

KILLING

YOUR BEST FRIEND

THE MYSTERY OF OUR PSYCHE AND HIDDEN ROMANCE

VALDA TAURUS

 ARCHWAY
PUBLISHING

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Archway Publishing
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.archwaypublishing.com
1 (888) 242-5904

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ISBN: 978-1-4808-8737-4 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-4808-8738-1 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-4808-8739-8 (e)

Print information available on the last page.

Archway Publishing rev. date: 03/02/2020

To my mother

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am fulfilling my great responsibility to warn you that this book is not a killing tutorial. Thank you for choosing it. Enjoy your reading!

A forensic psychologist holds a session with her client.

FP: Self-forgiveness is a result of the change in interpretation of our meaning of violation—or the mistake we made.

C: Who said that shit? How in hell can a killing be interpreted in a different way than a pure killing? I'm taking full blame for what I have done. Do you want to know, Missus Psychologist, what has really made a difference for me? It's that I'm feeling great remorse toward one killing, but I feel no regret whatsoever toward another one. I don't feel bad after killing the bedbug because that is the sanitized removal of a parasite.

FP: You just changed your interpretation.

C: Holy shit, Missy! We speak in different languages!

FP: Maybe, languages are different, but meanings remain the same.

Alaska. Its fiery red sunsets and glowing green nights fascinate us with its innocent beauty. Nature breathes its purity wildly on vast spaces of land. It seems that people born in this infinitive perfection are endowed with a special quality in their souls and their spirits. Namely, their essential purity of thoughts and clarity of minds are generously sent to them from above.

You would think.

They need sun. They are desperate for warmth.
And after all, all they need is love.

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TAMMY AND MARTA

T ammy woke in the middle of her nightmare. A sharp, metallic screech tormented her with an intense headache, and she shuffled her feet to the kitchen. She didn't even turn on the light. It would only intensify her pain. There was plenty of light for her from the electric clock-radio with an illuminated 3:37 a.m.

It never ends, she thought, struggling with the pain. I'm so tired.

With a sigh, Tammy reached for the small box with a red cross in the middle. For nearly two years, she had been battling cancer and the posttreatment side effects that often tortured her with severe headaches and insomnia. There was always something in her body that gave her a feeling of deep unhappiness.

"Forty years old ... I'm still young. I want to enjoy my life." She cried softly so she would not wake her husband.

She protested her illness every day. Every single day. She imagined herself with a flag of various colors in her hands to represent the *vividness* and *perfection* of life, and holding it tightly, she walked toward barricades to protest and to fight the *struggle* and the great *suffering* of life.

She took a pill, drank a cup of water, and looked through the window for no apparent reason—just as she usually did, because of her painful insomnia. There was nothing yet in touch with the new

day. Not a single motion was outside except the light spring breeze that occasionally interfered with the tree leaves. Suddenly, it seemed to her that a shadow flashed through the shed, but it was difficult to discern what it could be in the dark. Likely some animal scavenging for food. Besides that, it was a quiet early morning. Perhaps too quiet ...

Then she saw another shadow, much larger. It crept along the ground, trembling under the light of a lonely lantern. Tammy squinted her eyes again, peering into the darkness. Then only one word involuntarily burst out her mouth. "Why?" She glanced at the clock. It was 3:45 a.m.

A God-forgotten place, she thought. Shabby houses are divided into two halves, for the sake of people supporting each other. Life here is not the same as in the city. You can come over to your neighbor late in the evening to simply ask for salt if you're out of your own. You can exchange fresh venison for a bottle of moonshine. However, this life is not as simple and as harmless as it may seem at first glance.

The fact that last Saturday night had been so peaceful seemed uncommon to her. Usually, she could hear every word behind the wall of her duplex when Marta's husband was drunk. Both families could be imaginarily united as one, due to the number of secrets they kept about one another, involuntarily and faithfully but certainly not with a sincere desire of it. Sometimes Tammy wished Marta, the woman next door better luck with her terrifying spouse. She prayed for her safety while sending her daughter into the farther room to avoid having her hear the X-rated language that, luckily for her family, was often transformed into a drunk man's incoherent mumbles. She didn't know if she could handle it any longer. Ever since Marta married that man, everybody's life in their neighborhood had become shaded with hidden fear and the awareness of a potential murder.

2

COPS FOR BREAKFAST

“Get up! Get up!” Dustin shook his wife lightly by the shoulders. Tammy opened her eyes halfway. Showing disappointment, she shamed her husband. “Are you serious? You know I didn’t sleep all night.” The daylight was already breaking through the ginger curtains, creating an effect of fire in the bedroom. Tammy chose this fabric on purpose because she hated the cold. She hated her habitat with an importunate abundance of gray and green. So depressing. She pulled her blanket over her head.

“Please, Tammy, get up. There is something going on,” Dustin insisted with worry in his voice. His words summoned her curiosity, so she could not close her eyes again. She wrapped her tense body in a soft polyester robe and followed her husband to the kitchen.

“What do you need?” she asked with irritation.

Without words, he nodded toward the window. Cops were swarming around Marta’s shed.

“Do you have any clue what happened?” she asked her spouse.

“I don’t. But maybe *you* do,” Dustin said, and she caught a hint of suspicion in his voice. He agitated her. She shot him a challenging look, to which he immediately responded, “*You* were the one not sleeping all night, *not me.*”

“And what is your point?” she said.

“Well ...”

“That’s right! You have nothing to say!” she snapped.

She never had patience when he tried to build conclusions. Some things became hard for him to comprehend with his beaten head. Over the years, Tammy still loved her husband tenderly, and if not for her illness, which unfortunately had developed as a chronic one, she would open her heart to him again. But now she was a grumpy, impatient woman, and she snarled at him each time she heard his naïve talk or absurd ideas. On his part, he would not be able to forgive her for shoving him in a high school to be a gym teacher, instead of supporting him in his boxing career, which she never believed in. His last spar was as dramatically painful for him as it was for her. He lay in a coma for four days, and that was enough for her to understand one truth: there is no reason to endanger your whole life in an instant for the possibility of some silly fame. She tried her best to prove to Dustin her point. But either she didn’t choose the right words, or he was not made of the right material to absorb them. Either way, his mind had stubbornly followed the path to a hostile denial of all that his wife wisely created for him: his new life and his new career. He just wasn’t willing to accept the fact that without her, he would be nothing more than a full-bodied man with one dream annoying him constantly—how to split somebody’s head and protect his own.

“You’re still here?” Tammy said with irritation.

“Where am I supposed to be?” he asked and paused for a moment. “Can I have my coffee? Promise not to bother you with my stupid ideas.”

“Oh, thank you! You deserve a good breakfast then!” She allowed some irony. “What do you want? Eggs or biscuits?”

“Well ... can I have both?” he asked guiltily. “By the way, Happy Mother’s Day!”

Tammy burst out laughing. “Oh my God, Dustin! You are the most attentive husband in the world!”

After her sleepless night, she lost some control over her emotions.

Nothing unusual for any human being. Of course, she didn't mean to talk to her husband the way she did, but somehow it happened all the time. She would provide both—biscuits and eggs, plus sausages. She teased him because it simply fell in her manner. And the other thing: she experienced too many disappointments during her almost twenty years with Dustin. Doubtfully, her harshness reflected her rancor. No. Rather, it was the easiest way to defend her rights in her marriage.

A heavy knock on the door suddenly interrupted the silence in their kitchen.

“Open the door,” she ordered, cracking eggs in the bowl. “Cops.”

“Why do you think so?” Even now Dustin tried to argue with her.

She sighed, sending him another dramatic look, the look of a doctor to a hopeless patient.

“Who else can it be? Just open the door, Dustin.” She didn't even try to hide her irritation.

Of course, she was right. Two police officers—one tall and thin and the second shorter and heavier—were standing behind their door like a mismatched set.

“May we come in?” the tall one asked with the type of confidence only a cop could have, acknowledging that nobody would attempt to refuse the law enforcer's request.

“Sure,” Dustin said, stepping aside to let them in.

Tammy was busy with her breakfast preparation. The last thing she wanted to see in her tight kitchen were cops early in the morning. At least for her, it was too early.

“Yes?” she inquired, expressing titanium unhappiness. She did not even bother with the traditional *hello* or *good morning*. “May I help you?”

“Excuse my wife, please. She ...” Dustin held his tongue for a moment. “She has been sick for days.”

Tammy remained calm, but inside, she thanked God for timely leading Dustin's thoughts. Sure, the cops were fishing for details. Of course, she had nothing to hide, but she didn't want an extra headache.

“Alexander and Marta Gray are your neighbors? Have you noticed anything strange with them lately?” the tall officer asked.

Everything about her neighbors seemed strange to her. *They are married! And this is already strange!* “Yes, they are my neighbors,” she replied. “Is it not obvious for you, idiot?” she murmured under her nose.

“What?” the officer said.

“I don’t understand your question, sir.”

“Have you noticed anything strange in your neighbors’ behavior lately? Maybe loud talking, unusual visitors?” the officer asked.

“Like the president of the United States?” Tammy said, allowing herself to be sarcastic. Then she caught Dustin’s pleading look and settled herself back. “Sorry, Officer. I don’t see how the neighbors’ voices cannot be loud to us with the wall we share that is only four inches thick. I can diagnose them with the flu through the wall if they sneeze or cough.”

“Exactly,” the cop said. “If you can hear your neighbor’s cough, surely you can hear much more than that. Probably every word, huh?” The officer winked at her.

“Not really. Only the talking I hear from their bedroom. It seems like the architect of this crap”—her index finger drew a circle in the air—“had some sort of sexual disorder.”

The shorter officer smirked at her remark, and the other continued to question.

“Okay. Maybe some unusual activity? Perhaps some strange noises late at night? Shrills for help maybe?”

“I absolutely hate coyotes, Officer!” Tammy replied dramatically. “They sounded terrible last night. I had to stuff my ears with a bunch of cotton. And by the way, would you mind explaining what the hell is going on?”

The stick-looking cop ignored her question and showed an intention to leave, but the puffy one suddenly intervened.

“A murder took place last night at your neighbors’ barn,” he said,

and received a look from the other one, which didn't confuse him a bit. Tammy noticed that he no longer had a stupid smile on his face. *Maybe he is not stupid after all.* Holding onto the kitchen table, Tammy plumped into the chair. "Who?" she barely vocalized and felt a cold sweat all over her. Her lips became dry, and she experienced a sudden thirst.

"Did you know the guy named Ivan Kortnev?" the puffy one asked.

"Yes," Tammy said. She took a deep breath, and her own breath was incomprehensible to her—a disappointment, or vice versa, some strange relief? She couldn't interpret it yet. Then, under the pressure of the officer's insistent look, she said, "He was a good man."

"Was?" the officer regarded her eyes.

"You just asked me if I knew him," Tammy answered. Then she got up, reached to the sink, and poured a glass of water. She greedily drank half a glass.

"What about you?" The officer shifted to Dustin.

"What?" Dustin seemed confused. Tammy turned her head and gazed at her husband curiously. *What's his answer going to be like?*

The officer helped Dustin out. "Did you see or hear anything last night?"

"Sorry." Dustin shrugged his shoulders. "Can't complain. I slept good all night."

"Okay." The officer gave up and, redirecting to Tammy, said, "Have a nice day, ma'am!" Both turned and walked out of her kitchen.

"Good luck!" Tammy sent her modest wish after them, and then she reached for the plates to serve their interrupted breakfast.

Dustin swallowed his saliva at the sight of the plate with golden scrambled eggs and hissing sausages. *Marta's homemade sausages! Yummy!*

Then, after several bites, he expressed his disagreement with Tammy regarding their recent conversation with the cops.

“You shouldn’t talk with them like that,” he said, chewing on sausages.

“Please! That officer wasn’t worth a crap to have a decent conversation with, let alone saying anything about an interrogation. He has no skills whatsoever to take down testimony,” Tammy argued, watching Dustin eat.

“You just can’t stay away from troubles, Tammy! Can you? You’re always up for a fight. Always. Even now, with your medical condition ...”

He knew that his last words would pit her off, and he did regret them as soon as they slipped off of his tongue. She shot him a disapproving look.

“And what about my condition?” She paused for a moment, waiting for his answer, and then emphasized her point of Dustin being wrong. “I’m fine, Dustin! I’m fine! And I do *not* appreciate your clumsy condolence!”

3

THE GOSSIP

Soon after breakfast, Dustin left his hypercritical wife. He knew she was upset. Their daughter didn't make it home for the holidays, and then that stupid murder next door. She offered Marta help, but the other refused to open her door, explaining through her tears that she needed some time alone. Dustin knew it was just too much for Tammy, and he generously excused her grumpiness. At quarter after two in the afternoon, he left the grocery store. A beautiful bouquet of red roses stuck out of the paper bag, betraying Dustin's brisk conspiracy. He had never been good at expressions of love. Moreover, it seemed like he had been embarrassed by showing his best feelings, so he masked them with less attractive ones. Dustin remembered the time when he bought a furry bundle of parsley for Tammy's birthday, taking consideration of an old lady who had been selling greens on the street. She looked desperate. Her eyes expressed emptiness and great disappointment with life. Her poor clothes cloaked her wispy figure, providing her warmth as much as it was possible for her frazzled duds. Despite it, she looked clean. Her dark hair was brushed neatly and tucked in a sort of teacher's bun. She might have had an intellectual profession in the past, and now it seemed like she was very uncomfortable with what she was doing to sustain her subsistence. What became significantly touching for Dustin was that the woman

wasn't a beggar, and that fact alarmed his indignation to the point that he incriminated himself for his moderate well-being. There was no need for a scrutinized observation to find her whole appearance appealed to the humanity and integrity of the world. Dustin chose the *right* bundle of greens, gave her a twenty-dollar bill, and hurried away with the words "Keep the change." She had asked for only one dollar for a bundle.

Then, with the traditional "Happy birthday!" he honored his wife with quite a nontraditional bouquet, hoping to be excused. Tammy paid good credit to Dustin's sense of humor. She took the parsley without any resentment, not even thinking of any misconceptions.

"Thank you, Dustin. I'm glad you remembered my birthday," she said.

"Sorry," he responded guiltily. "Next time I'll do better."

As Dustin walked back to his truck, he bumped into someone he would rather avoid.

"Hey, Dustin! What's in your bag? The roses for Tammy?" Like a thorn in his rib, a familiar voice took him by surprise.

He saw Rick nearby, a big guy with a round and always pleased face, like the cat who just ate the canary. Dustin never liked him. A man of his type could not be trusted. Rick would tell nasty jokes about things that were not even funny. Dustin wanted to ignore the guy, but Rick made it difficult.

"Hi. How're you doing?" Dustin replied without a hint of interest.

"Good! Thank you." A loud voice with a note of a female's shrill jarred Dustin's ears.

How the hell did this big pile manage to have a lady's high-pitched voice? I would not be surprised if he can handle a soprano. Dustin tossed sarcastic thoughts, while Rick continued chattering.

"So? How's Tammy doing?"

"She's perfectly fine," Dustin blurted out and spat to the side.

"I see you got roses. It is for Tammy?" Rick smiled.

“What the hell is it your business, man? Of course, they are for Tammy! Who else would they be for?”

“Hold your horses, man! I didn’t mean to be offensive. Have any news about last night’s incident?”

“What incident?” Dustin played dumb as he was chewing on straw in his mouth. The presence of such an idiot irritated him.

“Your neighbor. Ax. He slaughtered his friend as if he was a hog, right in the barn. They were drinking all night. Christ, how stupid of the man was it, being around him.”

It seemed to Dustin that Rick was happy to share this news, and if instead of Dustin he had met someone else, he would have informed them as well.

“I don’t care about this,” he replied.

“Wow! The man killed another one next door to you, and you don’t care?”

“You’re spreading rumors, Rick. You will get yourself in trouble. Myself, I don’t see any benefit from this type of conversation. Have a good day.”

“It’s a close community, man! Take it easy!” Rick hollered as Dustin turned his engine on.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my sincerest apology to all whose names a content evaluation has asked me to change or remove. None of these people have anything to do with the content of my book. So, here we go!

My enormous thanks to someone whose honest and constructive criticism greatly improved my book. I am forever grateful that you generously agreed to spend your personal time proofreading my manuscript.

I am grateful to the talented artist and graphic designer who emphasized the spirit of drama and mysticism of the story by creating the right cover for my book.

I want to give my thanks to someone who read a few of my very first and very raw pages and said, “You can do it!” Thank you for your boundless optimism that has always inspired me.

My special thanks to my middle daughter for all the corrections that she suggested and all the laughter in the process; to my oldest daughter, who has always encouraged me despite the weather or season; and to my youngest daughter, who expressed her genuine curiosity about the characters in the story and showed her childish enthusiasm and impatience: “When’re you going to publish your book?” It moved me forward with Gulliver steps rather than Lilliputian.

My gratitude to the other pole of my battery, my husband. His mannish skepticism led to my strong desire to prove myself. When he learned the title of my book, he showed comical but quite

Do you want
me to prove
it?

understandable worries as well. Then, on his birthday, without any ulterior thoughts, I gave him a mug saying, “You’re My BFF.” I will never forget his look at that moment! Since then, he has never even tried to express his pessimism about my literary passion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dear reader, it is my pleasure to introduce myself to you. *Killing Your Best Friend* is my first novel. Don't laugh, but it took me nine months to give birth to my first rough draft, which was a bit longer (103,000 words) than the story you are currently holding. That period was followed by the same length of time it took for the daily care of my *child*, so that it could grow up healthy and worthy of your attention.

What moved me to write a book? Good question! The story spun in my head for nearly ten years, but I wasn't sure about writing and simply didn't have time to write a book. Then, one day, everything began to crumble like a house of cards. These changes made me feel as if I had to hurry and complete all my projects. So, here we go. One of them finally made it to you.

In addition to my personal traits, I would like to say that I am an animal lover. Most of all, I admire buffaloes. Every time I see them, I feel enormous power beaming from their strong and healthy bodies. I feel the same energy from rocks, despite the fact that they remain motionless. I like to sit on them by the lake, listening to the water and watching the birds. I enjoy little family getaways with my husband, three children, and my lovely dachshunds, Danny and Emma.

