobile?"

"She left it on her bedside locker."

"Then she can't have gone far. That phone is like an extension of her right arm." Karl's feet were cold against the wooden floor but the chill that ran through him came from an uneasiness that, as yet, had no direction.

"I'll check the beach," he said.

"Why the beach?" Justin sounded surprised.

"If she's out riding, that's where she could have taken the horse. She's just working off some teenage angst. We'll find her quickly enough."

After they ended the call he sat on the edge of the bed and checked his texts. Three days since he had last heard from Constance.

Have you got the tickets, Uncle Karl?

I have indeed, he'd texted back.

And backstage passes to meet the band. You owe me, kid.

Big time.

What was wrong with Justin and Jenna, he wondered as he pulled on a T-shirt and jeans. Constance had been a fan of Blasted Glass ever since Karl introduced her to their new music. The fact that he could get free concert tickets for her and her friends had been an added bonus. He imagined her disappointment last night, her anger over her parents' decision.

He heard Sasha's door opening, the soft patter of her feet on the landing.

"Daddy . . . Daddy." She ran across the bedroom, two Dora the Explorer heads wagging on her slippers, her Dora dressing gown flaring behind her as she jumped into his arms.

He hoisted her on to his back and they descended the stairs, singing the Dora theme song at the top of their voices. She

held his neck in a strangle-like grip until he lowered her into an armchair and put on a DVD.

"Ten minutes, that's all," he said. "Then you have to get dressed for summer camp."

Sasha ignored his warning, her attention already focused on the screen. Having moved seamlessly from the Teletubbies to Barney then on to Dora, her latest phase showed no signs of abating.

Nicole was still in her nurse's uniform when he entered the kitchen. She looked tired after her night shift in Emergency.

"Rough night?" He kissed the top of her head.

"Chaotic, as usual," she replied. "But no dramas." She plunged the handle on the cafetière and filled the kitchen with the smell of freshly brewed coffee. "What's new in your world?"

"Justin just rang." He accepted the cup of coffee and drank it standing up. "Sounds like Constance is in trouble."

"How so?"

"She'd a row with her parents last night."

"Not another one?"

"This time she's letting them cool their heels. She wasn't in her bedroom when Jenna checked earlier."

"That's not like Constance." Nicole sat down on a kitchen chair and yawned. Mascara smudged the skin under her eyes and wisps of blonde hair feathered her cheeks.

"She's thirteen," Karl replied. "Testing the waters."

"I'm surprised she's not here. You're usually her first port of call when there's trouble on the home front."

"That's what Justin thought," he replied. "But not on this occasion. I know you're tired but can you hold the fort for a short while longer? I told Justin I'd drive around, see if I can find her. I'll be back in time to bring Sasha to summer camp."

"Go on, then. I'll get her dressed. I suppose she's watching Dora again."

"Need you ask?" He pulled the hall door behind him and glanced across the road toward his brother's house. Justin had already left for the stables.

The morning traffic was beginning to build as Karl drove through Glenmoore. Once past the village and on to the coast road, it eased. It was still too early for the dog walkers but a few joggers were already in action. Karl parked his car on North Beach Road and walked down the wooden steps to the beach. Coral clouds stippled the sky and a cormorant, surfacing from the sea, flapped its wings as it landed on a rock. It was going to be a hot day.

Apart from a shoal of dead jellyfish glistening on the sand, the beach was deserted and unmarked by any indentations from horses' hooves. He walked toward a formation of rock that curved naturally into a sheltered cove. Nicknamed Ben's Shack as a tribute to the teenager who had organized the first beach party there, this was where the young people from Glenmoore gathered in the summer. The Shack parties had been a rite of passage for him and Justin during their late teens: bonfires blazing, guitars playing, bottles clinking, weed and sex; a potent mix. Justin had met his wife, Jenna, who was also a Glenmoore local, at one such party. They often reminisced with Karl about those nights, laughing ruefully and vowing to lock their children in towers rather than allow them anywhere near Ben's Shack.

Karl entered the cove, expecting to find dead embers and bent beer cans. The sand was clean. Clearly no beach parties had taken place there for a while. The uneasiness he had felt since his brother's phone call lessened as he walked back to his car.

Justin rang. Constance was not at the riding-school and he was driving to Glenmoore Park in the hope that she might have decided to run with the Junior Harriers.

Nicole was stretched on the sofa when Karl returned home and Sasha, dressed in jeans and a Dora T-shirt, was snuggled against her as she watched her DVD.

"No luck," he said. "I'm sorry I took so long."

"Do you think we've any reason to worry?" Nicole hugged Sasha closer.

"I'm sure she's fine," he replied. "I'll call over to Jenna and see what's happening."

"I can drive the kids to summer camp."

"No, you won't," he said. "It's way past your bedtime. I'll pick up Matthew and Lara, and come back for Sasha."

Justin's car was still missing from the driveway. Karl unlocked the front door and entered the kitchen, where Jenna was speaking on Constance's phone.

"She wouldn't leave the house in the morning without telling us where she was going," she said to Karl when the phone call ended. "She loves helping out with summer camp and she should be getting ready to leave right now. I'm worried something's happened to her."

"Nothing's happened to her," Karl reassured her. "She's sulking somewhere, probably regretting running away but afraid to come home in case she's in even more trouble."

Jenna stared at the mobile screen, as if she expected a message to flash into view and solve the mystery of her daughter's whereabouts. "I'm making my way through the names in her address book. I'd no idea she knew so many people."

The kitchen door opened and Lara, her younger daughter, flounced into the room in her nightdress.

"Where's Constance?" she asked.

"She's just gone out for a little while," said Jenna.

"But she didn't give me a cuddle."

"Here's one now." Jenna scooped her up in her arms and hugged her. "Constance will give you all the cuddles you want when she comes back." She buried her face in the little girl's hair, her voice muffled. "It's time to get dressed for summer camp." She handed the phone to Karl. "Will you ring a few of those numbers while I'm upstairs? Someone has to know something."

"Will do." Karl took the phone and hit the number Jenna pointed out to him. It continued ringing and he was about to cancel the call when a youth answered.

"Yo, bitch. What's up?" The voice was young and brash.

"Is that Lucas O'Malley?" Karl asked.

The youth's sharp intake of breath was followed by a pause. When he spoke again his tone was more muted. "Who's that?"

"I'm Constance Lawson's uncle. Is my niece with you?"

"No. Why do you want to know? Is something wrong?"

"Hopefully, nothing's wrong. She's gone off without her phone and her parents are trying to contact her."

"So, why ring me? I hardly know her."

"Are you in the habit of calling strangers 'bitch'?"

"It's a term, man. It don't mean nothing."

"If you see her tell her to ring her parents immediately." Karl was ending his fourth call, and was no nearer to finding out anything about Constance's whereabouts, when Matthew, his nephew, rushed into the kitchen in his tracksuit and trainers.

"Has Constance really run away?" he asked as he shook cereal into a bowl.

"Of course not," Karl replied. "She's probably with her friends."

"She's always with her friends." He spooned Rice Krispies into his mouth and swallowed noisily. "She hates living with us. That's what she said last night. Girls are so stupid. They're always crying about something."

Karl left his nephew musing over the shortcomings of big sisters and escaped into the living-room to ring the next number. He kept looking out the window, convinced Constance was going to rush through the gate, sheepish, apologetic, her ponytail swinging, horrified that her friends were being contacted.

When Jenna came downstairs with Lara, he ushered the little girl and Matthew into the car, and stopped at his house to collect Sasha.

Cars were arriving and leaving the campus in Glenmoore College, which served as a summer camp during the holidays. Matthew had joined the football camp and Karl dropped the girls into the arts and crafts room. He made his way to the field behind the school where the track and field camp was located, hoping to see Constance among the volunteers. No sign of her anywhere and Justin, obviously sharing the same hope, was already speaking to the coach. It was clear from the slope of his shoulders that Constance had not turned up. Nor had she been seen at the train station, the shopping center or the cafes in the village, he told Karl as they walked back to their cars.

Jenna had finished checking the names on Constance's phone when they returned to the house.

"I know it's too early to call the police." Justin slumped into a chair and rubbed his chin. "But I'm afraid to let it go on any longer."

"Getting the police involved at this stage seems like a drastic step," said Karl. "She's only been gone a short while."

"This is drastic," Jenna replied. "It's ten o'clock and we've no idea how long she's been missing."

"Did her friends mention anything about a dare?" Karl asked.

"A dare?" Justin sat up straighter. "What do you mean?"

"Constance did something stupid a few weeks ago." He hesitated, aware that they were watching him intently. "She begged me not to tell you. She was afraid of how you'd react—"

"Cut the crap and tell us what happened," Justin snapped.

The brightness had gone from the morning. Karl was conscious of this dulling as he began to speak, a thumbprint smudging his future, but he was unaware that the familiar whorls and lines of his life would never be the same again. ■

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