

## ***Q&A with Allison Brennan***

**Q: Tell us a little about your new release, *The Third to Die*. What character in the book really spoke to you?**

A: *THE THIRD TO DIE* is the first book in a new series, which is always exciting. I think what I like the most about *THE THIRD TO DIE* -- and the series concept of a mobile FBI task force tackling complex cases in rural and remote areas -- is that I can explore some areas that aren't often written about. With the vast numbers of crime fiction set in New York City, Los Angeles, and the like, I wanted to do something different. (This isn't to say other authors haven't -- J.A. Jance has a small-town Arizona series and of course Craig Johnson's Longmire series in Wyoming are two I enjoy.) I like moving the setting from book to book and keeping the core characters -- it's one reason I had Maxine Revere investigate cold cases in places other than where she lived. Because of the nature of the task force, they will be outsiders wherever they go, and need to learn to work together and trust each other.

In *THE THIRD TO DIE*, a serial killer hits a small community outside Spokane, Washington. The Triple Killer surfaces on March 3rd to take three victims before he disappears for three years. But this time, the FBI is on the case early, and they have the best chance of finding him. If they don't, a cop will end up dead. The best thing about this story is being able to create an ensemble cast of characters. I love shows like *BONES* and *SVU* where you have a lead character or two, but the writers spend a lot of time developing everyone else, so you feel like you're part of a team. That's what I'm trying to create with the MRT series.

Matt Costa heads the group, and what I love most about Matt is his ability to be a leader. He's a workaholic, but he trusts his team to do their job. He'll listen to everyone, but when he makes a decision, he stands by it. Detective Kara Quinn thinks, "He's an alpha male trying very hard, and failing, to be a beta."

Dr. Catherine Jones surprised me. I pictured her (somewhat) as a female version of Will Graham from *THE RED DRAGON* (the book, not the movies!), torn apart by what she's seen, but unable to leave the job behind even if it destroys her family. Knowing she's a secondary character in this book, I was surprised that her few scenes had such an impact.

But it was Detective Kara Quinn who really spoke to me. Kara was never supposed to practically take over the book. When I first conceived of the opening, where Kara finds the body, I thought Kara would simply be a witness and that she might investigate on her own and possibly even end up a victim herself. But getting into her head, learning about her childhood, watching how she interacts with Matt as well as his team ... she intrigued me so much that I hoped she survived (it was iffy there for a while!) because I wanted to keep writing about her.

**Q: You write about some interesting and complex characters in your books. From Investigative reporter Maxine Revere to the Rogan/Kincaid families. What is your favorite type of character to write about?**

A: This is a hard question! I like exploring a wide variety of characters, both heroes and villains. I love complex and conflicted characters, like Detective Kara Quinn, who has many strengths and a few weaknesses. I love writing villains and trying to figure out why they do what they do. To me, every great hero has a fatal flaw and every evil villain has a redeeming quality.

**Q: How long did it take you to get your rough draft finished on your latest release?**

A: Generally, a rough draft -- which is usually pretty clean because I edit as I go -- takes me 10-12 weeks to write. Because I wrote THE THIRD TO DIE "on spec" -- meaning, it wasn't contracted by a publisher -- I had to write between other projects that had deadlines. I wrote three complete books while also writing this book, so it took me a little over a year to finish the rough draft. But it wasn't really "rough" -- because I had to step away for weeks at a time, in order to get back into the story, I re-read and edited what I'd written, then wrote the next few chapters.

**Q: For readers who haven't tried your books yet, how do you think your editor or loyal readers would describe your books?**

A: My editor usually tells me that my characters are compelling, and I know how to increase the tension through to the climax. My long-time readers usually tell me that they feel like they know my characters and that they can't put the book down because they have to find out what happens. Most readers say my books are suspenseful. I also hear that my books are "intricately plotted" which makes me chuckle because I don't plot.

**Q: When writing, how do you keep track of timelines, ideas, inspiration and such? By notes on the computer, a notebook perhaps?**

A: I've tried every method of note-keeping, but little works for me. When I'm writing, I write notes directly into the manuscript either using the comment function or just typing in the text \*\*\* NOTE \*\*\* so I can easily search the asterisks. During revisions I have a notepad next to me with the key points my editor commented on, so I can keep those in mind while fixing problem scenes. For ideas I have a computer file called IDEAS (original, I know!) that I add to from time to time, but I rarely have used any of the thoughts I've jotted here.

**Q: In *The Third to Die*, were there any characters that started off as supporting characters, but then developed into a more prominent character?**

A: Detective Kara Quinn, who ended up being my favorite character once I was done writing, I'd intended to be a supporting character but as I got into her head, I liked her so much I kept wanting to go back to her. She became much more important to the story -- and, ultimately, the series. Detective Andy Knolls, who was a strong supporting character throughout, was originally supposed to be a much more minor character -- just the local cop my FBI agents could tap into for whatever they needed. But once he walked out of the autopsy because he thought he would puke, I realized he was a terrific character and I wanted to explore the character of a small-town cop facing a violent crime he was ill-prepared for.

**Q: What advantages or challenges does a writer in your genre face in today's fiction market?**

A: I think all writers, regardless of genre, face an overwhelming marketplace for stories. There are so many books being published today--both traditionally and independently--that standing out can be a challenge. But there are clear advantages to writing mysteries and thrillers -- I've talked to several bookstore owners and they tell me the genre has been selling much better over the last couple of years. Recently, one bookseller told me, "We used to sell tons of romances. Now, everyone wants mysteries." There is always a market for good stories well told, and genre fiction is always in demand.

**Q: *The Third to Die* is the first in a new series from you, called the Mobile Response Team. What made you decide to branch out into another series set in the world of the FBI?**

A: I had this idea more than a decade ago. When I participated in the FBI Citizens Academy in 2008, I learned about the Evidence Response Team and how they work within the FBI -- basically, they are agents from different squads in one jurisdiction who come together because they have specialized training in order to process and investigate specific types of crimes. One example locally was the Yosemite murders that terrified northern California in 1999, investigated by the Sacramento FBI with crime scenes investigated by the Sacramento ERT. But ERT agents also have their own cases, they're only pulled together in extraordinary circumstances. So I mentioned an idea to the public information officer about having an ERT unit that worked around the country (rather than in one limited jurisdiction) and he said he didn't see how it would practically work. I shelved it, but it nagged at me from time to time. Fast forward ten years and the PIO had since retired. He and I were chatting about another book of mine (I call him regularly for research!) and I talked to him again about my idea, but I had tweaked it. I had the concept of a Mobile Response Team to focus on rural and underserved communities, based on reading about some FBI offices that had huge territories and more limited resources (because of

size, location, etc.) He thought about it, and said, yeah, he could buy into it, especially since the FBI is working hard on improving its image. So, while it's not an *actual* FBI task force, it was *plausible*. So, I ran with it.

I love writing crime thrillers. I'm very comfortable writing in the FBI world, maybe because of all the research I've done and maybe because I'm interested in the cases they investigate. Because the MRT team moves around, I can explore a multitude of crimes that interest me. With an ensemble cast of characters, I can focus on different characters in each book, hopefully to make them more real to my readers. Matt and Kara will likely lead each book, but like Catherine was a pivotal character in this book, and Michael Harris will be a pivotal character in the second book, I hope to also go deeper into Ryder, Jim, and the rest of the team.

**Q: I really enjoy the complex story lines and cases you have in your Lucy Kincaid and Max Revere Books. How much research goes into your stories and is there a particular 'right from the news headlines' that catches your interest for a possible storyline?**

A: I love research! I read widely and have more than 50 research books on my shelf -- forensics, true crime, military, criminal profiling, psychology, police procedures, and more. I have contacts in many professions who I can ask questions. Before I start writing, I have to make sure the set-up works. After that, I research as I write. I participate in "generic" research whenever I have the opportunity--talking to people in interesting professions or going on "field trips" (such as to the morgue to view an autopsy or a ride along with the sheriff's department)--just to keep my general knowledge about law enforcement up-to-date.

Because I read widely, and keep up to date on crime related news, many 'right from the headlines' stories catch my eye, but I rarely write about them. It's usually a couple stories that I see together that give me an idea. Such as reading about a storm that unearths bones might interest me, but then I'll read an article about a missing person or a mortgage fraud scheme and twist all the articles into one idea that's completely different from the original stories. I've read a lot about human trafficking, and my second MRT book touches on that based very loosely on an article I read about how coyotes go back and forth across the border and the cost to their victims (financial, emotional, physical) coupled with another article I read about an abandoned camp that may or may not have been used for criminal activity, on top of a conversation I had with my brother-in-law, a wildlife biologist, about birds.

**Q: What do readers have to look forward to in the future from you?**

A: After THE THIRD TO DIE, the next Lucy Kincaid book will be out on March 31, where Maxine Revere gets to join Lucy in San Antonio -- but with a twist. In CUT AND RUN, Lucy is investigating the cold case and Max is investigating the recent murder. I'm almost done writing

the Lucy book that follows -- COLD AS ICE (10.27.20) as well as finishing the revisions of the second MRT book (currently untitled) coming out in the spring of 2021. I also have an idea for a trilogy about a female private investigator that I'm super excited about, and I'll be starting the first draft of the third MRT book this spring. Oh -- and there will be two Lucy Kincaid novellas coming this summer!

**Q: What advice do you have for someone working on their first book?**

A: Create good habits. Write regularly--create a schedule that fits into your life and stick to it, whether it's an hour every morning before the kids get up, two hours at night when you used to watch television, or every Sunday afternoon. You need to make sacrifices to find the time to write, but if it's important, you'll do it. (For example, when I was working full-time out of the house AND had three young kids, I gave up television for three years and wrote every night from 9 to midnight.) Also, learn how to discern constructive criticism--some advice is good, some isn't. Sometimes it's hard to know what to take and what to leave, but it's important. Generally, advice that is constructive will help you see your flaws while also motivating you to keep writing; advice that is destructive will make you feel like a failure. Don't listen to the destructive advice.

**Q: What is the hardest part about writing for you?**

A: Procrastinating. I get easily distracted, especially when I'm just starting a book. So, I guess that means the beginning is hard, hahaha. Once I am deep into the story -- somewhere between 100-150 pages -- something clicks and then I can't write fast enough. In fact, I've often said that it takes me twice as long to write the first 100 pages than it does to write the last 300 pages!

**Q: Do you have a set schedule for writing or do you work writing into your existing schedule?**

A: Before my first book came out in 2006, I worked full-time and I only had nights to write. I wrote every night when the kids went to bed, from 9 to midnight. Now I write full time, and I treat it as a full-time job -- I start after the kids go to school (about 8 am) and generally wrap up before dinner (about 6 pm). Not all those hours are spent writing -- I'll research, read, spend time on social media -- and sometimes I'll write at night, especially if I have to take a day off for errands or I have an imminent deadline or if I'm super excited about the scene I'm writing. Because my time is flexible, I can go watch my daughter's softball games or take a day to research on-site (like a ride-along.) I also write on the weekends, but only if we don't have family things planned (or a softball tournament!)

**Q: What is your favorite line from your book?**

A: I don't have a favorite line, per se. I have a couple favorite scenes. When Matt first comes to town and he and Kara walk through the crime scene. Matt's conversations with Ryder Kim, his jack-of-all-trades analyst. Kara's scenes with her grandmother. The climax was hugely fun to write and needed a lot of choreographing on my part to make sure it made sense! There's a scene from a child's POV that was very emotional to write and stuck with me for a long time. I think Kara has most of the best lines, to be honest, and one of the best exchanges between her and Matt was after a press conference Matt gave with the Spokane PD, when Kara was in the audience trying to figure out if the killer was watching the speech. Matt was irritated because he hadn't seen her, and Kara decided to have fun with him. At the end, as she's about to leave the room:

Kara smiled and handed Matt his wallet. "You were too easy."

Matt took his wallet, looking both surprised and angry, but also impressed. "You stole my wallet?"

"You gave me shit because you thought I'd bailed on you--I was just having fun. Don't take it personally. I've been picking pockets since I was a little kid."