

HID FROM OUR EYES

A Clare Fergusson/Russ Van Alstyne Mystery



JULIA SPENCER-FLEMING



MINOTAUR BOOKS
NEW YORK

—1
—0
—+1

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Minotaur Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

hid from our eyes. Copyright © 2020 by Julia Spencer-Fleming.
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information,
address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.minotaurbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (TK)

ISBN 978-0-312-60685-5 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-02266-0 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium
Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at
MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: April 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the three people who are my past, present, and future:
Victoria Hugo-Vidal, Spencer Hugo-Vidal, and
Virginia Hugo-Vidal

—1
—0
—+1

-1—
0—
+1—

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.
Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.
To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish-but naught changeth Thee.
Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render; O help us to see
Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee!*

—WALTER CHALMERS SMITH (1842-1908)
THE HYMNAL, 1982, THE CHURCH PENSION FUND

—1
—0
—+1

-1—
0—
+1—

HID FROM OUR EYES

—1
—0
—+1

-1—
0—
+1—

AUGUST 20, 1952

1. He had parked his cruiser in the muddy verge of the county highway, a little way from the circus that was going on up the road. The thunderstorms that had crested over the mountains and crashed over the valleys had paused; the night's pounding rain had lightened to a drizzle. The Millers Kill chief of police splashed into a puddle as he exited the car, twisting and cracking his back and flexing his knees. He felt every one of his fifty-odd years after being hauled out of bed at 4 A.M. He never could have survived being a dairy farmer, that was for damn sure.

He checked around to make sure no one had seen his display and settled his broad-brimmed rain cap in place. His own, not his MKPD flat. He was here on courtesy, not on right, and he had tried to parse the difference with his clothing: his uniform blouse and departmental rain jacket over his own twill pants and rubber boots.

The state police had cordoned off the road coming and going and had two enormous lamps illuminating the crime scene. The dull roar of the generator sounded like a jet engine. He splashed up the side of the road, past the other cop cars and the mortuary van, wondering why none of the bad ones ever happened on a clear, temperate afternoon. Or maybe some had, and his memory was playing tricks on him, turning everything bright into darkness and heavy weather.

He ducked beneath the tape and approached the scene. Two evidence officers: one the camera man, the other bent over searching for anything that might prove useful in the investigation. Which, even when a battering rain hadn't washed everything away, wasn't ever much. Ninety-nine out of a hundred crimes were solved by knocking

—1
—0
—+1

on doors until someone talked, in Harry's experience. Two detectives in trench coats that made them look like they were headed for the executive offices at General Electric, smoking and talking. One uniform, almost anonymous in rain cap and full sou'wester, the first man on the scene.

"Hey!" A detective spotted him. He recognized the man; Stan Carruthers, a hotshot from downstate who was disgruntled by his exile, as he saw it, to the hinterlands of Troop G. "What're you doing here?" Carruthers glared at the uniform, whose charge was securing the scene and who should have stopped anyone from crossing the line. The trooper tried to appear innocent, and mostly got it right, since he was so young he looked as if he ought to be home sleeping in his mother's house, not guarding a corpse.

"Who's this?" the second detective asked.

"Harry McNeil, Millers Kill chief of police." Harry held out his hand and the other man shook it automatically. "Pleasure to meet you."

"There's no need for you to be here, McNeil." Carruthers sounded more bored than upset. "We're almost finished up."

Harry got his first good look at the body. A young woman, barely more than a girl, sprawled face-forward in a tangle of wet limbs and hair. Night-black hair shone slick in the state police lights. She was wearing a fancy dress, a party dress in pale green, with petticoats plastered over her legs and back, the flattened ruffles like waves frothing around her knees. Bare feet. No stockings. His mother had had a picture book of famous ballets she would read to him as a child; the name *Ondine, or The Water Nymph* surfaced after a fifty-year sleep.

"Any idea as to the cause of death?" Harry directed his question to the evidence officer.

The man shook his head. "No signs of violence from here, although the rain could have washed any blood away. We're about to move her, though, so maybe we'll see something from the front."

"It's obvious," Carruthers said. "Some good-time girl, got liquored up and passed out and died of exposure. I've seen it before."

"In August?" Harry looked around. "In the middle of Route 57?" On either side of the two-lane road, wide fields disappeared into the

mist. To the west, the first Adirondack hills that would gather and crest a hundred miles away in the High Peaks were shrouded kettle-drums, echoing distant thunder. Not a single farmhouse light relieved the gloom.

Carruthers waved his cigarette. "Maybe her john wouldn't pay up. They had a fight, she stumbled out of the car to show him what's what, he took off."

"In the pouring rain. Without her shoes and stockings. Or wrap."

Carruthers frowned. "Drunks do stupid things, McNeil."

The mortuary men had left the cover of their wagon and were placing their stretcher next to the body. "Okay, boys," the evidence officer said. "Nice and easy."

They rolled the corpse over, depositing her neatly on her back. Everyone moved closer to get a look. Pretty, despite the mascara that had run across her cheeks. Her lipstick was still vividly red. No blood, no bruises, no scratches or ripped fabric or anything to indicate she might have been attacked. A detailed crucifix still hung from a delicate chain around her neck. Carruthers's partner pointed to it. "Catholic." He took out his handkerchief and turned the figure over, shining his flashlight on the silver. "Nothing engraved. No mark." He straightened. "She sure ain't Polish. Maybe Italian." He pronounced it *Eye-talian*. "Maybe French?"

"Not from around here, anyway." Carruthers took a last drag and flicked his stub away, a sure sign that he no longer considered this a crime scene. If he ever had. "She passed out and died of exposure. Or maybe alcohol poisoning. She could have thrown up a couple fifths of Four Roses and we wouldn't find a trace after all the rain."

Harry looked at the evidence man again. "Have you found anything? Shoes and stockings? Handbag?"

The officer shook his head. "Nothing. And I did a thorough search, up and down the road." His tone was bland, but his eyes shifted to the detectives for a moment. Harry could picture Carruthers yelling at the man to stop wasting his time and for God's sake just get the body bagged already. "Either side of the road as well, although we ought to go back over it in daylight to make sure."

—1
—0
—+1

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. Can one of you geniuses give me any *other* reason she’d be here like this?”

There was a pause as Harry turned the picture over in his head.

“Murdered and dumped.” Everyone turned toward the speaker. It was the responding trooper.

“Oh, great,” Carruthers said. “Now even the traffic cops are detectives. What’s your theory of the crime, Sherlock?”

“She could have been poisoned by chloroform or ether. Suffocated after she passed out from drinking. There might be an injury not visible yet.” The officer was young, but his voice was firm.

Harry nodded. “Why do you think so, son?”

“First off, if she were drunk, where’d she get the liquor? Here and Millers Kill are dry towns. The nearest bar’s in Fort Henry, thirty minutes away. Second, if she’s a prostitute, where’s her purse? Working girls carry rubbers and lipstick and powder and lots of cash. Maybe she was drunk enough to get out of a car in the middle of a storm without her shoes, but without her purse? Finally, why would a john bring her here unless it was to get rid of her body? There’s not a hotel or motor inn within thirty miles of this spot. Any farmer out for a good time would’ve headed for Glens Falls or Lake George and taken care of business there.”

Harry tilted his head toward the trooper. Exactly his reasoning, laid out cleanly and logically.

“Never attribute to malice what you can pin on stupidity, kid.” Carruthers gestured to the mortuary men. The pair lifted the stretcher and began a swaying march back to their van. “A couple drunks going from point A to point B, they screw in the backseat, they fight, or maybe she just stumbles away to pee in the bushes, he skips out without paying and here we all are. Death by misadventure.” He nodded toward his partner. “Let’s go.”

“Detective—” Harry began.

“It’s not your case, McNeil. Cossayuharie is Troop G’s concern, not yours.” He shot a look at the young officer. “Keep that in mind the next time you’re tempted to call in the locals, Trooper Liddle.”

The evidence officer and the camera man began to break down the

-1—
0—
+1—

lights. Harry waited until he heard the slamming of the detectives' car doors before he spoke. "Thanks for letting me know, Jack."

The trooper shook his head. "I'm sorry I wasted your time. It's just . . ." He glanced toward where Carruthers was pulling out. "It gets so frustrating. He doesn't take anything that happens up here seriously. He thinks it's all tipping over outhouses and hiding illegal stills because we're in the hills." He looked back at Harry. "What do you think, sir?"

Harry studied the young man. Jack Liddle's people had lived in this area for over two hundred years. Harry had never dealt with Jack personally—he'd been a good kid, not the sort who drew police attention—but he knew his parents. Jack favored his mother's Dutch blood: blond and square-set, with bright blue eyes that stood out even beneath the shade of his trooper's lid.

"I think I agree with your reasoning, son. I'd sure like to see any evidence reports they come up with, if there's any way you can lay hands on them for me. And I think you should stop with the 'sir.'" He smiled a bit. "Call me Chief."

AUGUST 20, 1972

2. **W**e've got the perp in custody."

"Hmm?" The Millers Kill chief of police was so intent on the body sprawled in the road, he didn't quite hear his sergeant. He had been awake—barely—when the phone rang with the news from the dispatcher. He had taken just enough time to shim into his uniform before climbing into his Fairlane and barreling up the hills into Cossayuharie, praying the whole time that this was different. A hit-and-run, or a gunshot victim. Route 137, not McEachron Hill Road. His prayers had gone unanswered.

He squatted next to the pretty girl in her lacy white minidress. Long, dark hair in a braid as thick as a rope. No shoes. No pantyhose and no bag. He could see one side of her face; her lips, pale in death, made even paler by her frosted lipstick. It changed, women's makeup.

—1
—0
—+1

You wouldn't think that, since faces didn't change. Two eyes, one nose, a mouth. Nowadays, it was all blue eye shadow and lipstick like this. The other woman had worn a deep red. Someone had told him it was called Cherries in the Snow. He couldn't remember if he had paid his phone bill this week or not, but he remembered that.

He stood abruptly, stepping out of the way of the coroner and his assistant. "Okay. Turn her over." He wanted to see a gunshot wound. The marks of a car grille. A slit throat. Anything except more of the lacy dress and pale skin, untouched and inexplicable. *Control yourself*, he thought. *Control yourself, control the situation.*

They maneuvered the body onto a stretcher. No necklace on this one; instead, a pair of plastic hoop earrings. One set of false eyelashes had slipped, and lay half across her cheek. Other than that, there were no signs of anything amiss.

"Huh." The coroner frowned. "If that don't beat all. You ever seen anything like this?"

"Yes," Jack Liddle said. "I have."

"Chief," his sergeant said again. "We've got the perp in custody. Some drifter on a motorcycle banged on the MacLarens' door before daybreak asking to use the phone. Claimed he found her here." The sergeant lowered his voice. "Vietnam soldier. Probably high. You know what those boys come back like. Stone killers."

Jack sighed. "Any other reason to suspect him? Other than the fact he's a soldier?"

"MacLaren held him on the porch with his shotgun while his missus called us. This guy pulled out a knife the size of your arm and threatened to gut MacLaren with it."

"That may be, but he didn't use it on this girl." At the expression on his sergeant's face Jack held up a hand. "Okay. I'll talk to him." He looked up at the circus that had assembled itself up and down the sides of McEachron Hill Road. The ambulance and the meat wagon and police prowlers and, oh joy, a Carman Ghia he recognized as belonging to a reporter for the *Post-Star*. "Is he in a car?"

"Davidson took him down to the station house. We got the impound truck coming for his bike."

“Okay. I want the men walking quarter turns across these fields looking for evidence. Tire tracks, footprints, anything that doesn’t belong.”

His sergeant looked at him as if he were crazy. “For a hit-and-run?”

Jack swung back to the coroner. “Does this look like a hit-and-run to you?”

The coroner didn’t glance up from where he was bending over the body. “Doesn’t look like anything to me. Which makes me think maybe an overdose.” He ran his hand up her arm, bunching the lacy sleeve and revealing more blue-white skin. “No needle tracks. Huh.”

“She might have been shooting up between her toes or near her groin if she wanted to keep it hidden,” Jack said.

The coroner looked up at him. “Don’t worry. The pathologist’ll give her a good going-over once she’s on the table.”

The sergeant snickered. Jack turned to him. “Did you find any paraphernalia on the soldier? Or on the bike?”

“No, but—”

“So we’re looking for evidence. Get them out in those fields and I don’t want to find anyone’s doing a half-assed job of it. Finding the perp is only half the case. Finding—”

“Finding the evidence for the prosecutor is the other half. You got it, Chief.”

Jack considered stopping at his house for a shave on his way to the station, but weighing a scratchy face against getting a cup while the first pot of coffee of the day was still fresh decided him on the latter. He barely managed the cup of joe—he had to call out his request to the dispatcher while Davidson, who had more enthusiasm than brains, herded him to the interrogation room. “We got that knife off him, Chief.” Davidson handed him a manila folder with his preliminary notes and the tape recorder. “No track marks on his arm, but he’s definitely on something.”

The *something* was Old Granddad, by the smell that greeted Jack when he entered the room. The kid was folded over the table, head buried in his arms. He was wearing a wrinkled olive drab army jacket over blue jeans so new they still had fold marks in them. Army boots

—1
—0
—+1

on his feet. Not just another 'Nam vet, then. This boy looked to be straight off the plane from Saigon, or wherever they flew them from these days.

Jack laid the manila case folder and the tape recorder on the table. "You're in a spot of trouble, son. Why don't you tell me what happened up there in Cossayuharie."

The soldier lifted his head. Sandy hair growing out of a military cut, bleary blue eyes. A bruise starting to purple up on his temple.

Holy Mary, Mother of God. It was Margy Van Alstyne's boy.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 19, PRESENT DAY

3. **T**he chief of police of Millers Kill had experience with hostile fire. There had been the war, of course, and that infantryman in Panama who had snapped and started sniping passersby on base. Those had been places he had expected trouble, though, not the colonial-cute meeting room of the Millers Kill Free Library. His small Adirondack town wasn't without its dangers—just a few years back, a couple gang members had decided he'd look better with a few bullet holes in him. That had been bad. Scary bad.

But nothing had prepared him for the League of Concerned Voters, Washington County Chapter.

"Chief Van Alstyne, in the comprehensive accounting from the town's aldermen," the elderly man said, shaking a fistful of papers, "we can see that dissolving our police department and relying on the state police instead will save taxpayers eight hundred thousand a year. That's a hundred dollars a year for every man, woman, and child in the three towns! What do you offer to me and my wife that's worth paying an extra two hundred dollars a year for?"

The twenty-odd senior citizens crammed into the high-ceilinged room nodded along with the tirade. Russ briefly considered offering them a hundred sixty bucks each for their votes and then crawling back home to get some more sleep. Eight o'clock in the morning was too damn early to field questions from a bunch of Tea Party types.

“Having law enforcement in Millers Kill, patrolling here and Fort Henry and Cossayuharie, is a lot like having insurance, Mr. Bain.” Russ tightened his jaw against a yawn. Since she was nursing, his wife took most of the night duty with their four-month-old, but even at her most quiet he woke when she did, and, more often than not, wound up changing at least one diaper in the wee hours. “We’re there for you when things go wrong.”

“Yeah?” Another geezer stood up. “Only time I ever seen your cops was getting ticketed for driving my farm vehicle on the road.”

“You’re out of order, Teddy. Hank has the floor.” This morning’s moderator was Michael Penrod, the library director. Supposedly, he was chairing the meeting because the library was hosting a series of public events around the upcoming vote. The real reason, Russ suspected, was that the Concerned Voters were so ornery, they couldn’t agree on a leader. Too many generals and not enough soldiers.

“Thank you, Mr. Penrod.” Hank Bain glared at the interloping questioner before redirecting his ire at Russ. “Are you saying the state police won’t be here once a crime’s been committed? Or that they can’t handle an investigation better’n you can? Or at least as good?”

“I have no doubt the state police can handle any investigation. We already use their crime lab technicians. But your police department”—he had to remember to keep framing it like that. *Your police department* was one of his talking points—“is here for a lot more than solving crimes. Think of our community as a car. You don’t wait until the oil’s turned to sludge and the engine throws a rod to get it checked out. You take it to the mechanic for regular tune-ups. You get the tires rotated and the liquids topped off.” Even the ferociously frowning men in the audience nodded. Russ’s deputy chief, Lyle MacAuley, had come up with the car analogy. So far, so good.

“Your police force is the mechanic. We stop petty vandalism before it becomes ugly damage that lowers the property values. We stop the local small-time dealer before his business becomes profitable enough to attract the big guys. We stop speeders before they cause accidents. And yes, when a crime’s been committed, we’re right there. I can’t say we’re better than the state police, but I can guarantee we care

—1
—0
—+1

more. Because this is our town, too, where we live and shop and bring up our kids.” Next time, he thought in a flush of inspiration, he’d bring the baby along. There would definitely be a next time. Russ planned on addressing every voters’ group, book club, civic organization, and congregation in Millers Kill between now and the vote in November.

Before Penrod could recognize one of the many hands waving in the air, Russ’s phone vibrated. He checked the text display. MKPD: 10-80. He wasn’t sure if he was annoyed or relieved by the interruption. “I’m sorry, everyone, but duty calls.”

Someone in the group muttered, “Cheap theater.”

“Thanks, Chief Van Alstyne.” Michael Penrod raised his voice. “If anyone wants to help themselves to coffee or banana bread, go right ahead, and we can continue the discussion in a minute.” He gestured toward the entrance, and Russ followed. Since the library had been built in 1909 and was largely unchanged since Russ was a boy, he figured Penrod wasn’t worried about him getting lost. The director paused by the front desk. “I just wanted to let you know the entire library is behind you, Chief.”

Russ raised his brows. “I thought *you* were the entire library, Michael.”

“There are the volunteers and the friends’ organization, thankfully. We’ll do what we can.” Penrod sighed. “If the board of aldermen is willing to put the police department on the chopping block, God knows what could be next. Taxpayers complain about libraries all the time.”

Russ shook his hand. “I appreciate the support.” The little bell on the door tinged as he exited, just as it had when he had been a kid.

The long walkway through the immaculate front lawn gave him time to call his dispatcher. She answered on the first ring. “What took you so long?”

Russ glanced at his watch. It had been all of five minutes since she’d texted him, but Harlene had her own standards for police conduct. “I was listening to a message of support. We need all of those we can get, these days. What’s up?”

“We’ve had a nine-one-one call.” Harlene’s voice sounded oddly subdued. “Reporting a body in the middle of Route 137 in Cossayuharie. A young woman. Wearing a party dress.”

His lungs seemed to seize up. He swallowed. “It can’t be the same.”
“Oh, no?”

“For God’s sake, Harlene, it’s been . . .” He couldn’t calculate how long. More than half his lifetime. “Who’s on the scene?”

“Knox.”

“Okay. I’m headed over. Let her know.”

“Lyle’s on the way as well. Do you want me to—” She hesitated. Harlene never hesitated. “Pull the old files?”

“Yes. Maybe.” Russ pinched the bridge of his nose. “No. We need to go in clean, not making assumptions based on—”

“But if it is—”

“No.” He was definitive. “It’s not. At least not until proven otherwise to my satisfaction.”

Her deference was exaggerated. “You’re the chief.”

“At least for now.” He hung up the call.

4. Clare Fergusson had chosen her pediatrician based on the fact that the practice had weekend hours, which gave her some much-needed flexibility with her oddball schedule. The downside? It seemed she never saw the same physician twice. She liked this one well enough so far. He reminded her of Master Sergeant “Hardball” Wright, her air force survival trainer; tall, lean, bald. Dr. Underkirk did not, fortunately, look as if he could kill you with his bare hands.

“I agree with Dr. Mason,” he was saying. “It’s simply too soon for a diagnosis of fetal alcohol effect. Difficulty sleeping, a high startle reaction, fussiness—it’s all within the normal developmental parameters so far.”

“At four months?”

“At four months.” He glanced to the carrier on the examination

—1
—0
—+1