

A LAST WORD AND TESTAMENT MYSTERY

# Murder in Profile

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Nineteen Cents Press

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For Jim.

*Murder in Profile* is a work of fiction. Many of the locations mentioned in this book are real, or at least existed at one time, but are used here fictitiously. If you go to Miceli's, try the chicken parm.





**I**t's been said that everyone has a novel in them. Not all of them are worth reading.

After twenty-five years in the business, I can attest that it's maybe ten percent. Of those few readable authors, a certain number will drop dead every year. They are the ones I'm looking for.

The sign on my door reads "Gracie Michaels, Publisher." It should add "...for the dear departed." I'm not a vanity press. My main imprint, Last Word and Testament, publishes books by first-time authors who died before they could get their work into print.

I'm obviously not looking to build a writer's reputation over time.

So, I market the imprint itself, and so far readers have been intrigued. Loved ones make their way to me with thumb drives and tattered, handwritten manuscripts. They're not always looking for money, which is good

because I don't have any. They're hoping I can provide a little hardcover immortality.

I don't do general nonfiction, cookbooks, or books for kids. The submissions usually fall within one of three genres: science fiction/fantasy, mystery, or autobiography. The sci-fi stuff is invariably all about world building—complete with elaborate maps and pages of genealogies—but I have yet to discover the next George R.R. Martin. Mysteries are much the same: derivative (usually a recycled movie or TV plot), and the voice tries to be noir but just comes off slightly autistic.

A lot of what I publish is literary memoir. I'm always looking for somebody who can get past their grade-school English teacher's stilted grammar and tell me a good story. My all-time best seller is a harrowing recollection of D-Day by a guy who was manning one of the "Duck" boats that ferried soldiers to Omaha Beach. My personal favorite is a woman's sweet memories of summers she spent with her famous artist grandmother in a cabin high in the Colorado Rockies.

There was a time when, if you didn't publish out of New York, you weren't considered published at all. I worked back there early in my career, but I fled back home to the Left Coast once my resume was heavy enough. I can't sleep in a vertical city; I need to see mountains on the horizon or I lose my bearings. Now I can look out my office window and see the Hollywood sign.

Los Angeles is a city of creatives. Every waiter is an actor; every busboy plays in a band. A journalist friend once told me that, when one of the local newspapers upgraded its computer system back in the 1990s, they found an average of 1.5 unfinished novels for each and every reporter in their newsroom.

For these people, getting a project published, filmed, or hung in a gallery is like winning the lottery. Better, because they are certain that lightning can strike not just once, but regularly and often. They want a career, and they want the money and fame that goes with it. They are serious as a heart attack about it, and the best thing about my imprint is that I don't have to deal with artistic temperament. Either the manuscript works or it doesn't. My writers can't exactly argue, now can they? Their heirs can, but that's what caller ID is for.

My website says that I don't publish work by living authors. I'm very clear about it, but I get at least twenty letters every week asking for my submissions guidelines. And then there are the phone calls. I've learned to let it roll to voice mail.

Still, manuscripts appear on my desk. The website clearly states that I won't acknowledge unsolicited submissions, but I get a couple a day anyway. Once a week or so, I open everything in the slush pile and make two stacks: the living and the dead. It's easy to pick out the dead writers; they don't sign their cover letters.

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The project I'm pursuing right now is from a woman who inherited a manuscript from her online boyfriend. Turns out, he was a scammer and she was his intended victim. He'd been writing a book about his exploits when he went down in that big plane crash last summer, the one on its way to the Virgin Islands. That's how she found out the truth about him. The cops sent her his personal effects, and here we are.

Annie Forsberg wrote me a nice query letter, and I asked her to give me a call the next time she was coming to LA. A week later, she drove over from Riverside.

I keep a small bar and fridge in my office, but not for booze. I love good teas. My clients bring them back to me from all over the world. I am in the middle of a London Fog kick, so the electric milk frother was bubbling away that day and there was vanilla bean (the real deal, not some sugary syrup) in an antique canister beside it. I'd brewed a nice pot of high-end Earl Grey before Annie arrived, and the office smelled like an orange grove. I was whisking in the steamed milk when she knocked on my door.

She was younger than a lot of my clients, maybe mid-thirties. She looked like she might be a file clerk or a mid-level corporate accountant: not mousy, exactly, but conservative and painfully shy. She wore flat shoes, black business slacks, and a pretty pearl-gray sweater that hid whatever figure was under it.

Annie was clutching a cardboard box. She rested it on the floor, carefully putting her purse on top of it. I offered her a share of my London Fog as she settled in.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what that is," she said, blushing.

I explained and she agreed to venture a cup. She sipped it thoughtfully, sitting on the edge of her chair with her back ramrod straight.

"Let me be sure I understand," I started. "You inherited this manuscript from somebody you met online?"

She nodded into her tea.

I waited for her to tell me the story. I learned a long time ago that people can't abide a silence in conversation. Eventually they have to fill the void.

It took her two more sips before she began. "I like to go into political threads, mostly on Facebook. I have a profile I built with a fake picture. I never use my own name—I mean,



I couldn't. But I have this...this persona I use." She thought about that for a moment. The blush was blooming now across her cheekbones.

"And?" I waited her out again.

"And I met him there, on Facebook. His profile said Scott Moore. I know now that that's not true. His name was Peter Larsen." She waved her hand, swatting away her discomfort. "Anyway, I was on a page for battered women, just kind of giving them support. There have been a lot of trolls, you know, really mean stuff. So I was calling one of them out." She studied the cup in her hands.

"Good for you," I finally said.

I got a small smile out of that, but she still didn't look up. "Yeah. Well, anyway, he was cruising in there, just reading the threads. I kind of got in this troll's face," she said, finally looking up at me, "and Scott ..." She stopped herself. "Peter..."

"Just say Scott. That's how you knew him. I'll know who you mean."

"Scott," she said emphatically, "liked my comments. He never did post himself in that first one, but he kept liking what I said as soon as I posted, so I knew he was reading in real time."

"And that's when you started talking to him?"

"No, not then. He was in there a few more times before he commented. He seemed like a nice enough guy, so when he friended me I accepted."

"How long was that?"

"Maybe a week, or a little longer. I don't go on every night, just when I've had a bad day and I need to blow off a little steam."

I smiled my best encouraging smile. "Okay, so go on."

She took a deep breath. "It went from there. After a while he messaged me and we started texting. It was right before the big women's march in DC. He'd told me he lived in Philadelphia, so I was thinking about flying back and meeting him there, but he said he couldn't afford to take off from work, drive up to DC, and pay for a hotel room, too." She sighed. "That's when he just went dark. I texted him a few times, but he never answered. The next thing I heard was when this Key West detective called me and said he was dead."

She opened the box and handed over a pile of yellow legal pads covered in bold handwriting. A blue Post-it bearing Annie's name and address was stuck to the top pad. "He had my real name on it—but, as far as I knew, he didn't know it. He was only supposed to know my persona."

I thought she was about to cry, but she just bit her lower lip. "When you read his book you'll see that he never intended for me to have it. He never, ever would have wanted me to read this. The police were wrong. I wasn't his heir. I was his target."

I pointed at the box. "So, why do you want to get this published? I mean, he was out to rip you off. Are you sure you want to go public with that?"

She finally looked me in the eye. "I don't want this to ever happen to anybody else."

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I live and work in a repurposed Classic Revival library building. It was built in 1909 but abandoned in the 1950s when the city plopped down a squat concrete block replacement on the other side of town. Over the years, the old library has been, between long vacancies, a church, a

youth center, a yoga school, and a community theater. Now it's mine.

I bought the library the day I first saw it, then spent way too much money restoring it and retrofitting it for earthquakes. I still love everything about it, from its Ionic columns bracing the high portico out front, to the coffered ceilings and hardwood floors inside.

The publishing company is at street level, in what used to be the public reading rooms. The ceilings on the ground floor are twenty feet high; dark paneling rises ten feet up the walls to the creamy plaster inset with tall double-pane windows. The amber glass bowls of four big Arts and Crafts chandeliers provide ample reading light. Many of the massive oak bookcases were still there when I bought the place—perfect for a book hoarder like me, and on move-in day the first thing I did was fill them with my personal collection.

I staked out the librarian's office at the back of the ground floor for my own. The top half of its front wall is glass, and from there I can see the four desk areas used by my staff. They have state-of-the-art desk chairs, but they pull them up to the old library desks that have been refinished to a satin glow. I worked in cubicles for far too long, so the work spaces here are separated from each other and from the reception area at the front by potted plants and art screens.

Next to my office is a floor-to-ceiling oak partition inlaid with a glorious Catalina tile mural of orange and yellow parrots. The partition hides a paneled staircase. When I climb the stairs and go through the double oak doors at the top, I'm home.

I gutted the upper floor of the library and made a studio apartment with an open floor plan. My private space has

the same dark wainscoting as the main floor, but here it is only head high. Above it soar tall, arched windows. Even late in the day the room is flooded with light, and at night my second-floor aerie feels like a tree house.

I sleep in a queen-size Murphy bed that hinges up into a cabinet hidden in the paneling, so that during the day the loft is roomy and uncluttered. There's more Catalina tile in the bathroom, on the back splash of the galley kitchen, and on the top of the four-seat dining table.

I may run a publishing company, but I never have time to actually read manuscripts during the day. I set aside one sunny corner upstairs for a reading area with a tufted red corduroy window seat loaded with pillows, a pair of Stickley armchairs and a tidy little Craftsman writing desk. I love to curl up in the window seat with a good book as the sun goes down. Our glorious sunsets are among the few California assets that are exactly as advertised.

Today I had some leftover broiler chicken from the organic market, so I whipped up a Cobb salad. Did you know they were invented down the street at the Hollywood Brown Derby in the late Thirties when owner Bob Cobb chopped up some odds and ends after hours for Sid Grauman and their pals? Anyway, I settled into the window seat with my salad and iced tea and started to read.

I've developed a hopeful mantra that I whisper whenever I crack open a new manuscript: Please, please, tell me a whopping good story.

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It didn't take Scott long to get to the point.

I am a thief.

You'd never guess it if you met me. I'm an ordinary