

*Marie Force*

286: An Inside Look at a Romantic Suspense Series

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/286 because it's Episode 286. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and, you know, all the usual places where you can listen to podcasts; and please, leave us a review. This will help other Word Nerds out there discover the show as well.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Marie Force. Marie is the New York Times, USA TODAY and Wall Street Journal bestselling author of more than seventy contemporary romances, including the Fatal Series. 29 of her books have been New York Times bestsellers, and she has sold more than 7.5 million books worldwide. Wow.

Now, today, we're going to be discussing book number 15 in the Fatal series, Fatal Accusation, but we're also going to be talking about the craft behind putting together a Romantic Suspense series or a series, in general. So, welcome, Marie; it is so great to have you here.

Marie Force: Thanks for having me.

GP: So, I'd like to start out by asking about the story behind the story, but before we turn our attention to Fatal Accusation, *per se*, I wanted to take a little walk down memory lane and hear about how the Fatal series, as a whole, got started in the first place.

MF: Sure. I have two updates to your intro, your lovely intro; and thank you for that. One, is I have 30 New York Times bestsellers. And two, I'm at more than 9 million books sold, the last time I got the--

GP: Holy Guacamole!

[laughter]

MF: So, these are all milestones; we have to celebrate every little of them. But the Fatal series came from-- Actually, I'm a big 'news junkie'. I read everything. I have subscribed to The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, The Washington Post.

And The Washington Post is one of my favorites, and I'm in there every day reading everything. And years ago -- this would've been like 2006 -- I saw a story about a congressman who had been found dead in his DC area town home.

And initially, it was treated as a potential homicide; and it turned out to be that he had a heart attack, fell down the stairs, and it was a sad story. But it got my whole brain going bonkers, going like, 'Okay, well, who would have jurisdiction? And, you know, if he died in DC -- would that be the DC cops, would it be the Capitol Police, would it be the FBI?'



So, I followed the story, and it turned out to be the local police who has the jurisdiction. And so, from that came the idea for Fatal Affair, where a senator is found dead in his DC area home by his-- He's actually in DC – actually, at The Watergate in an apartment. And his Chief of Staff finds him dead murdered recently.

From that, in walks DC homicide detective who had a one-night stand with the Chief of Staff six years earlier, and they have never seen each other again since. So, that's the whole start of the series. It all came from a news article about a DC area congressman found dead in his DC area home. And literally, that little thing has led to – now, soon-to-be – 16 books and counting.

GP: Wow. Wow. I love that.

MF: So, those two characters – Sam Holland, who is a DC homicide detective, and Nick Cappuano, who is a political operative – are the lead characters in every book in the series. And it follows their careers, their careers' trajectories. It follows their colleagues, their family members. There's a whole huge cast of secondary characters who are as beloved as they are.

But at the heart of this series is a romance between the two of them that is epic; it's for the ages. It's the thing. If you ask my readers who are so addicted to the series, why they come back for every new book, it's because they want more of them.

I get a lot of #marriagegoals, #relationshipgoal, #herogirls. So, people love him, they love her, they love them together. And the way that the series is set up with two very high-profile careers in the fishbowl of DC, and I've got it set up to grow, indefinitely.

GP: Love that. And I love what you were saying that like people want to see more of them – not just as individuals, but also together. And that it's almost like their relationship becomes this aspirational thing for your readers. Like it does become a merge goal or a relationship goal to have this great relationship with another person.

MF: Right, exactly. And the thing is, is that one of the questions I get often is, okay, so if you have the same couple in every book in a romance-- And just to go back too, to the beginning of this, like I tried to sell this series to a lot of different publishers and I got the same pushback, 'Okay, the same couple in every book is not done in romance.'

GP: Yeah.

MF: I was like, 'But, why can't it be? You know, why can't it be, why can it not be?' And so, you know, you use the example of, so for example, the J.D. Robb series, which has also at its heart, an epic romance. But when you look at where those books are shelved in bookstores, they're in mystery.

So, because that's in the Mystery genre, and it's the Nora Roberts pen name of J.D. Robb; and she's about to release the 50th book in that series. It was treated as a mystery, and even though she's the queen of romance and there is an enduring romance in that series, it's considered to be a mystery.

So, that's why it wasn't like, 'Okay, a slam dunk to do something similar to that where mine is more romantic suspense where I would say, where the in-depth books maybe are 70:30 in favor of the police procedural being 70% and 30% being the romance. I like to think mine are more like 60:40 with 40% romance.'

So, it is definitely more in the Romantic Suspense genre than in the mystery. And for that reason, I had a really tough time selling this idea to publishers. And, in the end, it ended up with Carina Press,



which is the digital-first arm of Harlequin – and later was moved up to HQN, which is the mass market imprint of Harlequin.

So, you know, there has been some-- There was a lot of pushback about that. But, and so, I get this question all the time – especially from other romance authors – ‘How can you keep the romance alive between them? Like, how do you keep the conflict alive?’

And my answer is always the same, the conflict is never between them; it’s always external. It’s always external. It’s always them versus the world. And then they come back at the end of the day to each other, and that’s where they get their comfort, and that’s how they sustain all the craziness that goes on.

And I keep it crazy; like there’s always something crazy going on with them in their jobs, in their lives, in their extended families, in their group of friends. There’s always something that is really like very challenging,

GP: I have to say, I can totally attest to that. As someone who came into the series with book number 15 to prep for this interview, there was definitely like in the first chapter, I’m like, ‘Wait, that happened to them? Oh, wait, wait, wait.’

Because like, you know, in the first chapter, we’re getting little nuggets of like what’s happened in the previous books to sort of help us, you know, like sort of remember where they’re coming from.

And obviously for someone who’s new, that’s all new. So, I’m like, ‘Wait a minute, and that happened? Oh wait, and that happened?’ And it just kept like, I was just like, ‘Oh my Lord, these two be-- Thank goodness they have each other.’

MF: Their life is-- Absolutely. Yes. And so, like, by keeping that conflict external versus-- That is not to say that they don’t have their bumps with each other and their relationships. Definitely, they have their moments, especially at the beginning when they’re kind of working out, you know, who they’re going to be together.

You know, for example, early in the series, Sam has a really big issue with keeping things from him because she doesn’t want to upset him with the realities of her job as a cop and what she sees and what she deals with; and she gets injured, and she gets kidnapped, and she gets-- All these things happen to her.

And like, and you know, she knows how he suffers over those things. So, she tends to keep things from him; and then he’ll hear it from someone else, and it’s a huge issue.

And so, every so often that still comes up like 14 later – you know, he’ll say to her, “I thought we were past this nonsense.” You know what I mean? So, like, it’s not like they’re so perfect that you don’t feel like it could ever be real. But they’re pretty close.

I mean, like they are absolutely perfect for each other in all their imperfections. And he rolls with her, she’s loco. I mean, if she thinks it, she says it. If she-- I mean she is the most fun character to write. You probably saw some of that in Book 15, you know, her vibe with her partner.

GP: Yes.

MF: She tortures him. The poorest suffering Freddie Cruz who’s such a nice guy, she drives him crazy. I mean, you have to go back and read when she was his best man/woman at his wedding and threw a bachelor party for him and the torture, the absolute torture she put him through with like things that she had planned for that party.



And like, of course, that's not like what she ended up doing, but you know, she drove him mad; and her goal, from the minute he asked her to be his best man/woman, was to make him regret it. So, she's a lot of fun to write.

GP: I wanted to actually unpack something because since you mentioned her having this, sort of, wild side, eccentric side; and of course, where they're at, they're not at this place in the first book in the series, but by the time you get to Book 15, he is now Vice President.

MF: He is.

GP: It's kind of a position where her behavior is not exactly conducive to that role.

MF: Right. And before he became Vice President, that was her number one concern. And it's a really-- There's a really funny scene. I can't remember what book it's in when she says, you know, she gives him her full list of flaws. You know, I lie – I don't mean to, but it comes out and it's a lie, and I know it's a lie.

She's like, she's kind of going crazy like, I'm going to ruin this for you. You know what I mean? I'm going to ruin this for you. And like, she's absolutely convinced that if he takes this job that is offered to him, he has a very swift trajectory – in the sense that he goes from being a Chief of Staff to a senator, then they tap him to be the senator's replacement.

Because there's a whole disconnect going on in the Virginia Democratic Party at the time where they really don't have somebody that is tailor-made for the position, and don't kind of like--

I don't want to give away too much, but, and then he becomes literally one of the most popular, like sort of an Obama-esque-rise. Like where, you know, he kind of caught the attention of the National Party; and next thing you know, he's like front and center, you know? And they're like, whoa.

And she's kind of humming on, like, 'This is not what I signed on for.' You know? And like, he becomes extraordinarily popular very quickly.

He's got a great backstory of being the result of a teenage relationship raised by a grandmother who didn't really want him, and like got a full ride to Harvard, and like met the son of a senator; and next thing you know, he's working in politics. And it's just like his rise is somewhat an American dream sort of thing.

GP: Yeah.

MF: And she's kind of like, she's kind of like-- Well, she thinks his potential is endless and boundless, but she fears that she's going to ruin it for him. And because, you know, the stuff she's involved in on a daily basis on her job too is not exactly Second Lady material. And then, when they decline a Secret Service detail for her, which they are legally allowed to do--

There's only four people who are required to have Secret Service protection by law; and that's the president, Vice President, president-elect, and Vice President-elect. Their family members are not required by law to have it.

And so, because of that, they were able to decline it. And so, that's a big issue too. A lot of people, you know, don't approve of that; they think, you know, she's making herself a potential target. And, of course, it's more angst between them and-- It never ends



GP: All these like external wrinkles are what help the, you know, keep the characters interesting throughout the series and also kind of keeps the chemistry between them interesting as well.

MF: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, they go through some truly terrifying things; there's no question. I mean, attempted murder is made against her. She's hit by a car. You know, in the course of her job, she takes a lot of lumps because she's right down in there.

GP: Yeah.

MF: She's not like a lieutenant who sits in the office and gives direction. She's out on the street with her people and you know, she runs into a lot of trouble; and she walks in on a robbery in progress in a convenience store, in one of the books where she's going to get a bagel.

And so, all of these things, when they happen, they take five years off of his life too.

GP: Right.

MF: And then when he becomes Vice President, he can't just go running to her. His poor Secret Service lead agent is, he's a long-suffering character.

GP: Well, what's interesting too is that like, you know, because it's like that mismatch between the situation and the character only amps up the tension, right? Because she walks in, say, to this robbery in progress, in a store, but because of who she is, she's not someone who would just like walk in and be like, 'I don't want to get involved – this is going to get me into trouble, is going to get my husband in trouble.'

Like, she jumps in. She like--

MF: She's a cop.

GP: Yeah. She like-- And not just a cop, she believes it is her job to right the wrongs of the world.

MF: Oh yes.

GP: Like she takes that responsibility about very seriously. And so, because of that it's like you have to-- Like another cop might be in that situation, like they might phone in for help or you know, and wait for backup. But, like, I could totally see her not doing those things even though that--

MF: Yeah, she's very much a renegade, and that gets her in trouble.

GP: Yeah.

MF: It gets her into a lot of trouble. She is the daughter of a high-ranking-- She was the daughter of the Deputy Chief who was Deputy Chief until he was shot and wounded on the job two years before Fatal Affair opens. She also is dyslexic and has struggled to put herself through college and graduate school.

And she did all these things hoping that she would have a swift rise in the department and get into the upper ranks. And so, a lot of people will tell her that she is where she is as the lieutenant of the homicide division because of who her father is and all of his friends, and his best friend in the world is the Chief.

And there's absolutely no question that she gets some leeway because of who she is, but she also has earned it.



GP: Yeah.

MF: There is that too. She's got the credentials but she also gets stuck with the B/S that happens in a department like that. And she has her enemies, and that's another whole aspect of the series is how she works – really, what's still – in a man's world within the department.

Even though there's a lot more women than there used to be – and she's got a lot of female friends in the department at various levels – but there's always that buzz in the background that she is where she is because of who she is; and she has a lot of issues because of that.

GP: So, I wanted to circle back to something that you mentioned earlier when you were talking about, you know, you got pushback when you first pitched the series – and the idea of it being romantic suspense, but it's sort of 40, 60:40 as opposed to more 70:30 or 80:20, as other books might be. So, can we talk a little bit about what makes something a Romantic Suspense versus a romance that happens to have suspense woven into it?

MF: Yeah. See, I think that might be slightly hair-splitting just to try to decide the difference between those two things. But I think basically anything that has that, like whether it's Navy Seals going after somebody who's been taken hostage or – in my case – a homicide detective who in every book she has a new case that is presented to her and her team, there's a few things that do arch multiple books.

Like the one right before this one finished a 14-book arc on her father's case. So, that book, that was kind of a crazy scenario in that book of what happened and how it happened and how it went down. And then Book 15, which is Fatal Accusation, they're kind of dealing with a fallout of what they uncovered.

And you know, there's a lot of secondary things that are going on besides the initial murder mystery that kind of unfolds a little bit slowly in this one. Like sometimes, it's Page 1, you find out like who the victim is and what's going to happen and blah blah blah.

In other books, it starts more with other stuff; and then it kind of builds up to that moment. And this is one of those moments where in this book, in Fatal Accusation, you don't find out until about a few chapters in, who the victim and this homicide is going to be.

GP: Right.

MF: I think there's a big-- I've been told by early readers, there's a big moment when they find out what happens and how it happens. And in the context of the bigger story that's being told in this book, there is kind of like a 'holy cow moment' when they find out what exactly is happening in the homicide end of it. So, I think as long as there is some sort of, whether it be a crime element or a 'person in danger' element, that's where the suspense comes in.

And then the romance is often either hand in glove with that or sometimes it's secondary to it. I try to keep it primary because I feel like especially in the Fatal series, the romance between these two characters is the big draw for the readers 100%.

Like if you asked me, if I could get away with eliminating one or the other, the suspense of the romance, I would never survive getting rid of the romance. But I could survive getting rid of the suspense. You know what I mean? If I had to pick which one.

GP: Like if suddenly they moved to a suburb and had a white picket fence, but if they still had this amazing relationship, that's what the readers come for.



MF: Right. And the readers come for that because; they're funny, they're suity, they're mouthy with each other. Like they've got an adopted son who is 13, as of Book 15. They drive him crazy with their public displays of affection, and he reminds them that there's children in the house.

And you know, they're constantly-- They're very funny together too. They're very yin and yang, that way. And I absolutely-- It's one of the things as a writer and as a series writer to know what is the element that keeps people coming back? Like, what's the crash? You know?

GP: Yeah.

MF: It's them. And like, and if I try to say, "Oh yeah, so they really love my police department?" Yeah. They like all that. They like the DC entry, they like the politics-- Like I don't put too much politics in there because, God knows none of us need any more of that.

[laughter]

MF: I give just enough to show his job, his reality, his actual-- He actually hates being vice president, hates it; you know, wishes he'd never done it. Hates being confined by the Secret Service, hates the whole thing. And he's constantly apologizing to her, 'I'm sorry I did this to us.' You know?

And she'll point out, 'Oh, but it's nice to have designated drivers when we go on a date night.' You know, she tries to find-- She tries to find the positive in it because she worries about his stress; he suffers from insomnia. There's a great yin and yang between them; and to try to not take two very serious jobs too seriously when they're not working, you know?

GP: Absolutely.

MF: So, to try to keep it real.

GP: So, going back and unpacking even further because there's so much in there; I love what you were saying about, sort of, knowing which element you could drop if you needed to – sort of, telling you which one anchors the story--

MF: Exactly.

GP: In this case, the romance is what anchors the story. The other thing that I thought was interesting, so romance is one of those genres, one of the few genres that has very clear rules; and one of the big rules is the Happily Ever After, right? Like that is a big deal.

MF: Correct.

GP: It's on the RWA website, like, that's what constitutes a romance. With a series like this, where-- They're together; like, we know that they're together. Like we don't know, like, are they going to-- You know, 'Will the guy get the girl? Will the girl get the guy?' Like that's not a question.

So, how do you fit the Happily Ever After element when it's not your typical romance with a different couple in each book where they just kind of--

MF: That's a good question.



GP: It ends with them kissing at, you know, the last scene or whatever.

Marie Force: That's a good question. And one of the things that, it brings in another one of the romance acronyms. So, we have HEA, which is Happily Ever After – but we also have HFN, which is Happy For Now. And that's kind of where I try to end. Every Fatal book tries to end--

I try to end with a really good scene between the two of them at the end whether it'd be-- Like sometimes, you know, when you read romantic suspense, the book kind of ends when the case ends or when the person is rescued.

And I always feel a little let down by that because I want to go back to the couple. I'm always constantly-- I'm a big, obviously a big reader of Romance; and I find it very aggravating when the couple is kept apart for artificial reasons. You know, like plot devices and things like, 'Ooh, let's keep them apart.'

I want them together. I don't want them working out their craft with other people. I want them working it out together; not, you know, off the page or elsewhere in a coffee shop with a girlfriend. I want them doing it together, you know?

And so, I always like to bring it back to them at the end of every book. And sometimes, it'll be an epilogue where they have a night away together or, you know, a night at home with their kids – or they're in the last moments of Fatal Accusation, he does something really big for her, and she's waiting for him afterwards and he doesn't know that she's going to be in the car, you know?

And so, that's-- Something like that to kind of bring it back to them at the end of it, is it kind of gives you, leaves you with a feeling of like, they're good for now – to the readers, they're good. Like they've just been through this, yet another ordeal.

And really, the timing of the series is very tight. Like, there's usually like a week, maybe two – sometimes a month between books and the timeline. So, they're constantly in a state of uproar; and so, always on the razor's edge of wondering, like, 'What's going to happen?'

And the current administration that he's working for has had a few scandals and he's kind of worried that he's going to have to step into this job, which, you know, he wasn't really – Obviously, he says, "Being vice president, your number one job is to be ready to be president – I'm not ready."

[laughter]

GP: So, that actually brings up an interesting point, what you said about how the series' timing is really tight. And like, I can already tell that the timing within-- I'm still partway through the book, so no spoilers about the ending.

But I can tell that the books themselves are pretty tight, like in terms of how quickly the chapters I've read are paced, but if the books are also packed together – so, how do you as an author think through that? Because at some point, either we move past the timeline of the books or the books move past our timeline. Like, are they sort of like suspended in time in like 2016 or something, or does it matter?

MF: So yeah, they're kind of, like-- Yeah, it does matter in the sense that I don't want the series to become dated. So, there is no gate. Like, so, for example, you know, he's Vice President; he's extremely popular. He's done a really great job as Vice President of embracing some areas where, like, for example, you know, he likes to talk to school kids about Public Service; it's one of his big things.



It's something that he never would've considered if he hadn't met the senator's son in college, been taken home to the senator's farm in Virginia, sat at the senator's dinner table and got literally bit by the political bug by knowing this man, you know?

And so, he was planning to do Finance; and he's like, my life would've been so boring. Like he really loves being a Public Service, loves the whole Public Service element of it. So, he's using his platform as Vice President to really promote the idea of Public Service to school kids.

And so, he's extraordinarily popular; and, obviously, the heir-apparent because he's working for a second-term president right now, so the big 'will he or won't he run' is kind of like up in the air and he keeps saying, "We've got three years, we've got three years, I don't even want to talk about it – we've got three years, don't even talk to me about it." You know what I mean? "I don't want to talk about it."

So, that kind of gives you an idea of, 'Okay, so, next election is three years from where they are right now.' I don't try to keep it time to the four years in between the current election cycle in our country because then that severely limits how many books I can write--

GP: Right.

MF: -in a series that I hope will go 50, 60, 70 books; that would be awesome, you know? So, if I keep it tight, whereas, you know, in DC, unfortunately the crime rate is very significant – the murder rate is very significant. There is always real-life issues to draw from in the city.

There is no shortage of things that I can do with both of them, with their jobs, with their families, with all the things they're surrounded by. So, you see in the book that you're reading now, one of her colleagues has been through an awful ordeal; his partner was shot and killed on the job.

He has suffered tremendously in the aftermath of having that happen right in front of him. You know, he was the senior of the two officers. He feels responsible for what happened to this young guy. He's had a terrible, terrible time; and that's been going on since Book 9.

His partner was killed in Book 9; and in Book 15, he's still – we're still dealing with the fallout; and in 16 we will be too. So, you know, there's no end to what I can do in this world that I have created within the DC Metro Police Department, which is another really interesting thing too, is when I first started writing this, if you look up the DC Police Department, it's called the Metro PD.

You see it's 4,000 members; they have community policing, they have levels and divisions and departments within the department. And that was a really big challenge at the outset to not overcomplicate my command structure, and to not bring in all these different levels that I didn't need to have now.

Since then, I've brought in, 'Oh, we've got so-and-so from Explosives', or 'We've got so-and-so from Vice', or 'We've got so-and-so from Special Victims', but they come in as needed.

You know, it's not like you got to set up this massive thing. And I put a note in Fatal Affair that I did my best to set up a structure that made sense to me and, hopefully, will make sense to the readers – but if I tried to mirror the actual reality of the DC Police Department, that's all the book would've been.

GP: It's kind of like how, you know, the original Law & Order happened first, and the other ones were spinoffs. Like you had to have that first one to kind of give us the basic format and structure. And then, as you said, like SVU or Vice or whatever, can come in as needed.



MF: Right. Yes. And you don't bring them in unless you need them.

GP: Exactly.

MF: So, you know, I have a Chief, a Deputy Chief, I have a captain who oversees all the detectives. I have the lieutenant in the Homicide Department. I've got a lieutenant in this department, in patrol, and I've got lieutenants, you know, blah, blah, blah, as needed.

The command structure, the higher up she interacts with them simply because too, like I said, the chief is her father's best friend; and they came up together. And so, yes, she has a relationship with the Chief; he was Uncle Joe to her growing up, that's a problem for her.

GP: Yeah.

MF: It's a problem for her, and it's also a help to her. And they walk a very fine line. The two of them, the two of them walk a very fine line throughout the entire series of; he has no children, she and her sisters were like children to him growing up. I mean, they're very important to him. It's a tough, tough thing for them to navigate, very tough.

GP: So, one of the things-- The timing between the books is fascinating me, because one of the things that's kind of a big thing in Romance, in a lot of series is the sort of seasonality of various books.

But because your books are very compressed in time, like they're close together, even though they may be released further apart than they actually happen in, you know, the story of the timeline, do you ever tie in anything seasonal or like current event type thing?

MF: Oh, well, yes and no. So, there may be things like, for example, her colleague who suffered the loss of his partner has struggled with a painkiller addiction. In the aftermath of what happened to his partner, he medicated himself; and he was also buying the pills on the street, and he's a cop. Yeah.

So, that's a subplot that comes up in this book. Like we all know that he did that. Everybody who's read through Book 14 knows that he did it. He did it on the page. Sam knows he did it. And now, one of her nemesis in Book 15 lets her know that he knows that he did it.

So, the suspense element can come from a number of different varieties. In one of the past books, that same guy who's one of her nemesis said something horrific to her after she had basically attacked and nearly killed.

He basically told her she'd had it coming and she punches him in the face; and he falls backwards down a flight of stairs and breaks his wrist and something else, I can't remember. He breaks two things. I don't remember what the other, oh, maybe his knee, I don't know.

And then she swept it for two books waiting to find out if she's going to be charged for assaulting him. So, I mean, the suspense can be in other things besides a murder mystery too.

There's a little suspense element, you know, that can grow. 'Okay, we know the colleague is buying pills on the street, we know that Sam knows.' Okay? And one of her cardinal rules that comes from her dad is if you know something, tell somebody – you don't sit on it? Okay. Because if you sit on it, then you're culpable too.

And her father has taught her these things from Day 1. She sits on that. And so, is that going to come back to bite her? You know, like when the higher-ups who do so much to help her out to do her job



and everything, are they going to be, what are they going to say when they found out she knew that and didn't tell them – you know, until somebody else who obviously doesn't wish her well is going to make a case of that?

So, these are the kind of things that constantly keep the readers coming back too, because now they want to know, 'Oh God, is she going to get in trouble?'

GP: Right.

MF: Like, she's always on the verge of some sort of trouble, always.

GP: And it sounds like that when you do pull things more from, like ripped from the headlines, like the painkiller addiction thing, that it's more like a suspense-related thing as opposed to like, 'This is the Christmas book, and this is the New Year's book,' and things like that. Yeah.

MF: Oh yeah. I don't do that. No. But they do celebrate Christmas. You see them celebrate Christmas, you see them have Thanksgiving, you see them celebrate their anniversary; and, you know, March 26th is their anniversary. And so, when March rolls around, there is an anniversary mention; and they do something for their anniversary.

So yeah, like there is seasonal aspects; you know, the weather in DC it's cold, it's hot – you know, it's everything in-between. So, the time of year matters, but we could spend three books in the fall.

GP: Right. Got it.

MF: You know, because they are tightly woven.

GP: I love that. So, how do you keep track? I mean, like, you know, their anniversary; and you might be writing them celebrating Christmas, but it's like April for you. Like, how do you keep track of this stuff?

MF: Well, my readers celebrate their anniversary. We have a-- We have a very big reader group on Facebook that has like 8,000 members in it or something like that. And the readers remember their anniversary sometimes before I do.

GP: Oh my gosh.

MF: And so, we celebrate it in the group, you know? and I did a wedding novella for them, Fatal Destiny, which came after Book 3. And one of the things we did, it was really fun; it was back in 2011, we did-- Remember the Today Show used to plan people's weddings and--

GP: Yes.

MF: -you could get multiple options, and you could; so, I did that. Like, I had them pick everything for the wedding; her dress – you know, the cakes, the invitations, they picked it all. And then I brought all those elements into that novella, and it was really fun. So, they were very engaged in the process of planning that wedding.

GP: I love that.

MF: Yeah. It was really fun, and I gave stuff away. Like for example, when we chose the cake, like I sent cupcakes to the winner of that day, you know, or something like that.



GP: Aww!

MF: We did all sorts of fun stuff like that. And so, they've been very engaged. I have readers from this series that have been with it since Day 1. And they're very, very, very, very invested in this couple and the series. And it's really, it's kind of a cool little fandom that the series has. And people are extremely excited about every new book, which I'm thrilled about.

And then, of course, it becomes my job to keep it interesting enough they want them, that they want to come back for more. And I will say that Book 15 was challenging for me because Book 14 is a blockbuster. Book 14 is a blockbuster. It actually made Amazon's list of the Best Romance of the 2019, which was a huge thrill.

GP: Wow.

MF: Yeah. And it's interesting because I'm not afraid to say that Sam's father passes away in that book. And what's interesting about that is on May 1st, 2018, I started writing that book. He's a para, quadriplegic. He's a quadriplegic throughout the entire series. He shows up in Book 1 in a wheelchair.

And so, his health and his situation has always been precarious throughout the entire series. And I started to get a feeling, towards the beginning of last year, that it was probably time for me to write him out because I was having trouble bringing him in, in a meaningful way in every book.

And there was a huge, like, 'who shot Skip' mystery that had spanned at that time more than 10 books. And so, I really kind of wanted to wrap that up too. And so, I started writing that book on May 1st of last year when my own father was perfectly fine. And on June 10th of last year, I noticed that my father was not fine; and 32 days later, he was gone.

GP: Oh my gosh.

MF: And I had to come back from that and write the end of the book where Sam's dad died. So, Sam and I lost our dads together.

GP: Oh my gosh.

MF: I wrote a whole blog post about this, That Which Doesn't Kill You. And it's just so strange, like the parallels between like what happened to her and like what I had already written; and then how it all unfolded for me was just like, it was shocking parallels, like crazy stuff that she went through, that I went through. I mean, you can't make this up.

GP: Yeah.

MF: So yeah. So pretty nuts, right?

GP: That is nuts.

MF: I know. So, it's, she and I have been through so much together.

GP: So, of your heroines, is she kind of one of the one, because you've written a lot of different series, is she like--

MF: She's my absolute favorite. She's my absolute favorite character that I have ever written, ever; and she always will be. There'll be no topping her. No topping her ever. She is-- And I joke too that like, in some ways, there's a lot of Marie in Sam.

So, if you know Sam, you pretty much know Marie; except, she's kind of a badass and I'm not. Like, my kids laugh when-- Like, they love that. They'll be like, 'Yeah, we could take you in third grade.' I'm like, I know, right? She can hold her own like in a street fight. I'd be like, 'No, don't hit me.' So, I'm definitely not like her in that way – but in many other ways, there's a lot of me in her. Yeah.

GP: Yeah. We can hear the connection between you and her comes across just as you talk about the series. Like it feels like you're really connected to it.

MF: It's very organic. Like sometimes when I'm writing it, I feel like she's channeling; like, it's like it's not even me writing it, it's her, you know?

GP: Wow.

MF: It's like, it's just so weird. Yeah.

GP: So, she's your favorite character; and my guess is that the Fatal Series holds a special place in your heart, but you have all these other series too. So, can you talk a little bit about like the big picture and sort of how the Fatal piece fits into that overall puzzle and how you manage it all? Because like, I can't even.

MF: Well, yeah, so there's, it's a lot, because like coming into 2019, I had six series going; and coming out of 2019, I have four. So, this is a huge-- Like, it's been a big year of trying to kind of get this Wild Beast under control.

GP: Uh-huh.

MF: But Fatal Series and Gansett Island are like my two marquee series, if you will. They're the two that, like, I'm most known for. Fatal is 15 books. Another one coming next year, and many more coming after that. And then, Gansett is-- The 21st Gansett Island book is actually out a week after this Fatal book.

So, those are the two really big series that-- Like, I've been writing since 2006; they're kind of like the big ones, the ones that have sold the most – you know, that have done-- They've done really, really well.

And then I have the Quantum Series, which is Erotic Romance that I just actually wrapped up in October with the eighth and final book, in that series. I have the Treading Water series, which I wrote-- Those are the first three books I ever wrote.

And then I wrote a fourth one when the readers asked me to, and that was in 2012. And ever since then, they've been asking me for a fifth book that I'm currently writing now, and hope to have out in 2020. And that will end that series too.

So, and then I've got a series set in Vermont about a family that runs an old-time country store in Vermont that's based on the Vermont Country Store, the actual family that runs The Vermont Country Store. And so, I kind of made up my own fictional version of the store and the family.

And so, they're like third and fourth generation proprietors of this store that the grandparents founded during The Depression; and, you know, it's become this huge business. The Vermont Country Store



is a massive, massive business; and you wouldn't believe if I told you the number of what they do in a year, it's huge. So, my series has kind of mirrored a lot of what has occurred for that family in Vermont.

GP: And with that series, is that one like different couples, like different pieces of the family?

MF: Yes.

GP: So, it's more like a family saga?

MF: Yes. And so is Gansett; and then Quantum has a trilogy of the first couple, is in three books; and then the next five books are all five different couples.

GP: So, it sounds like Fatal really does stand apart. Like it's completely different.

MF: It's very different. Yeah, it's the only series I write that has the same couple in every book. Yes. And it's a different vibe than all of my other books; it's grimier; it deals with things like, for example, in the other series, the dad would never die, you know what I mean? Like, that wouldn't happen in any of my other series, but in Fatal, I mean, it's just a whole different vibe. So yeah, like there's a grandfather in the Vermont series. I get so many emails from readers like, You're never going to kill Elmer, are you? I'm like, 'No, God no.'

[laughter]

GP: So, you mentioned that going into 2019 you had six series and now you've sort of called it down to four, so – Fatal, Gansett Island... and what are the other two that are sort of staying in play?

MF: Green Mountain and Butler. So, Green Mountain was originally, traditionally published and then I decided to take the rest of the series Indie. So, I started a new spinoff kind of. But it's literally picks up where the other one left off. But that way, I have a new Book 1 that I can use for promotion and stuff like that. So, that's why I did that. But it's all under the same Vermont--

GP: Vermont Family series.

MF: It's the same series. Right, exactly. And then I wrote two historicals for Kensington in a gilded series and I really had a lot of fun writing them, but they're not my bread and butter, you know what I mean? I don't want to get distracted by doing stuff like, you know, it was fun to do, but it's not what I want to be doing, you know?

So, I'm just going to write two. I may write a novella because there's a natural third book, if you will, but I don't want to write another whole book in that world. So, I may write a novella or something to kind of finish the story for one of the other characters that they were asking about, but I'm not going to do anymore in that series.

And then there's Treading Water where there's four books; and then a fifth one, fifth and final coming. Treading Water was my very first book in 2004, 2005. And the series is enormously popular. I've been so blessed. The readers seem to like what I'm doing.

And then I have 12 standalones and more in the works, where 12 single titles, just about 75 total books.

GP: Wow.



MF: And I'm looking at them all right now myself in my office.

GP: Yeah. I'm scrolling through your website to like see how the pieces fit together and like, 'Oh, okay, that's that series.' It's a lot. And so, you mentioned also like, it's fascinating to me like shifting gears and looking from a business perspective that you mentioned; you know, you started one series Traditional, now you've moved that one Indie. Is that the only indie thing or do you have other indie efforts? Like when you write novellas for books, are those Indie?

MF: Gansett is all indie.

GP: Okay.

MF: Gansett is all indie. Treading Water is all indie. Quantum was all indie. Most of the standalones, all the standalones are indie. Yeah. So, I actually, out of 75 books, 50 of them are indie.

GP: Wow.

MF: Indie has been very good to me.

GP: That's awesome.

MF: Yeah. If you look at my entire career, there's 9 million books sold, 6 million-plus are indie.

GP: Wow.

MF: So yeah, Indie has been very, very good to me. I just actually celebrated the ninth anniversary of pressing published for the first time on my own.

And it's really kind of a crazy story of how I went from literally nothing to something in a year. I had made \$2,500 for all of 2010 on my books. At the end of 2010, I published two books; one in November, one in December of books I had written years earlier after many rejections.

And, you know, nothing was really, like-- I was published by two different publishers, but nothing was really kind of coming of it. And then I started publishing on my own; and a year later, I had sold 80,000 books on my own.

GP: Wow.

MF: So, it just changed everything. I went from \$2,500 for the entire year of 2010 to quitting my 16-year-day job at the end of 2011. Like literally 10 years sooner than I thought I was going to be able to, because my youngest will graduate from college in 2021.

So, I thought I was going to have to work full-time, you know, at least until I got them both through college; and that did not turn out to be the case. And it was because of Indie Publishing. I had written all these books. I mean, Gansett Island has sold 4.5 million books, and I couldn't sell that series to a publisher to save my life.

GP: Wow.

MF: I just signed a full set of the 20 books while I was talking to you because we sell them every day out of the store on my site. You know, the series has been enormously popular, and we couldn't sell it to save our lives. My agent tried everything, and we were rejected everywhere with that series.



So, I published it on my own; and it's been the absolute, it's the reason I'm self-employed is Gansett Island, total game-changer. So, you know, I'm a huge advocate of whatever works as an author.

Like if you're, you know, not getting where you want to be as a traditionally published author, given to a whirl – if you want to be traditionally published and have your books on shelves, obviously give traditional a whirl. I have nothing bad to say about traditional publishing, gave me one of the best moments I've had as an author.

The Harlequin re-released a bunch of the Fatal books, and there were four of them on the shelf one day when I was in my dad's grocery store with him; and he totally freaked out. We had this awesome moment; and it's like, I couldn't have done that on my own. You know, he was freaking out; and I have great pictures.

And, you know, it was an awesome moment between him and I that I could not have done without a traditional publisher putting those books on that shelf, you know?

GP: Yeah.

MF: So, there's pros and cons to both ways. And obviously, it's not for everyone to be running the massive amount of stuff that goes on behind the scenes when you've published 50 books on your own; and not to mention, had 20 of them translated into foreign languages too, on your own.

Like, you know, a lot of them are published traditionally in other countries, but I've also translated in other languages, at least 20; I've lost track of how many books we've done on our own in other languages too. Like we did the whole Quantum series in Portuguese on our own. You know, we've done--

GP: That's so awesome.

MF: I know. And like in France, we're doing a bunch of stuff. We've got a whole team over there. You know, and so like, it's a big business behind the scenes; and I'm very lucky to have great people working with me. Some of my closest friends, actually, from before all this happened, work with me.

And, you know, they get all this stuff done behind the scenes so that I can focus on the writing, because when you're writing four or five series, it's pretty much all what you're doing.

GP: Yeah. I mean, I was like looking on your website to like, you know, know the listing of just the stuff that's coming out, that has come out, or will be coming out in 2019; and like eight books, like that's a lot of books to release in one year.

MF: Yeah. And I didn't write them all in 2019. I wrote two of them. I think I wrote two of them in 2018. But then, you know, there's others that are in the works for 2020 already. And yeah, so I'm writing a book actually for Montlake, which is going to be an interesting; I'm really excited about that. I'm writing a single title for them right now, and I'd like to do a bunch of single titles with them.

And I think that would be a really fun thing to do because obviously, you know, they're the marketing geniuses. I'm with Montlake in Germany for the Gansett Island and Quantum Series, which have done bonkers business in Germany. So, you know, they're very, very good on the marketing front; and so, I really look forward to working with them on this book – and, hopefully, doing more with them. We'll see.

GP: I love it. I feel like we could have a whole other conversation just on the behind-the-scenes of the publishing.



MF: Oh, no question. Yeah.

GP: But in the interest of time, I just wanted to circle back to our original conversation. So, you've talked about like, you know, what's led up to this point in the Fatal series. We have Fatal Accusation, that's coming out in December or that will be out when this airs. What else do you have coming up? Any other things you'd like to share with our listeners?

MF: So, I'm working on, like I said, the fifth Treading Water book that my readers are really excited about; and this book that they've been asking me for, for seven years. And so, I'm really psyched to be writing that. I'm writing this Miami set book for Montlake and hoping to have that out; I think that comes out later in 2020.

And then I've got another Fatal book in 2020, and I hope to add to the Vermont and Gansett Island series and all of-- There be a book for everybody in 2020. So, I'm constantly working on, at least, two, at a time; so that, you know, I'll do something in the morning, and then I'll switch gears and contribute to another book in the afternoon.

And that helps to keep things moving forward. So, whatever's on deadline gets done in the morning, and then in the afternoon something else gets done.

GP: I love that. It's like you get down to business in the morning, you do the deadline driven stuff; and then you play in the afternoon, and do like another fun part of the project. Love it.

MF: Yeah. Right. And like, I've been doing like word-- I'm very much driven by word-count. So, like for the Montlake book, I gave myself three months and I do a thousand words a day. And so, that way it's not like, it's not horrible. You're not like, 'Oh God, this is brutal.' You know?

I just do 1,000 words a day, and I'm up to 45,000 words and I've got-- You know, it's not due until January 6th so I'm like "fat with time". I don't like to say that though because whenever I say that something happens that slows me up.

So, I feel, I feel fat with time, at the moment. Yeah. So, I'll be-- No problem at all to finish that, you know, with time to spare probably because, you know, once you get past that halfway point, it does take off.

GP: Yeah.

MF: And then I'm working on something else in the afternoon, and I've got a couple of things going that I'm-- If I'm not doing working on one book, I'm working on another. So luckily, I have a brain that multitasks at a pretty good clip so I'm lucky about that.

GP: Yeah, I feel like I would totally get derailed and go down rabbit holes if I tried to juggle too many things, but that's amazing. I love that. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

MF: It's very simple, write-- Like literally, a lot of people like to talk to me. Like I get a lot of emails, a lot of inquiries, like, 'Oh, I want to write a book' or 'How do I publish a book?' Or I'm like, 'Well, have you written anything yet?' You know, writers write; we don't just talk about it, we do it.

I have set up my entire life so that, that is really pretty much what I spend most of my awake time doing, and that's why I can put out eight books in a year or six books in a year or whatever because that is what I do all the time. There's a lot of people who like to talk about how much they dislike writing, which I totally respect that, but I don't know that I could do it if I hated it.



So, I think if you love it, that helps; allowing yourself to get into a place where you hate it is not going to be productive. I feel like, you know, if it's what you love and you want to be a writer, then you must write; and word count goals, definitely help. They really do put some discipline into the day.

I resisted that for a long time when I was still employed by somebody else. I resisted word counts because I didn't want to set myself up to fail when I had so many other things going on.

But now that I'm a full-time writer, it definitely puts discipline into the day to, you can't do anything else until you get that word count scene too; you know, and it really does help. So, writers write, that's my number one takeaway.

GP: I love that. And I love also like tying what you just said to what you were talking about before, like it's not about binge writing. Like you set these very methodical goals and you pace yourself so that at the end of the day, like you have enough of a leeway before your deadlines so that you don't have to hate the process. Like it's actually fun because they're not in crunch.

MF: That's the goal. Right. And it took me a long time to kind of get my head-- So, one of the biggest problems I had going back again to the Fatal series, I love the way those books end up at the end – but I used to hate writing them. I used to hate it.

And I found out the reason why is because I was trying to do, I was trying to compress it into too small of an amount of time. Usually, I can do a book in two months; and so, if I was trying to do one of those books in two months, it wasn't working for me.

So, I reinvented the whole process with Book 10. I got 90,000 words due on X date. I add up all the-- You know, if I've got three, give myself three months. If I do 2000 words a day, Monday through Friday, take the weekend off, then I don't end up hating it; and it's very doable.

And so, now I'm doing that for everything. And so, that also gives me, if I do that 2000 words in the morning, that gives me the rest of the day to do something else. And I joke that if I'm in the middle of a sentence at 2000 words, I'm out.

[laughter]

GP: Love it.

MF: See you tomorrow.

GP: Somehow, like my inner perfectionist would probably die a little inside but I could see how that would really work.

MF: Right. You should see some of the places I leave them on Fridays.

GP: It's like the next day, you know exactly what you need to do because, like, you're right in the middle of a sentence, like you finish the sentence.

MF: Right, right, right.

GP: I love it.



MF: It's easier way to pick it up and start the next day. But it definitely brought a whole different manageable aspect to a series that I was actually having trouble writing but was obviously doing very well for me. So, I've been crazy to give it up, you know?

GP: Right.

MF: It's totally changed my mindset writing this book; the last five, it's been completely not easy, but so much better, so much better.

GP: I love it. I love how you sort of added to that advice because I think all these insights are so useful. Thank you so much, Marie, for being here today. This has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you.

MF: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

