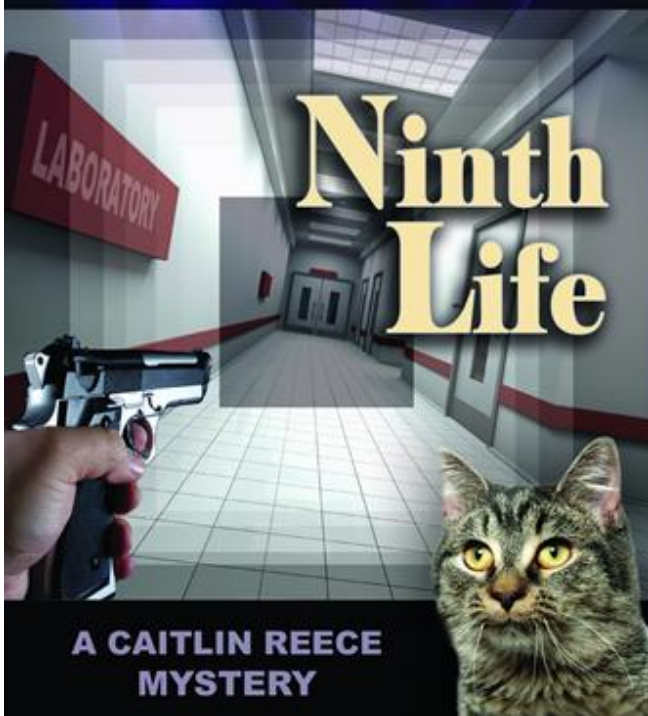


Winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Best Mystery

Lauren Wright Douglas



**A CAITLIN REECE
MYSTERY**

Ninth Life

A CAITLIN REECE MYSTERY



Lauren Wright Douglas



2011

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For all the Jeoffreys

Bella Books by Lauren Wright Douglas

The Always Anonymous Beast (A Caitlin Reece Mystery)

SUNDAY

Chapter 1

Midnight.

I sank a little lower in the front seat of my MG and sipped the last of my Scotch-laced coffee. Parked here in the shadows of Murphy's Auto Repairs, the MG lined up with half a dozen wounded road warriors, I was all but invisible. And bored. I had nothing to do but listen to the creak of Murphy's rickety sign as it swayed in the wind, and watch the occasional pair of car headlights go past on the road to the airport. And wait. I am not a patient waiter.

A particularly icy gust of wind swept across the highway from the ocean, and I shivered, zipping my windbreaker higher and jamming my hands into my pockets. Why hadn't I remembered my gloves? Late October on Vancouver Island is definitely gloves weather. I wiggled my fingers, and the note I had received—the note which had brought me to this desolate stretch of highway—crinkled in my palm. It had come to my home by registered mail

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two days ago. Written in longhand on a page torn from a yellow lined writing tablet, it read:

I need to hire you to take delivery of a package. Please meet me at the Donut Stop on Saanich Highway at midnight on Sunday, October 25. Thanks.

Shrew

High melodrama indeed! But the note had come accompanied by ten crisp one-hundred-dollar bills, which were now reposing safely in my wallet. If, as the wags say, money talks, then those ten crisp bills positively warbled. For I was broke. I might ordinarily have turned down such a strange proposition, but October had been a rough month. In the course of two weeks, I had to treat myself to a root canal and a rebuilt engine for my MG. Ouch. My savings account was dead empty. So I made an exception to my own First Commandment (Thou Shalt Take No Off-the-Wall Clients) and agreed to this nocturnal rendezvous. However, just to be on the safe side, I parked one establishment down from the Donut Stop, at Murphy's. This situation was tailor-made for a set-up, and I had no intention of being the settee. I'd let Shrew drive up to the Donut Stop and then decide if I wanted to take this mysterious package.

"Okay, Shrew," I muttered. "It's midnight. I'm freezing my hindquarters off and missing my sleep. Let's get on with it."

But nothing happened. The wind moaned a little louder through the branches of the Garry oaks, Murphy's sign creaked more ominously, and a tangle of paper cups, hamburger wrappers, and newspapers went scudding across the deserted parking lot in a crazy polka. Somewhere nearby an owl hooted—a mournful, tremulous sound. I turned, checking out the parking lot for gremlins, and saw the bulk of Mount Douglas looming like a mute, hulking beast against the sky. Suddenly I remembered—in a few days it would be Hallowe'en, the night when witches were abroad, speeding along the roads on their errands of mischief.

I snorted. In North America, Hallowe'en has become nothing more than a children's celebration, a meaningless night of free-loading and silly costumes. But Hallowe'en is a Celtic celebration, and in my family, anyhow, Hallowe'en was a very special day. It marked the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, and on the Rhys farm in Wales, huge bonfires called *Sambnagen* had been lighted year after year for centuries to call the poor shivering ghosts of our family's dead in from their wanderings.

Although I had certainly never seen such a bonfire, the idea was oddly appealing. My grandmother Meadhbh (or, in the anglicized version she hated—Maeve) explained it all to me when I was very young. If farmers took pains to move cows and sheep from the summer pastures into the barns where they could be cared for during the winter, should they do any less for the spirits of their beloved departed? No, she stated firmly. Farmers always lit bonfires on the hills to call the newly dead home for one evening of warmth and hospitality before they went on their way to the spirit world. I know Meadhbh was disappointed that we couldn't have a *Sambnagen* in the little bungalow where we lived in Ottawa, but life in the modern world was a constant disappointment to her.

As was I, I reflected. The night she died, she took my hands in hers and made me promise to build her a *Sambnagen*. Faithless grandchild that I was, I never had.

While I brooded, watching the night sky, a silver fingernail paring of moon pushed its way out from behind Mount Doug and hung in the sky like a crack in the curtained window of heaven. I was getting morose, thinking of my Grandma and my childhood, and resolved to put such thoughts aside. Where the hell was Shrew, anyhow? I peeled back my sleeve and looked at my watch. Twenty after twelve. Ten more minutes, then I was heading home to a hot bath and my bed.

A pair of headlights turned into the little Donut Stop parking lot, and I sat up straight. At last. With a protesting squeal of tires, a dark-colored VW Bug roared into the lot and stopped,

motor idling.

I slipped out the driver's door of the MG, keeping the bulk of Murphy's clients between me and the VW, and crept through the shadows until I was behind Shrew's car. A battered Honda Civic and ten feet of asphalt were now all that lay between us. Finally the VW's driver rolled down the window and a curly, blonde head emerged. The driver was clearly taking a good look around.

As was I. If this was a setup, it was too clever for me. I had checked things out pretty thoroughly earlier, and was as sure as I could be that there wasn't another soul anywhere. Still, I patted the bulk of my .357 as I straightened up from the shadows and walked up to the driver's side of the VW, nice and slow. As I had intended, the driver saw me. The blonde head swiveled as I approached and a voice called to me over the roar of the idling motor. The voice belonged to a young woman. A frightened young woman.

"Are you Caitlin?"

"Yeah," I called back. "Who are you?"

"Shrew," she said. She looked back nervously over her shoulder. "It's no good. They're onto me," she called, her voice breaking. Frightened? Amend that to terrified. "I'm going to throw some things in the dumpster by the highway. Get them when it's clear. I'll call you later. And don't come after me. Just do what I ask. Please."

"But—"

The screech of tires cut me off. Fairly leaping off the asphalt, the little Bug went careening out of the parking lot, and as it passed the large metal dumpster, I saw a flash of white as Shrew tossed something in. For my part, I beat a hasty retreat back to Murphy's and crouched down behind the battered Honda Civic. Not a moment too soon, either. A big, late-model American car—a Buick Century or an Olds Cutlass by its lines—rocketed into the Donut Stop, slowed for a heartbeat or two, then hurtled toward the exit driveway. I had one fleeting glimpse of two male

profiles—one bearded and sharp-featured, one bushy-haired and blunt-featured—as the car shot past. I squinted, and was barely able to make out the first three letters of the license plate—BRY. Then, with a shower of sparks from a low-slung muffler, the bigger car disappeared into the darkness toward Victoria.

I dithered for a moment, tempted to follow, but recalled what the young woman had said. Who was I to argue? After all—I had been hired to retrieve the package. Nothing more.

Still, I crouched behind the Civic in the shadows, hesitating. Even though no one had popped out of the bushes, I still didn't like this one bit. Packages that can't be delivered in the light of day, by UPS or Federal Express or even the postal service, usually have nasty, embarrassing, or incriminating contents. I had already decided that if the package contained drugs or money, this was a game I did not want to play. Frightened or not, Shrew would have to find someone else.

I walked over to my car, took the flashlight out of the glove compartment, and headed for the highway. A cold finger of wind found its way down my collar, and my teeth began to chatter and I hurried over to the dumpster. Shining my light into its depths, I discovered to my dismay that it was far from empty.

A layer of garbage—bagged and unbagged—lay two feet deep on the floor. I clamped my nostrils shut and tried to breathe through my mouth. Then, quickly, before I had a chance to change my mind, I heaved a leg up and over and let myself down into the smelly depths. Things I refused to imagine squished underfoot, and I resolutely told myself not to think about maggots. Or rats. The package Shrew had tossed in was right in the corner, and seemed to be a coarsely woven cotton sack. I bent and picked it up with my free hand, and as my fingers closed over the drawstring, something inside seemed to squirm.

“Jesus Christ!” I exclaimed, dropping the drawstring and leaping backward. Shining the flashlight on the sack, I saw that it was indeed squirming. “Oh, shit,” I whispered. Now what? I swallowed, gingerly reached for the drawstring, and pulled

the sack toward me. It was heavier than I expected—maybe five pounds. And now I had no choice but to pick it up. Holding the sack at arm's length, I waded through the garbage back to the side of the dumpster, then dropped my load outside. Vaulting out, I landed on the asphalt beside it. Fortunately it wasn't squirming. I felt encouraged. Maybe it hadn't squirmed at all. Maybe it had been my imagination. I shone the light on it, and to my dismay, the sack gave a convulsive heave.

I estimated the distance between the dumpster and the trunk of my car to be about fifty feet. I could be there in five or six seconds. Grabbing the sack by the drawstring, I held it as far away from my body as I could. Then I hustled myself over to my car, fishing the keys out of my pocket as I went. I opened the trunk lid, heaved the bag inside, and was just preparing to slam the lid down when I heard a sound. From the sack.

"Maair," a voice said mournfully, hopelessly.

"What?" I asked in amazement.

"Meeeaair," it reiterated, with a great deal more feeling this time.

"No," I said, my numb fingers wrestling with the sack's drawstring. "It can't be."

But it was. As soon as I had loosened the drawstring, a head popped out. A cat's head. A small, striped tabby head, which swiveled in the direction of my voice. But there was something terribly wrong. I bent closer, an atavistic dread gripping me. What in hell had happened to its eyes? With a cry, I stuffed the cat back into the sack, slammed the trunk, leaped into my car, and burned rubber out of the parking lot and onto the highway.