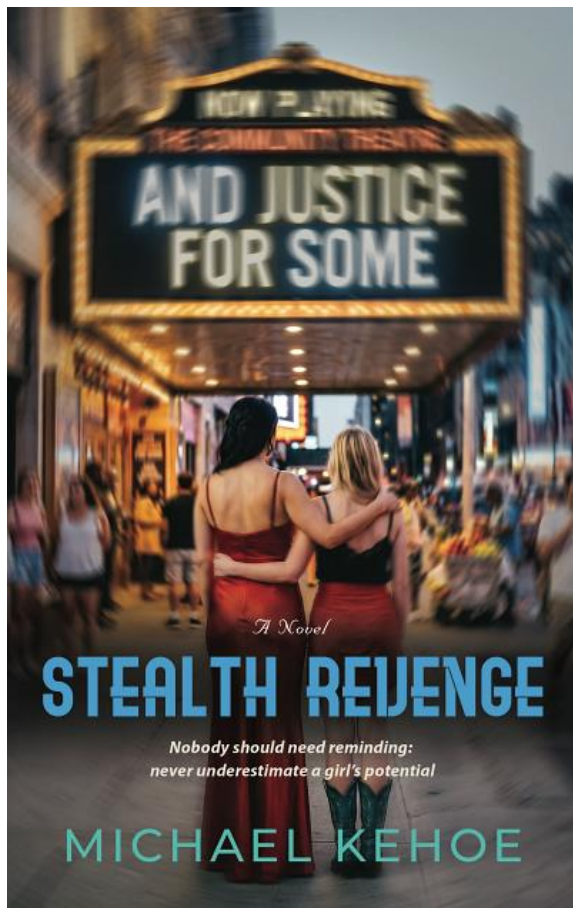




A poor but talented beauty is abused and runs away from home. She encounters many challenges and dangers in a large, strange city. She befriends another victim of rape. The two girls plan to bring their rapist, a corrupt cop, to justice.

Stealth Revenge

By Michael Kehoe

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A Novel

STEALTH REVENGE

*Nobody should need reminding:
never underestimate a girl's potential*

MICHAEL KEHOE

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Print ISBN: 978-1-961266-64-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-323-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kehoe, Michael

Stealth Revenge - Nobody should need reminding: Never underestimate a girl's potential by Michael Kehoe

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026900316

1. Trauma

And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted.

[WS: Sonnet 66]

Becky sat before her dressing-table mirror combing her long blonde hair. It was 10:30 p.m. and her thirteenth birthday party just ended. It was the happiest Australia Day she ever experienced. Too excited to retire to bed: “All you need is love” and songs of ABBA and other favorites rang in her ears. She smiled as she recalled her friends’ happy, pleasurable faces, and their many gifts. The aroma of red roses on her bedside table mirrored roses on a wall picture, a large poster of a young ballerina in costume, her head adorned in a garland of pink roses. Juxtaposed was a poster of Albert Einstein, his face partially obscured by a quote: “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination.” Another wall revealed pictures of Kylie Minogue gyrating on stage, a wild-haired Nicole Kidman riding a fast BMX bike, Elle McPherson gliding down a fashion catwalk, Margot Fonteyn in flight in her prime, and Becky herself posed in a white flared tutu and glittering tiara. The opposite wall revealed several of Becky’s own drawings. And at the head of her bed? Faded wallpaper revealed dragonflies and toadstools, elves and fairies. And beside the light on her bedside table, books with well-thumbed pages: *The Oxford English Dictionary*, an anthology of poetry, and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.

Her mirror image reflected happiness tinged with sadness. On the dressing-table, a framed photo revealed Becky embraced by her mum and dad, all smiling. Becky felt lucky: her parents gave her the very best genes. The long silky thick blonde hair cascaded over fair complexioned shoulders, reaching down her petite shapely figure. Big blue eyes gazed back approvingly; a Barbie beauty in the flesh. Her mum's features. Her mum worked Trojan-like after dad met a fatal accident three years earlier. A chill ran down her spine as she recalled the industrial estate where he had toiled. Workers' compensation barely covered his funeral expenses. Her mum tried hard to advance Becky's acting, singing and dancing lessons, working long night-duty hours to earn extra money. But Becky's personal life and school results had plummeted since her eleventh birthday. And she could not share her awful secret with anyone, not even her mum.

She tried on her new jeans and sneakers, gifts from her mum. Fitted perfectly. Her mum was proud of her. Ruby, too. Ruby was her best friend, but Ruby's mother insisted on taking her home. Becky had hoped she could stay overnight. All her friends left at ten. Then her mum left for work at 10:15. Weston Park Hospital was a short drive away.

She sat on her bed, entering the day's events in her diary. Her large wide-eyed cuddly, soft teddy-bear "Cuddles" gazed lovingly at her from the end of her bed. She would remember this happy day forever. Her phenomenal memory guaranteed it. Miss Hay, her primary school teacher had told her mum: "Becky has the most prodigious memory I've ever encountered. She's very lucky." That memory could be a

blessing *and* a curse—just like her idiosyncratic, anatomical secret, unknown to anyone outside her family.

Suddenly she heard the front door open; her brother's voice! The nineteen-year-old and his loud rugby mates had been out drinking again. Her stomach muscles tightened; her palms grew clammy; her heart slammed like a tennis ball in her chest. Thoughts churned. She bit her lower lip; clenched her jaws; tightened her hands into fists. Happy feelings shattered. Why, she wondered, had they left the pubs, the partying so early? On 26th January of all days! She jumped off the bed, bolted her bedroom door, hid her diary under the mattress. She could kill her brother; he was a monster.

Footsteps sounded on the stairway, louder, nearer. Becky switched off the bedside light.

"This had bedda be the poke o' the week," a slurred voice said. "You said she's a little witch who loves sex, Lou."

"Yeah!" said another, loud. "I've already paid my ten!"

Someone tried to open the door. It held. Two loud thuds were followed by a vicious kick; the flimsy bolt shattered; the door crashed open. Lou, her brother, stumbled in. Switched on the light. They stood at the end of the bed, leering. Lou swiped at the teddy; Cuddles shot across the room, bounced off the wall, rolled over on the carpet, lay face-down, helpless. Becky screamed; tried to hide under the bed. It was useless. They had the numbers; they had the muscle. Floorboards murmured in protest as she was hauled out and spread on the bed. Her necklace, a gift from a boy at school two years earlier, was ripped from her neck.

“Help!” “No!” She screamed several times, her voice strange even to her own ears. She stared at her brother: his square-jawed face was waxy, coated with a sheen of sweat. A sour boozy odor seeped from his pores, his bloodshot eyes devoid of humanity. A brutal hand clamped her mouth shut. Her heart thumped. Mouth dry. Mind numb. Foul breaths spouted across the room; a combination of stale beer, of stubbed cigarettes, of impending horror.

They pulled down her jeans and panties. He was big and bulky. Wore a black open-neck unbuttoned shirt revealing sprouts of hair clustered in O shapes on his chest. A mustache looking like a caterpillar sat below his flared nostrils. His breath reeked of alcohol. His eyes knowing. Becky wanted to puke; clenched her eyes shut. Felt as if stabbed with a knife; heinous, appalling behavior. Squeezed her anatomical secret; rough handling. They laughed; high-fived. Finally, he finished. In searing pain, Becky curled into a fetal position.

“Best ten bucks I ever spent,” her assailant laughed. “Here’s yer money, Lou. First of many deposits!”

Becky trembled at his alcoholic breath as he leaned over, kissed her full on the mouth. “We’ll do this again, babe. Real soon. I’m bewitched. Yer a wonder, a winna, *Bendova* Becky.”

Becky felt she was going to throw up; she clenched her jaw until the gums above her upper molars hurt. But her arms and legs were now free.

Lou, at the door, arms akimbo, asked, “Who’s next?”

They argued; almost came to blows.

Becky saw her chance. In a swift, nimble move, she hitched up her panties, her jeans and darted off the bed with

the lightning movements of a finch; dashed past the rapist still struggling to zip up his pants; raced downstairs.

“Fuck! What just happened?” Lou yelled in his hazy stupor. “Get her! Get her! Don’t let her get away!”

They scrambled to the door. Chuck got knocked over. Lou stumbled across the narrow landing, tripped, tumbled down the stairs, blocking the frantic advance of the others. Finally, they reached the front door and the street. Becky was nowhere to be seen.

Becky ran. Fast. *Mustn’t be caught. Mustn’t be seen. Survive the day. Day-by-day mum always urged.* She dodged through Binella’s back streets, headed west, avoiding the main roads. Knew what she had to do. Had to cross Flatlands. Skirt Beryl Park. Cut through the hated Wechtel Industrial Estate. She crossed Ipswich Road and Hailes Golf Course to reach her mother at the hospital. She’d been to the industrial estate before—in daytime—all six kilometers, a leisurely car drive. Now she was running for her life. In shock. Fear, instinct, determination and memory propelled her forward. Her dark clothing prevented her from being easily spotted. Three times on two different streets she dodged into the shadows to avoid passing cars’ lights.

“Damn it,” she mumbled. “My goddamn prodigious memory. This ugly experience will be seared into my mind forever.” On the edge of tears. *This is a day I want to forget already; but it’s also a day I must remember. Because ...*

Out of breath, she reached the Marrett Centre just before midnight. Soaked in sweat, disheveled, her sneakers squished with mud; she was exhausted; felt a sight. She banged on the

door for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, a woman in her fifties dressed in a white uniform and built like a Sherman tank unlocked the door.

Becky searched for words. "Help! I'm no ... not well. Call me mum."

"Call you what?" The puzzled, steely tank gave her a once-over.

"Help me. Call my mum. She works here. My name is Becky. My mum is Donna Laverty. She's a night nurse."

"Get inside! I can recognize a runaway when I see one." She reached down, grabbed Becky by the neck. "Never heard of Donna Lafferty and I'll hear no more of yer lies and fibs."

"But my mum works here," Becky, eyes flashing, insisting.

"Okay, *mum*," she said sarcastically. "You've come to the right place if you need help. I didn't train to be a nurse's aide for nuffin. This is the Marrett Centre; we have lots of runaway teenagers like yourself. All sorts of delinquents: physical, emotional, mental cases."

The aide slammed the door shut. "We'll find you a bed. You look as if you could do with a nice, long rest."

"But ... but me mum ..." Becky sniffled.

The aide marched Becky down a long corridor dimly-lit by little knee-high night lights. They rounded a corner, the nurse still gripping her neck forcefully.

Becky's protests fell on deaf ears.

"We'll sort you out in the morning, you little tramp. Now shut up; get inside; get some sleep."

She was tossed into a small padded room with a single bed, a thin mattress, a blanket, and a small, barred window. A

dim light shone from the ceiling. The door seemed to have no doorknob, only a small reinforced glass opening too high to see out. The door slammed behind her; Becky heard the lock click.

She sprang at the door; reached for the tiny window. "Let me out; I'm not crazy; I'm not a little tramp." But the only sounds she heard were the regimental echoes of the flat leather shoes receding in the distance.

Too exhausted to protest further, Becky sat on the edge of the bed, reassuring herself that her mum was just a short distance away, that everything would be sorted out in the morning—the confusion at the Marrett Centre, and her rape by her hated brother's friend. She would also tell her mum the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her brother over the past two years. She lay down on the hard bed; began to feel sleepy.

Becky awoke with a start. Excited voices. In the muted light she spotted two faces peering through the small door panel. She sat up, fully alert. Two boys, aged about sixteen; smirking, leering. She clutched the edge of the bed frame. Many times, she had seen her brother's leer; and she'd seen the drunken lust on the faces of his friends. She knew. She looked around for a weapon. Nothing. Then she remembered the door was locked; felt safer.

"Wow! A blonde young filly," the taller boy scoffed. "Guess I've got me a ride tonight!"

"Right, Jock," the other laughed. "Just leave enough for me! Can't wait to ride her past the winning post."

They fiddled with the lock.

Becky shook her head, her confidence evaporating. She called out to the nursing aide. Tried to move the bed against the door; it was bolted to the floor!

Within seconds, they had unlocked the door.

Becky screamed, "Nurse! Nurse! Nur-"

A fist smashed into her mouth; she collapsed. Felt blows to her head. A stunning blow struck the back of her neck. A blinding white light blazed with a sound like a cannon-shot. Then all was darkness and silence.

Becky awoke. Alone. Naked on the bed. Lying on her front. A throbbing headache. Her body aching and sore. A salty taste in her mouth. She coughed, sputtered. Knew that taste and smell. Her hateful brother had forced her many times. She spat out semen and blood. Wiped her face. Her lip was split and swollen. As she tried to sit up a piercing pain shot up her rear. She reached back. A broken handle protruded from her anus. Grimacing in pain, she slowly removed it. Stared at blood mixed with feces; flung it away. Pain surged through her body. Vagina and clitoris sore and bruised. She tried to wipe them but pangs of pain ripped through her private parts. In the hot summer night, she trembled like a drenched cat. Felt degraded, demeaned, diminished.

Slowly she steadied herself against the bed and wall. Felt like her own shadow at sunset. In her jeans pocket, she found some tissues, wiped her face, her privates, and then cast the tissues away as if they were a contagious disease. Reached down for her clothes, combating the pain, feeling as if jabbed

by a thousand needles at once. Surprised they were still intact, she retrieved her panties, dressed slowly. Her watch told her it was just after 1:00 a.m. *Must get out, get away from this living hell.*

Another surprise. The cell door was ajar. She heard indistinct distant sounds. Moved cautiously down the corridor, towards the nurse's station and the entrance. She was seeing everything in a narrow but strangely pleasing circle, like looking through an empty toilet-paper roll. She crouched down, feeling pain, as she spotted the nursing aide at her station—watching television. The entrance door. Was it locked? Or was the aide consistently incompetent? Unlocked! Becky slipped out; moved slowly across the golf course. Her feet seemed weighted with lead, each step an obstacle course of insurmountable agony. She recalled with irony her parents once attended a wine-tasting at the Hailes Golf Clubhouse three years ago; both were totally dehydrated next day. She wanted to down some wine to dull her pain, quench her thirst, rid her mouth of that obnoxious taste. She spat at regular intervals.

Now she had to get away. Away from her vile brother and his drunken rapist friends. Away from this crazy Marrett Centre. Away from its incompetent nurse aide and insane inmates. Felt she was desperately clutching a window ledge several stories high. Had to do something before her grip failed. Had to leave Brisbane. Had to run away. Had to survive on her instincts.

2. Escape

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweeep my outcast stage,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless
cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate.*

[WS: Sonnet 29]

Becky felt everything rushing at her like an oncoming train.

She positioned herself near the footbridge by the westbound lane. Needed to catch a ride to the motorway. A carload of young people pulled over, invited her to party; she pretended she was about to cross the footbridge. They drove off yelling obscenities and “Happy Australia Day!”

More cars passed. A TNT truck pulled up on the hard shoulder. Trembling, she approached the driver's side. A bear of a man leaned out the window.

“Where to?” His face kind as he scrutinized the split lip, the bloody nose, the bruised eye, the lump on her forehead.

“Anywhere,” her voice weak. “Sydney?” She observed the St. Christopher medal dangling on the windscreen.

“I'll get there in about twelve hours.” Sadness clouded his features, but there was a winged lightness to his voice that made her feel better.

“That's fine.” Her mouth twitched.

“Climb aboard,” he said.

She heard a pressure of air as she rounded the front of the cab; the passenger door swung open. Gritting her teeth, Becky hauled herself up the steps and onto the seat.

“Buckle up.” His voice was firm but friendly.

Becky sized him up. The giant across from her seemed a long way off. A big, broad-shouldered man with an air of confidence, much like her dad. She spotted family pictures near the rearview mirror; felt encouraged.

“I’m Penny, a runaway.” She forced the words out, jolted at what she said.

“I see you’ve been through hell. I won’t ask any questions unless you feel like talking. You’ll be right, Penny.” He smiled reassuringly. “My name is David McFudd. Would you like a Coke and some wet wipes?”

She nodded. Reached across. Tried to smile.

For a split-second Becky wished this giant would squash her hand, squash her head in his huge paw and end her suffering. Her mind raced. Why had she given a false name? Penny Peacock once lived in her street. Older than Becky; had died at an early age. They’d been childhood friends.

Becky applied the wet wipes gently as the big engine roared into action. She took a slug of Coke, rolled it inside her mouth like a disinfectant; spat it out the open window. Repeated. Then sipped slowly as she cast sideways glances at the driver from time to time. Felt reassured at two photos. Family of four: truckie, attractive wife, two nice-looking children: boy, and girl about Becky’s age. An individual photo of the girl.

She used another wipe.

"My family," David nodded. "We're from Wattle Ridge. My little girl, Tamira, blonde like you, is a terrific girl. Starts secondary school this year. Loves netball, swimming, soccer. Nicky's very keen on soccer."

Becky read the words on Tamira's photo. "Wattle Ridge rules, OK!"

"Tamira's *motto*." David smiled. "Great sense of humor."

"Very pretty," Becky said. "You have a beautiful wife, lovely family; you all look so happy." Becky felt a pang of envy.

He nodded. "We're very happy. We're fortunate."

Soon after the Ipswich-bypass, Becky felt more secure. And she desperately wanted to sleep, to escape her pain.

"I'm really tired, Mr. McFudd," she inclined her head. "Would you mind if I lay down with the seat back?"

"I have a better idea, Penny." He waved his left hand behind her. "This is an extended cab. Behind this curtain is a mattress. I use it myself on long hauls. Climb back, you'll be as snug as a bug in a rug ... And there's actually a rug and pillow. Sleep as long as you wish." He reached towards her. "Here's two aspirin: they may help."

Becky gulped them down with a swig of Coke; scampered back through stabs of pain. Sheet, rug, and pillow all smelled fresh and laundered. She closed the curtain; switched off the light; lay down, curled into a ball.

Gruff voices startled Becky. Still painfully sore, she raised herself on an elbow, pulled back the curtain. An empty cab. She looked about; saw many trucks angle-parked and two

road-trains. A large truck-stop; food odors filled the air. Two beefy drivers were cracking jokes, saying goodbyes as they mounted their trucks. She felt the power of the trucks start up, saw smoke belch from their stacks, felt the ground vibrate as the big rigs rumbled into action. She lay back on the bed; kept a wary eye out for Mr. McFudd.

He was back in fifteen minutes. Unlocked the cab; spotted Becky behind the open curtain.

"So, you're awake," he smiled. "Didn't want to bother you; you seemed dead to the world. Got you some food."

"Thank you." Becky smelled fish and chips. "Where are we? Are we there yet? In Sydney, I mean?"

"Hardly," he smiled. "Still in the Sunshine State, I'm afraid. Had to make a detour. But we're loaded up and ready to roll."

"What is this place?"

"The little township of Nindipilly. On the edge of the Queensland outback, west of Goondiwindi."

Becky's hand shot to her mouth. "Oh, my goodness, Goondiwindi is waaaay west of Brisbane!"

"Yeah, over 500 kilometers from Brissie." He buckled up. "Seventy kilometers north of the New South Wales border."

Becky frowned. "Will we ever see Sydney?"

"All in good time, Penny," Mr. McFudd smiled.

"Mr. McFudd," Becky frowned, "I need to go to the loo."

He took her to the Nindipilly pub.

Inside the tiny restroom, Becky felt relief. She stared into the foggy, cracked mirror, horrified at what she saw. Barely recognized her broken self. Face swollen, bruises, split lip, specks of blood beneath her nose; hair had lost its satiny,

golden luster; her breath fetid. Felt ugly, horrible inside. Took a strip-wash, shocked at heavy bruising on her breasts, privates, thighs and legs. No hot water, but the cold tap worked: splashed her body; her legs trembled as waves of pain shot through her. Used innumerable paper-towels to dry off.

Mr. McFudd was waiting outside the restroom with a paper bag. "Fish and chips. Tamira likes them; thought you might too."

Becky nodded. "Thank you, Mr. McFudd."

"And here's a bottle of cold orange juice."

Becky thought it might be better for her head and stomach aches.

"Thank you, sir," she said, as they walked to the truck; Becky laboring.

Mr. McFudd grunted. "Oh, just call me David. 'Mr. McFudd' and 'sir' are so formal."

Back in the truck, David gave a brief history of the pub, Queensland's oldest. A favorite stop for truckies; he described its specialty—the Nindipilly Road Truck Burger, the one-point-two kilo meat pattie.

Becky felt nauseous at the thought of the pattie, of flesh in her mouth. "Fish and French fries will do me just fine, David."

Soon they were in NSW.

"I've only been once to New South Wales," Becky said. "A trip with my parents to the RSL, the Returned and Services

League. I won twelve dollars on the pokies after a day at the beach and a lovely meal.”

David nodded, smiled at her. “We’ll soon enter the land of the Boggabilla and Terri Hie Hie, Wagga Wagga and Tumbarumba, Goonoo Goonoo and Kurri Kurri.”

Penny listened intently as he explained the historic importance of Tumbarumba and Marino wool, a time when “Australia rode on the sheep’s back.”

He said he had to stop at suburban Adamstown in Newcastle to unload some materials. He returned with a cheese-and-tomato sandwich and orange juice.

Approaching Sydney, they passed through Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and the Taronga Zoo. As they crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge, he explained actor Paul Hogan once worked there, cut his comedic skills regaling his fellow workers with anecdotes and yarns. “Locals call this bridge *the coat hanger*,” he smiled.

Becky was stunned at the sight of the Sydney Opera House. She almost smiled when David described it as a “congregation of nuns.”

It was past two in the afternoon when they reached an old brick building in Balmain. Its front door and windows needed a fresh coat of paint.

David gestured at the Centre. “This is a Rape Crisis Centre, Penny. It is worked by some excellent people. I phoned through from Adamstown; they’re expecting us. They’ll take good care of you. You’ll be safe here; you’ll have some peace of mind.” He nodded. “Sydney is Australia’s largest city. There’s lots to see and do; you’ll make new friends in no time. You’re

a terrific girl, Penny. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. You'll be right."

Penny felt, after her long haul from Brisbane, that future progress would not proceed in a straight line.

Events moved very quickly. Becky met two staff members; was introduced to a female doctor who explained what she did during a thorough examination. Becky said she had been raped by boys in Brisbane and had run away. The doctor explained the rape test kit; tended to her wounds. Becky caught a glimpse of her woebegone face in a wall mirror. She recoiled, turned her head away.

The examination and medical care over, Becky insisted on phoning her mum; told her she was in Sydney. Told her she had been raped by one of Lou's friends in Lou's presence, told her she'd been brutalized at the Marrett Centre. She explained her name was now Penelope Anne Peacock. Her mother seemed to understand. Becky extracted a promise from her mum not to reveal her new name or whereabouts to anyone, especially not to Lou. She also requested her primary school reports and Penny's birth certificate.

As she soaked in the bathtub, her head and stomach aches receded. She thought of her mum, who had drilled into her: *You should not expect too much in life, Becky. It can only lead to failure and disappointment.* Now she knew that her mother was right: the world was a mean place, dog-eat-dog. And yet ... and yet her mum always encouraged her to study hard, pursue her acting and art, singing and ballet. She knew

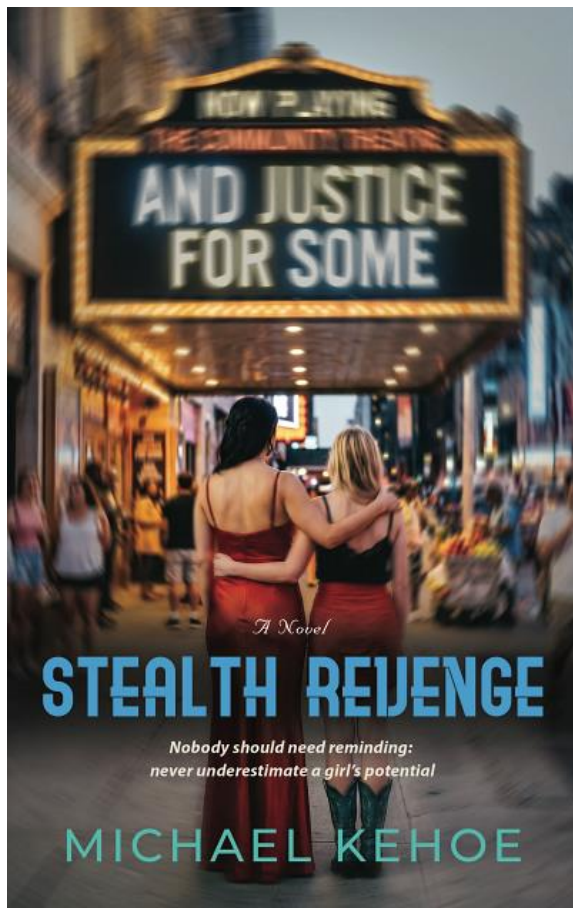
her mum wanted her to be successful at whatever she did; knew her mum would do everything possible to help her pursue her dreams.

Becky believed her suffering would not end just because she was among caring people at the Crisis Centre. She once heard that suffering builds character, that Lawrence of Arabia burned himself with cigarettes in order to build soldierly character. But she wanted to avoid suffering. Hadn't she suffered enough already at the hands of her brother, his ugly mates, and the juvenile delinquents at the Marrett Centre? It would be a long time before she could build soldierly character; she was quite sure she didn't want to burn herself with cigarettes. But she knew she had to survive, retain her sanity, adapt to her new circumstances, restructure her life.

The Centre staff gave her fresh clothes; she shared a room with another resident, Susan.

Her terror returned first night at the Centre. She awoke from her nightmare sweating and screaming, her head pounding, her stomach and back in severe pain. The locked door, the knife she'd taken from the dining-room and placed under her pillow failed to give her peace of mind. She finally managed to get back to sleep, her brain twitching, Susan's arms curled around her, Susan whispering encouraging words, "You're strong and courageous, Penny; you're gonna go the distance."

Becky knew this wasn't life, wasn't living. It was *enduring*; she wondered how much more of this hell she could tolerate.



A poor but talented beauty is abused and runs away from home. She encounters many challenges and dangers in a large, strange city. She befriends another victim of rape. The two girls plan to bring their rapist, a corrupt cop, to justice.

Stealth Revenge

By Michael Kehoe

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