

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

**SUMMER 2021**

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with Robert Dugoni*

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*Cross-Genre Challenges*

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**"GUARANTEED TO KEEP READERS BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL  
WELL INTO THE WEE HOURS."**

*-Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*

# NOTHING GOOD HAPPENS AFTER MIDNIGHT

A SUSPENSE MAGAZINE ANTHOLOGY

## JEFFERY DEAVER

WITH ADDITIONAL  
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SHANNON KIRK •  
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PUBLISHING



### CREDITS

John Raab  
President & Chairman

Shannon Raab  
Creative Director

Abigail Peralta  
Vice President, Editorial Dept.

Amy Lignor  
Editor

### Contributors

Susan Santangelo  
Kaye George  
Weldon Burge  
Ashley Winters  
D.P. Lyle M.D.  
J.M. LeDuc  
David Ingram  
Anthony J. Franze  
Barry Lancet  
Leslie Borghini  
Mary Lignor  
Jeff Ayers  
Joseph Badal  
Dennis Palumbo  
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Patrick Whitehurst  
Kirsche Romo  
Bailey Day  
Jaime Lynn Hendricks  
Patricia Wilson

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Hello, everyone, and thanks for diving into the cool reviews, interviews, and more that make up this *sizzling* summer issue.

I thought I'd talk a little about writing and how to get your kids involved in the creative process. Some of the greatest series in the history of books are categorized under YA, like the forever famous *Harry Potter*, *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, Judy Blume's *Fudge* books and many, many more. In a world where boredom can set

in quickly, reading books like this to them (or sharing with them) will hopefully get their imagination going and exciting them to the point where they want to create their own awesome world. We see it daily—if we have our eyes open—kids making up stories, realms, and so much more. They might take their favorite stuffed animal and put them in a fantasy world, setting them up for an unforgettable adventure. One of the best movies explaining this would be *The Pagemaster* (1994), with Christopher Lloyd and Macaulay Culkin.

In the movie, a young kid (Culkin) is afraid of almost everything. One day when a storm comes up, he races into the library for cover only to discover Christopher Lloyd, giving him his first library card. What Culkin doesn't realize at the time is this is his gateway to a world he has never seen. Once the movie is over, Culkin is hooked; he can't stop reading and his life is changed forever.

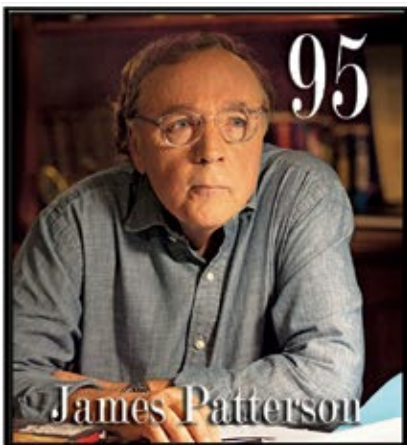
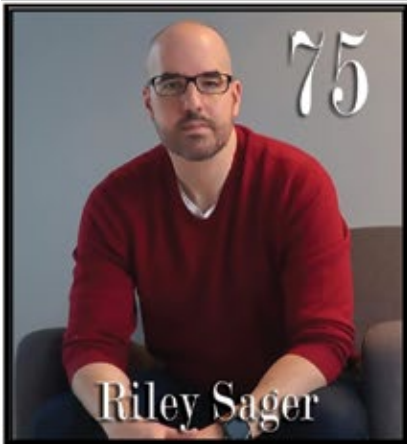
This is a great parallel to what many kids experience when they are able to explore the subjects that interest *them*. Too many times we force children to read books that are deemed "classics" only to end up boring them to the point where they never want to read again. I think that any type of reading is a good thing; if that means your child is fascinated in comic books, let them read all the comics they can. I believe that by fostering their love for reading, we will end up raising a generation who might never have even thought about writing, becoming incredible authors who will inspire even more kids. If we treated the arts with the same respect and focus we treat science, we will have a world full of creativity and beauty. Loving the arts is more than just books or paintings, it's about love for all things beautiful. The trees, the flowers, the rivers, the oceans, the mountains, everything that we can see that is not man-made.

Kids are still and will always remain the future, and we need them to continue to strive to expand the arts in our communities. Would the world be a better place without museums? Without libraries? Without music? Hell, NO! But too many times we put these things on the back burner instead of putting them front and center where they belong. In the end, keep your child's eyes open and let the imagination they have inside of them, come out. The world is waiting to see the magic they can create!

John Raab  
CEO/Publisher  
Suspense Magazine ■



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# *Sounds of* SILENCE

By Townsend Walker

The night was dark, split only by a flash of sulfurous light. Frank died that night.

Happened on the corner of Bank and 4th, in that nether land no one can ever find. He bled out; no scream, only silence.

Did he deserve it? Was it his fault? It was, and it wasn't, depending on who you want to believe. Frank, but he's not talking; the killer, and he's not talking. But Frank's friends and family may have known what he was up to, and the person who hired the killer certainly did. After all, the killer only saw him beneath the aura of a streetlamp on that cold, dank night, and had to ask his name before he pulled the trigger. It was over quickly, Frank didn't suffer.

So, who wanted Frank dead?

That's what C.J. and Al wanted to know. The detectives had been partners for twenty years, first on the beat, then in homicide. Al, sausaged into his pants and jacket, announced himself with wide ties in puce and yellow and a cackle for a laugh. C.J. was trim, tailored, a watcher, often unseen, and he liked it that way.

The medical examiner said Frank had been dead for maybe an hour or two before someone noticed the pool of blood and figured that maybe he wasn't sleeping it off. That passersby would leave some guy, well-dressed—Brioni, Patek, and a diamond signet—lying in the gutter for a couple hours, made Al grumble. "This neighborhood, not a place I'd wanna live."

"But you wouldn't be robbed," said C.J.

Driver's license in his pocket said Frank lived at 113 Jane Street, so Al and C.J. hiked over the six blocks, pulled their collars up against the frigid wind going arctic as they wound closer to the river. The Jane Hotel was at 113. Some history there, where the survivors of the *Titanic* stayed when they were brought back to New York, and many years later where the subterranean theatre saw the opening of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," the breakthrough musical about a transgender punk rock girl from East Berlin.

House security, Jimmy, who might have been a *Titanic* survivor himself, thin, bent, and water-wrinkled, took them up to Frank O'Keefe's room. But he didn't have just a room; he had a whole floor. Frank's grandfather was one of the *Titanic* survivors, never moved out, no place to go, whole

family went down with the ship. He started in the shoe trade, then got into diamonds and it was diamonds he was holding in '29. Frank's dad liked to fly and in the late 1930s bought a lot of stock in airplane companies and bought the family more space at The Jane Hotel. This was what Jimmy told Al and C.J.

Al opened the door. First words out of his mouth, "Holy Jesus, do you believe this?"

By God, it was a funhouse. Along the left wall was a bank of shape distorting mirrors, simultaneously making Al seven feet tall, Jimmy, three, and C.J. twelve. They looked down a long, long hallway with red and white square tiles on the floor and ceiling. Al lumbered down toward the door. After four steps he crashed into it. A left turn, and the three of them were into a rolling barrel. They couldn't stand. The barrel had them on their tails to the accompaniment of cackling spinning clowns. After a forever, they managed to crawl out on hands and knees.

"Stop," Al said, "Stop, we're being played."

"By a dead man," said C.J.

"A dead man?" said Jimmy.

"That's silence you're hearing." C.J. told Jimmy how they found Frank lying in the street.

"That's horrible," said Jimmy. He put his hands over his face, kept them there for a minute or two, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. "Give me a moment, fellows."

The detectives figured Frank must have a regular apartment somewhere up here and the only way to find it was to go on. They took a step forward and the floor fell out from under them. A step more and it rose, another step and the floor tilted right. On their butts one more time.

"You sure we shouldn't go back?" Al asked.

"Let's try this door." That led the three into a pit with hundreds of colored plastic balls. They tried to walk, but sunk and couldn't find a bottom, tried to swim, dog paddle, breaststroke, and finally crawled through the balls to the other side. Hung on the edge exhausted, then heaved themselves out on the deck.

"Sweet Jesus," Al cried, "Where's my pistol?"

"You want to go back for it?"

"Shit, no. We'll seal this room off and let forensics have



fun. Besides, I still got the ankle carry.”

Another door opened to a large disk, they jumped on it, scrambled to the center post, but it spun, faster and faster until gravity flung them against the wall—padded, fortunately. They crawled into the hall and collapsed. They weren’t in there long when the passage began to close around them. “I got a real feeling Frank doesn’t like visitors,” Al said.

They staggered into a room of mirrors, only mirrors, a maze of mirrors, at all angles, floor and ceiling with people talking, people hearing, people writing, only the scratches, beeps and whispers heard, tumbled, couldn’t tell when one wall started. Al managed to get on his feet, pulled C.J. up, then lost sight of him.

“Where’s Jimmy?”

“Jimmy?”

They saw him, his blood rather, in the corner of the room, tilted now so the blood reflected off and onto the mirrors, making the room glow and glimmer blood: deep, bubbly, sparkly, red blood.

“Mother of God, C.J., what the fuck are we going to do?”

“What you mean, what are we going to do? We’re getting the fuck out of here.”

“I’m shooting my way out,” Al screamed.

C.J. shouted, “Are you kidding? Do not fire. I repeat, do not fire. I do not know where you are. You don’t know where I am.”

“You ever see *Lady of Shanghai*?” C.J. asked. “Three people in a mirror maze, two guns shoot at reflections. One guy walks out, the one the dead ones were aiming at.”

They smashed glass, and smashed glass, and smashed glass. Ten minutes, sweating, stinking sweat dripping down, feet slipping, listening...sound, a hollow sound, a breakthrough. Another maze, a goddamn maze painted Easter egg pink, yellow, blue and green.

“C.J., I’m going to be sick.”

“Calm, stay calm, and turn away from me, you oaf.”

“Okay, so how we gonna get out of here?” Al asked

“Tremoux’s Algorithm. I’d explain it to you, but you wouldn’t understand, so just follow me.”

After marking paths once and twice, they wormed through the maze and arrived in a bedroom. A surprise after the funhouse. A bedroom from anywhere, except according to C.J., the furniture was a Frank Lloyd Wright design: Prairie style.

A second surprise. On the bed was Frank. The Frank that, an hour ago, was lying in the street. Frank was laid out on his bed, cleaned up, new suit, embalmed, a pan flute on his chest creating a song that people would never share, people would never hear, and slowly, slowly music crept through the space.

“There’s another door, must be.”

“Behind you, C.J.!”

C.J. turned to the left; a sword ripped through his right sleeve. “Where did that come from?” He hit the floor.

“That wall behind you.”

“That painting of a conquistador?” C.J. looked up. “I

don’t see a sword.”

“That’s because he flung it at you.”

“We’re out of here.”

Curtains. Window. Shutters. Open on to a FDNY ladder truck.

Five thousand people, could have been more, in the street.

When Al and C.J. got to the bottom of the ladder, their lieutenant was livid. “Where the hell have you been the last twelve hours?”

“That long? Oh my God, that damn funhouse.”

“Yup, that long.”

“Be delighted to take you through, Lieutenant. In fact, you gotta come up anyway,” Al said. “We got Frank all laid out. And house security, Jimmy, all bled out. Not a pretty sight.”

“So, I send you two out to find why this guy Frank is dead, and you end up with another corpse, a guy who was with you.”

“Actually, we lost him in the pit of balls.”

“In the what?”

“You know, like in a funhouse.”

“That’s where Al lost his pistol,” C.J. said.

“Tell me there’s no connection to Jimmy,” said the lieutenant.

“Gun never went off.”

“We’d heard it,” said Al.

“Well, we probably would have heard it,” C.J. shrugged.

The lieutenant, as the crowd now inched closer, assumed command posture and tenor. “Officers, we are going back up this ladder immediately. Let’s move.”

“Wait, if it’s been twelve hours, what did the M.E. say about the body?” C.J. asked. “She beat us to the scene. How did Frank get out of her hands and get into that bed up there?”

The lieutenant pulled out his phone and punched a number, listened for a long while. He turned to C.J. and Al. “M.E. says no mystery to be solved. Frank died of a gunshot to the head, at close range. 9mm pistol, silencer striations on the bullet. They released him to his brother, or at least a guy who looked like the vic and had a driver’s license saying he was Sean O’Keefe.”

“You guys, find the killer. Forensics will take this funhouse apart.”

Al piped up, “Don’t forget to look for Jimmy, and my gun.” Then he turned to C.J. “What say we start our search for the killer in that coffee shop across the street, strategize over some coffee and Danish.”

They hoovered their food, sat back, and C.J. pulled out his notebook. “So, what don’t we know?”

1. How did Sean know his brother was dead?
2. Where is Sean now?
3. How did the body get into the hotel room if the only entrance was through the funhouse?
4. Or, was it?



5. What did Frank do to get himself offed in the first place?

Back in the lobby of The Jane Hotel, the detectives heard a rattling cough, then from around the corner a wraith-like figure moved toward them. "Jimmy, what the fuck are you doing here, you were dead."

"Nah, that blood's part of the funhouse. Anyhow, I fell and you two made such a racket hacking the mirrors, you couldn't hear me."

C.J. went over and put his arm around Jimmy. "Need to talk, Jimmy."

They retired to the Old Rose, marbled bar, tables, floor and walls with sketches of Pan on the walls. "Alberto, a couple of your specials for me and my friends," Jimmy called.

The drinks arrived and were swallowed in a gulp. Jimmy started, "To lay it out for you guys, I know this. Our late deceased Frank had a doctorate in archaeology from Yale. Trips all over Egypt and Syria and the Andes looking for stuff. One day I ask him, 'Find anything?' He looks at me, a broad grin spreading out to his ears. 'Oooh, yeah.' 'Like what?' I say. 'This music out of Peru, songs that can't be shared. Try as we will, we cannot decipher the musical notation, it's on strings, even though we have the flutes and panpipes they played.'"

"A real help," Al quipped.

"Peruvian flutes, maybe we need Simon and Garfunkel," C.J. piped.

"Hey," Jimmy said. "Listen, a couple of shady types were hovering around the front of the hotel the other day, looked Peruvian, though they could have been from Columbia or Ecuador."

"And you know this, how?"

"Dark complected, reddish tint, high cheek bones, flat noses, but I knew they were from Peru because they spoke Spanish with a Peruvian accent."

"And you would know that, how?" Al said.

Jimmy straightened up, "By living in Pisac, near Cusco, for nearly twenty years. I taught English and Spanish and arranged for Incan blankets to be sold in the States—New York, Frisco, Dallas, all over."

"So now you want us to believe you know nothing about our Frank, only met in the hall?" said Al and then broke into a Simon and Garfunkel song about flashing warning signs.

"What?"

C.J. explained, "Jimmy, what Al is saying is that you're coming down to the station with us. In official terms, 'you are a person of interest.'"

"Me? I don't even own a gun with a silencer."

"Who said he was shot with a gun with a silencer?"

Jimmy, now a bit flustered, "Why, one of you did. Al, I think."

"I didn't. We found that out only after we went through the funhouse, after you 'died.' Or was that a gambit to stay behind with the body?" Al said.

Down at the station, the desk officer announced, "Boys, the lieutenant wants a word."

The lieutenant leaned across his desk. "You'll want to know what we found on the corpse."

Al popped up, "Let me guess, a flute and strings with knots in them."

The lieutenant jumped up, "You boys mind readers, or something?"

"Well, our dead house security man is very much alive, lived in Peru, knows that our victim was an archaeologist researching Incan music. He's in the Green Room as we speak," C.J. said.

"I guarantee this guy was not killed for an old flute and strings with knots unless..."

"There is a tune that means something," C.J. added

"Very good, Detective, and we're sure Sean put them with the corpse, to be retrieved later." The lieutenant stood to his full five-foot-two command presence. "Find Sean O'Keefe!"

The detectives went to the Green Room. "Jimmy, tell us about Sean," said Al.

"I don't know no Sean."

"Yes, you do." Al slapped Jimmy hard to the back of his head.

Jimmy shrunk so low in his chair his head was below the back. "If you're going to be that way, I'll need some help."

"What kinda help?" Al asked.

"Protection. Look, Sean and Frank were concocting some scheme in Peru."

"That much we figured," C.J. said.

"I overheard them one night in the Old Rose, I was walking by, doing my rounds, they were speaking in Spanish. Frank was saying that the tune is the key to a fortune the Incas buried when the Spanish invaded. Supposedly, Pizzaro found only about half of what the Spaniard's native allies said was there."

"So, now we have Esau killing Abel over a mess of bullion?" C.J. asked, not truly expecting an answer.

Al explained it for Jimmy. "C.J. tries to be fancy sometimes. The question was: did Sean kill Frank because they figured out where the gold was and the only step left was digging it up? But Sean didn't want to share?"

\* \* \*

Finding Sean was not hard. He was lying beneath the halo of a neon sign in a gutter in front of Frenchette's Bistro at West Broadway and Moore. Again, one of those nether parts of the city where New Amsterdam and Manhattan cross the way to confusion. Sean took a bullet to the head from a 9mm, like Frank, silenced. The autopsy revealed his last meal was duck confit and an ile flottante.

Sean had moved uptown while Frank had stayed down, and had a floor in a high-rise at Riverside and 91st. A building from the 1920s that retained its dark, gloomy, original wood moulding in the lobby. Seems Sean had fancied it also. His apartment had not been touched since it was built. According to Sean's wife, Rosa, some fifteen years younger, he had gone



downtown to meet a business associate in preparation for a trip to Peru.

"You wouldn't happen to know the name of the person he was meeting?" Al asked.

"Jaime, I think he said, an old friend and an old friend of Frank...poor Frank, he was a good man. Sean, not so much. I think I married the wrong brother. Now, they are gone." She sat down, dabbed her eyes perfunctorily.

"Where might we find this Jaime?"

Rosa said he was at the hotel where the boys grew up. "He took care of Sean and Frank when they were little, and their parents jetted around the world."

"Have you ever met this Jaime?"

"He's a little man, old, not well, when he came to our wedding in Cusco three years ago."

"What was he like?"

"Quiet, words like raindrops, especially when he speaks Spanish."

C.J. and Al got up and walked to the door. "One last question, if you don't mind, Mrs. O'Keefe," C.J. said. "Have you ever been to Frank's apartment in The Jane Hotel?"

"Only once, Sean has...had bad memories in the hotel..."

"Anything unusual about Frank's apartment?"

"Nice, classic, I liked it. Not like here, all old and dark... Maybe now, I can remodel this one."

On the way back to the precinct. "You don't think our Jimmy was protecting someone, do you?" Al asked.

"Why would you think that? Coming into the apartment by way of the funhouse?"

The two barged into the lieutenant's office. "Urgent request. We need Jimmy here now. And we need an ethnomusicologist, pronto."

"You need an enthno-whatchamacallit, why? To find out where the gold is?"

C.J. related how Jimmy had practically raised Frank and Sean. Now while they lived in style, Jimmy still schlepped around the hotel. Jealousy?

The lieutenant said he'd send a couple of blues to pick up Jimmy and that forensics had taken the panpipes and strings off Frank's corpse.

C.J. hit DuckDuckGo and found Helen Whistler, an ethnomusicologist specializing in Peru and teaching in Austin, Texas. "Professor Whistler, I'm a detective with the New York Police Department and we're investigating two murders we think are tied to Incan music," C.J. said.

"How's that again?" the professor said.

"Well, we have two dead men, an ancient panpipe and some knotted strings. One of the dead men was an archaeologist; the other, his brother, a civil engineer."

Al cut in, "Jimmy's gone, flew the coop."

C.J.: "Shit...sorry, ma'am. Our prime suspect has skipped. Can you fly up to New York tonight?"

"It's that important?"

"Yes, all expenses paid, plus your consulting fee. After

you make arrangements, let me know when and where you arrive. We'll pick you up. Look for a white Bronco."

Next morning, C.J. was out at LGA expecting a woman, tall and honey blonde, and that's the one that waved to him from the curb.

At the precinct, the pan flute and strings were laid out on the table. "I've seen these before. But I'm not sure how long it will take to figure out what they mean."

The two left her alone and went about finding where Jimmy had gone. No one resembling Jimmy in the last forty-eight hours out of New York airports. No one out of Philly or Boston or Chicago. Then, bingo, a Delta flight from Reagan to Jorge Chavez the day before at three.

C.J. couldn't wait any longer and barged in on Helen.

"I got in touch with two colleagues at Harvard, George Unger and Miguel Mendoza, to interpret these strings. They're called khipus. I sent them a picture," she said.

"So, what do the strings say?" C.J. asked.

"To make it simple, it is the Incan form of writing—numbers, words, notes. The color of the string, the way the string is twisted, right or left, and the type of knot, all mean something," she said.

"Okay, good, but what do these strings say?" Al cut in.

"Hard to tell. It's not like there's a dictionary," she said. "The guys at Harvard and I are working full bore. You have any ideas what might be here?"

"Here's what we're thinking," C.J. said. "They may be musical notes that would give someone a clue about where Incan gold was hidden from the Spanish."

"Aha!" Holly said and got on the phone to Unger and Mendoza.

Three hours later, C.J. and Al heard flute music coming from the room Helen was tucked away in. They ran to the sound.

"Quiet," Helen said. "I've got the Harvard guys on the line."

"Our best guess is gold was buried under the Maras salt ponds in the Valle Sagrado. You can spell words using musical notes and the notes on the strings spell out 'salt' and 'valley' and 'gold.'"

"You're sure?" C.J. asked.

"Well, the notes could spell out other things, but nothing that works for why two guys were killed."

"By the way," Al said, "One of the guys was the archaeologist Frank O'Keefe."

"Oh my God," the professors exclaimed. "Not him."

"And his brother," said Al.

"This sounds like a gold rush gone bad," C.J. said. "Thank you, Professors, agradiseyki."

"What?"

"You think I spend all my time on the sports page? I've been learning Quechan."

The lieutenant walked in. "Find Jimmy!"

\* \* \*



They found him in Cusco, in the plaza, trying to breathe. His cancer growing. Al sat on one side of him, C.J. on the other. "A lot you didn't tell us, Jimmy."

Jimmy launched into a long tale of how he thought he'd raised two good men who became greedy, silent men, especially Sean. "He was the ringleader, always that way. Schemes, forever schemes, the latest—dig up hidden Incan gold and cart it away. Sean even had a fleet of drones lined up to move the gold into the Amazon forest."

"They figured it out from the panpipes and the khipus."

"And that's what you overheard in the Old Rose?" C.J. asked.

"Yup."

"So," Al said. "Who offed them?"

Jimmy coughed and coughed and coughed. "I'm not sure who ordered Frank's death, could be any number of people. Remember, he was all over Palmyra, in Syria on an archaeologic trek during the heat of the war. Lots of treasures to be found with the ancient baths and temples. I don't know what he picked up, but maybe ISIS or the Syrians were looking for him."

"That's very nice, Jimmy," Al said, "but hardly helpful."

"Maybe this will be more helpful," Jimmy said, "I'm acquainted with the guy that got the contract on Frank. I had him take out Sean."

"You what!" the detectives barked.

"Sean was going to tunnel under the salt ponds, ruin them forever, kill the livelihood of the people in the region. I could not let him do it. I could not. I have too many friends in the Valle Sagrado. Better the gold never be found. It would only bring trouble."

"You're right," C.J. said. "But Jimmy, we got a problem. You. You had a man killed."

"True. You can take me back, we can go to trial, but of course you'll have to find the guy who pulled the trigger to rat on me, and that would take some time, no? Or, you couldn't find me. And in six months, no one will find anything but my grave, and only if you know where to look."

Al looked at C.J. "You excuse us a minute, Jimmy?"

"Before you go," Jimmy said, "I'm curious, what did you think of our funhouse?"

"Your funhouse?" chorused Al and C.J.

"Something the boys and I built while their folks were away. They were gone so often, they told me to do whatever it took. I made it so elaborate so as to fill the hearts of kids who had no mother. It worked, I thought, for a time. In any event, it gave them professions. Frank was real good at finding stuff we needed. Sean was the engineer, put it together. We were a team."

Al and C.J. walked toward the cathedral, turned and waved to Jimmy, and left the plaza.

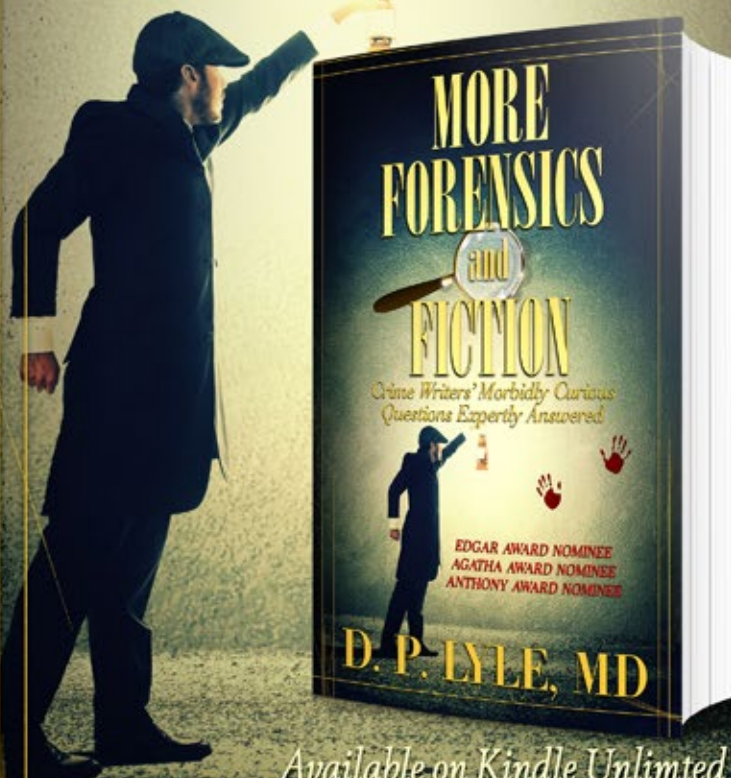
"I say we never found him," said Al.

"Who?" said C.J. ■

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# THE BOOK OF ACCIDENTS

By Chuck Wendig  
Press Photo Credit: Michelle Wendig



11

*Circles, Stovepipes, and the Strange Smell of Funnel Cake*

Fig's truck was a hellacious mess. Papers and fast-food wrappers. A toolbox in the second row seat. Couple coffee cups here and there. Soda bottles, too—wait, no, not soda. Kombucha.

"You drink kombucha?" Nate asked, a little surprised.

"I do."

"My wife, Maddie, drinks it sometimes. It always looks like a bottle of mop water with rotten coleslaw floating in it."

"That's the culture. The mother patch, or scoby."

"And you drink that?"

"I do."

"Does it taste good?"

"It's fine, just don't worry about it," Fig snapped. The pickup barreled down a windy back road. Old farms dotted the sprawling hills here. Ahead was Dark Hollow Lane, where the old Dark Hollow covered bridge sat—Fig pulled the truck down that narrow one-lane road. Finally Fig sighed and said, "Honestly, kombucha tastes like electric shit."

"That's descriptive."

"I dunno how else to describe it. It's got this buzzy, vinegar thing. It's fucked up. And the culture . . ." He made a face like he had just licked a cat's asshole. "God in heaven."

"So why the hell do you drink it?"

"My wife, Zoe. She makes me. Wants me to be healthy."

"This truck doesn't make you look too healthy, I gotta tell you."

"Don't be a judgy prick. Most of the time, my truck is my office, so you make do however you can." He gestured toward the glove compartment. "I have protein bars, mixed nuts, other stuff in there. And a bottle of raspberry kombucha if you want one."

"I think I'd rather drink pond water. Didn't you just tell me it tastes like shit?"

"Electric shit." Fig shrugged. "Hey, it gives me energy."

"I'll stick to coffee, thanks."

The truck pulled through the old red covered bridge, the paint on it peeling in long curls. Inside, it was a haven for

spiders—the upper eaves of the bridge were woven with endless ribbons and bows of web. The uneven boards of the bridge went *whud whud whud* under the tires, and the pickup's shocks didn't do well with the bumps—Nate's teeth clacked together.

They came out the far side of it, and turned north on Lenape Road, taking them past Ramble Rocks park, and the old stone train tunnel. The tunnel hadn't been used since the 1940s, and the tracks that once cut through there had long been pulled up. The tunnel now was part of the park: a lighted jogging path cut right through it. That was fairly recent, though, because for a long time, the tunnel was dark, and the path through it was overgrown. Which only accentuated the stories everyone told about it.

Nate remembered the tales that said the tunnel was haunted, that a conductor in the thirties had heard someone calling his name, and so he looked out the window. What he didn't know, though, was that a piece of stone in the tunnel wall had come loose. A big block of it, still there, still out of place. The conductor looked out just in time for his face to meet the stone—and it decapitated him. Head came off. Train kept rolling.

The tunnel became a place of dares: Kids said that if you walked the tunnel at midnight, you might hear a train whistle, and if you didn't run the half-mile length of darkness at top speed, the conductor would ride along in his ghost train and—

*Choo-choo, choppity-chop—*

Cut off your head, too.

But as with all things, it wasn't the spooky stories that got to Nate. It was the real-life ones, because, routinely, real-life stories were far worse than the imagined ones. The spooky stories were an escape from the truth.

And that truth was this: Older kids had another name for the tunnel—they called it *the murder tunnel*.

That was thanks to a killer named Edmund Walker Reese. When Nate was a kid, Reese killed four girls in that park. Nailed them to trees (with, as the story went, ninety-nine nails apiece), and then did the final dispatching of them with a pick-ax. Everyone said he killed those girls in the tunnel, which wasn't accurate—apparently, he snatched one of the girls, the first of them, as she took a shortcut through the tunnel on the way home. But stories had a way of getting their teeth into people, true or not, and it became “common knowledge” that he killed all those girls right there in that tunnel.

And so, it became *the murder tunnel*.

Edmund Reese got caught when the fifth girl escaped his capture. The state electrocuted him for it, but even after he was dead and gone, the stories lingered.

And people used those stories. Nate remembered one particular piece of shit, Dave Jacoby, who said he was gonna drag Susan Pulaski, his homecoming date, out to the murder tunnel because she wouldn't “put out.” Nate heard the bastard say it to her that day in school. Even now he could still hear that little piggy-squeal voice of Jacoby's. So he took a fist and whopped the sonofagun right in the piggy nose. Blood squirted out like the poor prick had a couple ketchup packets up there.

(He also remembered Susan giving the bastard a good kick to the nuts when he was down on the ground, which was extra satisfying.)

Nate got in deep shit for it. But it was worth it.

“You live around here, don't you?” Fig asked, cutting off Nate's train of thought as he reimagined the satisfying sound of Dave Jacoby's nose under his knuckles. Fig must've looked at his personnel file.

“That's right. Far side of Ramble Rocks here.”

“That's only a couple minutes down the road. You lived across from the park growing up?”

“I did.” *And, I live there now, again*, he thought grimly.

“You were there when—”

“When the Reese killings went down, yup.”

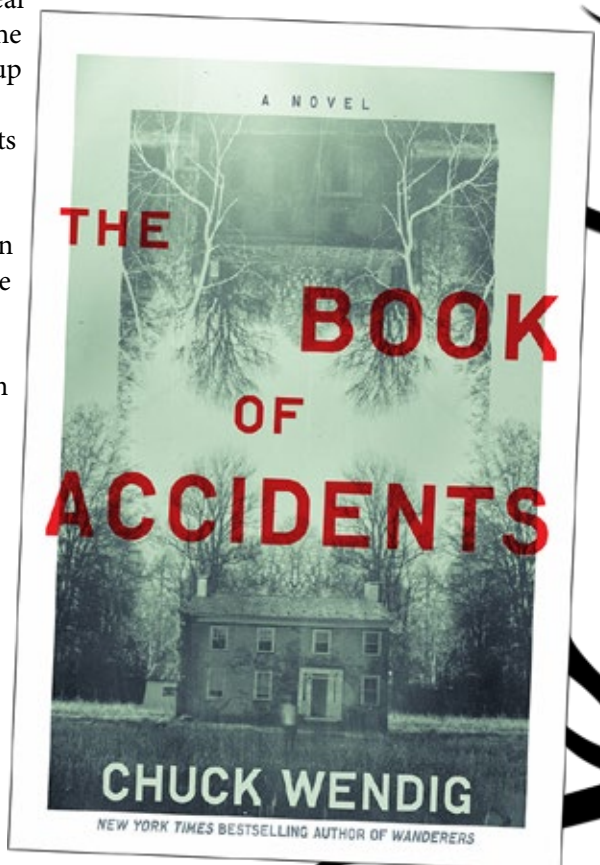
“That's messed up.”

“You heard what they said about him.” Fig gave Nate a look. A knowing look, as if to say, *Yeah, you know*.

“About his execution, you mean.”

“I didn't even grow up around here and I heard that story.”

Story went like this: Edmund Walker Reese sat there in the electric chair, the last person to be electrocuted in the state of Pennsylvania before they switched over to lethal injection. They flipped the switch. He lit up like the Ghostbusters' proton packs, but then—Poof. He was gone.





All that was left were char marks in the chair where he once sat, and the smell of—"Funnel cake," Fig said, wiggling his fingers up off the steering wheel. "What a strange detail."

"Let me be the one to ruin the story for you," Nate said. "My father was a prison guard at Blackledge, where they sent Reese to Death Row. And I promise you, he died there in that chair."

"Your father said so?"

"Yeah." *Once I got up the balls to ask him*, Nate thought. That was another day that stood out in his memory. It was a year or two after Edmund Reese died. He saw his father in the den, messing around with fishing lures and flies—not that he ever actually went fishing, but he talked about it a lot. The story about Reese not dying in the chair but rather disappearing had reached the school, and once Nate heard it, he knew he had to ask his father. So he screwed up his courage—you didn't interrupt Carl Graves when he was busy, and it seemed he was always busy (even if "busy" just meant drinking Crown Royal Canadian whiskey). But Nate had a burning need to know, just so he could tell the kids how dumb that story was. So, he asked. And then Carl turned toward him, eyes narrowed, a burned-down cigarette in one hand and a fishing lure caged in the other.

Nate had blurted the question out, but Carl seemed to chew on it. All the old man said was, "That story is nonsense. Reese died there in that chair. And you should know better."

It made Nate feel good for a second because he was right. "I *did* know better," he said, not to talk back or be smart, but because he was proud and he wanted his father to be proud. He was about to say, *I told the other kids it was just a story*, but then his head rocked back as his father slapped him. Felt like he was hit by a dictionary, *whap*. He tasted blood from his split lip.

His father hissed, his breath rotten, "What you know wouldn't fill a baby's shoe. What goes on in that prison, what I see, what I have to *do*—?"

"Dad, I—" Nate said, his eyes filling with tears.

The old man raised his hand again, but before he swung, he told Nate to get out of there. Which he did. He turned tail and hauled ass not just out of the room, but out of the house. Running, blinking back tears, and trying not to acknowledge that his throat was filled with some foul knot of shame, frustration, and sadness. He was twelve years old.

He didn't tell Fig any of that, though. He just said again, nope, didn't happen.

"So it's just horseshit," Fig said.

"That's right."

"I guess that's good to know," Fig said. "Just the same, a little bit of a bummer, you know? Like a little magic is gone from the world."

"World's not magic, Fig. And take some solace that Reese died, good and crispy, for what he did to those—"

He was about to say *girls*, but just as Fig was rounding the bend onto Butchers Road, he slammed the brakes hard and Nate had to brace himself against the dusty dashboard.

"Fig, what the hell—"

But he didn't need long to figure out why Fig stopped.

There, in the road, staggered a whitetail deer. A buck. Immediately, Nate could see that it wasn't healthy. From a broad six-pointed rack of antlers hung gooey strings of raw, red flesh—that, he knew, wasn't entirely unusual, though. That was just the animal's velvet coming off. Though it was a little late in the season for it, around early September a buck deer worked his antlers against trees to scrape off their soft velvet lining. No, what made the animal look unhealthy was the rheumy gauze over its eyes, and the way its head sagged and drool slicked its long muzzle and thick neck. The animal was thin, too; Nate could see the outline of its ribs under its hide.

It stumbled about in a clumsy circle. From one side of the road to the next, it circled an invisible point, and Nate had a hard time suppressing a chill despite the heat of the day—because sure enough, his mind wandered to those ants in Olly's room. Circling a dead mouse.

He knew one thing had nothing to do with the other.

(And yet.)

Slowly, Fig got out of the truck. Nate followed, unsure if there was some kind of protocol here he wasn't aware of. Already the other officer had unsnapped his holster.

The buck didn't seem to notice them at all. It continued to drool and froth and stagger along its invisible orbit.

"We need to be careful. That deer isn't right," Nate said.

Fig nodded. In a soft voice—softer than what Nate had used—he said, "Probably CWD." Nate gave him a quizzical *WTF* look, and Fig filled in the acronym: "Chronic wasting disease. Zombie deer, they call them. Not really zombies, you know. But sick in the head. Prion disease like mad cow."

"And what's the plan?"

Gently, Fig drew his Glock. "This is the plan."

Nate nodded and unsnapped his holster, but did not yet draw.

"Deer is moving slow. You should be able to line up a clean shot."

"The CDC might want the brain, so I'm going for the lung. Should take the breath out of it and drop it to its knees."

Fig lined up a shot, and already Nate could see that the other man didn't shoot too often. He had a thumb-over-thumb grip, which was better for beginners but, he felt, gave you less control than straight thumbs. His hands even shook a little as Fig drew a few shallow breaths.

"You're all right," Nate said. "Take it easy. Take your time. Here, he's coming around."

Sure enough, the deer stumbled to the side of the road and began doubling back again, still oblivious to their presence.

"He's showing you his broadside—line up your shot and—"

*Pop.*

The pistol kicked in Fig's hand. The deer staggered sideways by a half step, and stopped walking forward as a hole bloomed in its side. Blood trickled out, darkening its hide. Nate's ears rang from the shot.

The deer turned its head toward Fig.

It bleated, just like any deer making a warning noise, but this was a wet and gurgling sound that blasted ropes of foamy red snot from its nose.

"I don't think it felt that one," Nate said, a little more hurriedly. "Take another shot, Fig."

Fig squeezed the trigger—

But the gun didn't fire. Instead, the slide froze halfway—and now, Nate realized he never saw the spent shell from the first shot eject. Never heard the *tink-tink* as it hit the ground.

The gun was jammed.

*Shit.*

The deer lowered its head. Another red, frothy bleat from its muzzle. It stomped one black hoof down on the asphalt.

"Nate," Fig said, panic in his voice. He took a step back, toward the car. He tried racking the slide—the wrong thing to do—and it only jammed the gun further. He tried firing once more, but the weapon wouldn't respond.

The buck launched himself forward, and it wouldn't take but three long steps before it had Fig pinned to the side of the Bronco—

*Bang.*

A shot from Nate's Glock punched through the animal's eye, and out the other. A red mist hung in the air for a second even as the animal hit the ground, skidding forward, leaving a dark crimson streak and a growing pool underneath it. Fig pressed his back to the front bumper of the Bronco, half-poised like he was ready to climb up it to escape the buck.

"Jesus, shit," he said.

Nate lowered the Glock and eased it back into the holster. "You had a stovepipe jam. It can happen in the Glocks. Can't clear it just by racking the slide, either. Sorry I wasn't faster."

"Faster, shit, Nate, I was about to get pinned to that truck like a postcard to a bulletin board. The fact that next time I take a drink I won't turn into a sprinkler tells me you moved plenty fast enough, so thanks."

Nate walked over to his partner and the two of them looked down at the animal. Its tongue thrust unceremoniously out of its mouth.

And then, its muzzle moved.

"Shit!" Fig said, taking a half step back.

The muzzle rippled and bulged—

One of the buck's nostrils swelled up, and something wet and glistening appeared—a fat maggot, damn near the size of Nate's pinky finger, birthed itself from the animal's nose, and plopped onto the ground. But it had friends, too. One by one, maggot after maggot squeezed from the nose of the deer and followed the others as they moved in a single line along the asphalt. "Nasal bots, I think," Fig said, grimacing in disgust. "Fly larvae."

"That's nasty," Nate said. "Maybe that's what was driving the deer nuts? I'd think that many worms up in my head would make me crazy."

"Nah, they don't go into the brain."

And with that, the last one came laboring forth from the black, moist nose hole and got in line with its maggoty cohorts.

The two men watched as the grubs, in their line, moved inch by inch toward the center of the road. The first one began to turn just so—going from a straight line to a circular path. The others followed along. *Like the ants*, Nate thought, horrified. *Like the deer*. Fig didn't seem to notice. He got in the truck, got on the phone.



Nate, meanwhile, just stared until his own phone rang.  
It was Olly's school.

## 12

### *Fugue State*

The darkness pulled away like a curtain from a window, the light coming in bold and bright as Maddie's eyes popped open.

She lurched forward, sitting up, hearing the sounds of the forest around her: cicadas and tree crickets and squabbling catbirds. The chainsaw sat near her on the ground. She felt it. The engine was cold.

*How long was I out?*

She turned to the sculpture, to the owl she carved and—  
And it wasn't there.

Gone. *Poof*. As if it had never existed.

The signs of her efforts were everywhere: triangles of carved-out wood, plus a scattered spray of woodchips, splinters, and sawdust. All around, like a protective circle. She hadn't made it up. Hadn't imagined it. Maddie had made *something* here. Her mind, frantic, tried to recollect the pieces, tried to pore through the darkness to find memories—but none emerged from the shadow and fog except one, and this one was not a full memory but rather just the suggestion of a memory:

*This is not the first time this has happened, has it?*

She knew it wasn't. Knew it in her heart. But she had no memory of any other blackouts—it was just this mad certainty that no, this was not the first time she'd blacked out making something.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Her mouth tasted strange. Like after eating too much pineapple—a mad acid burn, something sour and sweet, but something like metal, too. That stainless-steel blood taste. Somewhere, she heard a sound: a distant buzzing. Not like the chainsaw but like wasps inside walls . . .

*My phone*, she realized. It was her phone, vibrating on a nearby stone.

She stood, woozily, and snatched it up. Already she spied a whole line of missed texts and calls. Calls from the school. Calls and texts from Nate. The last one from Nate: Olly was in a fight, where the hell r u?

*What the fuck happened?*

*Where the hell was I?*

And strangest of all, where did her owl sculpture go? ■

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# VIEBURY GROVE



A  
Method  
15/33  
Thriller

"Along the way I was certain Kirk  
penned the story in her own blood  
using a strand of barbed wire for a  
quill. It's that good."

—James R. Benn, Author of the *Billy Boyle*  
*World War II Mysteries*

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# THE MAN CAVE

By Rachel Amphlett

Forcing open eyelids crusty with sleep and dried tears, Darren raised his chin and choked back the urge to take a deep breath.

A fetid stink clung to the air—one that suggested whatever that smell was, there were sure as hell particles of it hanging around, waiting to creep across his tongue before seeping into his lungs.

An underlying stench of rotten *something* lingered as an undertone to the overall atmosphere.

Perhaps it was vegetables in the dustbin he could see through the cobweb-decorated, cracked window near the ceiling.

Perhaps a leftover chicken carcass.

Perhaps not.

He lowered his gaze, a single tear rolling over his cheek with embarrassment at the stain covering his lap.

His beat-up sneakers had swept scruffy arcs over the debris-strewn and dusty concrete floor, the footprint-shaped grey rainbows a reminder of the hours he'd already spent trying to shuffle out of the hard, wooden pine chair he was tied to.

Through a solitary pane in the window, maybe eight inches high and a foot wide, too narrow to squeeze through, weak sunlight teased and danced its way from the horizon.

Shivering, his body craving warmth and clothing more suitable to being held captive than ripped denim jeans and a thin, late-eighties *Aerosmith* T-shirt, he realized the solid weight of his Rolex watch was missing from his wrist.

He gritted his teeth.

On the wall, over to his right, a decades-old central heating system grumbled and shook itself to life, the pipework next to it rattling as it sent warmth up through the ducting system and into the three-bedroom house.

Darren counted the seconds off in his head before the familiar clanging from the air in the system began, and then the pressure reached temperature, pushing warmth into the rooms above.

Morning, then.

Half-past-six, to be exact.

Plenty of time to plan his revenge.

Whoever had done this, whoever had attacked him, would pay.

It had been nine thirty when the lights had gone out the night before.

Plunged into darkness, he'd dropped the knife he had been using to gut the trout and clutched at the sides of the kitchen worktop, shocked and disoriented at the sudden transition before glancing at his watch.

The luminous dials had ruined his night vision in the split second it took to register the time.

Stumbling his way past the ceramic sink clogged with grime and gristle, hands held out in front of him, he'd located the keys hanging on an old iron nail next to the back door. He fumbled a cylindrical fob on the ring and twisted it clockwise.

The miniature flashlight was a goofy consolation prize from a fair in Clearfield two years ago when he'd been trying to win a giant teddy bear for Tess. Now the narrow beam provided enough light to guide him to the cellar

door.

As his gaze ran over the fuse box fastened to the wall at the top of the wooden staircase, he'd spotted the trip switch in its "off" position and reached out to flick it back on.

He frowned while he tried to recall any noise, any warning that preceded the blow to his shoulder that sent him tumbling down the flight of stairs, each tread adding bruises to his arms, his legs, his hips.

All he could remember was a blinding flash as the power returned and the lights ignited—and then darkness when the back of his skull met the rough concrete surface of the cellar floor.

Had they tied him up and then ransacked the house, searching for cash, his laptop and more?

Darren clenched his teeth, then ran his tongue over his split lip and squinted as the sun crested the edge of the dusty windowsill, ducking his head to the side as a single ray sought him out, blinding him.

Digging his heels into the dust, he heaved the chair away from the light, groaning under the strain, wishing he had listened to his wife and lost those extra pounds around his waist.

Sweat beading at his brow, panting with the effort, he vowed to get in shape the moment he got home. For now, at least he was out of the sun's glare.

That would have to do.

He peered back at the window a moment longer, resigned to the acknowledgement that it was too small for his thickset frame to squeeze



through, and then turned his head and ran his gaze over two metal filing cabinets that lined the stone wall of the basement to his left.

A workbench stood beside them, its surface wiped clean and free from dust.

The cabinets had been there when his grandfather had been alive, salvaged from a garage sale a couple of miles away then used to collect mismatched nuts and bolts, torn pieces of worn and scratched sandpaper, a fist-sized ball of rubber bands--the detritus of sixty years of saving bits and pieces. Just in case.

Darren had found his own use for the cabinets over the years since his grandfather's death. He had cleared away the rusting history and spent a whole weekend filling bags he then took to the dump on the outskirts of town before he returned and oiled the locks.

Tess had never liked the house, or its remote and wild location beyond the urban sprawl of the city, and had refused to visit after the first time she had set eyes on it. She had begged him to sell it every year of their six-year marriage, telling him it gave her the creeps.

He couldn't.

The place held too many memories, too much history to simply discard it like some unwanted object.

Who knew what would become of the place in his absence if he sold?

Instead, he returned to the house every two months and chipped away at the jobs that needed doing, organizing and cataloguing the history that remained.

A shovel and a pickaxe were propped against the far wall. There were tools in two of the filing cabinet drawers, including pliers and saws.

He knew this because he prided himself on keeping them in pristine condition, ready to use at a moment's notice. The rugged terrain around the property was treacherous, with ankle-ripping tree roots entangled around

granite rocks and boulders that made it impossible to move fast.

Darren kept a routine every eight weeks, he would carve his way through the undergrowth, carrying the tools and pushing a wooden barrow that had once been used to transport coal between the outbuilding and the house each winter.

Even the barrow propped next to the back door served a different purpose since his grandfather had passed away.

And now the house had been invaded, his memories soiled by whoever had attacked him last night.

Thank God Tess hated the house.

Thank God she hadn't been here when it happened.

Who knew what could have happened to her otherwise?

The thought of strangers traipsing over the oak floorboards, wandering through the gnarled woodland surrounding the house tensed his shoulders. A flare of anger replaced confusion, a renewed determination to escape driven by a need for revenge that burned his gut.

There would be something in those drawers he could use to aid his escape, he was sure.

If only he could get into them.

A chink of sunlight caught the locks, polished and gleaming, teasing.

Where were the keys?

They had been in his hand the night before he'd been assaulted; before the lights came back on.

Had he clutched them in his hand as he'd fallen, or had he dropped them at the top of the stairs?

Darren craned his neck, rocking the chair back until he could see up the stairs in the gloom.

No keys taunted him from the thirteen treads leading up to the closed cellar door.

He cursed under his breath and let the chair fall forward with a dull thud, his stomach sinking with the realization that there would be no easy escape.

As if realizing his predicament and determined to taunt him, the trill of his

mobile phone ringing upstairs filtered down through the closed door to where he sat lashed to the chair.

He recognized the lame tune he'd finally downloaded earlier in the summer, a rock anthem he and Tess had fallen in love with at college. The sort of song the car radio got turned up for--loud. The sort of song they sang together, laughing at the memories it evoked.

Tess.

The phone rang out, and he wondered if it had been her trying to reach him.

At least she was safe.

She'd complained about the four-day software conference out of town, saying they could have had a long weekend away together instead if it wasn't for the job promotion she wanted.

He closed his eyes.

Three more days until she returned to their apartment.

Three days until she discovered he hadn't returned from the house in the woods.

His tongue scratched across the roof of his mouth, and he blinked, attempting to lose the spots that were forming at the periphery of his vision, blurring the edges of his sight. He crunched his eyelids closed. The headache had started again, wrapping its fingers around the base of his skull before crawling over his head and punching him between the eyes.

A clear plastic bottle of water caught his attention, the bright blue screw-on cap visible above the vice clamped to the edge of the workbench.

He licked his lips and tried to remember when he'd placed it there, whether it was full. And if the bottle was full of water or turpentine or white spirit instead.

No matter, he couldn't reach it from here, unless...

Darren dug his heels into the floor.

First, he shuffled and scraped until he'd turned the chair from his attempt to find the keys; he'd deduced it was

easier travelling backwards rather than forwards while his calves were tied to the wooden legs.

Next, he shoved the chair towards the workbench.

Dig in, shove. Dig in, shove.

The scrape of wood against concrete bounced off the cinderblock walls and reverberated in his skull, aggravating the headache, making it worse.

Taking deep gulps of air, panting from the effort, he wondered if anyone had heard him, and held his breath for a moment.

Nothing. Just the buzz of flies and the creaking of the window frame as it expanded in the sun's glare.

Dig in, shove. Dig in, shove.

Gritting his teeth, he reached the first filing cabinet and turned his head, grimacing as half a dozen flies lifted into the air from the locked drawers and buzzed around his nose and mouth.

He shook his head, growling under his breath, then continued his journey past the second filing cabinet. A bloody fingerprint smudged the top drawer's lock and he wondered fleetingly why he hadn't wiped it away.

He paused to catch his breath.

Tess had been nagging him these past two months to join a gym, but he'd never seen the point. He could lift several pounds, he'd argued. He did so every day in his construction job. Why pay to lift weights during his time off?

"Not weights; cardio," Tess had said, her lips pursed. Then she'd shaken her head and walked away.

Now, with sweat beading his brow and neck, dripping between his shoulders, he wondered if he should have listened to her.

He let his head drop forward, the strain in his shoulders burning his muscles while the ropes that bound his wrists behind the chair dug into his skin.

*Survival.* That's what this was about.

He had to get out of here. Had to find out who had done this.

Dig in, shove. Dig in, shove.

Now his shoulder was level with

the vice clamped to the workbench, the steel surface of the table clear of tools, leaving only an old rag and the water bottle to show for his last venture down here.

Darren jerked his wrists, testing the ties that held him, but they wouldn't yield. Instead, the edges cut into the skin, blood trickling across his palms and over his fingers.

He licked his lips then shuffled closer to the workbench, craning his neck, his mouth apart like a catfish seeking bait.

Baring his teeth, he lunged for the bottle, biting the blue cap.

It was heavier than he expected. His heart lurched as his mouth took the weight, panic setting in at the thought that it would topple and roll away from him.

He bit down harder and dragged it over the edge of the bench, swiping it away.

The bottle dropped into his lap and rolled forward.

Darren clenched his knees together, tipped the chair back and emitted a cry as the precious water stopped in its tracks.

Lowering his head, he used his teeth to right it between his knees, then paused.

How tight had he screwed the cap back on?

He had a habit of twisting bottle caps tight and then, as an afterthought, would give it a little extra twist. Paranoia, caused by a bottle of soft drink tipping over in the car one afternoon after a football game and Tess complaining about the sweet stench in the upholstery for weeks afterwards.

His breathing was hollow now, hot and desperate.

Tightening his grip, he chewed the cap between his teeth and twisted.

Nothing, except a dull ache at the base of an incisor, made him realize his jaw had taken a beating on the way down the cellar steps.

Angrier, in pain, he ran his tongue across his teeth before repositioning

them around the bottle cap.

He clenched his thighs, forcing pressure into his knee joints to grip the bottle, and twisted once more.

It happened so fast; it took him a moment for his brain to process what had gone wrong.

The cap loosened from the bottle with little warning, jerking Darren's head backwards.

Shocked by the sudden movement, he relaxed his legs, the dull *squish* of the plastic bottle bouncing off the concrete floor reaching him a split second after he could react.

"No—"

Too late, he shifted in the chair just in time to see the bottle roll under the workbench, leaving a trail of precious water to mark its trajectory.

Darren let his head drop forwards, closed his eyes, and cursed.

It couldn't be money. He owed nobody a cent. He and Tess paid their bills on time, lived a frugal life, and never borrowed, apart from the mortgage on the apartment.

Blackmail? There hadn't been any threats, no warnings.

Who knew about the house? There were no signposts to it back on the road, and the undulating track was almost half a mile long, overgrown and unkempt compared to the back of the property. Deliberately so, designed to keep people away when he wasn't around. That, and the chain across the track a few yards before the house, came into view.

Movement next to his right foot pulled him from his thoughts, and he glanced down.

No.

No, no, no.

Beady eyes appraised him, nose twitching as the rat raised itself on its hindquarters. Without warning, it scampered across his feet to the water droplets that dotted the floor and began to lap.

Darren lashed out with his foot, a grunt of satisfaction escaping his mouth as the rodent's body landed with a soft



thud against the nearest filing cabinet.

It wasn't dead.

The rat glared at him with a disdain that sent a shiver across his shoulders, then raised its nose to the metal drawers, unperturbed by the flies gathering there.

Darren wasted no time. He dug his heels in and made slow, painful progress back to the cellar steps.

The rat watched him for a moment, then began to clean itself, rubbing tiny paws over its whiskers and nose.

Darren kept his eyes on the rodent and craned his neck until he could see the cellar door and called out, "Is anyone up there? Hello?"

He clamped shut his mouth, his teeth rattling together.

The walls were thick, thicker than they were when his grandfather died. Reinforced. Sound-proofed with the best quality materials he could find.

He had no idea how the rat had got in, and he didn't care.

Darren choked back the next thought that entered his head.

Was his attacker coming back?

What if he had been left here, abandoned?

Forgotten?

What if something had happened to the person who had shoved him down the stairs?

What if no one else knew he was here?

Tess was away for three more days, and now he had no water. While she was at that software conference, dining out in five-star luxury morning and night, he was here.

Trapped.

Sure, he reckoned he could last without food...but water?

The rat lowered its paws and glared at him, a raw hunger in its eyes.

He smacked dry lips, tried to batten down the panic, and failed.

"Help me!"

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. He clamped his mouth shut, shocked by the fear trembling his voice.

Then—

A footfall, above his head as if someone had stepped into the kitchen and paused.

"Hello? Who's there?"

The seconds passed, the silence drawing out until he couldn't bear it any longer.

"Let me out!"

"How are you doing down there, Darren?"

"Tess?" Utter confusion clutched at his chest. "Is that you?"

"Did you have a busy weekend planned?"

His brow creased, his thoughts spinning. "I thought you were away. I thought you weren't coming back until Monday."

A sigh carried through the door. A sigh that held pain, loathing, disgust.

"I know about the others, Darren."

Her voice was soft, musical.

That made the accusation even worse.

"What *others*? I've never cheated on you, Tess. That's the truth."

She didn't answer right away, and his breath caught in his throat.

He'd been so careful. All this time, he'd been so careful...

"Let me tell you what I know, Darren. The first filing cabinet is for purses, watches and mobile phones."

Gritting his teeth, he strained at the ties cutting into his flesh.

*How could she know?*

*How did she find out?*

"The second filing cabinet—" Her voice broke, a sob as she beat the cellar door with her fist. "How could you?"

He glared across the basement at it now—the flies buzzing at the drawers, headbutting the cool steel surface in vain, the inquisitive rat sniffing at the metal surfaces, seeking a way in.

"That's where you keep everything else, isn't it, Darren?"

Yes, the voice in his head screamed.

*Everything else.*

*Everything catalogued.*

*Everything organized.*

"Fingers, Darren," she said, her

voice little more than a whisper.

He could sense her, trembling at the door as she spoke the words to him, her mouth close to the thick oak surface.

"Lips," she said. "Toes.... The rest.... I found the graves out in the woods, Darren."

"Wait, Tess. You don't understand. Don't call the police."

She laughed then, a rich guttural burst that exuded bitterness and something else.

He reared back in shock, the chair tilting on its legs. "Tess?"

"I'm the only one who knows you're here," she said, a menace tone creeping into her voice, a bitter confidence he hadn't heard before. "No one knows about the house except me, do they?"

"No...."

It was true—he never invited anyone here. Never mixed with the locals. Kept his distance.

For good reason.

"The police aren't coming," she hissed. "No one's coming. You can rot down there, Darren Forbes. You deserve to die a slow death for what you've done."

She thumped the door once before her footsteps retreated from the top of the stairs.

He peered up at the ceiling as she paced across the kitchen, her heels clacking on the wooden floorboards, and then the back door slammed shut.

A car engine roared to life beyond the grimy window before he heard the wheels crackle across the stony ground.

"Tess?"

His gaze dropped from the window to the filing cabinets, to the flies buzzing around the drawers. He heard their tiny wings beating, heard the scratching and scurrying beside the workbench as the rodent became inquisitive once more, and then its nose appeared, twitching as it sought him out.

Darren threw back his head and screamed.

"Tess!" ■



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# *The Infallible* **Mr. Truelove**

By Mistah Pete

“MIGHT I BE OF SOME ASSISTANCE?”

He swept the fedora from his head as he entered the penthouse apartment, his coif a gleaming wave off his high forehead. That devil-may-care grin was almost as established a trademark on the front page of the papers as was the tidily trimmed mustache under which it spread.

I wanted to punch him in it, if you'd like to know, but that's not ladylike.

“Faith and begorrah,” Inspector Barney blustered, with the same unctuous hero-worship he expressed every time this self-aggrandizing clotheshorse showed his smug mug. “Boy, is it ever good ta’ see you, Mister Truelove! We’re stumped!”

You’d think a New York police detective would be too proud to admit being flummoxed at a crime scene in front of his officers, not to mention this humble reporter, but not Hamish Barney. The Cheswick case had made his career, and this Mr. Truelove had made the Cheswick case.

“Now, I’m sure there’s nothing I can contribute that your redoubtable boys in blue cannot,” this walking mannequin said. Then he saw me, and I’ll be damned if he didn’t give me a playful wink. “But I’ll do my best not to get in your way, Inspector.”

I no longer wanted to punch him. Instead, I was looking around for a handy blunt object. He’s lucky there’s never a Louisville Slugger around when you need one.

The dandy walked to the body and crouched down, careful not to muss the crease in the trousers of his tailored charcoal pinstripe suit.

“Oh, Inspector,” he called, “aware as I am of your keen bulldog persistence, I’m sure you’ll have noticed soon enough, but may I draw this to your attention?”

The inspector crowded in, along with his uniformed officers. I’m rather more petite than these bulls, so I hitched up my skirts and ducked down to peep through the forest of blue serge legs. What I saw was a white blossom, crushed and stained with blood as it was pulled from under the heavy corpse.

“A flower?” the inspector asked.

“A tulip,” Mr. Truelove corrected. “And unless I miss my guess, the bullet that perforated the late Frank Spiro was a .22 caliber, am I right?”

Having arrived there with the inspector, I knew for a fact no one had fished a slug out of Fat Frankie’s chest. No one had even turned him over to be sure it was a bullet that brought him to room temperature.

But that didn’t stop the inspector from saying, “Yes, by Janey! It is! However did ye know that?”

“Simple enough, my dear Inspector,” the fashion plate said, shooting his cuffs as he stood. “The .22 is a woman’s gun, which along with the tulip makes it clear that our culprit is—”

Then we heard the key in the door, and we all turned to see her enter. Lola DeVries, the Dutch Songbird who performed nightly at Fat Frankie Spiro’s nightclub.

Only, it looked like she wasn’t there this night. And when she opened her mouth at our presence, it wasn’t to sing.

She looked at Truelove and pointed. “Why, you dirty...” she spat, as he spread his hands in an apologetic gesture.

I noticed she wasn’t wearing the tulip boutonniere she’d made famous among the uptown nightlife set. I wasn’t the only one who noticed it.

The inspector and his officers had her fitted for bracelets and down the stairs in less time than it would take me to type

the words into my article before deadline. My editor would discourage inclusion of the words she was shouting back at the oily smoothie still in the room beside me.

I turned to him. "I think she recognized you," I commented.

"Did she?" He inspected his manicure. I bet it cost as much as my shoes. "I do get around."

"Yes, you're found at all the best crime scenes," I retorted, and I thought it was a snappy one. "I get the impression you were expecting her, too."

"And it's just that spark of imagination that makes you such a compelling journalist, Miss Smith." He brushed an imaginary speck off his tie. "What you should expect is that the police will find that chromed .22 automatic in her handbag."

"Chromed, is it?"

"Might be," he said.

"Might be," I echoed with disgust I didn't try to hide. "You slip it in there like you did that flower under the body?"

With his constant air of mockery, I couldn't be sure if his raised eyebrows expressed genuine shock or a tweezer mishap. "I?"

"You," I confirmed. "In fact, I'd put a sawbuck down that you're the one who took it off her earlier tonight. And maybe told her to meet you here at this time."

He regarded me appraisingly. "Why is it," he asked, "that of all the crime-beat reporters in this fair metrop, it's Isolde Smith of *The Daily Klaxon* who possesses the only byline that never mentions Mr. Truelove by name?"

"Or puts your picture above the fold," I reminded him.

"Or that," he agreed.

"You should write a letter to the editor," I suggested. "Or Eleanor Roosevelt, for all the good it'll do you."

"Why? What's your beef against Mr. Truelove? All he seeks is justice."

"If referring to yourself in the third person isn't reason enough," I explained, "I'll have you know I interviewed Mabel Cheswick in prison last week. And I don't think she killed her husband, deserve it though he might've."

I moved in closer to him, my chin sticking out the way it does when I'm spoiling for a fight, which I guess I was.

"What I also don't think is that you're interested in justice at all," I told him. "What I think is that you're crooked as a hunchback's corkscrew. What I think is you got Mabel Cheswick put on death row for your own glory, and all the free meals and custom tailoring that celebrity buys you. And what I also think is that I'm going to prove it."

That's when I noticed the mockery was gone from his face; his eyes turned flat and cold. "A jury convicted Mabel Cheswick of murder." He leaned in at me. "There's your proof."

It occurred to me then that I was alone in an apartment with two men, one dead and the other I'd just threatened, and of the two of them, there was only one I could be sure of outrunning to the door.

Then the lightness returned to his face, but with a touch of menace I hadn't seen before. "The police seem to appreciate me," he said, his voice a jolly lilt. "And as your fellow members of the fourth estate like to say, I'm never wrong."

"It's your publicist who says that. Other reporters are just lazy enough to print it."

He shrugged, barely. "As long as it's the guilty parties who end up in jail, no one much minds how they get there."

"Far as I can tell, you invited Mabel Cheswick to the wrong party." I gave him my stinkiest stink-eye. "I'm going to find out what you're up to, Mr. So-Called Truelove, and I'm going to show you what justice really means."

If he had a response to that, it was cut off when one of the coppers remembered this was an active crime scene, and he appeared out of breath at the top of the stairs outside the door to say, "Um...hey, you guys aren't supposed to be here, okay?"

\* \* \*

Leopold Cheswick was one of those philandering business tycoons who thinks a fat bankroll makes him bulletproof. Such did not prove to be the case.

The gun that ended him wasn't hard to find, as it was in the man's dead hand when the police arrived. If there were any fingerprints to be found, they were smeared by old Leopold's greasy digits, so no accusations could be thrown. Except that no one was buying Cheswick as a suicide.

But nobody had any better ideas, and that was how it was going to stay until an amateur detective with a mysterious past, calling himself Mr. Truelove, found a single woman's glove with gunpowder residue in Mabel Cheswick's lingerie drawer.

The police are quick to tie a bow when a knot is presented to them, and the spouse is always the number one suspect in a murder case. The trial revealed that Cheswick had been looking for an excuse to dump his aging bride for a young chorus girl; said, Chorine, added injury to that insult by testifying Mabel was well aware of it. Mabel even looked into divorce attorneys herself, but turns out the best of them had already been employed. By her husband.



And so she'd acted before he could leave her high-and-dry, the court decided, and in the process inherited a bundle, and got herself sent up for first-degree.

No one asked what this Mr. Truelove character was doing rummaging through Mabel's undies, or why he was in the Cheswick house at all. He'd gone in with a flat-arches beat cop named Hamish Barney, and that seemed to be good enough. Not just for a jury, but also for the department, who promoted Barney to the embarrassment to law enforcement he is today.

Also what no one asked was why Mabel would've kept the glove. That was the first question I put to her when I'd gotten into the big house for an interview.

"But I didn't," is what she'd told me. "They weren't mine! Did you see those things? At least two sizes too big for me."

Not only had I not been aware gloves came in sizes, neither had I been allowed into the courtroom to see them. His honor and I have, at times, disagreed about protections offered by the First Amendment, and no one holds a grudge like a judge.

\* \* \*

The next morning when I came down from my apartment, prepared to train it in to the office, I was greeted by a block-long, low-slung roadster gleaming at the curb. A Charteris ST1, not that I keep up with such things.

Mr. Truelove leaned against it, and I squelched my natural instinct to slug him.

"You out of gas?" I suggested. "I got an extra token."

"This old thing?" he said with rehearsed nonchalance. He knew I was impressed. Hard enough to find parking in this city, much less afford a car. "Just something I brought over from my last trip abroad. Want a lift?"

Now, I'm no fan of New York City's public transit, but I'd rather get crammed onto the most rattletrap bus with the most tired and poorest of the huddled masses than spend even a moment with this fathead.

But what I said was, "Sure, you look lonely."

Because what I really wanted was to get a look at his pink, pampered hands. Would they fit into a woman's glove? An oversized woman's glove?

As it happened, they looked disappointingly large on the leather-wrapped steering wheel he jolted into the morning traffic. Didn't let him off, though.

"Nice car," I gritted over the sound of horns and screeching. I wished I was wearing gloves, so he couldn't see how white my knuckles were.

He shrugged. "Latest thing in London."

"Yeah, I can tell by the way you're sitting in the wrong seat," I told him. "We drive on the right here, by the way."

"I find people generally get out of my way." He looked over at me, which was a bit unnerving at this speed. "I don't suppose I could interest you in a side-trip, could I?"

"Not to London."

He flashed that reckless grin of his. "No, the Lower East Side. Specifically, the apartment of one Miss Giuseppina Rossi."

"Who's that?"

"Up until seven months ago," he drawled, "she was the housemaid of Mabel Cheswick."

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he looked back to traffic, innocent as an alderman with a pocket full of graft.

\* \* \*

He'd called it an apartment, but the word is tenement. The streets were lined with factories and warehouses, but between each was crammed what would be a two-family home anywhere else. Here, they must have housed eight or more broods each. They were gray and dismal and I hated to think people lived in them.

He braked his absurd automobile in front of one, the long hood seeming to stretch from one end of the house to the other.

There were grimy children out front, pressing close to get a look at the fancy flivver. I lost count of dark-eyed urchins. Not one of them was taller than my elbow, which made them small indeed. In my neighborhood, they'd be in school. I guessed these were the ones still too little to be working in the factories.

Truelove stepped from the car, picked the oldest looking one of the bunch, and spoke to him in rapid and unexpected Italian. The kid swelled with enthusiasm, and the apparently bilingual sharpie flipped him a coin.

As we walked up the stoop, I asked, "Hire him to watch the car?"

"Promised him another dime when we come out."

"Big spender." I looked back when we got to the door and saw the kid running off. So much for security.

Truelove knocked. This place had one bit of color, a well-tended red flower in a pot on the stoop, illuminated by light bouncing off the tilted windows of the packing house across the street. I tried to find some poetry in that and failed.

"Is Truelove an Italian name?" I asked as we waited.

He gave me a smile that was supposed to be disarming. "How would I know?"

The door opened and an old woman dressed in black peered out. She saw him and started to close it; then he spoke in Italian again and she stopped. I don't know the language, but I heard the name "Giuseppina." I heard it a lot, in fact, when the old woman started shouting at him.

A tired voice came from inside. "It's okay, Nonna, let him in."

The room was dark and cramped and windowless, Old World furniture and ornaments allowing only a narrow path. There was a smell of garlic and spices somewhere back in there, and the elderly woman pushed past us, shaking her head and muttering dark imprecations I was glad I couldn't understand.

When my eyes adjusted, I saw her.

Giuseppina, had to be. She wore a tatted robe, and her hair was mussed, and there was a wrapped and snuffling shape in absently bouncing arms. She had that weary, beautiful softness of the young mother in her face.

And I do mean young. Maybe sixteen, maybe younger. She was another one who would've been in school in my neighborhood.

"Sorry about Nonna," she said in unaccented English. "I was up late with the baby."

Mr. Truelove leaned forward, as if to try for a glimpse at the bundle of joy. "And does the baby have a name?"

The girl hesitated.

"Named after his father, perhaps?" Truelove pressed, and I wondered if I knew what he was getting at.

The girl shook her head. "I don't think—"

"I know," he said. "You could name him after your friend Aldo. He'd love that, I bet."

She sucked in a breath, and swiveled her arms protectively away from this man. "What do you know of Aldo? I told him never to come back here, not after what he did."

He cut his eyes at me, guileless, then said, "I suppose your grandmother must have mentioned the name."

"She would never—"

"Giuseppina," I said, stepping between her and Truelove, "why did you leave the Cheswick employ?"

She looked at the baby, instinctive, but what she said was, "Mrs. Cheswick's in jail."

"You left seven months ago," I pointed out. "She was still ninety days away from being arrested." I looked closer at her, hoping I'd get a reaction when I said this next part. "Ninety days from Leopold being killed."

I saw it. Just the faintest hint of a smile, but she hid it fast. "It became inconvenient for me to be there."

"Because of the baby," I supplied.

Hesitation, then she lifted her chin once, yes.

"Because," I pressed further, hating myself for it, "of what Leopold did to you."

Her eyes went hot now, and she said, "I want you to leave."

"Now, now, Giuseppina," Truelove began, but I grabbed his expensive sleeve and pulled him out. As a reporter, I was unaccustomed to being the one who exercised discretion in any given situation, but that tells you something about this Mr. Truelove.

On the stoop, he said, "Did you get all you need?"

"If you think," I told him, "I'm going to railroad that little girl and her baby into—"

"*That* dear child?" He 'tutted' at me. "By no means. As I've told you, it is the guilty parties whom I deliver unto justice." He smoothed at the sleeve I'd pinched. "Regardless of who actually committed the crime."

"You!"

We turned to see a figure moving around the long car, a man, but not just a whole lot bigger than the kid who pointed him our way. The kid Truelove gave a dime. Doesn't buy you much loyalty these days.

The man had a lithe, almost dainty strut, a small man up on his toes and leaning at an angle to puff out his tight undershirt like a rooster. He looked at us. Well, at Truelove, but I was there, too.

"I told you to stay away from Giuseppina! She's mine!"

"Ah, Aldo," Truelove murmured, barely loud enough for me to hear it. "Right on time."

"He told you?" I asked. "You know this character?"

"Not now, Miss Smith," Mr. Truelove said. "I have a feeling things are about to get exciting."

The man said, "Now I make you sorry!" and there was a glint in his hand. I stepped back, wishing the door hadn't been closed behind us, but Mr. Truelove stepped forward.

The man pushed his undersized fist at us, knife flashing, and Truelove let it slip under his arm and pulled, bringing them



both crashing onto the top step of the stoop. Which concerned me because that's where I was standing, and it was getting far too crowded for my tastes.

His weight on the arm with the blade, Mr. Truelove dropped his hand down on the man's head. There was a shattering noise, and I realized that manicured hand had been holding something. There were shards of pottery and soil all over the steps, and the little man's head.

Mr. Truelove stood, dusting the dirt off his hands, and examined the slash the knife had put in his suit-jacket. He looked less saddened by it than I'd have guessed, but maybe he was just considering where the blade might have gone instead.

"Remind me," he said, "to send Nonna a new flowerpot."

\* \* \*

The police arrived soon after, and I thought it was sure handy that someone in the neighborhood had called them, then realized there were no phones around here.

Didn't take long after that to realize just who had arranged for them to be there. He must've set it up before he even got to the curb in front of my building.

Press came with the squad cars, and there were questions. Inspector Barney told the reporters about how they'd found the glove that matched the one that fired the murder gun in Aldo's boarding house quarters. How Aldo had a history of violence in the area, especially toward women.

Barney added that this should result in the release of the unjustly incarcerated Mabel Cheswick, and he mentioned that he'd never believed that good woman could have performed such a heinous crime. You'd hardly know he'd been the one to arrest her.

He also said that Aldo had in his possession some jewelry stolen from the Cheswick estate. I didn't remember any jewelry being reported missing, but there'd been no reason to look for it, as no one had considered it a robbery. I wondered if Mr. Truelove had gone in and taken it recently to incriminate Aldo, or if he'd been holding it all this time, waiting for the right moment to use it.

Photos were staged for the camera-jocks: the culprit being taken away; Barney holding up the knife Aldo slung at us, and the glove; the tenement building and the broken flowerpot; and of course, Mr. Truelove himself, with his car, and his smile and his mustache. I still wanted to punch him under it, but I had a question I needed that mouth to answer, so I held off.

Once they'd all cleared out, Mr. Truelove offered me a ride to the offices of *The Daily Klaxon*. I took him up on it.

And there, in the road where he couldn't escape, I asked.

"Who really killed Leopold Cheswick?"

"Why, Aldo, of course."

"No," I said. "Who?"

He didn't look at me. "Do you really want to know?"

I considered the choices: Mabel Cheswick or Giuseppina Rossi. A wronged woman or a...wronged girl. Could have been either of them. Probably was one of them. And if it was, I figured they had the right.

I thought about the glove he found in Mabel's drawer, and the one the police discovered in Aldo's place, and Aldo with his dainty little hands that fit them. Aldo, who already knew Mr. Truelove. Aldo, who attacked right on schedule, as if he'd somehow been alerted to our presence, maybe by a kid Truelove paid a dime to go fetch him.

I thought of the white flower under Fat Frankie's corpse that put Lola away, and the red one on Aldo's head that kept me from being part of that history of violence he had toward women.

I thought of the planning that went into having all of this happen just the right day, at just the right place, at just the right moment for me to witness it.

And I wondered why he'd gone to so much trouble just to take the heat off a woman he'd already gotten convicted. A woman who might've been a killer.

Was it because I'd told him I didn't believe in him? Because I thought he was a crook?

I didn't say any of this. Instead, what I said was, "Maybe I'll just assume it was you."

Now he did look at me, and his smile looked genuine, if not just a bit deranged. "Why, you should put that in your paper, Miss Smith!"

Don't think I won't. Someday. ■

*Mistah Pete is an award-winning filmmaker and screenwriter whose works have played all over the world. He's shot documentaries in Greenland for the National Science Foundation, edited a feature for the Blair Witch guys (not that one), and seen his films screened at the Smithsonian. He lives quietly in Texas and loudly elsewhere.*

# THE GOOD KILL

By John McMahon  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



**I**n times of reflection, I find that my chosen profession isn't one that I'd recommend to others. Homicide is a lonely division in a police department, filled with a particular type of person—as comfortable with the dead as with the living, and often able to suppress their emotions in ways that cannot be healthy.

My partner, Remy Morgan, had arrived at Falls Magnet Middle School about twenty minutes before me and was hunkered down behind one of six patrol cars that littered the school's front lawn.

I grabbed a Remington 870P from a patrolman and ran in a crouched position, the shotgun clasped under my right arm. Dropped behind the black and white where Remy was.

"One gunman," my partner said, catching me up. "Three students and two teachers hostage. One of the teachers is injured. A shot to the gut is what we hear."

I borrowed Remy's binoculars, placing the Bushnell L Series to my face.

"The hostages are in the art room, P.T.," she said. "Back of the building. Far right. All the rest of the staff and students are accounted for. Fifty-nine adults. Three hundred and ninety-four kids."

I scanned the school grounds. To the right of the main building was a rectangular sports field, currently dressed for football and not a soul on it. To the left was a concrete area with two deserted basketball courts and a cluster of orange metal lunch tables.

Backpacks and Coke cans lay abandoned on the ground in the lunch area. Even farther left was the new library, no longer under construction but not yet open. A vinyl banner was strung across the front, announcing the date of an upcoming ribbon-cutting.

"There's something else," Remy said. "Avis Senza may be one of the three girls inside."

I pulled the binoculars down and made eye contact with my partner.

Avis Senza was a budding thirteen-year-old artist who attended the magnet school. She was also the daughter of our boss, Police Chief Dana Senza.

"Bullshit," I said. But Remy's face was dead serious.

My partner wore gray Kevlar over a white blouse and tan pants.

The outfit contrasted with her dark brown skin.

"Vest," she said to me, tapping at her own protection.

I grabbed mine. Pulled the straps tight around my chest. "The first report came in at 1:57," Remy said. "A student saw a man in the art room with a gun. The kid did a one-eighty. Pulled the fire alarm and high-tailed it."

From there, whispers and texts moved through the school faster than summer lightning. Soon, four hundred kids were racing across the parking lot.



Kids streamed into the nearby forest, Remy explained. Flooded into adjoining neighborhoods.

I turned and reexamined the campus.

Falls Magnet Middle School was only two years old, built on land that locals once called the Sullivan farm. When I was a kid, I'd ridden my dirt bike here with friends—a six-foot-long frog gig duct-taped to the handlebars, the metal pole of the tool sticking up into the air.

Where the main building stood was once a pond that overflowed from Cleric River. Back when I was ten, you could catch two silver perch and a bullfrog here on a good Saturday.

I leaned on the butt of the Remington. "You got an I.D. on the weapon, Rem? So we know what we're up against?"

Remy turned to a patrolman, crouched just the other side of her.

My partner had the sharp cheekbones of a fashion model, and her long hair was flat-ironed and cut at an angle at her shoulders. She could be intimidating.

"The students who ran out of the school," she said to the rookie.

"You got 'em in a safe area in the parking lot?"

"Maybe half of them, Detective Morgan," he said. "We've been releasing them to parents."

"Find me the boy who saw the gun," Remy said.

The patrolman took off, sprinting out of the area in a crouched position.

My name is P. T. Marsh, and Mason Falls, Georgia, is my town.

Lately we top out at around 130,000 souls. So we're not so big that there's more than two Walmarts in town. Then again, we're not so tiny that it won't make national news when a school shooting happens.

In the distance a hundred feet behind us, a white pop-up tent had been erected by patrol. A planning area. Farther back, in the visitor's parking lot, a CNN van was unloading camera equipment, an unfortunate circumstance of being ninety minutes from Atlanta. There was always a CNN van on some highway nearby.

I tapped at the bullhorn by Remy's side, and she explained how she'd tried to make contact with the gunman before I arrived.

"Patrol also called the cell numbers of both teachers held in the school," she said. "No answer."

"And Chief Senza?"

"He's probably twenty minutes out," Remy said. "Protocol is clear, though, P.T. Talk the shooter down. Make sure no one else gets injured or worse."

I took this in, realizing the extra sensitivity with the chief's daughter in play. Still, I'd overseen last year's active shooter training, so I knew the statistics better than anyone else in the department. In seventy percent of these scenarios, the ordeal ends only when the gunman is confronted or killed by police or himself.

"You remember a D.A.R.E. talk we did here last year?" I asked.

Remy shook her head. We'd been partners for a year and a half. Slightly less if you counted the time this summer when she took a three-month shift working in County.

"The kids weren't paying attention," I reminded her. "So the teacher decided to take the class outside?"

"Yeah." Remy nodded. A look of familiarity came to her face.

I motioned over the top of the one-story brick building where the shooter was. "Those pine trees to the right curve around back. There's a maintenance shed, tucked under a hedge of ironwood."

"What are you thinking?" my partner asked.

"I'm gonna circle back there," I said. "See if I can get a different angle on this guy. Maybe climb up on the roof of that shed."

I grabbed the Remington.

"You got your walkie?" Remy asked.

I looked down. It was clipped to my belt. "And my cell in case you want to stay off the radio."

"If you get the shot . . ." Remy said.

"I thought we were trying to talk him down."

"We are," she said. "But if conditions change and you get a good look . . ."



Remy hesitated, her eyes searching mine. "Do you want *me* to go instead?" she asked.

I took off without answering, making a beeline back toward the police tent. When I was almost there, I ducked left into the forested area that ran between the school and State Route 903.

Four months ago, I'd had a guy in the sights of my gun. A killer who'd taken out a dozen innocents. I'd pulled the trigger and missed him. Then missed again. If my partner hadn't been there, I'd be dead now. Hence her question.

I dodged around thick rows of sugar maple, the silver gray bark of the trees five or six feet from each other. Above me, their green and brown flowers hung in clusters.

In the world of policing against an active shooter, there's pre-1999 and post.

Before the '99 shooting at Columbine, the response to shooters at schools was always the same. Talk the gunman down. Call in SWAT.

And wait.

Post-Columbine, all the rules changed. Go in hard and fast. And if need be, kill the shooter before he can hurt any kids. But when a gunman takes hostages, all bets are off and patience is needed. Prayer doesn't hurt either.

I felt sweat building up under the Kevlar, and my walkie chirped.

I pressed the button two times to signal Remy that I was all right.

"We just heard something from the media," Remy's voice squawked. As I glanced back, I saw our SWAT van pulling in beside the E-Z UP. "What've you got?" I asked into the walkie, slowing to a stop and breathing heavy.

"A student talked to CNN. Apparently he saw the car the gunman came out of. A reporter ran the plates."

*Jesus, I thought. We're already playing catch-up to the media?*

"The gunman's name is Jed Harrington," Remy said. "He's thirty-six. A local."

I glanced through branches of wood fern at the parking lot, now far in the distance. In the last four minutes, two other media vans had pulled in, farther away from the school, behind the E-Z UP.

A CNN reporter stood in front of a camera, and I could see cars backing up onto the highway. More parents arriving. Panic setting in.

"Did someone pull his jacket?" I asked. "Any history of violence?"

"He's got no record, P.T.," Remy said. "Stay tuned, and I'll find out more."

Re-clipping the walkie, I hustled for another hundred yards. The forest curved to my left, bending around the shape of the school.

I thought of Avis Senza, who I'd chatted with three or four times at the precinct. A good kid and the only child of my boss. I knew from personal experience what losing a child could do to a man. The hole that Senza might fall into.

I found the small maintenance shed and moved around the back side. Scrambled up onto an air-conditioning unit.

Our SWAT team had a guy named Pierce who'd trained in talking to hostage-takers. If I could be Pierce's eyes, maybe we could end this standoff with no loss of life.

From atop the AC, I pulled myself onto the roof and scooped my six-foot-two-inch frame to the edge, my stomach flat against the surface. Trees from the forest hung overhead, and branches caught my tufty brown hair and scraped along my back.

At a hundred feet, I could see an eight-by-ten window that looked out from the art room onto the back lawn of the school.

I put the binocs to my face, and the art space came in clear.

The room was large, with students' paintings covering every wall.

Four black industrial work tables were spread throughout. High tops with stools around them. But no one sat at the stools.

I scanned left and counted. One, two, three students. All girls, twelve or thirteen, in white blouses and blue-and-red plaid skirts.

They huddled in one corner; at the front of the group, my boss's daughter. To her right was a brunette in her thirties, the art teacher presumably.

I saw the injured teacher too, but the shot he'd taken wasn't to the stomach. It was to the chest, and his blood had soaked through a pile of white smocks until they were brick red.

He was dead.

The shooter himself was white and stood near the teacher, close to the window.

Six foot tall and midthirties, Jed Harrington had a face the shape of an egg and sunburnt skin. He was handsome in a rugged way and wore a green-checked flannel, faded jeans, and hiking boots. He looked more like a dad bringing his kid's forgotten permission slip to school.

My cell buzzed, and I slid it close to my ear. I was lying prone, on my stomach, with the shotgun laid out in front of me. I held the binocs with my free hand.

"You're not gonna believe what I can see from here," I said to Remy.

No sound came back at first, so I pulled the phone up and glanced at the screen. The number was blocked.

"Good afternoon, Detective Marsh," a man's voice came back.

A voice I knew.

The man on the other end was the highest-ranking public official in the state of Georgia, a man named Toby Monroe. Governor Monroe to folks who saw him on the news or punched his name at the ballot box.

"I assume you're at this scene?" Monroe said. "The one I'm watching on TV?"

"I am."

"Thank God," Monroe said. "Someone I can trust."

But the governor and I didn't have what I'd call a trusting relationship. Ours was one in which favors were traded. And I was in arrears—owing him a big one.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"I'm calling to expedite anything you need," he said. "To make sure no children are hurt at that school."

My eyes tracked the gunman, pacing near the window.

I hadn't seen his weapon yet, but the man's left hand was below the sill. *Was he a lefty? Or had he put the weapon down?*

"No children have been hurt," I said.

"So let's keep it that way," Monroe replied. "From what I hear-tell, your job in an active shooter situation is to take out the gunman. No questions asked."

The governor's voice could shift from sophisticated to down-home in a flash. A politician's trick.

"Unless the gunman takes hostages," I said.

My walkie clicked, and I told Monroe to hold on. I put the phone aside, on mute.

I depressed the button on the walkie. "This is Marsh."

"I just talked to the kid who was in the art room," Remy said. "The one who saw the weapon."

"Yeah?"

"P.T.," she said, "he told me the guy only had one gun. A .38 Smith & Wesson."

A school shooter with a single weapon ran contrary to every constant that law enforcement knew of these situations. Even stranger, a revolver. A six-shooter.

"Did he see a duffel?" I asked. "Maybe some bag with—"

"Just the .38," Remy said. "But that doesn't mean he's not packing other weapons or explosives."

*Exactly*, I thought.

"SWAT wants to know what you see," Remy said. "They're gonna run a phone over to this guy. Pierce thinks he can talk him down."

"Is the boss there yet?" I asked.

"Five minutes out," Remy said. "Stuck behind a glut of parents' cars."

I stared at the female teacher, talking to the gunman. She was petite, with light brown hair that fell to her shoulders. The gunman put his hand on her forearm, and she looked down at it. He pulled his hand back.

"Get right back to you," I said, and Remy clicked off.

When I un-muted the phone, Governor Monroe was still there.

"How are the teachers?" he asked.

"One is dead," I said.

"Shit." His response came back.

I used my binoculars to examine the building at the far end of the school grounds. The structure that had just finished construction.

"I read in the Register that you're coming here," I said to Monroe. "To dedicate the new library."

"Yes," he said, his voice quieter now.

I scanned the vinyl banner strung across the front of the library, and my eyes stopped on something etched into the stone above the banner. The governor wasn't just speaking at the dedication.

"Your name," I said, sliding over the Remington so I was ready. "It's on the building?"

"That's not why I'm calling," Monroe said.

But it couldn't be good. The Monroe family name on a building after this? Whatever this was about to become.



"Mason Falls isn't known as a place where schools get shot up," Monroe said. "Those cities become infamous. But you and I can change that, Marsh. In Georgia, we act strong and fast. We protect children."

I stared down the barrel through the sights of the Remington, laid out across the roof. Sap drippings smeared across my forearms.

"What is it you want?" I asked.

"We can't wait until this psycho hurts a child," Monroe said. "Take him out. Now."

"SWAT wants time," I said.

Monroe's voice got gruffer. "For Christ sake, you just said he killed a teacher."

"They're running a phone line," I explained.

"And next they'll form a committee," he said. "Marsh, you owe me one."

I exhaled, my nose making a whistling noise. This was what I'd been dreading since I heard Monroe's voice.

In May, the governor had supplied me with the name and address of a man who I'd been searching for. A man who'd run my wife and son off the road two years ago. Who'd killed them.

In exchange for that information, he told me that he'd call at some point—for a no-questions-asked favor. And I'd agreed.

I stared across at the gunman.

"I'm not gonna *make* you do this," Monroe said, his voice calming again. "But I think every parent in the state would breathe a sigh of relief if you took out that killer."

I hesitated.

I'd read that Monroe was only one point ahead in the polls. One point ahead of an unknown competitor was a narrow margin for an incumbent governor. If a school shooting went bad, he might fall ten points behind.

"Just know that if you pull that trigger," he said, "you and I are square. All debts settled."

The phone went dead then, and I put my cell down. Focused on the art room.

The teacher said something to the gunman, and Harrington shook his head at her—vehemently, from left to right.

He grabbed the teacher by the shoulders then and swiveled her in my direction, staring out the window.

*Had the gunman seen me?*

I stayed completely still. Found Jed Harrington in the center of the Remington's scope and waited. He held his weapon to the woman's neck, and I confirmed it was a .38.

The gunman moved closer to the window, dragging the art teacher in front of him. He was forty yards away. Fifty at most. Slowly, I chambered a slug. Found the release lever and pulled back on the action, pumping the gun to the ready.

The teacher wriggled free from the man's grasp, and he let her go.

Then he glanced out at the forest, his .38 resting against the glass.

It was a moment of calm. *Was he reflecting on something? Still searching for some movement?*

I'd spent the last decade of my life trying to understand the machinations of the criminal mind. Why they take the risks that others don't. Their carelessness with the things that I hold dear. And the truth was that my understanding hadn't grown deeper. In the end, they just made me doubt the existence of a higher power.

My walkie came alive with Remy's voice.

"P.T.," she said, "phone line's ready to get walked over."

I stared at the gunman, my index finger resting against the trigger and then drifting away. Hesitating. Shaking.

The Remington 870P isn't a long-distance weapon. It's a short-stock shotgun that's great for clearing a house and hard for bad guys to pull out of a cop's hand. Still, when hunting, I've found that a twelve-gauge can be effective to about eighty yards. Twice this distance.

I eyed the red dot on the Remington and found the gunman.

Harrington had killed one teacher already.

And as I watched, he turned back toward the girls and the art teacher, his Smith & Wesson in hand. Held out in their direction.

Over his shoulder I could see my boss's daughter, Avis, at the front of the pack. She put out her hand, palm facing him, as if to say no.

"P.T.," Remy's voice chirped.

I took aim. Inhaled and squeezed. ■

From *A GOOD KILL* by John McMahon, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC. Copyright © 2021 by John McMahon.

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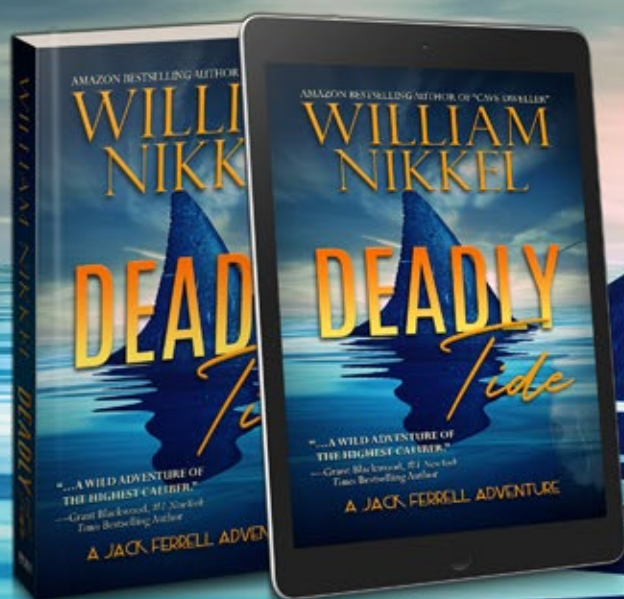


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—No. 1 Bestselling Thriller Author, Peter James

# DEADLY

AUGUST  
24



## *Tide* A JACK FERRELL ADVENTURE WILLIAM NIKKEL

Marine Biologist Jack Ferrell gets the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to join a two-man military crew aboard the deep-ocean research submersible, Alvin. Their mission is to explore the wreckage of the famous WWII cruiser—*USS Indianapolis*—lying three-and-a-half miles beneath the surface of the Philippine Sea.

His adventure into the perpetual darkness of this historic deep-water war grave is cut short when the director at NOAA orders his immediate return to Oahu, Hawaii, to investigate an unexplained outbreak of shark attacks happening off Waikiki Beach. This assignment not only reunites him with Honolulu Police Detective Brian Tokunaga, it also lands him directly in the path of a ruthless businessman who kills to get what he's after. As a heightened threat against the masses of people flocking to the world's beaches intensifies, Jack puts his life on the line to stop the unthinkable.

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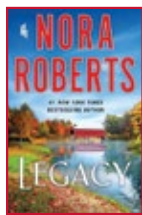
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# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

## LEGACY

By Nora Roberts



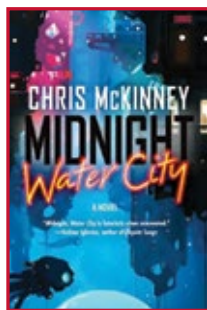
I am, and always will be, a huge fan of Nora Roberts and always look forward to her next new read to see what she has come up with. It is amazing to always note that this is a woman whose well of creativity never runs dry. To many out there, this writer is a queen at creating interesting characters that a reader can become inspired by and immediately care about. And “Legacy” does just this and more in a fantastic way.

The story begins when the main character, Adrian Rizzo, is seven years old and finally meets her father. This is also the day that the “stranger” man tries to kill her. After those first moments, we then meet the rest of Adrian’s family and Adrian meets new friends who stay in her life for decades as the book moves forward. Along the way, Adrian follows in her mother’s footsteps and starts her own business, tries to work on relationships with friends and family, rediscovers her first real “love crush” as they return to her life, and deals with numerous tragedies along the way.

Through all this family drama and fun, we add in so many other things... learning to stand up for yourself, becoming a huge success, babies and deaths, a couple of fabulous dogs that fall in love and, oh yeah, a serial killer with a connection to Adrian and a desire to make her the final victim in the story.

It is classic Nora Roberts all the way through, and readers will once again be involved from the very first page. It is a wonderfully written story that makes you really care about each character, with all their different personalities and quirks. In my humble opinion, with “Legacy,” Nora Roberts has achieved a new personal best in her years of storytelling.

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



## MIDNIGHT WATER CITY

By Chris McKinney

I am always up for a good murder mystery, and I also love tearing through a good science fiction thriller. “Midnight Water City” fulfills both of these literary treats, for it is an excellent murder mystery that takes place in a richly developed possible future.

Thirty years ago from the book’s present day, a giant asteroid named Sessho-seki nearly destroyed the planet Earth. It was thankfully destroyed by the brilliant scientist Akira Kimura. But for the hard-boiled detective narrator that worked for Akira during that difficult time, his life couldn’t be worse. He’s on his fourth wife and he has a cruddy job as a detective in a world that hasn’t seen a lot of crime since it was saved so long ago. Even with his natural ability of synesthesia, which allows him to literally see murder in bright colors, he isn’t as successful in his life as when he was working at Akira’s side.

The detective’s life only gets worse when Akira, maybe his only friend, is killed by methodical dissection in a futuristic chamber used for keeping people young. The world wants to believe it was assisted suicide, but he knows this was murder, cold and calculated. The detective gives up his job to delve into the mystery of Akira’s death. But what he discovers is not what he wanted. Akira may not have been the saint she seemed to be, and what she did in the past is finally coming back to haunt her and the underwater world they all now live in.

I have never read a book that combines noir and science fiction together in such a compelling package. McKinney has rich descriptions, fun inner dialogue, and a villain that is really quite chilling. I am so glad I got the opportunity to read this book! Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of “The Amazing Imagination Machine” by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## PRODIGAL SON

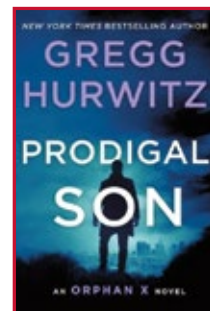
By Gregg Hurwitz

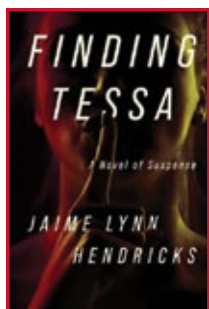
Gregg Hurwitz delivers on “Prodigal Son,” a deeply personal tale in the sixth installment of his popular *Orphan X* series.

Evan Smoak is best known to readers as The Nowhere Man and, of course, by his deadly original name of Orphan X. He was the best of the best when it came to government assassination jobs. Pulled from the Pride House Group Home and trained to kill, Smoak shifted gears to become The Nowhere Man to atone for that bloody life. Only now he’s been asked to retire his vigilante moniker in exchange for an official pardon and the promise of a normal life, something Smoak knows extraordinarily little about. To say no to the offer may very well be a death sentence. Things get a bit complicated when a woman claiming to be his birth mother enters his life and asks for The Nowhere Man’s help. She claims to have given him up for adoption many years ago, but now needs him to help a young man who is up to his neck in trouble. The task is right up The Nowhere Man’s alley as a crusader for those in desperate need. She asks him to help Andrew Duran, a man in the wrong place at the wrong time, who has inadvertently fallen under the deadly gaze of high-level U.S. military influence. To help Duran, Smoak would have to break his agreement to retire and put his own life at risk.

Spiked with emotion, gadgetry, and danger, Hurwitz serves up another James Bond-style epic in “Prodigal Son,” one that builds cleverly on the storylines that came before it and leaves fans with the promise of more to come.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■





## FINDING TESSA

By Jaime Lynn Hendricks

All readers will agree that there are debut novels ranging in the so-so category, some that are sort-of entertaining, and some that are pretty good. Then, as it is with this book, there are ones that are exceptional. "Finding Tessa," the first novel from Jamie Lynn Hendricks' mind, definitely falls into the exceptional category. It kept me riveted from beginning to end. In fact, I read the entire book in about five hours.

The story is about a young couple in love and, therefore, everything in their world should be perfect...right? Absolutely wrong. This is a thrilling story about abuse and revenge that is full of so many twists and turns the reader is in for a very real and memorable roller-coaster ride. Tessa has been running her entire life; her past is so full of pain that trying to reinvent herself has become a personal quest. She tends to always find the worst possible situations and, once found, make the same mistakes. But she's finally had enough. She is going to create a quiet and happy life that is safe.

Enter...Jace Montgomery. Not only does he save her, he then becomes her whole new world. Of course, nothing is that easy. Through a series of twist and turns Tessa ends up missing, Jace ends up accused of murder, and friends turn out to be enemies. It is a classic case of trying to outrun an old life and sprinting directly into a new one that is not real and may never be so.

Hendricks has created a thrilling and suspenseful story that is very well-written and leads not only Tessa and Jace on a scary ride, but the reader as well. It is truly worth all readers' time and energy. And I, for one, look forward to a second amazing novel.

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

## DEATH OF AN IRISH MUMMY

By Catie Murphy

American Army veteran Megan Malone has relocated to Dublin, Ireland and earns her living as a driver for Leprechaun Limousine Service. Meghan's job often requires her to deal with difficult clients, but none have been as annoying as her current one—brash Texan, Cherise Williams, who believes herself to be the heir to an old Irish earldom. She's arrived in Ireland to claim her inheritance, and insists that Megan drive her to St. Michael's Church in Dublin, where she intends to get a DNA sample from one of the mummified earls. The church pastor cleverly suggests that Cherise check out her claim first at the Central Statistics Office before any DNA sample be taken. Agreeing that this is a good idea, Cherise returns to her hotel to rest while Megan picks up Raquel, one of Cherise's daughters, at the airport. When Megan and Raquel arrive back at the hotel, they find Cherise murdered.

This is Meghan's third experience with the murder of a client. She was involved with the death of a celebrity food blogger several months ago, and also that of a well-known professional golfer. In both cases, she was helpful to handsome Detective Paul Bourke in solving those crimes. Raquel's sisters immediately fly to Ireland to find out how their mother died and decide to pursue her claim to the inheritance. They beg Meghan to continue to be the family driver because they trust her. Since Meghan has once again been given the same unique opportunity, Detective Bourke asks her to keep her ears open and report to him if she learns anything that will help him solve the murder.

"Death of an Irish Mummy" is the third in the *Dublin Driver* mystery series by Catie Murphy. It's a tightly written, entertaining plot with a likeable protagonist and well-developed secondary characters. Fascinating background information about Ireland and its history adds to the enjoyment of this fun read. Highly recommended.

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



## DENIED

By Mary Keliikoa



Having already read "Derailed," I was so excited to have a chance to jump on "Denied," the second in Keliikoa's the *Kelly Pruett PI* series.

Wow. Where do I start? This sophomore book continues Kelly's story as a PI who has inherited her late father's business. This time, she's been contacted by an old high school friend. Stephanie is married and pregnant and frantic about her missing father Vince, so she enlists Kelly's help to find him. After Kelly discovers a severed finger in Vince's garbage, she begins to look into his past to see where he might have gone off to. He had a gambling problem, sure, but once Vince's body is found, the police claim it was an accident. The more Kelly finds out about his last moments, however, the less sure she is that it wasn't murder.

Did the bookies have a hand in making Vince disappear? Or was it his shady son-in-law? Could it be the mayor who wanted to keep him quiet about the land he was developing or could it be his scheming wife? Was it his landlord or could it be the woman he was seen with around town for months, and quite possibly the last one to see him? Was it his old employer, or the old coworker, both who denied even knowing him? The options are endless and the question remains, did Vince just know too much?

Keliikoa is a master at making everyone a suspect in this gripping page-turner, a fantastic follow-up to her debut. I was thrown completely off the trail, and it tied up perfectly in a shocking ending. I can't wait for the final conclusion to this amazing trilogy.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of "Finding Tessa" ■



## JUNGLE UP

By Nick Pirog



Crime, action, humor, romance, deception, and did I say humor? This adventure that takes place in the Amazon jungle of Bolivia has all that and more.

The cast here is quite large, so you'll have to pay attention, but it's so worth it. There are two main male characters, the star of the series, Thomas Prescott, and Andy Depree, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago.

Everyone has their own reasons for going into the deep, dark, dangerous jungle, but all of the reasons swirl around Dr. Gina Brady, who has been living with a primitive tribe for several years and has now been kidnapped. A wealthy documentary maker, Jonathan Roth, finances the trip that Andy is on, wanting to shoot a chart-busting account of finding a fabled, lost city of riches. He brings soldiers, cameramen, archeologists, and other anthropologists—even a writer to compliment the filmed account of the trip. He's not a nice person and is determined to look good on camera at the expense of everyone else. But he's furnishing the money.

Thomas, who has gotten an urgent message from Dr. Brady, arrives with a mercenary, a local guide, and, possibly, a drug lord, to snatch his former lover from the clutches of whoever has captured her. He's not sure he can trust any of the people on his team, but he has to depend upon them if he's going to rescue Gina, a former lover whom he should never have let get away.

The story follows these two parties, and also that of Gina and her captors, who have their own mission.

All three groups brave the very real dangers of the jungle, including dengue fever, crocodiles, and human predators on their separate missions, until they collide.

The story is breathtaking and takes us on a journey we weren't expecting and won't soon forget.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter" ■

## BLACK ICE

By Carin Gerhardsen



It's a dark, cold, winter day in Gotland, an island off the coast of Sweden, when two cars have a near miss head-on collision that changes the lives of everyone involved—that is, everyone who survived.

Jeanette is in the car with her married lover on their way to a rendezvous. Overloaded with packages, Sandra accepts a ride from the kindness of a stranger. Jan is rushing home after an encounter his wife wouldn't be so pleased to hear about.

Surrounded by darkness and black ice, one dangerous swerve sends another car and its passengers to their demise. Or did it? Nothing is as it seems in this thrilling, fast-paced page turner. Unreliable narrators and short chapters give an unsettling feeling of never really knowing what's going on while thinking you have it all figured out. Was Jeanette driving, or was her lover? Who did she really leave for dead off the embankment that fateful night? Was Sandra's encounter with the stranger really so random—or so kind? What is Jan hiding, besides his trysts, from his wife? No one is who they seem when all three stories collide in a crash that doesn't need the help of black ice to get you there.

Told in three points of view in 2014, from the time of the accident, and in 2018, while the survivors deal with the aftermath, you'll go through a wild ride of twists and turns worthy of the mountainous roads in Gotland. A thriller you won't want to miss!

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of "Finding Tessa" ■



## THE KAISER'S WEB

By Steve Berry

Cotton Malone is back in this 16th installment of the outstanding series, and the one thing that can be said for sure is that this character remains exciting, fresh, thrilling, and edge-of-the-seat fantastic.

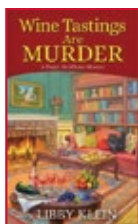
In this latest book, the German Chancellor spot needs to be filled and the election is coming up fast. Current Chancellor, Marie Eisenhuth, has kept the seat for sixteen years. Things she stands for include immigration, open borders, and giving back to the citizens in order to still make-up for what the government did during the days of the Nazi Party. This time around, Theodor Pohl is her opponent; his strong belief that has kept him in a neck-and-neck race with Marie is the fact that he believes that Germany is for Germans. Period! No apologies are needed, especially since the Nazi atrocities happened ages ago.

Turn to America and the former president, Danny Daniels. Currently serving as a senator, he's actually a friend of Marie's. The current Chancellor asks Danny for help because she's been hearing odd rumors that the evil, infamous Nazi Martin Bormann did not die in Berlin as claimed; and she wants to uncover the truth behind what happened to the wealth of money Hitler controlled. With her request, former President Daniels turns to his retired top-secret operative, Cotton Malone. Cotton agrees to investigate these issues, bringing along his beloved Cassiopeia, who knows all about the link between danger and money.

Heading to Chile, the adventure soon begins for the duo as they attempt to go back in time and find out the real events of April 30, 1945; who exactly dies, and where the money disappeared to. AKA: The Kaiser's Web.

As always with Berry, the story is meticulously written; it offers information on political aspects in present day as well as a fantastically realistic history that makes you feel like you watched the end of the WWII horror from the very front row. 5 Stars!

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



## WINE TASTINGS ARE MURDER

By Libby Klein

Poppy McAllister's return to Cape May, New Jersey, after a long absence has been jam-packed with surprises—some good, some not so good. Tops on the good side is Poppy's rekindled romance with her ex-fiancé, Tim, now the owner of a successful local restaurant who has hired Poppy to bake gluten-free pastries for the eatery. Tying at number one is hunky Italian barista, Gia Larusso, who has not only given Poppy the chance to feature her baked goods at his establishment but has also professed his undying love for her. How can Poppy choose between these two when she has strong feelings for both?

Poppy and her eccentric, outspoken Aunt Ginny have agreed to host a Wine and Cheese Happy Hour for a tour group at Butterfly House, the quaint Queen Anne home they've recently renovated as a bed and breakfast. Vince Baker, on the tour with his trophy wife, Sunny, and her teacup Pomeranian, Tammy Fae, is immediately Poppy's choice for the Most Difficult Guest Award. And Vince's mood gets even worse when his daughter, Alyce Finch, and her annoying husband, Ryan, show up as surprise guests on the tour as well.

Lily Snow, from Pink Sandals Boutique Tours, is the leader of the group, and Poppy is anxious to make a good impression on her. The other tour members are a young couple, Willow and Ken Mason; a retired couple, Rosie and "Cowboy Bob" Smith (who arrive in a Winnebago); and Zara Pinette, a lifestyle blogger. The first night "welcome party" is filled with sniping between Alyce and her new "stepmother," Sunny. Things go downhill from there, culminating in Vince's sudden death the next day with Sunny as the prime suspect.

"Wine Tastings Are Murder" is a well-plotted mystery with an outrageously funny cast of characters, a love triangle, and yummy, gluten-free recipes. Highly recommended.

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



## BITTERROOT LAKE

By Alicia Beckman

I enjoyed this interesting blend of supernatural/mystery/suspense. It's set in the author's home of Montana, and she evokes a very real sense of the place.

Sarah McCaskill's husband died a scant eighteen days ago, but she's ready to set her mind on something else, so she accepts her mother's invitation to return to the Whitetail Lodge where she grew up.

The place brings back a lot of good memories and few horrible ones. The latter are brought to the forefront when the central figure of the bad memories is murdered and her childhood friend, Janine, is a main suspect. Four women were involved in the old tragedy, Sarah, Janine, their friend Nic, and Sarah's sister Holly. There had been a party at the lodge with them and three young men, Luca, Jeremy, and Michael. A tragic car wreck followed an altercation and Michael ended up dead. The driver had been Lucas, the man who has just been murdered. The third man, Jeremy, became Sarah's husband, now newly deceased. There was another tragedy that night, too, though. One that was kept mostly secret and has always preyed on Sarah's mind. All four women are here now and the past is intruding.

A ghost appears and Sarah thinks she is trying to guide her to uncover the bitter roots of today's events.

Sarah is also worried about her mother, who is acting strangely and, after insisting she come help clean out the lodge, is ghosting her and Holly.

There's a lot for Sarah to dig through to reach the roots of not only what happened back then, twenty-five years ago, but also what is happening today. I hope you'll be as fascinated with this stand-alone novel as I am.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter" ■

## SILENCE IN THE LIBRARY

By Katharine Schellman



I always love a good murder mystery, and there was something special about Katharine Schellman's "Silence in the Library." This proper mystery had me guessing until the end.

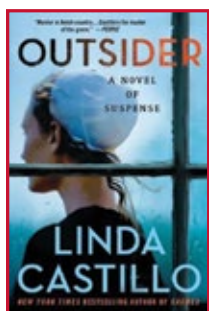
Lily Adler has enough on her hands without adding murder to the mix. Her arrogant, disapproving father has come to town to pay his respects to his old friend, Sir Charles, who just remarried. Not long after his arrival, Sir Charles is found dead in his own personal library, bludgeoned in the back of the head.

Too many people are willing to write off this case as an unfortunate accident, but Lily isn't convinced. The members of the household act like they are hiding something. They are much too eager to send the Bow Street Runners, local detectives, away and stop the investigation. However, when a maid in the house is also found dead, there is no more denying that something foul is afoot. It doesn't help that the members of the family are all too willing to pin the blame on someone else.

With the local detectives being more and more ostracized from the investigation, Lily knows that she must take matters into her own hands. An old friend to the Wyatt family, Lily is determined to find out who killed her father's close friends. But the truth she discovers is far more unsettling than she would have thought the Wyatts capable of.

This was a lovely mystery to read! I enjoyed the properness of it, as it was set in the 1880s. The story was very clever, which made me eager to keep reading. For all those looking for an enjoyable mystery starring a headstrong, independent female lead, "Silence in the Library" is for you.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## OUTSIDER

By Linda Castillo

It's always amazing to see a series that can go on this long and still be an "instant bestseller" on the *NYT* list every time a new book comes out, but when you're dealing

with author Linda Castillo, it seems to be the "norm."

This is number twelve in the beloved *Kate Burkholder* series and may just become the fan favorite.

During a blizzard of monumental proportions in the small town of Painter's Mill, a call comes in to Chief of Police Kate Burkholder's phone from an Amish widower named Adam who stumbled across a car embedded in a snowdrift; inside, there lies an unconscious woman, and he needs Kate's help. Kate isn't prepared for what she finds; the woman inside is an estranged friend of hers by the name of Gina Colorosa. Kate and Gina went to the Police Academy together and Columbus where they became the best of friends. But as time moved forward, so did they. Kate is a happy Chief of Police in the village, whereas Gina is running for her very life, accused of some truly heinous crimes.

As her story unfolds, Kate aids Gina in hiding on Adam's farm. While she's doing that, Kate and her love, State Agent John Tomasetti, put their heads together in order to investigate Gina's tale. Unfortunately, their work leads them into the middle of pure danger that involves corruption and murder within a police department. When a killer appears and violence runs amuck, the duo must find a way to stop the pain and bring the real enemies to justice.

Once again, Castillo proves she's the perfect voice for criminal procedure books, offering up a true mystery with multi-levels and a plot that truly feels like a nightmare at times. Add in the sparks of romance that kindle between the familiar couple, and you have another visit to Painter's Mill that you do *not* want to miss.

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

## LIES WE BURY

By Elle Marr

Claire Lou is a photographer in Portland, Oregon, who hopes that taking pictures of others will block out the horrible images in her head of her childhood. She, along with her two sisters, were born in captivity to three different kidnapped women, and barely escaped with their lives nearly two decades ago. Now twenty-seven, her new name and her limited contact with those from her past make it especially creepy when she gets a note: "SEE YOU SOON, MISSY."

She's horrified that someone found out her real name—Marissa—and that fear increases tenfold when she gets the news that Chet, her biological father, is about to be released from prison. Making it worse, when Claire is called to photograph the site of a murder, she recognizes things from her childhood at the scene. Someone wants her exactly where she is and is threatening her freedom. At the same time, she reluctantly agrees to be interviewed by a reporter, Shia, who is writing a book about her time in captivity. He's promised her part of his advance, and she's not exactly flush with cash. But as they dig deeper, more childhood artifacts appear that seem to be leading her to her next crime scene. She's convinced someone wants her at these murders to prevent them from happening, and she's one step too late every time. However, her constant presence means she's suspect number one.

Now on the run, she's in a game of cat and mouse to clear her name and find out who's committing the murders before she, and everyone she cares about, dies next. A shocking twist regarding her childhood years in captivity is delivered perfectly and will leave you gasping for more. A home-run thriller for your collection.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of "Finding Tessa" ■



## THE BOX IN THE WOODS

By Maureen Johnson

I'm pretty sure I could be the leader of the Stevie Bell fan club. After devouring books one through three of the *Truly Devious* series by author Maureen Johnson in one sitting, I was in no way ready to let go of Stevie Bell and her friends. Lucky for me, neither was Maureen.

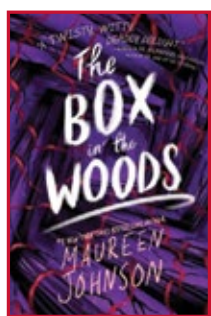
Stevie is back, and this time she's headed to summer camp. If you know anything about Stevie, you know she's not exactly "camp counselor" material. But she's been handed an

opportunity to escape her less-than-exciting summer at home to spend a few months at Sunny Pines, formerly known as Camp Wonder Falls—the same camp where four counselors were found dead in the woods back in the 1970's. The new owner of Sunny Pines only wants one thing from Stevie—for her to solve the cold case that has plagued the small town of Barlow Corners for decades—and she even gets to bring her friends along for some added extra fun.

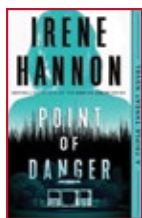
However, it's not long before we come to realize that not everyone in Barlow Corners wants Stevie to solve the mystery of Camp Wonder Falls. And when a family member of one of the camp's victims winds up mysteriously dead, Stevie must do everything she can to keep her own head above water...or die trying.

I love a good horror film and the flashbacks to the camp during the time of the murders will remind you of some of the best ones to hit the screen. Remember that famous hockey mask worn by a familiar 'crazy' named Jason? Stevie and the rest of the cast of this murder mystery will leave you begging for at least a few more of the *Truly Devious* series. Coincidentally, a series that's *truly* awesome to read!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■







## POINT OF DANGER

By Irene Hannon

RITA award-winning author Irene Hannon steps up to the microphone and unleashes the first in her *Triple Threat* series with her novel, “Point of Danger.”

Conservative radio host Eve Reilly, one of three tight-knit sisters, won’t back down from her beliefs, not even when a bomb is delivered on her doorstep. She may have a thick skin when it comes to feedback for her on-air views, but things have taken a decidedly more personal, and deadly tone. The bomb, though more threatening than deadly, leaves Reilly with a dire warning: Be silent or be silenced. Enter police detective Brent Lange, who is tasked with discovering who’s behind the ever-escalating threats and contend with a fearless woman who refuses to back down from her right-wing views. During the course of his investigation, Lange soon begins to fall for the threatened host, despite his own troubled romantic past. Besides Reilly, Hannon’s tale promises to delve deeper into the lives of her two sisters in forthcoming *Triple Threat* entries.

Heavy on the romance, with Christian themes, Hannon spins a tale straight out of today’s headlines.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER

By Mary Dixie Carter

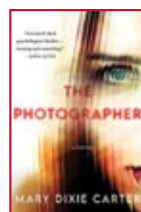
Some people trust too easily. Others lie too easily.

When Delta is hired to photograph a birthday party for Amelia and Fritz Straub’s daughter, she becomes enamored with all three of them. She finds ways to insert herself into their lives, first by using their eleven-year-old daughter, Natalie. She becomes the regular babysitter, but she wants more. She wants Amelia and Fritz to want her as much as she wants them.

Soon, she’s living a lie in her head, going as far as to photoshop herself in their house with them. Amelia, struggling with fertility, expresses her desire for another child and Delta finally finds a way she can be a useful—and permanent—part of the Straub family, and she offers herself up for surrogacy.

What follows is a game of manipulation and resentment, fantasies and lies, all which come barreling to a finish with a twist I didn’t see coming.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of “Finding Tessa” ■



## SAFE IN MY ARMS

By Sara Shepard

Lauren, Andrea and Ronnie have all enrolled their children in the same local private school, Silver Swans. They all want what’s best for their kids, and Silver Swans, despite hitting a hard time recently, is still that. But after an awkward orientation where none of them feel welcomed except in the vicinity of each other, they begin to question if they’ve made the right choice for their children and for themselves.

Their discomfort is only heightened when, after the first day of school, they each receive messages in their children’s school bags that confirm their worst fears—they’re not wanted in this school and someone who knows all of their darkest secrets will go to great lengths to get them out. After all, they each have something very important to hide.

Although they don’t know each other well, the three mothers form a bond as they try to uncover who might be this desperate to scare them out of the community.

An almost-murder, a few good twists and turns, the question of how far a person will go to protect their child, and a myriad of secrets make “Safe in My Arms” a wonderfully exciting and easy to devour tale.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## CHILDREN OF CHICAGO

By Cynthia Pelayo

I have good memories of staying up and watching horror movies with my cousins late into the night. Pelayo’s “Children of Chicago” brought back those good times with my family in the engaging, horrific story that she paints in these pages.

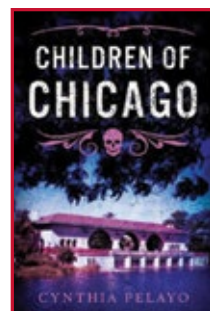
Lauren Medina’s life may as well be a horror story. She’s a homicide detective on Chicago’s streets, which means she’s seen her fair share of death. Her own family is gone; her little sister died tragically in her youth, and her stepmother went shortly after. Her dad just died recently, making all of Lauren’s own wounds come back to the surface.

Those wounds refuse to die as children start popping up dead all around Chicago. Everywhere the children die, the message ‘Pay the Piper’ is left behind in spray paint. Though the case of dead children seems pretty open and closed, Lauren isn’t so sure. As the ‘Pay the Piper’ message spreads throughout the story, Lauren realizes that something even more sinister is happening among the children, something she herself went through so many years ago when she was their age.

The Pied Piper is the one leaving the messages throughout town and taking so many children. Lauren already dealt with him once in her past; she can’t afford to have him wrecking the city of Chicago again, for herself and for the sake of anyone she’s ever cared about. But to deal with him may mean she would have to force some things out from her past she can’t bear to admit.

Pelayo wove in facts about Chicago and theories about fairy tales so seamlessly in this book that I was enthralled with each page. She made Lauren come to life, and I absolutely loved the supernatural Pied Piper monster who reminded me of the popular *Candyman*. It’s a perfect book for those who love horror!

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of “The Amazing Imagination Machine” by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## MURDER IN AN IRISH BOOKSHOP

By Carlene O'Connor

The residents of Kilbane, County Cork, Ireland are eagerly awaiting the grand opening of its first-ever bookshop, Turn the Page. Local garda (police) Siobhan O'Sullivan doesn't have much spare time for reading, but she's excited to have a chance to read a good novel when her schedule permits. As part of the grand opening, the shop is hosting several Irish authors. The plan is for the authors to autograph books for their adoring fans at the opening, so bookshop owners Padraig and Oran McCarthy have asked for a police presence to keep order. Siobhan is happy to be assigned to the event, despite the fact that it falls on her birthday.

The day before the bookshop is scheduled to open, Margaret O'Shea, who oversees the local book club with an iron hand is found dead near the bookshop. Margaret was getting along in years, so her death shouldn't be a surprise. But Siobhan is suspicious because Margaret apparently died outside, which is odd—she hadn't left her room for years.

The three authors make a “grand entrance” into Kilbane, accompanied by a well-known literary agent. It's immediately apparent that there's a lot of friction and competition among the group. The agent, Darren Kilroy, also represents wildly popular, reclusive author Michael O'Mara, and has announced that he will be signing one of the three authors to a long-term contract after their month's residency in Kilbane is up.

When Siobhan arrives at Turn the Page on official garda business, she's surprised that a birthday celebration, complete with a cake and candles, is waiting for her. Just as she walks in the door and sees her cake, the shop lights go out. When they go on again a few minutes later, one of the authors is dead.

I always look forward to a new title in this series, and “Murder in an Irish Bookshop” is another great read. I loved it! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Politics Can be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## BONE CANYON

By Lee Goldberg

This is Lee Goldberg's second book revolving around Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Detective Eve Ronin, and he continues to show us what a fantastic, strong main character is. The first book was good, yes; but this second one was even better.

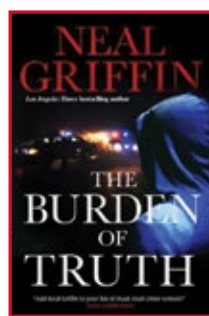
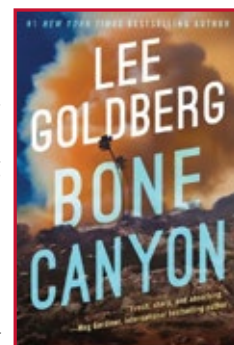
The Santa Monica mountains have gone through one of those horrific wildfires recently that seem to consume everything around them. However, this wildfire is not only destroying, but also helping...to uncover dead bodies of missing people that were buried in the overgrown brush of the mountains. Eve Ronin and her partner, Duncan Pavone, will deal with the repercussions of this particular ‘return of the dead.’

The team lands a cold case that becomes even odder as the bones of a 20-something are uncovered, and the horrible details of her murder emerge. Ronin and Pavone are set on the trail of a horrible crime and must use all their skills to uncover a wealth of cover-ups and corruption from a long time ago. Eve—already unpopular in her department due to her famous history—is about to become even more despised as she has to turn her eye on people within the sheriff's department to find a killer.

I enjoyed this book immensely. Eve is a strong, strong leader of this series, and although it is a serious tale, there are some very witty, charismatic moments that come at the expense of Hollywood...which always puts a smile on one's face.

This is the type of fast-paced, well written story we have come to expect from Goldberg, who excels at writing police procedurals, while including well-rounded characters who come across as intelligent and determined, with just the right amount of humor to make it a perfect read!

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



## THE BURDEN OF TRUTH

By Neal Griffin

*Newberg Mysteries* author Neal Griffin boils up a pot of modern-day intrigue in his fourth novel, “The Burden of Truth”—a tragic stand-alone tale of loss, family, and the court of public opinion.

Society's crushing pressures differ depending on your zip code, not to mention the size of your checkbook. For eighteen-year-old Omar Ortega, that pressure is the thug life.

He's managed to steer clear of gangs, at least for the most part.

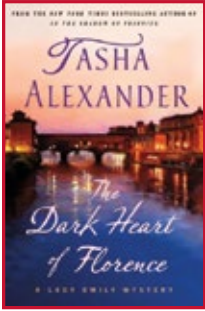
With high school graduation and enlistment on the horizon, he dreams of getting his family out of the barrio, where they have lived since the deportation of his father. Now, with his mother working as a house cleaner, Omar is the head of the household and works a variety of jobs while still managing to keep up his grades. His path takes a turn for the worse when he consents to hang out with a gang leader for a spin around town, though he only agreed to do so to protect his family. When a cop is murdered during a traffic stop, Omar is fingered as the killer and thrown in jail. Travis Jackson, new to the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, picks up the case. But by the time the truth is discovered. Omar's life has been changed forever.

Brimming with multiple perspectives and “before” and “after” narratives, Griffin weaves an emotional novel that reaches deep into hopelessness and the plight faced by so many marginalized members of American society.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■

## THE DARK HEART OF FLORENCE

By Tasha Alexander



This novel brings Lady Emily Hargreaves to Florence. The year is 1903. The surface story is that there have been some break-ins at the palazzo of her husband's daughter, Kat. Her husband, however, has a secret mission for His

Majesty.

Lady Emily is used to this but doesn't like it. She takes along a companion, her dear friend Cécile de Lac. It's a good thing, too, because a murdered corpse turns up in her stepdaughter's bed while they're there. Now the two ladies must investigate the murder and must also figure out what the secret mission is and how it's connected to the mounting body count.

Meanwhile, back in 1480, in the same fabulous palazzo, Mina Portinari is struggling with the attitudes of her times. Her beloved grandfather (Nonno), Teo Portinari, has given her the education of a male heir, teaching her to read Latin and Greek, and introducing her to Petrarch, and the like. This proves, eventually, to be her undoing. She finds a priest, Father Cambio, who shares her passion for literature. I won't spoil the book for you by telling you what a dark path we must travel with her.

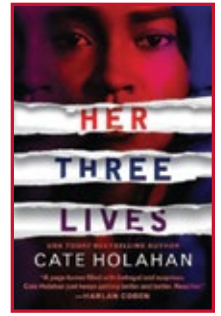
Back in the 1900s, Lady Emily is beginning to wonder if she can trust the staff. They are loyal to her stepdaughter, who is away, but are they loyal to her? She overhears things that make her uneasy about being there. She and Cécile embark on their own mission to uncover a fabled treasure, said to be hidden in the home hundreds of years ago, even though it is also said to be disastrous for those who seek it. It's a good cover for their investigations.

If you love historical fiction, and Florence, you'll love the dense prose that puts you right back there, whisking you from the late 1400s to the early 1900s, back and forth, drawing you deeper and deeper into secrets and conspiracies. Have fun!

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter" ■

## HER THREE LIVES

By Cate Holahan



Greg Hamlin and his wife, Leah, separate after 25 years of marriage. Their two adult children, Violet and Paul, are reeling as the divorce proceedings move forward. To add insult to injury, he's taken up with thirty-two-year-old Jade Thompson. And now she's pregnant, and they're engaged. What could go wrong?

It turns out, a lot. As Greg and Jade prepare for a night out, two criminals enter their home. Greg tries to fend them off, but he's beaten into a coma. When he wakes a week later, he's missing part of his skull, and Jade has lost the baby. When they get home, Greg is paranoid and installs cameras everywhere, promising they'll never fall victim again. However, while obsessively watching every inch of his house, he discovers there's more to Jade than meets the eye.

He begins to discover her lies as he tracks her every move. Why is she visiting a prison? Who is the man she met in the coffee shop? As his daughter makes her ill thoughts about Jade very well known—she's certain Jade set up the entire robbery that almost killed her father—Greg begins to doubt everything Jade says to him. However, the cops uncover an insurance policy taken out on Jade, by Greg, worth two million dollars.

This was a slow burn, but really picked up in the last third when the secrets start mounting. You'll have to decide who to trust and not only who's lying, but why. Because some people will do anything to protect those they love.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of "Finding Tessa" ■

## THE LOST APOTHECARY

By Sarah Penner



I have always enjoyed stories laced with murder and poison, but I do not know if I have ever read these themes in a more poignant, thrilling story as Sarah Penner's, "The Lost Apothecary." I found myself enthralled by the story and its themes, wanting to devour it all in one sitting.

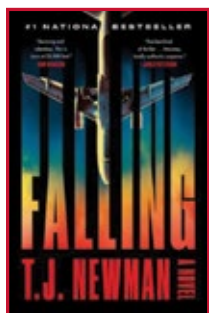
This story is set in the past and the present, the past focusing on an old apothecary who, after a betrayal in her own past, sells poison to women whose husbands or mates have betrayed them in some way. Now she is so tightly bound to this life of holding onto other women's dark secrets that she cannot find a peaceful way out. She usually sells to older women, so when a twelve-year-old girl by the name of Eliza comes into her shop one day, her already unstable life is thrown off the rails.

In the present, the story focuses on Caroline. She has held onto hopes and dreams for her whole life, but her life comes shattering to the ground when she discovers her husband's infidelity. Distraught, Caroline goes to London to get away from her husband and reprioritize her life. While doing so, she delves into the secret of the lost apothecary, discovering the past of the woman who sold poisons to get her mind off her own seemingly horrible future.

Penner combines the past and present so flawlessly in this story, where Caroline is discovering the past just as the apothecary and Eliza are stepping into an uncertain future. The ending held twists I never saw coming that thrilled me and kept me glued to the page. To anyone wanting to feel a little "girl power" in their life, this is definitely the book to read.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## FALLING

By T.J. Newman

Relatively speaking, a five-hour flight isn't very long. But for the passengers and crew onboard Flight 416 from Los Angeles to JFK, it's going to feel like a lifetime.

Captain Bill Hoffman has 144 passengers on his flight. He's got an impeccable safety record and an incredible sense of pride in his job as Captain. But when thirty minutes into the flight he's contacted by someone who has kidnapped his family—wife, Carrie; son, Scott; and infant daughter, Elise—

and is demanding that in exchange for their safety he must crash the plane, he's left with an impossible choice. First and foremost, who can he ask for help?

Despite threats of violence being brought down on the heads of his family if he tells anyone what is happening, Bill turns to the flight crew, mainly Jo—his longtime friend and someone he's worked with countless times on flights over the years. Jo, along with "Big Daddy" and Kellie, the other flight crew members, make it their mission to protect the passengers against whatever comes their way. The crew members are more than coworkers, they're family, and they're willing to do whatever it takes to protect each other and the passengers on board. They are a truly loveable group even in the highest of stressful settings.

From the very first sentence, I knew I was in for a high-intensity, heart-pounding ride and "Falling" delivered. Take this book on all your summer vacations, but do yourself a favor and wait until you've arrived at your destination before cracking the cover. This story had me on the very edge of my seat, and I'm so glad that seat wasn't in an actual airplane. There's *no* way this won't be a hit.

T.J. Newman is a name you'll be hearing for a long time to come.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## CHOOSE ME

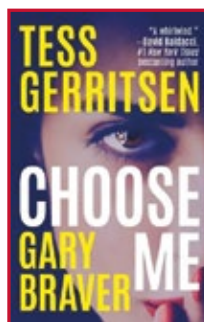
By Tess Gerritsen and Gary Braver

It's no understatement to say that this book is written by two of the most excellent writers in the community. They have now come together to create a murder mystery that is fast-paced and has a fabulous ending that I truly did not see coming.

The story begins with the death of a beautiful and smart college student named Taryn Moore. It begins there, and then reverses direction, sending the reader backwards in time as the lead detective, Frankie Loomis, arrives on the scene and tries to figure out why this seemingly perfect young woman fell from her apartment balcony and lies dead in the gutter. Everyone is confused. Murder? Suicide? But the bigger question is why? After all, to the outside world, Taryn had it all.

Frankie knows in her gut that there's a mystery behind this crime that will take all her experience to uncover. To one English professor, Jack Dorian, Taryn was an object of fantasy. She was off-limits, of course, and he knew that, but what soon comes out is the fact that Taryn may have had a dangerous streak that affected those she was interested in. And with her death, Jack Dorian is thrust into a macabre web that he needs to get out of before it's too late.

Overall, this is an intriguing story revolving around a victim who, it turns out, has a true nature that does not fall in the category of "victim." For me, as it will be for many, the best part of the book was the way the crime was woven around the stories focusing on subjects being studied in the professors' classes at the school. Not one part of this disappoints, so take the time to read it, ASAP. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## A TIME TO SWILL

By Sherry Harris

Chicago native

Chloe Jackson drove to Florida three months ago to fulfill a promise she made to her deceased best friend, Boone Slidell.

Before Boone left for his final tour of duty in Afghanistan, he asked Chloe to go to Emerald Cove, in the Florida Panhandle, to help his grandmother run the Sea Glass Saloon if he didn't return. Chloe tells herself that she's only in Emerald Cove temporarily until she's sure Vivi is okay. She decides to stay when she discovers Boone has left her his share of the business and his beachfront house in his will. Plus, she can't help being seduced by the laid-back vibe of the Gulf of Mexico.

Before Chloe heads to the Sea Glass every morning, she starts her day with a long run along Emerald Cove's beautiful sandy beach. During her regular run one foggy morning, she spots a large sailboat washed up on a sandbar. Concerned that there may be people on board who need help, she's propelled into action. She swims out to the boat and climbs aboard, but what she finds is a pitiful kitten mewing its little head off. She also finds a human skeleton in one of the ship's cabins. Frantic to get help, Chloe suddenly realizes the boat is drifting out to sea, grabs the cat and jumps overboard. Luckily for them both, a Good Samaritan comes to their rescue, deposits them on dry land, then disappears. The sailboat is the *Fair Winds*, which disappeared twelve years earlier with four people aboard. One of the people presumed lost at sea was the first wife of Chloe's dear friend Ralph, who is now suspected of her murder. Chloe teams up with the mysterious and resourceful Ann Williams to solve the mystery.

"A Time to Swill" is the second in Sherry Harris's *Sea Glass Saloon Mystery* series. With crisp dialogue, a fast-moving plot, and engaging characters, it's a cozy reader's delight!

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



## A GOOD DAY FOR CHARDONNAY

By Darynda Jones

Sunshine Vicram is back again and all she's asking for is one, *just one*, seemingly normal day on the job as Sheriff of her small-town police force. But today is not that day. Her teenage daughter, Auri, is out chasing a possible serial killer from a very cold case, despite her mother's insistence that she let it be, and she keeps getting herself into trouble. Their relationship will give you "Gilmore Girl"-esque vibes, and if you're anything like me, you'll never tire of their witty banter.

Sunny is also still searching for answers to the questions she's never shaken from her abduction as a teenager; the main one being, who did it?

Then there's the raccoon that keeps escaping...and an endless list of quirky townspeople to keep her on her toes, not to mention a good handful of swoony men, mainly Sunny's love interest, Levi Revinder, who she just can't stop thinking about. Nope, Sunny is definitely not going to get that normal day today.

I laughed my way through the first few pages of this book before pausing to go back and read the first in the *Sunshine Vicram* series, "A Bad Day for Sunshine," because I knew I needed to know all there was about these delightful characters before diving into book two. After devouring both books, I know that there's no way I could love these characters any more than I do now.

This series is sure to be a hit and I'll be first in line to read any others from Darynda that come my way.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## THE NINJA'S BLADE

By Tori Eldridge

The Ninja Daughter comes out swinging in the rousing second installment of Tori Eldridge's *Lily Wong* series.

Wong goes undercover in "The Ninja's Blade" to roust a vile group of sex traffickers, but our protagonist quickly learns it's never easy knowing who to trust. Those she thinks of as friends may actually be enemies and those she sees as evil may very well be the victims. Wong, a modern-day ninja of Chinese and Norwegian descent, also faces another challenge. Her overbearing grandparents have swooped into town straight from Hong Kong. Things are never easy for Lily, not even at home. With family drama escalating, Lily must juggle their wishes for her future and her own deadly mission as she seeks to rescue the lost women of Los Angeles, one of which is a teen girl kidnapped right outside her home. Added to these problems, Lily's one-woman investigation is also hampered by traumatic flashes of her first adventure in "The Ninja's Daughter," which occurred only a month prior to this second installment. Her "no-holds-barred" approach to life, save perhaps for how she treats her own family, keeps the momentum moving toward its inevitable action-packed finish.

Eldridge delivers another gritty, pulse-pounding story in "The Ninja's Blade," read as a standalone or as part of the *Lily Wong* series.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## THE NEWCOMER

By Mary Kay Andrews

Letty Carnahan is on the run with her four-year-old niece, Maya, in tow. After discovering her sister Tanya dead on the floor of her New York City townhouse, Letty knows it's her responsibility to get the child somewhere safe. Especially because Tanya recently warned Letty that she was in danger and begged her to do whatever is necessary to keep Maya away from her ex and, strangely, Letty's ex as well: Evan Wingfield.

Evan is an entrepreneur and through some illegal dealings has more than enough money and resources to track down Letty and Maya, so they take off to Florida and wind up at The Murmuring Surf Motel. They're welcomed with open arms by the owner of the motel but the woman's son, who is also the town's handsome detective, Joe, is suspicious of their motives. Letty knows that back in New York fingers are pointing at her in the investigation of Tanya's murder and Maya's disappearance, and she's not sure how long she'll be able to keep their whereabouts a secret, especially when the motel's loveable but nosy guests are determined to figure out just why Letty looks so familiar to them.

A little bit romance, a little bit suspense, and everything you've come to know and love from a Mary Kay Andrews story, "The Newcomer" is sure to be a summer favorite!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## ACCEPTABLE RISK

By Lynette Eason

Author Lynette Eason returns to the world of military suspense with "Acceptable Risk," book two of her *Danger Never Sleeps* series.

Army journalist Sarah Denning hasn't had it easy. Taken hostage in the Middle East, Denning is lucky enough to have a father able to come to her aid. Being the offspring of an Army general has its perks. The General enlists Gavin Black, a former army ranger, and his crack team to go in and get her out safely. Following the dangerous, but ultimately successful escape, Sarah's life doesn't improve all that much. She ends up smack dab in the middle of a deadly mystery when her brother, also enlisted but stateside to recuperate, kills himself just when it seems his mental health is improving. The intrepid journalist suspects foul play almost from the beginning and, with Gavin at her side, begins her own investigation. It seems her brother Dustin isn't the only one who has recently committed suicide. Other soldiers of late, all after serving in Afghanistan, committed suicide just when it seemed they were doing better. And Sarah is determined to find out if the deaths are connected, even if it kills her.

Read as a gritty standalone or as part of the series, "Acceptable Risk" plunges readers into the darkness of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide—wrapped up in a fast-paced, gratifying page turner.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT

By Elle Cosimano

Despite the title, Finlay Donovan is absolutely *not* killing it. She's broke, stressed out, and her ex-husband just fired the nanny. Her literary agent is breathing down her neck to get her a book that she hasn't even started writing yet, and she just had to duct-tape her four-year-old daughter's hair to her forehead in order to narrowly miss the type of meltdown that only a four-year-old can deliver. And that's just the beginning of the laugh-out-loud scenarios that Finlay finds herself in throughout this hilarious new book from author Elle Cosimano.

Finlay finally manages to deliver her kids to her ex, and she narrowly makes it to her meeting with her agent at a local Panera. As they discuss the plot of her (again, unwritten) new suspense novel, Finlay can't help but notice the seemingly nervous woman passing glances her way from a nearby table. Turns out that the woman, Patricia, is looking for a permanent way out of her marriage from a man that no one would miss. So, when she overhears only bits and pieces of Finlay's conversation, she mistakes her for a contract killer and leaves her a note offering her \$50,000 in return for Finlay killing her husband.

Finlay isn't a killer...she just writes about them. But for \$50,000, could she be? She decides it's worth a shot to find out, and one thing leads to another before Finlay has a dead man in her garage, and her ex-nanny, Vero, watching her try to move the body. The two decide to tackle the problem together and there is no shortage of trouble, or laughs, as they dig more than one grave for themselves, literally and figuratively.

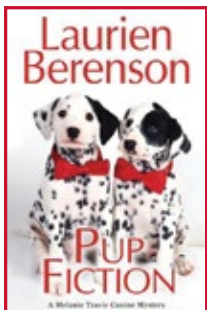
"Finlay Donovan is Killing It" was an entertaining, super-fun, hysterical mystery, and I loved every minute of it.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



## PUP FICTION

By Laurien Berenson



It's summer and Melanie Travis is looking forward to time off from her job as a special needs teacher at a private school in Greenwich, Connecticut. But as a mom of two very active boys, Davey and Kevin, "time off" doesn't mean she gets the chance to rest, relax and pamper herself. When five purebred champion poodles, plus another canine of uncertain lineage are added to the mix, plus the pressure Davey's under to bring Coral, a gorgeous poodle owned by Melanie's irascible Aunt Peg, to grand championship status during the summer dog shows, Melanie is one busy mom. Fortunately, both Davey and Kevin will be occupied during the week at a local summer camp run by Melanie's friend, Emily Grace. Davey's been hired as a counselor, and Kevin will be a camper. Melanie remains hopeful that she can carve out a few minutes every day for herself, but fate, of course, has other plans.

When Melanie and the boys arrive for the camp's opening day, she sees three beautiful Dalmatian puppies running loose on the grounds. Concerned about the puppies' safety, she helps Emily corral the dogs and return them to their pen. Emily assures Melanie that the pen was securely locked when she left. The escape of the three puppies is only the first of several mysterious "accidents" at the camp, culminating in a fire in the camp's kitchen. Melanie becomes increasingly concerned about the safety of the young campers there, especially her boys. Nothing, however, prepares her for the shocking discovery of a murdered man in the woods behind the camp, who turns out to be Emily's long-divorced ex-husband. Melanie's hopes for a little "me" time during the summer vanish as Emily is suspected of the crime and begs Melanie to find the true culprit.

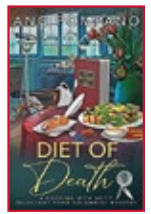
"Pup Fiction" is another terrific addition to the *Melanie Travis Mystery* series. Boomer, Lilly and I give it 10 dog biscuits—our highest rating!

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

## DIET OF DEATH

By Ang Pompano

Betty Ann Green has a big problem. Her column in *On Topic* magazine, "Cooking with Betty," is wildly popular, and chefs, cookbook authors, and other gurus in the culinary world



are always begging her for a personal interview. The reclusive Betty never accepts these requests. Instead, she sends her assistant, Quincy Lazzaro, in her place. One might wonder if Betty is painfully shy, or even worse, suffers from agoraphobia—fear of leaving the house. And one would be wrong. Betty Ann Green doesn't exist.

Which leads us to Quincy Lazzaro's big problem: he's been writing the "Cooking with Betty" column secretly since it began, with no cooking knowledge whatsoever. If it weren't for the recipes he's pilfered from his ex-wife's cookbook, the charade would have been over years ago and Quincy would be able to do what he really wants—become an investigative reporter. But, alas, Quincy is the victim of "Betty's" huge success, and his publisher (who's also a college chum and the only one who knows that Quincy is Betty) won't let him out of his contract.

When "Betty" is invited to interview self-proclaimed weight-loss expert Dr. Alan Tolzer about his "Westport Diet" book, Quincy arrives in his role as the columnist's assistant to take preliminary notes. It doesn't take Quincy long to pick up on the negative vibes at the so-called diet institute. But nothing has prepared Quincy for the shock of discovering Dr. Tolzer's dead body in his office after lunch.

The police are called, and one of the officers who arrives to investigate the death is Quincy's on-again, off-again girlfriend, police sergeant Nina Estevez. The police decide it's murder, and Quincy realizes that he's been given an unexpected opportunity that will free him from "Betty" forever. All he must do is figure out whodunnit.


"Diet of Death" is a real hoot of a mystery with a fast-moving plot and a fun cast of characters. Check it out!

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



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Some More*  
**GARY WILLIAMS**

In this third book, Gary and his dog, Guen, return to the historic streets of St. Augustine, Florida, to discuss such wide-ranging topics as Edgar Allan Poe, disco, black holes, dinosaur ghosts, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, Village People, and more. This continuing series is sure to leave you smiling, or shaking your head, or both.



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## THE HAUNTING OF BEATRIX GREEN

By Rachel Hawkins, Ash Parsons and Vicky Alvear Schecter

I love a good haunted house story. Much like Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House," and Richard Matheson's "Hell House," this haunted house story does not disappoint.

Set in Victorian England, "The Haunting of Beatrix Green" is the story of Beatrix Green, a phony medium who finds out quite by surprise that she has the gift after all, and James Walker, a man set out to discredit all mediums while hiding a haunted past of his own.

When James hires Beatrix to spend a night in Ashbury Manor to prove whether the house is actually haunted or not, she is wary but takes the job to gain financial independence. They are joined by Harry Smythe, who is a friend of Beatrix, as well as Amanda Reynolds, an American photographer, and James's childhood friend, Lord Stanhope, who has his own bizarre fascination with the manor. With twists and turns galore, this haunted house story has plenty of undertones brewing under the surface, including a love story, the power of friendship, the quest for independence, and a huge secret.

"The Haunting of Beatrix Green" is a page turner—one that Rachel Hawkins, Ash Parsons and Vicky Alvear Schecter all brought a different element to. I hope that there is a second episode in our future.

Reviewed by Amy Sampson-Cutler ■

## CRADLE OF THE DEEP

By Dietrich Kalteis

Crime novelist Dietrich Kalteis pulls no punches in his latest noir caper, "Cradle of the Deep."

The award-winning author of "Ride the Lightning," "House of Blazes," "Poughkeepsie Shuffle," and others opens the door for a new cast of characters in "Cradle of the Deep." We're whisked back into the late 1970s and into the gritty lives of gangster Maddog Palmieri, his young mistress Bobbi Ricci, and Maddog's ex-driver Denny, who Maddog unceremoniously fired. Ricci,

meanwhile, just wants to get away from the good-for-nothing old mobster when his luster begins to fade in her eyes. When Denny and Bobbi take a bit of revenge on the hood, (AKA a mountain of cash), things kick into high gear. Incensed at their betrayal, Palmieri enlists one his best killers, cold-blooded Lee Trane, to run down the two and retrieve the mobster's cash. The pursuit follows Bobbi and Denny through the northern British Columbia wilderness into Alaska as they do whatever it takes to escape Trane's sinister clutches, not to mention the suspicious eyes of one or two town locals. Small towners don't warm up quickly to strangers. Along the way we learn a bit about our cast of characters and how even honest intentions can lead to some bad decisions.

Grim, but sprinkled with humor, "Cradle of the Deep" brings the larceny, and the thrills, to crime fiction.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## RED WIDOW

By Alma Katsu

When a Russian businessman dies on a flight from Heathrow to Washington DC, a chain of events starts.

We soon meet Lyndsey Duncan, who works for the CIA; then, a bit later, the Red Widow, Theresa Warner. They both show up with plenty of baggage, but then the Russian "businessman" had deep secrets, too. Both women have reasons for wanting to hide from a world that has not been kind to them. Uncovering these secrets pulls us through this story, like running through an airport, trying not to miss the flight.

Something is happening to the Russian "assets" of the CIA, men who have acted as moles, gathering information for the US and giving to their handlers.

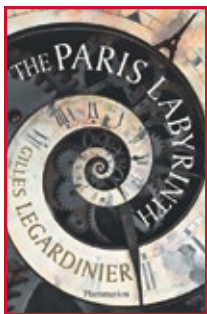
Lyndsey and Theresa, both misfits in the office, form a friendship until they begin to wonder if they can trust the other one. If you're like me, you'll be rooting for one or the other, and sometimes both.

The author was a senior intelligence analyst for agencies including the CIA, and the authenticity of her experiences deepens every bit of this story.

Both women, Lyndsey and Theresa, will have to fight for the things they want though it's hard to say at what cost.

I raced to the end, and you will too.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter" ■



## THE PARIS LABYRINTH

By Gilles Legardinier

If you've missed out on Legardinier's books in the past, after reading this intriguing tale, you'll immediately go back and read absolutely every word this author has written.

We are placed in France at the turn of the 20th century and Vincent is our main character. He's surrounded by a family that are "craftsmen" that also have the sincere gift of being able to create some of the most amazing structures, like secret passageways. Vincent has a type of obsession as well that involves the uncovering and solving of ancient mysteries, and he soon finds himself on an Indiana Jones-type adventure for lost treasure.

Paris is celebrating the 1889 World's Fair, and this author presents a story so phenomenal, it's as if the reader is walking through the city that's overrun by visitors and tourists and stalking Vincent—watching him and the only people he can trust take on a secret mission that puts them all in the direct aim of a gunman who is most definitely attempting to assassinate one and all.

With life-and-death challenges galore, Legardinier fills this tale to the brim with every adventurous/action/thrilling moment you can think of. Even though this is a highly intricate and fast-moving story, it's easy to understand as you jump on for this incredible ride. If there's ever been a truly great race to watch and be a part of, this is it.

From dark powers to history, to hidden places and surprises around every corner, this is a ride of monumental proportions.

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

## THE SCORPION'S TAIL

By Preston & Child

Preston & Child is one of the, if not *the* one and only, best writing team on the planet. Their series' have all been fantastic, and their characters have become household names. Now they're back with the second book starring archaeologist Nora Kelly and FBI Agent Corrie Swanson, as they work together to solve what many would consider a true nightmare. I, for one, was so excited to have a new book to sink my teeth into by this team, and "The Scorpion's Tail" did not disappoint one bit. This elite writing duo never fails to hold a reader's attention.

In "The Scorpion's Tail" we begin with a mummified corpse found in the middle of a New Mexico ghost town. The odd case is assigned to Agent Swanson, and she calls on her friend and archaeologist at the Santa Fe Institute, Nora Kelly, to aid in the investigation. After all, Dr. Kelly has extreme knowledge about the history of the area because of her job.

These two women make a formidable pair, and they never give up. They soon find that the corpse died heinously, stuck in the fetal position, with his skin coming off and a look of pure horror left behind on his face; they also find a Spanish gold cross that is worth a whole lot of cash. And when there's cash involved, there are others still alive battling to take possession of it.

The story is a mix of historical treasure and the desire for those in the present world to obtain it...no matter what the consequences may be.

There is nothing like a Preston & Child tale to keep a reader riveted to the page by leaving them curious, frightened, and unable to rest until that final word is read and the end is revealed. As with all of their other novels, this is a "do not miss" for any mystery/thriller lover. Yes...they've done it again!

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



## SEE SOMETHING

By Carol J. Perry

The city of Salem, Massachusetts is famous for its seventeenth century witchcraft trials, and is also the setting for the popular mystery series penned by Carol J. Perry. Each book has a touch of the supernatural in its plot, and the newest one, "See Something," is no exception. The chief character in the series is Lee Barrett, who has just been promoted to program director for WICH-TV. Lee shares her home with her research librarian aunt, Ibby, and a large orange gentleman cat, O'Ryan. Lee is also a scryer—a person who can see things in reflective surfaces that other people can't. Many of these visions are violent and the author cleverly uses this plot device as a clue to solve a crime.

Lee has barely started her new job when, as she's walking to work, she sees a distraught woman sitting on a bench in the Salem common. She's very concerned when she leaves the studio at the end of a long work day and finds the woman still sitting there. Realizing that the woman is in trouble, Lee approaches her and asks her name. The woman has no idea.

Trusting her instincts that the woman isn't dangerous, Lee takes her home and introduces her to Aunt Ibby, who welcomes her as "Jane Doe." Just to be on the safe side, Lee calls her boyfriend, Salem Police Detective Pete Mondello, and asks him to check out "Jane" for himself. Before Pete can do any real investigating, he's called to investigate the discovery of a body that has washed up in a harbor cove. As "Jane" begins to remember more, it becomes apparent that she and the dead man may be linked.

"See Something" is another fascinating tale of mischief, mayhem, and murder in the *Witch City* mysteries penned by Carol J. Perry.

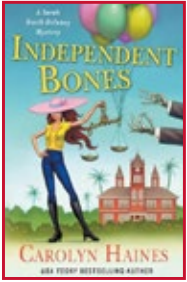
Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





## INDEPENDENT BONES

By Carolyn Haines



Carolyn Haines is back with the 23rd installment of her *Sarah Booth Delaney* series, “Independent Bones,” bringing you the same charming and clever prose that you’ve come to love from this iconic Southern investigator.

Dr. Alala Daikos, a visiting professor at Ole Miss, is controversial to say the least. She embodies feminism to its core, and she makes it her life’s mission to share her ideals with women everywhere. In Sarah Booth’s small town of Zinnia, Mississippi, this ideology is met with a mix of support and backlash, but Alala has no intention of backing down. When PI Sarah Booth Delaney finds a sniper rifle in the bushes at a local park where Alala is giving a speech, she offers her support, as well as that of her boyfriend, Sheriff Coleman Peters. But Alala has no intention of accepting help from the police department, or from any man. She’s a strong woman and she can protect herself.

Sarah Booth has a fondness for Alala and knows that she’d be willing to do anything to help a woman in need, not unlike Sarah herself. So, when they find the dead body of Curtis, a man notorious in town for repeated instances of abuse against his wife, Alala becomes suspect number one and Sarah and her longtime business partner, Tinkie, set out to help prove one way or the other if Alala is as innocent as she claims.

There is never a dull moment in Zinnia and we’re very lucky as readers that Sarah Booth is always there to bring us along for the adventures. This is another excellent addition to the series and I, for one, can’t wait for more.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## THIS IS NOT THE JESS SHOW

By Anna Carey

In a world where we are surrounded by pleasurable media, the question sometimes arises; how far would we be willing to go to keep ourselves entertained? That’s the question I thought of when reading “This is Not the Jess Show,” which is one of the best books I have read in a while.

Jessica Flynn doesn’t consider her life very exciting. Growing up in Swickley, New York in the 1990s isn’t exactly ideal, especially since her little sister has recently grown sick with a chronic illness.

But, everyone seems interested in Jess. Her mother always makes sure she is in designer clothes, her best friends always invite her to the biggest parties, and the hottest boy in school wants to date her. All Jess really wants is to play guitar, go off to college, and date whoever she wants.

Jess would have never guessed that there was a reason why everyone was interested in her and why bad things always seemed to happen. In reality, it’s not the 1990s, but 2037. She’s living on the set of a television show and no one bothered to tell her that her life was being filmed, not even her own parents, who have been using her for their own personal gain.

Jessica escapes the set, but life is no easier. Eager fans of her television show aren’t willing to let her go so easily; the people and the television company are willing to do anything to get her back, whether it’s pretty or not.

While this book had nods to *The Truman Show*, I appreciated the author showing me more of the world behind the set where Jess lived. I could see a startling prediction of the future of where reality TV might be heading. It was an excellent read, one that kept me glued to every page and excited for the sequel.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of “The Amazing Imagination Machine” by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## THE STRANGER IN THE MIRROR

By Liv Constantine

Addison has met the love of her life and she would really, *really* like to let herself be happy and enjoy this relationship. After being injured, and then rescued on the side of the highway by a kind truck driver a few years before, Addison has no memories of the person she once was. And all she’d like to do is move on with the person she wants to be. But as she begins to get flashes of a nightmarish scene that she can’t quite figure out her role in, she starts to wonder even more about the life and the secrets that she may have left behind.

Julian has spent the last few years searching high and low for his missing wife, Cassandra. He and their daughter, Valentina, are lost without her, and he knows deep down that she would have never purposely left without a trace. Just when he believes that the search for his wife is over, he takes a business trip and...there she is. It’s as if fate has brought her back to him and it’s relatively easy for Julian to make the case for her to travel back to their home after he shows her the photos of their daughter.

Leaving behind all the comforts of the small but happy life she’s beginning to build, Addison (now Cassandra), decides she owes it to herself to explore the past life she had before she moves forward with the new life she’s creating. She’s hoping for answers, but in true Liv Constantine fashion, nothing is as it seems. The more Cassandra remembers, the more she feels unsafe in her own house and in her own skin. If a tense and twisted plot is your thing (it’s definitely mine) then you need to add this to your reading list right away!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■





## THE FINISHER

By Peter Lovesey

Diamond Dagger winner Peter Lovesey brings readers his latest Peter Diamond investigation, and celebrates fifty years of mystery writing in “The Finisher.”

Maeve Kelly has signed up for the Other Half, a half-marathon held in Bath. Not a woman known for her athleticism, Maeve sets out to raise money for her aunt’s charity and prove the doubters wrong, despite having been forced into the race to begin with due to a bit of guilt. Meanwhile, we find Detective Superintendent Diamond working crowd control the day of the race. As Lovesey’s readers may have come to expect, one of the runners doesn’t make it across the finish line. In fact, they’ve vanished without a trace. Having spotted a man, Tony Pinto, who he’d put in prison years ago and who is now on parole, Diamond begins to wonder if something sinister has gone down. Fans are treated to the usual cast of Lovesey characters, including long-time love interest Paloma and Diamond’s rocky foil, Chief Georgina Dalymore. Could Maeve have something to do with the intrigue, and with the mysterious, sinister killer The Finisher? What about the other runners, like Olga or the Albanian refugees who recently escaped a local slave labor organization? Diamond’s sleuthing genius will be on full display.

Lovesey, with over forty mystery novels under his belt, nineteen of them Diamond adventures, proves once again why he was named “Grand Master” by the Mystery Writers of America.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■

## THE ANARCHISTS’ CLUB

By Alex Reeve

This is the most unusual historical mystery series I’ve read. The second in the *Leo Stanhope* series, it continues following the life of the man who was born Charlotte Pritchard. In the late 1800s, Victorian London, he must keep his original identity secret because exposing it would mean ruin. Unfortunately, there is one person who does know, and another who learns.

Always fearing he will be exposed, he leads his life in a solitary manner, associating with only those he must. A distraught young woman, Dora Hannigan, approaches him at the pharmacy where he works, needing a medicine she can’t pay for. She has her two young children with her, a spirited girl and her more reticent brother. When Dora is later found murdered at the building where she lived, a place where radicals gathered, Leo’s name and address are found with her, yet he says he’s never met her. A lie that will get him into deep trouble.

The lines of the plot are tangled and treacherous for Leo when a man from his past, from when he was a “her,” threatens to undo his comfortable, satisfactory life. And when Leo becomes attached to the two orphaned children, determined to do everything he can for them, at great risk to himself.

I hope you’ll love this series as much as I do.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of “Deadly Sweet Tooth” ■

## THE REFLECTING POOL

By Otho Eskin

Marko Zorn, a homicide detective with pricey James Bond-style tastes, faces a cadre of killers in Otho Eskin’s debut mystery thriller, “The Reflecting Pool.”

Zorn is a man who isn’t above extra work to afford his lavish lifestyle, which includes his swanky Jaguar. Nor is he above bending the rules a bit to earn that added income, which includes working for shady crime bosses. In his first outing, readers find the Washington D.C. detective investigating the death of a Secret Service agent, who supposedly drowned in the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool located on the National Mall. While investigators believe the woman’s death to be a suicide, Zorn thinks otherwise. He’s also smack dab between two crime bosses, both operating within our nation’s capital, warring over illegal arms. As if these problems weren’t enough, Zorn is stuck with a new partner. And a newly minted one at that. Faced with a boy scout watching his every move, Zorn’s secret side job gets tougher to hide. When the investigation into the death of the agent leads to a domestic terrorist organization, one that appears to have connections directly to the White House, the D.C. detective realizes he may be in over his head. Urban warfare, assassination plots, and political intrigue converge in one bombastic climax.

First-person action mixes with hardboiled political noir in Eskin’s debut novel, what promises to be the first of a gritty, fast-paced series.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



## THE PARIS BETRAYAL

By James R. Hannibal

This is one of those books that should have a disclaimer on the cover: “Make sure you’ve eaten before picking this up, because it will be impossible to put down once you begin reading.” No, this is not an overstatement; this is one book that is so filled with suspense, it feels like you’ve lived it, not read it.

The very scene that begins this thrilling novel offers up a literal crew of spies that are going after a target they’ve been following. When they receive their “package,” enemies come out of the proverbial woodwork, aiming at the spies, and worse yet, calling them by names they shouldn’t know.

Ben Calix is the main character of this tale and he’s given everything for his country. Being burned quite badly, he wants nothing more than to clear the darkness that has befallen his reputation. In order to reach his goal, however, Ben has to go up against some of the biggest challenges and the evilest of people in order to succeed.

Yes, as with all spy novels the cat-and-mouse games that ensue are interesting and cool, but the author keeps you guessing when it comes to who you should trust and who is simply staring at you with the eyes of a betrayer.

To say this reviewer was impressed is an understatement. The final reveal is awesome, and the spark of romance that’s offered turns this high-powered spy story into one with multiple tiers of emotion. From sniper attacks to an ambush to SWAT forces coming down on his head, Ben must face the worst of the worst, exciting readers at every step. It’s not a surprise that this author has won awards, seeing that every tension-filled page of this book is unforgettable. Enjoy! Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## MALIBU RISING

By Taylor Jenkins Reid

Taylor Jenkins Reid has done it again. She's managed to write another compelling story that completely transports you to a time and place where you feel like you're actually there. "Malibu Rising" follows the lives of Nina, Jay, Hud and Kit Riva, children of the global music sensation—and no-show father—Mick Riva.

It's the 80s. Nina's life is falling apart. She's twenty-five and recently separated from her husband. She's an exceptional surfer but more well-known for her recent underwear shots in a popular magazine. Jay is also made for the water, but his body tells him otherwise. He needs to quit surfing but it's all he has. Hud is the soft hearted one of the family, loyal beyond belief. That is, until he falls in love with his brother Jay's ex-girlfriend and can't find a way to tell him. The youngest, Kit, is at that point of discovering who she really is, who she wants to be and who she wants to be with.

It wasn't long after Mick left their family for the second time when their loving, alcoholic mother accidentally drowned in the bathtub. The children survived then, and they'll survive now. So, despite Nina's life crisis, she decides to go through with throwing the very well-known annual 'Riva Family Party' at her home in Malibu. The party is big, the Santa Ana winds are strong, and the surrounding Malibu brush isn't the only thing at risk of going up in flames as the party rages on through the night.

Written in multiple perspectives and over many decades, "Malibu Rising" will take you on a journey. And the drama you'll find on this 'trip' is so, so good.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

## SINS OF THE MOTHER

By August Norman

Intrepid journalist Caitlin Bergman returns in "Sins of the Mother" by August Norman, the second in the continuing series.

The award-winning reporter, fresh from the pages of "Come and Get Me," has never really come to terms with her past. In fact, she's told everyone her birth mother is dead, which the gritty newswoman would prefer rather than admit she was abandoned as a child. Her past comes back to haunt her, however, when a body turns up on the Oregon coast. Investigators think the remains belong to Maya, her long lost mother. Bergman is asked to travel to Oregon from her home in Los Angeles in the hopes of identifying the maimed corpse. She's also given access to her mother's diary, which Bergman discovers is full of details about her life in the mysterious Daughters of God cult. The snarky reporter soon discovers this same cult happens to own the land on which the corpse was discovered. Not only that, but the enigmatic cult leader may have information on Bergman's birth father. But the reporter isn't the only one interested in the group. A white supremacist, Johnny Larsen, blames the Daughters of God for the disappearance of his teen daughter. His family, who controls much of the forested Oregon county, have the cult members in their crosshairs and will do whatever it takes to get her home.

Easily read as a standalone novel, Norman delivers another solid tale with "Sins of the Mother," one full of family drama, tension, and terror.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■

## UNKNOWN THREAT

By Lynn H. Blackburn

I absolutely love new series that take off with a true explosion of awesome plot, incredible characters, and memorable locations because I get to fall in love with something fresh that guarantees I will see more of them in the years to come. Yes, this is the first book in a series entitled, *Defend and Protect* and I'm absolutely hooked. As an author, Lynn Blackburn has proven she can create fascinating characters that hold a reader's attention from beginning to end, and she shows her skill once again with "Unknown Threat."

In this thrilling tale, the U.S. Secret Service is losing agents under very unusual circumstances. Enter...FBI Special Agent Faith Malone, who is placed in charge of the investigation to team up with Secret Service Agent Luke Powell—Powell is one of the few agents who has not yet been adorned with a toe tag, but not for lack of trying; the serial killer has already put effort into his demise and won't stop trying anytime soon.

These strange circumstances lead this duo into a realm filled with intrigue, murder, and a wee bit of romance.

You'll watch as the story starts to come together and then spirals out of the agents' control again and again while working its way toward a fabulous ending. Readers will feel an intense desire to find out what is next in store for these characters we've grown to care about.

This is an excellent, thrilling story from beginning to end and what, I certainly hope, is just the beginning of outstanding things to come in this new series.

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



## COVER YOUR TRACKS

By Daco S. Auffenorde

Author Daco S. Auffenorde, named by *Suspense Magazine* as The Best of 2020 for Thriller/Suspense, buries readers in shivering terror with her latest thriller, "Cover Your Tracks."

Auffenorde's tale takes us on a doomed train ride from Chicago to Spokane and high into the snow-capped Rockies. There, Doctor Margo Fletcher, a month away from giving birth, finds herself at the mercy of Mother Nature when a blizzard puts the brakes on her journey home. Faced with an impending avalanche, the train's passengers are told to stay put. Former Army Ranger Nick Eliot, however, insists they ignore the conductor's command and demands they all move to the back of the train for their own safety. Margo believes Nick's warning, though no one else accompanies them. When his idea proves correct, Margo and Nick find themselves alone and cutoff from the world. Trapped in the last train car, the two are faced with surviving the elements with no food, water, or even heat, until they can be rescued. The threat of more weather, and another avalanche, soon removes the safety provided by the train. Eliot, a survivalist, proves a mysterious companion as the two fight their way through the blizzard and the impending threat of hungry wild animals. Interspersed with flashbacks, readers begin to learn that Margo and Nick's secrets may prove just as deadly as the brutal landscape around them.

A chilling, edge-of-your-seat thriller, "Cover Your Tracks" is a fast-paced tale of survival and psychological terror.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



# ***FAILURE ISN'T AN OPTION***

US Marshal Madison James still can't remember the face of the person who shot her, but she's ready to get back to work. When she and Jonas Quinn go on the hunt for four fugitives wanted in a string of bank robberies, it's a race to see justice served—and the perpetrators will stop at nothing to avoid getting caught.

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# Featured Artist

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

*Gwyneth EA*  
"The Visual Weaver"

*Madame Butterfly*





Gwyneth, known in art circles as “The Visual Weaver,” is an American living abroad in Germany. And, as she states, “Is absolutely loving it!”

Working in the digital arts realm for almost a decade now, the art galleries that can be found across the Internet attributed to her work are among the most spectacular, unforgettable galleries in existence. Viewers can “feel” Gwyneth’s personal enjoyment and inspiration while focusing on her talent. She is so skilled, with such creativity, that she should be blessed with her very own “DD”—also known as the “Delightfully Deviant” award that *she* created to bestow upon other brilliant artists.

Gwyneth was kind enough to take some time out and speak with *Suspense Magazine* about her background, her latest works, her inspirations, and so much more...

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Thank you for being with us. We always like to begin with a little background for our readers to get to know you a bit better: Where were you born in the U.S., and what brought you to Germany?

Gwyneth EA (G.E.A.): *Hello! It's a pleasure to be here.*

*Well...my origins are rather complicated. My father was from Manchester, England, and my mother was American. I was actually born in the Bahamas. After my father's passing when I was only nine years old, we finally settled down in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Then, at the age of twenty-one, I moved to Tucson, Arizona,*

*and lived there for about seventeen years. I still think of Tucson as my home base—it's where I feel the most comfortable, despite the heat. Eventually, I moved on to Texas and lived there for seven years. During that time, I met my best friend and wonderful husband. We made the decision to head over to his home in Germany, which is where I am now.*

S. MAG.: Were you practicing art at a young age while still in America, or was it something overseas that became the jumping-off point for your career in digital art?

G.E.A.: *As a young person, like most, I dabbled in drawing. I preferred, however, creative writing, poetry, and music early in my life. As I became older and ran into artworks while scanning the Internet, I fell in love with digital art. It was then that I began my first explorations into the digital art world.*

*My jumping-off point didn't happen until later, during a holiday time in Germany when I finally said, "That's it! I'm going to learn Photoshop!" Soon after, I worked up the nerve to actually submit my first work to DeviantArt...and the rest is history. It has been and remains to be a delightful journey of creativity and self-fulfillment. The challenges from DeviantArt and the digital art niche community—along with the brilliant artists within it—inspired, encouraged, and pushed me to become better and better.*

S. MAG.: Can you tell us what inspirations you find in Germany for your art?

G.E.A.: *Little did I know when making the decision to come here that I would find vast forests, lakes, rivers, hills, mountains, and landscapes that are often only found in your dreams or fantasies. They are a great source of inspiration; they are literally “the stuff that dreams are made of.” I found, and still do find myself on a daily basis, completely inspired by the absolute beauty of this land and her hidden forests full of history and myths. These forests are the birthplace of almost all of our childhood cultural fairytales, and I think that seeped into my bones a bit, as well as igniting my imagination.*

S. MAG.: When it comes to the process, itself, what is more your way of putting a piece together? Such as: Do you form the idea first and “mull it over,” or are you one who simply starts on that blank canvas, so to speak, and just runs with the mood and lets the art develop as you go?

G.E.A.: *Regarding my artistic process, the muse for a work varies from a character, a model, my own imagination to themes and ideas. If we are given a theme and can express it with full artistic freedom, I think I create my best works. The process starts with a*





*The Lionmaid Exhibit*





concept, then I mull it over and flesh it out, searching for the right stocks—mixing and mashing. That takes the most, timewise. After finding the concept and the composition elements, I work to bring them all together.

S. MAG.: Your work is so fascinating and absolutely stunning; do you have a few personal favorites? And, if so, what would they be and why do they stand out in your mind? In addition, where does your encouragement come from that allows you to create your brilliant ideas?

G.E.A.: First of all, I am deeply humbled and so very thankful for your kind words and support; it means so much to me that what I create touches you personally. There is no greater reward or compliment.

I do have two favorites; one of which I submitted with the rest of the artworks for your issue is my attempt at bringing a character to life from my favorite author, Tanith Lee, and her protagonist from her Birthgrave series. I absolutely adore her as a character, and this fantastical coming-of-age story. My second favorite work I have also shared here with you. The one mistake that people often make in this second favorite work is to assume that one of the characters outside the wall is a “bad guy,” when, in fact, neither of them are. They are just trying to survive and do the best they can in a harsh world and with what they are given, mixed with what they take. The proverbial “bad guys” are all those living within the walls and fly above it all, never touched by the daily worries and anxieties of survival.

S. MAG.: Is there a genre of the digital and/or artistic world that you have not tried as of yet but wish to delve into one day?

G.E.A.: I would love to one day do more sci-fi works, but I’m not there yet. I still have so many fantasy-based works that I’m inspired to create the most.

S. MAG.: Can you perhaps name a mentor/teacher of yours, or two, and tell us how they help you?

G.E.A.: I have had many amazing artists give me so much selfless support and friendship; I feel truly blessed.

If I had to name one person who really, really came down from the most “elite” of elite artists and approached me with humility, advice, selfless support and encouragement, it would be Roger Creus from Roger Creus Art (AKA Digital Rowye). As you are journeying and developing in stages, often the most elite artist seems so far away; they are the great monolith-like being that blesses the art world and alters it in the wake of their creative and powerful shadow. Roger is one of them, yet he is like a brother to me. He was always so relatable, kind, and open. Later, as I became better, the whole world of brilliant artists opened up to me and I was blessed to be inspired by them. I have made so many amazing friendships that I am eternally thankful for.



*"If we are given a theme and can express it with full artistic freedom. I think I create my best works."*

S. MAG.: If you could give advice to one who is just starting out as a digital artist, what would that advice be?

G.E.A.: *I know this sounds so cliché, but coming from a person that has absolutely zero visual artistic talent, I will share that the key to success is practice, practice, practice. Study lighting and composition while working out what feels and looks good to you. Your own "style" doesn't come quickly and often you don't realize you have even developed one, but it happens as a part of the process of your personal development and taste as an artist.*

*You will find stunning, talented artists who inspire you and you'll study details of what they do that brings about that effect that you adore. I don't mean copy them, but incorporate what they are doing and see what they do that works and separates it from others you don't feel drawn to or that inspire you. Then, it is a matter of trial and error to see how it fits into your vision. Then, bring your own work to life.*

*I highly recommend the plethora of tutorials available for free on YouTube, too. Both PSD box (i.e., Andrei Oprinca and Nemanja Sekulic) have amazing, detailed tutorials that are clear, easy to follow, and quite brilliant.*

S. MAG.: Can you give us a sneak peek as to what you're working on now that we, as fans, can expect?

G.E.A.: *At this time, I have many WIPs, while I am also pushing myself to learn more 3-D software. I am gladly sharing two copyrighted pieces. One is a character I am creating for a work, and in another project, I am working with a twin fairy concept.*

*Also, one of the coolest things is something I have been focused on for a while now. I wish to bring to life a dark retelling of the 'Germanic Story of Snow White'. After weeks of searching, maybe even longer, I just finally found the perfect model! <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/art-photo-woman-red-fox-sitting-1892845132>. It feels like I've been waiting to "discover" this for ages...and I finally have.*



S. MAG.: Fantastic! What are the sites where people can learn more about you and peruse your art?

G.E.A.: *I am available and can be followed and/or contacted via Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/PendragonArtsDigitalArts>; DeviantArt, which is the second-best place to reach me at <https://www.deviantart.com/pendragonarts-gea>; ArtStation at [https://www.artstation.com/pendragon\\_arts](https://www.artstation.com/pendragon_arts); WIX at <https://vyghramunjuwgcg2k.wixsite.com/pendragonarts>; Instagram at [https://www.instagram.com/pendragonarts\\_gea/](https://www.instagram.com/pendragonarts_gea/); or write to me at [gwynetheapendragonarts@outlook.com](mailto:gwynetheapendragonarts@outlook.com).*

We wish to thank Gwyneth for sharing these amazing upcoming works with our readers. This is one woman who most definitely "weaves" the most unique pieces that excite the mind, fulfill the soul, and inspire each and every one of us. ■





# The Artists of CHARTRES STREET

By Ellen Byron  
Artist Portrait: Provided by Author

“Ten thousand bodies lie under the New Orleans’ sidewalks.” Zemelda heard this many times a day from the tour guides who stopped on the street outside her centuries-old building. It served as a constant reminder of loss—a reminder *no one needs*, she thought, *especially me*. Friends, family, neighbors—outliving loved ones was a lonely business.

She heard music coming from the loft across the hall and smiled. Gwendolyn, the new tenant, liked to listen to music while she painted. Just like Zemelda once did. Zemelda didn’t recognize the tune, but that wasn’t new. She hadn’t recognized the music of anyone who occupied the loft in decades.

The French Quarter townhome’s ancient wooden stairs creaked under the weight of footsteps. A man emerged on the landing. His handsome face glistened with perspiration from the climb. Except for the artists’ studios housing Zemelda and the new tenant, the building was unoccupied, used mostly as a storage facility these days. Fans did a poor job of making up for a lack of air conditioning. Even in early March, when the air was laden with the damp, biting chill that defined a New Orleans late winter, the top floor trended toward warm.

The man didn’t notice her. Few people did. Zemelda saw he held a to-go coffee container from Café du Monde and a paper bag of beignets. This was no surprise. He’d made the same delivery several times in the week since Gwendolyn had moved in. He gave her new neighbor’s door a rap and it opened. A lovely young woman stood in the doorway. She was petite and her features were gamine, finely defined and delicate. Her chestnut hair was pulled away from her face in a high ponytail. The couple was similar in age; Zemelda guessed both to be in their early thirties. But there was a sadness to the woman. Her pale gray eyes were sunken, her skin flushed. Zemelda was sure she was unwell, although Gwendolyn—called Gwen by her friends—denied it.

The man, who Zemelda had learned was Alex, Gwen’s soon-to-be-ex-husband, handed over the bag and coffee. “Special delivery.”

Gwen took both and gave Alex a wry smile. “Again?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Who said a divorce has to be ugly?” He paused. “Or happen at all?”

A shadow crossed Gwendolyn’s face. “We’ve been through this, Alex. You want out just as much as I do.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You know.”

Gwen’s voice was firm, with an edge. Alex ran a hand through his sandy blond hair. Zemelda noticed it was beginning to thin. “Can I keep bringing you coffee and beignets?” His tone was hesitant. “Please?”

Zemelda could tell Gwen wanted to say no. But instead, she said, “Sure. Sometimes.”

The couple said their goodbyes and Alex headed downstairs. Gwendolyn didn’t move. She stood planted in the doorway. Zemelda felt for the young woman. “Would you like some company?” Gwen turned and walked back into her loft. She left the door open, which Zemelda took as an invitation to follow her, which she did.

The loft was a large open space, barely touched over the centuries. Giant sturdy beams supported the roof. Multi-paned, iron-framed windows lined two walls, allowing for streams of natural light when weather permitted. Paint flaked from the plastered walls, in one section revealing a spot of faded green, original to the building. Gwendolyn’s easel sat in the corner of the room between the two banks of windows. A canvas on the easel reflected one window’s view of French Quarter rooftops. At least, Zemelda assumed it did. The painting leaned toward the abstract. She noticed Gwendolyn hadn’t made much





progress in the last few days and attributed it to the young artist being dogged by whatever ailment was bothering her, as well as the emotional toll from her dissolving marriage. Zemelda had picked up enough snippets of conversation to know that the couple had married early and outgrown each other, leading to a string of affairs on Alex's side. Yet he was the one dithering about the divorce. Zemelda, skeptical thanks to hard-learned lessons from her own life, wondered if the financial aspect of the couple's relationship prompted the man's equivocating. An only child whose real estate developer parents perished in a private plane crash; Alex was enormously wealthy.

Zemelda took a seat on a wooden stool to watch Gwen work. The younger woman took a sip of coffee, then mixed a dollop of white into a dish of black paint to tint it gray. She began painting the slate shingles of a rooftop. After only a few minutes, she stopped. "I feel nauseous."

"You haven't eaten, have you? Eat something. Coffee on an empty stomach is never a good idea." Gwen took a few reluctant bites of a beignet. "Better?"

"A little. It comes and goes."

"You need air."

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The bracing walk to The Historic New Orleans Collection's Chartres Street campus seemed to invigorate Gwendolyn. She and Zemelda entered the renovated Beaux Arts building and walked to the furthest gallery, where they took seats on a bench facing a wall displaying nineteenth-century paintings. Their interest focused on a grouping of women's portraits, around a half-dozen in all. The subjects were clad in the hoop-skirted gowns of the time period and their poses were the typically demure ones of the Victorian era. But each woman was framed against the same backdrop, a vibrant wallpaper decorated with an explosion of extraordinarily vivid emerald green ferns.

"I never get tired of studying these," Gwendolyn murmured as she scanned the portraits.

A Collection employee hovering nearby approached them. She exuded the energy of the twentysomething Zemelda assumed she was. Her nametag read 'Charlotte.' "It's the Ducroix Collection. They're incredible, aren't they?"

"Totally," Gwen said. "There's an almost shocking sensuality to them, especially given the rigid mores of when they were painted."

Charlotte gave a vigorous nod. "I know, right? I love them so much. The artist, Emile Ducroix, had a weird career. He did a bunch of decent portraits and then painted these amazing ones in about two years. Then the 1853 yellow fever epidemic came and killed off a ton of people in New Orleans. I haven't been able to research why, but after that Ducroix went back to painting the way he'd painted before. People lost interest in his work, and he killed himself. It's like he got PTSD from the whole yellow fever thing and lost his talent."

"And his will to live," Gwen said, her eyes on the portraits.

"Right. That too. Anyway, there's something interesting about—" A dry, hacking cough came from a visitor browsing the gallery, interrupting Charlotte's train of thought. She made a face. "Ugh, that cough. I've been hearing it ever since Mardi Gras. There's something going around. Anyway," Charlotte continued, pointing at the paintings, "here's the thing about this grouping. That green in the background on all of them is what they called Schweinfurt Green."

Schweinfurt Green was also known as Emerald Green and Paris Green. Zemelda and Gwendolyn knew exactly what Charlotte was talking about. "I thought it might be Schweinfurt in the paintings," Gwen said. "It was very popular at the time. And also, very deadly."

"Yes, exactly!" Charlotte said this with an over-abundance of enthusiasm. "They used it everywhere. Wallpaper, paint, furniture, candles, even kids' toys. But it was loaded with arsenic, so it could actually kill people." She glanced at the portrait group. "There's so much green in these paintings. Maybe it got into Emile's brain and drove him crazy. And that's why he killed himself." Her tone shifted to somber. "Arsenic is scary stuff. My dad uses it to kill rats back home in Texas." The sound of the dry cough that was permeating the Quarter came from another visitor. Charlotte rolled her eyes. "Ugh. That is so annoying."

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A week later, the mysterious illness sweeping across the globe brought New Orleans to its knees, shuttering businesses, forcing residents to shelter in place, and filling hospitals beyond their capacity to treat the sick and dying—one of whom Zemelda feared would be Gwendolyn. A worried Alex brought his estranged wife food and drink every day, but the artist's condition didn't improve. Instead, she wasted away with a variety of symptoms. Zemelda came to realize some of them deviated from those associated with the global virus. An instinct borne of past experience tugged at her but when she shared it with Gwendolyn, the sick woman waved her off. "Think of the paintings," Zemelda begged. "Think of the green."



Gwendolyn shook her head. "I'm delirious. Go away. Go *away*."

Finally, the sickness became too much for Gwendolyn to bear. An ambulance came for her.

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Gwendolyn leaned back against the pillows on the bed at the far side of her loft. She'd been home a few days but was still weak from the battle with her illness. She sipped on broth from a ceramic cup. "There's no evidence, is there?" Zemelda asked.

Gwen shook her head. "Everything Alex brought me was in disposable containers. It's all gone. And with the chaos at the hospitals, no one had the time to take a deep dive into what was making me so sick. Since at least a few of my symptoms matched up with what virus patients exhibited, I was written off as one of them." The artist looked ill, but not with sickness—with grief. Haunted by knowing her husband had tried poisoning her by slipping arsenic into the food and drink he'd been delivering. "We got married on impulse. There was never a prenup," Gwen said. "That's been eating away at Alex. To lose money *and* me? Talk about failure, at least in his eyes. Alex could never admit to a mistake, even a mistake we both made in getting married way too young, and without putting much thought into it. Alex is spoiled rotten. Always has been. He can't lose at anything."

Gwen stared out the window, where rain pattered down on the slate roof of the building next door. "Humiliation. That's why people kill sometimes. They can't handle being humiliated." Gwen began to speak then, but overcome with emotion, she stopped. She swallowed and tried again. "You saved my life."

Zemelda Ducroix gazed over Gwen's shoulder. Paint had flaked off a large section of the wall behind her, revealing a small patch of green wallpaper featuring a once vibrant fern design. "I recognized the signs. My husband Emile was an average artist. I was better. We had an arrangement where I added the finishing touches to his portraits. Those of the well-placed wives in the city. Never of the men, of course. That would not have been appropriate. Thanks to me, we made a respectable living. Then one day, Mrs. Charbonnet came to me in secret."

Gwen flashed on the portrait of an imposing grand dame in the Collection, posed in front of the bright green wallpaper, hands demurely clasped, a slightly sly smile on her face. "I know that painting."

"After Mrs. Charbonnet, Mrs. Poche came, then Mrs. Ballard, until I'd completed half a dozen portraits. Emile was traveling up and down the river for months at a time to paint planters and their families, so I had freedom for a while. When he returned home, I revealed what I'd done and signed Emile's name to all the green portraits, as I called them, since the very idea of a New Orleans gentlewoman being employed as an artist was scandalous back then. The paintings received great acclaim, which thrilled Emile...at first. But gradually the realization that I had a gift he could not match infuriated and humiliated him. He became cruel. Instead of subjugating me, though, the urge to revolt grew. Finally, during a particularly unpleasant battle with him, I threatened to reveal myself as the true artist of the portraits. I told him I no longer cared what anyone thought. I was proud of the work I'd created." Zemelda paused, the memory still painful. "That's when he began adding additional arsenic to my green paint."

Gwen shuddered, recalling the agony of her near-fatal illness at the hand of her own husband. "I'm so sorry." She stared out the nearby window, its glass panes wavy with age. When she spoke, her tone was pensive. "What's ironic is that given the number of portraits you painted, and this being all over your studio," Gwen gestured to the patch of green wallpaper, "you were probably already inhaling enough of the Schweinfurt to die from it on your own."

Zemelda nodded. "Yes. Emile hastened an inevitable process. The yellow fever epidemic of 1853 killed thousands of people that year. Like now, no one had time to look closely at the details of an illness, so I became another body in the unimaginable death toll."

Gwendolyn stared at the vision in front of her. "You deserve credit for those paintings," she said, angry.

\*\*\*

Emily Aaronson, the Collection's rare book curator, appeared on Gwen's computer screen. "Gwen, so nice to meet you, albeit it virtually."

"You, too, Emily. I really appreciate Charlotte arranging this."

"Charlotte's a character, but she's a find. We're lucky to have her. She's in grad school, working on a master's in art history. She wants to become a curator herself, probably specializing in nineteenth century portraiture." The curator held up a small, worn leather book. "We had the diary you dropped off for us authenticated. It's a fantastic discovery."

"I thought so. When I realized I was living in a studio where Zemelda Ducroix once painted, I began poking around. I was so excited when I found her diary."



"I bet. The only painting we have that's officially credited to her is the self-portrait, which I'm sure you've seen."

"Yes." Gwendolyn knew the painting well. It was the portrait of the woman she'd dismissed as delusions from her illness.

"I owe you an apology," Emily said. "I jumped right into a conversation about the diary without telling you how sorry I am about your loss."

"Thank you. It's been hard. To think that you see someone one morning...bring them coffee and beignets.... And then...."

"I can't even imagine. And with the hospitals exceeding capacity—"

"Oschner was total madness."

"A friend's husband is an E.R. doctor there. He recognized your husband because his family has been such a fixture in the city for generations. My friend said Alex exhibited some unusual symptoms that confounded the medical staff."

"I know. It's horrible how this disease keeps mutating. I've never seen anyone so violently ill. I'd had the same symptoms, so it wasn't completely new to the doctors. But Alex's case was way worse. He died before they could figure out the best course of treatment. I saw him take his last gasp of breath. I'll never forget the expression on his face as he stared up at me from the EMT's gurney."

"Terrible," Emily said. "Just terrible. And given the current circumstances, you can't even get closure with a proper funeral."

"No. No funeral or anything. It was just me and his ashes, which I scattered into the Mississippi. I know Alex would have wanted that. The Gulf has claimed him as its own by now." Gwen took a beat. "It's hard for me to talk about this."

"Of course. I'm sorry. It's way too soon. We can talk about the diary if you're up to it."

"Yes. It's actually a welcome distraction from my grief. Anyway, I have an idea I'd like to run by the powers-that-be at the Collection. I'm coming into a bit of money soon, and I'd like to fund a research project into Zemelda Ducroix's life that would culminate in an exhibit of her work. It's time for her to get the attention she deserves. The attention she was denied in her lifetime."

"I love it. The project would restore credit where it's due and introduce the world to a brilliant female artist. *And*," Emily grew more enthusiastic with each word, "we could display the diary as well. I can envision the entire exhibit. I'll pitch it to the board, but I can't imagine the reaction will be anything except an unqualified all-systems-go."

"Wonderful. I think this would be a perfect project for Charlotte."

"I agree a hundred percent. It's right in her lane."

Emily ended the call with a promise to confirm the project within days. Gwendolyn went to her easel, where a canvas with a partially completed portrait rested. Zemelda perched on a stool and assumed a pose. Gwen set to work on the painting. She'd captured the brilliant green of the background with a modern paint devoid of deadly ingredients. Now it was time to do her friend justice.

As Gwendolyn painted, Zemelda recalled the century and a half of people who'd come and gone from her home on Chartres Street. Generation after generation of neighbors who refused to believe in ghosts, even in the most haunted city in the country. Every one of those neighbors denying her existence, and with it a chance to be recognized for her talent. Until now.

"I've waited so long for someone to accept that they could see me," Zemelda said. "*Merci*, Gwendolyn. Thank you."

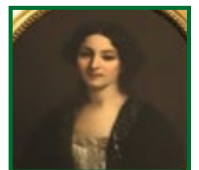
From outside on the street below, the women heard a tour guide for the first time in months. His voice was muffled by the mask he wore. "Ten thousand bodies lie under the New Orleans' sidewalks."

Zemelda smiled to herself.

*And I am one of them.* ■

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The Artists of Chartres Street* was inspired by this 1854 self-portrait of Zulmé Maspero de la Mardel, which I saw on display at The Historic New Orleans Collection. It's the only painting ever credited to the artist, although she is believed to be the mysterious "Z" signature on an 1838 painting of herself with two of her sisters-in-law.

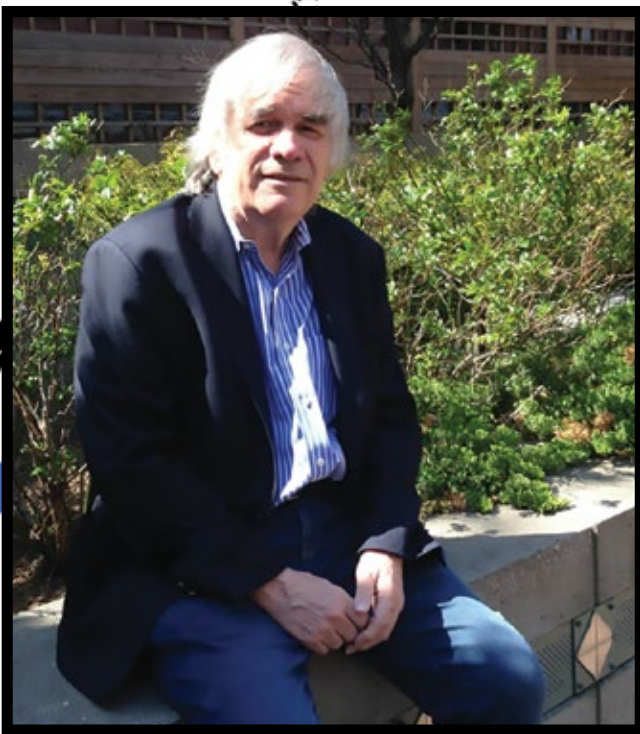
*Nothing else is known about her.*



*Ellen Byron's Cajun Country Mysteries have won the Agatha award for Best Contemporary Novel and multiple Lefty awards for Best Humorous Mystery. She writes the Catering Hall Mystery series, under the name Maria DiRico, and will debut the Vintage Cookbook Mysteries (as Ellen) in June 2022. Ellen is an award-winning playwright, and non-award-winning TV writer of comedies like WINGS, JUST SHOOT ME, and FAIRLY ODD PARENTS. She has written over two hundred articles for national magazines but considers her most impressive credit working as a cater-waiter for Martha Stewart. She is a lifetime member of the Writers Guild of America. Learn more at [ellenbyron.com](http://ellenbyron.com).*



# WHY PEOPLE LOVE CELEBRITY CRIME— *And Why I Write About it*



By R.G. Belsky  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

I've spent much of my life covering celebrity news as a journalist—for the *New York Post*, *Star* magazine, the *New York Daily News* and NBC News.

Now I write crime thrillers about a TV journalist named Clare Carlson who solves murders in New York City.

Why do I spend so much time on celebrities and crime?

Simple answer: because these are the two topics people love to read about the most.

And when you can put both of them—celebrity and crime—together in one story, you have...well, you wind up with something like the O.J. Simpson case.

Which is the inspiration in part for my new mystery "Beyond the Headlines"—about a woman celebrity who is famous for being famous (think Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton) that is accused of murdering her billionaire husband.

I try to set the tone for this right at the beginning of the book with this exchange in Clare's office at the TV newsroom.

"Do you know who Laurie Bateman is?" my friend Janet Wood asked me.

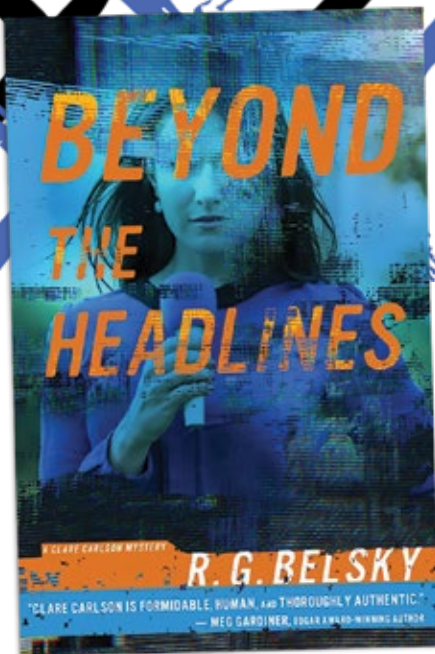
"I do," I said. "I also know who Lady GaGa is. And Angelina Jolie. And Ivanka Trump. I'm in the media, remember? That's what we do in the media, we cover famous people. It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it."

I was the news editor of *Star* magazine when the O.J. story broke during the summer of 1994. It didn't seem like that big a deal at first. I remember the day we heard about the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson, O.J. Simpson's ex-wife. O.J. had once been a big celebrity, but now was a kind of B-level personality for the media, an ex-football great and a so-so actor who had pretty much fallen out of the public eye. Plus, Nicole wasn't even O.J.'s wife anymore and there was no immediate indication of any connection to him. To be honest, we were more concerned with Oprah and Michael Jackson and other Hollywood celebrities.

But I sent a reporter to the crime scene in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles, then to O.J.'s mansion. The reporter called to say that the police had found blood on his property that might be connected to the murder. The reporter said O.J. might be a suspect. That's when we realized this could be big. Of course, it all exploded a few days later when an entire nation watched spellbound as O.J. Simpson led police on the famous white Bronco chase along the freeways of Southern California.

That led to the Trial of the Century with Johnnie Cochran, Marcia Clark, Kato Kaelin, Judge Ito





Why do I spend so much time on celebrities and crime? Simple answer: because these are the two topics people love to read about the most.

and all the rest of the cast of characters that kept the nation mesmerized with TV coverage—with everyone taking sides as to whether O.J. was guilty or innocent, with racial issues playing a big part in the case—until his controversial acquittal by the jury.

Fast forward now to 2021: Actress Laurie Bateman is the celebrity on trial in my suspense thriller “Beyond the Headlines,” and she’s accused of murdering her billionaire husband. It quickly turns into a headline story like O.J., with the nation again choosing sides about Laurie Bateman’s guilt or innocence.

But this time it’s not race that becomes the controversial issue in the case, like it did with O.J.

Instead, its women’s issues and the rapidly growing #metoo movement.

Laurie Bateman delivers emotional testimony—both in a TV interview with my character Clare Carlson and on the witness stand in a courtroom—about how she had been physically and emotionally abused throughout the marriage by her wealthy husband. This wins her a huge amount of sympathy and support in the public eye.

At first believing her story, then questioning it—Clare is forced to look past all the celebrity glamor, gossip and glitz, and follow the evidence to find out the truth about this case.

I’ve written about celebrity crime before, inspired by other real-life celebrity crimes that I’ve covered as a journalist.

The most notable is “Shooting for the Stars,” where a female celebrity is gunned down on the streets of New York City for no apparent reason—just like John Lennon was on that tragic night in 1980. Although the gunman is at first thought to be just a crazed killer like Mark David Chapman was with Lennon, my reporter uncovers a terrifying chain of celebrity deaths—stretching way back to past years in Hollywood.

I’ve touched on other real-life celebrity crimes that I covered as a journalist in my books too—and I always thought the death of Natalie Wood would be good fodder for a mystery novel. Not that anyone knows it was a crime.

But Natalie Wood’s tragic drowning—while on a boat with husband Robert Wagner and co-star Christopher Walken—has long been the subject of controversy and confusion. Maybe some day.

But, for now, the O.J. Simpson case has been the biggest celebrity crime of my lifetime—which is why it was easy to pick that kind of story to write about in my novel.

I even make specific references to the O.J. Simpson case along the way, including a moment where murder defendant Laurie Bateman—asked by the judge at her arraignment for a guilty or innocent plea—delivers this famous O.J.-like response: “I am 100 percent not guilty!”

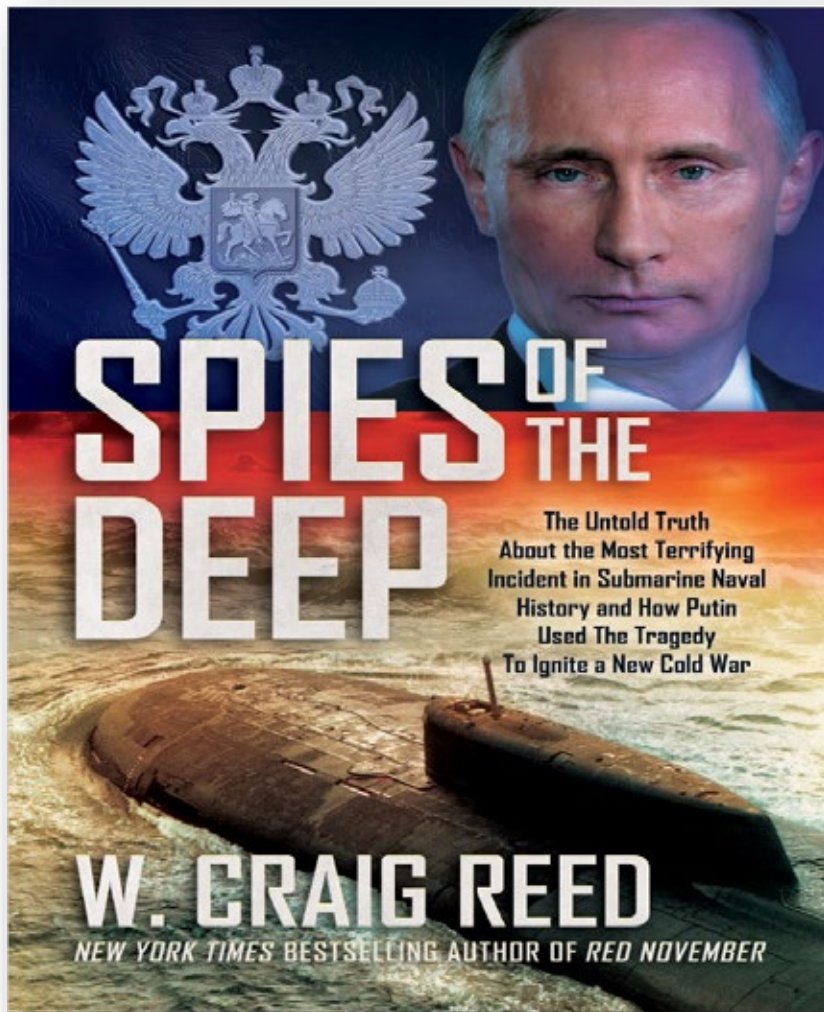
So is she really innocent or is she guilty of her husband’s death?

Well, you’ll have to read “Beyond the Headlines” to find out.... ■

*R.G. Belsky is an award-winning author of crime fiction and a journalist in New York City. His newest mystery, “Beyond the Headlines,” was published in May by Oceanview. It is the fourth in a series featuring Clare Carlson, the news director for a New York City TV station. The first book, “Yesterday’s News,” was named Best Mystery of 2018 at Deadly Ink. The second, “Below the Fold,” won the Foreward INDIES award for Best Mystery of 2019. The third Clare Carlson mystery, “The Last Scoop,” came out in May 2020. Belsky has published fourteen novels—all set in the New York city media world where he has had a long career as a top editor at the New York Post, New York Daily News, Star magazine and NBC News. He also writes thrillers under the name Dana Perry. And he is a contributing editor for The Big Thrill magazine.*







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# Pre-or-Post COVID That is the Question



By Dennis Palumbo

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At one point in my new *Daniel Rinaldi* thriller, “Panic Attack,” a dangerous suspect points a gun at our favorite psychologist and warns him back.

“That’s far enough, Doc. Just think of it as social distancing. You remember that, don’t you?”

In “Panic Attack,” the story takes place just after the last remnants of the COVID-19 lockdown have faded. Not from people’s memories, but in the sense that the safety protocols are no longer in place.

Which brings us to the title question:

In your current WIP, where does the pandemic fit in the narrative?

Of course, for those of you writing historical fiction, the question is moot. (You’re also liberated from dealing with computers, the internet, GPS and cell phones, among other modern plot-confounding irritants.)

But for the rest of us, whose mysteries and crime thrillers are determinedly contemporary, how—or even whether—to deal with the reality of the pandemic is a serious dilemma.

After all, our readers have all experienced its repercussions, from the merely inconvenient to the regrettably tragic. To write a novel or short story taking place in the present without acknowledging the pandemic in some way seems ludicrous.

Of course, there are ways around the problem. You can set your mystery or thriller just BEFORE the onset of the virus. So it doesn’t have to be dealt with at all.

On the other hand, I have no doubt there are narratives being written as you read this in which COVID-19 is front and center. It might even be the context in which the story takes place.

(Certainly it’s the position taken by a number of popular TV shows; i.e., *GREY’S ANATOMY*, among others.)

But unlike the journey from script to production for your average TV series, the path of a novel is slower from the page to the reader. The lead time is longer. So how would such a mystery or thriller unfolding in a world gripped by the virus handle this reality?

**But unlike the journey from script to production for your average TV series, the path of a novel is slower from the page to the reader.**



Though maybe never having sweated a suspect in an interrogation room or, presumably, not having recently gone on a five-state killing spree, the experienced crime reader knows enough about the genre to recognize its traditional aspects.

Especially since there are pockets of COVID still emerging in places around the world, with new variants being reported every day.

Which begs the question: how would your pandemic-included novel end? How can you, the writer, know? Or is the answer simply to end the book where we are currently with the crisis? The problem with that is, should real progress be made against the virus, with a legitimate end in sight, then the book is already out-of-date before it's even released.

In clinical terms, you might think of the two options regarding addressing COVID in your WIP as being either experience-near or what might be called experience-distant.

Using this terminology, all historical mysteries fall into the latter category, for obvious reasons. While most contemporary mysteries belong in the former.

For example, let's take police procedurals. Through the reader's exposure to previous, similar books—not to mention hundreds of TV shows and films—he or she is pretty familiar with all the conventions of the genre. Though maybe never having sweated a suspect in an interrogation room or, presumably, not having recently gone on a five-state killing spree, the experienced crime reader knows enough about the genre to recognize its traditional aspects. This is what I mean by experience-near. Our knowledge of and understanding about the reality of the pandemic also falls, in my view, into that same category.

The point is, if you craft a novel whose narrative posits a present-tense context involving COVID, you're left vulnerable to the reader's knowledge and experience of the pandemic's trajectory many months after your manuscript is written. You don't want characters reacting to the virus in such a way that the reader thinks, "What are they so scared of? We just get semi-annual booster shots now!"

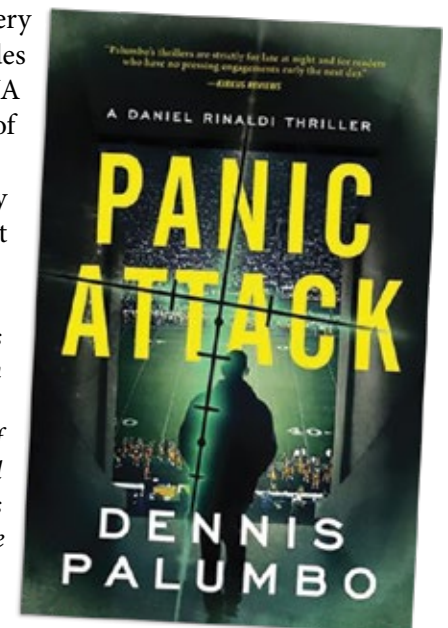
(Or, if current news items can be trusted, the reader thinks, "What are they so scared of? Our alien visitors have provided medicine to cure all diseases!")

Obviously, how we crime authors deal with the lingering reality of the pandemic is a personal choice. Perhaps not as difficult as dealing with (or ignoring) systemic racism in police procedurals or addressing persistent homophobia across an array of famous, venerable crime novels, but, like the flu and taxes, our recent and ongoing experience of the virus is now woven into the fabric of the real world.

If you're like me, as a writer AND reader, that's where I prefer my contemporary mystery novels to take place. So like it or not, you have to deal with the new reality that includes the pandemic. Just like we crime writers have learned to accept the reality of GPS, DNA and national fingerprint data bases which, in my experience, complicates the hell out of the cat-and-mouse nature of certain types of plotting.

In the end, how we deal with the COVID crisis reminds us that—as true for mystery authors as for anyone else—everything changes. And that how we respond to that fact is up to us. ■

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (*My Favorite Year*; *Welcome Back, Kotter*, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is now a licensed psychotherapist in private practice and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's *Mystery Magazine*, *The Strand*, *Written By* and elsewhere, and is collected in *"From Crime to Crime"* (Tallfellow Press). His acclaimed series of mystery thrillers, *"Mirror Image," "Fever Dream," "Night Terrors," "Phantom Limb," "Head Wounds,"* and the latest, *"Panic Attack"* (all from Sourcebooks/Poisoned Pen Press), features Daniel Rinaldi, a psychologist who consults with the Pittsburgh Police. For more info, please visit [dennispalumbo.com](http://dennispalumbo.com).



# THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING CROSS-GENRE

## *Cozy and Traditional Mysteries vs. Suspense Novels*

By Daryl Wood Gerber

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When I first started out as a novelist, I focused on writing suspense novels and thrillers, but I was unlucky at landing an agent or publisher, despite positive feedback on my style and stories.

A few years later, I was fortunate to have a critique partner who suggested I try my hand at cozy mysteries. After a few hits and misses, I met an agent who was able to drum up the opportunity for me to write a work-for-hire for Penguin Random House (Berkley) and my career was born. As Avery Aames, I wrote the popular *Cheese Shop Mysteries*. Then, under my own name, I sold the *Cookbook Nook Mysteries* and more.

But, I have to admit, my heart still yearned to return to my roots and write suspense. I just had to find the right story and the right tone.

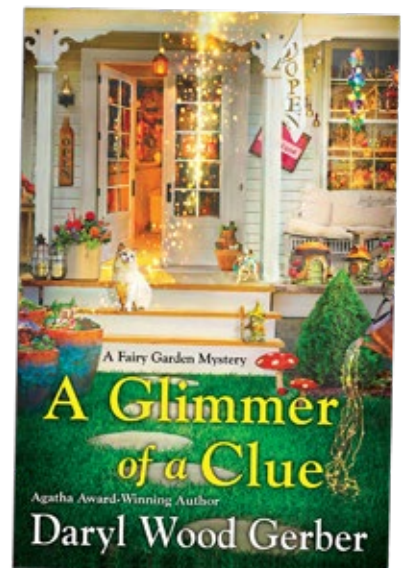
So, after having worked with excellent editors for my cozies, I pulled out a previous manuscript and took a fresh look while channeling their editorial suggestions. Needless to say, the manuscript needed work. Major work. It needed more action. It needed to be tighter. It needed a suspenseful tone and not a cozy tone. Then, I had to decide whether I should use an alias. Norah Roberts, the popular romance author, chose to write her futuristic suspense as J.D. Robb, so as not to confuse her readers. Misguidedly or not, I opted to stay with my name.

What's the difference between cozy and traditional mysteries and suspense? you ask.

Cozy and traditional mysteries are considered *whodunits*. A suspense novel falls into the *ticking time bomb* category. Cozies and traditionals are typically gentler and take place in a smaller setting, populated with colorful characters. They often feature amateur sleuths. These types of novels include a generous amount of description to immerse the reader in the setting and situations. These mysteries often have a *hook*. Plus they might include some kind of pet.

A suspense novel has more grit. The pace is faster. The situation may lead to a darker reality. Rarely will the author focus on the animals owned by the protagonist. The titles aren't cute or punny.

Given these contrasts, it can be difficult explaining to an agent, let alone a publisher, that I would like to write both. How will they market me? Will my audience read all of my books? Will my audience be led astray and feel betrayed if they're expecting a cozy and purchase a suspense?





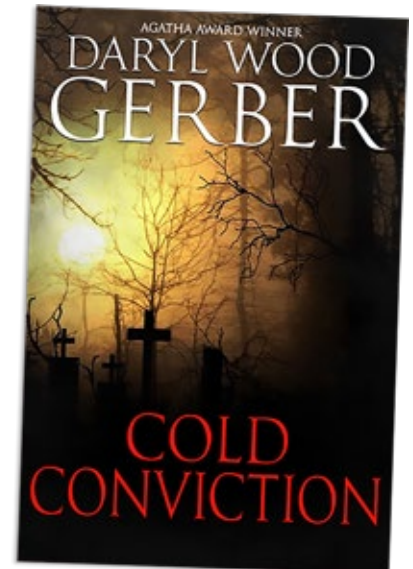
So let's talk about my audience. Cozy mystery readers are my base, it's true. This is what they expect me to write. They pick up one of my books that features a fairy or cat or even a helping of quiche on the cover, and they know what to expect. However, via social media, I have been able to encourage them to read my suspense novels. I make it clear to them that they are different. I don't tease them with a misleading cozy-like cover. Because the Aspen Adams series and my stand-alone novels are more dramatic, so are the covers and titles. However, because I don't want to lose my entire audience, I make it clear, also via social media, that my suspense can be read by someone who likes a cozy mystery. The language isn't soft, but it's not coarse. The murders or incidents are more vivid, but I don't dive into the dark and dreary because that isn't what I like to read—therefore, that isn't what I write about. I loved Alfred Hitchcock movies. I grew up reading Mary Higgins Clark and Daphne DuMaurier. I currently read Harlan Coben's suspense novels, and the like. I don't want my characters battling a horde of spiders or a killer who devours flesh. I like to write about real-life situations that challenge the protagonist.

The biggest hurdle for the author who wants to write cross-genre is not the writing itself, but the marketing. How to find that audience. How to build that audience. How to convince a publisher to take a chance on the author and not limit the author by saying "stay in your lane," meaning write the same genre for the rest of your career.

And what if the author decides she also wants to write a romance? Hold the phone! Does this make the publisher or agent think she is unfocused, and, therefore, unreliable? It shouldn't. An author tells stories. An author can move from one story to the next and remember the genre and tone she wants to set when writing that particular story. Actors for years have had the same type-casting problems. Agents or producers and directors want them to be one thing...and one thing only. Can you imagine limiting Jack Nicholson, Meryl Streep, or Robert DeNiro to one genre of acting? To staying in their lane?

I've decided that if writing cross-genre is going to make my career difficult, so be it. I've got a strong backbone. I can take the heat and the disappointments. But I have to go in with eyes open, knowing it is not going to be an easy path.

*Agatha Award-winning author Daryl Wood Gerber is best known for her nationally bestselling Fairy Garden Mysteries, Cookbook Nook Mysteries, and French Bistro Mysteries. As Avery Aames, she penned the popular Cheese Shop Mysteries. In addition, Daryl writes the Aspen Adams Novels of Suspense as well as stand-alone suspense. Daryl loves to cook, fairy garden, and read. She has a frisky Goldendoodle who keeps her in line. And she has been known to jump out of a perfectly good airplane and hitch-hike around Ireland alone. Learn more at <https://darylwoodgerber.com>.*



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# RULES OF FICTION

## Guess What's Coming to Dinner?



By Ken Brosky

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Rarely do books scare me. It takes a great author to form the sentences that will inspire my imagination to conjure the horror hidden in the written word. It's not like a movie, where scary things can be forced upon your eyes. That goes double for the gruesomeness that accompanies the best shlock fests—like John Carpenter's *The Thing*, to name just one example.

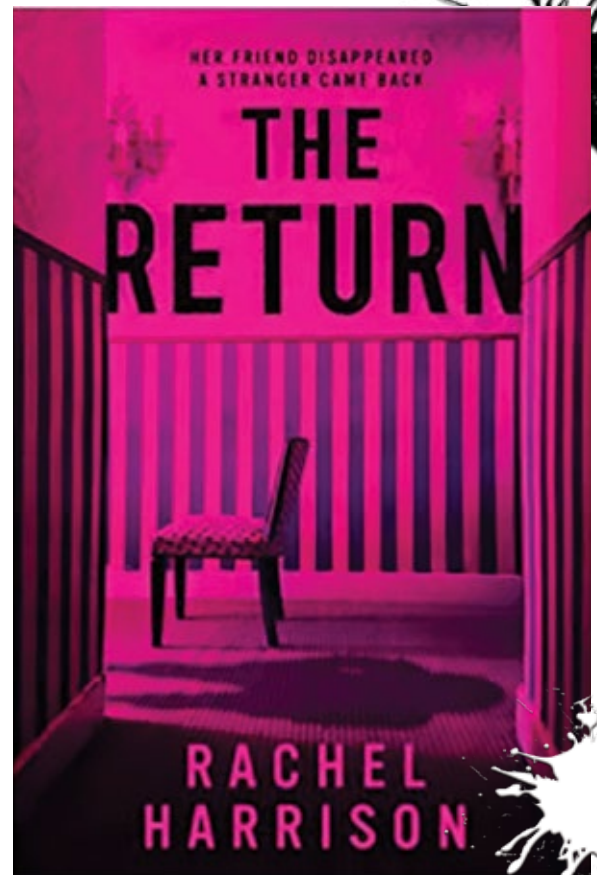
Rachel Harrison's "The Return" scared me. Even better, it came at me from different angles, like a pack of wolves closing in on an exhausted prey. I have to admit, I almost put this book down. The first twenty or so pages moved slow, and I found myself losing interest. But I pushed on and can't express how glad I was to have done so. By the time the book picks up—with the return of a friend who's been missing for two years—everything from the first section started to carry additional weight. It prepared me for the horrors to come by establishing the main character and building the bonds between friends so that what's to come is even more devastating.

So what is it about? Well, Julie has returned to the world after being missing for two years. To encourage her recovery, Julie's friends plan a retreat in a remote resort for some rest and relaxation. But Mollie, Elise, and Mae quickly realize that Julie is not quite herself. She's changed...and Elise worries it might not be Julie at all.


### DINNER ALWAYS HAS A PURPOSE

I want to zero in on something specific that Harrison does with masterful skill: the dinner scene. One important thing to remember about stories—books, short stories, movies, whatever—is that anytime people are eating, there's a purpose behind it. Subtext, lurking underneath the table. Watch how she does it, as Elise is preparing to meet her friends for dinner on their first night at the resort, and she notices her bag has mysteriously fallen off her bed:

*The way my clothes are, it's like there's a body there. Like there's some flat, invisible person wearing them, lying down on the floor...I can't stand to look any longer, afraid if I do the clothes will stand up or crawl toward me.*







Unnerved by the experience, Elise leaves and heads to dinner. It isn't long before she notices that Julie looks different. And it's not just the fact that this vegetarian has just ordered a steak:


*There's something about her teeth. Aside from being chipped, not white anymore, they've shifted. Her canines have come forward. And her lips. They're so chapped, shriveled thin, even in this dark room from across the table I can see the flakes of dead skin. And one of her dimples is missing. Did it fall off?*

Julie has suddenly developed an *interesting* taste for meat:

*There are drippings on her chin, and she's barely chewing before swallowing. Her head bobs. No. It's jerking. There's a physicality to the way she's eating. An aggression. I've seen her binge a few times, but it was never like this...there's not the slightest inkling of shame here.*

This dinner scene does so many fantastic things at once. It shows Elise is growing concerned. It shows a change that's come over Julie since her return. It shows a few inklings of conflict between three supportive friends, all of whom choose to interpret Julie's behavior in different ways.

But most of all, it sets the scene for the first truly scary moment at the end of the chapter when Elise goes back to her room:



*There's a shape in the shadows. Not the bed. Over the bed. On the other side of the bed, crouching in the corner. Knees and elbows up, sharp, at strange angles, like a tortured crab, head down, over something. Something dark and limp and dripping. And there are noises. Bad noises. Eating. Sloppy eating. Not eating. Feeding.*

I won't spoil the rest. Suffice it to say this is just the *beginning*.

## WRITING ACTIVITY: THE DINNER SCENE



Meals should only be in a story if there's meaning behind them. Nobody wants to read about a bunch of people eating and talking about the weather...unless, of course, the weather involves acid rain or something of the sort! Meal scenes are only important to a story if there's something simmering beneath the surface.

So let's try a writing exercise, which I'm intentionally spicing up with key details. Start by selecting an interesting location: either set your meal scene in a far-off space station, an ancient castle, or a business retreat in the isolated countryside. Once you have that, decide what's for dinner. Make it unique, based on the setting! This exercise is not the place for boring old steak.

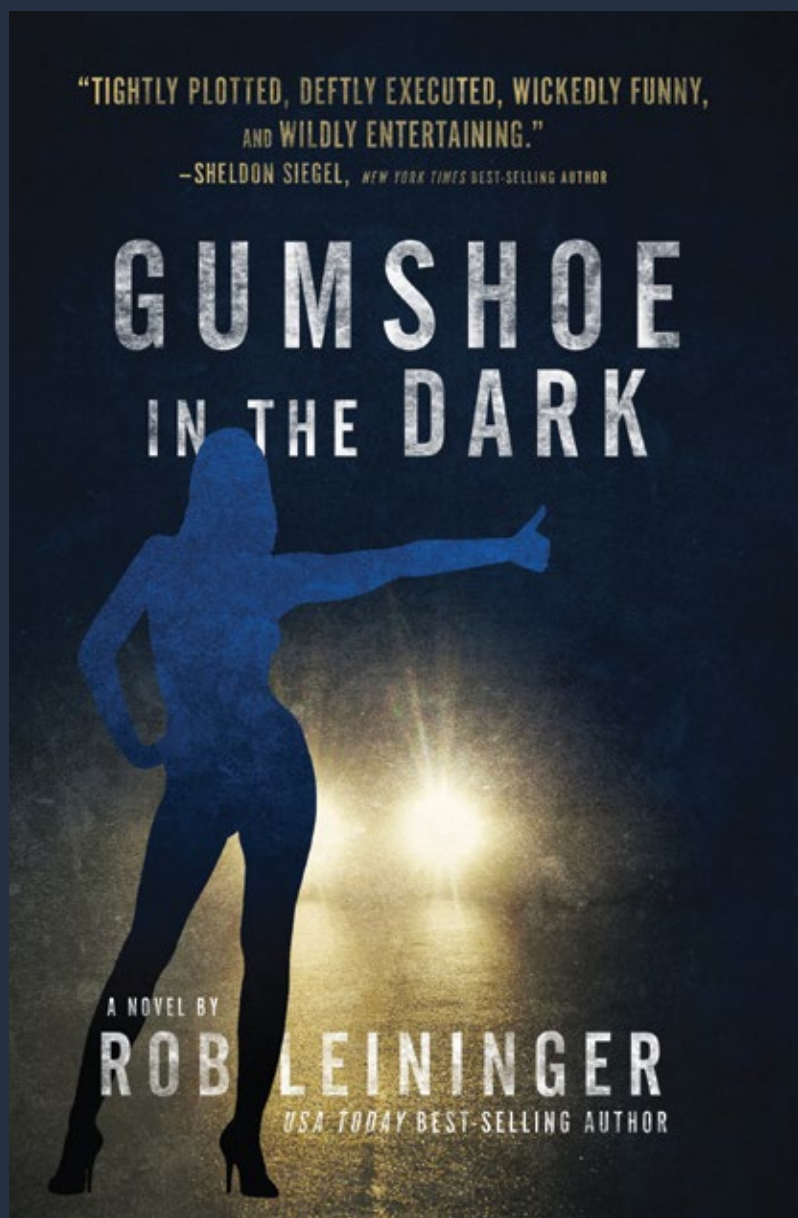
Now that you have the setting and the menu, populate your meal with characters. Aim for four at the most so you don't get too overwhelmed. Again, think about the setting to determine the role of each character.

Finally, there needs to be a reason all four are eating together. And there needs to be an *incident*. Something happened prior to this meal. Something bad. Be creative here, but consider the stakes: the incident should be serious enough to put everyone on edge.

Now write the Dinner Scene. One last caveat: *none of your characters should mention the incident*. Let it simmer just beneath the surface of their conversations. Let the stress of the incident guide how they eat, what they talk about, even how they respond to one another. Make it tense. Make it meaningful.

And at the end, let the pressure get to one of your characters. ■

Ken Brosky is a professor of creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He's been published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Portland Review, and Mystery Weekly. To get notified every time this blog is updated, [join the Pure Fiction substack!](#)



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# INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS ROBERT DUGONI

*Discusses his Menu of Beloved Characters*

Interview by Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: [www.RobertDugoniBooks.com](http://www.RobertDugoniBooks.com)



When you are defining the phrase “critically-acclaimed” in the author realm, Robert Dugoni is a perfect representation. From the *New York Times* to the *Washington Post*; from the *Wall Street Journal* to being #1 on the Amazon bestseller list, Dugoni’s books have been received and loved by the reading public. One of his fan favorites is the *Tracy Crosswhite* police series set in Seattle, and when it comes to espionage you can sink your teeth into, his *Charles Jenkins* series is the ‘best of the best’. Add to these two slam dunk series, the *David Sloane* legal thrillers, as well as several standalones including, “The 7th Canon,” “Damage Control,” and the literary novel, “The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell” (*Suspense Magazine*’s 2018 Book of the Year) and you can see why his skill, passion and talent call out to so many others.

With a new coming-of-age story to be released in September of this year, and future *Crosswhite* and *Jenkins* novels in production, Robert Dugoni took time out of his busy schedule to sit down with Joseph Badal and talk about his incredible work. From explaining characters to speaking of his own mentors to offering sound advice for those up-and-comers out there, Robert Dugoni shows exactly why he’s been the recipient of a wealth of awards and why his books, rightfully so, have been regaled in 25 countries and translated into more than two dozen languages. Now, sit back and enjoy these two fantastic authors’ converse!

Joseph Badal (J.B.): You are a prolific writer with a capacity to take on a wide array of subject matter. Your *David Sloane* books are legal thrillers, your *Charles Jenkins* books are espionage thrillers, and your *Tracy Crosswhite* books fall into the police procedural genre. I found myself wondering as I read each of your books whether it was as much fact as fiction. Are any of your books inspired by real-life events? If so, would you give us an example of where an actual event inspired your writing?

Robert Dugoni (R.D.): *All my novels have some basis in fact. I heard an author once say never shy away from admitting that a*

book has some truth to it. Every book is “of the author.” Who else is it going to be of? So while the books are not about me, they are “of me” and that includes real events that I experienced in my life, how I view the world, what terrifies me, what makes me laugh and what makes me cry. And sometimes we have people come to us with their story. That happened with Charles Jenkins and “The Eighth Sister.” The Russia aspect of the book is completely made up, though I have been to every place in the novel. The trial is close to a real trial told to me by a friend. I didn’t want to write his story and he didn’t want me to, but he let me use the trial in context with the Jenkins story, and I thought it worked well.

J.B.: What is your writing process? Do you concentrate on only one book at a time?

R.D.: I’m usually editing a book while writing another. Sometimes I’m copy editing, developmentally editing, and writing all at the same time. Different hats, so I have to transition between them, but I tend to be ahead of my deadlines, so things will start to back up but in a good way. I write five days a week, 8-10 hours a day. I take breaks and play golf to keep sane, especially during the Covid crisis, but I love what I do and I love to do it.

J.B.: Your series have been extremely well-received by the reading public. What is your secret to keeping a series alive?

R.D.: Making the characters relatable. I have many men and women who can relate to Tracy Crosswhite trying to juggle a difficult job and being a parent and a spouse. I have people relate to Charles Jenkins and his trying to be a parent and a spouse while also working for his country. They like his sense of duty and responsibility to those who have helped him. I also think it’s important to keep the characters alive in each novel. I learned a valuable lesson watching a great series on TV in which they never killed the antagonists. It’s a smart move because good antagonists are hard to create. So when you got one, keep him or her.

J.B.: Do you plan to continue the Charles Jenkins and Tracy Crosswhite series, and will we ever see David Sloane return?

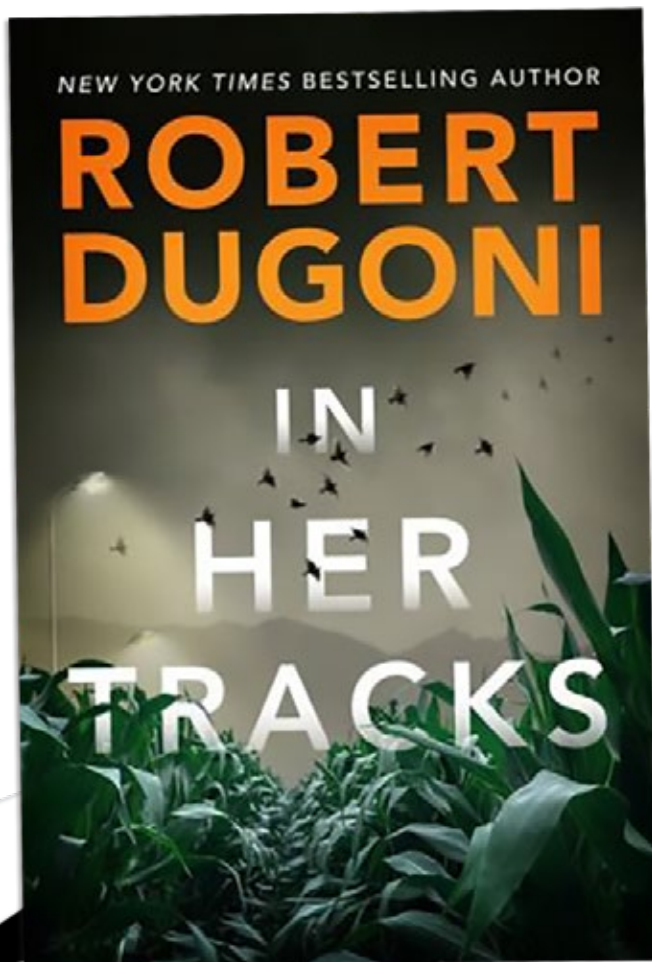
R.D.: I definitely plan to keep Tracy Crosswhite going and I think, after the third Jenkins book is published, that I will keep him going also. I see his books as trilogies, like “The Eighth Sister,” “The Last Agent,” and “The Silent Sisters.” What I need is another adventure. We’re starting to travel again, so I hope to find that adventure. In the interim, I’m writing my literary novels. The second, “The World Played Chess,” will be out in September 2021. It’s a coming-of-age story of three men that I’m very proud of. I’m not sure Sloane will come back as a main character, but I am kicking around the idea of a series using Jake, his son, who is now a lawyer.

J.B.: I loved “Damage Control” and “The 7th Canon.” Any chance that either one could be turned into a series?

R.D.: Thank you. There’s always the chance. I’ve had several people mention Peter Donnelly and want to see more of him. The question is, do I keep him in the 1980s or do I bring him into present times? Not sure yet.

J.B.: You are a master at character development. What is your process for deciding on a character, that character’s name, and his/her traits? Are your characters ever based on real people?

R.D.: Again, thank you. I almost always base my characters on people I know. They might not be people I know well, but people I’ve met along the way who made an impression on me. A lot of writing is just paying attention. I’ll also say that characters often come to me fully developed. They’ll often develop more as the story is written, but I have a strong sense of who they are and what





# “Study the craft. Then study it again and again and again.”

*makes them tick. It's a lesson I learned from Stephen King and Diana Gabaldon. Just let the characters come alive in our stories and trust them without having to work too hard to “create” them. When we work too hard, the character can seem forced.*

J.B.: Tracy Crosswhite is a wonderful protagonist who obviously has sustainability. You've already featured her in ten novels. Do you feel she has literary “legs,” and will she be your primary focus in the near term?

R.D.: *I love writing Tracy novels and I love how she has grown over the years. I want to have her continue to age and deal with all the problems that come with being a parent of a grade schooler and a teenager, etcetera. The big problem is, will she age out? To prevent that, I'm having one book follow the next very close in time. It's fun to do because the characters are all there and they come along for the ride.*

J.B.: Was any woman (women) you know a model for your Tracy Crosswhite character?

R.D.: *Again, Tracy is an amalgamation of so many women I've met and admired in my life. My wife. My mother. My sisters. But Tracy is closest to a retired Violent Crimes detective in Seattle who has been very good to me, helping me out with police procedure and being my sounding board. Her name is Jennifer Southworth, and I couldn't have written Tracy without her.*

J.B.: What writers have inspired you the most? And in what way?

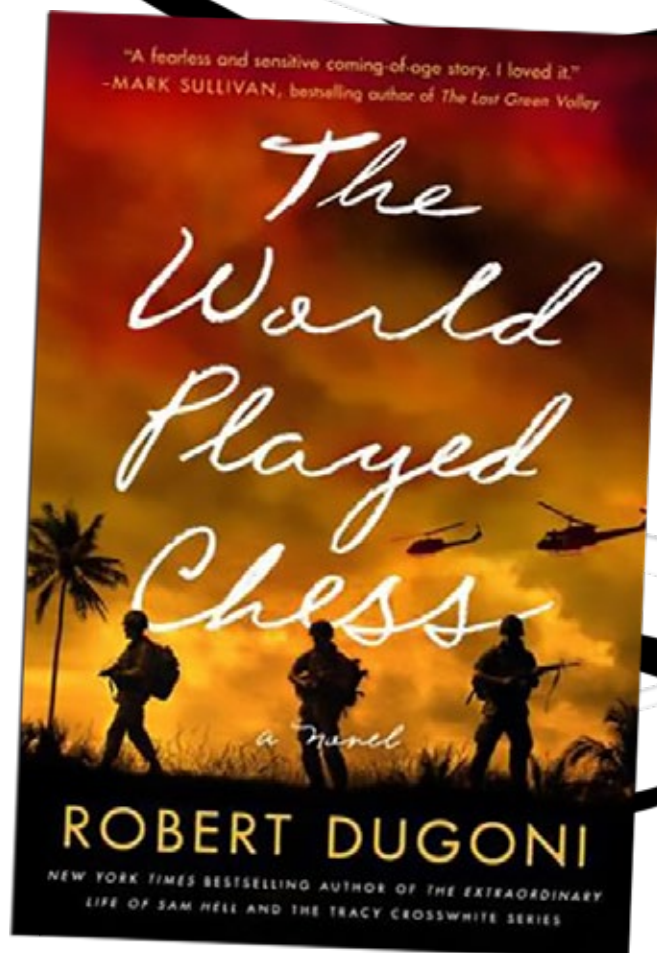
R.D.: *I grew up reading the classics. My mother was an English teacher before she started having children and she had wonderful books around the house like, “The Great Gatsby,” “The Count of Monte Cristo,” “The Old Man and the Sea” and more. I loved Patrick Conroy's and John Irving's books. I think Stephen King is brilliant and read him for entertainment and inspiration. For a while I was really into reading Stephen Hunter's Earl Swagger and Bob Lee Swagger sniper books. But I get asked to read a lot of books for blurbs and I found that I just love to read. The genre doesn't matter. I read thrillers, mysteries, romance, chick lit, westerns, sci-fi, fantasy. I just love a good story.*

J.B.: What are you presently working on and what will be your next release?

R.D.: *I'm currently editing the next Charles Jenkins novel, “The Silent Sisters,” which will be out in 2022, editing “The World Played Chess,” which will be published by Lake Union in September 2021, and writing the next Tracy Crosswhite novel.*

J.B.: What advice would you give aspiring writers?

R.D.: *Study the craft. Then study it again and again and again. Read Chris Vogler's book, “The Writer's Journey,” and understand how stories are put together. It will save you so much time and grief.*

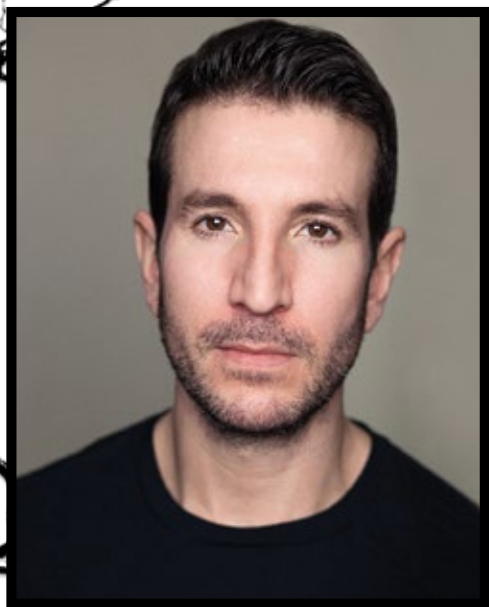


For more information and the latest updates on Robert Dugoni's books, head to [www.robertdugonibooks.com](http://www.robertdugonibooks.com). ■

# THE MAIDENS

By Alex Michaelides  
Press Photo Credit: Wolf Marloh

## PROLOGUE



Edward Fosca was a murderer. This was a fact. This wasn't something Mariana knew just on an intellectual level, as an idea. Her body knew it. She felt it in her bones, along her blood, and deep within every cell.

Edward Fosca was guilty.

And yet—she couldn't prove it; and might never prove it. This man, this monster, who had killed at least two people, might in all likelihood walk free.

He was so smug, so sure of himself. *He thinks he's got away with it*, she thought. He thought he had won.

But he hadn't. Not yet.

Mariana was determined to outsmart him. She had to.

She would sit up all night and remember everything that happened. She would sit here, in this small, dark room in Cambridge, and think, and work it out. She stared at the red bar of the electric heater on the wall, burning, glowing in the dark; willing herself into a kind of trance.

In her mind, she would go back to the very beginning, and remember it all. Every single detail.

And she would catch him.

## PART ONE

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

—C.S Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

### 1

A few days earlier, Mariana was at home, in London.

She was on her knees, on the floor, surrounded by boxes. She was making yet another half-hearted attempt to sort through Sebastian's belongings.

It wasn't going well. A year on from his death, the majority of his things remained spread around the house in various piles and half-empty boxes. She seemed unable to complete the task.



She was still in love with him, that was the problem. Even though she knew she'd never see Sebastian again—even though he was gone for good—she was still in love; and Mariana didn't know what to do with all this love of hers. There was so much of it, and it was so messy: leaking, spilling, tumbling out of her, like stuffing falling out of an old rag doll that was coming apart at the seams.

If only she could box up her love, as she was attempting to his possessions. What a pitiful sight it was—a man's life, reduced to a collection of unwanted items for a jumble-sale.

Mariana reached into the nearest box. She pulled out a pair of shoes.

She considered them—the old green trainers he had for running on the beach. They still had a slightly sodden feel about them; with grains of sand embedded in the soles.

*Get rid of them, she said to herself. Throw them in the bin. Do it.*

Even as she said this, she knew it was an impossibility. They weren't him, they weren't Sebastian—they weren't the man she loved and would love forever—they were just a pair of old shoes. Even so, parting with them would be an act of self-harm; like pressing a knife to her arm, and slicing off a sliver of skin.

Instead, Mariana brought the shoes close to her chest. She cradled them tight, as she might a child. And she wept.

\*

How had she ended up like this?

In the space of just a year, which once would have slipped by almost imperceptibly—and now stretched out behind her like a desolate landscape flattened by a hurricane—the life she had known had been obliterated, leaving Mariana here: thirty-six years old, alone and drunk on a Tuesday night; clutching a dead man's shoes as if they were holy relics—which, in a way, they were.

Something beautiful, something holy had died. All that remained were the books he read, the clothes he wore, the things he touched. She could still smell him on them, still taste him on the tip of her tongue.

That's why she couldn't throw away his possessions—by holding onto them, she could keep Sebastian alive, somehow, just a little bit—if she let go, she'd lose him entirely.

In his essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud argued that, following the death of a loved one, the loss had to be psychologically accepted and that person relinquished; or else you ran the risk of succumbing to pathological mourning, which he called Melancholia—and we call depression.

Mariana understood this. She knew she should relinquish Sebastian; but she couldn't—because she was still in love with him. She was in love, even though he was gone forever, gone behind the veil—'behind the veil, behind the veil'—where was that from? Tennyson, probably.

Behind the veil.

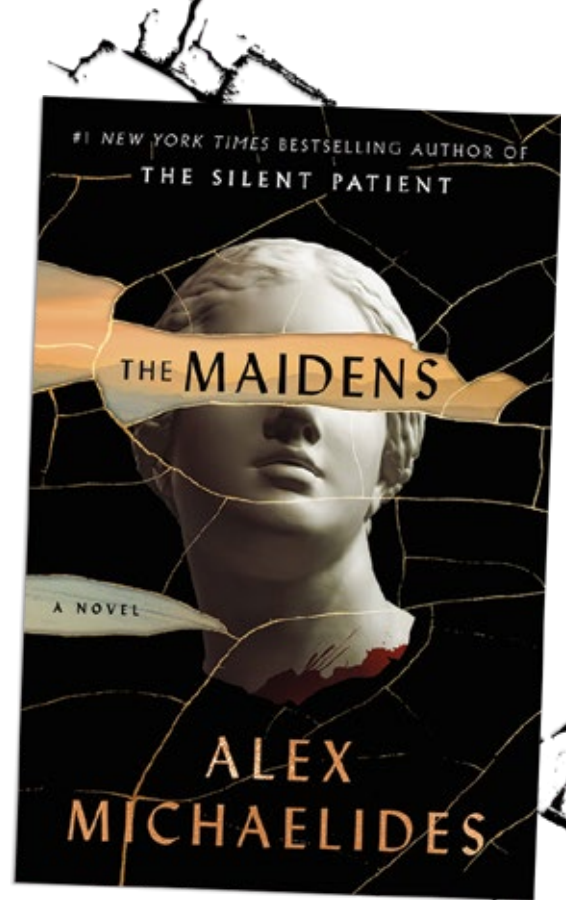
That's how it felt. Since Sebastian died, Mariana no longer saw the world in colour. Life was muted and grey; and far away, behind a veil—behind a mist of sadness.

She no longer had a full life; just a half-life—and that's all she could cope with: half a life. She wanted to avoid the world, all its noise and pain—and cocoon herself here, in her work, and in her little yellow house.

And that's where she would have stayed—if Zoe hadn't phoned her from Cambridge, that night in October.

Zoe's phone call, after the Thursday-evening group—that was how it started.

That was how the nightmare began. ■



From "The Maidens" by Alex Michaelides. Copyright (c) 2021 by the author and reprinted by permission of Celadon Books, a division of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC.

Renowned Actress  
**MEG TILLY**  
Discovers the Writer Inside

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Victoria Will



When it comes to the world of film, Meg Tilly is well-known for her memorable performances in incredible movies like the *The Big Chill*. Not to mention, her acclaimed performance in *Agnes of God* that landed her a Golden Globe. However, in the past few years Meg has gone in a new direction, following in the footsteps of those who were quite good at putting “quill to paper.”

Not only has she created standout titles in both the YA and women’s fiction genres, Meg also delved into the world of romance. Releasing her *Solace Island* trilogy to rave reviews was just the start. She will now be releasing her newest book, “The Runaway Heiress,” this very month. This particular standalone novel is set smack dab in the middle of Hollywood and reviewers are calling it a home run, to say the least.

Taking time out from her busy schedule, Meg joined hosts John Raab and Jeff Ayers of *Suspense Magazine*’s “Beyond the Cover” radio show to share, laugh, and give insight into the differences she’s discovered between the realms of acting and writing. But before enjoying this effervescent guest, let’s take a look at what “The Runaway Heiress” has to offer...

*Sarah Rainsford has been on the run for more than three years. She’s changed identities yet again in hopes of throwing her violent estranged husband, a police lieutenant, off her trail. Since she’s still legally married to him, and he is willing to bend any laws to get his hands on her inheritance, he’ll stop at nothing to locate her.*

*With a new name and fake ID papers, she lands a job as a personal assistant to none other than Hollywood’s golden boy director Mick Talford. He’s a difficult client but she senses hidden depths to him. Once Mick and Sarah combine forces in a desperate attempt to keep Sarah out of harm’s way, they build a strong bond;*





*but with danger trailing them, is it enough to keep them both alive?*

John Raab (J.R.): Welcome back, everybody. Today we are honored to have with us actor now author, Meg Tilly. We are so excited to have you here for the first time. How are things?

Meg Tilly (M.T.): Great! I'm doing great. Just sitting here, having a cup of tea, talking to you...all is good.

J.R.: Let's begin with your new book, "The Runaway Heiress." Now, I know that *Solace Island* was a series all based in one place, but even though this is a standalone book it is set near the same area. Is that correct?

M.T.: Well, with the *Solace Island* series, that included "Solace Island," "Hidden Cove," and "Cliff's Edge," each belongs to that series but each of them is also a standalone. Now, with "The Runaway Heiress," although the character was in "Hidden Cove" you don't actually have to read that in order to understand this one. In this newest book she's going under a fake name. I wasn't going to write it, but fans kept writing me and asking what happened to Mary? I need to know what happened to her. So I thought, okay, and I wrote this. But of course in this her name is not Mary, it's Sarah Rainsford.

She's on the run because she has an abusive husband who is a lieutenant. He's determined to get her. And right here I have to give a shout-out to Christina Dodd. I was having a zoom meeting with Christina, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Susan Elizabeth Phillips and I was stumped as to what the title of the book should be. Christina came up with 'The Heiress' and then my agent said what about "The Runaway Heiress"? So that's how it came to be.

J.A.: Now for this book, did you have the story in mind and realize she was the perfect fit as a character? Or did you think, well...I want to use her but how do I fit her into a story?

M.T.: Definitely answer 'B.' (LOL) I didn't actually know that I would write this; the fans just kept on asking. Then, out of the blue, this character popped up. Mick Talford who was that 'golden boy' director in Hollywood, which I actually based on a compilation of people I know. He's a wild man but started out more 'whoa!' but then I had to tone it down for that area I'm writing in. I just love him; he grew up in a brothel in Nevada and has become this person of stature, but he still feels like the person he was when he was growing up.

In all my books you'll find at least one character who is all fancy and stuff, but in reality they're a lot like me. You know, with the scruffy hair, who grew up entirely different than what people imagine. That's kind of a recurring theme: Who the world sees, who you feel you are, and the real person is somewhere in the middle. So, Mick showed up and then

they came together. Sarah is on the run and has to take a job as his personal assistant. So, is she safe now? She's in this monied enclave in the world of Mulholland Drive, or has she just thrown Mick in the crosshairs of the deadly danger that's after her? Then there's this romance, but I think the character of Mick is great. They're a great balance to each other. Their chemistry is good and they are unexpected. I hope everybody loves it because I do.

J.R.: It's awesome, actually. Now, we recently interviewed Deborah Goodrich Royce about "Finding Mrs. Ford" and her other titles, as well as interviewing other actors. The one thing that I love to hear about when I talk to actors about becoming authors is the challenge. Like, when you're doing a movie, you can do a lot of things that are unspoken. People just see it; they see the emotions. How do you take that scene and put it in a book? How difficult is that step to translate into words but still show all those feelings?

M.T.: Wow! You guys ask cool questions. It's not that big of a step, actually. My acting teacher knew I was a writer before I did. I was studying with Peggy Feury at The Loft Studio and one day she was doing a scene with some people and giving them a critique, when all of a sudden she stopped, turned around, and looked right at me. She said, 'You're a writer. You think like a writer.' I think the acting training really helped me in that respect. I mean, she had us study all of a screenwriter's works in order to see how the puzzle pieces of characters and plot fit together. As an actor you're just a piece. You don't get to choose what people see or what they don't. I was an actor who memorized the entire script so I knew it all before going into it. It was the way I worked; organically. But then when you get into the scene you can just breathe.

My biggest step to overcome was thinking writers are the fancy people, the intelligent people with a slew of university degrees, but that's not actually true. Writers are people who have learned how to see beyond the skin or what someone says or does. So it's really fun because I get to have my character say one thing but also get to be inside their body and know how they feel. So it's a natural progression for me. It's more rewarding.

J.R.: Because it's all you.

M.T.: Exactly. I get to set it, I get to light it, I get to decorate it, I get to cut it, so I can write and rewrite until it feels good to me. I also don't need permission to be creative. In acting, I need to be hired. I need to have someone say that I'm the one for the role. In writing, there are a number of ways now that writers can be seen. They can self-publish, they can create, they can get their voice out there. I've been fortunate enough to be published, and it's a lot of hard work, but I enjoy it. It's like making a big feast for everyone, and then they sit down, eat it

all and enjoy it.

J.R.: You can see the joy in your face.

M.T.: Yes, I am really blessed. It's so much fun. I don't have to tell you guys that we've just been through a horrid pandemic and I love being able to climb into that other world when I write. It's so nice to escape.

J.A.: Well, you kind of lead me to the next question. Who is Sara Flynn?

M.T.: Ah...since we're speaking about all the options writers have out there. (LOL) What happened is, I hadn't planned on writing romantic suspense. I had written YA, I had written literary books, I had written middle grade fiction, but I hadn't planned on that.

My dearly beloved friend of something like twenty-four years came to visit. His brother had passed away and he was very close to him. He was grieving and I was so worried because he was...I'd never seen him so...broken. The one thing that cheered him was that he had done a book on Amazon and he said that I should really do it. I thought, maybe someday, but I liked working with publishers. So one night I was lying in bed with my husband and said I was going to do it. The next morning I made my friend porridge, which he loves, and I said to him that I was going to do the Amazon thing and he was going to help me. He just cheered right up. He had a project and he was suddenly excited. It lifted him. But then I thought, now I've got to write it.

So I was walking with my friend and asked what I should do? He suggested that maybe I write a suspense like Jayne Krentz, but do it under a different name so my publisher wouldn't be all mad or anything. So I came up with Sara Flynn. Sara is my old, beloved rottweiler who was with us for twelve years; Flynn is a family name on my mother's Irish side. Once I had my name it was like having Superman's cape. I felt like I could really throw myself into it. I had tried to write romantic suspense before, because I really love it, but I always believed I wasn't good enough to do it. For me, that genre was like my golden chalice. But when I began, I have to say that's the fastest

book I ever wrote. I kept calling my friend for pointers and all. But after I wrote it, I got a three-book deal, which is how the Solace Island series came about. Then they bought this new one. So even though the gift was originally for my friend, it turned out to be a gift for me. I never would have had the bravery to try romantic suspense because when you read that kind of thing you think: No, I couldn't do that. So...I guess I just absorbed it



all by osmosis.

J.R.: So now, out of all the genres you've written in, is this your favorite? Is this where you're going to stay?

M.T.: Definitely, yes. This is where I'm going to stay as long as people keep buying my books. Now I say that...but things shift a little. The book I'm writing now, that's another set of three, has shifted on me a little bit.

J.R.: Has it gone a little darker? Because usually you get into this romantic suspense and then it shifts to thriller?

M.T.: (LOL) It works though. I do like to know that everything is going to be okay in the end, but I do have a dark side because of life, or my upbringing, or whatever. So it's kind of like the perfect marriage to have, both romantic suspense and dark thriller, but I am wrestling with that manuscript. I am at the end of it but it took a different turn. It opened a whole can of worms, so now I don't know how it will end up. In this one, yes, there is a resolution but not an ultimate one. The stories are more interwoven.

J.R.: Because it's a trilogy.

M.T.: Exactly. The stories got more complicated, like the roots of a tree underground. Now this is up and happening, now this, and I have to push that root down....

J.R.: You have to write yourself into a corner to get yourself out.

M.T.: Yeah. And I have a lot of corners. (LOL)

J.A.: How do you balance that line between romance and suspense?

M.T.: It's a tightrope walk, right? So, it's like being a juggler and you've got to keep it all in the air. For some people, they just know. They have a formula. For me, you put the work in but, being an actor, it's more of a 'feel' thing. If it doesn't feel right, I get stuck. It's a rhythm, and after reading it for over thirty years, I can see the rhythm. Now we need this character...we need this scene...it's like a pulse. It's like cooking. If you're in your head, you miss stuff. But if you feel it, if you're really into it, you know what the dish needs in order to taste just right.

J.A.: One other thing I'm curious about is, we know a lot of authors whose goal is to turn their book into a film. You have the background, so I was wondering if we should see any of





this on the screen anytime soon?

M.T.: Well, a lot of people have written and said these books would be great movies, but for me the golden chalice here is not film. I've made films. So even if you get optioned, you still don't know that it will be a movie. And, if it is, will it be good enough? It will mean more money, perhaps, but I look at things like how I want to spend the hours in my life. I would never feel unfulfilled if my books were never made into movies. I like the fact that people can dive in and escape for a few hours. I am sixty-one and I'm not at the point where I'm career-building. I want to write what will give me pleasure and hopefully give people pleasure when they read it. That's my goal, and I'm lucky because I get to write just because I want to.

J.R.: Do you look at a book as a challenge?

M.T.: Well, yes, every book is a challenge. But I feel the points you have to hit, even though sometimes my characters disagree. Being that this is my fourth book, I still feel like it's new and is still a challenge, but I'm so proud just to be writing them. Different things come to me but I guess...I think more along the lines of what flavor do I want now? My challenge will always be to make it the best book I can. And I think I've learned. If you read the first one, I go through a lot of drafts. The second was better. And with this one, 'The Runaway Heiress', I'm really proud of the twists and turns. I was like, wow! Maybe you always feel that way about the latest, because then you have the knowledge of all the ones you wrote before.

J.R.: Are you going to touch on COVID in any books?

M.T.: No!

J.A.: Thank you. (LOL)

M.T.: We're writing escapism, not reality. I lived through it; I don't want to write about it. For me, I don't want to do it because I'm not in the mood to read it. I mean, I read a lot and a reference to it is fine, but I don't want to be slogging through it all again.



J.A.: One of the things I love about you is your show, *Tea Times*. Could you talk about that a bit?

M.T.: Absolutely. It's called Meg's Cozy Tea Time and it's on YouTube. I never thought I'd be saying I have a channel on YouTube, by the way, because I didn't know anything about it. It started because my husband, during the boredom of the pandemic,

wanted something to do to keep his mind off everything, so he decided to learn to play the guitar. He went to YouTube and called up all these channels and videos that taught people how to do that. One day, he said to me that I needed to set up a channel. It would be cozy and a place to go where people could relax and take a break from the real world for a while.

So around four months into the pandemic, we were exercising and I was working on the new book and I'd just written four pages, which I never write in one day, so I was feeling like I could walk on water. So he started on the YouTube thing again, and I said: Honey, I don't want to have to present, to put on makeup, to dress up, etc. He told me I didn't have to because nobody did. He said I didn't even need to brush my hair. He was so adamant about it; I broke down and agreed. I sat in the chair, he taped the phone on a tripod with packing tape and hit record. I talked for about six or seven minutes; I was basically calling his bluff. But he watched it and said it was great and then posted it! I didn't think anyone would actually watch, but we built this wonderful community. I talk about whatever and people write questions in the comments and I pick one or two and just answer them. We just talk, but it's fun.

J.R.: And there's a link to that on your website? Would [www.megtillyauthor.com](http://www.megtillyauthor.com) be the best place to find all of this?

M.T.: Absolutely. I have Twitter, and I also have people who'll put things on Facebook for me because I have no understanding of the process, just like my husband does with my YouTube stuff, but the site will have it all.

J.R.: Are you going to any book conferences?

M.T.: Well, not with the pandemic. I am waiting to book anything until I'm fully vaccinated.

J.R.: Any virtual events?

M.T.: Oh yeah, tons. I'm also doing a signing/book launch at *The Ripped Bodice*, and *The Poisoned Pen* asked me to do an interview, and I'm doing a lot of these virtual things.

J.R.: Thank you so much for being with us today, Meg. We loved having you here and hope you come back again.

M.T.: That would be great. Thank you so much!

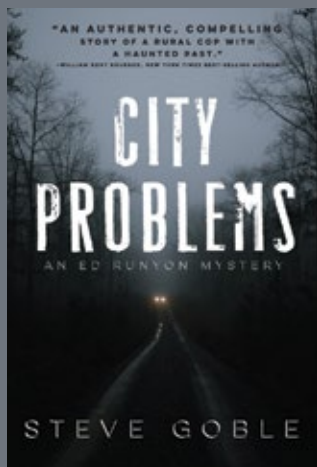
J.R. Readers out there, just telling you: When "The Runaway Heiress" comes out, don't walk, to get a copy. It is absolutely great!

M.T.: Thank you, guys. This has been a fabulous interview. ■

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—WILLIAM KENT  
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violence—a snap  
judgement—a  
life changed to  
the core

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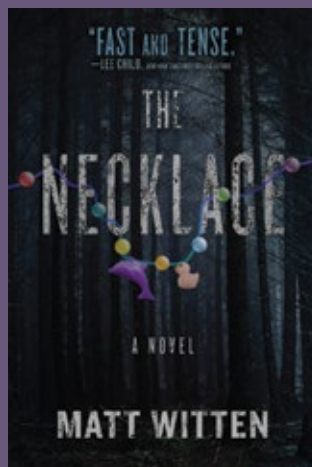


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one woman's  
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before it is too  
late

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Horror Fan

# RILEY SAGER

Offers Up Unforgettable Chills in “Survive the Night”

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



For those who are unaware of this man’s brilliant menu of books (and that can’t be many of you), Riley Sager is the pseudonym of a former journalist, editor and graphic designer. Becoming a full-time writer, Riley thrilled the world with his first book, “Final Girls,” which went on to become an international bestseller that’s been published in twenty-five languages. What came next were immediate *New York Times* bestsellers, “The Last Time I Lied” and “Lock Every Door,” and the hits haven’t stopped coming since.

With his latest title, “Survive the Night,” readers are gifted with a tale that earned a spot on the *New York Times Book Review* list as being one of the “summer reads guaranteed to make your heart thump and your skin crawl.” And that’s an understatement, to say the least.

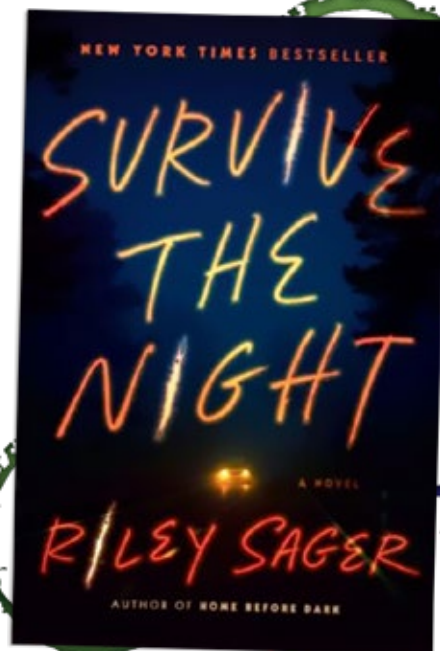
Taking time out of his crazed schedule, Riley linked up with John Raab, host of *Suspense Magazine*’s “Beyond the Cover” radio show to delve into the horror genre, talk about his

excitement and love for the film industry, and to take on a friendly battle regarding the band, Nirvana. But first, let’s take a peek at the chills and thrills “Survive the Night” will be giving to fans everywhere ...

*It’s November 1991. Nirvana’s in the tape deck, George H.W. Bush is in the White House, and movie-obsessed college student Charlie Jordan is in a car with a man who might be a serial killer.*

*Josh Baxter, the man behind the wheel, is a virtual stranger to Charlie. They met at the campus ride board, each looking to share the long drive home to Ohio. Both have good reasons for wanting to get away. For Charlie, it’s guilt and grief over the shocking murder of her best friend, who became the third victim of the man known as ‘The Campus Killer.’ For Josh, it’s to help care for his sick father—or so he says.*

*The longer she sits in the passenger seat, the more Charlie notices there’s something suspicious about Josh, from the holes in his story about his father to how he doesn’t want her to see inside the trunk. As they travel an empty, twisty highway in the dead of night, an increasingly anxious Charlie begins*



*to think she's sharing a car with the actual Campus Killer. Is Josh truly dangerous? Or is Charlie's jittery mistrust merely a figment of her movie-fueled imagination?*

*One thing is certain—Charlie has nowhere to run and no way to call for help. Trapped in a terrifying game of cat and mouse played out on pitch-black roads and in neon-lit parking lots, Charlie knows the only way to win is to survive the night.*

John Raab (J.R.): Welcome back, everybody. I am excited to say we are here with bestselling author, Riley Sager. It's great to talk to you, finally. How are you doing?

Riley Sager (R.S.): *It's great to be here! Nice to talk to you, as well.*

J.R.: I have to say I don't think we've spoken before. I mean, emails and things, but this is the first time on the show, I think.

R.S.: *I'm not sure. I have to say the last fourteen months have just been a big blur because of all this, so I don't even remember half the things I've done.*

J.R.: I might have gotten you for "Lock Every Door," but I'm not sure.

R.S.: *Maybe so. It seems like a decade ago, though. (LOL)*

J.R.: It's only been two books. (LOL) Now we're diving into "Survive the Night." Of course, "Home Before Dark" was *Suspense Magazine's* "Crimson Scribe Award" winner last year. You were the first ever to win in that genre. I mean... what would you call it? I think when you say horror, people think gore, but it's not that. I mean yours is horror; but scary, not gore.

R.S.: *I use the umbrella genre, actually; thriller. I mean, the movie Halloween is a great thriller at a suspense pace. I mean, it can be horror, like *Scream*. *Scream* is horror but it's also*

*an amazing mystery. And funny, too. I don't really think about what the books will be labeled when I'm writing them. I mean, some of my books have been considered YA fiction. So I'm okay if they're considered mystery, horror, or whatever; I just want to write a good book.*

J.R.: And you're not a series guy. All your books have been standalones. I

mean, I would think with horror it would be hard to write a series character just in general.

R.S.: *Yeah. I mean, when you're talking horror movies, you're talking diminishing returns when it comes to sequels. I think part of it stems from the fact that I never want to repeat myself. I also think I would get kind of bored if I was working on the same characters, in the same place, at the same time. I don't begrudge readers for liking that, nor do I judge writers for being able to write a dozen or so books like that, but for me it's more challenging to come up with a new location, new plot, and new characters.*

J.R.: Like a blank canvas.

R.S.: *Exactly.*

J.R.: Well, I'll tell you, "Survive the Night" was awesome. But I do have to touch on one point. I'm one of those people who love to read 'back of the book' stuff and I have to ask: Did you have to use Nirvana in the tape deck, man?

R.S.: *(LOL) I absolutely had to use Nirvana.*

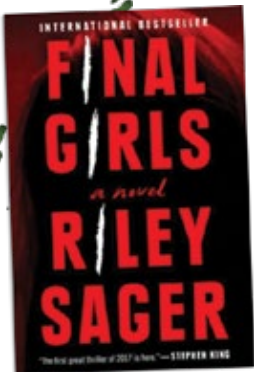
J.R.: Oh, man, I was such a fan of 80s metal and Nirvana killed me. They came on the scene and killed all my bands, so I'm not really a fan of theirs. You also said tape deck and not CD player, which I thought was kind of odd.

R.S.: *That's really from my own experience. I did not have a CD player until 1992. In 1991, I was still very much a cassette person, and even then I didn't have one in my car until... God...it might have been 2000 because up until then I was driving junkers.*

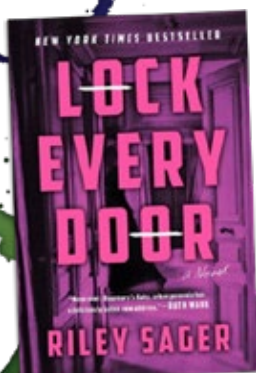
J.R.: Okay. (LOL) Give us "Survive the Night." Tell us what you have going on here.

R.S.: *Well, it's about a college student named Charlie. She's a film studies major and obsessed with movies – almost dangerously so. Her best friend has been murdered by a man known as 'The Campus Killer,' and Charlie feels a whole lot of guilt and shame over that, which she should, and decides she needs to go home. The only way to get home quickly is to go to the campus ride board which, in 1991, was the only way college students could get somewhere. If the parents couldn't come and pick them up, they'd go to this board. So if someone was going close to where you were going, you would pitch in for the cost of gas, etc., and ride with them. Which was normal. Nowadays, of course, when you say something like that they're aghast. Like, 'Say what? You got into a car with strangers?' It completely confuses them.*

*So anyway, she meets up with a guy named Josh Baxter*







who says he's going her way. Josh works at the university and says that they should team up and drive from New Jersey to Ohio. Not that long into the drive, however, Charlie suspects Josh is not who he says he is and may actually be 'The Campus Killer.' So now she's in a car, speeding down the highway in the middle of the night with a guy she believes is an actual serial killer.

J.R.: It was so real for me because I've driven that swath of Pennsylvania Turnpike before, because my dad had family in New Jersey, so I know that ride can be very long and very boring. It sent chills through my spine to know that someone could learn they're out there with a killer in the car, and now you're screwed going through Lancaster and Pennsylvania Dutch to places in the Appalachian Mountains where people could hide your body and no one would ever find you. It was so creepy. But when you were thinking about it, was it the characters that sang to you first or the location?

R.S.: *The first thing was the plot. It came to me so weirdly. You mentioned "Home Before Dark" earlier, which was just such a complex plot. It was literally two books in one and I was exhausted after writing that book. Of course, I was also contractually obliged to come up with another book. So I was like, 'Wow. What can I work on now?' Then it hit me: film noir meets Little Red Riding Hood. That exact phrase actually popped into my head. I'm like, 'That could work.' I started envisioning this girl trying to get home to literally Grandma's house and meeting up with a big, bad wolf, and what that would entail. I decided early on to set it in the past because it's so much easier from a plotting standpoint. There were no cell phones, no GPS; she was at the mercy of a payphone. It really was a perfect time because it was just before technology started taking over.*

J.R.: Right, because back then cells were for rich people in their cars. That's what I love; the tech is gone. You can't text your friends, and even if you're dumped off somewhere you can't exactly tell anyone where you are on a silent road like that in the middle of the night. So now you have the plot and you were trying to create characters on this blank canvas. You first figure out the villain or the hero? Give us a look into that.

R.S.: *Well, with the main character of Charlie I wanted someone.... I love movies so much, and I think that's apparent in most of the books I've written. I wanted to do something that was just a full-on love letter to the movies. That's why Charlie is a film studies major, which I happened to be back in the 90s when I was in college, so there was no research needed. I*

*thought I could cram in all these references to movies, because that's how she sees things—through this lens of cinema she loves so much. She was even named after a Hitchcock character, and it allowed me to have fun with things. Like, she'll wonder, in the movie Shadow of a Doubt the character would have done this, so maybe Charlie can do this too—so it was an interesting way to bring in movies as her mindset. It also makes her a bit unreliable because she doesn't quite know sometimes what's real and what's a movie. Therefore, sometimes the readers have to question whether or not certain things are playing out in her head or if they're all real?*

J.R.: Now, villains are creations I love, and you have some really cool villains. To me, they make the story. I actually love them more than the hero because the hero has to play by rules. So give us the insight on when you're creating your villain; do you look back on others personality-wise and see your last ones and try to make them more diabolical, etc., or are you just focused on the present book?

R.S.: *Actually I never really look back at the past. With this one I knew because most of the book is literally two people in a car, (LOL), so there had to be a great dynamic between the two to keep readers interested. I knew Josh couldn't be the standard bad guy. There had to be some charm there and layers, and even his own uncertainty. I mean, there is even a spark between them at the beginning; some flirtation goes on before Charlie thinks he's the killer. In essence, I wanted it to feel like a radio drama; two characters in a car talking while mind games are being played out. Such as, the characters are thinking things like, 'I know he's a killer, and I think he thinks I know he's a killer, so I have to pretend.' That sort of thing: mind games like that.*

J.R.: We speak of films, and in my mind "Home Before Dark" should be a slam-dunk for that, but has there been any talk about film or TV where your books are concerned?

R.S.: *Everything's been optioned and is in development, but I don't keep track of it because I really don't have any control over it. That's on purpose. I love movies and TV, but I don't want to know how the sausages are made, so to speak. For me it's like, here's my book, you have my blessing, any questions you have don't hesitate to ask, but I don't want to know the process. Besides, I know Hollywood is very fickle, especially now with the pandemic decimating the making of these things.*

J.R.: Have you ever thought about writing a screenplay?

R.S.: *Yes, but not on one of my own books. I don't have the ruthlessness to take out chunks of a book and smooth it out like that. There are two different beasts; I know the book beast but not the screenplay beast. I think it would be highly difficult.*

J.R.: It is a struggle, yes. Writing a book, to me, is harder than writing a screenplay. Nick Santora, who did *Scorpion* and *Breakout Kings*, also wrote a book called “Fifteen Digits.” He said once that when he was writing a screenplay he could have some guy spit into the holy water inside a church and walk out. He wouldn’t say a word, but you’d know he was evil with just that one thing on screen. But in a book he had to explain why that occurred and why/how that guy was bad, etc., which made writing a book so much harder.

R.S.: *I would love to try my hand at something, and maybe someday I’ll get the time, but right now books are keeping me super busy.*

J.R.: Well, you have to put out at least one book a year, right?

R.S.: *Yes, and I’m trying to get my next done early so that I can maybe do a secret side project I would like to do in the second half of this year, but we will have to see. A book a year is a tight schedule to begin with, so...I’m not sure if I’ll be able to.*

J.R.: True. I think people hear that, though, and think it’s odd. But to really get into the crux of everything and make a book truly great takes time.

R.S.: *Well, they also probably don’t understand that it’s a whole process. I mean, once you finish the book, there’s editing, revisions, copyediting, marketing and promotion, production, the cover, and all that stuff to do as well. There’s a whole second half of the job that goes beyond sitting and typing.*

J.R.: Would you agree writing is the easy part and getting people to buy it is the hard part?

R.S.: *Sometimes, yes. Some days I would disagree, but the hard part really is getting people to know that the book even exists. I’ve been very fortunate and benefitted from people with a very large audience getting ahold of my book and then telling their large audience about my stuff. Like Stephen King did.*

J.R.: I was gonna ask about that, actually. How did you get the Stephen King blurb on “Final Girls”?

R.S.: *Truthfully? I don’t know. It is such a thing that completely changed my existence, but I don’t know how he got the book because it was six months before the book came out. It was so odd. It was the day after Christmas, six months before “Final Girls” would be published...it was so unexpected.*

J.R.: So you had two Christmases. (LOL)

R.S.: *Exactly. At this point it has become such a huge moment*

*in my life that I don’t even want to know the details. I just am so appreciative that it happened.*

J.R.: And you are looking at some cool events coming up, correct?

R.S.: *Yes. It’s really exciting and a whole lot of fun. When we were planning this, my second virtual tour, the events will differ on a store-by-store basis. When the book comes out in June, it will first be Murder by the Book in Houston where I’ll be having a conversation with Abbey Endler who does the amazing blog “Crime by the Book,” and it’s a ticketed event. If you preorder the book from the store, you get a ticket. You can also get a personalized copy, which means Murder by the Book will be sending the books of all those ticketed to my house. I will do them all and then ship them back to Houston.*

J.R.: They send you the list of names and you send them back?

R.S.: *Yes, the actual book. This year there’s gonna be twice as many as last time around, when my dining room table was ready to collapse from the weight of all the books. But I love being able to do that for readers.*

J.R.: Do you do that for your local bookstores?

R.S.: *If they have the books, I’ll stop by and sign a few.*

J.R.: Oh, come on. They have to have the book.

R.S.: *No, that’s the thing. The closest store to me is a Barnes & Noble, so last year, I masked up and went there to sign copies of “Home Before Dark” on the day it came out but they had literally two of them. It was weird. There are a couple of indie stores within forty-five minutes of me that I hope to be able to get to visit in person this year around the release date.*

*I really want to be able to do that this year. I have to say, one of the positives of this whole horrible pandemic was that bookstores were very quick to adapt. Last year, around April, I still thought I’d be going on tour in June or July. When I was told that wasn’t going to happen, bookstores were very quick to say, well...break out your laptop. We’ll do this instead. Virtual conversations with this one and that, where we meet up and have these chats.*

J.R.: So it will be you and Jeff conversing?

R.S.: *Well, it’ll be myself and Jeff Deaver; me and Taylor Adams; me and Megan Miranda—all chats like that.*





J.R.: Ask Jeff what he feels about art museums and see what his answer is. (LOL)

R.S.: *Okay...(LOL). I'm really looking forward to that one because he's had such an amazing career. He was also one of the first to read "Survive the Night" and gave a very generous blurb. When he said he'd absolutely do this event with me, I was extremely excited. I want to be careful, though. I just did a thing last week where the battery on my laptop died. I think they thought I got tired and just quit, but I plugged it in and came back on five minutes later to say how sorry I was.*

J.R.: You should have come back and said, "Now, *that's* how a bestselling New York author leaves the room."

R.S.: *Yeah. Drop the mic! (LOL)*

J.R.: So is your website the best place to learn about all these conversations and events coming up?

R.S.: *Absolutely. [Rileysagerbooks.com](http://Rileysagerbooks.com) has all the pertinent information and also links to my Instagram and Twitter accounts, which I'm active on, and Facebook, which I'm not as active on. Twitter is easier because it's quick and you don't need a pretty picture to go with the post like you need on Instagram. (LOL)*

J.R.: Now, do you do newsletters or a blog?

R.S.: *I do have a newsletter. It used to be monthly but I ran out of things to say. (LOL) So it's quarterly now.*

J.R.: You should write about movies, like breaking down *Halloween* and stuff like that. Do you think they should have stopped the *Halloween* movies, though?

R.S.: *I'm actually excited about Halloween Kills. I'm also actually a fan of Halloween H20 from 1998. I thought that was a great ending. And I'm psyched about Scream V coming out.*

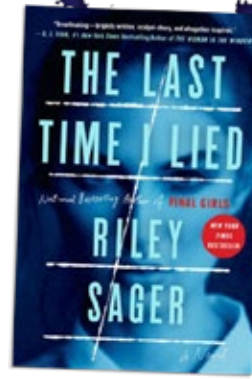
J.R.: Do you take anything from those old films for inspiration?

R.S.: *I do take a lot of inspiration from those types of stories, like "The Amityville Horror." I like to play around with things that have come before; it's fun to read into them and then subvert them. As a writer I find that really enjoyable*

J.R.: Well, Riley, I have to say it's been a huge pleasure to speak with you. And everybody out there, get "Survive the Night" as fast as possible, check out all the events coming up with Riley and remember some are ticketed, so make sure to get on those virtual links as soon as possible. But whatever you do, do *not* miss this book. It is really incredible!

R.S.: *Thank you so much. And...sorry, but I'll never apologize for Nirvana in the tape deck. (LOL)*

For more information on all of Riley's books, reviews, newsletter, and more check out [www.rileysagerbooks.com](http://www.rileysagerbooks.com). ■



## SURVIVE THE NIGHT

By Riley Sager

*Survive!* That's all Charlie has to do, but she doesn't know how she's going to make it out of the situation she's gotten herself into.

She's had a rough few years, to say the least. As a teenager, she lost her parents in a car accident and now, in 1991, she's just lost her best friend and college roommate to a serial killer dubbed, "The Campus Killer", after Charlie left her alone in a bar. To cope, Charlie turns to films as a way to escape the reality of her guilt. But more often than not, her mind blurs between a film-like world and reality, and some days she has trouble making sense of what's actually happening.

She makes the decision to leave school, and her loving boyfriend Robbie behind, and she heads to a ride-share board at the college hoping to find someone to drive her from New Jersey to Ohio. Enter Josh...a very cute, normal enough guy who just so happens to be heading in the same direction as Charlie. They agree to drive together despite all of the campus warnings about the recent serial murders, and plan to leave that night.

As they begin their trip, it doesn't take long for Charlie to notice a few things that make her suspicious of her travel buddy; after all, she's seen all of the best horror movies and she knows how this story goes.

If you've read any Riley Sager books in the past then you know there are bound to be twists in this story that you won't see coming no matter how hard you try, and "Survive the Night" is filled with them. Another killer book (pun definitely intended!). I couldn't put this down; it may be Sager's best one yet.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

# With a Focus on Powerful Women, Meet Best-Selling Crime Author LISA REGAN

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Best-selling suspense author Lisa Regan is perhaps best known for her two popular series, the *Detective Josie Quinn* and *P.I. Jocelyn Rush* novels. Her first published novel, “Finding Claire Fletcher”—about a woman kidnapped at the age of fifteen and imprisoned for a decade by her abductor—won her initial acclaim. The sequel to that novel, “Losing Leah Holloway,” also proved to be successful with readers. She’s been writing incredible suspense novels ever since.

Lisa is also a member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. She enjoys interacting with her readers and other writers, so she was more than happy to answer some questions for *Suspense Magazine*.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Thanks for talking with us, Lisa. Let’s start with your many readers. You have an enormous following. How do you think your active presence on social media contributes to that base?

Lisa Regan (L.R.): *I think it contributes a great deal to my fan base because they see I’m engaged and interested in their thoughts and I want to provide a fun space for them online. I am extraordinarily lucky to have fans who are enthusiastic about the Josie Quinn Detective series. I absolutely love interacting with them and hearing everything they have to say—even*

*the criticism. Some have become good friends. I also get to use my social media platform to introduce my readers to many other fabulous authors.*

*I don’t view time spent cultivating relationships with my fans as a waste. To me, it is essential. These are the lovely human beings willing to spend their time reading my words. That’s a sacred thing as far as I’m concerned. I wish I had more time to interact with them all, but they’re pretty understanding about me taking time to write the stories they’re waiting to read!*

W.B.: Are your series characters, Josie Quinn and Jocelyn Rush, modeled from people you





know? Maybe composites of those folks?

L.R.: *Josie and Jocelyn are not modeled after people I know. Rather, they're modeled after people I wish I could be more like. Both characters are smart, tough, strong, and gritty. Most importantly, they always run toward the danger and they've got a strong sense of justice. I've been lucky to see these qualities in people I know, but I didn't use anyone as a model.*

W.B.: Will Josie and Jocelyn ever cross paths?

L.R.: *There are no plans for that right now, but it sure would be fun to write. And, you know, Josie only lives about two hours away from Jocelyn.*

W.B.: What makes these two characters so endearing to your readers?

L.R.: *The thing I hear most often from readers is that they love that Josie and Jocelyn are incredibly strong women. What I hear most often about Josie specifically is that readers love her because she is "a badass". Also, it's not lost on my amazing readers that Josie's life and emotions can be extremely complex. She always works hard to navigate both in the most graceful way possible. Josie doesn't always succeed, but she grows as a character, even when it hurts. People relate to that. No matter what happens, she gets back up, dusts herself off, and keeps trying.*

W.B.: You once worked in a law office. How has your experience as a paralegal influenced your writing?

L.R.: *It definitely taught me to be more precise in whatever I try to write. But mostly, it has taught me how to be an extremely thorough researcher. I've learned to better evaluate sources. I have also become more confident in approaching experts in their fields and figuring out which questions I need to ask to get details in my books correct. I had to be so thorough and meticulous in my work as a paralegal, and that has carried over into writing crime fiction. I try to make things as authentic as fiction allows.*

W.B.: Most authors maintain a "bible" for their series to maintain continuity book to book, further develop characters, and avoid mistakes (a character with blue eyes in one book and brown in the next). Do you use a "bible" for your series?

L.R.: *I have to have a "bible," especially now that the Josie Quinn series is going into Book 12. It's difficult to remember where I've put everything in her fictional city of Denton and character descriptions and even names I've already used. There is a lovely woman named Claire Milto who compiled my series bible for me. With each book, she adds to it. It's invaluable and I keep the document open on my computer whenever I'm working on a first draft.*

W.B.: Outliner or "pantser"?

L.R.: *I used to be a pantser, but it was a massively inefficient way for me to write. Now I outline. I will start with a basic premise, like with Book 11 of the Josie Quinn series, "Hush Little Girl," that was about a young girl found dead at a wedding venue. I'll spend a couple of weeks writing notes and answering my own questions like, "Who is this girl? Where did she come from? What is her home life like? Who killed her? Are there any strange circumstances surrounding her death?" I go from there until I've got the crime fully fleshed out. Then I write the crime's backstory, which includes all the things Josie eventually uncovers during her investigation. After that, I write the outline for the actual book, usually chapter by chapter. It changes as I write. Often, I stop writing to adjust my outline to the new direction the book has taken. However, overall, outlining works really well for me now and it takes a lot of the stress out of writing.*

W.B.: I noticed in "Finding Claire Fletcher" that you alternate POVs between chapters, usually juxtaposing Claire with Connor. Was this structure something you used from the start (from the first draft) or something you developed as the plot evolved?

L.R.: *It was that way from the start. That was my first published novel. It wasn't the first book I wrote—probably the fifth or sixth book. When I wrote it initially, it was just Claire's voice in my*



head. It was like I was channeling her. I wrote almost all her chapters first. I realized, as a crime novel, it might work better if I alternated Connor's investigation with Claire's story, so I decided to alternate.

W.B.: On a similar note, the chapters with Claire's POV are all in first person, other chapters are in third person. This had to have been by design. What's your rationale?

L.R.: *There was no true rationale, to be perfectly honest. Claire's voice was so clear to me in first person, so that's how I wrote her. When I went to do the Connor chapters, I didn't feel comfortable doing them in first person, so I went with third. I kept waiting for some agent or publisher to tell me I couldn't do that, but no one ever did. Most importantly, that book is a huge favorite among my fans, so I think it worked out.*

W.B.: Nora Roberts, Janet Evanovich, or Karin Slaughter?

L.R.: *All these authors are legends, obviously. But if I had to pick a favorite, it would be Karin Slaughter. Anyone who knows me even a little bit knows Karin Slaughter is my idol and my biggest influence. I've met her twice now at signings, and I was so star-struck I could barely speak. I did talk to her, but I have no memory of what I said. I love how all her books are so intelligent, raw, gritty, and honest. I also love how the dynamics among her characters and the universes she creates are so authentic and real. Everything she writes is exquisite.*

W.B.: Writers know word-of-mouth is the best marketing. But have you used any strategies to garner reviews?

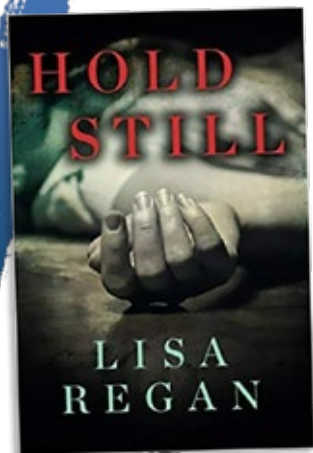
L.R.: *I have long-time beta readers who get early copies of each book and they're all so lovely; they'll leave reviews without being asked. My publisher has also cultivated relationships with fans and bloggers via NetGalley which garners a lot of reviews. I'm incredibly lucky that the readers who review on NetGalley before the book comes out always remember to post the reviews elsewhere after release. Personally, I give away a lot of paperback copies of my books. I give them away to social media followers and I'll often ask my long-time readers to "tag a friend" who might like my books and I'll provide some copies to those friends. In addition, my husband hands books to just about anyone from our plumber to the nurses in our family doctor's office. We always tell them, if you don't read crime fiction, give it to someone who does or donate it. You'd be surprised how many people read and review their free books. Many of those people pass them along to someone else and word spreads that way as well.*

W.B.: Tarantino, Scorsese, or Hitchcock?

L.R.: *Kathryn Bigelow!*

W.B.: Ah, excellent choice! With that in mind, if you could rewrite any suspense movie, what would it be? And what would you do differently?

L.R.: *I cannot think of one I would rewrite. But I can tell you many great suspense movies came out before the age of the limited series we now see on Netflix, Hulu, and HBO. Many of these classic movies would have made better six-to-ten-episode series than two-hour movies. I'm thinking of films like The Cell with Jennifer Lopez, The Gift with Cate Blanchett, and Heat with Pacino and DeNiro.*



W.B.: My wife, Cindy, and I saw you at a library panel discussion a few years ago. Do you often participate in such public events or schedule public speaking? Perhaps at writers' conferences? How important is this for writers?

L.R.: *I try to say 'yes' as often as I can. I love getting out there and meeting readers. Even if they don't read my books, it's great to hear their thoughts about what makes a book sensational or what makes it terrible. I also enjoy meeting other writers. I learn a lot from going to writers' conferences. I love listening to writers talk about everything from their process to the craft. Sometimes being on a panel with other authors can be a fantastic learning opportunity. I love to talk about reading and writing, and I love to listen to people talk about reading and writing.*

*Any public event is a win-win in my mind. Attending these events is important for writers,*



*both to meet new readers and to network with one another. The writing community is incredibly kind and generous. Many writers have helped me along my journey by beta reading, giving reviews, promoting my books, or being supportive and encouraging. I try to pay that forward every chance I get. Plus, I'm such a big fan of so many writers in my genre, it's just so much fun to meet all my favorite authors in person.*

W.B.: You're a prolific author, publishing several books a year. How do you keep the pace? What is your writing regimen to maintain that momentum?

L.R.: *It took me an awfully long time to figure out my specific regimen and process. I'm still fine-tuning it. I want to be clear that every writer's process, and therefore their regimen, is different. There's no "right" way to write a book. The "right" way is whatever way works best for you. Writers shouldn't beat themselves up if they're not writing at the same pace or via the same process as their colleagues. I used to think something was wrong with me, that I couldn't simply sit down each day and write for several hours straight like many authors do. I realized there was nothing wrong with me, that routine just didn't work for me. Every person's brain operates differently. Writers should honor that. Once you take the guilt out of the equation, it really does free your mind creatively.*

W.B.: But the pacing of your production?

L.R.: *For me, because of the way my brain works, I need plenty of pressure to produce. My publisher and I set a schedule and the tighter that schedule is, the easier it is for me to produce. If I had too long a lag between projects, I'd probably put my pen down and not pick it up for years because I'm easily distracted and have trouble staying on task. If I have a tight schedule, I'm forced to stay on task. For me, there is something about the constant pace a schedule demands that switches my brain into hyper-focus mode and allows me to get more done.*

W.B.: So, when a new novel is on the agenda, how do you jumpstart things?

L.R.: *Basically, I spend a couple of months working on my extremely long outline, tinkering with it for hours a day, sometimes sending it back and forth with my editor until we've worked out some things. At the same time, I research any topic I know is going to come up in the book. I will often write the opening chapters during this time. About four to six weeks (sometimes three) before my deadline, I go "into the book." I do absolutely nothing but write the book. It's almost like I'm going at the same pace as Josie while she's solving the case. I wake up and write all day. When I must break to eat or bathe or walk the dog, I'm still thinking about the book and what I'm going to write when I sit back down at my desk. I don't read during this time. I don't watch television. I don't go places or do anything. My husband quietly slides food across my desk and comes back later for my empty plate. Once I finish the first draft, it goes off to my editor. After that, there are two to three months of various rounds of editing and the pace is much slower. I then have a lot of downtime and I work on edits a few hours a day.*

W.B.: What's next for Detective Josie Quinn?

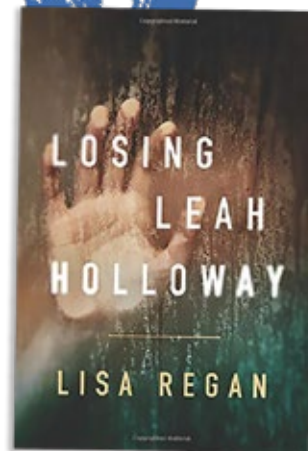
L.R.: *The next Josie Quinn book will be out on August 12th and in it, Josie must solve a case where members of a support group are being murdered one by one.*

W.B.: Last question: Pizza, tacos, or (being a Philly girl) cheesesteaks?

L.R.: *I don't want to cheat on cheesesteaks because they are a staple of my diet (Chubby's or Barry's only, thank you very much!). But I have to go with pizza. I could eat pizza for every meal for the rest of my life and never get tired of it.*

W.B.: Thanks, Lisa! It was great talking with you.

For more about Lisa, check out her website at <https://lisaregan.com>, her Amazon author page at <https://www.amazon.com/Lisa-Regan/e/B009YY0911/>, and her Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LisaReganCrimeAuthor>. ■





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# WRITING KNOWLEDGE & KNOW-HOW FROM a PANEL of PROS

with Christine Feehan,  
Sheila English & C.L. Wilson

Interview by John Raab for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit Christine Feehan: Michael Miller  
Press Photo Credit Sheila English & C.L. Wilson:  
Provided by Author

For avid readers, and writers who are looking at beginning their careers, *Suspense Magazine* got together a trio of authors who have created some of the most heralded and awarded titles that have appeared on a menu of bestseller lists. Not only did they offer an entertaining interview, they also talked about the tricks of the trade when it comes to the writing business.

We begin with Christine Feehan. Penning over ninety novels during her busy career, Christine has delved into various genres. From paranormal romance to fantasy to a new suspense that's just come out, her standalone novels and much regaled series' have been seen in the number one slot on the *New York Times* bestseller list many times.

Sheila English not only takes one of the most beloved characters, Mary Shelley, under her wing and produces the cool *Adam Frankenstein* series, she also creates the super-cool comic books where her unique character takes on that colorful world. Writer, digital artist, producer—a woman of many hats—Sheila also loves *Dr. Who* so much that she's even become a “Certified Time-Travel Companion.”

Cheryl Wilson, writing under the name C.L. Wilson, produces her own unique blend of titles that involve fantasy, action, and emotional intensity between her characters that have earned her a slew of die-hard fans in both the romance and fantasy genres. Building amazing worlds is a talent Cheryl owns, and this strength is part of the reason why her name consistently appears on bestseller lists with each new release. These incredible women got together with John Raab, host of *Suspense Magazine*'s “Beyond the Cover” recently to touch upon a variety of topics—from beta readers to the best marketing techniques to boost their brand—and talk about their own experiences that will help others learn more about what the job of “author” truly entails....

John Raab (J.R.): Welcome, everybody! This is a very special edition of *Suspense Radio*. We are here with three fantastic authors today: Christine Feehan, Sheila English and Cheryl Wilson. How are you doing?



CHRISTINE FEEHAN



C.L. WILSON



SHEILA ENGLISH

One and All: *Great, John, good to see you!*

J.R.: This is a panel that I like to call "Writing with Friends." Recently, Christine and I had an interview about one of her books and off the air, we talked about how many people don't really understand the complete process of how to write a book. A lot of people are like: "Why can't you just write twelve a year? I mean, how hard is it to write a book after all?" And you and I kind of laughed because they really don't understand how difficult it is to get a book going. We will be discussing that, among other things, but right now let's start off with introductions. Christine, why don't you start us off and give everyone a little background.

Christine Feehan (C.F.): *Okay. I'm Christine Feehan and I have written and published over ninety books. I have sixteen that have hit number one on the New York Times bestseller list, and quite a few others that made the list, so I've been very blessed to have my readers support me throughout my career. I mostly write in the paranormal realm, and romance is also in all my books, but I also write thrillers and suspense. I really enjoy writing, obviously, or I wouldn't have that many books out there. (LOL)*

J.R.: No truer words have been spoken. So C.L., tell us about yourself.

C.L. Wilson (C.L.W.): *Well, my name is Cheryl Wilson, but I write as C.L. Wilson. I have not published ninety books. (LOL) I have published seven epic fantasy romance novels and a few short fiction pieces; also paranormal fantasy. And, like Christine, all my books have romance. I have a degree in creative writing and I've studied a lot through genre fiction organizations, like Romance Writers of America. So, I've studied the craft of writing a lot; learning how to plot a story, etc. I started a*



*million books, and through studying, I learned how to finish them. So that was my journey to publishing. Five of my books have been on bestseller lists, like USA Today, The New York Times, and Publisher's Weekly. I've slowed down the past few years, spending more time with my family. And although I don't think I'll ever reach ninety titles, that will be my new goal. (LOL)*

J.R.: Fabulous. So Sheila,

what do you have for us?

Sheila English (S.E.): *Like Cheryl, I have also not published ninety books. But I am just so excited to be here with these two women, who are truly my dear friends. I write what I like to call, modern gothic. I do write some historical gothic, as well. I write the Adam Frankenstein series, which earned a "Best of" from Suspense Magazine back in 2016, so that was very exciting. And I also write comic books; my Adam Frankenstein also has comic books and they've won awards. I've primarily been writing in the horror genre, but more gothic, so it's a combo of horror and romance. I've been writing for years and been in the industry for years, so I've worked with publishers and know what they're picking up and looking at, which is handy when you're a writer. I've won several awards and am currently shopping around a full-length novel that I'm really excited about.*

J.R.: Nice. It's so great to have the three of you here. I have to say, one of the biggest things I hear a lot from authors is that they want to write about what's popular today; they want to follow the trend of what's going on today. I always say that the trend is gone because, after you write a book, it's a good 9 to 12 months (if everything goes well) before that book ever sees the light of day. Which means if they write the trend happening now, by the time the book comes out the trend will be over and the next trend will be currently in the editors' offices. How important, would each of you say, is following the current trend when it comes to writing a book?

C.F.: *I absolutely say, don't even look at the trend. I'm with you. If an author is going to be doing that, they'll be behind the trend. You want to be the trendsetter and write the book you're passionate about. You need to be the frontrunner because if you're following someone else's lead, you won't be passionate. It can be in that genre, per se, but you still have to write the book you're most passionate about. There is no way to look at a trend and say it'll last forever.*

C.L.W.: *I think the same thing. It takes me years to write a single book, so following a trend is out. I was writing epic fantasy when vampires were the hot thing and my best friend here was becoming the queen of paranormal romance. It's hard when you have a book you love and feel strongly about, though, and no one takes it because of the trend. I was thinking of self-publishing when I first started out, but I wanted to be published by a house. And it's hard when you have a book you love but no one will buy because of the 'popular trend' at the time. I will thank Peter Jackson for the Lord of the Rings movies here. (LOL) Writers have to remember that a good book will catch the eye of an editor, and if you're lucky, that editor will be as passionate as you about the book. You want that because they are the advocate; they are the evangelist saying how good your*



book is even if it bucks trends. Some people who write really fast, like Christine, may hit the trend. But as you said, it takes nine months to a year to see the light of day, so I can understand that self-publishing gives you a quicker window. Either way, however, you can't be a slow writer and follow trends at the same time. It won't work. And you're doomed to hold that book under your bed until the trend comes back around.

S.E.: I agree. I don't think following a trend is the way to go. I think Christine mentioned that you want to write a book you're passionate about. Following a trend takes away from the book; it becomes only a business and not a creative journey anymore. I agree that you want to be the trendsetter. It's nice of course when you have someone in the industry that can tell you they're picking up this trend in the next couple of years, because if you 'try to get in on it' while it's happening, you end up saturating the market. That's what happens; some fast writers can catch the trend, but once the market is saturated readers get bored.

J.R.: For a lot of new authors trying to get their first book done, how do each of you address the question of character versus story? Do you recommend hitting the characters hard or focusing on the plot, itself?

C.F.: For me—well for any reader, and I'm a reader first—when you're reading a story, if you're not involved with the characters you're not going to continue to read. Characters drive the story; they are going to tell both the reader and the writer which direction the story is going. You can have a wonderful story, but if readers hate or are bored with the characters, readers will not get past that. So as far as I'm concerned, it's the characters you concentrate on to get the story to unfold.

C.L.W.: I agree. Obviously, in romance, it's all about the characters because it's all about emotions. There are books where the stories come along through the fear or anxiousness they produce in the reader, though, and not the people in the story. In "The Amityville Horror," for instance, it was the fear, the house of fear that made you turn the pages.

J.R.: That scared the bejesus out of me at the movies. I figured the book would be easier; it wasn't.

C.F.: I have to disagree with you, Cheryl, because the character in that book was the house.

C.L.W.: No, that's true. I agree. But it was also the story or the plot; the house was the fear and the horror that led readers on. The humans in the book were not the main focus. They did very well, but the people took a backseat while the house took center stage. Most stories people read have that character arc, propelling the humans (which is what we see as characters)

to change throughout the story. From a novel perspective, that's what's important—building a journey and adding those emotions in that challenge the characters and evoke changes in them as they meet up with challenges along the way. Meeting those challenges is what makes them different at the end than they were at the beginning. In "Amityville," the family didn't change, the situation changed. They ran from the house which, to me, they should have done in Chapter 2. For authors, I would tell them to mostly focus on the characters because we are people and we connect with people. You can write a book where the human is not the most important thing, however.

S.E.: I agree that it's character one hundred percent. But... you don't have to love the character. They can be compelling or engaging. Take "Joker"; that's not a lovable character. Or "Gone Girl." Was there anyone to love there? I don't think so. You don't have to have a lovable character; for romance you need them but not all genres need that facet. One of the things to clarify is that it is character, but no matter if you love them or hate them or think they're just crazy, you want to know what happens next. And it could be the house; in that instance you're still thinking what the house will do next, but it remains a character.

J.R.: Which brings us to setting. A lot of authors' settings are already done for them because they're writing about cities that are already there. But in the paranormal realm, you have to world build. You have to use your setting as another character. So we'll start with Christine: How do you build something that's not there and make it relevant?

C.F.: For me, that's the fun part, because that's building on the imagination. I can clearly see it in my head, almost like a movie. I can build the map in my head and then on paper; I can draw it all out. I don't go as far as my good friend Cheryl, who can get out rulers and really draw things out. I'm not as good as her. As far as my worlds go, however, I need to know where everything is and the rules of the world before I even begin. I have to know my rules from the very beginning because I don't want to break those rules during the writing process. Even if I don't reveal all of them to my readers at the beginning, I have to personally know. I have to set it all up before I even begin. Often times, if I have a place or setting, I build it all on paper



before I write. My son, who is also a writer, is really good at maps and draws things out for me.

J.R.: That's really intense because it's not there; it's all new. So, Cheryl, explain how you write about something not there and make it believable.

C.L.W.: I will say Christine also does something else; she uses her settings and descriptive words to set an emotional tone in every scene, so that's another way the setting impacts. I give a world building workshop because I like to teach writing as well as do it myself. Some of the best advice I got during my career came from sci-fi author, S. Andrew Swan. He said, "Figure out what is unique about your world and make that uniqueness integral to the plot of your story." So if we were talking about "Amityville," the uniqueness is the house; it's entirely integral to that story. If you don't have the house, there's no story. This also comes when you talk about the Force in Star Wars; there are all sorts of examples. For me, I do extensive world building. I even draw maps to scale and use dental floss to measure the routes for my little people....

J.R.: Dental floss?

C.L.W.: Yes, it curves. (LOL) You can draw your path and my maps are minty fresh. I do that for consistency's sake. Suspension of disbelief is imperative, but especially when you're talking fantasy or paranormal, because they're not real. You have to make people at least jump in and think they're real in order to keep them there; the last thing you want is for them to put the book down. You still have to do research because you want to be as reasonable as possible. But I've created languages, races, culture. etc., for many books, and the most important thing I need to know is what does the culture value and what are they willing to do to defend or protect it. If you can distill something down to what people value and what they will do to protect those values, you can get to some interesting places. I do maps of houses, too, so I don't forget where the kitchens and bedrooms are; maps of cities, so I know where all my buildings are, and more. That's done so I can make my made-up world feel as real as possible in order to draw in those readers and keep them there.

J.R.: Sheila, what about you?

S.E.: Both of these women are fantastic at world building. Mine is a hybrid, so I'm using established characters, like Mary Shelley. I've read eight or nine books on her life, so I understand her voice and where she was coming from. Only one or two percent of that will actually make it into the book, but since I'm using a real person and people know her, I try to stay as real as possible. If you're talking about a real character, you better know about them so that people can think this might

be something that character would've said or done, and so on. So in my hybrid world with Frankenstein, you get to imagine where he would have gone if he'd lived; in my world he's a U.S. Marshal, so you get to imagine him in that career. One of the things I believe both the other women do, as well as I—and something I think is practical for world building—is we create a bible, for lack of a better word. If you're going to have a lot of places or people and know you're going into a series, from the very first book you need to keep track of names, where they came from, characteristics of them and experiences they've had, in case you revisit something you said in the past, you have to keep them straight. I take pics of people, what I think my character looks like, and I put those and their descriptions in my bible; I will do that with the characters I know I'll revisit one day. As far as scenery, if I mention or want to put in one book some large mansion on a teeny tiny island away from London, I will write something about the island and what the house looks like so I always have that information. So I do recommend authors start at the beginning and make that bible: don't wait for five books into it, keep track right from the start.

C.L.W.: I would like to add, keep an idea file. I search the web for interesting places all the time, like the huge quartz crystal caves that I think are somewhere in the Southwest, and the pink lake somewhere in Australia, I think it is...but all fascinating places and put them into an idea file, along with interesting people. That file is what I refer to.

J.R.: One thing you mentioned was Star Wars and the Force. I study Buddhism. One thing you notice is the Force is just like it. When you die, you become enlightened, etc. But there are some plot holes in some very big books that no one talks about. Take Harry Potter number three, for example; you have a device that can offer you time travel but it's given to a student so they don't miss class. The readers just sort of gloss that over. I mean, here you have the most powerful device but you give it to a student; it just so happens that it was used later, even though it wasn't meant to be used in that manner. I'll start with you, Cheryl. Do you worry about plot holes, or not so much because readers don't seem to care about them?

C.L.W.: Well, I think in the Potter case, the overwhelming feeling of that story is so delightful and so cool that readers are willing to give them a pass. Like with the reboot of Star Wars that had the fluid that started black holes which then magically disappeared. People do still call them out, but overall the stories are so entertaining the majority of people give them a pass. That's why critiques are necessary. You get tunnel vision as a writer; I worry about it constantly because I want to go back and change things or explain them. Like a time travel thing, I would be asking myself why do that because the characters could have just gone back and taken Voldemort out before all



**“YOU CAN HAVE A WONDERFUL STORY,  
BUT IF READERS HATE OR ARE BORED  
WITH THE CHARACTERS, READERS  
WILL NOT GET PAST THAT.”  
—CHRISTINE FEEHAN**

*of this happened? But, as I said, a majority really don't care. I would have gone back to explain, but it didn't bother people. Heck, I remain bothered by Terminator II because they had two blue eyed people giving birth to a brown eyed boy, so it was sort of like the postman's son. But did I still enjoy the movie? Yes. So it depends on how compelling the rest of the story is when it comes to holes. But that's why you should have beta readers or critique partners because everyone looks at books in a different way, so they will catch something that you as the author did not. When you're in the weeds, after all, you don't always see the black holes.*

J.R.: Sheila, follow up with this. New authors: should they be involved in a critique group or a couple? Perhaps groups from different genres?

*S.E.: I do want to follow up a bit on what Cheryl was saying because I think that's a perfect example of character over story. When there's a plot problem but your characters are amazing, readers will forgive and forget the problems. It's like Dr. Who. There are tons of stuff incorrect in those, but still my friends and I are diehard fans and get together and go to the conventions; we love the doctor no matter what mistakes are made. As far as beta readers and critique partners go, I also have both, and staying within your genre helps because they understand the rules of the genre. However, it's also nice when they don't read the genre because you get a whole new perspective. There are some people who won't read horror...Christine. But I won't mention any names (LOL). But they are people who understand relationships, which I want because I do have romance woven in the story. You're talking about setting scenes and such, and one of the best pieces of advice I got was from Christine Feehan; it changed everything for me. It may sound simple, but it was huge: "Atmosphere is important." She taught me that the atmosphere is part of the story; the atmosphere is a character. You can see why you want to have those kinds of writing partners critique because they can share that wisdom and understand what's happening to your writing. They can tell you what's good or what's missing. And no matter what genre writer they are, as long as they care about how your story is coming along, then you want those people who are invested in you as a writer. They give you good advice.*

J.R.: Christine, your thoughts?

*C.F.: I agree with Sheila. Our group has romantic suspense, serial killers, gothic horror, fantasy authors...none of us really write the same thing but we're all invested in each other's work. We*

*want each other to succeed, and that's what you're looking for; you want people who care about your writing. I am lucky enough to have someone read my book early on; because I write so fast, the first draft is really bad. You see, I never go back. I might get to Chapter 6 and say that I have to put this thread into the story, but I put it in Chapter 6 and don't go back to Chapter 1. She's the person who reads this and says something isn't going to work because this character wouldn't do this, etc. So she catches those plot holes for me. She has those eyes that spot them immediately. You have to surround yourself with those people you can trust. When Cheryl says something to me, same with Sheila, Karen Rose and others, I listen because I know them and they know me. I'm not going to say something I don't feel is right because I love their work and all of us want to see the others succeed. Believe me, nobody gets so good that they don't make mistakes! I don't want my editor to have to edit it; I want my book to be my voice.*

J.R.: Nice to know that after 90 books you still don't send the editor the first crappy draft. That you want it to be at least 90% done. (LOL)

*C.F.: No, I want it to be 100% done, but a lot happens in formatting; it can get messed up. It will come back to me and I'm like, 'Oh my God, what happened? Why is Gregory's name changed to Oregon?' (LOL) For the author, always send your best work to your editor. Poor Cheryl edits and edits and edits; in fact, I've never seen someone who sends a cleaner draft in, but you want that. You don't want someone else's voice in your manuscript.*



**“THIS IS A PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR PUBLISHER. THE PUBLISHER DOESN'T WORK FOR YOU.”  
—SHEILA ENGLISH**

C.L.W: Also, the less mistakes and sloppy writing given, the more the editor can focus on the meat of your story, or catch plot holes, or insert things that can make the book stronger. I want my writing to be clean because I want my editor to help. I don't want them to vacuum my floor and clean up; I want them to focus on the big stuff and not the small stuff. I will just say on critique partners, the number one thing you look for is honest feedback. You want people who have different strengths than you have. I have a strength when it comes to the flow of words; it's like a symphony to me. So when words are off, I can help people find a better word. But other peoples' strengths I need. Like someone who understands fights and tells me my fight scene doesn't make sense. They know more about fighting and tell me better ways of doing something. I encourage lots of people that when they find the right critique partners, the perfect meld of talents, they keep them! Like this group; the three of us have been together 20 years now.

J.R.: So for brand new authors, how do you approach and land beta readers? And how many do you look for? More than five? And do you want friends or someone who sits there and will tell you your book sucks? Sheila, what do you think?

S.E.: For myself, with beta readers I have a street team.

J.R.: You find them on the street? (LOL)

S.E.: No, I do not find them on the streets. They are called, The Story Sleuths. It's a Facebook group of about fifty people or so and a lot of them I met at conventions. The street team helps get the word out. You tell them my book is coming out and they're the cheerleaders who tell the next person about it. They encourage you and that's so wonderful. You start to get to know people a little at a time when you set something like this up. You want to build trust. The scary thing is you have to be careful who you hand your book over to; people have had horrible experiences with that. Someone you don't know giving you a personal opinion is not the way to go. I have five people who are beta readers that I've known a long time. I started by giving them a short story, and then a comic, and then moved on to books in order to build trust. I also have beta readers

sign NDAs—non-disclosure agreements—so they can't talk about any aspect of the book. Most people respect that. They understand you're giving them your baby and you expect them to protect it, and the agreement helps establish that they are participants in something that has expectations.

J.R.: That's a great idea. Christine, you must have a lot of young authors ask you to read their books and write a blurb about it. You most likely don't have the time, but how do you answer that? What can a young author do to get an author of your caliber to write a blurb for them?

C.F.: Normally all of those go through my agent or editor, no one approaches me themselves. I used to have more time but I don't anymore. I write six books a year and I'm swamped with so much social media. I've just written the murder book and they have me doing a lot of social media for that; I have never been so busy in my life. Unfortunately, my reading time has been cut down so much that it's been crazy. Normally, I enjoyed doing that because I like to find new authors but I haven't had the time to read anybody new for quite a while. Normally, it's done through their agent to my agent or my editor, and their tweet would never get to me.

C.L.W.: Christine is using our lingo by calling it the murder book. It's titled "Murder at Sunrise Lake" everybody. (LOL) Sorry, I just had to say it.

J.R.: Gotcha. Cheryl, your advice on getting a blurb?

C.L.W.: When it comes to my critique partners and beta readers, I don't have fifty or a bunch that I give my books to, but I will say that I have one that I'm sending the next book to as soon as I finish it. She last came up to me with written





questions and asks me stuff about my books all the time that I don't know the answers to. They're challenging, too. So I was like, next time I complete a book I'm sending it to you and I want you to do those questions. I also love that NDA she mentioned. I never heard of that. But whether you like it or not, it's a business. It's not a hobby. Everyone's got an opinion, but the way my brain works is that I don't want only the negative. They have to give me some positive or they don't get my book again. It has to be truthful and helpful but not mean. Everyone isn't going to love every book you write, but the critiques need to aid in making the book better.

J.R.: I tell people to look at things in real life, and don't ask people to do something you wouldn't do. Like you said, not everyone will like everything, but it's okay. You can trust the author and their work enough to know that what you're giving them is your best. I always tell people, you don't like all of Bon Jovi's songs, but you like enough of it to love that particular band and stick with them.

C.F.: And we all go and tell people when we've read a good book, because we're readers first and we will spread the word among us. It could be a perfect stranger writing and some people say that's a silly thing, that we have to say only bad things about the competition, but I say no. If it's a really good book, tell your readers. Writers should help other writers. Writers should lift each other up; I mean, that's the whole point. You need to help each other and you need to know that you honestly cannot write enough books to satisfy all readers. It's just not going to happen.

J.R.: What about reviews? Sheila, do you read them, and how do you process them? There's a good friend of mine who

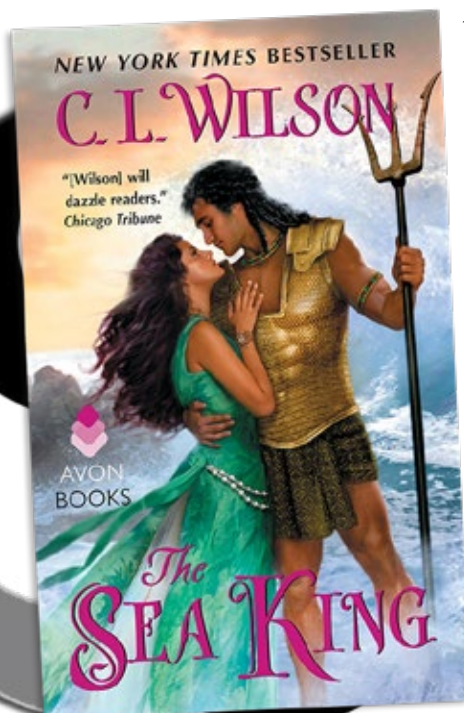
reads his reviews and the one he hates the most, he kills that person in his next book. That's how he deals with it. What would you tell a

debut author when it came to reviews?

S.E.: Well, first, I'm going to steal that idea and kill the author of the last mean review in my next book. I would tell debut authors that they will know when they're professional reviews. And when you see those '5 out of 5' stars, you feel great to see what other people think are the strengths of your story. But to go read them on book sites, it's a double-edged sword. For as much as it might build your ego, when you see that one star, it can be cutting. I tell myself that all people have opinions and my stuff is not everyone's cup of tea. I also realize there are a lot of jerks in the world who didn't read it but simply state that a book looks stupid. If you're not reading it but reviewing it anyway, that's wrong. Some books just simply don't work with some people, but I appreciate the time they take to read it. I would tell debut authors though to be careful. Because you don't know what you're going to get on these sites, so it's a gamble. I ask my street team to write reviews, but you want people to be honest too. Reviews are also hard to attain. They're good to read as a new author, because some really care about the reviews, but always be careful.

J.R.: I like what you said about attaining reviews and how hard that is because we get like 10,000 books a year to review in the magazine, and we simply can't do that. I say you can send it in but I can't guarantee the review, which makes me feel bad. Cheryl, I know you laughed when I asked about reviews, so you must have some funny stories to tell.

C.L.W.: No...I have a brain that never forgets the bad stuff, is all. I've discovered reviews are dangerous for me. I get honest critiques and I love that, but I always want to write a book that people love. I can always say I was never prepared for when they took off, but I'm also never prepared for something mean. My skin has gotten thicker over the years, but I don't look for reviews and I don't go out and read them. I tell people not to send me really bad ones because I'll never forget them whatsoever. I will say, as a reader, I read reviews of other peoples' books. But when I'm feeling masochistic, the thing I do to get it out of my brain is, I will go find a book I adore and



**“THE LESS MISTAKES AND SLOPPY WRITING GIVEN, THE MORE THE EDITOR CAN FOCUS ON THE MEAT OF YOUR STORY, OR CATCH PLOT HOLES, OR INSERT THINGS THAT CAN MAKE THE BOOK STRONGER.”**

**— C.L. WILSON**

*read the one-star reviews of it and think: 'How can this Cretan not like this book?' And that puts it in perspective for me. But for my own mental health, I tend not to read reviews at all.*

J.R.: Christine, what about you? Gosh knows you've had a lot of books.

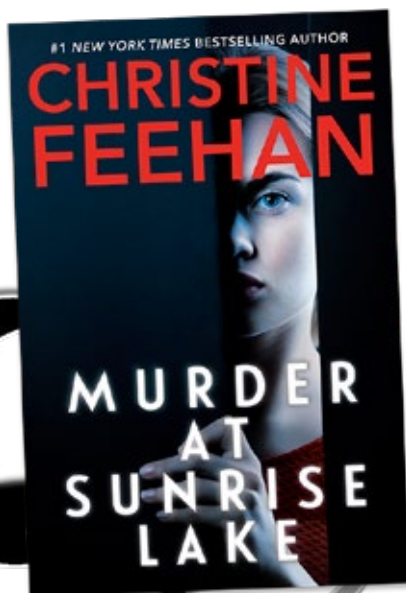
C.F.: Well...I'm a lot older, so pre-Amazon. When I began, people could put up whatever they wanted to no matter what, and no one even tried to see if they'd ever actually purchased and read the book. People could attack you, or other authors and their fans could attack you, and I didn't know that. So it was extremely hurtful or painful because I didn't understand any of that for a long time. It was horrible and at the beginning it almost ended my career; I could barely function after reading some of the stuff that was said. Chat rooms, reviews, message boards...it was awful. And it was personal, against me, and people didn't even know me, so I stopped reading anything. I knew other authors who just up and quit writing because of it. So I made it a policy not to read them and I've kept that policy. Now, I get these odd ones. I will spend so much time to perfect a book by researching, choosing every word, and I love the book and feel good about it. Then I'll get a letter stating something like there was a typo on page 398, but not whether or not the person liked or hated the book. I mean...come on people! Give me something.

J.R.: R.L. Stein said something once about the greatest review he ever got was from a kid who stated that he'd read all of Stein's books and hated them all. Stein said, "At least you read them all."

C.F.: Exactly. I'd get letters from one reader where they would quote the book, say they'd read it, and then say I hate this and I hope you die so I won't have to read the next one. Then

the next one came and her letter would show up again. Finally I wrote to her and said that I didn't have to die, she just had to stop reading them. I told her not to buy the next one and it would all be okay.

J.R.: (LOL) Now, the one thing a lot of authors focus on is book signings. They make it the end all and be all. The myth I always bust is that no matter who is publishing you, you still have to be the sole marketer of your books.



The publisher is not making you the bestseller. Sheila, when you tell the author who does the marketing, what do you say?

S.E.: It's 90% the author and 10% the publisher. That might change, but for a new author that's definitely fact. It's my experience that a publisher will look at your social media platform even before they pick you up nowadays. I was told by someone that works for one of the big houses that they sometimes have what they call a catfight. Say you have five editors and all want three books, so they bring them all to the table and decide what's best. It comes down to you and one other person who wrote a book and you both have similar books. They're both amazing and they've made it to the final round. What do you think they'll look at? Who's the best bet? If someone is an expert in that field, but you have 5,000 followers on Facebook, the publisher is going to look at what you bring to the table. This is a partnership with your publisher. The publisher doesn't work for you. This is something you have to invest in and they expect you to do just that, so social media is extremely important. You need to build your brand by letting people know who you are and what to expect from you. You're looking at the long haul. Now, once it comes out, you want to get other people interested. They want to know who you are, so you need to build that relationship with your readers. There are authors I've met and loved. I wouldn't read their books, just because it wasn't my cup of tea, but they were such great people that I ended up buying their books. That's the power of people. You have to put yourself out there; marketing is word of mouth, and sometimes that's done electronically. So social media and marketing are things you have to budget time for in order to do it right. There's no sense in doing anything if you don't have a book, but you still have to put effort into it.

J.R.: Cheryl, your turn.

C.L.W.: I'm not a huge social media person, actually. I think you have to do what's comfortable for you. I'm on Twitter but don't tweet a lot unless I'm recommending new books or announcing a release. I like Facebook better because I feel like I can follow the conversation. It's an easier format, so I enjoy it better. Whatever you do, you have to enjoy it. For me, on the marketing aspect, I like going to sci-fi/fantasy conventions. Those fans are awesome. You are the provider of their drug of choice, so to speak. Something I found very useful, unlike handing out pens or bookmarks that people simply throw away, I print up booklets that work. I print up a booklet that stops at the very first hook in my book and people like that. If I've drawn them in, they buy the book because they want to read more. Especially because I write series, I always keep on hand my first book at the convention. I am perfectly fine handing out the first book to people, because if they like the first one, they'll come back. I only have words to sell, so if you like them, there are more to get. Christine and I spoke in the



early days and agreed that you should direct your readers to sign up on your mailing list. So for those rabid fans, that's another kind of marketing. A newsletter, a blog, a pre-order link, or an excerpt—these are things I love to do, and I love to talk to people, too.

J.R.: What about you, Christine?

C.F.: Very early on I started a community for my readers where I could engage with them on my website. I wanted to protect them from spammers, so they had to sign up and then go inside. It was free, but then spammers couldn't get to them. I started thinking I'd never get 10,000 people, but we were hoping for that; that's the ceiling we had. I now have 167,000 (LOL) so we had to keep changing the website rooms. Now I have walls people can go through and discuss the books with others. I don't go in those rooms because I want them to discuss everything without worrying about hurting my feelings. But then there's another room, so to speak, where I'll answer any questions they have. So that's one way I started out; small, and built from there. I then have Facebook which I just use for giveaways when a book comes out, and I do Instagram. I don't do Twitter. It's just a lot and I'm not as tech savvy as people think I am. I wish I was, but I'm not. As far as marketing, you do have to market. I have to market. I have to do a lot of the marketing, in fact. I have fortunately built up my own marketing team that works for me now; I have three people who really focus on the marketing when a book is released. Only recently has the publishing house done ads for me, so you have to do your own marketing.

J.R.: Speaking of...let's do some promotion. Christine, what are you writing right now?

C.F.: "Murder at Sunrise Lake" came out on the 29th of June, and it's a little different than things I've done before. It's a mystery and takes place in the Eastern Sierras. Fun to write; there's a lot of dead bodies dropping around the place. This November, a new Dark Tarot comes out and it's going to be a really interesting one for my dark readers. It will revisit some of the older couples which they love, but it's very different and I think they'll be surprised and shocked by it all. Right after that comes two Torpedo Ink books, one in December and one in January. They're both standalones but feature the same couple.

J.R.: And you're probably writing today...?

C.F.: I am writing a new Phantom Game book, yes. (LOL)

J.R.: Cheryl, what about you?

C.L.W.: Well, I don't have any coming out this year, but I am working on my third of the Mystral series. I have got about

four other books in process: three set in the Fading Lands, my original epic fantasy world; two Mystral books; and one super-secret project we spent time brainstorming on yesterday.

J.R.: Ooh...tell us. It's okay. No one's watching this. (LOL)

C.L.W.: I'm trying my hand at writing with a co-writer, so I'm super-excited. Friends for years, we both love the same things so we're having a real good time. It will be paranormal, romance, and I insisted we be able to laugh in the book as well, so there will be crazy characters and a house full of witches. (LOL)

J.R.: Sheila, what have you got?

S.E.: Right now I have a book out with my agent shopping it around, "Mary Shelley's League of Supernatural Hunters" that I'm really excited about. It's a full novel, so fingers crossed for that. And then there's a comic, "Demon's Gate," which is the sequel to "Fear Fest," part of the Adam Frankenstein series. So I'm super-excited to have another Frankenstein comic come out. I'm hoping that releases by the time Dragon Con happens in Atlanta on Labor Day weekend. It takes over the city. Cheryl and I will both be there, and it's huge. The fans, like you said, are ramped up and awesome.

J.R.: And the websites people can look to in order to find out about all this stuff? Christine?

C.F.: [www.christinefeehan.com](http://www.christinefeehan.com) is a great portal for everything!

C.L.W.: Mine is [CLWilson.com](http://CLWilson.com).

S.E.: And mine is [Sheilaenglish.com](http://Sheilaenglish.com). (LOL) We try to keep things easy.

J.R.: Good for you! And remember ladies, *Suspense Publishing* is always here for you. We are waiting for any submissions that you would like to give to us. (LOL) Now, any last-minute advice before we wrap things up?

C.F.: Keep reading, everybody!

C.L.W.: Buy new books, and send the best version of your own work to your editor.

S.E.: And you can't be a writer if you're not a reader, so enjoy those books!

J.R.: Phenomenal, ladies. We are so happy to have you here. Hopefully, young writers have found out new things to do like beta readers, booklets (an idea I'm going to steal), and more. Thank you so much for some truly awesome ideas! ■



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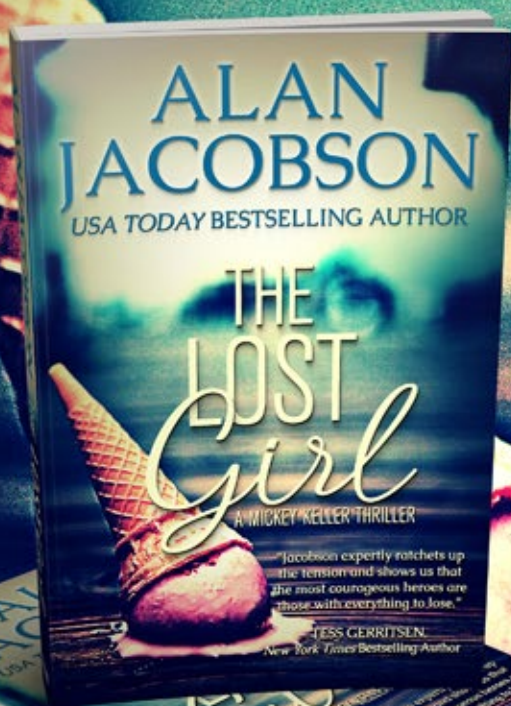
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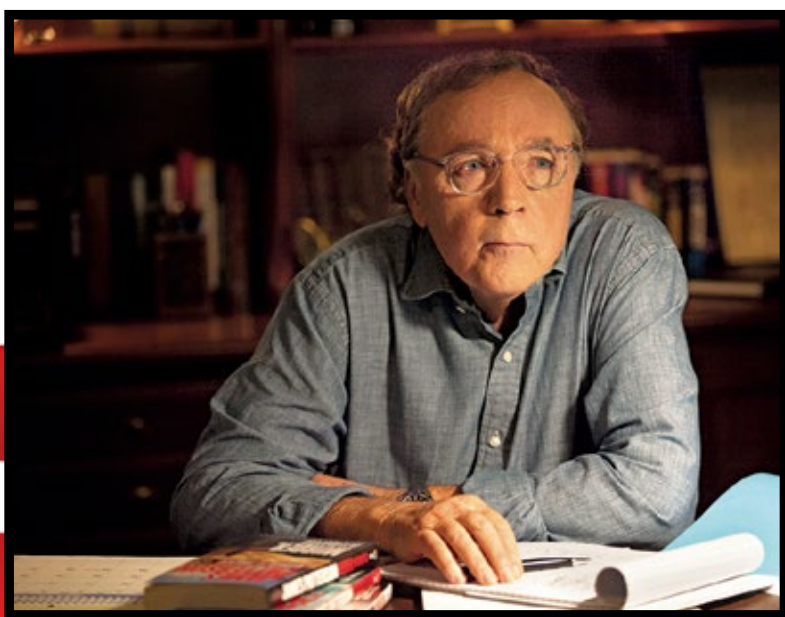
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# JAMES PATTERSON

## Talks Clinton, Projects & Raves About the Upcoming "Noise"

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
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James Patterson is responsible for some of the biggest bestsellers in the history of fiction. His characters, such as the eternal fan favorite, Alex Cross, have become household names. This time out, the well-known author once again teams up with the well-known former President Bill Clinton to write another stand-alone, fast-paced tale that focuses on an ex-President titled, "The President's Daughter." Compelling and action-packed, this title has already accumulated a wealth of praise as being a true rocket ride of a thriller!

With a slew of new projects in the works, including another Alex Cross that will be released this coming November, as well as a new, exciting thriller called, "The Noise" that (after reading this interview, will have everyone on the edge of seats waiting in anticipation to get their hands on)—it becomes truly clear that

James Patterson is not slowing down one iota.

Just recently, James joined *Suspense Magazine's* "Beyond the Cover" radio show and spoke with hosts John Raab and Jeff Ayers about all this and so much more. But first, let's take a quick peek inside this exciting new tale that Patterson and Clinton (AKA: "The Dream Team") created: "The President's Daughter"...

*Matthew Keating, a one-time Navy SEAL—and a past president—has always defended his family as staunchly as he has his country. Now those defenses are under attack.*

*A madman abducts Keating's teenage daughter, Melanie—turning every parent's deepest fear into a matter of national security. As the world watches in real time, Keating embarks on a one-man special-ops mission that tests his strengths: as a leader, a warrior, and a father.*

John Raab (J.R.): Welcome everyone to another edition of "Beyond the Cover." Jeff and I are so excited to have with us today mega-bestselling author, James Patterson. Thank you so much for being with us.

James Patterson (J.P.): Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

J.R.: Fantastic. Let's jump right into this amazing book, which is your follow-up with former President Clinton. I know the

first was the incredible, “The President is Missing” and this is “The President’s Daughter.” Tell us a little bit about this one if you will because when you start out, I must say, it starts off with a true ‘bang!’ You ignite the book by placing your villain right into the first page.

J.P. Well, with the first one, the president was actually in office. What separates the two books from the others, I feel, is that with these you get the information right from the horse’s mouth, so to speak. The authenticity is there. In other words, if something were to happen, and it’s hard to say that anything in this day and age couldn’t happen the way we’re going, this is the way it would happen. This is the way the Secret Service would act...that sort of stuff.

With the new book, “The President’s Daughter,” this was a way to make the president as human as possible. He’s no longer president when it happens, so he doesn’t have the resources he would have had as president; now he’s just a father so he’s gotta figure this out. If you think about most of the movies and TV when it comes to having a president, they’re sort of plastic. The president talks how he talks in press conferences, etc. Having hung around President Clinton, and the Bush’s a little bit, and even Trump, I can say that they’re not plastic; they’re human, with feelings. That’s what I tried to make sure we showed in this book. Make it as fast-paced as possible, but also insert that sense of humanity when it comes to these people, who for whatever crazy reason, actually wanted to be president.

J.R.: And what better subject to use than his own daughter? It’s not going to get much more personal than that.

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): So how did you get with President Clinton in the first place to begin writing these books?

J.P.: Well, we had the same lawyer/agent; Bob Barnett down in Washington. President Clinton reads everything, and we actually exchange stuff. Like, he just gave me the new Steve Hunter because we’re both Hunter fans. Anyway, Bob Barnett knew the president’s love of reading suspense, and he has loved it since the 80s, so Bob approached the president about getting together with me, and Clinton basically said, ‘I’d like to do it, but why would Patterson want to write with me?’

So, Bob called me and I said, ‘What are you kidding? I’m in.’ I’m on the Hudson River here now, but I grew up about thirty miles up the river in Newburgh and I still look at the world through the lens of a kid from that town. I mean, why be blasé about it? Write a book with the president? Heck, yes. Write a book period. I think it’s a blessing to do this will Bill. Someone once said you’re lucky if you find something you like to do in life, and then it’s a miracle if you find someone to pay you to do it. That’s my gig. The first book, “The Thomas Berryman Number,” was turned down by 31 publishers. I was only 26 at the time. But then it went on to win an Edgar as ‘Best First Mystery.’ So...go figure.

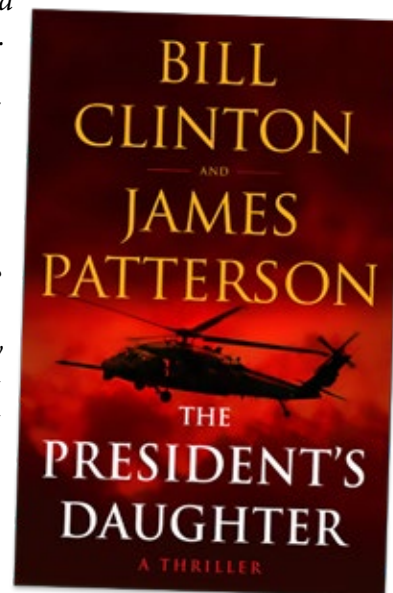
J.R.: When you collaborate, like...from the first book, you’re getting to know each other, but now, with this new book, you’re using the same school Clinton’s own daughter went to in real life. How is it different? I mean, I see it as this one is a lot darker than the first one. It seems you went more on the thriller side.

J.P.: Yes, the pace is faster certainly. What we would do for collaboration is simply talk. We were thinking about doing another one, talking about it, but not really sure if we wanted to. We kicked around a few ideas and made the outline, going back and forth with those five or six times for authenticity, plot, etc. One of the things he’s particular good at, where I can be sloppy because I’m so plot-oriented, is that he wants the characters to have depth. The daughter, Melanie Keating, is probably our favorite character in the book. She could have been the standard victim, but she isn’t. In the book she has a lot of grit and savvy, so she became our favorite. But he does push to make sure the characters are as rounded as possible.

J.A.: I’m curious. What’s going to be the subject of the third book you’ll be writing together?

J.P.: (LOL.) We’ll see. We’ve sort of become good friends. He gave me for Christmas, Monopoly for Socialists. For my birthday before that, he gave me a humidor when he knows I don’t smoke. So I called him up and said: ‘What the hell am I supposed to do with this? Do I put in bubble gum or chocolate cigars?’ He said bubble gum because you should always exercise those gums.

J.R.: I miss those from the days of playing baseball; bubble gum cigars.





J.P.: What I don't miss is the slab of gum that comes in the package with the baseball card. So gross. One of the many tragedies of my life is after I came back from my first year of college, my mother had thrown out all of my baseball cards, comic books, and all of my 45 records. And that was not a good thing.

J.A.: True. You could have doubled your salary just with them. So when you and former President Clinton collaborated, he focused more on character. When you decided to start with the first book, what came first? The fact that it was the president, or was it the plot you came up with?

J.P.: It seemed to make sense to write about a president, considering. The idea for the story came from the days back then when the cyber-terrorism thing was going on and, I felt, had not been written about enough. And it's a very scary book. Way back, when he was in office, he was one of the first who tried to push the country forward toward more security measures. But, of course, the next one comes in and focus's change.

J.A.: I was curious as to why you didn't do a series character and chose to do a standalone?

J.P.: When we started thinking about the second book, it was more useful that the president had a military background, so that first guy was gone. We haven't talked about a series. We'll see what happens. But it's not something to worry about; it's just an interesting thought.

A long time ago I was on a panel. Dan Brown had just put out "The Da Vinci Code" and it had become a huge deal, as you know. We were on a lunch break or something and I wandered over to his chair. What I said may have sounded stupid, but I told him to enjoy it. He didn't look like he was. It was as if he was already worried about the next book or the next review. He looked at me like I was crazy. Of course, if someone had said that to me when I'd just written my first, I probably would've looked at them like that, too.

I remember after I'd written that first one, and that it was turned down by so many publishers before actually getting published. One day, I get this phone call from the Mystery Writers of America and she said that my book had been nominated for an Edgar award for 'Best First Mystery.' I don't know what was going on at the time, but something was and I told her that I wouldn't be able to attend the event. She said, 'Oh, no, you have to.' I apologized, but she got a bit aggravated and eventually said that I had to come because I won. So...I get there with my parents and I'm sitting there, wondering if perhaps she'd lied to me. I didn't prepare anything; I'm not really sure why. But when I won and I got up there, I simply said: 'I guess I'm a writer now.'

I mean, when you're living in New York and someone asks you what you do and you say writer, they immediately ask what you've written, etc. When you say, I haven't actually published anything, they'd look at you like you were nuts. So that's where that line came from, I guess. When I won, it just made it real.

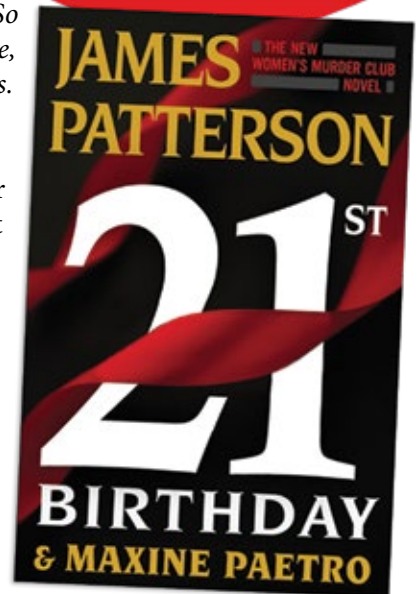
J.R.: So, what is the next up?

J.P.: Actually, "The Noise" is the next one with J.D. Barker, and I'm really excited about it. As a writer you always hope it'll turn out well, but you don't really know. Actually, I always say that if you can write great beginnings and endings, you'll get published. But if you can write great middles, too, you'll get a Noble Prize. Now, this won't get a Noble, but it's a really good book with a really good middle. Right from the beginning readers will be like: 'What? What is this all about?' And they'll be hooked. This incredible noise is sweeping through the country and hits this little town of a few hundred people and they're suddenly...gone. It's believable, and you're hooked, and you also know that if at the end it's only aliens, you're gonna give it a half star at best. But it's not aliens. In other words, there's actually a very cool reason for the noise and a lot of twists and turns. Like I said, you always hope it will turn out well, and I definitely think this did.

Like, when it came to The President is Missing they were shooting for six days. It was COVID and they called off the shoot and started losing their actors, so they canceled the whole thing. I was partly happy because I didn't really like the script. But now it's going to restart, so we'll see. We'll be getting a new script and Joe Roth is a really good producer, so I'm hopeful.

We actually had a famous writer read it and he absolutely loved it, but he said I can't quote for James Patterson. I basically thought, quote for J.D. then. (LOL)

J.A.: True. Now, you talked about what's upcoming for the president's book for TV or film. I have to say, I feel like network TV doesn't actually get your work.



J.P.: And the film stuff, actually. I mean, you can't argue with Morgan Freeman being a good actor, he's great!

J.R.: And I liked *Kiss the Girls*. I just wish *Along Came a Spider* followed the book a little more.

J.P.: It's interesting out there. In terms of co-authors and everything, I wrote with Liza Marklund from Sweden and I went over to Sweden for the book launch, where we had forty-seven interviews. You write a book here and you're lucky if you get two or three. Everybody reads over there; there are 8 million people in that country and they have books that sell over a million copies. They also ask you interesting questions about sociology, history and stuff. The one thing they all asked, however, was how can a Swede and an American get together for a book and do such a good job. I said, mutual respect and listening. We actually listened to each other. In general, I've found in Hollywood that they don't listen at all.

J.A.: That's probably why I haven't seen Michael Bennett then, because I'd love to see him.

J.P.: We did do a kid's movie, *The Worst Years of My Life*, which I thought was decent, but that was about it. Also *Kiss the Girls* could have been worse. But I think they could have done a much better job with these two serial killers co-operating; I think it was a much richer thing. I think the very talented Michael Connelly was also very lucky, like with *The Lincoln Lawyer*. It was a good screenplay. I would love to get one like that where I could go: "That was great! I loved that one!"

J.A.: Why can't Alex Cross have the same thing?

J.P.: Actually, we're in development with him right now. A good screenwriter is on it, so we'll just have to see.

J.R.: With the new *Cross* coming in November, can you speak a bit on the evolution of Alex? Has it surprised you in any way?

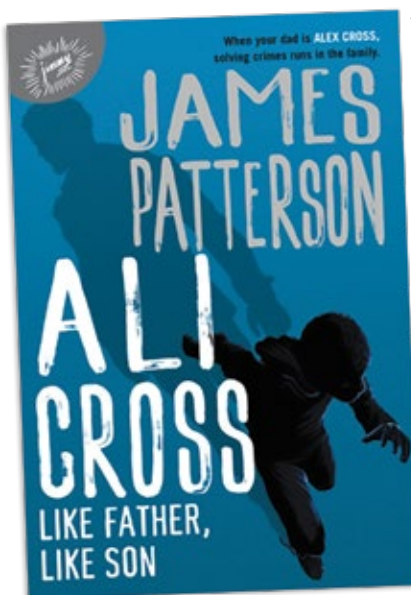
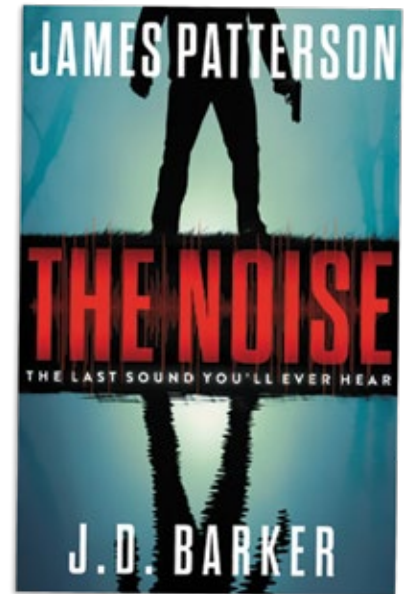
J.P.: Well, he's certainly gotten darker because he's been through so much. And there have been a lot of studies about police and how that happens. They go into the job with a certain approach and, as time moves forward and they experience more things, they do become darker because of what they see. The job gets to them. It becomes harder. I did this nonfiction book once called, "Walk in My Combat Boots," and if I've done anything important, it's that. I did it with Matt Eversmann, who is actually the sergeant portrayed in "Black Hawk Down." Matt did the interviews and he's great at that; he knows just the right questions and follow-ups to ask. He would do these forty-page interviews and I would turn them into five- or six-page nuggets. And if you've been in that type of situation, you'd say we got this book right. I didn't really understand the military until this book. And we just finished one on ER nurses, which will just be unbelievable.

J.R.: What choices did you make to establish your brand to the level it is now?

J.P. I have no idea. (LOL) I know what you're talking about...but all I have ever done is tell stories I was interested in and could get emotional about. Like with "The Noise"; if you can hook people, I love that. I did find something that I love to do and got that miracle of people wanting to pay me for it, so I scored.

J.A.: I have to say thank you because I'm a retired public librarian and reading is essential in my life. With your books, I couldn't keep them on the shelves. I mean sometimes they'd steal them right out of my hands.

J.P.: Yeah, those fans are tough.





J.A.: Exactly. I am curious, though...being that you write so many and work with all these co-authors, how do you keep all the details straight without mix-ups or repeats?

J.P.: *Alex showed up in a kid's book once. No, I'm just kidding. I don't find it difficult. I had been in advertising, but I've been clean for years now. In that business you had to keep track of thirty or forty clients at once, so I got used to it. I have around thirty projects in the works right now which is just nuts. I had one journalist in my office once who looked around at all these projects, looked back at me, and told me I was just crazy.*

J.R.: You show no signs of slowing down. In fact, you're ramping it up.

J.P.: *I think because of COVID, I did ramp up. I wrote an autobiography too, but it was just a bunch of cool stories, so it's fun to read. I think COVID just focused me more. I'm finishing one now that was a cool idea with Brendan Dubois, and a few other cool things happening, so I'm excited. As opposed to just...here's another Michael Bennett number.*

J.R.: Now, is your website the best place to learn all this?

J.P.: *I don't know. I suppose that's reasonable. (LOL)*

J.R.: Do you do social media on your own, or do you have staff?

J.P.: *Mostly, I don't have people. I have writers I work with. Pages come in, and I get on the phone. There is no staff. I just keep it simple.*

J.R.: Any conferences coming up?

J.P.: *Well, we're just starting to get out and about again. With the ex-president, we did one show, and I think we're doing Seth Meyers sometime soon.*

J.R.: I know we're nearing the end here.

J.P.: *Really? Asteroid coming? (LOL) It could be, you know. Just five seconds of warning and boom! The sky goes dark.*

J.R.: Actually...the end of the interview. I want to say thank you so much for joining us.

J.P.: *You're welcome. It's been a thrill.*

J.R.: And "The President's Daughter" is out now.

J.P.: *Yes, everywhere.*

J.R.: Thickest one yet, I must say. Over 600 pages.

J.P.: *Yeah. The president likes the big books. His memoir was like a thousand pages, and he's currently working on another that will be at a thousand. But people like getting their money's worth, you know. Most people are surprised and say this new book is like a freight train. They wonder how we keep it going so fast when it's like 600 pages.*

J.R.: Yes. This is definitely amped up. It's awesome!

J.P.: *Thank you. And...Jeff, just remember that there were books after "Cradle and All." (LOL)*



To keep up with James' busy schedule and keep tabs on all the books coming out, head to [www.jamespatterson.com](http://www.jamespatterson.com). ■

# LOST AND FOUND

*An Orson Holt Mystery*

## PART ONE: UNDERWATER

By Kris Polaha

Illustrations by Marco Magallanes



I'm a private investigator, and you won't usually find me five hundred feet below the surface of the ice-cold Pacific in a two-person submarine.

At the moment, however, the vessel is being captained by my new friend, Jenny, from the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute. She's helping me follow a tip from a stranger who walked into my office on Ocean Avenue in the heart of Carmel-by-the-Sea, California last week. He told me where I could find a treasure trove of stolen art, sunk and hidden by the Nazis near the end of World War II.

\*

A man walked into my office and introduced himself. "Hello, Mr. Holt. Your reputation precedes you."

"What reputation is that? I've been known to have a few."

"Your reputation for getting to the bottom of things—for finding answers when none can be found."

"Yes, then you've got the right Mr. Holt, but call me Orson. What can I do for you Mister...?"

He nodded towards a row of bottled water that lined my bookshelf. "My name is Nick Goldstein, and I have some very important information about a stash of artwork that the Nazis stole. Artwork that my family

believes has been hidden here in Carmel for nearly eighty years."

I handed Nick a bottle of water which he opened immediately and took a sip.

"How do you know this art is missing, and why do you think it's in this area?" I asked.

"The artwork belonged to my great-grandfather, who was an Austrian Jew and a very successful businessman in Linz. He had a very successful art gallery where he showcased many great artists from the turn of the century. Art was his passion. He was one of the first people in Europe to sell Pablo Picasso's artwork in 1899."

He took another gulp of the water, and smiled. "A story that's been passed down through the generations is that, in 1907, when Adolf Hitler was a young man, he entered my great-grandfather's gallery and began a heated argument about the obscenity of expressionism and how it was the product of a corrupted mind. It was as if this young man had already made up his mind about what he thought was wrong with Europe, and already knew how he would solve the problem if he was ever in the position to do so.

"Of course, that was the year Adolf's mother died, and the very same year he applied, and failed to gain acceptance into,



the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. A jaded, angry Adolf left Linz a year later, according to the history books.”

I simply sat and waited, already enthralled by the man’s tale.

“My great-grandfather was interned into Mauthausen, twelve miles east of his home, in the spring of 1939—thirty-two years after arguing with young Adolf. All of my family’s artwork from the gallery, as well as their home, was stolen by the SS. We have filed an international claim and have waited nearly a century for the artwork to be returned to our family, but no progress has been made. However, we recently tracked down information that led us to a supposed drop-off point that was established sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s. After investigation and research, we have come to believe this is a deep-sea locker where the artwork has been kept all this time. I imagine it’s a kind of underwater shipping container.”

“Ocean’s a big place,” I said. “Difficult to find.”

“Actually, we came across coordinates in the journal of a Nazi officer responsible for transporting and hiding over 30,000 known pieces of artwork; although, he’s believed to be responsible for hiding thousands more. I need someone to get into the water and search this location. My family and I do not trust anyone who is not an official, but the police move at a glacial pace, often bogged down by red tape. We prefer the private approach, and everyone I’ve spoken with has referred me to you.”

I took a breath and sat back in my chair. “Well, that’s quite a story. If it’s true, and an underwater locker filled with artwork exists, what makes you think it won’t be ruined by now? Destroyed by years of saltwater and pressure and tidal currents, not to mention fish?”

He looked at me for a moment. “I believe that if we can find the locker, and we can see what’s inside, then we will have closure on something that has been an open wound for my family for three generations. Four, if you include the generation that the Nazis killed.”

“Okay, show me what you have and I’ll see what I can do.”

He began to show me a very comprehensible history of stolen art, including where it was held and shipped during the Second World War. I learned of a warehouse full of Nazi art that was kept under guard at an Army base in Virginia. I was also made aware of a museum’s worth of art hiding in a cave in Austria. When the war was coming to a close, Hitler had ordered the cave to be blown up. Those plans were thwarted, thankfully, and the art was rescued. I was amazed to realize that there were over 100,000 items that still had not been returned to their rightful owners to this day.

“Look, Mr. Holt...Orson, I don’t expect that you will find our artwork, but I hope that you will move the ball forward, so to speak, and help us uncover another clue. In doing so, perhaps one day my family can have the closure we so desperately seek. It’s not just art; it is our legacy, history, and part of who we are, and we are tired of our heritage being missing. I’m about to have grandkids, and they say time heals all wounds, but not when there is an open wound still bleeding and festering with sores.”

This mild-mannered man showed me heat and passion, and it moved me. It reminded me of the kind of passion my wife had lived her life with, and I am a sucker for it. Sucker enough to call an old friend who works at the Monterey Bay Aquarium and ask him for a favor.

That’s how I ended up 500 feet below the surface of the water, where I could no longer see the light of the sun.

Monterey Bay is a natural wonder of the world, home to the Monterey Canyon—the underwater equivalent to the Grand Canyon. A superhighway to the Pacific’s deepest parts, the area is carbon-rich, full of kelp forests and a million different species of plants and animals.

Jenny, my new friend, let’s make her my new *best* friend, was competently driving the bright, blue submarine.

“How many times do you get to come this far down, Jenny?”

“Oh, this is nothing, Orson, I’ve taken her down close to 1,000 feet before, about as low as a craft this small can dive before the external pressure becomes crushing. We have automated subs that can travel even deeper than that, but it doesn’t quite match the excitement you’re feeling right now.”

“I am feeling something right now.” I shot a glance at Jenny, and she misread it and blushed. *Damnit, the last thing I need right now is to have Jenny thinking I’m flirting with her.* “I, um...I’m grateful you agreed to bring me down. I know it’s a big favor.”

“It’s not often we hear about sunken Nazi treasure, so my interests were peaked. It’s unusual to be accompanied by a land lover, but it’s a nice break from my fellow marine biologists.”

“I’ve been called many things, Jenny, but never a land lover.” It’s a fact, though, and never more than in this exact moment. “But when I’m not hunting for treasure, I tend sheep.”

Jenny looked amazed. “What do you mean you tend sheep?”

“When I’m not sleuthing, I tend to sheep on the ranch where I live, in a thirty-seven-foot-long Palomino trailer. It’s old, but it doesn’t leak and it keeps out the wind.”

The conversation that followed for the next hundred feet down was a sad story about my wife and baby dying, and how the only place I feel comfortable living is in the shadow of the house where she grew up. The subject definitely squashed any thoughts that Jenny may have had about me flirting with her.

I've been working in the area as a private eye for the past fifteen years, and I've grown to love my adopted home. It's where my wife's parents live. Their daughter and I met as UC Davis freshmen, where we fell in love. We were inseparable. I dropped one knee at graduation, asked her if she'd spend eternity with me and, luckily, she said yes. We made it official six months later. Six months after that, she was pregnant. Six months after that, she and my unborn child were struck down by a drunk driver as she was crossing the street with a coffee she just bought me. I heard it happen.

The driver hit the gas and kept right on driving after the impact....

I was raised on the east side of Sierra Nevada, in the heather sage where the desert smacks into a wall of granite 13,000 feet high, snow-capped most of the year. My father was an avid hunter. He had a hunting buddy, a man named Mo, whose mother was Shoshone and whose father was Paiute, making Mo one hell of a tracker.

Both my parents died in a single-engine plane crash when I was eight years old. It was winter, and the story goes that the weather turned harsh unexpectedly. Mo became my guardian late one snowy night. He taught me the things he knew, like how to track an elk any time of year. The winter was easy when it came to this because of footprints, but in the arid summer, he showed me how to look for the broken branches of sagebrush, find the slightest divot in the soil, search for tufts of hair, smell the air, and feel for the heat of scat. He taught me how to listen to my gut instincts (he would call them my 'hunches'), where the animal might have wandered into the quakes based on the grade of the summit, sunshine, shade, and rock formations. These techniques would always lead me to a place where the elk were settling in for the night. He was a brilliant tracker, and he taught me almost everything he knew. By the time I was ready to go off to college, I could track an elk thirteen miles in one day and bring it home before sunset.

Exactly five-and-a-half years later, I used those tracking skills to find the person who mowed down my wife and baby. I found her living in Sacramento, California. The local cops said I did such a good job tracking her down that I should join the force and become a detective. I took their advice and applied to Quantico. Given my special circumstances and a glowing reference from both the Davis and Sacramento PD's, I was accepted and trained to be a special agent. The Fed life didn't suit me, so I went to the only place I felt called to go: Carmel Valley to live with my dead wife's parents. She was their only child, and I was the closest thing they had left of her.

All this being said, I'm very good at what I do, and I have nothing to lose while I'm doing it. This reputation got me hired by the likes of Doris Day, Clint Eastwood, and a hundred other rich folks who wanted a problem solved or answers to their burning questions. Clint liked me so much he still uses me off and on for jobs here and there. I just get a kick out of being able to put 'Dirty Harry' and Orson Holt in the same sentence.

On that particular Thursday afternoon when Nick walked into my office, it was like every other Thursday afternoon, but I had a gut feeling that my life was about to change forever; for better or worse? I didn't know.



"Well, here we are," Jenny said a few minutes later. "This area matches the coordinates that you gave me. We are deep, and this sea wall is pretty steep, not an ideal place for a drop." Jenny scanned the seafloor with the underwater lamp. The darkness lit up in the ghostliest way, illuminated but not reflective of the light. No, the light just passed through the black veil and disappeared into an even deeper darkness.

There was a shower of jellyfish, beautiful in color, luminescent. It was another world down here of silence and the occasional beep of the instruments underscored by the constant hum of the propellers cutting through the abyss.

There was nothing made by a man down here, not that I could see, and if there was, it was buried deep or perhaps rolled to unknown depths. This was an unsuccessful errand, other than seeing something I'd never seen before,

but it did give me pause and made me think about things from a spiritual point of view—God and heaven and all that. It's what this darkness made me think about; this fearful, black chasm. Yes, I can appreciate its beauty, but it's not for me. I am a stranger down here.

"If they sunk a locker, we'd see traces of it on the seafloor, a track where it was dragged away by gravity, or a mound where it was buried by years of silt. This area is smooth and untouched and has been for as long as it's been under the water," Jenny said.



"It's not down here," I said, surrendering. "Should we head back up?"

"Do you mind if I look at something?" Jenny studied a map of the seafloor for a good ten minutes in silence, interrupted only by the hums, chirps, and beeps.

Sitting in that tight space with her, I had the chance to really look at her. She had intelligent eyes, and her body looked like it had been created by yoga and long, difficult hikes in Big Sur. Her skin was sun-kissed and glowing.

"Look," Jenny suddenly spoke. "If you draw a line from this point and follow it directly south to this point, and you were to flip two numbers on that coordinate—which are numbers that could easily get confused—that would put us in Carmel Bay. There's another canyon there, but this new coordinate would take us to a nice, deep, flat area tucked right off Pebble Beach. Do you think it's worth a look?"

"Can we get there in this?" I asked stupidly.

"No, we'll ascend and dock on the boat, but we have enough daylight left that we can make it over there and dive again. I'm happy to look. While you have me, you might as well take advantage." She said this last bit very flirtatiously.

The problem with being a widower is that even though I'm not emotionally available, there is that rare .01% of the time when a beautiful woman sneaks past my grief and reminds me that I am alive and male. Jenny is one of those women. She's wild and free; she dives in the ocean and studies fish for a living. I live in a trailer on land owned by my dead wife's parents and tend to sheep when I'm not spying on rich guys' wives for a living. *It'll never work.*

"I will take advantage, Jenny. If you're offering, I'm accepting," I said, without returning her flirtation.

Before I knew it, we were at the surface, and not long after that, we were at our second destination: Carmel Bay. If I squinted, I could see my office from the deck of the boat. The water was choppy over here, and the wind was snapping, but we were able to unload the sub back into the water. Getting into it again was no easy feat with all of the rocking, but we managed. We dove again, this time not nearly as deep, and we saw something *very* interesting.

**T**he seafloor had been disturbed, but not by a locker. A locker would leave a rectangular footprint in the seafloor sand or create a mound if it had become buried.

"Look at that. That tells me a very large, very heavy anchor dropped here at some point," Jenny said, smiling ear to ear.

Jenny and I were staring at what looked like a place where someone definitely had dropped anchor. The ocean floor was adorned with a gash. We could see where the water had pulled the ship towards land by the trench left behind, and finally where it dug deep into the floor, and when lifted, left a huge gash or what I like to call a divot. It was a big anchor, too; big enough to suggest a large ship needing such a heavy anchor in order to not move any closer to land.

"But World War II was eighty years ago. Is this new? This can't be what we're looking for," I said, doubtful.

"If we were closer to the shore, the currents and tidal flow would affect the seafloor, but out here and this deep down, it's almost like a vacuum. Whatever hits the floor just stays. A very heavy object, and we're assuming it was an anchor to a very big ship, hit the seafloor. Even if that happened a hundred years ago, it would leave a scar." She was excited by this discovery, and I was excited by the fact that most of my cases were solved using other people's expertise on a particular subject. In other words, use a marine biologist if you're gonna go looking at the seafloor. Use a butcher if you want a great cut of meat.

"So, if there is no locker but clear evidence that someone was here, evidence that someone dropped anchor at this very place that we have coordinates to...or close enough coordinates to...then this tells me something that I needed to know. If there's no locker on the bottom of the sea, then it must be on land. Which makes me ask, why here? Why this place?"

I let Jenny know I was ready for her to take me to the surface again.

**W**hen we got back onto the boat, I had a million questions. Why a ship? Why this far out? How would art play into it? Then I started thinking about rum runners during Prohibition. They would park a boat offshore, late at night, rendezvous with an onshore pickup and sneak the shipment on land. What if the Nazis did that with their stolen art?

I studied the shoreline from that point of view, the same spot where our mystery ship possibly anchored eighty years ago, and I scanned the entire bay. I saw Carmel Beach in front of us and, to the right, Carmel Point. The left of the beach was mostly cliffsides and jutting rocks, but there was a spot of land that caught my interest. Two bluffs on either side, but smack dab in the middle as if cut from the earth intentionally, there was an alcove that looked like a perfect place to launch and dock a boat. It was sheltered from rough seas and had access to low land behind it. This natural ramp was also on private property adjacent to The Links at Pebble Beach. It was a natural alcove, and it made me wonder. I said goodbye to Jenny and the crew, and thanked Jenny for her time.

She handed me her card; her telephone number was on it. "Please feel free to call me if you ever need to go on a deep dive again," she said.

"Jenny, if I'm ever in need, you'll be the first person I call. It was a pleasure. Thank you for your help." The chances I'd ever

use that number were slim to none, but you never know.

That night in my trailer, I did some thinking. I was curious about what existed on Pebble Beach during the 1940s. If the artwork is not on the bottom of the ocean, assuming those coordinates were accurate and considering they had something to do with the artwork, perhaps it was smuggled in? But where would smugglers stash the art once they got it on land? I logged onto my laptop and looked up housing records for Carmel and Pebble Beach, starting a deep dive on the Internet. Was there any possibility that the Nazis could have had a warehouse or a farm to store stolen art in America? It was a far-fetched idea, but Nick Goldstein seemed certain that his family's art had been hiding in Carmel, California, since the end of World War II. He also had the coordinates from a Nazi officer that, once tinkered with and slightly altered, led me to a divot in the bottom of the ocean that could have been made by a ship that anchored just offshore from a natural dock on the unprotected coastline of Carmel, California, eighty years ago. Coincidence? I've learned there are no such things. I was curious, so I searched Nazi construction in California pre-World War II, and I was absolutely shocked by what I learned.

In the 1930s, Nazism found a foothold in Los Angeles, California, and attracted locals to its cause. In 1933, when Hitler was the chancellor of Germany, he sent Nazi officials to the United States to start the Friends of New Germany Organization, or the German American Bund, which was intended to bolster support overseas. There were over 130,000 people in California who were Nazi sympathizers. I was shocked to learn that American Nazi sympathizers had even hatched plans to lynch Louis B. Mayer and Charlie Chaplin, among several movie studio heads that were Jewish. A married couple called the Stephens even went so far as to invest over four million dollars into building a Nazi bunker on their land that they named Murphy Ranch. They built a power station, a machine shed, fully irrigated the hillside for growing food, raised gardens, and built a massive water tank. There was even a place to store diesel fuel. They also built multiple cement stairs up the neighboring hillside to help with farming and patrolling the ranch. All of this in the heart of Pacific Palisades, California, where Hitler planned to run his Nazi empire after the war. If they built a bunker in Los Angeles, what prevented Nazis from building a warehouse in Carmel or Monterey or Salinas to store stolen art? Or, even more sinister, what prevented them from waging war off the virtually unguarded central coast of California?

I had work to do, and sleep was not an option, but I'd spent all day eighty-three fathoms under the sea. The pressure from being that deep and the alertness that came with Jenny's company had taken its toll on my body and mind. It was late, and the wind was howling around my trailer, enough to make it rock from side to side. The Internet was spotty when the wind blew, and tonight a chill was in the air.

Nazis had a foothold in California in the 1930s and '40s, and before my Internet dropped out on me, I learned there was a Navy base in San Diego that was actually built in the shape of a swastika. It had been recently discovered because of Google Earth, but now that people can see it, the Navy has spent millions to hide the shape with landscaping and solar panels. Also, relatively recently, a Nazi flag was seen in a government building in Sacramento. It was removed when a video of the flag went viral on the Internet, but it was hung, nonetheless.

The sheep were noisy tonight, which meant coyotes were nearby, and I had an oppressive thought that the country I thought I knew and loved might have a dark underbelly. What was I about to uncover?

*How deep will this rabbit hole go? ■*

## TO BE CONTINUED...

*Kristoffer Polaha is best-known for his long starring role in the critically acclaimed series Life Unexpected (The CW). Other TV series credits include Get Shorty with Ray Romano and Chris O'Dowd, the limited series Condor opposite William Hurt and Max Irons, The CW's Ringer (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Valentine, as well as North Shore (FOX). In addition to co-starring with Rainn Wilson in Backstrom (FOX), he had a multi-season role on the acclaimed series Mad Men (AMC) and Castle (ABC). Polaha is also well-known for starring in Hallmark Channel movies such as Dater's Handbook with Meghan Markle, and the Mystery 101 franchise on Hallmark Movies & Mysteries. Polaha first received attention for his portrayal of John F. Kennedy, Jr. in the TV movie America's Prince: The John F. Kennedy Jr. Story opposite Portia de Rossi. He has appeared in numerous independent features, including Where Hope Grows, Devil's Knot (Colin Firth, Reese Witherspoon), and the Tim Tebow film, Run the Race. Polaha has a featured role opposite Gal Gadot in Wonder Woman 1984 and in Jurassic World: Dominion. In addition to his work as an actor, producer, and director, Polaha is branching into the book world by co-authoring a new series, From Kona with Love, and he celebrated his first release from that series entitled "Moments Like This." He is also involved with several charitable organizations, including being an ambassador for World Vision, a board member for herARTS in Action, and The Polaha Family Circus Foundation. He is also the creator of a live show titled The Polaha Chautauqua on IGTV. He is married to Julianne Polaha and together they have three sons.*



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# THE GHOSTS OF THORWALD PLACE

By Helen Power

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## 1

"I think he's going to kill me." The voice is barely above a whisper.

I grip the telephone and take a deep breath. My eyes skim across the page in front of me. I know I should use open-ended questions, but I already find myself going off-script.

"If you believe your life is in danger, you need to call the police."

"No! I mean, no. I don't think my life is in danger."

I frown. It's not uncommon for callers to make grand, sweeping statements about murder or conspiracies and then recant moments later. But there's something different about this caller. There's something in her voice that makes me think she might have been telling the truth the first time.

"You can be honest with me," I say. "Tell me about your husband."

She pauses. "Well, he's really sweet. He's handsome. Generous. He buys me everything I could ever want . . ."

"But?"

"He gets horrible mood swings. He gets so . . . *mad* for no reason. I never know when he's going to snap. I think he's been having trouble at work, but he won't talk to me about it."

I bite my lip. "Has he ever hit you?"

The silence stretches like a yawning chasm as I wait for her next words to either topple me over the precipice or guide me safely away from the edge.

"No."

My heart skips a beat. I don't believe her.

"I wouldn't even consider leaving him if it weren't for . . ."

"If it weren't for . . .?"

"If it weren't for Shane."

"Who's Shane?"

She doesn't respond.

"Is Shane your son?"

I worry that she might hang up, but she finally answers.

"Yes."

"Has he ever hurt your son?"

"No."

My frown deepens. Is she lying? "Listen . . ." I falter. Normally I would use a caller's name here, to cement the trust I'm trying to build, but she refused to





give it. "I think you should call the police."

"I—can't. I won't."

I want to push her—this might be my only chance to convince her to get help—but instead, I give her a list of places she can go, emphasizing the discretion of the different women's shelters that are strategically located around downtown Toronto, where she has alluded to living.

"You can call any time you need to talk. Ask for Rachel, and they'll connect us if I'm working," I say. "I usually work a little later than this—from twelve to four."

I hear a muffled thump on the other end of the line. "I have to go. He's awake."

My heart leaps into my throat. I open my mouth, but I'm cut off by the dial tone.

I reluctantly return the phone to its receiver, the springy cord of my vintage, black telephone snapping tightly into place. I take a deep breath and arch my back, stretching my arms to the ceiling. Some—but not all, never all—of the tension releases from my body.

I flip through the pages of the binder back to the first page, ready to start the process over again. I've been volunteering at the distress line for almost fourteen months now, but it never gets easier. The service helps all those in crisis, from teens who just want information about mental health programs to the elderly who are grieving the loss of loved ones. We also get many calls about domestic abuse. Too many. Unless the caller explicitly gives us permission, or if we have reason to believe that someone's safety is in immediate danger, we aren't allowed to contact the police.

Sometimes, I hate this rule. But one of the reasons people feel comfortable enough to reach out to us is because of our discretion. Still, it's hard to hang up and let go of someone who needs my help. I may never hear from this girl again. I may never know the rest of her story.

I make a note on the call log, both online and in my own personal records. I put down my pen and stare at the phone for several minutes, hoping that I can compel the girl into calling back. But it's nearing the end of my four-hour shift, so I likely won't hear from her again tonight.

Housebound, I volunteer for four shifts a week. Usually, I take the most unpopular shift of midnight to four, but tonight I'm working from eight to twelve. Because of my flexible schedule, the hotline has made an exception, and I'm allowed to work from home instead of at the busy call center. Of course, I didn't tell them the real reason why I can't leave my apartment. They think I have mobility issues, which I faked during the company's mandatory therapy sessions. I was given a clean bill of mental health. Ironical.

I head into the kitchen and turn on the kettle. I grab a box of Earl Grey and drop a bag into my favorite mug. The mug is plain and brown and has a tiny chip on its lip, but it reminds me of home, and I always use this one, even though I have a dozen other mugs crammed onto the shelf. I hug my

arms across my chest as I wait for the water to boil. My wool sweater does little to warm the chill that has permeated my bones.

Once the tea is ready, I find myself back in my office, cradling the mug in ice cold hands. The wall to my left bears my collection of framed, black and white landscape photos. The only glimpse of nature I've had in over a year. My escape from the reality of being trapped in a city I barely know. To my right are several built-in bookcases, filled with the variety of leisure and professional reading I've amassed over the two years I've lived here. I approach the floor-to-ceiling-length window which fills the wall behind my desk. Toronto's bright city lights wink at me. Down below, the trees whip back and forth in a sharp gust of wind. Heavy rainfall drenches the pavement. Across the street are tall apartment complexes, peppered with the illuminated windows of those who cannot sleep. I sympathize with them. I haven't had a full night's sleep in two years. Instead, I take sporadic naps, giving in only whenever the exhaustion is too great to conquer.

A shrill ring cuts through the silence. The mug slips from my grasp, bounces, and spills, scalding hot liquid ballooning out onto the floor, sinking deep into the rug. I hurry to my desk, leaving the cleanup for later.

"Hello?"

An automated voice greets me. "This is the Toronto Distress Line. You have a caller on the line. If you are able to take this call, press one."

I take a deep breath, then press one.

"Hello, this is Rachel speaking. How can I help you?" I sound surprisingly serene.

"Rachel?" The voice is strange. I cannot place my finger on what's wrong, but a sense of dread washes over me. I ignore it.

"Yes. You've reached the Toronto Distress Line. Anything you say is strictly confidential. Tell me why you called here tonight."

"I know where you live . . . Kae."

"What—how do you know that name?" I swallow, my throat suddenly paper dry.

"I'm coming for you."

*From "The Ghosts of Thorwald Place" by Helen Power. Copyright (c) Helen Power and reprinted by permission of CamCat Publishing, LLC.*

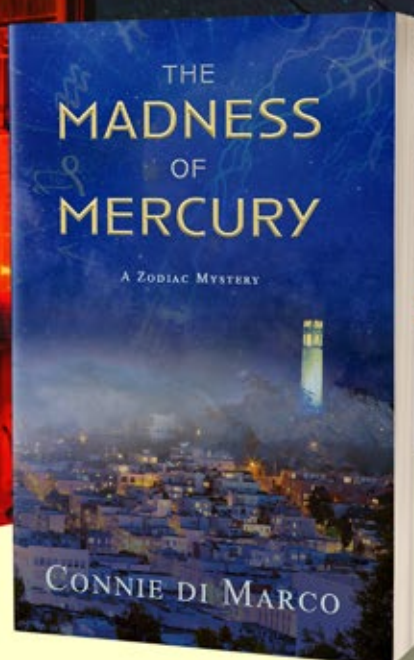
*Helen Power is obsessed with ghosts. She spends her free time watching paranormal investigation TV shows, hanging out in cemeteries, and telling anyone who'll listen about her paranormal experiences. She is a librarian living in Saskatoon, Canada, and has several short story publications, including ones in Suspense Magazine and Dark Helix Press's Canada 150 anthology, "Futuristic Canada." "The Ghosts of Thorwald Place" is her first novel.*



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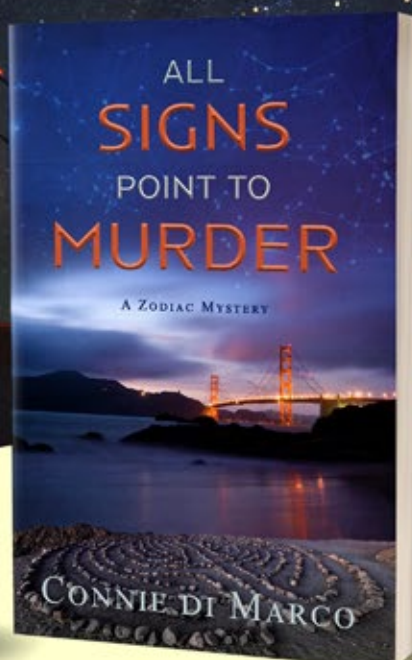
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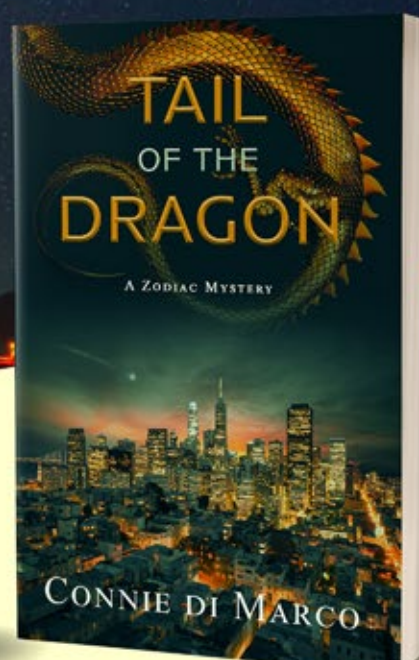
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