

*Teenager Laura Drummond barely survived a brutal assault. 24-years later, as a homicide detective, she faces a killer whose m.o. is eerily similar to the attack on her as a teenager. Now, she must face her past to catch a killer.*

## **Conceptus: A Laura Drummond Mystery**

By Brian Herskowitz

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A LAURA DRUMMOND MYSTERY

# CONCEPTUS

To catch a killer she must face her past

Brian Herskowitz

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Exultant Lusibus

Laura Drummond sat on a bleacher in the gym. She'd debated long and hard about going to the dance at all. The dress her mother forced her to wear made her look like the biggest prude. The fact was, she *was* the biggest prude. She hadn't become boy crazy. She didn't think she would.

Laura glanced across the room where her best friend... her former best friend, Marla Facinelli, huddled with Mark Rudner. Marla touched Mark's arm and leaned in for a kiss.

*Gag me*, Laura thought.

Boys.... Ugh. That's what had ended their friendship. A friendship that went back to first grade when Rebecca and Laura met in summer camp. They were the two best athletes in camp, and they made a formidable team. They won the wheelbarrow challenge, the three-legged race, and the canoe race.

Marla flicked her long blonde hair back, and Mark guided her to the gym's makeshift dance floor. A slow song, *Lady in Red*, was playing, and Mark was lip-synching along with Chris de Burgh.

*I hope their braces get locked together... forever*, Laura thought.

It's not like she couldn't dance if she wanted. Hadn't David Shackelford asked her to dance? So did Alan Stewart and Evan O'Meara. She wondered why she had fought so hard to come - begging, pleading, promising the world to her parents if they would just let her go to the freshman dance. The first dance of her high school journey and the last before winter took hold for real.

And in the end, her parents had relented. Of course, they had, but not before putting certain restrictions into play.

"We decide what you can wear," her mother said. "And you'll need to be home by 9 p.m."

"But mom—" Laura protested.

"No 'buts,' young lady," her dad chimed in. "Not unless you want yours paddled."

If there was a rebellious teen in Laura, she was hidden down deep. She managed a quiet: “No, sir.”

“Good. And no slow dancing,” Dad added.

“Daaaad! What’s the point of going?” Laura asked.

“Don’t go, then.”

His eyes narrowed. Laura knew that look. Her father played football in college with dreams of making it to the NFL, but that ended when he blew out his knee. Still, at six-two and two-forty, her dad was an imposing figure and quick to anger. Her mother wouldn’t risk an intervention if he reached for his belt. Yes, Laura knew that look all too well.

In the end, Laura had agreed. Letting her go in the first place was a victory she hadn’t expected. She was sure that they would make her go to confession on Sunday and probably again at Wednesday service. It didn’t matter. She was going, even if for just an hour or two, and she practically skipped the six blocks from her house to the school.

Laura cut across the small park. As she walked, she thought about Marla. She envisioned Marla pushing Mark aside and rushing to her arms, giggling and crying as she apologized to Laura.

But it wasn’t her zealot parents’ restrictions that kept her off the dance floor. It wasn’t the thought of confessing to Father McIntyre the egregious sin of slow dancing with a boy that was stopping her either. There was just something inside of her.

A fourteen-year-old classmate waved to Laura. Ally was barely five feet tall and rotund, although her classmates mostly called her fat. The nicer ones only said that behind her back. Ally’s mini-skirt was short enough to show her ample thighs and the tops of her biking shorts. She had moved from Texas to Ohio three years ago, and she thought of Laura as her BFF. Laura liked Ally just fine. When Ally first arrived in Columbus and attended Brookdale Middle School, she was teased and bullied.

One afternoon, as school was letting out, Laura saw three twelve-year-old girls and two boys surrounding Ally. They were pulling at her clothes and poking at her. Laura, like most everyone else, started to pass by. Then Laura saw the look in Ally’s eyes, the pain that she was feeling,

and when those eyes looked beseechingly to Laura, she knew she couldn't just walk away.

Laura stood half a head taller than the other girls. She knew them all: Peggy Rice, Maureen Offerman, and Lisa Harris. The boys were Phil Marks and his constant companion George Conner. George was squealing like a pig.

"Come on, little piggy. Oink for us," George teased.

"Leave her alone," Laura said as she stepped into the circle.

"What's it to you?" Peggy Rice said.

"I said leave her alone." Laura pushed Peggy, who stumbled back but didn't fall.

In her peripheral vision, Laura saw Phil pull back his arm. She moved into him. The swing was wide and wild. Laura easily blocked the punch and brought her knee into Phil's groin.

Phil dropped instantly.

"Why'd you do that?" Phil moaned through gritted teeth.

Laura put an arm around Ally and led her away. The others parted for her without resistance.

"You okay?" Laura asked.

Ally nodded.

"You wanna tell somebody? I'll go with you if—" Laura said, but Ally cut her off.

"Nah, I'm used to it. I don't want to get nobody in trouble." Ally wiped the tears and snot on the sleeve of her sweater.

Laura looked at the wet spot on her arm and wondered if it would dry like that or if she'd wash it when she got home.

From that day forward, Ally was like a devoted puppy. She followed Laura around until Laura signaled that she needed some 'alone time.' One thing you could say about Ally was that she knew how to read a room.

Laura got up from the bleachers and met Ally halfway to the dance floor.

"Laura!" Ally shrieked. "I know I'm late. Did I miss anything?"

"Mark and Marla making out... that's about it," Laura said. She glanced up at the clock at one end of the gym's basketball court. It was at 3:02.

*Highly unlikely*, Laura thought.

She then looked at the clock at the other end of the court. That one read 8:48. That was more like it.

“I’ve got to leave now anyhow,” she said.

“But you can’t! I just got here.” Ally pouted.

“My parents only let me come because I promised to be home by nine. If I don’t show up on time, they’ll kill me or, worse, send me to a convent.”

“Really? They really would?” Ally asked, wide-eyed.

“Not gonna chance it,” Laura said.

Laura turned to wave goodbye to Ally as she made her way to the exit, but Ally had vanished onto the dance floor, absorbed into the hive.

The air was crisp, and the sound of the canned music wafted from the gymnasium behind Laura. She’d never been with so many people and still felt so alone in her life. She glanced back at the entrance. She saw Peggy’s mom, acting as a chaperone, smoking just to the west of the gym’s double doors.

*Chaperone, but not a role model*, Laura thought.

She suddenly realized that she might be late, and that would not go well for her. Her father had taken a belt to her for a lot less. Laura gathered her gray overcoat around her and headed for the path through the park. The night was cloudy and colder than an average fall evening. She glanced up to the sky, silently praying that it not rain. If she ruined her coat, both her parents would whip her.

Laura walked across the wide street in front of her school. Franklin High. Home of the proud Stallions. The sounds of the dance faded into the distance as she stepped onto the sidewalk. She could imagine her parents waiting for her. Her mother sat next to her dad as he chugged a beer. The small screen T.V. - old, with tin foil on the bent rabbit ears, was tuned to the latest episode of Dallas. Her mom would have her Bible open on her lap, reading during the commercial breaks.

For a moment, Laura considered going back to the dance. Maybe there *was* a rebellious teenager somewhere inside her. But then she remembered the Bible and *the belt* and thought better of it.

Her shoes slapped the pavement, drowning out the music and the laughter. The sounds were now nothing more than ghost voices floating across the night: step SLAP... step SLAP... step SLAP.

Laura looked down at her dress. Her high neck, long sleeve, mid-calf length dress. God, she hated that dress so much. She closed the coat and stumbled.

Step SLAP... SLAP! Had she tripped on something? Shoelaces. The shoelace on her old, black Converse tennis shoes on her right foot. She'd all but grown out of them, but money was tight, and she had to make do, so...

She stopped and bent down to tie her disobedient tennis shoe when – step SLAP. Not hers.

“Hello?” she called to the darkness. No movement. No sound. Probably her imagination. She didn't have a particularly vivid imagination. But she decided it was her mind playing tricks. It wasn't real. There was no sound of someone walking behind her. Following her. Stalking her. It was just her imagination.

Laura peered into the night. Nothing... then rustling. Leaves rustling just off to her left... and in the Virginia Pines that lined the entrance to the park.

Laura rose to her feet. An uneasy feeling clutched at her stomach, and she thought of an old song ‘*Just my imagination, once again, running away with me... Just my imagination... running away.*’

She had forgotten all about her shoelace as she picked up her pace. Just four more blocks, and she'll be home, and she'll sit down on the couch next to her mom, watch Dallas, and tell both her parents that they were right. She shouldn't have gone to the stupid dance.

The streets around the park were dark, and the houses, unkempt, run-down. She thought she heard footsteps again, behind her, gaining on her. She started to pant, straining to hear over her ragged breath.

She looked around again... not slowing down, not stopping –

*No one there.* Laura took a deep breath, chuckled at her paranoia. And, of course, her stupid shoelace was still untied.

Laura bent down once again.



WHAM! Laura felt herself flying through the air. She had time to wonder what hit her. Laura felt the air forced from her lungs and a loud POP as her shoulder hit the hard ground, dislocating from its joint. She was aware of the pain, but only for a moment, as her head hit the ground hard and supplanted thoughts of her shoulder.

Laura bit her tongue as her head snapped back, rebounding off the ground. She tenuously held onto consciousness. She was aware of the blood in her mouth. She tried to catch her breath, struggled for air.

A shadow of a figure stood over her. In her semi-conscious state, she saw him reaching for his belt. For one moment, she thought of her father pulling his belt from his trousers, readying a beating for some infraction of the rules.

She wondered what she did, and she must have done something.

*But... not slow dancing*, she thought.

She felt hands moving on her thighs, pulling her panties down, and her paralysis broke. She sucked in a breath.

“No!” she screamed.

But her cries were cut off as a calloused hand clamped over her mouth.

She could smell the bourbon and weed mixed with body odor as her attacker brought his face to hers. His brown eyes peeked out from under a plain gray hoodie.

She struggled.

A knife, six inches long, appeared in front of her eyes.

“Shh. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will.”

He placed the blade of the hunting knife on her cheek and caught Laura’s tear on the tip. Of course, Laura didn’t know or care what kind of knife it was.

She tried to scream again when he entered her. The pain was sharp and intense. She hit his shoulders and back, but there was no real strength in her blows. The pain was excruciating, and she felt warm liquid running from her. She forced the hand from her mouth momentarily.

“You’re hurting me!” Laura cried.

“Shut the fuck up.” He replaced his right hand over her mouth and thrust deeper and harder into her.

Laura thought that he was tearing her in two. In her mind, she begged him to stop, prayed for him to stop...

Suddenly, his pace increased. He groaned and collapsed on top of her. She didn't understand that he only stopped because he climaxed. She only knew that for a moment, he was still.

Pain and fear consumed Laura. She couldn't budge the weight of her attacker, but she had to do something to try and escape. She pushed again, and he sat up, his hand still over her mouth. His foul breath huffed down at her.

She saw that he was Caucasian, big, over six feet tall, and heavy. His eyes burned with insanity. She suddenly thought, *He's going to kill me.*

She bit down as hard as she could on the hand covering her mouth.

"Goddamn!" He pulled his hand back, bringing Laura along. "Fuck!"

Her attacker hit her hard and high on the side of her head, just above her ear.

She dropped back to the ground.

"I warned you," he said.

Laura squirmed, clawing at his face. She saw the knife clutched in his right hand rise. Then the blade plunged down, rushing toward her.

For a moment, her senses were heightened. She listened to the winds rustling the leaves, the drops of water hitting the ground, the far-off music from the dance, and somewhere a dog barking.

And then another sound... A knife entering flesh. There was no pain at first, only the shock and the feeling of being struck hard in the chest. The blade retreated.

Laura tried to wriggle away from him, but the blade came down again. The knife hit her between the fourth and fifth rib, breaking the bone cleanly and puncturing her lung.

Laura thought of her parents. Then of God. She thought of all the things she'd never do. *Drive a car, see the world, fall in love.*

The knife hand arced and plunged again.

"Please..." she said weakly.

She thought about Ally. *Would she miss me? Would Marla?* Her teachers.

There was no pain anymore, only the sounds of the rain and the wind, the far-off music, and her attacker grunting. He pulled the knife from her chest and stabbed her again.

She looked into his eyes and saw anger, insanity, and pure evil. Her last thought as she lost consciousness was –

*I don't want to die.*

And as the knife swung at her again, she slipped into darkness and knew no more.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Columbus Magistratus

Laura awoke with a jerk, startled from a veiled dream of being stabbed and left for dead. Cold sweat painted her forehead, and her heart raced. She looked at the “Batman and Robin” alarm clock. It read 4:15.

Laura mopped her brow with the long-sleeved t-shirt she was wearing as her pajamas and looked back toward the other side of the bed. The echoes of her nightmare, a recurring one, made her shiver. She thought about the months, years, decades where these dreams would wake her with a scream stuck in her throat, like blood clogging, obstructing her voice. They weren’t that frequent now. Laura had found the right combination of alcohol and random sex to help suppress them... not stop them, but quiet them.

She could see a shapely bare leg sticking out from the covers. A tussle of long silky brown hair with golden highlights splayed on the pillow, sleeping peacefully, unperturbed. How Laura envied her. They had met at Griff’s, Laura’s regular prowling grounds. Both were a bit tipsy... well, maybe Laura was more than a *bit* tipsy. She was into her third bourbon and coke when the attractive young woman now occupying the west side of her bed had taken a seat just a few stools away. They shared furtive glances over her fourth bourbon and coke and the mocha martini that the object of her attention was having.

She did the classic pickup move, sending over a drink, and the woman with the pretty blue eyes and shoulder-length brown hair moved to the stool next to hers. When their hands briefly touched, there was a zap of electricity, and Laura assumed - quite rightly as it turned out - that there would be more touching ahead.

Laura pulled on sweatpants and a thickly-lined sweatshirt. She looked over at the feminine shape draped in her pink Bed, Bath, & Beyond 400 thread count sheets. She clearly remembered her bedmate’s lips, tickling as they made their way from Laura’s mouth to her breasts. Her touch; light and teasing, her fingers... genius. She remembered her

kiss, but her name...she was sure it would come to her, and if not, well, they'd always have Columbus.

The sun was still hiding behind the houses and trees that surrounded her home. Laura stretched her calves and hamstrings. Icicles were hanging from the rain gutter and the trees... The sun would put a dent in them somewhere near noon, but she knew they'd still be there when she returned home.

She bent at the waist, raising first her right leg over her head, then her left. She wasn't always that limber, but years of training had made her 'bendy.' As she twisted at the waist, there was a gratifying crack from her spine. She bent down, her gloved hands touching the frozen ground, her forehead flat against her legs... she stayed like that for a moment and then jogged away from her front door.

She took note of the brand-new, metallic red BMW parked in front of her house, and she vaguely remembered the woman in her bed following her home last night. The flurry of arms, legs, lips as they entered her home. The swift and passionate stripping of clothes even before they made it to the bed.

Laura put her head down and picked up the pace.

She loved to run. She loved it when her legs ached, and her lungs burned. She liked the precision of her movements, the pump of her arms, the length of her stride. At first, there were flashes. At least, that's what she called them. They were like photographs taken in time... pictures of significant moments. Like the moment that a knife, held high above her strikes...

Laura pushed that photo away... like a slide show. More images popped into her head; a hospital bed, a ventilator, a nurse. Laura picked up her pace, willing those pictures away. She had a box for those photos, and she preferred to keep it locked. Sometimes the thief of her subconscious obliged, and sometimes it didn't. This morning, as Laura went from a jog to a full-on run, the lock had been picked.

Laura blocked those photos, forcing them back into their rightful place, and another image popped into place. Fingers interlaced, a smooth inner thigh. This was a good picture; this she could run to. She felt the *click* that told her she was in the *zone*. Her breath was perfectly steady, her pace even. She ran her first mile in just under seven minutes. An

observer with a stopwatch would be stupefied to find that her second and third miles would be within seconds of her first and even more shocked to discover that her fourth, fifth, and sixth miles were virtually identical.

She had run non-stop for an hour when she reached Hank's Gym, and she sprinted the last two hundred yards. The sun had stopped playing peek-a-boo and was slowly climbing the sky. Laura glanced at her watch as she entered the gym; it was two minutes past six.

Hank was standing behind the cluttered reception desk. It was warm inside, warmer than warm. In fact, it was downright hot. Hank held a copy of the morning paper. He peered over the top of his readers as Laura entered, sucking wind from her final sprint. Hank had been a top bodybuilder back in the day, and he still packed a fair amount of muscle on his fifty-five-year-old, six-foot-one frame. Laura thought he'd top the scales at around two-forty, give or take.

"Morning, sunshine!" Hank beamed at her. "Good run?"

Laura managed a firm nod.

"Stupid question, huh?" Hank added, and Laura smiled at him.

"Stupid is as stupid –" she started.

"Yeah, yeah. Come on; day's not getting any younger, and neither am I." Hank buzzed her into the gym floor.

This was not your fancy high-end gym; this was 'old school.' There were a few stationary bikes, a stretching area, a boxing ring with a row of heavy bags along one side, and a row of speed bags on another. There was an octagonal-shaped MMA cage with wrestling mats covering the floor. The vast majority of the 4,000 square foot space was filled with free weights; dumbbells, barbells, squat racks, and benches. There were no more than a handful of early-risers getting their pre-work exercise in. In one corner, a man in a sleeveless gray Ohio State University sweatshirt jumped rope. His rhythm was like a metronome. Precise and steady.

Across the room, a powerlifter and his spotting partner trained on one of the benches. Laura added up the 45 lb. plates stacked on each end of the bar and quickly calculated the weight they were lifting to be 315 pounds. The powerlifter grunted through three reps before his partner started yelling words of encouragement.

"Come on! You can do it! Push!" the spotter yelled. "You got this; don't you pussy out on me!"

Laura paused for a moment. Hank's place was like her second home, and she loved the smell of sweat and heat. It was the sickly-sweet odor of tenacity. She breathed it in for a second, then headed for the woman's locker room.

Laura's locker was on the top row, third from the end. This wasn't a day locker; this was hers. She quickly opened the combination lock and retrieved a pair of fingerless punching gloves. The kind that your typical MMA fighter would train with. She grabbed the gloves and went back onto the floor of the gym.

By 6:15, Laura had finished stretching and was attacking the heavy bag. She worked speed and power, hitting the bag in rapid combinations – jab, hook, duck-shoulder roll, uppercut, roundhouse kick right, roundhouse kick left, and repeat.

Hank sauntered by with a rag soaked in a cleaning solution. He paused, watching her. Laura turned it up a notch, and when her left roundhouse caught the bag, it shuddered, the chain jumped, and the bag swayed four feet or more.

“Yo, Law, you break it, you buy it!” Hank called to her.

Laura wiped the sweat from her brow. *On what the department pays? Yeah, right.*

She went back on the attack, the morning's nightmare fading with each punch and kick. Laura sent a final elbow and knee to the bag and left it swinging as she moved toward the free weights.

It was ninety minutes later when Laura jogged back to her house. She stopped at the end of her driveway. The metallic red beamer was still there. Laura glanced at her watch, stretched, and then re-entered her house.

She closed the front door behind her and listened. No sound. It was still early. Laura doubted her bedmate would be up. She continued to the bedroom.

Sure enough, there was a body in her bed. She thought of the three bears for a moment... *Somebody's been sleeping in my bed, and there she is.*

And what was her name? She started running through the alphabet, a trick that often triggered her memory after a night of conspicuous consumption. When she got to ‘S,’ she stopped.

*Sydney... no. Not Sydney... Not Susan, Sarah... that's closer... Sarah... Sandy... no... Sharon? Yes, that sounds right.* Laura moved to Sharon's side of the bed.

*No, not hers. Not Sharon's bed. She just borrowed it for the night,* Laura thought.

Laura noticed that the bare shapely leg, still lying on top of the covers, was shapely and athletic. Laura pulled the covers, revealing a naked and beautiful back.

Sharon stirred.

"Hey, um... Sharon. Sorry to do this, but..." Laura gently jostled Sharon's shoulder.

Sharon rolled sleepily onto her back and stretched luxuriously. Her face was as pretty as her back, framed with dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes. Her body was toned and beautiful.

"Mmmm, good morning." Sharon reached for Laura.

Laura stepped back. Sharon noticed the move but pushed it aside.

"What time is it?"

"8:15, and I'm sorry, but I have to get to work." Laura looked away. "So, you've got to..."

"Oh... oh, I... yeah sure." Sharon sat up in bed and stood, her nudity suddenly feeling awkward in the early morning light. "Uh, I don't know where..." She spotted her panties, blue with a lace waistband, on the floor. She quickly stepped into them, looking around.

"There's some in the hallway. I'll get them for you," Laura offered.

"You don't have to do —" Sharon started, but Laura was gone from the room. She returned a few seconds later, holding a pair of jeans and a light blue polo shirt.

"Thanks..." Sharon took the clothes and began to dress. "Have you eaten? We can get some breakfast."

"No, thanks. I have to shower. Get ready for work," Laura replied.

Sharon smiled suggestively. "I could wash your back. Help you get dressed."

"I... I'm running late," Laura said.

"Oh. Yeah, sure. Another time then." Sharon slipped on her shoes, trying to hide her disappointment. "So, maybe another time."



“Listen, you’re sweet. We had a good time and all, but I can’t... I just... I’m not looking for anything long-term. I just need to be straight up with you, you know?”

“Ah... okay,” Sharon said.

Laura walked her out into the hallway.

“It’s not you,” Laura added, quickly regretting having done so.

*Shit*, she thought, *Couldn’t come up with anything more cliché?*

They got to the front door, and Sharon stopped. She looked at Laura with those piercing blue eyes. For a moment, Laura thought that Sharon might try and kiss her goodbye, and looking into those eyes, she didn’t think she would stop her.

Sharon turned from her and opened the front door.

“Right... well, I guess, I will see you when I see you,” Sharon said.

“Thanks for everything,” Laura said.

Sharon smiled at her. “I’d like to think it was both our pleasures.”

Laura watched as she unlocked the BMW with her key fob, got behind the wheel, and pulled away. She waited until the car was out of sight, then slowly closed the door.

Laura stood in the shower, letting the hot water steaming the glass cascade down her body. A morse code of scars crisscrossed her body, old and healed but clearly visible, another one near her shoulder, three on the left side of her chest, two more along her lower rib cage, and then one more, a thinner, cleaner surgical scar just above her pubis. Laura ran her hands through her wet hair and turned off the water.

Laura drove her Ford SUV into her parking space at the Columbus police department. The nameplate declared the spot was reserved for Detective Drummond.

She got out of the car wearing a pair of khaki pants, a white shirt, and a navy blazer. She walked around the passenger side and retrieved a large, rectangular pink box.

Laura backed in through the front door and turned to see the desk sergeant, Sergeant Murphy, looking at her.

“You’re a little late today, Detective.”

Laura placed the pink box in front of him. She noticed him swallowing the sudden rush of saliva as he eyed the box.

“Ya know, you bring these doughnuts; you’re perpetuating the stereotype.”

Laura reached for the box, “You want me to take them back?”

“Fuck off. Stereotypes are stereotypes for a reason,” Murphy said as he pulled the box out of her reach. In defiance, Murphy took out a chocolate cream-filled and bit into the pastry with gusto.

Laura waited as he buzzed her into the hallway. She pulled her key card from the pocket of her blazer and entered the squad room. A half-dozen officers worked the floor, and today was no different from any other day. Mary Jane Sewell was the only other woman working this shift.

“Morning, Law,” Mary Jane greeted her. Her arms were full of papers and a book on jurisprudence. Mary Jane was working as a police officer during the day and going to law school at night. She was shorter than Laura and heavier, kind, and pleasant enough.

Laura returned the pleasantries and glanced at the large whiteboard that commanded the south end of the room. Written in the watch sergeant’s steady hand was the day’s schedule, starting with roll call and briefing at 10 a.m. Laura had almost half an hour. Not much, but enough time to get a little work done.

She ducked into her office. The lettering on the door that declared the room to belong to ‘Detective Laura Drummond – Homicide’ was cracking a little. Laura made a mental note to get that fixed.

She left the door open, flipped on a light, and looked at her office. The desk had as many as three dozen manilla folders filled with cases stacked up. An unfinished report sat on her desk. She glanced again at the time. If she was efficient, she could complete the paperwork before the briefing and prepare for her court appearance the following day.

She sat down at her desk and picked up a pen, only to find that it was either out of ink or had simply dried up. Laura opened her drawer. Loose change, pens, pencils, lipstick, mints, and other odds and ends stared back at her. She grabbed a second pen... dead... and then a third.

*Third time’s the trick*, she thought.

Not for the last time, her mind wandered back to Sharon, nuzzled up to her in her bed. The warmth, the comfort, the pleasure... but that was over. *It had to be over*. She had too much...

Too much what? Too much to do? Too much drama in her life? Too much stress? Too much baggage? Too much... fear?

Laura put Sharon into a mental lockbox. She had work to do, and she set her pen, the third one she had tried, to the report.

There was a light rapping at her door.

“Fuck! Can’t I have five minutes to get some work done?” Laura muttered.

Looking up from the paper, she saw Detective Tom Browning, her closest friend and sometimes partner. Tom and Laura were two of the most senior homicide detectives in the Third Precinct. They covered the area from just north of downtown to the 161 and from highway 71 on the east to just past the 33 on the west.

“Good morning to you too, partner,” Tom said.

“Sorry, Tom. Been a stressful morning,” Laura replied.

“Already, that does not bode well for the day.” Tom smiled at her.

Laura liked Tom. He was four years her junior, big, black, and built like a brick shit house. His suits always looked like they were three sizes too small, and the coat seemed to make him look fat. That was an illusion created by a pair of massive biceps. Tom had a smile that could melt snow.

“Paperwork will keep. We’ve got a briefing with the Cap in ten minutes, and I want to buy you a cup of Joe,” Tom said.

Laura put down the pen and joined him at the door.

“You’re so generous... buying free shit like that,” she said sarcastically.

“What are friends for?” Tom gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder, and they walked to the kitchen.

The briefing went by in glacial time. Laura fidgeted, wanting to get back to her desk, back to work. There had been 114 homicides in Columbus in the last year. Twenty-three of those in the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Laura had apprehended 18 suspects. Nine convictions, four were currently on trial, and the others were awaiting trial. Then there were the five open cases.

When her nightmares weren’t focused on a knife plunging into her, they were about those cases. In some of those dreams, she was the victim. She felt their pain, their fear, the blows raining down on her as she was

beaten to death, the jealous hands around her throat extinguishing her last breath, the sound of the bullet that would end her life.

The report she was working on was one of those currently on trial. The prosecutor had alerted her that he would need her to testify. The DA was obsessed with Laura. She was one of the best, if not the best, witnesses for the prosecution he'd ever seen. She was precise, calm, clear, and factual on the stand. He believed that his 95% conviction rate on homicide was due in large part to Laura Drummond.

She reviewed the file once more. The facts of the case were simple. Dewayne Marcus Dumont had come home to find the mother of his three kids partaking in his stash of meth. He had warned her before. It's not that he disapproved of her using, but this wasn't for home recreation - this was for business. The mother, whose name was Valeria, became agitated. Not hard to believe when you're high on meth. They had argued loudly, and the argument had turned physical. Dewayne left, and when he came back five minutes later, he had a .357 magnum in his hand.

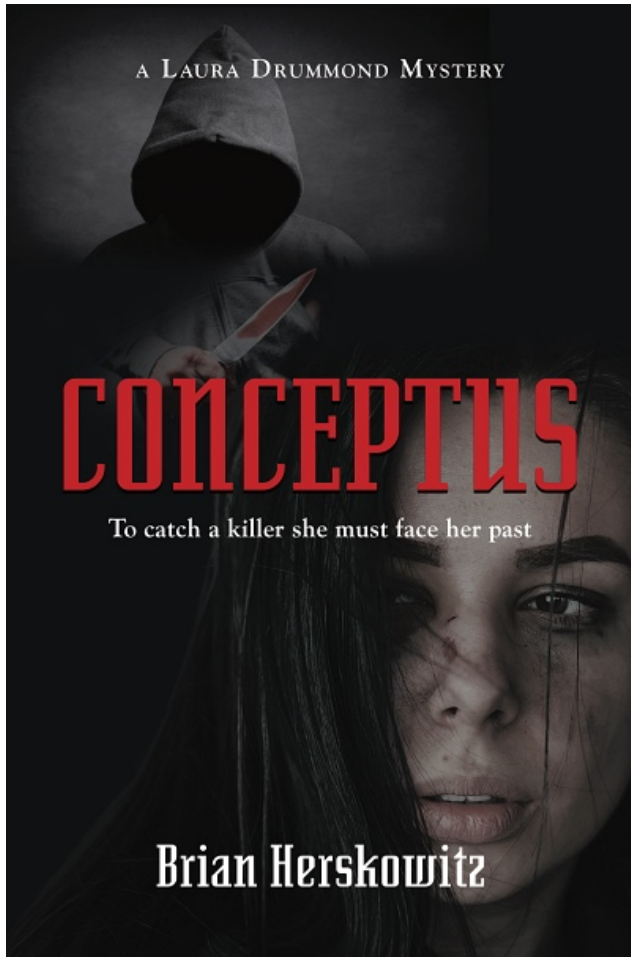
The eldest child, a little boy who had just turned nine, was a witness. He watched as his father shot his mother, then carefully returned all the meth into the baggie from which it had come. Dewayne did this as his Valeria lay dead, a hole the size of a baseball at her left temple.

Laura looked at the crime scene photos, gruesome and disturbing, but to her, it was just another day. Just another senseless murder.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brian Herskowitz is a screenwriter, producer, director, and teacher. Born in Houston, Texas, to a journalist father and an educator mother, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue his passion for filmmaking. While *CONCEPTUS* is his first novel, it is not his first book, having previously written a screenwriting textbook titled *PROCESS TO PRODUCT*. Brian is married to actress Gina Hecht, and they have two daughters, Maggie and Bailey. In his spare time, he teaches and competes in judo and jujitsu.



*Teenager Laura Drummond barely survived a brutal assault. 24-years later, as a homicide detective, she faces a killer whose m.o. is eerily similar to the attack on her as a teenager. Now, she must face her past to catch a killer.*

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