

## Stranger than Fiction

Once upon a time there was a little girl who went to university and then became a mom. And she was assigned very hazardous duties...



But I took her away from all that (at least while the kids were at school) and now she works for me. My name ... is Bailey.



When Wintergreen was between the ages of 5 and 10 years old, there was a TV show that pervaded her childhood: Charlie's Angels. They were detectives who chronically went undercover to solve crimes. Wintergreen liked the show because they were always assuming new identities and hence got to live, at least briefly, so many different lives. They posed as wealthy heiresses, frumpy secretaries, race car drivers, athletes, nurses, and exotic dancers. They skated in the Ice Capades and in the Roller Derby. They were showgirls and beauty pageant contestants and circus performers.

Little did she realise that, as a writer, she would have to do her fair share of identity-hopping. Rule number one for authors is: "Write what you know." Very good advice, you'll agree. But what happens when you need to write about combat without ever having served in a war or about insanity without ever having been committed? That is where I come in. I nudge Wintergreen to take on different assignments that will give her the needed experience to be able to write credibly about things beyond her ken.

This is how it usually happens...

"Good morning, angels."

Wintergreen looks at me and rolls her eyes. "Good morning, Bailey."

"I understand you're having trouble writing your combat scene."

She stares morosely at her computer. "Yup."

"And so you need the experience of being under attack."

"Yes, but how do I get that without ending up in the hospital?"

I give her a withering look. "Isn't it obvious? You go undercover."

"As?"

"You'll see..."

### **Episode 1. Xena, Warrior Princess.**

Wintergreen stood in a church hall ready to practice the manoeuvres she'd just learned in self-defence class. They'd paired her up with a 90-pound opponent who had previously been beaten up by a mugger. Surveying this woman, who looked so mentally and physically fragile, Wintergreen knew that she could not bring herself to throw a real punch. Instead, with infinite care, she slowly extended her arm so that the girl could block her. The girl's riposte was no more convincing. She threw a half-hearted punch which Wintergreen blocked with comparable enthusiasm.

"This is useless," Wintergreen thought as this mimed exchange continued.

She had travelled all the way down to London to find a realistic self-defence course, one that might teach her something about the chaos and immediacy of real-life conflict. So far it had held all the action of a toddler's ballet class. She was beginning to rue the waste of time and train fare.

And then a large man wearing lots of padding and a helmet stepped into the room.

"Now that you've all had time to practice," the instructor said, "let's put your new skills to the test."

Wintergreen was called forward and looked at the man dubiously. He was so padded and protected that he looked like the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man from Ghostbusters. Frankly, she doubted that he would be able to lower his arms, let alone attack her.

"You ready?" the man asked in a muffled voice.

"I guess ..." And with that Wintergreen was slammed against the wall.

She was briefly aware of the pain in her left shoulder, before everything descended into chaos. It was all a blur of large hands that were trying to pin her down and a large body that completely filled her vision as she was knocked off balance and slammed into the wall again. Her breath caught in her throat and to speak or cry out was impossible. There was no reasoning with the man, no negotiating. And it happened all too quickly for any clarity of thought. She went down painfully onto her knees and then onto her hip. Finally, finally, she got angry. But she wasn't angry with the man, she was mad at herself for being so useless, for knuckling under. With a hoarse cry, she struck out with every ounce of strength she had. No effect. She hit again and again until the man toppled backward and his helmet went skidding across the room.

The sight of a vital bit of safety equipment careening through the air brought Wintergreen to her senses.

"Oh my God, are you ok?" she gasped, kneeling next to the man and, it must be said, fervently hoping she wouldn't get sued.

"Yep," he said. "That was well done."

My writer knelt there for a while, trembling. The fight had been well beyond her abilities and yet ... and yet ...

She had gotten a few good hits in. She thought back to every moment in her life when someone tougher or more aggressive had made her feel small and she looked down at where the skin on her knuckles had split and thought, "Yeah, that's not happenin' again." As she struggled to her feet, she smiled.

Wintergreen caught the train home and furiously scribbled down all of the thoughts and sensations she'd had while getting her ass kicked

around the hall. And although she was tired and bruised, although she had bloody knuckles and a swollen lump beneath one kneecap, although she nearly wet herself when he slammed her against the wall, she felt like Xena, Warrior Princess.

"Good job, angels," I said when she arrived home. I turned my back on her to prompt her to scratch that spot just above my rump that I can't reach.

"Thank you, Bailey."

"How do you feel?"

"Like I'm getting too old for this crap."

"Well, don't worry. Your next assignment will be easier ... at least physically."



*Thank God in heaven that she doesn't feel the need to wear the leather bustier.*

## **Episode 2. Psycho.**

While writing Good Neighbours, Wintergreen had to read up on the psychopathic mind. Her research led her to Jonah Lehrer and his book, The Decisive Moment. In it, he states:

The capacity for making moral decisions is innate – the sympathetic circuit is hard-wired, at least in most of us – but it still requires the right kind of experience in order to develop. When everything goes according to plan, the human mind naturally develops a potent set of sympathetic instincts.... However, if something goes amiss during the developmental process – the circuits that underlie moral decisions never mature – the effects can be profound.... The developing brain can be permanently damaged... [through] child abuse. When children are molested or neglected or unloved ... the biological program that allows [them] to sympathise with the feelings of others [can be] turned off. Cruelty makes us cruel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonah Lehrer, The Decisive Moment: How the Brain Makes Up its Mind (London: Canongate; Kindle edition) 173-4.

The area of the brain that regulates emotion and empathy is the amygdala and it is this part of the brain that can be stunted by neglect and abuse.

Wintergreen was curled up with me one afternoon and thinking out loud (essentially, trying to get her head around all of the research she'd been doing into neuroscience and psychology).

"I guess it's a matter of use it or lose it," she said, scratching my ears.

I opened my eyes and gave her a look that said, "Continue."

"If you don't treat a child with kindness during their developmental years, then the neural circuits in the amygdalae don't fire in a way that reinforces the emotions of compassion and empathy. The circuits lie dormant for lack of use. Empathy is therefore something that we learn not just from copying the behaviour of others, but also on a cellular level as synaptical connections are made in the brain. If the neurons aren't stimulated, then the capacity for compassion may never develop."

I looked at her meaningfully and she read the question in my expression: "Which could leave you with?"

"A psychopath."

She fell silent and I rolled over onto my back so she could scratch my belly.

Finally, she said, "That just leaves one question -- how can I get inside that mind-set enough to write a credible psychopath?"

I stretched and nudged her hand for in her musings she had stopped petting me. "Sounds like another assignment," I purred. (Yes, I know I'm a dog, but I do make a purr-y sort of noise when I get a belly rub).

It was a difficult assignment. You see, Wintergreen likes people and sees them all as variations of herself. They all have their strengths and weaknesses, their hopes and dreams, their moments of suffering. As Ian Maclaren once said, "Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." My writer has fought some very hard battles indeed and hence, has resolved to respond to others with the kindness that she herself has, at times, so desperately needed. And so the problem was this: how to jettison that compassion to get into the mind of a character that feels neither empathy nor love.

For this the conditions had to be just right. I advised her to wait for one of those weeks -- you know the kind, when everything seems to go wrong. A guy cut her off on the road and then flipped her the bird. Her daughter's sports practice was cancelled but no one told her and so she drove an hour out of her way for nothing. Her son was bullied at

school; the charity that just cashed her cheque gave her grief because she didn't have any loose change to fill the collection tin when they showed up at her door. And then, just to tip herself over the edge, she went grocery shopping right before the holiday and got mowed down by someone in the grip of trolley-rage.

When she returned home, her face was a thunder-cloud.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"People suck," she hissed.

"Then you're ready."

That night she chugged a large bottle of Mountain Dew and let the caffeine do its work. She barely slept. By the next morning she was tired and jaded and well beyond giving a damn. In this frame of mind, she drove into Norwich, parked her car and walked among the crush of people in the city centre. Distanced from humans by her frustration, yet with her emotions dampened down by fatigue, she walked among

them. And she steadfastly refused to see them as human beings. Every time someone got in her way, she muttered, "Obstacle." Every time she flashed a smile to get someone to tell her the time or hold open a door, she thought, "Tool." She began to play with ways to manipulate people into doing things. What act of pseudo-kindness would get that woman to stop and recommend a good restaurant? What would prompt that man to help me carry these things



*"We all go a little mad sometimes."*

to the till? She literally bit her tongue to keep from saying thank you and gnawed on the inside of her cheek to prevent the word, "Sorry" from escaping her lips every time she barged into someone who had gotten in her way. Over lunch, she considered the more problematic relationships in her life and made a mental list of how she could, if she was prepared to be ruthless enough, bend them to her will. It was a surprisingly long list of manipulations, nudges, digs, and little twitches of the puppet strings and she was amazed at her own horrid inventiveness. Essentially, she spent the day being an ass.

She returned home drained from what she called her "psycho stroll."

"You ok?" I asked, licking her chin.

"No."

"Can you write your character now?"

"Oh yes."

### **Episode 3. Cheech and Chong. Still Smoking.**

At one point she had to write about drug addiction and the sensations experienced when under the influence. This posed a particular problem for Wintergreen because she has never done drugs. Furthermore, after all of her preaching to her own children about the dangers of imbibing, there was no way she could experiment now. How then could she capture the sensation without turning herself into the worst of hypocrites?

Thank God for Google. Try it: type in getting high without drugs and you get quite a list of techniques you can employ. According to an article in the Daily Mail, dated 21 January 2014, you can achieve an altered state of consciousness through "Holotropic Breathwork" which is a practice of voluntarily making yourself hyperventilate.

Wintergreen tried this. She sat on the floor (although not in a lotus position -- her joints don't do that anymore) and practiced the accelerated deep-breathing required to send herself into a transcendental state. And she gave herself an asthma attack.

As she sat beside me, sucking on her Ventolin inhaler, she said, "I am a moron."

I looked at her as if to say, "You'll get no argument from me."

With holotropic breathing off the list, she opted for another technique. There are, it would appear, videos on YouTube in which you watch a psychedelic display of shapes and colours in order to induce a drugged sensation. So that is what she did.



She sat there watching the video over and over again as concentric diamond patterns both collapsed in on themselves and rippled outward, all the while changing colour. Then she looked around the study and her stomach lurched. The books on the shelves began to pulsate. It reminded her of horror movies in which throbbing pustules burst spreading a deadly infection. The good news is that, yes, she felt high without breaking any of her own rules. The bad news is that she gave herself a migraine in the process.

Her work that day came to an abrupt end as she lay down on the study floor with a cool washcloth over her eyes and groaned. I curled up beside her, rested my head on her shoulder and wondered yet again how humans ever managed to become the dominant species on earth.

As you can see, a writer will go to strange lengths for an ounce of credibility in her work. As a writer's dog, it is my job not only to listen

and help brainstorm, but to be there with love and snuggles when she's done getting her butt kicked or indulging in self-induced illness for the sake of her art.

Yes, she is an idiot, but she's my idiot and I love her.

#### **Episode 4. Peanuts.**

All of this running around is well and good, but let's not forget Wintergreen's most important role -- looking after moi!

It's a little like all of those old Peanuts cartoons. Wintergreen is the Charlie Brown figure -- basically angst-ridden, socially awkward and with no fashion sense. I, on the other hand, am charismatic, adventurous and cool like Snoopy. Within the stories, Charlie Brown has only two roles in life: to fail miserably at sports and to look after his dog. Wintergreen, too, does both of these things admirably. Filling my food and water bowls, getting out the laser light so I can chase the little green dot around the living room, rubbing my belly and lavishing me with unlimited attention are among the most fulfilling and important duties of her life. Some people might say that she spoils me. I prefer to think of it as her pragmatic attempts to keep the talent happy. After all, in the writing team of Bailey and Beth Hersant, I am the undisputed brains of the operation.

