



THE DROWNING GAME

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BARBARA
NICKLESS

PRAISE FOR BARBARA NICKLESS

PLAY OF SHADOWS

“A brisk and clever whodunit with chills and verve.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Barbara Nickless hits the ball out of the park on this one . . . This is the third in the series but can be easily read as a stand-alone.”

—Midwest Book Review

“*Play of Shadows* is an artful mystery, heavily researched . . . and one that combines a contemporary serial killer with a complex of ancient myths and symbols.”

—*Denver Post*

“An intense thriller that resonates with dark myth, *Play of Shadows* is another fascinating case for Dr. Evan Wilding, one of the most interesting and original protagonists in mystery fiction. I want more!”

—J. F. Penn, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author

“*Play of Shadows* is a work of mythic proportions! Once again Barbara Nickless demonstrates her masterful storytelling, and her outstanding character development. We get to see a more nuanced side of Dr. Evan Wilding (already my favorite literary character), his archaeologist brother, River, his assistant, Diana, and detectives Addie Bisset and Patrick McBrady of the Chicago police department as they delve deeply into mythology (the Minotaur of Crete) to solve this grisly crime and stop the killer’s deranged

game. Nickless skillfully plays with the idea of Shadow, as we see the darker side of humanity. Barbara Nickless's research is staggering, her grasp of mythology is impressive, and the story is riveting. Once I got started, I could not put it down. This is Barbara Nickless's finest work to date."

—Francesca Ferrentelli, PhD, LPC, mythologist and psychotherapist

"Featuring a truly sinister monster and one of the best chase sequences put to page, *Play of Shadows* is equal parts harrowing and intriguing. Fans of the series will be familiar with the multilayered tensions between Dr. Evan Wilding and Chicago detective Addie Bisset, but this time out Evan's brother River adds a feisty, action-oriented element to the mix. The puzzle they face is a doozy, the clues are manifold, and the trail they follow is littered with traps. *Play of Shadows* is as smart as it is captivating, right down to the last page."

—Mark Stevens, author of *The Fireballer* and the Allison Coil Mystery series

DARK OF NIGHT

"Nickless's character-driven mystery unfolds on a panoramic scale . . . Engrossing bits of scholarship tucked into a nifty procedural with amiable sleuths."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Evan and his immediate circle fascinate . . . Fans of religious thrillers will have fun."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Captivating, compelling, and completely intriguing! Sherlock Holmes meets *The Da Vinci Code* in this brilliantly written and seamlessly researched adventure, where clues from the ancient past propel contemporary global intrigue. This is an immersive and atmospheric thriller, with an unforgettable main character, and I could not put it down."

—Hank Phillippi Ryan, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Her Perfect Life*

“Readers rejoice: Dr. Evan Wilding is back, and *Dark of Night* is another great vehicle for his wry brilliance. The novel is fascinating and twisty with unforgettable characters and writing that took my breath away. You’ll want to clear your calendar for this one.”

—Jess Lourey, Amazon Charts bestselling author

“*Dark of Night* had me at Moses papyri. Stolen antiquities, dark forces, cobra bites. What a wonderful read. What an adventure to sink into. What beautiful writing. I loved it.”

—Tracy Clark, author of the Cass Raines series, winner of the 2020 and 2022 Sue Grafton Memorial Award

“Dr. Evan Wilding is absolutely my new favorite fictional human. His witty charm, his intellect—matched only by his wry humor—along with his goshawk sidekick make him exactly the kind of character who captures an audience within a few lines. Add in the talented and tough detective Addie Bisset, a death by cobra, and a collection of sketchy people all seeking the same priceless artifact, and *Dark of Night* will have you flipping pages well into the night. Barbara Nickless is a phenomenal talent, and she just gets better with every book. *Dark of Night* is her best yet. Bravo!”

—Danielle Girard, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Ex*

“Missing artifacts? The dark underbelly of the antiquities world? Murder by . . . cobra? Count me in. *Dark of Night* is a top-notch thriller with an unforgettable lead in Dr. Evan Wilding. It’s no surprise that Barbara Nickless has fast become one of my favorite authors. I tore through this novel at breakneck speed and can’t wait for the next adventure.”

—Hannah Mary McKinnon, internationally bestselling author of *Never Coming Home*

“*Dark of Night* is a superb novel . . . After reading the first book in the series, I was hopeful that a second book would be as good or better. I wasn’t disappointed. With the new book, Barbara Nickless has solidified a great new mystery series.”

—BVS Reviews

AT FIRST LIGHT

An Amazon Best Book of the Month: Mystery, Thriller & Suspense

“Well researched.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“[In] this intense psychological thriller . . . Evan and Addie race to prevent more bloodshed. Hints of a romantic relationship between the pair enliven the story, and references to *Beowulf* and Viking history add depth. Readers will hope to see more of Addie and Evan.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Brilliant Evan Wilding, with his goshawk and unusual friendships, will fascinate those who read for character.”

—*Library Journal*

“*At First Light* is a winner.”

—*Denver Post*

“A high-intensity thriller that will take your breath away . . . Barbara Nickless is an awesome talent.”

—*Mysterious Book Report*

“The moment I finished this intelligent and pulse-pounding psychological thriller, I was ready for Book Two . . . Dr. Evan Wilding is one of the most

interesting fictional characters I've met in some time . . . Author Nickless's prose is crisp and, at times, poetic. Her descriptions are vivid but balanced. I became immediately attached to her engaging and well-drawn characters. In some respects, *At First Light* is reminiscent of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. I highly recommend this book to fans of fast-paced thrillers that include riddles, ancient languages, and literature."

—Claudia N. Oltean, for the *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*

"*At First Light* is a stunner of a tale. Barbara Nickless has fashioned a deep exploration into moral depravity and the dark depths of the human soul in a fashion not seen since the brilliant David Fincher film *SE7EN*. This wholly realized tale is reminiscent of Lisa Gardner, Karin Slaughter, and Lisa Scottoline at their level best."

—Jon Land, *USA Today* bestselling author

"Barbara Nickless has crafted a dark, twisty thrill ride with a bad guy to give you nightmares, and a pair of protagonists you will want to come back to again and again. Lock your doors and curl up with this book!"

—Tami Hoag, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Boy*

"*At First Light* by Barbara Nickless is one of the best books I've read in a long, long while. With unique and unforgettable characters who match wits with a devious, sophisticated, and ritualistic serial killer, this complex and compelling story is as powerful as a Norse god and just as terrifying. I can't wait for the next book in the series featuring Detective Addie Bisset and Dr. Evan Wilding! Bravo!"

—Lisa Jackson, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

AMBUSH

"A nail-biter with some wicked twists . . . Fast paced and nonstop . . . Sydney is fleshed out, flawed, gritty, and kick-ass and you can't help but root for her."

Nickless leaves you satisfied and smiling—something that doesn't happen too often in this genre!”

—*Bookish Biker*

“*Ambush* has plenty of action and intrigue. There are shoot-outs and kidnappings. There are cover-ups and conspiracies. At the center of it all is a flawed heroine who will do whatever it takes to set things right.”

—BVS Reviews

“*Ambush* takes off on page one like a Marine F/A-18 Super Hornet under full military power from the flight deck . . . and never lets the reader down.”

—*Mysterious Book Report*

“*Ambush* truly kicks butt and takes names, crackling with tension from page one with a plot as sharp as broken glass. Barbara Nickless is a superb writer.”

—Steve Berry, #1 internationally bestselling author

“*Ambush* is modern mystery with its foot on the gas. Barbara Nickless's writing—at turns blazing, aching, stark, and gorgeous—propels this story at a breathless pace until its sublime conclusion. In Sydney Parnell, Nickless has masterfully crafted a heroine who, with all her internal and external scars, compels the reader to simultaneously root for and forgive her. A truly standout novel.”

—Carter Wilson, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Mister Tender's Girl*

“Exceptional . . . Nickless raises the stakes and expands the canvas of a blisteringly original series. A wholly satisfying roller coaster of a thriller that features one of the genre's most truly original heroes.”

—Jon Land, *USA Today* bestselling author

“*Ambush* . . . makes you laugh and cry as the pages fly by.”

—Tim Tigner, internationally bestselling author

DEAD STOP

“The twists and turns . . . are first rate. Barbara Nickless has brought forth a worthy heroine in Sydney Parnell.”

—BVS Review

“Nothing less than epic . . . A fast-paced, action-packed, thriller-diller of a novel featuring two of the most endearing and toughest ex-jarheads you’ll ever meet.”

—*Mysterious Book Report*

“A story with the pace of a runaway train.”

—Bruce W. Most, award-winning author of *Murder on the Tracks*

“Want a great read, here you go!”

—Books Minority

“Nickless is on my favorite-writers list now.”

—Writing.com

“Riveting suspense. Nickless writes with the soul of a poet. *Dead Stop* is a dark and memorable book.”

—Gayle Lynds, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Assassins*

“A deliciously twisted plot that winds through the dark corners of the past into the present, where nothing—and nobody—is as they seem. *Dead Stop* is a first-rate, can’t-put-down mystery with a momentum that never slows. I am eager to see what Barbara Nickless comes up with next—she is definitely a mystery writer to watch.”

—Margaret Coel, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Wind River
Mystery series

BLOOD ON THE TRACKS

A Suspense Magazine Best of 2016 Books Selection: Debut

“A stunner of a thriller. From the first page to the last, *Blood on the Tracks* weaves a spell that only a natural storyteller can master. And a guarantee: you’ll fall in love with one of the best characters to come along in modern thriller fiction, Sydney Rose Parnell.”

—Jeffery Deaver, internationally bestselling author

“Beautifully written and heartbreakingly intense, this terrific and original debut is unforgettable. Please do not miss *Blood on the Tracks*. It fearlessly explores our darkest and most vulnerable places—and is devastatingly good. Barbara Nickless is a star.”

—Hank Phillippi Ryan, Anthony, Agatha, and Mary Higgins Clark Award–
winning author of *Say No More*

“Both evocative and self-assured, Barbara Nickless’s debut novel is an outstanding, hard-hitting story so gritty and real, you feel it in your teeth. Do yourself a favor and give this bright talent a read.”

—John Hart, multiple Edgar Award winner and *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Redemption Road*

“Fast paced and intense, *Blood on the Tracks* is an absorbing thriller that is both beautifully written and absolutely unique in character and setting. Barbara Nickless has written a twisting, tortured novel that speaks with brutal honesty of the lingering traumas of war, including and especially those wounds we cannot see. I fell hard for Parnell and her four-legged partner and can’t wait to read more.”

—Vicki Pettersson, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of
Swerve

“The aptly titled *Blood on the Tracks* offers a fresh and starkly original take on the mystery genre. Barbara Nickless has fashioned a beautifully drawn hero in take-charge, take-no-prisoners Sydney Parnell, former Marine and now a railway cop battling a deadly gang as she investigates their purported connection to a recent murder. Nickless proves a master of both form and function in establishing herself every bit the equal of Nevada Barr and Linda Fairstein. A major debut that is not to be missed.”

—Jon Land, *USA Today* bestselling author

“*Blood on the Tracks* is a bullet train of action. It’s one part mystery and two parts thriller with a compelling protagonist leading the charge toward a knockout finish. The internal demons of one Sydney Rose Parnell are as gripping as the external monster she’s chasing around Colorado. You will long remember this spectacular debut novel.”

—Mark Stevens, author of the award-winning Allison Coil Mystery series

“Nickless captures you from the first sentence. Her series features Sydney Rose Parnell, a young woman haunted by the ghosts of her past. In *Blood on the Tracks*, she doggedly pursues a killer, seeking truth even in the face of her own destruction—the true mark of a heroine. Skilled in evoking emotion from the reader, Nickless is a master of the craft, a writer to keep your eyes on.”

—Chris Goff, author of *Dark Waters*

“Barbara Nickless’s *Blood on the Tracks* is raw and authentic, plunging readers into the fascinating world of tough railroad cop Special Agent Sydney Rose Parnell and her Malinois sidekick, Clyde. Haunted by her military service in Iraq, Sydney Rose is brought in by the Denver Major Crimes unit to help solve a particularly brutal murder, leading her into a

snake pit of hate and betrayal. Meticulously plotted and intelligently written, *Blood on the Tracks* is a superb debut novel.”

—M. L. Rowland, author of the Search and Rescue Mystery novels

“*Blood on the Tracks* is a must-read debut. A suspenseful crime thriller with propulsive action, masterful writing, and a tough-as-nails cop, Sydney Rose Parnell. Readers will want more.”

—Robert K. Tanenbaum, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Butch Karp and Marlene Ciampi legal thrillers

“Nickless’s writing admirably captures the fallout from a war where even survivors are trapped, forever reliving their trauma.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Part mystery, part antiwar story, Nickless’s engrossing first novel, a series launch, introduces Sydney Rose Parnell . . . Nickless skillfully explores the dehumanizing effects resulting from the unspeakable cruelties of wartime as well as the part played by the loyalty soldiers owe to family and each other under stressful circumstances.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“An interesting tale . . . The fast pace will leave you finished in no time. Nickless seamlessly ties everything together with a shocking ending.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“If you enjoy suspense and thrillers, then you will [want] *Blood on the Tracks* for your library. Full of the suspense that holds you on the edge of your seat, it’s also replete with acts of bravery, moments of hope, and a host of feelings that keep the story’s intensity level high. This would be a great work for a book club or reading group with a great deal of information that would create robust dialogue and debate.”

—*Blogcritics*

“In *Blood on the Tracks*, Barbara Nickless delivers a thriller with the force of a speeding locomotive and the subtlety of a surgeon’s knife. Sydney and Clyde are both great characters with flaws and virtues to see them through a plot thick with menace. One for contemporary thriller lovers everywhere.”

—Authorlink

“*Blood on the Tracks* is a superb story that rises above the genre of mystery . . . It is a first-class read.”

—*Denver Post*

**THE
DROWNING
GAME**

ALSO BY BARBARA NICKLESS

Sydney Rose Parnell Series

Blood on the Tracks

Dead Stop

Ambush

Gone to Darkness

Evan Wilding Series

At First Light

Dark of Night

Play of Shadows

**THE
DROWNING
GAME**

**BARBARA
NICKLESS**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE LEGEND OF THE MERLION

According to myth, a fourteenth-century Sumatran prince was sailing in the South China Sea when a terrible storm arose. To save his men, the prince threw his crown into the waters, a sacrifice to the gods. The gods brought the ship to an island paradise, and when the prince struggled ashore, he was greeted by a lion. He named the new land using the Sanskrit words singa for “lion” and pura for “city”—Singapura.

The merlion—with its lion head and the body of a fish—is now a beloved symbol of Singapore, where many believe it can ward off evil.