



Denied

Mary Keliikoa

Camel Press

(224pp)

978-1-60381-783-7

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In Mary Keliikoa's mystery novel *Denied*, a private investigator takes on a missing persons case while dealing with her own grief.

After Kelly Pruett's father dies, she inherits his detective agency as well as his stubborn streak. In addition to losing her father, she's recovering from a divorce and from almost losing her life. She undergoes an identity crisis, uncertain if she should continue to pursue dangerous work while sharing custody of her eight-year-old daughter, Mitz. Kelly sticks to conducting a few stakeouts and serving legal notices until an old classmate, Stephanie, asks for help in finding her father, Vince. Due to a high-risk pregnancy and a shaky marriage, Stephanie cannot track Vince down herself to patch their circumstances up.

Once Kelly takes the case, the parallels in the father-daughter relationship cause her to relive her pain over her father's suspicious behavior and death. Stephanie's father, Vince, also lived a hidden life full of sleazy characters. As Kelly uncovers Vince's deceptions, she dreads hurting Stephanie, but learns that Vince may have had more honorable intentions than appearances suggest. Kelly begins to wonder if the same could be true of her father.

Kelly, who has a tough exterior, disregards danger, and is stubborn and independent, sometimes seems like a cliché of a private investigator—until, in narrating, she shares the doubts and feelings of inadequacy that she hides beneath the surface. She internalizes the criticisms she faces for her choices, and is full of self-reflection and a determination to be present in her child's life. With Mitz, parent-child dynamics are reversed: it is Kelly who wants her daughter's approval. Kelly also learns that ending a marriage does not sever all ties, especially when co-parenting is involved. She navigates the complicated relationships of a divorced family and grows as a person in the process, learning to lean on others.

Though the story takes place in the Pacific Northwest, it is not steeped in local culture. Kelly could be anywhere: she visits seedy bowling alleys, racetracks, and bars to question lying husbands and shady people. It's an authentic setting for the mystery of a missing man who lived on the margins of society.

At first, the plot and its pace are as methodical as Kelly's detective work. The answers to her case seem straightforward and predictable. But the story grows more complex the more that Kelly finds out, resulting in unexpected and engrossing surprises. Characters who are introduced as dimensionless villains or allies reveal their unanticipated motives at a gradual rate. The entanglements of Vince's life finally make sense by the story's dramatic, dangerous end.

Denied is a satisfying mystery novel whose detective, in pursuing a sympathetic case, learns more about herself and the father in whose footsteps she follows.

BRANDEE GRUENER (April 16, 2021)

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