

Even a Pandemic Can't Stop Love & Murder: Break the Bank

A. E. S. O'Neill

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A man with a troubled past who's on the run from the mob leads the psychologically insightful romantic thriller Even a Pandemic Can't Stop Love & Murder.

In A.E.S. O'Neill's romantic thriller *Even a Pandemic Can't Stop Love & Murder*, a haunted man becomes entangled in a deadly scheme.

Working as a military contractor in Iraq, Alby witnessed wild scenarios, but he never anticipated being betrayed by those whom he thought were his friends. He winds up in witness protection, where his handlers are apathetic government employees. He works as a contractor and tries to reconnect with his sister.

But when members of Alby's contracting crew steal a check from a bank that's controlled by the mob, a fixer, Jagger, is sent to take care of the situation. Dodging killers and questions from his family while trying to solve the mystery himself, Alby encounters Ginger, a dancer whose strong personality and sharp humor leave him charmed. Their relationship evolves with speed, as both challenge each other's emotional barriers.

Quiet, capable Alby is constructed in terms of his allegiance to the rules. Some rules (like don't work with family, and don't fall in love) become harder for him to live by, though. He has both physical and psychological scars; his PTSD symptoms manifest in nightmares and are triggered by conversations and media related to the war. Alby struggles to maintain normal relationships and keeps his nephew at arm's length. The source of his resentment toward his sister is revealed in tense conversations; these also change Alby's understandings of their shared past.

While Alby's adversaries are an unseen evil throughout, Jagger shares part of the focus. He's similar to Alby in that he has a distressing personal history and a talent for reading people, but is distinguished in how he chooses to use the latter: he researches facial expressions, information he makes use of with those he tracks down. His arrogance and apathy are at the fore. But other villains are set up as victims of society, as with young men from a run-down part of town who are driven to theft as a way out. As the check-stealing men give in to their distrust and double-cross each other, the tension increases.

In this steady story in which people's motivations are key, Covid-19 is a background factor, made most evident in descriptions of vaccinated versus unvaccinated sections of restaurants, applications that send alerts when unvaccinated people are present, and the taboo nature of handshaking and touching. Most of all, it is used to establish the period: a not too distant future. In stormy and dramatic climax, there are tantalizing hints of what this future might entail for the characters.

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DELIA STANLEY (December 31, 2021)

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