

THE ORPHANAGE BY THE LAKE



DANIEL G.
MILLER

A CAPTIVATING PSYCHOLOGICAL CRIME THRILLER WITH A TWIST

Daniel G. Miller

The Orphanage By The Lake

First published by Houndstooth Books 2024

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First edition

ISBN: 978-1-73-764636-5

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*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy
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To the missing girls.

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Acknowledgement

Reed Soeffker for teaching me the ins and outs of a missing person investigation. Hazel wouldn't be half the investigator she is without your patient instruction. All mistakes are mine alone.

Daniel Maya for showing me a day in the life of a private investigator. I can't thank you enough for how generous you were with your time and for answering my rookie questions.

Christina Kang, Phil Lee, and Sung Cho for providing me with a window into Korean culture through your friendship, kindness, and advice. Hopefully, I did you proud.

Siobhan Jones for delivering the perfect developmental edit. Your ability to zero in on the changes that take a novel from good to great is a marvel.

Elyse Lyon for trudging through my sloppy grammar and editing, and carrying this book over the finish line in fine form.

My wife, Lexi, for listening to my off-the-wall story ideas at all hours of the day, always with an open heart and an open mind.

My family and friends for serving as the ultimate alpha reading posse and softening the rough edges of my first draft.

My beta readers, particularly Anne B., for your enthusiasm and determination in coaxing this novel to reach its potential.

And finally, the team at Damonza for your creativity and inventiveness in designing the cover and supporting art for this novel. You brought *The Orphanage By The Lake* to life.

Chapter 1

Ah, the morning...

Is there anything worse?

I've always envied people who spring out of bed and jog around the neighborhood with a broad smile on their face. Unfortunately, I am not that person. My standard routine is to be woken from a deep sleep by a song from my Totally '80s mix. The sound of "Bette Davis Eyes" usually points me in the right direction. Then I snooze my phone alarm once on a good day, three times on most days. At this point, my roommate, Kenny, barks from the other room, telling me to get up and turn my damn alarm off. This is when I heave myself out of my squeaky bed and, with one eye open, stumble into the shower. Because my brain is only partly functional, I stand there under the hot water singing "Bette Davis Eyes" for the next five minutes before I embark on the whole soap-and-shampoo process.

Today is no different. I go through my routine and throw on a white blouse and navy pencil skirt. Once I've applied my makeup—a touch of bronzer, a dab of mascara, and a streak of highlighter to make those cheekbones pop—I enter the living room of our firetrap Chinatown apartment. The room doubles as our kitchen and dining room. It was open concept before people knew what open concept was. Kenny lounges at the folding-card-table-slash-dining-table and works his way through a trough of Froot Loops while he reads. He's studying for his police officer's exam. The thought of him as a police

officer is slightly horrifying. There isn't an object in our place that Kenny Shum hasn't dropped, toppled, or flat-out obliterated since he arrived. I'm sure that will go down swimmingly at the New York City Police Department.

My phone's calendar notification pings. Ugh, I'm going to be late for my meeting. I reach into the fridge and grab a sugar-free Red Bull. I know what you're going to say...What am I doing drinking Red Bull in the morning? Well, I don't like coffee, and when you're as tired of your job as I am, you do what it takes to get you through. Plus, it's sugar-free. You've got to give me credit for that. This day-old mochi doughnut I'm eating isn't going to wash itself down.

Kenny observes me and gives me a smile and a nod. He's witnessed my panicked late-for-work routine before.

"Good morning," he says.

He sports black hair, kind brown eyes, a tight haircut that feels like a tennis ball when you rub it, and a face as flat and round as a pancake. He reminds me of an Asian Stay Puft Marshmallow Man, except without the sailor hat. I suspect he might have a crush on me, but I do my best to make it clear that's not happening.

"Good morning. How many days till your exam?" I say with doughnut crumbs hanging from my lips.

"Five. I can't wait to be done."

"Don't worry. You'll crush it. I'll quiz you when I get back tonight."

Kenny's eyes light up.

"Thanks, Hazel. That would be great. I'll cook us some bibimbap."

Kenny and I bond over food, especially Korean food. It reminds us of home.

"Yum. That's a deal. All right, Special K, I'm off to the office. Good luck with your studying."

I run out the door with my doughnut and Red Bull in hand.

Kenny says something back to me as I leave, but I don't hear it because I'm already rocketing down the stairs of our walk-up building. We live on the fifth floor, which makes for a soul-crushing slog up the stairs at the end of a tough workday.

I hustle down the steps and launch myself out the front door and onto Mulberry Street. The sidewalk is bustling with a bunch of those smiley early risers I can't understand. It's a cloudy fall day in Manhattan, cool enough to keep the less pleasant smells at bay but warm enough to take a long stroll. Aromas from the Chinese vendor stands float through the air. An enchanting mixture of fish, fruit, and flowers. I wish I had time to stop and smell the proverbial roses, but I'm already late, and this is not a client I want to keep waiting.

Fortunately, my office stands just a few blocks from my apartment. I power walk down Mulberry and then hook a left on Canal. My agency sits on the third floor of a weathered brick building on Cortlandt Alley, which oddly isn't an alley but a tiny street. When I signed my lease on this building, I was the only tenant. But in the intervening years, it's somehow become trendy, with various designers and fashion start-ups moving in. I think it's the first and last trend that I'll start. Not a day goes by when I don't stumble over a self-important fashion shoot when I pop out for lunch. Still, it fits what I do. Close enough to walk, but far enough away that the shady characters who hire me can't find where I live.

Speaking of shady characters, time to meet with my client. I wave my key card at the keypad of the building and scamper up the worn wooden stairs. More stairs. Keeps the glutes tight. I turn the corner of the stairwell, and an unwelcome sight greets me.

"You're late," says Gene Strauss.

Gene slouches on the bench outside my office, beads of sweat gathering about the slicked black hairs on his receding hairline. He's wearing a brown-and-yellow-striped shirt,

buttoned about two buttons too low and revealing a rash of chest hair. The knuckles of his thick, meaty, gold-ringed fingers crack before he rests his hands on his oversized gut. He's here to find out about his wife, and I can't stop thinking to myself, *Who in their right mind would marry this man?*

I take a moment to catch my breath.

"I'm sorry about that, Mr. Strauss. How did you get into the building?"

He stands and smiles, showing unnaturally large canine teeth on a face that's sloped forward like a rat's.

"Never mind how I got here. You got something for me?"

I don't know how I feel about the fact that anyone can access my supposedly secure office building, but I decide to dismiss it for now. I don't want to spend more time with him than necessary. Unfortunately, right now he's my only client, so it is necessary.

"Yes, Mr. Strauss, I have the report you requested. Why don't we discuss it in my office?"

I pull out my key and unlock the door. As I open it, I look at the engraving in the frosted glass: "Hazel Cho – Private Investigator." It sounds so official, so badass. When I was a kid, my dad and I used to watch old Humphrey Bogart movies, and I fell in love with Detective Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. "The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter." Someday I'm going to deliver a line like that. If only my clients knew I live blocks away, in a building that the city should condemn.

"Why don't you have a seat, Mr. Strauss?" I say, closing the door behind him and gesturing to one of the two leather chairs that sit across from my desk. I don't have many things that I'm proud of, but my office is one of them. My sister, Christina, and I decorated it during the early days of my private investigation business, when I thought I would be like Veronica Mars, Thomas Magnum, or someone similar. I raided my savings and bought beautiful white chairs and a glass desk with gold trim.

We installed built-in bookshelves and stuffed them with a bunch of books I still aspire to read. My dad and I painted the walls a calming dark blue gray, while Christina looked at her phone and pretended to help. My detective license hangs behind my desk in a frame that would be more suitable for a Van Gogh. Little did I know then that my private investigation business would be less *Magnum, P.I.* and more *To Catch an Insurance Swindle*.

“Before we start, can I get you anything? A coffee, water, soda?” I say.

My news for him isn't good, so I'm hoping the coffee might help it go down smoother. Maybe I should slip in a sedative while I'm at it.

“Nah. Just give me the report.”

He has a thick South Philly accent and the charm to match.

“Okay, your call.”

I pull a manila folder from my canvas work bag and put it on the desk in front of me. I used to show clients the reports and pictures on my computer or via email, but I've found that they're less likely to be in denial if I show them the hard copies. It makes it more real.

“Mr. Strauss, you hired me because you wanted to know if your wife was having an affair. In short, the answer is yes. Per your instructions, I followed Emily last Thursday and Friday when you were out of town. On both occasions, she ate dinner with another man. The dinner was clearly personal in nature. No laptops, documents, or other work paraphernalia. She and that man then left dinner. I followed their cars, which traveled the same direction, and they eventually returned to his house.”

I open the folder and hand him the report. He flips past the text and skips to the pictures. They always skip to the pictures. As his thick, hairy fingers flip through the images of his wife in the arms of another man, I watch the rage building. He clenches the photos harder. His face turns a dangerous shade

of purple, and his legs bounce violently up and down like a washing machine on full tilt. Then his eyes rise from the pictures to me.

The eyes of a demon.

“You fuckin’ bitch,” he says to me, savoring every word. A malevolent smile crawls across his face.

“I’m sorry, what?”

At first, I think I misheard him. He must have said *That fuckin’ bitch*. I replay it in my mind. Nope, he said *You fuckin’ bitch*.

He rises from his seat and hurls the pictures in my face. A vein protrudes from his forehead. “These pictures are fakes. What, you think you can give me a few fake photos and I’m going to just say thank you and pay you my hard-earned money? You think I’m an idiot?”

When I followed Mrs. Strauss, I thought I saw bruises on her wrists, but I couldn’t be sure.

Now, I’m certain.

I ease up from my chair and raise my palms to calm him. This isn’t the first time one of my clients has tried to shoot the messenger. Of course, none have been as big as Gene Strauss.

“I assure you those pictures are real. Now, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s the truth.”

He points a thick finger in my face. Loud, fast breaths rush from his nose.

“Don’t you lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you. I’ve seen many of these cases, and it might take time, but you can f—”

He heaves one of the desk chairs, and it crashes against the bookshelf. Private investigation handbooks tumble to the floor. I glance back at him. Sweat pours from his hairline. I search his eyes. They remind me of a wounded dog I found once in the woods by my parent’s house: hurt, scared, angry, unpredictable. I glance over at my bag. My Taser sits inside it

just a few feet away.

“I want my deposit back.”

I stiffen my spine and shake my head.

“I can’t do that, Mr. Strauss.”

What I don’t tell him is that his fifty percent deposit has already been spent and I was banking on his second payment to cover this month’s rent.

His fists clench, and he takes a step closer, lumbering around my desk. An artery pulses in his neck. He’s coming for me.

I keep my eyes locked on him, but my hand slides toward my Taser. I’ve seen this look before. It’s the look of a predator searching for his advantage.

A door slams on the first floor, interrupting our stare-down. Strauss takes a step backward and listens. A woman’s heels click and clack up the stairs. The only other sound is our breathing. I want to run, but if you want to be a female private investigator, you don’t have that luxury. That’s what they want. They want you to run. They want you to be afraid. They want you to quit. They want you to cry. I hear the entrance to my hallway squeak open, and then a rap against my office door. I release a breath. I don’t know who it is, but they can’t be worse than being alone with this animal.

“Who is it?” I say. My voice catches in my throat.

“It’s Madeline Hemsley,” says a haughty voice through the door.

I rack my brain to put a face to the name, but I don’t remember any Madeline Hemsley.

“Who?”

The door opens and she glides into the room, the scent of expensive perfume wafting around her. She is the inverse of Gene Strauss: lithe and immaculate, dressed in a tailored suit that screams money—something I desperately need. She’s young but has clearly had several rounds of Botox. The pale

skin on her forehead shines beneath a waterfall of blonde hair. Everything about her is pointed. Her nose, her cheekbones, her speech, her gaze. But what distinguishes her are her eyes, an icy shade of green that penetrates. Relief washes over me at having another woman in the room.

She shoots a dismissive look at Gene Strauss, oblivious to what she's walked into.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I really must speak with you." She looks like she's in her midthirties, but she speaks like a middle-aged countess.

Madeline's disdain only fuels Gene's rage. I watch his pupils pulse back and forth to me and then Madeline, calculating whether he should take out his anger on both of us. I squint at him and shake my head, silently telling him it's not worth it. After a few interminable seconds, his shoulders slouch and his face cools. He's not smart, but he's smart enough to know this doesn't end well for him. He'll have to fight another day. Still, he can't walk away without a parting shot. He points at me.

"This isn't over."

He trains his stubby finger on me for a beat, letting the threat sink in, then brushes past Madeline and slams the door behind him.

Chapter 2

“**W**hat a hideous man,” says Madeline. She extends her hand for a shake, but with her palm down, as though I’m meant to kiss it.

I stare at her in disbelief. A man just trashed my office and was pretty clearly about to attack me, and she acts like we’re having tea at the country club. I look at the ceiling while I try to find my breath, pushing the exasperation down. A mash-up of emotions rips through my chest. Anger at Gene Strauss for what he tried to do to me. Disappointment in myself for how I wasn’t more prepared. Frustration with the fact that every day I feel like I’m one wrong move away from being throttled by an impotent man and his insecurity. But none of those thoughts are going to do me any good right now. Right now I need to deal with this porcelain doll in front of me.

I reach out to shake her hand. My hand trembles, and my palm is sweaty, and I can tell by the look on Madeline’s face that she notices. I lean on my desk to steady myself.

“I’m sorry, Ms.—?” In my distress, I’ve forgotten her name already.

“Hemsley.”

“Ms. Hemsley. I’m going to have to ask you to come back later. As you can probably see, you’ve caught me at a bad time.”

I feel tears welling in my eyes, so I turn toward the window. I’m still trying to process what just happened, and I can tell this woman isn’t going to offer a sympathetic ear.

She glances at her watch. “I must insist that we meet now.”

I snap back around and watch as she picks up the chair that Strauss tipped over and sets it upright before sitting down. She shows no care or concern for why the chair is toppled; she simply knows she needs a seat, and that's all that matters. Her lack of empathy is unnerving. I've seen this type of rich person before. They almost enjoy inconveniencing you. It makes them feel special, important. I remember when I was a teenager waitressing at the local country club and a woman made me mix tartar sauce from scratch just because she could.

"Have we met?" I ask.

She scoffs at the suggestion, as though I'd asked her if she'd like to smoke crack with me.

"No, Ms. Cho, we have not met."

An awkward silence hangs in the room, and I realize that there is no way I'm getting this woman out of my office without listening to whatever sob story she's got for me about a cheating husband or duplicitous mother-in-law. I bend over and pick up the pictures Strauss tossed on the floor. Then I grab a tissue and wipe the edges of my eyes, but I can't erase the tremor from my hands. She doesn't seem to care.

"You can call me Hazel. What can I do for you, Ms. Hemsley?"

"Of course, Hazel."

I notice she does not offer for me to call her Madeline. Shocker.

"Hazel, I'm here because I require your assistance. My goddaughter has gone missing."

I sit back in my chair. I didn't see that one coming. You don't see a lot of godparent casework when you're a private investigator.

"Your goddaughter? When did she go missing?"

She pulls a picture from her supple black leather purse and hands it to me with both hands like a priceless piece of jewelry. The girl in the picture is about thirteen or fourteen. She has

dark irises, soft brown skin, a spring of kinked hair, and an electric smile suffused with the joy and energy of youth. My first thought is astonishment that Madeline has a Black friend, let alone one who likes her enough to make her a godparent. A dazzling floral dress accentuates the girl's face. Her smile is bright and innocent, but there's a wisdom in her eyes, as though she's seen things but keeps her own counsel.

"She went missing six months ago," says Madeline.

"Six months ago?" My eyebrows jump up my forehead. "Ms. Hemsley, the most important hours in finding a missing person are the first forty-eight. After that, it's a needle in a haystack. After six months, there's nothing left to investigate."

Madeline's lips pinch, and she looks right through me. She picks at her nails like I'm boring her.

"I'm aware. Yet here we are."

"What about the parents?"

She flicks a piece of lint off her suit pants.

"They're dead. She's an orphan."

"How did they die, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A car accident, when she was an infant."

I feel like I'm cross-examining a hostile witness on the stand. "I'm sorry. Were you related?"

"No, just close friends."

"Is there a godfather?"

"No."

"So you're her sole guardian?"

Her neck tightens. "No. She was staying at an orphanage, or I guess they call it a children's home now, but it serves children who have lost their parents or had other family issues."

She shifts in her seat, anticipating the question I'm going to ask next.

"Why was she at a children's home? Why doesn't she live with you?"

Madeline's gaze drifts away from me and out the window as

she loses herself in memory. She agonizes over her words.

“My lifestyle isn’t suited for a child. Besides, she has a better life there than I could ever give her, and I’ve ensured she receives the absolute best care. It’s the premier home upstate.”

When I hear the word *upstate* I stand up from my desk. I’ve had enough of this woman who’s too cool to care for her poor orphan goddaughter.

“Well, they’re not giving her very good care if she’s gone missing, are they? I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to find someone else for this. I strictly work in the city, not upstate. And given the time that’s passed, I doubt there’s much I could do for you, anyway. I don’t even have a car.”

For a moment, the mask breaks, and I glimpse a quiver cross her lips. She swallows hard and stands with me. She grabs my hand with both of hers and bends at the waist toward me. These hands have never done manual labor, but the grip suggests resolve.

“Please, Hazel. I’ll pay for your car and all your expenses. I understand it’s a long shot, but it’s all I have left.”

She digs into her purse and takes out an envelope filled with cash. I don’t know how much it contains, but it’s significantly more than I have in my bank account, which is approximately \$172. Kenny saw my bank statement the other day and literally laughed out loud.

“This should get you started. I’ll have my assistant drop off another five thousand today or tomorrow. If you find her by the end of next week, I’ll give you one hundred thousand dollars.”

I have to work to keep my jaw from dropping open. A hundred thousand dollars would change everything for me. I could pay off my debt, pay my rent, refurbish my office, take out some ads, take better cases, turn down the Gene Strausses of the world, become the private investigator I always wanted to be. But only if I find her by the end of next week, which isn’t enough time.

“What if I don’t find her?”

“Then I hire another private investigator. You’re not the first and won’t be the last unless you find her.”

“Ms. Hemsley, that’s not nearly enough time for a case as complicated as this, particularly when so much time has passed. This could take weeks. Months, even. And even then I can’t guarantee I’d find her.”

“I’m sorry. Those are my terms. My dad used to say a ticking clock focuses the mind. And judging by your office, if that’s not enough, the money should be sufficient motivation.”

I reappraise her, and I catch red around the edges of her eyes and the bloodshot whites within. She’s been crying. Then my gaze flicks to the stack of unpaid bills on my desk. I can’t afford to decline this offer, or any offer, for that matter. I’m guessing that Gene Strauss will be less than timely with his final payment. But I still need to know more.

“What about the police?”

“I reported it to the police. They did a thorough investigation but, frankly, I don’t think it was their top priority. They told me she probably ran away and would come back soon enough. That was months ago.”

“What about another private investigator? You mentioned I wasn’t the first.”

“I’ve tried other investigators. They’re all incompetent and have failed.”

“Regardless, talking to them might save me some time. I’ll need their names and contact information.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. I want a fresh pair of eyes.”

Her words hang heavy, punctuated by the distant wail of a siren from outside my window. In my experience, when someone has hired multiple private investigators, one of two things is going on, or both: the case is impossible to solve, or the client is impossible to work with. I’m guessing this is both. Everything about this situation tells me I should walk away,