

RACHEL CAINE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



STILLHOUSE LAKE

**STILLHOUSE
LAKE**

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STILLHOUSE LAKE

RACHEL
CAINE

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781477848661
ISBN-10: 1477848665

Cover design by Shasti O'Leary-Soudant

To Lucienne, who immediately believed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROLOGUE

GINA ROYAL

Wichita, Kansas

Gina never asked about the garage.

That thought would keep her awake every night for years after, pulsing hot against her eyelids. *I should have asked. Should have known.* But she'd never asked, she didn't know, and in the end, that was what destroyed her.

She normally would have been home at three in the afternoon, but her husband had called to say he had an emergency at work and she'd have to fetch Brady and Lily from school. It was no bother, really—there was still plenty of time to finish up in the house before starting dinner. He'd been so lovely and apologetic about having to disrupt her schedule. Mel really could be the best, most charming man, and she was going to make it up to him; she'd already decided that. She'd cook his favorite dish for dinner: liver and onions, served with a nice pinot noir she already had out on the counter. Then a family night, a movie on the couch with the kids. Maybe that new superhero movie the kids were clamoring to see, though Mel was careful about what they watched. Lily would curl into Gina's side, a warm bundle, and Brady would end up sprawled across his dad's lap with his head up on the arm of the sofa. Only bendable kids could be comfortable like that, but it was Mel's favorite thing in the world, family time. Well. His second-favorite, after his woodworking. Gina hoped that he wouldn't make an excuse to go out and tinker around in his workshop this evening.

Normal life. Comfortable life. Not perfect, of course. Nobody had a perfect marriage, did they? But Gina was satisfied, at least most of the time.

She'd been gone from the house for only half an hour, just long enough to race to school, pick up the kids, and hurry home. Her first

thought as she turned the corner and saw the flashing lights on her block was *Oh God, what if someone's house is on fire?* She was properly horrified at the idea, but in the next, selfish second, she thought, *Dinner's going to be so late.* It was petty but exasperating.

The street was completely blocked off. She counted three police cars behind the barricade, their flashing light bars bathing the nearly identical ranch houses in blood red and bruise blue. An ambulance and a fire truck crouched farther down the street, apparently idle.

"Mom?" That was seven-year-old Brady, who was in the back seat. "Mom, what's happening? Is that *our house?*" He sounded thrilled. "Is it on *fire?*"

Gina slowed the car to a crawl and tried to take in the scene: a churned-up lawn, a flattened bed of irises, crushed bushes. The battered corpse of a mailbox lay half in the gutter.

Their mailbox. Their lawn. Their house.

At the end of that trail of destruction was a maroon SUV, engine still hissing steam. It was embedded halfway into the front-facing brick wall of their garage—*Mel's workshop*—and leaned drunkenly on a pile of debris that had once been part of their solid brick home. She'd always imagined their house as being so firm, so solid, so *normal*. The vomited pile of bricks and broken Sheetrock looked obscene. It looked vulnerable.

She imagined the SUV's path as it jumped the curb, took out the mailbox, slalomed the yard, and crashed into the garage. As she did, her foot finally hit the brake of her own vehicle, hard enough that she felt the jolt all the way through her spine.

"Mom!" Brady yelled, almost in her ear, and she instinctively put out a hand to hush him. In the passenger seat, ten-year-old Lily had yanked her earbuds out and leaned forward. Her lips parted as she saw the damage at their house, but she didn't say anything. Her eyes were huge with shock.

"Sorry," Gina said, hardly aware of what she was saying. "Something's wrong, baby. Lily? Are you okay?"

"What's happening?" Lily asked.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine! What's happening?"

Gina didn't answer. Her attention was pulled back to the house. She felt strangely raw and exposed, looking at the damage. Her home always

seemed so safe to her, such a fortress, and now it was breached. Security had proved a lie, no stronger than bricks and wood and drywall.

Neighbors had poured out onto the street to gawk and gossip, which made it all so much worse. Even old Mrs. Millson, the retired schoolteacher who rarely left her house. She was the neighborhood gossip and rumormonger, never shy about speculating on the private lives of everyone within her line of sight. She wore a faded housecoat and leaned heavily on a walker, and her day nurse stood beside her. They both looked fascinated.

A policeman approached Gina's vehicle, and she quickly rolled down her window and gave him an apologetic smile.

"Officer," she said. "That's my house there, the one that the SUV crashed into. Can I park here? I need to look over the damage and call my husband. This is just *awful!* I hope the driver wasn't hurt too badly . . . Was he drunk? This corner can be dangerous."

The officer's expression went from blank to hard-focused as she spoke, and she didn't understand why, not at all, but knew it wasn't good. "This is your house?"

"Yes, it is."

"What's your name?"

"Royal. Gina Royal. Officer—"

He took a step back and rested his hand on the butt of his gun. "Turn your engine off, ma'am," he said as he signaled to another cop, who came at a jog. "Get the detective. Go!"

Gina wet her lips. "Officer, maybe you didn't understand—"

"Ma'am, turn your engine off *now.*" It was a harsh order this time. She shifted the vehicle into park and turned the key. The motor spun down to silence, and she could hear the buzz of conversation from the curious onlookers gathering on the far sidewalk. "Keep both hands on the wheel. No sudden moves. Are there any weapons in the van with you?"

"No, of course there aren't. Sir, I have my kids in here!"

He didn't take his hand off his gun, and she felt a surge of anger. *This is ridiculous. They have us mixed up with someone else. I haven't done anything!*

"Ma'am, I'm going to ask you again: Do you have any weapons?" The raw edge to his voice derailed her outrage and replaced it with cold panic. For a second she couldn't speak.

She finally managed to say, "No! I don't have any weapons. Nothing."

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Brady asked, his voice sharp with alarm. “Why is the policeman so mad at us?”

“Nothing’s wrong, baby. Everything’s going to be just fine.” *Keep your hands on the wheel, hands on the wheel . . .* She was desperate to hug her son but didn’t dare. She could see that Brady didn’t believe the false warmth of her voice. She didn’t believe it herself. “Just sit right here, okay? Don’t move. Both of you, *don’t move.*”

Lily was staring at the officer outside the car. “Is he going to shoot us, Mom? Is he going to shoot?” Because they’d all seen videos, hadn’t they, of people shot to death, innocent people who’d made the wrong move, said the wrong thing, been in the wrong place at the wrong time. And she imagined it happening, vividly . . . her kids dying and her unable to do a thing to stop it. A bright flash of light, screams, darkness.

“Of course he’s not going to shoot you! Baby, please *don’t move!*” She turned back to the policeman and said, “Officer, please, you’re scaring them. I have no idea what this is about!”

A woman with a gold police badge hanging around her neck walked past the barricade, past the officer, and right up to Gina’s window. She had a tired face and bleak, dark eyes, and she took in the situation at a glance. “Mrs. Royal? Gina Royal?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re the wife of Melvin Royal?” He hated to be called Melvin. Only ever Mel, but it didn’t seem like a time to tell the woman that, so Gina just nodded in response. “My name is Detective Salazar. I’d like you to step out of the vehicle, please. Keep both hands in view.”

“My kids—”

“They can stay where they are for now. We’ll take care of them. Please step out.”

“What in God’s name is wrong? That’s *our* house. This is crazy. We’re the *victims* here!” Fear—for herself, for her kids—made her irrational, and she heard a strange tone in her voice that surprised her. She sounded unhinged, like one of those clueless people on the news who always made her feel both pity and contempt. *I’d never sound like that in a crisis.* How often had she thought that? But she did. She sounded exactly like them. Panic fluttered like a trapped moth in her chest, and she couldn’t seem to keep her breathing steady. It was all too much, too fast.

“A victim. Sure you are.” The detective opened her door. “Step out.” No *please* this time. The officer who’d called the detective stepped away, and his hand was still on his gun, and *why*, why were they treating her like this, like a criminal? *This is just a mistake. All a terrible, stupid mistake!* Out of instinct, she reached for her purse, but Salazar immediately took it and handed it to the patrol officer. “Hands on the hood, Mrs. Royal.”

“Why? I don’t understand what’s—”

Detective Salazar didn’t give her a chance to finish. She spun Gina around and shoved her forward against the car. Gina broke her fall with outstretched hands on the hot metal of the hood. It was like touching a stove burner, but she didn’t dare pull away. She felt dazed. This was a *mistake*. Some terrible *mistake*, and in another minute they’d apologize and she would graciously forgive them for being so rude, and they’d laugh and she’d invite them in for iced tea . . . she might have some of those lemon cookies left, if Mel hadn’t eaten the rest; he really loved his lemon cookies

. . .

She gasped when Salazar’s hands slid impersonally over areas that she had *no right to touch*. Gina tried to resist, but the detective shoved her back in place with real force. “Mrs. Royal! Don’t make this worse! Listen to me. You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent—”

“I’m *what?* That’s *my house!* That car drove *into my house!*” Her son and daughter could see this humiliation, right in front of them. Her neighbors all stared. Some had cell phones out. They were taking pictures. Video. Uploading this horrible violation to the Internet so bored people around the world could mock her, and it wouldn’t matter later that it was all a mistake, would it? The Internet was forever. She was always warning Lily about that.

Salazar continued to talk, telling her about rights that she couldn’t possibly comprehend in that moment, and Gina didn’t resist as the detective pinned her hands behind her back. She just didn’t know how to even begin.

The metal of the handcuffs felt like a cold slap on her damp skin, and Gina fought a strange, high buzzing in her head. She felt sweat rolling down her face and neck, but everything seemed separated from her. Distant. *This isn’t happening. This can’t be happening. I’ll call Mel. Mel will sort this out, and we’ll all have a good laugh later.* She could not comprehend how she’d gone in a minute or two from normal life to . . . to this.

Brady was yelling and trying to get out of the car, but the policeman kept him inside. Lily seemed too stunned and scared to move. Gina looked toward them and said in a surprisingly rational voice, “Brady. Lily. It’s okay—please don’t be afraid. It’ll be okay. Just do what they tell you. I’m all right. This is all just a mistake, okay? It’s going to be all right.” Salazar’s hand was painfully tight on her upper arm, and Gina turned her head toward the detective. “Please. Please, whatever you think I did, *I didn’t do it!* Please make sure my kids are okay!”

“I will,” Salazar said, unexpectedly kind. “But you need to come with me, Gina.”

“Is it—do you think I did this? Drove this thing into our house? I didn’t! I’m not drunk, if you think—” She stopped, because she could see a man sitting on a cot by the ambulance, breathing oxygen. A paramedic was treating him for a wound to the scalp, and a police officer hovered nearby. “Is that him? Is that the driver? Is he *drunk*?”

“Yes,” Salazar said. “Total accident, if you call drunk driving an accident. He hit early happy hour, made a wrong turn—says he was trying to make it back to the freeway—and took the corner too fast. Ended up with his front end inside your garage.”

“But—” Gina was utterly lost now. Completely, horribly at sea. “But if you have *him*, why are you—”

“You ever go into your garage, Mrs. Royal?”

“I—no. No, my husband turned it into a workshop. We put cabinets over the door from the kitchen; he goes into it from a side door.”

“So the door at the back doesn’t go up? You don’t park in it anymore?”

“No, he took the motor out, you have to go in through the side door. We have a covered carport, so I don’t need—look, what is this? What is going on?”

Salazar gave her a look. It wasn’t angry now; it was almost apologetic. Almost. “I’m going to show you something, and I need you to explain it to me, okay?”

She walked Gina around the barricade, up the sidewalk where black tire marks veered and careened in muddy ditches through the yard, all the way up to where the rear of the SUV stuck obscenely out of a jumble of red bricks and debris. This wall must have held a pegboard with Melvin’s tools. She saw a bent saw mixed in with the chalky drywall dust and for a second

could only think, *He's going to be so upset, I don't know how to tell him about any of this.* Mel loved his workshop. It was his sanctuary.

Then Salazar said, "I'd like you to explain her."

She pointed.

Gina looked up, past the hood of the SUV, and saw the life-size naked doll hanging from a winch hook in the center of the garage. For a bizarre instant, she nearly laughed at the utter inappropriateness of it. It dangled there from a wire noose around its neck, loose arms and legs, not even doll-perfect in proportions, a flawed thing, strangely discolored . . . And why would anyone paint a doll's face that hideous purple black, flay off pieces of the skin, make the eyes red and bulbous and staring, the tongue protruding from swollen lips . . .

And that was when she had one single, awful realization.

It's not a doll.

And against all her best intentions, she began to scream and couldn't stop.

GWEN PROCTOR
FOUR YEARS LATER
Stillhouse Lake, Tennessee

“Begin.”

I take a deep breath that reeks of burned gunpowder and old sweat, set my stance, focus, and pull the trigger. I keep my body balanced for the shock. Some people blink involuntarily with every shot; I’ve discovered that I simply don’t. It isn’t training, just biology, but it makes me feel that much more in control. I’m grateful for the edge.

The heavy, powerful .357 roars and bucks, sending familiar shocks through me, but I’m not focused on the noise or the kick. Only the target at the end of the range. If noise distracted me, the constant din of other shooters—men, women, and even a few teens at the other stations—would have already spoiled my aim. The steady roar of gunfire, even through the thick muffle of ear protection, sounds like a particularly violent, constant storm.

I finish firing, release the cylinder, remove the empty shells, and set the gun on the range rest with the wheel still open, muzzle pointed downrange. Then I remove my eye protection and put the glasses down. “Done.”

From behind me, the range instructor says, “Step back, please.” I do. He picks up and examines my weapon, nods, and hits the switch to bring the target forward. “Your safety’s excellent.” He has his voice pitched loudly to be heard over the noise and the barrier of hearing protection we both wear. It’s already a little hoarse; he spends most of his day shouting.

“Here’s hoping my accuracy is, too,” I yell back.

But I already know it is. I can see it before the paper target is halfway back on the glide. Empty holes fluttering, all in the tight red ring.

“Center mass,” the instructor says, giving me a thumbs-up. “That’s a letter-perfect pass. Good job, Ms. Proctor.”

“Thank you for making it so painless,” I say in turn. He steps back and gives me space, and I close the cylinder and replace the weapon in its zipped bag. Safe.

“We’ll get your scores in to the state office, and you should get your carry permit in no time.” The instructor is a young man with a tight burr haircut, former military. He has a soft, blurred accent that, though Southern, doesn’t have the sharper lilt of Tennessee . . . Georgia, I think. Nice young man, at least ten years below the age I’d ever consider dating. If I dated. He’s unfailingly polite. I am *Ms. Proctor*, always.

He shakes hands with me, and I grin back. “See you next time, Javi.” Privilege of my age and gender. I get to use his first name. I said *Mr. Esparza* for the first solid month, until he gently corrected me.

“Next time—” Something catches his attention, and his easy calm shifts to sudden alertness. His focus goes down the line, and he bellows out, “Cease fire! Cease fire!”

I feel a sweep of adrenaline ping every nerve, and I go very still, assessing, but this isn’t about me. Raggedly, all the percussive noise of the range dies, and people pull their weapons down, elbows in, while he walks down four stalls. There’s a burly man there with a semiauto pistol. Javi orders him to clear the firearm and step away.

“What’d I do?” the man asks in a belligerent tone. I pick up my bag, nerves still jangling, and head for the door, though I do it slowly. I realize the man hasn’t done as Javi instructed; instead, he’s chosen to get defensive. Not a good idea. Javi’s face goes stiff, and his body language changes with it.

“Clear that weapon and place it on the shelf, sir. Now.”

“Ain’t no call for this. I know what I’m doing! Been shooting for years!”

“Sir, I saw you turn your loaded weapon in the direction of another shooter. You know the rules. Always point the muzzle downrange. *Now clear it and put it down.* If you don’t follow my instructions, I will remove you from the range and the police will be called. Do you understand?”

Smiling, calm Javier Esparza is now someone else entirely, and the force of his command blasts through the room like a stun grenade. The offending shooter fumbles at his gun, gets the clip out, and throws it and the weapon down on the counter. I notice the muzzle still isn't pointed downrange.

Javi's voice has gone clear and soft now. "Sir, I said clear your weapon."

"I did!"

"Step back."

As the man stares, Javi reaches for the gun, ejects the last cartridge from the slide, and sets the bullet down on the counter beside the clip. "That's how people get killed. If you can't learn how to properly clear a weapon, you need to find another range," he says. "If you don't know how to obey a range instructor's orders, find another range. In fact, you might want to just find another range. You endanger yourself and everybody here when you ignore safety rules, do you understand?"

The man's face turns a puffy, unhealthy red, and he balls his fists.

Javi puts the gun back down exactly the way it had been when he picked it up, turns it downrange, and then pointedly turns it to lie on its other side. "Ejection port goes up, sir." He steps back and locks eyes with the man. Javi's wearing jeans and a blue polo shirt, and the shooter is wearing a camo shirt and old army-surplus uniform pants, but it's clear as day which one is the soldier. "I think you're done for the day, Mr. Getts. Never shoot angry."

I've never seen a man so clearly on the edge of either outright, unthinking violence or a massive heart attack. His hand twitches, and I can see him wondering how fast he can get to his gun, load it, and start to fire. There's a heavy, sick weight to the air, and I find my hand moving the zipper slowly down on the bag I'm holding, my mind calculating the steps—just as he is—to preparing my gun to fire. I'm fast. Faster than him.

Javier isn't armed.

The tension shatters as one of the other people standing frozen at a shooting station takes a single step out, halfway between me and the angry guy. He's smaller than both Javi and the red-faced man, and he has sandy-blond hair that might have been close-cropped once but is growing out to fan his ears now. Lithe, not muscular. I've seen him around but don't know his name.

“Hey now, mister, let’s just gear this back,” he says in an accent that doesn’t sound like Tennessee to me but comes from somewhere more in the Midwest. Folksy. It’s a calm, quiet sort of voice, seductively reasonable. “The range master’s just doing his job, all right? And he’s right. You start shooting angry, never know what could happen.”

It’s amazing, watching the rage drain out of Getts, as if someone has kicked a plug loose in him. He takes a couple of deep breaths, color fading back to something like normal, and nods stiffly. “Shit,” he says. “Guess I got a little ruffled there. Won’t happen again.”

The other man nods back and returns to his shooting window, avoiding everyone’s curious looks. He starts checking over his own pistol, which is oriented the correct way, downrange.

“Mr. Getts, let’s talk outside,” Javier says, which is polite and correct, but Carl’s face twists up again, and I see a vein pulse in his temple. He starts to protest and then senses the weight of eyes on him, all the other shooters waiting in silence, watching. He steps back into the booth and angrily begins shoving his kit into a bag. “Fucking power-hungry wetback,” he mutters, then stalks toward the door. I pull in a breath, but Javi lays a friendly hand on my shoulder as the door slams behind him.

“Funny how that asshole listens to the white guy before the range master,” I say. All of us in here are white, with the exception of Javier. Tennessee has no shortage of people of color, but you’d never know it from the makeup of the people on the firing line.

“Carl’s a jackass, and I didn’t want him in here anyway,” Javi says.

“Doesn’t matter. You can’t let him talk to you that way,” I say, because I want to slam a fist into Carl’s teeth. I know it wouldn’t go well. I still want to do it.

“He can talk any way he wants. Blessings of living in a free country.” Javi sounds pleasant, still. “Doesn’t mean no consequences, ma’am. He’ll be getting a letter banning him from the range. Not because of what he said, but I don’t trust him to be responsible around other shooters. Not only are we entitled to turn people away for unsafe and aggressive behavior, we’re required to.” He smiles a little. A grim, cold little smile. “And if he wants to have a word with me in the parking lot sometime later, fine. We can do that.”

“He might bring his beer buddies.”

“That’ll be fun.”

“So, who was the guy that stepped up?” I jerk my head toward the man; he’s already got his hearing protection on again. I’m curious, because he’s not a usual range rat, or at least not during the times I tend to shoot.

“Sam Cade.” Javi shrugs. “He’s okay. New guy. Kinda surprised he did that. Most people wouldn’t.”

I hold out my hand. He shakes it. “Thank you, sir. You run a tight range.”

“I owe it to everybody who comes here. Be safe out there,” he says, then turns back to the waiting shooters. He breaks out his drill sergeant voice again. “Range is clear! Commence fire!”

I duck out as the thunder of bullets rattles again. The run-in between Javi and the other man has shaved a little off my good mood, but I still feel vastly elated as I leave my hearing protection on the rack outside. *Fully certified*. I’ve been thinking about it for a very long time, cautious, unsure about whether or not I dared to put my name on official records. I’d always had guns, but it had been a risk, carrying without a license. I finally felt settled well enough here that I could take the leap.

My phone buzzes as I unlock the car, and I nearly fumble it as I open up the back to place my gear inside. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Proctor?”

“*Ms.* Proctor,” I automatically correct, then glance at the caller ID. I have to suppress a groan. School administration office. It’s a number with which I am already depressingly familiar.

“I’m sorry to tell you that your daughter, Atlanta—”

“Is in trouble,” I finish for the woman on the other end. “So I guess this must be Tuesday.” I lift the panel on the floor. Beneath, there’s a lockbox, big enough for the gun bag, and I put it in and slam the box shut, then pull the carpet back over to conceal it.

The woman on the other end of the call makes a disapproving sound, low in her throat. Her voice rises a notch. “It’s not funny, Mrs. Proctor. The principal is going to need you to come in to have a serious discussion. This is the fourth incident in three months, and it’s simply not acceptable behavior for a girl of Lanny’s age!”

Lanny is fourteen, a perfectly predictable age to be acting out, but I don’t say that. I just ask, “What happened?” as I walk to the front of the Jeep and climb in. I have to leave the door open a moment to let the