

Looking back on my life objectively, it was working out beyond my expectations. My divorce was finalized (again), and the third book of my popular *Grime* series had just been published. Best Buy gave me a fifty-cent-per-hour pay raise, my divorce attorney had gotten his last payment, and with luck, I would meet a seductive fan at my book signing.

Those were my upbeat thoughts as I steered my barely running, beat-up blue Toyota Corolla toward my future on that chilly Saturday morning. I had no idea what was about to happen or how a person like her could exist.

The bookstore was in a rundown '50s mall in Sandy, a small town outside my hometown of Portland, Oregon. The description my iPhone gave me for Island Books was "the best bookshop in Sandy." Unfortunately, it turned out to be the only bookstore in Sandy, and it needed a total fumigation. The shop was typical of the bookstores where I had been peddling books on weekends. This was by far the smallest bookstore I had been to, but admittedly, it felt cozy. The owner even had an old-fashioned mechanical cash register that made a "ding" sound when the keys were pressed.

The manager seemed pleasant enough, and he had a small, rickety table for signing books. Next to the table were three big piles of my books, and I was eager to sell each one. I asked if there was a decent place to eat, as I was committed to the all-day event. Small-time (or, as I like to think, up-and-coming) authors like me had to wait out the entire day, whereas prominent authors had a four-hour window and a line around the block. I ate breakfast at a greasy spoon and went back to the table. When the store opened at 10:00 a.m., there was a line of people. It was exciting to see so many fans interested in me and, of course, my fantastic work! I began preparing, by practicing my signature to make sure it was legible.

As soon as the door opened, all the people went straight to the used-book section. Saturday was "half off used books" day, and the manager was unloading a pile of new inventory. During the day, a few people came by my table, and some were actually fans of my books, or at least they knew the characters' names. Some asked me questions related to the book: How did I think up the plot? What was my inspiration? Was there ever going to be a fourth book? Why was it set in England? What was the deal with spell number eleven?

Some fans asked me totally unrelated questions: Whom did I vote for in the last election for president? What did I think about the old television show *Ren & Stimpy*? Did I live near Tom Clancy? (Apparently, all authors live on the same block. Did they not know that he passed away?) What kind of music did I listen to when I wrote? And most of all, what did I think of their town?

I tried to answer their questions as best I could with enthusiasm, humility, and kindness. As I had done this before, I took great care to learn about their town beforehand. Book fans love it when you have a connection to them. The reality was that it was all an act, and I did not care about the people who read my books or the town of Sandy. My goal was to sell as many books as possible. To that end, I was going to tell them exactly what I thought they wanted to hear.

The day wore on, and it was getting close to closing time. I certainly had not met any fans who were remotely interesting. At all of my other book signings, there were rewards. I had met many fascinating people and had gotten many new book ideas. However, the low turnout and dismal sales made this an uneventful day with no bonuses. So I was happy when the store was about to close, and my day could end.

I was chatting with an older woman about the main character, Mitch Williams, in my first book, *Grime: The Big Hate*, when a woman walked up behind her. When the woman finished grilling me about why Mitch had not made better life choices, she left, seemingly unsatisfied.

The new woman immediately grabbed my attention. She had a completely wild look about her that flowed from head to toe, yet her appearance came across as wholly refined and sophisticated. She had jet-black, crinkly hair that flew freely in every direction, yet it was neat and presentable, like a controlled explosion. At first, I thought she wore a wig, but I looked closely, and it was her natural hair. Her face was well worn with crazy lines seemingly in the wrong places, but somehow this all worked together to form a perfect presentation.

She wore no makeup that I could see; her face had a wild, natural beauty quality. Unfortunately, some doctor had recently done less-than-perfect work on her nose and her ears. Her lips were thin but flush and formed a daunting smile.

The most striking thing about her was her eyes. They were soft brown, but they had a piercing quality. I will remember those intense, arrow-shooting eyes for the rest of my life.

Her clothing was utterly unorthodox, with a Sax-Fifth-Avenue meets 1800s-Europe look. She wore a dark blue, custom-tailored shirt with actual gold buttons that contained sparkling blue jewels. Her trim, conservative gray skirt was made of a material that looked like silk but had an unusual sheen, with a unique star pattern. There were no seams, or the seams were so fine that I could not see them. Her tan shoes had a stylish, comfortable look, and I could tell they were expensive.

Her hands were slightly bony, but well-kept, with fantastic, perfectly manicured nails. In addition, she had a remarkably trim, slightly muscular figure of approximately five-feet-four-inches with zero body fat.

Everything about her was a mishmash that would stand out in any crowd yet worked to perfection. The word “attractive” did not describe her, but her whole figure was over-the-top stunning. This woman was an enigma, and I did not know what to make of her.

I was trying to take in everything that was “her” when I realized some time had passed and I should say something. Her arms clasped tightly around my latest book, *Grime: At the End*. Even though my book had only been on sale for a month, her copy looked to be thirty years old. I stammered like a frightened pupil in front of the teacher. “I see you have a copy of my latest book. Would you like me to . . . ?”

The woman squinted and stared deeply into me. Really deep! The effect made me feel naked, afraid, and alone. I did not know what to do and could not move my fingers, cough, or even blink. A chill shot up my spine, my lungs struggled, and my muscles refused to move.

I have never been so terrified in my thirty-one years. The woman continued to stare while I could do nothing. Then she flashed an evil smile, and said in a wicked voice, “You will do.”

I did not know how to respond or even what was happening. *What would I do? Was I in danger? Who was this woman? Was she crazy? What did she want with me? What should I do now?* I thought without having the answers to these fundamental questions. My instinct was to scream, but I could not utter a peep. The woman abruptly broke off her stare, turned, and walked away. She took each step with exquisite precision, almost like a gymnast during a precision routine.

While this encounter was brief, my shirt was sticking to my body from an uncontrollable cold sweat. Finally, I took a long, slow, deep breath. Eventually, the manager noticed my frozen expression of horror and walked over. I asked him if he had ever seen this woman in his store before, and he replied with a shrug, “No, but sometimes the crazy ones turn up at our book signings. It is part of the job. As an *author*, you should know that.”

I staggered into the grubby bathroom that smelled like years of cigarette smoke and then locked the door. When I splashed water on my face, I looked into the mirror. A terrified person I did not fully recognize looked back at me. It took me several minutes to calm down and regain my composure. I tried to convince myself that this was the price of fame.

After the store closed, the manager took me to dinner, where he insisted I should pay. He was upset because he had only moved eight of my books, and the day was a bust. I tried to explain, “this is show business,” but he observed that my book was “a steaming pile of paper pulp.”

The manager confided in me that fiction writers were often a waste of his time, and the profitable book-signing events were home-improvement books. I felt indignant and was not sure how to respond. So I remained glued to my cheap vinyl seat and felt deflated.

The bookstore manager and I did not part on the best of terms, and I got the feeling I would not be invited back to the “best little bookshop in Sandy.” But, I was relieved that the ordeal was over and I could go home. As I walked toward my car, I resolved not to set foot in this crazy town again.