

Hollis and Gray: Serafina Gray Mystery: Book One

J. P. Zeigler

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A green investigator pushes toward personal revelations in the involving mystery novel Hollis and Gray.

In J. P. Zeigler's realistic crime novel *Hollis and Gray*, a woman's trouble-filled life is beset by fresh trauma and change.

Serafina's background is both rocky and complex. From a diverse family, she was raised in a tough, albeit loving, foster care situation. In childhood, she learned to deal with loss and vulnerability. Secrets and feelings fester in her, complicating her relationships.

In adulthood, while waitressing at a strip club, Serafina befriends Frank, a mysterious Texan. Frank isn't like most of the club's customers: he likes having conversations with the women rather than lap dances. With Serafina, he adopts a paternal position. Still, they're both too reserved and damaged to admit to their loving feelings for each other. When Serafina stops working as a cocktail waitress, she accepts work in Frank's private investigator firm.

Drama ensues, though, and fresh challenges force Serafina to decide whether to protect herself or choose compassion, vulnerability, and asking for help. In the span of a week, Frank is injured and hospitalized in the course of a mysterious investigation whose details he kept from Serafina, and Serafina finds out she needs to move out of her foster brother's home. Ungrounded, depressed, and battling the flu, Serafina nonetheless tries to keep the firm's investigations going. With only the company of a newcomer and police officer, Cole, and Frank's dog, Datson, she begins to unravel the details of Frank's last investigation.

The book's point of view switches between Serafina and Frank, with most narrative duties landing on Serafina's shoulders. She has a broken past to piece together, though it seems as though each time she tries to find answers, she's held off: the people in her life claim to have good reasons to keep her past buried. Her impulse to uncover those reasons makes Serafina a vibrant, sometimes explosive heroine. Her hesitancy to get close to others is both fascinating and sympathetic—as are the revelations that draw her closer to the center of Frank's mystery than she expected to be.

The story is attentive to the intricacies of its characters' relationships, including those between Serafina and Wanda, her foster mother, and between Serafina and her foster brother, Randy. And Serafina herself fascinates: she adopts a private investigator's mindset with speed, shifting away from the drama of the strip club. And as the personalities of those around Serafina tumble together, the book moves into rising action and toward a fresh, attention-holding conclusion.

In the rich detective novel *Hollis and Gray*, complex emotions surface during change, illness, and family struggles.

CLARISSA ADKINS (December 20, 2023)

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