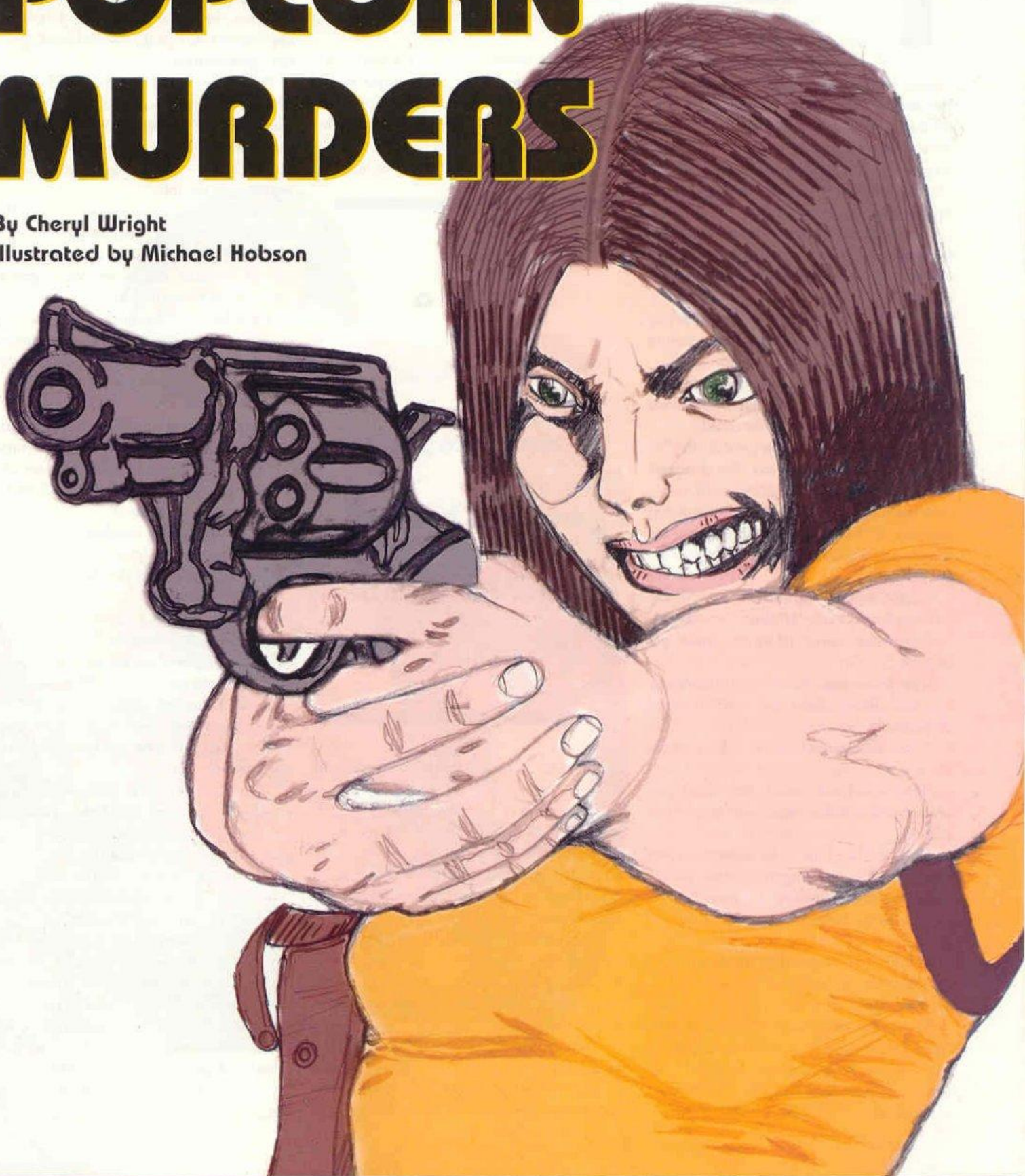


POPCORN MURDERS

By Cheryl Wright

Illustrated by Michael Hobson



Popcorn Murders

Written by Cheryl Wright

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About The Author

I admit it, some people call me strange. Even weird.

During the simple act of walking down the street, a story idea can hit me. Boom! There it is, the seed of a book.

It's happened waiting to cross the road at traffic lights, it's happened in a supermarket - I just happened to arrive minutes after a robbery and the place was swarming with police. And it's happened in the shower!



Writers are hit with ideas in the strangest of places, and we make no apologies for it.

Our minds work differently to everyone else. There's nothing we can do it, instead we make the best of it we can.

By turning it into a novel or short story.

The story you are about to read began when I was incredibly sick with pneumonia. I was sitting watching television, try to recuperate, when the image of a *drop dead gorgeous hunk of Italian manhood* flashed before my eyes.

Between drooling ☺, I gave him a profession - private investigator.

Instead of making the story serious, I decided it needed to be on the lighter side. I have a knack for weaving comedy throughout my stories. It's not forced, but rather very natural, which can make all the difference.

Popcorn Murders was the first in the series of my "Tony and Kelly" stories. They are so much fun to write, and I've been told they're also fun to read.

To learn more Cheryl's author website: www.cheryl-wright.com

Popcorn Murders

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“Tony?” I queried, fully knowing it was him - I was beginning to wonder if he would *ever* answer his phone.

“Have you been listening to the police scanner?”

Tony Fiorelli is a PI, like me. We’ve worked together a few times now. Trouble is, I’ve got the hots for him. And what female wouldn’t? Six foot two, curly black hair, beautiful olive skin and endless brown eyes. Oh! I almost forgot – he’s built like Mr. Universe.

And Tony? Well, he’s just itching to jump my bones!

“Yeah,” he said slowly, “Victim number four. Same M.O. as the others – single woman, living alone, throat sliced wide open!”

I was starting to get a bit edgy. This guy was doing the rounds of the single women in my neighbourhood.

Tony and me get together on occasion to work a case, so I thought that if the police couldn’t catch him, maybe we could.

“Pah-lease! Spare me the gory details.”

“Sounds like there was blood everywhere!” He was revelling in this stuff.

I had visions of Tony rubbing his hands together as I felt the bile sliding up my throat, and quelled the need to throw up. For now.

“Kelly? Are you still there?”

I swallowed hard. “Uh huh.”

“So what about it? You wanna get together?”

The amusement was evident in his voice.

“You talking about the case?” I asked suspiciously.

“Not necessarily,” he chuckled down the line.

Tony is a hot-blooded, drop-dead gorgeous hunk of Italian manhood. And he’s all mine!

Well, I’d like him to be anyway. Except something keeps getting in the way. Work - business and pleasure just don’t mix.

“Earth to Kelly!” he yelled down the phone.

“Huh?” I was startled by his shouting.

“You okay, Babe?”

Babe? Okay, that’s it!

“I am *not* your Babe!” I yelled at him. “And for your information, I was just thinking,” *About being wrapped in your arms, warmed by your kisses...*

“Kelly?”

“Hmmm?” I said dreamily.

“I’m comin’ over.” He slammed down the phone before I could reply.

My flat is above my office. It’s really very convenient; I don’t have far to go to work, and I can slip downstairs when the urge overtakes me. And right now, I have the urge.

“Holy shit!” I screamed, hand to heart as I opened my door and found Tony standing there.

His eyes were roaming my tall frame; I wasn't skinny, but I certainly wasn't fat. I suddenly felt self-conscious in my new skin-tight jeans and t-shirt. He was eyeing my substantial bust and I looked up into his expressive eyes.

Tony reached out and ran his fingers through my long brown hair. Silently he leaned forward, lightly brushing his lips along mine. "Sorry Babe, I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't." It was a lie – I knew it and so did Tony.

His eyes lit up. "Right." He reached out and pulled me close. As he backed me up against the wall, his lips covered mine before I could protest.

I was gonna protest. Really I was!

When we came up for air, I took the opportunity to speak. "We should go," I managed breathlessly.

"Go where?" He swooped and my lips were once again occupied. Not that I'm complaining. See, we got this understanding, Tony and me, we sort of flirt a bit, do a bit of kissing – Tony's a great kisser – then get on with the job.

Problem is, it's rather frustrating. If it weren't for the work relationship...

I pulled my door closed and dragged him toward the stairs. Bad move. My fingers are still tingling from the contact.

He fidgeted as I unlocked the door and eyed the office sofa hungrily as we entered. We almost got to second base on that very sofa a couple of weeks back.

Almost.

I headed straight for the whiteboard, not giving him the opportunity for distractions.

“Okay...” Some coloured markers were on the desk, and I grabbed them as I walked past. “What do you have?”

He handed me an envelope.

“Before and after pics.” Tony grabbed a blob of Blu Tack from the shelf.

“Before and after?”

His lips curled in a slight smirk.

“Before they were dead,” He paused for effect and I opened the envelope and looked at the first photo. “And after!”

It all happened quickly. One minute I was standing there looking at happy snaps, and the next I was on the floor with Tony standing over me.

“God-damn you!” He tried to restrain my wrists as I pounded his chest. “Next time you decide to present me with blood and guts, a little warning would be nice.”

“You’re a PI – you should be used to it.”

“Uh uh,” I answered. “Missing persons, jewellery, money – not murders.”

My problem stems back to when I was around ten years old. Mum and me stood barefooted in the kitchen, in searing heat making scones, when a mouse ran across the room. As she tried to get out of its way, mum came down solid on the poor thing. Blood and guts everywhere. Particularly on my suddenly hysterical mother’s bare feet. Ugh!

“I, uh, *was* gonna suggest we go over there.” His beautiful brown eyes reached all the way to my soul. “Maybe that’s not such a good idea after all.”

I sat myself up and began to stand. Feeling a little light-headed still, I swayed slightly and Tony took the chance to pull me close. Again.

Coffee hit the spot, and Tony stuck the photos of the previous three victims on the whiteboard. We couldn’t see anything significant so I called my old friend Detective Senior Constable Greg Connors of the Melbourne Criminal Investigations Unit. If anyone could get us in, he could.

Things would probably be a little quieter by now. The photographer and forensic people would be gone, and I could only hope the coroner had removed the body.

I handed my business card to the officer in charge.

“Kelly Johnston – Private Investigator,” he read.

“What’s your business here?”

“I, er,”

“Kelly!” a familiar voice called to me. “It’s okay officer, let them pass.”

The uniformed man nodded at this newcomer and let Tony and me through. Greg leaned forward and kissed me lightly on the cheek.

“Greg Connors, Tony Fiorelli.” I introduced them, each to the other. Tony offered his hand, but his eyes bore into Greg.

There was a certain tension in the air, and my guess

was, it wasn't to do with the murder.

He was jealous, Tony Fiorelli was pure and unadulterated jealous!

Greg led the way down the narrow passageway, passed a small study and the master bedroom.

It was an old house – early 1900's would be my estimation - the passageway was poorly lit and the ceilings were high, and I wondered how the victim had failed to hear her assailant coming; our every movement seemed to echo down the hall.

Greg stopped at the end of the passageway.

“The victim lived alone according to the neighbours. So far we know she was single, quiet, bit of a loner and no boyfriends.”

Greg was looking at me quizzically, trying to suss me out about Tony. I raised my eyebrows at him and he reached out and grabbed my hand. Greg and me were an item once. All heat and passion but no love lost. That was light years ago.

I could feel Tony's eyes trained on our intertwined digits and I flicked Greg's hand aside. Now it was Greg's turn to raise some eyebrows.

“It's pretty messy in there,” he told me, “Are you sure you want to go in?”

“Yeah, sure.” Confidence is great, on the outside, but my stomach was doing topsy-turvy by the dozen.

Greg looked to Tony for support and received a shake of his head for his trouble. Tony obviously wasn't buying into this one.

“I don’t think this is such a great idea,” Greg began.
“Piffle,” I told him. “Let’s go.”

He opened the door to the lounge room. The t.v was still blaring away and a small white kitten was curled up in a basket in the corner, oblivious to the goings on around it.

I took a few tentative steps inside the door and looked around.

I’d heard what happened when someone had their throat cut – the jugular gets severed and blood spurts everywhere.

It looked as though this had been a real gusher. One wall was literally covered in blood. The thick fluid was dripping down the shiny blue wall. Splatters could be seen on the other walls around the room.

My heart was thudding in my chest and I wiped my sweaty hands against my thighs, then swallowed hard.

I could feel the blood draining from my face and Tony came to stand behind me.

I wasn’t going to faint. I definitely wasn’t going to faint.

I looked around the room, on the floor, on the sofa, anywhere to avoid the blood. But it was everywhere. Bright red, sticky, dripping blood.

I turned and ran outside, shoving Tony aside in my haste. I heard him call my name as I left the house.

When Tony caught up with me, I was still heaving my guts out.

He sat me on the edge of the gutter and pushed my

head between my knees.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you in there,” Greg admonished himself when he joined us a few minutes later.

“You obviously don’t know Kelly very well,” Tony chuckled. “She doesn’t listen to us mere males.”

I put my head up and glared at them both.

“I’m my own boss,” I got out before the nausea began to surface again.

“We must be missing something.” I pulled the photo of victim number three off the whiteboard and had a closer look with a magnifying glass.

“Okay, let’s summarise,” Tony sat on my sofa – the sofa – and counted off on his fingers. “All white, all female. Mid twenties, lived alone, no boyfriends. That’s about it.”

I looked up and saw his long lean body stretched out comfortably along my very convenient sofa. He glanced my way and patted the seat next to him.

It was tempting. Very tempting, but I had work to do.

“So we must have missed something.” I deliberately avoided his eyes and turned my back on him.

His lips against the back of my neck startled me.

“Mmmm,” This was good, better than work in fact. “Pass those other photos down will you? I want to have a closer look at the rest.” Keep your mind on the job, Kelly.

We laid the police photos of the four victims out on

my desk. There had to be something there, I was positive of it, and if we looked long enough we'd find it.

At ten, I made coffee and opened some Tim Tams for sustenance; at eleven we called it a night.

"I could stay the night and we could get an early start," Tony suggested.

"In your dreams," I told him.

"Yeah, in my dreams," he answered, and began a heart-stopping kiss as his hand slid beneath my shirt.

Rolling over in the bed I hit something hard and solid, and quickly sat up then tried to jump out.

"Where are ya goin' Babe?"

Tony! It was Tony.

"Don't call me Babe!" I screeched.

"Sheesh, you didn't tell me you weren't a morning person." His arm came around my belly and he dragged me back in with him.

"Uh, uh," Did this guy have stamina or what? "We've got work to do," I told him. "I want to go back to the crime scene."

Tony looked at me as though I'd grown horns.

"You must be crazy." What was his problem? "Besides, we'd have more fun if we stayed here." He was so cute when he smiled.

So what would a few more minutes hurt?

Greg was about to take a bite of his apple when we lobbed in his office.

It's a known fact all cops eat doughnuts, right? Wrong. Greg's a health fanatic – one of the reasons I dumped him.

See, I'm a chocoholic, but Greg kept finding my stash. So then I had to make a choice – Greg or chocolate, chocolate or Greg. Hmmm, what to do? You guessed it, chocolate won hands down.

We went to the scene in our separate cars, Greg in his, and Tony and me in Tony's car. Greg had already unlocked the front door by the time we arrived.

The area was still surrounded by crime scene tape and would be for some time. A uniformed officer sat outside the house and let us pass, at Greg's request.

This time I'd be fine; I knew what to expect. At least that's what I told myself.

Greg handed us both a pair of disposable gloves and donned a pair himself.

"This doesn't mean you can go around touching things," he instructed sternly. Well, as sternly as Greg can get anyway - he still has a soft spot for me, and I make good use of it.

The smell of stale blood wafted through the air as we walked the few steps it took to reach the lounge room. I stood at the edge of the door and practised my long forgotten yoga – relaxing my body gradually until I was so relaxed I thought I'd fall in a heap on the floor. On second thoughts, maybe it wasn't actually the yoga that made me feel that way.

Greg stood rigid – a solid wall of confidence. “Ready?” His gaze penetrated me with an intensity that promised he’d be there if I needed him.

Tony’s arm slid around my waist in an act of either support or possession, I’m not sure which, but it was nice to know he was there for me.

“Okay, let’s go.” Brushing past Greg, I portrayed an air of confidence, of which I certainly didn’t feel. If it weren’t for the light dusting of talcum powder in the gloves, my hands would have been a lather of sweat.

“What are you looking for anyway?” Greg’s voice startled me, but gave me the distraction I needed to regain my composure, which was teetering on the edge.

Although I knew he wasn’t expecting the response he received, his face was a mask of complacency when I shrugged my shoulders.

I wandered around the room aimlessly, becoming gradually accustomed to the smell of blood and death, and looking as though I knew what I was doing. At least I hoped I did.

There was a sideboard not far from the television where I shuffled through some books and magazines, and a couple of blank videotapes.

Nothing interesting there.

I moved to the coffee table and lifted the t.v. guide, which, like most things in the room, was splattered with blood.

The kitten wandered out of its basket and rubbed its head against my leg.

“What arrangements have been made for the kitten?” I asked, as I reached down to pick it up.

“None,” Greg replied.

“But surely...” The question remained unfinished as my hand brushed against something under the sofa.

Holding the kitten in one hand, I struggled to pull the mystery item out with the other. As I eventually straightened, the men leaned forward trying to get a better look.

“What is it?” Greg asked, arm outstretched.

It was a silent demand to hand it over. A demand I ignored for the moment.

“I’m not sure yet.” As I held it gingerly I slowly turned it over. “A video box!” I was as surprised as the others.

“A video box?” Greg was looking rather perplexed and snatched the box out of my hand. Always the professional.

Tony leaned down and popped a video out of the recorder. “It’s a rental,” he announced. “You’ve got mail.”

Greg turned the cover so that he could read the name of the movie on the spine. “They match,” he said, looking from Tony to me with that stone mask he always used when he was on duty.

I held the kitten close to me, patting it gently and was duly rewarded when its little pink tongue began to carefully wash my glove covered fingers.

“What’s going to happen to it?” I asked Greg, as I cuddled the kitten lovingly.

“I’ll take it in for evidence.”

“Why would you want a kitten for evidence?” His answer confused me.

“Not the kitten, the box!”

The conversation reminded me of the other reason we decided to part. Greg often got agro at my answers, and questions. I’m not sure why.

“Do what you like with it,” he added.

“The box?”

“No, the damned kitten!” He put the box into an evidence bag and stormed out of the room.

I stared after him momentarily, then looked across at Tony to see him grinning broadly behind his hand, and correctly guessed it was time to leave.

Lounging comfortably across my sofa, I watched the warnings about video pirating scroll across my screen.

It was a hard decision, but finally ‘Sleepless in Seattle’ won out. I must have seen the movie a dozen times, and it always brought tears to my eyes, but what the hell, once more wouldn’t hurt.

A big box of Cadbury Roses at my side, my beautiful new kitten on my lap, and I was ready for anything. Especially soppy movies.

What better way to spend a Saturday night? *Hmmm, maybe wrapped in the arms of my Italian hunk?*

The music began, the credits rolled forward, I settled myself a little more comfortably and grabbed a handful of chocolates.

Sometime later, as Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks met on the roof of the Empire State Building, I heard a noise. I listened a little more closely. I even stopped the video.

Nothing.

As I turned the tape back on I heard it again, only this time it was closer.

Scraping. It sounded like a boot or a shoe dragging along the floor.

Slowly I put the kitten down on the sofa and listened again. Then out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of light, something reflecting off the table lamp.

The butcher's knife landed hard in the back of the sofa, ripping it open as it was removed. At the same time, I literally flew across the room.

I reached into my waistband and pulled out my trusted friend, my Smith and Wesson, and took aim.

He was tall and skinny and his clothes were ruffled. I noticed him watching me at the video shop when I'd been in this afternoon. He'd given me the third-degree - is your boyfriend coming over; are you watching the movie alone; would you like some company?

I'd felt very uncomfortable about the way he was grilling me, watching me, undressing me with his eyes.

At the time, I realised he had the perfect set-up. Single female comes in, borrows a video. All he had to do was access the customer database, and Bob's your Uncle — he had an address.

“Bitch!” he screamed as he lunged toward me again.

Tony and Greg ducked out from behind the curtains

almost simultaneously and tried to subdue him. But it wasn't to be.

As the knife's edge caught the side of Tony's arm slicing it open, I winced and my heart skipped a beat or two as I watched in horror at the blood running down his arm.

Greg pounced and grabbed the creep around the ankles as Tony continued to scuffle with him; the knife cutting continuously through the air.

I was waiting for my chance to shoot, but I had to wait until Tony was out of range and I stood rigid, my finger trained on the trigger.

I'm a good shot; I know I'm a good shot. I practice regularly. And I'm accurate.

The three men continued to tussle and I took some deep breaths, preparing myself for the inevitable. My hands were sweaty, and I could feel a bead of sweat forming across my top lip.

He turned his back to me and lunged toward Tony again, the blade of the knife poised to go straight through Tony's heart. I had to act. Now!

I fired off four shots in quick succession. The impact threw me off my feet, and I landed hard on my backside.

He slumped onto the floor, almost in slow motion, and I held my gun ready to fire again. Greg pulled his gun out of his holster and checked the killer's pulse, and I just sat there. I'm not sure if it was shock or what, but I simply couldn't move.

"He's gone." He replaced his gun and picked up my

phone, dialling the police emergency number.

Tony came over, took my gun and pulled me to my feet. As I looked down, I noticed, for the first time, the fine black powder that covered my hands.

“That’s the first and last time we use you as bait.”

You won’t get any argument from me on that score.

Tony slid his arms up my back, then kissed me gently and lovingly on the forehead. “It’s all over Babe,” he said, as he pulled me close, tears slowly trickling down my face.

“Don’t call me Babe,” I whispered. “Don’t call me Babe.”

our fabulous fiction

Hot Dogs and Champagne p. 20

Laurel Winter

"I'm out of checks; you might as well put everything back." She glanced over her shoulder to apologize to the attractive man behind her for taking so much time — he had chivalrously allowed her to go first, giving her a quizzical look, as if he knew her. He raised dark eyebrows over green eyes. Kate's cheeks burned. She wanted to melt through the floor.

Blackberries in May p. 28

Janet Mullany

The next time, he saw her clear as day. It was raining, and . . . Jack, hanging a photograph of himself and Anna on the wall, looked toward the open doorway and the hammer fell from his hand onto the floor. He saw a small, slender woman, maybe in her early twenties, with red-gold hair that wisped around her face and wide-set blue eyes. She wore a coarse, faded blue dress that fell to her ankles from a gathered waist, and an undyed linen scarf folded over her neck and shoulders. Her fair skin was dusted with freckles, and her mouth and hands were smudged with the purple stains of blackberries.

Stormy Memories p. 33

Elvina Payet

"You're safe now. He's gone. Thankfully, dead and buried this past year."

The raspy voice broke into Andrea Bennett's thoughts, startling her as she lazily walked through the town centre. "Excuse me? What did you say?"

"I don't blame you for staying away so long, but nothing to worry about now. He can't hurt you anymore."

She frowned. "I'm sorry — I don't know what you're talking about."

Andrea stared at the elderly man in confusion. What was going on?

The Cat's Pajamas p. 42

Christine Le Pierre

Anna watched his long runner's legs cross to the door and disappear. He was dressed for exercise — in brief white shorts and expensive-looking trainers. She wondered if he had already been out for a run, but he hadn't looked flushed or damp. She realized she'd rather like to see him a bit hot and bothered . . . and she knew just how she'd like to achieve it, too . . .

Quittin' Time p. 50

Delores Fossen

The demon-black stallion came at her hard and fast. The rider had the horse at full gallop, its hooves chopping into the frozen ground. In the cold white moonlight, Elaine saw the man's black duster lash through the air like a bullwhip.

She dropped the firewood on the porch and hurried inside to watch from the window. He pulled up, reining in the stallion and, in the same motion, dismounted. He stormed toward the house.

"Damn him," she whispered.

The Popcorn Murders p. 55

Cheryl Wright

Sometime later, as Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks met on the roof of the Empire State Building, I heard a noise. I listened a little more closely. I even stopped the video.

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The Best Gift p. 62

Ann Jacobs

The marriage would be one of convenience, not the love match she'd dreamed of for years on cold winter nights. She'd dreamed of dancing on the ice with Giles at the first skating party of the season. Watching snow fall while cuddling with him beneath a fur lap robe in a one-horse sleigh. Listening to the tinkling of sleigh bells, the strong beat of his heart. She grieved silently for the silly girlish fantasies that would never come true even though she would be his wife.

Home Plate Heart p. 67

Lily Rose Moon

Eric hadn't meant to eavesdrop. It wasn't his style. But overhearing Danika's remarks about her last relationship, he personally thought the jock must have been a complete idiot for caring that his girlfriend couldn't compete with him in sports abilities. He'd met a few guys like that at his health club, though, so he wasn't really surprised. Even if she was completely worthless at sports, any woman he dated got his respect just for making an effort to appear interested.