

THE
BLEECKER STREET INQUIRY AGENCY

To Write a Wrong



JEN TURANO

USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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For Raela Schoenherr,

my extraordinary editor who has been with me
since my very first book. Thank you for always being
the calm in whatever writing storm I find myself in.
It has been a delight working with you all these many years.

Love you!

Jen



CHAPTER
One

MARCH 1887
NEW YORK CITY

There was not a shadow of a doubt left in Miss Daphne Beekman's mind that her days as a successful novelist were numbered.

Taking a sip of tea that had long gone cold, she grimaced and set aside the cup before she flexed her fingers. Placing them over the keys of her Remington typewriter, affectionately named Almira after her favorite aunt, she closed her eyes and fervently hoped that something of worth would spring to mind to write.

A moment later, her fingers pounded against the keys, the clacking of every key hit drowning out the sound of the wind that was howling around the Holbrooke boardinghouse. Reaching the last available line on the page, she pulled the paper from the cylinder and took a moment to read over what she'd typed.

Crumpling up the paper a blink of an eye later, she tossed it over her shoulder, where it joined the hundred or so other crumpled pieces of paper littering the room. Heaving a sigh, she was suddenly distracted from what could only be described as a dismal mood by the sound of ruffling feathers. Glancing around, she found Pretty Girl, a temperamental parrot that had a propensity for nicking sparkly items, waddling through the discarded balls

of paper as she made her way for the crumpled ball Daphne had just tossed aside.

“If you think you’re going to find a treasure in there, you’re sadly mistaken,” Daphne said, which didn’t deter Pretty Girl in the least as she grabbed the paper with her beak and began shaking it from side to side, her shaking increasing when nothing sparkly fell from what she’d evidently thought was precious booty. Pretty Girl dropped the paper and stepped her way toward another crumpled ball.

“There’s nothing of worth hidden in any of those, especially no words of worth—not that you’d be interested in that,” Daphne said. “Every word typed out on those pages is complete rubbish. Frankly, I’m beginning to wonder what possessed me to think becoming a published author was a marvelous idea.”

Pretty Girl’s response to that was to fly from the floor and land on top of a lampshade beside Daphne’s desk. “Tasty treats, tasty treats,” she cackled.

“This is no time for treats. I’m facing a crisis right now, and I don’t believe you’re being very sympathetic to my plight. In case you haven’t been listening, my writing career is undoubtedly doomed.”

“Doomed, doomed,” Pretty Girl screeched.

“That’s hardly helpful.” Daphne slouched down in the chair. “I never thought writing would turn so challenging, but with the pressures of deadlines and expectations of my readers, I’m turning more neurotic by the second. That is not benefiting my nerves, which are questionable at the best of times. I’m beginning to think I should simply abandon this ridiculous profession before it kills me.”

“Kills me, kills me, awwk, kills me,” Pretty Girl parroted before she launched into flight and flew out of the attic room Daphne rented from Eunice Holbrooke.

“So much for using you as inspiration for the pirate scene I’m not having any success completing. We’ll see if I ever volunteer to watch you again when Nicholas and Gabriella go out of town.”

Forcing herself to abandon her slouching, Daphne turned back to the typewriter. “This is not as difficult as you’re imagining it is,” she said firmly. “You write all the time. There has to be a way to get Mad-Eye Willy off the plank without him losing his life in the process.”

Positioning her hands over the keys again, she closed her eyes, but instead of any reasonable solution to the Mad-Eye Willy dilemma springing to mind, a piece of chocolate cake drifted through her thoughts, the very idea of cake leaving her stomach rumbling. Opening her eyes, she shoved back the chair, rose to her feet, then flung herself directly on top of the crunched papers, flinging a hand over her forehead in a most dramatic fashion. Unfortunately, it didn’t make her feel better in the least, and definitely did nothing to curb the hankering she now had for cake.

“You do *not* need cake,” she told herself. “You’re only thinking about it because Pretty Girl mentioned treats. Besides, you’ve already visited the kitchen twice today for cake, and at this rate, you’ll be large as a house before you get close to meeting your deadline.”

A yawn from underneath the settee drew her attention, where she discovered Winston, a one-eyed dog that was sporting an eye-patch over his missing eye, watching her with what seemed to be annoyance on his brown furry face.

“Am I disturbing your nap?”

Winston blinked his one eye.

“If you’ll recall,” she began, sitting up, “I told you I have the habit of speaking to myself whenever I’m trying to compose a first draft. You certainly didn’t appear bothered by my disclosure when you trailed after me earlier, especially when Precious, your lady love, tried to engage you in yet another game of tug-of-war with that stuffed rabbit Elsy knit for her.”

Winston yawned again.

Daphne fought the inclination to yawn as well. “If you’ll also recall, I told you that you could enjoy time away from your

high-maintenance poodle with me, but only if you'd try your hardest to adopt the air of a true pirate dog. I was hoping that would lend me a substantial amount of motivation for at least two chapters, if not three."

Winston crawled out from underneath the settee, moseyed his way over to Daphne, and licked her cheek, leaving a great deal of slobber behind. He then headed for one of the narrow windows that flanked Daphne's favorite reading chair, edging behind the curtain and leaving only his backside in view.

"A view of your behind is hardly going to motivate me."

Winston burrowed another inch underneath the hem of the curtain.

Realizing she wasn't going to find much in the way of inspiration from Winston, Daphne gathered some crumpled balls of paper into her lap and spent the next few minutes lobbing them in the direction of her rubbish bin, not one of them hitting the mark. Abandoning that less-than-productive distraction when she noticed she now had paper balls scattered everywhere, she rose to her feet and began tidying up, abandoning that effort when she reached the trunk positioned at the foot of her bed.

Stored within the vast confines of the trunk were numerous disguises she'd begun collecting to aid with her second job—that being an inquiry agent for the Bleecker Street Inquiry Agency. As luck would have it, one of those disguises was a pirate outfit, rescued from the Cherry Lane Theater by Miss Lulah Wallace, a fellow Bleecker Street agent who also worked at the theater. That theater had recently performed a lackluster version of the *Pirates of Penzance*, and the reviews were so bad that the theater had been forced to close the show weeks earlier than expected. The owner of the theater had then demanded that all the costumes for that performance be tossed out, the poor man not wanting to have continued reminders hanging about of how dismally the show had been received.

Daphne flipped open the lid and dug out a pirate costume, hoping it would aid in her quest to finish at least one chapter that

night. Five minutes later, she stood in front of her mirror, turning side to side as she admired her improved appearance.

Tan trousers cut off below the knee were certainly a departure from the skirts she normally wore. And even though the trousers were incredibly baggy on her slim frame, she thought they lent her a rakish air. She rolled up the billowing sleeves of the beige blouse that was missing a few buttons, then settled a battered tricorne hat over her perfectly ordinary brown hair. Returning to the trunk, she rummaged through it, disappointed when she couldn't locate the cutlass that would go far to complete her ensemble.

Pushing herself out of the trunk, she settled her attention on Winston's backside. "I think I left the cutlass at the agency. What say we go for a nice stroll and fetch it?"

Winston inched farther underneath the curtain.

Daphne began tapping her toe against the wooden floor. "Honestly, Winston, I have no idea why you're being so uncooperative tonight. Dogs are supposed to enjoy taking walks. Besides, I told Gabriella that I would be diligent in making certain you got enough exercise while she's away on a most difficult case. We've been closed up in the attic for hours. That means we're going for a walk, and I expect you to be happy about that."

It took a good few minutes to convince Winston he wanted to go for a walk, but after he eventually abandoned the curtain, making a big production of stretching, yawning, and sending Daphne injured looks, he finally began ambling for the door.

"Do know that I'll be informing Nicholas when he returns about your less-than-accommodating attitude of late," Daphne said as she and Winston left the room, earning a wag of a tail from Winston at the mention of his owner, Nicholas Quinn.

Unable to help but smile because Winston did have a certain charm about him, even when he was being difficult, they walked down the four flights of stairs that led to the main floor and headed for the parlor, where she'd left the bag she never ventured from the boardinghouse without. Before she reached the parlor, though, Precious, the neurotic poodle Gabriella Quinn had come

to own after a client decided she didn't want the dog anymore, came prancing down the hallway. With her sights set firmly on Winston, she began to yip up a storm around the stuffed rabbit she was carrying in her mouth.

A sappy-looking grin immediately settled on Winston's furry face, probably because Precious was already nuzzling him with her topknot.

"You're a complicated dog, Winston," Daphne said as he frolicked away with Precious. Following after them, she stepped into the parlor, finding Eunice Holbrooke, the owner of the boarding-house, as well as the founding member of the Bleecker Street Inquiry Agency, sitting in a chair by the fire. Eunice was, as usual, dressed in stark black widow's weeds, although she'd abandoned her veils, probably because it was past ten and there was little chance anyone would show up unexpectedly at the door.

"Working late tonight?" Daphne asked.

Eunice dropped a file onto the stack of client files on the small table beside her, then blinked as her gaze traveled over Daphne. "Indeed, but you're evidently working late as well. Should I assume, given your appearance, that you're having difficulty with a particular scene?"

Daphne fetched her bag from where she'd left it earlier, then plopped down in a chair. "I'm in desperate need of motivation and am hoping this look will put me in a pirate frame of mind."

"I thought you were hoping Winston and Pretty Girl would do that for you."

"Well, quite, but they were less than cooperative. Winston's been snoozing all day, and Pretty Girl apparently got bored and flew out of the attic."

"Pretty Girl's on the loose?"

Daphne winced. "I'm afraid so, which means we'll be missing more silverware come morning, but not to fret. I found Pretty Girl's stash, so I'll retrieve the silver later. That will spare Alma a frustrating morning of trying to serve breakfast without utensils."

“I’m sure Alma will appreciate that, but returning to your pirate situation, I’m curious whether dressing like a pirate is actually getting you into a pirate frame of mind. You’re not acting like I’d expect a pirate to act, nor are you speaking pirate right now.”

“That’s because I haven’t assumed a full pirate identity yet. I think I left the cutlass that completes this outfit at the agency. I was just heading out to retrieve it.”

“Why would the cutlass be at the agency?”

“I was considering hanging it on the wall of my office, because it seems like something an inquiry agent might have on a wall, but then I got distracted with some of our cases.” Daphne settled into the chair. “I’ve been hoping a potential case will provide me with the spark I need to figure out this book I’m writing. Unfortunately, we don’t seem to have any murder cases pending.”

“We’re not really the type of agency to take on murder cases. In fact, it’s my humble opinion that murder is best left to the police department or the Pinkertons,” Eunice said. “Murders do tend to come with murderers, who, I’m sure you’ll agree, add a degree of danger I’m not certain we have the experience to handle quite yet.”

“We’ve handled numerous dangerous cases—one, if you’ll recall, that actually involved the death of a notorious villain.”

“True, but since we completed that case, we’ve concentrated our efforts on tracking down missing people, missing fortunes, and delving into the backgrounds of unscrupulous types. While those cases involve a measure of danger, tracking a murderer is on a completely different level.”

“Agreed, but a murder investigation might provide me with wonderful fodder for my story.” Daphne bit her lip. “Frankly, though, I’m not certain a murder case *would* help me because I’m beginning to conclude that I have nothing of worth left to write. My latest draft is filled with nonsense, which means my writing profession is destined for failure.”

“You said that with the last book you wrote, the one your publisher is convinced is your best work to date.”

“I might have bemoaned my fate as an author a time or two while writing that last book, but this time I *mean* it. I’m obviously an abysmal writer and all of my previous successes were merely flukes.”

“You’ve become one of the most sought-after mystery writers in the country. I doubt you achieved that status because of numerous flukes.”

“Perhaps not, but it’s a distinct possibility that I’ve used up all of my writing talent,” Daphne said. “I’m worried readers of Montague Moreland novels are going to be disappointed with this mess of a manuscript I’m attempting to plod through. That disappointment will certainly see my publisher parting ways with me and my readers abandoning me in droves.”

“You know that’s not going to happen, and even if it did, you could always reinvent yourself and write under your real name instead of your nom de plume once you pull yourself out of what is merely a writing slump.”

“Readers don’t want to read mysteries written by women, at least according to my publisher, hence the nom de plume *and* the reason I promised my editor I’d never let my true identity out.”

“Every resident at the boardinghouse knows you’re Montague Moreland.”

“It would have been difficult to keep that from the ladies since I’m often typing away in my attic room at all hours, as well as wandering around the house, talking to the characters in my head. However, everyone here, including yourself, has sworn never to divulge my secret. I’m of the firm belief everyone is good for her word.”

“We do have a most stellar group of ladies living here. But if your identity did leak—and not from us, of course—you could always write a different genre under your real name.”

“But I adore writing mysteries.”

“Then it’s fortunate you’re *not* an abysmal writer and are certain to have a long and prolific career ahead of you.”

“Did you miss the part where I said my current manuscript is a disaster?”

Eunice’s lips twitched. “That would have been difficult to miss, given how dramatically you’ve stated the deplorable condition of your latest draft. Nevertheless, you must know that state is only temporary. It’ll be a riveting read once you write the end and polish it up. It could be that you merely need to rethink the pirate scene you’re determined to include.”

“It’s not merely a single scene. Mad-Eye Willy is the hero of the story and he is in every chapter. One particularly tricky scene has been giving me fits for the past two weeks. I simply cannot figure out how to get my hero pirate off the plank he’s been forced to walk without sending him into the water. He’d certainly face a horrible demise if he toppled off the plank, given that I have an entire school of sharks swimming underneath him.”

Eunice’s brows drew together. “Not that I’m an expert on this, but a pirate seems like an unlikely hero.”

“True, but as I was contemplating what type of man would make the perfect hero for my next book, I decided that my female readers might appreciate a pirate in that role. Many women long to meet men of adventure, as well as secretly long to be associated with dangerous men.”

Eunice gave her nose a scratch. “Perhaps your difficulty with this book centers around the name you’ve chosen for your hero. Forgive me for pointing this out, but the name Mad-Eye Willy is a little off-putting. When I think of someone named Mad-Eye, I picture a dirty scoundrel who smells.”

“My hero does *not* smell.”

“And thank goodness for that.” Eunice tilted her head. “I feel I also must point out that, at least in my case, when I think of the name Willy, my mind conjures up an image of a gentle, somewhat nervous man who is slight of build. The Willy I always associate with the name is not a man who’d ever be standing on a plank with sharks swimming underneath him.”

The image of the man Eunice was describing immediately

popped into Daphne’s mind—a man named Willy who was not a pirate but a rail-thin, pipe-carrying, cardigan-wearing man, who was being attended to by someone because he was in frail health. She narrowed her eyes at Eunice. “You’re going to have to have more care with any additional observations you may want to toss my way.”

“Why?”

“Because now, besides having to figure out how to get my pirate off the plank, I’m going to have to choose a different name for him because you’ve ruined Willy for me forever.”

“Surely not?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Eunice winced. “I beg your pardon for that, Daphne. I had no idea my observation would turn so concerning, but maybe you can change the pirate’s name to Gentleman Jack. I’ve often seen that name used for pirates, and that would allow you to establish to your readers that even though he’s a pirate, he’s still a gentleman.”

“And while that’s an excellent suggestion, I have a brother named Jack. I’ve been remarkably unsuccessful using names of people I know in any of my books.”

“You have a brother?”

“I have three of them. Jack’s the oldest, followed by Arthur, then Frank.”

“You’ve never mentioned any brothers. Truth be told, I thought you were alone in the world.”

“I prefer to keep my life in New York and my family separate. My mother is not really supportive of my chosen occupation, nor is she—or my father, for that matter—thrilled that I’ve gone off on my own and taken up residency here in the city. My brothers were skeptical at best when I decided to leave the family fold, and they still try to convince me to return to Boston any chance they get. As for my sister, Lydia, she’s never been happy about anything I’ve done, but moving here has left her believing she’s related to a woman who’s taken leave of her senses.”

“You have a sister too?”

Daphne smiled. “She’s the baby of the family and is convinced my decision to move to New York has left a stain on the family name, which, in turn, has ruined her chances of securing an advantageous marriage.”

“How could your decision do that?”

“Lydia’s afraid that the most sought-after gentlemen won’t want to chance courting her in case my oddness is something genetic.”

“You’re not odd.”

“So says the woman who scares people by simply stepping into a room.”

Eunice smoothed a hand down one of her black sleeves. “I do seem to frighten people whenever I go out and about, but returning to your family—here I’ve been of the belief that your greatest secret is your Montague Moreland books, but I might be wrong about that.”

“My family isn’t a secret. I merely don’t discuss them often.” Daphne got to her feet and slipped the strap of her bag over her shoulder. “But my family aside, I’m off to fetch that cutlass because the night isn’t getting any younger and I have a chapter I need to finish.”

“Would you care for me to come with you? I have five files of potential new clients to get through, but it’s late.”

“Thank you, but no. The agency is only a few houses away. Given the sound of the rain pounding on the window, it’s clearly turning nasty outside. No sense in both of us getting soaked.” She nodded to Winston. “Winston will do well as my guardian.”

“He’s a complete and utter coward more often than not.”

“Winston’s proven he can rise to an occasion if something concerning is transpiring.” Daphne gave a snap of her fingers. “Come on, boy. Time for that walk.”

It took more than a few minutes to convince Winston once again that he longed to go for a walk, especially after Precious, at the mere mention of a walk, plopped herself down beside Eunice

and refused to budge. By the time Daphne got Winston out of the room, shoved her feet into boots, and slipped into a traveling cloak, she was rethinking her decision to fetch the cutlass.

That rethinking was only reinforced when she stepped outside and rain mixed with sleet hit her squarely in the face. Tipping her tricorne hat lower, she hurried forward, thankful that the Bleecker Street Inquiry Agency was only five doors down, but with the wind howling around her, it seemed to be miles away.

Unlocking the front door of the agency, Daphne slipped into the hallway with Winston by her side, who immediately slouched toward the library, clearly in search of someplace drier.

Daphne turned on a small gas lamp in the receiving hallway before she shrugged out of her cloak, hung it up, then made her way to her personal office. Three minutes later, armed with the cutlass she'd found underneath her desk, she hurried down the hallway, shivering as she stepped into the library. Deciding it would be prudent to warm up before venturing into the storm again, she threw a few logs into the grate, smiling when Winston, who was stretched out in front of the fireplace, rolled onto his back and stuck his feet straight into the air as warmth spread throughout the room.

Sitting down on a divan close to the fire, Daphne settled back against the cushions, her gaze running over the numerous bookshelves filled with books on police procedures, city atlases, law books, and even a handful of the latest mysteries of the day.

Even though the Bleecker Street Inquiry Agency had only come into existence the previous fall after a resident at the Holbrooke boardinghouse, Miss Jennette Moore, now Mrs. Duncan Linwood, had been arrested and unjustly charged with theft, it had turned into a viable endeavor.

It had quickly become evident that many women in New York City were desperate for someone to give their problems the attention they deserved. These women had not found success using the tried-and-true avenues for justice, such as the police department or the Pinkerton Agency. Those agencies were run by men, and

it was common knowledge that men didn't take women or their problems seriously.

The Bleeker Street Inquiry Agency believed every woman deserved to be heard, but more importantly, they *believed* them. That was why what had started out as the only way to clear Jennette's name had now turned into a lucrative business.

Cases were varied—from cheating husbands, to thefts, to missing people—and every resident at the boardinghouse was assigned to cases based on their different and varied skills.

Daphne's main job at the agency was to sift through their clients' disclosures, using the imagination that had allowed her to become one of the country's most popular mystery authors in order to create lists of possible suspects and motives. She enjoyed her role in the agency, especially because it generally kept her away from the action. The few times she'd been pressed into service had not exactly been pleasant experiences. Truthfully, they'd been downright horrifying, especially the night when she'd happened upon Mr. Nicholas Quinn for the first time and he'd pointed a pistol at her, which had resulted in her fainting dead away while in the middle of Jennette's case.

Granted, Nicolas hadn't been intending to shoot her, but she'd not known that at the time. All she'd known was that he was a threat, and she'd proven time and again that she wasn't a lady who dealt with threats in a calm and deliberate fashion, not with how she normally ended up unconscious on the floor every time she felt threatened.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

Daphne snapped out of her thoughts but found herself frozen on the spot because the voice that had just called out was certainly male and seemed to have come from within the agency, suggesting she might have forgotten to lock the door behind her—a mistake a seasoned inquiry agent would never have made.

"Go see who it is," she whispered to Winston.

It swiftly became evident that Winston was not going to embrace the attitude of a true pirate dog, or fierce guardian, for that

matter, because he immediately crawled underneath the fainting couch.

That unfortunate state of affairs meant that she, Miss Daphne Beekman, a lady prone to swooning whenever her nerves got the better of her, was now on her own to deal with a mysterious gentleman who, hopefully, was not a criminal in search of his next victim.