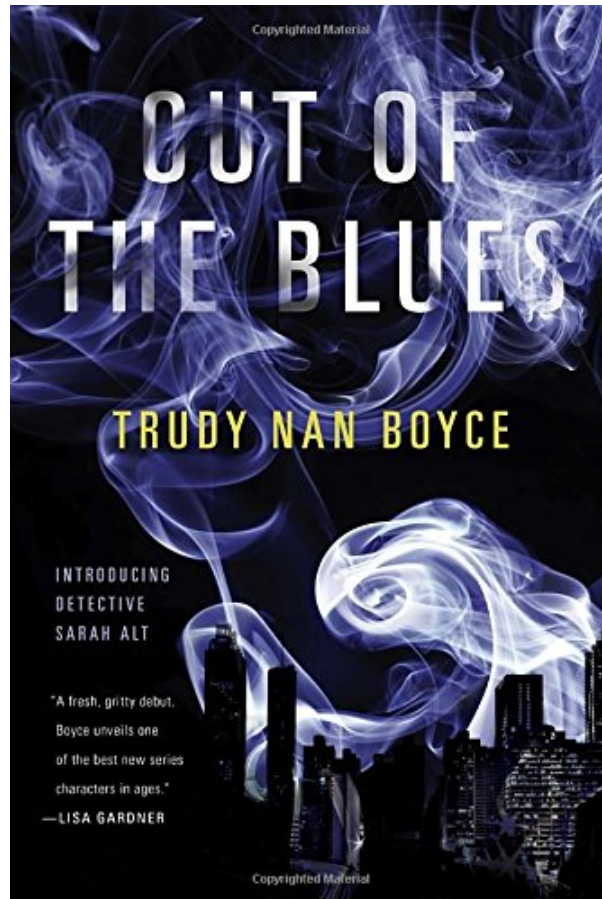
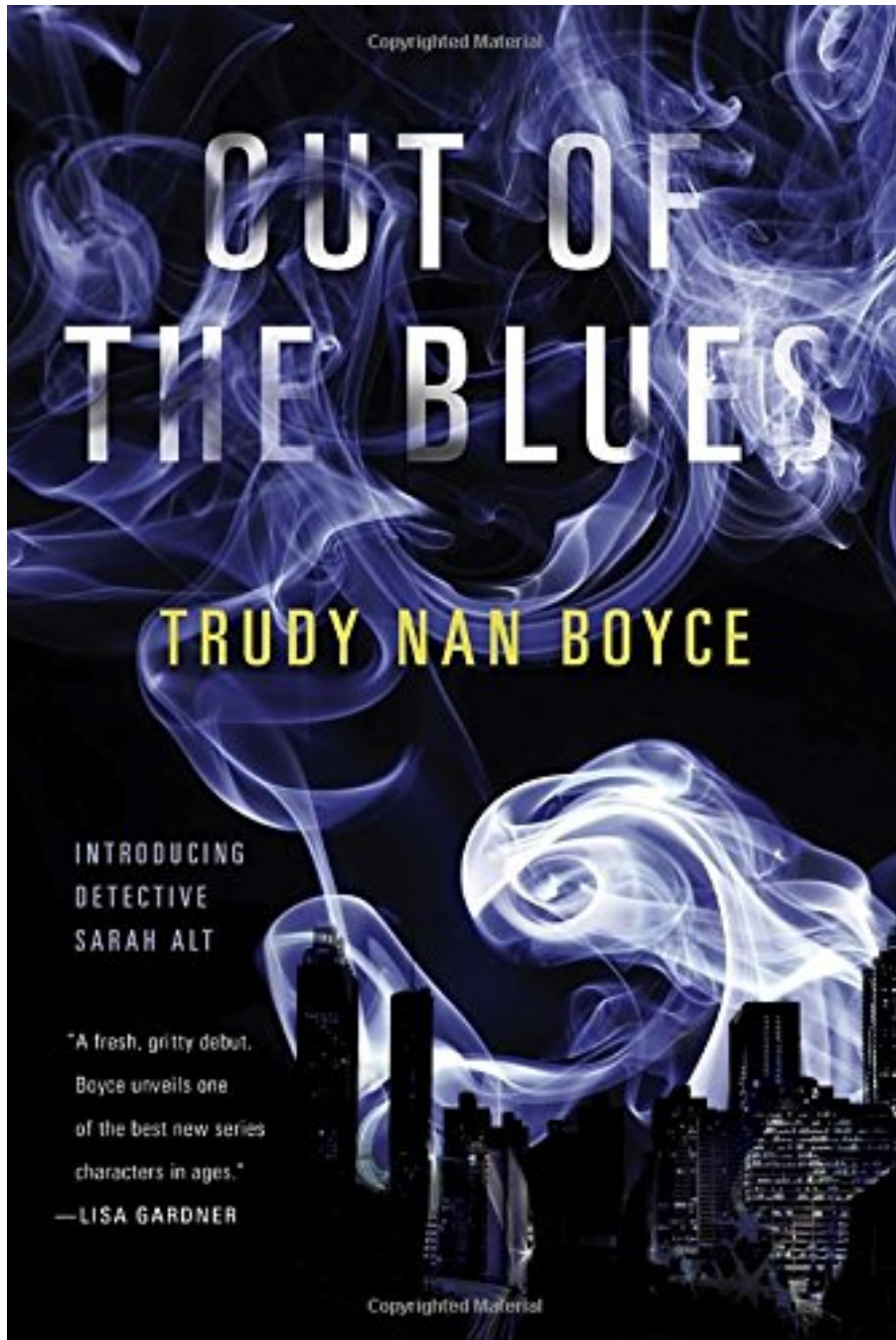


OUT OF THE BLUES BY TRUDY NAN BOYCE



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Review

Praise for Out of the Blues

“What's this? A female cop who doesn't look like a runway model and doesn't go mano a mano with psychotic killers? Trudy Nan Boyce may be a first-time author, but she was in law enforcement for more than 30 years, which should explain why the stationhouse personnel and forensic details in Out of the Blues feel so authentic.”—Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Exceptional . . . I figured authenticity would thrum from the dialogue, reality would pulse from the plot and the blues would be the narrative's soundtrack. I was correct on all counts.”—*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

“Out of the Blues introduces an appealing character, Detective Sarah Alt [“Salt”] . . . Atlanta locales and history are a recurring element in the narrative and a pleasant feature of the book [and] Boyce describes these places with colorful clarity. . . Salt's next sleuthing adventure should be much anticipated.”—*Associated Press*

“Boyce was a beat cop, homicide detective, hostage negotiator and lieutenant in Atlanta before retiring in 2008. She knows policing. She writes with intensity and flair and wit. This combination has resulted in an irresistible procedural with a winning protagonist. And the bonus, the lagniappe, is the seductive way Boyce writes about music, particularly the blues.”—*Shelf Awareness*

“A fresh, gritty debut. Boyce unveils one of the best new series characters in ages, an Atlanta detective with a haunting past but complete dedication to working the streets. A book that combines fast-paced suspense with moving insights.”—#1 *New York Times*-bestselling author Lisa Gardner

“Boyce has a season's veteran's way of creative irresistible characters . . . Out of the Blues is filled with authentic details about police work.”—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Less whodunit than odyssey, as Salt—clearly bent . . . on fixing the world one sociopath at a time—navigates anti-woman prejudice in her unit, anti-cop sentiment in her hometown, and the steaming

corruption that reaches from Atlanta's lower depths to its very top.”—Kirkus Reviews

"Salt's character combines quick intelligence and a refreshing, confident humanity that wins allies from all walks of life, and Boyce's fluid southern voice is an alluring contrast to the stark realities she skillfully evokes."—Booklist

"[A] moody, character-driven series debut."—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

"Out of the Blues takes the reader for an exciting ride through old Atlanta with brand new homicide detective, Sarah Alt, aka "Salt" as our guide. Salt is brave and imaginative, salty and sweet, and her creator—former Atlanta homicide detective, Trudy Nan Boyce—uses her impressive descriptive power to make our ride colorful, gothic, and irresistibly Southern."—#1 New York Times-bestselling author Joseph Wambaugh

"There's a new star in crime fiction . . . Boyce explores the dark underbelly of Atlanta in her excellent procedural. . . . [A] stunning debut."—RT Book Reviews

"Out of the Blues is a stunning debut. Trudy Boyce's background in law enforcement is on vivid display, and she writes with passion, heart, and a powerful no-holds-barred voice you won't soon forget."—Linda Castillo, New York Times-bestselling author of After the Storm

"Grit, heart, smarts, and authenticity—Detective Sarah Alt has them, and so does Out of the Blues. A terrific mystery by talented newcomer Trudy Nan Boyce." —Meg Gardiner, Edgar Award-winning author of Phantom Instinct

"As a former cop on the seedier and more dangerous streets of Atlanta, Trudy Nan Boyce has probably seen it all, and she shares it with us in this compelling debut novel. Salt is both gutsy and contemplative, and when her 'cold' case heats up, she's ready for the challenge." —Margaret Maron, award-winning author of Designated Daughters

About the Author

Trudy Nan Boyce received her Ph.D. in community counseling before becoming a police officer for the City of Atlanta. During her more-than-thirty-year career she served as a beat cop, homicide detective, senior hostage negotiator, and lieutenant. Boyce retired from the police department in 2008 and still lives in Atlanta.

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Uncovering

The girl climbed the tree so she could sit in her spot, look out through the limbs and leaves, and pretend about an imaginary dog. When she patted the pecan leaves, they gave off a green peppery smell. It was like breathing the breath of the tree. The jaggedy streaks of gray bark where she sat were like the tree's hard fur.

Wearing conspiratorial smiles, her mother and brother had waved from the car windows, knowing that she had been headed to the tree as they started out the long driveway around the house. Later she realized, when she saw the note on the table, that he must have thought she'd gone with them, because it wasn't long after the dust from the car settled that the gunshot sounded from the house and she dropped from the tree, forgetting almost forever the longed-for dog.

Frantic, she couldn't think how to clear his eyes of the blood. She couldn't leave him to get a cloth. Her shirt? She used her fingers to try and wipe the sticky globs from her father's eyes. His head in her lap, she cried for him to help her know what to do. He was a cop. He should know how to handle this emergency. The gun, black and heavy, lay next to the dusty rose bed skirt. She thought if he could somehow just see, he'd be able to help her, but he quit moving, his groans stopped, and she held his head, blood seeping through her red shorts and into the ruby dahlias and violet peonies embroidered in the rug.

And then their return. Their faces as they held the balloons at the door of the room. Their fallen faces. And the note left beside the cake for her tenth birthday.

No one in her family ever claimed to know where the old steamer trunk had come from. The trunk had been painted over in a flat country blue that had faded to gray, the original color revealed beneath the leather clasps that were now brittle, one completely worn through. Smudged and blurred, some brush strokes had come through the top layer of paint, "ST . . .," but the rest was faded. She'd moved the trunk out of the upstairs closet when the carpenters were doing renovations and had been using it as a nightstand beside the downstairs bedroom window. Sometimes thinking right before she fell asleep that she would get around to opening it, she'd go over the items she remembered might still be in it.

Removing the lamp and embroidered runner and letting the metal lock fall, she was eager about the coat. Beneath some quilts and baby clothes it was there in its original Rich's box, wrapped in fragile, yellowing tissue. The Atlanta department store had been gone a long time, bought out by Macy's, but the coat still had the tag attached to the sleeve with thread.

Looking at herself in the age-flecked floor mirror, Sarah Alt thought that even though she wasn't as tall as her dad, it was still a good fit. Twenty-five years after it was purchased, the tan trench coat now fit her, falling to calf length on her slim five-foot-nine frame—her father's coat, one he'd never worn.

Welcome to Homicide

Known throughout the department as "Rosie," the large man in transition with red-polished nails and long, blond, wavy hair and wearing a ruffled white blouse sat at the receptionist's desk and buzzed her in. "The code is number 1524," she said without looking up from the paperback she was reading.

"Thanks." Salt held her father's coat as she punched the numbers on the keypad and turned the handle of the inner door to the Homicide Unit.

Rosie mumbled, "Keep your chin up."

During the ten years Salt had been in uniform, a beat cop, she'd been to the Unit many times, making statements as the first uniform on murder and assault scenes, providing information from the streets to detectives. But this, this was her first day, first shift as a newly sworn detective. A shiny gold-tone badge

clipped to the belt on her slacks had replaced her old silver-finish shield, the one she'd worn for ten years of uniform patrol, most of them spent in The Homes, the most densely populated housing project in Atlanta. She'd worked there so long that it had felt at times more like home than her own. Now she heard talk that the city was making plans to tear down all the projects, including The Homes.

Two detectives, one white, one black, both on the small end of medium in height, wearing short-sleeved shirts and bright ties, were standing at the front cubicles in the rows of workspaces. "Well, well, well," exclaimed the black guy she knew as Daniels. "Lookee what the dog done dragged in."

"Yes in-deed-dee," the other guy said. "Got us a brand-new big-city detective."

"I got your big city," she shifted the coat to shake hands. "They told me to report to Sergeant Huff."

There were caricatures of the Three Stooges on Daniels' tie and Barney Fife's face on the other guy's. "He's around here somewhere." Daniels motioned toward the back of the big office space.

"I think I saw him go in the break room," said the guy with the Barney tie, pointing to the back right.

The Homicide room was huge and smelled of burned coffee and mildewed paper. Thirty or so gray cubicles filled the center space, less than a quarter occupied most of the time; only the detectives from the on-duty shift were working, and some of them were taking their weekend days off or were out in the streets. The walls were lined with supervisors' offices, interview rooms, and rows of five-drawer file cabinets in mismatched grays, tan, and military green colors. Salt wound her way through the aisles past the attached desks stacked with murder books and decorated with personal touches: framed photos, patriotic posters, military memorabilia, and action heroes. She walked past Wills' desk, noting with a smile the "Dog Is My Copilot" bumper sticker on his file bin and photos of Violet and Pansy, his Rottweilers. She and Bernard Wills had begun a relationship last year, and while he'd encouraged her to test for detective, neither of them had anticipated working the same unit, or "squad," as Homicide was called, much less the same shift. Wills' partner, Gardner, ever optimistic, ever ready with a look-on-the-bright-side comment, had the cubicle across from his. A photo of his garden hung on the gray-fabric cubicle wall.

She found Sergeant Huff, whom she knew from having talked to him on a couple of cases, in the unfortunately bright break room peering into a humming microwave. She whisked her fingers through her dark hair, which she wore short with a messy part on the left, a part made permanent by a bullet scar through her scalp.

"Sergeant Huff," she announced herself.

The microwave pinged and the heavysset sergeant took out a plastic bowl with a blue lid. "You're taller in clothes." He sat down at one of the metal and veneer tables and took a plastic spoon from his shirt pocket.

"Yes, sir, five nine in shoes." She pulled at her new cream-colored linen jacket and navy slacks. "In case . . ." Her voice trailed off as she realized she was standing at attention like she was back at roll call in the precinct. She tried to cover by slumping.

"My goddamn wife is starving me here. I'm forty-five years old and she's feeding me New Age hippie mush."

"I called Lieutenant Pierce yesterday to ask about my assignment and he told me to report to you today at four p.m." Salt sat down at the table, draping the coat across her lap.

Head lowered to the bowl, Huff shoveled the food into his mouth with the little spoon as he talked. “Doctor says I’ve got to lower my cholesterol, lose weight, quit smoking, ‘limit my alcohol intake’”— he made air quote marks—“reduce stress, exercise.” His close-cut brown hair had receded to the middle of his scalp. The bowl held something that looked like beef stew but with no aroma. “So the missus” shovel, “packed my lunch bag with an apple, which I ate on my way to work thirty minutes ago, and this fuckin’ tofu stew,” shovel, shovel. He tossed the spoon into the empty bowl—it hopped. “I just finished my lunch and I got eight hours left in the shift. Now that’s stress.”

“Sarge . . .” began Salt.

“‘Sarge,’ don’t call me Sarge. I hate being called Sarge. Sounds like some fuckin’ war movie. Call me Huff or Charlie or Shithead but don’t call me Sarge. Nobody calls me Sarge.” His belly popped from behind a large Harley-Davidson belt buckle as he pushed back from the table.

“Hey, Sarge.” Daniels stuck his head in the door. “We got incoming.”

Sergeant Huff leaned back, belched loudly, then stood and threw his plastic bowl into the sink. “I’ll show you your desk. You’ll get the same one as the only other woman ever worked Homicide nights in this city.” He led her through the cubicle farm. “She worked kids’ murders, something wrong with her head. She was nuts, totally, but for some reason they let her stay till she retired. She only got one or two cases a year. Went out on all the dead babies.”

“Sar—” Salt stopped at a barren desk across from one festooned with a rainbow flag and a purple flag. “Can I have this desk?” She pointed to the empty spot.

“If you’re thinking you might want to partner with Felton, our gay caballero there”—he pointed to a photo of two men in a frame on the desk with the flags—“forget it. Every man here wants him, as a detective partner, that is. You probably already heard he’s the best homicide dick in the city, state, and a contender for best in the nation, maybe the world. But he won’t partner.”

“Can I have the desk?”

“No.”

At a cubicle far from the entrance and far from the center of the room, Huff stopped and unclipped the radio from his belt. “Go ahead for Homicide,” he spoke into the handheld.

“Zone Three is requesting Homicide to 441 Brown Avenue on a body found in a warehouse.” Homicide dispatch sounded less urgent than Salt was used to from the beat dispatches.

Salt positioned herself in the Sarge’s sight and pointed to herself, requesting “Me?”

Sarge shook his head at her. “Homicide units 4125 and 4126 will be responding,” he advised dispatch. “Daniels, Barney,” he shouted across the room. Turned out the guy with the Barney Fife tie was named Barney.

“4125 and -26 copy,” the detectives acknowledged the call.

Daniels’ and Barney’s heads bobbed across the tops of the cubicles as they walked toward the door.

“This was the chick’s desk,” Huff said. “Now it’s yours.”

Other than the desk, a stained chair, and an old tower PC and monitor, the workspace was empty, except for a manila file lying on the desk. Huff picked up the file. “This is also yours. Wasn’t a murder and now it might be. You’ll start with that. Welcome to Homicide.” He dropped the file on the desk, turned his back to her, and walked away.

Before she could hang up her coat, fat fingers were on her wrist, soft, strong and insistent. Salt turned as Detective Hamm from day watch grabbed her and began pulling her toward the exit. “You’re coming with me. We’ve got another one.”

“But Sar . . . Huff said—”

“Fuck Sarge. My regular partner is off today so I get to pick. Even if he was here, I’d make sure you went with us. These guys are going to put you through the wringer, but I’m going to give you some starch first.”

Salt followed the lumbering detective, whose wide buttocks shifted and quivered up and down and side to side, to the elevators.

“How’s the head?” Hamm asked as she hit the call button. Hamm and her partner, who matched her in girth, had been the responding investigators to the incident last year when Salt had been shot. Charissa Hamm was the only woman, until today, currently working Homicide, also known as the Hat Squad. Hamm worked days. Salt, as a rookie detective, would work nights, four p.m. to midnight, but often the three shifts worked scenes together if a case was close to one of the shift changes or was a “red ball,” as the high-profile cases were known. An Atlanta native, Hamm had solid ties to her black working-class community, church, and high school friends—connections that had proved helpful to her both in her career and in solving cases.

“Fuck.” Hamm cursed the malfunctioning elevators and headed to the stairwell. Then the elevator pinged and the overhead panel lit up. They turned back but the elevator doors didn’t open and it scrolled up to the next floor. “Double fuck.” She slapped the wall beside the call button. “Your head?” Hamm repeated, her voice competing with their footsteps echoing in the concrete and steel stairwell, each floor marked with conflicting floor numbers, the “4” in red and “5” in black on the same door.

“Better,” answered Salt, lifting a lock of hair that covered the scar that began at her hairline.

The neighborhood was a mixture of middle-class homes, a few houses falling to lower middle, and seventies-built apartment complexes, some designated as government assists. A dog barked continuously, its howling seeming to come from differing directions. The residences backed onto a wooded area, bisected by a ravine that was owned by the city’s watershed management. Salt cocked her ear, listening to the dog.

“And the chick detectives aren’t ever fat.” Hamm was sitting in the driver’s seat, legs out the open door, pulling on old-fashioned rubbers over black loafers that were sprung at the sides, her brown, wide foot overrunning the leather. She zipped up a gear bag, tossed it in the backseat, and grabbed the Handie-Talkie off the console. “Fuckin’ TV makes juries expect a detective to look like—well, like you, Blue Eyes. You’re gonna ruin those new shoes.” She tipped her head toward Salt’s spotless navy athletic shoes.

“I bought a couple of pairs in different colors. They can be thrown in the washer,” Salt said.

“Smart girl. Just the same, get a pair of these.” Hamm pointed to the overshoes. “They’re cheap and will save having to clean shit, piss, and other body fluids off your shoes.”

“I love it. Just us girls talking about shoes,” Salt said as they walked toward the crime scene.

They followed the uniform who'd told them that the body, that of a young boy, was in the nearby ravine. Spring rains had come almost daily and made the ground soft and covered with dark, steaming layers of composting leaves and newly green tangles of briars and vines.

"Careful," warned the officer as he led them to a part of the gully where the decline was less treacherous. In spite of her heft, Hamm's step was sure as she gracefully navigated the roots and muck going down the bank. Once on the bottom they could see north up the ravine to where other uniforms had begun to string the yellow tape, marking off the scene at the tops of the banks and on both sides. People, including more than a few children, were starting to gather along the tape on the side where the woods met the backyards. A dirty blanket had been hoisted between two trees as a makeshift curtain so the spectators could not see the body.

Uniform supervisors and the rest of the two shifts from Homicide began arriving. Salt spotted Sergeant Huff and the crime scene techs. More people milled behind the tape. "Where's my baby?" One woman ran from the group as word spread that it was the body of a child. Another uniform stood to one side with an elderly can man and his industrial-sized plastic bags of recyclables. "Grunge found the victim and started yelling," said the first officer, nodding at the old man.

Salt and Hamm stood at the blanket, which smelled of old garbage. The dog's barking kept up, coming from somewhere north of them. "Ivory need to shut up," someone said from above. Overhead, the limbs of a massive pecan tree spread up and out, shading thirty yards in both directions. The ravine bed was dark with past years' slough and brackish puddles. The banks became increasingly dry closer to the top and were covered with tiny green sprigs, the fallen flowers of pollen from the big tree overhead. The woman who was looking for her child screamed from the street, "I can't find him. Help me, somebody!"

"This is going to get bad. I'm going to go set up a command post in the parking lot," Huff said and pointed above. Hamm nodded and went around the blanket. "I want you to come with me," he told Salt, "but go take a look first." He nodded to the other side of the blanket. The dog's bark was more insistent. Salt's shoe made a sucking sound as she turned.

The light-skinned boy was face-down on his right cheek, hunched with his buttocks bare, tan shorts around his calves. His hands were positioned as if he were going to push up. Except for some rust-colored smears on his backside, there was no obvious trauma. "You didn't have to see this," Hamm said in a low voice, not looking up from her note taking.

"I know." Salt left her and followed Huff up and out of the ravine. "Merrily We Roll Along" played over and over from an ice cream truck's plinky speaker. The sun shone through the canopy of mostly water oaks, their small leaves whirl-a-jigging in the bright breeze. Huff assigned the six investigators and five uniforms to a grid search for evidence and witnesses. They were to interview anyone and everyone and make notes.

No one had to say it, but the Atlanta Child Murders were on everyone's mind. From 1979 to 1981 more than twenty black boys and girls were killed, and their deaths still haunted the city, especially the APD. Atlanta had been forced into a conversation about race then while the city's police tried to avoid distraction from the work. They finally broke the case when Wayne Williams, a young black man, was arrested. He had lured the children with the promise of a music audition. Even though the murders had stopped after he was arrested, and physical evidence solidified his guilt, some people weren't convinced the murderers hadn't been the KKK or other racist crazies.

Salt was assigned to search the ravine north of the scene. The leather shoulder holster crisscrossed her new shirt—she'd left her jacket in the car and hadn't thought to remind anyone that she'd not been issued a Handie-Talkie with a detective frequency. She began her part of the search, looking back once to see Hamm kneeling next to the dead child. She realized that she'd been assigned an area where she'd be least likely to

encounter any witnesses or evidence, but it felt right to her to head in the direction of the barking that had been distracting her since their arrival. Reminding herself to stay focused on the terrain, to look for anything that could be significant, even if it just looked like trash or newly turned leaves, she slowed her quickened step toward the dog, his bark becoming raspy.

The murdered children had begun turning up right after her father had died. Scared, she'd gotten the idea that the children wouldn't have been killed if he'd still been alive and on the job. Her brother, who was only seven at the time, talked about the murders constantly and wouldn't go to sleep in his own bed.

She came to a place where the ravine rim was about eight feet above and found freshly turned marks in the red clay bank. The dog's barks were closer and coming from directly above. Pulling herself up by tree roots, she climbed out into a backyard Bible grotto. There were homemade signs everywhere warning of the coming Rapture, of hellfire, of the opportunity for salvation and predictions of doom. A white dog barked at the bottom of wooden steps that led to the back of a house. He turned his head, almost as if he were expecting her, wondering what took her so long, then turned back to bark at a screen door at the top of the steps. He was a large dog, uncommonly clean, more cream than white, some shepherd mix with a plummy tail held high.

"Ivory," she called, remembering the comment from the crowd. A doll's head was nailed to a tree trunk on her right. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" read a framed hand-lettered message, dangling from a tree limb by a sash.

"Here Ivory."

The dog barked up the steps.

At a bricked-off blueberry bush there was a stake in the form of a cross, draped with a necklace of baby pacifiers. "Jesus wept" was painted in red on a flat stone. The sides of the yard were enclosed by pines bent inward, heavy with kudzu so thick the sounds from the neighborhood were muffled, almost shut out.

"Ivory." She lowered her voice.

Through more signs, some hanging from tree branches, there was a path of sorts, bordered by toy parts, broken trucks, pieces of balls, plastic blocks, a pink doll's bed.

Ivory held his tail high, his front paws on the second step. The back of the house had been covered with chicken wire through which had been braided what looked like old clothes. It gave the appearance of quilting. Ivory was well groomed, his coat smooth and lush, but his tail had picked up some catkins that clung to the long, feathery fur. She approached him, patting her leg, which he sniffed, and he ceased barking. He allowed her to rub his ears and pat down his back. She was careful at his tail, pulling at one of the sprigs caught in his fur, examining it in the palm of her hand.

The door above opened. An elderly man wearing a brown pin-striped suit and red tie stood holding a worn Bible. He began to laugh. He was small and stiff in his composure, his skin the same color as his suit. He bent to his knees laughing, and as he did, an enormous presence came from behind him, rushing past and launching from the porch toward Salt.

She managed a break fall onto her back and tried to use the momentum to continue into a backward roll, but it was all she could do to get her knees between herself and the huge man before he was on her, one of his hands at her throat and the other clawing toward the gun beneath her arm. She became aware of the sound of her own breath and his heavy grunt, both amplified and muffled like the roar from inside a seashell. One of

his exhalations filled her nose and mouth with the taste and smell of sour milk. She felt the thick cotton threads of his shirt fabric as she grabbed his collar for leverage. She pushed the soles of her feet against his stomach, pulling his chest down and pushing up, and used his weight to propel him over and away as she rolled up into a ready combat stance.

“Fuck,” she said when she realized that on her first day as a detective she’d made a mistake worse than the stupidest rookie. She’d failed to check out a radio. “Call 911,” she implored the old man, while she tried to catch a breath and crouched in anticipation of the man now rising from the ground. If she’d just told Hamm to wait for her to grab a radio, she could be calling for help. She scanned the yard and sides of the house for a way out as he got up, his eyes searching the sky, unfocused like he was blind, yet he aimed himself at her. The dog was quiet now, but the old man threw back his head and either laughed or howled as she sidestepped and her assailant stumbled past, turned, and rushed her again. Salt pivoted, looking for some advantage as the big man came at her again. But her left foot caught on Christmas lights strung at knee level between two bushes. Before she could untangle, he wrapped his meaty arms around her shoulders and chest and was falling to the ground on top of her. As they accelerated downward, the man drew back the fist of his other hand while she fumbled to get a hold of the fat fingers holding her neck. The blow glanced off her left cheek just as she turned her head and leveraged her weight against his fingers and wrist. He grunted and tried to jerk away at an angle that caused him even more pain. She swiveled from under him and into another ready stance.

There was no exit she could see and she was backed against the rim of the ravine, breathing hard, balancing each foot as she moved backward and closer to the edge. If she pulled her weapon she knew he’d go for it, and then she’d have to use it or he’d take it. He ran at her, and at the last instance when he towered over her, his sweat flying into her eyes, she reached out and pulled his arm straight and used it as a fulcrum to throw him over and into the ravine below. Momentum took her with him in as controlled a fall as she could manage, knowing that if she was lucky and quick, she’d have half a chance. As they dropped she pulled at the cuff pouch on her left shoulder strap. Air whooshed from his lungs as they thudded onto the ground. Her fingers found the bracelets as she landed on his back, and before he could inhale she had one cuff around his right wrist. Using the cuff against his wrist bone for pain compliance, she jerked his forearm, bent it back, and snapped the second cuff around his other wrist.

She rolled off him, sat up, and looked at the rim of the bank some eight feet above where the old man, laughing still, stood beside the dog. She touched her stinging cheek with a dirt-streaked hand. Her new pants were torn at one knee, the linen shirt gaped where the buttons had been torn off, but she wasn’t bleeding. She couldn’t see any bloody injury on her assailant, who was rapidly gaining consciousness. She pulled him to a sitting position. His head was shaved to stubble, his face round, pink, and greasy with oily sweat. He had on matching workmen’s tan shirt and pants, new-looking and freshly dirtied from their fight. And there were smears of some unidentifiable substance on the front around his zipper.

“Alone,” he said breathless. “Why they send you alone?”

“What’s your name?” She stood up, trying to control her now trembling arms and legs.

“I am The Baby, Jesus,”

She pushed at his back and pulled him to standing. “What’s his name?” She yelled to the man above, who only put his hand to his waist, now bent with maniacal laughter that echoed down the bank.

The man sang Stevie Wonder’s “Ebony and Ivory” as they walked back down the ravine. He insisted he be identified as “The Baby, Jesus,” not “Baby Jesus” or “The Baby Jesus” but—and he was adamant—it was “The Baby, Jesus.” Fine, Salt just needed his compliance as they trudged to the scene. “Ivory white like me,”

he substituted some of the lyrics. His accent was stone black projects, missing verbs and mangled tenses. "You should shoot me."

She didn't want to expose TBJ to the crowd and therefore wanted to bring him out north of the scene. When she could see the light color of the blanket curtain in the distance, she veered toward the ravine bank. It was rough going to get the large handcuffed man enough momentum to reach the random footholds. "Left foot," she said pointing to an exposed root and hefting his arm as he planted his boot. At the top the crowd was thirty yards or so south of where she brought him out, and they weren't noticed. But they'd come up and out in the common area of the apartments where the command post had now been established.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise, given the city's still painful memories of the Child Murders, that quite a few city politicians and the chief of the department would, along with most of his command staff, converge on the scene, if only to assure the media and community that every resource would be made available to find the culprit. So it was just as the chief exited his car, camera people on his heels getting footage for the evening news, that Salt, abraded and covered in filth, emerged with The Baby, Jesus from between two apartment buildings. "Who's this, Salt?" Chief asked. When he'd come to her hospital room last year after she'd been shot, he'd already known her street name, a contraction of Sarah Alt as it appeared on her first uniform name tag, "S.Alt."

"The Baby, Jesus," answered the suspect for himself.

"Of course, Baby, I thought that was you." The chief raised his eyebrows at her.

"You need any assistance?" He turned to his driver and motioned for him to attend Salt.

"Sorry, sir," she said. "This is my first day in Homicide and I hadn't gotten a radio yet. If you could ask someone to radio for Sergeant Huff, I believe The Baby, Jesus is our suspect."

"Yes, I killed, murdered, homicided that baby boy there in the gully in the ditch. I choked and crushed the baby right out of his air."

"Shit," said the chief.

"Film at six," said some wiseass from the media scrum as they turned in unison and ran toward their trucks.

"I had to look it up, too," she told them. "They're called 'catkins,' those little dangles that fall from the pecan trees. It's why some people don't want pecan trees—they're messy in late spring. I have pecan trees at my place, so I noticed. The tree where the boy was found was the only pecan along the ravine."

"Catkins in the dog's tail," repeated Huff.

"But why did you go to that house?" Hamm asked. "Not that I'm in any way complaining. Thank you, Rookie Detective, for clearing this certain-it-was-going-to-be-a-red-ball-on-my-head case, not to mention he'd probably be a serial kind of guy as well."

"The dog," Salt said. "The dog kept barking. I heard someone in the crowd say, 'What's Ivory barking at?'"

"Did you go in the house?"

"No, Sar—sir. He came out after me."

"We tried to interview the old man who lives there," Hamm said. "He's way, way off his rocker and

supposed to be monitored by some home health-care company. I think the house is a group home.”

“Well, I don’t know how you’re going to write this up. Don’t get me wrong, I’m as relieved as Hamm to have this guy in the Gray Bar, but we’re counting on those blood smears on his pants to come back a match for the kid, ’cause flowers in a mutt’s fur ain’t exactly what juries expect in these days of ‘Atlanta CSI.’” He made air quotes again and tipped his chair forward. “Thank God for his spontaneous admission to the chief, crazy as that was.” He shook his head and stood. “I leave the articulation to you ladies.” He tapped the thickening blue file on the conference room table and left the room.

“You’re a mess.” Hamm smiled at her. “A fine mess and I need to get some photos of you before you even wash your face.” She used her Handie-Talkie to call for a tech to take the photos. “But while we wait, Salt, here’s some more advice you didn’t ask for. You and I work different shifts so I can’t help you much. You might hope this gets you off on the right foot here, solving this case on your first day.”

“I don’t—”

“Let me finish. It won’t. These guys are all all right, but they, most of them, have been burned by the Homicide fires too many times to appreciate any gift horse. You get what I’m saying?”

“All I did—”

“Salt, I don’t care. They don’t care. They’ll be lookin’ all up in your mouth and hoping that the next dog you hear barkin’ will be at a wrong tree. They want you burned and scarred, tattooed and branded to their brotherhood. Do not be talking about how you knew how to find this guy by the burrs in a barking dog’s tail.” Hamm lowered her head. “And, I’m sorry. I didn’t check to find out if you’d had time to get a radio. My bad. And yours. You got to stand up for yourself, even with me. And thanks for being stand-up and not mentioning it.”

Salt hung her father’s coat on a plastic peg beside the desk and sat down in the chair, which dropped suddenly to one side due to a missing wheel. She opened the gray metal bin above the desk and the drawers below, all empty except for some brittle rubber bands and bent paper clips. She picked up the thin file labeled “Michael Richard Anderson—861430587,” her first assigned case. Other than the autopsy report, which listed the cause and manner of death as “Accidental drug overdose,” the initial uniform reporting form, a short investigative report by the responding detective, and an envelope of scene photos, there wasn’t much to the file except for the new information that had prompted the follow-up Huff was assigning to her. The recent documents were first in the file and described the circumstances under which a new statement had been obtained from Curtis Dwayne Stone, who was doing time in federal custody. Salt looked up from the document and said the name out loud, “Stone.” She’d left The Homes, but it seemed The Homes would not leave her. She had been the one who’d arrested Curtis Stone.

Under federal sentencing guidelines, those convicted of federal crimes were eligible to have their time reduced if they gave reliable information about other criminals and crimes.

“So, my man Stone, you’re snitching now,” she said, turning to the next document, Stone’s signed statement.

She pushed a switch over the cubicle desk and a florescent light flickered across the transcribed pages.

Q: For the record, my name is Lawrence Jones, Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I am recording this interview. Please state your name.

A: Stone.

Q: Curtis Dwayne Stone?

Salt lifted her gaze from the page, closing her eyes, her memory reigniting the odor of gunpowder, replaying the bleating of a sheep. Stone had been The Homes gang member who was feared most. In her rookie days she'd witnessed the destitution of his childhood, and then it seemed he had determined it would be better for her to fear rather than pity him. Over the years he'd found opportunities to try to threaten her—finally last year assaulting her and her home. “Stone,” she said, and returned to the page.

Q: Do you have knowledge of illegal drug sales, prostitution, and child exploitation by the individual who owned Sam's Chicken Shack and a strip club, Toy Dolls?

A: I don't know about no child exploitation, but, yeah, I know about drugs and hoes.

Q: Mr. Stone, please describe what you know. What is the name of the man who you knew to be running those businesses?

A: John.

Q: Last name?

A: That's all his name I know. They call him “Tall John.” I can't remember if I heard any other name he was called.

Q: Please describe the man you know as John.

A: White, tall.

Q: Any marks or scars?

A: He look just like anybody.

Q: How did you come to know John?

A: I was hungry. He got me in back of Sam's trying to get some bags of peanuts off a truck.

Q: How old were you then?

A: I guess about twelve.

It would have been right around the time she'd first encountered him, when she was a rookie. Christmas, him in his thin sweatshirt, his shoulders like the unfolding wings of a vulture. She'd tried to find his guardian instead of taking him to juvenile and found only a dreadful, sad apartment where he and other children were neglected. Salt pressed the length of her palm to the scar.

Q: Who did you live with?

A: I stayed with lots of people.

Q: What did he do when he caught you?

A: He said I had to work to pay for stealing.

Q: What kind of work did you do for John?

A: Work around the bars.

Q: Did you go to school?

A: Sometimes.

Q: What work did John have you doing?

A: Whatever he tell me to do.

Q: What did he tell you to do?

A: Clean the bathrooms, sweep, pick up trash.

Q: What else?

A: Go with men.

Q: Do you mean you had sex with men for money?

A: I didn't have no sex with them.

Q: What did you do when you went with the men?

A: They gave me blowjobs.

Q: Are you saying that they performed oral sex on you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you do oral sex on them?

A: If I had to.

Q: What about anal sex?

A: What about it?

Q: Did John send you with men that wanted anal sex?

A: I'm not that way.

Q: Did some men put their penis in your anus when you were twelve years old?

A: Yeah.

Salt looked away from the file again, stood and strode to the back wall that was lined with file cabinets labeled by year. "Damn." She drew a breath, looked down the long wall of file cabinets, then turned back to the flickering cubicle.

Q: Did John have other people who exchanged sex for money?

A: He had hoes, some of the dancers.

Q: How long did you work for John?

A: Until Man let me stay with him.

Q: By Man you mean James Simmons?

A: Yeah, he hid me from John. He looked out for me and had his boys look out if John came around.

In The Homes the gang was headed by charismatic, handsome Man and included his brother and others, mostly young men who'd grown up together in The Homes. Some were now dead and some, like Stone, were in prison, put there by her. Man had always kept a safe distance from direct contact with the drugs and guns. Man, with his wide smile, and Lil D, with a birthmark the shape of a continent on his neck. Lil D, whose mother's murder had, in part, led to Salt's assignment to Homicide.

Q: Did John sell drugs?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you see drugs?

A: Yes. He the head junk man in this city then.

Q: By junk you mean heroin?

A: Yeah, H.

Q: Do you know if he still deals?

A: Word that he don't have no direct connection after them Black Mafia brothers moved in. But back then he deal some H. He still run hoes, but he big money now, runnin' high-dolla bitches out his clubs.

Q: What other businesses is he involved with?

A: Now he got dealing with Sam's and the Blue Room, Magic Girls, and maybe some white club somewhere.

Q: What do you know about the death of Mike Anderson, the singer and guitar player?

A: I know Tall John give that blues boy a hot pop.

Q: How do you know that?

A: 'Cause he told me. He said that's what he do when people that work for him don't do what he say.

Q: Did you see him give heroin to Mike Anderson? How did he know Mike?

A: That blues boy worked in one of the clubs, singing and playing the guitar. Got his H that way. I didn't ever see John changing junk for cash personally. Just saw the product in his office.

Q: When was the last time you had contact with or saw John?

A: Right before I was locked up last year. He pass by me all the time in the street.

Q: You said you hid from him.

A: Not after I got grown.

Q: Is there anything more you can tell me about illegal activity?

A: That's all I've got to say.

Before closing the file, she turned to the back and Stone's booking photo. In The Homes the faces of young men grew hard and sharp, calcified, their bones fixed like knives, a fearful hardening with things you could never know, things they didn't even tell themselves. The scowly surfaces glistening in sunlight or streetlight. No bit of softness.

Salt closed the file, stood, and put on the coat over her torn clothes.

Head lowered to the phone that he held in his left hand, Huff raised his eyes when Salt appeared in his office doorway. "Yes, I realize the pressure you must be facing, Councilwoman," he said, swiping his free hand over his scalp and rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling.

"The press has been all over us, too." He leaned his head back on his shoulders and closed his eyes, listening. "Detective Wills is one of our best . . .

"No, we are certain this case is not related to the Solquist murders. I realize they were your constituents . . .

"Of course the neighborhood is upset. When a crime like this occurs, everyone wants to know it was not random . . .

"No, we don't give out the detectives' phone numbers to anyone. The chief is your best bet." He held the handset away from his ear as an indistinguishable but loud woman's voice emanated from the earpiece. He put the phone back to his ear. "I probably will enjoy walking a beat again."

Huff spoke to the loudly buzzing dial tone, "Thank you, Councilwoman Mars," dropped the phone into its cradle, and looked up at Salt while slamming a desk drawer shut. The room smelled suspiciously of microwave popcorn. "Now what can I do for you? I just love me some women in my business." Most of the files stacked on his desk were bright green, while purple, blue, and yellow ones were piled on the floor, cabinets, and chair. There was no place to sit.

"I guess you finished reading the file? You cold?" He pointed at her coat.

"You gave me a very cold case." She stood in the doorway.

"You arrested Stone. You know The Homes. Your reputation preceded you and around here no good deed goes unpunished." Huff grinned.

"The limitations of any statute that could apply are up on everything but murder, so the feds don't care about the rest, the child prostitution, the drugs?"

"You got it. They took the statement and handed it to us. They got bigger fish to fry."

"Did anyone even bother to find out who 'John' is?"

"The Shack is owned by an LLC—I don't remember what name, but if you find the company it's not likely

you'll find John's name on the license. That's why they now call you detective, Detective."

"You also know Stone tried to kill me."

"And now you'll be helping him by verifying the information he gave in the statement. You're right. None of the accusations, except the murder, mean anything."

"How much of his time will get cut if I can corroborate his information?"

"Oh, about the amount he'd do for assaulting a police officer. Interesting dilemma. I like a sense of humor in a detective."

"Which of the other comedians will I be working with?"

Huff stood up and stretched with his hands on his lower back. "You mean for a partner? Let's see how you do alone first. Think of it as another chance to prove yourself. See if that dog luck holds."

Salt turned from the door just as a previously teetering stack of green files on his desk began a slow-motion slide to the floor.

As Salt came out, Rosie hung up the phone, the paperback she'd been reading spread facedown on the desk. The cover illustration depicted a bare-chested man with flowing blond hair clutching a buxom brunette.

Salt pointed to the book. "Good read?"

Rosie swept her hair to one side of her heavily made-up face—pancake foundation, blue eye shadow, red, glossy lipstick. "I'm a romantic. What can I say?" Rosie, legally Roger Polk, had claimed her new name and transgender status two years previously, and was in the process—counseling, hormones—of completing the transition.

"I think I'm going to need some help," Salt told her. "My computer isn't hooked up. I don't know where the supplies and forms are kept. Apparently Sarge wants me to learn the ropes on my own."

Rosie leaned back in the chair, eyes resting on the book, sighed, then waved an imaginary wand. "Actually, feng shui is my specialty. Just leave it to me. Did they give you Rita's desk? I thought so. By tomorrow it will be like a fairy godfather-soon-to-be-mother has come to your rescue. Oh, and don't mind Sarge; by the way, don't call him Sarge. He's just a sweetie. I have such a crush on him. Well, that's another story. You just go do your girl detective thing. And I'm sure you get this all the time, but you have the most unusual blue eyes. I love what you're doing with your hair."

Salt made a note to herself to cut some of the flowers that grew close to the sheep paddock. She was almost certain Rosie would love the big pink camellias.

Handcuffed and ankle-shackled, Stone shuffled into view on the other side of the heavy clear-plastic partition. The red jumpsuit, the prison uniform that signifies the wearer is mentally ill, hung loosely on his frame. His hair, intricately done in cornrows, formed a galaxy pattern. He sat down and propped his manacled arms on the steel counter. In the center of the partition was a five-by-five-inch square stippled with nail-sized holes. The air smelled of iron, of flesh-piercing slivers, of tears in the universe.

Stone kept his head turned to the graffiti scratched into the paint on the side wall of their divided booth.

"I've read the statement you gave to the FBI agent."

Stone continued his perusal of the scratchings.

“If I can find somebody else who knows that John meant to kill the bluesman, and if your information leads me to an arrest, you’re eligible to get your time cut.”

“Ain’t no ‘eligible’ about it,” he replied. His voice sounded strangled. “So what you got to do with what I’m telling the FBI guy?” Before she could answer, he turned and faced her. She’d thought it was because of the barrier that separated them that his voice sounded different, but it wasn’t the Plexiglas or the holes. His mouth had a caved-in look and was ringed with teeth-sized scars. His lips folded inward until he opened his mouth as wide as seemed possible, showing off his teeth, all of which were gone or broken off. He turned his loose lips up in a horrible grin, then flapped them together, making a wet, smacking sound. The shouts of men accompanied by the sounds of metal striking metal came from the hallway behind Stone.

“I’ve been assigned to investigate the death of Mike Anderson, the bluesman.”

Stone went back to examining the wall hieroglyphics. He brought up his shackled hands to touch a finger to a piece of a word. His eyes slid to her in a sideways stare. “That’s funny. You end up workin’ to get me free.”

“You are the second person to see humor in this,” Salt told him, “but the first wasn’t me.”

There was a sudden moldy refrigerant odor, and the close air turned quickly cold.

“So the white bitch cop put me in here now gonna help get me out.” He made a click with his cheek.

“It’s been given to me. It’s my job.” Her hand rested on the shield at her waist.

“Oh, and I do know you do your job,” he said, then seemed to draw back, realizing what he said and what it might mean for him.

Salt forced herself to lean forward, close to the dirty hard plastic. “There’s that,” she said, “and also that I may be able to arrest John.”

“How you gonna prove what happened ten years ago?” Stone’s voice growled from his battered mouth.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here, to ask you.”

“All I know is what John tell me. He said he gave the bluesman bad junk ’cause he tried to get out of a deal. I thought it was about singing and playing in the club.” Stone brought up his clenched, manacled fists. “Is that enough?”

“Who cut John’s dope for him?”

“Back then it was Man.”

“You ever know John’s last name?”

“Don’t nobody have no real last name ’round The Homes.”

“Was anyone else involved in John’s dealings with Anderson?”

Stone stretched back, his long body in a straight line, his bound arms above his head. “Maybe somebody the

bluesman played with. I can't remember all from back then."

Down the long hall behind Stone, at the far end, an inmate made wide swipes with a mop, accompanied by a faint but distinct tap each time the mop end hit the bottom of the wall. His rhythm was constant and steady. He faced the other direction but was backing closer and closer.

A sudden clank from the door behind Salt startled her as it began its motorized draw back into the metal wall frame. "Time's up," said the gray-shirted officer waiting on the other side of the door. Another guard appeared behind Stone. Salt stood. "Can you give him my card?" She pulled a generic blue card, on which she'd written her mobile number, from her jacket pocket and held it out. The officer took it and unlocked a tray to the other side where his counterpart retrieved it.

Stone had stayed seated, the fingers of both his hands again touching the letters and crude drawings on the sides of the space, like a blind man reading Braille. The guard behind him gave him a tap. "Time's up." Stone stuck out his long, thick tongue and licked the scratched steel wall.

OUT OF THE BLUES BY TRUDY NAN BOYCE PDF

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OUT OF THE BLUES BY TRUDY NAN BOYCE PDF

“A fresh, gritty debut. Boyce unveils one of the best new series characters in ages. . . A book that combines fast-paced suspense with moving insights.”—#1 New York Times-bestselling author Lisa Gardner

From an author with more than thirty years’ experience in the Atlanta Police Department comes a riveting procedural debut introducing an unforgettable heroine.

On her first day as a newly minted homicide detective, Sarah “Salt” Alt is given the cold-case murder of a blues musician whose death was originally ruled an accidental drug overdose. Now new evidence has come to light that he may have been given a hot dose intentionally. And this evidence comes from a convicted felon hoping to trade his knowledge for shortened prison time . . . a man who Salt herself put behind bars.

In a search that will take her into the depths of Atlanta’s buried wounds—among the city’s homeless, its politically powerful churches, commerce and industry, and the police department itself—Salt probes her way toward the truth in a case that has more at stake than she ever could have imagined. At once a vivid procedural and a penetrating examination of what it means to be cop, *Out of the Blues* is a remarkable crime debut.

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Review

Praise for *Out of the Blues*

“What’s this? A female cop who doesn’t look like a runway model and doesn’t go mano a mano with psychotic killers? Trudy Nan Boyce may be a first-time author, but she was in law enforcement for more than 30 years, which should explain why the stationhouse personnel and forensic details in *Out of the Blues* feel so authentic.”—Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Exceptional . . . I figured authenticity would thrum from the dialogue, reality would pulse from the plot and the blues would be the narrative’s soundtrack. I was correct on all counts.”—*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

“*Out of the Blues* introduces an appealing character, Detective Sarah Alt [“Salt”] . . . Atlanta locales and history are a recurring element in the narrative and a pleasant feature of the book [and] Boyce describes these places with colorful clarity. . . Salt’s next sleuthing adventure should be much anticipated.”—*Associated Press*

“Boyce was a beat cop, homicide detective, hostage negotiator and lieutenant in Atlanta before retiring in 2008. She knows policing. She writes with intensity and flair and wit. This combination has resulted in an irresistible procedural with a winning protagonist. And the bonus, the lagniappe, is the seductive way Boyce writes about music, particularly the blues.”—Shelf Awareness

“A fresh, gritty debut. Boyce unveils one of the best new series characters in ages, an Atlanta detective with a haunting past but complete dedication to working the streets. A book that combines fast-paced suspense with moving insights.”—#1 New York Times-bestselling author Lisa Gardner

“Boyce has a season’s veteran’s way of creative irresistible characters . . . Out of the Blues is filled with authentic details about police work.”—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“Less whodunit than odyssey, as Salt—clearly bent . . . on fixing the world one sociopath at a time—navigates anti-woman prejudice in her unit, anti-cop sentiment in her hometown, and the steaming corruption that reaches from Atlanta’s lower depths to its very top.”—Kirkus Reviews

“Salt’s character combines quick intelligence and a refreshing, confident humanity that wins allies from all walks of life, and Boyce’s fluid southern voice is an alluring contrast to the stark realities she skillfully evokes.”—Booklist

“[A] moody, character-driven series debut.”—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“Out of the Blues takes the reader for an exciting ride through old Atlanta with brand new homicide detective, Sarah Alt, aka “Salt” as our guide. Salt is brave and imaginative, salty and sweet, and her creator—former Atlanta homicide detective, Trudy Nan Boyce—uses her impressive descriptive power to make our ride colorful, gothic, and irresistibly Southern.”—#1 New York Times-bestselling author Joseph Wambaugh

“There’s a new star in crime fiction . . . Boyce explores the dark underbelly of Atlanta in her excellent procedural. . . . [A] stunning debut.”—RT Book Reviews

“Out of the Blues is a stunning debut. Trudy Boyce’s background in law enforcement is on vivid display, and she writes with passion, heart, and a powerful no-holds-barred voice you won’t soon forget.”—Linda Castillo, New York Times-bestselling author of *After the Storm*

“Grit, heart, smarts, and authenticity—Detective Sarah Alt has them, and so does *Out of the Blues*. A terrific mystery by talented newcomer Trudy Nan Boyce.” —Meg Gardiner, Edgar Award-winning author of *Phantom Instinct*

“As a former cop on the seedier and more dangerous streets of Atlanta, Trudy Nan Boyce has probably seen it all, and she shares it with us in this compelling debut novel. Salt is both gutsy and contemplative, and when her ‘cold’ case heats up, she’s ready for the challenge.” —Margaret Maron, award-winning author of *Designated Daughters*

About the Author

Trudy Nan Boyce received her Ph.D. in community counseling before becoming a police officer for the City of Atlanta. During her more-than-thirty-year career she served as a beat cop, homicide detective, senior hostage negotiator, and lieutenant. Boyce retired from the police department in 2008 and still lives in Atlanta.

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Uncovering

The girl climbed the tree so she could sit in her spot, look out through the limbs and leaves, and pretend about an imaginary dog. When she patted the pecan leaves, they gave off a green peppery smell. It was like breathing the breath of the tree. The jaggedy streaks of gray bark where she sat were like the tree's hard fur.

Wearing conspiratorial smiles, her mother and brother had waved from the car windows, knowing that she had been headed to the tree as they started out the long driveway around the house. Later she realized, when she saw the note on the table, that he must have thought she'd gone with them, because it wasn't long after the dust from the car settled that the gunshot sounded from the house and she dropped from the tree, forgetting almost forever the longed-for dog.

Frantic, she couldn't think how to clear his eyes of the blood. She couldn't leave him to get a cloth. Her shirt? She used her fingers to try and wipe the sticky globs from her father's eyes. His head in her lap, she cried for him to help her know what to do. He was a cop. He should know how to handle this emergency. The gun, black and heavy, lay next to the dusty rose bed skirt. She thought if he could somehow just see, he'd be able to help her, but he quit moving, his groans stopped, and she held his head, blood seeping through her red shorts and into the ruby dahlias and violet peonies embroidered in the rug.

And then their return. Their faces as they held the balloons at the door of the room. Their fallen faces. And the note left beside the cake for her tenth birthday.

No one in her family ever claimed to know where the old steamer trunk had come from. The trunk had been painted over in a flat country blue that had faded to gray, the original color revealed beneath the leather clasps that were now brittle, one completely worn through. Smudged and blurred, some brush strokes had come through the top layer of paint, "ST . . ." but the rest was faded. She'd moved the trunk out of the upstairs closet when the carpenters were doing renovations and had been using it as a nightstand beside the downstairs bedroom window. Sometimes thinking right before she fell asleep that she would get around to opening it, she'd go over the items she remembered might still be in it.

Removing the lamp and embroidered runner and letting the metal lock fall, she was eager about the coat. Beneath some quilts and baby clothes it was there in its original Rich's box, wrapped in fragile, yellowing tissue. The Atlanta department store had been gone a long time, bought out by Macy's, but the coat still had the tag attached to the sleeve with thread.

Looking at herself in the age-flecked floor mirror, Sarah Alt thought that even though she wasn't as tall as her dad, it was still a good fit. Twenty-five years after it was purchased, the tan trench coat now fit her, falling to calf length on her slim five-foot-nine frame—her father's coat, one he'd never worn.

Welcome to Homicide

Known throughout the department as “Rosie,” the large man in transition with red-polished nails and long, blond, waved hair and wearing a ruffled white blouse sat at the receptionist’s desk and buzzed her in. “The code is number 1524,” she said without looking up from the paperback she was reading.

“Thanks.” Salt held her father’s coat as she punched the numbers on the keypad and turned the handle of the inner door to the Homicide Unit.

Rosie mumbled, “Keep your chin up.”

During the ten years Salt had been in uniform, a beat cop, she’d been to the Unit many times, making statements as the first uniform on murder and assault scenes, providing information from the streets to detectives. But this, this was her first day, first shift as a newly sworn detective. A shiny gold-tone badge clipped to the belt on her slacks had replaced her old silver-finish shield, the one she’d worn for ten years of uniform patrol, most of them spent in The Homes, the most densely populated housing project in Atlanta. She’d worked there so long that it had felt at times more like home than her own. Now she heard talk that the city was making plans to tear down all the projects, including The Homes.

Two detectives, one white, one black, both on the small end of medium in height, wearing short-sleeved shirts and bright ties, were standing at the front cubicles in the rows of workspaces. “Well, well, well,” exclaimed the black guy she knew as Daniels. “Lookee what the dog done dragged in.”

“Yes in-deed-dee,” the other guy said. “Got us a brand-new big-city detective.”

“I got your big city,” she shifted the coat to shake hands. “They told me to report to Sergeant Huff.”

There were caricatures of the Three Stooges on Daniels’ tie and Barney Fife’s face on the other guy’s. “He’s around here somewhere.” Daniels motioned toward the back of the big office space.

“I think I saw him go in the break room,” said the guy with the Barney tie, pointing to the back right.

The Homicide room was huge and smelled of burned coffee and mildewed paper. Thirty or so gray cubicles filled the center space, less than a quarter occupied most of the time; only the detectives from the on-duty shift were working, and some of them were taking their weekend days off or were out in the streets. The walls were lined with supervisors’ offices, interview rooms, and rows of five-drawer file cabinets in mismatched grays, tan, and military green colors. Salt wound her way through the aisles past the attached desks stacked with murder books and decorated with personal touches: framed photos, patriotic posters, military memorabilia, and action heroes. She walked past Wills’ desk, noting with a smile the “Dog Is My Copilot” bumper sticker on his file bin and photos of Violet and Pansy, his Rottweilers. She and Bernard Wills had begun a relationship last year, and while he’d encouraged her to test for detective, neither of them had anticipated working the same unit, or “squad,” as Homicide was called, much less the same shift. Wills’ partner, Gardner, ever optimistic, ever ready with a look-on-the-bright-side comment, had the cubicle across from his. A photo of his garden hung on the gray-fabric cubicle wall.

She found Sergeant Huff, whom she knew from having talked to him on a couple of cases, in the unfortunately bright break room peering into a humming microwave. She whisked her fingers through her dark hair, which she wore short with a messy part on the left, a part made permanent by a bullet scar through her scalp.

“Sergeant Huff,” she announced herself.

The microwave pinged and the heavysset sergeant took out a plastic bowl with a blue lid. “You’re taller in clothes.” He sat down at one of the metal and veneer tables and took a plastic spoon from his shirt pocket.

“Yes, sir, five nine in shoes.” She pulled at her new cream-colored linen jacket and navy slacks. “In case . . .” Her voice trailed off as she realized she was standing at attention like she was back at roll call in the precinct. She tried to cover by slumping.

“My goddamn wife is starving me here. I’m forty-five years old and she’s feeding me New Age hippie mush.”

“I called Lieutenant Pierce yesterday to ask about my assignment and he told me to report to you today at four p.m.” Salt sat down at the table, draping the coat across her lap.

Head lowered to the bowl, Huff shoveled the food into his mouth with the little spoon as he talked. “Doctor says I’ve got to lower my cholesterol, lose weight, quit smoking, ‘limit my alcohol intake’”—he made air quote marks—“reduce stress, exercise.” His close-cut brown hair had receded to the middle of his scalp. The bowl held something that looked like beef stew but with no aroma. “So the missus” shovel, “packed my lunch bag with an apple, which I ate on my way to work thirty minutes ago, and this fuckin’ tofu stew,” shovel, shovel. He tossed the spoon into the empty bowl—it hopped. “I just finished my lunch and I got eight hours left in the shift. Now that’s stress.”

“Sarge . . .” began Salt.

“‘Sarge,’ don’t call me Sarge. I hate being called Sarge. Sounds like some fuckin’ war movie. Call me Huff or Charlie or Shithead but don’t call me Sarge. Nobody calls me Sarge.” His belly popped from behind a large Harley-Davidson belt buckle as he pushed back from the table.

“Hey, Sarge.” Daniels stuck his head in the door. “We got incoming.”

Sergeant Huff leaned back, belched loudly, then stood and threw his plastic bowl into the sink. “I’ll show you your desk. You’ll get the same one as the only other woman ever worked Homicide nights in this city.” He led her through the cubicle farm. “She worked kids’ murders, something wrong with her head. She was nuts, totally, but for some reason they let her stay till she retired. She only got one or two cases a year. Went out on all the dead babies.”

“Sar—” Salt stopped at a barren desk across from one festooned with a rainbow flag and a purple flag. “Can I have this desk?” She pointed to the empty spot.

“If you’re thinking you might want to partner with Felton, our gay caballero there”—he pointed to a photo of two men in a frame on the desk with the flags—“forget it. Every man here wants him, as a detective partner, that is. You probably already heard he’s the best homicide dick in the city, state, and a contender for best in the nation, maybe the world. But he won’t partner.”

“Can I have the desk?”

“No.”

At a cubicle far from the entrance and far from the center of the room, Huff stopped and unclipped the radio from his belt. “Go ahead for Homicide,” he spoke into the handheld.

“Zone Three is requesting Homicide to 441 Brown Avenue on a body found in a warehouse.” Homicide dispatch sounded less urgent than Salt was used to from the beat dispatches.

Salt positioned herself in the Sarge's sight and pointed to herself, requesting "Me?"

Sarge shook his head at her. "Homicide units 4125 and 4126 will be responding," he advised dispatch. "Daniels, Barney," he shouted across the room. Turned out the guy with the Barney Fife tie was named Barney.

"4125 and -26 copy," the detectives acknowledged the call.

Daniels' and Barney's heads bobbed across the tops of the cubicles as they walked toward the door.

"This was the chick's desk," Huff said. "Now it's yours."

Other than the desk, a stained chair, and an old tower PC and monitor, the workspace was empty, except for a manila file lying on the desk. Huff picked up the file. "This is also yours. Wasn't a murder and now it might be. You'll start with that. Welcome to Homicide." He dropped the file on the desk, turned his back to her, and walked away.

Before she could hang up her coat, fat fingers were on her wrist, soft, strong and insistent. Salt turned as Detective Hamm from day watch grabbed her and began pulling her toward the exit. "You're coming with me. We've got another one."

"But Sar . . . Huff said—"

"Fuck Sarge. My regular partner is off today so I get to pick. Even if he was here, I'd make sure you went with us. These guys are going to put you through the wringer, but I'm going to give you some starch first."

Salt followed the lumbering detective, whose wide buttocks shifted and quivered up and down and side to side, to the elevators.

"How's the head?" Hamm asked as she hit the call button. Hamm and her partner, who matched her in girth, had been the responding investigators to the incident last year when Salt had been shot. Charissa Hamm was the only woman, until today, currently working Homicide, also known as the Hat Squad. Hamm worked days. Salt, as a rookie detective, would work nights, four p.m. to midnight, but often the three shifts worked scenes together if a case was close to one of the shift changes or was a "red ball," as the high-profile cases were known. An Atlanta native, Hamm had solid ties to her black working-class community, church, and high school friends—connections that had proved helpful to her both in her career and in solving cases.

"Fuck." Hamm cursed the malfunctioning elevators and headed to the stairwell. Then the elevator pinged and the overhead panel lit up. They turned back but the elevator doors didn't open and it scrolled up to the next floor. "Double fuck." She slapped the wall beside the call button. "Your head?" Hamm repeated, her voice competing with their footsteps echoing in the concrete and steel stairwell, each floor marked with conflicting floor numbers, the "4" in red and "5" in black on the same door.

"Better," answered Salt, lifting a lock of hair that covered the scar that began at her hairline.

The neighborhood was a mixture of middle-class homes, a few houses falling to lower middle, and seventies-built apartment complexes, some designated as government assists. A dog barked continuously, its howling seeming to come from differing directions. The residences backed onto a wooded area, bisected by a ravine that was owned by the city's watershed management. Salt cocked her ear, listening to the dog.

"And the chick detectives aren't ever fat." Hamm was sitting in the driver's seat, legs out the open door, pulling on old-fashioned rubbers over black loafers that were sprung at the sides, her brown, wide foot

overrunning the leather. She zipped up a gear bag, tossed it in the backseat, and grabbed the Handie-Talkie off the console. “Fuckin’ TV makes juries expect a detective to look like—well, like you, Blue Eyes. You’re gonna ruin those new shoes.” She tipped her head toward Salt’s spotless navy athletic shoes.

“I bought a couple of pairs in different colors. They can be thrown in the washer,” Salt said.

“Smart girl. Just the same, get a pair of these.” Hamm pointed to the overshoes. “They’re cheap and will save having to clean shit, piss, and other body fluids off your shoes.”

“I love it. Just us girls talking about shoes,” Salt said as they walked toward the crime scene.

They followed the uniform who’d told them that the body, that of a young boy, was in the nearby ravine. Spring rains had come almost daily and made the ground soft and covered with dark, steaming layers of composting leaves and newly green tangles of briars and vines.

“Careful,” warned the officer as he led them to a part of the gully where the decline was less treacherous. In spite of her heft, Hamm’s step was sure as she gracefully navigated the roots and muck going down the bank. Once on the bottom they could see north up the ravine to where other uniforms had begun to string the yellow tape, marking off the scene at the tops of the banks and on both sides. People, including more than a few children, were starting to gather along the tape on the side where the woods met the backyards. A dirty blanket had been hoisted between two trees as a makeshift curtain so the spectators could not see the body.

Uniform supervisors and the rest of the two shifts from Homicide began arriving. Salt spotted Sergeant Huff and the crime scene techs. More people milled behind the tape. “Where’s my baby?” One woman ran from the group as word spread that it was the body of a child. Another uniform stood to one side with an elderly can man and his industrial-sized plastic bags of recyclables. “Grunge found the victim and started yelling,” said the first officer, nodding at the old man.

Salt and Hamm stood at the blanket, which smelled of old garbage. The dog’s barking kept up, coming from somewhere north of them. “Ivory need to shut up,” someone said from above. Overhead, the limbs of a massive pecan tree spread up and out, shading thirty yards in both directions. The ravine bed was dark with past years’ slough and brackish puddles. The banks became increasingly dry closer to the top and were covered with tiny green sprigs, the fallen flowers of pollen from the big tree overhead. The woman who was looking for her child screamed from the street, “I can’t find him. Help me, somebody!”

“This is going to get bad. I’m going to go set up a command post in the parking lot,” Huff said and pointed above. Hamm nodded and went around the blanket. “I want you to come with me,” he told Salt, “but go take a look first.” He nodded to the other side of the blanket. The dog’s bark was more insistent. Salt’s shoe made a sucking sound as she turned.

The light-skinned boy was face-down on his right cheek, hunched with his buttocks bare, tan shorts around his calves. His hands were positioned as if he were going to push up. Except for some rust-colored smears on his backside, there was no obvious trauma. “You didn’t have to see this,” Hamm said in a low voice, not looking up from her note taking.

“I know.” Salt left her and followed Huff up and out of the ravine. “Merrily We Roll Along” played over and over from an ice cream truck’s plinky speaker. The sun shone through the canopy of mostly water oaks, their small leaves whirl-a-jigging in the bright breeze. Huff assigned the six investigators and five uniforms to a grid search for evidence and witnesses. They were to interview anyone and everyone and make notes.

No one had to say it, but the Atlanta Child Murders were on everyone’s mind. From 1979 to 1981 more than

twenty black boys and girls were killed, and their deaths still haunted the city, especially the APD. Atlanta had been forced into a conversation about race then while the city's police tried to avoid distraction from the work. They finally broke the case when Wayne Williams, a young black man, was arrested. He had lured the children with the promise of a music audition. Even though the murders had stopped after he was arrested, and physical evidence solidified his guilt, some people weren't convinced the murderers hadn't been the KKK or other racist crazies.

Salt was assigned to search the ravine north of the scene. The leather shoulder holster crisscrossed her new shirt—she'd left her jacket in the car and hadn't thought to remind anyone that she'd not been issued a Handie-Talkie with a detective frequency. She began her part of the search, looking back once to see Hamm kneeling next to the dead child. She realized that she'd been assigned an area where she'd be least likely to encounter any witnesses or evidence, but it felt right to her to head in the direction of the barking that had been distracting her since their arrival. Reminding herself to stay focused on the terrain, to look for anything that could be significant, even if it just looked like trash or newly turned leaves, she slowed her quickened step toward the dog, his bark becoming raspy.

The murdered children had begun turning up right after her father had died. Scared, she'd gotten the idea that the children wouldn't have been killed if he'd still been alive and on the job. Her brother, who was only seven at the time, talked about the murders constantly and wouldn't go to sleep in his own bed.

She came to a place where the ravine rim was about eight feet above and found freshly turned marks in the red clay bank. The dog's barks were closer and coming from directly above. Pulling herself up by tree roots, she climbed out into a backyard Bible grotto. There were homemade signs everywhere warning of the coming Rapture, of hellfire, of the opportunity for salvation and predictions of doom. A white dog barked at the bottom of wooden steps that led to the back of a house. He turned his head, almost as if he were expecting her, wondering what took her so long, then turned back to bark at a screen door at the top of the steps. He was a large dog, uncommonly clean, more cream than white, some shepherd mix with a plummy tail held high.

"Ivory," she called, remembering the comment from the crowd. A doll's head was nailed to a tree trunk on her right. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" read a framed hand-lettered message, dangling from a tree limb by a sash.

"Here Ivory."

The dog barked up the steps.

At a bricked-off blueberry bush there was a stake in the form of a cross, draped with a necklace of baby pacifiers. "Jesus wept" was painted in red on a flat stone. The sides of the yard were enclosed by pines bent inward, heavy with kudzu so thick the sounds from the neighborhood were muffled, almost shut out.

"Ivory." She lowered her voice.

Through more signs, some hanging from tree branches, there was a path of sorts, bordered by toy parts, broken trucks, pieces of balls, plastic blocks, a pink doll's bed.

Ivory held his tail high, his front paws on the second step. The back of the house had been covered with chicken wire through which had been braided what looked like old clothes. It gave the appearance of quilting. Ivory was well groomed, his coat smooth and lush, but his tail had picked up some catkins that clung to the long, feathery fur. She approached him, patting her leg, which he sniffed, and he ceased barking. He allowed her to rub his ears and pat down his back. She was careful at his tail, pulling at one of the sprigs

caught in his fur, examining it in the palm of her hand.

The door above opened. An elderly man wearing a brown pin-striped suit and red tie stood holding a worn Bible. He began to laugh. He was small and stiff in his composure, his skin the same color as his suit. He bent to his knees laughing, and as he did, an enormous presence came from behind him, rushing past and launching from the porch toward Salt.

She managed a break fall onto her back and tried to use the momentum to continue into a backward roll, but it was all she could do to get her knees between herself and the huge man before he was on her, one of his hands at her throat and the other clawing toward the gun beneath her arm. She became aware of the sound of her own breath and his heavy grunt, both amplified and muffled like the roar from inside a seashell. One of his exhalations filled her nose and mouth with the taste and smell of sour milk. She felt the thick cotton threads of his shirt fabric as she grabbed his collar for leverage. She pushed the soles of her feet against his stomach, pulling his chest down and pushing up, and used his weight to propel him over and away as she rolled up into a ready combat stance.

“Fuck,” she said when she realized that on her first day as a detective she’d made a mistake worse than the stupidest rookie. She’d failed to check out a radio. “Call 911,” she implored the old man, while she tried to catch a breath and crouched in anticipation of the man now rising from the ground. If she’d just told Hamm to wait for her to grab a radio, she could be calling for help. She scanned the yard and sides of the house for a way out as he got up, his eyes searching the sky, unfocused like he was blind, yet he aimed himself at her. The dog was quiet now, but the old man threw back his head and either laughed or howled as she sidestepped and her assailant stumbled past, turned, and rushed her again. Salt pivoted, looking for some advantage as the big man came at her again. But her left foot caught on Christmas lights strung at knee level between two bushes. Before she could untangle, he wrapped his meaty arms around her shoulders and chest and was falling to the ground on top of her. As they accelerated downward, the man drew back the fist of his other hand while she fumbled to get a hold of the fat fingers holding her neck. The blow glanced off her left cheek just as she turned her head and leveraged her weight against his fingers and wrist. He grunted and tried to jerk away at an angle that caused him even more pain. She swiveled from under him and into another ready stance.

There was no exit she could see and she was backed against the rim of the ravine, breathing hard, balancing each foot as she moved backward and closer to the edge. If she pulled her weapon she knew he’d go for it, and then she’d have to use it or he’d take it. He ran at her, and at the last instance when he towered over her, his sweat flying into her eyes, she reached out and pulled his arm straight and used it as a fulcrum to throw him over and into the ravine below. Momentum took her with him in as controlled a fall as she could manage, knowing that if she was lucky and quick, she’d have half a chance. As they dropped she pulled at the cuff pouch on her left shoulder strap. Air whooshed from his lungs as they thudded onto the ground. Her fingers found the bracelets as she landed on his back, and before he could inhale she had one cuff around his right wrist. Using the cuff against his wrist bone for pain compliance, she jerked his forearm, bent it back, and snapped the second cuff around his other wrist.

She rolled off him, sat up, and looked at the rim of the bank some eight feet above where the old man, laughing still, stood beside the dog. She touched her stinging cheek with a dirt-streaked hand. Her new pants were torn at one knee, the linen shirt gaped where the buttons had been torn off, but she wasn’t bleeding. She couldn’t see any bloody injury on her assailant, who was rapidly gaining consciousness. She pulled him to a sitting position. His head was shaved to stubble, his face round, pink, and greasy with oily sweat. He had on matching workmen’s tan shirt and pants, new-looking and freshly dirtied from their fight. And there were smears of some unidentifiable substance on the front around his zipper.

“Alone,” he said breathless. “Why they send you alone?”

“What’s your name?” She stood up, trying to control her now trembling arms and legs.

“I am The Baby, Jesus,”

She pushed at his back and pulled him to standing. “What’s his name?” She yelled to the man above, who only put his hand to his waist, now bent with maniacal laughter that echoed down the bank.

The man sang Stevie Wonder’s “Ebony and Ivory” as they walked back down the ravine. He insisted he be identified as “The Baby, Jesus,” not “Baby Jesus” or “The Baby Jesus” but—and he was adamant—it was “The Baby, Jesus.” Fine, Salt just needed his compliance as they trudged to the scene. “Ivory white like me,” he substituted some of the lyrics. His accent was stone black projects, missing verbs and mangled tenses. “You should shoot me.”

She didn’t want to expose TBJ to the crowd and therefore wanted to bring him out north of the scene. When she could see the light color of the blanket curtain in the distance, she veered toward the ravine bank. It was rough going to get the large handcuffed man enough momentum to reach the random footholds. “Left foot,” she said pointing to an exposed root and hefting his arm as he planted his boot. At the top the crowd was thirty yards or so south of where she brought him out, and they weren’t noticed. But they’d come up and out in the common area of the apartments where the command post had now been established.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, given the city’s still painful memories of the Child Murders, that quite a few city politicians and the chief of the department would, along with most of his command staff, converge on the scene, if only to assure the media and community that every resource would be made available to find the culprit. So it was just as the chief exited his car, camera people on his heels getting footage for the evening news, that Salt, abraded and covered in filth, emerged with The Baby, Jesus from between two apartment buildings. “Who’s this, Salt?” Chief asked. When he’d come to her hospital room last year after she’d been shot, he’d already known her street name, a contraction of Sarah Alt as it appeared on her first uniform name tag, “S.Alt.”

“The Baby, Jesus,” answered the suspect for himself.

“Of course, Baby, I thought that was you.” The chief raised his eyebrows at her.

“You need any assistance?” He turned to his driver and motioned for him to attend Salt.

“Sorry, sir,” she said. “This is my first day in Homicide and I hadn’t gotten a radio yet. If you could ask someone to radio for Sergeant Huff, I believe The Baby, Jesus is our suspect.”

“Yes, I killed, murdered, homicided that baby boy there in the gully in the ditch. I choked and crushed the baby right out of his air.”

“Shit,” said the chief.

“Film at six,” said some wiseass from the media scrum as they turned in unison and ran toward their trucks.

“I had to look it up, too,” she told them. “They’re called ‘catkins,’ those little danglers that fall from the pecan trees. It’s why some people don’t want pecan trees—they’re messy in late spring. I have pecan trees at my place, so I noticed. The tree where the boy was found was the only pecan along the ravine.”

“Catkins in the dog’s tail,” repeated Huff.

“But why did you go to that house?” Hamm asked. “Not that I’m in any way complaining. Thank you, Rookie Detective, for clearing this certain-it-was-going-to-be-a-red-ball-on-my-head case, not to mention he’d probably be a serial kind of guy as well.”

“The dog,” Salt said. “The dog kept barking. I heard someone in the crowd say, ‘What’s Ivory barking at?’”

“Did you go in the house?”

“No, Sar—sir. He came out after me.”

“We tried to interview the old man who lives there,” Hamm said. “He’s way, way off his rocker and supposed to be monitored by some home health-care company. I think the house is a group home.”

“Well, I don’t know how you’re going to write this up. Don’t get me wrong, I’m as relieved as Hamm to have this guy in the Gray Bar, but we’re counting on those blood smears on his pants to come back a match for the kid, ’cause flowers in a mutt’s fur ain’t exactly what juries expect in these days of ‘Atlanta CSI.’” He made air quotes again and tipped his chair forward. “Thank God for his spontaneous admission to the chief, crazy as that was.” He shook his head and stood. “I leave the articulation to you ladies.” He tapped the thickening blue file on the conference room table and left the room.

“You’re a mess.” Hamm smiled at her. “A fine mess and I need to get some photos of you before you even wash your face.” She used her Handie-Talkie to call for a tech to take the photos. “But while we wait, Salt, here’s some more advice you didn’t ask for. You and I work different shifts so I can’t help you much. You might hope this gets you off on the right foot here, solving this case on your first day.”

“I don’t—”

“Let me finish. It won’t. These guys are all all right, but they, most of them, have been burned by the Homicide fires too many times to appreciate any gift horse. You get what I’m saying?”

“All I did—”

“Salt, I don’t care. They don’t care. They’ll be lookin’ all up in your mouth and hoping that the next dog you hear barkin’ will be at a wrong tree. They want you burned and scarred, tattooed and branded to their brotherhood. Do not be talking about how you knew how to find this guy by the burrs in a barking dog’s tail.” Hamm lowered her head. “And, I’m sorry. I didn’t check to find out if you’d had time to get a radio. My bad. And yours. You got to stand up for yourself, even with me. And thanks for being stand-up and not mentioning it.”

Salt hung her father’s coat on a plastic peg beside the desk and sat down in the chair, which dropped suddenly to one side due to a missing wheel. She opened the gray metal bin above the desk and the drawers below, all empty except for some brittle rubber bands and bent paper clips. She picked up the thin file labeled “Michael Richard Anderson—861430587,” her first assigned case. Other than the autopsy report, which listed the cause and manner of death as “Accidental drug overdose,” the initial uniform reporting form, a short investigative report by the responding detective, and an envelope of scene photos, there wasn’t much to the file except for the new information that had prompted the follow-up Huff was assigning to her. The recent documents were first in the file and described the circumstances under which a new statement had been obtained from Curtis Dwayne Stone, who was doing time in federal custody. Salt looked up from the document and said the name out loud, “Stone.” She’d left The Homes, but it seemed The Homes would not leave her. She had been the one who’d arrested Curtis Stone.

Under federal sentencing guidelines, those convicted of federal crimes were eligible to have their time reduced if they gave reliable information about other criminals and crimes.

“So, my man Stone, you’re snitching now,” she said, turning to the next document, Stone’s signed statement.

She pushed a switch over the cubicle desk and a florescent light flickered across the transcribed pages.

Q: For the record, my name is Lawrence Jones, Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I am recording this interview. Please state your name.

A: Stone.

Q: Curtis Dwayne Stone?

Salt lifted her gaze from the page, closing her eyes, her memory reigniting the odor of gunpowder, replaying the bleating of a sheep. Stone had been The Homes gang member who was feared most. In her rookie days she’d witnessed the destitution of his childhood, and then it seemed he had determined it would be better for her to fear rather than pity him. Over the years he’d found opportunities to try to threaten her—finally last year assaulting her and her home. “Stone,” she said, and returned to the page.

Q: Do you have knowledge of illegal drug sales, prostitution, and child exploitation by the individual who owned Sam’s Chicken Shack and a strip club, Toy Dolls?

A: I don’t know about no child exploitation, but, yeah, I know about drugs and hoes.

Q: Mr. Stone, please describe what you know. What is the name of the man who you knew to be running those businesses?

A: John.

Q: Last name?

A: That’s all his name I know. They call him “Tall John.” I can’t remember if I heard any other name he was called.

Q: Please describe the man you know as John.

A: White, tall.

Q: Any marks or scars?

A: He look just like anybody.

Q: How did you come to know John?

A: I was hungry. He got me in back of Sam’s trying to get some bags of peanuts off a truck.

Q: How old were you then?

A: I guess about twelve.

It would have been right around the time she’d first encountered him, when she was a rookie. Christmas, him in his thin sweatshirt, his shoulders like the unfolding wings of a vulture. She’d tried to find his guardian

instead of taking him to juvenile and found only a dreadful, sad apartment where he and other children were neglected. Salt pressed the length of her palm to the scar.

Q: Who did you live with?

A: I stayed with lots of people.

Q: What did he do when he caught you?

A: He said I had to work to pay for stealing.

Q: What kind of work did you do for John?

A: Work around the bars.

Q: Did you go to school?

A: Sometimes.

Q: What work did John have you doing?

A: Whatever he tell me to do.

Q: What did he tell you to do?

A: Clean the bathrooms, sweep, pick up trash.

Q: What else?

A: Go with men.

Q: Do you mean you had sex with men for money?

A: I didn't have no sex with them.

Q: What did you do when you went with the men?

A: They gave me blowjobs.

Q: Are you saying that they performed oral sex on you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you do oral sex on them?

A: If I had to.

Q: What about anal sex?

A: What about it?

Q: Did John send you with men that wanted anal sex?

A: I'm not that way.

Q: Did some men put their penis in your anus when you were twelve years old?

A: Yeah.

Salt looked away from the file again, stood and strode to the back wall that was lined with file cabinets labeled by year. "Damn." She drew a breath, looked down the long wall of file cabinets, then turned back to the flickering cubicle.

Q: Did John have other people who exchanged sex for money?

A: He had hoes, some of the dancers.

Q: How long did you work for John?

A: Until Man let me stay with him.

Q: By Man you mean James Simmons?

A: Yeah, he hid me from John. He looked out for me and had his boys look out if John came around.

In The Homes the gang was headed by charismatic, handsome Man and included his brother and others, mostly young men who'd grown up together in The Homes. Some were now dead and some, like Stone, were in prison, put there by her. Man had always kept a safe distance from direct contact with the drugs and guns. Man, with his wide smile, and Lil D, with a birthmark the shape of a continent on his neck. Lil D, whose mother's murder had, in part, led to Salt's assignment to Homicide.

Q: Did John sell drugs?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you see drugs?

A: Yes. He the head junk man in this city then.

Q: By junk you mean heroin?

A: Yeah, H.

Q: Do you know if he still deals?

A: Word that he don't have no direct connection after them Black Mafia brothers moved in. But back then he deal some H. He still run hoes, but he big money now, runnin' high-dolla bitches out his clubs.

Q: What other businesses is he involved with?

A: Now he got dealing with Sam's and the Blue Room, Magic Girls, and maybe some white club somewhere.

Q: What do you know about the death of Mike Anderson, the singer and guitar player?

A: I know Tall John give that blues boy a hot pop.

Q: How do you know that?

A: 'Cause he told me. He said that's what he do when people that work for him don't do what he say.

Q: Did you see him give heroin to Mike Anderson? How did he know Mike?

A: That blues boy worked in one of the clubs, singing and playing the guitar. Got his H that way. I didn't ever see John changing junk for cash personally. Just saw the product in his office.

Q: When was the last time you had contact with or saw John?

A: Right before I was locked up last year. He pass by me all the time in the street.

Q: You said you hid from him.

A: Not after I got grown.

Q: Is there anything more you can tell me about illegal activity?

A: That's all I've got to say.

Before closing the file, she turned to the back and Stone's booking photo. In The Homes the faces of young men grew hard and sharp, calcified, their bones fixed like knives, a fearful hardening with things you could never know, things they didn't even tell themselves. The scowly surfaces glistening in sunlight or streetlight. No bit of softness.

Salt closed the file, stood, and put on the coat over her torn clothes.

Head lowered to the phone that he held in his left hand, Huff raised his eyes when Salt appeared in his office doorway. "Yes, I realize the pressure you must be facing, Councilwoman," he said, swiping his free hand over his scalp and rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling.

"The press has been all over us, too." He leaned his head back on his shoulders and closed his eyes, listening. "Detective Wills is one of our best . . .

"No, we are certain this case is not related to the Solquist murders. I realize they were your constituents . . .

"Of course the neighborhood is upset. When a crime like this occurs, everyone wants to know it was not random . . .

"No, we don't give out the detectives' phone numbers to anyone. The chief is your best bet." He held the handset away from his ear as an indistinguishable but loud woman's voice emanated from the earpiece. He put the phone back to his ear. "I probably will enjoy walking a beat again."

Huff spoke to the loudly buzzing dial tone, "Thank you, Councilwoman Mars," dropped the phone into its cradle, and looked up at Salt while slamming a desk drawer shut. The room smelled suspiciously of microwave popcorn. "Now what can I do for you? I just love me some women in my business." Most of the files stacked on his desk were bright green, while purple, blue, and yellow ones were piled on the floor, cabinets, and chair. There was no place to sit.

"I guess you finished reading the file? You cold?" He pointed at her coat.

“You gave me a very cold case.” She stood in the doorway.

“You arrested Stone. You know The Homes. Your reputation preceded you and around here no good deed goes unpunished.” Huff grinned.

“The limitations of any statute that could apply are up on everything but murder, so the feds don’t care about the rest, the child prostitution, the drugs?”

“You got it. They took the statement and handed it to us. They got bigger fish to fry.”

“Did anyone even bother to find out who ‘John’ is?”

“The Shack is owned by an LLC—I don’t remember what name, but if you find the company it’s not likely you’ll find John’s name on the license. That’s why they now call you detective, Detective.”

“You also know Stone tried to kill me.”

“And now you’ll be helping him by verifying the information he gave in the statement. You’re right. None of the accusations, except the murder, mean anything.”

“How much of his time will get cut if I can corroborate his information?”

“Oh, about the amount he’d do for assaulting a police officer. Interesting dilemma. I like a sense of humor in a detective.”

“Which of the other comedians will I be working with?”

Huff stood up and stretched with his hands on his lower back. “You mean for a partner? Let’s see how you do alone first. Think of it as another chance to prove yourself. See if that dog luck holds.”

Salt turned from the door just as a previously teetering stack of green files on his desk began a slow-motion slide to the floor.

As Salt came out, Rosie hung up the phone, the paperback she’d been reading spread facedown on the desk. The cover illustration depicted a bare-chested man with flowing blond hair clutching a buxom brunette.

Salt pointed to the book. “Good read?”

Rosie swept her hair to one side of her heavily made-up face—pancake foundation, blue eye shadow, red, glossy lipstick. “I’m a romantic. What can I say?” Rosie, legally Roger Polk, had claimed her new name and transgender status two years previously, and was in the process—counseling, hormones—of completing the transition.

“I think I’m going to need some help,” Salt told her. “My computer isn’t hooked up. I don’t know where the supplies and forms are kept. Apparently Sarge wants me to learn the ropes on my own.”

Rosie leaned back in the chair, eyes resting on the book, sighed, then waved an imaginary wand. “Actually, feng shui is my specialty. Just leave it to me. Did they give you Rita’s desk? I thought so. By tomorrow it will be like a fairy godfather-soon-to-be-mother has come to your rescue. Oh, and don’t mind Sarge; by the way, don’t call him Sarge. He’s just a sweetie. I have such a crush on him. Well, that’s another story. You just go do your girl detective thing. And I’m sure you get this all the time, but you have the most unusual blue eyes. I love what you’re doing with your hair.”

Salt made a note to herself to cut some of the flowers that grew close to the sheep paddock. She was almost certain Rosie would love the big pink camellias.

Handcuffed and ankle-shackled, Stone shuffled into view on the other side of the heavy clear-plastic partition. The red jumpsuit, the prison uniform that signifies the wearer is mentally ill, hung loosely on his frame. His hair, intricately done in cornrows, formed a galaxy pattern. He sat down and propped his manacled arms on the steel counter. In the center of the partition was a five-by-five-inch square stippled with nail-sized holes. The air smelled of iron, of flesh-piercing slivers, of tears in the universe.

Stone kept his head turned to the graffiti scratched into the paint on the side wall of their divided booth.

“I’ve read the statement you gave to the FBI agent.”

Stone continued his perusal of the scratchings.

“If I can find somebody else who knows that John meant to kill the bluesman, and if your information leads me to an arrest, you’re eligible to get your time cut.”

“Ain’t no ‘eligible’ about it,” he replied. His voice sounded strangled. “So what you got to do with what I’m telling the FBI guy?” Before she could answer, he turned and faced her. She’d thought it was because of the barrier that separated them that his voice sounded different, but it wasn’t the Plexiglas or the holes. His mouth had a caved-in look and was ringed with teeth-sized scars. His lips folded inward until he opened his mouth as wide as seemed possible, showing off his teeth, all of which were gone or broken off. He turned his loose lips up in a horrible grin, then flapped them together, making a wet, smacking sound. The shouts of men accompanied by the sounds of metal striking metal came from the hallway behind Stone.

“I’ve been assigned to investigate the death of Mike Anderson, the bluesman.”

Stone went back to examining the wall hieroglyphics. He brought up his shackled hands to touch a finger to a piece of a word. His eyes slid to her in a sideways stare. “That’s funny. You end up workin’ to get me free.”

“You are the second person to see humor in this,” Salt told him, “but the first wasn’t me.”

There was a sudden moldy refrigerant odor, and the close air turned quickly cold.

“So the white bitch cop put me in here now gonna help get me out.” He made a click with his cheek.

“It’s been given to me. It’s my job.” Her hand rested on the shield at her waist.

“Oh, and I do know you do your job,” he said, then seemed to draw back, realizing what he said and what it might mean for him.

Salt forced herself to lean forward, close to the dirty hard plastic. “There’s that,” she said, “and also that I may be able to arrest John.”

“How you gonna prove what happened ten years ago?” Stone’s voice growled from his battered mouth.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here, to ask you.”

“All I know is what John tell me. He said he gave the bluesman bad junk ’cause he tried to get out of a deal. I thought it was about singing and playing in the club.” Stone brought up his clenched, manacled fists. “Is that

enough?"

"Who cut John's dope for him?"

"Back then it was Man."

"You ever know John's last name?"

"Don't nobody have no real last name 'round The Homes."

"Was anyone else involved in John's dealings with Anderson?"

Stone stretched back, his long body in a straight line, his bound arms above his head. "Maybe somebody the bluesman played with. I can't remember all from back then."

Down the long hall behind Stone, at the far end, an inmate made wide swipes with a mop, accompanied by a faint but distinct tap each time the mop end hit the bottom of the wall. His rhythm was constant and steady. He faced the other direction but was backing closer and closer.

A sudden clank from the door behind Salt startled her as it began its motorized draw back into the metal wall frame. "Time's up," said the gray-shirted officer waiting on the other side of the door. Another guard appeared behind Stone. Salt stood. "Can you give him my card?" She pulled a generic blue card, on which she'd written her mobile number, from her jacket pocket and held it out. The officer took it and unlocked a tray to the other side where his counterpart retrieved it.

Stone had stayed seated, the fingers of both his hands again touching the letters and crude drawings on the sides of the space, like a blind man reading Braille. The guard behind him gave him a tap. "Time's up." Stone stuck out his long, thick tongue and licked the scratched steel wall.

Most helpful customer reviews

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Rich Southern Characters and Suspenseful

By Woodie

My first and last impression throughout this book was it was chocked full of a rich array of southern characters represented in a very descriptive style. I was not expecting this at all being written by a former Police Officer. In fact, someone used the term "Police Procedural" and I immediately thought this would be in the style of *Dragnet*, delivered in plain deadpan English. This is a full blown meticulously formed work of literature. It had everything in it including style, intrigue, suspense and some blindingly heroic moments where you were cheering for the underdog.

And speaking of dogs, there was also this kind of weird, surrealistic dog reference throughout that added to the mystique of the young detective. I cannot explain it clearly because I'm not certain I understand the allusion behind it but it felt very supernatural. A kind of latent ability to intuit truth through vivid dreams. Like foretelling or prescience.

The history of Atlanta was incredibly detailed and complete. The references were plentiful and detailed. As a long time resident of Atlanta myself, I was delighted to see this. There is a great appreciation of the humanity that lives here.

I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys mystery/suspense/thriller novels like myself. I've got to warn you though. If you don't read all the way to the end, you will miss the punch.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Good Start To A Series

By Darcia Helle

Combining crime and the blues makes for a great launching point for this new series.

Most authors have a clear, natural strength, and for me Trudy Nan Boyce shines with setting. I don't mean that she simply paints us a portrait of a particular area, though she does that well. More importantly, Boyce makes sure we feel what it's like to live there. The roots and rhythm of the setting feels like a fully developed character in its own right, essential to the heart of the story.

The plot moves at a good pace. The investigation is a smaller aspect of a larger journey. The author touches upon some compelling topics, such as homelessness, the political power of church officials, and the history of slavery in the south. The author handles this well, showing us the uncomfortable truth without interfering with the natural flow of the story.

The stumbling point, for me, came with character development. I liked Alt's character, but I felt I didn't really know her. It was as if I'd jumped into the middle of a series with her character, rather than starting fresh. Her interactions with friends was often playful and fun, if not a little superficial, but I had no honest sense of her feelings for her boyfriend. I wanted more of a connection with her character.

This book does offer a memorable experience, and certainly makes me see Atlanta through a different viewpoint.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Heating up a cold case

By Divascribe

"Write what you know" is standard advice for aspiring scribes, and Trudy Nan Boyce certainly followed that dictum in writing "Out of the Blues." Boyce was an Atlanta police officer for more than 30 years, including time as a homicide detective. That gives her story about new homicide detective Sarah Alt -- known as Salt -- special authenticity.

Salt was a beat cop in a tough area of Atlanta for 10 years before being promoted to homicide detective. And the first case she's given is a very cold one -- the 10-year-old death of a local blues musician. His death was ruled a suicide by overdose, but a witness has come forward claiming that the musician was given a "hot dose" of heroin to kill him because he knew too much about criminal activity in the area. It's up to Salt to go back to her old beat and find out the truth, at some risk to her life. A big cast of characters -- in every sense of the word -- on both sides of the law make this an absorbing, multi-layered story.

Boyce does a great job of showing the everyday life of a detective -- the office teasing, the camaraderie and competition, and the grunt work involved in solving a case. This is a great debut for Boyce, and I hope only the first of a long series featuring Salt.

See all 43 customer reviews...

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Review

Praise for Out of the Blues

“What's this? A female cop who doesn't look like a runway model and doesn't go mano a mano with psychotic killers? Trudy Nan Boyce may be a first-time author, but she was in law enforcement for more than 30 years, which should explain why the stationhouse personnel and forensic details in Out of the Blues feel so authentic.”—Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Exceptional . . . I figured authenticity would thrum from the dialogue, reality would pulse from the plot and the blues would be the narrative's soundtrack. I was correct on all counts.”—*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

“Out of the Blues introduces an appealing character, Detective Sarah Alt [“Salt”] . . . Atlanta locales and history are a recurring element in the narrative and a pleasant feature of the book [and] Boyce describes these places with colorful clarity. . . Salt's next sleuthing adventure should be much anticipated.”—*Associated Press*

“Boyce was a beat cop, homicide detective, hostage negotiator and lieutenant in Atlanta before retiring in 2008. She knows policing. She writes with intensity and flair and wit. This combination has resulted in an irresistible procedural with a winning protagonist. And the bonus, the lagniappe, is the seductive way Boyce writes about music, particularly the blues.”—*Shelf Awareness*

“A fresh, gritty debut. Boyce unveils one of the best new series characters in ages, an Atlanta detective with a haunting past but complete dedication to working the streets. A book that combines fast-paced suspense with moving insights.”—#1 *New York Times*-bestselling author Lisa Gardner

“Boyce has a season's veteran's way of creative irresistible characters . . . Out of the Blues is filled with authentic details about police work.”—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Less whodunit than odyssey, as Salt—clearly bent . . . on fixing the world one sociopath at a time—navigates anti-woman prejudice in her unit, anti-cop sentiment in her hometown, and the steaming corruption that reaches from Atlanta's lower depths to its very top.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Salt's character combines quick intelligence and a refreshing, confident humanity that wins allies from all walks of life, and Boyce's fluid southern voice is an alluring contrast to the stark realities she skillfully

evokes.”—Booklist

“[A] moody, character-driven series debut.”—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“Out of the Blues takes the reader for an exciting ride through old Atlanta with brand new homicide detective, Sarah Alt, aka “Salt” as our guide. Salt is brave and imaginative, salty and sweet, and her creator—former Atlanta homicide detective, Trudy Nan Boyce—uses her impressive descriptive power to make our ride colorful, gothic, and irresistibly Southern.”—#1 New York Times-bestselling author Joseph Wambaugh

“There’s a new star in crime fiction . . . Boyce explores the dark underbelly of Atlanta in her excellent procedural. . . . [A] stunning debut.”—RT Book Reviews

“Out of the Blues is a stunning debut. Trudy Boyce’s background in law enforcement is on vivid display, and she writes with passion, heart, and a powerful no-holds-barred voice you won’t soon forget.”—Linda Castillo, New York Times-bestselling author of *After the Storm*

“Grit, heart, smarts, and authenticity—Detective Sarah Alt has them, and so does *Out of the Blues*. A terrific mystery by talented newcomer Trudy Nan Boyce.” —Meg Gardiner, Edgar Award–winning author of *Phantom Instinct*

“As a former cop on the seedier and more dangerous streets of Atlanta, Trudy Nan Boyce has probably seen it all, and she shares it with us in this compelling debut novel. Salt is both gutsy and contemplative, and when her ‘cold’ case heats up, she’s ready for the challenge.” —Margaret Maron, award-winning author of *Designated Daughters*

About the Author

Trudy Nan Boyce received her Ph.D. in community counseling before becoming a police officer for the City of Atlanta. During her more-than-thirty-year career she served as a beat cop, homicide detective, senior hostage negotiator, and lieutenant. Boyce retired from the police department in 2008 and still lives in Atlanta.

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Uncovering

The girl climbed the tree so she could sit in her spot, look out through the limbs and leaves, and pretend about an imaginary dog. When she patted the pecan leaves, they gave off a green peppery smell. It was like breathing the breath of the tree. The jaggedy streaks of gray bark where she sat were like the tree’s hard fur.

Wearing conspiratorial smiles, her mother and brother had waved from the car windows, knowing that she had been headed to the tree as they started out the long driveway around the house. Later she realized, when she saw the note on the table, that he must have thought she’d gone with them, because it wasn’t long after the dust from the car settled that the gunshot sounded from the house and she dropped from the tree,

forgetting almost forever the longed-for dog.

Frantic, she couldn't think how to clear his eyes of the blood. She couldn't leave him to get a cloth. Her shirt? She used her fingers to try and wipe the sticky globs from her father's eyes. His head in her lap, she cried for him to help her know what to do. He was a cop. He should know how to handle this emergency. The gun, black and heavy, lay next to the dusty rose bed skirt. She thought if he could somehow just see, he'd be able to help her, but he quit moving, his groans stopped, and she held his head, blood seeping through her red shorts and into the ruby dahlias and violet peonies embroidered in the rug.

And then their return. Their faces as they held the balloons at the door of the room. Their fallen faces. And the note left beside the cake for her tenth birthday.

No one in her family ever claimed to know where the old steamer trunk had come from. The trunk had been painted over in a flat country blue that had faded to gray, the original color revealed beneath the leather clasps that were now brittle, one completely worn through. Smudged and blurred, some brush strokes had come through the top layer of paint, "ST . . .," but the rest was faded. She'd moved the trunk out of the upstairs closet when the carpenters were doing renovations and had been using it as a nightstand beside the downstairs bedroom window. Sometimes thinking right before she fell asleep that she would get around to opening it, she'd go over the items she remembered might still be in it.

Removing the lamp and embroidered runner and letting the metal lock fall, she was eager about the coat. Beneath some quilts and baby clothes it was there in its original Rich's box, wrapped in fragile, yellowing tissue. The Atlanta department store had been gone a long time, bought out by Macy's, but the coat still had the tag attached to the sleeve with thread.

Looking at herself in the age-flecked floor mirror, Sarah Alt thought that even though she wasn't as tall as her dad, it was still a good fit. Twenty-five years after it was purchased, the tan trench coat now fit her, falling to calf length on her slim five-foot-nine frame—her father's coat, one he'd never worn.

Welcome to Homicide

Known throughout the department as "Rosie," the large man in transition with red-polished nails and long, blond, wavy hair and wearing a ruffled white blouse sat at the receptionist's desk and buzzed her in. "The code is number 1524," she said without looking up from the paperback she was reading.

"Thanks." Salt held her father's coat as she punched the numbers on the keypad and turned the handle of the inner door to the Homicide Unit.

Rosie mumbled, "Keep your chin up."

During the ten years Salt had been in uniform, a beat cop, she'd been to the Unit many times, making statements as the first uniform on murder and assault scenes, providing information from the streets to detectives. But this, this was her first day, first shift as a newly sworn detective. A shiny gold-tone badge clipped to the belt on her slacks had replaced her old silver-finish shield, the one she'd worn for ten years of uniform patrol, most of them spent in The Homes, the most densely populated housing project in Atlanta. She'd worked there so long that it had felt at times more like home than her own. Now she heard talk that the city was making plans to tear down all the projects, including The Homes.

Two detectives, one white, one black, both on the small end of medium in height, wearing short-sleeved shirts and bright ties, were standing at the front cubicles in the rows of workspaces. “Well, well, well,” exclaimed the black guy she knew as Daniels. “Lookee what the dog done dragged in.”

“Yes in-deed-dee,” the other guy said. “Got us a brand-new big-city detective.”

“I got your big city,” she shifted the coat to shake hands. “They told me to report to Sergeant Huff.”

There were caricatures of the Three Stooges on Daniels’ tie and Barney Fife’s face on the other guy’s. “He’s around here somewhere.” Daniels motioned toward the back of the big office space.

“I think I saw him go in the break room,” said the guy with the Barney tie, pointing to the back right.

The Homicide room was huge and smelled of burned coffee and mildewed paper. Thirty or so gray cubicles filled the center space, less than a quarter occupied most of the time; only the detectives from the on-duty shift were working, and some of them were taking their weekend days off or were out in the streets. The walls were lined with supervisors’ offices, interview rooms, and rows of five-drawer file cabinets in mismatched grays, tan, and military green colors. Salt wound her way through the aisles past the attached desks stacked with murder books and decorated with personal touches: framed photos, patriotic posters, military memorabilia, and action heroes. She walked past Wills’ desk, noting with a smile the “Dog Is My Copilot” bumper sticker on his file bin and photos of Violet and Pansy, his Rottweilers. She and Bernard Wills had begun a relationship last year, and while he’d encouraged her to test for detective, neither of them had anticipated working the same unit, or “squad,” as Homicide was called, much less the same shift. Wills’ partner, Gardner, ever optimistic, ever ready with a look-on-the-bright-side comment, had the cubicle across from his. A photo of his garden hung on the gray-fabric cubicle wall.

She found Sergeant Huff, whom she knew from having talked to him on a couple of cases, in the unfortunately bright break room peering into a humming microwave. She whisked her fingers through her dark hair, which she wore short with a messy part on the left, a part made permanent by a bullet scar through her scalp.

“Sergeant Huff,” she announced herself.

The microwave pinged and the heavysset sergeant took out a plastic bowl with a blue lid. “You’re taller in clothes.” He sat down at one of the metal and veneer tables and took a plastic spoon from his shirt pocket.

“Yes, sir, five nine in shoes.” She pulled at her new cream-colored linen jacket and navy slacks. “In case . . .” Her voice trailed off as she realized she was standing at attention like she was back at roll call in the precinct. She tried to cover by slumping.

“My goddamn wife is starving me here. I’m forty-five years old and she’s feeding me New Age hippie mush.”

“I called Lieutenant Pierce yesterday to ask about my assignment and he told me to report to you today at four p.m.” Salt sat down at the table, draping the coat across her lap.

Head lowered to the bowl, Huff shoveled the food into his mouth with the little spoon as he talked. “Doctor says I’ve got to lower my cholesterol, lose weight, quit smoking, ‘limit my alcohol intake’”— he made air quote marks—“reduce stress, exercise.” His close-cut brown hair had receded to the middle of his scalp. The bowl held something that looked like beef stew but with no aroma. “So the missus” shovel, “packed my lunch bag with an apple, which I ate on my way to work thirty minutes ago, and this fuckin’ tofu stew,”

shovel, shovel. He tossed the spoon into the empty bowl—it hopped. “I just finished my lunch and I got eight hours left in the shift. Now that’s stress.”

“Sarge . . .” began Salt.

“‘Sarge,’ don’t call me Sarge. I hate being called Sarge. Sounds like some fuckin’ war movie. Call me Huff or Charlie or Shithead but don’t call me Sarge. Nobody calls me Sarge.” His belly popped from behind a large Harley-Davidson belt buckle as he pushed back from the table.

“Hey, Sarge.” Daniels stuck his head in the door. “We got incoming.”

Sergeant Huff leaned back, belched loudly, then stood and threw his plastic bowl into the sink. “I’ll show you your desk. You’ll get the same one as the only other woman ever worked Homicide nights in this city.” He led her through the cubicle farm. “She worked kids’ murders, something wrong with her head. She was nuts, totally, but for some reason they let her stay till she retired. She only got one or two cases a year. Went out on all the dead babies.”

“Sar—” Salt stopped at a barren desk across from one festooned with a rainbow flag and a purple flag. “Can I have this desk?” She pointed to the empty spot.

“If you’re thinking you might want to partner with Felton, our gay caballero there”—he pointed to a photo of two men in a frame on the desk with the flags—“forget it. Every man here wants him, as a detective partner, that is. You probably already heard he’s the best homicide dick in the city, state, and a contender for best in the nation, maybe the world. But he won’t partner.”

“Can I have the desk?”

“No.”

At a cubicle far from the entrance and far from the center of the room, Huff stopped and unclipped the radio from his belt. “Go ahead for Homicide,” he spoke into the handheld.

“Zone Three is requesting Homicide to 441 Brown Avenue on a body found in a warehouse.” Homicide dispatch sounded less urgent than Salt was used to from the beat dispatches.

Salt positioned herself in the Sarge’s sight and pointed to herself, requesting “Me?”

Sarge shook his head at her. “Homicide units 4125 and 4126 will be responding,” he advised dispatch. “Daniels, Barney,” he shouted across the room. Turned out the guy with the Barney Fife tie was named Barney.

“4125 and -26 copy,” the detectives acknowledged the call.

Daniels’ and Barney’s heads bobbed across the tops of the cubicles as they walked toward the door.

“This was the chick’s desk,” Huff said. “Now it’s yours.”

Other than the desk, a stained chair, and an old tower PC and monitor, the workspace was empty, except for a manila file lying on the desk. Huff picked up the file. “This is also yours. Wasn’t a murder and now it might be. You’ll start with that. Welcome to Homicide.” He dropped the file on the desk, turned his back to her, and walked away.

Before she could hang up her coat, fat fingers were on her wrist, soft, strong and insistent. Salt turned as Detective Hamm from day watch grabbed her and began pulling her toward the exit. “You’re coming with me. We’ve got another one.”

“But Sar . . . Huff said—”

“Fuck Sarge. My regular partner is off today so I get to pick. Even if he was here, I’d make sure you went with us. These guys are going to put you through the wringer, but I’m going to give you some starch first.”

Salt followed the lumbering detective, whose wide buttocks shifted and quivered up and down and side to side, to the elevators.

“How’s the head?” Hamm asked as she hit the call button. Hamm and her partner, who matched her in girth, had been the responding investigators to the incident last year when Salt had been shot. Charissa Hamm was the only woman, until today, currently working Homicide, also known as the Hat Squad. Hamm worked days. Salt, as a rookie detective, would work nights, four p.m. to midnight, but often the three shifts worked scenes together if a case was close to one of the shift changes or was a “red ball,” as the high-profile cases were known. An Atlanta native, Hamm had solid ties to her black working-class community, church, and high school friends—connections that had proved helpful to her both in her career and in solving cases.

“Fuck.” Hamm cursed the malfunctioning elevators and headed to the stairwell. Then the elevator pinged and the overhead panel lit up. They turned back but the elevator doors didn’t open and it scrolled up to the next floor. “Double fuck.” She slapped the wall beside the call button. “Your head?” Hamm repeated, her voice competing with their footsteps echoing in the concrete and steel stairwell, each floor marked with conflicting floor numbers, the “4” in red and “5” in black on the same door.

“Better,” answered Salt, lifting a lock of hair that covered the scar that began at her hairline.

The neighborhood was a mixture of middle-class homes, a few houses falling to lower middle, and seventies-built apartment complexes, some designated as government assists. A dog barked continuously, its howling seeming to come from differing directions. The residences backed onto a wooded area, bisected by a ravine that was owned by the city’s watershed management. Salt cocked her ear, listening to the dog.

“And the chick detectives aren’t ever fat.” Hamm was sitting in the driver’s seat, legs out the open door, pulling on old-fashioned rubbers over black loafers that were sprung at the sides, her brown, wide foot overrunning the leather. She zipped up a gear bag, tossed it in the backseat, and grabbed the Handie-Talkie off the console. “Fuckin’ TV makes juries expect a detective to look like—well, like you, Blue Eyes. You’re gonna ruin those new shoes.” She tipped her head toward Salt’s spotless navy athletic shoes.

“I bought a couple of pairs in different colors. They can be thrown in the washer,” Salt said.

“Smart girl. Just the same, get a pair of these.” Hamm pointed to the overshoes. “They’re cheap and will save having to clean shit, piss, and other body fluids off your shoes.”

“I love it. Just us girls talking about shoes,” Salt said as they walked toward the crime scene.

They followed the uniform who’d told them that the body, that of a young boy, was in the nearby ravine. Spring rains had come almost daily and made the ground soft and covered with dark, steaming layers of composting leaves and newly green tangles of briars and vines.

“Careful,” warned the officer as he led them to a part of the gully where the decline was less treacherous. In

spite of her heft, Hamm's step was sure as she gracefully navigated the roots and muck going down the bank. Once on the bottom they could see north up the ravine to where other uniforms had begun to string the yellow tape, marking off the scene at the tops of the banks and on both sides. People, including more than a few children, were starting to gather along the tape on the side where the woods met the backyards. A dirty blanket had been hoisted between two trees as a makeshift curtain so the spectators could not see the body.

Uniform supervisors and the rest of the two shifts from Homicide began arriving. Salt spotted Sergeant Huff and the crime scene techs. More people milled behind the tape. "Where's my baby?" One woman ran from the group as word spread that it was the body of a child. Another uniform stood to one side with an elderly can man and his industrial-sized plastic bags of recyclables. "Grunge found the victim and started yelling," said the first officer, nodding at the old man.

Salt and Hamm stood at the blanket, which smelled of old garbage. The dog's barking kept up, coming from somewhere north of them. "Ivory need to shut up," someone said from above. Overhead, the limbs of a massive pecan tree spread up and out, shading thirty yards in both directions. The ravine bed was dark with past years' slough and brackish puddles. The banks became increasingly dry closer to the top and were covered with tiny green sprigs, the fallen flowers of pollen from the big tree overhead. The woman who was looking for her child screamed from the street, "I can't find him. Help me, somebody!"

"This is going to get bad. I'm going to go set up a command post in the parking lot," Huff said and pointed above. Hamm nodded and went around the blanket. "I want you to come with me," he told Salt, "but go take a look first." He nodded to the other side of the blanket. The dog's bark was more insistent. Salt's shoe made a sucking sound as she turned.

The light-skinned boy was face-down on his right cheek, hunched with his buttocks bare, tan shorts around his calves. His hands were positioned as if he were going to push up. Except for some rust-colored smears on his backside, there was no obvious trauma. "You didn't have to see this," Hamm said in a low voice, not looking up from her note taking.

"I know." Salt left her and followed Huff up and out of the ravine. "Merrily We Roll Along" played over and over from an ice cream truck's plinky speaker. The sun shone through the canopy of mostly water oaks, their small leaves whirl-a-jigging in the bright breeze. Huff assigned the six investigators and five uniforms to a grid search for evidence and witnesses. They were to interview anyone and everyone and make notes.

No one had to say it, but the Atlanta Child Murders were on everyone's mind. From 1979 to 1981 more than twenty black boys and girls were killed, and their deaths still haunted the city, especially the APD. Atlanta had been forced into a conversation about race then while the city's police tried to avoid distraction from the work. They finally broke the case when Wayne Williams, a young black man, was arrested. He had lured the children with the promise of a music audition. Even though the murders had stopped after he was arrested, and physical evidence solidified his guilt, some people weren't convinced the murderers hadn't been the KKK or other racist crazies.

Salt was assigned to search the ravine north of the scene. The leather shoulder holster crisscrossed her new shirt—she'd left her jacket in the car and hadn't thought to remind anyone that she'd not been issued a Handie-Talkie with a detective frequency. She began her part of the search, looking back once to see Hamm kneeling next to the dead child. She realized that she'd been assigned an area where she'd be least likely to encounter any witnesses or evidence, but it felt right to her to head in the direction of the barking that had been distracting her since their arrival. Reminding herself to stay focused on the terrain, to look for anything that could be significant, even if it just looked like trash or newly turned leaves, she slowed her quickened step toward the dog, his bark becoming raspy.

The murdered children had begun turning up right after her father had died. Scared, she'd gotten the idea that the children wouldn't have been killed if he'd still been alive and on the job. Her brother, who was only seven at the time, talked about the murders constantly and wouldn't go to sleep in his own bed.

She came to a place where the ravine rim was about eight feet above and found freshly turned marks in the red clay bank. The dog's barks were closer and coming from directly above. Pulling herself up by tree roots, she climbed out into a backyard Bible grotto. There were homemade signs everywhere warning of the coming Rapture, of hellfire, of the opportunity for salvation and predictions of doom. A white dog barked at the bottom of wooden steps that led to the back of a house. He turned his head, almost as if he were expecting her, wondering what took her so long, then turned back to bark at a screen door at the top of the steps. He was a large dog, uncommonly clean, more cream than white, some shepherd mix with a plummy tail held high.

"Ivory," she called, remembering the comment from the crowd. A doll's head was nailed to a tree trunk on her right. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" read a framed hand-lettered message, dangling from a tree limb by a sash.

"Here Ivory."

The dog barked up the steps.

At a bricked-off blueberry bush there was a stake in the form of a cross, draped with a necklace of baby pacifiers. "Jesus wept" was painted in red on a flat stone. The sides of the yard were enclosed by pines bent inward, heavy with kudzu so thick the sounds from the neighborhood were muffled, almost shut out.

"Ivory." She lowered her voice.

Through more signs, some hanging from tree branches, there was a path of sorts, bordered by toy parts, broken trucks, pieces of balls, plastic blocks, a pink doll's bed.

Ivory held his tail high, his front paws on the second step. The back of the house had been covered with chicken wire through which had been braided what looked like old clothes. It gave the appearance of quilting. Ivory was well groomed, his coat smooth and lush, but his tail had picked up some catkins that clung to the long, feathery fur. She approached him, patting her leg, which he sniffed, and he ceased barking. He allowed her to rub his ears and pat down his back. She was careful at his tail, pulling at one of the sprigs caught in his fur, examining it in the palm of her hand.

The door above opened. An elderly man wearing a brown pin-striped suit and red tie stood holding a worn Bible. He began to laugh. He was small and stiff in his composure, his skin the same color as his suit. He bent to his knees laughing, and as he did, an enormous presence came from behind him, rushing past and launching from the porch toward Salt.

She managed a break fall onto her back and tried to use the momentum to continue into a backward roll, but it was all she could do to get her knees between herself and the huge man before he was on her, one of his hands at her throat and the other clawing toward the gun beneath her arm. She became aware of the sound of her own breath and his heavy grunt, both amplified and muffled like the roar from inside a seashell. One of his exhalations filled her nose and mouth with the taste and smell of sour milk. She felt the thick cotton threads of his shirt fabric as she grabbed his collar for leverage. She pushed the soles of her feet against his stomach, pulling his chest down and pushing up, and used his weight to propel him over and away as she rolled up into a ready combat stance.

“Fuck,” she said when she realized that on her first day as a detective she’d made a mistake worse than the stupidest rookie. She’d failed to check out a radio. “Call 911,” she implored the old man, while she tried to catch a breath and crouched in anticipation of the man now rising from the ground. If she’d just told Hamm to wait for her to grab a radio, she could be calling for help. She scanned the yard and sides of the house for a way out as he got up, his eyes searching the sky, unfocused like he was blind, yet he aimed himself at her. The dog was quiet now, but the old man threw back his head and either laughed or howled as she sidestepped and her assailant stumbled past, turned, and rushed her again. Salt pivoted, looking for some advantage as the big man came at her again. But her left foot caught on Christmas lights strung at knee level between two bushes. Before she could untangle, he wrapped his meaty arms around her shoulders and chest and was falling to the ground on top of her. As they accelerated downward, the man drew back the fist of his other hand while she fumbled to get a hold of the fat fingers holding her neck. The blow glanced off her left cheek just as she turned her head and leveraged her weight against his fingers and wrist. He grunted and tried to jerk away at an angle that caused him even more pain. She swiveled from under him and into another ready stance.

There was no exit she could see and she was backed against the rim of the ravine, breathing hard, balancing each foot as she moved backward and closer to the edge. If she pulled her weapon she knew he’d go for it, and then she’d have to use it or he’d take it. He ran at her, and at the last instance when he towered over her, his sweat flying into her eyes, she reached out and pulled his arm straight and used it as a fulcrum to throw him over and into the ravine below. Momentum took her with him in as controlled a fall as she could manage, knowing that if she was lucky and quick, she’d have half a chance. As they dropped she pulled at the cuff pouch on her left shoulder strap. Air whooshed from his lungs as they thudded onto the ground. Her fingers found the bracelets as she landed on his back, and before he could inhale she had one cuff around his right wrist. Using the cuff against his wrist bone for pain compliance, she jerked his forearm, bent it back, and snapped the second cuff around his other wrist.

She rolled off him, sat up, and looked at the rim of the bank some eight feet above where the old man, laughing still, stood beside the dog. She touched her stinging cheek with a dirt-streaked hand. Her new pants were torn at one knee, the linen shirt gaped where the buttons had been torn off, but she wasn’t bleeding. She couldn’t see any bloody injury on her assailant, who was rapidly gaining consciousness. She pulled him to a sitting position. His head was shaved to stubble, his face round, pink, and greasy with oily sweat. He had on matching workmen’s tan shirt and pants, new-looking and freshly dirtied from their fight. And there were smears of some unidentifiable substance on the front around his zipper.

“Alone,” he said breathless. “Why they send you alone?”

“What’s your name?” She stood up, trying to control her now trembling arms and legs.

“I am The Baby, Jesus,”

She pushed at his back and pulled him to standing. “What’s his name?” She yelled to the man above, who only put his hand to his waist, now bent with maniacal laughter that echoed down the bank.

The man sang Stevie Wonder’s “Ebony and Ivory” as they walked back down the ravine. He insisted he be identified as “The Baby, Jesus,” not “Baby Jesus” or “The Baby Jesus” but—and he was adamant—it was “The Baby, Jesus.” Fine, Salt just needed his compliance as they trudged to the scene. “Ivory white like me,” he substituted some of the lyrics. His accent was stone black projects, missing verbs and mangled tenses. “You should shoot me.”

She didn’t want to expose TBJ to the crowd and therefore wanted to bring him out north of the scene. When she could see the light color of the blanket curtain in the distance, she veered toward the ravine bank. It was

rough going to get the large handcuffed man enough momentum to reach the random footholds. “Left foot,” she said pointing to an exposed root and hefting his arm as he planted his boot. At the top the crowd was thirty yards or so south of where she brought him out, and they weren’t noticed. But they’d come up and out in the common area of the apartments where the command post had now been established.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, given the city’s still painful memories of the Child Murders, that quite a few city politicians and the chief of the department would, along with most of his command staff, converge on the scene, if only to assure the media and community that every resource would be made available to find the culprit. So it was just as the chief exited his car, camera people on his heels getting footage for the evening news, that Salt, abraded and covered in filth, emerged with The Baby, Jesus from between two apartment buildings. “Who’s this, Salt?” Chief asked. When he’d come to her hospital room last year after she’d been shot, he’d already known her street name, a contraction of Sarah Alt as it appeared on her first uniform name tag, “S.Alt.”

“The Baby, Jesus,” answered the suspect for himself.

“Of course, Baby, I thought that was you.” The chief raised his eyebrows at her.

“You need any assistance?” He turned to his driver and motioned for him to attend Salt.

“Sorry, sir,” she said. “This is my first day in Homicide and I hadn’t gotten a radio yet. If you could ask someone to radio for Sergeant Huff, I believe The Baby, Jesus is our suspect.”

“Yes, I killed, murdered, homicided that baby boy there in the gully in the ditch. I choked and crushed the baby right out of his air.”

“Shit,” said the chief.

“Film at six,” said some wiseass from the media scrum as they turned in unison and ran toward their trucks.

“I had to look it up, too,” she told them. “They’re called ‘catkins,’ those little dangles that fall from the pecan trees. It’s why some people don’t want pecan trees—they’re messy in late spring. I have pecan trees at my place, so I noticed. The tree where the boy was found was the only pecan along the ravine.”

“Catkins in the dog’s tail,” repeated Huff.

“But why did you go to that house?” Hamm asked. “Not that I’m in any way complaining. Thank you, Rookie Detective, for clearing this certain-it-was-going-to-be-a-red-ball-on-my-head case, not to mention he’d probably be a serial kind of guy as well.”

“The dog,” Salt said. “The dog kept barking. I heard someone in the crowd say, ‘What’s Ivory barking at?’”

“Did you go in the house?”

“No, Sar—sir. He came out after me.”

“We tried to interview the old man who lives there,” Hamm said. “He’s way, way off his rocker and supposed to be monitored by some home health-care company. I think the house is a group home.”

“Well, I don’t know how you’re going to write this up. Don’t get me wrong, I’m as relieved as Hamm to have this guy in the Gray Bar, but we’re counting on those blood smears on his pants to come back a match for the kid, ’cause flowers in a mutt’s fur ain’t exactly what juries expect in these days of ‘Atlanta CSI.’” He

made air quotes again and tipped his chair forward. “Thank God for his spontaneous admission to the chief, crazy as that was.” He shook his head and stood. “I leave the articulation to you ladies.” He tapped the thickening blue file on the conference room table and left the room.

“You’re a mess.” Hamm smiled at her. “A fine mess and I need to get some photos of you before you even wash your face.” She used her Handie-Talkie to call for a tech to take the photos. “But while we wait, Salt, here’s some more advice you didn’t ask for. You and I work different shifts so I can’t help you much. You might hope this gets you off on the right foot here, solving this case on your first day.”

“I don’t—”

“Let me finish. It won’t. These guys are all all right, but they, most of them, have been burned by the Homicide fires too many times to appreciate any gift horse. You get what I’m saying?”

“All I did—”

“Salt, I don’t care. They don’t care. They’ll be lookin’ all up in your mouth and hoping that the next dog you hear barkin’ will be at a wrong tree. They want you burned and scarred, tattooed and branded to their brotherhood. Do not be talking about how you knew how to find this guy by the burrs in a barking dog’s tail.” Hamm lowered her head. “And, I’m sorry. I didn’t check to find out if you’d had time to get a radio. My bad. And yours. You got to stand up for yourself, even with me. And thanks for being stand-up and not mentioning it.”

Salt hung her father’s coat on a plastic peg beside the desk and sat down in the chair, which dropped suddenly to one side due to a missing wheel. She opened the gray metal bin above the desk and the drawers below, all empty except for some brittle rubber bands and bent paper clips. She picked up the thin file labeled “Michael Richard Anderson—861430587,” her first assigned case. Other than the autopsy report, which listed the cause and manner of death as “Accidental drug overdose,” the initial uniform reporting form, a short investigative report by the responding detective, and an envelope of scene photos, there wasn’t much to the file except for the new information that had prompted the follow-up Huff was assigning to her. The recent documents were first in the file and described the circumstances under which a new statement had been obtained from Curtis Dwayne Stone, who was doing time in federal custody. Salt looked up from the document and said the name out loud, “Stone.” She’d left The Homes, but it seemed The Homes would not leave her. She had been the one who’d arrested Curtis Stone.

Under federal sentencing guidelines, those convicted of federal crimes were eligible to have their time reduced if they gave reliable information about other criminals and crimes.

“So, my man Stone, you’re snitching now,” she said, turning to the next document, Stone’s signed statement.

She pushed a switch over the cubicle desk and a florescent light flickered across the transcribed pages.

Q: For the record, my name is Lawrence Jones, Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I am recording this interview. Please state your name.

A: Stone.

Q: Curtis Dwayne Stone?

Salt lifted her gaze from the page, closing her eyes, her memory reigniting the odor of gunpowder, replaying the bleating of a sheep. Stone had been The Homes gang member who was feared most. In her rookie days

she'd witnessed the destitution of his childhood, and then it seemed he had determined it would be better for her to fear rather than pity him. Over the years he'd found opportunities to try to threaten her—finally last year assaulting her and her home. “Stone,” she said, and returned to the page.

Q: Do you have knowledge of illegal drug sales, prostitution, and child exploitation by the individual who owned Sam's Chicken Shack and a strip club, Toy Dolls?

A: I don't know about no child exploitation, but, yeah, I know about drugs and hoes.

Q: Mr. Stone, please describe what you know. What is the name of the man who you knew to be running those businesses?

A: John.

Q: Last name?

A: That's all his name I know. They call him “Tall John.” I can't remember if I heard any other name he was called.

Q: Please describe the man you know as John.

A: White, tall.

Q: Any marks or scars?

A: He look just like anybody.

Q: How did you come to know John?

A: I was hungry. He got me in back of Sam's trying to get some bags of peanuts off a truck.

Q: How old were you then?

A: I guess about twelve.

It would have been right around the time she'd first encountered him, when she was a rookie. Christmas, him in his thin sweatshirt, his shoulders like the unfolding wings of a vulture. She'd tried to find his guardian instead of taking him to juvenile and found only a dreadful, sad apartment where he and other children were neglected. Salt pressed the length of her palm to the scar.

Q: Who did you live with?

A: I stayed with lots of people.

Q: What did he do when he caught you?

A: He said I had to work to pay for stealing.

Q: What kind of work did you do for John?

A: Work around the bars.

Q: Did you go to school?

A: Sometimes.

Q: What work did John have you doing?

A: Whatever he tell me to do.

Q: What did he tell you to do?

A: Clean the bathrooms, sweep, pick up trash.

Q: What else?

A: Go with men.

Q: Do you mean you had sex with men for money?

A: I didn't have no sex with them.

Q: What did you do when you went with the men?

A: They gave me blowjobs.

Q: Are you saying that they performed oral sex on you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you do oral sex on them?

A: If I had to.

Q: What about anal sex?

A: What about it?

Q: Did John send you with men that wanted anal sex?

A: I'm not that way.

Q: Did some men put their penis in your anus when you were twelve years old?

A: Yeah.

Salt looked away from the file again, stood and strode to the back wall that was lined with file cabinets labeled by year. "Damn." She drew a breath, looked down the long wall of file cabinets, then turned back to the flickering cubicle.

Q: Did John have other people who exchanged sex for money?

A: He had hoes, some of the dancers.

Q: How long did you work for John?

A: Until Man let me stay with him.

Q: By Man you mean James Simmons?

A: Yeah, he hid me from John. He looked out for me and had his boys look out if John came around.

In The Homes the gang was headed by charismatic, handsome Man and included his brother and others, mostly young men who'd grown up together in The Homes. Some were now dead and some, like Stone, were in prison, put there by her. Man had always kept a safe distance from direct contact with the drugs and guns. Man, with his wide smile, and Lil D, with a birthmark the shape of a continent on his neck. Lil D, whose mother's murder had, in part, led to Salt's assignment to Homicide.

Q: Did John sell drugs?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you see drugs?

A: Yes. He the head junk man in this city then.

Q: By junk you mean heroin?

A: Yeah, H.

Q: Do you know if he still deals?

A: Word that he don't have no direct connection after them Black Mafia brothers moved in. But back then he deal some H. He still run hoes, but he big money now, runnin' high-dolla bitches out his clubs.

Q: What other businesses is he involved with?

A: Now he got dealing with Sam's and the Blue Room, Magic Girls, and maybe some white club somewhere.

Q: What do you know about the death of Mike Anderson, the singer and guitar player?

A: I know Tall John give that blues boy a hot pop.

Q: How do you know that?

A: 'Cause he told me. He said that's what he do when people that work for him don't do what he say.

Q: Did you see him give heroin to Mike Anderson? How did he know Mike?

A: That blues boy worked in one of the clubs, singing and playing the guitar. Got his H that way. I didn't ever see John changing junk for cash personally. Just saw the product in his office.

Q: When was the last time you had contact with or saw John?

A: Right before I was locked up last year. He pass by me all the time in the street.

Q: You said you hid from him.

A: Not after I got grown.

Q: Is there anything more you can tell me about illegal activity?

A: That's all I've got to say.

Before closing the file, she turned to the back and Stone's booking photo. In The Homes the faces of young men grew hard and sharp, calcified, their bones fixed like knives, a fearful hardening with things you could never know, things they didn't even tell themselves. The scowly surfaces glistening in sunlight or streetlight. No bit of softness.

Salt closed the file, stood, and put on the coat over her torn clothes.

Head lowered to the phone that he held in his left hand, Huff raised his eyes when Salt appeared in his office doorway. "Yes, I realize the pressure you must be facing, Councilwoman," he said, swiping his free hand over his scalp and rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling.

"The press has been all over us, too." He leaned his head back on his shoulders and closed his eyes, listening. "Detective Wills is one of our best . . .

"No, we are certain this case is not related to the Solquist murders. I realize they were your constituents . . .

"Of course the neighborhood is upset. When a crime like this occurs, everyone wants to know it was not random . . .

"No, we don't give out the detectives' phone numbers to anyone. The chief is your best bet." He held the handset away from his ear as an indistinguishable but loud woman's voice emanated from the earpiece. He put the phone back to his ear. "I probably will enjoy walking a beat again."

Huff spoke to the loudly buzzing dial tone, "Thank you, Councilwoman Mars," dropped the phone into its cradle, and looked up at Salt while slamming a desk drawer shut. The room smelled suspiciously of microwave popcorn. "Now what can I do for you? I just love me some women in my business." Most of the files stacked on his desk were bright green, while purple, blue, and yellow ones were piled on the floor, cabinets, and chair. There was no place to sit.

"I guess you finished reading the file? You cold?" He pointed at her coat.

"You gave me a very cold case." She stood in the doorway.

"You arrested Stone. You know The Homes. Your reputation preceded you and around here no good deed goes unpunished." Huff grinned.

"The limitations of any statute that could apply are up on everything but murder, so the feds don't care about the rest, the child prostitution, the drugs?"

"You got it. They took the statement and handed it to us. They got bigger fish to fry."

"Did anyone even bother to find out who 'John' is?"

"The Shack is owned by an LLC—I don't remember what name, but if you find the company it's not likely you'll find John's name on the license. That's why they now call you detective, Detective."

"You also know Stone tried to kill me."

“And now you’ll be helping him by verifying the information he gave in the statement. You’re right. None of the accusations, except the murder, mean anything.”

“How much of his time will get cut if I can corroborate his information?”

“Oh, about the amount he’d do for assaulting a police officer. Interesting dilemma. I like a sense of humor in a detective.”

“Which of the other comedians will I be working with?”

Huff stood up and stretched with his hands on his lower back. “You mean for a partner? Let’s see how you do alone first. Think of it as another chance to prove yourself. See if that dog luck holds.”

Salt turned from the door just as a previously teetering stack of green files on his desk began a slow-motion slide to the floor.

As Salt came out, Rosie hung up the phone, the paperback she’d been reading spread facedown on the desk. The cover illustration depicted a bare-chested man with flowing blond hair clutching a buxom brunette.

Salt pointed to the book. “Good read?”

Rosie swept her hair to one side of her heavily made-up face—pancake foundation, blue eye shadow, red, glossy lipstick. “I’m a romantic. What can I say?” Rosie, legally Roger Polk, had claimed her new name and transgender status two years previously, and was in the process—counseling, hormones—of completing the transition.

“I think I’m going to need some help,” Salt told her. “My computer isn’t hooked up. I don’t know where the supplies and forms are kept. Apparently Sarge wants me to learn the ropes on my own.”

Rosie leaned back in the chair, eyes resting on the book, sighed, then waved an imaginary wand. “Actually, feng shui is my specialty. Just leave it to me. Did they give you Rita’s desk? I thought so. By tomorrow it will be like a fairy godfather-soon-to-be-mother has come to your rescue. Oh, and don’t mind Sarge; by the way, don’t call him Sarge. He’s just a sweetie. I have such a crush on him. Well, that’s another story. You just go do your girl detective thing. And I’m sure you get this all the time, but you have the most unusual blue eyes. I love what you’re doing with your hair.”

Salt made a note to herself to cut some of the flowers that grew close to the sheep paddock. She was almost certain Rosie would love the big pink camellias.

Handcuffed and ankle-shackled, Stone shuffled into view on the other side of the heavy clear-plastic partition. The red jumpsuit, the prison uniform that signifies the wearer is mentally ill, hung loosely on his frame. His hair, intricately done in cornrows, formed a galaxy pattern. He sat down and propped his manacled arms on the steel counter. In the center of the partition was a five-by-five-inch square stippled with nail-sized holes. The air smelled of iron, of flesh-piercing slivers, of tears in the universe.

Stone kept his head turned to the graffiti scratched into the paint on the side wall of their divided booth.

“I’ve read the statement you gave to the FBI agent.”

Stone continued his perusal of the scratchings.

“If I can find somebody else who knows that John meant to kill the bluesman, and if your information leads

me to an arrest, you're eligible to get your time cut."

"Ain't no 'eligible' about it," he replied. His voice sounded strangled. "So what you got to do with what I'm telling the FBI guy?" Before she could answer, he turned and faced her. She'd thought it was because of the barrier that separated them that his voice sounded different, but it wasn't the Plexiglas or the holes. His mouth had a caved-in look and was ringed with teeth-sized scars. His lips folded inward until he opened his mouth as wide as seemed possible, showing off his teeth, all of which were gone or broken off. He turned his loose lips up in a horrible grin, then flapped them together, making a wet, smacking sound. The shouts of men accompanied by the sounds of metal striking metal came from the hallway behind Stone.

"I've been assigned to investigate the death of Mike Anderson, the bluesman."

Stone went back to examining the wall hieroglyphics. He brought up his shackled hands to touch a finger to a piece of a word. His eyes slid to her in a sideways stare. "That's funny. You end up workin' to get me free."

"You are the second person to see humor in this," Salt told him, "but the first wasn't me."

There was a sudden moldy refrigerant odor, and the close air turned quickly cold.

"So the white bitch cop put me in here now gonna help get me out." He made a click with his cheek.

"It's been given to me. It's my job." Her hand rested on the shield at her waist.

"Oh, and I do know you do your job," he said, then seemed to draw back, realizing what he said and what it might mean for him.

Salt forced herself to lean forward, close to the dirty hard plastic. "There's that," she said, "and also that I may be able to arrest John."

"How you gonna prove what happened ten years ago?" Stone's voice growled from his battered mouth.

"I don't know. That's why I'm here, to ask you."

"All I know is what John tell me. He said he gave the bluesman bad junk 'cause he tried to get out of a deal. I thought it was about singing and playing in the club." Stone brought up his clenched, manacled fists. "Is that enough?"

"Who cut John's dope for him?"

"Back then it was Man."

"You ever know John's last name?"

"Don't nobody have no real last name 'round The Homes."

"Was anyone else involved in John's dealings with Anderson?"

Stone stretched back, his long body in a straight line, his bound arms above his head. "Maybe somebody the bluesman played with. I can't remember all from back then."

Down the long hall behind Stone, at the far end, an inmate made wide swipes with a mop, accompanied by a

faint but distinct tap each time the mop end hit the bottom of the wall. His rhythm was constant and steady. He faced the other direction but was backing closer and closer.

A sudden clank from the door behind Salt startled her as it began its motorized draw back into the metal wall frame. "Time's up," said the gray-shirted officer waiting on the other side of the door. Another guard appeared behind Stone. Salt stood. "Can you give him my card?" She pulled a generic blue card, on which she'd written her mobile number, from her jacket pocket and held it out. The officer took it and unlocked a tray to the other side where his counterpart retrieved it.

Stone had stayed seated, the fingers of both his hands again touching the letters and crude drawings on the sides of the space, like a blind man reading Braille. The guard behind him gave him a tap. "Time's up." Stone stuck out his long, thick tongue and licked the scratched steel wall.

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