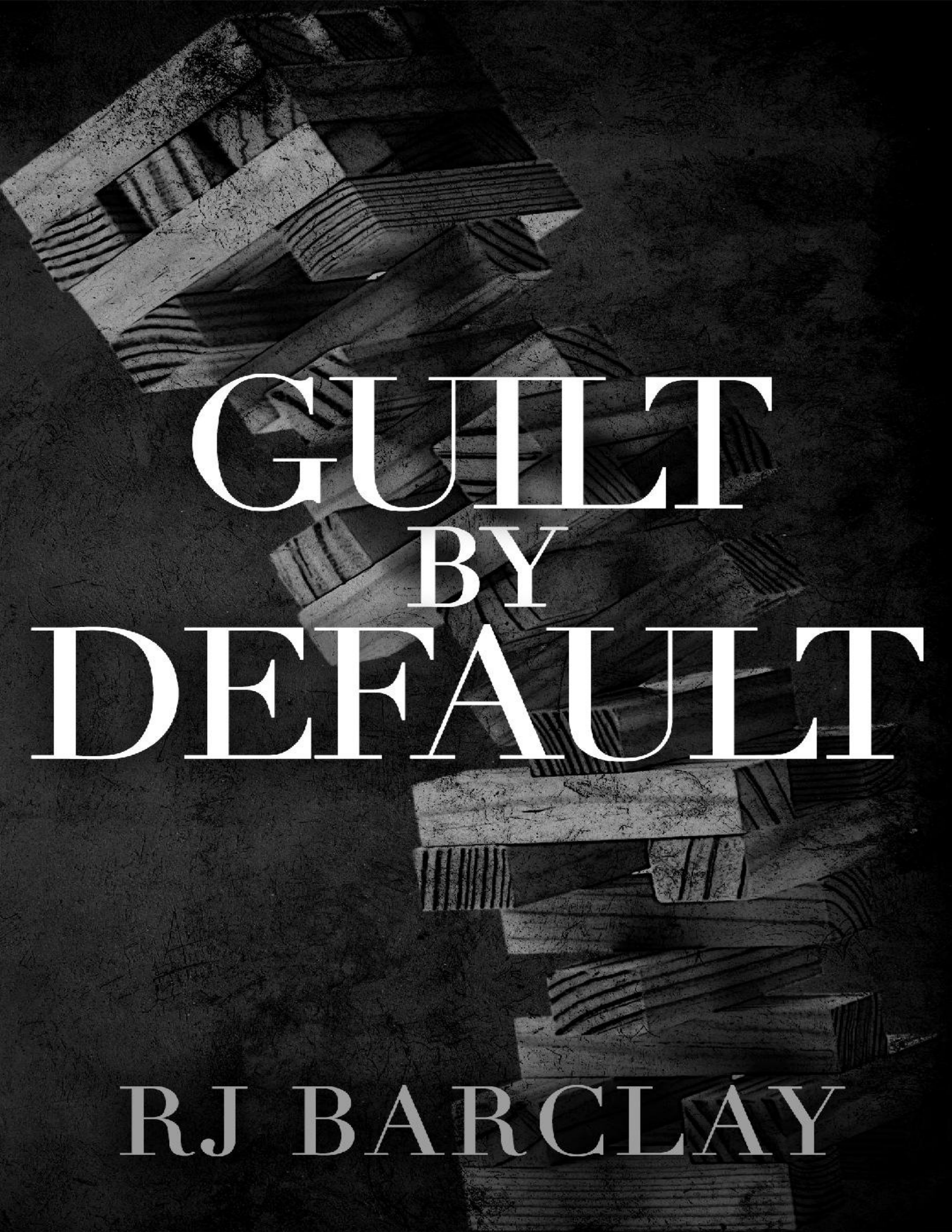


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BY
DEFAULT

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank every person who encouraged and supported me on this journey. I am forever grateful.

Guilt by Default

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Chapter 1

John Quisenberry raised his arms overhead and stretched side-to-side. The brisk morning air sent an invigorating chill through his body. Homer, close behind, charged through his legs nearly knocking him off balance. “Whoa, Buddy,” he laughed. The bulldog sniffed the yard’s perimeter, searching for a place to pee, as John meandered down the driveway to retrieve the morning newspaper. Across the street, the neighbor’s garage door rumbled open. *Oh great.*

Craig backed his red convertible out of the driveway and stopped in front of John’s house. He stuck his crew-cut head over the side of the car and gave him a condescending look. “Hey, Quisenberry!” he called out. “I see you’re enjoying those bankers’ hours.” John bristled and tightened his bathrobe. Craig liked to boast that his position as Commander in the Coast Guard made him more of a man.

John threw him a mock salute. “Sure am!” He picked up the paper and whistled for the dog. Homer raced him up the driveway. John entered the house breathing in the scent of French Roast. He poured dog chow into Homer’s bowl and scratched him behind his ear. “Here you go, Pal,” he murmured. “Good boy.” Smiling, John grabbed his “World’s Greatest Dad” mug from the dish rack. The kids presented him with a huge box last year on his forty-fifth birthday. Once unwrapped, he’d discovered a series of smaller boxes, each nestled inside the other. By the time he got to the mug, wrapping paper covered the floor. The kids had bellowed with laughter as Homer ran through the house trailing ribbons.

John filled his mug and slurped the hot liquid. He savored this morning ritual when all was quiet. Once the kids were awake, it would be chaos until bedtime. Pulling up a chair, he spread the newspaper onto the table and glanced at the headlines. “Sex Offender Registry Goes Public!” His heart stopped. *Oh, no, no, no.* Water pipes banged. His oldest daughter was getting into the shower—the whole family would be up soon. He scanned the article for pertinent information. “People in the state of California now have online access to names and addresses of registered sex offenders.” *Fuck.*

“Hi, Daddy!” Lucy, their youngest, burst into the kitchen. John sprang from the chair. His wife, Melissa, would be close behind. He folded the newspaper and stuck it on the counter behind some tool catalogs. Lucy wore pink leggings under an even pinker dress embroidered with balloons. Her strawberry blonde hair stuck straight up in a scrunchy, resembling a cartoon character. She bounded over for a hug. He wrapped his arms around her. “Hey, pink girl.” Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Can I have Cheerios with bananas?” Her blue eyes glimmered.

John tugged her ponytail. “You betcha!” He glanced at the newspaper peeking out from behind the stack, praying Melissa wouldn’t ask about it.

His wife made her way to the coffeepot, hair tousled from sleep. She wore a baggy T-shirt that said *I Just Need to Go to Jazzercise!* Her mismatched pajama bottoms had seen better days. “Morning, Hon,” John said. He forced a smile and kissed her cheek. “Sleep okay?”

“Pretty good.” She yawned. “You?”

“I slept great!” His tone was an octave too high—too enthusiastic. Did she notice? *Just paranoid*. He poured Lucy’s cereal, and with shaky hands, sliced a banana. He set the bowl in front of her.

“Thanks, Daddy,” she said.

The scent of strawberry shampoo wafted into the room. Thirteen-year-old Diana strode into the kitchen wearing a green hoodie with skinny jeans. Her auburn hair, the color of Melissa’s, fell halfway down her back. John bit his lip when he noticed her darkened lashes. Since the start of middle school, Diana changed from a free-spirited tomboy to a moody teen. She opened the refrigerator, took out a carton of peach yogurt, and peeled back the wrapper. He watched as she licked the foil and tossed it into the trash. His stomach clenched. *What if my name is on that list?* She grabbed her backpack. “I have practice after school today.”

“Will you be home in time for dinner?” Melissa asked. “I’m making spaghetti.”

“Yes, Mom, I’ll be home by six.” John glimpsed the eye roll behind his wife’s back. “Marie’s here. Bye!”

Melissa cringed when the door slammed. She looked at John, eyes narrowed. “Are you okay? You seem a little off.”

He couldn’t get into it now. Not with Kevin coming through any minute. “Thinking about work stuff, I guess.”

Like clockwork, their fifteen-year-old son entered the kitchen. “Did you get more bagels?”

“I did,” Melissa said.

Kevin clomped across the floor, banging the cupboard shut after he retrieved the package. He split a bagel in half and popped the pieces into the toaster. Opening the refrigerator wide, he tossed a box of cream cheese on the counter and grabbed the carton of orange juice. He removed the lid, took a long gulp, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Melissa glared at him; lips pursed.

Kevin ignored her. He grabbed the bagel from the toaster and loaded it up. John joked with him, “Hey Kev, would you like some bagel with your cream cheese?”

“Ha-ha, funny, Dad.”

Their son resembled John more each day. Unlike his sisters, Kevin inherited John’s dark hair and brown eyes. He already stood eye-to-eye with him. *What if he finds out about me?*

Kevin slung his backpack over his shoulder and grabbed his skateboard. Bagel in hand, he headed to the door. “I’m going to the skate park with Cole after school today.” He glanced at Melissa. “Yes, Mom, there will be plenty of time for homework when I get home.”

“Dinner at six,” she called after him.

The door slammed.

Mel glanced at John, shaking her head. They turned to Lucy, so quiet, her presence went undetected at times. She attended the afternoon kindergarten class, allowing John to spend time with her while Melissa showered. Today though, he patted her head, swallowing the lump in his throat. “Lucy Goose, Homer looks ready to go outside. Can you please take him to the backyard?”

Melissa turned to him and raised her brow.

Lucy hopped from her chair. “Come on, big boy.” The dog trotted beside her.

“Grab your jacket,” Melissa said. “It’s chilly.” She turned back to John, her eyes a question.

“The registry is online,” he croaked.

“What?” Mel’s face drained of color. “How do you know?” Her voice, breathy and shrill, sounded on the verge of hysteria.

John gestured to the newspaper behind the catalogs. “Front page.”

Melissa stood and hurried from the kitchen. John knew she’d gone to get her computer. He put his head in his hands. The rape and murder of seven-year-old Megan Kanka in 1994 attracted national attention. The perpetrator, a registered sex offender, lived nearby. One month later, New Jersey’s General Assembly passed the bill known as Megan’s Law. The law intended to inform members of the public about the presence of sex offenders in the community.

John and Melissa lived in Vallejo at the time—Kevin and Diana were just toddlers. He took a plea bargain

eleven years prior, with the understanding his name would remain confidential. The new law threatened to expose John's past conviction. Only perpetrators deemed "high risk" were revealed, but for months, they lived in fear of exposure. It had been the toughest time of their marriage. *Until now.*

Years passed, and John thought the worst was behind them. Then, in 2003, the PROTECT Act (Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today) was signed by George W. Bush. This required all states to maintain a database of registered sex offenders for use in background checks. Soon after, the demand came for the public to access the list. Last month, September 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger signed AB 488 into law, making the database public via a website known as Megan's Law.

Melissa returned with the laptop. Her leg jiggled as the computer hummed to life. "What do I look up? Does it list a website? Do I type in *Megan's Law*?" The clicking of the keyboard got faster, louder, echoing through the kitchen. "Damn it!" she swore. "I keep getting an error message!"

"What does it say?" John asked.

"HTTP 429. Too many people accessing the site."

"That couldn't be right," John said. "Maybe it's just a glitch." He hoped to God she wasn't right.

The sharp ring of the phone pierced the room. Melissa leaped to answer it. "Donna?" She recognized her sister's number on the Caller ID.

John heard undecipherable squawking.

"I've been trying to log on," Mel groaned, "but haven't been able to get through." Her hand trembled as she clung to the receiver. "Oh, God! What does it say?"

A darkness descended upon him—the walls closing in.

Melissa hung up and sank to the floor. Her shoulders wracked with sobs.

He pulled his chair next to her and laid a hand on her back, barely touching her, as if she might break. "Honey," he whispered. "it'll be okay." *So fucking inadequate.* The heaviness of her despair radiated through his body as if it were his own. John prided himself on being the man of the family, the protector. How could he protect his family now? Adrenaline surged through his body. "This is such bullshit!" he bellowed; fists clenched. He stood so fast the chair clattered to the floor. Melissa's eyes widened with surprise.

Melissa sniffed and wiped her nose with the sleeve of her shirt. "What are we going to do?" Her whimper sounded more like a child than a grown woman. It broke him. He wished he could assure her they would get through this, but he felt no such certainty.

They flinched when the sliding door opened. Lucy walked in, Homer by her side. She looked at the chair on the floor, then turned to John. "I heard yelling." Her eyes bore into him.

In a flash, Melissa stood and wiped her tears. "Oh, Sweetie, Daddy isn't mad. We were just having a discussion. Everything is fine."

Lucy's lip quivered.

"I bet you're thirsty," Mel said. "I'll get you some orange juice."

John picked up the chair and lifted his daughter onto it. Homer circled a few times and slumped beneath her. Melissa returned with a glass. "Here you go, love bug." Her voice rang with forced cheerfulness.

John cringed at the charade. He looked at his watch. "Ladies, I'm sorry, but as much as I hate to leave you, Daddy has to shower and get to a meeting."

Melissa grabbed his hand. "Don't go," she pleaded anguish in her eyes. "Please."

He could have called the office, explained something important had come up, but he wanted to be anywhere but home. "This meeting is important. I can't miss it." John pulled her into his arms, breathing in the scent of Ivory soap. "We'll be okay."

She stiffened. "How will it be okay, John?"

With Lucy settled in front of Sesame Street, Melissa started on the dishes. She breathed a sigh of relief when John yelled, "See you later," and shut the front door. Pulling a plate from the soapy water, it slipped through her trembling fingers and clattered to the floor. Shards of blue glass spun across the tile. "Dammit!" she

yelled.

“Mommy?” Lucy called.

“It’s okay, Honey. I broke a dish.” Nerves frazzled, she chided herself for having that second cup of coffee. “Please don’t come in the kitchen until I clean it up.”

Melissa grabbed the broom. She swept pieces of glass, along with bits of cereal and dog hair, into a dustpan. Flicking away tears with the back of her hand, she dumped the mess into the garbage bin. She wanted to scream. What were they going to do? She splashed cold water on her face and walked through the living room with a strained smile. “Mama’s going to take a shower.”

“K,” Lucy said, not taking her eyes from Kermit the Frog.

Melissa closed the bedroom door and headed to the closet. Sliding her clothes to one side, she reached for the olive-green coat that hung in the back. It had belonged to her mother—the only article of clothing Melissa kept after she died. She buried her nose in the tweed and inhaled. The faint scent of rose water lingered in the material, conjuring feelings of longing. Her mom had been a distant presence in her life, suffering from depression for as long as Melissa could remember. She ran the rough woolen fabric over her face, soothed by the scratchy familiarity.

Inside the satin lining was a secret pocket. At least that’s how she thought of it as a child. Often complaining of being cold, her mom sat bundled in this coat, staring out the window, a vacant expression on her face. Melissa would climb into her lap and reach inside the pocket to find peppermint candies. As she unwrapped the crackly wrapper, she’d be granted a weak smile. It was a secret pleasure they shared. In those moments, Melissa felt connected to her.

Today, she reached into the pocket and pulled out a pack of Virginia Slims. The whiff of menthol comforted her. Grabbing the Bic lighter, also hidden in the pocket, Melissa hurried to the bathroom. She tapped the bottom of the box until a cigarette popped out, then flicked the spark wheel. Eyes closed, she took a long, deep drag, relief washing over her. Before she exhaled, she slid open the window and blew smoke through the screen. Turning to the mirror, she faced herself. Fine lines appeared at the corners of her eyes. Her fair skin, like a blank canvas, appeared paler than usual, eyelashes barely visible without mascara. She hoisted herself onto the vanity and inhaled. The nicotine coursed through her bloodstream. Her worst nightmare had come true.

Chapter 2

John sat in his car in the office parking lot. Unable to eat breakfast, his stomach now burbled with acid from too much coffee. He pulled a pack of Dentyne gum from the glovebox and popped two into his mouth, hoping to rid the sour taste. The company he worked for specialized in high-quality fixtures for homes and hotels. Years of construction experience landed him an entry-level position after Kevin was born, offering a much-needed benefit package. Fourteen years later John held the role of Senior Buyer. On a typical day, his mind raced with ideas, excited to start on the newest project. Today, he only wondered if anyone had seen the website. He took a deep breath, grabbed his briefcase, and stepped out of the car. Passing the windowed entry, he stole a glance at himself. His face looked tight, creased with worry. He loosened his tie and opened the front door.

Bonnie, the manager's daughter, flipped through an appointment calendar. An algebra book lay open beside it. He'd heard through the office grapevine that she'd been caught smoking pot on the college campus. To keep a closer eye, Gail put her to work three mornings a week. *Just act normal.* John plastered a smile on his face. "Hi Bonnie, how's your morning going?"

She rolled her eyes. "It would be good except for this ridiculous algebra test. I mean, really, when am I ever going to analyze the speed of a boat in still water versus its speed in a current? I'm in college now; I should be learning more important things."

He winked. "Maybe it's to improve your critical thinking skills."

"If only." She reeked of sarcasm.

John followed voices down the hall to the break room. The thought of coffee made him gag, but he wanted to keep up appearances. He stepped into the kitchen area. Three of his coworkers huddled around Karen Wallace's laptop. Karen looked up in surprise, then quickly shut it. "Oh, John, hi!" Her face wore a pained expression. His coworkers did an about-face and walked to the coffeepot. They avoided his eyes. His heart raced. John made the excuse of a phone call and hurried from the room.

Once in the safety of his office, he closed the door. It would have been easier if Raoul or Mike had said, "Hey John, what the fuck are you doing on the sex registry?" Instead, the uncomfortable silence unnerved him. He toyed with the idea of calling a meeting to address the issue head-on but wasn't sure how many of his coworkers knew about him. He didn't want to alert those who didn't. His hand shook when he reached for the phone and dialed his sponsor's number. Paul answered on the second ring. "My friend, it's good to hear from you."

"Are you free today?" John blurted. "Can we meet for lunch?" Sweat trickled down the side of his neck. He tugged at his shirt. "On second thought, I can't eat. Can we meet at Hanns?" In John's early days of sobriety, he and Paul often frequented Hanns Park. The beautiful lake and hiking trails had a soothing effect on his nerves.

"Umm, sure." Paul sounded confused. "Let's see, it's nine-thirty now. I have a couple of case files to get out. Can we meet at noon?"

"Sounds good. Thank you."

"Is everything okay?"

John's eyes welled up at the concern in Paul's voice. "Everything's fucked. I'll tell you when I see you." He hung up the phone. It would take him an hour to get to Vallejo, which meant he had to leave by eleven. Two hours to kill. Footsteps echoed past his office. The weekly meeting had completely slipped his mind. John wiped the sweat from his brow and stepped into the hallway. His coworkers fell silent when he entered the conference room. John nodded an awkward greeting. In a swift motion, everyone turned and flipped through their paperwork. He grabbed a seat next to Simon from accounting. Baseball was about the only thing the two

had in common. John cleared his throat. “Hey, did you see Cabrera score that tying run last weekend?”

“Yep. It was something.” Simon turned back to his notepad.

John feigned enthusiasm as they reviewed the latest textiles. He offered suggestions, but no one commented on his ideas. The room became claustrophobic. It was hard to breathe. I have a dental appointment that I forgot to mention. Getting some work done, so probably won’t be back.”

Gail, his manager, looked up in surprise. “Oh, okay. Hope it goes well.”

It didn’t seem like she knew about him. Not yet anyway. John hurried from the room. It would be a matter of time until she found out. He loved his job—needed it. What if Gail fired him? The drive to meet Paul would give him time to think. Once in the car, he inserted *Vivaldi’s Four Seasons* into the CD player. The vibrant melodies brought back memories of his dad cooking French toast on Sunday mornings, back when everything was simple.

It had been over twenty years since that camping trip. Now it was back to haunt him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RJ Barclay was born and raised in Northern California. She has a BA in Psychology, and an MA in Depth Psychology. Her thesis explored the stigma of suicide and long-term effects of the children left behind. Her passion is to explore topics silenced by shame and bring to light a different point of view. Recently retired, she is excited to pursue her love of writing. *Guilt by Default* is her debut novel.