

KENDRA ELLIOT

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HER FIRST MISTAKE

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground and middle ground, there are rolling hills and valleys of red sandstone, showing distinct horizontal geological layering. The sky above is a vibrant mix of orange, pink, and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is dramatic and evocative.

PRAISE FOR THE COLUMBIA RIVER SERIES

“[A] gripping novel of suspense from Elliot . . . Elliot skillfully unravels layers of intersecting stories, each one integral to the overall story of the Mills family and their small-town secrets. Readers will want to see more from this author.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Elliot succeeds in creating both a thrilling mystery and a fascinating character study of the people inhabiting these pages.”

—*Bookreporter*

“With her riveting, narrative-driven, deftly crafted storytelling style as a novelist, Kendra Elliot’s *The Last Sister* will prove to be a welcome and enduringly popular addition to community library Mystery/Suspense/Thriller collections.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“Suspense on top of suspense. This one will keep you guessing until the final page and shows Elliot at her very best.”

—*The Real Book Spy*

“Every family has skeletons. Kendra Elliot’s tale of the Mills family’s dark secrets is first-rate suspense. Dark and gripping, *The Last Sister* crescendos to knock-out, edge-of-your seat tension.”

—Robert Dugoni, bestselling author of *My Sister’s Grave*

“*The Last Sister* is exciting and suspenseful! Engaging characters and a complex plot kept me on the edge of my seat until the very last page.”

—T.R. Ragan, bestselling author of the Jessie Cole series

“Thriller Award finalist Elliot’s well-paced sequel to *The Last Sister* opens at the home of fifty-two-year-old Reuben Braswell, a devotee of conspiracy theories, who’s lying dead in his bathtub . . . The twist ending will catch most readers by surprise . . . [and] fans will look forward to seeing

characters from the author's other series take the lead in future installments."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Elliot skillfully interweaves the various plot threads, and credible, mostly sympathetic characters match the lovingly described locale. Fans of contemporary regional mysteries will be rewarded."

—*Publishers Weekly*

**HER
FIRST
MISTAKE**

ALSO BY KENDRA ELLIOT

Echo Road

COLUMBIA RIVER NOVELS

The Last Sister

The Silence

In the Pines

The First Death

At the River

The Next Grave

MERCY KILPATRICK NOVELS

A Merciful Death

A Merciful Truth

A Merciful Secret

A Merciful Silence

A Merciful Fate

A Merciful Promise

BONE SECRETS NOVELS

Hidden

Chilled

Buried

Alone

Known

BONE SECRETS NOVELLAS

Veiled

CALLAHAN & MCLANE NOVELS
PART OF THE BONE SECRETS WORLD

Vanished

Bridged

Spiraled

Targeted

ROGUE RIVER NOVELLAS

On Her Father's Grave (Rogue River)

Her Grave Secrets (Rogue River)

Dead in Her Tracks (Rogue Winter)

Death and Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)

Truth Be Told (Rogue Justice)

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLAS

Close to the Bone

Bred in the Bone

Below the Bones

The Lost Bones

Bone Deep

HER FIRST MISTAKE

**KENDRA
ELLIOT**



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.

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First edition



For my girls

CONTENTS

<u>1</u>
<u>2</u>
<u>3</u>
<u>4</u>
<u>5</u>
<u>6</u>
<u>7</u>
<u>8</u>
<u>9</u>
<u>10</u>
<u>11</u>
<u>12</u>
<u>13</u>
<u>14</u>
<u>15</u>
<u>16</u>
<u>17</u>
<u>18</u>
<u>19</u>
<u>20</u>
<u>21</u>
<u>22</u>
<u>23</u>
<u>24</u>

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)

[37](#)

[38](#)

[39](#)

[40](#)

[41](#)

[42](#)

[43](#)

[44](#)

[45](#)

[46](#)

[47](#)

[48](#)

[49](#)

[50](#)

[51](#)

[52](#)

53

54

55

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thirteen years ago

“Did you vote for him?”

“I don’t remember.” FBI special agent Alice Patmore paused outside the impressive country home, studying the huge porch with its columns and heavy beams. She hadn’t voted in the last election and didn’t want to start a political discussion. “Does it matter?”

“Not anymore,” said Agent Wilson, sounding grimmer than usual.

She often partnered up with him. He was reliable and smart, but his long face—along with his constant pessimism—reminded her of Eeyore. Oscar Wilson could be counted on to point out anything negative within view. What bothered Alice the most about his gloomy outlook was that she felt pressured to bolster him, point out the positive, and be his perky counterbalance.

She was not a perky person.

Oscar lifted the yellow tape so Alice could duck underneath. Two forensics vans and a dozen law enforcement units were parked on the street in front of the striking home. Sacramento County sheriff, California Highway Patrol, and even the nearby city police. A mix of officers from the different responding departments watched Alice and Oscar head up the walkway. Alice swore she could feel their gazes boring through the back of her jacket. She wondered how many of them had trampled the scene inside before being relegated to the street.

The home was in an unincorporated area about twenty miles outside of Sacramento. All the nearby houses were upscale, expensive, and far from each other on small acreage lots. Personally Alice preferred to live closer to people and businesses. Out here she would feel too isolated.

The two agents nodded at the deputy monitoring the log and showed him their ID’s. As they signed, Alice scanned the names above. The medical examiner hadn’t arrived yet. “Who’s in charge?” she asked politely. There

was no question that the FBI had to respond to this murder, but she never knew if they'd get a bit of attitude from other law enforcement.

The deputy studied her for a long second. "Detective Rodden. He's inside."

As she and Oscar bootied up and slipped on vinyl gloves, she studied the front door's frame. No damage. The windows facing the street didn't show any damage either.

Who knows what we'll find inside.

Alice knew the name of the victim and little else. She preferred it that way, so she wasn't influenced by someone else's interpretation when she entered a scene. She'd been with the FBI nearly twenty years and had learned early on to assume nothing and always try to see for herself or hear directly from a victim.

"The air-conditioning bills must be ridiculous," Oscar muttered as he looked at the high ceilings and thick crossbeams.

"It's a gorgeous house," Alice stated firmly, quickly scanning the hardwood floor of the formal living room, checking for broken glass.

"It's got to be six thousand square feet and cost a fortune to clean," said Oscar with a deep sigh and a weary shake of his head.

Why do I even try?

She heard voices and followed the sounds to a gigantic kitchen, where two men in plain clothes with sheriff's badges on their lanyards stood on the far side of an island the size of Alice's entire kitchen. They were watching three forensics techs process the kitchen but immediately looked over as Alice and Oscar entered.

Medical paraphernalia littered the floor. Paper packaging for bandages, tubing, gloves, and gauze squares. The island blocked the sight of the victim's body, but Alice could see his lower legs, noting he wore jeans and hiking boots.

The rest of the body came into view as they neared the men, and she saw that several cuts and bruises dotted the victim's hands and arms. She and Oscar held out their ID's as introductions were made. The tallest man was Detective Rodden, the lead on the case, and the other was his lieutenant. Rodden intermittently chomped hard on blue gum as he spoke to the agents.

Studying the body on the floor, Alice was unable to visually confirm that the victim was Assemblyman Derrick Bell, as had been reported. Since

he was a member of the California state legislature, the FBI had been notified of his murder.

Bell's face was a bloody, smashed-in mess.

"You positive that's the assemblyman?" asked Oscar. "That could be anyone."

"That's him," Detective Rodden said forcefully. "His wallet was in his pocket, and you can see the small mole beside his right eye. Hair color and its style are correct too."

Alice moved to the other side of the body and spotted the mole. Detective Rodden held out the driver's license; the mole was identical, along with the victim's hair. From the license she noticed the assemblyman had just turned thirty-two, and that Derrick Bell had been a good-looking man.

No evidence of that was left.

She pointed at the cuts on his arms and hands. "These—"

"Defense wounds," said Rodden. "He fought back."

"They're not bloody," Alice stated. "Look at his face. Lots of blood. But these cuts have very little blood in them, if any. They were made when he was already dead."

All the men stared at the body.

"You're right," said Rodden. "Someone beat him up when he was down. They may not have even known he was dead by then." Rodden continued talking with occasional flashes of blue gum, relating a summary of what else they'd found. Alice listened with one ear, knowing Oscar would pay closer attention and make notes. She studied the body's position and then scanned the room. No broken windows. No damaged door or doorframe in the kitchen.

Did the killer simply walk in?

"What is that?" she asked, indicating a figurine on the floor several feet from the body.

"An elephant," said Rodden. "And yes, there's blood on it."

Alice squatted to get a better look at the piece. The cast-iron elephant was a little larger than a coffeepot. It was heavily detailed, and she suspected it had been expensive. She looked around the room, spotting a few more elephants of all sizes and colors.

Someone was a fan.

She pushed at the elephant with her pen, barely able to move it. It was solid and very heavy.

Murder weapon?

Blood speckled the figurine, and its trunk formed a heavy hook. With enough muscle behind the object, it could do a lot of damage. She looked back at the victim's smashed face.

"All the doors were unlocked when the deputies arrived," said Rodden. "Front door was wide open. Didn't find any forced entry."

"Rest of the house?" asked Oscar.

"No signs of a struggle anywhere. The master bed isn't made, and there are clothes in the laundry basket. Other than that, the rest of the home is extremely neat."

Except in the kitchen.

Blood spatter had sprayed across four of the kitchen island's white cabinets. A thick pool of blood with swirling smears was six feet away, where more medical paper packaging clustered. Obvious shoe prints appeared in that blood, and there were more bloody smears on the floor around it. One of the forensic techs was shooting photos of the dark blood pool, a second tech was dusting the cabinets for fingerprints, and the third made notes on a clipboard.

"Blood was still fresh when the ambulance arrived," said Rodden. "I don't think it happened that long before."

"Who called it in?" asked Alice.

"Anonymous 911 call from the house landline." He pointed at a cordless phone on the kitchen wall, its receiver covered in black dust.

"Who still has a landline?" asked Oscar.

"In this more rural area, a number of people," said Rodden. "Cell service can be sketchy. The call was made by a female. Whispering. I listened to it; she sounds terrified."

"His wife?" asked Alice. "House staff? Do they have kids?" She faintly recalled seeing the congressman's wife in media photographs. Together they were an attractive young couple that Bell's political party had high hopes for.

"His wife was attacked too." Rodden pointed at the large bloodstain by the tech with the camera. "She was still breathing when the deputies arrived. No kids."

Alice grimaced. She should have known *that* fact ahead of time. This time her preference for walking into a scene without too much information had backfired.

“Her husband wasn’t breathing,” Rodden continued. “Deputies tried CPR until the ambulance arrived. He never recovered. As far as staff, according to the neighbors, the Bells use a housekeeping service once a week. We’re checking to see when they were last here. The assemblyman has—had political staff that I believe only work at his office downtown. We’ll confirm that. We’re getting a list of staff names.”

“Do you have the 911 recording?” asked Oscar.

Rodden tapped on his phone and held it out.

“911. What is your emergency?”

“They’re dead! Oh my God! They’ve been killed!”

The woman was sobbing, her whispers choked with tears. “You’ve got to come now!” She whispered the address.

“Ma’am, can you speak up? Who is dead?”

“She doesn’t say anything else, but the line stayed open,” said Detective Rodden, ending the playback. “When law enforcement arrived, the receiver was lying on the counter, and she had left. Obviously the caller was wrong that both were dead.”

“Cameras?” asked Alice. The hair had lifted on the back of her neck. The woman on the recording had sounded genuinely scared to death.

Some people are good actors.

“No cameras here, but we’re checking with all the neighbors to see if they have them.”

“I’d expect an assemblyman to have better security in his home,” Oscar said in a sad voice.

“We’ve been told the security is tighter at his condo downtown and his office. Supposedly, out here, the crime is low,” said Rodden.

“Not low enough,” droned Oscar.

“Were the wife’s injuries similar to the assemblyman’s?” asked Alice, studying the victim’s disaster of a face again, wondering how bad the wife looked.

“Not according to the first responders. The deputies said the back of her head was bleeding. Nothing on her face, but she was unconscious and barely breathing. They said it was understandable that the caller thought she was dead. By the time the ambulance arrived, she was stirring.”

Surprised, Alice looked again at the pool of blood; it'd made her expect worse injuries.

Head wounds bleed a lot.

"Are the deputies that first responded still here?" asked Alice, wanting to hear their observations directly.

"I sent them back for a full debrief."

"When will the coroner get here?" asked Oscar.

Rodden sighed. "Last estimate was two hours."

Alice exchanged a look with Oscar. Waiting two hours for the coroner would be a waste of their time. They'd learn details at the autopsy and from the pathologist's report.

Right now the best lead was the eyewitness: Assemblyman Bell's wife.

Alice glanced at the wife's bloodstain, realizing that the swirling pattern in it had most likely been made by her hair.

She tipped her head at Oscar. "Let's walk the house and then go talk to the wife."