

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE



**JANUARY /  
FEBRUARY 2018**

**FORENSIC FILES**

**D.P. LYLE**

**CREATE NOW, CRITIQUE LATER**

**DENNIS PALUMBO**

*Get a Sneak Peek With*

**MICKI BROWNING**

**JULIE MOFFETT**

**JORDAN DANE**

**Our 80<sup>th</sup> Issue  
For the Love of . . .**

**C.J. COOKE**

**SAMUEL PARKER**

**DAVID PUTNAM**

**VICKI DELANY**

**WENDY CORSI STAUB**

**BRAD TAYLOR**

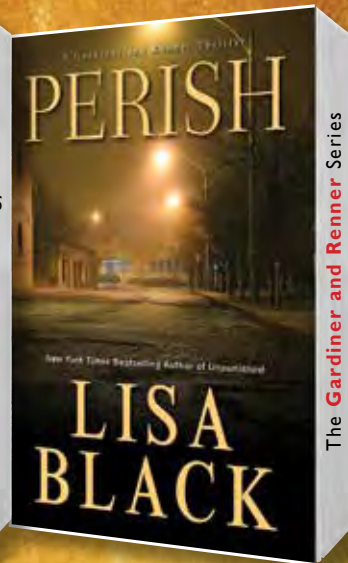
**JAYNE ANN KRENTZ**



# The Suspense Will Leave You BREATHLESS...

The *New York Times* bestselling author continues her Texas Trilogy series with a riveting novel of page-turning suspense where secrets and passions turn deadly...

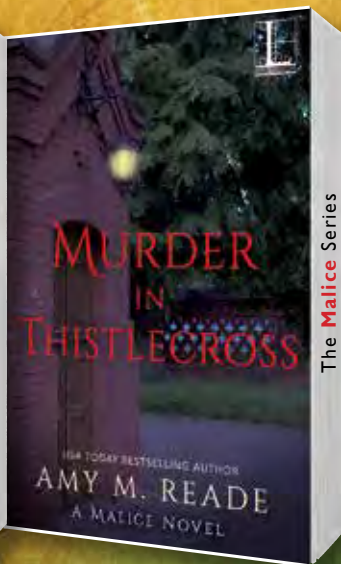
**"Martin takes readers on a roller-coaster ride."**  
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



Journey to the dark side of justice with forensic expert Maggie Gardiner and homicide detective Jack Renner.

**"The plot hurtles to an adrenaline-fueled conclusion."**  
—BOOKLIST

**"Reed writes as only a cop can."**  
—NELSON DeMILLE,  
#1  
*New York Times*  
bestselling  
author



**"An authentically crafted detective story."**  
—JOY SMITH,  
Goodreads,  
5 Stars

Detective Jack Murphy must find a sick killer whose twisted clues and chosen victims point to a madman out for revenge.


Within the stone walls of an ancient castle, a family's dark, violent past threatens to come back to haunt them...with fatal consequences.

Homicide detective Jake Carrington will have to face his personal demons and focus his formidable skills to stop a vicious murderer from striking again.

**"Danger, mystery, and a brave, resilient heroine."**

—heroesandheartbreakers.com on *Secrets of Hallstead House*

Available Everywhere Books Are Sold

 [KensingtonBooks.com](http://KensingtonBooks.com)



### CREDITS

John Raab  
*President & Chairman*

Shannon Raab  
*Creative Director*

Romaine Reeves  
*CFO*

Amy Lignor  
*Editor*

Jim Thomsen  
*Copy Editor*

### Contributors

Mark P. Sadler  
Susan Santangelo  
Kaye George  
Weldon Burge  
Ashley Wintters  
D.P. Lyle M.D.  
Kathleen Heady  
Andrew MacRae  
Melissa Dalton  
Elliott Capon  
J.M. LeDuc  
Holly Price  
Kari Wainwright  
David Ingram  
Jodi Hanson  
Susan May  
Jenny Hilborne  
Anthony J. Franze  
Kristin Centorcelli  
Jerry Zavada  
Leslie Borghini  
Mary Lignor  
Julie Whiteley  
Sara Guisti  
Jeff Ayers  
Elise Cooper  
Joseph Badal

### Customer Service and Subscriptions:

For 24/7 service, please use our website,  
[www.suspensemagazine.com](http://www.suspensemagazine.com) or write to:  
SUSPENSE MAGAZINE at  
26500 Agoura Road, #102-474  
Calabasas, CA 91302  
Suspense Magazine does not share our  
magazine subscriber list with third-party  
companies.

**Rates:** \$24.00 (Electronic Subscription) per year. All foreign subscriptions must be payable in U.S. funds.



Welcome to 2018! It was just eighteen short years ago we found ourselves in the middle of one of the greatest suspense stories of all time: What's going to happen when the clock strikes midnight on January 1, 2000? We had so many different theories, with people stocking up on everything, believing that anarchy would be right around the corner. Heck, I even had a plan when I was living in Minnesota that if the shit hit the fan, I would take my family to Northern Minnesota and stay in a cabin until things settled down.

Everything around you is a story. When you watch the news or shop in a store, if you just leave your eyes and ears open, you can find a story. Authors are very good at things like this. They see a news story about a young person who has been kidnapped and follow the story along with the rest of the world to see how it ends. But what's missing is the emotion and suspense found in the middle of the tale, which is where those authors fill in the blanks.

When you read your next suspense/thriller, like many of the books we have reviewed in this magazine, note that every title has its' own story within the story. Think to yourself...what must the author be thinking when they sit down to write a book with so much pain wrapped around the characters, to only reel it back and give the character some sort of redemption? Do you find yourself rooting for the hero, even though most of the time you probably realize they'll make it in the end but the journey to get there will be very bumpy?

I've asked the question to hundreds of authors: "The beginning or the end, which has more impact on the reader? And which is tougher for the author to write?" Thinking more about that question, I began to see that what I was missing was the journey of the tale. When you think about it, the beginning is the start of the path and the ending is simply the conclusion, but how did they get from point A to point B? That's where the talent of each author really shines.

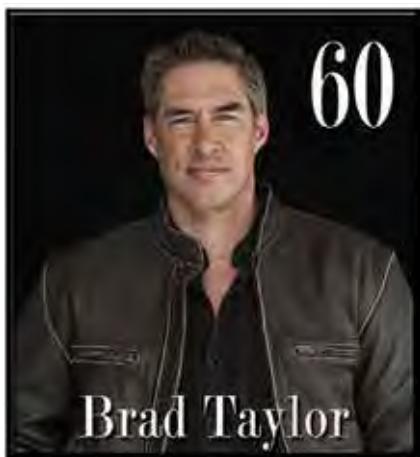
So, here's a resolution for you, since you don't have enough for 2018 already—take some time to really put yourself in the shoes of the author and consider the challenges faced to create a story that entertained from page one to the end. You might just lose yourself in their world and experience something you never have before, beyond simply reading words on the pages.

John Raab  
CEO/Publisher  
*Suspense Magazine* ■



Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/Only-the-birds-know-the-way-709913261>

*"Reviews within this magazine are the opinions of the individual reviewers and are provided solely for the purpose of assisting readers in determining another's thoughts on the book under discussion and shall not be interpreted as professional advice or the opinion of any other than the individual reviewer. The following contributors who may appear in this magazine are also individual clients of Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine: J.M. LeDuc, Leslie Borghini, Susan Santangelo, Jeff Ayers, Joseph Badal, and Amy Lignor."*



# CONTENT

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

*January / February 2018 / Vol. 080*

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Excerpt: "Beached" By Micki Browning. ....                            | <b>3</b>  |
| <i>Alma Mater</i> By Mike Wheat . . . . .                             | <b>7</b>  |
| Excerpt: "No Regrets" By Julie Moffett . . . . .                      | <b>13</b> |
| Enhancing Well-Being & Encouraging Minds: <i>C.J. Cooke</i> . . . . . | <b>16</b> |
| Create Now, Critique Later By Dennis Palumbo . . . . .                | <b>19</b> |
| <i>Inside the Pages: Suspense Magazine Book Reviews</i> . . . . .     | <b>22</b> |
| <i>Suspense Magazine Movie Reviews</i> By Jeff Ayers . . . . .        | <b>34</b> |
| <i>Featured Artist: Adriana Estevez</i> . . . . .                     | <b>35</b> |
| <i>Samuel Parker's Brand of Justice? "Coldwater"</i> . . . . .        | <b>40</b> |
| <i>David Putnam: Hasn't "Vanquished" his Series</i> . . . . .         | <b>42</b> |
| Excerpt: "The Innocents" By David Putnam. . . . .                     | <b>45</b> |
| <i>With my Eyes</i> By Leslie Budewitz . . . . .                      | <b>49</b> |
| Forensic Files: What is a Chimera? By D.P. Lyle, MD. . . . .          | <b>66</b> |
| Excerpt: "Valentine & the Lotus Circle" By Jordan Dane. . . . .       | <b>68</b> |
| <i>The Sea Cliff</i> By Peter Swanson . . . . .                       | <b>72</b> |
| <i>Family is Everything</i> By Lael Braday . . . . .                  | <b>76</b> |



# BEACHED

By Micki Browning  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

## Chapter One

Meredith Cavallo had questioned her decision to stay in the Florida Keys plenty of times over the past few months, but never while standing on the deck of the *LunaSea*.

Two days remained until Thanksgiving and she had a lot of blessings to count. She had only to look around her. The waves above French Reef sparkled in the late morning sun, a welcome contrast to the squall that had passed through last night. She drew a big breath of salty air. No. This was home.

At least for now.

Next month, charter boats would be full of divers on their winter holiday, but today a family of four made up the entirety of the *LunaSea's* manifest. That left plenty of elbow room on a vessel large enough to accommodate twenty-six divers.

Mer scanned the water out of habit. They had the dive site to themselves and the divers had splashed ten minutes earlier. The reef was shallow. They had at least another half hour to explore.

Captain Leroy Penninichols poked his head out of the engine hold. An ever-present plastic straw peeked beyond his silver-streaked beard. "Maggie wants to know what she can make for Thanksgiving." A slight drawl tempered his baritone voice.

Mer gathered the tools at the edge of the hold. "Not a thing. I've got it covered."

"She said you'd say something like that." He pulled himself out of the hold and onto the deck. Sweat dampened his T-shirt and he wiped his hands with a rag. "I'm supposed to insist."

"Really. I got it." The toolbox was its usual jumble and Mer sorted the equipment into specific compartments. "Recipes are just like experiments."

"How many of these have you done?" he asked.

"Experiments? Lots."

"I meant Thanksgiving dinners."

"Before this one?" Mer asked. "None."

Leroy folded the rag and placed it on the camera table that rose from the rear of the deck. "Oh, goodie. I'll tell Maggie to make pies...and maybe the turkey."

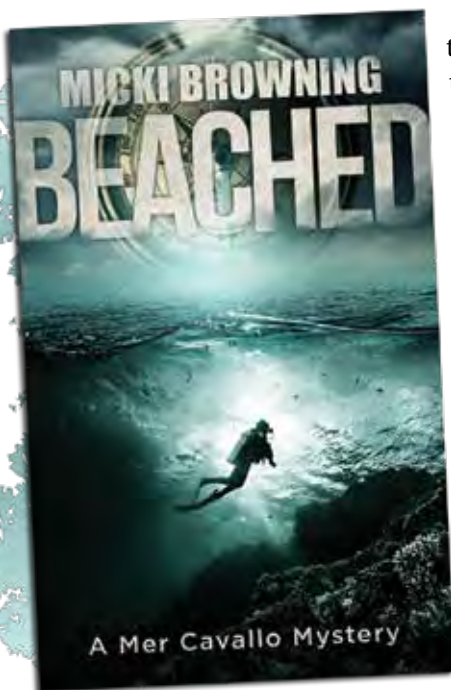
He dropped the lid of the hatch. It slammed with a metallic bang and she flinched. "Sorry." He indicated her leg. "That still bother you?"

She found herself rubbing her thigh and forced herself to stop. The wound had healed. "What bothers me is your skepticism regarding my ability to construct a pie."

"You don't even look like you know how to eat one."

"Well, if your waistline is any indication, you have enough experience for the both of us."

He patted his belly. "The proper terminology is baked, not constructed. Do you even have a cookbook?"



"That's what the Internet's for."

"Great. We'll bring the dressing, too."

"It's stuffing. It goes in, not on." The last wrench properly sorted, she shut the toolbox and snapped the latches. "Seems pretty self-explanatory." She slid the heavy box under one of the aluminum benches that ran the length of the deck on both sides of the vessel.

"How about we all just go out to dinner?"

Mer shielded her eyes against the November sun. Still no bubbles, but a dark shape in the water caught her attention. She stepped onto the bench to gain a better vantage and pointed off the starboard side. "Any idea what that is? I can't make it out."

Leroy glanced over his shoulder and then turned, giving the object his full attention. "Looks like we got us a square grouper."

Her curiosity stirred. "I've never heard of a square grouper. Are they indigenous to the Keys?"

He shook his head. "How can someone as smart as you act like a calf at a new gate?"

"It's a logical question. The Arctic Ocean and the Florida Straits have completely different environments."

"This isn't your old research boat, so before you warm up for a lecture I'm not interested in, don't." Leroy picked up the gaff. "A square grouper is a bale of marijuana, not a fish."

"Oh." The news disappointed her. "I didn't encounter any of them in the Arctic."

The current pushed the black object toward the *LunaSea*. Smaller than a bale of hay, it appeared to be wrapped in black trash bags and bound with twine. When it was close enough, Leroy leaned over the side, hooked it, and pulled it to the swim platform. Together they dragged it onto the deck.

Mer dropped to her knees next to the sodden bale and ran her hands over the contours. It felt as if there were smaller squares inside. "What now?" she asked.

He stowed the gaff. "When we're on our way back to the dock, I'll alert the Coasties. They'll come pick it up."

"Why wait?"

"No sense announcing to the world what we've got on board. You never know who's looking for their lost property." He squinted toward the horizon. "Or what they'll do to get it back."

The gaff had torn the outer wrapping. Mer tugged at the plastic and enlarged the hole. "It looks like a bunch of duct-taped bricks."

"Let me see." He unfolded his pocketknife and stabbed one of the bundles. White residue clung to the blade when he extracted it.

"Not that I have much experience with it," Mer said, "but I'm pretty sure that's not marijuana." The breeze fluttered the outer plastic and Mer glimpsed the corner of a clear plastic freezer bag stuffed between two of the silver bricks. "There's more than drugs inside." She dug into her shorts pocket for her cellphone and opened the photo app.

"Not enough to be a marine scientist? Now you're an archeologist, too?" Leroy teased.

"Never hurts to document things *in situ*. Sometimes it's not the item so much as what's near it that's important. Besides, there's a whole field dedicated to nautical archeology." She tugged on the baggie but it remained wedged. She yanked harder. The plastic ripped, flinging a small circular object end-over-end until it clinked onto the deck. Leroy stomped on the disk before it disappeared off the edge of the dive platform.

Mer's attention remained glued on the stained piece of paper that peeked out from the plastic. She nudged two bundles aside to avoid tearing the brittle page and gently removed it. Names covered the sheet. "That's odd." She laid it across her lap and snapped a couple of photographs.

"Bet I got you beat." Leroy examined the coin in his palm and held it out to Mer.

She placed the list on the dry table, where it fluttered in the breeze. Mer weighted the page with her cellphone so it wouldn't blow away and took the coin. It felt warm and heavy in her hand.

Sun glinted off the portrait of an elaborately coiffed man. "Seventeen thirty-three? I didn't think they dated coins that early." She flipped the gold piece. Latin words circled a coat of arms topped by a crown and Mer read them aloud, "*Initium sapientiae timor domini*."

"Wisdom begins with the fear of God," Leroy said.

She gaped at the captain. "I don't know what surprises me more. That I'm holding a coin that's nearly three hundred years old or that you know Latin."

The thick thatch of beard hid his smile, but his eyes crinkled. "Guess you ain't the only huckleberry on the bush."

A glint drew her attention back to the bale and she placed the coin on the table next to the list. "There's something else." She pushed two of the bundles apart and dug out a small electronic device. "What do you suppose this is?"

Leroy snatched it out of her hand and dropped it on the deck. "GPS tracker." He brought the heel of his Croc down on the device and smashed it. "Call up the divers. Good chance we're about to have company." He disappeared up the ladder that accessed the bridge deck.

She sprang to her feet, grabbed a dive weight, and rapped it three times against the handrail of the swim ladder that hung in the water.

Thirty seconds elapsed and she repeated the emergency recall.

Now all she could do was wait.

Mer scanned the horizon, squinting behind her sunglasses. The glare made it difficult to see. The itch of someone watching her prompted her to spin, but she was unable to locate the cause of her unease. She refocused on the water's surface, searching for the trail of bubbles that would reveal the divers' locations. She hit the ladder again. Imagined the sound traveling through the water. Willed it to



alert the parents and their eleven-year-old twins, Grace and Logan. Bring them back.

She rubbed her thigh and did the math. The divers had been down twenty minutes. Even if they returned immediately, it could still take them several minutes to swim back to the boat, plus a three-minute safety stop before they'd surface—if they heeded the signal at all.

Another minute ticked by. Still no bubbles.

A tiny dot separated itself from the horizon.

"We got company," she shouted.

## Chapter Two

A moment later the captain was at her side.

"There," Mer pointed. "Three o'clock. Moving fast."

Bubbles broke the surface along the port side of the *LunaSea* and inched toward the ladder. The family's daughter surfaced first and handed up her fins. Mer grabbed the blades and helped Grace up the swim ladder and steered her to the bench. "There you go." Mer kept her voice bright. "Let's get you out of this gear." Her fingers flew between the buckles and loosened the vest.

The mother, Lydia, surfaced next. Once she climbed aboard, Leroy walked her to the bench and guided her tank into the rack as she sat. Mer leaned close to the woman's ear and spoke low so the girl wouldn't hear. "I need you to stow your equipment and take your daughter into the V-berth. Stay there until I let you know it's safe."

The woman's eyes held questions, but she nodded.

Mer returned to the stern.

The boy bobbed on the line that floated behind the boat and struggled to remove his fins. Mer could feel the other boat racing toward them. She motioned to him. "Logan, I need you to hurry."

He replied, but the regulator in his mouth muffled his words and he took it out. "It's stuck." He put his face in the water so he could see the strap.

Blake surfaced a yard from his son and spit out his regulator. "There better be a good reason you're shortening our dive. I paid good money for this charter."

"Emergency. I need you and your son on the boat," Mer said. "Pull off your son's fins and push him to the ladder."

"They're expensive fins."

A boat engine rumbled like distant thunder. Growing louder. Closer. Mer's jaw tensed. No time to argue. She dove into the water and popped up next to the boy.

"Hey there, Logan. Let me see if I can help." She inhaled a few shallow breaths and dove beneath him. Her hands circled his ankles and ripped the fins off his feet. She hooked them over her wrist, then broke the surface and pushed him closer to the boat. "Up you go."

The sharp retort of a gunshot rang out. Mer froze. She knew that sound. Her leg throbbed.

The boy twisted in the water. "What was that?"

She grabbed his arm. They had to hurry.

A blow struck Mer from behind. Logan's father flailed for the ladder, not caring that his son was closer. She twisted and dodged his arm as it came around in another wild stroke. His knee slammed into her belly and drove the breath from her lungs. Then Blake was upon her, pushing her underwater in his panic.

Mer lost her grip on Logan. Salt water stung her eyes. The father thrashed the water above her head and her lungs burned.

The first rule of rescue was not to become another victim, and if Blake fell backward in his panic, two hundred pounds of man and an aluminum tank would smash into both Mer and Logan. Kicking away from the danger zone, Mer yanked the boy out of the way and surfaced, gasping for air. Fear widened Logan's eyes. His buoyancy compensator kept him afloat, but he wasn't moving.

Blake scrambled up the ladder. Leroy latched onto the father's tank valve to steady him as he lurched aboard the vessel.

Mer faced Logan. "We have to get on the boat. I'll help you."

Without his fins, the boy lacked the propulsion to move himself quickly through the water. Mer grabbed the ladder with one hand and stretched her other arm toward him. "Give me your hand."

Leroy leaned over the edge. "No time like the present, Cavallo."

"Get ready to get us out of here. I'll help Logan on board and stow the ladder."

Leroy nodded once and disappeared.

Mer clutched the shoulder of the boy's vest and drew him the last few feet to the boat. She wrapped his fingers around the rung of the ladder and swung behind him, her arms outside his, protecting his body with her own. "What say we get out of here?" She kept her voice calm as she prodded him up the ladder. Nothing wrong. No madmen hurtling across the water to intercept them. No one shooting at them. Just a typical day on the water. Her vision narrowed until all she saw was the path to the V-berth.

"See the opening to the lower deck?" She didn't wait for a response. "I need you to go down there." She peeled his fins off her wrist and gave him a gentle push. "Go on."

The growl of the high-powered boat grew louder. Low profile. Built for speed. Close enough, now, to distinguish two men in the cockpit.

Mer heaved the rope to raise the swim ladder and secured it. Leroy fired up the engines and she raced to the bow to unclip the boat from the mooring ball.

"Off line," she shouted.

The *LunaSea* surged forward. Wind tore through Mer's wet clothes as she sidled along the gunnels and swung back onto the main deck. The father cowered in the corner, still in his gear. The rest of his family huddled in the V-berth, staring at Mer through the hatch.

Mer dropped to her knees next to Blake. "You need to go below." She loosened the straps of his buoyancy compensator and undid the waist buckle as if helping a child. "Let's get this tank off you."

He didn't move.

She bit the inside of her lip to keep from venting her frustration. "Don't worry, I've got it." Her fingers fumbled with the remaining clips. She peeled the vest from his body and dropped the tank into the rack, snapping the bungee cord around the valve. The last thing they needed was a forty-pound tank rolling around the deck. Although at the moment, hitting him on the head with it held more than a little appeal.

She knelt next to him again. "I know you're scared." The *LunaSea* swung sharply to port and her hand shot out for balance. "We all are. But I need you to help me. Help your family."

Another shot rang out. Adrenaline flooded her body. Mer grabbed Blake's chin and forced him to look at her. "Your children need their father. Like it or not, that's you."

He swatted her hand away. "I know how to take care of my family." He stared at her a long moment before he crawled toward the berth.

Mer ran her hands through her hair. They were hopelessly outclassed. Even at top speed, the *LunaSea* pulled twenty-four knots. Respectable, but not racing material. Not like the sleek cigarette boats favored by smugglers. The narrow beam and long hull of their pursuers' go-fast boat enabled them to hurtle through the water at more than eighty knots.

Leroy steered the dive boat in a wild zigzag across the water. The harbor loomed closer, but not nearly close enough.

The go-fast boat steadily gained on them.

Mer climbed up to the bridge. Leroy had his hands on the controls. His head swiveled back and forth between the smuggler's boat and safe harbor.

"You know how to give a distress call?" he asked.

Mer grabbed the radio and keyed the mic. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Mer Cavallo of the dive boat *LunaSea*." She released the button and waited for a response. A male voice crackled across the air. She could barely make out his words over the whine of the engines, the wind, and her pounding heartbeat. "Request immediate law enforcement assistance."

The two men were too far away for Mer to get a description, but close enough to see the driver raise his arm. He fired another shot. The bullet struck the railing by Leroy's head. They both flinched.

"We are being pursued and fired upon. Repeat. They are shooting at us." Mer's voice climbed an octave as she reported their coordinates and approach path to Port Largo.

Without waiting for a response, she slammed the mic into its cradle. "Be right back," she shouted.

Sweat moistened her hands and she slid down the ladder rails, landing on the deck with a shin-banging thud.

Another shot. This one aimed at her. She ducked. Tried to make herself as small a target as possible.

The V-berth to her right offered safety. A place to hide. She turned her back to it and dashed toward the bale.

The plastic-wrapped bundle sat in the open on the stern. Mer slid behind it. She pressed her back against the camera table for support, wedged her feet against the water-soaked bale, and pushed. Her legs strained. The bale barely moved.

The driver raised his arm again and aimed. She scrunched lower. The open transom of the boat left her exposed. The only thing between Mer and a bullet was a sodden bale of drugs. The very thing she needed to get off the boat.

Her hand went to the pendant around her neck. With a growl, she redoubled her efforts. The table leg bit into her back as she shoved the bale across the skid-resistant deck, making agonizingly slow progress. Finally the bale teetered on the edge of the swim platform, and with a final jolt it fell into the churning whitewater behind the *LunaSea*. The dark plastic disappeared under the wake. For a horrible moment, Mer thought the bale had sunk, but then it popped up and bobbed on the swell.

The captain of the go-fast throttled back and broke away from the chase to retrieve the bale.

Mer's entire body shook as the adrenaline ebbed, leaving her weak-limbed and unable to get up. The angles of her seahorse pendant dug into her palm and she forced herself to relax her grip.

Fifty yards away, the smuggler pulled his boat alongside the black bundle and idled. The dark-haired passenger leaned over and tried to raise the bale into the boat. He couldn't do it on his own and the captain left the helm to help. Together they pulled the contraband into their vessel.

Leroy coaxed every bit of speed from the *LunaSea* he could, and it bumped and slammed across the waves. The distance between them and the smugglers grew. Mer drew a deep, steadying breath, but blew it out in a huff of renewed fear.

What if it wasn't the bale they wanted?

She clambered to her feet. Her cellphone was wedged in the corner of the camera table, still trapping the tattered remains of the list of names. But the coin was gone.

The flutter of fear returned. She had to warn Leroy. They weren't out of danger. Not yet. ■

\* \* \*

*An FBI National Academy graduate, Micki Browning worked in municipal law enforcement for more than two decades, retiring as a division commander. Now a full-time writer, she won the 2015 Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence and the Royal Palm Literary Award for her debut mystery, "Adrift." Her latest thriller is "Beached." Micki also writes short stories and non-fiction. Her work has appeared in dive magazines, anthologies, mystery magazines, and textbooks. She resides in Southern Florida with her partner in crime and a vast array of scuba equipment she uses for "research." Learn more at [MickiBrowning.com](http://MickiBrowning.com).*



# Alma Mater

By Mike Wheet

There were two shoes in the bushes, a few feet from the edge of the clearing. They were tattered old red Chucks, the kind Kelly used to wear. And they were angled upwards, resting on the heels, as if there were feet still in them.

I crouched for a few minutes at the edge of the empty lake bed, toeing the line where its brittle, yellow grass met the forest dirt. It was late summer—lithe green saplings stood in a tall ring and the wind rustled their new leaves. At their base grew the thick thatch of shrubs that partially hid the body. The soft murmur of traffic floated through the forest; in the branches overhead birds were perched on a wooden platform, warming up for the season. Otherwise, the clear day was quiet.

I inched into the clearing for a better view and pulled apart two of the bushes, creating a space among the dry branches. There were feet in the shoes and legs attached to the feet and the whole rest of Kelly rested above that. His skin was wan and bluish. He looked how I remembered him, except for his neck, which was twisted at an angle that made my insides tie themselves into knots. My guts heaved painfully and I was sick on the ground, though careful not to get any on the body. When I was through, I wiped my mouth and sat down next to him. A breeze whispered through the trees and tussled Kelly's hair.

"I told you I'd find you," I told him quietly. "I just hoped you'd be looking better when I did."

#

There's a secret world on campus, one that most people never even glimpse. That's what I learned from Kelly. Students here are so busy, he used to say, they stick to the main trails and walkways—the major streets, the central bike paths, the sidewalks around the central quad and the middle of campus. People keep their heads down, their eyes on the road right before them as they hurry from one class to the next. But if you look up, if you stray just a little from the campus's main thoroughfares, there's a whole hidden world to discover.

Sophomore year, Kelly showed me how to climb the fire escape to the roof of the Bio building, a quiet retreat just south of the quad where rare plants grew in sweaty terrariums. On the ground, the tiny bikers and walkers scurried along like

ants on a hill. You could lean over the railing and get a thrill at the sight of all campus laid out before you.

Just east of that was the Old Chem building, which had been closed for years since an earthquake damaged its foundation. We snuck in at night, slipping carefully past the motion sensors Kelly had discovered. Everything had been left in its place when the building was evacuated. We crept along the hallways, following the narrow beams from our makeshift headlamps. The unstable floors creaked as we walked, as if the whole place might come down on us. At least, *I* thought it did. Later, Kelly laughed and told me it was all in my head.

Kelly's favorite spot, though, was on the West side of campus. He didn't like to take people there, he said, because it seemed almost no one knew about it and he wanted to keep it that way. I was dating a girl named Anjali at the time and I practically had to beg him to let her come along.

To get there, you had to cross the lake. The spot was unreachable in the winter and spring, when the lake was full. But in summer and fall, the water drained out of the lake, leaving a bed of muck and dead grasses. At the far side of the lake grew a forest of young trees, with roots that dug deep into the fertile soil. As we stepped through the trees, a hush fell around us and the noise from campus faded. Kelly approached a giant tree that stood apart from the others. He glanced upwards, then looked back at me.

"You see it?" he asked.

High up in the branches, a wooden platform rested like a tray held by two arms. Wooden rungs had been nailed into the trunk and climbed up to the platform. It wasn't really a treehouse, just a simple place to sit and look over the canopy at all of campus. Kelly grabbed the nearest rung and shot up the trunk so fast that we could barely keep up. At the top, he had to help us leap onto the platform. My stomach dropped as the whole thing shuddered when I landed, and Anj shrieked. But Kelly was planted firmly and he held us as the branches settled. Beyond the lake lay the grid of campus, then the long stretch of El Camino, the rows of houses in Palo Alto, and finally the highways that ran to and from the city.

"Take a good look," Kelly said. "This is the best view in all of Silicon Valley."

That view must have been what killed him. The platform was fifty feet up or so; a fall would easily break your neck. We were always telling him to be careful, but he refused to listen. He'd just bound up those wooden rungs and sit up there for hours with his feet dangling over the edge.

Soon, I'd have to call the cops. A Missing Person report had been filed and Kelly's parents had been alerted. There was even a Facebook page. For a minute though, I just wanted to stay with him. I didn't move the body, but I did turn out his pockets. His phone was cracked and the battery was dead. His wallet was nearly empty—just his debit card, some dirty coins, and his old student ID with a bright-eyed picture from freshman year. He had a set of keys, a pungent little roll of mints, and a small orange vial—the type pills come in. I spun it around in my hand to read the label. The words “Adderall XR” were printed in small black letters, but the name on the label wasn't Kelly's. It was a name we both knew, but I couldn't figure out what it was doing there.

*Anjali Ramas.*

I left everything exactly how I'd found it, but I took the little vial with me. I wanted to think about it more, so I couldn't have the cops hauling it away and locking it up.

Two dopey detectives came to the house, took my statement, and ruled the whole thing an accident. One of them left a tattered business card on the counter in the kitchen as they went. Then there was a somber memorial service held at the chapel on campus. In a few days things had quieted down, so I dug up Anj's number in my contacts and texted her. At first she said she'd be too busy to meet: she was working at a startup in San Francisco and commuting back and forth. But I texted her back and said it was important. She ignored me for a while, but eventually my phone dinged. She'd be in Palo Alto Thursday evening for a workout, and if I wanted to meet her there, we could talk.

The Equinox was a bit off from the center of downtown, down a couple of tree-lined blocks with lines of high shrubbery that hid mansions. The sun had dipped below the rim of the sky, turning the clouds overhead bright streaks of color. I parked my bike at the rack in front and looked in the tall window. Right near the front was the cycling section, where rows of sleek, beautiful stationary bikes were being ridden by rows of sleek, beautiful people. Anj was near the back of the room in all black, designer gear. She'd pulled her hair into a tight ponytail and had worked up a light sheen of sweat that glistened on her dark skin.

The class was finishing up, and after one final push the riders climbed off their bikes. Anj spotted me through the glass and flashed her lovely white teeth at me. She made a signal with her arm which I assumed meant ‘I'll be right

there,’ but could have meant anything. She grabbed her things and disappeared into the locker room.

The air was chill and my legs were tired, so I stepped inside to look for somewhere to sit. The gym throbbed with peppy electronic music and there wasn't a single speck of dust to be found. It felt like you needed a good job or rich parents to even set foot in the place: no wonder Anj liked it. I, on the other hand, tried to act casual and *look* like I belonged.

The man at the front desk swung around with a plastered-on smile that quickly faded as he looked me over. His eyes wandered down my hoodie, sweat-stained jeans, dirty socks, and weathered sneakers. He'd crossed his arms haughtily before I even made it across the room.

“Hi, I'm—” I began.

“Are you a member?” His dark eyes glittered at me. He already knew the answer.

“I'm just waiting for someone.”

“You're welcome to wait outside,” he said. “We're not open to the public.”

Heat prickled at my collar and rose to my face. I was forming something rude to say back when Anj appeared from the doorway behind the desk. She glanced at the scene before her and quickly figured it out. “He's with me,” she said.

The man's smile reappeared and his voice rose about an octave. “Glad you two found each other,” he said. “Did you have a good workout?”

“Fine,” Anj said as she brushed past him.

“Have a wonderful evening.”

Anj didn't answer, she just grabbed my sleeve and pulled me out into the night.

“I'm sorry about that,” she said, once we were down the block from the gym.

I'd agreed to wheel my bike the few blocks to where Anj had parked her new navy blue Prius.

“They can be kind of snooty. When I first started coming I'd wear sweats and my old dorm t-shirt but everyone would stare.”

“I didn't even know you owned yoga pants.”

Anj tugged self-consciously at her elastic waistband, then she shrugged. “I didn't. I went shopping.”

We walked a bit further in silence. Neither of us knew what to say.

“What've you been up to?” she asked finally. “Still looking for a job?”

“I haven't found anything I like yet.” When I looked at her she was staring down at the ground, as if she was embarrassed.

“Don't worry,” she said. “It's just been a couple months. You'll find the right one.”

We waited for the light and crossed University. Her car was parked on the corner, its new paint still shined. She stopped at the curb and turned back to face me.



"What'd you want to talk about, anyways?"

"Guess you heard about Kelly?" I asked.

Her face turned serious. "Yeah, I heard. Saddest thing. I couldn't make the funeral, I had work."

"Had you seen him recently?"

She thought for a moment, then said: "No, not for a couple months."

"I just can't work it out in my head. He'd been climbing that tree for years, but *this* time he falls and breaks his neck?"

"We all told him to be careful. With no walls or railings, that thing was an accident waiting to happen."

"I know. I guess I just can't believe he's gone."

Anj reached out and rested her hand on my shoulder. "He was a good guy," she said. "He deserved better. But we don't all get what we deserve. My dad's always saying that." She pushed the button on her keys and climbed into the driver's seat.

"He asks about you, you know," she said. She buckled her seatbelt, rolled down her window, and clicked on her headlamps. The little hybrid engine sputtered to life.

"What do you say?" I asked.

"I say, I can't remember why we broke up. I'm sure it seemed important at the time. But for the life of me, I can't remember now."

She gave me a look that must have meant goodbye, then she rolled up her window and merged into traffic.

That night, I dreamed of Anj. Not as she was then, but as she'd been two years before when we were dating. We met towards the end of freshman year, when she had a lecture with a clique of girls who lived in my dorm. Anj was from a suburb outside New Haven. Her mother was a business school professor and her father was an MD, and when they called for one of their regular check-ins, Anj liked to whine that she *had* to take it, "the doctors" were calling.

Anj was wicked smart and bitingly funny. She also had this air of casual coolness about her; on a campus of Type A obsessives, she was possibly the most easygoing person I knew. It took me a while to realize that some of her casualness came from having rich parents. She wasn't showy or pretentious about it, but their money was always wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She was the first person I'd ever met who never worried about her bank account. I found her fascinating.

I met Dr. and Dr. Ramas soon after Anj and I started dating. At first they didn't like the idea of Anj having a boyfriend and it took them a while to warm up to me. But I was a city kid with a single mother who'd worked hard and made it into a good school. It was a story they knew and liked, and after I visited their bright, sprawling home that summer, "the doctors" invited me to come back any time.

They were tougher on Anj, though. They reminded her

how much they were paying for her tuition and how much it was going to cost to live the sort of life she was used to. They weren't going to be around forever, and asked if she was doing the right things to set herself up for the career she'd want? They offered to help however they could, but still it was the first time I'd seen Anj stressed and unhappy. Towards the end of my visit, we'd sit out on the front porch sipping iced tea. Anj would glance all around her, at the neighboring houses, at the gleaming cars in the driveways, with this distant look. It was like she was finally seeing the cost of everything, and she was adding up the numbers in her head.

We dated on and off for about another year, but it wasn't the same. Anj lost her coolness and became just as busy as everyone else. She joined every team and club she could, even started a few of her own. I could never figure out how she did so much. Between classes and all her other activities, she had no time for me. One day, early in junior year, she took me to lunch and reached across the table for my hand. 'We just wanted different things,' she said. My sandwich sat untouched in front of me as she slung her bag over her shoulder and headed to class. And that was that.

It was still dark when I woke up, gasping for air. I threw off the covers and rolled towards the open window, where the cool night seeped in. The house was quiet; my housemates must have gone to bed. So I laid in the dark, thinking about what Anj said.

It took me a while to summon the courage, but eventually I got up and turned on the light. I rooted around in my top dresser drawer until I found the empty pill vial. I held it up in the yellow incandescent bulb, squinting to read the label, although I already had a sense of what I was going to find. The prescription was dated August 2<sup>nd</sup>...just two weeks before. I tucked the vial in the back corner of the drawer and covered it with several pairs of socks. Then I turned out the light and laid back down on top of the covers. Overhead, the ceiling fan spun slowly as I let my mind reel through everything I'd learned since Kelly's death, knowing I wouldn't be getting any more sleep tonight.

#

Kelly had been renting a little room in a house in East Palo Alto. I helped him move in after graduation. It was a squat, salmon-colored ranch house with rusting iron bars over the windows. Patches of dead grass laid out in the front, and beyond that was the desolate, pot-holed street.

I stood on the little stoop and swung the metal knocker twice, loudly. I waited, listening to the hushed weekend noise, hoping to hear something from inside. I'd nearly given up and turned back to my car when a light clicked on in the window and soft footsteps padded towards the door.

The man who swung it open had pale, waxy skin and wiry, untrimmed hair on his face and chest. He wore only

socks and basketball shorts, exposing a monochrome dragon tattoo that wrapped around his shoulder. He squinted in the bright daylight.

"Can I do for you?" he asked.

"You're Aric, right? Kelly's roommate?"

"Yeah, he lived here."

"Can I come in?"

He eyed me uncomfortably and sucked in a breath.

"Maybe you didn't hear what happened," he said.

"I heard. Actually, I found the body."

"Shit," he said.

"Could I come in and look around?"

"You a cop or something?"

"No, just a friend."

We stepped into the dim, overcrowded living room. It seemed to be used as much for storage as for living—a grill and several lawn chairs sat up against the wall. Aric kicked an empty pizza box into the corner of the room and gave me an apologetic look. A flat screen TV hung on the wall and a sunken beige sofa sat across from it in the middle of the room. A dazed girl in ratty clothing sprawled across the sofa. Her skin was greasy and sallow and her hair looked unwashed. On the Ikea table in front of her sat a large green bong, still bubbling from a recent hit. Aric shut the door and the girl's bloodshot eyes swiveled towards the noise.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it," Aric said.

The girl pulled herself up and stared at me. The straps on her threadbare blouse nearly slipped off her shoulders. She pointed an unsteady finger.

"I know you," she said.

"You're baked, you don't know anything," Aric snapped.

The girl didn't argue, she just giggled and sank back down into the couch.

Aric led me past her, down a narrow hallway with wood paneling and dingy carpet. He pushed open a door at the end. "This was his," he said. "Take your time. You need somethin', I'll be down there." He nodded towards the square of light we'd just come from.

It was a cramped little room with a single window over the bed. The walls were dark and made it feel like a dungeon. The place was a mess: clothes spilled out of drawers, books and papers covered the desk. I flipped through several handwritten pages. They seemed to be English and Math notes, which didn't make much sense. There was also a picture frame that lay flat on top of the mess. I picked it up and found a photo of me, Anj, and Kelly from sophomore year, all grinning at the camera. I left it standing up; it was a nice photo.

I didn't quite know what I was looking for, so I pulled the place apart. I stripped the neatly-made bed and pulled off the

pillowcases. I lifted up the mattress and checked under the frame. Little clots of dust and hair swirled in the corners, but that was all.

His room connected to a shared bathroom with baby blue tiles on the walls and a clawfoot tub on one side. I checked the whole room: nothing. I even opened the cabinet behind the mirror. Its shelves were sticky with old toothpaste, but otherwise they were empty.

When I wandered back down the hall, I found Aric on the sofa near the girl's feet. He was playing Madden and his eyes were glued to the screen. He took a sip of store brand orange soda straight from the bottle.

"You good?" he asked without looking at me.

I hovered in the doorway, not ready to leave. "What was he like before it happened?" I asked. "Was he different at all?"

Aric grunted and mashed buttons, ignoring me.

The girl rolled her head over the armrest to face me. "He was kind of a dick," she said. "He got quiet and mean. Then he stopped coming out of his room."

Aric shushed her and smacked her foot. "You don't speak ill of the dead," he said. "Don't you know that?"

I headed for the front door, ducking under the TV as I passed. As I reached for the knob, I heard the girl gasp.

"I knew I'd seen you somewhere," she said. "That picture on Kelly's desk."

"Yeah, that's me."

"Guess all Kelly's friends are comin' around then."

I turned back to face her. "What do you mean?"

"That girl in the picture. She was here too."

The blood froze in my veins and I stood completely still. But neither of them noticed.

Aric paused the game and turned angrily to the girl. "When?" he shouted.

"Couple days ago," she said.

"And you let her in?"

"You were at work."

"So that's what you do when I'm gone? You let strangers into my house?" Aric's face turned red and puffy with rage. Little flecks of spittle were collecting on his lips and chin. But the girl seemed only half-aware he was yelling.

I slipped out the front door and let them fight it out. The air outside was cool and gently breezy. But I had nervous heat building in my chest from what the girl had said. I had just a vague hunch, but I followed it around the side of the house, where their driveway connected with an alley. At the property's edge there were two big green trash containers, both overflowing. I swung them open, releasing a powerful stench. I held my breath as well as I could. Then, I dug in.

I found the regular food waste you'd expect: coffee grounds, soda bottles, greasy pizza boxes, and takeout cartons. I jerked back when my hand nearly brushed a used condom, but I just scooped it aside with a discarded plastic



spoon and kept going. Buried under all the food was a plastic bag of books. I hauled it out and dragged it into the alley, where I could breathe better. There were three big GMAT prep textbooks, warped and yellow-stained by the coffee grounds. And there were six more empty orange pill vials, identical to the one I'd found in Kelly's pocket.

The garbage told me everything I needed to know.

**O**n Sunday, I texted Anj and asked her to meet again. This time she didn't take as much convincing. We agreed to meet at the Coffee House on campus, which was right between where we each lived.

I got there before Anj and picked a booth near the entrance. The Coffee House was my favorite campus eatery during school and it still had the same cool, funky vibe. The owners kept the lighting dim and played jazz over the stereo. It attracted mostly artsy students, dressed in black and typing on MacBooks, but it was open to the general public and occasionally non-students wandered in. The men at the booth next to mine clearly weren't students. They were both older and one had a shaved head. I amused myself, watching the skin on his neck crease as he talked and gestured, until Anj arrived.

She was dressed for work even though it was the weekend and her hair hung loose around her shoulders. She seemed lost for a moment before she spotted me, then a smile lit up her face and she made her way over. She dropped down in the seat across from me. I started to speak, but she reached across the table and grabbed my hand.

"Wait," she said. "Let me go first."

"Okay."

"I was telling the truth, you know. About not remembering."

"What?"

"I used to keep this journal, because I was an idiot. So I dug it up and went back to sophomore year and then it all came back to me. God, how stupid we were. How stupid I was." Anj looked up and held my gaze: her irises were dark puddles, deep enough to drown in. Then she drew back a bit, as if she didn't trust herself.

"I guess...I'm just saying...I'm glad to see you again."

I didn't have anything to say back, so we sat there and listened to the bustle of the place. Fork tines clinked on ceramic; students chattered into cellphones. Everything about it felt slightly off, but the place was the same. We were the ones who had changed.

"You know what you want to eat?" she asked. "I think I do."

"I want to talk, actually," I said. I took my hand back.

"You said that last time and then you didn't say anything." She carefully arranged her napkin in her lap, then folded her arms across her chest. "So, what is it?"

"I was just thinking about something. The first time we went to the treehouse with Kelly," Anj kept up her smile but her lip quivered slightly. I'd never have noticed if I hadn't been looking for it.

"You screamed when you landed on that platform. Even I thought I was going to fall. But Kelly was the bravest one of us. He just swayed with the tree, like it was nothing."

"What made you think of that?" she asked.

"I've been trying to figure out how Kelly could have just fallen. Then I started thinking, maybe he didn't just fall. Maybe he jumped."

I watched Anj's color fade like a transition in a movie. She looked pale and ashen in the dim café lighting. Her eyes darted nervously around the room.

"Kelly wouldn't do that," she said. But her voice was weak.

"I found this in Kelly's pocket." I pulled out the orange vial and placed it right in the middle of the table. We both stared down at it. That little vial held so much: Kelly's whole life, maybe Anj's, too.

"It's Adderall," I told her. "Yours, filled two weeks ago. You want to tell me why Kelly had it?"

Anj stared at the little vial, reading the label. The corners of her mouth twitched. Then, a gruff voice jolted us both.

"You folks know what you want?"

Neither of us had noticed the heavysset waiter arrive. He was a short man with a flat nose and large cheeks shaded with stubble. He held his pen poised over his notepad and glanced suspiciously from me to Anj and back again.

Anj gathered her things, stood up from the table, and tried to inch by him. "I think I should go," she said.

"C'mon, Anj."

"I'm not sure what's going on but I'm starting to feel like I should talk to a lawyer."

"Nothing's 'going on,' Anj. I'm just asking a question."

The waiter rocked on his heels and tucked his notepad into his apron. "I'll give you two a minute," he said as he turned to leave.

"She'll have the risotto," I said without meaning to. The words just burst out and seemed to have no intention of stopping. "Vegetarian. With extra asparagus and no peppers."

Anj cocked her head towards me, surprised. But she seemed to soften a little.

"See? I remember things, too. Come sit back down. We're just talking."

Anj wavered at the booth's end for a moment, then she slid back into her seat. Her eyes narrowed at me, but she put her purse down like she planned to stay. We both turned to the waiter, who still hovered over us uncomfortably.

He cleared his throat. "Anything for you, sir?"

"Just coffee."

"Very good." He lumbered away quickly.

I turned back to Anj, who was looking away from me out



"The latest Tallent & Lowery book from celebrated novelist Amy Lignor is the best yet, an exciting and colorful suspense story with every element we love."

—Night Owl Reviews

# THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

TALLENT & LOWERY  
BOOK FIVE

AMY  
LIGNOR

SUSPENSE  
PUBLISHING

the front window. "I'll tell you what I think happened. You don't have to say anything."

She nodded.

"Kelly was working and studying for the GMAT but it was too much for him. He asked you how you used to do it all in college—sports and clubs and school and work, all at the same time. And you told him your secret." I nudged the little vial at her.

"You sold him some of your pills and they helped. He asked you for more. And then more. Soon he was burning through them faster than you. So you got worried and cut him off. I read online what the withdrawal is like. Anxiety. Depression. Mood swings. Suicidal thoughts. After it happened, you even went back to his house to make sure nothing would tie him to you."

Anj whipped around to face me. The dark veins in her eyes showed and a tear slipped down her cheek.

"My dad said they'd help me focus," she said. "I take them like you're supposed to. But Kelly took too many. I sold him a month's worth and he came back a week later saying he was out. I didn't know what to do."

Soon, the waiter arrived with our order. He gave me the food and gave Anj the coffee, then he realized his mistake and switched them around. He asked if he could get us anything else, and when we said no, he slipped back to the kitchen. Anj didn't touch her food, though. She just pulled a tissue from her purse and tried to clean herself up.

"What're you going to do?" she asked. "Now that you know."

"I don't know. I haven't figured that out yet."

"Whatever you do, I won't fight it," she said. "I did an awful thing and I'll never forgive myself. Kelly was full of life and I took that away. Not just from him. From his parents. From you."

Anj stared at me with moist, pleading eyes. "I have no right to ask this, but I'm going to anyway. Please don't do the same to me. Turning me in won't bring Kelly back, but it will ruin everything I've worked for. And you know how hard I've worked."

I took a long sip of coffee. It was still hot and it burned the roof of my mouth and my throat.

"I know, Anj," I said. "I know."

We sat in silence as she finished her food. Even once she was done and the waiter cleared away our dishes, she stayed rooted to her seat and stared at the table. She looked up as I stood to leave, though.

"See you around," I said.

"Will you?" she asked sadly.

As I headed for the door, I glanced at the two men in the booth next to ours. One held a coffee mug in his large hands, the other picked at a dry pastry. They wore baggy jeans and ill-fitting polo shirts. They looked just as doozy out of uniform as they had when they'd sat in my living room. The coffee drinker looked up and held my gaze for a moment, then I pushed past them and out the front door where the day was waiting.

I crouched down by the bike rack to undo my lock. I tried to work out if it was fair the way things had ended up: me out here, Anj in there, Kelly in the ground somewhere. But I didn't think about it too hard.

Someone once told me we don't all get what we deserve. ■





# No REGRETS

By Julie Moffett  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

THE EVENING BEFORE THE WEDDING, I NOTICED SOMETHING ODD.

It's not that I go around *looking* for things out of the ordinary, but I have a photographic memory, and I'm also good with math and computers, so it's in my nature to look for meaningful patterns. When something seems off, I notice, perhaps more than most people.

My name is Lexi Carmichael, and first things first: the wedding I'm talking about is *not* mine. That honor goes to my best friend, Basia Kowalski. Tomorrow she's getting married to another of my best friends, Xavier Zimmerman, one of the most accomplished computer geniuses in the US. I have the honor of serving as Basia's maid of honor, a duty which has been stressing me out daily for the past few months.

People, parties, dancing and the beach are *not* my things. In fact, before Basia became my roommate at Georgetown University, I'd avoided all of them by never leaving my room. I lived online. Hacking, gaming and chat rooms. Virtual kingdoms and personal domains. Then Basia swept into our Georgetown dorm room and drowned the place in pink. She smiled at me every time I tried to ignore her, and offered to let me lecture her about password security if I'd just go to the cafeteria with her for an hour. She'd drag me to parties, and help me with my French homework. I still remember the day she introduced me to someone as her best friend. I'd been surprised and yet deeply touched, not sure how and when it had evolved to that. I owe a lot to her, more than I can ever repay. If she hadn't continually badgered me to "log off," I might still be stuck in a virtual existence. The transition hasn't been easy for me, but it's been worth it. Walking down the aisle as the maid of honor at her wedding is a small price to pay for a friendship I value highly.

Thankfully, the wedding rehearsal and subsequent dinner had gone off without a hitch. I hadn't messed it up, destroyed anything, or been shot at, kidnapped or tortured in the process. That sounds like a joke, but I'm not kidding. My life has been a statistically improbable whirlwind of all the above for the past year. My friends say I have a little black cloud of trouble that follows me around. Since I'm a computer geek and a math nerd, I started a spreadsheet noting specific events, actions and my involvement in them, so I could keep track. I called it my "Little Black Cloud" spreadsheet. I'd racked up a considerable number of entries in a less-than-one-year period. So much so, I'd mathematically proved beyond any question of a doubt that I'm a trouble magnet. My friends were right.

It concerned me more than I let on.

The fact the evening had gone as well as it had was a near miracle. Now I had only to survive the next twenty-four hours. Then my best friends would be happily married and the pressure for me to perform would be off.

Then, *bam!* My spidey senses went off when I saw them.

The *them* I'm referring to is three guys I passed in the lobby on my way to the hotel bar that faced the ocean. I was on my way to meet my boyfriend, Slash, who'd texted me he was waiting there. My boyfriend is Italian by birth, but American by heart. He's deep into computers and hacking like I am and was just promoted to one of the most sensitive spots in the NSA. He's so valuable to the agency, he's followed around the clock by his own Secret Service detail. It's been weird having my first real relationship in the prism of a fishbowl, but it is what it is.

I'd been in the bridal suite, because I was sharing a room with Basia on the night before her big day. I'd exchanged my dress and heels for jeans and a T-shirt because I



couldn't handle the discomfort for one more minute. Then, walking through the hotel lobby on my way to meet Slash, I saw them.

They weren't doing anything illegal or overtly suspicious. They weren't even standing together. Instead, the three of them were spread out in the lobby crowded with people. But all were sweating like crazy, even though the hotel was well air-conditioned. They glanced around furtively, as if they were scoping the place or looking for someone. They never indicated they were together, but the regular eye contact with each other confirmed they were definitely operating as a team.

A team of what?

I supposed it could have been as harmless as three guys spreading out to look for a friend or a girlfriend, but that wasn't the vibe I got.

While processing all of this inside the span of about five seconds, my inner alarm went off and I froze in mid-step. The guy the farthest from me noticed first. His eyes met mine for a fraction of a second before he and his friends abruptly melted into the crowd.

I did a three-sixty in the middle of the lobby, but all were gone.

What the heck?

Frowning, I went into the bar. It wasn't hard to spot my boyfriend, especially when most everyone else in the bar was looking at him, too. Although he perched quietly on a barstool, he commanded attention. Maybe it was the way he sat, his back straight, his dark eyes constantly assessing the room. Although people didn't mind looking at his jet black hair, square jaw and well-toned physique, they seemed hesitant to meet his gaze. I suspected it was because he gave off a slightly dangerous vibe. Tonight, dressed in a white shirt and dress slacks, holding a drink in his hand, he could have easily been posing for a *Vogue Italia* magazine photo shoot instead of waiting at the bar for his geeky, jean-clad girlfriend.

His gaze landed instantly on me when I walked in. My heart skipped a beat when he rose to greet me.

When I reached him, he pulled me in for a kiss, running a hand down the back of my ponytail. He smelled good, like a mixture of citrus, soap and cologne. I leaned into him and pressed my lips against his, feeling the scratch of his five-o'clock shadow against my chin. It didn't matter that we'd been dating for months, every time he kissed me, I melted.

Still, he knew me well enough to immediately sense something was wrong.

"Cara," he murmured against my mouth. "What's up?"

It boggled my mind that he could tell that from one brief look. Either I was going to have to work on a better poker face or resign myself to the fact he'd always know what I was feeling.

I put a hand on his chest and lowered my voice. "There were these guys in the lobby. They weren't doing anything...but I got a feeling."

He nodded. He trusted my instincts as much as I trusted his. "Descriptions?"

"Male, all aged between twenty to twenty-seven years, maybe. Two Caucasian, one Hispanic, all average height, no overt tattoos or markings. One of the Caucasian males had a navy blue knit hat on, a dark T-shirt and blue jean shorts. He had some facial hair, a partial beard, I think. The others both had dark hair, white T-shirts—sorry I couldn't see the front of them to see if there were any markings—and shorts. All of them were wearing sandals." My descriptions could have fit half the population of a hotel at the beach. "They're long gone now, Slash. They noticed me looking and disappeared."

"Wait here." Slash walked over to speak with two guys sitting at a small round table. His Secret Service tail. The agent on the right stood and went with Slash toward the lobby. The other stayed in his seat, his eyes on me. No question what his job was.

Sighing, I ordered a cranberry juice and spritzer water and stirred in a lime when the bartender set it in front of me. I read the latest tech news on my phone until fifteen minutes later when Slash returned and sat on the bar stool next to me.

"No sign of anyone fitting that description," he said. "But I told hotel security. They'll be reviewing the security feed to check it out."

I set my phone on the bar. "Hopefully it's nothing."

"These days it's better to be sure than hopeful."

"I agree." I noticed he'd angled his stool to have a better view of all the entrances to the bar. Since one side of the bar was open to the beach and ocean, it was a lot of ground to cover. Still, Slash didn't seem outwardly concerned. He took my hand and squeezed it lightly.

"You did a good job at the rehearsal tonight, cara."

"I didn't trip over my feet or lose the ring, so I count it as a win." The rings had gone back to the safe in the bridal suite I was sharing with Basia for the night.

"Definitely a win."

"I don't know how you can be so calm," I said. "Doesn't it bother you to be on display in front of everyone?"

Slash had graciously agreed to fill in as a groomsman after Xavier's coworker, Manny, had caught the chicken pox three days ago. It meant a lot to me that Slash was going to be a part of the ceremony. When he was there to be my buffer, social interactions were much easier. I knew it meant a lot to Slash, too, because it signaled Xavier had started to see him as a friend, and not just my boyfriend.

Progress on all fronts.

"I don't let things like that bother me." Slash picked up his drink and took a sip. From the smell, I guessed it was scotch,



two fingers, neat. “Not when I have more important things to worry about...like your parents coming to the wedding.”

“Right.” I sighed and stirred the lime around in my drink, thankful I wasn’t the only one worried about it. “I’m going to tell them we’re living together at the reception.”

Slash raised an eyebrow. “How is it that I didn’t know you haven’t told them yet?”

My cheeks heated. “Well, I kept meaning to, but it was never the right time. There was the trip to Egypt, the last-minute wedding preparations with Basia...and here we are.”

He gave me a look that even I could read. He wasn’t impressed with my lame excuses. Easy for him to think that, because he’d already told *his* parents. But his mom and stepdad live in England, so he had distance as a cushion, if he needed it. Lucky him. Distance, a lot of it, always made conversations easier for me. Unfortunately, my parents live twenty minutes from our new place in Silver Spring, Maryland—not that they even *knew* I had a new place yet. If I tried to chicken out and tell them over the phone, they’d be at our house before I had unpacked the glassware and could offer them something to drink. I’d made my decision and intended to stick with it no matter what they might say, but even I knew telling them in person was the adult thing to do. It didn’t make it any easier, though.

Technically, Slash and I had only been living together for about forty-eight hours. It was a big step for a geek girl who hates change, and a loner like Slash, but so far, it was working out better than expected. Difficult to derive any significant data from a forty-eight-hour stretch, though.

I’d prepared as much as possible for the talk with my parents because I always try to be ready with things to say for important conversations. According to the book I’d now read twice, titled *The Cohabitation Talk*, telling your parents you were moving in with your boyfriend was best done in person and with confidence in your decision. Despite the clawing anxiety now living in the pit of my stomach, I’d figure out how to do it right.

I worried the most about my dad’s reaction. He’d met Slash several times, chatted with him (while secretly employing ill-disguised, lawyerly interrogating methods) and watched him interact with me. *Maybe* he liked Slash a little...even if he wouldn’t admit it. Unfortunately, my dad is far too overprotective of his only daughter, even if said daughter can take care of herself just fine.

Luckily, convincing my mother this was a good development wasn’t going to be a problem. She’d be thrilled to hear Slash and I had moved in together. She adored him and had been mentally fitting him for a tuxedo for months while planning our two-thousand-guest wedding—which neither Slash nor I would ever attend, if we ever decided to get married.

I tried to push aside the anxiety. It wouldn’t help to freak out when everything was going well. I took a sip of my drink just as Basia and Xavier walked into the bar holding hands. Basia was dressed in a bright yellow sundress with matching shoes and purse. She was glowing—literally—with happiness and the bit of extra sun she’d gotten this afternoon while tanning on the beach. She carried a package in one hand and beamed as Xavier spotted us and raised a hand in greeting.

She walked over and gave me a hug. “Lexi. There you are. You slipped out after dinner so quickly I didn’t have a chance to speak to you.”

“You were busy,” I said. “I just got out of your way.”

She noticed the jeans. “You changed already?”

“I hope that’s okay. I figured I was off duty.”

“It’s fine.”

Slash slid off his stool and insisted Basia sit next to me. As there was no place left for the men to sit, they stood behind us. Basia perched on the stool and smiled. “Guys, I’m so happy. Everything was wonderful tonight. The rehearsal was perfect, and the dinner was spectacular. It all went exactly as planned.”

“That’s the part I liked best,” I admitted. “The going-exactly-as-planned part.”

The bartender came over and took Basia’s and Xavier’s drink requests—a glass of chardonnay for Basia and a beer for Xavier.

I tapped the package she’d laid on the counter. “Another wedding present?”

“Yes. The front desk handed it off to me.”

For some reason, Basia wanted the packages to be on display for the reception and Xavier didn’t care, so those of us who chose to get them something from the registry had our packages mailed to the hotel. Didn’t seem logical to me, but I wasn’t the bride, so I kept my mouth shut.

Since Basia and Xavier had apparently received an avalanche of gifts, the hotel ran out of room in their safe and storage area. So, upon our arrival at the hotel, Basia and I had taken several of the larger packages and stored them in our room. It was clear, however, if they got any more presents before tomorrow, we’d have to rent a room just for them. ■

*Julie Moffett is a bestselling author and writes in the genres of mystery, young adult, historical romance and paranormal romance. She has won numerous awards, including the 2014 Mystery & Mayhem Award for Best YA/New Adult Mystery, the prestigious 2014 HOLT Award for Best Novel with Romantic Elements, a HOLT Merit Award for Best Novel by a Virginia Author (twice!), the 2016 Award of Excellence, a PRISM Award for Best Romantic Time-Travel and Best of the Best Paranormal Books of 2002, and the 2011 EPIC Award for Best Action/Adventure Novel. She has also garnered additional nominations for the Bookseller’s Best Award, Daphne du Maurier Award and the Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence. Her book “A Double-Edged Blade” was an Amazon #1 Best-Selling Novel.*

Visit Julie’s website at: [www.juliemoffett.com](http://www.juliemoffett.com).

# C.J. COOKE

## Enhancing Well-Being & Encouraging Minds

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



Carolyn Jess-Cooke has had a remarkable ‘journey’ to become an international best-selling novelist, a poet who, quite literally, has her words set in steel, as well as an admired editor and academic. Moments in time that ranged from monumental to tragic have allowed this lady to create unforgettable tales, inspire others, incite conversations on the subject of creativity and motherhood, aid young readers and writers, and so much more.

Her surroundings have included growing up in Belfast on a council estate to living in a seaside town in north-east England and commuting to work in the stunning city of Glasgow, to a campus that looks much like the beloved Hogwarts. Taking time to speak with *Suspense Magazine*, C.J. Cooke discusses her new psychological suspense novel, the groups that she has founded, as well as a new project in the works that will bring some of her amazing characters into the television realm.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Can you give readers a little inside look into your new title, “I Know My Name”?

C.J. Cooke (C.J.C.): *It’s a psychological suspense about a woman, Eloise, who mysteriously and abruptly vanishes from her home in London, leaving her four-year-old and newborn unattended. Her husband, Lochlan, is forced to search for her, and in so doing begins to uncover the possible reasons for her departure, whilst Eloise finds herself on a Greek island with amnesia and only four strangers to offer her solutions*

*and a way home. As tensions arise within the group, Eloise’s safe return home is thrown into jeopardy but draws her closer to remembering who she is—and why she is there.*

S. MAG.: It has been stated that this particular title will appear on TV in the future. Can you tell us a bit about that project and how it’s going in development?

C.J.C.: *Yes! The TV rights have been optioned by a London-based media company, Catalyst Global Media, who have done some great projects. We’re still in the pre-production stage but they’re very passionate about it and share a similar vision to how the book can be adapted for a 6-part drama.*

S. MAG.: Where, exactly, do you get your ideas from? Are you one of those who read something in a headline and get a burst of inspiration, or are you more of an artist who gets the foundation for your creations from out of nowhere?

C.J.C.: *Both, I think. With, “I Know My Name,” the island emerged first. I kept trying to write something with four writers on a retreat that happened to be set on an uninhabited island—my friend, CL Taylor, mentioned to me over dinner that she was going on a retreat with some other writers and the idea took hold as an interesting basis for a story. A lot of writing is trial and error—once I had developed the characters of Eloise and Lochlan, I knew they had kids, but I had no idea that little Max (their 4-year-old) would be such an important part of the story. I loved writing him. The themes of motherhood and memory that are*



central to the book appear in everything I write. I expect I'll return to these themes again, but in different forms.

S. MAG.: Tell us a little about the project "Writing Motherhood" that you are the founder of. Do you have any particular special fan moment you can share with our readers?

C.J.C.: I set up 'Writing Motherhood' in 2013 to talk about the impact of motherhood on creativity and vice versa. I have four young children, ages between 11 and 5, and work full-time as an academic at the University of Glasgow whilst sustaining a career (or careers) as a poet and novelist. I'm curious about the meanings couched within the question, 'how do you juggle motherhood and writing?' which is routinely posed to female writers with kids but rarely to male writers with children. Motherhood is often seen as incompatible with a writing career precisely because of how Western society regards women's work. I'm fascinated by the tensions between writing and motherhood, and in the way that motherhood can enhance creativity. The project creates a space for maternal subjectivities and voices, and deconstructs media representations of motherhood that are implicitly derogatory and sexist. I toured for 18 months with 20 female writers and spoke to roomfuls of women who praised the project for enabling a conversation about motherhood and creativity, and it's been really rewarding to produce an anthology that was hailed as 'ground-breaking' by a reviewer, in POETRY magazine.

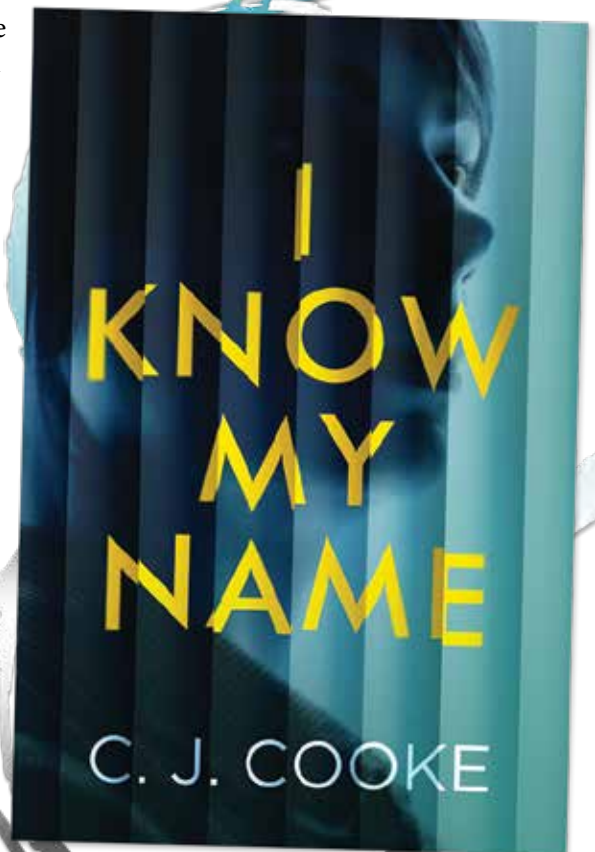
S. MAG.: One of your many paths is researching creative writing for mental health. Could you tell us a little more about how that came to be?

C.J.C.: My father committed suicide when I was 13 years old, so mental illness has been at the forefront of my creative work for a long time. About ten years ago I was commissioned to write a series of poems for a multimillion-dollar mental health complex in northern England. The poems were to be set into a ribbon of steel running for half a mile throughout the complex—it's the largest installation of textual art in the United Kingdom—and I had to think carefully about who would be using the space, which involved holding workshops with mental health patients and their therapists. I was inadvertently plunged into thinking about how to use creative writing for mental health, and from that point I began thinking critically about my own practice—how much of my writing was 'therapeutic' and whether it could actually be as beneficial as art, music and drama. Since then I've looked at a number of studies that prove its benefits, as well as how it can be harmful. I'm currently setting up a network for practitioners and researchers to look more closely at how writing can aid recovery from mental illness whilst establishing regulations for 'writing for wellbeing' courses.

S. MAG.: Having a career as both a novelist and a poet, can you discuss the most difficult aspect of each with other readers and authors out there? On the flip side, what is the easiest aspect of putting together a novel as well as a poem?

C.J.C.: I don't think I could be a novelist without first being a poet—the discipline of form and close engagement with language has informed my creative practice whether writing poetry or fiction. Poetry enables me to reach realms of language, meaning and imagery that occasionally fiction can't, and I can easily write a poem in an evening (or occasionally a handful of minutes), whereas a novel is a marathon. I love the problem-solving challenge that novels pose, and it's exciting to plan it out and undertake an ambitious, immersive project that coheres multiple themes and voices, but it's also exhausting and often emotionally draining.

**"I'm currently setting up a network for practitioners and researchers to look more closely at how writing can aid recovery from mental illness whilst establishing regulations for 'writing for wellbeing' courses."**

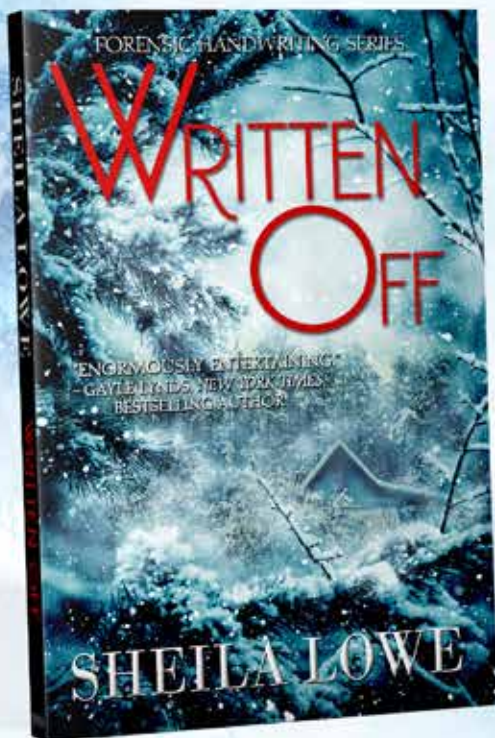


# A FORENSIC HANDWRITING MYSTERY

**"Utterly compelling! Joins the ranks of those rare thrillers that expertly blend nonstop plotting with keen perceptions of the characters—good and bad—who populate this wonderful tale."**

**—Jeffery Deaver, New York Times Bestselling Author of "The Bone Collector" on "Outside the Lines"**

## SHEILA LOWE



**"Lowe wins readers over with her well-developed heroine and the wealth of fascinating detail on handwriting analysis."**

**—Booklist**

**WWW.CLAUDIAROSESERIES.COM**

**SUSPENSE PUBLISHING**

S. MAG.: What is it like teaching and mentoring groups such as Cuckoo Young Writers and others? Do you have an outlook/viewpoint on the passion that young people have nowadays to become novelists in the future?

C.J.C.: *I'm passionate about teaching young people. I started writing at the age of seven and there just weren't any opportunities in Belfast to meet writers and learn from them. I think I would have published sooner had that been the case, though waiting until my 30s to publish probably wasn't a bad idea. I think it's great to nurture ambitions but more important to inspire young people to remember that creativity is play, and that involves trying out different games. You can aspire to be a novelist, but don't be afraid to explore auto-ethnography, erasure fiction, theatre, poetry, and so on. Have fun with it. And read, read, read.*

S. MAG.: Being a film academic before moving on to the writing realm, could you share with our readers some of your experiences in that area?

C.J.C.: *I won a scholarship at Queen's University Belfast to undertake a PhD, and although I wanted to do a PhD in Creative Writing, such PhDs didn't exist then (they do now). Still, I think my PhD in Shakespeare on film was a good route into writing. I explored the relationship between text and screen and cultural appropriations of Shakespeare and spent three years wading through literary theory. This pathway sharpened my analytical skills and helped me learn how to read deeply and critically before developing my creative practice. When I completed the PhD I took an assistant professorship in film studies at a university in north-east England and met my husband-to-be within 24 hours of moving there from Northern Ireland. My intention was originally to forge a career in film studies, and I didn't do too badly at it (I published four academic books in film studies and still examine film PhDs) but I signed a contract for my first poetry collection in 2008, and found that I was juggling two careers, one as a film academic and one as a writer, so...I had to choose.*

S. MAG.: What is it like in Glasgow for the writer: do the sights and sounds inspire that creative gene? Is there a favorite locale you like to go to when writing?

C.J.C.: *Glasgow is an amazing city—vibrant, beautifully and culturally rich, and historically thrilling. My campus looks exactly like Hogwarts. I don't live in Glasgow—I commute from a seaside town in north-east England—but I love to visit the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, which is close to my office and absolutely stunning.*

S. MAG.: What should readers look for next? Are you currently working on another thriller, or perhaps anthology for 2018?

C.J.C.: *I'm just finishing the edits on my next thriller, which is due out in the UK in July; as for a US pub date, watch this space!*

Which we most assuredly will be doing! From the amazing poetry to the thrilling tales, C.J. Cooke continues to engage and encourage minds of all ages. To learn more about her upcoming projects, head to [www.carolynjesscooke.com](http://www.carolynjesscooke.com). ■



# CREATE NOW, CRITIQUE LATER



By Dennis Palumbo

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

As a therapist who specializes in treating writers, I often stress to my patients the wisdom in taking the “long view” regarding one’s career. In other words, to remember that the up’s and down’s will smooth out over the years, and that a consistent, long-term commitment to artistic growth and the development of craft is what provides the ultimate satisfaction. However, in another recent article, I also suggested that real creativity only occurs in the here-and-now.

I want to explore this seeming paradox, particularly in light of a therapy session I had recently with a novelist patient. She was about a third of the way through a new novel, one which represented a huge leap in terms of scope and content, and she was in the throes of powerful feelings of doubt and confusion. Would all the elements of plot, character and theme come together successfully? Did she have the talent, stamina and craft to keep at it, when the end was so many months away? What if the whole thing collapsed, half-finished, a painful and fruitless waste of months of work?

“If only I could step back from all of it,” she said. “Get some perspective.”

“You *will* be able to have perspective,” I said. “When the draft is finished. You can see the thing as a whole.”

“Yeah, but I want that perspective *now*.” She gave me a wry smile, but I knew she was only half-kidding.

As we struggled with her conflicts about the book, I kept thinking of something Kierkegaard said: “Life can only be understood backwards; unfortunately, we have to live it forward.” What he meant is that, in hindsight, the choices and events in our life probably form a recognizable pattern, or possess a kind of thematic logic. But embedded as we are in our moment-to-moment daily life, we haven’t the perspective to fully grasp the implications of decisions, behaviors and events we take part in.

I realized that this was the dilemma for my patient. Embedded in the daily struggle to make *this* chapter work, or *that* character come to life—to create the hoped-for mood and tone as the pages of the novel flowed together—she was forced to stay in the here-and-now. The more she took creative risks, the more she mined her own feelings and experiences to give

But **embedded as we are** in our moment-to-moment daily life, we **haven’t the perspective to fully grasp the implications of decisions, behaviors and events we take part in.**

## HEAD WOUNDS

By Dennis Palumbo

For readers who have not followed the *Daniel Rinaldi* series, it is time to jump aboard this incredible train.

Being a consultant for the Pittsburgh Police Department, Psychologist Dr. Daniel Rinaldi is a specialist when it comes to treating/helping people who have been the victims of violent crimes. This, the fifth book in the series, has Rinaldi looking at becoming one of these victims, himself.

What you would definitely call a domestic dispute occurs right outside the doctor's front door. Unbeknownst to him, his own neighbor has told her angry, over-reactive boyfriend that Rinaldi is actually her lover, which causes a gunshot to ring out and almost take out Rinaldi right then and there. Instead, Rinaldi trades playing the role of a victim for murder suspect.

A cloud of darkness descends on the doctor's life—a familiar cloud in the form of Sebastian Maddox who is not only genius-level but also an absolute psycho. He wants Rinaldi gone in the most macabre way possible, as well as taking down everyone the doctor loves and cares for.

Rinaldi has been forewarned by Maddox that if he goes to the police or tells authorities about anything, deaths will occur all over the city. Yet, into the story comes FBI profiler Lyle Barnes, now retired who was once a patient who suffered from night terrors, along with Special Agent Gloria Reese. Reese has her own extra-special "gifts" that add to a new relationship springing up in this tale.

If you could put a picture beside the words "cat-and-mouse" in the dictionary, the cover of this book would be it. Palumbo has, as always and once again, given readers a story that they will never forget. The Daniel Rinaldi train is rolling...do not miss it!

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

# Remember, writing may occur in the here-and-now, but editing takes place in the there-and-then.

meaning and urgency to her characters and scenes, the more fully in the world of the novel she dwelt. In other words, she couldn't see the forest for the trees.

The hell of it is, good writing *is only about the trees*, not the forest. You're planting your trees, one at a time, day after day—until, after many weeks or months, you get to stand back and look it over as a whole and say, "So *this* is what the forest looks like. I'll be damned."

The plain fact is, the more fully engaged with your creative process, the less perspective you can have. "The eye cannot see itself," as Buddhists say. Now here's why I think that's a good thing.

As my patient and I investigated her concerns about the book, it became clear that the perspective she desired was in fact a yearning for *control*. Her novel represented a real creative and financial risk. Elements of the story were autobiographical and intensely painful, and were played out against a large and colorful canvas, spanning decades.

The difficulty of the task daunted her, and exposed her to painful feelings of inadequacy. Even more shaming was the notion that attempting to write a book like this revealed what seemed to be the depth of her pride and grandiosity, traits that were particularly frowned upon in her immediate family.

Given such a set of concerns and associations, who *wouldn't* want to have control over the writing? To be absolutely certain that the book was working, the writing was going well, that the finished product would be a critical and financial success. In short, that the end result would justify the pains of its creation.

As my patient worked her way toward this understanding, she saw the inherent contradiction in what she yearned for. If she was going to risk writing the novel, which meant living daily with her doubts and fears about it, she'd have to give up the idea of "perspective." Which, in this case, meant control over the outcome.

"But only in the heat of the writing," I reminded her. "There *does* come a time when it's necessary and appropriate to take perspective, and that's when the first draft is done. Remember, writing may occur in the here-and-now, but editing takes place in the there-and-then."

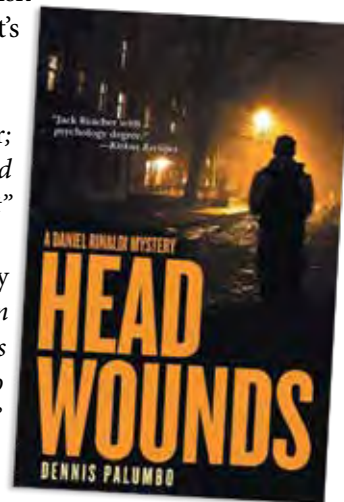
"I know," she said. "Thank God."

By session's end, she was ready to go home and risk planting another tree. For the truly committed writer, that's as good as it gets. ■

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is now a licensed psychotherapist and author of "Writing From the Inside Out" (John Wiley).

His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The Strand, and elsewhere, and is collected in "From Crime to Crime" (Tallfellow Press). His series of crime novels feature psychologist Daniel Rinaldi, a trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police. The latest, "Head Wounds," is available now from Poisoned Pen Press.

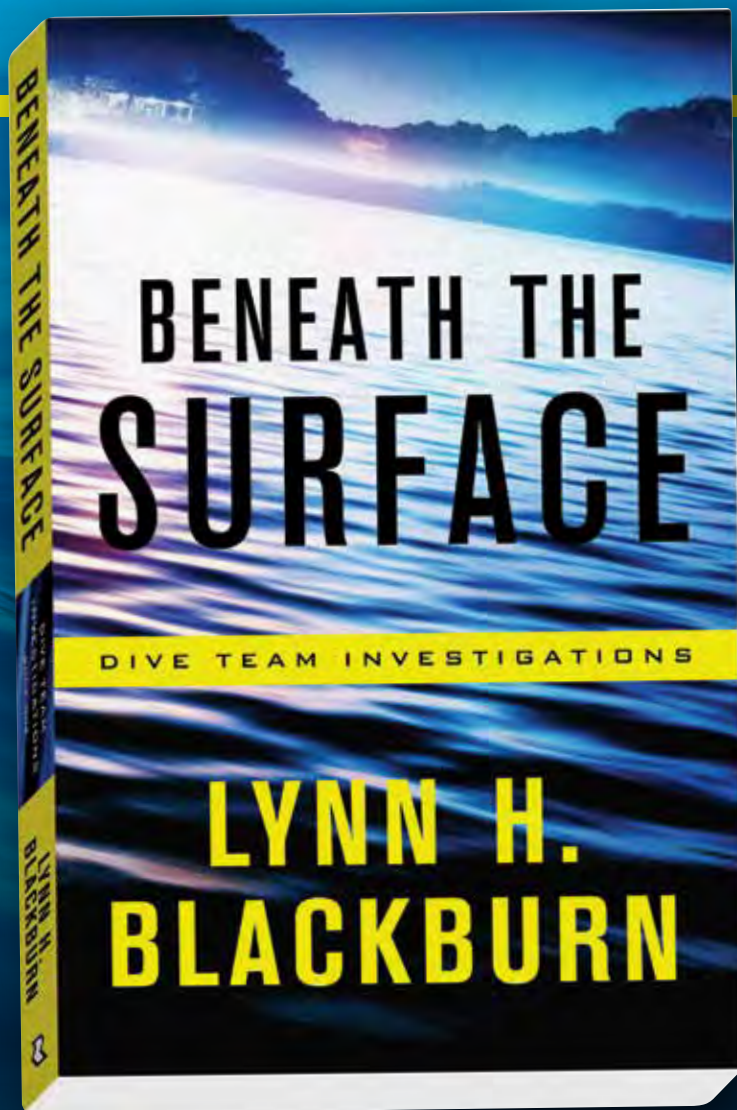
For more info, please visit [www.dennispalumbo.com](http://www.dennispalumbo.com).





Award-winning author Lynn H. Blackburn grabs readers by the throat and doesn't let go until the final

# HEART-POUNDING — PAGE. —



Leigh Weston thought she'd left a troubled past behind when she moved back home to Carrington, North Carolina. But when dive team investigator Ryan Parker finds a body in the lake near her home, she fears the past hasn't stayed where it belongs. Can Ryan find a way to protect her, and maybe win her heart in the process?

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT **LYNNHBLACKBURN.COM**

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

## THE SILENT FOUNTAIN

By Victoria Fox

Lucy Whittaker is a twenty-something living in London. She is a nice young woman who is, quite literally, wondering if she will garner headlines soon and have her life actually ruined by what has occurred. Her best friend and flatmate, Belinda, talks to Lucy about heading to Italy and getting out of London before the press do become a part of her life. There is a job available in a villa in Florence called the Castillo Barbarossa, and despite the fact that she does not want to go, Lucy ends up skipping town and heading to Florence to work as a maid. What she finds is an old, mostly decrepit place that looks like it hasn't been lived in for a long time. But what she finds inside, will be even stranger.

Vivien Lockhart comes from a family in South Carolina that is not at all a nice family. Her father, Gilbert Lockhart, is a preacher who is one of those who likes to use God as a threat, making his daughter turn away from him and seek her future elsewhere. Her life moves forward and Vivien ends up to be a film star. But a nightmare occurs that sends her into the arms of a secretive man named Giovanni.

What these two separate females have in common is the fact that they will both call the Castillo Barbarossa their home. The same place that plays home to odd voices, secrets, ghosts, and a fountain that appears in all sorts of dreams...and nightmares.

Victoria Fox is a master when it comes to weaving a tale that fits perfectly against the location/scenery she chooses to use. And, best of all, Fox has that talent to make a person's skin grow cold while they're reading about a sunny, beautiful day in Italy.

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



## TALK TO THE PAW

By Melinda Metz

If the adorable cover doesn't have you picking up this book to read, then the witty, charming mystery that plays out inside should have you begging for more.

Here we have Jamie Snyder. Mid-thirties, single, she's gotten to the point where she is sick and tired of dealing with moronic boyfriends. She's faced everything from men who are petrified to put that ring on a woman's finger to those who have tried to hide the fact that there's already a woman with a ring on their finger waiting for them at home; the woman they'll get back to after their date with Jamie is over. Jamie has turned her thoughts to herself. It's her time now, and the only man who is allowed to be in her life is her tabby cat, MacGyver.

Now, MacGyver is most definitely loyal to Jamie. He's not like the rest of those males out there. But, as with all males, he does have a quality that makes him a little hard to handle and more than a little annoying: he likes to sneak out of the house at night and steal things from the neighbors.

MacGyver, however, soon finds something else to keep him busy. This is one smart cat and he knows that Jamie is suffering from loneliness. To him, it's a certain scent she gives off; the same scent that a neighbor by the name of David transmits. David is a good guy, a baker, and handsome and is just what the doctor ordered for Jamie. So MacGyver's next step is to steal from David and get the young man to show up at their door. Plan works and soon stolen goods are being transported back and forth as Jamie and David heat up under MacGyver's cat-burglar eyes.

If you want fun, cute and memorable, this is the book.

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

## HIS GUILT

By Shelley Shepard Gray

Mark Fisher was never going to return to the quiet, Amish community that he once called home. After all, it is the site of the worst time in his life. Once upon a time in Hart County, he was falsely accused of assault, and he fled in order to put the past, the county and all its people behind him in order to live a better life. It is only when a friend, the only friend he had who helped him back in Amish-land, needs him that Mark decides to return. What he wasn't expecting, however, was to fall for a very pretty girl by the name of Waneta (Neeta) Cain.

The girl has a good head on her shoulders and does not believe that the now worldly Mark has an evil bone in his body. She certainly doesn't believe the gossip that still lingers regarding his supposedly violent past. But when her own friend is brutally attacked, some of that awful gossip starts to invade her psyche.

Mark feels like his heart is breaking when Neeta goes from happy to acting very wary around him. He wants to beg her, make her realize that he is not capable of assault and would never even raise a hand to a woman. But when another in the community is attacked suddenly Mark believes he knows exactly who has been doing this all along. He finds that he has two choices: He can run once again, which will solidify in Neeta's mind that he is guilty. Or, he can stay and fight, unveiling the real predator, clearing his name, and making sure that Neeta does not face the brutality that others already have.

Romantic suspense is definitely the category for this one, and the author delivers a highly emotional thriller that will have every reader going 'back in time' to get the first book in this, *The Amish of Hart County* series.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## THE COUNTESS OF PRAGUE

By Stephen Weeks

"The Countess of Prague" introduces the indomitable Beatrice von Falkenburg, otherwise known as Trixie, who is 28 when we meet her in 1904 in Prague. A bored wife who does not enjoy her privileges in high society—and whose aristocratic husband has fallen on hard times anyway—Trixie finds a new career as a detective, when the body of an old man is found in the Vltava River. The dead man is identified as the former officer and friend of her colorful military Uncle Bertie—or is he indeed the dead man? The plot thickens immediately, revolving around a Tontine, a gambling syndicate based on the life expectancy of the members' proxies. The corpse (maybe) was the uncle's ticket to fortune.

Trixie plunges into the tangled web of the case as it evolves, in what author Stephen Weeks promises will be the first of a ten-part series that covers ten years, up through the onset of World War I in 1914. Weeks tells a rollicking tale that takes its heroine through the changing Old World order of Europe in historically accurate fashion, with London and Prague providing the primary locations. Teaming up with lower-class waifs, her butler, and maid, Trixie disguises herself as a young man and is suspected of committing a new grisly murder herself. Eventually (of course) she figures it all out in a rousing climax that involves King Edward, Kaiser Wilhelm, a lethal gas, homophobia, and blackmail.

Weeks, a castle restorer, filmmaker, and writer, is a Brit living in Prague, and I predict that his clever plots, historical accuracy, and descriptive flair will make this series a hit. Here, for instance, is his description of the chief archivist for *The Times* of London, a minor but delicious character, "a man of very small stature, who sat on his high stool like a gnome. He had lank hair, a high forehead and eyes that were so shrunken-looking behind the extremely thick lenses of his round spectacles that his gaze resembled that of a reptile."

Reviewed by Mark Pendergrast ■





## SUNDAY SILENCE

By Nicci French

When we last met up with Frieda, she was sitting in her home looking at a ghastly sight under her floorboards. Not only that, but she had been battling to help a woman in an insane asylum. A gifted psychologist, she's friends with the police. But even though Chief Inspector Karlsson and Detective Constable Yvette Long have been a part of her world, they must step away from her case. Taking over is Chief Inspector Petra Burge. Although a great cop, she's also a strong woman, a stranger to Frieda, and doesn't have the faith (yet) in Frieda that Karlsson and Long have.

Frieda has claimed that Dean Reeve, a serial abductor and murderer, did not kill himself seven years ago. She has been trying to convince others that he is very much alive, stalking her and murdering others. Because of this recent crime, Frieda is finally exonerated and people "at the top" will be losing their jobs for not believing her in the first place.

When those close to Frieda begin to be abducted, Frieda figures out that Reeve is not responsible for all of it. Someone, a copycat, is stirring up even more pain. The culmination of what occurs is frightening; the shocks, secrets and twists during this game are amazing. However, fans of Nicci French and their character will ask for one thing after reading this book: *more*.

A series that began as a week, starting on "Blue Monday," has reached its final day. But is this tale wrapped up with a nice little bow? Nothing like that can be revealed here. All that can be said is that "Sunday" was just as exciting as the rest of the week, and Frieda will be sorely missed if she vanishes from the scene. This is one series that should not end. Yes, the days have run out, but the incredible husband/wife team can always use months of the year. Suspense does not get better than this.

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

## BOOKS OF A FEATHER

By Katie Carlisle

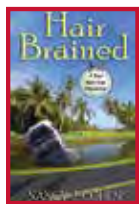
Although you wouldn't usually "tie" a library, Audubon's famous pictures of birds, and a national birdwatchers' group to a murder, this author did exactly that. And she did it very well. This latest *Bibliophile Mystery* brings back Brooklyn Wainwright, and has readers engrossed by the end of the very first page.

It is Brooklyn's friend who is in charge of the Covington Library. This is the library that just so happens to be opening a new exhibit starring the famous John James Audubon's work, "Birds of America." This huge book contains 435 life-sized watercolors of North American birds, and is considered the archetype of wildlife illustration. It's amazing for anyone to be able to get a glance at this nearly 200-year-old creation, so the Covington Library's gala is one of excitement and fun.

During the event, however, it's almost as if dreams are coming true for both Brooklyn and her friend. The President of the National Birdwatchers' Society, Jared Mulrooney, needs help repairing another, lesser-known work of Audubon's. In addition, Brooklyn's party becomes even more celebratory when she is asked to repair a copy of the extremely rare, "Poor Richard's Almanack." But when Mulrooney is found dead inside the library, the event turns from a "dream come true" into a horror flick.

But a dead body is not all Brooklyn has to deal with. She also has to put up with her parents who decide to stop by with someone Brooklyn most definitely does not want to see. Her skills and need to find the killer kick into overdrive when she realizes she is being closed in on and may just be on the murderer's list. But for what reason, she has yet to understand.

The *Bibliophile Mysteries* have always been entertaining, and the tradition continues with this latest tale. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## HAIR BRAINED

By Nancy J. Cohen

You would think that at one point or another a series would fade, or perhaps the characters would grow a bit boring no matter how wonderful they've been over the years. Yet, even though this is book #14 in this particular series, *The Bad Hair Day Mysteries* show no signs of ever becoming faded or boring. In fact, it seems like each one that hits the shelves offers up another breath of fresh air in the mystery realm.

This time around, an emotional story plays out when hairstylist Marla Vail's best friend, Tally, is hurt in a car crash and Marla takes over as guardian to her best friend's child. What makes this moment even worse is when Marla's own husband, Detective Dalton Vail, tells her that the car crash may not have been accidental at all. He believes that the crash occurred on purpose and someone was attempting to kill a person or persons inside the vehicle. This makes no sense whatsoever to Marla. After all, they're talking about Tally and Ken, two of the nicest people Marla has ever known.

While attempting to be the guardian and keep her friends' son safe and protected, Marla finds herself in a murder investigation. Information comes to light that proves just because you know someone, you don't really *know* them. Out of the woodwork comes a fraud investigation that apparently Ken's insurance agency was involved in; as well as information about a ladies' tea circle that Tally had just joined. The secrets among these women could just have put Tally on a 'to kill' list.

Readers will become immersed in book #14 as quickly as they did in book #1 of this incredible series. From page one, you'll hang on every word as the twists and turns of the mystery are revealed and Marla goes into overdrive to prove that the friends she trusted all this time were definitely worthy of that trust.

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

## BEAUTIFULLY CRUEL

By M. William Phelps

If you want to meet one woman you would most definitely not want to have living next door, then you must read this book. Keep in mind that the author has a career of being a hard-hitting investigative journalist, and has the ability to tell a story of a psychopath that will make your blood run cold.

We are in Iowa, of all places. This tale is not about the violent, gritty neighborhoods of say, Chicago or Detroit. Here, a housewife lives by the name of Tracey Pittman Roberts. She is on her second marriage and, from the looks of it, is having a great time. Her dream life includes three amazing children, as well as owning a face and body that is all-natural and stunningly beautiful. What Tracey seems to be missing, however, is a soul.

It was on December 13, 2001, that police were called to Tracey's home. There, they found a young neighbor of Tracey's dead as a doornail. This housewife claimed to have been protecting her children. She feared for her life after a supposed break-in by this twenty-year-old man, now dead, and another man led to her being strangled with a pair of pantyhose. Her story was self-defense, case-closed. The one thing that worked against her was the fact that nine bullet wounds were found on the victim, which made the police more than wary when it came to believing her cut-and-dried story.

It also didn't help that Tracey already had on her record a plea of no-contest in regards to the discharging of a firearm years before, when she lived in Virginia with her first husband, a plastic surgeon.

From the telling of the crime to the final showdown in the courtroom, this author has vividly described Tracey's case and allows readers to look deeply into a criminal mind they will not soon forget.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## ALL THE SECRET PLACES

By Anna Carlisle

For those who may have missed the incredible debut by this author, the first in the *Gin Sullivan* series called "Dark Road Home," readers were introduced to Gin who was living in Chicago and working as a medical examiner. Gin had lost her little sister, Lily, right after she had graduated from high school. With Lily's disappearance, Gin's family unit had fallen apart. It was twenty years later that Gin got the call while working in Chicago telling her that a body was found in the woods outside her hometown. Going home, she had to face many past mistakes as well as confront an old boyfriend who had been the prime suspect in Lily's disappearance.

In this follow-up novel, Gin is living in that small hometown of Trumbull, Pennsylvania. Taking an extended leave from her job in the M.E.'s office, readers watch as the old spark is reignited with Jake, Gin's old boyfriend from high school. But Jake is not done with controversy. This time around, his construction firm is working on a new housing development when it all goes up in smoke. Not only is the project destroyed, but a corpse has also been found underneath one of the burnt-out homes.

Gin's head spins when the identification of the body shows it to be a man who could very well have been the culprit who had people locking their doors a long time ago in Trumbull; the violent offender that could be responsible for everything that destroyed Gin's life when she was a teenager. Now, a new killer has to be found.

What readers thought was frightening the first time around becomes even more so. More secrets are uncovered, more lies, and even more suspects come to light as Gin does her best to find the truth and bury the past once and for all. All that can be said is Gin Sullivan is one character who has to be seen again!

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

## CITY OF ENDLESS NIGHT

By Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child

Let us just say that this, yet another masterpiece by Preston & Child, will be the perfect way to start out your New Year. That monument of oddity and intellectual greatness that is the well-known Special Agent Pendergast, once again teams up with Lieutenant Vincent D'Agosta to solve one of the strangest and goriest crimes NYC has seen.

First, we begin with a tabloid kid who has money, a bad rep, and the ability to always find herself in trouble. Well, this time the trouble was more than she could take: Grace Ozmian is found dead in an abandoned warehouse... missing her head, of all things.

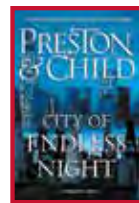
D'Agosta is assigned the job of trying to figure out who the heck killed this girl, and why. He's getting pressure from all sides being that this girl's father is an extremely wealthy man. Not only does the lieutenant need Pendergast's help, but Pendergast's boss feels that his special agent has let him down as of late and needs to get back on the right path by proving that he can still do the job.

Pendergast is not himself. After all, Constance is missing from his life now and he is having a rough time without her. He has gotten skinnier, almost gaunt, and even D'Agosta is worried about his friend. Until... that friend seems to know more than the NYPD does and, once again, keeps the information to himself.

Body after body appears, and none of them seem to have anything remotely in common. All that the corpses' share is the fact that their heads are gone and a killer seems to be outwitting everyone.

Just as it was when D'Agosta and Pendergast first met up in the thrilling book, "Relic," they are together once again solving a crime of mammoth proportions. Preston, Child, and their well-known characters are always sheer perfection!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Charlatan's Crown," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## THE BODY IN THE CASKET

By Katherine Hall Page

Amateur sleuth Faith Sibley Fairchild returns once again in the delightful series by the oh-so-talented Katherine Hall Page. Ever since her marriage several years ago to her clergyman husband, Tom, the transplanted New Yorker and proprietor of Have Faith in Your Kitchen catering has called the sleepy town of Aleford home. It's been quite an adjustment for Faith, but she's managed it with grace and nary a misstep, largely thanks to the friendship of the Fairchilds' next door neighbor, Pix Miller, and her family.

But even Pix is surprised when Have Faith is called upon to cater a weekend birthday celebration in the secluded enclave of Havencrest for legendary Broadway producer Max Dane. Neither Havencrest, itself, nor Rowan House, Dane's mansion, can be found on GPS, but that turns out to be the least of the surprises waiting for Faith when she accepts the job. Dane has received a death threat in the form of a casket, sent as an early present. The only thing in the casket is a twenty-year-old *Playbill* from Dane's final, and only failed, production, *Heaven or Hell*. Fearing for his life, Dane has hired Faith to do double duty as live-in caterer and sleuth, and figure out which of his guests, all of whom were part of the failed production, is out to kill him.

It's clear that the weekend is doomed. Two of the invited guests are unable to attend because they've just died. And the guests who show up aren't there to celebrate the birthday of the man they blame for bringing a premature end to their theatrical careers. With so much squabbling inside the mansion, plus an ice storm swirling outside which temporarily cuts off power, it's clear that Faith has a lot more to deal with than she ever expected.

"The Body in the Casket," like the others in this series, is an intelligent, well-plotted mystery with believable, likeable characters and a satisfying, logical ending. Bravo!

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



## LOOK BEHIND YOU

By Iris Johansen and Roy Johansen

Dr. Kendra Michaels has used her background to create hope for others. She is a music therapist who is currently helping a young boy rediscover his belief so that he can live again after dealing with tragedy. What Kendra also has a gift for is getting herself wrapped up in dangerous investigations because the FBI and the CIA go to her for help. You see, Kendra was blind for twenty years of her life, which ended up heightening her other senses, so she can literally "spot" more clues than the normal person can.

Right now a serial killer is operating in San Diego. Kendra tries her best to stay away from issues like this, but one day while working with her young patient, two agents walk through her door. They're there to ask her to come to the latest crime scene; they want Kendra to see if she can help them find this madman. Once Kendra is 'in' a case, she's in completely. But what's worse is that this particular psycho has chosen her to be their next challenger. Named Zachary, this killer likes to be brutal, and his "Look Behind You" message frightens everyone to their very core. Not only is this beast after Kendra, but the monster also watches as the doctor forms her own dream team to track him down, while protecting her friends as well as working with the man she desperately craves. Sparks fly as this crime unveils a horrific history where this one serial killer turns out to have killed *many* times before.

Anytime you see the name Johansen, you know it's going to be a fantastic ride. And every time this mother/son team gets together, this doctor and her co-stars bring about yet another Johansen hit! This is so thrilling, readers will be shaking by the time all is revealed.

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



## PERISH

By Lisa Black

This new *Gardiner and Kenner* thriller jumps directly into the world of high finance. We begin at the scene of a pretty brutal murder. Although the home is about as stunning as you can get, the entire ambiance of the place is completely blown by the never-ending blood that now covers the marble floor.

We are in Cleveland, Ohio, and it's here that Joanna Moorehouse has been attacked, gutted, and left to bleed out. She's not only the owner of the home, but she is also the founder of Sterling Financial. In other words, whether it be clients she may have robbed or employees she may have completely angered, there's most likely a list a mile long as to who would want to kill her in such a violent way.

Forensic expert, Maggie Gardiner, finds out some things about her co-worker, Homicide Detective Jack Renner, when it comes to his approach to the world of finance. Maggie and Jack know that, to solve this case, the two of them have to learn the ins-and-outs of this horrific industry. Yet with every move they make, they keep coming across people who literally are trying to "make a killing." Narrowing it down to one who actually did turn that proverbial cash killing into a murder, is going to be harder than they thought.

But what's worse is that in a series of completely unrelated killings that are taking place in Cleveland, an officer just so happens to uncover evidence that may link Joanna Moorehouse's life with something readers will never see coming.

As always with Black, this psychological suspense is incredible. And her way of describing the financial world makes you want to run out, take any money you have invested, cash it in and place it under your pillow instead.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## DEAD AND BERRIED

By Peg Cochran

Life is going well for Monica Albertson, who has moved to the small Michigan town of Cranberry Cove to go into the cranberry business with her half brother, Jeff. Jeff is the owner of Sassamanash Farm, and not only produces the fruit but also has a store on the premises to sell a wide variety of yummy food all of which contain—you guessed it—cranberries. Jeff takes care of the crop and Monica bakes and runs the store with the assistance of part-time employees, Nora Taylor and Arline Loomis.

There's more to producing a successful cranberry crop than Monica (and I) ever realized. For example, cranberry flowers can't self-fertilize, and fertilization is critical to expand the number of plants. To give them some help, Jeff has rented bees (yes, you read that correctly) under the watchful supervision of local bee-keeper Rick Taylor, Nora's husband, who arrives with a truckload of honeybees and his assistant, Lori Wenk. It's obvious to Monica that Lori has a king-size crush on her boss and doesn't care who knows it, including Rick's wife. It's even more obvious that, once a few of the bees are released, Lori's in the wrong profession, because she's stung so many times that she immediately dies. Something is definitely wrong, because Rick had decided against releasing the bees because of an approaching rain storm, and the bees don't like getting wet. Who released the bees? And why? Is it murder? And what a way to die.

The police immediately suspect Nora. They're also suspicious of Rick, who was uncomfortable with Lori's advances. But when Monica starts nosing around, she finds Lori had a history of antagonizing people that stretched way back. Monica is determined to find the truth about her death, no matter what the cost.

"Dead and Berried" is a fun mystery that cozy fans will love. The book has true to life characters, a realistic plot, and clever twists and turns that are totally unexpected.

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



## OATH OF HONOR

By Lynette Eason

Eason has been gifting her fans with law and order, strong women, handsome men, and romantic suspense for years. This first book of this brand new series titled *Blue Justice* is among the best of them.

This time around, police officer Isabelle St. John is celebrating her non-typical, unique, somewhat crazy clan that exists in her field of law enforcement. Two sisters and three brothers are always there for her when she needs some support, and now she needs more than ever. She and her partner are involved in a pretty harrowing event, leaving Izzy's partner murdered and her barely escaping with her life.

Her heart hurts, to say the least, but her determination and will are strong. She will stop at nothing to find the killer. But what happens is that Izzy finds herself knee-deep in an investigation that reveals a criminal organization that possibly is supported by cops they have on their payroll. Worse yet, some of those cops receiving money may just be her own family members.

Izzy has never faced a case where she may have to send her own family behind bars to do the job she has taken an oath to do every day. Not to mention, it doesn't help that she is going through all this emotion while her dead partner's handsome brother, Ryan, who just so happens to be a homicide detective, is breathing down her neck.

Doesn't matter what New Year we're talking about, or what new series, this author continues to deliver stories filled with romance, suspense, and amazing characters. It will be a whole lot of fun to see what *Blue Justice* has in store for us.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## WRONG SIDE OF THE PAW

By Laurie Cass

You don't have to be a librarian to realize that the men and women who chose this particular career path have become the basis for some of the best characters in the 'cozy' genre.

This, the sixth *Bookmobile Cat Mystery*, has librarian Minnie Hamilton returning to once again get immersed in a mystery that is a whole lot of fun.

It's time for Minnie to take a seat, gather up her cat, Eddie, and set out on a ride in her bookmobile. Eddie is always up for an adventure, and has a true gift for finding trouble in the midst of the bookmobile's readers. So... through the rolling hills of Chilson, Michigan, they ride and, as always, bring smiles to everyone they meet. But it doesn't take long before Eddie is in the center of a murder.

It seems like a normal, everyday thing for Minnie. On a routine stop by the bookmobile, Eddie decides to take a leap into the back of a pickup truck that just happens to be driven by the local lawyer in town. Trouble is, instead of finding a run-of-the-mill toolbox, Eddie just so happens to discover a dead body in the flatbed. What are the chances, right?

A member of the law-and-order group is now under massive suspicion of murder; therefore, Minnie and Eddie turn from a duo that helps readers get their fix, to characters who help mystery lovers do the same thing as they attempt to find out exactly what's been going on against the stunning backdrop.

Cat lovers, cozy mystery lovers, readers who are looking for the perfect whodunit fix, all will want to read this one. The characters are charming, and this is most definitely a page-turner extraordinaire.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## A JUST CLAUSE

By Lorna Barrett

Readers will love the fact that they get to go back to the fun mystery bookstore located in Booktown, N.H., called Haven't Got a Clue. This is one of those locales found in cozy mystery series' that you wish was a real place.

Tricia Miles, for those who have not been lucky enough to read all of the great stories in this series, is the owner of Haven't Got a Clue bookstore. Not only that, but she's also what you would call an amateur sleuth who seems to fall into a new mystery every time she finally has put one behind her.

This time around, she and her friend Angelica are having an awesome book-signing event inside the store when Tricia's not-very-gentlemanly father drops in out of nowhere. His name is John and he's one of those men who seems to be constantly drowning in scandal. Now, he has become the prime suspect in the murder of a woman who played a part in his gossip-filled past. Even though Tricia knows her father's character, she's more than a bit emotional when the Stoneham police tell her facts that she'd never known: her father is also a con man who has actually done jail time.

But her father is not the only suspect. After all, bestselling thriller author Steven Richardson arrived for the book signing just before the crime occurred, and a copy of his latest bestseller, already signed, was with the victim.

Tricia has questions and she is determined to find answers. Add to all this the fact that she wants this solved and buried before the town's first wine and jazz festival commences, and you have a sleuth whose time is running out.

Author Lorna Barrett has always delivered fun mysteries with characters that are so vibrant they practically jump off the page. And with this latest *Booktown Mystery*, she continues to deliver just that.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion*

## MURDER WITH LEMON TEA CAKES

By Karen Rose Smith

This New Year brings yet another new cozy series to fans. Titled *Daisy's Tea Garden Mysteries*, readers are immediately drawn to main character, Daisy Swanson, and her beloved Aunt Iris.

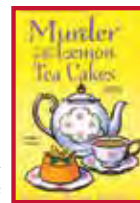
Daisy is a widowed woman who works hard to be a good mom to her two teenagers. She owns Daisy's Tea Garden which is set in an old Victorian located in the middle of Pennsylvania Amish country. Serving rich, memorable food along with a plethora of tea choices to the tourists and the community, Daisy and Iris have a daily schedule to keep. It's only when Iris begins dating Harvey Fritz that things start to go awry.

Harvey is a wealthy chap but his current wife is not exactly on the 'ex' list. And one day the still-Mrs. Fritz shows up at a party being catered by Daisy and makes a massive scene that is the perfect set-up for murder. But when Harvey is taken out, there's more than one suspect. Not only is Iris in line to take the rap because she was basically, the other woman; but Harvey's grown children were also not all that happy with Dad considering they were going to be written out of his will. So... whodunit? You're going to love finding out.

Thankfully, a former Philadelphia detective by the name of Jonas is on Daisy's side and she has faith that he'll help clear Iris's name and find the real killer before Daisy and her Tea Garden go up in smoke.

Like all the good authors out there, readers can also add recipes to their cookbooks for: Daisy's Leek and Potato Soup, Tessa's Carrot Salad, and Iris's Lemon Tea Cakes. The latter sounds as awesome as the story was. Great characters, great backstory, it will be hard waiting to see what happens next in Daisy's world.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## FOR BETTER OR WORSE

By Donna Huston Murray

Ginger (a.k.a. Gin) Barnes is back after a much-too-long hiatus and I couldn't be happier. In "For Better or Worse," the eighth in author Donna Huston Murray's *Main Line* mystery series, Gin is working hard to get her life back on track after the death of her husband three years ago. Rather than sit around, the always handy-around-the-house Gin has volunteered to help her daughter, Chelsea, and husband, Bobby, with renovations on their new home. Her first task is retiling the kitchen floor. As Gin is measuring, she's startled to hear a loud sound outside. She discovers that someone has thrown a garbage bag loaded with clothes and bricks from the third floor of the house next door. Bricks? Yes, bricks. This is followed a short time later by what sounds like gunfire. The neighbors turn out to be the elderly and crochety Mrs. Zumstein and her grandson. Gin is starting to wonder what kind of a neighborhood her daughter and son-in-law have moved into.

Her misgivings ratchet up when she meets two of the other neighborhood couples, who each have a young child. Cissie Voight and her controlling husband Ronald are Chelsea and Bobby's neighbors, and although Cissie loves her baby dearly, she's having trouble adjusting to motherhood. The fact that Ronald criticizes everything she does only makes her miserable, as Gin finds out firsthand.

The other couple is Susan and Mike Swenson, parents of 18-month-old Jack. Susan has taken a part-time job and Gin is roped into babysitting, a situation Mike is not happy about.

When one of the neighbors is critically injured and dies, it's up to Gin to unravel the mysteries of all three households so that justice can be served.

"For Better or Worse" is a roller coaster ride of a mystery with believable characters who could be anyone's next door neighbors. Lots of twists and turns and more than one surprise at the end. A real treat for cozy readers. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Dieting Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE DECEIVERS

By Alex Berenson

In this, the 12<sup>th</sup> incredible thriller starring John Wells, the headline news subject featuring the Russians is the focal point.

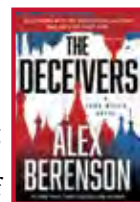
Readers are first told all about the American Airlines Center in Dallas, Texas. Here, during a scheduled Mavericks basketball game, a fake terrorist attack is set up to occur. Russian spies masquerading as FBI agents vow to the man they've tricked into infiltrating the sleeper cell of terrorists that the attack will not succeed. They're simply going to supply the weapons needed, but remove all the firing pins before the attack begins. Trouble was... the vow did not come true. This was a massacre.

John Wells, former CIA agent, is summoned to Washington almost immediately after this hideousness has taken place. There is so much that went wrong—so many people that could have been involved—that it needs to be investigated. Yet another belief that did not come true.

Wells is more than a bit surprised when he finds out that their request to come to Washington has nothing to do with him going to Dallas. In fact, the former CIA Director, who is now the President of the United States, Vinnie Duto, asks Wells to head to Colombia. It seems that there is an old "friend" there who has data to share, and Wells needs to figure out how to attain that data while outsmarting schemes being planned by sleeper cells, snipers and double agents in his own government that want nothing more than for Russia to take over the world and be the supreme power they always thought they should be.

The American elections were only the beginning, and once again author Alex Berenson takes today's news and opens up a can of worms that no one could possibly have thought to open. If you're looking for a great read, this is it!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■







## I'LL STAY

By Karen Day

Karen Day is an author well-known for the great novels she has written for middle-grade readers. But in this, her first novel written for adults, she does a stunning job of bringing to life a complex, emotional, and highly suspenseful tale.

Split into three parts covering the years 1983, 1986 and 1991, readers follow Clare Michaels when, during her senior year, she and three others (including her best friend, Lee) head to Florida for spring break to unwind and have the time of their lives. Like all college kids, Clare and Lee want to have an adventure. What occurs, however, leaves Clare escaping a situation that turned out to be nothing short of a horror film.

It's no wonder that Lee has lost all of her exuberance. She went from a strong young woman who was ready to take on the world to a withdrawn, quiet person who wants to hide from everyone and everything. Clare has her own guilt for this, of course, because she chose to run... even though she knew things about her best friend's past that she now regrets knowing. The guilt is a burden, the pain is a burden, and Clare seems to get hit with depression everywhere she turns. Even her own mother, a woman who has just created a bestselling novel, is a high-strung lady who is more like fingernails on a chalkboard to Clare than anything else.

As the novel moves from year to year, readers watch the toll that one Florida night takes on them, and how Clare must come to face what she really did way back then and how on earth she is going to gain forgiveness from a best friend whose life deserved to be better.

This plot is so well-written that the new adult fans of Karen Day will want many more titles in the future. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## AN ARMY OF ONE

By Tony Schumacher

Tony Schumacher's third entry in his *John Rossett* alternative history series pulls his main character out of London, where the Nazis have consolidated their victory and returned society to a semblance of normalcy, and drops him in Manchester where the scars of the war are fresh and Nazi control is tenuous.

Rossett wants to put the war behind him and return to his police work, but it's not an easy adjustment, especially when he has to kill a corrupt fellow copper in self-defense. While he doesn't jump at the request by Kriminalpolizei (Criminal Police—Kripo for short) General Major Neumann to accompany him to pick up a German sniper who killed the American attaché in Manchester, Rossett has to admit to himself that it might be best to get out of London for a while.

What he finds in Manchester is a world where the SS, the local police, and Resistance fighters have a fluid relationship where their natural enmity can be overcome by need and greed. The American attaché was negotiating the transfer out of the country of a truck full of gold, part of the Bank of England's reserves. It could have been a mutually beneficial transaction, until the sniper killed the attaché and hid the gold.

But this is no ordinary sniper. Karl Bauer is known as The Bear, a swift and cunning operative who worked solo against the enemies of the Reich. He sees in Rossett, who's been promoted in the press as The British Lion, a worthy adversary. The rubble of Manchester becomes the field of combat for the two men, even as the other players on the field try to eliminate both of them. The gold is the prize for whoever manages to survive—if anyone does.

"An Army of One" is a non-stop roller coaster ride from its opening scene to the final sentence, filled with sharp turns and drops that take your breath away. Schumacher does an excellent job creating an alternative reality that feels and tastes and smells completely real.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■



## THE BLACK PAINTING

By Neil Olson

This one may just have you staying away from artwork for the rest of your life!

A Goya painting has been rumored to cause madness to anyone who stares at it too long. One clan, by the name of Morse, has that particular painting in their family. It hung on a wall in their grandfather's estate, a mansion named Owl's Point, before the painting was suddenly stolen.

There are four cousins in the Morse family: One is a lawyer living on the West Coast; one is a med student who is genius-level; one is what you would call a hard-partying, hard-drinking gal; and the last, the youngest, is a girl by the name of Teresa who carries with her a deep-seeded fear that she is going to 'go the way of' her own father—a man who died of madness.

Out of the blue these four cousins get a call that they must immediately come to the old family estate. This is most definitely something that not one out of the four wants to do, seeing as that the last time they were there they were accused and vilified by their grandfather when that Goya painting disappeared from the mansion. In fact, that was the beginning of the end for the family as the fights sent them running their separate ways.

Attempting to have faith, they try to believe that their grandfather, now that he's getting old, wants to get the family back together and put all the bad behind them. But when they arrive at Owl's Point and Teresa sees that the old man is dead, all of them know that the worst is yet to come. Add to that the fact that the grandfather was literally dead with his eyes wide open... staring at the bare wall where the Goya painting used to hang.

This is an incredible plot with unknown twists that all readers who love mystery and suspense will thrive on.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## THE FOUR LEGENDARY KINGDOMS

By Matthew Reilly

For those who are unaware, Jack West, Jr.'s father was a ruthless colonel nicknamed "Wolf," who had encouraged Jack to join the U.S. Army. Instead, he decided to join the Australian Armed Forces where he proved to be a top-rate soldier and quickly moved up in the ranks to become a part of the Special Air Service Regiment. There, he went on to become an even stronger soldier than this father.

Archaeology was always his passion, which led to the Australian Army allowing him to attend Trinity College in Dublin where he became friends with Professor Maximilian T. Epper (AKA: Wizard) who he now works with.

This time around, Jack West, Jr. is enjoying a happy phase in his life. Living with his family on a remote farm has him loving the days. That is, until Jack is brutally knocked out and kidnapped. He wakes up to find himself being held prisoner in an underground cell, with a man in a mask racing towards him with a knife in his hand. Perhaps something he has done in the past has caught up with him. Maybe he even made an enemy while he was working on some of his perilous projects, who had now come to take him out. But what he soon finds is that he is one of the participants chosen to compete in a series of deadly challenges.

Jack is not the only elite soldier being held here. There are a dozen in total that must get through these challenges designed to fulfill an ancient ritual that has the fate of the entire planet hanging in the balance.

From super-cool mazes to horribly violent assassins, Jack must discover and unseat the powerful group that is behind this entire thing...the four legendary kingdoms.

This is fantastic. Once again, Reilly knocks it out of the park!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## THE WOMAN IN THE CAMPHOR TRUNK

By Jennifer Kincheloe

Chinatown is the scene for this absolutely terrific book. It is the year 1908, in Los Angeles, when a body is discovered inside a trunk that resides in the apartment of the corpse's lover. This scares the police more than anything else, seeing as that this Caucasian missionary female is the victim and her Chinese boyfriend is the only suspect. The L.A. police are more than frightened that a race war could begin.

It is Anna Blanc, Police Matron, and her former boyfriend, Detective Joe Singer, who discover the body that had been pushed into the trunk. They're aware that if this news gets out—that a white woman was killed in Chinatown—that bad times will come. So not only must they solve the crime, but they have to keep it a secret from a whole lot of nosey people. Mr. Jones, a prominent Chinese member of the community is having mixed feelings about helping the Los Angeles Police Dept. and is not keen on working with Anna.

As this is taking place, the Chinese Hop Sing tong has taken two slave girls from another group calling themselves the Bing Kong. Because of this event, a tong war is also about to break out that would just about kill everyone in Chinatown. And even though Joe orders Anna to get out of town for her own safety, Anna opts to stay and solve the crime.

So who dies and who lives? Can a race war, as well as an inner-city tong war be stopped? Readers will love the fact that Anna is absolutely fearless when it comes to her oath and her job, and well ahead of her time. They will also admire the love/hate relationship Anna has with her partner. It is safe to say that Jennifer Kincheloe is a wonderful storyteller with great tales to tell.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion*

## LOOK FOR ME

By Lisa Gardner

Gardner has yet again put together a frightening thriller that offers a web of plots that tie together perfectly in the end.

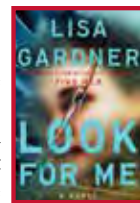
Beginning the tale with a hideous murder, a young girl by the name of Sarah escapes a brutal killer who has come into the home she shares with her roommates. This killer ends up taking out everyone there in front of Sarah's eyes, leaving her with a rough time ahead as she tries to put the nightmares of the evening behind her and move on.

Time has passed and now Sergeant Detective D.D. Warren receives a call about a crime scene she must report to. Upset that she can't spend the day with her son, helping him pick out a dog for the family, D.D. heads to work and enters a house where an entire family has been killed. One girl, however, the oldest daughter, is not there. As far as people know, she went out to walk the dogs and apparently has not returned. So, did the killer kidnap this girl after killing her family or was she, herself, the murderer and has somehow escaped?

The case becomes intricate for the detective when the dogs are found tied to a tree with a note attached to their collars asking for them to be taken care of. As the search for this girl grows wider in scope, a rebel from D.D.'s past joins the search. She, too, is a survivor and helps others (like Sarah) get through the agony they've been exposed to. Although she's a bit gritty and basically does her own investigation, she and D.D. combine forces in order to find the teenager, and figure out who on earth committed this brutality.

Readers will never be able to put this one down. The plot keeps you guessing by adding various red herrings into the mix, and characters that seem "friendly" are hiding some pretty frightening secrets. Another bestseller by Lisa Gardner.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Charlatan's Crown," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## BETTER DEAD

By Pamela Kopfler

Leave it to Pamela Kopfler to start off the New Year with a brand new cozy series that fans will absolutely eat up! Set in a small Louisiana town, readers are introduced to a whole new gang of memorable characters.

This story focuses on the demise of Mr. Burl Davis, who went to the "great beyond" and messed up his almost ex-wife's plans yet again. You see, he died too early for Holly to serve him with the divorce papers that were drawn up to put their relationship out to pasture. On a more positive note, if you want to see it that way, Burl did die before he *almost* bankrupted Holly's B&B set on Holly Grove, which is a plantation that has been owned by her family for generations.

Ironically, Holly can't seem to get rid of this guy; even death doesn't seem to want him. Burl's ghost remains because he has unfinished business. And before he can move on, he needs Holly's help to bring down a drug ring. Working together in death better than they did in life, these two come to an agreement. She'll help him if (and only if) Burl haunts the B&B to bring in more customers. One snag occurs when Holly's former boyfriend who she definitely still has feelings for decides to visit the B&B. She must now put up with a reignited flame and the ghost of the one man she hoped would never bother her again.

And for those of you wondering if something 'extra' is added... wonder no more. The author not only gives a great story, she also makes sure that for the New Year everyone can add Holly Grove's Mint Julep recipe and Nelda's Bourbon Pecan Pralines to their cookbooks. If book one is any indication, this is a series that will definitely become a quick fan favorite.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## THE LAST MRS. PARRISH

By Liv Constantine

Amber Patterson is a girl with a background. A background that includes a moment in time that she would rather forget; a moment in time that has this girl, now turned woman, shying away from photographers no matter what the circumstance.

Being a girl from a poor place who has always craved wealth, Amber sets her sights on attaining that one important goal. She focuses her energy on Daphne Parrish and her husband, which is why she has moved to Connecticut to put her plan in motion.

Amber befriends Daphne, who is one of those elite women in the super-posh state who gets everything she wants. She has the latest pocketbook that costs more than most peoples' houses; she's a member of "the club" and is raising two daughters, the youngest being a real brat who likes to call people fat and demand gifts. You may have heard this story before; where a woman will do anything to get what another woman has because her life is diamond-encrusted... to those who are looking *in*. What this author does, however, is make sure that after the story of Amber is conveniently told, the story of the woman looking *out* of the diamond-encrusted house begins.

Daphne and her husband have a life that no one sees, not even Amber. And what commences, what is revealed to the reader, causes this book to go from a good story to a whopping tale of suspense that you never saw coming.

The "play" that Amber is making may just work out great, with her getting that brass ring. However, she may just get what some women absolutely deserve. If you want to know who, exactly, the last Mrs. Parrish is, you have to read this book cover to cover. You'll find yourself on an out-of-control roller-coaster, making Liv Constantine one of the greatest 'teams' in suspense/thriller writing today.

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







## THE LATE SHOW

By Michael Connelly

Renée Ballard is a gung-ho detective in Hollywood, California, who has the desire to get scum off the streets and keep citizens safe. However, because she opened her mouth and told the truth about something her supervisor did to her, and because her old partner did not back her up, she now finds herself demoted and working “the late show” with a new partner. In Hollywood, that means Renée is working nights with Detective Jenkins, an older man who wants to work the overnight hours in order to spend his days with his ailing wife.

The night starts out very normal. Jenkins and Ballard head to a house to take a statement in regards to a burglary. A woman's credit card has gone missing and someone used it illegally. What the detectives will do is write up the report and hand it over to the division that takes care of that particular crime and then walk away from the whole thing. That's their job. But the night is far from over.

A male prostitute has been found, attacked and left for dead. The team heads to the hospital to collect statements. While there, a horrific shooting happens in a club and victims are brought into the same hospital where Ballard remains. Jenkins heads to the club but, because of circumstances, Ballard finds herself knee-deep in these two cases and hot on the trail of the perpetrators.

The worst comes when her old partner, who she has yet to forgive, turns up dead. Yet it seems as if many “stories” are being told that would pin the club shooting on the now deceased man. Ballard's plate is full; a plate that will have her face-to-face with more than one psycho before these cases are solved.

This is one new detective on the beat that readers will really like. It will be interesting to see what comes Ballard's way next time around.

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

## CRAZY RHYTHM

By T. W. Emory

This wonderful series began with the title, “Trouble in Rooster Paradise,” which introduced some extremely colorful characters, including the star of the series, Mr. Gunnar Nilson, P.I.

In this, book two of the *Gunnar Nilson* series, readers head back to the 1950's. Nilson works as one of those beloved “hard-boiled” detectives while dwelling in a boarding house located in the mostly dark and wet city of Seattle.

This time out, our adventure begins when Gunnar decides to go with a friend by the name of Rune Granholm in order to collect some gambling winnings. Trouble is, when Gunnar arrives at Rune's place, he finds Rune dead as a doornail, shot with his own gun. It doesn't help that Gunnar knows this was a murder and not a whole lot of people liked Rune. In fact, no one seems very upset that the guy is dead. But since Gunnar has a history with the family, he takes on the non-paying investigation, while also taking on a real investigation in order to pay the bills.

The cash comes from Attorney Ethan Calmer. This is a worried man who wants Gunnar to investigate some seriously frightening calls that Calmer's fiancée, Mercedes, is receiving. Mercedes is not living in some rough and tumble neighborhood, by the way. This is very much a rich girl living in a rich neighborhood that houses only Seattle's higher echelon. Mercedes may be receiving odd phone calls, but she's also more than a bit odd herself. As the investigations continue (both paid and un-paid), doors open that lead Gunnar to believe that somehow this rich girl has something to do with why Rune was found dead on the floor.

Readers will be thrilled that this series has continued. The tale is rich, and it will be interesting to see what Gunnar Nilson, P.I. is called upon to solve next time around.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## THE BAD DAUGHTER

By Joy Fielding

Robin is a therapist working in L.A. who seems to have more panic attacks than her patients ever could. Her fiancé's name is Blake, and she's always a bit worried that he's having an affair, so because of these things she has started popping pills to calm herself down.

Her sister, Melanie, is a real pain in the butt and was one of the reasons Robin left home. The other reasons included her mother's early death and her own father deciding to marry Robin's childhood friend, Tara, who is decades younger than her father. It also didn't help that Tara was engaged to Robin's brother, Alec, which further destroyed the family.

Robin gets a call from her sister back in Red Bluff letting her know that Dad, who happens to be the wealthiest man in the area, Tara, and Dad's stepdaughter Cassidy have been shot. It looks like a home invasion, but Melanie informs Robin that no one thinks their dad, Greg Davies, is going to survive.

Robin finds herself in Red Bluff trying to avoid Melanie's brutal sarcasm, while also trying to forgive her dying father for the crap he put her through as a child. What happens instead is that one person dies from the event; the home invasion turns into a murder case; and the town cop begs Robin to help get to the truth because Melanie has decided that everyone wants to pin this on her own autistic son, Landon.

This is one family with secrets galore, and every time you believe you know the killer and why they did it, Fielding makes sure to completely change direction. When you do find out what the title really means, you will not believe it. Which is the best review possible for a psychological thriller; something that Joy Fielding is an expert at writing.

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



## MANY A TWIST

By Sheila Connolly

For fans who have gotten absolutely hooked on these *County Cork Mysteries*, you'll not be disappointed with this new tale.

Maura Donovan is from Boston. Long ago, her father passed away and her mother had simply up and vanished, leaving her to be raised by her grandmother. Once she was grown, she was told that a man by the name ‘Old Mick’ had willed a pub to her operating in West Cork. The only thing Maura brought back to the place was a long-standing tradition of having Irish bands/live music, which has now brought new patrons and more money into the facility. Maura has a best friend named Gillian, who's almost ready to have a baby and dealing with her own problems, and Maura also has a romantic interest that has remained in the ‘friend’ category, yet the spark between them seems to be growing in intensity.

This time out, a hotel located close by named Cran Mor has been bought up by an organization looking to reopen the place. We're talking about a pretty ritzy location, and the group that's running it has called Maura to meet with her. They'd heard about her live music and want to make a deal. Trouble is, one of the members of the visiting group just so happens to be her long-lost mother. When the body of the man in charge of Cran Mor is found dead in the fancy gardens, Maura's mother becomes suspect number one, and Maura finds herself quickly thrown into a case filled with family dramas, secrets, and a whole lot of stuff from her own past she wasn't ready to hear.

Being the author of many series out there—from *The Orchard Mysteries* to *The Museum Mysteries*, and so much more—Connolly sticks to what she knows best: How to write a drop dead awesome book that keeps readers entertained from beginning to end!

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

## THE HOSTESS WITH THE GHOSTESS

By E.J. Copperman

This is the new fast-paced *Haunted Guesthouse Mystery* that fans of the series will absolutely love.

For those who have not yet met Alison Kerby and her group of both dead and undead family and friends, she's the owner of the Haunted Guesthouse located in her hometown of Harbor Haven, New Jersey. She spent a ton of money to renovate this huge Victorian home and has done well with her business. After all, people love ghosts, and the "spook shows" that occur inside this house have people coming from all over to stay there. But lately, the spooks are not as inviting as they used to be. Alison knows the reason why. One of her best performers, Paul Harrison, has vacated the property.

These are not actors; these are most definitely ghosts. You see, Alison had an accident a while back where she suffered a blow to the head and woke up with the ability to hear and see ghosts. She met Paul Harrison and Maxie Malone inside the old Victorian and made a deal with Paul. He had been working as a P.I. when he died and would haunt the house and bring her in guests if she would take the P.I. test and become his "eyes, ears and legs" in the industry. But when she said the deal was over, Paul said so long.

Out of the blue Paul's brother Richard appears inside the Victorian. He was defending a woman accused of murder, fell in love with her, and was murdered by someone who thought Richard had gotten too close to the truth. Alison is all of a sudden thrust back into the P.I. game, attempting to solve the crime Richard could not, find his killer, and track down Paul whose help and presence she definitely needs.

The plots in this series keep getting better. This is one that comes with wit, charm, suspense, humor, and characters you will not soon forget.

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

## LIVE AND LET FLY

By Clover Tate

This is a new title from the *Kite Shop Mysteries*, and it's just as entertaining as the first!

As summer is coming to an end in Rock Point, Oregon, Emmy Adler is desperate to win Rock Point's annual kite festival. You see, she needs the publicity for her shop, Strings Attached, because with the summer season dying down, so will the sales of handmade kites in her store.

Emmy has total faith and belief that she can win. Not even her fight with reality TV star, Jasmine Normand, can deaden her hopes. Unfortunately, that star—who just happens to be a judge for the kite contest—ends up dead as a doornail not long after the very public argument between she and Emmy.

Although she wanted nothing more than to garner publicity, this was most definitely not the type of publicity Emmy was looking for. But she can't avoid it. When police start investigating what happened to Jasmine, they soon come to the conclusion that the woman was murdered, making Emmy the number one suspect in the crime. It also doesn't help that a national reporter believes Emmy is 100% responsible for the killing. Doesn't matter now that sales will be falling at her shop, because Emmy now needs time to turn from kite creator and saleswoman to amateur sleuth in order to solve this case before she ends up behind bars.

This series is 'soaring.' The characters, the town, the supporting cast—everything is a whole lot of fun and cozy readers will absolutely love these tales.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## DEATH OF AN HONEST MAN

By M.C. Beaton



Honesty is a trait to be admired, for sure. But like too little knowledge, too much honesty is a dangerous thing. This is the premise M.C. Beaton uses as the springboard for Book 34 in her always entertaining *Hamish MacBeth* mystery series.

Paul English is a newcomer in Cnothan, a village on the beat of Scotland's most unassuming, yet brilliant police sergeant, Hamish MacBeth. English believes in telling everyone he meets what faults they may have. He tells Mrs. Wellington that she's too fat and in these days of emphasis on obesity, it's her duty to lose weight as an example to others. He tells Angela Brodie, a good friend of Hamish's and an aspiring writer, that her detective stories aren't worth reading. "I speak as I find," Paul says, as he tells Jessie, one of the twin Currie sisters, that she needs psychiatric help because she always repeats the last words of her sister's sentences. And, to top it all off, he insults Hamish personally by accusing him of having dyed his fiery red hair.

It doesn't take long for many of the locals to wish for someone to shut Paul English's mouth for good. And then, someone does.

Hamish is faced with his longest list of suspects at a time when he's dealing with a personal crisis of his own. He's still mourning the disappearance and probable death of his beloved feral cat, Sonsie. And, of course, his personal nemesis on the police force, Detective Chief Inspector Blair, is determined to undermine any efforts Hamish may make to solve the murder of English, even if that involves planting a policeman on Hamish's beat for the sole purpose of spying on him.

"Death of an Honest Man" is an absolutely delightful mystery from the very first page. My only complaint about this series is that I finish reading each one too fast, which makes me want the next one as soon as possible!

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

## POISON

By John Lescroart



The fan-favorite attorney, Dismas Hardy, is back again. And Lescroart, who was dubbed the "master of the legal thriller" has proven, yet again, that his attorney is one of the most riveting in the suspense world.

Money is the key and heirs are the suspects as Dismas finds himself in the middle of an investigation that has completely derailed his plans to ease into retirement and spend time with family that he hasn't been able to see much over the past few years.

With his two gunshot wounds fading into the past, Dismas should have time now to take a breath and focus on the next aspect of his life. Unfortunately, for him, the world has other ideas. Grant Wagner is the victim this time around. Wagner is a success story when it comes to the business world, being the patriarch of a money-making family business. It's only when he's found dead that the secrets begin to rise to the surface about just how nice this family actually is.

The first suspect, however, is Wagner's own bookkeeper Abby Jarvis. It seems that Abby was receiving large sums of money from the company: under-the-table, so to speak. But she's passionate about the fact that she is not the killer.

Her innocence seems more than possible once Dismas begins to delve deeper into the investigation and spots all kinds of problems embedded in Grant Wagner's family. Jealousy runs amok between the siblings, gold-diggers and blackmailers are running by their side, and even some pretty dark secrets are being buried so that no one knows the Wagner clan's twisted ways. With Dismas edging closer to the truth, it's easy to see why he feels as if his head is the next on the chopping block.

Lescroart never ceases to amaze his fans. The wit, the timing, the dialogue—everything combines to give this author yet another bestseller and provide readers with a fast-paced, memorable thriller.

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





## THE WIFE

By Alafair Burke

It's not often you can say this, but this new release, a domestic thriller if there's ever been one, by Alafair Burke, is a total and complete gem. Not one boring line or lagging minute can be found from beginning to end.

Her name is Angela. She met her husband, Jason Powell, when she was on the delivery side of things: catering a dinner party in East Hampton, NY. Yes, it was one of those flings between a summer tourist/visitor and a local. Or, at least she thought that's what it was supposed to be. Surprise, surprise, Jason definitely wanted more than that and the two ended up exchanging vows the summer after they met.

Angela was in love with Jason and loved the marriage even more. This twist of fate allowed her and her son to move out of her mother's house to Manhattan, a place where no one actually knew her. The marriage moved along beautifully. Jason published what became a best-selling book and began to become a household name in the literary world.

The downfall begins when a college intern accuses Jason of "wrong doing," and another lady, Kerry Lynch, comes out with even more gossip thrown in Jason's path. Jason tells his wife that he is absolutely innocent of all of these charges, and Angela absolutely believes him. But when Kerry Lynch up and disappears and an even greater shadow of guilt is cast upon her husband, Angela begins to realize that some old secrets from her own past may be dredged up with the rest of the mess that's about to befall them.

This is a fantastic story as Angela battles to figure out whether standing by her man is the right thing to do, even when that may mean watching a life she loves go up in flames. Reading this one is a great way to start off a New Year!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## KILLER CHOICE

By Tom Hunt

Gary Foster's pregnant wife, Beth, collapses and when he visits her at the hospital, they are both thankful to learn the baby is fine. Unfortunately, she has a brain tumor, and after bouts of chemotherapy, it only continues to grow. The doctor tells them of a clinical trial that is not covered by insurance that might be promising, but the cost is estimated to be around \$200,000. Of course, they don't have that kind of money.

Just when all seems lost, Gary has a visitor. This man has heard about the family's dilemma and offers to give him the money, but he has to murder someone to receive it. Now Gary has a decision to make whether to let his wife die or murder someone he doesn't know to get the funds necessary to save her life.

Hunt's debut novel shows that sometimes what is the best solution comes with a horrible cost. This is a terrific first novel, and anyone who enjoys a straight-up thriller will feel compelled to follow Gary on his journey to save his wife, even if it costs him his soul.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers, a professional librarian, book reviewer, and panel master and the author of several books, the most recent being the YA mystery "The Fourth Lion," (with Kevin Lauderdale) published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## MAYHEM & MASS

By Olivia Matthews

Sister Louise "Lou" LaSalle, a devout member of an order of sisters (not nuns—there is a difference) founded by Saint Hermione of Ephesus, is thrilled when a former colleague of hers, Maurice Jordan, is invited to be the guest speaker at the annual celebration of the founder's feast day. Mo is a Catholic theologian whose opinions are frequently controversial, and Sister Lou is looking forward to re-connecting with him.

They arrange to have a private dinner the night before his presentation, to give them a chance to catch up. Lou becomes increasingly concerned during the meal that her old friend seems troubled, even making mysterious comments like his work may be the death of him. He also confides that he's determined to cut back on his speaking schedule, so he can spend more time with his wife and son. When Mo fails to turn up to give his speech the following day, Sister Lou is worried that something has happened to prevent him from coming. Perhaps he's sick—or worse? But when she goes to check on him, she's shocked by what she finds in his hotel room. Her friend is dead, and it's obviously murder. Sister Lou is determined to find out who's responsible for this heinous act, despite the objections of the local police, several members of her own congregation, and the town's mayor. But she does have some allies she calls on to help.

Sister Lou's order founded the adjacent College of St. Hermione of Ephesus, and her nephew, Chris, is the college's Interim Vice President for College Advancement. Chris reluctantly agrees to help his aunt find out whodunit, as does a feisty reporter for the local paper, Shari Henson.

Although Sister Lou took the vow of obedience, she doesn't always play by traditional rules, as readers of this first-in-a-new-series will soon find out. "Mass & Mayhem" is a promising addition to the cozy mystery genre, and its protagonist is delightful!

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

## RATTLESNAKE HILL

By Leslie Wheeler

Kathryn Stinson is on a family mission to discover the identity of a mysterious woman in an old photograph one of her ancestors brought with him to California many years ago. One might think that this is an impossible task, but Kathryn already has several pieces of family history, which give enough background on her ancestors that she knows where to start: the Berkshires in Massachusetts. She knows, for instance, that the person who brought the photograph west and treasured it until the day he died was Jared Cutter. Cutter was a wealthy man, and one of the leaders in the Berkshire town of New Nottingham. But no one in the family knew why Jared suddenly pulled up stakes and moved to California. Did it have anything to do with his treasured photograph of a woman who became known in the family as Dark Lady? Kathryn is determined to find out.

Kathryn picks up the research trail begun by her beloved Aunt Kit, and once ensconced in a rental house with its own share of secrets, pays a visit to Emily Goodale, an elderly native of the area. Emily vacillates between living in a twilight world where long-dead family members speak to her, and being a with-it, and very demanding senior who's sharp enough (and mean enough) to give Kathryn tiny bits of tantalizing information and then shut down completely.

There are other forces at work in this hilly area of the Berkshires, too. Kathryn's suspicious neighbors on Rattlesnake Hill become openly hostile toward her when she starts seeking answers to a more recent mystery—the murder of Diana Farley, who once occupied the house Kathryn is renting. Rumors have swirled around her violent death, and both her husband, Gordon, and her lover, Earl Barker, are suspects.

Leslie Wheeler has penned a taut romantic thriller which mixes past and present with a menacing atmosphere, believable characters, and a fast-moving plot.

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

## I KNOW WHAT YOU BID LAST SUMMER

By Sherry Harris

Professional garage sale organizer Sarah Winston has more work than she can handle in the quaint Massachusetts town of Ellington. Sarah is a recent arrival and has been warmly embraced. When she's asked to donate her services to organize an athletic merchandise swap for Ellington High School, she finds the time. The night before the event Sarah stays late, alone, in the high school gymnasium to be sure everything is in place for the big day. What she doesn't bargain for is being viciously attacked. Managing to free herself, she's able to report the attack, is checked out at the hospital, and deemed to be okay. Just slightly terrified.

Sarah does an early morning walk-through before the doors open and discovers several items missing. Who would want to steal used sporting equipment? But the worst discovery is yet to come. Just as the swap is winding down, Sarah finds the school superintendent, Melba Harper, dead in her office, with a vintage ski pole through her heart. The police believe that the two events must be connected, but no one can figure out how.

Although she's upset by everything, Sarah has an upcoming high-profile garage sale to organize for school board member Lance Long and his wife, Kelly. Kelly's vision for her sale is "vintage, urban, chic," and has decided she wants refreshments served, plus she wants to rent an upscale tent to showcase the offerings. Sarah agrees, with reluctance, because this is after all a garage sale, not a Hollywood premiere.

The more questions Sarah asks about Melba's relationships to other school board members, the more she becomes the target of a diabolical killer. "I Know What You Bid Last Summer" is cleverly plotted, with an engaging cast of characters and a clever premise that made me think twice about my shopping habits. Check it out. And, by the way, it's possible to get tired of eating lasagna! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Dieting Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE STORM KING

By Brendan Duffy

Readers first meet Nate McHale out on the field, playing baseball. He's not the best of the best but he's pretty darn good for Greystone Lake's junior varsity team. Mom, dad and his brother, Gabe, are watching him play and are proud when Nate receives the game ball. Headed back home on this fun day, unfortunately, an accident is just waiting to upend their lives. The car in front of them hits the center line and Nate's father guns his engine in order to get out of the accident's path. Because of the game ball being wedged under the brake, a crash cannot be averted, and only Nate is left alive to deal with the fact that everyone he loved is now gone.

Speeding ahead, over a decade later, Nate has left Greystone Lake and this horrific moment in his life behind and has become a surgeon in New York City, as well as a loving father and husband. Life has gone on for Nate. What he does not know, however, is that Greystone will once again be surrounding him.

A body is found buried in the forest that plays scene to Greystone Lake; news that draws Nate back to this dark place. The reunion he has with friends, and the history he must deal with are filled with more suspense and secrets than he bargained for, including memories of one Lucy Bennett who'd been a large part of his youth. Add to that the fact that a hurricane is headed directly at Greystone Lake, and you have Mother Nature's acts of violence walking hand-in-hand with the violent acts of humans all around. Something is operating in this town that will have the past rise and others fall into blackness.

Author Brendan Duffy has written a mystery that unleashes a well of emotions—from thrills and chills to heartbreak and sorrow. This is one tale that most definitely will keep readers hooked until the very end. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## NO ONE CAN KNOW

By Lucy Kerr

This title, the second *Stillwater General Mystery*, carries on from "Time of Death," which was definitely a promising start to a brand new suspense series.

We begin with ER nurse, Frankie Stapleton, who's hard at work in her trauma-filled world when a car crash victim is brought in to Stillwater General Hospital. Frankie and the rest of her fantastic team work hard to keep the mother alive and save the baby, but after an extreme effort, the mother loses her life. What is worse, however, is when it's found out by Frankie that this tragic event was no accident.

The deceased mother, a social worker, has lost her life at the hands of a killer who is behind this definite hit-and-run. Frankie and members of her team at Stillwater believe that the murderer may just have been a troubled patient of the social worker looking for revenge. Yet another possibility is revealed when it's found that the woman was the wife of a politician who many people want to see succeed.

Readers will find this a thrilling tale, watching Frankie try to unravel whether this is a crime of anger or politics, and just how insane the person responsible for it may be. Add in the fact that the baby suddenly comes up missing, and now Frankie must kick it into overdrive in order to find the child and take a killer off the streets before Frankie becomes his or her next victim.

Author Lucy Kerr has made sure that this series that started well, grows in intensity. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## THE THRONE OF CAESAR: A MYSTERY OF ANCIENT ROME

By Steven Saylor

Okay, so Caesar is definitely a name all readers would know. However, author Steven Saylor is so good at what he does that the writing of this mystery is fresh, new and will not be just another "Ides" book, if you know what I mean.

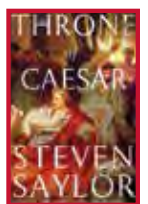
In fact, we concentrate mainly on Rome's own personal Sherlock Holmes, Gordianus the Finder. Although retired now, after a long life of solving crimes for the most rich, prominent families Rome has to offer, his services are once again requested from the very top of the ladder.

On March 10, he meets with both Cicero and then with the mighty 'dictator for life,' Caesar. There are conspiracies afoot, more than one, and both men ask Gordianus to keep eyes open, ears at the ready and report back if he discovers any scheme that's in the works.

Caesar has pardoned all the bad guys and rewarded all his friends and is now preparing to leave with his Army to fight another Empire: the Parthians. But before departure, Caesar is planning to bestow upon Gordianus an honor that will change his life and the destiny of his family for the rest of time. In other words, Gordianus, for personal reasons, needs to stop any plot that may be in the works that could take Caesar out. With four days left before the Senate convenes, Gordianus must put retired life aside and get back on the investigative path.

Readers will love the way this book is presented. The characters, the scenes, the history brought to life on every page... Saylor has made sure to not miss a single moment and should be praised for writing about a time and place in our past that many would still love to visit. This may be the first book in 2018 that will deserve an award nomination when all is said and done.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■





# BONE-CHILLING Suspense...



NEW SERIES

The  
Bone Gap  
Travellers  
Series

Enter the secret world of the Irish Travellers living in the Mountains of Tennessee with former Marine MP Brynn Callahan and her canine partner, Wilco, as they find unexpected danger in the bestselling author's riveting new series.

**"Readers will want to see more of the intrepid Brynn as she tries to find her place in a hostile community."**

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

Bestselling author Linda Ladd's latest thriller finds detective Claire Morgan following clues down a path with more twists and turns than any board game as serial killers force their victims to play along...or else.

**"Ladd masterfully sets up the suspenseful situations...will have readers turning the pages and staying up late to finish."**

—MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW  
on Enter Evil

Available Everywhere Books Are Sold

 [KensingtonBooks.com](http://KensingtonBooks.com)





## THE DISASTER ARTIST 2017

Genre – Biography/Comedy/Drama (R)

I will admit I'm not a huge fan of James Franco, and it appears he's one of the latest actors to be called out for his inappropriate behavior. If he had not, I would argue that not only would he have been nominated for a Best Actor Oscar for his role playing the real and bizarre Tommy Wiseau, but he would have won as well.

In 2003, a film came out called *The Room* that was strange, unintentionally hilarious, and the cinematic equivalent of a car wreck. It has developed cult status, and the writer, director, and lead actor Tommy Wiseau truly made a disaster. A book came out about the making of this film in 2013, and James Franco handles the difficult task of playing a person who does not seem real, and is probably the worst actor on the planet. Franco has to balance the line between bad acting while also doing it so well that's it believable.

The supporting cast makes this a fun experience even through the times where Wiseau's cluelessness makes some of the scenes uncomfortable to watch. Since Wiseau signed off on this film, it makes one wonder if he's still not grasping the big picture.

Seeing *The Room* helps give this homage perspective, but *The Disaster Artist* is still a great picture without knowledge of it. If you haven't seen the original yet, don't torture yourself. The end credits put the original film clips next to *The Disaster Artist* versions, and it's uncanny how well they pulled it off. ■

## JUMANJI: WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE 2017

Genre – Action/Adventure/Comedy (PG 13)

Four high school students face detention, and their punishment is to clean up the school's basement. While down there, they find a video game cartridge labeled Jumanji. They turn it on, and seeing it's a multiplayer game, they each select a character to play. After each one has picked and they press start, the four are sucked into the video world of the game.

Each becomes the character they chose. Shy Spencer is now a muscular explorer played by Dwayne Johnson. The football star "Fridge" is a short zoologist brought to life by Kevin Hart. Shy Martha is a female commando played by Karen Gillan, and the popular girl who can't spend more than 30 seconds away from her phone is a pudgy male cartographer portrayed by Jack Black. Black steals the movie away from everyone else, but all of them do a fantastic job of playing heroes while also clearly being uncomfortable high school students forced to fight for their lives and solve the game.

This is a crowd-pleaser from the second it starts, and the smile will not leave your face until way after the film has finished. It also pays a nice homage to the original *Jumanji* that starred Robin Williams, revealing that it's a continuation of the world rather than a reboot. That's a good thing. ■



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*.



# Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

A full-page artistic photograph of a man and a woman in a tango pose. The woman is wearing a dark, flowing dress and is being dipped or spun by the man. They are silhouetted against a vibrant, monochromatic red background. Red petals or confetti are falling all around them, creating a romantic and dramatic atmosphere. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of their bodies and the texture of the dress. In the background, there are faint, stylized architectural elements, possibly a clock tower or a bridge, also rendered in the red monochrome.

*Adriana Estevez*  
*Someone to Set Your Heart Free*

**TANGO TIME**

Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/Tango-time-720754651>

**A**driana Estevez is a woman with a great deal of talent, as well as a passion for *all* things creative. Not only is her artwork a collection of imaginative inventions that touch the soul, but she also combines a love of dancing as well as writing into her daily life. This can be seen in some of her pieces; the dancers, the flow, the absolute beauty that dwells within her mind that allows her again and again to dive into her imagination and bring stunning new creations to life.

From portraits to compositions to so much more, Adriana also owns a love for learning. Recently, she spoke with *Suspense Magazine* about striving to learn new things—programs and techniques—to accomplish even more and reach further with her work as the New Year commences.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Let us begin with your home in Spain. Many artists say their surroundings affect or inspire their work in some way. How do you feel in regards to that topic?

Adriana Estevez (A.E.): *Although I live in a town in the mountains of Madrid, I must say that my 'surroundings' are not what is most inspiring to me. My true inspiration comes when I am alone...when I allow my imagination to take over.*

S. MAG.: When it comes to the realm of graphic artistry, there are so many different techniques/programs to learn. You certainly have a variety of skills. Do you have a specific preference; and is there one program you would like to learn that you have not yet tried?

A.E.: *I like everything related to the graphic arts. I do not have preferences. I do my drawing with the mouse of the pc; I do not use a tablet. Although I do portraits and compositions, I am learning little by little.*

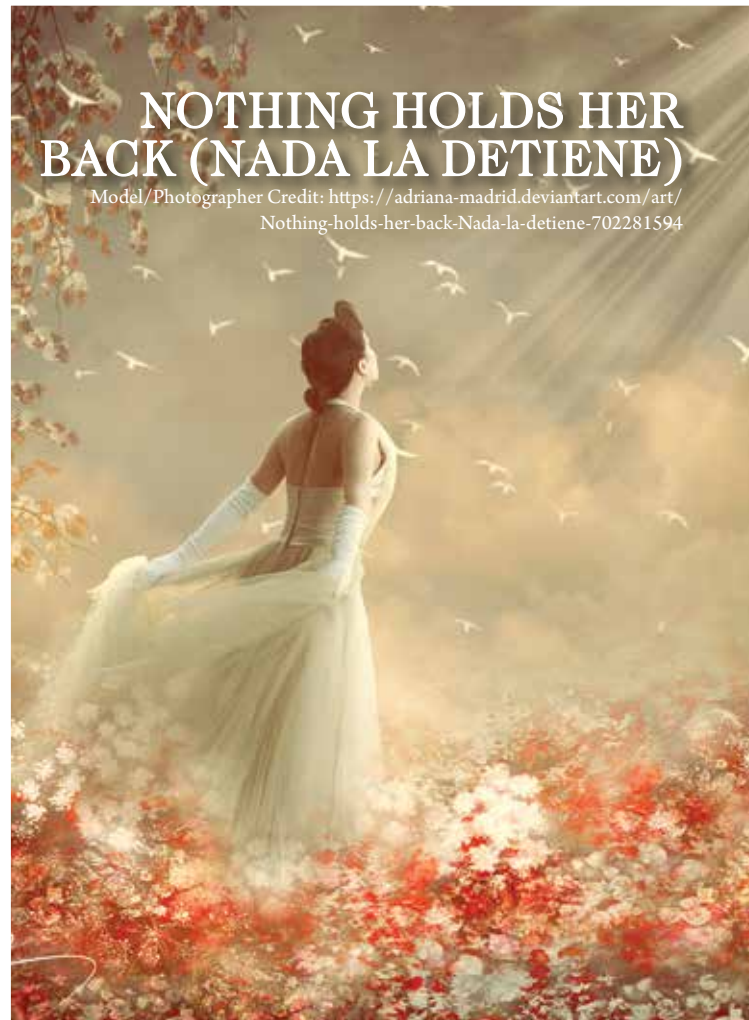
*I have begun learning with Illustrator, yet I still do not work with it on a daily basis. Being that I just started, I find the program a bit complicated. I love learning, however, and I believe that little by little I will be able to do things and learn a variety of techniques as I move forward.*

S. MAG.: When did you first decide that creating images and being an artist was what you wanted to do in your lifetime? Can you give us a bit of background as to when you first began and what drew you to being an artist?

A.E.: *I have always liked art. One day, a friend and I were*

## NOTHING HOLDS HER BACK (NADA LA DETIENE)

Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/Nothing-holds-her-back-Nada-la-detiene-702281594>



## ALICIA EN EL PAIS DE LAS MARAVILLAS

Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/Alicia-en-el-pais-de-las-maravillas-552976048>



*"Art is powerful and can bring everything  
from strength and power to beauty and wonder  
to those who view it."*



**UNDER THE RAIN**

Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/>

Under-the-rain-717477758



*speaking and they told me that if I wanted to learn Photoshop, I could give the program a chance. I started doing tutorials at that time. Until one day, I started doing my own work. That was three years ago and I'm learning every day. I invent new things (they do not always work out), but the important thing is to always be determined to learn and create without getting stuck on one particular thing that interrupts or darkens that creative spark.*

S. MAG.: How do you like corresponding with the fans that you have on DeviantArt? Can you tell our readers a bit about this realm, where so many talented people, such as yourself, get together to allow others to view your creations?

A.E.: *I do not have much contact with my followers on DeviantArt. I do not have too much time for it. But, if and when I'm able to view some of the other works and I find them fantastic, that can translate into even more creations. I can and have been inspired by many of them.*

S. MAG.: Included in your work are many pieces that involve dancing. Is dancing a personal hobby of yours? Do you have any other particular hobbies that inspire you?

A.E.: *I love to dance!! I enjoy it a great deal! Another hobby I have that also takes a bit of my time is writing. I write poetry as well as some short stories. And, as it is with the dancing, some of my art works are based on the poetry I write.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a plan for your work ahead of time and then sit down and begin; or does your piece transform while in the process of creating it?

A.E.: *Sometimes, if I have a plan—but, I do not know how—in some way, the piece transforms into something very different from what I was originally thinking. Other times, I just sit down and begin with no plan in mind at the start and see what comes to life. ... A texture, a color, something like that can help me start making an image that I did not even think about ahead of time.*



## MIGRACION

Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/Migracion-713072660>



## FUERA DEL MARCO

Model/Photographer Credit: <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com/art/Fuera-del-marco-713325748>



S. MAG.: Is there one work of art you can name that came about because of something specific, such as a building, the story in a book...etc.? If so, what would that be and why was that such an inspiration?

A.E.: *My poems have and continue to inspire me, especially when I make blends. And the rest...well, I owe to my imagination. Sometimes I will see a picture and I know what I'm going to do with it. Other times, I am on that imagination path and I try my best to capture it.*

S. MAG.: You have an amazing theatrical/emotional quality in your work, as well as wonderful, intense color. What is one thing you hope your audience will take away from your site after viewing them?

A.E.: *I would like all viewers to feel inspired by what I try to convey when I create something. When I fill them with sensations, I am satisfied. I do not try to show my personal self through my works. I try to make my characters seduce the viewer and, in some way, make them feel their own emotions strongly when they look at them. Art is powerful and can bring everything from strength and power to beauty and wonder to those who view it.*

S. MAG.: What is next for you in 2018? Are there future projects in the works?

A.E.: *Projects I have every day. I only hope to improve in my work. I am at that place where I can do these wonderful works that I see in DeviantArt and still have no idea how they got there. This 2018, I just hope to improve myself, keep learning, and move a little more each and every day.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a particular personal favorite artist that you would love to sit down with? If so, who would that be and why?

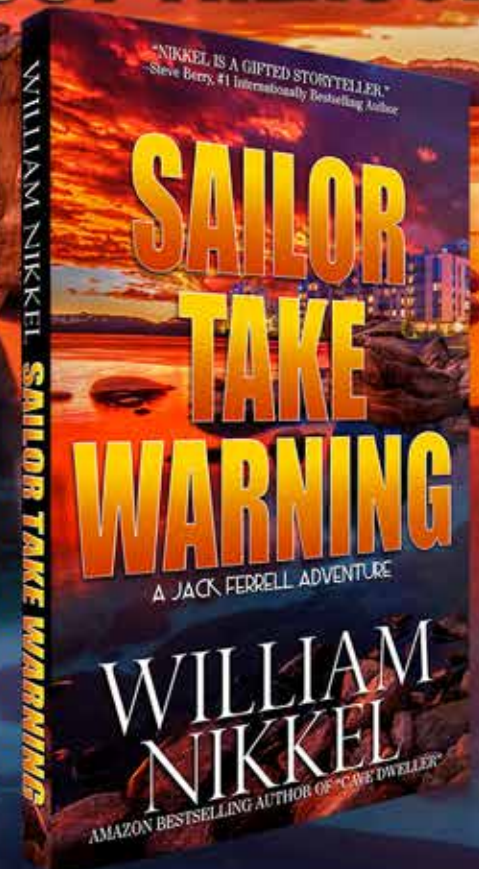
A.E.: *I like so many artists that it is impossible to choose one. I especially like those who transmit to me what they wanted to transmit through their works when they brought them to life. I like that they make me imagine and feel—that through art, you can feel wonderful things. Those artists I truly enjoy because they fill me with their sensibility and, why not...of their magic.*

Adriana should know, seeing as that she is an artist who most definitely fills the world with her own brand of magic. Her pieces cover a wealth of emotions that bring wonder to everyone who sees them. To view more of Adriana's work, she can be found at <https://adriana-madrid.deviantart.com>. ■

"This twisty thriller is chock-full of heroic exploits, nasty villains, and hard-boiled action."

—Boyd Morrison, #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

# COIN FRAUD, BLACKMAIL, & LOST TREASURE



## JACK FERRELL RETURNS

"A darkly demented tale that's utterly irresistible. The much-appreciated return of Jack Ferrell serves up a smorgasbord of deceit and duplicitousness across a landscape steeped in classic crime noir. Be warned: You won't be able to put it down!"

—Jon Land, *USA Today* Bestselling Author

# SAMUEL PARKER'S BRAND OF JUSTICE? “COLDWATER”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



Samuel Parker is the author of “Purgatory Road,” a debut thriller that introduced his name to the masses and gained critical acclaim right out of the proverbial gate—being named one of *Library Journal’s Best Books for 2017* and called “exceptional” by many others, including *Publishers Weekly*.

A man who states that he was born in the Michigan boondocks and raised on a never-ending road trip across the United States, Samuel Parker originally took up music—writing songs and playing guitar for a time—before coming to the realization that writing was the perfect niche for his creative talent. His new novel, “Coldwater,” is a fantastically frightening story about an ex-con that is basically impossible to put down. Talking about everything from his love of Westerns to heavy metal music, Samuel took time out to talk with *Suspense Magazine* and let fans get to know him just a little bit better.

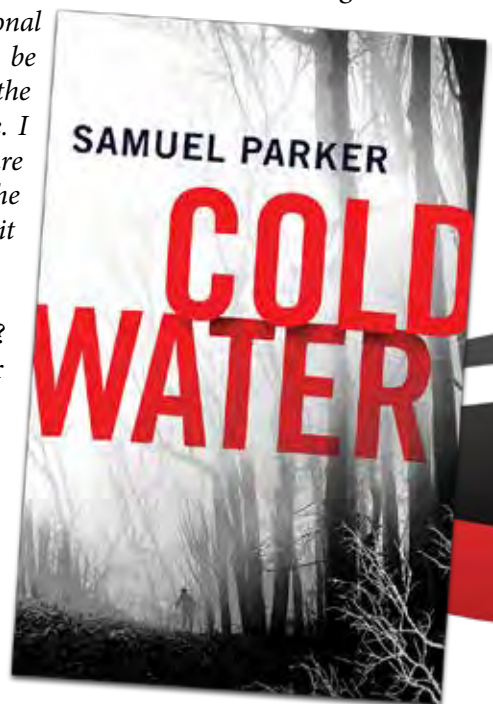
*Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.):* Let us start on a personal note. In your bio, you state that you were raised on a “never-ending road trip.” Can you tell us a bit more about that and how all those locales, perhaps, help you in your writing?

*Samuel Parker (S.P.):* My father was a school teacher, so in June, when school released, we’d pile into the conversion van and head west, several times not coming home until late August. We’d sleep in rest areas, national parks, or the campgrounds that used to be

along major highways. We’d wake up someplace else, my dad often driving through the night to arrive at a scenic spot before sunrise. The wanderlust started then for me. I just love finding out of the way places that have their own unique character. People are generally, at their core, the same. It’s the setting that they find themselves in that has the most character at times. Because I was able to see much of America at an early age, it allowed me to take it in with a healthy dose of mystery, wonder, and awe.

*S. MAG.:* Beginning with a love of music, what made you turn to writing as a career? And (from one heavy metal fan to another) I must ask, who would you pick as your favorite band?

*S.P.:* I’ve been writing in some capacity since I was in second grade, and believe me, there is some really bad writing (poems, sonnets, short stories...) in my past that I’m glad is buried in history. I started with music as a teen just to be cool, it’s why every guy starts playing guitar. I found that I loved writing and working on songs but absolutely hated playing on stage. I think deep down I knew I was nowhere near as good a musician as the guitarists I idolized. But writing songs was a way to be creative, and I was lucky enough to be around several talented and intelligent people





who were even more creative, and we had a lot of fun. We were flat broke, but it was one of the best times of my life.

As far as bands go, that's almost impossible to answer. I seriously can listen to almost anything and hear something interesting in it. I grew up in the Metallica/Megadeth age, and then grunge came in and I was addicted to Alice in Chains. I'm drawn not only by just sickly distorted guitars, but also the tonal quality of the voice, the more unique the better: Layne Staley (AIC), Chris Cornell, Chuck Billy (Testament). I loved Anthrax when John Bush was singing. Rob Zombie. This year I've been listening to a ton of Volbeat. Michael Poulsen has a great voice, and their album "Outlaw Gentlemen and Shady Ladies" has heavy guitar, and songs about the Old West. A perfect mix.

Sorry, I could talk forever on this subject, but you did ask!

S. MAG.: Please tell our readers about your new title, "Coldwater."

S.P.: "Coldwater" is the story of a man who is released from prison and moves back to the small town where he spent part of his childhood. The locals do not like having him around as it makes them feel unsafe and vulnerable. They try to "get rid" of him but fail. "Coldwater" then follows the aftermath of that attempt on the ex-con's life and what happens to the vigilantes who tried to kill him.

S. MAG.: Being that "Purgatory Road" was your debut, were you at all surprised that the title became an immediate success? All writers wish to know about how "that moment" feels—to know that you have a real winner. How was that moment for you?

S.P.: That moment feels great right up to the point of the first negative review, and then it gets wiped out (ha!). It was great to realize I had a story that resonated with people, and for that I feel extremely fortunate. The amazing part was getting emails from people all over the country who felt compelled to contact me after reading "Purgatory Road." I think that was the most gratifying result, over and beyond the positive trade reviews.

S. MAG.: Looking forward, is there any genre you have always had an inkling to try out one day, and why?

S.P.: That's easy. Westerns. I tend to think that I am already writing westerns, just in a modern setting. I'm addicted to them as a reader, so I think I would love to write one. I just need to expand my knowledge of horses and handguns.

S. MAG.: Is there one particular writer out there (or even one who may no longer be out there) that you admire and would love to sit down and talk with? If so, who would that be and what would you ask them?

S.P.: Robert Parker, Cormac McCarthy, Richard Matheson, Robert Olmstead...the list could go on. I have no idea what I would ask them; we'd probably just sit around sipping whiskey and staring at each other.

S. MAG.: Share with readers what a "Samuel Parker" writing day is all about. Do you have a set time to write, or just play it by ear? Do you need music in the background; is there a certain locale you like to visit to get inspired...?

S.P.: A typical writing day for me is anything but typical. Writing is not my full time job, and I have a family and other commitments. When I do write, it's usually during my lunch times, sitting in my car at the local park near my office. After the rough draft I will usually write to music to work on things like phrasing and feel, but the first pass is usually done in silence.

S. MAG.: Do you have a favorite in the writing realm where you simply just can't wait for their next book to get published so you can see that particular author or character again?

S.P.: Robert Olmstead is one who recently came out with a new title that I scooped up. Daniel Silva and his Gabriel Allon series is one that I will look forward to every year. I am not a big series reader, so I am always looking for new things and new authors to try.

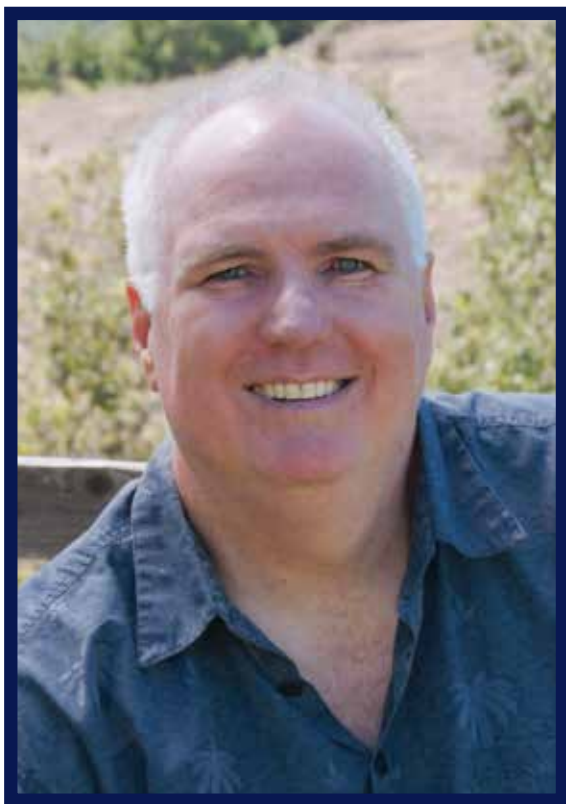
S. MAG.: What is your viewpoint on social media and the need to use it when it comes to furthering a career?

S.P.: My viewpoint is that I am really bad at it, and I am quite honestly the last person to speak authoritatively on that subject. I see a lot of writers really laying it down on social media and they do a great job marketing themselves and their books. I don't have that gene. I've even asked my wife to manage the social media side of my author life, but so far that hasn't worked out (ha!).

S. MAG.: What new things are on tap for you in 2018?

S.P.: My goal for 2018 is to just try and keep enjoying the process. This could all end tomorrow, so I want to make sure that I have fun for as long as it lasts.

Taking into consideration his extreme talent, and the awesome books Samuel Parker has provided thus far, something tells all fans out there that this career will not end tomorrow. (Thank God!) To keep up-to-date on the next Samuel Parker thriller, and perhaps to even catch a glimpse of that first Western that is sitting in his imagination just waiting to be born, follow him at [www.facebook.com/Samuelparkerauthor](http://www.facebook.com/Samuelparkerauthor). ■



# DAVID PUTNAM

## *Hasn't "Vanquished" his Series*

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

During his long career in law enforcement, Dave Putnam (AKA: "Deputy Dave" Putnam) worked primarily in California on teams for Patrol, Investigations, SWAT, Narcotics (street level and majors), Violent Crimes, Criminal Intelligence, Internal Affairs and the Detective Bureau. He even spent a few years as a Special Agent in a real-life "Hawaii Five-0" team. A long resume, to say the least.

His ability to 'cover various fields' also worked out extremely well for book lovers across the globe. Covering multiple genres, Dave Putnam has been doing a fantastic job, especially when it comes to creating a master detective by the name of Bruno Johnson. His knowledge allows the scenes he 'fictionalizes' to come off as absolute truth, making the blood pressure spike and causing it impossible for the reader to put the book down. With his newest release, "The Innocents," Dave Putnam took a moment out of his busy schedule to discuss with *Suspense Magazine* what it was like in law enforcement, what events he draws upon now that he's retired, and the happiness that comes from being an author.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): You have had a slew of law enforcement jobs. Can you tell us about your "Deputy Dave" period in California, and how having that knowledge helps you, or perhaps inspires you to create your plots? In addition, as part of a real-life "Hawaii Five-0" team at one point during your career, did that particular place add to the list of locations that you will spotlight in your books?

David Putnam (D.P.): I feel very lucky in the way my career played out. I had a great time and still have pangs and urges to go back. I do miss it dearly. But I'm too old and slow. I have a talk I give called "The Anatomy of Violence and What it Takes to Shoot Someone." I go into the legal right, the moral right, and the emotional ability to pull the trigger. I explain the 'Use of Force Continuum' and then go into the violent confrontations I encountered, each one in turn growing more violent until I was in my first officer-involved shooting as a young 21-year-old deputy. From these events, early on in my career, I found a fascination with violence and the people who perpetrated it upon the innocent. I began to chase violence, first in the form of armed robbers. Then later on, while working on a violent crimes team, I chased murder suspects. The department paid me to carry a gun and chase bad guys, a kid's real life dream of cops and robbers. A collateral duty was two tours on the SWAT team where the violence is rendered down for you. You don't have to go out looking for it.

Because of this path I chose, I specialized for most of my career. I met people, good and bad, and experienced things I would not have otherwise even imagined could have happened. I bring my experiences to the pages of my books usually fictionalizing events, chases, shootings, murder and mayhem, the by-products of chasing violence. I also try to portray the victims and witnesses exactly the way I found them. And of course the big losers of all, the children caught directly in the violence—the children of the victims, and the children of the suspects.

I retired after twenty-eight years of California law enforcement and went to work as a special agent for the Hawaii Attorney General's Office. I enjoyed my stay there immensely, though it was an absolute culture shock. Law enforcement is totally different



in the islands and it would take several pages (maybe even a book) to describe the differences and what happened there. For example, all my time at San Bernardino Sheriff's I qualified and practiced on the sheriff's range—a dry, hot, windy desert experience. For Hawaii Five-O, we qualified in Coco Head Crater with a view out over the beautifully blue ocean. This contrast is difficult to describe. There were other differences that weren't as nice.

I have yet to overtly use an experience in Hawaii, although everything that happened in my career in one way or another influences my writing. Mostly in the people I have met. Writing is all about the characters and I met many of those in all shapes and sizes, and dispositions.

S. MAG.: When did you first decide you wanted to go down the 'writing' path? Was this a passion early on, or something you decided to try after retiring? Does the author life suit you, so to speak?

D.P.: I tried writing in high school and started two novels I never finished. I was always an avid reader, starting in elementary school with Robert Louis Stevenson. I might have continued on to be a writer had I not fallen in love with law enforcement. I continued reading though, while being a cop, and kept novels in the backseat of my undercover car. During down time on surveillances when it wasn't my turn on the "Eye," I'd read a novel. Now, I thought this was the perfect world, they paid me to chase bad guys and when we were waiting for one of them to show their ugly heads, the department paid me to read novels.

One day, while watching a meth lab in Lucerne Valley, in the middle of the Mojave Desert, I was down to my last novel, a national bestseller. I'd read the first book by this author and it was great. This was his second and it was not only bad, it was absolutely awful. But I was out in the middle of the desert bored sitting in a car, so I read the whole thing. I thought I could do better and penned my first four novels sitting on the front seat of my undercover car. I wrote them long hand on four legal pads each. What I immediately discovered was that a good author makes it look easy. I found that I loved writing and continued to write in my spare time. I got up every morning at four a.m. and wrote until seven when I got ready for work. I attended writing classes, writing conferences, book conferences, and read and critique groups. I talked four different agents into taking a chance on me (at different times, of course); two of them were great, and the other two, not so. I was working on writing my thirty-eighth book when I finally

sold number thirty-four. I have to thank Oceanview for the wonderful opportunity. What a great publisher.

S. MAG.: Please tell readers about your new book, "The Innocents."

D.P.: Bruno Johnson is an ex-cop/ex-con who runs an underground railroad to rescue children from toxic homes in South Central Los Angeles, a place where I used to work. Bruno couldn't save the children like he wanted to when he was a deputy because of all the rules and regulations. Booklist describes Bruno best: "Bruno Johnson believes so passionately in justice that he'll lie, cheat, and steal to achieve it—and he'll pulverize anybody who gets in his way."

"The Innocents" is the fifth book in the Bruno Johnson series after "The Vanquished." In "The Vanquished" I left Bruno so physically and emotionally broken that I needed to take a breather before I went back and rescued him. So, with "The Innocents," I decided to do a prequel and planned out four novels to show how Bruno came to be Bruno. These books are subtitled as, "Bruno Johnson: The Early Years." The second prequel, or the sixth book, is titled "The Betrayed" and is due out in a year: Feb. 2019.

In "The Innocents," Bruno is just starting out as a brand new detective on the brand new Violent Crimes Team. He knows the street as a patrolman but this is an entirely different world and he has to learn quickly or lose his dream, or worse. Unlike the other Bruno books (the first four) where I put in four or five scenes based on what happened to me, in "The Innocents" fifty to sixty percent of the book are events that really happened and I fictionalized them.

In the first week on the new Violent Crimes Team, Bruno is asked to go undercover into a Sheriff's street narcotics crew. This crew is suspected of running a murder-for-hire conspiracy. Bruno is young and new and doesn't know which way is up. He is working with experienced cold-blooded killers. The idea of cops as contract killers isn't a fantastical premise; in fact, two LAPD cops were convicted of this crime:

"Nov 4, 1988: Former Los Angeles Police Officer Robert Von Villas, 44, of Simi Valley was found guilty by a Van Nuys Superior Court jury of one count each of first-degree murder ... Von Villas' former partner in the Police Department, Richard Ford, 48, of Northridge was convicted Oct. 11 of the same charges by a separate jury."

S. MAG.: How does an inspiration hit? Are the characters

"I LEFT BRUNO SO PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY  
BROKEN THAT I NEEDED TO TAKE A BREATHER  
BEFORE I WENT BACK AND RESCUED HIM.."

who appear in your book loosely based on real people, or are they figments of the imagination?

D.P.: Most of my characters are an amalgamation of people I have met, arrested, or worked with. For example, I used a part of a real investigation and a real murderer who I renamed in *"The Replacements"* as Karl Drago. In real life Karl Drago committed a murder, was convicted, went to prison for 12 years, got out on parole, committed another murder, went back in for 12 years, and again was getting out on parole. This happened before the Three Strikes law. The thought was that he might be a danger to society, so the team I was on was assigned to follow him until he committed any felony that would fall under the new Three Strikes. There is a lot more to that story. Karl was up there on the list as one of the most dangerous people I had ever dealt with. He was tattooed over every part of his body, one being a head of a ram with the horns on his hips and the snout of the ram was...well, you get the idea. Karl was so heinous that he'd turn into a caricature if I wrote him just as he really lived in our society. So, just as a hero in a book has to be flawed to some degree, I had to give Karl some humanity. Which I did, but apparently I went too far. I tried to kill off Karl in the third Bruno book, but the publisher said they liked him too much and asked that I keep him.

S. MAG.: Do you have any personal favorites when it comes to authors who you can't wait to read when their new release comes out?

D.P.: John Sandford (both the Virgil Flowers, and the Davenport series), Jonathan Moore, Harry Dolan (I really liked Noah Boyd but, alas, he's no longer with us), David Swinson, Don Winslow, Thomas Perry, Richard Lange, and Daniel Woodrell, just to name a few.

S. MAG.: Are there other genres you ever think of delving into one day? If so, what would they be?

D.P.: I read anything that is well-written, doesn't matter the genre. I have written a book called *"Fire at Will,"* about a deputy who goes out on a hazardous waste spill and is contaminated. He almost dies. When he recovers he thinks he can turn invisible, but really can't. This mental disorder causes him all kinds of problems. My agent loved the book and sent it around New York, the rejections said that they all loved it but didn't know if it was mystery or Sci-Fi. I liked the book so much I self-published it and it's selling pretty well.

I'm also working on a time-travel book where a female SWAT officer goes back in time to the Alamo. It gets into how her training in tactics and her weapons would impact that siege. It's finished and I'm polishing it.

S. MAG.: Is there a favorite character out there in the literary world that you like more than others? A favorite villain, perhaps, that you wish you had written?

D.P.: This answer is going to come off a little cheesy but... cringe... Travis McGee.

As far as favorite villains, there are two that immediately come to mind, both of them written by John Sandford, and as it happens more and more nowadays, I cannot think of their names. One was a female hitwoman/person; the other appeared in two books, a psychotic doctor who cut off the eyelids of his victims so he could document the moment life is extinguished.

S. MAG.: On a more personal note, with your background being what it is, do you have a personal viewpoint on the crime rate/tragedies that are happening in the U.S. today? If you could give a piece of advice to people out there on how to stop these things from occurring, what would it be?

D.P.: In my opinion this is a politically charged question and I do try to keep these opinions to myself. They don't mix well with the world of fiction writing and marketing. Other than to say we are definitely headed down the wrong path, one that could so easily be corrected. If you see me at a writing or book conference, I'd be happy to elaborate.

S. MAG.: Who, whether historical or present-day, would be one person you would love to sit down and have a discussion with? What is one question you would love to ask them?

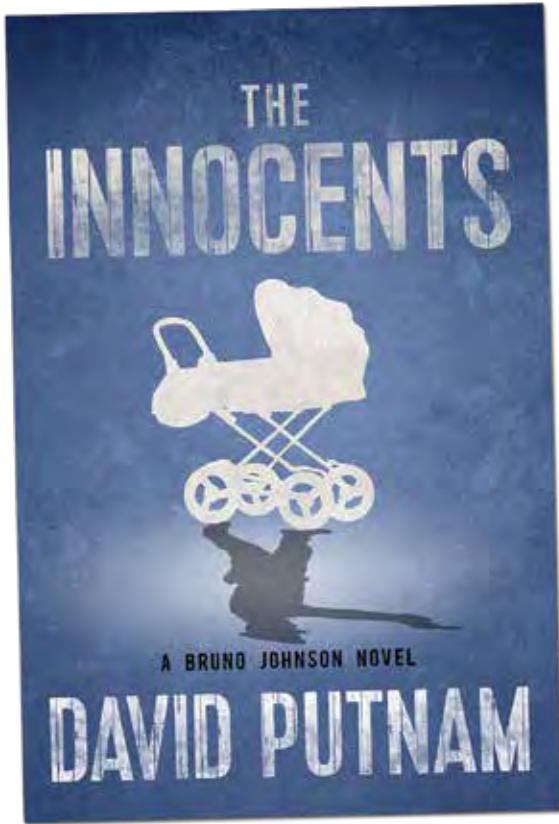
D.P.: This one is a toss up between Ben Franklin and Mark Twain. As far as the one question, I don't know if I could pick just one.

S. MAG.: Looking ahead, is there a project currently in the works that fans can learn about here?

D.P.: There is a book of mine, a stand-alone, being marketed in New York by my agent. It's called *"The Donut Dolly of Downey."* It's a story of a successful and skilled surgeon, Ava Larue, who is now an ex-con on parole. She is a defrocked doctor who can no longer treat anyone for anything. She owns and runs two donut shops while dodging her parole officer as she does back-alley surgeries for the underworld, looking for the two men who killed her husband and framed her for murder—the reason she went to prison.

This is one author who has a slew of interesting books with awesome plots to enjoy, ranging from Sci-Fi to time-travel to the beloved murder-and-mayhem that character Bruno Johnson is a master at solving. Not only were U.S. citizens extremely lucky to have a police officer such as this working to protect them for so long, but the world also gets the privilege of being able to read outstanding novels by David Putnam. To learn more about upcoming events and projects, head to <https://dwputnam.wordpress.com/>. ■





# THE INNOCENTS

By David Putnam

## CHAPTER ONE

East Compton 1988

Millicent hesitated, cocked her head to the side.

I turned the water off in the shower and listened. “*Shh!* I think I heard it, too.”

“Was it the door?”

The noise came again, a knock. Millie had been right: she’d heard it first. I’d been a little distracted.

“I better see who that is.”

“Ah, Bruno, can’t you let it go for now? I mean, really? I still need the conditioner or my hair is going to frizz.” She put her hand up on my chest. “You wouldn’t want a girl’s hair to frizz, would you, big guy? A real gentleman wouldn’t.”

I didn’t want to leave the beautiful, wet redhead wanting. Her lovely skin was littered with freckles; her green eyes flashed with anger over the interruption. She whirled around, her back to me. “Damn you, Bruno Johnson, hurry, then.”

I gave her a hug and kissed her on the neck. She turned and kissed me back.

I started to step out. She shoved me aside and went first. “What kind of gentleman are you to leave a lady hanging like this? Now I can see where your priorities are and where I fit in.” She grabbed a towel and turned her back to me.

I really couldn’t afford to make her angry. As the captain’s secretary, she had the absolute ability to influence him, whisper in his ear about a deputy who left a woman in the shower before the conditioner was applied. She faced the mirror and raised her arms to dry her hair with the towel. Her breasts bounced and jiggled. She watched my eyes in the mirror, knowing exactly what she did to me. I moved up behind and put my arms around her. “Just let me get the door. I’ll be right back and I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Then I yelled to the person at the door, “Coming!”

She turned in my arms and kissed me on the mouth. I groaned.

I pulled away then leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “I’ve just been assigned to a new team. This is the first day. It could be something important. I really need to answer the door, or believe me, I—”

She giggled. “I believe you, sweetie. Hurry and answer it, then get that cute little black ass back in here before I cool down.”

“I’m goin’. I’m goin’. You keep your engine runnin’. I’ll be right back.” I grabbed the second towel off the rack and hurried into the short hall, angry now at the intruder ruining a near-perfect morning. I tracked water as I wrapped the towel around my waist, my skin still slick from the exertion of the water sports. My feet thumped on the wood floor of my micro-small studio apartment that sat over the Anytime Dry Cleaners on Atlantic Avenue in East Compton.

I kept the curtains closed for privacy, which made the living room dark as pitch.

I jerked open the door. The bright sunlight blinded me. I brought my arm up to block the glare. My eyes gradually adjusted. A woman stood on the small landing at the top of the wooden stairs. She held something in her arms. At first I

didn't recognize her. Maybe my subconscious didn't want to recognize her. No, that wasn't it. When I knew her, she'd always been smiling, always had a smile for me. She didn't smile now. She said nothing and tried to hand me the bundle she held in her arms.

My mouth sagged open. I stepped back from her. "Sonja? What are you—?"

She followed me into the small living room.

The baby in her arms squirmed and gurgled. Sonja looked half-crazed, haggard, her hair a mess, dark circles under her eyes, her skin pasty. "Here, Bruno, take her. She's yours. I can't handle her anymore." Her voice held an urgency that scared me.

I staggered back. "Mine? That's my child?" The room spun as I fought the dizziness from this new information, the sudden shock of it.

Millie came out of the bathroom in a rush, tracking more water, not concerned enough about her nakedness, the towel held loosely to her chest and not covering everything. "You have a girlfriend? You have a baby?"

Sonja looked at Millie and said, "I see you didn't waste any time."

"Sonja, you can't be serious. That's my child?" She tried to hand her to me again. I still couldn't acknowledge my paternity or accept her offering. I took another half-step back.

Millie stooped and grabbed her dress off the floor, where we'd stripped it off her the night before. She turned her back and slipped it on over her head. The material clung to her wet skin. She grabbed up her black lace bra and panties, shoved them in her purse, and picked up her shoes. "You're a real asshole, Bruno Johnson." She moved around Sonja on her way to the door. She didn't slow when she said, "I'm sorry. Really, I didn't know. Good luck."

With Millie gone, the room still felt overcrowded by one.

I backed up and sat on the couch. "I didn't know you were pregnant. You never said anything about it. Why didn't you tell me?"

She came over and stood next to me. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You're going to find you don't know a lot of things, big guy." She gently placed the child in my lap. "She's all yours."

The warm bundle smelled of baby powder and squirmed as if trying to escape her cotton cocoon. "Sonja, I can't. Let's talk about this, okay? Please?"

Sonja turned her back, her hands going to her face. Her body gently shook as she sobbed. "I can't, Bruno. I can't take her anymore. It's too much. She cries all the time. She never sleeps. I haven't slept in two weeks, not since she was born. I'm going out of my mind. I'm afraid of what I'll do—"

She headed for the door. "Sonja, wait."

She froze, but didn't turn around.

"Bruno, I killed a man. You were there. You warned me. You told me to be careful. I hit him too hard with that

blackjack and I killed him. I don't deserve a beautiful little girl like her. I'm having a hard enough time living with myself. There just isn't any room for her in my screwed-up brain. Not right now."

She started for the door again. "How can I reach you?"

"You can't."

Sonja passed through the door onto the landing. A thousand words clogged my tongue, and I could only push out the less significant ones: "What's her name? What's the child's name?"

Sonja's voice came in through the door as she descended the stairs. "I didn't give her a name. The County Hall of Records has her as Baby Girl Johnson. Go ahead and give her a name, Bruno. She's all yours now."

And Sonja was gone.

## CHAPTER TWO

I stood on the landing, outside in the brightness of the early morning with a towel wrapped around my waist, dripping water and holding . . . and holding a baby girl.

My baby girl.

The thin blue cotton blanket covered most of her pink little face, her forehead, eyes, and nose. Only her mouth peeked out.

My entire world had turned on its ear just that quick. It had only taken seconds. It had only taken a simple little knock at the door.

What the hell just happened? What was I going to do? I had one hour to get to work, my first day on a new team. One hour. Every detective in the Sheriff's Department wanted one of the four slots on this team, and I'd been lucky enough to be chosen.

I didn't know how to care for a child, let alone an infant barely two weeks old. I couldn't move, though I knew I should get inside. I just stood there unable to twitch. I never felt so conflicted, so confused, and at the same time smothered in guilt and shame.

Dad.

Dad would know what to do. I hurried inside and tripped on the doorsill. I stumbled and almost fell. I juggled Baby Girl Johnson, who didn't know how close she came to a tumble on the floor. My heart jumped into my throat at the thought of hurting her. I needed to be more careful. Far more careful.

I turned around and found I'd tripped on the strap to a diaper bag Sonja had left on the landing. I pulled it into the apartment and closed the door.

I went to the phone on the wall and stuck the receiver between my shoulder and ear as I held the baby in my other arm and dialed.

"Good morning. This is the Johnson residence. Xander Johnson speaking."

"Dad. Dad, it's me."

"Bruno? What's the matter, Son? What's happened?"



"I'm in trouble, Dad, and I . . . I don't know what to do." I didn't want to tell him. The guilt and shame rose up and choked my words. Dad didn't deserve this. He'd raised my brother, Noble, and me to live with honor and to always do the right thing. Having a child like this in no way fit into his principles of life. What a God-awful mess.

"Take it easy, Son. It can't be that bad. Calm down and tell me what's happened."

As always, his controlled demeanor had a calming effect. But I still couldn't tell him, couldn't say the words. Those four simple words: *Dad, I'm a father.*

Reality struck. I'm a father. I'm . . . I'm a father. My knees shook. In a half-whisper, I said into the phone, "Dad, can I come over?"

"Of course you can, Son. But why can't you tell me over the phone?"

What's happened? "I can't, I just—"

Little Baby Girl Johnson chose that moment to make herself known. She cried out.

On the other end of the phone my dad said, "Oh, my Lord."

A lump rose in my throat and tears burned my eyes. The coward in me took over. I gently hung up the phone. I held on to it in the cradle and whispered, "I'm sorry, Dad."

My baby squirmed in my arms and continued to fuss, reminding me that no matter how I felt, the world continued to spin. I hurried into the bedroom and laid her gently on the bed as if she were made of fragile porcelain. Would she stay there? Would she roll off and fall on the floor if I didn't watch her every second? I picked up two pillows and put one on each side of her. There, that was better.

I dressed in denim pants, a blue long-sleeve shirt, and black combat boots. I put on a wide belt and laced in a pancake holster on my hip. I picked up the .38 off the dresser, the blue steel cold in my hand. I looked from the gun to the innocent child on the bed. The contrast made me freeze and reevaluate the world I'd chosen. A father for less than ten minutes and everything had changed, even the way I looked at my career.

I strapped my backup gun to my ankle as more wild thoughts roared through my brain. What did babies eat? I didn't have any food she could eat, did I? I had some oatmeal, maybe. What kind of diapers did I need to buy? What kind of bed? I set my foot back on the floor and realized that once she got older and began to crawl, I wouldn't be able to wear an ankle holster. She'd have access to it. Wait, how ludicrous was that? And I'd need a gun safe to keep both my guns secure.

I put my flat badge wallet in my back pocket. With a child to care for, would I be able to continue working as a deputy? Working as a detective on a violent crimes team with irregular hours and no home life? If something happened to me, what would happen to the child? Should I go in this morning and ask for a hardship transfer to court

services, a job with regular working hours? A nasty little go-nowhere job working inside all day with chained-up prisoners?

My God, what a horrible mess.

No, no, I had to stop thinking of this as a mess, not with a child involved. What would Dad call it?

A blessing.

Yes, that's exactly what he'd call this unexpected package left at my doorstep.

I gently scooped up my baby and froze. For the first time, the blanket had fallen entirely away from her face. I sat down on the bed, absolutely flabbergasted. Baby Girl Johnson was the most beautiful baby in the world, maybe even in the entire universe. The way she looked at me with those huge eyes, I would do anything for her.

Anything.

## CHAPTER THREE

I carried my child down the steps to the dry cleaners' parking lot, which was now filled with early, go-to-work folks who stopped in to get their clothes before their coffee and donut next door at The Big O donut shop. I didn't normally hold on to the stairs handrail, but I did this day, with the diaper bag hanging off my shoulder.

The wonderful aroma of fried dough and cinnamon wafted on the air. My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten since yesterday noon. Millie hadn't wanted dinner; she'd only wanted to come back to my place for "dessert" and a little "slap and tickle." Last night, life had been so simple, full of adventure. Now, even the thought of "a little dessert" would have to change.

I unlocked the door to my Ford Ranger pickup and got in. I went to set Baby Girl Johnson on the bench seat next to me and froze. What the hell? I couldn't leave her unsecured on the seat. I put on my seat belt and started the truck, a four-speed stick. No way would it be safe to drive with a child in one arm and shifting and steering with the other. What choice did I have? Dad only lived a few miles away. I'd take side streets and, at the first opportunity, get a child's car seat. I drove slow in and out of two different neighborhoods, crossed Compton Avenue into Fruit Town and on up into the Corner Pocket in the county area of Los Angeles where I'd grown up. My mind remained numb to all the serious ramifications this small child's presence implied—hundreds of them. I just needed to get to Dad. He'd know what to do.

I pulled up and stopped in front of our house on Nord Avenue. In all my daydreams as a kid, with my ideas of what life had in store, never did I think about being a father. That was just too much responsibility and far too difficult a job. I only wanted to play cops and robbers, chase the bad guys and make the neighborhood a safer place to live. Had all that just changed?

Dad came out of the small house and stood on the

NEW FROM  
★ TONY HILLERMAN  
★ AWARD WINNER  
**JOSEPH BADAL**

**"ONE OF THE  
BEST THRILLERS  
OF THE YEAR."**

—Jon Land, *USA Today*  
Bestselling Author

# SINS OF THE FATHERS

DANFORTH SAGA BOOK 6

THIS IS ACTION AS  
CLOSE TO REALITY AS  
YOU WILL EVER FIND.

[WWW.JOSEPHBADALBOOKS.COM](http://WWW.JOSEPHBADALBOOKS.COM)

**SUSPENSE**  
PUBLISHING

wooden porch. He wore his blue-gray postal carrier pants and a sleeveless white t-shirt. He wrung his hands and stared, his eyes full of concern. All I had thought about for the last fifteen minutes was getting to Dad's. Now I fought the urge to just drive off and keep driving for hundreds of miles rather than face him.

I took a deep breath and got out. I walked slowly up to the porch with my child in my arms.

Dad shifted his gaze to the blanketed bundle and came down the three steps. He held out his hands and said, "Ah, Bruno."

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath and let it out when he didn't scold me. Of course, he wouldn't scold me. What was I thinking? This was my dad.

Dad took her from my arms, cooed to her, and gently moved her up and down. He looked so damn natural at it. He looked up and smiled hugely at me. My knees went weak. I moved around him and sat on the stoop.

"What's her name?"

Of all the things I thought he'd say—Who's the mother? How could you let this happen? And the worst one: I raised you better than this—he'd simply accepted the situation for what it was and asked her name.

Still not entirely able to talk just yet, I merely shrugged. "What? This child doesn't have a name?"

"Not yet, Dad." My voice came out a croak. "When a child is born and the parents don't have a name ready, what goes on the temporary birth certificate . . . well, for right now she's called Baby Girl Johnson."

He'd gone back to cooing to the baby and again looked up at me. "Baby Girl Johnson? It does have kind of a ring to it, doesn't it, Son?"

"Yeah, I guess it kinda does."

He spoke to the baby. "Don't be silly, we'll think of a proper name for you soon enough, little girl. Come on, Son, let's take her inside."

"Dad, what am I going to do?"

"What are you talking about? You're going to raise your daughter." He walked up the steps and went into the house.

The simplest answer was always the best, I guess. Only this answer couldn't make it past my mental defenses.

I came in right behind him. Dad sat in the rocking chair, rocking the baby. Somehow the scene looked so incongruous: Dad caring for a child of mine in the house I grew up in.

I resigned myself to my fate and went to the phone to call in sick. I picked up the receiver.

Dad said, "What are you doing?"

"Calling in sick."

"You will not. I never called in sick a day in my life. I thought I taught you better than that."

"What are you talking about? How can I go to work?"

Someone knocked at the door. My stomach sank. I'd probably get that same feeling for the rest of my life anytime someone knocked.

"Hang the phone up and get the door. It's Mrs. Espinoza. I called her and asked her to come over. She's looking for a job and jumped at this one."

"Mrs. Espinoza? A job? What job?"

"Son, you have to go to work, and you can't take the baby with you. Get the door."

All of a sudden I realized everything just might work out. ■



# With My EYES

By Leslie Budewitz

**M**Y FIRST TRIP TO GREECE WAS MELINA'S LAST. Not what I'd planned, but that's how it went with Melina.

We met when I lost my checkbook and needed help at the bank straightening out my account. I sell stocks and bonds in downtown Seattle, but can barely keep track of my own pocket change. Luckily, Melina was great with figures, and of course, I admired hers. She endured my flirting with the same patience she gave my record keeping. By the end of the afternoon, I had a new account with a fresh checkbook and an accurate balance, and a date for Friday night.

Count me a happy man.

Until Friday, when Melina didn't show up at the restaurant. Or Saturday, when she didn't return my phone calls. Sunday evening, she called to apologize. Her cousin Paul from Athens had arrived unexpectedly earlier in the week and she'd spent the weekend escorting him around the city. Surely I understood and would give her another chance?

Surely, I would.

We finally got together for that dinner, and then another. By our third date, I was half in love.

Zorba the Greek had no flash and no fire compared to Melina Kargainis. Her high heels made her just the right height for kissing, and I'm a tall man. Her blonde hair swung, soft and straight, just below her shoulders. Her brown eyes were almost too large for her fine features, and her full lips made me think of a lush, ripe apple. The fruit of temptation, in Greek and Christian tales.

The three-quarters of an hour I'd waited for her that day in the bank proved themselves a great investment.

Most women I'd dated reveled in having their own places, but Melina preferred to live with her family—the Greek way, she said. She shared a rented house in a middle-class Seattle suburb with her mother, her sister, and her sister's two kids. Not my image of a typical Greek home, but what did I know?

And though I'm not your standard, freckle-face Irish redhead—more the black Irish type, with dark hair and dark eyes—I thought we made a terrific looking couple.

Her mother agreed, and made a point of saying so. Melina's father had abandoned them years ago, so no male relatives lurked nearby to test me. Just three women and two kids. No one ever said what had happened to the kids' father. Melina's sister looked nothing like her, though a hint

of family resemblance showed itself in her niece's bright eyes and gently curved nose. The kids adored Melina. Who could blame them?

My Greek goddess. She laughed when I called her that. "Sweet, romantic Danny," she said. "You see what you want to see."

We talked often, caught a weekday lunch here and there, went dancing on the weekends. I never knew what she'd want to do—spend hours at a jazz club, wander through the art museum, or ride bikes with the kids on a lakefront trail. My feelings grew, but the relationship didn't. Melina kept a distance between us that she wouldn't close and I couldn't cross, no matter what I tried.

Some of my friends thought her cold. My best buddy warned me. "She'll stomp on your heart, Dan, and she won't look back."

I found her charming. Exciting. Challenging.

A few months after we met, Melina and her mother took a trip to Greece to take care of some family business. I fished for an invitation, but Melina wouldn't take the bait. "It'd be too dull for you, Danny," she told me. "Greece isn't all beaches and baklava. The traffic and noise in Athens are crazy. And most of my relatives speak only Greek. Some other time, when you can see the sights."

Actually, the language barrier made the trip even more enticing. With Melina as my translator, we'd have more time together. Enough time to bridge that gap? Melina didn't give me the chance.

When she returned, things changed. She didn't call me on the spur of the moment for dinner or a night out. She stopped inviting me to spend Sunday afternoons with her family. Her sparkle dimmed. Had something happened on the trip? She wouldn't talk about it. I asked if she'd seen her cousin Paul.

"My cousin?" She blinked and shook her head rapidly, her voice rushed and breathy as she spoke. "No. No. We never left Athens. He lives up north, in Thessaloniki." I was sure she'd said he lived in the capital, but her family was even harder to keep track of than my own.

Her remoteness grew. Despite my fear of hearing her confess that she didn't want to see me anymore, I kept trying. I kept hoping that if I could help her through this difficult

time—whatever its cause—she might be grateful enough to fall in love with me. Still, every time I asked what was wrong, she shook her head, those lovely eyes rimmed in red, and changed the subject.

Finally, after several weeks of dates cut short by tears, of Melina digging for a tissue every time we sat down, she perked up. She gave no explanation, and I asked for none—I was just thrilled to see that radiant smile again. We went dancing again. We took her sister and the kids to the Woodland Park Zoo, where Melina laughed at the antics of the river otters, and we all made faces at the orangutans and gorillas.

She even went with me to my company picnic at Lake Sammamish. Melina was no outdoor girl, but I loved seeing her sitting on the grass, eating hot dogs and potato salad with my friends from work.

Melina had always changed the subject when I mentioned the future. But that changed, too. She began to talk about showing me the Greek islands, told me how the Aegean sparkles in the afternoon, and how moonlight glimmers on the water in the evenings. Seattle is surrounded by water, but according to Melina the views couldn't compare to Spetses, Santorini, or her favorite island, Mykonos. The beaches, the nightlife—she raved about it all.

Other days, her eyes clouded at the mention of Greece and she suggested a different destination. Mexico or Portugal. Amsterdam or Brussels, with their art museums and picturesque streets. Anywhere with her would have been paradise to me, but I longed to see her country. To see Greece with my Greek goddess.

I started searching for the perfect engagement ring. For Melina, it had to be special. Diamonds, maybe circled with sapphires. I debated whether to ask her here, risking the chance that she would say no and call off the trip, or wait until Santorini. On the island, she'd be dazzled by the sunlight glinting off the white-washed walls and the waves of the Mediterranean. How could she resist me then?

I was still debating when my fairy-tale romance ended. Melina died in the arms of a Washington State Trooper at the scene of a single-car rollover.

She'd gone to the coast for a weekend alone and lost control on a winding road above the ocean, her Grand Am plunging down the cliffs to the water's edge.

The guilt gripped me. If I had been—oh, I don't know, different somehow, less obviously infatuated and more alpha, maybe she wouldn't have wanted to be alone. I should have insisted on going along—she drove like a maniac. At the very least, I'd have held her in my arms one last time.

When I reached the Greek Orthodox Church before the funeral service, Melina's sister pulled me to the front pew to sit with the family. Her mother, her face shrouded in a black scarf, gripped my arm like a son's. Later, she asked me to drive the family home and insisted I come inside.

"Daniel," Mrs. Kargainis said, her accent thick as the coffee her surviving child brought us on a wooden tray arrived, "you loved my daughter."

I nodded.

"Then you must do something for us. For her."

"Yes, ma'am." With no idea what she might ask, I knew I wouldn't refuse. Doing her a favor gave me one last chance to please Melina.

"Take her ashes to Greece. Find a priest to bless them, sprinkle them on the water she loved. You will do this. She would want it."

Nothing had prepared me for her request. Go to Greece, entrusted with her ashes—the very thought stunned me. But her mother could not go—she was too old and ill—and Melina's sister could not leave the children. I understood, and agreed.

\*\*\*

"ATHENA TOO MUCH CRAZY," the taxi driver said, slurring the "r" and dragging out the "a," but I loved the city the moment I saw it. Nothing like Seattle with its high-rises and coffee-scented clouds. Athens stands only three stories tall, its buildings arm-in-arm with barely enough space between for one of the band of scrawny cats that roamed the city, their ears torn and necks scarred from street fights. The driver in his yellow Mercedes navigated streets that were narrower than alleys back home.

The map the desk clerk gave me highlighted nearby attractions: the Parliament Building, formerly the royal palace; the Temple of Olympian Zeus; Hadrian's Gate, standing guard over a major intersection, darkened by exhaust. And of course, the Acropolis and the Agora.

I couldn't be bothered with jet lag; sleeping in the afternoon felt like a waste of time, and I only had three days. So I left the urn holding Melina's ashes in my hotel room and headed out to explore.

Without much trouble, I found the Plaka, the tourist district adjacent to the Acropolis. Its streets reeked of life and energy. No doubt some shopkeepers were cheats, their merchandise overpriced, but the crowds, the sounds, the sights—it all drew me much as Melina herself had. Though shopkeepers called out in Greek, my first-timer's eyes gave me away. "Kalimera," they tried, followed by "good morning." Typical American that I am, I replied, but most tourists avoided making eye contact with them or me. No matter what language the shopkeepers used, the wary travelers kept their faces forward, hands tucked in their pockets.

At a corner restaurant, a dark-haired man about my age and height called "lunch time," gesturing to a menu mounted on a wrought-iron podium. "Bread, olives, tzatziki," he said. "Greek salad, a steak."

I laughed. Olives and tzatziki I expected, from my meals with Melina's family. But steak?

While I scanned the menu, he beckoned to other tourists, speaking in Greek, German, or French. How had he made me for an American so easily?

"Time to eat," he said, both expressive hands gesturing toward an empty sidewalk table. "Eat, and I'll buy you a beer. Amstel, Heineken, Mythos. Which will it be?"

I recognized a fellow salesman in any language. "A Greek beer."

"Mythos," he said, sealing the deal.



The steak was tough, but the beer tasted good. And my host could not have been more attentive. After the lunch crowd meandered off to roam through the ruins and museums, he stood by my table, a beer in hand.

"So where in America are you from?" His English flowed easily, despite the accent.

"Seattle. In the far northwest."

He nodded. "Space Needle. Microsoft. Bigfoot."

I laughed. If a Greek visiting the States had named a hometown other than Athens or Delphi, what were the chances an American would have a clue where he lived?

"Here on business, then," he said. "Your wife is at home."

"No wife. And you—is your wife the cook?" I hadn't seen the kitchen, and he wore no ring, but that meant nothing, even back home.

He shrugged and waved the beer bottle in a gesture I couldn't interpret.

"You'll want souvenirs for your girlfriend, then. There are many wonderful jewelers here in Athens."

No doubt the merchants and restaurateurs referred customers back and forth all day long, in the manner of businessmen catering to tourists the world over. I shook my head. "My girlfriend died a few weeks ago. She was Greek. Her mother asked me to—" I fumbled for the words, feeling the weight of my unhappy errand. "To bring her home."

He looked stunned, naturally enough. A simple question, to ask after a customer's family, with an unexpected answer.

"Oh, my friend. I am so sorry. Such a loss. Will you be in Athens long?"

"No." I rose and slipped my jacket on, dropped money on the table. "Just another day or two. So if I want to see this place, I'd better get going. Thanks for the hospitality."

"Any time," he said, as I stepped outside the iron railing and back on to the sidewalk. "I'm open for dinner, too."

Despite the emotion that blurred my senses, especially my sense of direction, I managed to find the entrance to the Acropolis, dodging scores of school kids on tour. I'd seen pictures, but other than the Parthenon, I hardly knew what was what. Once inside the gates, I stared at the ruined buildings atop the hill, studying the guidebook I'd picked up in the airport. Skipping the historical descriptions, I turned the book upside down to find my place on the tiny map. Erechthon, Porch of the Caryatids, Temple of Athena Nike—

Someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned and saw a tiny old woman, all in black, her dark eyes bright in a face as wrinkled as a walnut shell. "With my eyes, sir," she said in heavily-accented English, "you see so much more. Twenty, thirty minutes, that's all. Five hundred drachma."

Behind her, a cluster of old men eyed the streaming crowd, ready to pounce on other tourists with similar offers. "Hey, you," a guard in jeans and an Atlanta Braves t-shirt called out as he neared them, his arm making a sweeping gesture that crossed all language barriers.

As if struck, the would-be tour guides backed off and huddled next to an olive tree.

Five hundred drachma. Moving away, I calculated the exchange. A little over two dollars. She'd give me a guided

turbo-tour through the Acropolis for half the price of a twelve-ounce latte.

"Don't let 'em bother you," the guard said in a decent American accent. "Old Melina, she always goes for the single men in a hurry." He chuckled and returned to the entrance where another group of school kids pressed against the marble pillars and iron gate, clutching tickets and plastic water bottles.

*Melina.* I glanced over my shoulder at the old woman. She caught my look and pointed to her eyes. I took a deep breath and turned back to the map.

High above the swirl of commerce, the babel of tourists, the barking dogs and honking horns, the white marble ruins gleamed in the afternoon sun. Time had eroded every surface; the beauty of the Acropolis had faded mightily. A double major in business and poli sci, I immediately understood that Athens under Pericles had been the original "shining city on a hill" presidential candidates evoke with reverence. But recognizing that ideal in the crowded streets spread before me took a greater leap of imagination than I could make.

The light had dimmed by the time I left the Acropolis and the ancient Agora spread out below. Dark-haired boys chased each other through the streets and tourists sauntered down the sidewalks, pausing occasionally to eye the goods on display and banter with the merchants. Traveling had caught up with me. I grabbed a bottle of water and a spinach pie shaped like a turnover from a cramped grocery and headed for the hotel. Only three wrong turns. Good thing I had a map.

*Athena, too much crazy.*

The desk clerk glanced up, eyes heavy with lack of sleep, and reached for my room key. Neither of us said a word.

I slept too long. Way too long. Past noon the next day. Staggered into the tile bathroom, pissed, fumbled with the shower. Like most of Greece so far, it bore little resemblance to home. No shower stall, like in an American bathroom; no door or curtain. Just a flexible hose and a wall-mounted hook to snag it on.

When in Athens...

Not until I'd showered, shaved, and dressed did I realize something was missing.

Not just something, not just anything. The urn. Melina's urn. Melina.

I stared at the top of the battered desk where I'd left it. Twenty, thirty seconds was all it took to search the rest of the room.

The urn was gone. The maid hadn't been in yet. But someone had. Who would take a funeral urn? Bronze, about twelve inches high, a small bag inside filled with bone and ashes. Mrs. Kargainis had chosen that particular urn for its Greek style, but it hadn't looked valuable. Carrying it had given me the willies.

My head felt heavy from sleep and light from hunger. I left the hotel and went down to the market streets for food. Once my mind cleared, I could think what to do next.

"My American friend," the host at the corner restaurant called out. "Another lunch and a beer?"

Or three or four, I thought. Scotch might be better. I settled for a Greek salad, the ever-present crusty bread, and a good-sized bottle of Mythos. Food and alcohol did the trick. Fed and encouraged, I returned to my hotel to quiz the desk clerk.

"Sir," he assured me gravely, "no one has been in that room, except the maid, my wife, who cleaned after you left last morning."

"Last morning?"

"Just now. Hour or two, when you went out and come back." He gestured at me, the spiral stairway, and the door, then reversed the process, swinging his arms from the door back toward the stairs.

I sighed. What next? After more fumbling questions and stumbling answers, the clerk directed me to the nearest office of the tourist police. Strange term, but they were the cops who handled complaints against restaurants, taxis, tour guides and travel agencies, and hotels. They weren't much help. Though they questioned everyone, no one admitted entering my room except the maid. I agreed she had come in to clean after I left, but no one thought she might have come in earlier. No one acknowledged letting anyone else into the room. But the keys, with their enormous numbered handles, lay in open boxes behind the counter. If the desk clerk stepped into the office, or the restroom, or even turned his back, how hard would it have been to take the key, returning it without being seen?

Not hard. Not hard at all.

My head, on the other hand, throbbed very hard. I'd spent all afternoon with the tourist police and hotel staff, and still had no idea what had happened to the urn.

After assuring me they would do everything possible, the officers left. The thought of hanging out in my room turned my stomach. I handed in my key, noticing again how easily a stranger could slip in and pocket one key without disturbing a soul.

I wandered for hours through all kinds of streets, hardly seeing where I went, hardly caring. Melina's mother had entrusted me this simple task and I'd screwed it up. "Fuckin' idiot," I said out loud, and a woman headed the other way threw me a sharp glance. "Sorry," I mumbled, remembering how many people in Athens understood English.

My last chance, the last bond with my Greek goddess, and I'd eff'd it up.

Night had fallen by the time I realized I was lost and hungry. Worse, I'd left the map in my hotel room. Retracing my steps took every bit of brainpower I had, but finally I recognized a major street and asked a man at a bus stop for directions. He spoke English only a little better than I spoke Greek, but somehow it worked and I found myself back on restaurant row at the familiar corner.

"You don't look so good, friend," the host said.

"Don't you ever take any time off?"

"Later. I rest when it rains."

Just like Seattle.

Though I had thought myself too worried to eat, I devoured the bread and tzatziki, and the moussaka made with lamb that was as good as Melina's mother's. Washed it down with most of a bottle of Vin de Crete. After clearing my dishes, my friend the host brought me a plate with a sliced apple, sprinkled with cinnamon, and a glass of ouzo.

"Because you have been such a good customer," he said at the questioning look on my face. "And apparently have some trouble."

Friends back home swore that drinking the local alcohol is the best way to get a feel for the country. Boy, did I get a feel for Greece. That glass of ouzo had no bottom. No one had warned me about ouzo. Goes down smooth, and hits hard.

Around us, shopkeepers near the restaurant turned off their lights and rolled down the metal doors. Street cats and dogs—shooed away most of the evening—curled up under empty tables. Waiters—and they were all waiters; I never saw a woman working in a restaurant or taverna—whisked off the tablecloths and gathered up the chair pads. I followed my host inside and we bought each other a glass of ouzo. My third, at least. No point counting.

"You speak great English," I said, mine undoubtedly less than perfect. "Great American."

"Thanks to my wife."

"You're married to an American girl?" He'd shrugged off my earlier question about a wife. "Is she here? Where's she from?"

He shook his head. "Not here. Not here."

"I don't understand." I reached for the bottle and topped off both glasses.

"Nor do I," he said. "My beautiful wife, my beautiful children."

He would say no more. I stood carefully, knowing it was past time to marshal any sober instincts I still had. The lights in the back of the restaurant glowed dimly, and I wasn't sure which of several identical doors led to the john. First, I stumbled into the cleaning closet. My second try led to an office, the desk lamp still lit, a collection of clay and bronze pottery on the shelf behind the desk. I started to shut the door when a picture caught my eye.

And sobered me right up.

It had been taken on one of the islands, and Melina looked as beautiful as I'd ever seen her. Younger, to be sure, and so was he. So were the children, but I recognized them all easily.

Back at the table, I sat in the rush-bottomed chair. "We've gotten drunk together and you never told me your name," I said to my host. "But I think I know. You're Paul."

He drained his glass, staring at the bottom far too long, then looked at me with pain in his eyes. "Pavlo. Paul. Yes."

I stood, grabbed his arm, and jerked him toward an ornately framed mirror hanging on the restaurant's frescoed wall. We stared at each other, at ourselves. A Greek and an Irish-American. A tired, underpaid desk clerk would notice only the resemblance, not the differences.

"You got the key," I said, still staring at our nearly twin faces. "You took the urn."



We locked eyes in the mirror.

"I recognized you right away," Paul said. "On her last trip, she showed me your picture, said she had an American boyfriend and needed a divorce. I refused, again, unless she gave my children back. Our children, Melina's and mine."

"Melina's children? But she told me..."

"That they belonged to her sister, yes? She let everyone think that. They can't—couldn't—even call her Mama. I'm sure she never let them talk of Papa, of me."

I turned to face him. "You asked if I had a wife."

He shrugged, that same noncommittal shrug he'd given when I asked if he was married.

"Did you already know she was dead?"

He closed his eyes a moment, and when he opened them, they glistened. "There is a Greek grapevine, stretches across the ocean. We heard she'd had an accident, but nothing more. Those women, her mother and sister..." He shook his head. "You know how they are. They—what is the phrase? For how they shut out anyone who might break them apart?"

"Close ranks." I thought back to how grudgingly they'd let me into their circle, how I'd never felt truly part of their lives, even at their dinner table. As though I should confine my conversation to certain subjects, just as my visits to their home were confined to Sunday afternoons, my presence limited to the living and dining rooms, and the powder room by the front door. As if in any other room, even the kitchen, I might have discovered their secrets. And I'd been love-struck enough to accept their terms.

I'd never even seen Melina's bedroom. Had a copy of the picture I'd spotted in Paul's office sat on her dresser?

"How did you know where I was staying?"

Another shrug. "My cook's cousin runs the grocery down the street from your hotel. The cook was there yesterday morning, passing the time, when you arrived. You looked so much like me, you caught his eye. When you strolled by at lunch time, it seemed like a sign from the gods."

Those crazy Greek gods.

"You asked her for the children, but she refused," I said.

"She left me, so the Greek law gave me custody," Paul replied. "I had no heart for keeping them from her—I would have given her lots of visitation. That word, I know. But she took them anyway, to America."

"Aren't courts supposed to honor custody determinations from other countries?" Seemed like something I'd heard, though I didn't know where.

Paul led the way back to our table, but this time he filled our glasses from the water bottle. "Yes, yes. I tried, but fighting is hard. Last spring, I even went to Seattle to court, because I could not reason with her. I could see that the judge wanted to side with her, as the mother, but he ruled that the Greek order must be obeyed. Still, she resisted. She and her mother came here to challenge me, to prove that I am an unfit parent and that the children are better off with her. The court disagreed and held them both in contempt. They could never come back without being arrested."

It all fit. It explained her disappearances, her depression, her renewed hope. It explained why she canceled our trip,

and why she went to the coast alone. The treacherous coast.

And it explained why her mother refused to bring the ashes here herself. She'd used me, as Melina had.

"She used me," Paul said, echoing my own thoughts. "She was as manipulative as she was beautiful."

"Beautiful, and enchanting."

He nodded. "I couldn't stop loving her."

I understood. Paul and I were alike in more ways than the mirror revealed. "Why did you take the urn?"

He shook his head, muttering. His accent thickened as the emotion overtook him, and I leaned closer to decipher the words. "It's nuts. I am nuts. I'm crazy. If she were still alive, even if she begged me, I wouldn't take her back, but..." Paul rested his elbow on the table, forehead on his palm. He'd answered every question I'd ever had about Melina, without meaning to: why she always seemed so distant; why she kept changing her mind about coming here; why she wouldn't fall in love with me.

Maybe, my gut said, though I couldn't tell if it was instinct or too much ouzo, maybe I was better off without her.

Paul raised his head. I shook off my stupor and met his gaze, steadier than my own. "All I want is to bring my children home. But the time it takes to get a visa..."

I stared at the empty glass in front of me, thinking. I could almost hear Melina laugh and tease me. "Always thinking, Danny," she would say. "All that thinking, does it ever get you anywhere?"

I pushed back my chair and headed for the office, emerging with the urn. Set it on the table between us, and sat. Slipped my passport from my inside jacket pocket and gestured. "Trade?"

Paul hesitated, his gaze darting to the urn as he made sure he got my meaning, then nodded. "Take the ferry to Santorini. Spread the ashes in the old harbor below Fira. Stay a few days. With any luck, I'll be back in Athens in a week."

I glanced around the restaurant, toward the corner outside where the menu podium stood, where we'd first met. I wanted to visit the islands, but they could wait. While he went to America to claim the children, using my passport to get in and the court order and his own passport to leave, he would need a stand-in here. To chat up the tourists and pour the beer and ouzo.

"Take your time," I said. "I want to see this place with my own eyes." ■

*Leslie Budewitz is the national-best-selling author of seven cozy mysteries, including "Death at Dente," winner of the 2013 Agatha Award for Best First Novel, and "Books, Crooks & Counselors: How to Write Accurately About Criminal Law and Courtroom Procedure," winner of the 2011 Agatha Award for Nonfiction. Her eighth novel, "As the Christmas Cookie Crumbles," will be published in June, 2018. Leslie's short stories have appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Thuglit, and elsewhere. She served as the 2015-16 president of Sisters in Crime and is a member of the board of the Rocky Mountain chapter of Mystery Writers of America. Leslie lives in Northwest Montana. Learn more at: [www.lesliebudewitz.com](http://www.lesliebudewitz.com).*



# Vicki Delany

## Cozy Up with “The Cat of the Baskervilles”

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Robert Hallatt

**B**eginning a writing career while also being a single mother of three daughters and working a full-time job, Vicki Delany most definitely had her work cut out for her. Luckily, for readers everywhere, this is one awesome woman and author who could handle that near-impossible balancing act and ended up becoming one of the most prolific and popular crime writers in Canada, as well as the U.S.

Writing the cozy series, *Lighthouse Library Mysteries*, under the pen name of Eva Gates, Vicki is also hailed by fans for another fantastically fun character named Gemma Doyle, who owns a bookshop dedicated to the beloved and famous sleuth, Sherlock Holmes. With her newest title in this series being released, “The Cat of the Baskervilles,” Vicki took some time to talk with *Suspense Magazine* about the new book, as well as give a peek at what will also appear from the depths of her imagination as 2018 progresses.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Let us begin with the new title coming out from your *Sherlock Holmes Bookshop Mystery* series, “The Cat of the Baskervilles.” Can you give readers a ‘sneak peek’ that can’t be found in the synopsis?

Vicki Delany (V.D.): *Once again, Gemma Doyle is first on the scene of a crime, and once again her Sherlock Holmes-like observational skills show her things the police do not see. And once again she has to follow her deductions and interfere where the police don’t want her to.*

S. MAG.: You have so many “pans” in the fire, as my mother would say, writing a variety of series in the cozy category. Can you share what the most difficult part is when it comes to balancing all of these characters? What is the best part of balancing them all?

V.D.: *It can be difficult to keep the main characters’ styles and thought processes distinct because they are very different characters. Gemma Doyle is English and Sherlockian; Merry Wilkinson from the Year Round Christmas series is reasonably sophisticated*



(having worked for a major lifestyle magazine in NYC); Lucy Richardson of the Lighthouse Library series is rather naïve and quite sweet. The best part is the enjoyment I get out of writing three very different characters.

S. MAG.: Does breaking away from one series, whether to work on another or pen a standalone, offer some sort of 'breath of fresh air' for you, as an author?

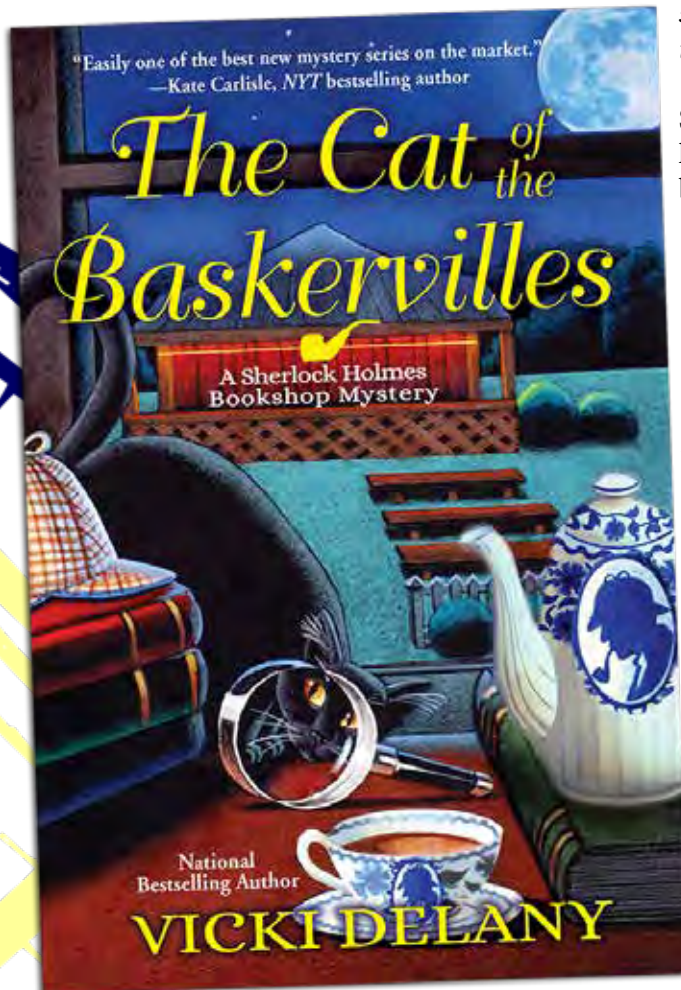
V.D.: I like having many pans in the fire, as you said. I can't imagine sticking with one series for years upon years. New characters, new locations...they add spice and interest to my writing life.

S. MAG.: If you had to pick one favorite from the mix, which series character would you most like to see on the big or small screen one day? Is there a particular actor/actress that you picture in your mind's eye when writing that character who would be perfect to play them?

V.D.: I love them all, but I think the one that would be great on TV would be Gemma Doyle from the Sherlock Holmes Bookshop. After all, what's more popular today than Sherlock Holmes in all his manifestations? Like the Great Detective himself, she can easily slip into disguise and has no qualms about a little break-and-enter if it will help her investigation. Jodie Whittaker would be perfect as Gemma, but she's rather busy these days playing "The Doctor."

S. MAG.: With the myriad of characters out there in the universe, is there one written by a favorite author of yours where you can't wait until the next book is released to see them again? Is there one in particular (classic or present-day) that you perhaps wish you wrote?

V.D.: These days I am reading a lot more standalones than series books. I'm loving the new style of psychological suspense books by the likes of Ruth Ware and Paula Hawkins, or modern gothics by Simone St. James or Kate Morton. I am very eagerly looking forward, however, to who we meet next in the Dublin Murder Squad series by Tana French. I would love to have created Mary Russell in the series by Laurie R. King.



S. MAG.: Speak about your home if you will. Is there some certain kind of vibe, or even a special locale in Ontario that helps you become inspired?

V.D.: I live in a 19<sup>th</sup> century house in the country outside of a small town. It's a major tourist area, so busy here in the summer, but dark and cold and quiet in the winter. But I write all the time, on the deck in the sun in the hot weather, and inside in the winter. I don't know if it gets me inspired but the solitude keeps me focused. No one ever just drops in.

S. MAG.: You began your career as a single working mom who had only Sunday afternoon set aside, now and again, to concentrate on your writing. Being that the kids are grown and you have gained more time over the years, fans want to know if that atmosphere of the 'Bruce Springsteen tunes playing in the background and a cup of tea at the elbow' still play a part in your writing system?

V.D.: Nope, the atmosphere has changed completely since those days. For one thing, I no longer have a day job to go to. So the Sunday afternoon has changed to seven mornings a week, the tea to coffee (a lot of coffee), and Springsteen to Mozart.

S. MAG.: Focusing on this new title for February, what made you decide to create the Sherlock Holmes Bookshop? The titles

## THE CAT OF THE BASKERVILLES

By Vicki Delany

This is the third title in the *Sherlock Holmes Bookshop Mystery* series, and it is a great one!

Gemma Doyle, originally from London, now owns the Sherlock Holmes Bookshop and Emporium located in London, Massachusetts, as well as part of Mrs. Hudson's Tea Room located next door. Her best friend, Jayne Wilson, is her business partner, and Moriarty is the cat who lives in the bookstore and seems to love everyone but Gemma.

The West London Theatre Festival is about to commence and Jayne's mother, Leslie, is exuberant that Sir Nigel Bellingham is coming to their small town to reprise his role in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. This is a role that the elite actor played in the West End, and even though everyone seems to be thrilled that a big name like Sir Nigel is going to come help the small festival, Gemma believes the man is far too old to play Sherlock now. Not to mention, far too drunk.

Going with the flow, Gemma helps Jayne get ready for the big fundraiser that Leslie Wilson has put together. When the successful event comes to a close, however, Sir Nigel ends up at the bottom of a cliff, pushed to his death. There are clues that point to Leslie Wilson being the killer, but as Gemma and Jayne begin to investigate, they find suspects galore. From a gentleman assistant who is sick to death of his aggravating boss to a girlfriend with her nose out of joint to a handsome understudy who everyone knows would do way better in the leading role of the play than some old coot.

As always with this series, the story is rich with everything from history to scenery to sarcasm, with even the feline stealing a scene or two along the way. It is a fact: every reader out there would love a Sherlock Holmes Bookshop and Emporium in their town!

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



you can play with from the past are extraordinary where this is concerned, and "The Cat of the Baskervilles" (instead of the 'Hound') is perfect. Do you already have the next play-on-words title for the next *Bookshop* mystery lined up?

V.D.: *There is nothing in the world more popular today in terms of culture than Sherlock Holmes. It's not at all unbelievable that there could be an entire store devoted to only the Great Detective and his many offshoots. As an aside, everything that is sold in the bookshop exists in the real world and it's been a lot of fun to stock my fictional shelves. I had the store in mind but not the character when I started to write it, and she almost immediately turned Sherlockian herself. I love the title "The Cat of the Baskervilles" but I don't want the titles to be too focused on Holmes, so that the non-Sherlock lover would decide the book isn't for them. It's a fine balancing act: to attract cozy lovers and hint about the Sherlock element without that being too overpowering. We're currently tossing around title ideas for book number four; right now the possibility is, "A Scandal in West London."*

S. MAG.: How do you know, as an author, when the series is done for you and it's time to leave the characters behind?

V.D.: *For many years, I wrote a police procedural series for Poisoned Pen Press set in small-town British Columbia that I loved, which was doing well and was popular. But I decided, after eight books, I'd said what I had to say about these people and their town. The last was "Unreasonable Doubt." I still get letters asking when the next one is coming out, though, so never say never...*

S. MAG.: What can fans hope to see from Vicki Delany in 2018?

V.D.: *"The Cat of the Baskervilles" comes out in February. My pen name, Eva Gates, has the fourth Lighthouse Library book, "Spook in the Stacks" coming in June. Then in November it will be time for the fourth Sherlock Holmes book (tentatively titled "A Scandal in West London"). I also write novellas for adult literary under the Rapid Reads imprint of Orca Books, and the next one in that series is "Blue Water Hues," which will be out in the fall.*

With so many "pans" in the fire, it is not a surprise that her implemented writing system now includes coffee instead of tea. Whether a Sherlock fan or not, Vicki Delany's titles are so much fun, with characters that definitely should appear on that big or small screen one day solving murders that even the most avid, faithful cozy reader finds impossible to deduce. Holmes, himself, would be quite proud! To keep current on all titles to be released follow [www.vickidelany.com](http://www.vickidelany.com). ■



# *Spiritual Awakening:* **WENDY CORSI STAUB** *Gets Cozy in the “Dead of Winter”*

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Dustin Hegedus

New York Times bestselling author Wendy Corsi Staub has enjoyed a storied career that’s spanned both decades and genres, with more than ninety books to her name (and a few pseudonyms). Though best known for her adult psychological suspense offerings, the most recent of which being her *Mundy’s Landing* trilogy—“Blood Red” (2015), “Blue Moon” (2016), and “Bone White” (2017)—for Harper, Staub has also written chick lit, horror, media tie-in, romance, and young adult; additionally, she has collaborated with, and ghostwritten for, a number of celebrities including former New York City mayor Ed Koch and Fabio. A three-time finalist for the prestigious Mary Higgins

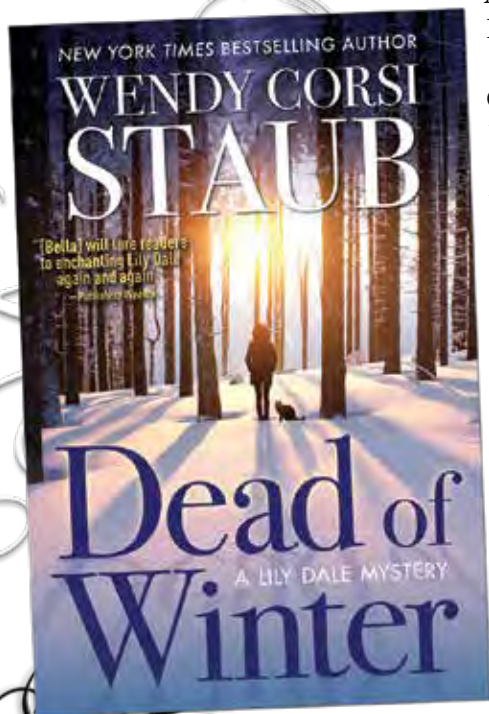
Clark Award, Staub has won the 2008 RT Award for Career Achievement in Suspense, the 2007 RWA-NYC Golden Apple Award for Lifetime Achievement, an RWA Rita award, and five WLA Washington Irving Prizes for Fiction.

Staub’s newest, “Dead of Winter,” is the third title in her cozy mystery series for Crooked Lane Books. Set in the real-life spiritualist community of Lily Dale, New York, the books find Staub mining familiar territory; indeed, she used the backdrop for an earlier suspense novel, “In the Blink of an Eye” (2002), as well as a four-book YA series that first introduced characters who have become staples of this most recent saga. A hit among readers and reviewers alike, “Dead of Winter” earned high praise from *Publishers Weekly*: “The endearing town, its quirky psychic medium residents, and a hint of romance ... carry through to a suspenseful ending.”

Join the author as she reflects on the mystery of suspense—and the suspense of mystery ...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “Dead of Winter” is your third cozy mystery. What have you found to be the greatest challenges of straying from mainstream psychological suspense—and how have these forays into this subgenre engaged other areas of your creativity?

Wendy Corsi Staub (W.C.S.): *In terms of craft, I feel like writing a mystery is working backward from the pivotal moment, and writing suspense is building toward it. Suspense plots are built around what’s about to happen; mysteries unravel what’s*



already happened. I'd written it before, earlier in my career—former NYC mayor Ed Koch and I wrote a cozy series together back in the late 1990's. But after all these years of focusing on suspense, I'd gotten out of the mystery groove—so I basically had to reverse my approach—not second nature for a pantsler!

J.B.V.: You use the backdrop of a real spiritualist community, Lily Dale, for these books. In what ways does this setting inform your stories (and the telling, given that it's an actual locale)—and how do you endeavor to balance an overall sense of realism with the supernatural, or otherworldly, elements?

W.C.S.: *Viewpoint is key to the balancing act. My heroine, Bella, is a skeptic. She's a stranger in a strange land—the only person in town who doesn't talk to (or claim to talk to, as far as she's concerned) dead people. This is a mystery series, not paranormal—Bella uses common sense to solve crimes while her psychic medium friends might, for example, try to figure out the killer by talking to the victim himself. Just like in real life, sometimes things happen in these books that make you scratch your head and go hmmm. Readers who believe in this stuff will see ghostly goings-on; readers who are skeptics will, like Bella, chalk them up to coincidence or other non-paranormal explanations.*

J.B.V.: Lily Dale was also the setting for a YA series that you wrote several years ago. To what do you credit your own continued fascination with “the Dale”—and how might readers of those earlier books find a bit of closure here?

W.C.S.: *I grew up a few miles away from Lily Dale, a quirky Victorian lakeside village in southwestern New York, the 19<sup>th</sup> century birthplace of the spiritualist movement. To this day, it remains populated by mediums. What better place to set a mystery? I know these people, who they are, where they are. Capturing the setting and characters—and Lake Effect weather!—is second nature to me. Anyone who read my young adult series a decade ago will find familiar characters resurrected in the new series. Fan favorite Odelia Lauder is Bella's next door neighbor. YA heroine Calla aged forward into her late twenties, and her high school love triangle is still going strong. Readers will get updates on these characters and others, and meet a whole cast of new ones.*

J.B.V.: In addition to your heroine, Bella, there's an ensemble cast that includes children and cats. In what ways can having such vulnerable characters both help and hinder the creation of suspense—and how do you maintain a realistic sense of danger throughout the narrative despite the expectation of a happy(ish) ending?

W.C.S.: *I don't write graphic violence—these are cozy mysteries and even though a missing child is at the heart of “Dead of Winter,” the peril is done with a lighter hand than I'd use in other genres. This book is fairly upbeat and even amusing at times. It's less tricky to accomplish that in mystery than it is in suspense! In each of my Lily Dale novels, I feature one of my real life rescue cats—although it's cumulative, because the earlier ones always come back. In “Dead of Winter,” I introduce Sanchez, a little black kitty who showed up on our deck last year, and bring back Chance—our adopted doorstep stray tabby (introduced in “Nine Lives”)—and Chappy, our orphaned Russian Blue kill shelter rescue (introduced in “Something Buried, Something Blue”).*

J.B.V.: Why did Crooked Lane Books appeal to you as a publisher for this particular series?

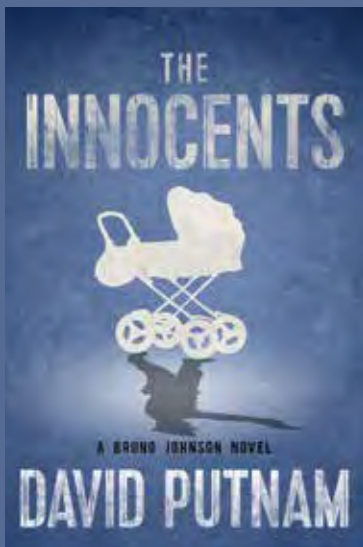
W.C.S.: *Crooked Lane is helmed by Matt Martz, one of the best mystery/suspense editors in New York. Working with him at a new house focused strictly on that genre was the draw, and it gave me the opportunity to branch out again after a few years of focusing on suspense alone.*

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

W.C.S.: *I'm launching a new suspense series about Foundlings with “Little Girl Lost” from Harper in July, so I have a full schedule of prop and deadlines this year and a full house with rescue kitties, so I'm not quite sure when I'll be able to write the next Lily Dale. But I've got a plot simmering on the back burner! ■*







*"The Innocents tells a story so fast and so taut it never touches the ground. . . David Putnam is one of the few writers who can bear comparison to Joseph Wambaugh."*

—TIMOTHY HALLINAN, EDGAR, SHAMUS, MACAVITY AND LEFTY AWARD NOMINEE AND AUTHOR OF THE SIMEON GRIST SERIES

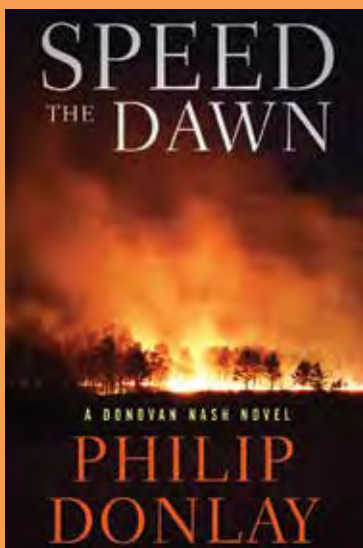
*"The scenes feel authentic and tense thanks to Putnam's decades of law enforcement experience. Great reading for crime-fiction fans."*

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

*"The Innocents is a terrific read reminiscent of the best of Joseph Wambaugh. . . A great novel for lovers of the mystery genre that blurs the line between good and evil and will keep you guessing until the final pages."*

—ROBERT DUGONI, NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF NO WAY HOME

ON SALE NOW



*"This is a story so energetic and realistically portrayed that smoke seems to drift from the book's pages. With whirlwind, high-tension action, Speed the Dawn is a quintessential disaster novel and a high-concept thriller."*

—FOREWORD REVIEWS

*"Powerful, unrelenting action drives Donlay's eighth adventure novel. . . few thriller fans will be able to resist the breakneck pace."*

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

*"If you want to experience terror, this is where to get it."*

—SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

ON SALE MARCH 6



*"The Mort Angel books are instant PI classics—smart, slick, charming, and highly recommended."*

—LEE CHILD, NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE MIDNIGHT LINE

*"Over the top? Yes. Bawdy and rollicking? Oh, yes. Politically correct? Would you really expect that of a hard-boiled PI? Of course not. . . A fun read, and a good one."*

—KILLER NASHVILLE

*"Smart, sexy, and un-put-downable. Mortimer Angel is my new favorite private eye."*

—JOHN LESCROART, NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF POISON

ON SALE APRIL 3

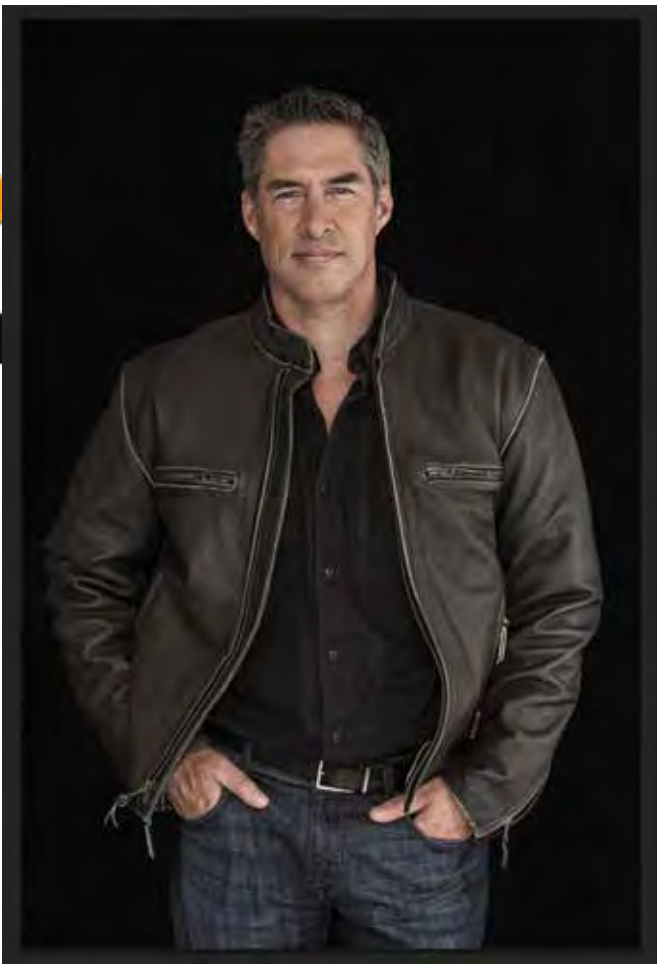
OCEANVIEW PUBLISHING

WWW.OCEANVIEWPUB.COM

# BRAD TAYLOR

## *Ups the Stakes with “Operator Down”*

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Claudio Marinesco



If someone were to write up a “list” of Brad Taylor’s jobs, the resume would be a long one. From serving this country to penning thrilling novels that are pure suspense, with his character of Pike Logan not only saving people but also solving crimes and stopping monumental bad guys in the process, Brad Taylor has and continues to do a great job in all areas.

Sitting down with *Suspense Magazine*, he spoke about a variety of things, addressing how and where his ideas come from, as well as his writing technique, to even offering up his own personal views in regards to the government and his own choice as to who was the best to ever sit in the Oval Office. Take a moment and find out more about this author and his brand new release, “Operator Down” which has Pike Logan (in his 12<sup>th</sup> tale) taking a slightly different path than the ones before.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): You have quite an extensive military background. Can you tell us a little about your service and how, perhaps, your experiences have affected your writing and original creation of the character, Pike Logan?

Brad Taylor (B.T.): *I spent close to twenty-two years in the U.S. Army, most of that time in Special Operations command positions all over the globe. After 9/11, the pace picked up significantly, and my chosen path—like everyone else’s in the military—became the focal point of my entire existence. That time of my life certainly influences my writing, but not in the way that people would think. It makes me uniquely qualified to write the stories I do, but I didn’t actually set out to write in my genre. Originally, I set out to write a*

*story of redemption, but I needed a backdrop for the plot, and so I used my experiences, which made “One Rough Man” a military thriller. If I’d have been a policeman, Pike Logan would have been a cop. If I had been a priest, Pike would have been taking confession. I happened to be a Special Forces Operator, and so that’s what Pike Logan became, but the theme of that original book would have remained no matter what I had done in my life.*

S. MAG.: Now on your 12<sup>th</sup> installment of the *Pike Logan* series, let’s talk a bit about the new title, “Operator Down.” Is there some sort of ‘sneak peek’ you can provide us when it comes to the plot?



B.T.: “Operator Down” is a little bit different from my other work. I was looking for a way to bring back the Mossad team of Shoshana and Aaron, introduced in “Days of Rage.” I also wanted a story that was more personal and less ‘ticking time bomb.’ I’d just finished “Ring of Fire” which had a very complex plot involving a multifaceted, spectacular terrorist attack against our homeland, and I wanted to reverse course, exploring not the potential death of hundreds or thousands, but the threat of harm to one or two very special individuals. After burying myself in research, kicking ideas around, I decided on a story involving the Israeli diamond trade and a coup in a small African country. At the time, I was just looking for a realistic story that would resonate on a personal level, even if it wouldn’t make the six o’clock news in the United States if it were real. Now, with various coups on the African continent splashed across the front page—like Zimbabwe—I think I was just ahead of the bow wave.

S. MAG.: In 2011, when your debut, “One Rough Man” soared, how did you feel about the immediate success it had with readers? Was your first difficult to write?

B.T.: *I was extremely flattered. Okay, flabbergasted. Whenever I write, I don’t try to determine the vagaries of what various readers would want to see, I only write what I would like to read. I’m a reader first, and that’s pretty much my strategy for writing. Having said that, it’s nail-biting throwing your heart into a work and then laying it open for the world to read, and it was very gratifying to see the reaction. “One Rough Man” was a dichotomy as far as difficulty. On the one hand, the story flowed out of my head non-stop, and was probably the easiest book I’ve ever written from that aspect. On the other hand, I’ve had no formal instruction in writing, and I had a lot to learn, so as far as the mechanics of writing are concerned, that book was by far the hardest.*

S. MAG.: It’s always interesting to get an author’s feedback who has been concentrating on a character that has become synonymous with not only action but also bestseller slots: Does it ever get difficult coming up with something new that Pike Logan has not yet done?

B.T.: *Yes, it is difficult. No author ever wants to repeat themselves, but honestly, there are only so many ways to skin the cat in my genre, and the real world seems to be on a rinse-and-repeat cycle as far as various crises go. Out in the wild, the names and locations can change, and yet the plot looks remarkably similar. Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula fighting the Houthis in Yemen? Looks remarkably like the Islamic State fighting in Syria. Readers don’t want something they’ve seen before (well, I certainly don’t, and as I said, I’m a reader first), so I’m constantly challenged to find storylines that are plausible and yet unique. Luckily, truth is definitely*

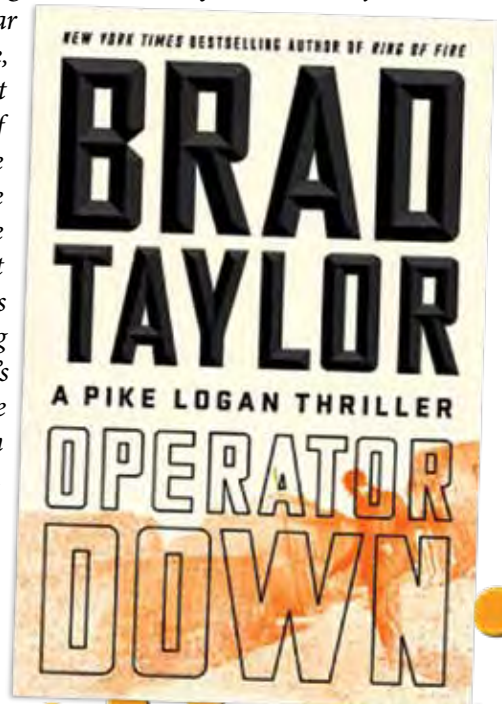
*stranger than fiction, and research always reveals a germ of an idea, so it hasn’t been an issue...yet. Eventually, something will happen or be reported—usually in some obscure outlet—that makes me scratch my head and say, “Now that would make a great book.”*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, is there anything—any news headline that you wish to tackle in the future? Some situation that you’ve wanted to put Pike into and see what he does?

B.T.: *The problem writing plotlines immersed in current events is precisely that—they’re current. If I had an idea based on a headline trending right this minute for a book, a year from now I’d be hard pressed to execute. When it came time to begin typing, that idea would either have already played out in the real-world, relegating any element of surprise moot, or it would have been rendered irrelevant due to other competing events. I confess, it leaves me in a bit of a quandary, as I can’t plan very far ahead, but it is what it is. The world doesn’t wait for an author to start typing, and any attempt to “pocket” an idea invariably ends up in the trash bin.*

S. MAG.: You’ve stated on programs that you’re not an “outline” type of guy when you begin writing. So...what is the system? Are there a set number of hours per day at a laptop for you; do you have the next one already planned in your own mind before you are completed with one...or is it more of a, “I write when the mood grabs me,” system?

B.T.: *I don’t outline chapter by chapter, that’s true, but I do build what I call a framework, where I know the threat, the antagonists, and the general scheme of maneuver. I just don’t get into granular detail in an outline, preferring to let the story sort itself out. I suppose one could say I’m more the “write when the mood grabs me” sort of a guy as far as my typical writing day goes, but that’s only because people equate writing with the actual typing on the keyboard. That is the end state, but I’m always writing. While mowing the lawn, doing physical training,*



walking the dog, you name it, I'm always writing. The true work happens in my head, not on the keyboard. The pages are just the output, so while it might look like I'm wasting time wandering around the house in my workout gear, I'm not. I've found that if I force myself into X number of words or pages a day, I force the story out, and it's never good. I'll end up rewriting it anyway, so I no longer attempt to do that. Instead, I'll jot down notes in my journal, let the story percolate in my head, and when I'm ready, I'll hit the keyboard. That could be at six in the morning or at midnight, and it might look like the "mood" just "grabbed me"; but in reality, I've been writing the entire time. That sequence of events continues until the book is done, sometimes with the cycle involving thinking in the morning and typing in the afternoon, and other times the thinking part of the cycle taking literally weeks, and then I bang on the keyboard like a demented monk for hours on end, cranking out upwards of 8,000 words a day.

S. MAG.: There are so many national headlines/tragedies... with you, having the military background and seeing issues that are currently happening everywhere, is there a piece of advice (or far more) you wish the government could take in order to make things better for the next generation coming up behind? A personal question with that: Do you have a particular historical favorite when it comes to the men who have sat in the Oval Office?

B.T.: *My advice is simple: If you work in the government, make your decisions based on the needs of the governed, not on the needs of yourself. You mention the next generation, and that is, in my mind, the key. Don't make any decisions based on how it will reflect on your immediate legacy or your personal fortunes. Make it based on what it will engender down the road. Anyone who works for the government has a sacred trust: all work done is for the governed, not the person executing the action. One might not see a result that favorably impacts oneself, but that's irrelevant. If future generations benefit, then that is the goal. It is no different than what a commander in the military does. Every decision I made was based on the mission, and whether my decision would enhance or detract from the strategic goals of our nation. Nowhere in the decision process was how it would enhance or detract from my ability to progress in the military.*

*In my mind, that's the problem with politics—it's all me, me, me. What will make ME look good right now, not what is in the best interest of the nation. I'm not saying the decisions are always mutually exclusive, but too often I see politicians making the easy, wrong decision over the hard, right decision solely because of short-term political gain.*

*As for a particular historical favorite in the Oval Office, it would be Abraham Lincoln. I cannot fathom the pressure he was under, and every decision he made was based on the future of the nation, not on how his polling would look the next*

*day. I'm sure there's a little historical shine put on that story, but not much. The fact remains that he presided over the most tumultuous time in our history, and did so without losing his moral compass.*

S. MAG.: When you're not writing, you serve as a security consultant; can you give more information on your role when it comes to aiding various agencies?

B.T.: *Not really. That part of my life is separate and walled from my writing, complete with non-disclosure agreements and classified aspects that I'm not willing to discuss. Suffice it to say, it's not sexy. I'm not closing my computer and putting on a Batman outfit. It's just work of a different type done by many, many people with skillsets like mine to enhance the security of our nation.*

S. MAG.: Growing up in rural Texas, you certainly have experienced all kinds of landscapes. Is there an affinity you have with the Lone Star State that gives you the desire or perhaps offers the peace and quiet you need in order to write?

B.T.: *I certainly have an affinity for the Lone Star State, but it has very little to do with my writing. I grew up in Texas, graduated from the University of Texas, joined the Army and lived all over the world. I retired to Charleston, South Carolina, where my parents were from, and wrote my first novel without ever having returned to live in Texas, so I'd be hard-pressed to say that the state has offered me the peace and quiet I need in order to write. But the law-breaking escapades I experienced there in my youth certainly informed Pike Logan's future.*

S. MAG.: What will Pike Logan do next? Will he perhaps land on the big or small screen one of these days?

B.T.: *Pike Logan is valiantly trying to figure out what he's going to do next, which is to say I'm in the, "What the hell am I going to do now" phase. I'm in the mid-point between books, where I sit and ponder, and my publisher begs me for an idea of where I'm going. Eventually, I'll start to panic, and it'll all become clear in a bolt of lightning in the middle of the night. At least that's what's happened in the past...pray for me. As far as Pike hitting the big or small screen, only time will tell. I've seen some interest, but in Hollywood that means absolutely nothing.*

Although fans know that proverbial lightning bolt will be delivered, our prayers will go out that the storm, itself, comes quickly—seeing as the 'output' from this incredible author's imagination is something we wish to read as fast as possible. It will not be out of the realm for other prayers to head on swift wing to Hollywood. Pike Logan deserves his spotlight on screen. To stay current on Brad Taylor's latest creations, check out [www.BradTaylorBooks.com](http://www.BradTaylorBooks.com). ■





## Jayne Ann Krentz

### *“Promises Not to Tell,” Maybe...*

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Marc von Borstel

A true American writing icon, Jayne Ann Krentz is a woman responsible for a string of *New York Times* bestsellers written under seven (yes, *seven*) different pseudonyms, since 1979. Whether paranormal futuristic novels or thrilling tales of romantic suspense—from contemporary settings to stunning historical backdrops—Jayne has delivered each and every time, creating a fan base that craves for the next book to arrive mere seconds after they’ve finished her latest release.

With her new title, “Promise Not to Tell,” she has put together another complex, compelling romantic suspense that is fast-paced and completely engrossing; not a surprise,

considering she is definitely a queen of the genre. Taking time out to sit with *Suspense Magazine*, Jayne speaks about her characters, her new releases, and offers her own personal views on things such as, ‘writer’s block’ as well as what a writer needs to possess in order to not only achieve a career, but how to maintain it as the years proceed.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): What would you tell new writers is the most difficult thing when it comes to achieving a writing career, and what you *have* to possess in order to maintain it for so long?

Jayne Ann Krentz (J.A.K.): *This is a very entrepreneurial business. From the start of your career you will be responsible for almost every aspect of it. You must write the book, you must figure out how to publish and distribute the book, either by finding a traditional publisher or going indie, and then you must market the book and build an audience. Even if you go with a traditional publisher, you will be expected to help build your brand. But here’s the thing: for me and for the successful writers I know, writing is a compulsion, not a deliberate career choice. If you can stop, you probably will stop. If you can’t stop, you’re doomed to be a writer. You may never find commercial success but you will write.*

S. MAG.: What is the system you’ve found over the years that both, brings a new series or character to your mind, and tells you when a character/series has come to an end? Do you have ‘an end’ planned ahead of time for a series?

J.A.K.: *Readers love series but I should warn you up front that I'm not the expert on how to start or end one. I've done a few series and also some continuing characters, but in most cases I stumbled into them. Anson Salinas in "Promise Not to Tell" is a perfect example. I knew from the beginning that he was the cop who had rescued the children from the cult, but I had no idea just how important he would become until I started writing the stories of his three foster sons. The only takeaway I have to offer to other writers is this: follow your instincts. If a character becomes important to you, the writer, then chances are very good he/she will be important to the reader as well. That one character may even be the key to a long-running series.*

S. MAG.: Is there one character out there in the world—whether present day or historical—that you would love to have penned, and why?

J.A.K.: *I have loved and/or admired many characters created by other authors, but I don't spend time wishing that I had written any of those characters because they were never mine to write. Reading really brilliant characters written by others can and often does inspire me to reach deeper into my imagination, but I only get truly obsessed, as in 'wake-up-at-two-o'clock-in-the-morning-wondering-what-happens-next' obsessed, when it comes to my own characters.*

S. MAG.: If you had to choose from the many fantastic leads you have written, who would you say is the character that is the closest to you? Is there one you have ever hated and wished you hadn't created?

J.A.K.: *Fantastic leads? Wow! Thank you. Ahem, where was I? Oh, right, which character is the closest to me? Hmm. I have never intentionally written myself into a book. In fact, I have never deliberately patterned any of my characters on real people. That said, I am convinced that an author's voice is infused with a lot of the author's core values, world views, philosophy of life, sense of humor, notions of good and evil, right and wrong, etc. The stories will also reflect the themes and emotional conflicts that compel the author. So, in that sense I guess you could say there is a little bit of me in all of my characters—except, of course, that I have absolutely no interest in experiencing the sorts of trauma and danger that they go through in the books!*

S. MAG.: If you could have a face-to-face with one of your characters, who would it be and what question would you ask them?

J.A.K.: *The characters I want to have a face-to-face chat with are always the ones that I am writing at any given moment. And the only question I want to ask them is, "What the heck do you think you're doing? That wasn't in the proposal I sent to the editor. What happened to Plan A?"*

S. MAG.: Can you give readers a 'sneak peek' of the new title, "Promise Not to Tell"?

J.A.K.: *I'm really excited about "Promise Not to Tell" because it is the edgiest story I've ever written. I mean, I've got a hero and a heroine who were traumatized by their childhood experiences in a cult, for crying out loud. Twenty-two years ago the evil leader tried to destroy the compound and everyone in it. He supposedly died in a fire. But now there's been another death and the heroine, Virginia Troy, the owner of an art gallery, has received a mysterious painting filled with cryptic images that indicate the leader may still be alive. (Cue the scary music.) She knows no one is going to believe her so she teams up with a private investigator named Cabot Sutter who, as a kid, was trapped in the same cult. I know, what could possibly go wrong?*

*"...writing is a compulsion, not a deliberate career choice. If you can stop, you probably will stop. If you can't stop, you're doomed to be a writer."*







S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan moment you can share with us that really made a poignant impact on you throughout your career?

J.A.K.: *There have been so many memorable fan moments that have meant the world to me. But nothing touches my heart more than the readers who have told me that my books have provided respite and comfort for them when they were going through difficult life events. I think the fact that my books can offer them a hug is an illustration of my theory that readers and writers who stick together over time probably share a lot of the same core values, world views and sense of optimism.*

S. MAG.: Where does an icon go to bounce ideas off of someone? Is there another out there who you have as a muse or sounding board?

J.A.K.: *I don't know where icons go but I can tell you that when I get some off-the-wall idea for a story, I call my fabulous editor, Cindy Hwang, at Berkley Publishing to ask her if I've gone over the edge. She'll tell me if I'm going down the rabbit hole.*

S. MAG.: Have you ever experienced a case of writer's block? If so, how do you handle that process?

J.A.K.: *I get asked this question a lot and the answer is, I'm not sure. Every writer I know interprets the term "writer's block" differently. That said, I can tell you that I have certainly experienced what I call, "writer's boredom". Those are occasions when I am so frickin' bored with a plot, a scene, or a character that I lose interest in finishing the chapter or even the whole book. When that happens I take it as a sign that things have gone very wrong. The fix for me is to start writing dialogue between the main characters. Once they start talking to me, or to each other, I discover all sorts of interesting things about them, things that send me off in a different direction. So, for what it's worth, my advice to writers who are dealing with writer's block is to first ask yourself if you are actually dealing with writer's boredom.*

S. MAG.: Is there one thing you are particularly excited about in 2018 that you can't wait for readers to see?

J.A.K.: *I've got something really special coming in May, "The Other Lady Vanishes" written under my Amanda Quick name. The setting is the glittering world of 1930s Hollywood, California. I am absolutely thrilled with this new era! I can't wait to share it with readers. We've got a heroine who is an escapee from an asylum. We've got a mysterious hero who is investigating a fake psychic. We've got the glamorous town of Burning Cove, California, playground of the very rich, the very famous, and the very dangerous. We've got cool clothes, cool convertibles, and cool cocktails. We've also got a murder...or three. I hope readers will love this new AQ landscape as much as I do.*

It doesn't take a psychic to already know that loving this 'new landscape' is a sure thing. Jayne Ann Krentz, no matter what name she is writing under, continues her long, spectacular career by creating memorable characters who bring about tales of thrilling suspense, each one set in its own glorious landscape. It certainly does the heart good to know that "writer's boredom" will *never* stop them from coming. You can follow Jayne's latest releases, news, and events on tap at [www.jayneannkrentz.com](http://www.jayneannkrentz.com). ■

# Forensic Files

## Q&A: WHAT IS A CHIMERA AND CAN IT CONFUSE DNA TESTING?

By D.P. Lyle, MD

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



**Q:** I recently saw on the Discovery Health Channel a story about a woman who discovered she had two different sets of DNA. She was called a chimera. What is a chimera? Could it cause confusion in the DNA processing if she were a murder suspect?

**A:** Chimeras are not common in nature, but they do occur, including in humans. Chimeras do have two, and very rarely more, distinct DNA types. To understand how this comes about, let's look at the genetics of reproduction.

When an egg and a sperm join to make a fertilized egg, the genetic make-up of the offspring is set at that moment, with half coming from each parent. The fertilized egg then divides into 2 and those into 4 and those into 8, and so on. At some point in the growth of the zygote the cells begin to specialize. We call this "differentiation." One cell line might become brain tissue, another blood cells, and still another muscle cells.

In fraternal twins, two sperm cells fertilize two eggs and the above process occurs in tandem so that two entirely genetically distinct individuals result. In identical twins, the original fertilized cell (egg) divides into two, but these two cells drift apart and then each proceeds along the above growth path. This creates two individuals with identical genetics. After all, they started from the same cell and thus from the same egg and sperm.

In chimeras, two fraternal twins are formed (two eggs and two sperm and two genetically different individuals), but these two original cells (fertilized eggs) join together to form one. As growth takes place the developing zygote is composed of two distinctively different cell types with two distinctively different genetic make-ups. As these cells begin to specialize some organs and tissues might come from one type of cell and some from the other, and still others develop with a mixture of cell types. This leads to a chimera where various body tissues (liver, blood, skin, heart, brain) might have one or the other or both of the two original DNA profiles. This can lead to confusion in any DNA testing.

Chimeras usually appear normal but they might display certain mosaic patterns, particularly unusual pigmentation patterns on their skin. This is merely an expression of their two genetic types. A mosaic in art is something made up of different appearing, distinct pieces. The same holds true here since the cells of the person contain separate and distinctive DNA patterns. These differences can sometimes appear in the skin, even as a checkerboard pattern in some areas.

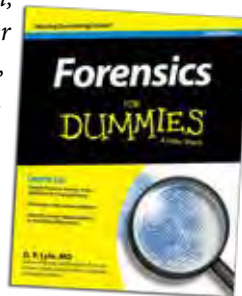
Yes, this could confuse DNA testing in a criminal case. But with testing blood, buccal (cheek cells), and tissue samples, the chimeric condition would be revealed and the two distinct types of DNA could be profiled. If one matched the DNA sample found at the crime scene, the chimeric individual would be identified as the source of the DNA. In medical situations, this condition is often unmasked only if the person needs an organ transplant or is the donor of an organ to someone else. Otherwise this can go unnoticed for a lifetime.

Interestingly, a similar forensic DNA problem can occur after someone has received a bone marrow transplant for some form of cancer or leukemia. Typically a person undergoing a bone marrow transplant will be given very powerful chemotherapeutic agents, which essentially wipes out his entire bone marrow. That is, it kills off all the blood cell-making components within the bone marrow. The donor's bone marrow is then given by intravenous infusion. This migrates to the bone marrow and sets up shop, and blood cell production begins once again. But that presents a problem. The donor has different DNA than does the recipient. This means that the bone marrow and the blood of the recipient would have one



type of DNA while the rest of his body would have another. If the donor then committed a crime and left his DNA at the scene, and the recipient somehow became a suspect, then DNA obtained by blood testing from the recipient would match that found at the scene. As you can see, the poor fellow would be in a bit of trouble. So how would the medical examiner get around this and determine the truth? He would simply do a buccal smear and the cells obtained from inside the recipient's mouth would show a different DNA that did not match that of the DNA left at the crime scene. He would then discover that this person had a bone marrow transplant and would check the hospital records and determine who the donor was. He would then have the identity of the true killer. ■

*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](http://www.dplylemd.com), <http://writersforensicsblog.wordpress.com>, or Crime and Science Radio at <http://crimeandsciencradio.com>.*



### A-LIST

By D.P. Lyle

Author D.P. Lyle certainly knows how to pen a series. With this latest series based on Jake Longly, Private Investigator, readers embark on Longly's second mystery that takes place in the colorful, one-of-a-kind, "Big Easy."

Jake and Nicole Jamison are heading to New Orleans to give some aid to Nicole's uncle, Charles Balfour. Balfour is a movie producer who is in more than a bind when you think about the repercussions that could occur...now that his star actor, Kirk Ford, has woken up in bed with the dead body of a college girl named Kristi Guidry by his side.

"The Big Easy" is the location of Balfour's movie shoot, and when Jake gets there he is amazed at the reality he finds, seeing as that the details are far more like something a screenwriter would've created and not real life at all.

Kirk Ford remembers almost nothing about the evening before. He also has no explanation whatsoever how and/or why this girl was murdered. And just to make matters worse, it just so happens that the corpse was the niece of a local Mafia Don who will make sure that his kin's death is avenged at once. As money wanes because of the gossip and danger, the movie is stopped in its' tracks. The actor's name must be cleared... fast. Add in all kinds of suspects, from Kristi's friends to her ex-boyfriend; as well as adding in advice from homicide detectives and even a local fortune teller, and you have a thriller that is all-out fantastic!

D.P. Lyle has made sure to give the reader a tale where the slogan: "Nothing is Easy in The Big Easy" will stick with you long after you're done reading. Jake Longly is yet another character created by Lyle whose next adventure is worth the wait.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion for Suspense Magazine* ■

[SuspenseMagazine.com](http://SuspenseMagazine.com)

## "SEDUCTIVE, SOPHISTICATED AND AUTHENTIC."

—Steve Berry, *New York Times* and #1 Internationally Bestselling Author

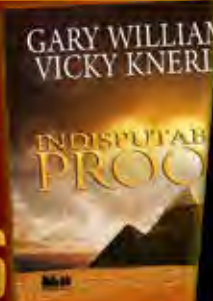


An expedition off the Italian coast reclaims a World War II-era German midget submarine. When the two-man sub is opened, it contains a single corpse, and an artifact from Adolf Hitler's bunker that was thought to be lost to history.

On Long Island, an elderly man and woman are brutally murdered. FBI Agent Link Johnsten is called in to assist local authorities and to maintain the victims' secret. When six unsent letters are discovered in their home, one piques his interest. It's addressed to his friend, CIA Agent Samuel Tolen.

Chinese-American physicist, Dr. Sing Liao, is abducted after making an astonishing, yet terrifying, scientific breakthrough. The intersecting lives of Dr. Liao, a rogue FBI agent, and a billionaire shipping magnate collide. With ties to Nazi Germany, Tolen and Johnsten are swept up in a frantic chase to uncover Adolf Hitler's darkest secret. At stake is the life of an 11-year-old savant—and the possible end of the world.

SAMUEL  
TOLEN  
RETURNS



On Sale Now

@WILLIAMSKNERLY



# VALENTINE

## *& The Lotus Circle*

By Jordan Dane  
Press Photo Credit: Kim Haynes Photography

## CHAPTER 1

### *San Antonio, Texas*

*After dusk*

Sweat trickled down Braxton Valentine's neck as he crept through the shadows of a dense stand of trees with his M4A1 carbine held tight against his shoulder. Dressed in full tactical gear and helmet, Valentine overlooked the sweltering Texas heat and a persistent cloud of gnats. He kept his eyes alert for any movement from the condemned mental hospital, dead ahead.

"You're running point, intel only. Report what you see. That's it."

When Valentine heard the voice of his team leader, Dan Romeo, over his earpiece, he stopped cold and listened.

"Hostage rescue is *not* on your agenda. I repeat, *do not* engage. Another team will execute the mission."

"Copy that," he whispered. Message acknowledged.

Valentine hated being sidelined as the new guy, but he understood having to pay his dues on the Phoenix Agency black ops team.

After he took cover behind a gnarled and sprawling oak tree, Brax tightened his grip on the suppressed assault rifle and used his night vision scope to scan the perimeter and peer into the mounting shadows of the abandoned asylum.

He'd used the same breach in the fence to gain entry to the grounds that local gangs had employed when they'd cut through the barbed razor wire cyclone barrier that surrounded the derelict facility. Evidence of their trespass had been left behind. Vivid graffiti marred the forsaken building and the dying light reflected off the jagged edges of broken windows to play tricks on his eyesight.

When something moved inside, he narrowed his eyes.

"Please...don't. *Stop.*"

A woman cried out and Valentine tensed. His muscles seized with a surge of adrenaline when her desperate pleas triggered a waking nightmare.

One face haunted him and the echo of another voice gripped him hard.





The heartbreak of his fiancée's death six months ago had metastasized from his guilt when he couldn't save her. He'd put a target on her back without knowing it. A ruthless cartel leader from his past, Mateo De La Cruz, had sent a hit squad to intercept a westbound train. Brax and Raine had been headed to Los Angeles for Brax to meet her parents for the first time.

The De La Cruz cartel had followed her when they couldn't track him. Raine Garrett had no idea what kind of danger she'd been in on the day she died and neither had Valentine. He'd quit his dangerous job with the CIA to marry her and start a new life. He'd put that life behind him, but his sacrifice had been too late.

Valentine hadn't seen Raine die on the train, but he held her body until the police forced him to let go. His imagination concocted his worst nightmares when the horror played over and over in his fevered sleep. The terrifying images had imprinted on his mind as if he'd witnessed them firsthand, branding him with their cruel version of the truth.

He clenched his jaw and blinked, but Raine's face wouldn't leave him.

"I heard a woman scream," he said into his com unit. "I see movement in the shadows near the west entrance."

"Stand down and wait for further orders," Romeo said. "We'll take it from here."

Valentine had been dismissed and it twisted his gut.

He wiped his eyes with the back of a hand and waited in the shadows, searching the darkness for his team—until the girl cried out again. *Damn it.* His skin crawled with an overwhelming powerlessness.

That feeling propelled him back to the train where Raine had died and his chest heaved with the frustration of being benched. He would have to overcome the dark memories that haunted him if he expected the Phoenix Agency to have faith in him.

He had ground to make up after recovering from being shot six months ago by someone from his new team after he'd confronted Raine's killer and was a second away from pulling the trigger. A well-placed bullet had been the only way to stop Valentine.

No one owned up to the shooting and he'd never been given the name of the guilty party, but he'd come to the realization that if he wanted to avenge Raine's death, he had to turn the other cheek to become part of the Phoenix team.

They had the shooter at a secret location to interrogate him for the greater good. For now, Brax played along. He didn't want Raine's death to mean nothing and get swept under the rug of a plea bargain, negotiated by suits.

When the voices of his team murmured through his earpiece, he raised his M4A1 and peered through the NV scope.

They were on the move—*without him.*

He couldn't stand being away from the action anymore.

He took his first step closer. The next one came easier. Before he realized, he'd cleared the trees and edged toward a side entrance to the hospital. His mind and his body were on auto-pilot as he flipped down the night vision goggles off his helmet and entered the abandoned building.

Muggy heat and the stillness of being sheathed in an oven of cement closed in on him. His boots crunched over the grit on the concrete as he crept toward a door. The eerie green of night vision colored his world as Valentine slowed his breathing to steady his heartbeats.

He could've communicated to his team what his instincts had called him to do, but he'd made a choice that felt right—especially after gunfire erupted.

Shots echoed and magnified through the old building, making it hard to tell where the sound came from. After Valentine communicated to his team leader, the man gave an order.

"We're pinned down. Secure the hostage and take the kidnapper alive. I repeat, we need him alive and talking."

"Roger that."

Valentine had his orders. He quickened his steps as he shuffled down a corridor with his rifle aimed, heading toward the position he had last seen the hostage.

The automatic gunfire grew louder. Through his NVG, muzzle flashes left ghost images on his eyes, but he kept moving until he saw the woman. One man held her arms as she struggled. He had a knife at her throat.

*Raine's face. The fear in her eyes.*

Valentine blinked back the punishing memory. Nothing could stop him.

\*\*\*

"You'll kill him. It's over."

A man yelled in Valentine's ear and grappled with his chest, pulling him off a guy on the ground. When spotlights cut across the cavernous space, Brax winced in the harsh light and looked down. His bruised knuckles were slick with blood. When he blinked from the spatter on his face and gazed at the carnage at his feet, Brax realized he'd lost more than time.

His mind couldn't fathom what happened until fragments came back to him.

Brax remembered only glimpses of the assault. He'd charged the kidnapper like a madman and used the butt of his M4 to disarm him. When the knife skittered across the floor, the abductor cowered and raised his hands, but that hadn't been good enough.

Valentine remembered an out of body experience where he witnessed the murderous look on his own face as he assaulted a man. He no longer wore his helmet or night vision goggles and the carbine had vanished from in his hands. He didn't even remember setting his rifle down.

Valentine only knew he needed to hit something and he did.

He pummeled the man's face and pounded his body until his arms were heavy with exhaustion. His wounded shoulder ached with the stress and a headache throbbed behind his eyeballs. Angry voices surrounded him, but they were his men—his team—and time slowed to a crawl until someone grabbed him.

When he came to his senses, he looked up to see stunned faces staring at him as if he were a rabid dog. In defiance, he glared at every face with his chest heaving until he realized his own men stood beside the kidnapper and his crew. The innocent woman who'd been taken didn't look afraid of her abductors.

She only looked fearful of him.

*What the hell?*

Even with his mind in a fog, he did the math. He'd been set up. His new team had run the exercise as a test—and he'd failed. He found Dan Romeo in the crowd and shifted his focus to the man's face.

"I could've killed someone."

Romeo glared at him.

"Not if you were doing your assignment. You were intel only, yet you came into the building before I'd given the order. We have your actions on video."

"You asked me to secure the hostage. You said you were pinned down."

"That was all staged to see what you'd do. In case you missed it, our kidnapper raised his hands to give up. The hostage wouldn't have been in danger if you had done your job. You were ordered to take the guy alive for questioning, not put him in the hospital."

Romeo shook his head and someone helped the injured man to his feet. As team leader, Dan Romeo must've made the call to set up a mock mission, informing everyone on the team except him. Brax thought the hostage rescue had been real. Real or fake, he'd failed miserably. Valentine expected to be cut loose on the spot, but what Romeo said next surprised him.

"I need time to assess your performance. We'll talk in a few days. Take some time off and get some rest."

Valentine had seen the furtive glances of the others. The team shared a ration of side-eyes with their leader that made words unnecessary. Even the woman hostage couldn't muster sympathy. No one on the Phoenix Agency black ops team would be able to trust him and he didn't blame them.

As adrenaline ebbed from his body, he shook with the chills of withdrawal, even in the clammy heat. The Phoenix agents turned their backs on him because he'd lost it. Something had broken in him the day he lost Raine and he had no idea how to make it right, but he couldn't get booted from the team.

To fail meant that Raine's death had been for nothing. He wouldn't get a say in what happened to her killer. The bastard would make a deal and disappear into WITSEC to

get another shot at his life.

Valentine couldn't let that happen. He had to get back into the good graces of Dan Romeo, no matter what it took.

\*\*\*

*An hour later*

"Mia, where are you? We have to talk about your boy."

Mia Romeo heard her husband Dan as he called out to her. He'd entered their house from the garage and hadn't stopped talking from the moment he entered their hill country home outside San Antonio and found her on the deck, gazing toward the glow of the city lights on the horizon.

Her Zen relationship with a glass of wine had ended.

The night view had calmed her as she waited for him to return. It had kept her from obsessing over the importance of the mock mission until now, but when Dan Romeo hadn't bothered to change from his BDUs before he launched into a tirade—or even given her a kiss—she knew things hadn't gone as planned.

She closed the sliders behind her as she stepped into their living room and set down her half-finished glass of a Chilean Sauvignon Blanc on a coffee table. She took a seat on the sofa and gave her husband the full attention he deserved.

His rant wasn't merely a husband confiding in a wife.

Mia Romeo headed the fledgling Psi Division, a new department formed to enhance the operations of the Phoenix Agency. The psychic women under Mia combined the gifts of telepathy, precognition, remote viewing, and psychic healing to enhance operations of the covert security agency. Mia's husband Dan had been one of the five founders and had charged Mia with the start up of the unique Psi Division, but she didn't need to be a mind reader to know Dan would have plenty to say to her about Braxton Valentine.

She'd been the one to bring Valentine onboard their team after she'd experienced the powerful psychic tether that the man had linked to her mind after his fiancée had been killed. He'd saved her life and forty-seven other innocent souls that day on the train. The mind link had been one-way. None of the other gifted psychics on her team could get beyond his strong mental barriers, not even after they consolidated their powers with her to break through.

"He's got serious skills to back up his solo act, but he's a head case, Mia. I wouldn't be surprised if he's covering up symptoms of PTSD after what happened to him six months ago. Hell, who can blame him? If something happened to you, they'd have to lock me up and drop kick the key."

Dan ran a hand through his hair as he unleashed more of his assessment of Valentine and paced in front of her, stripping off his duty belt and tossing it onto a chair. He wasn't done, not by a long shot.

"He's impulsive and self-destructive. With his expertise, he's a one-man wrecking crew, but our team doesn't need



a Rambo. From what I've seen, we can't trust him. Not yet. Bottom line, if you can't find a way to bring him in line, I'll have to cut him loose."

Mia crossed her arms and hugged them tight to her body. She'd hoped her husband might get through to Brax, without resorting to more desperate measures.

She'd been wrong.

"Don't write him off yet. Let my Psi team work with him...for now." She faced Dan and fixed her gaze on his handsome face. "He's got barriers none of us have been able to break through, but Aunt Vivi and Olivia tell me they have a plan. They've brought in someone special on his case."

"They've already brought someone in? How did they know what would—" After Dan realized his mistake, he shook his head with a sly grin. "Never mind. I forgot I was dealing with psychics. Your aunt is bringing in an outside expert from the Lotus Circle? Wow. Break out the popcorn."

Mia tensed her jaw at the mention of the ancient order of psychics that her Aunt Vivi Alderson and her partner, Dr. Olivia Crandall, had forged. Aunt Vivi had deep connections in a world alliance of clairvoyants, telepaths, and metaphysical practitioners—a network designed to train sensitives to expand their unusual abilities and keep an ancient practice alive.

When Mia only nodded, Dan smiled, kissed her cheek and said, "Valentine doesn't stand a chance."

\*\*\*

*Nearly dawn*

Braxton Valentine drove his RAM 1500 truck for most of the night, unable to settle down after he failed the mission. From his time with the CIA, nights were the worst for his haunted mind, but after Raine died, he heaped on the punishment because he deserved it.

On instinct, he kept one eye on his rearview mirror to make sure he wasn't tailed. Old habits were hard to break.

By the time he headed for his latest version of home, the sky had turned gray as dawn approached. Off 281, he took the exit for FM 473 and made a right onto Twin Sisters Drive. After he got past the Seven Oaks Dog Kennel, the road meandered into a series of switchbacks. He lived on a hilltop toward the end of the line where the land overlooked a small lake and he had the advantage of seeing anyone approaching by road—one of several safe houses he'd purchased over the years.

His truck jostled over a dirt road and kicked up dust as he climbed toward his dwelling—a small rustic cabin located on eighty acres of Texas hill country, north of San Antonio. He stopped to watch a small deer herd at the water's edge. Mist rose off the surface of the still lake that mirrored the sky like glass.

In the early morning solitude, he thought of Raine and

opened his heart to the pain of missing her.

He'd never brought her to any of his safe houses. She had accepted his need for secrecy and made no other demands on him, except to love her. As a couple, they had redefined the word 'honesty' to mean there were boundaries to their commitment, limits to what he could admit for the safety of both of them.

But that didn't stop him from thinking of her—and picturing her waking up in his bed and sharing coffee as they watched the deer graze. He had wanted to share everything with her one day, but he wouldn't get the chance now.

A big part of him died the day Raine did.

Valentine drove up to the cabin in the murky light and pulled up to an outbuilding he'd converted into a two-bay garage. After he parked his vehicle inside, he gathered his tactical gear and carbine to head into the house, but something stopped him, dead.

From the shadows, a massive animal leapt to its feet and challenged him for his porch. On reflex, Valentine reached for the Glock 21 that he had sheathed in a thigh holster lashed to his leg, when he believed a shaggy black bear had taken up residence in his cabin.

On closer inspection, Brax eased his hand off the butt of his weapon as he stared into the deep set, dark eyes of the largest dog he had ever seen. The beast looked as if it tipped the scale toward one hundred and fifty pounds, by his guess. If the dog stood on its hind legs, it would be nearly as tall as Brax.

The animal stared at Valentine with laser focus and its head low. When Brax made a cautious move toward his front door, the dog outflanked him and stood its ground without making a sound.

"Whoa there, Smokey. Stand down. My dance card is full."

At the sound of his voice, the dog pricked its ears and cocked its head.

Unless it attacked him, he had no intention of shooting the animal, but Valentine reached for his Glock with second thoughts. He eased the weapon from his holster and racked the slide to chamber a round after he realized he could've been mistaken about the real threat of the animal.

A dog defending its turf must have a master nearby, calling the shots. The massive beast may not be alone. ■

*Bestselling, critically-acclaimed author Jordan Dane's gritty thrillers are ripped from the headlines with vivid settings, intrigue, and dark humor. Publishers Weekly compared her intense novels to Lisa Jackson, Lisa Gardner, and Tami Hoag, naming her debut novel "No One Heard Her Scream" as Best Books of 2008. Dane is multi-published in crime fiction thrillers, has books in over seven countries, and has written young-adult novels for Harlequin Teen. Formerly an energy sales manager, she now writes full time and shares her Texas residence with two lucky rescue dogs.*

Learn more at: <http://jordandane.com>.

# The Sea Cliff

By Peter Swanson

"I think it's insane. I don't think either of you should do it." I said these words without really meaning them. No, that's not true. I meant them, but I knew that saying them would not change the fact that my husband, Robert, and his best friend, Tommy, were about to try and scale a hundred-foot cliff in the middle of the night.

"Big surprise," Robert spat back, turning his head and delivering a look of genuine dislike, a look that sometimes emerged when he was excessively drunk, as he was tonight. His lips, parted slightly, were stained purple with all the wine he had drunk at dinner. He had switched to beer as we had all moved from the inside of the seaside cottage to build a small fire on the beach.

"It looks doable," Tommy said. His back was to the dying fire as he stood side by side with Robert. Both were peering up at the dark expanse of rocky cliff that bordered the northern edge of the beach. The cliff rose about a hundred feet above the sea at its highest point. It was a black wall of granite and shale, on top of which began a public path that wended its way north toward Kennewick village. There was easy access to the top of the cliff from Micmac Road but from where Tommy and Robert stood, the only way up was to clamber over the seaweed-covered rocks at the base, then scale the more-or-less vertical wall.

"Yeah, it's doable," Robert replied, and the two began to map out a possible approach, noting fissures that could serve as handholds, examining the expanse of low-lying winterberry shrubs at the top of the climb that would help with the final few feet. It was an hour past sundown, the sky a wash of dark electric blue, clusters of stars just beginning to show.

"Are they actually serious?" Sonia asked me in a whisper from across the fire. She was Tommy's latest girlfriend. He had a different one every year, so I was careful not to become too attached to any one incarnation. They were all roughly the same—sexy grad students with no hips and unstyled hair. They knew how to make things like Tabouli salad and talked openly about orgasms. And they never seemed prepared for the side of Tommy—the competitive side—that came out when he got together with Robert.

I shrugged at Sonia and said, "How do I know?" I was feeling a little touchy after receiving that look of disdain from my drunk husband.

Sonia pinched out the stubby joint that had been smoldering between her fingers and slid it into the pocket of her cut-off jeans, then looked with worried eyes toward the two men, both of whom were now approaching the cliff. "Shit," Sonia said, and I suddenly felt bad for the girl.

"You can't stop them, Sonia, don't even try," I said. "They're like this every time they get together. It's generally at its worst the first night. It'll peter out as the weekend goes on."

"Yeah, at dinner..." Her sentence trailed off, but I knew what Sonia was talking about.

"The fight about the tides?"

"That was crazy. What was that all about?"

We'd arrived separately at the rental cottage in southern Maine that afternoon, a Friday in late August, for a three-day weekend. Tommy and Sonia had gotten there just after lunch, and Robert and I had arrived just before dinner. It was a yearly tradition for Robert and Tommy, and for me now as well—in the seven years since I've been with Robert—to get together toward the end of summer. Robert and Tommy would alternately pick a place. It was usually a place by the sea, sometimes a lake, but always near water. And the mood of the weekends was always the same—a kind of jovial competitiveness that occasionally tipped over into outright hostility. Robert and Tommy competed at everything: cooking, swimming, chess, fishing and, in particular, drinking. In the early days, it was all about who could drink the most beer. Lately, it had been about who brought the best bottle of wine or the most expensive single-malt Scotch. It was obnoxious, to say the least, but I'd gotten used to it, even grown to see it all with a sense of humor. I simply told myself that for three days out of the year, Robert and Tommy got to pretend to be little boys, even though I often wondered if the truth was that Robert and Tommy spent 362 days a year pretending to be men.



Tommy always brought his current fling along for the weekend. I sometimes wondered if this yearly weekend, with its bursts of alpha-male showmanship, had something to do with his magically disappearing girlfriends. Did the girls leave Tommy because they saw the real him, or did Tommy leave them because, after the annual weekend, he had no more use for them? Or was it something else altogether? I also sometimes wondered if the girls grew jealous because they saw how much Tommy flirted with me.

"That fight about the tides," I said to Sonia, "was pretty tame. They got in a fistfight once because Tommy told Robert he thought McEnroe had been a better tennis player than Björn Borg. They love each other and that's how they show it. That and stupid shit"—I tossed my head in the direction of the cliff—"like what they're about to do."

"Then they're really going to try and climb that cliff?"

"Probably. All you can do is lodge an official complaint for the books and then let them have their way. Trust me."

"How long have you known Tommy?" Sonia asked, as I stood and stretched, pulling an oversized cardigan around me. It wasn't cold out, but unless the sun was directly on my skin, I always felt a chill.

"God. A long time. As long as I've known Robert—I met them together."

"In college?"

"Grad school. Columbia. I met them both at the same time. At a party. Thought they were assholes. Still think so, at least when they get together. First time we all went away—what I mean is, first time Robert invited me to go away with them—we stayed at a motel in the Adirondacks. It had a pool in the courtyard and Robert bet Tommy that he couldn't jump into the pool from the roof of the motel. It was a single-story so it wasn't incredibly high but, still, it was about ten feet to the pool—"

"Talking about me?" It was Robert, who had come back silently across the sand to grab two more beers from the ice-bucket.

"Yeah. You remember that pool at that Adirondacks—"

"Tommy broke his foot. It was awesome."

"Right. My sensitive husband convinced Tommy that he could jump from the roof to the pool."

"No, no, no. I jumped first and made it. Tommy was just trying to copy me."

"I don't remember that."

Robert bellowed for Tommy, the words echoing against the rocks. Tommy came running, and for a while, we all argued the sequence of events that led to the failed pool jump and Tommy's broken foot. The sky turned darker, the stars brighter. A silvery moon came out from behind the clouded horizon line and cast dots of light across the Atlantic. Sonia, who had gotten quieter as the night had progressed, went into the cottage and filled the bucket with more beers. I wondered if the cliff had been forgotten, but after a pause in conversation, Robert said to Tommy, "We've got some climbing to do, my man."

"I don't think it looks safe," Sonia said, settling back onto the sand.

"It's a cinch. We've analyzed it."

"Yep. We've analyzed it. A cinch."

"I'm serious, Tommy, I really don't want you to do this. Let's just go to bed." Sonia's voice quivered.

Tommy stared down at his girlfriend for a brief moment before saying, "Uh...okay. But no."

I turned away from the interaction, not wanting to witness the actual, exact moment that ended this particular relationship. I *did* feel a little bad for Sonia. Tommy was a catch—handsome, flirtatious, funny and, except for occasions like this, even kind. I understood the attraction. I always had. I dug my hand into the gritty sand, warm below the surface from a long day of sun.

"Fuck you, too," Sonia said back to Tommy, but laughed.

"We'll be right back," Tommy said, and he and Robert trotted off toward the cliff. Sonia and I watched them disappear into the shadows.

"It's high," I said, "but it doesn't look too dangerous."

"Are you going to watch?" Sonia asked.

"I prefer not to encourage them. If we went over there they'd want to see who could do it blindfolded. But I am going to stay out here, just to see what happens. Besides, it's a nice night."

We were quiet for a moment, listening to the gentle respiration of the ocean, interrupted by the occasional muffled clap as a wave slammed into one of the eroded caves at the base of the cliff wall. We could also hear Robert and Tommy—words of advice, and hoots of celebration. I turned and craned my neck, telling myself I shouldn't look, but looking anyway. Moonlight clearly illuminated Tommy, recognizable by his longish hair and baggy cargo shorts. He was more than three quarters of the way up the cliff, one leg cocked, an outstretched arm pulling himself another foot toward the top. Robert, wearing a baseball cap, heckled him from below.

It was Tommy, not Robert, who I had initially been interested in, way back when we'd all first met at that party. We were all in the same MBA program, and cocktails had been organized to introduce incoming students. During the first two hours of the party, a vodka tonic growing warm in my hand, I listened to young men try and impress me by talking about the money they were going to make. I had been all set to leave when Tommy and Robert stumbled through the doors of the common

room, shedding jackets and scarves, both flush from an unusually cold September night. They spotted me putting my coat on, and turned me around, guiding me back toward the bar. We were an instant trio. The three of us took turns naming our favorite movies, our favorite books, favorite places in the world, and favorites in New York. We didn't talk about school, or business, or the classes we were taking. And neither of them seemed interested in other people at the party. We left together, all three of us, and at dawn, in the corner of a downtown bar lit only by candlelight, Tommy kissed me while Robert was explaining to the bartender how to make a Brandy Alexander.

"I have a girlfriend," Tommy said, after our lips parted. "We're serious."

"Oh," I responded. I didn't know what else to say, dazed a little by the suddenness of the kiss, and by Tommy's beautiful, brown eyes.

"But if you thought *we...*?" he said, then stopped.

"That's not my call."

"You're right."

Robert and Tommy walked me to my apartment building at dawn. As I pushed through the grubby double doors I turned back, and laughed as both men bowed in my direction from the sidewalk, each removing imaginary top hats. I got into bed that morning feeling as though I had fallen in love, and even though it was Tommy who had kissed me, I was thinking about both men.

Tommy eventually broke up with his girlfriend, sometime in December, but by then, Robert and I had begun to sleep together. I wasn't as attracted to Robert as I was to Tommy, but he'd wooed me with a barrage of self-confident banter and non-stop attention. Plus, I'd met Tommy's girlfriend and decided I liked her, not knowing that Tommy's average relationships rarely lasted longer than three months. But with Tommy single, Robert became even more attentive. Within a year, we were engaged, and Tommy was living with an aspiring poet who lived in Alphabet city. The summer after we all graduated from business school, Robert and I were married. Tommy was the best man. But if pressed, I would have to admit that after several relatively happy years of marriage, I still thought about that fleeting kiss with Tommy on the night we had all met.

"He made it. Thank God," Sonia said.

I turned. I could just make out Tommy in silhouette at the top of the cliff. "Easy," he shouted down. "Go more to the right than I did. There in the middle." His voice skimmed along the empty beach, some words muffled, some sharp.

"See," I said.

"Do we have any more pot?" Sonia asked.

"Inside, sure. I think. Check Robert's duffel bag that's in the living room."

Sonia stood, brushing sand from her long golden legs, then skipped away toward the cottage, forgetting to ask me if I needed anything from inside. I didn't mind. It was nice to be alone. I pushed up a little hummock of sand with my bare feet then spun around and leaned back against it. Through the rising, dying sparks of the fire I watched Robert slowly ascend the cliff. I felt unmoved by the spectacle. Not impressed, not excited. Not scared either. Like boys, Robert and Tommy's adventures were safe versions of the real things. Hills standing in for mountains. Sticks replacing swords.

Leaning back, I studied the sky, its points of light blurring slightly in my vision. I'd drank too much, and stupidly smoked pot. Already, the familiar tape-loops from the past few years were beginning in my brain. Should I force Robert into having a child with me? Was that possibly fair to him when all along I knew he had no interest? What would old age be like, just the two of us, day after day, without children, without grandchildren?

I heard a familiar sound over the lapping of the waves; it was Robert's voice letting out a sudden high-pitched exhalation, the sound he made if he slipped in the shower, or dropped a plate. I bolted upright and it took a moment for my eyes to readjust, to focus again on the black cliff. Robert was not there, nor was he standing at the top in mutual triumph with Tommy. My eyes instantly scanned downwards. I didn't see him at first since his body, crumpled and still, blended in with the slick boulders at the base of the cliff.

#

A year and a half after Robert died, Tommy and I eloped to Las Vegas. It didn't seem right to do it any other way, even though our friends and family had all publicly blessed the union. Everyone agreed that it was not just fitting for Tommy to step in after Robert's tragic death, but that it seemed almost natural. I agreed. Being with Tommy felt so right. After the terrible accident, we'd grieved together, planned the funeral together. In some ways it had been harder on Tommy, who felt guilty due to his involvement with the cliff climb. He had been standing on the top of the cliff when he watched, helplessly, as Robert lost his grip and fell to his death. Not only had he had to endure watching his best friend die, but he'd endured an investigation into the death. I had been questioned, and confirmed that Tommy had been at least ten feet away from Robert when he began to fall.

After getting married, Tommy and I moved to Boston. Tommy's parents had recently moved to Cape Cod, and my sister lived in Cambridge, just over the river. We'd lived in Boston a year without ever traveling to Maine, but with nothing planned for Labor Day weekend, we spontaneously agreed to take a trip up the coast. We booked a room in Camden. Passing by the exit for the Kennewicks, along the southern stretch of the turnpike, Tommy said to me: "I'm sorry if this is hard. Is this hard?"



"No, it's fine. I love Maine. So did Robert. I don't think it makes sense to avoid an entire state just because of what happened."

"I don't either. I just—"

"I'll admit I'm probably not ready to go back to Kennewick Cove anytime soon, but..."

"Of course not. We'll never go back there."

In Camden the days were warm and breezy, but the nights were starting to cool, the sky darkening and signaling the approach of fall. We slept under a quilt with the window of our room closed. After a mutual decision, I had recently gone off of the pill. Every time we made love that weekend it was with the knowledge that we might be creating new life, starting a family. I knew, although it was hard to admit without feeling little stabs of guilt, that I was happier than I had ever been before in my life. I missed Robert, painfully so at times, but Tommy and I were a better match. We made sense together, and there was an intensity of feeling between us that eclipsed anything I'd ever had with Robert.

On our last morning in Camden, I lingered over breakfast while Tommy went up to the room to finish packing. There were several other guests in the breakfast room, including an older couple that had stayed the whole weekend as well. They were in their sixties; the man brown as a belt from a summer in the sun, the woman pale and pretty, a floppy straw hat tied with a string around her neck. I had noticed that both of them, in particular, the woman, had been watching Tommy and me at various times throughout the weekend. I was aware of the woman's eyes on me now. I could observe her in my peripheral vision, and watched as she whispered to her husband before standing up and making her way across the room.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your breakfast, but I wanted to ask... Is the young man you're with named Tommy Belanger?"

I met the older woman's pale blue eyes. "It is. Do you know him?"

"Oh, I was sure of it, but I didn't want to bother him. I'm positive he doesn't remember me."

"How do you know him?"

"Well, it's awkward to say because of what happened. You know how he was involved in that terrible accident—"

"Uh huh."

"At those seaside cottages at Kennewick Cove. We stayed next to him—not when that young man fell off the cliff—but earlier that summer, when Tommy was there for the week."

"I don't—"

"Bill and I—that's my husband—we couldn't believe it when we saw what had happened in the newspaper. We remembered that cliff so well, and we remembered Tommy, and then to see that he was there, it was a total shock. Especially, since..."

I watched as the woman's husband, Bill, stood up from the breakfast table and cast an impatient look in his wife's direction. "Especially since what?" I asked. The skin of my scalp prickled as I searched my memory. Tommy had never been to that cabin before. I distinctly remembered him telling us that he'd never even been to the coast of Maine.

"Well, since Tommy was such an expert at climbing," the woman said, rubbing her chin with a liver-spotted hand. "That whole week when he was there, he must've gone up and down that cliff twenty times, and that was just what we saw him do. It was so peculiar—that's why we remembered. We thought he must be practicing for something, and then, when we saw what had happened in the newspaper, we couldn't believe it. Oh, my husband has that look that means it's time for me to stop my blathering and go. Say hello to Tommy for me, and pass on our ... our ... It's Bill and Roberta Williams—I'm sure he won't remember us. You look a little pale, dear, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I'll make sure to mention you to Tommy." My voice sounded surprisingly normal.

I watched Bill and Roberta exit the dining room. My mind raced. Maybe Tommy was just making absolutely sure that he would beat Robert at something on that weekend. I knew how competitive they were. But to visit the location in advance, and practice at something—it was ridiculous. It made much more sense that practicing climbing that cliff was to ensure that he could reach the top at nighttime, making it look relatively easy. He must have known there was a good chance that Robert would fall.

Tommy entered the dining room, bag at his side. He scanned the room, then found me, and the look of love that passed across his face as our eyes met convinced me. He'd planned it. He'd let Robert follow him up a cliff that he knew Robert would not be able to navigate. And as Tommy came across the dining room, never taking his eyes off of me, I found myself forgiving him before he even reached me. No, it was more than just forgiveness. Down deep, I was glad that he had done what he did. I might have loved Robert once, but now I loved Tommy even more. He had won. The best man had won. ■

*Peter Swanson is the author of four novels: "The Girl With a Clock For a Heart," an LA Times Book Award finalist; "The Kind Worth Killing," winner of the New England Society Book Award, and finalist for the CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger; "Her Every Fear," an NPR book of the year; and his most recent, "All the Beautiful Lies." His books have been translated into 30 languages, and his stories, poetry, and features have appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, The Atlantic Monthly, Measure, The Guardian, The Strand Magazine, and Yankee Magazine.*

*A graduate of Trinity College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Emerson College, he lives in Somerville, Massachusetts with his wife and cat. Learn more at: [www.peter-swanson.com](http://www.peter-swanson.com).*

# Family is EVERYTHING

By Lael Braday

I CANNOT LEAVE ANYTHING UNEXPLORED. I'm not even looking for a job. My husband's salary covers our needs and desires sufficiently. As blessed as I am, however, life can be tedious at times. It's not so much the loneliness as the dreadfulness of time spreading out before me each morning.

The decorative, bootleg sign in the otherwise bare yard states simply, "Assistant Required. Must Love Nature." Elaborate calligraphy enchants me. Each letter begins with a luscious color from nature and blends into another. The "A" transitions from the periwinkle of a hydrangea to the deep purple of an African violet. My fingers caress the curlicues that are neither precious nor vulgar.

Who would not wish to assist such a creative? I picture her in a full, billowy dress of muted blues and greens, like a dreamy earth mother, free-flowing hair to her waist, with a crown of flowers created each day to match her dress, her touch comforting and compassionate.

No one else is on the street in this neighborhood. My walk has taken me farther than I realized. Nothing is familiar. In my head, dear hubby admonishes me to be safe. His sigh hurts my brain.

Peering closer, I notice a small arrow pointing to the forest. Has the sign been turned? It appears to be secure, and my attempt to turn it confirms its stability. In any case, I see nothing of relevance in either direction—a few houses, a few lots empty, but mown—wherein an assistant might be required.

Well, into the forest I must go then!

Hush, husband!

In order to waltz carefree into nature, I turn off the adult aspect of my brain that warns of snakes, frogs, and other creepy-crawlies that I once excitedly carried into my house to show my mother, who always screamed to take them back outside. As I crunch oak leaves and pine needles with my non-sensible, spring slip-ons, I imagine a hidden hobbit house inhabited by a multi-disciplined, highly talented, forest dwelling ogre. No matter that it's off a quiet, residential street.

About three minutes into a journey through an open under story, I stand dumbfounded. A faded Victorian mansion with two levels of wraparound verandas sits within a quarter acre meadow of wildflowers. The inspiration for the sign's calligraphy resides in the lacy architectural detail of the verandas.

Out of place and tired, the mansion draws me onto the porch, and I lean against the door to feel its energy. As I still my breathing to listen carefully for the essence of this grand old lady, slowly there registers to my hyper-focused brain a gentle creaking followed by soft, shuffling footsteps to my right. I turn slowly to face the Victorian ogre.

I am not disappointed.

He looks as old and worn as the house, tall and broad, with old-fashioned red and white muttonchops. The butterflies in my stomach I attribute to nerves from his size. I hold out my hand to introduce myself.

"Ayuh. You're hired. Follow me."

It takes me a moment to realize that he's not about to touch my hand, and then another to conclude, from his frozen posture, that I must move away from the door before I can follow him inside. He unfreezes only after I step off the porch, shuffling faster when I catch the screen to prevent it from slamming.

History unreeals before me as I wander through the house behind this man who has hired me without introducing himself. Victorian furniture abounds: highboys, lowboys, fainting couches, a floral settle, and an ornate Victrola fully free of dust. Photographs lining the hallway speak of generations of Victorian ogres and wives in unsmiling black and white.



Open kitchen shelving displays delicate bone china with an elaborate floral design and products I recognize from my grandma's generation and vintage signs from antiquing.

We pass through the house silently, into a built-on back porch, incongruously shed-like, with large windows and stacks of test tubes in special carriers on the deep window sill. This is either where he conducts his mad scientist experiments, or he runs a small business, and I find myself unconsciously crossing my fingers for the latter. As I step farther into the room, boxes lined up in the corner come into view at the end of a long, tall bookcase, and I exhale.

Oh, his mouth is moving.

"...and then Eliza can show you exactly how it's packed and where it's shipped."

"Oh! Eliza?"

"My sister."

"Sister?" Is *he* not the talented artist?

"It's her business."

"Oh. Did she draw the sign?"

"No, that was me."

"It's lovely work."

He shrugs. "It's just an ad."

"True, but the calligraphy is beautiful."

He nods, a brusque dip of the head.

"I gotta go take down the sign. You can wait in this room for Eliza."

"Wait!" I yell after him as he retreats through the house.

"Wait in that room or Eliza will be mad!" He yells back at me.

I try to spy wildlife in the forest beyond the enclosed garden. From inside the porch, I'm high enough to view the layout of meandering, waist-high raised beds sprouting glorious blooms in colors matching the advert sign. Between the immense garden and the forest sits an actual shed, from which emanates a cacophony of insectoid sounds.

"What is your name?"

I startle and face a slightly smaller, sisterly version of the Victorian ogre.

"Hezzie, short for Hesalea."

"I don't like your hair down. It's uncomely for a young lady."

Observing her Victorian updo, I retort, "You do realize it's the 21<sup>st</sup> century?"

"Yes, I do...Hesalea."

Touché.

"If you're to work for me, I won't stand sass."

We stare at each other for a couple of beats. She opens a drawer of the sideboard and hands me a giant ivory comb.

"I'm asking you nicely to put up your hair."

I swirl my long, dark hair on top of my head and poke in the comb to hold it. She nods the brusque dip nod, obviously a family trait.

"You don't ask me how I come to be in your office?"

"I imagine Lonnie left you here to start work. He's

recovered the advert. You would not be my choice, but I respect Lonnie's word."

"Your garden is impressive."

"It's necessary."

"Such an elegant layout."

"It's convenient."

Eliza pulls a gallon container from a low shelf, a set of six test tubes in a wooden holder from the window ledge, and funnels from a drawer of the sideboard.

"Have a sit."

I take a seat at the farm table in the center of the room. After placing all the materials on the table, she sits across from me, pushes everything close to me, and begins my on-the-job training. She directs me to carefully pour the dye, a powder so fine it appears to be liquid, through a funnel to fill a test tube. I suspect this may be the extent of my job. On my first attempt, my breath causes the fine dust of the dye to fly away from the test tube.

"You must be careful! This is an immensely time-intensive product. It takes an unbelievable quantity of materials to make an insignificant amount of dye. We cannot waste a speck of it. Stop breathing!"

I learn to hold my breath while filling a test tube, and then hold out the full product. She plops a cork stopper in it and I nearly drop it. The shattering of the test tube would be the perfect catalyst for completing her transformation to a fairy-tale witch. I praise myself silently for stifling a grin. I gently place the test tube in the stand with its brothers.

Eliza talks rapidly as she flies out the back door. I concentrate on her figure as I follow her, listening to her explanation of dye-making. I will never remember which plant gives what color, only that the red comes from the whatchamacallit beetles, the clickers housed in the shed. Grasping it as I listen, I would not be able to even restate it. I must confess that I am indeed a paid monkey of this sophisticated creative.

"You are so much more than that, Hesalea," my dear husband proclaims when I announce my paid monkey position. He kisses me and swings me around, whispering in my ear, "I love you, crazy woman."

When I return on Monday, Lonnie greets me at the porch with the family nod and a quiet, "Heya." He feels safer somehow, though obviously as large. I suspect a smile is all he can handle as I let myself inside. Eliza has not filled me in on the logistics of the business, so I'm contemplating Lonnie's responsibility as I enter the workroom.

Test tube sets await me on the work table for dispersal of the gallon jugs of various dyes next to them. Work orders sit in front of my chair. Around 10 a.m., Lonnie ambles in to check on me.

"Gotcha. 15 orders. Good. Gonna post 'em now, so I'll be in town."

"Okay, Lonnie."

I was correct in my assessment of his shyness. Speaking

to him causes him to freeze. I stack the packages in the mail tote and hold it out to him. About fifteen seconds later, he grips the tote, gives the nod, and off he goes. Now I know his main duty is posting. I shall remember to be gentle with him.

Left alone again, I continue filling orders. An hour later, sounds issue from the kitchen. A half hour afterwards, a delectable aroma starts me salivating. I keep working.

When I suspect I can no longer stand it, Lonnie comes in and announces, "I made us savory pastries for lunch." The family nod releases me for the feast. Every bite is delightful. I taste turkey, cream cheese, roasted peppers, caramelized onions, chives, dill, and tarragon. I want Lonnie to adopt me.

Still high from the culinary treat, I good-naturedly debate cleanup with Lonnie, who concedes to my drying the dishes and stacking them on the counter for him to store. He is never within two feet of me.

My days become a gratifying routine, with the meditative hum of the whatchamacallit beetles. Eliza tends the garden, disappearing into the "clicker" shed intermittently. Lonnie posts the orders and creates gastronomical delights daily. It's so pretty here. I've seen fox and deer on my walk into the forest, and a variety of birds around the garden. The flowers bring butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds.

Dear hubby and I are getting along famously, as his attitude toward my peculiar position shifts from anxiety towards appreciating the extra income and a contented wife. When Christmas decorations appear everywhere, we discuss the new people in my life, deliberating token gifts versus real gifts, when I don't know them well enough to determine what those real gifts might be, yet wish to acknowledge their presence in my life.

Lonnie invites me for Thanksgiving. Because the invite does not include my husband, I politely decline. My parents are dead and his are awful, so we celebrate holidays with each other.

Eliza enters from the garden as I am declining Lonnie's offer. Her eyes shoot laser fire at him, and he scuttles away. The lasers are winding down as she sits and focuses her gaze on me.

"It's wise to stick to your work here. You're a good employee."

"Thank you."

"It's nearly the end of your shift. You can go ahead if you want, no penalty. I can imagine you're a bit unsettled."

"I'm okay."

"Still." She doesn't move or blink.

"Okay." And home I go.

Before dear hubby and I conclude our weeks-long gift debate for a final decision, I receive a gift from Lonnie, a notebook of original poetry, luscious and heart-wrenching, reigniting dear hubby's apprehension.

"Hezzie, the man is in love with you."

"He's my employer."

"That doesn't preclude the possibility. You're extremely

lovable."

"Why, thank you, sir." I give him a quick smooch, but alas, it does not turn his frown upside down.

"What do you really know about them?"

"I feel as though we've had this conversation before."

"You're too trusting, Hezzie."

"It's one of my better qualities. It translates directly to my trustworthiness." Smooch. Smooch. "Okay, okay. I won't smile at him, or encourage him in any way."

"Take your lunch."

"You're crazy! Who would trade his cooking for mine?"

"It's intimate cooking for someone."

"He's been making lunch for months for us, including his sister."

"Who eats alone in another room?"

"Yeah, she's a strange duck. But it would be weird, rude, to stop sharing his lunches."

"Love poetry, Hezzie?"

I quit cold turkey, citing weight gain, untrue since I walked to work, but Lonnie couldn't know.

Before Christmas, he is dead.

"Did Lonnie give you something?" Eliza asks me upon my arrival after Christmas break. Her voice startles me from the dark parlor.

"What? When?"

"For Christmas."

"Yes, a very early gift. Why?"

Eliza slouches on the deep purple Victorian settle.

"I should have known. I should have seen it coming."

"Known what? Seen what? Eliza, are you okay? Where's Lonnie?"

"You're a kind girl. It doesn't even matter that you're pretty. Lonnie never spoke to anyone but family. I thought it was a good thing. I was deadly wrong." Slight sniffing is covered by a cough obviously faked.

"Really? He talked to me the first day I came, told me he'd done the beautiful calligraphy on the sign. Eliza, where is Lonnie?"

I sit next to her, not close enough to touch, unsure how to comfort her, unsure why she needs comforting.

"He's gone."

She jerks her head toward me.

"What did you say?"

"You haven't told me where Lonnie is. I don't know what's wrong."

"The calligraphy?"

"Yes, the sign. Eliza..."

She jumps up, grabs my hands, jerks me off the settle, and drags me out of the house, repeating, "You've got to go! You've got to go now!"

After she shoves me off the porch, she apologizes and flutters her hands at me to keep moving. I look back when I reach the edge of the clearing, and she flutters her hands at me again.



Oh, shut up, husband! You don't know any more than I do.

A light snow falls as I walk home. Eliza had erected a portable greenhouse, what she called a hothouse, over the raised beds. I'd been looking forward to this first snow of the season, so late. I'd wanted to see it cover the greenhouse, which was actual glass panels, promising to be so pretty, now gone, like Lonnie. What did she mean he's gone? I wonder if she wants his present returned.

All day I'm distracted. I try to read, to write, to play with the cats. I hug them constantly throughout the day, receiving only ungrateful, growly meows. I watch the snow, so delicate, but taking a walk in it would make me feel worse.

Dear hubby arrives home early. The front door opening unexpectedly startles me. He drops his briefcase, runs to me, and hugs me so tightly that my feet lift off the floor and I struggle to breathe.

Then he caresses my face, babbling, "I'm so glad you're here. I love you," amongst other sweet nothings and gratitudes, fading to murmurs in my ear as he hugs me and pets me. It's agonizing to wait for the news that has brought on all this emotion, but I must wait for him to gather himself.

Finally, my love catches his breath and wipes his eyes. He smooches me once more and pets my hair before he speaks. "My friend Arvin, you know, the nurse? He was off, so we had a late lunch, and he said a guy came into the ER Christmas Eve, described him as a throwback to the Victorian era, a gigantic, ancient ogre with red and white muttonchops. Said he'd OD'd on flora; his words, not mine. There cannot possibly be two aged, Victorian, ginger ogres."

My body processes the news ahead of my brain, so that tears flow freely before I mumble, "Lonnie's dead? Was it an accident?"

"I'm sorry, babe. I don't know." I need the hug this time.

"Did you stay home because of the snow?" I nearly affirm his assumption. Instead, I quell my sob hiccups, wipe my eyes, take a deep breath, and share my news.

"Eliza was not working when I arrived." An ugly thought hurts my brain.

"The notebook. Eliza didn't know he wrote poetry for me. Were you right? Am I to blame?" A wail rises from my heart to my lips as the guilt settles into my bones.

"Shh...of course not. There was something wrong with him."

"I stopped having lunch with him. That hurt him."

"It doesn't matter. It was the right thing to do. He knew you were married. It's tragic, but you didn't cause it. Okay?"

"Okay." My heart hurts. I entered their lives a mere seven months ago and now one of them is gone.

Dead.

Not wishing to intrude on Eliza's grief, I remain at home, understanding her desire to be rid of me. Yet I can't stop thinking about her. Despite my love's assurances, I feel my part in the tragic end of the highly sensitive creative and it

pains my whole person. Time taunts me more than ever now.

It's snowing again. I kiss the cats and walk in the snow in an attempt to let go, chilling my fevered mind. It will be a year in this little town come February. As beautiful as it was in the summer, I hold a greater appreciation for its winter loveliness. The library owl, perched on the roof, overlooking the intersection, whitens with the snowfall, coming more alive with each layer.

The library! Always a haven to lose myself in the joyous mélange of stories, but possibly a place of hidden historians. Eliza's is a longstanding family in the little town. I never even questioned their current isolation. No one said anything when I mentioned working for her.

Hush, husband! Don't you "Miss Oblivious" me!

I'm asking a librarian. Miss Somerset smiles at my entrance. Dear hubby teases that she's as old as dirt. I'm laying odds that she will lighten my heart, or at least enlighten me.

"Good morning, Miss Somerset."

"Good morning, Hezzie. Can I help you find something?"

"Actually, I have a special request for information."

"Yes, dear?"

"You know I worked for Eliza Johansson?"

"Oh, yes, such a horrible shame about Lonnie. I can't imagine how Eliza carries on, after all the tragedies in her life."

"What do you mean?"

"I've said too much, dear. They're a very private family, not to mention the benefactor of our library. So I must respect their privacy."

"They support the library?"

"Much more than support. Their family is the reason we're the biggest library per capita west of the Mississippi. It's the only library I know with no volunteers. Everyone is an employee, from Head Librarian, that's me, to the Children's Storyteller."

"Wow! I would love to work here."

"Are you no longer employed with Eliza?"

"Looks like no. Her business grew just enough to need help. I can't imagine her hiring two non-family employees. With Lonnie gone, it became too challenging to have a stranger in her home."

"Well, I'll keep you in mind, dear."

"Thank you, Miss Somerset."

Well, that didn't go as expected.

Wait!

"Miss Somerset, I would like to look at the history of the town. Would you get me started on newspaper archives?"

Brilliant!

Thanks, my precious husband.

"Of course, dear. Follow me."

As I look through the digitized collection of the local newspaper, I'm finding no mention of the Johansson family, astonishing for such a prominent benefactor. I scroll slowly

for hours, the computer's flickering giving me a headache.

A tiny article deep inside the paper from 50 years previous nearly knocks me off my chair. I read it three times before fully comprehending.

Do I tell dear hubby? One year into marriage is not the best time to begin keeping secrets. He was right. I should listen to him. I close everything and log out of my guest pass. Now to keep it together past Miss Somerset.

No crazy eyes!

I will speak with you later, my love.

The Head Librarian catches my eye and waves me over.

"All finished and logged out?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you for your assistance. The town's history is quite interesting."

I scurry home, with the agonizing knowledge that I cannot share my news with dear hubby for another three hours. By the time he arrives, I have cleaned the house, finished the laundry, brushed all five cats, and made dinner, which simmers on the stove. I am on round two, cat three of brushing, when I hear his key in the lock.

Holding myself back while he removes and houses his accoutrements requires all of my concentration.

And then...

I hug him around the neck and burst into tears.

He pets my hair and whispers in my ear, "Whatever it is, we'll get through it."

"I know, I know." I'm entering the ugly, sobbing stage, complete with hiccups.

"You were right." I repeat between hiccups, "You were right."

"I know."

"Ha!" I run to the bathroom to wash my face. The smell of dinner draws us both to the kitchen. We serve ourselves and settle at the table.

"Is this a dinner topic?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Excellent! So tell me what's upset you."

"I went for a walk in the snow."

"Surely the snow didn't frighten you, my love?"

"Stop! This is serious."

He cedes through hand gestures to continue.

"I decided to go to the library."

"The library...?"

"...was not frightening. What I found at the library is horrifying."

"Really? At the library?"

"Yes. Can you imagine?"

"I'm waiting for the part where I'm right."

"I've waited all afternoon to tell you and now feel hesitant. It's so awful."

"It must be. I do notice that the house looks fabulous and the cats are glossy."

"Thank you, love." And with a deep breath, I continue, "Lonnie Johansson killed his parents."

Dear hubby's fork hits the floor.

"What?" The fork remains on the floor.

"Fifty years ago. I read it in a tiny article in the local paper, strangely the only mention of the Johansson family I could find."

"Why? How? What was he doing out amongst non-murderers?"

"The article stated that he used firecrackers to kill them in their sleep, with no further elaboration, or explanation of motive. I read that he was sent to an asylum for the criminally insane in Massachusetts. The strangest part of the article is the typo of his name as Donnie."

"Donnie? That's a weird typo. Those letters are on opposite sides of the keyboard."

"That's what I thought. Seems as though they should know his name."

"Maybe this was the town's way of distancing themselves from him?"

He picks up his fork and leans into the sink.

"I cannot believe you were in that house," he says as he gazes out the window over the sink into the snowfall. His voice lowers a register. "I can't believe you were alone with him."

"I can't believe it was the same person. He was so gentle and kind."

"Not to his parents. When did he get out of the asylum?"

He turns, raises an eyebrow.

"I'm not asking Eliza!"

"No, no, of course not. That wouldn't be proper."

"Not to mention futile. She doesn't answer questions."

"She's all alone out there in that big house. Do you think she feels some relief at the demise of her parents' murderer?"

"He was still her brother. She was protective of him."

He takes my hands, pulls me up into an embrace, and carries me upstairs. "I, however, am overwhelmed with relief that you are safe."

Eliza preys on my mind. I don't know her financial situation and can only speculate on her emotional state. By the weekend, I convince my love to check on her with me, expecting that she will be better able to maintain decorum if I am accompanied. He insists on driving, though the winter day is mild. After he places the car in "park," he sighs and faces me with inquiring eyes.

"Let's go," I exclaim.

Hand in hand, we walk through the forest. Having never seen the house before, dear hubby is agog at the reminiscence of the genteel splendor belied by the faded facade. The aura of old money washes over us, causing our hearts and hands to flutter. Such a different life from ours. It reeks of exponential sorrow. How I missed that on first sight is astonishing to me now, and guilt again wraps around me like another layer of clothing.

A thoughtful husband grabs my hand to restrain me when I reach for the door knob.



"I've always entered freely," I explain.

"Things have changed." A chill enters my heart and spreads throughout my body and mind, emotionally freezing me.

I step back and knock.

No response.

After two more rounds, we agree to proceed. There's no temperature change entering the house. An unpleasant scent furrows our brows. I lead the way through the house to my former workroom. It appears untouched since my departure, quiet organization exuding an air of abandonment. As we head deeper into the house, the hint of decay grows more solid. We pass the sitting room and continue down the hall to the stairs.

"It's like a museum," he whispers.

"Eliza?" I call softly.

My voice, our nervousness, and the smell increase as we ascend the stairs. I've not been up here. Our pace slows the closer we get to the top.

"Eliza, are you up here?"

We are now holding our scarves over our noses. The stillness speaks of more than the winter day, our footsteps clanging in our ears, echoing throughout the upstairs hall.

Espying floral wallpaper in the first bedroom on the left encourages me. If she's injured or hurt, unable to reply to my entreaties, then our visit of compassion, and I confess, curiosity, transforms into one of rescue.

The smell could be gangrene, vomit, possibly a dead mouse in the wall, creating in me a desire for a more seasonal weather pattern. The temperature is not low enough to mask it.

Eliza lies on her side, facing the opposite wall. I rush to let her know she is saved, shaking off my husband's hands and words of caution. Had I listened, he would have witnessed with me the horror that caused him to hesitate at my expression.

It's Lonnie. His toes are missing. Large pruning shears I recognize from Eliza's use are pressed closed between his knee, the blades having sliced off his fingers, all conscientiously lined up for one snap.

"Hezzie! Come now!" I run to him without thinking.

With his face averted, my love leads me out of Lonnie's bedroom. I dash into the facing bedroom. No Eliza. Onto the next room, but I'm snatched at the door.

"We must go call the police."

"You lied about Lonnie."

"No. My friend had no reason to lie. I can't explain this, but there is no deceit between us."

"Then help me find Eliza."

A huge, lengthy sigh, then, "Alright, Hezzie."

In the third bedroom of the four on this level, we find her. She is splayed across her bed, blindly staring at a corner of the ceiling. Her fingers and toes are scattered across the floor. We dare not enter the room for fear of stepping on a

piece of her. A meandering swath of blood tells an ugly story.

"She struggled."

"In many ways."

Whispers.

Why so many decades later? Was I a catalyst?

"You can accept no blame for this."

I look at him, astonished.

"She knew him." This is no explanation to me.

"He was her brother."

"She put you in danger." This I cannot deny.

"Let's go."

The day remains unpleasantly warm for January, but gray with a sense of impending storms. We drive home slowly, in silence, neither wishing to invoke the gruesome scene we had just witnessed, the horrific scent still clinging to our nostrils. The police dispatch a unit to the Johansson house and a unit to our home. I'm positive that we could not have expressed properly the horror awaiting them.

Upon arrival, the two officers shower us with compassion, assuring us of guilt-free association, apologizing for the experience that we know will never leave us, before performing the proper protocol "as a formality." We are separated to provide unique but corresponding accounts, then fingerprinted, a new procedure for both of us.

"Officers, I don't understand something."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I believed Lonnie Johansson passed before Christmas."

"Yes, ma'am, another tragic chapter in the Johansson family saga."

"It doesn't make sense."

"What exactly is your question, ma'am?"

"How is he now in their home?"

"Ah, ma'am, had we known Donnie was in that house, living in our town, we would have returned him to Danvers Asylum. Money buys unfathomable lies. We're glad you're okay, ma'am."

"Donnie...?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"He killed his parents. I found exactly one article."

"Seems they didn't fully purge as planned. Like I said, unfathomable lies."

"Donnie was the artist."

"Yes, ma'am, beautiful work. The criminally insane tend to be brilliant or highly creative."

"Officer, I'm exhausted."

"Yes, ma'am. If there's anything you need, call us. This was a long time coming. Our little town can breathe again."

"Goodnight, officers."

"Goodnight, ma'am; sir."

I am in on the secret.

We.

We are in on the secret.

And the secret is twins. ■

# Subscribe Today!

## BENEFITS TO SUBSCRIBING

- Reviews and ratings of new releases
  - Discover new authors
    - Short stories
  - Author interviews including many of your favorites
  - Much, Much More!
- Available at:

**AMAZON**

**BARNES & NOBLE**

or Subscribe to the

**ELECTRONIC VERSION AT**

**[www.SuspenseMagazine.com](http://www.SuspenseMagazine.com)**

RATES (Electronic): 1 Year: \$24.00/ 2 Years: \$48.00

*"Suspense Magazine nicely fills a long-vacant niche for readers of this popular genre. If you like a good old-fashioned whodunit, grab a copy and get the latest scoop on all your favorite authors, current books, and upcoming projects."*

~Wendy Corsi Staub, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

*"Suspense Magazine is chock full of stunning artwork, intriguing fiction, and interviews. It's a winner!"*

~Tess Gerritsen, International Bestselling Author





Horn's rich characterizations and setting, sparkling magic, and creepy villains bolster the narrative, and his focus on women as major players is particularly refreshing. The terrifying conclusion will have readers looking forward to the next installment."

—Publishers Weekly

"Palpable descriptions of magic both enchant and disturb . . . as Horn expertly weaves disparate story lines into a breathless, enthralling ending."

—Booklist



Coming January 2018 from 47North

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE



"Concise. Informative. Topical. If you want to know the latest from the world of suspense, then read *Suspense Magazine*."

—Steve Berry, *New York Times* bestselling author of "The Paris Vendetta"

## [www.SuspenseMagazine.com](http://www.SuspenseMagazine.com)

Named one of the  
100 BEST BOOK & MAGAZINE MARKETS FOR WRITERS  
by *Writer's Digest*