THE JOURNEY TO THE SILENT ASSASSIN: HOW MY DAY JOB JUMPSTARTED MY THRILLER SERIES

by Lori Andrews

On a trip to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, I asked a question about an obscure scientific article I had stumbled across: "What are the Vietnamese Trophy Skulls?"

My AFIP host pulled open a drawer and put a garishly graffiti-laden skull into my hands. During the Vietnam War, some U.S. G.I.s collected skulls of enemy soldiers – turning them into ashtrays and candleholders. When the soldiers tried to bring them back through U.S. Customs, the skulls were confiscated and relegated to a drawer at the AFIP. At that moment I realized that, although I'd come to the AFIP as a legal advisor to the government, I was going to leave the building as a mystery writer. With the skull in my hand, I saw the potential for a thriller. What if the president of Vietnam now asked for the skulls to be returned, much as Native Americans asked for repatriation of the remains of the bones of their ancestors? What past crimes would be revealed and what political intrigue might result as modern forensic techniques let the skulls tell their stories?

Fast forward to May 2007 when St. Martin's Minotaur publishes THE SILENT ASSASSIN. My protagonist, Dr. Alexandra ("Alex") Blake, is preparing a Vietnamese Trophy Skull for its return when she discovers evidence inside it of a thirty-year-old murder. Trailing the killer takes her from the bustling streets of modern Vietnam to the halls of power in D.C. – right into a contemporary plot against the U.S. President.

Although I'd read mysteries since I was a child and always wanted to write one, it was my day job that finally gave me enough inspiration to take pen to paper and fingers to keyboard. As chairman of a federal advisory committee to the Human Genome Project – the $3 billion effort to sequence all 30,000 genes in the human body, I spent much of my time behind closed doors at government laboratories and biotech companies. The technologies I encountered went way beyond CSI – brain fingerprinting, attempts to give humans night vision, the crossing of animal species. Lives and money were at stake and there was little oversight. It seemed like the perfect atmosphere for a mystery series.

Plus, I'm constantly being thrust into situations that seem more like fiction than fact. One night my dinner was interrupted by a call from a scientist. A man had died, and willed that his head be frozen and then attached to a healthy body. I was asked, "What are the legal rights of a severed head? Should it receive a portion of the estate?"

When Dolly the sheep was cloned, President Clinton's newly-formed National Bioethics Advisory Commission called me for a legal opinion on human cloning. I rapidly began to think of this as the Bill Gates problem. If a wealthy individual like Gates wanted to clone himself -- perhaps creating Bill Gates 5.0, 5.1, and 6.0 -- would any existing law stop him? And what if Bill Gates' barber took a lock of his hair, cloned him, and sued Gates for child support?

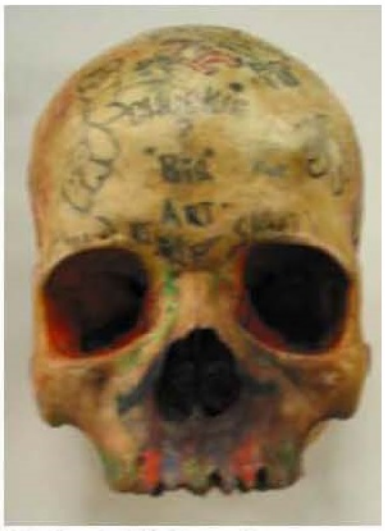
The government of Dubai flew me to the Middle East to provide legal advice. When I got to the Dubai airport, I could hear the policeman who was supposed to pick me up say to the immigration clerk, "When this gentleman arrives, notify me at once." My invitation had come over E-mail and they didn't realize that I was a woman! It turned out they wanted me to advise them on creating a legal system so that they could clone men.

Increasingly, I was feeling like the Harvey Keitel character in the movie Pulp Fiction. I was the cleanup person called in after scientists or doctors had done some strange new thing, the lawyer asked to sort out the rights and responsibilities, the liabilities, and the commercial potential. And the situations in which I found myself seemed like a perfect jumping off point for a thriller series.

I must admit that the setting came to me before the character. The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology blew me away. Established by President Abraham Lincoln, the semi-secret agency sits on 113 out-of-the-way acres in D. C. near the Maryland border, four acres larger than the Vatican. Like the Vatican, the AFIP has a surprisingly wide reach, often working in mysterious – or at least *sub rosa* – ways. The AFIP struck me as a fabulous setting for a thriller because it is a real institution, with wide-ranging projects that involve national security, forensics, historical analyses, infectious disease investigations, ballistics, training of law enforcement personnel, and so forth. The AFIP oversees forensic investigations in the United States and abroad involving the Executive Branch (the White House, governmental agencies, etc.) and all branches of the military. It also undertakes disease research and runs the National Museum of Health and Medicine, with incredibly strange exhibits of medical technologies and body parts (including the amputated leg from Civil War hero Daniel Sickles, who used to visit the bone every year on the anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, where his leg was shot off). So it is an exciting setting where nefarious events can happen or can be investigated. The latest technologies can be applied. Matters of national and international importance can hang in the balance. Yet hardly anyone has even heard of the AFIP.

"It's rare to discover a new author who's actually found a fresh vein to tap in the area of fictional homicide investigation, and Lori Andrews deserves a standing ovation," wrote author Jeremiah Healy about the first book in my series. *"SEQUENCE is the best novel I've ever read that deals with the details of forensic science. Her protagonist, Alexandra Blake, is pitch-perfect as an academic who joins the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology to research a deadly flu only to be dragooned into investigating a violent serial killer targeting victims on military bases."*

By making my main character a geneticist, I have a ready set of metaphors and conflicts. I can use a recurring theme of nature versus nurture, of how much of a character's behavior is hardwired and how much involves free will. I can create situations in which Alex is expected to use her talents in ways that she objects to morally. My plot lines can relate to the latest issues in science and culture, from issues of genetic privacy to the commercialization of humans through patents on human genes, from embryonic stem cell research to the decision in Italy to dig up 49 members of the Medici family to use biological science techniques to determine who had murdered whom. (Not to mention that I can find unique ways to kill off characters based on old



boyfriends!)

It was great fun to develop Alex's character -- almost like a do-over of my own life. My mother was disappointed that I'd gone to Yale College and Yale Law School and become a lawyer rather than a beautician. ("I'm never going to use a lawyer," she said. "If you were a beautician, you could do my hair once a week.") As a nod to my mom, my character Alex Blake lives in a former beauty parlor, the Curl Up and Dye. Her living room chairs are old dryer chairs with the plastic bonnets attached and her bedroom is the former bikini wax suite.

Alex is very opinionated. She's in her mid-30s, she hasn't really settled down yet in her life. When she shuts off the laboratory lights at night, she's less interested in being with other scientists, and so her circle of friends, other than a female lawyer friend, tend to be musicians, artists and men who make these short pit stops in her life.

At the time I was creating Alex, I had already published ten nonfiction books, including BLACK POWER, WHITE BLOOD: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHNNY SPAIN, a biography of a murderer who was a Black Panther. I was accustomed to writing about characters who were real. As I was walking back from my local Starbucks one day, I saw a woman with a classy looking dog, whose breed I couldn't name. I thought to myself, "Good thing Alex doesn't have a dog. I wouldn't know how to write about a dog." Then I thought, "Of course she doesn't have a dog, you made her up!"

When the first book in the series was published, there were several things that surprised me. Somehow, I hadn't expected the book to actually be read by anyone I knew. So, imagine my surprise when my 85-year-old Southern gentleman ex-father-in-law called after reading it and said, "Miz Lori, how did you find out about cherry condoms?" At one of my readings, a professor in my field asked, "Because of your professional standing in the academic community, did you censor yourself when you were writing?" I gulped and said, "Not enough."

I was also unprepared for the volume of e-mails I received about the book. Some women got very attached to the bad boy musician character, Luke. Another person wrote about growing up in the neighborhoods where my series takes place. Still another chastised me for letting an investigator throw a Diet Coke can in the trash in Chapter 39. "If we cannot get government employees to recycle, we are going in the wrong direction," he wrote. "It is imperative that authors such as you set the right tone in this regard." Somehow, the serial killing, rape and mutilation of women in the book hadn't bothered him, but oh that failure to recycle!

My day job still provides plenty of fodder for fiction. Recently, I wrote a brief for the U.S. Supreme Court for a patients' rights organization, advised the U.S. Department of Energy on the legal issues related to nanotechnologies, helped draft a Congressional bill, and received an award from the national organization of infertility patients for my public interest legal work about reproductive technologies. But now my mystery writer identity has added other activities to the mix, such as participating in a Bouchercon panel and attending the Romantic Times convention where SEQUENCE was nominated for the Best First Mystery award.

And it's not just my day job that enhances my thriller series. Sometimes it's the other way around. The series has given me a new view on the ethical issues I routinely handle in my legal work. At one point, Alex tests her boyfriend's DNA to see if he's the killer. I'd fight against that in real life, but writing Alex's character made me see how easily a person could be pulled into it a seemingly unethical action. Fiction can thus help inform policy.

Mystery writers understand not just the technologies, but the human emotions of greed, competition, and hubris that motivate how technologies are used and misused. On May 21, I am convening a full-day free conference in Chicago, *Who Owns Your Body? Legal and Social Issues in Michael Crichton's NEXT.* Michael Crichton will talk about the actual incidents involving body theft, biotech patenting, and legal disputes that provided the background for his latest novel. And lawyers, judges, sociologists, policymakers, and ethicists will develop the new legal rules we need to deal with these issues. (See www.whoownsyourbody.com)

Writing thrillers and spending time with other writers gives me an additional chance to rant about the genetics policy issues that I care passionately about in my law work. But, if I do it well in a novel, I can reach a whole different audience, and maybe even a greater number of people. And, if I try hard enough, maybe I can even work in a subplot of the legal rights of a severed head!

SIDEBAR:

Lori's Advice for Turning Your Experiences into a Mystery Series

1. Find something interesting in your life or the experiences of someone you know.

Don't think that you have to be a cop or a criminal to write a good mystery series. No matter how dull or exciting your job is, there is something going on in your life that could seed a series. Your emotional experiences (or even those of a friend) can be written about in a mesmerizing way. In SEQUENCE, my character Alex is dealing with the death of her father. My father died as I was revising the book, which changed how I wrote about her experience.

On the other hand, don't assume everything that you do will fascinate others. People tend to specialize and that may be too narrow for a character. My agent loved all the cool genetics tools that Alex Blake used in my first book, SEQUENCE. But when I wrote the second in the series, my agent found those techniques a snooze – because she had already read about them! So, even though a real person might employ the same skills day after day, your character's actions need to be more diverse.

2. Make sure your character uses his or her unique talents to solve the crime.

Several years ago, I wrote a draft of a crime thriller with a doctor as the main character. I gave it to an editor friend who was a mystery addict. He loved my character, but advised me of a giant deficiency in the plot. The mystery was solved in a way that did not draw on the character's knowledge or skills. And it's not only a character's brains or brawn that could solve the crime. Think of *Legally Blond* where fashion knowledge saves the day!

3. Run the manuscript past by someone not in your field.

If you are writing about someone with specific talents or training – a scientist, doctor, hacker, insurance claims adjustor – make sure someone from another field weighs in on the manuscript. You'll be amazed at how much you take for granted in your field that is impenetrable or downright boring to an outsider.

4. Pay attention to the physical.

Most of my nonfiction books dealt with genetics policy issues which were abstract and cerebral. When I wrote the first draft of SEQUENCE, I realized that I had no sense of the physical. Where were people standing? How did that character suddenly get into the

room? How could someone be shot and be back in the conversation a few seconds later? Creating the physical sense of how characters move and interact is a challenge that faces anyone who is bringing knowledge from a day job into the mystery realm. You may have great material from your job as a prosecutor or a newspaper reporter, but you probably will not have actually experienced the physical aspects of being beaten up or shooting someone. Even cops rarely face the battles and batterings that thriller characters go through on a daily basis. "On CSI, investigators are shooting at people all the time," says Cindy Pontoriero, Chicago's first female homicide cop. "In reality, we rarely discharge our guns. If you do, there's just too much paperwork."

5. Think series.

I wrote SEQUENCE as a stand-alone, but St. Martin's Minotaur bought it as a series. That means that I'll have to live with the character and setting for a long time. Perhaps I'd have chosen a cast with fewer military people if I'd realized that they were going to be my new family. But, luckily, Alex is an outsider and can put them in perspective. When she is in a meeting with her new boss, a military colonel, she tunes him out, thinking about how, as a teenager, she was part of the Barbie Liberation Brigade, which switched the voice boxes on the Barbie and G.I. Joe. She recalls that the Barbie would then yell, "Vengeance is mine." And she imagines her jar head boss, like the revamped G.I. Joe, whispering, "Math is hard" and "Let's plan our dream wedding."

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