

July 22, 2023

Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense Ceremony Transcript

*Transcript created by Descript and edited for clarity. I apologize for typos.

ERIN NOVOTNY:

Hello. I am so very happy to finally be in this position and I am incredibly thankful for so many people and all the hard work they've done today. I think we absolutely need to recognize our president, Tiana. She has done an incredible job planning this event, she works tirelessly. And she's still planning a thousand things. And we could not have done this without you. I am very excited that this is our 25th anniversary of the RWA Kiss of Death, Daphne du Award for Excellence in Mystery and Suspense.

Thank you so much to our volunteers. We cannot do it without your help.

Thank you too Doug Johnson is a website guru. He joined Kiss of Death decades ago because he thought he wanted to write romantic suspense and somehow we suckered him into creating the actual website that we used for the writing contest. He has been kind enough to still to stay with us. Applause for Doug.

Regina Mize is our judge coordinator. So, if you were a judge in our contest this year, you had contact with her. Kimberly Pride was our published entry coordinator. She handled all of the entries for our published entrants. Linda Rees was our unpublished coordinator. Finally, our judges did a phenomenal job, and we cannot do this without them. So thank you so much, judges. Finally, to Jen Graybeal, thank you for not blocking my number.

So, a little bit about me. My name is Erin Novotny. I write as Tobi Doyle. I started off in Kiss of Death many years ago and I started as a published entry coordinator. From there I've continued working on the contest, so it's very nice that I've been able to do every job, and now be the coordinator.

And I was also fortunate enough to be the past president for two years, and I am thrilled to death that Tiana has taken over that role.

Okay. A little bit about Daphne du Maurier. Her first book was The Loving Spirit in 1931. She was 22 years old. She got married the following year.

She was raised by theater folk, which I find lovely. She called her husband "Boy". His name is Frederick Arthur Montague. Later she called him Moper. When they got married, he was very handsome.

I actually got to go to the Daphne du Maurier Museum that is at the Jamaica Inn in England, in Cornwall, the day of the Daphne du Maurier award ceremony last year. So that's where I was, because my husband loves me more.

So, they got married. Lovely, lovely couple. He had to go to war and when he returned, and of course when he was at war, she was living in Menabilly, which is what the house Mandalay is

based on. That was her favorite house ever. When he returned, he had PTSD and unfortunately, they didn't really have treatment back then.

The contest has two divisions: Published and Unpublished. I love this quote from Gambino Iglesias. Monthly reminder: Many people have a book in them, but it takes a special kind of hero to leave the land of laziness, cross the plains of procrastination and insecurity mountain. Find the blade of no one made you do this and use it to cut your chest open and yank that book out.

To all of our entrants, you guys are amazing.

(Please note that in the video, applause makes the sound cut out.)

How our scoring works for this contest. For the unpublished, we have four judges. For the published division, we have three. We usually drop the lowest score. If a tiebreaker happens, there are actually tie-breaker questions on the judging form to help break tiebreaker. If there's still a tie after that, then we consider the lowest score.

If there's still a tie after that, then we send it to a special committee. None of our books had to go to this point, so I'm very happy to say, because that would've been awkward. Hey, can you read four books in a day?

I would really love to encourage all of you to consider being a judge. If you love reading mystery. If you love reading suspense, I don't care if you're an author, you don't. You just have to like the subject matter. You get to help a writer by offering constructive comments and encouragement. You get to read free books. Come on people. And there is a free orientation provided, so please consider.

Black Mark: Paul Spencer

What made me want to write this story? I lived in Portland during the BLM protests, and I was constantly frustrated by the sensationalist media reports of riots and chaos, when the truth was that the protests were almost entirely peaceful, and any trouble was usually instigated by the police. That planted the seed of an idea about the rich and powerful creating straw man bad guys to blame for their own wrongdoing, which in turn morphed into Black Mark's story of corruption and murder. Also, I used to be a defense attorney, and I saw first hand the inequities inherent in the American justice system, which gave me inspiration to create and portray Elliott's mistreatment at the hands of the police and the courts.

Facets of Murder: Janet Ciccarelli

She included a picture of Jules, her dearly missed dog. The genesis for this story was an anniversary trip taken by my best friend and her husband to Port Townsend WA. The hotel they were staying in had seen better days; in fact, there was a hole in one of the walls. Being a mystery writer, I began to imagine all sorts of possibilities for what lay behind that wall. The focus on gemstones, jewelry, and history comes from my own passions for those topics and my work as a jewelry artisan.

Nothing But The Truth: Carolyn Garrod

I came up with this character in a writing workshop, and really wanted to figure out what she was hiding. The only way I could figure out what she was hiding was to write her story, and she's surprised me every step of the way. I love antiheroes, moral gray areas, and complex women doing things for complex reasons - and Amanda has all of that in spades! It's been exciting to get to know the character, even as I've created her - its great to realize I've written something that isn't right for her, because it means I understand her character and who she is.

Oriole: Mary Keenan

Oriole started as my first attempt at writing suspense, but I soon realized I wanted to write an oil and water mother/daughter story in a mainstream mystery format. I thought it would be interesting if the daughter solves the crime, while holding her nose and at great personal risk, in order to save her mother's life. Not for her mother's sake, but simply to be able to sleep at night afterward. Working out all the details, and the possibility this woman might come to care for her mom, pulled me in. Then I found myself enthralled by each of the other four characters and the ways they interact with each other, pulling and pushing as it serves their own objectives. It's been a wonderful project to work on, so much fun.

Vintage Model: TK Sheffield

What inspired me to write the Backyard Model Mysteries was ... my Wisconsin backyard! My husband and I moved into a fixer-upper with a gorgeous backyard in 2019. The view of the pines, birds, and wildlife inspired me to write a cozy mystery. I combined my love of mysteries, fashion, and a beautiful yard with a plot: a retired fashion model returns to her beloved, touristy hometown only to discover killer "posers" lurking within. *Model Suspect* (working title *Vintage Model*) will be released in November 2023.

Since writing *Model Suspect* (working title *Vintage Model*) I've acquired a literary agent and have written *Model Suspect* and its sequel, *Pontoon, romance, boats, and bad business in the Wisconsin Northwoods*, which will be out in May '24. I've also ginned up the courage to enter contests!

**HONORABLE MENTIONS GO TO:
MARY KEENAN FOR ORIOLE
TK SHEFFIELD FOR VINTAGE MODEL**

**THIRD PLACE GOES TO
CAROLINE GARROD FOR NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH**

**SECOND PLACE GOES TO
JULIE CICCARELLI FOR FACETS OF MURDER**

FIRST PLACE GOES TO

PAUL SPENCER FOR BLACK MARK – HE WASN'T ABLE TO ATTEND BUT HE'S SENT US A MESSAGE...

PAUL SPENCER:

Thank you all very much. I'm delighted to receive the Daphne Award. My work recognized by esteemed group writers, a great honor I would've loved to the award in, but so thank the judges and involved their efforts. I'd also congratulate my fellow finalists for their great, let's all use this as inspiration.

ERIN NOVOTNY:

Writers should be read, but neither seen nor heard Daphne du Maurier on writing. I asked our entrants if they had read any of Daphne du Maurier and what their favorites were.

Janet Ciccarelli, a finalist in mainstream unpublished said she has read Daphne du Maurier. Her favorite is Rebecca. She says, I am astonished with her skill in creating atmosphere and characters.

Mary Keenan says, I'm sure I wasn't a teenager yet when I discovered Daphne du Maurier and I read anything of hers I could get my hands on. I particularly loved Rebecca, of course, and my cousin Rachel has never really left me. Those two novels trade so well on the possibility of betrayal, even to the point of murder by somebody you feel you know somebody you trust more than anyone else in your life. Being that wrong about somebody you've taken so deeply into your psyche is the most shattering form of fear. I think and she presents it utterly convincingly.

Our next category is Unpublished Romantic Suspense.
And by the way, we are doing our finalists and alphabetical order.

Our first finalist is High Altitude Abduction by Elaine Clampitt.

I woke up one morning with a question in my head that morphed into a manuscript entitled Reinventing Riley. I wanted to find out how a woman confined to a wheelchair after years of working as a police officer on Detroit streets would find a way to continue to do the work that she loved. After an auto accident steals the use of her legs, Riley reinvents herself in a second career that keeps her as part of the police department and gives her an opportunity to have the life that she's always wanted. This story involves a sniper that loves to break glass and believes he has the power to make Riley whole by putting her through a sheet of glass.

Once I completed the first manuscript, an idea for a follow-up story took shape in my head. His Partner was born. I needed to know how Riley was handling this new life and how the sniper persuaded a person outside the penal system to haunt and hunt Riley.

Murder's Mistress by Eliza Carter

—I came up with the character of Adele d'Orvine before she had a setting or even a mystery to solve. She is practical but vain, conniving yet kind-hearted. She often acts aloof when in

company, but she is stubbornly loyal to those she loves. I am a huge fan of mysteries that have multiple points of view, but Adele's voice kept taking over, and I re-worked the original manuscript to be in first-person. Her (sometimes outrageous) observations of the society she inhabits come to the fore. I placed her in Tudor England, because I am, quite simply, obsessed with the history of this era. Also, the court of Henry VIII, full of political intrigue and personal grudges, is perfect fodder for a mystery series. I knew I wanted the stakes for Adele to be high with Murder's Mistress, the first of a series I have planned featuring her, along with her estranged but dishy spouse, as the sleuths. She is accused of the murder of one of her clients, and must find the real culprit before she is imprisoned and executed.

Suspended in Darkness by Anne Belen

Having helped organize and run so many writers conferences back in the day, I always heard plenty of jokes about everyone walking away from the event and writing about one – but it seems not many people ever do! I thought it would be interesting to write from the POV of someone who wasn't an attendee, and, in having met so many agents and editors and seeing their perspective, thought this would be a fun angle.

As for the genre – I knew I wanted something mystery (it's me after all!) and I loooove spooky. The idea of a harmless pitch turning into something bizarre was inspired by a real-life story I heard from an agent friend (no ghosts were involved with that, though). I'd tell you the story, but that's her tea to spill. :)

The theme of the story developed as it normally does for me – because something else is weighing on my mind. At that time, my agent had just passed away unexpectedly, and I was reflecting on career choices. That led to thinking about my prior career as a parole officer and the victims of abuse I had met along the way. Without getting too personal here, those musings dredged up feelings and conflicting emotions in me, and those feelings bled onto the page as the story progressed.

Annie R McEwen for Tamsin Lee and the Jaguar God

I was glad to be asked what motivated me to write the particular novel, and it's a question that—for me—unlocks a great deal of memory. I am the child and grandchild of immigrants. When I was born, America had yet to grasp the concept “inclusivity.” My parents and grandparents suffered quite a bit from their immigrant status and even I, born in America, had to cope with the labels and assumptions applied to those of immigrant background. The protagonist of my novel, Tamsin Lee, is a first-born immigrant child. To make her situation more challenging, her father is Chinese. In the setting of my novel, 1912 America, there was a great deal of anti-Asian sentiment, and this is something that both traumatizes and strengthens Tamsin Lee. In many respects, my real journey through life became her fictional one.

AND THE WINNERS ARE:

HONORABLE MENTION:

ELIZA CARTER FOR MURDER'S MISTRESS

ANNE BELEN FOR SUSPENDED IN DARKNESS

THIRD PLACE: KAREN WHITE-OWENS FOR HIS PARTNER

SECOND PLACE: ANNIE R MCEWEN FOR TASMIN LEE AND THE JAGUAR GOD

FIRST PLACE: ELAINE CLAMPITT FOR HIGH ALTITUDE ABDUCTION

Daphne du Maurier Acceptance Speech – Elaine Clampitt – Unpublished Romantic Suspense

When I decided I wanted to be a writer, I knew nothing about the craft or the industry. Surely writing was something I could learn to do. After all, I loved to read!

Attending my first writing conference should have given me a clue. I embarked on my journey full of doubts and optimism. My only preparation; a mountain of craft books and a carry-on bag for what I soon realized was a Bear Grylls version of a month-long trip navigating the Amazon. Definitely not for the faint of heart!

Thankfully, I found local writing chapters, national conferences, writing retreats, other writers to meet with regularly, and too many good craft books which mostly got me confused about the whole process. I pressed forward while dealing with all the hardships life throws in our way, taking breaks to heal and ponder life's lessons.

I've often looked back on my journey and thought “if I knew then, what I know now”...would I have even started this journey? My answer has always been “Yes.” At this point, I figure I've invested too much into the journey to quit now.

If you can relate to my journey, I encourage you to continue. You are learning each step of the way, and I bet you'll find that a lot of your struggles will make it into one of your books. There's no timetable you have to meet. Each one of us has a unique path to follow. And I will gladly cheer you on!

It is such an honor to be part of this 25th Anniversary celebration of the Daphne du Maurier Award. And it is a dream come true to win this special award. Thank you to the Kiss of Death Chapter for making this opportunity available. I know a lot of hard work goes on behind the scenes, and I appreciate all of it.

Congratulations to all the other finalists, and a big thank you to those who have encouraged and supported me over the years. I can't express how much your time and sharing your gifts and talents has meant to me, whether for over a decade or recently.

Thank you again for this honor.

Okay, so this is me when I went to Jamaica Inn, cause I'm so lucky. Jamaica Inn was published in 1936 and that is actually Jamaica Inn, so it's a Smugglers Inn. If you did not know, what happened was—they actually have done a really nice job trying to keep it spooky on the inside—making it look like it did back when she probably visited in 1936, but Joss Merlyn was murdered there and supposedly still haunts the Inn.

Surrounding this whole area are moors and Menabilly is not too far from there. And Daphne du Maurier was in fact an avid equestrian. She went out on a ride and could not get home because of all the fog. She saw the lights on the end, they checked her in, they allowed her to stay the night, and they put her in the haunted room.

So on that spot or in that place, Joss Merlyn was murdered. And from there she wrote the book Jamaica Inn.

I've also asked our contestants to say things about her. Toni Anderson who's a finalist in Long Published Category, said I love Jamaica Inn, and actually visited the Inn and Fowey where she lived for much of her life on my honeymoon. Her stories were atmospheric and absorbing. She was way ahead of her time.

Tracy Devlin, also a finalist and long published, said Daphne du Maurier is one of my literary heroes, or should I say heroines. I have a beautifully bound and illustrated four book collection of her four most popular works, Rebecca, Frenchman's Creek, Jamaica Inn, and My Cousin Rachel. And who could ever forget her short story, The Birds. Du Maurier's writing is gorgeous, atmospheric, and almost, and often terrifying in what is left unsaid. A true master of the genre.

So if you didn't know, she did write a lot of short stories, which is why we included the novella category this year. All right, we are ready now for our published division categories, we had mainstream mystery and suspense, and there doesn't have to be any romance in those.

We have novella, mystery and suspense, which did not require romance. Long Romantic Suspense Category is 60,000 words and more. Short Romantic Suspense Category is 60,000 words or less. And then finally our Paranormal and Historical Romantic Suspense Categories were judged by those judges, but their category scores were combined.

If you entered in paranormal, you were judged by paranormal judges. However, we wanted to make sure that we had enough category or entrants in the category, so we combine those into romantic suspense.

Our first for published mainstream mystery and suspense category finalists is:
Toni Anderson – Cold Silence

She wrote this story because:
This is the third story in my Adrian Reilly series. I didn't plan on writing a trilogy (for now) when I started out but as I kept creating, I knew he needed both a professional arc and a personal one once he meets the love of his life. Book one is his story about clearing his name in the eyes of the military and his country and bringing a traitor to justice with the help of the woman whose father warned of the traitor. Book two is her story about being betrayed by her country and how Reilly navigates both the wrongful accusation, hidden secrets, and her old lover who may be the only one who can save her. The book being judged in the Daphne du Maurier Contest is the third book that tests Reilly's promise to stop hunting madmen and forces him to confront the lie he's always told himself that he's unworthy of love or family.

Exposed by Anna J Stewart

What made me want to write this book? Joy—after my editor asked me, “what do you want to write?” From that moment on, I hit the ground running. No restrictions, no pushback, no doubts, only faith.

This book contains all my obsessions: unsolved murders, a secret society, a chance to pay homage to old Hollywood, and most of all, a romance between a super feisty paparazzo heroine and a no-nonsense, honorable cop who clash in pretty much every way possible (ah, conflict!). It also has a large cast of characters, many of whom will be getting their own stories in the near future. This was truly the most free I've ever felt while writing and for that I will forever be grateful.

Hooker Avenue by Jodé Millman –

What made me write this story? Actually, it was a True Crime on my doorstep. In 2000, Kendall Francois was convicted in New York's Dutchess County County Court of killing eight women, who had disappeared from 1996 to 1998. Many of them were prostitutes who had been solicited from the front steps of my law office in downtown Poughkeepsie. In macabre fashion, Francois had murdered them and buried them in his home, which was located a few blocks from my own home.

Since it is rare that a crime fiction writer has the opportunity to look a prospective antagonist in the eye, and being intrigued, I attended Francois's pre-trial sentencing hearing. Distraught families gathered in the courtroom to address Francois and the judge, begging for the imposition of the ultimate punishment available at the time – capital death. He was sentenced to sixteen life sentences without parole and died in prison in 2014.

Giving a voice to the sex workers' stories, and the failure of the criminal justice system to find the perpetrator, inspired me to write HOOKER AVENUE.

Last Liar Standing by Danielle Wong –

I was actually sitting on an airplane reading the newspaper when I first came up with the idea for *Last Liar Standing*. The article claimed that the average person was keeping about thirteen secrets, and I immediately knew I wanted to write a novel inspired by that fact! From there, my main characters emerged and took over. I felt like a conduit during much of the writing process, transferring their words onto the page and trying my best to do their story justice.

Spirit Daughters by Carol Potenza

A long, long, long time ago, I presented some archeology in a biochemistry class about how scientists could figure out what was stored in ancient clay pots by taking a small sample of the pot's inside and analyzing it. I loved that idea and wanted to use it one day in a book. But what if it wasn't food that was stored in the pot, but a medicine or tea? A fertility tea drunk from

a double-spouted wedding vase by the couple getting married? And what if the fertility tea actually worked in a very unexpected and miraculous way such that it would be priceless? And what if the pursuit of this priceless medicine led to murder? I really enjoyed this book because it was so much fun to write.

**AND THE WINNERS ARE:
HONORABLE MENTIONS
HOOKER AVENUE BY JODÉ MILMAN
COMPROMISED VOWS BY NADINE DANDORF**

**THIRD PLACE
LASI LIAR STANDING BY DANIELLE WONG**

**SECOND PLACE
EXPOSED BY ANNA J STEWARD**

**FIRST PLACE
SPIRIT DAUGHTERS BY CAROL POTENZA**

CAROL POTENZA:
Oh my goodness. I did not expect this. I really didn't. I really appreciate this. I just want you to know, I want to thank all of the people who read the books and you've, you just made me want to become a judge, so I actually, yes, I really would like to contribute that way and I really appreciate everything you've done.

I've been a part of a chapter that runs a contest and I've been up to midnight, one and two o'clock in the morning making sure everything gets read and all of the sheets are in, and all of the scores are put together. So, I really appreciate this, and this is just a love. Oh my goodness. This is really lovely.

And I just want to say one more thing. We had a lot of cancer in our family during this time and my agent had said to me look, this book is not going to get published because of what's in it. You need to drop it. And I couldn't. It just literally—as I wrote it—I was able to escape inside this book and just live through this time that we were going through my family. And so this book is a book of my heart and I really do appreciate it.

ERIN NOVOTNY:
On writing, she (Daphne du Maurier) says, when one is writing a novel in the first person, one must be that person. I would like to add, not if you're writing a serial killer.

Annie R. McEwen, Finalist in the Unpublished Romantic Suspense Category wrote:

As to the influence of Daphne du Maurier on my work: I am only now assessing it for the major impact it is. I started reading Du Maurier in high school, first her short stories and then her

novels. Even though I later spent 30 years on the stage, I didn't know for a long time that Du Maurier was a playwright. But the emerging actor-director in me recognized that there was something fundamentally theatrical in Du Maurier's work. Whether her setting is Bodega Bay or a manor house on the Cornish coast, she builds suspense the way a good play does, until she rips the skin of normalcy off the stark, hard bone of human emotion beneath. If on my best day as a writer I can master that quality, it will be a very good day for me, indeed.

Our next category is Novella Mainstream

Christmas Threat Lynn Shannon

The cover for this story came first. When I saw the barn with the Christmas wreath, my mind immediately jumped to asking: what would happen if the heroine found a baby inside her barn? Add in a friend-to-lovers romance, a widowed heroine, a law enforcement hero, and some suspense...it all came together to create this novel.

Cold Drip Heather Day Gilbert

COLD DRIP was inspired by our visits to nearby caverns, and ROAST DATE was a Christmas mystery featuring my sleuth Macy's "found family" next door--her neighbor, Vera. It's always a delight to craft Barks & Beans Cafe mysteries, because I'm able to integrate my readers' beloved dogs into the storylines as shelter dogs visiting the cafe. For example, COLD DRIP highlights a dog named Sadie, and ROAST DATE highlights Thistle and Copper, all based directly on my readers' canine companions.

Justified Vengeance Lori Matthews

Roast Date Heather Day Gilbert
For published authors: What do you wish you knew about writing or writing craft that you know now? That it's very likely you'll enjoy writing what you love to read. I've always been a mystery reader, tearing through *Encyclopedia Brown* and *Nancy Drew* books as a child, then moving on to Agatha Christie, Phyllis Whitney, and Mary Higgins Clark books as a teen. In fact, my Borderdoodle is named Agatha (much to my children's dismay). I relax by watching mystery series on TV. So it makes sense that writing in the mystery genre would feel natural to me. I wish I'd learned that earlier in my writing career.

The Vow DL Wood

I'm drawn to the idea of ordinary people finding themselves in extraordinarily harrowing circumstances and rising to the challenge. Kate, the protagonist in the story, has so many challenges to overcome before the danger even enters the picture. Finding out whether she comes out of the crisis victorious and how she manages to do it, kept me glued to the keyboard.

**Published novella mystery and suspense category winners are:
Honorable mentions:
Christmas threat by Lynn Shannon**

Roast date by Heather Day Gilbert

Third place
The Vow by DL Wood

Second place
Justified vengeance by Lori Matthews

First place
Cold drip by heather day gilbert

I did not receive an acceptance speech from Heather Day Gilbert.

Rebecca was published in 1938 and it was based on, or the house was based on Menabilly, which literally had a skeleton in the basement. She was doing some reconstruction and there was a skeleton in there. She loved the house. I don't think the kids loved it quite as much.

But Danielle Wong from published mainstream finalist says she is a longtime Daphne de Maurier fan and loves for rich settings and atmospheric pros. Rebecca is one of her all time favorite novels.

Mimi Matthews, who wrote The Belle of Belgrave Square in the Published Romantic Suspense category said she's a huge fan of de Maurier's novels, particularly Rebecca.

She not only loves the gothic atmosphere and air of mystery and suspense, she also loves her unparalleled use of language. She writes so beautifully and so evocatively. Her ability to conjure a scene as magical.

DL Wood, Finalist in Published Novella Category:
I read Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca many years ago and, of course, have seen the movie adaptations. It's a brilliantly atmospheric tale that sucks you in, makes you think you know what's happening, only to flip those presumptions on their head and leave you in awe. She also creates a world where the settings are characters, contributing the story rather than simply serving as a backdrop.

Our next category is Long Romantic Suspense, again in alphabetical order.

Cold Silence Toni Anderson

I've been thinking about a serial killer auctioning off torture and murder for pleasure and profit since I wrote the very first Cold Justice book back in 2012ish. I think I even mention that Alex Parker (one of my protagonists) is hunting someone way back when. When I finally started writing about the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team I thought I could bring everything together and hopefully make it work. It just seems very relevant to the moment.

Crash Site Rachel Grant

Disarming Caine Janet Oppedisano

Disarming Caine is the 3rd book in a single-couple series. They're the first couple I wrote and published, so they'll always have a spot in my heart. This particular book was a big leap forward both in their relationship and in the series-length mystery. I loved all of that, but my favourite part was being able to amp up the danger element. It was a challenge, given I'd already set much of the scene in the first two books, but bringing in more bad buys, more good guys, and more chaos was an absolute blast.

Flash Point Tracey Devlyn

FLASH POINT is part of the Steele Ridge: The Blackwells series, which I co-author with Adrienne Giordano. When we first conceived the idea of a family of asset recovery agents, I immediately loved the idea of Zeke Blackwell being the reluctant leader of this band of black sheeps. Liv Westcott came to me more slowly. But then I realized the absolute best person to go head-to-head with a man who doesn't hesitate to break the rules to complete a recovery was a by-the-book FBI agent.

Into the Storm Rachel Grant

And the published romantic suspense long category winners are

Honorable mentions:
Rachel grant – into the storm
Tracey Devlyn – Flash Point

Third place : Rachel Grant – Crash Site

Second place – Janet Oppedisano – Disarming Caine

First place – Toni Anderson – Cold Silence

I'm shocked and grateful to have won from this outstanding group of finalists. As we all know, writing is a solitary endeavor, but publishing is a team sport. Thanks to my critique partner, Kathy Altman, who I found at the start of my writing journey and who has never let me down. Appreciation to my editors and proofreader, Deb Nemeth, Joan Turner, and Alicia Dean. Thanks to Rachel Grant (my fellow *double* finalist) for a great beta read and always being there when I need a friend to vent to—and the Sexy Six, they know who they are. One more thing for my fellow finalists. No one lost today. You wrote great books and, at this stage, I think luck and, according to one judge's comments on my book that didn't final this year, comma usage, plays a huge part in determining the actual winner. Today I got very lucky. A final thanks so much to the judges and for the hard work of the organizers.

Writing every book is like a purge at the end of it, one is empty, like a shell on the beach waiting for the tide to come Again. Again, this is her writing about, or talking about writing. She was also a huge avid sailor in addition to being an equestrian. The museum is amazing if you ever get to go there.

Next we have our short category finalists.

Christmas Baby Rescue Jordyn Redwood

She included a picture of her dog, Lucy. Christmas Baby Rescue was a story she had on her mind for a long time-- particularly the opening scene of a baby abandoned on a doorstep on Christmas Eve and the self-isolated hero who finds her. Working as a nurse, I see how mental health issues can cause people to withdraw from society and I wanted to explore those issues with a hero who had also served our country and was suffering from PTSD. What would it take to get him reengaged with society?

Necessary Peril Lynn Shannon

I wanted to write a story about a woman on the run. That was the very beginning concept for this book, and it slowly grew into a full-fledge story that included secrets and a hidden identity.

Shielding Her Son KD Richards

Twin Murder Mix-Up Sami A. Abrams

Wyoming Winter Rescue Juno Rushdan

The person who most encouraged my writing career, aside from my mother, was my high school English teacher. She saw a spark in me and encouraged it by allowing me to write fictional stories aside from the regular class work. She would then critique me and encouraged me to reach deeper and write richer. She opened up the possibility of me actually having a writing career.

And the published romantic suspense short category winners are:

Honorable mentions to:

Sami A Abrams - Twin Murder Mix-up

Jordyn Redwood - Christmas Baby Rescue

Third place

KD Richards - Shielding Her Son

Second place

Juno Rushdan – Wyoming Winter Rescue

First place – Lynn Shannon Necessary Peril

She says, “Thank you for this amazing recognition. It’s an honor to be grouped together with the other outstanding authors in my category, and to be singled out to win this award is a blessing.”

Here was the freedom I desired. Long sought for not yet known freedom to walk to wander, freedom to climb hills, to pull a boat to be alone.

Eliza Carter, our romantic suspense unpublished finalist, said, —I fell in love with mystery novels after encountering Nancy Drew at the library. But then, when I was about twelve, my mom introduced me to *Rebecca*, shoving the book at me and saying, ‘You should read this.’ (Very typical of my mother). It was a well-worn copy from her own expansive bookcase. I discovered that heroines did not need to be perfect. That they could in fact, be deeply flawed, and I would still root for them. I also found out that I like a bit of romance and poor decisions, based on lust, mixed in with a well-plotted and paced mystery. Poor Nancy Drew went to the back burner for a while. For decades, moms, aunts, librarians, and booksellers—women everywhere—have acted as the guardians of *Rebecca*, handing her to adolescents when they are deemed ready. Its appeal is evergreen. Sharing *Rebecca* with a younger generation is a beautiful, empowering tradition.

Our next category is the romantic suspense category.

Connection RL Merrill – Attending

I wrote this book to honor my best friend, the real "Cassidy" who is an incredibly brave, talented, and generous woman. She's the only person I know who, when asked what she wanted to be when she grew up at age 7, she said, "a Pilot." When everyone tried to convince her she really meant flight attendant, she confidently asserted that no, she meant Pilot!

Fiona and the Enigmatic Earl Grace Calloway

Forbidden Love Marissa Garner

She included a picture of her writing space. She says, “This is the view from where I write. The temptation to procrastinate is hard to ignore.”

What made me write this story:

I conceived the idea for *Forbidden Love* while my husband and I were visiting the Mayan ruins in Chichen Itza, Mexico. El Castillo, the step-pyramid poster child for this famous archaeological site and my cover image, was truly inspiring. The tales of human sacrifice magnified the eeriness of the ruins and produced the sensation of being watched by unsettled spirits. I believe in ghosts, and I felt a lot of company as we explored the area. I kept thinking about what incredible stories the spirits would tell if they could speak to the living. So, I created a Mayan myth about forbidden love as the foundation for my plot. The heroine’s goal would be to prove the myth was true. I used the spirits of the mythical lovers to tell their tale as I wove together two love stories: a tragic one set in the ancient Mayan culture and a happier one in the present. And that’s how *Forbidden Love* was born.

Heartstone Rose Sartin

My inspiration for Heartstone:

One hot July day my husband, Gary, came in from working in our garden and handed me a dirt-encrusted piece of flint. He was grinning, and I knew what he'd given me was more than just another piece of rock, I carried it to the sink and held it under a stream of water.

I held a perfectly napped spearhead.

It was a rare find. The chert or flint was a beautiful silver-gray and rose hue. But more unusual was the vein of iron oxide at the tip. The mineral discoloration looked like dried blood.

I wondered if the warrior who'd created this weapon had crafted the point for that effect. Then I wondered about the man himself. How did he live? Did he have a family? How did he die? From those musings Heartstone took shape in my mind.

The Belle of Belgrave Square Mimi Matthews

The Belle of Belgrave Square was inspired by Victorian sensation novels—thrilling, often melodramatic, stories with elements of romance, crime, and an emphasis on hidden secrets and identities. It was also influenced by my fondness for fairy tales and legends, like Beauty and the Beast and Bluebeard's wife. I loved weaving the fairytale tropes and sensation-style Victorian elements together, all while preserving the sincerity of the romance. It made Belle an absolute pleasure to write!

Honorable Mention:

RL Merrill – Connection

Marissa Garner – Forbidden Love

Third Place

Rose Sartin – Heartstone

Second place

Mimi Matthews – The Belle of Belgrave Square

First place – Grace Callaway – Fiona and the Enigmatic Earl

She sent us this recorded message:

GRACE CALLAWAY

First off, my sincere thanks and gratitude to the Kiss of Death Awards Committee for their hard work and dedication to promoting excellence in romantic mystery and suspense. I am so honored to receive the Daphne this year especially given the amazing books put out there by my talented fellow finalists.

Y'all are wreaking havoc on my TBR pile. I have so many people to thank for the existence of Fiona and the enigmatic Earl. I'd like to thank my editor Veronica Nelson and my proofreaders for making my book Shine to my readers. You guys are the best and I appreciate each and every one of you. For supporting my characters and the world that I've been writing in.

And also to my writing posse. I couldn't do it without our daily texts, our weekly meetups and our inspiring retreats. Last but not least, thank you to my family who not only puts up with a working writer that supports her in living out her dreams. I am just so full of gratitude. Thank you everyone.

ERIN NOVOTNY:

I feel really horrible because we have these amazing first place prizes. So Carol, will you please come up and get yours?

So at the end of our competition, we have overall winners. The people who have the highest scores for the unpublished division and the published division.

This is a total surprise for them. So the 25th anniversary, Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery Suspense overall division winners.

Our unpublished division overall winner is Elaine Clampitt for High Altitude Abduction. Congratulations.

And for our published division, it is Toni Anderson for Cold Silence. Congratulations.

I want to thank each and every one of you for coming here tonight, and I would like us to raise a glass to our entrants, our amazing finalists who managed to be here today. Congratulations to you all.

Please remember, I asked finalists what their favorite writing craft books were and some writing advice. You can find all of their answers at the website, RWAKissofDeath.org/contest/ It's four pages, guys, and it's quality advice, you definitely want to read it. Awards and certificates will be mailed out by the end of July. (Probably closer to the first week of August.)

And thank you again to our amazing volunteers for making this happen. Finally, I want to point out that we are having the cruise, which Tiana already talked about tonight. So just a reminder to keep you interested in that. And Tiana, did you want to say a few words? No. Okay, then enjoy. Goodnight.