



ELLEN HART

Five-Time Winner of the Lambda Literary Award

WICKED GAMES

A JANE LAWLESS MYSTERY

Wicked Games

A JANE LAWLESS MYSTERY

by
Ellen Hart



2010

Copyright ©1998 by Ellen Hart

Bella Books, Inc.
P.O. Box 10543
Tallahassee, FL 32302

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Originally published by St. Martin's Press 1998
First Bella Books edition 2010

Cover Design and photo by: Kathy Kruger, Whistling Mouse
Illustration & Design

ISBN-10: 1-59493-185-2
ISBN-13: 978-1-59493-185-7

About the Author

Ellen Hart is the author of twenty-five crime novels in two different series. She is a five-time winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Mystery, a three-time winner of the Minnesota Book Award for Best Popular Fiction, a two-time winner of the Golden Crown Literary Award, a recipient of the Alice B Medal, and was made an official GLBT Literary Saint at the Saints & Sinners Literary Festival in New Orleans in 2005. *Entertainment Weekly* named her as one of the “101 Movers and Shakers in the Gay Entertainment Industry.” For the past twelve years, Ellen has taught “An Introduction to Writing the Modern Mystery” through the The Loft Literary Center, the largest independent writing community in the nation. In the spring of 2008, Ellen, William Kent Krueger and Carl Brookins (who have traveled together for nine years promoting their individual novels as The Minnesota Crime Wave) began a monthly TV show, *The Minnesota Crime Wave Presents*. Segments are available on YouTube and the MCW Web site: www.minnesotacrimewave.org.

Ellen’s newest novels are *No Reservations Required*, A Sophie Greenway Mystery (Ballantine, June 2005) and *The Mirror and the Mask*, the seventeenth Jane Lawless mystery (St. Martin’s/Minotaur, November 2009). She lives in Minneapolis with her partner of 31 years.

An author writes, not in a vacuum, but for an audience. Many thanks to Linda Hill, Karin Kallmaker and everyone at Bella Books for bringing this story, long out of print, back into the light of day.

Ellen Hart, 2009

Cast of Characters

JANE LAWLESS: *Owner of the Lyme House Restaurant in Minneapolis.*

CORDELIA THORN: *Artistic Director of the Allen Grimby Repertory Theatre in St. Paul. Jane's closest friend.*

ELLIOT BEAUMAN: *Children's book writer.*

PATRICIA KASTNER: *Daughter of Virginia and Otto Kastner. Jane's new neighbor.*

OTTO KASTNER: *Owner of Kastner Construction. Father of Patricia.*

VIRGINIA KASTNER: *Owner of Kastner Gardens. Mother of Patricia.*

EARL WILCOX: *Private Investigator.*

JULIA MARTINSEN: *Doctor. Jane's newest love.*

SIGRID LAWLESS: *Jane's sister-in-law. Therapist. Wife of Peter.*

PETER LAWLESS: *Jane's brother. Cameraman at WTWN-TV. Sigrid's husband.*

ABBIE KAUFMAN: *Potter. Patricia's old girlfriend.*

KEVIN TORLAND: *Doctor. Patricia's recent boyfriend.*

DR. CYRIL DANCING: *Psychologist. Professor at the University of Minnesota.*

RAMONA DANCING: *Cyril Dancing's wife. Judge.*

CONNIE MAYVILLE: *Grade school friend of Patricia's.*

Other Bella Books titles by Ellen Hart

Faint Praise
Robber's Wine
Small Sacrifice

From such crooked wood as that which man is made of,
nothing straight can be fashioned.

—*Immanuel Kant*

Prologue

MINNEAPOLIS, MIDSUMMER, 1968

When Virginia thought of this night, years later, she was never quite able to shake the sense that she'd failed to see or understand something important. It would become a nagging ache, one that haunted her days and nights just as it would forever destroy her peace of mind. This ordinary summer evening would become the fulcrum on which the rest of her life turned. Was it a chance event? Certainly, she hadn't seen it coming. Nor, for that matter, had her husband.

Driving home from the store that lovely July evening, the scent of summer rain in the air, she was on top of the world. The small floral and garden store she'd opened a few years before was going strong, so strong in fact that she planned to open a second store in the fall, in time for the Christmas rush. And next spring, she was thinking of expanding into a full-service greenhouse, selling everything from house and bedding plants to specialty pots and garden supplies.

As she pulled into the driveway, turning off the motor and sitting for a minute enjoying the cool breeze and the dark, her mind was occupied by thoughts of inventories and plans for the buying trips she would need to make to Mexico and the Far East before the new store opened.

Life was good for Virginia Kastner. Both of her boys were doing well in school, and though her husband was having some trouble finding just the kind of job that suited him, he'd been working steadily as a construction foreman all summer. He loved to work with his hands, especially when it came to carpentry, and Virginia assumed he would eventually end up in the building trades somewhere, probably as the head of his own company.

Hearing the sound of muffled laughter, she slipped out of the front seat, careful to make sure she didn't drop her briefcase. It contained two bone china plates she wanted to show her husband. It was about time they picked a family pattern.

Glancing around to see where the laughter was coming from, Virginia looked up and saw a dark form huddling on the peak of the roof near the chimney. "Otto?" she called, wondering what her husband was doing up there at this time of night.

"Guess again," came a youthful voice.

Feeling a shiver creep down her spine, Virginia stepped away from the car. "My God, Jay! How did you get up there? Get down this minute!" Thinking better of her order, she barked, "No, just stay there. I'll have your dad come up and get you."

"No you won't," he snickered. He tried to stand, but seemed unsteady on his feet. "I been sick, Mom. Don't be mad." He wiped a hand over his mouth.

"Sick? Sick how?"

"I threw up."

"Just stay still!" She felt her stomach clutch. Neither of her sons had ever gone up on the roof before. Not that Jay could entirely understand the danger. He was only ten years old. She set her briefcase down. "Where's your brother?" she asked tentatively. The two of them were always together. Maybe he

was up there too, but too afraid to show his face. When they'd moved into the new house, she'd given them separate bedrooms, but since they always ended up sleeping together anyway, she eventually gave up and bought bunk beds.

"Yeah, where *is* Elliot?" said Jay. "That's a good question. Hey, Mom, I'm surprised you can see me." He sounded annoyed now.

"See you? Of course I can see you. Why wouldn't I?"

He let out a snort. "Because you got a wooden eye." His words seemed to strike him as funny and he began to giggle.

"What are you talking about?" Her fear was mixed with impatience now.

"You're as blind as a bat, Mom. That's what Dad said. A blind old *wooden* bat." He giggled again, playing with the sentence. "A blind bat. A blind rat. Are rats ever blind, Mom?"

If she didn't know better, she'd think he'd been drinking. "Just stay still. I'll get your father. You've got some explaining to do, young man."

"Hey, wait," called Jay, standing up and weaving away from the chimney. "This is fun." He hiccupped, then covered his mouth with his hand. "I don't wanna come down. Not ever. I'm gonna live up here from now on. You can put Twinkies and stuff for me to eat on the sunroom roof. You should see the world from this high up, Mom. It's cool. I feel like a king and this is my mountain." He flung his arms out and looked up at the stars. "Really, it's—" Stumbling awkwardly, he lost his balance and tumbled forward.

"Jay!" She held up her hands, realizing the instant she did so that it was useless. Hearing a thud in the backyard, she rushed around the side of the house and lunged through the open gate, but it was too late.

Jay's body lay limp and twisted on the grass, his beautiful dark hair matted with sweat. As she knelt next to him, afraid to breathe, she touched his forehead gingerly, seeing the trickle of blood coming from the side of his mouth, smelling the alcohol, the vomit. She knew she had to run to get help, but it was a moment

out of time. Her mind raced, but her body was paralyzed, frozen by a sound she heard somewhere in the distance. It was a high-pitched screech, like the shriek of a siren or a factory whistle. Had someone already called the paramedics? It took a few seconds more before she realized the sound was coming from inside her.

Chapter 1

THE PRESENT, EARLY OCTOBER

Elliot wasn't sure who he should tell. The body was probably still there, though he couldn't be positive. He'd searched in vain through the morning paper hoping to find a story about the murder, something that would put his mind at rest. After all, if someone else found her, he wouldn't need to risk talking to the police. He'd listened to the radio in his car nearly all day. The longer he listened, the more he realized that the provincial, easygoing town of his youth had matured into *Murderapolis*—the murder capital of the Upper Midwest.

Elliot had been away for a few years, setting up residence for most of that time in Pitman, Iowa. Sure, he was used to an even slower pace now; small-town life, the quiet of the country, space to think and to breathe. Yet as he drove back into town last night, the difference jarred him. Elliot was in his late thirties, no longer impressed by what the big city had to offer. As he drove down Hennepin, he could sense that he'd come home to a town in

crisis. As a matter of fact, he'd walked straight into the middle of it.

He'd slept in his car last night, hitting the city limits around two a.m. As a writer—even a widely published children's book author—he hadn't yet made it financially. Every penny counted when you didn't have many pennies to begin with. Tonight, however, he'd reserved a room at the Nicollet Motel in south Minneapolis. Not a palace, but it would do. After unloading the contents of his rented U-Haul into his room, he'd spent the rest of the day driving around town looking for an apartment. Later, he'd found a quiet spot near the Minnehaha Creek to have dinner. He sat in the open air with a Mountain Dew and a roast beef sandwich, enjoying the crimson sunset deepening into night. Yet even after only two days, he already missed his rented house in Pitman. And especially, he missed his cat, Cain.

Cain was a wanderer at heart. A free spirit. He loved to roam the cornfields behind Elliot's house. But he was a cat regular as clockwork, always home within two hours of sunset, snuggled next to Elliot on the couch, purring contentedly as Elliot watched TV or read a book. Funny thing was, Elliot had let him out last week and hadn't seen him since. He'd gone out looking for him several times, but with no luck. Of course, Cain could've gotten into a fight with a dog or another cat, crawled into the cornfield to lick his wounds or even to die. But Elliot knew Cain was still alive. He'd simply disappeared. In his prescient cat soul, Cain probably knew where they were headed and even what was about to happen. And smart as he was, he wanted no part of it. Maybe, by taking off, old Cain was trying to give Elliot a last message. Run, friend, run away while you still can.

As darkness fell, Elliot found himself back in his car, driving around town aimlessly, regaining a certain familiarity with the city. Around ten, he climbed into the backseat to take a short nap before heading downtown to catch some of the local nightlife.

Except, he couldn't fall asleep. Every time he closed his eyes, the same image reappeared. It was like a haunting: indistinct,

foggy, and yet each time there was something more—something new and horrific. The air surrounding him grew electric with fear, whispered words, darkness and the smell of sweating bodies. And a name.

Carrie.

“Carrie, what...what happened?” cried Elliot, sitting bolt upright in the seat. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and then rolled down the back window, gulping air into his lungs as if the terror were his own. Pushing open the door, he climbed out, breathing hard as he stood next to the rear fender. After a moment, he slammed the door and looked up at the stars.

The image followed him outside. “No,” he said, mashing his hands against his eyes. It was getting stronger. Clearer. Choking him. Carrie was innocent. Nothing like this should have happened to her. He threw open the front door, jumped inside, and started the engine. He needed to get away from the quiet, preferably someplace where there was music, and people, anything to drive away the vision.

Ten minutes later he walked into a crowded Lake Street bar, sat down at the counter, and ordered himself a Coke. Yes, this was better. Mindless. Smoky. Vaguely sexual in an empty sort of way. A good place to sink into invisibility. As he sat staring at a young woman playing a video game, it occurred to him that maybe he should call his sister. She’d moved back to Minneapolis herself three months ago. But what would he say? Hi, sis, guess what? I followed you back. Sure, she’d be happy to see him, but for now it was best to keep a low profile. Find a place to live. Settle in. And then he’d call. There was time for everything he needed to do. The deadline for the next book wasn’t until early December. That meant he had two full months left. Piece of cake.

Elliot had always been a loner. But unlike most loners, he wasn’t embarrassed by his loneliness. In his current profession, the ability to enjoy spending time alone was actually a plus. All the endless days spent working at his computer, talking to no one but his creations—the animals, the children, the superheroes

and the monsters that peopled his books—enriched his life as no human company ever had. He created worlds out of nothing but his own imagination. He could make them as charming and as sweet, or as menacing and dark as he wanted. But the bottom line was, *he* was in charge. He'd already won several national awards for his writing, been praised for the subtlety, beauty, and simplicity of his illustrations. He was in the right profession, all right. If life would simply leave him alone to pursue his interests, he would be a happy man. But life had a way of not cooperating.

The woman sitting next to him at the counter eased over and gave him a boozy smile. "Hey, handsome. Looking for a little company?" She raised her eyebrows seductively.

Elliot cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably on the stool. "Not really."

"No?" She kept her smile at high beam. "What's your name?"
"Elliot."

She turned toward him, revealing a low-cut dress and far more makeup than he found attractive. He figured she was a hooker. He wasn't interested.

"You here by yourself?" she asked, lighting up a cigarette.

He nodded, then turned away to take a sip of Coke.

"Me too. My old man's gone bowling. Bowling! Instead of staying home to play with me."

Okay, she wasn't a hooker. Elliot looked at her again. This time she just looked sad. Sad and drunk. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too." She blew smoke out of the side of her mouth. "What a life, huh? You get married thinking you're going to be with someone and what happens? He's never home. And when he is, he ignores you."

Elliot remembered now how much he used to like going to bars. He enjoyed the anonymity, the smell of perfume and hot bodies on the make. Then again he never knew how to respond when he got pulled into one of these conversations. "That's too bad," he said weakly.

"Shithead. I hope he drops the ball on his foot. Both feet."

She finished her drink and then motioned to the bartender for another. Cocking her head, she said, "I meant that—about you being handsome. I like guys with broad shoulders. And you've got a nice...you know, gentle voice. You married?"

He shrugged. "No."

"Well, you're smart. Take some advice from me. Don't bother." Scrutinizing him a moment more, she said, "Hey, you like women, don't you? You're not—"

"If you mean am I gay, no."

"Good." She smiled again. This time, even though it was every bit as boozy, it looked more sincere. "I like you, Elliot."

"Thanks."

"You live in town?"

"I used to. I spent the last three years in Iowa. But my parents are still here."

"Ugh, parents." She picked a piece of tobacco out of her teeth. "That's another subject you shouldn't get me started on. I suppose you like your folks."

The muscles in his face hardened. "Not much."

"Nah, me neither." Her drink arrived. "Put it on my tab."

"No more tabs," said the bartender, a deep scowl on his meaty face. "Cash or no drink."

She glared at him.

"I'll get it," said Elliot, tossing a five on the counter.

The bartender walked off shaking his head. "It's your funeral, pal."

The woman stuck out her tongue at his retreating back. Then, returning her full attention to Elliot, she cuddled up even closer. "Hey, that was real nice of you."

"No problem."

"Maybe this is going to be your lucky night."

Elliot had no intention of staying in this dump for longer than a couple more minutes. And when he left, he was leaving alone. "What's your name?" he asked, picking up his Coke.

"Me? I'm Carrie...Lundstrom, although you don't need to

know that last part. Some people call me Carolyn, but I prefer Carrie. You like that name? Say, hon, you look kind of funny. Your face just turned white as a sheet.”

Elliot backed off the bar stool and headed for the door. He knew she wasn't the same Carrie, the one he saw so clearly in his mind's eye, but it didn't matter. The name had jarred him. He had to get away.

“Hey,” called Carrie. “What's wrong? Where are you going?”

The early October breeze felt bracing against Elliot's hot skin as he burst out of the door. He began to run as fast as he could down Lake Street. Three blocks away, he spotted a police car on the other side of the road. He waved, then dashed up to the front window. “I want to report a murder,” he said, resting his hand against the front fender. He needed to catch his breath. “A woman. I'm not sure where, but I can see—”

The officer shot out of the car.

Elliot felt a bright light hit his eyes. “Turn that off,” he said angrily, jerking his head away.

The flashlight went dark. “Talk fast, buddy. What about a woman?”

“It happened last night.”

“Where were you?”

“Me? No, you don't understand. I wasn't there.”

The officer hesitated. “Let's see some ID.”

Elliot yanked his billfold out of the back pocket of his jeans and handed over his driver's license.

Switching the flashlight back on, the officer studied it for a moment. “Elliot Beauman. That right?”

Elliot nodded.

“You're visiting our fair city from Iowa?”

“I'm originally from Minneapolis. I'm moving back.”

“Right. So, tell me, Elliot, who was murdered?”

“A woman. Her name was Carrie. I don't know any more about her except that she was young. Blond hair.”

“And where did this happen?”

Elliot could feel a familiar pounding behind his eyes. “I don’t know,” he said, mashing his temples hard with both hands. “I think maybe by a water tower. I can see—men with swords. Men with no legs. And eagles.” Even though the night air held a chill, Elliot was straining so hard that his face was covered with sweat. “Woods—trees, bushes. And then there was this door...and lots of gang graffiti. Cement walls. And...and not far away, a school. And houses. Older ones, but nice.”

The officer just stared at him. “You say you saw this?”

Again, Elliot nodded. “It was two guys in a van. The license plate—” He closed his eyes and concentrated as hard as he could. “I don’t know. There’s an M and twenty-three in it. That’s all I get. But they live close—I *know* they do.”

“You weren’t there, but you saw all this? What’s the deal here, Mac? You claiming to be psychic or something?” The officer moved aggressively toward him.

“No. I...can’t explain it. I just...had to tell someone.” With a speed and a force that surprised him, the officer handcuffed Elliot and then pushed him into the backseat of the squad car.

“I think we better continue this downtown.”

Elliot didn’t fight. He sat in silence as the lights of the city sped past. One thing he knew for sure, he was in way over his head. He should have kept his mouth shut and not gotten involved. And yet, he had a good reason for what he was doing. It was a calculated risk. He hoped it would pay off.

Elliot was taken to City Hall, a hulking granite structure in the middle of downtown Minneapolis, and ushered into an interview room. He could feel his heart pound inside his chest as he declined the offer of a cup of coffee.

Two burly homicide sergeants interrogated him for the next several hours. Their initial concern seemed to center on Elliot’s mental health. After satisfying themselves that he wasn’t a “crisis candidate” in need of immediate psychiatric counseling, they

began to grill him about his story. They asked the same questions over and over. Elliot figured they were trying to trip him up. After all, if he had information about a murder, that probably pegged him as a prime suspect.

Around one a.m., both of the officers left. For the next few hours Elliot waited. He paced and read magazines, sat in a chair and studied the ceiling tiles. He knew they couldn't hold him indefinitely without charging him with a crime. Even so, it looked as if it would be a long night.

By three in the morning, his mouth tasted like the floor of a poultry barn. The muscles in his back were sore and his head ached. He'd managed to doze off for a few minutes, though the dark visions inside his brain refused to give him any peace.

Shortly before four, Sergeant Engsdahl, a tall, lanky man with a perpetually disgusted look on his face, reentered the room. "Get up. You can go."

Elliot swung his feet off the coffee table and stood, rubbing the small of his back. "How come? Did you find her?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Over by the Washburn water tower. I used to live in that part of the city. When you mentioned the part about men with swords, it all clicked." As they walked out the door, he added, "It could have been a while before anyone located the body. It's teachers' conference this week—kids are out of school so there isn't as much activity around there. Her body was dumped near the base of the tower."

"What about the guys?" asked Elliot, following him down the hall.

"We spotted a white van parked in a driveway a few blocks away. The interior had been cleaned up, but we could see some stains under the seat. We were pretty sure they were blood. Turns out we were right. The guy inside the house took off out the back door, but we nailed him. In a moment of panic he tried to blame his accomplice for what happened. They're both in custody now.

And, lucky for you, neither of them said they'd ever heard of you."

Elliot nodded, yanking on his jeans jacket. "Thanks for the hospitality. It was a pleasure." As he was about to leave, the officer put a hand on Elliot's arm and stopped him.

"Not so fast, friend. As I understand it, you don't have a permanent address in town yet."

"That's right."

"When you do, call me. I may need to talk to you again." He handed Elliot a card: *Sgt. Harold Engsdahl, Criminal Investigations Division, Minneapolis Police Department*. "And second"—his cool blue eyes looked Elliot up and down—"are you really asking us to believe you weren't a witness to that murder?"

"I wasn't there physically, if that's what you mean."

"And nobody told you about it?"

"No. No one."

"So...you're telling me you're psychic? You see things? Hear voices?"

Elliot shook his head. "I...don't know what I am. But I'm not a psychic. Psychics are all fakes."

Detective Engsdahl's mouth curled, but it wasn't much of a smile. "Seems like there's not much difference between you and some nutcase in a mental hospital. They hear voices. See visions."

"Maybe you're right."

He held Elliot with only the force of his eyes. "This kind of stuff happen to you often?"

"Not often."

"Do you get premonitions? You know, before things happen?"

Elliot hesitated. "Sometimes."

"So, did you get any premonitions while you were our guest here?"

Looking away, Elliot said, "No, but I got a strong one yesterday, when I was driving into town." He paused. "I think there may be another murder. In a house this time. Big house. Somewhere near one of the lakes. And it will be a woman again."

I wish I could help you more, but that's all I know.”

Engsdahl shook his head. “It's a hell of a world if you're a woman.”

“Yeah,” agreed Elliot. “It is.”

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

