

First, kill all the lawyers

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

A few years ago Orca Publishers created a new imprint, Raven Books, which, through their series Rapid Reads, features short fiction by such established writers as Barbara Fradkin, Gail Bowen and Rick Blechta. The novellas run around 120 pages each, just the things for readers on the go or who lead busy lives (which nowadays seems to be most of us), and, at less than ten dollars each, are very affordable. The series was an immediate success. Building on that achievement Orca has recently expanded their frontlist. One of their latest works comes from the pen of Lou Allin, a name that will be familiar to lovers of crime fiction.

Lou Allin, *Contingency Plan* (Orca Books, 2012)

Life has not been kind recently to Sandra Sinclair. Only a year has passed since her husband died from cancer, leaving her to cope with raising her twelve-year-old daughter Jane and make ends meet. But things have been looking brighter lately. Sandra can't believe her luck when she meets Joe Gillette, a successful estate lawyer who seems to be madly in love with her. Sandra begins to think about moving on, and two months later Joe and Sandra are married. He charms Jane, and begins to build an eight thousand square foot

home with all the upscale amenities, on five acres on Vancouver Island. Finally, after so much heartbreak, everything seems to be falling into place for Sandra and her daughter.



But there are clouds on the horizon. Gradually Joe reveals a dark side: he is evasive when Sandra suggests his family visit from the East Coast, and he is callously indifferent when a power surge causes Sandra's daughter to lose all her computer data for a school project she was working on. He lectures her that in life one always needs a contingency plan.

Joe becomes more and more controlling and abusive, and Sandra soon comes to the agonizing decision that she and Jane must leave him. She needs, in short, to come up with her own contingency plan.

Leaving her husband, Sandra soon discovers, will not be easy. There are hints that Joe may have had a hand in his first wife's death, and when she confronts him he insists that he will never let Sandra go. Faced with a skilled and manipulative lawyer, she realises that she cannot count on the law to help her. In a desperate bid for freedom Sandra manages to acquire some cash, and she and Jane flee to a remote cabin in the woods where they hope to be beyond Joe's reach.

Until, that is, Joe finds them in the wilderness, and Sandra must rely on her own resources to defend them both against an obsessive and resourceful enemy.

A standalone thriller, *Contingency Plan* is a fine, well-constructed story with an all-too-plausible plot line and convincing characters. It has been done before, but seldom as well. Think *Sleeping with the Enemy* but with a rural setting, and a distinctly Canadian (and deliciously satisfying) ending. Given the restrictions inherent in a short novel, Allin has done a remarkable job of creating characters we care about, and a plot that holds our attention.

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