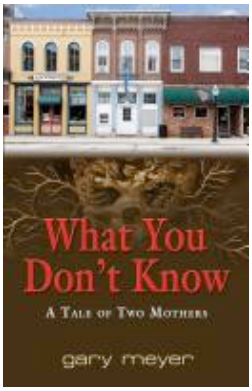
What You Don't Know

A Tale of Two Mothers

gary meyer



When nostalgia meets reality, things can get ugly.That's the lifestyle clash awaiting young mother Becca Norris when she returns to her small-town childhood home after seven years as an architect in the United Arab Emirates city of Dubai. What she remembers are tree-lined streets, friendly neighbors and a child-nurturing bucolic environs. What she finds is duplicity, corruption, murder, sexual assault, marital infidelity - a hard-drinking, hard-living world where little is what it appears to be.

What You Don't Know

Veronica Kovaks went to bed almost giddy with relief.

"Well, Rusty old boy, it's you and me for quite some time, I guess," she said, bidding her new canine companion good night at the base of the stairs before ascending to her bedroom. She eased herself down to sit on the second step from the bottom. Rusty came over and licked her right hand as she reached it out to pet his head.

"We're going to have a great time, I promise you. Those new pills from the doctor seem to be working, and my arthritis pain is as low as it has been for months. I really think that our little walks also are keeping me in better shape, thank you very much."

But her sleep that night was not smooth. She had to drag herself out of bed for an unusually achy round of morning customs. When she finally settled into her a.m. finale — opening up the morning newspaper as she sat in her comfy recliner — she found something to blame for her unrest: a death notice for Megan Shirley.

"Oh yes," she remarked out loud to Rusty, who lay at her feet. "The air was filled with hate and bitterness last night. Those were the bad vibes that crimped my bones, I'm sure. The Shirley family most assuredly was sending some serious ill will my way." Her eyes were dry but her heart began to race. "Things will be tense around town for a few days, ole boy. We better lay low."

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First Edition

What You Don’t Know

Gary Meyer

For Marge, Mickey, Sam, Derek and Mom —
thanks for believing in me even when I don't.

PROLOGUE

Sexual assaults, random violence, depraved conduct.

These are the stuff of police reports on any given day in a major U.S. city.

"Not so, little ole Rockboro," said Ron Reynolds, chief of the village's three-person police force, grinning widely at the young news reporter sitting across from him.

"Okay, yes, I guess we do have our tawdry behavior — our drunks, our petty thefts, our occasional domestic fight that ends with a punch. But if you want front-page news, you won't be spending a lot of time around our office, I'm afraid."

Laura Leonard, in her first week on the staff of the village's weekly newspaper, *The Record,* smiled politely back.

"Fine with me," she laughed.

Fresh out of journalism school, the petite 22-year-old had taken the job mostly to write features and cover education. But her editor suggested she first meet all the officials serving the Village of Rockboro and its surrounding Town of Market, population 9,898.

As a group, they liked saying that the six-square-mile municipality, with a population that never quite reaches 2,000, inspires descriptions like *quaint, bucolic, innocent, sleepy* and *historic.*

But Veronica Kovaks, like many lifetime residents of the village's tree-lined streets, laughs at that image of innocence,

at least in her darkest moments, on her third glass of Chardonnay, sitting alone in her dimly lit den.

"We coulda been the model for Peyton Place," the 60-year-old widow mumbles to the empty room.

Then she sighs, knowing the book, movie and TV show that made those words synonymous with the ugly side of small-town life are decades past their popularity.

Certainly, that comparison is meaningless to Rockboro native Rebecca Norris, currently settled 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean.

Buffeted for years by the showy, sun-baked, wealth-drenched Middle East environs of Dubai, Norris sees her hometown as an oasis of sanity.

With each passing day in the foreign country, the 29-year-old rising professional longs more and more for Market. In her mind, it is everything she wants for raising her young family: rock-solid, all-American, traditional, down-to-earth, real.

She is close to making the transition back. But she will be entering Veronica Kovaks' world.

CHAPTER 1

Becca Norris wanted her words back as soon as they left her lips.

"Wow," she had begun. That word alone caused her immediate regret. She is not a "wow" person. She could not explain how the damn thing came out.

"Oh, will you look at that — the beach, sunshine, blue skies," she had continued. It was an attempt at sarcasm. The country of Dubai always has sunshine and blue skies. Only problem: Rebecca "Becca" Norris stinks at sarcasm, always had — in her 29 years of life — and probably always will, despite a passion for such humor in movies and television shows.

Yes, Norris knew better. But she had lost control, desperately going for a little wit in an ill-advised attempt to impress the reporter for *Trip Out* magazine who was welcoming her to the King Corner Alcove Suite of the Hilton Jumeirah of Dubai. As if her new blue button-down silk blouse and stylish khaki shorts wouldn't be enough. As if the new layered cut of her midnight-black, shoulder-length hair was for naught.

"Oh Christ," Norris thought, grimacing inwardly when she heard the exaggerated lilt she had put in her voice. Now, as always happened right after she slipped outside her natural personality, she went full turtle, pulling back into her shell. She cast her eyes downward in embarrassment even as the

reporter, Tina Marshall-Jones, smiled and responded politely with her own flat opening pleasantry.

"Oh, yes, I guess you must get a little tired of this perfect weather. But as a visitor and someone who spent the winter in Maine, let me tell you, this is all pretty welcome."

Norris, settling down to her cozy low-key persona, laughed lightly. Marshall-Jones took the cue to dial back the bubbly mood. She motioned to the two chairs at the far side of the room by the windows, opposite the king-sized bed covered in a thick white spread. The simple straight-back chairs were astride a small wooden table, facing the sliding glass windows that spanned that entire side of the room along with the one opposite. Another table, surrounded by four chairs, was on the porch.

"Let's sit here. It's a bit stifling outside."

"Oh yeah," Norris said, now in the standard conversational tone she found most comfortable. "That's the other constant here, in case no one has told you. Temperatures in, like, the hundreds and humidity to match. And it's only June. Wait until July. You won't want to venture far from any air-conditioned room. Just one of those things, you know, the travel agents fail to mention."

The two took their seats across the table, where Norris already had moved a lamp aside so they could face each other. Marshall-Jones, also neatly dressed in shorts and a sleeveless white blouse with a lace collar, put a notepad, manila folder and digital recorder on the table. Norris reached in her multi-colored handbag, hand-woven by a Dubai merchant, and pulled out her Blackberry. She placed it on the table so she could keep track of the time and any incoming e-mail messages. She explained to Marshall-Jones that an hour she needed to pick up her two young children from the day care center operated at the adjacent high-rise Jumeirah Beach

Residence, where she and her husband rented a two-bedroom condominium.

Outside, the sands of the hotel's private beach on the Arabian Gulf baked in the mid-morning sun. No one was there or in the waters off the Jumeirah beach as far as the eye could see. But two children could be seen playing in the hotel pool, surrounded by landscaped gardens, as a woman sunbathed in a lounge chair.

"They won't be there long," said Norris, nodding toward the pool group.

"No," agreed her interviewer. "But as for the advice of your basic travel agent, that's why I'm here in person and, you know, talking to people like you — for the real story of what this little Middle Eastern paradise is really like, at least for Americans spending time here — how long have you and your husband been here?"

"We're starting our seventh year — our seventh and final year, you know."

"Oh really. I did not know that."

"Yeah, we signed up with our architectural firm for four years and then re-upped for two more after my mom died. Then, with the projects we were working on still needing us — and a second child on the way — we agreed to one more. Now we've had our fill and we're ready to go back to the states to begin leading normal lives."

"So sorry to hear about your mom — what happened, if I may ask?"

Norris hesitated. Every day for the last two years it took a conscious effort for her to keep thoughts of her mother at the far edges of her mind. Now she could feel a lump rising in her throat.

"It's hard for me to talk about it, you know. We were very close." Her eyes welled up. "Sorry. Whew. It's still very, you know, what's the word? Raw."

"No problem," said the reporter, nervously bending slightly forward to check if her recording device — positioned in front of Norris — was running. "Take your time. I apologize for asking."

"Well," Norris began, then excused herself to reach into her large leather bag for the package of travel tissues she always carried. She turned toward the room behind her, blew her nose and cleared her throat. "Sorry," she offered meekly.

She fanned herself with her right hand, widened her eyes and blew out a puff of breath.

"Sorry, again. Okay. Whew. Well, I was an only child. My parents had me late in life, when they were in their early 40s. My mom was my best friend, really, and the hardest part of taking this job was leaving her alone, living alone — my dad had died, you know, like 10 years before — in our hometown in upstate New York. She was in her late 60s but appeared very healthy and had a lot of friends. Tons of friends. And my husband and I figured, hey, we'll make tons of money — two six-figure incomes for five years — in our 20s, working day and night, and then be able to, like, invest and take less time-consuming jobs back in the states while we raise a family. My dad had died in 1998 from cancer, prostate cancer, so my mom had gotten used to living on her own. She and my father had, uh, drifted apart over the years, anyway, and she was pretty independent. She was doing quite well. I thought. A strong person."

Norris looked down as she continued. Marshall-Jones kept silent, looking at her notepad as she occasionally jotted.

"But I guess just the stress of life and years of unhealthy living — red meat, ice cream; you name it, she felt she should

be able to eat it. But it took its toll. She never went to a doctor — *hated* going to the doctor — so she never knew. What you don't know *can* hurt you, I guess."

Norris looked up and forced a smile, paused and then looked down again before resuming:

"She was a teacher, you know. An elementary school teacher. A long time. Thirty-eight years. Her whole adult life. For a small school, with like 600 kids. Loved it, you know, but worked God-awful hard at it. Led the PTA, led the teachers union, always very active. Stayed after school to meet with parents or work with kids. Volunteered at the library and art center, too. Finally, at age 68, her heart gave out. Just gave out while she was out shoveling snow."

Norris put her head to her chest and struggled to keep back her tears, sniffing and blinking. Marshall-Jones leaned forward.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked. "I've got some water in the refrigerator there."

"Yes," said Norris, the word sounding stronger than she felt. She swallowed hard. Marshall-Jones walked briskly over to the 3-foot-high refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water.

"That was two years ago," continued Norris. "At least she got to meet her first grandchild. We flew her over here for the birth and had visited her for Christmas the year before she died." As Marshall-Jones crossed the room to hand the water bottle to Norris, she tried steering the conversation away from its sad stopover.

"If I may," she asked, retaking her seat, "could I ask you for a few basics before we get too far? Like full names and how they're spelled?"

"Oh yes, my full name is Rebecca Ann." Norris opened the bottle and took a gulp. "My mom's name was Loretta Lawson and my dad's was Stanley Lawson, so I was Rebecca

Lawson until I married Milton Norris and even for a few years after that, really, while we worked at the Rose-Gentry architectural engineering firm in New York City. You see, I kept my so-called maiden name — I hate the term "maiden"; sounds so Victorian — but decided to go with Milt's name before we left for Dubai, to, like, keep down the confusion, you know, and to establish us firmly in all aspects as a married couple. I mean, it seemed important at the time for us, you know, for coming to a strange society, especially one so conservative, you know, about man-woman relations. To be together and sharing the same name gave me some feeling of security and linkage to our American society. Plus, you know, we could give our children one simple name once we decided to go that way. And the hyphen thing . . . just didn't work for us. Uh, sorry."

Norris laughed softly. She had regained her composure. She was enjoying the chance to chatter about her personal life. Marshall-Jones, who had turned on her recorder, shrugged and smiled warmly back at Norris, who took advantage of the break to ingest some more water. Her interviewer squinted and nodded to signal Norris should just continue her narrative.

"Yes, so, anyway, after both graduating from MIT, we did accept these jobs in Dubai with Rose-Gentry, which was designing and engineering like a half-dozen of these new skyscrapers that were popping up like weeds here back in the mid-1990s. It even got a subcontracting role in the biggie – Burj Khalifa. We designed the lower layout, you know, working with someone from Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. So we were part of history — on the ground floor, so to speak, for the largest building in the world. I don't think it will be surpassed anytime soon, you know, if ever. That kind of put an exclamation point on the whole experience, took some of the edge off missing our homes."

Marshall-Jones raised a finger to interrupt: "Yes, I'd certainly like to get into all of that but first I need to finish the technical stuff on the names, okay?"

"Oh yes, sure, sorry, got carried away there. But yes, my mom's name was Loretta . . . did I say that?" Marshall-Jones nodded with a polite half-smile. "Yes, yes, right," said Norris. "Okay. My children. There's Milton Jr., age four, and Julia, just turned one."

She spelled all of the names for Marshall-Jones.

"Let's see, what else . . ."

"Your father's occupation?"

"Right, right. He was a contractor. Small jobs but high-end stuff, you know, like nicely remodeled kitchens, top-of-the-line materials, heavy-pillar porches. That's where I got my love of design and building. I watched him and gained an appreciation for the finer things in construction, not to mention the time, discipline and math skills needed to make things come out right."

"So you and your husband met . . ."

"Well, we went to neighboring high schools — big rivals, really — in way upstate New York, the central part, about midway between Albany and Syracuse. Where are you from?"

"The other coast — Santa Clarita, California — about 60 miles west of LA."

"Oh, then you know something about constant sunshine and warmth, huh?"

"Oh yeah," Marshall-Jones mock-scoffed. "And we were close enough to the desert that we had temps about like here, so put a few turbans on the local gangs there, and it would be just like downtown Dubai."

"Well, this couldn't be more different for me. I mean, I was born and raised in Rockboro, where the sun shines less than 100 days a year — at least that's what I read somewhere;

it seems even less than that. And winter stretches over five months, October through March. It gets pretty gray and a lot of people get pretty down by the time winter's over. We've had snow on Mother's Day, for Christ sake. My family pretty much stuck to the Northeast, too. We may have hit New York once, Boston twice, Toronto once, when I was in high school. Oh yeah, and we had a school trip to Ellis Island and another — for kids who did tons of community service — to Buffalo — no, wait, it was Cleveland, that's right. Got to see the *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*.

"But I stayed pretty busy and was very happy, actually. I have a lot of terrific childhood memories — I did all the high school sports I could — loved track — and the other high school stuff — put out a school newspaper. I also loved figure skating, which was big in our town. We had our own rink, pretty rare for a town our size. I think it had like 10,000 people. I graduated fourth in my class of 130 at Rockboro High.

"Milt will tell you about his background when we have dinner tonight, but I'll tell you he had a lot of the same type experiences. He was born and raised in Nedwick, which is about 10 miles away and a lot bigger, maybe 20,000 population — I mean, Rockboro had about 2,000, I believe, but the school district was mostly in the surrounding Town of Market, which, like I said, has about 10,000 people. Anyway, Milt was BMOC. He was seventh or eighth in his class, you know, academically, out of something like 600 kids — a real brain and a big basketball player. We never met while in high school but I followed his sports exploits in the paper and on TV."

"BMOC?"

"Big Man on Campus."

"Gotcha."

"So I was more than a little intimidated when I found out he was enrolled at MIT. I mean, pardon my French, but he was a hot shit, you know? I avoided him the first year but we had a class together as sophomores and, as they say, loved bloomed. Well, it took a while, really. But we were both kinda loners at MIT and really had a lot in common. And by that time, the old high school passions had cooled, you know, both for the old sweethearts and the old alma maters. In other words, I could like date a guy form Nedwick without throwing up — and being beaten up, or at least cast out, by the old Rockboro crowd."

Norris paused to take a few sips from the water bottle.

"We both graduated with honors and had a nice little wedding that summer. Very nice, actually, now that I look back on it. Family and friends at the local country club. Beautiful June day. So nice." Norris looked down and her voice trailed off as her mind detoured back in time.

"Anyway, anyway," she said quickly, opening her eyes wide and shaking her head to force it back to the present. "As starry-eyed new grads, we had both applied to the same companies. I mean, there were a ton of them recruiting on our campus and we wanted to at least work in the same city, you know. Well, wonder of wonders, we both got offers from Rose-Gentry. Our families were thrilled, even though the company wanted us to start work out of its New York City office. Well, you know, 21 year olds cannot be choosers.

"Man, it was a struggle for a while to adjust to the big city, you know? Whew. Then, after, like, a year, the company floated the offer of the Dubai jobs. We agreed it was a golden opportunity to see the world, see close-up this incredible cutting-edge place and make a lot of money early. That was our plan, and it's working pretty well, actually. We want to save a lot for our children's education and such, and then get

back to the states, back to our hometowns, hopefully, and, like, raise our children the way we were raised. We're real close now."

Marshall-Jones raised her pen to signal she had a question.

"Oops, sorry," said Norris. "I'm just rambling. Nothing like talking about one's self to get one rambling."

"Yes, and believe me, it's all quite interesting, really. And very helpful. But the focus of my article really is the adjustments young Westerners face when coming here. So let me ask what you expected and what you found — what were your biggest challenges and, by the same token, what were the easiest parts — if there was anything easy about the transition?"

"Well, we came into this thing with our eyes wide open. I mean Rose-Gentry had sent representatives over here for a year or so and they had written a detailed report for all prospective engineers and architects and support staff to read. It projected the boom that would be coming and the effect it would have on living here for newcomers. Very prescient."

Becca quickly checked time on a look at her Blackberry. She ran a hand up over her forehead to push back a pesky strand of hair as she continued:

"Even then, we were a little awed by the spectacle as it unfolded. I mean, at one point the construction here meant something like 15 to 25 percent of all the world's cranes were here, for God sake. There were like 5.5 million hotel guests here in 2005. I read that the other day. And they — the hotels — brought in 6.5 billion dollars. It was dizzying and we felt privileged, uh, to be part of it. Because, really, it's all — you know, the man-made islands, the sprawl — the mall sprawl, really, there's like two dozen of them in its nearly 4,000 square feet of space – it's so unbelievable.

"But it's crazy how everything is both not as good as it looks and not as bad. You know what I mean? All of the glitz. Some brochures call it spectacular, just gush over it as a wonderful cultural crossroads. But at the same time it masks some pretty harsh realities, which we saw firsthand in our first few years. Very discouraging, very disheartening.

"Here's what one guy wrote on the internet about living here — the awful parts of living here."

She handed the reporter a paper she had printed out. It told how Dubai encouraged business to hire people from poor countries, signed them to 10-year contracts and took their passports. The Dubai government lets this happen even though taking passports is illegal, the article states.

It continued:

"These poor people are promised a certain pay, but the companies neglect to tell them they will be deducting their cost of living from their paychecks, leaving them virtually penniless — that is, if they choose to pay them. Companies hold back paychecks for months at a time. When the workers strike as a result, they are jailed. Protesting is illegal, you see (apparently this law IS enforced).

"These people will never make enough to buy a ticket home, and even if they do, they do not have their passports. They live crammed in portables with tons of others, in highly unsanitary conditions. The kicker: They are building hotels that cost more to stay in for one night than they will make in an entire year. Things are so bad that a number of laborers are willing to throw themselves in front of cars because their death would bring their family affluence in the form of *diya*, blood money paid to the victim's family as mandated by the government."

Norris said it was one of many drawbacks the article cites. She and her husband had seen many of them first hand even after only a few months of living there.

"There's the months of unbearable heat, I mean, it's suffocating for like four months. Worse than even Florida in July, like the guy wrote."

She looked down at the paper and ticked off more of its observations:

"Then there's the absence of a standard address system for mail delivery or even directing taxi drivers; the blocking of Web sites the government finds offensive to religious, moral and cultural values of the United Arab Emeritus; the blocking of e-mail; lack of trees, plants and grass; public toilets without toilet paper or soap, only hoses for rinsing, which leaves the floor covered in filthy water (so my husband would rather rupture his bladder than use them).

"The cost of living here is high, and then there's the wild driving conditions, with crazy drivers unhindered by the plethora of traffic cameras. Women also find there's incessant, bothersome staring at Westerners by the natives. Then there's the rampant prostitution and the crazy tight controls on alcohol sales.

"I could go on and on. There's obviously plenty to complain about, from smelly taxi drivers to the destruction of the environment from the construction."

Norris reached for a brochure in her bag. She handed it to the reporter.

"Now contrast that with how this travel agency promotes this area," said Norris.

The blurb was titled "Dubai: A Jewel In The Middle East: A Modern City On The Persian Gulf" and it read: "Set against the backdrop of sand and sea is a remarkable city. Dubai, once little more than a sleepy backwater town, has sprung

magically out of this desert wilderness in the last 30 or so years to become a modern, cosmopolitan city whose inhabitants have arrived from the four corners of the globe to embrace a liberalism not enjoyed anywhere else in the Middle East. This odd hybrid of Baghdad, Bombay and Phoenix is the new Mecca for a host of nationalities: Arabs, Indians, Filipinos, Iranians, Russians, Europeans and Americans."

Norris quoted from a printout she had brought from another promotional Web site:

"While Dubai may at first seem remote and unaffordable, this eBook has a different tale to tell, a tale of a city that beckons people from all over to fulfill their dreams. Some are taking a 'wait-and-see' attitude toward the Dubai economy, holding off until things 'even out.' But many others are finding their destiny there, and with full sails and this guide to lead you, Dubai can become your oasis, too. It is about taking on the challenge with the will to succeed. Like the tales of the Arabian Nights, the promises of this spectacular country will continue to hold you in awe."

Marshall-Jones looked up from the brochure.

"So, I guess you aren't in awe, but have you found things to like here — I mean, how do you tolerate all those bad things you mentioned?"

"Yes, yes, when you take the time, there's a lot to keep you sane. We headed out to Heritage Village during Ramadan and also went to the DSF — the Dubai Shopping Festival — and experienced a lot of the native culture, you know, the local songs, dances and traditions of the Emiratis. The Dubai Creek, or *Khor*, is a great place to take the kids, to see the wooden boats and the abras weaving along the water, smoking some sheesha."

Norris laughed self-consciously at her use of the local terms and offered to explain their meaning, but Marshall-Jones said she could look them up later.

"Anyway, we often take walks when the cooler weather arrives, and the beaches are magnificent, and the restored *Bastakia* area and *Karama* and *Satwa* cultures are fascinating.

"Bottom line: If you look behind the fancy trappings you can really learn and relax in the natural setting of this area. It takes some patience and a lot of 'looking the other way,' perhaps, but it's there.

"But, by the same token, we really cannot wait to get back to our homeland. No offense to Dubai and other foreign lands, but our little towns in upstate New York are real as dirt — good ole rock-ribbed, honest living. There's a pace of life that's tolerable for the average human being. Just great places to raise a family and learn the true values of life, away from the hustle and bustle and crassness that some societies can inflict on humans."

Norris looked down at her Blackberry and pressed a button. Her eyes widened in exaggerated shock.

"And speaking of family, geez, I'm almost due to pick up my kids at daycare. Time flies when you're talking about yourself, I guess."

The two women laughed. The interview session, closing in on 90 minutes, had been unexpectedly wearying for both.

"Oh, yes," said Marshall-Jones, shaking her long blond mane side to side while leaning back in her chair. "You've been great, thanks so much. I'm sure there's not much else we need to cover tonight. Maybe just, like, the adjustments to culture differences, you know, dealing with the Dubai Code of Conduct. Is it real or just a piece of paper? And how about staying connected to the latest and greatest in entertainment, technology and the like over here — you know, keeping up

with the advancements and social changes in the United States? I'll go over my notes and the recording just to be sure I've got what I need."

She stood up and Norris also rose from her chair, slinging her purse over her right shoulder.

"Great," she said. "And you have our e-mail addresses if you need anything else. How many other interviews are you doing?"

"Three or four other couples and maybe four or five singles, who have an entirely different perspective, you know, trying to manage the single scene."

"I can imagine. I thank God every day that I have a husband and a stable family situation here. I'm not sure I could handle dating or being alone in such an environment, you know what I mean?"

Norris walked to the door and turned back, offering her right hand to Marshall-Jones. At 5-foot-3, the reporter stood about four inches shorter than Norris. But their choice of shoes — Norris in business-attire flats, Marshall-Jones in heels — brought their heights nearly even.

"See ya around 6, right? In the hotel lobby?" said Marshall-Jones as the two shook hands lightly, just grasping the fingers.

"Exactly. I made reservations for 6 o'clock so the children can eat early and even go outside and play while we talk," said Norris. She turned and exited the door. She was happy with how things had gone after the rough, out-of-character start. Okay, she rationalized, so a stray "geez" had escaped her lips. For the most part she had been the Becca Norris she was proud of: confident, open, lucid, under control. So she allowed herself a smile as she walked down the hallway with the boldness of a runway model and pushed through the motel's exit door.

CHAPTER 2

Veronica Kovaks stood alone and stared out the second-floor window of the Saskoon County Courthouse. Her 60-year-old bones were bitching from weariness. She found no comfort from the scene outside.

Spreading 20 yards outward from the 5-story brown brick building was the brown-green matted-down lawn of late winter. It had reappeared only days ago from a four-month snow cover. Emerging also was the debris, natural and unnatural, from that annual struggle — discarded papers and tissues, turf heaves, flicked cigarette butts, twigs from the property's two large oaks trees. Five-foot-high mounds of plowed snow, blackened by ice-melting mixtures and vehicle exhaust, encircled the adjacent parking lot. Beyond that was downtown Gray, again living up to its name on this cold, rainy mid-March day.

Kovaks turned away from this dismal scene and prepared to face her own once more. Taking a deep breath, she sat down on a hallway bench. Her neck creaked as she settled in the seat. "Ow," she uttered quietly. She rolled her neck to work out the kinks then put a hand up to smooth down her short white hair and push silver wire-rimmed glasses back up her nose.

Kitty-corner to her were the large oak double doors for courtroom 2A. There, in five minutes, Kovaks would take a front-row seat to hear the fate of her former boss, Roger

Shirley. She had practiced over and over in her mind how she would look straight ahead, resisting the temptation to look at Shirley's reaction at the defense table to her right. But the other possibilities kept her awake at night. What if he wanted to make a statement? What if others — his family or friends or former associates — wanted to address the judge? What if someone addressed her, bringing up her own plea deal? Worse, what if someone tried to talk to her?

The thoughts pushed down on her, making her six decades of life feel like nine. She just wanted to sit and watch in silence, blending in with the knots of the dark walnut bench. Kovaks was compelled to be there, to be present, to witness first hand the conclusion of this year-old trauma. But she knew her presence would be provocative. She had, after all, provided the testimony that led to Shirley's conviction for embezzlement. Without her, prosecutors said their case was only half as strong. She had, on top of that, accepted a plea deal with the prosecution that would keep her out of jail. Now if Shirley were sentenced to jail . . . at his age, 70, it would be devastating.

That imminent threat was dominating the group gathering down the hallway like the distant swirl of a tornado. Shirley and his family were slowly coalescing at benches on the other side of the stairwell that ran through the center of the building. Some sat, some stood.

An early arrival — Shirley's son — had spotted Kovaks at the window and guided those coming behind in the opposite direction. It was distant but still within sight of the courtroom entrance. They occasionally looked over there, but mostly they made idle conversation in low tones.

For his part, Shirley sat a few feet apart and stared straight ahead, his back erect, arms folded and legs crossed at the ankles. Despite this staunch bearing for his 6-foot-2 frame, the

former Army captain looked frail and worn. His hair, once thick and black, had receded and whitened. His facial wrinkles and sags — roughened and browned to a leathery texture from a love of the outdoors in all four of the often-harsh upstate seasons —were prominent enough to be seen across a soccer field. Out of his stolid hallway position, he would turn to the familial hallway crowd every few minutes to offer a faint smile at something being said.

Kovaks knew them all. She had worked side by side with Shirley for 20 years. That brought her in frequent contact with his wife and children. Shirley was the popular top elected official of the Town of Market. As a Republican in the heavily Republican town of just over 10,000, he had been re-elected "town executive" with more than 70 percent of the vote every two years since the mid-1980s.

Kovaks had been his secretary from the start. They were both lifelong Market residents, born and raised in its population center, the Village of Rockboro (population 2,038). Both were graduates of Rockboro Central School. Their families were active Republicans and, as fruit falling just below the tree, both offspring had continued the tradition. Kovaks worked hard for Shirley in his first run for the town executive job. It was a bitterly fought primary battle against a three-term incumbent.

Shirley, a former three-sport athlete at Rockboro High School who rose to officer rank in the Army and then returned to start a printing business in Market, won by just 200 votes.

He rewarded Kovaks with the secretary's position, throwing her a lifeline at a time when she desperately needed a job. Her husband Charles — five years her senior — had just died from a stroke at age 45. Their only child, Charles Jr., was entering his junior year in high school and planning to attend college. With her income and some financial aid from the state

university system, Charles Jr. went on to gain a degree in history and then a teaching certificate. He now lived and worked in Stockton, Pa., a suburb of Pittsburgh, with a wife and two children.

Kovaks and Shirley were the only full-time employees at the Town of Market's municipal building. The other town employees either worked in the adjacent highway department building or the historic Lancer Memorial Hall across town.

The town executive and his secretary had separate offices but Kovaks and Shirley often sat and talked. Shirley's wife Megan, son Michael and daughter Pamela were frequent visitors over the years. Although she didn't regularly socialize with the Shirleys, Kovaks also had met most of Shirley's family at various social and political gatherings over the years. So she knew, or at least recognized, the faces of everyone now sitting down the hall from her.

Kovaks looked at the dainty gold watch on her right wrist. It was diamond-encrusted with hands pointing to the hour and minute, a gift from her husband on her 30th birthday. She relished its old-fashioned look and the memories it always stirred. But now it showed 9:59, which meant the hour of reckoning was at hand.

She rose to her feet but hesitated as a slight rush of blood made her dizzy. Straightening her knee-length skirt, she took a few seconds to regain the equilibrium in her slight, 5-foot-2 being. She then walked with deliberation into the courtroom. The Shirley family pretended not to notice but several already had begun gathering up their coats and other winter gear in preparation for the walk down the hall.

As Kovaks walked toward the courtroom doors, Deputy Ted O'Leary of the Saskoon County Sheriff's Department was coming out. He was 60-something and portly, his bouncy belly showing the aftereffects of too many beers and too many side

trips to the first-floor snack stand between boring guard stints in uneventful court cases.

"Wondered where everybody was," he said gruffly. "The judge is ready."

"Oh, we're all coming, Ted," smiled Kovaks. "You know, the less time spent in that room, the better. I feel like I could paint it from memory — in a couple of hours, really."

"Oh, it's not that bad," responded O'Leary. "Believe me, when you spend as much time in there as I do, you begin to appreciate its finer points."

The two chuckled. Kovaks walked deliberately to the spot she wanted at the left side of the courtroom. Within seconds, the Shirley family followed. They saw Kovaks take her second-row seat and began filling the front rows on the opposite side. Shirley, hands in pants pockets and holding a file folder under his right arm, went straight to the short fence across from the front of the spectator section. He was accompanied by his wife, who was on the arm of their daughter as they made their way to front-row seats.

The latter was a tall, fidgety woman in her late 20s who had inherited her father's square-jawed handsomeness. She devoted a good chunk of each day to softening that appearance with puffed hair — bleached in streaks between its natural brown color — atop cosmetically redesigned eyes, complexion and mouth. Ironically, the extended and blackened lashes, along with similarly darkened eye rims, blue shadow above them, reddened lips and blushed cheeks, toughened her femininity more than proclaimed it.

The elder Shirley pushed his lanky legs sideways into the middle gate, nudging it open. He then proceeded to the defense table and stood behind it. His wife and daughter were joined on the front row by Michael Shirley, a 30-something whose looks and height took their cue from his mother. A

protruding stomach was his family physical trait alone, though.

Megan Shirley had retained the size-10 shape of her youth but now needed help getting around. Although 11 years younger than her husband, she had multiple sclerosis. It was diagnosed a few decades earlier and thought to be a less common type, one that came on late and was unremitting. For Megan Shirley, the disease's debilitating effects had worsened under the stress of her husband's arrest and trial.

O'Leary, standing just outside the door, greeted those he recognized from the three-week trial, which had ended the previous month. The court reporter and court clerk were already seated at tables across from each other at the front of the courtroom, at either side of the 7-foot-high judge's bench. After a few minutes, O'Leary walked to the front of the courtroom and disappeared into a room left of the bench. A few more minutes passed and he reappeared with two men and a woman in tow, all smartly suited. The men, a shorter one in a navy blue outfit and the other stretching out a gray pinstriped number, were Shirley's attorneys. They walked over to the defense table and immediately took their seats after quietly greeting their client. The threesome leaned over, put their heads together and began talking in low tones.

The newly arrived woman, wearing a navy pinstriped pencil-skirted suit, was Assistant District Attorney Lynn Mallory. She wore her blond hair pulled back in a tight bun. It gave her that severe, no-nonsense look that best serves prosecutors. Only when she was on the campaign trail — she had announced her candidacy for district court judge two weeks prior —- did she let her hair down in a softer, modified pageboy.

She nodded with a half-smile in Kovaks' direction then glanced around to survey the rest of the audience. That now

included six or seven persons who had filed in behind Kovaks and four more sitting behind the Shirley family. Seeing the look of curiosity on Mallory's face, Kovaks casually tried to check the latest arrivals. She recognized all but three as Market residents, most of them town employees. Some smiled at her, others looked past her.

The other three individuals were reporters from Market's *Record* weekly, Gray's one television news operation and its daily newspaper. They all had followed the case from the start. Articles and questions by the young man from the *Record*, Clark Jones, actually had started Shirley's downfall.

Jones, fresh out of college, had taken a particular interest in the Market budget and why things didn't seem to add up in certain accounts. He pushed and pushed, working the 80-hour workweeks only the young can endure. He annoyed the piss out of Shirley but got little attention from Market residents, who had long admired their elected government leader.

Finally, though, Jones' persistence — calling state auditors, dogging the town's board of trustees, pressing the town's own auditor — brought on a complete state audit. And that found money missing from dozens of accounts.

"Please rise."

O'Leary's voice filled the room. He was standing to the right of the judge's bench. Everyone stood.

"Oyez Oyez. Supreme Court for the Fifth Judicial District of New York State, County of Saskoon, is now in session, the Honorable Justice David H. Rapposo presiding,"

Rapposo entered, stage right, in traditional black robes. Standing about 5-foot-11 with a healthy head of salt-and-pepper hair, the veteran jurist, now in his early 60s, looked straight ahead as he headed swiftly to his chair on the bench.

"Please be seated," said O'Leary. He remained standing.

"Good morning," said Rapposo, donning bifocals. He opened a file on his desk. The doors at the back of the courtroom opened and a man entered. He hustled up the center aisle, his navy blazer flying out sideways, exposing a wrinkled dark blue shirt and red-striped tie over gray slacks. He walked directly toward the front of the courtroom, through the gate and over to the prosecutor's table, where he sat next to Mallory. He was the lead state police detective in the case, Milton Bradbury. Rapposo ignored his arrival.

"Prosecutor Mallory, defense counsel," the judge began, "we are here today for the sentencing in case number 000794955, the State of New York vs. Roger Shirley, Mr. Shirley having been found guilty Jan. 15 in this courtroom of the Class E felony crime of embezzlement." He glanced up at the prosecution table, where Mallory rose to speak.

"Good morning, Your Honor. Yes, that is our sole item of business here this morning."

"Thank you," Rapposo continued, turning his attention to the defense table. "Are you ready, Counsel?"

Paul Burns, the lead attorney for Shirley, got to his feet. He was an imposing 6-footer, with the broad shoulders and chest of a football tackle, which he was in his youth. Unfortunately, 30 years removed from the playing fields, his waistline now matched his upper body in size.

"Yes, Your Honor," Burns said. "I believe you have before you the pre-sentencing report of social worker Samuel Brickman and our brief based on his findings. We are prepared to argue that and also present character witnesses on Mr. Shirley's behalf."

"Yes, you will be given an opportunity to present all of your arguments and witnesses. But first I will hear the state's suggestions and recommendations."

"I understand, Your Honor," said Burns, folding back into his seat.

"Thank you, Your Honor," said Mallory. She walked over to the podium that was situated between the two lawyer tables. Adjusting the microphone downward, she opened the sheaf of papers in front of her.

"Recapping where we stand," she began, "Mr. Shirley was found guilty by a jury of his peers of stealing for his own use $100,000 from budgets of the Town of Market over a 10-year period. That was taxpayer money — dollars collected from the hard-working citizens of Market for the purpose of operating their government — for maintaining a police department, for operating a town park, and for a number of other functions vital to the well-being of the citizenry. During that period, Mr. Shirley was the top elected official in that town, holding a position of the highest trust after running for election 10 times with the expectation and promise of honestly administering those operations residents there have created for the common good. Instead, he was siphoning off money above and beyond the salary allotted him — some $30,000 to $40,000 a year during that decade in question. We have heard that he was hard-pressed to afford college for his children and that he did not intend for any of the money to go for his personal use. But, of course, having that stolen money allowed Mr. Shirley to live his life at a higher standard than he normally would have been able to, had he been forced to take out loans or pursue other legitimate avenues of generating revenue — avenues that the normal citizen must pursue in order to meet life's costs. At the same time, taxes were hiked 37 percent during that period to pay for the town's costs of operation — increases that could have been avoided or at least lessened if Mr. Shirley had kept his hands out of the town till."

Mallory paused to take a sip of water from the glass at the edge of the prosecution's table. She continued:

"Your Honor, the state grants the findings in the pre-sentence report — that Mr. Shirley had only minor traffic violations on his criminal record and, from all available evidence, led an otherwise fine and upstanding life — a pillar of the community until these thefts came to light. But we would postulate that he was leading a double life, taking from the public coffers while pretending to have the best interests of his fellow citizens at heart, to the point of considering a run for state office at one time. It is this scenario — the sneaky taking of money using a system that only someone in his privileged position could conceive of and execute — that troubles us the most."

"That's just flat wrong!!" yelled Pam Shirley from her seat.

Rapposo quickly banged his gavel.

"Order, please," he yelled, reaching a decibel level that even startled several in the room, causing them to jerk their shoulders or lean back. "There will be no outbursts in this courtroom or I will remove whoever is responsible."

The judge had lowered his voice but still spoke through a growl as he warned:

"I could even close this entire proceeding to just the lawyers. There will be a chance for all to be heard who want to address this court. You are all going to hear things that you don't want to hear today, that's just the nature of the sentencing procedure. You must — I repeat must — maintain control and keep matters civil. Proceed, Mrs. Mallory."

"Yes, thank you. Well, let me just conclude that the state feels Mr. Shirley's actions must be viewed in the context of what he knew, the actions he knowingly undertook. This was no innocent, cash-strapped young man. This was a calculating

individual, a man well versed in public service who continued stealing despite repeatedly taking public stances of service and trust. For that reason, Your Honor, the state would ask that some jail time be imposed on Mr. Shirley. We must send a message to all public servants that this type of conduct — even with the supposed best of intentions — cannot and will not be tolerated. There is no excuse for stealing and there is no escaping harsh punishment even at an advanced age, even with a lifetime of notable achievements, even with a noble purpose for the ill-gotten goods. We leave it up to the court's discretion to set the exact length of time to be served behind bars but respectfully request that it be a minimum of one year, with the remainder of the maximum time allowed under state law for a Class E felony — four years — to be spent on probation. We also ask that he reimburse the Town of Market for the $100,000 he stole and the costs of the legal proceedings required to bring him to justice."

Mallory sat, cueing Rapposo to address the defense table.

"Thank you, Prosecutor," the judge said. "Mr. Burns?"

"Thank you, Your Honor. If it please the court, at this time, I would like to call to the podium some people who can attest to the character of Mr. Shirley, in support of the pre-sentence report and our position that justice would be best served in this case if Mr. Shirley is spared jail time."

"Proceed," said Rapposo.

Burns motioned to a well-dressed middle-aged man who was sitting in the back row, having just entered the courtroom.

"Your Honor, our first character witness is Reginald DeWitt, our esteemed state senator from the 112th District."

DeWitt, a bespectacled diminutive man with a large head, walked up to the podium. He shook hands with Burns and muttered, "Thanks Richard," mistaking him for his brother, who also is an attorney.

"Your Honor," he began, "I have known Roger Shirley for some 40 years, and I can tell you straight out that he is a man of high honor and good character. I know what has occurred in this courtroom may belie that opinion — and our district attorney certainly is welcome to her opinions — but I know from personal experience — both in professional dealings and personal dealings with Roger in politics, business and just everyday community life — that he is an honest, straight-shooting, family man. It is in that last capacity — as a devoted husband and father — that the state says he ran afoul of the law. But can anyone say a man who steals to provide for his family is guilty of a heinous crime and deserves jail time? As the Bible admonishes: Let he or she who is without sin cast the first stone.

"Would I hire him to work in my office? You bet. In a heartbeat. I would trust him with my office finances, personal books, whatever. This is a man who may have made one mistake in his professional life but I know — and you'll hear this from his own lips today, I'm sure — he is very, very sorry. I beg that you consider his lifetime of achievements and wonderful personal contributions to his community in passing sentence. Thank you."

Burns again shook DeWitt's hand as the senator left. Burns returned to the podium to call his next witnesses. In order, they were: Market Town Attorney Sylvester Burke, who also was past chairman of the state bar association; Antonia Harvey, executive director of the Greater Gray United Way; and Richard Faxton, principal of Rockboro High School. From them poured forth the best of Roger Shirley as government leader, community volunteer, youth sports coach, father and friend. There were stories of his leading the Market Kiwanis Club in its annual effort to help less-fortunate families at Christmas with baskets of food or gifts; of

balancing the town budget year after year to avoid tax increases; of being a role model for his children and youth in general in coaching youth sports.

When they were done, a half hour had passed. Rapposo had listened without changing expression. Shirley then walked up to the podium.

"First of all, let me thank all those who have gathered here today to offer their support and kind words. Words can't express how appreciative Megan and I are for your support — and that of many others — both today and in the past year. We couldn't have made it through without you."

Sniffling could be heard among audience members on the right side of the room. Shirley's son put his arm around his mother and pulled her close. Pam Shirley dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

"Yes, as you said, Reggie, I am very, very sorry for what has happened. I was desperate to provide the best life possible for my family but I now see that I was dead wrong to take from the great people of Market even the small amount I did. I always loved my hometown, and the harm this brought them causes me pain, a pain second only to the harm I caused my own family.

I can only hope someday, when I have repaid what I took and shown my remorse, they will forgive me. They are a forgiving people, I know, so I have every confidence we can once more be close friends down the road.

"Meanwhile, I throw myself at the mercy of this court. Yes, some punishment is warranted, but I hope you will consider the pain and torture this already has caused me over the past year. And I pledge that I will dedicate the rest of my life making this up to Market and the state of New York. I will double my volunteer work and will do whatever I can — whatever the court directs — to reach out to others who could

be tempted to cheat or steal or otherwise violate the trust placed in them by others. You have my word that this has changed my life and I will walk out of here today a man driven to erase this black mark from the record of my lifetime."

He turned to leave the podium, smiling wanly back at his wife and children. His wife and daughter continued to cry softly. Burns gave him a light hug and went behind the podium.

"Your Honor, I would only add that my client has indeed served a stiff sentence for his crime these past months. He has lost his job, yes, but more importantly his reputation in his hometown — where he chose to remain and make a living and raise a family — has been dealt a severe blow. Society deems it necessary that persons who violate its laws must suffer, so please know that Roger Shirley has suffered. At age 70, he faces the torturous thought that the time left on this planet may not be enough to make things right, to repair the damage done to his family and his community. I beg that you give him that time — a term of probation with community service. Thank you."

Rapposo sat upright and looked at the prosecution table.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"No, Your Honor," said Mallory.

"Well, here's the way I see it," began the judge. Shirley rose and walked over to stand beside Burns at the podium.

"With all due respect for the decades of public service rendered by the defendant, the jury did conclude that he had stolen a significant amount from the coffers of the Town of Market while serving in a position of the highest trust. As I sat here listening to testimony in the case, I was struck by the disparity between the 'good public servant' image projected year after year, election after election, by Mr. Shirley and the

actual man behind it: scheming, siphoning off tax money, year after year, budget after budget, for his personal use. He had an intimate knowledge of the intricacies of the budget process — something he used to impress voters — and used that to know how he could take a little here, a little there, without anyone paying too much attention. And if it wasn't for the persistence of a news reporter, and the eyewitness testimony of a co-worker, this would or at least could still be going on today. That's what struck me."

He was looking straight at Shirley, who likewise stared directly at the judge. He did not move a muscle or show any emotion.

"So, I think about the thousands of public officials in similar positions throughout our land. What can they be thinking as they watch those who are caught with their hands in the till? Can they be cheering cynically for Mr. Shirley to beat the rap, as he tried during his trial? And are they now hoping the court shows some leniency, as a precedent for what they might expect if they are caught? I fear that could be the case."

There was some stirring in the Shirley family section, some shifting of butt cheeks, some scratching of backs.

"Yet, I also see — and I hope these potential crooks also have taken note — how this trial and this prosecution alone has taken its toll on the defendant, as both he and his counsel have pointed out. I do not doubt he has suffered a great deal. Perhaps that is the message that other would-be thieves are getting. And I also take note of the pre-sentence report's summary of his glowing achievements outside this one trip outside the boundaries of the law, at least the one we now know about. An outwardly clean life may not be a true indication of what lies beneath or a harbinger of what is to come, but it's all we've got to go on, until proven otherwise.

"So, balancing society's need to punish offenders against the suffering imposed by even the first stages of the judicial process, I find that some jail time is warranted in this case, with supervised probation to follow. Therefore, it is my order that Mr. Shirley be remanded to the custody of the Saskoon County Correctional Facility for a period not to exceed nine months. Upon his release, he is to then be placed on state-supervised probation for a period of three years. During that period, he is to undertake 3,000 hours community service. That figures to roughly 20 hours a week. The terms of that service should be worked out by the parties and submitted for my approval before the end of his jail term, six months from today.

"As for restitution, due to the age of the defendant, his already-strapped financial situation and his severely limited income potential, I am reserving the option to order or wave repayment of all or part of the $100,000, pending satisfactory completion of the other parts of this sentence. That's my decision."

Shirley's wife sobbed into the shoulder of her son. Pam Shirley sighed and looked achingly at her father. Others among his family and friends looked down at their feet. But Burns spoke into the microphone.

"If it please the court, I plan to file an appeal of the court's decision in coming days and would like to make a motion at this time that Mr. Shirley remain free on bond pending the outcome of any such appeal," he said.

"Motion denied," said Rapposo flatly. "It is time to begin the punishment phase. Mr. Shirley has one hour to report to the correctional facility to begin serving his sentence. I will, of course, entertain any other motions once they have been properly filed with the clerk. Court adjourned."

Silence fell over the room as Rapposo exited out the door he had entered. Slowly, the spectators rose. The Shirley family gravitated toward the front, where one by one they embraced Shirley. “Don’t worry, Dad,” said Michael Shirley. “We’re going to keep fighting, Dad,” said Pam.

Kovaks stood and stretched. Her neck again barked its creaky stiffness. She hesitated a moment to gain her bearings and allow those behind her to file out. The news reporters were beginning to corral spectators for their reactions to the sentence. Kovaks was hoping they would be too busy to notice her. Timing would be everything. But she immediately regretted her decision to delay her exit.

Pam Shirley pivoted away from the family gathering. She walked deliberately to the gate, swinging it open with her left hand and striding through as if challenged to a fight. Her look was that tough — lips pursed, mascara-blotted eyes squinting, faux leather sack-purse slung over her left shoulder. Kovaks, who had turned toward the center aisle to time her exit, caught Pam Shirley’s approach out of the corner of her right eye. Her heart pounding, Kovaks kept her head pointed downward in hopes the young woman would pass by. But Pam Shirley charged to within a foot of her. From six inches above Kovaks, the angry daughter leaned forward and down, until her lips were near Kovaks’ right ear.

“Traitor bitch,” she whispered huskily in a voice damaged by decades of smoking. Kovaks pulled back. She widened her eyes in surprise and then narrowed them while tilting her head sideways and shaking it in a look that said, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

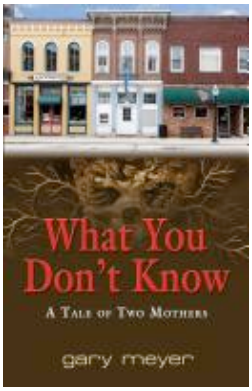
Pam Shirley pushed her face into a menacing grin.

“Every dog has its day,” she said.

Kovaks hesitated a few seconds before responding, her head now turned away, toward the back of the room. Her mind raced in search of a snappy rejoinder but found none.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said softly. She walked into the aisle and out of the courtroom. She noticed her hands were shaking slightly. Her arthritic knees ached. Clark Jones was interviewing Burns just beyond the doors. When he spotted Kovaks, he looked over and held up his right index finger. It was intended as a request that she wait for him to finish his interview with Burns. "Could I get your reaction?" he asked as she walked by.

"No comment," she said as loud as she could without shouting. Not waiting for Jones' reaction, she walked toward the stairwell and then down as fast as her creaky lower joints would allow.



When nostalgia meets reality, things can get ugly.That's the lifestyle clash awaiting young mother Becca Norris when she returns to her small-town childhood home after seven years as an architect in the United Arab Emirates city of Dubai. What she remembers are tree-lined streets, friendly neighbors and a child-nurturing bucolic environs. What she finds is duplicity, corruption, murder, sexual assault, marital infidelity - a hard-drinking, hard-living world where little is what it appears to be.

What You Don't Know