

Wolf: A Jessica James Mystery

Kelly Oliver

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Wolf is a thrilling and suspenseful mystery, its every page jam-packed with action.

Kelly Oliver's *Wolf* masterfully builds suspense with its relatable protagonist and bold subject matter. This whodunit asks who's really pulling the strings in the dark and seedy underbelly of Northwestern University.

Jessica James is a rough-and-tumble cowgirl from Montana turned philosophy scholar. She lives in the attic of Brentano Hall above the office of her thesis advisor, the pompous Professor Wolfgang Schmutzig. When his body is discovered in his office bathroom, law enforcement writes it off as a simple overdose, but Jessica knows better. Jessica, along with her friends Amber, Lolita, and Jack, are led on a journey to discover who is manipulating the events behind this dastardly murder.

Meanwhile, Dimitry Durchenko, a failed artist who fled Russia and who works as the janitor, learns that he cannot escape his past in an organized crime syndicate. Headed by a man called "the Pope," the syndicate begins extorting Dimitry for favors. Dimitry has to act quickly to protect his family from the repercussions of his decisions.

Wolf incorporates many tropes from classic mystery novels. The discovery of a body jump-starts the narrative, and a constant stream of clues consistently thickens the plot. Details that may seem insignificant at first have major implications as the story unfolds. The novel comes to a head as the protagonists confront the criminal mastermind manipulating events from the shadows. These characteristics of the genre make the book seem both familiar and hard to put down.

Jessica James herself is one of the novel's most unique elements. Both intelligent and practical, she balances university-instilled book smarts with cowgirl street smarts, making her a dynamic protagonist. She is also a twenty-one-year-old PhD student who still has a lot of growing up to do. The mix of these traits makes Jessica particularly relatable. Lines like "She'd been weaned on Canadian Whiskey and Poker. Her mom claimed Jessica's first word was 'Straight Flush'" succinctly offer a window into Jessica's home life, hobbies, and strengths. Such development helps flesh her out and ultimately makes her a strong protagonist.

Jessica and her friends are faced with many situations that real college students may encounter, and Oliver doesn't shy away from difficult, even toxic, social issues. GHB and sexual assault on college campuses are addressed in a tactful way. Oliver's knowledge in this area is evident, as key terminology is explained at length, making the text equally educational and gripping.

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GREGORY A. LOWE (October 14, 2016)

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