

STRANGER DANGER

By Donna Huston Murray

A Lauren Beck Crime Novel #3

Finalist, National Indie Excellence Award



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Chapter 1

So I'm cruising along, top down, sunscreen on, Ray-Bans, my blonde ponytail flicking back and forth like some carefree model in a feminine hygiene commercial, and oh no! Losing power, Major Tom. Losing *all* power.

I climb out, lift the Miata's hood, and recoil from a steaming, stinky cloud of smoke.

"Why?" I ask the ancient engine. "Why now?" We are perhaps forty miles from my destination. Maybe not even.

Sadly, the answer is all too obvious. I've been driving hard ever since I left Maryland. We are surrounded by cacti baking in the sand. If there was a whiff of a breeze, I'm sure tumbleweed would be rolling by. My sweet ride chose the perfect place to make her point.

Fifty ways to leave your lover, one of them a tow truck.

I dig out my cell phone and hope for a signal.

Yes! We aren't as far from civilization as I feared. Now that I think about it, not that far back was a cluster of businesses, a hint of habitation. Electricity. Running water. Humans...

AAA asks if I'm safe. "For a short time," I reply truthfully. "It's pretty hot, and there isn't any shelter." Putting the black ragtop up and waiting inside the car would be stifling, worse than staying out in the open air.

"Copy that," remarks the dispatcher. "On it right away."

I grab a bottle of lukewarm water from the console and dig an Orioles cap out of the trunk. Pocket my phone. Look around. There isn't much to see, just a billboard forty yards away. It's casting a feeble late afternoon shadow in my direction, so I fan myself with the hat and stroll toward it. The tow truck driver will have no problem finding me.

That the sign is there at all strikes me as odd. The wooden frame looks old but is well preserved by the New Mexico climate. Still, I can't imagine who would bother advertising in such a lonely spot. A struggling enterprise, for sure. Someone in need of a bargain.

When I get to the shade, I kick a lump of stone away with my sneaker and draw a swipe in the sand with my toe. I planned to live off my savings short term, and now I'm worried what the Miata's going to cost.

No point in moping about that now. I lift my head to give the billboard a closer look and immediately feel worse.

The photo is of a young girl in jeans and a pink t-shirt, sitting on a blanket. Her left leg is outstretched, her right pulled up. Her torso is twisted toward the camera, and her reluctant smile tells me she's indulging whichever parent holds the camera. The desert sun has bleached the sign enough to make her features appear indistinct and her complexion paler than it should. Yet her hair is clearly auburn, her eyes most likely hazel or blue. Her approximate age thirteen.

Kathleen Duncan. I memorize her name out of respect, as if keeping it in my head will somehow prolong her existence. For she is missing. The phone number printed in a huge, black font begs for information leading to her whereabouts. To an ex-cop like me, the billboard says "abduction" and suggests this beautiful young girl is dead.

It's times like this, when I'm distressed by something else, that my most haunting failure rears up. Standing in the literal shadow of another missing child, I suppose I should have seen it coming.

It wasn't as if my head hadn't been in the game. Or I was drunk and not paying attention. Or my partner was a dope. Or any of the excuses you see on TV. I just didn't find her in time. I got to the shed behind the church first, which was why I saw the pile of boards covering her tender,

bruised body before anyone else. Lifting the last jagged piece of plywood gave me enough nightmare material to last a lifetime.

Patty Lennon, resting in peace no thanks to me.

Knowing the child on the billboard probably suffered a similar fate has sharpened my senses with desperate life. I feel the sweat on my neck, taste the stale, warm water from the car, sweep away the tickle of hair from across my cheek. As always, I ache for the victim's family and wish there was something I could do for them.

Survivor's guilt? Probably just plain guilt.

A few cars have driven past at speeds ranging from in-no-hurry to my-foot's-on-fire. None showed one speck of interest in my predicament, so I'm especially relieved when a truck spelling out "Tommy's Towing" in gold-shadowed script lumbers to a stop in front of the Miata.

"Hi. I'm Lauren Beck," I say, extending my hand. "Thanks for coming."

A large, stoop-shouldered man emerges from the cab and lifts a quizzical eyebrow.

"You must be Tommy," I add, which is when I notice the "Ned" label on his shirt.

Ned lets that revelation settle in before he enters the conversation.

"Just quit on ya, eh?"

"Yep. She, uh, pretty much just stopped running."

Resting his grease-blackened hands on the warm edge of the Miata's engine well, my rescuer spits a stream of chewing tobacco into the dust at the side of the road. Shaking his head, he drops the hood shut, repositions the tobacco, and fixes me with a woeful stare.

"You in a hurry?" he asks.

I shrug.

When we last spoke, my father perked up at the idea of a visit. But he didn't offer a date, and I couldn't bring myself to admit I was homeless again. I dithered about calling to say I'm on my way, but the closer I got to New Mexico the more a good, old-fashioned surprise appealed to me. I pictured Dad's smile stretching to his ears, me stepping into his warm hug...

Ned seems to sense ambivalence.

"Best thing'd be take 'er to CarMaster," he decides for me. "They can fix most anything, and if they can't, they got used vehicles plenty newer than this out the whazoo. Sound good to you?"

"No. I mean yes. They nearby?"

Ned ejects the last of the tobacco into the dust. "What d'you care?" His lip lifts at the corner, and I huff out a laugh.

"They got a Coke machine?"

"Yup. A clean ladies' room, too."

He goes about the business of cranking my darling red convertible onto the back of the truck, and soon we're side by side going back the way I came.

Ned defaults into a tight-lipped silence, as if driving a loaded tow truck is absorbing enough for him. No soul-wrenching Western radio music. Not even a lame joke about the weather.

Miles go by at a snail's pace with nothing to keep me from obsessing about the reception I'll get from my father and his new wife. Ana sounds quite nice. But stepmothers, especially ones with a kid of their own, don't always cotton to their new spouse's progeny.

I really should have warned Dad I was coming.

"Mind if I use my phone?" I inquire.

Ned shoots me an up-to-you glance and returns his eyes to the road.

I open my Contacts and poke Dad's home number.

After fifteen rings, I end the call.

Great, I think to myself. Something else to worry about.

Chapter 2

The used-car salesman wears a summer weight, baby-blue sport coat and gestures with a manicured hand. “I’m gonna be honest, hon. Your Miata’s toast.” To emphasize his sincerity, he lowers his chin and meets my stare.

Seeing my savings go up in smoke, I stifle a four-letter word.

“Okay. Show me what you got,” I reluctantly tell the salesman I mentally call Ernie, for aren’t all overachieving used-car salesmen Ernest no matter what their mother named them?

His lips curl, and his eyes gleam. “What’s your price range?” he asks, as he shrugs out of the sport coat. The air conditioning inside is frigid, the outside temperature another story altogether.

I let him interpret my shrug however he wants.

His eyelids lower. “C’mon, hon. Ballpark figure.”

I shrug again, and his lips press tight.

We saunter outside. Strolling through the heat is like wading through pudding.

“How about this beauty, hon,” Ernie urges. “Only ninety-five thousand on it and rarin’ to go.”

It is the size of a parade float and emits stale cigarette stink the instant the door is opened.

“Nope,” I reply, and begin to hustle down the row.

Ernie trots to keep up. “Can you at least tell me what you’re looking for?”

“Know it when I see it.”

Two rows later, I stop at an orange Jeep. It has a rag roof across the back and comfy-looking dark gray seats. I know Jeeps to be a bit expensive, but good quality. However, I assume this one is here for a reason.

“Uh,” Ernie waffles. “That’s not for sale.”

Which is when I notice we strayed into the employee parking lot.

I figure a dealership employee probably takes good care of his ride. It is also the only Jeep in sight, suggesting its owner prefers anything but the company’s everyday stock.

My lips lift into a mischievous smile. “Would the owner consider an offer?”

“I..I..”

“Why don’t you ask?”

“Ummm...”

While “Ernie” plods back to the showroom, I take the opportunity to engage my brain. My usual outdoor activities are running and hiking. This model offers enough room for what little I brought with me, and if I ever need to sleep in my car again, *God forbid*, I can manage just fine.

Short story. It belongs to the boss, a florid, paunchy male specimen who obviously doesn’t run or hike or camp or anything remotely sporty, so he probably has no business driving a Jeep. Also, according to Ernie’s sly whisper, boss-man switches cars as often as twice a year.

On the requisite test drive, I discover I like the Jeep’s solid feel. Probably the same reason it bucked like a bronc when I drove over a speed bump. I mentally name my new ride Buck, borrow a computer to transfer my precious savings to my checking account, read the fine print, sign up, pay up, and resign myself to pouring dirty martinis to pinstriped customers for the foreseeable future.

This, plus the ritual used-car clean-out and clean-up, takes us up to dinnertime. At last, Buck has finally come to a halt in the exit tunnel next to the glass door adjacent to the sales floor.

Bouncing the keys on his greasy glove, the man who just prettied up my purchase hops out and enters the showroom. When he lifts his chin to look at me, his shoulders jerk as if I’ve stopped him with both hands. His mouth gapes and a vivid blush ignites his southwestern sun-dweller’s

tan. I note that his earlobes have an unusual squared-off shape as if they've been trimmed. Ridiculous, of course, but something I've seen at least once before. His eyes might be chocolate brown, but he lifted his face so briefly I can't say for sure.

I'm young and athletic, I'm blonde, and I have breasts. Currently they are encased in a red and white striped tank top because I've been alone in my now defunct red convertible driving diagonally across the country. Tons of people along the way will never see me again, so I haven't worried about overdoing the blonde thing.

However, I was a cop. I should know better than to invite unwanted attention.

The car mechanic's head angles sideways and down as if to deny his reaction. His gloved fist closes around the Jeep's keys. He mumbles, "Forgot something. Be right back."

Pivoting on his bootheels, he pushes the glass door wide enough to waltz through without crashing into the doorjamb. After hoisting his ass up onto the Jeep's driver's seat, he roars out of the drop-off tunnel straight down the short driveway and out onto the road.

"Did he just steal my car?" I ask, only half joking.

"He'll be right back," Ernie says, his face as gray as oatmeal.

Chapter 3

Louella spit the first mouthful of Bammy's oatmeal back into the bowl. The oatmeal she'd had at her friend Charlotte's house tasted like cookies. This stuff was so salty she wanted to barf.

"Aaaaah," her grandmother cried out, warning the six-year-old she should have swallowed like she did when Bammy gave her chicken with stuff on it that burned her tongue.

Gray hair flying free from its pins, spoon raised toward the ceiling, her grandmother was huffing back and forth.

Louella pushed away from the table in case she needed to run. God was about to get another "What'd I do to deserve this?" scolding from Bammy. That was for sure.

Then suddenly the old woman's pacing stopped. The spoon landed back in the pot, and Bammy whirled to face her late daughter's daughter. Fists resting on ample hips, she aimed an ugly glare at Louella's widened eyes.

"I'm sick and tired of your ingratitude, young lady. No party for little girls that don't eat their oatmeal. Time you learnt some respect."

"But I'm all ready to go," Louella pleaded.

"I said no, Missy."

"It's not fair."

Bammy reached for the wooden spoon, and Louella jumped off the chair.

"Go'on now. Scat."

"I didn't have any breakfast."

"Yes, you did. You jus' din't eat it."

Tears stung in Louella's eyes, which would not do. She was too old to cry like a baby over missing breakfast. She ran upstairs and dug two cookies she'd brought home from Sunday school out of their hiding spot. Whenever possible, she tried to have her own food. Living with Bammy had taught her that. She also knew to brush the crumbs off her bedspread.

"Not fair," she whispered to herself as the tears began to drip. "Super not fair."

And then it came to her. She would wait for Bammy to come up to use the bathroom, then sneak downstairs and out the door. Charlotte's mother wouldn't mind if she was early. Mrs. Ramsey might even let her phone her father. He drove a truck cross-country, so he wasn't home. But if she asked real nice, maybe she could stay at Charlotte's until her dad got back. Then he would grin at her so hard he'd get deep wrinkles on each side of his mouth. He would laugh, and hug her, and pet her hair, and tell her she never had to eat salty oatmeal ever again.

When she heard the heavy march of her grandmother coming upstairs, Louella sniffled extra loud on purpose until the bathroom door shut tight.

Then she slipped down the stairs quiet as a cat and out the front door.

It was nice out, with few clouds and no need for a jacket. Lucky, because she didn't bring a thing with her. Not even Charlotte's present, a dusty old Perfection game Bammy found at the church basement sale.

The pavement was cracked and bumpy, so Louella tried hard not to scuff her almost-new, basement-sale shoes. Around her, birds talked bird business in the trees, and through one window of the close-set houses a TV flickered with morning cartoons. A teenage boy played noisy music on his phone while he washed a car, but otherwise nobody seemed to be around.

Louella was careful crossing the street in between blocks, but pretty soon the blocks began to look strange. She hugged her elbows with her hands and hurried. Charlotte's house had to be right up ahead, maybe farther than she thought, but it was there.

Wasn't it?

Her lower lip began to tremble, and her steps slowed.

That was when the blue car stopped beside her, and the closest window rolled down.

The man driving leaned away from the steering wheel to speak to her.

“Hello, little girl. That’s a pretty dress you’ve got on, but you shouldn’t be out here by yourself. Are you lost?”

Chapter 4

I've just purchased a bottle of water from the dealership's vending machine when the mechanic returns with my Jeep.

Loaded for bear and waiting by the exit-tunnel's glass door, the boss corrals his errant employee as soon as he enters. Ernie the Salesman hovers close by, an eager audience.

I'm too far away to hear, but the boss is obviously delivering a finger-wagging lecture. Arms spread, a telltale white bag dangling from his hand, the mechanic tries to defend himself.

A few steps back, Ernie has fidgeted around enough to see me wave. After a last glance at the show, he steams toward me with hands on his waist and blue jacket flapping.

"Something else," he mutters. "Never seen nothin' like it."

"What's the story?"

The salesman shakes his head. "He panicked. Was supposed to pick up his girlfriend's prescription yesterday. Something he says she needs every day."

"Birth control?" I wonder aloud, and Ernie snickers.

"Guess that'd do it."

"You think he'll get fired?"

"Nah. Too good a mechanic. Rollie's just givin' him hell for screwing up."

"Keys?" I remind him.

"In the ignition."

On my way past, I wave the paperwork envelope at the men in lieu of goodbye. This late in the day, getting to Dad and Ana's house at a civilized hour may be impossible. Not the sort of surprise I had in mind.

Forty minutes later, I arrive at their suburban cottage in the fresh glow of twilight.

The one-story house is pale stucco with a Spanish tile roof, the distance to a strikingly blue front door fifteen feet at most. A curb would allow one car to park, but the spot is just packed clay at the moment.

Nobody answers my knock on the door; and, since only an NBA player could see through the small, decorative rectangle of glass at the top, I sidle across the arid earth to the right front window, shield my eyes, and peek in.

Lots of shadows. No lights.

The solid, six-foot-high wooden fence encasing the back yard is the same earthy, flower-pot brown as the roof. Its gate is padlocked, making me wonder whether the neighborhood is the safe little enclave it appears to be.

I call my father's cell.

Fifteen rings. No answer.

My heart is beating hard now. My hands are slick with sweat. I'm imagining my dad as sick, injured...or worse.

And what about Ana? Could she be sick or injured, too?

I give myself a hard mental shake. It's past dinnertime; I am hungry myself. Maybe Dad and his young bride went out to eat. But no lights? This street will be dark as a cavern pretty soon.

Lights have come on straight across the street. None yet in the nearby homes.

Across the street it is.

A dog barks even before my knuckles tap the door.

The middle-aged woman who answers is wiping her hands on a dishtowel. She's got wispy tan hair secured behind her head and eyes that could melt metal. Her peephole is eye-level, and I feel certain she used it.

“Yes?” she asks. “Is there a problem?”

Good guess, considering the hour.

“I’m Bernie Beck’s daughter, Lauren. Have you seen my dad or his wife today?”

The neighbor thinks for a moment.

“Now that you mention it, Raffles did hear their car leave.”

The yappy dog. Of course. *Good dog.*

“About when was that?”

“Yesterday?”

Not good.

“By any chance do you have a key to the house? I’d like to make sure everything’s okay.”

“Wouldn’t let you in even if I did. Never saw you before in my life, have I?”

Unfortunately, she has a point.

Okay. So if she and the Beck couple across-the-street aren’t friendly enough to exchange emergency keys, maybe someone else has one. Or else Dad hid a spare.

More homes have lights on now, and an additional car sits along the curb just past the Jeep. Darkness is nearly complete, so I poke on my phone’s flashlight to hunt around Dad and Ana’s doorway for a spare key.

I’ve just bent down to look under the mat when a man tackles me sideways. My phone illuminates fat, spatulate fingers reaching for my throat while the attacker’s stocky body nearly crushes me flat on the cement landing. The impact sends my phone flying.

Struggling to reach the thug’s crotch, my hand encounters what feels like a long canvas jacket—over sweatpants, according to my bare leg.

Adrenaline pumping, I roll onto my side, free an arm, and slam my palm hard up under his chin.

The thug rears back.

I push myself into a sit. He rams my shoulder into the front door. My head snaps hard enough to put stars in the sky.

I glimpse a windup that would put me out for sure, except suddenly floodlights bright enough to light a prison yard have started blinking like crazy and an alarm is screaming loud enough to wake the dead.

My attacker heaves himself up and runs to the car at the curb. Three seconds later it takes off as if somebody already had a foot on the gas.

I stagger around to the front of the Jeep but only glimpse a yellow license plate with maybe red letters and the hint of a Honda emblem glinting off dark paint. An Accord, probably. As common as cactus.

With the usual fanfare, the cops arrive just as I find my phone.

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