

The author of "Erased" and the Valkyrie Smith Mysteries

Jeremy Gates



He said, She said

"Murder"

He said, She said Mystery Series #1



"One of the best crime novels I have read in a long time."

-Amz Review

He said, She said,
“Murder”

By

Jeremy Gates

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Chapter 1



Tanja Shepherd
(Prologue)



THE RAIN CAME DOWN in torrents. Thunder rumbled, artillery-like *booming* echoing up and down the coastal mountains, reverberating through the hills like aftershocks, shaking the vehicle around me. I inhaled the humid ocean air, tinged with the faint cinnamon fragrance of the old air freshener that hung from the Suburban's rear-view mirror, and my breath came out in a gush of steam. My skin tingled, not just from the chill.

I used the sleeve of my jacket to wipe the fog from the passenger window, and gazed across the dark parking lot in silence. Lightning flashed, glinting in the windows of the creepy old warehouse thirty yards ahead. The single halogen bulb at the front of the building hissed and steamed inside a glowing halo. The light struggled to push back the darkness, but failed miserably. It couldn't even quite seem to reach the asphalt below.

Thunder came again, rolling, drumming, shaking, and then dying in slow fading echoes. Joe was in that warehouse, I thought... With a *killer*. How long had it been? How long had I been sitting there, waiting, worrying, straining for a glimpse of the man I loved somewhere behind those dark window panes? Something wasn't right. I felt an anxious gnawing in my gut.

"Give me fifteen minutes," my husband had said, "If I'm not back by then, drive down the road until you get a phone signal. Call Sheriff Diekmann."

Joe's plan had two problems: First, it was storming violently, and the odds that I'd get a cell signal anywhere along the NorCal coast on a night like that were somewhere between nil and none. Even in clear weather, reception on the Sequoia coast comes and goes at will. For all I knew, a cell tower may have been half a mile away. Tucked into that narrow valley between the coast and the cliffs, with the wind howling off the bay and the rain pounding down, it may as well have been a hundred miles.

The second problem was that Joe had the car keys *in his pocket*. I hadn't even noticed that little tidbit of information until after he was gone. I didn't have

a spare, and hot-wiring the Suburban didn't seem like the best alternative, especially since we still had three years of payments left to make. I simultaneously wanted to call him a moron for leaving me in that predicament, and felt an aching dread in my chest for his safety.

I glanced at my cell phone and confirmed that I still had zero bars. Joe's fifteen minutes was up, and then some. Something was definitely *not* right. I opened the center console, pulled out my 9mm Glock, and checked the magazine to make sure it was loaded.

I patted my swollen belly.

"Looks like it's just you and me, baby Autumn. Time to rescue daddy again."



Chapter 2



One week earlier:

My name is Tanja Shepherd. It's the traditional German spelling, with a "J" instead of a "Y." That seems to throw some people off, especially during those sales calls I get from some anonymous stranger hundreds -or thousands- of miles away, who insists on pronouncing it like "jam" instead of "yam" no matter how many how times I correct him. It's very annoying. Tanja does *not* rhyme with ganja. Period.

I suppose the uncommon spelling of my name seems strange to some, but certainly no stranger than the fact that I'm six feet tall -and taller than my husband. That definitely throws some people off. We get looks. Most of the time, I can guess what people are thinking as they size us up. They glance at my husband Joe -they notice his broad shoulders, his shaved head and goatee, and then they look at me, the six-foot blonde- and it's obvious that something special brought us together. Not just physical attraction, although it is definitely there, but something deeper; some connection based on our personalities and experiences that you can't quantify in mechanical, physical terms.

Usually, they conclude that we're just two unique people who fell in love. Other times, the reaction is less pleasant. I see the smirk beginning to form, the slow curl at the edge of the lip, the amused gaze that lingers just a little too long. It's funny to them, as if a couple inches of difference in height makes us two completely different species. Beyond the obvious, I really can't guess what's going on in their minds, but I don't expect it's much. It doesn't make me self-conscious, because it says more about them than it does about us. Joe and I are happy, and that's what matters.

There is one last thing, one more unusual detail about the two of us: Joe and I are private detectives. It wasn't always that way. We used to be cops... Sort of. Joe worked undercover, and I was a consulting behavior analyst for the FBI. I'll explain more on that later.

Long story short: We ended up in Sequoia County with a baby on the way and hardly a penny in the bank. That is, until Sheriff Diekmann suggested we go into business. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Unfortunately, the reality wasn't quite coalescing the way we'd hoped. After our first two months,

we had no clients, no savings, and we were on a fast track to bankruptcy.

Then the sheriff came up with another proposition:

It was a sunny February morning. I had just started a pot of coffee when I heard the doorbell ring. I stepped out of the kitchen into the hallway. Joe came wandering out of the bedroom. He was fresh out of the shower, wearing nothing but a pair of old sweatpants, water still dripping from his thick blond goatee.

I opened the door to see Sheriff Diekmann standing there with a cardboard box. "Morning," he said with a nod. "Do you and Joe have a few minutes?"

The sheriff had dark circles under his eyes, and more crow's feet and wrinkles than an old paper bag. His dark brown hair was slightly mussed, curling up around the telltale ring of an old baseball cap he usually wears. He needed a shave too, but that's pretty much how Bill Diekmann looks all the time. He's the kind of man who owns just one suit: a black one, reserved especially for funerals. The rest of the time he wears faded jeans, flannel shirts, and the aforementioned cap.

I invited him in, and we gathered in the kitchen. Diekmann set the box next to the table. I poured him a cup of coffee while Joe finished getting dressed. My husband returned a minute later, now also wearing an old sweatshirt and a pair of hiking boots.

"Sorry to drop in," the sheriff said as we settled around the kitchen table. "I understand the two of you might be looking for work. I think I can help with that."

My eyes lit up. *Looking for work?* That was an understatement. In the weeks since Joe and I had launched our business, we hadn't had a single client.

"This job is different from what you have done before," Diekmann warned. "There won't be any car chases or wild shootouts. In this case, the bad guys are long gone and the trail has gone cold, if there ever was one. All that's left is to clean up the mess. In most cases, you probably won't even be able to do that."

"Most cases?" I said, raising an eyebrow. Diekmann patted the box next to him.

"I have a dozen of 'em in here. But let me be honest: These are lousy cases, and you probably won't be able to solve most of them. If it was easy, they'd be done already. Anyhow, the department is willing to pay you on a case by case basis if you can produce results. I wish I could do more for you, but those are the terms. It's up to you if you want the job or not."

I glanced at Joe and found him staring at me. For a few seconds, we just stared. Then, he gave a little shake of his head. "I don't think so, Sheriff. It's probably not a good idea..."

I caught my breath. *What are you doing? We need this!*

“It’s always trouble, working with friends,” my husband went on. “If something went wrong...”

“Say no more,” said the Sheriff. “I totally understand. I had a few reservations myself, but I wanted to make the offer. At any rate, these cases aren’t going anywhere, so if the two of you change your minds-”

I popped out of my chair like a jack-in-the-box. “Joe,” I blurted. “Can I have a word?”

Both men’s eyes widened. Diekmann leaned back in his chair as Joe rose to follow me out into the hallway. My husband started to say something, but I silenced him with a glare and a wave of my hand.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I said in a low voice. “Usually, I’d agree with you, but this is no time for that. We’re behind on our bills, and-” I glanced down at my belly “-and our baby is going to need diapers. A *lot* of them. Do you know how much diapers cost?”

“I get that,” Joe said. “It’s just that Diekmann is practically family.”

“Then we’ll be respectful. We’ll do a good job. We will act like professionals.” It was a statement, not a question. I think Joe could tell from the look on my face that this wasn’t up for discussion. His broad shoulders slumped in defeat.

“I don’t like where this is going.”

“Would you rather get a job at the drive-thru? You’re pretty good at flipping burgers.”

“Very funny.”

A moment later, we were back at the table. A diffuse ray of sunlight came streaming in through the windows behind Joe. The light glinted off his scalp, illuminating the tiny whisker-like hairs that are otherwise invisible, and making his blue eyes sparkle. Sometimes they’re green, depending on the weather and his mood, but not today. Joe was not feeling playful.

I glanced at the sheriff, who was still waiting for our answer. He raised an eyebrow. I took a deep breath. “We have considered your offer,” I said, “and we’ve decided to accept. Joe and I won’t let you down, Sheriff.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The sheriff grabbed one of the folders from the box. He opened it and produced half a dozen snapshots, which he spread out across the kitchen table. “I’d like you to start with this case, if you don’t mind.” He selected a photo and handed it to me. It was a girl in her late teens with shoulder-length chestnut hair and dark, almond shaped eyes. It was an outdoor shot, probably taken by a friend. She was leaning up against a Camaro, smiling and attractive... Happy, like any girl that age should be.

“Pretty,” I said. “She seems very happy.” I showed the image to Joe.

“That’s the victim, Becky Sweet,” the sheriff said. “She was murdered five years ago. She was a senior at Hillsburg High School. Her father had committed suicide several years before that, and for a while, Becky’s mother was afraid she was becoming suicidal. The two of them went through an intensive counseling program together.

“When it was all over, Becky seemed to have recovered. She became a cheerleader and a high school teen counselor. She had lots of friends, and seemed to be loved by everyone. It really rattled the community when she was murdered.”

“What happened to her?” said Joe.

“She was drowned.” The sheriff grimaced as he produced another photo. He handed it to me, and I looked it over. I saw a large room with a concrete floor and several rows of stainless steel tanks. In the foreground was a sheet-covered body lying on the floor. Puddles and splatters of white fluid covered the area. Nothing else leapt out at me.

“What is this place?” I said.

“Timber Hills Dairy Farm. It’s just a couple miles south of Vine Hill.”

Joe snatched the photo out of my hand. “Are you saying Becky was drowned in *milk*?”

“Cream, to be exact,” said the sheriff. “When the owner showed up for work that morning, she found Becky’s body in one of those vats. Apparently, the cream had been run through a separator and left overnight for processing the next day. Someone shoved her in there, and then sealed the lid.”

“You’re sure this couldn’t have been accidental?” I said.

“Unlikely. The coroner determined that the killer struck Becky from behind with a wrench and dumped her into the cream. The weapon was found at the scene. We found DNA under her fingernails, but it didn’t match anything on record. We didn’t recover any prints.”

“Did Becky work at the dairy?” Joe said.

“No, the dairy owner had never seen her before. At the time, there was just one other employee, a mentally disabled man. He’s the one who found the body. Traumatized him pretty bad, too. Becky’s mother had reported her missing the night before, so it didn’t take long to confirm her identity.”

We fell silent, all three of us staring at the grisly photo.

“What about a motive?” I said. “Are there any suspects?”

Diekmann picked up one of the other photos and handed it to me. It was a mug shot of teenage male with shoulder-length dark brown hair and a sleeveless t-shirt with the logo of a band called *Death Metal*. He looked like a run of the

mill troublemaker. His eyes were dark, almost angry, but his face was expressionless. I looked closer and noticed a purple bruise on his left shoulder, right below the tattoo of a skull with a snake looping through the eye sockets.

“That’s Jimmy Pishard Junior,” Diekmann said. “He was our prime suspect at the time. He had been dating Becky, and they’d just had a nasty breakup. His only alibi for the night of her disappearance was that he’d fallen asleep watching TV after getting stoned. He was alone.”

“No alibi,” Joe said. “It sounds to me like an open and shut case.”

“We thought so, too. Unfortunately, we couldn’t find anything solid to pin it on him. The DNA evidence we found wasn’t a match. We had no way to place him at the scene.”

“What kind of DNA did you have?” I asked.

“I mentioned the skin under her nails, and we also found a spot of blood on the vat.”

The sheriff handed me another photo, this one of a tall, thin man in his forties with graying hair and a permanent scowl etched onto his face. “That’s James Pishard Senior, Jimmy’s father. He couldn’t vouch for Jimmy, because he was out of town for a business convention. In fact, he took one of our investigators aside during the interview and told him he didn’t trust his son. James even said that he wouldn’t be surprised if Jimmy *had* killed Becky.”

“Why would he say something like that?” I said. “Did Jimmy have a history of violence?”

“No, we ran a full background check and came up with zip. We even interviewed a few of his teachers and they had nothing bad to say about him. If you read the notes, the detectives didn’t buy it. They were sure Jimmy was into some sort of trouble, and that made him the prime suspect.”

“Why’s that?” I said curiously.

“Intuition maybe. He had outright admitted to smoking pot. Then there was the hair and all. You know, heavy metal music and snake tattoos. Satanic stuff.”

“Long hair and a tattoo is satanic?”

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. “When a kid looks like that, and as much as admits he’s involved with drugs, it tends to put the spotlight on him. Between the long hair, the drugs, and the heavy metal music... Well, you can imagine he didn’t fit in too well around here. Plus, with their relationship being on the rocks, I’m sure you can see why they suspected him. Not to mention the fact that he lived just two miles away from where the body was discovered.”

“Everybody in Vine Hill lives two miles away from where the body was discovered,” Joe said with a chuckle.

I glanced at the photos of Jimmy and his father, wondering what could drive such a wedge between a man and his son. Clearly, there was a lot more to the story. I took a good look at James. The man appeared very stern, very proud... His appearance was tailored, his suit clean and pressed, his face shaved smooth. Normally, I'd attribute that look to a car salesman or one of those religious groups that goes door to door, but the man's glare was dark and cruel. I saw signs of narcissism there for sure, but was he violent?

I know the symptoms of an abusive relationship from both training and experience, and I would have bet my last dollar that James Pishard had been abusing his son. Jimmy had been rebelling against something, and I had a strong feeling it was his father. This dark dynamic in their relationship piqued my curiosity. I couldn't help wondering if it had something to do with Becky's disappearance.

"So what happened?" said Joe. "Did you ever press charges?"

The sheriff folded his hands on the table. "We tried, but it was a mistake. We knew we didn't have much on Jimmy at the time, but we wanted to make sure he didn't skip the state. The DA thought he could make a case until the DNA evidence fell through. We ended up dropping the charges rather than face double jeopardy sometime down the road."

"So that was the end of it?" I said.

"There wasn't anything else to do. My deputies interviewed Becky's friends, the other cheerleaders, her teachers... We couldn't come up with any other suspects..." he displayed his empty hands. "We had nothing."

Joe asked to see the file, and quietly thumbed through the pages. "There's not much here. A few interviews, some observations by your investigators. I can see why this case was never solved."

"I had given up on it," said the sheriff. "Which is tragic, because Becky deserves better than that. So does her mother. Kendra Sweet fell apart. You can imagine what it was like for her: First, her husband's suicide, and then her daughter's death. Unfortunately, we didn't have the funds or manpower to keep pursuing a dead end, and that's what this case turned out to be. That is, unless you can find something we missed."

"Says her car went missing, too," Joe said, stroking his goatee. "It's kind of hard to hide a whole car, isn't it? Especially a sixty-nine Camaro."

"We listed the car as stolen and posted a statewide BOLO. Never heard a word. That car just vanished into thin air."

Joe set the file on the table. "Thanks for everything, sheriff. We'll get right on this. We'll find your man and deliver him in cuffs."

"As cocky as ever, I see."

“Worse than ever,” I said.

I pushed away from the table, making room for my belly as I rose from the chair. The sheriff glanced at the basketball-sized lump under my shirt and smiled.

“Do you know what the baby’s going to be?”

“A girl,” I said proudly. “Joe’s a little freaked out, but I couldn’t be happier.”

“I’m not freaked out,” Joe said, feigning hurt. “I just don’t know what you’re supposed to *do* with a baby girl. Boys are easy. They make forts, climb trees, ride skateboards...”

“You never know,” said the sheriff. “I’ve seen girls do all that. Have you settled on a name?”

Joe and I exchanged a smile. “We named our business after her,” I said. “Autumn’s Hope Detective Agency.”

“Autumn, then,” said the sheriff. “Nice name, on both counts.”

“We thought it made sense,” said Joe. “Considering this business is Autumn’s only hope of ever getting into college.”

The sheriff threw his head back and laughed. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

He headed for the door. Joe followed him out. I could hear their voices fading into the distance as Joe accompanied Diekmann out to his truck. I waited until they were nearly to the street before I walked across the kitchen and opened the drawer under the coffee pot.

I stared at the envelope in the bottom of the drawer for a moment before taking it out. I had left it in there all weekend, ever since it had arrived in the mail Friday afternoon. I’d hidden it away from Joe, not out of dishonesty, but because I was waiting for the right time to show it to him. Unfortunately, that time had yet to come. I was beginning to wonder if it ever would.

Honestly, I didn’t have the heart to show it to him. That was the problem. Joe had sacrificed so much for us already, for our family. I didn’t know how to break it to him. I opened the envelope and carefully unfolded the letter inside. I stared at the big, bold print at the top of the page that read:

“Past Due Notice: You are in danger of foreclosure!”

I heard the sheriff’s truck start up out front. I jammed the letter into the envelope and shoved it back in the drawer. By the time Joe had returned, I had settled back down at the table. I didn’t say a word as he sat down next to me.

Find the rest here: <https://books2read.com/u/brpRjz>
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