

The Thrill Begins

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Chevy Stevens is the debut author of *Still Missing* (St. Martin's Press, July 2010). Rights have been sold to Brazil, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, and Australia. Brilliance Audio bought audio rights for *Still Missing* and Chevy's next two novels, and St. Martin's Press has sold book club rights.

Carla: Chevy, your story is about a realtor, Annie O'Sullivan, who is abducted and held for a year, as told in narration to her therapist once she's freed. It's a fascinating concept. How did you dream it up?

Chevy: When I was a Realtor, I spent hours at open houses reading books or scaring myself with horrible thoughts of what could happen to me. One of the most terrifying scenarios began with being abducted. That led to other thoughts like who would abduct me and what it would be like to try to fit back in your life after such a brutal experience. Was it even possible? The idea hovered in the back of my mind for a while, then one day I heard my main character's voice telling her story to a "shrink." I walked up to my office and just started writing. The basic structure and story line has never changed from that very first draft.

Carla: How long was it from that point until you felt it was ready for submission?

Chevy: Almost four years.

Carla: What made you stick with this particular story? Did you always want to be a writer?

Chevy: When I was a child growing up on a ranch I dreamed of being a writer and carried books around with me everywhere, usually with a cat under the other arm and a dog following behind. There were a few attempts at early novels, one featuring a detective mouse and another where a wife poisons her abusive husband—obviously I had an early tendency toward thrillers! I took writing in school, but I planned to be an artist. Then I started working in business and got sidetracked.

Shortly before the idea of *Still Missing* came to me, I'd stayed on a remote gulf island and started writing a memoir. I didn't stick with that piece, but I fell in love with writing. Then I started dreaming in prose. I would see sentences landing on a blank

page. Not long after the idea for *Still Missing* came to me. When I started writing, I became consumed with Annie's story and connected with it deeply on a personal level. Although the exact events that happened to Annie did not happen to me, her story is a metaphor for my life growing up in a dysfunctional family with an alcoholic father. Annie's emotional growth after her abduction is very similar to what I went through during the process of writing this book.

As to why I stuck with it for so long--that's a hard one to explain. Despite the slim odds of being published and the fear of failure--especially when I left Real Estate in the middle of a hot market!--it was something I had to do. It wasn't a choice, it was a compulsion.

Carla: What do you hope your reader will get out of *Still Missing*?

Chevy: I hope they see that it's okay to talk about your pain, that there's no shame in feeling emotions and being vulnerable. I hope this book gives people permission to tell their stories and the courage to reach for happiness.

Carla: What was the most challenging aspect of writing this story?

Chevy: This is a very emotional story so I had to dig deep into my own fears and pain. I often struggled to avoid going "there," but when I did it was always enormously cathartic. From a technical perspective, it was difficult to tell this story authentically and share the nightmare that Annie endured--that women endure every day--in a way that wasn't too horrific for people to read. It's a fine line and I tried my best to be sensitive to the subject matter I was working with. It was as hard for me to write as I'm sure it will be for many to read. But I feel the book's message is important; these are things that need to be talked about.

The book's structure--told in sessions with Annie's therapist--allowed me to dive into Annie's psyche, but it was confining at times and very challenging to show her growth as she progressed through her therapy. I spent several months working just on the session intros, trying to get Annie's voice to reflect her emotional state at each stage of her healing.

Carla: What was the easiest?

Chevy: I probably had the most fun with Annie's sarcasm. I have a very dry sense of humor and it was fun writing some of her lines!

Carla: It's unusual for a debut novel to garner so much international interest. What do you feel is its particular appeal?

Chevy: Although Annie went through a horrendous experience--every woman's worst

nightmare--she survived. Her spirit is shattered, but she doesn't want her pain to win. Somehow, through it all, she's trying to rebuild her life and find happiness again. That's a human desire people can understand all over the world. There are many victims of violence and abuse who are struggling to heal. I believe *Still Missing* says that it is possible. You can overcome. You may never be the same person again, but you can end up a stronger person.

Carla: Could you describe an average writing day?

Chevy: I'm up by 6:30am and have my first cup of tea while I return e-mails and read blogs--all that good Internet junkie stuff! Then it's out for a walk with my dog, Annie. When the second cup of tea is in hand, I start writing. I can't retain focus for long periods of time so there are usually several tea, e-mail, and puppy cuddle/playtime breaks. And once in a while I make it to the gym! But that's mainly just damage control.

Carla: If you could pick one author to meet, who would it be?

Chevy: If I were to pick one author, it would have to be Bryce Courtenay. *The Power of One* resonated with me in a way that no other book ever has, and I identified with his main character Peekay completely. He also has an incredible body of work and is just brilliant at capturing intricate family dynamics, usually playing out their stories in an incredible setting. His stories have strong themes of survival, which I really connect with.

Carla: Can you share anything about your next novel?

Chevy: I'd love to! Sara has a much different energy than Annie and it was interesting to see how that shaped the novel. Here's a little teaser. Hope you like it!

"Sara discovers her biological father is an infamous killer who's been hunting women every summer for over thirty years. She tries to come to terms with her horrifying parentage--and her fears that she's inherited more than his looks--with her therapist, Nadine, who we first met in *Still Missing*. But Sara soon realizes the only thing worse than finding out your father is a killer is him finding out about you."

Carla: That sounds like an excellent follow-up to *Still Missing*! When will it be out?

Chevy: July 2011.

Carla: I can't wait. Thanks for stopping by our debut blog.

Chevy: It was fun! Thanks for having me.

Carla Buckley is the debut author of *The Things That Keep Us Here* (Delacorte Press, 2010) and Chair of the ITW Debut Author Program.