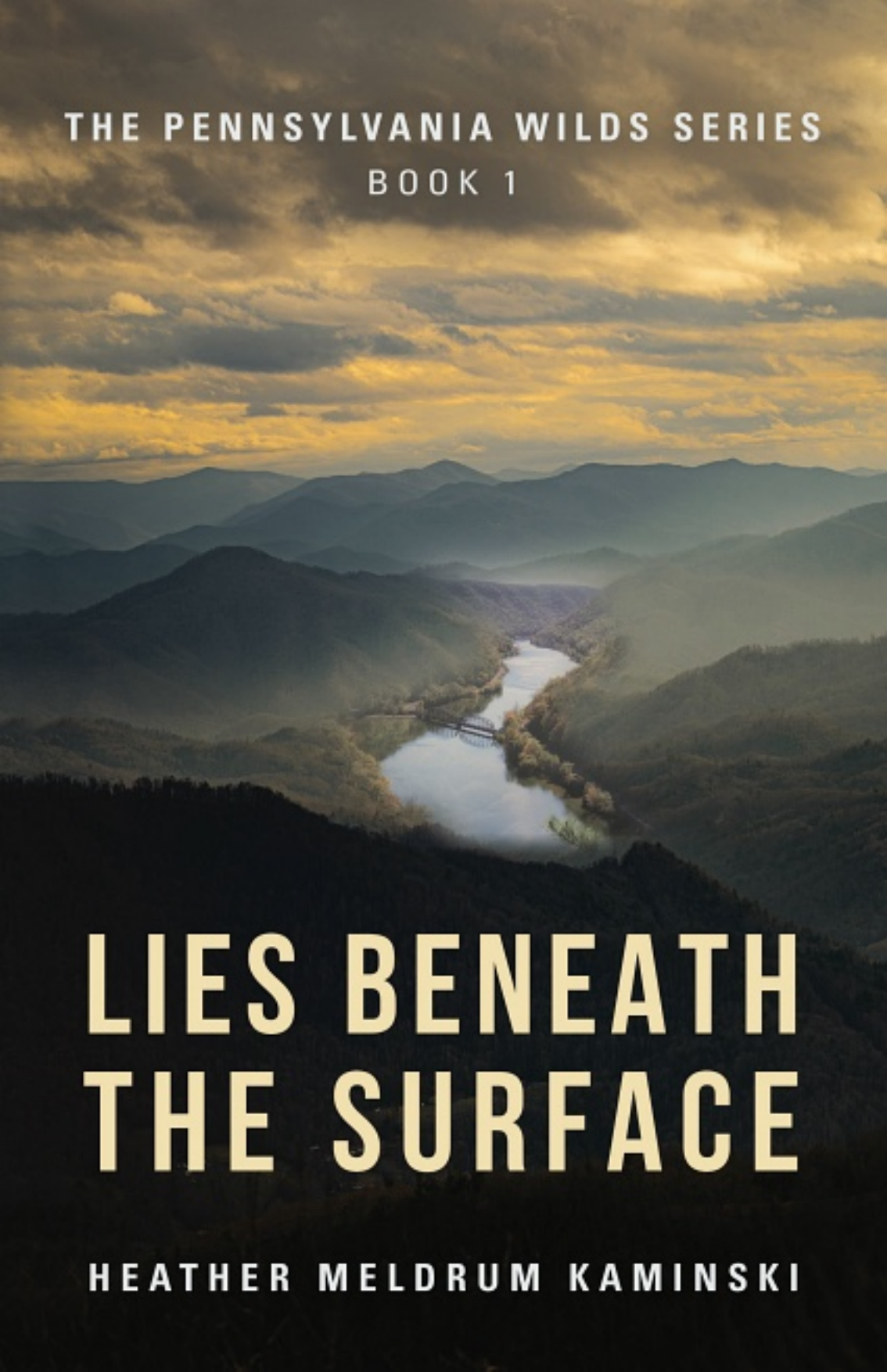


How far would you go to protect what you loved? Three strangers, seemingly unrelated, will converge under the shadow of fate, their destinies bound together by murder. Do people actually get what they deserve? Come find out.

**Lies Beneath the Surface:
The Pennsylvania Wilds Series Book 1**
By Heather Meldrum Kaminski

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THE PENNSYLVANIA WILDS SERIES
BOOK 1

LIES BENEATH THE SURFACE

HEATHER MELDRUM KAMINSKI

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CHAPTER 1:

**NICK PARKER’S BAD DAY
ON THE ALLEGHENY RIVER OUTSIDE OF
WARREN, PA**

JULY 19, 2023

Nick Parker was having a bad day. He hadn’t caught a thing despite swapping out his flies, and trying all sorts of over and under patterns. He threw his kayak and gear in his pickup, lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. He didn’t know what he was going to do. He’d spent the day trying to figure that out but it didn’t happen.

His fiancée, Jody, expected him home around 4:00 p.m. He left the house around 6:30 a.m., his usual time, to make his 7:00 a.m. shift at the refining company in Warren, PA.

She didn’t know he had been fired yesterday because he failed a random drug test and he didn’t know how to tell her. He wasn’t pissed at the company; he was pissed at himself. His job involved heavy machinery, pressurized systems, volatile chemicals, flammable materials, and high temperatures. There was a strong safety emphasis, and strict adherence to OSHA

standards. Workers are expected to be sober and alert at all times because it's a matter of life and death.

The sad part was, he hardly used drugs but his cousin Jake got some "good shit" in Bradford and they smoked it at his Bachelor Party last month. Nick thought that would be a better choice than to hammer the whiskey. Not so. That night was a disaster. Not used to ingesting substances on a regular basis, he went way up there, and fast. He ended up falling asleep very early. Apparently, he missed some good parts of that party. Probably just as well.

He put his forehead on the steering wheel. What now? There weren't jobs like that everywhere in Warren. The refinery employed a substantial workforce of 4,000 people, making it a major employer in the region. How was he going to explain this to Jody? Nick started his pickup. On the radio, Billy Joel's Captain Jack lamented through the speakers. He could relate to the lyrics.

Everything was wrong, Nick thought, as he flicked his cigarette out the window. Yesterday, Nick felt like he had everything he ever wanted - and he had worked very hard to get it. The refinery job paid him a solid 65K with full benefits. Not bad for a 23-year-old kid in Warren with no college. He also worked on Foster's large dairy farm doing anything that was needed. He was careful with money. He paid off his truck, and bought a double-wide on a mid-size piece of property. Jody wanted some fancy

appliances and he was proud he could pay cash for those. Jody was thrilled.

Meanwhile, his cousin Jake was struggling to pay rent with his fiancée in a rundown apartment in Bradford. Jake never seemed to be able to save a dime even though he worked at the beef processing plant. Good thing Jake didn't own a home anyway. Neither him nor his fiancée knew how to clean or maintain anything. When he visited them, he was never sure how dirty the bathroom would be. That, and there was always garbage everywhere. He thought it was disgusting.

But, he and Jake had grown up together and they were virtually brothers. He loved Jake no matter what. Just different upbringings.

Nick had changed a lot since he was a teenager. He had Old Man Foster to thank for that. And Jody, of course. In his mind, they were his family and the most important people in his life. Any thought of losing them, or letting them down, was worse than dying.

Jody was pure and kind. She always believed in him and told him how smart he was, hardworking, and deserving of good things. Not like his dad who beat the shit out of him and his mom who never got a chance to love him because she died in a car accident when he was eight months old.

He spent most of his adolescence feeling stupid, anxious, insecure, and hopeless, no thanks to his alcoholic father whose idea of a good day was using his disability check to drink himself into a stupor while watching bad TV.

Jody was everything to him. Even today, he still wondered how fate had brought them together five years ago. In the late Spring of 2018, Nick met Jody at Old Man Foster's Farmstand. Unbeknownst to him, that day would change the trajectory of his entire life.

It had taken Nick that whole summer to have a conversation with her. He didn't want to remember what he was like back then...but, unfortunately, old feelings were coming back in full force at that moment.

CHAPTER 2

CHELSEA AND RANDY LYNN'S BAD DAY OUTSIDE OF MASONTOWN, PA FAYETTE COUNTY

JULY 19, 2023

Chelsea and Randy Lynn were very excited. Up until now, the summer had been absolutely boring. They were both 12 years old, and trying to make the most of their time off from school. And, lately, things were a drag. They had no transportation and little money. That and there wasn't much to do where they lived. There was the pool and a few corner stores. Neither of them spent any time at a summer camp or organized program.

They spent a lot of their summer at Randy Lynn's unoccupied house playing video games, making TikTok videos, playing card games, or watching YouTube. Sometimes, they borrowed other kids' bikes, and rode around town, or hung out by the Mon River.

There were a few other kids they hung around with but Randy Lynn's mom didn't want kids in the house when she wasn't home and they never went to Chelsea's house. That left them at the mercy of other kids to invite them over, which happened occasionally. They had two

other close girlfriends whose mothers drove them places, paid for things, and fed them dinner.

Chelsea's mom never had any money to take her anywhere, and was either sleeping, working, or seemingly drunk or out of it. Randy Lynn's mom was usually at her boyfriend's house, which was about 10 miles outside of town. She told Randy Lynn since she didn't have to get her on the bus in the morning, she wanted this time to herself to spend with her boyfriend, and to just call if she needed anything.

Randy Lynn wasn't going to call her. She hated her mom's latest boyfriend. He didn't come around much but, when he did, he liked to give her "some friendly advice." If she called for anything, they would both show up at the house. Randy Lynn's mom would be annoyed and her boyfriend made sure to remind her that, at her age, she should be able to take care of herself. Gaslight special. What a jagoff.

The excitement came from scoring four resale tickets to see The Great Equalizer in Morgantown next month. Both girls worshipped the band, especially the lead guitarist. The band had a metal rock beat, and timely lyrics about a lot of social issues. The girls loved their look, too - grunge meets metal. The northeast portion of their tour was swinging into the region next month and everyone was talking about it.

Chelsea saw the ticket resale ad online on her phone and pounced on it. All they had to do was meet the seller at the auto repair place, and give him the money. Chelsea's sister, Christa, was going to drive them to the concert. She was 17, and always up for a party. She gave Chelsea the cash for the tickets. When she needed some money, Chelsea asked Christa.

Christa started selling refurbished furniture and crochet animals online to earn extra money for her and her sister. She also had a job as a hostess at a local restaurant, and worked about 30 hours a week. Their mother struggled with Heroin addiction. She had been clean for over seven years but, in the past year, she started using again and it was becoming more and more frequent. The area had seen an overall increase in drug use.

Because of erratic work attendance and performance, their mom's hours had been cut and the family had almost no money. Being 17, Christa had zero interest in being placed in foster care (again) and they had no relatives that were able, or willing, to take her and Chelsea in. Her plan was to move out after graduation, and take Chelsea with her. She remembered what it was like when her mom was using all those years ago. That was when Chelsea was just a toddler. Screw that.

* * *

Chelsea and Randy Lynn walked to the auto repair shop at dusk. It took them over an hour to get there on foot. They were to meet a man in a red sedan near the back bay to get the tickets since he worked there and was getting off his shift. As they approached the bay, neither saw a red sedan and the shop looked closed. There was no one there, and no cars.

"What the hell?" said Chelsea. "This guy was supposed to be here at 8:00 p.m. He can't be late because he said he works here, and was getting off work."

"I dunno. Maybe he sold them to someone else and he's ghosting us," said Randy Lynn, with a bit of an attitude. She rolled her eyes, and crossed her arms. She wasn't particularly fond of walking all the way out here. If they had to walk back in the dark without the tickets, she'd be pissed off.

"Better not be. I brought the money," Chelsea said, her temper flaring. "If he did, I swear I'm going to find him, rip his throat out, and eat it."

Just then, a white sedan pulled up and a younger man got out of the car. He was blond, average build, and clean shaven, wearing stylish, well-fitting clothing and shoes. He looked expensive. That and he looked like he had his shit together.

"Hi, ladies, Great Equalizer tickets?" he said smiling. "Sorry I'm late, I had to make a quick stop."

"I have the money," Chelsea said. "Here," she handed the man the money. She thought the guy was cute. He looked like he could be an upperclassman, probably a senior.

The man didn't take the money. He gave Chelsea a pensive look, and stroked his chin in a provocative gesture. "Say, I know you from around here. Is your sister Christa?" he asked. "She and I have hung out a few times. She's great, so fun. You look like her. She's lowkey, superfine," he said in a playful tone. Chelsea never had a guy flirt with her before. Most of the boys in her class were stupid and cringy.

"Yeah, she is and she's going with us to the concert," she said. Just then, she noticed a second person in the car, seated in the passenger's seat. She sidestepped around the man with the tickets to catch a glimpse of the other person in the car.

The man, noticing her looking in the car, tapped the passenger side window, and said, "That's my cousin. We were just heading to the drive-in. They just changed up the movies and both are worth watching. You guys want to ride out there with us? We can drop you back in town after. It would be on our way."

The passenger rolled the window down, and smiled at Chelsea and Randy Lynn, "Hey, what's going on here?" He raised his eyebrows, smiling bigger. "Nice. We ready to roll? You guys in?" he said, looking at Chelsea, and then letting his gaze linger on Randy Lynn.

Chelsea took Randy Lynn's hand, and pulled her aside. "What do you think? Should we go with them?" she asked.

Randy Lynn, looking over her shoulder at the attractive pretty boy in the passenger's seat, said, "I dunno. They seem to know your sister so they're probably from school. It's a long walk back to town from here. I dunno...it's up to you. I brought money in case we were going out tonight."

Chelsea turned to the two men. "Umm, yeah, we can go with you," she said.

"Sweet," said the man on the passenger's side, smiling kindly at them. He got out of the car, and went into the back seat, leaving both the passenger's side door and the back door open. "How about you ride back here with me?" he said to Randy Lynn, still smiling. "Your friend can ride up front. This way we can get to know you guys."

Chelsea and Randy Lynn looked at each other. Chelsea shrugged, got into the passenger's side, and

closed the door. Randy Lynn got into the back seat, and shut the door. The first man got back behind the driver's side, and started the engine, which automatically locked all the doors. Simultaneously, both men plunged hypodermic needles into the thighs of each of the girls. They immediately became unconscious. Both men put on gloves, and found each girl's cell phone. They wiped the phones, and placed them by the back door of the auto repair shop.

In absolute silence, they drove to the back of a warehouse outside of Greensburg. Both men exited the vehicle, and got into a different vehicle. After three minutes, a different individual got into the vehicle where the men had left it, and drove it into the warehouse. From there, the victims, called targets, would be prepared for transport. In this case, the next stop was Warren, Pennsylvania. Their personal belongings were destroyed. They would be drugged and subdued until their final drop off.

Driving out of the warehouse parking lot, the two young men high-fived each other, and then drove to the designated safe house located outside of Pittsburgh. Their part in the operation was complete. A substantial amount of money would be discreetly deposited into their offshore accounts within the next two hours. When they arrived at the safe house, they would find fried chicken, energy drinks, chips, their favorite video games and electronics, and anything else they had requested.

They would stay put until their next directive for target acquisition, or were released for off time. They were young, professional, and had a total disregard for human life. They didn't think about what would happen to the two girls they'd kidnapped and drugged. They didn't care. The job was lucrative and they only had to work a few weeks a year.

* * *

At midnight, Christa arrived home from work. Her mother was asleep on the couch with the TV blasting. She turned down the TV, and went into the kitchen. She opened the fridge, and took out a can of Coke. She leaned against the entryway into the living room, watching her mother sleep. So far that year, there'd been over 50 overdose deaths in the county. Something had made its way into the area. People were getting addicted, and dying. She kept Narcan in her room. She wasn't stupid. She didn't want to stay with her mother but she didn't want to see her die either.

She made her way upstairs, and noticed all the lights off. She opened Chelsea's bedroom door. The lights were off and Chelsea was not in bed. Odd, she thought. She knew Chelsea was with Randy Lynn but she said she'd be home by 11:00. Christa got out her phone, looking for messages, but there were no messages sent after 5:45 p.m.

5:45 pm: "SIS!!! I know you're busy being all responsible at work, but THIS CANNOT WAIT!!! Randy Lynn and I are locking down the tickets TONIGHT!!! You HAVE to start figuring out who you're bringing RIGHT NOW because this is gonna be SO UNBELIEVABLY, MIND-BLOWINGLY, EARTH-SHATTERINGLY AMAZING!!! LEGENDARY doesn't even BEGIN to describe it!!! This is gonna be like...THE EVENT OF THE CENTURY!!!"

She tried to call Chelsea but there was no answer. She texted her, "What's up? You OK? Just got home. Where you at?" She waited five minutes for a reply, but did not receive one.

Getting worried, Christa tried to call Randy Lynn. No answer. She texted Randy Lynn, "Hi, it's Christa. Is Chelsea with you? Just got home. She's not here. Everything OK?"

After about 10 minutes of no response from either girl, Christa became increasingly concerned and feared they had gotten themselves into some trouble. She went downstairs, and looked at her mom. No help to be had there. She didn't know Randy Lynn's mom's phone number so she drove over to their house, and knocked on the door. There was no answer and the house was dark.

She drove around to the places the girls usually hung out. Most of them had already closed. Chelsea was

usually home by 10:00 or 11:00 so where could she be? She got into her car, and drove to the police station. She didn't want the cops to come to their house, and see her mom strung out.

After telling the police what she knew, Chelsea was reported missing with unknown last location. Christa told the police that she'd last seen Chelsea before she left for work at 3:30 p.m. She showed the police her phone and, with regard to the last message received, had no idea where they were headed; only that they were walking somewhere to meet someone to buy concert tickets.

The police located Randy Lynn's mother that morning at her place of employment. They informed her that Randy Lynn and Chelsea went missing, and questioned her. She was unable to provide any useful information to the investigation, and had no idea where the girls were, or what happened to them. She had not seen Randy Lynn since July 18th when she dropped off groceries at their house before heading back to her boyfriend's.

The Pennsylvania State Police were contacted for assistance as this was potentially multi-jurisdictional. Being a small municipality, they needed more resources to find the girls.

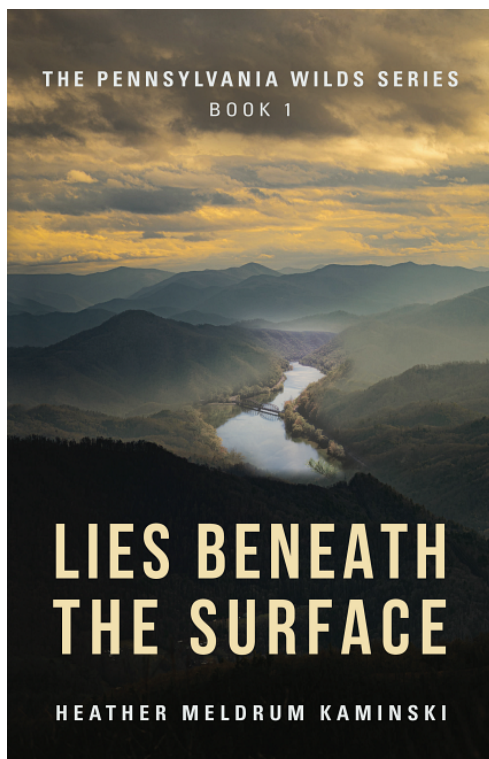
Their cellphones were located at the auto repair place, and scoured for evidence. They could not find any

advertisement for concert tickets on either phone, or any communications about buying tickets online.

The shop closed at 7:00 p.m. and there was no evidence of foul play. All the employees had alibis, and were quickly ruled out as suspects. The shop had no exterior cameras and there were no other businesses around the shop.

Law enforcement was not sure that the shop was the last known location of the girls. They were able to pick up some footage from merchants in town but nothing provided leads.

It was as if they vanished into thin air. They mobilized a manhunt, setting up a command center, public notification, ground teams, and tech support. It was difficult to establish a search parameter but they prioritized outlying areas and along the river. Nothing was found in or around the Monongahela River. Nothing was found at all.



How far would you go to protect what you loved? Three strangers, seemingly unrelated, will converge under the shadow of fate, their destinies bound together by murder. Do people actually get what they deserve? Come find out.

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