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**HOTTEST
BOOKS,
AUTHORS &
SHORT STORIES.**

**SELF PUBLISHING TIPS
BOOK COVER DESIGNERS
FICTION VS. NON-FICTION
THE ART OF EROTICA**

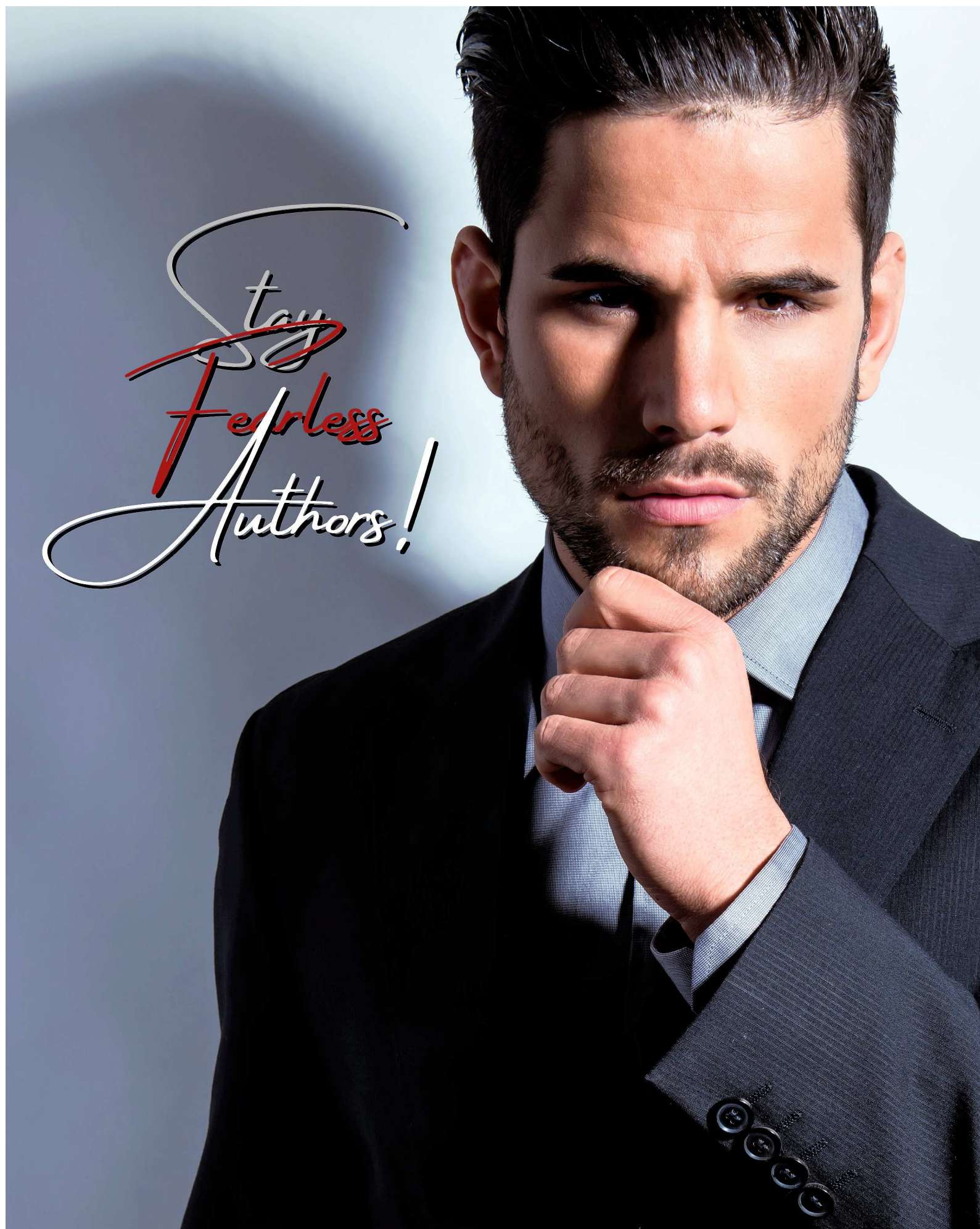
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**AUTHOR INTERVIEWS:
JUANITA D. HOUSTON
TAMARA LAWYER**

**SHORT STORY FEATURES:
JM BERNALDEZ
CHELE PEDERSEN SMITH
TRISHA McKEE
MICHAEL R. YOUNG
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IDENTITY MAGAZINE

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AUTHOR LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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FEBRUARY 2021



Juanita D. Houston

Author of Romantic Suspense

Bio

Juanita Houston lives in Tipton County, TN with her retired Sr. Chief husband. She started writing in middle school and high school but then life got in the way and it was put aside until she returned to Tennessee. She joined several writing groups and submitted her first short story to the first anthology for Malice in Memphis.

She's since written five more stories for subsequent anthologies. Christmas of last year she rewrote and self published one of the earlier anthology stories, An Unwanted Visitor. Three months later she published her first novel, Full Throttle, the first in a series. She's working on Book two of the Full Throttle series. She originally wrote a series set in Whiskey Bend, TX and earlier this year did some tweaking and rewriting it for a trilogy.

Dark Stalker was published on July 18 th of this year. It follows a group of friends as they try to save their own from a stalker from the past. Each story has its own arc in addition to the overall one. "This is one of my favorite story lines." She says. Dark Discovery and Dark Revelations will be out soon. In April her story The Spirit in the Mask, set in New Orleans about haunted objects, was published in the anthology The Secret of the Jeweled Mask anthology.

There will be more in this series in the future. The Princess Hunter is a prequel to the novel Chasing Vengeance and follows Ella and Jasper as they join forces again to save his sister from someone in his dad's past. The prequel will be out in The Court of Sin Anthology later this year. She published the newsletter Dead to Writes for Malice for six years and served as Secretary for five years. When she's not writing, she's researching for books, geocaching or painting.

Author of Mystery & Romantic Suspense

Dark Stalker, The Stalkers of Whiskey Bend, Book One
Full Throttle

An Unwanted Visitor

Grave Danger

<http://www.juanitadhouston.com>

Interview

When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

I've always wanted to write stories. I think it started when I was in middle school and read the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series. I wanted to write stories like that. As an adult, I wanted to write like Janet Evanovich in her Stephanie Plum series. I put a lot of snark and twists in my books for that reason.

• How long does it take you to write a book?

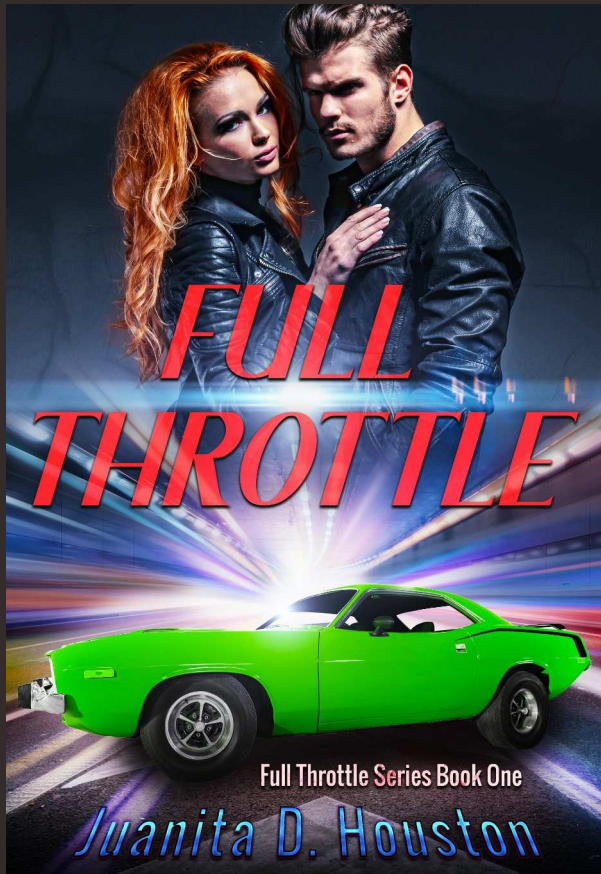
Depends on the book. Some have been really quick books, taking just a couple of months to get them done and others have been a year or so. I let the story determine how long it takes.

• What is your work schedule like when you're writing?

I write every day, even on holidays and vacations. I start out writing in my bedroom because I have to wait an hour after taking meds before I can eat. So I get as much done before breakfast as I can before I move to my office. If I get stuck on a story, I will take a drive on a backroad or run an errand until I get it worked out. At the end of the work day I move to my living room computer and switch stories, unless I'm on a roll with the one I was working on, so I can spend some time with hubby. He's usually on his computer also so we're not ignoring each other.

• What would you say is your interesting writing quirk?

Probably trying to write /edit more than one story at a time. If I'm writing a story in my office during the day, then I try to edit a different story when I move to the living room computer. It's easier that way.



- How do books get published?

My personal publishing process is this. When I finish a story, I put it away for a couple of weeks. Then I pull it out and start editing with fresh eyes. I also try to read it as reader instead of a writer. I do have an editor but a lot of times I rely on my beta readers. They're great for helping me with stories. One told me she could tell when my brain got ahead of my fingers...or was it fingers got ahead of my brain. Also, I use Vellum to publish my books/stories.

- Where do you get your information or ideas for your books?

I write romantic suspense, so I try to do a lot of research for injuries, fighting techniques, and jobs mostly. If I can't find out something or someone won't cooperate then I post a disclaimer so if there's any question I at least tried to warn them. Some of my ideas have come from a song I heard, a video or sometimes television shows.

In my first book there was a local racetrack, I tried to go our local one but the two people I spoke with were so rude that I had to rely on the internet. I have a disclaimer in all my books that says I do as much as I can, but ask that the reader remember it's fiction

- When did you write your first book and how old were you?

My first novel came out in 2020. It took me a year and a half to write so I was 55 when I started writing it and 57 when it was published. But I had my first short story published nine years prior to that in anthologies. I'm taking some of the anthologies stories and updating them for release as well as the stories I'm already working on.

- What do you like to do when you're not writing?

I love to research for a current story or a new story. If the story has a winery, I go visit several wineries. The same with breweries, distilleries etc. I wrote a short story based in a local cemetery, so I went there several times. The same with National parks. Hubby is good with traveling on our vacations to places I am considering using in a story. I take photos of anything I think will help. Houses, businesses etc. I learn things, hobbies, etc I also read and paint when I can.

My next focus is axe throwing and archery.

- What does your family think of your writing?

Most of them are supportive. My husband and my kids primarily. My sister and my mother-in-law have actually read some of my stuff, the less steamy stuff that is. I have sisters at heart and friends who help with either being beta readers or let me bounce ideas off of them. It's great for road trips and it's really hard for them to get away if I'm the driver. Captive audience and all that.

- What was one of the most surprising things you learned in creating your books?

How much work is involved in doing this job. I wouldn't change it, but I swear some days I need three of me to get it all done.

- How many books have you written? Which is your favorite?



Four novels, two under my name, and two under a pen name. I love all of my characters. So far, Dark Stalker is my favorite novel that I've written because I just love all of my characters in the town of Whiskey Bend (story). I have two more coming out in that series that I am working on. My all-time favorite characters are some from my short stories (their first full-length novel hopefully coming out next month). Dean and Gwen Colton are not your typical couple. They've been married for thirteen years and they have two kids. Dean is a detective with the Memphis Police Department. (our stories had to be set in Memphis for the anthologies) and just when life was getting mundane, Gwen is thrown into the middle of a murder mystery and she has to protect her son and his class during a field trip. (remember those?). Dean has to rescue her but realizes his wife is pretty bad ass in her own right.

- Do you have any suggestions to help me become a better writer? If so, what are they?

Write every day until it becomes a habit. It took me almost a year to do this. You don't have to do it like I do which is write most of the time, but I'd say at least 5-15 minutes a day. It takes about three weeks for something to become a habit. Some days are going to be great and some not so much. Set a goal. It can be anything. A certain number of words or pages. Mainly though, just write every day. When you get stuck, walk away and do something else for a while. A lot of times your brain just needs to work through the scene or chapter.

When I was growing up, I was forced to learn the piano and I had to practice it every day. Back then it was annoying but now I see what my mother was trying to instill in me. Practice makes perfect...well near perfect.

- Do you hear from your readers much? What kinds of things do they say?

Yes, and usually it is...when is the next one coming out? Or I need more.

- Do you like to create books for adults?

Yes, that way I can cuss if I want. I really like having as few restrictions as possible.

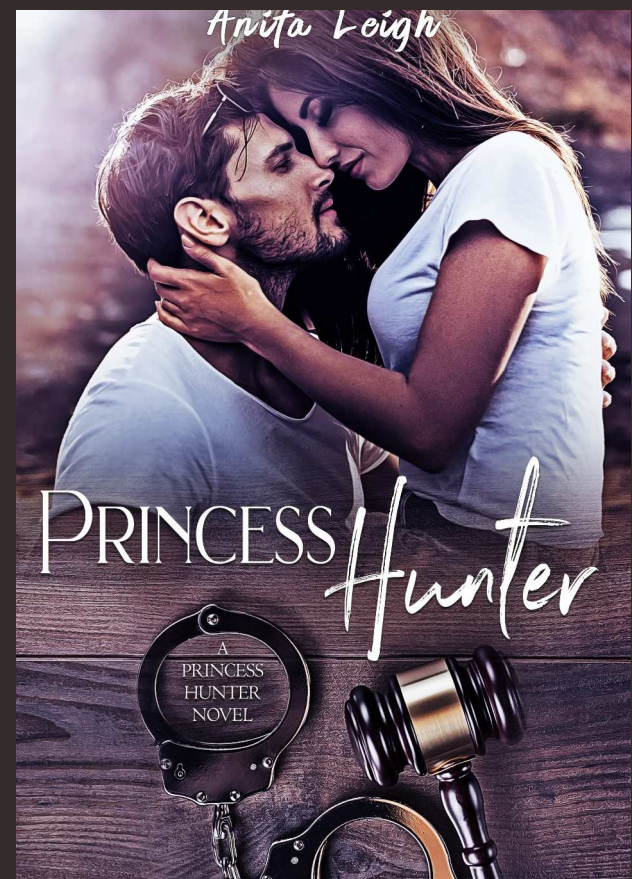
- What do you think makes a good story?

Interesting characters doing ordinary and extraordinary things. You also need snark. Really you just need to make your readers feel something, either for the characters, or the place. Most of my places are fictional towns so I want them to want to visit the town or city, I want them to want to meet the people in the story. In other words, pull them into that world and the story.

- As a child, what did you want to do when you grew up?

I thought I wanted to be an architect at one time, so I learned how to draw house plans. I've wanted to be a private investigator. I even got my license back in the late 80's. It's not as glamorous in real life as it is on television. It turns out, I really just wanted to be a writer, that way I can be whatever I want as I live vicariously through my characters.

juanitadhouston.com



C. M. Santoro is excited to share her writing journey with you. She writes romance, suspense, and thrillers.

Her first book, *His Deadly Betrayal: A Shattered Marriage*, is the first book in its series. Her background includes being a teacher's assistant, a PCA, and a mentor for middle school students that need academic support. She's also an advocate for breast cancer awareness.

She lives in a rural town in south-central Pennsylvania with her husband, three daughters, and 3 fur babies. When she's not writing, she's supporting her special needs daughter—writing, taking walks, and mentoring are all her favorite hobbies.



ROMANCE, SUSPENSE,
& THRILLER AUTHOR

C. M. Santoro

A wolf without a mate.
A witch who doesn't date.

Serenade



TK Lawyer

Author, TK Lawyer

*Passionate * Playful * Paranormal*



Tamara K. Lawyer who writes under the pseudonym TK Lawyer was born in Colon, Panama. She moved to the United States with her family to pursue her post- secondary education aspirations and found her love of writing sometime in 2013. Her first book, *Nightfall* was published shortly afterward, in October 2014.

She writes sexy and heartwarming paranormal and contemporary romance. Her books often toe the line, straying from traditional ideas and opening readers' minds and hearts to unlimited possibilities.

When she isn't reading or writing, she is likely spending time with her husband/best friend or catering to their lovable American Foxhound misfit who steals all the attention in their house.

You can connect with TK on Facebook at [facebook.com/tklawyerauthor](https://www.facebook.com/tklawyerauthor) or on Twitter @tklawyerauthor. You can also visit her website, <https://tklawyerauthor.wordpress.com/> and connect with her on Amazon at [amazon.com/author/tklawyer](https://www.amazon.com/author/tklawyer)

When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

Well, actually, I never wanted to become a writer. I only entertained the idea because I was disenchanted with my day job and needed something to feed the raw passion within me which was getting stifled by the rules and regulations of my day job. It was only after I literally screamed in my kitchen that I needed something more, that ideas started flowing through me at great speed. They came to me at all hours of the day, creeping into my dreams and night time hours and even invading me while I was driving, exercising or taking a shower. I started writing a plot line and then moved on to write *Jasper*, the first book in my *Guardian League* series. Placing the incomplete manuscript aside, I concentrated on a new idea that popped into my head for *Nightfall*, finished the book and waited for a contract. It was when I received a publishing contract that I knew being a writer was a good fit for me.

How long does it take you to write a book?

It used to take me six to eight months, if not longer, from start to finish to complete a book. That was when I wrote longer books. I've realized over the past year that more authors are writing shorter novels. This keeps the fans engaged as well, as they get to look forward to more books from the authors they love.

Instead of continuing my constant struggle to achieve more words with each book I created, I decided to try my hand at decreasing the amount of writing I did. Though my books are still not as slim as some of my author friend's novels, I find I have an easier time writing when I don't feel as pressured to produce.

My latest wolf-shifter book, which is now in the hands of one of my publisher's, took me approximately four to five months to complete. The extra time I saved allowed me to move on to another book, which I have already started and am making great progress with.

What is your work schedule like when you're writing?

Well, I actually don't have a schedule for writing, though I'd like to have one. I think it would help me stay more on track. Problem is, I can only write when I am in the mood to write. I can't force my writing so I write when I get an idea that has to be written down, before I forget the idea and move on to something else. Or I'll sit in my chair a while and get myself in the mood to write by thinking about my characters and what I want to say or maybe thinking about a particular scene in the book I might want to embellish. I will write sporadically through the week trying to do this, mostly during the week days as weekends are precious to me and my hubby.

What would you say is your interesting writing quirk?

I'm what they call a "pantser." I get my ideas at random so I will write down ideas at any time of night when they come to me. Sometimes they come to me while I am exercising and I will need to write them down as soon as I'm done. I will get layouts of the book in my mind or specific detailed scenes to include in the book. It is absolutely wonderful how I get my material.

How do books get published?

I have two publishers and I also Indie publish, as well. When I have a book ready, I consider which route to go (traditional publishing or Indie) and will submit the book the way I feel is best for the book. If I think a book will do better on the Indie markets, I will go that route.

Sometimes going the Indie route is better, especially if there may be controversial content within the novel or you don't want to change how things are presented and you know that will happen with a traditional publisher. It's all about getting your unique voice out there and what is the best way to do that.

Where do you get your information or ideas for your books?

Well...that's a good question. The ideas actually just come to me. I specifically concentrate on two genres, for now: contemporary romance and paranormal romance. I might think of a character I am working on for a book, asking myself where is the character going or what is he/she doing. What is the final outcome and how do we lead up to it? The book, somehow, just falls into place and weaves its tale magically for the readers to enjoy.

When did you write your first book and how old were you?

I actually tried to write a few stories back when I was in high school. I still have the incomplete manuscripts and when I read them, I just laugh and laugh. Still, I love some of the story concepts and ideas and I've actually considered taking one of the manuscripts, re-working it and writing it out so it can get published. I was always into Romance and most all of my stories revolve around this genre.

My one script that I really love was my sad attempt at writing a Victorian Romance. I did this, on my own, over a week or two with no prompting from any teachers. I re-read the story recently and I still love it and the main characters I wove into the script.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

Actually, just “vegging out” on the couch in front of the T.V. or with a good book with my hubby or by myself. I enjoy time spent with good friends and family. Every once in a while I will get creative and start a project on my crochet loom.

And I absolutely adore my American Foxhound, Molly, who has her own hashtag on Instagram: #nollylawyerrocks She gets lots of affection from me plus extra treats whenever I am in between my writing projects and my full time day job.

What does your family think of your writing?

For the most part, my mom supported my writing before she passed away though my dad never did. I have always felt that if you wanted to do something and it wasn't going to cause anyone any harm, just do it. I have never relied on other people to tell me what to do or how to spend my time. Regardless of what my parents thought, I was going to write and keep on writing if I felt like it and I did.

My husband fully supports me and his mother is just in awe that I write, which is amazing. She is always telling the neighbors about me, which really honors me. So, I have a lot of support which I am truly grateful for.

What was one of the most surprising things you learned in creating your books?

All the marketing I would have to do, afterward. Lol. Actually, it can be pretty fun to market my own books but sometimes it can also be mentally exhausting. I think I would enjoy it more if I didn't have to rely on a full time day job for income. But I make the most of it and do the best that I can. That's all anyone can do.

How many books have you written? Which is your favorite?

I have written fourteen books. It's actually a bit difficult to choose a favorite because all of them are so unique in their own way but there are some that I love re-reading.

From my Guardian League Angel series, Aeron, book four, is one of them. Apollo, book three is another one I enjoy. I absolutely love Nightfall, which I am currently re-working on for the third edition- to be published soon. Nightfall is my first wolf shifter book and Josh's character is amazing. Loving and patient, Josh is also protective and endearing to readers.

Do you have any suggestions to help me become a better writer? If so, what are they?

Just keep going. Don't give up. Don't compare yourself to other writers because that is sooo easy to do in our industry. Do your own thing and do it within your time frame and availability. Keep plugging along and keep writing. Don't worry too much about sales- that will come with hard work and time.

Do you hear from your readers much? What kinds of things do they say?

I have a fan group of my closest fans. They are my amazing “Kittens” and I love them so much! They are one of the reasons that keep me going because they love my books so much.

Most of the comments I hear from them, from reviews or from wonderful fans actually reaching out to me, is that my books are emotional, sometimes making them cry. They love my writing style and actually get lost- immersed within the developed scenes. For an author to hear these things...I can't tell you how it touches my heart. It is amazing that the words I write cause such emotion and enjoyment. I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to uplift and entertain so many wonderful people.

Do you like to create books for adults?

Yes, I love it! I have thought about writing YA romance but who doesn't love a good, exciting romance with maybe some raunchy fun. Lol. Writing adult concepts is much more up my alley. Showing the intensity of love and attraction that unites a stranger with another is a really big part in romances. It uses a lot of creativity and substance to write out the subtle details that most of us often take for granted. A subtle glance here, a wink there...these are all beautiful elements that sometimes lead to forever. Life struggles and heart break are a big part of adulthood and bringing these to life with elements of hope and willpower are what make for a great adult story.

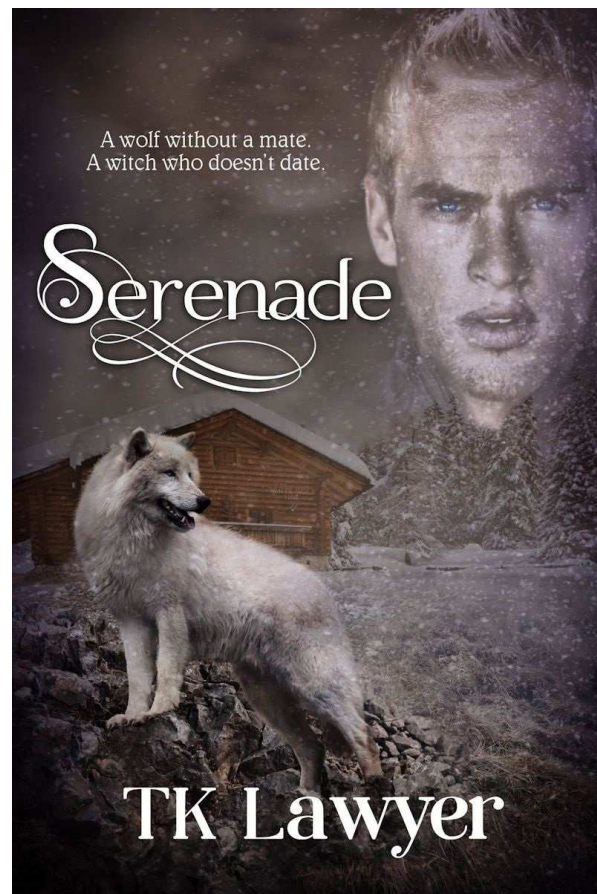
What do you think makes a good story?

A strong plot line with just as strong characters.

It doesn't matter what genre one writes as long as they can weave a beautiful story that the reader can easily follow along and enjoy. Great editing also makes for a good story. I have read a few books that had so many typos that it actually detracts from enjoyment of what the author was trying to convey.

As a child, what did you want to do when you grew up?

Actually, I wanted to be a businesswoman, owning two retail stores. I was going to live in a high rise condo in New York City and own two Dobermans. None of it came true except for, maybe, the businesswoman part. Lol

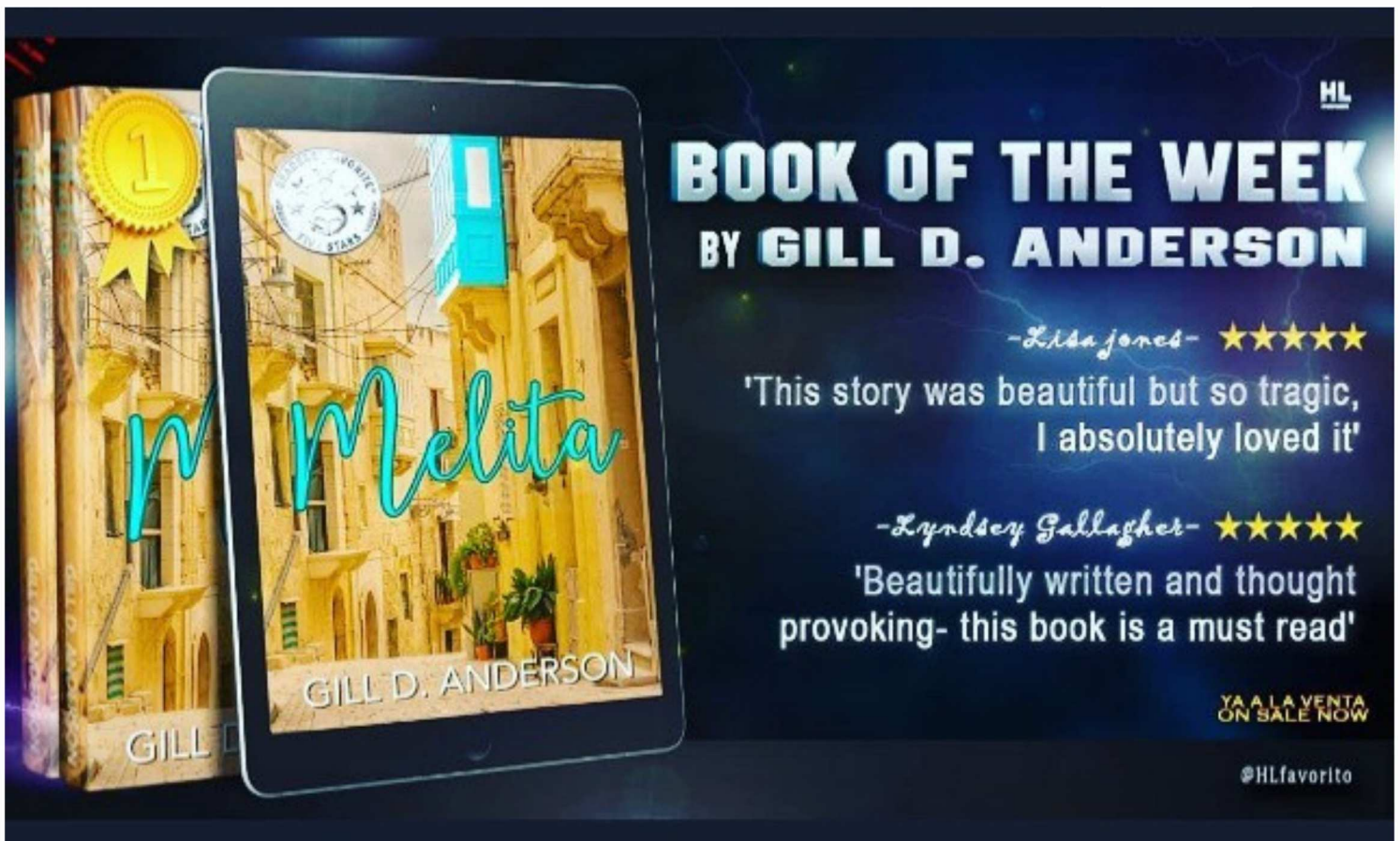


GILL D. ANDERSON

MELITA



DRAMA SUSPENSE FICTION NOVEL



BEAUTIFUL & TRAGIC

GILL D. ANDERSON

IGNITIVEIFY FEATURED AUTHOR

MELITA

As the only child of a single parent, and with little knowledge of her father or her paternal relatives, Emily struggles with identity issues throughout her childhood. Her mother's past and family history have always been shrouded in secrecy. Moving from Scotland to Vancouver, Emily hoped to start a new life and reinvent herself, but she unintentionally becomes estranged from her mother, Melita, during the process.

The tension between Melita and her daughter that has built throughout the course of Emily's life finally comes to the surface. Slowly, the truth about Melita's harsh childhood growing up in Malta unravels, revealing the inevitable impact it had on Emily's upbringing. Will the dysfunctional familial patterns remain entrenched forever?

Or can Melita and Emily find a way to reconcile with the past?

BOOK EXTRACT MELITA

It reached a head one Sunday afternoon when Troy's parents finally decided enough was enough. Melita turned up at Troy's parents' house with no food contributions, did not offer to help the rest of the family who were busy preparing food and then to top it all off, she engaged in a vicious argument with Troy's elderly great uncle about Catholicism, despite knowing he was recovering from a recent stroke. The final straw was when Cathy tried to distract Melita by asking her if she was enjoying the trifle. It was Cathy's speciality and she was yet to come across someone who didn't rave about it.

Melita looked up at her with a sour expression. Cathy secretly thought she looked like she was sucking on a lemon. Melita stared at Cathy pointedly and said, 'It's disgustingly sweet; I don't think I can eat it, to be honest.' Melita's beady eyes were hard and her tone was far from apologetic. Cathy inwardly shook with rage in response to Melita's obvious attempt at provocation. She picked a water jug off the table that needed refilling and promptly marched into the kitchen where she slammed it down on the kitchen bench with force.

Ricky came up behind her. 'Deep breaths,' he said, placing his hands on his wife's shoulders. 'Don't let her get to you; that's exactly what she wants.'

Cathy's breath became shallow as she tried to keep her anger in check. She turned to her husband and hissed through gritted teeth, 'That's the last time that cow comes here – family or no family. If I didn't love Emily to bits, I'd happily never set eyes on her again. I seriously cannot get over the audacity of that woman!' Ricky nodded. 'Enough is enou ...' he stopped mid-sentence as he saw Emily enter the kitchen, her worried expression and blotchy red neck sure signs that she was uncomfortable with the situation. As she approached them, she averted her eyes to mask her humiliation. Cathy softened as she realised Emily must feel mortified. The older woman opened her arms and smiled as Emily walked into her comforting embrace.

As Cathy patted Emily's head soothingly, Melita walked in and stopped dead in her tracks. This woman is comforting my child! she thought. Who does she think she is! Why is she putting ideas in Emily's head that there is anything to be upset about? This family is so dramatic and I'm at risk of having my only daughter brainwashed by them!

Melita's eyes were cold and hard as she surveyed the scene. 'Come on, Emily, it's time we were going; we have taken up enough of these people's time.' Melita used an authoritative tone as she crooked a finger at Emily. Melita fully expected her daughter to jump to attention and leave with her. Emily pulled away from Cathy's embrace and spoke in a shaky voice, her eyes lowered. 'I'm not coming back with you, Mum; I think I will stay on and help everyone clear up. It's the least I can do after all the effort they went to for us today.' Yes, she thought, I'm making a dig at you; it's embarrassing that you are my only family representative and you can't even act like a decent human being for a few hours.

Melita was furious and stormed straight out to her car, which was parked inconsiderately across the neighbour's driveway. For the first time ever, Emily did not follow her mother or try to put things right. She was tired of feeling stressed in her company and of constantly overcompensating for her behaviour by being overly helpful and nice to prove she was not a chip off the old block. Emily did not know it at the time, but that day was a turning point for her. From then onwards, she began to challenge her mother's behaviour and their relationship deteriorated further with each passing day. Melita appeared to have no reflective capacity and was completely unwilling to consider that her behaviour was out of line. She certainly had no intention of being the one to apologise. Instead, she replayed the scenario several times in her mind and each time she came to the same conclusion. Troy's family were conspiring to take over and shut her out of Emily's life. With her mouth in a grim line, Melita pondered how she was going to handle this situation. It could get ugly; there was no doubt about that.

When Troy and Emily announced their engagement a year later, Melita declined the invitation to the local pub to join in the celebrations. Troy's parents originally planned to hold the party at their house but considered that even though it was Melita who had been out of line the last time they hosted, they did not want her to feel uncomfortable about coming to the party. Therefore, to keep the peace, it was agreed that a venue in neutral territory where everyone could join in the celebrations was best. When Melita announced she wasn't coming, Emily broke down in tears and begged her mother not to embarrass her in this way. 'Mum! You are my only relative; you can't do this to me. I will be so upset if you don't come and be happy for me on my special night.' Melita's lip curled spitefully. 'You should have thought of that when you sided with the precious Wilson family! Incidentally, you will soon become one of them and I will be left on the outside; have you thought about that?'

Overcome with hurt and anger, Emily could barely form any words. 'Mum, if you let me down like this, I'm not sure it will be something we can recover from. I beg you to think this through and make a choice that is for the greater good of us all.' Melita considered appeasing her daughter for all of a few seconds, but somehow she simply couldn't

bring herself to be nice. It looked like Emily was about to live the happy life she should have had. It simply wasn't fair. Instead she looked at her daughter with a self-satisfied smirk and said, 'I won't be coming, Emily.' Emily gasped, her expression a mixture of hurt and horror, as she watched her mother casually walk out of the lounge room as though what she'd said was no big deal at all. Emily felt like she had been kicked in

the guts. How could she possibly be at her own engagement party with zero family representation and how could Melita not care how this affected her? A transition was taking place. The invisible umbilical cord that usually ties mothers and daughters together over the course of their life was beginning to sever. In fact, it was practically hanging by a thread. Emily had always made excuses for her mum, sticking up for her and using her sad start in life to justify her awful behaviour. But there was only so much she could take and she had just about reached her limit.

MELITA

Genre: drama/suspense/contemporary adult fiction/ | Publication: 16 July 2020. Author: Gill D Anderson | Publisher In House Publishing, Queensland.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gill was born in Edinburgh, Scotland and immigrated to Adelaide, South Australia in 2004 with her husband and two daughters. Gill studied at Flinders University in South Australia and has a double degree in Social

Work and Social Planning. Gill currently works in a corporate role in the field of Child Protection.

Gill is a strong advocate for women who have suffered violence and sexual assault and these are prominent themes in her debut novel *Hidden From View* which is set partly in Edinburgh and in Adelaide. Her second novel *The Chosen Seven* is a story depicting a siege situation in an Adelaide city restaurant which allows the characters to have a life review and reconsider what really matters when faced with the possibility of death. Gill's strength is creating strong believable, colourful characters that intrigue the reader and draws them in. Gill's novels tend to have confronting themes that tap into the psychology of human behaviour (based on their trauma backgrounds) and touches on the impact that the character's choices have on others.



Michael R Young was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest and migrated east to attend Princeton Seminary, where he began writing for the Wineskin student newspaper. He currently lives in the North Quabbin region of Massachusetts on a farm with his wife, Pat, two mini horses and a large Great Pyreneese dog.

His writing won him the title of Poet Laureate for Royalston, MA. In addition, he contributes to and edits for the Quabbin Quills, a regional literary journal, and teaches writing at Mount Wachusett Community College. The subjects which inspire him most are nature and spirituality.



Thorns of Faith

An old, oral tale of unknown origin retold and renamed

by

Michael R. Young

There was once a pilgrim on the path in search of a teacher. He heard of a special master who lived in a faraway valley, in the shadow of a majestic mountain. One day, with little in his possession other than his thirst for spiritual knowledge, he trudged to the home of the master. Upon his arrival, he spied the master with his flowing robes and his long, white beard. Prostrating himself at his feet, the pilgrim implored, "Oh most noble Master, please take me as your disciple! I would do anything to sit at your feet and learn from you." "Very well, Pilgrim" replied the Master, "Tend my roses." It was then that the Pilgrim realized he was in the most elegant of rose gardens, with bushes of many varieties of the most fragrant blossoms he had ever seen. Under the direction of the Master, he learned to cultivate and prune the roses. The Pilgrim was given special prayers and spiritual practices to recite while caring for the magnificent flowers. He even learned to call them by their names, some quite exotic and foreign.

In the cool of the evening, the Pilgrim would sit at the seat of the Master and listen to his teaching, often in the company of other devoted disciples who lived nearby or in the small monastery on the property. This went on for quite some time. But the Pilgrim was never invited into the chapel that sat just up from the rose garden. Then one day the Pilgrim got up the courage to address his Master. "Oh Master, for low these many days have I tended your rose garden with prayers and spiritual practices, and yet I have never been invited into the chapel with your other disciples. What must I do to gain entrance into the chapel?"

The Master handed him a sack and a spade, and pointed to the neighboring mountain. "My son, for you to enter the chapel, you must first take this sack to the mountain. There is a large cave in which you will find something that my roses love and need to flourish."

The Pilgrim took the large sack and a small spade, along with a meager loaf of bread and flask of water and scaled the mountain path. Before him loomed the mouth of a vast cave. As he was about to enter, there issued forth from the cave's mouth a dark cloud of bats! Startled, the Pilgrim still determined to enter the cave for the sake of his Master and the beloved roses. It was then that he was overcome by the putrid stench of what lay inside on the cave floor.

There must be some mistake! Abruptly the Pilgrim whirled around and hurried back down the mountain. Panting for breath, he returned to the garden, where he dropped the sack and slumped abruptly to the ground before his Master. "Oh Master, please forgive! I have done as you asked but could not take anything from the cave. Do you know what those bats are depositing on its floor? It's disgusting!" "Yes, my son. I know, but you have not done as I instructed. It is what my roses love, what feeds them." With that, the Master picked up the empty sack and handed it back to the Pilgrim. "If you would enter the chapel, you must first learn to deal with bats and the fertile excrement on the floor of the cave."

In these current times, faith is what gets you to the roses.



HOT THRILLER AUTHORS

AUTHOR >

ASHBY FROST



Author Ashby Frost is a thriller writer who has had her work compared to the SAW movies writer. Ashby doesn't hold anything back in her short stories and novels; her characters will grab hold of you and shake you to the core.



AUTHOR>

C.M. SANTORO



Julie's life hangs in the balance. Julie and Bill seem to have it all - money, a fancy home, and a supportive community. There's only one problem, Bill has been having an extramarital affair with his accountant. But the truth is more complicated than either of them realize. An old friend resurfaces to uncover a deadly secret. James, an undercover cop, works to save Julie from the dangerous lies her husband hides behind. Unaware of what's going on, Julie's heart takes a turn in a new direction. Everyone will feel the earth-shattering repercussions of Bill's infidelity.



DETAILS >

CRIME FICTION

Crime fiction provides unique psychological impacts and enables readers to become mediated witnesses through identifying with eyewitnesses to a crime. Readers speak of crime fiction as a mode of escapism to cope with other aspects of their life.[14] Crime fiction provides distraction from readers' personal lives through a strong narrative at a comfortable distance. [14] Forensic crime novels have been referred to as 'distraction therapy', proposing that crime fiction can improve mental health and be considered as a form of treatment to prevent depression.

Crime fiction, detective story, murder mystery, mystery novel, and police novel: These terms all describe narratives that centre on criminal acts and especially on the investigation, either by an amateur or a professional detective, of a serious crime, generally a murder.[1] It is usually distinguished from mainstream fiction and other genres such as historical fiction or science fiction, but the boundaries are indistinct. Crime fiction has multiple sub-genres, [2] including detective fiction (such as the whodunit), courtroom drama, hard-boiled fiction, and legal thrillers. Most crime drama focuses on crime investigation and does not feature the court room. Suspense and mystery are key elements that are nearly ubiquitous to the genre.



THE ART OF EROTICA

COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA

According to Wikipedia, Erotic literature comprises fictional and factual stories and accounts of eros – passionate, romantic, or sexual relationships – intended to arouse similar feelings in readers, in contrast to erotica, which focuses more specifically on sexual feelings. Erotic literature can take the form of novels, short stories, poetry, true-life memoirs, and sex manuals. A common feature of the genre is sexual fantasies on such themes as prostitution, orgies, sadomasochism, and many other taboo subjects and fetishes, which may or may not be expressed in explicit language. Other common elements are satire and social criticism. Much erotic literature features erotic art, illustrating the text.

Despite cultural disapproval of such material, the circulation of erotic literature was not seen as a major problem before the invention of printing, as the costs of producing individual manuscripts limited distribution to a very small group of literate readers. The invention of printing, in the 15th century, brought with it both a greater market and increasing restrictions, including censorship and legal restraints on publication on the grounds of obscenity. Because of this, much of the production of this type of material became clandestine.



WHEN GREED ENTICES MURDER

ASHBY FROST

DUSTY ROSE

THRILLER NOVEL

TASTE OF THE STORY

Hiding in her room, hoping that the yelling and screaming do not make it within her walls again, Dusty sits on her mattress on the floor with her arms around her legs, rocking back and forth while humming. Dusty Rose is a 15-year-old girl that is living with her mother and step-father.

She is no stranger to abuse. Her step-father also has no boundaries of the abuse he inflicts on Dusty. Her father has never been in her life; she has no idea who he is. Her mother, Laura, refuses to tell Dusty who her birth father is or if she knows where he lives. Laura swears that he is a no-good piece of shit and that Dusty is better off not knowing him.

Dusty has plans on leaving this life and moving away as far away from her mother and her mother's husband as she possibly can. She knows that she has to plan her escape quietly. Dusty cannot tell anyone what her intentions are in fear that her mother will find out before she gets a chance to leave.

Dusty works after school as a waitress. Her step-father orders Dusty to give him all of her tips and her paycheck. But for the past six months, she has been keeping money out of her tips. She cannot get away with that on her paycheck because he demands to see what she has made to make sure that he gets every single red cent. Dusty has managed to save around fifteen hundred dollars. She has the money hidden in a tin can down by the creek buried within dirt and rocks. She puts a unique rock over the top so she knows Dusty can find the money when she needs it.

The day she decides to leave, the rain is pouring down as Dusty is walking home from work. She hates the idea that she has to give that sorry bastard her hard-earned money so he can drink it away. Dusty takes a deep breath before walking inside the house. She quietly opens the door in hopes that her step-dad Bully's passed out and she will be able to grab her bag that she has packed and can sneak back out the door and finally be on her way to living her own life.

Dusty sees Bully is sleeping on the couch. Her heart starts pounding as she quietly closes the door. She turns and takes a step. The floor lets out a loud creak. Shit! She thinks to herself. Bully moves his arms then settles again. Dusty waits for the right time to sneak past him. She starts walking past him; once making it to the hallway, her heart is pounding in her throat and ears so loudly. She would not hear him if she needed to at this point. Making it to her door, she pushes it open. She walks into the room without shutting the door. Checking her watch to see how much time she has before her mother gets home from her drinking binge at the local bar, Dusty sits and listens for a few minutes. After not hearing anything from Bully, she decides that it's now or never!

Dusty puts on a hooded sweatshirt over her wet clothes from work. She decides to take off her tennis shoes and put her boots on instead. Once all is done, Dusty listens again for Bully or her mother, and again nothing. She grabs the backpack that she packed. She then stuffs her last paycheck from the diner in her jeans' front pocket, takes a deep breath, and heads for the living room. Dusty sees that Bully is still on the couch sleeping. She starts to walk past him, her heart pounding once again. Then in a faint deep voice, she hears the words she dreaded to hear. "Where in the fuck are you going, girl?" Trembling, Dusty turned around and said, "I'm going back to work. I took another shift." Bully sits up on the couch and says, "Well, where the hell's my paycheck?" Dusty says, "I haven't gotten it yet. Payroll wasn't ready when I got off of work, so I told them I would pick it up tonight after I get off."

Bully looked at her, then looked at the floor. Slowly he is getting off the couch. Bully walked toward Dusty. Once reaching her, she could smell his stink breath and how he reeked of stale sex and alcohol. He grabbed her by the throat, then got in her face and says in an evil voice, "You better not be lying to me, you little bitch!" Tears welled up in Dusty's eyes. Her voice shaken with fear, she says to him, "I'm not. You will have your money tonight." He then says, "What the hell are you doing with this backpack?" Dusty says, "It is pouring rain, and I need dry clothes once I get to work, or they will send me home." Bully just stared at her and kept holding her by the throat. Dusty says to him, "I have some money for you right now, Bully if you want it." He let go of her and stepped back for a moment; then Dusty reached into her sweatshirt pocket where she put the money she had separated from her other money just in case this had happened. She handed him a wad of cash, then tells him that there were forty dollars there. That that was all, she had made in tips earlier that day. Looking at the money in his hand, he looked at Dusty and smiled the most sinister smile. The next thing Dusty knew, she is on the floor, and her mouth is full of blood.

Bully started yelling for her to get her ass up off the floor. Dusty struggled to collect herself and get up as he had demanded. Once she is standing again, he hit her again. Once again, Dusty is lying on the floor, spitting blood. She knew not to let him see her cry because if she shows weakness, then his beating will be worse than ever. "Get Up!" He yelled again. Dusty once again got up off the floor. Expecting to be knocked down again, she flinched as he came close to her. He grabbed her by her hair and pulled her into his face. Using his other hand, he started wiping her blood off of her mouth. He then kissed her and held her tightly into him, where she could not get free. The taste of his mouth made her sick to her stomach. She could feel her vomit coming up in her throat. Finally, he let go of her, then says, there is more where that came from tonight when you

get home. He opened the door, pushing her outside so hard that she fell down the stairs off of the porch. He threw her bag to her and hit her in the face with it, bloodying her nose.

Dusty picked up the bag and started to walk away from the house that she hoped she would never have to enter again. Using her sleeve to soak up the blood from her nose, she walked to the corner store. She used the bathroom to clean all the blood off of her face, then cashed her check and used the phone to call her work. Her friend Holly was working, and Dusty needed Holly to cover for her long enough for Dusty to get her money from the creek and catch the bus. Holly knew what kind of life Dusty lives, so when Dusty finally confided in her about leaving, Holly was more than happy to help. Holly is older than Dusty by about five years. Dusty told Holly if she can pay her back for the help, she definitely will. Holly told her not to worry about it.

Dusty got her money from the creek, but she is not out of the woods yet. She still has to get out of town without anyone that knows her seeing her and telling her family that she is not at work. Dusty made it to the bus station, which is on the edge of town about a half-mile away. Dusty took every direction but the direct route to get to the bus, trying to convince herself that no one had seen her. Once at the bus station, she buys a ticket under a fake name and age. The gentleman working has no idea who she is and that she is only fifteen years old and on the run. Dusty is still not out of the woods yet. The bus does not leave for about a half-hour. The man at the counter told Dusty that she could sit on the bus if she'd like to. She agreed. Dusty walked onto the bus to find that there are a few other people on the bus. Not anyone she knows, though; she walked to the back of the bus and got an aisle seat. Dusty did not want to be seen from the window. She planned to get a window seat once she is far away from this hell hole that her mother has forced her to live in for so long. The driver finally entered the bus and announced that the bus will be leaving in five minutes and that everyone needs to be seated and ready to get on the road. Once the bus started moving, Dusty's heart began to pound like crazy. Is her fear going to consume her, and she decides to have the bus driver let her off the bus? Or is she going to ride out the fear and get to her destination in Northern California and start her new life? The bus finally made it to the interstate, and Dusty said to herself, no turning back now. You deserve your own life, and you deserve to live a peaceful existence without her screwed-up family. A smile finally came over her face, and she leaned back in the seat, took a deep breath, and relaxed. Dusty swore to herself that never again would she step foot in the state of Iowa once she crossed that state line.

By the time Dusty reached California, she is exhausted; her fear of her step-dad set aside, now a new fear has set in. Where is she going to stay? Where is Dusty going to go? Dusty didn't think that far ahead when she bought the ticket.

The town is tiny and has trees everywhere. Dusty grabbed her backpack and her bag of food that she has bought on her trip and exited the bus. She and one other girl got off the bus. There is a bench alongside the building. Dusty decided to sit for a few minutes and collect her thoughts. The other girl came and sat next to her.

"Hi! My name is Kendall." She then reached out her hand towards Dusty.

Dusty looked at her a moment then said, "Hi! I'm Dusty." "So, Dusty, what's your story? Where'd you get those bruises?"

Dusty automatically put her hand over her face. Kendall said, "You don't have to hide them on my account. She then stood up and raised her shirt for Dusty to see that she too is covered in bruises.

"Oh my, God!" Dusty gasped! "Who did that to you?" Kendall looked away, then grabbed herself a cigarette lit it, took a long drag, then said, "My dad. What about you? My fucked up step-dad." Dusty asked Kendall, "so are you from here?"

"Hell No!" Kendall said to her. "I'm from Ohio. Do you have anywhere to go or know anyone here, Dusty?" Kendall asked.

"Nope," Dusty said. "Me neither," Kendall replied. "Now what?" Kendall asks. Dusty said, "Well, we need to find a place to stay for the night, and then we will find better housing tomorrow," Kendall agreed. Kendall did not tell Dusty that she is an 18-year old that is running from her pimp and not her father. Kendall had run away from home because she did not like the rules or her new step-mother after her mother had died when she was 14 years old and has been on the streets ever since.

Kendall is an average looking girl with short dark hair, an olive complexion, and dark eyes. Kendall bounces from state to state and pimp to pimp. She is from California, though; in fact, her father and step-mother live in the next town over.

Kendall would not tell Dusty this little secret. "How long have you been on the streets, Dusty?" "Only a few days; well, since I've been on the bus. So I guess tonight would be my first night."

"Oh!" Kendall says. Kendall looks at how sweet and innocent looking Dusty is with her fair skin, long dark hair, full lips, and blue, green eyes. Dusty is about 5'1 with a curvy body and big breasts. To Kendall, she doesn't seem like she could take care of herself if she needed to.

The girls walked around town and then found an old motel run down with a vacancy sign. The girls went inside and asked how much a room was. Dusty gave a fake name and paid thirty bucks for the room. When Kendall saw the cash roll that Dusty has with her, Kendall knew she has to stick with Dusty to survive. They went to their room and cleaned up. Dusty checked out her cuts and bruises in the mirror. She promised herself she would never let another man lay a hand on her again as long as she lives. While Dusty is in the bathroom, she separated her money so that she did not have it all in one spot, and Dusty would always keep the majority on her. Dusty did not mind helping her new friend but not knowing her means, not trusting her, and she is not about to put herself in the situation of not having any money. When Dusty left the bathroom, she saw Kendall lying on the bed in her bra and panties; covered in bruises. Dusty put her bag down on the floor next to the T.V. stand then sat on the bed next to Kendall. Dusty told Kendall that she would find a job the next day and pay for two more days at the motel, giving her time to find something better, maybe. Dusty looked at Kendall and said, "If you

want, we can stick together and try to conquer what we have endured. We can find jobs and maybe rent a place." Kendall told her that that sounded good but that Kendall has no clothes other than the ones she has on, and they have bloodstains on them. Dusty told her, "I will loan you some of mine for tomorrow, then we will go to a thrift store and get some more clothes and better shoes for working."

Kendall asks, "What kind of job you want to get, Dusty?" "Well, I have been waitressing for the past two years, so I thought I better stick to something I know. What can you do, Kendall?" "Well..." Kendall hesitates and says, "I'm a prostitute." Dusty looked at her and said, "Well, you're not one anymore; we are in a new town, and we are starting new lives." Kendall started crying and then told Dusty what had happened to her and how she got her bruises. Kendall's story made Dusty's story look like a walk in the park.

The next morning the two girls' got up, got ready in clean clothes, and went job hunting. Downtown they had found an old mom and pop diner. The girls walked in and sat down. An older lady came to their table and gave them menus. Dusty asked the woman, "Do you need any waitresses?" The woman looked both girls up and down then she said she would be right back. They watched the woman go into the back, and then after a few minutes, she comes back out with an older man. They walked up to the girls, and the older man says, "So you two are looking for work, huh?" "Yep!" Dusty says.

"Do you have waitress experience?" He asks them.

"I have two years of waitressing experience," Dusty says.

The man looks at Kendall, and she shook her head no.

"Can you start in the morning Dusty as a waitress?"

And Kendall, I can start you as a busser.

"Yes, sir!" Dusty tells him. "Do you girls have a place to stay?"

"Yes, we are staying at the circle T Motel right now," Kendall tells him.

The woman gasps and then says, "not tonight, you won't be; that is a terrible place to stay. We have a one-bedroom cabin with a loft that you are welcome to have as part of your pay.

Kendall says, "Well, we don't have any furniture or anything."

"That's okay says the woman. It's furnished."

Dusty asks, "Where is the cabin?"

"Oh honey, it's on our farm about twenty miles from town."

"Then Kendall tells Dusty, "We will have to stay at the motel because we have no car to get back and forth."

Then the man points at Dusty then says, "You got fifty bucks?"

Dusty says, "Yes."

"Then, I got a truck. I will sell it to you." He reaches his hand out to her and says, "Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, sir, we do!"

Dusty tells him, then shakes his hand.

Then the woman says, "Well, I'm Lucille, and this is Henry. Our last name is Moore, and we own this diner."

Lucille tells the girls that they can stop and pick up their belongings from the motel room on their way out to the farm later that afternoon. The girls told them all they have are a couple of backpacks, that they would get them and meet them back at the diner at closing time. Dusty asks if there is a thrift store to get some things, and Lucille told them to up the street about three blocks on the right.

Dusty is so excited about what has taken place that she is talking Kendall's ears off about it. Dusty bought the girls some clothes and shoes for working at the diner. At about five-thirty, they met Lucille and Henry and headed for the farm. Once they reached the farm, Lucille said that dinner would be in an hour; they are to wash up and come to the main house for dinner. Lucille headed for home.

Henry told the girls to follow him to the cabin. It is nice. Henry informed them that the couch folds out into a bed to sleep there and one in the bedroom or a twin bed in the loft. He then told Dusty, "I will get your pick-up truck running after dinner, and you can follow me to town tomorrow."

Dusty said, "Okay, Henry, but I don't have a license."

"That's okay," he said. "My son is the Sheriff; I will call him and explain the situation."

"Okay," Dusty said. Henry left and headed for the house.

The next morning Dusty got up and got ready for her breakfast – lunch shift at the diner. Kendall is still sleeping on the couch. "Kendall, are you going to work today?" Dusty asks. Kendall told Dusty Kendall is feeling sick and thought she would stay home that day to rest and let her bruises heal. Kendall asked if Dusty will tell Lucille and Henry for her. Dusty agreed. Dusty drove her new truck to work, which is a black 1979 Ford four-wheel drive. It is in excellent condition. Henry told her that he had had the truck since he bought it new and has only used it for driving in the winter to the diner and on the occasional trip to the auction. Dusty is so thankful for everything that the Moore's are doing for her and Kendall.

After a long day of work at the diner, Dusty headed back to the farm to check on Kendall, unaware of what she is about to find out about her new friend. Dusty went into the cabin only to find that Kendall is not there. Dusty went and looked around the farm for her in the barns and the main house. There is no Kendall anywhere. Dusty had a bad feeling come over her, and she ran to the cabin and checked her bag and her hiding spots for her money. Most all the money is gone. Out of nearly two thousand dollars, all Dusty has left is about five hundred dollars that she had hidden in her pick-up the night before. Dusty is furious Kendall hustled her and stole all of her money after all Dusty had done for her.

The next four years of Dusty's life has just flown by quickly. She continued to work for the Moore's and live in their cabin. They had taken her in as one of their own. The Moore's are the only family that Dusty ever had, and she thanked God for them every day. Over the past four years, Dusty had never seen or heard from her mother or step-dad until one morning when she is at work at the diner when her mother walked in. Dusty could not believe her eyes or how she had found her.

When Dusty was underage, the Moore's let her work under the table, but once she turned eighteen, they put her on the books. Unknown to Dusty, her mother, Laura, uses her personal information to get credit cards and bank loans in Dusty's name. Once Dusty got on the books at the diner, her mother knew where to find her.

Laura walked up to Dusty and said, "Aren't you going to give your momma a hug?"

Dusty started to tremble because she never thought she would see that part of her life again in a million years. "No!" She told her. "Laura," said Dusty, "you have not seen me since you were fifteen years old. You just took off, and no one knew where you were for years. All the worry I went through, and I don't deserve a hug?"

"No!" Dusty told her again. "I want you to leave," Dusty told her, "before your husband comes in here thinking he is going to push me around again; I will have to shoot him!" Dusty tells her mom. "Oh Dusty, I'm not with that son of a bitch anymore. I got tired of him spending all of my money." "I don't care about your situation or the reason you are here. I want you out of this diner and out of this town, or I'm going to call the sheriff and have you arrested for harassing me."

Laura laughed at her and said, "You wouldn't dare." "Try me," Dusty told her in a stern voice. Overhearing the conversation between the two, Lucille had called her son without Dusty knowing. Suddenly, the diner's door came open, and there was Trevor, Lucille's grandson, the deputy Sheriff. Trevor walked up to Dusty and said, "Is there a problem here, Dusty?" "No, Trev, she is just leaving." Laura looked at Dusty and said, "You remember I'm your mother, and you cannot treat me this way."

Laura went to turn to leave when Trevor asked her where she is staying; she said, "The motel up the street, but she would be leaving town in the morning."

After Laura walked out, Dusty looked at Trevor and said, "Thanks." Trevor sat down for lunch. Trevor loved Dusty for a couple of years but has not led on about how he feels for her. Dusty came to the table to bring his food and said, "So what can I do to thank you for running her out of here?" Trevor laughed then said, "Cook me dinner." Dusty felt butterflies strong because she has secretly loved Trevor for quite a while. Dusty smiles at him, then said, "Okay, Friday night, I will cook you dinner at my place." "What time?" Trevor asked. "Be there by 7:00."

"I don't know if I can because I get off work at 6:00, and I won't be able to shower and get out to the farm by 7:00." Dusty looked at him real flirty and said, "Then shower at my house, so you're not late for dinner." Trevor smiled back at her and said, "Well, maybe I'll just bring an overnight bag." Dusty turns and looks at him, then says, "Why you won't need anything to sleep in; and then she smiles, turns, and walks away."

Dusty is so nervous because she has never said anything like that to him before, although she has loved him for years. Dusty has never really been with anyone, not anyone that she loved anyway. Trevor left her a large tip on the table and gave her a sweet smile on his way out the door, telling her that he'd see her for dinner on Friday. Dusty smiled and waved goodbye to him because her butterflies were so bad that she felt she might vomit. The rest of the evening, the diner filled with regulars for pie and coffee; the night seemed to drag on forever. Thursday night, Dusty could not sleep at all, anticipating her date with Trevor.

When Dusty got to the diner that morning for work, Lucille was making fresh homemade pies. Dusty heard Lucille hollering for her, so Dusty went into the kitchen to see what Lucille needed. "Dusty, I hear you have a dinner date tonight with my grandson." "Yeah, that's the rumor," Dusty replied. "Dusty, I don't want you to be here all day. I want you to leave at 1 pm instead of 4 pm." Lucille told her. "Oh no, Lucille, I don't need to take off of work for a dinner date," Dusty tells her. "Yes! Dusty, you will because I have watched the two of you kids beating around the bush over the past couple of years about the way you feel for each other. I want you to take off early today so that you can have everything ready the way you want it; besides, if Trevor is anything like his grandfather, then honey, you will need the rest!" Lucille laughs and continues to make her pies. Dusty decided that she would take Lucille up on her offer and just stay until after lunch rush is over. Trevor came in during lunch; he told Dusty when she has a chance that he has a certified letter for her from an attorney. Dusty wasn't sure why an attorney would be contacting her. She finished her tables then went to Trevor's table, and he told her to sit for a minute; when she did, he handed her the papers that he had to serve to her. Dusty glanced over the documents, not comprehending what they were saying; she had to give an order at a table, so she told Trevor that she'd be right back. Lucille has gone to the table, and Trevor told Lucille about the papers. Lucille went over to Dusty and said that she needs to read those papers, that they are significant, and that Lucille will take over Dusty's tables. Dusty sat back down and started reading the court papers. All of a sudden, she let out a loud, "Holy Shit!" Everyone turns and looks at her. Dusty starts laughing uncontrollably. Then looks at Trevor and asks, "Is this a joke?" Trevor tells her, "No, Dusty. It's not; it's legitimate." Dusty sits quietly for a couple of minutes, thinking about the shitty life she had when she was younger and how hard Dusty has been working and supporting herself over the last four years. Now she gets court papers telling her that she has not only inherited a cutting horse ranch in Colorado; she has also inherited over 50 million dollars! The biggest shocker of it all is that it is from her birth father, someone she has never even met.

Dusty left the papers on the table and then went outside. After giving her a few minutes, Trevor went out to check on her. Dusty is crying. Trevor grabbed Dusty into his arms and held her while she cried. Then Dusty says, "If I was so important to him that he would leave this kind of money to me, then why was I not important enough to him to help me when I was young and be a part of my life?"

"I don't know," Trevor says to her.

"Did I get this stuff because he died?" Dusty asked.

"Yes," Trevor answered.

Dusty started crying again.

Then Trevor says, "Dusty, this is your chance for a great life. You need to take the opportunity to live the life you deserve; forget about all the bad that has happened to you before now."

Dusty is quiet for a moment, then asks Trevor, "Does this mean that things will change with us?"

"No, Dusty. Not at all. I don't care that you got an inheritance. I liked you before I ever knew about any of this. Honestly, Dusty, I have been falling for you for a couple of years; I just never said anything because I didn't know how you felt."

Dusty then looked up at Trevor and said Trevor, "I felt the same for you. I just didn't think you would want me because I'm so much younger than you are."

Trevor looked at Dusty, then pulled her into him and kissed her so passionately that it made Dusty's butterflies stir. Suddenly they heard clapping and hollering coming from inside the diner, as they turned and looked they saw everyone in the window watching them. They both start laughing too. They went back inside the restaurant; Lucille says to them, "It's about time you two kiss. I've only been waiting for the last two years or better." Lucille grabs the papers off the table and then tells Dusty, "Get out of this old diner, go live your life! Dusty hugged Lucille then she and Trevor left together.

Three months later...

Against Trevor's advice, Dusty has decided to contact her mother. Dusty felt that she had lost one parent that she never even knew, so maybe Dusty should make amends with the one parent Dusty still has, no matter how rotten she made Dusty's life. Dusty figured that she is an adult now and no longer lived under her mother's roof, so nothing wrong could happen, and she would call the shots.

Dusty will be leaving for Colorado a few weeks before Trevor will head there to be with her. Trevor has given his two-week notice to the sheriff's office due to his plans to relocate with Dusty to her new ranch. Dusty decided to drive to Colorado in her new pick-up. She will be leaving in the morning. Trevor has some concern with letting her go by herself, especially knowing that she plans on picking her mother up in Boise, ID, on the way there. Trevor has a right to his concern.

Dusty is standing in the kitchen, getting a glass of water when she felt arms around her and a hand up her tank top. Dusty stood there and enjoyed what is taking place, anticipating the kisses on the neck that soon followed like clockwork. For the first time in Dusty's life, she experiences feeling love for someone and them loving her in return. She feels completely safe with Trevor. Turning to face him, she tells him, "I will miss you, babe." "I will miss you too," Trevor tells her, then picks her up and carries her into the living room. He lays her down in front of the fire that he built while she was in the shower. He starts kissing her legs and thighs until he finds his way to her sweet spot that he loves. Dusty lays back and enjoys what she has learned to love. Trevor started making love to her, both letting out a gasp. Kissing each other and caressing her, Trevor is in heaven. Dusty just smiled with pleasure while hearing him moan so loud; she knew she satisfied him! They laid on the floor in front of the fire, wrapped up in a blanket holding each other. They talk about what they want out of life and their relationship. Trevor gets up and tells Dusty he will be right back. He grabbed his jeans and put them on and then put on his boots. Dusty, worried, wondering why he is suddenly getting dressed and leaving, asks, is everything okay, Trev? He just smiles and tells her that he will be right back. Dusty laid back down and watched the fire and the flames dance and change frequently; she thought that her life would be changing again just like the flames are moving and changing directions. The front door on the cabin came open Trevor came back inside with the biggest smile on his face. Dusty smiles back at him and is curious why he is so happy

Trevor walks to where Dusty is sitting with the blanket wrapped around her naked sexy body in front of the warm fire. He gets down on his knee. Dusty looks at him; he grabs her hand and looks her in the eyes, "Dusty, I am in love with you, and I have been for the past few years. You mean the world to me; I want to know if you will marry me?" Dusty is staring at him and then looks as he opens this little black box and sees the most beautiful white gold ring and diamond she has ever seen. "She looks at him, she has tears rolling down her cheeks; "Yes, I will marry you, Trev!" "I have been in love with you since I was sixteen years old. "Trevor took the ring out of the box and placed it on her finger. He then put his hand behind her head, pulling her in for a kiss. He tells her that he had bought the ring two years before and that he has had it in the glove box of his truck, waiting for the perfect time to ask her to marry him. Dusty put her arms around his neck and hugged him, and finally, she feels like she is finally coming home. No horse ranch or millions could make her feel this way, and she'd choose him over her inheritance.

"We need to set a date. Dusty says." "I already did. Trevor replies." Did you? Dusty asks in a surprised tone." Yes, and Grandma Lucille has already helped me take care of everything, but you have to postpone your trip to Colorado for a few days. Dusty is impressed with his secret wedding plans and agrees to wait for her journey and will call her mother in the morning so that she knows I will pick her up next week instead. "Next week? Trevor asks curiously." "Of course, you didn't think you are getting out of a honeymoon, did you? Dusty laughs." Trevor smiles and says, Heck, the honeymoon is the only reason I'm marrying you, Babe!" Trevor gives her a Cheshire grin to see her reaction. "Oh? It is, is it?" Dusty says, laughing. "Yep! that's right, it's all about the honeymoon, baby!" Trevor tells her while trying to keep a straight face. Dusty pushes him over backward, crawls her

naked body on top of him, giving him a passionate kiss. Dusty gives him a few kisses on his neck, and when she feels that she has accomplished getting his undivided attention, she gets up and tells him, good night, Trev, see you tomorrow! He gets up and sees her heading for the bedroom and chases her down; she laughs; he picks her up, carries her into the room, then shuts the door. Their laughter filled the little cabin.

The next morning Dusty gets up and gets herself ready to go to the small dress shop in town for a wedding dress that the owner Rachel told her about over the phone; it's simple and sexy, that is what she wants. As she left the house, she got a call from Trevor; he asked her to meet him up at the barn; Dusty agreed and said she'd be there shortly. She drove her truck to the old rustic Dutch-style barn, a mixture of faded brown and gray Barn-wood with an old dark tin roof. The barn is in pretty good shape for as old as it is with its lifetime of history. The big door on the front of the barn is open, and she sees Trevor walking towards her with a big smile on his face. He wraps her up in his arms and kisses her, then tells her to follow him. Dusty follows him inside the barn; she is amazed at how beautiful everything looks. He has clear light bulbs on strands hanging from the rafters giving the barn a romantic feel. Trevor showed her Trevor built her an archway out of barn wood in a square shape with small silver crosses in each arch's corner. He has barn wood benches he made for their guests to sit on and watch them get married. He also cleaned out the other side of the big barn room for a dance floor for their first dance. Dusty soaks joy into her soul while glancing over the barn at all the work Trevor accomplished for her, so her wedding day is unforgettable.

Trevor walks towards Dusty and says, I picked to marry you in this barn because my grandparents married in this barn over 50 years ago; they are still very much in love today. They have built themselves a family and a beautiful life all of these years. Dusty, I want to create an eternity like that with you; I want to be in love with you 50 years from now and know that I am home with you and only you. Dusty reached up and kissed this handsome man that she is marrying the next day; she put her hands on each side of his face and says, I do; I want more than anything to build a life with you that is a love affair that never ends. I want to be your best friend, wife, and mother to your children; I am ready to marry you tomorrow.

Trevor told her the flower shop is delivering sunflowers for the wedding in the morning. "She smiled and said, you remembered?" "Yes, they are your favorite. He answers." "What about the cake she asked?" "My Grandma Lucille took care of that. He answered." Okay, she said. He wrapped her back up in his arms and asked, "Are you going to get a dress?" "Yes, I am leaving for town soon and going to see what Rachel has in her dress shop for me. I called her, and she said she has something sexy and simple." Sexy?" He says with a smile. Dusty laughs and says, "You'll just have to wait and see when I show up to the wedding." You never know, I might get a potato sack from the diner and marry you in that sexy little number." She says, laughing. "Ohh...definitely sounds sexy to me, he tells her with a laugh." Dusty leaves the farm and heads for the dress shop; Rachel was right; the dress is simple yet, sexy. Trevor is going to love it! The dress is white chiffon with a sweetheart top and thin spaghetti straps; it is form-fitting showing off all of Dusty's curves with a slit up one side going partially up her thigh so she can show off her tanned pretty legs. Rachel pulled out these cute summer wedge shoes that have clear straps that sparkled. They are about 4" tall, which Dusty loves because she is short at barely over 5'; Trevor is a very good looking man standing 6'4; he has dark brown hair and the greenest eyes, a muscular chest and arms but not extreme, just enough that he looks hot in and out of his sheriff's uniform. Dusty thanked Rachel for all of her help with her dress, shoes, and jewelry. Next, she went and got French tip nails; she didn't want anything bright or extreme; she is going for simple and sexy. While Dusty is at the beauty shop with Barb, she made a makeup and hair appointment for the next morning; she didn't trust herself with doing her makeup and hair on such an important day. Dusty walked into the diner, and her customers congratulated her on her upcoming wedding, gave her hugs, and told her that she is marrying a good man, and wish her many years of love and happiness. She thanked them all and then went into the kitchen and saw that Lucille and her daughter-in-law, Trevor's mom, bake her wedding cake. When they saw her standing there, they escorted her back out into the dining area and said the cake is a surprise and she needs to wait until the wedding.

Dusty hugged them both and thanked them for all their help and for loving her as they do. "Thank you, Lacey, for all that you are doing for Trevor and me. She told Trevor's mom." "Oh, honey, you are very welcome. I couldn't have asked for a better woman for my son to fall in love with and marry; we love you, Dusty, from the first day you walked into the diner four years ago." Lacey told her in such a loving way. Dusty hugs tight around her neck, telling Lacey that she loves her too, and that she is head over heels in love with her son and that his heart is safe with her. Later than evening, Dusty hears a knock on her door and answers the door, and Trevor is standing there with two dozen yellow roses. "Oh my goodness, they are gorgeous!" Dusty exclaims. Trevor says, not nearly as gorgeous as you, but they are close." "You're sweet-talking me so you can stay the night tonight, huh?" He shoots her his sexy smile. Dusty reaches for the flowers and kisses him on the cheek, then says, "I love you, Trevor, but it's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding; I've had a lifetime of bad luck; I don't want to invite any of that kind of luck into our wedding day or marriage." "Please, tell me that you understand. She asks." "Trevor leans in and kisses her and tells her, well, we have until midnight, right?" "Yes, we sure do!" She stepped aside and let him into the cabin. Once in the house, Dusty puts the beautiful roses on her kitchen table and then walks over to Trevor and gives him a kiss thanking him again for the sweet gift. "Are you hungry?" She asked. "Sure, I can eat something; I haven't had anything since breakfast at the diner this morning." He answered. Dusty had pulled out a couple of steaks earlier that day to thaw; she seasoned them and asked Trevor if he could light the BBQ'er. He obliged and went out on the back deck. Dusty takes the steaks

out to him and then tells him that she will make them a salad and some bread rolls to go with it. After getting the food all ready for them to have dinner, Dusty walked out to the table on the back deck and made it pleasant for them. She brought a cold beer for Trevor and a glass of Merlot for her. They sat down together after the steaks are finished cooking and said a prayer, then started eating. They talked and laughed and made plans. "Dusty says, I love you, Trevor, and I just want to keep our life simple like it is right now; I don't want my inheritance to change our way of life." "I love you too, Dusty; that is the last thing I want to happen." "Let's just go out to Colorado and see what the horse ranch is, and we can decide what our plans will be from there." He tells her. "I think that is a great idea, Babe. I have been very stressed about my inheritance and seeing my mom next week." She tells him in a concerned voice. "Don't worry, he tells her. You will be just fine, and if you have an emergency, call me, and I will be right there." Trevor reached for her hand, kissed it, and smiled at her Trevor told her to cheer up because, in less than 24 hours, she will be Mrs. Trevor Moore. She smiles a big beautiful smile at him; her thoughts go to their wedding, which is a big surprise because Lacey and Lucille refuse to let her help with the cake or the decorations; they want her just to enjoy being the bride.

After dinner, Trevor helped Dusty clean up the dinner meal and the kitchen. He went and started a fire in the fireplace and dimmed the lights. Trevor sat down on the couch and thought about marrying this beautiful girl the next afternoon and how much Trevor is in love with her, but how he doesn't want her to know that her meeting with her mother is concerning to him and that he has a bad gut feeling. He can't go with her, though; he has to work. Dusty has gone and changed into her cute P.J. pants and a tank top. She came out and saw Trevor sitting on the couch, watching the fire and curled up on his lap and laid her head on his chest. "I always want it to be with way." She says. "I don't want this to change because we have that piece of paper." She tells him. "Dusty, we will always be this way; it's what love is all about, and that piece of paper has so much meaning to me because I have to live up to the man that signed that piece of paper for the rest of my life." He said. "Dusty kissed him and said, how did I get so lucky to be loved by such a good man?" I always thought I'd end up with a man like who my mom settles for because that is all I ever knew. I am so grateful that I left when I was 15 and for the opportunities that your grandparents gave to me because they led me straight to you." "Dusty, babe, you deserve a good man, and you deserve to be loved because you are so much more than who you used to be in that house with a step-dad that abused you, an alcoholic mother, and a real father that you never knew." He tells her. She wipes her tears off her face and tells him that she wants him to stay the night. They don't have to make love. He tells her that he didn't plan on going anywhere; superstition or no superstition, he is waking up to her beautiful face in the morning. Dusty smiles and stands in front of him and takes her pajama pants off, leaving her standing there in a pair of lacey purple panties, and then she took off her tank top, exposing her breasts. Trevor smiles at her, gets up off the couch, sweeps her up in his arms, and carries Dusty to the bedroom.

Morning came quickly, and Dusty jumps out of bed! Trevor! She hollers as she smacks his foot on her way out of the bedroom. He opens his eyes and looks at the time. "Holy shit! I'm late!" He says. Jumping out of bed, he put on his jeans and t-shirt, ran down the hallway to the front door, and pulls on his boots; he didn't even untuck his jeans from his boots. He ran back to the bathroom where Dusty was in the shower; he pulled the curtain back, grabbed her, and kissed her so passionately that her knees went weak. "He looks at her beautiful wet face and says, I have such a pretty girlfriend, but man, oh man, my future wife is some kind of gorgeous!" Smiling, he kisses her again. "There you go again, with all of that smooth country boy talk!" She says jokingly. The wedding starts in an hour. Dusty is ready with her hair and makeup and nails to perfection. Lacey and Lucille helped her with her dress and gave her the sunflower lilac and yellow roses bouquet they had made especially for her. Dusty has her long hair pulled up into a beautiful bun showing her pretty diamond earrings that she splurged buying that morning to match the simple diamond necklace she had bought from Rachel when she purchased her dress. Her make up is so pretty, and her smoky eye look makes her look unbelievably sexy, at least that is what she hopes her new husband will think. Dusty put her wedges on; they made her look very tall, and Lucille says, "wow! Dusty, you look stunning in that dress and those shoes; my grandson isn't going to keep his hands off of you!" "Dusty laughed and said, I sure hope not!"

Dusty is standing outside of the barn, waiting for her cue to enter. Henry is walking her down the aisle to give her away to marry his grandson, and she couldn't be happier. They hear the music start playing, and "Henry asks, are you ready, sweetheart?" "Yes, sir, I am more than ready!" Dusty is pleasantly surprised at how beautiful the barn is for the wedding and how many guests showed up for them. She looks up at Trevor, and he looks so damn handsome. He is wearing blue wranglers and boots with a white long sleeve shirt, black paisley vest, smoke grey felt cowboy hat, and a yellow rose boutonniere. When Dusty reached him, she sees he's got tears in his eyes that made her heart just pound so hard; when he cuddled her hands into his and looked at her, she had tears well up, and he reached and whispered, "I love you." Then wiped her tears away.

After the I do's and the preacher told Trevor to kiss his wife, Trevor grabbed Dusty and dipped her backward and kissed her like it may be his last, and the crowd roared in applause and laughter. The cake is a three-tier cream in color with sunflowers and lilacs, and the cake is lemon ice with raspberry filling. The decorations are beautiful Dusty thought. The beautiful archway is covered with sunflowers and ribbon. The food is a potluck style dinner, and the music is a local country singer. Dusty is so grateful for how pretty her wedding is and how much love everyone put into making this an unforgettable day. "Their first dance is to the song, Are You With Me? which is perfect for them. Trevor held her so close to him and bent down and kissed her softly and says, I will love you just like we are right now, for the rest of my life." "Dusty laid her head on his chest, and for the first time in her life, she knows that she is finally home; he is her home." No fighting, no beatings, no hiding, no crying, and no more running. She is at home. Trevor and Dusty thanked all of their family and friends for coming and sharing their special day with them. Trevor helped Dusty up into his truck, and then he got in on the driver's side and closed the door. He tells her that he has a honeymoon surprise for her. "Oh, she says with a laugh, the infamous honeymoon." "He laughs and says, hell; yes, I've been waiting for this day all week!" He grabs her hand, kissing it, and then smiles at her and tells her that he loves her dress; she took his breath away when Trevor saw

her walking down the aisle, and that is why he lost it tears came. "I am one lucky man, Dusty Moore!" He tells her. "She says, I love the sound of that!"

Trevor drives them up the coast to a quaint little town on the beach, where he made reservations for them for a couple of days. He knows that Dusty loves simple and isn't into extravagant places or material things, so he incorporated that into this honeymoon surprise. They drove out to this beautiful beach, and a few small cute beach houses are sitting several feet from each other facing the ocean. Dusty is pleasantly surprised at the thought put into this honeymoon for them and that he knew what she would love. They got out of the truck, and Trevor grabbed their bags, and they headed to the beach house that he reserved for them, and it is beautiful; it's a bluish color. Almost a seafoam blue with white trim and a cute white covered front porch with furniture. They walked up onto the porch, and Trevor sat the bags down to enter the key code to unlock the door. He hears a beep, and the door unlocks; he opens the door. He turns around, gives Dusty a big smile, sweeps her right off her feet, and carries her into the beach house. She is laughing the entire way. He sets her down inside, kisses her, and tells her that he hopes that she loves the house and the honeymoon he has planned for her. "Dusty says, this is perfect! I couldn't have dreamt of anything better than this; thank you, honey!" She kissed him and then turned to check out the house while he went onto the porch and grabbed their bags. Sitting next to the bed is a bottle of champagne on ice with glasses and a bucket of chilled strawberries with a note that read, "I love you, my sexy wife, Trevor." She held the letter to her heart. Trevor watched her and then walked into the room, wrapped her up in his arms, and kissed her cheek. "Dusty says, this is wonderful, thanks, babe." "You're welcome, he tells her."

"Babe, we have dinner reservations. Do you want to change or wear that sexy dress and make me fight all of the men off of you? He says jokingly." "She replies, I want you to fight for my honor." Then let out a silly laugh. He just shook his head because he knows that she is just as quick-witted and funny as Trevor is, and he loves that about her. "Alright then, the sexy wedding dress wins!" He tells her while checking out how good she is looking in her dress. They left the beach house and headed to a quiet Mexican restaurant in town. The place is very romantic, with only a few other customers having dinner. Trevor tells the woman at the counter that they have reservations. She grabbed the menus and motioned them to follow her to a private booth in the restaurant's back with candles lit and the lights are dim. On their way to their table, a sweet older woman stops Dusty to tell her how stunning Dusty looks in her dress and that she likes that Dusty picked a dress that enhanced her beauty instead of the beauty of the dress. She and her husband congratulated them on their wedding. Dusty told her, thank you for the beautiful compliment that she genuinely appreciated. Dusty and Trevor sat down at their table across from each other, and Trevor grabbed her hand and just stared at his beautiful wife; his tears started to well up in his eyes again, and he wiped them away. "What's the matter, babe?" Dusty asks him.

"I just never thought this day was ever going to happen. I wanted it to happen, but never thought you'd choose me. I didn't know that you loved me all of this time too. He tells her in a choked up sincere voice."

"Trevor, I have dreamt of this day since I was 16, and now today, I am Mrs. Moore, and you know what, that is enough for me. I don't need any fancy inheritance or horse ranch. I just need you. I love you with every breathe that I take, and it brought me to this day with you right now at this very moment, and I wouldn't change that, ever."

She says in such a loving way that he feels each word that comes across her lips.

Their dinner was terrific, and so were the margarita's, Dusty thought. After they got back to the beach house, she asked him if he'd like to walk on the beach and watch the sunset with their toes in the sand? That sounds good to me, he told her. They kept on their wedding attire and grabbed a blanket, and started their walk on the beach. Once they got down quite a ways from the other houses, they unfolded the blanket halfway and sat down. The sun is getting lower, and the sky starts to change colors and reflect off the ocean. Dusty suddenly gets up and takes off, running towards the tide. Trevor follows and catches her as she gets into the water and starts kicking water at him with her bare feet. He grabbed a hold of her from behind and started swinging her around and laughing with her. He put her down, and they started walking in the water a little ways from where they left their blanket. The sky is getting more glorious in color by the moment. They stopped and kissed while the waves hit their feet. Dusty turned and looked as the sun was hitting the water and asked, "Trevor, have you ever seen anything this breathtakingly beautiful?" "He looked at her and said yes, I have, and I will see this beauty every day for the rest of my life." She turned and looked at him and kissed him. They went back to the blanket and sat down, putting their toes in the sand and holding hands while they watched the sunset on the best day of their lives.

The following week after their honeymoon ended, Dusty got on the road. She promised that she would call Trevor once she got to Boise and picked up her mother so that he knew everything was alright. Trevor has this strange feeling in his stomach about the mother. He does not trust her, especially after the first time he met her. Once reaching Boise, she gets to the hotel that her mother is staying at, and Dusty takes a deep breath and then heads into the lobby, hoping that this is the right decision. Well, it's too late now, she tells herself after opening the lobby door. The gal at the counter asked to help her. Dusty gave her mother's name and the woman to call her mother's room to inform her that she is waiting for her in the lobby. The woman at the front desk told her that her mother said that she would be right down. Dusty's conscience is telling her that it is not too late to get up and walk out. Dusty sat there for a couple more minutes waiting, and she just has this awful feeling come over her. She decided to step out and leave. As Dusty reached her truck, she heard someone hollering for her. Dusty turned around, and there are her mother and some man. Dusty looked at her mother and then said, "I told you that I am only picking you up and no one else." Laura says, "I know Dusty, but he needs a ride back to the bar where he left his car." The man is kind of young-looking with tattoos, a short haircut, with a goatee. He is about 6'2 or so.

"Dusty, please," her mother begged. "Oh! Alright," Dusty says. They all got into the truck, and Dusty says, "I need to know where you are going." So the man told her to start leaving the parking lot and head toward the freeway entrance. Dusty stopped the truck, "You are not coming with us to Colorado! I don't care what my mother has told you!" Dusty said in a stern voice. The man said, "I know.

You have to cross the freeway to get to my car." Dusty still felt uneasy, and her stomach is in knots, knowing she has done the wrong thing by having her mother near her. Dusty pulled out onto the road and headed to cross the freeway when her mother let out a booming laugh. "What is so funny," Dusty asked her.

"Oh! Dusty, my dear, you are so gullible. Did you think that Johnny isn't going to come with us?" Dusty tried to stop the truck from making them get out, and then Johnny put a gun to Dusty's head and told her to drive until he tells her to stop. Dusty turned onto the freeway. "Where are we going?" she asked them.

"We are going to your ranch," Laura told her.

"But you're not."

Johnny said as he started laughing,

"What do you mean I'm not?" Dusty asked.

"Mom, what is going on!" Dusty demanded.

"You will know soon enough," Laura told her.

"So I take it. You had this planned all along, right?" Dusty asked.

Laura looked at her, then said, "Did you think that you are going to get all of that money, and I was going to get nothing?"

Dusty then said, "I'm here so I can help you, mom!"

"Dusty, that just isn't enough because I want it all, not just the measly little amount that you will give me while I watch you and your new beau live the luxurious life that I want!"

"Laura, that new beau is now my husband, and he is a Deputy Sheriff, so you better think this through a bit more! Dusty tells her.

"You married him? You're dumber than I thought, you little brat! It doesn't matter that inheritance is mine whether he is a cop or not!" Laura says in a sarcastic, hateful tone.

"That is what this is all about, is the damn money!" Dusty screamed at her.

Laura slapped Dusty across the face then told her, "I am your mother; you will not scream at me, you little bitch!" Dusty hasn't been struck since she was 15 years old when she got away from her step-father, and now she is fuming! As they approached an exit, Johnny told Dusty to take the exit and not try anything stupid. Dusty takes the exit, looking for a place to pull into and jump out of the truck or finding a police officer for help. There is nothing there. Deep down, Dusty knows what their intentions are, and she is scared to death. Dusty starts thinking of Trevor and how much she loves him and how hurt he will be over losing her and how she wished she had listened to him. Dusty has now put herself in survival mode. If they try to kill her, mother or no mother, she will return the favor.

Johnny has her turn down this long winding road. The road seemed to go on forever until a dirt parking area came up on the right side. Johnny told Dusty to turn into the parking area and turn off the truck. Dusty's heart is pounding so hard right now because now is when she will have to fight for her life.

Dusty turned off the truck, and when she did, Laura reached over and grabbed the keys from the ignition. Dusty has one spare key in her pocket because Trevor was worried she may get locked out and wouldn't have a way to get back into the truck. All three of them got out of the truck. Johnny is looking around to make sure he doesn't see anyone there before pushing Dusty toward the trailhead. Laura is right behind them after using the keyless entry to lock the truck. Then Laura tells Johnny that she has locked the truck; that Dusty has no way to get back inside the truck because Laura has the keys.

Johnny started pushing Dusty more and more until he finally pushed her toward the ground; suddenly, he is on top of her trying to get her jeans off with no luck; he is becoming outraged and then grabbed hold of her shirt, tearing it partially off of her. Dusty is struggling to try to get away from him. He then hit her in the face with his fist. Pain consumed Dusty's eye socket, and she could feel the blood running down her cheek into her hair. Dusty decided it is time to fight back and to fight as she has never fought before; she is no longer that frightened teen girl; she is a strong woman. She started hitting and kicking Johnny. Then Laura grabbed Dusty's feet; and sat on them so Dusty could no longer kick at them. Johnny grabs Dusty's bra and tries to rip it off her, but the bra clasp won't break; the bra is just digging into Dusty's skin. The pain is awful, but Dusty will not cry! Johnny is getting mad at the bra and wanting to get it off of her that he laid the gun down on the ground. Dusty sees the gun lying there; suddenly, she grabs the gun and puts the gun to Johnny's chest as he is sitting on top of her; she pulls the trigger. The look on his face is pure shock. Then she put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger again! Dusty screams, "Get off of me, you son of a bitch!" She pushed him off of her and pointed the gun at her mother. Laura is in shock that Dusty has the gun. "Honey, we are just playing with you," Laura said in a pleading voice.

"Playing with me?!" Dusty screamed at her. "Now that I have the gun, you are just playing with me! You were letting your boyfriend try to rape me!" Dusty screamed at her. "You are trying to kill me!" Dusty kept the gun on her; then ordered Laura to get on her knees. "Why?" Laura asked. Dusty is getting even more furious. "It's your turn! I am going to shoot you dead!" Dusty screamed at her.

"Oh! No! Dusty!" Laura pleaded. "I'm not going to tell you again. I said, get on your fucking knees!" Dusty shoved Laura to the ground while screaming at her. Laura got on her knees. Dusty put the gun to Laura's head and then said, "Thanks for nothing, mom." She then pulls the trigger. Laura is screaming and crying so loud. Then Dusty pulls the trigger of the revolver again,

and once again, there is no bullet. Laura put her head in the dirt sobbing, and Dusty ran towards her truck. Once Laura collected herself, she noticed she's not shot, and that Dusty is gone. Laura started running up the trail toward the truck too. Dusty reached the truck. Dusty's shirt is nearly ripped off her, and her bra is hanging down with her breasts exposed.

The blood from her eye socket is running down her face and chest. Her vision is blurry. Dusty reaches the truck; she starts struggling to get the key out of her pocket, suddenly she sees that Laura is running up the trail toward her. Dusty gets the key in her hand; and starts to put it in the lock, but she is shaking so badly that she can't line up the key right. Finally, she gets the door open and gets into the truck; before she could get the door closed, Laura grabs the door; then grabs Dusty. Dusty is hitting her anywhere and everywhere to get Laura off of her.

Dusty grabs the gun off the seat, believing that the weapon is empty, she hits Laura in the head with the gun as hard as she could, knocking Laura to a heap on the ground. Dusty grabs the door and shuts it quickly, then locks the doors. She has to hurry because Laura has her other set of keys. Dusty is shaking so badly that she has difficulty getting the key into the ignition to start the truck. Once the truck starts, Dusty puts it in gear, leaving her mother lying in a hump on the ground. Soon as Dusty has cell service, she calls Trevor and tells him what happened. He told her to get the local police and make a report and to go to the hospital. She agreed. Trevor is furious. He contacts the law in Boise, ID, and lets them know that Dusty is a fellow officers wife and she has been attacked and hurt and one of the people that tried to kill her is not dead, but injured, but that the male perpetrator was shot twice with his gun or a gun that he had in his possession. The officer taking his report told Trevor that they would get right on this and inform him once they confirm Mrs. Moore's whereabouts. Trevor thanked them and then hung up the phone. He fell to his knees and started praying for his wife and God to protect her and not take her away.

Dusty pulled into the hospital; she sat in the truck, not believing what had just taken place. She grabbed the gun and put it under the seat on the passenger side; she wanted the gun away from her until she can give it to a police officer, then she got out of the truck. Exhausted by having to fight for her life, she strolled up to the emergency room doors. A nurse saw her and ran to her, asking her what happened and helping her to a bed. The nurse ordered another nurse to contact the police. After a few minutes, a woman officer came into the room and started asking Dusty what happened and informed her that her husband Trevor Moore had contacted them and started the report. Dusty told the officer that she left her mother lying in the dirt, and the man that attacked her was lying dead with two bullet wounds, one to the chest and the other to the head. The hospital called Trevor to inform him Dusty is in the hospital and treated for her injuries. She had stitches over her eye and bruise her with numerous cuts, but that his wife is a brave woman and should be proud of her because she fought hard to save her own life. Trevor is choked up and told the nurse that he knows she is strong and very thankful for that. He also told the nurse that he is flying into Boise in the morning and letting his wife know.

The nurse told him that she would let her know and have Mrs. Moore call him.

After Dusty was treated for her injuries, she did not want to stay in the hospital; she wanted to get a hotel room and wait for Trevor. Against the doctor and nurses' advice, Dusty left the hospital; the emergency room doctor did call Trevor and let him know that Dusty is no longer in their care and left the hospital against their advice and doctors' orders. She had told them that she is going to get a hotel room and wait for her husband. Trevor thanked them for calling him but can't figure out why Dusty would leave the hospital's safety, but he will find out when he can reach her.

Dusty got to her truck and unlocked the door. Climbing into the truck, she closes and locks the door. Dusty then laid her head on her arms on the steering wheel and started sobbing. Suddenly she hears something, and before she knew it, Laura slashed at her with a knife. She is cutting through her hands as she is trying to protect herself. Laura then made a quick slicing movement with the blade at Dusty's throat. Cutting her throat, Dusty falls across the seat. Dusty laid there, and she can feel her blood draining and her life flashing before her eyes. Laura jumped into the driver seat and pushed Dusty down on the floor to keep her out of others' sight. Laura puts the truck in reverse and starts backing out of the parking place. She looks at Dusty lying there motionless on the floorboard with blood everywhere. Convinced that she is dead from the gash to the throat, Laura continues to drive to exit the parking lot and head for the freeway. Dusty is clinging to life by a thread. The gash did not hit her carotid artery, but she is bleeding profusely. Dusty opens her eyes and then sees the gun lying under the seat. She could faintly hear the music that is playing on the radio. Dusty grabbed the gun, using what strength she had left to turn herself over so she could point the gun at Laura. Laura caught a glimpse of the gun pointed at her out of the corner of her eye; she then laughs at Dusty, saying, "You silly girl. You know the gun is empty!" Dusty pulls the trigger shooting her mother in the side of the head. Laura slumped over the steering wheel, causing the truck to crash into another car in the intersection. Dusty looks at Laura's lifeless body then says, "I guess it wasn't empty after all, you greedy bitch!"

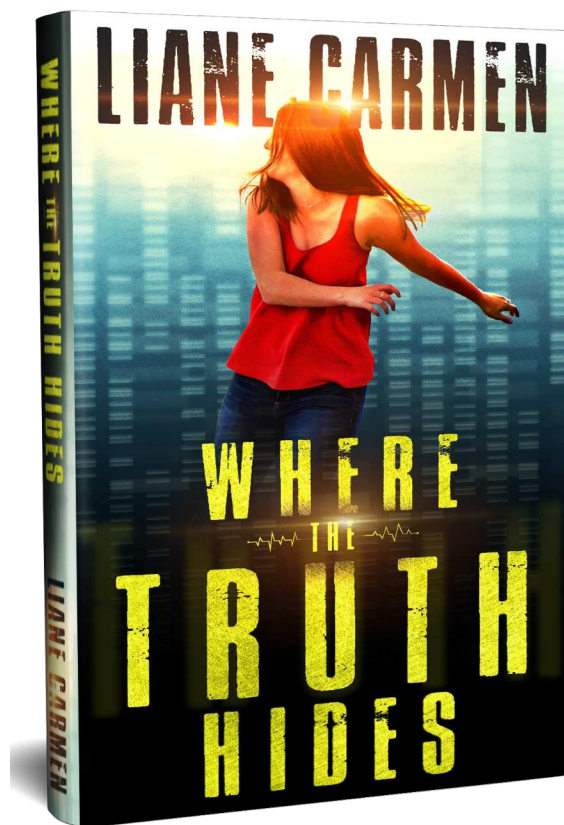
Dusty can hear the sirens coming from the distance and is praying that they get to her in time. Within what seemed to her like an eternity, an officer opened the passenger side door and found Dusty clinging to life. He started yelling for EMT's to hurry that a girl with her throat cut, but is still alive! When the ambulance got Dusty to the hospital, the on-duty doctor recognized her and his heart just sank; the doctor knew that he has a very devastating call to a husband that he wished he didn't have to make. Dusty's injuries are severe, and he doesn't think she will make it through the night. Trevor's phone rang, and he sees that it is the hospital in Boise. He answers, thinking it is Dusty deciding to let them admit her; he had no idea of the tragedy coming from who is on the other end of the phone.

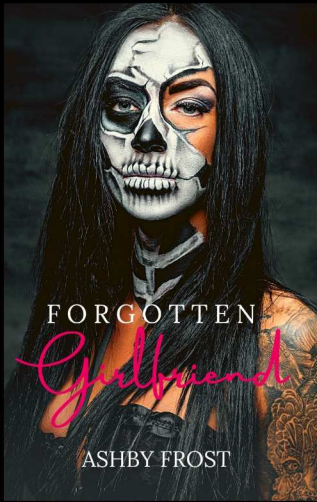
Trevor hangs up the phone and throws it across the room as he is screaming and crying at the top of his lungs! He collected

himself and found his phone and called his parents with the sad news. They are in shock. "Dad, can you ask Uncle Frank if he will fly me in his plane to Boise tonight?" "I can't get a flight out on a commercial jet until 11 am tomorrow, and the doctor told me that Dusty is in surgery and her chances of making it through the night are very small." "His dad in a choked-up voice says, yes, son, I will call him. Hold tight." "After a few minutes, his dad calls and says, pack your bag; you leave in fifteen minutes." "Thank God, thank you, God, Trevor says to his dad." Trevor and his mother and Lucille fly in the plane with his uncle Frank and his dad, and grandfather Henry is driving to meet them the next day. Lucille is distraught. She loves Dusty like Dusty is her very own granddaughter. Lucille tells Trevor, I remember the day that Dusty and that other young girl walked into the diner. Your granddaddy and I knew that she was a runaway. Dusty must've been running from something terrible, with all of the bruises that were on her pretty face. When she asked me for a job, I just knew that she was a hard worker because Dusty was determined to change her life even though she was bruised and beat. I knew the other girl with her was a bad seed, and your granddaddy and I were thankful the day that she ran out on Dusty; it was unfortunate that she took all of Dusty's hard-earned money, though. I never mentioned it to Dusty, but I heard about a year later that Kendall ended up in prison for drugs and burglary. The officers called me because our diner number was the only number she had on her when Kendall was arrested. Lucille says she hopes that girl never gets released because she isn't any better than Dusty's greedy momma. Trevor listened to his grandmother's story and was surprised he had not heard the whole story before, and it made him love his wife so much more.

Trevor walked into his wife's ICU room, and his heart just sank. She has bandages on her right hand and arm, her left arm, and across her throat. She is hooked to tubes and a respirator to help her breathe; the heart monitor caught his attention, and he stood there watching her heart beating. The surgeon told him that they had to put her in a medically induced coma to give her body a chance to heal itself. He walks to Dusty and sits in the chair next to her bed and grabbed her small hand into his and raised it to his cheek, and says, "if you can hear me, Babe, I'm here. I love you; please come back to me." He sat there sobbing while holding her left hand, and he suddenly feels a hand on his shoulder and turns to look, and it is Lucille; she is visibly shaken and sad by the situation. "Trevor, she will come back to you; your love will heal her," Lucille tells him as tears roll down her face.

Author's Note: Full Novel Available Summer 2021





cold, dark
& *vengeful.*

ASHBY FROST, AUTHOR



MY LOVELY MISERY SERIES



OUR GAME OF MISERY

ASHBY FROST



Teen witches in magical juvie, because they really messed up!

Don't Mess with This Witch

E.B. LOROW

Interview with E.B. Lorow

Q ~ Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

A ~ I've always been extremely creative. I missed the clues that I might enjoy writing... Like I loved my creative writing class in high school and earned an A from a tough teacher, but like I said—Duh. I pursued Fine Art instead. Fast forward several years and lots of twists and turns in my journey, and I became an RN to put food on the table. In nursing, creativity is highly discouraged by doctors who want you to follow their orders to the letter. Sheesh. I needed an outlet! So I took a course in screenwriting. That taught me how to tell stories, but Hollywood passed on my romantic comedies. Oh well. I lived closer to New York anyway, so I turned my 'movies' into novels. I've had several published under another pen name. I can't tell you what that name is or parents would kill me. I wrote steamy romance novels!

Q ~ Favorite famous quote?

A ~ Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Well behaved women rarely make history." Well, I don't have to worry about that!

Q ~ What do you like to do when you're not writing?

A ~ Walking the beach, reading, crafting, (pre-covid) going out to lunch with friends and shopping.

Q ~ If you could have lunch with one person, dead, alive, or imaginary, who would it be and why?

A ~ Jim Carey, because I love to laugh. I think there's a lot more to him though. He's had some real hardship in his life and I think comedy was one way he coped with it. I'd like to know more.

Q ~ How did you begin writing? Was there a single catalyst or a series of events?

A ~ A romance series got my through the terminal illnesses of my parents. I took care of them in their home for several months. I read every time they were sleeping or had visitors. It was my guilty pleasure.

Thanks, Diana Gabaldon for Outlander! I devoured the whole series and now I try to pay it forward.

Q ~ What's the best thing that's happened since you began writing? The worst?

A ~ Best: Meeting authors and fans who are now dear friends.

Worst: Being judged harshly or unfairly.

Q ~ Who was your biggest influences in life?

A ~ My mother. She was a trailblazer. She was an Army officer promoted through the ranks. She never had a college degree, but her intelligence was hard to miss. Even before that she'd earned her pilot's license and became one of our country's first female military pilots. She was a liberated woman before the term existed. She never told me I 'could become anything I wanted to be'. I already knew.

Q ~ Why did you choose to write Young Adult Fantasy?

A ~ I actually call what I write Magical Realism for all ages. It's more of a PG 13 and up age group and includes a type of fantasy that is set on our Earth in our time period. Very realistic, then suddenly, bam! Magic! Now, I'll answer your original question. Why? I wrote light paranormal romance--sometimes hot contemporaries, but always comedy. I believe every good story should have a little romantic spark to liven it up. The erotic adult romances kept pushing the envelope and made me uncomfortable. I was ready to try something new.

Q ~ Do you prefer to write in a small town or big city setting? Why?

A ~ I write what I know. I lived in Boston for 4 years and it still feels like 'home' to me, so many of my books were set there or began there and traveled elsewhere. I live in Florida now, which also feels like home after only a year. My first book set in Florida is my E.B. Lorow debut *Don't Mess With This Witch*.

Q ~ Can you tell us a little bit about your latest release *Don't Mess With This Witch* and what inspired you to write it?

A ~ To be honest, I wasn't going to write any more—and then I told my agent about an idea I had and she loved it.

Unfortunately she called it 'adorable.' I think kids want something edgier these days so I tabled that one. Then this new idea popped into my head. I wrote a few pages and showed it to her. She said she'd never seen an adult author adapt to young adult voice so well. (Yay me!) I think my spirit has always been young at heart.

Q ~ What was the most difficult part of the process while writing *Don't Mess With This Witch*?

A ~ For me, it's the physical act. I have severe arthritis in my neck and I never learned to type, so I have to look at the keys. I know...another duh! Shoulder and neck muscles kill me if I sit at the computer too

long. Add to that a recent 'yoga accident' and resulting tendonitis. I now use dictation software, and can write in a lounge chair or anywhere.

Q ~ What characters do you find yourself especially drawn to and why?

A ~ Charming boys. You know the type. They tease, but never in a mean way. They're cute and funny.

Q ~ What advice would you give to an aspiring writer?

A ~ Write a book, get it edited, proofread, then send it out to agents and editors, and while you're waiting to hear back, write another, rinse and repeat. Be patient... Your first book might not sell, but your third or fourth might. Your writing will improve the more you do it. So just do it!



A GUARDIANS OF DACIA NOVEL

IMMORTAL MOONLIGHT



LONI LYNNE

Immortal Moonlight

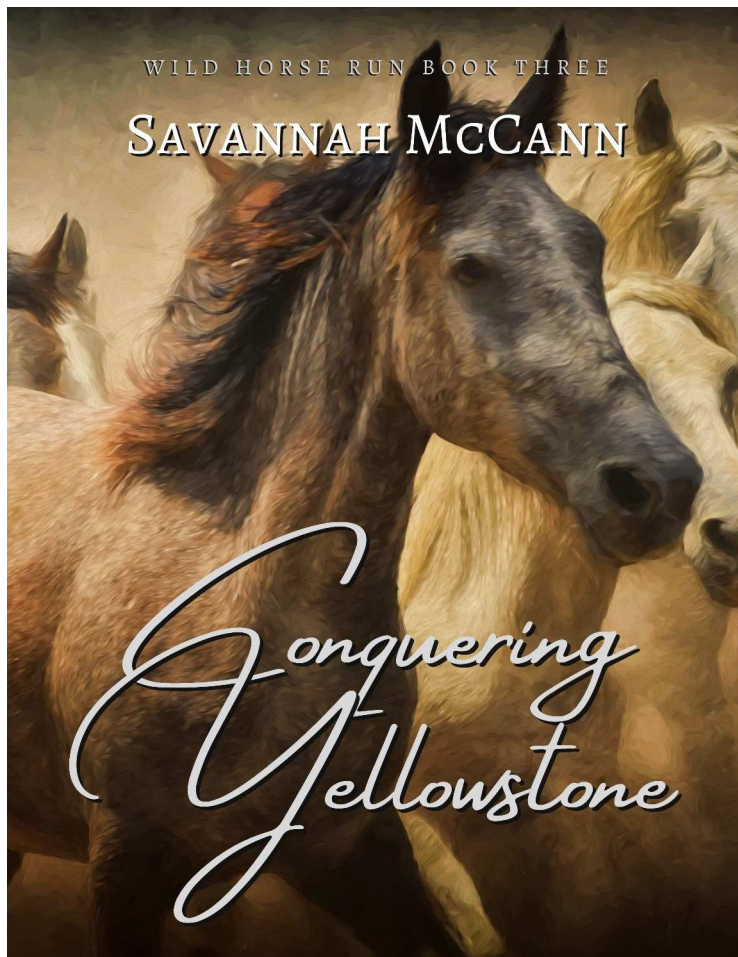
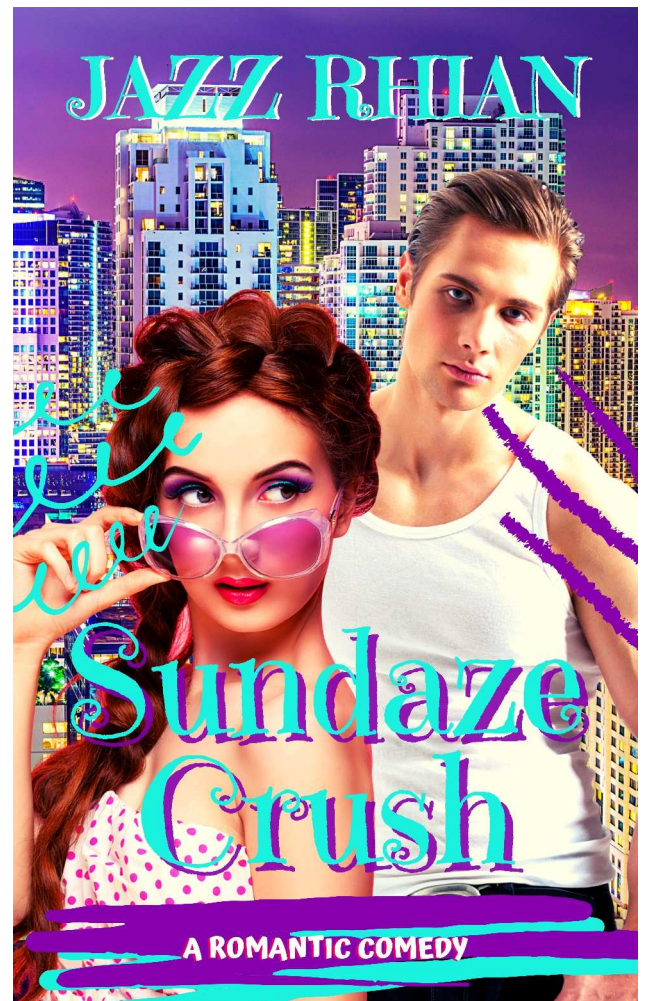
'She'd been thrown to the wolves...
And she's back... leading the pack.'

Wolves! Jessica Winters dreams about them, sees them during random times in her life and swears they follow her. Even her spirit animal happens to be a wolf. On a mission to find a secret place called 'Livedel', a place that will hopefully explain everything to her and give her peace, once and for all from the nightmares, random, mysterious encounters and constant danger, she encounters the one person who might be able to help her...and he's drunk. The last thing Ren Lupino needs is another woman in his life.

The last one threw him for a loop and he doesn't do loops well. For hundreds of years he's had his share of women, not having to worry about anything until lately and now, the woman who rescues him from a bar fight needs to find Livedel and swears she's part wolf. One, very few find Livedel...Livedel finds you! And two, if she is a wolf, gods help her soul because the rest of her will belong to an all male clan as ancient as time...eager for a mate.

The past and future are about to collide as Jessica and Ren are about to witness a new beginning. A thousand year curse and a new world order are about to rock their universe and it is up to Jessica to understand her part in it, with or without Ren's permission, and what that means for the old clan and the new generation to come. But time is running out and she only has until the next Immortal Moonlight to come to terms with what she is and her part in keeping a clan alive.





FICTION

VERSUS

NON-FICTION

COMPARING THE 2 TYPES OF LITERATURE



Fictional literature is made from the imagination.

Its purpose is to entertain. You read to enjoy.

It uses narrative elements such as theme, conflict, characters, setting, and resolution.

It gives readers a theme, message, moral, or lesson.



Non-Fiction is literature that is based on fact.

Its purpose is to give information. You read to learn.

It uses text features like the table of contents, glossary, index, labels, charts, photos, and graphs.

It gives readers information or directions on how to do something.



THE FLYER

HANNA'S DIARY 1

JM BERNALDEZ



THE FLYER

"Do you remember your first love?"

I stared at the blinking cursor on my screen pondering on the writing prompt for my next article. "Hmmm, of course I do, how could I forget." A smile grazed my lips as my mind brought me back in time...

I zoned out to the sound of Mr. D's voice. It was the last period for the day and physics wasn't really the best way to end it. So, I daydreamed. The best way to end my day, every school day, is when I see him.

It was some kind of an unspoken routine between us. Almost every day before I go home, I'd go directly to the library to my 'almost' secret spot; a lone bench at the back corner of our huge library, the tall shelves creating a cozy setting for reading where I would lose myself in a book. Then, He would come. He'd quietly drop his bag on the floor and sit beside me, take out his own book and read. We'd spend at least 30 minutes, sometimes an hour, just sitting down and reading. Sometimes there were occasional talks about random things, but that's it. We weren't exactly friends. I don't even know how he found out about my routine.

I opened my notebook when something fell on my lap. The Prom Flyer. Oh, I almost forgot. Prom is next week. Yey for those who are going as I certainly won't. I think I'd only go if he would ask me to go with him. But that's so unlikely. After all, he was the campus heartthrob. Why would he pick a nerd to be his date?

I didn't realize that I started doodling his name on the back part of the flyer until I focused my attention on it; a simple artwork completed with hearts and the words *"Will you go to prom with me?"* daintily written at the bottom. Sigh, I know these things only happen in fairytales but I can't help it.

"Ms. Tuazon, will you tell us why the speed of light is so important with astrophysics?"

I felt my cheeks burn as I stood up. "I, uh... because it is the universal speed limit?" I stuttered my answer, my brain still foggy with my princessy day dream. Mr. D. nodded and continued explaining why light speed is related to our topic for the day. Good thing I did some reading last night.

Gosh, Puppy Love; It makes people crazy and somehow stupid. I don't believe in fairytales but a girl can always dream, right? Finally, the bell rang. I slid the paper in my notebook and got up, eager to get out.

"Hanna," Mr. D approached me, gesturing for me to take the black flash drive in his hand, "Please take this to Ms. Garcia. I'd requested her to make printouts for tomorrow's activity." I groaned inside. So much for being the class secretary. I took the drive from him. "Of course, Mr. D. I assume I should wait for the printouts as well?" "Yes, please."

I nodded and hurried off to the computer lab which is located just above the library. I saw him enter the library. Omg, I'm late! There are two entrances to the 2nd floor and I turned right so I wouldn't have to cross the lobby and rush upstairs. Grabbing the door, I swung my bag in front of me to stuff my notebook inside and headed straight to Ms. Garcia's office.

"Hey Hanna." Ms. Garcia greeted me with a warm smile. I returned her smile, handing her the flash drive.

"Mr. D.?" she asked.

"Yes." Ms. Garcia took the flash drive and started talking while working on the printer. I usually enjoy talking to her as well but today I felt antsy and I couldn't understand why. I nodded and smiled like the polite student I was but after 5 minutes, I couldn't take it any longer.

"Uh Ms. G, can I come back and pick up the print outs later? I remembered I needed to borrow some books from the library."

"Oh, sure dear. They'd be ready later."

I rushed down to the library with no idea why I was in a hurry. When I emerged inside, my eyes instantly landed on him, his hair looked tousled and he was...frowning. He was walking my direction but his eyes were trained on the floor and when he looked up, our eyes met. He stopped and I stood frozen on my feet. Should I say hi? I don't think I could. I was uncertain what to do next so I remained staring at him. He stared right back, looking uncertain himself. Then he took a

deep breath and said my name "Hanna."

"Jared!" We both turned to the gorgeous girl who suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She hooked her arms in his, her perfectly curled hair swaying with her every move. Diane, the queen bee. Of course, she has to come at the right moment. Feeling glum all of a sudden, I left the library without looking back. My head swirled and I felt like I wanted to stab Diane in her face. Ugh...So I'm plotting to kill someone now over a boy? I'm losing my mind.

I walked back upstairs, muttering to myself about my insanity over a boy. Why do we have to undergo this stage again? Must be the Hormones? Cripes, he is just a boy and here I am, going crazy. I wouldn't call it love, more like a silly crush maybe, or was it? It's not like I'd be marrying him in the future so why do I feel this way? I didn't want to wait inside the computer lab, so I turned from the door and went to lean on the railings instead.

To make myself feel better, I played my favorite game, the "What if" game. I played the scenario over in my head and imagined what if Diane didn't come. There are a lot of possibilities so I went over each of them, thinking of the things that I would have said, the things that he would have said.

I lost myself with daydreaming, again, when someone spoke from behind me. "I believe you dropped your love letter." I froze. I knew that voice. I whirled around and he was there, his lips curved in a lopsided grin, his right brow arched slightly upwards.

Then my eyes zeroed in on the bright pink paper in his outstretched hand; blood rushed to my cheeks. Oh my G! the Prom Flyer! How did he? It must have fallen from my notebook. I think I'm gonna faint. I have no intention of ever showing him that doodle. "I...uhmmm," I stammered and grabbed the paper from him. He just stood there, his brow still arched as if waiting for something.

I am dying inside right now. I turned the flyer over to see the foolish question I had written like 45 minutes ago. And there it was, the 7-word question that was once my dream but is now turning into a nightmare.

"Will you go to prom with me?"

He must think I'm desperate! I looked up and he spoke again, there was an awkwardness in the air. "So... uhm, will you? go to prom with me?" Wait, what did he say? My eyes widened then I looked down at the paper once more. This time, I noticed that the hearts were gone. And this definitely isn't my handwriting.

"Well?" he looked nervous.
"You are...asking me to Prom?"
"Yes, please?"

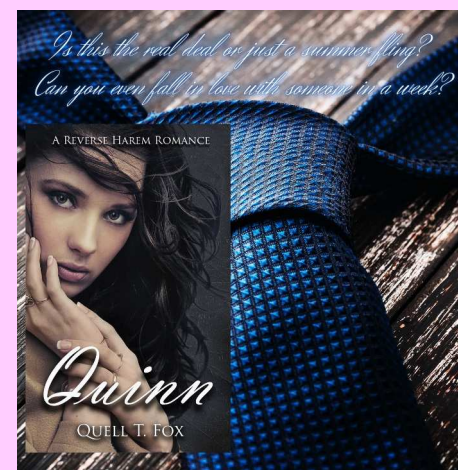
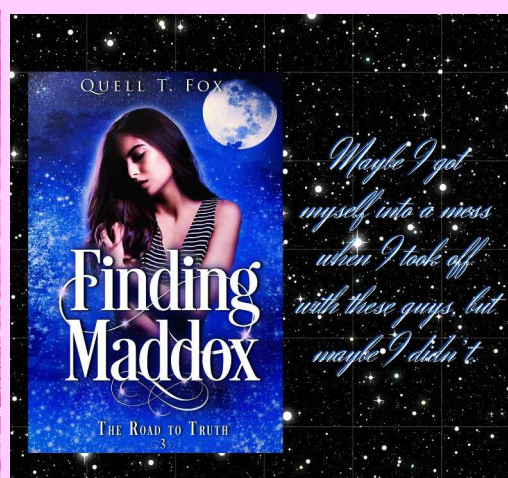
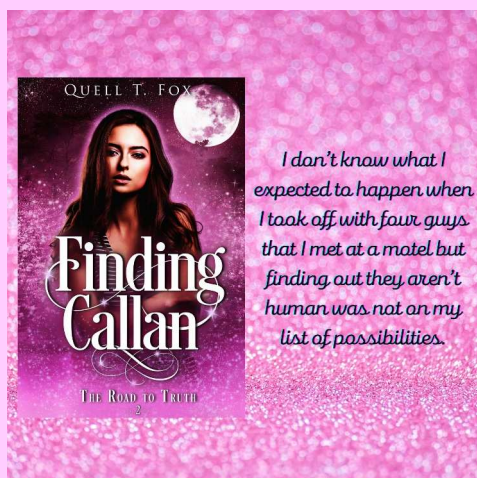
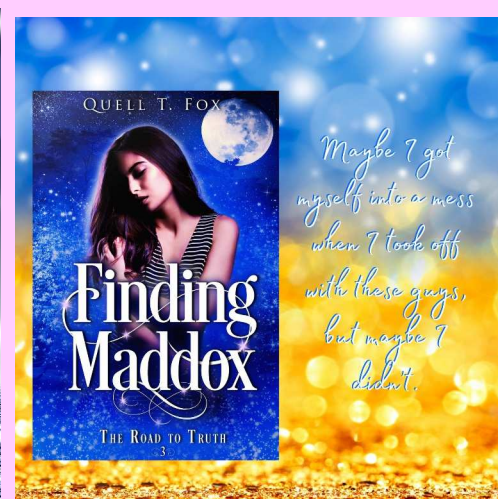
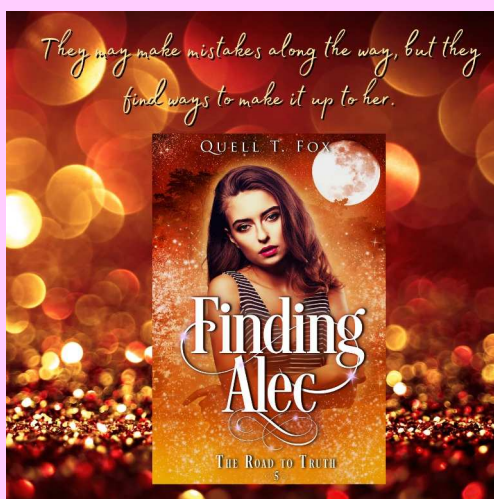
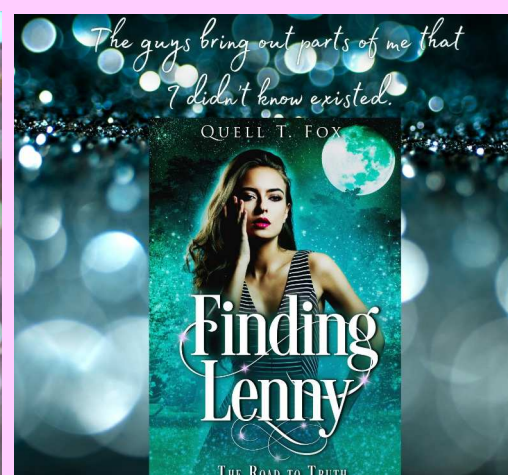
The world came to a standstill. I heard my heart thumping wildly in my chest. Is this how falling in-love supposed to feel? I have no idea of course as all I could think about is how the butterflies kept fluttering in my stomach and how my head felt so light as if it's filled with helium that I'd be floating away into the sky any minute now...

I pinched myself, am I still dreaming? He must have seen what I did as he chuckled and stepped closer. "Shall I ask you again, will you go to prom with me?" This time, he sounded sure. My head bobbed to answer him 'Yes', the bright pink paper forgotten as it fell to the floor.

I snapped back to reality when somebody tapped my shoulder. "Love, you're daydreaming again aren't you." I turned and smiled at my husband. "Well, would you be angry if I say I was daydreaming of you?" I asked him, the smile on my face grew even wider.

Well, Fairy tales do come true after all.

By Author JM Bernaldez



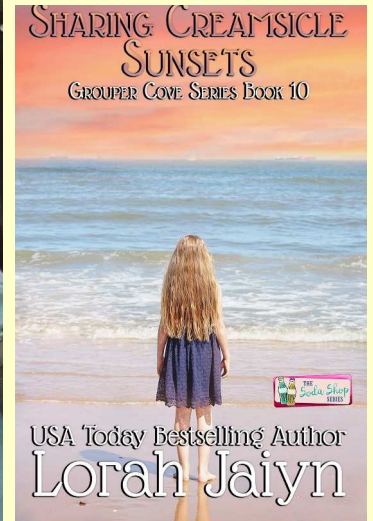
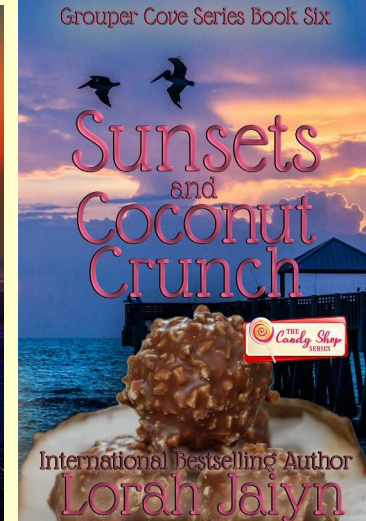
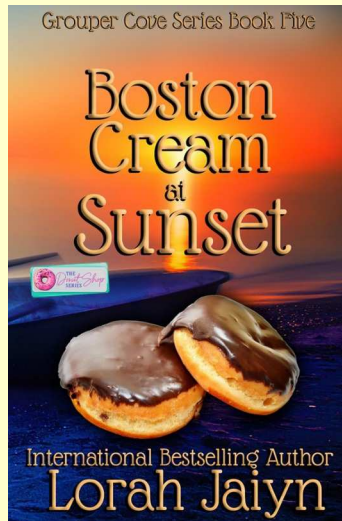
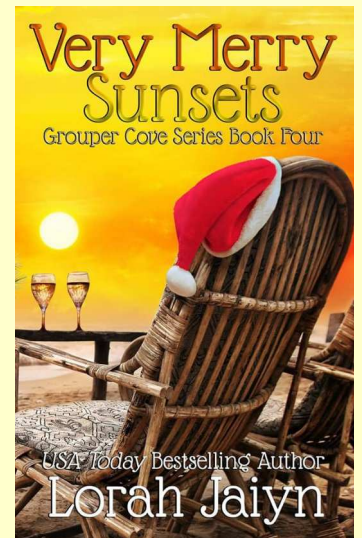
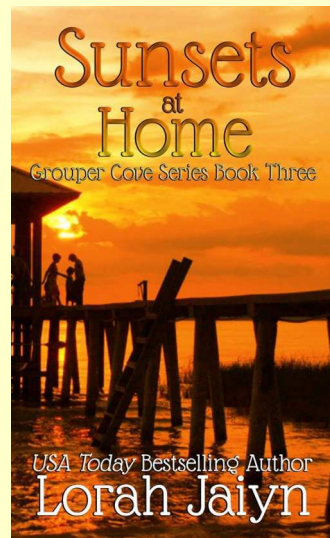
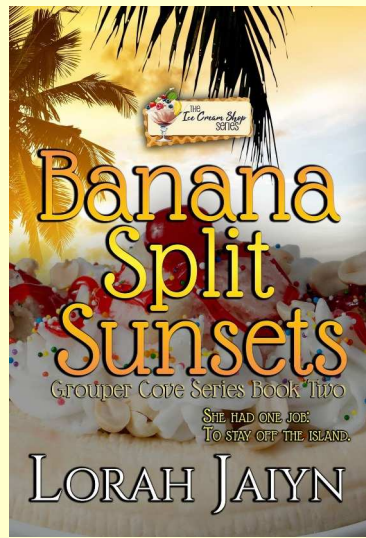


I'm a splash of the Hallmark
Channel, a whole lot of
Nicholas Sparks, and a twist
of Robert Liparulo.

Lorah Taiyn

Grouper Cove Series:

The friendliest fictional town on the Gulf of Mexico in Florida's panhandle...
where the people are friendly, the fish are biting, and the beer is always cold.



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Different options for

SELF-PUBLISHING YOUR BOOK

online or in print!

THE E-BOOK ROUTE



SINGLE-CHANNEL DISTRIBUTION

These services, such as Kindle Direct Publishing, will only distribute and sell your work through one channel or device.



MULTIPLE-CHANNEL DISTRIBUTION

These services, such as Pronoun and Smashwords, will bring your book to different retailers and distributors. They usually ask for an upfront fee or a part of your sales.

SO, YOU JUST FINISHED WRITING YOUR OWN BOOK. WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP?

Self-publishing gives you complete control over how your book looks and gets distributed, and there are a few different ways to pull it off.

THE IN PRINT ROUTE



PRINT-ON-DEMAND

You can give your book to publishers who will make your work available online. When someone orders it, they can sell it for you.



SUBSIDY PUBLISHING

You can hire smaller publishing companies to help you distribute and sell your book. This method may involve paying for your book's printing and binding and other fees.

IGNITIVEIFY MAGAZINE

Editing a Fiction Manuscript

HOW TO BECOME A SOUGHT-AFTER EDITOR



MAKE SURE YOUR GRAMMAR IS IMPECCABLE

No one is perfect and you may come across some grammar rules you haven't heard before.

This is when you bring out your grammar books and review grammar sites.

SOMETIMES RULES AND WORDS CHANGE

Always keep yourself up to date!

READ AND KNOW THE GENRE YOU ARE EDITING

It is important that you are not just familiar but well immersed in the genre you are editing.

You must know the tropes, the expectations, and the needed plot points.

LOSE YOURSELF IN THE BOOK LIKE A READER

Read the manuscript for the first time as if you were a reader.

Pay attention to your reactions, feelings, doubts, and questions. Raise these to the author.

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF EDITING

DEVELOPMENTAL EDITING = STORY FLOW

Keep these in mind:

- Understand what the author is trying to say: what story is she trying to tell?
- How can you help her tell it best?

COPY EDITING = WORD FLOW

Keep these in mind:

- If revisions need to be made, ask the author to do them
- Work using track changes so author can see your edits

PRESERVE THE VOICE OF THE AUTHOR

Discuss what the author wishes to say before editing.

Do not rewrite the story.

Offer suggestions but allow the author to come to the conclusions and revisions herself.

REVIEW THE AUTHOR'S REVISIONS

Once you have given your suggestions, review the author's changes.

Be open minded and remember that it is still her book.

But also point out your possible misgivings.

FACEBOOK.COM/IGNITIVEIFY



Dirt Road Diner

Trisha McKee

For the hundredth time since returning home, Liza heard, "I'm very sorry for your loss. He was a great man." Then the person added, "I used to visit the Dirt Road on Tuesdays. Your mom was the best baker this side of Pennsylvania! Her peach pies were amazing!" She wasn't my mom, she thought, her teeth pressing down on her tongue. It was not that she disliked Sherry. She had been a wonderful companion to Liza's father for over twenty-five years. But that assumption brushed aside the heartache, the agonizing questions, the desperation. That damn ignorance meant that most had forgotten the tragedy, the mystery that had haunted Liza and her sister Joan for decades. Her mother had never been a waitress. She would have died before tying on an apron, would have left a lot sooner had that been forced upon her. No, Suzanne was the bookkeeper, the buyer, the organizer.

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Feeling melancholy, Liza sat down on a nearby bench. She blinked back tears, the sun blinding her as she struggled. The memories were downright insistent, aggressively wrestling for the forefront of her mind. That diner... she and Joan had been so young when their parents had purchased the dining car and placed it on that dirt road right off the main highway. How exciting it had been to run through the diner, to swing on the stools, to know that every inch of that place was theirs. She and Joan played cook, pinning up scraps of paper on that rotating wheel, calling out orders of belch waters and frog sticks, laughing so hard they could barely screech out the words. Aw, that time of youth. They had been two little girls on the edge of an adventure, and that was all they saw. But every now and then, Liza, being the older and more observant one, caught ripples of unease.

"No frilly curtains!" Suzanne dropped the curtains, her fists hitting her thighs. "Look, you say no to this, I say no to the name."

"Name's already decided. Not going through this again."

"The Dirt Diner?"

"Dirt Road Diner."

"Mickie, be reasonable! Who wants to eat at a place with 'dirt' in its name?"

He sighed and waved to the window. "This is on a dirt road. This small town is known for its dirt roads. People travel past here on that highway, and they're going to notice that name. Mark my words, Suz."

Liza's father was right. The diner became a popular stop for people passing through, but it also became the favorite hangout in town. The space seated 42 people, and it was rare that

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Those seats were not filled most evenings. On weekends, there was a line out the door. Mick cooked delicious diner food, his burgers well-known for miles and his meatloaf famous four counties over.

Mick's instinct for a successful business only managed to irk Suzanne. She resented the hard work she put in behind the scenes, only to watch her husband be the hero. In Suzanne's mind, it was the financial handling of the business that kept it successful. "Anyone can flip a burger," she muttered when the praise for Mick got to be too much.

Mick oozed charm. His good looks brought in many a female admirer, sitting at a booth and sipping a milkshake just for a chance to giggle at his stories and flip hair over a dainty shoulder. He was not immune to that attention and appreciated pretty women. His diner was full of waitresses that had bouncy ponytails and hopeful smiles. Mick was not only a fantastic cook, he understood people. Except maybe Suzanne. When they were young, Suzanne was a mystery. While most girls were throwing their clothes at Mick, Suzanne was almost indifferent. The chase was intense. And when she finally gave in, her passion rivaled any female he had encountered before. But she was practical. She valued winning and self-reliance, while Mick craved

excitement and fun. He often kept the diner open well past its 10 PM closing time, hanging out with the customers, with friends, eating and laughing, playing music and spinning his famous tales. Suzanne was in bed by 9 PM most nights. Liza and Joan grew up in that diner. They helped out evenings, weekends, and summers, first taking drinks to customers and wiping down counters and then waitressing, cooking, and cleaning. Suzanne was often exasperated with the girls, not understanding why they argued or stayed out past curfew or talked back. But Mitch was all in. He often called them over to a table,

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Announcing that he had the prettiest daughters west of the Philly line. Not many could argue that. Liza had her father's dark curly hair and cerulean blue eyes. Joan had her mother's blond hair and hazel eyes. Both girls were outgoing and friendly, laughter cascading from their lips, as their father had taught them to enjoy life, to love and laugh. It was a much better path to explore than their mother's path of detachment and regrets. "For God's sake, Liza, get down from there!" Suzanne stood with her hands on her hips, her face scrunched up, hiding any beauty that might have lingered over the years. "Mom!" Liza dangled her legs over the edge of the cooler. "Everyone climbs up here. It's our hiding spot for unscheduled breaks. Try it sometime. Get the stick out of your ass." She scrambled further back, squealing as her mother jumped and swatted. "Can't

get me.” As teenagers, Liza and Joan watched the demise of their parents’ marriage. It was gradual enough that there was no big shock, and the resentment, the indifference, were always there. Ingrained in their day-to-day lives. During Joan’s chorus solo, Suzanne showed up with another man and sat next to her husband as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Mick glanced over and to his credit, calmly stood and moved two rows up. At Liz’s graduation, Mick and Suzanne got into a screaming match. They argued, they ignored, they even cheated, but they rarely displayed such naked anger, especially in public. It was then that the sisters understood the end was near. It came out that Mick was involved with one of the waitresses. This was not a shock, as the couple had been seeing other people for some time. The difference was that this relationship had substance. Mick claimed deep feelings and wanted to officially separate from Suzanne.

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Surrounded by half-packed boxes as Liza prepared to leave for college, she and Joan feasted on chips and popcorn, tossing out names of possible culprits.

“I say Rhonda. She’s always hanging around dad,” Joan guessed, pinching her face in distaste. Rhonda was in her late twenties, blonde and perky. Just their dad’s type.

“Hmm, maybe. Could be Carrie.” Liza shivered. “Can you imagine? Dad dating a girl just two years older than me?” Carrie had caught her father’s eye from the beginning with her long red hair and piercing blue eyes. She giggled constantly and dropped a lot of plates.

Their dad was a flirt, so it was difficult to narrow the possibilities down. The sisters understood that he had wanted his marriage to work. For years, he compromised, bargained, pleaded, and sacrificed to try to keep Suzanne happy. Now he was ready to move on.

“Joan! Get down from there. You too, Robbie.” Suzanne stepped back and sighed as the two kids climbed down from the cooler. “I thought Liza was the only one stupid enough to do that. Now you hide up there with busboys?”

“We weren’t hiding!” Joan argued. “Everyone climbs up there.”

“Well, don’t.” She stretched her neck to look over Joan’s shoulder. “Have you seen your dad? I need to go over finances.”

“No.”

“Probably hiding out with Sherry.”

Joan froze, too stunned to notice Robbie sneaking away while the attention was diverted.

“What? Sherry?”

Her eyes focused on her youngest daughter. “I thought you knew. They’re seeing each other. Your dad’s leaving me for her.”

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She wanted to correct her mother, remind her of all those years she had stepped out on her marriage. She wanted to insist that he was leaving because it was no longer worth fighting for something neither seemed to want. But she was too stunned to speak.

Joan immediately found Liza and told her of the news. Liza pulled back, eyeing her sister with skepticism. “That doesn’t make sense. You sure you heard right? Maybe mom was joking. You know we don’t always get her sense of humor.”

But when they confronted their dad, Mick merely confirmed with an abrupt nod and short, “Yep.”

Sherry was in her late thirties and was the opposite of everything they had known their father to like. Mick had always been attracted to the blatantly pretty girls. The young beauties with slim figures and large eyes. Sherry had mousy brown hair that hung to her chin, and her waitress uniform was tight around her middle and her bottom, the seams bursting as she bustled around. But she was always smiling, her laugh ringing out above the chatter of the diner. She was kind and nurturing, and the sisters noticed that she spoke to their dad with adoration coating her voice. There were no demands, no competition, merely a mutual respect and a quiet excitement for their future.

It soon became natural to see their father and Sherry together. In fact, they coexisted so instinctively, so cohesively, the sisters forgot what it was like before they were a known couple. The divorce proceedings rambled along at the same slow pace as the demise of their marriage. Mick would buy Suzanne out of her part in the business. They both knew it was Mick’s diner. It was his baby, his heart and soul. Then proceedings came to a halt. Suzanne discovered Mick’s plan.

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Deciding it was time for an upgrade, Mick bought a larger building down the street, even closer to the highway and more visible to passersby.

“So you want to trash this place?” Suzanne accused, her voice wobbly. “This place we got together?”

Mitch paused, taken aback by his wife’s reaction. She had never been a sentimental person. “Yes. I’ll take this building and move it to the woods across from my house. Just until I can properly dispose of it. It’s falling apart, Suz. It’s time for better things.”

“Oh, like Sherry? You’re getting rid of me so why not this dump, right?”

He regarded her closely. “You want this? ‘Cause you can have it.”

“What? This building? What good is it without the name?”

“You never liked the name! Geesh, Suzanne! You’re drivin’ me nuts!”

“It’s not about the name. It’s the reputation. People know Dirt Road Diner.”

The argument spilled into the next day at their home. Suzanne had moved out the year

before, but she showed up to continue her tirade.

As Sherry quietly left the room, having no desire to be in the middle of the feuding exes, Mick pushed back from the table and stood, grabbing his mug. "I'd offer you coffee, Suzanne, but truth is, I don't want your ass here. I'm tired of talking about this."

"You know if you move the diner to another location, you're going to fail. Dirt Road Diner is known for its location."

"What do you care? Huh? Your interest in that place left a long time ago."

"I'll fight you on this."

"You were fine when we drew up the papers. What has you so upset?"

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Her eyes were wet, and her lips trembled as she worked to compose herself. "That diner. The kids grew up there. Everyone in town goes there almost every day. And you're just going to toss it."

"You can have it, Suz."

"Okay. I want the name then. Dirt Road. You can have the new building with a new name."

He shook his head, turning his back on her. As he focused on pouring coffee, he quietly answered, "No. I guess we'll fight it out in court."

Liza was home to study in peace, the party atmosphere not conducive to acing tests and heard the entire exchange. She wondered as her mom ranted and bawled over a decaying building why Suzanne had not fought harder for the girls. They were adults now so there were no custody battles being waged. But Suzanne never attempted to strengthen their relationships. She was content to move on and let the daughters stay with their dad when they came home on weekends and summers. Impulsively, Liza followed her mother out. Suzanne waved her away. "Not now, Liza." "Yes, now! Mother! Why are you putting dad through this? Huh? You show no interest in anything and now it's all-" Suzanne spun around and lurched forward, and Liza was surprised by the tears spilling from her red-rimmed eyes. "No interest? You and Joan might have some fairy-tale memories of your father, but I know what kept that diner afloat all these years. It was the business side of things. It was balancing the costs with the money coming in. It wasn't your dad's smile or even those damn burgers. And it sure as hell wasn't the stupid name!"

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"Then why fight for the name! Huh? You know, Mom, you are so cold. This is dad's life. And we're his life. You didn't make an effort."

"An effort? You mean I wasn't the fun one? I was the one that stopped playing long enough to make sure you had clean clothes. The one that filled out every damn school permission slip or medical paper, that made the doctor appointments! Dammit, Liza, I might not display every emotion I feel, but ... don't you see? That building.. That diner is us. Your dad wants to throw it away. Not only will that hurt the business, it's getting rid of our history. Us." She cursed and threw her hands up before turning away.

"Let her go," Mick quietly ordered when Liza started to follow. He stepped out from the shadows. "She's your mom. Don't talk to her like that."

Liza watched as her father returned to the house, his shoulders rounded, his frame slumped over. Thirty minutes later, he burst from his home office and raced out into the night. He returned hours later, appearing even more haggard.

In the days that followed, Mick's lawyer advised that he act before Suzanne had a chance to fight it. She had already signed off on the papers giving him the business. So he shut down the diner as they worked on getting the new building ready.

And Suzanne disappeared. No one heard from her. No one saw her. Mick insisted she was off somewhere pouting, but Liza and Joan had their doubts. Their mother was not the type to wallow in self-pity. She was the type to run toward a challenge.

By the third day, they called the police. She was not in her apartment. Her car was there, but she walked everywhere. Her purse was on the kitchen counter, but that also was common. She rarely took it with her. They tried calling her cell, but it was either shut off or dead.

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To Liza's utter horror, her father continued on with the plans to reopen the restaurant. His insistence that Suzanne was somewhere blowing off steam did not sit well with either daughter. When the police questioned him, Mick was nothing but cooperative. He offered to let them into his home, the diner, to look over their divorce papers, but once they were gone, he was back at the new building, working alongside the contractors.

When she confronted him, Mick continued measuring the wall, distraction weaving through his words. "Liza, listen to me. I'm a little worried too, but I really think she is off licking her wounds. This isn't easy for any of us."

"Right, dad! You two have been living separate lives for years."

"I know you like to think you know it all with the fancy college education I'm paying for, but life isn't all black and white. Yes, this divorce is a long time a-comin', but it still doesn't make it easy. I can't sit around and wait. I'd go nuts. Your mom is going to come through the door any minute now and say, 'Mickie, these countertops are all wrong.'"

Liza heard her father's voice catch, and she suspected he was on the verge of tears. Mick

was an emotional man, but it was rare that he let anyone see him cry. She wondered if he was emotional because he was worried about his ex's whereabouts or because he was feeling guilty. The summer was full of questions and change. The girls waited to hear from their mother, and as time went on, they wondered what their father knew about her disappearance, what he was hiding. Suzanne was not a traveler, she did not like to keep people guessing. She dealt in facts and resolutions.

Then the new diner was ready, and Liza had to admit, it was spectacular. It housed twice as many customers, had updated appliances, boasted leather seats and aluminum edged tables, and a chrome exterior that would catch anyone's eye. The inside held enough bright lights and

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signs, that could easily be seen through the large floor to ceiling windows. The large rooftop neon letters were visible from the highway, and that was what excited Mick the most. This sign would let drivers know the Dirt Road Diner was open and ready.

As they went to shut down the old diner and move it to its resting place, Liza felt it was wrong to move it now with Suzanne missing.

"Oh wow," Joan exclaimed, covering her nose. "It stinks. This place has seen better days."

After the glory of the new building, it was easy to see the old place's decay. The sagging floor, the chipped tables, the smell...

Mick squeezed Sherry's hand. "Did Ted clear out the coolers? The fridge?"

She nodded absently. "Pretty sure. I think that's just the smell when you shut everything off, and leave it in this heat."

They grabbed pictures, any equipment they could use at the new place, and said one last good-bye. At one point, the tension of the past few weeks started to show when Mick caught Joan climbing up the cooler and snapped, "Hey! No! We don't have time for that... no."

And then they watched as the old diner car was driven away, each person silent, as if watching a large chunk of their lives just leave. The empty lot was jolting. This is what accounted for over a decade of their lives, their memories. A dirty, cracked slab of concrete. Liza went to visit the abandoned diner once. It was in the woods, a mile behind their home. It had lost the appeal, the life, and it sat sagging and miserable. She squinted her eyes, trying to bring it back to life, to its former glory, and she thought she could hear the distant hum of the coolers, the jukebox music playing, the laughter and chatter.... The sounds of her childhood. The music of innocence. Finally, she could not stand it anymore, and she left.

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Once again, Mick's instinct was amazing. The revised, enlarged diner brought more customers, more business, and he decided to open the diner 24 hours, six days a week. It was life-changing for him, for Sherry, and they fell into a new routine. His life was still all about the diner, but now it was with more intensity.

The girls returned to college and now they came home sporadically, fitting in less with their dad's new life. He called and begged for visits, and every now and then they obliged. But things were different.

Sherry was now in charge of bookkeeping. She was careful not to mention it to the girls, always cautious about overstepping, but they knew. They also understood that their father was happier than he had ever been. He no longer blatantly flirted with other women. He was still charming, a ready smile and a casual joke, but his eyes were no longer wandering. It was obvious he was smitten with Sherry. Plain, chubby Sherry.

They ran the diner together. Where he and Suzanne's duties had been split down the middle, he and Sherry worked together. There was not such a drastic divide. It was their diner, not Mick's. And it was a success. Word got out, and people travelled to try the food, to see the large neon letters luring patrons in, to experience the true diner meal.

Joan made it home more times than Liza, not as convinced that her father had anything to do with Suzanne's disappearance. But Liza had been home that day Suzanne had threatened to take Mick's one great love - the diner. For Liza, there was no other explanation.

She called the investigators often and they were always patient and listened to any news or ideas she might have, and then they admitted there were no new updates.

They lived in a small town, so of course, there was talk. But the town had always known Mick best. Suzanne was not an easy woman to get close to. Their theories ranged from running

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away with a lover to embezzling money from the diner and leaving. Sometimes Liza walked into the post office or the bank, and everyone grew silent, and she understood they had been discussing the mystery of Suzanne.

One year passed, marked only by a short conversation between Liza and her father.

"Dad, tell me something."

Mick hung his head, and she saw some new gray hairs peppering that thick wavy hair of his. "You honestly think I know something I'm not telling you? You think I'd do that to you? To Joan?"

"You have to know something. That's the only thing that makes sense!"

He stood, pointing a finger inches from her face with a hostile energy she rarely

experienced from him. "You listen, little girl. You go back to that school, keep learning, maybe learn some things about life. I did nothing to your mother. I loved her. I don't understand why she left. I don't know where she went."

Liza graduated college and moved even further away, starting a career in restaurant management. She followed what she knew. She met Brian, a confident but quiet man that reminded her nothing of her family back home. They eloped, and it caused a bigger rift between her and Mick, as he had dreamed of the day he would walk her down the aisle. She did bring her new husband to the diner for the reception her father insisted on throwing. It was odd to be there and see Joan move around with a familiarity Liza no longer felt. It was strange to feel detached, to look around and see everyone laughing and celebrating, and she wanted to ask why time was not standing still. Why were they not more concerned about her missing mother? Five years should not mean anything when her mother's life was in question.

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So she visited maybe three times a year, despite her father's pleas. He visited her a few times, although he claimed it was hard to get away from the diner. As if her job as manager of a busy steakhouse restaurant in the city was any less taxing.

Somehow the years came at her faster, blurring dates and anniversaries. Her daughter was born, and then the second daughter, and then a son. Life got in the way of any grudges and regrets. Her resolve softened a little, and Liza realized she missed the diner and wanted her kids to know the magic of it.

The one advantage of the diner's hours was that she could arrive home at midnight, stop for a piece of pie, and she was always greeted by someone familiar. Pete was working the grill, and Sylvia was waiting tables, smiling and clapping her hands when she saw her.

"And where are the angels? I want to squeeze their cheeks!"

"They're at dad and Sherry's, fast asleep. I wanted to stop in, grab a bite to eat. Too wired to go to bed. Boy, the place looks great. How's business been?"

"Well, hasn't slowed down much all these years. People still get a kick out of that big sign. You know your dad. Just a big kid, but he knows the business. Says the trick is to keep upgrading... but keep it looking the same."

"He's happy? Dad seems good?"

"Oh yeah. He misses you girls, but ... he and Sherry are good."

Once Sylvia left to check on her other tables, Liza shut her eyes and leaned back, taking an indulging bite of apple pie. It was as if she were transported in time, to that tiny diner where there was a line out the door. She suddenly felt a strong urge to go back to that time, to be a girl chasing her little sister through the diner, hiding under tables, and spinning on those stools.

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On the ten-year anniversary of Suzanne's disappearance, they had her declared legally dead. Liza and Joan came back to the diner to mourn the mother they somehow lost. They talked about her strength and dedication. They admitted they had never fully appreciated her. And they confessed that the mystery of her disappearance haunted them. Because the man they admired most in life was the one they both suspected most. But anytime they brought the subject up, Mick vehemently denied any wrongdoing. He claimed he had no knowledge of where Suzanne went that night. He had left the house to look for her but found no sign of her. Liza focused on her family, raising her children, taking them to sports games, watching their recitals, and searching for a way to slow time. She and Brian created a life miles and miles away from that diner, and yet it was impossible to purge that past from her soul. It was a part of her. It was in her dreams, entwined in her speech, and tangled up in her thoughts. Anytime she passed a small diner, she stopped, even if it were for just a cup of coffee. She took note of the uniforms, the bakery display case, the music pumping through the room. And she watched the people. Because lives were shared in diners. Experiences and memories and souls touching other souls. That is what made a diner. And she realized that her father was an expert at creating that, bringing people there time and time again.

Then Sherry passed away after a brief illness. Liza returned home to find her dad looking weaker, smaller than she had ever remembered. The diner seemed to be cast in shadows illuminated by the bright signs that had at one time been cheerful and inviting. Liza realized that Sherry had become such a large part of this place, and without her, it was incomplete... lost. And two years later, Mick was gone. Heart attack, or perhaps a broken heart over Sherry, and the incomplete diner.

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Joan was Liza's rock as they sorted through their dad's possessions. They arranged the sale of that precious diner. They felt as if they were betraying Mick and themselves by selling it, as it was a part of their family, their history. It was a part of the town. But they each had their own lives far away from this town. They were no longer those little girls running through the diner, feeling breathless with the thought of the place being theirs.

They packed up the house, and as they went through the belongings, they found paperwork from a private investigator dated over twenty-five years ago.

"Joan, look!" Liza stared wide-eyed as she handed over the paper. "Dad hired him. To look for mom."

"What?" She reached for the paper, her eyes devouring it before she looked up, her mouth open. "So..."

"I don't think he had anything to do with her disappearance."

They were still reeling from that bit of information as they realized they had another task ahead of them.

The old diner. That small diner car out in the woods that had been decaying all these years. They arranged to have it disposed of as their father should have done years ago. He was a sentimental fool, and now they were stuck with the task.

The crew arrived early on that summer morning to tear apart the building. The girls were there to watch, and as they broke down the counter, the sisters remembered the slices of pie they had served. They remembered as the booths were pulled out, all the customers that had shared their triumphs and heartaches, their mundane days and their exciting moments.

And then as they got ready to remove the coolers, Liza remembered the countless times they and other members of the staff had climbed to the top for a quick break, some privacy...

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and in a flash, she recalled her mother watching her up there with an almost wistful stare. And she remembered how her mother had insisted the diner stay, arguing that it was a part of them. Liza realized as they pulled the cooler out and discovered the remains what her mother had been trying to do all those years ago. She had been trying to keep a part of history alive, their family alive, and the wispy connection with her daughters alive. And when she couldn't do that, she had tried to capture a bit of their youthful spirit by climbing and relaxing in the spot she had seen them climb a dozen times before. All those years, all those questions and accusations, and their mother had been in the one place she had never wanted to leave.



The Night Owl
Editing and Copywriting

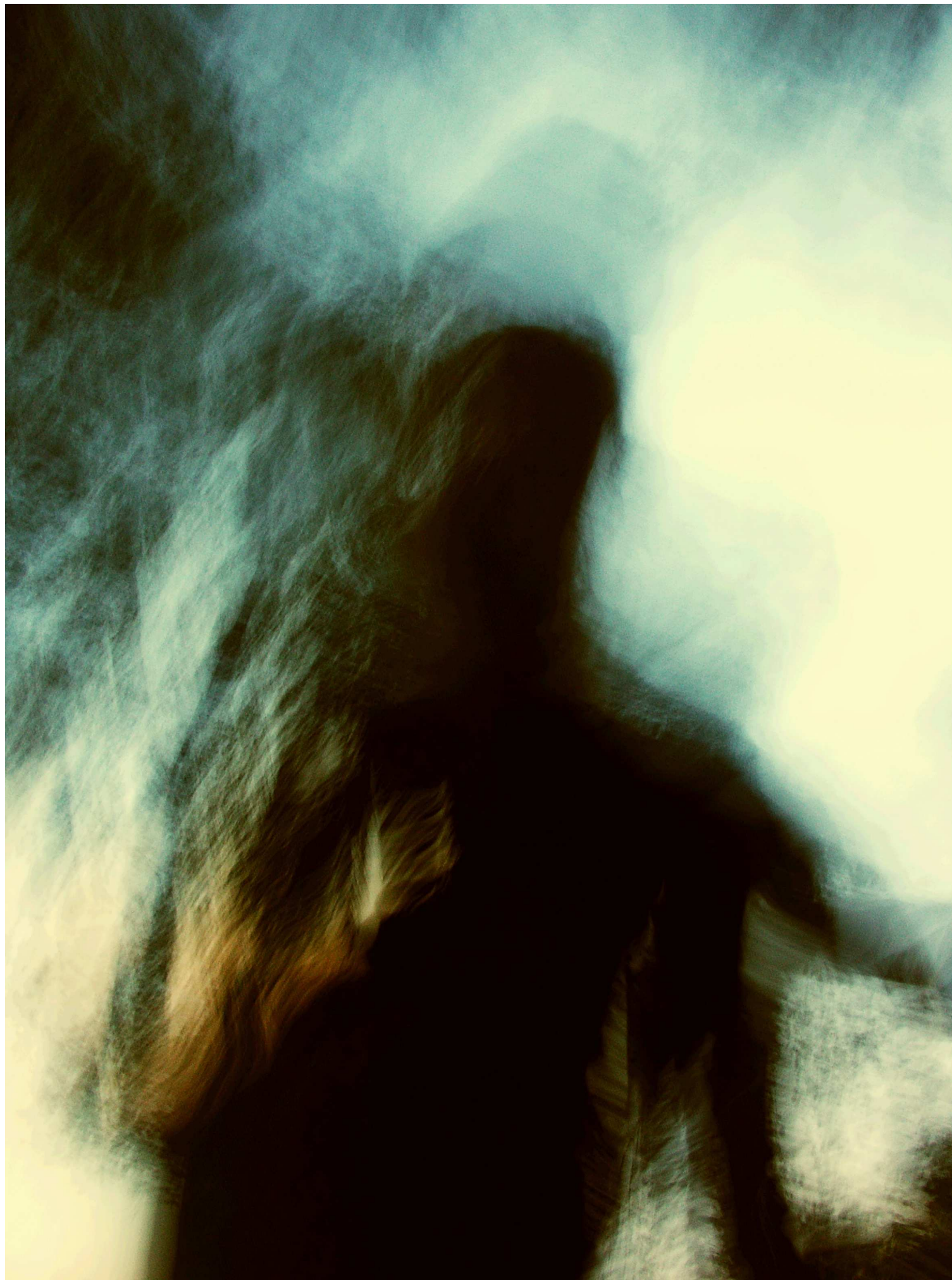


LAUREN RAYBOULD

EDITOR | COPYWRITER | FREELANCE JOURNALIST

I'm a freelance editor and journalist with specialisms in B2B and B2C sectors, literature, music, entertainment, games, magazines, and editing fiction books. I started The Night Owl Editing and Copywriting in December 2019 to help authors, writers, and businesses produce high-quality content. With seven years of writing experience and five years of editing experience, I give expert advice on how to improve writing projects to ensure the words are sassy, full of personality, and fit your tone perfectly. Forget all those buzz words! When I'm not working, I'm playing video games, have my head buried in a book, playing the violin, or walking my dogs.





Hitch Hiker

Jeff Flaig

Maybe if I walked a little faster, I'd warm up. I don't know if I could handle another cold night like last night. I quickened my pace as I took and exhaled a deep breath, which reminded me of a steam locomotive, only there was no fire inside to keep me warm. I was encouraged, only slightly, as it lit up like a rainbow and mingled with the morning sunlight breaking through the trees across the road. That's three long nights in a row that I had to make my way on this lonely highway, through the dampness of the Northwest. I wish someone would stop and offer me a ride.

It's not like it used to be back in the sixties and seventies, when it was no problem to hitch-hike from one end of the country to the other.

These days, people rarely pick up a stranger, but then who could blame them with all the weirdoes on the road. Fortunately, today was sunny, and when the morning warmed up and moved on, it caused my clothes to dry out, and as the night escaped the day, it made everything around me look as if it were on fire, turning everything into a halo of rainbows and smoky mist. At least the rays felt good on my face and shoulders.

A pickup with an old couple passed and didn't even give me a second look. I guess I will have to play dead in the road to get a ride.

I walked for another hour. Perhaps, this is the loneliest road in America. As I was walking, I saw a flash of brown in the woods and turned to look. That was funny, a flash of brown in the woods? It was more of a light brown with a tint of yellow and didn't look like tree bark.

It turned out to be a house, the first I have seen for the last twenty miles. I didn't recall passing a driveway or a road leading off the highway.

I walked into the woods to get a better look. It turned out to be a big log cabin. I went in a little further until I was standing in the yard. I took a deep breath when I could see the whole property. The cabin was rustic. It had a big front porch with faded painted columns supporting the overhanging roof, and windows with light brown, almost yellow shutters, across the front, one end to the other.

"Are you here to fix the roof? She asked.

"What?"

She answered, "Are you here to fix the roof? I called three days ago.

"No, I'm not. I saw your cabin from the highway and came in from the woods to get a better look."

"Oh, okay. What highway?"

I turned to look, but I could not see the road from where I was standing. Oh well, I turned around to explain myself when I noticed how beautiful she was.

"Can you fix my roof?"

I answered, "Probably, let me have a look at it."

She led me around to the side of the home to where a ladder was leaning up against the cabin. I climbed to the top of the ladder where I found several shingles had fallen away from the roof. "I can fix this if you have some replacement shingles, and some roofing nails."

She said, "I do. Let me get them for you."
 I shouted after her, "Bring me a hammer too."
 "Okay..."

I am not a dangerous person by any stretch of the imagination, but this woman had no fear of me. I could have been any kind of deranged human being, and here I was fixing her roof.

How did she get me to do that? The wildest sense of fear grabbed a hold of me. What if she was some deranged human being herself? Oh my. What am I doing?

After giving me the materials to fix the roof, I went to work removing old broken shingles and putting new ones in their place. The damage was just four feet from the edge, and because of that, I dropped two shingles on the ground.

"Hey. I dropped two shingles off the roof. Could you please bring them up to me?"

No sooner did I ask when a snout crawled up and over the roof and set the shingles next to me. I panicked. I nearly fell off the roof. I leaned over to see the largest elephant I have ever seen standing on the ground below me.

"You, you have an elephant?"

She wasn't there. I shouted, "Hello! Hello, are you there?"

"I'm sorry, I was around front. What do you need?"

"That's an elephant. I mean you have an elephant."

"He's not mine. He shows up to eat the apples from my tree in the middle of the garden. What is your name?"

"Henry. My name is Henry."

"Henry, meet Larry. Larry, meet Henry."

With that, the elephant lifted his trunk with a loud trumpet. I wasn't sure if I should get down and run away or act like it was normal for someone to have a pet elephant in this area. This did not seem right.

Instead, I asked her name, "What is your name?"

"My name is Margret." "People call me Maggie."

After a brief pause, she asked, "Why are you staring at me?"

"I'm sorry."

I went back to work. I could only think of how beautiful she was, with coal black hair, and lavender eyes.

I went back to work while she told me about Larry, "Larry lives in the woods. He comes by every other day to eat the apples from that apple tree." She pointed to a large tree in the middle of her garden.

"I don't mind, but he tears up my garden making his way to the tree."

There was a noticeable trail leading to the tree through her garden. He smashed everything to the ground.

"Otherwise, he is very polite. He carries firewood for me, so I consider it a fair trade."

I asked, "How is it that an elephant, such a large elephant, can live in the forest here in the northwest?"

She answered, "I don't have a clue. I tried following him into the woods, but he is too fast for me. Just like all the other creatures that live there. I think there is something unusual about that forest. Things seem to come and go that shouldn't."

What a curious thing to say.

I stood up and asked, "What kind of animals are you talking about?"

She answered, "Every kind of animal you could

imagine. If you are here long enough, you'll see them."

For some reason, I assumed that Larry was a circus elephant. "Do other large circus animals come to visit too?"

"Sometimes."

I turned my attention back to the roof, while Larry made his way to the apple tree. Maggie yelled at him asking him, "Please don't step on my tomatoes."

It was too funny how he complied.

When I finished the roof, she asked, "Do you have any experience with carpentry?"

"I have a little experience. I can usually put something back together when needed. Why?"

She led me back to the front of the cabin and to an old broken down mail box.

"Larry broke my mailbox, smashed it to the ground. I have everything I need to rebuild it, but I am not a carpenter. I can pay you if you like."

I wasn't sure how to respond. I said, "No, don't worry about paying me. I am happy to fix it for you"

I was getting worried because I needed to get down the road before it got too dark. Otherwise, it was going to be another cold night on the highway, although I didn't say anything about it. I hoped it wouldn't take too long and then I could be on my way.

It was more work than I had expected. I had to dig out the old cement anchor and pour a new one, then place the new box and prop it up so that it stood straight. That took most of the day.

She did feed me lunch, chicken soup and grilled cheese sandwiches.

To my disappointment, evening showed up before I finished. Now, I have to spend another night in the damp northwest weather. I should have just kept going down the road.

Despite my frustration, and as much as I wanted to be angry, I couldn't because I didn't mind fixing her roof and mailbox, even if it cost me another cold damp night on the road.

As I put the tools away, and while saying my goodbyes, she offered me a place to stay for the night. "I have a small barn. It has a separate room for guests. You're welcome to stay there for the night, if you like. It has a bed and a woodstove. You can build a fire to keep warm."

Now, was I going to spend the night walking down a dark, wet, cold road, or should I spend a somewhat warm, dry, normal night in a bed of all things? Sometimes, decisions are just too easy, and they make themselves.

"Thank you. I didn't want to walk all night, again."

She led me to the small barn. I hadn't noticed it earlier while fixing the roof because it was on the other side of the cabin out of my sight. She directed me to the back room and said, have a good night and left.

One-half hour later she came back with a hot bowl of rice and chicken. "I assume you must be hungry."

"I am. Thank you!"

I built a fire, ate the rice, and made the bed. I was sleepy, but I laid there thinking just how beautiful she was.

Eventually, I fell asleep.

I slept in the next morning. It was very hard to get out of that warm comfortable bed. Maggie was already working in her garden when I emerged from the barn.

She asked, "Good morning, Henry. Did you sleep

well?"

I looked at Larry, who was already stealing apples from her tree.

I answered, "I did. I slept very well. In fact, I can't remember when I have slept so hard."

"That's nice. If you're hungry, I could cook up some eggs, maybe some bacon, if you're hungry."

"I planned to be on my way by now, but I can't refuse your hospitality."

Maggie picked two red peppers and went into the house to make breakfast.

Assuming Larry was tame, I walked over to have a closer look. He was the biggest elephant I have ever seen, and how does he live out here? It was such a peculiar situation.

"Henry, come on in, breakfast is ready."

The inside of the cabin was so beautiful. A real craftsman built this house. Although the aroma of bacon and eggs filled the kitchen, I could smell burnt wood and cedar. In the middle of the kitchen was a long dining table made from a single piece of walnut, with plates of hot food sitting on either side. I could live like this.

"Your table is beautiful, and so is the cabin. Did you have the cabin built?"

"No. My father built it, and the table. He died five years ago and left it to me. This home, his home, is so beautiful. I can't see living anywhere else. I could almost say it is enchanted, so I could never leave."

"He did a masterful job. It looks like he was a great carpenter."

"Yes, he was. Please, sit and eat."

I was halfway through breakfast when there came a knock at the front door.

Maggie said, "Oh, I forgot. My sisters are coming by this morning."

She got up and answered the door.

"Come in. Have a seat."

They were talking, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Until one sister asked, "Did he come again? When?"

"Maggie, you can't keep living out here all by yourself. The things you are telling us is just plain crazy!"

"No, it's not!"

"Yes it is! Have you figured out who this man named Henry is? And come on, an elephant named Larry? You need to talk with someone before they commit you."

"I'll prove it to you."

Maggie led her sisters to the kitchen where they found a half-eaten breakfast.

"Maggie, that means nothing. Look, the other one is untouched. So, you ate half of this one. That proves nothing."

Next thing the front door closed. She returned to the kitchen to eat her breakfast. "Those were my sisters. They stop in now and then to check on me. They don't like me living out here by myself. Oh well, what can I say?"

I heard a thumping at the back door. A bear lifted its head to the glass inserts at the top.

"Don't worry, Henry. That is just Charlie the dancing bear."

The bear lowered its head, and I heard it climb down off the back porch. Maggie got up and ran to the door and opened it. "Charlie, don't eat the cucumbers! You can have the squash, but leave the cumpers alone!"

She sat back down, "That bear loves summer squash, and cucumbers. I have to yell at him every time or he will eat them all."

I asked, "Did you used to own a circus or something?"

"No, but a few years back a circus heading to Reedsport crashed out front. I think some animals escaped. That's why they are so friendly. They must be used to humans by how they act."

"I guess that makes sense. Have you called the authorities to come collect them?"

"I would never do that. They are free and I believe that is what they want. I would never turn them over to the authorities!"

I took the last bite of breakfast, put my napkin down, and said, "Breakfast was very good, and thank you for your kindness, Maggie."

"Well, I had an ulterior motive."

"What was that?"

"I need the columns painted on the front porch. I planned to ask if you wouldn't mind doing that for me. I am a horrible painter. I could keep you fed and give you a place to sleep for another night."

I almost asked to see her to-do list. Instead, without hesitation or a second thought, I said, "I would love to paint them for you. Just show me to the supplies."

I spent most of the day painting when I wasn't standing round dumbfounded from all the different animals that came by to raid Maggie's garden. She spent most of the day making sure they stayed out of her cucumbers. I would assume that all the animals that belonged to that circus escaped, and she was helping them.

Around 7pm, Maggie had dinner ready. She made a big deal about the salad, and how she defended the cucumbers all day. It was full of cucumbers, too many.

We talked late into the night. She told me about her life with her dad, her sisters and how protective they were, and upset that she refused to move from the cabin. She never asked me why I was hitchhiking or where I was going. That fact slipped my mind, even though I planned to tell her. I guess I was mesmerized by her soft demeanor and beauty, which I could not understand why she was alone out here like this.

I asked, "Why did you never marry?"

"I'm too young and restless to think about that now. Perhaps, someday I'll get married, but I enjoy my life just as it is."

I went to bed again thinking about how beautiful she was, and kind. She was kind-hearted.

I slept hard again that night. When I woke up, I was horrified, and that would be an understatement.

First thing I looked up to see that the roof was half gone, most of it fallen into the room I was in. I was lying on a pile of leaves. In front of me was an old wood stove, almost rusted away. I sat up. Most of the walls were gone and what was left of them was all moldy.

I stood and ran outside. The cabin wasn't in any better shape. Every window was broken out. I cross the yard, or should I say an old garden, overgrown with weeds,

to the front of the cabin. The front porch was broken through, except for one spot on which sat an old rusty paint can with a brush stuck to its insides. Near the front steps was a bouquet of roses, with a note that read, "To our most precious sister, we love and miss you, sweetheart."

I freaked out and ran to the road. Fortunately, a young couple stopped and picked me up.

"Thanks for stopping." I was shaking!

"No Problem, we are going in to Reedsport, so we can get you that far."

And then she looked me over and asked, "Are you all right? And;

I couldn't help but tell them what had happened to me.

The woman, Janice, asked, What was the name of the woman? Margret. She called herself Maggie;

Janice said, Maggie Sinclair. I knew her. She had the most beautiful lavender eyes. I wish I had known her better. Tragically, she died four years ago when a convoy of circus vehicles crashed in front of the home back there. She used to live there. I guess she was out checking the mail when it happened. She and most of the animals in the convoy died. Oh, there was another person who died too. He was one of the circus people. I think he was driving and was responsible for the accident."

She turned to her friend and asked, ";Do you remember the name?"

"Yeah, I think they said he was also the elephant trainer. His name was Hank, or Henry something."

She turned to the back seat and said, "Hello?"



Farm Girl Faith

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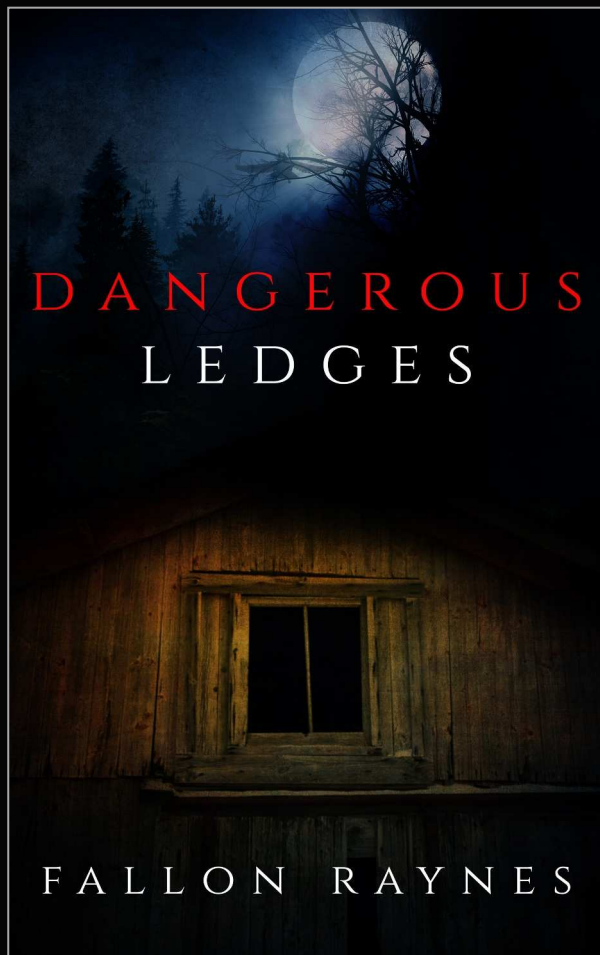
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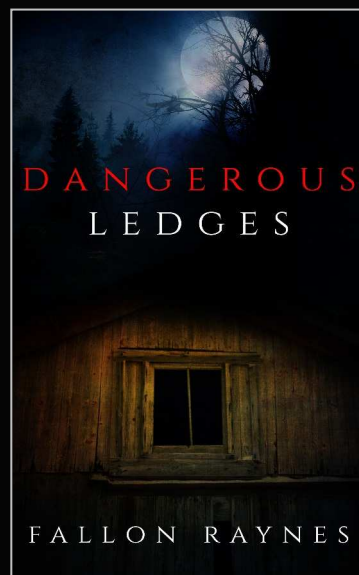
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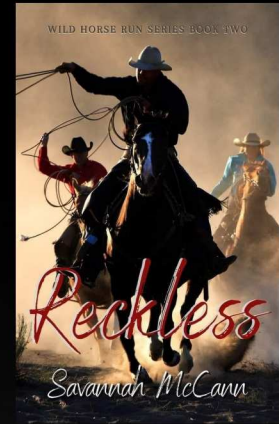


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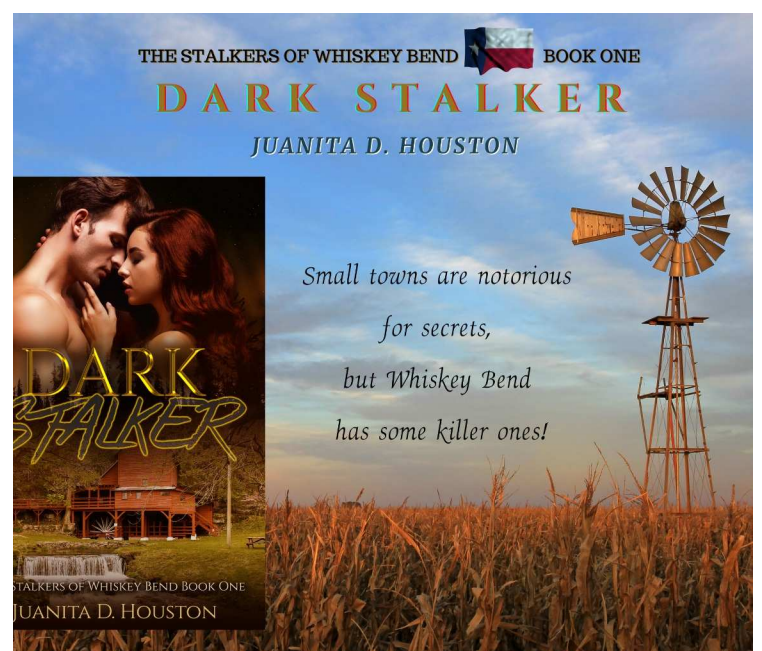
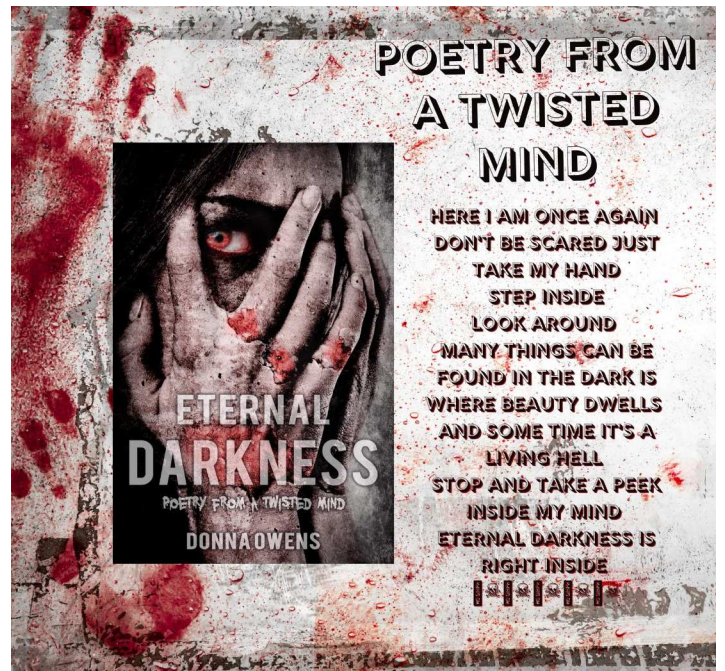
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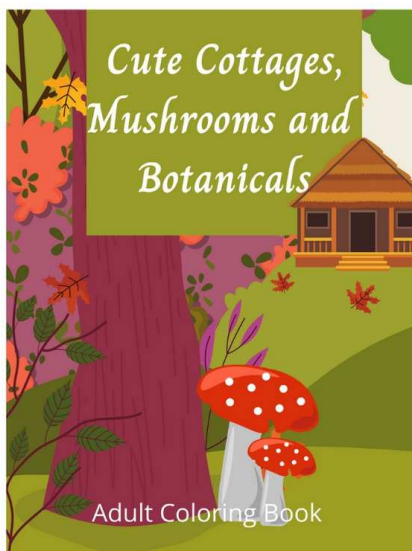
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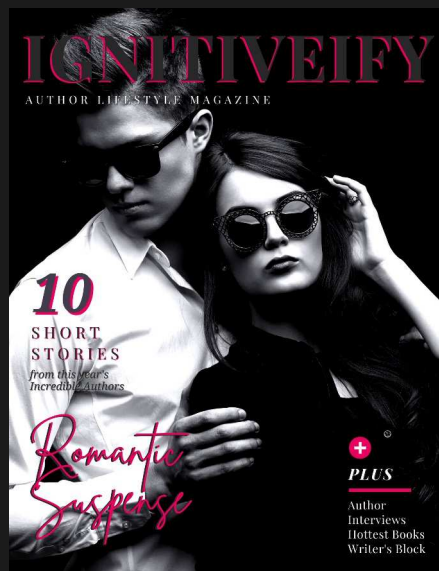
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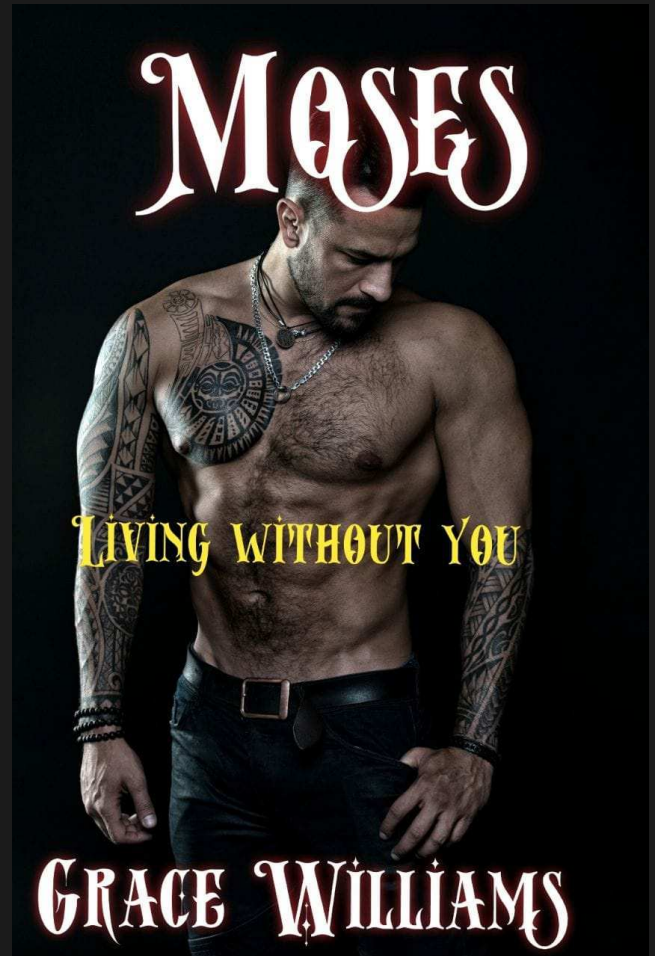
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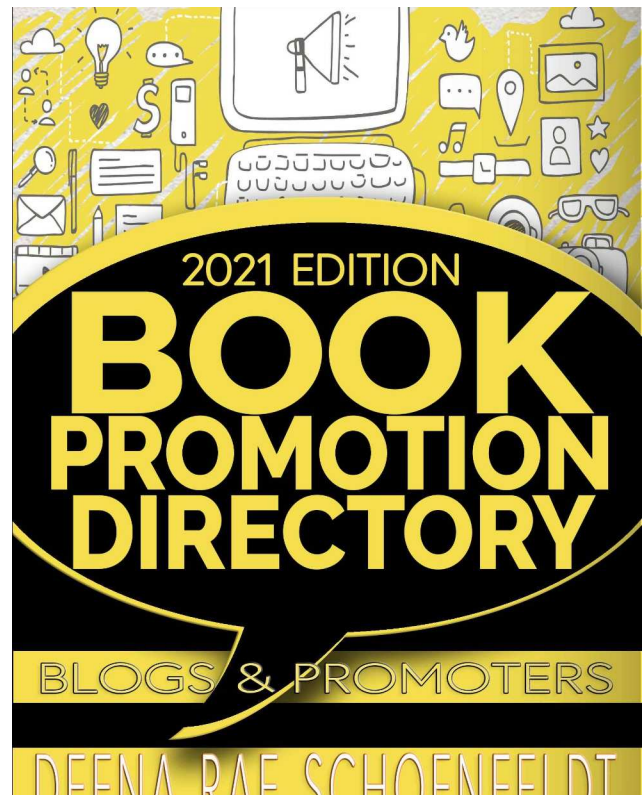


My name is Sadie Kincaid and I'm a new writer in the world of erotica and steamy romance. I've written gangland crime for a few years as Caz Finlay, but I have always loved to read dark romance. The idea for my debut novel, *Dark Angel*, has been in my head for a few years and I finally decided to do something with it at the end of 2020.

Dark Angel is a dark mafia romance, the first in The London Gangsters series, and is set to be released in April 2021! I've loved having readers respond to my characters in my crime books, and I can't wait for the world to meet Gabriel Sullivan.

I love to connect with readers and talk about books, reading, writing and anything else under the sun!

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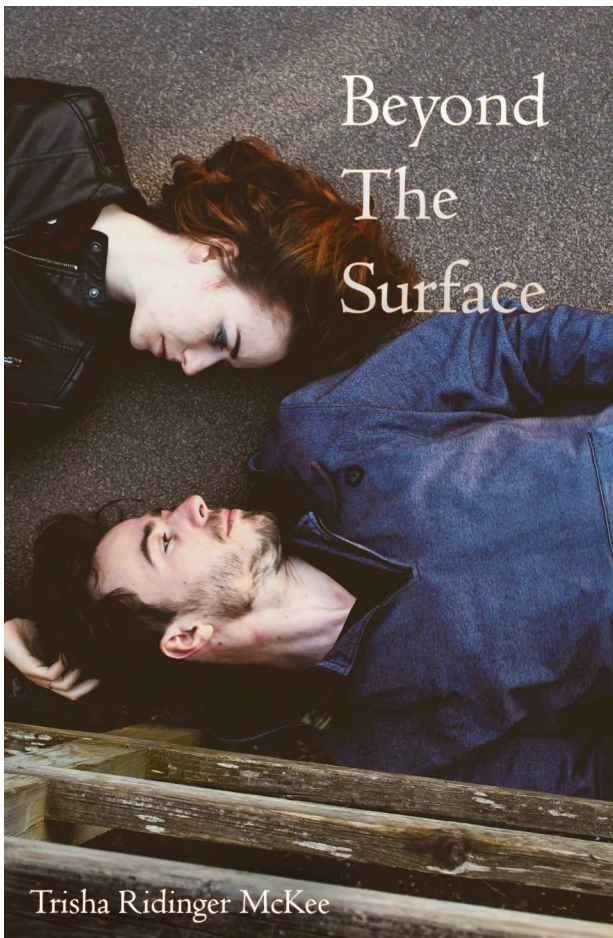
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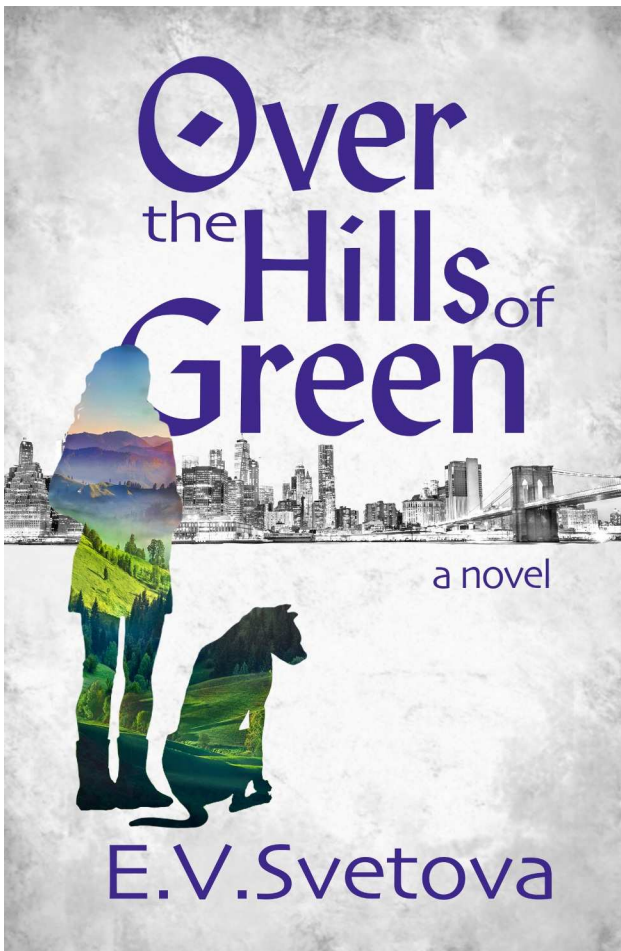
She walked toward her departure gate at San Francisco International Airport, traveling solo and looking forward to a visit with family. Having arrived with plenty of time to spare, she ducked into the women's restroom to do what you do there. That done, she continued on towards her gate.

As she walked, she noticed that several people took a longer-than-usual look at her. Head held high and with a new surge of self-confidence, she thought, I'm glad I wore this outfit, I look good in it. She continued on, a smart spring in her step. A youngish man noticed her and stared. She smiled demurely at him. Gosh, she thought, flipping her hair back, I'm fifty-four but I guess I still got it.



Yeah, you still got it, all right. You got toilet paper hanging out the back of your pants and it's trailing you along this very public floor. No, this did not happen to me. A teacher friend, Barbara, told me this story. A friend of Barbara's confessed this embarrassing incident to her. Live and learn? Gotta admit, ever since I heard that story, I am more careful with TP in public restrooms.

From Riding the Milky Way Tonight
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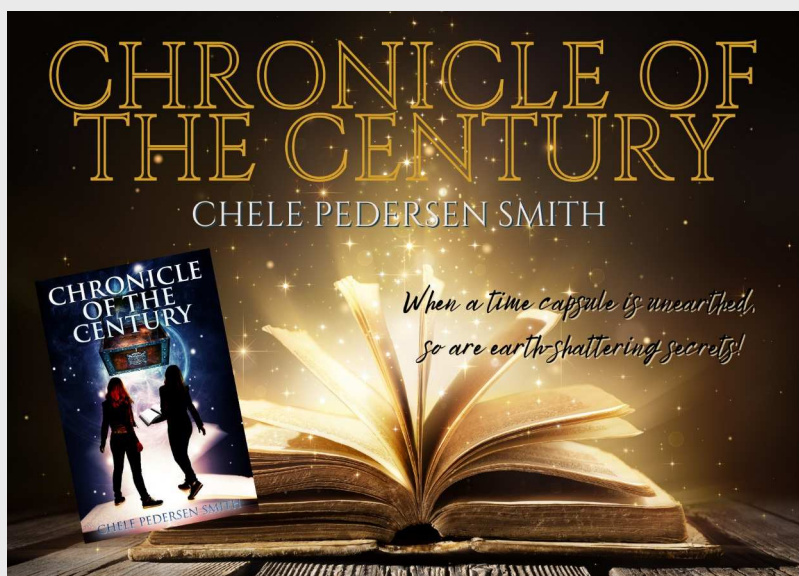
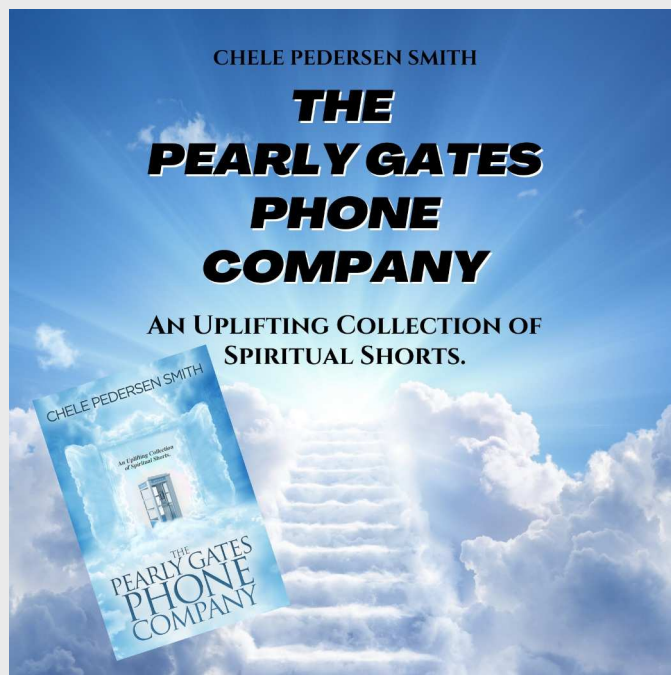




Chele { Shell} is a contemporary author smitten with romance, comedy, spirituality, and speculative "what ifs." Writing since sixth grade, she finally began following her dreams; first as a published author in 2017 and then graduating with a professional writing degree in 2019 where she won an *Excellence in Writing* award.

Currently, Chele has five multi-genre books: *The Epochracy Files* (time-twisting tales), *The Pearly Gates Phone Company* (true mini-miracles), *Behind Frenemy Lines* (spy romance mystery), the teen time capsule/diary mystery, *Chronicle of the Century*, and the whimsical Santa's workshop fantasy, *The Mysterious Gifts of Tinsel Town*.

When she's not daydreaming about dialogues and weird realms, Chele's a pharmacy technician, college writing tutor, and thinks any day is Taco Tuesday.



Gas Station Time Machine

You'll need more than fuel to escape the mayhem alive

By Chele Pedersen Smith

Gas light. Why now? Its warning matched my fear on the dark, deserted road. I was in a realm between two Illinois towns, Antioch and Waukegan, to be exact. I knew my SUV could last at least twenty miles, but still, it made me nervous. Normally, I wouldn't let it get that low. As doubt and worry jitter-jattered my brain, I tried to focus on road signs. The rattling in the backseat didn't help matters. How many miles til the next town? Up ahead, the reflective strips of a guard rail curved so I followed it. Hmm, this wasn't the exit for gas. I was blinded by the blackness and my lights only made things worse. I hit the brake, running into leafy overhangs and found myself up against a sign. The larger-than-life words caught in the high beams evoked chills: Welcome to Wisconsin.

In the quiet, dead of night, the sign was anything but welcoming. The nineteen-mile-trip, which usually took about thirty minutes, now seemed endless. Why didn't I just sleep over at Janie's? Insecurity swept my stomach. I longed to be safe in bed with a book. Anywhere but here. The road ended out of nowhere, but where was I exactly, besides on the brink of one state and the smidge of another? Against the swelling moon, brambles of sprouting twigs looked like the crooked hands of witches. A faint moan rose in the distance. Please tell me I didn't run someone over! Or maybe, logic hoped, I rolled onto a farm. I fought off tears and a frightening intuition. Why did alien abductions come to mind? Peeling out, I stepped on the pedal in reverse, but my wheels spun, stuck in a rut. I didn't want to exhaust the reserves so I gave it a rest. Guess I wouldn't be filling up anytime soon. Of course it would happen the one time I didn't take my stepdad's advice.

Even at thirty, I valued his wisdom. "Gigi, always fill up when it's at half a tank," he said from day one. "Especially in winter." Well, at least it was spring. But I already had one scare tonight. After dropping my friend, Janie, off at home in the suburbs, I headed east into the night. Every so often, a jangling from my hatchback bothered me. And every few minutes, I couldn't resist peering past my shoulder to check. I knew what the ruckus was, but alone in the massive midnight abyss, it rattled my soul. On my last looksee, I noticed flashing police lights lassoing me over. Just great. Worry shot through my mind. Was I speeding? Was a light out? But no, I knew why. When the cop appeared, I rolled my window down. "Good evening, Miss. May I see your license, insurance and registration, please?"

You were weaving a bit back there. Have you been drinking?"

"No, Sir. It's just my turntable clanking. I kept looking back to check. I'm sorry, I was supposed to deejay a dance." My excuse was so lame, I curled over the steering wheel in shame. But pointing his penlight into the back of my car, he indeed found the culprit I was talking about. Good thing Janie and I were too broke to go out for drinks. My innocent breath must have helped my case, because thankfully, he didn't make me get out and walk a straight line. He handed my documents back. "Alright, keep your eyes on the road. And have a good night." "I will, thanks." He started to step away. "Oh, officer. Do you happen to know where the nearest gas station is?" "Sure, about five miles down. Then turn right. It's hardly a town, so don't blink. Good night... uh, Gigi," he smiled. Caught off guard, I returned the grin. That's when I noticed he was sort of cute, in a limited light kind of way. I eyed his name tag too. "Thank you, Officer Carson."

I traveled on, glad he believed me, but mostly baffled. How the heck did he know my name? A few minutes later, it hit me. Your driver's license, dummy. But hmmm, couldn't be; it only revealed my real name, Georgia. I mulled the mystery over for a bit,

but then started daydreaming—or night zoning.

Janie's such a good friend, she didn't mind helping me launch my disc jockey dream. We were psyched to get our first booking—spinning tunes at a youth mixer tonight. It would have been fun if anyone showed up. How were we supposed to know the place was being fumigated? Yeah, hello, a call or text message would've been nice. Especially since our frantic stocking up on Top 40 CDs took most of our money, the whole day and was the reason I was low on gas in the first place. Not counting our untouchable 401(k)s from our bank teller job, it was the end of the month before payday, which meant the coffers were coughing. We figured we'd make it up in pay at the dance. But that was a bust.

Since I needed my spare bucks for gas and not knowing what else to do, we ended up sampling all 31 "taste spoons" at Baskin-Robbins and called it a night. We left feeling like rats for not ordering full cones. But they do offer samplings, so it's not like we committed a crime, right? We vowed to come back and order the works next time, especially since we had all the flavors down. Remnants of the so-called dance and losing a chance to make up the cash chafed my pockets. Not a good start for getting my side business off the ground.

Lost in regret and fuming more than my gas tank, I was suddenly sleepy. My eyes must have checked out, hypnotized by the reflective barriers, which is how I found myself face-to-face with the Great Cheese State. Where was my cute-in-the-shadows officer when I needed him now?

Considering the remote area and borderline, I clutched my cellphone. Would I have service and more importantly, what were the odds the same cop would show? I dialed 911, figuring I'd find out soon enough. After explaining my predicament, a part of me was giddy. I liked this dice roll. Or at least I would enjoy it more if I wasn't so lost and vulnerable. A shrill voice cut through the murkiness and I jumped. "Ma'am, can you see what your car is stuck on?" the 911 dispatcher

asked.

“It’s pitch black and I’m in the middle of nowhere. Should I get out and check?” I crossed my fingers she’d say no. “Yes. It will be helpful for the officers to know what you need,” she advised. “Use your flashlight on your cellphone if you don’t have one.”

Crap. I got out, shining my light. I hoped I wasn’t going to get mauled by a coyote...or a cow. But what do you know? My light roved over my magnetic sign advertising my Dee Jay services— Gigi’s Gigs. Carson must have seen it with his flashlight too. I laughed despite the dismal scene. Getting back to the matter, I checked under my wheels and saw a thick limb. Tucking my cell between my shoulder and chin, I bent down to move it, but it wouldn’t budge. However, my phone did and after a few fumbles, I caught it like a game of hot potato.

“Hello?” I called. “Still there?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Did you find the problem?”

“A big tree limb is jammed underneath. I couldn’t pull it out. Smaller branches are probably holding the undercarriage hostage.”

“Got it. Now what is your location? I’ll have the police on the way with road side assistance. “

“Uh,” I stalled, looking around. “I’m not sure. Aren’t our calls automatically traced?”

“No, we only get information from cell towers, not your exact location,” the dispatcher said. “Do you see any street signs?”

“I can’t see a thing but I might be on a farm. I was on 45 supposed to be on 173, but I must’ve veered off into the Wisconsin border. It’s pretty woodsy. Not long before this happened, a cop stopped me. Do you have any officers who usually travel this way? Maybe he would know.”

So much for relying on chance AND sounding like a doofus on top of it.

“I’ll check with the Antioch station and surrounding departments. Don’t you know any landmarks at all?” She sounded a bit aggravated and I didn’t blame her.

“Um, the officer said I was five miles from a gas station. Does that help?” My meek voice raised a hopeful octave.

“Do you have GPS on your cellphone? The map should tell you where you are.”

Of course. Duh again. I looked at my screen and activated the location device. Soon a blue pushpin pulsed. I revealed my secret whereabouts.

“Much better. I’ll send them out. Shouldn’t be long, but I’ll stay on the line until they arrive.”

“Thank you so much!” Whew, a tow truck was just the thing to free my car from the arborous clutches. I’d be on the road and home, crawling into a cup of tea in no time. It was a chilly wait so I huddled into my hoodie. An imaginary scenario entertained me. Of course all pipe dreams drum up perfect dialogue. But in real life, what witty things would I say if I faced my repeat rescuer? As I drew a blank, I realized how absurd this all was. What was up with this sudden infatuation, anyway? Sure, I was free and

single, but I didn't usually fall this fast. Maybe it was a bonding thing, like the last two people left on Earth. Or a Florence Nightingale effect... if she were a cop. Within ten minutes, a patrol car pulled up. Nerves pounded my chest. Would I even recognize him again?

The policeman approached my window shining a blinding light.

"Ma'am, you okay?"

Squinting, I rolled down the glass, then scanning the face, I knew...it was not him.

Drats! I rolled a crapshoot. Ironically, this guy fit the idiom of tall, dark, and handsome.

I stared up and noticed his Wisconsin patch.

"I'm Officer Zenda, Twin Lakes PD. You look distressed."

"Oh, it's just that...my car is stuck."

"You'll be fine. The tow truck will arrive shortly," Zenda assured. "Can I see your license and registration, please? You ran into a grove. There was a big storm here yesterday, so tree limbs are everywhere. Where are you heading?"

"Waukegan," I mumbled, gathering the paperwork. "Well, I was supposed to take an exit for gas first. I must have followed a fork."

High-pitched beeping punctuated our conversation as a truck backed up. Yay! The tow was here. When I twisted behind me, another squad car pulled in.

Reinforcement of troops seemed like overkill, but I was grateful for the help.

When the second officer checked in, my heart raced as I read the Illinois patch on his right sleeve. Next, the name tag hit the serotonin jackpot.

"Officer Carson, do you remember me?" I rushed in one breath. "The stereo girl..."

"Ah, yes," he chuckled, glancing at my car magnet. "But this doesn't look like a filling station." "I know. I'm not having the greatest night," I sighed. "I don't know how I got here. I'm not trespassing, am I?"

"No, not at all. This part of the farm is where they set up a vegetable stand. It's open to the public, Gigi."

"Gigi, like the musical?" Zenda cut in. "That's my favorite."

"Hey, my wife's too," Carson said. "I don't know how I could forget. She dragged me to it a zillion times."

My heart sank into Lake Michigan.

"Ah, 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend', right?" Zenda asked.

I expected them to break out in song and dance, so I was surprised when he aimed this question at me. "Oh, well yes, in the show I guess. But not for me, personally."

"Ah nice, a girl of simple means," Carson nodded. In spite of his praise, I forced a wry smile. Now that he was married, the chance game was no longer fun.

He opened my door and offered his hand, my grasp a diminutive contrast in his thick grip. I swear I saw a bluish-white jag zing the air, even in the brief moment we touched. If this had been a minute earlier, I would've been Bella at the ball with Edward.

Now it was just boring ole business so I wouldn't trip. As if wrestling a gator, Zenda and Carson jostled the tree limb free. With the crane hooked to my bumper, my car followed suit shortly after. A round of applause broke out. "Thank you so much!" I gushed to them all, and then a rush of panic drowned the heroic moment. "Oh no. I can't pay you," I aimed at Mo's Towing. "I only have enough to get a few gallons of gas."

"Not to worry," she said. "Just sign this and write down your insurance. If you don't have the roadside rider, we send a bill." Relieved, I filled out the form, digging out my coverage card yet again. "Good luck. Get home safely," Zenda nodded and left.

Soon Mo did the same. In the dark deadlines of two states, it was just me and Carson caught in the strobe of his twirling squad lights. "We have to stop meeting like this," I joked. "Agreed," he said. "Oh, sorry! Didn't mean to sound cold." He reached out about to pat my shoulder, but let his arm drop to his side instead. "I just meant..."

"Oh, I know," I assured. "I'd love to be off the road and in bed right now."

He bit his lip to hide amusement, folding his arms as the reflection of ruby swept his cheeks.

"Oh! I didn't mean it like that," I laughed. This time it was more than the lights coloring my face. "I just want to curl up with a book under my comfy covers." Carson chuckled. "Tell you what, I'll give you an escort to the gas station. Then I'll know you found it and you can be on your way safe and sound...and in bed," he winked. "Sure, sounds great!" I climbed into my car and turned the key. A funny flutter flipped my intuition. Was he was flirting? Nah, couldn't be.

Reassured following him, I relaxed for the first time since leaving Janie's house. I had driven this route a bunch of times after a girls' night out. Why was I having so much trouble tonight? Was I meant to meet this guy? What was his first name? Too bad he was married; this would've made some meet-cute. Okay... obviously this infatuation thing was hanging on. I grabbed the steering wheel firmer and reminded myself the dude was hitched. Did his wife worry when he worked the late shift? If he were mine, I'd be on edge all the time. "There, that should put the fire out," I nodded with finality.

In a remote location, he pulled into an all-in-one convenience and coffee stop near a rundown service pit. Hanging above the two-sided gas tank were a double row of lights. One was burned out, the other on intermittent life support. The neon sign omitted some letters as well. Instead of announcing what I guessed was Optimal Fuel & Donuts, the remaining lit characters spelled TIME OUT."

Ha! I was more than ready for a break from this crazy night. All I wanted to do was fill up and high tail it home, but the place didn't exactly look open.

In front of us, our cars' beams revealed a demolished heap of the store's remains. Carson strolled over and as if reading my mind, leaned in. "There was a fire on the coffee side about a year ago. Took down the whole works, but the gas pumps are good." "That's a relief. Thanks. I'm sorry I've been so much trouble tonight."

“No problem; it’s my job. You should be all set here. It’s a bit eccentric, but Gus is legit.” I looked around for encouragement. “Oh good. Wow, I bet your wife worries overtime with you out at these hours.” “Yeah. Well, she did. It was what we fought about most. Ex-wife,” he grimaced. “I apologize for misleading you back there. It’s still fresh so I’m getting used to it.” “Oh! No, I’m the one who’s sorry. For your pain and for bringing it up.” I rested a hand on his elbow, not really sorry at all. “Thanks, that’s kind of you.” His warm eyes invited me in like chocolate.

In the fuller light of the flood lamp, I could see his features more clearly. He was no obvious George Clooney, but he had his own brand of subtle attractiveness. Stocky build, tousled but regulation hair, crooked nose, slight acne, but his scruff covered most of it anyway. The double rescue bumped him up a few notches. “I’m not sure what’s up. I usually get home just fine. I’m not really this helpless,” I assured him. “Yeah, it’s weird. I rarely come across the same damsel in distress twice in one shift.” “So it happened before?”

“Just once. And it was a blue moon, like tonight.” He pointed to the full lunar glow above. It was the second one this month.

“Wow. Do you get extra credit for it?” I joked.

“Not officially,” Carson smiled.

Mesmerized by the vertical creases when he spoke, I nearly reached out and touched them. I imagined the scratch of his stubble and I liked the bend on the bridge of his nose, the curve of his lips—

Ping! Ping! Ping! The urgent tone of my dashboard’s S.O.S snapped me out my stare and mortified, I worried too many minutes had slipped by. Had I made him uncomfortable? I didn’t want him to think I was stalking. And worse, suddenly red, I pleaded with hope that my actions were all in my head.

“Uh, I better get some juice in this thing before the last drop idles away,” I said.

“Thanks again.”

“Good night, Gigi,” he bid with a glint, walking back to his car.

I putted over to the pump. Pulling the lever of my gas cap release, the amplifying pop jolted the silence. I climbed out and couldn’t help glancing his way again. He waved. I looked down for a second, self-conscious, but when I returned his gesture, he was gone. My eyes swept the area, but I didn’t see tail lights in the distance—in any direction! Damn, that was fast. Was he beamed up or get another call?

“Lucky!” A twinge of green bubbled for whoever it was. Maybe I should get “lost” again. I chuckled at my evil plot.

An electrifying buzz from the working bulb tasered my trance. This is no time for love, silly! Focus on the dire need at hand. The foreboding scene seconded the notion. Hmm. I could squeak about a tank’s worth out of my credit card. The way things were going, I’d better keep what little cash I had in case of an emergency.

I searched for a place to insert my card, but couldn’t find a slot. Between the

establishment's ghost town ambience and old school machinery, I was stranded on a deserted concrete island. "Okay, cash it is." I dashed over to the dim hut, hoping an attendant was on duty. Relieved to find a lump of a man wearing a smudgy mechanic's suit with the stitched name "Gus," I handed him two crumpled fives and a tentative smile. He took them with a nod and the emotion of a robot.

Back at the pump, I unleashed the unleaded handle. A flash from the florescent rod zapped, crackling like a dozen moths' execution. The ding, ding signal of a car tripped the arrival switch. I looked around hopeful. Had Carson returned? No, I was still the only customer here. Strange, it didn't go off when I pulled up. Was it a delayed reaction or was I too googly-eyed to notice? About to sink the fuel dispenser into my tank, I was startled by, "Good evening. I'm Cal. Full Service, Sir?"
I jumped, letting out a small scream.

A young, blonde attendant appeared wearing crisp, blue coveralls and a cabbie cap. He had the persona of the teenage boy-next-door, yet there was something off about him, as if he sprang off an old billboard advertising an appliance. Collecting myself, his words trickled down my ear canal.

"I beg your pardon." I ran my fingers through my short, chic hairstyle.

"I'm not asir. I'm a woman."

"My mistake, Miss. Men drive more where I come from." He took the gas hose from me. "Whoa, see this? You have to be careful." With the precision of a surgeon, he plucked a syringe free from underneath the pump handle, deposing it gingerly into a red Sharps container tacked to the island. Without missing a beat, he stuck the hose into my car's reservoir. "Window wash?"

Cal tapped a squeegee from the soaker and cheerfully streaked the glass.

"Uh, that needle wasn't there before," I defended. "How could it just mysteriously appear? And while we're at it, where are you from? Because it's the 21st century and women drive as much as men."

"1950," he replied with pep. "True, ladies do drive, but like I said, most of my customers are men, especially since the war ended. And about that other matter. Things can get tricky around here, so you better stay on your game."

He was back to fueling the car, clicking the handle to assure a proper fill-up.

"Okaaay...but watch it. I only gave Gus ten bucks. I can't pay if it goes over."

"Then you're in luck, Miss. You'll be due plenty of change."

"Whaaat?" I shot a look over at the kiosk, now brightly lit. Was it my imagination or was the outline a much younger, thinner Gus? I crept closer for a better look.

To the left, the fragrance of fried decadents rose from the shop. The wafting lured me sideways. Odd, moments ago it was a pile of rubble. Now, somehow magical, the molecules of melty glaze saturated my tongue. My stomach crunched into a sit-up,

suddenly starved. No wonder. Thirty-one tiny taste spoons had long evaporated. But yum, with the leftover cash, I could grab a pastry for the road. I could hardly wait. Over on pump island, the abrupt beat of bubblegum music bounced between the speakers. I laughed, catching the song, "Sugar, Sugar," by the Archies. I wandered back over as my favorite roller rink record whisked me away to simpler times. Funny, both beams of fluorescent rods burned brand sparkly new.

Reaching into my car, I whipped out my cell phone. Gad, it was after one o'clock! Better call Janie and relay my delays. As products of fretful parents, we made each other call when we got home after a night out. I punched the speed dial while the signal connected, hoping she was still awake.

Cal jumped in front of me. "Hey, hey, put that away. Don't you know cells blow up gas pumps?"

"That's just a myth," I assured. "It was busted years ago."

Janie answered, "Geeg?" but Cal's frown unnerved me. I followed his glare and saw the gas pump begin to smolder! Managing to squeak, "Hil'mFineJustRunningLate," before snapping my cell off, I hoped my auctioneer spiel didn't worry her more. Maybe she'll think I ran into my old boyfriend and hooked up. As if. I tossed the phone on the passenger seat like it had the plague.

The arrival ding tripped again. This time a convoy of Cadillacs roared in, leaving a chorus line of others down the road.

Now the place was hopping?

It didn't make sense. "Cal, those look like gangster cars."

"Sure do. I'd say they're 1928 armored numbers."

The speakers blared a jazzy Benny Goodman oldie.

Another ding diverted my attention as a PT Cruiser pulled in. Out on the street, caddies without headlights passed a few modern vehicles who flashed theirs as a courtesy.

"Oh no," Cal groaned. "Here we go again."

"Why? What's happening?"

For answer, the rat-a-tat of machine guns pierced the air, shooting the signalers.

I gasped, frozen in place.

Cal grabbed my hand. "Run for cover."

We ducked behind the attendant's booth.

"Oh my god! Why did they do that?" I asked.

"Gang initiations."

"Pretty harsh!" I sputtered. "The headlight flashers were just trying to help."

"Haven't you ever read chain letters?" Cal scolded.

"Chain letters?"

"Don't tell me you never received notes of caution or money schemes through the U.S. Postal Service. And you better have mailed them out to the two people listed on the

letter or you'll have bad luck for years."

"Snail mail, like the Pony Express?" I teased. "But what do gangsters have to do with it?"

"Oh, right. You're from the future times. I bet they're electronic now. Did you ever get warnings and forwarded those on? One particularly warned not to flash your lights."

"Ohhh, those emails. Yeah, they're just urban legends— and so '90s!" I laughed.

"They've evolved into social media memes now. Like, check under toilet seats in outdoor enclosures because deadly, silly ass-named spiders lurk beneath ready to poison our hiney? Tell all your friends," I rolled my eyes. "I mean, of course spiders are more likely to hide in recreational park bathrooms, but the species listed are obviously fake. In fact, all those messages are just mass hysteria spreaders, so no, I don't forward. I delete them."

"Bad juju," Cal clicked his tongue. "You sure you want to risk it?"

"Yeah, I think I'm good. Besides, I'm pretty sure the headlight hoax meant urban gangs, not prohibition gangsters."

A scuffling of wingtip dress shoes crunched the gravel behind us. I could smell the scorching scent of freshly fired sulfur as two mobsters cocked cold arsenals at the side of our foreheads.

"Oh yeah, Doll. Wanna bet a bootleg on it?" one sneered.

He grabbed my arm and another dragged Cal, marching us over to the convenience store. They shoved us inside toward the ATM.

"Give me the suds from this moolah maker or meet my little friend. Now!" His gat stabbed my back.

My eyes sent daggers to Cal. What the hell was going on?

"C'mon, we ain't got all day," the other hood snipped.

I addressed my capturer. "Sir, I-I would love to help, but I don't have my bank card."

"Stop bumping gums," he sneered. "Input your number or yours will be up!"

Panicked, I flailed for words. How could I make these old-fashioned goodfellas understand today's technology?

"The machine only spits out money after I activate it by swiping my computer card," I said, gesturing toward the slot. "Without it, I can't type in the special numbers, see? They are, uh ... like fortune teller cards."

"You mean Tarot readings?" one gangster quivered, eyes big.

"No, debit cards," I said. "Like credit cards, only the money comes from your bank account."

"Cut the mumbo-jumbo." The thug with the gun pressed it deeper into my spine.

Then Cal whispered, "Plug your pin in backward. It'll call the cops."

Why didn't I think of that? Oh yeah, because I didn't believe in these things.

However, I did like the idea of cops showing up. Obviously.

I whispered back, "Without the card, would it even work?"

Cal shrugged.

With nothing to lose, except maybe our lives, I tapped my personal identification number in reverse. The goons vanished. Whew! Cal and I exhaled, breathing easier, hands settling our chests. We ventured outside.

“Where’d they go?” I scanned the area and the Cadillacs were gone, including the ones lining the street. And there weren’t any sign of the dead cars either. Not counting mine, the PT Cruiser was the only one remaining.

“My purse! They probably stole it in their get-away.”

Anxiety gripped my throat as we ran back to the pump.

Peering in, my bag was still slumped between the armrests. Thank Goodness. A quick peek proved nothing was touched. I shut the door and sighed.

“That was close,” I told Cal, leaning against the SUV.

“See, better safe than sorry.”

I barely had time to register the fright when a shadow approached and a sheet of paper smothered my face. “Perfume sample, lady?”

“Rude, much?” I muffled.

I ducked under his arms, but not before the whiff invaded my nostrils. To my surprise, it was pleasant. “Oh, lilac. My favor—”

A warping dizziness spun me into Cal’s arms. The man and his car whirled into a vortex while I collapsed.

Cal’s voice echoed through a faraway tunnel. “Gosh, I tried to warn you.”

Next thing I knew I woke up drenched. “Oh no, did it rain? Can this night get any worse?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know how else to snap you out of the fainting,” Cal said, holding a partial bottle of water.

“I passed out?”

“I’m afraid so. Just don’t sniff any perfume samples again.”

“I’ll try.”

Cal helped me into my vehicle. “Maybe you better not drive right away. Give it a few minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I relaxed against the headrest and closed my eyes for a second. A ding called Cal away and he kept busy tending to the next car, I suppose.

A slight scurrying skimmed from my eye to my mouth. Suddenly paranoid of spiders, I was afraid to open my peepers. Since a bunch of the legends had already come true, I was sure to find the Arachnius gluteus creeping along the wrong set of cheeks. When I corralled the courage to brush off the tickle, I was startled even more. A woman in a smart suit was leaning over, her ombre hair skirting my face. She pressed a business card into my palm with urgency.

“I’ve heard the whole conspiracy from your virtual phone assistant,” she said, crushing my hand. “I’m Rio Rivera, government agent. I’ll have to take you in for

questioning.”

The cardstock cut into my flesh. “Ow, government questioning? What conspiracy?” “Don’t deny it. Strange things have been going on tonight, have they not?” When I nodded, she launched into a lecture. “And you’re the ring leader, I take it? If you don’t confess, I’ll have to scan your brain.”

“No! I’m just a customer. Cal, help! Tell...her. I... had...noth—” My speech slurred in slow motion until I lost the ability to form any words at all. Next, blinking became impossible. An alarming sensation skulked up my spine. It was like being comatose, yet conscious.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Cal bump the gal out of the way, then flick the calling card from my grip. I heard a racket to my left. He must have removed the squeegee bucket from the hook because next thing I knew, my hand was plunged into the icy, blue liquid. Specks splashed against my arm and I sure hoped they weren’t windshield wings and squashed things. After a few swishes, Cal patted my mitt dry with a paper towel. Next he reached over and plucked a sanitizer wipe from my console, dabbing away any last trace.

A few minutes later, I was able to bat my eyes. Other movement returned slowly.

“Thanks, ‘Madge.’ That. was. quite. the mani,” I tried to joke, but my speech lurched like a nervous driver hitting the brakes.

“The business card was laced with a nerve drug,” Cal said. “Let’s not accept anything else at this point.”

“Good. idea. By. the way. What’s. with. all the. loonies on the loose?” With the sensation of a stiff neck, I surveyed the best I could. The spy seemed to have split. I touched my head, still a bit woozy, but at least my speech was returning with quicker cadence.

Then a voice boomed over the loud speaker, startling me next. “Miss, please come to the booth. Your credit card is declined.”

“Well, that’s. embarrassing. for someone,” I muttered. I scanned the island, but the gas platform was empty once again.

“Miss, come see me at once!” Gus insisted.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I stumbled over.

“I didn’t... pay with plastic... Remember? I gave you cash.”

Gus leaned forward and nodded “I know, lady. But a man climbed into your back seat. I called the police so just stay put.”

“Omigod! Okay...”

I admit, instead of total fright, part of me was delighted at the prospect of Carson coming around again. Would three times be the charm? Besides, whenever the scares appeared, the young attendant always knew what to do. Full service, indeed.

“Oh wait,” I told Gus. “The man in my car is probably just Cal.”

“Who’s Cal,” he grumped. “Your boyfriend?”

"No, you know, Cal, your gas pump guy. Cheery chap, shiny cap. He's been helping me all night."

"I haven't hired anyone in decades," the boss gruffed.

I looked around to point him out, but the place was a shambles again. When I glanced at Gus, he was back to his old, dumpy self.

Hmm. Well, that explains the kid's golly-gee attitude.

"Oh, my change..." I started to say, but Gus's hard stare told me things were back to the present.

"Well, at least I have plenty of gas to get home," I mumbled. And I better get there this time. Revving up, I rolled past the pumps and realized my indicator sprang to the top. I got a bonus fill-up after all.

"Thank you, Cal!" I whistled. "Whoever you are." I was glad something went right tonight. Full service, indeed!

*Read the rest of the story in Chele's book, "The Epochracy Files," available online at Amazon, Apple, Kobo, and Barnes N' Noble.

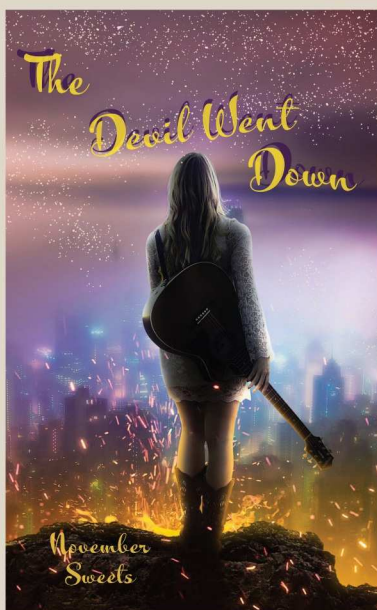
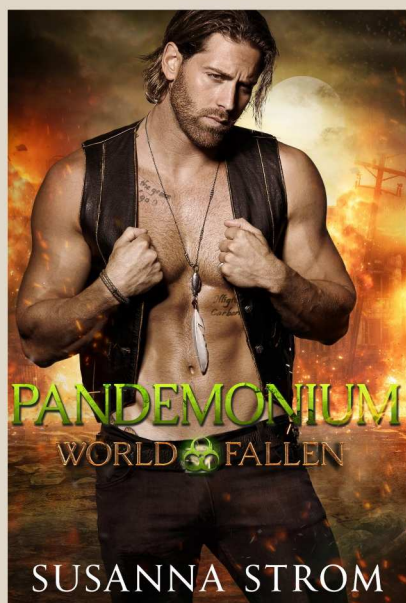


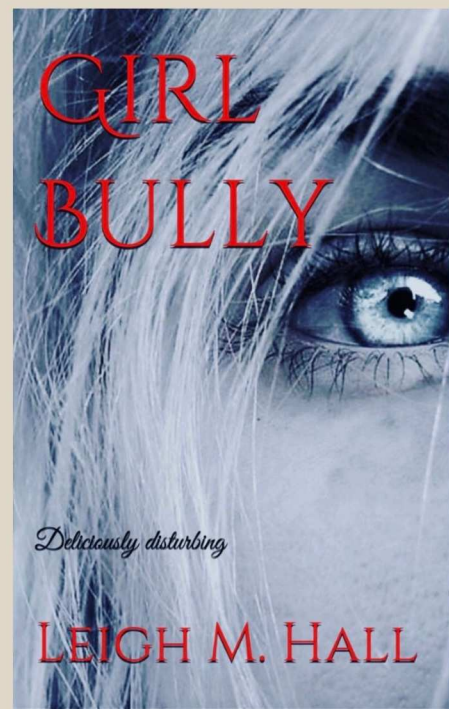
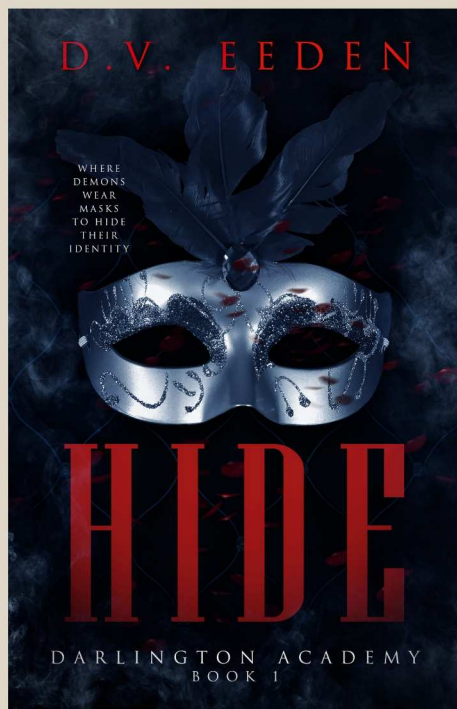
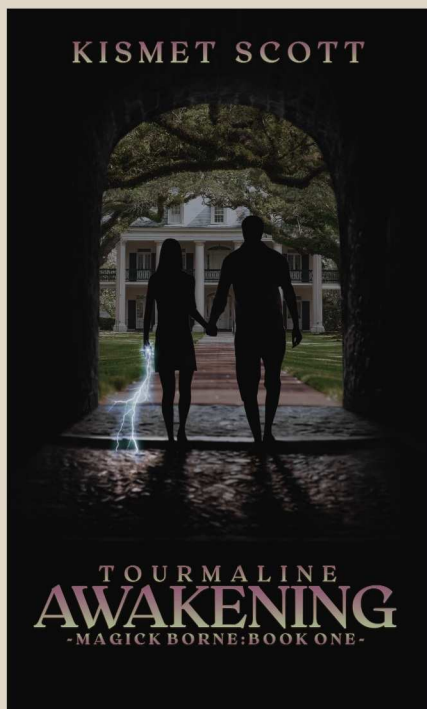
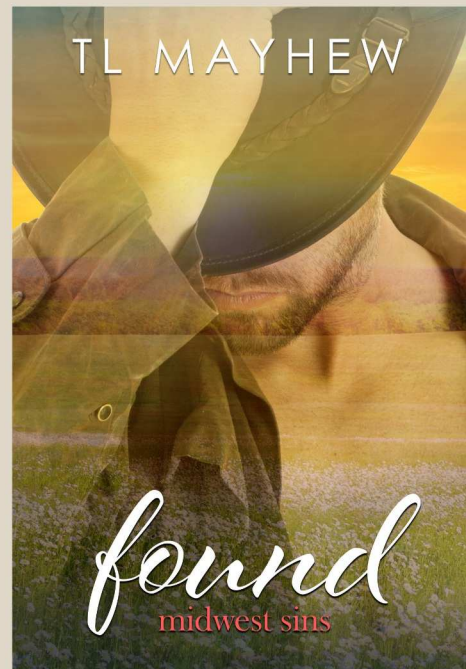
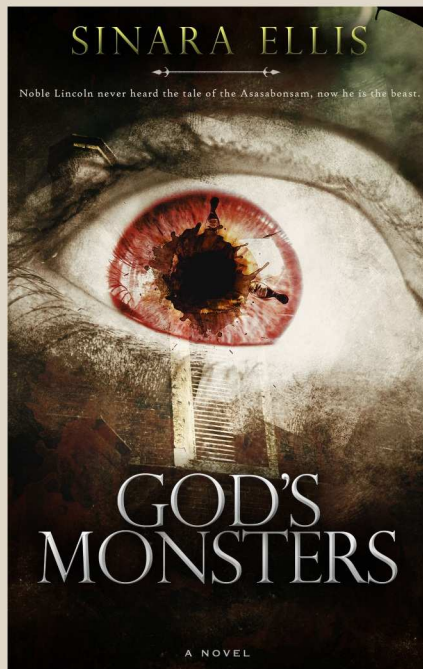
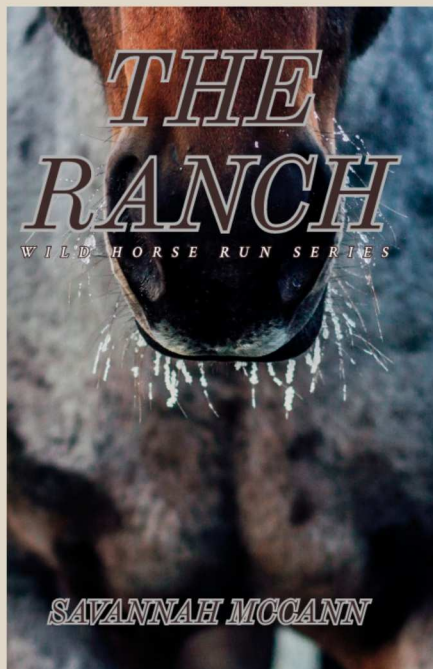




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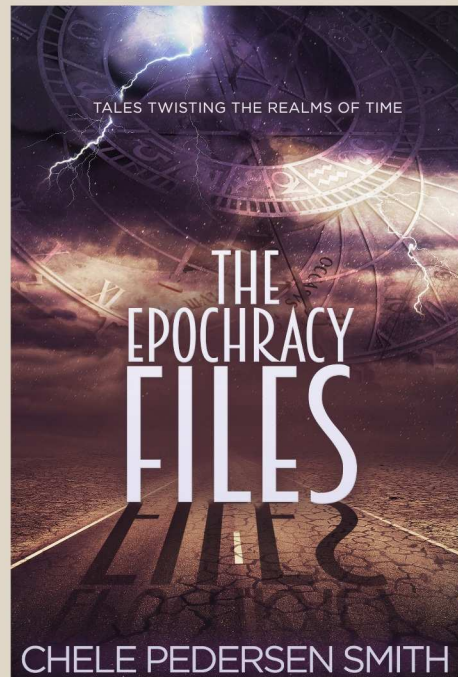
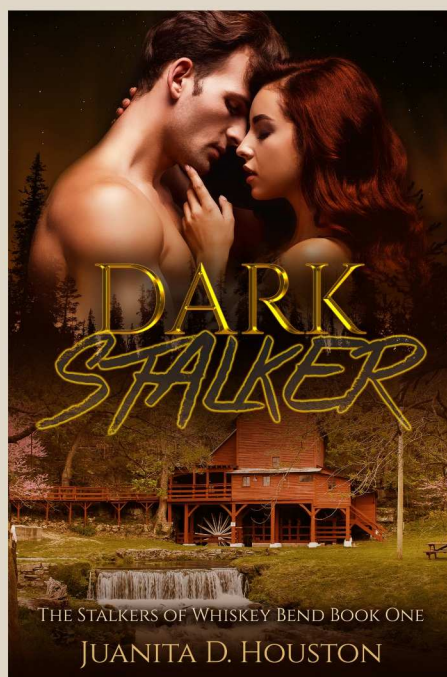
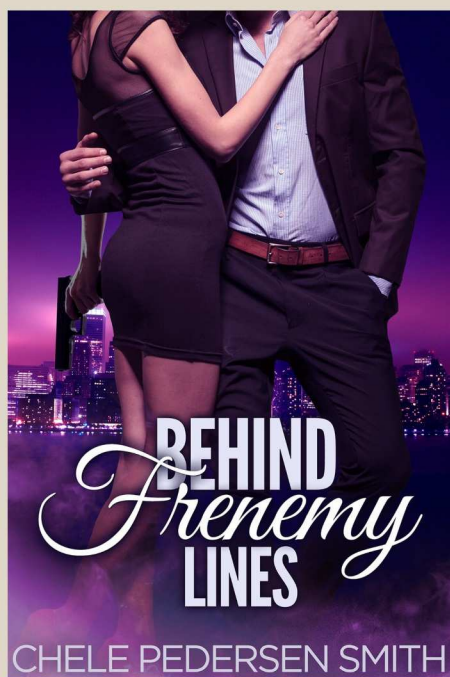
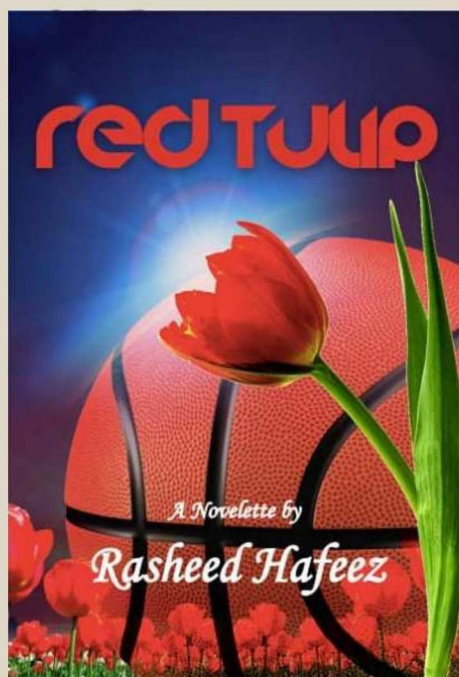
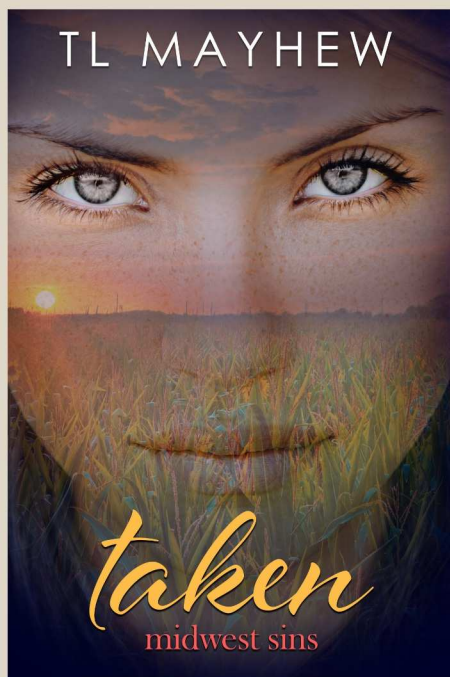


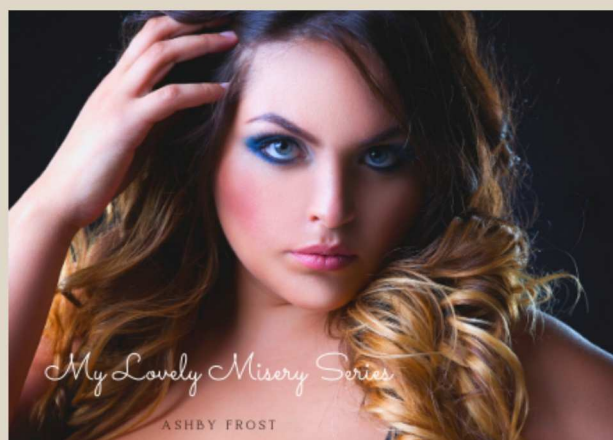
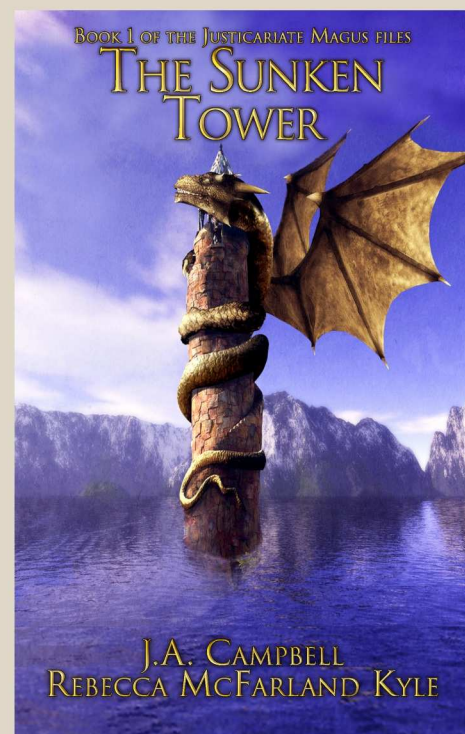
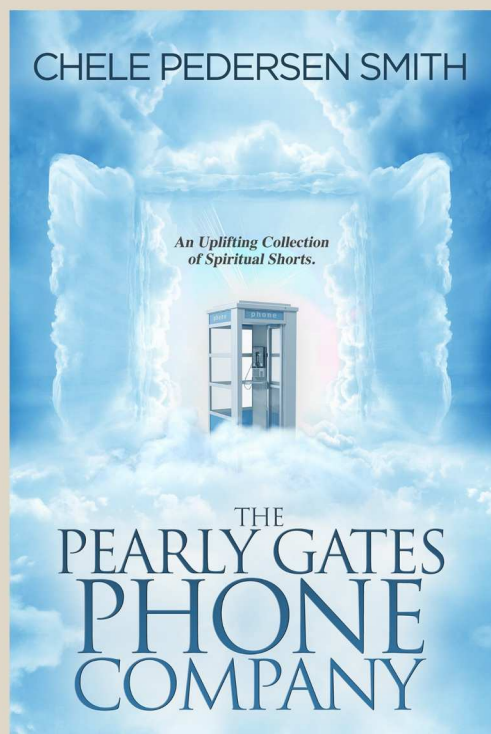


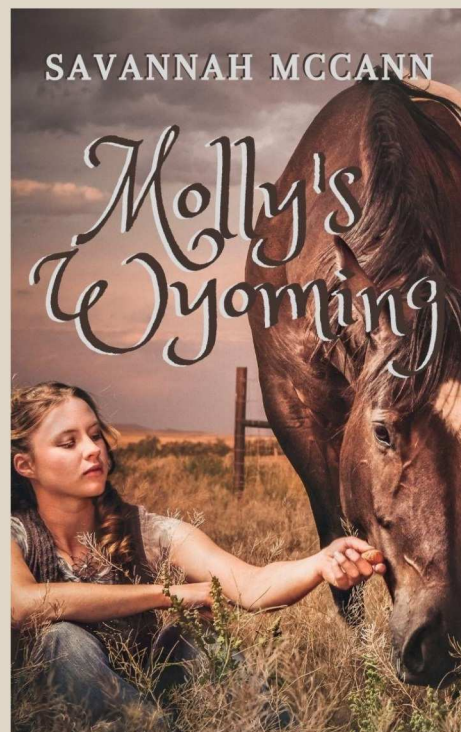
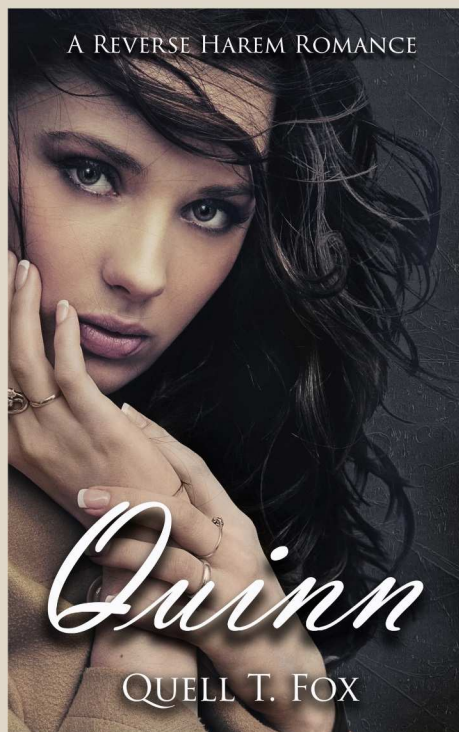
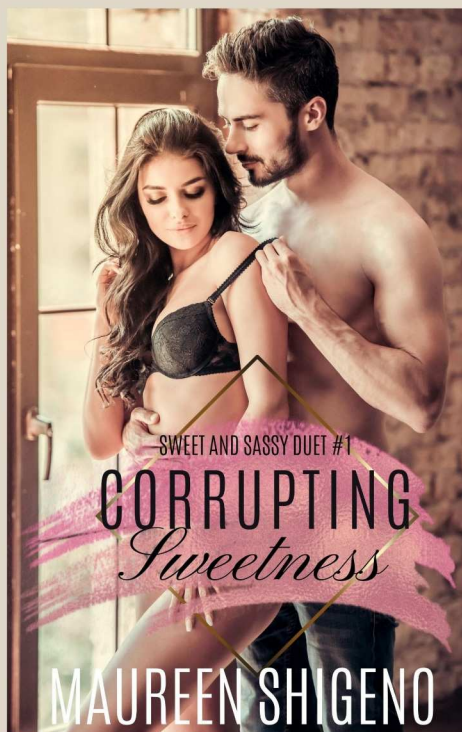
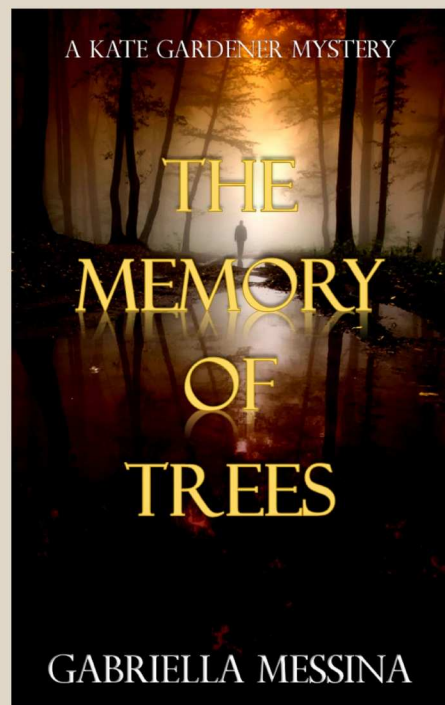
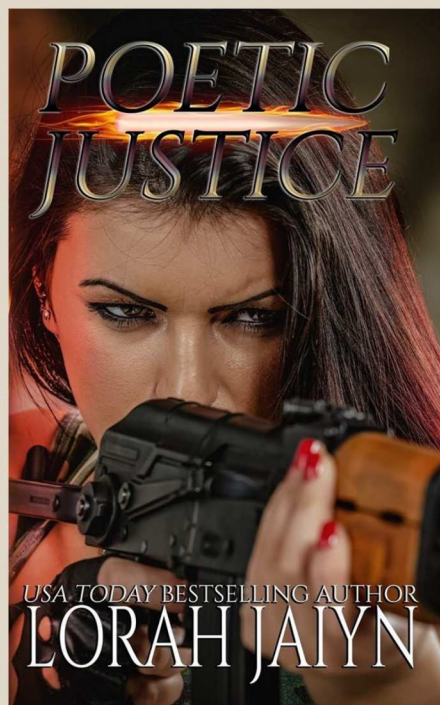
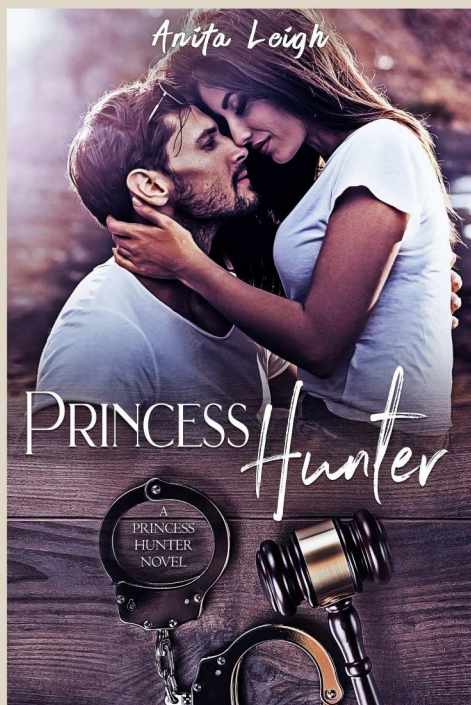
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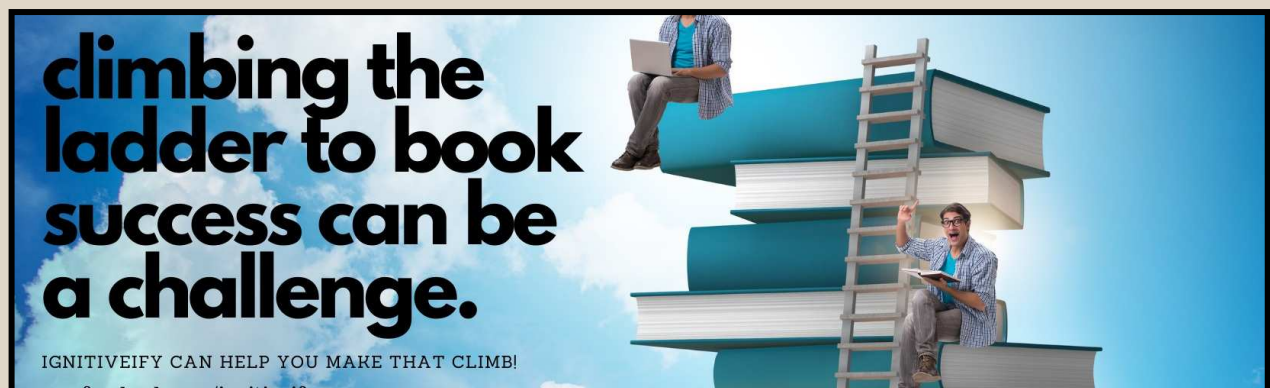
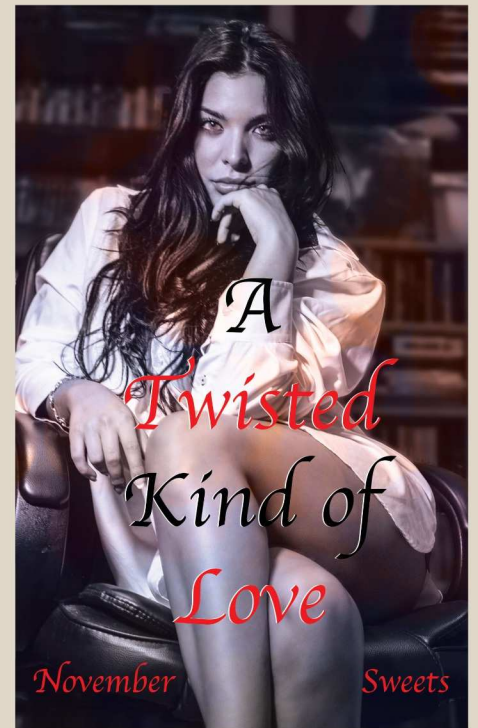
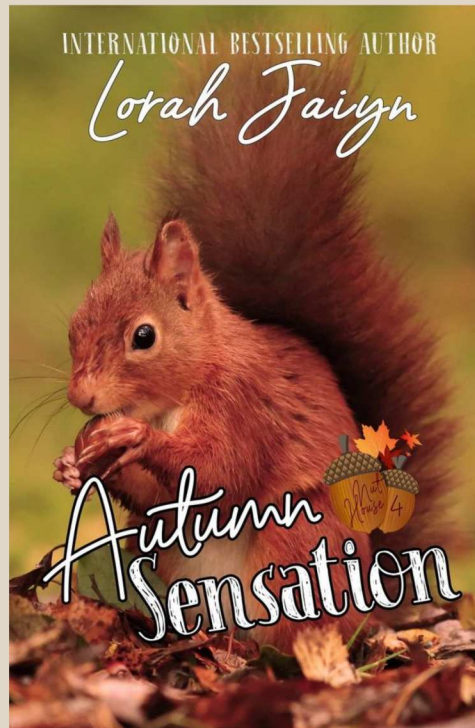
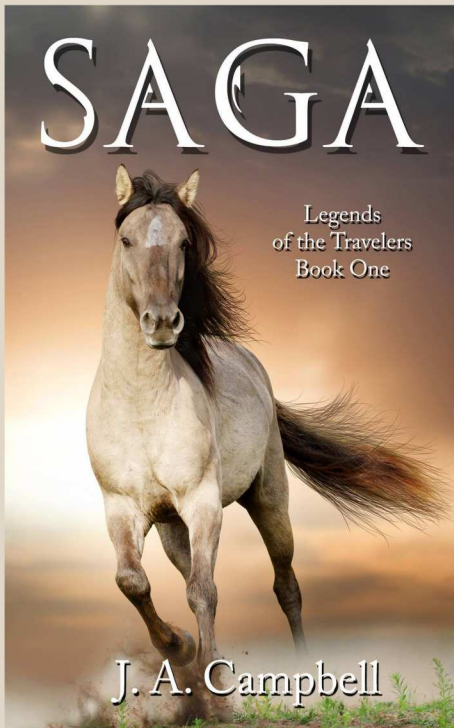
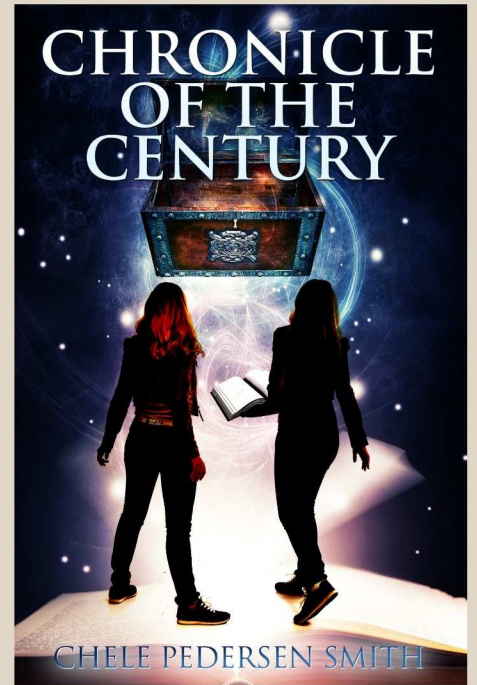
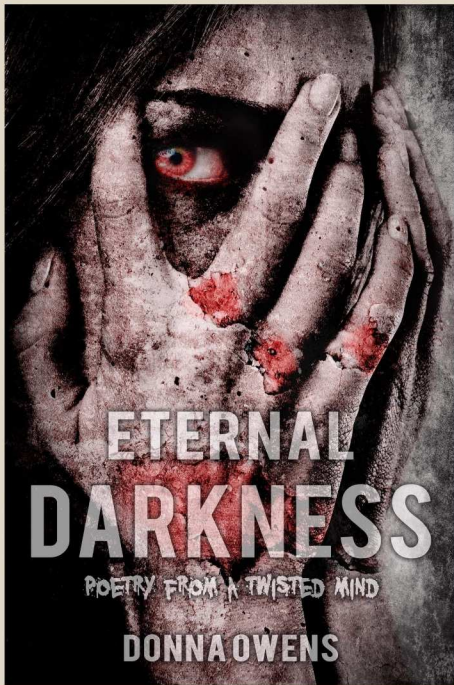


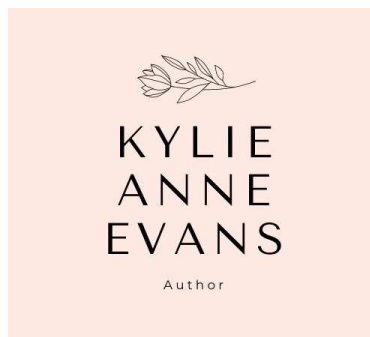


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