



# Write **ON!**

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE  
WOMEN'S FICTION WRITERS ASSOCIATION

*Fall 2017*

## **THE BEST AND WORST WRITING ADVICE**

*Plus*

**2018 WFWA BOARD CANDIDATES**

**WHAT I'VE LEARNED DURING FOUR  
YEARS AT *WRITE ON!***

**A LOOK INSIDE THE 2017 WFWA  
RETREAT**

**OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK**

**THE TRUTH BEHIND PRINT SALES**

**GRAMMAR LIGHT- COMMAS &  
CLAUSES**

**WHAT DOES A RISING STAR WINNER  
LOOK LIKE?**

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## President's Note

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Recently, I read a post by an author describing an experience she'd had in her local writers' group. Someone had requested feedback on a query letter. This author offered suggestions, only to be told, "Nope, I can't do that." The author later vented in a closed online group about the importance of being gracious when receiving feedback, especially when it's constructive, especially when it's solicited. Responses ranged from "she was just being defensive" to "some people only join groups to get praise." Yet all the authors shared the same frustration: unwillingness in other writers to learn and improve their craft.

We were all newbies once. Those of us lucky enough to have more experienced writers critique our work know the sting of hearing what needs fixing. Or, more accurately, *we know the soul-crushing pain of having others rip apart our work and stomp on our dreams*. Because that's what it feels like to get feedback, and not just as a newbie. Giving the words we've sweated and toiled over to someone and asking them what's broken makes us vulnerable. We're inviting criticism, asking others to judge our skills. Who *does* that? Writers who want to improve, that's who.

I have a beloved novel I've worked on intermittently for almost five years. This year, I entered it into Brenda Drake's Pitch Wars contest and won (I was shocked). I have a mentor! A published author selected my novel from all her submissions and gave me extensive feedback on how to overhaul it. I'm honored, thrilled, and miserable. There is so much to change. But the process has already improved my book and taught me more than I could have imagined.

For anyone hoping to be published, writing is not a solitary endeavor, and the need for input never ends. We write the first draft for ourselves, yes. Then we must revise and edit to make it readable, beautiful, and lovable for the masses. How do we learn to do this? By mining [craft books](#) for tips and inspiration, process, and instruction. By reading [the work](#) of more experienced writers, stories that make us laugh and weep and fall in love with the characters. Finally, we learn by sharing our words with [seasoned readers](#) who know how great books should sound and can help us bring out the best in our own.

This, then, is the irony of the writer's life. Many of us are introverts who toil away alone for months on end, typing up tales we're burning to tell, bringing our ideas to life. Once published, those words—no matter how polished—will draw uncensored criticism, which can be harsh and plentiful. But reviews are necessary. This is why we *must* reach out to our peers for input before sharing our work with the world. Although writing may seem like a lonely pursuit, none of us is doing it alone. We can constantly grow and improve in our craft, as long as we're willing to learn from those who've walked this road before.

Christine Adler  
WFWA PRESIDENT



# Editors

## FEATURES EDITOR

Erin Bartels writes copy for a living, but she writes novels for a life. She has worked in the publishing industry for fifteen years and has been a finalist in WFWA's Rising Star Contest and in the *Saturday Evening Post's* Great American Fiction Contest. You can find her in her home office in the middle of the Mitten State or at [www.erinbartels.com](http://www.erinbartels.com).

## LAYOUT EDITOR

Sierra Godfrey writes fiction with international settings and always a mention of football (soccer) or two. She is also a graphic designer with a soft spot for magazine layout, and a sports writer covering La Liga for online sports sites. She lives in the foggy wastelands of the San Francisco Bay Area with her family and can be found at [www.sierragodfrey.com](http://www.sierragodfrey.com) or @sierragodfrey.

## ASSISTANT LAYOUT EDITOR

K.L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women's issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word normal. Her historical novel, *Life Before*, is about two women separated by a century who discover they've shared a soul. Web: [KLRomo.com](http://KLRomo.com) or @klromo.

## MANAGING AND COLUMNS EDITOR

Stephanie Knipper is the author of *The Peculiar Miracles of Antoinette Martin*. She lives in Kentucky with her husband and six children, where she is currently at work on her second novel.


## CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Patricia Friedrich is Professor of English at Arizona State University. She is the author/editor of six nonfiction books including *The Sociolinguistics of Digital Englishes* (Routledge, 2016), the award-winning *The Literary and Linguistic Construction of Obsessive-compulsive Disorder* (Palgrave, 2015), and several published short stories. She is currently working on revisions to her first novel-length manuscript, *Artful Women*.

Write ON! is published quarterly by the WFWA.

[womensfictionwriters.org](http://womensfictionwriters.org)

 [facebook.com/WFWritersAssociation](https://facebook.com/WFWritersAssociation)

 [twitter.com/WF\\_Writers](https://twitter.com/WF_Writers)

## ABOUT THE WFWA

We began this organization in 2013 with the idea to create a safe, nurturing place for male and female writers of women's fiction. The publishing industry is morphing—with new opportunities and, as yet, unknown futures. The founders of the Women's Fiction Writers Association wanted somewhere to amass and disseminate information to and about our chosen genre.

Defining Women's Fiction has proven as subjective as the types of books we prefer. For that reason, our guiding statement is broad and comprehensive:

Stories that are driven by the main character's emotional journey.

Our stories may have romance. Or they may not. They could be contemporary. Or historical. But what binds us together is the focus on a main character's emotional journey.

*Write on!*



Join the closed WFWA Facebook group by sending an email to:

[membership@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:membership@womensfictionwriters.org)

## READER LETTERS

Like what you've read in *Write On!*? Send us a letter! We'd love to hear your feedback and reactions on the stories and features. Email them to [writeon@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:writeon@womensfictionwriters.org). Submitted letters are considered for publication and may be edited for clarity or space.

## 2017 WFWA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Vice President, Programs

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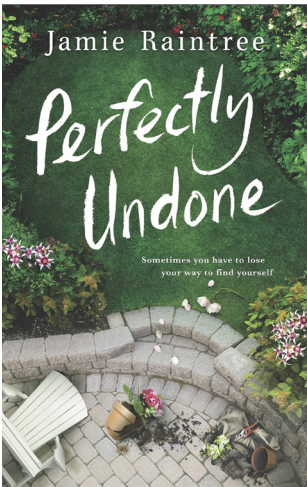
**Heather Webb**  
Guiding Scribe

**Crystal Klimavicz**  
Membership Director

## THE WFWA FOUNDING TEAM

Orly Konig	<a href="http://www.orkonig.com">www.orkonig.com</a>
Kerry Lonsdale	<a href="http://www.kerrylonsdale.com">www.kerrylonsdale.com</a>
Laura Drake	<a href="http://www.lauradrakebooks.com">www.lauradrakebooks.com</a>
Linda Avellar	<a href="http://www.lindaavellar.com">www.lindaavellar.com</a>
Marilyn Brant	<a href="http://www.marilynbrant.com">www.marilynbrant.com</a>
Maggie Marr	<a href="http://www.maggiemarr.com">www.maggiemarr.com</a>

# MEMBER Releases



PERFECTLY UNDONE  
JAMIE RAINTREE  
OCTOBER 3, 2017

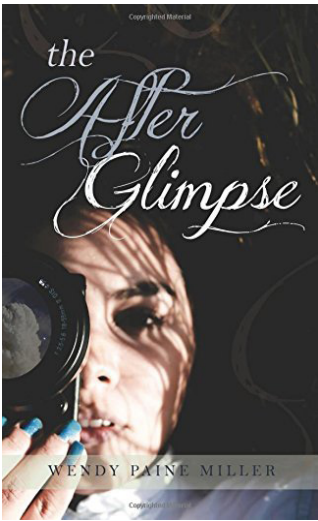
Yes is such a little word . . .

Dr. Dylan Michels has worked hard for a perfect life, so when her longtime boyfriend, Cooper, gets down on one knee, it should be the most perfect moment of all. Then why does she say no?

For too many years, Dylan's been living for her sister, who never got the chance to grow up. But her attempt to be the perfect daughter, perfect partner, and perfect doctor hasn't been enough to silence the haunting guilt Dylan feels over her sister's death—and the role no one knows she played in it.

Now Dylan must face her past if she and Cooper stand a chance at a future together. But when Cooper makes a startling confession of his own, can Dylan find the courage to define her own happiness before her life becomes perfectly undone?

Set among the breezy days of a sultry Portland summer, *Perfectly Undone* is a deeply moving novel of family secrets, forgiveness, and finding yourself in the most surprising of places.



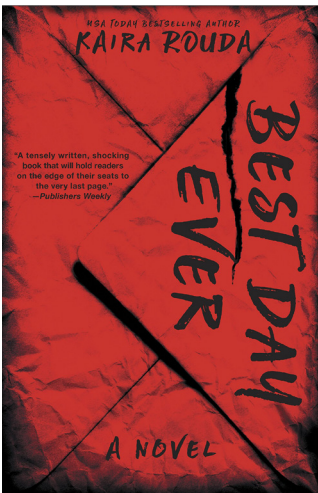
**THE AFTER GLIMPSE**  
**WENDY PAINE MILLER**  
**OCTOBER 13, 2017**

Corrine Boulder, Landon Young, and Aria Glynn share something inexplicable in common. They've all lost loved ones two years ago to the day. To the second, in fact. But that's not the only thing connecting these three.

Their loved ones are resurfacing in photographs taken within the past twenty-four months.

A toddler, a murdered sister, and a beloved dog suddenly begin appearing in photos captured after their last day on earth. Desperate for an explanation, Corrine, Landon, and Aria seek out possible reasons as to why this phenomenon might be occurring. Little manages to put their minds at ease as they wrestle with the implausible potential that maybe their loved ones are still alive.

Bereft of answers, the trio begins to understand that perhaps it's not why this is happening, but to what end that matters most.



**BEST DAY EVER**  
**KAIRA ROUDA**  
**OCTOBER 17, 2017**

*I glance at my wife as she climbs into the passenger seat, and I am bursting with confidence. Today will be everything I've promised her . . . and more.*

Paul Strom has the perfect life: a glittering career as an advertising executive, a beautiful wife, two healthy boys, and a big house in a wealthy suburb. And he's the perfect husband: breadwinner, protector, provider. That's why he's planned a romantic weekend for his wife, Mia, at their lake house, just the two of them. And he's promised today will be the best day ever.

But as Paul and Mia drive out of the city and toward the countryside, a spike of tension begins to wedge itself between them and doubts start to arise. How much do they trust each other? And how perfect is their marriage, or any marriage, really?

Forcing us to ask ourselves just how well we know those who are closest to us, *Best Day Ever* crackles with dark energy, spinning ever tighter toward its shocking conclusion. In the bestselling, page-turning vein of *The Couple Next Door* and *The Dinner*, Kaira Rouda weaves a gripping, tautly suspenseful tale of deception and betrayal dark enough to destroy a marriage . . . or a life.



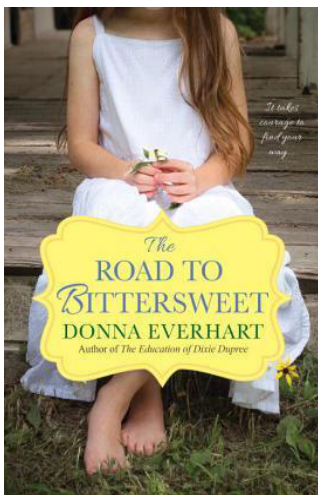
**LAST CHRISTMAS IN PARIS**  
**HEATHER WEBB**  
**OCTOBER 3, 2017**

August 1914. England is at war. As Evie Elliott watches her brother, Will, and his best friend, Thomas Harding, depart for the front, she believes—as everyone does—that it will be over by Christmas, when the trio plan to celebrate the holiday among the romantic cafes of Paris.

But as history tells us, it all happened so differently...

Evie and Thomas experience a very different war. Frustrated by life as a privileged young lady, Evie longs to play a greater part in the conflict—but how?—and as Thomas struggles with the unimaginable realities of war he also faces personal battles back home where War Office regulations on press reporting cause trouble at his father's newspaper business. Through their letters, Evie and Thomas share their greatest hopes and fears—and grow ever fonder from afar. Can love flourish amid the horror of the First World War, or will fate intervene?

Christmas 1968. With failing health, Thomas returns to Paris—a cherished packet of letters in hand—determined to lay to rest the ghosts of his past. But one final letter is waiting for him...

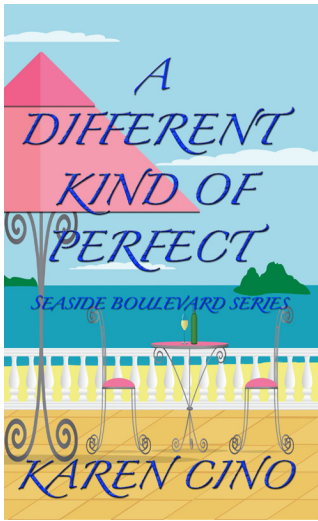


**THE ROAD TO BITTERSWEET**  
**DONNA EVERHART**  
**DECEMBER 26, 2017**

Set in the Carolinas in the 1940s, *The Road to Bittersweet* is a beautifully written, evocative account of a young woman reckoning not just with the unforgiving landscape, but with the rocky emotional terrain that leads from innocence to wisdom.

For fourteen-year-old Wallis Ann Stamper and her family, life in the Appalachian Mountains is simple and satisfying, though not for the tenderhearted. While her older sister, Laci—a mute, musically gifted savant—is constantly watched over and protected, Wallis Ann is as practical and sturdy as her name. When the Tuckasegee River bursts its banks, forcing them to flee in the middle of the night, those qualities save her life. But though her family is eventually reunited, the tragedy opens Wallis Ann's eyes to a world beyond the creek that's borne their name for generations.

Carrying what's left of their possessions, the Stampers begin another perilous journey from their ruined home to the hill country of South Carolina. Wallis Ann's blossoming friendship with Clayton, a high diving performer for a traveling show, sparks a new opportunity, and the family joins as a singing group. But Clayton's attention to Laci drives a wedge between the two sisters. As jealousy and betrayal threaten to accomplish what hardship never could—divide the family for good—Wallis Ann makes a decision that will transform them all in unforeseeable ways...



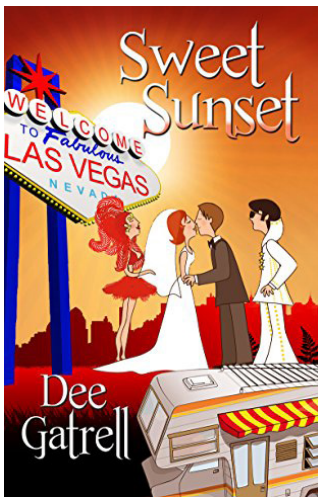
## A DIFFERENT KIND OF PERFECT

KAREN CINO

OCTOBER 1, 2017

It is the grand opening of *The Perfect Pitch*. All the pieces fall into place until Francine's diagnosis of breast cancer, throwing their lives upside down. While Amy and Jason deal with the reaction from her family to their interracial relationship, Toni finds herself in another overbearing relationship with Pelicans third baseman Gary Thompson.

In the midst of taking care of Francine and working at *The Perfect Pitch*, Richie gets a call from the owner of the Pelicans. He is offered a job as pitching coach for the team. Richie accepts the job, putting a huge strain on his marriage which affects all of them.



## SWEET SUNSET

DEE GATRELL

DECEMBER, 2017

When Myrtle Sue Henderson becomes widowed, she never dreamed she'd be saddled with the job of caring for her dementia ailed mother-in-law. But her loopy in-law troubles aren't her only family baggage—she's ailed with three adult children who use her like she's a pair of Depends. With a daughter and two grandchildren attempting to escape an abusive husband, a second unmarried daughter who is pregnant with twins, and a son who just refuses to grow up, she's at her wit's end.

With a mountain of medical bills to pay, she takes a job working at the high school cafeteria cooking. Myrtle Sue tries to find a home for her mother-in-law before the woman's antics send her over the edge. She has petrified the microwave by blowing up cans of soup, and eggs, and nearly burns the house down when she plugs in the stove and turns on the burners, forgetting she left a pan of soup to heat.

Myrtle Sue never figured she'd ever meet another man she'd care for, until she went to church to get away from her troubles, only to find more when her mother-in-law causes chaos and hits an elderly man with her cane. That's how she meets Zack Schwyer, a psychologist, who could spend his life trying to figure out her family. She figures once he meets her dysfunctional family, he'll run as fast as he can—away from them.

Wacky though they may be, Zack loves Myrtle Sue and her crazed family, and with good Southern cooking that's fit for the divine, he's sure he's found his match.



THE WELCOME HOME DINER  
PEGGY LAMPMAN  
OCTOBER 10, 2017

Betting on the city of Detroit's eventual comeback, cousins Addie and Samantha decide to risk it all on an affordable new house and a culinary career that starts with renovating a vintage diner in a depressed area of town. There's just one little snag in their vision.

Angus, a weary, beloved local, is strongly opposed to his neighborhood's gentrification—and his concerns reflect the suspicion of the community. Shocked by their reception, Addie and Samantha begin to have second thoughts.

As the long hours, problematic love interests, and underhanded pressures mount, the two women find themselves increasingly at odds, and soon their problems threaten everything they've worked for. If they are going to realize their dreams, Addie and Samantha must focus on rebuilding their relationship. But will the neighborhood open their hearts to welcome them home?

If you have a Women's Fiction novel being published in the next quarter (January through March), and would like *Write On!* to feature it, please [fill out the submission form here](#).



# What I've Learned During Four Years at *Write On!*

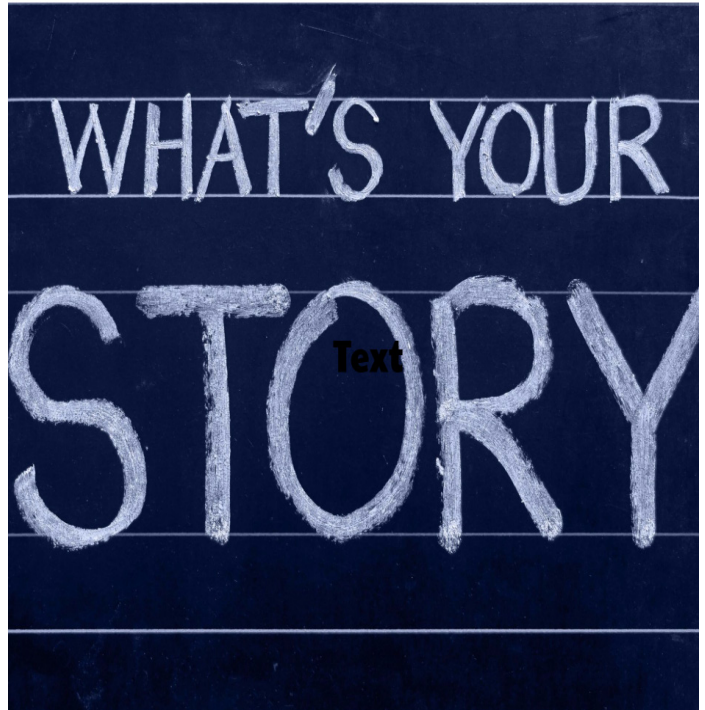
by Erin Bartels

According to my old bank statements, I joined WFWA in September of 2013. I retain no memory of how I heard about the organization, but my first distinct memory of interaction with WFWA members is when then-President Orly Konig asked me if I'd be interested in helping to get a quarterly newsletter off the ground. *Write On!* was born.

My first article in that Winter 2014 issue was called "Whatever It Takes," a piece on doing, well, whatever it takes to find the time, space, and inspiration to write. At the same time our fledgling team was producing that first issue, I was fast-drafting my second novel. I was doing whatever it took and hoping it would eventually pay off.

It did. That was the manuscript for *The Bone Garden*, which will release in January 2019 as my debut novel. There was a long road of revision, rejection, and agonized waiting after that first draft, and you can probably piece together most of the journey by reading my articles from past issues of *Write On!* in chronological order.

There were articles on how to write your first draft in just two months, how to love your WIP (even when you hate it), how to



enjoy the revision process, how to avoid burnout, why to attend the WFWA retreat, how to chase inspiration, how to get the most out of beta readers. These were all things I've had to figure out along the way, and I've gotten so much help and encouragement during each step from writers in our organization. I've learned from conversations in the Facebook group, from reading recommended articles, from discussion groups at the retreat, and from articles WFWA members and

friends have written for this magazine.

Not a week goes by without me getting something out of my association with the association. I learn from those ahead of me, right beside me, and just a few steps behind me on the path to publication. I cherish the friendships I've made and the ones I will make. And I hope that, in some small way, I've been able to make your writing journey as rich as you're making mine.

With this Fall 2017 issue, my time as the features editor for *Write On!* has come to a close. Over the next two years I'll be taking on an expanded role helping organize the Fall Retreat. I'll also be releasing two books. I'll have a lot on my plate. And anyway it's time for some new blood. I'll let my replacement introduce herself to you in the Winter 2018 issue, but suffice it to say you'll be in good hands.

I will say this, though. Had I not jumped into this organization with both feet right from the get-go, I know I would not have gotten as much out of it as I have. If you've been toying with the thought of volunteering, I urge you to make the decision to do so in 2018. The friendships, experience, networking, and opportunities are well worth the effort and time you'll spend.

After all, what you put into WFWA is what you get out of WFWA. So do whatever it takes to get the most of it.



**Erin Bartels** is a full-time marketing copywriter at an independent publisher, a freelance editor and writer, and the author of *The Bone Garden* (releasing January 2019) and *I Hold the Wind* (releasing November 2019) which was a 2015 Rising Star finalist. She is constantly learning and trying new things. The latest? Screenwriting. You can find her at [www.erinbartels.com](http://www.erinbartels.com), as well as on Facebook @ErinBartelsAuthor, Twitter @ErinL-Bartels, Instagram @erinbartelswrites, and probably a lot of other places too. For someone who rarely leaves the house, she gets around.



## 2018 WFWA

# Board Candidates

BY ORLY KONIG

WFWA CO-FOUNDER AND FOUNDING PRESIDENT

**H**ard to believe another year has passed. It still amazes me that the WFWA community has grown to almost 1,000 strong in the four years since we launched the association. It's humbling to see the amazing community we've become and, I can honestly say, it's because of our wonderful members.

Now I'd like to introduce you to the passionate volunteers who have stepped up to serve on the board for 2018.

### **PRESIDENT**

Christine Adler

### **VICE PRESIDENT, PROGRAMS**

Lainey Cameron

### **VICE PRESIDENT, FINANCE/ TREASURER**

Laura Drake

### **VICE PRESIDENT, COMMUNICATIONS**

MM Finck

### **SECRETARY**

Michele Montgomery

### **PRESIDENT**

#### **About the position:**

The President shall serve as spokesperson for the Association; call, set the agenda for, and preside over all meetings of the Board and the members; appoint, with Board approval, such committee chairs as may from time to time be necessary; serve as a non-voting ex-officio member of all committees (or assign another Board member to do so); execute Association business as specified by the Board; appoint, with Board approval, qualified members to fill any officer or director vacancies; and coordinate all activities and fulfill any other obligations designated by the Board.



## **What Christine has to say:**

### ***How long have you been a member of WFWA and what have you gained personally and professionally from the association?***

I dipped my toes into the WFWA waters at the very beginning—I joined in September of 2013! As the organization has grown, I've gained a tribe of fellow writers who have taught me countless things about the industry, the writing life, the craft, and the business. Personally, I've gained some true friendships, a place where I feel valued and appreciated and inspired to give back to the community.

### ***You're running for a second term as WFWA president. Do you feel you met the goals (and/or are on track for meeting those goals since the year isn't over yet) you set for 2017?***

The funny thing about goals is how they change over time. I started out 2017 with a list of things I wanted to accomplish, and along the way learned a lot about the membership and its wants and needs, along with the requirements to get the programs I wanted off the ground. So my goals shifted, and while some things got shelved for future implementation, other things were put into place to help the organization run more smoothly. For example, our volunteers program and its coordinator have streamlined

the process of finding suitable and eager volunteers to fill various positions as they've arisen. Having a super savvy workshop administrator helped us run some terrific programs for members this year and helped us formulate a clear idea of what requirements we need to run the kind of programs we want next year. That info was communicated to a consultant who is in the process of narrowing down the right web provider software for us, and we look forward to implementing that in the new year. My hope is that the goals we had to shelve this year will be viable options for next year as a result of this year's changes.

### ***What made you decide to run for a second term?***

I think one of the most important aspects of leadership is continuity. Being able to set short-, mid-, and long-term goals, and then staying on to help bring them to fruition, means I'll help to shape the future of WFWA. It's an organization that has become very dear to me, both professionally and personally, and I take pride in striving to make it the best it can be for current and future members.

### ***What are your goals for 2018 and what are you most excited about?***

We are looking to find ways to arrange regional gatherings among members, something I know they've been wanting for some time. We've got some new program ideas, both in terms of topics and technology, which will translate to more opportunities for members. I'm excited about the prospect of some form of mentorship program and will be working out the details for that along with other board members. I've seen many of our members flourish in their careers this year and was proud to hear how much WFWA played a part in their successes. I'm most excited to continue providing the sup-

port that members have come to depend upon and hope to see many more careers and friendships blossom in the coming year.

### **About Christine:**

Chris Adler has lived many lives in the past few decades. A former IT Help Desk Design Specialist, she spent years in customer service and IT support. But after her first child was born she started a blog and never looked back. She's the current President of WFWA and a member of the Historical Novel Society. She's also a former Editor-in-Chief of the literary magazine *Inkwell Journal*, and of the regional NY parenting magazines *Westchester Parent* and *Rockland Parent*.

Chris's articles, essays, poems, and book reviews have appeared in various print and online publications throughout the Northeastern United States and Canada, and she has a Master's degree in Writing from Manhattanville College. She's currently shopping for an agent for her first historical fiction and is at work on her second. She lives in the suburbs of NYC with her husband and two teen sons in a home that is, for the first time in ten years, pet-free. For now.

## **VICE PRESIDENT, PROGRAMS**

### **About the position:**

The Vice President-Programs shall assume the duties of the President and preside over all meetings of the Board and members in the absence of the President; be responsible for planning and overseeing all program-related activities undertaken by the Association, including those at regular meetings, workshops, and conferences; and fulfill any other obligations designated by the Board.



### **What Lainey has to say:**

#### ***How long have you been a member of WFWA and what do you think is the most important benefit of membership?***

For me, the biggest benefit of membership in WFWA has been support and encouragement from our community of writers. I'm still a fairly new author (I started my first book in January 2016 and joined WFWA shortly after that). Although there are many opportunities in terms of knowledge, craft workshops, the pitch session, the amazing retreat, it's the people that make this organization so special, the idea that we can interact with those further along the writer's journey than ourselves and get thoughtful insights and support. And in return, we can help others with by sharing our own skills and expertise. I'm thrilled to say that WFWA is the most welcoming organization that I have been part of.

#### ***You've been supporting WFWA programs for almost a year now. What have you gained personally and professionally from volunteering?***

For me, as an extrovert, the writing journey can be a lonely one. Running our online workshop program for the last year has given me a chance to share the journey and see the great work of so many talented writers. On a personal level, working on the workshops and pitch sessions has helped me to feel valuable and needed, because talking to a liquid crystal screen for hours every day without human

contact other than those damn characters chattering away in your head can actually be kind of demoralizing!

### ***What excites/intrigues you about running for Vice President, Programs?***

WFWA is growing so fast in our membership size that it's time for our technical infrastructure and our programs to grow too! Right now, we are restricted on size for our workshops and events. Some of this is a technical challenge (and the reason we are investing in a new website), but it's also because if an online event has a hands-on coach or agents involved, they can't give feedback to hundreds of writers at once. So our challenge is how to create opportunities for programs that scale, and allow hundreds of our writers to benefit.

The great news is we have a wealth of expertise and people who are willing to help within our membership. All I want to do is work out how to spread that wealth more broadly. For example, rather than only hands-on workshops (of which I want to run more), what about simple webinars with a successful author (not only WFWA members) who can share their approach to a topic and be open to Q&A? Or what about short webinars on pitching from agents? Or business topics (how to think about taxes as an author, how to maximize your productivity, etc)? These are the type of webinars and events where we could share expertise, but wouldn't have to limit the number of participants.

### ***What would you like to put in place in the coming year that we haven't seen so far at WFWA?***

Oh, so many things! In an ideal world, I'd like to get to the point where we have one online event a month, with different series running across the quarter (author talks,

craft topics, writers helping each other in workshop format), as well keeping our popular pitch session and Work your WIP.

To expand to that level, we need a team of program volunteers (hint-hint if you're reading this!). To enable that, I'd like to make it easier for members to get involved in smaller, more manageable ways. For example, a volunteer could host and communicate with one writer from outside our organization who is going to give a webinar. Moderate one discussion for a day. Research potential speakers and suggest topics for us.

If you haven't filled in the [volunteer form on our web site](#) please consider doing so, because that's where we'll pull from to invite people to participate with us as part of Team Volunteer (which needs a better name!). Also, I'm recruiting for ideas of authors to invite, topics, speakers, workshop givers, and would love your ideas on what you as a member might find helpful? There's also a [program ideas form](#) where you can send us tips for topics and speakers you'd like to hear from.

### **About Lainey:**

Lainey Cameron spent two decades as a marketing executive, immersed in the irony and absurdity of Silicon Valley. She recently dropped out of tech, became a global nomad, and is focused on honing her writing. She is active in the Women's Fiction Writers Association, where she runs the online workshop program, and trained with Margie Lawson's Immersion Program and Jenny Nash's Author Accelerator coaching.

In 2017, her first book became a finalist in the Colorado Gold Novel Contest (Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers) and won second place in the WFWA Rising Star Award for unpublished women's fiction.

## **VICE PRESIDENT, FINANCE/ TREASURER**

### **About the position:**

The Treasurer/VP, Finance handles all accounting and financial transactions including managing bank and PayPal accounts, issuing payments, reviewing PayPal and merchant account transactions, updating the annual budget, and entering data into Quickbooks Online. The position also includes monthly bank reconciliations, quarterly financial statement generation and review, and annual tax return filing. Finally, this position makes suggestions/recommendations to the WFWA Board based on financial status and budget projections.



### **What Laura has to say:**

***As one of the founding members, how would you compare where the organization is today versus the goals the founding members had on day one?***

To me, we've exceeded every goal we had! But back then, we didn't even know how large the pool of WF writers were, much less what we'd be able to offer. I'm very proud of the programs we offer, the contests, and education, not to mention the camaraderie! I'd never have guessed we'd have come this far, this fast.

***You held this position for two years when the association was first founded and now you're running for a second term, your second time around. What***

***made you want to run again and what are your goals for the position and WFWA in 2018?***

I'd like to help in the transition to our new website platform. There's a lot that goes on behind the scenes in regard to the Treasury, and I would like to see that all implemented successfully before turning over the reins to the next Treasurer.

***As WFWA continues to grow, what do you see as a key area that you, as VP Finance, can do to help support that growth?***

Now that we're a bit more established, we have more funds to expand our growth and programs. Budgeting is key; we must continue to offer value to the membership, while at the same time being realistic regarding what we choose. As a career CFO, that was my job; breaking numbers into manageable chunks and making recommendations for good decision-making. I hope to be a part of that process going forward.

***What have you gained personally and/or professionally from the association?***

Professional contacts, experience, and most of all some lifelong friendships!

### **About Laura:**

Laura Drake is a city girl who never grew out of her tomboy ways, or a serious cowboy crush. She writes both Women's Fiction and Romance. She sold her Sweet on a Cowboy series, romances set in the world of professional bull riding, to Grand Central. *The Sweet Spot* won the 2014 Romance Writers of America® RITA® award in the Best First Book category. She also published a four book, small town series to Harlequin's Superromance line. Laura's first women's fiction, *Days Made of Glass*, released January 2016.

In 2014, Laura realized a lifelong dream of becoming a Texan and is currently work-

ing on her accent. She gave up the corporate CFO gig to write full time. She's a wife, grandmother, and motorcycle chick in the remaining waking hours.

## **VICE PRESIDENT, COMMUNICATIONS**

### **About the position:**

The VP Communications is responsible for the overall communications strategy and messaging of WFWA including the development, review and execution of the Communications Plan; maintaining consistency in all internal and external communications; coordinating all communication vehicles including the quarterly magazine and newsletters; assisting the social media and web site teams with message and program opportunities; promoting appropriate successes of WFWA members, including Star Awards and Rising Star awards; assisting in managing any other messaging opportunities for WFWA. The VP of Communications will work closely with the President in all messaging and promotion opportunities, as well as fulfill any other obligation designated by the Board.



### **What MM has to say:**

***How long have you been a member of WFWA and what have you gained personally and/or professionally from the association?***

I have been a member of WFWA since its

inception. The nod goes to serendipity for seating me next to Orly Konig at a regional RWA conference lunch a few months earlier. I confessed to my new friend that, while RWA's community, connections, and craft instruction were unspeakably valuable to me, what I write isn't really "romance"—gasp!

WFWA has given me a home where I can be wholly open—no incognito, no secrets. I started out making friends on the Yahoo! Loop, then in our beloved Facebook group, while sharing our work and learning together in workshops, at three increasingly wonderful retreats, and with every entrant of two years of the Rising Star Award for unpublished fiction, which it was my passion and pleasure to chair. Camaraderie, craft, community, connections. What hasn't WFWA given me?

***What do you think is the most important benefit of membership, and what will you do to support that?***

This is an impossible question! There are many important benefits.

In addition to the parade of *c's*—camaraderie, craft, community, and connections—and in keeping with that theme, I'll add *contests* because WFWA sets the bar for women's fiction with the Star Award. The winning books of the Star are flagships for the genre. And the Rising Star Award is tremendously effective at shining a light on deserving writers and getting their work in front of agents' eyes. More than one finalist received offers of representation.

Camaraderie and community are my heart. My support of those will go on as ever. I will always do everything I can for the contests.

What I'll be able to do more of in this role is expand WFWA's *connections*. My role with *Women Writers, Women's Books* (booksbywomen.org) gives me direct contact with agents, editors, publicists, and high-profile

authors. When I believe in something the way I believe in WFWA and our members, I'm fearless about who I approach. Following current VP, Communications Martha Sessums's lead, I want to get our accomplishments and news out to a wider and more prestigious audience. I want popular websites. I want more libraries. I want every independent bookstore in the country. I want book clubs. I want your ideas.

A side benefit is that some of these connections will be with craft and industry experts who we may want as instructors.

### ***What excites/intrigues you about the position you are running for?***

The VP, Communications position was created by the Board for the 2017 year. Since that time, I've had the pleasure and opportunity to work with and learn from Martha Sessums, the first person to hold it, through the weekly Inside WFWA newsletter process and various Rising Star Award press releases. I enjoy the teamwork and fast pace involved with this position.

(I'm also really excited about learning the new website we are about to acquire which will change how we do a lot of our internal and external communications. Learning new IT skills is fun for me. Last summer, because my protagonist is an app creator, I studied and learned how to write an app. There's your dork confession for the day.)

### ***What do you see as WFWA's strengths and how what ideas do you have for further promoting those?***

WFWA itself is our strength. I want to elevate its reputation and expand its reach. Among the ideas I have are establishing relationships with key industry players (publicists, editors, reviewing bodies). I'd like to make it easy for them to invest in us, such as quick interviews and short webinars. As our brand grows, we can ask for more. My bet is that eventually they'll be asking us. I'd like to recognize those in the industry who are do-

ing good things for our genre. I'd like to offer high-profile authors of women's fiction free memberships for the same reason producers want Jennifer Lawrence. Her name attached to the film elicits instant interest and respect. I will reach out to RWA and learn from them. My idea is to pool together our resources and contacts, target new ones, and use them. We are a thousand members strong. We count award winners and bestsellers among us. They want to hear from us, even if they don't know it yet.

### **About MM:**

MM Finck is a novelist, essayist, and query letter coach, opening pages editor, and overall story analyst as [The Query Quill](#). She oversees [Women Writers, Women's Books, Interviews](#) and [Agents' Corner](#) segments. In addition to WFWA, she is also active in *Writer Unboxed* where she has been a guest contributor and in her local writers group [James River Writers](#). Her women's fiction is represented by Katie Shea Boutillier of the Donald Maass Literary Agency. She chaired the Rising Star Award for the past two years. Her work has appeared in national and regional publications, including *skirt!* Magazine and upcoming on SheKnows.com. When she isn't working on her work-in-progress *Pin Up*, you can find her biting her nails over her novel *#LOVEIN140*, which is currently on submission.

## **SECRETARY**

### **About the position:**

The Secretary shall be responsible; record the minutes of all meetings of the Board of Directors and the membership; keep Association records, including copies of newsletters, communications, Association business correspondence, committee reports, and all other official documents; mail notices; and fulfill any other obligations designated by the Board of Directors.

## What Michele has to say:



### ***What do you think is the most important benefit of membership, and what will you do to support that?***

It's hard to pick only one! My *favorite* benefit is having a tribe who not only bands together to tell stories about women's emotional journeys but actively supports writers emotionally and professionally on a daily basis. I've never met a more generous group. Whether it's the workshops, the Facebook pages, the Critique Program, or *Write On!*, there's always something to lift us up and out of solitary confinement. I'd love to help foster even more programs in the WFWA where we exchange ideas and open more professional avenues for our members.

### ***You've volunteered since day one, helping launch and then maintain the critique program. What interested you about this position instead?***

I joke that I never volunteered for the critique program but was drafted because of my critique credentials. I feel lucky that I helped establish that program and even luckier that the Board let us expand it over the last few years. Recently, very competent volunteers have jumped in to assist in the critique program so I'm ready to move to a broader organizational level. I'd like to help the Board create more services for our members, more ways for us to advance our careers, and more avenues that will bring attention to women's issues and entertainment.

### ***Are there any new directions you'd like the organization to take and, if yes,***

### ***how do you see yourself being able to champion them?***

I'd love for us to have a mentoring program. As a past mentor to many high school students, I not only have firsthand experience of how mentoring works but deep appreciation for how it impacts an individual's success. Mentoring would be a perfect fit for us, as support has always been how we roll at WFWA. I'd also like to help raise national awareness that we are an organization that not only fosters the genre of women's fiction but also supports writers at every level of their careers. My background in medical sales helped me overcome my shyness and I feel I could assist Board members in contacting publications, agents, or organizations that can raise awareness of how we support women's fiction and its writers.

### ***What have you gained personally and/or professionally from the association?***

I'd never had a drink from a margarita fountain before, so I gained that new experience. But seriously, the friendships have been the biggest personal bonus. Professionally, the information I've gleaned from the discussions at the retreats and the craft workshops has taken my writing to a higher level. I recently had a publication achievement that would never have happened if it weren't for the guidance and nudging from several of my WFWA colleagues. Their support was priceless and I enjoy returning the favor by helping other writers. Sharing information and helping members connect with people to help their career gives me a selfish high.

### **About Michele:**

Michele Montgomery writes suspenseful fiction laced with offbeat humor. Her novel, *The Disastrous Plans of Trumpet McMann* is out on query and her personal essay "We Were Snubbed by Our Dead Dog. Twice." is being published by *The New York Times*. She's a Program Coordinator for WFWA, a freelance screenplay analyst for Hollywood institutions, and has written for *Write On!* zine.



# A Look Inside the 2017 WFWA Retreat

by Orly Konig  
WFWA Founding/Past President & Retreat Chair

**F**or me, one of the highlights of the year is the annual WFWA retreat. This was our third retreat and return visit to Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town. When the founding members brainstormed ideas for this event, we weren't entirely sure what to expect or what shape it would end up taking. What we knew, though, is that we wanted something that built on the foundation of what WFWA is about—community.

The WFWA retreats are a mixture of learning, working, networking, and socializing. Each year we have a workshop presenter and then fill the schedule with writing time and discussion groups. The topics addressed during the discussion times come from a poll of the attendees. There's plenty of down time to write, read, relax, socialize, sightsee, whatever you need to make the retreat a valuable experience.

Some thoughts on the retreat from four attendees . . .

## ***What Two First Timers Had to Say***

### **Kirsche Romo:**

It was amazing to meet and mingle with



the writers I've worked with and talked to online for so many months. The wonderful authors whose betas I've read and whose novels I've read and reviewed. I've been volunteering for various WFWA programs, so I have met (virtually) many members in the process. I was so happy to put faces with the names I've come to know over the last eighteen months. Acquaintances became friends, and friends became even closer friends.

One of the best rewards as a first-timer was being assigned a retreat buddy. A "veteran" retreat-goer corresponded with me before the retreat and then made sure I felt comfortable while there, helping me along

the way. My retreat buddy was wonderful and immediately became a friend. *Jess, you ROCK!*

Everyone at the retreat was there for the same reasons, regardless of where we were in our writing process. We were all people who loved books and stories. Who better to understand us than others going through the same experiences?

The only thing I would caution newcomers about is the altitude. Even with drinking lots of water (that they said would keep the evil thin air from sabotaging my good time) it took me a full day to sneak some extra Z's and get with the program.

So if you've never been to a WFWA retreat, consider going next year. And if you have been, keep coming back for more!



### **Lisa Montanaro: Finding My Writing Tribe**

On September 20th, I made my way from Northern California to Albuquerque, New Mexico to attend my first Women's Fiction Writers Association (WFWA) Retreat. I was eager to learn more craft and apply it to my writing. I was so looking forward to the Story Genius master class with Lisa Cron, as well as the breakout discussions led by members. And those did not disappoint (more on those below)!

But while I went seeking craft and the retreat delivered on that promise, it was a writing tribe that I found. Being able to

spend quality time with other writers that I had only had contact with online in the past was very special. There were breakthrough conversations about our WIPs, sharing of frustrations, hopes and desires with regard to our writing careers, inspiring stories of publishing successes, and lots (and lots and lots) of margaritas.

My background is in the nonfiction arena. I've spent years networking in circles with authors who write books to further their business brand and share their content expertise. I didn't know what to expect in the fiction world. What I found was an amazing amount of support, warmth, raw honesty, and camaraderie. A tribe of writers, creatives, and artists with a diversity of experiences who all came together to connect, inspire, and motivate each other. What a treat!

### **Seeking Craft & WFWA Retreat Delivers**

On the craft side, the retreat included the fabulous, well researched, very-hot-in-the-writing-world-right-now Lisa Cron, who covered her Story Genius methodology with attendees. She did so with energy, conviction, and lots of humor. While the subject matter can often be dense, and I still plan to work through the content in the book on a more detailed basis, it was wonderful to have Lisa there with us live, to go deeper into the content, answer questions, and further drive the points of Story Genius home.

I admit that at times I felt that I wasn't "getting it" and, yet, I found myself experiencing some breakthroughs with regard to my WIP after having conversations with other attendees post-Story Genius master class. I think the Story Genius magic was working under the surface, creeping into our veins and influencing us on a deeper level than we may have initially realized. I have heard this point echoed by many attendees as they digested the content, let it marinate, and then

applied it to their WIPs in the hours, days, and weeks after the retreat. Many WFWA retreat attendees could be heard murmuring about their character's misbelief, a-ha moment, or worldview, further evidence that the content was sparking deep level thought that would last well beyond the event (or that those margaritas were kicking in!).

One of my favorite parts of the retreat was the group discussions, where so much sharing took place. It was fascinating to hear different perspectives from attendees, and I took copious notes in each discussion, as well as raised my hand to participate, ask questions, and interact. I felt like a kid in a candy shop! From labeling genre, to lessons learned along the way to publication, to a lively debate between pantsers and plotters, there was something for everyone.

The discussions on the last day turned to marketing, writing practices, using editors, keeping a positive mindset, and empowering yourself as a writer. I was honored to lead the discussion "Get Yourself Out There: Online and Offline Marketing for Writers," and apply my expertise as a 15-year entrepreneur and coach to the writing community. I always go by the mantra that one of the best ways to truly get to know an association and its members is to volunteer, and I am so glad I did. I learned so much from that discussion and others. I was so impressed with how open attendees were about sharing their fears and challenges, as well as insider information about what has worked for them, with no worry about giving away too much or being competitive in any way.

And that is my biggest takeaway from the retreat as a first timer. WFWA is truly an association of crusaders and trailblazers, who in turn have become givers, supporters, cheerleaders, and motivators for all of

their writing peers. I may have originally registered for the WFWA retreat seeking craft, but I am so happy that what I received was so much more. I found my writing tribe.



### ***What Two Repeat Attendees Had to Say***

#### **Amy Impellizzeri: Third time's a charm!**

This year marked my third trip to Albuquerque for the annual WFWA Retreat—a trip and an event I have come to look forward to—and it never disappoints! For me, this event has a signature feel to it—a mixture of peaceful, easy-going community and a healthy dose of as much quiet writing time as you can carve out for yourself.

It's no secret that the writing mojo in Albuquerque can be quite powerful. With no editors to talk shop with and no agents to pitch, the vibe of the annual WFWA retreat is uniquely generous. The friendships I've made and cultivated at the retreat are genuine and organic. And I usually make it a point to steal away from the writing and networking groups for a little reflective writing time. This year was no exception. The Los Poblanos lavender fields are a short Uber ride away from the hotel, and there's a fabulous coffeehouse and other writing nooks hidden away off the beaten track in nearby Old Town.

#### **This year was a blend of familiar traditions and fresh ideas.**

Frequent flyers recognized the margarita bar,

quality interactive discussion groups, the silent auction, and the peaceful serenity of our location at the Hotel Albuquerque. But 2017 also brought some wonderful additions in this repeat offender's opinion.

Lisa Cron's two-day workshop was inspirational and practical. The fact that more writing time was written into the schedule meant I could balance my schedule better and skip fewer discussion groups to just write. An extra day made the retreat feel less rushed, but I confess—it still wasn't enough and I was so sad to say goodbye!

### **Jennifer Fromke:**

My name is Jennifer Fromke and I am an RRO (Retreat Repeat Offender). A three-peat offender to be exact. And I will say, without equivocation, this year was the best. And by the way, I've never visited the margarita fountain, yet still I return.

WFWA retreat is about freedom. I love that I can attend any session or none of the sessions and nobody judges me. And speaking of the wonderful people who don't judge me, the people who attend truly make it worthwhile. I didn't talk to everyone. I still don't know everyone. It was a delightful mix of old and new friends. Because we are all friends. I talked with fascinating people about real stuff. Also, about made up stuff. I talked to people who get me. I was heard. And I think I listened extra much when I listened to you. I hope I did.

Here's the thing: the WFWA retreat is for us. Not for the presenters, planners, agents, or editors. It's for the writers. And it feels like someone who knew what I needed spent a whole year making sure that what I needed could come true at the retreat (ORLY!). I wish

everyone could experience a retreat like this. A retreat that feeds the soul of the writer. This is not the only retreat that can do such a thing, but this retreat does indeed, do that thing.

If you would like more nitty-gritty details, here's a tiny snapshot of my experience:

- Laura hugged me literally on the way into the hotel, suitcase still rolling behind me.
- My roommate and writing buddy, Christy, encouraged me nonstop.
- Lexi smiled at my idiocy when I forgot her name. I might have forgotten it twice. Then she taught me about websites and I learned that she is a ridiculously talented individual.
- I dressed up like Alison one night.
- Lisa Cron's workshop gave us a new term: the misbelief.
- I walked to Vinaigrette's for lunch without any money on me. My newest friend saved the day.
- I chatted up Amy and our conversation lingers still.
- Yoga. The porch (you've seen the photos). Chocolate drizzled popcorn and Ben & Jerry's at snack time. Name tags.
- Also, Sopapillas with Nancy on the last night. (Yes, I dripped honey all over my dress)

### ***SAVE THE DATE!***

**The 2018 retreat will be returning to Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town, September 26–30, 2018. Workshop presenter and schedule will be posted on the WFWA website prior to registration opening in February.**

## The Best and Worst Writing Advice

BY HEATHER WEBB

**H**ow many posts can we read on writing advice? I've read hundreds, bought at least a dozen craft books, and yet I always come back for more. Why is that? I'm passionate about improving my craft, but also for me it's about inspiration. I'm always hoping to find a little nugget to light a fire under me or find some fresh way of looking at an issue that has me stumped with a new project. Each book, each project, after all, has a unique set of needs. So without much ado, I'm going to share a few of my own writerly tips.

We have to begin with the very most important point:

**1. Work your butt off.** No really, WORK YOUR BUTT OFF. Writing is challenging and exhausting and time-consuming (and magical and exciting and so much fun), but there's no room for excuses. People who make excuses don't run the world. They don't finish short stories or books or become published. If you want to write, then make like Nike and JUST DO IT, and do it with all your heart.

**2. Be humble.** When a writer behaves like a special snowflake, their writing life is often an arduous one—both on the page, because of internal expectations, and also with others in the business of publishing, because



of prima donna behavior. No one likes to be around an ego-maniac or a drama queen. They aren't fun to play with, and they are especially difficult to work with. Another note on this. The most difficult thing about the publishing industry is that one minute you're flying high and full of hope and promise because you've just signed with someone or had a book release and it's selling well. The next minute, you're looking for a new agent or editor, or a book you loved doesn't sell well (or at all), and you have to fight your way to another deal. This isn't to be a downer, but to ground ourselves in reality with the best tools on our path to success. One minute we're up, the next we're back in the trenches, so it's important to remain humble and generous with others. We, the creative talent in this operation, must stick to-

gether; help each other out. And remember, we aren't better than anyone else.

**3. Surround yourself with people who inspire you.** Life is hard enough as it is. Dump the dead weight, the nags, the negative nellys, and the poor-mes. They add nothing to your life, weigh you down, and they sure as hell don't help you feel good about yourself in a difficult business. I think this is especially hard for women to do because we have a tendency to want to take care of everyone, not rock the boat, avoid drama. The best way to avoid drama is to eliminate these people from your life. You're worth it. Your passion for writing and great story is worth it. Surround yourself with people who fill you up and challenge you, not those who deplete you.

**4. Read every single day.** There is always time. Everyone can read for ten minutes before bed, or listen in the car or while cleaning or cooking or walking. Lose sleep, even just a few minutes. Reading matters. There are dozens of studies that show its direct correlation to writing skills. Not only that, but it's a terrific way to study the craft while enjoying yourself. I've learned more from reading fiction constantly than all other methods combined.

**5. Consistency matters more than quantity.** Some days we write 500 words, some days, three sentences, others 3,000. Don't judge your quantity, judge your routine, your dedication, and your consistency. The turtle wins the race.

**6. Don't compare your journey to others.** For one thing, it doesn't help us write any better or sell more books. For another it makes us feel like a loser. It's easy to be eaten up with envy in a creative business. Transform that envy to fuel, to once again

WORK YOUR BUTT OFF. And always be proud of what you've accomplished.

**7. Give yourself time to "refill the well."** If you're writing well or "correctly," it takes a monumental amount of intellectual and *emotional*, never mind creative, input. Though exhilarating, it's also exhausting. Strike out on adventures. Dabble in other hobbies or creative pursuits you love. Fill your well with richness and replenish yourself so you have more to bring to the table on that next writing day or with that next project.

**8. Be flexible about your vision.** Each book we write changes us. The direction you thought you wanted may not be the place where you end up. Be open to change. It could very well send you to the moon.

**9. Don't forget to live in the present, not just in your fictional worlds.** It's easy for us to get lost in other worlds. That's one of the biggest draws to writing. But if we don't have life experiences and interests and knowledge and skills, we would have no creative well in which to dip. Be present. Absorb. Engage. It can only make your books stronger.

**Conversely, for all the great advice out there, there's a bunch of **BAD ADVICE** as well. A few of my favorites are:**

**1. Start your own blog, especially to talk about writing.** If this is something you enjoy, go for it. But the fact of the matter is, there are hundreds of writing blogs. When you blog about writing, you're growing your publishing community (definitely a good thing), but it's NOT a way to reach readers. How many novels have you bought after reading an author's posts from their writing blogs?

**2. Write what you know.** If we did this, there would be A LOT of books about writers in yoga pants with huge piles of laundry to wade through. Snoozzzze fest. Obviously I flout this rule completely as a historical writer. You should, too. Part of what is so exciting about this passion of ours is branching out and learning, stretching and growing. So wade into uncharted waters and see what happens.

**3. Rock social media like it's going out of style.** I enjoy social media as an extrovert. Connecting with people is fun for me since I'm typically alone all day in my fictional world. That being said, the longer I'm in this business the more I realize how much social media detracts from a writer's psyche. Also? If you haven't figured out a way to reach readers online, once again, you aren't selling books. Choose which platforms you develop wisely. Doing them ALL isn't effective or practical.

**4. Write every day.** This industry is too full of "shoulds" and doesn't have enough "coulds." Sometimes you just need a break (which takes us back to refilling our creative wells). As I said before, **WRITING IS HARD**. If you don't rest once in awhile, you may find yourself in burnout mode.

P.S. If you want to write good books, it never gets easier so you must really LOVE what you do.



**Heather Webb** is the author of historical novels *Becoming Josephine* and *Rodin's Lover*, which have sold in six countries and have been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *France Magazine*, and more, as well as received national starred reviews. *Rodin's Lover* was a Goodreads Pick of the month in 2015. Up-and-coming, *Last Christmas in Paris*, an epistolary love story set during WWI, releases October 15, 2017, from HarperCollins. Heather is also a professional freelance editor with more than two dozen clients placed with agents and publishers, an amateur foodie, and a travel fiend. Find out more at her website, [www.heatherwebb.net](http://www.heatherwebb.net), and on Twitter @msheatherwebb.



# The Truth Behind *Print Sales*

BY LG O'CONNOR

**A**dmit it. As a debut author, you've dreamed of walking into a Barnes & Noble and seeing your book on the front table luring readers over to buy it. Dreamy sigh. Am I right?

It's not until you've been in the business that you understand the chances of that aren't as high as you think, unless your book was selected to receive a generous marketing budget from your publishing house.

In reality, those spots are paid placements from co-op funding between publishers and bookstores and can run upwards of tens of thousands of dollars. Nonetheless, whether an author is published traditionally, hybrid, or indie, many still have the dream of physical representation in bookstores and libraries. A place where people can see and touch their books, not just look at a thumbnail on Amazon.

I know I did.

Yet, as much as we all hunger for print, what I've found is many debut authors don't understand the deep nuances around the economics involved. The topic has spurred many a discussion between me and some of my closest author friends. Just like the dream of being in bookstores is universal among authors of every publication pathway,

so are the drawbacks. It's just that when you are in a traditional situation, it's masked by royalty systems, but it feeds into why a large percentage of debut authors never see a dime beyond their advances.



**Let's start with the basics and some averages.**

**The Industry.** Booksellers run consignment businesses. They can order as many of your books as they want, and they only have to pay for the ones they sell. All the others can be returned, sometimes up to a year later, in any condition, without penalty. Return rates run between 25% and 50%, with the largest impact coming from wholesalers and chain stores. Small independent bookstores tend to buy only a few copies due

to space limitations. But there's more. The "gray market," which has emerged recently as the controversial "3rd Party Reseller" issue on Amazon, is tied into this, but more on that below.

**Trade terms.** To have your book stocked in a bookstore, you need to offer trade terms. That means you must offer a 55% discount off the retail cover price, and make the book returnable. If you are publishing through Amazon's CreateSpace, unless they have changed their terms, your books are not returnable. That means, as an indie, no one is going to order them unprompted by you. Add to that the general bias independent bookstores have against Amazon, and you are wasting your time with expanded distribution through CreateSpace. If having a chance at being in a bookstore is a must have for you, try IngramSpark.

**Let's pause to do some math.** I know! It's the wrong side of the brain. But just stick with me here.

Retail Price = \$16.00

Manufacturing cost = \$4.00

How the Biz works for Indies (if you are traditionally published, after publisher and agent fees, you'll see \$0.60 – \$0.85 per book in this example. Hopefully, you're making it up in volume):

Retail Price (GROSS)	\$16.00
Minus Trade Discount of 55%	(8.80)
Wholesale Price	\$7.20
Minus Manufacturing Cost	(4.00)
Net Profit to Author	\$3.20/
book	



**Hurts & Return fees.** Remember when I said that bookstores can return your books in ANY condition and not pay for them? If they are damaged, they are considered a "hurt" and cannot be resold. If it costs \$4.00 to produce that book, guess how much you made for the sale of that book? You took a \$4.00 loss. That loss will be used to offset any sales on future books. Restocking / return fees are generally \$0.50 per book.

**Remember that math?** You'll need to sell more than one book to make up for the loss of that one returned hurt as an indie. As traditionally published author? Yup, you guessed it. You need to sell 3-5 more books to make up for the single loss. If 30-50% of books are returned, remember that royalty check with all those sales? That's why they withheld 25-30% of your last royalty check as a 'reserve'—to cover future returns. Keep in mind, the average traditionally published debut author sells 2,000-5,000 books, and 10,000 if they are doing really well. For indie authors, the average is 150 books and 1,500 for a 'respectable' number. Of course there are the outliers—I've met some of them—but comparing yourself to them would be like a movie extra comparing himself to Brad Pitt.

Are you starting to see the economics of print coming back to bite you in the arsenal?

It used to be that if a bookstore asked you to sign some copies of your book to leave

behind after an event, they couldn't return them. Well, not anymore from what I understand. They can return them, and guess where they can end up? Your hurt pile, as unsellable stock, or with a third party seller. So, think twice about signing those thirty extra copies.

**Backlist status.** Another thing about the publishing industry. Your book is like a ripe melon that has a shelf life. It's considered a "frontlist" title for only the first year it is out, with most of the activity occurring in the first twelve weeks after publication. Backlist is anything a year or more from the current date. If you have a series, backlist matters less than if you are a standalone novel. Generally, bookstores won't go out of their way to order backlist titles from debut authors unless they plan on having a physical event at that particular store.

The general flow of royalty checks looks something like this (at least from my publisher who pays quarterly with no upfront advance): the first two checks are high and then they slowly decline in the next two quarters when all the returns come home to roost.

**Discounters and 3rd Party Resellers.** Who are these people anyway? You may or may not see a dime on these sales. Where are they getting their books? Giveaways and ARCs tend to make their way to the secondary markets, but that's not the only source. Remember I mentioned the "gray market" above? Those hurts and returns—you know, the ones you paid the production fees on and yet didn't get paid for the actual sale? Well, I just read an article in the *New York Times* on October 12, 2017, that explains how third party sellers are buying the books that bookstores are returning for credit from the publisher or distributor, and then reselling the "remainders" or "overstock" to these bottom feeders who then turn around and sell them as "new." Bottom line: the author is not get-

ting paid for these sales, which is where the controversy lies in Amazon's new policy to allow these third party seller to bid for the "BUY" button on Amazon. Customers are inadvertently purchasing from these third party sources and the author is not getting royalties.

At the end of the day, I'll still offer print on all the books I indie publish using print-on-demand technology. Nothing compares to the actual feel of the book in your hands. Also, I enjoy in-person events and signing books. As far as bookstores are concerned? I will continue to form relationships with bookstore owners and nurture them. But if you're looking for my books in Walmart, chances are you'll only find them on their website and never in their stores.



However, my eyes are open to the impact these sales have on my overall economics, and I've made the choice to take that potential hit. With Ingram, I can always turn off the distribution machine with the toggle of a button. Honestly? Without the benefit of an Ingram Sales Rep pushing my book, the chances that I will have to are slim to none.

If you are indie, one more thing to consider: offer print through CreateSpace for Amazon-based print sales—you'll make more on those sales—and let Ingram distribute the rest. Best of both worlds.

***What about you? What are your experiences with print and your thoughts on how this contributes to your sales?***

*This article originally appeared on [www.lgoconnor.com](http://www.lgoconnor.com)*



**LG O'Connor** is a corporate marketing exec by day who takes her author cape out at night. An avid reader, she loves books with memorable characters that make her heart sing. She's the author of the urban fantasy / paranormal romance series, *The Angelorum Twelve Chronicles*, and *Caught Up in RAINE*, her contemporary romantic women's fiction debut. A native Jersey Girl, she's always in search of the perfect cup of coffee and fine Italian leather. Her perfect hero always keeps the heroine fed. You can find her new cookbook, *Recipes from Raine's Roost aka Jillian's Kitchen*, written by Raine MacDonald, the sexy hero in *Caught Up in RAINE*, on Amazon. Check out her work on [www.lgoconnor.com](http://www.lgoconnor.com).



# Overcoming Writer's Block

BY JUDITH GROUT

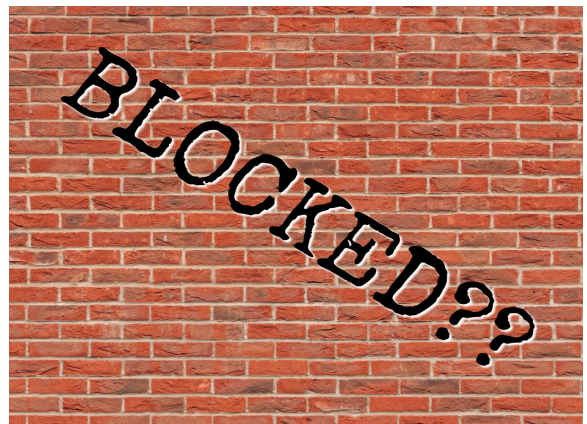
**O**f late I've not been able to write a single coherent line of prose, let alone a full article, despite my notebook crammed with fascinating notes from recent interviews. I fear my thinking has become clouded. I feel drained of inspiration. This results in frustration, which seems to lead to yet more blank stares off into space, rather than words written on the page. I feel like a rat in a maze, making many wrong turns, only to stub my whiskered nose at a dead end."

These thoughts bubble through the brain of my protagonist, Master Richmond Edgar Bishop, in my current WIP titled *Widow's Landing*. Richmond is unemployed and desperate to earn enough money to keep body and soul together at the height of the Great Depression. He casts his lot with a group of impoverished writers who've found work as part of the Federal Writers' Project. They are leaving New York City in search of stories worth publishing that will justify their pay, the princely sum of eighty dollars a month. Alas, for Richmond, this is not the best time to develop writer's block.

But is there ever a good time? How many of us have agonized over this plight, this desert of the brain? I am a scientist at heart and suspected there had to be some valid analysis of this brain freeze phenomenon

published somewhere, perhaps even a cure-all remedy. Thus my research began.

Writer's block was first described by Edmund Bergler in 1947. Not being considered a true form of mental illness, it is not made famous, or infamous, by being periodically published in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association*. But it is a condition that stymies the creative writer, with much wringing of hands and biting of lips and muttering, "What next?"



Since this condition is not considered harmful, there isn't a market for treating it, nor a specific line of medications that pharmaceutical companies can make a fortune selling. No, the affected writer must soldier on independently and, with persistence, eventually get past it and live to write again.

Here are some strategies for doing just that.

**Problem: Drawing a blank.** When you search for something to write, all you see is a blank screen. You may get several lines written down, but then you don't have another single thought to expand the opening idea. You can almost feel the word needed or the idea wanted, yet it dangles out there, taunting, mentally just out of reach.

**Solution:** Relax. Think of other things. Take a break. Take a walk. Take a nap. When your brain focuses on other things around you, suddenly the word or thought will pop into you head. Have paper handy to jot it down.

**Problem: Lack of knowledge about the current topic.** You can't expect your brain to pull out information that was never there in the first place.

**Solution:** Take time to research. Take notes. This will increase your self-confidence and the words will flow.

**Problem: Lack of inspiration.** Remember when your fifth grade teacher wrote a writing assignment on the blackboard? If you didn't have any inspiration to write about the topic, writing an opening sentence, let alone a page, was challenging.

**Solution:** Brainstorming. Think of impressions, ideas, definitions— even if they appear to be “bad” just write them down anyway. You are changing your perception of the topic and your creative juices will flow.

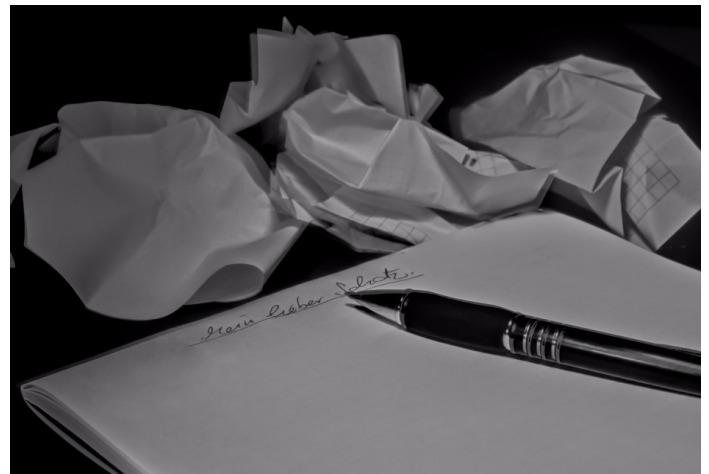
**Problem: Growing frustration.** You cannot think of anything useful to say but, because a deadline looms, you know the need to write is upon you. This causes a physical stress response in your body which starts a negative feedback loop that actually

strengthens writer's block.

**Solution:** Sit quietly, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. When troubling thoughts intrude, gently draw focus back to your stress-reducing breathing. Meditate for fifteen minutes and then return refreshed to your writing.

**Problem: Inability to focus.** Your mind drifts from the writing topic to wondering what to fix for dinner or what all your friends on FB thought of your latest post.

**Solution:** Put your nose to the grindstone after mentally setting a reward when your writing has been accomplished.



**Problem: Analysis paralysis.** A condition that occurs when your internal editor whispers, “Keep at it. You must make your writing perfect.”

**Solution:** Stop the constant analysis of what you have written. Run from perfectionism like it's the plague. Realize your first draft is exactly that—the infamous “shitty” variety. The experts tell us to just get it down. Don't critique along the way or stop to pick out the nits.

**Problem: Motivation starvation.** If you don't have any enthusiasm to complete the writing task at hand, stop beating yourself up and admit this project just isn't for you.

**Solution:** Deal with the problem head on by starting a frank discussion with the person, agent, editor, or critique partner waiting for the completed work. Agree to withdraw from the project and move on to what stimulates your interest and increases your level of satisfaction.

**Problem : Physical causes.** ADHD, alcohol or drug use, depression, fatigue, sleeping too much or too little, dementia, hypothyroidism, diabetes, Lyme's disease—the list of physiological reasons for inability to focus goes on and on.

**Solution:** Get thee to a doctor and seek medical help.

**Problem: Groove analysis.** Remember when you used to write perfectly? Effortlessly? Now you think you have lost your groove?

**Solution:** Put your consciousness to work for you, not against you. Changing your environment, taking a stroll around the neighborhood, or even taking a break from writing can help you re-center.

**Problem: Physical distraction.** Look around and decide if you are working in the best location. Can you focus here? Block out the background noise and your other responsibilities? I do not believe that any good writer can multitask.

**Solution:** I know I need a quiet place to FOCUS. No headphones, no video games handy, no FB friends to chat with. If kids, spouses, or pets are interrupting you, you may need to

get out of the house to focus.

When all else fails: coffee. Rev up your energy level with some java or an energy drink. Or find inspiration by reading a totally new genre or some inspirational poetry or quotes from a writer you admire. Call a writer friend and talk about everything *other* than your writing.

Don't let writer's block stop you from achieving your creative goals. Thinking about a sensible solution, then doing it, should mend the tear, help you get past the gap, and write freely again.



**Judith Grout** lives and writes in Glendale, Arizona. She graduated from the University of Minnesota in Clinical Laboratory Science and worked many years in healthcare. Now retired, she attended creative writing classes and published a fictional account of her mother-in-law's hitchhiking journey across America in 1939. Her current WIP is a linked story collection titled *Widow's Landing*.

## Commas:

### *Independent and Dependent-Clause Order*

BY PATRICIA FRIEDRICH, PHD

**I**f you ever wondered why “If you are busy now, I can call later” has a comma and “I can call later if you are busy now” doesn’t, this lesson is for you.

Let’s start from the beginning with definitions for dependent and independent clauses.

Independent clauses have complete grammatical meaning in themselves. Here are a few examples:

1. I slept.
2. John ate some pineapple.
3. Jane and Michael will go to a party next Saturday.

They follow a pattern of SUBJ + VERB + COMP (where complement can be an object or an appendix, such as a time or place expression).

Dependent clauses, on the other hand, do not have complete grammatical meaning on their own. They beg questions (which would be answered by their complementary independent clause). Examples include:

1. When I finish my work (What will you do? Answer: I will take a nap – independent clause)
2. If you need my help (What should you do? Answer: You should give me a call –



independent clause)

3. After Peter washed the dishes (What did he do? Answer: He put them away – independent clause)

The default order for these structures is independent clause + dependent clause. Therefore, any inversion of the default order is signaled by a comma, which means,

1. You should give me a call if you need my help.

**BUT**

2. If you need my help, you should give me a call.

**Now you try it. Comma or no comma?**

1. While I typed the telephone rang.
2. I found the answer while I searched for another piece of information.

3. You will finish the story if you turn off your phone.
4. Although I was hungry I waited to eat at home.

Key: 1. Comma 2. No comma 3. No comma 4. Comma



**Patricia Friedrich** is Professor of English at Arizona State University. She is the author/editor of six nonfiction books including *The Sociolinguistics of Digital Englishes* (Routledge, 2016), the award-winning *The Literary and Linguistic Construction of Obsessive-compulsive Disorder* (Palgrave, 2015), and several published short stories. She is currently working on revisions to her first novel-length manuscript, *Artful Women*.



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# What Does a Winning *Rising Star Entry Look Like?*

BY SHERI TAYLOR-EMERY

**T**he organizers of this year's Rising Star Award contest approached the *Write On!* staff with what we thought was a great idea: Why not share the winning entry of the 2017 Rising Star Award with our members? So, for your reading and analyzing pleasure, we present Sheri Taylor-Emery's winning entry, *The Fifty-Week Wife*.



**Sheri Taylor-Emery** has worked for newspapers and magazines for over twenty-five years as designer and art director, so she was as surprised as anyone to find that her true passion was writing. She has written two novel manuscripts and is committed to the traditional publishing route until she has as many rejections as Jodi Picoult did when she was starting out. Sheri lives in an Atlanta

suburb with her husband, a writer for CNN, her daughter Harper (yes, she was named for Harper Lee), her son Jackson, a dog, and three cats. She is an unabashed Anglophile, a hopeless romantic, and considers Baltimore her second home, though a day doesn't go by that she doesn't dream of England.

## **SYNOPSIS:**

A gate is open. A cow is in the middle of the road, and all the animals at 105 Hall Road have been left free to roam. On the nearby cliffs a woman's body is found and inside the house is her journal which reads, in part:

*For two weeks I am another man's wife.*

*There is no piece of paper binding us together. There are no rings.*

*He works in the garden and watches football. I bake pies and write. We drink wine and go to the cinema and we make love until we fall asleep with exhaustion.*

*It is a lie I tell myself, but it is the truest fourteen days of my year.*

Iris Weild, a young police officer, is one of the first responders on the scene and is tasked by her superior with reading the diary. What starts as a search for insight into the dead woman's mindset becomes a journey into a troubled woman's life: Alison's

love for her husband, Martin, and the disintegration of her marriage due to in her inability to conceive; Alison's relationship with Ian Bennett, the man she meets during her two-week sojourn to the shore in Cromer, UK.

From the time they met at University, Martin and Alison Leeds talked about starting a family. Alison is twenty weeks into a pregnancy when she miscarries for the third time. The loss sends her into a tailspin of pain and depression. Martin feels helpless and suggests his wife leave their home in the south of London and go to the coast for two weeks. Alison has always found time at the ocean to be therapeutic and books a holiday to the eastern shore of England.

She begins keeping a journal as a place to record her thoughts. Alison has so convinced herself that Martin will not continue to love her if she can't provide him with a child that she begins to pull away from him in small and subtle ways. Leaving him is a bridge too far for Alison, but she will give him every opportunity to leave her.

On her first night in Cromer, Alison meets Ian Bennett, a fellow diner at the pub where she takes her evening meal. Alison sees Ian again and they bond over a mutual love of pie. She learned to bake from her mother who owned a pie shop in their small town before she succumbed to cancer. Ian lives alone on a farm away from the centre of town, where he grows his own food as well as supplies several area restaurants and hotels with produce.

Though their relationship remains platonic she feels herself growing closer to him. She agrees to come back every summer for two weeks – a bit of news her husband is none too thrilled to hear. In the short term, Alison and Martin try to work on their marriage, but in her heart Alison considers herself broken and wants him to leave her and

build the life she thinks he deserves. Martin believes they could move on, but the continued lack of affection takes an emotional toll. Ultimately Martin finds love and a much-wanted family with another woman and Alison takes comfort in a life with Ian.

The story of the unraveling of Alison's marriage is told in flashback and dovetails with revelations from her journal as seen in real time through Iris' eyes. Iris believes Ian to be the best source of information about Alison and the reasons she took her life – the problem is she can't track him down. There is no record of him owning property or living in Cromer and none of the townspeople know of him. Iris begins to wonder if he ever existed. Was Alison's story a delusion or a diversion?

### **Following is an excerpt of the beginning:**

*For two weeks I am another man's wife.*

*There is no piece of paper binding us together. There are no rings.*

*He works in the garden and watches football. I bake pies and write. We drink wine and go to the cinema and we make love until we fall asleep with exhaustion.*

*It is a lie I tell myself, but it is the truest fourteen days of my year.*

### **— The Journal of Alison Leeds**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Spring 2016**

In her first few months on the force, Police Constable Iris Weild's days had been filled with making traffic stops and keeping an eye out for mischief-makers, so when the

call came in to the station about a cow in the middle of Hall Road, she had to chuckle.

*Well, that's something different.*

With about eight thousand residents, and encompassing less than five square kilometers, Cromer, in Norfolk County, on the eastern coast of England, is best known for its fishing and resorts. Given its popularity as a tourist haven, a row at the pub is about as serious as the police work gets.

"The mail carrier is going on about the cow, and the gate being left open at number 105," said the dispatcher, covering the phone's mouthpiece with her hand. "He's convinced something's off. Says the lady there lives alone. Alison Leeds is her name. Can someone go by and check on her?"

Iris glanced across the desk at her partner, PC Robert Sullivan, who gave her a nod of the head as he stood and put on his cap.

Five minutes later, Sullivan pulled the patrol car off the main road, stopping short of the gated entrance to number 105. The cow had moved to the side of the road and was now contently grazing in the grass along its edge.

"Wield, there's some rope in the boot," Sullivan barked at her. "Grab it and tie ole Bessie there to the fence so we're not scraping hamburger off the road later. I'll check the entrance."

Iris wrinkled her nose, thinking her partner was grumpier than usual this morning. Though less than thrilled, she went to get the rope, all the while watching as Sullivan walked over to the rusty metal gate and inspected the latch. He seemed to be satisfied with the gate ... not so with her, she thought. She could see him shaking his head as he watched her struggling to get around to the front end of a cow that was clearly not interested in being corralled.

"Wield!" he called out, his voice only half masking a laugh. "Who's in charge there? You or the cow? Come on, then."

While Sullivan waited for Iris to tether the animal to the fence, she could see him scribbling in his notebook before sliding back into the driver's side of their vehicle. Once she was back inside the car as well, Sullivan proceeded slowly down the driveway, coming to a stop after about twenty feet.

"Weild, hop out and close the gate, won't ya? Don't want anyone else calling this in to the station."

Iris clenched her jaw as she opened the door to exit. "You could have bloody well asked me before I got in the car," she mumbled as she marched back to the gate.

"What's that?" asked Sullivan.

"Nothing," she replied as she slammed it shut with a loud metallic clank.

Iris was winded after wrestling with the bovine and the sound of her panting mixed with the crunch of gravel beneath the wheels as Sullivan continued on. *One day, I'll have a junior partner and I won't be this bossy,* she thought.

She had been on the force for nearly four months and, as was the custom, younger officers were paired with their more seasoned counterparts. Iris had wanted to be a police officer since she was in her teens, but Sullivan had more than fifteen years on her in the experience department.

At University, Iris had studied Psychology and applied to the force right after graduation. It was her dream to eventually rise to the rank of Detective Inspector or perhaps even Detective Chief Inspector. The one time she had asked Sullivan about his own aspirations, he had looked at her as if she had grown a second head. He made it perfectly

clear that he was content to leave the work behind at shift's end and return home to his wife and four children.

Iris stuck her head out of the open window and allowed the sun's rays to warm her skin and melt her anger. Bright red poppies danced along the edges of the wide, unpaved path, which ended at a two-story stone structure less than a kilometer away.

She noticed a paddock on the right hand side of the road. A horse swished his tail, with no apparent thought to the open gate before him. On the opposite side, goats sauntered in and out of their pen, and exercised their newfound freedom to cross the road. Once she and Robert were closer to the house, she saw chickens pecking in the yard. They scattered as the car came to a stop near a side door.

PC Sullivan got out and stood with hands on hips, surveying the scene. "Lovely out here, innit?" he said with a sigh, as he took in a deep breath of pure, country air. "Well, let's go ask the lady why all her animals are out in the road."

Iris straightened her cap and fell in line behind her partner, following him up several narrow steps to a small porch.

The senior officer knocked at the door and waited. When there was no answer, he tried the handle and found it opened with ease.

"Hello," he called out. "This is the police. Is there anyone in the home?" Again, silence.

He nodded at Iris and continued through the door and into a large, bright room. It was an open space with no division between the living area and the kitchen. A vase of fresh flowers sat on a side table next to a slipcovered couch and sunlight streamed through massive windows that overlooked a garden. Everything appeared neat and clean to the

eye—no gathering of dust, nothing out of place.

"What's that smell?" asked Sullivan.

Iris turned her head and sniffed the air. "Not sure," she said, "but I think it might be cinnamon."

Glancing over at the counter, she noticed a pie with a latticework crust. She walked in the direction of the kitchen for a better look. Next to the pie was a nondescript brown leather book and a sheet of paper on which was written, 'For whomever finds me.'

Iris furrowed her brow. "Sullivan, come over here. I don't think this is a good sign." Iris took a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and pulled them on before flipping through the pages of the book. It appeared to be a journal of sorts, written in the same delicate hand as the note.

The officer walked over to join her and read the note. "No, that doesn't sound good at all. Sounds like suicide." Sullivan shook his head. "Who the hell bakes a pie and then goes and offs themselves?"

They both turned and looked in the direction of the back wall, which was flanked on each side by an open doorway.

"I'll take the left, you take the right," said Sullivan.

Her partner flicked his closed hand toward the wall, signaling they move in. The two officers exited into a wide hallway. A banister led to the second floor. There were two doors—one open, one shut—and both nearest to Iris. She checked the first, which was a cupboard and the second, she could see was a toilet.

"No one here," she informed her partner.

"I'll check the upstairs," he replied. "You look around back."

Iris nodded in agreement and headed for the garden. The door leading outside was unlocked and she crossed a small patio before stepping onto the wide expanse of green. The garden was filled with the remains of what looked to be a healthy size plot of vegetables. Overgrown now with grass and weeds, the stakes for beans and cages for tomatoes were still standing.

There was a small shed, which Iris checked and found it held only garden tools and potting soil. She continued on toward the back of the property and was greeted by the faint sound of the sea. The sound intensified as she moved further away from the house. Already she could see the horizon of the property and as she walked closer, it remained finite. Once she reached the furthest-most edge, all that remained were some trees, their roots thick and gnarly, surrounded by uneven gray rocks.

The sound of crashing waves was louder now, and Iris held on to one of the trees for balance as she stepped up on the stones for a look over the edge.

What she saw caused her knees to go weak and she grabbed onto the tree even more tightly for support. Three quarters of the way down the rocky cliff lay the body of a woman.

From Iris's high perch, the woman looked more like a rag doll that had been tossed aside by a child, but the pool of blood around her head suggested otherwise. Iris would never have anticipated that a call, about a cow in the middle of the lane, would have ended like this.

\*\*\*\*\*

The residents of Cromer are not prone to dying other than of natural causes, so when PC Sullivan alerted the constabulary to a possible suicide, it didn't take long for Duty Sgt. Mark Hughes to arrive at the Leeds

residence. Hughes was known around the station as a man of few words—tough, but fair and accustomed to having things done a certain way. Although Iris guessed him to be around five foot nine inches in height, when he walked into the house, he commanded the space.

Hughes nodded in greeting. "Ugly business, this. Just came up from the beach. The doctor and Scene of Crime Officers are there now. Another team of SOCOs are on the way here," he said, squinting his eyes and surveying the main room. "So, find anything useful?"

"She left a note," said Iris.

Hughes held out his hand.

"Oh, sorry," she said pointing to the counter. "Not a suicide note. She baked a pie and left a note saying it was for us."

"For us?" asked Hughes, walking in the direction of the kitchen.

"For us, what found her," added Sullivan.

"What's that, then?" he asked pointing at the book on the counter.

"Appears to be a journal belonging to the woman," replied Iris.

"Do we have an identification on the victim?" Hughes asked, looking at Sullivan, as the SOCOs began to file into the room.

"Postman who called it in says a woman named Alison Leeds lived here alone. I checked earlier and it's the name on the mail as well," said the senior officer.

"Well, let's step aside and let the evidence fellows do their job. I'm sure they'll find some corroboration but someone will need to make a formal identification. For now we'll see if the postman would be willing. I assume you have his contact information?"

“He’d already gone when we arrived,” replied Sullivan. “I’ll check with the dispatcher.” Hughes nodded and then turned his attention again to Iris.

“Weild, make sure that journal gets logged in as evidence at the station. Then give it a read to see if there’s anything there that speaks to her state of mind and whatnot. Possible next of kin.”

“Yes, sir,” Iris replied. She knew the case investigation would be turned over to detectives but she was feeling chuffed that Hughes had entrusted her with this task.

Hughes scratched his chin. “She baked a pie. Damnedest thing.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### Three years earlier

Alison smiled as she watched her husband struggle to hold up the ends of the crib while simultaneously trying to attach the middle rail.

“I’ve graduated from bloody University. How can this be so difficult?” he asked with a laugh.

After more than a decade together, she still found her husband incredibly handsome. His sandy blond hair, always ruffled, framed a pair of riveting blue eyes and when he smiled, you felt as though the gods had bestowed a gift upon you. It was not uncommon for Alison to catch other women sneaking glances at him when they were out together.

But it was Martin’s easy temperament that Alison had found most attractive once she got to know him. He helped to balance out her mood extremes, which had only worsened with each miscarriage.

Putting together this crib was a mile-

stone of sorts for the two of them. This was Alison’s third pregnancy and still they had no children. Two earlier attempts had both ended with tears. Her first miscarriage had been soon after they learned the happy news: at a mere eight weeks gestation. The second time they made it through the first trimester. Both times the sadness in them had choked their words before they could reach the surface. Then, they had held on to one another for support, each afraid that the other might slip away. Later, words of reassurance and promises to try again spilled from their lips like a river of hope. They would make another baby.

Now, here she was at a little over twenty weeks ... halfway home. With hearts full of optimism, they gave themselves permission to believe that everything would be okay and for the first time, began to ready a nursery. Each lost child had deadened a bit of Alison’s heart and her relationship with Martin had become more strained. But they were hopeful and happy again now that their goal of a family was back on track.

Alison had been on the floor for almost half an hour and was beginning to feel uncomfortable sitting in one position. Although she felt clumsy and cumbersome, she managed to maneuver herself to her hands and knees so that she might get to her feet more easily.

“Wait, honey. Let me help you,” said Martin, as he dropped the crib rail to the floor. Alison glanced up as he came to her side and she heard his breath catch. She could read the shock in his eyes as his voice broke. “Al...”

She gasped as a sharp pain tore through her. Martin helped her rise to her feet and then tears welled in his kind blue eyes. She saw it now, too—the bloody imprint where she had been sitting.

“Noooooo,” she screamed, allowing his arms to slow her collapse. Alison began to sob. “This can’t be happening again!”

“Just stay calm, love,” he said, composing himself and springing into action mode. “Let’s get you to A&E. I’ll call the doctor from the car. Perhaps it’s just heavy spotting.”

Alison knew better and she felt herself begin to shut down. It was the only way to cope with what would surely come next. She allowed Martin to steer her to the car. He forced her legs to bend and put her in the passenger seat, which he’d covered with some towels he had grabbed on their way out of the house. She slumped against the seat while Martin buckled her in. He raced around the car to the driver’s side, jumped in and thrust the key into the ignition. The hospital was ten minutes away but Martin seemed determined that it would not take that long. Alison stared out the window as the houses and shops and people with their own lives and problems, passed by in a blur. She leaned her head against the cool glass, hating that they were headed to the hospital. It was an awful place full of awful memories. She had hoped the joyful arrival of her child would change that perception, but once again, she was being denied.

Once they arrived, someone helped her into a wheelchair and pushed her inside a building. She remembered hands maneuvering her onto a trolley. Squinting, she focused her stare on the ceiling, counting the dimpled tiles as more hands attached a cuff and her body was poked and prodded. Her blouse was pulled up and her pants were pulled down as a cold jelly was applied to her abdomen. The one thing she knew with clarity was that Martin was there, holding her hand—both of them frantic to see a heartbeat on the ultrasound.

She did not allow herself to devolve into hysteria. Rather, she remained quiet and

counted. And she waited. Waited for him to say the words.

“I’m so sorry,” said the technician. He paused. “I’m afraid I can’t find a heartbeat.”

Alison turned her head to the side knowing all too well the finality of that statement. She closed her eyes and allowed quiet tears to come. She was aware of Martin’s hand leaving hers and new, strange hands cleaning her, pulling on her clothing and covering her with a blanket.

She had no idea how long she laid there, with her eyes closed, trying to shut everything and everyone out.

“Alison.” A gentle voice called her name and she felt a hand on her arm. It took all of her effort to open her eyes. Before her stood her obstetrician, Dr. Rottingham.

“Hello, love. Bad news, this,” he said. “I’m truly sorry. I had hoped we could make it through this time.”

*We, Alison thought. It’s me actually, isn’t it? I’m the one with the problem. Can’t seem to keep a baby in there.* But of course, she said none of this aloud.

“I’ve been talking with Martin,” Dr. Rottingham went on. “You’ve lost quite a bit of blood, but the ultrasound shows that there are still bits of the placenta and pregnancy in your uterus. We could wait and see if your body will expel them but you had a rather nasty infection last time this happened and I’d rather not risk it. I’d like to take you to surgery in a bit and do a D and C. Do you understand?”

“You want to ...clean me out, is it?” Alison whispered.

“That’s it, dear. You’ll be a bit sore, and there may be some cramping but that should subside in a day or two. We’ve been through this before, you and I...this loss. I know how

it knocks you to your knees. We can talk about it, once you've come back from the procedure and feel up to it."

"We will be able to try again, though?"

"Alison, dear ... don't distress yourself anymore than ..."

"I need to know," she interrupted. "You've always been honest with me. Tell me now."

Alison turned and gazed over at Martin, his head down, hands in pockets. He seemed years older than he had just twenty minutes prior.

Dr. Rottingham took her hand. "I'm going to get a tissue sample during the procedure. I have some suspicions that a biopsy could confirm, but if I'm right, you may want to prepare yourself. Trying again may not be an option."

"Martin?" she whispered.

He raised his head and stared at her. Her husband looked hollow—like a man who had been beaten down and emptied out. "I'll go round to the house and get you a change of clothes," he said. "I'll be waiting on you when you wake up."

*That's that, then,* she thought. Martin walked closer and gave her a light kiss on the lips. "I'm so sorry, Al."

"Not your fault," she said, the threat of more tears choking her words. The hands came again, this time grabbing the metal sides of her trolley. Alison watched Martin turn and disappear as she was wheeled down the sterile corridor.

She was put in a holding room with some other patients, all of whom seemed to be sedated or sleeping. Alison thought herself lucky to be next to a window where she could at least peer outside in an attempt at self-distraction.

*I was so happy, just this morning.* She wanted to grab on to that sense of joy and bury it within her so she could unearth it at a later date. She had a feeling she would need it.

Alison closed her eyes and waited. She had vague recollections of being poked again ... of tubes and needles readying her for surgery. She let her mind go to another place, another time.

She thought back to when she first met Martin.

They were both students at the University of Manchester, she a year behind him. He was studying finance, and Alison, with no clear direction in mind, had always liked to read and write so she'd chosen English as a course of study. A bit shy by nature, she found it easier to interact with the characters in her stories than she did with most people.

One day, while having lunch in the student canteen, she looked up to see a boy staring at her. Each time she glanced his way—for the whole of the twenty minutes it took her to finish her sandwich—he was still looking at her. While flattered, Alison felt self-conscious and nervous, so she gathered her books and left.

Still, she was intrigued and Alison wondered if she might see him again. She had only to wait until her next lunchtime for an answer. He was there that day and the next and every day for the next two weeks—watching her. Smiling. It became a bit of a game and at last, she found it impossible not to smile back, though she never got the courage to go and speak to him nor did he make an attempt to approach her.

Then came first semester finals and after that, the holidays and Alison didn't see her lunchtime admirer for close to a month. When she walked into class on the first day of the new term, much to her surprise, he

was there, pointing to the empty seat in front of him.

“The back of your head is not my preferred view,” he said, when she was close enough. “But I’ll take it nonetheless.”

She felt her cheeks warm as she sat down.

“Martin,” he whispered from behind her.

“Alison,” she offered in return.

After class he walked with her to the canteen.

She learned he was raised there in Manchester and had two older sisters, each who had children he adored.

Trading stories, Alison told him she was an only child and grew up on a farm, near a small town where her dad was the butcher and her mother baked pies that she sold from a small shop next door to her husband’s.

Alison liked to study Martin’s face as he talked. She found him funny and intelligent and though she had often been told she was attractive, she thought him to be the one who was beautiful. His features were delicate and bordered on feminine, but his voice was deep and his laugh had an earthy quality that Alison found delicious. And he had a scent—Paco Rabanne aftershave she would later learn—that stayed with her. The smell was fresh and distinctive and would forever remind her of Martin.

One day, midway through their lunch, another boy—this one with obsidian-black hair and moss-coloured eyes—came up behind Martin and kissed him on the neck.

“Get off, you,” laughed Martin, pushing the fellow away.

The green-eyed man grabbed a chair, turning it around so he could straddle it as he faced them.

“And who is this divine creature?” asked the intruder, chin in hand, as he smiled at Alison. “She’s nearly as lovely as you, Marty.”

“I’m Alison,” she said, extending her hand for a shake. “Not quite sure about the divine bit.”

He took her hand and flipped it over, planting a warm kiss on her palm.

“Alison, meet Sean. He likes everyone,” said Martin.

“What he means is that I’m an equal opportunity fucker,” Sean said with a smile. Alison could feel her eyes growing larger. “Although this one,” said Sean, with flip of his thumb in Martin’s direction, “won’t give me a chance. But I must say I’m chuffed to bits to meet you, Alison.”

“Don’t you need to piss off and get to class, you wanker?” asked Martin, feigning disapproval.

“Yeah. Probably should do,” said Sean, jumping to his feet and flipping the chair back around and into place. “I shall see you again, fair Alison,” he added with a wink.

“He’s the character, isn’t he?” asked Alison as she watched Sean walk away.

“You have no idea,” said Martin. “Once he realized his hitting on me would never get him anywhere, we became good friends, actually. He’s quite fun to go have the pint with.”

She smiled at the memory. Her body began to go limp and her eyelids fluttered shut. Perhaps whatever was dripping into her veins was taking effect. Alison gave in to the feeling of utter relaxation. She knew that when she woke up, Martin would be there, waiting to take her home ... a home without a baby.

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The car ride back to their house was filled with the uncomfortable silence of two people who needed a kind word but couldn't find the right thing to say, so they said nothing.

Once they were back inside, Martin helped Alison down the hall to their bedroom. The door to the nursery was shut, as if that would somehow negate its purpose. She knew without asking that he would put the parts of the crib away where she wouldn't see them. Martin had laid her dressing gown on the bed, and with great effort, she changed into it before crawling, exhausted, beneath the duvet.

"Fancy a cup of tea, darling?" he asked.

"That would be nice, thank you."

Alison winced as she tried to get comfortable against the pillows. Her body hurt, her head hurt, her heart hurt. But most of all, she was angry that she had to endure this ... again.

"Listen, I've got a call in to the office," he said, as he sat next to her on the bed. "I'm just waiting to hear back, but I'm planning on staying home with you tomorrow."

"I wish you wouldn't do that, sweetheart. I'm going to do nothing but stay in bed and rest and it seems silly. I know this is a busy time of year for you."

Most mornings, Alison drove Martin to the train for his trip into London, kept the car, and continued on to her job at a pre-school in their town. After the first miscarriage she had stopped working in a classroom because it was painful for her to be close to so many children on a daily basis. Their ruddy cheeks and runny noses, their tiny fleeces and scuffed saddle shoes, had been more than she could bear. And so, for the past three years she had worked in the office. She thought that now, even that might prove too difficult.

"Just drive yourself to the station and leave the car for your return. I won't be going out, I can assure you."

"I dunno. I feel awful leaving you all on your own."

"For fuck's sake," she exploded. "I'm not an invalid."

Martin stood, his face expressionless, but the posture of his body showed his dejection. "I'll go make that tea now."

Alison felt guilt mixing with her exhaustion. She knew he was only trying to be helpful but, her filter was shot and she was feeling vulnerable. If anything, she needed Martin to be strong right now. It made her angry to see him acting weak, though in her heart she knew that he was just hurting just as much as she was.

Martin returned with her tea and set it down on the bedside table. "Come. Sit," said Alison, patting the empty space next to her on the bed. Martin did as she asked but refused to look at her. She reached over and took his hand.

"I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to go off on you like that. You know what it's like. I'm just tired and sad and hurt right now and I took it all out on the person I care about the most and it's not fair. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," he said, putting his hand atop hers. "Just try and remember I wanted this baby as badly as you did. We're in this together, you know."

"I know," she said, forcing a smile. "Just give me a little time. A few days, and hopefully, I'll be back to myself."

"Okay, love. The doctor wants to see you for a follow up in two week's time."

"I'll be much better by then, I'm sure of it," she said as she reached for her cup of tea.

Martin rose to leave and bent down to kiss her on the forehead. “Listen Al. You need your rest. I’ll grab my suit and shave kit and I’ll stay in the other room tonight so as not to wake you when I have to get ready for work. You just have a nice lie in tomorrow morning, all right?”

To be truthful, Alison was relieved that Martin chose not to sleep in their bed. She couldn’t bear the thought of being touched. And the thought of being pitied appealed to her even less. She was empty. Even this simple conversation left her drained.

“Thank you, sweetheart. I’ll no doubt be tossing and turning so it’s probably for the best. ’Night, then.”

His things in hand, Martin shut the door, leaving Alison alone in the dim light of the bedside lamp.

She put her hands under the bedclothes and moved them down her body. Her stomach was still tender and swollen as if it, too, could not believe the child was no longer there. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine the soft flutter she felt when the baby had moved inside her, but her imaginings were as empty as her womb.

Her body had turned against her, refusing to give her what she wanted most in the world. She wondered how long Martin would continue to love her when she couldn’t give it to him either. Alison reached over and switched off the light, then sank low beneath the cover. Pulling the duvet over her head, she tried to shut out the noises of the night. The two things she couldn’t turn off were her quiet sobs and the sound of her breaking heart.

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When Martin got home the next evening, Alison was still in bed. She had lain there for hours, thinking—paralyzed by her thoughts—

and now the house was dark and the kettle cold. She could tell by his hurried footsteps that he was alarmed. When her husband came into the room she pretended to be sleeping.

“Alison, honey. Are you okay? Are you in pain? Have you eaten?” He asked, touching her arm. Alison opened her eyes and could see the concern on his face.

“Yes, no, and a bit. I’ve been taking pills for the cramps. But then they make me feel sick so I’ve been nibbling on soda crackers,” she said.

“I knew I shouldn’t have left you on your own,” he added, looking distraught.

“Relax, dear. I’m fine, just awfully tired. I could have gotten up if I’d wanted.”

What she didn’t tell Martin was that she was in the middle of a full-blown, self-pity party where she was the guest of honour.

“Why don’t I go and make you some tea. Or how does a nice bowl of soup sound?”

“Uh ... no, actually,” she said, trying to sit up in the bed. “But why don’t you give me a few minutes on the tea. I think I’ll go shower first. I’m sure I’ll feel much better after that.”

“Can you manage?” he asked, hovering above her.

Alison gave him a steely-eyed stare that suggested that indeed she could, and he backed away, hands up in surrender. “Off with you,” she said. “I’ll come to the kitchen when I’m ready.”

She put her feet on the soft carpet and shuffled toward the bureau. Steadying herself against the edge, she studied her drawn, grey reflection in the mirror. *Nothing like a little surgery on your lady bits to take the wind out of your sails.* Opening the centre drawer, she removed a fresh nightgown, and then shuffled to the bathroom. She took deep

breaths to quell the dull ache in her abdomen.

Alison turned on the water and let her nightgown drop to the floor as she waited for the room to fill with steam. The warmth felt nice against her skin as she stepped into the shower and closed the door. Reaching up, she turned the showerhead so it would rain down big heavy drops—a sort of wet self-flagellation.

Leaning against the wall, she raised her hands above her head, and thought about her babies. Martin had brought up the possibility of adoption on more than one occasion, but given the way he'd always talked about having a son or daughter, Alison knew in her heart he would never be truly happy unless he had a biological child. He may love her now, and perhaps for a while yet, but she was broken. She knew it was only a matter of time before he found someone who could give him a family.

She reached for the soap and rubbed it against her swollen belly until soft clouds of bubbles formed and were washed away, formed again, and rinsed clean. Alison backed away from the water, and raised the bar of soap high above her head. Closing her eyes, she shot her hand down into her abdomen, using it as a bludgeon. She cried out as she doubled over from the pain and prayed Martin had not heard her. Again she stood and raised her arm. Her eyes began to tear from the fiery ache. She quickened her motions and hit herself harder and harder until the soap slipped from her grasp. The pain was so intense that she nearly passed out. *Pathetic, useless body*, she thought. *What man would want you now?*

Steadying herself against the wall, Alison rinsed off and then, shaking with exhaustion, left the shower. She towed herself dry and ran a comb through her damp hair. After a quick dusting of talcum powder, Alison

slipped on the fresh nightgown and reached for her robe that was hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

Knotting it loosely around her throbbing stomach, she headed toward the hallway. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted the pain pills on the bedside table. She reached for them, and then withdrew her hand. *No*. She would learn. She would live with the pain.

Alison moved down the carpeted hall with slow, measured steps until her feet met the linoleum of the kitchen. Martin was at the sink, pouring hot water into two mugs.

“Oh, good,” he said. “Perfect timing.”

*He is kind*, she thought. *He is trying to help. Remember that.*

Martin walked over and set the cups on the table as she lowered herself into a chair, teeth clenched as she strained to keep a groan from escaping her lips.

“Your colour is better after the shower,” Martin said.

She raised her mug and made an effort to smile. She knew it was only the heat of the water that had caused her skin to flush. The warmth of the drink felt nice against her throat. Between sips of tea, she made an announcement.

“I’d like to call the preschool tomorrow and quit my job.” She braced herself again, this time for Martin’s reaction.

Her husband set his cup down and thought for a moment, seeming to measure his words. “Do you think that’s wise?” he asked. “It gives you something to do, and it’s not as though we can afford to lose the income.”

“I’ll find something else,” said Alison, looking up to meet his eyes. “It just makes

me too sad. Besides, I still have the inheritance money from my parents.”

Alison and Martin had been married less than three years when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was a fast-moving cancer that took her from her daughter and husband in a mere six months’ time and Alison had spent the last few weeks of her mother’s life helping to care for her. Her poor father was too distraught to manage it. Through it all her mother remained unflinchingly polite and even later, when she could no longer summon the words, she would do her best to smile at the nurse who came by each day. Alison doubted she could exhibit such grace should she ever find herself in that position.

Her father closed his wife’s pie shop when she became ill and though he kept the butcher shop open, he had no joy in his work. Not two years later, he passed away from a stroke. Alison was convinced his heart was broken and he could not continue on. After his death, Alison found someone willing to buy the business and that left her with a not inconsequential amount of cash.

“But it’s your money, to do with as you wish,” said Martin, his voice raising as if gearing up for an argument. “It’s not meant for household expenses.”

“If it gives me the freedom to not go back to the preschool, then it is being used as I wish,” she whispered. “I can’t face the children.”

“I understand,” said Martin, pushing himself back from the table. “It’s too soon. Hopefully with time ...”

“I really can’t think much more ahead than this,” she interrupted, as the tiredness crept back into her voice and her bones.

They sat in silence, sipping their tea. Martin began to stir his drink and each scrape

of the spoon against china caused his wife to wince internally.

At last he broke the stillness. “Do you have any plans for tomorrow?” he asked.

“I thought I might stay in bed and wallow in self pity for a bit,” Alison answered.

Martin shook his head, looking like someone struggling to find the right words of comfort. “You know, Dr. Rottingham said it’s quite normal to feel a bit depressed, considering what you’ve been through.”

“Normal?” asked Alison, through clenched teeth, anger suddenly overriding her exhaustion. “Normal is a baby sleeping in that crib in the next room.”

“Perhaps I should call him. Get some anti-depressants to get you over the hump.”

“You know I hate those. I tried them the last two times and they made me feel worse. I shuffled about like a zombie,” she said, her ire growing at having to defend herself.

“And how is that different from the way you’re feeling at the moment?”

As soon as he spoke, Alison’s head shot upward. She could tell from the look on his face, that her husband knew he had made a massive error in judgment. Alison stood and let her rage propel her toward the kitchen counter. She put her cup in the sink with such force that the handle broke.

She watched as Martin’s head sank and his shoulders slumped forward. “I’m sorry, Al. Really. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

Turning her back to him, she began to rub the jagged edge of the cup against her wrist. She watched as a thin rivulet of blood broke through to the skin’s surface. In the past, she’d cut herself. Not often, and not where Martin might see. Just as it had helped then,

now the pain caused her anger to ebb, and she exhaled, counting to ten in her head.

“Why don’t you go ahead and quit your job tomorrow, then?” said Martin in an attempt to make peace. “We’ll sort it all out. Perhaps you could take some time and go to the coast,” he suggested, grasping for anything that might calm his wife. “The sea air always rejuvenates you.”

“That’s a splendid idea, Martin,” Alison said, as she continued to survey the bright redness against her pale skin. “I think I’ll book a holiday straightaway for myself and my useless womb.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Iris

Iris Weild eyed the plastic bag sitting on her desk. She’d returned from the crime scene nearly an hour before, and she had yet to either log the journal in the evidence locker or to read it for information about the Leeds woman. She glanced over at her partner, who was typing away like a man possessed. Iris, however, was finding it difficult to focus on the computer screen in front of her.

A feeling of faintness came over her. She pushed back her chair and stood, as beads of sweat began to form on her forehead. Five long strides later, she was at the entrance to the ladies’ room. Pushing open the metal door, she went straight to the sink, turned on the tap and splashed the cool water on her face. Iris began to shiver as the panic rose in her chest and she looked up at the mirror to find hollow eyes in a pale face staring back at her. She shook her head madly, as if that could dispel the memory that lived inside it. Gripping the sides of the sink with both hands for support, she took in deep breaths of air and blew them out between pursed lips

until her racing heart slowed to a normal rhythm.

Iris had not stopped to think that she might be so affected by the sight of a dead body, especially one viewed from such a distance. It wasn’t the mere fact that the victim chose to end her. Nor was it because the woman lived in a home surrounded by so much natural beauty and grandeur, yet seemed so small and alone in death. No, It was something more personal that had Iris drowning in a cold sweat.

Iris had known Jake Lawrence since she was a young girl and they had begun to date in her tenth year of school. Tall and lanky, he had eyes the color of burnt chestnuts and hair as dark and shiny as polished onyx. One of the brightest students in their year at school, the scope of his imagination was rivaled only by the size of his heart. Though she was only sixteen at the time, Iris had liked to imagine a future with Jake. He had been her best friend and now he was gone.

Jake had the misfortune of being a good person in the right place at the wrong time. After walking in on a robbery in progress at the local newsagent, he had been stabbed trying to protect the woman who owned the shop. Jake had bled out on the cold tile floor before help could arrive. He was seventeen years old. There had been nothing Iris could do to save him, but she could do something positive with her life and she honour his memory by becoming a police officer.

Whatever the reason, work and life collided today and she was filled with a terrible sadness. She also wanted to know why this woman took her life. By Iris’ reckoning, here was a woman so kind she would bake a pie as a thank-you to the first responders at the scene, yet she clearly had demons that drove her to commit such a desperate act.

Iris closed her eyes and took another

deep breath. She smoothed her shirt with her hands, stood tall and squinted at her mirrored doppelganger. Even if she wasn't totally composed, she would act like it. She returned to the patrol room and sat down to the sound of Sullivan still pecking away on his keyboard.

*Might as well get to it*, she thought, so while she waited for her partner to file the incident report, she decided to read while she ate her lunch.

Iris pulled out the bottom drawer of her desk and took out a bottle of water and a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. Shifting her weight in the chair as to better reach into the pockets of her trousers, she retrieved another latex glove. She unfolded the wax paper to reveal the tuna salad on wheat bread, and then slipped a single glove on her right hand. After removing the book from the bag, she reached for one perfect triangle of sandwich.

Iris took a bite of tuna and opened the journal to the first page.

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*This is my third miscarriage and the longest I was able to keep a child safe. We let ourselves believe that this time things would be different, but I couldn't manage it. I'm exhausted in body and mind—also feeling quite worthless at the moment.*

Martin told me I needed time to relax and recover. "Get away. Go to the coast." That's what he said to me.

Perhaps he is right. Here, the salt in the air clings to my skin. The smell takes me to another time and place—a happier one. While I'm away, I've decided to keep this journal to record my thoughts. I seem to be having a lot of them lately. Thoughts.

I used to do this — keep a journal — when I was younger but then life got more com-

plicated. I tried again with the first baby. My sense of joy made it easy for the words to flow, but it was a short-lived attempt. Perhaps now it will bring me comfort ... help me reclaim my life.

The train from Guildford took a little over five hours. I'd left home a bit before noon and it was nearly time for tea when I arrived in Cromer. Fortunately, the cab ride from the train station was short—fifteen minutes to the Red Lion Inn, where I'd booked a room. It's an older place, but the front rooms face the sea and that was what mattered most.

My room is adequate. A bit flowery for my taste but it has everything I need for a two-week stay. Its main feature is a large window that looks out over the street and beyond that, to the sea. Already I can tell that the change of scenery has had a positive effect on me. I unpacked, and then called Martin to let him know I arrived. He was still at work and since I'm away, he has decided to stay in the city and have his dinner with Sean. Our conversation was brief and cursory. He did tell me he loved me.

After sitting on the train, I felt the need to stretch my legs, so I made my way outside for a walk. I changed into a pair of trainers and grabbed a scarf and a light jumper as a defense against the sea breeze. Since the hotel sits opposite the esplanade, I had only to cross the street to get to the boardwalk.

It was that magical time of day when the sun was sinking in the sky, long low shadows were beginning to form and the crashing sounds of the waves had dulled to a rhythmic lull. Gulls squawked as they dove for their supper and, mercifully for me, families were headed back to their hotels and homes to shower and get ready for their own evening meal. The heat of the day had dissipated and the ocean air whipped my hair. I reached in the pocket of my dress for the scarf and tied it around my head.

There were a few fishermen left on the pier and I strained my neck to view their catch as I walked by. The smell of bait and sea was both invigorating and nauseating. I traveled the length of the pier until I reached the entrance to the Pavilion Theatre, then continued around to the side of the structure and took a seat on a bench. Feet on the railing, I threw my head back and inhaled. The sea and the salt were full of the smell of life. I've been surrounded by death for too long. My mother and father. My babies. One. Two. Three. I breathed in again. Deep gulps of salted air. In that moment, I swept pity aside and decided to choose life.

Pulling the cardigan tighter around me, I closed my eyes and, for the first time in days, felt my body begin to relax. I must have dozed because, when I opened my eyes, the streetlamps had begun to flicker with light and the sky had gone from blue to purple. I glanced at my watch. Ten past eight. The grumble in my belly reminded me that I hadn't eaten since I left Guildford, so I went in search of food.

I walked along the esplanade for a bit, not wanting to venture too far from my hotel. Across the street I noticed a small pub, its lights spilling out into the street. I crossed over and peered through the large, paned window. There were only a handful of customers at the bar. No happy families, just a handful of customers at the bar, and a lone diner sitting in a booth, his head bent over his plate.

When I entered, the woman wiping down the counter looked my way. "Can I help you, love?" she asked.

I studied the menu on the chalkboard above my head and made a quick decision.

"I'll have an egg sandwich and a pint, please."

"Right. Just sit anywhere, duck. We're not

busy, I'll bring it over to you."

I made my way across the room and slid into a booth. Not the one next to the man, but one over. The sea air had dampened my dress and I stuck to the seat.

The man glanced at me and our eyes locked for a moment. He looked to be several years older than me, with hair cut short and a face covered in stubble. He lowered his gaze again. Now, long, dark lashes were all I could see.

I would have said he was handsome if asked, but it's not my business to have an opinion.

The barmaid came over and placed my drink on the table. "Your food will be out soon, love. My name's Brenda, by the way."

"Thank you, Brenda."

I took a small sip of the ale, letting the cool liquid slide down my throat.

The man coughed and I looked up.

"Thursday," he said, pointing at the sign above his head. "Meatloaf night."

"Oh," I replied, nodding as if I understood. "I ordered an egg sandwich."

"So I heard."

He got up; took his plate and glass. He had eaten only half his food. How nice, I thought, to save Brenda the work of clearing his table.

To my surprise, he walked toward me. He was taller than I had realized. He stopped at the seat across from me.

"The Steak and Kidney Pie isn't bad either. That's Saturday."

Not sure of what to do, I smiled out of politeness.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

I nodded, still unsure, still polite.

He put his plate down on the table and slid across to the centre of the booth. “Ian,” he said, extending his hand.

“Alison,” I offered as I placed my hand in his. My pale skin looked even fairer against his tanned palm. I was surprised by its roughness. This was a man who worked outdoors, not locked away in an office like Martin.

As I was pulling my hand away, Brenda brought my food and set it down before me.

“Just pay at the bar when you’re done, love. Give a yell if you need anything.”

She winked at my companion before walking away. I picked up my sandwich, and we sat and ate in silence, this stranger and I.

It should have been uncomfortable, but truly, I liked that he was quiet. It suited my mood.

The egg and bread were warm and felt good in my hollow belly. In between bites of food, I would steal a glance at my dinner partner. Once I was caught, and he acknowledged my social misstep with the slightest of grins.

I wiped my lips with my napkin and sighed to signal I was done.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Alison,” he said, as he put his own napkin on the table and stood. “Perhaps I’ll see you another night. I eat later than most folks so it was nice to have the company.”

I found that an odd thing to say, considering we spoke so little.

He walked to the bar, paid his bill, and gave me a nod of the head before he turned to leave.

By that time I was so tired, I couldn’t

stifle the yawn that came over me. I took the final swig of my ale before leaving to start my walk back up the hill. When I approached the counter to pay for my dinner, Brenda told me it had already been take care of.

My thoughts jumped ahead to Saturday. Steak and Kidney Pie did indeed sound good.

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*Today I changed into my swimsuit, packed a book and a few necessities in a small bag and headed to the beach. There were deckchairs and windbreaks to rent and I availed myself of both. The day was hot, but a strong ocean breeze kept me comfortable in my retreat. The Red Lion had afforded me a proper English breakfast, though I didn’t eat much of it. Contented, I stayed in my perch, reading and napping, before going out around noon for an ice cream.*

After so much time spent worrying about my baby, my body, my health, was nice to drift off into thoughts of nothingness on a schedule of my own making.

I found those thoughts did on occasion veer toward someone rugged and quiet. I knew it was inappropriate, but thinking of Ian was a nice diversion from the reality of my life. I wondered if I might see him again at the pub. A part of me hoped I would. I was curious to see if we might be able to carry on a full-fledged conversation. So, while this is the first time in ages that I’ve been away on my own, that doesn’t mean I have to spend all my time alone.

The therapeutic value of the sea aside, it is been nice to be in a place other than Guildford. Here I’m not *that poor woman*—someone to be pitied by the young mothers as they drop off their precious children at the Nursery.

Here I am someone sitting in a deckchair, reading a book, and having a cone. I might

have secrets. I might have desires. I can be anyone I want to be. I'm going to be here for two weeks. It could be an adventure.

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*It is Steak and Kidney Pie day, and I'm sitting in the pub waiting on my meal.* If I'm being honest, I have to admit that this was by design. I've spent the better part of two days speaking to no one outside of the woman at the front desk of my B&B, so I would welcome a chat. The little I've seen of Ian suggests he is a man of few words, but I like to imagine that there are dark secrets hidden beneath his dark features.

I was on my third sip of lager when I saw him walk through the door. He saw me at once and the edges of his lips curled almost imperceptibly. As he strode toward me, I studied his carriage, his manner—the way he filled the space. He's very different from Martin. Masculine. Handsome, but in a rugged way.

"Evening," he said, as he slid across the booth's seat.

"And to you, as well," I replied.

He raised his index finger in Brenda's direction. She acknowledged him with a wink as she dried a bar glass. *This is all he does to order*, I thought. When he looked back at me, his dark eyes held a twinkle.

"Did you take my recommendation?" he asked.

"The Steak and Kidney Pie?"

He nodded.

"I did."

"You won't be disappointed."

"Thank you my dinner the other night, by the way."

"You're welcome." That was that.

Ian sat with fingers interlaced on the tabletop as he studied my face.

"You've gotten a bit of sun, I see."

I felt myself beginning to blush but hoped the redness of my skin hid it from him.

"Yes. I wore a hat most of the day but it seems the bit I was out was enough to do the damage. I'm quite fair, I'm afraid."

"It's nice," he said. "You look healthy."

"Thank you. I guess you could say I'm here for my health."

Brenda arrived with a tray holding his drink and our two dinners. She set them down before us and I was thankful I didn't have to explain my situation further.

"Anything else I can get for you?" she asked.

He glanced back at me, and raised an eyebrow. I shook my head.

"No, thank you. This is good, love," he said to her.

Ian dug into his meal with gusto, taking in big mouthfuls. I watched in silence as the muscles in his arm moved and tightened with each rise of the fork to his lips. With little food in my stomach, the lager was beginning to go to my head.

He regarded me with a quizzical look and pointed with his fork toward my pie.

"Eat up," he mumbled between bites.

I cut into it and sampled the warm meat and pastry. He was right. It was some of the best steak pie I've ever had. I was hungrier than I realized and attributed it to the magic of the sea air to giving me back my appetite.

"You're married," he stated, keeping his head down but his eyes turned upward.

“Oh, yes,” I replied, studying my wedding band. “What is it? Ten years now. You?”

“What?”

“Married.”

“Nope.”

“Ever?”

“Never.”

“Really?”

He smiled. “Really.”

“Do you think we could move beyond a monosyllabic conversation?” I asked and we both began to laugh.

“Certainly,” he said. “Is it good?”

“The pie is lovely,” I answer.

He laughed again. “The marriage.”

“Oh! Well, it can be ... and it can’t.”

“Is the *can’t* part the reason you’re here alone?”

“Partly,” I said, feeling a bit guilty bringing Martin into it, even indirectly. The answer, however, seemed to satisfy my dining partner.

Ian told me, as if it wasn’t obvious, that he’s a bit of a loner. He’s lived in Cromer his entire life, and when his folks passed away he took over their small farm. He gardens and raises food, keeping enough for himself and selling the rest to some of the area restaurants. Seems the mushrooms in my pie were from his garden!

When we finished our meal, he asked me if I’d like a tea or coffee and I decided to take him up on the tea.

