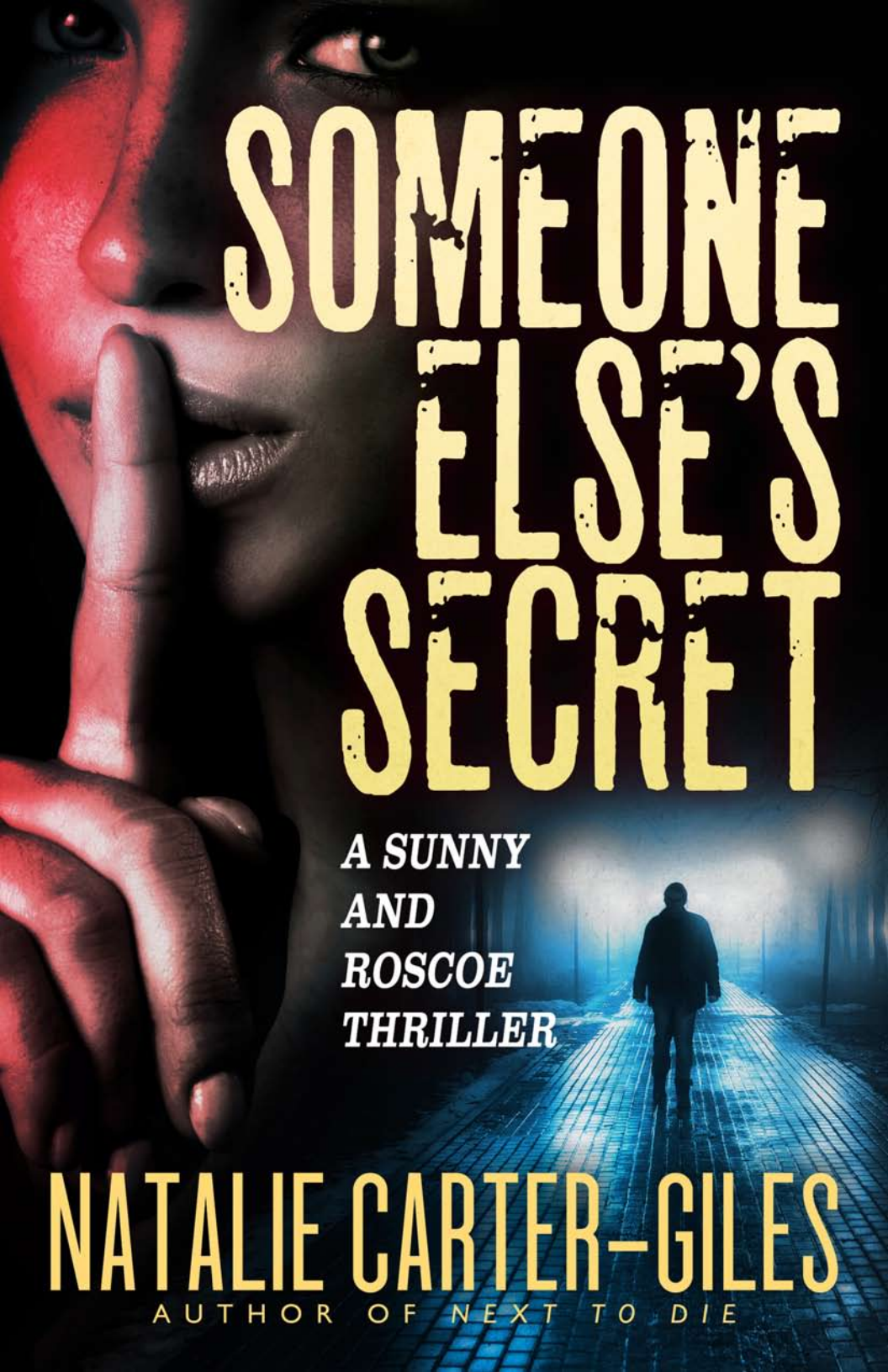




SOMEONE ELSE'S SECRET

A SUNNY
AND
ROSCOE
THRILLER

NATALIE CARTER-GILES

AUTHOR OF NEXT TO DIE

PRAISE FOR NATALIE CARTER-GILES

Hunting Helena

“As the narrative shifts back and forth, in an effective technique for building suspense and filling out character and motivations, teenaged Helena wades through the loss of her father, trying to care for her deeply depressed mother and making her own decisions about what university campus to enrol in, and where to live, and adult Helena seeks to solve the crime that nearly destroyed her.”

JOAN SULLIVAN, THE TELEGRAM

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SOMEONE ELSE'S SECRET

*A SUNNY
AND
ROSCOE
THRILLER*

ALSO BY NATALIE CARTER-GILES

Hunting Helena

— Sunny and Roscoe Thrillers —

Next to Die

Someone Else's Secret

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NATALIE CARTER-GILES

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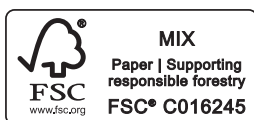
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We acknowledge the [financial] support of the Government of Canada. *Nous reconnaissons l'appui [financier] du gouvernement du Canada.* We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. *Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.* We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation for our publishing activities.

For Rick.

For all our yesterdays, each and every today, and endless tomorrows.

Loving you forever and always.

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SOMEONE ELSE'S SECRET

*A SUNNY
AND
ROSCOE
THRILLER*

A secret remains a secret until you make
someone promise never to reveal it.

— Fausto Cercignani

1

Four years earlier

I wasn't born a murderer. I never aspired to be one. Yet here I am with a bucket of barely diluted bleach and Mama's old scrub brush, desperate to erase the evidence from the kitchen floor. The yellow, brick-printed linoleum is old, cracked in places, and I worry it has seeped into the floorboards beneath, to wait patiently for someone to peel back the layers and discover what I have done.

Across the room, my eyes stall upon the shape of you, wrapped neatly between a plastic sunflower-printed tablecloth and Mama's threadbare rug. The coupling of chemicals with the realization that cleaning up is merely half my battle causes my throat to constrict. I know I have to rid myself of your flesh and bones, to erase every last piece of you from this earth, but I can't do it alone and I'm not prepared to do the unthinkable and carry you out piece by piece.

I didn't choose this path, yet somehow it's the middle of the night, I'm on my knees, and my fractured mind has entered into a battle I have no way of winning. How did I end up here? I cannot remember when my life changed, when the downward spiral grew to a raging tornado. I can't tell you the exact moment I disappeared inside the storm. I can't pinpoint the date and time I was swept up, spun around

in vicious circles, and propelled into this life. All I know is, little by little, I faded. Not willingly. Not knowingly. But each day, each week that passed, each year that dragged on, pieces weathered and died. Now I am merely a shell, cracked and broken and rotting inside.

You did this.

Your words, cast with vengeance, eroding my sense of worth, destroying my meagre self-esteem. Your hands, bearers of the softest caress turned balled fists to force and control my every move or suffer the consequences. Your heart, beating with false love and devotion, reeling me in and holding me close, so you could trample my emotions and crush them with your special kind of love. You sought to erase me from the beginning.

And I nearly let you.

I scrub a little harder. More bleach. Another bucket of water. So hot my skin is the colour of diluted blood.

And still I see you.

Prone on the floor. Blood trickling from your wounds. Hatred radiating from your eyes. Your breaths grow shallow, fading into intermittent gasps that force your chest to heave and fall. Still I wait. Anxiety and calmness compete as each jolt comes less often, less intense than the one before, until your final breath is expelled in the last words you will ever say to me.

“See you in hell,” you whisper, words thrust through liquid gurgling inside your throat. I want to tell you that I am already there, but I refuse to offer the satisfaction.

The linoleum is cleaner than it has ever been. The grooves, once grungy grey with embedded dirt and kitchen grease, gleam white as they can with their age. And yet I still see it—a bright coagulating sea of red. Its tentacles reaching across an uneven floor, creeping through crevices, hiding in places I cannot see, reminding me that I’ll never be rid of you.

I pause to catch my breath and fight the exhaustion waiting on the fringes, creeping ever closer, my will and courage spent.

The underside of Mama’s rug burns my retinas, searing its image into my brain. Finally, the tears come. I cry not because I’m sad for

you, not because I'll miss you or long for you to burst through the door. No. Hell, no. I cry for myself, for all that I've lost, for all that you've taken, and for everything you've still yet to claim.

You're never coming back, but how do I move on without you?

How will I explain your absence? I'm not certain I'm that good an actress, and even if I were, you're still lying in the middle of the kitchen and I've no idea what to do with you.

I spy another spatter under the table, a rusty, brown-crusting blob, and so I return to the bucket, forcing my hands back into the steaming bleach water, scrubbing vigorously. Mama always said she could think better when cleaning.

And then it hits me.

I can't do this on my own, but am I really alone? There are others. Women who have endured this life. Women who will understand completely what I have done and why. Out there somewhere, there are others just like me. The burning question is, *Can I trust them?*

2

"Hang in there," Sunny pleads. "Help is on the way."

Sunny Bronson is on her knees, oblivious to the filthy hardwood floor in a bedroom deep inside a house a team of RCMP officers stormed mere minutes ago. Once the initial chaos settled, a search revealed several young women in the back, all under the influence of something. One woman is badly beaten and barely alive. Sunny holds her cold, bony hands and silently sends up a prayer. There is nothing more she can do for the young woman whose tenuous grasp on life fades as the seconds tick by.

The woman's eyes roll over in a shocking display of glossy white orbs. Her lids fall slowly, open again, revealing greyish blue irises and pupils the size of a pinprick. Sunny isn't sure what the woman sees, if anything at all. Her mouth moves, air passes between dried, cracked lips, but only a whisper is audible.

"What are you trying to say?" Sunny asks, her face as close to the girl's as she dares. "Tell me your name. I'm Corporal Sunny Bronson with the RCMP. You can trust me." Sunny raises her voice with the hope it will somehow reach the woman. "We're here to help you. We'll get you to a hospital, I promise."

The woman's eyelids flutter again. Her head lolls to the side, her cheek resting on a grungy mattress encrusted with dirt and stains Sunny would rather not analyze. Her entire body shakes. From the cold or the result of whatever drugs she's taken is anyone's guess. In a place like this, she probably took whatever was offered and was thankful for it. And yet it is just as likely she was forced as a method of control. Whatever the case, it's over now one way or the other. If she doesn't get to a hospital soon, she won't make it.

"Roscoe! Where the hell are the paramedics?" Sunny yells, her voice betraying her anxiety.

"Still five minutes out," he replies, looking from the woman to Sunny to his wristwatch.

Roscoe's face says everything Sunny can't voice out loud. This woman doesn't have five minutes. Sunny averts her eyes from Roscoe's stare and focuses on the woman instead. Her face is grey, her skin damp with sweat. Despite her condition and unsavoury lifestyle, it is easy to see she is barely out of her teens. The woman's chest heaves with intermittent ragged breaths as she struggles for air. Unexpectedly, her fingers tighten around Sunny's with such intensity, Sunny winces from the jolt of pain. Her pale lips move frantically, her blue eyes boring into Sunny's with a fierceness she doesn't dare ignore.

"I'm listening," Sunny assures her. "Whatever it is, just say it. I'm here to help, I promise."

It's obvious the young woman has suffered terribly in her short life. The evidence is written in the distant look in her eyes, in the track marks and scabs the length of both arms and between her toes, and in the bruises circling her wrists and dotting her bare legs. She is a fighter. Whether she knows it or not doesn't matter. In this moment, balancing the tightrope between life and death, this woman somehow

finds the strength and determination to voice what she has been trying to say since Sunny burst through the front door.

Sunny lowers her ear to the girl's lips, straining, expecting her to voice the name of the man who forced her to offer her body to despicable men who then used her to satisfy their sick desires. The same man, Sunny suspects, held her here in this house against her will, pumped full of drugs and dependent on him for everything from food to a hot shower to her next fix. But the words aren't the ones Sunny is expecting.

The second they are forced from her body, the woman's eyes flutter again and her grip on Sunny's hand grows slack. Her chest rattles hard, then falls with her last, laboured breath. As if on cue, the paramedics rush through the door and push Sunny aside to work their magic, even if it looks less and less likely that the woman will live to fight her battles for another day.

"Did we get him?" Sunny asks her partner, still hopeful something good came of the whole operation. Roscoe shakes his head, anger flashing across his face. "Damn it! This needs to end, Roscoe. How many lives is he going to ruin before we stop him?"

"As many as he can, Sunny. As many as he can."

Sunny glances at the paramedics still working tirelessly to revive the girl. Still hopeful, she catches a look from a female paramedic holding an IV bag above her partner, who is performing CPR. She shakes her head slowly, a grim confirmation of what they were expecting.

"Damn it!" Sunny shouts to no one in particular. "How the hell did we miss him? C'mon. I want to speak to the guys he left here to guard the girls. Right now, I could choke the truth out of them."

"The other women have been taken to the Health Sciences Centre for medical attention," Roscoe tells her as he leads her toward the two men. "They are strung out. One is in pretty bad shape. It might be a while before they are coherent enough to talk."

"Christ, what a mess." Sunny sighs, surveying the surrounding shitstorm.

Corporal Sunny Bronson is a member of the RCMP's Major Crimes Unit located in the Newfoundland city of St. John's. A beau-

tiful woman, with long, red hair and legs most women would die for. She set the record straight early in her career that she wasn't a pretty face who slept her way up the ranks. Many have cast negative comments, both sexual and derogatory, behind her back throughout her career, but her unwelcome arrival at Major Crimes was especially notable. Some of the old-school officers felt a woman had no business in Major Crimes and openly expressed their discontent at her working the big cases. Sunny let it slide and instead proved her worth by helping to solve some of the most heinous crimes to plague the city.

Along with her partner, Sergeant Roscoe Pratt, Sunny made it known that she is as good as—if not better than—her male counterparts at doing the job they all love. She is smart. She is a quick thinker with a unique ability to understand each perp that crosses their path. When Sunny is assigned a case, she works it like it is her own personal mission. If she was on your tail, you don't stand a chance. When it comes to crime, Sunny Bronson is on it like a fly to molasses.

Sunny and Roscoe have since been dubbed the most effective team in the division with the highest solve rate. Individually, Sunny and Roscoe are officers to be admired. They see the evidence and understand their cases like none other. Together, they are a force to be reckoned with, bouncing facts, ideas, and intuition off of each other in ways that make other officers' heads spin.

A few months ago, they stopped a man who brutally murdered six people—along with four others he killed as an experiment—in a convoluted plan to rid the city of sinners. Sunny was injured. Roscoe nearly died. In the end, Sunny figured out who was responsible in time to stop the killer and save Roscoe's life.

She was ordered to stay off work for a couple of weeks to recover from a severe concussion. Roscoe, on the other hand, had needed six weeks of recuperation after suffering stab wounds to his abdomen followed by significant blood loss and shock. His wife, Lauren, a registered nurse in the emergency room at the Health Sciences Centre, had barely made it to the end of the six weeks without killing him

herself. They'd been back together working Major Crimes for nearly two months before finally finding their groove again. Then they were handed a case that had them ready to pull out their hair.

During the "Disciple" investigation, Sunny and Roscoe inadvertently uncovered an international human trafficking ring that brought its poison into the city. The couple involved didn't survive the Disciple's wrath, but they did leave behind incriminating evidence, enough that a federal task force had discerned a person of interest. The problem was the information didn't identify the person they were looking for beyond a nickname—Fidget.

An hour ago, they thought they were about to capture the elusive Fidget and secure the key to unlocking the case. They were sitting on a rundown house in a dilapidated area inside Buckmaster's Circle, while another team watched the rear from a vacant lot, and patrol units waited at each end of the sealed-off street. Inside, they believed, was a man they were certain spent his days trafficking young women and girls to johns all over the city and across the country in an elaborate scheme to control their every move and reap the benefits of their abuse. He is known only as Fidget. Recently, they learned of his lucrative side gig, whereby he zeroed in on the most wealthy johns—those with the most to lose—and blackmailed them for substantial sums in return for his silence and a continual supply of "fresh meat," as he was known to refer to the women. It isn't yet known if Fidget's bosses are aware of his additional income.

Solving the case looked promising a month ago when a patrol unit picked up a working girl, known locally as Candygirl, along with her john, a local businessman named Josh Brophy. Little did they realize the hornet's nest they'd just poked. With threats of exposure and criminal charges, Mr. Brophy agreed to exchange information for his anonymity, telling them everything he knew about the operation and providing the link to the province the federal task force was searching for—the link to Fidget.

Candygirl, too afraid to speak against her boss, was eventually released with an order to attend court at a later date. Sunny and Roscoe were brought into the operation and, with the information

provided by Brophy, were able to obtain the manpower for physical surveillance, which led them to more girls and even more johns. Further digging produced a list of suspects, believed to be minor players in the grand scheme of things, but who held enough knowledge of the business to bite the head off the mastermind of the whole tawdry operation—if only they could persuade one of them to talk.

The goal of today's operation was to finally bring Fidget into police custody and initiate a much-needed conversation. Fidget was the middleman responsible for several girls being trafficked locally, as well as those who arrived for short visits on and off throughout the year. If the information was reliable, the girls arrived on a private bus that toured the country, making its way from coast to coast. The girls were rarely the same, and Brophy couldn't say what happened to them once the tour was over. That was another level of investigation, one to which Sunny and Roscoe weren't exactly privy.

Their job is to arrest Fidget and persuade him to talk, a task that seemed easy in the beginning but has since taken on a life of its own. Believing he is the link they need and proving it are two entirely different things.

Through intense surveillance, they learned Fidget has a soft spot for a woman named Violet Caines, who is in an assisted-living facility in the city's east end. Violet is fifty-two and suffers from daily life challenges that deem her unfit to live on her own without twenty-four-hour care, hence her admission into the care home when her parents were no longer able to provide for her. A search of the family's history produced no links to anyone fitting Fidget's description, yet he visits her frequently. The nurses knows him as "Freddy," Violet's cousin, but no one by that name can be found in her family tree. Regardless, she is the only link to the man they need to break the case. They are reluctant to stake out the assisted-living facility until they have enough evidence to charge Fidget with a crime, but after today's failed bust, their options are few.

"So, what next?" Roscoe asks, more as a statement than a question.

"I'll get patrol started on the door-to-door," Sunny replies, pushing her feelings about the woman's death aside for the time being.

"It's possible someone saw something or is at least suspicious of the goings-on here, but in this area of the city, getting someone to talk won't be easy," Roscoe grumbles.

"In the meantime, we'll make these guys so uncomfortable they'll want to tell us all their dirty little secrets," Sunny says, referring to the two men arrested inside the house. Both, they suspect, were hired to guard the girls, provide them with the bare necessities as needed, and keep them in line behaviour-wise. "And let's set up surveillance on the assisted-living facility in case Fidget turns up for a visit," she adds. "I hate to use Violet Caines, but I will if I have to."

"Evans and Jenkins left with them a while ago. They'll be starting to squirm about now," Roscoe says.

"Hopefully they're in a talkative mood, because we're running out of options."

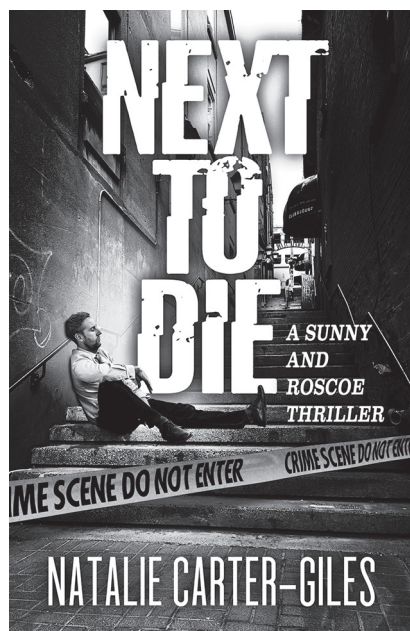
3

Becca

I sigh theatrically as I gather the stack of papers atop my desk. My relief is obvious as I prepare for the last bell. My grade ten students follow suit. Books, Chromebooks, pens, cellphones, everything tossed into backpacks, messenger bags, and totes, zipped tight, tossed over shoulders, and soon to be discarded until Monday. Except for their cellphones, which have somehow become an extension of their bodies like some freakish alien creatures.

Underneath the desks, feet are tapping, legs are jiggling. Each student brews with anticipation, itching to escape the classroom, to beat it down the hall and out the door to freedom. It's Friday afternoon, so who can blame them? I know what they're looking forward to. A weekend of parties, sleepovers, pizza and beer, ball games and hookups. They've already forgotten about *Macbeth*, the tragedy written by William Shakespeare hundreds of years ago and the subject of

ALSO BY NATALIE CARTER-GILES



The Disciple is on a mission to rid the city of sinners. With a twisted view of the Bible, he finds unique ways to kill those he believes deserve to die. He claims he's teaching the city a lesson. It turns out he's done this before. But this time, there's a major difference—the Disciple has now discovered how much he enjoys executing his mission.

Travis Parker is the Lead Hand in the produce department at the local grocery store. However, he fancies himself a journalist. When he stumbles across a grisly scene in a dark downtown alley in the city of St. John's, Travis alerts the police, but not before taking with him a note that the killer left in the victim's pocket.

Corporal Sunny Bronson and her partner, Sergeant Roscoe Pratt, are members of the RCMP's Major Crimes Unit in the city of St. John's, Newfoundland. They've just been handed the most difficult case of their career. The body count is rising, and the mountain of evidence is growing, yet they can't seem to connect the dots. The Disciple's list is growing, and time is running out for the *next to die*.

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